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Dockets 'n' Dowels

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Abstract

Like my danda and my danda's dad, my dad was a cabinetmaker, master craftsman. The lads up in Mulla's said he was a genius; he could make a full piece of furniture, no nails or screws used. I swear to God, you can never really know what goes on in another man's head, but it's hard to believe that something as slapless as a wooden dowel could turn my dad away from the cabinet making. It was like up until then, his whole life swung around Mulla's. But one day, snap! No more. The day of the dowel dawned.

CÓNAL CREEDON

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I swear to God, you can never really know what goes on in another man's head, but it's hard to believe that something as slapless as a wooden dowel could turn my dad away from the cabinet making. It was like up until then, his whole life swung around Mulla's. But one day, snap! No more. The day of the dowel dawned.

'Sure any,' he'd say, 'dawfaker could trow a cabinet togedder dese days.'

Maybe it had to do with the fact that Mulla died and his son, the Graduate, took over the running of the yard; or that the Graduate ran the yard from the office and he didn't know one end of a hammer from the other. Maybe it was because there was no mass in the wood joint no more nor the men who knew how to make them. Whatever the reason, there was no doubt but dowels had destroyed the detail of the craft, and enough was enough, and my dad's head was turned.

'Sure dat's not furniture,' he'd throw de mallet down. 'Look! Either you make it! Or the Chinese make it!'

'Take yer pick!' the Graduate would say and walk away.

'Docket's 'n' dowels,' he'd throw the eyes to heaven. 'Tis all docket's 'n' dowels dese days.'

It was like he saw his craft die in front of his eyes and with it's death he caught a glimpse of his own mortality. Somewhere along the line it dawned on him that he couldn't face eternity in some thrown together plywood box fastened with a few aul' dowels. He was a cabinetmaker and only a casket fitting of a master craftsman would do. That's why! That's why at the age of fifty-eight he decided to make his own coffin... in the kitchen..., at home.

He drew together boards from trees grown on different continents. Boards hand-picked from shipments as they'd arrive into Mulla's yard, boards brought together, planked and hobbled away home. It took over a year but he was in no rush, he wanted the finest collection of grains to be found either side of the hardwood jungles of Burma and the Amazon Basin for his masterpiece.

No nails, screws or dowels used, but perfected joints, handed down from generation to generation, grains married so tight together that no man could

pull asunder.

'Look a' dis son,' he'd say. 'Dat's a dove-tail, and dat la, dat's a T-joint. An' see dat one dere in the corner, dat's me own secret F-joint, and I'll show you how to make one a' dem one a' dese days.'

My sister Kathleen lined his coffin with quilted yellow, green and black silk, the colours of The Glen. And in the true tradition of quilts she stitched in a square that didn't match the pattern, a planned mistake so as not to challenge God's pride by creating perfection; split down the middle half red and half white for Cork.

They say that you'd know a shoemaker's wife by the holes in the soles of her shoes and there's a grain a truth in that, because with all my dad's knowledge we didn't have a stick of furniture. I mean, we had beds, the odd chair and all that but no shelves, no presses, no sideboards, nothing special, not if you don't count the coffin. It stood there in the middle of the kitchen on two carpenter's trestles, a sheet thrown over it protecting my dad's handy work and a few wads of white paper to save the sheet. It was our table and we'd gather around...

Kippers of a Friday, roast of a Sunday, one of the days between Monday and Wednesday it'd be bacon and cabbage and with payday on Friday, it was usually fried bread of a Thursday. Same aul ding-dong dinner time, same aul ping-pong chit chat, like Mass night after night, every day of the week, except that is for Saturdays. Saturday was my dad's day.

'De pig is de one animal that you can ate every bit of,' he'd say. 'An d'ya know why? I'll tell ya why! 'Cause we're Christians, dat's why. Tis de only ting dat de Catlicks an' de Prositents has in common. We all ates de pig. Now de Hindoos an' de Muslims an' de Buddas an' all dat shower don't eat no pig, dey has no God. Dat's why we eats de pig. And here in Cork we show our devotion to the one an' only true Jesus Christ Our Lord by not wastin' one mouthful of de God given flesh of de boar, de sow or de banabh.' His excuse for the weekly feast of entrails, off-cuts and offal. 'Not only is it religious,' he'd say, 'but it's part of our kulture. De people a' Cork were atein' pig's heads long before St. Finbarre found us.'

And he was right, 'cause where we came from, the head of the pig often kept the wolf from the door. Never the fur lined devilish faces of the cow or the sheep. Always the pig, whose human-like fleshy jowls, for some reason tasted easier on the conscience. Still and all, there's something evil when two eyes stare out at you from a pot. Maybe that's why he cooked them half-head at a time; split skull and jaw with hammer and axe, slit with carving knife down between the eyes, along the centre line of the snout, right through the palate of the mouth, all the way home to the jawbone.

I'd sit there watching. Sleeves rolled up beyond his elbows and him tearing into and devouring the pig's head. Held firmly by the ear in the one hand and the snout in the other, scraps falling from his mouth to the white paper covered coffin. He'd bate into the prime cut of the cheek muscle just above the tooth ribbed jaw bone, gristle and grease seeping down over his

hard hands all the way to his elbows and the fat from the pig's eye socket, forehead and lock, being smeared all over my dad's face as he'd battle with the jaws of the beast.

