

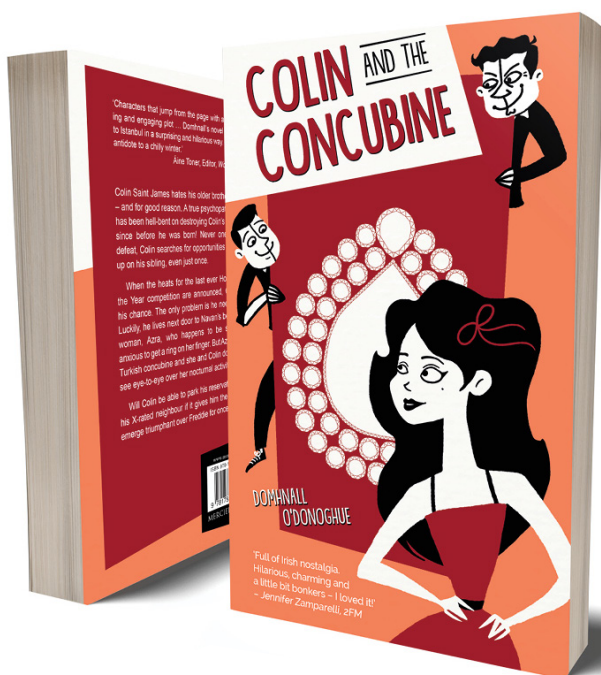
COLIN AND THE CONCUBINE



DOMHNALL
O'DONOGHUE

'Full of Irish nostalgia.
Hilarious, charming and
a little bit bonkers – I loved it!'
– Jennifer Zamparelli, 2FM





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DOMHNALL O'DONOGHUE



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PROLOGUE

2019

‘The outlook is somewhat grim, I’m afraid.’

When Alfred ‘Freddie’ Saint James received the news that he’d just months to live due to insubordinate kidneys, the one-time local councillor immediately envisaged a day spent guzzling the very thing that had played a role in his undoing: alcohol. The last thing the sixty-seven-year-old foresaw was that he would instead be traipsing up the driveway of his former home to plead with his estranged sibling, Colin, for a lifeline.

Yet that is what transpired.

‘A transplant is your best shot of survival,’ Dr Collins had earlier advised, moments after dropping the bombshell.

Wearing jeans and an oversized polo shirt, Freddie debated the various ways he could ask Colin for the permanent loan of one of his vital organs. Twenty-five long years had passed since the warring brothers last spoke to each other and Freddie wondered if his brother had managed to forgive him.

Not that he deserved it.

Maybe I went a little over the top at times, he conceded, as his brother’s various humiliations raced through his mind. Although, in my defence, things seem to have worked out well for him in the end. How many fellas would have given their right arm to be married to the best-looking woman in the town?

Not quite ready to call upon those two loathsome words – ‘I’m sorry’ – the dying man stopped outside the house and sat on the steps in between two of the four large columns that had always acted as the property’s bodyguards. Behind him stood two front

doors instead of the original one, thanks to Freddie's outrageous decision following their parents' death to divide the property down the centre. The money he'd received for his half – in addition to his substantial portion of the inheritance – had been nothing short of a godsend at the time. Outside of his brief stint as a councillor, the man had never subscribed to the concept of working for a living.

Throughout his early childhood years, Freddie had been certain that he lived in a palace. Boasting two storeys, the magnificent house had been inspired by the designs of Italian architect Andrea Palladio and was once one of the most photographed properties in the entire country, thanks to his matriarch's success in that blasted housewife competition. He wondered what all those envious plebs who used to stream past the iron gates daily would think of its current, unimpressive state.

He examined the garden, struck by how small and mediocre it now looked in comparison to its halcyon days. Its controversial centrepiece – the rather rude fountain – no longer released water into the basin through the boy's little member. Navan's more conservative brethren would be delighted to learn that, today, moss offered the marble statue some warmth and much-needed cover.

His critique of the property was cut short by a sharp pain on one side of his torso. He placed his unsteady hand over his rib. He was ashamed and embarrassed by how pathetic his kidneys had turned out to be – though, of course, he could admit that the abuse to which he'd subjected them had played no small part in their – and his – impending demise.

With a heavy sigh, Freddie returned to his feet and finally knocked on the door of his ancestral home. He knew Colin was inside. Not only could he smell the delicious home baking, a skill that his brother had inherited from their mother, but in the front room, behind the net curtains, he could also see the television screen airing a match that involved the Meath football

team. Freddie had no idea if Colin was a football supporter or not; in truth, there was very little about his brother that he did know, other than that he was accomplished with a mixing bowl. He himself had little interest in the sport. He was never able to appreciate the value of watching a piece of leather being kicked around a field, or understand the sport's ability to reduce so many grown men to tears. In saying that, since entering the world sixty-seven years earlier, Alfred Saint James had never cried once, not so much as a droplet. The closest he came to blubbering had been following his younger brother's birth in 1958.

