

“Young Dubliners”

By

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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.

Chapter 2 – Meet Ralph

Johnny had friends but not many. His closest - Ralph, knew him well and he would confide in Ralph but not deeply over Thursday night pints in the local. Ralph was blessed with a simple mind, not troubled by complexities he couldn't resolve. As he often told Johnny he thought too much.

Ralph was healthy in his habits. He didn't smoke. He didn't drink much, the occasional binge was acceptable. Christmas and Easter and after closing some business deal which he would never discuss with Johnny.

Their Thursday night encounters would consist of three pints for Johnny and one for Ralph. Ralph usually drove to the pub now that he had moved out to Killiney. Ralph valued Johnny as his only intellectual friend and Johnny secretly suspected he enjoyed the ego boost he got from associating with someone less successful.

Even though he hadn't read a book in years Ralph had a deep and profound respect for matters cultural and of the intellect. It was he who encouraged Johnny to write his book. He even read parts of it and often gave encouraging feedback. However Johnny only ever got half-way through and then he abandoned the project. Something Ralph could never understand. He was not a finisher Johnny he had concluded years before.

Chapter 3 – Off to work Johnny

"A woman of Ruth's stature comes once in a lifetime" he declared out loud as he took his suit out of the closet.

It was a fifteen-minute walk to work and John was punctual if nothing else.

Ralph was going places. Johnny knew partly because he rarely saw him these days. When they backpacked around Europe they were on the same level. Ralph was even a bigger bum than he. What the hell happen? Ralph got that sales job and next thing he was their top performer and then he bought a house and a flash car acquired an immaculately groomed girl and a whole dreary succession of other events that left John feeling very inadequate.

Still Ralph was a good mate.

He decided to buy his coffee from the café on Camden Street. Murray would probably be late.

Murray, Johnny's manager was his main connection with the company. Murray had developed a tolerance if not a liking of Johnny over the years. He thought John complicated his working life unnecessarily and he attributed this to his high faultin' notions.

Johnny could always be relied upon to be absent or sick at month end or have an urgent appointment that necessitated leaving on time. He just wasn't a team player and though he showed periodic flashes of brilliance it was all flashes in the pan as far as Murray was concerned.

Murray had just bought a semi-detached house in Dunboyne for a princely sum. He had to get on the property ladder he told Johnny. There was no time for delay. His bird was getting into the family way and space had to be provided.

Still Murray was all right for a manager. He did suffer from galloping halitosis in the mornings until he had his lunch. There was no polite way that John could share that information.

Over time he had developed a detailed knowledge of Murray's life not by design but rather proximity. When Murray needed to call his builder he did it at work. When he had an argument with his fiancée he made it up at work.

John's briefcase was another area of concern. In it he kept all his important papers. These were papers that meant something or had meant something when they were put in the briefcase. Sadly their meaning fluctuated over time. Papers that were of interest six months ago became dog-eared and dirty. And yet he was loath to take them out. He might want them for something at some stage.

He recalled Murray's comments at their last review.

"You promise everything," said Murray, "but you don't deliver. You can't do that to people Johnny. They lose faith. They feel cheated."

He was referring to Johnny in the zone when he revealed a scintillating side. His eyes sparkled and his speech was witty and fluent. Those who didn't know him were instantly charmed.

"The M50 is a bloody nightmare," Murray declared to anyone who would listen. He omitted to say as usual.

"It's all right for you living in town," he directed at Johnny.

"You should try living in town," said John provocatively.

"Yeah really."

Murray often tried to make suggestions to get John involved in what was going on in the department but it was always an uphill battle. To progress in the company John would have to show an interest outside his immediate area. He never volunteered for additional responsibilities.

John got back to his reports.

After he had finished his sandwich he went back to his desk.

Chapter 4 – Buying Flexco stock

John skipped down the steps of the bank in a very good mood. He had just withdrawn a banker's draft of his entire savings. Twenty five thousands euros odd and with this draft he planned to purchase 50,000 ordinary shares of Plexco at the giveaway price of 50 cents a share.

He consulted no one except the broker who he was now going to meet in person for the first time. It was a deal. It was a bargain. He didn't need the broker to tell him. Plexco were shortly to begin drilling and all the indicators were good that they would find oil. Conservatively he put his potential gains at five times his initial investment.

He hadn't told Ruth and he wasn't going to tell her. For one thing it was his money, his savings. For another she would undoubtedly be negative about it. Ruth was much more conservative and wouldn't approve of investing in the stock market.

Chapter 5 – Ruth Egan was a nice person

Ruth Egan was a nice person. This was one of her most obvious characteristics. She was considerate of others and she quite rightly expected consideration in return. She made it to Mass even if she was a few minutes late and stood at the back of the church until Communion. When the Holy Eucharist was bestowed she departed immediately thereafter. She would not consider herself a religious person but in times of trouble she would pray. Her times of trouble mostly concerned Johnny.

God to Ruth was a kindly listening voice that was there for nice people like her. God made sure that fairness prevailed and that what she was seeking she always found.

Ruth was not intellectual though she liked to read - her favourites were usually romantic novels. They were so much easier and more passionate. She had her shows on TV and if she was late home she programmed the recorder to tape them.

She felt strongly that nice things happened to nice people. And if bad things happened then they probably happened to bad people. Her mother played a large role in her life and often was consulted on matters strategic relating to John. Her mother's view was that he was worth the investment and could be turned in the right direction.

Ruth never considered herself pretty. She was too objective for that. She felt however that she was the kind of woman a man would be lucky to have. She was practical. She organised John's bank account for him and renegotiated his car loan because she enjoyed doing those things.

She was the motivator to do things in their little world. John would sit around for the whole weekend and not take advantage of all that was on offer. So she devised a reasonable schedule of activities for him, because he needed to grow. She didn't tell him of course that some of the events she had already attended with her girlfriends.

Ruth was sure that she loved John. Of course John had his ways and he could be difficult, but she had been told that men are fine as long as they have good management. John was Ruth's greatest management challenge to date. He was an on-going work in progress. She had made improvements but he had a depressing

tendency to relapse as well, or, in fits of anger to reveal that he was only doing it to keep her happy.

Lately she had noticed a wellspring of anger in him towards her. He was just more curt and abrupt than he used to be. He used to take correction very well but now sometimes she considered her constructive criticisms before she made them in his presence.

Ruth worked for a financial firm in Ballsbridge. She managed the asset rebate team and the girls under her all said she was tough but fair. Now things were changing. Jen got married in August and Noreen was planning her's. Susan Flanagan from Depreciation even had the nerve to ask "so when is John going to make the move?" She flushed at that, the cheek of that one. There are some things that should never be said. Still and all it had given her a spur and the next evening with John there was an edge of steel in her voice.

Today Ruth left her mother's in Stillorgan a little late. Mother had this annoying tendency to get up when Ruth was getting ready for work. Sure what could she say to her? She had nothing to do all day except wait for Ruth to come back in the evening.

Ruth caught the bus on the dueller. She had heard some nasty boys in tracksuits call it that and ever since that it was fixed in her mind. Her navy blue jacket concealed the embarrassing wide shoulders and in the skirt disguised her plump derriere, so much so that a rather handsome man in a suit gave her an eye-widening look as she took the stairs to the top deck.

This was one thing Ruth would not stand for. It was "one man one woman" and her's was John. John, John she thought for the umpteenth as she took her seat. He was no stunner but he had a heart of gold. She had already picked out the names of the children with her mother. Her gaze drifted on the houses and people on the pavement below.

What about mother when she moved in with John? Mother would have no one and reality was she wouldn't get over there much. She got off near Lesson Street Bridge and was at her desk five minutes later.

She logged into her computer and the first thing she noticed, or truer to say, the first thing she looked for was an email from John.

"Oh beauty Ruthy you make me fruity!"

That was just his funny way.

"Pretty please forgive last night's words; harsh though they were I have a peace offering for you."

There was link. She clicked on the link and a travel website flashed up with details about holidays in Cyprus.

"The little brat" she thought. "He knows how to manipulate."

"Would you like some coffee, Ruth?" It was Siobhan looking very hung-over.

"No thank you" she said all business like. Siobhan went off. She made a mental note to check her figures again. Normally when Siobhan was nice she had made some big mistake.

Later on after she had dealt with her emails and the big out of balance on one of the ledgers she returned to the email.

After lunch she called the girls and they all trooped into the conference room.

She handed each one of them a printout. There had been irregularities in the way certain journals had been posted. Everyone was doing it so she wasn't pointing any fingers. She was clear though it had to stop. She used the whiteboard and wrote a series of steps for the girls. Then she sat at the table with her team. Ruth was big on encouraging team contributions so she went around the table looking for feedback.

She always favoured a proactive approach with her team. Perhaps there were deficiencies in the training. She needed to know in order to help.

"So Siobhan how's everything with you?"

"Oh not a bother really." She was big awkward looking, red-faced girl, whose singular characteristic seemed to be an obdurate resistance to Ruth's will. She never wanted Siobhan on her team but she got stuck with her and now she couldn't get rid of her.

"Fine really. Bit hung-over you know."

So unprofessional, Ruth thought. She pursed her lips as she did when she disapproved strongly.

"Orla."

"Oh everything's fine Ruth. Bit of bother with that asset we talked about."

Orla was just lovely, so reasonable and so compliant. She was short, skinny and extremely self-effacing. She never held eye contact for long and mostly looked at the floor when she was not spoken too.

"Joan."

"Oh just like Orla really."

She always set aside ten minutes at the end of team meetings for chat. Here she would permit some slight intimacy with the girls, just as much as was healthy for them to see that she was human being too. She usually got the ball rolling.

"John is taking me to Cyprus, don't you know."

"Really. Where to?" said Orla.

"Cyprus is great craic," butted in Siobhan. "Me and my fella went clubbing all night the first night. We were so drunk we arrived back at the hotel in time for breakfast!"

"We're not interested in that kind of holiday," said Ruth, witheringly.

When she got back to her desk she had another think about Siobhan. Clearly she didn't respect her authority. That's what it was. It said in "Management for Dummies" that a good manager ought to focus on the problems not the personalities. She repeated this too herself as a mantra for a few moments. "Problems not personalities."

Siobhan wasn't the problem it was the issues. She kept trying to convince herself of this. It was so unprofessional to dislike anyone. She flushed at the thought. What mattered more was effectiveness. Was she being effective around Siobhan? This she couldn't fathom.

She checked Siobhan's figures again and there was another big fat mistake, which she had overlooked. Perhaps she would ask for advice from Caitriona. That was a last resort. Caitriona was the head of the business unit. And Ruth didn't wish to bring her problems to that door.

She got up her computer and grabbed her coat. It was lunchtime and she was meeting Niamh for lunch. Niamh was her favourite friend right now because she could talk to Niamh about John. And John was always an enigma but lately much more so. Niamh was a good listener by her own admission and she sat patiently in Cocoon nursing her espresso shot until she caught Ruth's eye through the window.

Ruth was about Niamh's equal in looks and this was very important for Ruth. She didn't think she could be a friend of someone who was outside her range in looks or lifestyle. Ruth had known Niamh since they were in the convent school together. For years they are not been closely in touch. But then everyone was getting married and just not keeping up and all the other girls got hitched so now it down to Niamh who was her main woman for chat and then there was Fiona for doing things like the cinema, concerts and so on.

She came in the back entrance of the pub and sat down beside Niamh and ordered a coffee. Niamh was a striking red head with red eyelashes and piercing green eyes. She was not as tall as Ruth and despite her striking characteristics she found the world of men an impossible challenge. She was single and embittered at least so she told Ruth. As Ruth told John, in private of course, Niamh will jump on the next guy who comes along.

"So how's everything Ruthy?"

"Oh I don't know what to say," said Ruth. Sometimes she felt such ennui with John that it would shock other people. What was the point in holding out for someone so difficult and complicated?

"Tell me about yourself, Niamh? Any hot dates?"

"I joined a web site," Niamh said, hopefully. "But I don't know. I haven't met any one yet. Do you think it is weird to be single?" She leaned and deliberately straightened her back. She was wearing a turquoise sweater and a long of beads and the usual flamboyant bracelets.

"No. You're not weird. It's hard to meet the right person. I was lucky with Johnny. Anyway the Internet is just how people meet these days. There is no stigma. Right?" Ruth put her bag on the floor and took a sip of her coffee.

"John is taking me to Cyprus I think."

"Oh Ruth you're so lucky." She flicked her long mane of hair behind her shoulders.

"It's not all wine and roses Niamh, as I am sure you know. John has been quite rude to me lately. It's a make-up gesture. I won't say abusive but I never seen it this bad."

"What did he say?"

"Oh I don't want to talk about it. He's just getting weirder. It's almost like eccentric or something. I mean I know he loves me. I am so sure of that. But just sometimes I think I can't get through all the bullshit in his head and then that scares me. I can't reach him and I don't know what do. Of course I can ignore the outbursts and bad-

temper and the unreasonable behaviour. But this is someone Niamh I am thinking of spending the rest of my life with. I have to be sure. Don't I? Oh sometimes I envy you Niamh. John and I have been together years. I can't just walk away. It would be like having all my teeth pulled. Part of me is with him now."

Niamh sat back shocked at the torrential outburst.

"Is everything okay Ruth? How are you feeling?"

And then it was too much and the tears welled up.

"I just don't know what to do Niamh."

And in the same instant almost they were gone.

Niamh sat back her chair surprised. She had never seen Ruth like this.

The tears were gone and didn't return. Just a few seconds of emotion was the most Ruth could generally rise too and that rarely. She blew her nose loudly and sat back.

"Oh I am sorry Niamh. But better out than in, right."

"That's okay Ruthy. I am much more blubby than that. You haven't seen the half of it."

"Well its stupid isn't it? I mean everyone has problems."

"That's why us girls have to stick together" said Niamh, unconvincingly.

Ruth smiled weakly.

She left Niamh after the coffee and returned to the office. In the ordered quiet of the accountancy department she was able to reformulate her thoughts and she concluded she was quite addled. It seemed like she had two choices. She could let him talk her around as he had done before and let it pass or she go for one of rare confrontations and "where are we going?" style conversations.

Problem with the confrontational style was she had to mean business. There was no sense throwing down the gauntlet and not meaning it. John could tell. He knew what he could get away with. She would refuse the holiday in Cyprus. That was the ticket. She was not going anywhere until they cleared up a few items. She wanted a date set for the wedding and she wasn't going to be fobbed off. She had the hotel picked out and he could just go along with it. Beauty Ruthy meant business this time.

After work she deliberately left her laptop on the desk. This was an evening she needed to think and to plan in her mind what she was going to. She caught the bus at the canal bridge and sat up top, as was her way. Ruthy needed to think all this through and on the bus was where she did her best thinking.

She reckoned and had reckoned for a long time that she was 4 out of 10 in the looks department. John was no stunner either. But the alternatives needed to be considered if this was what she thought it was and Johnny boy meant business. Being out in the marketplace scared her. She was 31 now and she didn't like pubs and she didn't like drinking and hanging off fellas.

She liked John because he spoke to her at a concert and was a real gentleman. John was her one and only and there had never been anyone before John. Only a few drunken gropes outside Leggs and that didn't count. Heavy petting made up the rest of her encounters. She was a good convent girl and not ashamed to admit it. Only Johnny boy had corrupted her and that was why she had a strong mind to marry him.

After a year she told her Mum about the sex and she eventually came around to accepting it.

"Young people these days have their ways. Different stresses and strains" she nodded sagely as she said.

Mum was her hope because Mum was deep in Ruth's councils to the point of too deep she thought sometime.

Johnny boy was always eccentric but it was getting worse. The point of the holiday was forgiveness for the biggest fight they had had in their history only last weekend. When she thought about it she had an ache in her heart like butterflies or worse an arrow. The thought of losing Johnny and what then. No one to call on the phone. No one to escape on those dirty weekends to Jury's in Galway when John used to come with special discount vouchers and signing themselves in the guest book with strange names. She was Ruthina Etoile.

Her heart flipped like an omelette on a frying pan. She had to tread carefully now so as not to make things worse. She nearly missed her stop at Stillorgan but just got up in time.

Mum was sitting in the kitchen reading a book. She put it down with a big smile when Ruth came in.

"Well Ruthy how was your day?"

"Oh Mum. I don't know what to do about Johnny? It's all so weird."

Mum smiled. She loved talking about Johnny. She drew heavily on her own married experience. But then again Frank was a very simple man compared to Johnny at least from what she had heard. She often told Ruthy she wouldn't be in this situation only for she let him pluck her cherry. Girls had to be smart. This was the way of the world.

"He's invited me on holidays to Cyprus. What do you think of that?"

Mum smiled. She knew there was more coming.

"I mean why does he have to be so complicated and tied up in knots all the time. I never understand what's eating him. If he could just accept life the way it is. He has some hidden agenda."

She sat down having poured herself a cup of tea.

"Oh Ruth. I think you both get on well together. Why don't you talk to him about all this? Explain how you feel." She patted her on the arm.

"I know. I will. I just love that man. That's what it was like with Dad wasn't it? I mean love finds a way. It has too." She clenched her hands together and looked into the middle distance.

"Love does find a way, dear. It does."

She brought her bag upstairs to her room. It was the same room she had slept in all her life. Her sister moved over to London after college but Ruthy stayed. She called her the home bird and would drop in every Christmas with her condescending big city ways and comment disparagingly on how so little had changed.

Ruth did think about moving out several times. Eventually she brought a small house out in Swords and rented it out. She just couldn't leave Mum alone, by herself, and John was all weird about living together even though she would spend usually 3 nights a week in his place. No. She was happy enough. Not ecstatic perhaps but content nevertheless.

She just wasn't going to call him back tonight and that was it. This was her mental resolution to herself. She changed out of her work clothes and threw her bag on the bed. Apart from the bed there was desk with a computer on it. There was a photomontage on the wall she made of John and her in Chamonix last year. There was the wooden wardrobe, which was in the house from the time it was built. In it she kept her "special dresses." There was a selection of evening dresses that she had worn to various black tie events with John. The inevitable round of Christmas parties.

She loved dressing up and going places with John because of the effect it had on him as much as anything. Put John in a room full of people and he would come alive. John was the ultimate "love and leave you" socialite. Even Ruth couldn't keep up when he got going.

She hung up her clothes and dresses in the wardrobe and made another mental note to think on him no more for the rest of the evening. And that was that.

Chapter 6 – Johnny and his plans

John spent many hours considering his plans.

His father always said "do everything in a big way, Johnny. That's the essence of success. And never ever give up. Always keep plugging away"

His father had been a comfortable professional in a large financial firm. However when he branched out on his own things started to go wrong. He got involved in two partnerships, which folded with large debts. He naively put the family home up as collateral.

Johnny was going to change all that and reverse the family fortunes.

But when was it going to happen? He couldn't go on like this forever. Ruthy gave him a long rope to run on but eventually she was going to yank that leash.

His Dad died when he was twenty five.

Success came in many forms. He toyed with the idea of a career change many times; driving Ruth demented with the thought of it.

He felt he had the potential to be many things. He was a jack of all trades but master of none. He was a gifted person. He did not understand why the world did not share this view. He was an overlooked talent, a man of special abilities deserving and awaiting recognition.

All his projects he went about with great energy and vigour. To Ruth they were phases. She felt that when John was in a phase he lost sight of past and got caught up in the moment.

