

Miles to go before I sleep

With every stride, the lake crept back into view and a deceptively wet and dogged drizzle fizzed straight down on top of them. “Balls.” A curse from his normally docile companion shook Brian out of his mental stupor. He refocused his train of thought. *Mind games. I get it. Today of all days, hah? Bring it on!* Feigning assent with an audible grunt, he half-kicked out his legs in anticipation of the next rise in ground. Far from being daunted, his mouth creased into a wry smile in acknowledgement of his long-held affinity for the conditions. Usually, the town’s capricious autumn weather, the soaked lycra heaving against his skin and the sweat marks forming at the bevel below his hat, equalled his idea of fun. The hat was bothering him. How come in all the times he went running he never stopped to readjust it, soldiering on instead, seeing it as some other perverse challenge to prove his worth? He could request a stop to stretch but this wasn’t his style. No. The Maguires gave in to no-one. “They’d see you in hell before they’d see you right, that crowd”, was a common refrain. His hat could wait. They were three miles into the run; he was three million euro in debt.

The year began in earnest, promising so much. A meeting over coffee had triggered the realisation that a deal could – would – be done. *One more deferral will tide me over. Definitely. The green shoots are inevitable. The numbers add up.* God he could spin a yarn. That, and some creative accounting by Denis – at this stage he owed him more than one – had managed to convince the bank. Feeling his best friend’s coal dark eyes on him, his pulse weakened by the beat. The stark truth peered across at him. *Last time bud. No more. Please. No more.* He averted his eyes in a flash and launched into another round of pressing the flesh. Denial. A coward’s blanket.

Running eased the pressure. Someone said the attraction lies in an addiction to endorphins, the “runner’s high.” He saw it in a wholly more tangible light: everything seemed more achievable after a run, everything. His mounting debts meant his usual training partners were off-limits so he resorted to the internet: “Run-Buddy.com: why run alone when you can share the miles with a pal.” The tag-line needed some work but the service was convenient to a fault. Log in, message your available “buddies” and the “within the half-hour” guarantee meant you could be pounding the streets or tracks in no time. Samantha was incredulous at the implicit presumption of innocence.

“I’m telling you, they could be serial killers. You won’t catch me trotting out with any old quarehawk.”

Being pregnant meant her honesty switch was set to default, he reckoned. He must be immune. Sam may have doubted the bonafides of some members but he was happy to take his chances. Considering how his diminishing pool of friends was ebbing away by the day, these “randomers”, as Sam put it, were more than fit for purpose.

He hadn’t seen her in two days now – couldn’t face her if truth be told. Work kept him office-bound for most of the evening and after that he rattled off the trusted litany of excuses. *He’d another run booked. The race was only around the corner. Needed to get a few more miles into the legs. Sure he wouldn’t be long.* “Yera, leathscéalta biy”, his father would have said. *Half-stories*, how apt. Never the full, unedited version. Story of his life.

The other night he'd turned the key in the lock expecting – hoping maybe – that she'd be gone to bed. She was. After padding quietly across the tiles, he positioned his mud-caked Asics next to her baby-like specimens in the utility room. Her diminutive shoes triggered an impulse of shame. Two months before they would be parents and he was broke. He knew she'd go spare when she found out. He couldn't face that.

“Three more minutes to the turn,” urged his now gliding run buddy who could have been mistaken for any of the nearby doleful deer such was his easy stride. Brian sucked up an extra gulp of air and gunned for an advantage in the rusty terrain. The pace increased. It wasn't a race; no, it was only a run, but like stone-age savages in pursuit of their prey, the testosterone took over when any semblance of a challenge peered out from behind the ostensibly pally veneer. There was just some inner buzz about perceiving a lapse and eking out an advantage, any advantage. Many a weak property pretender had he buried at the slightest indication of weakness. *Inept, useless idiots.* Almost on instinct, he picked up on his nemesis' quick and urgent sequence of breathing and surged. This was his town, his dominion, his arena. In the very next breath, the acrid but invigorating whiff of fox cast him back to his usual coliseum: the urban jungle of business.

The deathly blow had been landed earlier that week. Sitting outside a café, he wiped at the gathering coffee scum at the sides of his mouth. Fifteen minutes to kill. Time the magician: can never have enough of it except when you have to wait. From his vantage point, he could just make out the bobbing heads of the local punters as they ducked in from the latest instalment of the diurnal rain. It was true for that comedian, he mused with a silent snort: you can always spot the Irish people in the rain – they're the ones holding the newspapers over their heads. His powers of perception had become

abnormally heightened, a state most often reserved for running time. This had been the site of many a deal, many a scheme. The niceties mind you. The hard-nosed number-crunching usually reached its pinnacle inside the oak panelled walls of the company's towering office block, followed by a ceremonial but deal-clinching parade to the bank, a stone's throw from where he sat. Today, he floated along robotically, in a trance almost, as others ran to escape a drenching.

