

Watching the News.

With his usual, calm, deliberation, Frank Finlay, the grey-browed elder statesman of Irish newsreading, announced, "here is the news", before lifting the solid black handgun to his temple and pulling the trigger. On a million television screens the same stark scene enacted itself: the droll, dry announcement; the pointed polished gun; death's vivid explosion; the dark - suited figure slumped on the news desk; the blank, staring, empty camera eye. Frank Finlay died a million simultaneous deaths: he shot himself over and over in an infinite array of sitting - rooms, taking full advantage of television, making sure of the job.

Brid Foley, Frank's attractive, flirty, co - newsreader, nicknamed Brid Fantasy in media circles, because of her well - known preference for wearing exotic underwear while reading the news, was the first to give her reaction.

"She was shocked," she explained, her black curls shaking, her dark eyes dismayed, "deeply shocked."

She'd been reading the news with Frank for almost five years and he'd never let her down before. In fact, he was known and valued for his reliability. She was sitting right beside him, slightly off camera, waiting for her cue, when it happened.

She firmly expected him to sit back up and carry on with the news.

"Frank was that type," she said. "He always bounced back in a crisis."

Frank's editor, Paul Padula, shy in front of camera, because of his baldness, and congenitally bewildered eyes, was left with the harsh duty of summing Frank up.

"Of course we're all deeply shocked," he said, "deeply shocked. It was a terrible tragedy. Nobody expected Frank to... It wasn't at all like him. He was always the consummate professional."

Paul felt he had said enough but saw more was expected of him. He wondered how long it would take him to get off camera.

"My first feeling was one of annoyance," he admitted.

"I thought, damn you, damn you, damn you! After all, the first responsibility of the news editor is to get the news out. I consoled myself with the thought that, even if it was out of my control, the news had been at least delivered as it ought to be, as it happens. That was thanks to Frank. Maybe that's what he had in mind?"

Frank's producer, Roy Spain, flabby and self - satisfied, felt it incumbent on him to appear on that evening's special bulletin, devoted exclusively to Frank. He explained, through heaving asthmatic accents (if he'd known this was going to

happen he'd have given up smoking years ago!), to ace reporter, willowy, industrious, squirrel-like Philomena Carey, just back from Bosnia, that he was the one who had chosen Frank for the job.

"I was impressed most of all by Frank's wonderful aura of self-possession," he said in answer to Philomena's question: "what impressed you most about him when you chose him for the job?"

"The news," Roy asserted, "is all about the creation of harmony out of inimical chaos, the rescue of meaning from disorder and oblivion."

Silent Philomena invited him to plunge deeper.

"The news," he went on happily, trotting out further slogans, well-polished during years of social evenings and cigar-smoking, "is about making sense of the world; is about giving it back the shape and substance that war, disease, suffering and death have taken away from it."

"That's your view then, is it?" Philomena asked forcefully.

"That's the news," Roy confirmed with a limp, papal, wave of his hand. "That's why we say we're in the front line."

"And Frank Finlay?" Philomena Carey questioned sternly. "Would you describe Frank Finlay as having fallen in battle?"

Roy took a deep breath, aware that the eyes of the nation

were on him, before saying,

"I don't really know. I didn't know Frank that well..."

Thinking, what could he say? Thinking, Frank was more in the line of a bloody deserter, damn him. Thinking, at least the ratings were up. Thinking, Frank was King of the Castle anyhow, at least till Sunday.

A late evening special programme, hosted by Philomena Carey, gathered a group of commentators and experts together to dissect, minutely and precisely, the meaning of Frank Finlay's "desperate act", as it was now called.

There was, from left to right, television critic, journalist and philosopher, Finbarr Foley, brother of Brid Foley, and about whom, jealous wags whispered bitterly, a whiff of incest clung like a dense cloud of sulphur. Finbarr's heavy tangle of hair, keen, squinting eyes, and pallid lacklustre features meant he was not a hit with the ladies, but that didn't stop him trying.

Next, Martin Brittlemit, professor of media studies, sometime television producer, and writer of bestselling potboilers, *The Hard Way*, *The Soft Entrance*, and best known of all, *Jubilee Splendour* -the story of a simple working girl who becomes the richest and most powerful woman on the planet- under the pseudonym of Eartha Dunlea, waved a grin of intense but

lopsided commiseration at the wrong camera. Martin, a slightly hunched, uncertain figure, timid as a rabbit, was introduced as a man who knew, "*more about the inside of women than women themselves did*", and he wished sincerely, with all his heart, and a great deal of onanistic fervour, that it was true.

The third specialist, as Philomena called her, was bright eyed, perky, middle-aged and making the most of it, Agnes Arundel, a well-known personality, resident agony aunt in an evening newspaper, phone-line therapist, talk show regular, outspoken feminist, and serious book critic. Her book, based on her diaries, about her own sexual awakening, *A Wonderful Experience*, which described in detail, the thirty three partner-induced, the twenty two self-inflicted, and eleven accidental orgasms, she'd had between the ages of twenty nine and thirty two, had been a surprise Christmas bestseller the year before, and proved especially popular, it appeared, in the bulging, tired stockings of maiden aunts. As a result it had earned her a great deal of money and respect.

Last, but "*not least*", as Philomena reminded her audience, there was tall, dark, handsome, Gay Braden, suave, polished, sincere, child psychologist, social commentator, author of many books on many issues, recently voted sexiest man in Ireland by the reader's of the popular women's magazine *Us*, and best-dressed man in Ireland by the readers of the popular society rag *Diamonds and Pearls*. Replete with this self - knowledge and the

confidence gained from it Gay Braden was the first to speak, shafting Agnes Arundel exquisitely with the piercing point of his absolute sincerity. Gay Braden, when he spoke, crooned like a love-sick spaniel.

"I, for one, am deeply shocked," he crooned towards Agnes. And then embracing everyone, but especially Agnes, continued, "I think I can safely say that, hardened professionals as we all are, we are all deeply shocked." He embraced his favourite camera angle, saying,

"I think it's fair to say that the entire nation is deeply shocked this evening."