"You are such a dreamer Johnny. Why do you devote so much of your spare time to things that don't make money?" Ruth often asked.

"I have to find my true calling" was the reply.

"But we could be on a weekend away together and do so many things if you just gave less time to these interests. Come on Johnny you have been at it for years."

But Johnny just wouldn't listen.

"God loves a tryer" he said. "And sooner or later I will make my breakthrough."

What was his true calling?

"But Johnny you can't expect them to promote you if you don't spend an extra hour after work each day" Ruth would say. "That's how I got my promotion. You have to want it and work for it. You are too divided in your focus."

He knew his focus was divided. He cared little for the urgencies of finance and he always returned to his pet projects.

Ruth clearly saw the phases and mood swings. He could be very attractive to be around when he was upbeat.

Of course he would never tell Ruth. That was crazy. No it was Johnny's little secret.

There hadn't been many flings. Just the occasional random encounter when Ruth was away with the girls or Niamh. They had broken up too for six months in their second year. Johnny kept her on the "back-burner".

He managed to have a girl on the go for nearly two months but he nearly got caught out so he gave her the boot. He would call Ruth up after the pub and she would drive over from Stillorgan to spend the night - a perfect arrangement or so he used to tell Ralph.

Long term he knew that no one he met in this capacity compared to Ruth. There was no reality check for the male ego like time. And as Johnny aged his hair thinned. He could no longer capture those bright young naïve things that floated around Temple Bar like so many may flies every season.

He found his witticisms less witty and his dashing, debonair approach less appealing. The rejections began to significantly outweigh the acceptances. He was getting old.

Still Ruth remained.

It wasn't a destiny he had any reason to resist.

Poor starry eyed Ruthy. John had to be the centre of female attention and would never rest easy otherwise. He needed to be reassured constantly that he was loved.

Chapter 7 – More on Ralph

Ralph was tall. He had a prominent nose, set squarely midst his elongated face. He had long arms and cut his hair short and parted it in the middle. With the ladies he always considered himself a hit, even though he had his barren periods. Now in his thirties he focused more on divorcees and single mums. They tended to be a more fertile hunting ground.

He had never settled with one woman, despite having a succession of girlfriends over the years. The longevity of Johnny's relationship with Ruth impressed him. This was something he could never manage.

He used his hands volubly when making points. When he gave himself to a task it was a matter of personal pride to complete it. No half measures would do.

When Ralph originally branched out into his own business John was unsure. He felt it was the right thing to inject a note of caution and he did. Ralph took it well and said.

"I've only being at it for week. Give me a chance."

John was jealous that Ralph was a successful entrepreneur. He thought of his own situation working for the same dumb firm for nearly six years where his salary had barely kept pace with inflation.

Johnny admired his calm in difficult situations. When things went wrong Ralph just laughed whereas John would be thrown for a loop.

"You should stick to your strengths Johnny" said Ralph.

When Ralph first became successful Johnny went to him for a heart-to-heart. He found him in his office on the docks where he ran his import export of Chinese furniture. For the first time in their friendship he saw Ralph blush.

"But John you have a successful career as a financial analyst. Not every one is cut out for sales."

"What are saying? I can't hack it in sales?"

Ralph swivelled in his executive chair.

"Look John we're friends. I am trying to be frank here in your interest. You are in the career you are in for a reason, first of all. If you had the tendency to be in sales you would have felt it by now. You are in the grip of an impulse."

"But it doesn't seem like an impulse."

"John you are a thinker. You are an analyser. Sales people are driven by simple impulses - money and ambition. Their needs are no more complex than that. Consider our friendship. I like intellectual conversation. I find your observations and comments engaging."

John slumped at the last commentary. Outside a lorry rattled the windows of the office as it passed by.

"Oh Jesus Ralph how do you do it?"

"Do what?" He started to look really uncomfortable.

"The beautiful girls, the beautiful life."

"Oh John don't talk that way. You have Ruth. You have your job. You have your health. What else do you need?"

"I don't know Ralph." John put his head in his hands. "Where did I do wrong? I mean what did I do? "

"Johnny you should get out more and meet more people. I don't think you are ready for a big change. People settle when they have finished exploring themselves. Have you ever thought about cutting loose for a while, a change of scene?"

He shook his head. "I know what you mean. I know exactly."

"Look John I would love to chat on to you. But I've got some clients coming in this afternoon. Can we hook up again sometime soon?"

John looked up from his hands.

"Yes of course. I am sorry Ralph. I'll be in touch."

Chapter 8 – Johnny’s Phases

Maybe Johnny had gone into another phase thought Ruth. That could be it. But he had so many phases. They always ended. When he was in a phase Johnny didn't know. Ruth just had to wait for him to come out of it.

She tried to distract him from these introspective and all-consuming moods without success. She realised that his moods had a dynamic of their own and had to play out. She had long given up following him down the road of these passing enthusiasms.

Today Johnny sat at his desk in the bedroom. He was brain storming. He had already been sitting there for thirty minutes. He looked at the window and could see a view of Rathmines and the surrounding area. On a pad on the desk he had written business ideas and underlined it. So far he hadn't written anything else.

He had managed to shoe Ruth out shopping with her mother. It was Saturday morning and she had a tendency to linger overly long when he needed to be by himself.

She never understood that he needed time to be alone. She never wanted to be alone herself. If she wasn't with him, she was with her Mum or she was at work. She had no comprehension of the need for solitude.

He gave his crotch a generous scratch and tried to refocus. No he definitely wasn't in the mood. He stood up in his boxers and walked around the room.

Opportunities: that was what he needed.

Ruth never liked Ralph. He was a bad influence and she tolerated him. She hated the way he talked to women including her.

He had invested through an Internet website the whole twenty thousand in a company mining for gold in Nigeria. If they struck gold he could be a millionaire. "It's a potential jackpot," said the broker, on a toll-free number John found on the website.

"But what are my chances, my statistics?"

There was a pause. "I feel very good about this stock," said the broker in a slight Cockney accent.

He doodled idly on the notepad.

He threw down his pen. He was going out to meet Ralph and he was going to get drunk and not even call Ruth today.

He threw on his jacket and made for door.

There were always plenty of taxis outside on the street. He had no set agenda and a mental note to leave Murray a bogus voicemail saying he was sick before he crashed.

The cabbie dropped him at College Green and he got out and walked briskly across the slippery, cobblestones towards the pub. A light drizzle was coming down in gentle waves and the sun was setting in the sky, a dusky orange. When he opened the door he could hear amid the clink of glass at the bar the murmuring hum of life.

He made straight for the bar and ordered himself a drink.

Then he looked around for Ralph.

"Aren't you going to introduce me to the friend?" in heavily accented English.

Her name was Tasha and judging from her glassy blue eyes she was already buzzed.

Chapter 9 – The stock announcement

The day of the stock announcement Johnny got up early and was in exceptionally good humour. He was going to be rich and he had no doubt that by the afternoon he would be a wealthy man.

He deliberately kept it a secret from Ralph and Ruth. He didn't want them to know. He didn't want to take their negativity on board and he knew exactly what they would say if he had sought their opinion.

No this was Johnny Martin on his own, taking the initiative. He didn't need any advice or counselling from anyone.

At exactly one minute past nine he called his broker. He remembered the time clearly because he planned with himself to call precisely that moment.

However when he rang he could not get through. The broker who phoned him constantly during the transaction was suddenly unavailable.

When he got through finally he felt as if he had been kicked in the stomach. The drilling results were negative. They found no oil. The markets reacted immediately and the stock price collapsed.

Chapter 10 – Meet Tasha

Tasha was tall and lightly fair skinned with freckles scattered liberally across her forehead and cheeks. She most often wore her blonde hair in two long shoulder length plaits or if pressed for time in a single ponytail. She was well endowed but lately her boobs had started to sag.

Tasha had been with many men. She lost count somewhere after her eighteenth birthday. That was okay because she knew what they needed. Most of the guys were all right. In fact the average time it took them to do their business and leave was ten minutes. That suited her just perfectly.

Since she had moved to Ireland her business had boomed. Now she was charging two hundred euros a visit and that didn't include any funny business. Of course Pak took a lot of it but even still there was a lot left over for her.

The only problem now though was Pak. Now that he had more money he was high most of the time and this worried her. She cared about Pak but Pak was so unpredictable and violent. He was the only family she had and the only person who cared about her.

She lived with Pak off Mountjoy Square. It wasn't a bad place. They had cable TV and she wasn't far in her high heels from Henry Street where she spent the idle hours browsing through Arnotts and the other shops raising eyebrows in her black spandex body sock and bleached blonde pony-tailed hair.

The evening was business and she had a regular clientele that came to the flat by appointment only. They were mostly Irish guys and full of polite apologies but their intent was no different to the few foreigners amongst her clients. There were those who felt guilty and would pour their hearts out to her afterwards about some betrayed wife or lover. She just pretended she couldn't understand and that worked okay.

Sometimes she thought she would run away from Pak. Because he would never understand that she didn't want to do this forever. He hadn't learned very much English and was spending a lot of time with the other Romanians. Most of them were claiming asylum so they hung around the flat smoking Turkish cigarettes and drinking oily black cups of espresso. They were angry and Pak was angry. There was nothing at home and nothing here.

Today she slouched around the apartment in her tracksuit. There were no punters booked for tonight. She had a casual thing going with a Polish guy. He was a bouncer at the club where she used to dance. They got together a few times, no big deal. It wasn't easy to have a boyfriend. Most wanted to control or influence her. She slumped onto the couch, thumbing idly through a gossip magazine.

She loved reading the celebrity gossip. Some day she would be a movie star. She would pay for Pak to get his head straightened and live in Hollywood, no more hooking. Maybe she could find a nice woman for Pak. And then he wouldn't be so violent.

She lit one of the Turkish cigarettes. Perhaps she would go out after all tonight. She was in the mood. She put on the water heater and went into her room to pick out something, preferable low-key. She didn't want any hassle.

She stripped off naked in front of the mirror and critically inspected herself. Her breasts were definitely starting to sag. They were losing their shape and definition she thought sadly. Still she had good figure though. She loved her hair. It was always her best feature.

Black suited best and she pulled out a low-key number. This would do for the place she had in mind. It was one where all the rich Irish went. Maybe she would bag herself a millionaire. She got into the shower and an hour later was sitting on the couch calling a taxi.

When the taxi arrived she was explicit in her instructions. He knew the place.
"Meeting some friends, are you love?"

She said nothing.

He gave up after that and dropped her off on the corner of Parliament Street. It was early yet in the bar. The handful of customers tried hard not to stare. Despite her low-key number, Tasha always turned heads.

She sat at the bar and ordered herself a dry Martini. She had seen done in a movie and adopted it as her drink.

On her days off she watched many movies. She had even purchased a monthly cinema card. She liked to think that it helped her English but in reality it just fuelled fantasies about style and fashion and much as she could she incorporated them into her lifestyle.

She didn't like Irish guys much she had concluded a long time before. They lacked a sense of reserve. They were too emotional and wanted to talk about their feelings all the time. She knew as a hooker that feelings were a drag even though she could rise occasionally to a numbed empathy. Guys were human after they did their business and then they were all apologies and just had to go. She didn't mind. She had never known much more than abuse from men.

With Pak she knew it wasn't abuse and that he did love her. He was the closest thing she had ever known to love and their Dad was just someone she preferred not to think about. Whatever happened to her, her fate and Pak's had always been closely linked.

When she was bored she liked to flirt. The barman knew her and knew her game. She never expected much out of him though he was polite to her. More than she could expect from these pseudo-Catholic Irishmen. They were just as bad as any other men though they liked to think different. She saw the way he looked at her and when she bent down for change his eyes widened at the exposed cleavage.

For the most part she just dated the bouncer in the club who was not given to emotional outbursts. He worked out in the nearby gym and sometimes he came around to the apartment during the day when she was off and they made love. Often she didn't feel like it but she did anyway because she knew it would upset him. He didn't know exactly what she did and she never told him.

In the end she had to get rid of him. He was just too much trouble. He started looking for commitments and this was a warning sign for Tasha.

So she was back out on the market looking to score. For Tasha meeting men was never difficult. Finding good men and keeping them was another story. There was the law student who she had a fling with on and off for three months. Then there was the salesman from Cork who never told her he was married but she figured it out in the end.

She sat down at the bar and she put down her smokes and her bag on the bar top. It was crocodile skin black and it matched her dress. She lit up a fag and ordered herself a drink. Already she could sense the glances from the more sedate punters.

That said Tasha was picky about her boyfriends. After all she was a pretty good-looking woman. The type of guy who interested her was the very one who would run from her profession. This she knew. It was a fair trade in some senses she

reasoned, her good looks and their good background amounted to a match or so she thought. If she could just get a good guy who would look after her then she wouldn't need to be on the game anymore. Of course what would Pak do? In her heart she sometimes thought she was just fooling herself. With Pak on her back no sensible guy would come near.

Tasha had an instinct for her kind of guy. She could sense the delicacy and the good background. She knew education and indulgent parenting at least to the extent what it did for guy and that was her kind of guy.

After a while John came in and sat down beside. The sitting beside her was really by chance. By this stage Tasha was on her second drink and feeling very chatty. She believed wholeheartedly in her own intuition. She liked the way he was dressed the way he got embarrassed when she caught him looking at her.

She smiled and when she did her eyes with her. He smiled at her. And before she knew he was chatting away about this and that and the other. She understood about 50% but just kept smiling anyway. He kept talking about seizing the day - carpe diem. She had heard that before.

"Are you married?" she said during a pause.

"No." But he blushed when he said it.

"Girl-friend?"

"Maybe."

"It's okay. I don't care. I am a dancer. I dance at the lap-dancing club in the quays. "

"Ah. I see."

"Some day I will have enough money for college," she said. "I want to be educated. You are educated. Aren't you."

He smiled and nodded.

"Do you take your clothes off?" he said.

Old Johnny boy was on a roll. This was shaping to be a Ralph-style story. She was pretty damn cute. In all his time with Ruthy there had only been a handful of infidelities and he never told her and never would. There was a drunken English girl that he had prised with Ralph's help from a hen party in the Turks. Only flashes remained of boozy gropes in a hotel bedroom while Ralph was shagging the friend in the other bed.

John was better than this. He knew this. However he needed an outlet because he knew himself well enough to know he was cracking up.

No. He was entitled to this, after all things happen for a reason. She must have a fabulous bod. He so reasoned that for her he was a score and for him she was a gift from the Gods. Who could ever connect the two of them? With the lads you just don't know who talks to whom. This was the only reason he came to Temple Bar because it was so completely anonymous to him.

Dancer she may be but she was little too tarty in her makeup and dress. Johnny boy was no fool though he liked to let other people think so. Ruthy would not in a month of Sundays imagine Johnny boy down here. Well there it was.

"No I don't," she said, all cross. "I am a respectable dancer. It is how I choose to make my living" she said grandly coldly accepting another Martini. She had a dull look in her eyes as though her heart was a shuttered buried affair.

This was the time to get out if he was going to do it. He knew from his pre-Ruth days. And everyone knows when that barrier between stranger and intimacy is swung wide and he knew he could cross it with her. She just didn't care and she was more fucked up in the head than him he liked to think. He could go now and forget he ever met her or even had been there. Poor Ruthy! But poor Johnny more!

Poor Johnny burdened with all his strange dos and don'ts. Poor Johnny weighed down with his curious and contradictory morals. He pushed them all to the furthest reaches of his mind and focused on the task at hand.

Didn't she have the last laugh after all, wasn't she getting the best part of him. This could be his last hurrah. He was going to enjoy it. This time the gloves were coming off.

He moved his seat closer and sat facing her with his legs wide open. She didn't move back or become defensive. There was no challenge from her to this closer intimacy and soon he was gently touching her on the shoulder to emphasize a point he was making and then there was another of drinks. Eventually it was getting on and he suggested they move. He was thinking now of the bottle of vodka still wrapped that he had in the flat.

"My place is not too far away. We can go and listen to music and hang out" he said, deliberately simplifying his English for her. `

"What about your friend?"

"Oh he will be alright."

Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ralph boy smiling away. Johnny boy was coming up trumps. Like all fast people he loved company.

She didn't need much persuading.

Chapter 11 – Meet Pak

Pak was proud of his dossier. He had briefly been in the not too tender care of the Bucharest psychiatric services. Whilst his episodes could not be linked to series of unexplained and grisly murders the police were suspicious. Of course dissidents were also thrown in with Pak and the others. That gave him an idea. Those bleeding heart liberals in the West would believe anything.

Tasha came to visit him regularly during that time. He knew she was on the game. She knew he knew, but neither of them said anything. She was the only family he had and he wasn't about to knock it.

He vaguely recalled life with his father in the tower block on the outskirts of the city. Tasha and his Dad were too close. He didn't like it. He vividly remembered bursting in to his father's room, finding his father with Tasha six years old and naked. And though he was only ten he tried to stop that. His father was a strong man though. He was five years in Afghanistan with the Red Army and pretty agile with his fists.

Pak recalled that beating well because it left him in hospital for two weeks. He had some things in common with his father. He was a good hater and he never forgot.

When the opportunity came to repay that debt he didn't hesitate. This was the last of the many nights that his father drank too much and overlooked his son's capacity for vengeance.

He was out on the balcony smoking a cigarette. He had the habit of hanging clothes over the railing only on this occasion one got snagged and he had to lean well over the parapet. Pak only had to give him the gentlest of pushes and over he went. He may not even have felt the teenage hand that speeded him earthward from the twenty-third floor.

Accidental death was the judgement of the police on the scene, when Pak descended to the ground floor ashen faced everyone offered sympathy. Later the autopsy found a large quantity of Polish vodka in his father's system. Pak of course knew the truth and he confessed to Tasha.

Tasha passed no judgement. She forgave him in the way she forgave all men and for a while he supplanted his father in her affections.

Thereafter Pak perfected his art of accidental murder. It was so much the better if the victim had no idea what was coming until too late. He was good with cars and he used his knowledge to rupture the brake cables on Nikolai's Skoda after a row over a poker game. Nikolai survived a thirty foot plunge into a ravine near the city, but he was paralysed for life.

Pak often felt a twinge when he passed Nikolai in his wheelchair. He lost his job after the accident, and when the Berlin wall fell there was no services for him so he lived in squalor on the tenth floor of the tower alone and begged on the corner of the platz. Pak always give him a cigarette when he passed him. Nikolai always saluted his generosity.

Moving to Ireland was Pak's only stab in the dark. He didn't like the unknown. He had grown accustom to the murky, underworld of Bucharest and now he found himself a member of a small and misunderstood non-English speaking minority.

Anywhere was better than back home. They both knew that. Once he was set-up in the grotty flat in Mountjoy Square he sent word for Tasha to come over.

She opened the door and Pak was there. He was a short, sallow dark-skinned man, incredibly broad chested with biceps as big as his calves. He wore his hair in a sleeked back ponytail. He had three day growth on his beard and his eyes glinted evilly in the soft light.

He was sitting on the leather couch smoking when she got back from John's place. Tasha had insisted that they keep the plastic covers for the couch. Pak didn't care but sometimes with the old furniture he would leave grimy stains where he sat.

"Where were you?" he said looking up.

"I have met a new man," said Tasha, sitting down and taking a cigarette from the packet.

