

*Harvest of Chains*  
A Novel of Ireland in the 70's  
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Written 1971  
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Chapter 1  
The Artists' Circle

Although the clock had yet to strike half past two, the painters were already gathered about the lower corner of the bar of the fashionable Bedlam pub, exchanging shop talk and gossip pertaining to any and all of their colleagues unfortunate enough to be absent that day. The nearly deserted bar had filled to overflowing in a few minutes. Soon the chatter lapped over on both sides of the bar and into the crowded aisle. Eagerly were so many reputations gathered up and, like dust churning out of a sawmill, consumed, destroyed, and scattered. In due time they might be resurrected, if only to be pulverized once more to better effect.

The name of a certain young artist who, after 10 years of unrecognized labor, had received his first commission, was gently withdrawn from a valise of familiar concerns, examined with love, passed from hand to hand and, the better to see its unique imperfections, raised to the light; then, to the recitation of established litanies, impaled by numberless pins with all the atavism of primitive sacrifice, in the lungs, kidney and liver, in the fingers which held the brush and the eyes which guided it, in the brains which conceived it and the heart which gave it life.

Then, as on almost every afternoon in the Bedlam, the same individual mentioned the oft-repeated name of the same other individual, deriving an additional delight by visiting on him the sins of his father together with his own formidable host of infractions against decency, intelligence and taste. Needless to say neither the father, who had long since disappeared from their company, nor the son who, more likely than not, was hard at work in his studio, were present to defend themselves. Not that either one of them, the living nor the dead, would have been the least bit interested to learn that they were being served up as the principal burnt offering of this cannibalistic feast.

To speak truthfully, the unspoken venom was a thousand more times more potent than the spoken. This would have been obvious to all, had each speaker known of the opinions of his audience concerning his own person at the exact moment when, with mutual rejoicing and abandon, they tore apart their scapegoats *in absentia* .

The group of painters might vary from three to more than a dozen. Mildest in his contribution of invective was Jerry O'Brien. There were even some who might consider him a bit chary in his dues. As a visual artist he could with some justice lay claim to a basic ineptitude with words. Groggy, leaning his meagre frame against the hardwood counter and swaying as if sea-sick, ( having already topped a good half dozen "jars" even before walking into the Bedlam) , O'Brien, (much as the sound of a struck triangle which, at a precise moment, reinforces the texture of a symphony )

contented himself with mumbling a vague "Yes", or "No" in synch with the prevailing mood.

Thus, if he found that the others were all lined up at the rim of the pit, paving- stone in hand, intent upon the martyrdom of some well-known, well-hated rival, he could be expected to join them with his bit of brick, tossing it in without much enthusiasm, merely to indicate an amiable compliance with the mob. Likewise if it were to be ironically suggested that a certain wretch might, on some trivial grounds, be spared, Jerry O'Brien could be depended upon to respond on cue to give the expected thumbs down.

Perhaps he was too addled to realize that an identical fate awaited him the moment his back was turned. It must be confessed that he never was fully conscious of all that was going on around him. That progression into marginal consciousness that had begun earlier that afternoon would reach its plateau by 5 PM. It would stay much the same until closing time around 10 when he would leave to drive home, alone and unassisted, in his Porche parked around the corner.

Jerry O'Brien painted one picture a year, toiling over it during his intervals of sobriety with the discipline of a concert artist. The finished products were deemed masterpieces by all, particularly to his face. As he was 35 and credited with 10 known paintings, it can safely be conjectured that he'd adopted this life-style in his mid-20's. It was more than likely it would continue its unvarying course until either his inspiration or his liver gave out.

Opinions within the Bedlam elite relating to the value of O'Brien's work were divided. No one ever called him a bad painter.

"Irrelevant" perhaps; or "too avant-garde" ; or "too conservative" ; or "superficial" ; or "imitative" ; or "talented without drive" ; perhaps: "hard-working but limited" ... yes; that was a good way to put it : *limited* . Not a "bad" painter, no one had ever said he was that: not a craftsman like O'Brien, a man who could draw a masterpiece blindfolded at 3 in the morning. Who, in addition, who so often ended up paying for the drinks.

It was quite otherwise with his inseparable companion, that short red-headed fellow, Geoffrey Hodges. Excepting only Hodges himself- and possibly O'Brien - the entire membership of the honorable drinking fraternity of the brush-and-mallet considered him a fool a fraud, a *chancer* , a talentless pretender. Why not call him an ignoramus! ?

It was a source of perplexity to all that, despite this sorry list of moral, spiritual, educational and mental handicaps, Hodges regularly received more commissions in a week than many better artists in a year. The caprice of fate by which he was constantly being blessed with such unmerited recognition was beyond anyone's comprehension. Geoffrey Hodges, apart from being on the faculty of the Academy, was the scion of a wealthy manufacturer in Galway and inheritor of a modest fortune. Yet he managed to live comfortably entirely from the sales of his work! According to the more disreputable rumor-mongers, the rest of his income was being invested in the financing of another British invasion. Given that he deserved nothing but couldn't stop boasting, wasn't it high time to pack him off to America!

The consensus of Public Opinion, the opinion that is of those who care about such matters, had reached a consensus, that Hodges' phenomenal luck was not unrelated to his many hours spent in the hail-fellow-well-met stew of the Bedlam.

The Bedlam was the classiest pub in Dublin, therefore in all of Ireland. As such it was the focal point for all the assorted dregs of the Irish bourgeoisie, the political set, the young professionals, the riding, hunting and polo circles, the theatre world and those who were nourished by its aura of glamor, plus all their relatives, finally an international element holding rich American tourists and the occasional presence of dethroned Continental aristocrats and deposed presidents who had fled their native lands decades before.

The Bedlam was therefore the inevitable, indeed the unique hang-out for graphic artists with more ambition than talent, with little imagination and limited energy for painting, yet gifted with a knack for empathizing with the rich and powerful, for touching them in that secret place of their calloused and lonely souls, for reaching to that venue where heart and pocketbook come together.

It was insinuated, and not for the first time that Hodges was a master at this craft. Truthfulness requires one to state that there wasn't a single artist who frequented the Bedlam who did not, somewhere at the back of his mind, entertain notions of this sort. Many of the Bedlam regulars were rich. The rich were the only persons in Ireland with the interest or checkbooks for buying or commissioning paintings. It was always a fantastic stroke of luck when a painter aroused the enthusiasm of someone with enough money to pay him well for his work.

Dozens of anecdotes attesting to the wisdom of dedicated Bedlamizing circulated around Dublin 's studios . Anyone who would ignore or, heaven-forbid, *reject* the opportunities for advancement obtainable from wasting long afternoons in the Bedlam, had to be a prig, a fool, some infantile idealist, a snob certainly... like that despicable individual, so-and-so! Etc.....

*But Hodges* ? Hodges did grate on one. Those chance commissions which came to others once in awhile, and then only after long service to the Bedlam, seemed to be handed to Hodges merely for the asking. His work was abominable. The sheer egotism which blinded Hodges to what was obvious to the rest of the world, was the source of endless controversy and morbid speculation among all the Bedlamite cliques, who only waited on Hodges' rare absences from the scene for making their opinions widely known.

Legend would have it that he created his paintings by lifting cans of paint and dumping them out at random on enormous rolls of canvas. One canvas could be cut up to make from 2 to 4 masterpieces. The real work, it was said, consisted in figuring out how to slice them up into bizarre shapes. A dozen "paintings", the work of a few weeks, represented a year's income.

Over time the circle of artists who hovered about the Bedlam's counters had acquired the knack of identifying a typical Hodges' mark at sight : paunchiness of a particular species; an apparent disdain for labor; a simple-minded simper of complacency combined with a fatal penchant for drink, all things that could be taken in at a glance. They announced the presence of

a possible customer for some of them, and a certain victim for Hodges. In this surmise they were rarely proven wrong. These reliable indicators of philistine wealth, were totally uncorrelated to intelligence.

There was, for example, that American , Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins. Writer and professional Irishman, a colossal bore, though undeniably intelligent, as anyone could see right away from reading his books, he was already to be found, sitting on a high stool at the counter. It was rumored that his young wife, a competent artist in her own right, had thrown a whole joblot of Hodges' works into the fireplace. It appeared that she hadn't gotten all of them. Bulging over the fireplace of the living-room of their split-level ranch house in County Cork for all to see, one could see hanging an immense sprawling painting shaped like an octopus, consisting mainly of blue splotches splattered at random, to which the adjoining of an autograph would have been not only superfluous but an additional disfigurement.

O'Higgins, who never listened to anything anyone ever said to him, was certainly not listening to the heated altercations of the painters standing at the counter to his left, even though a certain amount of their carrying-on may have been done for their benefit. Jake Josephs , a fashionable sculptor, was trying to make himself understood to Stan O'Glass, another sculptor who was beginning to line his pockets with amazing rapidity through commissions in church art.

" If you ask me my opinion", muttered Josephs with a laconic snarl, " A thousand quid means a lot of money."

"Too much." Stan O'Glass was a man of few words.

" The Arts Council has a theory that by dangling that kind of money before young painters, they're going to glut the Irish nation with a crop of budding geniuses! But all you've got on this benighted island is a pack of bloody fakes and chancers . Pretenders, that's what they are! Send one of those spoiled and pampered brats to England and they'd having trouble making enough money for a flop in a doss house ! Why, they 're only hanging out here because they know that England and America's got no use for them! Why the bloody hell should they go there and live off the dole, when they know they can be ridin' high in Ireland, just by claimin' to be an artist!"

Stan O'Glass slurped off the foam on the head of his third jar of Guinness before giving his reply: "You may be right."

" Why, take that Eddie Dugan, one of your 22-year old geniuses. Nobody buttered my bread while I was growin' up! I assure you, he 's been the laughing stock of Dublin ever since his father financed that exhibition of his in the Morris Gallery two years ago!"

Stan O'Glass responded with a sickly laugh that might be interpreted as assent.

" He's got the talent of a snail." Josephs commented, finishing him off.

O'Glass, evidently believing the subject of a snail's talent too deep for immediate reply, said nothing. At the same time his eyes wandered the depths of the pub searching for more congenial conversation. But Josephs wouldn't let go:

" And, just imagine the nerve of that Bill Devlin! Hmmp! I'd bet you any amount of money he really thinks he's going to get the Arts Council award! Why, that little tit of a wife of his must already be pealin' her eyes on a cozy little house in Rathgar."

" Why not Fitzwilliam Square?" queried Stan O'Glass. He had just made the move himself to Rathgar the month before.

" Not a chance! Not a chance! I'm sorry to tell you, Stan, but that couple is pure Rathgar. I wouldn't credit her with any more vision than a schoolmistress. A little country tit like that is always thinkin' of raising her *wee little brats* in Rathgar, and sendin' them to St. Killian's . "

Stan O'Glass, now visibly irked at the interminable monotony of this one-sided conversation, though normally a man of few words, now allowed himself a few more. What he came up with went something like this :

" I imagine it depends on whether or not he has friends at the Art Council oh by the way I just received a commission from St. Brendan's for 500 pounds."

Josephs continued to fume with pretentious rage. Ignoring O'Glass' last remark he continued:

" The Arts Council is run by a real pack of nincompoops. Why, if I wasn't watching my language I might just be callin' them a pack of filthy *gobshites* !"

Stan O'Glass didn't hear the final comment, which in any case had been delivered *sotto voce* in acknowledgment of the presence of feminine company.

" I've received £5,000 in commissions this year alone." was the apt reply.

As this continued to receive no comment he sighed, heaved a yawn and went on:

" There can't be another profession more difficult than the graphic arts. But I've got no cause for complaint."

After this O'Glass retreated into a benign and portly silence. Not long after that however he was disturbed from his reveries by none other than Hodges' himself:

" Say! I heard the two of you talking about Bill Devlin, weren't you? If you ask me, his kind is a mule. I call them mules. Work, work and more work - and for what? He hasn't got a drop of talent! Everything he's done has been copied from somebody else. His paintings look like Picasso's, his sculptures like ... who's that guy , "Maillol " ? Somebody like that. He never went to art school, yet he has the insolence ... no, I'll call it guts, I'll give him credit for guts .. to think he can compete with real artists .. like us! People who've studied for years with the best teachers! More power to him... not that it'll do him any good! Ten years of work, and nobody knew a thing about him! Now that he's had a bit of luck he imagines he's on top of the world. Did I hear you say he's trying for the thousand quid from the Arts Council?"

Josephs smirked, nodding his head: " Why that little whore of his goes around making out he's already got it! I overheard her just the other day, sayin' something about a vacation on the Greek Islands! Now where the hell do you expect them to get that kind of money?"

Hodges shook his head with commiseration: "Poor fellow. He's a pitiful chap, really. Just another victim of Ireland. Say, Jerry, what's your opinion about that?"

During the whole of the preceding dialogue Jerry O'Brien had been sitting at the counter resting his weight on his elbows. His head was tipped forward, the better to take in what people were saying. As each point was made he appeared to be nod in agreement. Now, having been so rudely accosted with a direct question, it became evident that what everyone had taken for gestures of sympathetic comprehension were merely the results of the peristaltic tremors of a drunken stupor. As all eyes were directed to him, Jerry's head continued to nod in the same unbroken rhythm.

Finally the pressure of prolonged silence had its effect, making him feel that some sort of respond was obligatory. Yet this was hardly the case, as everyone present was well acquainted with his state by that time of day:

"..Yes ... yes ... Devlin ... No good. No good at all ... of course .. stuff is shit."

It was clearly useless to interrogate him further on this matter. All the same he had not disappointed them. Sensing that it was somehow now his job to drop another turf briquette into the smoldering flames, Josephs reminded the others, with a sneer, that "... Devlin's wife, who's never be to an art school in her life, has been advertising in the papers to give art lessons to unwashed brats at 30 bob a crack!" Which information was received with volleys of sniggering laughter.

Meanwhile another clique had assembled around Ferdinand O'Higgins. Though he was not noted for eloquence or charisma , this group seemed prepared to act as if he were. Its composition was diverse. Among its mainstays were O'Higgins himself, William Fitzherbert, a doctor, and an architect named Brendan Johnson. A few more distinguished professionals may also have been gathered around him on this particular afternoon. As O'Higgins had said (once upon a time- perhaps on this very day!) , he felt a genuine kinship with professionals who, like himself, united Science with Art.

In addition one could remark the presence of familiar faces from the London West End theatre crowd, friends of O'Higgins from his decades of party-hopping through the London "lit." scene. Seven years had passed since he'd made the momentous decision to turn Irish, the balance having been tipped in that direction by new laws which eliminated tax on the proceeds on works of art.

The thespians had disembarked at the port of Dun Laoghaire that very morning, and were delighted to find old 'Higgely-Piggely' pontificating splendidly in time-honored form in the caves of the Bedlam. O'Higgins' closest friend among the actors was a vivacious little flirt by the name of Deirdre O'Conor. She was a proud and radiant girl, her face illuminated by a tinsel though not unappealing smile, her lithe figure weighted down by a black maxi-coat, and with hair golden enough to drive any pre-Raphaelite to laudanum. Having struggled the long way from the Irish Boglands to the theaters of Shaftesbury Avenue, she seemed anxious to prove to O'Higgins that she'd become as much of a snob

as he was. On that afternoon it was nothing but "The Duchess of So-and-So", "Lord X", "Larry" and "Terry", and "Bobbie", when referring to literary celebrities with whom the rest of us normally consort on a last name basis in the public library.

Accompanying this gay voyeuristic chatter went a more doubtful conversation in the language of gesture with the eyes, tossing of the head, meaningful sidelong glances, the casual brush off grazing fingers conducted without the slightest attempt at discretion, with considerable impudence in fact, given that O'Higgins attractive young wife, a dainty-looking woman in her mid-thirties, was seated next to her at the bar and within proper dotting distance of the Great Man.

Though Judy Wilcox O'Higgins affected not to notice the juvenile usurper, inwardly she was crawling with jealousy. It was rather sad in a way that the presence of this rather insecure, yet in no way malicious, young actress should have been the occasion for so much emotional misery. Judy's possessiveness towards her aged husband was not only hopeless but manifestly absurd: O'Higgins' conduct towards her did little to merit such devotion. The vaguely tawdry game-playing meant nothing to the young actress. Nor was it apparent how much O'Higgins, who could not help being what he was, that is to say a pompous boor, was getting out of it.

But Judy O'Higgins, née Wilcox, was a woman strongly addicted to self-imposed unhappiness. In 17 years she had migrated from one horrible marriage to another. Nor did it appear to her friends and acquaintances that she had done any better in her present one. The men she fell for were always talented,

sometimes excessively so, not particularly handsome nor endowed with charm, of a conservative cast, yet invariably cloddish, tyrannical, even brutes. Her string of divorces had been wrenched out of her through dire necessity, for she was one of those admirable, yet undeniably tiresome wives who passionately believe in fidelity as their one major duty in life.

Her first husband had been a gifted painter, but also a bully and heavy drinker. Once he beat her so badly that she lay in hospital for a week, hovering between life and death. The next male wonder used her estate to further his personal interpretation of Bloomsbury promiscuity. Irked by her devotion in spite of it all, he was the one who split of his own accord , leaving no forwarding address beyond the general notification that he was heading towards France. Such haste was perhaps a bit precipitous, given that he perished about a week later in a 5 car collision on the Route Nationale- a fairly common occurrence they tell me - together with his pretty girl friend, a movie star picked off the Croisette during the Cannes Film Festival.

Since the following nightmare was choreographed by a man much too young for her, she'd probably chosen Ferdinand O'Higgins for her fourth enrollment in matrimony because he was much too old for her. It could not be denied that O'Higgins was largely free of the defects of his immediate predecessors. There was a time in his life when he was a heavy drinker, if not alcoholic by the medical definition yet indistinguishable from one . Paradoxically his vice had stabilized after he migrated to Ireland. It was here , half a decade ago, that he met and married Judy Wilcox,

thrice married, twice divorced, and sole heir to the fortune of the California-based Wilcox Appliances.

Ferdinand O'Higgins was a good writer, craftsmanlike, erudite and original. He was also willful and spoiled, used to getting his way in everything. At the same time, desperate as he was for affection, he could be a helpless prey to any supposed well-wisher who knew how to press the right buttons. Although he treated his wife with a haughty disdain amounting to contempt, snubbing her completely at social gatherings, he would never, not in a millennium, raise a hand to her. Not that it would have been wise to do so. Only 60, he had already progressed far along the road to becoming a total invalid.

Heart disease had set in early for this man, who was only 45 when he suffered his first stroke. Another one, coming in his early 50's, left him partially paralyzed in both legs. Since that time he lived in a constant state of dread in anticipation of the third visitation which might finish the work initiated by the previous two. His will divided his estate between Judy and his son Oswald by a previous marriage. The abuse she'd suffered in her first marriage had made her unable to bear children.

Judy O'Higgins was a small woman, very gentle in her manner, to the point of self-effacement. It was difficult to imagine this frail, soft-spoken person surviving the slightest affront from a savage world. Yet, although she had endured more than one cruel assault over the last two decades, she appeared neither hardened nor worn. From the evidence the psychological toll had clearly been a heavy one. She was constantly fidgeting, never seemed to be

at ease, and chain-smoked. Imagined slights and petty annoyances, like Deirdre O'Connor's childish behavior that afternoon, kept her in a constant state of torment. Her quiet speaking-voice, virtually a whisper, degenerated often enough into diffidence. When combined with embarrassment or excitement, stuttering might develop.

Her eyes shyly diverged from those of the person she was addressing. Under the smallest suggestion of criticism she retreated into a shell from which she could not easily be extracted. In an environment like that of the Bedlam, where overt hostility might erupt at any time, her basic strategy was bi-modal, gyrating between trying to keep the conversation on an even keel and retreating altogether.

"Ferdy", she whispered, " that girl can't be serious when she says that she met Larry in Spain in 1963 . My memory's not that bad. Larry was living in New Zealand then, working on the draft of his fifth novel."

"That girl" , a.k.a. Deirdre O'Connor, balanced an Irish whiskey in her hand and explained the situation. It was clear to all that she was inordinately proud of sharing a secret page in the life of "Larry" :

" You're right, Judy. Larry did spend most of that year in New Zealand. But business brought him back to London for a few weeks in September . On the way back to New Zealand he made a stop-over in Barcelona. A friend of mine and I had found jobs there in a travel agency. Larry came into the agency to confirm his flight. She recognized him from his pictures on the book jackets. The two

of them got along very well - let's be discreet- (*Giggles*) - and they came back to the apartment very late at night. We must have chatted for about an hour, but it was obvious they wanted to be alone- of course - so I made some excuse and went to my room. For the next week they were absolutely inseparable! Then they broke up and he continued on his way home. "

"Well, don't keep us in suspense!" Judy cried, "Who was the lucky young lady?"

Deirdre laughed : " Oh - I don't know if I should tell you - perhaps I'm saving that secret for my memoirs." Although Judy's detestation of Deirdre was now at the breaking point, the embarrassment was covered over with giggles. Somewhere along the line "Larry" had been Judy's lover too.

Old, crusty Ferdinand O'Higgins didn't crack a smile. Rather he came up with a kind of snort, let's us say a noise which might have been taken for his ridding his throat of an overdue accumulation of catarrh. Then he said:

" That story, Miss O'Conor, is an artless concoction of *rubbish garni* ! Larry, apart from the drivel he is sometimes stupid enough to put into his novels, is so much of a prude that I hesitate to call him a prig! Never would he presume to waste his substance in the excesses of debauchery, so terrified is he of the ancient Hebraic vengeance in which the superstitious imagination of his childhood was steeped! Notwithstanding that little bit of shabbiness with my wife" - the comment floated along the flotsam of his discourse as if she were not even present,

" which occurred long before I entered the picture and which therefore does not concern me, Larry is most emphatically *not* a skirt chaser ! "

" But Ferdy! Higgely-Piggely!" Deirdre struggled vainly to interrupt, chagrined that he had not at least guessed that *she* was in fact the fictive room-mate of the story:

" But nothing, damn it! I have the highest regard for Larry, and that in spite of all the damage his writing has done for his friendships, including my own. Larry 's is the sin of vanity, I assure you: he is not venal. Years ago, when we first met, he was still struggling to make a name for himself in the noble craft of fiction. He worked for days on end on a can of beans! He ruined his health for life!

"Furthermore, Larry fought valiantly in the service of his country. I did the same for mine! When on leave he was out helping the poor of Italy, rather than enriching the whore -houses of Naples like the majority of his comrades-in-arms. Sin and Scandal have never been attached to his name, and I know - *for a fact!* - that he has not spent a day in Spain in the last 10 years!

"As for that sordid little experiment in co-habitation between Larry and my wife, let it be stated, for the record, that they were planning to be mar - "

Judy leaned over the bar and seemed to be engrossed in asking for another drink. The bartender noticing the tears flowing over her burning cheeks, looked at her with amazement. Deirdre, as embarrassed as Judy, continued to listen in disbelief to O'Higgins' crude rant,

" - ried at the time. When their foolish plans came to nothing, they dissolved their association immediately!!"

With these final sputtered words O'Higgins, vindicator of the honor of his friend, of that of his wife and, by implication, his own, withdrew into self-righteous contemplation of his vodka and orange juice.

Judy, her third hot paddy tilted in her lap, had covered the lower part of her face with her handkerchief and turned back to join the conversation. The concern in her voice was sincere as Deidre asked her :

" Is anything the matter?" Keeping her handkerchief over mouth and nose Judy bobbed her head up and down, indicating something equivalent to affirmation - to be more precise, indicating that a great deal was the matter but that the best way to handle it was to ignore it. She blew her nose and put the handkerchief back into her pocketbook. With an eager smile and wild toss of the head, eyes now swollen and inflamed, she beamed her full attention onto Deirdre:

" Oh Deirdre!" Sniffing in an exaggerated fashion and seemingly convulsed with laughter she reached out to her with a sisterly hand and said:

" Everthing's fine, honey!" Another wild shake of the head, "I'm really all right. Honestly! It must have been the effect of the whiskey." With her free hand she bobbed her hair , " I can never take more than a bit."

Deirdre returned the smile, with the addition of a tiny dab of thespian glitter, anxious to bypass the embarrassing interlude and

go back to having fun. Her husband's eminent colleagues who, until she had asserted that everything was fine, had had no notion that anything was amiss, turned to stare at Judy with self-conscious grimaces of professional concern.

Judy straightened herself up in her chair and leaned back abruptly. Too abruptly: the glass of whiskey balanced thoughtlessly on her lap, no doubt owing to her desperately forced nonchalance, tipped over and spilled its contents over her dress and that of her closest neighbor.

" Oh, Deirdre! I've spilled it all over your coat!"

Deirdre, who had been touched, briefly, ( as were most of Judy's friends sooner or later), by her fatal penchant for bad marriages, had not been so moved that she was prepared to take this supposed accident in good grace. Her actress's vanity , that pathological self-consciousness of the effect she was making on others, made her unable to forgive so direct an assault on her appearance. As far as she was concerned, Judy's act had been one of deliberate malice. And she may not have been far wrong.

"Damn it, Judy! I've just had it dry-cleaned! What am I going to do now?"

Brendan Johnson, architect, produced a handkerchief which he applied to wiping off the rest of the whiskey. Everyone chattered with excitement, even the painters' clique down at the other end of the bar, momentarily distracted from their tedious exercises in character assassination by the promise of a feline spat.

Ferdinand O'Higgins alone continued to maintain a frigid indifference, as he always did when he was not the sole center of

attention. Ignoring the commotion he opened the latest issue of "Dublin Magazine" and held its innocuous contents up close to his nose: a lifetime of literary toil had played havoc with his eyesight.

"I've got to be back on-stage in London tomorrow night. What am I going to do? How am I going to be able to get it cleaned?!"

"There now. That's not so bad." Brendan Johnson stepped back to admire his handiwork, as he might consider a statue for the lobby of a new branch of the Bank of Ireland.

"I really am sorry, Deirdre", July apologized, now completely miserable, "Send me the bill from London and I'll pay for it."

It was at just that moment that a disreputable character, with a mean physiognomy partly concealed by a grimy beard, draped by a green jacket torn in many places, his exposed stomach bulging over his belt buckle, a sly and dissolute individual, with a reputation, (in some circles anyway) , of being one of the great poetic talents of the age stood up. Availing himself of the venerable drunkard's privilege of butting in, he cried out:

*"Aw! What'd'ye mind? Y'afierd t'be goin' back t'England, an' takin' the smell orv good Oirish paddy on'ye?"*

Which remark put everybody standing around the bar in a devilish ill humor. The group around O'Higgins closed ranks still further to form a compact wall against the intruder. Not that it would do much good: Seamus McGrath held proprietary rights over his alcove in the Bedlam, having inhabited it almost daily since the onslaught of his profound depression brought on by the horrors of World War II. He had no intention of relinquishing

these rights to people he deemed a low pack of Anglo-American shoneen :

*" By thee holy mither orv God , I say , it's a bleedin' pity that th'oid I.R.A. is gone, that Sean Connolly is been massacred by a pack'eh traitors, and Mike Collins and his brood orv cowards took over the land of Eire from the bleedin' Limeys, may they all rot in hell from their fucken Shakespeare to their fucken Churchill! Oh! And why ain't there the likes of Countess Mankewitz and Padraic Pearse t'be cleanin' up and stompin' all over this rotten rabble of fucken shoneen and American blood-suckers! Dogs! Pigs! Koochies ! Filthy gobshites like yer man O'Higgins, gettin' drunk like an old souse! Why and it's the like's o' you what's fucken' ruinin' the country! Oh and why ain't old Dan Breen here, packing a pair of pistols to black and tan the hides orv these miserable shoneen bastards, bluer'en uh dog's bollocks ? !!"*

Arms flailed the air, legs executed a reel and kicked the shins of the surrounding spectators. One way or another McGrath was hell-bent on making a scene:

*" Up the I.R.A. ! Mayyer niver die, ye sons orv Eire! Arise ye prisoners orv fucken starvation! Why and I spit in the eye of any Corkman here present! And it's a bleedin' shame Hitler in fucken Germany didn't find room enough in his ovens for our own fucken five-by-twos ! "*

Angry murmurs hummed throughout the pub. In one way or another the proletarian poet had managed to offend just about everyone present. Only the firm armholds of his near associates

restrained a violently trembling O'Higgins from defending his manhood against McGrath, fellow literary man notwithstanding.

Jerry O'Brien, driven by that curious kinship which links alcoholics in their cups, stumbled over to McGrath and, despite his being a full foot taller than the poet, put his arm around his shoulders and exhorted him to sing. Although they were both Irish to the marrow of their bones, it turned out that neither of them knew more than a verse of *Danny Boy* and 4 lines of *My Wild Irish Rose* .

They did know, however, that the Bedlam, not being what in Ireland is known as a Singing Lounge, did not permit singing nor musical instruments. However in view of the present circumstances its proprietor, as good a Druid as any of them, a close friend of the O'Higginses and himself something of a patron of the plastic and bardic arts, allowed the besotted pair a few minutes of drunken revelry before showing them the door with whatever degree of force might eventually prove necessary.

Ferdinand O'Higgins, as many must have surmised by now, represented a pure strain of that species of American Irish who are more patriotic towards Ireland than the Irish themselves, despite the fact of his being in the direct line of that class of Irish who for centuries had considered themselves more English than the English, (and who, several hundred years before that, had thought of themselves as more Norman than the Normans) .

These impudent sallies from McGrath consequently set him foaming at the mouth. In addition there was the matter of his wife for, although he affected a brutal unconcern for her privacy, he was

in fact very vulnerable on the score of his standing as an elderly and portly invalid married to an attractive woman twenty years his junior. There was a world of difference between the insulting manner in which he treated his wife, and what he would allow others to say to her in his company, or to him in hers. As long as she was in his keeping, he would not tolerate the use of coarse or vulgar language.

No did a few bars of *Danny Boy* yelled quaveringly from the throats of two drunkards signify that the disturbance was over, not by a long shot. His hands shook as he sloshed more vodka into his paunch, muttering vaguely masculine threats into the ear of Dr. Fitzherbert, the amiable friend who'd found him his acreage in County Cork:

" I'll have no truck with a man who insults me in front of my wife."

Dr. Fitzherbert urged O'Higgins to ignore the incident. McGrath was a Bedlam fixture. The regulars had learned to put up with him. At least he had talent, Fitzherbert went on - one would think he was drawing up a balance sheet of vices and virtues. Evidently he had not yet fully assimilated O'Higgins' habit of not listening to most of what was said to him:

" I'll be damned", he swore, " if anyone ever tolerated me because of my talent!" Which might have sounded a bit odd to many of those present, accustomed to tolerating him for his money. O'Higgins right fist alternately clenched and unclenched as his invalid face, with its prominent veins , alcoholic blush and bizarre blending of intellectual ability, moral banality and sheepish

dissipation , puckered up into a hideous middle-aged caricature of the Man of Violence, the Self-Reliant Pioneer of the West.

Judy touched his arm:

" Ferdy, let's go. Don't you think there's been enough excitement for one afternoon? It's after four o'clock." He brushed his wife aside with impatience:

"I'll show him if I'm a man or not!"

And it was just then that McGrath, who from the start had borne Jerry O'Brien's chumminess with surly impatience, cried out:

*" And Oi piss in de bleedin' oye orv dat accursed gobshite Aymerican, O'Higgins, dat uses de blessed flag orv Ireland, de orange, white en green, fer uh bloody snot-rag! "*

A dozen distinguished professional men and as many flatterers ducked hastily for cover as (metaphorical) jets of blood spurted from the ravaged eye-sockets of Ferdinand O'Higgins. A formidable adversary when aroused, he butted his tub against the feeble bodies of Johnson and Fitzherbert. Hacking a way free with his left arm, his right fist reached uncertainly for his cane, as if still undecided whether to do the manly thing and pummel McGrath with his bare fists, or the more expedient one of thrashing him with the cane.

" I'm as good a man as Ireland ever saw!" he bellowed, vainly persisting in his effort to extricate himself from Fitzherbert's stocky bulk:

" I fully intend to push the teeth down the throat of any man who shall have the effrontery to challenge me in any way !"

" Use your head, Ferdy!" Fitzherbert whispered desperately, " He's a degenerate."

" I'll break his bones, I will!"

Then he stomped Johnson on the foot. He stepped aside , more from astonishment than pain, just long enough for O'Higgins to reach out with the cane and crack McGrath across the temples. O'Brien and McGrath, hopelessly entangled, were sent sprawling against a wall, spurting a heavy shower of booze and debris in their wake. O'Brien hit the floor first, as McGrath fell on top of him. Another instant and a dozen Bedlam regulars were on top of them preventing them from getting up.

Yet, even when submerged in the depths of intoxication, Seamus McGrath could fight like a tiger. The aisle before the bar became a wild free-for-all of bodies, chairs and blows, as one might find in a Western , or a bad play about Ireland.

Ailing and feeble, O'Higgins allowed himself to be pulled out of the fray. His transformation from one of the giants of Irish mythology to a helpless infant was frighteningly sudden. He leaned his back against the counter of the bar. Judy, now very much in control, loosened his tie and opened his collar. Between coaxing and hugging she fed him from a cup filled with strong coffee:

" Come on, Ferdy - take some more. Be a good little boy. We're going home right away. " Using imperious and dis-coordinated arm swipes O'Higgins tried to push the coffee away; but Judy was too quick for him and held the cup just out of reach before forcing it on him again. After awhile he regained his

composure, indicating that he wanted to take the cup into his own hands. Leaving him in the charge of others, Judy retired to the Ladies' Room.

Between draughts of coffee , O'Higgins sputtered incoherently, talking in gasps:

" *My roots!* ... *My ... very own .. roots!* ... *In this soil .. This land ... My land !* Martyrs for Irish freedom in my family ... my ancestors fought Cromwell! ...A great uncle at the right hand of Wolfe Tone in 1798 ...On my mother's side as well there were those who fought the British tyrant ... in America... Even as I ... Even as I .... risked my LIFE .. TO SQUASH!!" an eloquent gesture with his flabby right fist .. " the Nazi hydra in 1941! The hatred of tyrants is engraved into the Irish blood flowing through my veins... and ... I will not allow anyone .. ANYONE! ... to tell me that I am not AN IRISHMAN!! ..And I have never begged a penny from ANY MAN! Not one penny! ..Every sentence that has issued forth from my pen has been a LANCE in the hide of the dragon of WORLD COMMUNISM!! *I am a hater of tyrants !* I am an IRISHMAN!! I left America, the land of the free!!...to return to my MOTHER! MY NATIVE SOD! MOTHER IRELAND! ... To seek .. FREEDOM... And no one dare tell me... *and no one dare tell me* ... "

The poor man, unable to proceed further, his frame shaking with tremors, broke down in a mindless confabulation of words, whines, sobs, snuffles and groans; a mask of decrepit old age already covered his features. Judy returned from the Ladies Room and helped him off the stool. Her self-confidence rising in

proportion to his helplessness, she held him by the hand as, together, they cleared a path to the door.

The proprietor of the Bedlam closed the door behind them, then returned to his place at the cash register. Few had noticed, or could have noticed that McGrath had been heaved, through a fog of kicking and groping, out the doorway by a corvee of young braves. Once out in the street he persisted in his filthy vituperation for the next half hour, to the horror of shopping ladies and the amusement of tinkers, unzipping his fly and laughing horribly, dancing about like a Russian bear.

In due time McGrath was pushed along by some honored employees of the *Garda* . He wended his way homewards or, the more likely, stumbled along in search of some more cordial shelter or cellar door where, undisturbed and at peace with the world, he could work undisturbed at another one of his celebrated sonnets.



## Chapter II

# The Devlin Household

It had been explained to visitors to the Devlins, that Bill preferred that they not show up at the house before 8 PM, and that their visits should terminate by 10. Yet there was also an understanding, more tacit perhaps but no less binding, to the effect that his charming wife, Beatrice, unable to imagine the possibility of living without a continual coming and going of news from the outer world, was every bit as willing to receive them before breakfast as she was after dinner.

Bill's views on sociability were decidedly un-Irish, if not altogether out of touch with reality in a city like Dublin. An expressed preference for a solitary existence was of course insufficient to the task of keeping the world at bay. It was therefore all the more fortunate for him that his wife's character so naturally complemented his own. She eagerly took upon herself the chore of hosting the daily crush of visitors, leaving Bill free to manufacture some of his Art.

Work habits developed over decades had accustomed Bill to a rigid routine little short of astonishing in Dublin's easy-going artistic milieu, the fruit of many years of relentless warfare against those elements in Irish life which tend, inevitably, to drain even the hardiest of all energy, inspiration or ambition.

In the depths of the gruesome Irish winter Bill was up and walking about by 6 AM. At this time of year the dawn sunlight is blocked out by a thick pea-soup fog that coagulates over the

heavens and can remain there until noon; and although there is a tendency in most people, especially those who are involved, or affect involvement, in the arts, to require at least a modicum of sun before stirring about, Bill Devlin would have already completed three solid hours of drawings and sketches before they could be expected to rouse up the courage to roll away the covers.

Bill realized that, without his strict adherence to this superhuman schedule he would have been obliged to throw down his brushes years ago. As it was, despite his refusal to concede anything to the climate or the body's natural inertia, the rest of the day would take the form of a constant struggle against intrusions, against the endemic sociability, or, what Beatrice called, the "gregariousness" of Irish life.

And, if for any reason Bill had to leave the house to go into downtown Dublin on an errand, however trivial, such as arranging for the delivery of new carpeting for the living-room, or serious, such as taking his 2-year old daughter Moira to the dentist, he accepted it as a matter of course that the afternoon was entirely lost. A Dubliner can form no notion of an encounter that is strictly business. A trip to the grocery store down the block for a bottle of milk can tie up half an hour. Not to mention anything so momentous as an examination of one's daughter's teeth!

Bill Devlin's personality harbored all the obsessiveness of someone determined to accomplish a personal ambition with which few others sympathize. He could not remember how many times he had, like a computer which must be kept constantly running to amortize its cost, calculated and recalculated the

number of working hours this emergency had cost him. He loved his daughter very much, yet by his estimation the five hours spent walking about Dublin, making small talk with the dentist, his secretary, the pharmacist and a sympathetic if hopelessly ignorant patroness of the arts he'd met at the prescription counter, could have been compressed into something less than an hour in a more civilized society.

On the way home he'd run into Aleister McDonnell, a poet of fair competence. In addition to being a personal friend of both the Devlins for many years, Aleister was writing the biographical sketch to accompany Bill's catalogue for his one-man show in the Open Studio Gallery scheduled for next month. Custom dictated that Aleister be invited back to the house where they would break open a 6-pack.

Bill would have been ashamed to admit to himself that he found such involuntary socializing a relief from the intensity of his artistic preoccupations. For all of these and for other reasons, he had been driven to the strategy of getting up very early in the morning for 3 lonely hours of sketching before people started knocking at their doors. Either that or pull up stakes altogether and relocate elsewhere than Dublin. This he certainly had no intention of doing.

I felt rather uncomfortable at first stopping by to visit the Devlins after 2 ; but Beatrice was always there, welcoming and eager to put me at my ease. Bill could eavesdrop on our conversations and continue to work in the yard. What better use could she make of her time, she confessed, than in playing hostess

to friends? No doubt I much abused the privilege, yet my stay in Ireland had often been unhappy. I'd known many difficulties in supporting myself, making friends or using the time profitably . For most of these problems the Devlin household offered a ready-made solution.

Beatrice and I chatted away in their large living room. The low and long wood-framed house comprised two stories plus a gabled attic. It was set back in an alleyway as part of a row of similar dwellings sharing a common fence. Its' green and white exterior faded into the urban landscape like an evergreen tree in a forest.

Long windows on the ground floor extended the length of the living-room front and back. Entering from the front door, the right side of the room was blocked by a shabby couch, an unused fire place, and a steep wooden staircase banister going to the upper floor. Although the wallpaper was somber, a kind of dark brown-gray, the wide windows normally admitted ample quantities of sunlight. At night the high ceiling lights projected an intense illumination, making it possible for Bill to work indoors at any time.

Against the staircase one might find some large painting of Bill's. Almost all of them cubist. The graphic arts may have developed beyond cubism, but that was of no interest to Bill Devlin. Besides the old frayed couch already alluded to, which may conceivably have made a extended journey from the 6 counties on the occasion of their marriage, the furnishing consisted of half a dozen chairs in a capricious assortment of styles, and two easy

chairs with plush cushions. At the back of the room, set in an alcove which did its duty as the dining-room, stood a dinner table, chairs and cupboard for silverware and china. Near the entrance stood a Franklin stove surrounded by a dozen bags of peat briquettes, the one natural resource on which Ireland has a world monopoly.

The kitchen was located at the back, to the left as one entered. The living-room, being the one decently sized room in the dwelling, had been drafted into multiple service as parlour, dining-room, painter's studio, and laundry.

On a normal day Bill would take a break at 4. The afternoon tea, which extended to 5 and often beyond that, was shared with several other visitors besides myself. I generally took my leave around 5, unless Bill and Beatrice prevailed upon me to stay for dinner, or my finances might inspire me to make the suggestion myself, or there might be a bit of both, in which case my visit could be prolonged to 8 or even later. Even the house where I was staying, that of Joe Donaghue, an elderly itinerant sailor turned antique dealer, who'd transformed his home into a refuge for artistically minded homeless vagabonds, had been arranged for me by the Devlins.

Yet in most other respects I was but a minor offender. Either Sylvia or Ed Delaney, next-door neighbors and Trinity students, stopped by almost every morning around 11. The steady influx of friends, relatives, relatives and kindred spirits thus initiated continued until well into evening. The only payment ever imposed on me was in the form of a tacit understanding that I make myself

available for baby-sitting on the rare occasions when the Devlins stepped out for a night on the town.

In this arrangement I found no cause for complaint : being left to myself in the Devlin's living-room for a few hours after dark provided one of those rare opportunities during my stay in Dublin for getting a bit of work done.

The Devlin's two-story wooden domicile was situated midway along an alleyway branching off from a street running along the west of the Canal. The houses on both sides of this secluded lane were demarcated from each other by means of high fences or concrete walls, creating an impression of a row of small workshops or warehouses. Bill had recently painted his own fence an aquamarine green. The door into the yard stood at the left edge of the fence. One either rang the bell, shouted, or combined the two. If somebody was at home one stood a fair chance of being admitted. I recall no exception to this rule.

Entering the yard one could expect, most afternoons, to be either shocked or delighted by the spectacle of Bill Devlin crowned with protective helmet that would have done honor to Ivanhoe, wielding a blowtorch with the dexterity of a medieval mace or Torte bow in the hand of a violin virtuoso; for Bill could manipulate this odd graphic tool with more skill than many a painter with his sable brush. Someone who didn't recognize at once that he was engaged in sculpture might be pardoned for mistaking him for a free lance arc-welder, hired for a day to piece together the exploded fragments of a land mine left over from the Rebellion.

The sharply curved brick path, connecting the left wall of the fence to the Devlins' front door, could be taken as the sickle complementing Bill's hammer. This door was the sole entrance to their unadorned- ( the word 'ramshackle' does not quite fit) - yet no less charming low 2-story green and weathered home . Several windows, one of them extending the entire length of the living-room, filled up the front and back walls , while the sides were hidden by the adjacent houses. From the inside one could see that the front wall of the living-room had been partitioned by several long panes of glass, rising from waist level to the ceiling. A French window of sorts had been created from two vertical planes of glass that one could slide open from either end. In fair weather this would always been left open, maintaining the continuity of yard and living-room.

Because their domicile was located on the south side of the alley the living-room, even on the brightest of days, was always a bit shadow- heavy. A wall extended at the left from the entrance had created a corridor, permanently dismal, that lead to a small and very cluttered kitchen.

The front yard was long and, unlike Barb'ra Allen's bed, not too narrow. Under normal circumstances it would have been considered adequate for the needs of a small family of 3. Yet for reasons having to do with Bill's craft and his basic approach towards the arts in Ireland, very little free space was available. Heaps of metal and brick surrounded by plaster, wood and other debris associated with construction, lay about the yard. A long pile of iron and copper rods leaned against the wall of the house. In

front of this stood large flat sheets of scrap metal. Whatever green sod may have originally covered the surface was buried under construction materials or entirely scraped clean.

Examples of Bill's sculpture, along with many done by others, stood in the kind of casual yet careful arrangement we have been familiarized to by the gardens of modern art museums. The works of a dozen sculptors and their students, they'd been cast by Bill or with considerable assistance from him on site. By virtue of a long apprenticeship in English foundries, with or without salary, Bill knew more about high-quality casting than any other sculptor in Ireland. Most of these pieces being too heavy to cart away without proper transportation, or simply lacking an appropriate home for the time being, they'd been left there as a temporary arrangement. And there was more than a few pieces that never would be redeemed.

Bill worked methodically; his detractors might call it a kind of clumsiness. By his estimate there was still enough empty space in the yard to accommodate his work and its technology for another two years. It wasn't too early to start investigating the possibility of warehouse space, but he didn't have to hurry. By that time he expected to be able to move to better living quarters. According to Beatrice they should have already done so.

Yet for the moment Bill really enjoyed being where he was. By using the front yard as a studio he could carry on a conversation with Beatrice in the living-room and keep an eye on their daughter Moira at the same time. Not that this was really necessary; both Beatrice and I kept Moira under close surveillance.

She employed a thousand devices to distract our attention from our brisk chatter to her . A mop of golden hair would be seen to scramble up onto the desk, or Moira's plump body and legs would amaze us with their dexterity as they climbed up onto the large worktable in the far corner, a dangerous enough place and real cause for concern, filled as it was with bottles, turpentine, discarded cans of paint, brushes, palette knives, rusty razors and oil-soaked rags, a kaleidoscopic rubbish heap which had not been sorted, moved or removed in the two years they'd been living there.

Or she would be endlessly falling off the chairs, or bang her head against the legs of the rudimentary dining table, or simply tumble to the floor below because she was still so unsteady on her legs. At these times her sparkling emerald eyes would fill with tears, (particularly if someone was looking), and Beatrice would be obliged to put aside whatever she was doing and hurry over to her and pick her up, taking her back to the chair to rock her on her lap until the crisis was past.

When she was happy Moira, not unlike her mother in fact poured forth a continuous onomatopoeic chatter, running over to us on a minute-by- minute basis to show us this or that object she'd claimed ownership of. When she was crossed she issued sudden imperious demands in a high-pitched voice. The competition with Beatrice, whose own voice, although she had no difficulty in making herself understood could, when animated, evoke comparisons to the peal of a fire alarm, was often effective.

Beatrice had just turned 23. She was a spirited country girl from rural Donegal, of a wild, almost savage beauty, neither tall

nor particularly slim, with burnished red hair, pale cheeks alight with points of fire and a relentless animation that set all her features in motion working together. Whether it was because of the eclipse, by marriage, of her own penchant for the graphic arts, or because she 'd never behaved differently, her imagination had channeled its natural energy almost entirely into conversation. Within their circle at least, there weren't many who would attempt to compete with her in the accumulation, re-shuffling and distribution of Dublin's most prized commodity: *gossip*.

