

The Sessions

An Odyssey

Chapter One by Myles Downey,
Founder of The School of Coaching



Session One: A Fateful Day in Bongo Ryan's

At the very centre of the Hal' penny Bridge, where the hump of the bridge neither rose nor fell, Pdraigh¹ stopped walking and stared vacantly out over the river. The confusion in his thoughts and emotions drew all his energy, leaving nothing to move his legs. He could feel the weight of his briefcase in his hand. Useless now. In a swift half-conscious act, he opened his shoulders and threw the briefcase out over the Liffey. He watched it's slow arc as it fell, spinning in the air and smack into the water, hesitate for a second or two, dip on one side and then slide under the greenblack rolling surface of the river. He rearranged his long, waxed raincoat on his shoulders where it had been pulled askew by the physical exertion. Three boys in their shabby school uniforms, shirts out, tie-knots pulled down, walking by apparently unsurprised by what they had just seen.

"Big throw Mister!"

"Hey Mister! If yu' want that back yu'll need more then yer poofey raincoat to keep yu' dry".

Pdraigh laughed. Hurling the briefcase had released some of his tension. He became conscious of people staring at him. A young girl took a tighter hold of her mother's hand and moved closer into her coat. Two girls, university students from their dress, jeans, jumpers and scarfs, tried to look away but failed, succumbing to the attraction of the unusual. Embarrassed, but lighter in his heart he crossed to the north side of the river and turned left down the quays. There was no particular destination he was heading for; he needed to walk. The exercise and the aimlessness allowed his thoughts to gather themselves, allowed memories of that morning's meeting to present themselves and, above all, allowed his anger and frustration time to settle down.

He continued up-river. The number of pedestrians grew smaller as he moved further away from O'Connell Street. He approached the Four Courts and slowed to appreciate the commanding Georgian architecture. Once, his father had pointed out that the best of Dublin's architecture was to be seen above the shop fronts and Pdraigh had developed the habit of looking up to see the original details. The copper cupola and the scales of justice. Looking down he noticed the lawyers going about their business. 'Justice, politics and commerce', he thought, 'difficult to separate, the first two in service of the last'. He reviewed his own situation against those three words and came to the same conclusion; maybe in his case it was more about politics, office politics. He walked on. Shortly, on the other side of the river, he could see the dark blue gates of the Guinness brewery with the name of the stout spelled out in gold writing. "Good old Arthur", thought Patrick, referring to the eponymous founder by his familiar name. He looked at his watch. Three-thirty. And Bongo Ryan's not five minutes away. With this thought his pace increased as he made his way to the public house, the sweet smell from the brewery creeping across the December-cold river a welcome encouragement.

Pdraigh pushed open the door and made his way towards the bar. He looked around hoping he would not see anyone he knew; it would not do to be seen appearing on one's own for a pint in the middle of the afternoon on a Monday. Fortunately he did not recognise any of the small number of people scattered around the bar. From one of the snugs² he could hear the low tones of the muffled voices of a man and a woman in intimate conversation, there were two old boys on the far side who were animatedly discussing the virtues, or otherwise, of having a female as Head of State. A lone drinker sat by the opaque glass window doing his best to look out, feigning indifference to the world inside the pub. On his left, set comfortably on a bar stool and propped against the dark mahogany partition, was the only man in the bar, other than himself, wearing a suit. He was in conversation with the barman. The barman looked up as Pdraigh noisily pulled out a stool and sat down heavily upon it.

"I'll be right with you, sir."

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The Barman was wearing a white shirt with half-length sleeves and a rugby club tie. Pdraigh recognised the particular uniform of the professional barman and wondered if a winter version with longer sleeves would be more appropriate to the typical cold, damp Dublin weather. The barman approached, recognising him from the occasional Friday night after work drink he had with his colleagues.

“What will it be?”

“A pint of Guinness, please”

“Certainly”. The barman began pouring the creamy brown stout into a straight glass. “We don’t normally see you here at this time of day” he observed.