In a million sitting rooms across Ireland, where the ghost of Frank Finlay still lay slumped across glimmering television screens, teenage girls and older, felt strangely, pleasurably violated. Gay Braden was lovely, lovely! The rest of the panel nodded sagely. Yes, Gay Braden was lovely.

The following morning the nation's breakfast bowl was full once again with the massage oil of Gay Braden's incredibly soft, yearning and sincere voice. The first guest on breakfast television, everyone wondered how he managed to look so eternally youthful, first thing in the morning.

"The children of the nation have been witness to a desperate act," he warned gently, "and parents,

mentors, and tutors now have a duty to be vigilant and attentive to the needs of those children."

"We must be vigilant," Gay impressed upon everybody.

The country listened.

"The children need to be healed," Gay said, the healing unction of his voice spreading evenly over the land. "They need to be loved and caressed and reassured. There is a fissure now in the fabric of the world which needs to be filled in and plastered over. We must move this act within the comprehension of children; when the child understands the meaning of what has happened the process of healing will begin."

"Take care of the children," was Gay's final message to everyone, before he explained that he had already said all this on Philomena Carey's programme the evening before; but it was a message he would not tire of repeating because it was "so essential to the welfare of everybody!" Which was, of course, his main concern.

"This desperate act needs to be rescued from disorder and oblivion," he said. "It needs to be given meaning if we are to understand it."

The next programme was a special phone-line programme offering advice to distraught parents unable to explain suicide to their puzzled or distressed offspring. Many callers were angry. Suicide was a "*selfish, inconsiderate act.*"

Pell-mell the nation commented.

"Frank Finlay had no thought for anyone but himself; imagine shooting yourself at a time when every child in the country was sitting watching television!"

"Easy known he had no family of his own!" one caller had gleaned from an article by one Alice O'Malley, aspiring journalist of the year, in the morning newspaper.

"Frank Finlay had no one to think of but himself, no mother, no father, no brother, no sister, no cousins, no wife, no children, no girlfriend; was he gay?"

"O.k., so he deserved a certain amount of sympathy, but he was dead now and what good was it going to do him?"

"If he was here today," one caller asked, "what would he think of everyone talking about him?"

Alice O'Malley's article was widely read and quoted. She had been the first to look into Frank Finlay's background to try to find a reason for his suicide. Under the heading "A Man Alone" this young, blonde, photogenic journalist, described a private Frank Finlay that no one suspected: a man who lived alone, who kept to himself, who had no friends and no relations; in short, a mystery man.

"Frank had no ties to life," she wrote in her best maudlin fashion; he was a *man alone*, "a man whose

heart had no home."

This, she thought, was going to be her best shot at journalist of the year.

That evening as the country switched onto the six o' clock news no one felt quite comfortable. Frank's replacement Mike Middler was under strict orders to keep his hands where they could be seen; as was Brid Foley, who was told by Paul Padula, "*the country does not want to see you playing with yourself this evening*".

Mike, a former international rugby player with impeccable good looks, gave a sterling performance, and struck just the right note when he said, "of course, we cannot forget Frank Finlay. No one has a right to judge him. Here in the newsroom we shall always remember him and always miss him."

Brid was impeccably restrained and everyone knew she wanted to cry but would not let herself.

On the wall of the newsroom a mysterious notice appeared demanding that: "*firearms are not to be let off during news transmissions*".

"It's the only way I have of getting back at that bastard," Paul Padula admitted unashamedly when suspicion at last fell upon him.

Philomena Carey hosted a second special programme that evening, but this time with only Gay Braden and Agnes Arundel in attendance, as neither Finbarr Foley or Professor Brittlemit had

contributed anything of value the previous evening. This allowed the two participants to repeat everything they'd said the night before but this time supported with a vast interplay of erotic overture and invitation.

"Of course we can never penetrate the dead," Gay Braden asserted. "We can only penetrate the living. Nor do the dead expect penetration... Though the living do!"

Agnes Arundel thought Gay Braden had the most luxuriously obscene tongue she had ever seen, throated and hooded like a cobra, and tantalisingly restless.

"Isn't he wonderful?" she whispered to Philomena.

"Of course, if we were to penetrate the dead, the dead would not respond!" Gay Braden continued.

"What more is there to say?" Philomena responded, feeling effortlessly redundant.

In the newspaper the following morning Alice O'Malley had an article on Frank Finlay's school. His headmaster, Prionsias Prisunach, faced with the impossibility of remembering the boy Frank from amongst the hundreds of others who crowded his memory told that, as far as he could remember, Frank was, "a studious but not particularly bright pupil who worked hard but achieved little."

"He was not a pupil we took much notice of," he said.

"But I can see now the qualities that made a good newsman out of him."

"Of course," the headmaster emphasised, "the school," -a nondescript vocational school in the midlands- "was overjoyed at his success as it was equally downcast at his unfortunate denouement."

Two of Frank's former classmates, Pat Connor, a well-to-do farmer recently branched into cheese making, and Joe Molloy, shoe shop owner recently branched into suits, had no strong memories of Frank.

"He never had much to say," they did remember. "He wasn't sporting, he wasn't outgoing, and he never had girlfriends. He was neither handsome nor unattractive. He was unexceptional in every way. The Ryans, his foster parents were good people; both of them now dead, thank God."

Alice did the most to make her article interesting; she used all of her writing talent, painted vivid pictures of Frank Finlay's home town and its inhabitants, coloured in his background with some wonderful soft-focus vocabulary, managed to induce a perfect atmosphere of separateness and isolation in her prose, but could not prevent the emptiness at its centre from showing through. What galled her more was that Finbarr Foley had placed a wittily written and perceptive if more ephemeral article in a rival rag, an article which asked the question, "*Suicide: does the end justify the means?*"

Finbarr's more philosophic standpoint irritated her because

she realised she could never attain it. What's more at a recent charity ball he'd made a pass at her which she had sternly refused so he had no right to upstage her like this. Wearily, she saw her journalist of the year hopes flagging.