"Another one."

"Yes. Another one. Do you think I can live all day and be a prostitute to pay you money at night so you buy drugs and bring those horrible men here? Is that what you think? I think I will kill myself before I let you ruin my life."

"Tasha."

"Oh you are sober now are you? You are not a man you are an animal. How dare you live here with me?"

Pak hunched his shoulders under the black leather jacket he wore every day. He had seen her like this before. And she just had to have her say and then she would start to cry.

He rarely slept with her anymore. Some days she would call him into the bedroom but he always left it up to her. When she first came over they had been very close for a while.

"Who is this new guy? Some Irish guy you met in the pub?"

"Oh shut up. What do you care about me?" She stormed into the bedroom and slammed the door.

Pak finished his cigarette as if nothing had happened and later with a sign and some muttering of curses he got off the couch and let himself out the front door. The guys in the coffee shop would be good for a few vodkas. He left and closed the door gently behind him.

Chapter 12 – Ruth calls John on his mobile

Ruth called John on his mobile at 10pm having held out as long as she could. There was no answer the unit was powered off said the nasally message. The little brat he was definitely avoiding her.

John lay back on the bed after Tasha had left. There were no awkward good byes or leaving taking. It was fantastic. She was a dancer and he had her phone number. This was just what he needed and yet what about Ruthy. He thought of her sad face when she heard. But she had to understand! Johnny boy had his secrets too.

He looked at the ceiling, lying back in the bed. Oh he had been out of the fast lane too long. At 11pm he turned on his mobile and checked his messages. There was a frosty one from Ruth asking him to call her back. She agreed in principle with the trip to Cyprus but wanted to know what dates he had in mind in order to get time off work.

Fuck her! The world was turning. His confidence rose on Tasha's rising wave. This was the new and improved Johnny – confident, go getting and uncompromising. Women came flocking and he had the evidence! His room was heavy with her smell.

And yet what about Ruthy? Ruthy was his rock. She was there at every turn in the last six years. What she didn't do for him? And she encouraged him in every whimsical effort to be someone, and now this. This was his repayment.

The next morning he left Mullah Murray a chirpy message for someone supposed to be sick. He had taken Tasha's number but had no intention of calling her. It was just politeness. John was always polite even in his unmentionable infidelities. He lay back in his bed naked and exultant. The whole day was now at his disposal.

Tasha was only a one-nighter. That was all. He had his fling. Ruth would never know and everything would go back to normal. He even felt relieved. As Ralph put it he had "cleaned out the old pipes." Now he was ready for Ruthy and he would do what he did best, which was win her back.

Next he called Ralph and arranged a liquid lunch. He debated whether to tell Ralph or not and sided against it. He could manage a smug glance and that would do the trick. Ralph was inclined to blurt too or make embarrassing jokes in mixed

company. Better not to fill him in on his passionate night. He knew he had Ruthy on a string and he would have to call sometime today. He decided to avoid it for the morning and call her at work that afternoon.

He was early for Ralph and found a nice table flirting shamelessly with the waitress. Johnny boy was on a roll.

Ralph arrived late and whilst talking on his mobile phone.

"Johnny boy is back in the saddle." He could hardly contain himself as Ralph got off the phone.

"What the hell happened to you? Yesterday I thought you were going to throw yourself off a bridge" said Ralph, sitting into his wicker backed ornate chair.

"Wow, she's cute".

"She's got a boyfriend."

"How do ya know?"

"I asked her."

"There's that Johnny grin," Ralph studied his menu. "Just closed another loan. This one is for two million. Can you believe it?"

"Ralph you are the man. There is nothing else to say."

"Ah Johnny boy, you have your life and your woman. I respect that woman of yours and I don't say that so easy."

"Ralphy I think I fucked up. I am not sure how to say this."

"What is up with you lately, Johnny?"

He took a deep breath and waited until the table was cleared.

"Ralphy I had a fling and I haven't told Ruthy. Oh Ralph what do you think of that?"

He stared intently at Ralph's sun-tanned face. Ralph suppressed a huge smirk.

"When did this happen?"

Chapter 13 – Excerpt from Ruth’s Diary

Ruth's Diary - January 12th, 2005

I am very worried about John now. It has been two days since he emailed me and I refused to contact him back on principle. If I thought for one second that my Johnny boy was up to something that would be the end of him and me. Oh yes beauty Ruthy is not for that game. He better not have, that’s all I am thinking. A woman knows and a woman can tell.

He has been weird before but never this weird. I don’t know what to do. It seems as though the influence I had with him is slipping away. He is just so much more obdurate these days. And I can't reach him. No matter how hard I try. He is so fucking weird and difficult.

I went into the church on Haddington Road at lunch and I said prayer for us. Lord, I said, help John and me to find our way to marriage and a life together. Typical man, he just doesn't see the importance of marriage. I have lectured him about this many times before.

Last weekend was our big fight. I told him I wanted a date for the engagement. He said relax. I can't relax. All the girls are getting married. What if he pulls out now or in six months? Ruthy is not going to be last one standing.

I know John cares. Deep down I know he cares. What is wrong with him? I hope it is not depression or some such thing. Oh God - in sickness and in health that is the pledge.

Oh God please let it not be depression. I have always feared for John in that area. If I don't hear from him today I will go around to his place. I have to do something.

He is spending more time with Ralph. I know it. I can't stand that guy. I know John thinks he's his best friend but Ralph only wants an audience. He has no clue how to talk to women at all. In fact he is Darwinian in his approach to every woman. What my Johnny sees in him I can't say. Every time he spends time with Ralph he is just so unmanageable and contrary afterwards.

When we get married I am going to insist that he does not spend time with Ralph. Ralph is someone who will never learn and never learned any respect for women. What can I imagine in a family of six boys? The poor mum - must get back to work.

She sat on the bed in the room she lived in her life barring a 4-month working holiday in Martha's Vineyard. There was a dull ache in her heart and it was John. He hadn't called and she would be damned in she called him.

She lay back looking up at the familiar ceiling. Her mother knew not to bother her when she was like this and she was fully updated on the John situation. John, John, John, the bastard, her one and only. A solitary tear etched its way down her face.

She said to herself if I want to cry its okay. There is no one around and no one to notice or care. All my hopes and dreams come crashing down with this bastard. I have tried to give him his freedom and his space and I see the crystal vision. I know he does too. I'm his beauty Ruthy!

No. I won't shed any tears for that bastard. If Johnny boy wants to play it that way, he will be a lonely old man.

What was she to do? She needed a strategy and her logical brain started to work. She would play hard to get for a change and she would join Niamh on her single nights out. She would stimulate his jealousy. That was the plan. What he least expected he would get a generous dose of - his own medicine.

The tears forgotten she laughed out loud at the thought of it. This would send Johnny boy scurrying in the right direction. The little rat! A smile of determination lit up her face. Who was that guy who had sent her the Valentine's card? She figured out in the end that it was Damien in Asset Management. Oh Ruthy, Ruthy. I am cunning beyond compare.

Chapter 14 – Johnny muses on Ruth

He had gone down the lonely road and almost by chance or maybe sub-conscious something within him had broken or died. He knew he could never lose Ruthy nor even would he have the courage tell her. By acting so childishly he strangely felt more in her power and more respect for her. She was the one who could focus on him and sustain with him her love and affection.

There was maturity in that. He knew enough to know that his changeability was a cross she had to bear not him. When it came down to it he always opted for stable and safe old Ruth. Beauty Ruthy she would never let him down for he was her one and only and he never forget it. The only man who could have or should have plucked her cherry and in the process winning a level of commitment he struggled ever to reciprocate.

He had known others. There was the sneaky shag on the boozy weekend with Ralph and the boys. Before that there was his teenage love and then a J1 summer encounter with a buxom blonde from Grand Rapids. All in all the scales of balance in their love centred ever on old Johnny boy being a problem child!

And yet Johnny felt fear when he thought of idly casting Ruthy aside. It wasn't that he felt it was wrong. Or he felt there was moral reason why he shouldn't. But it was more he felt that without her he would have lost something very innate to his being.

Here was this woman who was an uncritical fan of his. She laughed at his jokes. She encouraged him when he was downhearted. She overlooked or accepted his failings. And yet it wasn't enough.

Chapter 15 – Tasha likes Johnny

Tasha had a good memory and she liked John. He was civilised and educated. He didn't try any backdoor action or forced fellatio. He was a gentleman in bed and that was Tasha's main criterion with men. And Tasha had got a fix on him. This had happened to her before periodically. It usually was caused by encounters infrequent with what she called men of quality. These were always men outside her industry.

Not that her punters couldn't be gentle enough indeed would some pour their hearts out, but it was always after the deed and not before.

These fixes or crushes stimulated Tasha's romanticism. And in the last few days she had been dreaming of the life that could be. If only John could take her away it might dull the numbing pain she had learned to accept as her daily lot. Who knew? Maybe he could even arrange a shrink for Pak or perhaps some brotherly guidance. All was possible in her untrammelled imagination.

She waited a few days and then gave up on him ringing her but not on him. Tasha had a way with men and when she liked one she normally got him. John wasn't bad looking from what she could remember but she wanted to move up in the world and here was a chance to get away from Pak and all that.

One day the following week she took a cab down to the café beside library from where she could see the front door of his apartment building. She waited and she waited but he never crossed her view.

She did however happen to figure out his flat number because years ago he had gone to the trouble of doing up a little stencil card for the bell which he laminated and it read, "John Martin, Flat 8"

After an hour or so in the café she got bored. She walked across the street and rang the bell a few times just in case. In the end she put a note in his letterbox. The note read.

Dear John,

I haven't heard from you since last weekend. Perhaps you lost the number. Here it is again. Please call me. Missing you lots, Tasha."

Chapter 16 – Ruth speaks to Damien

When she passed by Damien in the canteen, she stopped and paused at his table, and asked him how he was. When he recovered from a fit of coughing he answered.

"Not too bad Ruth" he said, colouring rapidly.

In response to his nervousness she started to feel nervous.

He wasn't half-bad she thought to herself.

"Are you coming to the Rebates drinks party on Thursday night?" she said. She knew full well that he was part of the furniture at all social events.

"I will be," he said, recovering some of his composure. She gave him another saint less smile and was gone.

What was she playing? She thought about it as she sat down at her usual table with the other team leaders. What would she do about Johnny boy? It was time to get in touch some how before things got out of hand. She knew Damien was there for her and she knew with little encouragement he would be all over her.

There was reputation to think about also. What would she tell her co-workers? What conclusions would they come too? Everyone knew about John and her being practically an item. Did she really want to put out a different message?

She tried to eat her lunch but it just stuck in her stomach and she gave up. There was a growing knot of tension in her guts and it just wouldn't let. Johnny boy needed a chance to redeem himself. It was day three now, and there was no word. This was unprecedented in their six years. She would break the silence. Dutiful Ruth! She would confront Johnny one more time and get some kind of answer from him. Her co-workers at the table didn't bother her. They could see she was lost in thought.

This was no time to be naïve however. There had to be another woman involved. She was no dummy and she knew her Johnny. Women had ways of knowing things.

She left the canteen with 15 minutes to spare. Enough time to dash into the church and say a prayer. She prayed for Johnny and herself and her Mum. She asked God for strength against the dull ache she felt in her stomach. She didn't want to be right about Johnny this time. And she didn't want to find out with her head but with her heart she knew. She prayed to God that Johnny would be righted and whatever was eating at him would pass away.

She thought of how she got her nails done and her legs waxed all for Johnny boy. How he might be appreciating any of that or any of her? Another tear welled up and tracked down her flushed cheek. She thought of Johnny and compared that feeling to how she felt about Damien. She couldn't compare them. There was no comparison. Damien was a rebound if it ever happened. And something told Ruth that it needed to happen.

John was just that sort of person who wouldn't listen to reason. It had to be the hard way for him and no other way.

When she got her desk she opened up her email and replied for the second time to his Cyprus mail.

"John, I know you are up to something and I know you like your space and I know you like to have things your way but I am telling right now that I need answers from you. I have not heard from you in three days. At first I thought it was a bit of a joke. I must see you this evening John. And if you don't reply I am coming around to your place. You owe an explanation and a lot more besides. Ruth."

She closed her email and tried to concentrate on work. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Siobhan watching her from her desk and clearly enjoying the unusual absence of her composure. She went to Siobhan's desk and demanded an update on the project she had given her. That shut her up for a while.

An hour later there was a reply from John. She knew he was at work.

"Ruth. I think you need to understand that things are not the same for me as for you. Not now, nor ever. I can meet you after work in Café En Seine at 7pm. Go to the back I will be sitting there. I will talk to you then. John."

She read it over several times. There was coldness to it. And her heart sank further. Something big had happened. There must be someone else. Her Johnny was Cock-of-the-walk now and this transformation, for what else could she call it, was recent. A month ago he wasn't like this.

A month ago he was plodding along in his usual fashion. What could have done this to him? She went through all the options in her head. Maybe he really is changing and falling out of love with me, she thought. Maybe I just don't know him anymore. She had heard such stories of a husband or wife walking out after twenty-five years of marriage. Of course they only had been together six years. But still.

She tried to concentrate for the remainder of the afternoon. And after a few efforts she did manage to get some work done.

She was early in the pub and took a table at the back. It was empty and dimly lit and ornate ironwork cast spooky shadows around. She ordered a glass of white wine and took out some printouts from work, not that she planned on doing any work but just so she would have something business-like in front of her if a stranger happened to be walking by.

Ruth always maintained the highest standards of decorum in public, which was why in part Johnny boy was her secret source of corruption.

He was late as usual and he flashed her that cheesy grin he always reserved for his Ruthy. He seemed to have an unusual spring in his step and she thought he looked quite chipper from normal. He gave her wave and went to bar signalling beforehand if she wanted a refill. It was almost like nothing had happened and yet in the pit of her stomach she knew harsh words would have to be spoken.

He plonked himself down with his pint and immediately detected the frostiness in the air.

"What is going on, John?" Ruth said, deciding to get straight to the point.

"Nothing. What do you mean?" He started to scratch the back of his head.

"Why haven't you responded to my messages and my email?"

"Look Ruth. You are taking this way too seriously." He took a nervous sip.

"Now you listen to me John. I know you are up to something. So tell me what it is and why you have been acting so strangely lately. Are you spending more time with Ralph? Is that part of it?"

Suddenly he kind of hunched into himself. She felt sorry for him in a way and in her sinking heart she knew he had been with someone else. It was the same guilty look he had when he came back from that club weekend. She never had the conviction to challenge him on that but she knew that she was right.

"Look Ruth I am not very happy right now in my life."

"John I could say that too. I could say life is tough. John what about us? Where are we going?"

"Ruth I don't know where I am going, less still where that leaves you and me. Ruth you always had more conviction than I. Isn't that obvious?"

Oh it was hopeless. He was winding her around that little finger of his again. This he had done before. The memory came flooding back. It was three years before. Things were different or were they?

Resolution grew inside her. Things were different now. This wasn't some twenty something boyfriend girlfriend crap. This was about the future. It was about the way he treated her and way she put with it. Well she wasn't going to put with it any more.

"Now you listen to me Johnny boy" and there was ice in her voice. "I am sick of your bullshit. I am going to give you a piece of my mind plain and simple."
She leaned forward towards him and lowered her voice.

"I don't what you are up too. And I have decided I don't really care. You want to walk a lonely road. Fine! That's your business. Don't expect me to be waiting for you when you come back."

"I thought we were going to Cyprus" he said, genuinely shocked.

"Cyprus my ass. You've been shagging someone else haven't you? You think old Ruthy is a dummy. Ruthy is no fool."

"Now wait just one second."

She didn't give him a second. "Do you know what you are throwing away Johnny boy? You act like you don't care. I know you do. You'll regret this and mark my words.

He sat in his chair visibly stunned as though what was being said was not real or he was not really a part of it. She is really breaking up with me he said to himself. I can't believe it. This has never happened before.

"Now wait, wait. Give me a chance to explain."

She was half standing up at this stage.

"Is there someone else or not? I want to know. I have the right to know."

He said nothing but his silence said it all.

"You fucking bastard and you sit there and you act like you don't care. I've a good mind to throw this drink over you."

"Please don't leave me Ruth" he was whining now. "Sit down please I want to talk to you."

He reached for her hand but she withdrew it quickly.

"John" she said softly, "this is too much to forgive. Who is she? Is it someone we know?"

"Ruth please be my friend at least."

He looked so pathetic sitting there hunched over his pint. She began to wonder what it was she saw in him when he really was such a pathetic little man. Hate had a good way of focusing her mind. But she didn't hate him even now. It was like one of those crystal visions they should never be realised. They only shatter upon implementation. She felt less now that he had confirmed her fears. She could see how confused he was at this new uncompromising side of her.

What she wouldn't have done for him? But this was too much, a bridge too far for her to cross.

Her mind started to wander as he mumbled on with some half-hearted explanation about some girl he met in a pub with Ralph and how it had only been one night and would never happen again. She stopped him in mid flow.

"This just makes me more indifferent" she said. "John I don't know what you are going through but whatever it is you clearly want to be by yourself. There is no room in your life for someone like me. I know I am not the greatest thing to look at maybe but I had a heart of gold for you Johnny boy. And you treat me like this. How would you feel if I was the one telling you? I am leaving John." She stood up and picked up her bag.

"Don't try to contact me," she said, and she walked out.

He sat there for a long time. Only the barmaid disturbed his thoughts. He declined another drink. Fuck! His mind was churning. This was not good. This did not go well or how he expected. Ruth had walked off on him before but never with this kind of justification. He had taken a big chance telling her. That kind of information can really rankle with someone.

Okay! Okay! What was he going to do? Well she needed time to cool off. That was the first thing. He would leave her for a few days and then send a card apologising again. Thank God he didn't book anything yet for Cyprus. There was no point telling Ralph. These things didn't mean anything to guys like Ralph. Ralphy would never have admitted to anything.

After she left John, Ruth went into the church and her mind was in turmoil. She knew she did the right thing. There was no doubt about that. What a humiliation! And all the times she had sung his praises to all and sundry. She said a prayer for herself and her Mum. She deliberately left him out. She found some peace in the church and she thought of all the other troubled people who came here for respite.

No. Her conscience was clear. This was all Johnny boy. As she prayed her innate common sense took over. This had nothing to do with her and everything to do with him. He just wasn't ready and it was foolish to wait on him. Because when would he be ready. Perhaps in six months perhaps never. Ruth was ready now. She wanted to be a Mum and she had wanted John to be the father of her children.

At the thought of it, the conviction melted away and she could feel the pain in her stomach again. She had hardly eaten anything all day. Oh God was this really the end? How could she go back to him? She would be a fool. No. There was no going back. This was the way he wanted it.

There was hope of course. She needed to be strong now and to hold out. There was no way she was going to forgive him for that. The leaden feelings had passed for the time being and her mind turned more to the present and the future.

Chapter 17 – Tasha leaves Johnny a note

He turned the note over and over in his hand as he sat on his couch. He had not been in contact since the night he had met her and now it had been a week. He hadn't made any effort to patch things up with Ruth either. Some part of him told him not to worry. She would be back. She always came back. He dialled the number and after a few rings a very gruff man's voice answered.

"She is not here," he said. "She will call you later."

Maybe that was the brother she mentioned.

