

Maladjusted Terrorist

# ***The Maladjusted Terrorist***

*A Novel*

*by Roger Boylan*

I can say Ireland is hooey,  
Ireland is a gallery of fake tapestries,  
But I cannot deny my past to which my self is wed,  
The woven figure cannot undo its thread.

**Louis MacNeice**

**“Valediction”**

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*For Dorothy*

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As that hypocritical old Russian Christian-Socialist millionaire-peasant ascetic-boozer-groper-and-father-of-bastards-beyond-the-counting-of-'em (don't laugh, your great-granda could've been one) Leo N. Tolstoy, serf-Count and author of *W&P* and *Anna K.*, never said to the missus over crackly plump sausages, black bread of the holy steppes, thick cream from the sleek cows of Yasnaya Polyana, foamy sweet Caucasian *kvass*, and/or vodka (certainly not in English, anyway):

*Oy! All happy marriages are alike, but each unhappy marriage is unhappy in its own way. (Springs onto table, dances the kazachok.) Hey! Hey!*

But he might have. And he'd have been right.

Just take the peculiar case at hand, that of Ferdia and Shirley Quain, inhabitants of the faux-Edwardian pebbledash bungalow at No. 15, Cretino Crescent, Killoyle City, in the lush, verdant, nonexistent southeasternmost of Ireland's 32+ counties. The Quains' marriage had a tendency to hit the rocks with the regularity of smokers' bronchitis in an Irish winter<sup>1</sup>, usually as the result of no obvious cause beyond tempers on the simmer for a day or so beforehand, Ferdia's layabout indolence (now that he was officially retired as Chief Archivist of the Provisional IRA, Northern Command) and Shirley's time of the month. But once they went off the rails dramatically, even for them, and it took a trip to America, and Interpol, and a sensational court trial to bring them back together again—sort of. Wait till I tell you.

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<sup>1</sup> This just in: They've banned smoking indoors and out, and word has it they're sending armed patrols down the backalleys and snipers onto the rooftops, known haunts of smokers, to hunt 'em down, in a deployment reminiscent of the Tans in '20. See below.

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It came to a head for the first time one night in front of the telly (*Bao Dai Days* on Channel 4, with special guest stars Lee Bum Suk and Nicolette Tedman). All the aforementioned elements necessary for a grand old bust-up were swarming about in the ether when Shirley, who'd been sneaking sneaky little sidelong glances at Ferdia's great-dinosaur profile, came to the epiphanic realization that her man was a) "a bloody ex-terrorist" b) "a moron" and c) "bone bloody idle."

Glaring boldly at him now, she summarized her emotions in a terse exhortation.

"Bugger off, you 'orrible Fenian sod."

His own indignant retort to this, once he'd jolted himself awake, was:

"Wha...?"

And when she'd repeated herself,

"Jesus. You're as bad as a Unionist," he spluttered.

"Well, I *am* a Unionist, as it happens. Funny you never asked. Ex-IRA indeed. Silly bastard. Go on, 'op it."

Well, that did for it and all. But this was the way of it in the marriage of Irish Ferdia Quain (of the Quain clan, long since reduced by circumstances) and English Shirley Soup (of fine old Yorkshire stock).

Ferdia moved out to his cousin Finn's place, swearing never to return, at least for a good few days.

Or several hours, at least.

"I'll teach her, so I will."

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In earnest of his seriousness he took his books (23, not counting magazines)<sup>2</sup> with him in his old Rah duffelbag, the one with the Easter lilies on one side, “Poblacht na h-Eireann” on the other; but a week later he moved back in again when Shirl was in less of a wax.

“Sorry, ducks,” she murmured on the phone. “It was my time, you know.”

“Ah sure the hell,” he said, open to anything, even the old game of forgive and forget.

But from the depths of the following month’s monthlies she struck at him again, this time ostensibly on the subject of his hypochondriacal consumption of vitamin tablets and her discovery of a secret cache of four vitamin bottles—containing gelcaps of C, D, E, and a hitherto unknown vitamin named T+, said to be excellent for the gall bladder and the cartilage of the foot area—hidden in the heel of his seldom- (indeed, never-) used Runbucko running shoes, a Christmas gift from his mother-in-law, who’d no use for them, or him.

Shirley held the vitamin bottles high, triumphantly, her eyes glittering.

“What’s this, then?”

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<sup>2</sup> Including, since you ask (he tried to flog them to me once during one among many times of want and knock-kneed need), his own battered hand-signed copy of *Vomitus I*, by Ernest K. Gand, along with, in no particular order, *That Tremendous Waistline: A Biography of G. K. Chesterton, Esq.*, by Dom Danny Boye, S.J., *Supergrass*, by A. N. Other; *Pre-Celtic Roundworms of Munster*, by Paddy O’Swiller; *The Amateur Architect’s Guide to Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, Aberystwyth and Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch*, by Taffy ApDavid; *The Lights Are Going Out All Over Terenure*, by P. Ploughman, TD; *An Ombudsperson’s Romance*, by Heber Glunfionn; *My Cheeses Are Swiss*, by Jean-Marc Salopard; *The Eyes in the Loo*, by Michael Loins-Jones; *Butter Me Up, Butter Me Down*, by Sergette Groscolot; *101 Narky Golf Swings*, by Milesius O’Molina; *Care and Maintenance of the 1976-78 Ford Escort with the 1.3 litre Engine and Unsynchronised First Gear*, by Karol “Pop” Wojtyla; *How To Ignore People*, by Eamonn Boozer-Wall; and much, much (too much) more.



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Later that night he found himself once again, vitamin- and book-heavy duffel bag in hand, at his cousin Finn McCool's door on the second floor of Lord Thomas Maher Towers, the luxury housing estate on Oxtail Place.

"This time it's permanent," he said, glumly.

"Ya never," said Finn. "Women. Sure they're a bunch of gacks, so they are. You wait. She'll come round."

They entered. Ferd flung himself at the wine rack, stocked by him during his previous sojourn for just such a contingency.

"She'll come round?" he echoed. "Yes, but will I?" rhetorically inquired he, as the double-jointed fingers of his left hand closed around the neck of a bottle of Chateau-Jaffrey '98 while with his right he sought the corkscrew.

"Ah yer arse," commented eloquent Finn.

"Fup," declared the emergent cork.

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"No, no buses here. Try a bus company. Goodbye, and don't call again, or I'll be really cheesed off—no, *really*, know what I mean?"

Donal Duddy replaced the handset, his face mottled with angst and high blood pressure as, impatiently, he explored his hollow torso in search of the tell-tale bulge somewhere in his shirt pockets of a packet of Turf Accountant Imperial Ultra-Lite Dual Hyper-Filters<sup>3</sup> . . . *Eureka!* He found one, but only one, and a poor

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<sup>3</sup> The old Turf Accountants, is it? Pardon me while I stagger briefly down *le bon vieux boulevard des mémoires*, as it were. Yes, Brother Barnabus back at Molloy College smoked those, to the a) detriment of his appetite and complexion (sallowish at best) and b) tune of dozens a day, thereby deepening and

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specimen at that, wrinkled and slightly curved downward, like a limp dick, he thought; or the trajectory of his life. (It never occurred to him, Donal being Duddy and vice versa, to turn the fag around to produce instead an upward-yearning symbol of hope, as in a bland United Nations brochure of eternally mindless optimism and beaming black faces with Crest- (or air-) brushed teeth.)

“Buggersods,” he muttered. “Shiteballs.”

Chewing the air with an obscure and nameless fury, Donal stuck the cigarette in his gob, lit it, inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, exhaled, inhaled, and proceeded in like manner repetitively for some two to three additional nerve-racking minutes, expertly alternating inhalations, intermittent expectorations, and deep-voiced exhalations (“RRRRRRnnnnnnnnaahhhh”) between mouth and nose whilst all the while contemplating (for approximately—no, *precisely*—the 25<sup>th</sup> time that day) the not-so-great outdoors, Duddy’s corner of which embraced not sun-dappled uplands nor sweeping vistas of the sea nor mighty herds of eland on the veldt; rather, a grey stone wall across the way adorned with moss, the streaked remnants of an old pop concert poster or two and (the main attraction) ineptly-painted renderings of Northern hunger strikers Sean Pease, Petey Partridge and Oinsias “Socks” MacPayne. The wall was a magnet for tourists of a republican persuasion and a subject of total indifference to Duddy, who was of no particular persuasion except neo-alcoholic. Immediately to hand, in the forefront of his vision, was a sight of greater significance to him: a carpark littered with cars, all for sale, or if not, for hire. The place had a sad, even poignant *gestalt* for Killoyle-born Donal Duddy. Laid off temporarily as an assistant lecturer in “Anglo-Irish and -Saxon Literature Studies or Whatever 101” at Downstairs State College in New Ur of the Chaldees,

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broadening the already-rich bronchial chest-music that began with the rising of the sun and lengthened steadily throughout the day until by eventide he was a walking chamber ensemble of scratchy wheezes and mucal percussion with piercing woodwind interludes, positively vying with the barking dogs next door for volume and projection of incessant sound—not that *that* stopped him from purveying Jesuitical learning, nor the zesty jests for which he was world-famous from Youghal to Skibbereen—hang on, I’ve got one on the tip of my tongue: “Lest Old Aquinas Be Forgot Cough Cough,” certainly his party favourite, and mine. Alas, poor Barnabus. The good news is that he developed a mad crush on a small West Indian cricketer and left the order in order to keep house for him. Rumour has it he’s kicked the Turf Accountants and is currently moving steadily upward in the world of London fashion; in fact, the Quant revival of the late teens was directly attributable to his influence, at least if you go by the society column in the *Daily Quotidian*, which I don’t.

