



[www.penguin.co.uk/tasters](http://www.penguin.co.uk/tasters)

Counting Down  
by  
Gerard Stembridge

Copyright © Gerard Stembridge, 2009

All rights reserved



Penguin Books Ltd

This is a limited extract from Counting Down

To find out more please visit [www.penguin.co.uk](http://www.penguin.co.uk)

## **Transcript from a television news report, 20 November 2006**

. . . This exclusive apartment block overlooking Dublin Bay was the unlikely setting for the grisly scene that unfolded this chilly winter morning. Gardaí were alerted by neighbours, concerned about an increasingly unpleasant odour coming from behind the door of the third-floor apartment. On gaining entry, what they discovered was shocking and tragic. Inside the luxury apartment, on a sofa, were the decomposing remains of a man. He may have been dead for two weeks or more.

The assistant state pathologist is at the scene right now, but because of the condition of the body it won't be possible to establish cause of death for some time. A Garda spokesperson refused to confirm or rule out any possibility, including foul play or suicide. The man cannot yet be identified, and even if, as seems most likely, he was the occupier of the apartment, very little seems to be known about him. The mailbox in the main hallway has no name on it, just the apartment number, and only one of his neighbours appears to have spoken to him. The young woman didn't wish to go on camera, but she told me he was a quiet, good-looking man in his mid-thirties, always rather distant. As if, she said, and I'm quoting here, 'nothing you might say would ever be of interest to him. He never even told me his name.'

Joe Power, realizing he had an hour to kill, stopped in Ballinalee. He knew there was no point in arriving early. Juliet wouldn't like that, and he didn't want any vibe whatsoever on the first access visit. It ought to be – had to be – civilized. Just as their last meeting had been, when they met to sign the papers; a bit stiff of course, but with no pugnacity; voices calm, with at least an attempt at warmth, which was conscious on his side, but he thought he detected it from her too. Their eyes had managed to meet. And why not, after all? She was getting everything she wanted. Willingly. She looked a little fatter that day.

Time passed in slow seconds. Joe sat in the car considering what to do. Farrell's across the road had a freshly painted black frontage, and new old-fashioned lettering on the windows. Wines and Spirits on the left and Undertakers on the right. Ho ho ho. He wondered if it had ever been true. Probably, way back in the dismal thirties and forties, that other Ireland. It might be pleasant to pass the hour in there with a Jameson and the morning paper? No. No. Definitely no. Joe turned his face from Farrell's bar and lounge and switched the radio on. The levees in New Orleans had been breached during Hurricane Katrina. It was a real live horror tale and a godsend to talk radio. A young-sounding male, with an authentic Southern American voice, was talking down a phone line.

'... And I guess what is really most tragic, is that it seems to be primarily folk from the poorest sections of town,

mostly from the African-American community, who are worst affected . . .’

Big fucking shock horror surprise.

‘. . . And I tell you something, these scenes unfolding now before the eyes of Americans are nothing less than apocalyptic. People are asking could this really be happening in their country? –’

Joe switched off. Was apocalyptic the most overused word of the new century? Every fucking chunk of ice that broke off and fell into the fucking foamy deep was a fucking apocalypse. He needed to get out of the car and do something to fill this lump of time. It would have been amusing if some locals had passed at that moment, so that he could have enjoyed their reaction to his Maserati, his recent ‘single-again’ gift to himself. But no one passed. Stepping away from the car, he stood alone at an empty crossroads. In the mild calm of mid-morning in Ballinalee, Joe Power listened, automatically sorting the soundscape into its individual elements. There was a car somewhere in the distance to his left, a tractor too, nearer but not approaching; birds all round, of course, a cackling magpie and something sweeter he couldn’t put a name to; his right ear caught a cow howling somewhere as if in agony or dread. In the village itself the only sound was the rattle of bottles in a crate somewhere, probably from the back of the pub. Further away, a heavy door slammed. Strangely, there was no human chatter or movement. There was literally no one on the street. What options were there? He could walk to the old Protestant church at the far end of the village. Juliet used always to remark on it when they drove by. They always agreed that they must have a look inside, but never had. In fairness it never looked open.

And that was enough about the past.

