

Damien Lane



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If I were a preacher, I tell you what, I'd save a million souls

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For the sake of heroes on wards don't falter now



VICTIMS ... children

STATE DID NOTHING TO STOP ABUSERS

I GREW up in the 1970s. My childhood was one of freedom and colour.

But that was because of my father and mother.

Outside my family and the world of my friends, official Ireland was a grey place.

In fact, the drabness is what remains in my memory the most.

We went to school dressed head to toe in grey. Christian Brother grey, gabardine grey. The only thing not grey, the black boots, the blackboard and the black, unloving eyes of your teachers.

Sadists, if I'm honest. And allowed to operate with impunity by a state that handed the Church control of its children.

The Mother and Baby homes were allowed to exist and flourish.

Misery, hidden from view, problems swept under the carpet.

Well, the reckoning for that past is upon us.

It's the Church that should pay as much as the state.

But it won't. Our governments haven't had the backbone to demand of the priests and the nuns that they pay for their sins — not in words of contrition and prayer but in hard cash and buildings.

The suffering of children under their black hands demands it.

SCHOOL OF LIFE IS SO VITAL

IF you've school-going children, don't fret about their education.

They are resilient creatures, kids. They learn in spades despite, not because of teachers, in many cases.

And it's their parents they learn most from. Not because they help them with their sums and foclair. But because they love them.

Now they're home for the month of January, let them enjoy their freedom. It will do them no harm to be out of class.

Best thing you can do is to read to them each evening before bed. Imagination and love make a child flourish.

Don't stress about them being left behind. This will all soon end and they'll not have a scratch on their souls. So, parents, be kind to yourself.

MY only time out of the house this dark January is for long night walks through the deserted streets.

Me and the gloom, punctuated at frequent intervals by the blue strobe lights of the silent ambulances.

They don't need sirens to navigate the roads — there's no traffic to disturb their journeys to and from the hospitals now Christmas is a bitter memory.

The stillness of Ireland under lockdown Part III is a far cry from the agonies unfolding in the bustling corridors of our hospitals, where battle with Covid is reaching its most dangerous phase.

I can't begin to imagine the effects on the soul, both short and long term, of working face-to-face with death every day.

But that's what they do, our selfless doctors and nurses. They wage war with death to save as many lives as they can.

The effects of toiling as many as 15 hours a day on the frontlines during this pandemic can never be truly quantified.

Cause and effect takes time to work out. But an image I stumbled upon during the week, and printed above, serves to illustrate just how hard the job is.

Eight nurses, from a hospital in Italy, peel off their masks at the end of their shifts to reveal the scars of battle.

The mask strings have dug into their faces, leaving bruised and bloody lines.

The post to social media is simply titled: 'The Female Influencers'. It is a powerful composite image, one that, in its haunting beauty, encapsulates the bravery and sacrifice required to enjoin Covid in battle.

It's the nurse's eyes that get me the most. They are eyes that have seen all there is to see in the world. Colourless, black for having shaken the devil's hand too many times. What they have gone through on one shift, many of us will never experience in an entire lifetime.

Unquantifiable. Young in their souls carry burdens that make them wise. Nothing will be a mystery to them again for the rest of their lives.

