

Fear and Doubt – and not a little stout – in Doheny and Nesbitt's



Padraigh left his office at a quarter to four with more the enough time for the walk to Doheny and Nesbitts. He noticed a sense of relief in leaving the office as the atmosphere had become tense in the last few days. There had been an initial flush of excitement when Padraigh had revealed that he had won a respite for, if not secured, the future of the business in Dublin. The excitement had all too quickly disappeared as people began to realize that there were no guarantees for their jobs and that there was a considerable amount of work to be done just to get agreement to the business plan, whatever about the long term future of the business. With

Ciaran gone relationships began to deteriorate, for he had been the cement that had held people together. Pdraigh was sure that a number people were already looking for their next employment. There was also some animosity directed towards him. A number of his colleagues were resentful of his new position and he had heard rumours that they were laying the blame at his feet for Ciaran's departure.

Acknowledging the relief forced him also to face up to his other feelings:

despondency and loneliness. Despondent because no matter what he tried or how hard he worked he could not get the team to pull together. Loneliness because he felt he was doing it all his own without anyone on his side and no one he could confide in.

On reaching the end of Harcourt Street he crossed the swift-moving traffic that encircled and made something of an island of St. Stephen's Green. Rather than go through the Green to the designated pub, Pdraigh followed the footpath around the perimeter enabling him to absorb some of the quietness of the Green while still being able to see the buildings that made up the impressive Georgian square. He hoped that the oasis of calm that was the Green and the pleasure he took in the architecture would alleviate his mood somewhat while giving him time to prepare him for his meeting. The four and five storey buildings that formed the square had originally been large family houses. Over the years the use to which the houses had been put had changed. Family homes became the offices of professionals, solicitors and doctors taking advantage of the central location. Later came the odd up-market shop, famously Smiths of the Green, Grocer and Delicatessen, restaurants and 'gentlemen's clubs' after the London model. There was a girl's school, a convent, on

the south side and The University Church, a part of University College Dublin, took a central position on the West side. In time many of these building would be knocked down to be replaced by soul-less, glass and aluminium encased office blocks.

Although this process was beginning as Padraigh made his way, the square still existed in almost all its splendour. The perfect form of the facades, each element a multiple of the proportions of the red bricks of which they were composed, gave an elegant simplicity, a simplicity accentuated by the contrast with the rich detailing of the doors and the fan-lights above them, iron window boxes and small balconies and, inside, the intricate plasterwork of the high-ceilinged rooms which Padraigh could just discern through some of the windows.

Padraigh made his way towards the top of Grafton Street, Dublin's main shopping street, and turned right in the direction of Baggott Street, still following the Green. He would have to walk past the Shelbourne Hotel and he wondered if he would meet up with his new friend as he too made his way to the rendezvous. Despite the two previous conversations Padraigh was a little unsure of what to make of this gracious if somewhat reserved man who was so willing to give up his time to help him.

He passed the hotel without seeing the man and continued towards Baggott Street coming to O'Donoghue's pub, an institution and a Mecca for the tourist; in this pub some of the finest Irish musicians had honed their skills and for this reason most of middle-class Dublin has never crossed the portal, abhorring anything culturally Irish even more than they abhor the tourists. He came to the junction with Merrion Row

and looking to his left could see Merrion Square and the entrance to Dail Eirinn, the Irish 'Houses of Parliament'. Continuing on down Baggott Street he could see his goal, Doheny and Nesbitts, a long brass plate extending under the windows with the name John Delahunty impressed upon it. This referring to an earlier proprietor who had run a grocer's shop on the same premises. The pub stands on the left hand side of the street situated at the point where the narrow bottle-neck opens out into an impressive boulevard of tall, terraced red-brick Georgian town houses, a row of trees down the centre dividing the lanes of opposing traffic. The pub's exterior, two large windows set in a wood frame, the orange-red varnish cracking just a little and on the right, wide double doors, set back from the rest of the façade, which were only just high enough for those whose stature reached the six foot mark. He arrived at the pub in a slightly better frame of mind than that in which he left the office. Maybe the prospect of talking to someone about his situation lifted the burden. He pushed open the door to be greeted by the barman who was slicing lemons for the anticipated rush for gin and tonics that would begin in an hour's time.

