Glass House Books
A Few Drops Short of a Pint

Chris Dowding grew up in Redland Bay, a rural seaside community thirty kilometres south of Brisbane, Australia. He attended the local school in an era when kids got excited by doing tricks with yo-yos or poorly executed stunts on their BMXs.

In the 1990s, he studied civil engineering at QUT in Brisbane. After graduating, he lived a quiet solitary existence until he met his future wife, Kerryn.

Chris and Kerryn moved to Ireland in 2001. Both Kerryn and Ireland had a sense of spontaneity and surprise that Chris had previously avoided in his life. This was so unusual for him that he began writing about his experiences.

Chris and Kerryn now live in Australia, on the Sunshine Coast, with their cat, Mia.

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Chris Dowding

Glass House Books

Brisbane

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Preface

Three months after our wedding, Kerryn and I left Australia. We wanted to see the world, or, at least some of it. We packed up and boarded a plane for Dublin, Ireland.

For me, the reality of travel came as a bit of a shock. I was bitten by bed bugs in hostels, terrified by "extreme sports" bus drivers and shoved out of the way by little old ladies in grocery stores.

Ireland was full of contradictions and extraordinary mobile phone tunes. Some people went to church on Sunday, many others didn't. Only a few people liked Celtic music, and even fewer people danced like Michael Flattley. Leprechauns were not mentioned in conversation and could only be found in tourist shops, where everything was painted green.

Ultimately, I stumbled upon the heart and soul of the people who call Ireland home.

Acknowledgments

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Writing this book was only made possible with the support and encouragement of my friends and family. I have to thank you all for your suggestions, your patience and your belief in me.

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Grandma and Granddad, your love and strength have influenced me all my life.

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To my publisher and editors, David and Craig, thank you for the opportunity to write the book and for pulling it into shape. It's been quite a journey and I'm grateful for your support!

Contents

Chapter 1

Moving House by Bus

Your feet will bring you to where your heart is.

– Celtic proverb

Dublin, mid January, 2002

'I'm glad that's over,' I laughed as I stepped down onto the footpath. Then I spotted the hand case, still on the bus' luggage shelf. 'ARRGHHH,' I yelled.

The hand case was still on the luggage shelf, as the bus roared off. There was no way we'd see it again, or the possessions it carried, if we let the bus get away.

'Wait here,' I shouted to my wife Kerryn. I bolted down the street after the bus, leaving her with the rest of our luggage. I leapt between couples, dodged around old ladies with shopping bags and shoved my way through groups of people. My shoes were a blur as I ran the fastest 200 metres of my life. The bus pulled into the next stop, about 100 metres in front of me. I still had a chance!

Unfortunately only two people got off the bus and no one climbed on. As I drew level with the rear doors, the bus moved off again.

'SHIIIIT!' I groaned.

I gestured wildly at two people looking at me through the window. 'Press the button!' I screamed, using my finger to imitate pushing a button. 'Press the bloody stop button!'

The passengers averted their eyes like I was some kind of lunatic. I felt my legs dying underneath me as the bus drew away. I lost heart as it crested over Portobello Bridge and disappeared from sight.

I had slowed significantly—a three-legged overweight dog could have run faster—but still I kept going. I was going to get our case back or be hospitalised in the attempt.

I wheezed my way over the bridge. The bus was stopped ahead in the right lane and the traffic lights were red. With a final burst of energy, I ran across the traffic and hammered my fist on the front door of the bus. I knew that bus drivers were not allowed to open their doors unless they were at a bus stop, so I nearly fell up the stairs when this driver opened the doors. I looked at the passengers, who had watched my dash along half of Rathmines Road and were more than slightly curious.

'I forgot my bag!' I announced as I picked up the hand case, with a half bow to the passengers and the driver.

'Ah, so that's wot it was all about?' the driver grinned at me. 'Well done. Fair play to ya!'

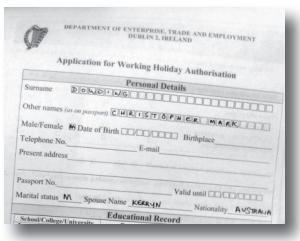
The passengers cheered as I climbed off the bus. *Accept your neighbour, no matter how crazy he seems* – this was a characteristic I noticed in many Irish people, during the months that Kerryn and I lived there.

When I'd first arrived in Ireland, *I* wasn't accepting at all. But despite my moaning early on, my new Irish friends welcomed me. *We accept you as you are!*

It took me a while to hear them.

Chapter 2

Welcome to Ireland


DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT
DUBLIN 2, IRELAND

Application for Working Holiday Authorisation

Personal Details

Surname DONALDSON

Other names (as on passport) CHRISTOPHER MARK

Male/Female M Date of Birth Birthplace

Telephone No. E-mail

Present address

Passport No. Valid until

Marital status M Spouse Name KERRYN Nationality AUSTRALIA

Educational Record

School/College/University

Two roads diverged in a wood and
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.

– Robert Frost

Brisbane Airport, Australia, Tuesday afternoon, August 21, 2001

Kerryn and I exchanged hugs and kisses with our family and friends.

'See you. Bye. Enjoy yourselves. We'll miss you!'

Kerryn's Mum and Dad hugged us. 'Take care. Send us a postcard.'

My Grandma waved as we stepped onto the escalator and descended to the Customs level. I was very excited. We each had a Working Holiday Visa, which permitted us to work for up to two years in the Emerald Isle, although we only planned to stay until early to mid 2002. I felt a previously unknown sense of freedom.

The fine print on our visas advised that any work we accepted could not be a continuation of our careers. The fine print didn't worry me much; I interpreted the words literally. I fully intended to work in my trained profession as an engineer, which I saw as a *job*, not a career. I'll explain why: in the 1990s, after I graduated

from university with my hard-won degree, the construction industry slumped. Employers had plenty of eager graduates to choose from, and negotiated tough conditions with low pay. I spent my early working years wrestling with uninspiring numbers, formulas and diagrams. I took phone calls from irate builders and received lectures from unsympathetic bosses. I drove home at the end of each day, cooked dinner, ironed my clothes and slumped into bed.

I'd become disgruntled and depressed before Kerryn came along to change my life. I met her one night at Doohley's Irish pub. (In a way, Ireland brought us together before we'd even been there). Kerryn quietly told me about her fund-raising work with Red Cross and her university studies in business. Her politeness and self-possessed manner impressed me.

Kerryn's reserved exterior gave way after we started dating. Once, I went on a skiing holiday to the Snowy Mountains and returned to see her two weeks later.

'You know, if you hadn't sent me a postcard, I would have broken up with you,' she said, looking at me steadily with her brown eyes.

She had a big thing about postcards. There was a bizzare one of Rowan Atkinson as Mr. Bean in his underpants in her photo album. I felt reassured, because she obviously went for skinny men with big noses.

Anyway, back to our departure for Ireland. I had struggled a fair bit with the idea of moving to the other side of the world. Europe wasn't a real place to me; it seemed like a fairytale land that I watched on TV. Things happened that I didn't understand. Europeans came up with bizarre ideas like the SMART car—I mean, why would anyone have wanted a tiny little car like that? (In 2001, large V8 powered cars still roared around the streets with glee in Australia.) Most unbelievable of all was the choice of music available in Europe. I was upset to discover that some Europeans actually liked boy bands. (I would have been horrified if I'd known that I would learn to like [one or two] boy bands later.)

The plane flight was difficult for me. As is the case with most long-haul international flights, we were offered food at times when we weren't hungry, the internal cabin lights were turned off to aid sleeping when my body wanted to be awake, and the video player for in-flight movies must have been somehow coupled to

the engines; as I tried to increase the headphone volume, the noise of the jets seemed to increase as well. By the time we landed in Heathrow, we'd been locked in for 22 hours.

'I just want to be able to move my shoulders and legs,' I groaned, willing to accept the sounds and sights of almost any type of music or tiny car, as long as I could get off the plane.

We had to change airlines at Heathrow, which involved a commute from Terminal Three to Terminal One.

'I think we have to catch a bus from *here*,' said Kerryn.

A locked bus waited outside the glass door, but we couldn't see any sign of the driver. I walked up to an attendant sitting at a small window, in a colourless uniform.

'Is this the right place to catch the bus to Terminal One?'

'The bus is straight outside them doors, love,' replied the attendant.

'It's locked. I couldn't see the driver anywhere.'

'Oh, 'im. 'Ee'll be along shortly.'

We waited for half an hour, until 8:00 p.m.. Kerryn approached the attendant again. 'Um, excuse me. Do you know when the driver is going to arrive? We've got to catch a plane to Dublin at 9:15 from Terminal One.'

'I'll put out a call for 'im then, love,' she smiled apologetically.

'Thanks.'

A few minutes later the bus driver arrived. He produced a key from his uniform jacket with a flourish and smiled at us. His teeth shone whitely. 'Hello. Which terminal are you going to?'

'Terminal One, please,' we replied.

'Okay,' he said.'We'll just wait for a bit and see if anyone else comes along. Are you from Australia?'

'Yeah, from Brisbane. We're going to live in Ireland for a while. Where are you from?'

'I'm from Trinidad. My family is still there. I came here for work, you know?' He gestured at the grubby terminal. 'Ah, the weather here, it never stops raining! I miss home, but there's no work there.'

The bus driver kept talking while Kerryn and I looked at our watches nervously. Although it was normal for me to worry about schedules, there *really* was a problem if Kerryn was worried. She had always been a whirlwind of activity, with her leisure activities

squeezed for every last second of available time. Before we got married, she would arrive home at her parents' house, put her car keys down in any convenient location and talk non-stop to whoever was around to listen. After a while, she would realise she had to be at a friend's place on the other side of the city in 15 minutes. She would scurry off to the bathroom to shower, get changed and brush her wavy blonde hair. 'Dad, Mum, can you *please* help me find my keys?'

Sometimes, the keys and purse turned up underneath a kitchen utensil or behind the sofa. (On other occasions, she would give up and retrieve a spare key from the back of her desk). She'd race off in her red two-door Daihatsu Charade without her purse. The level of chaos generally increased, as she stomped on the accelerator, veered wildly around corners and turned up the volume on the radio. This drowned out the noise caused by one corner of her skirt flapping outside, under the door. All of this drove me nuts, of course; but Kerryn added a creative randomness that had been missing from my life.

'Thank you for helping me find my keys,' she would often say, in gratitude for the *order* I'd brought to *her* life.

Back at Heathrow, the minute hand on my watch flicked to 8:20 p.m. We had booked a hostel room in Dublin, and we didn't really have spare money to pay for accommodation if we missed our 9:15 plane.

'Sorry, do you think we could get going now?' I said. 'There's no-one else here and our plane leaves soon.'

'Well, we'll wait two more minutes and then we'll go.'

We finally managed to get there. We negotiated Customs and checked in with just enough time to visit the bathroom and refresh ourselves.

Ireland's national airline is called Aer Lingus and their two-toned green planes have a clover emblem on their tail. The seats inside the cabin were also vibrantly green. I listened happily to pleasant conversations around us, in Irish accents. Many of the passengers carried expensive looking bags from clothes stores and bottle shops. Ireland seemed more real and exciting to me with every moment.

Our plane followed another jet out onto the runway and took off smoothly.

'Hello, ladies and gentlemen,' a voice said over the speaker system. 'This is Sean Murphy speaking. I'm your co-pilot on this

flight. We left the ground at 9:15 p.m. and we have a slight tail wind, so we should be able to reach Dublin a few minutes ahead of schedule. The weather there is cloudy, but dry, with a temperature of around 10 degrees.'

Kerryn peered out the window at the lights of London. 'Oh wow. It's such a big city. Look how far the lights go! I wonder how large Dublin will be, compared to this?'

'12 million people or so live in London,' I replied. 'There are about one and a half million people in Dublin.'

Clouds blocked our view of the Irish capital at night, as we got closer. Just before we prepared to land, I saw a huge flash of light from the corner of my eye, like someone had taken a photo, from the *outside* of the jet.

'What the hell was that?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' Kerryn replied.

'Good evening ladies and gentlemen,' said our co-pilot. 'We are now approaching Dublin airport. We're just waiting for clearance from the control tower before we make our descent. Some of you may have noticed a flash of light outside a few minutes ago. Our plane was struck by a bolt of lightning...'

Was that an omen?

No one was at the Immigration desk at the airport when we arrived. Kerryn was concerned we'd be thrown out of the country if our passports were left unstamped. So we hunted around and finally found an airport official. He didn't seem too worried about illegal immigrants. He didn't even want to *see* our passports until Kerryn demanded he put arrival stamps in our documents.

She was still frowning as we walked out.

I grinned at her. 'Told you, Kez. This is Ireland, not Australia. I knew they wouldn't be worried.'

We walked under a huge advertisement for an Irish boy band: "Westlife—a world of our [their] own". Clearly we had arrived in Europe.

The double-decker bus lurched around a corner. The driver tramped briefly on the brakes and we were thrown headfirst towards the seat in front of us. The driver pressed on the accelerator just in time and our heads rolled backwards, just before our teeth collided with the seat.

I clutched Kerryn's hand and jammed my feet tightly against the floor. Was the driver training for some kind of Bus Grand Prix event? He tested the entire power range of the engine as he raced towards the city. He also changed gears and floored the engine every time he hit a bump in the road, which made the bus leap spectacularly into the air.

I looked out the window through the softly falling rain with interest. There were a lot of grey coloured buildings. There were also a surprising number of people walking around, considering it was midnight. Masses of small cars and scooters jockeyed with the bus for position on the busy road. I'd finally made it to Ireland for real!

I'd wanted to come here since one of my primary school teachers had told my class about it: Ireland is split into two separate countries. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and is home to around two million people. The Republic of Ireland [or "The South" as it is known] is an independent country with no ties to Britain. It has a population of about four million people. The physical partitioning of the land is a symptom of the religious and political divisions of its population. I hadn't really understood, at seven years old. Ireland sounded like an odd place, a place where the people were all Christians, but fought about which name the church should hang over the door. I'd wanted to know more.

After an hour of jolts and bumps, our bus screeched to a halt.

'Lower Gardiner Street!' shouted the driver.

This was the stop for our hostel. Kerryn and I swung on our packs, grabbed our suitcases and stepped down into the rain. After two days of travelling, I felt exhausted. I rubbed the dark circles under my eyes and stumbled up to the hostel door. It seemed to be locked. I pushed again.

I groaned.

'I'm sure we'll be able to get in,' said Kerryn. 'Look, there's a light on.'

(I guess I should mention that I was a bit neurotic back then. I'd grown to expect the worst in life. If things went right, I'd be

pleasantly surprised. This attitude came in handy as an engineer, as my job was to think of all the things that could go wrong and find ways to prevent most of them from happening.)

Suddenly I heard a buzzing noise and a man gestured behind through the hostel window next to me. I pushed at the door and fell into the hallway on top of my suitcase.

'We'd like to check in please,' I said, from the floor.

The desk attendant had untidy clothes, messy hair and unshaved stubble. He consulted a list and did not meet my eyes. He seemed a bit shifty to me. A doorbell rang; two girls in skimpy tops waved at him through the window. He pressed a button to unlock the door for them.

'Hi girls how are you?' asked the desk attendant. 'Where have you been? Did you have a good time? Got any plans for tomorrow? Did you see the football? Did you go shopping?'

He continued on for some time. I sighed loudly. The attendant waved to the girls and turned to face us.

'Can I have your credit card, please?' he asked.

I passed over my card and he swiped it through the scanner. It made a sad beep and spat out some paper.

'I'm sorry, it's not working,' informed the desk attendant.

'Could you try it again?' I asked.

The phone rang. The desk attendant picked it up and talked for about five minutes. He swiped my card again and looked up. 'This card is not working.'

'Try typing in the number manually,' I said, grinding my teeth.

The phone rang again. With phone cradled between shoulder and ear, the desk attendant typed in my credit card number. The scanner gave another sad beep and spat out a little roll of paper.

I had flown on three aeroplanes, waited around in four airports and been on one hell of a scary bus ride during the last two days. I'd barely had a wink of sleep and I was feeling seriously cranky. To top it all off, I had used this card yesterday in Singapore and it had worked fine. I clenched my fists and moved towards the desk attendant, but Kerryn grabbed my arm and passed over her own credit card, smiling sweetly.

'He's just doing his job,' whispered Kerryn, as we walked away with the room key. I grimaced.

This was only the second time I had stayed in a hostel. My first stay had been in a little YHA hostel in Canterbury, England,

one year earlier. Friends of mine had taken me on a weekend trip to Kent and Sussex. I'd had visions of a run down building with carpet reeking of cigarette smoke and windowpanes replaced with plywood. I'd fully expected the other guests to be thieves and drug addicts (Neurotic nature combined with overly active imagination). I'd been happy when we'd parked in a white gravelled car park next to a lovely well-kept English garden. The beautiful little three-storey brick building would have been world heritage listed if it had been in Australia.

Unfortunately, my approach of expecting the worst but hoping for better didn't work for our *Dublin* hostel. Kerryn and I entered the hallway across carpet that smelled of alcohol and cigarette smoke. The walls were painted in a sort of grime-yellow colour, with stains everywhere. The stairs creaked alarmingly.

On the positive side, it was warm, all the windowpanes still had glass in them, and any place to sleep was welcome at this stage.

I put the key into the door of our room and tried to turn the handle. It didn't move. I turned the key back to its original position. The handle still didn't move. I turned the lock back and forth—10 degrees left, 5 degrees right, 30 degrees left and about 10 or 20 other positions. The lock emitted an annoying shriek with every movement.

'OK. That's *it*!' I shouted.

I shook the door, kicked it and twisted the key simultaneously. At least if I didn't beat the door into submission, I'd scare the heck out of that attendant out on the front desk! Finally the door opened, content with its victory.

'Thank goodness,' we said in unison and walked in. A tousle haired figure dragged himself sleepily back towards bed.

'Oh shit, there's someone in here,' I whispered.

'You can turn on the light if you want,' said our roommate. 'I'm already *awake*!'

Rather than embarrass ourselves further by floodlighting the room on the poor guy, we unpacked, made our beds and chain-locked our suitcases to a bed in near total darkness. I wasn't sure if our unfortunate roommate got back to sleep because I couldn't see and I couldn't hear for the noise of Kerryn or myself falling over the suitcases. Eventually we got to bed, Kerryn on the top level of one bunk and myself on the other. I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Thirty minutes later I was awake again. I had been dreaming of a jet engine roaring beside my right ear.

Our tousle haired roommate snored on the bunk below me. I found it hard to believe a sleeping human could make such a racket. The saying "a sound that could awaken the dead" seemed pretty accurate. He could have been used as a "control" for the upper limit of human noise tolerance experiments. I waited for about half an hour, hoping the noise would die down.

The snoring continued: 'Hrrrrghh… Hrrrrghhh… HRRRRRGGGHHH!'

I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned. Either I could be nice about this, or I could be sneaky.

Being sneaky and crafty had been my usual approach when I was younger, along with my brothers, Lachlan and Andrew. We'd grown up on a farm on the east coast of Australia and the nearest town of any significance was ten kilometres away.

Our neighbours were a family of farmers who grew citrus fruit. Unfortunately, they also liked to race around on motorbikes and shoot at the migratory magpie geese that nested every year in the wetlands at the bottom of our farms; magpie geese eat wetlands grasses and sedges, they do not eat fruit. We discouraged them from shooting at the birds by throwing rocks at them as they were aiming their rifles. I remember one occasion vividly, when we hassled the fruit [cake] growers with stones from the safety of a corrugated iron shed.

'Where are those f***ing rocks coming from?' one of them yelled. 'Some kids must be throwing them!'

'Let's get 'em!' yelled the rest of them.

They fanned out and moved towards the shed. We made a run for it and disappeared like shadows, shit-scared, into our uncle's banana plantation. At least we temporarily stopped them shooting at the birds.

Back in the Dublin hostel, it was time to be sneaky again: I shook the bunk back and forth violently. The frame squeaked and groaned. After about five minutes of rocking, our roommate leapt off his shaking mattress; I stopped moving and closed my eyes. He groaned and lay down again, unaware of my efforts as snore saboteur. I don't know if he got back to sleep or not, but I slept beautifully.

Chapter 3

The Manky Breakfast

Manky—Irish slang, possibly derived from the French word 'Manque'.
Manque—'lacking, defective, having failed to achieve ambition, falling short of hopes or expectations'.

– www.tiscali.co.uk

Dublin, Thursday, August 23, 2001

I woke at about seven. Kerryn and I were both hungry. I was ready for the complimentary breakfast and rubbed my hands together in anticipation. I had heard about the strange black and white puddings that formed part of a traditional Irish breakfast and I wanted to see why acquaintances had shuddered slightly when telling me about them.

Our tousle haired roommate was asleep, snoring happily. On our way out I slammed our room door to make sure it was locked. (His snoring still annoyed me.)

The woman who attended the counter pointed to some trays stacked next to her. Each tray contained a three-quarter full glass of orange juice, two plain bread rolls and a butter knife. I picked up one of the trays and took it over to the attendant. I waited for her to present the rest of the breakfast, which was presumably behind the counter in a hot tray.

'There's butter and jam if you want it,' she growled, waving vaguely at some baskets as she walked off around the corner. 'Coffee and tea are over there.'

Everyone stared at me, expectantly. Perhaps they were waiting to see if I'd throw the breakfast at the counter lady. They'd probably all wanted to react the same way after they'd realised their breakfast was three quarters of a glass of orange juice, two bread rolls and a complimentary scowl.

Kerryn was even less impressed than the rest of us. She is a coeliac—she can't eat wheat or grain foods. This is often a plus, because whenever we go out to eat, we get to try really tasty (wheat-free) foods like Thai noodles, Mexican or Indian and I always get any free bread rolls. However, this morning it meant Kerryn's breakfast was going to be a small cup of orange juice. She felt jet-lagged, she was hungry and boy-oh-boy was she unhappy. She stared harshly around the room, which fell silent. The other diners dropped their eyes and got on with their bread rolls.

We sat briefly at a table so Kerryn could drink two orange juices and I could eat four bread rolls. Then we left the room and headed back to our sleeping quarters. Behind us, conversation resumed loudly.

We decided to go out and find some real breakfast. I loaded some Irish money into my wallet and we stepped outside. We turned right into Talbot Street and a man walked straight across our path. Politely we moved out of his way. As we moved forwards again, a group of people stopped, turned around vaguely and spread out directly in front of us.

I had walked in the food courts of Westfield shopping malls on Saturdays in Brisbane and believed I was well practiced at avoiding pram-wielding mothers and long rows of shopping trolleys pushed by teenagers. None of this was of any use on Talbot Street. People walked, turned, stopped and constantly changed direction, beside us, behind us and in front of us. There was a benefit to this: we probably walked three metres for every metre we went forward, so we got some good exercise.

We noticed an "Iceland" grocery store. It looked nice and quiet so we scurried inside, crashing into another couple of pedestrians on the way. We each heaved a sigh of relief as the door shut behind us.

I looked around the store intently, to check prices and to see if

Weet-Bix was available. The fruit and vegetable section only carried a few withered carrots, an apple or two and a bag of potatoes. I wondered what the heck the shoppers in this store took home to eat. At the checkout I got one answer; the customer in front of us had about 20 or 30 boxes of microwave dinners in his trolley. Food that hadn't been shrink-wrapped and glued into cardboard boxes was not going to pass into this man's mouth. I was a bit horrified. At least I'd found some Weet-Bix on the shelves, although it was called "Weetabix" here.

We returned to the hostel. For some reason, each row of Weetabix was tightly wrapped in its own individual plastic package. As I levered each Weetabix biscuit from the packaging, a shower of wheat flakes fell around me onto the floor.

After we'd boosted ourselves with our second breakfast, we decided to go to the bank and open an account. Kerryn and I had obtained reference letters from our Australian banks and we had our passports, driver's licenses and credit cards as means of identification. We headed off purposefully towards O'Connell Street, the main street of Dublin.

O'Connell Street was named after Daniel O'Connell, the "Liberator of Ireland". In the early 1800s, Daniel was instrumental in returning political rights to Catholics, who had been oppressed for centuries under English rule. He used a non-violent approach, bringing change with his charisma. Sadly, the English exploited his abhorrence of violence by threatening to harm Irish people if he continued to give them ideas "above their station".

An active movement grew out of Irish frustration and O'Connell Street became the scene of the Easter Rising (1916). The leaders of this rebellion proclaimed the beginning of an Irish Republic from the steps of the General Post Office.

The English responded promptly by shelling the buildings along the street and setting fire to many of them. (Bullet holes from the Easter Rising can still be seen in the stone columns at the front of the Post Office.) A great deal of the street was destroyed and the rebellion leaders were caught and hung. Although the movement was unsuccessful, the Irish people were incensed by England's treatment of the Easter Rising leaders. Strong sympathy for the Irish republican movement was generated and a rebellion began.

We dodged hundreds of descendants of that rebellion as we walked the street and some of them seemed determined to assert

their independence from English rule more than 80 years after the event. For example, very few people queued when waiting for the bus. Most people stood around in small groups and each group surged towards an arriving bus, like a reverse version of the Big Bang theory of the universe. When they reached the doorway, they would split into new formations, determined by the people with the strongest elbows. Of course, the *English* perfected queuing; I've heard tales of Englishmen who will join the end of a line of people, curious to see why it is there.

Eventually we arrived in front of the National Irish Bank. The National Australia Bank owned this bank—though here the familiar little falling star logo was green instead of red. We thought it would be easy to open an account here, as Kerryn was a customer of the National Australia Bank and carried a letter of reference from them.

Inside, Kerryn hid behind a column in the bank foyer and struggled with something under her shirt. This probably didn't make the bank staff feel very secure and I looked around nervously; I don't think this helped either. No doubt one of them was leaning towards a red PANIC button behind the counter when Kerryn released the little travel holster she carried under her shirt and took out our passports and her reference letter. A collective sigh of relief echoed around the room.

We approached the counter.

'We'd like to open a bank account please,' said Kerryn.

'OK,' replied the bank attendant, 'I'll need a passport or other proof of identity, a utility bill or bank statement with your address on it and proof of your residency; either your PPS number or residency visas.'

We handed over our passports, Australian bank statements, reference letters and our work permits.

'Ah, sorry,' she smiled, 'I'll need a statement from an *Irish* bank or utility company with your current address. And I'll need your PPS numbers.'

'We have only just arrived,' Kerryn said. 'We have a letter of reference from the National Australia Bank. Isn't that sufficient?'

'Ah well, no, sorry,' the bank attendant replied, 'I can't help you unless you have a proof of address and residency. It's against the regulations...'

We walked out unhappily. I think Kerryn was most annoyed, as she had a thing about banks; she'd worked for one for a year. Kerryn

hadn't really aligned with her employer's mission statement; she loved talking to people and putting a bit of sunshine into their lives, so she decided to return to university to study Nutrition and Dietetics. So far, she'd enjoyed the course much more than explaining to people why their account fees had gone up.

'Well, I think we should forget about organising banks today,' I suggested. 'We're still jet-lagged. Let's get on a tour bus and look around Dublin.'

'OK,' agreed Kerryn. We climbed onto a two-storey bus full of tourists and sat upstairs.

'Cead mhile failte, Baile Atha Cliath,' bellowed the driver.

Everyone went silent. Was this tour going to be conducted in a foreign language? Everything had been written in *English* on the side of the bus.

'Ah, don't worry folks—we do speak English on this tour,' the driver chuckled. 'I just said, "Welcome to Dublin".'

The bus moved off along the street. At each point of interest, the driver had something to say. Did you know Dublin is home to the first purpose built maternity hospital in the world? And Molly Malone is affectionately known by Dubliners as "the dish with the fish" or "the tart with the cart". Our driver burst into song as he drove past Molly's statue:

"In Dublin, fair city, where the girls are so pretty, I first set my eyes on sweet Molly Malone. She wheeled her wheelbarrow, through the streets wide and narrow, singing cockles and mussels, alive alive-O!"

I hadn't expected live music as part of the tour, and I cheered loudly along with the others on board.

'Ah, tanks [thanks] very much,' the driver chuckled. 'Molly is an old Dublin legend. She sold fish by day and her ah... personal services by night.'

We swept past St Stephen's Green, one of the lovely central parks in Dublin. We also passed Leinster House, which is the meeting place of the modern Irish Senate. Most importantly, the bus took us past the Guinness Brewery at St James Gate. Sir Arthur Guinness, the founder, signed a *9000-year* lease for the original parcel of land at the bargain price of £45 per annum in 1759. Guaranteed widow's pension, 10-20% higher pay than the norm, paid holidays and free medical care made the brewery a desirable place of employment.

About 10 million glasses of Guinness stout are consumed around the world each day. Of these, 2.5 million are produced in Dublin. The entire population of Ireland (North and South) was about 6 million. *Every* man, woman and child could drink nearly half a pint each day for good health.

'I'd say there are a few serious drunks who make up for the slower drinkers among us,' chuckled our bus driver.

With 700 pubs in Dublin alone, the Irish have no shortage of places to enjoy a pint of the black stuff. Guinness is *very* big business. Distinctive black delivery trucks scurried around the city carrying large kegs to the pubs. Advertisements were played regularly on TV. There were large posters on bridges, buses and billboards everywhere. In Dublin, the Guinness harp symbol is far more pervading than the Golden M of McDonalds.

If Sir Arthur Guinness could have seen the legacy he'd begun, I'd say he'd be a very happy man.

Chapter 4

The First Pint

There is nothing that cuts you down to size like coming to some strange and marvelous place where no-one even stops to notice you.
– Richard Adams

Friday, August 24, 2001

Kerryn and I met people from all over the world in the hostel where we stayed. Every night we shared our room with someone new—a French girl who'd come to go to the U2 concert at Slade Castle, an Australian male who had moved here for work, and a man from England who'd come here to watch spotted wrens or badgers, or some other incredibly boring animals.

Last night we'd had a roommate who'd sounded like he had whooping cough. Every hour, I'd been woken by a 10-minute fit of coughing. I'd covered my head with my sheet hoping it would filter out the germs.

Later in the day, we headed out to meet with Kerryn's friend, Mary, who had travelled down from Northern Ireland to spend the weekend with us. Mary and her family had lived in Australia for a few years. She and Kerryn attended the same secondary

school in Brisbane and stayed in touch by writing to each other after Mary returned to Ireland.

Mary was the quintessential 20-something-Irish girl, slender, blonde and full of energy. She wore racy tight-fitting clothes and, with her fine boned features, she looked like a blonde Nicole Kidman. She'd arranged for us to go out with her cousin, who was an architect.

'He should have some tips for finding work, Chris,' she said, as we walked across O'Connell Street Bridge, which spanned the River Liffey. 'He worked in Australia for a year.'

The Vikings founded Dublin in the Ninth Century, at the point where the River Poddle met the Liffey in a black pool of water. The Celts called the Viking settlement "Dubh Linn" (Black Pool). The land around the Liffey had already been settled for some time. The Celts arrived before the Vikings and scientists have found evidence of *prehistoric* human settlements. The Celts had their own large settlement along the Liffey, "Baile Atha Cliath", which translated literally to the "Town of the Hurdle Ford".

Over time, both settlements grew and merged. As a result, modern Dublin has two names—Dublin in English and Baile Atha Cliath in Irish, pronounced "Boll-yeh Aha Clia".

According to legend, the Guinness brewery used water from the Liffey to give their famous drink a distinct taste. This worried me a bit, as I noticed the colour of the water was a fairly vibrant shade of green. I had no doubt the water had a "distinct taste", but the level of biological pollution required to turn water *that* colour was not healthy. Perhaps that was why everyone weaved wildly across the footpaths. Half a pint each day of alcohol made with Liffey water would have made me stumble about in a hazed state of perception too.

Kerryn, Mary and I walked along "the Quays" beside the river, after Mary encouraged us to scoot across the road in front of a speeding bus. Over the last couple of days, I'd seen a sizable number of people cross Dublin's streets heedlessly in front of cars, trucks and other heavy vehicles.

Our destination was Fitzsimons bar in Eustace Street. I shook hands with Mary's cousin Brogan in the foyer, who looked about twenty-five years old. He dressed in the look-at-the-statement-I'm-making way some young architects did.

'Hi there, how do you do,' he said without smiling. 'We thought

we'd take you to one of the modern bars. It's not a traditional Irish place, but it's where everyone goes. It's pretty expensive.'

'Ah, it'll be grand!' replied Mary.

Brogan greeted his friends, who were waiting for him downstairs. He briefly introduced us to the five of them, but I was on my own after Kerryn and Mary walked to the bathroom.

'Did ya see the football yesterday?' said Brogan, to his mates.

'Ah yeah, Seamus McFinn was playing grand, wasn't he?' replied one of them.

'The man's a right bollocks!' said another. 'He missed two passes and a goal,'

'Ah no, he's sound enough,' said a third. 'That coach now, he's a feckin header, sure he is.'

I recalled a statement I had read in a travel guidebook: "Ireland is home to perhaps the most gregarious and welcoming people in the world."

I looked at Brogan and his mates yakking about a football game I would obviously know nothing about. They weren't too bothered including me in the conversation. I shrugged my shoulders and walked over to the bar and ordered some pints for Kerryn, Mary and myself. The barman filled the glasses to about half full and then walked away. I waited and waited... and waited. Had he forgotten about me?

After several minutes, the barman came back and finished filling each glass, with a creamy head at the top. 'That'll be £15.'

Over 30 bucks for three drinks! I gasped and pulled out a quarter of the week's budget from my wallet.

Ah, well, it'll be worth it, I thought before I took my first sip of Guinness in its homeland. In Australia, Guinness had always ripped, snorted and cavorted its way across my tongue. I'd usually needed to use mouth freshener for a week afterwards to get rid of the aftertaste.

The taste of Dublin's Guinness surprised me—it was *subtle*. It didn't cavort its way across my taste buds and I didn't gag. It went down smoothly, which took a little getting used to, but I soon loved the taste. There was something pure about it.

A barman in an Irish pub in Brisbane once told me a story about Australian Guinness.

'You know how they make it?' he asked. 'They bring in the syrup from Singapore and then fill it up with XXXX [Fourex] beer!'

I'm not sure if this story was true, but I've always enjoyed a good conspiracy theory. The Castlemaine Brewery in Brisbane pumped out XXXX beer at a rate of 310,000 litres a day. I thought it was fine as far as basic beers went, but when I'd paid for a Guinness, I expected a Guinness.

I checked later about the Fitzsimons barman's slow pouring technique. A properly trained barman partly filled each glass and left it on the bar, to allow the heavier black stout to settle. After waiting a few minutes, he filled the glass to the top and left it to settle a second time. Apparently the flavour became exceptional using this method. I was fascinated to watch the stuff settling, particularly after having (quite) a few pints. Little bubbles travelled in bizarre oval patterns, eddies and currents. Some bubbles headed towards the surface and others towards the bottom.

You might be thinking, with such a slow pouring method, how on earth did the bar staff keep the drinks up to a pub full of Irishmen? Well, the Irish have more than 200 years experience in the pouring of Guinness. A good barman will have three or four half-full glasses on the bar in reserve, so he can quickly finish filling the glass when the next order comes in.

(The pouring method has such a powerful effect on the taste, that when I returned to Australia in the following year, I spent a lot of time trying to teach my friends how to pour Guinness the Irish way.)

I was pleased to discover Guinness was *not* made using water from the Liffey. The water came from the Wicklow Mountains, south of Dublin. So at least I was unlikely to be weaving about wildly on the footpath from the effects of green coloured river water.

I returned to our group. The conversation had turned to the Irish economy.

'You might find it difficult to get a job straight away,' said Brogan, as he looked down his nose at me. 'Construction has slowed down a lot. Everything was booming in January, but it's not so good now.'

I gritted my teeth—I didn't want to hear this sort of thing. It had cost me a lot to get here. (I was definitely a bit of a tight-arse when it came to money.) What I wanted to hear was sugary sweet stories about how Australian engineers earned bucket loads of cash, because everyone wanted to employ them. It was a

struggle for me to tolerate Brogan, let alone like him, as the things he said seemed to be of questionable value. Let me elaborate: The Celtic Tiger economy of Ireland had grown strongly through the late 1980s and 1990s. The government lowered the company tax rate and attracted overseas corporations into the country. A low cost Irish workforce helped to make the taxation policy a great success. Many U.S. information technology companies decided to base their European operations in Ireland and cash injections from the European Union provided funds to improve the country's infrastructure. Ireland leapt from poverty to wealth in less than a generation. Dublin had more construction cranes, building sites and "help wanted" signs than I'd ever seen in Brisbane.

'Oh well,' I said, 'I've got an interview lined up on Monday. The agents are pretty positive.'

Despite all this, though, Brogan's words spooked me. I began to question why I had come to Ireland and drifted away from our group. I tried to take solace in my drink, but I felt worried. I didn't know a single person in Ireland, apart from Mary, who was really Kerryn's friend anyway. I had incurred a large credit card debt to get here, I was almost broke and I needed a job. Why the hell had I left a paying job, my home and all my friends? I had to think hard to remember why.

When we'd been planning our wedding a year ago, Kerryn had been keen to go overseas and live somewhere different for a while, but I hadn't been very interested.

'Look,' she said, 'you've said before you wanted to work overseas. If we don't do it now, when will we get the chance again? We'll get tied down with a mortgage and kids. I want to go *now*.'

'Yes,' I replied, 'but saying I want to go is completely different from actually *doing* it. Plenty of people say they'd *like* to do things, without ever actually doing them. I'd like to write a book one day, but I don't know if I'll ever do it. We also have to pay for a wedding. How can you expect to pay for both?'