The skill, the inventiveness, the sheer enthusiasm with which Beatrice gleefully assassinated the characters of friends, enemies, associates, acquaintances, celebrities or public figures, transformed this primitive though universal propensity into something more akin to an act of love. She bore no real animosity to any of her victims, not even those whom she deemed most odious. And, if she did allow a touch of malice to creep in every now and then, it was simply because to do otherwise would cripple the free flow of her inspiration, bubbling up from internal sources and rippling along like some divagating stream of fact and fable, sparkling with sensibility, vitality and wit.

In terms of its barren subject matter, her conversation differed little from what one could hear any afternoon at the Bedlam. In all other respects the gulf that separated them was staggering. To compare the rude hatchet jobs of the Bedlamites to Beatrice's masterpieces of surgery, would be to compare the output of a hack political cartoonist to the devastating wit of George Bernard Shaw.

One example, drawn from many, will suffice: it has been related how, while drinking in the Bedlam one afternoon with his painterly fellowship, Simon Goldstein had encapsulated his opinion of painter Ed Duggan in this devastating metaphor:

" He's got the talent of a snail."

Now on the afternoon we have been speaking of Beatrice Devlin, extemporizing on the identical topic, Ed Duggan's talent, ( which she held in every bit as low esteem as Simon Goldstein did ), remarked to me:

" I'd sooner buy a lithograph from a blind man than a doodle from Eddie Duggan!"

From where he was working in the yard Bill could overhear every word of our conversation. He stepped off the raised platform he'd been using as a scaffolding and shouted through the open French window:

" Stop yer jabberin' , female, or I'll come in and clobber you!"

Beatrice giggled but went on:

" I assure you Tom, that if you ever get to see one of his paintings, you'll agree with me right away that he's the worst artist in Dublin."

Bill was pulling off his arc-welder's mask : " Don't listen to her, Tom!" He removed his gloves and started walking towards the house: "She's a cow - just a cow, like all women!"

Beatrice gathered up Moira and rocked her in her arms:

"Still, I'm not down on Eddie Duggan as *some* people are ; at least you don't find *him* sittin' all day long in the Bedlam, hangin' around with that brood of *opportunists* ! All those low pretenders

like Hodges and O'Brien and Stan O'Glass! All of *them* think that my husband should be doin' just what they're doin' , *drinkin'* all day long and *hopin'* for some *rich tycoon* to come along and set them up for the *rest* of their *lazy days* ! Of course they don't like it when Bill gets up in the mornin' and stays at home all day, busy *workin'* of all things !

"Well, "I replied, " if that's the case, I won't go out of my way to look at anything by Eddie Duggan."

"What's that? Oh yes! You're not lookin' *forward* to it, did you say?"

"That's right."

"Well, I don't *blame* ye . It's not that he doesn't know how to paint. He might very well, for all *we* know - but the thing about it is that he doesn't even *try* to paint! Last winter I think it was, he arranged for an exhibition at the Open Studio. Well, it was only a week short of the opening of his show, the *vernissage* as they call it in French , and *youer* man hadn't done a *single* painting ! So, imagine what he does next! He goes out and buys himself a dozen cans of paint, mostly black, and paints himself twenty pictures in three days! "

" Were they any good at least?"

" *Not - At - All! Not-At- All* ! How *could* they be any good if he did them *all* in *three days* ! It's his wife ruins him. She's the one who's been making him think he's a *great artist* without having to *do any work* ! I assure you, Tom, she's got him completely convinced that it's all *inspiration* ! Just look at Bill:

where would *he* be if he just sat around all day, waitin' for his precious *inspiration* !"

She put Moira down on the floor: " Excuse me just a minute. I have to go into the kitchen to watch the stew."

Beatrice stood up and walked across the room towards the kitchen door. Briefly illuminating the room, a burst of sunlight spread its force upon the windowpanes. Part way across the room she stumbled against a cluster of Moira's toys. With a reflex action born of long practice she bent over to pick them up. Moira stumbled along close to her side. One could hardly deny that it was her intention to be helpful, although more often than not one found her pulling the toys back out of their boxes and spreading them once more around the floor. As she worked, Beatrice continued talking, muttering in an undertone that may have been directed to me, although one could not be certain:

"What was I going to say?"

I'd gotten down on all fours to help with the cleaning up:

"Weren't you talking about the Bedlam crowd and the way they attack Bill?"

" Oh yes – now I remember –" She stood up and brushed her flowing hair back out of her eyes, at the same time raising her voice to that thunder-clap pitch it assumed whenever she became excited:

" Well! I always say that a man should *get on with the job* ! , and leave all that *talkin'* and *spitein'* and *braggin'* to lazy *gobshites* and *drunken layabouts* , an – and *fucken buskers* and *chancers*

who don't do anything all day long except drinkin' away all the money their *father's* been givin' them! "

After throwing a final handful of toys into one of the boxes arranged around the room, Beatrice hurried to the kitchen door. Just before entering she turned around and paused, long enough to say :

"I'd like to see if *Stan O'Glass* ever got up at 6 in the morning , even once in his lazy life! I'd like to know if any of *them* ever bothered to do something over *twice* because they saw it was *no good* the first time! Why, my husband has *thrown away* more work than any of them will *ever* produce *in their whole lives* ! Getting' on with the job, that's what I believe in. I'm not an intellectual I guess, because I don't believe in sittin' home all day on *youer* bum just thinkin' all the time. ..like Eddie Duggan ... or . or Aleister McDonnell and his crowd of self-styled poets, exercisin' their *talents* by *hangin' out* in Gleeson's! Why, Aleister came around just this mornin', moanin' about *the miracle of inspiration* ! He just likes to hear himself talk, if you ask me .. and what else was I going to say? ..Excuse me, I've got to take care of the stew ..."

And smiling, sweetly in the way known only to country girls, Beatrice vanished into the kitchen.

Moira's normal reaction whenever she found herself alone in the company of a stranger, would be to rush after her mother. If Beatrice had closed the door, and she was unable to open it, she could break into howls which continued until Beatrice reappeared. She'd become used to me by now and found nothing menacing

about my presence. Moving over to the fireplace she tumbled to a sitting position on the bricks of the hearth, regarding me with that fixed gaze, characteristic of very young children, wide-eyed with anxiety mixed with a tentative sympathy.

I stood up, walked over to the window and looked into the yard to see what Bill was doing. He was concentrating on his work and I didn't want to interrupt him. Instead I began walking about the room and examining his paintings and drawings hung, somewhat ostentatiously, around the walls in a kind of permanent one-man show.

Each item had been carefully selected as representative of the best of his work. Bill's imagination was fundamentally sculptural. The arrangements of figures, the techniques employed and other details were those of a sculptor. The flat field of a drawing or canvas was forever being impressed into the service of a third, alien dimension. Indeed this was part and parcel of a larger program: Bill Devlin had taken it upon himself to revive Cubism, even more, to promote a distinctive school of Irish Cubism half a century after its vogue on the Continent. Bill's fascination with the cubists, Picasso, Braque, Juan Gris, went back a decade or more. A systematic study of their techniques was initiated about 5 years earlier. Yet it was only in the previous year, during a stopover in Paris after a 3-month visit to Sweden, that he'd had a chance to examine the originals in Parisian museums.

The Cubist dogma lay as flat on his canvases as a party-line dogma on the lips of a Communist zealot. It was as if he'd taken an initial giant leap into modernism, quickly come as far as the

cubists, then deliberately chosen to preserve its stylistic conventions for an indefinite period. Within its fixed boundaries however, a continual development was always apparent.

Cubism appears to have been Bill's solution to the problem of remaining a sculptor while engaged in painting. By means of the deliberate application of a disequilibrating perspective, landscapes of colossal figures were crowded onto canvases ill-equipped to support them. One searched in vain for restraints to keep them from tumbling out of their frames and onto the spectator. Like the gargantuan beings they accommodated, even the backgrounds against which they were placed lacked that subtlety of light and shade, that magic of color and line that distinguishes painting from the other visual arts. Whatever objects he translated into color seemed to thrust themselves into the world as a kind of unsolicited rebuke, a kind of brute confrontation with the superficial and apathetic world surrounding him, and into which he could never be assimilated.

Like the construction materials piled up in the front yard, they accumulated, in large blocks, rude in tone, into a tortured flux of vortexing and splintering forms, like the opening up of gashes in bruised flesh, maelstroms of suffering shapes that captivated the hear and held the soul prisoner through its multi-parametered dynamism.

It could not be denied that at this stage in his career, in the technical domain, in the mastery of the facile forms of virtuosity so valued by critics though irrelevant to artistic value, Bill fell somewhat short of the mark. Given his energy and stolid single-

mindedness, this would come in time. Yet, despite its unfinished quality, the lack of that polish he was destined to develop in a few more years, Bill's work had already begun to make its mark in the artistic consciousness of the Irish nation.

Why was it that from among all those crushed under the burdens of privation and social injustice, sent out to work as children to be put out to pasture in old age, never once through the long dreary years having lifted their heads above the crude routines of dull, mindless labor, there should arise one person in a generation who, still a journeyman pipe-fitter at age 24 should, at age 30, have wrested a tribute from the ungrateful public that his was a promise unlike that of any other young Irish sculptor?

Certainly nothing had been promising in his beginnings. The tenement in Mountjoy Square where he first saw the light he would later struggle to capture, had no more romance in it than the endless succession of squalid blocks which, like an enormous black cinder on the heart of the city, rippled away from its center. What fate had determined that, from an existence which he shared with anonymous millions, that he alone would struggle to be free of its dross?

Even in his own family of 12 brothers and sisters there had been no other rebel, not even a sympathizer, agitator or fellow traveler to pick up on or even to understand their brother's path. Two of his 3 sisters were salesclerks, the others worked in a biscuit factory. One of his younger brothers had just turned 14 and, as Bill had done, was already preparing to drop out of school and join his father in the factory.

To the mind of Mike Devlin, his oldest brother, his graduation into the police force had been as significant an advance above the sordid conditions of his home environment, as his brother's circle deemed Bill's dedication to the Fine Arts. Like him, Mike also proudly maintained that he'd exchanged the trappings of a routine life for a profession with freedom, respect in the community, and a future. The only real difference in these two perspectives was that most of the Devlin clan sided with the cop brother, few having any sympathy with the painter brother's notions. It was from such a world that Bill Devlin's vision had emerged, the testament of its painful despotism everywhere manifest in his paintings.

Yet it was from these unglamorous beginnings, devoid of intellectual stimulation, dreary, uninspiring, a capacity for demoralization capable of brutalizing the most robust imagination, that Bill derived both his handicaps and most of his advantages.

Apart from 2 years of formal studies, largely in art history, Bill was self-taught. One consequence of this was that he's escaped all the destruction wrought through years of hanging around the art schools, wherein one risks ruining inspiration, sensibility, integrity and determination. The handicaps of miseducation,- the interaction of student and teacher which so often degenerates into farce, the primitive circumcision rituals, the debilitating social life - lead inexorably to the snare of compromise required to survive as an artist in our fabled civilization, culminating in the inevitable sell-out.

It was his good luck to have avoided the fate that befalls most of the over-dependent products of education in the West, that indoctrination into fads and fashions which so often passes for superior wisdom. He was thus unaware that painting, as it should be done, was being done by this school but not by that one; that in 1964 art from this place and time was considered superior to art from that place and time, but that in 1965 one was obliged to maintain the opposite; that a certain visiting painter must be snubbed because he adheres to an avant-garde fashion anathema to the irritable ego of the department chairman of sculpture; that it's got to be Abstract Expressionism but not Pop, or if its Pop its not Op, or if its Op its not Minimalist, or if its not Minimalist it's Post-Modern, or perhaps Post-Modern Op or Pop, or .... and so on; so many starved and sickly plants struggling to take root in a topsoil of superficiality, jealousy and ignorance.

Above all, and this was perhaps the most precious endowment of his pitiful state of under-privilege, Bill had never learned that a certain myth of the artistic life which will be in vogue for the next few years or so, has to be adopted even if it spells emotional or financial ruin; or that money, material gain in any form, is contemptible but, on the other hand but, but, yes, uh huh, you see ...; or that one ought to despise every form of activity or labor, save that which comes charging on six steeds in the white heat of flaming inspiration; or that a touch of dissipation is good for an artist's image; or that irrational thinking is superior to rational thinking, ( unless you're a scientist, a being of inferior mentality ); or that it's best to let people think you're a Marxist, or

at least some kind of leftist; to appear shrewd; or be, or at least look, distracted; or naive, like an unspoiled child of nature; or that one needs to strike a pose, like Gauguin; or be a womanizer like Picasso; or a lunatic like van Gogh; or a misanthrope like Degas; an egotist ( egoist? ) ; a sensualist; a philosopher; a medicine man; a demi-God; an insatiable sex fiend ; or eternally spurned infatuated lover; a saint; a monster; a teller of riddles; a transmitter of ancient truths; a magician; a good-for-nothing; a king; a beggar; a master; a failure; arrogant; suffering; morbidly sensitive; brutally insensitive; possessor of truths deeper than science (though proud of one's inability to understand its gobbledygook) ; despiser of all systems of value, political; scientific, religious; any but the aesthetic; and a thousand suchlike things.

In contrast, Bill's own stubborn and pig-headed attitudes were the tragic consequence of his not having attended art school, thereby rendering him semi-educated, that is to say even worse than uneducated. He believed that a painter was a person who made paintings, much as a baker makes bread.

No amount of reading ( an activity which Bill took very seriously, setting aside a few hours every day for just that purpose), or discussions with learned friends who, through no fault of their own, had been afforded the benefits denied Bill, could make him budge from these obstinate beliefs.

A painter makes paintings; a cabinet-maker makes cabinets; a composer writes music; a writer writes books. Somehow Bill could not free himself of the erroneous misconception that, apart from his talents in the graphic arts , there was no great difference

between himself and say, his policeman brother, with whom most of his friends could not suffer to be in the same room.

Yet at heart, in addition to detecting in himself an element of inverse snobbery (which he considered quite justified given that there weren't many painters in Dublin who weren't just a little afraid of proletarians ) he acknowledged that he really didn't believe it himself. It could not have been boredom alone which led him to flee the factories to reap lonely harvests in the wintry fields of the artist's life. Although his mind would never become clogged with sentimental fantasies of the artistic personality, he realized that, apart from the gift of talent and benefits training, a genuine artist does indeed possess something which sets him apart , and that something is Vision. And Vision alone.

In Vision lay his sole claim to uniqueness; he might otherwise have become anything: businessman, train conductor, gangster. Only the possession of Vision can distinguish one factory hand from a thousand others. Devoid of this crucial ingredient of Vision, the genius of an Einstein combined with the material advantages of a Rockefeller count for little . The Catholic upbringing , so vehemently rejected, returned indirectly to him in Bill's conception of the artist's unique endowment of Vision, as a kind of Grace.

Only the conviction of a personal vision could have given him the strength to persevere, starting with the day when, yet an adolescent, he'd put away his tools, removed his welder's mask, and gazed with a private, virgin wonder at the dreary Irish day, much as Joyce, Synge or Yeats might have done, such as would be

repeated many times over in the history of this visionary people, yet from whom not one worker in a thousand, one politician in ten thousand, one policeman out of a million, would generate more than the conventional bickering and caviling over the injustices of life.

Although Bill could never admit it to himself, the truth was that he did, after all, regard himself as a being apart from the world around him. To have acknowledged a valuation that places souls hearts burdened with a vision above those lacking one, would have offended his sense of democratic fair-play. Rationalizing his convictions, Bill told himself that a claim to exceptional vision demands exceptional sacrifices, thus failing to notice that he'd fallen into the ancient and infinitely devious sin of pride. Poverty he bore without complaint; vain, insensitive, envious criticism he met with silence; mediocrity he bore with indifference; even in the presence of self-righteous ignorance he tried to show an interest which he told himself was unfeigned.

Yet despite the elaborate program of self-deception by which he attempted to convince himself that he believed himself little more than a man among other men, someone who worked with a brush and chisel as a plasterer with his mortar, or his recently deceased father with hammer and torch, the truth could not be hidden, even from himself, that his presumption of a personal vision made him self-centered to a degree that would have horrified him had he been forced to acknowledge it.

What was hidden from Bill was obvious to Beatrice. Making less of a fuss about Socialism, she was in many ways more of a

Socialist than he. She had always known that the class of persons whose presence her husband could really tolerate for long was tiny, far smaller even than that of those whose ideas he respected. It required no unusual capacity for insight on her part, to see that someone whose preferred mode of social interaction was a 12-hour day of solitary labor in a sculptor's studio, would somehow never find the time to march in a demonstration, or teach school, volunteer for the Peace Corps, or seek the kind of activity undertaken by those who really do believe that they want to work to better the lot of mankind. Well before her marriage Beatrice had accepted, and been content to accept as a husband, someone basically wrapped up in himself. To her mind this was exactly how an artist ought to be.

As part of her education, she'd been trained in various "accomplishments": a term of art school, some piano, dancing lessons, a month in France. Many bits of unassimilated factual knowledge had been picked up from her father, a schoolmaster in the 6 Counties. It was from this gentrifying amalgam that she had pieced together her own notion of what a genuine artist should look like. Surprisingly it corresponded exactly with her picture of her husband.

Beatrice was honest enough with herself to admit that she would not have minded a few of the simpler middle class comforts, although the very mention of them sent her husband into spasms. Despite this, she was resigned to staying with him through years of privation. In this regard she differed significantly from the sort of woman very common in the USA, so readily fired up with

missionary zeal to force her man into social respectability, to narrow his ambitions to the options for advancement, to cultivate motives no more honorable than acquiring the latest model of automobile, or television, or home. By contrast Beatrice Devlin believed in her husband and the rightness of his work; all to the good, as he would never have accepted her on any other terms. In most of the world's 'advanced' countries Bill might have remained a bachelor for life.

Brushing back his hair with his coat sleeve, Bill stepped through the French window into the living-room. His blue knitted cap was in his left hand, the other held his welder's mask and goggles. He stood in the doorway, smiling broadly, red-faced stolid and ox-like, very similar in fact to one of the over-sized figures that inhabited his canvases:

"Just ignore everything she says, Tom! She's a cow. She cooks well enough, I guess. Ireland isn't famous for its cooking. And she keeps the house in order. But I'm afraid you've just come to the wrong party when it comes to intelligent conversation! You can't talk to a cow."

Bill normally spoke in a soft voice, yet these comments were issued in such a manner that they could easily be heard in the kitchen. The retort was not long in coming:

"That's just what I've been *sayin'*! He leaves junk around for *three people*! Then I spend the rest of the day cleanin' up after him, while he goes out to the pubs with his friends, leavin' me all alone to look after the baby. But that's all right, because he's an *artist*!"

" Stop yer' yappin' , cow! And don't burn the stew! " Bill turned to me, laughing in his gusty manner:

" Well, Tom , how do you like our happy family? *Hey , Beatrice , where's the brat ?* " He shouted again.

" I left her with Tom. What did he do with her?"

"Oh . all right. There she is. So, Tom, what have you been doing with yourself these days?"

"Not much", I replied, in some embarrassment, " I came to Ireland as a tourist, then decided to hang around for awhile. Being a tourist was fun, but it doesn't seem possible to be anything else."

I described for Bill's sake the list of bureaucratic catastrophes I'd encountered in pursuit of jobs with Radio Eirann, the vocational school system, and even part time tutoring at Trinity College.

" That's Ireland for you!" Bill sighed, " A person looking for work is treated as a threat to the system. As long as you've got something in your belly, even if you haven't, we'd rather have you a drunk panhandler than being employed in any kind of productive capacity."

Bill opened the door from the kitchen so that Beatrice could come into the room carrying a tray holding tea and soda bread.

" My biggest problem in living here, in Dublin ", Bill went on, " is convincing people that my psyche isn't screwed up! The last time I dared let myself get drunk was on Christmas eve a year ago."

" You weren't even really drunk then, Bill, you just drank a *wee bit* too much. But I don't forget certain *other* occasions! I

suppose you think you can cover up what happened last week when Brendan Casey showed up !"

" Well, Tom, she's right. I suppose I did drink a bit then, too. What can we do? Its the way of life. As it happens, I don't enjoy drinking beyond my limit of tolerance. And I certainly don't allow it to interfere with my work. Ireland, Tom, is littered with enormous talents, I mean, real geniuses with fantastic intellects, all ruined by drink. Jackson McVay is a good example. At one time he was considered the leading theatrical talent of the post-war period. In 15 years he hasn't been a day away from the bottle."

" I'm not sure I know him."

From across the room where she was preparing the table for tea, Beatrice shouted, " Sure you do, Tom. You've visited the Bedlam, have you?"

"Yes. Just yesterday in fact."

" Jackson McVay is a permanent fixture of the floating *scene* , if you know what I mean. He's always there. He's a tall man, wears dark glasses, usually wears a black motorcycle jacket, just like some kind of *pretend* I.R.A. "

"You can't miss him" Bill interrupted, somewhat annoyed that Beatrice appeared incapable of relating even the simple details of someone's appearance without throwing in a bit of slander, " You know he's gotten good and pissed when he starts busting people in the gut. It happens every night."

" I did see a fight the other afternoon", I remarked, " There was somebody there pointed out to me as a famous American

writer. He was swinging a cane and bellowing. But I gather than Jackson McVay is a native-born Irishman."

They both laughed. " Oh, you must be thinking of Ferdinand O'Higgins!", Beatrice said. Her voice dropped to a whisper:

" So, you've already met up with O' Higgins, have you? Of course I don't know a thing about him. but from what people tell me , he's *sexually depraved* !"

" My God, Bea!" Bill yelled, really upset this time around, " From what gutter mouth did you hear that fable?" She giggled, " Well I suppose I'm exaggerating a bit of course. But *why* would a man , especially a *rich* and *famous* person like Ferdinand O'Higgins, whom the whole world calls a *brilliant* writer , wait until he's *fifty-five* to get married? "

Bill corrected her: " He was married before. His son is over in England, studying engineering. "

" Well, all right, so I'm wrong about that. But let me tell you, the first time I saw him in public, I thought *that man's a homosexual* ..... or *even* some *worse* kind of *pervert* ! And last week I learned from Sheila Franklin, that's the girl from Australia we know who's been living in Dublin for two months, that Ferdinand O'Higgins treats his wife *absolutely horribly* , which is all the evidence I need about his *weird sexual practices* ! And I could go on, too, about some *other things I've heard* , but that wouldn't be right since I was sworn to *secrecy* !"

" Cow! you're talking nonsense again !"

" Just take a look at that face, and I dare you to deny that you can see the *twisted leer* of some *wee little boy* he's seduced and

ruined for life !"

Even I had to laugh:

" You'd have trouble proving that in court, Bea; be careful when you say things like that. For all you know there may be some friend of his listening in by the fence this very minute! "

" I'm sure I'd have no trouble at all. None at all!" Beatrice replied with an injured tone, casting an uneasy glance in the direction of the window frame.

Bill sighed , " Go ahead, Bea: we can't wait to hear the latest garbage from the Beatrice Devlin Daily News!"

"Oh", " I don't know anything" , she said, happily flustered, "not really I mean, but there's supposed to be something very *strange* about the way he left England in such a *hurry* when he was doing *so well* over there, One day he's *hob-nobbin'* with the lords and ladies; then all of a sudden he's *beating* a strategic retreat to *Ireland* ! And, oh yes, Sheila Franklin mentioned some scandal that got into the London newspapers. It was all hushed up *immediately* , naturally, but it must have been something *terribly ugly* , I'm sure."

" Of course", Bill chuckled in a tone of flat sarcasm, "right out of the front page of the *News of the World* !"

" That's where she read it in fact, but even they wouldn't dare print something if there *wasn't* a *grain* of truth in it , *somewhere* ! And oh yes, Sheila did mention something about a suit brought against him by the mother of a *twelve-year old little boy* ! She didn't know what the exact charges were; but that's enough for me! I tell you, Tom, the next time you run into him, just look at his

face, and tell me if you don't agree that he *must* have led that *poor little lad* into *vice* , or even *worse* ... !"

Bill groaned : "There you have it, Tom: that's the Northern Irish mentality coming out in her !" Then he encouraged me to pour myself another cup of tea. For the next hour we sat at the dinner table, gossiping up a storm.

Moira decided that she wasn't getting enough attention. She picked up her plastic cup and ran to the table. Beatrice filled it with sugared milk. Laughing and shrieking, the child dashed off to another part of the room, spilling the liquid onto the floor before her as she ran. She'd only taken a few sips before noticing that Beatrice was cutting pieces from the loaf of soda bread. Stumbling back to the table in haste, Moira spilt the remainder of the milk. By the time she got to the table all the milk was gone. Then she deposited herself on the floor and howled her lungs out. Beatrice reached over to pick her up. Then she settled Moira securely onto her lap. From this vantage, content at last, Moira was free to forage across the table at will.

The sun, having emerged from underneath the cloud cover for half an hour, and apparently concluding that it had exerted itself enough for Dublin, closed the door of heaven and went inside for the rest of the day.

This momentous event redirected my attention from the living-room, through the large picture window and into the front yard. My gaze wandered over the jungle of sculpture that had taken root there and blossomed over the decade. Beatrice was silent, a rare occurrence, and was quietly occupied in clipping

recipes from the Sunday Irish Times. Perhaps she'd exhausted her stores of current speculation, or perhaps she was sufficiently at ease to feel free from the pressure of being obliged to make conversation. Bill was examining a sheaf of drawings he'd procured during his visit to Sweden the year before. Even Moira, poised to over turn the bottle of milk standing on the table, looked around momentarily, wondering as to the source of this universal contentment.

Regarding the sculptures in the yard one more time, I could almost imagine them coming to life. Perhaps the transient sunlight had been enough to kindle them into flame ; or it may have been an unmistakable affinity to the old Celtic world, before the advent of all that is normally assumed to be characteristically European , instilling into them a current of life that o'erleapt the centuries.

Bill, working at a table in the far corner, hunched in mental concentration like the crest of a wave hovering above its trough in the act of propelling itself forward, was developing ideas latent in the drawings gleaned from former years and a former place. No conscious actor in the world's spiritual advance, merely its vessel, heir to 3000 years of melody and magic, of fables and mysteries resonant within Ireland's vibrant field of poetic energy and spiritual vision, Bill was little more than the harvester of seeds of memory wordless and imperishable, cradled in those universal bonds which tie man to nature, rocking him to deliverance, inextinguishable and active against the drab conformity of an ignorant civilization.

Bill, Beatrice and Moira: now it seemed to me that, contained in the microcosm of this young family, demanding nothing from others beyond the right to live and work on its own terms, there was to be found every facet of the human condition: its primitive selfishness, its inherent stability, its eternal validity, its indifference to the demands of society, law, status, custom; its courage and also its weakness; and the ultimate joy feeding at its core.



### Chapter 3 Portrait of the Artist

It must have been the Revolution which, after an uncharacteristically lengthy stopover in London, brought Riccardo diGiogio, Genoese painter, hurtling onto the Dublin scene.

By which revolution one might mean that of the earth about its axis, accomplished each day in a little over twenty-four hours; yet which could also refer to the inevitable victory of the People's Revolution, or even to the revolution *in perpetuity* uniting mankind everywhere in universal bonds of brotherhood. Or any revolution one cares enough about to trouble to evoke.

Whatever its nature , Riccardo deGiorgio washed up one November afternoon, in some year in the 1970's , on the crest of one of those not infrequent tidal waves which, throughout the centuries, from the small sea separating it from its inhospitable neighbor, has submerged the Emerald Isle.

Apart from the clothes on his back he carried with him few worldly possessions: one suitcase filled with winter clothing, another with sketch pads, books and drawings. Something like 30 unframed canvases, sent ahead the previous week, were being held in storage at Shannon Airport.

There were numerous other prodigies of labor and mind which he could claim as his own, such ownership being scattered across half the nations of capitalist Europe. He had a check book, but no bank account; this also tells us something about him. The latter state of affairs was comparatively recent; indeed it had not been too long ago that he would have admitted that he was doing rather well for himself in London. Rumors had been circulating about him from the first day of his extraordinary appearance in Dublin. They hinted at scandalous love affairs, of enmities acquired among the elite and the powerful, of enormous debts, and other things of a similar character that made it unlikely he would be thinking of returning there in a hurry.

The impression he gave of himself was quite the opposite. To hear him speak, one would think only one interpretation could be given to his hasty departure: his moral revulsion at decadent and imperialist England, steeped in villainy, stewing in bourgeois hypocrisy, rotten to the very bedrock. Even in the unlikely possibility that the entire city of London somehow owed *him* money, so he claimed, nothing could ever induced him to go back there!

The true facts of the matter were both simpler and less sinister than either his theories or the speculations of the

Dubliners. His situation in London had indeed become desperate; yet over and above that, he'd become sincerely captivated by the Irish Legend. Like many a benighted dreamer before him, Ireland was his nation of the heart. He asked nothing more of the higher forces that govern our existence, than that he be permitted to pass the rest of his days amid the joys and sufferings of these gifted, tragic Celtic souls, anarchists in their very genes, inspired bards who pass their days reciting ballads in the streets, their evenings in pubs where they imbibed poetry, song and fine ale, drinking and pledging eternal fellowship, and their nights given over to uninhibited bawdry!

All of this is speculation, a reasonable assessment based on evidence assembled many years after the events presently to be portrayed. One fact is however indisputable: less than two days after his crash landing on Irish soil, Riccardo deGiorgio's mere presence in Dublin had split the world of the Graphic Arts into several acrimonious, bitterly hostile camps.

Thereby did an innocent Italian artist with no political agenda, ethnic prejudices, or dubious intentions, make more lifelong enemies out of Irishmen in months than the scheming of British politicians could have done in years. The phenomenon, "Riccardo deGiorgio", sundered allegiances, terminated long-standing friendships, set husband against wife against child against sibling against teacher. His continuing residence on the island provoked long overdue redistribution between the numerous groups of idle tongue-waggers, making heroes of some, scapegoats of others. Busted jaws and demolished reputations

figured in his legacy; and, as inevitably must happen in things of this sort, inevitable boredom set in long before his inevitable, and inevitably hasty, departure. In the long overview of the decade, he'd served only as the fuel for a new cycle of scandal, grievance, back-biting, and in the final verdict, despair.

All by showing up at the wrong time.

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The roots of these remarkable developments lay 7 years in the past. Were one to set aside the historical perspective this account, which now appears merely implausible, would become incomprehensible.

In the early 60's a loosely knit community of Irish artists and writers, each on their personal Grand Tour, had come together and established itself briefly in Zurich. Given their innate clannishness, they'd made few efforts to develop contacts and knew little about local literary or artistic activity. A café had been found that suited them, out of the way and empty most of the time. Most of their free time was thereafter spent snuggled up in one or another of its nooks, mulling over ancient animosities, damning established reputations and, in general, behaving as if they'd never left their favorite Irish pubs.

Had they not run into Riccardo, they might well have returned to Dublin in a year or so without ever having had to deal with another denizen of Zurich apart from their café waiters and concierges.

However Riccardo also frequented this café. Much of the time he could be seen busying himself with water-colors and sketch-books. This encouraged them to make his acquaintance. It turned out that he could speak a passable English as well, and seemed to know quite a bit about the art world of Zurich, their ostensible reason for being there.

It wasn't long before Riccardo deGiorgio had been accepted in their tight circle as one of them, though, lacking so many decades of immersion in the Hibernian experience, he could never hope to be treated as a member in full standing, Yet all of them treated him with genuine friendship.

Most enthusiastic among them was Brendan Casey, self-admitted dilettante who, by doing a little bit of everything badly, offended no-one in particular. Brendan made use of deGiorgio as his tour guide to cultural Zurich. To his credit, Brendan was more of an internationalist than his friends who, it would seem, would take no more notice of the interior of a Buddhist pagoda than they would of the decorations on the walls of the jet airliner that carried them to it. However it was through Riccardo that Brendan got to pass several delightful weeks in the company of several celebrated Swiss artists, writers and composers, thereby supplying him with dozens of anecdotes to spring on his circle of auditors back in the Dublin pubs, where he had a reputation as raconteur.

In his most expansive mood, Brendan exhibited his unparalleled capacity for generosity by inviting Riccardo to Ireland. He promised to show him around in much the same way that he himself had been, even going so far as to guarantee

exhibitions and entries into the world of established and reliable patronage.

At that time Riccardo deGiorgio hadn't the slightest interest in migrating to some obscure island nation sticking out in the Atlantic Ocean like a flattened potato pancake. He had other things in mind. It was high time to set off for an extensive journey around the capitals of Western Europe in pursuit of a career promising recognition, income, security, fame and wealth, (not necessarily in that order). Zurich had never been anything more than a temporary point of refuge.

Riccardo deGiorgio went next to Paris, fired up by a thoroughly romantic, if somewhat pedestrian, dream of taking the capital of the arts by storm. No newspaper headlines heralded his arrival at the Gare de Lyons, in a first-class train accommodation on which he'd spent almost half of his liquid assets. He carried with him little more than a tiny address book listing a few acquaintances, referrals to several artists, and the names of a gallery owner or two. Nor were there any headlines three months later when he was stuffed into the back seat of a station wagon driven by some young Dutch painters sympathetic to him who'd urged him to try his luck in Amsterdam.

A suitcase held a sampling of his recent work, The remainder had been seized by his landlady as security for unpaid rent. The two dozen quality art books he'd purchased during his stay there stood on the open stalls of the *bouquinistes* along the quais of the Seine. And he was decidedly thinner; all to the good, as Riccardo had a fatal tendency towards obesity.

En route to Amsterdam his friends regaled his ears with anecdotes of quick success. Nor were they speaking off the top of their heads, or from a desire just to make him feel good: within a week they'd landed him a commission. A prominent publisher engaged him to illustrate a series of travel books about Italy. A small advance was given him, with promises of more to come and a steady stream of commissions. On the strength of this modest sum Riccardo immediately borrowed as much money as his scant acquaintanceship with Amsterdam permitted; still, it was a good deal more than he had hoped for. With these funds he rented himself a basement apartment on the Amstel, and set immediately to work.

When he'd completed a dozen sketches, deGiorgio took them to a Mr. Vanderdam, the house editor assigned to the project. He was on vacation just then, but 10 days later got in touch with deGiorgio. Although the sketches were judged satisfactory, deGiorgio was advised not to do any more work on the commission. There had been a turnover in the staff and all current productions were on hold. deGiorgio was given assurances that this situation was only temporary and that there would be lots of work for him in the near future.

deGiorgio waited a fortnight before returning to the office. Vanderdam was away. As his secretary all too carefully explained to him, he never saw anyone without an appointment. Glancing over something that might be taken for his appointment book, she told him that Vanderdam's days were filled up for the rest of the month

Totally impractical in financial matters, deGiorgio deemed himself defeated without having put up a struggle. He had not a scrap of evidence against the publisher. There had been only a verbal agreement, no written contract. The small advance he'd received from Vanderdam, (which he'd implied, with little subtlety, had come out of his own pocket) did not cover even the small amount of work he'd already done. deGiorgio had been both too proud and too thoughtless to ask for a receipt. As he often did in such situations, deGiorgio flew into a rage. Before the security guard arrived to evict him, he'd already left.

In his assumption that Vanderdam had deliberately contrived to cheat him, deGiorgio was merely making the mistake of confusing the results of mismanagement with deliberate theft. The publishing house went bankrupt a few months later and many people lost their investment. In the long run, he recognized that there had been no deliberate theft. He'd merely been stalled indefinitely, standard business practice everywhere.

After he'd come to accept the fact that he wasn't going to get any more money out of the deal, he stopped by Vanderdam's office one final time to collect his drawings. Two very annoyed secretaries, incensed that a client should make them work for their boss's discourtesy, made a great show of searching the office without finding anything. They did let him know however, that if he came back that afternoon, there was every chance of finding Vanderdam at home.

He was. Vanderdam steered the conversation away from the contract violation. All that deGiorgio could get out of his was a

statement to the effect that he remembered seeing the drawings in one of the closets in his house. He promised to send them along that evening or the next day. deGiorgio returned to his basement apartment and waited. They never came; no doubt the sketches had been lost in the confusion of auctioning off the furnishings.

Thus prematurely soured on Holland, deGiorgio began making plans for going elsewhere. He hadn't a penny beyond what he'd borrowed, and that was running out quickly. The situation was not altogether hopeless, for in the few months he'd lived in Amsterdam he'd done some of his best work to date. His friends recognized this and reassured him that he could get him an exhibition there. Were he to sell some of the paintings he'd done in Amsterdam, he might pull together enough money to repossess the things he'd done in Paris, and possibly arrange to have some of his canvases sent up from Italy.

Despite the awesome prospect of having to try to interest the public in the work of an unknown foreign artist painting in avant-garde styles, a gallery was found willing and courageous enough to take on deGiorgio's paintings. It is to these that we now turn.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Il Nuovo Stile**

Highly advanced technically, supercharged with literary and political allusions, baroque and defiantly erotic, deGiorgio's painting might escape censure only from a critic as knowledgeable in both letters and art he was, and free from the least taint of

prigishness (or, shall we say - modesty). His dominant theme, virtually a monomania, was voluptuous decadence, luxury at its zenith, that is to say virtually identical to its nadir. His canvases abounded with galaxies of fornicating cardinals, bugged nuns, sadistic autocrats, flayed and flagellated serfs, allegories of venality, bestiality, disease, pulchritude, cruelty, perversity, rotting and bloody flesh, and cannibalism. They represented the anguished outpourings of a repressed and tormented rebel, of an artist contemptuously of all fads and fashions, tastemakers, critics, schools and, alas, the sensibilities of public and private sources of financing .

These were no mere infantile political cartoons, or somewhat ludicrous scatological barbs, sick jokes against the Entrenched Establishment. One could imagine them better as excursions on vessels cruising the polluted rivers of Hell, through physical and moral sewage thick with pungent stench, carnivals of torture and lust, some awe-inspiring vision of mankind's insatiable and indestructible barbarity, dressed up in all the gaudy splendor of high civilization and technology.

Riccardo deGiorgio would have encountered serious obstacles to living by his work as an independent artist in any culture. In Latin Europe, where the links to Classical and Renaissance civilization are still strong he might, with luck and persistence , have uncovered patrons who, admiring his courage or reveling in the sheer exuberance of his style, or else too degenerate to recognize that they were the very objects of

deGiorgio's vilification, would have underwritten his right to be himself.

Such alien fruits as his could never hope to ripen in the frigid Northern climate. deGiorgio's uninhibited display of exhibitionism exploded over a rain-swept metropolis functionally unable to understand him, like a hive of wasps accidentally kicked off its perch.

The pragmatic mercantilism of the Dutch, combined with the contempt for indolence endemic to all of Western Europe north of the Rhine was unable to cope with the sensuous liberty that is the special prerogative of the Mediterranean universe. Prospective customers came to his exhibition, stayed no longer than courtesy dictated, either hiding their embarrassment or at least did what they could to avoid embarrassing the gallery's directors, then fled. They carried nothing away with them beyond the sensation of having been touched by something dirty, a dirtiness furthermore impossible to wash off. No hooks had caught in their souls, no checkbooks emerged from their pockets.

It was quite otherwise with colleagues from the fraternity of serious professional artists. They recognized, and freely acknowledged that Riccardo deGiorgio was an accomplished craftsman, with an authentic voice and an important statement to make. A few visited the gallery more than once, expressly to give him words of support and encouragement. Yet serious artists, for the most part, rarely have the money to buy one another's paintings. Even so, five of his works were bought by artists of independent means. These sales had a positive impact on his

prestige, and were even reported in the arts sections of the newspapers, though doing little to make his fortune.

It was around this time that the rumors began circulating, hinting at a dark secret which deGiorgio had never made any effort to conceal. To anyone who bothered to ask, he freely admitted that he was a practicing homosexual. Most of the public concerned avoided talking to him directly. What they'd noticed was that Riccardo spent much of his free time hanging out in the upper-class bars ringing the Rembrandtsplein. Since he wasn't particularly alcoholic, they readily surmised other causes. One of them, certainly was his intention to attract a moneyed clientele. This was hardly sufficient to explain why he spent so much time hanging out with a young bartender, someone not in any position to buy his paintings, and whose intellectual level was such that no one would ever think that his conversation alone could mitigate deGiorgio's boredom.

He'd been seen on more than one occasion sitting at the counters of the sailor's taprooms by the waterfront and around Amsterdam's notorious red light district. To people who took an interest in such things, and it turned out that there were quite a number of them, it did not appear to them that deGiorgio's frequentation of these sordid venues had much connection with a painter's need to study humanity in the raw.

There was nothing of substance, nothing that could be said to rise to the level of a scandal, even when exaggerated. Riccardo deGiorgio had never bothered to hide the fact that he and the bartender were fond of one another. In all other respects his public

behavior was discrete and inoffensive, almost innocuous. Homophobes never feared that he might make a pass at them; some may in fact have been secretly angry at him because he didn't! As he absolutely refused to do anything to accommodate those parties anxious to whip up a real scandal, within a few months the flames of controversy had dimmed to a low simmer. It is possible that his perversion had driven the final nail in the coffin of his exhibition, which in any case had never had any hope of success.

Dutch fashionable society began to take a greater interest in him when he moved, quite unobtrusively, into the apartment of a young university student, daughter of a high-ranking military officer. He'd managed to tread the fine line of toleration as simply a pederastic dego and debauched filth peddler. As a colorful bohemian he could serve as a source of amusement to the merchants of culture. Yet when his intention of widening his circle of corruption to include the daughters of the upper crust became manifest, he'd clearly overstayed his welcome.

A few days after taking up residence in his girl-friend's apartment, two Dutch police officers appeared at the door. It was in the early morning and she was out, attending classes. Riccardo was alone in the living-room, hard at work on a canvas. He admitted them and they stepped inside, claiming to be engaged in a "routine search for drug activity" in the student community.

They asked to see his papers. Irregularities abounded in them, of course. His tourist visa had expired some time ago, and he'd never gone through the tedious process of obtaining work and

residence permits. This was understandable: he'd never had any intention of establishing himself permanently in Holland. Without a regular job, he'd never had an employer to fill out the forms and pay the customary fees.

Now the cops turned to bullying. They threatened to charge Riccardo with breaking and entering. There was a double irony to this, given that they were the ones who had entered without proper authorization. They demanded that he show them how much money he was carrying on him. Although his cash on hand only amounted to a few guilders, his wallet held a check from his girlfriend for a thousand guilders.

The check made it difficult for them to hold him on the vagrancy charge, or on the illegal entry for that matter. Thereupon the more impulsive of the two took the check out of his wallet and ripped it up. Once this was gotten out of the way Riccardo was informed that he was being deported as an illegal alien with no means of support and no fixed residence. He responded by pointing out to them that an exhibition of his work was still in progress and that a sum of money was still waiting for him at the gallery. Surely a painter with an exhibition that was bringing in money could not be considered disreputable.

Now the other cop, no doubt feeling cheated because he'd not yet had his share of the action, walked over to the easel standing in the center of the living room. He began studying the painting, looking for things to ridicule. "This stinks!" he said, without ceremony, pressing his right thumb against the surface of the canvas and smudging the fresh paint. Policemen as a class are not

distinguished either for appreciation of the fine arts or verbal ingenuity.

Riccardo deGiorgio thought he was losing his mind. Returning to the fray, the first cop picked up a brush dripping with paint and began swabbing the canvas randomly with wide strokes. When deGiorgio pleaded with them to stop, they laughed at him. If he'd taken the road of humoring them in their cloddishness they would most likely have gone away and left Riccardo alone, at least for the time being. His girl-friend could have written him another check. He would have had to leave Holland, but on his own time with the option of coming back later.

Not surprisingly, given his volatile character, he completely lost his head. Springing out of his chair, he committed the capital blunder of trying to pull the cop's arm holding the brush away from the canvas. They pummeled him down to the floor until boredom set in. He was picked up, still conscious, and placed back on his chair long enough for them to put the handcuffs on him. Then he was prodded from the apartment to a police car waiting for him at the foot of the stairs.

Left behind on the carpet as a memento of his brief sojourn, a vandalized canvas, much stomped upon, displayed its mute testimony to a young woman's perplexed eyes. Not that she was likely to return home any time soon. She was being kept under house arrest by her family for 24 hours, to guarantee that the police would be undisturbed in the peaceful execution of their mission. They were not completely without consideration: they first drove Riccardo to his gallery to collect his money. After a night in jail he

was hustled across Holland in a police van and dropped off at the German border.

Four years of wandering followed: Riccardo deGiorgio passed through Cologne, Munich, Vienna, Athens, Milan, Florence, Nice, Paris again, Toulouse, Barcelona, Majorca, Brussels, Stuttgart, Stockholm, Dusseldorf. There was even a clandestine return to Amsterdam for a few weeks. He was able to meet briefly with his girl-friend and say good-bye, before going underground. There were no further reasons for remaining in Holland, apart from a personal need to establish his right to be there.

With the exception of Barcelona, where he stayed for six months, his sojourns rarely lasted more than a month. He always had enough money coming in to keep him off the street, yet never enough to begin settling in for a protracted stay.

Like many another artist with little genuine interest in politics, he called himself a Marxist. Despite this he was congenitally incapable of bringing himself to perform or even seek manual labor, or any other employment making use of those skills which rude and uncultivated persons lumped together under the generic heading of "work". The human race is characterized by enormous diversity, spread out across a yawning spectrum of preferences, aptitudes and opinions. Some people enjoy the taste of cheese, others don't like it very much. Still others will vomit if you tell them that what they'd been eating had cheese in it. This in no way implies that the person fond of cheese is morally superior to the one with the cheese allergy. It was the same way with Riccardo deGiorgio: that he was constitutionally unable to work, that his

essential "spirituality" prohibited him from picking up a brush, broom or shovel, didn't make him any lower on the scales of virtue than others who slave 16 hours a day to avoid having to look at themselves in a mirror.

Physical labor had been despised in deGiorgio's family for many generations. Even clerical work, even teaching were frowned upon, although stark necessity might at times dictate that one had to bite the bullet. Although he shared fully in these ancestral prejudices, a vast gulf of intellect separated him from the petty pseudo-aristocratic world that, after stifling him as a child, had disowned him as a man.

His grasp of Marxist theory would have put to shame any union organizer; hatred for the bourgeoisie may well have been spewed as hot venom over his turbulent canvases; and if he ran across a brother worker, some fellow victim of oppression, some comrade, either in the streets of Milan or anywhere in the world for that matter, he could so moved by class love as to not only embrace him immediately, but sleep with him later on. The fact remained that he could not debase with even a single hour of honest toil.

Yet he possessed an appetite for hard work that can only be called ferocious. Immense application, energy and dedication were poured into his painting. He was not to blame if his work was incomprehensible save to other artists, many of whom had come to recognize the power of his imagination and his growing mastery of technical resources. Among professional collectors he was a total unknown. The posh galleries, anxious for quick profits, and the

museums, which tend to examine the embalmer's receipt in judging the credibility of a work of art, could not be expected to concern themselves with the fact that a major talent was being ruined in its critical years by poverty and rejection.

