

Chapter 3: The Fruits of Desperation

How can they say my life is not a success? Have I not for more than sixty years got enough to eat and escaped being eaten?

Logan Pearsall Smith

My friend Doug said, “Why didn’t you call me when it happened? I know people in the Special Branch who would have put that guy behind bars!”

“Ok,” I said, “if he’d been trying to extract money from me.”

“He was!”

“Yeah! But it was money I owed to someone. Did I tell you how he put that? He said, ‘you know the money you owe to those guys’ – and he named the printing company – ‘you don’t owe that money to them anymore.’ If it weren’t for the sinister voice I’d have been celebrating. He continued, ‘you owe it to me!’ But it wasn’t like he threatened that he would break my legs or anything.”

“No, he just implied it.”

“All he said was,” I imitated the tough guy’s strong Belfast accent, “‘we don’t use police or solicitors. The only person you’ll meet in relation to this matter will be the last person you’ll meet.’”

“Sounds sinister enough to me,” Doug said. “All the more so because he’s probably an ex-paramilitary.”

“I suspect you’re right!” Peace in Northern Ireland had left a lot of those guys with time on their hands and redundant skills. “Anyway,” I went on, feeling truly relaxed for the first time in months, “It’s all over now thanks to having seven loving sisters.”

“‘Seven loving sisters!’ That could be an order of nuns.”

“As good as but not so scary!”

Doug, still hopping mad that he missed the chance to take on this tough guy, said, “what kills me is that the bastard got away with the money.”

“As it happens,” I went on, “He turned out to be a small mild man. The scariest thing I noticed about him, when we met, was a couple of modest tattoos on his arms. In fact, he was the one who looked scared, glancing over his shoulder all the time. I’d insisted we meet in a busy Dublin pub. No way was I going to Belfast.”

“I should feckin’ hope not!” Doug laughed. “Did he even buy you a drink?”

“I offered to buy him one but he refused saying he must be movin’ on but then he stayed and chatted for five minutes even after he had taken the money from me and stuffed it deep into his pocket. He told me I was lucky. My debts were chickenfeed. ‘There’s one guy;’ he told me, ‘who owes twenty times that. That boy’s in real trouble.’ He sounded almost sorry for the guy.”

“So all this was because the Killarney show bombed.”

“Yep! It closed the night it opened.”

“I never get that! How can a show close the night it opens? You’ve gone to all the trouble to get it started and, just because only a few people come the first night, you close. How does that work? What happened to persistence?”

“Oh, it’s not that easy! I wasn’t being charged rent for the venue but I had to underwrite forty dinners a night at twenty-five euro a plate, that’s a thousand euro a night and my budget was well gone. In a room that could take two hundred and fifty you’d think we could have pulled in forty minimum but no.”

“If you kept going you might have built it up.”

“Too late. I had to cut my losses. I had started out thinking the coach drivers would pour the tourists from their busses into the show if I offered them a cut.”

“A bribe?”

“A commission!”

“I hope you offered a bigger bribe, sorry, commission than the other Killarney shows were paying.”

“Yes, but apparently anything involving group dinners is planned at least a year in advance! The drivers said they would consider my generous offer for next year if I was still alive.”

“Hah! So if you’d planned forward. Or sold tickets without dinners?” then Doug remembers, “Of course you couldn’t do that because of your forty-dinner quota. God, you really thought this out.”

“I was desperate to do something.”

“And such are the fruits of desperation. Were there other debts?”

“Lots of them! Peter ...

“Your brother?”

“Yeah! He offered to help me sort them out. Well, not pay them, but organise them. He’s an accountant, as you know. Peter had also helped with marketing and things from half way through the campaign. A strange thing, Doug ... Peter met a guy outside the door of the venue on the opening night.”

“Which was also the closing night.”

“Yes! Peter was taking the tickets so he wasn’t all that busy. For some reason he felt my dad’s presence. You know, us two brothers involved in something together. We’ve had a lot of friction before. But he had this feeling that Daddy would support what we were trying to do here. Anyway, the man started chatting to Peter and it turned out he had worked under Daddy in a fertiliser factory a long way from here fifty years earlier, the year Peter was born. The man, probably now in his early seventies went on about how much he’d liked Daddy and how sad he had been when he’d read in the papers about the plane crash in ’68. After the man left, Peter found me and said, ‘he’s with us tonight’ and I knew immediately who.”

“I believe you,” Doug said, “that’s how these things happen.”

“So,” I continued telling Doug, “a couple of days after the Killarney show closed, Peter volunteered to help me organise the debts. He told me first I needed to buy a lever-arch file.

‘Are you crazy?’ I protested, ‘I can’t buy anything! I’m broke! And there are a lot of things higher on my priority list than a lever-arch file.’

‘That’s the trouble with you, Dezy; you never listen to anyone. You may be broke but a lever-arch file is exactly what you need to buy.’

‘Can’t we use those yellow, purple and green plastic folders we bought to put scripts in,’ I asked him and continued, ‘can’t we make some use of the two cash boxes we acquired but never had cash to put in’.

‘You think,’ he said emphasising the two and a half inches he is taller than me, ‘that cash boxes are only meant for carrying cash’.

‘I’m sorry,’ I replied, ‘I was fooled by the name.’

‘And,’ he repeated, ‘you never listen to anyone. What you need right now is a lever-arch file.’”

“So,” Doug asked, “Did you get one?”

“No!”

“Shit, Dezy, you never listen to anyone! How’s Dawn?”

“She says I broke her phone!”

“That’s a new one.”

“I thought she was having a heart attack or something because the phone went suddenly dead in the middle of a tirade so I tried phoning back. The phone just kept ringing and going dead but I kept trying. Apparently Dawn herself wasn’t dead; she’d been answering then hanging up immediately each time. Later she texted to say my stubborn persistence had broken her phone.”

“Why was she mad at you in the first place?” Doug wanted to know.

“Because I’m leaving the house.”

“I didn’t know you lived together.”

“No, I’m leaving the house three doors up. While I lived as her neighbour I hardly saw her, yet now that I’m leaving she’s mad at me because, apparently, we’re a couple and have been all the while.”

“There’s a name for that. Where she runs away when you go to her but runs after you when you leave. What’s it called?”

“Stupidity?”

“There’s another name for it but that’ll do for now.”

“Her text” I told him, “said, ‘you broke my phone and I never want to talk to you or see you ever again.’ So I went to the movies on my own and when I came out there was a sort of peace had descended on my soul. Doug, I think my year of desperation may be over.”

“Congratulations!”

“Thank you!”

A few weeks after the show ended I had to go back to Killarney to wrap up some business. As I was filling my petrol tank at the edge of town a lady rolled down the window of her car and said hello. I recognised Niamh’s mother. I was bit embarrassed as I felt I’d let everyone down particularly this lady’s talented kid. The poor girl had rehearsed hard for a summer show and now it wouldn’t happen.

“I want to thank you, Dezy,” Niamh’s mother said.

“Thank me, Mrs. O’Sullivan, whatever for?”

“That was the greatest experience of Niamh’s young life. It has given her the courage and enthusiasm to join the musical society among other things. She just loves performing.”

“That young lady is a bonus to any team and has a wonderful talent.” I told the proud mother.

“Well, I want to thank you from her and on behalf of all the members of your young cast. You gave them a great experience.”

I drove home quite chuffed that my apparent failure had been worthwhile for some people. Neil had got a lot out of it. And now Niamh and then I realised there was someone else, at this minute driving this car, who had gained a lot from the whole thing too.

Plus: next time I’d know what not to do.

To be continued