“No. I’d had enough nonsense at the office so I called it a day.” Pdraigh responded by way of explanation. He took off his coat, folded it over his arm and placed it on the bar stool next to him.

“It’s well for some, being able to up sticks and go when you’ve had enough. It’d be a quare thing if we could all do that.” The barman said this mostly to the pint his eyes flicking up to see the reaction. There was none. He left the stout to settle and went back to his conversation with the man at the end of the bar. In amongst the bottles, glasses and mirrors behind the bar was a large clock. It read ten to four and Pdraigh could clearly hear its’ ticking. He had never been in the pub when it was quiet enough to do that. After he had watched the minute hand describe two complete revolutions the barman returned, topped up his pint and put it in front of him.

“Will there be anything else?”

“Is it possible to get a sandwich or anything like that? I missed lunch.”

“I think there are a few rolls left over out the back. If there are, what would you like? Cheese, salad...”

“Cheese and salad would be just fine.” Pdraigh said. The barman nodded and disappeared to see what he could find. Pdraigh watched the brown cream in his glass turn to black and prepared to take a deep draught. As he did so his eyes came up level with the mirror and he saw himself seated at the bar in his suit with the glass pressed to his lips. There was something in the incongruity of the neatly pressed, dark blue business suit, the crisp white shirt, the bright tie, the cuff-links

just glinting in his sleeve and the image conjured up by the glass of Guinness; conviviality, good conversation and a man on a surfboard³, that caused him to consider the pressure that he and others put themselves under in their business lives. Again his thoughts returned to the morning and his annoyance rose. Without touching a drop he put his glass down on the counter, hard, and cursed quietly to himself. This had the effect of causing the be-suited gentleman at the end of the bar to look up from the paper he was now reading.

“Apologies,” said Pdraigh, “it’s been a tough day”

“Not to worry, at least not on my account”, came the response, and after a slight pause

“Excuse me, but your about to lose your keys”, the man nodded towards Pdraigh’s raincoat. Pdraigh’s car keys were hanging out of the pocket, held only by the fob. He pushed them into the pocket.

“Thank you. They must have jumped up when I threw my briefcase in the river”.

The man’s eyebrows rose just a fraction. Only then did Paraigh appreciate how strange his explanation must have sounded.

“That must sound ridiculous. What can I say?”

“There was nothing valuable in it I hope?”

“Just some papers.” Another pause. For Pdraigh the gates of normal civil reserve between strangers and the need to communicate with another human being had been opened and he continued: “I prepared them over the weekend for a meeting earlier today but they proved irrelevant.”

“Hmm”

“Your right. Hardly enough to merit tossing the whole briefcase into the river, but it felt good.”

The barman returned with a cheese roll on a plate with a few leaves of salad, browning at the edges, and a small, hard tomato that had seen insufficient sun, cut into quarters.

“I am afraid that’s the best I can do for you”

“Thanks. It’s fine.”

Pdraigh handed the barmen a ten-pound note and reached for the roll.

He turned to the man and continued:

“Actually I was so annoyed that I had to do something, otherwise I would have damaged something, or myself.”

“Oh.”

“I’d spent so long preparing those papers without realising that they were useless because the decision had already been made. I’m such a fool. I should have known. I should have known.” This last observation was made more to the pint glass that he brought to his lips.

“Known what?”

“I should have seen the game they were playing. I’m sorry, I am not making much sense, am I?”

“No, not really.”

“I work for an IT company, very specialist, and pretty successful. We had a meeting this morning to discuss future plans. Strategy and things, you know. I was supposed to present the team’s views to the Americans this morning but I never got the chance. It was the presentation that was in the briefcase”

“Ah, I see. And the Americans are..?”

“Oh, we’re owned by an American company”. Here Pdraigh mentioned the name of an international IT company. “They bought the company a few years back because we had some innovative products. And some very bright people.”