In addition to which he was clearly his own worst enemy, bound inextricably by strange neurotic patterns of traumatic re-enactment. Somehow, in those situations where he did receive the patronage of the wealthy, or support from public institutions, he always found himself embroiled in sticky relationships with the daughters and even the wives of the social elite, leading invariably to social disgrace and financial ruin. It remains a total mystery that he would go out of his way to bring disaster upon himself in this way, when it is so apparent that he really did prefer working-class young men to any of the women he courted. No worse off than himself economically, though better able to survive, these boy-friends were, in terms of their education and social breeding, as beggars to a prince.

deGiorgio paused briefly in his relentless flight to take up a teaching position in a small arts college in Barcelona. His sufferings during the one term he worked there, exceeded all that he'd been through in his decade of humiliation. Everything he painted in that period has been discarded or lost, while not a single drawing or work in other media was finished. Several sketchbooks were filled up with sterile fragments of ideas. He roundly hated all of his colleagues, loathed his students, despised the administration. The very indignity of having to show up for classes early each morning at the precise hour was insupportable to him. Riccardo

wasn't fired, nor did he quit, in the usual sense of the word. Truth be told, he fled.



A few months later, looking for a quick haven from accumulated debts, Riccardo migrate to England. The nation itself had little appeal for him. Apart from contempt for its minuscule standing in the graphic arts, deGiorgio personally harbored quite a large number of the conventional European stereotypes about the quaint, pompous formalities of the Anglo. It was therefore all the more astonishing that, almost from the moment of his arrival, his unshakable bad fortune forsook him for a few years.

Part of the credit for his brief flirtation with prosperity in London has to be given to the protections granted by the Welfare State. It was prior to the advent of Margaret Thatcher, when there really was such a phenomenon. Is it possible that the career of Dante Gabriel Rossetti a century earlier, had conditioned the eye of the Londoner to the wilder outpourings of Italian visual consciousness? No doubt the causes, which one can endlessly debate, were less far-fetched, more arbitrary.

What one can state as a certainty is that, for the first time, people with money, taste and influence took the time to study his work, and were able to see beyond its rebarbitive surface to a lifetime of uncompromising integrity that endowed it with lasting value.

A few parameters can serve indicate the swiftness of his rise from destitution to affluence.

(a) Less than a month after his arrival in London, Riccardo stopped shop-lifting art supplies, reversing a policy dating back to his student days.

(b) Within three months he had his own flat.

(c) In less than a year his own studio.

(d) Reaping the benefit of long experience with obtuse immigration officialdom, he kept all of his papers up to date. Owing to this he was able to navigate the bureaucratic sea well enough to float through the lean second year on the welfare system of a country in which, although Jerusalem may not yet be builded there is, at least in some places, green and pleasant.

(e) A more secure footing was established when, near the beginning of his third year in London, Riccardo landed a commission to illustrate a book of translations of the complete works of a famous Italian poet of the post-war period.

The works of this poet had appealed to many intellectuals needing a direction in the confusion of the times. He knew them intimately. His poems had kindled a fire in his soul from an early age, and he was able to recite many of them from memory. By a stroke of good fortune, an English publisher had brought together the aging poet with the only graphic artist in England capable of transmitting the essence of his thought into visual form.

It was the reviews of the first two volumes of this project, in *The London Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Observer* that set Riccardo deGiorgio's career onto the upward spiral of success. The miracle only lasted for a few years; in comparison to the volcanic, if brief, explosions of show business fame, it could hardly be called

dazzling. Yet it did provide deGiorgio with the sense that he might be able to earn in the Anglo-Saxon world what had been consistently denied him on the Continent: the dignity of living by his art.

New commissions followed. No longer did he have to deal with the sort of patron who might calculate that, by giving him room and board for a week or treating him with a free meal in a good restaurant, he could gain possession of deGiorgio's work for little or nothing. Despite the lurid quality of his imagery - for in this respect he had scarcely changed - he even managed to sell some of his works to the managers of pasta restaurants in Soho. Thereby the despised representatives of the bourgeoisie became accustomed to slurping their spaghettis beneath wild allegorical tableaux suggesting, among other things, a virgin being raped by a bull, a masturbating Pope, or an emperor eating his own excrement.

For the first time in twenty years, since he'd brushed off the dust from his place of birth, that Riccardo deGiorgio was able to put aside a bit of money and plan for the future. He must therefore be excused, indeed granted a full pardon, if this tiny bit of security went to his head in much the same way that a sip of wine will act on an empty stomach.

Riccardo deGiorgio had never had the opportunity to develop habits of thrift, nor had he given much thought to what he might do with an accumulation of surplus funds. Possessing a small amount of debt-free capital so unnerved him that it was all dissipated long before he was able to seriously ask himself what he should do with it. Little short of amazing was his total freedom

from any feelings of obligation to reimburse those knaves on the Continent from which he'd been so rudely evicted!

All of his income beyond room and board was quickly diverted into books, theater, good restaurants, travel, outings with friends, and supplies for grandiose artistic projects. Somehow he never remembered that all of his shirts were frayed; that he'd promised to repay a loan by the end of the week; that he might now be in a position to fulfill a long-standing ambition and study architecture; that he ought to be out looking for a better studio. By the time he remembered these things, the money to accomplish them had vanished.

Altogether, a sudden affluence had re-acted negatively both on him and his work. Mounting anxiety over the consequences of his financial problems obsessed both sleeping and waking hours. The conditioning by a hand-to-mouth existence, reinforced over decades, had rendered him functionally incapable of sensibly organizing his life around his new income. One brings to mind the prisoners in tiger cages during the Vietnamese War who, liberated, were unable to straighten themselves up, or even to walk; or of the survivors of a siege who, through compulsive gorging, kill themselves.

On Monday he could give 20 pounds to an artist from sympathy for his state of desperation. That very same day, seized with panic at his lack of control over his money was, he could refuse to bankroll a friend to a cup of tea.

By Tuesday he could be restricting his diet to a sandwich and a cup of coffee as he counted up, minute by minute, all the money

he was saving by doing so. On Wednesday, as a reward for his exemplary asceticism, he would treat himself and a few friends to a meal at an expensive restaurant. After which he might launch himself into a spree of buying up art books, to lie around for months in his studio without ever being opened.

Once he opened up a bank account for the purpose of putting aside money for a visit to the United States. By the end of that same week, all of it had been thrown away on a costly array of art supplies, projects for which he would never again recover any enthusiasm and destined to remain forever in his sketchbooks.

An over-indulged childhood, followed abruptly by a prolonged period of bitter privation had dissipated his appetites and dreams into a thousand mindless streams. A species of money-madness could descend upon him, working him up into a frenzy, like the madness with which the gods of Greek mythology infected their victims on their way to destruction. In point of fact, Riccardo deGiorgio only felt free when he'd squandered away every penny.

It was inevitable that the difficulties of his situation, unique though not all that unusual, would begin to manifest a decisive influence on his work. Apart from some drawings done in his first months in England, the admirable illustrations from the poetry commission, and a set of remarkable etchings worked up from sketches made in a trip to Scotland, very little of the work produced in his three years in England has lasting value. Three factors appear to have been fatal to his inspiration:

*(i) The unheralded bestowal of an adequate, if unstable, income upon an artist who had struggled without success for 20 years:*

*(ii) The realization that he could best support his new standard of living by the invention of a facile style, only slightly above the level of advertising art, which became his signature for the 3 years following upon the poetry commission, and:*

*(iii) Another liaison with a woman from the upper echelons that would bring about his ruin.*

The scandal differed in significant ways from the others that had sewn disaster in deGiorgio's path and would continue to do so. First off, she wasn't married to one of his patrons, or to anyone else. Her position in society could not readily be exploited to serve his personal agenda. Finally, despite his being homosexual, nor pretending to be otherwise, he proposed marriage to her.

The reasons for this extraordinary decision are not difficult to discern: disoriented by too abrupt a transition to recognition and claim, combined with his fear of descending once more into a hand-to-mouth vagabond subsistence, Riccardo diGiorgio had concluded that it was time to go straight and settle down. A fatal sip of the elixir of comfort had led him to believe that the tiny fluorescence of a career could be coaxed into a steady blaze by paying his dues to society in the conventional manner. This was not so surprising in itself: Riccardo had always been more conventional than he imagined himself, and in fact compromises had always been made in every domain, even the content of his art.

Despite the brave front he displayed before others, he'd never hidden from himself the knowledge that up to that time his life had been an unmitigated catastrophe. Super-sensitive yet at the same time quite tough, he smarted inwardly at being characterized

as a queer, a pervert, lascivious, a corrupter of youth, a freak of nature. Worn down by ignorance and hypocrisy, (though shrewd enough to recognize that some hypocrisy had been involved in his own choices and decisions) he was willing to sacrifice his principles in exchange for a measure of economic protection.

Beyond superficial appearances, Riccardo deGiorgio was a puritan, (if the label be taken to mean a mixture of asceticism and sexual obsession). Riddled by guilt as any Cromwell yet helpless in the clutches of his violent lusts, he was no longer able to deal with the instability and squalid misery that had hobbled most of his working career. His many loves had brought him nothing but grief. Quite apart from the vicious mistreatment at the hands of an intolerant public, the heartbreak and savagery of his liaisons, both male and female was in itself enough to drive him to the same conclusions.

Obviously he did feel attracted to women, if only in the form of a temporary affection. Yet although he might enter into a romantic relationship with them, or go so far as to consent to make love to them, it had always been because he thought it necessary to make some sort of sacrifice in exchange for what he hoped to get out of them. Paradoxically, although this attitude was basically one of predator to prey, these involvements invariably terminated in his own ostracism or exile.

One is not really surprised to learn that, for the reasons elucidated above, many women found him irresistible.

Never before had he dare imagine that a real future, one sanctioned by society, could be his, with a stable income, bank

accounts, one or more homes, vehicles, investments, even a family of his own, cosseted in the smug respectability he'd always considered his birthright, with no obligations towards anyone, free of debt and scandal, and a clear conscience.

The narrative of any one of the disasters of deGiorgio's life can serve as the model for all. Suffice it to say that his fiancée was a young lady of the minor aristocracy, a person with money, pedigree, connections and enough artistic talent to make her acceptable to him. There was an affair, and she became pregnant. There was talk of marriage, which came to nothing. Rumors circulated of an illegal abortion, of an overdose of barbiturates. The year spent in a private sanitarium in Canada however is a matter of public record.

A few years later she re-entered British high society, comfortably ensconced in the kind of dull, conventional marriage intrinsic to her social position. It was around then that Riccardo deGiorgio was being made to understand that he might be really happier if he went elsewhere. Only then did he begin to consider the possibility of going to Ireland.

The agency for his hegira was none other than Brendan Casey. For 7 years his phone number had lain forgotten in Riccardo's addressbooks. As home addresses change less frequently in Ireland than in, say, a place like the United States, Brendan could be reached at the same telephone number, and Riccardo was able to talk with Brendan on his first call.

Brendan Casey still remembered him, recalling the long conversations they'd had in Zurich. Over the course of several

telephone conversations Riccardo learned that Brendan had become one of the directors of a prominent Dublin art gallery, the Phoenix. Nothing would give him more pleasure, Brendan assured him, than a chance to repay the debt he'd incurred for the good times he'd enjoyed in Zurich. He intended to do everything possible to set his old friend Riccardo up in a one-man show in the Phoenix.

In a conversation lasting over two hours, Brendan Casey exhorted to catch the next plane for Ireland. After centuries of tyranny and oppression, the Emerald Isle needed the infusion of new artistic talent from abroad. The Irish way of life, he crooned, really was as fabulous as he'd been led to believe from his reading of the great modern Irish authors and his encounters with expatriates. Art was built into the genes of the Celtic race; he would be loved by everyone. It would serve both him and Ireland, he insisted, that Riccardo come and place his abilities in the service of the nation. Flee the British hell-hole!, he exhorted him. London was nothing but a septic tank. Ireland was still a place where a man could still breathe, feel proud to be alive, be himself ... etc, etc....

A few days later Riccardo received a final call from Brendan. He was persuaded to pack up as many of his canvases as he could and ship them to Dublin immediately. Brendan promised him an exhibition in 3 weeks time. He promised to take care of everything: collecting the canvases from Shannon Airport; having their framed; supervising their hanging and arrangement on the walls of the gallery. All free of charge. All that Riccardo deGiorgio needed to do was to fly over to Ireland in 3 weeks time in time for the gala *vernissage*.





## Chapter 4

### Showdown at the Open Studio

Excited by Casey's promises of an easy conquest of Dublin, Riccardo began setting aside drawings and canvases that very afternoon. It took him 3 days to gather everything into boxes and crates and bring them to Gatwick for shipping, via Aer Lingus, to the airport at Shannon. Following which he sat down and sent a telegram to Brendan Casey announcing that his work was on its way. In a letter written and sent off later that afternoon he explained that he intended to stay on in Ireland for some time. Left unstated was the supposition that the length of his stay would be conditioned on the amount of time it might take for London's memories to fade and tempers to cool: Riccardo deGiorgio had no intention of remaining forever in Ireland, which he considered something of a backwater.

He gave Casey permission to begin looking around for a flat for him immediately. It would have to be cheap but serviceable, a place to settle himself in for the remainder of that year, and perhaps get a bit of work done. A few days later he wrote again, specifying the exact date of his arrival: October 12th, 3 days before the projected opening of his show at the Open Studio.

On the stipulated date, October 12th, 7 AM, Riccardo deGiorgio arrived at Dun Laoghaire by late night ferry from Liverpool. An hour later he alighted and walked away from the Pearse Street Station in downtown Dublin. Neither Brendan Casey

nor anyone else was there to meet him. He stepped into an insalubrious restaurant near Trinity College to get some breakfast. With the help of a city map obtained at the station he walked up Grafton Street into the pleasant precincts of St. Stephen's Green. Continuing on to the other side brought him to the premises of the Open Studio.

A plaque on its doors let him know that the gallery opened at noon. This meant that he would have to hang around another 3 hours. The time was used to make some sketches in the park and passed quickly.

Returning at noon he found the gallery open. Stepping inside he found the atmosphere unpretentious, perhaps unassuming to a fault. One might even be inclined to accuse it of a lack of basic professionalism. He could see however that it was well managed. Bill Devlin's paintings were on all the walls. It was apparent to him that his work, labored without being amateurish, had had no time to benefit from international exposure or travel. Riccardo anticipated that he would have no trouble convincing people here that his was a presence to be reckoned with.

The gallery was located on the ground floor of a Georgian building. The walls were plain, the rooms barren of ornamentation. The rugs were ordinary, even somewhat frayed. The light also was bad, coming in through windows poorly arranged relative to the street and adjacent buildings; but Riccardo had exhibited in far worse surroundings. It certainly wasn't what he'd become used to in London.

A reception table holding two staff members, a young man and woman, was located at the far end of the room accessible from the street. Riccardo strolled over to it quickly and introduced himself. To his surprise he discovered that no-one had been told of his coming that afternoon. Nor did they know anything about him, or his reputation. The young man went to the back and returned with another staff member, a somewhat older man. He'd read something about deGiorgio in an article in the Arts section of the London Times. Then again he might have confused his name with DeChirico. In fact, he now recalled that the article had been about an Italian sculptor, not a painter after all.

Brendan Casey? Oh yes, everybody knew about him! He'd gone to Denmark on short notice and wasn't expected back for another month. They were all very sorry, but Brendan hadn't said anything to anyone before leaving, about arranging an exhibition for a friend coming in from London!

Riccardo's paintings? No, they had no idea where they'd ended up. Probably still in the left luggage rooms at Shannon. The fact of the matter was, Mr. deGiorgio must certainly have misunderstood what Brendan was telling him, since he could hardly have arranged for an exhibition at the Open Studio, when Bill Devlin's show was scheduled to run to the end of the month, that is to say, the first of November! Furthermore, who has ever heard of a gallery framing paintings for nothing?

"I'll tell you what". Moved by his plight, the person who'd read about some artist with an Italian name began to respond with traditional Irish hospitality: "I'll put you up in my flat tonight, and

tomorrow we can go to Shannon to find out what's happened to your paintings."

Riccardo was too furious to acknowledge that, under the circumstances the offer was more than generous. He'd moved out of his apartment in London after putting his artwork and furniture in storage. There was nothing to go back to. Solely on the strength of Brendan Casey's assurances, the renewal of a promise he'd made in Zurich 5 years ago, he'd transposed himself and about 30 of his paintings to a country about which he knew nothing and where he was acquainted with no-one else. He admitted his naiveté in expecting that he could come to come to Dublin to find his works framed and already on exhibition in a fashionable gallery, with a line of rich patrons (clearly he knew little about Irish history) standing at its doors, fighting each other for the privilege of being the first to buy them.

From his reading he'd built up a mental image of Ireland as a land of poets, artists, musicians and bards, something like Renaissance Italy. This living monument to Socialism would be strengthened through its association with the renowned pragmatism of the English.

His personal appearance in the present circumstances was also causing him acute misery; travelling all night on the ferry from Holyhead to Dun Laoghaire had left him dirty and exhausted. From his point of view it was clear that he'd been cheated, and that no-one intended to take responsibility for footing the bill.

Through force of habit Riccardo descended into a begging routine conditioned by dozens of similar experiences with

publishers, gallery directors, patrons and other so-called art sympathizers.

"What I supposed to do?" he stamped his foot, "I come here with promise from a director that he will give me an exhibition in this place. You don't show any responsibility. You no see that somebody take care of me?"

"I don't see how you can blame us. We're just individuals. We haven't got any money to buy your paintings." Peter Maloney, the gallery manager, pushed his glasses up on the bridge of his nose and, not without a feeling of repulsion, regarding him as some kind of strange insect, "You're not the first foreigner to come to Ireland to live off us. Still", he added hastily, "There's no reason to get angry. Someone's already offered to put you up, and tomorrow somebody will drive you to Shannon to see about your paintings.

"We're not going to give you an exhibition unless Bill Devlin agrees to withdraw his early, which isn't likely. However; he's a friend of Brendan's .... why don't you talk to him? I'm sorry we can't do anything more for you, but we don't feel responsible for anything Brendan Casey may have said to you."

deGiorgio stormed around the gallery, throwing out wild threats and swearing:

"I am 20 years a painter! You think you are first to cheat and rob me?" His acute sense of grievance and humiliation compounded by the feeling that, relative to the chrome decor of the gallery he looked and smelt like a bum, deGiorgio was seized by the urge to strike out at anything or anyone:

" You owe me money! I make you pay! I am bum! Thief! Pervert! But I wreck everything in this gallery unless you treat me like an artist! I have dignity! I never going to forget this! " He probably didn't realize that he was swinging his fists.

" Look here now, you get out of here!" Peter Maloney stood up, frightened and trembling . deGiorgio dashed over to him and seized his jacket lapels:

" You want I beat in your face?" Maloney gaze at him , petrified with fear. A staff assistant used the opportunity to run out the back door and summon the police.

" You - you'd better go now, Mr. deGiorgio." Maloney sputtered, " The police will be along any minute now."

Riccardo released Maloney and raced madly through the rooms. He ran over to one of the larger of Bill Devlin's canvases and went through the motions of wresting it from the wall and trashing it. Yet, crushed by shame, all of his capacity for action deserted him the moment his hands gripped the sides of the frame.

The situation was simple, really: it was just that there was nothing he could do. And it would ever be thus, he knew. It would always be they who held the power, whether it be gallery directors, patrons, publishers, critics, that whole nebulous yet easily identifiable class of society who held the upper hand in the commerce of art. They would always be alert and ready , eager to deny him happiness, recognition, the decency of a life freed from poverty, the semblance of normalcy. They would make the ultimate decisions concerning his life, and the world would judge him by their decrees, whether he was to be to be thought of as a good artist

or a bad artist, a good man or bad man, whether he deserved to survive or perish.

And it would always be he, along with other souls, far nobler, yet trapped alike in a futile destiny, condemned eternally to wander alone, lost amidst the masses of mankind with whom they have little in common, his powers squandered uselessly while at their uttermost heights, mired in helpless dependency when independence was most vital to him .

Riccardo, arms dangling, fists clenched at his sides, visibly a metaphor of total impotence , his head lowered to his breast like an intimidated child, slinked towards the door anxious only to avoid being seen. Shunning the gazes of hostile astonishment on all sides, Riccardo deGiorgio stumbled clumsily out the door. He sat himself down on the bottom doorstep. His disheveled trousers and jacket fluttering in the sharp wind, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Beatrice Devlin was just then coming up the street. She was taking Moira out for her afternoon stroll, holding the child's left hand tightly in the grasp of her right. They were both tightly bundled against wind and perpetual damp. Before proceeding to shop for small items, she had decided to visit the Open Studio to waste half an hour or so gossiping with Peter Maloney and to find out how her husband's exhibition was coming along. She wore a green coat and high boots, her flaming hair bustling in the strong wind, Moira protected by a jump suit with suspenders, plaid scarf and a red coat. They walked up the street together at a quick pace.

She'd noticed Riccardo from a distance , but imagined at first that he was probably a drunk turned out of a local pub. Once she was inside the Open Studio she learned quickly enough who he was. Leaving Moira with a secretary she came back out immediately, sat down beside him and began discussing the details of the present crisis. Riccardo turned his face away from her, ashamed as he was at being seen crying in the company of a woman. She knew how to talk to him; her husband, after all, was an artist who'd had his share of rough times from the Dublin art world. Within a short time he'd calmed down and was able to tell her what had happened.

She went back inside and collected Moira. She was able to persuade Peter Maloney to leave Riccardo with her and not contact the police. A few minutes later they were walking together to the Devlin household to meet Bill. Once Riccardo had washed up, taken a nap, and been filled with a solid Irish stew, they would sit around and figure out what might be done to launch his career as a painter in Ireland.



## Chapter 5

### The deGiorgio Affair

All Dublin was up in arms over the "deGiorgio Affair" in a matter of days. That nothing at all was known about the man hardly mattered. Vague rumors circulated about an Italian painter who, for awhile, had been making something of a name for himself in London. Others had recollections of a whiff of scandal attached

to his name, without the slightest idea of what the issues were, or why they might have something to do with his situation in Dublin. Coming together in public, the professional artists were at a loss to fathom what species of convoluted logic had induced deGiorgio to emigrate to Ireland, almost all of whose painters had been reduced to despair from trying to find ways to escape.

One cannot overly blame Peter Maloney for doing all he could to denigrate him. He spread the word through the pubs that Riccardo deGiorgio was a dangerous maniac, a reasonable conclusion based on the impression he'd conveyed during that fateful afternoon at the Open Studio. Maloney's harsh criticisms found a ready ear among the clean-shirted plutocratic crowd he was forever trying to lure into making a visit to the Open Studio.

Fabulous accounts of deGiorgio's homosexual exploits seemed to take bloom from the very Dublin air. His physical predilections, though far from unique to him, added their bit towards damaging his reputation in elite circles, which included a decisive proportion of the city's editors, art critics and journalists.

Already there were a number of venues of some importance in downtown Dublin, where Riccardo deGiorgio had become *persona non grata* even without ever having put in an appearance in them. It was a foregone conclusion that any exhibition he did manage to arrange in the near future would be prejudiced in advance by a coalition of journalists, gallery owners, artists, even politicians, determined to ruin him. There were many in Dublin who hated him long before they'd met him, a situation that more than once proved to be embarrassing to him once he began making

the rounds of fashionable Dublin society. Although it is true that some scandal or controversy can help an artist's career, it has to be of the sort that a patron can endorse bravely, provided that bravery doesn't cost him anything. Furthermore, Dublin was simply too provincial to accommodate a notorious foreigner accustomed to conjuring up the great issues of art, politics, money and morality.

Without prior warning, Riccardo would suddenly find himself having to deal with the most obtuse hostility coming from some complete stranger he was meeting for the first time, someone who could only have known about him through connections about which he could only speculate. No doubt these same mechanisms also earned him several secret friends, although for some reason he almost never seemed to run into them. So thoroughly does an opinion, rumor, attitude, or permeate through Dublin society, that it is impossible to piss in a deserted alleyway at 2 o'clock in the morning, without the whole world exchanging informed judgments on the event that same afternoon.

Among the small number of facts about which there could be any certainty was that deGiorgio had moved in with Bill and Beatrice Devlin. The events surrounding his arrival coincided with the period in which Bill Devlin was beginning to carry some weight in artistic Dublin. As a young sculptor who had come from the bottom up, who had already begun to stake out his territory in a difficult and highly competitive craft, he'd earned the grudging respect that is always given, even by confirmed hypocrites, to a youthful and dynamic integrity. Few persons wanted to go on public record that he was on the outs with Bill Devlin, though they

might revile him in private . Some of the more established artists, already calculating that Bill might, in the near future, offer them serious competition, were beginning to court him, if only to be able to say later on that they'd recognized his talent before anyone else. Among the places in which Devlin's prestige was at an all-time high, was at the Open Studio itself, if for no other reason than the plain fact that without his unfaltering support it would have folded long before.

The Open Studio had been founded in the late 50's by a group of relatively unknown artists calling themselves "The Communards" . They were all in their 20's. Few had any formal art education. Their association grew out of informal gatherings for the purpose of learning as much as they could about modern art from the scant resources available to them in Ireland.

Half a dozen or so of the Communards had stuck it out long enough to become professional artists, the rest of them going into professions such as law and medicine, or emigrating to England, America or elsewhere. The ties of friendship had held firm however, and when some of the original members of the group had established themselves successfully in business, they provided patronage for the next generation of aspiring artists.

These were the ones who, in the middle 60's, had set up a modest avant-garde gallery in an abandoned car loft above a service station near the heart of Dublin. The original somewhat pretentious name for it was the "*Salon des Independents* " , but this was soon changed to, first the Phoenix Gallery, then The Open Studio. The name had held through four changes of address until it

found its present home in a fine Georgian house just to the north of St. Stephen's Green.

The gallery survived. The elderly business types served on its board of directors, coating the enterprise with a whitewash of respectability which enabled it to engage a small number of artists with large international reputations, as well as a genteel clientele. Crucial to the enterprise were the energy and enthusiasm of Bill Devlin, who could be expected literally to work around the clock to keep it going at times when either money or morale were running low. Bill turned all the proceeds of his own exhibitions there to the gallery. He stayed up nights framing the works of artists too poor to pay to have it done, or too inexperienced to do it themselves. He designed and printed its posters, promoted the Open Studio at all of his other exhibitions. For her part Beatrice used her large circle of acquaintances to bring the numbers into the gallery for its opening nights. More often than not the punch and sandwiches had been prepared by her.

Without the Devlins the Open Studio would not have survived beyond the 60's. Its directors recognized that they could not afford to alienate Bill Devlin, all the more so as his own exhibitions were so well attended, bringing in hundreds of much needed Irish pounds.

The politics of art being what they are, Bill's rising star produced a situation in which all of his friends and associates were partisans of the pro-deGiorgio faction. They took Riccardo out on the town and paid for his drinks. Often they served him as protective cover, walking with him into pubs where customers

would turn away with sinister murmuring as he entered the door. They invited him into their homes for meals, showering him in the warm hospitality for which Ireland is justly famous. Not only were they willing to defend him against his slanderers, they even came to blows doing so.

Bill Devlin, his friends and the present membership of the "Communards" tended to congregate in pubs congenial to artists, writers and students, places that were not prominent on the fashionable registers. These were the places in which one found the pro-deGiorgio factions.

As the board of directors of the Open Studio, their friends, their patrons and the fashionable artists that gave legitimacy to the gallery generally hung out in the elite pubs around St. Stephen's Green, it was in these that one found the strongholds of the anti-deGiorgio cadres. There he could expect to find nothing but his enemies laying in wait for him, and for the first chance they could get to shillalegh him out of Ireland.

And there were even two pubs in which public opinion was split right down the middle. One of these was the Bedlam itself, if for no other reason than its being the only pub in Dublin big enough to not be totally provincial. The crowd that frequented Gleason's, a much smaller pub on the other side of Grafton Street, was clustered around the personalities that Riccardo had run into in Zurich in the 60's. Several of these artists and writers maintained an obstinate ambition of creating an exclusive literary salon, modeled on their ideas about the salons of 18th century London and Paris.

A veritable typhoon raged through the ranks of the Gleason's clan over the part played by Brendan Casey in luring deGiorgio onto Hibernian soil. More than a few among them detested Brendan. They welcomed the chance to side with deGiorgio, if for no other reason than they might, by doing so, further blacken Brendan's reputation in Dublin. There were others however who thought of Riccardo deGiorgio as the worst kind of foreign freeloader, merely because of his decision to come to Ireland to live for awhile.

Aleister McDonnell, one of deGiorgio's warmest champions, was a member of the Gleason's crowd's inner circle. He was also a good friend of Bill Devlin. The uproar that broke out on the floor of Gleason's the day after Riccardo's arrival was so hurtful to Aleister that he broke with his own set, with whom he'd shared drinks on practically every day fore the past five years, and went over to the Bedlam, which he'd always found thoroughly nauseating, for the next week.

A 50-year old poet threw the contents of his glass of Guinness into the face of a 25-year old upstart who had dared to suggest that Brendan Casey might be an ignoramus and a fool. And a young painter who seemed to live in Gleason's, idly boasted that if Riccardo deGiorgio so much as set foot within its premises, he would be happy to have the honor of throwing him through the window.

That very evening Riccardo did indeed come into Gleason's in the warm embrace of Joe O'Donaghue, art collector and antique dealer. The afore-mentioned painter did not follow through on his

boast by throwing him out the window, but retired to a dark corner where he passed the rest of the evening muttering dark curses and sulking.

Even in the respectable Bedlam sharply divided opinions had a way of rising to the level of violence. All in all, Riccardo deGiorgio provided provender for the gossip-mongers from months, the tough raw meat communally masticated to keep everyone from dying of utter boredom. Many denizens of the fashionable arts world, notably the malicious cluster at the bar of the Bedlam most afternoons except Sundays, had always despised the Open Studio and all that it represented.

It is therefore more than a little curious that he should have fallen afoul of the Open Studio, a place where, despite the unhappy compromises it had been obliged to make to survive the decades, still carried some glimmers of its aura of Dublin's lone independent gallery. Not surprisingly, there were many enemies of the Open Studio among the regulars at the Bedlam. These were people who hated its prime mover, Bill Devlin, because he'd risen up from dire poverty whereas a significant portion of them, so many sons of rich families, were destroying their youth with drink.

They hated a gallery that sold paintings, often of better quality, at half the prices demanded elsewhere. They gloated over any news that might damage the reputation of the Open Studio, which had never blundered half so much as when it alienated Riccardo deGiorgio on the first day of his arrival in Ireland.

It was this antagonism between him and the Open Studio that guaranteed Riccardo a small but dependable following at the

Bedlam, a circle of besotted flatterers eager to buy him drinks, soothe his wounded vanity, promise him a quick success in Dublin and feed him with antiquated legends of the Open Studio's past misdeeds.

At the same time, in a place like the Bedlam it was inevitable that one would find plenty of customers who hated deGiorgio merely because of who he was: bohemian; penniless; perverted; foreign; savagely anti-clerical; left-wing and self-styled radical, yet at the same time spoiled by his upbringing and very snobbish, not to say elitist. His enemies there did everything possible of course to make his life miserable. They cursed him behind his back and even, when they could get away with it, to his face.

Yet it was because of this unmerited bullying that others went out of their way to endorse him; and conversely, because certain people were openly friendly to him, others made it a point of cutting him dead. Yet there was scarcely a soul in the Bedlam who knew what the quarrel between Riccardo deGiorgio and the Open Studio was about, except that Brendan Casey was somehow involved in it. And it appeared rumors were going the rounds that Brendan himself would be returning from Denmark in a few days. Everyone eagerly looked forward to the moment when they could interrogate him in person.

deGiorgio himself was in a position to regard this phenomenon of his own making, this hurricane by which all Dublin had been plunged into turmoil within a few hours of his arrival, with complacency tinged with a certain wry amusement. This was not the first city he'd visited, in which his mere presence

had sufficed to stir up a tempest in a teapot, although the extreme provincialism of Dublin gave this inflated squabble a unique prominence in his recollections. He felt rather more flattered than annoyed, that the Irish nation had gone out of its way to make him feel at home from the day of his arrival. From the cozy security of the Devlin household Riccardo deGiorgio could gaze out upon the storm with detachment, even as Bill and Beatrice instructed him into the workings of the ludicrous machinery that made the wheels of Dublin's aesthetic world go round.

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## Chapter 6

### Haven in the Storm

Bill and Riccardo had discovered that they got along famously. Their admiration for one another was in direct proportion to the divergence in their work and character. Yet Beatrice who had initially taken pity on Riccardo and welcomed him warmly, cooled off very soon afterwards. Eventually she treated him with a kind of reserved courtesy that fell far short of friendship. Despite her being so outspoken in her opinions, Beatrice Devlin was actually quite conservative at heart. The self-consciously neurotic deGiorgio was rather unsettling to her, and if truth be told she considered him immoral. She'd never traveled further than London; in her entire life she'd not spent a year outside of Ireland. The Continent for which Riccardo was serving

as the cultural emissary, personally repulsed her. However she tolerated him for her husband's sake.

Bill on the other hand found Riccardo intriguing; there is no other word for it. Every deficiency in his own life, talent and character found a corresponding virtue in Riccardo. Like his wife, Bill had had little opportunity to step outside of Ireland. The annual trips to England were for business purposes. Apart from that there were the two months in Sweden and about two weeks in Paris. In 15 years, deGiorgio had struggled to survive in as many countries.

He spoke 4 languages with admirable fluency: Italian, German, English and French, and could make himself understood in Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese. Extensively cultured, over-educated in fact, he could write a good, if labored and academic poetry in Latin and Italian. He knew next to nothing in the sciences but had never considered this to be much of a liability.

Bill's education had finished at age 14. Despite the justly famous gregariousness of the Irish, Bill did not go out of his way to cultivate new human relationships unless they were thrust upon him. Yet he could still secretly envy someone like Riccardo, who, through his years of travels and interaction with all levels of society, had fashioned a worldly philosophy of terrifying cynicism. Even his homosexuality, which under normal circumstances he would have found repugnant, Bill felt inclined to gloss over as symptomatic of the psychological scars of someone paying too high a price for his demand that life be lived to the fullest.

Bill could scarcely have imagined that Riccardo admired in him the very qualities that he disparaged. He realized that Bill's lack of formal education had spared him the burden of a suffocating humanistic pedantry, which Riccardo saw as a major handicap to artistic expression. The no-nonsense, craftsman's mentality which enabled a Bill Devlin to ignore intellectual fads, matters of fashion and social standing, lay like a soothing balm over deGiorgio's seething inspiration, as if Bill Devlin were showing him a way by which one might ascend to the heights without paying the sacrifice of one's soul.

For Riccardo deGiorgio did not regard it as any great accomplishment that he had been a fugitive and pariah in all the countries of Western Europe. Quite the contrary: in Bill he thought that he had found a genuine artist, able to forge a career against the grain of convention, in a society that had marked him out from birth as one of its robots. Without ever realizing it, deGiorgio had encountered in the paradigm of Bill Devlin one of the cosmic paradoxes of Ireland. It is because of people like him that its culture will forever maintain have a unique standing in the world.

That the same forces which conspire to produce a nation saddled with drunkards, idlers, fools, embittered dreamers, hypocrites and wastrels, can also produce, in those able to rise above this chaos, moral and spiritual powers of extraordinary magnitude, remains among the enduring mysteries of all small, embattled nations wracked by centuries of poverty and injustice. The significant exceptions stand out like huge cliffs thrusting

their faces against the buffeting oceans overwhelming all beings of lesser stamp. Though Ireland be racked with degeneracy and despair, shackled with religion, drink and the English, reduced to a backwater amused by its braggarts and merciless towards progress, it will never lose its giants. And similar observations can be made of all peoples scattered in Diasporas about the world.

deGiorgio found himself baffled, then awed, by this quintessentially Irish phenomenon. In his own hejira he'd encountered more than one artist who had sacrificed a life of mediocre comfort for the bitter Calvary of creative poverty. What had impressed him as truly exceptional about Bill Devlin was the great reservoir of strength available to him from his native roots. Bill was as fixed in the Irish soil as Tir-na-noch, as incapable of living or thriving elsewhere as a tree upon air.

Bill's career was so unlike Riccardo's - which might be likened to the image of an ancient wandering monk hurrying along a mountain road and hopeful of some haven against the impending rains - in this respect, that Riccardo found himself under an obligation to revise many of his cherished ideas about the relationship of the artist to his craft. Bill could draw forth waters from the well of his Irish heritage as rich and as bounteous as any at the command of deGiorgio, inebriated by the heavy Styxian wine of literature. Bill's roots were the envy and wonder of deGiorgio, who could only sense, not see, how deep they lay, and who would always be denied such staying consolation as they give.

It was clear to him of course, that a rooted life also carried its disadvantages. When it came to the technical resources of modern painting, Riccardo's command was far more advanced than Bill's. The difference was not due only to the fact that Bill was six years his junior. Yet it should be taken as a tribute to the high quality of Bill's work that, despite its sometimes embarrassing awkwardness of execution, Riccardo found much in it that he admired. All peoples everywhere acknowledge that one of the prime requisites for friendship is the presence of the right set of weaknesses in each party to forestall envy in the other: instead of opposing it, Bill's technical immaturity versus Riccardo's indolence effectively nurtured their friendship.

One of the early consequences of this unlikely friendship was that deGiorgio got his exhibition in the Open Studio after all. Bill announced to its directors that he would withdraw his own show a week earlier than scheduled so that the time could be donated to Riccardo. He then arranged with Peter Maloney that, contingent on an apology from him (another week's negotiation) the Open Studio would give Riccardo an additional eight days. Thereby Riccardo deGiorgio would be guaranteed a fair trial before a jury of his peers, after which presumably he would have only himself to blame if his exotic Italian orchids could not thrive on Irish soil.

Not owning a car, Bill prevailed upon Aleister McDonnell to drive them him, Beatrice and Riccardo out to Shannon Airport. Doing his duty with a certain amount of bad grace, Aleister grumbled all the way out there that he was being robbed of a "full

day's creative labor" . Since Bill had estimated that half of Aleister's generic "creative day" was spent gossiping with Beatrice, and most of the second half Gleason's with his fellow scribes ( after which he did manage to get in a bit of work), he found himself unable to feel more than a slight twinge of remorse at taking such outrageous advantage of him.

As for Riccardo, he didn't feel guilty at all - which was somewhat unfortunate, Aleister McDonnell being one of his strongest partisans in the ugly gossip wars of the pub artists. It appears that Riccardo, still staggering from the shock of his initial reception in Dublin, had taken to treating the entire city as if it were the enemy, not sparing even the Devlins, who were exhausting body and soul to help him. With memories of the recent past much stronger in his mind than dubious promises about the future, deGiorgio had few thanks to spare, no matter what others did for him. No amount of assistance could, to his mind, pay off the debt the city had contracted by its initial mistreatment of him.

So : not only did he neglect to thank Aleister, or even to buy him a drink which was only normal civilized behavior under the circumstances, he generally behaved in such a manner as to give the hyper-sensitive Aleister McDonnell, (who was, after all, a poet) , the distinct impression that he was being exploited. Wasn't it enough, Aleister thought, to have consented in the service of a good cause ( after a serious bout of interior struggle) to forgo one entire day of creative struggle, just to drive that distinguished son

of the Renaissance, Riccardo deGiorgio, all the way out to Shannon Airport to pick up his canvases?

Was it also required of him that he hoist heavy boxes of drawings and rolled canvases from the baggage rooms, ( given that it was general knowledge that his state of health was extremely precarious and that he was doomed to die of consumption before 30) That, furthermore he be directed about like a servant, with two painters barking orders about how to position everything in the van, though rarely bothering to give him helping hand in getting them in! As if this were not enough already, he had to learn from this deGiorgio character that he should be considered responsible, along with the rest of Dublin, for ruining his life!

When it came to poetry, Aleister McDonnell thought of himself as a member of the avant-garde . Until that fateful excursion out to the airport he'd refrained from allying himself with those who considered deGiorgio a degenerate because he was a homosexual. But in view of his behavior, wasn't it obvious that he must be a person of low morals? Why else would he display such low ingratitude before a simple act of disinterested courtesy? Nor was it enough for Bill and Beatrice to treat him and his wife to a table laden with corn beef and cabbage, brown bread, greens, cakes and tea for him to be appeased. Over the course of the year, Aleister and his wife regularly ate the Devlins out of 50 pounds or more. One meal more or less did little to improve the situation.

As long as he could be treated as an abstraction Aleister had defended Riccardo in the pubs for weeks. Now he seriously

revised his opinions after encountering the man in the flesh. That night when he got home he began a sketch for a poem about the degeneration of the ideals of the Renaissance by the corrupting materialism of the 20th century.

In point of fact, it should be stated that gratitude was never one of the shining adornments of deGiorgio's character. It could not have been self-interest which motivated him to treat others in an indifferent and self-centered manner, especially in a friendly place like Ireland which has little use for such vestiges of aristocratic snobbery.

We do not intend to excuse him, but only to suggest by way of explanation, that 15 years of denial of the just fruits of his labor may not have motivated him to develop a sense of gratitude for the handouts he'd been forced to accept in order to survive. At a certain point he'd simply lost the ability to distinguish between a disinterested act of friendship and the bone thrown to a dog who presumes to call himself an artist.

So that Bill Devlin, who had made every conceivable sacrifice of his time, his own work, and his exhibition, to assist someone whom he believed had been given a raw deal by Irish society, never received, ( nor expected to receive) , the least sign of appreciation from the much injured Riccardo, who had never asked himself what benefit Bill was deriving from cutting his own show short a week, feeding and lodging him, getting his canvases, framing them, and many other acts of friendship.

Ireland, in the form of Brendan Casey and others like him, had injured him, and Ireland, in the form of Bill Devlin, his wife,

Aleister McDonnell, and others, were merely making largely ineffectual efforts to make it up to him. How could room and board for a few weeks possibly equal the salary he deserved from the Irish people by consenting to give them the opportunity to pay gilt-edged prices for it? How could the night in which Bill Devlin went without sleep to frame his canvases, while he slept in the upstairs bedroom, possibly compensate for the false promises of Brendan Casey, who had lured him to a land where nobody felt responsible for what happened to him?

Bill was perfectly aware of the egotism in Riccardo's attitudes. Yet, because of a certain sympathy for the man, and because he also, bore a grudge against Ireland (with more justice), he was prepared to accommodate them.

Things were quite otherwise with Beatrice. She didn't presume to pass judgment on the artistic merits of Riccardo's work; he might be the world's greatest living artist for all she knew. That didn't give him the right to walk all over her husband and herself.

She kept her thoughts to herself when he was living with them, but when after two weeks he finally did move out, she was not sorry to see him go. She had been kind to him in the beginning, indeed it was she who'd persuaded her husband that they should help him, but with Riccardo gone she was able to admit to herself that she didn't like him one little bit.

His paintings didn't impress her either. She imagined herself as someone of advanced and liberal ideas. The sort of obscene display one found on Riccardo's canvases wasn't leftist

polemic, it was degeneracy. Nuns might indulge in love-making once in awhile; it made very little difference to her whether they kept their vows. But to fill one canvas after another with clerical lubricity, pursued against backdrops that could only be called disgusting! There was a limit to everything. Being shocking to everyone didn't automatically make one a great artist.

deGiorgio's culture cut no ice with her either. At the most, it confirmed her in the belief that he was nothing more than a self-infatuated snob. Dropping a line from Petrarch or Baudelaire every once in awhile could hardly excuse him from ignoring the simple rudiments of courtesy!

One night, she remembered, after she had sweated alone for over an hour with the dishes in the kitchen, she came into the living-room to find Riccardo with his new boy-friend, Tonio, filling up the only free chairs. Bill was at work framing a canvas ( his own, at least ). They were impervious to embarrassment; she must have stood right in from of them for fifteen minutes without them noticing her. Riccardo went on talking, a self-stimulated monologue about some Italian philosopher's theory of baroque architecture. Can you imagine for a moment that it occurred to either one of them, that it might be the gracious thing to do to stand up and offer her a chairs? You've got to be joking! To Riccardo she was a mere woman, that is to say she didn't exist.

Finally Tonio, who was just a lowly dishwasher from - where was it? - Palermo, or some such place, got up and gave her his seat. But Signore deGiorgio, being the Great Literary Homosexual Renaissance Artist, couldn't be bothered with Neanderthals like

herself , even if she was the wife of her protector. A few days later when she brought up the matter with Bill, he just laughed, and said, " I'll get you some arch supports."! Men were all alike.

... No, she wasn't in the least sorry to see the last of Riccardo deGiorgio. If the truth be told, Beatrice never really believed that tall tale about some promise Brendan Casey had made to him years ago. Everybody in Dublin knew that Brendan was completely undependable. Why, just a few months before, he had broken up a play at the Abbey Theatre , of all places, by bawling out one of his notorious yarns to his friends, right in the middle of the third act! For a certainty he'd never grown up, but she wasn't prepared to consider him a total loss; although he didn't seem to have done very much with his life over the decade since the University College got tired of him hanging out, and gave him a degree just to get rid of him!

She recalled how every time she and Bill came around to his flat to visit him and his wife Teresa, Brendan was always sitting in some gloomy corner of the room, hunched over and straining his eyes on the pages of some novel by Dostoyevsky. Once in awhile he submitted some stupid story to Aleister McDonnell's 4 page literary sheet. It was her private opinion that Aleister only published Brendan's stuff because he was part of the circle of drunken bards that hung out at Gleason's .

Aleister would probably publish some of hers, though she couldn't write to save her face. She'd attempted to keep a diary when she was enrolled in art school. Most of what she wrote was so silly she couldn't bear to think about it now. Just before getting

married, she'd ripped it up and thrown the shreds into the trash. Blushing she recalled how she later retrieved the pages from the garbage and burnt them, lest the dustman discover and read them. Had some of the things she'd written been made public it might have ruined her for life!

"... but to hear Riccardo talk", she went on to me "you would think that Brendan Casey was *worse* than Lloyd George! Or Hitler at least.. . Why, you only have to *listen* to his story the way he tells it, to know that *most* of it is just the product of his *imagination* ! *First* of all : he wants us to believe that he met Brendan in Zurich *seven years ago* and showed him around the city, which is why *Brendan* invited *him* over here to Ireland and promised to set him up with an exhibition. *Why* , supposing *I* invited somebody to come over a stay for a little bit , and then *they* showed up on my doorstep *seven years later* , with *six* suitcases, and announced that *they* were going to have to *feed, clothe and lodge* me for as long as I *liked* ! Well, that isn't exactly what happened, but I suspect that Riccardo must have had something like that at the back of his mind *all the time* . Yet nobody can seriously expect me to *believe* that story about Brendan *promising* Riccardo a show at the Open Studio, as if it were all up to him and nobody else needed to be consulted ! Why *everybody* knew , and Brendan Casey *most of all* , that Bill's show was expected to go on until the *end of the month* ! And Riccardo, with his *wild experiences* all over *Europe* , knew that *no* gallery in the world frames paintings for *nothing* ! Why the

job that Bill did for him he couldn't have gotten *anywhere* for less than a *hundred quid* !"

I interrupted her to ask if she thought that Brendan Casey had had no share at all in deGiorgio's misfortunes.