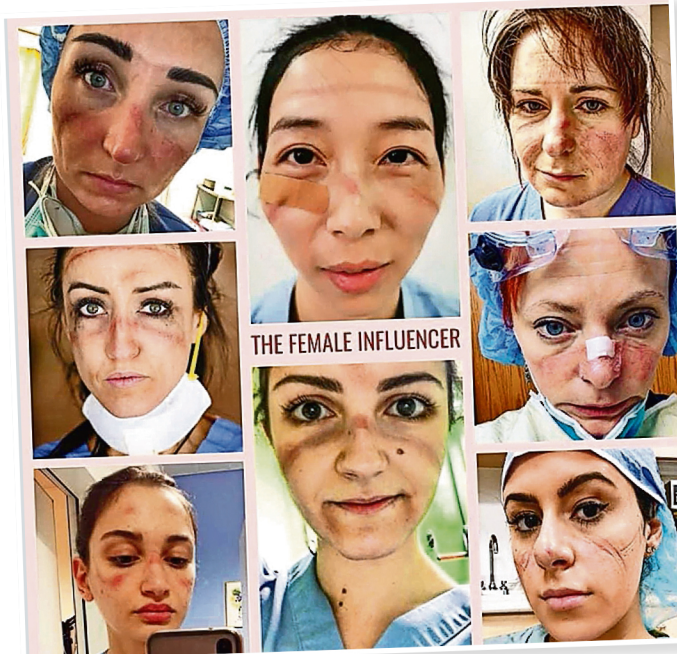
If the faces of these angels on our shoulders doesn't move you to redouble your efforts to battle Covid with all the fibres of your being in this third perilous wave of the pandemic, then nothing will.

You are lost and there is no salvation for you. You have a stone heart and an empty head. Turn the page and never come back. If your resolve is strong, read on.

Imagine our fight against Covid as an inch-by-inch shuffle across a tightrope slung between the north and south rim of the Grand Canyon.

We are three quarters through that daunting journey to safety. And now is not the time to throw a wobbler, look down and give up. Now, is the time to stand tall, take a deep breath and find a way to get to the end.

First things first. Those on the frontlines need us all, now, more than ever, to stay at home all the time. Doing so, will stem the flow of Covid casualties flooding into our hospitals. Yesterday, the HSE ordered



BATTLE SCARRED ... medics show marks of war with Covid-19

hospitals to treat the current Covid surge as an "emergency situation" by suspending all non-urgent work and escalating the discharge of patients "with immediate effect".

By Monday, the HSE predicts more than 2,200 people will be in hospital with Covid. More than 220 of these will require ICU care, surpassing for the first time the number of Intensive Care beds in the system.

The number of people dying from Covid is rising too. Chief Medical Officer, Dr Tony Holohan has warned that while there are signs that the new lockdown has

and while initial supplies are small in number, it adds to the surging optimism surrounding the vaccination programme.

By January 29, the Oxford/AstraZeneca shot will be approved by the European Medicines Agency. Its arrival on the scene will mean a massive increase in vaccinations in February and March.

Unlike the Pfizer and Moderna vaccine, the Oxford doses can be stored in normal fridges, meaning GPs, pharmacists and local health clinics can administer the job.

Added to that are plans, currently under way, to set up mass vaccination centres around the country, where you can rock up in your car to get the needle.

January 29 — circle it on your calendar. That's the day when the dark days end and hope springs forth.

Last week, I set the Government the target of vaccinating one million of us by St Patrick's Day. Just seven days later, that goal looks increasingly conservative, such is the speed with which the vaccine roll-out is evolving.

Yesterday, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly said four million of us will be vaccinated by the end of September — that's 80 per cent of the population.

By the end of the summer, everyone who wants a shot can get one.

And the good news keeps on coming. Yesterday, the journal Science reported that as soon as we immunise a significant proportion of the population (60 per cent minimum), Covid will turn into a virus no worse than the common cold.

It will continue to infect people, but the vaccine, or previous exposure, will essentially render it impotent. Our immune systems will fight it without us knowing we've even been infected. Soon we will fill our cups with joy again and consign the nightmare to the attic of our thoughts.

So, today, as January creeps towards the end, sit up straight in your chair, take a deep breath, curl your lips upwards in a smile, close your eyes and picture all the good things that are to come.



IMPEACHED ... Don

REPS BAD REP AFTER LOYALTY TO TRUMP

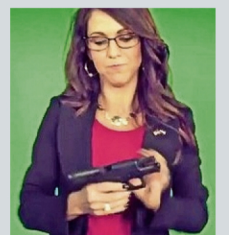
BUBBLING away in the swamp under Donald Trump's (small) feet are the Republican acolytes who've clung to him like limpets through thick (mostly) and thin.