"Good afternoon."

Padraigh was on the point of reply when a now familiar voice came from behind him. A mid-Atlantic accent was how his father would have classed it but it seemed to Padraigh that perhaps its' origins were not quite so far to the West; a native accent surely, but softened and smoothed by many years abroad.

"I've been following you for the last couple of minutes but couldn't quite catch up. I spotted you just as I left the hotel. Where shall we sit? Somewhere private, perhaps."

They looked around the bar. Once again because of the time of day there were few people in the bar and it was mostly silent.

The barman suggested a small snug at the back-end of the bar and the two men moved towards it. As they settled in his head appeared through a hatch from the side of the bar.

“What can I get you?”

Padraigh – who had received something of a rebuke from his wife after the previous meeting for arriving home with a few pints on board and for taking a taxi, although how she worked the latter out he could not fathom, since he had discharged it at the end of his street – was about to request a coffee but hesitated, torn between Irish-Catholic guilt and a more dissolute characteristic of this Celtic race.

“Two Guinness, please,” the man said, “and it’s my turn to pay.”

“Grand.”

“So are you happy with the proposition?”

“The proposition? Oh, if you mean continuing our conversation then, yes. Although I can’t say I know what you are getting from this other than a guide to a variety of Dublin pubs.”

“Ample reward, ample. I’ve enjoyed our conversations and have some spare time on my visits here. To be frank, there have been so many people over the years who have helped me that I feel that I am honouring them and, in a sense, repaying a debt. If I was in your position and I had met someone like me I wouldn’t have hesitated to get all the help on offer. So, I’m happy if you are.”

Padraigh nodded, the man's response had been immediate and it rang true for Padraigh. He recalled his student days when he had hardly a penny to rub that friends who were a little older and who had their first jobs would not let him put his hand in his pocket when they met on a Friday evening for a few pints of Guinness. And he remembered the dismissive looks he received when he had occasionally tried to pay for a round. Later on Padraigh had adopted the same policy towards those a few years his junior. As far as he knew nothing was ever said about this tradition, if that is what it was. So he decided to look upon this offer for help in a similar light and hoped that sometime in the future he himself would have a chance to re-pay this debt to the next generation.

"Good. Let's do some work."

"Let's do some work." Agreed Padraigh.

"Tell me what's happened since we last spoke"

Padraigh exhaled slowly. "Where to start? When I got everyone together and told them what had happened, you know, trying to get us to move to the States and then my chasing the CEO to the golf club, that surprised them and all, and winning the twelve month reprieve, there was excitement at first. Then they realized how close they had been to losing their jobs and the amount of work ahead of us." Padraigh broke off as a man came into the snug, a cigarette in one hand, a pint in the other. He looked surprised to see them.

"Excuse me, I didn't think there was anyone in here." He said and moved away.

The man said

"That was the guy from Ryan's, wasn't it? What's that they call him?"

“Kerrygold.”

“Ah, that’s it, butterfingers. Go on.”

“Now it’s all over the place: some people are excited, some are terrified and others probably want to leave. We have to pull together the business case by next week, and, because we’ve got twelve months, eleven and two weeks, I know that we can’t take our eye off delivering existing business and finding new business – people are running around like headless chickens and I am working every hour”

“Doing what?”

“Everything, simply everything: writing the business case; trying to handle peoples worries; trying to keep people motivated; making sure we deliver what we promised, chasing clients: everything!

“And where does it leave you?”

“Despondent. Exhausted. Some days I wish I had never gone to the golf club and been given the job.”

The man did not respond. He kept his attention on Pdraigh, who shrugged and picked up his pint. The man prolonged the silence and then, very carefully, summarized what Pdraigh had said about the situation.

“How does that sound to you?”

“The summary? Accurate, that’s how it is.”

“No, not the summary itself. How does your situation sound to you?”

Pdraigh who had been cradling his pint in his two hands took a sip. And then another.

“It sounds like chaos. Panic”

“Yup.”

