

# Brighid's diary: "The man was about six-two, shaven head, wearing a T-shirt that said 'Asshole with feelings'. Naturally, I was intrigued..."

One man's revealing candour contrasts with the over-amorous ducking and diving of another fellah 'with a want in him'



Brighid McLaughlin. Picture by Gerry Mooney  
Brighid Mc Laughlin

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I love watching and studying people from a distance. It's an awful auld habit I know, but I just can't help it. On Monday I stopped at the wall of the Vico Road to gaze out at the sea. A man in his fifties came jogging down the Cat's Ladder and plonked himself on a bench nearby.

I find sunglasses brilliant for this kind of surveillance and I watched him while pretending not to watch. He unloaded his rucksack and began to take out all sorts of goodies, his forehead beaded with sweat.

The man was about six-two, with a shaven head, and there was a set taut look to his mouth. He was wearing a T-shirt that said 'Asshole with feelings'. It cracked me up. Naturally, I was intrigued.

I watched as he laid out a tea towel as a makeshift tablecloth, straightened a knife and fork ever so thoughtfully, placed two strawberry Yoplait pots to his right, some salami, tomatoes, celery sticks, cheese, a white roll, two apples and a Mars bar to his left. To top it off, he had two little jars with salt and pepper, no less. The whole procedure was very precise, fastidious, almost military. I bet he's in the army, I thought. Begod, I was right.

"Yep, I joined the army at 17," he laughed. "I loved it. The only problem was I learnt how to drink pints while I was there, no fault of the army." Then after a moment's hesitation, he said. "You see, I am an alcoholic." I was surprised at his candour.

"Lots of people who leave the army find it hard to adjust to civilian life," he said, eating his celery stick noisily. "They become institutionalised in the army and, cut loose into society, they often fall on hard times. Suddenly there is no one there to tell you to adjust your tie, polish your boots. That's what happened to me."

Of course, I was glued to his story.

"Like most alcoholics," he said, "I brushed off any inkling that I had a problem. I would promise the wife I would be home at seven. Sure, I never came home at seven. Never.

"At the very end of my drinking, things started getting really rough. I would get up at 6.30am, put the keys of my car in the letterbox to stop me driving, go to the early house for 7am – and stay there until 11am when the proper pubs opened. I never drank at home."

"Did you go the AA [Alcoholics Anonymous]?" I asked.

"Of course," he said, "but I had absolutely no interest in it. I just went there to get the monkey off my back and to stop people nagging me. "All I could ever think was, 'what time is this f\*\*king AA meeting over?' I couldn't wait to tell the wife that I had been there. I was a bastard.

"God help her, she was living on a false promise for years."

I listened carefully. This lad had a lot to talk about. I was astonished by the amount of booze he said he could put away. "Sure, I'd be only warming up after 10 pints," he said. "I could knock back 20 pints a day when I was in full swing, maybe even more. "I ended up sleeping in the car. No blanket.

No belongings – just a toothbrush in the boot. “The first thing I’d do when I’d wake up is ring the barman and ask him did I leave my coat behind, knowing that I didn’t – just to find out if I was barred or not.”

“What was your lowest moment?”

“I remember it well,” he says, “I was the first customer into the early house one morning. The barman was busy bringing crates of beer up and down the stairs. He’d bought a new ghetto blaster and had placed it on the counter so the punters could hear the news. A fellow came in for a drink and admired the ghetto blaster. He thought it was mine.

“Knowing that I hadn’t got the price of a pint in my pocket, I told him he could have it for ten pound. He gave me the tenner – and I scarpered. “Unless you do the AA programme, you will never make it on your own,” he told me. “The fellowship is fabulous. People think it’s a Catholic organisation. It’s not, it’s non-denominational. I mean the AA wasn’t just made for people who believe in Christ. Members pick their God of choice, a Higher Power.” This man swears by the AA, and so do I. We have both witnessed the recovery of buddies who have battled this dire disease. And the folks I know consider themselves blessed, as do their families.

“I accidentally bumped into a friend, an ex-sergeant major who I had lost touch with for 40 years. He knew a substantial number of ex-army men and women living rough on the streets like myself.

“He directed me to Brú Na Bhfiann – ‘Home of the Brave’ – on North King Street, just off Smithfield in Dublin. “It’s run by the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel. They look after army folks who have fallen on hard times. Do you think you could give us a mention?”

Of course, I said. So any readers out there with connections to the Defence Forces who can spare a few quid, this is a great cause, and you can donate online.

“By the way,” I said, “what is your name?”

“Seamus de Santiago.”

“That’s hilarious,” I said. “Not when you have walked the 800km to Santiago de Compostela as many times as I have,” he laughed. “That has been my salvation. I have great faith.

“This September I will be walking the 800km with my friend, the ex-sergeant major, to raise money for our house in North King Street.”

Finally, Seamus de Santiago started to pack up, neatly compressing all his bits into a bag.

“Don’t forget me, Biddy,” he said.

I certainly won’t. He is a fantastic man. And guess who was waiting for him at home? His lovely, long-suffering wife. They are now as happy as bumblebees.

<https://www.independent.ie/opinion/brighids-diary-the-man-was-about-six-twoshaven-head-wearing-a-t-shirt-that-saidasshole-with-feelings-naturally-i-was-intrigued-40372222.html>