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The two gardaí were still struggling to pull the drunken traveller out of The Bridle's front door when they heard a *boom!* in the distance, like a bomb going off.

Garda Micky Phelan looked around and said, 'What in the name of Jesus was that?'

'Take your filthy crubeens off me, will you?' the traveller blurted at him. 'I'll report you for racial discrimination, you see if I don't.'

'Shut your bake, you're totally mouldy,' Garda Neasa O'Connor snapped at him. 'You know full well that you're barred from The

Bridle. And the bang of benjy off of you, I swear – it's enough to make a maggot gag.'

Patrick the barman came out of the doorway, wiping his hands on his apron. 'Holy Mother of God, that was one hell of a wallop, wasn't it? What do you think it was?'

'No idea at all,' said Garda Phelan. 'It was way too loud for a crow banger.'

'You're right. It sounded to me like it came from those new houses – the ones over there at Sean-áit Feirme. Let's hope it wasn't a gas main blew up. They had a ball of trouble there with gas leaks only a couple of months ago. Bord Gáis was around there every other day.'

'For feck's sake, will you let go of me,' the traveller demanded. He must have been somewhere in his mid-fifties, with wild grey hair like a bramble patch and a face so crimson with drink that it was almost purple. He was wearing a tan leather jerkin and a soiled check shirt with his belly hanging out. The front of his

baggy green corduroy trousers was dark with urine.

‘We’ll let you go, boy, as soon as we’re sure that you’re well on your way.’

‘Okay, okay. My truck’s over there, see, next to them rubbish bins.’

‘If you think we’re going to let you drive you must be Fecky the Ninth. Off you go. It’s only a couple of kilometres down to your halting site. If you don’t fall into too many ditches you should be able to get there before it starts pouring.’

Between them, Garda Phelan and Garda O’Connor managed to heave the traveller across the car park like a sackful of rotten potatoes. Once they had reached the pavement they released their grip on his arms and he stood in front of them for a few moments, swaying.

‘Curse a God on you altogether, both of you,’ he slurred, and let out a ripping two-tone burp.

‘My cat’s curse on you, too. I hope the Devil uses your spines for a ladder.’

With that, he went shuffling off down the Ballyhooly Road, occasionally stumbling, and at one point stopping and holding on to a telephone pole to steady himself.

‘Maybe we should have given him a lift,’ said Garda O’Connor.

‘What, and have the back seat soaked in Pavee piss? No thanks.’

The traveller had just disappeared around the bend in the road when they heard another boom, not as loud as the first, but still enough to make them frown at each other and then turn around. About half a kilometre away, somewhere along the Ballincolly Road, a column of thick black smoke was piling up into the pale grey afternoon sky.

‘That’s no gas main,’ said Garda Phelan. ‘I don’t know what the feck that is but we need to go and check it out so.’

The barman was still standing in the doorway as they hurried past him. He raised his hand and said, 'Thanks a million! Come along and have a scoop when you're off-duty! It's on the house!'

The two officers climbed into their squad car, slammed the doors, and sped out of The Bridle's car park with a squitter of tyres. They turned down Ballincollicie Road, a narrow hedge-lined boreen that ran south-westwards towards Dublin Pike. As they passed the new housing estate at Sean-áit Feirme with its red-brick detached houses, they could see now that the smoke was rising from somewhere further down the road. There was scarcely any wind, and so the smoke was towering up above them, higher and higher like some mythical ogre.

About three hundred metres past Sean-áit Feirme they came around a curve and saw a burning car by the side of the road. It was blazing so fiercely that it had set the hedge alight, too, so that the blackthorn and hazel