

The Road Bowler

By Mark Cantan

Whoever throws the ball furthest wins.

Chapter 1

The place was packed. The beer was a river. The air was a thick soup of smoke, sweat and laughter. An army of dancing feet shook the house to the rhythm of the sweltering music.

They were all here. The best musicians in the county. On top of the chest of drawers Jacksie O'Donnell downed a pint without missing a note on his tin whistle. To his right Paddy McGulkillahooly beat his bodhrán and made it sing like a goat. In front of them Knocker McCarthy, four foot tall in his long socks, winked at the girls over the top of his accordion. By the door Rory "Pleasant Hands" O'Toole played his mandolin so hard the strings had gone numb. Next to the mantelpiece Big Joan O'Flynn danced with her fiddle like it was some long-lost lover who she used to rub with a bow. While down at the front Tumbledown Trevor bellowed out a song about being far from his true love and his wife.

They all played like they were one mind thinking one thought: a rip-roaring, foot-stomping tune that once you heard it it filled all of your thoughts too. This was it. This was the night. They were going to play their hearts out tonight. It didn't matter if they collapsed. It didn't matter if their fingers dropped off. Tonight was all that mattered. It was a very special night in this part of the country; a traditional night of celebration and rejoicing. They called it Friday Night. And if they just kept playing then maybe they'd never have to see a Monday morning ever again.

Another reason why this night was one of note, apart from the fact that it was Friday Night, was that this was the night that the greatest road bowler Ballysuir has ever known was born.

Seán stepped out of the front door of the house. As he opened the door the music and the light were unleashed on the still night. The valley turned to look at the old house, its gloomy concentration broken by this noisy little pocket of life. The dark valley walls were incensed to see something interrupting their silent menace and they reared up their deep shadows and twisted shapes at the house.

Seán was oblivious though. He cared not a jot for dark valley walls, incensed or no. He took a breath of the cold night air and used it to wake himself up a bit and let some of the drink and the music from his head.

'Right,' he said, clapping his hands in a determined kind of way.

He turned back to the house.

'Síle, are you coming love?'

Síle was making her way along the hall towards him. She laughed and hugged people goodbye. When she got to the door Seán pulled her shawl up onto her head and kissed her on the lips. She was not the most beautiful thing you'd ever seen since breakfast but the gleeful smile that regularly stretched out from one dimpled cheek to the other was certainly in the running for such a prize.

They walked out into the forecourt and Seán helped his wife up into the seat of the horse and trap that waited for them there. He patted the horse on its cheek, took the reins in his hand and climbed up beside her.

‘Wait, what about Díarmuid?’ said Síle.

‘He’s grand. He’s having a great time.’

‘But how will he get home Seán?’

‘He’ll find his way home eventually. He’s drunk. It’s like an automatic pilot.’

‘But it’ll take him ages.’

‘Yeah, but he won’t even remember it tomorrow.’

Síle just looked back silently.

Seán sighed.

‘Alright fine.’

He let go of the reins, got down off the trap and marched back into the house. Síle waited in the cold night. She was more sensitive to deep shadows and silent menaces. They made her shiver. She got a blanket out from under the seat and wrapped her legs in it.

After a minute Seán re-emerged from the party. He looked around and then called out to his wife.

‘Did he come out here, no?’

‘No.’

‘I thought he might have come out.’

‘No, he didn’t come out.’

‘Ah for God’s sake. Where the hell has he got to?’

Seán stomped back into the party.

After a longer minute he re-emerged again. This time a drunken Díarmuid was hoisted across his shoulders. No mean feat since Díarmuid was a big man, even back then. But Seán could match his brother in size and better him in determination. As they walked across the forecourt, they seemed to be having some kind of discussion.

‘I think I should stay Seán,’ said Díarmuid.

‘No, I don’t think so. I think you’ll find that you should leave with us,’ retorted Seán, gently mocking his drunken brother.

‘I should probably stay.’

‘No. You do put up a good argument but again I have to contradict you there Díarmuid, and I’m sorry to do so, but I think you should probably go.’

They reached the trap and Díarmuid was delighted to see Síle waiting for them. ‘Síle!’

‘Hello, Díarmuid.’

‘Síle, I think I should probably stay.’

‘Not at all. Come on Díarmuid, let’s go home.’

Seán dumped Díarmuid heavily onto the back of the trap. His last ‘I should probably stay’ muffled by hay and dirt. He soon forgot his troubles however and started singing a drunken song which wandered slowly between three sober songs, at each turn changing from one to the other and leading him round in a complicated circle.

Seán took up the reins of the horse. He cursed the cold night and his stupidity at bringing his pregnant wife and their unborn child out on such an evening.

‘Jesus, I’m a fool. I knew we should have brought the Nissan.’

They set off down the dark road away from the house and its warm life. In the back Díarmuid’s song slipped away from him and he lost it amongst the hay and dirt. He poked his head up over the back of their seat.

‘Síle?’

‘Yes Díarmuid.’

‘Síle?’

‘Yes Díarmuid.’

‘Can I touch your tummy?’

‘Hey, no copping a feel off my wife.’

‘No Seán, I’d never,’ said Díarmuid, shocked at the suggestion. ‘Just for the baby Seán, just for the baby.’

‘It’s okay Díarmuid. You can touch my tummy. Although I think he’s asleep at the moment.’

‘He?’ asked Seán with a smile.

‘Well, I think so,’ replied Síle.

Díarmuid reached up over the seat and gently laid his hand on Síle’s belly. He smiled, drifting off into a cosy dream of babies. Just then Síle let out a scream.

‘Aaaaah!’

‘Oh bollocks,’ said a worried Díarmuid, ‘I’m sorry Síle, I didn’t mean to break it.’

‘Seán! Seán! The baby’s coming, Seán.’

‘Alright love, don’t worry. We’ll get you to the doctor’s. Everything’s going to be fine.’

Seán gave the horse a whip with the reins and they sped off along the country road. The wheels of the trap rattled on the loose surface of the chipped and worn tarmac. They could see the horse’s breath in the cold night air. It flew over them in waves. The horse was old but clever. It didn’t have the strength in its legs that it used to have but it had experience and it knew when trouble was in the air. It strained its muscles blindly trusting its master to lead it in the right direction and not run it into the ground.

‘Come on! Come on horsey! Come on!’ shouted Díarmuid, encouraging the horsey along. He stood up to give it some extra encouragement but at that moment they turned a corner and Díarmuid lost his balance and went flying out of the back of the carriage.

‘Díarmuid!’ cried Síle, ‘Stop Seán! Díarmuid’s fallen out the back.’

‘He’s grand. He’s having a great time.’

‘Weeeeeeee.’ agreed Díarmuid.

‘But he could get hurt.’

‘No, no, no. He’s drunk. You can’t hurt a drunk man love. Come on now, we’ve got a baby to deliver.’

Behind them Díarmuid rolled down the hill through the night. End over end he fell. Half trying to stop, half willing himself on. How far could he fall? How long could he go on for? This was easy. He just had to let gravity take him. He’d finally found something he was good at: rolling.

Chapter 2

Seventeen years later 1995 was having its day in the sun. It was on all the calendars, on all the movie posters, on all the TV schedules. The papers led with it in every edition. It was everywhere. But deep down it knew its days were numbered.

Síle cared less that it was 1995 and more that it was 6:55 and dinner was due. She was working hard at the stove. Her hair was greying now, there were a few more wrinkles in her face and her figure had filled out a bit, but her smile remained unchanged. She chuckled along to some political discussion on the radio. Behind her the back door swung open and banged against the side table. Síle didn't look up. She knew it wasn't the wind. It was just her husband. Seán stomped in and started taking off his boots.

'What's for dinner love?' he asked.

'The food of kings! Shepherd's pie.'

'Ooh là là, très fancy.'

'It's almost ready, fetch your son, will you?'

'Right so,' said Seán as he swung the door open and stomped out again.

'Are you not going to put your boots back on?' Síle called after him.

'No, no, no,' said Seán dismissing the silly woman's silly notions. He walked out into the muddy garden and started calling his son's name. 'Michael! Michael!'

Over the hill and past the brook Michael was hard at work. His feet dug into the ground as he pushed the rusted plough through the rusted earth. In front of the plough the horse wasn't being much help. Michael was starting to think that he was pushing the horse too. His hands were blistered and his feet were sore. His shirt was off and sweat trickled down his back. It had been a long time before Michael had taken his shirt off. Unlike some guys who whipped out their chest as soon as the weather forecast changed from overcast to partially cloudy, Michael was embarrassed by his underdeveloped body. Skinny and pale, he didn't like the look of himself.

'Michael, your dinner is ready,' said Seán, stepping up beside him.

'Okay Da, I'll be there in a second I'm just going to finish off this small patch and then I'll be down.'

'What are you doing there son?'

'I'm tilling the soil so we can put the spuds in next week.'

'But son, I'm an architect. This is Jim Geraghty's farm. And he raises cattle. He's going to be pretty fecked off that you dug up his field. Ah hello Jim.'

'Hello there Seán, Michael,' said Jim. 'How are you today gentlemen?'

'Fine, fine. And yourself?' said Seán.

'Oh grand yeah, yeah...uh, can I ask what you're doing to my field?'

'Uh, I was just doing a bit of tilling Mr Geraghty,' said Michael.

‘Well, that’s...that’s very kind of you Michael, but, uh, I actually raise cattle. So that’s not much use to me. You’re actually doing damage to me, in fact, because I use this grass to feed my cows.’

‘Oh. Sorry, Mr Geraghty.’

Jim surveyed the scene. The whole hillside had been ploughed.

‘Mind you, you got a fair amount done,’ he commented.

‘Oh he did alright Jim; he’s a good strong worker.’

‘That’s actually probably most of my crop you’ve just destroyed. I needed that to feed my cows this winter. I’ll probably have to sell the farm now. But sure, never mind, never mind.’

‘Ah yeah, sure we live and learn,’ said Seán.

‘We live and learn is right Seán. We live and learn.’

They stood there in silence for a moment thinking about life. About how a day where you learn nothing new isn’t a day worth living and so we should never be afraid of trying and failing since failure is inevitable and the shaper of all things.

‘Where did you get the horse and plough from anyway Michael?’ asked Mr Geraghty eventually.

‘I borrowed the horse from Mrs Mahaffy’s stables and I got the plough from the museum.’

‘Fair play, fair play. Well, I’ll see you then lads.’

‘Okay, see you later then Jim.’

‘Bye, Mr Geraghty.’

They watched Jim Geraghty leave until he was out of sight.

‘Right,’ said Seán, clapping his hands together in a determined kind of way and they walked off towards home.

‘Why did you start ploughing in the first place?’ said Seán as they crossed the brook.

‘I thought you told me to do some ploughing?’

Seán thought for a second.

‘No, I told you to do some *homework*.’

‘Oh right. I guess I must have misheard you.’

‘I guess you must have. You didn’t think to question that I was asking you to do some ploughing when we’re not farmers?’

Michael thought about it.

‘Not really.’

‘Fair enough.’

And they set off for home. As they passed over the top of the little hill by their house Michael suddenly stopped, catching sight of something over the rise to their right. Floating along the road was a vision. And the vision was a beautiful girl. She didn’t seem to have a care in the world, elegantly peddling her bicycle along the country lane. Her long blonde hair flowed out behind her like an ad for hair. Her small and perfect little lips stretched out in a relaxed smile between her pretty chin and her pretty nose. Her summer skirt rippled and rolled across her legs hinting at the smoothness and softness beneath. As soon as Michael saw her he knew exactly what she was like. He could hear her beautiful laugh, could feel her warm affection. He knew they’d get on great together. They’d have the same sense of humour. They’d believe in the same things. They’d scintillate and excite each other. She was after all the most beautiful

girl he'd ever seen. He was transfixed. It took his father's voice to break him from her spell and bring him back to the real world.

'Would you come on. My feet are getting cold.'

At the dinner table Síle was telling a story. Michael's two little sisters sat in rapt attention. Not taking their eyes off their mother in case they missed something, they slowly picked at their meal without even looking down to see which part of it they were eating. Síle stood at one end of the table unable to sit with the excitement of her own story.

'So there we were in Foley's. I was just about to go up to the counter to get some bacon when a whole load of slappers from Fecktown came in the door. They'd come over here to Ballysuir just to laugh at us. Can you believe the nerve of them? God I hate them so much I wish they'd all just fuck off and die.' Síle had to stop the story for a moment she was so caught up in her disgust. She soon brightened however, remembering how the story ended. 'So they came into the shop and started chanting, "Ballysuir, Ballysuir, Ballysuir to choke." Well, Dee was having none of it so she jumped up on the counter and started calling back, "Fecktown feckers! Fecktown feckers! Fecktown feckers!"'

The whole family collapsed laughing at this. Loudest of all Síle. 'Fecktown feckers, God I wish I'd thought of that one,' she said wiping a tear from her eye.

Just as the laughter was rolling its last ripple Díarmuid burst through the door.

'Hello!' he announced.

'Hi Uncle Díarmuid,' said Anastasia, the younger sister.

'Hi Uncle Díarmuid,' replied Díarmuid in a poor imitation of her little voice. He started pretending to look round the room, under the side board and in the cupboards. 'Who said that? I can't see anyone here. Only this sack of potatoes!' he said, suddenly grabbing the giggling girl and slinging her over his big shoulder. The family all laughed again. Anastasia squealed with delight.

'I can't stay for long I just popped in to see if you wanted to go down to the pub tonight Seán.'

'Ah not tonight, I think.'

'Okay so. I'll see yiz then,' said Díarmuid and with that he opened the door and walked out again. Still on his shoulder Anastasia managed to fit in a, 'No, Uncle Díarmuid, you can't take me with you,' before the door closed behind them.

The family continued to laugh for a full minute before slowly coming to a stop.

They waited for Díarmuid to return.

Seán was the first to speak.

'Actually Michael, I think you'd better go and get your sister back.'

'I...I can't. I've broken my arm.'

The room was dark and shadowy. Possibly for effect, possibly because no one had bothered to get a new bulb. It was a circular table but three men were clearly sitting

behind it and one was sitting in front of it. Mick McMichaels was looking nervous and haunted. He remembered to support his broken arm just a little too late.

‘How did you break your arm?’ asked Mr McCleary, who even though it was a circular table was clearly sitting in the middle of the three men who were clearly sitting behind it.

‘A tractor fell on it,’ mumbled Mick looking at the ground.

‘Was it the British?’ interjected the grey bearded Mr Scully excited for a moment.