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Ohiowa, he had come home again upon the death of his aged (81) father, known as “Dad,” ex-president of the Southern Counties Bank long-ill-esteemed by all; and, what with the subsequent windfall (the family house plus £70 large, give or take), Donal had soon made numerous evanescent investments in a bad marriage with Jen, a woman with the thighs and buttocks of an Aphrodite Callipygos but (in Donal’s words, screamed by him that final night in the doorway of Mad Molloy’s Poteen and Wine Bar, the new hot spot down on the Strand) “the mind and morals of Himmler—yes *that* Himmler, do you know any others? In Torremolinos, eh? Well, it’s Heinrich I’m talking about, not Nico”; adulterated drugs, impelled by the hope of seeing phantasms of the eye drawn out by the fierce chemistry of dreams into insufferable splendour (no go, just heart palpitations, a touch of eczema, and a bad case of the jigs); striped fur coats afflicted with moth-mange; fast but unreliable cars, all of British manufacture; sagging real estate in and around Big Sinkhole, Fla.; and finally a Manx divorce from Jen and a long sojourn in the confines of a Co. Meath detox clinic (Dr. Matthew Mole’s, The Larches, near Navan<sup>4</sup>).

Oh it was the bit of an old slump lifewise, you might say, but:

“Right, then,” had been Donal Duddy’s can-do response, as soon as he found himself outside Dr. Mole’s gates, watching the ceaseless traffic of the Dublin-bound down the Navan road. “Cars are the men, me butty.” As a result, after tugging the odd Dad-inherited connection, he was soon assistant under-manager of a used-car business owned by a mostly absentee chap named Byrne up in Dublin. The business was named Heartland Autos, which name Donal took to be a good omen; for did it not seem at first blush to be a fortuitous homage to his former (and future, he hoped) home in America’s heartland, the great Midwest? The woods, the barns, the luminous prairie ...and aah the purling waters of the mighty Wabash? Whereas in

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<sup>4</sup> I went onto their web site, just as a matter of interest, while I was waiting for the post to bring the day’s bills and threats from bill-collectors. On the home page was Dr. Mole in person, shown for some reason playing golf, with a discernable twinkle in his eye and a sidecar laden with bottles of Power-Ade and Pssschitt French orange squash. “Welcome to Mole’s,” it says, before the flybitten old soundtrack lurches into life and gives you a full dose of “Turn Off the Meter Honey, I’m Staying the Night,” complete with non-musical sound effects—loud groans, popping of corks, slapping of bare thighs—provided by Dr. Mole and his “assistants,” who look more like the denizens of a New Orleans bordello if you ask me, what with the number and amplitude of tits on display ...oh sorry. Just a wee half-‘un on the side, thanks. Now where was I?

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mundane fact it paid homage to nothing of greater consequence than the previous owner's favourite pop group, Basil, Heartland and Snicks, whose 1999 hit single "I'm in Sync With Your Hips" had topped the charts for nineteen weeks running and had swept the Gobbovision awards the following year<sup>5</sup>.

In any case, the place was conveniently located for potential customers, being just off the Uphill Street extension in the northern district of Killoyle.

"WAAAWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWWW yummm," yawned Donal, hippopotamianly. Desperate in the midst of his enforced idleness he picked up his well-thumbed copy of *Bookhead*, the lit-crit mag, and turned to the agony column.<sup>6</sup>

"Dear Bookhead," wrote T. T. in Athlone, Pennsylvania, "I had a crush on Vincent Altomonti, the deconstructionist. I e-mailed him verses from a. a. lemmings and Thom Bunn and Sylvie Plank and even tried to call him up on the phone, all to no avail. He hung up on me, with a very rude noise that sounded like steam escaping from a radiator—you know, the kind you get in old tenement buildings in like New York City? Anyway, I felt really spurned, as if I were an HIV carrier, or a Republican. Then, on his birthday (the 22<sup>nd</sup>: he's a Virgo, just like me) I sent him flowers, c/o the English Dept. at Jeffersonia University. One day—one *terrible* day—I went to the front door and a police officer was standing there, and before I knew it there I was, spreadeagled face down . . ."

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<sup>5</sup> Until booted offstage by the likes of me. I mean it, I'm not standing for any more of that rubbish, and you can hang that in your barn and smoke it. Wait a sec. It's my round, you say? Are you quite sure? Halves all round then? Ah sure God bless and preserve the two eyes in your head and the world they behold. I was only joking, just. Pints and chasers is it? Ay, I was afraid yez would say that. My goodness me, I do believe I left my wallet in my other trousers.

<sup>6</sup> Funny you should mention it. That was where I met Samuela. No, honestly. One rainy afternoon in the Finsbury Park house I was rummaging around in a few back issues of mum's old copies of *Bookhead* when I came across a nifty snap of a right corker on some beach somewhere (Florida, I reckon), identified in the caption as "Dr. Samuela Johnson, Author of *Aiiiiiee! Birching and Bondage in the Early Modern Era.*" That's my bird, I found myself saying, and before you knew it there I was, on the blower to McAuroch International University in New Melton Mowbray, Fla., employer of said babe. "Sure, son," were her first words to me, and we were married shortly thereafter. Of course, she ditched me as soon as she got the chance—it was while motoring through the Black Forest on our honeymoon, as I recall, not long after I'd seen her deep in conversation with a leather-clad German named Dieter, in a glade outside Emmendingen (I only caught the words "get shut of that git")—but it was fun while it lasted.

Man oh man is the stout good tonight it's going down like porter so it is.

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The possibility of further perusal of this fascinating tripe was negated by the phone, which rang, or rather, hooted, again, binding Donal tightly in the agony of having to a) answer it and b) communicate with strangers. He was, after all, the only potential phone-answerer on the premises, what with the total number of staff at Heartland Autos PLC having temporarily shrunk to one—himself—after Declan and Nasir, his two colleagues (assistant manager and head of sales respectively), had got themselves arrested for cocaine and heroin trafficking, the silly sods, and been sent off to serve one to three-and-a-half without the option in Shelton Abbey. It had been a tense few days. Donal himself had been subjected to questioning and, as a former drug addict, over the course of a week or so he'd been a bit roughed up round the edges, not to say manhandled verbally, by a nasty specimen named Sherlock Neame (the bastard), Inspector or something of the local Gardai Siochana (the nasty fuckers).

“Drugs, eh?” Neame had growled, making a fist. “Drugs, eh, you narky Yank?”

Donal shivered at the memory.

The phone continued to importune in its mindless way—HOOOOOT [pause] HOOOOOT [pause]— and seemed capable of emitting identical double-hoots until the Day of Judgment unless picked up—HOOOOOT [pause]—HOOOOOT . . .

“HELLO THANK YOU FOR CALLING HEARTLAND AUTOS WE ADVANCE CREDIT DONAL DUDDY SPEAKING HOW MAY I HELP YOU?”

Actually, this time, once he'd got started, Donal responded with surprising fluency, even courtesy.

(It was a female voice, you see.)

“Yes, madam, each vehicle is thoroughly tested and valeted before being sold,” he awoke to hear himself saying by the tail end of the conversation, the beginning of which he had missed entirely, or already forgotten. Such on-the-spot blackouts were common among former drug addicts, he'd been told, although

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personally he put it down half the time to plain old mind-blowing boredom with whatever was being discussed . . . Vans? Saloons? Two-door dropheads? For the life of him he couldn't remember, but whatever it was, she wanted it *now*.

"I'm going away on holiday with my fiance," she explained. "Do you have a Web page?"

"Ah. Working on it. Up soon."

"Well, are you open today?"

"Of course I'm bloo . . ." Donal reined in his traditional Irish ire, not to say irascibility. "Yes, madam, yes indeed, open as can be, open to one and all. Until nine of the p.m, or twenty-one hundred hours. First left after you turn off Uphill Street. Thank you, madam. Do drop in." (The bleary bloodshot image of a bar named the Dew Drop Inn on the south side of New Ur of the Chaldees, Ohioa, wobbled in front of his red-rimmed mind's eye.) It sounded promising, right enough, and there was the faintest hint of a purr in the gal's voice that sent shivers of a different sort elsewhere than the spine... too, Duddy reminded himself sternly, a deal would be good for business. He might end the day by actually selling a car.

*. . . but then, as an ex-drug addict and all-round failure in every walk of life inclusive, what did he know about anything at all, at all?*

"Sweet Fanny Adams," he muttered to himself, "is the truth of it."