Focusing on the slow present at not very long after eleven in the morning, Joe realized his choices were either to pay a pointless visit to Farrell's hardware shop thirty yards down the road to his left, or cross to the other side and buy a '99 or a Dairy Milk in Farrell's mini market. Joe suddenly noticed a little Garda station on the corner. How many times had he driven through Ballinalee in the last five years and never realized it was there? It just showed how little . . . stuck sometimes. It was, however, of no particular use to him now. Why the fuck did a dead village like this have a Garda station to itself in this day and age anyway? Joe stood gazing, listening, becalmed, resentful. He began to hear, deep inside himself, a rumble of blame directed at Juliet for putting him here at this moment. He was snared, unable to fill this oppressive hole in the day. The last day of summer. Literally nothing was moving around him. It was as if time had paused, and was just hanging around, waiting for him to do something? How long would this fucking hour last?

A car approached the corner from the Longford road, an old Opel Kadett station-wagon. Joe didn't hear it until it he saw it, which was amazing given the clack of its old engine. It slowed as it turned the corner. The old driver had time to nod a country nod at Joe. There was something odd about the way he sat in the car, but Joe couldn't put his finger on what it was. Was he a dwarf or something? Forty or so yards further on, he turned into a small open area in front of the ugly Catholic church, parked boot out, opened the door, and struggled from his seat. Had he a hump on his back, was that it? He opened the boot. Joe saw that it was absolutely jammers. The old man took a piece of cardboard from the car and went to the nearest streetlight pole. Suddenly, Joe knew not from where, he had a little hammer and some tacks in his hand. He tap-tapped quickly until

the cardboard was fixed to the pole. Joe could read the hand-printed message clearly from where he stood.

## CAR BOOT SALE – ALL DAY

The old man went back to the car. He started to unpack. Joe could see now that he wasn't a dwarf, and he didn't have a hump. He just carried himself strangely, his neck sunk into his shoulders. It was obvious he was no first-timer at the car boot sale game. He had a little system going. First, a series of small folding tables were arranged in what he probably thought was an elegant little arc. Then he started to create his display. Joe checked his watch: 11.11. It took about ten minutes to drive from Ballinalee to the cottage. The choice was to leave now and fill the time elsewhere or hang around for another forty minutes. The old man's car boot sale might be his salvation. More vendors might arrive soon, a whole relieving cavalry of them. There was room for at least a half-dozen cars on this patch. It might be a great kitsch-fest, fingers crossed. Would there be, maybe, a Sacred Heart lamp? He and Juliet had always wanted a proper old Sacred Heart lamp for the cottage . . . Enough of that. Stop. Now. Still, if he found one Joe decided he would buy it for her. It could be an amusingly appropriate peace offering.

Joe felt his mood lighten. Fuck it, he thought, the whole mess might work itself out in time. He and Juliet could even become pals or something, easy with each other. Milo would grow up absolutely cool with the whole situation. By the time he got to secondary school, half his class would be from separated homes anyway, more would be kids of single parents, and most of the rest would be from marriages that were, in reality, fucked up only the parties concerned

wouldn't admit it. If Juliet persisted with her lunatic scheme of living in the Longford cottage, and renting out Brighton Vale – Joe couldn't believe it when he first heard that, but he was hardly in a position to say anything – it might actually work out well for him in the long run. The cottage was mickey mouse, only ever intended as a bolt-hole, for time out. By the time Milo was thirteen or fourteen, he would definitely think it so much cooler to spend time in his dad's high-end Dublin pad than in the arsehole of nowhere with his fat and bitter mother. In time, Joe would win. Just how attractive this grand prize would be was less certain. Would he want a teenage male suddenly in his space, dependent on him, as he reached his mid-forties? Well, who knew the future? Feeling a certain amused anticipation, Joe approached the tables, which were now pretty well groaning. The old man had managed to squeeze an astonishing amount of stuff into his car. Looking at it laid out now, Joe wouldn't have believed it all came out of one boot if he hadn't actually seen it himself. No sign of a Sacred Heart lamp. The old man clocked him. He nodded hello, but made no sound. Was that a smirk or just a naturally weird expression? The eyes shone bright from spiralled skin. Joe heard himself use a bantering tone.

'You've a nice day for it anyway.'