‘Why would they push a tractor on his arm?’ asked Mr O’Riordan.

‘Ah, I just thought they might have,’ mumbled Mr Scully.

‘How did a tractor fall on it, Mick?’ said Mr McCleary, trying to keep to the point.

‘It...just did. It was an old tractor. I’m not lying.’

‘I didn’t say you were Mick.’

‘Come on Mick, do it for Ballysuir,’ said Mr O’Riordan. ‘Show Fecktown who’s boss.’

Mick shuddered at the thought. He was a broken man. Apart from his arm. ‘I can’t do it. I just can’t do it. Do you understand me?! You can’t make me! I’m out.’

‘Okay,’ said Mr McCleary kindly. ‘Thank you, Mick.’

Mick got up and walked towards the door. He opened it letting in some of the noise from the bar but then turned back to the three men.

‘I’m not scared.’

‘No Mick, we know you’re not,’ said Mr O’Riordan.

Mick left, closing the door quietly behind him. He tried to slip out of the pub without anyone noticing him while everyone in the pub tried not to notice him as he slipped out. Back in the back room the three dark men turned their frowns towards each other.

‘Well then gentlemen, Mick McMichaels is out,’ said Mr McCleary. ‘What are we going to do now? We’ve got less than a week to find someone to compete against Fecktown and there’s not a decent bowler left in the town.’

‘What about Patsy Reilly?’ suggested Mr O’Riordan.

‘No, he won’t do it. His wife says he’s too nervous to even leave the house any more,’ replied Mr Scully, shifting his walking stick.

‘He’s come out from under his stairs at least. We should be thankful for that,’ said Mr McCleary.

‘Joe “Bonus Round” Nolan. When did he compete for us?’ said Mr Scully.

‘Three years ago.’

‘Surely he could do it.’

‘No, after he lost he went on a fishing trip to try and cheer himself up. Unfortunately, while he was getting ready to leave a gorilla snuck onboard his boat,’ said Mr O’Riordan.

‘A gorilla?’

‘It had escaped from Dublin Zoo. Three days he spent in the middle of Lough Derg before the police eventually found him. He hasn’t been the same since,’ explained Mr O’Riordan.

‘Well, he’s dead,’ said Mr McCleary.

‘Oh, is he? God that explains a lot.’

‘It...it wasn’t the British, was it?’ said Mr Scully hopefully.

‘No, it wasn’t the British. What have you got against the British?’

‘I just don’t trust them.’

‘Well, I don’t see why not, Mr and Mrs Jones seem like a perfectly nice couple to me.’

‘I can never forgive them for what they did to my father and my three brothers.’

‘What did they do to your father and brothers?’

‘They wouldn’t let them eat dinner in their restaurant, just because they were Irish.’

‘They don’t own a restaurant; they own a pet shop. And if they didn’t want any Irish customers, why would they open a pet shop in an Irish town?’

‘Just to shove it in our faces, the bastards.’

Mr McCleary was used to these distractions. Mr O’Riordan and Mr Scully had limited attention spans. It made these town council meetings a bit of a chore. Still, he felt it was his duty to the town. They’d been in a slump for the past 5 years. It wasn’t just Mick McMichaels’ arm that was broken. The whole town walked around as if they were just killing time until death. Everyone tried to wear a brave face of course, but you could see it in the slump of their shoulders and the trudge of their feet. They needed something to feel good about. They needed a hero. Mr McCleary sensed the silence in the room. The other two must have come to some sort of a finish.

‘Right. So then who do we have left?’ he said.

‘No one. No one will dare. People say the town’s cursed. They say we’re never going to beat Fecktown,’ said Mr Scully. He was the eldest of the three by well over a year and liked to live up to the ominous old man image. Mr McCleary suspected he didn’t even need that walking stick.

‘But we’ve beaten them in the past,’ said Mr O’Riordan. The youngest by at least four months and therefore the voice of eager youth.

‘Five years. It’s been five bitter years,’ said Mr Scully looking sorrowfully into the distance of the boxes of crisp packets. ‘And now they’ve got Whacker Jackson. He’s unstoppable. They say he’s had a pneumatic pump fitted into his arm. There’s not a man in Ballysuir that can beat him.’

‘What about Díarmuid Doyle?’ asked Mr O’Riordan.

‘No.’ said Mr McCleary.

‘Why not?’ said Mr Scully. ‘Díarmuid Doyle’s the only one that can beat Whacker Jackson.’

‘No.’

‘He’s our only hope. He’s the best road bowler this town has ever seen. Whacker would be shaking in his boots if he had to face him.’

‘No,’ insisted Mr McCleary. He got up, walked over to the door and lifted up the little curtain over the small porthole which looked out into the main room of the pub. Outside in the main room Díarmuid was dancing on a table top. He was spilling a pint out of one hand and a woman out of the other. The woman cackled and shifted her breasts so that they were back to the desired 40:60 ratio inside:outside her orange top. Some of the patrons were delighted with Díarmuid and clapped along. Others slept through it all. The song on the jukebox changed and Díarmuid shifted into can-can mode. In all he managed just three leg kicks. One on top of the table, the other two on his journey to the floor. Díarmuid’s lady friend cackled once more and fell on top of him. The patrons continued to clap.

‘No. Díarmuid doesn’t bowl any more. We’ll just have to find a new road bowler.’

Chapter 3

Nine years earlier a fat squirming worm of a crowd lay on a thin dead pencil of a country road. Everyone was bunched up down the middle of the road trying to get a clear view of the top.

Suddenly a wave ripped down the crowd as it was split apart by an unknown force. Through the centre sped the blur of a little metal ball.

Everyone spun around to watch it go past. Further and further it bounced, pushing apart the crowd.

Then it rolled.

Then it trickled.

Then it stopped.

A man strode up and placed a flag on the ground beside the little metal ball. He didn't wear a white coat or a bright jacket to differentiate himself. Everyone knew who he was. He was the man with the flags.

Back at the top of the road the crowd cheered. It was a good throw. Jack Beed was pleased with himself. As he strode back to his waiting position, he cocked his chest and flicked a look at Díarmuid.

'Is Uncle Díarmuid going to win?'

'Maybe Michael, maybe.'

From his vantage point on top of his father's shoulders Michael watched Díarmuid step out into the middle of the road. He looked like a giant. In one hand he carried the little metal ball, in the other a pint. He took a sip of the drink and placed it carefully down on the road. He backed up a couple of paces, set his gaze then strode forward, whipped his arm round like a propeller and released the ball. Away it shot. Bounding along the road.

Again the crowd spread before it. Young lads waited till the last moment before leaping away. No one dared wait too long though.

All eyes squinted down the long road except for Michael's. Michael's eyes were pointing at his uncle. This big man had always just been a walking barrel of fun. Michael never thought he could be exciting. His uncle could do something; something great; something graceful. When he threw that ball he looked like some kind of cross between a ballet dancer and an action hero. Michael saw his uncle's expression change from nervous hope to delirious delight. Díarmuid's roar exploded out of him and carried him up into the air. While he was up there he gave the sky a quick punch with his fist just to teach it a lesson about underestimating him. As he hit the ground again a crowd flooded in on top of Díarmuid and Michael lost sight of him. All he could hear was Díarmuid's roar, louder than the rest of the crowd combined.

17-year-old Michael shifted his school bag on his back as he turned the corner onto the main road by his house. The bag was heavy with new books all ready and eagerly waiting to confuse the shit out of him over the course of the next year. School wasn't

Michael's strong suit. He wasn't sure what his strong suit was yet but it definitely wasn't school. He had a lot of work to do this year if he wanted to get into college. That was the general consensus. He didn't know why he wanted to get into college. It just seemed like it was going to be more school. Why would you struggle through something you don't like when the reward was just more of it? It was like having a job where at the end of the week you got paid in work. But he took people's word for it that college was what he wanted. Although which course he wanted they didn't say and he couldn't figure out what he wanted to do which just added to his stress. He was getting stressed out about coming up with a reason why he should be getting stressed out about his exams.

'Hey Mikey! Slow down, Mr Speedypants.'

Michael was too lost in thought to hear Gregor coming up behind him. When he caught up Gregor grabbed him by the arm.

'Hey.'

'Oh, hey.'

'Jesus man, I've been calling you for ages.'

'Oh, sorry.'

Gregor was scruffy. It was as much a description of his personality as his appearance.

'You were walking pretty fast. Are you in a big hurry to get to school or something?'

'Well, it's kind of cold and I didn't bring a jacket so I wanted to get inside.'

Gregor let out a yelp of victory, 'Ah! Listen to him. It's cold so he wanted to get in. Jesus Michael, you can't just go speeding off to school just because it's cold. I've told you before, if you turn up to school early you're going to look like a prat.' Gregor looked at Michael's bag, disappointed. 'And what's this?'

'What?'

'Michael. You can't carry your bag on your back using both straps.'

'But it's heavy.'

'Yeah. Exactly. You've got to carry it like this.'

Michael looked down. Gregor was holding one of the straps of his bag and dragging it along the ground behind him. Michael looked back along the road. There was a trail of paper and biros spread out behind them.

'You've dropped some of your stuff there.'

Gregor was losing his patience. 'Yes! Of course I have! I'm dragging my bag along the ground! What do you expect?!' Gregor pointed at his lost stationary. 'That's cool. That's what cool is all about. It shows that I don't give a shit.'

'But that stuff all cost money.'

'That's the whole point. Michael?!...What?...I just don't understand you sometimes.'

'Sorry.'

Michael carefully lowered his schoolbag to the ground and they continued to walk. Gregor's bag bled a calculator.

'So what did you get up to last night?' Michael asked trying to change the subject.

'Ah just out with Gemma. You?'

'Yeah, not much, just watched TV.'

'Another night in, eh? Man, you've got to get yourself a girlfriend.'

'Yeah.'

‘Seriously man, they’re great. It’s like a mate that you kiss.’

‘Well, I would if I could.’

‘Of course you can. Just find a girl you like and ask her out.’

Michael was sheepish. ‘Yeah, I guess so.’

‘Come on, Mikey,’ said Gregor to the space where he expected Michael to be but Michael wasn’t there to respond. He was a few paces back looking down into a ditch at the side of the road.

‘Is that you Uncle Díarmuid?’ said Michael into the ditch.

‘It is Michael,’ came Díarmuid’s reply.

‘Did you have a good night last night?’

‘Pretty good yeah.’

Michael stood in silence for a moment. A bird chirped from a telephone wire.

‘Well, see you so.’

‘Alright, see you then Michael. Take care of yourself.’

Michael was feeling pretty uncomfortable. He should have let Gregor sit down beside Gemma. Gregor had insisted Michael enter the classroom first, since walking in second was cooler, so Michael had walked in and sat down beside Gemma without thinking. He felt like a bit of a gooseberry sitting in between them. Particularly because they’d started kissing. About two inches in front of his chin. For about a minute now. Gemma had her hand resting on Michael’s knee for support. Michael looked down at it anxiously. His leg was starting to go a bit numb. He was afraid to move it though in case he collapsed the whole structure. He carefully tried to take his books from his bag and put them on his desk without disturbing the loving couple rubbing faces in front of his head.

Over the tops of their heads a pair of eyes appeared.

‘Hi Michael.’

‘Oh, hi Emily.’

‘How’s it going?’

‘Grand. Just...unpacking my books here.’

‘Cool.’

‘Yeah.’

Michael didn’t know what else to say to her. Emily was a nice girl but a little strange sometimes. He’d often catch her staring at him and then she’d do a little jump and look in a different direction. Did she really think Michael looked that weird? She smiled at Michael now, or at least her eyes did as they watched him carefully over Gregor and Gemma’s heads. He tried to find something else to look at besides Emily or Gregor-Gemma. There wasn’t much else in view so he looked up at the ceiling and pretended to yawn. Just then the school bell rang.

‘Saved by the bell.’

‘Sorry?’ asked Emily.

‘Oh nothing.’

Gregor and Gemma broke off their kiss just as Brother Peter entered the classroom. He strode up to the rostra and looked down at the class meaningfully.

‘Je-sus Christ,’ said Brother Peter. ‘Jesus Christ lads. What does Jesus say to you?’ Brother Peter paused but no one answered. It wasn’t the type of question you should answer if you’re sane. ‘He says, “I love you.”’ Brother Peter put on rather a strange voice when he was speaking for Jesus. It sounded vaguely gay. “I love you. And I will punish you for your sins. I will punish you with love.” Jesus loves you. So he will punish you. With love.’

Everybody tried not to meet Brother Peter’s eyes but at the same time not be caught looking away.

‘Now I know what you’re thinking lads. How do you punish someone with love? Well, your mammy loves you, doesn’t she? And how does she punish? Well, Jimmy?’

‘Eh, she doesn’t give you dinner.’

‘The silent treatment! She gives you the silent treatment. Doesn’t she lads?’ said Brother Peter delighted at the concept. ‘And that’s what purgatory is like. Jesus, just sitting there, not saying a word to you, just sitting and staring into space with that pissed off look on his face that you just want to carve off with a bread knife. Yes, Pádraig?’

‘Eh, Mr Colgan, is this on the syllabus?’

Brother Peter sagged down into his chair. ‘The syllabus?’ he said wearily. ‘What’s that? Where did that go to? What happened to the syllabus of my life Pádraig? Y’know? I thought I had my life syllabus all figured out. The course work, the essays, the practical experiments, the mock exam papers. And then she leaves me. She just ups and leaves. Leaves me for the feckin’ parish priest. Of all the clichés. And not even *our* parish priest. I wouldn’t have minded so much if it’d been Father Garvey. But she shacked up with that old bollocks from Fecktown. I mean, how could she?’

There was an uncomfortable silence. Even Michael had stopped taking notes at this stage. The silence went on for a couple of minutes until it was broken by Mr Penny, the principle, coming in the door.

‘Good morning, Mr Colgan,’ he said to the slumped figure at the top of the class.

‘Mr Penny.’

And then it happened: Mr Penny was followed into the class by the girl. The girl that Michael had seen on her bike cycling along the road with her long blonde hair and her long summer skirt. She looked even better close up. Her features were even more delicate. She looked like the template for beautiful. If someone tried to make a beautiful face they’d be trying to make this girl’s face. She was nigh on stunning. *And* Michael had a bit of a thing for school uniforms.

‘Uh, what are you wearing there Mr Colgan?’

‘It’s a monk’s habit.’

‘Right. And why are you wearing that then?’

‘I’m a monk now. Brother Peter.’

