

Atlantic City

by Kevin Barry

A July evening, after a tar-melter of a day, and Broad Street was quiet and muffled with summer, the entire town was dozy with summer, and even as the summer peaked so it began to fade. Dogs didn't know what had hit them. They walked around the place with their tongues hanging out and their eyes rolling and they lapped forlornly at the drains. The old were anxious, too: they twitched the curtains to look to the hills, and flapped themselves with copies of the RTE Guide to make a parlour breeze. Later, after dark, the bars would be giddy with lager drinkers, but it was early yet, and Broad Street was bare and peaceful in the blue evening.

The youth of Broad Street and its surrounds had convened in a breeze-block arcade tacked onto

Moloney's Garage. This had been one of Moloney's sharper moves. He'd taken an old shed that he'd used for a store room, it was maybe forty foot long and half as wide, and he'd installed there a pool table, three video games, a wall-mounted jukebox and a pinball machine. To add a note of local pride, he'd painted the walls in the county colours. It wasn't much of an arcade, with just the clack and nervous roll of the pool balls, and the insipid bleats of Donkey Kong and Defender. There was high anxious talk about girls and handjobs and who had cigarettes, and there was talk about cars and motorbikes. It wasn't much at all but it was the only show in town and this evening, a dozen habitués had gathered there, all boys, from pre-pubescent through to late teens, and there was desperation to make this a different kind of night, a night to sustain them through the long winter. But so far it was the same old routine, with Donkey Kong and Defender, and winner-stays-on at the pool table, and James was always the winner, and he always stayed on. The pinball machine lit up and crackled to salute a good score. Its theme was the criminal scene of Atlantic City, and the illustration showed a black detective, with a heavy moustache, patrolling in a red sports car, and whenever the day's hi-score was achieved, the detective's eyes lit up and he spoke out, in a deep-voiced, downtown drawl.

He said: 'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

This was James's cue to leave the pool table and approach the pinball machine. At nineteen, he was the oldest of the habitués, and certainly the biggest. Not fat so much as massive, the width of a small van across the shoulders, and he moved noiselessly, as though on castors, and the flesh swung and rolled with him, there was no little grace to it, and he considered the breathless, blushing youngster who'd achieved a new hi-score on Atlantic City, and he considered the score, and he said:

'Handy. Handy alright.'

With a long-suffering sigh he reached deep into the pocket of his jeans and took out the necessary coin and inserted it in the slot. The silver balls slapped free and he pulled the spring-release to send the first of them on its way, and it bounced and pinged and rebounded around the nooks and contours of the game, around the boardwalks and the neon boulevards, and wordlessly, the habitués of the arcade swivelled their attention from the pool to the pinball, for the magic had shifted to a new discipline, and cigarette smoke hung blue in the air, and it twisted as they turned. It was a matter of pride to James that he wouldn't let even one of the silver balls drop between the flippers to the dead-ball zone, and he worked the flippers with quick rhythmic slaps from his fingers and palms—an expert—and his score rolled onwards and upwards. The habitués were hypnotised

by the ratcheting numbers, and James knew precisely when he'd made the day's hi-score and he drawled it deep, in time with the black detective:

'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

Then, with the silver ball still pinging and rebounding, and the score climbing still higher, his routine was to become Stevie Wonder. He closed his eyes and clamped on a delirious smile and rocked his head wildly from side to side, and he sang:

'Happy Birthday... Happy Birthday to ya...
Happy Biiiiirthday...'

And the arcade rumbled with the usual low laughter, and as James sang the blind star's signature tune and rocked his head on his huge shoulders, beaming blindly to the ceiling, he let the flippers miss the first of the silver balls, and he released the second and let that drop too, and then the third, and all the while he maintained the delirium of a blind ecstatic. Then he returned to the pool table, took up his cue, and said:

'Right so. Where am I here?'

'You're on the reds, Jamesie.'

Beyond the open doors of the arcade, Broad Street revelled in the unexpected languor of evening heat. Broad Street didn't know itself. The evening was moving to its close, quicker now as the summer aged, but there was heat in it still. There was scant traffic.

The hills above the town darkened with the shadows of approaching night. Moloney sat in his kiosk, on the forecourt of the garage, by the pumps, and he cursed the championship reports in the weekly paper. The lying bastards hadn't seen the same match he'd seen. They were making excuses for the county side. He hadn't seen a county side as weak in years. There were fellas with weight on them. It was a disgrace. There were fellas on the county side who'd spent the winter drinking. Where, Moloney asked the walls of his kiosk, oh where was the dedication? There were no answers, and certainly none outside on Broad Street.

