sample extracts from

THE INVISIBLE PRISON

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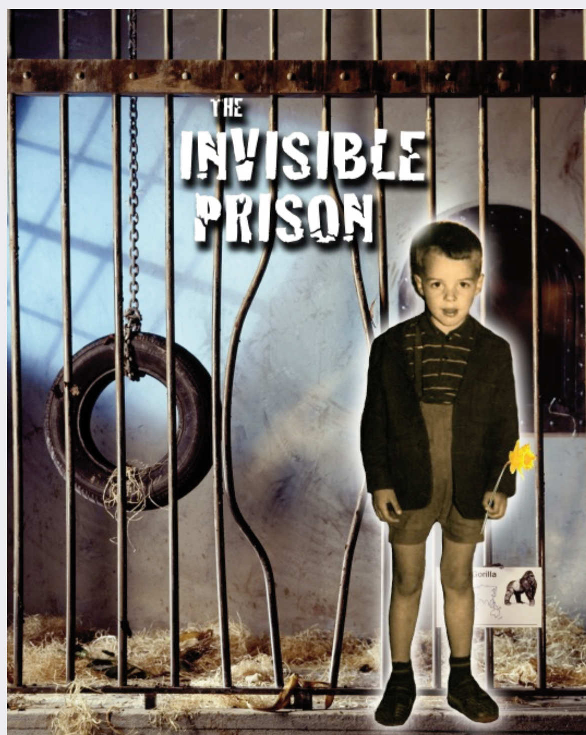

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All Along the Watchtower

When the January 03, 1970 edition of The Leinster Express carried an advert for the Coliseum Cinema in Bull Lane, Portlaoise, the evening's main feature, Hang 'em High, appeared to promote rough justice for law-breakers.

"They made two mistakes," ran the advertising copy. "They hanged the wrong man and they didn't finish the job."

At that time, being just seven years of age, pretty much anything in the Coliseum Cinema was out of my reach (with the exception of supervised matinees of Oliver, The Robe or, the following year, Fiddler on the Roof). And yet the presence among us of a movie about crime and punishment can not have been lost on the adult population of our prison town, even if the true dominance of the 'gaol' would not

commence until its upgrading to political status two years later.

Of course, someone must have built the prison: we wondered about it even then, even as kids, passing it on our way back from Sunday walks and picnics on the Block Road, the great sturdy door and arch and walls of it a mystery even then. Especially then.

A mystery compounded by the reports my father began to read aloud at the kitchen table, within our earshot, in both the local and, increasingly, the national press. Reports of “trouble in the prison”, of “protests on the Dublin Road”, of “crowds from the North marching through the town”. I remember hearing about attempted escapes, small-scale riots (“when lads start throwing bits of the furniture around” as an article in the same January 1970 edition of the local paper puts it.

Life and art inextricably intertwined.

“A substantial amount of damage was done to the furniture and fittings and to the fabric of the recreational hall, in which the incident started. Items broken include two TV sets, a radio, film projection equipment and two billiard tables.”

“Wow,” we said in school the next day when the subject came up. “Imagine: their own billiard tables!”

And every youngster in the town felt torn between a life of freedom and good behaviour (but endless deprivation) and a life of crime (and punishment), the latter significantly sweetened by the presence of TV sets, film projectors and billiard tables.

Seven years later, long after the political status upgrade, another press report would list some of the games the Republican prisoners in Portlaoise were playing to help them pass the time, the same games we were playing after school as it happens: among them chess, Ludo, Snakes and Ladders and (life imitates art imitates life) a Colditz escape game.

Love All

In the Portlaoise of the 1970s, where I grew up, there were two tennis clubs. One was owned and run by the ESB, as their staff social club: it was just at the then outer limits of the town, and was open to the general public — the young lads of whom, like myself, gravitated to the pool tables in the club house, happy to watch their sisters and friends knock a handful of yellow tennis balls from the local tennis ball factory back and forth, desultorily, until the sun went down. The other tennis club, The Portlaoise ‘Lawn’ Tennis Club, was a very different affair.

The Portlaoise ‘Lawn’ Tennis Club was situated behind a small Protestant parish hall more or less in the centre of the town. The fact that it was right across from the wonderfully-named Dead Wall — the biggest wall I’d seen in my life until then —gave it a kind of central authority. But if the Dead Wall had been built to hold up and back the weight of the thirty-foot railway

embankment that runs through the town, the small lawn tennis club across the road from it was proof that gentler, more fragile activities could occupy the hearts and minds of the populace of our midland town.
In truth, I don’t think I ever actually played what might be called a game of tennis, either in one of those two clubs back then, or since. My mother in her time had often done so, and later both of my sisters regularly went out with on summer evenings, tennis rackets in hand, to play at one of the tarmac courts that would later appear in the grounds of the Presentation Convent. Despite this, tennis remained for me a strange, if strangely fascinating, game.

It was true that, unlike any other game I could think of, or saw anywhere around me, tennis alone broke the gender divide, which was a divide worth breaking, as far as I was concerned, and couples could often be seen playing together, even in Portlaoise. And it was even true that the championships at Wimbledon, and maybe even at other tournaments, had a category called Mixed Doubles, which was exactly that — as if, despite its apparent tameness and a dress code that gave it an olde worlde feel, tennis was at the same time somehow, discretely, revolutionary.

