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# Mrs. Carbonate, Mrs. Cuttlefish, Mrs. Conundrum

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## **Anthony Caleshu**

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### **MRS. CARBONATE, MRS. CUTTLEFISH, MRS. CONUNDRUM**

Patrick is singing, as he is always singing, and his voice is trying to do that Christy Moore sort of justice he can do to anything he sings. That such a deep voice can come from Patrick amazes most people because he is chinless and thin as a tin-whistle, a long-necked man who looks like he should be pipping. Today, he sounds like he is pipping:

Where is the ring I gave to Mrs. C.?  
No matter where I roam  
It's with her I want to be.

Patrick stops singing when he enters Rod's shop and says, 'Morn-ing Rod,' drawing out the syllable as if to start another song.

'See Carly's walking,' Rod says.

On the shop's broad pine slats, Carly takes a wide stance and begins running the length of the short aisle. At the end, she turns back to see if Patrick is watching her.

'Can't go on carrying her forever now, can I Rod? Sink or swim I told the Mrs. there, and gave her a little push off.'

Patrick turns his laugh to Rod, and Carly hides her own smiling face behind one of the bookshelves.

'Go on Mrs. Calliope, Mrs. Cowtail, Mrs. Cupola,' Patrick says.

It's been a month since Patrick has stopped into Rod's, just down from Andrew Square in South Boston, for a browse before he heads to the street stall market for a potato and carrot curry with Carly. The smile that usually runs across his face is stretched and lopsided, as if he's been snagged by a fishhook.

‘Haven’t seen you in a while,’ Rod says, ‘Any news?’

‘Besides Mrs. C’s new found land legs, nothing strange at all,’ Patrick says, stooped as if carrying a heavy load. When he sees Rod looking at him, he straightens his back until, in his old brogues, he stands his full six foot one.

‘Have you seen my friend John lately?’ Patrick asks. ‘With the black hat and the leather jacket?’

Rod has known John since well before Patrick, since he began buying books from John over ten years ago.

‘He left me in these books last night,’ Rod says. ‘I told him to stop in today and I’d have a price for him.’

John buys his books in charity shops then sells them on to second-hand dealers for a few euro profit. Every once in a while he’ll find a first-edition and make a bit of money.

‘Always on the look out!’ Patrick says. ‘Just like John!’

Rod points to the cardboard box in front of the *Fiction* section just inside the doorway.

‘I’ll tell you that John is something else!’ Patrick says as he props Carly up on the big brown and green couch. She holds a picture book in her lap and Patrick falls to his knees in front of the box, singing:

Where is the milk I gave to Mrs. Cuckoo?  
No matter where I roam  
I’m still haunted by her bottle.

For the past two years, he’s carried Carly in his arms, on his back, high up on his shoulders. She was talking long before she could walk and made her demands into the back of his head. Without her, he looks gangly, as if he’s lost too much weight. She runs to him now with arms outstretched, ‘I want curry.’

‘Mrs. Cupcake, Mrs. Carpool, Mrs. Consonant! I can’t hold you forever, go back and sit on the couch.’

When she doesn’t move, Patrick smiles, shakes his head and leads her by the hand back to the couch. He returns himself heavily to his knees and begins again inspecting John’s books.

‘Do you know John’s been thinking of going back to University?’ he says to Rod who is behind the cash register, wiping down dust jackets on the counter top. ‘He only needs one more year’s credits, but they want him to start all over again. Say he’s been out too long. A scholar and a gentleman, the most well-read man I know, and they say he’s been out too long.’

Several regulars enter and Rod nods to them.

Patrick continues, ‘John’s sure turning his life around. Back and ready to settle into some good hard study, or work, or whatever he sets his mind to. Because he can have anything he sets his mind to, anything he wants!’

Patrick pauses just long enough for the smile on his face to sag. His skin looks mealy and yellow, his eyes bloodshot.

‘You OK?’ Rod says.

‘I took John out to dinner a couple of weeks ago. Just to talk over some things. Told him it was all my treat before the meal. But when I was in the loo, you know what John did while I was in the loo? You know what he went and did?’

Rod shrugs: ‘What?’

‘He paid for the whole meal. With hardly 10 euro to his name and he pays for my meal. And it wasn’t a cheap meal! That’s exactly the sort of man John O’ Connell is. I invite him to dinner and he pays for my meal... Would you look at some of these! I imagine you’ll be giving him a fair price for a hefty box of books like these!’

Patrick holds up a mid-collection of Heaney's. A first edition, but with a library stamp on the inside cover.

'Nice all right.' Rod says.

'What'll John get for a book of this quality?'

'I haven't priced them yet,' Rod says.

'Well approximately,' Patrick says, 'Thirty? Forty?'

'I'll probably only sell it for twenty,' Rod says, then lowers his voice, 'He might get ten.'

'Ten!' Patrick roars. 'If I have to buy it from him myself, I'd pay fifty dollars for a book like that!'