James chalked his cue. He performed this action with priestly nuance, a sense of ritual. He allowed a particular amount of chalk onto the tip's head, blew off the excess dust, and then, with an air of dainty finesse, surprising in a young man the width of a van, he chalked the curved sides of the tip too. A small fat pink tongue emerged from between his lips as he performed the task. It was a sign of concentration, for it was a knacky business to get it right. He wanted no moisture whatsoever in the vicinity of the cue's tip. Not on a night so clammy as this, when the arcade was fuggy with the sweat and vapours of teenagers in summer.

'So listen, Carmody,' he said. 'Are you looking at me with a straight face on you and telling me she's not ridin'?'

'All I'm saying is I don't think our friend has been next nor near. Our friend hasn't been within a million miles.'

James closed his eyes, briefly, and nodded his head, slowly. This was sombre acknowledgement of information received. His manner, as he leaned in over the pool table, was proper and studious. The great mass of his belly he arranged carefully, and he peeked beneath his chin to ensure that it was not interfering with play and thus causing a foul—if it was, he'd be the first to call it—and he formed a careful bridge for the cue between thumb and forefinger of the left hand, and he sized up a long red for the bottom left corner.

'I'm not saying for a minute she'd be an auld slut,' he said. 'I'm not saying that at all. All I'm saying is she'd be gamey. All I'm sayin' is if you could get her going at all then she'd really go for you. Do you know what I mean, Carm? She'd be like...'

His gaze drifted out to Broad Street, as he sought the precise image.

'She'd be like a little motorbike.'

The low murmur of laughter rippled again around the table's edges. Another kid was having a go at Atlantic City, there was an amount of interest in Defender, somewhat less in Donkey Kong, but there was no contesting the focus of attention. Outside, at a little past nine, the evening had gone into tawn, was in its dream-time, with the sky velvet, with the air still

warm, with the shadows taking on the precise tone of the sky's glow. As he prepared to let the cue slide, James tapped the faded baize three times with the middle finger of his bridge hand, a sportsman's tic, and with his right arm working from the elbow as a smooth piston, he made the shot. He sent the white down the table onto the red and its kiss sent the red slowly for the bottom left, and the left-hand side he had applied to the cue ball, an indescribable delicacy, caused it to drag and spin back towards the centre of the table, where it would be ideally in place for the next red he had in mind. The object red still rolled, slowly, and then it dropped into the bottom left pocket, and the cue ball's positioning was perfect, and his opponent, Carmody, tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor in stony-faced regard. And the usual hymn, the usual evensong, was sung:

'Shot, James.'

'Shot, Jamesie.'

'Shot.'

'Shot, boy.'

The hymn was ignored, was disdained. He leaned for a tap-in red to the middle right, its ease a result of his positional play, and he made it without fuss. A lesser player would be inclined to ram in the easier pots with showy force and venom, but always James played the game quietly, he would roll his reds gently home rather than slam them, he would apply no

more force than was needed, and for this reason it was exquisite to watch him play, and the arcade was hushed in the presence of his talent.

Just then, the air changed: a small troop of girls arrived in, a battalion of three. They had vinegar in them and they roved their dangerous eyes around the habituées and they were a carnival of cheap perfume on young skin and whatever summer was they'd trapped its essence and fizzed with it. The habituées developed deeper slouches, and their heads went shyly down, and they moved back into the shadows if they could, but their eyes were uncontrollable and darted up insanely for an eyeful of suntanned girl and they couldn't but wince from the delirious pain of it. All the boys became awkward like this, and thick-tongued, all except James. He laid the cue across the table, rubbed his meaty hands together, straightened his shoulders, closed his eyes, shook his head in wonderment and he said:

'Ladies? I'll say one thing now for nothing. I've seen ye lookin' well in yere time but never as well as ye're lookin' tonight.'

It was the girls' turn to be shy. His hungry gaze asked severe questions of their confidence and inside they seethed at being reduced to these giggles, this nudging. They went and staked out the ground around the wall-mounted jukebox, it was their acknowledged terrain, and they hummed and hawed over the

selections and James strode across the floor, searched for another coin in the pocket of his big jeans as he moved, and with a polite gesture of the hand moved the girls back a little from the jukebox and put the coin in the slot and selected the song that was currently at the top of the charts. He took the cue from the table to use as a microphone and he launched powerfully into song as 'Baby Jane' by Rod Stewart struck up on the tinny speakers, and he planted his feet wide on the floor, rock star fashion, and he had all the required shimmies of hip and flicks of hair, and laughter took hold of the arcade, again, and everybody was relaxed and easy again.

