

Chapter 7 ... Anything Else is Sticking Plaster

Do what you love in the service of people who love what you do.

Steve Farber - The Radical Leap

I had just hung up the phone from my sister when it rang again. I looked at the display. It said Paul. I didn't want to talk to him right now. I wouldn't want to talk to Paul O'Shea, the bar manager at the White House even at the best of times and this certainly wasn't the best of times.

My sister, Clare had told me Ma was worse than we first thought. But it was hard to imagine her sick. The last time I had seen her she and her two friends were laughing like three teenage girls who'd skipped school for the day. Ma, Sheila and Aine told me I'd have to come up with something more shocking than The Stress Management Song. They'd become immune to that one. The time before that Ma had driven Una and me from Sleah Head to Killarney and after high tea in The Great Southern she had set off alone on the ninety-minute journey back home. Now my sister was saying that fluid was building up on Ma's lungs and even though they drained it, it could come back without warning. When she came out of hospital she would need minding.

"Ridiculous! Ma's the one who does the minding. Always has been."

But she would not be going back to Sleah Head to live alone and even in Colette's granny flat in Dublin, Ma would need constant watching. I instantly agreed to take my turn and stay with her at least one night a week once she came out of hospital. Dublin was four hours away for me and I knew ultimately I would have to move closer.

All this was rushing through my head. The phone was still ringing. Shit! I was going to have to take this call. If I didn't he'd only call back tomorrow.

"What is it, Paul?"

"Hi Dezy, remember what we spoke about a couple of weeks ago?"

Of course I remembered what we'd spoken about a couple of weeks before. Paul wanted to cut my wages. By Paul's estimates I was chasing business away from The White House bar by telling drunken idiots who fell over my piano what to do with themselves. The fact that the bar was jam-packed Monday to Thursday evening when I played there was irrelevant to Paul. I was chasing away the big drinkers and this, he claimed, was beginning to show in his books.

"So is it like this?" I asked him, "I bring you a hundred people a night when you don't even have that many on a Saturday night but because they drink in moderation you can't make money from them? You can only serve customers who require excessive doses of alcohol to carry on living? I don't need the money, Paul. I earn more from the audience than you pay me. But there is a principle at stake here."

"Exactly," Paul snapped at me, "We give you a platform to sell CDs and you put your jar around and people stuff it with cash. I've seen what you collect. The White House does that for you."

“Paul, are you by any chance peeved that I earn more than you do, you being the manager and I being a mere piano player?”

“Don’t get personal. You’re just going to have to take the cut. That’s it!”

“OK, Paul, if that’s how you feel, why don’t you just give me one week’s termination of employment notice. Put it in writing and send a copy to Michael?”

Paul agreed to that plan more readily than I expected. The Michael I was referring to was Michael Frawley, the owner of The White House, the man who had called me his ‘people magnet’ the first year I worked for him. Paul had come on board the following season to help handle the extra revenue I’d generated and from the start we had not seen eye to eye.

He built what I like to refer to as the ‘confessional box’. For the Catholics among you that’s what it looked like. It was a sort of porch inside a door, which prior to that had opened on to the street. Paul’s purpose was to stop crowds from gathering outside on the footpath and enjoying the show with their heads in the door while ‘buying no drink’. The point Paul was missing was that, fifty people in a doorway with their asses sticking out so the whole world could see them was a great advert. It screamed, ‘something’s going on in there!’ And, pre Paul’s time, the crowds just poured in through the other door. ‘The confessional’ didn’t affect business but it blocked my view of some of my audience in the far corner. I wasn’t a happy boy when I saw that. It was not a good start to our working relationship.

I came off the phone call and ranted to my son, Ronan for an hour or more. It was a mixed message of non-acceptance that Ma could be seriously ill and anger at Paul’s shortsighted mismanagement. Ronan, knowing both Ma and Paul was just the ear I needed. He sympathised with conviction. I headed off for rehearsals of *The Show* feeling better. I didn’t say much to Gerry or Peter as the business of ‘Not the Life I Ordered,’ was in itself sufficient therapy.

Monday evening I sat behind my familiar piano in the White House bar. It was, as usual, standing room only with tourists from every corner of the world packed in around me while the other establishments in Kinsale served one or two Monday night customers. Before I began I had been handed Paul’s letter. I couldn’t resist reading it to the audience.

‘Dear Des, you have been warned regarding your rudeness to some of our best customers. You have ignored these warnings and your attitude is now beginning to affect business.’

I stop reading to ask the crowd, “How many of you came here tonight to see me?”

More than a hundred hands go up as some of them put up both hands. “Ah, yes,” I say, “It does look like I am affecting business.”

I could have left it at that but you know when you are ready to press the self-destruct button nothing will stop you.

“I’ve been told,” I continue, “By a successful bar manager miles from here who would know these things, that if an entertainer brings in the crowds a good manager will find a way to make it pay. Drink, apparently, is not the only product a small hotel like this sells. So, how is it that our manager here, Paul O’Shea cannot make this pay?” I look to Paul’s staff of ‘little fishes’ behind the bar (They got that name because they scurry away in a shoal at the first sign of a customer ... they hate me because I keep them busy). Miraculously I catch their eyes, “Could it be because he’s an ASSHOLE!!!!” The crowd loved that. The little fishes cowed down and one or two slipped away apparently to report to the boss.

Predictably after that, Michael not only did not back me against Paul. Instead he texted me the following morning saying that as I’d now resorted to abusing the staff in public I need not play at The White House again. I was disappointed that this man who had valued what I did for him didn’t think me worth a phone call.

I wondered why I self destructed and blew away work I loved and an income I could use. At first I partly excused it by saying I was upset at Ma’s condition and blamed Paul’s intransigence for the rest. But it wasn’t any of that. Something deeper was driving me.

This is how it works. No matter how far or rough the journey is to the place you need to be you must forsake all other roads and begin that journey. Destroy all other options. Anything else is sticking plaster!

As I walked into rehearsals for *The Show* the next day Gerry said, “You look happy.”

And despite much turbulence of mind, I could truthfully answer, “I am.”

To be continued