Somehow, eventually, she convinced me. As Kerryn had arranged our wedding, I'd researched possible destinations for us. We'd both wanted to go to Europe. We only spoke English, so that had left us with two alternatives: England or Ireland. Kerryn had left the choice up to me.

So, why did I choose Ireland? Lots of the usual clichés came to mind: Ireland had so much history, and it was mysterious and

romantic. But none of those reasons cut it. I looked around the bar that Mary and Brogan had brought us to; people laughed easily, smiled and flirted with each other. They were having fun and enjoying life. I wondered what it was like. I could count the number of times I'd enjoyed life on my two hands. To be honest, that was the reason I chose Ireland; I wanted to be able to express myself and have fun freely, like the Irish could.

I awoke grumpily on Sunday morning to the sound of some drunken Australians singing badly in another wing of the hostel. You might think I would have felt a sense of patriotism, knowing some of my countrymen were in Ireland with me. I'm afraid not—not this early in the morning. I would have been happy for the Irish immigration department to eject the guy who sang the loudest from the country. I covered my ears, but I could still hear him. He eventually lapsed into silence, either from the effects of 20 pints too many or because his neighbours had killed him; either way, I was thankful.

We awoke later and headed downstairs for our orange juice and bread rolls. We were becoming experienced hostel breakfasters. We grabbed some milk from the fridge and poured some bowls of cereal to supplement the bread rolls. We also had some fruit, purchased at great effort from Dunnes Grocery Store in Talbot Street the day before. The other shoppers had shoved, pushed and tackled us in their quest to get a loaf of bread and some cereal as quickly as possible. (After I'd been in Dublin a few more weeks, I found that I also liked shoving and not standing around in queues—it was quite liberating.)

In the afternoon, we hailed a taxi to get to a Gaelic football match. Brogan and Mary had invited us to the Derry versus Galway match at Croke Park.

Gaelic is a much older game than rugby or soccer. Records of the game exist from the 17th and 18th Century. I had vague memories of playing the game at high school. I don't think our Physical Education teacher had ever read any of the rules, as the ball had only played a very small role in his version of the game: kicking and thumping players on the opposing team had been more important. The team with the players who'd grown up eating nutrient-loaded battery hens every night had a distinct advantage.

There were people everywhere when we arrived at one end of Lower Dorset Street in the taxi. The Irish Garda directed traffic away from the partially closed street. Along both footpaths, hawkers sold plastic flags and woollen scarves with the team colours.

I sweated a bit when I saw the scarves that were for sale; some flags were red and white, others were maroon and white. By a horrible stroke of fate the t-shirt I was wearing was also maroon and white. Which team did Brogan and Mary support? I guessed it would be Derry, as they were both born there. Which team wore maroon and white? Maybe the red and white and maroon and white colours were the alternative colours for one team. I mean, how could two teams be allowed to pick colours that looked so similar? I looked around wildly, hoping to see an open clothes store. Why had I worn *this* shirt? Would fans here behave like soccer fans did at matches in England? I imagined packs of raving hooligans squashing me against a fence because I supported the opposing team.

We walked into a brightly coloured pub near the stadium, where we were meeting Brogan and Mary. Hundreds of people laughed around us as they threw back pints of beer or stout. Some of them wore maroon and white scarves; others wore red and white. I noticed the people wearing different colours stayed in separate groups.

We found Brogan and his friends sharing a round of drinks in the back of the pub. They took one look at me and went silent. Brogan wore an expression even more disdainful than he had worn the night before. Obviously Derry's colours were red and white—not maroon and white. I wonder if I'd have got the same reaction if I'd asked them to forgive the English for the Potato Famine and Bloody Sunday. I'm afraid the next half-hour of stony expressions wore on me and I decided to go for a walk around the pub.

'I'm just going to the Gentlemen's,' I said.

I wandered off around to another floor of the pub, muttering to myself. I was pretty annoyed. Three months ago I'd married Kerryn and the wedding had been far bigger than I had expected. Everyone had treated me like I was a movie star that day and I'd felt really special. In the months afterwards, our relationships with our family and friends had become deeper and more important

to me. Life had become almost euphoric, until now. Being near Brogan was like having a bucket of icy water thrown over me.

I sulked my way around the different groups of people in the pub. One old feller who was a Derry supporter shouted at me. 'TISN'T hard to see who you're supportin'!'

I jumped involuntarily. I'd heard a warning on the radio of possible bomb threats at the Stadium. Apparently this happened every time a team from Northern Ireland came to play in the Republic. Presumably, the threats came from terrorists in Northern Ireland; for all I knew this man could be one of them.

The Derry supporter saw the look of fear on my face and laughed. 'Enjoy the game,' he smiled.

I sighed in relief and smiled back.

I waited for an hour or so before I returned to Brogan's group, who by now were a bit merrier. We headed off towards Croke Park, with a few thousand others. The sun shone and everyone looked happy. Well, everyone except me.

We arrived at the stadium and marched in through the stalls. I had a good look around, as half the stadium was still under construction. The finished half had an impressive sail canopy to protect the patrons from the ever-threatening rain.

'What a great stadium!' I remarked. 'How big will it be when it's complete?'

'It will hold 82000 spectators when it's done,' replied Brogan.

The crowd roared as the teams ran out onto the field. After a short wait, two players from each team moved to the centre of the field. The referee hoisted the ball into the air, in a similar fashion to basketball. The players reached high, attempting to grab the ball first.

Paddy from Galway reached higher than Mickey from Derry and passed the ball back to his team. The team passed the ball by hitting it with their fists.

'This looks a bit like Australian Rules!' I said.

'That's right,' replied Brogan. 'There's a Mixed Rules game played every year between Ireland and Australia. Ireland usually wins. I suppose the round ball is a bit unusual for you Australians.'

Unlike Aussie Rules, where there were four posts and no crossbar, there were only two posts at each end of the field, with a crossbar, in Gaelic Football. There was also a goalkeeper. One

point was scored if the ball was kicked over the crossbar and three points were scored if the ball went under the bar and made it past the goalie.

Derry and Galway were pretty well matched. Both sides were defending well and no one on the attacking side could break free. Suddenly, Mickey rammed Paddy's side hard and flicked the ball away with his hand. Surely stealing the ball was a foul? I had grown up watching Rugby League and that sort of action simply wasn't on. Paddy fell onto the ground with a thud I felt from the stand. Ouch.

The spectators around me in red and white leapt up and roared with approval. Play continued. Mickey's disorderly looking performance had been allowed. Mickey raced towards the goals and bounced the ball between his hand and his toe every few steps. He fisted the ball to Seamus, who ran four steps and then booted the ball towards the goals. The goalie leapt spectacularly—but not far enough. The ball flashed through under the crossbar.

Around me, the crowd went wild.

'YEAAAAH—DERRY, DERRY, DERRY!'

There's no doubt Gaelic football is a pretty rough game. And it was probably rougher 200 years ago. It is thought by some that Australian Rules evolved from Gaelic football, as a result of the thousands of Irish who were deported as convicts to Australia in the 19th Century.

"On... [8th May] in 1866 the basic rules of the game [Australian Rules] were agreed in a Melbourne Pub and it was decided to ban tripping and kicking the man, which was all part of the game before then", reported ABC Presenter, Malcolm Duxbury.

Malcolm made no reference to Gaelic football, but if kicking and tripping were common in Australian Rules before 1866, I'm sure a game of Gaelic football in the 17th and 18th Century would have finished with some very bruised and battered players!

The game finished with Galway winning 14 points to Derry's 11. Brogan and his friends looked depressed. I, on the other hand, felt vindicated I had picked my shirt appropriately, even though my skill level equalled that of people who used their favourite colour to pick the winning horse and jockey on Melbourne Cup Day. I hadn't studied a form guide, but I was one up on Brogan and that was all that mattered to me.

In a month's time, Galway went on to win the All Ireland Championship Final, seventeen points to County Meath's eight. I felt even better.

Chapter 5

Changing with the City

An Irishman is a guy who:
Believes everything he can't see and nothing he can.
Has such great respect for the Truth, he uses it only in emergencies. Can lick any man in the house he is sole occupant of. Believes salvation can be achieved by means of a weekly envelope.
... we are a very perverse, complex people. It's what makes us lovable. We are banking heavily that God has a sense of humour.

– Jim Murray

Late August, 2001

There were more people in Dublin than places to live; newly listed rental properties were snapped up. Most people checked the Internet site "www.daft.ie" and the *Evening Herald* newspaper to look for a home. The wonderful thing about the web site was the ability to search for suburb, cost, number of bedrooms, and whether the place was furnished or unfurnished. Unfortunately, everyone else did the same thing. A newly listed property could be gone within two hours of being listed on the web site. I'm not sure *why* the Internet site was called "daft" but the name was appropriate, because looking for a home in Dublin was

a daft idea. (We would have to find two homes during our time in Ireland, and both times it would be tedious and disheartening.)

Just after lunch on Monday, we noticed an advertisement: "RATHMINES, 2-bedroom unit, furnished, cable TV, close to shops, tport. Call Mickey (01) 295 2222 or 086 358 3666 btwn 6-8 p.m. only, £600 per month". This sounded exciting. Rathmines was fairly close to the city centre and was a respectable and safe suburb from everything we'd heard.

At five to six, I called Mickey. 'I'm just ringing about the unit at Rathmines.'

'Ahh, sorry, it's already gone,' replied Mickey, 'It went at 3.00 this afternoon. Goodbye,' replied Mickey.

Rule No. 1 of house hunting in Dublin—ignore the advertised calling time.

Kerryn noticed another advertisement. "DUN LAOGHAIRE, 3 bedroom house to share w others, quiet st, own bathroom, b/in wrobe, call Hans 296 7777, £550 per month". Dun Laoghaire was a nice suburb by the waters of Dublin Bay.

An Irish friend of mine back in Australia had recommended Dun Laoghaire highly. 'Ah, it's really grand beside the bay. You can catch the DART into town; it's much easier than the bus.'

Hans didn't sound like an Irish name. I wondered where he was from, as Kerryn phoned him.

'Hi, we're just ringing about the room for rent?'

'Yes, it is still available,' Hans replied, 'Are you able to see it at 10? It is easy to find, just take the number 45 bus to Shanganagh Vale. We are in number four of the Fairview Lane. You get off at the Esso Stop.'

Kerryn agreed a time with Hans and rang off.

'He sounded nice,' she said, 'His accent didn't sound Irish, though,' she said.

We caught the No. 45 bus from the Quays, which moved off in the lurching, veering fashion we were becoming used to.

'Can you tell us when you get to Shanganagh Vale?' asked Kerryn.

'Sure,' answered the driver melodiously, 'take a seat and I'll let you know, so.'

All of the double-decker buses were fitted with a special

mirror so the driver could see the upstairs passengers. In this way, he knew when someone was about to go down the stairs. Those drivers with a particular sense of humour would hit the accelerator or the brakes at the right moment to help the passenger down quickly. Climbing the stairs was almost as hazardous, as the drivers always seemed to accelerate their buses hard when passengers reached the third or fourth step. Thankfully there were handrails and given the driving technique, I was surprised how few of these rails were buckled out of shape.

I watched the antics of other passengers climbing the stairs for an hour or so. The bus ground to a halt in a small village. We waited for a few minutes. Abruptly, the bus driver appeared on the stairs.

'This is your stop, Shanganagh Vale!' he puffed.

We got up quickly and climbed off the bus, embarrassed at making the other passengers wait. None of them seemed to mind much though.

'Thanks very much!' we chanted.

One of the nice things about bus travel in Dublin was hearing the passengers thank the bus driver as they got off. It made for a congenial atmosphere and the bus drivers appreciated it. Besides, keeping a £250,000 double-decker bus upright at the speeds *they* turned corners deserved some form of congratulations.

Shanganagh Vale was a little village with an Esso station shoehorned into a crappy space beside the four-lane N11 National Primary Road to County Wexford. We were nowhere near the lovely harbour town of Dun Laoghaire.

The walk to No. 4 Fairview Lane took us another 30 minutes. We walked past another couple of bus stops on the way. Good one, Hans; your directions weren't too helpful. We knocked on the door of the house and a tall blonde man in his mid-twenties answered.

'Hallo, hallo, come in,' he gestured at us. 'So, this is the house. We like to keep it tidy. We like to keep it quiet.'

I couldn't quite place his accent. We followed him upstairs.

'Here is the bathroom,' he began to explain, 'We take turns buying the soap. Here is the upstairs toilet. We don't use it between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. We use the downstairs toilet then.'

'This is Fritz,' he indicated, waving at a flat mate.

Fritz had a bald scalp and was in his twenties. He was solidly built and wore clothing I would describe as army leisure wear. I

was fairly sure he was a former East German; fairly sure that they both were.

'This is the (vacant) room,' continued Hans, 'The wardrobe is okay for clothes, but not to store suitcases. Suitcases *must* go in the downstairs cupboard.'

Hans went on to explain the details of the water heater operation during each and every one of the 24 hours in a day. Also, apparently the toilet roll costs were shared, but washing powder costs were the individual's responsibility. He gave me 1000 reasons to think '*There's no f***ing way I'm going to live here!*' Mercifully, we escaped within an hour or so.

Rule No 2 of house hunting in Dublin—The advertised house can be listed in a suburb that is up to five kilometres away from the true house position, in the same way as there is an error between magnetic and true north. And former East Germans may not provide the easy, relaxed atmosphere you were hoping to find.

On Tuesday, we noticed an advertisement for a unit: "RATHGAR, 2 bedroom unit to share with tenant, furnished, close to shops, tport. Call Aditi (01) 295 2223 or 086 358 3667, £550 per month". This sounded good. We called Aditi.

'Yes, yes, the room is still available,' Aditi chirped. 'It is next to the church on Rathgar Rd. Unit 15, Grenville Lodge. It doesn't have a street number. I am here for the next hour if you want to have a look at it.'

We hailed a taxi on College Green, opposite Trinity College. The driver headed up Dame Street and turned left. We narrowly avoided two 20-something girls, who were jaywalking across the road in front of cars as they talked on their mobile phones. The taxi driver hooted at them and shook his fist.

'They don't even look where they're going, these girls,' he complained. 'I nearly hit one the other day, so I pressed the horn, so she knew she was in danger, like and she *abused* me. They're too busy talking shite with their dozy boyfriends on their cell phones.

'Dublin's changed a lot in the last 10 years,' he continued, 'people aren't as friendly; they're in too much of a rush. And, I used to be able to drive from town to Rathgar in five minutes. It takes 20 now. The traffic has doubled in the last couple of years.'

'But surely it's good that everyone has jobs now?' I wondered aloud. 'It must have been tough 10 years ago.' I had seen the movie *The Commitments* like everyone else. Dublin had seemed like a fun place to play in a band, but it had looked very poor.

'Ah, yeah, some things are a lot better all right,' replied our driver. 'But some things are worse. Now, here's Rathgar Road. Which church is it you're wanting?'

It was too much for me to expect only one church on this road; there were two. This was Ireland after all. The Catholic Church ruled the country ruthlessly until 10 years ago. It is worth noting the heavily starched underpants, robe and stiff collar worn by the local clergy were also the favoured clothing articles for many of the world's dictators. One look at Dublin's map revealed small cross symbols scattered like minor fiefdoms, all over the city. There were probably as many churches in the city as pubs.

The Church had lost its hold on Ireland after people discovered that some of the bishops had secret families. Word also got out about certain close relationships between priests and their altar boys. Many people were infuriated by the actions of their religious leaders. I'd heard lots of phone-ins to radio stations from enraged citizens around the country and I expect this will go on for years to come.

One fellow put the country's anger into a succinct sentence for me: 'If I found out some priest had been touching my children, I'd wanta go and kill the fecker.'

We climbed out of the taxi opposite the church on the corner of South Leicester Avenue and Rathgar Road. I saw no sign of Grenville Lodge and only half of the houses had street numbers. I walked up and down the street a little way, peering at the letterboxes hopefully. None of the buildings near the church looked remotely like a block of flats. There were a lot of grey houses with blue, yellow or red Georgian doors and a Spar convenience store, where I decided to ask for directions.

'Excuse me,' I asked, 'do you know where Grenville Lodge is?'

The shop attendant rubbed his pimply forehead.

'Ah, what street is it on?' asked the attendant. It seemed to be an Irish thing to answer a question with another question.

'Rathgar Road,' I replied.

'Ah, sorry,' he said, shaking his head, 'no, I don't know Rathgar Road. I live in Harold's Cross.'

Across the pavement, a blue and white sign bore the postcode and street name: 6 RATHGAR ROAD. I looked through the window at the sign and then looked back at the shop attendant. He gave no reaction. It was like expecting a brick wall to be surprised when a wrecking ball hit it.

Kerryn phoned Aditi, again.

'Yes, yes, it's a little way down the road from the church.' explained Aditi, 'It's near the shops.'

'Ask her for the street number again,' I whispered to Kerryn.

'Ah, sorry, the building doesn't have a number,' Aditi trilled, 'it's just called Grenville Lodge.'

We scoured the buildings around the Spar store fruitlessly, which was the only shop in the vicinity. I hailed a man standing beside his car.

'Excuse me, would you know where Grenville Lodge is?'

'No, I don't sorry,' he answered me in a broad Australian accent. 'Are you looking for a place to live? It's bloody soul-destroying, isn't it? Half the places don't have a proper address.'

Kerryn called Aditi again, using our Australian mobile phone, which cost about two gold bars per call within Ireland.

'It's a grey coloured building,' Aditi advised.

Nearly all the buildings on the road were coloured grey.

'Can't she come out into the street and wave at us or something?' I fumed.

Eventually we found the place, at the far end of the one kilometre road. The building sat next to another old church. I noticed the street number on one of the driveway posts: 111. Hmm.

The three years old unit was very well appointed. It featured timber floors, nice bathrooms and free cable TV because the previous tenant had never got it cut off when she left. The bills that arrived for her every month were never paid. For some reason the cable company kept supplying the service.

Aditi was a native of southern India, with a curiously Irish-Indian accent. She had spent most of her childhood years in Ireland with her family, while her father studied medicine. The whole family had returned to India during her teens. She came back later to study commerce and had stayed in Ireland ever since.

She seemed like a fairly sane person. If we were going to live with her and entrust all our possessions to her, I wanted to be sure. A few years ago, I'd shared a house with a flat mate who

became difficult. I'd agreed he could use my car while I was away on holidays and one day, as he was getting into the car, his coat got caught in the door. Unfortunately, the mobile phone in his coat pocket was flattened to the size of a credit card; he blamed me for destroying it even though I was 400 kilometres away at the time. The amiable flat mate relationship went downhill fast afterwards. Perhaps my lowest point was seeing a cheese grater clipped to the fridge door with a magnetic file holder, to show his anger at the quality of my dishwashing. To be fair, there *was* still a thin peel of cheese on the grater, but my flatmate had no cause to criticise, as he'd rarely washed anything himself.

Rule No. 3 of house hunting in Dublin—Make sure your flat mates aren't the types of people who blame you for their own messes.

We decided 111 Rathgar Road suited us perfectly. We didn't have a car for Aditi to drive and there was an automatic dishwasher in the kitchen, so there could be no argument about washing quality or quantity. The little bar fridge in one corner looked great for keeping cans of Guinness cool.

'We'll take it,' said Kerryn firmly.

'Well, I've only just placed the advertisement,' advised Aditi. 'I'd just like to see who else comes along. I'll let you know in two or three days.'

Later, I screwed my face up, as we walked across the road to the bus stop, and began to complain. 'Why couldn't she just decide straight away? I'm sick of that hostel—it's feral. I just want somewhere decent to live!' My earlier commitment to enjoy life was briefly forgotten as I sulked my way back to Lower Gardiner Street.

We returned to the hostel to cook dinner. I attacked a vile orange residue that had been left on all the cooking pots by some backpacker. He'd probably gone to the pub to enjoy several guilt-free pints. In the meantime, Kerryn introduced herself to another couple. The guy had a mop of red hair so vivid I thought he must have dyed it. He was about 24 years old.

'This place is kinda bad, huh?' said the young man, smiling with intensely bright eyes.

'Hi, I'm Nick,' he introduced himself, 'and this is Andrea.'

Nick's accent was definitely North American. Knowing how Canadians dislike being mistaken for people from the States, I spoke tentatively.

'So, you're from...?'

'North America, yeah,' he finished, 'Canada, actually.'

'Is it true Canadians sew their flag on their backpacks so they aren't mistaken for Americans?'

'Yeah, we wouldn't want people to think we're *Americans*,' he laughed, 'Do you know some of them don't even know where Canada *is*?'

'You're joking, aren't you?' I laughed. 'They're right next door to you. On the same continent!'

'Yeah, they are, but all they know about is America. The news they get is mostly only about stuff that happens in the US.'

Nick had recently graduated with a Mechanical Engineering Degree. Andrea was a qualified Biochemist and was about to apply for medical school in Vancouver. She looked about 23 years old, and had long brown hair. They had married a couple of months ago and decided to come over to Ireland, before they settled into the responsibilities and trials of everyday life.

'So, how long have you been in Ireland?' Kerryn asked.

'Only a week,' replied Andrea. 'Do you want to share some of our ice cream? We've had a lot of trouble finding a place to live. How about you guys?'

Kerryn told them about our visit to Fritz and Hans' place.

'...and it was *miles* out,' she laughed, 'It was nowhere near where they advertised it to be.'

'You know, we went out to a house, way out near the airport,' Nick smirked. 'We met this Irish guy outside at 10 yesterday. When we asked to have a look inside, he said we couldn't because he wasn't renting it. He'd advertised the house in the paper, but he was just hoping to find a flat mate. And *then* he was going to find a place to live.'

We talked for about three hours about our new home, our old homes, finding a job and the difficulty involved in walking along Dublin streets. Canada sounded similar to Australia—apart from the weather.

'You know, Calgary can get down to minus 40 degrees in winter,' said Andrea.

'*Minus* 40?' I said.

Our hometown, Brisbane, might have reached minus two degrees on the coldest night in the coldest winter. Why the heck did anyone decide to locate a city where temperatures got to minus 40? For the first time, I understood what people meant when they said Australians were lucky.

Chapter 6

Making Ends Meet

Order is an exotic in Ireland.
It has been imported from England but it will not grow.
It suits neither soil nor climate.

– J.A Froude

Late August, 2001

Ireland's employment market had reached a pinnacle just before we arrived in Dublin. I hated to admit it, but Brogan had been right; things had slowed down. The newspapers were running stories about the end of the Celtic Tiger and job agencies were letting many of their staff go.

We regularly went to our favourite Internet cafe in Temple Bar and checked the web for jobs. The biggest site was "www.irishjobs.ie". The site mascot was a woman with a huge mop of red hair, who pulled various silly faces for different pages. She symbolised the job agencies I had called perfectly: lots of posturing, but a questionable level of action.

I noticed three or four positions advertised for the *LUAS* project. The Government wanted to replace Dublin's light rail tram network after ripping up all the lines about 50 years ago. It

sounded like a fascinating project to me, particularly in a city that had 9th Century Viking beginnings.

The LUAS people claimed one tram would replace 168 cars, an important feat in Dublin, where the traffic was constantly jammed. The completion date for the project had recently been revised. The project managers probably struggled to motivate their sub-contractors to leave the pub. It was more enticing than going out in the rain to rip up old Viking remains with their excavators. (The construction of any railway involves some excavation work. Like it or not, excavation work in Dublin was inevitably going to expose items of historical significance.)

I called the agency listed in the ad.

'Hello, can I speak to Mick, please?'

'This is Mick speaking,' replied the agent.

'I wanted to ask about the positions advertised for the light rail project,' I said. 'It sounds very interesting.'

'Ah, sorry,' he replied, 'we don't have any jobs for that. Goodbye.'

Unfortunately, some of the listed positions did not exist. The advertisements acted as a carrot to pull in prospective employees and get them on the agents' books. Mick hadn't even asked me anything—perhaps he didn't like my accent. I doubted his gruff manner came from working too hard.

That afternoon I had an interview with a consulting firm in Ballsbridge, Dublin 2. I decided to take the train to Lansdowne Road and walk from there to their office.

The electric powered commuter train was known as the DART, short for Dublin Area Rapid Transit. I wonder if the people who come up with these acronyms start with *any* four letter word and then make up the meaning later. I guess S.H.I.T—short for Seriously Hopeless Incidentally-arriving Transport—wouldn't have made the shortlist.

The DART ran along the coastal part of Dublin from Malahide in the north, to Greystones in the south. The service officially opened in 1984. The public responded to the new system with great enthusiasm. They'd suffered poorly maintained and dangerous railways for decades.

I sweated under Dublin's bright summer sunlight; it was surprisingly hot. The train was brand new—the paint was shiny green and the seats were devoid of chewing gum stains. The doors

closed as I stepped on.

'Mind the gap,' played a recorded message with an English accent. 'Mind the gap. Mind the gap.'

I saw sudden stiffening of the postures of people around me. Obviously Iarnrod Eireann [Irish Rail] hadn't tested this new train before putting it into service. And it had clearly been built in England. "Mind the gap" was the message played on the London Underground while the carriage doors closed. I couldn't see the Irish having much truck with that; it must have seemed to them that the bloody English were *still* trying to run Dublin.

The train travelled through a few stops with dark scowls from all the people around me. I was happy to get off at Lansdowne Road, before anyone decided to take harsh action against the Rule-Britannia propaganda being spouted by the train. (I never heard an Irish train speak those words again.)

I arrived flustered at a grey coloured building for the interview. The receptionist ushered me into a room and I waited. I felt nervous. I needed a job—any job. The door opened and a man with steel rimmed spectacles entered, followed by a plain looking woman. The man tilted the desk light into my face and the woman removed some pliers and other disturbing instruments from a cupboard. Actually, I just made that bit up.

'I am Mr Snooky,' he began, 'and this is Mary from our HR department. You are Christopher?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'Pleased to meet you.'

I shook hands with each of them. (I hated being called Christopher. My parents had always called me that when I was in trouble. I felt like I was on a backwards step in this interview already.)

Mr Snooky began. 'So if you were designing a concrete slab spanning six metres, how thick would you make it?'

'Well if it was a commercial building, about 200...'

I failed to finish before he fired another question: 'How did you manage the loads for the coal structure you designed in Australia?'

'I got the loads from the Project Mechanical Engineer,' I began, 'stuck 'em in my design file and then watched him change them at least nine times before he completed his design.' (Manage loads? What the hell were they supposed to be—a football team? I suppose I wasn't thinking like a manager.) Mr Snooky's face stretched into

what I imagined was meant to be a smile, but it could easily have been a grimace. 'You designed some houses in Australia, yes?'

'Yes,' I answered, 'they were usually constructed using light timber framing.'

'How would you test the moisture content of the timber?'

That one threw me. Timber merchants supplied their product "seasoned" or "unseasoned" at home. I had never needed to test it. I knew if you put unseasoned timber onto a fire, it sent up a smoke signal that brought Red Indians from miles around. This type of test wasn't much use for a finished house, unless you were a professional arsonist.

'Well there isn't much need to test the timber in Australia,' I explained, 'It is controlled by a set of Standards... it is much more important to check the wind tie down of the fixings as cyclones are a big problem...'

'You will tell me how to test the moisture content of timber NOW!' demanded Mr Snooky.

He seemed to be very set on this moisture testing business. I supposed timber in Ireland would tend to be as damp as Mr Snooky's sense of humour.

I knew there were electronic gadgets that measured moisture content, but I had no idea if these were used here. I was thinking *inside* the square; I'd learnt to establish the timber strength and ensure everything was adequately connected together. A timber house deck in Brisbane collapsed a couple of years ago during a party, because the responsible engineer hadn't paid enough attention to the right details.

I was later pleased to discover that Mr Snooky's company hadn't been too sharp about some of the important details either. The London office of Snooky Inc. designed the Millennium Bridge across the Thames. The pedestrian bridge was opened on the 10th June 2000.

'Some 80,000 people crossed the bridge on its opening day and those on the central and southern span detected vibrations,' reported the BBC at the time, 'the bridge began to sway and twist... leaving people unnerved and unsteady... the deck was moving by up to 70mm. The engineers insisted the bridge wouldn't fall down but closed it completely after an attempt to limit numbers [of people] proved unworkable.'

The bridge had cost £18 million at completion. Snooky Inc.

spent a further £5 million to fix the swaying problem. They installed a small information plaque beside the bridge to explain everything; the problem was essentially caused by—wait for it—*people walking*. The company pledged to inform other engineering consultancies about the dilemma.

I didn't impress Mr Snooky much. In retrospect, I could have answered his questions better, but I was pre-occupied with the thought he must have had a large carrot stuck up his backside. I returned despondently to Lansdowne Road station. A train had just closed it doors and I still had to negotiate the walkways and turnstiles to reach it.

The driver was watching me. 'Come on, I'll wait for you,' he said. 'Hurry up!'

I gave him a smile and ran quickly through the turnstiles; I hadn't expected his kindness.

Kerryn, Nick and Andrea were waiting for me when I got back to the hostel.

'How did it go?' asked Kerryn.

'Pretty crap,' I answered. 'I didn't do a good interview.'

'Oh well, never mind,' sympathised Kerryn, 'There's other jobs out there.'

We pulled some pots out of the cupboard for dinner. Fortunately, they were washed this time.

'You'll never believe what we saw today,' said Nick. 'There was a Spar convenience store being held up. We called 999 [Ireland's emergency services number] on our mobile and told them we were watching a robbery.'

'They asked us which service we wanted,' laughed Andrea, 'Ambulance, Fire or Garda.'

Nick continued the story. 'I told them, "We are watching a robbery taking place," and they asked us again,' he laughed, 'did we want Ambulance, Fire or Garda.'

With such remarkable service, I wasn't surprised the robbers got away—on bicycles. In this bustling city with its ever-present traffic jams, riding a bike or walking would be the quickest ways to escape. Burglars escaping in a car would quickly be stopped by a red traffic light, with a Garda vehicle full of irate policemen stopped at the next set of lights behind.

At least the robbers didn't try to escape on the bus. The timetables at each stop were pretty useless. The only times shown

were those for the first stop on each route. This was useful for someone standing at the first stop on a route. There were another 20 or 30 stops where it was no use at all. The number of people waiting around at a stop could be used to vaguely predict the bus arrival time. More people waiting meant a higher chance of seeing a bus. But anyway, even if the robbers *had* managed to catch a bus, they probably would have been maimed climbing the stairs.

Kerryn and I were on Bus No. 32, headed to Raheny on the north side of Dublin for the weekend. Not that there was anything special about Raheny. Our grotty hostel in Lower Gardiner Street was booked out for the weekend, so we headed out into the suburbs to stay in a dodgy B&B in Foxfield Avenue. Or maybe it was in Foxfield Crescent. Or Foxfield Grove. All eleven of the Foxfield street variants were next to each other, just over the road from the Sheilling Hotel.

In front of us a cyclist pedaled hard, as he raced along at about 40 kilometres an hour. He looked over his shoulder and half fell off his bike in fear. He pedaled even harder.

I couldn't blame him. From my top-storey front row seat, I saw our bus was only about two metres behind the unfortunate cyclist. A moment later he disappeared from my sight entirely. There were no sudden thumps, so I assumed he was either brushed aside into a hedge, or had put his hand back against the grille of the bus to fend it off.

Bicycles were a fairly common form of transport in Dublin, although the motor scooter had largely taken over this role, and both vehicles were generally tolerated in the bus lanes; by everyone that is, except the bus drivers. Four metre high buses molested cyclists, positioned just behind the back wheel of bicycles, all over the city. The drivers alternated between the accelerator pedal and the brake and made the bus roar and squeal, just for the fun of it.

We arrived at our appointed B&B late in the afternoon. Our host was a bit of an entrepreneur—he ran the B&B, a start-up Bram Stoker tourist centre and the local sports club. He was fluent in the Irish Gaelic language. I suspect he was telling jokes about us to his son, because he laughed pointedly in our direction before switching back to English to explain the breakfast menu.

The twin single beds in our room almost sagged onto the floor and Kerryn's mattress exhaled enough dust to fill an industrial

strength vacuum cleaner. Kerryn was distinctly unimpressed; her jaw jutted out at a dangerous angle. At least the attached ensuite was clean.

'How about we get some dinner?' I asked in an effort to stop her thinking about the room. We stepped outside and walked along Howth Road, in search of the local fish and chip shop.

We trudged for miles along the busy road past rows and rows of houses, with no shop in sight. We came across a young teenager waiting for a bus. He was the only person at the stop, so I didn't expect to see a bus for a couple of hours.

'Excuse me,' I enquired, 'do you know where a fish and chip shop is around here?'

The teenager blinked his eyes in concentration. I think my accent threw him.

'A chipper?' he asked. 'There's one down the road in Raheny village. Turn left into Main Street.'

After a bit of searching, we found the place. I suspect the shopkeepers were "Travellers" who had (unusually) settled down. "Traveller" was the politically correct term in Ireland.

It is believed the Travellers are related to the gipsies of Europe. They are usually nomadic, travelling Ireland in their caravans. They make a living by trading various goods.

An ancient law permits Travellers to camp on public land in Ireland. Groups of caravans can be found huddled together in sports fields and parks around Dublin. Unfortunately these sites become littered with garbage and old car wreckage. They often remain that way after the group moves on. Not surprisingly, this has made the Travellers unpopular with the settled Irish population.

The Irish Times reported:

"Last year, the *Evening Herald* highlighted how a massive camp of approximately 100 caravans did untold damage to a GAA [Gaelic Athletic Association] pitch in Firhouse, which cost about £100000 to repair."

If you drive around Dublin's outskirts you will see newly built parks, footpaths and sports ovals that incorporate steep earth mounds, large boulders, or high concrete barriers as landscape features around the boundaries. These features make the entry of normal vehicles virtually impossible, especially those towing a caravan.

Like others in the Irish population, some Travellers preferred to ignore rules: sometimes they removed the large boulders from a park they wanted to camp in. They would tie each rock with a rope to a large four-wheel-drive vehicle and then jerk it backwards.

Travellers are quietly barred from entry to many clubs, bars and hotels. A Irish travel website informed us: "Travellers rarely marry a member of the settled community and any such inter marriage would be a source of terrible shame to the settled Irish family to this day." Many commentators have described the treatment of Travellers as an Irish form of apartheid.

Whether the shopkeepers were Travellers or not, the fish and chip shop was pretty confusing: I couldn't see where to place our orders. The other customers were no help; they steadfastly avoided queuing. Kerryn decided to approach the swarthiest looking person behind the counter. We ordered the cheapest items on the menu and he craftily upgraded them for us along with the price by pretending not to understand us.

Further down the counter was an angry-looking woman. 'What do you want?' she glared with dark eyes.

There seemed to be some delay in communication between the order taker and Ms. Grumpy, even though they were standing only two metres apart. We repeated our order and waited. To our surprise they cooked the food pretty quickly.

'Do you want salt and peefar on your chips?' asked Ms. Grumpy.

I nodded dumbly and Ms. Grumpy dumped on some salt and then to my horror grabbed a bottle of vinegar and started pouring it on. Apparently the Irish liked their chips this way. Ugh! Salt is OK, and I sometimes have gravy.

I leapt forwards shouting, 'No vinegar!'

Ms. Grumpy snarled and looked like she wanted to pull my arms off. She flung our food across to us and we left, wandering around outside looking for a place to sit. There weren't any chairs or tables. The grease had already seeped through the wrapping paper onto my hands, giving me what I guessed were second-degree burns.

We sat down on a low brick wall near the bus stop and opened the wrapping. The chips were floating in a puddle of oil that would have scared the heck out of the Heart Foundation.

Some teenagers walked past and looked at us warily. Their

conversation dropped away and they hurried on to the bus stop.

Kerryn calculated her weekly dietary intake allowance and pushed the greasy bundle towards me after nibbling two or three chips. I couldn't finish them either. I usually ate hot chips voraciously, but Ms. Grumpy's were the worst I'd ever tasted. Even sweaty chips that had sat in a warming tray for hours at the Brisbane Transit Centre tasted better than this. I choked down some and threw the rest into a bin. The teenagers quickly put *both* walls of the bus stop between themselves and the bin. Some of them were smoking, so they were probably afraid. Perhaps they thought that we'd created a horrendous fire hazard by dumping all that oil near them.

Afterwards, we decided to watch TV back in our room rather than discover what the opaque lights of Raheny had to offer on a Saturday night. Irish television offered excellent variety, particularly for those who had cable television. First of all, there were the British dramas: *Eastenders* and *Coronation Street* were the big ones. They depicted a negative vision of life in England. Most episodes seemed to include a single 15-year old girl who had been raped by an elderly Mr. Jones. She lived next door to a group of alcoholics who went on regular hell-raising rampages. Another neighbour had stolen Mrs. Smith's TV. The characters generally expressed themselves by whining.

I didn't need any help to get depressed, so I preferred *Home and Away*, which depicts the laid-back beach culture of a fictional Australian coastal town. The stories were always half-baked, but I found this quite relaxing.

Advertisement breaks on Irish TV were spaced well apart and many of the ads aimed to be funny. One advertisement started with man walking his dog. The dog trudged along industriously.

As the view panned back, we saw another young owner in a living room chair, sipping a cup of tea while his dog walked on an exercise treadmill. Outside, the rain bucketed down. It rained nearly every day in most parts of Ireland, so a cup of tea was a grand way to pass the time.

The weather reports were often unintentionally funny. The reporters tended to be upbeat, outgoing types, who strove to put a happy angle on weather that was likely to be cold, wet and briefly sunny on the same day. Their reports were filled with terms like "brightening rainy weather". The reporter on Channel

Four spent most of her allotted time talking about the weather in Spain, Morocco and the Black Sea. She mentioned very little about Ireland. Maybe she was researching the places she was going for her next holiday.