A farm truck pulled up on the forecourt outside, and dispensed a farmer, and Moloney shrugged out of his kiosk and nodded curtly, and received a curt nod in payment, and Moloney crossed his arms and leaned back against the pumps.

'That was some messin' below in Clancy Park on Sunday,' said Moloney.

'Shocking,' said the farmer.

'There're fellas should be shot,' said Moloney.

'Don't be talking to me,' agreed the farmer.

'You could put stones in jerseys and you'd get more out of them.'

'You nearly could.'

'But listen to me, did you have any joy with them creatures above?'

The farmer looked to the velvet sky, and he considered the vagaries of life, chance, and sheep management.

'There's no getting them down off that blasted hill,' he said. 'I'm going to have to come up with a new tactic.'

And Broad Street was on fire. The last of the evening gave out in a show of dying golds and reds. The street lamps came on. The blue flicker of television screens could be seen behind terrace windows. The summer night announced itself, with its own starlit energies. It brought temptation, yearning and ache, because these are the summer things.

James slotted a straight red into the top left pocket, and he applied top spin to the cue ball so that it rolled onto the top cushion and allowed him to line up the last of the reds. This would be tricky, because great precision was required when the cushions came into play, and he lit a cigarette to consider it. Carmody was his opponent, again, and he was all but beaten anyway, Carmody was beaten in the mind even before they began to play, but all the same James liked to win stylishly and well, he liked to make little gasps escape the habitués when he achieved the unlikely shots. He paused now to draw attention to the table before he attempted the difficult red.

'You're putting it up to me tonight, Carm,' he said. 'I don't know what's after getting into you but

you've moved on to a new level of expertise altogether. Are you practicing on the sly?'

The habituées quietened, and moved in closer, because they could sense a put-down in the making. James had gone into the familiar pose, with the head held at a slight incline, and he regarded Carmody down his nose, and there was a thin set to the mouth, and he expelled air from the nostrils with a powerful snort, and he said:

'You're practicing on the sly in the barn, aren't you? You're like...'

He put the cue down and danced a two-step.

'You're like an auld farmer hitting off to a matchmaking festival. He's had the first bath of the year. He has the hair slicked back with strong tea. He's dragged a comb through his teeth...'

The titters and giggles built nervously, as the habituées waited to see where James would take it.

'...and he's set the hens on automatic. He's worried about the dancing, of course he is, the man has titanium hips, so he's clearin' back the floor of the barn, of an evening, when the working day is done, and he's trying out a shtep.'

And he did a high-kick step in the air, and the laughter rumbled, and built.

'And he's saying what I need for myself now is... a nice good little nurse. Do you know the way? A nice little nurse from an ear, nose and throat ward. He's

always maintained a bit of a grá for nurses, because they'd be kind to you, wouldn't they, of a cold winter's night, with the big thighs wrapped around your throat?'

The girls gasped and tssked. The habituées shook their heads, embarrassed with mirth. They never knew where to look when James roamed abroad on a course.

'It's the way I see it, Carm. You're practicing on the sly in the barn, like the auld farmer, by the light of a lonesome moooo-ooooon!'

And as he crooned the word, cowboy-style, he leaned in to attend to his shot: full attention had now been secured for the pool table. He made his bridge, tapped the baize three times with his middle finger, rolled the white along the cushion, it kissed the red, and gave it momentum to move at a slow even pace, and the red yawned for a moment on the lip of the pocket, as though he hadn't given it enough, but of course he had, and it dropped.

'Shot, James!'

'Shot, Jamesie.'

'Shot boy.'

'You're a fucking lunatic, James,' said Carmody, and tapped the butt of his cue three times on the concrete floor.

'Sure I know that.'

Moloney put the petrol takings into a tin box, turned off the transistor and locked up the kiosk. He crossed the forecourt, carrying the tin box reverently, and he cursed at the weather. Ten o'clock at night and you were walking around the place in soup. He put his head around the door of the arcade.

'Ye've an hour till I close it up.'

'Not a bother,' said James.

'And keep it down a bit, for Jesus' sake.'

'Absolutely,' said James.

'An hour,' said Moloney. 'D'ye hear me?'