Brooding, he witnessed with abating pleasure the fading light of the gloomy gloaming leeching away the colour from the Hunger Strikers' faces, which slowly faded but for incongruously toothy smiles that lingered briefly in the shadows like those of three Cheshire Cats. Twilight drew in its cobalt cloak (metallic-grey actually, just like the

colour of that almost-new Spratt-Mondale GLX with twin turbochargers he'd been trying to move for a fortnight already) and got Donal to thinking wistfully of places and things he remembered, like the covered bridges of western Ohioa and the fat

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sluggish galleons of Midwestern thunderclouds bellying across the Ruysdael skies and the towering stalks of maize marching to the horizon in the slanting Raphael sunlight (or was that corn? Never could tell one from the other, or *t'other* as they said quaintly in the alluvial plain of the Wabash River and environs)...and yet Ireland, home of the meandering boreen and the clay pipe and the Little People, and an absolutely sickening surfeit of twinkling-eyed flute-tootling stout-quaffing anti-nuclear free-loving long-legged red-haired folklorists (and by the way, just to set the record straight, Donal Duddy was not then, nor had he ever been, prejudiced in any way, shape or form against the redheaded—but then he'd never known a single gingernut in all his born days, had he, especially not in Ireland, so there)—Ireland, as we were saying, *was a much more modern country than the States*, for all her Neolithic passage graves and even more ancient shite!<sup>7</sup>

“True for ya, bugger,” mumbled Donal. He masticated nullity, negatively. His thoughts had swerved well away from the great unsold mass of automotive metal on his lot—not to mention the insufficiently-updated e-account books and so on (he could barely figure out how to turn the bloody computer off, let alone on)—and were even now plunging inward to his own soul—spirit—ka—harmony—yin/yan—mental rubbish tip, etc.

So yes, Ireland, Marbella-visiting, Mateus-bibbing, satellite-TV-watching software haven, was undoubtedly way ahead of the States, and the longer the inhabitants of *that* great isolated landmass stayed isolated and clued-in to bugger-all bar not eating (or scarfing down) red meat, saving (or shooting) the road runner, shaping (or letting go) their abs and pecs, driving a car with zero (or 100) m.p.g., building defenses against the Federalist-Zionist conspirators (or the Arabs), etc., the more nineteenth-century they were likely to remain in the extremes of their quasi-religious preoccupations, whereas Ireland, as a full-fledged European nation and

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<sup>7</sup> Now there's food for thought, not exactly a *cordon bleu* sirloin steak swimming in garlic butter and its own juices with a side of neeps and tatties, but certainly a packet of crisps with oil and vinegar, at the very least.

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duly paid-up charter member of the Treaty of Rome, was becoming far more secular, fashionably skeptical, relativistic, sex-obsessed (while pretending not to be), nouvelle-cuisine-eating, in a word: Eurochic.<sup>8</sup>

Not that that was all good, mind you.

“Not that that’s all good, mind you,” Donal repeated, this time aloud, preparing to resume his interactive discourse with *Bookhead* but inadvertently addressing:

The gal, whose arrival had been as silent as that of the first snow (an infrequent visitor to rainy Killoyle).

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Terpsichore. I called earlier? About a roadster?”

From the male perspective—and that would be Donal’s, entirely—she was a knockout: red haired (at last!), clear-skinned, green eyed and appropriately willowy and well-shaped for one who’d blathered on the phone about instant purchases and debit cards and Mediterranean night clubs (he remembered now, he’d recommended one in Ibiza called Paco’s, God knew why, he’d never been near the place, he’d only read about it in some silly glossy mag called *Gloss* or *Glam* or something while he’d been sitting in the Garda anteroom, sphincter puckering with ill-ease, waiting to be summoned by Neame (the bastard)) and holidays with fiances and the tan she sported on the exposed parts of her arms and legs was decidedly unIrish in hue. Her teeth, too, gleamed overmuch for a Celt. And look at the hoop on her. Big enough to get a grip on but without the hint of a sag in either hemisphere, as firm and contoured as a pair of conjoined canteloupes, straining against the

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<sup>8</sup> Sheik yourself. I don’t know about the rest of yez, but I have the distinct feeling this bloke’s never been west of Weston-super-mare, if that far. Sex-obsessed? *Nous?* Get out of that, boy, right away. Why, only the other day—youse’ll laugh your tits off to hear this one, wait till I tell yez—I was deep in conversation with Mrs. Heap, down at the local Tesco’s, you know, the one with the permanent sale on caged birds in their own feathers and mock-Chippendale armchairs...? No? Well, anyhow, there she was. “Sex?” I enquired, being quite the lad, as you know. “Ectually, I make it round half-five,” was her prim reply, and man oh man you should have seen the map on me then, you talk about forty shades of green!

Is it in me Power’s yer puttin’ that icecube? Get it out of there and get out of that, boy. What do you take me for, some kind of *norteamericano* shagger, or a Yank altogether?

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imprisoning denim of her Lewis jeans. Surely to God she was wearing falsies fore and aft.

Because if she wasn't, Donal was a goner.

*Well, she wasn't, so it'll come as no surprise to either of us that Donal was, in fact, a goner, in love instanter he was, the gawm, starting with her arse and spreading up and out, like.*

Anyway, to business: It was indeed a roadster she was after, no surprise there either, the afore-mentioned red Tortuga being pretty much her line of country. Donal feigned delight.

"Five speeds, oh aye. Short throws, brakes like hammerlocks (four-wheel disks fore and aft with antilock on all four wheels you'll not be surprised to learn), a real pleasure in the twisties," brayed he outside on the lot, with mawkish and utterly false good humour fighting the rising morass of self-disgust and misery in his soul as desperately as a drowning man fights the sea. "Just a few old quid down God bless ya and you're away. Oh God," he muttered, turning aside from his own unbearable mock-cheeriness, mine hearty host with the shadows of despair etched under his eyes. The hunger strikers twinkled at him from the deepening darkness. It was the time of day that was always hardest to take. In the twilight he'd usually get a touch of the shivers, even a quick reel or two of the "movies," as the ex-drug fraternity called the hallucinations, coincident with a sudden fierce longing for extinction that had to be fended off with, say, a visit to a pub.

"Twisties?"

Donal pledged a grin, shakily.

"Ah. Yes, yes. Narrow highways that effect sudden or abrupt curvature left or right frequently with deleterious effect on mental concentration and/or physical well-being, as in Co. Kerry, say, or the Alps. Highly prized by the boy racers among us as ideal venues to put an automobile's performance capacities to the test, madam."

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“Well, as a girl racer meself I suppose I’ll have to take ‘er for a spin, yeah?”

“Of course. Mind you, we’ve a nice Spratt-Mondale GLX over there, always garaged, driven round the block infrequently by two nonsmoking old ladies, or were they gentlemen, a right pair of old dears anyhow.”

“Nah. The roadster’s the one.”

Donal bowed, hands poised for clasping, like those of an overly unctuous chamberlain at the court of the Dowager Empress of China (Ming Dynasty); then, suddenly aware of his obsequious demeanor, he put his hands in his pockets and scowled. He’d never quite sussed out the right balance of servility and *amour propre* you needed in a job that depended completely, after all, on the goodwill and willingness to splurge of total strangers who, being people, were apt to be flattered by handwringing attentiveness and equally likely to take umbrage at its absence, as well as at foolish things like the tilt of your eyeglasses or the cut of your anorak or the lingering afterpong of the fags you smoked—or the fact that you never took your hands out of your pockets, or never put them in, or wore eau de cologne instead of aftershave.<sup>9</sup>

“Of course, madam.”

“Don’t you ‘madam’ me. The name’s Terpsichore. Terpsichore O’Hanlon.”

“Ah. *Terpsichore*.”

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<sup>9</sup> Oh I’m with you there, boyo, every step of the way. People, eh? Reminds of (hold me down and gag me if you’d heard this one before) the time I worked in a hairdresser’s. “Smelly little prat,” was the customers’ initial assessment of me; then, when I’d applied a touch of Wild Spice, bugged if it wasn’t all “Ponce!” and “Shirt-lifter!” Indeed, fisticuffs erupted on the cutting floor on that particular subject, with me in the hard-swinging position versus one Robb Manlove, a muscular carpet-muncher who led the local branch of Dykes of Erin. We were into Round Three and she was giving as good as she got, left hook for right, when Mr. Dunce, the owner of the place, intervened, his exposed chest hair afire with emotion and reddish dye. “You?” he bleated at me, pointing a tremulous finger upon which a zircon ring sparkled like the watery sun of Connacht through the mists of dawn. “You’re sacked, you brownhatter.” And that was that, fisticuffs or no fisticuffs. Robb got in a swift kick to my clenched withers as I retreated, abashed. Just goes to show, doesn’t it. Like we were saying: People, eh? “Can’t live with em can’t live without em, eh ducks,” as my first neighbour, an ample Norse lass named Kristen Lavransdottir used to say, smoking her meerschaum over the back fence round midnight with her blouse hanging out all over the place, the old slag.

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“Nah. Terpsichore.”

“Aha. Terpsi.”

“Right.”

“From Killoyle, are ya?”

“Yeah.”

“Muse of the ah? Dance, is it?”

“Yeah.” She gazed at him intently. “You aren’t Italian, are you?”

“Italian? Good God no. Irish as. Well.”

“Colcannon and boxty with a pint of stout on the side and a fag after.”

“Right. Right.”

Glad that was settled, yet somehow deeply *unsettled*, Donal handed over the keys.