My favourite TV show by far was *Winning Streak*. Four contestants turned a large wheel and played games of chance in an effort to gain as much money as possible. We watched the show for a few minutes to see who was winning. Curiously, the audience cheered every contestant along equally. In most game shows I have seen, I easily guessed who was ahead, by the way the host spoke to each contestant.

Derek Mooney, the bright looking host, encouraged all of them. 'Well done, Eamonn. You've got £30,000! Excellent Niamh, you've got £17000! And look at Mary. You've won £17000 as well! Liam, you've got £16500 there. Keep it up!'

The audience cheered, 'Come on, Mary! Good Luck, Liam.'

Clearly, Eamonn was miles in the lead. But somehow, *everybody* still seemed to be in the running, and the show only had five minutes to run.

'Who on earth is winning?' I asked.

'I don't know,' laughed Kerryn.

The show finished. Derek congratulated each of them on *their* winnings. Members of the audience ran in and hugged everyone. Eamonn, Niamh, Mary *and* Liam got to keep *all* the money they'd racked up during the show. What an excellent game. Everybody won!

I liked the idea of living in a country where everybody won.

Chapter 7

The Grim Truth about Holiday Visas

At last I went to Ireland,
'Twas raining cats and dogs:
I found no music in the glens, Nor purple in the bogs,
And as far as angels' laughter
In the smelly Liffey's tide
Well, my Irish daddy said it, but the
dear old humbug lied.

– George Bernard Shaw

Early September, 2001

Kerryn and I returned to the hostel in Lower Gardiner Street after our weekend in Raheny. I attended two more job interviews while Kerryn went to an interview with the Eastern Regional Health Board. We'd used most of our savings, so we both needed to get a job soon. We were still looking for a home as well. Everything we'd seen since the place at Rathgar had seemed…unsuitable for maintaining our health. Both of us were hoping to hear from Aditi. I began to understand what people went through when they left everything they knew and moved to another country. I was already so far from my comfort zone I had developed an eye twitch.

My first interview was with a small firm at the top end of Blessington Street in the city. It took me quite a while to find the place.

I walked up and down the short street in my only suit. I averted my gaze from some scruffy looking rogues who *also* walked up and down the street. They may have been trying to rob a building. It was a struggle to find any street numbers and I suspect they couldn't find their building; I certainly couldn't find mine.

I ultimately discovered the firm in the basement of a grey coloured building. The rooms were dimly lit and the paint was half peeled off the walls. The reception was damp and cold. It seemed like a great place to catch tuberculosis. The receptionist confirmed this happy thought by coughing her lungs out. She ushered me into a meeting room and pushed some mouldy plans off a chair so I could sit down.

I left my suit jacket on. The temperature outside was a comfortable 24 degrees, but this room recreated the effect of a winter spent outdoors, in Calgary. How on Earth did anyone work in here?

The receptionist came back in with a cup of tea. It turned out she was Australian.

'Ah hoo!' she coughed. 'I've been here for two years.'

'Have you seen much of Ireland or Europe?' I asked.

'Ah hoo!' she continued, 'I've wanted to travel, but it's hard to get any money together in Dublin. Ah hoo hoo! It's a very expensive city to live in.'

She probably had to spend most of her money on medical bills and for psychological problems induced from staring at the damp walls. The boss was about 50, with hair growing out of his ears and nose. I think he offered me a job, but I escaped from the place as soon as possible.

In the afternoon I headed off on the bus to my second interview, with Dillon Dally. The company office was located near Tallaght, on the very edge of southwest Dublin. The bus trip took about one hour. Along the way, we crested a small rise and some beautiful green hills came into view to the south.

These hills were the Wicklow Mountains. County Wicklow had a colourful history and was perhaps one of the most beautiful places in Ireland. Some hills were dotted with small farms and forests, while the more desolate mountains were covered with

heavy outcrops of granite. Every time I saw these mountains over the next few months, I felt a strong desire to put on my backpack and go exploring (I wasn't very fit, so I didn't). Wicklow's lush green valleys were sometimes known as the "Garden of Ireland" and were home to some very pretty villages.

For centuries, Irish rebels used the mountains as a base and hideout. They attacked the English in Dublin and frustrated pursuing forces by disappearing into the hills. In the 19th Century the English constructed the Military Road to hunt the rebels down. I'm not sure if the road helped the English, but it still exists. It runs across 50 kilometres of mountainous country and bog-land and is a great way to see the beauty of County Wicklow.

The bus left me at the last stop on the route. I couldn't find the reception when I arrived at Dillon Dally's office. I walked up the stairs to the second floor, only to be confronted by a short hallway with a number of doors. I opened one door into a bathroom. Another door opened into a meeting room. Yet another opened onto a man talking on the phone. Frustrated, I walked back downstairs and pushed open another door.

'Excuse me,' I asked one of the surprised occupants, 'I'm here for an interview with Fergus.'

'He's just on the phone,' she advised. 'I'll take you up to the meeting room. Would you like a cup of tea while you wait?'

'That would be nice, thanks,' I answered.

The interview went fairly well, although Fergus wore the same style of spectacles as Mr Snooky, of Snooky Inc. Fergus had plenty of questions to ask me, which I answered astutely (this time), and followed with questions of my own. We finished up at quarter to five and Fergus gave me a ticket to get back to Dublin on the faster private bus network.

I sat on the bus with another employee from Dillon Dally. Tania was a 28-year-old engineer from St Petersburg, Russia. She was quite short—her feet didn't touch the floor of the bus from the seat. I know this is a stereotype, but she sounded startlingly similar to the Russians depicted in old James Bond films. 'In Russia, there is very little work. In some places, the crime is very bad. Ireland is very busy and my boyfriend lives here. So, I come to Ireland. It was a good choice.'

'What is Russia like nowadays without communism?' I asked.

Tania shrugged her small shoulders. Her blue eyes looked sad as she replied.

'In general,' she began thoughtfully, 'people trusted the promises that were made by Gorbachov at the time. But it was only promises. For many, the changes brought only poverty and instability. There were a lot of positive issues during socialism. Medical care, education, sports clubs all were free. The only bad thing was that the people were isolated from the rest of the world. While, now people can sort of go... but where to get the *money* to go?'

'So how do people cope?' I asked.

'For the young people it is not too bad because it is easier for them to adjust to the new style of life,' she answered. 'They prefer it to be the way it is, but for the old people it is extremely difficult. In a few words, it is right to say that those who have better economical positions now or at least as before, they are happy. Those who live in poverty or close to it are very unhappy.'

As I climbed off the bus and walked back to the hostel, Tania's words made me think we Westerners may have been misled about the so-called evils of communism. In the early 1980s, when I'd been at primary school, it had seemed that Russia [the Soviet Union] was going to cause the end of the world in nuclear warfare with the United States. As a child I became more disheartened with each news story. The Soviet Union had been portrayed as Enemy Number One, along with the communist system it was built on. As a child, I hadn't been able to understand why anyone would want to end the world and I became fearful and angry.

My fear of Russians, which I still carried without realising it, began to unravel after I met Tania. As I got to know her over the next few months, I realised she wasn't interested in dominating the world or causing nuclear holocausts. It became clear to me that she (a Russian born into communism) just wanted to have a good life, as I did.

Looking back now, I can see how naïve I was when I arrived in Ireland. Until then, I'd relied on one-minute news reports and newspaper articles to build up my understanding of the world. In Ireland, I saw news stories about Australia that upset me. My country had a lot more to offer than backpacker murderers, funnel-web spiders, poisonous snakes, crocodile hunters and bushfires. I then realised that Australian news bureaus probably gave a

similarly disastrous impression of *other* countries. News reporters were generally accurate with their stories, but their reporting style made any problem look enormous.

I'd been looking at a photograph of a pimple on someone's face and thinking it represented his entire personality.

Kerryn arrived back at the hostel and gave me a kiss. Andrea and Nick followed her shortly. They were talking about the hygiene of our current lodgings.

'We've been getting bitten by some kind of bug at night,' said Nick, showing me his left arm, which was covered in red welts.

'So have *I*,' said Kerryn. 'What do you think it is?'

'I think there are bed bugs in the mattresses!' replied Nick.

'Good night, sleep tight; don't let the bedbugs bite,' I recited. 'I thought that was just a saying. I didn't think they still existed!'

According to the website of a Dublin pest controller, bed bugs fed at night, on the blood of humans. When they bit, they injected salvia into the wound and caused the red swelling and irritation that was on Nick's arms. Bed bugs lived in cracks and crevices, behind peeling wallpaper and in beds and furniture. They were most commonly found in poorly maintained homes, hotels and *hostels*.

We looked around at the grime-yellow walls and the cracked, dilapidated furniture. "Poorly maintained" didn't seem a very fair description of our hostel; "Abysmal" was much more accurate.

The conversation turned to work visas. Australia and Canada had reciprocal "Working Holiday" agreements with a number of countries. The program allowed young people to live and work in another country for a period of (at least) one year. Each country had its own eligibility requirements to fulfil.

'We applied for our visas back in Australia,' I said. 'When we arrived at Dublin, the passport officer told us we had to go to the head Garda station or something to get them approved. Surely when you apply for a visa and receive one, that means it's approved?' 'We couldn't even find anyone to check our passports at first,' said Kerryn. 'We had to look around to find anyone and I had to force him to even *look* at our passports!'

'We have to go to the Garda station too, to get *my* visa authorised,' said Andrea. 'Nick has a UK passport, so he can work here without a visa.'

'We walked past the Garda station the other morning,' said Nick. 'It opened at eight and there was a queue of 300 people waiting. Apparently they only process about *60 people a day*.'

The stamps in our passports indicated we had one month to report to the Garda station. We decided to get up early in the morning. At the rate the visa department was processing people, we would probably need the rest of the month to get our "Claytons" visa changed into a real one.

We left our hostel at 6:30 in the morning. We intended to get to the Garda Headquarters by 7:00, an hour before it opened. We crossed the Liffey and strode towards Grafton Street, the trendy heart of Dublin's shopping precinct. We got a bit lost, so I asked for directions from an old feller shuffling along the street.

'It's the large grey building down Harcourt Street,' he said. 'Just follow this road straight down. Ya can't miss it!'

I looked up and down the street at the buildings as we walked. All of them were grey. But the old man was right. We couldn't miss the Garda Headquarters. I saw representatives from half of the nationalities on Earth, in a queue of people that stretched from the gates and around the block.

Kerryn asked the group at the front when they had arrived.

'We got here at four a.m.,' said one of the queue leaders, smiling.

I smacked my right ear with the palm of my hand to make sure I was hearing properly.

'Four a.m.—you're joking, aren't you?' I squeaked.

He shook his head sadly.

My shoulders drooped. Where was the charming fun and mysticism claimed by the Irish tourist brochures? There wasn't anything mystical about a rude architect, a dodgy hostel and unhelpful employment agencies. There was certainly nothing fun about queuing at four in the morning to get a visa I *already* had. For a few seconds, I considered going back to Australia, but Kerryn was more pragmatic.

'We'll just have to get up early tomorrow morning and get into the queue,' she said.

We awoke at half past three and climbed into a taxi. We didn't know the city very well yet and I'm sure the cabbie drove us around in circles to increase his fare.

The cold stonewalls and black iron gate of the Garda Headquarters awaited us, with a cold wind blowing softly, like a grim scene from *Lord of the Rings*. Along the road some fairy lights twinkled around the outline of the Harcourt Hotel. I was still half-asleep and wasn't too sure if I was dreaming or not. The experience was quite surreal. Here we were in Dublin at its quietest and calmest. But in a few hours, we might be thrown out of the country or given permission to stay here. We'd spent a lot of money getting to Ireland, so I hoped we'd be allowed to stay.

'I hope we're in front of the right building,' said Kerryn, as she looked around.

So did I. To stand in front of the *wrong* place for four hours was more than I could take.

After a little while a mini van rolled up and unloaded six young guys, who joined our two-person queue.

'Where are you guys from?' I asked.

'The Philippines,' one replied.

It turned out they were refugees applying for citizenship of the Emerald Isle. This was a big topic for the new Ireland. A booming economy meant there were more jobs available than workers. Ireland had opened its doors and people were flooding in.

It gave some people a chance to have jobs that didn't exist in their home countries. Others, like us, were here for the chance to experience living in a different culture. I'd read that some people in the country didn't want things this way. Sadly, a sub-current of racism ran through Ireland, with occasional violence against the newcomers. I was disappointed people had racism in their hearts. It didn't line up with Ireland's claim to be one of the friendliest countries in the world. Australia claimed to be relaxed and friendly too, but race-related abuse and violence happened there as well. It would appear friendliness was very conditional.

Anyway, by 4:45, our queue outside the Garda Headquarters had grown to 30 people. Some nightclubs further up the street had just closed and trendy-looking people were drifting past us, on their way home for a quick sleep before heading into work. Two of them staggered up and stopped beside the Phillippinos.

'What're all these people queuing here for?' one asked the other. 'What're they standin' about for?' They were probably genuinely perplexed anyone in Ireland would queue, as the queue wasn't even outside a nightclub or pub! They decided to ask the Phillippinos.

''Scuse me, what're all these people queuing for?' asked one of them.

'We are waiting to get work visas,' replied one of our queue members.

'But why are you here *now*?' asked the other.

Because of your country's bloody government, I thought as they wandered off.

By half past five about 100 people were lined up. Suddenly a guy rolled up on his skateboard and stopped in front of us.

'You know, this is the *start* of the queue,' snapped Kerryn. 'We got here at four a.m.!'

'Sorry,' replied the guy. He gazed at the long line of people morosely and looked back at us. Kerryn just glared at him and tapped her foot impatiently until he clambered back onto his skateboard and rolled off down the queue.

Another guy sauntered up to the opposite corner of the black gate at half past seven, put on his sunglasses and casually leaned against a post. He appeared to be just resting there, but we knew better. He ignored Kerryn's warning glare and stared at us with a sneer. At eight o'clock, a burly policeman came to open the gate, and our young "friend" prepared to enter.

'If you want to enter this gate, you need to form a line with the rest of the queue,' requested the policeman.

'No, Sir, I will not!' replied the little smart-arse. 'The law says you must allow all refugees to enter the State of Ireland. You must let me in!'

'Get to the back of the line!' bellowed the policeman.

It was a really bad move to quote the country's laws to a policeman. He was huge and in a bad mood. He opened the gate and barged the young guy out of the way. I cringed inwardly—were the police here like some of their counterparts in Northern Ireland? Would a crowd of policemen charge out and beat the living daylights out of us all with their big sticks?

The same policeman ushered *us* into the complex. I heaved a sigh of relief and watched him hold the young man back from the gate. We could still hear his protests as we entered the building.

A crowd of visa applicants squeezed in behind us as we rushed to the counter. An official endorsed us for 12 months work in Ireland.

'Good luck now,' she smiled, as we turned to go.

We jumped for joy as we left the building. A few minutes later, Kerryn's phone rang.

'Hello, Kerryn, this is Aditi speaking,' the call began. 'About the unit in Rathgar? The room is still available if you want to take it.'

It had only been a week since we'd seen the unit, but it had seemed a lot longer. We were both delighted. We had a place to live and were legally permitted to work in the country. We just needed jobs and we'd be fine. Life was looking up. Woohoo!

Chapter 8

Dublin 6

Rathgar, upon thy broken wall,
Now grows the lusmore rank and tall,
Wild grass upon thy hearthstone springs,
And ivy round thy turret clings

– Excerpt from a poem by Geoghegan

Early September, 2001

I awoke with a smile and looked around the room—we'd spent our last night at the hostel. I dragged our bags to the reception. Excellent! No more would we have to feel the sting of hungry bedbugs. No more would we have to taste the flavour of a watered-down half-glass of orange juice. And no more would we have to look at grime-yellow walls.

Kerryn had taken a temp job for the week as a receptionist for the LUAS project, after the last fortnight of job hunting. She left early because she had to take a bus out to the "Red Cow" roundabout. (I'm not sure why it was called that. Maybe a speeding bus hit a dairy cow, with tragic results.) She then had to walk for half a mile beside busy traffic to get to the office.

I checked out of our hostel and picked up our suitcases with a spring in my step. The clear blue sky sparkled in the sunlight.

'Don't forget to come and visit us once you're settled,' said the hostel desk attendant. 'Good luck now!'

'I will!' I said, meaning it. After the initial difficulties, the hostel staff had turned out to be very nice.

I climbed into the taxi I had booked and we moved off past Custom House. We crossed the very green Liffey. We turned right onto Adelaide Road, distinguished by continuous rows of blue construction site hoardings. Workmen, cranes and trucks scurried around to construct the New Dublin.

The taxi swung left onto Richmond Street and crested over the top of Portobello Bridge. The bridge, with its graceful stone abutments, spanned over the Grand Canal. Ducks and swans splashed around in the water, next to sunken shopping trolleys and algae covered plastic bags. The Grand Canal looped around the south of Dublin in a six kilometre arc and was part of a 550 kilometre waterway system, linking Dublin to the Shannon River in the west and to the Barrow River in the south.

Portobello Bridge was the scene of an odd tragedy in 1861. The bridge at that time was much steeper. A carriage rolled backwards when the tired horses pulling it struggled to climb the slope. The carriage crashed through the timber barrier and fell over the side into the canal lock, pulling the horses in as well. Fortunately the water in the lock was only just above leg height, so the six passengers were okay. At least, they were for a moment.

In a move that could only be described as an unfortunate form of lateral thinking, the lock keeper flooded the three metre deep lock, in the hope of making the carriage rise up to the surface. Let's just say it didn't work; even the horses drowned.

Local legend says that true Dubliners are born inside the boundaries formed by the Grand Canal to the south and the once competing Royal Canal to the north. The Royal Canal never made money and both canals became unprofitable with the development of railways. The last commercial barge to use the Grand Canal carried a consignment of Guinness from Dublin in 1960. It was easy to see which cargoes were important in this country!

A new song came onto the radio in the taxi.

The female singer purred the words: 'Take me home, Take me home, I know another place to be. Take me home, Take me home, you deserve a girl like me!'

'Ah, this song's causing a lot of controversy at the moment,'

said the taxi driver, 'It's not a good example to the children, like.'

This was the first time I'd heard the song. It turned out to be the debut single of Sophie Ellis Baxter. Twenty-two year-old Sophie would take Ireland and England by storm in another three months with her second hit "Murder on the Dancefloor". But at this stage I'd never heard of her and her song sounded pretty harmless to me. I wondered if the taxi driver had ever listened to anything from the Nine Inch Nails. Had he ever seen teenage girls out at night here? In spite of the chilly weather, 16 to 26 year-olds rampaged across the city at least four nights a week, wearing clothes that barely covered their goose-pimpled bodies. I don't think "the children" were as innocent as the taxi driver imagined.

Anyway, Sophie's song seemed poignant as the taxi approached our new flat, taking me to *my* new home. I climbed out of the taxi, after handing a tip to the driver. I dropped our suitcases onto the bedroom floor, with great relief, and headed out again to have a look around. Just around the corner, Rathgar village impressed me. It was well serviced, with three restaurants, two pubs, a deli, a bottle shop [off-license], a bakery, a chemist, a bank, two take-aways and two convenience stores.

The Spar convenience store employing the directionally-challenged shop attendant was only 400 metres away, and Rathmines village was another few minutes walk towards town. Rathmines had absolutely everything, including a movie cinema, Tesco's and Dunnes supermarkets, a public library, two or three banks and a handful of churches. Christ Church, a Presbyterian church built in 1859, was right beside our flat, so we could always dash in for a quick blessing if necessary. This stone church in the suburbs was as old and as beautiful as many of the cathedrals I'd seen in Australia.

The closeness of everything thrilled me, particularly as we didn't have a car. Almost everybody owned a car in Brisbane, as the shops and services were spread far and wide. This was probably *because* everyone owned a car. If I wanted to go shopping, I had to drive to a shopping mall. If I wanted to see a doctor, I had to drive to a medical centre.

We could walk comfortably to everything in Rathgar. This was entirely due to the way Dublin had developed. Each suburb or village was constructed around the population's capacity to walk

or ride. Until the early 19th Century, Rathmines and Rathgar, only three kilometres from the Liffey and O'Connell Street, were rural pastures with a few outlying houses. Of course, cars did not exist until late in the 19th Century and many people in Ireland did not own a car until the rise of the 1990s Celtic Tiger economy.

I walked back to Rathmines and entered a small shopping centre. Dunnes supermarket, inside, carried everything we needed. The store sold a combination of groceries, clothing and bedding. I needed to get some pillows and sheets. Luckily most flats in Dublin came furnished, so we had a bed. I saw the customers in the grocery section were up to their old tricks. They dodged and weaved around each other competitively. The bedding section was far more civilised and I managed to avoid getting involved in any group tackles.

As a quick diversion, you may wonder how many suburb names in Dublin begin with "Rath". Actually, I have no idea, but I *can* tell you "rath" was a Gaelic word for a circular fort with earth banks. Both Rathgar and Rathmines sported their own castles until they were damaged during the Battle of Rathmines in 1649. I suppose the old word evolved to mean "a castle".

The Battle of Rathmines was a precursor to Oliver Cromwell's infamous tour of Ireland. Oliver Cromwell, the man credited with ridding England of its monarchy (for a couple of decades), was a zealous Protestant and parliamentarian. When I first read that Cromwell was a parliamentarian, I thought he would be a man for the people, committed to their right to choose. I'm afraid I was wrong.

Cromwell landed his army at Ringsend, just north of Dublin, in August 1649. In a move that has never been forgotten by the Irish, Cromwell's army slaughtered around 40 percent of the indigenous population. That's right, he slaughtered 40 percent. Even in the face of certain death, men and women held steadfastly to their Catholic faith and remained loyal to the deposed Catholic king of England, Charles I.

As I made to leave the Swan Centre with my shopping, I had my own Battle of Rathmines to fight. Shoppers had gathered around the exit doors the way seagulls flocked around a discarded cup of hot chips. (Seagulls in Australia, I mean; I don't think many seagulls would have survived if they'd flocked around Ms. Grumpy's chips.) I had to force my way through. I noticed the

same behaviour over the next few weeks, and drew a bit of a flow diagram for shopping centre etiquette:

1. Walk towards the exit door.
2. Open the door and walk through.
3. Stop immediately outside, approximately half to one metre away from the door.
4. If you are with friends, spread out around the door and talk to each other loudly. If it is raining, turn slightly sideways, so you can pretend not to see anyone who is trying to enter the building.
5. If you are by yourself, prearrange with a friend to call your mobile phone at the moment you walk through the door. Put down all the shopping bags or luggage you are carrying in a semicircle around the doorway.

Kerryn had come home by the time I got back to the flat. I gave her a kiss and put down the shopping bags on the dining table. After going to the bathroom to wash my hands, I heard an annoying noise coming from the hall cupboard:

"CHUG chug grrrrrrrr CHUG CHUG grrrrrr chug chug grrrrrr CHUG chug grrrrrr."

'What is that bloody noise?' I asked Kerryn.

It sounded like a jackhammer. It had to be some kind of mistake; new flats didn't make noises like that. We opened the hall cupboard to find a small water pump whirring away. What kind of dodgy builder would have put in something like this?

Apparently there was a building regulation that required builders to put pumps into new flats, as the water pressure in Dublin was extremely low. This meant if I flushed the toilet in the middle of the night, the pump would turn on and wake up everyone in our flat and probably everybody in the next one as well. I wouldn't have been surprised if it woke up everyone in the next *building*.

A few days later, I was taking a shower and humming away to myself as I washed my hair. The noise of the jackhammer chugging away industriously masked my singing from the rest of the household. All was well until someone flushed the toilet in the other bathroom; I yelled and jumped away from the water. The jackhammer caught between the difficult tasks of supplying the cold water to the shower and refilling the toilet cistern, had

concentrated on the latter effort. The hot water, however, kept pouring through the shower rose.

I would have hated to be a fireman in Dublin. Just imagine being in a team fighting an enormous fire, struggling to hold on to the hose. Suddenly the water pouring from the hose would slow to a trickle.

One of your team members would step away from the hose. 'Ah yeah, I know what that'll be caused by!'

He'd walk up to the next-door neighbour's house and rap on the door smartly. 'Sorry, do ya think you could stop flushing yer toilet until we've finished puttin' the fire out? Tanks very much!'

Chapter 9

A Day in the Life

One must live with a person to know that person.

– Celtic proverb

Late September, 2001

I never really felt a sense of belonging in Australia: I didn't enjoy drinking vast quantities of beer, I felt intimidated by large groups of men, and I didn't enjoy watching sport.

Many Australians, of course, love sport. A fine example of this love could be seen every year, in the rugby league State of Origin matches. Match-goers dressed themselves in light blue for New South Wales or maroon for Queensland. Some painted their faces in the same colours. State of Origin fever seized unlikely people in both states; normally timid women hurled insults at the opposing team during the game and often for quite a while after.

I've always hated Monday mornings at work in Australia; Monday was like yet another wrap-up of all the sport played over the weekend. It's amazing how far I've gotten with a grunt, nod or smile when someone has mentioned sport jargon like "6 for 152", "luv-15", "10 in the sin bin" or "that was an excellent mark!" but sooner or later I fear some official will figure me out and take my Australian citizenship away.

Unbelievably (for me), the level of passion of the Irish for their sport was easily as strong as that of Australians. At sporting events in Ireland, the level of each county's involvement reached fever pitch towards the end of the season. Car, truck and bus drivers tooted their horns excitedly as they passed each other. Large signs sometimes appeared at the borders between counties:

GOOD LUCK, SEAMUS O'CONNOR AND CATHAL DOYLE!

GOOD LUCK KILKENNY IN THE SEMI FINAL THIS WEEKEND!

Flags flew from house windows, boat masts and lampposts. Spectators from participating counties waved their county's flag proudly. And on Monday mornings, people at work discussed the sport results for the weekend. Sigh!

Dublin's flag was a motif of three castles. Each castle appeared to be burning down, with fire leaping from the towers. Perhaps the flag was meant to symbolise the revolution of Ireland and the split away from England. To me, it symbolised the chaos of a typical day in Dublin.

First of all, there were the banks. After I'd jumped through all the administrative hoops required to open a bank account in Ireland, my next task was to secure an ATM card. This wasn't easy, as I couldn't just walk into *any* branch to order a card. My bank seemed to operate on guidelines published in the 1960s; I had to visit the branch where I had *opened* my account. This branch in Smithfield was a hassle for me to get to; it was 20 minutes walk from the nearest bus stop. When I finally did, I put in an order for an ATM card and received it a week later. Although 1960s banking rules prohibited the bank from mailing the card to my home, they could at least forward it to a branch nearer to me. It seemed easy enough, but when I tried the card in the ATM machine outside of the branch it buzzed, whirred and clicked for a while and then spat the card back out with the message:

"Sorry, your card is not a valid Bank of Ireland card. Please contact your branch."

I called my branch in Smithfield.

'Sorry,' apologised the branch employee, 'we've had a bad batch of cards come out. We'll order you a new one, Sorr [Sir].'

I received another card a week later. The ATM machine buzzed and clicked and spat out the card again:

"Sorry, your card is not a valid Bank of Ireland card. Please

contact your branch."

After getting hold of my money, the bastard little machines were highly reluctant to give it back. How could two cards have been faulty? Ireland was supposed to be the IT capital of Europe.

I decided to try the second card in another bank's ATM machine. I approached the AIB Bank's machine at the crossroads in Rathgar and punched in my PIN number. The ATM machine buzzed and clicked and then spat out some Irish 20-pound notes. I danced on the footpath in delight. At least I could get money out, even though my *own* bank's ATM machines had rejected my card.

By this stage I'd learned to be very patient and not to have high expectations of the bank (perhaps I had set them too high to begin with). I was grateful they had at least managed to maintain my account without losing any money. The bank staff probably shuddered at the sound of my voice when I ordered my *third* card.

'Sorry about all this,' the branch employee sighed, 'we won't charge you for the new card, Sorr.'

I hoped not. At least the bank's employees were always friendly. The third card worked by the way.

The second arena of chaos was my place of employment; a couple of days after we'd moved into our place at Rathmines I decided to go and work for Fergus at Dillon Dally. After being there a week, I began to realise I had made a tough choice for myself. To begin with, we didn't have a secretary. This meant heavily loaded staff got to answer all the phone calls, distribute faxes, type their own letters and handle their own filing. When I started, I was entrusted with the design of a £36 million office development. I found this fairly challenging, as the Codes of practice, building techniques and materials were all different to my experience in Australia.

Fergus positioned me on a tiny little desk, directly opposite him. He wanted to keep an eye on me and make sure I was working hard. I didn't have room to spread out my drawings and it was an annoying place to sit for other reasons as well: private firms locked their doors in Dublin, perhaps to stop over-zealous (Northern Ireland) terrorists from interrupting the flow of business, and the doors had to be opened by a push button, usually by the receptionist. As we didn't have a receptionist, the role of doorman

was usually left to me. The mail-franking machine was also next to my desk. A typical day for me was:

1. I answered the door for the postman.
2. I took the mail to the person who distributed it.
3. I placed drawings all over the floor, because they wouldn't fit on my desk. Of course, people kicked, scuffed and tripped over these drawings as they walked across to the mail-franking machine, which was next to my desk.
4. I showed other staff how to use the mail-franking machine.
5. I did 10 minutes of productive design work on the office building.
6. I answered the telephone.
7. I answered the door for a courier. I signed the package and delivered it to the appropriate person.
8. I answered the door for Seamus, the young drafter who was supposed to answer the door. He never showed up until 10 in the morning.
9. I answered the phone again and then did another 10 minutes of productive design work for the £36 million office.
10. I moved the drawings on the floor back into place after passing staff kicked them sideways.
11. I listened to Seamus as he answered his mobile. That would be at least 20 times a day. His conversations were completely pointless:

'Ullo, what! Uh! Wha? Uh! Yeah! Wha? Yeah! Wha? Yeah! Uh, have to go!'

Fergus was one of the most annoying engineers I had yet met. I approached him to show him my layout for the office development, which had proceeded quite well, considering I'd spent most days opening the front door and working the franking machine.

'I was going to put a 600x600 column next to this parking space,' I began, 'Does that sound OK?'

Whenever I asked Fergus a question, he employed a number of strategies to avoid giving me a straight answer. First of all, he looked at me through his thick glasses, with dead-fish eyes, he then brought up another question; one I wouldn't know the answer to.

'Have you talked to the Architect about the finish quality of the concrete yet?'

His second method was to denigrate some other part of the design I hadn't had time to look at, because I'd been opening the doors for the mailman and a dozen others. He'd lean his short frame forward and frown at me.

'Why are you putting that wall in there?' he bellowed, 'The developer won't have it, sure he won't. He won't have walls in car parks. He likes to see one big open space!'

Fergus also liked to have a go at my country of origin.

'What on earth is this house slab you've designed?' he went on. 'Where's the insulation? You have to insulate it ya know.'

I explained the design was typical of an *Australian* house and apologised for the time wasted. I waited for him to explain a suitable solution, but he never missed a chance to give out at me.

'I don't believe those details would work in any country at all!' he commented snidely.

I drew myself up angrily.

'Those *details* are part of an Australian *Standard* and they work perfectly fine in *Australia*!' I bellowed. 'They are used on thousands of houses every year!' My reaction to Fergus' words was ironic, considering that I'd been thinking similar disparaging thoughts about some things in Ireland, like banks, hot water systems and working holiday visas.

Fergus never used a consistent approach. One day he would be highly conservative and the next he would be cutting designs ruthlessly. A few weeks later our client rang up and complained about the basement car park ramp for the office development. It had already been built, but our client wanted it raised. The ramp was made of concrete and reinforcing steel and weighed around 25 tonnes, so it wasn't a simple matter of lifting it with a car jack and pushing a few bricks under it to make it higher.

Fergus was strangely quiet about who was to blame for this ramp. He was usually quick to tell our client which employee from our company was responsible for any debacle. He couldn't fault me, as I hadn't been working at Dillon Dally when the ramp had been designed. For the entire time I worked for him, I never heard Fergus take any blame for the actions of his staff. I quietly chuckled to myself. My best guess was Fergus himself had designed this particular ramp. We both headed out to site to have a look at the problem. We had to alter the level of the current ramp by pouring more concrete on top.

'So how are we going to do this, Chris?' Fergus asked.

'Well, we could just fill it up with reinforced concrete,' I answered. 'That's probably the easiest…'

'I'll tell you what we can do,' said Fergus. 'We'll put down some polystyrene to save concrete and then pour a 100 millimetre layer of concrete on top!'

The original ramp had been designed to take heavy vans and small lorries, plus our client's brand new Ferrari.

'Polystyrene!' I gasped. 'The new concrete will crack when the first van goes down that. You're kidding aren't you?'

'Ah, you can get very *dense* polystyrene,' replied Fergus.

Maybe they extract it from between your ears, I thought.

I drew up a set of sketches for the work using *solid* concrete and gave them to one of our drafters to draw up and send out.

Fortunately I soon found a friend who understood the problems I had with Fergus. Brian, an engineer in his mid-twenties, often gave me a lift to work and back home, as he lived near our flat in Rathgar. His dark hair was thinning out, despite having a youthful face. His accent sounded Northern Irish, which made sense, because he was from County Monaghan, which is right next to Northern Ireland. He pronounced "could" as "coo-d" and "on" as "awn". He also used a rising tone at the end of many of his sentences, so I often wasn't sure whether he was making a statement or asking a question.

'Monaghan has three borders with Northern Ireland, like a sort-a peninsula?' said Brian. 'The IRA used Monaghan as an escape route from the North, because it was easy to get across the border without being caught? What part of Australia are ya from?'

'Oh—ah, Brisbane in Queensland,' I replied.

'Ah *lived* in Australia for a year, ya know?' said Brian, 'Wasn't it Queensland that had a referendum about daylight saving? And the people voted no to it because the cows wouldn't know when to come in for milking? And house curtains would fade too fast because they would be pulled shut to keep the sun out?' Brian laughed.

Hmm—I was embarrassed someone on the other side of the world knew about that.

'How do you find working for Fergus?' I asked him, to change the subject.

'Ah'll tell ya something,' replied Brian. 'There was an engineer, Aoife, who designed a building for Fergus. He gave her very specific instructions on how to do it. He and Aoife went to a client meeting and the client ripped up this design in front of her. Fergus just sat there and let her take the client's shit.'

'What a bastard!' I said (I'd begun to understand the tone of Brian's sentences).

'Ah don't think that it's the right way to carry on, especially as he's the boss,' agreed Brian. 'Aoife left recently—she'd had enough.'

'Did you work while you were in Australia?' I asked.

Brian looked at me for a moment with his clear blue eyes.

'I worked for a building company for a while, setting out floor slabs for houses with an Irish mate of mine,' he replied. 'It wasn't good work; we had to deal with the dumbest sub-contractors I've ever met. One day my mate went mental, like. He'd had enough of how careless those guys were. He was going to resign. I said to him, "Oh, don't worry about it, it's just Australia". "Maybe you should think something similar about here," he said, smiling.'

Brian's words made an impression. Over the next few months, the words "don't worry about it, it's just Ireland" helped me to calm down a number of times.

Occasionally I didn't get a lift home with Brian and I would catch the bus instead. I'd share jokes about Dublin's bus service with some of the other passengers.

'A friend of mine was heading home on the bus the other day,' I said. 'The bus driver pulled over next to a corner store and climbed out. He walked into the shop and bought his groceries, while a full bus load of passengers waited!' We laughed out loud and then stopped to watch a bus go past on the other side of the road. The rain fell heavily and we both breathed a sigh of relief. The bus would be back in a moment to pick us up.

We waited for another 10 minutes.

'Where the hell is that bus?' I snapped. 'I'm bloody freezing out here! Where do the buggers go?'

This bus stop was like the Bermuda Triangle. Double-decker buses just…vanished. How could someone make a £250,000, four metre high bus painted in vibrant blue, white and orange disappear? Maybe the driver had nicked off to the nearest pub for a drink; there was a tavern just over the next hill.

I questioned a number of people about the puzzling bus disappearances. The truth was more idiotic than my pub theory. The drivers were *supposed* to turn around 100 metres up the road and come back to pick us up. Drivers who were running late did not turn around. They raced past, turned onto the nearest freeway and headed back into the city. The buses were completely empty.

It's the sort of efficiency drive I would expect from Sir Humphrey Appleby of the BBC's *Yes, Minister* series. In one episode, Appleby posted 200 administrators to a brand new hospital. No patients had been admitted and there were no doctors or nurses, because, "the cost would be prohibitive, Minister."

After I arrived home, Kerryn and I had to go grocery shopping again. The bar fridge in our kitchen was the *only* fridge in our kitchen. Somehow three people were meant to store all their cold groceries in a fridge barely big enough for a six-pack of beer. Our Canadian friends Andrea and Nick were even worse off than us. They had moved into an apartment with four other people and had a similar bar fridge. A carton of ice cream didn't last very long in their house; it had to be eaten. There was no way it would fit into the fridge alongside their flat mates' six-week-old stocks of mouldy pizza.

Grocery shopping in the IPAC Centre in Dublin City or the Swan Centre in Rathmines was a not-to-be-missed adventure. Dunnes Grocery Stores had some amusing little marketing slogans hanging around the store like: LET US HELP YOU MAKE YOUR SHOPPING EASIER.

They upheld their claim in a number of ways:

1. They made the aisles narrow, so it was easy to see the other 100 or so customers. In this way, I naturally wanted to move closer to the shelves to avoid them. I could see the products more easily and reach them quickly.

2. They stocked only two or three brands of any item, so I could make my selection more quickly and move on.

3. They ran the stock on shelves down to almost empty every few days, so the above selection of brands was reduced even further. My choices became even simpler.

