

JOSEPH AND THE AMAZING TECNICOLOUR HAT

Ms Barry only revealed to a small number, a few selected acquaintances, her first name, Majella. After all, there was no real need to be on first-name terms with people who didn't even have much interest in her in the first place. Most people talked about her, not to her, often referring to her in third person as yer one, or the eccentric spinster. Each night she escaped for a walk in the dark with her dog, heading for the station, where she could speak to the local beggar, who was always happy to listen, impartially, in return for a small donation.

That night she had been busy studying the astrological charts in relation to future dramatic events. This had kept her in later than usual, as the stars indicated much turmoil to come. The deserted streets gave her ample time to "heighten" her senses. She breathed the fresh air in, detecting a high level of dopamine due to the nocturnal sleeping patterns, and scoured the sky for stars. But the stars eluded her vision due to clouds and she heaved the usual sigh, starting what she referred to as '*Just another karmic endurance test.*'

This was because the dog, unaware of any possibility of past or future lives, merely absorbed in satisfying its primordial needs, would sniff every lamppost, wall and street corner. Moreover, possibly due to the exceptional stellar activities, Ms Barry was not feeling her usual self. At one end of the long extending lead, Leona, the dog, out of view, was sniffing at a heap of bins behind a shop, totally hidden from passer-bys, whilst at the same precise moment of time in the universe, Ms Barry hopped from one foot to the other in the cold. She extended the lead to its full length to meander around the building and reach the heat of a shop entrance, which was a challenge to her vegetarian karmatic senses as it happened to be a butcher's.

As she pondered on the unfairness of the foodchain, and flashed herself images of healthy vegan options to obscure the reality, a young couple came along and started looking into the window of the shop next-door, a jeweller's. They admired various rings, obviously for an imminent engagement.

In fact Ms Barry, for these long hauls, as she called them, had a long list of strategic spiritual evolution tasks which she enjoyed practicing when she was hovering. This also enabled her to ascend from the specifics of time and space. Blowing on her frozen fingers, as she had forgotten her gloves, she practiced her astral projection techniques, which would, a few months later, once perfected, give her the edge over competitors when her astral projection travel agency business plans took off.

She intercepted an image gliding effortlessly into her subconscious. She was sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine in her hand whilst Leona happily chewed on biscuits on front of a cosy fire. *"Did you send me that?"* she looked belligerently at her dog *"I am offended by the inferences, Leona"* she muttered but added *"maybe just one glass, then, before my usual chakra meditation."* She squeezed her eyes tight and sent the image boomeranging back to the dog, realising guiltily that now the dog would think she was on her second glass of wine. Reverse subliminal messaging. The dog didn't care as long as she got more biscuits.

The dog whimpered, a long, lingering sound in the night. Ms Barry opened her eyes. The couple were observing them with great curiosity. Ms Barry, embarrassedly, bent over the dog and whispered in her ear: *'Have you not mastered the art of delayed gratification yet? The biscuits come AFTER the walk'*. The girl stepped forward. *'What a lovely dog! And what a coincidence! I just happen to have a packet of biscuits on me? Ginger nut, do you like Ginger Nut!'*. She looked at Leona. Ms Barry grabbed the packet quickly *"Oh, yes, exactly what I wanted, I mean, what Leona wanted, thank you!"*.

Feeling quite pleased at the first small victory of the night, her large pocket full of ginger nuts, Ms Barry continued up the High Street with a lighter step, knowing synchronicity had occurred in some befuddled manner, resulting in astral nuggets for earthly consumption.

Then Ms Barry decided to practice one of her Time Warp techniques. It involved dispersing time's inclination to move forward within a linear framework. She would follow the movements of the dog: forwards for a sniff, backwards to double-check a particular spot, forwards again for a tree, a bin, and so forth. The physical world thus became confused, agitated, and the scission with time would be initiated.

At first time tried to keep up with this game: it too stood still, moved forward, then back, shimmied, twerked, but finally shivered. On a good day, it was like a lover's tango, the dog lead playing the part of their heart strings, crossing over and under, becoming entangled, intertwined. On a bad day, it could be more like snakes and ladders. the usual power struggle, dog-versus-master-versus-lead. A chink in the chain, suddenly the lead no longer tugged, dog had slipped out of collar and was leaping ahead in time, to the bit where she got biscuits from the beggar.

Although a permanent fixture, resident outside the station, Joe was untouchable. For starters he was a distant relative to the local Gardai station-master. Secondly the station staff were well aware, from both practice and theory, that it was a waste of resources to outwit Joe, as his resourcefulness had outwitted them back in retaliation on numerous occasions. The only thing they ever extrapolated were empty beer cans. Thirdly, the CCTV camera mysteriously seemed to be allergic to their presence, blanking out on cue.

Anyway, Joe had, what the commuting community called, “a pleasant disposition” which in police lingo implied he had never been vocal about donations. In fact he added colour to the otherwise bleak and grey architectural landscape, even the graffiti. And his hat, with its multicoloured patchwork design, shone like a beacon in the dark.

Many older punters, with fading eyesight, had asked him over the years if he was the same Joe as the one from the show, Joseph and the Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat. He would say no, he wasn't, with a little enigmatic smile, but most tipped him heavier because they thought his smile concealed the pain of a deeply tormented artistic soul. Although Joe weathered with time, the hat seemed to remain eternally young. He had purchased the hat on a trip, but when questioned what type of trip he was always evasive. The hat had been a premeditated choice, as it had a good lining to stash his dope in, and a high crown.