" Well, no, of course he did, but the point I'm gettin' at, is that Riccardo and his *admirers* are trying to convince the *whole world* that Casey was *entirely* to blame for *everything* that went wrong, and what ... *I'm* saying is that the blame is *mixed* ! No, I want to go *further* and place most of the *blame* on the shoulders of *Riccardo* ! If I hadn't gotten to *know* the man , I might have thought differently, but now that I do, you just can't make me *believe* that Brendan Casey, whom I've know for over a decade, deceived him *all that much* . "

Beatrice encouraged me to help myself to some more tea and soda bread. I explained to her that I'd tried to avoid siding with either faction. I've been living in Dublin for less than a year. I'd never met Brendan Casey, had only one brief encounter with Riccardo. I happened to be looking at Bill's paintings in the Open Studio one afternoon, when Riccardo stopped in to discuss his own exhibition with Peter Maloney. Each of them had the unmistakable look in their faces of dearly wanting to kill the other.

deGiorgio in particular had struck me as someone thoroughly worn down and exhausted by the struggle of life. I'd also had the distinct impression that his wanderings were not yet over.

"I don't know", Beatrice replied in a non-committed fashion, " I'm not an *expert* on people like Riccardo. "

To change the subject she asked me how I was dealing with the problems of cope with Dublin . It gave me a chance to recollect all the things I'd done to hold my own - school teaching, a few radio interviews, a lecture at Trinity, money from the States, some book reviews - ultimately I'd come to understand that the situation was hopeless, the country was too poor to support refugee alienated and writers outcast from foreign lands that I'd accepted the hopelessness of my situation there. I had enough money remaining to hold out until the following spring when I intended to return to France, where the opportunities were greater and the climate less bitter.

Beatrice nodded from time to time to give the impression that she was following me , but really letting me understand that I knew how to talk nonsense when I felt like it . It ended up, as usual, by her inviting me to dinner with her, Moira and Bill.

Needless to say, the travails of Riccardo deGiorgio were carried over into the conversation around the dinner table . It gave Bill his chance to express his views on the continuing scandal. Bill said that he felt sorry for any painter in his late thirties without a following, career, reputation, family or even country to call his own. Obviously, Riccardo's version of recent events was colored by all the egocentric emotionalism natural to the Latin nations. Still, Bill had always regarded Brendan Casey as a kind of grown up baby, little advanced past the thumb-sucking stage. No account of his antics ever came to him as a surprise.

"But- that's Ireland for you! ", he swore, " People never really grow up; and if they do, it's because they emigrated before it was

too late! Dublin will continue to protect people like Brendan Casey, the Gleason's crowd, Jerry O'Brien, Eddie Dugan, Jackson McVay and all the others.

" Jackson McVay! Look at him! One couldn't hope to find more talent in a man! His only tragedy is that he didn't get out in time! If he 'd gone to England in his 20's , or the US, or even some horrible place like South Africa before, he might now been known as one of the world's great theater directors. No; he had to stay in Ireland, and now you'll find some people who feel sorry for him, and others who treat him like an alcoholic joke!

"But Ireland will only tolerate a man's weaknesses, and gangs up on anyone who tries to stand on his own two feet. Why, look at all I've had to struggle against! It was just five years ago, at 24, that I decided definitely that I wasn't going to be a *lump* for the rest of my life. Nothing would please the Dublin crowd more than for me to lay down my brushes this and lie in the streets like an alcoholic bum! Self-styled friends Brendan Casey and Jake Josephs would buy me all the drinks I needed; whenever I was hungry I could return to being a pipe-fitter's assistant! My conversation would be filled with descriptions of all the great paintings I planned to do!

" Folks in the so-called Dublin arts scene would love that! Riccardo claims to be shocked by the behavior of clowns like Brendan Casey; he doesn't know the half of it! He hasn't begun to touch bottom in Ireland! Wait until his show opens the day after tomorrow, then he'll *really* discover what Ireland can do to an artist!"

After dinner, Bill asked me to pose for a few sketches. Beatrice carried the dishes into the kitchen. Bill still had experienced problems with sketches from life, and had to labor over them slowly to get them right. After Beatrice had finished up in the kitchen she returned to the living-room where we sat around talking some more.

Leaving Beatrice with Moira, Bill and I walked over to a local pub around 8 PM, a place frequented by the Devlins and a small circle of friends. At the beginning the conversation revolved around the saga of Riccardo deGiorgio, still the *cause célèbre* . but interest in this topic had already begun to wane. It was clear that Dublin was already fishing about for some new scandal with which to relieve the boredom of living. Then they discussed the rise in the price of a bottle of Guinness, listened to the report of an avant- garde exhibition in London, lamented the falling-away of the Open Studio from its high original principles, complained about the dearth of available intelligent girls these days, chuckled over the antics of the local "I.R.A. ", a fancy name adopted by a gang of petty thieves who performed hold-ups on Mom-and-Pop grocery stores, and muttered with grim faces about the situation in Belfast, where the group who bore this label afforded fewer opportunities for low comedy.

Never had the texture of Dublinese small talk seemed so threadbare. Around 10 PM people started standing up and leaving. Bill and I also made our good-byes as well, he to return to his home, work and family, while I dragged my feet along the Canal Road towards the dilapidated house in Sandymount where I was still the welcome guest of Joe O'Donaghue, the elderly antique dealer and his teen-age German wife.



## Chapter 7

### A Poets Circle

At 4:30 in the afternoon Gleason's pub, near St. Stephen's Green and off Grafton Street was all but deserted. The presence of a old, dour faced street musician should not be overlooked. He sat in his preferred nook, his battered violin case staved away in a corner and pint of Guinness in front of him. On weekdays during the lunch hour he filled the halls of Grafton Street with an infernal caterwauling. Everything about him was worn; from the folds in his face, to the lining in his gut, to the contours of his mind ; for he was old, and senile and drunk. As he has little bearing on this narrative, I will say no more about him.

The two publicans were: publicans; I will say very little about them. But the group huddled in a corner of the room, to the left of the bar as one entered from the street were - POETS! One is therefore obliged to say a great deal about them. If one doesn't tell all that there is to tell concerning them, they will do it for themselves. It is just as well that one get the drop on them.

Their reunion this November afternoon was special in one respect, though otherwise differing little from the daily gathering which began soon after lunchtime and continued, with interruptions, until closing. On this day, in addition to scaling the heights of poetry on a scaffolding of beer barrels, this select coterie were also feting the return of Brendan Casey after a month of roving through Denmark, whither he had repaired to gratify a passion for Kierkegaard.

All of Brendan's 32 massive years were seated behind his third pint of stout. The very image of exuberant, if somewhat dissipated, health, Brendan's mood vacillated between King Lear and Henry VIII. From time to time he curled his lips like a professional actor; a dark furrow creased his brow and he became Raskolnikov, or Stavrogin, or Captain Ahab. When he gripped your hand it was with the firm grasp of the stone guest from Don Giovanni.

" But I'm sure you all want to hear about those Danish birds!" he roared in the bass register:

" Well; they've got long cunts and short arses - har, har, har!"

This information was not received as being in the least way exceptional. Aleister McDonnell made bold to ask him if this was why he had returned to Ireland.

" Not a chance!", he growled, encompassing his audience by turning his head from side to side. He sniffed at his glass of stout, seemed to find it acceptable, and took a draught:

" In Hibernia-land, the arse is so god-damn big, the cunt gets swallowed up inside the bloody thing- Har, har, har!" Brendan Casey was in the habit of saving you the trouble of laughing at his jokes by doing it for you.

Peggy McGuire, a chubby girl with thick spectacles and a way of making people feel as if what they were saying wasn't worth listening to, commented:

" Well; that finishes the subject of Denmark, I guess." She stood up to go to the bar for another vodka and orange juice.

" Oh; haven't you heard?" Aleister remarked, in a tone of subtle insinuation, " It appears that DeGiorgio's exhibition isn't going too well."

If he had expected to witness Brendan bursting into flames, he was doomed for disappointment. Tapping his beer stein reflectively, Brendan merely replied:

" Oh. I didn't know he was in Dublin; I met him in England last month and he said he might be coming over here."

In addition to those of Aleister and Peggy, the muffled gasps around the table came from a young lady of rural antecedents named Siobhan Lacey; Mike Mulligan, a bearded romantic poet lost in the folds of his blue overcoat; and Padraic Parsons, poet and scholar in his 50s. Gazing into the depths of his pint of stout, Padraic appeared to be contemplating the play of sunlight on the bodies of the golden maidens of the Rhine.

Daylight was fast fading. One of the bartenders switched on the back lights. This gave little relief to the dreariness of the lifeless pub, with its large paint-covered ogive windows, its small cramped interior and mean floor covered only by a thin torn layer of black linoleum. If one were to say that Gleason's sometimes gave one the impression that the whole world had come to a dead stop, he would not be far wrong. There were moments here when time itself seemed to halt, like a jeep that has gotten its tires stuck in a mudslide. The sensation could be agreeable. One might hang out at Gleason's, chat for an hour or two, then leave carrying away a feeling that there had been neither advancement nor regression in the world's awesome dynamo.

At a distance of less than a yard the buzz of conversation at this table completely faded away . Even at the heart of the group one couldn't help feeling that, despite the overbearing seriousness of those who were saying it, that just nothing was being said.

Aleister was the first to recover:

" There's something odd about that, Brendan, you know. To hear the fellow talk, Riccardo has a very different impression of what went on between the two of you."

" HMM? WHAT..! So what...I mean, how so?" Brendan appeared genuinely surprised. Siobhan leaned forward to catch every syllable of the conversation as Aleister went on, mercilessly:

" According to Riccardo, you invited him over here. He claims that you promised him an exhibition."

Casey bobbed his head from side to side in ever widening arcs. Coming abruptly to a full stop he faced Aleister squarely. On his lips twitched a dolphin-size smile. With his right hand he grasped him firmly on the shoulder.

" Aleister, my lad! Do you believe everything people tell you? Let me assure you, old boy, the sky isn't going to fall down. Har, har, har! No sir, that sky will be up there for a long time to come!" As if to indicate that the subject was no longer worthy of discussion he quickly turned away,

But the lean, pinch-faced, and allegedly consumptive Aleister would not be robbed of his prey:

"...Yes.. But something tells me you aren't too welcome in Riccardo DeGiorgio's company."

"Well then!" Casey stormed, banging the table with his fist and shouting in an exaggerated manner: " Let him come in here! I'll be waiting for him! Look, man. I'm not afraid of some wog fairy!.. Why; are you?"

Padraic Parsons , either having lost sight of the golden maidens or merely satisfied himself for the moment that they wouldn't go running away, lifted his shaggy head and beard. Glaring incredulously over the rims of his heavy spectacles through blood-shot eyes, he addressed both of them :

" Why bring it all up again? Why not just forget about it ? Why not let sleeping dogs lie!?"

Although Aleister had great respect for Padraic he had no intention of giving up:

" That's all right with me Padraic; yet Brendan claims to be unaware even of the fact of Riccardo's *being* in Ireland, while the rest of the world is insisting that Brendan brought him over here! I'm merely trying to get my stories straight, that's all."

" I did not bring this DeGiorgio bugger over here! That's a lie! " This time he banged *both* fists on the table, and even stomped his feet.

" Yes; but - " Aleister started to return to the attack; but Padraic, who cherished peace at any cost, and who intended to show that, despite his university affiliation, he had no fear of dirty words, yelled:

" Oh ,shut up, you asshole!!!" Upon which Aleister withdrew, for the time being at least . Padraic Parsons returned to his contemplation of the Lorelei. In the meantime Peggy McGuire had

returned from the bar. She sat quietly, idly tapping her glass of vodka. She seemed to think that all these shenanigans, perhaps life itself, were terribly dull, and said as much:

"Well, none of this is very interesting, I think."

"Hell!", Brendan blustered, "It's a frigging bore, if you want to know! Now look here: I've just come back from Denmark, laden with wild Scandinavian lore; and here we are again, in dirty old Dublin, where everybody wants to know how often his next-door neighbor brushes his teeth! If no-one can suggest a better topic of conversation, I damn well am going to leave!"

To show his displeasure, Brendan drained off half a pint of Guinness at a single gulp.

During this heated in-fighting Mike Mulligan, normally very talkative, had not said a word. Yielding to spontaneous impulse he lifted up his glass of stout and swore:

"I say we should all quaff a pint of Guinness, to honor the filthy name of Riccardo deGiorgio, that fabulous sodomite!"

Some trembling image which had hung suspended less than a foot in front of Parsons' dreamy eyes, audibly cracked. He was seriously annoyed:

"Look, you shit!", he whined, "Lay off, will you?" Taking the silence as his cue, he went on:

"You're just a mother-fucker, Mike! And a phoney! That's right! That's all you are! A mother-fucker and a phoney!"

After this powerful interjection, Padraic Parsons withdrew completely from the conversation, so much so that it was generally assumed that he had fallen asleep.

" Well, Mike!" Brendan turned on him the full force of his rude and comic mien:

" Have you, in my absence, won any new favors of the frigid bard?"

" Ay!" Mike wailed, tottering unsteadily, " But the whore of the muse, she hath a frizzly cunt! But I say to you, that we should both quaff a beaker of vintage stout, so that we may drink to the name of the greatest pre-Raphaelite of them all, Riccardo deGiorgio, the fabulous sodomite."

" SO!! Mike" Brendan replied irritably, rubbing the lapels of his jacket " I see you're just as obnoxious as you've ever been."

" That I am, that I am...", the rest being lost as Mike babbled anew in his cups.

" Well, I'll drink to him, if that will make you happy. I've nothing against the good man."

Carried away by the tremendous drama of the moment Brendan Casey lifted his weight fully erect to toast to the much maligned Riccardo deGiorgio. A tiny amount of stout still sloshing about the bottom of his glass was hoisted at the end of a pike-stiff arm as he boomed:

" To Signor Riccardo deGiorgio! An able man if there ever was one, who could, if so required, paint the amorous entanglements of Socrates with Alcibiades, and who, for all we know, has already done so on the soft epidermis of a whore's arse!"

This masterful speech received the applause it justly deserved. Brendan turned a face beaming with appreciation upon his elite audience, which now gave him its undivided attention,

" And I drink to the unholy name of Riccardo deGiorgio, the man chosen by Jesus, Joseph and Mary, to educate the backward Celtic homeland in the sins of the Holy Ghost!"

To judge from the applause this also went over quite well. Mike Mulligan stood up and started walking unsteadily towards the door.

" Where're you going, Mike?" Peggy called after him

" I'll be back in a moment; I'm only going out to bum a few quid."

Brendan took this opportunity to excuse himself and to make a trip to the bogs. The silence that descended over the collective could be heard as far away as West Meath. Peggy McGuire, yawned . Her whole body seemed to have been fashioned for sitting. Were her vodka not being maintained erect through inertia, it would probably have spilled into her lap. At last, chewing each word like a poppy seed before spitting it out, she said :

" I've just finished a poem."

Siobhan McKenna nodded with appropriate solemnity. She was the youngest among them, preferred speaking Irish to English, and claimed, probably truthfully, that she was descended from a long line of Irish minstrels. Her hair was long, black and straight, her skin sallow. Her lips were therefore in contrast quite ruby red. She rarely addressed any subject directly, and when she wasn't silent she tended to hysteria. She turned to Peggy:

"Is this another poem from your 'period of remorse'?"

"No", Peggy responded in her throaty and permanently bored alto, " I'm entering a new phase. I'd read it to you but I forgot to bring it with me. It's a short poem, only 8 lines."

Aleister McDonnell was led to remark that his thousand-line epic had just reached line 778 as of the night before. On the assumption that everyone was anxious to hear it, line 778 was immediately recited with passion and excellent diction:

*" Her tits awaiting, the overdose killed her !!"*

Which came as a shock to nobody, as all present realized that Aleister had been on a prolonged "beat-poetry" trip ever since he'd spent three months in London hanging out with the avant-garde.

"Well", Peggy droned, " I don't write that kind of poetry. I think it's rubbish."

Aleister laughed. Padraic Parsons suddenly went on the offensive:

" You've got no right to say that!", he snorted, " You write shit yourself, you know! Everything I've ever seen of yours is shit! Just shit!"

From Peggy's expression one would think the roof had caved in:

" Yes...well, I...Look, Padraic, let's discuss it.. some other time, when ... when you've had a few less drinks.. Is... is that all right?"

" Oh! I've got nothing against your poetry, Peggy! I just wanted you to see what it feels like to be told by someone you respect that your work is shit! That's all I was doing!"

" Well, I'm sorry", she went on monotonously, " but I think that poetry like that is rubbish. Aleister might be very gifted in that vein, but I don't believe there's anything in it of value for the history of poetry."

" So then!" Parsons raged, " What *do* you like? What do *you* think is valuable? The Charge of the Light Brigade ? Jabberwocky? Daffodils? What's the matter with words like "shit" and "cunt" ? They're perfectly good English words. They also, as it happens, perfectly express our age: *The Age Of Cunt* . You certainly must be aware, Peggy, of the fact that we live in the Age Of Cunt?" Parsons glowered at her with hatred.

Peggy blushed and reached nervously for her drink:

" I don't care... I don't like those words, and I don't use them. My favorite poet is Marvell, and he doesn't use words like that. So I don't see why I should have to."

" Someone can use the word, 'shit' in his poetry and be a bad poet, while someone else can refrain from using the word 'shit' and be a very good poet", Aleister explained for the benefit of all, " but I still think that my line 778 , " *Her tits awaiting, the overdose killed her !!*" is a good line, although I'm not sure of where I should place the comma."

Softly Siobhan sang the lines of an old ballad from Connemara. She had a quiet, lovely voice.

Clearly proud of what he had done there Brendan returned from the bogs, resuming his place at the table to the right of Aleister. Waving his right hand like a grandee and crooking his

prehensile forefinger he bellowed: " As the guest of honor I claim the right to buy drinks all around. What'll it be? Guinness for me. "

" Guinness!"

" A paddy!"

" Guinness!"

" I think I'll have another vodka."

Brendan looked around: " Where's Mike?"

" He went out to look for some money." Peggy explained.

Brendan sat down again and leaned his head against the wall:

" Well, I guess I can't buy him a drink then", he sighed, satisfied with having done his duty.

Mike Mulligan was indeed out in the street looking for money. In his periodic bouts of depression he sought prolonged refuge under a blanket of drunkenness. That Mike was not alcoholic by nature was clear from the great efforts he had to make to push himself into drinking, and by the enormous toll it took on him. Once initiated, these binges persisted until he had antagonized every last friend and made himself an object of universal censure.

So that on this 5:00 in the afternoon of a Dublin November, with the darkness falling rapidly and, as ever, a touch of rain in the air, the pedestrians on Grafton Street were astonished to behold an otherwise respectable and intelligent young man in his late twenties tottering down the street in a dangerous state of intoxication and demanding money from every passing stranger for the lost cause of Irish poetry. His face was covered with shaggy tufts of beard sprouting randomly like weeds, his blue overcoat

thrown open to show the world that his clothing, though rumpled and dirty, was properly middle-class.

He was well known to many of the people he touched up; or they knew his father, a lawyer much respected around Dublin. Or they recalled that Mike Mulligan, when sober, was considered, by some at any rate, to be a promising young man, with literary gifts and an aptitude for scholarship, who had done well in his first year at Trinity. His father would certainly have no trouble getting him a good position in his own firm, or with Radio Eirann, since he was so literary-minded.

Mike continued on down the street. When he tired of the cause of Irish poetry, he switched to singing scraps of Irish ballads, of which he knew many, holding his cap out into the drizzle and whining like a true beggar. People sadly shook their heads, sometimes gave him a few coins. The money mattered little, the satisfaction was in the doing of it.

Still following his luck, Mike reached the foot of Grafton Street. There he turned right into Dame Street. Suddenly he felt a tight grip on his shoulder. Turning around he confronted Peter Maloney, manager of the Open Studio, heading home after a hard day's work.

"Snap out of it, Mike! Stop acting like a baby! Come with me; I'm getting you some strong coffee."

Maloney's manner was infested with self-righteous urgency. Protesting for the sake of form Mike allowed himself to be led. To a casual on-looker it might have appeared that Mike was being dragged into the Golden Spoon by his coat collar. Inside the

restaurant Peter pushed him into a seat. He sat himself down opposite him, and glared as he forced Mike to bolt down two cups of black coffee. Then he said:

"What is it this time, Mike?"

"Peter", Mike whined, "I just don't know where to begin."

"Where're you coming from?"

"I was sitting in Gleason's, and.."

"*Gleason's!*" Pete Maloney, the Eternal Father, gasped, "You shouldn't go into Gleason's! That's a bad crowd..."

"Yes; well, I was in Gleason's, and Brendan Casey was there, and.."

"*Brendan Casey!*" Peter nearly fell out of his seat, "I didn't think he would have the nerve to show his face in Dublin so soon. Do you realize he's almost ruined the Open Studio?"

"Yes, Peter. Well, Brendan Casey is sitting in there; or was when I left them... And he was insulting Riccardo. And he was insulting me... I'm telling you, he was insulting *me* !

"*Riccardo!* What did he say about him?"

"... insulting me ..he called me *obnoxious* , and.."

"Good, good. But what did he say about Riccardo?"

"Riccardo? ..oh yes... he didn't say anything, Peter... No, in fact he did say something... No, I'm wrong... he called him a 'wog fairy' .. which, between you and me, is an outrage....and.."

"Listen, Mike! Is Brendan still there? Let's go back there as soon as you've finished up."

"Sure, Peter,... And you'll buy me a drink, too, won't you?"

Peter Maloney gritted his teeth as if he'd swallowed a bad tasting ball of phlegm:

" All right... But just one! That's all I'm getting you!"

" Fair enough, Peter." In a moment they were back out onto the street. Peter looked around, affecting not to know which direction to turn to get to Gleason's. Mike grabbed him by the arm and raced with him through the crowds up Grafton Street .

When they arrived at the open doors of Gleason's, Maloney wagged a finger in Mike's face:

" Remember! Only one. I'm not buying you any more than one!" Mike's face glowed like a beacon. He slapped Peter on the back:

" You're good, Peter! Honestly, you're the greatest person I know! "

They stepped inside. Gleason's now held about 30 customers. It would soon be filled to capacity. Peter Maloney spotted Brendan Casey instantly. He was sitting in the same place where Mike had left him, surrounded by the admiring crowd of poets. Peter strode impetuously across the room. Hovering directly over him he shook his fist, a bit self- consciously, in Brendan's face:

" You bastard!" , he swore, "You utter bastard!"

It was all Brendan could do to keep from falling through the floor. If there was one thing he dreaded more than anything else in the world, it was being called to account for anything he did. Life could be so nice, so cozy... if only one wasn't being obliged to justify one's behavior to the whole world on all occasions...

But, when one came down to it, it was really very hard to make Brendan Casey lose his cool:

" Why? Why, Peter ? " he laughed, "Come on, man. It's terribly rude of you to be calling me names in front of all these people!"

Maloney blushed: maybe Brendan was right.

" All right, Brendan...I'm sorry. But we've got to talk! Now! Privately."

" Look, Pete!" Brendan laughed again, nervously, "Some of my friends might get the impression that I'm your enemy. I've got nothing against you. I've got nothing against any man! If there's something you want to discuss with me alone, I've no objections." He stood up and faced his audience:

" I want everyone here to take note! Peter Maloney has just called me an *utter bastard* , in response to which I accede *immediately* to his request to talk things over in private. Why, I've never seen a better example of turning the other cheek!"

Peter was becoming increasingly impatient. He smacked his forehead with the heel of his left hand.

" Come on!....Come on!.."

" At least, Pete", Brendan requested, " You don't mind if I take a glass with me? You'll give me that consideration, I trust?"

Brendan went to the bar, ordered another glass of ale and went with Peter to a shaded corner at the back of the pub.

Peter began scolding him even before they were fully seated: "What do you mean?", his hoarse whisper had become a rasp,

" inviting Riccardo over to Ireland without clearing it with us ?  
His show is ruining the Open Studio!"

" What?!...Well, now look here, Peter! Don't start throwing out wild accusations at me! No sir, indeed: I refuse to answer any more wild accusations ." He smirked insolently as if he were being made fun of.

" No! *You* look here, Brendan !....DON'T get excited!" Peter begged, at the same time waving his arms. He lowered his voice: "No one is accusing you of anything. Did you, or did you not, invite Riccardo deGiorgio to come to Dublin?"

" Why...Why; yes I did. I told him he would like it here . Is there anything wrong with that?"

" Did you promise him an exhibition at the Open Studio? Did you call him back to urge him to fly his canvases over here for that exhibition?"

"Well, Peter." Tapping his glass, Brendan stared aimlessly at the floor. It would have to come out.

" What I said to him was that, since I'm on the board of directors of the Open Studio, I could probably get him a show."

" Did you advise him to ship his paintings over before the first of the month?"

" Why... yes...I did. But I didn't imagine he would see any connection between both suggestions."

" WHAT??!"

" I'm simply telling you the truth, Peter. At the time I expected to be in Dublin through to the end of the year. He said he wanted to come over in a few weeks, and I told him if he shipped

his canvases to Dublin right away, I would go to Shannon Airport to pick them up. He also said something about framing, so I said I could arrange that, too. He seemed so terribly upset, I just kept saying "Yes" to everything. That's the best way of dealing with people who are angry and upset, don't you agree, Peter?... But right after our conversation, I was given this chance to go to Denmark, so I went. I tried to call him before I left but his phone was disconnected. Why, Peter, wouldn't you have done the same thing?"

Maloney scowled darkly:

" Well, Brendan; you've really made a mess of it this time."

" Why; what happened? I don't understand."

" Because of *you*, Brendan, we had to give Riccardo his damn show. *Do you know what they can do to an Art Gallery in Dublin?*" Peter exploded, " That bastard has plastered the walls of the Open Studio from one end to the other, with *nothing but fucking* ! Why, on one of his bloody canvases he has the Pope screwing an animal! A bear! Maloney took out a newspaper out of his briefcase and unfolded it on the table:

" Read what the Irish Press has to say about us!"

Succumbing to the gloom which never lay far from hand, Brendan deflated like a pricked balloon. The article, which he rapidly skimmed, had this to say:

*THE IRISH PRESS, November 5, 1969 :*

*The Irish Nation can no longer be expected to tolerate the criminal outrage to its conscience shamelessly displayed on the walls of the Open Studio. One reads in the newspapers every day of*

*some errant lad who, contemptuous of the education given to him by the Christian Brothers, goes to London, Mother of every vice and sin, and falls into evil ways. That his elders were not strong enough to steel him from the paths of error is to their lasting shame. But The Nation as a whole must not allow England to spew its sewage of corruption over the fair Isle of the Saints.*

*Yet this is what the Open Studio is doing by permitting Mr. Riccardo deGiorgio, an Italian of known scandalous morals, and it appears, the social sensation of Kensington, to flaunt his filth across its walls. From the moment I walked into that gallery I could only cry " Satan! Get thee behind me!" At the Open Studio the other night your humble critic beheld such foul slime, such debased portraitures, such bestial fabrications that he refrains from shocking the decency of his readers by trying to describe it .*

*We, the IRISH PEOPLE, have the right to demand that our government protect the innocent minds of our children from such perverted filth "*

"So, Pete ", Brendan chuckled, " You and I know that the Irish Press is a kind of sick joke."

" Brendan; you and I don't count! Look: even I think Riccardo's stuff is revolting, but I'm broad-minded enough to keep my opinions to myself. Do you realize that ever since this vile show of his opened last week, we've been submerged with mail calling us everything from 'filth peddlers' to", he choked, " 'unbelieving Jews!'"

Brendan emitted a series of forced horse-laughs.

" Our windows have been broken!"

Peter rapped on the table. He was really angry,  
 " Yesterday somebody tried to throw a bucket of mud on the walls. We were able to get him out of the building, but our *reputation* !", his face was poker-hot and his body trembled, *our reputation* ! in Dublin isn't worth a penny! It'll take years for us to gain back what that 'pansy' has ruined in a week. And Brendan: if you think that the Irish Press is a "sick joke", you should see what the Catholic Standard says about us!"

Brendan sudden pallor reflected the glimmering of the Celtic Twilight.

" The ...Irish Times didn't deal too kindly with us either. nor did the Independent. But you haven't heard the worst of it, yet. Some... idiot... got onto the Bishop of Cork, and from the look of it, we're to be *damned from the pulpit* this coming Sunday!"

" *Ahhhhhh!* " Brendan groaned, truly worried at last, " But look, man what do I have to do with all this? Where do I come in?"

" *You ?* " Peter screamed at him, " Why - why - why- ...it's all *you're* fault! First of all, *you* brought him over here. Then you placed us in such a position that we were literally *forced* to give him a show. Why!" Peter shouted, momentarily losing control, "I could knock your teeth down your throat!"

Brendan probably felt some fear. Yet, when all was said and done, it really was very hard to make him lose his cool.

" Look, man:", his laugh could be taken for an apology,  
 " Suppose I said I was sorry? I'm really sorry, you know.. Yes, I'm very sorry about the whole thing. Yes...yes...Uh Huh.." As if to

invest more authenticity into his words, he accompanied them with a vigorous bobbing of the head.

"But....but what do you intend to do about it?" Peter growled.

"Do about it?" Brendan yelled, peering about wildly like a trapped animal, "What can I do about it? It's not my problem!!"

Peter continued to steam. However, he had not anticipated any constructive proposals coming from Brendan.

"Well... Riccardo's exhibition has got to go."

"When, Peter? Look: don't you go hurting his feelings again!"

"He's got to go, and the sooner the better... We're throwing his work out tomorrow morning."

"Well.....so...that settles it, doesn't it?"

"WHAT?"

"If he's got to go, get rid of him. That will solve all your problems, won't it?"

"But.... *you* brought him here!!"

"Look, look, look!! No,no!! Brendan shook his head with impatience, "I'm really tired of hearing about it. I'm just not your man; all right? What do you think I can do about it anyway?"

Peter had calmed down. He had accepted the inevitable. He explained the situation to him as he would to a child:

"I want you to break the news to Bill Devlin. You're a friend of his."

"I don't understand. What's Bill got to do with deGiorgio?"

"When Riccardo came to Ireland, at *your* invitation, he didn't have anywhere to stay. Bill and Beatrice Devlin gave him a roof over his head for two weeks. Then Bill pressured us into

giving Riccardo a show; he also stayed up two nights framing his canvases. How the hell could you take it upon yourself to tell Riccardo that we would frame his canvases, when no gallery ...!" Peter Maloney realized he was getting angry again and stopped himself. Lowering his tone of voice he went on:

" Bill's going to be hopping mad when he learns that we've taken Riccardo's shit off the walls. I need you to smooth things over."

Brendan rocked slowly back and forth. Sweating and breathing heavily , he lowered his head into his hands. With so much cosmic anguish in evidence, even Peter Maloney had to relax his severity. In a few moments, Brendan leaned back in his chair and sighed:

" It's a deal. Bill and Beatrice are expecting me at their place tonight for a home-coming party . I'll tell him then."

"You're serious now?"

" I'll arrange everything. Don't you worry about a thing."

" I'm depending on you, Brendan." Peter rose from the and collected his coat, "I've got to go now. This place depresses me."

" Goodbye, Peter! Don't you worry about a thing! I'm your man! You know you can always depend on me!"



## Chapter 8

### Alone in Dublin

Although Riccardo deGiorgio was only able to sell one painting from that memorable exhibition in the Open Studio, that sale was of vital importance to the continuance of his stay in Ireland. He'd not been completely penniless when he left England; he'd brought enough along with him to tide him over for a short spell. A few days before his opening at the Open Studio Riccardo moved from the Devlins to a flat in Rathmines. There was room enough for himself and Tonio, with a kitchen, a small room that served as both studio and living-room, and a bedroom with a double bed. a cramped though tidy bed-sitter going at six quid a week. The studio was created by blocking a portion of the room adjacent to the large windows as his own domain.

Yet for the moment Riccardo felt a strong disinclination to do any painting. His creative energies had been dissipated by the turmoil of dislocation, in addition to which there were times when, even for him, the proud, self-conscious professional, Painting with a capital P seemed so oppressive that he wanted only to shut it out of his mind.

"Why shouldn't I take a break?", he told himself. He'd earned it. Improvident he might be, lazy certainly not! Still, he couldn't help feeling guilty. There was no lack of inspiration. The natural light was adequate for painting. For most purposes he worked better in artificial light anyway. From the windows of the living-room there was a wide view of the Dublin mountains. At this time of the year they were permanently obscured by a curtain of grey,

but he imagined they could be quite beautiful in the spring and summer.

He considered all the possibilities , one-by-one, and rejected them. He needed to rest. No, in fact :what he needed most was an interlude of self-examination. He'd been putting off for too long the desire to rediscover the "pure painter" within himself, to lay down his brushes and embark, alone or with the help of friends, on a voyage of inner discovery. The *pure painter* , in Riccardo's personal mythology, was an internal mental process, one perhaps inherent in the grey matter of the brain, capable of thinking directly in terms of line, color and form to the exclusion of all function, externally affixed meaning or representation, an idealized of the artist, deriving his inspiration directly from spatial or textural configurations, from juxtapositions of colors or the excitement generated by the variations in a line.

"Concepts", "functions", "ideas", "labels" intruded on his imagination rather than enriching it. A recognizable face in which one could read emotions, thoughts or experiences, hindered him to the extent that it had to be seen as a face. Color itself was an obstacle to pure painting unless it could be apprehended as a pure relation.

In Riccardo's philosophy of the pure painter, sensuality would be totally absent in his makeup ; or, if there was to be some , it would on a higher plane, a feasting in the delight in immaterial, indeed immaterializable ideas. Absolute painting should be incapable of separating "representation" from "abstraction". These were fictions designed for a general public which demands easy

explanations to compensate for its own ignorance and lack of education. Caricature and allegory alike fill him with horror. Indeed, anything pleasurable or meaning would be foreign to the pure aesthetic.

There was very little evidence around to show that Riccardo had ever painted anything in that way himself. In point of fact, he had always found himself in need of a catalyst, some sort of literary or political idea, to stimulate his slumbering inspiration. Yet he felt that he ought to cultivate the pure painter within for awhile, if only to see what he could learn from the experience.

In this way did he manage to convince himself that he'd found yet another excellent reason for not working! Not that he sought for or needed reasons. If the truth be told he was simply tired out. Rather than working he'd gotten into the habit of taking long walks. He also resumed the program of reading he'd neglected in his prime years in London. Once again he needed to moderate his appetite for books: too much reading, he told himself, was bad for a painter, indeed for creativity of any kind.

It was time as well to be thinking about finding some new friends, contacts, professional associates. (He didn't put Tonio in the same category. All of his life deGiorgio had separated his amorous entanglements from his circle of intellectual equals.) Go to the cafs, the pubs. Visit galleries, sample the theater and the concert halls. Why not travel around Ireland for awhile? It was considered to be a beautiful country, particularly in the West. Though, as he'd already reminded himself, landscapes had little effect on him.

After a few weeks Riccardo had slipped into an innocuous daily routine that he found rather pleasant. He allowed for the possibility that it might remain that way for as long as he was in Ireland, or until the money ran out.

Try as he might, he could not come up with a single idea for a painting. More than anything else, it was the foul weather that seemed to drain him of all inspiration. He came from a world endowed with endless sunlight; rich, brilliant sunlight beating down without restraint for days at a time. Cities like Amsterdam and London could challenge him for awhile as a stimulating contrast to his native environment. Persistently dreary days, overcast, fog laden, with long stretches of rain, were destined to make serious inroads into his morale.

Getting out of bed before 10 AM was not to be imagined. More and more he was falling into the habit of not stirring before noon. Tonio would already have gone to work, leaving his breakfast ready for him standing in the oven. Lingering over his second or third cup of coffee Riccardo would read a novel, always in English to extend his command of the language, preferably by an Irish writer, so many of whom are justly famous. Although he wasn't painting he continued to maintain his journals. This often took an hour or more daily.

Sometime between 1 and 2 he took the bus into town. Inevitably he found himself passing an hour or so in the Bedlam. He mostly listened, talking little: Dublin gossip richly amused him. When the Bedlam closed for the afternoon, he might join some

group making its way down Grafton Street to the Nassau restaurant , hanging out over a late lunch.

Leaving his companions, deGiorgio usually wandered over to the Open Studio to see how his exhibition was faring. Badly, as it had been doing from the day of the opening. Its being doomed to failure was, as he told anyone willing to listen, entirely the result of Peter Maloney's deliberate sabotage.

Riccardo would only stay as long as needed to reinforce his conviction that his enemies were hard at work trying to ruin him. From there he might make his way to the bookstores. There he derived a certain barren pleasure asking the young salesgirls, all charming but not very informed, in an exaggerated Italian accent, for books he knew to be banned in Ireland.

Arriving in a strange city, he was in the habit of wandering through all of its neighborhoods, from the wealthiest to the most impoverished. Once again, Dublin seemed to thwart any such ambition. Eventually he did manage to get around to visiting several neighborhoods and most of the landmarks: the historic Post Office on O'Connell Street where the revolution was inaugurated; Trinity College; the American Embassy in Donnybrook ( one of the only occasions during his stay in Ireland in which he was seen to break down laughing); various sites named in Joyce's Ulysses, and so forth.

The National Gallery annoyed him; in fact it got him angry. Nor did the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art send him into raptures. The art exhibited in the commercial galleries he found uniformly terrible. In fact the only decent work, to his mind, that he

remembered seeing in Ireland came from Bill Devlin and some of his impoverished colleagues from the "Communards": the name made him wince. He conceded that some of his drinking comrades in the Bedlam were not without talent, although he was not willing to allow that their mental, even physical laziness, accorded with his conception of what it was to be an artist.

There was always a good chance that one might find him sitting in the second floor dining room of Lazlo's between 5 and 6 PM. This Hungarian restaurant off Pembroke Road was the only eating establishment in Dublin which bore any resemblance to a Continental cafe-restaurant. It was an agreeable locale for taking a snack, reading the papers or chatting with friends. Once in awhile he might even be inspired to pull out his sketch pad and do some drawing.

If he decided to have dinner there he would stay on in town until the evening establishments opened up. Otherwise he would make the return trip back to the apartment in Rathmines where Tonio prepared dinner for the two of them.

The two of them would then descend back on the town again to go to the theatre, or do the nightly pub crawl: Gleason's - Fish's - The Bedlam- Gloomy's - a stop back to Gleason's - then a final nightcap at the Bedlam. They did not necessarily go to all of these watering places in a single night. At the back of Riccardo's mind lurked the hope of running into a prospective patron or potential customer for the paintings in his exhibition. Tonio only went because he was with Riccardo.

A demoralizing life, without a doubt. Yet in Dublin, for someone with no job, responsibility or specific task cut out for him, this trajectory is more or less inevitable. It will be to our benefit to review, once more, the daily routine of our deracinated protagonist, Mr. deGiorgio. This will enable us to better understand the constraints under which he was obliged to operate:

No-one ought to be too severely censured on the grounds of laziness, if he or she finds that, with no fixed schedule and face up against the rigors of the Irish winter, he or she is unable to muster the effort to stir before mid-day. To go to bed when there is a nasty chill in the room and a pouring rain outside ; to awake to find the rain still unrelenting, a vicious frost, and a curtain of belligerent blackness obstructing the view from the window, these are hardly encouragements for rising at an early hour. The famous Temperate Climate boasted by the travel brochures , is admirable as theory: a theory so far carried into practice as to convince most landlords that they need not bother with adequate heating arrangements.

Riccardo deGiorgio, furthermore, had never been noted, even in Italy, for being an early riser. If he were in a good humor and or with something important to accomplish he would most likely, in most other places, be up and around by 8. In Dublin, however, where he had nothing to do, the sun would have to carry much of the burden of getting him out of bed by noon.

By two o'clock he was usually ready to go into town. Then he climbed up into one of those rollicking buses, the black and white caravans which provide Dublin with public transportation, to be toppled, jerked, careened and lurched into the heart of town. Every

day saw the re-enactment of a miracle of self-preservation whereby not only the man, together with his illusions were delivered intact to St. Stephen's Green, to wit: that, in the center of every metropolis one should always be able to find a bit of Rome, of Paris, of Barcelona, of Amsterdam.

Day in a day out Riccardo deGiorgio ventured into downtown Dublin to hunt out his favorite Parisian cafe, his cherished Amsterdam coffee house, his adored Florentine trattoria; only to discover, without ever fully getting the message, that Dublin is uniquely designed to frustrate every aspect of the artistic life as he understood it. Except for a brief spell in the afternoons, when the pubs fill up, downtown Dublin is drearier than a day in the life of Ivan Denisovitch.

In the period in which the plot of this novel is set, the 1970's, no one would think of coming into the center of Dublin if he wanted write a book, or work over a poem, or concoct a scientific model (save perhaps at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, where J.L. Synge still presided) or plot the overthrow of the government, or fill up sketchbooks, or work out a get-rich-quick scheme, or dream mad dreams. The coffee shops, such as the Golden Spoon, Bewley's, the Nassau and the Amsterdam, were dark oppressive hot-houses where two minutes of attempted reading might do permanent damage to one's eyesight, with Musak loud enough to burst a blood vessel, and where the coffee, which might be either very good or very bad with little in between, was too heavy to go much beyond a single cup. As in many other lands heavily

influenced by English customs, one couldn't sit for very long in these places with feeling the compulsion to simply drink up and leave.

If one picked up a notebook and began to write, the whole establishment would stare at you until you put it away. Not at all like Paris, where such ill-manners would be considered barbarous, but common enough in diners and short order joints and other forms of eatery in the Anglo-Saxon continuum, from Britain to America to Australia to the Union of South Africa.

Surely the pubs would be more congenial! Isn't it from them that Brendan Behan and Patrick Cavanaugh drew their inspiration, liquid and otherwise? But in fact the pubs are impossible. Nobody goes into a pub to get any work done, unless he wishes to deeply offend those who, from motives ranging from frank good nature to extreme drunkenness, will take up a chair at his table and begin to regale him with all the familiar old names and all the new stories.

If you happen to be trying to write something, your new friend will insist on examining the pages: everyone in Ireland is a writer. If you're reading a book, he's already read it, or he knows of a better book by the same author, or he will assure you that the book's not worth reading. If you're sketching, he insists on peering over your shoulder and giving you the benefit of his impromptu criticism. While if you're into politics, he will extemporize on the glories of the grand Irish revolutionary tradition.

So you put down your pen, or brush, and participate in the conversation, because you must; and in the twitch of a hare's whiskers, half a dozen of his friends have gathered about your

table. After an hour or so, or half a dozen jars , ( whichever measuring system is being used), you notice that you're not getting any work done. So, a bit annoyed, although there is really no one on whom to place the blame, you stand up to take your leaves, and walk - out into the grisly Irish day!

So now where does one go? Trinity College? There's an art exhibition there : but you've already seen it. The bookstores? You've made the rounds of them a dozen times and never found more than the same monotonous rows of Penguins and Pelicans. It just isn't possible to work up an interest in the exciting new field of Sociochemistry as popularized by the Science Editor of the London Times.

No charm; no vulgar exuberance; no intellectual stimulation; nothing. Just people, which, after all, is all that a city really needs. Fascinating people, unbelievable people! : Celts, Normans, Anglo-Irish, Scotch-Irish, Moles, Firbolgs, tinkers, poets, musicians, dreamers, fools, giants, monsters and saints. Still, if you want to get a bit of work done....and you don't know many people... and you're not "gregarious" and in fact tend towards timidity mixed with temerity... but you want to continue a drawing or extend a manuscript while sitting in a café, or be stirred up by a bracing current of new ideas, or revel in a gaudy honky-tonk, or mingle with the sights and sounds of a colorful marketplace...well; you might think twice before coming to Dublin.

After a week of wandering about downtown Dublin, one is bound to find oneself walking, for four hours at a stretch, up and down the length of Grafton Street, oblivious to the gruesome

weather or the rain relentlessly pelting down upon one's exposed head, walking mindlessly back and forth, fingering the few shillings in one's pocket and wondering what one is supposedly doing or where one is supposedly going.

These admonitions are directed, naturally, only to people with nothing to do. If you are a bank clerk, or civil servant, train conductor, ticket collector, then you are busy with your work and don't need distractions. If you are an established writer or fashionable painter, with more commissions than you can handle and your name practically a household word, then you can take a plane from Shannon airport which will get you to London in a few hours, and the high life that awaits you there. Or, if you have lived in Dublin all your life, you will have a circle of not less than 200 friends. If you're an alcoholic or a busker, there is always a niche in which to rot.

**ALL OTHERS BEWARE!** Foreigners, outside agitators, failed artists, intellectuals of every sort, international jet-setters, belly dancers and, certainly, some anti-Christian Italian artist of unpalatable morals, who was kicked out of England without a penny to his name and came here to live with us!

Within a week of moving out from the Devlins, Riccardo deGiorgio found himself, for four hours of every afternoon, walking up and down the length of Grafton Street, oblivious of the gruesomeness of the day, or of the relentless rain pelting down upon his exposed head, walking mindlessly back and forth fingering the few shillings in his pockets, wondering what he was supposed to be doing and where he was supposed to be going.

Although only one painting from the Open Studio exhibition was sold, that sale was far more important to the rest of his stay in Ireland than the amount of money it brought him. It happened on a Friday afternoon in November 1970, on the very day, indeed, on which Brendan Casey returned to Dublin from his impromptu trip to Denmark.

Riccardo had been sitting that afternoon at a table in the second floor dining room of Lazlo's. Neither reading nor sketching, his heavy figure leaned over an untouched cup of coffee and he was holding his head in his strong hands, whether from depression or boredom is difficult to say, no doubt some combination of both. Although his grey rumpled suit descended uncomfortably from hunched shoulders and he hadn't shaved for several days, one would not confuse him with a derelict. He wasn't down-and-out, he was simply depressed, as morose as the unkind and gloomy sunlight that peeped through the low windows looking out onto the street and half-covered obscured with green shades.

In one sense only could it be said that he had reached the end of the line. He'd attained to that acute phase of depression in which one no longer dares to think about ways of relieving one's condition. He'd taken out his sketch book, but as he couldn't think of anything to put into it; the white page looked up at him like a mirror reflection of the white-washed walls of the room. Near his right hand rested a copy of McGahern's "The Dark"; a map of Dublin stuck out from his from his jacket pocket. A veritable bear brought to bay, Riccardo welcomed even the scandals that had

bedeviled his existence, yet which in some strange way enervated him, to drag him out of his state of paralysis.

Besides himself the room held 3 regulars. They sat at separate tables some distance apart. Today, as on most weekdays, an Egyptian political exile laid claim to an obscure niche at the back. For two hours he would sit over cups of coffee as he read from 3 to 6 newspapers from cover to cover, and entering notes into a journal. Then he would order dinner, eat and go home.

At another table, against the row of windows, sat a woman in her 70's of somewhat extravagant aspect, her costume, which may have been current half a century earlier, a fantastic jumble of incongruous odds and ends. She was allowed to remain there throughout the entire afternoon long over a single cup of coffee, during which time she stared stupidly into space and never spoke to a single soul.

Finally there was a fellow at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Study, located only a few blocks away, who came by to read papers in theoretical physics and fill his notebooks with calculations.

During the week Lazlo's, like many other eating establishments in Dublin received few clients apart from its regulars before 6 PM, when it quickly filled to capacity. Mrs. Lazlo, a middle-aged plump, soft-spoken woman dressed almost always in blue, was sitting in back of a high wooden counter, tabulating receipts and chatting to the personnel, two waitresses and a cook, working in the kitchen. Although married to a Hungarian and a militant communist, she was Irish, of liberal

political views though not as extreme as those of her husband. They ran the restaurant together; as he was frequently engaged in political activity, it was not uncommon to find her working there by herself.