They would not have been tears of joy.

Aware of Colin's limited hearing, Freddie knocked for a second time, louder and longer. His earlier, rare feelings of vulnerability were waning, replaced with the rage that had long been associated with him.

'Open the bloody door, you deaf moron!'

And just like that, the former councillor's wishes were answered. Before him stood his little brother, whose soft, easy-going face quickly became hijacked by a look of concern when he realised who was at the door.

'Finally.'

Freddie noticed his sister-in-law, Azra, in the kitchen, busy setting the table. Despite her questionable career choices in the past, the fellow had to admit that the Turkish delight was most certainly a thing of beauty – and remained remarkably well-preserved.

Surely she must be over sixty now, he thought, as he watched her place knives and forks on either side of place mats.

'What are you doing here?' Colin asked, instinctively taking a step backwards.

'I don't suppose you have a minute to spare, do you?' Freddie replied, feigning politeness.

‘Well, em, I’m ... accounts. I’m, em, attending to accounts. So ...’

This quivering uncertainty reminded the uninvited guest who had the power in this pairing. Without so much as an explanation, Freddie barged past him, leaving his only brother somewhat unnerved.

‘Come on in,’ Colin mumbled as he followed him into the kitchen. ‘I’ll, em, stick the kettle on, shall I?’

1958

ONE

‘Smelly pig!’

Around the time his mother became pregnant with her second child, Freddie had developed a habit of calling anybody who annoyed him a ‘smelly pig’. When it came to doling out this insult, the freckle-faced six-year-old never paid a blind bit of notice to the person’s status in society; everyone from his classmates in school to esteemed members of the clergy became targets, much to his parents’ embarrassment.

‘Please ignore him, Father. You know what children at his age are like – always testing boundaries.’

The Saint James’ doorbell had been exhausted by the volume of angry neighbours calling to the house to complain about Freddie’s naughty ways – callers like Lena Gorey, who appeared at their door one day, her angry face the same colour as the new, pink-red lipstick she sported.

‘He marched straight up to my four-month-old daughter in her pram and, bold as you like, snatched the hat from her head and threw it into a puddle, shouting, “Smelly pigs don’t wear bonnets!” I mean, Mrs Saint James, the world is tough enough without being attacked by a little boy in dungarees! And besides, who uses the word “bonnet” these days?’

The exasperated couple convinced themselves that it was just a phase. Beguiled by the little lad’s charms, they sometimes questioned if their neighbours were entirely honest with their version of events – maybe they were jealous or wanted to spice up their humdrum lives by causing a scene?

‘I’m sure Alfred was only trying to be friendly. People can be so stiff these days,’ Mrs Saint James said to her husband that night as she combed her long, dark hair in front of the vanity table. As the pair readied themselves for bed, they declared Freddie’s innocence

to each other, arguing that they had the best boy in all of Navan, one who would, in a few months' time, be the best older brother imaginable.

'He'll think all his birthdays have come at once – a younger sibling he can play with and take care of!' Mrs Saint James predicted as she exchanged her comb for the nail clippers and began tending to her husband's fingernails, a task she carried out twice a month. The handsome and well-groomed banker bossed hundreds of staff members about each day at work, so he enjoyed giving his wife full control over him at home.

'You're absolutely right, sweetheart. As always.'

'Let's tell him the good news tomorrow, shall we?' Her excitement was so great, she cut the tip of her dear man's index finger.

The following morning, complete with a bandaged finger, Mr Saint James whisked Freddie and his wife away to County Meath's golden Bettystown beach for a dollop of ice cream and a paddle in the nippy Irish Sea. It hadn't crossed the child's mind that there was more to his adoring parents' intentions than it originally seemed – after all, he had only broken one vase and two plates that week, so he was undoubtedly owed this little treat. Therefore, upon hearing the words 'We have a little surprise for you', as they sat on the beach, he assumed that he was going to receive something like a pair of fancy shorts or sandals. It would be just in time for the summer, too.

'What is it?' he demanded, his cheeks now as bright as the red syrup that spiralled around his half-eaten ice cream.

He could see that his parents were equally exhilarated – if not more so – leaving Freddie to wonder if this surprise would be even greater than expected. Perhaps, at long last, they were finally

going to present him with the magic flying carpet that he had been requesting since time immemorial.