Again a nod rather than words as the old man continued some tasteful rearranging. Joe looked along the tables: plates, bowls, old cutlery, a battered wall clock, a 60s transistor radio, picture frames, assorted ashtrays, candlesticks. Crap really, and not even interesting crap. He began to rattle through a pile of plates. One design, which he guessed was from the 1940s, caught his eye; white with a simple green line round the edge; the kind of thing Juliet would say was just right for the cottage. He searched and found three such plates in all. He might as well buy something.

‘How much?’

‘A pound. Everything’s a pound.’

Joe smiled.

‘As in, a euro?’

‘No. A pound.’

The old man made a little sighing noise and went to the car. He came back with a cardboard disk. He spun it slowly, concentrating. Joe recognized the cardboard euro conversion disk that every household had received from the government, way back when the currency changeover was happening. Was this old guy having him on?

‘That’s one euro twenty seven cents.’

There was no flicker of a smile. Joe decided to play the game.

‘Fair enough. I’ll take these three. But hold on for a minute. I might buy more.’

The old man nodded. He took the three plates and put them in a little cardboard box. At the bottom of another pile Joe found real treasure. Fantastic! A plate with JFK and Jackie on it, hand-painted style, cheek to cheek; a golden, almost saintly couple. This was nearly as good as a Sacred Heart lamp. This was classic.

‘Is this a pound as well?’

‘Everything’s a pound.’

Fair enough. A real bargain. Joe moved along the arc, re-energized, convinced he would turn up some other little treasure. His eyes almost passed over a small wooden box filled with assorted tennis balls, golf balls, and a couple of well-worn sliotars, but he noticed something odd. It was a moulded white plastic sphere, clean and bright amid the shabby used balls surrounding it. Looking at it more closely Joe saw it was not all white. It had a narrow rectangular black face, plastic, reflective. He picked it up. The sphere was

perfectly smooth and round, with a matt finish, scratched from the passage of years; a mini space helmet on a plinth. A curious thing was, there seemed to be no buttons or switches. What did it do? How did it work? Joe turned it upside down, and saw a sliding piece set into the underside of the plinth. Even before he opened it, he knew it was a battery chamber. Of course there were none inside. What the hell was it? Turning it right side up again, he looked closely at the black plastic rectangle. It merely reflected his ballooned face, but if the thing was working presumably that would show a digital readout of some kind. On the bottom corner of the plinth a trademark name was impressed on the white plastic.

Millennium©.

Something about it reeked of the seventies; just had to be. Joe just about remembered the digital watch fad, but he had never owned one. This thing was clearly from the same period. It had the feel of a clock of some kind. Even if it wasn't the kind of kitsch he had been expecting, it was tempting. He held it up.

'Does this work?'

The old man looked up. The pause before his reply seemed long to Joe. Did something change in his eyes? He definitely heard something different in his voice when finally he spoke; a shift in tone, the slightest hesitancy. All the more surprising given that he said just three words.

'I don't know.'

Clearly the old man wasn't going to say any more.

'Well, do you know what it is?'

'Some class of a clock.'

Keep it a secret why don't you, Joe thought, but held his patience.

'Right. What kind of a clock?'

‘You’ve never seen one before?’

So, Joe thought, it’s the old ‘answer a question with another question’ technique.

‘Like this? No.’

A shrug was the only response. Joe wondered what form of question would get him the information he wanted.

‘So, is it just an ordinary digital clock?’

‘No. Not as far as I know.’

This old fucker was obviously just taking the piss. The thing now, Joe thought, would be to say nothing more, and put the thing back where he got it. Let him go fuck himself. Joe placed it back in the box. It now seemed completely out of place there. He couldn’t resist one last question.

‘So if it’s not a normal clock, what’s it supposed to do?’

Suddenly, surprisingly, a relatively straight answer.

‘Ah, it was one of those fad things. It was supposed to count down to the millennium.’

Joe leaned in and stared again into the narrow rectangular face, trying to see something beyond his own fat reflection. A countdown to the millennium? So. Not much use now then. A definite case of built-in obsolescence. He picked it up again and brought it to the old man, holding it towards him.

‘Sorry if I’m being stupid, but could you explain how it worked, like without any dials or switches?’

The old man didn’t take it from him. His eyes looked elsewhere.

‘I never saw it working myself. Like I say, they were only a fad. Never took off. As far as I know, you put in the batteries, and a number came up on the thing there, the face, and that was supposed to be the exact number of seconds to the millennium.’