Rapidly, and rightly, impeached this week by a vote in the US House of Representatives for 'inciting violent insurrection', Trump was still backed by 197 of the 207 Republicans in that chamber.

Among the Forever-Trumpers are a cohort of newly-elected young representatives, who revel in their master's anti-establishment messaging. They don't care much for legislating. Creating offence is their thing.

One such political vandal is 34-year-old Lauren Boebert, who faced calls to resign last week when she posted on social media the whereabouts of Democratic rivals, including the Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, as the Trump mob stormed the Capitol.

Boebert also likes to



GUN FAN ... Boebert

cradle AR-15 assault rifles and last week videoed herself walking to Congress, pistol holstered in her waist.

Boebert launched her campaign to be elected last September by warning one-time Democratic Presidential hopeful Beto O'Rourke to take his hands off her guns.

She stormed: "I was one of the gun-owning Americans who heard you speak regarding your, 'Hell yes, I'm going to take your AR-15s and AK-47s.' Well, I'm here to say, 'Hell no, you're not.'"

It got her elected. Her sort are the ones kicking and screaming for Trump as he goes down in ignominy as the first US President to be impeached twice.

But as Trump fades from the political stage, the treachery and vandalism he brought to the heart of the Republican establishment will live on, poisoning the party of Abraham Lincoln. That is, until it purges itself of the Trump apologists and cheerleaders like representative Boebert.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH



RENTAGHOST was the height of sophistication when it came to kids' TV in the late 1970s and early 1980s, if you had pipe TV and could tune in to BBC. Luckily, my folks had it so instead of RTE, which screamed 'Go to the Pub' every time it came on air, we got to watch shows such as Grange Hill and Rentaghost, which featured the medieval jester Mr Claypole. Mr Claypole brought to mind Trump QAnon lickspittle, Jake Angeli, the moron who dressed up in horns and a bear skin to lay siege to the US Capitol. (Thanks to @ScotsFootyCards)

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Speed is of the essence.

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ADMISSION... Minister

TIME TO GROUND TRAVEL

MORE than 10,500 people flew into Dublin Airport last week, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly admitted this week.

All of them 'essential' travellers, no doubt. That's an astounding figure, given that we are in the middle of the most dangerous phase of the pandemic.

Two weeks ago I urged the Government to get its mandatory quarantine legislation passed as quickly as possible. It chose to sit on its hands. The debate in the Dail has barely started and this time two weeks it's unlikely to have passed into law.

That's four weeks of inaction. Which shows staggering incompetence. The greatest threat to the nation's health currently is the importation of Covid variants.

By NOT forcing ALL incoming travellers to quarantine for two weeks in a State-supervised hotel, at the travellers' expense, we are risking a fourth wave of disease and death.

Arguments over exactly who should quarantine and who should police it are trivialities. No one cares.

What's of utmost urgency is that mandatory quarantine legislation is enacted fast.

GOVT AT RISK OF FALLING

THE grassroots in Fianna Fail and Fine Gael are up in arms at the Government's shambolic handling of the pandemic. Both parties held their parliamentary party meetings on Wednesday night, hours after an opinion poll showed just how low the governing parties had sunk in the public's esteem.

'Disgraceful' was how one party stalwart described Micheal's performance since Christmas. You'd want to be lobotomised to disagree.

The rank and file are spitting feathers and rightly so. The only thing that will save them from an annihilation at the polls is the speedy rollout of vaccines so 'mid-summer' can be saved.

If the pubs, restaurants and hotels remain shut come July 1, the Government will fail.

You had better give us our jab... or you'll both be out of a job

SIX more weeks in the can, at least.

Not a whiff of freedom in the air. Weary arms, legs and head still in the stocks. Trapped for a further dollop of gloom in the lockdown that has blanketed our lives like a thick, dark shroud for the last 12 months.