‘Right then...uh, Brother Peter...there’s a message from your wife. She says: “You’ll never be as much of a man as Father Gruntle. He gives her the kind of love that she needs. Goodbye. And, uh,...”’ Mr Penny had to check the note to remember the rest. ‘She hopes that you can “learn to love yourself and let go of the self-hatred that you hold so precious to your heart.” Now class, this is Ali, she’s just joined the school. I’d like you all to make her feel welcome.’

Ali smiled sweetly. Michael grinned stupidly.

Michael sat on a bench in the school yard. Beside him Gemma sat on Gregor's lap. The two were busy kissing. Michael slowly ate his cheese sandwich. He gazed out across the school yard and took a sip from his carton of juice.

'I've been thinking,' said Gregor, coming up for air. 'Are we heading out tonight?'

'Ah, I don't think so. I was thinking I should probably do a bit of study, y'know?' said Michael.

'Man. Come on. It's Tuesday Night. *Tuesday Night*.'

Michael had to admit that it was Tuesday night. 'Well, alright then.'

'Good man. So...what about asking that new girl to join us?'

'Eh...'

'Come on. I saw the way you were looking at her.'

'Ah. Yeah. No. Maybe. I don't know.'

'Go on. Just say a group of us are going out and would she like to come too.'

Michael just shrugged and turned away. 'Uh, yeah, maybe. I guess so.'

'Come on, Michael, they're not all going to turn out like Níamh. It's time to get over that and get back in the game.'

Michael was feeling very uncomfortable. Luckily, he was rescued by Gemma. 'Oh, do you know what I heard? Mick McMichaels has pulled out of the road bowling competition on Saturday.'

The other two were shocked.

'Really? Who are they going to get to replace him?' asked Michael.

'Well, I wouldn't want to do it,' said Gregor.

Gemma smiled at her boyfriend. 'Don't worry dear. I doubt they're going to call on you.'

'I'm serious! There's no way I'd go up against Whacker Jackson. He's fucking crazy. Just like all the rest of those Fecktown bastards. I heard there was a guy killed over there the other night. Shot dead.'

'Really?!' said Michael.

'Well, maybe it was a horse actually. And it wasn't really shot. Someone let off a banger near it. Still though, that's fucked up.'

'Yeah.'

Gemma looked unimpressed. 'So you're scared of competing against them in case they let off a banger near you?'

'I'm not scared. I just don't want to. I'm just not interested in that kind of thing. I'm not scared. Scared? Come on.'

'Yeah, right,' said Gemma.

Gregor looked around for something to shift the focus of attention.

'Hey look, isn't that the girl?'

Gregor was right. It was the girl. Ali had just come around a corner into the schoolyard and was now walking across it. She was all by herself with her schoolbag on her back, both straps. Michael felt his insides tighten. He stared hard at his yoghurt.

'Now's your chance man.'

'Right. Okay. Great. Yeah, absolutely. Chance for what was it again?'

‘To ask her out.’

‘Yeah, absolutely. So what am I saying?’

‘Just say that we’re going for a drink tonight.’

‘Yeah, absolutely. Perfect. And then...?’

‘And ask her if she wants to join us.’

‘Right. Yeah. Simple.’

‘That’s it. There you go.’

Michael got up, took a deep breath and started after her.

‘Leave the yoghurt Michael,’ said Gemma.

Michael left his yoghurt and started out after her again. He jogged across the yard, making sure to keep his jog nonchalant. When he got to the far side he opened the heavy fire door and stepped in.

Ali was nowhere to be seen. Michael looked up and down the corridor. There was no sign of her. He didn’t know what to do. Which way did she go? He looked up the corridor again hoping to see some kind of clue that would indicate that Ali had gone that way. A couple of first years were throttling each other with their ties. What could that mean? Would Ali walk towards throttling or away from it? It was impossible to know. Michael turned and looked down the corridor again. All he saw in that direction was Níamh.

Michael jumped back and hit the wall.

‘Hello Michael, my dear Michael,’ said Michael’s Ex.

Michael stood perfectly still as if faced with a dangerous animal. To an outsider Níamh wouldn’t have looked that scary. She stood with her hands held demurely in front of her and her head bowed slightly. She looked up at Michael through a ringlet of red hair. A shy smile sat below her freckled nose. To Michael she was terrifying though. He slowly started to back away. Níamh followed him.

‘Níamh, what are you doing here? They’re not giving you day release now, are they?’

‘Tell me, Michael, how it is that you are doing this day?’

Michael spoke carefully. He didn’t want any sudden movements, either physical or verbal, to spook her. ‘Fine Níamh. How are you?...How are you...feeling?’

Níamh brought her hands up to her chest and smiled up towards the ceiling. ‘Oh yes, joyful is it that I am being Michael. To be here with you and out of that place.’

‘Oh good.’

Michael bumped into a wall behind him. Níamh kept advancing towards him. He had nowhere to turn. She was very close now. Her mood flicked from joy to despair.

‘Oh Michael, would that what I am saying were the truthfulness of the matter. I am in the wanting of you Michael. I do feel it in my breast.’

‘Right, right, mm.’

Michael tried to look anywhere but at Níamh. Difficult to do when she was an inch away from his face.

‘Oh Michael, they did try to tear us apart, but I knew that our love does be stronger than any cage, four strong security guards and a nine-foot-high electric fence.’

Michael had thought that he was quite scared but now he realised that that had just been a little bit of anxiousness compared the heart stopping fear that he now felt. He cautiously tread through his words, 'Níamh, did the doctors actually release you from...the hospital...or did you...release yourself?'

Níamh put her finger up to Michael's lips. Michael flinched. 'Shhh Michael, there's no need to worry about them any more. All that is important now is you and me. You know we belong together don't you?'

'Yeah, absolutely. In a kind of a way,' said Michael through Níamh's finger. 'I mean not completely. Maybe we should think about not...' Michael trailed off as he saw Níamh's expression flare with anger.

'We are destined for each other Michael right?!'

Michael tried to think of something to defuse the situation. He ran through the possibilities in his mind. He could scream for help, but if Ali heard he'd look like a wimp that was getting beaten up by a girl. He could make a run for it, but he kind of suspected Níamh would be able to track him by scent. He could pretend he was having a heart attack, he could pretend he was French, he could pretend he was his own twin brother. Luckily he was saved from whatever brilliant idea he would have come up with by the appearance of Emily.

'Hi Michael. Hi Níamh.'

Michael nearly exploded with delight. 'Hey! It's Emily! Hey Emily! How's it going?! How are you? Good to see you. Actually Emily there was something I wanted to talk to you about...' Michael quickly put his arm around Emily's shoulder and led her away.

'Yeah, interesting, an interesting thing Emily, that I really wanted to talk to you about, this thing,' Michael babbled.

After a couple of seconds he glanced back to see what Níamh was doing. She was watching the back of Emily's head like she was thinking about cracking it open and using her brains to paint the walls. Luckily at that moment one of the teachers came round a corner and Níamh fled into the woods.

'Hey, thanks for that Emily. You really saved me there.'

'No problem.'

There was a moment of silence. Michael didn't know what more to say. His brain was just about to think of something when his eyes spotted Ali.

'So, Michael...I was wondering...'

'Uh, I've got to go Emily, I'll see you later.'

Mr Penny was sitting in his office pretending to look over some paperwork. What he was really doing was hiding from his secretary. Of course, she knew he was trying to avoid her since she was his secretary and she knew that he had no paperwork to do. She knew that he had no paperwork to do for the simple reason that he never had any paperwork to do because she did it all. But still he continued to pretend. She stared at him coldly through the glass window in the door to his office. Somehow he managed to never notice her staring at him. He managed to look in every direction but at her. He

went out of his way to not look at her. He'd turn the long way round in his swivel chair rather than have his glance pass over that wall even for a second.

Mr Penny couldn't remember why he didn't want to meet his secretary's gaze. It had just been going on so long that if he actually looked at her now it would be a big thing. The door to his office opened and Mr Penny buried his face in his filing cabinet.

'The mayor is here to see you Mr Penny.'

'Oh yes, thank you Grace, send him in,' said Mr Penny without removing his attention from the filing cabinet. He only managed to find the file he was looking for, one of four which were in the filing cabinet, when Mr McCleary entered the office.

'Ah John, come in.'

'Ted, how are you?'

Suddenly the door to the office opened again. Mr McCleary looked over at it but Mr Penny was too well practised at this and he stared intently into Mr McCleary's eyes.

'Would you like tea or coffee gentlemen?'

'Uh, no thank you.'

'No, we're fine thank you Grace,' said Mr Penny not taking his eyes off Mr McCleary. Mr McCleary felt slightly uncomfortable with Mr Penny staring at him. But then Grace left the office again and Mr Penny let go of his hand.

'Now what can I do for you?'

Ali was crouching down by the lockers looking into her school bag. Michael didn't know what she was looking for but all he wanted in the world was to help her find it. As he approached her he noticed a little frown on her face. It made Michael want to protect her. He wished he could surround her and stop anything from hurting her, physically or emotionally. Maybe that's what she was really looking for at the bottom of her bag: a shield. Michael wanted to be a shield. He wanted to be *her* shield.

Michael failed to be her shield within the first couple of seconds of deciding to be her shield. Lost in thought Michael didn't notice Ali standing up. The back of her head came up and smashed into his nose. It was painful but Michael didn't mind. As well as the pain he also felt a small bit of elation as he got a breath of her hair, so clean and perfect. Mostly he felt the pain though.

Ali was the first to talk.

'Ah! Fucking...'

She rubbed the back of her head and Michael could see that her little frown had deepened. I'll protect you, he thought. Mostly he thought pain though. He put his fingers up to his nose to see if it was bleeding. He was pretty sure a bloody nose wasn't a good thing when asking a girl out. His nose wasn't bleeding though.

'Sorry,' he said. Or at least he was pretty sure that's what he said. That's what he'd intended to say but it had just come out as a high-pitched croak. As soon as he'd opened his mouth to speak to this girl his throat had dried up like a tomato in the sun. Ali seemed to understand what he was saying though. Already they seemed to have some kind of connection.

'Well, just watch where you're going will you?' said Ali.

Michael was surprised to hear she had an English accent.

‘Oh, you’re English,’ he croaked.

‘What?’

‘You’re English. That’s cool. I don’t have a problem with that. I’m fine with English people.’

Ali just stared back at him. Her frown was beginning to look less inviting now. Michael thought he better get out what he was going to say before his throat dried up completely and he never spoke again for the rest of his life.

‘Uh, welcome to the school. Michael. Is my name. Michael.’

For a second Michael became transfixed with Ali’s vibrant eyes.

‘Eh.’

They were so beautiful how could she possibly see out of them?

‘Uh.’

Surely her eyes would just want to look at themselves all day long.

‘Um.’

Just as he started to feel himself actually falling into her eyes Michael managed to snap himself out of his trance.

‘I was wondering! Some of us are going out to a pub tonight, and I was wondering, if you’d like to come too.’

Ali seemed totally taken aback by this. It looked like she couldn’t believe this had actually happened, but not in a she-couldn’t-believe-her-luck kind of way.

‘R-ight. Can I take a rain check on that, actually? I’m kind of busy with the change of school et cetera.’

‘Oh yeah absolutely. A rain check. Yeah. No problem. Take as many rain checks as you want. ‘Cause I was thinking of taking a rain check myself. So actually you can borrow mine if you like. I don’t know if it would fit you...’ Michael didn’t know what a rain check was.

‘Right. Yeah. Goodbye.’

‘Yep, seeya then.’

They both stood staring at each other till Michael realised he was the one who was supposed to leave.

After lunch they were in English class. One of the class was reading from Jane Austen in the kind of dull, clumsy monotone that Jane Austen must surely have dreamed her work would be one day be expressed through. At the top of the class Mrs Creevy cracked open her third beer of the day. She did it under her desk so that none of the class would notice. The class were so bored they wouldn’t have noticed if she’d had a full keg under her desk. Mrs Creevy knew this for a fact. She took a sip and placed the can back on her desk.

Gregor and Michael were sitting at the back of the class.

‘How’d it go?’ whispered Gregor.

Michael just glared back at him.

‘Is she coming out tonight?’ whispered Gregor.

Michael tried to increase the intensity of his glare but still Gregor didn’t get the message.

Mr Penny entered the class.

‘Hello, hello. I have something to talk to the class about if you don’t mind Mrs Creevy.’

Mrs Creevy shrugged and took a swig of her drink.

‘Okay. Now class, as you might have heard, Mick McMichaels has had to pull out of the road bowling competition this Saturday after an unfortunate accident where a tractor fell on his arm. The mayor reckons it’s time we got some new blood into the sport so he asked me to see if any of you wanted to give it a go.’

Nobody spoke up.

‘Come on now. There’s no need to be afraid. Sure, maybe Fecktown have beaten us for the past few years, but that just means that it’s Ballysuir’s turn. We’ve just got to get back up there and give it a shot.’

Still nobody volunteered. All the class nervously tried to find something to distract themselves. Jane Austen had never had so much attention. Gregor, of course, didn’t have a copy so he grabbed Michael’s.

Mr Penny knew he wasn’t doing well. He tried to build to a crescendo. ‘This town needs somebody to be their champion. That somebody could be any one of you. All you have to do is stand up and take the chance! That’s what life is: taking a chance! If you don’t take a chance once in a while you may as well be dead. Now who’s going to do it! Who’s going to take a chance!’

No hands flew up. Nobody jumped out of their seats. Mr Penny was about to give in but then a little English voice spoke up.

‘Michael should do it.’

‘Yes!’ said Mr Penny leaping on the idea. ‘Well done, Michael. Give him a round of applause class.’

Mostly through relief that they hadn’t been snared themselves the class all applauded loudly. Michael looked around at them. He looked at Ali. She smiled back at him. The applause started to ebb and Mr Penny spoke over it.

‘Well Michael, what do you say?’

Michael looked around at the expectant faces again.

‘Yeah, absolutely.’

Chapter 4

Five years before, the crowds were back on the road. Ballysuirans lined one side of the road, Fecktowners the other. Across the gulf of 4 metres of tar macadam they shouted and jeered each other. Both sides wanted, needed this victory. They could feel it rising up inside them. They'd both known the excruciating weight of defeat. If they lost then those other bastards would be rubbing it in their faces all year. They had to win, just to show them. That's why they shouted and roared and screamed at each other because they feared they wouldn't be able to shout come five minutes time. So they yelled their abuse, each side trying to outdo the other. The fever rising and rising, not bothering to worry about where it was going to land. If that white line hadn't been an impenetrable barrier in between them who knows what would have happened.

