

‘Disheartened’

by Jason Raman Kelly

Grey clouds loom low in the sky. Silence stills the streets. Dublin has a dark disease. It clutches at its inhabitants and compels them to feel less, think less and *be less*. It hums with a sense of vagueness, of everything becoming muted. Numb.

As the clock strikes five, the stillness is broken by the feverish scurrying of the Rats leaving their concrete and glass towers. Spilling out into the dreary outside air. I scurry out amongst them. Each one in a hurry, each one of us confident in the belief we’re more important than the others. We are still all rats, however, a sobering fact never lost on me. There’s a collective moment of pause as we scramble out the hulking doors of ‘Big Bank Business Inc.Ltd.com.ie.’ The icy wind lashes out against not-yet-tightened coats, and swirls noose-like around the necks of barely wrapped scarves. The stark white light of the building still manages to look uninviting, even when the alternative is the dishwater grey of the outside.

The colony quickly disperses, some to their great diesel guzzling SUVs, others towards the distant earthy rumble of the DART and others still, like me, to the buses. The aging driver’s weary eyes stare right through me as I cough up some grubby coins. I fight my way through the hot, tightly packed sardine tin of bodies, up the stairs and into the last available seat. At my side, the old lady’s groceries knock against my leg. I pat down each of my jacket pockets in turn, only to realize with a sigh that my earphones lie on my desk, unable to shelter me from the claustrophobia of people on every side. I lean back heavily in my chair and close my eyes. I notice all at once that I hear nothing. Not a sound. I open my eyes and look around slowly to see the Moths fluttering about the glow of their screens.

Jacked in, their white cords tethering them to a different dimension. The silence is hollow and deafening. I can't stand it. I have to get out. I push the button. Down the stairs. Through the masses. Forward. Out. Finally, I stumble into the gutter and can breathe again. I start out at a brisk pace without a clue as to where I'm going.

As one often does in Dublin, I find myself at the threshold of Grafton Street. When I first arrived, these shops were so bright and glittering in their unapologetic gaudiness. The sales people seemed to be on tenterhooks, ready to help. Now all I can see is the dim, dull lane of buildings, stocked full of tired, fake smiles. The light pitter-patter of the drizzle has me damp and shivering as I listen to out-played buskers playing their melancholy songs and perhaps, too, lamenting on hard lives and broken dreams. I could hear a high tinkling laugh not unlike that of a wind-chime and before I see them, I know it's a gaggle of tourists. I turn to watch them; their childlike innocence keeps them safe in their own little version of Dublin. Their own personal worlds. I seethe for I despise them. I also envy them, however, and as they disappear once more, the absurd idea to run after them and join their gaiety only gets stronger. I cast my eyes down and join the trudging march of the Zombies.

I make it to the river. Hot sweat trickles down the nape of my neck but quickly cools in the chilly air. The tide is low and the muck is revealed like a truth the city kept hidden. A black-brown sludge is caked along the sides, bits of garbage and trolleys interrupt the slovenly flow of the brackish water and every now and then an indeterminate dead thing peeks out of the filth. The putrid stench it gives off assaults my nostrils to the point where I can taste it. I cannot, however, turn away. The edge beckons to me. It invites me to not just stand holding the rusty metal railing, but instead to climb over it. To fall. The French call it *l'appel du vide*: the call of the void. A strange sensation at the back of my head pulls me out of my trance and I turn to see my observer. A boy of no more than fifteen sits

wide-eyed, dirty-faced and huddled in his sleeping bag. An empty cup rests before his thin, thin face. I lean over hesitantly and drop in my remaining coins as I feel the October breeze through my warm layers. He glances up, mouth set in a grim line, emotionless. I try to think of the hardships he has endured that have left him unable to react at all. My pity for him and guilt for the failure of everyone who was supposed to help him is overwhelming, and I feel a salty tear burn down my face and catch my lips as I walk away.

I stand rotting on the edge of the street. A scraggly bearded man sits a few meters to the side. He's bent over as if in great pain and his expensive shirt is muddied by the kerb. He is also crying, a physical, heaving sob. Some people walk past him and look up at me as if looking for affirmation that doing nothing is okay. Most people ignore us both. A black taxi screeches to a halt in front of me and I smell the strong odours of too many flowery perfumes coalesced into one overpowering scent. The scent is accompanied by the giggles of the scantily dressed Birds out for a night on the town. They flutter on, blind to me and my sorrowful partner, but their scent 'Insecurity No.5' lingers still. I get into the back of the car, startling the smoking driver.

I slip the key into the heavy oak door and slink in silently, my heavy steps sink into the thick pile of the carpet. At the top of the stairs I stop into the rooms. I kiss my sweet daughters on their foreheads and they smile angelically in their sleep. Every movement is sluggish and it's with great effort I walk down the hall towards my room. I sip slowly on the lukewarm glass of water in my hand. My wife is already asleep but stirs as I slip between the sheets. I kiss her gently. I glance around at the comfort of the room, content for now.

Dublin has a dark disease. People are disheartened. They're stuck in a rut and yet it seems they're content to continue as they are. There's a lack of empathy, of feeling, a muting of all colours, sights, tastes and sensations. Sound gains a

hollowness and everything becomes a bit more numb. Pins-and-needles in the soul. The only solution is to fight, every day of your life, to do what you enjoy and to ‘rage against the machine.’

Don’t be a rat, stuck in a race. Don’t be a moth, hovering over a screen. Don’t be a zombie, trudging through the daily motions. Don't be a bird, flying through the air. Instead, I ask you, to be whatever you want to be. Feel More. Think more. Be more.

J.R.K.

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