

EAMONN LENIHAN

Power & Perdition



a nobetterman book

For:

*Michelle; Nick, Paul, Donal; Ned & Aggie -
who've helped me muddle through...*

This edition, 2015

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AVAILABLE ONLINE & IN STORE

Youth is wasted on the young...

George Bernard Shaw

ONE

Comfortable family homes lay to one side; industrial units, to the other; and wedged in between, a modest block that was frequented by singletons. It stood five floors above the houses and the factories, ugly-brown for the most part and defective since day one; strategically positioned - as if the centre of this universe, or a focal point at least - slap bang in the middle of one of the individual apartments.

The wooden *Cantrell & Cochrane* crate John Power had acquired while slaving away in the residents' bar of *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* the previous dead loss of a summer wasn't much to look at either. But - 24" x 9" x 7" - it housed his considerable collection of vintage 45s snug as a bug. And, if stood on end, it also made an ideal occasional table. Right now, it was stood on end in front of the gas-heater.

Power had lugged the heater, a bog-standard one on castors - the focal point - up four flights of stairs. This unexpected gift came with a mother who talked her way into the flat that day he left home. Power's father - dead-set against the move from the word go, *particularly* since it involved a flat-share with someone like Mulligan - came no closer than the car park adjacent to the building. It was as though the kerbside he'd reversed his clapped-out *BMW i3* up to represented an invisible border; was an implied demarcation between his son's dull-as-ditchwater present and potentially exhilarating future; an unspoken division - if you like - between the old, established order and the new. To reinforce the implication that his work was done that day of the move, Power's dad had averted his gaze and folded his arms across his chest before suggesting, *Why don't you ask your new flat-mate to help you?*

The new flatmate was an old pal from Uni. Power

suspected he should never have revealed any details about Mulligan to his parents: a Lothario, who'd been expelled following an incident involving his School Principal's 15-year-old daughter; a *dilettante*, who fancied himself a painter; a criminal, who'd spent a night in the cells, drunk and *incapable*; and an impudent scut, who, when charged with riding a bicycle without a light after dark, had made a postal plea of *guilty but insane*.

So, after completing the third run from A to B, Power's father fiddled with the car-stereo. He fiddled for seven long minutes while his wife, son and daughter emptied the last of the car-boot's contents onto the pavement, viz. the minimum of blankets and bed linen; one suitcase of winter clothing; an *outrageously* expensive hi-fi system, recently purchased with income earned slaving away at *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* during the previous dead loss of a summer; one aluminium flight case containing rare vinyl albums for said hi-fi system; unlabelled cardboard boxes crammed with a mix of musty paperbacks, shoes (2 pairs of), kitchen utensils, perishable foodstuffs and toiletries; a second-hand armchair that his parents had long ago earmarked for the local dump; plus the aforementioned *Cantrell & Cochrane* crate and gas-heater.

Typically, Mulligan was nowhere to be seen that morning; nor that afternoon, when a van delivered two new single divans. Power would learn that Mulligan's absences would often correspond with instances of moving heavy objects up four flights of stairs, or moments when essential financial contributions were urgently required.

Atypically, Mulligan was first up this morning. Power listened to Mulligan pull a second pullover on over the one he'd slept in, shuffle out of the room in his bare feet, and make the usual piddling, flushing, brushing-of-teeth and running-of-water noises one associates with the bathroom. On his return, Mulligan picked his grey crombie off the wardrobe floor. He let out an unenthusiastic *Yippee!* when he found, in one of the pockets of his overcoat, the complimentary box of matches *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* gave punters each time they purchased an e-cigar (a weak joke that had become a strong tradition). Mulligan pulled

on a panatela, struck a match, lit the gas-heater's pilot-light and dragged the *Cantrell & Cochrane* crate closer to the flame.

What flame that fluttered.

The bedsit didn't have solar-powered radiators; nor a heat recovery system. Instead, its builders had installed "revolutionary" sub-floor heating. After receiving his first bill, Power dispensed with the, albeit revolutionary, concept.

"I'd say we need a new bottle of gas," Power muttered from inside his sleeping bag.

"Oh, you're up at last, then?"

"I've been awake for ages." Power uncovered his face.

"A likely story."

Mulligan picked a fork up off the unvarnished floorboards - one of Power's forks as a matter of fact, part of a set with black plastic handles which he'd been given after amassing 1000 bar-coded loyalty points at *Moneysworth*[®] superstore - pronged a slice of Power's medium-sliced white pan to it, balanced the fork on the crate, close to the flame.

What flame that fluttered.

"Whose turn is it?"

"To do what?"

"To buy gas."

It was Mulligan's turn. He'd only once before visited the deaf old biddy who sold bottles of butane and 10 kilo bags of wood-pellets from an outhouse in her back garden. Power's discomfort came back in a flash: the trek down the hill with the empty bottle; the inevitable exchange of obvious pleasantries complicated by the woman's inability to hear the simplest, most plainly-spoken words properly; her slow fumbling with the padlock before unlocking and loosening the chain that bound the bottles together; his deliberate counting of the coins into her gnarled hand; his trudging back up the hill with a full bottle; the Herculean struggle up four flights of stairs.

It had to be Mulligan's turn. But today was a Wednesday. Power knew Mulligan would have no money for forty-eight hours.

"Would you like a small loan?"

"Why?"

"To buy gas."

"Oh," Mulligan feigned astonishment. "Is it my turn again already?"

He sat aloof, imperious almost, in the bedsit's only armchair. The Rotten Red Armchair, Power called it. They'd have thrown it out long ago if they could have afforded another.

"So," Mulligan said, evidently drawing a veil over the business of essential fuel purchase. "Do you know the seven wonders of the world or not?"

"Of course I do."

Power scratched two nail-bitten fingers on a stubbly chin.

"Then out with them, lad," Mulligan said. He'd left an eBook lying on the unvarnished floorboards. Now he stretched for it with his right big toe; side-footed the e-reading device back to within arm's reach; resigned himself to having to bend down; groaned as he did so; and then expertly typed in his log-on password.

"Stonehenge," Power said uncertainly.

"I'd have thought that was a mystery rather than a wonder."

"Can't it be both?"

"Fine by me."

"The Great Wall Of China."

"As seen from Outer Space."

"By astronauts?"

"Of course. Who else would be loitering in Outer Space?"

"I don't believe that for a minute. Unless of course the Apollo team were about to re-enter the Earth's atmosphere and one of them remarked *Over there, that thing like a caterpillar, isn't that The Great Wall Of China?*"

"Who's to say that's not what happened? Do go on."

"The catacombs," Power said. "In Egypt."

"Under Egypt, surely?"

"Under *Alexandria*, if you want to be precise."

"Why not be precise?"

"The Coliseum."

"In Rome?"