In the afternoon Frank Finlay's funeral took place with only Alice O'Malley in attendance. This resulted in a beautifully succinct and poetic article in which Alice captured perfectly the desperate melancholy of the cortege, its unnoticed passage through winding, busy streets, the isolation and silence of its destination, the cold, heartless earth, the trees mourning with gently whispering leaves the dead newsreader. Inspired, Alice admitted to a sudden, uncontrollable urge to love this man; to embrace Frank Finlay in her heart and restore him in some way to life.

"How could I remain indifferent," she wrote powerfully, "when all the world was indifferent?"

Her declaration of love earned her a front page and a five minute berth on the breakfast news programme.

"We must ask ourselves how we as a society failed to love Frank Finlay? And also, how each of us as individuals failed to love him? If we'd loved him better perhaps we wouldn't be here having this discussion now..."

The presenter of the breakfast programme was Brid Foley who

understood perfectly what Alice was saying.

"Yes, yes," she said, "I understand. Indeed, I ask myself, how Frank could carry the gun into the studio without my knowing. I always examined him minutely beforehand to make sure there was no unsightly bulges in his clothing."

Alice nodded, woman to woman, her understanding.

"I guess a gun doesn't make much of a bulge," Brid concluded.

"How would you describe your new-found love for Frank Finlay?" Brid asked Alice.

"It's a true, woman's love," Alice replied. "Honest, faithful, pure, unquestioning... I would never ask Frank why he did it; why he chose to end his life. Love doesn't ask questions. It never asks: why?"

That morning the nation's entire female population experienced a surging, inexplicable love for Frank Finlay. Women spoke at length about their new-found feelings.

"How am I going to tell my husband?" one woman wept stridently over the phone, to be consoled by the newly employed Agnes Arundel, exhausted by an eighteen hour bout of lovemaking with Gay Braden whose speculative promises of marriage and undying love had added three crushingly intense orgasms to her collection.

"Tell him," Agnes advised, "that Frank Finlay poses no

threat to him...".

Agnes, replete with Gay Braden, waxed tender.

"Love him as only a woman can love," she advised another caller.

As she spoke, Agnes oozed Gay Braden from every pore. Her voice trembled lovingly on the airwaves.

"It's true we cannot love Frank Finlay in any physical sense. Only by the physical love we express to those nearest to us can we offer some of that love to Frank Finlay..."

Another caller suggested that a "*ceremony of love*" be held at Frank Finlay's grave side to express and celebrate all the love the women of Ireland now felt for him. She asked if Agnes Arundel, "*Ireland's priestess of love*", would preside?

"Gladly," Agnes agreed, with a sublime smile of complacency.

"You know what's happening of course?" Martin Brittlemit, his nose twitching, challenged Agnes in the studio canteen. "The whole country is engaged in a thoroughly self-indulgent orgy of self-love! Thanks to that O'Malley woman..."

Agnes blinked benignly. Brittlemit continued,

"They say she's frigid, you know... She turned Finbarr Foley down. She's not my type, of course; but don't you see, the whole country is frigid, and is

compensating for its frigidity by this indecent display of necrophiliac excess?"

He gasped to a standstill.

"Are you saying that every woman in Ireland suffers from frigidity?" Agnes probed tenderly. "Are you saying that Brid Foley is cold sexually?"

They sat alongside Brid Foley cradling her steaming coffee cup in her hands. Martin Brittlemit blushed. Agnes noticed but Brid didn't; she was used to seeing men blush at their secret thoughts in her presence. Martin covered his face with his hands, afraid that the awful fantasies he'd been having about Brid were going to rush out through his eyes and attack her.

"Martin says your brother Finbarr is chasing Alice O'Malley," Agnes taunted Brid.

The jealousy brother and sister reserved for each other was legendary. Brid's irritated eyebrows jiggled nervously.

"I'm sure," she said, "that it's all a game. He enjoys teasing her. He wants what he calls: the trophy of her virginity. You know they say it's her only real talent and so she wants to keep it forever."

Brid, a veteran newsreader at twenty six could be terribly cruel if she wanted to be.

Roy Spain and Paul Padula just happened to be passing and could not help overhearing. Together they decided to play a cruel joke on both women.

"You know," Roy wheezed quietly, employing all his conspiratorial asthmatic tones, "it's rumoured, and we know how true rumour can be, that Finbarr Foley and Gay Braden are an item... Everyone knows that Gay Braden is irresistible even to men. He has Finbarr under his spell!"

The women's raised eyebrows pretended incredulity but concealed severe discomfiture. Anything was possible where Gay Braden was concerned. Paul Padula turned the screw.

"Alice O'Malley has discovered that Frank Finlay was in love with Gay Braden and that's why he killed himself. Alice says that Gay stole Finbarr away from Frank."

He winked at the two women.

"What a hornets' nest!" Paul laughed.

"Is there any truth in any of these rumours?" Martin Brittlemit put in.

The two men nodded with passionate conviction and then moved on. Brid and Agnes exchanged meaningful glances.

"I don't believe it," said Brid.

"Neither do I," said Agnes.

"I always knew there was something funny about Gay Braden," Martin said.

"A man without a woman to love him is destined for spiritual, moral, or even physical death," was how Alice O'Malley began her latest article.

Inspired by love she had decided to take Finbarr Foley on at his own game. Finbarr Foley reading the article in Bewley's restaurant was impressed but not alarmed. He calmly contemplated attempting suicide as a means of seduction. After all surely he would present a figure more deserving of women's love than the defunct Frank Finlay? Finbarr Foley was after all, he reminded himself, a philosopher of sorts; a man with his own unique perspective on life; a man who saw things in a different light; he was a thinker, a true original.

The germ of a new idea grew in him. He mapped out his idea on a Bewley's napkin: the generous interplay between suicide and love and death and love; the transformation of the base lead of the physical into the pure gold of the spiritual; the secret desire hidden deep in the hearts of women that men should die to earn their love. The clarion call of women through the ages: unless a man would die for her he was not worth her love! Had Frank Finlay killed himself to earn the love of a woman?

"There must be a woman somewhere in all this," Finbarr concluded.