‘Seconds?’

‘Yeah. That’s what I was told anyway. As I say, never saw it working.’

A memory stirred in Joe; a school tour to Paris in the early eighties? The Pompidou Centre? Hadn’t he seen something like this on a giant digital readout?

‘But back in the seventies, it would have been millions of seconds to the millennium.’

The old man shrugged. Joe felt a little buzz. He put down the clock, and took out his mobile. He searched for the calculator. Sixty by sixty . . . 3,600 . . . by 24 . . . 86,400 by 365 . . . 31,536,000.

‘Thirty one million, five hundred and thirty-six thousand seconds is one year. So say . . . to make it easy . . . 1975, thirty years ago. By thirty that’s . . . nine hundred and forty-six million and eighty thousand seconds. What about that?’

He picked up the clock again. Could the long narrow black plastic face fit that many digits? A thought occurred to him.

‘Hold on. What about batteries? They’d never last that long. So what happened when they ran out?’

The old man shrugged.

‘You haven’t any, I suppose?’

‘No.’

Joe wondered if Farrell’s would have the right batteries. Suddenly he got impatient with himself. What was he hesitating for? It was a measly pound, one euro twenty-seven. That was all it would cost him to find out.

‘A pound, yeah?’

It was hard to be sure with such a riddled face, but Joe thought the old man showed some surprise.

‘You want it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even though you don’t know if it works any more or not?’

‘I’m feeling reckless. I’ll take a chance. So what’s it altogether? Five pounds? Call it seven euro.’

‘I’ve had that there for five years. No one ever offered to buy it before.’

‘There you go, today’s your lucky day.’

Joe wondered what was going on. Was the sly old fuck going to raise the price now?

‘Are you going to try and get it working?’

‘Well . . . yeah, if I can find the right batteries for it.’

‘Well then . . .’

In the pause, Joe thought, here we go, rip-off time. Oh, I couldn’t let this go for a pound. This is a seventies design classic. You’ll have to make me a better offer. Fuck you, old man.

‘. . . Before I sell it to you, I’d better tell you how I got it.’

Joe noticed the time on the old man’s watch. Jesus! 11.28 already.

‘Look, I haven’t much time, I’m afraid. I’ll pay you a pound for it. No more.’

‘That’s all it is. I told you everything was a pound.’

No rip-off? So what was the story?

‘Fine, well, let’s do this then.’

The old man handed him the little box of purchases. He picked up his cardboard currency converter. Joe interrupted.

‘Seven euro is more than enough, I promise.’

The old man reached for the money. As he did so, he caught hold of Joe’s wrist.

‘Please, let me tell you about the clock. For the sake of my conscience.’

Feeling his grip and seeing the brightness in the old man’s eyes become a hard stare, it occurred to Joe that he was a bit loohla. Maybe that was what he had sensed about him from the start. Thankfully he was too frail to do any harm.

His conscience? Jesus Christ, what next? Joe had paid up and the cardboard box was in his hands. He should just go. He heard the church bell ring. 11.30. Why not give him three or four minutes? He could always cut him off if he started rambling.

‘I’m in a bit of a hurry, but yeah, go on. What’s the story?’

The old man began.

‘When an old house is being sold off around the area, local auctioneers usually give me a shout to see if I want to buy the contents. Not the furniture now, I don’t deal in the big items, just the bric-a-brac. Usually an all-in price for the lot. Early in 2000 I was asked to go to this house near Lanesborough. Taylor, the auctioneer, told me it was a bit of a tragic case. The owner was a Dublin barrister with plenty of money and time on his hands. The house was his hideaway. He wasn’t married or anything. Do you see what I mean?’

The old man’s inference was obvious. Joe allowed his impatience to be heard clearly.

‘What? He was gay?’

‘Yeah, a bit lavender right enough. Anyway, what happened was, he’d had a crowd down from Dublin for a big party he was having on the night of the millennium, and whatever state he’d got himself in, he had gone out on the road and got himself knocked down. Killed instantly. I’d heard something about it alright, it was in the papers an’ all, I suppose happening on the night it did. Anyway, the place was being sold up, and they wanted to get rid of the contents. Taylor tipped me the wink that they’d accept any kind of a reasonable offer, if I took everything away there and then. Whoever was handling the estate just wanted to get shut of it. Grand so, I went down for a look. Straight away I could see plenty of good stuff. He had any God’s

amount of nice little knick-knacks; very sellable. I mentioned a meagre enough sum, and the Dublin fellah said fine, take it away. No argument. I won't go through all the items he had –'

'No, don't, look, I have to be going –'

'Wait! Listen now.'