There was a pause. The man came back:

“So what happened?”

Pdraigh took the top quarter of his pint in one draught. The barmen, who had been covertly listening, took the opportunity of the lull in Pdraigh’s outburst to give him his change. Pdraigh acknowledged this with a nod.

“What happened? They’ve only decided to close the business down”

“But you said it was successful”

“Well, they’re not actually closing it but it amounts to the same thing. They’re going to move it ‘back stateside,” Pdraigh said the last words with an attempt at an American accent that could be pinned to neither coast nor to any known State.

“No. Really?” said the barmen and, realising that his eavesdropping was now an evident fact, looked down the bar for a distraction. He saw a customer who was surprised at the level of attention he now received, being only half way through his pint.

“With you right now sir. What will it be?”

Padraigh and the man shared a subdued laugh.

“Sorry, I don’t normally go on like this,” Padraigh said.

The man smiled.

Padraigh exhaled, staring into his pint. Distractedly he drew some squiggles in the spilt stout on the bar counter, lost for a second in his own world. Would Tom Wolfe⁴ really have called the smudge on the counter art, he thought.

“Yep. I had thought that this was it, my chance.” He looked back at the man, “Blown it now.”

“There’ll be another opportunity”

“Not like this I don’t think. I had a chance do something unique, something exciting. And the timing was just right. If they take it all over to the States they’ll lose it.”

“And you’re losing me.”

“Consider this. You grow an idea, a small company. It has its own ways of doing things; a culture if you must. It reaches a point where, in order to take advantage of its’ success, it needs an injection of capital. So you sell out to a bigger company. If you’re lucky you continue to grow and then, well then the bigger company will want to ‘optimise” He broke into American again. “And when you ‘optimise’ you lose what’s special. They want you to start filling in time-sheet and things. The excitement goes, the energy goes, the best people go – or stop joining. You fail.

“That can happen.” The man agreed.

“I thought as much.”

“Was this your own company then?”

“No, although I was encouraged by Ciaran he was – is – the founder, to think of it as my own though; he was that kind of person. I joined just before the sale as the

operations director, my first real management job... I like to think that I made it all work.”

“I can see why you threw your briefcase into the river”

“Don’t remind me. But that wasn’t what really got to me. Perry Vincent, bastard.”

Padraigh said the word with an emphasis on the first ‘a’ and it exploded from him.

“I’m sorry. I’m...I know exactly what he’s doing...building his empire...he as much as told me so.”

“And who is he?”

“He’ one of the shiny boys from over there. Rumour is he’s being groomed for the top in a few years, perhaps even CEO. Perry and I met at a company conference in Lausanne, in a big hotel by the lake, The...” Padraigh hesitated trying to remember the name.

“The Beau Rivage”

“The very place. You know it?” Padraigh asked with surprise.

The man nodded, and then waved his hand dismissively. Padraigh continued

“The conference was for the top managers in the company, the leadership group. There were about 80 or 90 people. I was surprised to have been asked. Anyway I had a bit of run in with the yer man Perry. He’s bright, ambitious and self-righteous. Devious to the core”.

“No judgements there then.”

“None at all,” was Padraigh’s deadpan response, then he allowed himself a weak smile. “No, the thing is, whatever the business case for closing us down, I know he’s behind this”.

“You do.”

“Aye. You see, we did this daft exercise at the conference, about leadership; all coloured pens, big sheets of paper and ‘visualisation’. I was in a small group with him and although he sounded all collegiate and consensual he’s simply in it for himself and wants to get to the top, regardless of cost”. Padraigh started laughing. “I saw the image that he had drawn of himself as a leader, very apt. A phallic symbol. Though I’m sure he didn’t see it as such”

The man laughed too

“But how do you know he’s behind all this?”