4. They let me price label my own vegetables, ensuring I wouldn't waste food. There were only so many vegetables I could tolerate labelling while being pushed and shoved by 20 other customers saying "sorry", just before they rammed my hip with

their shopping basket.

At peak shopping times, Dunnes strategically placed staff members in the aisles who must have been specially trained in customer service. They swept mops across the floors and my shoes enthusiastically, they pretended to pack shelves, and they pushed huge crates of products right across the path of my shopping trolley. The checkout operators also helped me learn multi-tasking skills by "allowing" me to pack my own shopping into plastic bags (the type that wouldn't ever open when you needed them to) while they sat idly on their stools and demanded payment. Tesco's, who achieved all of the above items even more effectively than Dunnes, went one step further. The operator usually threw all my items across the checkout desk, demanded my money and then proceeded to throw the next customer's items across on top of mine while I fumbled with a series of plastic bags that wouldn't open. But in my Ireland shopping adventures it was always the little old ladies who surprised me the most; when I politely moved aside for them, they thanked me by scowling at me and hitting me with a shopping basket.

Perhaps RTE could start a reality TV show called Looter. Two hundred contestants would be given a shopping trolley and a time limit. The aim would be to bring back a trolley loaded with groceries and the person with the highest value of groceries would win. Special bonus points would be given for innovative tactics, like blocking an aisle with a trolley to stop the other contestants from loading up with the premium camembert cheeses and deli products.

I'm sure it would be a great success; people would turn it on just to watch ruthless old ladies using their umbrellas or shopping baskets as weapons against the other competitors.

Chapter 10

In Search of the Dolphin

Never cross an Irishman
driving with his hazard lights turned on.

– Chris Dowding

Early October, 2001

I was still half-asleep when Brian stopped the car to pick me up for work.

'How's the craic, Chris?' he asked. It was eight o'clock in the morning; I wondered why Brian was talking about drugs.

I'd heard "craic" used a few times since I'd been in Dublin, but the word always seemed to be used around pubs and clubs, so at first, I'd thought people were talking about drugs. Brian chuckled with a half-smile, and then set me straight before I insulted someone.

It turned out "craic" is an Irish word, pronounced (and sometimes spelt) "crack". The word has a variety of meanings, including gossip, fun and good times. "What's the craic?" means "What's happening?" or "What are you up to?" and "How's the craic?" means "Is it fun?"

"Craic" wasn't the only word I misunderstood in Ireland. On the following Saturday, I climbed onto the number 15A bus

behind Kerryn. We were on our way into the city and the bus was crammed. I shuffled along the aisle and stood in the last remaining space, in front of the stairwell. Kerryn stood opposite me, in the standing space usually reserved for wheelchair users. The bus moved off towards Rathmines.

Someone pressed the STOP button for the next stop. 'Soorry!' said a loud male voice behind me.

Why are you sorry? I thought. Nothing has happened!

The use of the word was confusing: "sorry" was said *before* the incident occurred. At first, I couldn't understand what incident *had* occurred, even afterwards. I soon realised the word was not always used to apologise, but was often used as a warning. A few examples where "sorry" might be used are shown below:

Situation: Standing on the bus
Word: 'Soorry!'
Meaning: 'You're stopping me from reaching my bag on the luggage rack. Move!'

Situation: Walking along the street
Word: 'Soorry'
Meaning: 'You're in my way. I'm about to shove you out of the way and step on your foot.'

Situation: Standing at the checkout in the shopping centre
Word: 'Soorry'
Meaning: 'I need to get that heavy carry basket you are next to and I'm going to hit you in the arm with it when I lift it.'

Australia's Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, who had made himself infamous for not being able to say "sorry" to the Aboriginal population, should have been sent to Ireland to learn how easy a word it is to use.

I stopped thinking about "sorry" scenarios as our bus lurched to a halt at its terminus in Townsend Street. Almost all of the south-side buses stopped on the south side of the Liffey and likewise on the north side. The Liffey marks a psychological and social boundary in the minds of Dubliners. The suburbs south of the river tend to be significantly more affluent than their counterparts to the north. It's been said the residents south of the Liffey only

cross the river a few times in their lives and when they do, it's only so they can get to the airport.

We were headed to the airport ourselves, but not to catch a plane. I had booked a rental car with Budget. We could have picked up a car from the inner city depot, but for reasons I'll explain, I refused to drive through the centre of Dublin.

A few weeks previously I'd been in a car with a work colleague. We rounded a corner and stopped abruptly to miss a small car stopped in the middle of road. The driver had been conversing cheerily with someone on the footpath and wasn't hurrying to get out of the way either. He finished his chat, as 20 or so cars banked up behind him, gave us a wave and then moved on.

A few kilometres further on, and we'd had to pull over hard to the left and stop on the road shoulder as a little old lady in a bright red car circled around a roundabout in the wrong direction. As she sped past she waved at us as well; a wave seemed to be an apology for all kinds of motoring debacles.

Similarly, if ever I saw a moving car with flashing hazard lights, I knew it was time to be very scared. In the same way as "soorry" warned of an imminent but unpredictable impact with some part of my body, flashing hazard lights indicated the driver had decided to perform a manoeuvre that would be considered highly illegal in many countries.

Having seen the Irish driving, I wasn't all that surprised to read national statistics advising that over 58 percent of all motor accidents occurred during the day, in high visibility conditions with dry weather, on a *straight road*. The highest proportion of these occurred in and around Dublin. So now you know why I refused to drive there.

If you are ever in Ireland, remember, if you see a moving car with hazard lights on, pull over to the side of the road and wait for the pandemonium to begin. Or, if you are feeling daring, put on *your* hazard lights and keep moving forwards; that way the other driver might think you are even crazier than he is.

Once we had picked up our little Opel Corsa from the airport, we travelled south on the M50 ring road for half an hour and then swung west onto the N7. We were going to County Kerry, in "the South", although it was really more west of Dublin than southward. The road between Dublin and Kerry alternated between a high quality four-lane motorway and a one and half lane bumpy road,

but it was optimistically called a National Primary Route all the way.

Somewhere between Dublin and Kildare, I swept around a corner at 100 kilometres an hour and was confronted by a tractor just ahead of us, moving at the much slower speed of around 10 kilometres an hour.

'Look out!' shouted Kerryn as she closed her eyes.

The front bonnet of the car jerked downwards as I hit the brakes. The tyres squealed and the car skidded to a halt, mere inches from the rusty looking harvesting implement fixed to the back of the tractor!

After a few deep breaths, Kerryn and I regained our composure and proceeded onwards, through Counties Kildare, Laois, and Tipperary. Many Normans settled in the rich, fertile lands of Tipperary after they invaded Ireland in the 12th Century and the county remained a substantial contributor to the agricultural component of Ireland's economy. I'd never seen grass as green in Australia. There were cows and sheep grazing in paddocks on both sides of the road.

Over the last couple of months, Irish rain had not affected me much—in fact, I enjoyed the opportunity to stay in and read a book or watch television. But I really did not like to see rain on the afternoons I attempted to play Gaelic football with some of the guys from Dillon Dally. (I have to emphasise the word "attempted" because I never really understood the game.) Each time it rained (which was often), I looked at my teammates, expecting them to run for cover, and was always disappointed when they continued playing. In Brisbane, a couple of days of rain resulted in empty sports ovals, and massive traffic jams as supposedly easy-going Australians gave up on public transport.

Kerryn hit me in the arm; it was time to veer wildly around another tractor. Looking at sheep and cows had gotten a bit monotonous, so I looked at the road signs to see how far we had to go: LIMERICK—40. A few moments later we passed another sign: LIMERICK—60. My sense of direction, which was usually quite good in the Southern Hemisphere, had seemingly abandoned me after I crossed the Equator. I *had* thought we were headed towards Limerick.

Kerryn grabbed our copy of the *Lonely Planet* guide for Ireland. A small paragraph caught her attention:

"The older white road signs give distances in miles, but the newer white ones use kilometres."

This didn't help much; all the signs looked the same white colour to me. It was as difficult as trying to find the right building in Dublin.

We approached the outskirts of Limerick. I dredged up what I knew: apparently Limerick used to be a violent place, which earned it the name Stab City. The city was built on the banks of the River Shannon. A type of joke was named after the city? The parts of Limerick I could see didn't look funny at all: lots of rundown buildings with broken glass windows and flaking paint. I locked the car doors.

I felt happier after we left the city and headed southwards through the pretty countryside in Counties Limerick and Kerry. The flat plains and gentle downs near the town of Tralee were vibrantly green and beautiful, the sort of green that earned Ireland the name Emerald Isle. The plains slowly gave way to stony mountains, with brilliant shafts of sunlight falling through the spaces between heavy grey clouds.

Kerry people are said to be different from people in the rest of Ireland. The Kerry folk believe they are quick-witted, clever and always two steps ahead of their fellow countrymen. They are also the subjects of some unkind jokes, perhaps out of jealousy.

My colleagues at Dillon Dally had told me a few jokes when they'd heard I was going to have a weekend in Kerry:

Q. How do Kerry men forge 10p coins?
A. They cut the corners off 50p coins

Q. What do you do if a Kerry man throws a pin at you?
A. Run like mad—he's probably got a grenade between his teeth

I laughed until I cried at these jokes, but not for the reasons my workmates thought. I'd heard this sort of humour before, when I was at school, but the joke-tellers hadn't been poking fun at people from Kerry specifically; they had talking about people from *all* of Ireland.

I steered the car out along the Dingle Peninsula and we got our first ever view of the Atlantic Ocean. Windsurfers raced across

the sparkling blue water and there was a sandy beach along the road ahead of us. I didn't feel like going for a swim though, as the water temperature was around eight degrees Celsius. This was less than half the water temperature of the Pacific Ocean, in my part of Australia.

The road made its way through some little villages, nestled beside their own little beaches. On the left, we passed one of the whitewashed stone cottages that always appear in tourism brochures about Ireland. The cottage was surrounded by a herd of curious, black-faced sheep. At the village of Camp the road split in two directions. We decided to take the Connor Pass route, as it was said to be the more scenic route. The road rose steeply and became ridiculously narrow, even for *one* car. Large, fender-destroying rocks loomed on the high side of the road. On the other side there was an almost sheer drop.

'Oh-my-god, there's a car coming the other way!' cried Kerryn.

I looked around urgently, but there was no place to pull off. I steered the car as close to the fender-ripping rocks as I dared and stopped while the other car edged around us gingerly. Its occupants clutched each other, white-faced, as their passenger-side tyres skipped over the few cobbles that stood between the road edge and oblivion. I think all of us breathed a huge sigh of relief when they safely made it around. While we were halted, I took the opportunity to look at the view: to the northwest I saw glorious mountains shrouded in heavy mists and there were two icy lakes below us. Striking green, red and yellow vegetation nestled amongst stony outcrops and, beyond the land the Atlantic Ocean and Brandon Bay formed a spectacular blue backdrop.

At 456 metres, Connor Pass was the highest road pass in Ireland. It was certainly bloody cold; the dashboard thermometer dropped from 15 degrees at the base, to about three degrees by the time we reached the top. Along with 20 or so other tourists, we pulled into a car park to take some photos. In the heated car I had worn only a thin shirt and trousers. Leaving the car's warmth was…bracing.

I saw Mount Brandon to the north, half hidden in mist. The peak rose 951 metres above sea level. Saint Brendan, the Navigator, was said to have climbed the mountain with his monks in the 6th Century, before they set sail over the Atlantic in search of a

"promised land". At that time, many Irish intellectuals believed the world to be spherical, with continents lying on the other side of the ocean; most other 6th Century Europeans thought the world was flat. Legend has it that Saint Brendan discovered Greenland and America, around nine centuries before Christopher Columbus made his way across the Atlantic.

Mount Brandon was a popular venue for walking, however there were warnings to check the weather before starting. Heavy mists and cloud had left people completely lost. (My youngest brother Andrew would climb the mountain in a few months time. He'd get caught on the peak amongst the clouds of a fierce rainstorm and be nearly frozen.)

Kerryn and I climbed back into our car and proceeded down the southern side of the Connor Pass. This side was relatively flat and not nearly as dramatic. Halfway down, we had to stop for a large herd of black-faced sheep to cross the road. The road widened out as we got closer to the bottom and approached the town of Dingle.

Dingle was originally a fishing village and it served the surrounding rural countryside. The little town had 52 pubs for a population of 1270 people; that's around one pub for every 24 people! The west of Ireland was sometimes known as the "wild west", because the English and other would-be conquerors had had less influence on that side of the island. The western population's affection for alcohol was another reason for the nickname.

Dingle was a pretty little place, but its real claim to fame was entirely thanks to the sea. In the early 1980s a bottlenose dolphin swam into the harbour and played around the boats of the fisher folk. "Fungie", as the Dingle residents christened him, returned every year and was an international celebrity. He placed Dingle firmly on the map of tourism.

Our first task was to find accommodation for the night. There were a lot of cheap B&Bs on the Connor Pass road, a short distance from town. We picked a likely place and stopped to have a look.

'Ah, come in, come in,' said the hostess. 'I'll show you our rooms. The cost is £19 a night including breakfast.'

Outside, the weather had turned grey and foreboding, making the bedrooms look very cosy.

'I had another couple staying last night,' said our hostess, frowning. 'They came back earlier. They said they had liked it so much they wanted to stay another night.'

'That's good,' I said, thinking it was a high recommendation.

'I wish they had told me they were staying,' she continued, 'as I'd already taken the sheets off their bed and washed them. Now I will have to remake it.'

If all businesses reacted that way to repeat customers, we'd still be living in little shelters made out of sticks. Still, the rooms looked tidy and comfortable and the rate was cheap. We checked in and headed into Dingle to have dinner.

Ireland has some of the best fish in the world in its territorial waters; the Atlantic salmon was the finest you could find. Unfortunately good fish was wasted on me; I preferred battered cod and crispy hot chips. Anyway, we enjoyed a lovely seafood meal at Danno's restaurant, on Strand Street next to the harbour, with Kerryn having the salmon and I the scampi (chopped-up prawns, dipped in breadcrumbs).

In the booth next to ours, we heard people speaking in a different language with an Irish accent. The Dingle Peninsula was a "Gaeltacht" — a region where the residents spoke Irish as their first language. The Gaeltacht areas included large portions of counties Donegal, Mayo, Galway and Kerry; and parts of counties Cork, Meath and Waterford. Irish is taught at all schools throughout the Republic as a compulsory subject, but only about 83,000 people speak it as their first language.

All modern road signs in the Republic displayed the English and Irish versions of town names, such as Waterford, which was "Port Lairge" in Irish. The pronunciation was usually nothing like the way the word read: "cead mhile failte" was pronounced "kade meela fawltcha" and meant "100,000 welcomes". Bus services used both English and Irish names in their destination display windows. "An Lar" meant "City Centre" and was often the first Irish words a visitor learnt.

After breakfast the following morning, we climbed into our car and motored west towards Slea Head. Rolling green hills swept down to the endless moody blue of the Atlantic Ocean. White cottages with grey roofs dotted the

landscape and sheep grazed in pastures divided by green and red hedgerows. The Dingle Peninsula was also home to numerous stone circles, beehive huts and other ancient sites. We stopped next to a sign: BEEHIVE HUTS—HERE.

We walked up into a farmyard and turned a corner. In front of me I saw a rusty old shed with half the wall missing. Someone was sitting in it and reading a magazine. It looked like...? I turned around quickly to Kerryn.

'Is she sitting on the toilet in there?' I whispered, red faced. The shed looked the right size to be an outdoor loo.

'No, I think it's where we pay to go in,' Kerryn replied, laughing.

We paid the entry fee and puffed up the hill to the beehive huts. These huts were constructed with dry stone walls laid in a hemispherical shape and were still solid, except for a small hole in the roof and the small doorway. The roofs were high enough for me to stand up inside.

I opened the yellow information sheet we had been given by the ticket salesgirl at the "toilet" shed. Some historians believed the little settlement had been home to two or three families around 1200 AD, although it was difficult to date them, because the same construction technique had been used for nearly 5000 years throughout Ireland. A low stone wall surrounded the three huts. Apparently the inhabitants had moved their sheep and other livestock behind the wall each night to protect them.

I stood in the centre of the walled-in space as the cool ocean breeze washed over me. The original owners had certainly picked a place with a fantastic view of the Atlantic.

We walked back down to the car and continued onwards. The road curved and weaved about the coastline, revealing beautiful scenery with each turn, in a similar way to the Great Ocean Road in Australia. We turned a corner and suddenly we saw the Blasket Islands and the rocks of Slea Head in front of us.

'Oh, it's so-ooo beautiful!' Kerryn exclaimed.

The Blasket Islands were inhabited until 1953. The islanders survived largely on a fish based diet and grew a few potatoes and some oats. Some kept sheep and a cow for milk. During the Famine, the potato crop failed as badly as it did on the mainland. The islanders were not as badly affected, thanks to their fish. In

fact, some people fled the famine-struck mainland and moved to the islands to live.

After 1916 the population fell from its peak of 176 to a mere 22 people in 1953 because of emigration. The remaining islanders abandoned their homes for the mainland, perhaps out of loneliness or hardship. Nowadays the islands are home only to white seabirds and grass-loving rabbits.

Kerryn and I walked down to Coumeenole, a beautiful sandy beach around the corner from Slea Head. I was happy to see my first Irish surf beach, but had no desire to swim. We were quite content looking out across the Atlantic, with nothing but the Blasket Islands between America and ourselves.

Our weekend was rapidly drawing to a close and we had to return to Dublin. We travelled back to the highway along the southern side of the Dingle Peninsula. Brilliant coloured wildflowers waved to and fro in the breeze along the roadside.

Across the bay, I saw surfers enjoying unpredictable waves along the three and a half mile beach near the village of Inch. Surfing had become popular in all sorts of unlikely places over the last few years; Newquay in Cornwall was also a major surf haven. I thought back to my first attempt at surfing, when I was 12. Eventually, I'd managed to catch a wave but my surfboard had nosedived and I'd landed face first on the beach; it seemed I had started too close to the shore. Embarrassed, it was quite a long time before I dared try again. As we rounded a corner I had my last glimpse of the ocean. If there's any magic left in the world, County Kerry is one of the places to find it.

Chapter 11

The Phallic Symbol

PAT: He was an Anglo-Irishman.
MEG: In the blessed name of God, what's that?
PAT: A Protestant with a horse.

– Brendan Behan

Dublin, late October, 2001

When Sir Arthur Guinness first began brewing at St James Gate in Dublin, he did not even make the famous stout that now bears his name. After he signed his famous 9000-year land lease in 1759, his main product was ale. Many people enjoyed ale at the time and mothers even gave their children a pint of weak ale daily, instead of milk, because of the threat of tuberculosis. Sir Arthur always had an excellent sense of timing.

Kerryn and I were touring the Guinness Storehouse with our friend Stephen. Stephen was 26 and had studied Business with Kerryn at university. He'd recently moved from Australia to work for a large recruitment firm in London. He'd flown over for the weekend and arrived in great spirits, despite waiting in the departure lounge for three hours as the airport mechanics changed a flat tyre on his plane.

Over the last half-hour, Stephen's shoulders had sagged, his tall frame had hunched over and his brown eyes had dulled. The Guinness Storehouse was not exciting. I'd hoped to see giant machines and pipes, with vents of steam and rumbling rollers. The only equipment to be seen was a silent old steam locomotive and an empty brewing vat. One minute of Celtic music ran over and over on an endless loop. I like Celtic music, but this was hard to endure. I thumbed the Swiss army knife in my pocket and looked around for any exposed speaker wires. Unfortunately, there were none to be found.

On the next floor a video machine played a documentary about Sir Arthur's life. In 1775, the Dublin Corporation decided that Arthur Guinness had drawn more water from the Liffey than his lease allowed. The Corporation sent in the City Sheriff's team to cut his supply. Arthur, normally a reserved man, grabbed a pickaxe from one of his workmen and shouted he was prepared 'to defend it [the water supply] by force of arms.'

The Dublin Corporation has never been clever in its dealings with Dublin citizens. During the 1970s, a Viking village and part of the ancient city wall were uncovered during excavation works for the Corporation's new Civic buildings. In spite of a large protest movement and attempted legal action, the Corporation continued construction and the beginnings of Dublin's 1100 year old story were crushed and buried under multistorey buildings, fittingly known by locals as "the Bunkers".

Unlike the supporters of the hapless Viking settlement, Arthur Guinness reached a satisfactory solution to his water supply problems through legal channels. He began brewing a version of stout, named "porter" due to its popularity with London porters of the time, in 1778. The sales of porter increased threefold towards the close of century and in time, the St James Gate Brewery became the largest brewer of stout in the world. Nowadays this brew is known simply as *Guinness*.

'I don't think I can stand any more of this,' I yawned loudly.

'No, me neither,' said Stephen, 'Let's go and get our free pint of Guinness.'

The three of us climbed into a glass walled lift, which reminded me of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Great Glass Elevator*. The elevator rose up into the roof space and stopped. The doors opened. We were on top of the world; we looked out across the

city through circular glass walls. The room in front of us bulged with people. Everyone was taking photos or sipping pints of Guinness. Conversation buzzed around the room and Bob Marley sang stridently on the music system:

'I wanna love ya, I wanna hold and treat you right.'

His reggae music was a strange but successful fit with our view of Dublin in the sunshine. In the centre of the room, three bartenders served complimentary pints with a speed I hadn't seen elsewhere in Ireland. As expected in *the* bar of *the* Guinness brewery, they observed the correct procedure of waiting partway through the pour. My pint tasted excellent.

Stephen brightened up and smiled broadly. 'I think I'll be drinking this a bit more from now on!'

We climbed back onto a tour bus in a significantly more cheerful state than we had left it. The bus crossed the Liffey and swung up into Phoenix Park. The gas street lamps along Chesterfield Avenue had just been lit. They cast a romantic glow across the pavement. The driver pointed out the Wellington Monument to the left.

'Look, it's a big phallic symbol!' laughed Kerryn.

I looked at her, a bit shocked. 'Is that what the nuns taught you at your Catholic School?' I asked.

I suppose the pointed stone obelisk did look a bit like an erect part of the male anatomy—albeit a 205 foot one. The Monument was a tribute to the first Duke of Wellington, Arthur Wellesley, who defeated Napoleon's army in 1815. It may surprise you to know the Iron Duke was born in Dublin at No. 24 Upper Merrion Street. When teased by the British about his Anglo-Irish heritage, he said, 'Just because a man was born in a barn, doesn't make him a horse.'

The native Irish replied, 'But it doesn't stop him being an ass!'

Dubliners had very strong feelings about the statues and monuments scattered around their streets. I was amazed the Wellington Monument was still standing. The British erected the Nelson Pillar in O'Connell Street in 1808, as a tribute to Admiral Horatio Nelson for his naval brilliance. In 1966 the IRA loaded the pillar with explosives, under the cover of darkness. The pillar cracked in half and old Nelson flew halfway along the street! The IRA gave no warning and motorists and pedestrians alike had to duck for cover as stone fragments scattered everywhere.

Most of the other monuments in the city have been given a derogatory nickname by Dubliners. Two stone statues of women swapping gossip in Lower Liffey Street were known as the "Hags with the Bags". James Joyce never made himself popular with his fellow Dubliners, as he had made disparaging comments about them in his books. In revenge, his statue in North Earl Street was known as "the Prick with the Stick". Anna Livia, a woman sitting on a slope with water trickling over her, was created in the 1980s as a monument to the River Liffey. She was known as "the Floozie in the Jacuzzi" or the "Hoor in the Sewer". Anna wasn't very popular with the locals and she looked a bit desolate in the middle of O'Connell Street, half covered in green slime. The Dublin Corporation removed her a few months after we arrived in Dublin to make way for their new monument, the Millennium Spire.

'Ah, we don't want that [Spire] here,' a taxi driver told me on one occasion, 'We'll have it down as soon as they turn their backs!'

According to one Dubliner, the Dublin Corporation installed the "Bowl of Light" in the 1950s to symbolise Ireland's progress and aspirations. It was a giant plastic bowl filled with fake plastic flames. Some Trinity College students decided to use it to measure the tidal flow of the Liffey. It sailed out into Dublin Bay and disappeared. Apparently when the culprits were caught, they were praised by the local judge and given unofficial freedom of the city.

Although many dissenters rallied against the Millennium Spire, the Dublin Corporation gamely held a competition to give their Spire a name. "Stiffy by the Liffey", "Stilleto in the Ghetto", "Skewer in the Sewer", "The Height of Folly", "Bertie's Erection" and the "Stick in the Sick" were just a few of the names being bandied around by the locals as I wrote this chapter. I don't expect the "Corpo" would pick a name from any of those. They'll probably end up doing what they did when they built their Civic buildings; they'll grind public opinion and history underneath a 20 tonne excavator.

I stopped daydreaming and looked out the bus window again, at the darkening field and the Wellington Monument. Why hadn't the Irish destroyed it, or at least given it an unkind nickname? Maybe it was because he was Irish. In spite of Wellington's distaste

for his Irish brethren, as Prime Minister of Britain, he helped to pass the *Catholic Emancipation Act* in 1829. The Act restored voting rights to some Catholics. Sadly Wellington's reasons for passing the Act didn't include any feelings of sympathy towards Catholics. Politics were the motivation; he wanted to win some votes.

On second thought I reckon the reason Ireland had left the Wellington Monument alone, was in plain sight. Leaving a monument that looked like a big di*k was perhaps symbolic enough.

The next morning was sunny and glorious again. We'd been very lucky with the weather: rain had only fallen once or twice a day since we'd arrived. The east coast of Ireland tended to be the driest and Dublin was said to have some of the best weather in the country. As many locals said, it never got really warm in Dublin, but then, it never got really cold either.

Stephen, Kerryn and I were headed for the Bus Information office in O'Connell Street, to catch a Coastal Tour Bus. We had been at a pub until late the night before, so all of us were feeling a bit rough.

'I've got the worst headache,' moaned Kerryn, as she clutched my hand.

'We're nearly there,' I offered. 'Then you can sit down.' We raced up to the bus and leapt on.

'Cead mhile failte, Baile Atha Cliath,' said the bus driver.

'What did he just say?' asked Stephen.

'Welcome to Dublin,' said Kerryn, holding her head in her hands.

The bus moved off, smoothly for a change, towards Dublin Harbour.

'On our right is Customs House,' informed the bus driver, 'It was designed by James Gandon and was completed in 1791. It was almost destroyed by fire in 1921 during the war with the English.'

The bus driver didn't mention that the IRA had set fire to the elegant building to destroy the government tax records and other documents, as part of their campaign to undermine British rule in Ireland. The building was left completely gutted, until the free Irish Government restored it years later.

Our driver pointed out another sight to the left of the bus. 'Those buildings are part of the IFSC, which is our new financial district. The government has been renewing the area and there are some expensive apartments you can live in up ahead.'

The IFSC district developed during the late 1980s and 1990s was the first real effort by the government to regenerate the Docklands area. Thank goodness they made a beginning.

Historically, the port was a major place of employment for Dubliners. During the 19th Century, many warehouses and businesses leapt up around the Docklands. Contractors reclaimed land and many people relocated into the region. In the 1950s and 1960s, the advent of "roll on roll off" ferry services meant that trucks could carry containers of cargo directly to their destinations. The need for loading facilities and storage warehouses declined and much of the Docklands region became derelict.

As our Coastal Tour Bus continued through the district, I saw run-down workers' cottages, piles of rubble from demolished buildings and the rusting skeleton frames of disused gas storage tanks. The Grand Canal (which ran through Rathmines near our home) terminated in the Docklands at Grand Canal Dock. In an idea I found quite alarming, a windsurfer training school used the dock. Floating shopping bags covered the eastern side and I wouldn't have been surprised to see a few used condoms and who knows what else floating about as well.

The tour bus turned onto Beach Road. In striking contrast to the Docklands, Dublin's coastal regions were beautiful. Windsurfers raced across the (clean-looking) bay and I could see the outline of a ferry on the horizon, as it made its way towards the harbour.

Perhaps the nicest part of Dublin's coastline was the little village of Dalkey. The town had a couple of nice pubs and a pretty stone-walled harbour at the end of Coliemore Road. Dalkey Island, with its ruined church, rested quietly just across the water. Dalkey was a popular retreat for some of the bigger Irish music personalities. Bono and the Edge both had houses overlooking nearby Killiney Bay, while Enya was building a castle up on the hill. Unlike most of the Western world, people here generally left their stars alone; the "fame thing" just wasn't a big deal. In contrast, Kerryn and I were like the paparazzi; we leant against the bus window, with our camera at the ready; we saw no one.

The bus rounded a corner and I saw something crash into the telephone pole ahead of us. A witch, dressed in her best black

cloak and pointy hat, had been out drink riding on her broom. The broom was crunched in half and the witch's pointy nose seemed to be jammed into the telephone pole.

Our driver chuckled. 'Ah, it looks like some comedians were out last night.'

Halloween was a big event in Dublin. Shops owners put up big displays in their windows. Kids trick or treated their way around town. Shop-owners stacked pumpkins along their fruit and veggie shelves. To the Irish, pumpkins were only suitable as food for pigs. They were only available in shops for Halloween partygoers to buy as decorations.

Everyone at work had been talking about Halloween for the last week.

'Ah yeah, my kids will be out trick or treating tonight,' said Fergus.

'Oh, I'll have to get some of those "warhead" lollies,' I quipped.

Warheads were sweet on the outside, but had vicious ingredients like extraordinarily hot chilli in the middle. I didn't think anyone in Ireland would have heard of them.

'Well, I don't think that's a very nice thing to do!' scowled Fergus.

One of my workmates laughed quietly, behind his hand. He gave me a lift home after work. 'Look at this now, Chris,' he said, pointing out a huge bonfire in the Tallaght district.

'What's that?' I asked.

'Every Halloween,' he began in explanation, 'the houses around here compete with each other to build the biggest fire.'

The big stacks of fuel weren't built with much firewood. There were lots of bed mattresses, old doors and bits of building rubble in each pile. Some of the stacks included truly stupid things, like fridges, washing machines and shopping trolleys.

'Do they clean up all that mess tomorrow?' I queried.

'Nope,' he sighed. 'They never clean it up. They leave it for the Dublin Corporation.'

'Pretty inconsiderate of them,' I replied.

'Yes,' he said. 'But Tallaght is a very poor suburb. People don't have a lot to look forward to.'

'So they light a big fire?' I asked.

'Wait till you see Dublin later on,' he replied. 'People everywhere fire rockets out of their yards. The rockets are totally illegal, of course.'

'How do they get them?' I asked.

'Ah, they go up to Northern Ireland to buy them,' he replied.

Our Coastal Tour Bus returned to Dublin. Kerryn, Stephen and I went home for dinner. The rain had come back and I felt quite happy to stay home for the night.

Stephen had other ideas. '*Moulin Rouge* is on tonight. I saw it in Brisbane; it's fantastic. You've got to see it. *I'll* see it again. I'll ring up the cinema and find out when it starts.'

I felt wrecked, but Kerryn had wanted to see this movie for months. We hailed a taxi and directed the driver to O'Connell Street. The Savoy cinema, which opened in 1929, was a regular host of film premieres in Ireland. The theatres were fairly tatty and old, but they had a sense of grace about them. Theatre One, where they were showing our movie, boasted the biggest screen in Ireland.

I did end up enjoying *Moulin Rouge*. Ewan McGregor sang "All You Need is Love" to Nicole Kidman in the movie, and although I'd heard this simple song many times before, hearing it there somehow allowed me to feel a strong sense of love for Kerryn and all my friends and family. It wasn't all because of the movie; my feelings and thoughts were stronger and more present than I could remember them being for a long time. I'd even started writing down some of my experiences and emailing some of them to friends in Australia. I noticed so many things around me that I'd never noticed before. I was connecting with the world around me.

I felt like I was waking up for the first time.

Chapter 12

Gaillimh

A soft answer turns away anger.

- Celtic proverb

Early November, 2001

The Temple Bar district was Dublin's cultural and recreational quarter. Art studios, record stores, clothing stores, restaurants, cafes and pubs crammed the area between Dame Street and Wellington Quay. Something was always happening and people could be found on the cobbled streets at any time of the day or night—talking, merrymaking or eating. I found, to my surprise, that I actually liked having all these people around. I really was changing.

Most of the buildings in the district were constructed during the 18th and 19th Centuries, including the attractive Bank of Ireland building, which was completed in 1739. In direct contrast, the relatively modern Central Bank, built in the 1970s, was an utter blight on the area. Some people did enjoy it, however; marauding skateboarders used the steps and ramps of the building constantly as stunt platforms (which were dangerous for passers-by, who

stood a high chance of being hit by a skateboard or teenager hurtling sideways after a poorly executed trick).

Kerryn and I were in Temple Bar Square waiting for my friend Anthony to arrive. I had studied civil engineering with him at university, but hadn't seen him for many years. He worked for a company in England that developed software for engineers. He'd come across to Dublin to train some of his clients and called me to organise a catch up session.

Tourists and locals hurried past, on the way to their pub of choice, as the rain fell softly around us. On weekends the Square became a market place for second hand books. It was also a good landmark for a meeting place.

Without warning, an awful cacophony of high-pitched shrieking and wailing erupted from the opposite side of the square.

'I sleeeept in a barn one night in Currabaaaaawn,' it screeched. 'A shoocking weeet night it waaas. There was holllles in the roooof. And the raindrops coming throoooough!'

The creator of this noise, a small boy, visited the streets of the Temple Bar district frequently and defined himself, mistakenly, as a singer. He was busking, but I don't think people paid him for his remarkable voice. Certainly *I* was willing to give him up to £10 to be quiet.

The worst of it was, there was a whole family of these little shriekers. It was possible to escape the sound of one boy, by moving three or four streets away, but another boy, who sounded exactly the same, would be wailing around the next corner.

'Over the fieeeelds with my bulging heavy sack, wiiiith holes in my shooooes!'

They had better coverage of Dublin than Vodafone. I thought that we citizens of Dublin should have held a street appeal for this family; I'm sure all donations would have been more than generous. With enough money, they could have been given a nice house and a bank account—in another city.

A beggar walked up to us. He was in his mid twenties and his face was covered with red welts. He wore a grubby blanket over his shoulders to keep him warm. 'Please kind sir, do you have a spare pound?'

'Oh… okay, here you go,' I gave in. Unfortunately, he came back again fifteen minutes later, having seemingly forgotten our

earlier meeting.

Dublin had lots of beggars on its streets. Although many of them needed assistance, locals advised me that some beggars had more money than you or me; these people were simply "on the take". I found it very difficult to distinguish the genuine ones from the sponges. Liars and the honest alike employed all sorts of clever tactics to get attention, such as bouncing a grubby shawl wrapped baby on one knee. Once, when I'd looked closely, the baby had been a doll.

Anthony arrived. He smiled with his brown eyes as he shook my hand. We had dinner and then adjourned to the Temple Bar pub for a couple of pints. The building looked like a traditional Irish pub but it was apparently only a few years old. Locals described it as a haunt for tourists, but I wasn't so sure. The sound system blared away and whenever a popular song came on, more than half the customers sang along. "Daydream Believer" by the Monkees began with a heart-felt feeling of approval from the crowd.

'Cheer up, Sleepy Jean, Oh what can it mean, To a Daydream Believer and a Homecoming Quee-ee-ee-een!' everyone sang in delight. We smiled at the singers and talked about old times at university.

'I used to worry about getting good grades, so I could get a job.' I said. ' Since we finished uni, I've always been able to get a job, but the worrying has never gone away.'

'Yeah, you never really let yourself have fun at uni, did you?' replied Anthony. 'I didn't let it get to me much. Life's too short.'

Anthony didn't end up with record-breaking marks, but he never seemed too stressed either. I was jealous of his ease of mind; after we'd graduated, I'd taken the first job that came along while he'd zipped off to the UK and scored his job in software.

'I'm getting a bit bored with my job,' he said. 'I've been offered some work with the same company in Texas. I might go there for a bit.'

'Well it'll certainly be different and you might meet a few friendly southern gals,' I said enthusiastically. 'Sounds pretty good to me!'

My generation of Australians has travelled like none before. It has made Australians more aware of the rest of the world and the rest of the world more aware of us. Travelling gave me a different

perspective; I developed new ideas for dealing with problems, both personally and professionally, that I could take back home. In gaining an understanding of a different culture I also learned how to cope better with the unexpected.

Anthony, Kerryn, and I stayed for a few more pints before we headed for our respective bus stops. Kerryn and I hurried along Temple Bar [the lane], until a beggar wearing a blanket over his shoulders hailed us. Yes, the same bloke we'd met earlier was trying to get money from us again.

'Look, I gave you money earlier mate,' I said. 'If you think you're getting more, you're wrong.'

He looked at me with a faint sparkle of humour in his eyes. 'But that was over three hours ago!'

Touché. One thing I loved about many people here was their ability to make the mood feel lighter in almost any situation. While the rest of the world huffed and puffed and threatened to blow houses down, these brilliant diplomats could gently but firmly drive their point home with a joke.

Dubliners and the rest of the world were lucky the Temple Bar district did not suffer the fate planned for it. In the 1960s, CIE, Ireland's national transportation company, purchased property in Temple Bar. The group intended to flatten the entire area and build a major bus station. They were also responsible for the planning and operation of the Dublin Bus network. I could only imagine the discussions they had at their Strategic Planning sessions.

'Ah yeah,' said the Chariman, 'we need to get all these people around the city, like.'

'I know what to do!' started one of the Planning Boffins. 'Let's start a bus service which doesn't ever run on time, so we can save money by only giving the customers the *starting* time of each route.'