Joe heard insistence in his voice. His eyes had lost their smirk. It seemed almost as if he was frightened that he wouldn't get to say his piece. He spoke faster.

'When I noticed that thing –'

He pointed at the white plastic sphere.

'I said, what in God's name is that, the same as you did earlier. The same as hundreds of people since, who had a notion to buy it off me, but never did in the end. What is it? I could tell straight away they weren't too happy at me asking, Taylor and especially the fellah from Dublin, the friend of the deceased, or whatever he was if you see what I mean. What is it? I asked them again. What's the big mystery? Taylor dived in first, trying to pass it off. Some kind of an old clock, he said, it's worthless, you'll probably end up throwing it away, but you know yourself, he said, that's how it goes, you take all or nothing. Do you know what the pair of them were like? They were like two school-boys caught smoking behind the toilets. I'd only asked out of normal curiosity because I'd never seen a thing like it before, but now I was . . . well, I was a bit suspicious. I looked at the thing a bit more closely. I thought the same as yourself. How did it work? I found where the batteries went. They were still in there. Dead of course. All that only took a few seconds I'd say, but the silence was pure deadly. You'd swear it was a bomb I had in my hand.'

Joe Power had now forgotten about time passing. He was trying to figure out what was coming. The old man paused,

confident his listener was hooked. Then he resumed more slowly, pointedly.

‘Your man from Dublin decided he’d better give me a proper answer. He told me what had happened. Maurice he called him, the dead man, had bought that thing in Paris in 1976. He was told the same as I told you, that it would count down second by second to the millennium. He thought it was the best thing out. He loved all that kind of stuff, your man said. He called it something, can’t think of the word . . .’

Kitsch. Joe guessed silently.

‘. . . Gave it pride of place on his shelf, loved showing it to people. “Look,” he’d say, “stand looking at that for a while, see your life disappear second by second by second. It’s a terrifying thing.” Anyway . . . he bought the place in Lanesborough back in nineteen ninety-three –’

Coincidence. Joe had bought Brighton Vale the same year.

‘A few months before the millennium he started inviting all his special friends down for a big do. From what your man said, once Maurice invited you, that was it, you had to go.’

Joe knew the kind of people the old man was talking about. College had been full of them. He could hear them in his head. VSF only. Very special friends. ‘It’ll be fabulous. Maurice’s hospitality is legendary.’

‘Everyone was told that they were welcome from the middle of the morning for champagne and a bit of grub. By the afternoon people were fairly well-on already. Your man Maurice was making a big thing out of the clock. He’d put it on the mantelpiece so that everyone could see the countdown all the time. People were knocking crack out of it, you know, shouting out how many seconds were left and clinking their glasses. Of course none of them did the sums. They had better things to be doing. By the time it got dark

sure most of them were in no condition to count to ten without tripping over themselves . . .’

Joe could imagine the scene very well; all over the world the same story. Like their own millennium madness in Dromoland Castle with Shane and Orla, Rory and Lisa, Steve and Karen. What a night. When Milo was conceived.

‘. . . But there was this one fellah, another barrister. He was staring at the clock for ages, like he was hypnotized. He started working it out. Next thing he’s over to Maurice, having a sneer. The clock is wrong, he says. There’s too many seconds.’

Joe could hear the smug stretched vowels braying above the drunken hubbub. ‘Too many seconds I’m afraid, Mo darling. Too many ticks and too many tocks.’ Then rummaging for what he imagined was a bon mot: ‘Seems you may have some time on your hands.’

‘. . . Tried to shut him up, but of course people start taking notice. Next thing a few more are trying to work it out, to see if he’s right. People are getting pens and bits of paper. It’s just coming up to eleven, so it’s easy enough to work it out. Your man told me he could tell from looking at Maurice that he was starting to worry that the clock might be wrong . . .’

A man who hated being wrong, Joe suspected.