At the age of seventy-two, he tried out the coffin for size – found it a mite tight, must have put on a bit of weight. Kathleen blamed it on the pig's head, 'All fat an' bone,' she said. He took to training, you know walking and things – getting fit for death.

But as she got older and he got more feeble the pot boiling came to an end when my dad's pride gave way to his age, and Kathleen took a tighter hold on the household. He was lost for a while, just hanging around like someone waiting for God.

Then one day he pulled the sheets off the coffin again, rubbed his fingers along the grain, no knots, not at all. And it all began simply enough, a little bit of inlay here and there, a simple scroll alone, the side. He then carved the full forty-nine lines of St. Patrick's Breastplate, you know the one, 'Christ be before me, Christ be behind me, Christ be about me' ... right down the length of the lid. And then with oak, walnut, ash and cherry veneer he inlaid the symbols of his craft: the mallet and chisel, the tenon-saw and plane, the pencil and pot of glue and the square and dividers, one at each corner. It was medazza, but he just didn't know when to stop.

Somebody mentioned that the square and dividers was a Freemason's sign and suggested that St. Patrick might have been a Protestant. He spent too much time up with de Unionists to be a real Catholic? So he carved The Virgin Mary on the end panel up by his head and draped around her feet he inlaid the tri-colour in mahogany, ash and pine.

'Let dere be no mistake about it,' he said. 'Not only am I an Irish Catlick, but I'm an Irish Republican Catlick.'

But he didn't stop there. Glen Rovers were remembered by a set of crossed hurleys and sliotar. Then right above St. Patrick's Breastplate he carved the top section of Shandon steeple with a big goldie fish inlaid in beech. He said that the fish on top of Shandon looked down on him in life, so, it may as well look down on him in death. Of course he knew Shandon was a Protestant Church, that's why he put St. Mary's, pillars and all, on the left panel. When my dad's brother Uncle Miah saw St. Mary's he said it was a nice touch, you know remembering 1916, and all that.

'1916?'

'My dad was lost. Ya know like, de G.P.O.,' Uncle Miah pointed to the coffin.

'De G.P.O.? Dat's it dere isn't it?'

'G.P.O.? Dat's St. Mary's, Miah boi.'

'Really? Jesus it looks very like de G.P.O. to me. But now dat ye mention it, St. Mary's looks like de G.P.O., don't it?'

Enough said, my dad chiselled the words *St. Mary's, Pope's Quay*, under the carving and so as not to offend the lads of 1916 he put the names of the leaders down the right-hand panel. And that wasn't the end of it.

Ronnie Delaney was commemorated by a pair of running shoes and the words *Ronnie Delaney Olympic Gold, For Ireland and for Glory*. On went Daniel O'Connell, Michael Collins, St. Finbarre, Terence Mc Sweeney, Tomás Mac Curtain, Christy Ring, Blackrock Castle, Patrick's Bridge... he even had a *Sile na Gig*¹ at his feet, and the work went on until every inch of the coffin was overlaid, inlay on inlay, sort of like a beautiful body mutilated with tattoo.

'An not a dowel in it!' he'd say proudly. And that's the way it went, tapping away at the coffin when ever he took the notion, right up until the day he died.

His wake was a grand affair, even the Graduate and the crowd from Mulla's were there, most too young to remember my dad; all carpenters; not a cabinetmaker between them. In a way it was a happy occasion, you know, people telling stories, that sort of thing. The priest said that in all his day's burying people he'd never seen a coffin like my dad's, this lifted a bit of a laugh... and after the prayers, myself, Uncle Miah and a few others shouldered the coffin from the kitchen. It's a strange feeling, carrying your father in a box.

'Hoi! Hold it lads! Hold it!' Uncle Miah brought the procession to a halt. 'Back 'er up! Here la, try it dis way. No! No! Turn 'er 'round.'

We tried it sideways. We tried it lengthwise, we even tried it upright, but it wouldn't turn in the hall. One into one just wouldn't go. The crowd who had piled out onto the street waiting, were back in the kitchen again standing around the coffin, advice flying, but nothing moving.

The sound of bottles being cracked open again, big roars of laughter from the back. The Graduate was telling me that the furniture trade had changed since de recession ended.

'It's all quality furniture they want these days,' he said. 'They'll pay a fortune for it. Leave the old dab 'n' dowel for the Eastern Europeans that's what I say. But do you know what?' he stopped. 'You can't get a craftsman these days for love nor money,' and he was off talking about something else. Uncle Miah cleared the house and closed the front door behind them. We lifted my dad's board-like body from the coffin and lay him on the floor. And then with the big rusty saw from under the stairs, he cut the coffin in two, right down between, ...*Christ be behind me* and *Christ be before me*...

Twenty-eight dowels to put it together again, six top and bottom, eight on each side and he tacked a sheet of plywood to the base. Just in case. We placed my dad back into his masterpiece.

'Com' on! Hurrup!' said uncle Miah. 'He won't know. Wha' he don't know, he.'

The front door opened out, and my dad, the master craftsman, was carried shoulder high, by the tradesmen through the streets of Cork.

1. Pre-Christian Celtic fertility goddess.