“It sounds like a complete lack of direction and people not knowing what they are supposed to be doing – no leadership. Which is what I ‘m supposed to be providing”

“But you’re not? That’s a question – not a statement”

“No, not really.”

“But you say you’re working every hour?”

“Yes, but not leading, I’m doing stuff, sleeves rolled up.”

“That’s an important thing to acknowledge.” A slight pause and then he continued,

“What has stopped you from taking the lead?”

Padraigh thought a while

“A number of things, I suppose. There is so much that really needs to be done.”

Padraigh swirled the remains of his drink around the glass, catching the creamy foam that had fixed to the sides like so many sedimentary layers and pulling it all to the bottom. He drank.

“If I am really honest I am a little frightened.”

The man nodded in understanding. Padraigh continued.

“I have all these thoughts about it, like who am I to presume; it’s a bit like that line from Elliot ‘No, I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be: Am an attendant lord, one that will do to swell a progress...

“Start a scene or two, advise the prince..’ The Man joined in.

“That’s it. And I won’t mention the bit where he suggests he’s a fool: what if I get it wrong; and all these people are dependant on me?”

“Come with me.”

The man walked back into the main part of the bar, went up the barman and said something to him. The barman looked a little surprised but handed over three

lemons none-the-less. The man then approached Kerrygold who was sitting on a stool leaning against a partition. Pdraigh, hovering a few feet behind the man, could not quite hear the conversation but was intrigued as the man lead Kerrygold to the centre of the room and backed away from him. Kerrygold put his cigarette into his mouth for safekeeping. The man threw one of the lemons to Kerrygold, whose eyes were now screwed up tight against the smoke from his cigarette. Kerrygold held out his hands stiffly in front of him and hardly moved as the lemon thumped into his chest.

“You see,” he said in a voice approaching a whine, “I told you I can’t catch.”

At this point the other people in the bar began to notice that something a little unusual was happening and the gentle hum of conversation died down.

“I know you did. But never the less humour me. Let’s try something different this time. I’m going to throw the lemon again, and if you catch that’s great, but this time what I want you to do is to simply notice the lemon in the air and tell me what you see.”

“That’s all.”

“Yes”

The man threw another lemon. It brushed by Kerrygold’s fingers and fell to the floor.

“It’s yellow,” said Kerrygold.

One or two of the other people in the bar laughed. The man held a finger to his lips to quieten them as Kerrygold put the cigarette into an ash-tray on the bar counter, resumed his position in the centre of the room and pushed his sleeves up.

“Fine. Tell me what you notice about this one.” He threw another. It bounced out of Kerrygold’s palm.

“It’s got a white dot on it, a sticker.”

OK. And what about this one?”

“It’s spinning” said Kerrygold as he caught the lemon. He did not seem to notice, although there was a slight gasp from some of the on-lookers. The man indicated to Kerrygold to throw the lemon back. Pdraigh picked up the two on the floor and gave them to the man. The man had not taken his attention off Kerrygold.

“You’ve noticed three things John, the colour, the white dot and the spinning. I’m going to throw another, I’d like you to tell me which of the three stands out the most.”

A lemon sailed across the intervening space, John, for that it seemed was Kerrygold’s real name, stretched his hands towards the lemon, and as it got close, brought his hands back into his body, matching the pace of the incoming lemon, executing a perfect catch.

“The spinning stands out. It’s spinning towards me.” He said, describing the direction of spin with his hand

“And tell me which way this one is spinning.” The man threw; John caught again and threw the lemon back. After the lemon had gone back and forth between the two a number of times, someone started clapping, others joined in. John was at first surprised by the interruption, so engrossed was he in the exercise. And then the dawning realization: he could catch. With surprise and delight written into every expression and gesture, he did a little dance.

“I caught it...but I can’t catch...but I did...so I can.

“We’ll have you on the national cricket team then,” someone called out. Everyone laughed, cricket not being the national sport.

“How did you do that?” John demanded, “I was terrible at sport, always. In fact there was a Christian Brother, not all that Christian,” here Kerrygold hesitated, looking for a response to his joke and was duly rewarded. “Who took great pleasure in making me look ridiculous. If I ever find him I’ll...”

