Protected

A short story by Art Kavanagh

I'm the man who put Gregory Connell away for fourteen years. No, that won't do. Let me see if I can't be a bit more precise. The truth has become—belatedly, I'll admit—of overriding importance to me. After decades of deceit and evasion, a time has come when I find I need to record the events in which I've taken part, and my unique perspective on them, with total accuracy. This account is going to contain nothing but the truth, otherwise there'd be no point in writing it. Anything less than absolute precision would be of no use to me or anyone else. "I'm the man who put Gregory Connell away" simply isn't up to scratch. This is better:

I'm the man without whose evidence Greg Connell would probably never have been convicted. If not for me, he'd almost certainly still be in business, still extracting his substantial illegitimate tribute from the gross domestic product of our pleasant, put-upon little land. I played my part, and it was a necessary, if far from sufficient, condition.

There! Already, we've gone from "I put him away" to "I played my part". That's what accuracy and precision will do to you. So, this is going to be a duller read than the tale I'd have written twelve years ago. Of course, *that* tale would never have been written. As indeed it wasn't.

The key to understanding Greg is to recognize that he was

Al Capone in reverse. What every schoolchild knows about Capone is that the federal authorities of the United States could never get enough evidence to convict him of murder, so they were obliged to settle for tax evasion instead.

Greg, conversely, was a man whose *raison d'être* was the evasion of taxes, duties and imposts of every kind. His particular skill was in VAT carousel fraud, a crime which by its very nature has complexity built in. It involves a web of transactions between a large number of trading companies, ideally spread across several European countries. Greg, who has an IQ over 140, revelled in the complexity. He devised a structure even more labyrinthine than was strictly necessary and the full details of which were held in just one place—his head. Even a jury composed exclusively of accountants could never have been expected to follow it. Ultimately, the combined forces of the Criminal Assets Bureau, the Garda Fraud Office and the Director of Public Prosecutions had to content themselves with an indictment (and in due course a conviction) for conspiracy to murder. For that they needed me—their star witness.

When I gave evidence against Greg, I had already come to an agreement with the men who ran the Irish witness protection programme under which my old name would be discarded as I left the precincts of the court. This was not a fact which I or the witness protection people wanted to make public. The judge granted an application by prosecuting counsel for an order which forbade the mention of that old name in news reports. The papers and the tv news all used the same formula, without variation. Details, they said, were being withheld "to protect [my] identity". I had plenty of time to scrutinize the shades of meaning of that peculiar phrase. What does it mean to have an identity, and what methods (legitimate or ill) can one use to protect it? I'll try to answer the first question first.

I think we can agree that "identity" is a slippery, not to say downright ambiguous, concept. That's the first obstacle in the path of my aspiration to total truth. The more I think about it, the more persuaded I am that it is simply the attempted fusion of two really quite incompatible concepts. On the one hand, our identity is what makes us distinct, unique. The sense in which there is only *one* of me and this is it, as in identity papers. A mélange of disparate human characteristics which go to make up a single individual who is entirely distinct from every other similar assemblage of characteristics in existence, or which has ever existed.

But on the other, it's what I share with the collective I *identify* with: the nation, the racial group, speakers of a particular dialect, the oppressed or privileged minority. It is that wonderful self-contradiction: a shared distinctiveness. To put it another way, it couldn't possibly be something real or solid. It's an illusion, a seductive one.

I dare say it looks like I'm deliberately missing the point. Not a bit of it. Of course I know that the phrase "to protect his identity" is a piece of linguistic flim-flam, the elision of two ideas which the prosecuting authorities don't want the public to think too carefully about. "To protect his identity" balances entirely on the precarious and unstable midpoint between two quite separate concepts. In reality, the thing that was being protected was my anonymity, and what was being done to my identity was its concealment. But it's best for public confidence in the system of criminal justice that attention should be averted from the possibility that the witness giving sworn testimony might have something to conceal, not least the answer to the question "who is this person"?

I've no wish to be faux naïf: I know very well how the weaselly expression, "to protect his identity" came to be so useful to prosecutors and journalists. My point is merely that by adopting it so enthusiastically they may be revealing more than

they mean to. The obfuscation hints at a deeper truth. And, of course, there's one sense of "identity" in which the term is 100% accurate. The authorities doubtless hoped that by withholding my name they'd be able to keep me *in one piece*, at least as long as my evidence was useful. Staying in one piece was my priority too. Luckily for me, it was soon after the Irish state had set up its first witness protection programme that the Fraud Squad began to investigate Greg.

I'm not someone who particularly values loyalty, least of all in myself. My initial wariness when asked to inform on Greg had less to do with a distaste for betrayal—if the subject of the investigation had been any other of my criminal acquaintances I wouldn't have hesitated—than with the personal affection and friendship I felt for him. That and a keen sense of self-preservation. At least the detectives had been able to offer something to assuage my second concern.

As is well known, the Irish witness protection programme was set up as a consequence of the murder of the journalist, Veronica Guerin. After a trial in 2001, the newspapers published some extraordinary pictures of one of the gang members changing his shirt outside the court. He had just given evidence against his former accomplices and was about to acquire a new identity. Some journalists began to ask exactly to whom the state was offering its protection. There was a minor public outcry, maybe a little less restrained than usual. The new scheme wasn't wound up but the it faded from public view. That, I'd thought at the time, was as it should be. Witness protection is a difficult thing to achieve in the glare of publicity. When my own time came to avail of the programme, I was glad that its profile was so much lower than it had been.