"*Naturellement.*"

"Surely you mean *naturalmente*?" Mulligan said.

"*Naturalmente*, then. The porcelain tower at Nanking."

"An interesting choice. That's five."

"You require all seven, do you?"

"*Naturalmente.*"

Power sat up in his sleeping bag and gazed through the window that provided a perspective on the world outside. He examined the dormer bungalows that were arranged in neat little rows in the foreground, with their uPVC porches and smoke that elegantly drifted from less-than-elegant redbrick chimneys. He surveyed the mountains and green fields in the distance, the mud flats in the estuary.

As if inspired, he said, "The leaning tower of Pisa."

"Not a wonder much longer, I gather."

"Why's that?"

"Apparently," Mulligan said, "it's due to topple any day."

"*Any day*?"

"Yes, *any day*. The degree of lean has been deemed too dangerous to let tourists inside."

"And after travelling all that way, dear me," Power tut-tutted. "But it still qualifies as a wonder?"

"For the time being."

"That's six, so. Which brings me to - " Power rasped a vibrato fanfare through cupped hands, hands that were blue with the cold, " - the mosque of San Sofia at Istanbul."

Mulligan met Power's self-satisfied grin with one of his own.

"Did you say Istanbul?"

"Yes. Constantinople, if you prefer."

"I'm very sorry, I must accept your first answer."

"You sneak!"

"*Naturalmente.*"

Victorious, Mulligan leaned across to take the bread he'd toasted in the gas-heater's meagre flame.

"You certainly know your wonders of the world, though," he conceded.

"I get by. Making tea, then?"

"Go away out of that!"

"Fair's fair. You know the rules."

"Only too well." Mulligan buttered a slice of bread with one of Power's knives (another part of the set with black plastic handles obtained after amassing loyalty points at the *Moneysworth*[®] chain of superstores). "A correct answer entitles the respondent to a pot of tea. An incorrect one doesn't."

"Istanbul, Constantinople," Power moaned. "You're splitting hairs and you know it."

"As question master and adjudicator," Mulligan insisted, "hair-splitting is my privilege." He munched on the toast. "But I'm in a magnanimous mood this morning. Bear in mind the cup I'm about to make for you is an admission of nothing."

Mulligan traipsed into the kitchen to fill the kettle. Power's kettle: stainless steel, the element in urgent need of de-scaling. Gushing water and gurgling pipes suggested Mulligan was wasting no time in the filling - through the spout, no doubt. And after stretching its cable: Mulligan never once bothered to unplug the kettle's mains lead from the wall.

Meanwhile, Power - now standing in his sleeping bag - bunny-hopped to the window and had another look outside.

"Not much going on out there."

"Where?" said Mulligan, returning from the kitchen.

"Below."

"Obviously."

"I'd say it'll rain."

Mulligan advanced to the window.

"Of course it will," he said. "It always does for a finish."

Mulligan leaned his elbows on the window sill, rested his face on the palms of his hands. He ruminated. Frowned.

"God help them," he said. "Two-year-old cars with three years to pay... Five-year-old houses with twenty years to pay... Ten-year-old marriages with -"

"A lifetime to pay, I know."

They looked out a while longer, Power from a standing

position in his sleeping bag, Mulligan from the window sill.

"What's it all for, I wonder?"

"Hell if I know," Power agreed. "Kettle's boiling."

Mulligan returned to the kitchen. A *cosy* kitchen: if the Corporation allowed pets on the premises, and if you felt the absolute need to swing a cat, well, this wasn't the place to be doing the swinging.

Power, meanwhile, slithered out of his sleeping bag. He jumped into a pair of black trousers that had been draped over Mulligan's easel the previous evening. Deciding to leave his dirty string-vest on - *who'd see it?* - Power buttoned up an un-ironed black cotton shirt over it. He didn't complete the ensemble with a tie - Power drew the line at wearing ties.

He switched the clock radio on. *His* clock radio, since it was something Lena had ordered for him from the *Revolt Into Style* website. A jolly station ident jingle piped *Radio Too, too good to be trooo* back at him. It struck Power as absurd, that someone should have taken up a commission to compose those couple of bars of music, book a session in a recording studio, and then impatiently wheedle a group of performers with a baton: *once more - from the top!*

Radio Too was licensed to broadcast advertising capped at 13 minutes per hour, and - evidently - fill the rest of its air-time with cheaply-made programming that was low on imagination and variety. According to unconfirmed reports, it was owned by a struggling global media franchise that operated 97 radio stations across Ireland, the UK, and mainland Europe. The word on the street was that it was about to be taken over by a conglomerate which currently owned 226 radio stations across the UK, mainland Europe, and the Far East.

The noon Angelus bell pealed. Solemnly. That the midday Angelus was still aired on Irish radio was nothing short of a miracle: ironically, it was continued at the insistence of foreign owners seemingly unaware that, these times, less than 11% of the Irish population regularly attended mass on Sundays.

Every time Power heard the Angelus on the radio, he wondered the same idle thought: is that a recording?

Absolutely, he was thinking now. Briefly, he entertained the roguish hope that the digital file would crash in mid-bong. The news came on. An hourly catalogue of shutdowns, job layoffs, robberies, bombings, and (leaked) statements on the North was impeccably delivered by an impassive voice. The announcer's tone brightened somewhat for an item - hardly news - concerning a "singing" poodle. The weather forecast (*mild at first, squally showers later*) was followed by a jocular, *vitally* important voice-over that posed the life-or-death question: *Thinking of buying a car?*

"No," Power addressed the clock radio. "I am not."

Mulligan re-entered with the tea.

"They work far better on the Internet," Power said.

"What do?"

"Car commercials."

"Indeed."

Mulligan had a lifetime subscription to the Internet: an encrypted, bootlegged account that was, for now, wirelessly connected to Power's 42" *Ocular Vision*[™] screen. Needless to say, the annual *online entertainment* government levy had not yet been paid.

Reverentially, Mulligan handed Power his *Dennis The Menace* mug.

"Did you squeeze the bag?"

"You really don't need to ask."

Mulligan placed his own mug on the gas-heater, retrieved his eBook, sunk into The Rotten Red Armchair.

"Aren't you going to shave?" he asked without looking up.

"I suppose so," Power agreed.

"Any idea what it's for?"

"No," Power admitted. "I didn't think you were that interested."

"I'm not," said Mulligan. "But remember: work is dignity."

"I'll try to keep that in mind."

Power didn't want to work. But since he hadn't made sufficient contributions to apply for unemployment benefit, Power had signed for unemployment *assistance*.