“He was here this morning with the CEO and it seems like he’s fooled him as well. They’re setting up a new division, New Business and Innovation,” again the ‘faux’ American accent, pronouncing the ‘new’ and ‘nu’, “something like that. Our business is going to be a big part of it and Perry is heading it up. The run-in, an argument, we had was at the final dinner. We were talking about innovation and within minutes the conversation had switched to risk-management. I couldn’t believe it. So, a little forcefully, I asked which they really wanted innovation or risk management. I’m not sure everyone got the point. But Perry saw his chance to show off and went for me with a whole load of Harvard Business School speak.” Here Padraigh paused, breathed out heavily. “He’s a company man, I’m a maverick. He wants to control everything; I want people to express themselves. I seem to remember too that the CEO was at the table, I think he kind of enjoyed the whole thing. I left feeling a bit stupid; you shouldn’t show emotion or argue with passion apparently”.

“Really?”

“So it seems”.

“Tell me” the man said, “What happens to you in this scheme?”

“They want me to go to the States and to keep managing the business as a ‘department’. That’s the only good thing to come out of this. At least they rate me.”

“But you’d be reporting to what’s-his-name?”

“Perry, yes. I could see that pleased him no end.”

“Will you go?”

“I don’t know. I can’t quite see how, you know, family and all that. And I’m not sure that it’d be the right place for me.”

“Why is that?”

“I sometimes think that people who could really lead a business, inspirational like, don’t make it through middle-management, where they are required to toe the line and well – not think, you know... I don’t want to have to fight those battles anymore and if I went stateside – shit, now I’m saying it – I think I’d have to play some of those games again.”

“It’s an interesting theory. You could be right”

There was silence for a minute. They simultaneously lifted their glasses and drank.

“Another one?” The man offered indicating with a lift of his chin towards Pdraigh’s empty glass

“Yes. Here, I’ll get them.”

He looked to the barman who was standing on the other side of the bar polishing a glass.

“Two pints coming up” he said.

The barman removed the two empty glasses and the beer mats and started filling two clean glasses. He returned to mop the counter, delaying as much as he decently could. Another customer came to the bar and took a seat a little way from Pdraigh and behind him

“A pint and a chaser then, Kerrygold?” The barman asked the newcomer.

“The usual, the usual” He sighed as he sat down.

“Kerrygold?” enquired the man of Pdraigh.

“He’s a bit of a character around these parts. He’s been called that for as long as I can remember. I’m not sure I know his real name.”

“Yes,” said the man, “but why Kerrygold?”

“It’s a brand of butter...” started Pdraigh

“He can’t keep a hold of anything, save the drink, of course”, interjected the barman. “Drops things all the time. Kerrygold; butterfingers, you see?”

The man blinked.

“So what are you going to do?”

“Sorry?” Pdraigh was considering whether to explain the Kerrygold thing further.

“What are you going to do? No, hold on, I’ve got to go to the gent’s.

The barmen, who appeared to be reading the early edition of The Evening Herald answered without hesitation:

“Just round to your left. Mind the step.”

As the man left the Barman asked Pdraigh.

“Who’s your man?”

“I’ve no idea, I thought you knew him. He’s got a bit of an accent, not from around here. That said there is something familiar.”

“Barman!” A call from the other end of the bar. The barman grumbled and moved off.

“Customers getting in the way of the smooth running of the bar,” observed Pdraigh quietly.

By the time the man had returned there were two fresh pints on clean beer mats on the counter, a hint of condensation on the glasses telling them that the stout was at just the right temperature; cold enough to keep the more bitter overtones at bay but not so cold as to smother the taste of the malted barley.

“So,” the man asked, “what are you going to do?”

“Do I have to decide now?” Pdraigh rejoined with a half-smile.

“No. But if you did have to decide...?”

“Jaysus! All these questions. You’re hurting my head.”

“Well, I am sorry for you.” The man responded with the lightest touch of irony...“Look, I’ve got a car coming to collect me in...” he looked at his watch, “...about forty minutes. You’ve told me most of the story but I’d like to get to the ending. What might you do about it?” He gave a winning smile.