Though we'd been nodding acquaintances before, I'd really got to know Greg in the mid-70s, when we'd both been

students at Roscommon Regional Technical College. He was well on track to become an accountant, I was spending a couple of years doing a more general Certificate in Business Studies. I'd already decided before the end of the first year that Business Studies had been a mistake and that I was going to Galway to take a degree in English lit, but I ended up staying in the Regional for the second year and getting my Certificate. That was largely Greg's doing. He was planning to get a few years' experience in an accountancy department before setting up in business on his own. He'd be delighted to have me on the payroll but, by the time he'd be ready, I'd have been a few years out of UCG, years which I'd most likely spend teaching the poems of Yeats's later period to secondary school students. Where was the rush? I should finish my Certificate, and only then go to Galway.

Greg had been 100% right. UCG, or more precisely English lit, had been a terrible disappointment. I'd done *Heartbreak House* for the Leaving and entertained the belief that I'd like to know more about the writings of George Bernard Shaw. Detailed study of any author's work is tantamount to making the intimate acquaintance of your heroes. Notwithstanding his socialism, Shaw turns out to have been a certifiable fruitcake, with preposterously unscientific notions about evolution and a weakness for the "thought" of Henri Bergson. But he was only the greatest of several let-downs. Donne, the author of that rebarbative, ostensibly libertine, open-minded poetry, was either an inflexible Calvinist or an unprincipled careerist. (Like most people, I find careerism pardonable only in those few who succeed at it, and not even in all of those.) Spenser was the literary forbear of Frank Herbert (or, worse, L Ron Hubbard). George Eliot and Henry James compounded the sin of unreadability with length. Even Dickens was too prolific to be consistently good, and had in any case been all but ruined for me by atrocious television adaptations. English literature was

revealed to be a vast, moth-eaten, unmusical fraud.

My disillusionment notwithstanding, I left Galway with a borderline first in my English degree. I believed, without much in the way of evidence, that the thing which pushed me onto the borderline from 2:1 territory was an extended essay in which I argued that Iago's "motiveless malignity" was psychologically more credible than a consistent, "relatable" explanation of his conduct would have been. Not that "relatable" was the word I used—I'd never even heard it at the time—but I can't remember my exact phrasing. With that degree, I could have gone on to do a Master's; the obvious alternative being to get a HDipEd and become a teacher. Indeed, I started the HDip but more to fill in time than with any long term aim to make a career in the education system. I got in contact with Greg and reminded him of his offer of employment. At that point, he was a recently qualified accountant and his plan was to work for a couple of years in an established firm in one of the larger towns around Dublin, accumulating both experience and a certain amount of start-up capital. He urged me to be patient, so I pressed on with my teaching qualification and eventually got a job in a secondary school in north County Meath.

In my experience, no member of the profession is ever happy to admit to being a bad teacher. I've said that my story will be accurate and truthful, not that it will be exhaustive. I doubt my ability to be both comprehensive and honest about my time as a teacher, so I'm just going to pass over it in silence. Its only relevance to later events, in any case, is by way of explanation for my state of mind when at last Greg was able to make good on his offer. My English degree, impressive though it was (at least to me) didn't particularly qualify me for any distinct role in Greg's burgeoning electrical goods business (mainly wholesale but with a substantial retail outlet in the eastern part of a midlands county), so he took me on with the

job title Marketing and Development Manager.

From childhood, Greg had shown an impressive talent for what, now that he was a businessman, it was appropriate to call "strategic thinking". There was no doubt that he had the vision thing but he confided in me that he worried his training as an accountant might have channelled that vision too narrowly into a bean-counting mindset. His intention was that my supposedly liberal education would tend to counteract his more rigidly financial approach to the business.

Since I'm dead set on telling the truth here, I think it's important to record that Greg did not set out from the beginning to be a crook. The business was legitimately, if unspectacularly, profitable and Greg took visible satisfaction from its incremental, organic growth. Year by year, the enterprise consolidated its position and, while running it didn't come close to stretching Greg's formidable intellect, as far as anyone could tell he was happy and fulfilled. I was the one who chafed.

I was uncomfortably conscient of the fact that my input wasn't necessary to the success of the enterprise. I was being carried, not pulling my weight; I was taking out more than I contributed, which was approximately nothing. In my newfound commitment to truthfulness, I feel obliged to note the fact that I can't say why this should have bothered me, given that it clearly didn't bother Greg. I suppose it left me feeling that my position was precarious. If there should ever be a downturn in the business—and surely the one certainty about any kind of economic activity is that it is cyclical—if ever it became necessary to trim excess fat, then I would be the obvious candidate for trimming. On top of that, having little or nothing to do, I was understandably bored. But most importantly of all, my self-esteem was at stake.

Confronted with the daily reminder that Greg was a shrewd

and capable businessman, it wasn't long before I began to look for ways to validate my own claim to significance. I wanted to amount to something. The electrical goods supplier was obviously thriving without my contribution so, objectively, the best course of action would have been to resign my sinecure and go and do something completely different. Unfortunately for me, I had the unshakeable feeling that I wasn't qualified to do anything other than teach, an activity for which I'd already convincingly demonstrated an utter lack of aptitude. The one thing I've always been very good at is reading. That's why I'd believed in the first place that an English literature degree would have been a good use of my talents.