Standing by the Ballysuir side Díarmuid was getting ready to bowl.

'Is Uncle Díarmuid going to win this year Dad?'

'Well hasn't he won for the past 4 years?'

'He has.'

Díarmuid took a sip of his Guinness and set it down on the side of the road. He walked out into the middle of the road and stopped. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath. Michael had grown well used to this routine over the years. For a couple of seconds Díarmuid seemed to go to a different place. Michael always wanted to know what he saw in that place but he'd been too shy to ask him. After a few seconds Díarmuid opened his eyes again and Michael saw the familiar serenity that always entered his uncle just before he was about to bowl. He didn't have time to think about the way his uncle almost didn't look like himself any more because at that moment Díarmuid launched himself forward, swung his arm around and launched the ball.

The crowd was quiet, save for a few cries of anguish the owners of which just couldn't stifle. 'Come on!', 'Go!', 'Do it!' The crowd from Ballysuir wanted that little ball to never stop. But it always did. As it did this time. The exact distance from the bowler to the ball was: too short. It hadn't passed the longest bowl of the competitor from Fecktown. Díarmuid had lost. No one thought it was possible but everyone knew it was true.

Díarmuid's face collapsed as the Fecktowners launched into the sky. Michael watched his father walk over to console him. Across the road Ecky Powell, the Fecktown bowler, was lifted aloft on the shoulders of Fecktown. Back on the other side of the road Ballysuir trudged home demoralised but with a hint of hope. There was always next year.

Michael stood outside his front door trying to collect his thoughts. What had just happened? How had he just become the town's new road bowler? He'd never bowled before in his life. Well, apart from that one time his uncle had tried to show him how, but he was only six then and they'd been using a tennis ball instead of the proper metal

ball and that Alsatian had jumped on him to try and get the ball before he'd even had his first bowl and then Díarmuid had thrown the dog into a field, so that didn't really count. He'd never been tempted to try it again after that.

Could he actually do this? Could he beat Whacker Jackson? Surely he didn't stand a chance. Mr Penny seemed to believe in him though. And all his class. And Ali. Why had she volunteered him like that? More to the point why had he accepted? Even more to the point how could he have accepted? Surely it was more complicated than that. Shouldn't there have been some kind of competition to see who would represent Ballysuir? Some kind of elimination process where they separated out the good bowlers from the bad bowlers and then eventually the best bowler. Where were all the other bowlers? Back in the day it had been a tough competition to get the honour of bowling for Ballysuir.

Michael didn't want to think about why no one else wanted to bowl. Instead he concentrated on the next task at hand. How was he going to tell his family? He took a deep breath and opened the door. Inside the kitchen Lucy and Anastasia were at the table doing their homework. His mother was sitting on one of the high stools with her friend Dee, peeling potatoes.

'Hiya Michael.'

'Hi Mammy, hi Mrs Sheridan.'

'Hi Michael.'

Michael decided it would be best if he just told his mother about the road bowling straight away. Get it over with. 'Mammy...'

'We were just talking about the disco they have every Saturday up in Shafter's, Michael,' interrupted his mother.

'Do you ever head out to that Michael?' asked Dee.

'Uh, yeah, sometimes.'

'Oh, I bet you're up there all the time scoring lovely birds,' said Síle.

'I'd love to still be going to discos,' said Dee.

They'd gotten off the point and Michael hadn't even got the point out yet. He tried to think of a way of linking this conversation back to the road bowling. 'Speaking of discos, I was in school today and...'

But his mother still wasn't listening. She turned to Dee. 'Oh yeah. I'd love to go to out to a disco or something sometime too. You know, sometimes...sometimes, I just want to let it all go, y'know? Just scream at the top of my lungs. Woo-hooo!' Síle let out a loud cry of delight.

Dee quickly joined her. 'Weeeeha!' she shouted.

Michael gave up. It'd be a good while before he had their attention again.

'Yahooo!' said Síle.

'Yooow!' said Dee.

The two women jumped up from the table and started dancing around the room. They jumped off the chairs and swung in and out of each other's arms. Lucy and Anastasia watched in awe for a moment before jumping up and joining in. They didn't need much of an excuse to be tempted away from their homework but this was an unmissable opportunity. Michael watched them all slightly embarrassed. He kind of wanted to join in but he knew that he was too old for these kinds of things. He was also afraid Mrs Sheridan would start dancing with him which could lead to an undesired

reaction. His body had a mind of its own these days. It could be set off by anything. Even watching that gardening show with the female presenter. Even listening to his biology teacher Mrs Byrne explaining the female anatomy in her clinical, unsexy, scientific terms. Or even an unattractive forty-year-old friend of his mother's dancing with him. And Mrs Sheridan had a tendency to do more than just a waltz. When she started dancing for some reason it always ended up with a fake striptease and the unveiling of a bra strap. She was starting into it now with his mother as the pretend punter. Michael placed himself behind the counter and untucked his shirt just to be on the safe side. Mrs Sheridan shook her hair in the way she imagined strippers did. Luckily Seán came in and interrupted the proceedings before they got too far.

'Sorry, could you keep it down? I'm trying to watch The Commitments.'

'Ah The Commitments! Brilliant!' cried Síle jumping up. 'Come on kids, The Commitments is on!'

The family sat round the living room watching the greatest film of all time: The Commitments. They all roared with laughter at the jokes they'd heard a dozen times before. Michael still hadn't told them about the competition. Any second now he promised himself. As soon as there was a slow point in the film. The problem was The Commitments didn't have a slow point. If they weren't laughing at the hilarity they were caught up in the emotion of a group of working-class Dubliners trying to find something special to put into their lives. And then there was all the brilliant songs which the family all knew off by heart. How was Michael ever going to find an opportunity to speak up. He guessed he'd just wait until after the film.

"Ya little bollix." Hahaha! Did you hear that? Did you hear that Lucy?

'Yes Mammy.'

"Ya little bollix." Brilliant. Feckin' brilliant.'

Seán noticed that Michael was looking distracted.

'Are you all right son? Do you want me to explain it to you?'

But Michael had seen this film enough times that he rarely needed any explanations. 'Eh, I think I'm going to be bowling for Ballysuir this Saturday.'

The whole family went silent. The Commitments kept singing away. Michael looked around at them waiting for some kind of reaction. They were in shock. Michael had never entered anything before.

Síle's face bloomed into delight and pride. 'Oh, that'd be brilliant. That'd be brilliant. What do you think Seán? That'd be brilliant, wouldn't it?'

'Yeah. If that's what you want to do Michael,' said Seán.

'But, do you think I could do well? I mean, I only have a week to practise. And Whacker Jackson hasn't been beaten for the last three years,' said Michael.

'Oh, Whacker Jackson's not so scary,' reassured Síle.

'Well, he is a bit,' said Michael.

'Yeah, he is a bit actually Síle,' agreed Seán.

'What are you talking about? Michael could beat him. He's great at throwing things. Remember that time you threw that snail really far?' said Síle.

Michael did remember that time he threw that snail really far. The memory buoyed his spirits a bit. 'That's true. Remember that Da?'

'Well, that is true, he did throw that snail really far that one time, but-'

'And Díarmuid could help him as well, couldn't he Seán?'

Seán was unsure. 'Well, I don't know about that. Díarmuid's...'

But Síle had the idea now and was determined to make all the pieces fall into place. 'Course he will, just ask him Michael. He'll teach you how to be a brilliant road bowler. You'll be great. Michael could beat Whacker couldn't he Dee?'

Dee smiled at Michael. 'Oh definitely, Michael's a great strong lad. I've always thought he'd be great at bowling.' Michael knew he must be imagining it but somehow Mrs Sheridan made that sound like a dirty thing. 'It's about time someone taught those Fecktown bastards a lesson,' she added.

'Go on now and find Díarmuid,' said Síle, 'I'm sure he'll help you. It's seven o'clock he's probably down in the pub.'

'Oh yeah,' said Michael remembering, 'I'm meeting Gregor in the pub anyway so I'll talk to Uncle Díarmuid when I'm there.'

Michael got up to leave but his father stopped him.

'Do you not have any homework to do?' he said.

'Ah come on Seán, it's Tuesday Night. *Tuesday Night*. Let him have a little fun,' said Síle.

'Oh, alright then, but be back by 2.'

'Okay, seeya later.'

Michael left and they went back to watching the film.

'Ah The Commitments.'

The evening was warm as Michael walked down the hill towards the pub. There was still some day left in the sky. The sun had gone down but the sky was obviously having such a good time that it had decided to stay on being blue for a while. Birds were singing in the trees. Michael didn't recognise the tune but he appreciated it anyway. A gentle breeze ran its fingers through his hair.

Michael was feeling pleased. His parents had reacted well to his announcement. He was starting to believe he could actually do this. His parents believed in him. Maybe he might stand a chance. His class believed in him. Who's to say that he wasn't a great road bowler. Ali believed in him. Michael really hoped that was a sign that she might like him. He wasn't sure where nominating you for a sporting event fitted into the rules of flirtation. A girl as pretty as that had never fancied him before but maybe this girl was different. Maybe she saw past looks and intelligence and a sense of humour, to the real person.

As Michael walked along dreaming of how it could be he spotted a particularly round looking rock sitting by the side of the road. He picked up the rock without even thinking about what he was going to do with it. He measured the weight of it by tossing it from one hand to the other. He looked down the road. There was no one around. He looked back at the rock. It was a very round rock. It was quite possibly the roundest rock he'd ever seen. Michael looked up and down the road again. There was

still no one around. He took a couple of paces into the middle of the road. He brought the rock up to his chest, took two strides forward, swung his arm round and released it.

It was a pretty round rock but it wasn't that round. It could never have been round enough to bowl with. After only a couple of bounces it span off into a field and made a smashing sound. This surprised Michael as neither rocks nor fields usually smashed.

Michael ran up and looked over the hedge into the field. Jim Geraghty stared back at him. Jim Geraghty was looking out of the broken window of the smallest caravan that Michael had ever seen.

'Is that you Michael?'

'It is Mr Geraghty.'

'Throwin' a rock were you?'

'I was Mr Geraghty. Sorry about that. I seem to have broken your window there.'

'Ach, sure, don't worry about that, it was quite an old window.'

'What are you doing in this caravan Mr Geraghty?'

'Well, I had to sell the farm after you dug up my fields the other day. I just about managed to get enough to buy this caravan, what with the price of property these days, sure you know yourself.'

'Not really.'

'So I've been living in here since then.'

'And how long has that been?'

'Since about 3 o'clock this afternoon. Things move very fast in this business.'

'Right.' Michael looked behind Mr Geraghty. 'I think I might have broken your other window there as well Mr Geraghty.'

Jim Geraghty turned around. 'Oh God, you did and all Michael. Jaysus that was some throw. Well, I guess I won't be able to sleep here tonight. Or else I'll freeze to death. Hahaha. Well, sure, I'll see you again,' said Jim Geraghty getting up and heading off across the field.

'Seeya Mr Geraghty,' said Michael and he continued on his way into town.

The roar washed out over him as Michael opened the door of McLoughlin's.

'Go on Michael!'

Michael's first reaction was to turn and run but then he realised that people weren't angry with him. Everybody was cheering. A little bald man Michael had never seen before grabbed his hand and shook it excitedly pulling Michael into the pub.

'We're all very proud of you Michael.'

'Thanks.'

The little bald man let go of his hand and Michael drifted further into the pub. People raised their pints and patted him on the back as he passed. He could barely make his way through with everyone coming up to congratulate him. Gregor's face squeezed through the crowd. '*There* you are. Everyone's been waiting for you to show up.'

Michael looked around at the crowd. 'Have you seen my uncle?'

But Gregor couldn't hear over the shouts and cheers.

‘Well done Michael!’ said one old man pointing his toothless grin into Michael’s face.

‘Thanks,’ said Michael and the old man disappeared back into the crowd laughing. Michael turned back to Gregor. ‘Have you seen my uncle?’

‘No. This place is pretty packed though. He could be here somewhere.’

‘Show Fecktown who’s boss Michael!’ a sweaty eyebrowed man shouted into Michael’s ear.

‘I’ll try,’ said Michael.

‘You hear that?!’ shouted the sweaty eyebrowed man, this time to the rest of the pub, ‘He says he’s going to show Fecktown who’s boss!’ Another cheer went up.

‘Do you want a drink Michael?’

‘Well, I just want to find my Uncle Díarmuid first, then I can...’

‘There you go big man, get that into you,’ said someone shoving a pint into Michael’s hand. Michael looked round at the crowd. Everyone looked back at him expectantly. ‘Cheers,’ said Michael. He took a sip and the crowd all cheered again.

Three men watched the celebrations from the darkened back room. It was a different darkened back room this time. This one had a working light but they left it off partially for atmosphere, mainly because it was easier to see through the little window into the main room when the light was off.

‘Do you think he stands a chance?’ asked Mr O’Riordan.

‘Not a hope in hell,’ said Mr Scully.

‘Look at them though. They’re delighted. They have someone to believe in again. It’s worth it. Even if it’s just for a week,’ said Mr McCleary.

‘It’s a bit unfair on the poor boy though, isn’t it?’ said Mr O’Riordan.

‘It’s for the greater good. This town needs just a little bit of hope to pull them out of this slump. And if he could actually win, well, maybe this town could get back up on its feet again.’

‘Can I help you lads?’ said Noel McLoughlin coming into the back room and turning on the light.

‘Oh. We were just...’

‘Oh, Mr McCleary, it’s yourself. What are you doing back here in the dark?’

‘Uh...’

‘We were just developing some photographs,’ said Mr O’Riordan.

‘You were developing photographs?’ said Noel suspiciously.

‘He means, taking a photograph,’ said Mr Scully. ‘In the dark. So that we can see what we look like when we’re sleeping. If we were all sleeping together.’

Mr McCleary looked backwards and forwards between his two colleagues trying to decide, given the choice, which he’d get rid of first. Of course he didn’t have much choice since they were the only two who could be bothered turning up to the town council meetings these days.

Noel wasn’t buying their water tight explanation but he decided to let it go. ‘Alright, well I think you’d better take it back out into the main room lads.’

‘Right you are Noel,’ said Mr McCleary pushing the other two out the door before they said anything else.

Gregor and Michael were sitting at a table. They weren’t drunk but it was still very much on the agenda. Gregor turned to Michael.

‘So do you reckon you can actually beat Whacker Jackson?’

