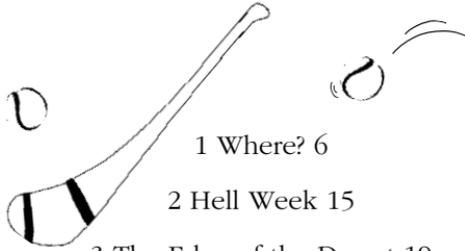


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WHERE?

Benny Shaw was built like a ferret, or so Father Barty liked to tell everybody. Short and skinny with bandy legs you could roll a basketball through. At this moment his brow was wrinkled in concentration.

The two goalposts looked like there was only half an inch between them. And there was a whole shower of grunting, hairy full backs just itching for him to make a mess of the shot. The pressure was well and truly on. Not just any old puck-about: this was the Primary Schools County Hurling Final. Saint Jerome's of Wexford facing the Christian Brothers' of Wexford. Deadly serious.

Father Barty Finn was at Benny's shoulder, muttering advice, a cigarette jiggling in his false teeth. Barty coached each game like he was standing beside Pearse in the GPO. School-work was grand, but hurling was sacred.

'Take your point, boy,' hissed Barty.

Sound advice. They were already in injury time. A point would square it. No need to risk losing everything by going for a goal. Buy a replay. Even at that, it was a knacky shot.

A sideline, ten yards out. You'd have to really get under a ball to lift it at this range. Benny could try lobbing it in to one of his team mates, but the marking was tight. Fierce-faced little terriers clashed hips, waiting for the ball to drop in the

square in front of the goal.

Benny concentrated on the small leather ball before him. He stooped low and sliced his hurley beneath it. It was a sweet shot. He knew it the instant he hit it. No flat jarring up the handle of the hurley and barely a blade of grass pulled out of the muck.

The *sliotar* arced high, loaded with backspin, buzzing above the hurley range of the defenders. Benny glared after his shot, sweet-talking it into the square. The players lowered their hurleys. It was out of their control now. The trajectory looked a bit off, but there was a bend on it, dragging the *sliotar* across the face of the goal. Too late the keeper, who was already eating a victory burger in his head, realised the danger. He whipped up his hurley but the bullet had already gone past.

A goal! St Jerome's were two points ahead. No way back for the Brothers. The park erupted. Parents danced on the benches. Schoolboys howled derision at the opposite stand. As Father Barty often said: It's not the winning that matters, it's beating the other chap.

The Brothers tried a quick puck-off to gain time, but the ref blew it up. All over. Benny pulled off his helmet just in time for Father Barty to tip ash all over his head.

'Good lad, Shaw,' he cackled. 'That'll learn those chancers.'



Benny wore the medal inside his vest. It knocked against his ribs as he ran home, reminding him of the goal. The kiddies were on the path playing kerbsie. George was there being cute. His favourite trick. Benny scowled. Just the sight of his little brother darkened his mood. Nine was too old for cute. Ma had

him this way – Jessica Shaw’s little actor, swathed in designer outfits. George actually cared about clothes. This was incomprehensible to Benny, who rarely arrived home without a few extra holes in his pants.

And George actually liked drama. He thought acting in pageants and plays was important. What was the point in pretending to be someone else when everyone knew who you were anyway? Benny didn’t see the attraction. And pictures? Why would anyone sit inside drawing some old tree when you could be outside climbing up one?

‘Mother’s looking for you,’ his brother shouted at him.

Benny grunted. Imagine calling your Ma Mother. It felt wrong in his mouth, like when you crammed a whole digestive biscuit into your gob and it hit the back of your throat. That was Jessica Shaw – always different. There was the whole name thing, for example. George and Bernard Shaw, after some old fellow who wrote plays. And she always called him Bernard, except when she was annoyed and forgot to stand on ceremony. Then it was ‘Benny’, in tones that would freeze mercury.

The car was by the gate. Da must be home from work. Time for a daily ritual. Benny hopped up on the wall, landing neatly on his own ingrained footprints. There was a side door between the wall and garage, gloss green with a cracked and peeling centre. Benny let fly. The *sliotar* sped to its target, knocking off a few more paint chips. But the latch held. This one was surviving longer than the others. Possibly Da had rigged it, just to annoy him. Might have to do a bit of midnight screw-driving.

Pat Shaw appeared at the porch. He gave Benny the obligatory glare for whacking the door, but he couldn’t hold it.

‘Well?’ He looked like he was waiting for hospital-test results.

Benny raised his medal by the ribbon.

‘Good man,’ Da said, breaking into a relieved grin. ‘Here, show me that slab of gold.’

The two Shaws came together awkwardly, both grinning like eejits. Pat chanced a hug, throwing an arm around his boy. It was more like a headlock, but Benny got the idea.

‘What score did you get?’

Benny calculated. ‘Two goals, four points.’

‘Out of how much?’

‘Two-eleven.’

Pat nodded. ‘So what happened to the other seven?’

Benny croaked out a laugh. ‘So, how come you’re home?’

His father’s humour faded suddenly. ‘Well, Bernard ... that is, Benny ... we have to talk. It’s important.’

‘I never touched him.’

‘No, no. God, I wish that was all.’

A voice floated through the hall. ‘Patrick? Is it our eldest?’

‘Let’s show your mother this medal,’ said Pat Shaw, his large hand wrapped fondly around his son’s skull.

Jessica Shaw wore a lot of masks. Two silver ones on a pendant. A couple more on handpainted ceramic earrings, and a gold brooch with four tiny cubic zirconia eyes. She collected them. Apparently the smiley chap and frowning lad represented the yin and yang of the dramatic arts. Benny had made the blunder of asking about that once. Jessica had given him a fifteen-minute lecture contrasting some characters called Falstaff and Ophelia. It was all very educational: Benny learned

not to ask any more questions about drama.