And - like Mulligan - he was waiting to be assessed by someone from the Claims Section division of Employment Services. Mulligan - who'd signed on one working day before Power - had already applied for the maximum rent allowance for the flat. This was a mischievous move: the bedsit was actually in Power's name. Power fretted that, if word of the 50/50 apportionment of the rent got back to the Corporation, he might be charged with sub-letting. So when he signed on after his seasonal work at *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* had come to an abrupt but not unexpected end, Power furnished his parent's address on the Employment Services' e-application form. He realised this would adversely affect his assessment - once it was finally determined - knew it would cost him a Euro or two. But there was nothing else to be done.

"What time's the interview?"

"Twelve forty-five."

"Hmmn..." Mulligan reflected. "A quick fifteen minutes before lunch."

"Is that a good sign or a bad sign?"

"Depends. Is this fifteen-minute block a formality, confirming your suitability? Or is it an opportunity to prove you're sharper than your résumé suggests?"

"I don't like either of those scenarios."

"These things usually run late," Mulligan surmised, sipping tea. "They'll have a good few applicants to screen. You may only get five minutes."

"Five minutes, four - that's fine. I can make the wrong impression immediately."

"Then get your act together!"

Getting your act together was all about getting the lie out there. Take tourism. More and more fishermen visited from Germany and France, even though our lakes and rivers had never been so polluted. And those many golfers who converged on the expanding chain of 18-hole courses, spas and luxury hotels were happy to discuss the quality of the putting surface but never once mentioned the developers' destruction of another peatland ecosystem.

"Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes," Mulligan advised. "Ask yourself what sort of qualities he or she may

be seeking."

"It would help if I knew what the job was!"

"You will soon enough. Besides," said Mulligan, "I'm sure you could do with a bit extra. To tide you over."

Power was certainly strapped for cash. And he wished to buy a wireless *Far & Wide*[™] speaker system (*at 0% finance, subject to availability, minimum deposit required and the usual terms and conditions*). Such a unit could be controlled from the - relative - comfort of The Rotten Red Armchair; or anywhere, for that matter.

But starting another job quite so soon after finishing up the other? He'd have much preferred Mulligan to go out and earn his fair share, for a change.

"Tell me," said Power. "How is it you weren't emailed a reminder? You are registered, I take it?"

"You know that I have to be. In order to claim dole."

Still. Power was only being called for an interview. Nothing concrete had been offered. No *actual* job.

"Here's a helpful tip: try to establish something you and the interviewer have in common," said Mulligan. "Don't be afraid to ask questions, show an interest in the company. And if all else fails..."

"Yes?"

"...Bring the conversation round to the wonders of the world."

TWO

"Jesus wept! Look at you, with half *The Banner* plastered to your face!"

The Banner was once a family-run newspaper, published locally in Co. Clare. After being bought lock, stock and barrel by the son of a Chinese billionaire, it was distributed free to retail outlets and budget airline operators in the locality. A minor online presence helped it turn in a small profit.

"I cut myself shaving," Power said.

"What with, a machete?"

Paddy from Cork put down a spanner, wiped an oily knuckle on his blue boiler suit. He left the bonnet of the *Tesla Roadstar* up.

"Seriously, Head, how's it going?"

Head: that was a new one on Power. He supposed Paddy wasn't one to expend energy on remembering the names of every Tom, Dick or Harry he passed the time of day with.

"Not bad, Paddy, not bad at all."

"Step into my office."

Paddy gestured towards a rolled-up roller door that led into one of fifteen garages located outside the front of the flats. Long ago, these were for the exclusive use of residents; nowadays they were rented out to clientele like Paddy.

"You're all dressed up like a dog's dinner."

Paddy, who sported a straggly ginger beard and hair down his neck, favoured a more casual look.

"I've a job interview."

"I didn't think you were on the way to your First Communion," said Paddy. "Anything interesting lined up?"

"I don't know yet. I was called."

"Called?" Paddy frowned, contemplated, smiled. "By Employment Services?"

"Employment Services, Manpower, The Job Centre, The

Dole Office, whatever the hell they're called these days."

"I'm sorry I spoke," Paddy chuckled. "But you do look a sight, Head."

Power wore a pair of tan leather brogues; dark drainpipe trousers that ended suddenly above the sock-line; a check sports jacket that pinched under the armpits; black shirt, no tie - Power drew the line at wearing ties.

"Can't talk now, Paddy, I'm pushed for time."

"Sure those things always run late. When are they seeing you?"

"Twelve forty-five."

Paddy made some mental calculations.

"That'll make you the last man before lunch."

"Is that good or bad, Paddy?"

"Twelve forty-five, what's that in English? A quarter to one." Paddy glanced at the watch on his left wrist. A digital effort, chunky strap: been passed down from his paternal grandfather. "Five and twenty-to now. Sure you're grand - you've only a few yards to walk."

Which was true. Should Power happen to stare from the front landing of his flat, he'd see bay after bay of industrial estate, jagged warehouse roofs protruding like lines of *Toblerone* chocolate along the horizon.

They both stared out at the rain that had begun to fall.

"A day for the sub-floor heating," Paddy concluded.

Power ambled to the front of the *Roadstar*, peered under the bonnet, formed an intelligent expression.

Finally, Paddy asked him if he knew anything about electric cars.

"Not really," Power admitted. "A bit before my time."

"Their days were numbered once the *issues* with hydrogen cars were ironed out. Most drivers prefer visiting filling stations to plugging in at home," he said. "Anyway, I reckon the original battery is no longer holding a charge and I'm having trouble sourcing a replacement."

"Golly gee! They weren't small back then." Power examined what he presumed to be the car's lithium battery. "And what else have you been up to?"

"Just before you arrived, I was greasing a nipple."

"In broad daylight?" Power scratched his unruly mop of

hair, hair he never bothered running a comb through. "To what purpose?"

"Simple. This car is a wreck - "

"I can see that."

"I picked it up cheap," Paddy said. "For €750."

"Go on."

"I plan to strip it down, recondition the engine, give the bodywork a facelift, and then sell her for a hefty profit."

"I wish you luck."

Paddy chuckled, "You're the one who needs the luck."

Power observed the kettle, the toaster, the mini-refrigerator in one corner of the garage.

"Do you work yourself, Paddy?"

"No, I am not gainfully employed, at present." He withdrew a packet of e-cigarettes from the chest pocket of his boiler suit. "I'm between jobs. Officially."

Paddy opened the pack, counted. Two cartridges left. He proffered.

"Thanks, Paddy, but I don't smoke. And if I did, I wouldn't touch *that* brand."

"Life is short, Head. If you're going to die, you're going to die." He puffed, wheezed. "Also, I rent a small allotment. For the early potatoes, the rotation of a few organic vegetables, and so on."

"Good man yourself."

"A seaweed mulch is great for lazy beds. No digging involved," Paddy smiled. "Can't you skip the appointment?"

"And have my dole cut?"

Again Paddy chuckled, more heartily this time.

