



# PEELING ORANGES

*"I had to love myself in, I highly recommend it."*  
Gabriel Byrne

JAMES  
LAWLESS

As a kid I kept thinking the insurance man was my father. Not that I knew him mind (I only met him the once), but I heard him often enough. I can remember my mother's voice pleading with him. Was it over money? We weren't poor, although my father – my real father that is – was dead. He had been a diplomat, so he didn't exactly leave us destitute. But I got it into my head that my mother hadn't the money to pay the insurance man and he sought payment in other ways. I should say at this stage that my mother was an uncommonly beautiful woman. Everyone's mother is beautiful I know in the eyes of her offspring, but Mam's beauty was universally acknowledged. When in her prime, her bright blue eyes and svelte figure attracted many suitors which, apart from the insurance man, included medical students, members of the *corps diplomatique* and even an IRA man. The last mentioned was a friend of her older brother, Tomás.

She found out that Uncle Tomás was a member of the IRA one day when, as a young girl, she was tidying the house for Muddy (my grandmother) and discovered his revolver in a hollowed-out book. It's in my late father's study now among real books, like a sort of heirloom.

She tried to deny or at least play down any republican involvement later in her life. However, she always had a soft spot for Michael Collins and frequently spoke of the waste of such a 'fine strap of a man'. All this of course happened before she settled down and married the diplomat, Patrick Foley. Well, not that she really did settle down.

With the insurance man there was shouting and arguing and a familiarity not common for mere commercial transactions – that's probably why I thought he was my father; well, I had no role model to go by. My real father died when I was two, or so I'm told.

I should point out that the shouting was on the man's part, for my mother was gentle and rarely raised her voice. I was very close to her, at least I thought I was. As the only male member in the family I felt my role was to protect her. I went into the room once when the insurance man was berating her and she was in tears. I saw a giant before me. I remember big black boots, very shiny. And when I looked up I saw this bushy red beard which frightened me. Beards were for hiding behind. Santa only wore a beard so that children wouldn't recognise him, but he took it off with his boots and his outfit when he went home. Every kid knew that. Beards were for big occasions. Beards were not for ordinary things like insurance collecting.

He fell silent when I came into the room. He was taken aback. Then he smiled at me, but when he tried to pat me on the head, I lifted a poker from the fireplace and lunged at him.

‘What have you done to my mother?’ I shouted.

He fended off the blows and held both my arms tightly, rendering them impotent, left hanging like the words in the gunbook, and the poker fell to the ground.

‘Someday when I’m bigger I’ll kill you, you bastard.’

‘Now now bastard Derek, what a word coming from *an buachaill beag*.’

At least I think he said that.

All this is so far back in time that it seems a fabrication. But my attempted assault of him is vivid. Mam refused to talk to me about the incident; she tried to pass it off as nothing. She said that I had too fertile an imagination. She said she was not well that day and Mr Counihan was simply trying to console her. When I said he had a loud way of consoling people, she gave me one of her withering looks which ended the matter.

Ever since then I realised that my mother and I were really not close at all, and soon after that incident I was sent off to boarding school in the country.

The cloistered world of boarding schools engenders a strained socialisation in students (and I suppose in staff as well). One is often forced into the company of people with whom one has little or nothing in common. The loudest ethos (often the voice of a bully) predominates. I never subscribed to the notion of *having* to get on with *everyone*, because man is a social being etc. To me it implied that everyone was the same, that there was no such thing as individuality, difference or freedom of choice in a person. Such qualities were suppressed (often viciously by ‘social man’) on the grounds that they constituted anti-social behaviour. But in my solitary studies I discovered that accomplishments in human endeavour were achieved by individuals, often against collective, social pressure.

The mundane reality, however, was that I carried a feeling of insecurity with me wherever I went: in my satchel, in my hurley stick, in my voice when I had to speak or read aloud. Trust is bred in an environment of love and stability. I missed out somewhere on the skill of trusting people. My pen was the only instrument that flowed freely, as if doubts themselves sought outlets through ink. I did quite well academically, particularly at history, for which I won the school gold medal.

Some of my scholastic peers were also diplomats’ children, but I didn’t feel at one with them. I tried many times to tell my mother that I wasn’t really a diplomat’s child at all. I mean Patrick was dead, and both she and I were in Ireland all the time since. It seemed a cruel form of justice to me that I should see my mother less frequently than other boys whose parents were stationed

abroad. I did not mix well. I frequently took off to the library rather than have to engage even in mere phatic communication.

We queued for sweets on Friday evenings. And on Sundays I got a double supply because I was not one of those pupils who went home at weekends. Sweets were good. Sweets could mollify that heartsinking gloom that suffused empty dormitories on damp Sunday evenings where every sound had its echo.

I remember my first year boarding, the school hired a projector. It rented the films, *Mise Éire* and *The Mark of Zorro*. It was always two films in those days; that's why *Zorro* was allowed, even though it was a foreign film. Raffle tickets were used for admission. I got the number eleven.

In my class there was a small, skinny fellow with a snub nose which accounted for his nickname of Pug. He resented me because I kept to myself, because I refused to bow down to him or join his gang, and also perhaps because I had got first in the class in the history examination.

He came strutting along the corridor one day flanked by a couple of his cronies. I greeted them in Irish as was the custom.

'Here's the historian.' They taunted in English.

'The piss-in-the-bed.'

'What have you got for us, swot?'

They pushed me against the wall and forced me to turn out my pockets. A brown paper bag and my ticket fell to the ground. One of the cronies opened the bag.

'*Jelly Babies*. He's got *Jelly Babies*.'

These were not the school sweets but sweets my mother had sent from Muddy's shop.

'Don't you know English sweets are not allowed?' Pug said. 'We'll do the historian a favour. We'll swallow the evidence so he won't be found out.'

They twisted my arm behind my back. 'Say thank you,' said Pug with a *Jelly Baby* dangling from his mouth. He saw the ticket on the ground. 'Legs 11.' He tore the ticket in two. 'Just one leg now.'

'I'll get you for this,' I said.

Pug smiled. 'After school in the football field.'

I wanted to run away. But there is nowhere to run in a boarding school except into a field. All power left my body as *Pug* knocked me down and held me in a half nelson until I submitted. And it's only now in hindsight that I know why I submitted. It wasn't that he was stronger than me. I knew the fear was there all along but I could never pinpoint the cause of it. And there it was staring me in the face all the time. It's what happens when you don't feel loved. You

feel you're standing on one leg.

I also learned that day why I liked history. It provided a cover. It let you off the hook. You could project your personal fears into the national psyche. You could blame other races for your own shortcomings. And nobody need ever know.

I never got to see the films. I was told by a teacher to go away and be more careful with my ticket in future. I saw re-enactments of *Zorro* all right, on classroom desks with rulers as swords, and for a while some pupils went around marking Z on copy books and walls. Some of them even made cardboard masks.

Pug met me again. He wore a mask, but it was easy to see it was him. He wanted to fill me in on what the film was about. It was a shame I wasn't able to go. He had a blade. The cronies opened my shirt and held my mouth, and Pug cut the letter Z on my chest.

I didn't cry. There wasn't really any pain. It was just a superficial cut. I kept my handkerchief pressed against it to save my shirt. It would stop bleeding if I stayed long enough in the library.

I looked up my first Spanish word, *zorro* for 'fox' at the back of a dictionary. It was a funny way to start learning a language, from back to front. It reminded me of our history teacher saying to us that we should learn history backwards because we leave school before we get to the present.