He thought things would be clear for him now. But they just weren't. Ruth didn't want to hear some sob story about confusion and doubt. She wanted commitment. And he just couldn't do that. And yet he didn't want her to go.

Things seemed to be unravelling and there was little he could do except watch. He could call a stop to it now. Avoid that woman's phone call. There was no need to repeat the error of the past. But yet she was damn cute and Ruth had dumped him. He was a freeman and yet part of didn't want to be. He was so damn conflicted that if tripped and fell he could break into a hundred pieces.

Why wasn't life ever clear-cut? Why couldn't Tasha have Ruth's brain and personality? Or Ruth Tasha's body? Why the fuck was he sitting here in the mess of his life asking stupid philosophical questions to which there were no answers.

He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the couch. He didn't even bother to take off his suit trousers. Oh God what would she say to her Mum about him? His ears were already burning. Sometimes he felt like he was going out with the Mum too.

A while later he must have dozed because he woke to the phone ringing. He picked it up. It was Tasha.

"It is Tasha," she said as if announcing an important visitor.

He pictured her naked in his bed.

"What are doing tonight?"

"Tonight I am busy," she said in textbook English with a dull Slavic tone. "Maybe tomorrow we meet for drinks, yes."

"Okay tomorrow night in the same place" he said.

He let the phone drop on the floor. Well that's great. Another night shagging Heidi and he thought about Ruth. Oh God she meant business this time. He had never known her so determined.

His life was falling apart and he could feel it and he didn't care. It was day he had always feared when the slender thread of motivation that bound him to his bourgeois existence finally snapped. He could feel the thread straining. Work had been an impossible struggle that day. But he was indifferent.

He could see now that his life and Ruth's were diverging and he knew that if he didn't take action soon the gap could be too wide. He wanted her to understand certain things that she didn't grasp. Life was more than just a comfortable middle-class existence. There was life beyond that and despite that. She was so sheltered and yet so grounded in the things that mattered to her.

He wanted to live a lot and he wanted her to let him. How strange was that? And why couldn't he? Why did he have to play by the same old rules? That drove men into early graves and coronaries and women into loveless and hopeless marriages. Dammit he was going to do it and if Ruth wasn't there when he was finished then it would be a price he would have to pay.

He got up off the couch and tidied the place up. Just in case he got Tasha back again.

Everything seemed so surreal in this life without Ruth. Necessary yet not without pain. He was never a man to pray like old Ruthy did. He decided in university that God didn't exist because if he had done he reasoned his life would be much better than it was. No there was nothing for it. We are in this world alone.

He was conflicted and yet happy that Ruthy had done all the work. Thank God is walked out. Maybe down the road he would miss that closeting and claustrophobia that she inspired in him, but it would be some ways down the road yet.

Chapter 18 - Ruth flirts with Damien

That day at work Ruth made sure to catch Damien's eye again as she crossed the canteen. It was all so absurdly simple. She had been out of the game these six years and never really been much of a game player to begin with. Just batting her eyelids and showing him rudimentary interest had stimulated his ardour to new heights. He wasn't a bad looking sort. Not as good looking as Johnny boy. Her eyes misted over at the thought.

Wasn't life a fucking drag? I mean was that it - just work all the time, a few babies, retirement and six feet under. There had to be more. There was God. The more she prayed the more things seemed to go wrong. Snap out of it Ruthy. Can't be like this at work! People are watching.

Damien came over with his tray.

"Mind if I sit here" he asked.

"Sure. Sit" she said, more abruptly than she had intended.

All of a sudden she didn't feel like talking to him. She knew he was only responding to her coded invitation but the feeling she had for him had dwindled to be replaced by a dull ache that she prayed every day to be relieved of.

Damien wouldn't understand. He was not a thinking man like John. That was plain. He loved his football matches and his pints. Why was this so damn hard for her if it was so easy for John? She didn't get it. Was it just some biological clock telling her to cling to her desired male regardless of his suitability or willingness?

"Are you okay Ruth?" he looked genuinely concerned.

"Sorry I have something on my mind. I have to go sorry."

She picked up her tray and left the table.

The feelings were like lead and the afternoon dragged endlessly. There was after work drinks and Damien would be there but she decided she just couldn't rise to the occasion. She wanted to be alone mainly. It was now a full 24 hours since her showdown with John and there was no word and neither did she want any.

It was only on bus journey home that her thoughts took on any semblance of order. She had had enough of John. This did not mean however that she was quite ready for Damien just yet. She was in mourning and she couldn't feel right getting close to

someone else for now. Oh he had wounded her this time. She even didn't tell her Mum about the other girl. In case John ever met her again.

Just like that - six years down the drain. And what could she say and what could she do. She had heard stories of people who had lost the run of themselves after something like that. She was always the practical one. Even her Mum deferred to her often for common sense and good decisions. She was bearing up okay. She had arranged to meet Niamh at 8pm in the Mill House.

He was to blame anyway. It wasn't her fault. She wouldn't like that on her head.

She was at the Mill House early deliberately since she had a lot on her chest. She found a nice, quiet, corner seat. It was early anyhow and not crowded. Niamh arrived a few minutes after the hour. It took a little time to update her on the goings on with John.

"That bastard."

"And not the slightest bit remorseful either."

"You know Ruthy this might be a blessing in disguise."

Niamh outlined her view of things. At least now she knew what John was really like.

"You know Ruthy you are fairly young yet."

"But Niamh he was my one and only. And now I out in the cold. Out in the unforgiving market place. Do you know how that makes me feel? I have to tell all the girls at work that John and I have split up."

"But not yet Ruthy. He might change his mind."

"I will not take the bastard back." Niamh recoiled at the venom in her voice.

"Okay. Okay. I understand."

Sometimes being Ruth's friend was more like being a psychiatrist. What did a single person ever get from befriending coupled people? Agony aunt was basically the dividend. Niamh was weary of that.

"Now listen to me Ruthy. Get your best black dress and tomorrow night we are going out on the town and you will discover how absurdly simple it is to meet someone. Agreed."

"Oh Niamh. You make me feel so much better. You are a true friend. "

Niamh was right. This was what she needed to get out more and not to be hanging around with her mother in the home. She hadn't cried in the last few days and it didn't surprise. In her heart she saw this coming. She knew without knowing. He was a fuck-up like all men. A disaster waiting to happen.

"Niamh be patient with me because I am going through something here."

"Well I think you are very brave. Now to plans."

This is what she loved about Niamh.

"I think dinner in Milano's followed by drinks in Ron Blacks. What do you say?"

"I am there. And Niamh you have to show me the ropes."

"Oh Ruthy you wouldn't believe how simple it is."

Chapter 19 – Tasha gets ready at home

Tasha was out to ensnare her man and she knew well how to do. She spent hours getting ready including a complete body inspection. Her body she always knew was her best feature. She was no genius or intellectual though she did admire people with education.

She showered and stood naked in front of the full-length mirror in the bathroom critically inspecting her parts, as was her way. She made sure to powder down below just in case John got adventurous. Not that she would say no. She liked when men did that but she didn't think he would be that type though. Everything was well proportioned and in order as far as she could see. Black was the safe number she chose and she knew this would knock 'em dead in the pub.

John was perfect for her she reasoned. He was too polite to challenge her. He would never hit her. And he was not a criminal. All her main criteria were satisfied. She had told Pak about John and he didn't display any interest.

Pak was unpredictable that way. He rarely commented on her boyfriends. When he did it was usually with violence. He had variously threatened, punched, broken a nose and most recently busted a boyfriend's jaw so badly that she had spend the whole night with him in St Vincent's A&E.

He seemed to like the Polish doorman but only because he was psychotic too. Yep she reckoned Pak and John would not have a lot in common. Best to keep the two separated if at all possible.

She had a quick look in the mirror one final time. All was in order and she left and hailed a cab on the Square.

Tasha's thoughts were rudimentary but made her sense to her. She thought in silence as the cab sped towards town. She could see the taxi-driver was checking her out in the rear view mirror. She pretended not to notice.

Men were most desperate before they had done their business. This she knew. This was when Tasha had real power. They would beg like little dogs just to be got off. She would never treat John this way. She wanted to have a mature relationship with him. John would some day marry her. This she would engineer and she had her plans.

It didn't occur to her that she made new plans every day and every week and that often they were no more than fantasies to get her through the day. She believed in her plans and would not allow for them not to be taken seriously.

First on the list was abstinence. If John were denied what he so wanted then he would crave her all the more. This was her strategy. She felt already off balance. After all she had been eager beaver and only now was he getting back to her. Maybe she would sleep with him tonight - if she felt like it. She would play it by ear.

"I am here." The heavily accented voice chimed in his ear. He hung up his mobile and went out to bring her in. There she was at the doorway looking stunning and yet slutty in a very tight black dress that accentuated her large cleavage.

"I took cab," she said. He kissed her and from her breath he could tell she had already been drinking.

"Come inside" he said with false nonchalance. Was this really a good idea? All the memories came flooding back. That same smell like the peep show he had visited in Amsterdam.

He had a table at the rear and despite the lubricating effect of several drinks the conversation was pretty bad. She was very tight-lipped about her dancing and ignored several direct questions. It didn't take much to realise that dancing was a pseudonym for hooking.

She seemed completely unfazed by the lack of conversation. In her realm of poor English many voices were alien. He felt his desire for her fluctuate, downwards, and he relived himself of the burden of caring by drinking more vodka.

What was he doing here with her and Ruthy speeding in the opposite direction? Oh my God! This would turn the mother against him for good. He would never win her back now. But he didn't want to right! Oh he didn't know. This woman was an intellectual mouse compared to Ruthy. He missed the conversational challenge. Made your bed Johnny, better lie in it.

"So can I come watch you dance" he asked for badness. He was amused by the looks she got when she went to the bathroom and returned. She was certainly a striking woman.

"I don't like talking about my work. Why you ask me?"

"Okay. Forget it." The booze was finally making him amorous.

There was a silent understanding existed between them that in short space of time they would be in bed together.

He fumbled the keys at the door and she giggled - her first show of humour. They kissed on the steps for a while and he finally got it open. A steep flight of stairs led them both up to the first floor. Someone had scrawled "Life - It's a bollix" on the wooden panelling. He unlocked the door to his flat and they nearly fell in the door laughing for no particular reason.

He gestured to the couch, where she sat down. Meanwhile he fixed up some pretty powerful screwdrivers in the kitchen. Then he came back and sat beside her. He put on some music in the background at her request. Her tipsy laugh was infectious but eventually drunk as he was he tried to distract into more amorous matters.

She put her hand on his manhood and when he recollected himself five minutes later he was lying naked on top of her on the living room floor having passed his genes in a splurge of unprotected sex. He nestled his head between the large mammaries, a gesture that Ruth used to love.

"You are on the pill right?"

"Of course I am. You must go again, come on."

"Give me a few minutes."

"Okay I go to toilet. Where is the toilet?"

He rolled off and pointed. Her functional attitude struck him and he wondered if his surmise was correct that she was a lady of the night. The thought of all the guys she must have slept with put him off and he really didn't want her there much longer.

There was no easy way about it. She was making herself at home. She called him from the bedroom and she had already climbed into his bed. He got in beside her and this time she climbed on top.

He was relieved when she said she couldn't stay the night and in his half empty bed where he curled to avoid the big wet spot he pondered his situation. There was no pizzazz or sparkle. She was very pretty and he knew that but she was an empty headed woman. She had no interest in anything. Ruth could always rise to a decent conversation about politics. And yet Ruth wasn't exactly a head turner.

John felt glum despite his new conquest. Ruthy was slipping away and he didn't think that a hooker from Romania could fill the gap. He felt mostly that he wanted

to be alone. This was not about his virility. This he had proven to himself sufficiently not to have to repeat the demonstration.

No there was more. He was thirty. Whatever he thought he was it was now time to be it and it should already have been time. What the hell was eating at him? He didn't know but his heart was like lead and felt something approaching repulsion for that young lady where previously desire had ruled.

He needed to talk to someone about this and it wasn't going to be Ralph or indeed Ruth at this stage. He needed a head-shrink. Yes! - An independent, impartial and objective view on his troubles.

Why hadn't he thought of this before? It was so obvious. He was fucked up someway in the head. There was no other explanation. He just couldn't see it. He knew it by his actions and the years rolling by with no sign of the long-awaited synthesis or connectivity.

What was so special about John Martin? Except to John Martin of course. He had a routine job, a routine life. He may have miscalculated with Ruthy. Yes. Ruthy was a bridge too far. He pushed her too hard this time. He needed to do something to win her back. He was going to deny everything. That always worked before.

She had to forgive him -her little Johnny boy! She always forgave him. And she would this time. He would say no more about the girl and keep her on the back burner. She was low maintenance and could hardly take issue with infidelity.

At that last thought he started to laugh out loud in the privacy of his bed.

Chapter 20 – Ruth goes on date with Damien

That afternoon Ruthy had waxed her legs in preparation for the evening dress she was about to put on. Thoughts of Damien were on hold until Monday. Though she was confident that she could have him out on date faster than he could say Damien Price. He was in reserve now as Niamh called it. Niamh was sharing a mother lode of dating tips and Ruth loved it.

Ruth went through her collection of evening dresses. These she had worn on the rare black tie events she had gone with Johnny boy. Oh what was she doing? Who was she fooling? Her heart skipped a beat as thoughts of Johnny flooded her mind. Love always found a way with Johnny until now. What did it mean to be single and in one's thirties? All the girls were getting hitched. She could never catch up now.

She critical appraised herself in the mirror. There were crow's feet around her eyes. This was not her doing and her innate resolve took over. Johnny wants to play that's his business. Ruthy can't do much about it. Maybe she would be an old spinster sad and alone but at least she tried for love. Better to have love and lost. She quoted it to herself.

"Remember Ruth" Niamh had said, "You only have to look like your game ball and they are all over you like a rash."

Two hours later she recalled those fateful words. It was like being at a cattle mart really. She stood beside Niamh at the bar. They had been seated but this became impossible as the thirsty wave of Irish manhood swept by them. Niamh was giving out her number all over the place.

"Niamh."

"Only way to be sure."

"You are too old for this place," said one red haired twenty something with a big spot on his neck.

"Don't mind him Ruthy," said Niamh.

Poor Ruth! She felt uncomfortable. She was sweating in the wrong places. Her black matching shoes were ruined. She felt evaluated and unwanted. She thought about John and the other girl and what must be going on. He used to say they were like ham and cheese. Something's were worth fighting for, he would tell her. She knew she believed that. Was this one of those things? How could she fight such indifference? What could she say? It had already been said.

She signalled to Niamh and they moved towards the door and space beyond. "I'm okay" she said, in response to her solicitous look. "Is it always like that?"

They walked up Grafton Street together luxuriating in the space around them. Near the Green she said good-bye to Niamh and took a taxi back to Stillorgan.

Mother was in bed and she didn't wait up. Some times she preferred thinking in bed and she put away her dress carefully. She would deal with the shoes tomorrow. She couldn't see her future and it worried her. What was going to happen? She knew the basics. She loved her job. She would probably move out anyhow John or no John. But what she couldn't see was how she felt into the future.

Where was the certainty of feeling that she had with her Johnny? It had left with him to be elsewhere. This Niamh caper did not seem to be her style. She was always more serious than Niamh. She had no idea what to do about it. Some ignorant twenty something had even stuffed a note in her pocket as she was leaving.

No reason must be foremost. She was 4 out of 10. She always thought Johnny was a 5 or maybe a 6 on a good day with the right light. That shit didn't matter when Johnny was lying beside her or only a phone call away. Now the bitter clinical truth of a plain woman in her thirties came home to roost. Those guys just wanted a leg over. She had told Niamh time and again. She didn't seem to understand.

There were certain things in life that the longer you didn't know them the better for you. But Ruthy was smart. She read books and she knew that the world was a tough place for those who knew most. She didn't believe in chance or Prince Charming or any romantic notions. Cling to what you got was her credo and now she was at sea without a boat. Who knew maybe Damien would look more favourable in Monday morning light?

Chapter 21 – Pak and friend take cab to Ballsbridge

They took a taxi to the south side and their destination was deliberately vague. The taxi man looked suspicious but didn't ask any questions. In the back was Pak's most trusted friend and ally, if it could be said that Pak was capable of friendship. They had partnered in many pub brawls and now they out scalping for a little extra cash.

He dropped them outside the American Embassy and it was 3am. A bitter biter of a wind came whistling up Merrion Road. They decided to work the residential stretch and deliberately picked out the cars without alarms. It was monkey work really. He carried the bag and Pak carried a foot long crow bar wrapped in one of Tasha's old scarves. Mostly they got a few CDs. They also took the radios if they could.

When they got to the flat Tasha was up and drinking a cup of tea.
"How is your Irishman?" said Pak, smiling and showing a swathe of missing teeth.
"He is mine. I don't want you fucking with him."

Pak said nothing and went into the living room. His friend laid out three lines of coke on the mirror on the table.

"There is one for you Tasha if you want."

"No I am given up. I will take no more. "

"Is this for your Irish boy?" said Pak. The two started laughing at that.

"Does he know what you do? Look Tasha I got you some new CDs" said Pak.

"You bastard, you leave me alone." She left her tea and went into the bedroom slamming the door.

The sound of drunken laughter could be heard through the door.

She lay on the bed and felt that maybe Pak was right. John would never want her if he knew that she slept with men for money. Would he want to save her from all that? She had feelings too. She wanted it to end. Pak wouldn't let go and how could she leave him to his fate? He needed a woman's hand and without it he would fall apart.

She thought she loved him sometimes but lately she was beginning to realise that where she needed to go he couldn't come. She could get off the game and get a real job, but not with him around. He was a burden. He was an unpredictable element in her world. She was always the calm one and she never freaked out like he did.

She didn't know what to do. And it wasn't clear to her yet what she should do.

She could never tell John about this. This was more than he would deal with or be interested in. She would have to come to him without baggage and then perhaps something could happen. She had saved ten thousand Euros in the credit union and it was enough to disappear. She didn't think John would want to disappear with her. But she needed to work her plan with care.

Eventually she fell into a light, restless sleep. The sounds of snoring could be heard coming from the living room.

Chapter 22 – Ruth as a single woman

Monday morning and Ruth was bright, cheery and resolute. She had embraced her single life with relish and John could go to hell. This had been decided over night and she boarded the 46A with a spring in her step. Finding her way to the top floor and even sparing a salacious look for that handsome professional whom she sometimes locked eyes with.

Life was what you make of it! Seize the day. No time for messing around and moping. She was young, she was pretty, and she was available.

Niamh's philosophy had been percolating through. It was nonsense to try to co-opt an unwilling male into fatherhood and life long commitments. To hell with them! They only wanted to sow their oats.

She found the front seat on the top deck and it was free. She plonked down with her bags and her laptop. He had stung her that she reasoned. He was her first and that entailed some added involvement.

Work was a breeze that morning and the doubt of before seemed resolved. At least she knew where she stood with Johnny boy. The clouds of uncertainty were gone. It was his way or the highway so she chose the highway.

She sent Damien an email asking for lunch on Tuesday. The reply was almost instantaneous and in the affirmative. She found it amusing that he had it bad for her. The tables were turned and she wasn't complaining. She had talked it over with Niamh and she decided she was just going to play and take it from there - nothing serious mind you. She had no mind for that yet.