Following my disappointing encounter with the canon of great works in English, I continued to read, of course, only now I read anything *except* literature. History and biography, of course, up to a point. But I've never really been able to get my head around history. In fact, it's indistinguishable from literature, except that it works on a greatly expanded scale. The behaviour of monarchs, governments, societies and peoples are just those of individual fictional characters writ large: the occlusion (and mixture) of motives, the shifting of alliances, the pursuit of an abysmally understood approximation of self-interest, the determined (if presumably unconscious) eschewal of rational motivation—they're all of a piece whether the arena is the the drawing-room or 16th-century Europe, and all equally incomprehensible to me. Most biography tends to suffer from the opposite problem. Motives are unpersuasively clarified, explanations offered which are too rational to seem plausible to anyone who has observed actual human behaviour. Subjects are cast either as highly principled persons of irreproachable character or as selfishly cynical schemers without a redeeming feature. It wasn't all that long before I concluded that history and biography have little to recommend them over the merest literature. But I still needed to read.

Popular or "genre" fiction helped to fill the gap for a while—actually for longer than, in retrospect, I believe I had any right to expect. Certain popular genres—romance, science fiction and YA for a start—had no appeal for me at all. In fact, I was effectively restricted to crime and spy fiction; and within crime, I had no patience with serial killers and little tolerance for "procedurals". In a strange way, my release from the obligation to read literature, history and biography, combined with the frankly formulaic character of the low quality fiction I *was* reading, freed me to read anything and everything, and I did just that. I read trade magazines and technical manuals, IRC threads and newsgroups. I read how-to books from earlier decades, which offered untestable solutions to problems which no longer existed—which were, in many cases, no longer conceivable. I even read some of Greg's accountancy protocols and the tax code. I've never really doubted that it was some synthesis of this misdirected, heterogeneous reading that led me to the idea.

For the first few years, the mainstay of the business had been washing machines, fridges, cookers, stereos and televisions, but recently there'd been something of a shift, and mobile phones had assumed a disproportionate importance in our turnover. Greg adjusted nimbly to the changed market. Unfortunately for him, it hadn't stopped changing. As long as a substantial number of people wanted to own their phones outright, Greg could make money from them. Technological development and economies of scale even brought the prices down for a while so the market remained hospitable. Lower prices meant higher volumes and the business maintained its profitability, more or less. However, as the manufacturers learned to add features—cameras, media players, email—and started to push prices up instead of consistently lowering them, more and more people discovered that they were content to get their phones on contract from the telecomms companies.

Greg found his market suddenly and irreversibly shrinking.

But he'd lost none of his entrepreneurial agility. Noting that the market outside of Europe and North America had very different characteristics, he set about putting in place an export operation. It was then that I saw the opportunity to make myself instrumental in the continued success of the business. By all means, I urged, let the phones end up in Africa or south Asia but not before we had fully extracted every scrap of the value they still retained within the EU. I dare say you're shocked. I, the person who would eventually shop Greg to the authorities, am the same person who had encouraged him to get into VAT fraud in the first place. That, I'm sure you're thinking, sounds very like entrapment. Well all I can say—and remember I've undertaken to be completely honest with you—is that it wasn't like that. Not at all.

It wasn't until many years later that I reluctantly concluded that the only way I could avoid going to prison was to cooperate in bringing Greg's career as a VAT fraudster to an end. When I first urged him to embark on that career, I didn't foresee or intend that my advice would lead to his arrest and conviction. Circumstances changed several times in the intervening period and consistency in the face of changing circumstances is the utmost folly. There was no intentional link between my initial luring of Greg into crime and my ultimate betrayal.

For a start, it isn't exactly true that I lured him. I was the first to have the idea but at that stage it was far from being a detailed plan. I'd been reading, somewhere, about VAT carousel fraud and how it was depleting the VAT revenues in several European countries. Naturally, the publishers of the article wanted to shock and entertain their readership without providing an instruction manual for aspiring copycats, so the piece was light on details. After reading it, I had a vague understanding of how the fraud worked but I certainly wouldn't

have been able to put the pieces in place to carry it out. Somewhere else, I stumbled upon a suggestion that mobile phones might be the ideal commodity on which to base this kind of fraud. All I did was put two vague ideas together to form the sketchy outline of a proposal.

I hadn't been expecting Greg to seize on it but he surprised me. Several years later, he was to tell me that my idea came just at a moment when he'd begun to feel at once bored by running the business and worried about its prospects of survival. Cashflow was good and margins were substantial but he had overinvested in mobile phones just as the market for them was about to change its nature. That needn't have been a problem if he'd still been full of enthusiasm and fire. My suggestion provided a glimpse of the prospect of recovering the capital he'd tied up in the phones. For once in my life, my input could be described as timely.

As I've said, as yet that input consisted of just the vague outline of a plan. But Greg was the detail man and the task of designing a scheme was exactly the challenge he needed at that point. He'd have to balance illegality and commercial uncertainty on the one hand with security mechanisms and cut-outs which allowed him to manage the risks to himself, his business and his family on the other. Eventually, he was to carry all the details of the complex scheme in his head but that would come later, only after it had become a reality. For now, as long as no overt act existed to convert his grandiose plotting into an actual conspiracy, he worked on the backs of sheets of waste paper, recovered from the recycling boxes.