"For not showing up to an interview? Head, you'll not even be missed. There'll be hundreds of them over there."

"Hundreds, you say?" Power considered. "But what if it's something good?"

"Something good will have been filled already."

Power understood that much. Graduates, or people with relevant résumés, snapped up the top few positions, those boasting *attractive benefits* or *remuneration commensurate to experience*. Power wasn't even sure he wanted the pressure of holding down a job where

remuneration was *commensurate to experience*. For the time being, the dole seemed the most prudent option, a chance to weigh up his options; even if it did mean confronting Mulligan over the finer points of the rent allowance.

"Head, I'm about to set off in the opposite direction. Allow me to buy you a pint. And all you'll have to do, in return, is pretend to listen to what I say."

Power didn't appear to be listening now.

"Paddy, when did you move away from your parents?"

Paddy stroked his straggly ginger beard in the act of remembering.

"As soon as I was able, Head."

"Then you'll understand. If I don't get a job soon, I won't have enough to cover the rent. And moving back home isn't an option."

"Is that all?" Paddy reached across with his right hand to scratch under the left shoulder of his shirt-collar. "Can't you be like the rest of us and get a loan from the Credit Union?"

"I don't like falling into debt. Anyway, if I wanted something to borrow, I could always ask the sister - "

"There's your solution: end of story. Come on, Head! My shout."

"Another time, Paddy."

"Suit yourself. But if you change your mind, I'll be stopping there for an hour."

Power could have a pint. Or he could do without. The truth was, he wasn't pushed either way.

THREE

Jobs for people, people for jobs.

"Love the slogan," Power had said to the taller of the two men; him with the fine head of hair: distinguished grey, *Brylcreemed* back in gentle waves. Did the man sport a blue, mauve, yellow, red or green rosette on his lapel? Braving the wind and rain some weeks on, Power couldn't recall. The only thing that sprang to mind was this: he was glad to be one of the 47% - *The Don't Knows* and *The Don't Cares* - who hadn't bothered themselves on Election Day.

Power upturned the collar of his check sports jacket, avoided - first - a puddle on the pavement and - then - the tsunami created by a car that trundled through a nearby pot-hole.

That evening, someone on the landing had muttered, *Bell's probably banjaxed* as, safe and sound on the other side of the door, Mulligan and Power supped tea, looked out at the dormer bungalows being lashed by the rain, and exchanged glances which insinuated: who would want to speak to us on such a foul night? Power's immediate suspicion was that the callers were Scientologists. Then he suspected it might - at last! - be the man from the Corporation, here to inspect the fungus on the ceiling. (Everyone still referred to the private company that handled the region's rental accommodation as "The Corporation" even though, a couple of decades back, the Corporation, *per se*, had been dissolved and had its entire residential property portfolio bought out by a German developer).

The inevitable knock had followed, a confident one, let it be said, and Power had risen from The Rotten Red

Armchair to be confronted by the aforementioned men with matching rosettes. No introductions were necessary but Power got them anyway. And then promptly forgot them. The taller of the two canvassers - it being election time - offered his hand; Power maintained his grip on the door-handle. Undeterred, the smaller, heavier-set man placed a leaflet in Power's free hand.

"Some reading matter for you," he said, with what seemed like a mixture of shame and boredom.

Not today, thank you is what Power wished he'd said. In actuality, he'd remained silent. Power had even relaxed his grip on the door as he gawked at the candidate's profile: factory worker, shop steward, entrepreneur, sportsman, community activist, family man, fervent environmentalist, *teetotaler*. The head-and-shoulder photograph that took up a good deal of the A5 page was dominated by the man's combed-back coiffure: a series of small undulations which brought to mind the incoming tide on a calm day in West Clare.

Thanks to clever lighting, shading, cropping - the usual tricks of the trade - the photograph flattered. In the flesh, the man's face was fatter about the jowls; drifts of dandruff had settled on the shoulders; the eyes were quick and cunning; the lips, deceitfully thin, cruel even.

Power had re-examined the string of words printed, in bold, below the photograph: *Jobs for people, people for jobs*.

And he'd suddenly found himself saying, "I haven't a job." Power had been absolutely frank: his summer stint slaving away at *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* had just come to a sudden but nonetheless expected end. The men on his doorstep weren't to know that Power wasn't *that* upset, that Power didn't just accept this to be the normal course of events when the dead loss of a summer was officially deemed over. They had no way of knowing that Power was *happy* to get the old heave-ho, once he'd obtained a trumped-up reference on letter-headed stationery, the written confirmation of his full-time employment on a permanent basis which the pen-pushers and paper-shufflers in the Housing Section required from prospective

tenants before a key and a rent-book were handed over.

"I'm very sorry to hear that," is what the man with the wavy hair had mumbled back. "You should be in a good position to understand why I've opted to make unemployment one of my key campaign issues."

Power *had* understood: hadn't he regarded the man and his campaign manager/blood relative with deep misgiving?

"So I can count on your *Number 1* on election day?"

"Not unless I register to vote in the meantime."

Before moving on to someone who could actually vote for him, the man had delivered a parting shot: *Good luck with the job hunting.*

But in order to hunt, one had to have a vague idea what your quarry was; and where to start looking. Since dropping out of university - or rather, since *formally intermitting*, because Power had the option of completing his final year some time in the future - since *formally intermitting* more than 14 months ago, Power had only the one minor success story to relate. And working in the bar of *The Corcu Baiscind Hotel* didn't really count: his Auntie Rose Kennedy had landed him the position.

Power supposed that, right now, strolling along in the wind and the rain, he was on the hunt. He didn't know which *particular* job he was hunting but - as Mulligan had so rightly pointed out - he'd find out soon enough.

After entering a prefab building like many another in Bay B-7 and the vicinity, Power clambered up a cast-iron spiral staircase. He shook the rain from his more unruly than ever mop of hair, blundered along a corridor that brought him a few steps closer to his prey. Power pushed a door marked *Pull* - the multitudes inside would have him written off already - before gripping the handle, pulling it, wiping his feet on a mat that urged *Please Wipe Your Feet*, and entering with an exaggerated swagger. The room inside was hot; the revolutionary sub-floor heating must have been set to high. Looking round for somebody who might provide assistance, Power allowed his gaze to settle

on a woman who was crouched over a computer keyboard. She wore a cream blouse with a frilly collar, the type of outfit you'd only wear to work - something to please the boss, rather than yourself. Power passed further judgement as he approached the woman: late 30s, a mother working part-time. She - the decent, law-abiding wage-earner - was separated safe and sound from the delinquents on the dole by a waist-high counter-top.

Eventually she looked up.

"Can I help you?" she asked without interest.

Her lips were made up prim and proper; her spectacles, sky blue designer frames, mid-price range.

"I hope so," Power laughed.