‘. . . Because he’d gone on and on about this clock for years. It takes a while to figure it out because everyone is pie-eyed at this stage. No one is listening to anyone else. They all have a different estimate. Next thing Maurice tries to take the clock away, to stop them, but someone grabs it off him and runs away with it up the stairs. From the way your man told me the story he had this bozo down as the real troublemaker. He shouldn’t even have been at the party, according to your man. It was like he blamed him for everything. Anyway, a few go after him, but Maurice doesn’t.

It's getting very near midnight and the millennium. Next thing the young fellah comes back down, holding up the clock and saying he's worked it out for sure. He makes everyone shut up and tells them that it's out by twelve minutes and twenty-four seconds –'

Joe interrupted.

'You mean that at midnight the clock would still have that much to run?'

'Yes. Seven hundred and forty-four seconds. The young fella gets a kind of a chant going: "Seven-hundred-and-forty-four, seven-hundred-and-forty-four," and that's when, your man told me, that's when Maurice goes for him and the two of them wrestle on the ground, and he finally gets the clock away from him, and goes off into a corner. Won't talk to anyone. Next thing someone shouts out there's only a minute to go, so the real countdown starts and everyone is gathering round in a big circle. Maurice won't join in. Some people go over and try to drag him back but he won't be budged. Your man said it was as if just by staring at the clock he could somehow work out what had gone wrong with the thing. So now it's only ten seconds to midnight, and people just let him be. They look at the telly and count down the last few seconds. Everyone starts jumping and hugging and singing Aul' Lang Syne, no one is taking any notice of the poor fellah any more. After a few minutes your man said he went over to try and talk to him, but Maurice suddenly jumps up and says, "I'm throwing it in the river, that'll be the end of it," and he ran out of the house.'

The old man stopped talking. He seemed to need a break. Joe felt certain he knew what was coming next and asked.

'How long after midnight was it at this stage?'

The old man acknowledged what Joe was thinking with a nod.

‘I should tell you this fellah’s house was set up high, with a clear view of the Shannon just across the road. He even owned a lump of land at the river itself. He had a boat moored there. Very nice. That day I was there I was able to look out the window and see exactly where the thing had happened, at the same time as his friend from Dublin was describing it to me. It was freezing out on the night. No one went chasing after him. A few smoking outside saw him open the gate and go out on the road, but no one remembered hearing the car, and the headlights seemed to come out of nowhere. They heard the brakes and then a bump. They ran down straight away. Some said they saw him die just as they arrived. Then someone noticed the clock lying next to his hand . . .’

The old man paused and shrugged at Joe.

‘Well now, you see, no one can say for certain that he died at the exact second that the clock got to zero, but from the way your man told me the story, everyone who was there believes that that is what happened. That clock was counting down his life for twenty-four years.’

Joe Power waited, afraid there was going to be a bad joke now, a shaggy-dog punchline. He was relieved when the old man said, ‘That’s exactly the story as I heard it. Your man was there himself that night. He was giving me fair warning. He told me if I didn’t take the clock I couldn’t have the rest of the stuff. What I did with it after that, he said, was my own business. But he wasn’t going to touch it.’

Joe felt the plastic hard and cool in his hand as he held it up.

‘So do you believe this thing somehow foretold how long this barrister was going to live?’

‘What I’m telling you is, I never tried to find out. I haven’t as much as opened that battery thing there since the day I

got it. That's why I don't even know if it works or not. So anyway. As long as you know.'

Quite suddenly Joe became aware of sounds left and right. Clatter. Chat. A car pulling up. He looked around. Four more cars had joined the car boot sale. The owners had set up their stalls. Locals were arriving for a gawk. There was a cheerful hum. How much time had passed? Joe picked up his box of goodies.

'Buyer beware, ha?'

'That's right.'

People of this old lad's generation didn't understand how for Joe's generation a warning of the possibility of something 'other' was enticing; the combination of kitsch and the supernatural, pretty well irresistible.

'Well . . . I've paid for it now. I'll take my chances.'

He foresaw the scene; a few of the guys round the table at his place; booze, a deck of cards and in the centre, the countdown clock. Batteries. Joe would retell the story he had just heard, with suitable flourishes. Which of them would then be drunk enough or cool enough to tempt his fate on the turn of a card or some other game, and set the clock in motion? Just for a laugh.