'Grand!' agreed the Chairman. 'And we'll hire on a non-communicative bollocks to drive some of the buses. We can pay them really low wages and they can give out at the passengers, like. It'll be gas!'

For a number of reasons, including public outcry about CIE's stupid ideas, the bus station project in Temple Bar did not go ahead. The CIE built a central bus station on the north side of the Liffey, behind Customs House. The station became known as

Busaras, and Kerryn and I were headed there. Broadly speaking, it looked like two giant grey aspirin boxes on their side, placed at right angles to each other. People who wanted to use the station risked life and limb to cross the adjacent streets, which were full of 15 tonne buses travelling at high speed. To access the entry doors from most directions involved crossing the main driveways, which were again full of 15 tonne buses moving at high speed. Once inside the station, people milled about aimlessly and got in each other's way, as they looked for the poorly marked information desk.

Ironically, the Institute of Architects in Ireland had hailed the building as a gold medal winner. I expect the presentation ceremony was brimming with enthusiasm for Busaras.

'The building breaks the boundaries of traditional architecture and sets new standards for transportation infrastructure; congratulations to the design team!' cried the Master of Ceremonies.

In other words, the building departed from the attractive curves, domes and arches people travelled halfway around the world to see. It also failed to serve its function, which was to convey passengers quickly and safely to the correct bus or street.

The chief architect had probably been some older version of Brogan: 'Look at the statement I'm making!'

Kerryn and I needed to catch a bus to Galway for the weekend. Our Canadian friends, Andrea and Nick, had moved over there when Nick scored a research job in mechanical engineering.

Galway is an old city on the Atlantic coast of Ireland, about 200 kilometres west of Dublin. It was already well established when the Vikings arrived in the 8th Century. Unlike Dublin and Waterford, the Vikings did not settle there. They utterly destroyed the place. By the 12th Century, the local population had rebuilt the town, only to be attacked again by the King of Munster. The Normans arrived in 1171 and re-established Galway early in the 13th Century.

It took around four hours for our bus to complete the trip. It was night-time when we arrived. My first glimpse of Galway was of a pretty town, with winding narrow streets and stone faced buildings. Andrea and Nick met us beside the railway station. We hugged each other and smiled, before we climbed onto a local bus to travel to their flat.

'So how are you guys?' asked Nick, smiling with his bright eyes. 'How's Dublin treating you?'

'Much the same as usual,' I replied.

'Testing you out, huh?' he said. ' Oh, this is the River Corrib,' he pointed out, as the bus passed over a swiftly flowing river.

'Over to the left is the Spanish Arch,' informed Andrea, waving one of her small hands, 'where the trading ships from Spain used to unload their cargo.'

Galway was the upwardly mobile city of the west coast. I felt the pride and prosperity reflected in the clean streets and the neatly presented gardens. The maroon flag of Galway hung from the windows of many houses and shops in recognition of their football team's domination in the All Ireland Championship Final. Despite my disinterest in televised sport, I was proud of their team too: they had let me rub Brogan's nose in it when I'd first arrived in Ireland.

The bus turned a corner and Nick pressed the button for the next stop. Thankfully, we had arrived. Andrea and Nick had a warm living room and an inviting guest bedroom. Exhausted, I changed out of my crushed clothes, climbed under the blankets and fell asleep with the relaxed dreams that come with being in a friend's home. We awoke in the morning to the sound of food being put on the table: Nick had cooked us an excellent breakfast, which we ate quickly. Andrea had arranged for all of us to travel to the Aran Islands.

The ferry ride to Inishmore, the largest island in the group of three, took about 90 minutes. An icy wind blew around the boat. Kerryn was happy to escape the chill when our ferry rounded a point and cruised into the sheltered waters of Cill Einne Bay. The motors died away as we docked against a long pier.

'It's so quiet,' I said, almost in a whisper.

The lack of mechanical noise was astounding. I heard the soft sounds of people talking to each other and of others going about their business in the small town of Kilronan to our left. A horse clopped his hooves as he pulled a cart along one of the small lanes next to the harbour. I noticed the mews of sea birds as they searched for fish across the bay and the soft roll of tiny waves against the pier.

Even when I was a boy on Mum and Dad's farm, the sounds of a car somewhere or a plane overhead always seemed to be present.

The background sounds in our busy way of life rarely went away, even when we tuned them out. I fell in love with the quiet island of Inishmor straight away.

As we walked along the pier, 20 people offered their services as tour guides. Some had vans, others had horse-drawn wagons and some even had bicycles. Andrea got some prices from them. She looked overwhelmed; they were all desperate for business. Even people living on an idyllic and peaceful island had their problems.

We eventually picked a man with a minivan to show us around. I nearly fell out the rear door when my unbolted seat rolled backwards. I quietly laughed with Kerryn as I used the seat belt to pull myself upright.

The bus driver began his spiel without blinking an eye: 'Right, so,' he began. 'Inishmor is home to 900 people. It is 14 kilometres long and is only four kilometres across at its widest point.'

The land was covered in tiny green fields, fenced by speckled limestone walls. Small boulders dotted many of the fields. There were even more rocks along the shore and most houses were made of rocks. In fact, I had never seen so many rocks in all my life.

'Half of the island's surface is bare rock and cannot be farmed,' our driver continued. 'The *good* fields only have four or five inches of topsoil over the top of the limestone. The whole island was covered with rocks that needed to be rolled out of the way before the land could be used. There were no machines, so every rock had to be moved by hand. You can understand why the old farmers didn't want to move them very far. They built the walls to get *rid* of the rock.'

There were over 1600 kilometres of stone walls on this 14 kilometre long island. Apparently islanders augmented the thin layer of soil in each field for centuries by piling layers of seaweed over the fields as fertiliser. Living here 200 years ago would have been tough, without electricity or piped water. Living here *2000* years ago would have been really tough: clearing of the scattered stone would have been extremely slow with the poor tools available. On the west side of the island, we stopped near an ancient structure, which symbolised the difficulties of early life on the island. Dun Aengus was constructed sometime between 300 BC and 800 AD. No one has been able to come up with a more definitive date. Nothing is known about the builders of the

structure, which many researchers have described as a type of fort.

We approached Dun Aengus by walking up a gradual slope, which was covered in rocks (of course). Around halfway up I heard a tremendous noise.

BOOM… BOOM… BOOOOM! It sounded like a band with all its drummers playing at once.

"What on earth is that noise?" Andrea asked.

We climbed the rest of the slope and approached a six metre high stone wall. I climbed through an opening in the wall and stopped in awe. The stone walls had been built right around to the edge of a 100 metre high cliff, which fell directly into the sea. No one would have attacked the fort from that direction. The waves struck the cliffs with all the fury 3500 kilometres of the Atlantic could give them.

Each wave crashed heavily and surged at least halfway up the cliff. BOOM!

Dun Aengus originally had four separate ring walls, but only the inner two remained intact. A clever form of defence still stood between the remains of the outer two walls. Hundreds of rocks, which were the height of a small man, had been arranged to make approach to the inner keep very difficult. It was like an ancient version of a barbed wire fence. A band of attackers would have had to run up the slope and negotiate their way around all the rocks while the inhabitants would have flung spears, rocks and arrows at them. I'd have put my money on the home side to win.

Nick had disappeared. We looked around for him for a little while, but he didn't seem to be anywhere.

'Hey Andrea, look!' called a Canadian voice from the cliffs. Andrea looked over in horror as a hand came over the top of the cliff and dragged its owner's body up over the edge.

'Nick!' Andrea screamed, stamping her foot. 'Stop kidding around. Come away from the cliff!' Laughing hard, Nick climbed back down the side onto the small ledge he had hidden on. I took a photo of him struggling to "save" himself.

After Andrea stopped hitting Nick, we walked back to a little cafe at the bottom of the hill. I ordered a serve of locally caught fish in Guinness batter. Unfortunately, the Guinness batter tasted like a fresh coating of tyre rubber mixed with bitumen. For the first time in my life, I scraped off most of the batter to enjoy the

taste of the *fish*. Afterwards, Kerryn and I crossed the lane to have a look at the tourist shops. The Aran sweaters looked warm, but I was allergic to wool. The sweaters didn't cater to everyone's tastes and some of the gaudy patterns woven into the wool made me feel more allergic than the material itself.

A woman with big hair and even bigger shoulder pads demanded in her strong American accent to see the entire store's stock. The lady behind the counter began to talk about each sweater. The customer swung her shoulder pads around and stormed off. Maybe she was upset because the shopkeeper didn't display her wares the way her *See Ireland* guidebook had described.

The four of us returned to the pier at Kilronan and waited for the ferry to return. The island of Inishmore was quiet, isolated and beautiful. Life in the past must have been hard, but it was probably never as tough as having to put up with bad mannered tourists.

Years later, I still wonder why such people travel; perhaps they wanted to assure themselves that their own country was better than each country they visited? I'd thought the same way when I first arrived in Ireland, but, over time, something in me changed. When the tour bus seat had rolled backwards earlier, I'd just laughed. I guess Ireland's sense of humour had started to rub off.

The next morning we had to hurry again. We'd woken up late and missed the bus from Salthill into Galway. The Connemara tour bus left from the same place as the Aran Islands bus, in the centre of town.

'Can we just get a taxi?' I grumbled as we jogged up a hill. Andrea and Nick exchanged perplexed glances and kept running.

After a long run, we climbed onto the bus and headed off along the road to the west again. Unfortunately we couldn't *see* anything through the windows of the bus.

'Hello, all of you,' chuckled our driver. 'Well, I'll be showing you the fine countryside of Connemara. Or I will be if the fog lifts!'

A thick blanket of grey fog covered the whole area. I could barely see the fences on each side of the road, let alone anything else. It was a wonder the bus driver could see anything either. I decided I was better off not thinking about that.

We passed through the little village of Spiddal. The fog began to lift and I noticed the land on the southern side of the road. Rock walls bordered hundreds of small fields and more rocks poked through the grass. The effect was like a patchwork quilt and was quite similar to the scenery of the Aran Islands, with one significant difference: the granite-based soil here was far less fertile than the limestone enriched soil on Inishmor and the other islands. The people who lived here had traditionally struggled to survive on the produce from their small pastures. Happily, the recent rise of the Irish economy had helped to improve things.

'A few years ago, our local minister created a package of attractive options to get businesses into the area,' explained our driver. 'Now days, Connemara is home to a film and television industry. Fishing and tourism are very strong.'

'We also have schools where people can come and live to learn the Irish language,' he continued. 'Children come to board here during their school holidays and they have to speak in Irish the entire time. Even when they go to a shop, the locals will speak to them in Irish. It's a great way to learn.'

The land beside the road became wide and flat. The rich brown, orange and red grasses contrasted with the bare granite outcrops and the brilliant blue sky.

Between 1800 and 1845, the Irish population grew from five to eight million. In Connemara, the majority of people lived in conditions of near poverty, although they were rich in culture and language. They didn't own their own houses, and lived under the constant threat of eviction. The potato, introduced to Ireland in 1509, became the staple of their diet. The root crop grew well in poor soil and needed very little attention. One and a half acres of potatoes fed five people for six months (not to mention pigs and other animals). However, disaster struck when a fungal disease commonly known as "blight" led to the failure of the potato crop in 1845. It failed again in 1846 and every year thereafter until 1850.

Can you imagine being hungry for five years? Alexander Somerville, a British journalist, visited Ireland during the Famine in 1847 and wrote about his experiences:

"I thought I would speak to the feeble old man and followed and came up with him. He was not an old man. He was under 40 years of age; was tall and sinewy and had all the appearances of

what would have been a strong man if there had been flesh on his body. His skinny skeleton hands clutched the handle of the shovel upon which he supported himself while he stood to speak to me, as if it were the last gasp of life.

'It is the hunger, your honour; nothing but the hunger,' he said in a feeble voice, 'I stayed at the work till I could stay no longer. I am fainting now with the hunger. I must go home and lie down. There is six children and my wife and myself. We had nothing all yesterday and this morning we had only a handful of yellow meal among us all, made into a stirabout, before I came out to work —nothing more and nothing since. Sure this hunger will be the death of us all. God have mercy upon me and my poor family.'

I saw the poor man and his poor family and truly might he say, God have mercy! They were skeletons, all of them."

Of all the injustices and bad luck that fell upon the Irish, the Famine was one problem the British were not directly responsible for. Ironically perhaps, the Famine was the disaster that was most remembered and the one which has ensured Ireland's hatred of Britain remains strong.

While England was not to blame for the potato blight itself (some have argued otherwise), they also didn't help. Government policy of the time let market forces dictate the supply and demand of all goods; the simple fact was, most of the Irish people had little money to spend and food was exported out of the country to places that paid more. Potentially lifesaving food was stockpiled in seaports while the population starved.

Some Englishmen argued against providing aid, suggesting the Irish estate holders should have offered it first. They may have been right, but they had forgotten who most of those estate holders were; the plantation policies of the previous century had stripped the Irish of their lands and passed title to English immigrants. Many of these gentlemen did not offer help (a few did, but they were overwhelmed by the scale of the problem). In County Mayo, 600 starving men, women and children walked 15 kilometres to Delphi Lodge, where they hoped the Board of Guardians would give them food. When they arrived, the Board was at *lunch* and the starving delegation had to wait. After they finished lunch, the Board gave the starving people nothing and advised them that they needed to go through the proper channels to receive aid.

On the return journey, 400 of these souls perished in the freezing snow and rain.

When I heard this story, I didn't believe it. It seemed too callous. But the Board of Guardians' behaviour was not unique. After voting to spend £200,000 to beautify Battersea Park in London, the British Parliament moved onto the Irish problem. They voted to spend *£100,000* for the relief of the Irish peoples who were "suffering keen distress". There were eight million people living in Ireland at the time. Corn meal was imported with the money, but it didn't seem to find its way to the people who needed it most. The distribution system was too slow and too top heavy. It was based on the *efficiency* of the English Civil service.

Since the arrival of the Normans, 700 years earlier, Ireland had been part of the kingdom of Great Britain; but, in truth, the Irish were not regarded as true citizens of the Kingdom at all. British "scientific" literature of the day described the Irish as a lower evolutionary form than their "superiors", the Anglo-Saxons. Apparently it was all to do with the shape of their jaw. Men of genius were "orthnathous", which meant they had less prominent jawbones. The Welsh and the Irish were "prognathous", meaning they had prominent jawbones and were stupid. The Irish were also playful, poetic, light-hearted, imaginative and highly emotional. They were therefore childlike and in need of guidance from others who were more "highly developed".

Of the eight million people living in Ireland, one million died. Another million emigrated to America, Australia and to Liverpool in England, in sheer desperation.

J. Craig, of Cork, sent a letter of distress to Westminster in 1846: "We ask for bread and you give us a stone. Can you wonder if we put it in our sleeve to hurl at you in our hour of utmost need? For the day will come despite all your greatness, in which I rejoice and of all your glory, in which I take pride, when you will need us, hungry and helpless though were are and despised though we seem to be."

Those words of warning may have been remembered, when, nearly 100 years later, Adolph Hitler looked across from the shores of France with the intention of turning Britain into a slave colony. The Free Irish State (the Republic of Ireland) had broken away from the Kingdom in 1921, after a violent war. Free Ireland wanted nothing more to do with Britain and the Irish

Government maintained official neutrality throughout World War II. Britain and Germany were not allowed access to Ireland's ports. However the IRA guerrilla organisation was still violently opposed to British rule of Northern Ireland and some members became informants for the Germans. This caused as much trouble for the Irish Government as it did for the British.

You may remember the story of the lion and the mouse. It was poignant that the symbol of England was the lion. Unlike the fairytale, the mouse *never* came to help.

Chapter 13

Building a Nation (in a hurry)

All that glitters isn't gold.

– William Shakespeare

Dublin, early November, 2001

Autumn moved towards winter and, to my relief, it became too dark to play Gaelic football after work. We began playing six-a-side soccer under floodlights instead.

Although I didn't enjoy watching sport much, I didn't mind playing it—sometimes. It was healthy and a good way to get to know people. Every Thursday night, we met at Ballyoulster Park in Celbridge, which was reached from Dillon Dally's office in two ways. We could drive on the main roads, which were well sign-posted, but like going from Earth to Mars, via Pluto. Alternatively we could take the "shortcut". Unfortunately, this route had difficulties of its own, particularly for someone unfamiliar with the correct directions.

Do you remember the U2 song, "Where the Streets have no Name"? The title must have been inspired by Dublin, the original home of the band. The reason for the song title, I reckon, was that

Bono, like me, couldn't find the street name signs for half the bloody city. Indeed, the streets appeared to have no name at all.

It seemed to me the Irish Government had decided to save heaps of money by not bothering with poles for the street signs. These signs could be found in the following places, shown in order of likelihood:

1. On the top storey wall of a multistorey building
2. On the front brick fence of someone's house, underneath an overgrown hedge.
3. At the bottom of Dublin Bay, as an anchor for somebody's lobster pot.

As a bus passenger looking for a place I hadn't been before, it was alarming to find one part of Dublin looked very similar to the rest. My mind reeled helplessly with the total lack of landmarks available to locate myself.

Grey house with Georgian door... Grey house with Georgian door... Grey house with Georgian door... Grey house with Georgian door... Shopping village, comprised of grey buildings with coloured signs... Grey house with Georgian door... Grey house with Georgian door... Occasional street sign hidden behind hedge.

I found myself praying for those businesses that couldn't be bothered thinking up an original name for themselves, like "Ballinteer Butchers", "Lucan Laundromats" or "Sandymount Auto Repairs".

One technique I used was to slavishly follow every bend and intersection the bus negotiated with the *Ordnance Survey Dublin City and Dublin Street Guide*. This worked okay, but other bus passengers gave me strange looks. Possibly, most Dubliners did not see the reason to use maps because a) they actually knew where they were going, or b) they were lost, but were convinced they would eventually find their destination (they usually did) and c) "Sure, wot's the rush anyway? It'll be grand!"

When I did eventually climb off a bus in the hope I was somewhere near my destination, I found the streets all appeared to have the same name. It was very difficult to find anything, with adjacent street names like Rathgar Road, Rathgar Place, Rathgar Avenue, Taney Road, Taney Park, Taney Rise, Taney Court, Taney Crescent, Taney Avenue, Taney Avenue, Taney Grove, phew...

Grange Park Avenue, Grange Park Road, Grange Park Grove, Grange Park Walk, Grange Park Drive, Grange Park View, Grange Park Rise, Grange Park Green and Grange Park Crescent. You really have to wonder what was in the Town Planners' minds when they came up with these names.

There were similar looking houses, on streets with similar sounding names; and to add a little more frustration, many houses did not have visible numbers. Yes, numbers were an optional extra in the city "where the streets have no name". Post offices all over the world should send their postmen to Dublin, in the same way an army sent its soldiers into the jungle. Dublin would be a really tough survival course to sort the posties out. Graduates would be issued with a special red beret and a little chrome trophy for their moped.

Kerryn and I had one other method for finding our way about Dublin, but we didn't use this method if we were in a hurry. It was simply too risky.

The method was...to ask a local for directions. Risky, but sometimes necessary. Of course, there was a natural hierarchy of people we asked:

Worst Direction Giver—Convenience Store Attendant

These people were paid the absolute minimum wage in Ireland. Orienteering and customer service were obviously not rated as necessary skills for the job. Some surprised us and knew exactly where we needed to go, but others did not seem to know the name of the street for their shop.

Slightly Better Direction Giver—Person in the Street

For some reason if we asked someone in the street where to go, that person felt compelled to give us some kind of directions, even if he or she had absolutely no idea of how to find our destination. The term "wild goose chase" aptly described the result. This happened over and over again, with many different people.

Perhaps it was something to do with the history of Ireland. When Henry VIII decided to abolish the Catholic Church throughout the United Kingdom, he sent out his soldiers to sack, burn and destroy Catholic churches and schools. They were free to kill all the Catholic priests they found. Irish families hid many priests, despite offers of payment for their whereabouts. Some of

the surviving priests set up secret open-air churches and schools where people maintained their faith and education.

The Irish may have learnt their ability to give vague directions from their ancestors, who were interrogated by English soldiers looking for the priests. I don't know why the soldiers would have bothered. Even if the Catholic secret schools had been listed in a phone book with a street address, it would have taken ages to find them. Imagine a bunch of soldiers who'd just smashed down a door and barged into the living room.

'IS THIS NUMBER 14, BALLYMONT ROAD?'

'No! It's number 16, Ballymont Lane!' the annoyed occupant replied.

'OH RIGHT... WELL... sorry about the door.'

Best Direction Giver—Bus Driver

The bus drivers at least had *some* knowledge of the city, as they had to travel their routes several times each day. If we asked them nicely, they even stopped the bus at the right stop for us. (Passengers normally had to press a buzzer to get them to stop, which was no use if you didn't know your location). Many of the drivers were helpful and friendly, but some were completely unsuited to interaction with the public. Obviously we had to use the bus to get any information.

Certainly, navigating ourselves around Dublin was no easy task, but with these techniques and a bit of luck, we managed.

The New Ireland was fully *e*-nabled with mobile phones, notebook computers and high-speed Internet connections linking them to the rest of the world. Builders were literally slapping buildings together in an effort to give the IT savvy population somewhere to work.

Dillon Dally was the engineering consultant for a £36 million office complex being constructed in Sandyford, Dublin. The architectural design had never been finished. The engineering design had never been finished. The builder designed things as he built them and the developer changed the design soon after that. Steel columns and beams were being hacked, chopped and generally pushed around in an effort to finish the job.

On one occasion, the head builder had organised someone to bore a heap of holes through all the concrete floor slabs. He

wanted to build a service duct for water pipes and cables, but all he managed to do was bugger up the concrete. Fergus was quite angry about the situation. He was in one of his conservative moods when he instructed me to design some steel beams to strengthen the slabs. He wanted the biggest and best repair job.

I designed the beams and took the drawings out to the building site. After spending two hours discussing each detail with the younger foreman, we agreed on the work to be done. At that point the head builder arrived.

'Ah doan wanta do any of that,' he said. 'Can we not install an acrow prop and plaster it into a wall?'

I laughed heartily until I realised he wasn't smiling. An acrow prop is a cheap and light steel column used to *temporarily* hold up a very small bit of the formwork for wet concrete until it goes hard. A future building owner pulling the wall apart to do renovations might think the post had been left there by accident and pull it out. Think about the story of the three little pigs and the house built of sticks…

When I told the builder acrow propped buildings were not acceptable he rang up Fergus to complain.

'I don't know why you made the design so expensive, Chris!' cried Fergus, later. 'The developer will never go for it.' Fortunately he agreed an acrow prop wasn't a suitable way to hold up a building.

A few weeks later there was another debacle. No one was certain if the buildings had been built inside the property boundaries. I was astounded when I heard this. Imagine how you would feel if someone built a set of townhouses halfway across your block of land.

Fergus was not concerned at all. 'Sure, the builder has surveyed the block,' he said. 'Why would it be wrong?'

'Because they assumed the fence line was the boundary,' I replied. 'How would we know if it was properly positioned when it was built?'

'Look, we've been given the feckin survey!' yelled Fergus. 'I don't want to hear any more about it.'

Less than a week later, the shit was falling all around Dillon Dally. Our client (for the office development) wanted to lodge property documents with his lawyer, in readiness for putting the complex onto the market. He was screaming because a staircase

from the basement appeared to be located on the next-door neighbour's land. Suddenly the accuracy of the builder's survey was *very* important to Fergus. We opened a copy of the registered plan for the property.

I was dismayed; the plan looked like a four-year old with a crayon had drawn it. Wavy thick lines formed a vaguely rectangular shape, but they were smudged and blurry, as though someone had spilt chocolate milk across the drawing and then sent it through a fax three or four times. It belonged on a parent's fridge door, not in an engineering office. There weren't even any measurements to show the size of the property. I was about to loudly damn it as the poorest drawing I had ever seen, when I saw a stamp on it—Registered Plan, Surveyor General of Ireland.

I took a deep breath and shook my head. Our client wanted our hides, but unexpectedly the head builder came to our rescue. I was grateful to hear that he'd got rid of the problem by ripping the staircase out completely.

Dublin's Quays and the surrounding city were regularly jammed with heavy transport lorries that roared through the city and filled the air with diesel fumes. The heavy traffic came from the seaport located in the Docklands.

The Irish Government planned to fix some of Dublin's traffic problems by getting the trucks off the surface roads, and were building a five-kilometre road tunnel from the seaport to the northern outskirts of the city. They'd spent a lot of money already, but they had a long way to go; the project was the most costly the government had ever undertaken. Their estimate was £204 million in 1999 and £353 million in 2000. In 2003 they revised it again, to £450 million.

In 2001, the Government's appointed contractors imported two enormous 11.8 metre diameter drills and began drilling. They made good progress, but the press broke an incredible story in 2002: "The Dublin Port Tunnel will not be re-designed to cater for the estimated 900 trucks a day, which would be unable to use it because they are too high."

I was unable to stop laughing. How on earth had they approved a tunnel that wasn't high enough for all the trucks that were supposed to use it? Apparently the designers hadn't thought to ask some drivers how high their trucks were, before

digging themselves into a £450 million hole. I sobered up a bit when I realised the tax I had paid to the Government had helped to fund this expensive joke.

Like most politicians the world over, the Irish government didn't admit they were wrong. In this spirit, the Transport Minister made a statement to the press:

"Mr. Brennan yesterday moved to bar double-decker lorries on environmental grounds. The ban will affect dozens of exporters, supermarket giants such as Tesco, shipping companies and car transport firms, which rely on the new trucks."

Unsurprisingly, the Minister's speech made no mention of the tunnel, which had a height limitation of 4.65 metres, as compared to the 4.8 metre high lorries. The Government must have known the "double-decker truck ban" statement wasn't going to fly with the public, but they stubbornly refused to acknowledge there was a problem. Their own postal service, An Post, had just ordered seven trucks that would be too high to use the tunnel. The Irish Road Haulage Association sounded pretty cranky and lobbied strongly to have the height increased: "There was a staggering lack of consultation with the hauliers—the people who will use the tunnel."

I was curious to find out about the designers of this remarkable project. I found no mention of their names in the press releases. When I discovered the designers' names, I wasn't surprised they'd ducked for cover; Mr Snooky's company had struck again. What was surprising was that they'd been employed by anyone after their effort with the London Millennium Bridge—a pedestrian bridge that was unsuitable for pedestrians. Obviously they'd diversified into truck tunnels that were unsuitable for trucks. I was relieved to discover that they didn't design aeroplanes.

Chapter 14

Putting My Head in the Lion's Mouth

If it is good to have one foot in England it is still better, or at least as good, to have the other out of it.

– Attributed to Henry James

London, mid November, 2001

Piccadilly Circus was packed when we walked out of the tube station. A fair proportion of London's 12 million odd residents seemed to be out on the street, on the first night of their weekend, in a determined effort to have a good time. The sounds of a thousand conversations thrummed through the air and my eardrums were assailed by the sounds of thousands of footsteps walking in every possible direction.

London's red double-decker buses moved slowly alongside shiny black cabs, brand new BMWs and clapped out old bangers. Hundreds of people streamed across the road in front of the traffic, dodging around the people coming from the other direction.

Across the road from the tube station, Sanyo and McDonalds displayed flashy advertisements on the digital signs fixed to one of the buildings. These signs dominated the streetscape with

brilliant colours and pattern sequences. Electrically illuminated signs have been on the Circus since 1910.

We'd flown over to spend the weekend with our friend, Stephen. Kerryn looked starry eyed; this was her first time in London. Our previous stopover at Heathrow didn't count.

Stephen grinned as he watched us swivel our heads around to look at everything. 'When I first arrived in London, my friends took me here to see this on Friday night,' he said. 'It just blew me away. I wanted you guys to see it, too!'

Although London had no real central district, Piccadilly Circus was an informal centre. Regent Street curved northwards to the shopping district of Oxford Street. The trendy markets of Covent Garden and the theatre district in Leicester Square were a short distance eastwards. Westminster was a short walk away and so was Buckingham Palace and St James Park.

Piccadilly Circus was designed by John Nash and built in 1819. The street was named after a 17th Century frilly collar known as a "picadil", although the Circus looked far more magnificent than its silly namesake.

Stephen took us for a brief walk around the club district in Soho, which was just north of the Circus. We ducked and weaved around packs of drunken guys in business suits and eccentric looking individuals I suspected were drug dealers—or users.

'Let's go into a pub for a quick drink,' said Stephen.

There were more than 50 pubs within half a mile of Piccadilly Circus, so we were spoilt for choice. I have no idea of the name of the pub we eventually walked into, but it was decked out in polished steel and timber and full of Brits engaged in 100 different conversations. They were interesting to watch. Most of the time, Brits seemed to be incredibly reserved in public. It was hard to strike up conversations with them. Copious amounts of alcohol changed all that.

'Weyyyy Heyyyy,' yelled a group of men. 'Here's Juliiieee, how are ya, love?' A scantily clad female friend walked into the room and was groped by one of the men.

Stephen made his way to the bar and got a pint of ale for me, a half pint for Kerryn and a Guinness for himself. We swallowed our drinks slowly and enjoyed the craic.

'Time please, Ladies and Gentlemen,' announced the bartender. 'Please finish your drinks. We will be closing in five minutes.'

My watch read 22:55.

'Yeah, they close earlier in England than at home,' said Stephen, 'but it *is* legal to have a drink outside on the streets here. At home you'd be arrested! The differences between the two countries keep amazing me.'

Stephen finished his drink and hurried out through the doors. 'We'd better move fast if we want to catch the tube,' he said. 'Everyone in London will be in the station in a minute.'

It was very important to stand on the right when using a tube escalator. The space on the left was reserved for people who were running late for their train. These people seemed to prefer death to waiting the five minutes it took for another train to arrive. They would hurtle down the stairs and people who were unaware of the "stand on the right" rule were either elbowed out of the way or insulted loudly. Of course, everyone else heard these embarrassing moments, because talking in the tube system was frowned upon.

The "no talking" rule was cousin to the "no eye contact" rule. In no circumstances it seemed were passengers permitted to look at each other. Apparently it was all to do with "loonies". There was always a certain proportion of the population that didn't fit into what society expected of them. The Underground network carried around three million passengers daily, so inevitably there were some odd customers.

The type of loon varied considerably. I've seen one guy having a conversation with an invisible comrade. I'm not sure if it was the same bloke, but on another day, I saw a guy having a punch-up with his invisible ex-comrade. There were drunks and men wearing dresses. It was important to avoid eye contact, because if they caught you looking at them they would try to strike up a conversation. It was even more crucial not to answer, because a) the person could be a stalker and was trying to find out where you lived, and b) embarrassingly, everyone else heard the entire conversation, because they weren't talking.

Kerryn, Stephen and I waited on the platform, along with a few hundred others. The information board indicated the next train would arrive in two minutes.

The approach of a train in the Underground is always easy to predict, because cold wind blasts along the platform before the train arrives. I wonder how much air the trains move around each day as they rush through the tunnels. Apparently they push

a few mosquitoes around as well. The Underground is home to a unique species of mozzie, *Culex pipiens*, which found its way into the tunnels when they were being dug a century ago.

BBC Wildlife magazine reported that: "...the insect has evolved so fast that the difference between the over ground and underground forms is as great as if they had been separated for thousands of years."

Personally I find the concept of accelerated mosquito evolution pretty scary.

Mosquitoes weren't the only form of wildlife to be found underground. Many Londoners swore that they had shared a carriage with a pigeon. That's right, a pigeon—the feathered scavenger bird that covered Trafalgar Square in bird-shit:

"Back in the late 1980s...there were several pigeon trips by all sorts of different pigeons," explained one Londoner on the *Going Underground* chat website. "Sometimes they seemed to be looking for food and accidentally found themselves on an unplanned trip, but others definitely planned their itineraries, strutting on board with a determined gleam in their eyes."

I suppose it's *possible* that pigeons use the tube to get around. They'd easily avoid eye contact with human passengers, being only five or six inches tall. They'd stop annoying conversations with loons with a look of incomprehension. And imagine how easy it would be for a pigeon to evade fares.

After a short walk from the tube station, we arrived at Stephen's house in Clapham. I realised his house was relatively comfortable as soon as I saw everyone had their own bedroom. During my previous visit to England, I'd seen the living quarters for a few Australians and read about more in *TNT* magazine, which was the travellers' guide to living in London.

I'd noticed some common themes:

1. Rents were ridiculously high. It was common for one flat-mate to use the living room floor as his bed.

2. The Sterling to Pacific Peso [Australian dollar] exchange rate made it expensive to get started. The living room space was often given to one or more mates who'd just arrived from the Southern Hemisphere. Living room rent suited people who didn't have a job yet and were burning pacific pesos at a serious rate to pay for cup-a-noodles and Tube fares.

3. Fortunately London's cold climate slowed bacteria down,

because inevitably one or more flat mates were complete slobs. Two weeks of unwashed cooking utensils scattered randomly around the kitchen were a dead giveaway and if one of the bathroom towels leaned against the floor more rigidly than a piece of 15mm particleboard, you could be certain there was a Slob in the house.

4. Most travellers knew about the problems of the Sterling to Pacific peso exchange rate. Some people took advantage of this and became sponges on the system. The Sponge ate and drank everyone's food and beer, because he "couldn't afford it" himself. He left any unfinished food on the kitchen bench, where it would entertain slow-moving Salmonella germs, from their home in the Slob's unwashed pots and pans.

London began with the arrival of the Romans in 43 AD. The commander, Aulus Plautius, marched his troops northwards from their landing place in Kent, until they came to the river Thames. Aulus ordered his men to construct a bridge, to allow them to cross. The Romans settled on the land along the northern side of the river. They named the settlement "Londinium" and it became a centre point for trade.

Londinium thrived and grew to a population of 45,000, until the Romans returned home to defend their dying Empire. The city fell into decline and was squabbled over for centuries, between the Anglo-Saxons, the Danes and Norwegian Vikings, until the Normans arrived in 1066. After they knocked off the last Saxon King of England and took control of the country, the Normans constructed a massive new building beside the old Roman city walls. The English had never seen a castle like the "White Tower" before. It was designed to awe and subdue the population. Over succeeding generations, the Norman and English monarchs added defensive walls and other towers to the castle, which became known as the Tower of London.

The Tower had been used for a number of purposes over its life. Most recently, the Tower had become a tourism attraction, which included a display of the Crown jewels. In the past, it had been home to numerous monarchs, including Henry the Eighth. The Tower had also been used to hold traitors before their execution on the nearby Tower Hill. Fifteen thousand people regularly gathered to watch some poor bugger get his head chopped off for committing a heinous crime, like raising one eyebrow at the Queen.

(Presumably people were less accepting of each other's differences in those times than we are nowadays. But I wonder if we have merely shifted our focus. We used to be critical about the appearance, dress or thoughts of one person or a group. Nowadays, we seem to be critical of entire nations.)

I have to admit I wasn't thinking of executions or criticism when Kerryn, Stephen and I walked past the Tower walls on our way to breakfast. After enjoying bacon, eggs, sausages and endless quantities of tea, we puffed our way up to the top of St Paul's Cathedral. Some of the 530 steps looked a bit flimsy for my liking. I don't love heights and the red double-decker buses on the streets below looked like toys. My feet and hands tingled with pins and needles when I saw little platforms on the domed roof for maintenance workmen. But the view from the Cathedral roof was awesome—London spread out all around us in the sunlight.

We decided to get on the tube and go to Notting Hill, made famous by the movie of the same name, starring Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts. The trip took quite a while, as the London Underground was having an "off" day. When we finally walked out of Notting Hill Gate station, the weather had changed. Rain poured down. We walked into the local Starbucks so Kerryn could order her first real latte in four months. She'd missed out in Ireland; coffee in Ireland tasted pretty average as a rule.

The Starbucks girl scowled at us as we approached her. 'Yes. What do you want?'

'Err, Umm,' I stuttered, 'I'll have a hot chocolate please.'

She sighed heavily, as though I'd asked her to go out and harvest the stuff herself. She started clashing plates and cups. After a while she brought out our order. She banged it down onto the table and then turned abruptly on her heel. Her actions reminded me of the TV series *Fawlty Towers*, in which Basil Fawlty, an English hotel owner, treats his customers and staff outrageously. It was billed as a comedy, but I seriously wonder if John Cleese and Connie Booth wrote it as a documentary.

William Shakespeare would have been chuffed to know how well his plays have endured, in the four centuries since he wrote them. For example, in 1997, which was the most recent year I could find statistics for, his most popular play, *Hamlet*, was performed worldwide in an estimated 90 stage productions. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* followed closely with around 88 productions. Just to compare, *The Phantom of the Opera*, one of the most popular stage musicals ever, was performed in only *29* separate stage productions during the same year.

Shakespeare had established his reputation as a playwright by 1592. In 1594, he joined a theatre company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men and his success left him comfortably well off. In 1611 he left London and returned to his Stratford upon Avon home, to live out the rest of his life.

Stephen, Kerryn and I were very excited. We were going to see a Shakespearian play in the very city where he wrote and performed his work. We arrived at the theatre in Leicester Square early. My seat featured a pink coloured column between the stage and myself.

'To be or not to be: that is the question!' announced a strident voice from the stage.

Kerryn and I exchanged a surprised look; the actor's manner wasn't very theatrical. He didn't get much better either. I groaned as three male actors crammed 10 or so Shakespearian plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, into a silly, but harmless comedy.

At the bottom of our tickets, the Reduced Shakespeare Company claimed they had been "reducing [and decimating] expectations since 1981". Consistent with my general approach, I suspected I would have enjoyed their performance more if I hadn't gone in with such high expectations.