On this day, a slight perturbation rocked the afternoon's monotony at around 5 PM, with the arrival of Judy Wilcox O'Higgins. It was not unusual for foreign visitors to drop into Lazlo's sometime in the afternoon as a form of refuge from the forbidding Dublin day. A young girl from Australia, Sheila Franklin, an acquaintance of Beatrice Devlin, was with her. They walked in and found themselves a table near the windows. When Sheila pointed out Riccardo deGiorgio, seated despondently at a table across the room, Judy insisted on meeting him.

Startled by the sound of Sheila Franklin's voice, Riccardo pulled himself erect to a sitting position. Despite being self-preoccupied and wrapped up in his own miseries, he eagerly accepted their invitation to join them at their table. Both he and they were desperate for conversation. Riccardo removed Judy's pale brown rain-coat from her shoulders, revealing a dark green dress covered with flowers. Sheila's held onto her black impermeable; she didn't seem to want it removed.

No sooner were they seated when Judy Wilcox exclaimed with an impatience that embarrassed all of them, herself included:

" Riccardo deGiorgio! You're the *bête noire* of the Open Studio, aren't you?"

Riccardo, rising to the challenge, replied somewhat facetiously:

" Why not describe the Open Studio the *bête noire* of Riccardo deGiorgio?"

" Well, I just have to tell you ", she picked up, with a surprising frankness that fell short of gushing, " I admire your courage!"

Riccardo flushed with anger. Americans were that way, he knew: direct and to the point, yet fertile in non-sequiturs. Women in particular made him defensive, put him on his guard. Yet he replied, politely enough:

" It's not courage; that's the way I paint. I can't imagine doing it in any other way."

He felt increasingly uncomfortable under the full weight of Judy's unwavering admiration. Few people understood how morbidly sensitive Riccardo really was.

" Well!" Judy cried. "I'm going to buy one of your marvelous paintings, if that's any help to you !"

Again Riccardo stiffened. Who were these people? What did they want out of him? Why was she trying to get the advantage over him ?

" I'm very glad to hear that. Which one do you want?"

" We're not sure yet. I'll be bringing my husband down to the Open Studio tomorrow morning. Oh, I'm sorry Maybe I ought to introduce myself: I'm Judy O'Higgins. This is my friend Sheila Franklin." Sheila extended her hand:

" You may not remember me. We met at the Devlins home."

Riccardo indicated that he did remember and they shook hands.

Judy went on: "Have you met my husband? "

Riccardo nodded. He had met Ferdinand O'Higgins a few times at the bar of the Bedlam. He also knew of his reputation from living in England, where several of his novels had been published.

There was something decidedly unfriendly in the way in which he laughed:

" Your husband and I", he smirked, " have a great deal in common."

"What makes you say that?"

deGiorgio regarded her directly, closely, for the first time. There could be cruelty in the way he looked at woman, sizing them up with an attitude of pure calculation emerged unmixed with tenderness or compassion. He saw them largely at potential patrons of his work, fit only to be used. In addition there was something in Judy's manner, perhaps only her tone of voice, which put him on his guard. At the same time she was a representative of the society with which he was familiar, but had yet to encounter in Ireland. Under the right set of circumstances such people could be could mercilessly manipulated with total cynicism.

Judy blushed. Riccardo turned away abruptly and spoke to the wall:

" The 'respectable people' kicked both of us out of England."

" My husband wasn't kicked out!" Judy yelled, her anger thoroughly aroused, " He left on principle!"

" Well" Once again, there was something nasty in his manner.

" So did I."

Sheila Franklin had no notion of what they were talking about, but knew that she had to do something to dispel the awkwardness of the situation that was beginning to turn out badly. She began chattering away about the Devlin family in a frivolous manner. Moira had kept Bill and Beatrice awake all the night before. Beatrice was thinking of writing pieces for the woman's section of the Irish Times. She'd done that sort of thing in school and it might bring in a few pounds.

Bill was working: normally that was all there was to be said about him. The drainpipe that ran across the roof of their house needed to be repaired. Bill had been talking about buying a second-hand station wagon with which to cart his sculpture around. He didn't know the first thing about driving, and wasn't sure he wanted to.

deGiorgio nodded from time to time, making no attempt to conceal his boredom. He'd always considered the Devlins as a prime example of domesticated mediocrity, and it had never crossed his mind that they'd ever done anything for him, an artist poised permanently on the barricades, for which he ought to be grateful.

Judy said nothing. From time to time she looked about the room as if lost, placing her hands in different positions, either by her sides or on her lap. She and Riccardo avoided looking at one another. It seemed as if she both welcomed Sheila's idle patter, yet also that she resented it, as if there were things that she wanted to say to Riccardo in private.

In a short while, the two women took their leave. Judy promised Riccardo once more that she would be bringing her husband down to the gallery the next day. Sheila promised to pass his greetings along to the Devlins. Then they left. Finishing his coffee, Riccardo paid the bill and hurried outdoors to catch the next bus to Rathmines to dig up Tonio.



## Chapter 9

### An Artist's Studio

By Saturday morning the tempestuous weather had leveled off. The torrents descending upon Dublin that seemed to never have had a beginning faded away shortly before the break of dawn. A foretaste of the fabled Temperate Climate advertised in all the travel brochures was tumbling through the air, fusing an alloy with the nipping sleet that continued to hover, both as precursor and afterthought.

As was to be expected Bill Devlin had been working at his drawing board since 6 A.M. He was not so conditioned to the rigors of an Irish winter as to be ungrateful for a rare interlude of decent weather. He'd been up since 5. Beatrice had gotten up with him but, after lighting the fire under the tea kettle, had gone back to bed. Now Bill sat alone in a side alcove off from the living-room, his drawing illuminated by the dazzling light of a small Tensor lamp (one of his few concessions to modern technology) clamped to his work table.

*Why am I doing this?* A routine question, banal, perhaps pointless, yet one which he posed to himself every morning before sitting down to work, a question particularly appropriate to Dublin, as opposed to several other places around the world where he might have chosen to live: London for example. He spent several weeks of each year over there, doing unpaid or minimally paid work in a foundry in exchange for casting his own pieces and everything he could learn of the caster's craft.

He'd last been there had been in September. Bill knew hardly a soul in London. Having nothing else to do he'd stayed up, alone in his bed-sitter, until late in the night, making sketches, keeping a journal, and reading.

*Would you believe it! Just from those 3 hours or so each night, I got more work done in a mere two week, than I can do in a month in Dublin!*

What a shame it was, really, one might even call it a disgrace, that he didn't like London. An unfriendly city -"Unreal City", T.S. Eliot calls it; they've got no sociability; discourteous people bumping into you and expecting you to apologize; no eye contact, no plain speaking, no frankness. What he remembered of its streets were streams of zombies going from nowhere to nowhere.

And the pubs! Filled to burst their seams with the "British workingman", a species he loathed, yabbos talking about little else than the football scores and the Jamaicans and other colonials taking their jobs from them. A nation full of lumps as far as he was concerned.

On the other hand, you take your Irish worker. Sure, he also drinks his Guinness and draws his pay-check once a month. But it doesn't stop there: he can, and will, talk about Biafra, Vietnam, the laws against contraception, James Joyce, the American moon-landing...

*The British prole wouldn't have the least idea of what you're talking about! Biafra, where dat! Joyce, who dat? That's the Britisher for you.*

Nor did he have the impression that he might be "missing something", either, through being unable to "participate" in the remarkable avant-garde art scene they crow about in the newspapers! He'd actually gone to an opening while he was there in September. From the moment he walked through the door he couldn't stop laughing. Some young "discovery", bursting with talent, all the critics rage! The budding genius had nailed an apple peel onto an empty canvas. The peel had been coated with varnish to hinder the rotting process, (a shame, really). Swirling a wide brush dripping with green paint he'd drawn an elongated question mark, and below it the words: "Is this an apple peel?" Nail, question mark and title were all integral to the total concept. No color sense, no notion of composition, nothing at all. Visual jokes; sight gags! A whole exhibition filled with nothing but sight gags! It was enough to make you sick.

*Why if I moved to London I'd probably have to paint like that!*

Still, that one gallery is all there is to London; and London is all there was to England.

*But who in bloody hell wants to live in England!*

He reflected that he had few complaints against the people he had to live with. Aleister McConnell and his wife, Kathy? They're all right. Brendan Casey? Live and let live: at least he tells a great story. The Gleason's poetasters? Well, some are less phony than the others. Once in awhile one of them writes an interesting poem.

Peter Maloney? *Now that's one person I 'm not too fond of. Hell: I 'm not leaving Ireland because of Peter Maloney!*

Then there's Joe, and the McGuires, Tom, Pat, Maria, Siobhan O'Neill, weird ducks like O'Higgins and O'Donoghue, tragic cases like Jackson McVay.

I really have very objections to my life here: Dublin's fine with me.

*Only why doesn't anyone understand that there are just times when a man needs to get a bit of work done!*

Bill reviewed once again the arguments that, time and again, made him toy with the advantages of leaving Ireland. The experience of spending 3 months in Sweden a few years before had been a valuable one. Stockholm is full of galleries, plenty of shows. He met some interesting people, saw some good work there. Stockholm was very cold; much colder than Ireland. But one gets used to the weather.

Bill Devlin did not have sufficient experience in traveling abroad to recognize the superficiality of his observations. It's all too tempting to judge places like London or Stockholm by a single visit. To the unseasoned traveler, events within the first 10 minutes of arrival at a new place can frequently determine how he judges an entire city, even an entire nation.

In point of fact, he went on, in terms of the readings on the thermometer, Ireland doesn't have what one might call a cold climate. *It's just so damn dreary!* Between alcohol, the English, climate, politics and the Church, not falling into manic-depression on the Emerald Isle is a full-time job! It's little wonder the land is crawling with psychotics. That big mental hospital out in Cork is one of the great tourist attractions of our benighted nation. It's a quarter of a mile long, the longest building in the city, perhaps the longest in Ireland!

*Sweden?* Bill sighed: he just wouldn't feel comfortable living in Sweden. There was the language problem, to begin with: he couldn't learn another language to save his life! Not that he'd ever tried. Most of the people you met in the streets spoke an acceptable English, some of them spoke excellent English, better than his own.

But there was something in the way of life that didn't agree with him. Like the fact that all those incredibly beautiful women were, from what he could see, cold as icebergs. Just like us, they're a screwed up bunch. Just read Strindberg. Why go to another Ireland. He's seen one Strindberg play, at the Abbey. That was enough for him.

*Why? What's wrong with us: apart from bloody Mother Church over us, under us, inside and outside of us! There's nothing wrong with our family life. When it comes to their sex life, Sweden's like a concentration camp! Those pornographic films they dish out; you have to laugh. They're the biggest farce since Duchamp put a moustache on the Mona Lisa!*

They hate sex there, he assured himself: I think they only do it to have something to boast about to their friends. On the other hand are the cars, television, central heating, highways, automation, modernistic furniture, electronic gadgets, SAAB's.

For some reason, the allure of a technologically advanced nation didn't work for him. Bill recalled how he'd nearly been busted in the face by a door in Stockholm when he walked into it the wrong way. Worse than the U.S., he thought, though of course he'd never been there. In the U.S. they respect your individuality; that's the propaganda.

*Aw, he admitted to himself, with some chagrin, I'm just a bloody Paddy ..... He'd always lived in Ireland. Apart from small trips, little more than vacations, he probably always would: that was the lump in him.*

*Brendan Casey's been to more places in this year alone than I've visited in my entire life! And Riccardo deGiorgio! There's a man for you. He's ruined more careers in more places than any artist in living history! I admire him, though I don't envy him. Fighting your whole life just for the right to be you.... But I suppose that's what it's all about ..."*

That's what it's all about, he repeated as a kind of monotonous refrain: pursuing a career in the arts is just a projected egotism, basically. Look at what I was doing, a minute ago: pure selfishness! Were he to be the husband he ought to be, give Beatrice what she wanted, they'd have cars, vacations on the Riviera, a "ranch house" in County Cork, a new dress each month.

Yet here he is, going on with his work, his own notion of what he ought to be doing, not giving a damn about anybody else.

His own family, both his mother's and father's side, made no apologies for hating him, not him really, but what he'd done with his life. Bill admitted that, although he'd not done anything to injure any of them, he hadn't exactly given them what they expected from him either.

*Look at this drawing in front of me, (which is going fairly well for a change): It's just ME! All the pictures hanging on the walls are ME. ! Everything I see around me is ME, ME, ME!! Makes you ashamed of yourself... If you're stuck in VietNam or Biafra you don't have any spare time to just sit around and paint... When you've got your back against the wall, it's different.. I persist in believing that something higher's involved, else I wouldn't be doing it...*

*"Bill Devlin, the artist! "he muttered in a mocking tone, imitating Beatrice's manner of speaking ... " yet I know damn well I couldn't do anything else if I were to be given..... a million pounds and a palace in California. I'm a complete reactionary, really. Making scratches on a piece of rice paper in Dublin, that's my perspective..."*

Bill yawned, stood up, stretched his limbs; then he stood up and walked into the living-room. Going into the kitchen he poured himself a cup of tea and picked up a piece of soda bread. Walking idly about the room he gazed mechanically through the windows into the yard.

*...In most respects Dublin is possibly the worst place in the developed world for anyone to try for a career as an artist...*

*Damn it! , he swore, that god-damned lady!*

He'd suddenly recalled the upper class lady, Old Ascendancy written all over her, who'd come by his studio a few days ago. She was being driven in a big American car, Chrysler or Pontiac; it barely slithered on its belly through the alleyway.

She'd been directed to his home by a staffer in the Open Studio. The woman claimed to have been transported into raptures by a bronze bull standing on the table in the living-room. She asked him to bring it with him to a fashionable restaurant on O'Connell Street that afternoon, where she and her husband would be having lunch. She wanted him to see it first before buying it.

So, idiot that he was, he'd lugged the bronze bull statuette half way across the city. It cost him the better part of a day's work, just sitting around and talking with them. Apparently she'd changed her mind just after leaving his place and hadn't considered it worth her trouble to come back and tell him as much. No offer even of lunch, of course.

*Man, but an artist's really no better than a beggar!* he swore, his right fist striking the back of an armchair. **THAT'S IRELAND FOR YOU!**

With obsessive morbidity his mind worked and reworked the time he'd lost through this misadventure... almost an hour getting to the restaurant.. another hour in vapid chit-chat.. an hour back.. it wasn't possible to get down to work until after dinner. And that was ruined when Brendan Casey knocked at the door!

*Funny; he didn't say much. That in itself is strange.... Totally unlike him; told us a few stories from his visit to Denmark. Then,*

*well, he just sat there for what seemed the longest time. You just knew there was something he wanted to get off his chest. Simpering like a silly ape, he was.*

*Whatever it was, it couldn't have been very important, since he never did get around to saying it. All the same, I still wonder why he paid us a visit. Alone, that is, without the usual crowd of friends. Which is just as well; don't want to have Bea squawking like a bitch.*

*He ever brought along a six-pack of Harp. Drank up two bottles and left the rest for us. He must have talked around a dozen topics before he got up and left. Don't know, really; I had the impression he'd just come from doing some heavy drinking and was getting ready to go out and do some more. Brendan Casey isn't really an alcoholic, relative to the national character that is.*

*Come to think of it, he did say he'd decided to visit me after a talk he'd had with Peter Maloney. Both of us avoided talking about Riccardo. That's simple common sense: best thing is to let it all blow over. It's a total waste of time to try to call a person like Brendan to account for anything he does.*

*.All the same; it really was very peculiar. All the same; the way he finally got up and left, I could scarcely keep from laughing! Brendan must have turned around three times as he was going out the door. Opened his mouth once or twice, as if he were about to spit something out.*

*Finally he said goodbye. "I'll be stopping around again. There's something I want to talk to you about!" The way he fled you'd think he was trying to escape the cops! Really very strange ..."*

Bill carried his empty teacup back to the kitchen for a refill. Then he returned to the alcove and seated himself once again before its table of completed and unfinished sketches.



## Chapter 10

### A Patron of the Arts

8 AM: Turning over in his bed, Brendan Casey's naked backside pinned the right foot of his wife, Teresa. They'd been separated for the better part of a month while he was away in Denmark. In that time Teresa had made an excellent adjustment to doing without him.

"Hmmm... Brendan... could you turn your fucking carcass back facin' the wall?" , she muttered, "Ye're givin' me a club foot."

Though still more asleep than awake, Brendan was never remiss when an opportunity for ribaldry appeared:

" Watch what ye're sayin", he groaned , "or ye might jest git a'club up yer arse..He,he,he,,".

He emitted the ghost of a sick laugh, unable even in sleep to relinquish his role on the stage of life. They'd celebrated Brendan's return to Dublin until 5 in the morning and were thoroughly besotted .

" He,he,he", she mimicked. Wrenching her thigh away from the weight of his slack meat, she reached out with both arms and clutched him about the chest. Whispering ever so softly, she said:

"Cushla, let's make love..."

" Leave me along, ye bloody female! ", Brendan snarled, " Did ye think I was wastin' me time in Copenhagen? I've tasted enough smelly cunt to last me the rest of my fornicatin' life! ..There's a thought, love ...Methinks, wench, I seek the savor of more Middle Eastern defilements.. Perchance will turn pederast.."

Teresa gave him a resounding whack on the rear.

" You don't fool me, you fucken fraud! Why there isn't a queer in Dublin who'd so much as look at you! Do you think I'd stick with the likes of you all these years if I wasn't a good Catholic?"

" Lady.." Brendan belched, then swore " Christ, mum .. if that fabulous sodomite, the lubricious post- Machiavellian Riccardo deGiorgio, shows up with a box of pepperoni pizza in his hands, let him in, will you?...Could use a slice of wog arse.." after which he turned his face back to the wall and fell into a deep slumber. Sighing, Teresa relinquished her hold on him, wrapped the sheets more tightly about her naked form and joined him in mindless oblivion.



9:30 AM : Aleister McDonnell, barely conscious, lay awake in his bed. His limbs spread apart like the blades of a scissors, his left hand maneuvered about in the empty bed for the familiar feel of his wife. Suddenly, with the realization that she wasn't there, he sat bolt upright. It was not, however, so much her absence that had terrified him, as the sight of a menacing shadow along the windowsill. It took him some moments to realize that this strange

projection was being cast by a chair that had been moved to an unfamiliar position.

" Kathy!", he called out, "Kathy!" Kathleen McDonnell was standing in the kitchen, putting up tea. Her slender figure silhouetted against the wall behind the stove, she poked around with a stick in the belly of a briquette stove from which the top burner had been removed. Her cropped and straggly black hair framed a face furrowed with care.

" What is it, Alex?"

" Did you notice, Kathy? The sun is out today! It's going to be a *good* day , like the ones they have on Mylos, or in Tel Aviv!"

" That's wonderful, dear."

Aleister remained in the bed in a seated position. His body racked with cramps from the binge of the previous night, he gazed perplexedly about the small room which served them for everything but bathroom and kitchen. Papers were strewn everywhere, covering all the bare surfaces of the furniture and the foot of the bed. Another 20 or more were scattered about the floor. Most of them held no more than a line or two of poetry; most of these had been scratched out.

" Kathy - what time did I go to bed last night?"

" I don't know, dear. Perhaps 3 A.M. You stayed up late, working."

" .... working?..working?" he mumbled, "...do you know? I don't remember a single word of anything I wrote last night? Kathy! You've got to keep me from doing that! It's very bad for my health."

" Yes, dear."

" The artist and the beast in me are always at war.. yet if I don't give the beast his due, the artist will kill me!" Aleister tumbled out of bed. Walking about the room in confusion, barefooted, dressed only in his underwear, Aleister scooped up as many of his papers as his hands and arms could carry. Stumbling across the carpet, he carried his lode into the tiny kitchen. Walking in, he bore the evidences of his creativity aloft, putting one of mind of the mirror and razor of Buck Mulligan in the opening pages of Joyce's *Ulysses* .

More sensitive to the conventions of decency, Kathy had draped her nightgown in a bathrobe tied with a sash.

"Good morning, dear." The voice with which she greeted her husband was sugary and a bit simple-minded.

Aleister nodded curtly. He had other things on his mind:

" Kathy!" he commanded , " Burn these! I want you to burn these!"

" All of them, darling?" The horror in her voice did not overshadow her recognition of the unique predicament of the soul of an artist.

" All of them! They came from my *Lower Being* ! They are *unworthy of me* !" Kathleen McDonnell used a poker to clear a space between the burning briquettes. Before dropping them into the fire, she regarded him with an earnest look, in which tenderness mixed uneasily with pleading:

"*All of them* ?" Nodding his head vigorously, Aleister pointed to the stove in a manner that brooked no compromise.

Thereupon she took the papers from his hands and thrust them into the coals .

Standing together, with, like the couple in Yeat's ballad of the Sally Gardens, her snow white hand placed upon his leaning shoulder, they watching the foolscap smoulder and crackle, flaring up briefly a few instants prior to giving over its cargo of wisdom to the flames .

As the ashes settled into the bottom of the stove and the garish points of light flickered and died, Aleister grabbed her by the shoulders, turned her face to his, and cried: " Kiss me Kathy! Kiss me ....before I begin today's torment!!!"

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10:00 AM: Padraic Parsons sat after breakfast, in the dining-room of his house, teaching himself Russian. Peggy McGuire, keeping an eye on her six brothers and 3 sisters, was reading aloud from the holy sonnets of John Donne. For refusing to make up his bed or clean up after himself, Seamus McGrath was being ejected from the Dublin Men's Shelter. Mike Mulligan was asking himself whether it was time to end this drunk, and when to begin another one. Jerry O'Brien was planning his next painting.

With nothing to do until 2 , the bartenders of the Bedlam lay bets on the horses. The editor of the Irish Independent asked himself how much longer the Finn Gael Party was going to remain in power.

At the stroke of 11 PM, Peter Maloney put his key into the door of the Open Studio and honorably entered his place of business.

The sun sailed in the heavens like a unwinding top, or like a paintbrush swirling the much vaunted Temperate Climate about covering the fronts of the Georgian residences as if it were a coat of whitewash. Peter Maloney, like most of the rest of the population of Dublin, found this rare interlude of good weather both bracing and stimulating. That was all to the good, for he had serious work to do.

He was waiting for Sean Harris and Reginald Jamison to come into the gallery. They were expected some time between 11:30 and noon. These two members of the Board of Directors had promised to take a break from their professional duties to help Maloney remove Riccardo deGiorgio's daubings from the walls.

Proud as a ship's captain before the wheel, Peter Maloney took up his station behind his desk. His wispy beard quivered. One could almost read, in the snarl of satisfaction which curled about his lips, the naked malevolence of his thoughts. With tie in place, cuff-links protruding just below the edges of his jacket sleeves, not a trace of lint on his proper grey suit, creases straight along the thigh-bones, parallel part across the middle of his scalp, little modification would have been need to turn sharp pleats of his body into a perfect rectangle.

With half an hour or more of idle time stretching before him he opened the ledger on the desk before him, and began totaling up the receipts of the previous day. With a felt pen he drew a line down the middle of a clean page. On the left side, at the top, he wrote SALES in block letters. Below this he placed a zero. On the right below the word "EXPENDITURES", he wrote "Office

Supplies £ 5" In the margin to the far right, he wrote the date of the previous Friday.

With a sigh of relief he started a new page, placing the current date a Monday, at the top. Then he opened the desk drawers to tabulate the remaining petty cash. At the top of the left column he entered the sum of 4 pounds, 6 shillings and 3 pence.

It occurred to him that this might be a good time to make a draft of a letter to the editors of the *Irish Times* . Laying flat a sheet of letter-head stationary he began: *Dear Sirs :*

He paused; that wouldn't be appropriate. Perhaps in a business letter, not in a letter intended for the whole population of Ireland . He crumpled the page into a ball, dropped it into the trash basket, pulled out another paper and began anew:

*To the readership of the Irish Times:*

*The Open Studio wishes to extend its humble apologies for the exhibition, so offensive to morality which, contrary to its wishes, it was constrained to accept, owing to irresponsible commitments made by ..."*

At 11:30 AM , give or take several minutes, Riccardo deGiorgio walked onto the premises of the Open Studio! Not one to waste time on greetings, words being otherwise superfluous , he pulled up a chair in front of the desk . Tipping forward on the edge of its seat he fixed Peter Maloney with an unflinching stare. Maloney wilted under the brutality of this visual attack.

" Well, fellow!" he exclaimed with false exuberance, relying on the innocuous to come to his rescue: " Bright and early today, isn't it?"

diGiorgio said nothing, the damnation in his eyes being more than adequate as a substitute for the expected reply. To his mind, if anyone needed to do the explaining, it was Peter.

"Okay, Riccardo.. speak up! What's the matter? Something's obviously wrong, isn't it? I can see it in your eyes. Don't you want to talk about it? "

deGiorgio was waiting for the right moment to speak. Apparently it hadn't come yet.

"Cat got your tongue, eh?"

Heaving an enormous sigh , as if saying in effect that, although he was experiencing the sufferings of Christ, he had no intention of taking his attitude towards them, Riccardo permitted himself a few words. His voice resonated with a barely constrained pessimism:

" What is this that I hear about you gonna close my show?"

Peter Maloney's stoic posture crumpled like a line of bad verse. With his trembling right hand over his face he sat huddled over his desk. The crisis passing, he lifted his hand away again, it being needed for a new function, that of banging the top of the desk, softly to be sure, though decisively. He may have mumbled something like "Christ, why do I stay in Ireland?" Then he turned to confront deGiorgio:

" Who told you that?" he asked, letting him know from his tone of voice that whoever had done so was a very bad person indeed:

Riccardo examined the soles of his shoes, noting that he might have to buy a new pair fairly soon:

" I meet Brendan Casey last night at Gleason's. He tell me that everything that happen to me is your fault."

Maloney's face flushed crimson with rage: " Oh he did, did he!?" He was tempted to bang the table once again, with greater force, but thought better of it:

"Perhaps it true, perhaps not. I do not know. What should I believe. Because he tell me, I not making any mistake, he tell me that he try to do everything he makes promises to do, but that you ruin everything."

" That bastard!", Maloney swore, "That dirty bastard!"

" And then he tell me this: I better hurry, he say, over to the Open Studio gallery today, right away in the morning, because you no like what the critics are writing, and you gonna close down my show. Is that true?"

" Now, now....take it easy, Riccardo", Maloney's smooth, unhappy face supported a wide grimace, a mannerism notable for its incongruity in the cozy haven of the Open Studio gallery. His arms languished in their sockets like the wings of a rain-soaked butterfly, as his right hand rose up once more to cover his face:

"You show know by now, Riccardo, not to believe *anything* that Brendan Casey says. There's been a terrible misunderstanding! "

" I no longer believe what anybody is telling me, including you." DeGiorgio stood up and strode, somewhat pompously, back and forth before the desk:

"That includes you!" he swore again. He strode right up to Maloney, pointing a finger close to his face, stopping just short of intentional violence:

"But it true, no , that you gonna close my show?"

" That was a silly thing for Brendan to say, Riccardo! Just don't get excited!" His heart was pounding and his body shook with tremors of fear . He knew that he had to get out of the gallery right away, if only for a few minutes. He also needed to alert Sean and Reginald as to what they ought to expect to find :

" Riccardo, what I need more than anything right now is a cup of coffee. Look, can I get you one? What do you want in it? Cream? Sugar?"

Riccardo sat down once more in the comfortable easy chair situated in front of the desk. Heaving a melodramatic sigh, his gaze floated around the room as he critically assessed the effect of the rows of canvases hanging about the room. For the first time, he acknowledged that Bill Devlin and his co-workers had done an excellent job in framing and hanging his work.

" So... Brendan Casey is wrong, then?"

" Absolutely, Riccardo.. Look. Your show's scheduled for another week, isn't it?"

" I think .. No ... another five days."

" Let's make it a week, all right? We owe you an apology anyway, Look, Riccardo, I've just got to get that cup of coffee. What do you want in yours?"

" Black... espresso, if they got it." Like a child running home from school, Peter Maloney sped out the door onto the stone steps of the terrace of the building and down the staircase onto the street. There he reduced his pace to a sedate trot. Halting before the traffic light at the first intersection, he saw Sean Harris and Reginald Jamison coming towards him on the other side of the street. Crossing rapidly, he gripped his jacket lapels in both hands and boldly set forth to face them.

"Morning, Peter." Sean Harris was a man in his middle forties, stout about the middle, prosperous in appearance, an obvious asset to any community, father of a college graduate and other children.

" Morning, Peter." Reginald Jamison, shorter, not so heavy, exuded an aroma of smug self-satisfaction. A shock of bright red hair casually groomed, presided above black-rimmed glasses and a wide mustache. Both walked with ambling strides, as befits men who make their own way in the world, provided they stay on schedule.

" Morning Sean; morning Reg. Look: you'd both better come with me. Something's come up. Where can we get breakfast? " Grabbing both of them by the arms, he steered them to a small, restaurant, almost empty in anticipation of the luncheon crowds..



Riccardo deGiorgio paced the floor space of the Open Studio. As his thoughts wandered aimlessly from one painting to another, he wondered what could have led him to imagine that anyone in Ireland would want to buy them? He recalled the circumstances under which each of them had been conceived and painted, some as long ago as 4 or 5 years. This activity of reassessment was, with him, as it is with all serious artists, a continually renewed obligation.

When he was able to get beyond the thick carapace of his personal vanity, Riccardo was capable of realism about himself and his work. He halted before an earlier canvas, painted in Zurich in the days when he first met Brendan Casey and his crowd. In spite of himself, he chuckled: a nun is depicted nailed to a cross, heavily clothed save for a grossly exaggerated bare breast. A leper clings to her body, squeezing the breast to catch the oozing drops of milk. One might consider it an amalgam of Enlightenment anti-clericalism with Counter-Reformation piety.

Even for a non-Catholic it was disgusting. It was meant to be. Indeed, it could even be defended on the grounds of Catholic orthodoxy. Wasn't this what these pious sisters of mercy really want, hadn't he captured the secret fantasy of most nuns? Who could deny that the essence of a certain vision of the religious life had been captured in this striking image? Who could deny it?

Turn to Luis Bunuel for cruel satire at the expense of the Catholic church! *The Milky Way*, *Viridiana*, *Los Olvidados*. Look at the surrealism of Leonora Fini, from whom these barbarians had probably never seen a single drawing. And Georg Grosz. Goya for

that matter! In fact, the scandalous DeGiorgio hadn't invented anything; it's all been done before him. Max Beckmann! Edvard Munch! Even Picasso for that matter!

No question about it: Max Beckmann wouldn't have lasted a day in Ireland! He peered at another canvas, closely examining it to uncover Beckmann-like allegorical effects in it. There was something to be learned from such a man. His ferocity; his sense of the grandiose; his powerful conscience.

Despite an aesthetic so profoundly different from his own, there was something both challenging and irresistible in the paintings of Max Beckmann, which gripped him, held him fast. Riccardo sometimes doubted that he'd ever progressed beyond the stage of merely imitating his influences. Was there anything he'd done which hadn't been borrowed from others? From Picasso, Modigliani, Czontvary, Chagall, DiChirico, Beckmann, Munch, Fini, Ernst?

While still a student the works of all of these artists had been intensively studied. Like a mechanic dismantling a machine to learn how it functions, he'd analyzed hundreds of paintings, ancient and modern, sometimes inch by inch, to uncover the secrets of their effects, how and why they worked upon intellect and imagination, their unique magic. Since then, over the years, he'd continued to incorporate what he'd discovered into his own work.

Things had changed greatly for him in the space of a mere decade. Back in the late 50's he'd been able to dependably produce a far more concentrated energy to bring to his work, a quality of energy he'd never recovered, probably never would. His

recollections amazed him: there was a time when hard work, 12 to 15 hours a day before a single canvas, was not considered unusual, whole days going by in which he neglected himself, his friends, cafe life, social gatherings, books, museums. The recollection of such- single-minded dedication to art filled him with immeasurable sadness, for now it seemed to him that he was dedicated to little more than getting through life one day at a time.

What did he need to do to rekindle that enthusiasm, to reinvent a more restrained version of that old dedication, bringing to his craft enough experience and maturity to make up for the vanishing of the old fire? One thing he knew: he needed to get away from people, from the expectations of patrons, from financial want. Perhaps he should avoid the big cities for awhile, go out to the countryside, force himself into a situation in which there was nothing else for him to do, where he would be required to paint from sunrise to sunset merely to cope with monotony and boredom! How long was it that he'd been getting nowhere, changing without developing, dragging his feet: 3 years? 5 years? Struggling to live, wasting time, chasing after clients and commissions as a fish jumps to the bait?

In theory the craft of the artist was the most useful of all activities. The creative person sets himself up in the place of God, acting as the burning glass through which the scattered energies of the universe are brought a focus. He is the pathfinder determining the course of evolution for all mankind. All this had always been self-evident to him. Such a belief did not imply conceit. Surprisingly, they reflected a kind of humility, not

arrogance, in the face of the task set before him. All activities have their legitimate domain of operation, the artist's being only one among many, not even the most indispensable, only the highest.

Yet: there was theory and there was practice. As he reflected upon his life over the past decade, Riccardo could not help but feel that his efforts and energies had been largely wasted. In pragmatic terms, he knew of no-one whose life was more useless to himself and others. Only a negligible fraction of his work in this period now hung on the walls of the despicable class that had the money to buy it.

That brief moment of success he'd known in London had been nothing more than a distraction, already swept away into a past that was, in the larger picture, dismal. He had lived off friends, abused the confidence of dotting women, stolen whatever he needed: books, art supplies, even money.

For what? For every constructive hour he wrested from the grasp of a philistine culture he'd wasted as many days: sleeping in train stations, homeless shelters or out on the streets; standing in lines for stupid jobs, or waiting in offices for money owed to him; beggary in a thousand disguises; dealing with police or border guards or landlords; even time in jail, waiting to be deported...

Even something as simple as cashing a check could use up an entire day, if one were a foreigner without a real bank account, without even the bus fare to travel across town to the bank that would accept it! An endless litany of frustration, grievances, misery, hostility. What did he have to show for it? Huge investments in time and energy in exchange for slops from the

tables of the rich! A smile and a handshake from a major Belgian painter who had seen his work and understood it. A week's rent and a meal in a good restaurant for a drawing into which he had poured three days of fierce effort. A trunk of drawings and watercolors ruined by rain after being impounded by the German police. A friend in Paris who'd given him 300 francs to save him from being kicked out of a filthy, evil-smelling hotel.

Were these the rewards appropriate to a vocation which deGiorgio believed to be more exalted than any other? Was it not rather the case that, instead of rewarding him, society sets out to destroy the very culture it hypocritically claims to admire, taking credit for a tri-millennial heritage of intellectual achievement?

"Hello, Riccardo". Sean Harris, closely followed by Peter Maloney and Reginald Jamison, had just entered the Open Studio. His tone of voice that which a school principal might use to a recalcitrant truant:

"Riccardo", Peter Maloney made the introductions, "This is Sean Harris; I think you've met before. And this is Reginald Jamison."

Sean Harris didn't believe in wasting time: "Riccardo," he broke in before the ceremonial shaking of hands was finished, "We've got something to tell you."

"Yes ... and I think I know what it is, too."

"We're closing your show. as of right now. If you're a decent sort of person, you'll help us take down your work."

"Decent? So that's what you call it? The way you use the word sounds very funny. It may be that we do not understand this word, 'decent'. Maybe you tell me what you mean by 'decent' .

"I'm sorry, Riccardo", Peter interposed, " but that's the way it has to be."

deGiorgio remained calm. His suspicions confirmed, he was able to deal with the situation:

" You cannot do this to me. You remember that we have an agreement?"

" That agreement is off! Riccardo; off!" Peter Maloney waved his hands in wide arcs, as if physically wiping out all agreements, present and future. Reginald Jamison contributed some professional advice:

" Legally, Riccardo, the Open Studio is under no obligation to keep your paintings a day beyond its own legitimate interests. The only agreement you have from us ( which, I remind you, was forced on us very much against our will and, you've forced me to say it, our artistic judgment) is a kind of 'gentleman's agreement'. We were hoping, in fact, that you hadn't forgotten this and would accept the situation - as a gentleman."

Riccardo's frozen smile served as a disturbingly fragile seal set upon his mounting anger: "I'm not a gentleman, my good friends. I will tell you a little secret: I am really a dog. My feeling is we make a "dog's agreement". Speaking with you as from one dog to another, I not let you take down my paintings! "

"Now, now, Riccardo!" Peter Maloney was frantic, "Take it easy, for God's sake!!" Nervously, he paced the floor in quick strides,

"How can I make you understand that it's not our fault? We've got nothing against your paintings, Riccardo. This is Ireland, man! We've got our reputation to consider! You must realize that we've got nothing against you personally. Why can't we still be friends? Look Riccardo, you help us take down your paintings, and I'll buy you dinner. How's that?"

It was the worst thing he could possibly say. Riccardo's fist was itching to reach out and break his jaw:

"I not hungry, thank you very much. You give that dinner to some bum on the Green! Nobody take down my paintings!!!"

It was around this time that Sean Harris discovered that his fists were also closing automatically in a clench:

"So, Riccardo- you're not going to help us?" He snarled, something between a laugh and a sneer.

"You just try to take down my paintings, you see what happens."

Sean flushed : "Is that a threat?"

"No; perhaps a promise."

"Reggie!" Harris yelled in a choked voice "Let me hold this degenerate dego at bay while you and Peter pull his crap off our walls!!!"

Like a long-delayed erection, Riccardo's fist rose to connect with Sean Harris's left cheek. Harris staggered backwards, put up his guard and jockeyed about, aiming for the stomach. Maloney

and Jamison sprang back with a shared reflex. Stepping behind Riccardo, Jamison tried to reach out and pin back his shoulders. With a savage kick Riccardo sent him sprawling against one of his canvases, notably the one supporting the copulating images of Pope and bear. Fortuitously, there was no damage done either to trustee, bear or pontiff. While Sean Harris and Riccardo deGiorgio tussled, Peter Maloney raced hopelessly up and down, horribly upset, wringing his hands and shouting for them both to stop.

In a moment, Riccardo and Harris were sprawled on the floor, the former raining heavy blows on the latter. The whites of Riccardo's eyes gleamed with manic savagery, with all the veins in his face inflamed to bursting.

Coming up from behind him, Jamison yanked on Riccardo's jacket while kicking him with the pointed of his patent leather shoes, 20 quid apiece from Brown-Thomas. Harris and deGiorgio struggled to their feet assaulting one another in shameless fury. Peter Maloney, courageous enough but no fighter, persistently interposed himself between the two of them, begging them to behave.

Riccardo seized him by the throat and pushed him into Harris, who pushed him back into Riccardo, who thereupon set to throttling poor Peter Maloney, becoming so engrossed in the performance of his chores that he didn't notice Reginald Jamison coming up from behind again with a broom raised over his head. The motion of its shadow caught Riccardo's eye, who turned away just in time to parry the threat. Grabbing Peter by the underarms he spinned him around like a battering ram, catching Jamison

squarely in the midriff and knocking him down, sending Peter sprawling on top of him. Riccardo used his new found freedom to return to Sean Harris, wholeheartedly committed to beating the daylights out of him.

He knocked Harris to the ground, planting his left foot against his groin. In his left hand he gripped his shirt collar, using his right to pound Harris's bloodied face. It appeared to be a matter of indifference to him, whether he killed him or merely disfigured him for life. Peter Maloney picked himself off the floor and dashed out the door to summon the police.

One will never know how many years in prison Riccardo might have accumulated had he been allowed to continue, or how few the number of days he would have had to wait before being deported, had not both he and Harris been saved by the serendipitous entrance of Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins, in the company of Judy Wilcox, his young and beautiful wife !!

O'Higgins took in the situation at a glance. The blood of generations of Irish patriots and American pioneers flooded his blood vessels like the pounding of the surf on Aran Island's cliffs. This was a man never known to back out of a fight, or lose control before any situation requiring his personal intervention or exhibition of courage. Holding his cane in a tight grasp he sidled his balloon stomach across the room on his semi-crippled legs. Dispassionate as the most idle curiosity-seeker he tapped Riccardo's shoulder with his cane.

" Young man? ... Harrumph!.. What is this I see here?"

Riccardo turned around with horror to discover whom he had to deal with now. He recognized O'Higgins face from the bar of the Bedlam, and froze with shame. Letting go of Harris's body he sat back from a squatting position and stood up:

" It's all over now ... I've ruined everything ."

Out in the street Peter Maloney had noticed O'Higgins and his wife walking into the gallery. He reversed his steps and returned to the gallery.

" Mr. O'Higgins!!!" he rushed to his side, " What can I say to apologize for this dreadful scandal? What a terrible thing for you and your wife! Don't worry: we'll have this brute behind bars in no time!!!"

"Disgraceful!" O'Higgins stormed , "Disgraceful! Can not all of you, as true gentlemen, resolve your differences without resorting to the barbarism of fisticuffs? Why, the use of physical force is ever the resort of the moral coward!!!"

O'Higgins stooped over his paunch and extended the hand of succor to Sean Harris.

" May I, sir, your injuries notwithstanding, humbly assist you to rise?"

Reginald Jamison took the other hand and together they pulled Harris back up on his feet. His condition looked much worse than it actually was. No broken bones, no sprains; apart from a bloody nose, raw face and bruised shins, no serious injuries. Assisted by Jamison he staggered off to the washroom at the back of the gallery.

" Now, gentlemen", O'Higgins, using his cane like a pogo-stick and twirling about almost facetiously, like some high dignitary:

" If no more such unseemly disturbances are to be anticipated, *I am here to buy a painting!* "

*The celebrated man of letters, Ferdinand O'Higgins has indeed come into the Open Studio to buy a painting!*

*Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins, Ireland's most distinguished immigrant, ( after Erwin Schrödinger), internationally acclaimed American author, whose novels have often, ( no one knows how often), graced the best seller lists of the New York Times Book Review, recipient of numerous write-ups in the New York Review of Books!*

The *Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins, one time toast of the British literary establishment!*

*Veritably a Joyce returned to Dublin! Lord of the Bedlam!  
Virtual monopolist abd dictator of the literary page of the Irish Times!*

*Has just walked through the doors of the Open Studio  
With his young, beautiful and talented wife, Judy née Wilcox  
To buy ... buy ... Buy!!! A painting*

*by*

*the*

*Scandalous Renaissance Genius*

*Riccardo deGiorgio!!*

Judy took deGiorgio aside, leaving Peter Maloney free to initiate negotiations with her husband:

" Mr. O'Higgins!" Maloney gushed, "You've saved the day! We were just about to close down his show. Look, if you think we should have him arrested, we can still do that."

" Arrested? Close the show? Don't even think of it, my good man! Why, apart from my wife, he's the only painter in Ireland who's not churning out rubbish! He's much better than Hodges, you know : one can see that at a glance."

It should perhaps be explained that O'Higgins knew absolutely nothing about painting. In addition, he'd not seen a scrap of deGiorgio's work before coming into the Open Studio. He was merely parroting the opinions of his wife.

"Oh, do you think so? There is something to it, I must admit. It takes people who know something about art to point up the merit of deGiorgio's craft. I gather he's quite highly thought of on the Continent. An international reputation I've been told."

O'Higgins glared at him, straining eyes and neck as if he were staring down some disobedient dog. Maloney turned to jelly. Without a word O'Higgins swiveled around and hobbled about the gallery with a mock-military gait.

Judy Wilcox had walked with Riccardo to a quiet corner of the gallery. As a peace-maker she'd always been supremely gifted: the consoling of fractured egos was a skill she'd acquired with long practice. She sat him down in a wooden chair, placing her firm hands on the shoulders of his grey suit jacket, worn through although not yet in tatters. Though he squirmed about a bit, Riccardo deGiorgio did not try to stand up. He stared fixedly at the floor, his face crimson with shame, his heart still consumed with

anger. Heaving like the great bear he resembled, he collapsed into helplessness under the soothing hands of the slender woman who coddled him like a indulgent mother.

"What's possessed you, Riccardo? Didn't I tell you I was bringing my husband here today to buy a painting? One show more or less won't affect your career. You're still a young man, you've still got plenty of good work ahead of you. Do you realize how lucky you are? If we'd come half an hour later you would now be in jail, facing deportation. As it is, we may need all of my husband's influence with the Irish government to keep you here."

With Peter Maloney close at his heels, O'Higgins briefly scanned half a dozen paintings, humming, coughing, pointing to certain features with an expression both quizzical and knowing. Finally he paused before the painting of the leper and the nun:

"Aha!" he blared, "That's unorthodox! What say you, fellow?" Peter was up to the mark in a flash:

"Well ... a bit cynical perhaps. But we do live in the age of the New Morality ..uh ... so-called. Everything's called into question, isn't it?... At least for the time being. "

For a second time, Ferdinand O'Higgins glared at him:

"Don't talk rubbish, man!" He continued on the next painting:

"That's a good one there. That's splendid! Not for the living-room I'm afraid.. just wouldn't fit in with the decor. There's another one I like ...hmmm. Hmmm."

Riccardo turned aside to allow a limping, sour Irishman named Sean Harris, steadfastly ignoring his gaze and little

inclined to forgive him for anything, to walk past them. After a brief interchange and a handshake with Peter Maloney he continued out the door.

Judy pulled over another chair and sat down beside him:  
" "Riccardo? Riccardo, listen to me! Higgley-Piggley and I know lots of people in Ireland and England who can help you. We've got good contacts in America too; you ought to go there."

She took out a handkerchief and started wiping the blood streaking away from his cut lip and down his chin. He winced and pushed her away; she gave him the handkerchief so he could apply it to himself.

" What's wrong with you, Riccardo? Don't you want anybody to help you?" He trembled, helpless as a baby. deGiorgio felt something give way inside him. In the presence of certain kinds of women he felt as if he were being depleted of some essential source of energy. Judy re-arranged his hair back in place. He turned his face to look at her, then, as a deep sense of shame surged through him, turned away again. There was a place in his soul that was rarely visited, from which he felt the stirrings of a new emotion, one normally repugnant to the deep roots of his vanity: gratitude.

" Thank you!" he whispered hoarsely.

" That's all right, Riccardo. Surviving as an artist is next to impossible. I know. You're not going to make it any easier for yourself by killing some gallery director. What you really need is a place to work, somewhere out in the country, away from the distractions of the city. Since you've come to Dublin you've

allowed everything to go downhill. Dublin may be a city but it has the mind-set of a small town. The whole world knows how you spend your days wandering up and down Grafton Street like a lost soul! When's the last time you remember doing any work in your studio? You see? I've made my point. "

deGiorgio nodded his head mechanically, indicating a mute if conspicuously annoyed assent to all that she was saying.

Resting his paunch comfortably against his pelvic cradle, Ferdinand O'Higgins folded his hands over his tweed jacket. He pushed his glasses against the socket of his left eye, the better to squint, appropriately mystified, at a truly astonishing montage.

It was something of a stylistic breakthrough for deGiorgio, a tour-de-force. The canvas, smaller than its neighbors, held few discernible features, and seemed to be connected by no single theme. Evidences of serious workmanship suggested that it had been revisited many times. One could not call it realism, nor surrealism, nor in any reasonable sense abstraction, its unfolding taking the form of waves of suggestive forms, an ocean of voluptuous shapes, sinister and mocking, streaming within and around a wealth of pulchritudinous and gorgeous tapestries.