James laid the cue on the table, goose-stepped across the floor, threw his right arm into salute and cried out:

'Selbstverständlich, mein Kommandant!'

'And you watch yourself!'

Moloney tried and failed to keep the smile from his face, and he left them to it. This was the signal that the night was truly rolling, and for the more dangerous talk to begin. The younger of the habitués, earlier indulged, would now be pushed to the peripheries. The older ones would draw up schemes of devilment for the small hours. The girls became nervous.

'Atlantic City. Feel The Force!'

'Ah for the love and honour of God,' said James, who had been lining up the black to continue his evening-long winning streak. He crossed the floor to

the pinball, considered the new hi-score, patted his young usurper on the head and said:

'Knacky. Knacky alright. As a matter of fact, you've put it beyond my reach. Let it be known that from this moment forward, the young fella here is the king of the pinball. Give the boy a banana.'

Walking back to the pool table, James suddenly stopped, gasped, and collapsed onto his knees. He clutched at his chest. His face was frozen in a terrible grin, and it became a grimace, and he gasped out the last words...

'I... leave... every... thing... to... to... to Jamesie!'

The arcade throbbed with laughter. This was one of the most famed routines. It was James's impression of the heart attack that had killed his father on the kitchen floor.

Though the girls had become shyer, shyness can fold in on itself and be transformed on a summer night: when there is possibility in the air, shyness can say what the hell and trade itself for a brazenness. They fed coins to the jukebox and summoned a couple of slow numbers.

James saw to the black, and allowed his next opponent to step forward and rack for a new game, and he moved his great rolling flesh to the jukebox, and he said:

‘Ladies? Ye’ll have me red in the face now for the want of it. Do ye hear what I’m saying? Is there no such as thing as a bit of mercy? Ye know full well what I’m like when I hear that one. I hear Bonnie Tyler and I go to pieces.’

The younger of the habituées began to drift off, in ones and twos, and those who left early would be furious the next morning, when they learned that they’d missed the great drama of the night. A little before eleven, the squad car rolled into the forecourt of Moloney’s, and Garda Ryan got out, with a face on him like turned milk. He stood on the forecourt and regarded the arcade, and everybody crowded to the door, and he addressed them.

‘There was a windscreen of a car put in below in the square last night,’ he said. ‘Is that news for ye?’

James moved to the front of the habituées, crossed his arms sombrely, and stroked his chin with his forefinger.

‘At what time precisely, Garda Ryan,’ he said, ‘was the mechanically propelled vehicle interfered with?’

‘Watch yourself.’

‘Have you no note made of it, guard?’

‘I won’t warn you again. Believe me! I don’t care who your family is. There was a windscreen put in. That’s a hundred pound damage. There’s been other incidents. There’s been nothing but trouble since this

place was let open late. I’m marking yere cards for ye now, all of ye. I’ve eyes in my head and they are wide open. I’m not going to let this messing go on a night longer. Not a single night, d’ye hear it? I’m watching ye.’

Garda Ryan, in shirt sleeves, stepped back into the squad car, and with a flinty gaze he looked over the small group from his rolled-down window, and the more nervous of the habituées stepped back into the gloom, but it could not be left at this, and it wouldn’t be, and one of them stepped out onto the forecourt, and everybody held their breath, because it was James. He planted his feet wide, gunslinger style, and mimicked a pair of pistols with his fingers and thumbs, and he drew and aimed at the guard, and he said:

‘Atlantic City. Feel The Force!’

There were still tears and peals of laughter when Moloney came back to lock up, and Moloney had a few drinks on him, and he was convinced that he himself was the cause of the merriment, and he became narky.

‘Fleck off home out of it!’ he cried. ‘I’m seriously thinking of closing this place altogether! I’m seriously thinking of calling a halt to the whole bastarin’ operation!’

And they set off about the town. The last of the younger ones straggled home with regret, because July nights like this don’t come around too often. The

older ones caused what trouble they could, even though in a small town it was hard to work out constant variations on trouble, but they tried anyway. The summer night was warm and sweet about them, and repeated assaults were made upon the reputations of the girls. The summer would move on, and fade, there is always the terrible momentum of the year's turning. Exam results would come in. The older of the habitués would begin to make their moves. For one that would move to the city, another would stay in the town, some would take up the older trades, others would try out new paths, and one on a low September evening would swim out too far and drown, and it would be James. Laments and regrets were no use—these were just the quotas and insistences of Broad Street.

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