No man with a heart, he knew only too well, can avoid falling in love.

Celestial Alice O'Malley, dressed entirely in black, which showed her blonde curls off advantageously, had adopted the mournful mien of the desolate widow. For the photographers and television cameras at the "*ceremony of love*" at Frank Finlay's grave side she was the centre of attention; their glass eyes

never left her.

"I've never seen such a sexy woman," one veteran commented as she stepped forwards to lay a wreath of blood-red roses on the grave.

"Oh Frank! Oh Frank!" Alice cried out through her rolling tears."Accept the love now that we were never able to give you during your lifetime!"

A raised, curved arm, slender and white as a reed, protected her from fainting. Applause was generous and sustained.

"Jesus Christ!" Paul Padula repeated over and over again, seated in front of his news monitor. "Is there anything as sexy as a funeral?"

Watching on television Finbarr Foley felt his heart breaking. He was now convinced that he utterly loved Alice and bitterly disappointed that he could not have her.

Alice could not sleep at night; she felt that Frank Finlay was calling her to join him. In the phone book she found the number of a popular and trusted spiritualist.

"Frank Finlay is trying to make contact with me!" she announced to the astonished but pleased medium.

The medium a shawled and black-eyed Mathilda of indeterminate age but heavily wrinkled had foreseen this opportunity arriving and was prepared. At dawn, while the rest

of the world slept, the two sat in seance, hands joined, invoking the spirit of Frank Finlay.

"I sense he is near, very near," Mathilda said, her eyes closed on some inner spirit detector.

Alice willed him closer.

"Frank, Frank," she called out, "don't be afraid!"

A vague tapping was heard under the table.

"It's him!" Mathilda said. "Tell us, Frank, tell us what you want!"

Mathilda concentrated at length, holding Alice's hands tightly in her grasp.

"I don't believe it!" she said then aloud.

"What is it?" Alice wanted to know.

"It's incredible, it's unbelievable!" Mathilda said, fighting off an incipient weakness occasioned by such close contact with the spirit world.

"What is it?" Alice demanded impatiently.

Wide-eyed Mathilda announced: "He wants to marry you!

Frank Finlay wants to marry you!"

To a stunned and speechless Alice she made herself abundantly clear.

"He's proposing!"

Overjoyed Alice at last responded, "I accept!"

Roy Spain and Paul Padula had fallen madly in love with each other and had both left their families to go live in Jamaica. This was the amazing information relayed to Finbarr

Foley by a tipsy Philomena Carey who had always harboured a slight yearning for Paul Padula. Finbarr Foley relayed this information to the newspaper reading public the following morning in a stirring article celebrating sexual freedoms under the heading: "*The Editor and the Producer - Breaking the Mould in Irish Society.*" "Frank Finlay's death had been a salutary reminder to both men to seize life before it was too late," Finbarr claimed.

However, Finbarr's article was largely forgotten by lunchtime overshadowed as it was by Alice O'Malley's revelation in that she was going to marry Frank Finlay in a private esoteric ceremony to take place at the weekend.

"Because Frank is dead," she wrote, "this will be a purely spiritual union. There are some who may laugh but I am one of those who believe that love is eternal and will not be conquered by death."

Finbarr Foley was furious.

Both Finbarr and Alice, together with Gay Braden and Agnes Arundel, appeared in that evening's special news programme hosted by Philomena Carey. The topic for discussion was: *Love beyond the Grave.*

Alice maintained that true love was only possible between two people when "one of them was dead".

Agnes Arundel, wanting to support Alice proclaimed her "an example to women everywhere".

"This love, this beautiful love, Alice is giving to that most unloved of men, poor Frank Finlay!" she sang.

"But isn't the purpose of marriage to have a family?" Finbarr Foley chipped in sceptically.

"If you see the world as a manifestation of purely physical reality!" Alice replied haughtily.

"Do you expect there will be an exchange of ether?" Gay Braden considered, with no ill intent.

"Will he wear your ring?" Finbarr persisted.

"How is this marriage to be consummated?" Philomena Carey asked seriously.

"Amongst the stars!" Alice explained with the most ethereal of smiles.

Finbarr Foley realised that she was completely lost to him and that a pass made later would get him nowhere.

Martin Brittlemit, at home, had found his inspiration for his new novel with the double-barrelled title: "*A Voluptuous Woman-A Desperate Man*". It was a novel haunted by the ghost of Frank Finlay. Frank Finlay was in love with Brid Foley, Martin reasoned. How could he not be? Realising the hopelessness of his love he had killed himself before her very eyes; a strange and desperate testimony of his love to her. Martin understood that perfectly; he too felt quite desperate at times. Though he had possessed Brid in his dreams many thousands of times -Martin was unmarried- he longed for the one real moment of love which must

inevitably pass between them. He waited, but waited impatiently. His only release was the novel he had begun. By creating a fictional Brid to love and caress- Martin saw himself as the sensitive newsreader whose love was unrequited- he succeeded momentarily in obliterating the real Brid. To this end, sweet forgetfulness, he wrote all of the sex scenes first; by doing so he managed to finish half his novel, which would run to seven hundred and twenty pages, in less than three days. These pieces he would draft over and over again; he would never tire of polishing them. His was a labour of love.

Finbarr Foley, desperate to put a spoke in Alice O'Malley's wheel, was also beginning to wonder about his sister Brid. It stood to reason, anyone could see that. There had to be a woman involved and Brid was the only woman who had apparently had any public association with Frank Finlay. But it was obvious! She was a woman. She wore sexy underthings. She examined him minutely before every broadcast. He was a man. Did he not crave her during every moment of the news? Did he not yearn for her sexually through wars, disasters, famines, and endless, endless suffering? Was he not in fact totally weakened and subdued by her and reduced inevitably to an enervated and suicidal wreck?