He treated the planning as an intellectual exercise, almost a game, emitting a little grunt of satisfaction whenever yet another element of the design slotted into place. The planning took up the bulk of his spare time over three or four weeks. Then, he gathered up all the sheets of waste paper, opened the top of the range and shoved them in. In the following days,

he got in touch with accountants and lawyers in Holland, Italy, Spain and probably a few countries I didn't know about to set up a string of companies whose main object was the trading in electrical and electronic goods and which immediately registered for VAT.

Greg never told me the details of how these companies operated. I assumed that he installed local management who carried on a legitimate business. Where he got the money to do this while so much of his capital was tied up in the mobile phones is something I can only guess at. My ignorance of these details is one of the reasons I wasn't able to point the police in the right direction when the time came, so they had to investigate him for conspiracy to murder instead. What I do know beyond doubt is that, in a little over two years after the burning of the waste paper, Greg was the indisputably the preeminent VAT fraudster in Ireland. He retained that position throughout the late 1980s and all of the 90s. He seemed unassailable.

In those days, you'll remember, Ireland was beset by paramilitary groups on the one hand and vicious drug-dealing gangsters on the other. The former had insatiable fund-raising requirements, while the latter combined limitless greed and ambition with moronic thuggery. These two groups included the most dangerous men in the country. Greg's enterprise, which was at once phenomenally profitable and devoid of any legal protection, was a conspicuous target from their point of view.

I happened to be present when one of these groups confronted Greg. It was a stormy winter's night and the range in Greg's kitchen was stoked up but his four visitors declined to remove their dark overcoats (or even to turn down their collars) and showed no sign of finding the heat oppressive. One, the

leader, sat at the kitchen table and motioned to the man to his left to join him. The other two remained standing, in the background. The men weren't obviously armed, though a great deal could have been hidden under those large coats. Although they kept their collars up they seemed to take no great care to avoid being identified. There were no balaclavas. Only the leader gave a name—Pádraig Mac Thomáis—which was surely an alias.

Greg took the initiative. "I hope you don't mind if we skip the preliminaries. I know what you want. You're here to look for a share in my business. I don't need to know how large a share. Perhaps the lion's share. That's immaterial, because I'm here to tell you that you can't have it."

"Is that a fact?", Mac Thomáis intoned with slow menace. "Because I'm here to tell *you* some things you might not be aware of."

"I can't be intimidated. My business can't be run without the knowledge that I have up here. Company names, trading relationships, the ownership at any given moment of a particular consignment of goods. Prices, VAT reclaim amounts. None of that is written down. Without what I've got in my head, there is no business."

"Some of it would have to be written down."

"The individual companies keep the records they're required to by law. Those records are complete and accurate and all above board, up to the moment when it's time for one company to cease trading, leaving a substantial amount of VAT unpaid. But good luck piecing all those details, even if you could assemble the right ones, into an overall scheme. The tax authorities of six or seven countries, working together, can't do it and they have at least one advantage over you."

"What's that?"

"They want to shut the fucking thing down. It's of no use to you unless you can keep it in operation. Without my willing

cooperation, you haven't a hope in hell of doing that. And my willing cooperation is something you won't be getting. Just so we're clear."

Greg paused, giving the other man a chance to assess his seriousness. Then he went on: "And don't even think about threatening me or mine. Do you suppose I haven't anticipated this approach, haven't prepared for it? I'm ready to abandon all of this in an instant. We'll be gone and I promise you you'll never find us."

Greg had remained standing during this exchange. He'd been leaning forward, with his two palms resting on the edge of the table, opposite Mac Thomáis. Now, he stood upright and went to open one of the fitted cupboards along the back wall of the kitchen. The two standing paramilitaries tensed, expecting action, but Mac Thomáis motioned them to relax. Greg reached inside the cupboard and brought out a bottle of Jameson.

"And now that we've got the fundamentals out of the way," he resumed, "what was it you lads wanted to talk about? I'm all ears. Colm," he nodded to me, "Six glasses, there, if you wouldn't mind."

The paramilitaries stayed for a couple of drinks but didn't linger over them. The conversation was inconsequential. Neither Greg nor Mac Thomáis had a penchant for small talk but Greg, having put his point across, was happy to make the effort. After the visitors had left, Greg poured each of us a third drink and put the bottle back in the cupboard, though what was left in it at that stage would barely fill a thimble.

"That was impressive", I said. "I'd never have thought they'd take 'No' for an answer so easily."

"I don't think for a moment that they will."

"Then what …?"

"That was just the opening gambit. I was making sure they know I won't be a pushover. But they'll be back all right."

"And then?"

"Then I'll play it by ear, like I did tonight."

Greg could presumably have concluded a deal with either the paramilitaries or a gang under which he'd pay for "protection" from, in effect, the attentions of the other group. Instead, he played them off against the other, telling each that he was paying the bulk of his contributions to the other but that he would also make a smaller payment to them as a form of additional insurance. He boasted to me that by splitting the payment he saved more than a third on what it would otherwise cost him. I thought that this was an irresponsibly risky strategy and that he'd be much better off dealing exclusively with the disciplined and predictable paramilitaries and cutting out the volatile, atavistic rabble. But it was important to Greg to make it clear that he no more supported the violent methods of the paramilitaries than he did the socially corrosive activities of the criminals. It was a point of pride with him to keep his contribution to both sets of coffers as low as he possibly could. I suspected that it wasn't just the methods of the paramilitaries that he hated but equally their aims. I tried to draw him out on the subject.