‘I dunno. Maybe.’

‘Man, just because your uncle was good at it doesn’t necessarily mean that you’re going to be good at it too.’

‘He’s going to train me though. Actually I’m supposed to be talking to him about that,’ said Michael looking around.

‘Listen man, it’s Tuesday night now, the competition is on Saturday, that means that you’ve only got three days left to practise. When you’ve never bowled before. And you’re up against Whacker Jackson. Even with your uncle you don’t stand a chance of beating him. He’s the best.’

‘But maybe. Maybe I could win. I mean, why not?’

‘Well...’ Gregor thought about this. ‘Because of all the things I just said.’

‘Mm.’

‘I mean have you ever done anything like this before?’

‘Well, there was this one time I threw a snail really far.’

They were interrupted by the crash of the main door being swung violently open. The pub fell silent. Michael and Gregor strained to see what was happening. Over the tops of heads they caught sight of something they didn’t expect or want to see tonight. Whacker Jackson had just entered the pub. He stood just inside the doorway scowling scornfully at the pub. On either side of him a couple of big men scowled at the parts of the pub not within Whacker’s main field of vision. Whacker was a big man, big in both directions. He puffed out his chest as far as it would go but it still failed to reach further than his belly. Nonetheless people were afraid. Even the big farmer types, many of whom were much stronger than Whacker, wilted at the sight of him.

‘Well, well, well,’ said Whacker theatrically. ‘Hello Ballysuir. And how are you all this evening? You seem to be having some kind of a celebration. And why would that be now? Have you got some new brave champion who’s going to kick my ass this Saturday?’

How had Whacker found out so quickly?

‘Well. Let’s take a look at him then.’

Michael felt everyone, including Gregor, start to edge away from him. Whacker zeroed in on the epicentre of the movement. He walked slowly over to where Michael was sitting, reached down, grabbed Michael by the collar and pulled him up out of his seat. Michael felt Whacker’s sneering breath on his face.

‘Well kid, do you think you can beat me?’

‘I guess...possibly...it could-’

‘Oh yeah?’ sneered Whacker. ‘And what makes you so sure?’

‘Well...there was this one time I threw this snai-’

‘Well you’re not going to!’ shouted Whacker not waiting for him to complete his point.

Michael tried to get his head as far back away from Whacker’s ferocious jaws as he could.

‘Oh excuse me!’ Whacker continued, ‘Where are my manners? I haven’t even introduced myself yet.’ Whacker pulled Michael closer. ‘I’m your worst fucking nightmare.’

‘The...the one about the bees in my head?’

‘No, not the one-’ Whacker stopped short and composed himself, trying to get back on track. ‘So you think you’re a smart guy do you?’

‘Not really.’

‘Then let me tell you something smart guy. You’re going to lose. I’m unbeatable. I’m unstoppable. I’m going to win this year. Just like every year. For Fecktown!’ Whacker raised his fist in the air and a cheer went up from his cronies. The Ballysuirans all looked down at their drinks afraid of catching anyone else’s eye, Fecktownner or Ballysuiran.

‘You haven’t got much to say for yourself, have you chump? You look like a bit of a loser. Is that it kid? Are you a loser? I bet you’ve been a loser all your life. And now you’re thinking that maybe this time, for once, you might not lose. You might be a champ.’ Whacker pulled Michael even closer. ‘Well, it ain’t gonna happen. Loser.’

‘Let go of him.’

The whole pub spun round to see Díarmuid standing in the doorway. Whacker smiled. He didn’t loosen his grip on Michael.

‘Díarmuid Doyle. I should have known you’d have something to do with this loser. Losers tend to stick together. Ya pair of...losers.’

‘Let go of him Whacker. He’s not the one that you want.’

‘Oh? And what’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You never beat me Whacker.’

Whacker released Michael and turned to his cronies. ‘Hah. Would you listen to him?’ His cronies laughed. ‘I didn’t have to beat you Doyle. You beat yourself, you lousy drunk.’

‘I’ve still got the record Whacker. 4 years.’

Whacker mimed typing at a typewriter. ‘Newsflash buster: I’ve won for the past 3 years. And there’s no one to beat me this year. Is there? So I’m going to win. And then I’ll win next year. And then I’ll have beaten your precious record. And you’ll have nothing left to cling to.’

Díarmuid just smiled and turned to Michael. ‘Come on Michael, let’s go.’ Michael made his way through the pub over to Díarmuid. When Michael was past him Díarmuid turned to leave.

‘Unless, of course, you want to try and stop me Díarmuid,’ Whacker called after him. Díarmuid just kept walking but Whacker wasn’t done with him yet.

‘Oh, say hi to Cathleen for me will you Díarmuid?’

Díarmuid froze.

‘Michael, wait for me outside.’

‘But...’

‘Wait for me outside.’

Michael obeyed his uncle and walked out. He turned around to look back and just caught a glimpse, as the door closed behind him, of the whole pub backing away, leaving Whacker and Díarmuid facing each other in the middle.

Four years ago Díarmuid put the pint to his lips and downed it in one. Michael could see the nervousness in his eyes. This wasn't looking promising. Díarmuid wasn't the bowler he used to be. He wasn't the man he used to be. Ballysuir was looking worried.

Michael watched as Díarmuid took a step back and began his run. Two paces into his run his toe hit a crack in the road and he fell forward. He managed to get his arm out in front of him and release the ball just as he hit the ground. The ball rolled a full three metres before it came to a stop. The Fecktowners all fell about laughing. In the middle of the road Díarmuid lay on the ground and didn't get up.

Michael stood outside the pub waiting. He could hear the commotion inside. Things were getting broken. He'd never seen that expression on his uncle's face before. It scared him a little bit. It scared him to think that his uncle was vulnerable like that. He had no idea who Cathleen was and he wasn't sure he wanted to ask.

The night was getting cold and Michael had left his jacket inside. He blew on his hands to keep them warm. As he did Díarmuid came crashing out of the window and fell into a heap on the ground. He lay there, face down, for a while. Michael heard laughter coming from inside the pub.

'How did it go Uncle Díarmuid?'

'Grand, grand,' said Díarmuid as he picked himself up off the ground and dusted himself down. They started walking towards the car park together.

'You've got a cut on your hand there,' said Michael.

'Yeah, that's probably from when I hit myself with the ashtray.'

'Does it not hurt?'

'Oh, no, no, no. You can't hurt a drunk man Michael. They're immune to injury.'

'Really?'

'Oh yeah. Sure that's how we won in 1916. We were drunk.'

'But we didn't win in 1916.'

Díarmuid sighed. 'That's because we ran out of drink. Countess Markievicz insisted we go for Jacob's Biscuits. Jacob's Biscuits! What use is that to anybody? Stoned out of her mind Michael. Stoned out of her mind.'

They walked in silence for a while before Michael remembered the reason he'd been looking for his uncle. 'I'm entering the road bowling competition, Uncle Díarmuid. I want to beat Whacker. Will you help me?'

'I will in me hoop,' said Díarmuid. This meant no. Michael couldn't believe it. He watched as Díarmuid opened a car door and got in.

'What do you mean you won't help me?' Michael asked through the closed window of the car.

‘Couldn’t be arsed Michael. More trouble than it’s worth.’

Michael was shocked. He hadn’t planned on this. He tried to think of some persuasive argument. ‘But...’ was the best he could come up with.

‘Sorry Michael, must be off now.’

‘Uncle Diarmuid, I don’t think you should be driving when you’re drunk.’

‘Oh don’t worry Michael, odds are it isn’t even my car. I’ll probably just try to fit my keys into the ignition for a couple of minutes and then fall asleep on the steering wheel. Seeya now. Best of luck with that old competition.’

Diarmuid started poking the ignition with his keys and Michael walked away disheartened. He had to walk back past the pub so he quickened his pace. Whacker and his pals would be getting bored of bullying the patrons pretty soon and Michael didn’t want to be waiting outside the pub when they did. As he was reaching the end of the building he heard a footstep behind him. His heart instantly sprinted away leaving the rest of him behind, stuck on the spot.

‘Hi Michael.’

The voice wasn’t the one he feared but it wasn’t one that calmed his nerves either. Michael tried to force the expression on his face from terror to nonchalance. By the time he’d turned around he’d managed to get it about halfway so that it was holding somewhere around anxious / pensive. When he saw Ali’s beautiful face coming out from round the corner of the pub it dropped back a couple of places to fretful. It had only been a few hours since he’d last seen her but somehow he’d managed to forget how stunning she was and how attracted to her he was. It all came flooding back to him pretty quickly when he saw her smile.

‘H-i-y-uh,’ said Michael, somehow managing to fit several awkward gear changes into that one syllable. ‘What are you doing here- Not that you can’t be here. I just thought you said...’

‘Who was that drunk you were talking to?’

‘What drunk?’

‘That man back there.’

Ali pointed in the direction of the car park.

‘Oh just...I don’t know.’

‘Sorry about earlier,’ said Ali walking closer to him.

‘That’s okay. Wait. Sorry. Sorry about what? Sorry.’

‘I kind of volunteered you for that road bowling thing, didn’t I? I just thought you might be good at it. With your big strong arms.’ She reached out and squeezed the place on Michael’s arm where his bicep would be.

Michael looked at Ali’s hand on his arm. Despite his mind his body wanted to swallow, but then his throat just seemed to want to gurgle dryly, so there was absolutely no consensus. ‘Uh, thanks.’

‘So I was thinking, maybe we could go out sometime.’

Michael’s insides jumped. ‘Uh, sure.’

‘What about Thursday?’

‘Uh, yeah. That should be fine. If it’s not raining. Or even if it is ‘cause I have an umbrella so...’

‘Pick me up at 8.’

‘Okay.’

Ali walked away. Michael watched her go, feeling quite happy and absolutely petrified. He looked up at the moon and the millions of stars. The wind rustled the trees, an owl hooted as it flew past on its night patrol and from the car park came the mournful wail of a car horn being held down by a drunk man's face.

Chapter 5

‘So I’m picking her up tomorrow night at 8.’

Gemma and Michael were sitting on the fire escape round the back of the gym so that Gemma could have a smoke. Smoking was another cool thing that Michael had never really gotten a grip on. It had been explained to him before. It was a fuck you to authority apparently. But surely their teachers and parents told them not to do it because it was bad for them so was it cool to ignore advice that was just common sense? It certainly hadn’t worked when Michael had tried running around with scissors in his hand. No one had called him cool then. Particularly not Helen Norris. Or at least he doubted she had but it had been hard to tell what she’d been saying amidst all the crying.

‘Sounds good. So where does she live?’ said Gemma.

That was a good question. Michael hadn’t asked her and Ali hadn’t told him. This was going to make picking her up at 8 a bit of problem.

‘Eh. I don’t know actually. I suppose I’d better find her and ask,’ said Michael.

‘Really?!’ said Gemma surprised.

‘Uh, I dunno,’ Michael wondered if this was against the dating rules. Something in Gemma’s surprised reaction made him feel like that’s exactly what he didn’t want to do. ‘Do...do you think that’s a bad idea?’

‘I just think it would be a bit awkward. I wouldn’t want to meet someone before I went out on a date with them. What would you say to her?’

Michael thought about it. ‘Uh, “Hi. How are you? Are you well? You’re looking well. Do you want to-”’

‘No,’ interrupted Gemma flatly. ‘Trust me. You’ve already won: she’s agreed to go out on a date. Anything you say now can only fuck things up. Surely you must have found that with your previous girlfriends.’

Michael thought back to his previous girlfriends. There hadn’t been a lot of them. There was Claire who had been in his class when he was 9. She’d allowed him to kiss her on the cheek for a packet of wine gums. Michael wasn’t sure if she really counted.

Susan probably didn’t count either. She lived down the road from Michael. She was two years older than him and a good deal stronger. He’d run into her by the old ruined house at the top of the valley. He was 12 at the time and was pretending to be a soldier even though he knew he was too old for that type of thing. He’d spotted Susan sitting by the fireplace in one of the rooms of the old house. Without saying a word she’d grabbed him and started kissing him. In many ways it was a fantasy come true. In many ways it wasn’t. Susan wasn’t the most attractive girl. She had matted hair and wonky teeth and was always holding some kind of rock. Michael had still enjoyed it though. When she was done with him he’d given her two pounds.

Then there’d been his first real girlfriend...

2 years ago Michael had been sitting on the bus. He was heading over to Carraig Barry, the largest town in the county. He wanted to buy some tapes and there was no music shop in Ballysuir. Well, except for Clafferty's supermarket which had a shelf of tapes beside the men's toiletries. All they had was 'Mega Hits of the Eighties', 'When the Going Gets Tough: The Greatest Hits of Billy Ocean' and 'Sean Nós Around the Clock'. Michael already had all of them.

As he sat on the bus he had the creeping feeling that he was being watched. He looked behind him but there was no one there apart from Old Ned and his pet rabbit and they were both too interested in licking each other to be watching Michael. He turned back around and realised that the girl three rows in front of him that was staring intensely at him. That must be where the feeling of being watched was coming from.

'Uh, hello,' said Michael.

'Hello to you it does be, Michael,' said the girl.

'You're in the class below me in school aren't you?'

'Yes, yes. Oh, it does fill me with gladness that you can recall of me.'

'Oh. No problem.'

'Níamh is the name that 'twas done bestowed upon me, from my two parents dear.'

'Níamh...Cool,' Michael could barely understand what she was saying. Where had this girl learned to talk like this?! Donegal?

They were still about twenty minutes away from Carraig Barry. There was no escape.

'I have been in the watching of you Michael, and from afar it is that my soul has developed an affection for you,' said Níamh looking shyly downwards. 'Once before our paths did cross when you did rescue me from an evil tyrant.'

'I don't re...' Michael started but then a memory started creeping up on him.

A couple of months before that Mrs Blarty had been giving out to Níamh in class.

'Níamh, this kind of behaviour is totally unacceptable. How could you even think that your homework was to kill a cat?' asked Mrs Blarty.

'You did do tell us to find a cat and kill it. The remembrance is clear on me.'

'No, I didn't!' insisted an exasperated and slightly scared Mrs Blarty. 'Why would I tell you to do that?'

At that moment there was a knock on the door. Michael entered the class.

'Sorry Mrs Blarty,' said Michael. 'Mr Penny is looking for Níamh O'Dwyer.'

Mrs Blarty sighed. 'Okay Níamh, you'd better go and see the principle.'

Níamh looked at Michael starry eyed as she glided past him and out of the classroom. She might have actually been on roller-skates but this was a memory within a memory so Michael didn't really trust all the details.