“I’m Donal,” he ventured boldly, heart fluttering like a caged sparrow. She gave him a tight smile by way of acknowledgment, as if to say “Watch your step you pathetic sex-starved galoot I know what you’re after.” Or words to that effect, such effect being that of a swift kick in the family jewels followed by a slap across the gob. Reminding himself that this was not, after all, the movies, where her character—likely portrayed by some beauteous and excessively-famous lamebrain like Marge Bryan or Lettie Hobsbawm (or Nicolette Tedman, whom she slightly resembled)—would have broadcast hints of absurd future writhings ‘neath tangled bedsheets with a lash-batting comehither and chirpy “Hi, Donal,” Donal stood back, aside, and down, attempting thereby to efface his existence completely from the radar screen of her perception; but Terpsichore O’Hanlon, seemingly (although not, in fact) oblivious, got into the car and proceeded to display her considerable girl-racer capabilities. She shifted and handled the car adeptly, looking all the while like an

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advert for the blooming Syndicat d'Initiative of St. Tropez or some other Cote d'Azur hot spot (Duddy's idea of earthly paradise was situated somewhere more or less equidistant between Marseille and Nice: he'd been once, as a laddeen, and always longed to return), right down to the long auburn hair flowing in the brisk breezes of March as the car hugged the corner and she was away at an accelerative rate equal to that of, say, Michael Schumacher at the wheel of a Ferrari on the Westphal straight at the Nürburgring . . . *away?*

So there she went, the girl in the red Tortuga—hang on a sec (said Donal to himself) “The Girl in The Red Tortuga” sounds like a shimmying sexy Brazilian beach-song of the Ipanema variety, doesn't it?

*Tall and tan and young and lovely*

*The Girl in the Red Tortuga*

*Comes Driving*

*And when she passes she goes “a-a-a-ah!”*

*When she drives she's like a samba that*

*Swings so cool and sways so gentle*

*That when she passes each one she passes goes “a-a-a-ah!”*

Or some such blatherskite, with gentle congas and marracas burbling in the background against the soft soughing of breezes in the bowing palms. Certainly not a ballad, you'd say, for Erin's boreal shores.

And yet!

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An hour later Donal was still reassuring himself that it was only a test drive, that the girl was young and vivacious and therefore quite a good match for a red Tortuga (and did he but dare the thought (he did), more than one for him, Donal Duddy, as well), especially with the top down; and that she gave off no vibes of malfeasance, none whatsoever—unless they were disguised by the stronger emanations of unadulterated sex that flowed from her like radio waves from a transmitter—and that she'd be back at any minute, or at any rate pretty soon . . .

*Hush yer jabber isn't that her now?*

HOOOOT [pause] HOOOOT [pause] HOOOOT [pause] HOOOOT [pause]  
HOOOT¼

“HELLO THANK YOU FOR CALLING HEARTLAND AUTOS WE ADVANCE CREDIT DONAL DUDDY SPEAKING HOW MAY I HELP YOU?”

“Ah never mind that shite, Duddy, 'tis Byrne here.” The boss. Byrne of Dublin, not in Dublin. “I'm in Killoyle. Staying at the Spudorgan Palace. Meet me in the Balsa Bar at nine. And bring the accounts.”

Donal rang off with a murmured acknowledgment and returned to *Bookhead*, but he was distracted by his own uneasiness, as expressed in nail-biting, fruitless hunts for more fags, sudden belching, and sideways glances.

Ultimately, his several frenzies spawned a brief but intense hallucination depicting a huge rubbish tip momentarily illuminated in a shaft of blinding light with, in the background, the accompanying aural hallucination of a monstrous breath wheezingly inhaled and shudderingly exhaled like the sobbing of a nearby demigod.

*Where was she?*

\* \* \* \* \*

Terpsichore O’Hanlon and Stan MacKnee lived together on a barge, the *Rumpelstiltskin*, under an enshading willow on the Mangan Canal, just down from the Slumbeg Bridge, a hop skip and jump across the lock from Moylan’s Canal Bar and Grocery, the ensemble (plus St. Thor’s R.C. church, Mr. Iqbal’s sweet shop, the Driscoe Cash ‘N’ Carry, and a Vroom filling station) clustered together like a flock of cowering sheep on the broad upland of The Belfers, a fertile tableland across which ran the chessboard pattern of symmetrical stone walls erected by Homo Erectus or his descendants in the immediate pre-Neolithic period, halfway between Killoyle and the former asbestos-mining town-turned-health-resort West Crumsford North.

Stan, 40 or so, a would-be writer or something, was a bargee more by happenstance than by inclination. A mate, Terry Whelan (1<sup>st</sup> in line to inherit fuck-all from Mack Whelan, bankrupt bus conductor and burden on the public rolls), had absconded to Australia with the funds of various local church socials and bingo parlours and had left Stan the title and ownership of the barge. So there was always a place for Stan to put his feet up and lay his head down, sometimes both simultaneously and at the same time, like. This was fortunate indeed, as he’d lost his last job, that of under-assistant sub-foreman at Hildo’s Balls (Eire) NV, the local branch of the Dutch ball-bearing conglomerate, by dint of simple non-attendance spiked with insolence.

“It’s a fockin shite-for-brains wankerama for a lark and nothing to me achall bar the twice-monthly paycheque, which I declare here and now they can stuff right up their arse,” he’d said to Terpsichore early one morning over a fag and a cuppa as the cockerels crew on the nearby farms and the mallards gobbled on the canal outside and the prospect of eight hours hunched over a bin full of steel balls barely illuminated by a flickering fluorescent tube, under the hooded gaze of Ruud the Dutch shop steward, seemed about as inviting as (say) a weekend nailed to the side of a house, or dinner and dancing with Hitler.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> And *that* would be no day at the iced-lollie stand, I’d wager. Although it might be just barely worse— what with the potential for openly voiced disagreement (say through commentary scornful of the Führer’s wisdom, or outright yawning in his face) leading to instant and/or prolonged incarceration leading in turn to

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“I’ll just not go in, full stop. It’s too boring. What do you think of that? Bleedin’ deadly, eh?”

“What is it you do again, exactly?” Terpsichore leaned over to turn down the radio on which she’d been quietly listening to a rebroadcast of one of her favorite scenes from *Mrs Browne’s Schoolboys*, the one where Mrs. B. takes a shoebrush to the young wan. Terpsichore mildly resented the interruption.

“Sure and haven’t I told you a dozen times gersha.” Stan had a lean look of permanent puzzlement, as though he’d been up to no good but had forgotten exactly how, or what. Sometimes, as now, the look of puzzlement spilled into more general expressions of agitation. His head nodded rapidly, his shaggy hair swayed back and forth, his hands played with the air, all traits indicative of a propensity to pantomime, or a gift for the dramatic arts, or rock music (not an art). “Well here goes again, but it’s the last time, OK? I stick piles of fuckin metal balls into one fuckin machine and take more stacks of fuckin metal balls out of another fuckin machine. At the end of the day I put all

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painful execution—than the monologues I had to sit through when I was working at Harbridge’s Ltd., the school publishers, a real haven for the dispossessed and overweight and weak of will. Wait till I tell youse, a *Cheann Comhairle*. My immediate supervisor, or Head Senior Sub-Editor, was a burly old bore named Tall Talbot, no relation, who looked upon me as a protege, but it never took; indeed, I balked, and initiated scurrilous rumours on his account. Not that he ever noticed. “Percival,” he’d say, referring to me by a name not my own, “I’m the kind of fella likes to know what’s going on, know what I mean? I’d like you to have a dekkó round the place at odd times and just slip me a word to the wise, comprende, tovarich? Then we can have a good old chinwag, what say you, comrade?” Then, back in my three-by-five cubicle next to the lavatory, just when I was thinking I’d made good my escape, lumbering footsteps, sawing breath, a bulky shadow, and an all-too-familiar drone would burst the bubble of my illusions: “Ah there y’are, lad. Did you know that I was the All-Ireland Junior Hurling Champion for the Under-14s when I was under 14? Did you know that I was a Freemason for about six months until my da found out about it and gave me the tanning of a lifetime? Did you know that my da was a timekeeper for the Great Northern Railway when he was a nipper? Did you know that I very nearly shook Eamonn de Valera’s hand one day in Phoenix Park in 1957, but at the last minute decided not to, which was the right decision because it wasn’t Dev at all but an old fella named Fetts who delivered the coal? Did you know that one of my earliest hobbies was astronomy and that to this day I can name you all the principal galaxies and sub-formations in the Cassiopoea cluster? Did you know that they made two versions of the VW Minibus, one with full petrol power and one with single-rail diesel injection, and that at different stages in my life I’ve owned both kinds? Did you know that I once walked from Cushendun to Cushendall the back way, via Limavady, Maghera, Magherafelt, and Derry? Did you know that Hitler had only one big ball?” And so we come full circle, back to the lower reaches of Adolf and his dinner table. (Parenthetically, that’s all ballocks, so to speak, as best I know the Führer was fully operational in that area if not so much in others.) Anyhow, next day or the day after I heard a commotion down the hall and shortly thereafter reports trickled in to the effect that Tall had been found dead, sprawled face first across the empty In box on his desk, verdict: death by strangulation on his own bilge. A day or so later a collection went round for flowers for him, poor sod. I put in a tanner, breathing a prayer that wherever he’d ended up I’d not run into him then or later, may God bless his mortal remains and the soil they fertilise.