“Show him you can catch?” Suggested another on-looker.

“Precisely that.” Said John.

“How do you think I did it?” the man interjected.

An onlooker probably an architect – he was wearing a corduroy jacket and brown brogues – responded

“You didn’t do it, he did. You made him focus on the lemon, not on the catching. Now that I think of it, you did not tell him anything about how to catch.”

“That’s right,” said Kerrygold, “all I was thinking about was the spin on the thing.”

“Yes, and when you’re thinking about the spin, when you are focused,” the man acknowledged the architect with a nod, “when the fear and the doubt is diminished, your ability to learn kicks in. Learning is hard-wired. Most of what we call teaching gets in the way. But that’s another story”

The man paused. Some of the people were returning to their conversations

“Thanks John. Can I get you drink?”

“I think the drinks are on me.” He returned

The architect approached, a pensive expression on his face. “That was amazing – pure genius! Does it mean that other things that people think they can’t do, they actually can? And that it’s the thinking that ‘I can’t’ that gets in the way”

“That’s how I see it.” Said the man. “Of course, people have limitations – as far as I know human beings cannot fly unassisted.”

Kerrygold’s, nicknames are hard to loose, eyes lit up again, his feet beginning a little jig anew. The man withdrew as the architect and Kerrygold took up a conversation that became increasingly animated. He steered Pdraigh back to the snug. Pdraigh knew that he had just witnessed something astonishing but was not entirely sure what it was.

“I don’t think I have ever seen anyone learn more quickly. And you did almost nothing. I mean, I am sure it was very subtle,” he added hastily as they resumed their seats.

“I can’t imagine that you are into new-age Californian nonsense, you know, the ‘you can have it if you can dream it’ stuff.” Pdraigh continued. The man smiled, then said

“You can draw a number of lessons from that little exercise. The big one is this: we human beings have huge potential, genius perhaps...”

“Like the Guinness Ad...Pure Genius.”

Yes...if you like...anyway, put simply, we get in our own way. We have capacities to think, to imagine, to be creative, to learn.

“Or to lead” Pdraigh interjected as he began to comprehend what he had been shown.

The man nodded.

“And then, all too frequently, fear and doubt rear up. You can see this most clearly in sport but it is no less true of everyday activities, even business performance...”

“And leadership!”

The barman pushed two pints through the hatch.

“From Kerrygold.” He said. “Could I have my lemons back, d’yu think?”

“Of course, the man said as he picked them off the table and handed them across.

“Thank you.”

“No trouble. Not often we get a good floorshow in here. Unless the politicians show up, and then it’s unintentional.” He laughed, juggling the lemons in his hands. He looked at the lemons then at the two men “No charge.”

Padraigh laughed quietly and then said

“Fear and doubt then. In Doheny and Nesbitts, Ha”. He thought a little, watching his pint. “

“So I have the capacity to lead but something is stopping me: fear or doubt..”

Padraigh said slowly.

The man said nothing. Silently they both reached towards their pints and withdrew their hands in unison.

“Not ready yet” the man said

“The pint or me?” Asked Padraigh with a weak grin. The man laughed.

“Well, I meant the pint but ...” His voice tailed off. He came back with

“Tell me, if we assume that you have the capacity to do the job, notwithstanding that you might have some things to learn or may get things wrong occasionally, what is stopping you?”

“A bit like Kerrygold really, fear and doubt: confidence.”

“Confidence in what?”

“In myself, that the others will do as I ask, that we are doing the right thing. But mostly in myself: that I can pull this off.”

“You know, there are two parts to this idea: the notion of ‘getting in our own way’, or fear and doubt, and the notion of potential. You, like many others, have chosen to talk about the former.” The man observed.

Padraigh looked back at the man and let out a long sigh and said

“When we were in Bongo Ryan’s and I told you that my wife had said, “just be yourself”, I remember you said that there may be something in that.”

“Yes”

“Here’s what it is. I can see how we might work out the focus part – getting really clear about what I should be doing. What I am struggling with is this: can I be myself at work?”