The woman didn't.

"Are you here to be interviewed?"

Power nodded. The woman pointed.

"Swipe your I.D. card there."

Power patted and fumbled within his pockets before producing the laminated card that contained personal particulars like date-of-birth, current address, next-of-kin, criminal record (if any), organ donor consent, blood group, allergies, work history (if any), current tax free allowances and bands, social welfare number and the like. He placed the card's magnetic strip under a beam, tapped in his 4-digit security code.

The woman rose from her swivel chair and teetered on high heels. As she bent on her haunches to open the bottom drawer of a filing cabinet, her black mini rode up her thighs. They were plump. Power liked the look of her fingers, though. Right now, two slender fingers on her right hand glided along reams of dog-eared files. These very same digits - at once understanding the absolute futility - had probably attached the message in the email advising Power of his interview. In due course - all going well - they'd be responsible for typing his *We regret to inform you...* letter.

At last the busy fingers came to a halt. A disdainful pairing of thumb and forefinger removed a single dossier from the drawer and flipped it open. Power spotted, among the various A4 sheets, an upside-down facsimile of his

registration form, and remembered how he'd written *Anything considered, providing it's legal* in the *Positions Desired* section.

"I'm surprised you still use paper," he said, in attempt to make small talk.

"A legal requirement," the woman replied, retrieving another sheet from her desk. She ticked a box, folded away the file, and - for added dramatic effect - pushed the frame of her spectacles back up the bridge of her nose with the middle finger of her left hand.

"So," the woman pressed her advantage of being in the dominant position, "John. Your appointment is for 12:45."

"Yes."

The clock on the wall read ten minutes to one.

"You're a little late." She threw in a silly little smile, to soften the accusation. "We're running late ourselves."

"I see." Power threw in a silly little smile of his own. "How late?"

"Those gentlemen are before you."

Power turned his head to find, not hundreds in the room, stuffed like sardines in a tin, but three other applicants: beached whales stranded on a remote atoll.

"Would you like to take a seat? We'll not keep you waiting too long."

Power took a seat. It was plastic, lurid yellow, and uncomfortable. But compared to The Rotten Red Armchair, it was a joy. Sizing up his rivals for unemployment (he assumed that, like himself, they were here for appearance's sake only), Power perceived an immediate disadvantage. The other interviewees were wearing jeans; Power - though he'd never donned a tie, not even to a christening, wedding or funeral - felt overdressed.

The New Romantic Of The Dole Queue had a coffee table at his disposal, and the magazines strewn upon it. He reached across without getting up, plumped for an old copy of *National Geographic*, reclined in his chair, crossed his legs and perused.

At school, Geography had been one of his better subjects. Power could spot a drumlin a mile off. Knew a thing or two about convection fog, transhumance,

limestone features, linear settlements. For all the good it did him. Why couldn't he have excelled at something of practical use, like Advanced Programming, Food Science, Genetics, Macro Economics, Maths, or Woodwork?

Power knew that, with change happening so fast, should he be considered for employment, the most useful things still remembered from school were likely to be obsolete, in any case. He lingered over an article about the depletion of the Amazonian rain forests, and the sterling efforts a global media conglomerate was making - or at least *making known* - to right some of the wrongs. The photos were striking, but Power couldn't concentrate. None of the text sunk in. The journalist's efforts couldn't be faulted - there was a time and a place for reading this sort of thing: at home, at the end of a stimulating day, sipping a hot brandy with the shoes kicked off. Here, in reception - and at this hour - Power required a humorous distraction. Putting the copy of *National Geographic* back where he found it, a quick look confirmed his suspicions: no comics.

None of the others were reading. The three were in a line staring gloomily ahead, slouching back in their yellow plastic chairs. Arms stoically folded like members of a sporting team sitting for a portrait, one of the illiterates bore a hedgehog-like hairstyle. Another modelled a ridiculously tight skinhead cut, with an entirely shaved circular patch that accommodated a graphic tattoo. Understanding this wasn't so much a haircut as self-mutilation, Power put himself in the interviewer's shoes: who in their right mind would offer such a man a job?

The job, he'd nearly forgotten. What *was* it? Power wished he'd asked the receptionist when the chance had presented itself. Approaching the counter-top, he noted that her head was now lowered, the fingers no doubt cutting and pasting a *We regret to inform you...* for a slacker who'd already successfully unimpressed. Just as Power was about to speak, the woman's 'phone beeped. She picked up the receiver without looking away from the terminal in front of her, rested the earpiece on her left shoulder.

"Yes," she said, in a respectful tone Power hadn't

previously detected, "I'll tell him."

The familiar tenor of her voice returned: undeniably courteous, but with a hint of frustration.

"You may go in now, Mr Locke."

"Cheers," said a young man whose face was concealed by a mophead of hair. He stood erect on legs that could have passed for stilts.

Power recognised those legs, but wasn't sure from where. Mr. Locke and his legs like stilts loped off inside a pair of patched-up denims that were all the rage in the late 1960s. Locke's a long way from Woodstock, Power thought, recalling the soundtrack album.

He returned to his seat.

Locke, Locke, Locke - of course! "Lanky-Legs". He'd attended the same school as Power. Not that they'd had much in common: Power had shared few interests with those he'd happened to share a classroom with. On the one hand, there were *The Swots*, always making compelling contributions during lessons, with valid opinions on just about everything; and then there was *The Rest*, who never spoke in class but elsewhere - in the corridor, at lunch, in the playground, at the bus-stop - couldn't stop blathering on about sex, sport or celebrity gossip.

Power's attentions centred on disappointment, loss, disillusionment; and the absurdity of existence.

Locke, Locke, Locke: not what you'd call the sharpest blade in the drawer. One of life's tryers, was Locke: A+ for effort, but destined to stay in the 'D' stream. Power vaguely recalled that Locke might have even repeated his final year. Power, on the other hand, had breezed through school: top third of the class with the minimum of effort; and a good exam technique.

Of course the question remained: where had it got him?

"Lanky-Legs" didn't sport a moustache. Odd, that. Facial hair seemed to be especially common among young men round these parts: The Skinhead had a faint wisp running above his upper lip; The Hedgehog, a rampant brush. Power had even tried to grow a moustache once but

- one itchy face later - gave up.

He hoped the male interviewer had one.

Power rose, stretched his legs, and approached the *Vacancies* notice board. He looked along and across and up and down at the assortment of titles displayed on the interactive touch screen. Nothing local - obviously - and just two part-time positions advertised some time back for the county; plus a few in Dublin. Most of the offers were in the *Overseas Section*. Power rejected these also: if the jobs were so desirable, why then hadn't locals snapped them up?

Directly, an office door creaked open, and Locke re-appeared. A man with a crisp collar and tie (but no facial hair) followed. He patted Locke on the back - consolation or congratulation? It was impossible to tell.