On Sunday afternoon, Stephen took us to Trafalgar Square. Thousands of tourists were walking around the city, taking photos of each other and smiling in the (rare) sunshine. The focal point of the Square was Nelson's Column. Unlike its counterpart in Dublin, it still stood, as an eternal reminder of Nelson's victory over the French and the Spanish in 1805. Nelson died from the wounds he received during the Battle of Trafalgar. Construction of the Square began in 1829 to commemorate him.

Underneath Nelson's Column lay four enormous bronze lions, watching from their own pedestals. Maybe they were guardians for Nelson, or perhaps they were reminders of Britain's potency during the 18th and 19th Centuries. The lion in front of us seemed to glare at me.

'Wouldn't it be a funny photo if I got up there and stuck my head in its mouth?' I said, not really meaning it.

'Yeah, cool!' said Stephen. 'I'll come too.'

I looked around fervently, hoping there were no policemen around.

'OK, let's do it,' I said.

I climbed up and put my head in the lion's mouth. Stephen lay on top of the lion's right paw like a kill victim. A crowd of Japanese tourists laughed at us while Kerryn raised her camera.

England had changed. The Empire had withdrawn from the rest of the world and now the rest of the world seemed to have moved to England. The Indian restaurant proprietor, the Zimbabwean natural food retailer, the Kiwis and Aussies of Earls Court, the actors of the Reduced Shakespeare Company and the merchants of Chinatown near Covent Garden were all part of modern London. The city buzzed with life in a vast melting pot of culture and history. There was so much to experience, to learn and to absorb.

The strangest thing of all about London was the sense of freedom the place gave me. No one knew me. No one spoke to me. No one looked at me. In comparison, Dublin had a more inquisitive nature. People there seemed to be interested in everything I was willing to let them know.

London had no expectations of *me*; I didn't feel I had to be perfect, or someone "better". I found it easy to find out about myself in this city of cities.

Chapter 15

Feeding the Ducks

A friend's eye is a good mirror.

– Celtic Proverb

Dublin, late November, 2001

I loved Dublin's airport. One look at the ARRIVALS and DEPARTURES screen reminded me of the exciting destinations that were easily reached from this part of the world—Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Frankfurt, Paris, London and Barcelona. The possibilities were endless. After two hours in a plane, I could step into an entirely different country. Maybe it takes another Australian to understand why I found this so exciting. A trip from Australia to most other countries involved sitting on a plane for at least seven hours and the tickets cost a *lot* of money.

My brother Andrew was flying in from Australia and I expectantly joined a large group of people waiting outside the arrival gate. I watched as families greeted their arriving daughters or sons. I heard an audible intake of breath every time an arriving passenger pushed the door open.

'Look there she is!' shouted a mother, jumping up and down with joy. 'Cathy, here we are!'

She ran out to give Cathy a kiss and a hug. The entire group of her family and friends surrounded the girl, who smiled broadly.

'Ah, it's so good to see you,' said her Dad, as he hugged her.

The rest of the group patted Cathy on the back or winked at her, as they picked up her bags and asked her a thousand questions about her travels, her health and her general well-being. Everyone grinned as they headed out to the car park.

Family seemed to be very important in Ireland. People here seemed to be comfortable about showing their feelings in public. People like me, with Anglo-Saxon-Norman origins, could learn a lot from them. My public display of emotion was limited to smiling and shaking my brother's hand when he arrived. In fact, I was fantastically happy to see him, but my social conditioning didn't permit me to show it.

'How are you?' I asked him. 'How was the flight?'

'Good,' Andrew smiled. 'Yeah, the flight was OK.'

Andrew looked pretty sprightly for someone who had been sitting on planes and waiting in airports for more than 24 hours. Although his eyes were tired, he held his lanky frame straight and tall. He was the younger of my two brothers and had always been bolder than me. On more than one occasion, Andrew had appropriated fruit from the trees around the house of our gun-toting neighbours.

We walked outside and climbed onto the Airlink Bus, which was appropriately Number 747. Airlink was the one service operated by Dublin Bus where passengers were unlikely to be thrown violently when the bus driver turned a corner. I suppose they didn't want to scare the tourists too much on their first day.

'So, how have you been finding Dublin?' asked Andrew.

'Tougher than I expected,' I replied. 'My boss is a real bastard, so I find work a bit hard to take.'

'Sounds the same as usual for you, are you ever going to leave engineering?' he asked.

I didn't have an answer, so I showed Andrew a few of the sights around Temple Bar. After a short time touristing I delivered him home to our flat in Rathgar for some rest.

I stupidly returned to work, where Fergus was waiting to have another go at me. Recently I'd discovered a problem with the steel connections for a balcony in the Sandyford office development. I expected it to fall down as soon as people used it for a party. I had

a lot of trouble convincing Fergus that a problem existed. The fact that the design did not comply with the British Standards didn't seem to register with him.

'Sure, you'll never get the full load on that floor anyway,' asserted Fergus. 'There will only be one or two people standing out there at a time.'

"Except on the opening day,' I countered. 'Which is certainly not the time you want it to fall down. What a *fantastic* advertisement for our firm. And imagine Christmas parties, people jumping up and down with excitement; you'll get the full load then."

Fergus argued for another hour with me and repeatedly questioned my abilities as an engineer. I couldn't believe how irresponsible he was about the issue. I alternated between anger and despair. I shook by the time he'd finished and I walked out of the room in disgust. I went upstairs and asked Tania, the Russian engineer, if she wanted to go for a walk.

Tania was the voice of reason for me every time I felt like telling Fergus to go f**k himself. We walked across to the duck ponds, near the Cafe Fresca. The antics of the ducks always helped me calm down. They made funny noises and they always hoped to get some bread. They waddled up onto the bank and surrounded us.

'That guy is a bastard—he keeps insulting me,' I moaned. 'He makes me feel useless. I don't think I want to be an engineer anymore.'

'Quack,' said one of the ducks.

'Why would you feel useless because someone else says so?' Tania asked. 'It is not right to feel this way. It is what you know inside that matters.'

I muttered my reply. 'When someone tells you that you're no good every single bloody day, you start to believe it.'

'Quack, quack!'

'Well, you should not,' Tania counselled me. 'You are very experienced. You are patient and helpful. Why would someone else's opinion matter?'

Suddenly I realised something about myself: I had always depended on other's opinions as a gauge to my own worth. This trait probably started at school; teachers, who I expected would compose their reports in a scientific and honest manner, graded me and, unfortunately, I had looked to the person in charge for

my "report" ever since. I had no good opinion of myself. Perhaps that was a mistake.

'I wanted to tell you something,' said Tania, in a whisper. 'On the weekend, I became engaged to my boyfriend. We are going to get married!'

'Congratulations!' I smiled, hugging her. 'Have you set a date for the wedding?'

'It will be in six months' time,' she said. 'I haven't told many people at work yet, just you and one other. I would like to keep it quiet for a short time.'

'I feel honoured you told *me*,' I said. 'But why don't you want everyone to know?'

'I do not enjoy all the attention,' she replied. 'In Russia, we have small weddings. There is not so much fuss.'

Not surprisingly, weddings were a big deal in Ireland. But I understood Tania's discomfort. I came from a small family and I was shy. In alarming contrast, Kerryn's family was enormous. My wedding had been a much bigger event than I *ever* expected. In spite of myself, though, I had enjoyed it immensely.

All of us deserve a day of adoration at least once in our lives.

Kerryn, my brother Andrew and I squeezed past hundreds of other pub patrons as we hunted for Kerryn's workmate, Felissa. Kerryn had met Felissa a few weeks ago, when they both started working at a financial services company called AAA Friendly Society.

Friday and Saturday nights were the big nights to go out in Dublin, but Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Sunday nights were also very popular. Thousands of people hit the streets, with the better part of their pay cheques, in search of a few pints and a bit of craic. Owning a bar in Dublin must have been like owning a Fortune 500 company.

We found Felissa and her friend, Tim, in a corner at one end of the pub. Felissa had shoulder length brown hair and a strong Kiwi accent. She was from Auckland. Tim was from Sydney. He had red hair and a deep resonating voice. He looked familiar; I was sure I'd seen him somewhere before. I was about to say so, when I realised I'd mixed him up with an actor from *Neighbours*.

'I've always thought Tim should be a presenter or announcer with his voice,' said Felissa.

'Uh… I'd rather be behind the camera or microphone than in front,' said Tim.

'Where did you guys meet?' I asked.

'We were both living in London,' replied Felissa. 'I worked as a nanny and Tim was working as a TV editor.'

'Our working holiday visas expired around the same time and we both went home, but I wasn't ready to settle down yet,' said Tim. 'I didn't want to get into a mortgage or anything. I rang up Felissa and we thought we'd try Ireland.'

'How have you found Ireland, Andrew?' asked Felissa.

'Yeah it's been pretty good,' said Andrew, grimacing slightly. 'I went to County Kerry this week. I've had some trouble, though. I got back to the hostel I was staying in after climbing Mount Brandon and getting caught in a storm. I was really tired and just dumped my backpack on the bed. When I came back from dinner my wallet was gone. I'd left it in the backpack. The police said some guy has been travelling around the country, checking in at hostels and then robbing the backpackers.'

'Well it's a hard lesson,' Felissa sympathised. 'But I guess you'll never leave your wallet lying around again.'

'No,'replied Andrew. 'The hostel owner was great though. He loaned me some money to get back to Dublin. Chris gave me some money to pay him back.'

I frowned inwardly; I was a bit annoyed that Andrew had been so careless. He obviously hadn't been feeling himself when he'd left his wallet unattended; I suppose he had nearly been frozen on top of the mountain. Andrew had easily been as crafty as me when we were growing up. I will never forget when he'd pinned up posters of camp looking boy bands in my bedroom just before some of my school friends visited. It took me some time to recover from the fallout of that episode.

'How have you guys found it working here?' I asked Felissa and Tim.

'Work's less fun here than it was in London,' replied Felissa. 'But Kerryn and I spend most of the day laughing at the rest of the staff.'

'How come?' asked Andrew.

'Because they waste so much time,' said Kerryn, shaking her head. 'They arrive at nine each morning and check their personal e-mails. At 10 they go to the subsidised cafeteria for breakfast. At 11 they stop for morning tea and at 12 they stop for lunch. Then they get into a big panic and have to work late every night.'

'Some of them stay until 10 and they give us nasty looks when we leave at five,' added Felissa. 'If they actually did some work in the morning, they'd be able to leave at five as well.'

It sounded like AAA Friendly Society used their name for inspiration; friends came first and clients came second. It was clear to me the management at Dillon Dally used their name in a similar way. Fergus spent most of the day messing with his employees' heads, which inevitably resulted in a lot of dilly-dallying.

It was early December 2001, and the Corrs were singing "Would You be Happier" on the radio, as I swung our hire car onto the M50 ring road:

'Would you be happier if you weren't so un-together? Would sun shine brighter if you played a bigger part? Would you be wonderful if it wasn't for the weather? You're gonna be just fine.'

The song cheered me up a bit. Thankfully, it was the weekend and the weather was spectacular. Kerryn and I had decided to see Ireland's sunny southeast in Counties Wexford and Waterford, before the cold weather of December set in properly.

I wanted to see some of County Wicklow on the way, so I steered the car onto Enniskerry Road. Green topped hills and conifer forests competed for our attention, against sparkling glimpses of the Irish Sea. The road then turned inland to the southwest and we saw no water until we arrived in the small village of Roundwood.

Roundwood was nestled beside the beautiful Vartry Lake, but for some reason, it was difficult to get more than a glimpse of the water from the main street. I couldn't understand the logic, but somehow the town had been arranged to miss out on most of the lovely views. Instead they'd built a toilet block in the best location on the street. The view, through the window above the urinal, was breathtaking. The last leaves of autumn still clung onto the trees in red and golden clusters. The reflection on the surface of the lake was magical. It was a pity about the rusty piss-trough in the foreground.

The County Wexford N11 road was excellent, with overtaking lanes every few miles. Interestingly enough, the rural Irish seemed to resist ideas that would make their roads a lot safer. On

our previous jaunt to Kerry, along the N7, we had seen dozens of posters rejecting the intended upgrades to a motorway quality road. I had trouble imagining the thoughts of the people who had penned these posters: 'Why on earth would we want a big road going past our farm? It would upset the cows.'

It reminded me of the level of debate in Queensland over whether daylight savings should be adopted.

Another interesting phenomenon in Ireland was a resistance to the introduction of Random Breath Testing (RBT). We've all heard that the Irish love a drink, but the blood alcohol limit in the Republic of Ireland was *0.08%*, which was a heck of a lot more than 0.05% in Australia and 0.035% in the UK. I couldn't see what they had to complain about.

The sun set as we approached the town of Waterford. The road wound back and forth along the northern banks of the River Suir for a little while and I saw the first lights of the town glimmering to the south. The northern bank of the river was unremarkable, although the decrepit-looking warehouses and railway lines made a startling contrast to the beautiful town on the other side of the river. The soft illumination of the buildings reflected across the river. The town seemed to glow with optimism.

We crossed the Rice Bridge, which boasted an opening span to allow passage to ships. The bridge's full name, which was understandably rarely quoted, was the Brother Ignatius Rice Bridge. The Irish government had recently approved funding for a second bridge, hopefully with a shorter name. The people of Waterford were not impressed with the project however, as the bridge would *not* have an opening span and would not be *high* enough for the larger ships navigating the river. The Morris Oil Company was about to sue the Government, because the bridge would stop ships from delivering fuel to their £8.3 million terminal. Many public projects in Ireland seemed to be dogged by controversy. I hope the new bridge will end up being *long* enough—I was still stunned by the story of Dublin's diminutive Port Tunnel.

I turned the car left onto darkening Merchant's Quay. We motored alongside scores of moored yachts and motorboats. People strolled beside the river, on their way to a pub or a restaurant. The

first decorations of Christmas shone in the windows of the houses and other buildings along the Quays.

Our guidebook advised us there was a bed and breakfast just along the street. We parked the car next to Cathedral Square and walked across to the address listed in my book. I swore quietly when I saw the building. It looked like it hadn't been used for some time. The windows and doors were boarded up and the walls appeared to be blackened by fire. Clearly our guide writers hadn't kept up with this development. We hunted around a bit and found a B&B across the street. It was tatty but clean, so we checked in.

Waterford had a busy nightlife, thanks to the student population from its university, and had a large number of pubs available in which to seek refuge from the freezing weather outside. We stayed in the first pub we walked into, partially owing to the weather and also because it was funny to listen to the other patrons.

'Ah, come on, Liam, ya big bollocks, sit yerself down and have another pint,' said one of the punters, laughing. 'You're too drunk to go home to Niamh any road. Ya couldn't get that wee thing in yer trousers to satisfy her, it would be as shrivelled as a crisp packet in an oven, in this weather.'

'Look Murphy, ya drunken layabout,' Liam replied. 'Ah've promised her...'

'Well, ya shouldn't give promises ya can't keep!' laughed another of his mates.

'Ah've promised her I would be home by eight to watch a picture with her,' Liam said, putting on his coat. 'I'd prefer to be snuggled up to her than breathing the diseased fumes of yer man, Murphy. Look at you. Disappointments to yer mothers, the lot of ya!'

After laughing quietly to ourselves, we went back to the B&B to get some sleep.

We awoke late on Sunday morning and decided to have a look around the town. Our first stop was Reginald's Tower. Some historians believe a Viking called Reginald McIvor, built the tower in 1003. Like Dublin, the Vikings founded the city of Waterford in the late 9th or early 10th Century. The tower was one of the oldest urban structures in Ireland. I found it very humbling to stand inside a building supposedly built by Vikings 1000 years ago.

The streets around the city were particularly quiet as we walked around. Ireland's Saturday nights at the pub seemed to

take precedence over the once important Sunday morning visit to church. We walked past the Christ Church Cathedral, which had an extraordinarily high spire. The church was completed in 1779 for £5,397, on the site of an old Gothic church. The Gothic church had itself replaced a Viking church. The original church was supposedly built in the 11th Century, when the formerly pagan Vikings became Christians.

The Vikings did not have long to celebrate their newfound spirituality. In 1170 the Normans arrived in Waterford, with an army of 2000 knights and 1000 men-at-arms. After turfing the Vikings out, the Normans took Waterford for their own and made plans to dominate the rest of Ireland. Celtic chiefs submitted to Norman rule with little resistance. Maybe the superior weapons and tactics used by the Normans stunned the Celts into submission, or perhaps they remembered the story of Normandy's bloody defeat of Anglo-Saxon Britain, one century earlier. The Normans went on to achieve control of Ireland, almost without bloodshed.

Unfortunately for the parties involved, the following 900 years would make up for that.

Chapter 16

The 12 Pubs of Christmas

I receive a lot of presents I can't wait to exchange.

– Henny Youngman

Dublin, mid December, 2001

One of my workmates sang happily as he worked at his desk in the front room of Dillon Dally's office: 'Oh, the weather outside is frightful, but the fire is so delightful. Since we've no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow!'

He'd been singing the same song continuously since the beginning of December. While I applauded his taste in music, his singing wasn't really up to Frank Sinatra's. I'd heard him sing "Let it Snow" five times already this morning and it was only 11 o'clock.

'Can't ya sing something else now?' Brian said loudly.

'Change the record, please,' I added.

We didn't really mind all that much. Christmas was coming and singing did cheer up the office. For me, Christmas time has always been a time for celebration, eating, drinking and having fun. Most people I'd met in Ireland enjoyed having fun at any time of the year, so I knew Christmas here was going to be excellent.

Christmas did not begin in Dublin until sometime in late November, as it used to in Australia when I was five years old, before the Australian retail industry's excessively capitalistic behaviour had largely spoilt the event for me. Nowadays I'm so cynical that I expect to find shops selling plastic Christmas tree and Action Mutant Girl dolls just after Father's Day. I'm sure Christmas will start in early September in a few years.

Ireland helped me recapture the special feeling and spirit of Christmas. Kerryn and I sang carols in the church next-door to our flat. It was unexpectedly comforting to sing carols with complete strangers in a foreign country. While some of the words were different, the songs were familiar—"Silent Night", "Good King Wenceslas", "Jingle Bells" and "Away in a Manger". With song leaflets and plenty of helpful "supporting" vocalists, the adjustment was easily made.

The carol "12 Days of Christmas" actually originated in Ireland. It was written to help young Catholics learn about their religion during the times when being a Catholic in public meant being a criminal. The words of the song concealed hidden messages.

'On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a partridge in a pear tree.'

The "true love" was in fact, God and the "partridge in a pear tree" was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. "Two turtle doves" were the Old and New Testaments. "Six geese a laying" indicated the six days of Creation and "ten lords a leaping" were the Ten Commandments.

The church social club served sandwiches and tea afterwards. I was touched by their efforts to make us feel welcome.

Every evening on the way home from work, I saw more lights twinkling on houses, shops, car dealerships and churches. Even cranky old builders got into the spirit of the event, with bright Merry Christmas lights fixed to the latticework of enormous site cranes. Nothing like that ever happened in Brisbane.

Pre-Christmas parties continued for weeks. On one Saturday night, we were invited to the Tsar Ivan, a Russian themed restaurant in Clarendon Street near St Stephens Green, with most of the people from Dillon Dally. Tania, my Russian friend, had organised the event. She liked cultural experiences, like going to the opera and having meaningful conversations with people. I think she hoped the restaurant atmosphere would promote some

stimulating chats, in contrast to the pub, where many of us drank excessively and talked a load of bollocks.

The Irish amongst us circumvented this by inviting everyone to a pub down the lane from the restaurant, to have some pre-dinner drinks. After we'd warmed our bellies and talked a lot about nothing in particular, we headed over to the restaurant. Two of the guys proceeded to order *vast* quantities of wine and food for all of us.

One of my Irish workmates was a bit embarrassed about the country's drinking habits. He talked loudly about the subject, waving his glass of wine about for emphasis, while nodding to indicate he needed a refill. The sound level in the restaurant rose by several decibels, with most of the noise coming from our table. I turned around to see Tania, who was sitting at the adjacent table. She rolled her eyes.

Later in the evening, a very drunk Dillon Dally employee asked the restaurant staff to bring each of us a shot of vodka; he then loudly toasted the restaurant, Russia, and Tania respectively for their hospitality, thinking the drinks were complimentary. Outside, later, he swayed with vodka-fuelled anger as we explained the drinks had cost a small fortune.

'Ah'm going back to get that money out of them, or Ah'll wreck the place!' he replied.

He stumbled towards the door and then fell over. There weren't too many of us in the office on Monday morning.

The following Friday was Christmas break-up day for Dillon Dally. I had finished the remedial design for the dodgy balcony at Sandyford and was feeling pretty good. I wasn't going to show the drawings to Fergus until the New Year and I left them with another person in case Fergus swept his eye over my desk. I went upstairs to talk to the civil engineers for a few minutes. When I walked back into the front office, I was dismayed to see Fergus studying my drawings.

'Chris, what is this load of bollocks?' he asked. 'Look, why, why, do you need to put all these plates onto the side of this column? And I don't think we need these tie plates here, sure I don't!'

'Look, we discussed all this already and you agreed to it!' I replied.

'How can I go to the client and expect him to agree to this?' he complained. 'He won't buy it, sure he won't!'

'The column is only a thin walled circular hollow section,' I

countered. 'If you load those bloody beams on the side of it, they will crush the column like an eggshell. And even if they don't, the connection plate between the beams will fail anyway!' Our client would be very upset if his precious balcony came down.

'I don't understand what you're talking about,' said Fergus. 'Crushing the columns you say?' The designer has done his best. What more can you do?'

You could start by obeying the laws of physics! I thought.

'I want you to have another look at this!' shouted Fergus. 'I don't know what you are talking about. Columns *crushing*. I've never heard of such a thing! Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah, Blah!'

I knew I was beaten at this point. One of my reasons for coming to Ireland was to give engineering one more chance. I'd failed. I'd wasted four years at university and another eight chasing the dream of having an interesting and enjoyable workplace. My engineering career and I were now officially at the crossroads.

Fergus went on for quite a bit longer. Great—all I'd wanted was a quiet morning. What had I done to deserve this? One by one, my workmates left the room in exasperation. Thankfully Brian came in and gave a sign that he was leaving for lunch and I needed to as well if I wanted a lift. I agreed with Fergus that I would look at the balcony design again and left, scowling.

We climbed into Brian's car and headed off to Luigi Malone's restaurant in Stillorgan. The company was paying for the food and drink, so I was certainly going to make the most of it. I sat across from Tania. Bottles of wine arrived continuously at the table and soon we were toasting each other and laughing loudly at everyone's jokes. I talked garrulously. I felt ecstatic to be finished work for the year. If only I could figure a way to be finished for good.

Before I realised, it was 6:00 p.m.. We had only booked the table until 4! The clientele had changed a lot in the meantime.

'Please be quiet, we have children eating here!' pleaded the waitresses.

Normally I would have cringed in shame at this, but I was pretty inebriated. We got up to leave when it suited us.

Someone handed me a small Swiss army knife that had fallen on to the chairs behind me. 'Is this yours, Chris?'

'No, it's not mine. I'll see if I can find the owner,' I replied.

'Excuse me, is this your knife?' I asked, walking up to each of

the other tables. I'm not sure, but I *may* have approached these people with one of the knife blades extended. Even worse, no one ever says "excuse me" in Ireland, so I was noticed by everyone.

Fortunately two Dillon Dally workmates grabbed me. 'Put that thing away or you'll get into trouble!'

In a temporarily subdued state, I stumbled downstairs with everyone to the pub underneath the restaurant. I ordered a pint each for one of the younger engineers and myself.

'How are ya going, mate?' I asked as I swayed to and fro. 'Are ya having a good night?'

'Oh grand, Chris,' my workmate replied. 'It's always good to get a free lunch out of Dillon Dally.'

Suddenly there was a crash behind me. I'd knocked my workmate's pint off the shelf behind me and smashed it amongst a group of people below. Luckily it hadn't hit anyone.

'Oh sorry, sorry, my mistake,' I said to everyone within earshot.

I bought the man another drink and placed mine on the shelf behind me. We resumed conversation and I threw my hands around wildly for emphasis. There was another crash as my glass leapt off the shelf and onto the floor below, seemingly by itself.

'What the hell is wrong with that shelf?' I muttered to myself.

The bar staff rushed to clean up the mess again and yelled at me. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but their hand gestures were clear enough; I decided to hold the next drink in my hand.

A bit later Tania said goodbye and wished everyone a Merry Christmas. I stumbled up to her and kissed her soundly on both cheeks, in the way I imagined Russians did, or some Europeans at any rate. She looked taken aback, but she returned the kisses.

'Have a good Christmas, Chriiis,' she said sexily, making my name sound very Russian, as she turned to go.

Our group had thinned out considerably by the time we left the little pub. I climbed into the front of a mini-van taxi and everyone else piled into the back.

When we arrived at Cornerstones pub, I rushed inside to find the men's toilet. I had been drinking way too much and was well beyond FFP [first fatal piss] stage. Of course, I went to the bar to buy another pint straight after. I found the rest of my group singing an impromptu song about Ireland.

'Ah, here he is, the Australian!' they shouted. ' Sing us a song, Australia!'

I had never sung in public before. Men did not sing in Australia, unless they wanted to be condemned as Nancy boys. Real Aussie men were able to quote the last 20 years of statistics in at least three forms of sport and tell nostalgic stories about all the different beers they'd got drunk on in their lifetimes. They did not dance and, above all, they did not sing.

I stood tall and drew a breath. 'Once a jolly swagman camped by a billabong, under the shade of a Coolibah tree,' I began, astoundingly in tune (or so I believed).

'And he sang as he watched and he waited till that billy boiled, you'll come a Waltzing Matilda with me!' joined in my workmates.

'Waltzing Matilda, Waltzing Matilda, you'll come a Waltzing Matilda with me. And he sang as he watched and he waited till that billy boiled, you'll come a Waltzing Matilda with me!'

'I'm sorry, I can't remember any more,' I apologised. It was an emotional moment. I'd spent my entire life stopping myself whenever I'd wanted to do something different. I'd worried about what people would think of me; I wanted to be accepted. I'd worried about what people would say if I failed. This was the first time I'd truly let myself go. I'd freed something I'd always kept locked away. And then it hit me. It wasn't important whether you did *well* at something you wanted to try. The important thing was to try. If you loved it enough, you'd always find ways to improve. Wow!

Ireland really *did* have a kind of magic to offer.

On the 23rd of December we realised we didn't have a turkey for Christmas.

'I thought *you* were going to order it,' said Kerryn.

'Well, I thought you *had* ordered it,' I replied.

We had as much chance of finding a turkey for sale at this stage, as we did of finding a full keg of Guinness on St Patrick's Day. The supermarkets and shops around us only seemed to carry a bare minimum of stock. But Kerryn remained optimistic and we walked across the street to our local butcher.

'Ah well, we don't have any turkeys left, I'm fairly sure,' said the butcher. 'I'll check with Joe out back.' He came back out with

a worried frown on his face.

'Well, Joe says we don't have any left out back,' he said, 'But we do have one left in the window for £20. Someone ordered it and then cancelled. It's only small, like.'

To me, the turkey looked the size of a well-developed ostrich. I didn't see how it would fit into our oven.

'We'll take it,' decided Kerryn.

'If you stay positive, it's amazing what you can achieve,' she said to me.

We walked up to Rathmines to make a few more purchases: camembert from Normandy, white wine from Chile, allegedly fresh vegetables from Dunnes Stores, Cadbury's Roses chocolates and Tesco's Irish pudding for dessert. We bought coloured wrapping paper for a tablecloth and Kerryn got some green crepe paper to finish off the cardboard tree she'd made.

My brother Andrew got back to Dublin that afternoon. He had been on a bus tour of Ireland. He arrived in high spirits and convinced me to play computer games at the local Internet cafe.

'Northern Ireland was amazing,' said Andrew, as we walked towards the café at Rathmines. 'I did a black cab tour of Belfast. The houses in the Protestant area near Shankill Road were covered with murals of the UFF and people with guns and the kerbs were painted in red, white and blue.'

'Geez, people get shot there you know, Andrew!' I said. 'And some idiots were throwing pipe bombs at school kids a couple of months ago. You didn't go around Belfast alone, did you?'

'You worry too much about stuff, Chris.' he said. 'Nah, I went with a couple of guys from the bus tour. It felt pretty scary, but nothing happened."'

'You don't worry enough…' I started, before deciding to let it go. My brother could make his own choices.

'What else did you see on the trip?' I asked.

'I picked up a *soccer* ball on top of Croagh Patrick,' said Andrew. 'We christened it the Holy Ball. I brought it back for us to have a kick around in the back yard.'

Dublin became progressively more deserted during the days running up to Christmas, so Andrew and I had plenty of room in the car park behind our unit to kick around the Holy Ball. Lots of people left to visit their relatives in other parts of the country. The traffic on the streets steadily died down, until the buses and taxis

were the only vehicles left in the city. I started to feel homesick. All of our new friends had gone away and we were a long, long way from our family.

On Christmas Eve, the city was like a ghost town. Kerryn, Andrew and I opened a bottle of wine, laid out some cheeses and olives, turned up the heater and settled down in front of the TV. Andrew and I lit a candle and placed it in the front window. The burning of a candle in the front window was an old tradition in Ireland. It symbolised a place of welcome for the Virgin Mary and her husband Joseph as they searched for shelter. During the times when Catholicism was outlawed, the candle also indicated a safe place for priests to perform mass.

We awoke on Christmas morning with the hope of seeing snow and the disappointment of having the flu (there wasn't any snow either!) Kerryn was hit the worst; she cooked a fabulous Christmas turkey dinner, ate with us and then went back to bed to sleep. I was glad Andrew was around or I would have felt really lonely. I felt a pang as I thought of Mum and Dad sitting down to Christmas lunch on the other side of the world. Andrew and I didn't have any snow to throw at each other, so we played soccer in the chilly car park and watched movies on TV for the remainder of the day. I went into our bedroom to check on Kerryn every half an hour or so. She was so sick that she didn't get out of bed until the next morning.

The 26th of December was known as St Stephen's Day in Ireland. Saint Stephen was the first known Christian martyr: he was sent out by the Twelve Disciples to help the poor and needy. He did so with some success, until men conspired against him. They took him to local authorities and presented false witnesses, who claimed, "this man never stops saying things against this holy place and the law". He was put to death in the same year as Jesus was crucified.

Ireland's Christmas celebrations always ran for 12 days, beginning on Christmas Day and continuing for 11 days thereafter, perhaps in homage to their Christmas carol. It was considered bad luck to take down decorations until January the sixth, which was known as Little Christmas. Andrew went on another bus tour to the south of Ireland. Kerryn and I began to plan a holiday in Europe for April and May; we believed we could clear all our

debts and save enough for a good trip by then. We decided we would return to Australia in June.

During the break, I also thought a lot about my search for fun and happiness. For most of my life, I'd been the type of person who said "when I have a new car, then I'll be happy," or "when I've finished that project, then everything will be fine". I had noticed that many of my friends in Dublin chose to be cheerful even though they weren't at that elusive point in their lives when everything was "perfect".

There were certainly moments when I had felt elated over the past few months. Imagine singing "Waltzing Matilda" in the middle of a Dublin pub! And finding a good place to live had been exciting. But was it possible for *me* to be cheerful and happy without these special events? Maybe it was.

Chapter 17

A Bunch of Cowboys

I don't make jokes. I just watch the government and report the facts.

– Will Rogers

Early January, 2002

On the first of January, Ireland adopted a new currency, along with 11 other countries within the European Union. The euro replaced the Irish punt, or pound, as it was known. The introduction of a single European currency was the biggest thing to happen in Europe since the demolition of the Berlin Wall. Imagine all those countries agreeing to use the same money.

I'd miss the Irish £1 punt, a large silver coin with the Irish harp symbol on one side and a reindeer on the other. On the plus side, the new currency meant an end to dealing with those Bureaux de Exchange money changing con-artists, who ripped off travellers with crappy "we buy-we sell" exchange rates every time they crossed a border.

Each country still had its own distinct currency, even though their notes and coins were all legal euro tender. The Irish euro coins bore a picture of the harp on the back and the Netherlands had a figure of their Queen Beatrix. It was a nice way for each

country in the EU to maintain its own identity. As people travelled around Europe, the money would be spread and interchanged, but everyone would know the origins of each coin.

During the months leading up to the introduction of the euro, the Irish press had discussed the issue from every angle. Would the public accept the new coins? (They didn't have much choice.) Would the new currency be a success? What would happen to inflation? Would prices rise? Would the Government guarantee people, who had literally been hiding money in their mattresses for 30 years, the chance to bring their old notes and coins in to exchange them for euros, even if it took another 10 years to open up their mattresses?

To be honest, I'm not sure if the Government (or the press) were in touch with any of the important issues. Months earlier the Taoiseach [Prime Minister], Bertie Ahern, had helped to set up a new campaign called Pennies from Heaven. The idea was to encourage people to donate their unwanted Irish and other coins, which would be given to 11 national charities that worked in the fields of healthcare, childcare and homelessness; a worthy and noble cause.

Imagine my surprise when I read the following article by Kitty Holland in *The Irish Times*:

"The Taoiseach and his Minister for Finance spent their last punts betting on themselves yesterday. The pair of political punters put £1 on Bertie Ahern to be the next Taoiseach at 2 to 5 with Paddy Power bookmakers. Gathering confidence, they then decided to bet £100 on the current coalition partners retaining their form into and after the next general election."

Brilliant, huh? The Taoiseach helped to set up an organisation to give old money to charity and then spent *his* old money on a bet. And what was the National Finance Minister doing in a gambling establishment? These actions did not enhance my confidence in his ability to control the fiscal policy of a small toy store, let alone an entire nation. In Australia, I was sure this debacle would have been political suicide. When I laughingly asked my Irish workmates about the Taoiseach's bet, they just shrugged their shoulders.

'Sure, wot's the big deal?'

One useful thing the Irish Government *did* manage was to give out a pound-to-euro electronic calculator to every household in the Republic of Ireland. Every household except ours, anyway. Shops

and businesses set up their computer systems and registers to do conversions and for those without registers, they could always buy a calculator at the local cheap shop. Our first experience with one of the cheap shop calculators was at a restaurant in Georges Street.

Button Layout of calculator

< £ > < € >
< 7 > < 8 > < 9 >
< 4 > < 5 > < 6 >
< 1 > < 2 > < 3 >

We borrowed the calculator from our waitress. To use it, we had to enter the number using the numeric keypads and then press one of the two special function buttons: the < £ > button or the < € > button. Sounds simple enough, doesn't it? Kerryn, Tim, Felissa and I wanted to convert our bill, which was in Irish pounds, to the equivalent in euros. We knew that pounds were worth more than the euro. I keyed in £10 and pressed the < € > button to convert to euros. The calculator came back with 7.87.

'Hang on a minute,' I said, confused. 'Pounds are worth more than euros. Shouldn't the answer be bigger than the question?'

'Let me have a look,' requested Felissa. 'Hey yeah, it says 7.87. *That's* not right.'

'Let me try,' said Kerryn, getting the same result. 'What's wrong with this stupid calculator?'

We tried a different approach. To convert pounds to euros on this calculator, we had to enter the value in pounds and then hit the < £ > button. Not the < € > button.

When driving a car (forwards), did anyone steer with their head out the window looking at the traffic *behind* them? Most people concentrate on where they are going, but the calculator manufacturer seemed to have concentrated on where he had been.

In the second week of January, I had to return to work.

'Working for Fergus—ugh!' I groaned. 'Thank God we're leaving in April. That place is doing me in.'

I hugged Kerryn and made my way downstairs to the bus stop. It was mid-winter and at a quarter to eight in the morning, it was still dark. Waiting at the bus stop, I cursed as a cold wind blew

across my rain-drenched face. I supposed it was worth gritting my teeth and putting up with Fergus' annoying voice for a little longer to pay out my debts and have an awesome European holiday.

Fergus and two of the others were already at work when I arrived. Brian came into the room shortly afterwards. The background picture on my computer screen drew his attention.

'Where's that picture from, then?' he asked.

'It's a photo of Noosa; it's a beach town 200 kilometres north of Brisbane,' I enthused. 'I lived there for a while. It's a beautiful place.'

'So will you have a picture of Dublin on your computer when you get back to *Brisbane*?' he asked, as he raised an eyebrow along with his familiar half smile.

That stopped me for a moment. I'd probably had a picture of Brisbane on my computer when I'd lived in Noosa. It seemed like I'd always wanted to be somewhere other than where I was.

Brian interrupted my thoughts. 'Does anyone here know the definition of viscosity?'

'Do you mean, like, in fluids?' I asked.

Brian nodded. Both of us were structural engineers, so we didn't make regular use of fluid mechanics theory.

'It's been a while since I did my Hydraulics subject,' I said. 'But... a highly viscous fluid is like honey; it flows very slowly. A low viscosity fluid, like water or oil, flows freely. A fluid with a high viscosity constant means it will have a low flow rate.'

'Ah, no, I don't think that's the case at all, sure I don't,' said Fergus.

Fergus' thick glasses fogged a little as he waited for me to respond, but I knew there was no point in trying to win an argument with him.

'I suppose you could check on the Internet or in a book,' I shrugged my shoulders. I put my head down and returned to work to discourage any further discussion.

Brian and Fergus went into the next room to borrow a dictionary of technical terms. The door closed behind them. I let out a long sigh and continued with my calculations. Brian returned in a few minutes. In the background from the adjacent room, I heard Fergus ranting away.

'Blah blah, what the feck! Viscosity, book, blah blah!'

Brian closed the door and returned peace to the room.

'So was I right?' I asked.

Brian put his thumbs up. 'Yeah,' he smiled.