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me balls into a fuckin great box and turn both the fuckin machines off. Then I fuck off to the boozier.”

“Sounds like a bore, all right.”

(There were times, never more than now, when a tiny flat voice in the recesses of Terpsichore’s mind whispered, *This flake’s not for you, woman*. But such was her all-too-human desire for comfort, stability, and the same thing over and over again, that she ignored the tiny voice—*for the moment*.<sup>11</sup>)

“And I do it eight hours a day.”

(And there were times when another inner voice responded from the other end of her cerebellum: *I know. Yer too bleedin’ right*.)

“Poor dear.”

“And me a literary genius, the actual dog’s ballocks, gal. But you know what?” Stan sat up, his face elastic with inspiration. “I’ve had it with them and their silly old balls. Wait till I tell you now. I’ll just not go in.”

“Not go in?”

“Right. I’ll see how long it takes ‘em before they give me the heave. I’ll just stay away, by way of an experiment, like. It’ll be like the times I mitched me finals at school. Or stayed home sick.”

“Suit yourself,” said Terpsichore, an easy girl in some ways.

“Then I can go on the Sosh and draw the dole,” said Stan, as a means of making his proposal irresistible. “And concentrate on me writin,’ like.”

Stan’s plan was gas. The phone was silent for the first day and a half, then heavily Dutch-accented calls started coming in. Initial enquiries spuriously couched as expressions of concern for his health metamorphosed rapidly into stern reprimands that contained within them the seeds of menace, the blossoming of which was expedited by Stan’s habit of interjecting into his phone conversations with Ruud mock-stream-of-consciousness monologues (Stan had taken Mod. Ir. Lit. at Benedict Kiely College in Strabane and like so many of his nationality fancied

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<sup>11</sup> Aha. The dreaded Foreshadowing strikes again, I reckon.

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himself quite the pocket James A. Joyce, Esq.—sans the hangups of course, thank you very much, like your man’s propensity for scatophilia, or fear of dogs and electric storms), quasi-literary ravings free of any precise association—doggerel, in short, that would be the front-page pride of many a student rag.

“One you not attend any day at all last wekk,” stated stolid Ruud, soberly. “This very hood dam bad, hood dam bad. Two you not call by phone anybody, or me. Bad, boy. Wery hood dam bad.”

“Ruud oh me rude boy me crude boy me wild and preening lewd boy me headstrong netherlandish low-country boyo boy, you’ve some neck me bonnie lad ah me bonnie bonnie lad me Dutch lad wild and free, me headstrong Friesian guy o headstruck, headstrong with hemlock in me rucksack Oy set out for the merry oh.”

“You not listening. I said very hood dam bad, meneer Stan.”

“Oh bad me lad ah cripes bad’s sad but God bless you and all but it’s a lovely day and all and today down on the old riverbank down on the Suir on the stilly greeny sure bedad did you know the river runs past Eve and Adam’s from swerve of Suir to the briny coastland of Killoyle Castle and environs oh doe the merry dee doe ray me oh tell me when you’re done me brawny lad and I’ll heave ye over me shoulder for the long trek down Ballybrann-na-Craic where the road rises up and the mountains plunge down like a colleen’s cleavage oh aye the merry oh.”

“OK shit to you, hood dam stupid guy. No phonecall to boss manager or me instead. I can tell you your future career’s not good looking. It’s no wonder you’re fucked, by Johnny God verdammm it.”

“And a trot and a trek and a cross-country trip, o so gallops the jaunting car o so merrily marriedly Mariolatrily-o and all ajaunt the young roan bay oh so gay with the canter of a king’s charger hey ho the golden-o o the gilded golden blaze of light bles yellowly over the plain of Tara’s golden haze tarah tee boom dee ay oh two oh tea for two and two for tea and you for me and me for you.”

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“OK so you come in tomorrow for meeting at eight punctually in the a.m. or by Gaad you out of here for good you son of a butch.”

“Bite the back of me ballocks, old son,” had been insouciant Stan’s final response to rude Ruud. “With mustard sauce.”

Not surprisingly, a certified letter, manifesting the unerring punctuality of bad news, arrived the next day and informed one Stanley MacKnee of his termination as a wage earner at Hildo’s Balls (Eire) NV, with various reasons adduced, out of a checklist of ten:

- 1) daily near-tardiness;
  - 2) implied insubordination;
  - 3) suspected inefficiency;
  - 4) potential non-productivity;
  - 5) rampant individualism;
  - 6) overt opinionatedness;
  - 7) a reluctance to avert his gaze in the presence of superiors;
- etc.

“Well, that’s that then,” had been Stan’s airy response. The letter, once read, served as a paper airplane swishing in leisurely semicircles through the stagnant air before crash landing in the dustbin and being in due course whisked from thence to the municipal tip, along with three empty Biryani containers; yesterday’s and the day before’s *Daily Calrion* (sic); an unread collection of poems by Milo Rogers, autographed hopefully by the author; an empty fag packet that had once contained twenty Turf Accountants DeLuxe Dual Filters; several bottles, clinking merrily, that had as recently as the night previous been brimful of Murray’s porter; and other *objets* best unnamed, being stringy and sticky and altogether gray.

A while passed, and Stan reckoned he was living the life of Reilly, with the old *Rumpelstiltskin* and all, better off anyhow than he’d been when he had a job. He was writing the odd bit here and there, too, or at least pretending to. He was immersed, anyway, in *Cá bhfuil fiacla Mhamó?* a good old thigh-slapping read by Firbolg O Leeson, the poor scholar.<sup>12</sup> It kept him going, brainwise, within limits. And in the canal outside there were fish for the taking (trout mostly, with the odd pilcher in spring), and the pub across the way pulled a fine pint, and—best of all—he’d sold a piece, albeit a mincing, anodyne, housewifely one copied word for word from the Australian fashion mag *OzGlam* (“Canal Living: Pardon My Barging In”), to *Belfers’ Belfry*, the local journal of record. But they’d paid, or more accurately had promised to pay, 25 euros for it; and wonder of wonders—provided he showed evidence of looking about a bit for a job, of all things, nothing more demanding than a classified advert from the *Clarion*, say—every fortnight Stan drove his old Nitsun Micro with the dented left rear wing over to the Employment Exchange in Killoyle City and received from the fond plump hands of the Irish State in the person of Mrs. Dalrymple, resident representative of Poblacht na hEireann, two hundred and eighty-six

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<sup>12</sup> A thigh-slapper indeed, as I hear, although I could never get past the dedication (“*Pionta Guinness, le do thoil*”). Speaking of books and the like, incidentally, you might be interested to hear that I ran into the afore-mentioned Milo Rogers when I was up in town last week, and man oh man did he ever look cheesed off when he spotted me in the mirror above the bar in Banville’s (you know, that trendy new joint off the Norrier), as if he’d seen the ghost of his own worst enemy’s granddad, bedad. “Bastard,” he mouthed at me, silently, and I could tell he was displeased at having had the footnoter’s job taken away from him, but after all I lobbied hard for this position and *he* had three collections of poetry in the bookshops and a nice jolly or jolly nice wife in that new head librarian and all —and a little one on the way, according to the rumour mills—so where was his beef, eh (I mouthed back at him, silently but furiously, across the bar)? But by the time I finished I realized the object of my silent trans-bar-counter tirade was no longer Milo but a tall galoot with a red nose and tinted spectacles who was sneaking nervous glances at me over the top of his *Sunday Dependent* like he was about to be set upon by an irate bull in a muddy pasture during a rainstorm; so I went back to my drink—speaking of which I’ll stick to the Arthur’s I reckon, pints of course, no no that’ll do me fine, well all right a short one on the side if you must but make sure it’s Power’s, neat, and none of that bloody ginger ale, *if you please*, and no ice, mind. Cheers yourself, and may your front garden be forever free of aphids.

euros and sundry cents, enough for a fortnight's worth of fags and groceries and the odd pint (or two) nightly (unless he was lucky enough to get bought a round), like.

So life could be worse, so it could (and had been, and would be again—*cf. intra*).

“Did you know, it's dead easy to get money out of the government in this country, darlin,” he explained to Terpsichore. “All you have to do is get sacked.”

“Easy enough to be a government artist, you mean. Doesn't hurt if your motte has a job, but, does it,” was the young lady's short, shrewd response.

“Right. Eh—what is it you do, exactly, darlin?”

She muttered an irritable reply that left him none the wiser. In fact, she was a waitress at Fairy Farmer's, the wine bar on Downhill Place, and it wasn't much of a job at all. She detested the false humility, the kowtowing to morons, the ogling, the murmuring behind her back and the ordering about, not to mention the skimpy pay and odd hours; but the sad, not so uncommon truth was that she'd started out fine in life but had squandered a fair amount along the way. Whereas Stan was the scion of the Ballymun MacKnees, two parents and eight kids as working-class as you could get without actually transmogrifying into Arthur Scargill to the power of ten, Terpsichore's O'Hanlon ancestry was the lineage of barristers and librarians and law professors and the sweet East End of fair Killoyle's swank King Idris Avenue where children were raised up to the academic heights of Belvedere and UCD, or UCC at the very least; but in her case *nostalgie de la boue* had taken care of all that, and although she'd started off with some panache at UCD's newish campus in Belfield, Dublin 4—first in her first-year Honours classes in Post-War Italian Cinema and Micronesian Anthropology (a most promising debut for one who had never been to Micronesia—or should that be *Macro*?—nor shown any interest in anthropology; although she had seen Italian films, mostly late at night on RTE9's *Director's Chair*) she'd not graduated, having instead married and divorced a Harley biker from New Ross named John Fitzgerald Kennedy who was now serving a short sentence down Kerry way for having a go at his da.