"Cheers, then," Locke said, pulling a door marked *Push*, before recovering and exiting.

Only then did it hit Power. Locke - the thick *eejit* who'd repeated his final school year - and Power - the lad who'd breezed into college - were going for the same job.

Whatever it was.

The man with the crisp white collar and tie combination handed a clipboard to the woman behind the counter-top. She whispered an aside to her boss before he looked up to address the room.

"All here for the sewerage farm?"

No one said a thing. They watched with horror as she, in her high heels, and he, in his hush puppies, clip-clopped and lurched from *her* desk to *his* office.

"To hell with this! I'm off to join the army," The Skinhead said, jumping up from his lurid-yellow seat.

"Meet interesting people and shoot them," The Hedgehog quipped.

Power's lips curled into what might be described as serene acknowledgement. In truth, he was trying to recall a day-trip his school's biology department had made to the local sewerage works, but nothing sprang to mind.

Not even the smell.

"Mr Power," the man with the crisp collar and tie collated a batch of printed papers, "John. Sorry for the delay."

Power immediately noticed how small and beautifully formed the man's hands were. Ten impeccably manicured nails emphasised the milky-whiteness of his skin and suggested someone who'd not worked a *single* hard day in his life.

"Take a seat."

Power sat (on a hardwood chair, upholstered). The man neglected to introduce himself, and then reeled off seemingly-irrelevant questions - psychology study, no doubt. Power feigned disinterest whenever the man scribbled notes on a scrap of paper. The conversation would turn to Power's degree, as Power knew it must at some point, and he put himself in the interviewer's shoes. Power changed the subject - as he knew he must - resolved to find the common bond. Eventually, he manoeuvred the conversation round to the man's son, a computer programmer lucky enough to have worked in London, New York and Sydney, since completing his Masters.

"Have *you* any computer experience, John?"

"No. But I'm keen to learn."

"Do you have a scientific bent, at all?"

"Not really."

"Oh."

The preliminaries dispensed with, the man finally posed the question Power had been anticipating since first thing this morning.

"You never finished your degree, why was that?"

"Accommodation problems," Power suggested. "I didn't drop out. I *formally intermitted*."

The man listened patiently as Power explained the subtle differences between *formally intermitting* and dropping out.

Then he asked Power, "You don't intend to return this academic year, do you?"

"No, no." Power had anticipated that question also. "Even if I could *afford* to return. It wasn't really for me. And I've no wish to live a lie, simply for validation from

others."

"I see." The man was scribbling again. "Perhaps you'd be more interested in a temporary position?"

"Yes," Power warmed. "For the time being."

"That rules out the sewerage farm, so." A scowl formed as the man scrolled down a list of titles on the computer screen in front of him. "This one," the scowl suddenly disappeared, "may be of interest. Came in today."

"Go on."

"Ever worked in a factory?"

"No."

"Can you drive?"

"No." Respecting the man's unspoken reaction, Power lied, "But I've just started taking lessons."

Scribble, scribble.

"Will I arrange an interview?"

"When?"

The man glanced at his wrist watch.

"Today if you wish."

"How far away is it?"

"Not far. A five minute walk."

A short, temporary contract wouldn't hurt. The cash injection wouldn't hurt, either - the last time Power had checked, the balance in his debit account was €24.66.

"Today," Power said, almost smirking. "Today is fine."

He had a white overall on, the top button of his shirt undone, a bright floral tie loose at the neck. The Shop Floor Manager - to quote the man's own description - directed Power to a table. They sat on lime-green chairs. Gaudy plastic; silver legs, light material - aluminium? Close by, a grey-haired woman who scrubbed an electric cooker hob smiled a greeting.

"Glad you could make it," the man said. He didn't have a moustache.

"So am I," said Power.

Conducting an interview in a canteen implied a lack of office space, or a company going out of its way to be informal. Either way, Power was impressed.

"By the way," the man said, "my name is Hewitt."

Power nodded, and set down an oversized, cardboard cup of coffee on the table in front of him.

"Have you any factory experience?" Hewitt asked, putting down his own cup.

"No. But I've worked shifts."

"Good man yourself. But we work a straight day here - 8 to 4:30. Ever driven a forklift?"

"No," Power said. "I'd be keen to learn."

"There won't be time for that. So long as you've a good pair of hands, we can use you."

"Hands I have."

"The money's not great," Hewitt said, and went on to reveal that, by *not great*, he meant almost double the rate Power had earned at the hotel during the summer.

"You realise that the job's only temporary?"

"Suits me," said Power. "For how long?"

"That, I can't tell you. A month, possibly six weeks."

"Doing what?"

"Re-organising, putting up shelves, taking in new stock. Ever work in the Stores before?"

"No, never."

"You'd get the hang of it soon enough." Hewitt glanced at his watch. Power noticed that it had a gold strap. "I've to get to a production meeting shortly. Any questions?"

"Just one," Power said. "Will the work involve computers at all?"

"No," Hewitt said. "Not in any way."

"Ah."

"You're into computers, are you?" Hewitt laughed, getting up to go. "My eldest boy is mad for the online games."

"What age is he?" Power asked, believing he could be onto establishing that all-important *something in common*.

"Seven," Hewitt said. "Look, I really must go. Thanks for your time."

They downed their coffees, exchanged a solid handshake, and separated: Hewitt off to his production meeting, Power back out towards the lashing rain. Turning

up the collar of his check jacket that pinched under the armpits, Power reflected that he wouldn't have minded getting a job such as this one. He should have buttered up Hewitt a bit more, put himself in the man's shoes. No doubt Locke - whose legs encroached the doorway area Power was about to leave through - would adopt such a tactic during his own discussion in the canteen.

No matter. Power would survive. He was due tax back from the summer's toils at the hotel. In the meantime, he'd have to persuade Mulligan to start pulling his weight.

Not such a tall order.

FOUR

"Give me a second," Power said. "It's on the tip of my tongue."

"I'll have to hurry you."

"Yes, yes - have you noticed how cold it is in here?"

It was clear Mulligan had: respecting the icicles that dangled from *inside* the window-frames, he'd put two bars of the gas-heater on. At this rate, they'd need another bottle before the weekend was out.

"Well?"

"No," Power conceded, "it's gone."

"Big Ben, the famous bell in the clock-tower in Westminster, was named after..." Mulligan cleared his throat. "...Sir *Ben-jamin* Hall."

"Who was?"

"Some sort of Minister at the time the bell was cast."

Disconsolate, Power sloped off to make the tea.

"I *can* tell you," he shouted from the kitchen-too-small-to-swing-a-cat-in, "that the Houses Of Parliament were roofed from oak tress cut down in Cratloe Woods."