Niamh was her strategist and mentor. The whole emailing Damien thing was agreed in advance.

She just needed to develop an off switch with this stuff. Before the thought of emailing someone she didn't harbour a great interest in seemed insincere and unfair. Now with Niamh's guidance she could see that she was not committing to anything. She could be as non-committal as she felt. After all we were all adults or so she liked to think.

A whole world was beckoning - a world of freedom but also loneliness. It was nearly two weeks since she had been in John's bed. And even not to be in contact with him had a strange air of unreality still.

Chapter 23 – Johnny sees a councilor

He left work early to keep his appointment at five in the village. When he rang the doorbell a heavy-set women in her late forties ushered him into a waiting room. He sat down on the couch. In an oak cabinet by the wall were the collected volumes of British Psychology spanning ten years. He read the spines in an absentminded way while he waited.

It had taken some courage on his part to make this unprecedented move. There was always something wrong with the world and never with John. This was an admission of the reverse. He just needed someone to talk to. And what better place then here. After a while another lady of similar vintage and girth called him into a little sitting room at the back.

The room contained a fireplace with a two-bar electric fire, one bar on. The walls had prints of Ranelagh in Victorian days. Horses and carts plied its narrow main street. Blurred faces of pedestrians long dead walked the pavements. There was a desk where the lady took her seat and a couch where she indicated he should sit.

When they were seated he poured it all out - all the things that didn't make sense about his life. His infidelity with Tasha, his sundered relationship with Ruth, how on the one hand he wanted to escape Ruth and on the other he couldn't live without her - about all his grandiose ambitions and the impossibility of them being realised.

She listened patiently to it all and made some notes in a notepad on her lap. When he stopped she nodded and smiled.

"Well you seem to be blaming yourself a lot," she said. "The world is not of our making."

"But I am to blame and I have to deliver" he said.

"But what do you have to deliver and what pressure are you under to deliver these exceptional results? Are you not playing into the expectations placed on you as a child?"

He thought about that for a while and said nothing.

"But I still want to make a contribution. I do have something to contribute but it's not happening and I don't know what I am supposed to do. Or what I am supposed to do about it. I just lost Ruth and I know she is right for me. I know I belong with her and yet I let her slip through my fingers for a woman with a fraction of what

Ruth has to offer. And yet it remains this impossible urgency and this threat to my mediocrity."

"Why do you see yourself in such stark terms?" she said, shifting her ample frame in her wicker chair. The chair gave a stifled creak of protest. "Everyone is ultimately mediocre. Life is only pass or fail after all."

"Do you think I should go back to Ruth?"

She paused for a long moment.

"I think you have taken a course now since then. There is the other woman. I am not going to tell you what you should do. You wouldn't want me too but I am going to say that you should not go back to her until you know better what it is you need from her. "

She smiled in an indulgent way, like a big queen bee. He resented that smile. It made him feel that somehow she wasn't taking him seriously.

He felt unburdened but suspicious and vulnerable. What was she going to say now? Surely she would give him some great recommendation on how to move forward. No matter what he said, she continued with that comfortable smile. He was growing unimpressed.

"So what do you think?" he said directly. "I mean you must have seen this before. What have I got? And what can I do about it?"

"Maybe you have depression," she said. "That would account for the deadened feelings. It takes time to delve into oneself. Maybe next week we could start to look at root causes."

He thanked her and said good night. He was hoping for an instant solution and was disillusioned instead to find himself interrogated. There were no answers here. He felt sure. There was nothing for it. He had to make a stand on how he felt.

Chapter 24 – Ruth dating Damien

Although Ruth was confident dealing with Damien at a distance, up close was a different matter. She had agreed without due consideration to meet him for a pint, as he put it, in a bar on Dawson Street. Now the thought of meeting him in the flesh seemed much more daunting. For one thing he might want to kiss her and she definitely didn't want to do that yet, if ever. Also she was feeling more implicated in the plot of her and Damien than before by virtue of her acquiescing to his request to meet.

She just didn't want anything serious and she didn't want to hurt him at the same time and he was a work colleague. She felt tied up in a thousand knots and dos and don'ts. Niamh's advice was not very helpful.

"Why don't you just go for it? He's not bad looking," she said on the phone.

Thoughts of John or at least of relationship like the one she had with John, she corrected, were never far from her mind.

When she met him she could tell by the flush in his face and his speech that he already had a few. He indicated a seat beside him but she prudently chose the seat facing him. He must be nervous, she reasoned. Why else would he drink before the date? He kept his eyes mostly averted only holding eye contact for a few seconds.

The conversation started off in a very bland way. She ordered a glass of wine and sipped.

He loved sports and watched everything on TV. He also played rugby but only in the winter. He shared a flat with two other lads, one from the company. He managed to get to Greece on his holidays and when he finished his exams he might be moving on. But that was on the Q.T.

Ruth sat facing him and her mind was numb. How was going to get through the next couple of hours and what would she say? Suddenly she didn't feel like making small talk and she was beginning to realise that she nothing in common with Damien except that he was a man and she was a single woman. It was dawning on her that John was the benchmark now. He was the template for future encounter.

She missed his sense of humour and his non-conformist talk and his intellectual conversation.

"Do you have any interest in politics or reading, Damien?" she asked.

"I haven't read a book in a while" he admitted, after some thinking. He was trying to evaluate which way to answer.

"You see with the accounting exams Ruth, it's hard to find the time for anything else."

"Are you watching the match on Saturday? There is a crowd of us going from work."

"I don't know Damien. I don't know if I will be able to or not."

There was nothing for it. She was committed for the evening. It would be rude and inconsiderate to bail out at this point. He was a nice fellow and he had feelings too. She would last until eleven that was the plan. She was going to wring Niamh's neck though. How could she have listened to all that psychobabble? No wonder Niamh was single.

She ordered another round for both of them. He was getting well on now which was a dicey situation. He was gesticulating more with his hands and she felt his confidence was rising on an alcoholic wave.

"Why don't you sit over this side Ruth?" he asked when his fourth pint arrived.

"No. I am fine here," she said decisively.

He picked up on that and pulled in his horns a bit. He was a nice fellow she kept reminding herself. He was so polite at work always holding doors open for the ladies. She felt sure that he was close with his Mum.

Damien had two older brothers. He grew up in Cork and migrated to the big smoke in search of work and opportunity. He felt that someday he would like to return to Cork and property was very reasonable down there. He hadn't fully decided yet.

She couldn't rise to any interest in his life at such short notice and he was willing to let her in too so easily that she almost felt there was something suspect. In her heart there was a sinking realisation though that the kind of closeness she had with John would not be easily replaced. Her enthusiasm started to sag and she mumbled something about catching the last bus. Damien jumped on it and he seemed relieved too at the thought of their date coming to an end.

She left him outside SamSara and gave him a hug and a quick peck on the cheek and she was gone.

There was that ache again as she stood at the bus stop. She let it come over her in a wave. She could call him but that went against every instinct in her body. Maybe she could write him a letter and what assurance was there that he would not do it again. Once bitten twice shy but not her.

This was turning out to be a disaster. Maybe time was what was required. It was still recent news. She just was never good at these things. And she always left it to John because he always seemed to know what to do and she went along with it.

She boarded the bus. She didn't want to think about it. There was nothing to think about it. Was it not possible to feel for someone long after they were gone? Why couldn't it be that way with Johnny boy? Not because he wasn't a scumbag for what he did but for all the time she spent with him, in his bed, in his life, worrying about him, hoping he would be happy and okay. Wasn't that the real core of the problem?

She shook her head to herself. Nothing made sense anymore and she realised that in the past she had just accepted things as okay and that was the way she operated before. A dreary vista of non-committal dates and pointless interactions stretched into her future. Even Niamh with her aggressive singles agenda could be a drag.

No this was her fate and she must accept it. She would not contact him. At least she didn't plan on it.

There didn't seem to be a happy middle ground for her in this new single life. She felt a dull, throbbing sense of loneliness, which did not appear to have any resolution.

Chapter 25 – Tasha runs away

She decided without thinking as was her way and in the morning when bastard Pak and his bastard friend were out scrounging around she pulled her out her little travel bag and packed it with a few essential items. These included some lingerie, which she was sure John would like and a little tube of lubricant in case he asked. She felt sure he wouldn't. She left anything of value behind her. Let Pak have everything! She wasn't ever coming back.

This was the end of being on the game. John was going to take care of her. She was still confident in her looks and she could not imagine any adult male turning her away if she arrived on their doorstep. She put on her sexiest outfit for him and then she closed the apartment door without locking it and jumped in a taxi and went over to John's place.

It was morning still so she took up her station in the café. John was at work she didn't know where. He would have to say yes. She had nowhere else to go. It was a long day and she was bored waiting. She read some celebrity magazines for a while. But she couldn't concentrate. She was terrified to think what Pak would do when he found out. He had a wild temper and he would never let her go willingly.

She was fairly sure she had covered her tracks. But if John sent her back now she would be in for a quite a beating. Already she had missed a few punters today and Pak hated it when business was lost.

Around six o'clock she saw him coming up to the door of the apartment. He had bought some groceries and was fumbling for the key. She ran across the road to meet him and she could see by his reaction that he was not happy to see her.

"John it's me" she said. "I thought I would surprise you."
He stood standing still, looking. "What are you doing here?"

And then she started to cry and he had to bring her upstairs and put her on couch and make her a cup of tea just to be kind. Then the waterworks started.

She poured her whole heart out to him about the abusive brother and the cold nights parading in heels up down the square and how some of the punters were violent and forced her to do certain things.

"And that is why you have to let me stay? I have nowhere else to go and my bastard brother will beat me if I go back."

He sat down in the chair facing her. And was a silent for a long moment.

"But Tasha we hardly know each other. This isn't the way to do it. And Tasha I don't know how I feel about you. Everything happened so fast. I haven't had a chance to think. Look Tasha I have problems of my own too. I just split up my girlfriend and I not ready for a big commitment. I never even lived with her can you understand?"

She looked into her tea and he could see she was about to start crying again.

"Okay. Look you stay here tonight and we talk about it again tomorrow."

The tears vanished. "You want to now?" she smiled, suggestively.

"No I don't want too." He stood up. "Look I am just going to go into the bedroom for a while."

"I come too right."

"Tasha I need to think. Please."

"Okay. I stay here on the couch. I will be very quiet."

He shut the bedroom door behind him and lay down on the bed. This wasn't going to work out and this wasn't part of the plan. What the hell was he going to do? She was getting comfortable too. He knew he had to agree to it for one night at least. Tasha was from the wrong side of town and he didn't doubt she could be pretty damn tough if she didn't get her way.

Maybe he should call Ralph. He didn't want a scene and her thrown out on the street with all the neighbours looking. This was a problem indeed that had come back to haunt him. Tomorrow he would suggest to her that she find a hotel room. The sight of her crying with mascara running over that painted face really put him off. And the brother too he sounded tough.

All was not happy days for Johnny boy and he had just been thinking of sending a letter to Ruthy. Now this was too much. He had to get rid of her soon and it would be mistake to encourage her in anyway. What was he going to do? She was very determined and she had sunk her hooks into poor old Johnny boy and it didn't seem very easy for him to get away.

It was a mistake bringing her back to the flat in the first place. He should have known with such a slapper. He lay down on the bed and wondered how he would maintain his fragile calm with such an obstreperous female on his hands.

There was a knock on the door.

"Come and talk to me Johnny." It was Tasha.

"I'll be out in one second." This was a bloody nightmare his own sanctuary over run by this female.

He was just going to go along with it for the time being and hopefully figure out something tomorrow.

Tasha sat on John's couch and contemplated her situation. She had never lived without Pak before. And to tell the truth there had been previous abortive escape attempts. Pak had foiled all such attempts. He claimed complete ownership over her body and her presence whereas often overlooked was never tolerated to be absent.

Just now he was probably freaking out wondering where she was. He knew he needed her and that she didn't need him and that sooner or later a guy would come along who would take care of her and Pak knew this.

He never forced himself on her but she would have been terrified to refuse him. She knew the manner in which he came to her - high or drunk it was the same. Once she thought he might have made her pregnant. But it was a false alarm. She would have strangled that baby.

He was nice this John and she had claws in too deep perhaps for the time they had spent together but she was desperate and so far it was working. Anyway destiny had brought John into her life and that was just the fact of it. They were meant to be together and she would make sure that they were together. He was a Scorpio and so was she. He hadn't seen her mean side yet but in time he would.

She put her feet up and lay back on the couch. Children! She could have children with him and he would never hit her and never treat her bad. Children! She never thought she would.

Chapter 26 – Ruth goes to meet Damien

On Friday night she caught the bus into Stephen's Green and walked across the rain drenched street to the taxi rank. There she took a cab out to Stoneybatter where Damien lived. And at eight twenty two, fashionably and deliberately late, she pressed the buzzer on the intercom outside a red brick townhouse. A few moments later there was a clatter of heavy feet coming down the stairs and the door suddenly swung open to reveal Damien's nervous and flushed countenance.

"Ruth. You made it."

"Yes I did." There was an awkward silence.

Then he said "Come on up. The lads are just going out and everything is in the oven."

She followed up the stairs and her resolve of earlier, despite discussion with Niamh, was already wilting. At the top of the stairs was a kitchen and living area. A large stained beige couch wrapped around the wall and up to the banister. On the far wall an enormous flat screen television bathed the room in a phosphoric glow of football. Two meaty lads sat on the couch grinning, nodding and giving sheepish looks whilst finishing off some cans of beer.

Her heart sank at the set up. This was just rebound territory and nothing more. Now she had dug herself in even deeper, despite her fears after their last encounter. This was not the best mind set to begin the evening, she reminded herself crossly - an open mind. Now that was what was required. She took the offered seat at the kitchen table.

"I brought some wine" she said with feigned nonchalance, putting a bottle wrapped in a brown paper bag on the table.

Damien had his back to her in the kitchen busy with his preparations.

"Thanks a million. I think I'll stick to the beer myself. Less of a head the next day."

There was a new found confidence in his talk. He

Chapter 27 – Ruth misses Johnny

Despite the days rolling by the ache in Ruth's heart hadn't diminished. Niamh was weary of talking about it. Her Mum had ventured all her philosophical comments. Situation was that Johnny boy was still cropping up in her mind. She had received nothing from him and sought no contact.

She went to every effort to forget. She deleted all his old emails. The picture of him on her desk at work disappeared into a drawer. She stopped wearing the watch he had given her as a birthday gift. Nothing seemed to work.

What was she going to do? She knew the situation and she knew herself. She would in time forget. She was not so illogical or irrational, as all that. But wasn't she missing out on something? Couldn't she just maybe discuss it one more time? There had been no contact since that day in Café-En-Seine. She knew him well enough to know that his silence was an admission of guilt.

He had been shagging someone else - the bastard. Ruthy was no fool! And yet six years down the drain without a fight? Could this be right? Despite her better sense the need within her was growing for another meeting.

The whole thing was an imponderable of impossible depth. She was torn in two thinking about it. If she went back to him it was surrender. Surrender to his infidelity and unpredictable behaviour. If she stayed sundered from him she would never give voice to a depth of feeling that could, possibly, be reciprocated on his part.

What she needed to do was to lay some conditions and that would be the basis upon which she returned to his life.

In times of difficulty Ruth turned to God only God appeared mute and despite her prayers the certainty she had hoped for didn't materialise.

One day after work she went into the church and the priest heard her confession.

"Perhaps you should speak with this young man?" he said, after a lengthy pause.

"But Father, he hasn't contacted me" she said.

"Perhaps he is feeling what you are feeling only in a different way. The only way to know is to contact him."

She left the church deep in thought.

That was the first piece of evidence. Niamh delivered the second.

"You know Ruth if you go on about this anymore I am either going to shoot you or shoot myself. Will you talk to John and see what the matter is?"

She was tired of letter writing and tired of phone calls that ended inconclusively. She decided there and then, that the best thing to do would be go around to John's place when she knew he would be there and speak with him directly.

Chapter 28 – How to get rid of Tasha

When Johnny boy was stuck, and he had never been more stuck than now, he always called Ralph. Ralph always knew what to do.

Tasha had moved in on a Monday evening and by Friday was showing no signs of leaving despite several big hints. Johnny was not given to being assertive. It was not his way with women. To his credit he had never fallen in with one as Machiavellian as Tasha until now.

Every time it looked as though he was getting tough, tears appeared and it left him speechless. Ruth hardly ever cried and never inflicted the way she felt on Johnny boy.

In the end it was all he could do to meet Ralph for a drink and he was in seriously in need of some advice.

They met at a bar on Rathmines Road. Tasha was at home watching the television, John's television. He could see from a glance that Ralph was enjoying himself immensely.

"Oh Johnny boy you have dug yourself in deep. Does Ruthy know about this?"

Johnny placed two pints on the glass table they were sitting at. Below on the dance floor some goofy college students were cavorting about the place. They were sitting on the upper deck overlooking the whole bar. It was mid week and quiet.

"Ralphy, what am I suppose to do? She's watching TV, taking showers, she has even been asking for her own key."

"Johnny, you have to be firm with someone like that," he said with a barely suppressed smile.

"I can't get rid of her Ralph," he said.

"Of course you can Johnny. This is your place. You pay the rent."

"You mean I have got to get tough. Don't you?"

"Well you are only asserting your claim to what is yours. Tell her but mean it. She must have somewhere to go. She came from somewhere."

"She lives with her brother. He sounds like a monster."

"Well she is a prostitute Johnny boy by her own admission. What were you expecting? A convent girl?"

"Ralph. I am a mess. I still have feelings for Ruth you know."

"Well Johnny boy. Ruth is a total package and I think you know that I think quite highly of her. She's got it all. This Tasha is a fuck-up. I hate to say it and I met her too but she will never know the life that you lead. Some people make bad choices in life and you and I can't change that. You can't help her Johnny. She is running away from reality."

Ralph took a sip of his pint. Sometimes he thought Ralph found John's indecision to be his most appealing aspect. Ralph loved to hear about chaos so that he could inject some structure and decorum.

A wave of numbness seemed to come over him at that. The correct the sensible thing to do would be to get rid of Tasha and then to reconnect with Ruth, but if he went back to Ruth that would be the end of his dalliance. He could not expect anything then but the inevitable groove into engagement and marriage. Was this Johnny's last hurrah? He really didn't know.

Maybe he should just accept the way things were. Tasha was pretty cute and there was a lot to be said for the status quo, wasn't there? It didn't require any effort it was just there. He thought about that and then he thought about how he felt about Tasha and compared that to Ruth and there was no comparison.

Tasha was like a shell, a pretty shell, but completely hollow and empty. Her favourite pastime was the lives and loves of celebrity women and after trying to converse with her on a number of occasions during the week he was beginning to realise that she was half-crazy too.

"I don't know man," said Ralph. "A lot of guys would envy your situation. Tasha is a great looking girl and Ruth is a woman any man would be proud to have."

Johnny didn't answer. He was feeling the knot of anxiety tighten in his stomach. He always ran from confrontations but now he knew he would have to face one.

He stayed on with Ralph deliberately, prolonging the time away from his flat. It was no longer really his flat, now that Tasha had set-up shop there.

"Everything was fine at a distance but up close and personal like this I just can't breathe. She is there all the time and doesn't go out and I am just not ready to live with someone. "

"I could never live with a bird."