What was more, Terpsichore hadn't spoken to her family (Mum, Dad, brother Pegasus) these two years and counting.

Then one night, in the midst of an entourage of poets and wastrels, Stan MacKnee entered Fairy Farmer's and her life simultaneously. Stan, she thought, held out the promise of freedom

from routine, as well as the chance to be a lifelong berk on your own terms, like. (Not to mention live rent-free on that old barge.) It was a two-edged deal, she soon realized as soon as she also became aware of what a total naghead and loser the fella was.

“No rent, darlin’,” he’d said, over a glass of chilled Yquem-Salade he could hardly afford. “It’s a barge, d’you see. All mod cons, but. I’ve even a satellite dish, if you can credit it. Me pal’s in Australia and not likely to come back as long as there’s Gardai about, if you follow me drift. Ah it’s a grand old barge so ‘tis. License paid up till the end of next year. Docking guaranteed as long as I’m on board every night.”

Plus, there was something about the fella’s guileless face, when he shut his eyes to laugh.

“*Snork-asnork-asnork-asnork*,” he’d chortle, eyes tight shut, tearlets forming.

So there they were. Only he was twice the slacker she’d reckoned at first, she was beginning to see that. Whether he was an actual writer or not, he certainly sat about doing enough “research” to fill a library. Still, he never actually wrote a word, except when copying stuff out of magazines, which he then sent off to other magazines under his own name. It didn’t seem entirely right, somehow, but she didn’t really care. But it was about the time he lost his job that Terpsichore, faced with the bleak prospect of further belt-tightening and an endless, if leisurely, downward spiral into permanent unemployment and poverty, started seriously to contemplate the prospect of a more stimulating life lived on the margins of legality and beyond, viz., adultery, the demimonde, mild use of recreational drugs, emigration to America, etc., like some steamy bosomy broad in Vittorio de Whatsit’s *Biker Boys or Gay Thief* or whatever it was called (*Il Gran Vitello Milanese?*) or Nicolette Tedman in *Up Up and At ‘Em...*

“Oy. Ever stolen anything?” she asked Stan one evening after they’d managed a complex yet languid bout of sexual fondling involving much moaning and bared midribs and thighs that had culminated in quick, spasmodic shudders and joint reaching for the fags.

“Sorry. You go first.”

“They’re yours anyway.”

“Who cares. Common property, eh?”

“Not on my barge, darlin.”

“Well, you go ahead then.”

“Oh all right.”

“Got a light?”

“Oh, right. Here ya go.”

Inhalations vied with exhalations, then:

“So did you ever steal anything?”

“Bar the odd quid from the collection plate, not much.”

“How about a car?”

“Nah. I have a car.”

“But it’s a piece of shite.”

“It is not. It’s a ninety-four. Anyhow, so long as it gets me down the Sosh and back, I’m happy. I don’t need it for the bloody Paris-Dakar, for fuck sake.”

“Well, I don’t have a car. And I’m dead narked at taking the bus every day.”

Hence the red Tortuga GT that suddenly showed up that wild March eve parked in Moylan’s carpark across the canal.

“Fuck me, darlin,’ you never nicked her, didya?”

“Well, let’s say I’m taking it on an extended test drive, like.”

“Shite on a pole,” said Stan, bemused, caught between admiration at the outright brass of the girl, like, and the distinct possibility that someone, somewhere, was dead cheesed at her, and was very likely at this very moment reaching for the phone to summon the guards (*oh she’s the one lives with that gurrier on th’owld barge down the canal*, he could just hear it now) . . .

\* \* \* \*

Next morning at eleven o'clock, consequent to not one but three bottles of the Chateau-Jaffrey, with digestive single-malt accompaniment (Glen Gland, 16 years old), Ferdia was still asleep on the sofa in the living room.

"Snore," he declared, nasally.

The wild March winds shook the electric lines outside the window and produced a low, irregular, thrumming sound<sup>13</sup> like distant drums being expertly tuned up by warmongering primitives; but Ferdia, as if responding to hidden dream-stimuli of a more gustatory nature, resorted to smacking his lips obnoxiously once—twice—thrice.

"Slurp. Slop slap."

This was too much for Finn, who promptly flung at him the book he was reading: *One Toe At a Time*, by Clay Schouëst.<sup>14</sup>

"Wake up, you old pisser," he screeched.

Waking was not achieved instantly, for hadn't the pair of them hit the scratcher well after one a.m., and wasn't Ferdia indeed older, in comparison to 32-year-old Finn: 47, but not for long. His 48<sup>th</sup> birthday, in three days, would put him in contention age-wise with, among others, trim, tennis-playing "still-young" politicians, heavily face-lifted and tanned former starlets off whom the bloom has begun to fade, and retired, balding, overweight jockeys.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Like a cello incompetently played in a piece incompetently composed by some incompetent modernist asshole with more talents than talent? Like Sir Puff McCarthy or them Yanks Pillock Gloss or Stan Imperium or John Urdoes? Or another of those naffing gits? Bloody wasters. With so much Beethoven around, it's like turning down a filet mignon in favour of a Wimpy's hamburger. I mean honestly.

<sup>14</sup> One of the all-time greats, jeez that was a corkin good read so 'twas, specially the part where Ottorino carves his name in the back of whatsername's wardrobe.

<sup>15</sup> Carfax comes to mind (see *Killarle An ArseFace*, pp. 1-241), but he's in chokey, isn't he, and anyhow he's well over 60 or I'm a blooming Cuban rumba dancer (which I'm not, last I checked).

*Anyhow.*

“Arrrrrgggh,” semi-articulated Ferdia, mouth open and emitting, like a spitting cobra, considerable random discharge of fine saliva. His limbs twitched ataxically; his heart stopped, his eyes opened, closed, and opened again, his heart resumed beating with an extra roll of the timpani for good measure, his eyelids fluttered like wary pigeons at the sight of diminutive but glowering and muscle-bound Finn, known to his girlfriends—well, to Anthea down at Mad Molloy’s, at least—as “Work-Out” McCool.

“Arrh.”

“Wakey wakey,” said Finn, snappishly. He watched Ferdia disentangle himself from sleep’s embrace. He was still undecided whether his cousin’s appearance might better be described as “the small version of a large dinosaur” or “the family-size model version of a small dinosaur,” say an oversized velociraptor rather than a miniature T-Rex (or Allosaurus) . . .

It would be a fella with the hell of an overbite, anyhow.

“Wassa time?” inquired Ferd, smacking his lips.

“It’s half eleven,” said Finn. His forefinger tapped his watch with heavy significance. “And today’s the day.”

“*Tis* that, boy,” concurred Ferdia. He sat up, his eyes a pale blue blur behind eyelids that went up and down like venetian blinds in a gale. “*Tis*. I know. What do you take me for, a fuckin eejit? But not till the p.m., like.”

“True. But you’ve the bunting, the cutlery, the caterers. And it’s on the other side of town.”

Yes, but the town in question, Killoyle, was, and is, a mere three miles and a half from stem to stern, so not much of a travail to traverse, bar the odd bottleneck round the Shops, especially with “Wet” Wesson’s new government having abolished all shopping taxes and the French coming over in droves on weekends with German or even Dutch lovers in tow, all as anti-nuclear, oversexed and long-legged as all get out<sup>16</sup>—and yet! Finn, for all he was the merest broth of a boy,

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<sup>16</sup> That would be the gals to whom you’re referring, needless—I hope—to say (I think). But you never know, nowadays, do you, what with the traditional saintly if a bit musty symbols of Christianity immemorial (well, all right, Catholicism, and a bit of High C. of E. —and I., of course, at the heel of the

had spent a year or so of his earlier life knocking around North and South America with his big brother Fergus (now the proud owner of the Dew Drop Inn in New Ur of the Chaldees, Ohio, USA, of all places) and, as a consequence of having seen bits of the world here and there, he sometimes hit the nail on the head, if you please, with the iron *whack!* of common sense, that oh-so-uncommon sense the lack of which Ferdia, for one, had spent much of his life displaying—I mean to say, just look at the record (as follows):