‘Tell me!’ he barked, his patience wearing wafer thin.

However, there was no announcement that he was soon set to soar across the seven seas like Aladdin; instead, much to his disgust, he received the cataclysmic news that some good-for-nothing stork was delivering a little brother or sister to the household in four months’ time.

‘Isn’t that just marvellous, Freddie?’ his father added, kneeling beside him in the sand. ‘Aren’t you just tickled pink?’

On the contrary, red was the colour the child identified with the most, and he made absolutely no bones about allowing his true feelings to be known.

‘Noooooo!’ he roared, tonsils trembling. Not knowing how else to express his discontent, he flung his ice cream at some unsuspecting ‘smelly pig’ septuagenarian, who was too distracted trying to decode four across in the morning’s crossword to duck for cover.

‘Tell the stork to give it to another house!’ Freddie demanded.

The tantrum continued and for the following few minutes his parents’ emotions vacillated between embarrassment and rage.

‘You will still be the man of the house, son,’ his mother promised.

‘Stop screaming this very moment – everybody is looking at us!’ his father shouted. ‘And pull up your trousers, for heaven’s sake!’

This only worsened Freddie’s tantrum.

His mother rubbed his back, as if hoping that this would calm him. ‘Daddy is sorry, he didn’t mean to shout at you – come and give Mummy a hug.’

But the boy’s meltdown appeared interminable until an angry seagull – possibly a friend of the offended stork, Freddie later suspected – delivered his own parcel right on top of his head.

‘Arrgh!’

Left with no other choice, the distraught parents grabbed their poo-covered offspring and spirited him away. The tissues that Mrs Saint James always kept up her sleeve were put to good use, wiping her son’s head clean as they left.

‘If he were my son,’ a judgemental passer-by commented to the crossword enthusiast, ‘I’d place him over my knee and give him a good lashing. That would shut him up, the little devil!’

‘That’s it! Four across – “Horned tempter”!’ the elderly man exclaimed as he scribbled the letters SATAN in the only blank spaces remaining in his puzzle. ‘My marbles are not what they used to be. Many thanks!’

For him, at least, the day had suddenly gotten a whole lot better. For the Saint James clan, on the other hand, the day was going from bad to worse.

‘He’s probably just a little tired,’ Mrs Saint James maintained as they placed him, still kicking and screaming, into the back of their black Morris Minor.

Mr Saint James nodded, his nerves frayed from the whole ordeal.

Yes, Freddie was tired – sick and tired of having his authority challenged by unruly feathered creatures like storks and seagulls. He was sure of one thing, anyway, as the Saint Jameses sped away from Bettystown beach: there was only room for three in his nest and he was prepared to go to any lengths to ensure that things remained the way they were.

But how would he protect the status quo?

And with that thought, the tantrum ended. The child had a plan to come up with – one that would require concentration.

Much to his parents’ delight, calm was finally restored.

For the time being.

TWO

In Istanbul, some 2,300 miles to the south-east of Navan, Azra Demir was a little girl with big ambitions. There was only one thing in life that she loved more than her beauty, and that was when others complimented it. Even though she was just three years of age, the youngster had become used to people gathering around her, cooing over her thick, brown hair or praising her striking almond eyes. Her neighbours often noted that she was the mirror image of her late mother. Azra, however, was not in a position to agree or disagree – aside from a single, tatty photograph pinned to one of the cupboards, she had never seen the woman who, according to those who knew her, was ‘the most beautiful and gentle woman in all of Turkey’.

‘She held you in her arms for a short moment,’ her only brother, Yusuf, often told her, ‘kissed you on your tiny nose, then left to be with Allah in paradise.’

Rather than being comforted by Yusuf’s memory of this brief encounter with her mother, young Azra was furious that she’d been cast aside in favour of this Allah person who everyone kept fussing over.

He could hardly be as beautiful as me! she thought.

Many of the people who lived alongside the Demir family in Istanbul’s central and traffic-clogged Eminönü neighbourhood felt obligated to look after her, seeing as her *baba* had reneged on practically all of his parental responsibilities. Instead, he preferred spending his days getting into various scrapes around the city. Recently, Yusuf was also rarely around. The ten-year-old had been forced to abandon his childhood in favour of the workforce, to ensure that the bills delivered to their run-down house were paid and that at least some food was put on the table.

The care that these neighbours insisted on showing Azra

during her early years was extremely commendable, particularly given that she was quite a difficult girl. Declining to share was a common occurrence, as was refusing to leave her bed or part with her cracked mirror. They had first-hand experience of their own children thinking that they were the centre of the universe, but there was something different about Azra; she just didn't fit into her humble surroundings. Even though it was too early to tell, the women worried that Azra would take after her father when it came to morals.