I'd capture the mood of the nation better if the Government renamed its Living with Covid plan, the Living Like Zombies scheme. That's what it is unless you go to school, or work in one. Heaven protect you.

The only deviation from the drudgery in the Government's strategy to end the pandemic — the reopening of schools this Monday. Opening them now is like playing in the final of a poker tournament in Las Vegas in just your underpants — no cards up your sleeve. The greatest of gambles.

Some 330,000 pupils, including more than 250,000 aged between five and eight, will be in the classroom three days from now. They will be joined on Monday by more than 65,000 Leaving Cert students.

Two weeks after that, on March 15, tens of thousands more pupils, fifth years, will be allowed back in the mix.

Then, after Easter, which this year falls on the weekend of April 5, the plan is to have all schoolkids back in class. All told, that's one million people packed together like sardines. Are they mad?

Three months and more than 1,400 deaths after the decision to open up society so we could have a "meaningful Christmas", the Government has decided on a further risky roll of the dice.

In his speech to the nation on Tuesday, Micheal Martin reasoned that they simply had to reopen the schools for the "mental health of students, and parents alike". A noble sentiment, infused with danger.

He said getting pupils back in the classrooms in stages would be dependent on how the virus behaves in the weeks ahead. No one knows what will happen. And that's why it's a supreme gamble.

The virus is waiting for any crack in our armour. The reopening of schools might well provide the opportunity it needs to gain the upper hand again.

It will be by sheer luck (and the hard graft of teachers at the coal face, not the hand sanitiser in school corridors) that we dodge a fourth wave in the weeks ahead.

We can only hope that the Government's hunch that 'schools are safe' turns out to be the case — and their wager pays off.

If it doesn't, we could well be back to where we were just after Christmas when the virus had us in its noose-like grip.

We have managed to climb down from the dizzying heights of 8,500 cases a day in early January, but we are not at levels where we can be confident about opening any sector of society, including our schools. Not by a long shot.

The highly transmissible B117 variant is still infecting an average of 700 people a day. Progress has been made, but we do not have the pandemic under control.

Cases are surging in the 19-24 age group. Latest figures show an average of



LOT OF PROMISES... Micheal and Leo better come through

512 cases per 100,000 in that cohort — DOUBLE the rate of infection that exists in any other age group.

Among school-going kids, case numbers are still too high to be considered no risk. Infections among secondary pupils, aged 13-18, are an average of 234 per 100,000. It's at 164 per 100,000 among primary school kids and 186 per 100,000 in pre-schoolers. For comparison, the national average stands at 240 per 100,000 people.

I don't want to appear to be banging a lonely drum, but let's reiterate the science. Last week, I wrote how NPHE's US equivalent, the Centre for Disease Control, has recommended schools in communities where the Covid case rate is above 50 per 100,000 people should stay closed.

The safe threshold for school reopenings in the States followed a study that found a correlation between high rates of infection in the community and increasing transmission when schools were open. Here, not one parish in the entire country is below the safe threshold of 50 per

100,000. In fact, NOWHERE in Ireland is below 120 per 100,000. Somehow, though, our schools are 'safe'. Mmm.

One of Martin's stated reasons for further lockdown is so we can drive down case levels in March. How can you do that if as many as 500,000 kids are mingling in schools with no specific mask mandate and a variant is circulating that is 70 per cent more contagious? If the Taoiseach pulls off the reopening of schools without driving up infections, it will be a miracle worthy of the loaves and the fishes.

His Living with Covid strategy is two-fold. On the one hand, it depends on a huge slice of good fortune in the classroom; on the other, a significant ramping up of vaccinations in the coming weeks. Micheal and Leo Varadkar have their fingers crossed in their trouser pockets.

As he delivered the grim news of further weeks of lockdown, the Taoiseach had to throw us a bone. The one he lobbed in our direction was well-gnawed and lacked any real nourishment. It was the marrowless bone of hope.

