

Young Dubliners

Chapter 1 – Opens with Johnny Martin

Johnny Martin was not a masterful man. He had lived long enough to taste the bitter tang of disappointment in his thirty years. Things had not gone according to plan. And in his more honest moments he suspected that neither were they likely too. These days he clung to more irrational and extreme hopes.

He rolled over in his bed before the alarm and in the darkened room took stock yet again of his situation. There was Ruth. She was moderately successful – more successful than him. And they were an item. They had been for six years. He had his job – a grimace passed over his face at the thought. Four years in university and he was stalled, buried in a small finance department in Dublin. Nevertheless it was a boat in a big ocean.

Still he never could have believed he would still be there. He had so many plans and so much conviction about his own abilities, and yet convincing the world that had been the problem. So he remained and was an aloof, detached, and reserved figure, flitting in and around the office. His co-workers had long since concluded it best to leave him to his own devices and he had few chats and even fewer interactions with the work crew.

Murray had tried to get him more involved in the naïve hope that he would step up and make a greater contribution and maybe develop something of a career but it had all come to naught and even he had ultimately to admit defeat.

And yet he felt that desperate times called for desperate measures. If he could just have one thing go right. Some good luck for a change. Was that too much to ask for? Ralph would say you make your own luck and wasn't he right. He did alright and wasn't praying for divine intervention to the best of Johnny's knowledge.

It all added up to a hopeless case and he felt momentarily a twinge of regret and sadness at the wasted, hopeful years but he swatted that irritating thought away with a more hopeful aphorism. There was still time and time to rectify the situation.

The day was not yet entirely lost and he had a few tricks up his sleeve yet to play. Of course Ruth wouldn't understand. Her vision did not extend beyond a semi-detached house in Lucan and a couple of squalling infants. There was time enough for her dream to be realised and in any event it did not impinge greatly on his plans.

No he had a plan. Not a particularly complex or erudite plan, nothing that would confuse or perplex the average man in the street. He was going into stocks and into stocks in a big way. This was not an impulsive, rash or ill-considered step. He had given this matter plenty of thought. For nearly twelve months he closely scrutinised the listings in the financial papers and by himself he had devised nay engineered a system of buying and selling high performing stock in a manner that could only guarantee a high return.

The details he kept on his computer sitting on the desk in the bedroom. No one must know. No one needed to know. When the day would come and people inquired about his income or wealth he would just smile and nod rather sagely. Just so they knew that he knew and understood the question. No. This was not some naïve attempt to impress the world. He would never breathe a word of this even to Ruth, especially to Ruth.

He smiled as he lay in his bed. He rolled over to check the clock. Still another fifteen minutes before the bell. The risk was all at the start. That was the catch. Once he was up and running and had a portfolio he could relax. But to get started he would have to take a punt. And he had been tracking the very stock for months now.

It was a company prospecting for oil in Nigeria. They were onto something really big. They had signed contracts with the government. And they were just about to start drilling off-shore. Now was the opportune time – or certainly in the next couple of weeks. He knew he had to act soon and he would. This would be the turnaround the one decisive act to reverse his fortunes. Of course if he did become wealthy he would be generous – not overly. People took advantage of that but he would be a philanthropist – again a discreet one. He would appear as the silent benefactor and then disappear.

Yes a silent benefactor. That had a nice ring to it. And he would take Ruth on a cruise. Wherever she liked, no expense spared. The Bahamas? No problem. Maybe

the Mediterranean at first. But Ruth wasn't materialistic really. Money didn't impress her much. More power to her convent education. No old concepts like honour and integrity and decency got her attention. Sometimes he wished he could be half the person she was.

But then again that was probably why she got him - something to work on. Someone to improve. Though needless to say he often didn't appreciate being worked on. No. Women like Ruth were the salt of the earth. Salt of the earth.

He rolled over again. Another five minutes. Bless those fleeting minutes. Then there was that terrible, straggling, niggardly little doubt. What if it all went belly up? It had happened before. That would be it. His life savings down the toilet. Why take such risks? Why not be content? Be risk averse and don't gamble everything.

But he countered that was no way to get ahead. Pioneering, breaking new ground required gumption, balls.

The alarm bell interrupted his thoughts.

As he struggled out of bed into the hazy gloom of his heavily curtained room his thoughts took a different direction. He had in his day been a big hit with the ladies. At least there was evidence to support this assumption. He turned on the immersion and sat on the edge of the bed waiting for it to heat up.

His star had very briefly shone in the firmament. He recalled fondly a J1 summer in the states before he met Ruth. He had done well that summer with the ladies. He had been the envy of the little Irish colony of which he was part - all men of course. But how could women be expected to appreciate such manly bravado?

He still had a glad eye for the ladies even though these days; there was less of a point. There was Ruth to consider. She had to be kept in a happy state of ignorance though from time to time she voiced suspicions. She had niggardly little doubts. It was the dreaded female intuition that he most feared. How she seemed to know things or have a sense of them without any information.

There was little enough for her to worry about in any event, just the occasional snog in the pub when she was away for the weekend, or just once as he fondly recalled a night of drunken passion leading to a very sober and embarrassing morning.

He thought about going back to the States after that summer. Maybe he should have done. But instead he stayed in Dublin and begrudgingly and unwillingly integrated into that little world. Then of course he met Ruth. And there was no way she could be parted from her mother, at least not for anything more than a holiday.