'So what is Fergus doing now?'

'He's arguing with the other guys about what the book says,' said Brian. He shook his head in disbelief.

It was no wonder I argued almost every day with Fergus. He was always right, despite the visionaries who originally defined viscosity or any other scientific concept.

The words of a wise builder mate of mine came to mind.

'Chris, there are dickheads everywhere in the world,' he advised. 'You've just gotta learn how to deal with them.'

I had very average soccer skills, but it was one of the few games I'd enjoyed playing at school. When I'd started playing the game with the guys from Dillon Dally, I'd puffed my way back and forth along the enclosed tennis-court-size soccer field. I was so unfit that I needed a rest every five minutes. The game was very fast, because the ball was never "out" unless someone kicked it over the four metre high fence (which I managed a few times). My ball handling skills included an unfortunate ability to pass the ball to the opposite team. In some of my lower moments I'd even managed to score goals for them.

After Fergus' argument about viscosity, I played one of the best games of my life. Every time I kicked the ball, I thought of it as Fergus's head. I booted it into the wall for a rebound pass to one of my teammates. I belted the ball sideways past the goalie and scored a goal (for us). Later I smashed it around Brian's feet and across to the same teammate, who scored another goal for us.

I'd never played a very clean game of soccer on this field. I couldn't stop or turn as quickly as some of the guys, partly because I had bought a very cheap pair of sports shoes before leaving Australia. The bloody things slipped all over the place. I turned this to my advantage by running straight into whichever player I was tackling, which helped me to stop and disorientated *him*. If an opposing player deftly moved the ball away from my swinging leg, then his foot got kicked instead of the ball. Screaming yells (sometimes by me and sometimes by the guy whose foot I'd just kicked) also tended to put the opposing team off their game.

My spirited version of sportsmanship all came back to me when I was tackled in the same way. My legs got tangled up

with another player's and we went down. The ball rolled across to someone and he raced back towards the goals with everyone chasing him. The guy who I'd crashed into got up and ran back to his position.

I tried to get up as well. 'Oww, aw, shit, dammit, bugger!'

'Are you all right, Chris?' yelled the other players.

'I can't put any weight on my knee,' I panted. 'I twisted it somehow when I fell.'

'Maybe you could stand in as goalie for a while,' somebody offered. 'If you can get up.'

I had to get up. I felt a certain amount of national pride was required in the circumstances. I started to move, but fell back on the ground. 'Shit, bugger, dipshit, dumbnuck, dickhead!'

After a few more minutes of quietly swearing, I slowly got up onto my feet and hobbled over to our goal defense position. The look of approval in everyone's eyes seemed to make the pain in my knee feel worthwhile. (I was looking to others for my self-worth again!) I even ran with a few more attacks during the last half-hour of the game, keeping my weight on my good leg as much as possible.

The real pain set in after I stopped running and my knee cooled down. By the time Brian dropped me at home, my knee had swollen up to the size of a small football. I limped across Rathgar Road and cursed my way up the stairs to our flat.

Kerryn laughed at me when she arrived home a bit later.

'Why on earth did you keep running after you fell over?' she asked.

Because I felt like a heroic figure, fighting on after being wounded in battle, I thought.

'Because my team needed me,' I said.

She put me in bed, with a large bag of frozen peas covering my knee, to help reduce the swelling. I was always a real baby when I was sick and my knee was actually very painful.

'Can you get me a warm drink?' I pestered Kerryn. 'And my book? I'm cold; can you turn on the heater? What's on TV? Is any of that chocolate left?'

I rolled over to get more comfortable and the bag of peas burst open. Cold peas rolled across the sheets and into my loose fitting pyjama pants. 'Aw, bloody hell. Look at all these peas!'

I scrabbled about to remove the frozen little green buggers

from their uncomfortable position around my groin. Kerryn rolled around on the floor in pain from laughter. An hour later, I found the last pea under my pillow.

The throbbing pain in my knee broke my sleep during the night. I took Friday off, because I couldn't walk down the hallway, let alone stand on a bus for an hour. Painfully (for me), we caught the bus up to Rathmines on Saturday to see a doctor. I hoped the state of his desk didn't reflect the state of his mind. Books were piled up all over his desk and the floor. Medical notes were heaped in a dusty set of shelves. He did some reflex and movement tests on my knee and then prescribed some painkillers.

'Well your knee seems to be OK,' he said. 'You should suffer no permanent damage from what I can see. But we can only be sure by getting an X-ray. I can write you out a script, but you would have to wait at the hospital for six or seven hours.'

Seven hours! In Australia, I probably could have got an X-ray in less than an hour. Only now, after travelling across the world, did the "Lucky Country" slogan, which I used to scoff at as a teenager, begin to mean something to me. Australia's health care and public services are among the best in the world, even allowing for the recent funding and staffing problems.

Some people back home, who'd questioned my desire to go to Ireland, probably wouldn't have been surprised by the country's average medical services. But, in many respects Ireland was ahead of Australia, particularly regarding social and political awareness. Former president, Mary Robinson, was Ireland's first female elected president between 1990 and 1997. As president, she ushered in legislation to decriminalise homosexuality and improve the availability of contraceptives. Not long before that, the Catholic Church had controlled Ireland immovably, with its "no contraception" policy and zero tolerance (publicly) of homosexuality.

Mary Robinson left the presidency in 1997 to become the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights. During the time, she was Secretary General for the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance. I don't believe Australia's Prime Minister at the time, John Howard, attended this conference. He'd been too busy telling the Australian press and public how he'd done a good job kicking

out refugees who'd been shipwrecked off the Australian coast and picked up by the Norwegian freighter MV Tampa.

I was impressed the Irish had someone like Mary Robinson to represent their country. Sadly, I cannot envisage Australia getting the chance to have someone like her as its own Prime Minister or Head of State in the near future.

We decided to forego the long wait at hospital and went home. I put up with my sprained knee and hobbled around for a week, wearing a knee brace. Dublin did not cater for the handicapped. There were steps everywhere, bumps in the footpaths and using the bus was difficult and painful. No wonder elderly ladies on the bus looked cranky. (I had mistakenly taken them to be kindly old grandmas, but I suspected they were the same women that batted me out of the way regularly in the Rathmines shopping centre.) After a week with a bad leg, I think I understood their point of view. A lifetime of using the buses in Dublin would make *anyone* vicious.

In early January, 2002, Kerryn and I flew to Edinburgh to celebrate Tim's 30th birthday. He and Felissa had flown over from Dublin the day before. He had no idea we were coming to his party and Felissa was under oath to keep it quiet.

'NEXT STOP, PRINCES STREET!' roared the Scottish bus driver, ignoring the P.A. system in his spotless £250,000 bus.

At least he wasn't singing the Go Airlines corporate jingle. Budget airlines were doing great things for travel, but I thought we deserved a further discount for wasting valuable moments of life listening to "Go, Go, GoGo-Goooo, GoGoGoGoGOOO".

Princes Street, opposite the northern side of Edinburgh castle, was the city's principal shopping street. Unlike the shoppers in Ireland, the Scots stayed on their own side of the footpath or politely moved aside to allow us to pass. I'd picked up a few habits from life in Dublin; I ignored the queue at a sandwich bar and stepped up to an adjacent part of the counter. The other customers scowled at me.

'Excuse me, could ya please get into the line!' requested the shopkeeper.

I hurried to the back of the queue, red-faced.

Edinburgh struck me with its beauty and was justifiably listed as a World Heritage Site. From the summit of Castle Rock, the castle dominated the scenery, The hill had always been easily defensible as it could only be safely approached up one face. In the 7th Century the English held the area. They gave the future city its name, calling it Eiden's burh. The Scots captured the region in the 10th Century and in the 11th Century King Malcolm the Third built his castle on the hill.

The streets of the city were very clean in contrast to those of London or Dublin. The streets of London were usually littered with garbage because people had nowhere else to throw it.

'They had to remove all the bins from the streets because the bloody IRA kept putting bombs in them,' a friend of mine, who lived in London, once explained to me.

Kerryn had arranged to meet Tim and Felissa for dinner at the Balmoral Hotel, in Princes Street. The hotel first opened in 1902 as the North British Hotel. The name change was symbolic of the changes in Scotland itself. Scotland had its own Parliament again, after nearly 300 years of English political control. The new Parliament had responsibility for most internal affairs and could even vary the rate of income tax set by the English Parliament. I sensed the pride the Scots felt for their capital city. The streets were swept clean and buildings were scrubbed and painted. Tourism officials were helpful and well informed. I felt the optimism in the air.

The inner streets of Edinburgh were beautifully lit at night. The clock tower of the Balmoral Hotel shone brightly and well-positioned lights cast a romantic glow onto the towers and walls of the castle.

A convenience store attendant politely directed us to our restaurant. 'Have a good night,' he wished us.

Tim stared at us, gob-smacked, when we entered the restaurant. 'You guys came!' he said excitedly. 'I didn't think you were going to make it after Chris hurt his knee. This is great!'

'Happy Birthday, Tim,' I grinned. 'How's it feel to be old?' Kerryn gave him a kiss.

We sat down and Felissa introduced us to everyone:

'This is Tom and Tash from London. Ben and Debra are from Melbourne, but they live in London now. Guys, this is Chris and Kerryn from Brisbane, but more recently from Dublin.'

Tom and Tash were a fun young English couple. They had seen more of Australia than me.

'Oohh, I loved the Barrier Reef,' said Tash. 'We were diving there for days. I'd love to go back again.'

'And we visited Uluru, it was magnificent,' said Tom.

'How on earth can you stand to live in Brisbane?' asked Ben, the pale-faced Melbournian. 'It's ridiculous how hot it is. I went there last summer and it just about killed me.'

'Tom, what part of England are you and Tash from?' asked Kerryn, as she swatted me on the knee as a warning to keep any retort to myself.

'Well, we both live in London now, but Tash and I both grew up in Bristol,' replied Tom, 'It's on the West Coast. It was a fun place to live, but London is where the best opportunities are,' he continued.

I was curious to know what an everyday Englishman thought of the Irish situation. I knew many Irish people were still angry with the English for the wrongs committed against them over the centuries.

'Do the English really understand why Northern Ireland is in such a mess?' I asked.

Tom looked at me uncomfortably.

'Well it's all about religion, isn't it?' he replied. 'The Catholics and the Protestants don't get on. They never have.'

If I'd asked the same question of a Mexican on the other side of the world, I probably would have received Tom's answer. Everyone understands Northern Ireland has a problem, but they can't really say why there is a problem. Tom may have been uncomfortable, because he knew that on some level, the world held England responsible for Northern Ireland's woes.

I stepped out of the room afterwards for a breath of fresh air and saw a Scotsman wearing a kilt. I might have been tempted to laugh at a man in a skirt if I'd been in Australia. A dangerous glint in his eyes suggested the folly of this action.

'Ah wouldna laff, if ah was you!' was written all over his face.

How on earth this item of clothing ever became popular in a place like Scotland was beyond me. The weather was too damn cold to leave your private bits unprotected under a chequered blanket. I guess it was a measure of how tough these people were.

Like the Irish, the Scots were descended from a variety of races and it was commonly held that both peoples had a strong dose of Celtic blood. Ancient Rome knew the Celts as fierce barbarian invaders, although in later times they were better remembered for their musical and spiritual qualities. In 400 BC a previously unknown tribe of warriors invaded the Po valley in Northern Italy. The native people of the region sent a plea for help to Rome and the Caesar duly sent out envoys to talk with the chiefs of the invading tribe.

'We know the Romans are brave people because the Etruscans asked Rome for help,' said the Celtic chiefs. 'Since the Romans have offered an embassy instead of arms, we would not reject an offer of peace in exchange for land.'

The Romans asked whether it was right to take land from its owners on pain of war.

'Our rights lay in our arms; all things belong to the brave,' said the Celts, defiantly.

I sensed this uncompromising attitude in some members of Edinburgh's population. A number of burly Scots were deep in conversation, just inside the door of a pub we visited after dinner.

'Ah fookin left ma fookin car at the fookin garage the other fookin day,' said one of them as he clenched his fists. 'The fookin mechanics could'na fix the fookin thing. Ah said, "What the fook are you, a fookin bunch of fookin fooks!" Ah fookin nearly fookin set fire to the fookin place.'

When we left the pub later, these guys blatantly pursued the women in our group.

'Ah, come with me, ma darlin', Ah'll show ye how a reeel man treats his woman. That fookin wee boy yer with can fook off. He's surely not of an age to satisfy you!'

It seemed easy to get into a fight in Saturday-night Scotland. Fortunately our unwanted chaperones gave up after a bit more taunting; perhaps they needed more alcohol before they actually stole someone's girlfriend or wife.

But, all in all, I loved Edinburgh. It was a beautiful city, and I felt the confidence and energy of its inhabitants, who seemed to have a strong sense of their own destiny. I will visit again.

Chapter 18

A New Home

One must live with a person to know that person.

– Celtic proverb

Dublin, late January, 2002

The weather was the coldest I had ever experienced when my brother Andrew left Ireland to return to Australia.

'Thanks for letting me stay at your place while I was here,' said Andrew.

'That's OK,' I said. 'I guess you'll be glad to get back to the warm weather at home.'

'Yeah, I s'pose you want to get home as well?'

'Yeah—I'm feeling a bit homesick,' I said.

The time came for Andrew to go through Customs to the departure gate for his plane. I gave him a hug instead of shaking his hand.

'Have a safe trip home,' I said. 'Say hi to Mum, Dad and Lachlan for me. See you soon.'

'See you, Chris,' Andrew said. 'It won't be long and you'll be on holidays. Hang in there.'

I felt depressed as I waited in the cafe for his plane to leave. I'd enjoyed Andy's company while he had stayed with us. I

thought about how we'd kicked the soccer ball into the parked cars behind our flat. I thought about the Christmas turkey we'd shared—Kerryn had chased Andrew and me around the kitchen with the poor thing's head, thinking it was hilarious because both Andrew and I had scurried away yelping (neither of us liked to be reminded of the animals that our food came from).

I felt very lonely as I walked downstairs. Thank goodness Kerryn wasn't going home as well. I braced myself for the razor sharp feeling of the wind as I walked outside to catch the bus home.

In the past week, we'd moved to a new home at 32A Mount Pleasant Terrace, Rathmines. As you know from Chapter One, we'd chosen to move house by bus, which had been a little… troublesome.

For me, moving house had always been a bit of a hit and miss affair. A few years prior to our move to Dublin, I helped a removals man lift my bed up five sets of stairs to a new flat in Wooloowin, Brisbane. We swore and cursed our way around each landing. We scuffed elbows and knees against the brick walls. We stopped to let other tenants get around us. We did everything right, until we reached the top flight of stairs. The top of the bed struck a glass ceiling light, which went bang, bounce, bounce, clatter, spreading pieces of itself onto the steps and landings of all five flights of stairs. Distressingly, I didn't have my vacuum cleaner or broom with me.

We'd met our new Rathmines flat mates Marcel, Julie and Kate over the course of the week. I'd been a bit uncomfortable moving in with people we'd never met. It seemed a bit like an arranged marriage. Mind you, Aditi (our Indian ex-flatmate) had told me arranged marriages were often very successful. One in three (voluntary) marriages failed in Australia, so maybe an obligatory marriage partner was better than a voluntary one. Perhaps it would work the same way with flatmates.

Marcel was from Dunkerque, in the north of France. An Irish girlfriend had lured him from France to Dublin. After he made the effort to move to her country, she left him. In spite of this experience he decided to stay. He stood tall and his blue eyes were bright as he talked about Dublin's lifestyle.

'France does not have the pub culture like Ireland does,' explained Marcel. 'There are cafes and restaurants in France, but

it is nice to have a drink after work with my friends.'

'Is it hard to work and live using the English language all the time?' I asked.

'At first it was a little difficult, but my girlfriend helped me,' he said, running his fingers through his light coloured hair. 'After I'd been here for a while, I started to have dreams in *English*. It was very weird. I thought to myself, "Ah Marcel, now you are seriously f**ked up". Now when I write to my parents in France, they say my *French* is getting very bad!'

Marcel was genuinely friendly and interesting and it wasn't long before we became good friends with him. He often invited us to his regular pub, The Barge, for drinks with his workmates on Friday. We shared our dinner with him and he shared his excellent Bordeaux wine with us.

Julie was from Western Australia. She was a very tall girl, with a shy exterior hiding a feisty personality.

'What do *you* think of Dublin?' I asked her one night, while we were watching TV.

'Oh, Dublin is all right,' she said. 'But I keep telling my Irish boyfriend how much nicer life is in Australia. He doesn't like hearing it much.'

Kate (our third flat mate) worked at a restaurant in the city, with Julie. She was from one of the industrial cities of Northern England and hadn't seen her family for the last three years. She was about 28 and had recently broken up with her Australian boyfriend. She was happy to direct some of her angst towards me. Apparently we (Australian males) were not to be trusted.

Before Kate moved to Dublin, she had based herself on the Continent and driven truckloads of racehorses from one part of the world to another.

'Not too many people expected to see a girl driving a lorry,' she said. 'The customs officials were often taken aback. I travelled all over the world in the job. Lots of bizarre things happened. I nearly got shot when I was moving some horses with another driver down in Asia. Some bandits tried to rob us.'

'What did you do to escape?' I asked.

'I had to talk my way out of it,' explained Kate. 'They threatened the two of us with guns. They wouldn't believe we had no money!'

If I'd heard the story before meeting Kate, I would have expected some kind of real life Lara Croft, with a black belt in

karate and a knife hidden in her left boot. She was actually quite normal in appearance, apart from her weary aura, which resulted from her dismay at the world around her. I enjoyed her company in spite of her feelings about Australian males.

All in all, we felt comfortable and welcome in 32A Mount Pleasant Terrace, apart from a couple of problems.

'The f***ing shower water is cold again,' announced Kerryn one night. 'I can't handle this crap. I'm not going to stay here. I want to move somewhere else.'

'The water was warm when I had mine,' I replied. 'You seem to have all the bad luck with the showers.'

I won't repeat Kerryn's answer here, but the threat of having to move house again spurred me into action. The hot water system had to be operating by the next morning, or else! I spent a long time investigating the pipes and taps on both floors of the house. Plumbing in Britain and Ireland bore some resemblance to the Medusa's hair: messy, constantly changing and venomous to anyone who touched it. I struggled with dials, buttons and switches to come up with the following procedure for hot water:

1. Walk into the kitchen and fiddle with dial on white metal box.

2. Press large red button on white box and check for blue flames leaping into life behind observation glass.

3. Walk upstairs to second floor and open linen cupboard. Flick white switch next to metal tank.

4. Wait for at least 30 minutes.

5. Undress in freezing cold bathroom and pull string on ceiling switch above shower. Ensure small orange light next to string is ON.

6. Stuff around with two dials on yet another white metal box above bath, amusingly advertised as a "Power Shower". Inexact combinations result in a gush of ice-cold water. The correct combination allows a mediocre stream of water that is slightly warmer than body temperature.

7. Repeat for night-time showers.

I was no longer surprised that many people only showered two or three times a week in England and Ireland. The start-up sequence would have frustrated a team of NASA technicians, but the cold weather made Kerryn and me very determined. I set up the white metal box in the kitchen to automatically begin its stuff

at 5:00 a.m., so we would have hot water by half past six. For a few days this worked well. On Friday morning I climbed into the shower, after switching on all the necessary dials and buttons.

'Ahh shit, this water is bloody freezing!' I screamed. 'What the *F**K*!'

I suffered the shower long enough to rinse off and then went downstairs to our bedroom, muttering. Kerryn couldn't help smiling.

'Was the shower *cold*, Chris?' she asked.

I just stood there scowling.

'I talked to Kate last night,' she continued. 'She doesn't think she and Julie should have to pay for the heating, because they are at work all night. She changed the settings so the heat won't come on till eight in the morning.'

'Well I work all bloody day and *I* still have to pay the heating bill,' I fumed. 'What's the f***ing difference? And if they want to get picky, what about weekends when we go away? Will we take those times out as well? What a load of bullshit!'

It seemed to me that some people in Dublin didn't pay bills if they felt it was unnecessary. At our last flat in Rathgar, the tenants who'd lived there before Aditi had never paid their phone bill. We were not able to get the phone connected because the phone company, Eircom (or "Irksome", as I preferred to call it), expected the outstanding money to be paid by the people who lived there—us. The offenders had moved elsewhere and probably started another account they didn't intend to pay. As a result, Irksome lost more money and lost clients who would have paid their phone bill—us.

In contrast, the cable television provider had left the connection running to the same flat. We had made great use of the 20 available channels. The ever-increasing bill arrived each month in the name of a long relocated Ms Karen Somebody-or-other.

'We really should pay that bill if we are watching the channels,' Kerryn said repeatedly.

'I see it as our payback to the previous tenants for leaving us with a £200 phone bill,' I replied.

Bill paying etiquette was another interesting facet of Ireland's culture; they seemed to have a casual view about some of "the Rules" of society. I asked my friend, Brian, about this.

'Yeah, for some utilities there's a Government rule that says the companies can't cut their services if someone doesn't pay,' he

explained. 'A lot of old people were turning off their heating at night to save money and dying from cold, like. The Government covers the bill for anyone who can't pay.'

I understood electricity and heating were essential services in a country that was so close to the Artic Circle. (By the way, Kerryn and I had the hot water at Mount Pleasant Terrace going again by Saturday morning.) I wasn't so sure there was an urgent need for the Government to maintain cable television services.

But then I remembered what everyone at Dillon Dally had said: 'In Ireland, it rains a lot. There are only two things to do when it rains: go to the pub, or stay home and watch television.'

Chapter 19

Bus Showdown

We the undersigned ask, no, demand that every senior board member, director or member of management of CIE and Dublin Bus, along with the Government Minister with responsibility for transport, have their company cars taken from them and be forced to use whatever public transport is at their disposal.

I saw a girl being refused…because she wouldn't fold up a pram [carrying her] 11-week-old baby... [Although] they are buggy [pram] accessible buses[,] the bus driver swore at her…then proceeded to drive alongside[her]... whilst beeping the horn...

– http://busrage.com/

Late February, 2002

I was in a meeting with the client and builders for the Sandyford office development. In my opinion, our client was talking bullshit. His expectations were ridiculous.

'Ah've just about had enough of you and your company!' he shouted. 'You're always late getting back to the builders with their questions. You're fecking hopeless, the lot of you!'

I thought about things for a moment; Kerryn and I had paid all the bills and had saved just enough money to do our trip around Europe. The worst this bloke could do was to get me sacked, which would probably be an improvement for me. I opened my mouth to shout back at him. He stood up and glared at me.

'Don't you fecking talk back to me or I'll find another company to do all my work,' he continued. 'You'll sit and listen. Ah've had it with you. You get your work to the builder on time or you're out, the lot of you. Blah, blah, blah…'

By the end of the day, I was still an employee of Dillon Dally (just), although I'd really had enough. I scurried out to the bus stop, through the freezing rain. It was half past six at night and I just wanted to get home.

Of course, bus drivers had a nasty habit of driving straight through the roundabout and heading back into the city or the pub, without turning around to pick up anybody. I decided I couldn't stand the idea of another bus disappearance. I hustled to the *arriving* side of the road. If any bus went straight through the roundabout, I was going to be on it.

A few minutes later a bus appeared down the road. I stuck out my hand to get the driver to stop. The bus screeched to a halt and the doors hissed open.

'Where are you going?' asked the bus driver.

There was only one more stop on the route and it was a short distance up this road.

'Into the city,' I said, with my hands in my pockets.

'Well you can't get on here; you'll have to go across the road and wait there,' he stated, pointing at the bus stop I'd just abandoned.

The guy had to be joking. 'Can't I just stay on now?' I asked. 'You're just going up *around* the roundabout anyway, aren't you?' I asked.

'I'm not going back to the city,' he said.

I didn't believe him—his bus was the only one here at the exact time a bus was scheduled to leave for the city. The only timetables that were accurate were those at the start of a route—and my bus stop was the start of the route back to the city.

'I've told you this *before* haven't I?' he asked. 'Get off the bus!'

(Actually this wasn't the first time I'd tried this stunt.)

'There's no need to get all cranky about it!' I said.

He climbed out of his seat threateningly. 'Get... off... the... fookin... BUS!'

I felt no desire to spend the night in a Dublin lockup for "assaulting" a bus driver. But I would have loved to put some nails into the bastard's tyres.

'All right, all right, I'm going.' I said. 'Have a *great* night!'

'Oh *SURE*!' he replied, as he slammed the doors shut.

The bus shuddered off and raced up to the roundabout and then turned *around* and came back to the empty bus stop on the other side of the road. The driver slowed, scowled at me and drove past. Luckily for him, I didn't carry a rocket launcher in my backpack.

I had to laugh (a bit dementedly) later when I read an article about Dublin's public transport in *The Irish Times*:

'CIE is relying on the goodwill of the public not to exploit the no-fares day protest action by transport unions on Friday, urging those who use cars, cycle or walk to stick to their normal habits. CIE is concerned that an over-enthusiastic response to the unions' initiative will lead, not to free buses and trains, but overcrowding and cancellations of services. "We are in uncharted waters here, so we don't know what the public reaction will be," said CIE spokesman Mr. Cyril Ferris.'

I was fairly certain I could predict the public's reaction for Mr. Ferris. It wouldn't make a whit of difference to them. Given the amount of crap we passengers had to put up with, the bus should have been free all the time.

The only reason people used the Dublin Bus service was because they had no alternative. People with cars were not going to give up their warm, climate controlled VW Golfs and BMWs to be insulted by cranky bus drivers and left behind because the drivers couldn't be bothered stopping.

I imagined an elderly Irish gentleman reading Mr Ferris' comments and then turning to his wife: 'Ah, feck it. Ah'll take the car to work. It'll be less costly to me soul.'

On Sunday morning I awoke to see swirling white flakes fall past the window. I stared at them blearily for a moment.

'It's snowing!' I announced excitedly.

I leapt out of bed and ran along

our brightly coloured hallway to the front door. I threw it open and turned my palms out to face the sky. Soft white flakes fell across my fingers. I raced back into our bedroom.

'Kerryn, it's snowing. Look! I'm going to get the camera,' I said.

We put on coats over our pyjamas and went outside. Kerryn danced around and ran up and down the lane with a bright smile on her face.

'I've never seen snow falling before,' she said.

We would have probably looked pretty silly walking around in our pyjamas, with stunned smiles on our faces and with our palms raised to the sky, had anyone else been on the street to see. To us snow was like magic. It may have been cold to touch, but it brought us happiness.

Almost any event in Ireland was an excuse to have fun. Football wins were celebrated by going to the pub. Football team losses were dealt with the same way. Birthdays, weddings, people arriving, people leaving, and wins at horseracing were all sufficient reason for a party. There were so many celebrations to go to that I lost count. I'll always remember St. Patrick's Day, though.

On the 17th of March of each year, a fair proportion of the world joins the Irish in St. Paddy's parties. I think Australians celebrate the day as a celebration of all things Irish. Especially Irish alcohol. The festivities do not involve any great understanding of Ireland's patron saint or Ireland in general. However it is a great excuse for Aussie pub owners to hike up the price of Guinness.

Australia's publicans cranked up their U2 and Van Morrison CDs or hired a band that had a vague idea of how to play a tin whistle or a bodhran. Mobs of drunken idiots (including myself) would leap and cavort around on the dance floor in the flawed belief we were doing a brilliant impression of Michael Flatley, the "Lord of the Dance". St Patrick's Day was the only time Australian males thought it was OK to dance with (attempted) flair.

Kerryn and I were looking forward to seeing how the Irish celebrated St. Paddy's in their country. Australians celebrated the day with street parades and drinking festivals; surely Ireland

would put on the biggest show I had ever seen.

'It's amazing in Boston,' began one of the older Dillon Dally employees. 'I've got a lot of cousins there, so I spent St. Paddy's with them a couple of years ago. People shook my hand and wished me a good day. They shouted me drinks, like it was my birthday or something.'

Hmmm. I suppose plenty of Irish descendants lived in the U.S., so it wasn't surprising that St. Paddy's was a huge event there. Even London had a St. Patrick's Day parade and it really wasn't long ago that the English and the Irish were at war. Still I was convinced Ireland would put on an astounding carnival of sound and light.

We spent St. Paddy's in Galway. We wanted to catch up with our friend, Nick. (Andrea had made a quick trip back to Canada, to make an application to medical school in person.) The three of us walked into town on Sunday to watch the parade in Eyre Square.

'I want to buy something green to wear for the parade,' I said.

I bought a green scarf and a small plastic flag to wave. Spectators packed the street and even the roof of the public toilet was used as a vantage point. We squeezed our way into a space on the footpath as the Mayor of Galway opened the parade.

There were lots of children dressed in band uniforms, sports gear and colourful costumes. Some of them pulled silly faces, which amused me. It looked to me like many of them were marching because their parents had forced them into it. I felt like I was back at one of my primary school fetes.

A police brass band had come over from Boston. Apparently most of the members were of Irish descent. They sounded really good, but they marched past us far too quickly. More kids marched past in silly uniforms.

Some large floats passed us, powered by huge trucks. At the very end of the procession a large articulated lorry rolled along slowly.

'Look at that!' I said.

'What on earth is *that* all about?' Kerryn exclaimed.

Unlike the other floats, the truck was completely unadorned. A huge grey slab of granite rested on the trailer. There was no sign or announcement to indicate why a rock was part of the parade.

'It's just a big rock!' said Nick, laughing.

It was either some kind of holy relic, or a piece of rubble from a building site. Knowing Irish builders, it could have easily been both. To be honest, the rock had been the highlight of the parade.

There were around 10,000 or so spectators listening as the mayor made his closing address. Less than two minutes after he finished, everyone *disappeared*. It was midday and the real celebration of Saint Patrick's Day was about to begin. The pubs had opened. A bomb scare couldn't have moved them faster.

Kerryn, Nick and I walked into the first pub we found and ordered a round of pints.

'Slainte!' we toasted each other.

The three of us had been in Ireland long enough to know a momentous truth. Drinking in Ireland was not a game. It was a blood sport.

Whenever I'd been drinking with an Irishman, I'd been expected to keep up, matching him pint for pint. It was easy to be fooled, but behind a mask of drunken cheerfulness, he kept an accurate tally of the number of drinks I consumed and he knew exactly when it was my turn to shout. The expression "one for the road" was only an opening to begin another round of shouts. Any attempt to hold off total unconsciousness by having a glass of water was met with a cry of anger.

'Ah put that away, yer cheating!'

The only way I'd found to throw him off track was to drink spirits. This usually made him shudder with fear, which suited me fine, because he didn't want to drink small quantities of Scotch whisky any more than I wanted to drink quantities of stout exceeding my own bodyweight.

Given the amount of stout consumed around us, the 17th of March might easily have been renamed "Guinness Day". Irish men and women hoisted pints of Guinness or specially brewed green beer to the sky, in honour of the man who converted Ireland to Christianity.

Like Christmas in much of the Western world, the religious significance of Saint Patrick's Day has diminished with time. But who was Saint Patrick anyway? What did he do that was so special? Scholars do not agree on all aspects of his story and written records in Ireland during Patrick's time were uncommon. The Celts did not keep written records. Although the Romans maintained excellent records, they never made it to Ireland.

Some believe Patricius Magonus Sucatus (Patrick) was born in Britain, in the West somewhere between the Rivers Severn and Clyde. His father, Calpurnius, was a Roman civil official and a deacon, during the late 4th and early 5th Century. His mother, Conchessa, was a close relative to the patron of Gaul, Saint Martin of Tours. Patrick's early years were spent at his father's villa, which would have been a comfortable estate, although villas in Britain had become dilapidated as Rome's control of Western Europe weakened.

During his teenage years, Patrick was kidnapped by Celtic raiders and taken back to Ireland, to be sold into slavery. Six years later he escaped, after a vision of God came into his dreams, telling him he should be ready for a courageous effort that would take him home.

After Patrick was reunited with his family, he was determined he would spend his life in the service of God. He put himself under the guidance of Saint Germain and was promoted to the priesthood after a few years. During this time he had repeated visions of children in Ireland, asking him to "Come back to Erin and walk once more amongst us."

With the approval of Pope Saint Celestine I, Patrick returned to Ireland as a bishop, with the mission of bringing the Irish people into the Christian religion. We know he succeeded, but he faced capture, near-death and the ire of the Celtic Druids many times during his mission. The Druids were the ruling class of Celtic Ireland; they maintained religious control, supervised sacrifices and handed down decisions on almost all public and private disputes. They were exempted from military service and were not subjected to taxation. In other words, they had a pretty cushy job.

Patrick's arrival threatened the existence of the Druids' order. They attempted to silence Patrick by assassination, capture and the use of "magic". Somehow Patrick prevailed. He gave gifts freely to chiefs and kings, wisely understanding that if a leader converted to Christianity, his people were likely to follow.

Ireland's steadfast dedication to the Catholic religion, even when they faced death during Henry the Eighths's sacking of the Catholic religion, or at the hands of Oliver Cromwell's army of killers, points to the success of St. Patrick's mission. Unfortunately,

many of his successors were not as inspiring. In recent years, the Catholic Church had been exposed in serious scandals, some centuries old and others relatively modern and Ireland was not impressed. I think the Pope needs to reinvent the Church or St Patrick's Day might easily become Guinness Day.

At the top end of Grafton Street in Dublin, there is a small shop called Butler's Chocolate Café. The shop retails the Irish Butler's Chocolate range, which are delicious, but more importantly, its staff brews the best hot chocolate in Ireland. They also make excellent coffee. Kerryn and I regularly visited Butler's on the weekends in springtime; all the drinks were sold with a free chocolate. We crossed the street to sit in Saint Stephen's Green along with a fair proportion of Dublin's population. People spread themselves on the grass like flocks of birds and sunned themselves.

Springtime in Dublin was amazing. The birds came out to sing after their long winter absence. The first flowers of spring, daffodils, in their cheerful shade of yellow, blossomed in parks all around the city. Daffodils even arose in the green grass along the shoulders of the roads. Tulips followed after the daffodils, in all their brilliant colours. The days became longer with earlier dawns and extended twilight. The smell of spring in the air made me feel happy and connected again, after the coldness and darkness of winter.

The thing that surprised me most about spring was that I'd stopped to take notice.

'It's really nice, sitting here drinking hot chocolate and watching the world go by,' I said. 'I wouldn't have done this a year ago—I would have felt guilty,' I said. 'I've always felt like I needed to be doing something useful.'

'I know,' said Kerryn, rolling her eyes.

'I wonder what has changed?'

'What about moving halfway around the world?' Kerry offered.

'Yeah, but it's not just that,' I replied. 'People are different here, too.'

'You know, they're not really different,' said Kerryn, 'They want to earn a good living and enjoy life. They want to have good friends and happy families. That's pretty similar to how we are.'

'So what is different?' I asked.

'Well… people here didn't know us before we arrived here. They don't have that history with us that our friends and family in Australia have.'

"It's the same for us, too,' I replied. 'We didn't know anyone here before we arrived. It's almost like we get to invent ourselves as we go along.'

'Yes…' Kerryn said. 'We do, I suppose.'

That was it, I was sure of it. I'd lived most of my life based on my previous successes, failures and expectations. When I'd moved to Ireland, I'd eventually had to leave my past behind me. Nothing here was familiar, so I couldn't live life on automatic pilot.

On this beautiful spring day in Dublin, I was living life as I chose.

Chapter 20

Soul Searching

I'm interested in one thing, Neo. The future.
And believe me, I know
The only way to get there is together.

- *The Oracle,* Matrix Reloaded

Dublin, September 11, 2001

I didn't pay much attention to the Middle East when I was growing up. It was too far away from Australia to be important to me.

Things changed dramatically for me when terrorists attacked New York. I was at work in the Dillon Dally office when a workmate raced through the door.

'A plane just crashed into the World Trade Centre!' he said.

'What?' asked the rest of us. 'Was it an accident?'

A few minutes later we knew it wasn't an accident. A radio newsreader announced that a second plane had flown into the side of the building. I imagined two empty planes had been stolen and there would just be a lot of damage to clean up. When I arrived home, I found Kerryn glued to the TV.

'Something terrible has happened,' she sobbed.

I sat and watched the images in disbelief, along with the rest of the world, as both towers collapsed into enormous piles of rubble. My dismay and disgust heightened when Kerryn told me both planes had been full of passengers.

We watched Sky News in the morning before we left for work and until late in the night when we got home the next day. Apparently, the Al-Qaeda terrorist network was responsible. In the next few days, the Middle East came under the world's spotlight, when Al-Qaeda demanded that the land of Israel be returned to the Palestinians.

I learnt a bit about the Middle East in Ireland, of all places. Hanna, a Palestinian, was Dillon Dally's permanent representative at the Sandyford office development. I was initially surprised to find he and I had some common ground. We were both married. We both wanted better lives for our families. And our boss, Fergus, made work an unpleasant experience for Palestinian and Australian alike.

Naturally our backgrounds were different. Hanna grew up in Kuwait. He was working there as an engineer in the early 1990s when Saddam Hussein decided to make Kuwait part of Iraq by force. For various reasons, the Kuwaitis believed all Palestinians supported the Iraqi leader. When the dust settled, Hanna and his kindred were hustled out of the country.

'How could they throw you out?' I asked. 'Surely you were a citizen? I mean, you were born there!'

'Well, no, I was ineligible for Kuwaiti citizenship,' replied Hanna. 'All Palestinians were. We weren't eligible for passports anywhere until the Palestinian Authority came into existence.'

Many Palestinians are refugees in the land Britain promised to return to them in exchange for their assistance during the First World War. However, Britain also promised to help establish a Jewish state in the same place. The land is, of course, Israel.