Rod looks around, blushing. 'You would not,' he says quietly.

'I would too! And it seems to me, that you'd want to help a man like John. Trying to get back on his feet again, instead of taking advantage of him!'

Patrick is beet-red in the face and gesturing with his long arms at the bookshelves that line the small shop's wall when Carly slides off the couch and runs to him.

'I want some curry,' she says.

'In a minute Mrs. Curry, Mrs. Curmudgeon, Mrs. Curlicue.'

Rod takes a quiet step back in the space behind the till.

'Would you marry me Mrs. Constantinopole? Mrs. Curtain Call, Mrs. Crank Case?' Patrick says, bending down to look her in the eye.

'Marry,' Carly says.

'I can't hold you forever,' he says, 'Back you go.'

Carly bounces bow-legged across the floor. And Rod looks at the few customers looking at him. He considers himself more than fair when buying books.

‘Look Patrick,’ he says softly, ‘I’m only doing John a favor by taking these books in. I don’t even like the idea of him coming to me with books from charity shops. I’d rather people who don’t have the money be able to buy them there. That’s the whole point of a shop like that, no profit, you know?’

Patrick is still kneeling, humpbacked and crooked. He looks from Carly on the couch to Rod behind the counter. He looks as if he’s trying to stand, but then just as quickly decides against it.

Then he decides for it. He braces his hands against his knees and pushes until he’s upright.

‘I’ll give you \$200 dollars for this box of books,’ he says, reaching into his coat pocket and pulling out a thick roll of notes.

‘Patrick,’ Rod says. ‘Jesus.’

‘Not enough? \$300,’ he says, peeling off the \$20 notes and putting them down on the counter-top in front of the till.

‘Patrick,’ Rod says again, ‘What are you doing, where’d you get this money?’ -- more money than Patrick has ever had, more money than all the money he’s spent in the 10 years he’s been coming to Rod’s shop.

He slaps another series of 20s down on the countertop, ‘\$400, 420, 440, 440, 460, 480 -- \$500... I’d pay more but the bank account’s empty and a man and his daughter have to eat. Now make sure John gets his share. Half of that is John’s.’ He walks back to the box of books, stands over it and doubles down with his legs locked straight. With a grunt, he takes the box in his hands and straightens himself again.

‘John O’ Connell, the man who paid for my dinner when I invited him to dinner!’ he says.

‘Give it to John yourself if you want him to have it that badly,’ Rod says, gathering the notes and trying to hand them back to Patrick from behind the counter.

‘Mrs. C!’ Patrick calls loudly. ‘Mrs. Cat’s Claw! Mrs. Cous Cous! Mrs. Crock Pot!’ he says lifting the box into his exaggerated chest.

From the couch, Carly comes running with a picture book, ‘Daddy, I want some curry.’

‘How much for Mrs. C’s book, Rod?’ Patrick says without looking at him.

‘Take your money back, Patrick. What’re you like? What’re you doing?’

With a quick shift of his feet, Patrick lifts the box of books from the floor to above his shoulder. With his left hand he balances the box and with his right hand he reaches into his pocket for what remains of his roll of notes. His face loses all its colour. He’s dripping sweat. He’s got \$10 in a shaking hand when Anne comes running through the door. She has slammed on her brakes and parked her car in the middle of the street, just beside Patrick’s car, just in front of the bookshop.

‘Patrick!’ Anne is screaming, ‘Patrick! Where’s Carly!’

Her hair is wet from the shower. Her clothes are loose and she has no shoes.

Patrick moves quickly. He grabs Carly’s hand, but in doing so he loses the balance he’d assumed with the box of books which in turn causes the box of books to come tumbling down on top of Carly.

‘Oh Carly, come here to me Carly!’ Anne says to her daughter who is crying on the floor.

‘Mrs. Calypso, Mrs. Caterpillar!’ Patrick says as he bends to pick her up. ‘Mrs Calligraphy, you’re OK.’

‘She’s not OK, Patrick!’ Anne says, slapping at him. ‘You don’t just take her, Patrick. You don’t just take her!’ she says. ‘I was in the shower, for God’s sake!’

Carly’s cry gets louder and louder as Anne pulls her away from Patrick and tries to move her toward the door.

John, who has been sitting in Anne's car, steps through the threshold, into the shop.

'John!' Patrick cries, as he pushes past Anne and swoops Carly into an arm. 'Tremendous haul of books!'

He's reaching out a free hand to John when his back spasms, crashing him down onto all fours on the floor. Carly is sprawled a second time and wailing louder.

'Mrs. Cuckaracha, Mrs. Chorus Line. Mrs. Corn Poppy,' Patrick says, rolling himself flat onto his back. With the last of his strength, he reaches for the \$10 bill he's dropped onto the floor and with a straight arm waves it in the air.

'Mrs. Cruise Control. Mrs. Cracker Jack. Mrs. Cuckold,' he says, 'buy yourself a book', as if nobody is standing over him, looking down.