He took in each premises, ticking them off like items on an inventory. His current location gave way to a health store where the hippy-dippy of the area could pay over the odds for a natural fix. Not for him. Run it outta ya, natural, like. Computer outlet next – on the up, fair play, what with the increase in demand for tablets and all. Then, the ubiquitous newsagent which kept changing its franchise clinging to the receding print market – dopes. Competitor bank – ask once, worth a try; ask twice, you're a glutton for punishment. Neck or stupidity? Did they see something lacking in him? Or was there a "want" in him, as the more derogatory of his friends would categorise someone with apparently less acumen than them. A "want" in *them* more like. Post office – small change. Lady's clothing boutique – a spender's Mecca. And so, the money house.

Reaching the bank, he nodded to a familiar face and was shown down a side corridor. His eye took in the deep pile carpeted corridor leading in hallelujah ceremony to the adjoining salubrious boardroom built for more audacious days. Entering a stripped down office with plain beige carpet, pine desk and two standard plastic chairs, he felt his throat squeezing vice-like and took a deep breath. The tools of an interrogator, he mused. Enter Tim Dineen. A wiry, twitchy sort who fiddled incessantly with pages in what ought to be a paperless office. No small-talking, soft-featured, blustery bubble-banker here.

“Brian.”

“Tim.”

Problem? Or am I imagining it?

“Soft out.”

“Yera, not bad.”

“Carry an umbrella and you’ll be grand.” *Small talk. Not good. Here goes.*

“We’ve come to a decision Brian.” His face acquired the look of a lonesome donkey – long and unconvinced.

“We’ve decided not to sanction this draw-down.”

The donkey stiffened his resolve with an opening and closing of his hands and nodded in anticipation of a reply. For the briefest of moments, Brian considered mounting an attack, a retort, a case for the accused, but then something changed. Shifting his weight to the front of the chair as the pithy words of banking parlance sank in, his breathing fell into time with the regular tick of the clock on the wall behind him. His hands in turn fell easily into his lap and as he touched his tongue off the top of his mouth, it occurred to him that the sum of his parts had conflated into a meditative poise. Deep breath.

“The numbers just don’t hack it. The way things are we’d have to secure a lot more collateral. If you – ”

“– Ok, ok. I get it. Look, I need some air.”

With that, he rose from the prisoner’s chair and with as much dignity as he could muster, marched to the exit. His walk did not let him down but his heart was anchored at the bottom of the lake.

He clocked up another mile and a half before it became apparent that he was alone. “Giorraíonn beirt bóthar.” “*Company shortens the journey.*” Another of his father’s truisms echoed in his ear, shattering the sweat-induced clarity of mind. Enough of that. Focus. This is running time. But his mind was infected and their last exchange of bittersweet words made his heart sink even further.

“No, Brian. Not this time.” *No? Is that it?*

“I’ve enough on my plate – the sale of the house – sure, you know yourself.”

“Yeah.” *Sorry I asked at all.*

“If anything I’d get too involved, too...too...?”

“Consumed by it?”

“Consumed. That’s the one.” At this minor triumph, his father’s eyes lit up. He was blessed with a bright disposition and always had that positive vibe at close quarters; an ally ready to sweep him off his feet at the slightest hint of despair in his business dealings. The apple fell pretty far from the tree.

“That’s the one alright. You always had a way with words son! Look, I’m happy with my lot. Your mother’s buying up the town in readiness for the cruise. I couldn’t put that in jeopardy.” *Don’t do it. Don’t tell the fucking joke.* But he did. *Two men see a notice in the street proclaiming the words: “Jobs in Jeopardy.” So they make a beeline for the travel agents: “Two tickets to Jeopardy please!”* There was a time when he’d broker a laugh and indulge the old fella. Today he just about mustered a smile. His father eyed him with a look of trepidation.

“Sure you’ll raise it somewhere else, ha?”

“Ah, yeah, course. I just thought you’d be interested. Bricks and mortar, you know.”

“I do, I do. Maybe next time.

“Maybe...look dad, it’s grand. I must head, right.”

“Oh grand job. See you so, son!”

“Sound. G’luck dad.”

Stopping up and gasping for air, his breath fogged out in front of his face, a cool dampness coating his shadowed jaw. He pieced together the last scraps of the conversation with his erstwhile run buddy.

“I’m gone. Tank’s empty man. See you back at the boathouse yeah?”

He didn’t recall replying. He hadn’t as it turned out. He wouldn’t be keeping that appointment. In fact, he wouldn’t be keeping any more either. His last scribbled words were perched at the edge of the kitchen table. *I’m sorry. I never meant for things to get so out of control. You deserve so much better. Forgive me. Brian.*

This was it, his last run. The mist was turning to fog and his thoughts strayed to the other lost faceless souls at the bottom of the lake. He tightened his grip on the sides of his hat and pulled down hard over his temples. *Miles to go before I sleep.*