'Since you rescued me I have thought only of you,' Níamh continued. 'I have followed you home and watched over you as you slept. I have taken a lock of your hair

and clippings of your finger nails. I know everything about you and I does wish to be with you as your soul-heart. Together it is that we shall be in the now, now. And hands in hands we shall walk strong and proud with the knowing that we are each other's heart and beauty. And we shall be believing in the being of true love. And you will flow into my breast. And when the hours of time do-'

'Sorry, what was that last part again?'

'You will flow into my breast, so tender and warm we will be together, loving and kissing, breathing and sighing.'

Michael reached for his wallet.

Michael had gone out with Níamh for three months. Two intentionally, one just to be polite. When he'd eventually been talked into talking Níamh into breaking up she hadn't taken the news well. She'd stolen a donkey and driven it into a tree. Once Níamh and the donkey had come out of their comas she'd been sent to a home for the mentally infirm. That was the last Michael had seen of her and the last time Michael had thought about approaching a girl until yesterday.

'Sorry, what were we talking about?'

Gemma looked at Michael with affectionate frustration. 'We've been sitting here in silence for the last five minutes you know.'

'Oh sorry.'

'We were talking about your date with Ali.'

'Right, yes.'

'You don't know where she lives.'

'Right, so I've got to find her and ask her.'

'No, you've got to avoid her. I'll find her and ask where she lives.'

'Right. Sorry. Grand.'

Gemma finished her cigarette and stubbed it out.

'So, did you avoid Gregor before your first date?'

'Oh yeah. But that was more because I didn't actually want to see him 'cause I thought he was a fucking idiot. But that's the way it goes. It's always the last person you think of.'

Yes. Yes! thought Michael. Gemma's words hit him like a punch on the forehead. The last person you think of. Why had he been so stupid? Here he was chasing after this impossible girl and all the time a brilliant, beautiful and sweet girl had been right in front of him. And now that he thought about it, it was obvious that she contained the most important of attributes: she liked him. He couldn't let her slip out of his fingers. Gemma was perfect for him.

He closed his eyes and leaned forward to kiss her. Something impeded his progress however. He opened his eyes to find it was Gemma's hand on his chest.

'Not me Michael.'

'Oh right. Sorry.'

'That's okay.'

'Sorry Gregor.'

‘No worries,’ replied Gregor from the step above them. ‘Right, who’s up for spitting at the pigeons?’

On Gemma’s instructions Michael had spent the rest of the day hiding from Ali. He’d had to use all his guile to navigate his way through the corridors. Jumping from nook to cranny. Crouching behind bins and lurking behind lockers. He’d still almost run into her twice. It had been even more difficult when they’d been in the same classroom. Michael had accidentally sat behind her in Physics. Every time she looked like she was going to turn around he’d dived for his bag pretending he needed to get something from it. He’d ended up with all his books on the table: Irish, History, Pride and Prejudice. None of which were particularly relevant to physics. Except when he’d piled the books too high and they collapsed onto his head as he’d leaned down for the next one.

Now Michael was on the home stretch. There was only ten minutes left of senior lunch and then just Economics, History and Technical Graphics and he was pretty sure Ali wasn’t in any of those classes. All he had to do was make it from the football pitch up to the C floor and he’d be home and dry. He decided to leave the game early so he could take the back stairs just to be on the safe side. He didn’t want to let his team down but it just needed to be done. They’d probably be okay without him. He doubted he was that vital to their success, particularly because he wasn’t even sure which team was his. He turned to the nearest boy to him.

‘Hey, Liam. Is it okay if I head off early?’

‘Oh Michael. How’s it going? What’s up?’

‘Just wondering if you guy’s will be okay if I head off now?’

‘Uh, sure. Who’s team are you on?’

‘Uh...not really sure. Which team are *you* on?’

‘I haven’t a clue to be honest with you. I know I’ve scored 7 goals but I don’t know if that’s 5 goals and 2 OGs or 2 goals and 5 OGs. Good game though. Listen, I’ll catch you later okay.’ With that Liam disappeared back into the mêlée calling for a foul, a cross and an offside before blocking Gary’s attack on the goal and scoring in it himself. Michael wasn’t sure how that effected the score but he cheered anyway and headed towards the fire exit.

For some reason the students weren’t allowed to use the normal entrance to the school. Staff only. The students were told to enter by the “use only case of emergency” exits. Michael made his way over to the back exit. He looked in through the window in the door, saw that the coast was clear, walked through and went up the stairs to the C floor. When he got to the C floor the corridor was empty. He walked out and headed towards his classroom and he nearly made it there before Ali appeared around the corner at the far end. She was talking to Belinda McDonald and hadn’t noticed him yet. Michael frantically looked for somewhere to hide but there were no bins around. Panicking he dived into the nearest door.

Michael found himself in Mrs Creevy’s class. She was explaining the symbolism of the monster in Lord of the Flies to a group of first years while pouring herself another glass of whiskey. She turned to Michael expectantly.

Michael desperately tried to think of a reason for him being there. 'Sorry Mrs Creevy. Uh, there's a message from Mr Penny.' Mrs Creevy waved him on and Michael turned to the class. 'Um...from now on...there is to be no...French...people...allowed in the school.'

'Right, you heard him,' said Mrs Creevy turning to a small, worried looking girl in the front row of the class. 'Let's go.'

The girl stood up and started packing away her books.

'Uh no! Sorry,' said Michael. 'Uh, I got that wrong. It was actually there's to be no...French Guianan people allowed in the school any more.'

'Right, come on then Hugo.'

A boy at the back started packing up his stuff.

'Uh no wait. Um. That's still not right. There's to be no French Guianan people allowed in the *pool*, if we had a pool, which we don't, so that's fine.'

'Hmm. That's a bit racist of Mr Penny but I can't say I blame him. Notorious for their disregard for normal pool etiquette the French Guianans. Isn't that right Hugo?'

'I don't think so.'

'Yeah, whatever. PC gone mad Michael. You can't say anything these days. Thanks for dropping by.'

'Uh, okay, thanks.'

Michael walked cautiously back out of the class into the corridor. There was no sign of Ali. Looking up and down the corridor like he was crossing a motorway Michael walked across and through the door where he thought his class should be. Instead of the classroom he was expecting he instead found himself in the toilets. There was something wrong with these toilets though. There was no urinal and a weird looking vending machine on the wall.

'Oh! Hi Michael,' said Ali.

'Hi. Hi. Hi.'

'Were you looking for me?' asked Ali.

'Uh...no...yes...but not here...I mean, I wouldn't think...if I was looking for you I wouldn't look in here...not that here is...it's a perfectly normal human function. I have no problem with this. Not that I'm into it! I don't get my kicks...by...' Michael trailed off.

'So am I still seeing you tomorrow night?' asked Ali.

'Yeah, sure, right, that'd be lovely.'

'So...eight o'clock then?'

'Yeah, sure, right, that'd be lovely.'

There was a pause. Ali looked at Michael expectantly.

'Oh! Uh, there was just one more thing. I don't know where you live.'

'Oh, of course, sorry. How silly of me.'

Ali took a piece of paper out of her bag and started writing. Michael turned to Belinda who was watching him with disinterest. She didn't usually socialise with Michael. Michael wasn't sure if she'd ever actually spoken to him before.

'So, uh, Belinda, did you do that Maths homework?'

'Yeah.'

'That, uh, cubic equation sure was a tough one wasn't it?'

'No.'

‘Right.’

Ali handed Michael the piece of paper. Michael looked at it.

‘Uh. I think you’ve made a mistake here Ali. This road is in Fecktown.’

‘Yeah. That’s the right address. I live in Fecktown.’

‘She lives in Fecktown.’

‘Fecktown?’

‘Yeah.’

Michael and Gemma were on their way out of school. Every day at 4 o’clock the bell rang signalling the time for everyone in the school to charge for the exits, only pausing by the coat racks to grab the nearest coat or part there of. The flow of pupils and teachers gasping for a breath of freedom washed past Michael and Gemma as, deep in conversation, they made their own way slowly out the fire exit.

‘Fecktown?’ asked Gemma again as a herd of second years scurried past.

‘Yeah.’

‘She lives in Fecktown?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Jeez, you wouldn’t think it to look at her.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Then why’s she coming to school here?’

‘I dunno.’

‘God, I can’t believe she’s one of them. But then you never know do you? You just never know. Someone can look nice but then you find out they’re a total bitch from Fecktown. Well, I guess that’s the end of that then isn’t it?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, you can’t go out with her now. She’s from Fecktown.’

‘Can I not? I was kind of thinking of going out with her anyway. You see, she’s a total ride,’ explained Michael.

‘Michael!’

‘Mike-o!’ Gregor came up and joined them. ‘What’s going on?’

‘The new girl, Ali, she’s from Fecktown,’ said Gemma.

‘Jeez, you wouldn’t think it to look at her.’

‘But Michael’s still going to go out with her.’

‘Why?’ asked Gregor.

‘She’s a total ride,’ replied Michael.

‘That’s true. She is a total ride.’

Gemma wasn’t convinced by this. ‘Well, I just think you should watch out for her.’

‘Hey!’ said Gregor. ‘Are you going to do a bit of training after school? See how good you really are at road bowling?’

‘Oh yeah. The competition. I’d forgotten.’

‘What?!’ Gregor was horrified. ‘Michael, this is one of the most important things you’re ever going to do. This Saturday the pride of Ballysuir rests on your shoulders. How could you just forget about it?’

‘Well, after Ali agreed to go out with me…’

‘Yeah, I suppose you’re right. That is a good excuse. She is a total ride.’

‘Gregor!’ said Gemma.

‘What?’ said Gregor, thinking fast. ‘I just, I was remembering how I totally forgot to do my Maths homework before my first date with you.’

‘Awh baby.’

Gemma grabbed Gregor and started kissing him. Michael coughed, yawned and left them to it.

As Michael was walking home along the road an old man came cycling past.

‘Are you going to show Fecktown who’s boss, Michael, haha?’ laughed the old man.

‘I’ll try,’ replied Michael.

‘Ahaha. Fair play to you Michael!’ the old man called back to him as he cycled into a ditch.

This was getting complicated, thought Michael. The whole town was behind him but would they be quite so happy to support him if they found out he was just doing it to impress a girl from Fecktown? Maybe. If he won they probably wouldn’t care why he was doing it. Michael decided he should probably win then. The only question was how?

He was mulling over this point when he realised that he’d stopped walking and was staring at a tennis ball by the side of the road. He went over and picked it up. Michael looked up and down the road rolling the ball from hand to hand thoughtfully. There was no one around, maybe it was time to give his bowling skills a proper test. He took a deep breath then began his run. He swung his arm around and released the ball just as a car came over the rise. The ball skimmed the ground and bounced up to hit the car on the grill sending it sailing into the air (the ball not the car). The car screeched to a halt and, fearing a reprisal, Michael jumped into a hedge.

From inside the hedge Michael spotted the car door opening and someone getting out. For the second time in two days he’d never been more delighted to see Emily. She waved goodbye to the driver of the car and it drove off.

Emily walked over to where Michael was hiding in the hedge.

‘Hi Michael, how’s the road bowling?’

‘Not so good,’ replied Michael from the hedge.

‘Why?’

‘I think I might be absolutely crap at it. I should never have volunteered.’

‘Why *did* you volunteer?’

‘I wanted to impress...a girl.’

‘Oh,’ said Emily starting to blush.

Michael was starting to feel lost and sitting in a hedge with Emily smiling back at him he felt emotions building up in him. His voice quavered as he let everything out. ‘I’ve only got three days to practise, my uncle says he won’t help me, no one has managed to beat Whacker Jackson in the last three years, and I’ve never tried to road bowl before in my whole life. So I’m going to do crap, I’ll let the whole town down, and...this girl isn’t going to like me any more.’

Emily spoke carefully, 'Well, maybe it might be easier than you think to win over some people. Maybe you just need to...tell them...how you feel.'

Michael thought about this. Maybe Emily was right. 'Hey! Maybe you're right Emily.' She was pleased to hear this but Michael hadn't finished, 'Maybe if I talk to my uncle again I'll be able to persuade him to help me.'

Michael clambered out of the bush and strode off down the road.

'Seeya Emily! Thanks for the advice,' he called back to her.

'No, I wasn't...' said a tiny voice behind him before it gave up and headed off in the opposite direction.

Díarmuid's house was up the hill from theirs. Michael climbed over the rusted shut gate into the neglected garden overgrown with weeds and the occasional forest. He navigated his way down the thin path of trampled plants which ran from the gate to the front door. Several other paths broke off from the main one ending in cul-de-sacs where a drunken Díarmuid had eventually figured out he'd left the main path and turned around. At the end of a couple of these cul-de-sacs there was a small patch of matted down weeds where Díarmuid had decided it was close enough and gone to sleep.

Michael knocked on Díarmuid's door.

"Come in!" shouted a distant voice.

Díarmuid's door was never locked. Díarmuid wasn't afraid of thieves breaking in because he had nothing worth stealing. He had actually been broken into once. The place had been completely ransacked but no one had noticed.

Michael stepped into the cottage. He looked in the kitchen, then the living room, then the bedroom, and the toilet, then the kitchen again in case he'd missed him the first time.

'Where are you Uncle Díarmuid?'

'I don't really know to be honest with you Michael. It's quite dark. Maybe I'm in the cupboard in the living room.'

Michael opened the cupboard in living room carefully in case any objects had become dislodged during the flight. He found a saucepan, a complete set of Encyclopaedia Britannica and a carp, but no Díarmuid.

'No, I don't see you in there.'

'Okay, try behind the sofa.'

Michael pulled the sofa away from the wall and looked behind it.

'Yeah, you're behind the sofa alright.'

'Well, that's a relief I was beginning to worry we wouldn't find me. Try and hoist me up will ya?'

Michael leaned over and grabbed Díarmuid by the belt and started to haul Díarmuid upright. When his arms were released from under the weight of himself Díarmuid used them to help in the operation. When he was upright Díarmuid looked around the room as if he'd never seen it before.

'Ah. Right,' he said.

Michael watched as Díarmuid started walking around the room getting ready for the day that was nearly over.

‘Uncle Díarmuid...’ said Michael.

‘Will you pass me that shoe over there?’

Michael did so and Díarmuid sat down on a bail of hay to put it on.

‘Uncle Díarmuid...’ tried Michael again.

‘Is that a piece of toast there?’ said Díarmuid.

