**My Whiffenpoof**

*Bradley Burt, Fort Myers, FL*

The young lad’s voice was pleasant enough, if a tad off-key here an’ there, an’ he held his beer-drinkin’ audience rapt as he sang his mournful song.

*To the tables down at Mory’s, to the place where Louie dwells,*

*To the dear old Temple Bar we love so well,*

*Sing the Whiffenpoofs assembled with our glasses raised on high,*

*And the magic of our singing casts a spell…*

“What’s a Whiffenpoof?” old Angus McKinnon yelled rudely, slammin’ his empty glass down on the scarred table in front of him, half-cut already, though the night was young. “Sounds like a *fart!* One o’ them SBD ones!”

The lad stopped singin’, joined in the laughter that greeted McKinnon’s pronouncement, then asked, “SBD? What’s SBD?”

“Silent but *deadly!”* McKinnon’s wife cried, pointin’ at her husband, beckonin’ to me for another round as the laughter erupted again throughout the smoke-filled room. “An’ that’s ‘im alright! That’s me Angus!”

“Quiet, ye lot!” I shouted from behind the bar where I’d been drawin’ another tray of drafts. “Let the boy sing his song! Lord knows he’s come a long way to be with yez all!”

Indeed, he did look more a boy than a man---sittin’ there in his wrinkled, khaki uniform, the cuff of one sleeve pinned to his left shoulder where his arm should have been---the only one to return of five village lads who had marched proudly to the train station two long years ago, off to fight the foe for King an’ country.

The polished medal at the end of the ribbon ‘round his neck testified to his gallantry an’ sacrifice---the Victoria Cross, awarded for valour in the face of the enemy, the highest military award the nation could offer. It had been presented by none other than old King George himself, in front of the Grenadier Guards arrayed on the Mall in all their pomp an’ circumstance. An’ me, I’d been there to witness it.

“Let him sing!” I cried once more into the clamour, an’ it subsided quickly as Jimmy took up his song again.

*Yes, the magic of our singing of the songs we love so well---*

*‘Shall I Wasting’ and ‘Mavourneen’ and the rest---*

*We will serenade our Louie while life and voice do last,*

*Then we’ll pass and be forgotten with the rest…*

The eyes of almost everyone were fixed steadily on the lad as he sang, the words an’ melody castin’ a solemn pall over the room. Those who weren’t lookin’ at him were starin’ emptily into space with that haunted, thousand-yard stare I used to see in my Robert’s eyes after he came home from fightin’ the Boers in ‘02. He never spoke of the war’s horrors, poor broken man, nor of the comrades he’d lost, but I knew they’d remained with him ‘til the day he died. An’ then, without so much as a fare-thee-well, he was gone off to be with them again, forever this time.

I’d held on to the business after he passed, *The Heather & Thistle* bein’ the only home I had, an’ the only pub for miles ‘round---a gatherin’-place as sacred to its patrons in its own way as the Church of England ever could be. It was a tough slog for an old woman on her own, but now the boy was home.

When the singin’ paused again, Sean MacPherson spoke softly, insistently, into the silence. “Aye, Jimmy, sing to us some more! Sing the chorus for us!”

The lad drank deeply from the new pint I’d set in front of him, wiped the foam from his mouth with his one hand, an’ when he started in again, many of the assembled joined in, the words as familiar to them as the weatherbeaten faces greetin’ them in their mirrors every mornin’---

*We’re poor little lambs who have lost our way,*

*Baa, baa, baa!*

*We’re little black sheep who have gone astray,*

*Baa, baa, baa!*

*Gentlemen songsters out on a spree, doomed from here to eternity,*

*Lord, have mercy on such as we,*

*Baa, baa, baa!*

My tears, unbidden, bounced an’ glistened on the polished, wooden surface of the bar, an’ I scrubbed ‘em away furiously with my rag. Most of the grizzled, old warriors who’d been singin’ along were weepin’, too---silent tears trackin’ down their ruddy cheeks, only to be captured an’ lost in their gray, scraggly beards, just like their innocent youth had been torn from ‘em by the long-ago battles they had fought for our fadin’, once-glorious Empire.

“As if the sacrifice were bloody worth it!” I muttered uselessly to no one.

In the silence that blanketed the normally-boisterous room when the song ended, Jimmy stood up, tossed off the rest of his pint, waved shyly to the crowd, then walked wearily over to the bar. “I’ll be headin’ up now,” he whispered, offerin’ me that lovely smile he surely got from his daddy. “Shout me up when yer closin’, an’ I’ll be back down to help.”

“Sure, an’ I’ll be doin’ that very thing,” I said, knowin’ full well I would not. The boy was bone-tired, I could tell, an’ needin’ his sleep---if sleep would come. I watched as he mounted the narrow staircase, his steps heavy, his one hand on the balustrade, his chin sunk low on his chest. I couldn’t see his medal, but I know it weighed heavy on him. He’d have given it back in an instant if it meant the return of his fallen friends.

“He’s a good lad, our young Jimmy!” Liam Dewar shouted, his half-empty pint raised high. “A noble warrior, an’ a damn fine singer!”

“Three cheers for Jimmy!” Molly Malone cried, a bit unsteady on her feet, tryin’ not to show it. She’d had a shine for Jimmy since grade school, but she was not my cup of tea! The crowd joined in, as did I---*Huzzah! Huzzah! Huzzah!*

An’ then another song broke out, this time led by the lovely, tenor voice of the vicar, the Reverend Alastair Holmes, an’ everyone took up the tune---

*It’s a long way to Tipperary, it’s a long way to go,*

*It’s a long way to Tipperary, to the sweetest girl I know…*

An’ I couldn’t help thinkin’ on the long way home young Jimmy had taken---that awful journey from carefree boyhood to the blood-soaked trenches of France, an’ back again---mutilated an’ scarred, perhaps for all time. An’ for what? For three cheers an’ a piece of tin around his neck?

My tears began anew, but they were tears of gratitude this time---gratitude that, unlike so many other mothers’ sons, Jimmy was home again.

My Whiffenpoof.

My boy.