"It's a false distinction," was the most I could get from him. "The aims and the methods are two sides of the same coin. I don't even believe 'aim' is the right word. Can you call something an 'aim' if it can't be achieved? And it's from the impossibility of achievement that the violence arises—an expression of frustration in the face of intractable reality."

He wasn't prepared to say any more than that. It was, of course, Greg's dealings with militant republicans on the one hand and and vicious gangsters on the other which made it possible for me to persuade the authorities that my life would be at risk unless I went into witness protection. The small matter of the conspiracy to murder Bernard Sheehy apart, Greg had never been known to use violence. On the contrary, he

always made clear his distaste for it.

After Greg's conviction, I first went to live in Peterborough. I hadn't before then spent any extended period in England—or, indeed outside Ireland. I'd been on holidays in Spain and Scotland and spent a few weekends in London and one in Rome and that had been the extent of my foreign travel. Peterborough was more of a surprise than I was expecting but I was younger then and more resilient and I'm not going to claim that I found the experience exactly a shock. Let's say a mild jolt. I thought I knew English life quite well from television—from "The Sweeney" and "George & Mildred", as I put it to one English acquaintance, half joking. If I'd wanted to be less facetious, I'd have said "Last of the Summer Wine". England was familiar but foreign at the same time, and my sense of not-quiteness was reinforced by the near-absence of a language barrier.

Though it was only twelve years ago, it's hard for me to think myself back into my state of mind at the time. During my years as a business student, I'd developed an interest in the Irish legal system, which was one of the subjects on the course. When I arrived in England, I was worried about moving from a republic with a written constitution, a more sophisticated and democratic electoral system than first-past-the-post, and higher courts willing to protect individual rights and check abuses of institutional power, to a monarchy governed by vague constitutional conventions and the remnants of the royal prerogative, with courts whose power was limited by the principle of parliamentary sovereignty. Ludicrous as it might seem in retrospect, I worried that I was migrating from a society which was free if manifestly imperfect to one where the people were subjects rather than citizens and I would not even be the former. As I said, it's hard to put myself back in that frame of mind.

If I learned a lesson from my experience, it must be that

constitutional forms are poor indicators of the degree of openness and freedom of a society. Freedom and openness are properties, not of governmental structures, but of something as nebulous as "culture". The United Kingdom's trappings of monarchical and aristocratic rule were at odds with its vibrant culture, whereas Ireland's constitutional arrangements—admirable though they seemed to me at the time—made little impact on its cautious, wary and suspicious mindset. It wasn't till my recent return that I was finally forced to accept the second half of of that juxtaposition. Stated as baldly as I've put it here, it seems obvious, undeniable and by no means a surprise. Clearly, I had more invested than I realized in not believing it, because being forced to recognize the truth hit me with the force of a physical shockwave. It is deeply unsettling to find that you have no choice but to accept that you've been deceiving yourself for most of your adult life. After a few weeks back in the country, I still haven't accepted that the Ireland I've come back to is a real place and that I am really in it. I've repeatedly had to dismiss the notion that it's a distorted simulacrum from which I'm separated by a transparent dome on which I slide around, fruitlessly and out of control.

It's from this experience that my determination arises to tell the complete and absolute truth about Greg's trial and conviction, and my role in both. I've had enough self-deception to last me the rest of my life. And then some. So where was I? Greg's known opposition to violence, in all its forms, wasn't it? Strange that he, of all people, should be guilty of conspiracy to murder. Again, as with the original move into VAT fraud, I have to take the credit for nudging him in a direction he wouldn't have followed of his own accord.

As I've mentioned, I wasn't present for Greg's first encounter with the criminal gang. He didn't tell me what had gone on, but I imagined that it wasn't a lot different from his confrontation with the paramilitaries. If there were subsequent

meetings, they also occurred without my participation. It would be several months before Greg confided in me that he was a lot less comfortable about his dealings with the gangsters than he was about the republicans. I'd been right, he conceded, the latter were predictable and seemed to make a point of ensuring that the relationship went smoothly with minimal opportunity for disruption. The criminals, on the other hand, made him uneasy.

From what I could gather, the position of the guy in charge was not all that secure. He had staved off a challenge but only by agreeing that they'd have to bring in more money. Unfortunately for the boss, this coincided with a period of increased police surveillance, so the demand couldn't be satisfied by importing and selling more drugs or any other kind of high profile criminal operation. One possibility that remained open was to extract more money from the businesses who relied on their protection. Greg had been a reluctant payer in the first place. An unexpected increase in the tariff, with no guarantee that that would be the end of it, prompted him to reevaluate the deal.

"I'm not in business for their benefit," he told me. "If they make it so it's not worth my while to go on, then I won't. I could be living the good life in Spain, or Florida or Australia. I don't need their fucking 'protection'. I don't have to sit here and take this."

"What would you do with the business?" I wanted to know. "Sell it?"

Greg had been thinking about that and had an answer ready. "I could sell the legit side. It's profitable but nothing out of the ordinary. There wouldn't be a lot of fat for the boyos to take their cut."

"And the other side?"

"Nothing to sell. No books, no transferrable knowhow. Nothing you could put into a contract for sale. I'd just quit while

I'm ahead."

"You'd be happy to do that?"

"You know me, I get bored. I've made some money, enough to be going on with. Time for a change, maybe."

"Maybe?"

"It seems the sensible move."

"But you'd be willing to consider alternatives?"