But you could not, as Gay Braden had put it, penetrate the heart of a deadman. How to know what Frank Finlay felt about anything? Unless somewhere along the line these two professionals, paid not to betray emotion of any kind, had had a lapse. It was his only hope. And the only person who could

possibly know if such an unlikely thing had occurred, because Brid would never tell him, was Fidelma Coyne, who with her daughter Patricia, wrote the most scintillating gossip column the world had ever seen: *The Whole Truth* in an influential designer newspaper for the middle and not so middle classes. Finbarr phoned Fidelma and arranged to meet her. He felt sure of a juicy morsel, one that would sour the gravy on Alice O'Malley's wedding day: that *gravedigger!*

"Funny you should ask that," Fidelma Coyne said juicily, sipping her dry martini in the discreetly lit lounge of *The Merry Duck* where she was always to be found. "I seem to remember something!"

Neat blonde bombshell Fidelma bravely held forty at bay. The lighting in *The Merry Duck* was kind to her. Her eyes, lined with vivid purple, pierced the gloom; the eyes of a Diana with arrow drawn. Finbarr wondered if the rumours about her sexual proclivities -rampant and indiscriminate- held any truth. He wondered if there was any chance she might be rampant and indiscriminate with him; not now, but later.

Fidelma, whose column *The Whole Truth* boasted that she knew everything about everything did, in fact, know everything about everybody. That was because everybody told her everything; that was her talent, eliciting confidence, trust, betrayal. She had the knack of it. As a result, to people who mattered, because she only wrote about people who mattered, she was the most

feared and respected woman in Dublin; even Finbarr, doing battle with a full glass of whisky, was afraid of her, though he pretended to be afraid of no one.

Fidelma's strength, due to an innate quirk never excised, was that she liked no one; and so, from time to time, the cutting edge of her column could slice even in the direction of those she favoured, if and when she felt like it. She felt it a duty sometimes to hurt those closest to her so she could be seen to be impartial and now felt that though Brid Foley was an admired and loved friend and confidante there was more than ever a need to draw the line between columnist and buddy. And of course the timing was perfect.

"Brid did let slip some time ago..." Fidelma confided.

"...Oh, that darling girl can be so naive sometimes!"

Finbarr squirmed with anticipation in his seat. Fidelma called for another dry martini. Her daughter, Patricia, groomed carbon copy, same curling blonde hair, same spry huntress eyes, same black mini - skirt riding soft thighs, apprentice to Fidelma, waved with charming insouciance from her barstool and the bartender who was hooked and tied like a floundering foppish fish to her.

Finbarr wondered if, failing Fidelma, he had any chance with Patricia. He had spoken to men who said they had and all agreed it was pure bliss. He sketched a tentative wave towards her which went unacknowledged.

"Patricia," Fidelma told Finbarr wryly, "is protecting her little jewel at the moment... She says it's nice

being a virgin again." Finbarr coughed uncomfortably.

It was an unwritten but acknowledged rule with Fidelma that she never imparted information without some return, not necessarily financial. Finbarr felt he had something to offer. During his drink with Philomena Carey she had let slip about Agnes Arundel and Gay Braden. She lived in the same apartment block; in fact the position of her bedroom was adjacent to that of Agnes' bedroom. Philomena had not slept that night, the night they had appeared on her programme. How could she? It was like one of those interminable Wagner operas; and she'd know Gay Braden's voice anywhere.

"He has a very fine tenor voice," she had explained.

Finbarr was glad of the information. Fidelma and Agnes, sexual rivals since boarding school days, were arch and inveterate enemies. Fidelma never tired of flaying Agnes metaphorically in her column; and Agnes, whose earnest intellectualism was no match for Fidelma's scathing wit, was the best whipping girl Fidelma could ever have. Fidelma it was, who having read Agnes' chest-baring *A Wonderful Experience* quipped that, "none of the orgasms described was genuine" and that "the entire book was faked."

Agnes had still not lived this down.

Any morsel bated with the scent of Agnes would excite Fidelma's venom and even though Gay Braden had slept with

everybody Fidelma would make the most of this latest rencontre. Instantly she saw her angle: *The search for that elusive YES! Arundel goes back to the drawing-board. Gay Braden lends himself to "a wonderful experience". Water drawn from stone!* And so on and so forth with myriad variations and exquisite cruelties. Of course she would help Finbarr, he had earned her thanks. And there was another little girl who needed a spanking, that Alice O'Malley, who had refused her an exclusive on her wedding night with Frank Finlay; but Alice had already contracted to write a book based on her experience, provisionally titled: *I Married a Dead Man*.

"I must say it's something I've never tried," Fidelma admitted regretfully.

The story at last emerged. Frank Finlay had been reading the news for years when Brid Foley came along.

"Brid was only eighteen at the time! Do you remember? The youngest newsreader ever on our National Television..."

Brid was anxious to impress, and she had all she needed to, but, spoiled by adulation and lust, she'd never known a man like Frank Finlay. He seemed genuinely indifferent to her, on every level. This troubled Brid, who at eighteen was still not proof against insidious doubt. Was she not the most beautiful, desirable woman who ever lived? She had to be sure. When the rumours began to circulate about her taste in undergarments,

Brid was less than cautious with Frank.

"Do you imagine I wear such things?" she whispered in his ear.

Frank seemed unmoved. Brid was less than happy. It wasn't worth being a woman if Frank Finlay refused to pay obeisance.

Frank Finlay was, according to Brid, an extraordinarily passive lover; the unperturbable centre of the man seemed to extend even to his genitalia. They had however, according to Brid, successfully achieved coition, and Brid was happy that Frank appeared quite flustered afterwards. He was a pet of a man really and could not believe, according to Brid, how good she was to him.

Brid was reassured; her charm had been tried and tested on the most difficult of subjects; and though they never made love again she never doubted that Frank would like to.

"Sometimes," she confided in Fidelma, "he looks at me in such a way, as if he couldn't live without me!"

Finbarr moaned terribly unhappily.

Finbarr Foley, having been refused by both Fidelma and Patricia Coyne, left *The Merry Duck* to ponder quietly the most onerous decision of his life. He was preparing two birds for the one stone, he realised: both Alice and Brid would be devastated by what he would divulge. Had he a choice? No... If Alice had chosen to sleep with the living rather than the dead then things might be different.