To the right of the painting, standing on the wall at eye level, the typefaces on the surface of a sheet of white paper explained that it either depicted, or somehow derived its inspiration from an orgy in the palace of Sigismondi Malatesta, one of the more barbarous 15th century Italian despots. No action was depicted, no object or objective, no theme or attempted representation. One was left only with an over-reaching

impression of brooding tyranny, of debauchery, gluttony and lust and suffering, a vision of Hell pushed to the outer limits, at the very center of the full flowering of the Renaissance.

Altogether a striking, morbid, powerful little masterpiece. Among those features by which it was highly recommended was its total absence of any subject matter on which one might pin a label or enrage the literal-minded: communist, blasphemous, anti-clerical, homosexual, pornographic. O'Higgins swiveled about once more to scan the room:

"Judith: come here for a minute, dear."

"Look: don't you see?" she whispered in deGiorgio's ear, "Higgy's found a painting he likes, and we're going to talk him into spending as much money as we possibly can for it."

Taking Riccardo by the hand she led him across the room.

Ferdinand O'Higgins cane was poised at the perpendicular, in such a manner that it seemed that, left to its own devices, it would have already plunged into the depths of deGiorgio's masterwork. It would appear that even the eminent O'Higgins was having some trouble controlling the cane's boundless ambition to be free: his entire body was jerking about in his effort to keep it upright.

As Judy came up to him, he said; "Darling; I'm convinced we've got something remarkable here." Judy passed in front of her spouse to examine the painting while he continued his peroration:

"Notice that blotch of .. well ... 'argentine' in the upper right corner. That sums up the whole thing, don't you think? What did you say? Hmmm."

Judy made a careful study of the work. Then she stepped back as far as the wall on the other side and examined it some more:

" Why ... it's simply marvellous! .. Though it's not the one I had in mind."

" I worked very hard on it." Riccardo interjected, thereby adding to its aesthetic qualities the additional one of virtue. Peter Maloney, judging that the time had come to let nature take its course, beat a humble retreat back to his desk. As soon as he got there he destroyed the incriminating preamble of a letter to the Irish Times that no longer needed to be written. It was more important now that the newspaper's art critics who hung out at the Bedlam should learn that O'Higgins was buying deGiorgio's work. Hopefully time, self-interest and the herd instinct would do the rest.

" This painting is. I think, the best out of my recent work", Riccardo went on, neglecting to remark that the best of his recent work had been done four years ago. O'Higgins huffed:

" Well, it's damn good! That's for sure. Judith, my wife, knows more about the visual arts than I do, but any man of breeding knows a masterpiece when it's thrown in his face. I'll buy it, how's that? I will! I will! ...but. Judith, you did say, didn't you, that you had another one in mind." He reeled about to face her, narrowly avoiding whacking her in the face with his cane.

" Yes, honey... but I wasn't sure you'd like it.. This one impressed me when I came by the other day " She led them over to the bold objectification of the nun/leper concatenation.

" Apart from the subject matter", she began, "the formal elements are very powerful. They show Riccardo's mastery of technique at its best. In addition you'll find .." but O'Higgins had made one glance in its direction and begun blustering:

" No, Judith! Absolutely not , my dear! Quite out of the question!" He pivoted on his cane and explained himself to deGiorgio, taking a mild tone, anxious to avoid giving offense: " I've nothing against the painting, mind you. I'm a man of the world and, I dare say, as much of a free-thinker as you are! Since my college days I might add. And I'm hardly blind to the powerful classical handling of form and space . and ..er" , he turned back to the canvas with a certain dumbfounded embarrassment, his hand over his mouth, "..light and shade.

But!", he stamped his cane once again on the floor, his right hand traveling to his hip to relieve a cramp, " I've become quite an important man in my adopted land in recent years ... a famous man ! You will understand, I'm sure, that I simply cannot allow the just rewards of a lifetime of honest toil to slip out of my grasp, merely through the pernicious gossip of ignorant and malicious associates!

"I continuously entertain at my ranch house in County Cork . Hundreds of people enter the premises every week, either to benefit from my largesse, or to share in the ferment of the artistic revival which I hope to initiate on this island. Obviously it's impossible to expunge from this throng all but those individuals endowed with high culture and intellectual attainments.

"I'm afraid to admit that even rather low elements do, from time to time, show up at my gatherings, though they do not stay for

very long. So, Mr. DeGiorgio, hear me out: if I were to hang this painting on the wall of my living-room, my standing in Irish society might be irrevocably damaged; through ignorance you understand. I simply must put the good work I intend to do in Ireland before all other considerations.

"Whereas your other painting..." he waved his cane once again in the direction of his first choice, ' may carry a message of social polemic every bit as powerful as this one , yet it has the happy circumstance of being virtually non-representational, yet without quite being abstract. The ignorant will neither understand nor misunderstand it. They will merely gawk over it through the eyes of apes and learn nothing.

" So, Signore deGiorgio: enough said, don't you agree? If you would do me the honor, I will be happy , nay, I will be very proud, to be the purchaser of this little gem. Hang it, man! I'm all ready to write out the check! How much is it? Did you say?"

Riccardo simpered, embarrassed in spite of his ill-humor and inner turmoil. The man was simply too pathetic to inspire animosity. He stared at O'Higgins for a few desperate minutes, unable to formulate a reply. Surrendering to despair, he turned to Judy again for reassurance:

" What's your opinion?"

" Well .. I did rather like the other one, of course. However this painting is very good, and it's the one my husband likes. Let's go with it."

" You understand", O'Higgins added, "although I never do anything without first consulting my wife, it is I and not she who

makes the final decisions in all important matters." Thus giving Judy the back of his hand, as he was unable to resist doing at least one in every social encounter, O'Higgins bellowed:

" Well, what do you want. man? What's the price of that thing?"

"1000 pounds!" deGiorgio stammered, overwhelmed by his own audacity.

Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins strutted over to the desk. As he sat down in a swivel chair placed alongside of it, he felt around for a checkbook in an inside pocket of his jacket.

Standing behind the desk Peter Maloney hovered closely above, rubbing his hands together even though the day was not particularly cold, and in spite of his manners, which were always impeccable. After the check was scribbled O'Higgins, with the intention of passing it along to Riccardo deGiorgio, stretched his arm out along a wide arc. The unremarkable trajectory of this check was, however, abruptly arrested by the nimble fingers of Peter Maloney, through which agency it quickly disappeared into a metal box kept in his desk drawer for such purposes. No small percentage of that check would have to be invested in mollifying the inflamed ire of Jamison and Harris.

Ferdinand O'Higgins staggered to his feet. Firmly reposed on his cane, he robustly slapped his tummy:

" And now, my young man, or, as it can now be said without reservation, fellow artist, I earnestly hope you do not feel yourself obliged to decline my offer that we all repair to the nearest pub,

where I will subsidize your inalienable right to drink, even to utter inebriation, for the rest of the afternoon!"

An offer which, to Riccardo at that moment, was like a surgeon's offer of a free operation to excise a 25-pound tumor.

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## Chapter 11

### Ulysses in Nighttown

A night on a town in Dublin. Always unforgettable; provided it end with the obligatory visit to the Bedlam.

Yet the evening itself must, in and of itself, be special: to be worthy of recounting at a later date it must be cold, and dreary, and wet. Ideally we're talking about February. And, as it will most likely begin with attendance at a theatre, one can't hope to do better than the Abbey.

A ticket to the Abbey Theatre production of *The Quare Fellow* was passed along to me by some friends. I promised to pay them back, now or eventually, the eventuality being contingent on factors unknown. But they wouldn't hear of it:

"Pay us back? Nonsense! Devil knows when you'll be returning to Ireland. You can't go running off without witnessing at least one play at the Abbey! Doing Brendan Behan no less! Like watching a Chekhov play at the Moscow Art Theater; a Kabuki play in Tokyo! Go ahead: get yourself out of the beastly Irish winter, and into a British prison for a couple of hours! Brendan Behan makes the best British prisons. Better than the English ones! We do everything better than the English."

" Here's a few more bob. Drop into the Bedlam for a nightcap. Get lost; you can tell us all about it later!"

And indeed, in the confines of Brendan Behan's Brixton, a terrible beauty was born. Sitting in the audience one could but be penetrated through and through, by the mystical radiance that emerges from the congealed and concentrated spectacle of misery, like a block of clay ineffably filling the living stage. For two hours we accepted this healing immersion in a bottomless peatbog of Celtic anguish; a sweltering, lugubrious, luscious torment, with soul-wracking torrents of brogued Hibernian woe thundering through the auditorium, swaddled in the oratory of some of the finest actors in the Anglophone world.

And you acknowledge that, as long as you remain in the auditorium under its spell, that the human condition is, truly as bad as that – at least it may be so in Ireland - as bad as that , truly, and so truthfully depicted that one can barely stand it, but so awfully true that one must continue to endure it, that one must continue to steep oneself in this shameless bath of narcissism, jingoism, chauvinism, sentimentality and outright bawling. You begin crying yourself, crying being the only outlet available for relief.

Nothing has been overlooked; it's all there: the drunken ballad singer; the unvanquishable brogue; the bit about old Mother Macree; the glories of the I.R.A. ; the immortal self-infatuation of all inhabitants of small , persecuted nations, Irish, Jews, Gypsies, Armenians, Palestinians. Even a Black and Tan, may he rot in hell, would weep at this relentless spectacle. A ritual soul-

purging, primitive, reaching down to the elemental roots of raw emotional identification : central Africa, or Haiti, or New Guinea right in the heart of 20<sup>th</sup> century Dublin.

Outdoors it is winter in Dublin winter. Only recently have we come out of it. We sense the cold and the rain, we huddle in the warm auditorium as if in fear of being evicted. In our temporary comfort, all the dearer because it must soon be over, we succumb to the embrace of all prisons, all incarcerations, all bondage, all crucifixions, yet presented here adorned and ornamented with those particulars which distinguish Irish mourning from all mourning, Irish futility from Russian futility, Irish lamentation from Jewish lamentation, Irish vengefulness from Palestinian vengefulness.

We are the accused and condemned, the victim and the victimizer, judge and judged, nursing our guilt-ridden security in blessed innocence, as all seals and patents of convention and restraint melt away under the scalding torch of that master arc-welder, Brendan Behan. Our souls have been inundated by Irishness, seared by the hot branding irons of Druidic Messianism, so that even a non-native, not even an Irishman, like myself, feels emboldened to cry out: "I'm more Irish than the Irish!", even as the natives sob: "We ..we...us....us....us...it's all true..."

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What better refuge after so much revelation, than an hour or two at the Bedlam? The crowds, exalted and stunned, pour out of the Abbey Theatre. You exit the building in a state of shock, and head directly over to Duke Street and the world renowned Bedlam

Pub. It is Saturday night, just past the stroke of 10, the most unfavorable moment among many for entering its premises.

Two means of access are available: there is the door closest to the main drag, Grafton Street, and another one at the far end of the building. There is also a back door for the exclusive use of the employees; perhaps it is only used when giving them the sack. However one suspects that it is rarely used for this purpose: The staid publicans of the Bedlam have the appearance of a long rootedness, forbiddingly so, much like stalagmites which, requiring long centuries in their formation, are not about to relinquish their eminence easily.

To resume: imagining that one decides to enter via the Grafton Street passageway, one traverses a corridor where it is normal to find a dozen or so adolescent girls standing in a line, waiting to get to the telephone. Proceeding further one encounters a paneled door, heavy and thick. All of one's weight must be concentrated against it to get it to open. To succeed in forcing an entry by these means, (and one must be stronger than I am to do so) has managed to displace anywhere from 4 to 10 tottering souls, journalists, painters, salesmen, con-men, men of affairs and politicians; persons who, although they hang around the downtown most of the day, never seem to be short of money.

Entry thus achieved, one finds oneself engulfed in a warm climate redolent not so much of ferment as of fermentation. Wraiths bubbling up from tankards of stout writhe in the air like ghostly hangovers. They lap about one's feet and climb, tingling, up and around one's body, they are blown into one's face by the

action of fans, by the gusts of air released from every conversation, loquacious or taciturn.

Most of the customers are standing or leaning against the bar. The rest fill the semi-circular booths, in order that they may isolate themselves, in their imaginations at least, perhaps tourists from the US or the Continent, or visitors from England, or fashionable celebrities, such as the famous author who holds court in one of them almost every night, who can now be seen to be buying drinks for a dozen or so young sots, enthusiastic disciples of the muse in exchange for a few shot-glasses of whiskey; or the plutocrats just arrived from the hinterlands, camping out at the chic Shelbourne hotel for a few days to form the center of attention of the horsey fraternity.

One's triumph is temporary, one's illusion of stability is quickly submerged in the desperate need to grapple. Deciding whether one has deliberately collided with the hulking individual now ramming his elbow into your face, or if he rather staggered backwards into it, is not easily done. Besides, there isn't time: the heel of one's left shoe is firmly planted on somebody's toes, an arm appears to have unavoidably stuck itself into a 3-way conversation about the theater, one's body is wedged between the back of a gangster, the behind of a dilettante, the flank of a well-known playwright who's just announced his entry into politics, and an artist drinking himself blind after an exhausting day spent dancing before his canvas.

One pushes past all these people, only to discover that, in some inexplicable fashion, one's gripped the back of a lovely

young thing in a half-Nelson. Releasing her produces the unfortunate result of smacking a publisher or somebody like that in the face. But it's too late to turn back: one must continue to plod, past a long drunken monologue delivered by a exciting young Abbey actor who comes into the Bedlam once in a while in lieu of resorting, as he normally does, to Gloomy's, where he hobnobs with the politicians of the D'ial.

One's goal is in sight; soon one can expect to arrive at the frothy foam of arms, hands, heads, smiles. voices and heady brews raging before the bar. It has taken you as long to work one's way through this morass, as it would to get across downtown New York in a cab during the rush hour.

Entering via the other door would have led to much the same result, although the initial confrontation would have been more like trying to board a New York subway during that hour. Movement is frozen for long stretches of time; breathing itself becomes all but impossible. One is surrounded on all sides by menacing looks which say things like: "Keep your hands off my girl", ( a physical impossibility), or " How much money do you make?" a question one can't normally imagine anyone asking in Ireland; however this is the Bedlam.

Most of the physiognomis are endowed with roughly the same limited expressive vocabulary , mixing boredom with desperation, memory and desire, coming with a mounting barely restrained desire to bust somebody, anybody, in the gut, and sensations of nausea held in check by incredible effort.

Via the route, and a prolonged ordeal of tussling, scratching, biting, hair-pulling, scuffling and so forth, one may make one's way to the back room. Here at least it is possible to stumble about from place to place, although idle strolling is not to be thought of. The separation of this room from the principal arena of the pub is provided by means of a low partition upholstered in pool-table green, and a short staircase. A distinguishing feature of the back room is a bench at the far end, on which one finds a shifting contingent of Trinity University students, both classified and declassified.

It must be admitted that these students do not exactly represent the cream of that venerable institution. Paperbacks of poetry by W. B. Yeats, or short stories by Liam O'Flaherty ( still very much alive in the years this novel, a regular to these haunts) can be spotted sticking out of their pockets. Once in awhile one notices someone pouring over the Viking anthology "1000 Years of Irish Literature", One may hear short passages from "Ulysses" being quoted from memory.

It will happen that an older man sitting among them, a lover or writer of poetry, stands up in the back room, the better to draw forth from the shadows the spectre of Brendan Behan. In his downward passage from pub to pub ( it is rumored that he was bounced from 40 or more) Behan became the stuff of legend. Anecdotes and recollections of the gifted playwright cling to the walls, tables, furnishings, paintings and rugs, abundant riches of legend endlessly reworked or recaptured:

*" The last time I saw Brendan, he was sitting there with ..."*

*" I never met him, but do you see that fellow sitting over there? He was with him when ..."*

*" There was nothing like him. He and Patrick Kavanaugh would ..."*

In the company of Brendan Behan one will sometimes witness the emergence, as water is drawn from a well, of the lean, haunting shadow of Patrick Kavanaugh who , it must not be forgotten, also drank himself to death. Common opinion at the Bedlam would have it that, between the two of them, they embodied of the cracked Guinnessglass of Irish art, as if the secret to being a great poet resided in drinking 16 pints a day.

Like two giants from the Mabinongian, the spirits of Brendan Behan and Patrick Kavanaugh stride over the Grafton Street pubs, their final words ringing in the ears of those yet to follow them into the grave, like the reverberations in a concert hall after the last chord of the symphony has been played and the orchestra has fallen silent.

Treasured anecdotes about these fabled bards , to whom the pubs never did anything but harm, are passed about reverently from hand to hand, like pieces from the true wood of the cross, combined with bold reminiscences, accurate, inaccurate or invented of Joyce, Yeats and the Abbey, the Revolution and the Civil War, Padraic Pearse and O'Connell, and - why not - the famine of 1845....

For within the Grafton Street pubs, in the harangues of stuporous actors and the recollections of hack journalists, from the lips of Trinity students gone to seed before their time, and the

incantations ever-so-serious poets, Irish history is constantly being remembered and remade, but surprisingly little Irish history is being made.

While Brendan Behan and Patrick Kavanaugh were still alive visibly deteriorating with ferocious acceleration , pub society could bask in the intense, rapidly fading luster of their poetic genius, like freely dispersed as a flower will shed its nectar, even as their bodies and minds were being destroyed from within.

Now that the two greats, hastened through their very improvidence to a premature grave, are gone, it is as if a blight had settled over the pubs, as if the great surge of poetry had, in its vanishing, opened up a chasm of emptiness, to be filled pointless gossip and the pious invocation of those who destroyed themselves for its sake. It is in that way that the literary pubs will manage to hold onto its public until that future day when a new supernova will burn itself out in a grandiose display of energy.



Yet even the stifling congestion around the bar is preferable to remaining, even a minute more, in the depressing ambiance of the back room! Onto the staircase and back down into the maelstrom:

*...Why! Isn't that ...sitting over there ... just take a look - in that booth, down there in the corner ..*

Why, its Ferdinand O'Higgins ... and ... and ... Riccardo deGiorgio! Away from their rural hideaway down in County Cork and up for a Dublin pub-crawl!

I see that Riccardo's definitely put on weight since his Dublin days.

-That was less than a month ago, when the Great Move was launched.

And get a look at old Ferdy O'Higgins, (who's always been chubby) : what a weird outfit he's wearing, some kind of emerald-green suit! They're so very different, that it's hard to imagine them exchanging more than a few words; yet in some strange way they're remarkably well suited to each other. Both of them artists, both expatriates. Upper crust snobs, too, with chips on their shoulders. Though O'Higgins is such a prig! Whereas deGiorgio...? Don't know what to describe him as.

Look down there, at the other end of their booth. .. Why, that's Judy Wilcox O'Higgins , the great man's wife. Who's that she's jabbering with? Why, its Jackson McVay! Same as usual; greying curly hair, enormous bulk , his big torso covered with a black leather motorcycle jacket, ( a patent affectation), self-righteously pugnacious. A brilliant man of the theater –once upon a time that is. Now he doesn't give a damn about anything or anyone.

And who's that next to him? Don't recall their names exactly, though they look familiar... some actors from London. And. well of course, there's Deirdre O'Conor. If you believe the gossip, she's become the mistress of old man O'Higgins. You can't convince me of that ... she's got to live in London for her work, whereas O'Higgins rarely leaves his self-designated 'arts colony' down in County Cork.

Deirdre's interest in O'Higgins must be strictly professional; her and that deGiorgio scoundrel, they know how to milk the old fool dry. It looks to me as if Judy's prepared to let Deirdre have him if she wants. She's probably thoroughly sick of her husband by now....

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But let us leave these fixtures of our narrative , this perennial *dramatis personae* , whom we never seem to be able to get away from, to take a stroll around the pub to visit some of the other booths. There's more than one infamous Dublin character sousing at the Bedlam tonight, and we've can't pass up the rare opportunity to meet them all.

Our first stop is, alas, once more in the back room where we discover Helen. It is impardonable that we should have missed her in our previous visit. Helen is the one and only officially acknowledged prostitute in the Bedlam. Public opinion would have us believe that she abandoned her calling a decade ago, either because she'd found a modicum of security from a 'friend' whose whereabouts no-one has ever been able to uncover, or from the sentiment of having done enough for mankind in one lifetime.

Helen passes a great deal of her time in the back room, where she has to endure the malicious abuse of the Trinity College crowd. She puts up with it for the sake of one young man on whom she's developed a crush: Bob Clancy, a terminal case at 22, can boast, among his other accomplishments, of a Guinness habit of 16 pints a day and scoring a lay, on the average, with at least one new girl per night. He' s handsomer than Peter O'Toole, gregarious to

the point of lunacy, and the passion of every brainless twit in the Bedlam.

One readily understands that Bob hasn't got much time to spare for Helen. Supposing that he might, once in awhile, feel a twinge of desire for her, he is normally incapacitated from expressing it since each of his hands, when not pouring liquor down his gullet, is always enclosed in the creamy palm of some teeny-bopper or groupie. There's little left over to share with old Helen beyond his sarcasm. She for her part, being in the Profession no longer, has allowed herself the once unforgivable indulgence of falling in love. Though she ought to know better, she shares the belief, entertained by all the other women sitting in the back room, that Bob is the most desirable man in the Free State.

Yet Helen is indefatigable; some might even qualify her as "obnoxious". Even when young she was not remarkable for her beauty. Now she can't walk without a cane, has to wear thick spectacles, carries a set of dentures, and is decidedly elderly in all other respects. She still manages to get to the hair-dressers once a week or so, and changes dresses frequently daily. Still, there's little in either her comportment or deportment that a young man, particularly a libertine like Bob, is like to find attractive.

Despite this she is always manufacturing emergencies to get him to hold something of hers, such as her pocketbook or umbrella. Time and time again she manages to sit next to him and rub her body against his. He pushes her away, sometimes with a good-natured shrug, or, when some sweet thing is coming up the stairs into the back room, an exaggerated show of nastiness. And

everyone has seen those moments when Helen will grab at Bob's private parts in an impardonable manner, often the occasion for crude guffaws from the other young sots. Who knows, perhaps justice will indeed be served in the long run : Bob may well be dead before she is.

*Already well-launched into her third vodka, Judy Wilcox worked up the nerve to suggest to Deirdre O'Connor that her natural gift for flirtation may have become overdeveloped to the point of meriting reproach from honest society. Riccardo laughed, then expressed the opinion that her observation could be applied to all women. Deirdre flushed and stood up in a manner that indicated that she wished to be dissuaded from her intention of leaving.*

*That's when hubby , rising to the bait, told wife to mind her own bloody business and to keep her "femaleness" to herself. Jackson McVay gallantly offered to bust Higgley-Piggley one in the gut, nobody took up his offer . Tempers settled down to a slow boil as conversation resumed its trite promenade.*

Ah : Once again, these same people! Is there really nothing better to talk about in the whole of Dublin on a wet February night than the foibles of its displaced persons? Yes, but you see the thing is, they also happen to be the most talked about *ménage à trois* (quatre? cinq?) in Ireland . Everybody, but everybody (who is anybody that is) , has been speculating about what's going on down in that ranch house in County Cork!

It's inconceivable, when you come down to it! That a worthless *chancer* like Riccardo deGiorgio would agree to isolate himself from urban society to spend hours upon end in a

refurbished barn, filling canvases with lurid imagery that can't be exhibited in the house up the hill! Or that a talented young social butterfly like Judy Wilcox O'Higgins is perfectly happy to be sitting around all day long in that same beastly ranch house playing step-mother to Oswald, O'Higgins' son from a previous marriage, and her junior by less than a decade, sometimes playing a bit of piano or turning out a piece of sculpture, while her pompous husband sits in his studio from dawn to dusk, churning out his reactionary garbage?

*Just a minute! Hey! What's going on here? No, I'm not referring to Arthur Hodges or Jerry O'Brien, thank you. There's never anything new about them, they've become bores before their time. I'm referring to him, over there. Can't you see that that scruffy character, hiding a thug's face under a red beard and laughing? Look - he's just tipped the contents of his glass of Harp over poor drunk Jerry O'Brien's head!!...*

*Why;, of course I know who that is! That's Rory O'Reilly! Isn't he with the I.R.A..? What calls itself the I.R.A. down here in Eire. They ought to call themselves the Capone gang, for all their bollocks! ... .*

*Uh-oh? Did you see that., now? That's Jack Boyle, just come in the door. You don't want to mess with him. A very nasty individual, their gang leader I've been told. Heavy tan woolen overcoat with wide pockets and tall collar, fedora, cigar ...that's his 'American' act ... A bit overdone for sure. They're said to be involved with narcotics as well. .. Possible... Booze and narcotics don't mix, though they may*

*well pass a few ounces of hash to the Trinity crowd in the back room. There isn't enough of a market in Ireland for hard drugs.*

*This so-called I.R.A. bunch hasn't got the imagination for anything really big. They sit in the downtown pubs all day long planning the next grocery store heist. Preparing for the revolution, that's what they call it...*

*One shouldn't forget, all the same .... they did pull off that big payroll job. Made off with 20,000 quid I hear. That was three years ago and they're still living off the heist. The government never did a bloody thing, even though those idiots were caught red-handed. Politics. The rot in this country is so deep you can fill the peat-bogs with it . Not afraid to show their faces. They're Mafia - Ireland's own Mafia.*

*Ohhhhhhhhhhh! Did you see that? Reilly's just broken a Harp bottle over Jerry's head! The blood's pouring over his scalp and mixing with the sawdust on the floor. That's ugly! Poor Jerry .. isn't anybody going to help him?*

*He isn't dead, is he? No, although he'll need more than a few stitches in his scalp. You'll not normally see anyone fighting in here, but when they do it's God-awful. Rory! Where's Rory? Ran out the side door. Poor Jerry! No painting for him for awhile. Notice that Jack Boyle lit out of here pretty fast. He's no body's fool.*

*They ought to clean up that scum. What do you expect in Ireland? The muck is all around us. It's everywhere; we've all got our feet stuck in it. Boyle used to be a decent sort until he went to London... what a waste...*

Judy Wilcox Hargreaves Wilson Stern O'Higgins indicated with a surly tone of voice her firm intention of opening up a conversation with Riccardo Guiseppe Malatesta deGiorgio the Third. To this end she pushed aside her husband's gouty legs to push past him to the far end of the booth where the great Renaissance man was seated.

After starting in on his 4th vodka, the patriot Ferdinand Wolfe Tone Ormonde Pearse O'Connell Fitzhiggins had become almost human. With a clumsy "Harumph! Harumph!" he made way for his young wife who, after seating her self against the right arm of the booth, began a thoroughly distracted conversation with their prize ward.

The great interlaced mass of humanity circling the barroom floor hid from general view the compromising spectacle of Judy Wilcox pushing her right thigh against one of deGiorgio's, as well as his equally compromising act of letting it stay there. Although she continued to babble nonsense to him, Riccardo, who never drank more than 2 pints of Guinness in an evening and was unable to understand the pleasures associated with heavy drinking, replied in coherent sentences.

Now the very famous actor from London asked Daniel Bone Tone Fitzhiggins why, with all the great poetic and dramatic qualities latent in his best-seller prose, he'd never written a play. The world-famous American writer then explained that, as the Thespian muse had never beckoned to his ear, he had never had occasion to respond to her siren call. He considered the theater, as

a medium, infinitely more difficult than prose, which had taken him a lifetime to master.

His enthusiasm for Ireland had awakened in him the possibility of composed an endless theatrical monologue based on the life and death of O'Connell.

Jesting, as one professional does with another, he asked the very famous actor why he had never written a novel. To which this eminent man replied, that as the nature of his craft was evocative at best and imitative at worst, he considered himself devoid of talent in that direction.

As he eavesdropped on the conversation of these master representatives of the literary craft, Jackson McVay yawned, drank and swore. He was thinking that it was time for a good fight. Even a major intellectual had to blow off steam once in awhile! He got up from his chair and piled through the thick of the crowd about the bar, looking for Liam McAlister, the playwright, who'd just that afternoon announced his entrance into politics.

Judy had just been stunned by the knock-out punch of her fourth vodka. She slumped her head onto the table and cried. Given that there were by this time over a dozen other persons in the room doing the same thing, the incident aroused no comment. King deGiorgio the Third waved his trembling, exquisitely trained artist's right hand over her head and, while her husband looked the other way, balanced it very briefly on her hair. Deirdre O'Conor glanced in their direction long enough for him to instantly withdraw it. He needn't have bothered; what did it matter to her? What she was concerned with was the question of whether

Ferdinand O'Higgins still had enough clout in the London literary circus to get her a part in a new play opening up in the West End. She cast a quick glance of contempt in Judy's direction. How wretched she looked! What an old carpet! *If I were married to Ferdy*, she was thinking, *I'd know how to get what I want out of him!*

*God damn it! What is all that bloody commotion coming out of the back room! It's that obnoxious crowd of Trinity students, though no one can say how many of them are or were actually enrolled in Trinity! Several of them have been chronic alcoholics for 20 years or more....*

*Take a look at that, will you? You see that scruffy kid with patches of beard around his face? That's Kevin. Hasn't got a penny to his name, but you never see him without a glass of stout in front of him. Did you see how he and Helen, that's the old whore who hangs out with them, stood up and began singing "My Wild Irish Rose"! , Helen says its her favorite song; more likely it's her only song. Then half a dozen students, all pissed out of their minds, started singing with her; that's when pandemonium broke out!*

*Mike and Pat, the bartenders walked onto the upper floor to break it up, only to find themselves being jostled about in a manner indicating considerable disrespect for their calling.. Now it looks as if that filthy, bearded Kevin is being crammed through a crowd of a hundred gregarious souls and pushed towards the front door. Mike and Pat have nothing against Kevin personally. He'll be back here soon enough. They've done nothing but encourage him on his honorable path these past 3 years..*

*And in fact they didn't make it to the front door! The crowds defeated them. They've accepted a bleary apology from Kevin and allowed him to return to his friends. He 's got the gift of soliciting drinks from anyone, particularly by virtue of his recent injuries unjustly inflicted.*

Judy Woolworth Cassatt Sosotris Higginson, by an incredible effort of will, saw her fourth vodka through to the bitter end, then started up immediately on the next one. Her body rolled forward until her head dropped into the lap of the unsavory dego to her left. He permitted it to remain there, telling her husband that she was just 'sleeping it off' .

Ferdyduke FitzAngus, his sixth whiskey and soda swilling about in his tummy, who now regards Ricci DiGorgonzola as his best friend, accepted this explanation with great gladness. Deirdre glared at DiGorgonzola with curiosity , wondering if he could be blackmailed.

A short distance away in the general neighborhood, Jackson McVay pushed the hulk of Liam McAlister against the back of the chair containing the very famous actor from London. McAlister executed a feint near McVay's right eye, whence Sonny Liston McVay punched him hard in the belly. Liam went wild and was in a fair way of murdering McVay before Mike and Pat once again weighed in through the crowd and broke it up. No attempt was made to throw them out. One doesn't give Bedlam celebrities the boot. After disappearing into the Men's Room, Jackson McVay returned to resume his place of honor at O'Higgins table.

With the greatest tact, Riccardo has lifted Judy's head back onto the table before starting a conversation of sorts with O'Higgins. The latter was desirous of learning where the influences of the *quattrocentro* could be seen in his work. Riccardo explained that the teachings of the Renaissance were distributed so pervasively through all of his works that he couldn't begin to sort them out. Then O'Higgins confessed that the thing which had made the deepest impression on him in deGiorgio's work was his superb handling the chiaroscuro . He'd observed similar things of course in the work of ..er...ump...Raphael.

Whereupon Raphael DeGiorgione confessed freely that Raphael's paintings had been the deepest influence on his since his teens. Which is really all that Henry Hagus O'Higgins had wanted to hear. It was about then, also, that he suggested to the modern Botticelli that he could probably use another jar of Guinness.

Noticing that Riccardo Raphael de Gorgione was gazing with concern at the face of the Sleeping Judy, Hagus remarked sourly:

" Don't worry about her, my man. She's weak, like all women! Erp ...can't hold much more myself, I'm afraid."

In an excess of uncommon expansiveness, Rory Higgins O'Shaugnessy belched a torrent of foul wind before confiding in Deirdre O'Conor:

" I really should have married you, dumpling! You don't know how much I despise weakness, even in a woman." As he spoke his body racked febrily and he coughed a mouthful of catarrh into Jackson McVay's pint of stout.

No doubt Judy Wilcox had been sleeping at the moment of this occurrence. It is a matter of record that a few minutes later she arose as if out of a nightmare and kicked her husband savagely in the shins. As she flailed her arms and clenched fists in the air, pulled her back down into her seat. Then, with the permission of the Great Writer, Don Giovanni walked the Sleeping Judy out the door and down the street to the Golden Spoon for a sobering coffee.

Deirdre took over her seat, to begin whispering calculated sweet nothings into ear. Flier-de-Lies felt emboldened enough to put his arm around her waist, then with rude friendliness, gripped her right arm tightly, though short of snapping it off. Love takes many forms.

Jackson was at peace, talking to himself in a patois of pseudo-Trotskyism rant. The famous English actor had fallen asleep. Helen was feeling around for some young man's genitals, any young man's. Kevin was stretched out on the floor, dead drunk. Lima McAlister was telling his constituency his plans for Ireland's future. Jack Boyle had returned quietly to the Bedlam and was sipping a quiet drink at the bar. All this was related to me later: I was vomiting in the bogs. Hodges was thinking up new ideas for a gross of paintings. Mike the bartender was telling Pat about his hypertension.

And, as the night moved to its close, a great peace descended upon all Bedlamites, young and old, wise and foolish, gentle or cruel, at all stages of drunkenness .



## Chapter 12

### The Aporiae of Art

Following a decade of solitary labor with little encouragement or recognition, Bill Devlin's career had begun to blossom. Hard-earned and, although little enough in its own right, it indicated a trend that was irreversible. Bill was not immune to the myth that identified success with merit, in addition to which he had a family to raise. More immediate concerns included the purchase of a station wagon for transporting his sculpture, and long range plans for sending his daughter to a private non-religious school, in England or America if necessary. On the periphery of his ambitions hovered a studio in the country and journeys to distant places.

Make no mistake about it: Bill Devlin hankered after status, a human failing so universal that it would indeed be wrong to single him out for censure. If his immediate objectives appear somewhat bit middle-class, they had the saving grace of being, for the most part, essentially intellectual. Everything he'd learned about the lives of the great artists confirmed the legitimacy of his aspirations. No matter that Riccardo deGiorgio and others let him know by indirect hints and slights that they considered him essentially bourgeois; the banality of Riccardo's own grandiose aspirations was even greater.

At one end of the spectrum, Bill thought of Michelangelo and his life of voluntary poverty. Even at the pinnacle of his fame he had lived meanly, like a peasant. He didn't marry, didn't have a

family to consider, and was lucky enough to have generous patrons who put their gigantic fortunes at his disposal for the realization of his conceptions.

DaVinci wasn't married either: sex apparently didn't interest him, although there are various schools of thought on this matter. He also maintained a large studio which did double duty as a laboratory for his scientific experiments and factory for his inventions. He paid for the support of all of his students and adopted a series of waifs and derelicts. All this required money.

At the other extreme there was Picasso. The marketability of his genius turned out to be his greatest personal tragedy. It came as no surprise that Picasso had produced nothing of interest to artists for 30 years.

Van Gogh? Bill admired the man immensely, without the least desire to live the way he did. Go be a bohemian and a lunatic if that's what turns you on, as long as you didn't have people depending on you. The world's biggest talent doesn't relieve one of basic responsibilities! Bill was in the habit of telling himself that he could always return to arc-welding if his family's security was ever in jeopardy. Once in awhile he really believed it himself. Certainly he was in no hurry to put his commitment to the test!

Yet it was not here that the real conflict of conscience lay. If ever he did find himself forced to abandon sculpture to support his family, he knew he would do it. Yet he would always be hounded by the feeling that he'd done so from a sense of duty, rather than because he really loved his wife and daughter more than he prized his talent.

He'd married Beatrice because he loved her. He'd always wanted three things: to paint, to raise a family, and to live at an acceptable standard. As opportunities arose to fulfill each of these ambitions he took them, as we all do. In that sense we are all adulterers: we grasp at opportunities as they appear to us, debating the moral and philosophical consequences afterwards.

With some relief, Bill Devlin noted that the need to make such decisions would not be clouding the immediate future. The series of exhibitions he'd held at the Open Studio over the last five years had been good to him, while incidentally making more for the Open Studio, than anyone else. Were he not about to invest almost all of it into the of casting new bronzes, the £800 in the bank would have been enough to cover the mortgage on the house for the coming year.

His latest exhibition had produced positive reviews in the local newspapers and even some commentary in the British press. Through this he'd acquired a new clientele from abroad, enough to stabilize his finances and stoke his illusions of a secure future.

And there were promises of bigger things to come on the horizon. It appears that the luxury Victoria Hotel, a snobbish, pulchritudinous and otherwise revolting establishment, temporary residence of the class exemplifying all that was most hateful to the Irish conscience, had suddenly become aware of the need to restore its pitifully tarnished image in the public eye.

Announcements had been placed in all major Irish newspapers, stating that the Victoria was looking for an Irish sculptor to decorate its terrace-restaurant with depictions of scenes

from the Mabinongian, a relic of Irish history sufficiently ancient, sufficiently distant from memories Wolfe Tone and Padraic Pearse to avoid giving offence to the descendants of the English landlord class who socialized in its lobby.

Bill had submitted his application right away. His chances of receiving the commission were excellent. Without waiting for the committee's decision he'd begun making sketches for the giant figures he envisaged for the locale. Months after the closing of his exhibition at the Open Studio, he was still the most talked-about young sculptor in Ireland. Even Telefis Eirann had wasted two weeks of his life making a documentary about him. Society artists like Jake Josephs and Stan O'Glass, whose essays in mediocrity stood outside every bank and church, had so offended the Dublin public by now, that there was every chance that this time the Victoria would pass them by.

Bill knew very well that the Josephs' and the O'Glasses would forgo their usual haunts at the Bedlam for a crack at this commission, and were even now hard at work at their desks, scratching out their visions with hands palsied by mental atrophy, worn clichés long since dead even in the minds and hearts of the bank presidents and civic officials who pontificated over public art in Dublin, as they do everywhere.

Initially Beatrice was opposed to the idea. Creating the statuary for Victoria commission would entail, conservatively, six months' work, with hardly a day off. She'd never really gotten used to being neglected, though she had learned to live with it. Still, it really was asking too much of her, that she should to accept

living with a husband with whom she could expect to relate perhaps a few hours in the evening for half a year. Their social life would be cut to the bone. Her role as the ideal wife would oblige her to sit indoors changing Moira's diapers all day long while he stood in the yard working.

" And what'm I supposed to be doin' , while youer makin' yourself *famous* ? , she snapped, "Carryin' on with some other *man* , I suppose. "

They finally reached an agreement whereby Bill would build a shed in the front yard where he could work unnoticed and uninterrupted, leaving Beatrice free to conduct the permanent Open House without which life would be unendurable.

In line with the old adage that fortune comes to those who already have it, other opportunities and possibilities were opening up to him now , some of them better than the Victoria commission. A job as instructor in an art school in Cork would be his for the price of a telephone call.

In a world which is everything that is the case, it was unfortunately the case, that the mere contemplation of school teaching filled him with repugnance. Beatrice, whose father was a school teacher, had no sympathy for Bill's elitist aversions. If she weren't tied to the house with Moira, she'd be teaching herself.

She did make a small concession, at least with regard to the teachers among their personal friends, such as the Duggans, who lived in Rathgar and visited them on the weekends. They were terribly *burjwah* , which was not how she imagined Bill and herself. Education in Ireland, as with so many other professional

domains, was in in a permanent state of chaos. The stranglehold of the Christian Brothers on elementary education was being contested for the first time in centuries, with the government giving a lukewarm support to so-called 'technical schools' that were being permitted to offer a non-religious curriculum. These schools had no textbooks and little funding. In addition, teachers in them never knew when they were going to be paid. Some of them had to wait as much as a year before receiving their salaries, or even a percentage of them. It was claimed that the recently installed computers in the offices of the government bureaucracies were constantly breaking down. Whatever the reasons, it seemed that everything possible that little was being done to help along the establishment of a non-Christian, even a non-Catholic, school system at the elementary level. And one could not imagine Beatrice teaching catechism!

Yet, given that Bill had other possibilities, Beatrice she didn't understand why he wasn't following up on them. A theater was opening up in Athlone, of all places. A friend of Bill's father had contacted him to ask him if he wanted the job of decorating the lobby and stage with murals. It wasn't a question of money: career-wise the commission was a dead end, and he was tired of being tied down with small commissions. That was precisely why the Victoria commission was so important. It would be a turning point in the road.

It was much harder to know how to respond to the offer of an exhibition in a major gallery in Belfast. After lengthy debate with himself and discussion with his wife and friends, Bill had

turned it down. In August! He wasn't going to get himself blown up for nothing! Furthermore since , as per local custom, August is riot season, who would find time to look at his paintings?

Beatrice thought differently: she'd love the chance to head up to Belfast and clobber a few Protestant fascists. Relatives on both sides of her family had been murdered by the Black and Tans. An uncle's leg had been shot off in a riot twenty years ago. When Beatrice learned that an exhibition of her husband's work in Belfast was in the offing , her first reaction was to scout around in the yard for easily held and throwable rocks. Bill would have none of it: Belfast in August was out.

Then there was that lawyer, one might call him an erotomaniac, who'd bought 3 of Bill's paintings and wanted to commission him to do a set of drawings based on deSade's "Justine". Bill sent him to deGiorgio. There was also talk of commissions, of an exhibition in Cork, in Chester, even in London

Through persistent work on the sketches for the Victoria Bill was able to post them in late January , two weeks before the deadline. Then he went over to England for two months to cast some bronzes. Beatrice remained alone with Moira in Dublin.

During the time he was away I passed by the house almost daily. Beatrice welcomed a bit of help: Moira's cold, complicated by teething problems, had lingered through the winter. Even by Dublin's standards the winter had been abnormally severe. Warm days began appearing in March, yet there were still periods, even

whole days of bitter, persistent rain. Dublin, someone in the physics department at Trinity College remarked, was sweltering under a heat wave at 256 degrees Kelvin!

When I stopped over to visit Beatrice one evening around the middle of March, it was with some good news: the Irish Times had just paid me 10 pounds for a small article about the influence of W. B. Yeats on the Theater of the Absurd, a well-woven exercise in trite conjecture. Beatrice had just gotten Moira off to bed after a trying day and was cleaning up the remains of dinner.

With a shopping list and a bit of money I was out the door again down the road in a flash to do some emergency shopping. Returning I was sent back out immediately to pick up a bag of turf briquettes. When I came back this time there was a pot of tea waiting for me on the table, a dish of stew left over from dinner and a heel of brown soda bread baked the night before.

At night the Devlin's front room was, if not the warmest, then certainly the coziest spot in Dublin; by which I mean my Dublin, naturally. Whether it was the manner in which the shadows gathered together in the corners like friendly messages from familiar ghosts, darting spectral fingers along the walls; or it may have been the kaleidoscope of paintings displayed on the walls; or the clutter of toys, household effects and materials distributed over about the room and over the work tables; or perhaps the way in which the night invaded the room through the windows with its comforting smile and broad face, and kept at bay by the glow from the briquette stove and the two weak, poorly

situated light bulbs which scarcely illuminated their surroundings, and were of no help in reading or doing anything.

None of these by themselves would have meant anything to me in the absence of Beatrice's pure and disinterested hospitality; Beatrice who, merely by speaking could put anyone at his ease; who could be out of the room for hours yet give the impression that she was everywhere present; who could prattle on about the barest nothing, her whole conversation often enough little more than a long string of irrelevancies, while yet communicating such glowing delight and warmth; Beatrice whose primary fault, and that a severe one, one which she shared with virtually all of Ireland, was irresponsible gossip; which, in her defense, she had fashioned into a fine art, in which there was no viciousness or spite; Beatrice, a woman who, above all, remained faithful to her beliefs. This was the woman Bill Devlin had married, and of whom he was slow to appreciate the treasure.

She and I moved to the only warm spot in the room, that created by the briquette fire in the stove, bearing our teacups and slices of buttered soda bread. Beatrice worked for awhile cutting lines into a linoleum print block; but she soon found it difficult to concentrate and abandoned the task. After depositing it on Bill's desk she came back and began speaking to me about Moira's health. Her illness had lingered for months; deceptive remissions that had lasted perhaps a few days were followed by the inevitable relapse. Now she'd not gotten out of her bed for 3 days.

Bill wasn't expected back for another two weeks. I suggested that she write to him: if the situation was that serious he could always cut short his trip.

" I wouldn't *hear* of it! Bill's been working almost *two years* to cast some of that work he's got with him! If he came back *now* , for some little thing like Moira's cough , I'm sure he'd *never* forgive me !" She laughed,

" It's beginning to look as if I'm gettin' *you* to be twice as worried as *me* , just from *hearin'* me *talk about it* so much! I'm *all* day in the house *alone* with her."

She stifled a giggle : " Just the other day Padraic Parsons! , of all people, looking *weirder* than ever, stopped by in the mornin' and brought me a sack of potatoes! He's trying to be nice, but what use do *I* have for a *sack of potatoes!* I think he was sent by those poets at Gleason's dreaming up some worthy cause like helping their fellow artists in need!

" I wouldn't worry, Tom; it's perfectly *normal* that Moira's on my mind, if you know what I mean . I'm still continuing to learn what *a terrible* thing it is to have a child, Tom. So, my advice to you is that you *never* get married and just *go on doin'* what you're doin'! Writin' and all that. To tell you the truth, if I didn't have Moira here to look after, I just don't know *what* I'd do with myself. Write some silly lady's column for the Irish Times. Or I could try to be a *great painter* like *Bill* !"

"Well", I confessed, " Like anything else, working at art involves lots of dull routine. Besides, it doesn't pay very much."

" You talk just like Bill", she replied, gaily contemptuous,

" Always *complainin'* about doin' what you enjoy *most* ."

" Well I guess you're right. If I didn't have my writing to keep me business, I'd probably be running after girls. Do you know? I've been in Ireland almost a year now, and have yet to meet an unattached single girl."

" Aha!" she scowled, " *That's* serious. Tom, let me tell you something: its a sheer *waste of time* for you to be goin' after girls, they're such *silly* people I assure you, and you're such a terribly *serious* young man !" She dodged skillfully away as I lunged at her:

" Anyway , Tom, I know *lots* of nice girls to recommend to you . Why don't you ask Peggy McGuire out on a date ? She likes poetry", now I was seriously afraid I might hit her , "though I've heard it said that she's already engaged to a *classics* professor at *Trinity* ."

I gave a sigh of relief, glad to be spared the task of explaining why I didn't want to go out with Peggy McGuire.

" Its a shame, really", she went on, " If you were a *Catholic* , Tom, I'd suggest that you become a *Jesuit* . You *look* just like one."

I stood up and began walking impatiently around the room. I'd met some admirable Jesuits in my time, but there was a certain displeasing insinuation in Beatrice's tone of voice.