From anyone other than me he mightn't have been. I didn't have a plan to offer him off the cuff, just the glimmering of an idea. I asked him to let me think about it.

At that stage, I really didn't have more than a few vague notions, but I could see that the police concentration on the gang was to our advantage. Whatever we did, the criminals' room for manoeuvre was limited. Obviously theirs was a cash business—somebody had to come and physically collect the money from Greg. The pattern was that their guy would turn up every two weeks and browse the electrical goods. Sometimes he'd buy something small but he always went away better off than he came in. In the previous two months, it had been somebody different—I assumed that the boss was reacting to the police surveillance by using somebody who wasn't directly associated with the gang. I thought I was fairly safe in assuming that the new guy was less experienced than his predecessor.

The police who were watching Greg's "protectors" would most likely be aware of Greg's less legitimate activities too: that would explain the gangsters' interest in his business. Of course, they wouldn't have any evidence but equally they wouldn't be under any illusions as to Greg's law-abiding character. I calculated that, though I was Greg's best "known associate", any surveillance wouldn't extend as far as me. Targeting criminals is an expensive business and, if I was right in thinking that the gang boss was the bullseye, I'd be on one of the

outermost rings.

That left me free to look into the background of the gang's new collection agent. I learned that his name was Bernard Sheehy and that he was a nephew of a prominent member of the gang. Sheehy himself had no criminal record and, it seemed, no history of gang activity. He'd been called to the bar—part of some grandiose idea of his uncle's that the gang ought to have their "own" lawyers. Sheehy had responded with enthusiasm to his uncle's encouragement, studied hard, attended his dinners but, when it came to it, didn't come up with the goods for the gang. The study of law affects different people in different ways. For some, if a visit to the legislature is analogous to watching sausages being made, an in-depth, up close study of the law is more akin to being inside the sausage-making machine itself. Such people become entirely cynical about the very notion of justice. There are some, however, a surprisingly high proportion, for whom the lure of being a rule-keeper, the seduction of legitimacy, is too compelling to be resisted. Sheehy was such a person.

He wasn't fool enough to think that the gang would continue to support him after he'd turned his back on them, so he relinquished his ambition to become a noted criminal advocate and a charmer of juries, instead attempting to build up a practice in the area of personal injury. The gang, his uncle included, turned out to be more vindictive than he'd counted on. Their pressure on a select number of solicitors, coming at the same time as the introduction—at the behest of the insurance industry—of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, meant that suddenly his prospects in the law were a lot less attractive. It wasn't long before Bernard was attempting to rebuild bridges with his uncle. His rediscovered conciliatory mood came at an entirely opportune time for the gang, who needed somebody capable of evading Garda notice to continue to collect their protection money.

I pieced this together partly from following Bernard—I'd told Greg that I'd be discreet and that it would be useful to have as much information as possible about our new liaison with our "protectors". The rest I got from Law Library gossip: a couple of my classmates from UCG, no more enthusiastic than I'd been about teaching the poetry of Yeats and Heaney to feckless teenagers, had eventually made their way to the bar, where they'd found a practice marginally more lucrative than Bernard Sheehy's. Sensing that Sheehy, if he had a normal set of human emotions, was probably feeling resentful about his descent in the world at the hands of his uncle and his accomplices, I decided that there was probably nothing to be lost by approaching him direct.

I'll admit I handled it badly. As I've already said, I'm not always astute in my understanding of other people's motives. I'd read Bernard as a rule-keeper, someone who's self-image had "law abiding" inscribed at its core. I really thought the prospect of working with the police to help them close down the criminal operation which had treated him so shabbily would actually appeal to him. I know, I know … when I put it in those terms, even I have to wonder how I could have been so obtuse. Bernard was appalled.

"What kind of ungrateful fucker do you think I am?" he demanded, after I'd outlined my proposal to him. My idea was that he should avoid handing over the money he collected for a few weeks, using the fear of attracting police attention as an excuse. In the meantime, he could be talking to the police, giving them what they needed, getting the gang out of everybody's hair, including ours.

"If I tried to pull anything like that, the first thing they'd do is suspect that I was going to … you know. I'd be dead—or worse—within hours. These aren't guys who wait for their suspicions to be confirmed. Anyway, I owe them. If they've been a bit harsh in their treatment of me, it's no more than I

asked for. And Barney is my own flesh and blood. You must be crazy, thinking I'd do something like that."

Sheehy assured me that he wasn't going to tell his uncle Barney or any of the others about my approach. This wasn't purely altruism on his part—he took the view that the less he said the less likely he was to raise suspicions. In spite of my misgivings, I thought he was probably not going to say anything.

I've another discreditable admission to make: I played up my doubts when reporting on this to Greg. I can't say exactly why I did this. If there really had been a risk of Bernard's telling his uncle about my approach, that would make my misjudgment all the more catastrophic in Greg's eyes. It would have been more sensible to have tried to reassure him that there was no danger, but if anything I exaggerated the risk.

"Do we need to do anything about Sheehy?" Greg asked me.

"Like what? I can't see what we could do that wouldn't make things worse." Having aroused his anxieties, I now started to backtrack. "If the hard chaws get to hear about what I said to him, you can tell them it was just me trying to show a bit of misdirected initiative. You knew nothing about it. That has the advantage of being true. Tell them that you're handling it now and there wont't be any other attempts to undermine their—well, you know what to say."