"What am I going to do, Ralph?"

Ralph looked up from his drink exasperated.

"Look Johnny boy. I will come around with you. Together we will take her stuff and throw it out on the street and her after it - no cops or anything. It's the only way to do it."

Finally they agreed that Johnny boy would go back one last time and try to persuade her to move out. Then if that didn't work Ralph would arrive and provide backup. Ralph was to wait in the pub for a phone call from Johnny boy.

When Johnny boy got back to the flat Tasha was already in the bed.

"Is that you Johnny? I keep bed warm for you."

It was only 8pm.

"Tasha, can you come out here? I need to talk to you."

He was dreading this but resolved.

She knew by the tone in his voice.

"You can't stay here anymore. I am sorry. You going have to pack up and leave."

She started bawling crying and he was almost ready to forgive as he had done before.

"Look this is my place. It's just not big enough for two people. I am sorry this isn't any room."

She sat on the couch blubbering away. Her mascara was hopelessly smudged. He felt dead to this passion and dead to her too. He had been faking an interest in her, faking an interest to plug the gaps between desire and indifference. Now that she was here all the time the desire had largely given way to indifference. Now that he was seeing her as she rarely was his desire had evaporated. When it came down to it he really didn't care for her very much. This was news to him when after eight drinks she seemed very desirable.

He never realised how much he needed his own space and his own place in order to be human. The invasion of another human being into his space left him tongue-tied and threatened. Even Ruthy could have this effect on him after a few night overs.

"Now look Tasha. I don't want anymore of your bullshit. I need you to leave and to talk your stuff with you. This has to end and it's going to end right now. I never wanted you to move in here. You bullied your way in. Now you know I am fond of you but you have to move back to your old place."

There was no response. She just sat on the couch and ignored him. He had talked this over with Ralph and a violent gesture was needed from him.

He took her bag and threw it out into the corridor. All the make up and accessories designed to make her look beautiful for him went flying down the corridor. Compacts and makeup kits hit the walls and smashed. A great cloud of foundation dust went up into the air. All her tampons and sexy lingerie which she never got a chance to use were spread all over the floor.

The sheer violence of the gesture left both him and her shocked. There was a pause. Then Tasha screamed.

She let out an almighty whoop and ran into the corridor.

"You bastard you have messed up my stuff," she exclaimed. She began picking up makeup cases, eyeliners, nail varnish and compacts that were strewn across the floor.

He followed her and locked the door to his apartment behind him.

"But my jacket and my coat are still in there."

He went back inside and grabbed her coat and jacket.

"No Johnny, please don't do this to me."

She sat down on the stairs and started to cry again.

"No Tasha. You have to leave." He was impressed with how firm he was being. He helped her pick up her stuff and carried her bag down to the front door.

"You don't understand, Johnny, I can't go back to him. He will beat me up again and again. Johnny, don't you care about me at all?"

He faltered. She sensed his weakening.

"He is a violent, violent man, Johnny. Please let me stay at least until I can find somewhere else to live. Don't send me back to that life."

Her pleading tones were having an impact. At the pleading tones his instinct was to forgive and let her stay. He had talked about this with Ralph. Ralph had told him that some women use this in a man as a sign of weakness - not something a woman of Ruth's calibre would do but the other kind.

He didn't feel anything for her at that moment. He didn't feel anything for anyone. He just wanted to get rid of her as soon as possible and be alone. He felt no more than that. The deadness was conquering his heart. There was just numbness and an urgent necessity to eject her from his life.

He gave her what was meant to be a push in the right direction and without realising it she tumbled to the top of the stairs then fell over and over down to the half landing.

He stood there for a few moments shocked at what he had done. Then he recollected himself and ran down the stairs to help her.

"Are you okay, Tasha?" he asked. After a few moments she got up.

She stood up cursing and swearing at him and said very menacingly

"You will be sorry for this, Johnny". She picked up her bags and stomped off down the stairs seemingly unhurt.

There was violence in her heart when she left Johnny's place - that little Irish bastard. He thinks he can treat me this way. I will show him manners. And to think I had feelings for him. How dare he reject me? No man rejects me and he is not even a tough guy.

Already she was plotting her revenge. She would tell Pak that Johnny beat her and then pushed her down the stairs. Then we would see what would happen. That should be enough to stimulate Pak's psychotic tendencies.

Tasha had disappeared before. Pak knew this. It was not unprecedented. He could be got round and she knew how to do it. She planned what she would say as she waited for a taxi on Johnny's doorstep.

A neighbour looked suspiciously at her as she sat on the doorstep. She gave the neighbour Mrs McCormack daggers look and for added scandal flashed her breast at her. Johnny would have to explain that. She smiled to herself.

She had been behaving on her best behaviour since she moved in. Mrs McCormack backed away in shock and nearly ran up the stairs.

When she got back to the flat Pak was out. The place was a mess but that was no surprise since she was the only one who cleaned it. She emptied over-flowering ashtrays and collected up empty bottles of booze and half-eaten Chinese dinners from the night before.

A few hours later she heard a key in the lock and it was Pak. When he saw she was back he flew at her in a rage and kicked her in the stomach. She was used to this and fell to the floor covering her head from further blows. He gave a few more kicks on the thighs but more softly now. He must have missed her after all.

She lay on the floor for a while. She could hear Pak in the kitchen eating - one of his favourite pastimes. She knew she would have to sleep with him tonight. They had very little direct dialogue but when she attempted to run away as she had done he would take over her little life for a while and run it with a more iron fist.

She got her self off the floor and she went into the bedroom. She knew he could hear her. He had very acute hearing. She stripped off gingerly and inspected her bruises. It had not been a good night for Tasha. There was dark six-inch wide bruise from falling down Johnny's stairs. And the rest belonged to Pak.

The door swung wide and it was Pak. He was dressed only in his socks and sporting a huge erection. Tasha knew what to do and had known since she was a little girl and they used to play adult games together in Bucharest. As he stood at the corner of the bed she grappled his manhood.

Afterwards he became very tender and they lay on the bed together and he held her in his arms. He was the closest thing she had to a long-term relationship in her life. After a while he spoke in his gravel voice, too many cigarettes and Turkish coffees. "Tell me about this bastard Irish guy."

Tasha told him the whole story with particular emphasis on the part where Johnny threw her out.

Chapter 29 – Pak scopes Ralph’s car

Ralph normally parked his vintage Mercedes outside the office in the docks. On this occasion Tasha was with Pak sitting on a park bench across the street and they both observed him get out of the car.

"There he is. There he is! That is Johnny bastard's friend" said Tasha.

Now that Johnny was no more in her life she joined in Pak's style of revenge with relish.

"Okay" said Pak. "I will come back later on when it is dark." They both got up and left.

Ralph frequently worked late from his office and so when Pak returned he could see the light was still on.

He opened up his old cloth bag filled with tools. Using a razor sharp switchblade he cut the tyres front and back. Next he keyed the doors on both sides. Then he knocked out the headlights with a discreet tap and then finally packing up the bag and getting ready to leave he used a hammer to destroy the windscreen and the windows left and right.

The blows to the windshield set-off the alarm and Pak fled having exacted his revenge on Johnny's friend.

Hearing the sound of the alarm Ralph came down after a few minutes to find his vintage Mercedes in tatters.

Chapter 30 – Pak attacks Johnny

It was late on Tuesday night that Johnny was walking alone up the canal. He passed the Barge pub and then he walked along the tree-lined route towards the next bridge. It was dark. The kids from the flats had vandalised some of the streetlights.

As a big guy he never found himself challenged or cornered on the darkened streets he would often roam by himself. However he got the feeling from Kelly's Corner that someone was following him. In his peripheral vision he could see a shadowy, shambling figure dressed in black leather jacket and black denim.

For the first time in a long time he felt threatened. Johnny was a lover not a fighter he used to say to Ruthy in his humorous moments. Things were rum with Tasha and he knew she left in a venomous mood. What about that nutcase brother?

He got the feeling that some guy had been following him from Lesson Street Bridge. But he wasn't very observant particularly when he had a lot on his mind. And as he walked he heard suddenly the sound of running feet in his direction. There was a clanking noise and he felt nothing but numbness after the first blow and he dropped to the ground like a sack of potatoes.

After that everything was surreal. The trees above where a grey swirl of dusky foliage. He could see a patch of sky through the branches.

Pak had struck again. He aimed three more blows to the head but more gently and then he put away his chain. He wanted to hospitalise him but not kill him. He gave him a few solid kicks to the mouth as well making sure to break some teeth.

"That's what happens to people who fuck with me and mine," he said into Johnny's ear.

And he was gone.

A woman out walking her dog found Johnny fifteen minutes later. An ambulance was called and he was brought to St Vincent's hospital.

He must have fallen into a coma because when he woke he found himself lying in a hospital bed. The first thing he realised was that he couldn't move his arm or open his mouth.

Chapter 31 – Ruth late for Niamh

She was late arriving to meet Niamh. They had arranged to meet in the Duke and it was packed. After scouring the downstairs she climbed the creaky, wooden staircase to the upstairs. Niamh was at the front looking down over the street below, occasionally sipping her drink and checking her mobile phone.

Ruth threw her bag down with a bang and slumped into the chair opposite her.

“What’s wrong” said Niamh, instantly sensing the frustration in her body language.

Ruth didn’t labour the point. “I’m pregnant” she said, with a crushing air of finality.

“Johnny’s?” said Niamh in a quiet voice.

“Who else? There is nobody else.”

“Oh Ruthy. What are you going do?”

“I don’t know Niamh. The tears she had been holding back flowed silently down her cheeks, leaving two inky trails of mascara.

“I haven’t even told Mum yet.”

Chapter 32 – Johnny’s jaw is wired

When he woke two days later he found he couldn't open his mouth or move his right arm. Ruth was sitting in a chair looking at him as he woke.

"What on earth happened to you?" she asked.

He couldn't speak. He could only mumble.

"Who was that person that attacked you?" she said. "The Guards want to know."

"Why did you come here?" he mumbled despite his wired jaw.

"John, it's the same reason you got rid of that woman from your life. Don't worry I have been talking to Ralph and he has filled me in on the details."

She leaned forward and took his hand.

"John I think it is clear to you that a woman like that would never work out for you even if you had lived together. The Guards have told me they want to deport her. Her asylum application has expired."

He decided not to speak.

"Johnny one of the reasons I am here is you were calling my name a lot in the last few days. Ralph contacted me and said I should come in."

"Is there something you want to tell me Johnny, because all this is a lot to forgive for me and I am ready for that? Don't know if I ever will be. You hurt me real bad Johnny, real bad and I am not sure if I can get over it. I just want you to know that I think we should try to be friends Johnny. That would be the best for me right now. Look John I know what happened with that woman. You don't have to tell me I knew without telling me."

There was silence. She didn't know if he couldn't speak or if he had nothing to say.

"You know Johnny. You should accept that I know you better than you know yourself. Why did you go with that woman? What were you hoping to achieve? You don't know anything about me Johnny. I too have been seeing someone."

This was the part she had rehearsed with Niamh to say. She was disappointed by his reaction.

Perhaps it was his injuries that prevented him from speaking out but it was also the realisation that whatever drove him on motivated him despite Ruth's teenage effort to gain a reaction. Through out all of this what John did or didn't do had depressingly little to do with Ruth's reaction.

She got up to leave and he signalled goodbye by raising his left hand.

Chapter 33 – Ruth says a prayer for Johnny

She lit a special candle in the shrine to Our Lady in the church and she dedicated it to Johnny's speedy recovery.

The road to forgiveness was not an easy one to travel for Ruth. Yet travel it she had decided to do. She knew Johnny was confused and she knew why. Johnny had never made more sense to her then he did now.

Seeing him so vulnerable made her realise how easily she could exert her influence over him. The whole experience of what he had been through had knocked the stuffing out of him and all the bullshit she was so used to hearing from him was quite muted now. He was meek and docile.

He knew he had fucked up and fucked up badly. Whatever he had gotten himself involved in could have killed him. He had that guilty look on his face and Ralph knew more than he was saying - typical!

She could see all the imperfections but she chose not to dwell. She didn't want to know and it wouldn't make her life or her choices any easier if she did.

There was enough cynicism in the world and Ruth Egan was not going to add to it. She loved that stupid, idiotic man-child Johnny and she wasn't going to let go. Every fibre of her body told her this was the right thing to do. He was the man of her life and her one and only and though he may not realise it he would in time.

Johnny was a victim. He was a helpless pawn of that manipulative female. He was also a twit. But she loved him and she was going to fight the great fight to get him back.

She wasn't stupid. She knew there was another women involved. Johnny wouldn't say but she got the gist between the jigs and the reels. This man who attacked Johnny was some friend or associate of the women. That much she had been able to figure out.

He was not responsible for his own actions or in a position to control him. How could he lying in a hospital bed be to blame for all that? No she was clear. And her mind was made up. That disgusting prostitute poached her Johnny and then set her rabid brother on him when it didn't go the way he wanted.

She was the first to admit that Johnny was more experienced in the ways of love than she.

It was bad enough hearing whispered rumours of infidelity but to have it paraded in such a public manner. Well her Mum thought she was crazy going back and yet she did go back and sit at his bed. Heaven knows even the press might have written something about it.

Of course Niamh and her Mum thought she was a nutcase and even that awful Ralph looked surprised to see her sitting there but she wanted to make sure that he was just all-right, even if they never were to be again, just to make sure that he was okay.

In the coming weeks John staged a speedy recovery. The doctor told Ruth he was young and healthy but also that he a strong will to live and he was coming on very well.

Three promises Ruth extracted from John as he lay recovering in his hospital bed.

The first was that there would never be another infidelity. This was the end and he needed to understand that. Whatever motivated him to do this was at an end and there would be no return to this.

The second promise was that John and she would move into the house she owned in Blanchardstown as soon as possible. This she felt would give her confidence over his activities and she could be sure that he was committed.

The third promise was they would get married as soon, as was reasonably possibly.

She was saddened to demand what she believed ought to be a natural evolution of their affection and trust for each other. After the business with Tasha she realised clearly that whatever vision there was of her relationship with John she was the one who carried it and even he knew that. John would suggest nothing and take no action and drift along in his little bachelor world. The longer he could postpone commitment the more he liked it. Typical male! They just didn't appreciate motherhood. It was the noblest of callings and it useless to wait for him to realise.

Well she knew how far that got him! But just the same being as managerial as she was being a little something of the love died.

John couldn't be trusted. And if she was enter into a marriage with him she would need to keep a very close eye upon him indeed. Very clearly she could see that a new chapter was opening up for the two of them and in this chapter Ruth and not John would be in control.

This pleased her very well in many ways. John wasn't bothered about marriage. He didn't know or care how much it meant to her. But sometimes it would be nice though unrealistic as Niamh reminded her to be met halfway. Perfect balance in relationships was perfect fiction and the closest approximation was a sweaty tug of war.

Marriage was the badge of respectability that Ruth needed. Of course these days nobody commented on other peoples lifestyles but her mother would from time to time make comments and anyway what the hell was wrong with marriage. Why did Ruth have to apologise for something that was in essence a good thing.

She would be an honest woman when married. Marriage was a symbol of life long trust and commitment. Marriage was an institution that she appreciated far more then he did.

Nobody these days appreciated marriage. It was almost uncool or unhip, this bullshit foreign influence. What was wrong with the old ways anyhow? They weren't all bad. This she knew.

She left John in the state she found him and decided to visit him not again until he was fully recovered. The whole business with the horrible woman was out in the open now and she could see it had knocked stuffing out of him. He was just a helpless little boy now.

John would have to pursue her now. She wanted a ring and she wanted some attentive courting and she wanted it now.

Chapter 34 – Fragment in hospital

When Johnny came round and found he was in hospital bed he knew he needed to do some fast thinking. He was fairly sure though he had a monstrous headache that Tasha's brother attacked him. He was the only person with a motive and Tasha had told him enough about the violence for him to remember.

He was fairly sure also that Ruth had been informed and no doubt she had been in already. The nurses said he had been out for two days and on a drip.

Chapter 35 – Johnny promises to change

"I am going to change Ruthy. And that is the end of it," said Johnny, holding her hand and looking into her eyes. I didn't appreciate what you meant to me and now I do."

Ruth said nothing.

"I am not going to put you through any more bullshit. Look you know I am changeable and I am prone to whimsical impulses. But you were never a whimsical impulse in my life. It just took me longer to grow up than you. You were always sensible and always did the right thing."

Ruth blushed a little.

"Do you really mean it Johnny" she leaned forward in the chair, "because I am tired of this bullshit and I need to be sure about you now Johnny. It doesn't suffice anymore to have some vague promise. Are we talking about what I need to talk about? I am thirty-one Johnny I can't mess around anymore. I need to get settled and if you want to be a part of my life you need to settle with me too."

There was silence. The only sound in the hospital bed was the sound of Johnny's raspy breathing. Then he spoke.

"I want the same things you want Ruthy. Look I know I have been a fool over this girl. She meant nothing to me but I don't deny what I did. Only with you Ruthy is the possibility of a life together. I want to be a Dad and a husband Ruthy and when I was lying on the ground seeing stars after that bastard attacked me I was just thinking this could be the end. This could be the end of me. And there is so much more that I want to do and so much time that I want to spend with you and so many things I want to experience."

Ruth reached out for his hand.

"Look together we can make it. I'm not perfect but I don't think I will be giving you that kind of trouble. There is a lot to be said for commitment and a lot to be said for the old values. Our parents weren't idiots and they had better marriages than a lot of people we know."

They sat there in silence for a long time. In the end the nurse stuck her head in breaking the silence to remind Ruth visiting time was over.

Chapter 36 – Johnny Confesses

The bad news was the other girl. She had heard from Johnny's lips and that was a harder blow. He confessed in his bed and there were stories, other infidelities. How could he treat her love in this manner? She just didn't understand. Why? Why had Johnny cared so little for what she cared so much for?

Why she asked herself? Niamh asked. Even her mum wanted to know if it would not be better to change now that Johnny had proven himself so complicated and unpredictable.

Few women knew the constancy that beat in Ruthy's heart. The thought now of finding another man and loving him didn't seem right to her. She thought of Damien Price and dismissed his memory. Some little part of her would have to die if she gave up and instead she chose to fight on.

It wasn't Johnny's fault she reasoned. That horrible prostitute woman had put him up to the whole thing. Niamh tried to inject a word of caution.

They met for coffee one Tuesday for lunch in their usual spot in Cocoon. The conversation got to John almost immediately.

"I hate to say this Ruthy but you are not thinking very straight and I know you are a straight thinker. Understand that he can do it again. What he is telling you now is because he is in a bad way. When he was well you saw his choices."

"I am not such a lovelorn idiot though, Niamh. I know what he did. I know that he has the capacity to do it again. Believe me I will extract some commitments from him. And I am able to do this only because he is in bits right now."

There was a pause.

"Don't take this the wrong way Niamh," said Ruth, "but I didn't think you would understand. This isn't some fling or month long romance. This is six years of my life hanging in the balance."

"But Ruthy what's to stop him doing it again. I mean I know you are a strong character and everything but supposing you and John were married and he went off with some other woman. I mean how can you trust someone like that?"

"Niamh. I don't want to talk about it. There are certain things you will understand if you ever build a history with someone."