"Cratloe, Co. *Clare*?"

"The very same."

After his life had fallen apart, Power moved back home because he couldn't think of anywhere else to go. He often wondered why Mulligan had decided to settle here.

"Did I hear the flapping of a letterbox earlier?"

"You did."

"Anything interesting from *Irish Mail*?"

"There was a postcard," Mulligan confirmed.

"Interesting in itself - "

"For me," Mulligan continued. "From Acapulco."

"Acapulco, Mexico?"

"I can't think of any other Acapulco, can you?"

Power hurried out of the kitchen-too-small-to-swing-a-cat-in.

"And who do you know in Acapulco, Mexico?"

"Nina," Mulligan smiled. "Continental, sophisticated, seductive Nina. A great beauty."

Power tried to imagine what Nina was like, what Acapulco was like. The only image that sprang to mind was a portly Frank Sinatra crooning *Come Fly With Me* on a tacky TV special from Las Vegas.

"Nina," Mulligan went on, "is the free spirit I chanced upon in St Tropez two years ago."

Halfway through the final term of the second year of his Sociology (B.A., Hons) degree, Mulligan turned twenty-one. He chose to commemorate that drearily familiar coming-of-age ritual in a refreshingly unfamiliar manner. Mulligan simply disappeared. Disappeared with an undisclosed sum, an undisclosed sum of money that had been held in trust since the sudden passing of his parents. They'd both been killed on the outward leg of a daily commute from Cork to Dublin. Fault was not disputed. Because of pilot error and/or computer malfunction, their flight had missed the runway and burst into flames. Some considerable time later, two ermine-trimmed gentlemen - one representing the budget airline operator; the other, the deceased - haggled in a corridor to decide upon the *actual* amount of compensation awarded. The price of human life would continue to be determined outside courtrooms in the future: driven by ever-tighter margins, airlines were hiring fatigued pilots on zero hour contracts to fly rickety jets in dangerously inclement weather at a time in history when Air Traffic Control was reluctant to turn flights away from domestic airports. (The Irish Aviation Authority didn't want a repeat of the now-infamous gridlock pile-up of St Patrick's weekend 2028. To this day, conspiracy theorists believed - despite speedy and unequivocal denials by spokespersons from the American, Chinese and Russian governments - that an accidental collision with a drone had given rise to the loss of 4 jets and 397 souls).

So, for an indeterminate number of weeks that spilled into the summer recess, Power's college apartment received picture postcards from Dubrovnik, Florence,

Geneva, Amsterdam and Marseilles, each blank save for an encircled score out of ten. Assuming the role of self-appointed personal assistant, Power monitored, as often as he found himself on campus, the internal mail sorted to Mulligan's Mi-Mz pigeonhole. Initially, there was little to monitor. But after a month or so, one of Mulligan's course directors politely enquired about the progress of an overdue assignment. Two weeks on, a memo from the Dean warned of the serious consequences Mulligan might have to face should he continue to miss vital seminars. Then a personal advisor advised Mulligan, in a handwritten note, to drop in to his office for an informal chat, one that should establish the precise nature of any extenuating circumstances. Mulligan never showed, and was promptly sent one final letter he never bothered reading.

Many months later, over a *Face-To-Face*® online chat, Power broke the news in a casual aside: *Did I mention you've been kicked out of college?*

"I don't recall you telling me about Nina."

"The one with the apartment in Paris."

"Doesn't ring a bell."

"The country house in Brittany?"

Power shrugged.

Mulligan retrieved the postcard, a scenic snap of a bronzed thrill-seeker diving off the top of a very high cliff into a very blue sea. Presumably, this was a pastime in Acapulco.

"Mon cherie - she calls me that, must think it endearing - mon cherie, by the time you read this, I'll be in Paris, sitting on babies -"

"Sitting on babies?"

"Baby-sitting," Mulligan said. "Nina hasn't quite grasped the subtleties of the English language yet. It's ironic, since she teaches English for a living."

"Teaches English?" Power repeated. "As in someone who conjugates verbs for fee-paying foreigners? Or someone who force-feeds Joyce to teenagers?"

"I'm not sure."

"Not *sure*?" Power persisted. "I thought you two were on intimate terms?"

"Yes, we knew one another, but only in the Biblical sense. Ours was a holiday romance, with no time to waste on inessential detail. Picture it - "

"I'm good at putting myself in other people's shoes."

" - Glad to hear it. The balcony-doors of a hotel room thrown open, as if an invitation to ravish her; an August moon shining on the Med; champagne in the ice bucket; and two unattached people - Nina, with her apartment in Paris, and her country house in Brittany, and yours truly - living for the moment. Would you pull back from a passionate embrace to ask, *Hang on a minute, do you teach English Lit or English as a foreign language?*"

"When you put it that way, no."

"So," Mulligan continued, "the issue remained uncertain, Nina slipped off her lace camiknickers - "

"Ah." The penny had dropped. "*That* Nina."

"Yes, *that* Nina," Mulligan said, getting up from The Rotten Red Armchair. "Besides, it's important not to know everything about a person you're involved with. To contribute to the sense of mystery."

Mulligan began frisking the pockets of his grey crombie overcoat.

"She could have been lying," Power suggested. "About being a teacher."

"Why might she do that?"

"To create a good impression," Power said. "She could have worked in an abattoir, for all you knew."

"It's possible, I suppose."

"And she may have been lying about her residential status. I mean, how many schoolteachers do you know with apartments in Paris and holiday homes in Brittany?"

"Good point. But, then, how many slaughterhouse employees do *you* know with apartments et cetera?"

"So, there was no other post?"

"No," Mulligan said. "Were you expecting something important?"

"Just word about the job."

"The job," Mulligan ruminated. "I nearly forgot. Did you

manage to put yourself in the interviewer's shoes?"

"I did. Both times."

"You had a *second* interview?"

"Sort of. The second one was in a factory. It involved waiting twenty minutes for a chat that was over in seconds. Gave me a chance to admire, at length, a healthy-looking plant in reception."

"Let me guess," said Mulligan. "Waxy leaf?"

"Waxy leaf, yes. And lots of - what would you call them? Indentations."

"*Monstera deliciosa*. The Swiss Cheese Plant. Shade-tolerant, easy to keep. Anyway," Mulligan said, "What became of the tea you were making?"

"It'll have to wait. I've to make a 'phone-call, but need to buy credit first. Unless you can lend me your mobile."

"You know I don't own a cellular 'phone. But if you're going down the hill -"

"Yes?"

"You might," Mulligan said, "get a bottle of gas on your travels."

