

It was a means of escape from the rain really, that prompted me to push open the door of Pete's café. Pete's face registered an almost childlike pleasure on seeing me. It is some time now since I visited this café. My smattering of Italian would have to be aired, it made his day. Perhaps it evoked in him memories of warm indolent Autumns in Napoli, I don't really know, and yet it seemed to me the singing lilt of the language could only have matured in sunshine. It seemed so out of place here in a cold wet Welsh October. "Oon packeter dee deachy, ay oona scatola dee fee am eefry!" Pete's pleasure made his responses appear like the efforts of a bad actor in a poorly produced play about Italians. "Si Si Gratse," he almost shouted, "I oona café Nero" I continue, "Me deeah dayly speechaly" he was shouting by now. A morose looking character who had entered just after me listens to all this, and his face registers the contempt he obviously feels on having to listen to two Italians blabbering. I feel I can read his mind "Italian swine, my uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, nephews boy, fought against you lot in the war". I turn to him, "Shomai, sod of a day innit". Contempt is replaced by bewilderment, "Oh ay, ay", he grins at me stupidly, "hell of a day mun, he leaves hurriedly.

I take my coffee to a table and Pete joins me. We talk of this and that, Pete is happy. Then the door opens with something of a bang, we look up and see John standing there. John is known to me but not Pete. It is just after stop tap and he stands rather at an acute angle. He orders a cup of ciffy, and joins me spilling most of it into the saucer. He looks belligerent, Pete finds suddenly that he has a lot of tidying and polishing to do, and stays firmly behind the counter. John looks at me, open and works his mouth three or four times, but only one word comes out "oz-ar-going?" He lifts his cup in the general direction of his lips. No contact made between lips and cup, the cup is waveringly returned to the saucer. I sit there wondering if he realises this, or thinks it is a good cup of coffee. He fixes me with what I suppose is meant to be a threatening stare, but reminds me of a spaniel with bad eyes. "You looking for trouble", he asks. "Well of course I am John, I always go looking for trouble". He tries to snarl, but drivels instead, and I am reminded even more of a spaniel under the weather.

He goes on and on, threat after threat, balling his fists for effect, "I'm going to smash you", he promises. I am bored by now, "Oh god no John, you've discovered my secret, you know I'm made of glass". I want to leave but wont because of Pete's obvious terror. "Shall I put him out Pete" I ask, but I don't rally want to get involved. Pete turns up the radio

and he pretends he can't hear. John sits glaring and grovelling while Swansea sound spins out some sentimental rubbish. John listens with his mouth hanging open. The record ends and with it John's aggression. He looks near to tears. "I'll never forget you Terry, you saved my life on the Skewen job". I'm bored to tears now. "Think nothing of it John, it's a habit of mine saving lives" He rises, tries to embrace me, but only succeeds in knocking over two chairs and ending up on the floor himself. The radio blaring, Pete not knowing what is going on. Obviously he is thinking his café is about to be wrecked. He disappears below the counter. Whether he is on his knees praying, or has fainted I don't know, but check. I see his fingertips on the counter edge, and looking over find he is couching out of sight.

I at last feel anger at John, who has reduced such a gentle character as Pete to this object state. "At goomba, comesta", I say to the top of Pete's head "Baeno Baeno" he responds rising like the phoenix, on realising I had survived the terrible onslaught of poor old drunken John. I help John to his feet and take him outside, we walk to the nearest wall and I prop him there, the pouring rain will help sober him. I leave him, he is talking about God.

Terry Hetherington's Stories of Melincryddan

A walk through Melin streets, a visit to a corner shop, Public House, in fact anywhere local people were to be found in numbers, a character would be met. Colourful, devious, vociferous, intense, characters, they were part of Melin life:

"Jim fag end" was one such. During the thirties he earned this title, at the annual Neath fair. Jim was pressed against the raised stage by the large crowd watching the performance of a firewalker. The exotic artist walked barefoot over the glowing coals without apparent harm. At the end of his act he came to the stage front. To take a bow. It was then that Jim stuck the hot end of his woodbine between the dusky gentleman's toes, and gazed in amazement as the recipient of his kind gesture leapt high in the air frantically trying to shake loose the errant woodbine, accompanying his strange dance with yells of agony.

Outside the Gwyn Hall in the centre of Neath stood the huge statue in bronze of Howel Gwyn, who was deemed a past benefactor to the Town. He stood there in all his glory, finger pointing to the house opposite, which had been his birthplace. On the numerous occasions a yo-yo was seen to be hanging from the pointing finger about 20 feet above the ground, one could be sure "Jim fag end" had sailed forth from the Melin that day. As a matter of interest Howel Gwyn now stands in Victoria Gardens, free at last of Jim's ministrations.