Ferdia Aloysius Quain, middle-class boyo from the Connemara Road and all (with God- and Inland Revenue-fearing neighbours into the bargain), after an utterly mundane progression through Loreto Convent school and Collins Comprehensive, with a degree in librarianship tossed his way by the Senatus of Upper Killoyle College on condition that he leave the premises AND NEVER COME BACK, had joined the IRA at the age of 22 at Bodenstown, over a teary lunch. This entailed much chanting and mystical tattoo-bearing and recitation of emeraldine blather from the likes of Douglas Hyde and Padraig Pearse, which rigmarole had as its goal the forging of a fine fanatic, whereas Ferdia's sole ambition was to become a librarian or archivist. It was a vision inspired by over-heated mental pictures of great librarians and/or archivists of the past, say white-robed Hero of Alexandria poring over semi-unrolled papyrus manuscripts on marble tabletops half the size of the Irish Midlands, with of course small steam engines of his, Hero's, own devising put-putting about like mechanical mice, and through the cross-paned glassless windows the lofty Pharos towering against the ever-cerulean sky of Antiquity (strong appeal, that, for a gray-sky-schooled Irish lad)—young Ferd had seen Lord Grade's *Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Part III* three times, after all—then, closer to home timewise, there was scarlet-robed

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hunt)—statues, icons, votives, etc., all one way or another signs of sin and redemption and all that carryon—going the way of the manual Hoover and transistor radio and being replaced (in the popular mind of the modern liberal neo-intellectual) with the chic backdrop to all art and culture, and not a little political life and TV, as well: two blokes a-buggering! Why, let 'em get on with it, I don't give a toss, it's the elevation of it all into a bloody religion that gets me. The shibboleth of modern tolerance and Holy Duo of the secularist's Church of the Sacred Rectum—and if you don't like it, well sod off, so to speak, and devil take the hindmost, as it were. Dear me. Hard to imagine what Sister Alphonse would say. “Shite in shallots,” probably, knowing that old girl (just ask Francie about her, he's got a story or two to tell right enough), just before popping open a cold one to go with her teatime Partagas. *Slainte go var.*



future Troubles exclusively to the connivance of the Provos, the Church, and Eamon de Valera and his descendants. A great-uncle of Ferdia's (Tim O'Boone) had been shot during the Civil War on the Treaty side by Dev personally, to hear Bren tell the story; and a great-aunt, Imelda McCaffrey, had mysteriously disappeared in Spain with General O'Duffy, eliciting rumours of illicit passion and elopement with a tall, taciturn Spanish peasant—except to Bren, who saw everywhere the Hand of Dev (“only for the fact that the awld bastard was blind as a newt they'd have laid the deed at his doorstep personally, you mark my words ah shaddup ya little git”). Pictures of the sainted dead rubbed shoulders in the hallway with aging chromos of Michael Collins, Kevin O'Higgins, General O'Duffy and Tam “Anker” Mac Heron, the half-blind balladeer.

“There's room for one more hero here,” Bren was wont to muse out loud, while contemplating the little portrait gallery in the entrance hall, his little pipe a-puff and a-gurgle, “but it won't be you, lad, nor any of your Provo friends, you can be sure of that, ya bleedin' nit. Bunch of bleedin' Fianna Failers. Ye've the bad drop in ya. I knew it from the first.”

“If I've the bad drop where could it have come from?” inquired Ferdia, reasonably, to his father's retreating back.

On the other hand, Joan or Jean, the mam, regarded her first-and-only-born with equanimity, even affection, at times.

“Ach yer de quare shoneen sure yar arencha ach sure yar,” she'd say in a piercing Galway accent while prising apart diminutive Ferdia's cheeks with a firm pinch on either side and thereby eliciting angry shrieks to which her unmaternal response, when pissed, was usually (in pure Liffeside) “Aw sharrap yer gob.” (Jean or Joan, known primarily as “Mam,” was also widely known as an *aficionada* of bottled liquors, more's the pity.) The paternal response followed the lines of the exhortation quoted above or, with Shavian conciseness, the likes of (say) “Sod off, you.” Otherwise, what with excess contraception (it being, back then, the heady '60s, well into the '70s), sheer laziness (the welfare state, as we all know, turning honest citizens into pampered layabouts), and advancing age (oh, and Joan-Jean's extreme debilitation following a bout of bulimia rendering her something of an Auschwitz survivor in appearance and firmly quelling any lingering desire old Bren might have been feeling but wasn't), no more children joined Ferdia in the privileged category of Offspring of the Quains. He was an only child, poor boy.

In fact, it was fine by him.

“Fine by me,” he said in another temporal/spatial context, that of his flat, the present year, and a response to Finn’s proposal of:

- 1) a quick bite downstairs at Fairy Farmer’s, Killoyle’s newest and trendiest eatery featuring oh-so-healthy items such as baby green snapdragons in onion gravy, St. John’s-wort pâté, muesli cakes stuffed with muesli, Celebean lizard rolls, and charcoal-braised endives *à la Katangaise*;<sup>20</sup>
- 2) a hearty workout at Jim’s Gym on The Parade (Ferdia shook his head furiously at this suggestion but said nothing, preferring to cite his objections in due course in the methodical order in which they presented themselves—1) too bloody boring; 2) too bloody exhausting; 3) too much horrible pop music; 4) the TV, forever tuned to some Moron Special; 5) too many sweaty hairy blokes);
- 3) a brisk stroll along the Strand, past The Shops, to The Shop, whose inauguration day it was.

They set off. Ferdia, no slob at heart, was dressed in a quite, indeed excessively, elegant Gianfranco Mafioso double-breasted blue-and-white twill pinstripe suit with a loosely knotted Principessa Benita Fanculo silk tie depicting rampant Dalmatians, set off nicely by a touch of gold round the sock area and a yellowish-hued hankie that peeped out coyly from the breast pocket like a lone daffodil in a drainage ditch. In stark contrast, Finn wore only maroon cycling shorts, greying tennis shoes, and an off-white Ironman singlet, the better to expose his biceps for puposes of visual wooing of the opposite, and far fairer, sex.

It was cold, but.

“Brrr, it’s cold,” he muttered, as they strode along—or rather, Finn strode, while Ferdia progressed in his precise, stealthy way, like a giant sloth speedy in comparison to others of his species.

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<sup>20</sup> Yum yum oh yum, especially them endives. I had some back in Katanga in oh 1959? ’60? Served at the Grand Hotel Baluba in Stanleyville by a courteous maitre d’ named Patrick, if I remember right, or was it Patrice? Oh it has me fair drooling over meself, it does, as my old Great-Uncle Charlie used to say down the pub before closing time when Olly the publican came round to adjust Charlie’s bib and bowtie and pour him out a valedictorian brace of Theakston’s (this was in Yorkshire, not far from Hutton-le-Hole) before summoning the ambulance service. Stuck it out till he was 92, but (Charlie, that is). And we the nits who’d written him off at 45, when he had his first pneumatic seizure. Just goes to show, doesn’t it. Aye, don’t mind if I do. I’ll have a half of the black stuff—oh all right, make it a pint, the evening bids fair to wend its way out the door and down the toilet anyhow, if you follow my drift. Cheers.

“Shouldn’t have worn that stupid bloody singlet, should you then, me owld sweat?”

“Aw shut it, big man.”

Fairy Farmers was closed, for some unfathomable reason.

“That’s all it says: Closed.”

“Bugger it.”

“Luck of the Irish, eh.”

And so it was that our heroes<sup>21</sup> paused at McShiney’s Super Shiny Sausages for a quick greasy bite: three orders of Super Sized Shiny sausage and Super Limp Chips, two Big Daddy portions for Ferdia, the Kiddie portion for Finn, doubled, with half again on the side, equaling three Big Daddy portions.

Following ingestion, they set off again, albeit with a mite more gastric activity, not to say queasiness.<sup>22</sup> “Now for the gym,” announced Finn, smugly, shadowboxing the bobbing and weaving wind.

“Yer granny. With huge sweaty blokes everywhere? And that bloody pop music?”

“Pop music, is it? What do you expect, Vaughan feckin Williams? Well, all right, maybe later.”

“Count me out of that, boy, now and permanently. Sure won’t I be getting all the exercise I need just lifting crates at the shop when the stuff’s delivered.”<sup>23</sup>

The cousins, mismatched in years as they were, and temperamentally polar opposites, nonetheless got on quite well, considering—considering notably, that is, Finn’s limited range of

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<sup>21</sup> *Anti-*, surely.

<sup>22</sup> I’ll bet. Last time I stopped in at one of those Yank fast-food parlours I was taken with abdominal cramps that had me bent double in the fast-jockey position for the better part of three days, nowhere more so than at the office, where they all politely ignored me, despite my groans of distress. Finally, with a jerk, I was free, and vowed never to set foot in that place again—but wouldn’t you know it, no more than the hint of a smile from a pretty girl, ah a real *beor* so she was; anyhow there I was again, doubled over like a foetus—for *five* days this time, and finding it deucedly hard to carry on a coherent, let alone seductive, conversation, let me tell you, what with the frequency and volume of posterior winds, but somehow I managed, and we were married shortly thereafter in St. Piers Ploughman’s, Mayfair. The marriage was a happy one for a day or so but during our honeymoon on Mykonos she decamped with a local fisherman named Anthony Quinn, an Irish immigrant. “It was love at first sight,” she later told *Bandstand*. “And my own desperate need to get shut of that horrible git I married. Of course, I was abused as a child.” I missed the bint for a while, but all in all it was better that way. Then came Aisling.

