

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

D.E. Kern
Hell's Kitchen

Chapter Two

June 20, 1916

I stand on the quay at 12th Avenue and 48th Street and watch the Hudson's waters rise and fall. It's dirty as death, a mix of blood and oil, the liquid fouled by tanning and dyeing. One block to the east, the railroad clatters with coming and going, making and shipping. I struggle to keep my fag lit in light of steady wind, a welcome reminder of home.

I am an hour removed from a shift on the docks loading parts of unknown origin for contraptions to be made who knows where. Frankly, I do not care. Business strikes me as a matter of necessity—one that hits me intermittently with a certain level of guilt—but I need to eat and keep a roof over my head. So I put in my time stooping and hoisting, hauling things until the sweat makes a dish rag of my shirt.

I engage in all this nonsense along with Jimmy who works the second shift for the same transport firm. The boss man is a big, wretchedly foul-smelling fellow named Jones, though—judging by his talk—I imagine he changed it while still on the boat. He sports a considerable and greasy mustache strewn with bits of several meals that I suppose cause the odor. When we applied, he told us he would put us on different shifts so the other boys didn't carp too much about him taking on more Irish. Besides, Jimmy looked strong and I looked smart. Jones just asked us to hide the fact we're brothers.

That is easier than he or anyone else may think. Jimmy takes off most nights, trading in stories and sips with anyone game. Meanwhile, I tarry over a book at home, sitting beside the open window and half expecting him to find trouble. At least he's a good-natured fellow, given to carousing more than violence. Thus I doubt he's dug in with the Gopher Gang or any of their ilk, though I'm uncertain of his friends.

I'm deep into Conrad and finding the story more moral than exciting. Sometimes, I wonder if Jim did anything wrong, surviving being a necessity and all. Who's to say if the people on that ship held the promise he did? I imagine the Darwinians could tumble quite a bit over that question. But my brother would not struggle over it so much. He'd day it is just the sort of cowardice to expect from an English sailor. My Jimmy is not much for tangled up stuff.

We share a room in a three-story building on Ninth Avenue just inland from where I'm standing. It is scarcely bigger than our cabin on the boat and just as seedy. The walls do not breathe, so the heat makes them sweat. And the rest of the tenants—about a thousand based on my count—warn me it is just as distressing in the winter when cold makes ice of your drinking water. The roaches are the size of a dress button, and I fear the rats joined us in exiting the boat. We keep a fist-sized rock on the window sill and use it to drive them back into the walls. On our second night,

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

Jimmy caught one good with a jagged edge and killed it on the spot. We looked at one another and considered eating it. The next day we found our jobs.



I hear Jimmy and his company, the Spaniard and Italian, before I see them. Those two came through the island with us and, in spite of hearing Hell's Kitchen was a predominantly Irish place, decided to stick nearby. They share a flat over a barroom nearby and get a certain sum scratched from the rent in exchange for odd jobs.

Jimmy is the loudest of the three, crooning on about some heroic rebel or another in a voice remarkably true for a drunk. *Soldiers are we, whose lives are pledged to Ireland. Some have come from beyond the wave. Sworn to be free, no more our ancient sireland, shall shelter the despot or the slave. Tonight we man the bearna baoil, in Erin's cause, come woe or weal, 'mid cannon's roar and rifle's peal, we'll chant a soldier's song.*

He opens the door, pushes through his red nose, and greets me in full voice. "Ah, Andy! How in the hell can you sit here sweatin' your balls off reading a book? This city is alive. The pints are cool. And the ladies have their skirts hiked up considerably." He crosses the room and slaps me on the back. "I've seen much worse nights, brother."

I take a deep breath. "Please call me Andrew."

"That's what you've got to say?" Jimmy takes off his hat and scratches his head. "I come in here, greet you with a song and a smile, invite you to drink with me, share intelligence on the beauties, and you get all sorts of finicky in regards to your fecking name?"

I smile in spite of myself. "Yes."

The terseness of my reply humors Jimmy's friends, who attempt to squelch their snickers.

I continue. "At the least, I expect to have some control over what I am called. Also, I have told you many times I don't like pubs. They are loud and smoky, crowded even for slums, and reek of sweat. Add to all that, they are full of dullards."

"Well, ain't that rich?" Jimmy shakes his bare head. "In addition to disturbing the peace and smelling like horse piss, I'm dull!" He pauses for emphasis. "Now, Andrew, that hurts."

I do not have the heart to tell him that is not precisely what dullard means, so I change the subject. "How was work?"

He reads my intent yet plays along. "Ah, it was grand, better than lunch with the Astors! Perhaps the best ten hours of my life, stooping and stacking crates 'till my fingers bled from splinters. I haven't grunted so much since last I held a lass." He tosses his hat across the floor toward the largest of the rat holes. "My God, Andy! It's a job. Do you expect me to like it?"