"After all, do you think the dead need sex all that much?" he asked Martin Brittlemit in his most disconsolate tone. "Why don't they stick to their own?"

There were books everywhere in Martin's living room; they seemed to have replaced all the furniture. Finbarr's second full glass of whisky rested on a handsomely bound *Media and Society - Is there Life after Television?*

"Is there life during television, more bloody likely!"

Finbarr muttered morosely.

He wondered why Martin didn't appear to be listening.

"What's wrong with your ovaries?" he demanded.

Martin Brittlemit sat with face firmly in hands. He had decided he could no longer face the truth. The truth was, and he had written it down somewhere and hoped Finbarr would not find it, that a.) Brid did not and would never find him attractive b.) she would never offer herself to him gratuitously or for payment c.) life was not worth living without the possibility of someday shafting her d.) he was a failure as a writer. e.) he wished he really was Eartha Dunlea.

"I wondered why the book I was writing was so bad, so out of character," he complained bitterly.

"Why then?" Finbarr asked, twirling his glass in the air.

"I was writing a book by Martin Brittlemit, about Martin Brittlemit, for Martin Brittlemit," Martin

confessed without hope of absolution. "And Martin Brittlemit is a bloody lousy writer who leads a bloody lousy life!"

Removing his hands he revealed to Finbarr a drained and desperate face.

"Eartha is gone," he said, "she's gone!"

"You know these women," Finbarr said nonchalantly, "they always come back!"

When Finbarr had left Martin phoned Brid who had just finished reading the main evening news. Mike Middler, her anchorman, had smiled all through the bulletin, like the cat who's got the cream. Martin Brittlemit, professor of media studies and pulp fiction writer, was convinced it was because he'd had an all expenses paid visit to the underside of Miss Foley. It just wasn't fair!

"Your brother is writing something about you and Frank Finlay," he told Brid. "Something about a night you spent together!"

He told Brid everything.

"Don't you think the information is worth some reward?" he prompted.

"Oh shit!" Brid said. "Oh shit! Oh shit! Oh shit!"

And she hung up.

Martin Brittlemit decided there and then to kill himself but having no real desire to end his life failed miserably in the attempt.

"Frank Finlay, when all was said and done, was a lucky bastard!" he told himself, green from envy and barbiturates.

"I can't believe my brother is betraying me like this."

Brid, inconsolable, keened to Agnes Arundel.

"Do you think you could somehow, for my sake, persuade Alice O'Malley to sleep with him?"

Agnes, wise old bird, shook her head doubtfully.

"Please! Please! Oh Please!" Brid persisted.

Agnes felt she should do something. She rang Alice whose story was now attracting interest from the international press.

"Would you, as a great favour to someone I know - someone who desperately needs your help -sleep with Finbarr Foley, just once?"

A deadly silence emanated from the other end of the phone line.

"I've heard Finbarr's a darling in bed and quite harmless," Agnes pursued her request.

A high-pitched scream of indignation cut her short. Even Brid could hear each sharpened syllable as it sliced the air.

"How could you even suggest such a thing to me?" Alice protested. "What sort of a woman do you think I am? Listen, Agnes..."

She took a deep breath before going on.

"I will never, I repeat never, be unfaithful to

Frank!"

Brid collapsed in tears.

"What am I to do? What am I to do?" she cried.

"There's only one thing you can do," Agnes said despondently. "Only one thing..."

Roy Spain and Paul Padula returned penniless but cheerful from Jamaica and promptly threw an impromptu party in Finbarr Foley's bedsit. The centrepiece was a video taping of Frank Finlay's last news emission relayed over and over on a thirty-six inch television screen and accompanied by some stirring rap rhythms, "*Hey man, what ya doin' where ya goin' what ya thinkin' what ya knowin'*", powerfully blasted from Finbarr's inadequate music system.

"The only excitement Frank ever gave us!" Paul explained.

By slowing the tape down and jogging from frame to frame Roy demonstrated to everyone's satisfaction that Frank's grip on the gun was anything but certain.

"He almost missed," Roy wheezed.

The two men danced to the music, kicking their legs high in the air.

"I love being alive!" Roy squealed, before falling on his knees to imitate a pig foraging for truffles.

Finbarr's article in which he asked the question: "*Did Frank Finlay die for Alice - or for Brid? You decide...*" was due

to appear the morning after the wedding took place but did not. Alice's article, the latest in the series, in which she explored her feelings as she approached the altar of eternal bliss was due to appear on the morning of the wedding day but did not. Nor did the wedding take place. At the last moment a shattered, distraught Alice, clad in gleaming ruffled taffeta of purest white, could not say yes to Frank Finlay. When asked if she was "prepared for eternal conjuncture with Frank's immortal soul", she answered: "No, I don't think so... Frank has let me down. He has some explaining to do first."

A session with Mathilda was hastily convened at which the hastily invoked Frank refused to make his presence felt. Alice withdrew, discreetly shielding her tears.

Martin Brittlemit could not believe his luck. *The Sunday Enquirer* featured twenty-four -he examined each one individually- highly coloured photographs of a scantily clad Brid Foley in its four page spread dedicated to: "*Brid's Night of Love with Frank Finlay*".

"I don't blame myself. Frank Finlay was a man no woman could resist. And I have never tried to hide the fact that I am a woman.", the article began.

The accompanying pictures bore ample testimony to that.

The Sunday Enquirer, already the best-selling Sunday newspaper, had doubled its circulation. Not content with one copy to ogle, many men had bought several; Martin had bought

six. Lovingly he kissed and caressed every inch of Brid with tentacled fingers spreading over twenty four outspread pages. He was completely drunk with her.

"Oh Brid," he whispered fervently, his tongue rippling wetly over paper breasts. "Oh, Brid, you're mine, all mine!"

Brid and Agnes celebrated with champagne breakfast in *The Merry Duck* where Fidelma Coyne raged inwardly at their presence, at her own impotence, and the falling flat of her article on Agnes Arundel which had gone unnoticed. Eventually she left in high dudgeon, like the wolf who failed to blow the little pig's house down.