“Alright, alright.” Pdraigh laughed. “I could take the job on offer and go to the States or I could stay here and try and find a new job. Not so easy in this economic climate but...”

“Before you start analysing, tell me what other options there are?”

“Other options?”

“Yes. What else could you do?”

“I have no idea.”

“If there were no constraints...”

“I could start my own business. And the IT industries are really targeting Ireland so there must be some opening.”

“What else. No, wrong question” the man paused, “Tell me, what do you really want?”

Padraigh looked over his shoulder towards the window. In the relative silence he could hear again the ticking of the clock behind the bar.

“This is going to sound pathetic. What I really want is to deliver the plan that was in my briefcase. I spent most of the last month working on it, everyone at the office was excited about it. That’s what I want.”

An encouraging sort of noise emanated from the man. “Ah.”

“You see I really think they’ve got it wrong. I believe that if they move the business to the States they’ll lose some of the people; Ireland’s a great place to live, bring up kids. The culture will be smothered and we’ll lose contact with some of our best clients here and in Europe.”

“You suggested earlier that there was a business case for taking the business to the States...”

“Of course, but mostly it comes down to reducing costs by sharing resources, that kind of thing.”

“So, is there a business case for staying here?”

“Well, yes. I believe so. But there is no point in talking about this, they’ve made their decision.” Padraigh gave a mild snort of disgust.

“Are you sure it’s final.” The man asked.

“They have to take it back to the Board; the visit here was supposed to be a consultation exercise, would you believe.”

“So it’s not final.”

“In theory, no. But how can I get them to change their minds?”

The man left a short pause and then asked very deliberately:

“How *can* you get them to change their minds?”

“I thought you might ask that.” Padraigh paused. “Only by showing the business will thrive here – and meet their needs for cost-reduction and, I suppose we may have to integrate a little more, be less independent.”

“And whose minds need changing?”

“It will come down to the CEO. He, too, talks about consensus but the people around him are sycophants – non-judgementally.”

“Touche.”

“How can you get to him?”

“He’s here for tomorrow. Playing golf in Howth⁵ before flying out. I could try and get a stay of execution.”

“And then?”

“Put together an alternative plan.” Pdraigh could feel his spirits lift

“Do you know what to do from here?”

“Yes, I do.”

After a moments silence Pdraigh excused himself and made his way to the toilet. After he had gone about three steps he turned and said to the man

“That was brilliant. Thank you.”

The man smiled. Pdraigh continued on his way.

When he returned the man was gone. He looked quizzically at the barman who shrugged his shoulders and said

“He said you were to call him in the Shelbourne Hotel on Friday between three and five O’clock, if you have the mind.” He checked something written on the back of his hand. “Room 342. He also said good luck tomorrow.”

“Good luck tomorrow?”

“Yea, I suppose he meant with yer man, you know...”

“The CEO.”

“That’d be it. Eh, not that I heard anything, mind.”

Pdraigh looked at the barman. The barman kept the eye contact, he didn’t even have the decency to blush.

“No. Of course not.”

Pdraigh left the pub. On the road outside a taxi was beginning to pull away, having left a passenger at the pub. An omen, thought Pdraigh. Taxis are almost impossible to get in the city. He caught the drivers eye, raised his eyes as in a question. The driver nodded and Pdraigh got in. As he settled he told himself that he deserved the extravagance and, if he got the driver to stop at the end of the road, his wife would never know.

“Where to” asked the driver. Pdraigh gave his address.

“Had a tough day then?” the driver asked with a twinkle in his eye, implicitly referring to the fact that he had picked him up from the pub in the early evening.

“Please no more questions”, was his thought, but instead, looking out the window, he said quietly

“You could say that.”

“The Shelbourne Hotel” the hotel operator answered

“Could you connect me with room 342, please?”

“Ah, a most charming man. And are you phoning from some benighted, far-off land as well”

“Dublin, Ireland”, responded Pádraigh.