Yet the truth was that, in my age group at least, tennis was a girls’ game, a game that us boys could watch, or pretend not to watch, but about which we were, as in so many other respects, in the dark. Surely there was more than meets the eye to a game in which the word ‘love’, not to mention the word ‘match’, was used over and over.

But boys simply did not play tennis. By which I suppose I mean Catholic boys. Where gaelic footballers, soccer or rugby players of my acquaintance seemed intent on mucking up their kit as quickly as possible after the initial throw-in or kick-off, tennis players at the end of a match would come off the court in the same virginal whites as they'd gone out. It seemed to go against what games were all about, a kind of rough and tumble, a kind of letting go and giving in and going wild.

It took just a small incident one summer's night, in the late 1970s, to change my mind about tennis, and to see it less as some affected pastime of the gods, stopping to sip their ambrosia, and more as just another, if more stylised, version of a great cosmic game.

Having spent the afternoon after school at a friend's house (where the main activities had been drinking Coca Cola and pillow-fighting in his elder brother's bedroom), this particular summer's evening I took a short cut back home up Railway Street, which meant I had to pass along by the side of the Dead Wall (looming up over me like a cliff face), and of course by the Portlaoise Lawn Tennis Club. And as it happened, whatever evening of the week it was, a Friday perhaps, a tennis club social was in full swing: some local tournament had concluded earlier in the day, and now disco music and the glow of flashing, coloured lights was spilling out of the high windows of the small building.

It was then I noticed that the parked car beside which I was idly standing, half listening, half thinking of

nothing at all, was moving from side to side and up and down. And, just as others in my class had claimed, though I hadn't believed them, when I stepped back, startled, and glanced over again, through the steamed-up windscreen I could just about make out two shapes, two figures, one female, one male, and both dressed in white, their arms wrapped tight around each other, for all the world like two angels struggling to be human again.

Flypaper

Encouraged by the success of a jam-jar on the kitchen windowsill, into which a veritable plague of wasps and bees came to drown themselves each summer, in the early 1970s my mother succumbed to the dubious attractions of flypaper. Maybe it was the fact that, not long before, our small pokey kitchen had been extended by the Sullivan brothers, and the intervention into the structure of the house had resulted in the displacement of a number of hitherto unnoticed life-forms.

Mice, for example, dislodged from behind the old walls or under floors, were suddenly poking their noses into everybody's business; ants, whose nests had once faced out into our gravel-surfaced back yard, now re-routed their caravans across the kitchen table and up the kitchen wall ... Perhaps these were still the times before people lived in hermetically-sealed homes, buildings that sometimes appear designed to ensure survival in the void of outer space. Either way,

the line between inside and out was still back then a fuzzy one, and flies were just one of the many fuzzy life-forms regularly to cross that line.

The traditional solution to such incursions was a rolled-up copy of The Nationalist and Leinster Times. (This in no way reflects upon the literary or journalistic qualities of said publication; but as a weapon of broadsheet class it did offer a significantly longer reach—or greater penetration—into enemy territory than did the tabloid Leinster Express.) Where previous summers had been punctuated by the whoosh and slap of paper cudgels, the cheers or curses of would-be assassins, the invention of flypaper heralded a spooky silence in the household. Or at least that is what should have happened.

Where apples on strings meant Halloween, and mistletoe signified Christmas, almost overnight the arrival of summertime was marked by a profusion of thin orange pendants that dangled from the ceiling, as if the new kitchen were a cross between the Hanging Gardens of Babylon and the Brave New World the American comic books were still predicting.

First encountered in a paper tube, and tightly wound around itself, the new technology was primed by the insertion of a finger into a hole in its base. Tugged free of its own reluctance, it would suddenly drop through the trapdoor of itself to reveal a long, sticky single helix, the simplicity of which form belied its power to pronounce over life and death.

Ticker-tape our American cousins called the swirling, twirling, whirling lengths of coloured paper showered on victorious presidents and returned

astronauts—though after one has seen flypaper close up, the implications of something glamorous in such motion become somewhat less convincing.

For flypaper, let's face it, was as ugly as sin. Where the generation of bug-zapping machines that would replace it at least attempted (with their red-hot filaments, their eerie blue screens) to dispose of the bodies, flypaper seemed designed to show them off, making it the domestic equivalent of crucifixion.

And human nature being what it is, there was also undoubtedly a temptation to leave a hanging strip in situ as long as one could bear it, to see how many flies it was possible to catch, to accumulate, how many it might take to compose a living tongue of them, a temptation no doubt added to by the pressures of those earlier recessionary times.

And I remember once my older sister at the dinner table standing up too quickly, momentarily failing to pay attention to the strip of orange doom that dangled above us all, the serpent eavesdropping on our conversation. Her screams as it first glanced against, then worked itself into her hair, I can hear almost still, her screams as her struggling tore it from the ceiling and joined it more intimately to her. They were, it would turn out, a kind of keening for the death of flypaper.

For despite the oohs and aahs, the resolutions to get a pack for visiting relatives, the flypaper craze didn’t last much beyond a handful of summers. And though my mother kept spares in the press for years, she never unfurled one again, and we survived the attentions of flies in the traditional way: swiping at

empty air like mad men and mad women.

And at night, down on our knees in those years of the family rosary, we struggled to put out of our minds the images the television was bringing home to us now, bringing to us for life: the children of a land, far distant, entirely covered in flies, flies drinking from the wells of their eyes, and they without even the strength to shoo them away.

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