As the years passed, and the hat began to fray, Joe started patching it up, and complimented on his handiwork, he added more embellishments. Like little dangly jewellery, things like that. Eventually it became a conversation point and part of his identity. It transformed Joe's image, from the sad addict, he became the budding artist. Approachable to the upper echelons of society. Joe saw the funny side, and particularly enjoyed goading the *spinsters* on: when they enquired if he was a tortured penniless artist he would say “ah yes, but that is intentional. The longer I am tortured the better the art will be, when I eventually get around to it”.

Joe would usually wait till the last commuter train had left. Ms Barry noted with surprise it was approaching that time, putting the fast passing of time down to her warped time games. Joe, as she approached him, quickly resumed his persona reserved for eccentric spinsters with ‘baby’ dogs in tow. He was fully aware Ms Barry saw him as a sounding board, and perfected the role of the listener, riding silently on the surges of her mostly unintelligible monologue.

It involved some deviation to his inertia, which tended to gravitate and meander around the same issues of primordial needs, ie sex, dope and drink. He checked the authenticity of his fixed desperate expression quickly on his iphone, neatly concealed in an inner pocket, and cleaned his den, the empty beer cans and paraphernalia, sweeping them under a crumpled soiled newspaper. He pulled his hat tighter around his head and bent over to wipe his collection-tin clean, whilst mentally enacting his repertoire for Ms Barry.

“ ‘night Joe. I see you are on the high pro-rata ratio shift!’ , laughed Ms Barry.

Joe knew the lingo: many of the last train customers had had a few, and the pickings could be good..but he didn't let on. “Well, there won't much banter tonight. It's freezing!” He pulled his coat tightly around him and gave a shudder . “Any chance of a quid? I'll be off to the shelter soon. Don't want to be found dead of exposure in the morning.”

Ms Barry handed over a coin, the quid pro quo, a down-payment to ensure her sentences did not fall on deaf ears.

Suddenly, from the silent night a load clap of thunder erupted like an uncontrollable fart, frightening the dog, who ran for shelter through the station door. Out of the blue raindrops suddenly ravaged the street. “ I'm off!” gasped Joe, hastily grabbing his six-pack. In his rush, a gust of wind blew his hat off and it was only after he got to the end of the street and was heading for any watering hole, did the watering of his head alert him of a required retrograde motion to this trajectory.

Ms Barry had instead remained enraptured, staring transfixed at the sudden dazzling light which appeared in the jet-black sky. “There is a crack in everything. That is how the light gets in.” she muttered. But as her glance returned earthwards and she saw Leona sniffing at the discarded hat on the ground, simultaneously her peripheral vision glimpsed a flash of scorching

lightning heading for the hat with a crackle. Ms Barry reacted swiftly. “Get back, Leona!” she screamed, grabbing the dog in the nick of time.

The hat reacted quite peculiarly, shimmying and twerking, bouncing and ricocheting into the air, then recoiling, circling like a boomerang, to finally reach touchdown. It let out a jingling sound, let off a puff of white powdery smoke, then heaved a sigh and deflated like a slashed tyre. Later, Ms Barry would refer to the occurrence as a moment of divine intervention.

Joe would think she had said diving intervention. He had arrived in time to witness what he instead described as “sod’s law”, in the heat of the moment even topping his rant with “is Leona a drug-sniffing dog?”. A slip of the tongue. Not good. His thoughts were swirling, after all this was the woman who regularly proclaimed that she was downloading data from the Collective Cosmic Consciousness. The 3Cs, she called it. He bit his lip. As naïve as Ms Barry could appear, or not, depending on the way the wind was blowing, the tides were ebbing or the stars were circling, nonetheless, the dog could have uncovered enough clues.

Joe scoured Ms Barry’s enigmatic face for signs, which could defy gravity, matter, and space, but he knew that was her usual expression, and that he had to focus intently to catch any small movements. He detected a slight flexing of the jaw muscles, ruminating. This usually meant the concept was slowly diffusing through the cortex. Sometimes however Ms Barry liked to give instructions to the tongue satellite branch before receiving instructions from headquarters. Ms Barry called this premonition or telepathy. *Presque-vu* to be precise. Joe called it the brewing-tongue disease, but on this occasion what she spurted out could be revelatory. The central office wouldn’t have had time to shoot the messenger, irrespective of which office had instructed them.

Joe kept his gaze fixed on Mrs Barry. After a moment, so protracted it seemed to encapsulate the destruction of time, Ms Barry's tongue reacted. "Maybe in a past life. Mr Troglodyte" she laughed whimsically. Joe heaved a sigh of relief. She wasn't that smart, after all.

Then Ms Barry added, making Joe's eyebrows align with the indentation furrow that was embedded in his forehead from years' of the heavy hat "Ah, you let the cat out of the bag...." And pointing at the hat she laughed, with her school teacher tone of voice "Put it back on. Now I know why you wear that dirty old thing all the time".

Joe sniffed to cover a hiccup. A little flush crept over his cheeks "oh, yeah...why's that, then...Majella" he said slowly, feigning indifference, but using her first name to indicate he knew a secret, or two, and they were now bound by a secrecy pact.

Ms Barry sniffed back, also feigning indifference. But a flash, like the lightning bolt she had seen earlier, escaped from her eye and despite her efforts to frown, the corners of her mouth drooped upwards, for all the wrong reasons. After a pregnant pause she replied nonchalantly "I never realised you were bald....Joseph".