"We've chased her from her own hunting ground!" Agnes cheered.

Brid laughed happily. She'd been paid the equivalent of a year's salary by the *Sunday Enquirer* with ten times as much due from international reproduction of the coveted images.

"Of course I'll never appear on Irish television again," she said sadly. "Now that the entire country has seen my nipples!"

But an offer had already come from satellite television to present an international news programme which would be seen by millions.

"They'll appreciate you on the continent," Brid was told by a loudly squawking, oily news executive, suited in penguin black and white, who had come all

the way from Amsterdam with his tempting offer.

He pointed out her obvious advantage to his network.

"We don't want people watching the news any longer. We want them watching you!"

It was like a dream come true.

"I'm sorry I didn't do this years ago," Brid confessed, sipping her champagne.

Alice O'Malley, hurt, embarrassed, confused, planned her suicide with meticulous attention to detail, and once she had perfected her idea dropped it completely. After all, a man might kill himself over a woman, but a woman should never kill herself over a man; that was an unforgivable waste. Her wedding night, her might-have-been, she passed in resigned melancholy. Her bright, flashing taffeta dress she took next morning to the second hand boutique and sold it. Marriage, she had decided, was not to be.

She drank a coffee and smoked a cigarette inside the rain-streaked window of a cafe in Donnybrook. She watched the passing world evanesce and fade. She was only twenty-one. Life had hardly begun yet. And if love was impossible then there was always cancer. But wait... That man at the counter with the silken voice and flashing eyes. Wasn't it..? Yes, it was! Gay Braden. She felt herself, involuntarily, blushing. That mingling of compassion, tenderness, understanding in his eyes! It was strangely moving to be stared at by him. And he noticed her. He pitied her; it was obvious. He was so sympathetic. He came

towards her, seeming to float as if his feet never touched the ground. He sat beside her, uninvited, but she didn't care. He took her hand, it felt so right. He spoke.

"I want you to know," he said, "not all men are the same!"

She nodded. Gay Braden's fingers paddled her palm.

Finbarr Foley had hit rock bottom. Sitting watching the news read by Mike Middler and newcomer Moire Padula, younger sister of Paul Padula, he felt an enormous void had opened in his life. He had lost Alice O'Malley and now his sister Brid had left him for the mecca of Europe. A career in movies looked promising. She told him he could never expect to hear from her again. She was moving out of his world while he was staying in it.

"Is there anyone left who can love me?" he asked, in ringing Shakespearean tones, a bemused but complacent Martin Brittlemit.

"The important thing is to love yourself," Martin consoled him.

"No, I've tried that," Finbarr said hopelessly.

"Have a drink," Martin advised. "Have another one!"

The two got steadily drunk.

"Would you like to look at some photos of Brid?"

Martin suggested. "I have the originals."

From a warmly bound leather portfolio, twenty-four fabulously smiling glossy portraits of Brid slipped sideways to the ground.

Finbarr felt he had nothing to live for; the days slipped by in empty procession; his nights were sleepless and dreary. He longed for a vision of life to appear, a bright and startling vision that would rescue him from disorder and oblivion. Love! If only love would emerge from wherever it had gone to ground. If only... If only the rain would cease to fall those dark evenings he walked from his Leeson street bedsit to the railed and shrouded Green.

One evening he had to run for shelter from the rain, with a newspaper covering his wig of unkempt hair, to the Concert Hall on Earlsfort Terrace. Once inside that glittering, chandeliered world a siren-like music drew him into the narrow amphitheatre. On stage a choir two-hundred strong made heavenly noise; amongst them Margaret, a bright, golden vision to Finbarr, soared above the others and shot like an arrow to his heart.

Finbarr loved Margaret the moment he saw her and when he heard her singing *Kyrie Eleison* he was totally lost. Boldly he accosted her.

"I know I was staring at you," he apologised.

He stumbled nervously over his words.

"You're so lovely, so beautiful... I couldn't help it!"

Margaret blushed.

"Will you sing for me in private?" Finbarr risked, and after some hesitation, she nodded.

Finbarr couldn't believe his luck.

In his sitting room he sat with eyes closed, listening to her. Her sweet soprano voice filled the room softly. The *Kyrie* was lovely; lovely! When he opened his eyes the mystery of her beauty made him swoon. The girl's round young face blushed at his blind, adoring gaze. Finbarr loved all of her ardently; her red hair streaming brightly to her waist, the shadowed, cherub innocence of her eyes and face, the tender, reticent promise of her blouse, the fond folds of fat that filled the waistline of her knee length black skirt, but most of all her voice that filled his silence and melancholy with serene and thrilling loveliness. *Kyrie Eleison* created a world of its own around them. Finbarr felt he was melting into nothingness as he listened: felt he, Margaret, and Rossini's *Kyrie* -for it was Rossini's little mass, little *Kyrie* she sang- were being subsumed into some sort of cosmic echo, music of the spheres, eternity, detached and floating through space, far from the confines of his narrow, comfortless bedsitting-room. Afterwards, her music done, Margaret stood with arms embarrassed at her sides. Night after night Finbarr made her return. She never objected; she was happy to sing for him; she too was in love with *Kyrie*.

When the time for confessions came she listened patiently, attentively while Finbarr detailed his sins, past and present. Chief amongst them, he felt she had to know, was his unrequited

love for Alice O'Malley -the same Alice who had, it was whispered, recently sacrificed herself on the alter of Gay Braden- which love, Finbarr now felt, had been pure folly and illusion, from which he was wholly rescued and recovered by Margaret.

Margaret cried with copious ease tears of gleaming crystal.

"A woman likes to feel she's the only one, the special one..."

Finbarr assured her.

"You are, you are the only one!"

Making her blush hotly.

Finbarr gripped her hands tightly.

"Did you have no one? Surely there was someone before me? There must have been!"

Reluctantly she nodded.

"I'll show you," she said.

And added mysteriously,

"I still have the key."

Finbarr, doubting what was to come, let himself be led by her.

It was a room like his own around the corner from where he lived. Margaret was on her knees setting a fire.