Dogs - Power had learned from Mulligan - don't bark in the wild. Apparently, barking is an acquired habit, one encouraged by man. Power was mulling such a thought over right now because a domesticated mongrel had unexpectedly taken to barking at him; had taken to launching into a sustained, and completely unprovoked, display of snarling and teeth-gnashing. It's likely that the dog's owner, who'd taught the animal to fetch, stay, beg, sit, and roll over, was responsible for this behaviour also. No matter what Power did - stand his ground, whistle a friendly greeting, throw a stick, threaten the dog's territory with an empty gas bottle - the mongrel wouldn't shut up.

What was the silly little creature trying to prove? But, then, why had people climbed K2, run a three-fifteen mile, travelled to *The Sea Of Tranquility*?

Power decided that the action of walking away - with the mongrel, by turns, snapping at his heels or withdrawing - lacked dignity. So he stopped in his tracks, and reflected

further on canine-related trivia. Recalling the axiom *barking dogs seldom bite* provided some consolation. As did the saying *his bark is worse than his bite*. Power had also heard said *to bark at the moon*: what exactly did that mean? And of course there was that old chestnut, one applicable to Power's love life: *barking up the wrong tree*. Useful phrases. He'd have to spring them on Mulligan at an opportune moment.

Meanwhile, the mongrel ran off, barking after a car that was speeding down the hill far too quickly to be caught. Power sighed, picked up the empty bottle of gas, put one foot in front of the other.

At least it wasn't raining.

"I need a refill," he smirked, shyly eyeing the empty bottle at his feet. "Please."

"Are you sure that's one of ours?" The deaf old biddy struck a defiant pose in her doorway, blocking a view that he had no desire to see. "It's a bit rusty, isn't it?"

Power couldn't argue the point, though he did consider disputing the implied blame. He handed the appropriate paper money to the deaf old biddy. Deliberately, she counted.

"Have you got the odd four cent? I've no change."

Power dug deep in his pockets, handed over the odd four cent.

"Can you get a full bottle from the lorry? My arthritis is playing me up."

Power wrestled a full bottle down off the lorry. He was about to remark on the recent warnings concerning depleting gas reserves - based on the results from ongoing deepwater drilling in the Antarctic basin - but then decided he couldn't be bothered.

The deaf old biddy pointed a finger, one riddled with arthritis, at a line of bottles riddled with rust.

"Take the empty one over there," she said.

Next time, it would *definitely* be Mulligan's turn.

The immediate community of terraced houses, all "Corporation"-owned, was served by a shopping mall that mirrored the area's seemingly-modest desires: pub, betting-shop, *Hard Cash For Gold*[™] franchise, hairdresser's, movie exchange outlet, and an especially unpretentious *Moneysworth*[®] mini-mart. Power went in the latter, still carrying his (full) bottle of gas, sidled up alongside an officious individual. The stranger with the familiar face was dressed in a white overall and busy pressing a wand down hard onto a hand-held gizmo.

Power set down his bottle.

"Am I OK to leave this here?"

Because the manager was only *delighted* to be of service, he allowed Power to limbo under the chain that looped across an out-of-service checkout aisle. Power swung round to the 10-Items-Or-Less counter where he queued behind a woman in a dowdy coat. A conveyor-belt conveyed one white sliced loaf, two tins of cat-food (liver flavour), one litre of *Super-milk*[®] and a packet of chocolate-chip cookies away from his gaze. Power waited while the woman in the dowdy coat fumbled deep within her purse, confused three ten cent coins with the twenty cent denomination, and inserted the items, one-by-one, into her shopping trolley (tartan design, two white wheels, waist-high handle). Grunting and wheezing, she eventually pulled it towards the automatic doors that led to the street.

"Hi," Power brightened, upon seeing His Favourite Checkout girl glance up at him. "I need some 'phone credit."

He'd acquired a free mobile 'phone from *Moneysworth*[®] after his sister Lena had bought him an introductory €50 of credit. Those who topped up at the supermarket chain were entitled to exclusive discounts - 20% off €20 credit, 10% off €10 and so on: offers which created a tension between buying more credit than you really needed, and the realisation that you were passing up a bargain. Loyalty points were - of course - awarded for all purchases you were good enough to notify the company's market researchers about (by consenting to "membership" card reads at the checkout).

Power handed over his last fiver. Not wishing to appear a cheapskate, he asked the attractive young woman at the checkout for a €5 top-up, took his complimentary 5% discount. After she printed up a validation code, Power politely stepped aside for the next customer, and mooched in an aisle marked *Toiletries*. He scanned the validation code into his 'phone, clicked on a number in its memory. Someone answered before the third ring: a woman's voice.

"Hello," she piped.

"Human Resources please," Power said, projecting an air of confident efficiency.

"Who shall I say is calling?"

"Power, John Power."

"Ringing now."

After a fifth ring, the same disembodied voice returned. "Mr Hennessy is taking a conference call in the meeting room. Will anyone else do?"

"A Mr Hewitt."

"The Shop Floor Manager is off today. Can *I* help you?"

"I don't know."

"Try me."

"It's about a temporary job - "

"Starting on Monday?"

"Yes, that's right. I had an interview - "

"And you'd like to know if you got the job. Just one moment."

The moment passed with a bizarre arrangement of Beethoven's *Fur Elise*, played on what sounded like a marimba.

"John," the woman cut in, just before the key change. "Good news."

"Yes?"

"You're starting on Monday. Be here for 8am. Was there anything else?"

"Not really," he said. "Though I was expecting written confirmation."

"It would have left here a couple of days ago. I frank all the outgoing post myself."

"Oh."

"See you Monday, then."

Power would liked to have said *See you Monday* himself before the woman hung up, but she was too fast for him.

Good news. But was it? Now that Power had the job, he wasn't really sure he wanted it. Back at the 10-Items-Or-Less checkout, Power queued behind a woman with a wrinkled face, a blue rinse hairdo, and a stoop. He watched her one white sliced loaf, tin of cat-food (beef flavour), litre of *Super-milk*®, and family-size *Toblerone* glide along the conveyer-belt. After the woman with the wrinkled face, blue rinse hairdo and stoop fumbled deep within her purse, confused one ten cent coin with the twenty cent denomination - but *before* she began inserting the items into her shopping trolley (bright blue, navy wheels, waist-high handle) - he asked, "Can I squeeze by?"

"Everything OK?" His Favourite Checkout Girl asked.

"To be honest..." Power carped. "But thank you for caring."

"With your 'phone credit, I mean?"

"No complaints there," Power said, motioning towards the exit. "I'll just get my bottle of gas."

His Favourite Checkout Girl smiled, uncertainly...

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CURRENT & FUTURE TITLES...

- ★ Audiobook, e-Book, paperback and hardcover editions of "Power & Perdition" will be available.
- ★ The first in a series of non-fiction e-Books and pocketbooks will be published by the end of 2015.
- ★ And look out for another novel, "Drowning The Shamrock", which is due out early in 2016.

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