"Look Ruthy I wouldn't say this only I am your friend and I am concerned."

"Sorry" said Ruthy. "I am just very wound up about John."

"When is he out of hospital?"

"Next week. But he still looks pretty banged up and he lost a few teeth too. Oh Niamh I know you are right I am just worried about him that's all. There is no answer to the way I feel about this. It feels right. Can't you understand?"

"Sometimes feelings can be wrong Ruthy. I mean I have been there on that one. You can't always go by your feelings. Where would you end up if you did that?"

Ruthy leaned forward in her chair.

"I know. I know Niamh you are right. This goes against my better judgement too. I wanted to write him off after how he treated me. But Niamh I have never seen him like this. "

"Ruthy I don't understand. But then like you say I haven't gone out with someone for six years so I really don't know what it is like. All I can say is once bitten twice shy. That's my philosophy."

They fell silent temporarily hushed by the arrival of a couple who sat at the seat nearest the window.

Niamh was right but she was right too. John needed her. She knew by the look of him as he lay in that hospital bed. She never really got the full story and Ralph was fairly tight-lipped.

Chapter 37 – Dentist crowns Johnny's teeth

The dentist crowned John's broken teeth and after the scars healed it was hard to tell that he was the victim of a brutal assault. Of course there was the psychological effect of being brutally beaten. That was something that made him very uneasy on quite stretches of streets or walking home alone late at night.

He felt rage at this psycho brother of Tasha's and was convinced that he was behind the assault. Of course it all happened so fast that he didn't see a face or couldn't ID someone.

When he was well enough he explained his deductions to the guards.

"You see Mr Martin," a young fresh faced guard explained, "We need something to go on. We need to have some positive information - if you had an address for this Tasha that would help a lot. We followed up on the mobile number but the number has been disconnected and there was no customer information behind it."

Inquiries were made after Tasha and her brother. Despite various leads the scent ran cold. They were gone from the place in Mountjoy Square and nobody there knew where they had moved too.

"You never know with people like that," she said to Johnny. "They can crop up anytime they want."

Chapter 38 – Johnny goes camping

"Where are you going Johnny?" The floor of the living room was covered in camping gear and he was in the process of loading it into the car.

"I have to get away for a few days. This place is wrecking my head."

"But who are you going with?" She sat down on the couch.

"I am going with myself and nobody else."

There was silence.

"But Johnny that's bizarre."

"It may be bizarre but that what I am doing."

"But why? It's me isn't it? You want to get away from me?"

"Oh Ruthy look you know what I am like. I like my privacy and I like to get away by myself."

"But Johnny who are you going to talk too on your trip and will you be okay camped by yourself with no-one to share the tent with. It's seems crazy. Why don't you wait and ask Ralph if he will come too?"

He gave her a big hug. "Don't be silly, silly billy. I am a big strong man and no one will mess with me. Beside that I am not afraid to be camped by myself and I have done it before - believe it or not. So don't worry and I will give you a call on your mobile when I get settled in for the evening. This is my time away and I need to be by myself. Don't you worry about me it will be fine."

Ruth protested no more. He kissed her goodbye and half an hour later he was on his way.

He took the M50 to the exit for the West and he drove his little Corsa with a big dent in the left rear door at speeds approaching 80mph. He felt elated and yet he felt sad. This was an escape but it didn't really make any sense. His dreams lately worried him and he could see storm clouds on the horizon.

He felt free yet trapped. He had a vague idea of where he was going from the Internet downloads he had made earlier in that day. It was pure impulse to take this trip. He decided this morning and he hadn't even told Ruth.

She was cool though. She was happy to see him doing things. It was more like the old Johnny she knew and loved.

When he got to Galway he had a bit of dithering about where to go. He eventually picked a campsite forty miles outside the city and it was already getting dark by the

time he was pitching his tent. The women in the office laughed when he told her he was camping by himself.

"Nosy old bid," he thought to himself.

By sunset he was sitting in his camp chair and barbecuing some pork and he felt as though it was a job well done. He knew Ruth didn't like camping. And slumming it was not her style. Still and all it would have been nice to have her here to see the sunset.

He had much time to reflect and look back on what happened and the experience he had. And though he hadn't told Ruth his injuries were pretty serious and the doctor reckoned he was lucky not be brain damaged after being in a coma like that.

It seemed to him now that his whole life before as a bachelor was gone. He needed Ruth and he always knew that. Ruth was stability and she kept the ship in the road. Without her things just wouldn't work anymore.

He was committed to her. And he owed her now big time. In a way he had never felt before. If she had walked away from him back there he would have been devastated. No there was responsible and honour in relationships. He could have justified his fling with Tasha as saying or thinking that he was not really committed to her then not like now. No there would be no more flings that was his guarantee to her.

He looked back and felt like a bit of a fool or a teenager. Ruth was too nice to say it. But he knew she was more mature than he was. He just didn't grow up like so many others.

What the hell was he going to do with the rest of his life? He knew the Ruth part. They would have a few kids and she would be happy with that. Ruth was always easy please. He was the complicated one with all the problems.

He turned his sausages on the mini-barbecue he had bought in Salthill two hours previously.

And then there were the clouds on the horizon. He feared for himself and he feared slipping into a rut. It was quite possible and he had few resources to prevent it. Before he had lived off his schemes and dreams and now they had run out of gas and there was nothing to hope for or aim for. He was suburban and there was no escaping that.

He needed the hope that dreaming and scheming gave him and yet there was nothing on the radar.

Later as he lay curled up in his sleeping bag he did recall Ruth's words and he found himself attuned to the sounds outside the tent, which were numerous but eventually died down. Every dog that barked and ever teenager that stumbled back drunkenly from the pub was audibly too him.

When he slept in the end his dreams were dark and sinister. Clouds were forming on the horizon and this time he didn't have the resources to fight or prevent it.

He thought to pray and then thought better of it. No if there was a God then his mother would still be alive and all the praying he did when she was diagnosed with cancer would have paid off. God if there was one was a sadist. He looked down on human suffering with indifference. He had the power to intervene and yet he chose not too.

There was no God. It was an absurd confidence trick peddled by the Catholic Church amongst other organisations.

He woke early to a sticky dawn. There was perspiration on the sides of the tent wall and the roof. He hadn't slept well and he didn't feel refreshed from his evening of driving. He had no plan for the day and he even felt like going back but stopped himself.

Ruth had sent him a cheery text message so he replied with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. He felt he ought to pretend he was having a good time since he talked so much blarney about it to her on the way out the door.

He packed up his stuff early to avoid the teenagers who would be spilling out of their big dome-shaped tent early, hung-over and irritating.

He paid the laughing cashier and she passed no comment on him this morning, which was well for her because he was ready with a biting rejoinder.

He took down the tent and loaded the gear into the car. He took off along the coast road. He took the road from Lennane in the direction of Westport. He stopped the car along the way and got out to take a walk. It was beautifully clear day and the sides of the fjord were lit up with unexpected sunshine and clarity. It seemed him as

he struggled to master one of the lesser peaks that the beauty of nature put his life and his concerns in context.

Basically he did not want to grow up. If he could keep Ruthy on the long finger for another five years he would do it if he could get away with it. Still there was nothing for it. He knew now that he had less bargaining power with her than he used too. There was less of the starry eyed look now. She had seen him at his worst and it was not a pretty picture.

He was sometimes amazed that she had stayed and he was glad that she had done. He couldn't push her away now and get away with it. No, that wouldn't work.

After another half-hour of struggle he reached the top. He found a large rock that protruded from the heather and sat down and looked down across the inlet and to the other side. Mountain goats were speckled like so many dots of white up and down the sheer face.

No Ruth was the best. He was lucky to have her and he would not find a better even in his best of health. He thought of that idiot Tasha. What was he doing with her? Sometimes he was doing it to compete with Ralph boy in the only way he could compete with him.

He needed to be stronger than that. He hadn't seen so much of Ralphy boy since the whole thing. Ralph didn't like problem situations and he only come into the hospital one time. He supposed it wasn't very nice for Ralph to see his friend in distress. He was sorely put out about his car too.

No Ruth had to come first now. He knew he was fool because she would have done that willingly anytime in the last five years and Johnny only belatedly and with bad grace. Oh well. She was the more mature party. He had said it so many times to himself. Ruth managed him and he liked it.

It seemed a lonely place this life without guys like Ralphy or the other lads. She wanted him to step up to the plate and be a man and be a Dad and yet for him there was no rush, there was no urgency. He could fool around for however many years no taking these things seriously.

Women had a time limit - the dreaded old clock. He knew Ruthy wanted to grow the nest, she had said as much. There wouldn't be too many more weekends away like

this. Then again he didn't mind. Or at least he thought he didn't. As far as he could understand he just had to be along for the ride.

Ruth was great that way. She would take care of everything. He was even living in the house that she bought and paid for him.

Chapter 39 – John moves in with Ruth

When John got better they moved into Ruth's little house in Swords. This had been agreed. John promised to mow the grass, which had grown foot high back and front. He promised to help around the house and generally make himself useful. He felt however that he was being committed to suburbia and he registered his disapproval.

Ruth hesitated to extract further promises from him. He had not gone out with Ralph or any of the lads since the incident and she hoped he would keep it that way.

Her confidence in him was strong despite all she had learned about him.

"I suppose you want me to wax the car on Sunday" he said.

"What do you mean?" She was learning not to respond to his provocative quips.

"Isn't that what all good middle class couples do on Sunday?"

"You are so twisted some times. You are not going to be doing anything anyhow so why wouldn't you?"

They left at that. But true to his word he got up early on Sunday morning and Ruth woke up to the sound of the lawn mower running in the back garden. An hour later he was finished. He filled the living room with the smell of petrol and walked grass cuttings up the stairs.

There was not a lot to do out there in the house and they were still a good walk from the village where all the shops and businesses were located.

He was quite quiet after he left hospital and he went back to work more taciturn than ever. Ruth noticed this change but assumed it was probably temporary.

The commute each day occupied at least three hours of their time respectively. Apart from that everything was going according to plan and Ruth even started to think about family and kids a bit more.

For now however all was peace and quiet in the little home. Johnny purchased himself a new computer and seemed to spend more time with that than he did talking to Ruth.

Suddenly the Internet and his computer seemed all encompassing and fascinating. It always took several calls to rise for a meal. And he never suggested going places like he used to. Even out in Swords there were things to do and places to see.

It was as though he had lost some of his enthusiasms for this. All the major decisions of a financial and housekeeping nature he left with Ruth. He agreed with everything and never questioned her judgement in this regard though she wished he would.

Sometimes she wanted to shake him. She felt that she had signed for something only to find a different person had shown up instead. She knew deep down in side her real Johnny was there but sometimes it was an act of faith to know that.

They had settled into a comfortable way of things. John did seem a bit changed, Ruth thought. The assault seemed to have knocked some of the exuberance out of him. It had been part of their agreement that they would live together when Johnny came out of hospital. Whereas he honoured his part of the bargain she couldn't help thinking he was a little down nevertheless.

John found himself most often avoiding the company of other people. At work he became exceptionally taciturn and a social. It was not really an issue as such. Mullah and Foxy knew him well enough not to ask too many annoying questions. They had heard something of his hospital stay and indeed had seen the effects upon his return.

It was after a month or two of this low ebb that he began to feel something had permanently changed. He couldn't put his figure on it and Ruth didn't want to say. But they both felt that he was not himself.

He found that he slept a lot more and would lack energy that Ruth expended without thinking. Ralph noticed the change in him too.

"Man ever since you moved into that house you have been in the doldrums."

"I know. I don't know what is wrong with me."

"Maybe you are depressed. Did you ever consider that?"

He hadn't but he did.

The whole house thing was fine. He didn't get that excited about living with Ruth. He knew what to expect. She was the one who thought a major watershed had been passed.

It seemed to Johnny now that he was tied in and tied down to a lifestyle that just wouldn't change. Sometimes he felt completely inept around Ruth she was so much more able for the practical things. Johnny felt he had not delivered on his expectations and all his little pet projects and plans and so forth were just tidied away by Ruth and put in the drawer of his desk.

He found he was sleeping a lot more and he a lot less energy during the day. Ruth noticed the change in him and she commented delicately at first and then with increasing urgency.

He couldn't imagine his plans anymore and he couldn't imagine all the things he hoped to do. When he envisaged the future it was just grey fog on the horizon. There didn't seem to be anything for it except to go along with these reduced circumstances. He had lost interest in all his schemes. And when he saw a pretty girl out in the supermarket or in the town centre he just felt awkward and uncomfortable.

At first he thought it was just routine depression but then the trough just kept getting longer and longer.

The fight had gone out of Johnny and he just didn't care anymore. Life was mapped out and there was no room for his contribution. His most cunning plan was exposed as a failed effort. He was plum out of ideas and he was ready to throw in the towel.

His mood started to move downwards and there was no way he could stop it. He had read and heard about people with depression. He just never thought he would be one of those people.

Some days it was really bad and it was all he could do to present himself at work. Mullah noticed but did not comment overly. John made a lot more mistakes and things had to be explained to him three or four times before he would get it.

Ruth noticed too. In bed Johnny was mostly disinterested in sex and would avoid intimacy if at all possible.

He felt as though his thoughts were leaden and the simplest task became incredible complicated. He would have to repeat steps. He was forgetful. He tried to

Her love kept going during that time because there was little else. He was very distant and taciturn. It took a long time to persuade him to go and see someone

about it. Some male ego thing but he just refused. He was ashamed to admit he was down.

Against her better instinct she tried to bring Ralph into it. One day she had coffee with him and asked him if he would talk to Johnny. Ralph agreed.

The man to man chat seemed to work because the next day Johnny made an appointment and went to see the doctor.

It was scope lost that Johnny feared. For you see a man of his creative breadth and vision felt like he was wearing blinkers when depressed.

The doctor was low-key and helpful.

"Well you have all the symptoms of someone suffering from depression. Low energy, poor sleep, diminished appetite for food and sex."

"What is wrong with me Doc?" said Johnny.

"Well depression is caused by a lot of things. Did you have any major changes in your life lately?"

That gave him pause for thought.

"I moved in with my girl-friend."

"Well that's a big change. But look there could be any number of reasons. So the best thing I can do is give you a proscriptioin for Prozac."

"But how long will I have to take it?"

"We'll put you on three months to start off with."

The weeks turned into months and the grass grew tall again front and back and this time John didn't need to be asked. His spirits rose on the rising season. And something somewhere told him things would have to get better.

He had been Prozac for six months and now he was scared not to take it. During that time he felt like a flat car battery. There was pizzazz. There were no connections in his mind. His creative thinking was barely awake to the world.

He had managed to get by at work okay and his co-workers were sympathetic though weary of picking up after him.

Their little house had become a home and Ruth had kitted it out with everything they could possibly need. When Johnny wasn't working he spent a lot of time around the house. He was not exactly a handyman but he did respond to Ruth's requests and painted and hammered and plastered where needed.

He had developed quite a book collection, which Ruth called the library and he would spend his spare time reading and writing in his diary, which was top secret. Ruth would not have read it in any case. She respected those things. Lost in fiction he found himself more comfortable and less challenged than a world he could not understand.

There were rarely any fights. He was too lethargic for that. His feelings would rarely rise to opposing Ruth.

He tended to accept her decisions on matters at the time but then later he would find himself irritated or annoyed by something she had decided to do.

Chapter 40 – Dinner at Milano's

Ruth decided that it was time to get out of the house for a while and she organised an evening out with Johnny. She invited Niamh and Johnny invited Ralph. There was no thought that Ralph and Niamh would hit it off. Ralph had already made it plain that Niamh was not gifted in the looks department and Niamh taking after Ruth thought Ralph to be an odious man.

They had dinner in Milano's. And despite all the misgivings an engaging conversation struck up over topics of mutual interest.

"But I just don't see" Niamh was saying, "that our generation can be expected to be like the last. When my mother got married she was twenty-two. She had few choices either of career or man. And now I have been faced with all this choice. That is the reality of my time. My Mum was a stay at home mum but she was perfectly content to be a housewife."

"It's pros and cons Niamh" said Ralph on his third glass of red wine. "Pros and cons. Individuals come first now. You can't turn back the clock on that. No way. If you try to emulate your parents you cease to be the person that you can be."

"It's a definite trend" said Johnny. "Business, culture everything will be more about servicing the needs of the individual. We live in an era where the individual has never been more empowered."

"I don't understand all of this" said Ruth. "There is nothing wrong with commitment or having a strong commitment to someone. It is a central part of my life anyway."

The conversation meandered away in other directions.

Chapter 41 – John explains being depressed

One day Ruth came home from work earlier than usual and Johnny was lying on the couch not even watching TV or reading a book but just lying there. She came into the room and sat on the chair opposite him.

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

He looked up from his supine position.

"Awful."

She didn't say anything and then he spoke and when he spoke it was like the words came tumbling out more words than he spoken in day's maybe weeks.

"You don't understand. Every day is struggle for me. Even the simplest things are complicated. And it changes too. Sometimes I could shoot myself and then the next moment I could hug you for joy."

Ruth just sat there and listened. After a while she spoke.

"Would you like a cup of tea? I am having one."

She made the tea and he sat up in the couch.

"Have you been back to the doctor?" she asked when she returned with a tray.

"The doctor" he said contemptuously. "What does he know? He told me to keep taking the stuff. I tried to tell him how I was feeling but he just doesn't get it."

"How are you feeling today?"

"Hardly did anything. I called in sick again."

"Johnny you can't keep doing that. Eventually you will get a bad reputation for yourself."

He poured himself a cup of tea.

"Oh I don't know. I don't know. You're right of course. I haven't called in sick that much."

"But you should use your day off if you take one."

"Do you know that I went for walk along the headlands today and all I think about was what if I jumped off the cliff? Would any really care Ruthy? Would they?"

"I would care, you fool of a man. Don't talk like that. You'll get through this Johnny. This is a test Johnny. A test of what you are made of."

She sat beside him on the couch and put her arms around him.

"I love you John Martin and don't you ever think about doing something like that. You have people who care about you and you will care about yourself again very soon."

"What is wrong with me Ruthy?" said Johnny. "What's happening to me?"

And he started to cry but not for very long. After a while the tears stopped. He put his head in Ruthy's lap and he lay like that for a long time.

Outside the sun started to set on a grey February evening. She didn't disturb him by moving and he didn't speak.

She felt mixed emotions seeing her man fall apart like this. She spoke stronger than she felt and sometimes she wondered if she could play this surrogate mother to a son who just refused to grow up. Of course she sympathised with his depression but she just wished there were something left for her. Right now she needed to be strong for both of them and for the kids who had yet to arrive.

Every day she said a prayer for both of them in Haddington Road church. She prayed that God would not chastise Johnny too much for being a bad person. It was after all a punishment on him, so she saw it. She had feared for him and depression and that was what had arrived. All that grandiosity and those big plans inevitably they had to come to an end sooner or later reality would come crashing in.

After a while Johnny started to snore. She let him run on with it. She knew he hadn't been sleeping well and sometimes he would get up in the middle of the night and go for a walk. That kind of thing really freaked her out.

There was a girl at work who got depression and she ended leaving the company. Nobody really liked her as far as Ruth could see. She was too sensitive and took everything personally. She hoped Johnny would not get like that. He needed more in the world than just Ruth to cling onto.