Padraigh watched the pint settle, watched the tiny bubbles rise to the top of the glass, giving the stout its’ characteristic creamy head

“You know, talking to you is just like the bubbles in the glass. At the beginning my head is a swirling mass of thoughts and ideas, confusion, and then as we talk the good ideas come to the top. Just like the bubbles”

“I’ve heard a conversation with me described in many ways but this is the first comparison with a pint of Guinness.”

“Ready now?” The man asked. The object was clear this time and both men reached for their glasses and drank deeply, resurfacing with a feint, creamy moustache on their respective upper lips. They put their glasses down and dwelt in the few moments of companionable silence.

Padraigh spoke

“I have often wondered how an apparently decent, intelligent person can put on a suit and immediately turn into a complete eejit. You meet someone socially, like with their family, and they can be responsible, logical, caring adults. And then they get to work and they seem to have left their brains at home. And they can be so devious and manipulative. Or compliant; agreeing to do things that are patently daft. What’s that about?”

“And the point is?”

“People not being themselves, I suppose. As for me it’s not just ‘can I be myself at work’, it’s more like who am I at work and who am I as a leader?”

“That’s the idea”.

Two more pints came through the hatch. The barman shrugged

“Kerrygold?” Padraigh inquired

“John, he’s now insisting. But no, these are from the guy in the corduroy jacket”.

“Well, thank him from us both.”

“So what would it be like to be yourself at work, if you really expressed the characteristics you see in Joe and Ciaran – what if you are the Prince of Denmark²?”

“In this job, as the leader of the team?”

“Yes.”

Padraigh thought for a few moments, his eyes cast upwards at the yellow-ochred, smoke-stained ceiling

“The first thought that comes to mind is to have more time to think.”

“Very wise.”

“And I would have more faith in my own decisions and judgement. I’d stick to my guns about what this business could be like – and I’d tell people about it, try to get everybody on board. That’s it, that’s what Joe and Ciaran were both good at, had in common; getting other people excited. Ciaran spent so much of his time simply talking to us all, and listening.” He looked at the man. “I like this ‘just be yourself bit.” And then continued. “Whatever about ‘can I be myself at work’, it’s beginning to occur to me that, as the leader, I’ve got to get others to be themselves, to get to that place in the head. I’m pretty sure that’s not the text book version of leadership, but work could be fun that way. And, I’d guess productive – no, more productive.”

Padraigh was getting quite animated and the drink in his glass, still in his hand, sloshed about alarmingly.

“Maybe you should put the glass down.” The man suggested.

Patrick slowed his movements, took a sip and put the glass down.

“So how do we progress from here?” the man asked.

Patrick did not hesitate

“I have to get myself sorted before I can lead the team.”

“And you being sorted means?”

“Accepting the role of leader and understanding what it means in this business – and giving time to it.”

“What else?”

“The thing I learned about the exercise with the ball, John catching, was about focus, so having really clear focus – as a leader. It will mean passing on some of my current workload.”

“What else?”

“I don’t know how to do it yet but the idea of helping the others ‘be themselves’ is exciting, maybe even find their own genius.” Pdraigh paused again, still obviously thinking. “But I can’t just do what interests me. There are lots of other things that I should be doing.”

“There it is”, the man said and smiled, “Good old doubt. Followed by ‘should’ and then, usually, ‘must’ and ‘have to’, three critical ingredients of a dull, unproductive life.”

“Are you really suggesting that I should only do what interest me?”

“What I want to say is yes – and not just for dramatic effect – that’s where real genius lies. However, I suspect that until you’re fully ‘sorted’, as you put it, there may be some things that you need to do that are less fun.”

“Of course, but there’s still an awful lot to do that’s really compelling. Tell me, do you think I can do it?”

The man took a couple of seconds before he answered with a smile

“After this conversation I am not sure I should even dignify the question with an answer. But yes, you can. You have been given the position, you have huge abilities. It’s time to step into your own shoes.” He paused again. “In fact, my guess is that some of the frustration that your colleagues are showing is because you have not stepped up to the plate and taken the lead.”

Pdraigh raised an eyebrow by way of a request for elucidation. The man nodded towards the glass of Guinness

“They can see the bubbles rising, Pdraigh, and are pissed off they can’t get a taste.”