‘No, it’s a book.’

‘Oh. Well, do you see any yoghurts or anything around you?’

Michael looked around. ‘No, I don’t see any.’

‘Alright, well, throw us over that book you had there anyway.’

Díarmuid looked at the book when he received it but it didn’t seem to be an edible book so he cast it back into his future explorations.

‘Michael, what are you doing here anyway?’

‘Eh, I wanted to talk to you about something.’

‘What’s this now?’ Díarmuid’s tried to tie his shoelace and it snapped.

‘I was wondering if you’d reconsider helping me with this competition.’

‘Ach, you’re not still going on about that are you? I thought we settled this. You want me to help you and I couldn’t be arsed. It’s a classic Mexican standoff I’m afraid.’

‘But, I really need your help. Everyone’s depending on me.’

‘Ach. I don’t have time Michael. I’m a busy man.’

Michael looked up at the clock on the wall that read 5:05 and then looked back at the yawning Díarmuid.

‘Are you?’

‘I have my job.’

‘Well, maybe the leisure centre can do without their head ball-boy for a couple of days.’

‘Well...I have to go somewhere.’

‘Where?’

‘Eh...uhh...ehhhhh...uhhhhhhhhhhhhh...the...shops.’

‘That shouldn’t take too long.’

‘Well, probably. It probably won’t take too long. It’ll probably only be about ten minutes, but, these things always take longer than you think they will. So just to be on the safe side...’

‘I’ll take the risk and wait for you here.’

Díarmuid paused, sighed, and finally looked Michael in the eye.

‘Michael, I’m not supposed to tell you this, but, when you were born your father made me promise never to teach you how to road bowl.’

‘Really?’

‘No. Sorry. I just made that up.’

‘Then why won’t you help me?’

‘It’s complicated. It’s complicated Michael.’

‘Come on. When was the last time you risked something?’

Michael didn’t wait for a response. Instead he just slumped his shoulders out of the cottage and down the hill home.

In the kitchen Díarmuid set about preparing a bowl of Rice Krispies. He found a clean bowl in the cupboard, which was clean, whole and in its place presumably by some bizarre chain of ever more unlikely events and coincidences that now only the bowl knew. He poured in the Rice Krispies and some milk and then went looking for a spoon. A rookie mistake. He knew he should secure the implements before pouring on the milk. Now he was spoon searching against the clock.

He spotted a cheeky tea spoon peeking out from a stack of dishes in the sink. He sized up the stack, the angle of the spoon and the viscosity of the leftovers on the dishes. Delicately, like he was plucking the pubes of a mad dog, Díarmuid picked the spoon out of the pile. He stopped and waited for the dishes to topple but they stayed upright. Díarmuid punched the air in delight but the spoon slipped from his grasp and flew behind the cooker.

Wearily Díarmuid got down on his knees and reached behind the cooker. His hand patted over unidentified objects both sharp and hairy before it found something it wasn't expecting. Slowly Díarmuid pulled a picture frame out from behind the cooker. In it was an old photo of young Díarmuid. He was on a rug on the grass with his arm around a young woman. Both of them were grinning like they'd found the Treasure of the Sierra Madre in each other's eyes.

Díarmuid caught up with Michael halfway down the lane.

'Alright. I'll do it.'

'Great.'

They paused unsure what the next step was.

'Right. Should we go for a pint to celebrate?'

'Ehh, I kind of think we should start training now. I mean we've only got three days.'

'What?! Ah for god's sake. Sure, you're never happy are you. First you want me to say that I'll train you, now you want me to actually do it.'

In the leisure centre locker room Michael was changing into his sports gear. He'd never really been very enthusiastic about sports before so his sports gear consisted of a pair of cords and a vest.

'So what exactly are the rules?' asked Michael.

'Well, of course around here we play by league rules.'

'Is there a league?'

'No, but we play by their rules anyway.'

'Okay.'

Michael finished tying his laces and they set off.

‘Okay,’ said Díarmuid, ‘so, if you want to chip a lofty you mustn’t play with a left curler. But if you do it won’t be distance. If you pass the sod when you’re throwing a score then your turn will be marked “Pass the Sod” and you will be past the sod.’

‘Right.’

‘When the line is cracked by another competitor you’re not allowed to gabble the finch, i.e. never hatch a full clocheen.’

‘Right.’

‘And most importantly, even though it isn’t really in the official rules it’s accepted as sportsmanlike to always discard some of the wedge rolls that you don’t have.’

‘Right.’

‘Do you understand all that?’

‘Some of it.’

‘Which bits didn’t you understand?’

‘I understood the *words*. But not their *meaning*.’

‘Right. Well. The gist of it is you get three throws and whoever throws the ball the furthest wins.’

‘Right.’

Michael walked in the door to the weights room but Díarmuid didn’t follow him.

‘Where are you going?’ said Díarmuid when Michael re-emerged.

‘I thought we were here for some weight training.’

‘God no. Sure what use would that be to you? Road bowling isn’t about messing around with stupid stuff like that. Weight training, aerodynamics, basic levels of fitness. There’s only one way to learn how to road bowl. It’s how I was taught and how the man who taught me was taught.’

Michael nodded sagely. ‘By just bowling.’

Díarmuid thought about this.

‘Okay. So I guess there’s actually two ways.’

Michael’s training was abstract at the very least. He spent fifteen minutes ripping up leaves by the band stand in the park. Six and a half minutes being kicked in the ass by some 8-year-olds. Forty minutes were spent running round and round a moving cow. But it was when Michael was hanging upside down from a beam in the leisure centre trying to juggle backwards that he started to doubt Díarmuid’s training techniques.

‘This is definitely going to help me is it?’ he said.

‘Absolutely. Vital. 100 percent necessary,’ said Díarmuid handing him back the fallen juggling balls for the 34th time. ‘That’s it. Keep it up,’ he encouraged. ‘So why do you want to enter this competition anyway?’

‘Well, actually, I’m just doing it to impress this girl in school,’ Michael confessed. ‘I guess it’s kind of stupid.’

‘Nah, not really. Good a reason as any. Philly Donabate started because he thought pelting balls down a road might be a good way to smuggle drugs across the border, which of course it was. So have you asked this girl out?’

‘Yeah, I’m taking her out tomorrow night.’

‘Do I know her?’

Michael didn’t want to get into the finer points of her being a treacherous harpy from Fecktown so he decided to concentrate on Ali’s less controversial aspects. ‘No. She’s new. She’s from England.’

‘An *English* girl?! Really? Jesus, if your grandfather could see you now. After all he went through in the Civil War. He’d be so jealous. He sold so many secrets to the Brits hoping to get the ride off one of them. Where in England is she from?’

‘Glouwckester I think,’ replied Michael pronouncing it phonetically.

‘Glouwckester,’ thought Díarmuid. ‘That’s a weird name for a place. Why do the English name their places so weird? Why don’t they have normal names like Ballinaskiddle, Ballinamuck, or Dunshocklin.’

Michael nodded his upside-down agreement but Díarmuid hadn’t finished.

‘Or Ballyfermot. Or Carrick On Shannon. Or Clonmel. Or Castlebar.’

Díarmuid opened a can of beer getting into the swing of his list.

‘Dundrum. Portlaoise. Portadown. Portnoo. Drumcondra. Tipperary. Dundalk. Drogheda. The Boyne Valley. The Ring of Kerry. Bray.’

‘Can I get down yet?’

‘Not quite yet. Wicklow. Wexford. Waterford. Innis Man. Innis Free. Kilkenny. Cabinteely. Mullingar. Leopardstown. Dolphin’s Barn. Chapelizod. Stepside. Crossmaglenn. Eh. Kells. Right, that should do it for today. I’ll meet you back here bright and early tomorrow morning at 1.’ And with that Díarmuid stomped out of the sports hall.

It took Michael fifty five minutes to get free of the ropes that tied him to the beam. There was no way Díarmuid had forgotten to let him down. That must have just been part of it.

Chapter 6

Thursday morning awoke with mixed feelings. In many ways the week was still just really getting started. In many ways the week might as well give up at that stage. In other ways it was the only day of the week that actually, really felt like it was “in the week”. It didn’t know where it was at all at all.

Michael also awoke with mixed feelings. It was good to have someone in his corner. Well, apart from his friends obviously. And his mum and dad. And all of the people in Ballysuir. But he was still had some uneasy feelings about Díarmuid’s methods. Maybe these things had worked for Díarmuid before but maybe Díarmuid was just naturally talented at road bowling. He still hadn’t actually tried to bowl a ball. Surely that was the main part of the sport: being able to throw the ball far. But on the other hand, Díarmuid must know what was best, otherwise why would he tell Michael to do it?

His mum gave him a note to get off school which said that he had a hangover and Michael made his way to the leisure centre.

He began the day with optimism. He tried very hard to understand the point of each task that Díarmuid set him. But it became harder and harder as the morning wore on. He finally lost his temper as he was carrying Díarmuid up the stairs of the leisure centre.

‘Should I not be, maybe, practising with the ball?’ he asked.

‘Not yet Michael, not yet,’ said Díarmuid, sipping his pint. ‘Don’t worry about it. We’ll get to the throwing later. After the sheep wrestling.’

Michael dropped Díarmuid. Díarmuid dropped his pint.

‘The what?!’ said Michael.

‘Sheep wrestling.’

‘Why do I have to wrestle a sheep?’

‘Sheep. Not *a* sheep.’

‘Why do I have to wrestle sheep?’

‘Well, you’re not ready for the donkey.’

‘I don’t want to wrestle a sheep or a donkey. I want to throw a little metal ball down a road! I can’t see how any of this stuff is going to help with that! I mean, how was eating 30 dry ice-cream cones meant to help me?!’

‘It’s not a physical thing; it’s a mental thing. The cones are representative of your desire to win. You can’t win if you can’t lose. We’ve got to get you into the right state of mind before we can even think about throwing the ball. Now come on, we need to get on to the nettle licking.’

‘No! I’m not going to do it! I’ve got to win this competition and you’re wasting my time with all these stupid tasks! You haven’t a clue what you’re doing!’

‘I do have a clue,’ replied Díarmuid meekly. ‘I used to be the champ remember.’

‘No. I don’t remember. That was years ago. No one remembers that Díarmuid. They just remember the drunk!’

‘What? I’m not a-’

‘Yes! You are! You’re a joke!’

‘A joke? To who?’

‘To everyone! To me!’

And with that Michael turned and stormed back down the stairs. As Michael left the leisure centre, there wasn’t a second that he didn’t regret what he’d said. He tried to keep himself angry just to justify his comments but it didn’t stick.

Across the valley in a stone cottage without running water, central heating or a basic dial-up modem Níamh sat with her family. There was at least a dozen of them, although it was hard to pick out exactly because they all blended together in a jungle of red hair and freckles. Níamh’s mother watched her darning by the fire and knew she wasn’t in full spirits.

‘What does it be, oh Níamh, child of my heart’s heart?’

‘Oh Mother dear, my dear Mother, dear Mother dear, it is a great sadness that is upon me now in my breast and heart and larynx.’

Níamh’s father looked up from counting the turf. Fear haunted his eyes.

‘Not the scallion blight again?’ he said.

‘No Father, there are still scallions aplenty.’

‘The quince rot?!’

‘The quinces are in full bloom Father.’

‘A delay in the pork scratching delivery truck?!’

‘No Father, all your precious food stuffs are secure.’

‘Oh thanks be to Jesus and to Mary and to Manuel and to all the Gonzales family,’ said Níamh’s father and went back to his turf counting.

‘It is of my one true love,’ continued Níamh. ‘He does do spurn me. Oh, I am of 17 years now and shall be in my 18th year this Michaelmas. I do fear that I shall never wed and shall end my days as a bitter spinster like sister Gráinne it is.’

Níamh’s 23-year-old sister Gráinne nodded gravely, spat in the fire and went back to chewing on her worry stick.

‘Then you must fight, my love,’ replied Níamh’s mother. ‘You must fight for what your heart desires. In 1916 they loved biscuits and they did fight for them.’

‘Yes,’ said Níamh rising determined from her stool. ‘I shall fight Mother.’

That evening Seán was in his study working at his drawing board when Michael slid into the room.

‘Well son. How’s the road bowling?’

Michael couldn’t think of any words to say so he just shrugged dejectedly.

‘Not good?’

‘I had an argument with Díarmuid.’

‘Ah. What about?’

‘I just didn’t understand all the stuff he was getting me to do. I couldn’t see how they made sense. So I told him I didn’t want to train with him any more. But I don’t know how to train myself. So what should I do?’

Seán thought carefully about this. Michael's father was a careful and considered man. He'd surely come up with the solution to all his problems.

'I dunno,' Seán shrugged.

'Yeah, abso-...Wait, what?'

'Well, on the one hand maybe you should just try to practise without Díarmuid. Or maybe you could go and try to make up with him. Or maybe you should just pull out of the whole thing.'

'Yeah. So...?' Michael waited for the final answer but none seemed to come. 'Which one should I do?'

'I don't really know Michael,' said Seán.

'What? Why not?'

'Well, you've got to decide for yourself. You can't just go around doing whatever anyone else tells you to for the rest of your life Michael. Just make a choice, even if it's the wrong one it's better than not making a choice at all.'

'Okay.'

'Okay?'

'Yeah. I think so.'

As he walked out of the room Michael's brain spiralled endlessly round a loop of listening to his father's advice about not listening to other people's advice and therefore not listening to his father's advice which was not to listen to other people's advice and so he *should* listen to people's advice including his father's advice which was not to listen to other people's advice.

Michael walked up Gregor's family's house's garden's path. It was a pristine path. It was a pristine garden. This was the only place Michael had ever seen grass that was all perfectly aligned. Although the crazy paving was certainly crazy it was only crazy like a crazy person whose manic actions by chance were exactly the right ones for a normal, respectable life. Michael had once tried to trim his bush into the same unicorn shape that Mr Dunphy managed to sculpt his but all he'd ended up with was a bald stick that was very much just the shape of a stick.

He knocked on the door and waited. Mrs Dunphy answered in her perfectly pressed dress. A bluebird sat on her shoulder singing a pleasant song.

'Ah Michael. How are you dear?'

'Okay Mrs Dunphy.'

'Any news?'

'Well, I'm Ballysuir's entrant into the road bowling competition with Fecktown this year.'

'Smashing. And what's road bowling?'

'W-...uhhh...g-...' Michael had absolutely no idea how to answer this.

'Mum!' shouted Gregor appearing behind her. 'I've told you before! We've lived here our whole lives! How can you not remember what the most important event of the year is?!'