"As Sheehy put it to you, we're dealing with people who don't wait for confirmation of their suspicions. And they'll still be suspicious, even if they believe me." He sighed. "So what do we do about this?"

"Nothing. Above all, we don't do anything that would make things worse. We hold our horses and see what happens."

"If it was anybody else we were dealing with, I'd agree with you. But you don't take chances with people like these. Talk to this Sheehy guy again. Try to make sure he hasn't said anything

to his uncle Barney or to any of their associates. And, once you're sure he hasn't—in fact, even if you're not sure—make him go away."

"Make him—?"

"Put the fear of God into him. Make him believe that he has no option but to flee the country."

"The fear of God—I don't think that's going to be able to compete with the fear of his uncle's pals. Now if—"

"If?"

"I just had a wild idea. But it was one of my wild ideas that got us into this position to start with. Forget it."

"Let me hear it anyway. I'm not going to do anything against my better judgment, but I'd like to know what all my options are."

So I told him my idea. Sheehy was already terrified of Barney's friends. He believed, rightly, that they wouldn't hesitate to kill him if they thought he was a threat. This knowledge made his situation enviably uncomplicated: all he had to do was to stay on the right side of them and make sure he gave them no grounds to suspect him. If I could persuade him that he was in danger from another angle, suddenly his life would no longer be quite so simple. Instead of a single variable, the equation would now have two.

"What would be the second variable?" Greg asked, though I had an inkling that he was way ahead of me.

"If he believed that you thought he was going to tell the gang about my conversation with him, and had decided to have him killed before he could do that."

"And you could make him believe that?" Greg didn't attempt to keep the scepticism out of his tone.

"I could—if I had, say, a surreptitious—mar dheadh—recording of you and me discussing his impending death." I let him have my goofy grin—we were just tossing around silly ideas, after all.

"No."

"Yeah. It wasn't—"

"Not you and me discussing it. On the recording. Me and somebody whose voice he doesn't recognize but whose timbre unmistakably conveys 'ruthless hitman'. You know—"

"Tadhg?"

"Tadhg."

Tadhg was Greg's brother-in-law. He was, to all appearances, a perfectly blameless and amiable individual, blessed with a vocal tone which can most accurately be described as a bass rasp. He'd have been ideal in the role of homicidal conspirator, but I'd be surprised if he had been willing to play it.

"You'd be asking him to let himself be recorded, ostensibly plotting to commit murder. I don't think he's that stupid."

"He'll trust me. After all, I'll be on the recording too. He'll know that I'd have to make sure it didn't get into the wrong hands."

"And how could you do that? You'd have to let me have a copy at least, so that I could play it to Sheehy."

"I've thought about that."

And he had, though where he'd got the time to do so, considering that I'd just now outlined my scheme, was beyond me. The recording which I was to play to Bernard would be on an iPod. By default, the software on this device wouldn't allow me to copy the audio file off its hard disk. It would also show a digital count of the number of times the recording had been played. I was to play the recording once and once only to Sheehy. Any attempt to duplicate, rerecord or copy the audio file would leave a digital trace and I'd have earned Greg's undying suspicion.

There were, of course, ways around these restrictions but they too would leave behind tell-tale indications. I had no doubt that Greg could buy the necessary technical expertise to

interpret them—if he didn't already possess it himself. And another thing: Greg claimed that he wouldn't just be relying on the default software on the iPod. He would have specialist software installed which would keep a record not only of how many times the audio track was played but also of the time at which it happened. So it wouldn't be possible, for example, to make a duplicate recording through the line-out and then play the duplicate as often as I (for example) liked.

I couldn't blame Greg for being a little suspicious of me—after all, I was the one who'd suggested that he make a recording which could potentially implicate him in plotting a serious criminal act. Far from blaming him, I was grateful to him for letting me know just how much of a mistake I'd be making if I allowed myself to fall into temptation.

So, a few days later, I met Sheehy in a quiet coffee shop. I played him the recording of Greg and Tadhg giving their best and most sinister vocal performances, having first warned him to listen carefully as it would be played only once. In spite of my warning, he wanted to hear it again. I had to insist that that wasn't possible.

"You recognized Greg's voice. You know what it means. Hearing it again isn't going to change any of that. Is it?"

He let his head sink onto the table. The earbud slipped from his right ear and a shake of his head dislodged the left. I detached the cable from the splitter and rolled it up. I put the iPod and its accessories away carefully in my small document case. "Why me?" Sheehy muttered. "I'm not the one taking his money. I just collect it."

"Because you're the one who's out in the open. Exposed. You're the low-hanging fruit. Also, you're not fully a member of the gang, but you're related to Barney by blood. So, it would be a way of sticking it to Barney without getting everybody else's backs up. You're just badly positioned. Actually, the more I think about it, the more taking you out seems like a good

tactical move. Greg hasn't been involved in physical violence before, to the best of my knowledge (which is extensive), but it looks as if he may have quite a feel for it. Your bad luck, I'm afraid."

"What am I going to do?"

"Actually, your options are as straightforward as they've always been. It's just that they keep getting less inviting."

Sheehy groaned. "I'm going to have to run."

I patted him on his miserably hunched shoulder. "As far away as you can."

Of course, Sheehy was in no actual danger from Greg, whose sole aim was to discredit him in the eyes of the gang and get him out of the picture. His former employers viewed his sudden absence with less equanimity but luckily for him he hadn't had time to take any of their money before absconding and Barney was still willing to defend his corner. So I have no reason to doubt that Bernard Sheehy got clean away. I like to think he's living a modest life in some little-visited backwater. He's probably better off.