" Come and sit down!" she motioned, bursting into laughter , "Can't you tell when I'm *jokin'* !" I sat down again, stared at the fire and rocked indolently back and forth,

" Though I don't see why *anyone* should *want* to go on a date with a *person* who hasn't got *any hair* on his head!"

" Have you heard from Bill?" I interposed, in a desperate attempt to change the subject.

" Oh, Bill?" she chuckled, " Bill's all right. The only problem *he* has is that the *girls* fall all over *him* !"

I gazed at her, speechless. Once again she burst out laughing : "But ... I know just the thing for you..." Moira's crying echoed from through the ceiling. Beatrice's merriment died on her lips

"Excuse me a moment. I'll be right down.." Beatrice stood up and walked quickly through the door and up the stairs. While she was away I used the time re-reading my notes from a journal I'd kept in a trip out to Galway the previous September.

She was back in twenty minutes. In the way in which she walked back into the room one could see that her worries had assumed a more definite shape:

" She's got some trouble breathing. I'd better call Dr. Gottlieb."

" I'll go down the street and do it for you."

" No, that's all right. I need to talk to him myself. I've gotten her back to sleep again, but I want him to come here and take another look at her. Do you think you could stay here while I go next door to the McDonnells and call him from there?"

"Shall I go to her room and watch her? "

" It's better if you stay right here. She's just gone off to sleep again. She shouldn't be disturbed. Pour yourself some more tea. You don't mind staying, do you?"

I stared at her as one does when asked a silly question.

"Where's my coat? Why bother, it's only next door."

She was back in a quarter of an hour, happy to learn that Moira hadn't stirred. She hurried up to her room and came back down again. The crisis had passed.

"We'd better keep our voices down", Beatrice sat down again by the stove, "Dr. Gottlieb will be coming over in half an hour. Aleister McDonnell wanted to come back with me. It's not a good idea, there being too many people in the livingroom, all talkin' at the same time."

I suggested once again that she write Bill and explain the situation.

"No, it's not that serious, not just yet. If Dr. Gottlieb thinks he needs to return, I'll call Bill and he can get on a plane. I'd rather he continue workin'. Unless Moira is really sick of course." Then as if she would feel more comfortable changing the subject, she started telling me something about the work he was doing in London:

"There aren't any good bronze casters in Ireland. *Stan O'Glass* was advertising *himself* as one: he ruined a *dozen* pieces of work by his friends, before the idea caught on, that he couldn't mould a *pudding* in a teacup! Bill knows almost enough to be a caster himself, but he needs to learn more. Even though he's paying them to cast his pieces over in London, he's also putting in 5 hours a day *working* for them at base pay. I'm almost beginning to believe that Bill has a *mental condition*! He *can't* stop working, not even for *one day*! He doesn't know anyone in London, so he stays in his flat at night, modeling figures in clay.

" That's what I call *gettin' on with the job* ! One thing I can say with certainly, I'm not ashamed I married him. You see, if Bill learns *all there is to know* about casting, he can get money to set up his *own* foundry , right here in Ireland.

"We don't have any good casters here. Bill will have his hands full days and nights from all the work he'll be gettin'. How will he be able to do his own work, painting and sculpting, that's what I want to know."

Beatrice compulsively threw another glance at the ceiling. Without a break in the stream of words, she walked over to the dining-room table again and returned with a few more slices of soda-bread:

" So you can see, Tom, why it's really very *important* that he stay there *as long* as he *can* . Maybe he should be coming home, with Moira ill and so on, but I don't know what he could do here that I can't be doing myself with a little help. By the way: you've heard about the Victoria commission, haven't you?"

" Yes. Is it definite?"

" Not for certain. We don't yet know, but who *else* could they be giving it to, if not to Bill? There wasn't a soul in all of Ireland that wasn't *outraged* last year, when the Arts Council grant was divided between *Jake Josephs* and that *Stan O'Glass* , pretenders who didn't *need* that money at *all* - and , what's more, don't *deserve* to have it! Why, the only *talent* people like *that* have got is for making the right *connections* ! But now the word is going around, that Josephs and Stan O'Glass aren't even being *considered* for the Victoria! commission You probably don't know, Tom, that Josephs really *blew his credit* around here, when he just *dumped* that pile of figures you just can't *avoid* noticing in front of the Celtic Bank in Sandymount. Josephs couldn't have found a better *way* to prove to the public that he doesn't have an idea in his head that wasn't out of date *fifty years ago* ! Why, Rodin never *existed* for a man like that! What surprises me is that he

doesn't work for Woolworth's, modelin' *plastic midgets* and *little bears* and things like *that* !

So, to get back to what I was *sayin'* .... who *else* could they be givin' the commission to if not to *Bill* ? The only *other* sculptor in Dublin *qualified* to do the job is Jack Brown, and he'd tell them to *fuck off* if they ever *try* to walk on his doorstep!"

" I've heard his name mentioned him from time to time."

" You ought to meet him. I'm sure you'll like him, he's like you in a way. He comes around to see us whenever he's *going out of his mind* with loneliness. Jack Brown is the kind of person who sets an example for *Bill*, but who will *never* get *anywhere* on his own."

" I gather he's something of a misanthrope."

" What? A misanthrope, did you say? Well, not exactly. You can't describe a personality as complicated as Jack Brown's with one word . *Bill* calls him a *fascist*; but he's not exactly that either. I think he's just an eccentric.

" But we all agree that there isn't a man livin' in Ireland today who hasn't been given more *chances* ! But he's *ruined* every *one* of them !

" It must be because he was raised in an *orphanage* and has had to rely on himself almost from the day he was born; but he's walkin' around in the *twentieth* century with a nineteenth century *idea of the great artist* in his mind! He becomes more convinced of it every time he's turned down for a commission or antagonizes some *important* person just because his *political ideas* don't happen to line up with his own!

" There isn't an artist in the *whole of Ireland* who's been given *more* opportunities than Jack Brown. He's *ruined* them *all* ! Did you know that even *the Abbey Theatre* wanted to give him a commission! If *Bill* were offered a thing like he he'd be standing *outside* the theatre at 5 in the *morning* ! But you just won't

*believe* what Jack did. Right away he starts *bargainin'* with them, settin' up *hundreds of insane conditions* !

" From what I've heard, and you've got to remember that what I'm telling you is nothing but *hearsay* , he started to tell them what *kinds* of *plays* he wanted them to produce! In their *own* theatre! So *of course* he lost out on the commission to one of those Bedlam low-lives !

"After that you had to sit and *listen* to Jack Brown *every night* going on about the *dirty capitalist bosses* who run the Abbey , and about how he's just waitin' to *go into politics* so he can chase the *Abbey scum out of Ireland* !

" For all *we* know, they may be *every bit* as corrupt as he says ! But that's hardly an excuse for *spittin' in the eye* of a world famous theatre like the Abbey, when they're offering you *five thousand pounds* !

"Nobody denies he's got *talent* ! You can talk to some little tinker girl living in a tent down by the canal, and she'll tell you she's heard that Jack Brown has *talent* ! And he might work *even harder* than Bill, which you might think was *impossible* , but it's not so hard to understand, really, when you recognize that he lives *all by himself* in an old building on Thomas Street, that he never invites a soul to visit him, that he won't get married in a *thousand years* ... and that he considers himself *a great genius* !

"Last year he insulted Bill so badly I advised him never to have anything to do with Jack again. But Bill can't hold a grudge for very long, not against anyone, and poor Jack really hasn't got a single friend in the world, so it seems *cruel* , you know, just to drop him, even though Bill had *plenty of* good reasons for doing so . This much must be said for Jack , he's never taken a *penny* from anyone he didn't respect. "

The sound of Moira's coughing and crying could be heard again coming through the ceiling . Beatrice stood up quickly and went out of the room. When she came back , it was with Moira in her arms, thickly swaddled in blankets.

" I'll keep her comfortable here with us until the doctor comes."

She went over to the stove and rocked the child gently too and fro, singing the Brahms lullaby, evidently the only song she knew for such occasions. Moira's face was feverish and swollen. The congestion in her sinuses had forced her chubby fists up against her face. Her eyelids were heavy with slumber, while in her eyes one could read the anguish that children must feel upon their first initiation into the prolonged miseries of illness. She cried intermittently, falling off into a fitful sleep, only to reawaken in a state of feverish intoxication.

Gottlieb came by a few minutes later. He knocked at the fence, and I stepped outside to let him in. He was a man in his sixties, a refugee from Hitler's Germany. Dublin's artists used him because he was willing to accept paintings in lieu of money. Though a resident of Dublin for over thirty years, he still spoke with a thick German accent.

Beatrice lay Moira onto the couch and let the doctor examine her. After finishing his diagnosis he told us that there was as of yet no cause for concern, but that under no circumstances should Moira be allowed out of doors. After prescribing some pills to help her sleep, he went upstairs with Beatrice to help put Moira to bed. Then he sat in the living-room with us and chatted for another ten minutes. Beatrice's offer of another cup of tea had to be refused; he had another house call to attend to.

I saw him to the door. When we reached the fence, he explained to me that he was worried that Moira might have developed pneumonia. I was not to say a word of it to Beatrice, because he wasn't sure. He would be stopping by every day

from now on until the situation improved. For the present Beatrice should not be made to worry needlessly. Beatrice and I chatted on until eleven; then I left.

I stopped by their house almost every day after that. A week later, Beatrice informed me that Bill had won the Victoria commission, and that Moira was getting better. Dr. Gottlieb had expressed the hope that she would soon be well enough to be taken outdoors for limited periods.

3 days later however Moira's condition took a sudden turn for the worse. She began to suffer from severe chills; there was no longer any doubt that pneumonia had set in. She was rushed immediately to the hospital.

When Bill returned from England at the end of the week, carting with him the best work in sculpture he'd done to date, he learned that his daughter had died in the night.



## Chapter 13

### Integrity

For the next two weeks the Devlin's house served as the venue for the endless comings and goings of relatives and friends. Everyone pitched in to relieve Beatrice of the burden of work. This was very welcome at first, as she was unable to function; yet after about a week or so the sheer magnitude of the help she was getting became as oppressive as her perception of her own helplessness.

Bill crawled back into the ever-reliable remedy he'd cultivated all of his life, that of throwing himself into his work. Yet this, which on so many past occasions had been his one source of solace, now proved powerless in the long run against the devastation of the tragedy that had robbed him of all his strength. His heart

crushed beneath a mountain of pain, he could not completely escape having to yield to the dominance of sorrow, which extinguished any resolution he might have of engaging in meaningful activity.

Like a machine programmed to flash its lights and start revving up in the presence of catastrophe and sudden grief, Aleister McConnell quickly composed a grandiloquent 100 line ode on the death of Moira. Saving a photocopy for himself, the original text was offered as a gift to the Devlins. So obsequious and ceremonial was his manner, so stark his solemnity, so assured his confidence in the mystical significance of the occasion that, had the Devlin's not been so thoroughly overwhelmed by grief they could not have repressed their laughter. Yet McConnell's intentions were impeccable, as thoroughly unselfish as he could make them, while the poem itself, abstracted from its cloud of thunderous declamation, was not a bad one.

However, Bill and Beatrice found themselves under an obligation to receive it, to listen to Aleister's recitation of it, to read it in private, then to admit, with the customary dash of negative commentary reserved for its minor failings, and with an insincerity that was almost beyond their power of endurance, that it perfectly expressed all that was in their hearts.

For a fortnight there were never less than 20 people at dinner. Every visitor brought food into the house. That Beatrice should do any of the cooking was not to be imagined. It might have been better had she been allowed to do so, as it would have relieved her of the continual strain of having to play host and hostess to crowds of people. After 10 days Beatrice was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Who can say what it was that awakened Bill to a sense of his responsibility, to realize that they had to be alone for awhile if they wanted to survive their ordeal? Within a few days Bill had pushed everybody out of the house. Yet so deep was their shared grief that for a certain time, they found even one another's company

insupportable. Beatrice went off to stay with her parents in Ulster. Bill's policeman brother turned out to be exceptional kind and receptive to his situation and welcomed him into his house for an indefinite stay. As it turned out, that was an excellent arrangement: his brother's unpopularity among his intellectual friends now showed its potential as a valuable asset. During the period that Bill was staying with him, he was safe from most intrusion, welcome or otherwise, apart from those of his own family, about which he could do nothing as they also had lost a valued member of the tribe.

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It was not until April that I ran into Bill. The mild weather had brought me outdoors that afternoon to linger downtown on Grafton Street late into the evening. There was much to see, sitting in St. Stephen's Park, strolling down Grafton Street and through the courtyards of Trinity College, looking at people and gazing at the displays in shop windows. A box of used books had been placed on the sidewalk outside a bookstore and I'd begun thumbing idly through the old paperbacks when I felt someone's hand placed on my shoulder.

It was Bill. He invited me to join him for a pint at Gleason's. As we were walking over there, Bill filled me in on recent developments in his life. He's only returned to his house and studio the night before. Beatrice was in London with her relatives and was expected back by the end of the week.

Upon entering the precincts of Gleason's, it was easy to forget that it had ever been a balmy April day outdoors. Never the model for cheer on the best of occasions, the time happened to be at the dead center of the total cessation of activity, between the lunch crowd, and the imminent stampede of evening regulars.

Several members of the well-nigh irrepressible poet's circle were dutifully present, chewing the peat briquettes of their inalienable turf. Bill and I moved off to a darkened corner where we had the least chance of being disturbed, at least not right away. Bill ordered a round of Guinness. We drank it off in silence. He didn't begin speaking until we'd gotten into our second round, which I may have ordered, unless I was in my habitual state of penury in which case he ordered all the drinks; more likely the latter.

Somewhere part way through the second round Bill startled me by boldly announcing that he intended to reject the Victoria Hotel commission.

"I'm not going to take it. I'm through fooling myself."

"Are you sure that's wise, Bill? Your entire career could depend on it."

He lifted his head and regarded me point-blank. Even he could be arrogant when the occasion dictated it:

"Career? It's strange, Tom, that it's you who are using the same word as everyone else. By a 'career' you no doubt mean something that will accord me, in say a decade or so, the right to sit on my duff in the Bedlam with my good cronies Josephs, Hodges and O'Brien, flush with smug satisfaction because of having monopolized enough connections to give me the right to steal the bread from younger and better artists. That's what most people mean by a career, isn't it? It's what I deceived myself into believing I really wanted."

Bill laughed, though there was little of the old strain of mockery in the tone of his voice. He gazed at the ceiling and, as if signing his name, began drawing pictures in the air with an index finger:

"Bill Devlin, sign painter and graven image maker for the landed Irish moneybag class. In his life he was one pathetic yaboo, who went to his grave without a splinter of conscience and twenty thousand quid in the bank. Hah!

No, Tom, you've got to hand it to a nut like Jack Brown. In thirty years he'll be as poor as he is today. He hates everybody but I wouldn't call him a hypocrite. He'd done nothing he has to be ashamed of."

It was already well into April before I saw Bill again. It was a mild early evening, and I was strolling down Grafton Street gazing idly into the bookstore windows, when he tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to join me for a pint at Gleason's. He had come back to his house that morning; Beatrice would be joining him in a few days. The cares of the past month told heavily on his features, yet he seemed to have regained some of his old resilience, and was prepared once again to pick up his life and begin all over again. At this time of day, Gleason's was always torpid, if not entirely dead. The "poet's circle" was stewing in its habitual corner. We side-stepped them and found ourselves in a darkened corner where we would not be disturbed right away. After a certain amount of conventional small talk, Bill startled me by announcing that he had decided to reject the Victoria commission.

"I'm not going to take it. I'm through fooling myself."

"Are you sure that's wise? This is the biggest chance you've ever had. Your entire career could depend on it."

He lifted his head and regarded me point-blank. He could be arrogant when the occasion arose:

"Career? It's strange you should be using the same word everybody else uses. By a "career", you no doubt mean something that will give me in, say, another ten years, the right to sit on my duff in the Bedlam with my good friends Josephs, Hodges and O'Brien, rubbing my hands with smug satisfaction because I have all the connections that gives me the right to steal the beard from younger and better men. That's what people mean by a career, isn't it? That's what I tricked myself into feeling I wanted." He laughed, though there was little of the old humor in his

humor. Gazing up at the ceiling, Bill spelt words with his right index finger on an imagined mural:

" Bill Devlin, sign painter and graven image maker for the landed Irish moneybag class, went to his grave without a splinter of conscience and twenty thousand quid in the bank! Hah! No, John, you've got to give credit to a character like Jack Brown. In thirty years he'll be as poor as he is now. He hates everybody; but he's no hypocrite. He'll never have anything to be ashamed of.

But if I accept this Victoria job, I'm setting myself up to become another fashionable arse-licker like, well like your man O'Higgins, or just about anybody else you want to name. If I'm really honest with myself, that's what I've been working for all along, isn't it?

" Where's the fighter, Bill?"

" Fighter? Well, that's a matter of opinion, isn't it. Hah! " He made a poor attempt at imitating the standard Brendan Casey guffaw: " Well, yes, I thought I was a fighter. I've received allegations that I'm tough-skinned. Bill Devlin, the ox! Tom, I'll let you in on a secret: Bill Devlin is just another security-seeking craven! As long as Moira was alive", he hesitated, waved aside my comments, averse to dragging up useless emotions,

" I'd convinced myself that I was living for my family, for her, for Beatrice. Even an artist didn't have the right, I told myself, to neglect the people who depend on him. I had to make money for them. That was the justification for every compromise.

" It took Moira's death to make me realize how much I resemble that cabal of society painters down at the Bedlam. I'm telling you this, Tom, because I respect you. I know you'll take it in the right way.

"Why kid myself? I wouldn't mind a dozen good suits, a few more cars, vacations on the Riviera. I guess so; I've never been there."

I had. There were some places worth visiting on the Cote d'Azur. It was a matter of avoiding the tourists.

" Or California. Why not the Bahamas? I wouldn't mind a few good reviews in the Irish Independent or, even more, the London Times. It's what other people think. Isn't that what really counts?"

There was almost something vicious in his self- disparagement, something exceptionally dishonest in his way of railing against his own honesty.

" But look Bill", I said, " You've got to live. You've nothing to be ashamed of . So what if a Jack Brown sticks his head in the ground and vaunts his futile integrity? I've always thought you were different, a realist."

" A realist, eh..?" Bill shook his head as if to indicate that to him the very concept was dubious. "Maybe. What difference does it make, really? Come what may, I'm rejecting the Victoria commission. I'd feel better casting an over-sized bronze statue of Cuchulain for the itinerant tinkers squatting in shacks outside Galway. I'd set it up right in the middle of the damn highway before I'll take a penny from the Victoria Hotel."

The darkness that had fallen over the pub's interior served to reinforce Bill's despondency. I leaned my head against the hard wood booth and thought over what he'd been telling me.

" So Bill: what are you going to do now?"

" I don't know."

" You're not going back to factory work, are you?"

" No, I won't go back to the factory."

" You won't give up painting?"

" No; of course not." He sighed, " but beyond that I can't say anything. There are plenty of opportunities out there; I don't have to sell my soul. It'll be easier, won't it, without a daughter to support, isn't that right? "

It was all he could do to fight back his tears. Padraic Parsons' sudden appearance was almost welcome, as he approached our table to embarrass us with his dreary condolences.

As we parted an hour later, Bill invited me over to his house for dinner that Thursday.

I approached the Devlin household through the alleyway leading off from a side street, apprehensive of what I would find. A number of guests had been invited and one knew that there would be many more as the evening wore on. I entered a cheerless and desolate living-room, as if, with the departure of Moira, the ray of sunlight that had given life to all within were extinguished. All of Bill's paintings had been removed from the room or taken down from the walls of his paintings and put into storage. Without the sketch pads, mounds of clay, plaster, canvases, pipes, sheets of metal, without the discarded tubes of paint squeezed to extract the last morsel, before being crumpled into hideous wads and dropped on the floor, without the flakes and crumbs of paint smeared on the palettes and furniture, the sheaves of drawings no longer strewn recklessly about the room, it truly seemed as if this hearth which I had grown to love almost as much as they had been overwhelmed by a desert. Someday they would have to start over again. As to what direction their lives would take, it was impossible to say.

Beatrice, normally so lively and impulsive, bubbling over with gossip from everywhere, so anxious to keep her company alert through an unending stream of trivia, now seemed moody, irritable devoid of energy. Yet for her, also, it appeared that the worst was over.

She was happy to see me, and hastened to thank me for all the concern I'd shown them, though in truth I had done nothing. When the conversation turned to their plans for the future, she mulled over a dozen possibilities, none of which seemed to hold any real interest for either of them. She understood why Bill had

rejected the Victoria commission. In fact she had never felt easy with it. Painting and sculpture were Bill's life. For either of them, his turning to anything else was not an option. One could not possibly imagine him filling his days other than by the hard creative work to which he was obsessively attached.

As we sat down to dinner, Aleister and Kathleen McDonnell put in an appearance. They were not unwelcome to join us, but their company was oppressive. One could well believe that for people like Aleister life itself was a perpetual dirge, its particular tragedies serving merely as its peak experiences.

Others began arriving and it was not long before there were a dozen persons around the table. Despite our efforts to lift the spirits of the gathering, Aleister contrived to dampen all attempts at levity by his professional gloom. One could already anticipate the very real danger that, for the rest of their lives, (his and the Devlins, whichever finished first), he would continue, long after they themselves had begun once again to laugh and smile, to treat them as victims of some hideous Greek drama.

As our attempts at levity were cut short by the looks, serious and otherwise, that circulated about the dinner table, the party descended into a collective gloom punctuated by muted voices, brief comments and dull embarrassment. For a moment it looked as if the evening would be over by 7, no more than a few hours after it had begun.

Then a miracle happened: the front door clicked open and Brendan Casey stepped into the room. He strode purposefully across the rough uncarpeted expanse of the floor and stretched himself out on the couch, face upward on a pillow with his long legs extended and the shoe of his left foot reaching into the floor. Up to his old tricks, Brendan displayed his usual gimmicks to focus the general attention onto himself, both irritating yet at the same time very funny.

One would committing an error to call Brendan empty-headed. Indeed there were times when he could be reproached for being all too serious, when quoting from Kierkegaard for example, or sharing his fear of imminent death. His chief failing seems to have been a pathetically, ( or pathologically) short attention-span, particularly on matters that needed to be taken care of right away.

Had he not put in an appearance just then the evening might have ended with everyone leaving with a bitter aftertaste. There are situations in which a court jester is more welcome than any elegiac poet, and it might be general knowledge that Brendan was unforgivably childish, to the point of being obnoxious to many, it was not to be denied that he could, on occasion, fulfill an essential social role. Even Aleister abandoned his self-assumed posture as mourner-in-chief to shoot missives of his barbed wit into Casey's hide, never a match for his sallies.

Then some of Bill's friends acquired in art school, members of the short lived moment called the "Communards", showed up carrying several six packs of beer.

Later that evening Peter Maloney knocked at the door. Dressed like an undertaker, he stood in the doorway with great solemnity, surrounded by other staff employees from the Open Studio, and thrusting forward a box of chocolates.

Around 10 o'clock the remaining poets from the Gleason's circle, having made their collective resolution to urge Bill not to desert the pursuit of the plastic arts, dropped in to pay their respects. Four actors from the Abbey Theatre also stopped by, as well as a few rival painters from the society painters crowd. Lastly Jack Devlin, Bill's policeman brother, came by to share a drink with Bill's snob friends.

Someone tuned a folk fiddle, and Siobhan Lacey, whose voice really was quite beautiful and who knew many authentic Gaelic ballads, entertained us for upwards of an hour.

Bill went down to Philby's for some more beer and brought back three more friends. The gathering went on until 5 in the morning. By that time only Bill, Beatrice and 2 of the painters were left. If I remember correctly, we were trying to persuade Bill to accept the Victoria Hotel commission. Life had to go on; it was doubtful that another opportunity such as this one would present itself, certainly not in Ireland. He stuck to his guns. Ireland wasn't the only place in the world, he reminded us. He might try his luck in America; even Australia, There were Devlins in Sydney.

The old Bill Devlin was gone. Hard-working, self-centered, perhaps too narrowly ambitious, an artist who had pulled himself out of backwardness by Herculean efforts, who, struggling to establish himself in respectable society had actually reached the point where he needed only to open a door, to leave the world of the Devlins forever and enter the world of the Victoria Hotel and The Bedlam.

Yet, having triumphed in the long ordeal, he was now prepared to relinquish its fruits, to evolve to a yet higher stage. The struggle, yet more bitter, would have to start all over again, no longer this time for security and recognition, but for satisfaction of conscience, for a self-righteous, even misanthropic dignity, for a level of affluence that would not be mean but at most adequate, for the right to be an artist on his own terms.

And into this new battle, Beatrice would follow him, as she would follow him everywhere.



## Chapter 14

### Eagle's Nest

Monday morning in early August. Heat and a cool summer light were streaming in through the chicken-wire mesh of the screen door that Riccardo deGiorgio had installed at the north end of the converted barn that since the previous November had served as his studio. He opened the door, then secured it with a hook to allow the heavy residue of paint fumes that had accumulated over the past few days to escape.

Riccardo observed his own surprise at being ready for work in his studio by 9:00 AM with a detached irony. Normally, no one in residence on the O'Higgins estate ever stirred before eleven. It was a rare day in Eagle's Nest, the arts colony being established by Ferdinand O'Higgins, and of which Riccardo was the first occupant, on which the creative impetus assaulted anyone before two in the afternoon.

He pushed aside a stack of wood, cardboard and discarded sketch pads blocking the path to the stone sink. Unwashed brushes lay where they'd been tossed at random the night before. A torrent of icy water descended like a lightning bolt into the sink from the opened faucet. Picking up the biggest brush from the stack, he jabbed it nastily into a block of industrial soap. All the fury of his pent-up frustration and annoyance were conveyed into the act.

He couldn't think of anything else to do that might be considered useful. Otherwise he need not have bothered to show

up at all that morning. Even with a idea or project in mind it was much too early to think of getting down to any serious painting.

There was always house-cleaning. At a leisurely pace, putting the studio space in working order could take up the rest of the morning. The studio had begun its descent into chaos from the day he first arrived from Dublin, after accepting the offer from O'Higgins and his wife to come and live on their famous 25-acre estate in Country Cork. Promises had been made, and it must be admitted, largely kept, of guaranteed financial backing to assist him in making his contribution to mankind in untroubled serenity, free from financial worries and the malicious back-biting of rivals and critics, enveloped by a protective isolation that threatened, in a short time, to bring him to the brink of madness!

He arranged the brushes carefully on a worktable next to his easel; no amount of depression could alter the professional habits of a life time. Then he returned to the sink. After holding a coffee pot under the cascading water for a few minutes, he finally twisted the faucet shut. A bag of coffee, freshly ground from a local supplier, was taken down from a cabinet; several spoons of dark espresso were sifted into the pot's filter. He'd picked up the habit of caffeinating himself all day long from his first year in art school.

Walking across the room, he placed the cafetière onto the grid of a hot plate. The thought of thinking itself was not thinkable before two morning cups of black espresso! Waiting for the water to boil, Riccardo traipsed impatiently about the room, stopping capriciously before this canvas or that drawing recklessly strewn

around the floor or against the walls. In doing so, several scraps and sheets of old newspapers covered with paint had collected on the backs of his shoes. Thoroughly exasperated, Riccardo sat down on the edge of his cot, removed his shoes and began scraping them clean. The water boiled, coffee spurted from the lid and dropped onto the hotplate, sending a cloud of steam upwards. He grabbed the pot by its broken handle. After pouring himself his first cup of coffee for the day, he settled into a cane chair and studied a handful of drawings.

Riccardo felt no inclination to work. It was not that he was lacking in ideas, but the context which he felt he needed to bring them to fruition. Rather than imagining what he could be doing with his time, he berated himself for having gotten up so early. He hardly needed to study his drawings another dozen times to know that he was in a protracted slump.

It had started in June just after his return from a 2-month visit to Italy. That was the moment, now irrevocably past, for exercising his common sense, thanking the O'Higginses for their generosity and good intentions, then packing up and leaving not only Eagle's Nest, their lovingly maintained Shelter for Homeless and Deserving Artists, but Ireland itself, a land he would never understand and no longer wanted to.

Since then there had always been complications preventing him from leaving. Opportunities as well, though he never seemed to notice them. He always managed to convince himself that he ought to give the arrangement one more chance; otherwise stated, that he had more to lose from going than by staying.

Fundamentally he really wasn't ready to leave; yet it was not routine work or inspiration that kept him grounded. At a very deep level, Riccardo was worn out. It was not only desperation that the hyperactivity of recent years produced, it also acted as a drug, one that he'd come to crave though, like all drugs, far from conducive to his well being in the long run. He'd long ago become numbed to the damage inflicted on body and mind by a rootless existence.

It was only when, by a fortuitous coming together of persons and circumstances, that he was able to rest, that he could see what his way of life had cost him. In many ways his very inactivity was a good thing. Ferdinand O'Higgins asked very little of him, and appeared to be satisfied to receive the shallow offshoots of a tired imagination. Although it had become apparent to him by now, that he would not be creating anything under the auspices of the O'Higgins Cultural Foundation that he would later have reason to be proud of, this made little difference. Many of the ideas entertained, laid aside and stored in sketches or in his mind, were destined to bear fruit at a later date, and on other shores.

Riccardo continued, in a desultory fashion, to inspect the remaining half-dozen drawings he held in his hands. He could identify no quality in them that he might want to develop or use in future work: originality, imagination, technical skill, subject matter. There wasn't one among them that he would allow his name to be associated with, nothing he would permit to be mounted in exhibition, nor to be sold at any price. With one exception: O'Higgins could have that in part payment of the rent.

All that kept him from throwing them into the trash basket was his lack of courage.

Something had to be the matter, although he didn't know what it was. Despite his infatuation with metaphysical speculation, his fondness for 'deep thought', he really knew very little about himself. These manifest symptoms of discontent only indicated that he needed to strike out in a new direction. He was bored, sick of painting, disgusted with himself and with his work. And he felt like a prisoner.

There was one component of his problem that he had no identifying : he loathed the O'Higgins clan, everything about them, their personalities, their way of life, everything they stood for. Quite apart from their politics, which he had always despised but which made them little different from most other people in his eyes, he simply didn't like them. Their friends fared no better, that social set from wide-flung corners of the world that gathered every evening after dinner in the lounges, living-rooms and bedrooms of the main house of Eagle's Nest, up the hill at a distance of about 300 feet.

The old man himself was insufferable. Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins had only to open his yap to drive Riccardo deGiorgio to thoughts of vengeance or suicide, whichever was easier. O'Higgins saved the worst excesses of his garrulous egotism in order to disgorge them at dinner, usually between the hours of 7 and 8:30 . The moment that Ferdy's voice rose above a conventional whisper was the signal for Riccardo had to sink down in his chair and simulate a mild coma. That Ferdinand O'Higgins had lived an

interesting life was a truism that Riccardo had never had any intention of disputing. One could just as well make a dozen good novels out of his own life, when one came down to it; however, from the day he'd taken up residence at the O'Higgins Foundation in November of the previous year, he'd not been granted so much as a minute to contribute his share of recollections. O'Higgins would brook no competition: throughout his long life, he'd always hogged the rights of autobiography for himself.

These tempestuous monologues at the meals at Eagle's Nest, aka the *Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins Center for the Enhancement of the Creative Arts in Ireland*, ( acronym SECRA ) drained a great deal of the energy and inspiration which could otherwise have been applied to fulfilling the stated goals of the organization. Who among us has not, time and time again, undermined the very causes we claim to believe in? Riccardo, helpless as a wounded lamb in the wolf-like claws of the old writer, was obliged to endure, full blast, the latest news reports on the secret life churning within the magnificent loneliness of the superior Ferdinand O'Higgins soul, which intimacies, apparently, the Bard could confide to none other than him.

Little it mattered that this secret life differed not a jot from the tediously rehashed rhetoric smothering the pages of his novels, including his present love child, upon which, like a migrant farmer struggling to support his family in Mexico, he labored every minute of his working day ( generally between the hours of two to six) and frequently beyond .

Judy Wilcox's company was tolerable, often a welcome relief from her husband. Yet she wasn't that much easier to deal with, and DeGiorgio continued to find her somewhat puzzling. Although O'Higgins had extended the hand of patronage, Riccardo would never have accepted his offer had he not been persuaded to do so by Judy.

Dinner was generally at seven. These orgies of anthropophagy, ( a meal at which the host eats his guests) might continue on until 9, by which time the living-room at Eagle's Nest was beginning to fill up with guests, and Ferdinand had to excuse himself to play the genial host. Most of them were the off-shoots of crusty, uptight and snobbish Establishments the world over , the odd individual might be intelligent or amusing or both. He or she would therefore provide the rare outlet for Riccardo's otherwise lonely, rigorous and hermetic life here in the boondocks of an alien land. Sometimes they would ask about his paintings. He'd even managed to sell a dozen of his earlier works to them.

That there were definite advantages to living rent free out in the countryside, rather than being penned up in a costly flat in Dublin, could not be denied. The weather, to begin with, although at this time of the year the weather was not too bad in Dublin either. In addition to providing for his material needs, O'Higgins kept open a bottomless purse for art supplies. In exchange for all this, room and board, studio space, supplies and adequate pocket money, deGiorgio gave O'Higgins either one painting or two drawings per month.

And, at heart, deGiorgio was no spendthrift: once his living arrangements were secure, his needs were frugal. Or let us say, with more accuracy, that, as we have seen from the account of his years in London, his ability to control his cash flow was a function of the anxiety level induced by external circumstances. In his studio were his bottle of wine, his can of espresso and espresso maker, his bread and cheese. Once a compulsive chain smoker, he had cut down greatly over the last decade. He now smoked about two packs of cigarettes a week, most of which he rolled for himself.

Breakfast was taken in the main building. For lunch the kitchen staff prepared a hamper of sandwiches and a thermos of soup placed quietly outside his door. O'Higgins was following a tradition he'd picked up from his summer residences at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire.

O'Higgins had laid down the law to both family and staff that, barring an explicit invitation, the very distinguished Italian painter Signore Richard deGiorgio, was never to be disturbed in his studio during working hours. This was merely an extension of the prohibitions he'd been enforcing with regards to his own time for decades. Accordingly, for the first few months, Judy Wilcox stayed away from "Quattro cento", her husband's name for Riccardo's reconverted barn-studio.

Yet those indignities she'd endured in silence before Riccardo's arrival, the prolonged stretches of boredom, the little yet unrelenting humiliations, the growing resentment which could find no outlet, not so much as a sympathetic ear, nor shoulder to cry on, all those things which were intolerable yet had to be borne,

held in check; once it appeared that some relief was in sight, her resistance broke and the unrelieved accumulation of all the years of imprisonment in an unfulfilled marriage poured over the self-constructed moral barriers she'd required to convince herself that she'd made the right decisions. Thus she gradually fell into the habit of stopping by Quattro Cento several times a week for brief visits.

It was over breakfast a month or so after his arrival that Judy asked Riccardo if he would mind if she came over to see him once in a while, never more than 20 minutes at a time, and never when he was at work on some important project. He could always let her know over breakfast if it was not a good day to visit.

Riccardo saw no reason to object: her company was much preferable to her husband's. Nor did she abuse the privilege at first, staying at most half an hour and always quick to leave when he said he was busy. By February, that is to say, 3 months after his arrival it had become part of her settled routine to drop in on Riccardo 5 days out of the week. Then, without warning, Riccardo went and complained to O'Higgins about her, and her visits ceased.

Yet, reversing roles a few weeks later in early March, responding to some sense of remorse, that he'd done the wrong thing to someone who'd always supported him - Riccardo was not unaware of the fact that ingratitude was a signal blight on his character - he came up to the main house and called on her. Judy Wilcox was sitting alone in the darkened living-room. Ferdinand was at work upstairs in his studio. The mere thought of visiting him there filled her with distaste, in addition to which O'Higgins

had very pronounced ideas about being allowed to write undisturbed, lest the errant muse wend its way to his door and find him unprepared. There were of course lots of things she could busy herself with, that indeed needed to get done, were it not that the underlying futility of life at Eagle's Nest made her disinclined to pursue them. When Riccardo called on her, Judy was seated at the piano, idly strumming out a Chopin Prelude she'd long ago forgotten how to play.

When she saw him coming through the door, she imagined at first that he might be a weekend guest who was showing up early. When she realized that it was Riccardo she was afraid that he was still angry with her, but he quickly put her at ease. She disappeared for a few minutes to put some tea, then came back, opened the blinds and sat herself down opposite him on a couch.

Riccardo stammered out an apology. He admitted that he'd missed her visits and would not be in the least put out if she continued to stop over just as she'd been doing before, provided her visits were brief. When she responded by bursting into tears, it was all he could do to maintain his composure and prepare himself for the onslaught that was to follow: a long, disconnected and incoherent tirade against her husband, his suffocating tyranny, egotism and absurd pretensions. She railed against Ireland, against the climate, against Eagle's Nest, against all the people she'd met there and those who, for the sake her husband, she was obliged to tolerate.

The deluge of recriminations was interrupted for only a few minutes as she got up to bring back tea and a platter of cakes and

cookies. Then the conversation resumed as if there'd been no interruption. Riccardo sat patiently and listened to her for over an hour. Finally she calmed down and they were able to speak of other things. He left at 6, giving him little time to put away his work and prepare for the ordeal of dinner.

Her visits resumed, this time with no objections from deGiorgio. By the end of the month they'd dwindled to no more than a few times a week; by mid-April they'd ceased altogether.



Once in awhile, when Riccardo showed up for breakfast, he would find himself seated next to the third member of the O'Higgins family. This was Oswald O'Higgins, Ferdinand O'Higgins' son by his first marriage. Oswald commuted intermittently between Eagle's Nest and Sussex, where he was enrolled as an engineering student at the university of Brighton. Oswald made a single courtesy call at Quattro Cento sometime in January; but Riccardo's took such an extreme dislike to him that his father instructed him never to go over there again. He explained to Oswald that the "artistic temperament" of Signore deGiorgio made him distrustful of outsiders.

Riccardo acknowledged the presence of one redeeming virtue in Oswald's character: he was neither involved, informed, nor interested in the "higher things" which were the driving obsession of all the other residents of Eagle's Nest. He was quite happy with limiting his perspective to engineering (third year). The coordinate axes of his space of interests were given by the

cyber revolution, science fiction, the American space program and the distinguishing sexual and intellectual characteristics of male and female engineering students. Totally unlike his father who considered himself an authority on all aspects of the universe, he freely admitted that he knew nothing outside these chosen areas. At the same time he also believed that all other subjects were superstition, nonsense or stupidity.

Not that this would have made any difference, in and of itself, and could have endowed him with a certain naive charm. At the same time it appeared that Oswald also lacked that collection of attributes which is normally called a conscience; yet this too could have been borne. The problem was that, to his own great misfortune, and that of all others in his vicinity, the boy rendered himself totally obnoxious by the excess of self-confidence he displayed in the promotion of his own shallowness of soul. One was led to believe that, even at this young age, his studies had already lifted him to that level of human triviality which entitles one to a place in the elite community of those who run the world we live in.

Oswald's views on such matters as selecting the right friends for getting ahead, the future of the transistor, the qualifications of a wife useful to one's career, the identifying qualities of a safe girl-friend, the conquest of yet undiscovered solar systems in distant galaxies, the road to world domination through macro engineering, and the application of the laws of probability to the stock market, were delivered in a high, brassy, reeking voice with

no sense of shame, around the dinner table and at every social gathering.

It is easy enough to understand that, when Oswald walked into his studio and tried to proselytize him, Riccardo blew his stack. From that time forwards Riccardo did everything to keep him at a safe distance, with Oswald enthusiastically reciprocating in kind. He let his father know that he had no interest in speaking to "that Italian"; wasn't it obvious that his painting exhibited a lack of understanding of the scientific method?

That April, Ferdinand O'Higgins not to be outdone in Medician largesse, paid the round-trip fare to Italy so that Riccardo could visit with his family and pick up about 20 canvases which had been stored there for almost a decade. Riccardo handed them over to O'Higgins when he got back in June, who sent them to New York to a personal agent, a man genetically endowed with a talent for fleecing rich Philistines. It was a happy note in an otherwise dismal story: deGiorgio would have several thousand dollars in the bank and the beginning of a small following when he arrived in the United States to pursue new adventures outside the scope of this narrative.

When Riccardo returned to Eagle's nest in the late spring, he found everything waiting for him just as he had left it. Ferdinand O'Higgins paid his employees well for the labor of tolerating him. Yet he also discovered that, in a number of ways, his rent had gone up: Oswald did not have to return to university until the third week in September, and would be residing at Eagle's Nest for the rest of the summer.

In addition to which O'Higgins ,with the confidence that can only come from unchecked self-indulgence over many years, had notched up his command over the dinner table as lord of the manor by a number of decibels. In language astonishing for its sheer verbosity and narrative eloquence O'Higgins expostulated liberally on his plans for pushing through a new "Irish Renaissance" , this to be achieved through the force-feeding of American dollars, in much the same way that delicious liver paste is manufactured through the abuse of geese. As he spoke one could actually see in the air about his head, just above the upward thrust of his palms and the fount of stentorious spittle that surged from his enthused lips, the materialization of grants, scholarships, theaters, art centers, concert halls, schools, musical prodigies, masterpieces and other cultural miracles.

Long and lingeringly did he dwell on the streams of grateful pilgrims that would find the way to his doors, the Young Poets of Ireland. It was over there, in that field beyond the tool shed , that they would place their tents and build their campfires. And it was there that they would wait, patiently for weeks, in the surrounding fields, to receive from his lips a few words of encouragement and half a quid to keep the wolf from the door. Then, from the intimate soirees at Eagle's Nest, or in the local pubs and householders of lovers of literature, would the golden honey of the Bardic tradition be reborn after a thousand year sleep.

In the midst of his reveries, spurred to action by some abrupt muscular reflex of Riccardo's, who'd worked up the nerve to crack open his morning hard boiled egg, O'Higgins would recall the

Plight of the Young Musicians of Ireland. For them there would be a several series of benefit concerts, the night air around Eagle's Nest resonating with the sublime harmonies of the revered Masters until eventually, through his dedicated patronage, the Irish Artur Rubinstein would be discovered, and, etc.,etc....

As a general rule when he came to this point, O'Higgins imagination tended to wind down, although once in awhile he was able to push through with the feeble boast that every musically gifted child on the Emerald Isle would have access to, if not ownership of, a concert grand piano.

On occasion Riccardo might attempt some mad act of self-assertion, such as picking up, with deranged fascination, a 3-month old copy of Time magazine. After a frantic search he might discover an article which, as he had only read it six times before, was still a potential source of intellectual stimulation. Or he may have had the foresight to come pre-armed with a book, which he would have the complete effrontery to open and read at the same time that the Great Benefactor was trumpeting his visions. Or Mother Nature might come to his rescue and necessitate a trip to the Bogs.

If Oswald were seated at the table at the same time, the situation quickly degenerated into catastrophe. For whatever Oswald lacked in scope or breadth of ambition was more than amply compensated for through the irritating insinuation, in a trenchant voice, of his petty-minded views.

Once Oswald got the sense that, for some unfathomable reason, he was being ignored, he did not, like his father, merely

raise the volume of noise, filling out the greater amplitude with reams of new rubbish from an inexhaustible source. His tactic was to bully his audience with direct questions amounting to accusations, larded with vague personal overtones which seemed to imply that the attributes of normal human intelligence had passed his listeners by.

Instead of saying, "Do you follow me?" or, more realistically, "Do you want to follow me?", Oswald was likely to come out with, "Aren't you able to follow me?". Intent on ramming home a point by drowning out his opposition through a barrage of statistics, (generally in support of some moral opinion unworthy of a Mafioso, he would rhetorically solicit "data" that only he was likely to know:

" Wasn't it in 1967 that there was a sharp surge in the copper market? Or don't you remember?" or " Now, take galvanization of rubber. Do you happen to remember the chemical formula for rubber?"

When he could get at Oswald alone, Riccardo easily made short work of him; for despite his pretentious show of arbitrary knowledge, the brat was more ignorant than any peasant. Alas, the combination of father and son was unassailable. If Riccardo, through a combination of obstinacy and ingenuity, discovered a way to ward off the onslaughts of the grotesque idealism of the elder O'Higgins, Oswald was sure to shatter his concentration by loading him down with a host of imbecile questions. And whenever he succeeded in firing back to Oswald some crude but

undeniably appropriate sarcasm, O'Higgins would come crashing down on him in a flash.

Without the presence of Judy Wilcox, Riccardo would have been compelled to leave before the summer was out. But she prevailed upon him to stay, at least a little while longer, promising to do everything in her power to relieve the oppression of social life at Eagle's Nest. Whenever she noticed that Riccardo was being besieged, she was usually able to initiate some diversionary tactic against either father or foster son, giving him enough respite to finish his meal, if nothing else. She also found many occasions to draw Riccardo into the kitchen or drawing-room, leaving the two Cretaceous bores, father and son, to slug it out between them. Predictably enough they had nothing to say to one another and dreaded the thought of being left alone.

Life for Riccardo at Eagle's Nest was otherwise little changed from what it had been before his visit to Italy. In some respects things were a little bit better. The days were sunny, the weather pleasant, the countryside covered with lush dense green. Riccardo took long hikes through this rich though deserted land, with settlements few and far between and history on every side. At least twice a month he either walked or hitched a ride into Cork, (not an easy matter as there were few cars on the road.) There he would walk through the streets alone for hours, neither knowing a soul nor caring to, too much of a recluse to make friends spontaneously. Eventually he did strike up one friendship, with an English industrial designer and his wife. They bought two

paintings from him and offered him the use of their cottage on weekends when the Eagle's Nest became impossible to bear.

After his return Judy resumed her short daily visits to Sunshine. She never showed up before 4 PM, and kept her visits under half an hour. However near the end of August she paid him a surprise visit at noon. The excuse she gave was that she'd been delegated to bring him the basket of soup and sandwiches prepared for him every afternoon in the kitchen. He did not invite her in but did not protest when she stepped through the screen door and sat down to wait as he began eating. Clearly she had come for a reason.

Riccardo had spoken perhaps half a dozen words, when she suddenly opened up with a torrent of angry denunciations of her husband. It was in this way that Riccardo learned that Ferdy had taken the bold initiative to exhibit his insensitivity by inviting Deirdre O'Connor down to Eagle's Nest to spend the weekend with them. Worse still, Deidre had had the temerity to accept:

"I can't understand her! I just don't understand people like that! Has she no sense of shame? Doesn't she know what she is? She should at least know what she looks like! She's a common flirt, that's what she is!" - Judy stopped short of uttering the word she really wanted to use.- "Just watch how she walks across the room, the way she looks back to make sure that all men's eyes are following her! "

"I know for a fact that she doesn't even want my husband! Not really. She's just been able to pull the wool over his eyes, the silly fool that he is, and he can't see past her. But, let's face it,

Riccardo - he's a married man! She's using him to advance her own career on the London stage! But what he doesn't know is that everyone is laughing at him. And her, too! She can't love him! That's no easy matter, Riccardo, loving someone like Ferdy, take it from me. "

Riccardo had stood up and was studying the painting he'd been working on since that morning. Without ignoring her entirely, he nodded vague agreement and allowed her to continue:

"Yesterday afternoon, he nearly, drove me crazy! I really believe that I was ready to call up that notorious mental hospital in Cork and tell it to lock me up! All day! The old fool was babbling nonstop - all day long! Scholarships to the Beaux-Arts! Schools for modern dance in Limerick and half a dozen other places I've never heard of! Then he starts going on about Jews in the arts. My God, Riccardo, I never realized I'd married a racist! Though I shouldn't have been surprised: there hasn't been any fresh air in that brain of his for decades!