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

"I'm just making conversation."

"Oh? Forgive me—I thought we were talking about you joining us for a drink."

"It's just that we can ill afford to lose our jobs. We have to build something here, make something better. Besides, the rent is up, and the landlord came knocking."

"Who are you talking about the rent is up—Mum? You seem to be saying you're better at your precious job because I dally in pubs. Or is the trouble the company I keep?" As he asks this, his friends step forward and cross their arms. "Would you rather I sit here and read a book? Well, let me say this once and forever, Andrew. Books are not worth a shite."

At this the Spaniard, who once told me his grandfather wrote for the stage, draws a deep breath.

I tremble. "Unlike you, I didn't intend to be hurtful. You were having no parts of my explanation as to why I steer clear of pubs, so I changed the subject to work. I don't expect you to like the job, I certainly don't, but we need it. We have little and the water is rising fast."

One good thing about Jimmy is the fact that—in terms of his temper—he's like a Lucifer. He flares quickly then backs off to nothing. So he gathers himself and crosses the room to our crude work spot, just a stool and an off-balance table left by the previous tenant, to take a seat. His guests understand this is some sort of invitation and help themselves to spots on the floor where they sit cross-legged.

The Spaniard appears to be dealing with the weight of Jimmy's assault on literature. He holds his head in his thumbs with his hands folded, the fingers clasped and covering his nose. I wonder if he's praying, but his eyes are open and darting about the room.

The Italian, who has put considerable work into his English, is animated and surprisingly supportive of my position.

"Andrew speaks truth," he says. "As long as we stay here, our feet slip in the mud. We're too many—like bees by the rot pile. No one looks for the good in the bad."

Jimmy squints and rubs his hands on his thighs. "There are good bees in the slop?"

But the Italian—I think his name is Medina—is undeterred by my brother's mocking. "I mean it's hard to show your ... your use."

"You mean your merit?" I lean forward in my chair.

"Yes!" Medina smiles and claps his hands. "Your merit." We all laugh at this, but Medina continues. "We stay here and it's just like the Old Country. Maybe something good comes, maybe not. We need to move on to the place where we can be *the* Italian, *the* Spaniard, and *the* Irish—not just one among thousands."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

Now it's Jimmy leaning forward in his chair. "If we go, do you think they'll make *the* Irish lug crates?"

I crack the window farther, using the book for a prop. "We'll never know if we don't go." I wink at him and run my fingers through my hair.



June 30, 1916

I walk the battery at the south end of the island regarding the reflection of the sun on the water, which sparks at each eddy. I admire the statue too. She is unshrouded as opposed to the morning I first saw her and regal in every sense of the word with her flowing robes and lamp pointed skyward. But it is her feet, shod precariously in sandals and grounded on something larger than her person, I find most welcoming.

She dominates the small key we landed on before reaching Manhattan. I know now they call it Ellis Island though it seems the name prod island fits it better. We and our shipmates received a going over there normally reserved for horses at sale. Jimmy got a chalk mark for not standing up straight, but he flipped his jersey around and passed through. There were anxious moments regarding the Spaniard's scalp too. But, after a few knowing glances, we were all smiles.

I shake my head over our nervousness now. Arriving here and passing inspection seemed like a triumph. But, as I kick my way through the garbage flooding the streets, it feels like no feat at all.

Don't get me wrong. I'm by no means miserable. America is the land of fair shakes and all. But I wish we were making more of our plans to move on. Medina is right; this is the sort of place where a fella can get stuck in a million ways. And it seems there is something I owe mum for the ticket after all. Dealing with Jimmy, however, takes a delicate touch.

In many regards, he is the leader of our little group. Of course this is common among aces, people whose passions run high. He lends life to any party, makes Othello pure comedy. He just requires a bit of help to find his vision.



July 1, 1916

Like I said before, Jimmy is just a so-so reader, but he is committed to digesting the news from home about the Rising. Today he is fit to be tied over a report in the *Cork Free Press* about conditions at Frongoch. According to their man, the place is knee-deep in filth and all sorts of things to drive a body mad.

I cannot say as I'm surprised. I never assumed prison was a place for holding hands. But I can see my brother's motivation building. He's hatching plans like eggs.

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

"Bastards!" He raps the rolled paper on the table. "It's one thing to fight a man on a field, quite another to toss him in a cage and poke him."

I gnaw on a piece of toast and nod.

Jimmy continues. "I bet Stephen's all sorts of knotted. He believes in dignity after all."

"No doubt." I sip tea from a mug the Spaniard found at work. "I wonder if mum read it. If so, she's worried sick."