Hope came in the form of a cast-iron promise, that by the end of April — just nine weeks away — 47 per cent of us (that's 2.4million) will have received at least one shot of vaccine.

Currently, just 240,000 of us have had at least one shot. So it was a brave target to set. The Taoiseach went on to promise that by the end of June, 82 per cent of the population, more than 4.2million of us, will have had a vaccine shot. He was either on the turps when he made those promises (highly unlikely, because he doesn't drink) or he knows something about vaccine supply the rest of us don't.

The greatest optimist among us must be sceptical. The current rates of vaccination would suggest the figure of 2.4million shots by the end of April is fanciful. It would mean we'd have to inoculate 39,000 people A DAY between now and then. Doable? To put it in context, it's four times what we're doing now. If Martin's promises turn out to have no basis in reality, he's in serious political trouble.

He wasn't alone in making grandiose pledges to the nation. Less than 18 hours later, the Tanaiste emerged to repeat the very same vaccine undertakings.

The pair of them are now hostages to fortune. And I, for one, am going to hold them to their promises. There can be no more excuses in the tortuous weeks ahead. They better come up with the goods.

You have promised enough vaccines for ten million people. Now ensure those pledges are delivered in full.

I expect that by the end of June ALL pubs will be back open. Every restaurant in Ireland will be filled to the brim with the best of food and drink, ready to be devoured by a ravenous nation. The nightclubs will be bouncing too, pumping out banging tunes until dawn as we celebrate the end of Living Like Zombies.

There can be no more lockdowns. Martin assured us on Tuesday: "The end is truly in sight." He better be right. Because, if any of the promises made are broken, both he and Leo will pay the heaviest price. It will be their Waterloo.



TWIST... gargoyle

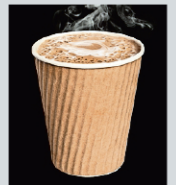
WORDS THAT ARE LINGO IN PLACES

EVERY year the Washington Post asks its readers to send in alternate meanings for common words in their neologism contest.

This year's entries were particularly impressive, so I felt I should share them with you.

Here are the best 14, ranked in order of popularity, but not necessarily in order of brilliance.

- 1 Coffee (n.) — the person upon whom one coughs.
- 2 Flabbergasted (adj.) — appalled over how much weight you have gained.
- 3 Abdicate (v.) — to give up hope of ever having a flat stomach.
- 4 Esplanade (v.) — to attempt an explanation while drunk.
- 5 Willy-nilly (adj.) — impotent.
- 6 Negligent (adj.) — described a condition in which you absently-mindedly answer the



BREW ARE YA?... Joe

door in your nightgown.

- 7 Lymph (v.) — to walk with a lisp.
 - 8 Gargoyles (n.) — gross olive-flavoured mouthwash.
 - 9 Flatulence (n.) — emergency vehicle that picks you up after you are run over by a steamroller.
 - 10 Baldersdash (n.) — rapidly receding hairline.
 - 11 Rectitude (n.) — the formal, dignified bearing adopted by protologists.
 - 12 Pokemon (n.) — a Rastafarian protologist.
 - 13 Circumvent (n.) — an opening in the front of boxer shorts worn by Jewish men.
 - 14 Frisbeetarianism (n.) (back by popular demand) — the belief that when you die, your soul flies up onto the roof and gets stuck there.
- If you can have any neologisms of your own, get in touch by email or tweet, above. A prize (alcoholic) for the best.

SEPARATED AT BIRTH



ONE of the most dramatic televised events of my childhood was the Spanish coup of February 23, 1981. Franco sympathiser Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero led 200 armed Civil Guard officers into the Cortes in Madrid and held MPs hostage for a gruelling 18 hours. They eventually surrendered without anyone being killed when King Juan Carlos denounced their bid to restore military rule. The fragile Spanish democracy, just two years old, was saved. I was struck this week by how much Tejero looks like Fr Stone from Father Ted.