"The room was always warm," she explained. "He always had a fire blazing each time I came."

She shook glinting black coal out of a coal scuttle and held a burning match to tortured twists of paper. Smoke billowed

in the blackened fireplace; tongues of flame danced in the chimney's hollow belly.

"Can I sing?" Margaret asked shyly, hesitantly, like a pupil asking her teacher. "Can I sing, for him?"

Finbarr withered sadly; his face in his hands, he shook his head. Margaret essayed the first, tentative notes.

"The room's not properly warmed up yet," she said.

She began again. The slender, sad lines of the *Kyrie* opening pierced the room gently and Finbarr's heart. Finbarr could not remember the last time he cried.

"I needed you to do this!" Margaret said, kneeling beside him, her arms resting on his knees.

Finbarr's tearswept eyes seemed inconsolable. Margaret sensed what was wrong.

"It was different with him," she said.

"But he did everything with you that I have done!" Finbarr protested. "He heard you singing. He approached you. He brought you here. He made you come back time and time again to sing for him. He was in love with you!"

Margaret acknowledged what she thought was true.

"Yes, I think he was in love with me, but it wasn't like you think... He never touched me!"

Finbarr moaned as if she had struck him.

"But I've never touched you!" he reminded her.

She smiled at his childlike pain.

"But you will," she promised him. "You'll touch me

whenever and wherever you want to."

Finbarr looked at himself in Frank Finlay's cracked bathroom mirror and asked himself, "Am I the same as Frank Finlay? Am I the same person that he was?"

On the credit side there was the reassurance of his distinctly different first and second names, apart from the frightening symmetry of the initial F's. There was also the absence of any physical resemblance whatsoever, though Margaret claimed the two were alike in other ways. There was an age difference of some twenty years, which didn't at all reassure Finbarr who had once argued some obscure point about chronological and real ageing in an article he'd written. There was the geographical distance that separated them at birth, Frank Finlay having been born in the midlands, presumably, and Finbarr having arrived on the planet somewhere in Dublin's northern hinterland. However, Frank Finlay's real origins were shrouded in mystery and who could say what the real truth was about him?

Finbarr considered that the credit side of his relationship to Frank Finlay needed shoring up badly.

The debit side was hell to contemplate. Finbarr had replicated exactly the manner in which Frank had fallen in love with Margaret; more strange and troubling, an entire passage of

Frank Finlay's life had been lived out by Finbarr, history had repeated itself, and Finbarr wondered if his love for Margaret was no more than an echo or reflection through time of Frank's. A breach had appeared in Finbarr's notion of reality through which he was in danger of falling. Was the rest of his life to be the rest of Frank Finlay's life also? Was the life of the suicide, untimely cut short, grafted on his to grow out of his?

Finbarr refused to accept it; refused to function as a vehicle for Frank Finlay's life after death. He wanted to be his own man, to harbour his own dreams, desires, affections; he tried hard to persuade himself, to assuage his fears, to lay his particular ghost; he told himself that, after all, what was so strange about two men loving the same piece of music? And if Margaret's throat gave birth to that music then what was strange about two men loving Margaret? Stranger coincidences had occurred, hadn't they?

Undaunted he burst the bubble of his fear.

"I will love her!" Finbarr told his broken reflection in the mirror, "in spite of Frank Finlay."

He had no choice but to love her.

"After all," he reasoned, "how could I live without her?"

Finbarr Foley did something he was sure that Frank Finlay had never even thought of doing: he married Margaret. They married in the springtime under the cherry blossoms in the

garden of the house where Frank Finlay had lived.

"I liked Frank," Margaret, waxing nostalgic, admitted.

"But he was strangely empty... I wasn't surprised when he did what he did. I think there were times when he was trying to tell me."

Finbarr plucked the cherry blossoms out of the tree and put them in her hair.

"You are the most magical woman who ever lived," he told her.

"I couldn't love him the way I love you," Margaret said. "That empty space inside him just wouldn't accept love or tenderness, as if it had been closed up years ago and whatever was inside had died... Only, in some way, the music was able to get through."

Finbarr could never trust another man, living or dead.

"Did he never try to..?" he hinted.

Margaret cut him short.

"Never!"

Finbarr shook his head doubtfully.

"We're all composed of the same muscle, tissue, nerves, instincts... I can't believe he didn't desire you."

Margaret shook him with frustration.

"Frank Finlay got what he desired: Rossini, the Kyrie, my voice, was his final requiem... I think I made it possible for him to die!"

Finbarr would never be persuaded.

"The man knew it was hopeless," he insisted cruelly.

"He knew you'd never love him!"

On the last day they visited Frank's room before it reverted to the lease holder Finbarr unearthed a folded note with the words, "*Margaret is my only happiness.*", written on it. He waved it vehemently at Margaret.

"There! There! There!" he shouted at her.

"It explains nothing," Margaret protested. "I don't know why you're so excited about it!"

Finbarr couldn't tell her; he wanted to but couldn't. His jealousy was destroying his love. He didn't seem to be able to fight it any longer.

At home Finbarr wrote, "*Margaret is my only happiness*" over and over on a piece of notepaper as if by doing so he could exorcise his jealousy but his heart only sank deeper in its own bitter, jealous, impotent, hopeless rage.

"This is crazy," Margaret said, tearing the notepaper to shreds. "Frank Finlay is dead, is dead, is dead!"

She flicked the television on.

"Every time the news comes on I expect to see him," Finbarr said.

And as he watched the news he saw unmistakably Frank Finlay sit at his newsdesk with a handgun poised and pointed at his forehead. Finbarr knew it was going to happen again and it did. Frank Finlay shot himself again, a million times in a

million sitting rooms in a million different but similar Irish homes, but this time, unlike the last time, as the bullet exploded and shot through his brain, the music of Rossini's *Kyrie Eleison* could be heard, at every point in its trajectory.

"There!" Finbarr said, "there!" Pointing out the evidence. "How can you deny that? That proves that he died because he loved you! That proves it absolutely!"

Margaret, watching, saw and heard nothing, through the blinding light of her tears.

The End.