He bites his bottom lip. "You're right. Have you sent her a post?"

"It's been a fortnight. I mailed one to say we were here and another one once we had work." I set down the tea and wipe a soggy crumb from beneath my lip. "She sent back a tin of tea biscuits lined with bills."

He nods. "I'd rather she didn't do that. You never know who's inspecting the posts."

"Agreed." Reminded of them, I pull the prized soda bread cookies out of our bag and slide the tin across the table. "This should dress things up a bit."

"Ah." Jimmy pries the lid and pulls out a biscuit. "The comforts of home."

I try to steer us back to the topic at hand. "Say, do you think he's staying stout in there? I mean a few rats and rubbish aren't about to take him down."

My brother raises his eyebrows and chews. "Not likely." He snatches the mug and sips. "He's Irish. He's been dealt with like a dog before."

"So what's the Brits' play?"

"Not a bloody good one." He taps his fingers on the table. "I suppose they're trying to break them down—upset their stomach for it. If there was a better play, the whole lot of them would be dead. The prime minister figures one war at a time is enough, and for once I gather he's right."

"You think he's delaying."

Jimmy nods. "That's my guess."

I suppose my brother is mostly right. The English have their hands full across the Channel, and they need Irish bodies. It is common knowledge the republicans at the Rising carried German guns, and Kaiser Wilhelm has every reason to arm them again. Asquith knows better than to stoke the fires. But there might be a flaw in his plan.

By all accounts Frongoch is great soil for the seeds of discontent. The ragged rebels there are weaving their thread-bare hearts into something interminably stronger. Collins is gathering his men and lecturing his lieutenants. The university is in session, and I don't know if it is Jimmy or me who is more in a lather.



Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

July 4, 1916

It is America's Independence Day and, for reasons unknown to either me or Jimmy, Mr. Jones has decided to give most of the mules—his name for crate bearers—the day off. My brother insists this makes Jones a Socialist, but I am not about to argue with the decision. A day to relax is an uncommon thing, and it is a gorgeous day in the droning city, a bit cooler than most this summer with a high blue sky.

I have managed to save a pocket's worth of change from the last two pays and start the day with a visit to a bakery ran by a fat woman from the Baltics. She sells tortes, dumplings, and filled sponge cakes out of the narrow window of her apartment on Eighth Avenue. I drop three coins in her floured hand and receive two treats in return. Meanwhile Jimmy, who I charged with the task of finding tea, is waiting for me on a bench set fortuitously beneath a broad-spanning oak.

He is smiling and holding two steaming cups. We exchange a pastry for a drink, and I settle beside him with a sigh. To my surprise, he returns the money I gave him for tea. "I helped some lass a few blocks off load flowers on her cart, and she gave thanks with a taste of her morning brew."

I wink at him. "Such a charmer." I lift the cup and take a careful sip. It's passable, nothing to write mum about.

"Whatcha think?" His eyes are bright and typically devilish.

"I think it's not bad for something bought with flirtation."

"Ah, and without the fever or itch!" He laughs loudly as if he's uncertain I got the joke. "At least it's not coffee."

I pucker my face and gag. "Coffee! How in the hell can people drink that bitter shite? Even across St. George's Channel they know it's proper to start a day with tea. Weak tea—I give you—but tea."

"A drink fit for a queen!" Jimmy bites through a cake filled with raspberry preserves. "Say, you give any thought to how we'd spend the day?"

"Not really."

He reaches inside his pocket and produces a stack of bills thick as two loaves of bread. "I thought perhaps it was a grand day to go visit the ponies."

My eyes pop out of my head. "Holy Jesus, Jimmy! Where in the world did you get that wad?"

"It seems our friend Medina's a louse at poker."

I gather my breath. "Seems so, but you cannot spend that all at the races."

"Spend—who in the hell said a thing about spending?" He waves the cash inches from my nose. "Take a good look, Andy. I'm a winner."

I roll my eyes. "Even you aren't that big of a fool."

"Phht. Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Wilderness House Literary Review 10/2

"That's three month's rent and food for two more."

"Just imagine if it's doubled."

I look at him sideways. It's useless to think I'll get my way straight out. "How about we take a third of it to Mr. Belmont's Park and use the rest for necessities?"

"Not counting the trolley fare?" I think this is an odd point to stand firm over, but my line of thinking cuts both ways.

"Fine," I say, "A third of it—all for the races."

Jimmy's smile is so bright I doubt the fireworks can compete. "It's going to be a fine day, Andy. Now, let's go win me a hat and a hook to hang it on."

I shake my head as I push myself off the bench and turn in the direction of Blackwell's Island Bridge. "Hats aren't that expensive you know."

"Don't be so literal, Andrew. It won't make you any friends."