More than six million Jews throughout Europe were murdered during the Holocaust. At the end of the Second World War, it seemed clear that an independent Jewish state was needed. A special UN committee recommended partitioning of the land of Palestine into Jewish and Arab states. The Jews accepted the plan, but the Palestinians rejected it. The Jews went ahead and declared the State of Israel. The next day the new country was invaded by the Arab nations of Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.

Somehow the untested Israeli army sent the Arabs packing, using weapons provided by the U.S. And in every attack since, Israel has held and expanded its territory. As a result, the Arab world looks upon Israel without fondness.

A few days after the September 11th attack on the World Trade Centre I asked Hanna about the renewed hostilities that had broken out between the Jews and the Palestinians.

'Why do Arabs fight with the Jews all the time?' I asked. 'Why are there so many Palestinian suicide bombers?'

'Because it is the only defence we have. The Israelis have guns, tanks and planes: all provided by America,' he explained. 'You don't know what is happening there. The Western news services do not tell you and you cannot read Arabic news on the Internet. They are murdering us!'

Have you ever read George Orwell's book *1984*? I read it in Dublin during a rainy weekend in late March, 2000. Orwell coined the saying "big brother is watching" in this book and investigated the possibility of a world divided by hatred and war.

In the story, a segment called "the Hate" was broadcast every night on the television. The Hate was meant to keep the viewers angry about the injustices and wrongs done by whichever country their nation was engaged against in war.

Initially I thought *1984* was a ridiculous tale that would never happen. But when I turned on the television, I saw newsbreaks every hour about terrorist attacks and terrified people. I saw parliaments around the world voting in anti-terrorist laws in order to protect their populations; and police given the right to spy on individual citizens and detain them without specific charges. Security forces were being strengthened and border controls were being tightened.

Albert Einstein had a saying, "the definition of insanity is to do the same thing over and over and expect a different result". I truly wondered how all this strengthening, tightening and controlling was going to rid the world of war and terrorism.

I was in a cab on my way to Sandyford for another project meeting. The cabbie was talkative, which kept me from worrying about my unpleasant client.

'What made you move to Ireland, so?' asked the cabbie.

'I wanted to try living somewhere different,' I replied. 'Ireland

seemed like a fun place to go. And I've always liked your traditional music, you know, the *diddly-di* type.'

'Ah, well if it's music you're liking,' he began, 'then you should go to the Comhaltas Ceoltoiri in Monkstown. I play there me-self sometimes ya know. Where do you live, so?'

'Mount Pleasant Terrace in Rathmines.'

'Every Thursday night there's a session held at Rosie O'Grady's in Harold's Cross, which is close to Rathmines,' said the cabbie.

'Is Rosie O'Grady a person?' I asked.

'No, no, it's a pub,' he replied cheerfully. 'You and ya wife should go there sometime. It's good craic.'

'Okay, we'll do that,' I replied.

Apparently, music sessions occurred in pubs around Ireland all the time. Wikipedia has advised that: "The objective in a session is not to provide music for an audience of passive listeners; although the punters (non-playing attendees) often come for the express purpose of listening, the music is most of all for the musicians themselves. Audience requests for a particular song or tune of the players can be considered rude. The session is an experience that's shared, not a performance that's bought and sold."

Kerryn and I set off at 6:30 p.m.. Harold's Cross was some distance from Rathmines, but it was still walkable. We strode along beside the Grand Canal, which still held more than its fair share of shopping trolleys and plastic bags.

I pushed my way through the front door and looked around. There didn't seem to be any traditional musicians around.

'Is there a music session on tonight?' I asked a bartender.

'Oh yeah, they usually turn up a bit later, so,' she answered.

'We may as well order some dinner,' I said to Kerryn.

At 9:30 p.m. I looked around the pub again.

'I can't hear any music playing,'I said. 'Maybe they aren't going to show up tonight.'

'Oh, I just asked someone,' said Kerryn. 'Apparently they're upstairs.'

There were only five musicians playing when we found them. They each had a half-full pint at their side and the room was full of cigarette smoke. The room quickly filled up. There were 15 musicians in the room after half an hour and 25 after an hour. There were guitars, banjos, fiddles, tin whistles, bohdrans and squeezeboxes all around us. One person would start off a tune

and then another would pick it up and another and another. I enjoyed it so much that goose bumps came up on my skin and my foot tapped involuntarily. Kerryn smiled and clapped her hands.

I loved traditional Irish music; the jigs and reels never failed to lift my spirits. It transformed my mood from blue to bright and brought out the better side of my humanity.

On the other hand, I did not enjoy traditional Irish singing, which always seemed to involve sad stories about lost love, forced emigration and over-indulgence in alcohol. It's no surprise that these songs were the inspiration for American bluegrass and country music, with songs about lost dogs, long roads, dead relatives and upset marital partners. My neurotic nature was pulled lower by these sorts of songs; I didn't need any help to dwell on the bad side of a situation.

Fortunately, the session at Rosie O'Grady's was all about music without singing. Kerryn and I left later with flushed cheeks and light hearts. The effect music could have on people always amazed me; it was so powerful.

I decided to choose the radio stations I listened to more carefully in the future.

Chapter 21

The North and the Troubles

The moment the very name of Ireland is mentioned, the English seem to bid adieu to common feeling, common prudence and common sense, and act with the barbarity of tyrants and the fatuity of idiots.

– Sydney Smith

Belfast, April, 2002

A lot of people believe the problems of Northern Ireland result from the religious differences between the Catholics and the Protestants. I certainly did before I moved to Ireland.

A week before September 11th 2001, trouble erupted on the streets of Belfast. Protestants who lived in a small area in the north of the city claimed they had been pressured to leave the neighbourhood by the Catholic population surrounding them. Men and women hurled rocks and stones at Catholic schoolgirls, who had to walk along the Protestant section of Ardoyne Road to get to their school.

On the second day of violence, the police and army barricaded the street with Landrovers and escorted the children towards their

school. A pipe bomb was flung into the street and exploded in front of the policemen. The children screamed in terror and ran back to their parents. Bricks and bottles were hurled over the barricades at the security forces. None of the kids were hurt but a policeman was badly injured.

While it is true that the population on each side of the conflict can *generally* be divided along religious lines, it isn't their religion that divides them. There is a great deal of history in the conflict and manipulative politics are at the heart of the matter.

When the Normans arrived from England in the 12th Century, they fell in love with the Irish way of life. They became more Irish than the Irish themselves and adopted Ireland's language, music, laws and dress code. The Normans ruled their subjects under the Celtic/Irish Brehon Laws, which were highly advanced for the time. Significantly not even a king could forcibly take a man's land from him.

The Anglo-Norman leaders back in England hated (and feared) the Irish culture that had swallowed their fellow Normans so easily. They hated the Brehon Laws, which prevented a noble from taking land from his peasants. The law was entirely in conflict with the system in England, where commoners did not own land and had to pay rent for the right to live on it. They could not understand the welcoming nature of the Irish, nor did they treat their women as equals, as the Irish did.

England's Norman leaders did not behave like the Romans. The Romans had been intelligent enough to at least observe the cultures they encountered before they declared war against them. All worthwhile ideas, technologies and cultural systems were taken back to Rome and incorporated into Roman life. The English rulers may have matched the Romans' thirst for conquest, but they weren't ready to accept that their own culture might be improved with ideas from the Irish. The English Government engaged itself in war against the Irish way of life.

'It was intended to make them poor, to crush in them every germ of enterprise and degrade them into a servile race who could never hope to rise to the level of their oppressor,' said Lecky, in his *History of Ireland in the 18th Century*.

The Brehon laws were dismantled and replaced with the Penal Laws:

The Irish Catholics were forbidden to exercise their religion,

They were forbidden to enter a profession,
They were forbidden to hold public office,
They were forbidden to engage in trade or commerce,
They were forbidden to purchase land,
They were forbidden to vote,
They were forbidden to sit on a jury, and
They could not send their children abroad to be educated.

After reading about the Penal Laws, I understood why people in the Irish Republic seemed to be cynical about the law.

Warfare and outright slaughter were common throughout the centuries following the Anglo-Norman invasion. Henry VIII ordered a mass murdering of Irish people for being Catholic and therefore disloyal to the British Crown. A century later Oliver Cromwell ordered another slaughter of Ireland's people, again for being Catholic, which made them *loyal* to the British Crown.

The last battle between England and Ireland occurred early in the 20th Century. In 1919, the Irish made a bid for independence. They set up their own Parliament in Dublin and sent messages to countries around the world, requesting recognition of the Irish Republic. The British Government was understandably a bit miffed about this, and sent new weapons into Ireland (developed during the First World War) including tanks, armoured vehicles and warplanes. The British Army embarked on a war of vengeance, burning towns and shooting men, women, toddlers and the aged alike.

The Irish public did not submit to the fear and terror as expected by the British Government. They were outraged and disgusted by the British Army and rose to fierce levels of resistance. The IRA was born and its members conducted a vicious series of attacks against British assets in Ireland. National tax records and other information about Irish citizens were destroyed in a series of fires. Intelligence gatherers collected information about British movements and key members of the armed forces were targeted.

Word of the atrocities leaked out to the rest of the world. The British Government was pressured into giving Ireland some form of freedom and drafted the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921. The treaty effectively partitioned the country into two and allowed for a Free Irish State in the South. The South was to remain part of the Commonwealth and was expected to give its allegiance to the British monarch. Many of the new Irish Parliament members

refused outright. In 1937 the Free Irish State declared itself a Republic and severed its ties with Britain completely.

The North remained part of the United Kingdom, but with its own parliament. The state was born intact with all of the feelings and emotions produced by 800 years of uncomfortably close history with Britain. The North's parliament viewed Northern Ireland as a Protestant nation, with Protestant Government, for a Protestant people, despite 30 percent of the population being Catholic.

Early in April 2002 Kerryn and I made our way up to Northern Ireland during spring. We hired a small Fiat from Dublin Airport and headed northwards along the N1.

A German had told me about his journey during the early 1980s into Northern Ireland. He had driven his VW Kombi campervan up to the border. Unfortunately, Kombi vans were also the vehicle of choice for the IRA. The soldiers manning the border post held the German at gunpoint and practically smashed their way into the back of his van, terrifying his sleeping wife in the process.

In spite of everything I'd heard about the *improving* situation in the North, I felt a little nervous. I remembered another story regarding a group of British paratroopers who shot and killed the occupants of a car crossing the border because they looked a bit shifty (maybe their jawbones were the wrong shape). The troopers were put on trial, but they were acquitted. Manslaughter is not a crime in Northern Ireland and the soldiers' actions were found to be accidental. I had never pictured the use of a semi-automatic rifle in that light before.

'I wonder if we will have to show our passports to get through?' Kerryn said.

'I was sort of expecting to see soldiers with submachine guns standing behind barbed wire fences, but I read that all the checkpoints had been removed,' I said.

We approached the border district after stopping for a quick break in Drogheda. The road looped through a flat valley surrounded by small, bare hills. Petrol stations (which in the Republic of Ireland were always American firms such as Texaco or Caltex) displayed flashing signs: CHANGE YOUR MONEY HERE. The Republic uses the euro as their currency, while Northern Ireland uses the British pound.

There were no barbed wire fences. There were no border guards. There wasn't even a sign saying: WELCOME TO NORTHERN IRELAND. ENJOY YOUR STAY. PLEASE DON'T PULL FACES AT THE ~~SOLDIERS~~ BASTARDS. The petrol station names changed to British ones, like BP and Shell. The road became a little less bumpy. Fuel prices were quoted in pounds instead of euros and post-boxes were red, instead of green. I was relieved not to see British soldiers brandishing machine guns.

We passed through the town of Newry, which had to be a loyalist area, given the number of Union Jacks flying. A short time later we entered the outskirts of Belfast and took the motorway exit for the city centre.

I had no intention of parking the car on the street. I feared it might be misconstrued by the RUC [Royal Ulster Constabulary] as a bomb threat and be destroyed by some kind of armour-plated tank. We needed to find a car park. I turned left, then right and circled around a few times, until we found an off street park near City Hall.

The centre of Belfast was full of dome-roofed Victorian buildings. City Hall, in the middle of Donegall Square, was the centrepiece for a Titanic celebration arranged by the city. The magnificent and allegedly unsinkable ocean liner had been built in Belfast, in the Harland and Wolff shipyards. The people of Belfast seemed to be quite proud of their involvement, even though the ship struck an iceberg and sank on her first voyage in 1912. Hmm…a ship that wasn't suitable for the sea it sailed through; I wonder if Mr. Snooky's company had been around in 1912.

We had a look around the city. Boots Pharmacies, WH Smith newsagents and Tesco stores were everywhere. I found it strange to hear so many Irish accents, in a town that looked so British. The people were quite different to the Irish I knew. I was used to the devil-may-care attitude of Dubliners. Belfast's citizens watched each other out of the corners of their eyes. They moved quietly and carefully.

'The people in Northern Ireland should all be well-off, because they are much better workers than we are in the Republic,' Brian had told me. 'It's all the fighting that's wrecked the place. A few years ago lots of American and British companies based themselves in Belfast, but when the Troubles started up again, they pulled out. There are loads of Northern Ireland companies doing work in the Republic now, because there's no work up there.'

Kerryn organised a Black Cab tour for us. My brother Andrew had told us about these cabs. They took tourists through the Loyalist and Republican area to let them see some of the impacts of the Troubles. I found this a bit unnerving, remembering what people had told me about these areas.

'Whatever you do, don't drive a car with a Republic number plate through any Protestant areas,' one of my workmates had warned me. 'They might attack you. Take a cab.'

'The houses in the Protestant area near Shankill Road were covered with murals of the UFF and people with guns,' my brother Andrew had said. 'It was pretty scary.'

Our cabbie picked us up next to City Hall and drove us to the Horseshank estate, which was a strong Loyalist [Protestant] area.

'Look at the kerbs,' said Kerryn, in a hushed tone.

The street kerbs were painted strongly in the colours of the Union Jack: red, white and blue. Letters were painted on the sides of some brick walls—UFF—for the Ulster Freedom Fighters. The cabbie turned a corner into the main street.

The street was ominously silent, apart from the sound of the cab engine. Dilapidated brick houses surrounded a large green grass square. Some garbage blew across the street in the wind and two kids were riding pushbikes around. The doors and windows of the houses were shut tight.

On the walls around us, murals depicted images of death, men with guns, martyrs, Union Jacks and Scottish flags. A large mural showed three men wearing balaclavas, with submachine guns in their hands. The words UFF—3RD BATTALION were written underneath. These paramilitary groups obviously saw themselves as legitimate armies. On another wall there was a picture of a man with a machine gun, standing in front of the grim reaper, in a cemetery, with three names on headstones over three graves.

'Those names are the names of IRA men the UFF want to kill,' explained our driver.

'*Want* to kill?' I asked. 'Did you say *want* to kill?'

I felt goose bumps form on my body; suddenly the day seemed very cold. I imagined what it would be like to have my name up on a public wall indicating someone's desire to kill me.

'Why don't the police paint over the murals?' asked Kerryn.

'They have in the past, but the murals just appear again overnight,' replied our driver.

The paintings were a clear indication of the anger and hatred these people carried. I felt their glares and disapproval of our presence from behind the closed doors. I found it truly horrifying.

My fear and desire to flee the area heightened rapidly when the cabbie turned the engine off.

'Let's have a look around,' our driver said, as he climbed out.

We sat for a moment and looked at each other in disbelief. Shouldn't he have kept the engine running?

'Oh well, we're all going to die sometime anyway,' I muttered.

I felt very nervous standing in the middle of that angry square. My brother Andrew had shown a lot of guts to come here. I decided to get a photo of myself in front of one of the murals. I was incredibly conscious of the grim reaper standing in the picture behind me with his scythe, as I waited for Kerryn to take the photo. She fumbled around with the lens for a few seconds. I felt panicked. What if an IRA assassination squad drove past and saw me standing here?

'Hurry up, Kerryn,' I urged.' Take the damn photo!'

I leapt away as soon as the camera clicked.

'There are actually three different loyalist factions in this neighbourhood,' explained our driver. 'They are all violent and they will even fight and kill one another, even though they basically believe in the same cause.'

'This area looks a lot like the Tallaght area in Dublin I go through on the way to work,' I said. 'It's really run down, a very poor area.'

'Most of the problems here in Belfast occur in working class areas,' replied our driver. 'These people have to put up with a lot of shit in their lives. They want a better life and they support their group, the IRA, the UVF, whichever, in the hope that it will make a difference. It really wouldn't matter who was running the place, Ireland or Britain, these people are always going to be stuck where they are.

'There *are* areas which have mixed Catholic and Protestant populations,' he continued. 'Most of them tend to be the middle class, where people have a nice house, a good car and a comfortable life. They don't give a shit about all this because they don't have to.'

We climbed back into the car and turned right onto Cupar Way, which ran alongside the Peace Line. The Peace Line separated the Republican and Loyalist areas. It was 25 feet high with the bottom half made of brick and concrete and the top made of metal sheeting.

'The wall is several kilometres long and is only broken at roads linking the areas together,' the driver said. 'There are gates at each of those. The gates usually stand open during the week to allow people to go about their business, but some are closed on the weekends to restrict movement between the different areas. It protects people on both sides, because it's difficult for troublemakers to make a clean getaway.'

'Why is the wall made of steel at the top?' Kerryn asked.

'The wall had to be extended upwards twice to make it more difficult for people to throw petrol bombs over the top,' explained our driver.

'In the days before the Peace Line was erected, there were some pretty bad deeds carried out by both sides,' he continued. 'A Protestant group known as the Shankill Butchers used to take a cab into the Catholic areas and abduct somebody. They would take them away to a quiet spot to torture and kill 'em.'

We stopped alongside some of the graffiti that had been scrawled or sprayed onto the wall. Most of the messages seemed to have been written by visitors: PEACE BE WITH YOU, CHILL THE F**K OUT. Kerryn took out a pencil and began to write a peaceful message on the wall.

A couple of kids roared past on a motorbike. 'YARRRRGHHH BAAASTARDS!' they yelled.

I jumped about six feet in the air. Fortunately they didn't hurl any petrol bombs or other solid objects at us. Kerryn gamely finished writing her message: MAY YOU HAVE PEACE.

We travelled onwards into the Republican Falls Road area. The houses here were much neater than the Shankill houses and the feel of the place was far friendlier. There were only a few murals on the walls and they were much less violent in appearance than the Shankill ones. The pictures were devoid of guns and death wishes, instead displaying pictures of Catholic martyrs or words of dismay.

Nearly every house flew the orange, white and green tri-colour of the Irish Republic. Apparently there was to be a big celebration

during the weekend, to commemorate the [Dublin] Easter Rising of 1916.

'The Republicans in Northern Ireland celebrate Easter with a lot of marches and banners,' said our driver. 'It usually pisses the Loyalists right off. Of course, when the Loyalists celebrate the Battle of the Boyne, they really piss the *Republicans* off.'

We stopped outside the headquarters of Sinn Fein, which was the political wing of the IRA. The building had a shop on the lower floor.

'What's that shop there?' I queried our driver.

'It's a tourist shop,' he replied. 'You can buy souvenirs there. But just remember where your money goes if you buy something.'

I decided not to go in.

'Why does the Catholic area look less violent then the Shankill area?' Kerryn asked.

'The IRA has a brilliant public relations set-up,' said our driver.

I suppose he meant the modern IRA was better at hiding their less tasteful activities. Both sides were equal in the level of violence they were willing to commit. In Australia, we have always been well informed about the actions of the IRA. They set off countless car bombs in London during the 1980s.

Personally I couldn't remember hearing about the actions of the IRA's enemies: the UVF, the UFF and others. I suspect this is because Australian news is often simply repeated from the bigger news services and not from the smaller ones. In other words, we got Britain's news rather than Ireland's. Be assured, the Unionist/Loyalist paramilitary groups have never been idle. In total, Loyalist forces were responsible for 2192 shootings and assaults in Northern Ireland between 1973 and 2003. During the same period, Republican forces were responsible for 2337 shootings and assaults, again, in Northern Ireland. I felt very sad for the people of this country. When would they ever be at peace?

We were glad to get back into the centre of Belfast. We walked back to our car, silently brooding over what we had seen. The areas we'd been taken to were like war zones. I felt a great sense of relief when we found our way back onto the motorway and headed northwards out of the city.

We drove to Portrush on the north coast of County Antrim, where we had booked a room at the Abbeydean B&B for the night.

The little town had a warm and friendly atmosphere. This was good, because we needed cheering up after seeing Belfast.

'Ah, welcome, welcome,' our B&B hostess said. 'Did you come up from Dublin this morning? How was your journey? Now, here are your rooms. Is there anything else I can do for you?'

'Well, are there any places you'd recommend for dinner?' I asked.

'Yes, there are two lovely places next to the harbour, just along the street,' she said.

I felt a lot better after I had a shower and got changed into fresh clothes. We walked down Ramore Avenue to the harbour. At the bottom of a long staircase, we found a wine bar and restaurant. The place was packed and we had to wait about three quarters of an hour for a table. There was a happy vibe in the room and the wine was cheap, so we ordered two bottles. We got cheerfully drunk and spent two or three hours laughing and talking a lot. Good food, good wine and good company—who could ask for more? Portrush had peeling paint and crumbling stones, but it oozed charm.

In the morning we headed eastwards. The scenery in this part of Ireland was stunning, the best I had seen in both the North and the South, with the possible exception of the Dingle Peninsula. I loved the winding coastal roads of both places.

We stopped at Dunluce Castle, which was a beautiful old ruin perched dramatically on the top of a high cliff. The castle had been built a little too close to the edge: in 1639, the kitchen fell into the sea, along with the servants who had been working in it at the time. I guess they didn't get the chance to file a workplace health and safety claim.

A bit further eastwards, the Giant's Causeway beckoned. It was made up of hexagonal shaped stone blocks, which looked like a giant's Lego bricks. The legend goes that an Irish giant, Finn McCool, was a bit keen on a female giant over on the Scottish island of Staffa, so he threw the rocks out across the ocean as stepping-stones to reach her. There is a similar rock formation on the Scottish island, so who knows? At some point, geologists took all the romance out of it, by explaining the Giant's Causeway as a rock formation formed by a complex cooling of molten lava. I preferred the "stepping stone to love" theory.

A little further along the road, the Carrick-a-rede rope bridge

was apparently a must-do for all tourists. The rope bridge was originally used by salmon fishermen, who crossed the bridge to set nets in the water around the adjacent rocky island. The sight of the bridge scared the shit out of me. It looked exactly like one of those rope bridges shown in the *Indiana Jones* movies. The bridge was 25 metres above the sharp looking rocks that appeared occasionally under the surface of the rolling ocean.

I'm one of those people who have nightmares about falling. Heights greater than about three stories make my hands twitch with pins and needles. I suspect my height phobia started when I was about six years old. I called my Uncle by his first name without the use of the prefix. This sort of informality wasn't on as far as Uncle was concerned. He picked me up and hung me upside down over the side of the staircase for a few moments, until I promised to call him by his formal name. He thought it was funny, but I did not.

The sight of the distant ground, as seen through the razor-like steel lacing, made me feel sick. I stared at the wire ropes for some time before I put a single foot on the bridge. I reckon I touched the planks twice as I sprinted across to the island, although the bastard kids who jumped up and down to bounce it didn't help. Getting back was even worse, because I noticed the condition of the access stairs to the bridge. They were fixed to the side of the mainland cliff with some very rusty steel bolts. There were also plenty of tourists waiting on the stairs for their turn to cross the bridge. I took a deep breath and then bolted across, leaping past all the waiting tourists. They were clearly doomed, but at least *I* was safe, along with my overactive imagination.

I was keen to get a good view of the Mull of Kintyre over in Scotland. Northern Ireland was less than 20 kilometres from Scotland at the closest point. I steered the car on a wild goose chase towards the north-eastern corner of Ireland, in the hope of seeing Scotland properly. I navigated by my wits and a tiny map in our *Lonely Planet* guidebook.

I should have known better. Road maps gave a particularly vague idea of the true length of Irish roads. I couldn't turn the car around—the stone walls and hedges saw to that—and the road wound sharply back and forth around farms, trees, high cliffs and sheep.

We approached the nearest point to Scotland along a rough gravel track. There was a high stony ridge in front of us, so we

couldn't see the land of highlands and heather. We couldn't even the see the ocean. The only thing we *could* see was a ramshackle old farm with a house the Addams Family would have built if they'd moved onto Irish acreage.

A couple of huge dogs ran towards the car, howling. They leapt up against the windows and bit into the tyres. We preferred to keep our limbs attached to our bodies, so we turned around and hurtled back to the main road. We became hopelessly lost. While we wandered, we discovered the northeast corner of the island had some really beautiful scenery.

Hours later we found our way back to Belfast along the motorway. We noticed something odd as we passed an off-ramp for one of the suburbs. A British Army armoured personnel carrier/tank and three armoured Land Rovers were caught in the traffic on the off-ramp, presumably on their way to maintain peace during the Republican Easter marches. I don't know about you, but I have serious issues with tanks forming any part of a city's everyday traffic.

Nothing I had dealt with in life came close to the ugliness that Belfast residents lived with every day. Northern Ireland was an Ireland of the past: it was controlled by another country, its occupants completely misunderstood each other, and hate and anger were easy to find.

In contrast, the Republic [the South] was an Ireland of the future. Britain no longer had any say in the Republic's affairs. The Irish had re-invented their country to make it the IT capital of Europe and they had a booming economy to prove it. I knew why they wanted to live it up a little. They were free!

I had never questioned my own freedom before and I realised I'd greatly undervalued it. I was so lucky to have grown up in Australia, where I'd been able to walk down the street without being persecuted for having differing beliefs to my neighbours and walk to school without fear of being stoned or dismembered by a pipe bomb. In Australia I'd been able to park my first car regularly on the side of the road, without having it bulldozed away and destroyed, and I'd been able to travel through Brisbane without needing to share freeway lanes with armoured personnel carriers and tanks.

Many of the children of Northern Ireland do not know this feeling of freedom. They have been conditioned from birth to

keep their eyes and ears open for trouble. Their parents have told them all about the atrocities that have been committed by their paramilitary opponents and by the armed forces. Even if Northern Ireland's politics were miraculously solved tomorrow, I suspect these kids would never learn to completely trust other people.

I realise now that a free life is priceless. It cannot be taken for granted, or it will be lost. I see the world as being on a precipice; we free citizens of the world demand that our politicians protect us from terrorists and criminals. We now have security cameras on the streets, more police and more armed forces. And, yes, I have shared roads in Brisbane with armoured personnel carriers. We barricade ourselves into homes with large fences and drive the streets in large SUVs and four wheel drives, which have become our private armoured personal carriers.

We are giving up our freedom for the illusion of safety, but no amount of armour plating, concrete walls or security cameras will protect us from a determined person carrying a bomb. September 11th, 2001 and the war in Iraq have proven that.

Perhaps there's another way. What if there was no reason for anyone to become a terrorist? What if the world was committed to teamwork and cooperation? What if the world was committed to poverty reduction and worldwide education for children? I'm going to dream of world that is free, and take actions consistent with that dream. Dreams can become real.

Chapter 22

The Last Pint

The things you own end up owing you, and it's only after you've lost everything that you're free to do anything.

– Tyler Durden, Fight Club

Dublin, mid April, 2002

In less than a week, Kerryn and I were going to leave Ireland and travel around Europe. I felt elated: no-one could spoil this week for me. No one except me, anyway.

I arrived for my last day at Dillon Dally, to find Fergus staring at his computer. He looked across at me angrily, but remained uncharacteristically silent.

'Someone subscribed Fergus to AsianBabes.com,' said Brian, in a stage whisper. 'It's been set up with his work email address. His inbox is full of porn messages!'

I started laughing, wondering who on earth would have done such a thing. Personally I suspected the engineer from Bulgaria,

who had had even more arguments and disagreements with Fergus than me.

'I think we all know who would have done it,' said the office IT manager.

Everyone stared at me: apparently I was the prime suspect. I guess it didn't matter—I was leaving anyway. I could barely stop myself from rolling around on the floor, as Fergus frantically deleted messages full of bawdy photographs. He-he!

At the end of the day, most of us headed across to the nearby pub for my going-away drinks.

We brought our glasses together with loud clinks: 'Slainte.'

'We knew you were interested in the history of Ireland, Chris, so we got you a book,' said one of the guys. 'It's got all the major family names and a section about each county in it.'

'Here, let's have a look at that,' said another. He lent over and opened it to the section describing the 900 year history of his family.

I'd never been much interested in history before, but in Ireland I'd become hooked: old stories were so close that I could touch them here. There were two things I realised about the past:

1. People have always wanted to be happy and comfortable.
2. History has tended to repeat itself whenever people haven't felt happy and comfortable.

As I sipped my pint, I could see how my own history had repeated itself over and over. I'd considered myself lucky when things had gone well and I had blamed someone else when things hadn't. It struck me that I'd taken very little responsibility for my life: I'd put it into the hands of Fate and other people.

I felt sick when I realised I'd blamed Ireland for my unhappiness during the last few months. And, before I'd moved here, I had blamed other people in my own country for my misery. I could see that there was only one constant in all of this: me.

I'd spent thousands of dollars and moved to another country to figure out that I was the one causing unhappiness in my life. What a fool I'd been! I suppose I could have given up thousands of dollars to sit in a therapist's office in Australia, so in a way I'd spent well: travel and therapy together.

We'd moved to Ireland with few possessions and a lot of debt. I'd gained unexpected freedom of time by having nothing to tinker

with or fix. I'd looked out at the world around me, instead of trying to ignore it. I'd listened to other people's ideas and beliefs. The impact on my thinking had been enormous. This might seem blindingly obvious, but I realised it was important to steer the direction of my own life, instead of reacting as life happened to me.

Kerryn hadn't been greatly affected by our lack of possessions, but when we'd arrived we'd only known one person in the entire country. The dislocation from her usual busy work and social life allowed her to break from the roles she'd always assumed at home. She'd left work at 5:00 p.m. without guilt and taken time to reflect on life. She'd also spent time reading books and seeing me.

Kerryn and I had learned to rely on each other much more strongly than we had in Australia. In Ireland, we'd made our plans together. I shared my dream of writing books for a living and Kerryn shared her dream of travelling every year. Ireland gave us the opportunity to create a life that was relatively free of our past.

But, like many experiences in my life, I wouldn't understand the real impact of my life in Ireland until we'd left, until I'd gained the perspective that distance so often brings.

In July 2007, Kerryn and I returned to Ireland, this time with Kerryn's parents. An Australian friend of ours was getting married; his family have always been close friends with Kerryn's family. He had met the girl who would be his Irish fiancé two years earlier in Scotland.

Kerryn and I were ferrying her parents to various pre-wedding functions in Adare, County Limerick, when they saw the groom's step-father standing outside the grey-coloured church.

'Look, there's David!' they said. 'We need to see him to find out about dinner tonight.'

'No problem.' I replied, before swerving the car towards the side of the road. The left wheels of our black hire car thudded loudly as they hit the kerb and bounced up onto the footpath.

The pedestrians on the footpath stood frozen behind our now-stationary car. I wondered why their faces looked shocked.

'Oh yeah, I forgot.' I switched on the hazard lights.

The waiting pedestrians relaxed and squeezed between the car and the adjacent stone wall, to continue on their way.

'OK, I'll wait here for you,' I said to my parents-in-law.

My mother-in-law laughed. 'I can't believe you just did that. I would have driven around for ages looking for a car park. Surely it's illegal: you can't just stop wherever you like.'

'Well, it probably is,' I chuckled. 'But the locals do it. When in Ireland, do as the Irish do.'

I was happy to realise that I'd felt at home from the moment our plane had touched down at Dublin Airport. It was almost like… I belonged. I'd changed since I last touched down here. In 2001, I hadn't felt like I fitted in anywhere.

Living in Ireland had been the catalyst for this change. After I'd seen that I was the cause of my own unhappiness, I'd realised I could do something about it. I'd discovered more and more of my false perceptions I'd first started to distinguish in Ireland in 2002. One was my neurotic need to do things by "the rules". I realised this compulsion had started when I'd been six years old. I'd been playing my first game of football and I hadn't understood how it worked. I'd dropped the ball, fallen over and tripped up some of the other players, who pushed me over to the sidelines in frustration.

'You can't play with us,' they yelled at me. 'You don't know what you're doing!'

As a six year-old wanting to be accepted, this had felt like the end of the world, so I made a decision: I would never play any game if I didn't know the rules. This became a problem as I grew up, because life had thrown me into a heck of a lot of games that I hadn't understood. I became extremely risk-averse as a result: there was no way I could know all the rules to life.

Sometime after living in Ireland, I realised how ridiculous it was to be ruled by a decision I'd made when I was six. I began to take some risks: I caught oversized waves in the surf and got dumped on the beach (again). I organised a collection for Sri Lankans displaced by the 2004 Tsunami. I persuaded my boss in Australia to put me onto an exciting public transport project in 2005. And when we returned to Ireland for our friend's wedding, I drove through the centre of Dublin. Yes, you read correctly. I cast aside my memories of Ireland's national accident statistics, turned eastwards from the M50 motorway, and pressed the accelerator

down. I was pleased to swerve around several Dublin buses and ignore their wishes to enter my lane of traffic. Ha-Ha!

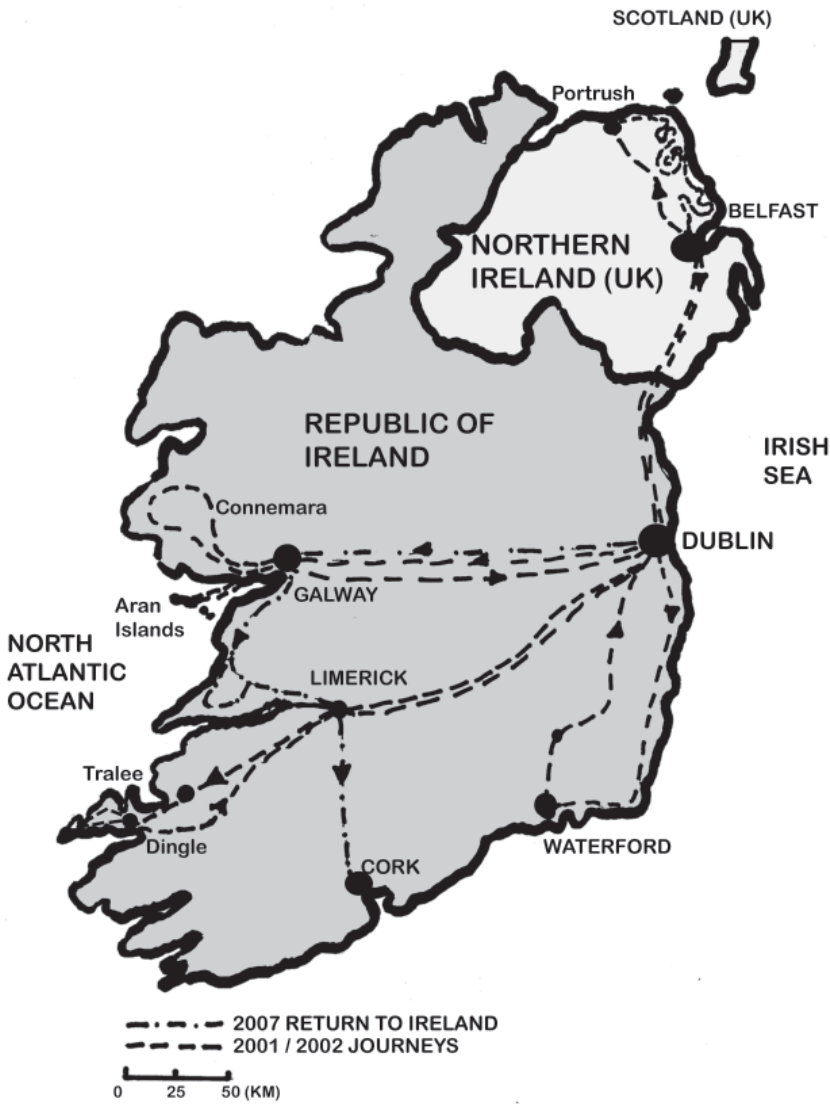
Of course, I got lost. Ironically, it wasn't long before I waved a bus displaying AN LAR – CITY CENTRE into the space in front of me, so I could follow it. I remembered my own words, 'the bus drivers at least had some knowledge of the city, as they had to travel their routes several times each day'. I guess even an unpredictable bus service has something to contribute to the world.

As Kerryn and I travelled through Dublin and the rest of Ireland, I saw there'd been a determined effort to improve the country. The Port Tunnel had been completed, and was a great success (even though the tall double-decker lorries were still banned). The LUAS trams were ferrying commuters around the south of the city in half the time of buses. And the four lane motorways leaving Dublin extended for 100 kilometres from the capital before changing to one and half lane bumpy roads. I'm sure these motorways were only ten kilometres long in 2001.

I was also reminded of the Irish's sense of fun: with entertaining pubs, humorous radio DJs and amusing television advertisements. This took me back to my original reason for moving to Ireland in 2001. Had I learned to have fun? Was I happy? I thought for a moment: I still worried a lot. And I still got uptight at work. But I'd enjoyed designing the tunnel for the public transport project. I'd loved working with the contractors who built it. Kerryn and I had a great relationship and we'd bought our own home. I was still a bit surprised when the answer came to me: I really was happy!

I was a little wiser and a lot more grateful than I had been when I'd boarded the plane to Dublin in August 2001. Thanks a million, Ireland—may the sun shine warmly upon your fields for every spring and summer to come. I will be back again.

Our Irish Travel Map



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