“Indeed, sir.” There was a something of an emphasis on the ‘indeed’ Pádraigh thought. “Putting you through right away, sir”.

“Thank you”, said Pádraigh, struck by the fact that even the telephone operator was aware of the guest in room 342. There was a pause, a click and then he could hear the phone ringing.

“Hello”.

Pádraigh recognised the voice.

“It’s Pádraigh here. We met on Monday in Ryans on Parkgate Street.”

“I have been expecting your call. How are you?”

“Well, I suppose. A lot has happened since we spoke. And I thank you for that.”

“It was a pleasure.”

“It is OK to ring you – I’m not interrupting?”

“No, It’s fine. My work for the day finished about an hour ago, I took a pleasant stroll through Trinity College and have been invited to supper later on. If you would like to take our conversation a little further I’d be delighted to talk.”

“That would be great.”

“So, what’s happened”?

“I did it. They agreed that the office should remain in Dublin!”

“Well done. That’s good news”

“It’s not all good but it is for the most part. And it is not finally agreed yet, but it should be with the CEO behind it.”

“Give me the whole story”

“I called the CEO – I’m to call him Jack now, apparently – on Tuesday morning in his hotel and he asked me to meet him at the golf club in Howth after his game. I had about twenty minutes to persuade him of my plan as we drove to the airport. He bought the idea that the creative bit would probably be lost if we were merged into the bigger organisation. In a nutshell this is the plan: we get to stay here as a department - and this is one of the less good things – reporting into Vincent Perry, I think I mentioned him”

“I remember.”

“We will have our own budget and we have to turn a profit by the end of next year.”

“Twelve months.”

“Yea, a bit challenging. By the way, this is all dependant on them signing-off the completed business plan at the end of next week.”

“That’s not much time either.”

“No, and if I had not thrown away my briefcase...”

The man laughed softly. He asked:

“That all sounds pretty good.”

“There are two problems though. One is working with Perry Vincent...”

“Your rival, of course. And the other?”

“He wants me to run it.”

“Congratulations. Hold on, why is that a problem?”

“Because I have no idea how to do it, no idea of all the different aspects of running a business, of HR, Finance, Tax. I don’t know. Marketing.”

“So you say. The CEO obviously thinks you can.”

“That’s exactly what my wife said.”

“A wise and perceptive woman.”

“Except that she followed it with that bloody meaningless platitude ‘just be yourself’.

The man laughed again

“Yes, people do say that” he said, “and maybe there’s something in it. Are you going to take it on?”

“I’d look really foolish if I didn’t – and I have already told the guys in the office.”

“How did they respond?”

“Mixed, very mixed. Everyone’s pleased that we have a stay of execution and a chance to make it work in the long run but some people...I think they’re a bit unsure about me.”

“In what way?”

“I don’t think they see me as a leader – I don’t really see myself as a leader.”

There was a pause in the conversation

“Do you think you could be a leader? The man asked after a while.

There was another pause in the conversation.

“Yes. I don’t know. Probably. I’d need a lot of help.”

“Do you know what kind of help you would need?”

“No idea. There must be a course or something but I don’t have the time.”

“If you’re interested I think I can help.”

“Of course I am. But how?”

“By continuing these conversations. It so happens that I’ll be here in Dublin quite a bit over the coming year and well, Guinness goes down best in company, I’ve discovered.”

1. Pdraigh: pronounced Paw-rig, sometimes Paw-drig the Irish for Patrick
2. Snug: a small partitioned space in which, in times gone by, women could sit separate from the men
3. Refers to a well-known Guinness advertisement in which a surfer appears, apparently making his way through a wave that becomes the foam head of a pint. Christy Moore, a legendary Irish musician, famously had a line in a song

“but I never could work out

How yer man stood up on the surf board

After thirteen pints of stout’

4. Tom Wolfe: author of *The Painted Word* asks whether such a squiggle might constitute art
5. Howth: a headland north of Dublin quite close to the airport