<sup>23</sup> Lifting crates? And your man’s complaining about it? Typical, isn’t it? No one wants hard work any more. Why I spent the better part of my early twenties waist-deep in bogwater, indoors and out, working as a bog tester for the Bord Na Mona. One night I remember as if it were yesterday. There I was, standing in putrid bilge up to my oxters when a voice whispered “You’re out.” I slewed round, of course, but there was no one there; only a bit further on, in the dim tangle of a gnarled oak tree barely visible against the pearly grey of nocturnal cloud cover, I perceived what methought to be the ember-glow of a fine tobacco pipe, and I fancied I heard the cavernous sucking of mighty lungs such as a pooka might boast of. Boys o boys it gave me a turn, I can tell you. I heaved myself out of that mud pit and never looked back till I was halfway down the Dual Carriageway to Naas, Co. Kildare, overtaking lorries in the fast lane. Brazil nuts? No thanks. Just the stout, please.

intellectual interests (he was a former software engineering student at Lower Southeast Polytechnic, after all) and Ferdia's grudging indebtedness to his young cousin after so many bailouts and shakedowns in the four years that he'd been married to Shirley. So here they were, roommates again with Ferdia all on his lonesome . . . oh this one would take a while, he knew that. If it could be fixed at all. He'd called her at her office (she was a senior property surveyor for the King Maher Land Corporation, "all winks and no money" as she described it with insanity-inducing regularity) (*but had he ever said anything?*) and she'd rung off instanter with a brief plosive sound of contempt and a muttered, semi-audible "cretin."

So there he was, spurned by his wife, just another ex-IRA serviceman on his uppers trying to start a business, having been cashiered in the wake of the Derry Accords and the Porridgetown Codicils by the organization whose proud and sinister motto had once been "Once In, Never Out"! But Ferdia Quain was no dunce, despite appearances. He'd been ensconced in the IRA archives, after all, for a fair while altogether—twenty years, give or take--and he'd not forgotten where the bodies were buried, as it (and they) were; and this, in turn, enabled him for financing purposes to invoke the names of some ex-contacts, once he'd thought up, over a few Pisherogue Specials down at Mad Molloy's, the little venture that was coming to full fruition today, to wit:

*Killoyle Wine & Cheese, F. Quain, Prop.!*

"Oh I know, there's pubs galore, and a couple decent wine shops down by The Shops, and Driscoes have a halfway acceptable cheese counter (in their serviette department for some reason)<sup>24</sup> but as far as I know, and correct me if I'm wrong."

"Ah yer right yer right ah yer right right enough arrh."

"It's not much cop as a delicatessen."

"Sure God bless ya yer right so yar."

"Furthermore there's not a single bloomin actual wine AND cheese shop in the place."

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<sup>24</sup>Odd, certainly; but let me tell you. The Driscoes' shop back in Battersea had its electrical and ladies' underwear departments reversed, as I recall, eliciting complaints from the clientele although the mannequins were considerably sexier than the ten-foot-lengths of flex and grab bags of clothespins, unless you're Herm Mann the Handy Man or one of them lads, of course.

“There’s Fairy Farmer’s. That’s wine and cheese.”

“Yes but that’s a *bar*, ya twat. I’m talking about a *shop*, you know, a place where you can pop in at your leisure and pick out say a nice crisp Riesling or Chardonnay for later and then pop over and choose say a nice Vale of Avoca Blue to go with it and then pop off home and wash down your Avoca Blue with your crisp Chablis or Pinto Gris till the bloody welkin rings. All the foregoing transported mind you in very elegant carrier bags, sure aren’t those fellas half the battle in any respectable emporium.”

“Do you say so, now.”

“Eh—that’s Pinot, surely?”

“Carrier bags are the men, are they?”

“Right enough, just think of Harrier’s in London, sure many’s the gal who’s been lured into that particular bazaar on the strength of getting hold of one of them British Racing Green carrier bags with the snob appeal and never been seen again. Mind you, when Crankshaft O’Deane planted that thirty-pounder in the Food Hall, the one that didn’t go off quite in time—wonder how Crankshaft’s doing, I heard he just set up down here, in semi-retirement, I’ll have to give him a buzz...nah, you just wouldn’t believe the numbers of allegedly missing persons who suddenly emerged from the woodwork.”

“And now that Killoyle’s getting like a half million tourists a year over from Europe.”

“We’re part of Europe now. Have been since ’73, or was it ’74. No looking back, anyway.”

“No surrender!” guffawed a party peripheral to the conversation, earning himself stony glares galore.

“Exactly. Europeans we are and Europeans we’ll stay. And wine and cheese are part of what makes Europeans European, if yez follow my drift. Not that I’m a connoisseur, or in any way a specialist, no no I’m the first the admit it.”

“And I’m the second. Sorry, just joking. Carry on.”

“Anyhow. It’s time for a spot of oenophiliac whatsit, like. Wine culture. Here in old Killoyle town.”

“Whatever.”

“I mean please don’t forget that for a while back in the nineties I was seconded by Sheets McGinty, the Bogside Beria, as an observer of archives to Harry Batasuna, the Galician Goebbels, ah ha ha ha, over in Bilbao, Spain, the Lusitanian Limerick, ah ha ha just joking. A fine city it is. Home as you all know of the famous Guggisberg Museum. And plenty of fine wines there, believe you me. Your Rioja, for a start. And the old Ixarra fortified brandy, brrr. Grand stuff altogether.”

“Sheets, was it.”

“Ah, dear old Sheets, now there was a fella. Wasn’t he in the papers again recently, carrying out a series of friendly executions somewhere in the Cork area, or Youghal, or—God bless us—Killoyle itself?”

“Arrah. You may have something there, Ferd me owld flower. The Soldiers of Brian O’Nolan caper, as I recall, went down very poorly with yer man.<sup>25</sup>”

“Right y’are, Finn.”

“But it’s not all Spanish plonk you’re counting on flogging at your winery, is it Ferd?”

“Not at all. Sure weren’t there the Strasbourg years after that.”

“Years? I thought you were there for like a fortnight or less.”

“Well all right so I was. But I could have been there for years, if they’d accepted me at the translators’ school.”

“Ah the translators’ school. Hogs’ heaven for translators, yeah?”

“Pigs’ paradise for drunks is more like it. While they were poring over my application forms, I was pouring the vino.”

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<sup>25</sup> See *Da Grotty Paint Pushin’ O’Limpiad, A Moistly Oyrish Fart*, for the gen on this one. Page something or other, I think, or was it One through Four Hundred Odd? I know—why not go and buy it, the way you’ll find out for yourself.

“Good old froggie plonk, was it.”

“No plonk, boy. The best Alsations, and I don’t mean bow-wows. Traminers, Rieslings, you name it, grand stuff, ambrosia so it was, so anyway I knocked it back full tilt so I did and thereby acquired quite an educated palate, believe it or not. Granted, I blew all my nicker and had to come home, but they’d turned me down anyway at the translators’ school, as I don’t speak French worth a tinker’s fart. Sorry, traveler’s. But overall the experience gave me quite a taste for wine.”

“Sure it’s well-known that yer an awful owld wino, Ferdia Quain. And that’s a fact.”

Unexpectedly, for a former member (albeit a mere archivist) of what was, after all, a notorious terrorist organization, Ferdia was the very soul of restraint, quick to anger but rarely given to violence. It was thanks to this forbearance that the speaker of the last-quoted words wasn’t given a good *schmaaaaaaaaaaaaaack* on the muzzle, as one of his companions (Finn) pointed out:

“Jayz, I’d give ya a good *schmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaack* on the muzzle for that.”

“Just you try it, clever dick.”

So anyway, it was in the wake of all this, and despite a decided paucity of your actual financing, that Ferdia felt episodic surges of apprehension alternating with exultation below the breastbone, like a severe attack of intestinal gas, or the on-and-off confluence of two live wires in the wind, as he and Finn approached their destination that blustery March afternoon: the actual opening for business of Killoyle Wine & Cheese (very important to have that ampersand in there with its connotations of bespoke Victoriana and general gilded upscaleness and that, as Ferdia had shrewdly and repeatedly pointed out to the signpainter, one B. Ehan, Esq., of Sandycove), the city’s first *emporium vinitorium*, an establishment “for the discerning cheese-lover and oenophile, a relaxed dual boutique with piped violin music and separate entrances doubling as exits, in which the shopper may sample and browse in boutiques adjoining, etc.” (He’d thought up the PR shite himself).

And there it was. Hung with bunting, with a large sign in the window.

“Grand opening 1800 HRS March 17<sup>th</sup>: Killoyle Wines & Cheeses, F. Quin Prop.”

“Who’s the gobshite wrote that out?” inquired Ferdia, peevishly. “Cheeses? And looka that fer Jaysus’ sake. Quin? Me arse. Can’t even get the name right.”

“Oh God,” gasped Finn, as if punched in the solar plexus.

“I know. Well, I’ll leave it for now. The owner’s name won’t matter that much to the customers, anyway.”

“Not the name. It’s the date.”

“The date? Sure there’s nothing wrong with the date. The seventeenth . . . that’s today, isn’t it?” Nevertheless, a serpent of nameless worry coiled itself round Ferdia’s bowels.

“Jayz, man, wake up! It’s March seventeenth! *It’s blooming St. Pat’s Day!*”

“Whaaa?” quavered Ferdia, thrown decisively off balance, and with the first deliveries due to start in ten or fifteen minutes . . . *or not*, on the national holiday.

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