Following his dad into the kitchen, Benny lobbed his kit into the black hole underneath the stairs. His mother was seated at the table, a steaming cup of coffee before her. Inevitably, the drama masks were etched into the handcast mug. At least Jessica was easy to shop for. George, the little crawler, managed to work the motif into his art lesson every Friday. They had a shelf full of his creations. Everything from lollipop sticks to saltdough moulded to the shape of Jessica's favourite symbol.

'You won your little game,' gushed his mother. 'That's wonderful, darling.'

'It was the county final, Mam.'

'What a lovely medal! That'll give you something to remember.'

Pat Shaw's gaze dropped to the floor.

Benny didn't miss it. What did she mean, remember? 'What's the story, Da?'

His father put both hands on Jessica's shoulders. A united front was being presented.

'Let's wait until your brother gets here.'

Benny began to get worried. They weren't a group-conference sort of family. A terrible thought occurred to him.

'Is Grandad all right?'

'What? Of course ... No, no, Benny – Bernard – it's nothing like that.'

'What's going on then?'

'Be patient, darling. Here's Georgie now.'

George traipsed into the room. He was, of course, immacu-

lately dressed. Baggy beige corduroys and a white polo shirt.

All Benny's shirts were from the supermarket. Sometimes he found it difficult to both sneer at his brother's clothes and feel envy – at the same time. It took real effort.

'Ready, darlings?'

George smiled. Benny squinted suspiciously.

'Father has some wonderful news for you. It concerns us all, as a family.'

'Lotto?'

'No, Bernard.'

'You got that part in *Glenroe*?'

'No, Georgie, you darling. Those TV directors have not seen fit to call me, or to return my tape.' Jessica sniffed delicately.

Pat Shaw took up the narrative. 'You boys know we've been having some cutbacks at work.'

EuroGas had been in the news recently. Some executive salary scandal. People being let go.

'You've got stamps, haven't you, Da?'

Pat smiled, nervously. 'No, Benny. It's not that bad. It's good really, a wonderful opportunity.'

'What is?'

'I've been offered a promotion. Shift supervisor. It means moving.'

Benny blanched. 'Not Kilkenny. Tell me it's not Kilkenny. I couldn't play with the Kilkenny Cats.'

'No, not Kilkenny. A bit further afield.'

Jessica had recovered from the TV snub. 'It will be wonderful, darlings. A chance to study another culture.'

'Oh no. It's Kerry, isn't it? Sure, they don't even know how

to play hurling there!’

Jessica would have scowled, if that didn’t give you wrinkles. ‘No, Benny ... Bernard. This whole ordeal doesn’t revolve around your proximity to a hurling pitch.’

Benny didn’t care about wrinkles. He scowled.

‘My job will be to train in the locals,’ continued Da. ‘Bring them up to speed on our procedure.’ He was looking at the floor again, stalling with semi-relevant information.

‘Where, Da?’

Pat Shaw swallowed. ‘Tunisia.’

The Shaw family stared into the air as though the word was flashing there. Even George was speechless. Tunisia! Where was that? What was it?

‘Isn’t it wonderful?’ Mother’s smile would have won her, at the very least, a Bafta.

Even The Crawler was fazed. ‘Is it?’

‘Of course it is, George, darling. The company values your father’s services so much that they’re prepared to move the entire family to Tunisia.’

‘It was either that or redundancy.’

‘Pat! Let’s give it a chance.’

‘Yes. Sorry. You’re right ... it seems a really good deal. Everything you could want.’

‘Drama club?’

‘No ... I don’t think so, George.’

‘Hurling?’

‘Well, no ...’

‘I think it’s best we concentrate on the positive, everybody.’

‘What positive, Ma?’

Jessica winced. 'Ma? Please, Bernard.'

'Mam,' conceded Benny.

Da got his second wind. 'Sit down, the pair of you.'

George and Benny, puzzled, remained seated.

'Well, shut up then!' continued Da, braving Jessica's disapproving glance. 'Here's what's happening. EuroGas is in a bad way. Stocks are down. British Gas are pulling out of their slump. The domestic office can't support ...'

Pat Shaw noticed his sons' earnest blankness.

'Aah ... They're shutting the Wexford office down. So it's either Tunisia or the dole office.' That was plain enough.

Benny heard the words. He understood them individually, but they didn't seem to make any sense as a sentence. Dole? That was for other dads. For people on the news.

'So, tell us then!' said Benny.

'What's that?'

'This Tunisia place. Where is it?'

'Ah ... Ah ... North Africa.'

The Crawler began to cry. Benny, alarmed, blinked back a few tears himself. Tunisia was one of those obscure little countries on the globe that he'd heard of but couldn't quite pin down. He'd been thinking maybe Eastern Europe, one of those places that used to be in Russia.

'*Africa*, Da?'

'North Africa. They don't have lions or elephants or anything.'

'You mean we're going to Africa for the whole summer and they don't even have lions and tigers?'

Pat and Jessica Shaw glanced at each other. George was too

busy blubbling to spot it. But Benny missed nothing.

‘It’s not just the summer, is it, Ma ... Mam?’

‘No. It’s not.’

George’s tears dried up as though his tap had been turned off. Another benefit of speech-and-drama classes.

‘How long, then?’

Mam took a deep breath and gave them a reassuring smile. ‘Your father’s initial contract is for twelve months.’

‘A year!’ Someone turned the tap back on.

‘A year, Da! In some ...’

Benny was working up to a curse. It would be his first in front of his parents. He felt the occasion merited it. But by the time he’d settled on one, his nerve was gone. Jessica rushed to comfort her distraught youngest. Da rubbed his forehead, obsessively flattening the ancestral cowslick.