He was chicken. He should have gone anyway. He could have struck out on his own. Made his fortune in America but instead he opted for a grimy flat and a crappy job in finance in Dublin. Another lost opportunity.

But somehow when it came down to it he didn't want to be on his own. It would have been lonely and strange, alien in fact to have no one around. At least he had Ruth and maybe there would be a little Johnny someday. Maybe. He never wanted to be alone. Never. That was no kind of life.

He stood up, stripped naked and entered the tiny bathroom that adjoined his bedroom. No there was no doubt about it, he thought as the water streamed off him still only lukewarm. America could have been something, could indeed have been the answer but some people made good even back in Ireland. There was Ralph for example. He decided not to shampoo his hair.

Ralph was doing pretty well. He always talked his success down to Johnny. He knew how competitive Johnny was and how easily he could be upset. He tried to spare his feelings. But it was difficult to hide the six figure income, his own business, and the expensive car he drove. For all his talk Ralph still liked the badges of success.

Still he was a good friend.

The showering over he dried him with yesterday's damp towel and quickly dressed. Smart casual was fine. No need for a suit on Friday's. He critically held his slacks up to the light. Not the cleanest he concluded. But anyway no one cared what he wore.

He pulled back the curtain and the sudden light rushing in momentarily blinded him. He leaned across the computer desk and opened the small window for ventilation.

Ruth had been angling for some time now that they live together. He was holding out but he knew eventually he would have to give in and that would be another nail in the coffin of his freedom. Even his Thursday nights in the local with Ralph would come under review.

Still it was not to be helped nor could it be avoided. He was inexorably bound on a journey to matrimony despite all his kicking and screaming. And in a way he didn't care. At least she was decisive and knew what she wanted. He was glad one of them did. He took his jacket off its hook on the back of the front door. You couldn't swing a cat in this place. It was a real bachelor pad.

He picked up his briefcase and opened the front door. No the long and short of it was he was tired. He was tired of a thousand false starts and things not going according to plan. How much disillusionment could he be expected to stomach?

Of course his damnable pride was to blame. He fancied himself way too much. He knew that was the subtext of all the negative feedback he was receiving. There was nothing special about Johnny Martin the negative voices clamoured. If he didn't have that pride he could be free of it. Free of all the torturous and unsatisfied ambition – to do what, to be what. He asked himself but could furnish no answer.

Why couldn't he be like Ralph now - successful, contented and most importantly: relaxed. Johnny never knew how to relax. Even on holidays he always had some micro project that required his urgent attention. A week in West Cork had to be cut short for an important letter arriving from London. It never came. In Tenerife he spent three days of his holiday trying to get the fiction editor of the London Independent on the phone.

It came off Ralph in waves – relaxed, successful, and accomplished.

Ah to hell with anyway, he thought, going down the stairs. Success wasn't everything. He gave the street door an extra slam to accentuate his frustration. Plenty of people were late starters. But what if they never started?

Ranelagh's triangle was bustling with people going to work. He walked down to the canal and crossed over the bridge. He dawdled not really wanting to arrive. At the window of a coffee shop he lingered and looked in. The place was bustling with early morning commuters. A queue stretched almost to the door.

He would have loved the freedom to chuck the day and just go in and order coffee and sit for the morning. Just like when he was in college. Those were days when there were few matters of consequence. Still duty called and he moved on. He decided to take the long way down Camden. Murray would be late probably though he liked to blame it on the traffic. Some excuse.

Johnny's father had been a loving if troubled man. And when he thought of him he barely restrained a tear. It was terrible really that he never found what he was looking for. If he, Johnny, only had known what he wanted he would have done his best to live up to that expectation. But that was the puzzle of it his father despite his best efforts never seemed to notice him at all.

That dearth of expectation had the curious effect of making Johnny even more unsettled. If he could only come upon the right path perhaps his father would have noticed. In any event he never did. He was gone to his rest five years now.

He remembered with exact clarity the day they had to vacate their leafy, detached house in Foxrock. He may have been twelve but the event was permanently etched on his memory. They had to move. His father's business had soured and then recession struck and it transpired that a few investments relied on the family home as collateral. There was nothing for it but to sell up and move to a cheaper part of town.

His mother had not enjoyed the move to a council house in Churchtown. It transpired that her friends were contingent largely on her former address and they had few visitors in their new home. His father it seemed retreated further and further into himself and his parents both observed a strict policy of separate bedrooms ever after.

Johnny was too young to remember it ever being any different. And as an only child he devised elaborate fantasies and games to while away the lonely days of his youth. There was his imaginary butler whom he called Perkins. Perkins was the ever

obliging man servant of English extraction with whom he held a rambling and convoluted dialogue in his head. Perkins didn't quite fade away until Johnny was a teenager. Then there was his unshakeable conviction that he would someday be a king in a fantasy realm.

As he grew up the fantasies mutated and took on more adult forms. There were numerous crushes he developed on girls, one most notably in the school play. He stayed up late composing torrid verses of admiration and devotion which he posted anonymously through her letter box along with a tape he had made of all his favourite songs.

Eventually the crushes petered out when he met his first girlfriend – the kissing girlfriend she was forever dubbed in his memory. He recalled furtive chilly gropes in the local park and large mammaries which managed to remain firmly in check despite a futile but energetic struggle with a bra. There were arguments about sex and she announced that she just wasn't ready. She wasn't going to be ready until she went to college and that was the end of it, take it or leave it.

In the end she left him and went off with his best friend who rather sheepishly reported no luck in the sex department over pints some months later after she dumped him.