"He's not against Jews, mind you, that's what he says - not as a class, or sect, or tribe, as he puts it. He's just against their *politics* ! Or, what did he call it? : their *instinct* for politics!

" But just look at *him* , Riccardo! Don't imagine that it's his talent that gets his books published! His first novel was accepted by a publisher only because his grandfather was the ambassador to Paraguay. He would never have gotten *anywhere* without his family connections, and - and a lot of old money. He pulls more strings than Lyndon Johnson, and here he is, fuming against Jewish politics in the arts! Oh, please don't say anything, Riccardo,

there's nothing you or I can do about it!" She brushed away the tears and looked away, embarrassed. Giving way to another hysterical outburst she railed:

" I married him! I accepted him with all his faults , Riccardo! I don't regret anything! But now he's bringing over that awful girl!" Her sobs were forced out in fits and starts as she raised her arms, clenching her fists in a gesture of impotence, " I've never met anyone like her! I didn't think that people like that existed!"

Having had to endure the burden of Ferdinand's bearish presence for over half a year, Riccardo did acknowledge a certain amount of sympathy with Judy's account of her troubles. He reached over and took her in his arms. She buried her head in his chest and cried her heart out:

" Deirdre's coming to the house tomorrow night. Ferdy asked me to welcome her, but I can't imagine what he expects me to say to her. Why, she thinks nothing at all of walking into another woman's house and carrying on with her husband right under her eyes!"

Riccardo aimlessly played with her hair, as someone might comfort an unhappy child:

" That's very sad...very sad... We must think of some way to get that girl away from your husband."

Judy clung desperately to Riccardo's chest. Her head had fallen back onto his left shoulder, while her legs were pulled up onto the cot. She seemed to find the position both comfortable and comforting, and made no move to alter it. Riccardo was annoyed but not really displeased, as he silently speculated on what might

happen if her renegade husband should just then walk into the studio and find them together. Then he thought of what might happen if Oswald showed up; his mood soured.

"Get up", he whispered, pushing her away from him, "What is someone coming in and seeing like this?"

Something, some notion perhaps that what she was doing was above reproach, collapsed within her. She sprang off his bed and stammered:

"What? You dare accuse me!?" She pointed at him with hostility.

"Accuse you? I don't understand." Riccardo was completely bewildered. What would this woman be up to next?

"Why, I've never heard anything so..!" She collapsed into a chair, grasped her head in her hands and moaned hysterically,

"You think I'm as bad as that horrible girl! I'm about to lose my marriage; I come over to see you, in the privacy of your studio - you know you wouldn't have that if it weren't for me, don't you? - to the only friend, the only living being I can talk to within a hundred miles, and you think I just..I just..want to SLEEP with you! Why, Riccardo, you're just as bad as he is! Your mind is filled with all those ugly thoughts; just like those things in your paintings! You're worse than my husband!"

In her wild and selfish ranting, she'd lost all sensitivity to the possibility that she could be able to injure his feelings. Few people knew how sensitive deGiorgio really was.

" No, Judy. You are wrong in what you are saying. I was only thinking of what could happen if someone saw us here together. I don't accuse you."

" Yes you did! You called me an adulteress! I've been faithful all my life, to *five* husbands , men that most women would have thrown overboard into the sea if they'd had the chance! It takes a guest, a guest IN MY HOUSE, to call me that thing!"

" Don't say those things, Judy. You don't realize what you're saying." For reply, she stood up trembling with fury, strode across the room and slapped him hard across the face. Before he had time to recover from the shock, she grabbed his face tightly in both hands and pressed her lips against his.

" I-". She stepped back, blushing with fear and shame; her hands rose to her mouth. Utterly beside herself, she ran out of the studio.

Dinner that night was a peaceful affair, if only because after a short time O'Higgins found himself alone with his son at the table. Judy retired early to her room, pleading a headache. Then Riccardo's friends from Cork showed up and drove him to their place to spend the night . After preliminary attempts at starting a conversation, O'Higgins and son grumbled in ill- natured silence through the rest of the meal. O'Higgins made one comment before shutting up. Apropos of the expected arrival of Deirdre O'Conor and a passel of friends from London the following night, he remarked:" Well, at least she's one woman who knows how to listen when I'm talking to her!"



## Chapter 15

### Hijinks at the Arts Colony

The pall of gloom that had lingered over dinner the night before had not dissipated by breakfast at 9 o'clock the next morning. O'Higgins, oblivious to the frigid silence engulfing protégé and wife, took full advantage of the opportunity to deliver himself of an extraordinary quantity, even for himself, of blarney. Not doubt he wished to lay to rest the last remnants of skepticism concerning the sincerity of his benevolence.

Cloaked in an austere posture of disdain, Oswald, after contributing a few inappropriate comments, maintained a condescending silence which was more than welcome as long as he kept his mouth shut. Riccardo left the breakfast table early. He quickly reached his studio. Inside, he barricaded himself both physically and mentally, submerging his internal commotion by a frenzied show of work.

It may be appropriate here to say a few words about the quality of the painting that Riccardo was able to produce at the Ferdinand O' Higgins Center for the Creative Arts in Ireland. They may aid in dispelling certain indestructible myths which, since they have the authority of centuries, see so much that is positive and so little that is negative in artistic patronage. In the initial period after his installation at Eagle's Nest, Riccardo DeGiorgio produced a large quantity of ink

drawings of middling worth, partly from a sense of obligation to the O'Higginses for subsidizing his "right to work", partly because he had, under more difficult circumstances, contemplated many projects which, in his new freedom, he wanted to realize all at once .

This tidal wave of ambitious yet disorganized activity soon slacked off. As the other members of the O'Higgins household did not begin their day's activities before eleven, Riccardo gradually became habituated to doing the same. The two hour breakfast with Ferdinand O'Higgins which began at 9, educational as it may have been, drained his spirits sufficiently that it took Riccardo an hour or more to recover the energy required for painting. During this interim he might take walks about the countryside, read the newspapers, browse through a novel, even go back to sleep.

Or it might happen that he would make a great show of work, throwing himself with excessive if hollow passion into re-arranging his studio, cleaning brushes, sweeping the floor, or writing letters. It was not unknown , also, that at least part of this time could be wasted sitting on the edge of the cot, rocking slowly back and forth in a state of depression narrowly close , if not quite equivalent to, despair.

After he'd lived at Eagle's Nest two months, it was a rare day indeed in which Riccardo could hope to be ready for work before 2. Uninterrupted he could work steadily until 5; five PM being the time for most people at which the normal workday ends.

Oppressed by the knowledge that that by the end of a conventional work day he could point to only two or three hours of constructive activity Riccardo would frequently become overwhelmed by his sense of failure. The coming-on of evening, coupled with the conviction that his

life was going nowhere, could bring on a nervous depression that hindered him from doing very much until supper at 7, the official dinner time up at the main building on the estate, O'Higgins' prized ranch house.

These occasions, which he felt under an obligation to join, were ordeals several times worse than those of the morning breakfast. Once in awhile Riccardo was able to get out of putting in an appearance, but it would have been evidence of excessive ingratitude had he stayed away for more than a few days in the week. Invariably a day's communion with his own mind had opened up vistas in O'Higgins' master plan for the human race that he'd not realized were in it. Nor was it possible to get back to work after dinner, owing to the intense socializing which began around 9 and went on to midnight and beyond.

The pattern varied from day to day, often considerably, in both positive and negative directions: this is only an indication of what might be considered typical. However it was exceptional when Riccardo was able to achieve more than two hours of creative work in a day. Periodically he felt compelled to run away, heading off to Cork or even Dublin. Though he might linger for a few days in these towns, he always returned, determined to give the Ferdinand O'Higgins Foundation for the Creative Arts in Ireland another chance.

When he wasn't painting he could be thinking about what he intended to do; and it also true that a mere two hours, day after day, of applied creative effort, can bear positive fruit. Riccardo could point to a number of interesting sketches he'd turned out under the patronage of the O'Higginses. Yet even the very best of his work from this period bears the marks of the paralysis by the demoralizing pressures imposed

upon him by his situation: the Gothic family up in the big ranch house, their absurd and predictable games; the near-total isolation from any other form of society; the evening crowd which, with few exceptions, he loathed; his sense of painting to the four walls; the deprivation of his personal sexual needs, not so pressing at that time but certainly, for a foreigner, unsatisfiable in the provincial heartland of Ireland ; his inability to concentrate on what he was doing on account of numerous petty distractions and demands on his energy and time. His painting became spiritless, lifeless, abounding in quick solutions, in facility for its own sake. Everything he did showed a disinclination to undertake any effort, any strain, to commit himself to a substantial message or idea, to put heart and soul into any venture.

Deirdre O'Connor arrived that evening shortly after dinner. Accompanying her were a dozen or so friends from the theatrical merry-go-round of London's West End. Judy Wilcox's life-long training in the art of concealing one's emotions did her real service in this instance, with the result that she fulfilled her obligations as hostess admirably , if with an chilliness that would have been apparent to anyone with tact. Deirdre was quick to make herself right at home; she may have been as tactful as the next person, but she was not going to let it interfere with her larger objective.

Among her friends were a prominent theatre critic, a playwright, the playwright's wife (something of a television personality in her own right), and a minor film star in his 60's, an alcoholic.

Ferdinand conducted them ceremoniously into the parlour where, in the florid rhetoric they'd become accustomed to imbibe from him so often over the years, he introduced them to his one-man

Renaissance, artist-in- residence, Riccardo DeGiorgio. Having gotten the introductions out of the way, they seated themselves on the chairs and couches for a long evening of sloshing of drinks and insipid palaver.

Despite his impressive revolutionary credentials, Riccardo had yet to free himself from his early socialization and rid himself of the tendency of regarding established writers and critics with respect or taking their ideas seriously. It was no doubt because of this lapse in maturity that he committed the blunder of trying to open up a conversation with the prominent critic about things being done in contemporary Italian poets, by authors some of whom he knew personally.

The critic was quick to put him in his place. Not only didn't he know, or want to know, anything about contemporary Italian poetry, he knew next to nothing about poetry, plain and simple; nor was he interested in learning about anything in literature beyond what he was paid to know. Giving Riccardo to understand that shop talk was a bore, he set up a conspiracy with the others to give him the cold shoulder. Thereupon conversation proceeded along the usual lines of the time-consuming exchange of banal courtesies interspersed with a great deal of name-dropping. Many of the celebrities mentioned may in fact have been personal friends of the guests, as if it mattered, although it was not the kind of conversation in which an outsider could gain a foothold or otherwise be made to feel welcome. By 10 PM, unable to stomach it any more, Riccardo fled.

Much to his amazement he was able to get down to work right away. Although O'Higgins had paid for the installation of banks of

shimmering fluorescent lights in the barn, this was the first time that Riccardo actually turned them on. The legs of a collapsible drawing-table were opened up, and a new pot of espresso placed on the burner. Bolts of blue cloth were hurriedly pinned to block up the windows. Preparations made. Riccardo sat down before the table and set to work. Neither the concert of crickets outside his windows, nor the outer world of blackness, nor the absence of snakes, were sufficient to distract him.

He worked uninterrupted for two hours. Shortly after midnight he was disturbed by a sharp knock at the screen door. It was Judy. Her hair and clothing were disheveled, her face streaked with tears. She must have run from the estate to the barn in great haste; her legs were splattered with mud and covered with scratches from grass and thistles.

" Riccardo! - It's me! Judy! Please let me in. I'm terribly sorry about yesterday afternoon. It didn't mean anything! I was upset, Can't you understand? I didn't want to hurt you. I'm so terribly, terribly sorry. I just need to talk to you!"

Adopting a mocking tone, Riccardo ordered her back to the house. If she stepped inside, he said, he would complain to her husband.

"O, Riccardo; if you don't let me in, I'm going to sit here on the steps and cry for the rest of the night! I've got nowhere else to go. I need a friend!"

"It's not a good idea, I think. Remember what happened the last time."

"Why don't we just forget about that? I promise it won't happen again. I'm just a foolish, weak woman, and my whole world is falling apart! Please! Please let me come in! I won't be but a minute!"

He thought about it; he'd done enough work for the time being evening, and welcomed a bit of company. Not unsympathetic to her plight, he could not just let her sit out there in so evident a state of misery. Not without misgivings, Riccardo opened the door and helped her into the studio.

This time she was not play-acting; her distress was genuine and she was in a dreadful state. Riccardo sat her down on the cot and brought her a towel with which to dry her face and legs. She accepted a cigarette and began talking:

"Riccardo: my husband's done something horrible! He slapped me, right in front of all those people!" In a manner reminiscent of Rossetti's Beata Beatrix, she lifted her face to him without bothering to wipe away the tears:

"He's treated me badly before, but never like this!"

Riccardo's response was cynical: "He thought they were show business people, so he gave them a good show. Look, Judy", he went on, not bothering to conceal his irritation, "Why do you always come to me with your problems about your husband? You should have known what you were getting into when you married him."

"Oh, Riccardo - you don't understand at all!" she shook her hair away from her face and stretched out a hand towards him; he backed away, "You probably think he's just an old fool, but really he's not. There are times when he can be wonderful; really wonderful." She emphasized each word, as if to convince herself that they were true.

"He is getting old, it's true. And as he gets older, he becomes more impossible. Then again, I'm not getting any younger." Finally alighting on the only argument that had meaning, she cried, "Oh God!

**I married him! I agreed to stick with him and I'll follow him to the end". She buried her face in her hands once again and sobbed, "but I can't love him! I don't see how anyone in the world can love him!"**

**Riccardo had ceased to listen to her. He leaned over to study her face with a detached contempt; the artist in him had become intrigued by the patterns of light and shade reflecting her particular state of unhappiness. There did exist, he told himself, intellectual justifications for being a homosexual.**

**"Don't you realize, Judy," he began gently, " that all the time you are sitting here with me, this Deirdre O'Connor is up there in the living room, stealing your husband away from you?"**

**This brought her up quickly. She giggled foolishly through her tears. Her face was set hard, and she began to laugh:**

**"Why, Riccardo! There's hardly any danger of that! As if that were the thing that worried me!"**

**He looked at her curiously,**

**"The old bastard", her voice wavered hysterically between a whisper and a shriek, "has been bone dry since the day I married him!" She leaned back and laughed some more, delighted by the impression she imagined she was creating by her astonishing revelation. Clapping Riccardo's face between her hands, she laughed again:**

**"Why, the old motor conked out years before I married him!" Riccardo chuckled slightly; it was tolerably funny after all.**

**"Even that strumpet, Deirdre, couldn't make the blood rise up in him. Why do you think he talks so God-damn much? The normal pathway's been blocked off, and it's got to come out some other way!"**

Riccardo irritation had reached its zenith. He pulled himself away from her, stood up, and began pacing nervously about the room.

"How can I make you understand that this isn't my problem? I've nothing to do with it! If you don't love your husband, get a divorce! That's easy in your country; go back there! If you want to stay with him, then why are you down here with me, rather than up in the house, keeping him away from Deirdre? I came back tonight to do some real work; the first I've been able to do in four months! Why can't you just leave me alone?"

Judy pouted, "Riccardo, don't carry on like that! I'm not asking you for anything. I just want to talk, that's all! Why don't you go back to what you were doing before I showed up to annoy you with my silly problems? Go on; go back to that drawing, and I'll sit here like a good little girl and be quiet. How's that? Shall I put on some more coffee?"

deGiorgio stormed about the room, overwhelmed by his total helplessness, the sheer futility of it all, the months wasted in the O'Higgins art paradise, this insane woman, the utter senselessness of everything that had happened to him since he first set foot in Ireland little more than a year ago. Not only was his career in ruins, it seemed to have somehow found a way to build on its own wreckage, the endless repetition of cycles of hope and failure nurturing the lurid pessimism that permeated his opus.

He squinted at her, lifted his arms in a gesture of annoyance, imagined he was making faces at her; still she would not leave.

Judy had withdrawn to a corner of the couch. She'd removed her shoes and curled her feet up under her. With a steadfast stare she

continued to regard him, embarrassing him with her admiration, astonishing him with her pitiful selfishness.

Riccardo glared at her a final time, then turned away. With the self-conscious air of someone intent on getting down to business, he seated himself once more at his desk and went through the motions of sketching. Judy nodded brightly. With a wave of her hand she let him know that she wanted him to get back to work. A few minutes later she stood up and went over to the stove to pour out a cup of coffee. Then she tip-toed back across the room to lean over Riccardo's shoulder, her eyes glistening with fascination.

Only with difficulty could Riccardo keep up the pretense of application. His lips were set tight while he kept his eyes fixed on the sheet of white paper in front of him. It came almost as a relief when Judy opened the upper buttons of his shirt and pushed her hand down his chest, Riccardo bolted upright, furious with her, bursting all of his shirt buttons as he spun around to face her.

"Riccardo - ". She tried to grab onto his hand; he slapped it away. Excited rather than intimidated by his hostility, she moved her body closer against his. He pushed her away from her with a suggestion of brutality; she stumbled across the room and fell onto the couch. Then he walked over to her and slapped her face. A torrent of fury, built up from the many frustrating months of being cooped up in Eagle's Nest, poured out of him as he slapped her roughly back and forth between his hands. She lay curled up in a tight ball, hunched on the cot, terrified and sobbing, her body trembling, her jet black hair covering her face.

His rage spent, Riccardo's arms dangled helplessly at his sides. One more he sat down next to her and buried his face in his hands. The

room filled anew with silence. Only their heavy, troubled breathing bore witness to the storm that had briefly arisen and passed on.

Timidly Judy pushed aside his hair and lifted her eyes to face his. Without quite knowing what he was doing, his hands began in total silence to unloosen the fastenings on her dress.



## Chapter 16

### With Nothing Resolved...

In early September, just before returning to France and the Continent after a year in Ireland, I made an afternoon call on the Devlins. The opportunity to spend as much time as possible with the two people I'd known in Ireland from whom separation would be truly painful, could not be passed up. They welcomed me into their living-room. There we pulled up chairs beside the large floor-to-ceiling window through which a pallid yet stimulating late summer light streamed onto the threadbare carpet, perching on the sparse furnishings and the chaos of objects pouring out from Bill's studio and spread all over the room.

The principal subject for conversation was a foregone conclusion. All of cultural Dublin was awash in speculation about the circumstances under which Riccardo deGiorgio would also be leaving Ireland, no doubt permanently this time. His flight to New York was scheduled for the following evening, the ticket already pre-purchased by the Irish-American Maecenas, Ferdinand Claremont O'Higgins. The reasons for his abrupt departure were common knowledge, and where there was speculation it was over the details.

And more: it was conjectured, even by reasonable opinion that, despite his pathological attachment to the cause of the rebirth of the Irish Nation, Mr. O'Higgins himself would soon be leaving his adopted homeland; and, on a separate itinerary, his wife as well. Apart from her stated intention to take up residence in some country where divorce was relatively uncomplicated, her destination was unknown.

Oswald O'Higgins would stay behind in Brighton to continue his pursuit of a degree in engineering. Given that O'Higgins had shipped Riccardo di Giorgio off to America, it was very likely (though not entirely inconceivable) that he did not intend to return there himself. England was a more natural candidate.

It was also noted that, within the period under consideration, all sorts of wonderful opportunities appeared to be opening for Deirdre O'Connor! Play scripts, dropping like manna from heaven, were arriving through the mail with amazing frequency. Already she'd signed onto a role (with many photogenic guarantees) in an international co-production to be filmed on location in Spain. For these and other blessings she was properly grateful, as befits any civilized human being, and she is even said to have sent O'Higgins a kiss - by telegram.

I learned about these things, and a host of related details that afternoon from Beatrice Devlin. On this occasion she appeared more animated than she had been in months. As she generously unpacked her store of randomly accumulated rumors for my entertainment, Bill continued working alone on a new metal sculpture, a commission for a public square in Galway, in a shed constructed for that purpose on the fenced-in lawn.

" Judy, you see", Beatrice said, all on fire and with the air of a school-mistress explaining a point in logic, " has been looking for the right man all her life, but she keeps gettin' them *worse and worse* ! . Finally she throws herself into the arms of a man, your Signore deGiorgio, with whom she has *no chance at all!* , if you know what I mean, a *homosexual*, a man who hates women!

"I should know, I had to *put up* with Riccardo staying *here* for a *month!* *Anybody* can see that he's used to using a woman like a *rag!* I assure you, Tom: like some kind of *floor mop!* He'd be in for a big *surprise* , pulling that kind of caper with *me* ! What you have to understand is that a man like that thinks that, when he sleeps with a woman, he *humiliates* her! That's what he did to Judy O'Higgins.

"Why, *yer man* goes right to O'Higgins himself afterwards and tells him the *whole story* , just like *I'm* sittin' here, *talkin'* to you right now, making *her* the *cause* of it all! And even then nothing would have happened, except that , *Deirdre O'Conor* , that *scheming bitch*, was sittin' in the same room, *listening* and taking it all down in her *mind* to use it against *all* of them *later* !

"So now the great Riccardo deGiorgio is back bummin' *on the road* again, poorer' than a church mouse and without a friend in the world, which doesn't surprise *anyone* that *knows* him! It came out *all right* in the end, if you ask me! "

Beatrice looked up, suddenly surprised. Bill, dressed in a white tee-shirt with gray overalls, still wearing his protective helmet and carrying an arc-welder in his right hand, had come in from the front yard and was standing silently in the doorway, listening seriously to what that she was telling me. When he removed the helmet, one saw the

perennial knitted cap that, like a pious Jew entering a synagogue, he wore whenever he worked outdoors. His facial expression left little doubt that Beatrice's commentary was not meeting with his approval:

**"It's wrong, Bea, to speak that way about someone you hardly know at all. His struggle is every bit as hard as ours, even harder in some ways. Before you start judging him as you've been doing, you ought to try living with his problems then see how well you'd deal with them. Riccardo is a talented and dedicated artist, although he may never succeed in finding a place in the world that will allow that talent to take root and to grow. There have been inspired artists like him in every generation, forced to wander their entire lives without ever finding a haven – as if they were weighted down by some – unique treasure which they dare not lose – and which they can never put down to rest, even for a moment.**

**"Artists like myself are luckier, I suppose... We may have to work very hard, put up with lack of recognition, even hostility; but everything comes to us if we wait long enough. I know that Riccardo is good gossip, but I just don't want to hear about it any more!"**

Beatrice stood up silently and went into the kitchen to put on the tea. Bill walked across the room and sat down on a chair next to mine:

**"Keep in touch with us, Tom, wherever you end up. I plan to come over to Holland next year for about a month. If you're still in Europe at that time, we ought to get together. This is my home, I'm afraid. I may find a better living arrangement. Bea and I have been thinking of moving out to Galway, but my guess is that I'm stuck in Ireland for the rest of my life. All the same I do want to travel a bit."**

Beatrice returned holding a tray with cups and plates, tea, soda bread, jam and butter. As she stooped over the table, she paused, turned to face me and said:

“Oh - and there's *something else* I want to say about *your Riccardo*, and that is...”

“Shut up, woman!” Bill swore.

And that would have been the end of it were it not that, scarcely half an hour later, the infamous Riccardo deGiorgio himself put in an unsolicited appearance at the outer fence door! Hearing the bell ring, Beatrice walked outside to open the door.

Her astonishment was scarcely to be imagined. It was one of those rare occasions on which she found herself totally at a loss for words. There Riccardo stood, his balding head exposed to the thin rain descending from a sky that had clouded over only minutes before. His coat was new and he carried a suitcase; a morning newspaper was tucked up under his arm. Beatrice stood aside to let him pass. Recognizing him through the window, Bill merely nodded, then turned to me and said,

“Well; I guess we're right back where we started.”

Then he stood up to go into the kitchen for another cup and plate.

As she followed Riccardo at a short distance through the living-room door, Beatrice cast a surreptitious glance in my direction, as if she were anxiously soliciting my help in a conspiracy against the unwelcome intruder. She had no intention of pretending to be polite to him. Riccardo now appeared to be sorely lacking in that confidence, that mixture of conceit and bluff which he normally assumed when entering anywhere at any time. Something had broken in his swagger. He put

down his suitcase and stood by the wall, as if waiting for Bill's permission to sit down. Bill motioned to a chair and encouraged him to do so.

His stay in the country had not done much to improve his physical appearance. He'd always been chubby, but the combination of rich food and indolence he'd known out in the country as guest of the O'Higginses, had caused him to put on even more weight and increased the number of folds in his face. I had the feeling that the inherent inertia of the flesh had established a new dominance over his frayed ambitions and drive. Still one could see that his body, though shapeless and seemingly inert, held within it an unextinguished store of repressed energy.

It was clear to see that he'd left Eagle's Nest without regrets. Nor was he about to parade any false nostalgia for Ireland, where he'd struggled so hard to lay down roots, yet found nothing but stony places.

Bill returned in a few minutes. He and his wife had always had strong disagreements on the matter of deGiorgio; for his part he was pleased to have the opportunity to for a final talk with him. I myself was neutral on the subject, with sympathy and aversion for him combining in about equal measure. Aversion is perhaps too strong a word. I recognized that his insensitivity was no more than a shield against the world; but that knowledge did not increase the charm of his company. Yet I too was happy to see him once more before leaving.

Finding herself outnumbered, Beatrice muttered something under her breath; both she and her Bill had grown moody in a way they had never been before. Soon afterwards she retired to the kitchen to see what was could be done about dinner.

The dining table had been pushed across the room to the front window. A broad view of the yard revealed that it was, once again, cluttered with the debris and works, finished, unfinished or abandoned, of his circle of friends. Bill poured out tea for all of us. As soon as we were settled in, Riccardo opened the conversation with a few polite comments to the effect that he had never really thanked Bill adequately for helping him out when he first arrived in November of the previous year.

Bill replied that he was sorry that Ireland had not given him the kind of encouragement which he felt he had deserved. The intervening period was filled with small talk, Dublin arts world gossip, the latest news about shared friends and acquaintances. Then Beatrice returned from the kitchen and joined us at the table. She sat silently, neither contributing nor really listening, nodding her head from time to time.

Abruptly, Riccardo shifted the topic of conversation:

"Bill, why did you turn down the Victoria commission?" The manner in which Riccardo spat out his words indicated unmistakable hostility. Beatrice started to rise up with indignation, but Bill indicated that he could deal with this, and replied:

"Riccardo, I've got only one life to live. I'd rather be poor than ashamed of myself; how's that?"

"But Bill, don't you agree with me that the artist is obliged always to live outside the society?" Riccardo's words appeared to come from so dreadful a state of unhappiness, as if he were repeating something which he had learned by heart but which had long since lost all meaning, that even Beatrice softened to him.

**“I don't know. I'm not sure.” Bill replied, turning his decision once more over in his mind, ” but Riccardo: what's that got to do with what we're talking about?”**

**“Aren't you selling yourself cheap? Aren't you compromising your dignity by rejecting that commission? “ Then, as if determined to leave no doubt in anyone's mind that he'd come to pick a fight, he once more changed the subject and said:**

**“Why don't you charge higher prices for your paintings?” Bill stared at him with astonishment:**

**“I really don't know, Riccardo. I charge what I consider an honest price. I don't really see myself as a businessman. I don't want money to be an issue to people who want to be exposed to my work and may get something out of it.”**

**“But Bill - ”, Riccardo glanced in my direction for support. Yet I, too, was at a loss to figure out what he was getting at,**

**” Have you consider the possibility that, by not insisting on getting the highest prices for your paintings, by not constantly taking advantage of every opportunity, honest, or even dishonest, you, in your historical role artist, are being used as a tool by the bourgeoisie?”**

**Beatrice had heard just about all that she intended to take. She stood up, brimming with anger, and interrupted the conversation with a sweeping gesture of exasperation: “Look, Riccardo! You gave us the *idea* that you were just stopping by to make a *social call* before leaving for *America* ! But it really looks like you came by just to *insult* my husband!”**

**With some impatience, Riccardo shook his head, “I am not trying to insult your husband.”**

"Then why're you *asking* him all those *questions*? I've lived with Bill for *three years* now, and I don't see *one good reason* why anybody has the right to call him a *bourgeois tool*! And say, what about *you*, living out there with O'Higgins in County Cork? What's that if you're not being used as a bourgeois tool?"

Riccardo did not take offense:

"I didn't say that. I don't think your husband is a tool of the bourgeoisie. "Then he fell into muttered in a strange manner , almost as if he had fallen into talking to himself, " I've always wondered why he allows himself be exploited as their victim."

Then he went silent, as if he, too, wanted to clarify what he had to say in his own mind. But Bill, who had begun to sense what Riccardo was getting at, exploded:

"Their *victim*?! I know exactly what you mean, Riccardo, but I'm really amazed to hear it coming from you! You're quite wrong if you imagine you're the first person who ever lectured me on how I ought to be spending my days sitting in the Bedlam, buttering up connections, wheeling and dealing to get commissions, rather than wasting my time at home , plugging away like an ox in my own back yard!

"Why, just yesterday, Brendan Casey, whom I don't imagine is any friend of yours, told me that I spend too much time working at my art and not enough time 'benefiting myself', that is to say going out and scrounging up money."

"That's right! ", Beatrice broke in: " It all began with Bill's show at the Open Studio last winter, and all the *jealousy* it aroused , particularly among people who've never *done a thing themselves their whole lives* ! I've heard so much *talk , talk, talk* from people who

ought to *know better* , about how Bill ought to wear a *suit and tie* whenever he goes out, and how he'll never *amount to anything* because he doesn't sell his work in the right galleries at *three times* the prices he charging, just so he can become the *darling* of some *elite* ! I tell you, I'm already sick of hearing about it!"

Riccardo had withdrawn into himself and sat hunched over in his chair, morose and profoundly depressed, his face and body reflecting such spiritual misery that anyone would imagine that his suffering was actually physical in nature. Despite this it appeared that he had no intention of leaving without getting some satisfaction, though evidently slipping further and further away from him.

"Bill, I don't think you understand me. You still don't see what I'm talking about, do you? Let's agree for a start, shall we, that the artist has been a kind of... well, 'martyr'... to society since the Industrial Revolution, say, since the 17th century."

"No; I don't agree. ; not entirely, anyway."

"But you do agree that, in some way, or to some extent, that this is his true situation?"

"All right, for the sake of the argument, but we can talk about it later." And in fact Bill was not being totally honest with himself. For was this not the lesson he had derived from the bitter years of factory labor?

"You admit with me then, that the artist in the modern world is an alien being, an outcast, even a pariah perhaps. He is not welcome in society anywhere, although he is necessary to society. He is accused of not doing any work, of not being productive, because he is not making

any money. He is considered an idler, or a subversive, because he is content just to paint, or write or compose music.

“His only option, if he intends to take himself seriously, is to become a revolutionary. He must always be an enemy of... the official structure... the 'system', or the Establishment. His life is a war, a war against everything that is considered normal: convention; property; respectability; the exploiters; religion and education; the entrepreneurial class ... The enemy is here, there... wherever he turns...

"Therefore the normal restrictions do not apply to him. As long as they relate directly to his art, his message, there are no such things as stealing, cheating, taking advantage. He does wrong only if he fails to use every opportunity to exploit the society for his own purposes.

“He must rid himself of all weaknesses, for any weakness in him will be used against him without the least hesitation. The gallery managers will show him no mercy, nor the critics, nor the art schools, nor the patrons. Therefore you must also have no mercy towards them."

Bill looked at Riccardo with pity. How he talked, and look at his life! No wonder he resented Bill, no wonder Bill found him so difficult to understand.

“I’m afraid, Riccardo”, Bill shook his head, “I still don’t follow with you. On the one hand, you tell me that the ‘bourgeoisie’ is our common enemy. Then you turn around and say that I ought to decorate their hotels and set my prices so high that only they can afford my work."

“But don’t you see?” Riccardo cried, as if desperately pleading to a jury, "That's the whole point!"

**“No; I don't see it at all. I make a decent living from my work. I haven't developed any elaborate theories about my role in society, but I believe that a man deserves an adequate return on his labors. Otherwise I'm much more interested in seeing to it that my work is seen and bought by persons who don't normally have the money to buy art, than I am in carrying some Marxist cross on my back which obliges me to exploit the rich.”**

**As Bill spoke Riccardo's expression became increasingly condescending, and at the same time more rigid:**

**“No Bill. You don't understand: it is impossible for a genuine artist to exploit the rich. It's a contradiction in terms! It is the rich, always, who exploit you! Me! All of us! That's obvious: they never become rich otherwise! It is they who crush true culture, they who are responsible for all these ugly cities and crippled minds. You are not able to exploit them; you can only escape their tyranny!”**

**“Yes, Riccardo. You do have a point, but the trouble with this kind of talk, and I've been hearing it all my life, is that it neglects the effect that this kind of thinking have on the lives and work of the people who advocate it. I don't doubt for a moment that you really are fighting real, injustices, even that the class structure is the true enemy. It may even be true that this ‘class structure’ is more or less the same in Italy, Ireland, even the United States - I doubt it - but even so - what possible satisfaction can you derive from creating works which, by your express intention, can't be understood or appreciated by a clientele which you claim as your sworn enemy, from whom you feel you have the right to demand fabulous prices? On the other hand, if you were to direct your work to a more general public, people who...”**

Riccardo's pose of superior indifference had been stretched to the breaking point. His emotional tension aroused to a fever pitch, overwhelmed by the accumulation of his bitterness and rage, he stood up and shook his fist at Bill. Lapsing into broken English he shouted:

"You! You talk me like this, but everybody in Dublin know your daughter she die because you no have the money to take her to a good doctor and buy for her medicine!" He turned about, taking in with a grand gesture all of Bill's paintings on the wall and sculpture in the yard:

"You trying to pretend you accept the society, the society that kill your own daughter! This society that step all over you, that destroy your family and force you to live in this - 'pig house' while you make it 'masterpieces' for nothing!"

Bill and Beatrice, both profoundly shocked, stared at him as he, completely caught up in his bitter personal turmoil, ranted away at them, totally unaware of the cruelty of his words or the madness of his logic:

" You fools! You are complete fools! You live like this the next forty years and still you be proud of yourselves while...while thousands around the world die of hunger because you not fight for them! You never be a true artist! Never! You never live better than you live today because you accept the society, but the society never accept you! You do everything people expect you to do! You..!"

Throwing himself back into his chair, Riccardo's breakdown was complete. He lowered his head to cover his face with his hands, his body racked with shudders of uncontrollable anguish.

Beatrice was too stunned to reply, but Bill spoke to him in a gentle tone:

“Riccardo, there wasn't anything we could do to save our daughter. No medicine in the world could have prolonged her life. We had enough money then. There were over a thousand pounds in the bank. And you may consider our home a 'pigsty', but we happen to love it; we wouldn't want to live anywhere else. Why have you come here just to hurt us? What have either of us done to deserve this from you?”

Riccardo, broken and defeated, got up, still sobbing but without a word, and moved to the door. Whatever he had hoped to gain from his visit lay in ruins. His hand reached out to the doorknob and he made ready to leave.

Bill, Beatrice and I exchanged glances; it was impossible not to be moved by the wretchedness of this profoundly miserable man. As he was stepping out into the yard, Beatrice called after him:

“Riccardo! Don't go yet; you haven't finished your tea.”

He stood outdoors on the flagstones of the walkway, his back to us, unable to face us. Bill came to the door:

“We all sometimes say things we don't really mean.” Bill said

Riccardo turned to the right, too ashamed to expose his face to scrutiny:

“You don't want me to go, after all the things I've just said to you?”

“Why kid ourselves? It's better in the long run to know what people really think. Sometimes we can talk it through. You're not in any hurry, are you?”

Riccardo gazed around him at the considerable body of reputable work that Bill had already done; at the obvious evidence of the generosity he'd exhibited in helping talented friends, even many whose gifts were more questionable. It came to him forcibly, with what dedication Bill had worked over the last decade, and how little basis in reality there was to treat him as an enemy. Above all he realized, as he had never done before, that he'd been attacking the wrong person. Riccardo turned around and went back into the house.

Yet when he finally entered through the door and came back to the dinner table, Beatrice stood up quickly and walked out of the room. She had in fact invited him back, but she couldn't stand to be near him another minute. Riccardo turned around again once more as if to leave, but Bill again motioned to him and asked him to stay.

Once Riccardo had settled in at the table, Bill left the room for a few minutes to talk to Beatrice; this left me alone with Riccardo. He sat immobilized in a posture of dejection, with his face to the ground and his hands folded. I filled the time leafing through one of Bill's art books. We'd never been more than acquaintances, and there was little I could say to him.

Bill came back again with Beatrice. She'd been crying. Everyone put on a brave show. One could hardly imagine that nascent resentments would be so easily resolved, yet, in the short time remaining for deGiorgio in Dublin, no-one felt inclined to stir the embers once again. Thereby the outward appearance of peace was maintained. After reminding us that we were all to stay for dinner, Beatrice disappeared into the kitchen.

Then Bill, Riccardo and I pulled our chairs up to the window and looked out silently into a clear sky of an early September evening. Each of us sat alone in communion with his private thoughts, anxious to not preserve the fragile aura of tranquility that had temporarily descended upon us. Bill was the first to break the silence:

“Okay, Riccardo. Get it off your chest. I know you didn’t come here this afternoon just to exchange small talk. That’s fine with me. Something’s on your mind and we’d like to hear about it.”

Riccardo leaned back in his chair. Although indicating that I was welcome to listen, he addressed himself primarily to Bill. His tone was bitter and weary. He realized, in a way that few others could understand, that, in the final analysis, he had only himself to blame:

“So, Bill: here you have it. I’m 39 and will soon be 40. I’ve got 20 years of work to my credit, yet with neither reputation, following, nor the shadow of what any reasonable person would call a career. Everywhere I go I stir up trouble; when I leave it is under the cloud of a scandal. Tomorrow I’m traveling to the United States for the first time. Maybe life will be kinder to me there. Let us hope that it is so.

“You must all know the story by now, of the circumstances under which I was forced to leave Holland. Three years before I left Germany because of a situation very similar to the one I’m in today. There too I lived in the house of a wealthy patron, once more there was a scandal with his wife, yet this was even more difficult because the patron was himself a homosexual and assumed that there would be part payment in sexual favors. Well, I don’t need to go into it.

“The reasons for my sudden departure from Rome a decade ago were very different, but one sees in them a similar pattern: an unhappy

love affair, deep suffering of the kind that will make it impossible for me ever to live there again. All the painting done there, some of it original and inspired, a considerable body, was destroyed or lost. In a way I'm relieved: I don't have to worry about promoting it or keeping it in storage.

"Now I can say it without shame, Bill, that I have envied you, even hated you, because you have what I've struggled for all my life to obtain and cannot find: security, a real home, a family of your own, a city, a country, a world where you are content to remain for most or all of your working days. You will always find work, customers; there will be no scandals.

"Such envy is useless, I know; it derives from a misunderstanding, and it poisons the soul. We do not choose our destiny, it is given to us from the beginning, even perhaps before birth. We are permitted to interpret it, and, to the extent possible, to act upon it. But it cannot be changed.

"Were I to honestly search my heart, I would have to be the first to admit that I do not feel any great love for poor people, not of the sort that would incline me to want to give them my paintings for nothing.

"I'm an aristocrat, from a corrupt family that I despise, although I am just like them. It may be my goal to shock and offend the rich, yet I also pay them the tribute of being able to understand what I am doing. In all sincerity, I do not believe that the 'ordinary people' you talk about can ever understand anything I do.

"Maybe you think I am hypocrite. In fact I know I am hypocrite, but this is my background and I cannot rid myself of it. I will always be a painter for the class that I condemn and will never have anything to

say to the people I claim to admire. This is what I have called, 'exploiting the bourgeoisie or 'taking advantage of the upper classes.' As you can see, I am not very good at this job.

"I imagined somehow that maybe I can find - perhaps - something in Ireland that I cannot find in any of the other countries where I have lived. And - you will find this very surprising, certainly - I think I have. I believe that if someone is born in Ireland and is raised here from childhood, he will inherit all the strength, all the wisdom of your thousands of years of history. It is in the air itself, this sense of immense age, so much so that it appears ageless, this insulation against the folly of the moment. At some time in your past everything that could be done was done here.

"Yet for someone who comes as a visitor, as a stranger hoping to find an opportunity, an environment in which to realize a new vision, it must be catastrophe; as it was for me."

Bill nodded slowly in agreement. After a short silence he added a cautious footnote:

"Riccardo, I would like to think that what you've told me wasn't true, but you're absolutely right. Ireland may very well be unique in that respect. Take the hippie phenomenon, the flower children: today you'll find hippies in every other capital in the world, but you won't find them in Dublin. My guess is that the Irish went through that phase a thousand years ago. History is something we tend to take for granted. Ireland can't really change, it can only repeat itself. It explains why no one can understand our way of life without having lived here for a long time.

**"Many nations, of course, do have histories dating back thousands of years. Italy is one of them. You've risen and fallen from greatness several times, and will do so again. In some sense all of Europe is Italian.**

**"Still, apart from the Jews, I don't know of any nation besides Ireland for whom the entire history of three thousand years is immediate present and relevant to life today. Italy has gone through one transformation after another, while we are as rooted to our Celtic-Catholic tradition as we were centuries ago. One can still see the Druids walking among us, you find them in our poetry, our institutions, our ways of thinking.**

**" We thrive on our history, we justify ourselves by it, it almost , though not quite, compensates us for whatever we lack in terms of living standards, progress, industrial development, infra-structure, investment capital, you name it."**

**"This is not without its benefits: In my opinion we're not in any danger of becoming another cultural satellite of the United States. We avoided the Roman Empire, the Reformation and World War II, and we've gone far to avoiding the American Century. Yet this is also our greatest misfortune, in that we're incapable of relating to any other culture or people.**

**"We may be economically dependent, yet we consider ourselves socially self-sufficient. Our traditions are deep and rich, and we instinctively shy away from any admixture from the outside as a kind of pollution. It's difficult for an alien flower to take root and thrive here. We've not got much in common with the rest of Europe, and it's always been that way."**

Riccardo indicated that he did not entirely agree with him. Adopting the pose of someone who claims to be asking a real question which is obviously rhetorical, he mused: " I have always asked myself if the Irish people of today might not be using their history as a crutch, an excuse for blocking social change, as a way of covering up the ugly realities of a backward society."

"You're telling *me* Ireland's backwards", Bill exploded, "Resistance to change is a way of life in this God-forsaken land! Try walking into a pub with a new idea, not even a very original one at that. You'll be called a snob, an elitist. You might even be accused of being a British sympathizer!

"I'm not justifying it, Riccardo. I know my country's been bad to you; I'm just trying to make you see what's behind it. There's a larger context that you won't understand until you've been around for a number of years. Most people are too impatient to wait that long; it's human nature.

"All of our wealth, you see, is vertical, like a sterile desert with rich oil deposits buried underground. Horizontally, we're nothing! We were raped by England for a thousand years. We barely escaped total starvation during the Famine. It's still with us, you know, we haven't recovered from it. I wonder if any nation can survive such a blow. Imagine Biafra in a hundred years. We have barely 3 million people in a land that can hold a good 20 or more. Yet, when young creative talent comes to us from abroad, like yourself, and Tom here, the Irish nation closes ranks against you. It's a tradition with us: our best artists, writers and thinkers were driven into exile.

**“There’s no nation more hospitable than ourselves. But let no-one dare suggest that we should, or even can, change our ancient ways! He’ll be branded a trouble-maker and sent packing! John Huston has spent millions of dollars trying to get a film industry started in Ireland. All wasted. People have tried to get the ball rolling with - you name it - industries, publishing houses, colleges, orchestras, magazines. They’ve all failed. “**

**“Yes”, Riccardo laughed, "even an ass like O'Higgins."**

**“That’s right”, Bill went on, ignoring the insinuation. “Even an ass like O'Higgins. But there're been lots better than him, sincere, intelligent people, who really broke their hearts trying to do something for this land. Joyce fled to the Continent in his twenties, then spent the rest of his life writing about us.**

**“Sean O'Faolain, for Chrissake! Why the man was a mathematician, a linguist, a poet and a novelist! Nobody gave a damn about him while he was living. Or Liam O'Flaherty! Some people whose opinion I respect call him the greatest living Irish writer. Sometimes you can find him sitting in the Bedlam at night, drunk as the rest of them. Half his books are out of print; no library, publisher or university ever bothered to collect them. The bookstores don't carry more than a few reprinted paperbacks. What most people call respect for tradition here is just the cover up for neglect and indifference.**

**“But Riccardo, tradition and history aren't quite the same thing. A man like Joyce might have been suffocated by the dark, Irish mind , yet he drew his very breath from the substance of our history. You can spend your whole life studying it and just scratch the surface: it's immense. I'm sure it’s impossible for any outsider to understand how a**

nation as backward, impoverished, under populated and out of touch with the world as we are, can still be content to remain as it is."

Riccardo indicated that he'd also thought along these lines:

"It's something I'm constantly turning over in my mind.", he said, "Whether there is any hope for someone like myself, who, although he comes from a nation also rich in history, finds nothing in that history to give him support, something he can call his own. My family, Bill, is a relic, a leftover from a long-vanished past clinging to the modern world. It exists by the invention of a false necessity for itself. Whenever it can, it shields its illusions with money. Even when there is no money, and we have many poor relations, there is always the same childish hypocrisy, which I grew up under, and which I began detesting from the moment I could think for myself.

"I am of no community; I belong to no social class; I have no real friends; I look with unfeigned envy on anyone who can maintain an easy relationship with others: a grocer, a policeman, a sailor: anyone who belongs to the life of the world. Unable to take refuge in social relations, I have taken refuge in literature. Beyond that, I have the sanctuary of my own mind and the legitimacy of my talent. If I could not paint, I am sure I would go mad. Painting is all that connects me with the external world."

It was getting late. Beatrice announced that dinner was ready. Later that Bill, Riccardo and I repaired to Philby's where we continued our conversation. Beatrice begged off, pleading fatigue, though it was obvious that she would under no circumstances allow herself to be seen with Riccardo in public.

We walked Riccardo to his hotel; afterwards Bill walked with me back to his house via the long route going along the Canal. Somehow we could not rid ourselves of the feeling of astonishment before the infinite diversity of lives , how some are passed in despair, others in loneliness, poverty, or heroism, even martyrdom, how no-one stands in a privileged position to anyone else, or had the right to cast judgment on another's suffering. We all come into the world differently, and for a different purpose.

Back once more at the house, Bill, Beatrice and I stayed up talking until 3 in the morning. Even then we were reluctant to part; but I still had a long distance to walk. They saw me to the door. It was arranged that we would meet at least once again, later in the week before I left. Then I set out alone on the Canal in the direction of Rathmines. My heart had never been light in Ireland, but now perhaps I could afford to smile. It really did appear, for a brief moment, as if human fellowship had been able to surmount all but the most extreme physical misery and disappointment.