Chapter 42 – John takes to the bed

He wanted her to understand. But he felt she couldn't. This was what it was like to be enslaved to darkness. His every thought was like lead. He took a week off work but it had no good effect. Nothing gave him pleasure anymore. The walk with the dog along the sea front, the books he liked to read, even the music he liked to listen to were all meaningless now.

He spent the week lying in their double bed. Ruth knew better than to initiate anything sexually. He just lay rolled up in his corner in foetal position.

She had stopped asking him what was wrong in this mood, as this elicited no good response. He wasn't violent he just ignored her. It was as if he wasn't there. He told her once in a more sober moment that that was the way he wanted it.

"Look you must leave me alone when I am like this. There is nothing I can do about it. I am just hanging on for dear life at the moment."

One day he rode his bike out along the cliff head and he looked down into the swirling ocean below. It would be so easy just to end it all - to jump and plummet the hundred or so feet to the rocks. He thought of Ruth and how she would feel and he thought of how his parents would feel in heaven knowing they had reared a suicide and he thought about going to Hell and he stopped.

He reminded himself that it would pass and he had felt this way before. It seemed like a hollow mantra and all his mantras from his old life had broken down and didn't work anymore. There was no point saying to him that his schemes would lead to greatness. That had a hollow ring to it. Ha ha Johnny the great! Johnny was a fool and a moron and an idiot!

He hadn't even called Ralph back in over a week. Even Ruth commented on that.

No this was Johnny hanging on by his fingernails. He thought of his past excesses. What was he playing at spending all that money on stocks or that business with Tasha? What if Ruth left him? What would he do then?

How could he cope? Surely she would sicken of him soon enough. He was really pushing his luck with her this time. No sex and not friendly. And what if he lost his job? How would he find another partner if she left him, feeling the way he did feel?

There was no answer to these impossible questions.

He tried reading the Bible but it didn't seem to work. He read Matthew's Gospel and the verses seemed hollow and empty. So many things now he would have done differently. And he dreaded meeting neighbours and acquaintances any situation where he had to be friendly or convivial. He just didn't feel like it.

There was no way out. It just seemed to go and on. He felt a lot worse than he looked and he decided at the end of the week off to go back. It was the best strategy and the hope would be that the daily routine would give him a lift.

He went back to see his doctor.

"Doctor I am in the horrors now for sure. You've got to help me."

"You have to give time for the medication to work," he said. "You haven't been on it long."

"But doctor I can't sleep. I have no interest in food. I have no interest in sex. This can't be normal."

Despite that he just didn't care. Whatever the doctor decided to do was a better decision, than any he could make. He had lost confidence in his own abilities and he didn't expect that Prozac would help him regain it.

The doctor agreed to monitor the situation.

When he got back home Ruth wanted to talk.

"John this is hard for me too" she said bringing him in to the living room and sitting on the couch.

"I know Ruthy but what can I do." Even the way he said made him feel flat.

He yearned for his former self - the well person who would have laughed at depression and shunned the depressed. That person died somewhere and now he was diagnosed with depression and Ruth was beside herself and he didn't care. He couldn't care. He was incapable of feeling empathy.

It wasn't indifference it was deadness. He felt nothing at all. And Ruth started to cry and he should have comforted her and the old Johnny would have put his arm around her and made things right. But how to make thing right when they can't be righted?

He thought of his mother in the grave and what she would have wanted for him and none of it made sense.

Suddenly everything seemed very black and death was all around. He left Ruth in the living room and went upstairs and lay on the bed. He heard her moving around downstairs and knew she was preparing to sleep in the second bedroom.

She sometimes did that if things were really bad for her. He lay on the bed in his clothes and the demons came to attack.

"Johnny boy" they called. "Oh Johnny boy, being mean to poor old Ruthy. Not such a stud now Johnny boy are we?"

There was blackness across his heart and he didn't see the fog lifting. After what seemed like an age. Ruth came into the room. She lay on the bed beside him and snuggled up. Neither of them spoke and eventually Johnny slept and in his dream a field of blackened flowers spread out before him.

The next day was grey. It was all he could do to pull himself out of bed and into the shower and then put his clothes on and go to work. He reasoned if work were not busy, then he might get away.

No such luck - when he got in Mullah had one of those urgent expressions on his face.

"Johnny we have to get those two reports out by eleven" he said.

Johnny nodded and sat at his desk. These were reports that he should have completed last week.

He turned on his computer and logged in. Try as he might he just couldn't concentrate. The deadline kept approaching and he could see Mullah was becoming more and more anxious.

His mind was dead and what would have been a simple task seemed impossible. He knew Mullah well enough to know that he was worried.

He focused his mind as best he could and carried on with the task in hand. The report was complete by eleven.

The afternoon dragged with painful slowness. His mind was numb, his thoughts flat. He just kept his eyes focused on his computer terminal hoping the clock would move faster. At five o'clock he made a bolt for the door.

What was he going to do? How was he going to deal with this problem? He could go back to the doctor but he wasn't scheduled to see him until next month. He also found that he ran to the doctor in one mood and after talking to him was in another.

He walked along the quays aimlessly. He didn't want to go home and inflict this on Ruth and he didn't know where he should go. In the end he went into a phone box and called the depression help line. After a few moments a woman's voice answered.

That was it. He was off. He just talked and talked and talked. She listened unable to interject a word. He told her about the walks and the suicidal thoughts and how he had hurt Ruth and how he couldn't ask more from her. The woman listened.

He hung up the phone and felt worse. He would get drunk if it would do any good but then he would have to face Ruth half-pissed. He knew she would be disappointed at this relapse but what could he do. He walked around Temple Bar for a few hours. It reminded him of the happier times he had spent there. He even recalled the invincible feelings he had when he knew Tasha. He was such a cowering wreck of an individual now. A tearless sob filled his throat.

He was hanging on by thread. He wanted to be well. Wanted to be well for Ruth and for all the things she expected of him and he had promised. His depression could wreck the cosy little world they were planning to construct. It wouldn't take too much punishment from this.

No one cared for a depressive. They were objectionable and unwanted. He realised now how he was always skating on ice.

There lessons of course if he could see them. The dull, numbing pain was a message of something severely wrong in his life and expectations. But what was that thing. He could barely function.

He walked into the Temple Bar pub and sat at the counter and ordered a pint. It didn't do much for the ache he felt to be there, but at least he had somewhere to sit down for a moment.

His life had crawled to a standstill. The most rudimentary tasks were a struggle for him. He could derive no pleasure from sitting in the pub neither was he relaxed despite the inebriating effect of the pint.

He knew everything wasn't wrong - but how to correct a house that was built on bad foundations. He couldn't reengineer his life without putting it on hold.

He knew Mullah was covering for him. He was aware of that. It scared him rather than made him feel more comfortable. He was the under-performing member of the team. They all knew his situation and the numerous doctors' certificates that had gone in. He was paranoid and he hadn't been fully honest with them concerning his situation. He remembered all those times he had gone in there and considered the job beneath him. Now it scared him.

His thoughts turned to Ruth and how she must feel. He gulped down his pint and ordered another. It didn't seem to make any difference to the way he felt.

He didn't care if only the pain would go away. But it didn't and it couldn't because he couldn't escape from himself. And no matter whether he was in Swords or Temple Bar or at his desk at work the feelings were the same.

The doctor said that the feelings would change. He wanted to talk someone and instead he was put in front of a pharmacist. He wasn't sure what to believe. Were his problems caused by him or had he had inherited baggage?

He walked down to Connolly and took the late train to Swords.

Chapter 43 – John’s Depression

The doctor was scratching head when John returned to his clinic. He was a tall, tweedy anglicised Irishman and wore spectacles and tried to maintain a reserved composure around his patients.

"You must have something stronger, doctor. I can't take anymore of this."

John sat uncomfortable in the chair. He knew that a conversation was the last thing his doctor wanted. But he couldn't help to force one. He had taken the morning off work again and Mullah had passed no comment but yet there was still a growing backlog of work to be dealt with.

"It's not as simple as that. I can't just give you a higher dosage and ignore the consequences. "

The doctor put his fingertips together and touched his nose as though the action displayed a deeply reflective moment.

"How are you feeling today?"

"I always feel better when I talk to you and then when I am alone or at home it comes back."

Chapter 36.5

The next morning Mullah called him into the office and had a serious expression on his face. He didn't mince words and as soon as John was seated he got straight to the point.

"It's the quality of your work, John" he started off by saying. "There are so many mistakes these days and I can't send reports to senior management filled with errors. Neither can I fix it myself."

"Look I haven't been feeling the best these days. I mean nothing serious" he added quickly. "I just don't concentrate very well."

"Well how are we going to fix it because I can't go on working like this? To be honest John Foxy and I have been covering for you quite a bit lately. I am sure you noticed."

"Look its getting better. I have been to the doctor about it. I have a viral infection" he added. He had already rehearsed this explanation with Ruth.

“Well look” said Mullah, “can you keep me informed of how it’s going and slow down with the work you are doing. I would prefer less of it and it being accurate then the opposite.”

John nodded. They both got up and left the conference room. Although he felt he took the conversation in his stride later that day he started to feel very down in the dumps again. He called Ruth from a call box on the street outside the office.
“

Chapter 44 – Ruth is pregnant

One day Ruth came home from work with a serious expression on her face. Johnny was upstairs in the box room reading. She called up to him.

"Johnny can you come down here for a moment?"

When he came down he knew from the expression on her face that something serious had happened.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She sat down on the couch in the little living room.

"I'm pregnant Johnny. That's what it is. I am going to have a baby."

There was a long silence. He didn't really know what to say. It didn't seem to be a joyous moment like it was supposed to be. This was what they both wanted yes. But the timing, well they would have liked to have control of that.

"Well...that's good news, right?" Johnny said, after a while. "I mean maybe it's a bit sooner than we planned but it's not a major change."

Ruth was silent. "I know. I am a bit in shock. I just wasn't expecting this. Well you know."

"But we are ready Ruthy. Aren't we?"

He sat down beside her and gave her a hug. "We'll make it you'll see."

And something in him awoke a spark of new enthusiasm for living. He was going to be a Dad. He would be responsible for fucking someone up in the head.

He thought of the awesome nature of the bond. His whole life long this person would seek a relationship with him. He thought of Ruth and what she would have to go through.

"You just sit there and put your feet up. I am making the tea today" he announced.

Yes this was a spark for him, a spur. He had been feeling generally better these last few months and summer had seen a definite lift in the way he felt. But this news perked him up no end.

He needed this. He needed a lift in his otherwise drab existence. Of course Ruth had been brilliant and he had returned to some of his old habits. But a new living, breathing person, here forever. Well what could be better than that?

Ruth sat silently on the couch while John was in the kitchen. Yes it was for the best. She didn't tell him though that when she first heard the news her heart dropped.

John was never a casualty in her view but just sometimes with the depression and everything she wondered if she wouldn't be better off somewhere else. It was a dark thought for her and she dismissed it summarily. No her whole belief centred on this relationship. John had been good since they moved in together. He had explained the new situation to Ralph and there were no more lads' nights out and coming back pissed in the morning.

John was a changed man and as he returned with the tea and gave her a big hug she considered her lot not misfortunate indeed. Was she not the luckiest woman in all Ireland?

She put her feet up and drank her tea and had a great old chat with Johnny. The old Johnny was back, she thought to herself. How happy she was to see him. He asked her a million questions about her day and about the baby and about what the doctor said and how she was feeling and Siobhan and how everything was going and made lots of suggestions about improvements. He suggested things she could do with the team. It was like her prayers had been answered.

For Johnny it was lift but by nightfall his demons were circling for a counter attack. It was usually after the light was out and Ruth fell fast asleep that they came on strongest. He never found it easy to get to sleep or he would sleep and then wake early in the morning before sunrise.

It was always the same. He was a failure and a fuck up. He hadn't achieved anything and it wasn't acceptable for him not to achieve. He tried to fight and he had learned some mantras.

He wasn't doing so badly. The demons laughed.
"Living off your girl-friend. Where's your house tough guy?"

They settled on the ledge of the bedroom window and carried on a stream of vitriolic commentary.

"You're not assertive enough," said one.

"Then again you wouldn't want to be too assertive. That could cause problems with a lady like Ruth."

"You might as well just jump off that cliff you've been thinking about. Nobody is going to miss you."

"It's not real. It's not real" whispered Johnny too himself.

"Oh but we are real kept man. Any more stupid projects to consider. That little brat you are planning needs to know what is Dad is like. A suicide."

On and on and on it went. Eventually he fell into a fitful and shadowy slumber.

His dreams were noisome and glades of evil smelling dark flowers spread out in shadowy vales in all directions. He stumbled though the flowers even though they rose waist high. They were covered in steely thorns and his clothes were ripped and bloody. He was calling out Ruth's name but she wasn't there. He reached a mausoleum in a clearing and before the stone edifice a tombstone was erected.

"Here lies John Martin RIP for in life he knew none."

He fought back and fled the clearing. There was light on the edge of the valley and he struggled through the flowers to reach it. It was image of his son and him walking along the same seashore where previously he had pondered his existence in such a grievous fashion.

And then he was kickboxing and fighting. Enemies surrounded him on all sides. He was in the light and they were in the darkness, attacking him when the opportunity arose. And he knew he was fighting for Ruth and the love that was dying between them and somehow he found the strength and energy to overcome his enemies and they were beaten back into the shadows.

He woke suddenly and he was cold. He had kicked off the blanket on his side during the night. The clock said 5am and beside Ruth slept deeply.

Chapter 45 – John and Ruth get married

<Need to work in another chapter with Niamh and Ruth>

The big day came and Ruth admitted to Niamh and her mother that she was stressed out. They had the church booked in Foxrock and after much negotiation Ruth was able to get the Killiney Court Hotel. Johnny tried to avoid having any involvement in the organisation and in the end she made a deal with him that he would handle the guest list and the invitations. That meant his part was complete by the day.

The weather favoured them, which was important since part of the ceremony involved a garden reception. Johnny was not keen on the religious side of things but he went along with it to keep Ruth happy.

Ruth had spent a lot of time and money on her wedding dress and she was very nervous. Niamh helped her put the finishing touches to her outfit. "Ruth you look beautiful" she said, genuinely meaning it. Ruth smiled.

This was her big day and though she would have liked not to be pregnant already her heart rose and the thought of her and her Johnny united before all their family and friends. The day was perfect. Johnny was very handsome. All the preparations had paid off and they were booked on a two-week trip to Egypt complete with Nile cruise for their honeymoon.

Honeymoon! John and Ruth in love forever! Her "one and only." Her heart skipped at the thought. She was not a person given to exuberance rational or otherwise but her heart skipped as the day she always imagined dawned.

Chapter 46 – Hadn't been back to Temple Bar since assault

He hadn't back to Temple Bar or anywhere else since the assault, as he liked to call it. He was wary of stray women and he had given his word in any event to Ruth and that could not be broken.

He did occasionally met Ralph out after work for a few pints and just for old time sake he arranged to meet him in the Temple Bar pub, the epicentre of his casual encounters.

"So how's the family man?" Ralph greeted him with his usual bonhomie. They sat at a booth away from the bar so they could hear each other's conversation. It was quiet yet and the place had yet to fill up.

"Oh well, not so bad" he replied. "It's great being a Dad. You should try it."

"Try it. But I don't know whom I would try it with. I am not mature enough to be a Dad Johnny boy. I knew you had it in you. And Ruth is amazing."

"What about Niamh?" she's single.

"Oh I don't think so Johnny boy. What is it with you these days? It's so hard to get you out."

"Commitments Ralphy. I can't come out during the week pretty much. Paul was sick for a while too. You understand."

"Married man. Married man."

They sat together in silence for a while.

"Jesus, look at the ass on her" said Ralphy, commenting on a young lady who walked into the bar and passed their table.

The comment annoyed John even though in the past he would have been making similar remarks of his own. He let it pass and made no remark on it. Ralph's company seemed somehow lacking and he felt little enthusiasm for the prospect of spending the next couple of hours with him. He seemed such a teenager in comparison to past encounters where he felt such envy for his success and ability to network and get on with people.

He was already on his mobile phone calling some female he knew and trying to get her to come in and join him. He expended all his energy just to have what Johnny had waiting for him when he went home every night.

Despite his material success, Johnny felt sorry for Ralph. There was sadness too in those blue, blue eyes and a willingness to compete at the drop of a hat when really affirmation and approval were what he sought.

Ralph didn't really have friends, just a network of positive acquaintances. He didn't really allow anyone to rely on him or offer the same in return.

The conversation meandered around and Ralph filled Johnny in on his last weekend in Amsterdam. There was plenty of salacious detail and Johnny didn't want to be rude but he didn't want to hear it at the same time.

He realised also that this wasn't just a latter day conversion on his part. He had always wanted to contradict Ralph but held back and was afraid of offending him. Now he realised that he was never really like that to begin with.

Ralph was always far more into this than Johnny. He was the ringleader the motivator behind their countless weekends and their dirty encounters in Amsterdam and elsewhere. He didn't take women seriously and naturally enough they shunned him for it.

"I know what you are thinking," said Ralph after a long moment. "You think I am some kind of misogynist. But you should know Johnny that I am perfectly content. I chose this single lifestyle for myself. You were always someone who needed someone and I wasn't. Sure I sometimes wonder what it is like to have a little wifey but I don't get demoralised by it."

He looked over from his pint.

"Now Johnny" as though he could read his mind, "if you let yourself be led that is hardly my fault."

"How do you know what I am thinking?" Johnny said.

"I know you so well, old man."

"Sorry I don't mean to judge. I am really thinking about myself anyway. I was the one who was led astray with Ruth in my life. You know I felt I do feel that I owed much better than that. She doesn't know the half of it and she never will but I think she's amazing. What she has put up with from me and what she able for herself."

Ralph said nothing.

He knew Ralph was telling the truth but he didn't really believe him anyway. He knew the sidelong glances and the many nights Ralph went home alone with his tell between his legs. He was a very optimistic and enthusiastic person but he had no doubt that in his dark moments he wondered if he had fucked or not.

Seeing Ralph now from the other side of the fence he could see the insecurities that he previously mistook for confidence. Ralph was lost but expert at appearing found. He had a successful business and many would say he was doing well but he just didn't know women and it seemed as if he really wanted to and needed too.

Chapter 47 – When Paul was born

When Paul was born a change came over Johnny. He was the perfect father. He went everywhere and did everything with Paul. He was the prototypical new age Dad. He changed nappies and washed Paul's bum and carried him around the house. They went shopping together.

Paul took over a small but very audible corner of John's heart and sometimes Ruth thought that he and not she had given birth to the baby.

For Ruth pregnancy had been a routine affair. Of course she was out of shape afterwards and it seemed as though no amount of work in the gym would change that. Once the baby came out it was as if she had been stretched to go back into shape.

Wherever there was Paul, Johnny was never far behind. Ruth loved the way that he played with the child and she drew closer to Johnny through Paul. Now they were a little family and they went away together on family weekend breakers. Paul was getting on to nearly one year old.

Over dinner one evening Ruth initiated the conversation.

"You know we really should consider giving Paul a brother or a sister. Don't you think?"

Johnny didn't say anything.

"I mean for me the sooner we do something like that the better."

"I think it's a great idea," said Johnny. "I am all for it. It would be good for Paul too."

THE END