

## How Much For A Slice?

Gary Grace

Robbie was in what his friends referred to as “swaying tree mode”. This meant that the tall and slender hipster Robert was pissed, eyes barely open, not engaging with anyone but moving slowly side to side, mouthing the lyrics to a song that wasn’t playing. This was typical of Robbie and no one worried anymore that he would fall over, his tight skinny jeans acting as a solid foundation. Robbie licked his lips and left without saying a word to anyone, his stomach churning, in search of a slice. As was his ritual, this customary “Irish goodbye” came around 2 am and for a time went unnoticed as the others’ attention had turned to acquiring a few bags and finding a session.

Leaving The Workman’s bar on Wellington Quay, the crisp air of the Liffey hit his face and opened his eyes. In DiFontaine’s he was greeted with a smile from a face he knew well. Robbie left with an enormous pizza that he parked momentarily atop a bin while he dug through his pockets in search of his headphones. He didn’t have far to go back to his apartment in the Liberties that he shared with his friend Barry. He always nursed one or maybe two slices on the walk back uphill passing Christchurch then downhill past St Patrick’s Cathedral. Robbie was dramatic and always listened to classical music passing these beautifully lit monuments on this walk home. He commended himself for exiting those nights with grace, avoiding the eyebrow licking coke-fueled shite talk that lay ahead for the rest of his mates. He wanted to be somewhat fresh for training the following day

Barry would be out with his own mates. Robbie thought of his big warm bed and the soothing purring of his cat curled up on the pillow beside him, lulling him to sleep. Approaching St. Patrick’s cathedral, “Arrival of the Queen of Sheba” by Handel played through his headphones and he hummed as chewed in a jocular fashion. He was practically skipping in anticipation of the safety of home just a few short minutes away just past Fallon’s bar on the corner of New Row South. He needed to piss however and was unsure if he’d make it. Seeing that there was no homeless person occupying the alcove of the entrance to the Centz Discount Store on the corner, Robbie took this opportunity to not piss in his much loved skinny jeans. He placed the pizza box down out of harm’s way and released a steaming heavy flow.

As he rose with the box, the glaring eyes of two tracksuit-clad young lads met his. The older of the two was mouthing something to Robbie and moved closer. The younger brother, Robbie thought, hung back smoking a cigarette. Robbie removed an earphone.

"Giz a slice of yer pizza man," the older one said.

The younger lad started laughing a bit noting the confusion and the seeming helplessness of the cornered Robbie.

“Go on man, don’t be a scabby cunt, just giz a little slice for fuck sake”.

Before Robbie could find any words or offer one, the young lad lunged forward flicking the smoke with an impressive degree of precision directly into Robbie’s face, red embers flying in his eyes. This was happening in unison with the older brother smacking the pizza box out of Robbie’s hands, which opened up, slices and a garlic dip spiraling down towards the piss-soaked concrete. The older brother grabbed Robbie by the throat and pushed him up against the metal shutters of the discount store. The younger brother snatched the phone from Robbie’s hand and after a brief moment of tugging, displaced it from the cord of the headphones and took off running towards Kevin Street.

Along with a proclivity for skinny jeans, craft beers and ridiculous mustaches, the modern-day hipster has a penchant not only for watching Mixed Martial Arts but also for practicing and in particular, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. Robbie was no different from that of his clan

and at the time was training quite a bit. Drunk or not, the learned mechanics of locking up and taking unsuspecting cunts down to the ground and submitting them with a chokehold was no problem at all even for the gangliest of hipsters such as Robbie.

For the first thirty seconds or so, the older brother wildly flailed his arms and blurted out threats, something about Robbie invariably getting cut up. This serenade was brief, with Robbie on his back, he had legs and arms hooked in and applied just enough pressure to choke out the threats, which went from barks to light gurgles to nothing.

Allowing for some slight exaggeration by our aforementioned hero, it is still safe to say, knowing the area myself, that it is reasonable to think that no one happened by for quite a while at that time of night. When the older brother had given up his struggle, Robbie gave him just enough airway to breathe and speak freely.

“I’m fuckin sorry man...just let me go, I’ll get your phone back”. This went on for a while and Robbie thought the older brother might start to cry but he didn’t. It was cold. Very cold. Robbie’s piss puddle was creeping dangerously close.

A couple passing rang the Guards but didn’t stick around. Within a couple of minutes a squad car pulled up, its flashing blue light gleamed across the puddle mirroring the older brother’s wincing face. Robbie quickly and purposefully rolled the older brother over face-first into the then acrid cold piss. There were three Guards and shaking, the older brother was taken and cuffed by the lone female officer.

“Up to your old tricks, Damien,” the male senior officer said smirking.

“C’mon O’Reilly, I’m not into anthin’ anymore, this lad fuckin attacked me!”

The older brother was put into the back of the squad car and O’Reilly said to Robbie, “Garda Keogh here will take a statement from you. Have you been drinking yourself?” Robbie said that he had and after giving his statement to Garda Keogh was instructed to present himself at Kevin Street Garda Station the following day.

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The brothers were known to the guards and on entering their family home nearby, a bedside locker drawer in the room the brothers shared was found full of phones and other contraband. Robbie’s phone was returned to him after giving a detailed description of it and was advised that he could press charges if he liked but that unless he was hurt, it might not be worth the trouble. The younger brother was a minor and the older brother would almost certainly be heading back to inside for a slew of offenses he was awaiting senescing on.

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Robbie didn’t go out the following weekend or the one after that.

The next time he did venture out, no excuses for absence were given nor were any asked for. His ritual repeated as normal it seemed to his mates but Robbie had employed some imperceptible changes. This time he consciously did not *quite* as pissed before leaving, skipped the pizza to keep his hands free and walked with only one earphone in. He was listening to “The Ride of the Valkyries” by Wagner. The little bump of coke he had done was keeping him alert. Grinding his teeth, he gripped tight a newly acquired set of brass knuckles in his jacket pocket that warmed in his sweating palm. He kept looking over his shoulder, so much so that he bumped into someone right at Kevin Street. It was the older brother.

Robbie jerked his fist out of his pocket and cocked it, ready to rain it down. Robbie had fanaticized about the sound of older brother’s crunching bones for weeks. The older brother’s cheek had a fresh slice that ran all the way down it. A pink scar had bubbled up. The other side of his face had bruises gone yellow and green. He recognized Robbie immediately and glancing at the gleaming knuckles screamed, “I’m sorry man, I’m sorry...Sorry!” shielding his face. Robbie saw the fear in his face and hesitated. The older brother took off running at an incredible pace.

When Robbie got home, Barry had a load of people over. They were drinking and smoking weed off the balcony. Robbie said nothing and just went to his room. He wondered how much money you might need to owe a dealer before they might cut you. Or was it just for cooperating with the Guards? He buried the brass knuckles in his sock drawer, put in his earplugs and switched out the light. His heart was racing. He tried to have a wank for some relief to calm down but it wasn't happening. He wasn't used to the coke.

Closing his eyes he saw a crying woman in the kitchen of dilapidated Dublin flat, staring out the window, ashing in the sink, wishing her son would come home. Robbie could still hear the sound of Damien's tracksuit swishing in the wind. It was beautiful in a way, the way a saw tearing back and forth through wood or bone is. Robbie raised his right hand, barely visible in the darkened room and stared at his shaking fingers.