'I pity the man who marries you,' her neighbours often joked.

In her defence, Azra felt that, aside from her beauty, there was little for which she should be thankful and so she had no problem expressing her frustrations out loud. What with her mother's death, a father who was never around, and her brother's round-the-clock work schedule, all the youngster had was a filthy hovel in which she was often forced to remain all alone.

Her only joy came when, each night, she drifted off into a deep slumber where she was whisked away from the noisy, always-under-construction Eminönü neighbourhood to be worshipped by knights and kings.

Someday, she vowed. *Someday*.

THREE

A ritual Freddie enjoyed more than anything was his daily bath.

With the tub positioned upstairs in the main bathroom overlooking the apple trees in the back garden, he had always found it an inspiring place to plot. A year earlier, while soaking in the enamelled tub, Freddie had concocted a plan to destroy the grand piano after overhearing a suggestion that he should start taking lessons. Shortly afterwards, it was from this bubbly kingdom that Freddie had resolved to do away with Lucy, the family dog, as a means of ending her insistence on barking throughout the night.

The solution to his latest pickle, however, was proving harder to reach. But, ever-confident in his abilities, Freddie trusted that it would come.

As his tired mother cleaned the dirt from beneath his fingernails, the boy scoured the dark recesses of his mind to find the most suitable method by which to free the family from the unwanted and ever-growing burden inside his mother.

'You adore playing in the garden, don't you, my darling,' his mother remarked, finally clearing the last of the dirt from his nails. She was secretly dreading checking on the current state of her beautiful petunias. 'Imagine, you'll soon have a little brother or sister who I'm sure will only be delighted to join you on your little adventures outside! Why don't you put your hand on my belly and tell them where your favourite place in the gardens is? The orchard? The sundial? The labyrinth?'

Freddie pretended not to hear her request. By now, he was beyond exhausted by his parents' endless suggestions that he try to bond with his unborn sibling by talking to it or singing to it or similar nonsense. Despite the usually calming influence of the yellow rubber duck bobbing up and down on the water's surface, he was starting to feel agitated again. He had to take action before it was too late.

But how?

After so much success, was he, at long last, being forced to admit that his deviousness had limitations?

Fat chance.

‘I hope you were kind to all your little friends on the patio this morning, my darling,’ his mother continued. ‘I don’t want to find any more tortured snails and worms on the terrace furniture. We are all God’s creatures, remember.’

Freddie smiled, remembering this morning’s massacre across the grey paving slabs. Suddenly his whizzing mind had its ‘Eureka’ moment. It was inspired. He would take his lead from his favourite pastime: the squishing and squashing of the garden’s insects – except, on this occasion, rather than his clenched fist, it would be his mother who would do the squishing!

‘Thank you, Mummy.’

‘For what?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ he replied, shoving the rubber duck underwater.

His mother smiled at his obvious happiness and couldn’t resist giving her angelic child a big sloppy kiss on his wet cheeks. ‘Who is the sweetest boy in all of Navan?’ she cooed.

After a while, his mother lifted a wrinkled Freddie out of the bath and patted him down with his favourite fluffy towel. Freddie stood millimetres from the mirror – his dark, angular haircut contrasting with the gilt of the faux-antique frame. He released a broad, toothy smile.

‘May I have some of the biscuits you just baked, Mummy?’ he asked as she dressed him in his new, yellow pyjamas, knowing that she would be unable to resist giving in to her darling boy’s demands. And after all his hard work planning, he felt he deserved a little treat.

‘Characters that jump from the page with an entertaining and engaging plot ... Domhnall’s novel ties Ireland to Istanbul in a surprising and hilarious way. The perfect antidote to a chilly winter.’

Áine Toner, Editor, *Woman’s Way*

Colin Saint James hates his older brother, Freddie – and for good reason. A true psychopath, Freddie has been hell-bent on destroying Colin’s happiness since before he was born! Never one to admit defeat, Colin searches for opportunities to get one up on his sibling, even just once.

When the heats for the last ever Housewife of the Year competition are announced, Colin sees his chance. The only problem is he needs a wife. Luckily, he lives next door to Navan’s best-looking woman, Azra, who happens to be single and anxious to get a ring on her finger. But Azra is also a Turkish concubine and she and Colin don’t exactly see eye-to-eye over her nocturnal activities.

Will Colin be able to park his reservations about his X-rated neighbour if it gives him the chance to emerge triumphant over Freddie for once in his life?