Greg's eventual appeal against conviction was turned down, so I'd had to testify against him just the once. I was grateful for that. While my testimony included "nothing but the truth", I answered only the questions I was asked. Lawyers and judges, they don't like it if you stray off the point. He served nine years of the fourteen he was sentenced to and got out three years ago. I heard a rumour that he left the country. I'd rather not run into him, not that I think I've anything to fear from him, or any real reason to feel embarrassed. It's just that I'm not good at confrontation.

So, here I am, back in Dublin after all this time. I don't think I'm going to stay. I never actually lived in Dublin but, before I went away, I spent a lot of my spare time here and it always felt

like my town. It was its own place, separate from the rest of Ireland. Now, it feels as Irish as condoms on prescription once had. Had the place changed so much or was it my perspective that was different? I could waste a lot of time fruitlessly chewing on that question but what was the point? There was no longer anything for me here. I went for a pint in Kehoe's, which had never been one of my haunts in the old days but which was now one of the few places around Grafton Street where I could feel comfortable spending twenty minutes over a drink.

"There's a face I wasn't expecting to see!" I looked up from the screen of my phone. The man who'd spoken uttered my original name but at least he had the sense to keep his voice down.

"That name has long been retired," I told him. "Or at least made redundant."

"What are you going by now?"

"I dare say you could find out easily enough. Are you a journalist?" But as the question came out, I placed the vaguely familiar face. "No, I remember now. You were the expert who authenticated Greg's voice on the …"

"It's all right, everybody still says 'tape', though it almost never is these days. Like they say 'rewind', though there's nothing to wind. Including people who have probably never seen even a cassette in their short lives. Yes, that was an interesting case. There were artefacts on the recording suggesting that an original digital source had been duplicated by analogue methods."

"And that's unusual?"

"Not particularly but it can raise suspicions. You have to ask yourself why it was done that way."

"Are you saying it was faked?"

"Not at all. I found no evidence of splices or edits. I just wondered why the clean source had been copied the way it was."

"Gathering evidence of criminal conspiracies is a messy business. I took what I could get without making Greg suspicious. Should we be talking about this?"

"Why not? Neither of us was on the jury. He's served his sentence. The case won't be reopened." He nodded to the barman, who began to pull another pint. The recording expert swallowed what was left in his glass. "You know his businesses—the VAT fraud end—continued to operate in Europe for several years after he went to prison?"

"I don't see how that could be. Just a rumour, it must be. You know how people gossip and always assume the worst. Aren't there restrictions on phones and the internet in prison?"

"I'm not saying he ran it himself. Or even—necessarily—that it was done for his benefit."

"Sorry, but that's complete bullshit. Only Greg had the knowledge to keep it going. Nothing—literally nothing, except the legitimate stuff—was in writing. Even if Greg had told somebody, they'd need …"

"They'd need a memory as good as he had. At least as good."

"It's too far fetched. Where did you hear this, anyway?"

"I work with the CAB every now and then. There's an accountant in there who I'm friendly with. We form a sort of alliance to protect ourselves from the cops and lawyers. Well, he said that, given the way Connell ran his operations, they expected the level of European VAT carousel fraud to fall off a cliff once he was out of circulation. That isn't what happened. It tapered off gently, over six or seven years."

"Other players, seeing the gap, rushing to fill it."

"Not quite. If it had been simply that, you'd still expect some disruption. This was almost smooth."

I finished my drink but didn't call for another. "This is fascinating. But I'm afraid I don't have time to sit around speculating. We'll probably never know the answer."

"I'm quite sure we won't. Not for certain. So why not indulge me while I speculate a little? What harm can it do?"

"All right. I admit I'm curious." I gestured at the barman. "But I've a feeling I'm going to be disappointed."

"Connell can't have kept literally everything in his head, right from the planning stage. What I mean is, he wouldn't—couldn't have started out with a fully formed picture, ready to be memorized. He'd have had to try things out, see how they fitted together. If he managed to do all that mentally—"

"He didn't. There were plans, sketches. He spent weeks over them, writing on old sheets of waste paper. But as soon as the plan was complete, before he took the slightest step towards implementing it, he burned the whole lot. In the kitchen range. I saw him do it. Nothing was left, I'm certain of it."

"But suppose somebody else saw his drafts before he destroyed them. Suppose somebody was able to memorize them, maybe even make a physical copy. Photograph them, or—"

"Impossible! He barely left them out of his sight. Greg Connell was—is, I don't doubt—an extremely careful man. Nobody saw those papers long enough to work out what they were about, let alone memorize or copy them."

"You didn't need to work out what they were about, you already knew."

"All right, that's true. But I'd have needed … Are you saying you think I've got a photographic memory?"

"Have you?"

"I don't believe there's any such thing."

And that's the God's honest truth. I don't believe that anybody, even Greg, has a photographic memory. According to the proverb, the thing it's essential for a liar to have is a *good* memory, and there's no denying that, before my newfound dedication to the truth, I used to be an inveterate liar. I drained

my glass, stood up and took my coat off the back of my chair. As I was putting it on, I pronounced my last word on the subject.

"What do you think the odds are against two people with the capacity to remember all the details of Greg's scheme being present in his kitchen at around the same time? I'd say they were very long. You'd have a better chance of winning the lottery."

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