'Oh yes, yes. Sorry Michael. It's the little skipping the balls game isn't it? It's kind of like boules.'

‘Mum! It’s nothing like boule! What is wrong with you?!’

‘Well, I enjoy a game of boule. You like it. We play it on holidays in Brittany.’

‘That’s a different situation! Everyone experiments on holidays! We were absorbing the culture!’

‘I don’t see why we can’t still play boule together as a family. Maybe after dinner.’

Gregor thought about this.

‘Mnnn. What’s for dinner?’ he grumbled.

‘Sausage casserole.’

‘Yeah, okay, fine.’

‘Lovely. I’ll tell your father. Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes,’ said Gregor’s mother heading into the kitchen. Gregor shook off his mother’s uncoolness and turned to Michael.

‘Hey.’

‘Hey.’

‘Shouldn’t you be practising?’

‘Yeah, but I had a big row with my uncle.’

‘Jesus, really? So what are you going to do?’

‘I don’t know. I guess I’ll just try practising by myself. Want to come?’

‘Ehhh. I dunno. Sausage casserole, y’know?’

‘Oh yeah.’

‘After dinner?’

‘Boule.’

‘After that?’

‘We’ll probably have a boule awards ceremony.’

‘After that?’

‘Uh, yeah, sure.’

‘Great.’

‘But aren’t you supposed to be meeting Ali tonight?’

Michael didn’t say a word. His eyes just opened wider than they’d ever been before. He pegged it down the garden path, opened the garden gate, carefully closed it again so as not to disturb the flower display on top of it, and then sprinted off along the road.

By the time he reached Fecktown Michael was down to a half-jog half-stagger. He was exhausted. He didn’t think he had any energy left for the actual date, whether he was there on time or not. He didn’t have the energy for pretty much anything at this stage. He wasn’t really sure what a proper date actually entailed but presumably it involved more than just lying down and breathing heavily.

Fecktown was every bit as terrifying as Michael imagined it to be. Mainly because terror was in the mind and it was *his* mind that was imagining how terrifying it was so how could it not be as terrifying as he imagined it to be? He kept his hands in his pockets – because that seemed to be the custom around these parts – and hoped that no one would be able to spot that he was a Ballysuiran. He tried to give off the air of depravity and aggression that was the natural state of all Fecktowners.

Two fierce looking men who were standing outside a butchers drinking pints glowered at Michael as he walked past. He kept his head down but could still feel their narrowed eyes watch him pass. Unfortunately he was out of earshot by the time they spoke to each other.

‘I can’t see a bloody thing,’ said the first squinting man.

‘Yeah, I think we must have picked up each other’s contacts this morning,’ said the other.

Michael turned a corner looking for Ali’s street when he came face to face with the cruel expression of a wizened old woman.

‘Turn around! Turn around I say!’ she croued at him. ‘Turn around and let me check out that ass on ya!’

Michael performed an almost balletic, almost suicidal series of turns and squirms to squeeze around the woman and continue swiftly away from her.

‘That’s it!’ he heard the woman wail after him. ‘That’s what I pay the big bucks for!’

Then a couple of teenagers let off a banger near a horse. The horse was unmoved.

After a further half an hour of panicked searching Michael managed to locate Ali’s street. He’d actually stumbled across it while running away from an enraged goat. It seemed like the goat must have taken umbrage at his haircut because it had tried to give him a different one by ripping off a couple of hunks of hair before Michael had managed to get free. As he’d fled he’d tried to think of what excuse he’d give Ali in school tomorrow for why he’d never turned up because some things weren’t worth losing your hair over. He decided upon uncontrollable flatulence as he rounded a corner into the street he thought was the one out of here but glancing up at the road sign he’d seen that it was actually Ali’s road: Barglegunt Villas.

Her house wasn’t as elegant as he’d imagined but then it *was* in Fecktown so there was only so much her beauty could percolate into the building. If anything it was a lumpy sort of building. Michael stared at it wondering what his next move was. He might have stood there all evening had he not eventually had the realisation that she might have already seen him and was now watching him as he creepily stared at her house.

He jogged up the garden path and knocked on the door, then noticed the bell, then wondered if knocking was audible if they felt the need to also have a bell, then rang the bell, then regretted ringing the bell as well as knocking, then knocked again as if to cancel out the bell.

As he waited nervously he heard a goat’s howl behind him so spun around but couldn’t see anything. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned his attention back to the door which wasn’t there any more. Instead of the wooden door there now stood the stone face of Whacker Jackson.

‘Well, this is some surprise,’ snarled Whacker.

It certainly was a surprise. Michael was speechless as he replayed every event in his life that had led to this moment. How could he possibly have got this *this* wrong? He backed away in fear, tripped over a plant pot and fell to the ground.

Whacker didn't wait for the answer that didn't seem to be forthcoming. 'What the hell do you want, sucker?'

'I...' Michael eventually managed. 'Sorry. I must have the wrong door, sorry.'

'Yeah, you'd better be sorry,' postured Whacker. 'Or else you'll be sorry. Now you want to be leaving!'

Michael struggled to his feet.

'S-s-sorry. I'm going.'

But just as Michael was turning to run faster than he'd ever run before he heard a pretty English voice behind him.

'Hi Michael.'

Ali skipped out the front door past Whacker Jackson.

'I'm going out with Michael,' she told Whacker coldly. 'And I don't know when I'll be back.'

Whacker had no reply as Ali turned and started walking towards the gate. Michael looked backwards and forwards between Whacker and the disappearing Ali but there really wasn't much competition as to whose face he'd rather be around so he followed Ali. He heard the door slam behind him.

'So. Where are you taking me?' asked Ali, seemingly oblivious to how bizarre everything that had just happened was. Michael guessed asking someone why they'd just walked out of the house of your number one enemy would be a real mood killer so he just went with it.

'Eh. I was thinking we could get a bottle of cider and go drinking in a field.'

Ali laughed at this. 'Oh Michael, you're so funny.'

'Uh, yeah,' said Michael not sure what the joke was.

'There's a great little restaurant in town. Let's go there.'

'In town?' said Michael. 'And by town you mean *this* town?'

'Yeah. Is that a problem?'

'No. Not at all. Not at all. No.'

It was.

The restaurant was dimly lit unlike McGurckle's back in Ballysuir which had the decency of fully illuminating your plate so you knew exactly what was peas and what was pork chops. Michael was suspicious. What were they trying to hide? Was the food covered in spit and snail's eggs? Or were they just being stingy with the electricity? A single lit candle sat on the table between Michael and Ali. What, was there a power cut or something?

Michael looked around at the other patrons. None of them seemed to be paying him any attention. Which was suspicious in itself. Here he was, a Ballysuiran in the lair of the Fecktowners, and the Ballysuiran road bowler no less, surely they should be sizing him up, ready to pounce. Michael kept half his attention on them as he tried to engage Ali in conversation.

'So...how are you?'

'Fine thanks.'

It was an ironclad answer, Michael had used it before himself, but it left him little room for a follow up. There was only one other thing on Michael's mind. He tried to bring it up as nonchalantly as possible.

'So...is Whacker Jackson your father?'

Ali smiled at this, like Michael had said something amusing, but he was pretty sure he hadn't.

'Not quite.'

Michael was about to follow up with questions about the Irish adoption process when the waitress appeared at their table so Michael quickly started scanning the menu as he hadn't figured out which of the strange sounding meals had the least amount of his least favourite ingredients. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the waitress' uniform didn't fit her properly and her belt had missed a loop on her skirt. Score another one for Ballysuir.

'Hello, it is to you,' said the voice of the waitress. 'May I be in the taking of your order now?'

Michael froze with his eyes over the margarita pizza.

'I'll have the lasagne bolognese with a green salad please,' said Ali.

Slowly, carefully, as if the roll of his eyes might trigger a tripwire which would explode his face, Michael looked up at the waitress. Níamh looked back at him with a strange smile. She winked.

'What...what...what...are you...'

'The pizzas are really good,' interjected Ali snapping his attention back to her.

'Yeah, pizza, pizza. I'll have pizza.'

'Very good it is to you sir,' said Níamh, not writing anything down but turning and walking back to the kitchen. One of the other customers tried to catch her attention but she ignored him. As she went in the kitchen door Michael could have sworn she saw a pair of legs lying, unmoving on the ground.

'So how's the road bowling been going,' asked Ali. 'Have you been practising?'

'What? Oh, uh, yeah. Uh, no, actually. I haven't.'

Ali smiled again.

'Surely you need to practise.'

'Umm. I don't know. Probably. I guess I haven't had time. Right. Should we get out of here?'

'But we've just ordered.'

'Oh. Yes. Let's stay here and eat whatever food that waitress brings back to us. Good idea.'

'I'll be back in a sec.'

Ali got up and went over to the toilets. Michael glanced around at the agitated looking Fecktowners. He tried to make small talk to allay their suspicions.

'Howya. You having a nice night? Great to be living in Fecktown, isn't it? Particularly after being born and raised here.'

No one responded but now that he was taking a closer look he saw that none of them actually had any food. Some were shaking their heads and looking at their watches. The door to the kitchen opened and several of the customers' heads looked around hopefully but Níamh returned carrying nothing. She went straight over to Michael and sat in Ali's seat.

‘Michael-’ she started.

‘Excuse me, waitress,’ tried a customer behind her but she ignored him.

‘Michael, I have done come here to rescue you.’

‘Níamh, what are you doing here?’

‘I have done come here to rescue you.’

‘Rescue me from who?’

‘That evil temptress, that harlot, that jezebel. I know that she has put an enchantment upon you.’

‘Níamh, I really don’t need rescuing. I promise you: she hasn’t put an enchantment on me,’ said Michael starting to doubt the words as he was saying them.

‘That’s just what she wants you to say.’

‘Sorry, can I ask where our food is?’ tried another customer.

‘It’s okay Michael,’ continued Níamh, rising to her feet. ‘I know ‘tis not you that is talking. ‘Tis the charm, the hex, that controls you now!’

‘Níamh, please keep your voice down. Don’t get excited.’

‘How can I stay calm when it is a great hole that does be in my heart that can be filled only by the placing of you within it. If I can’t bring you back to me I shall smash myself in the face with every rock in Connemara!’

Michael was too horrified with this image to notice that everyone in the restaurant was now watching them.

‘Níamh, please, *please*, don’t hit yourself in the face with every rock in Connemara.’

‘Then come with me, come. Like Díarmuid and Gráinne we will ride o’er hill and dale, away from this godforsaken coven to our one true home of Ballysuir!’

‘Wait a second,’ said a large man with an angry beard rising from his seat. ‘You’re from Ballysuir?’

‘They’re a couple of Ballysuir spies sent to learn our road bowling secrets!’

‘Look! They knocked the staff unconscious,’ said a voice by the kitchen.

‘Yes, ‘tis true,’ declared Níamh leaping onto a table. ‘We are from Ballysuir pure and true. This is Michael Doyle from Ballysuir! Never a truer man has been born. And this Saturday he’s going to teach Fecktown a lesson in humility! He spits on you from a height!’

Michael started backing away from the angry customers.

‘Michael Doyle does do declare to ye today that he will punish the vile and ugly faces of Fecktown!’

‘I really don-’ tried Michael before being cut off.

‘He can’t say that about Fecktown!’ shouted one.

‘Ugly is a very insulting term!’ shouted another.

‘Some of us are alright looking!’ shouted yet another.

Michael didn’t try to argue the point any further and instead bolted for the toilet door.

Ali was just washing her hands as he burst into the ladies’.

‘Michael!’

Michael grabbed a bin and wedged it between the door and the wall.

‘Hi. Just came to see how you were getting on. Everything...? Listen. It turns out they’ve actually stopped serving food.’

‘But she took our order.’

The door shook as the people outside tried to push it open.

‘Yeah, eh, she thought we were actually ordering food for tomorrow. So they apologised for the mix up and said we’d better just find somewhere else. That’s them banging on the door now. They just want to apologise more but it’s getting a bit annoying, y’know?’

‘But how are we going to get out of here if you’ve blocked the door?’

‘When was the last time you climbed out a window?’

‘And everybody was thinking like, “No way is he going to do this.” And I have to admit I was a little bit nervous myself,’ said Michael offering Ali the last of the cider. ‘So I picked up the snail and-’

‘Well. This is my house.’

Michael looked up at the lumpy, grey building. He’d been so lost in his story he hadn’t noticed which direction they’d actually been walking. He should still be terrified. For all he knew the angry mob might still be scouring the town for him. But something about being in Ali’s presence made him forget about angry mobs. Is this what true love was? Forgetting about angry mobs?

Just as he was pondering this Ali grabbed him and kissed him. Michael was so stunned his mind went into some kind of safety mode. For a couple of seconds his only thought was an image of two owls arm wrestling by a volcano. When he finally came back online he struggled out of the hedge he’d somehow fallen into. Ali waited patiently as he untangled his shirt from a thorn.

‘Sorry. I got carried away,’ she said.

‘That’s quite alright. Really. Absolutely fine. No trouble at all,’ said Michael.

‘Oh Michael, you’re so funny.’

And with that Ali walked away up her drive. Michael watched as she went in her front door. As the owl hoots and lava bubbles in his head slowly started to fade he began to notice a sound underneath them. One in the real world. The sound of an angry mob approaching.

‘There he is!’

Where had they found twenty pitchforks?

Michael was panting hard as he left the streets of Fecktown and began climbing the first hill on the road to Ballysuir. The Fecktowners were still on his tail. He could hear their raging feet and goat hooves not too far behind him. Adrenaline was still pumping through his muscles but they seemed to have built up some kind of immunity to it. His arms and legs swung around like empty coat hangers in a wardrobe tumbling down the stairs.

As he crested the hill Michael couldn’t take any more and he looked around for a place to hide. Hopefully they didn’t have any sniffer dogs with them. Or sniffer people. He spotted a battered car by the side of the road and he tried its door. He almost walked away he was so sure it would be locked but stopped short when the passenger

door actually opened. He slid inside and huddled up in front of the passenger seat. He was listening intently for the sound of the mob when he noticed a movement on the back seat.

‘Ah, is it yourself Michael?’ said Jim Geraghty from beneath his rug.

‘Oh, hi Mr Geraghty.’

‘What are you up to this evening?’

‘Just hiding from a mob.’

‘Ahhhh, I remember those days,’ said Jim Geraghty wistfully. ‘Well you’re welcome to stay here for the night if you like.’

‘Thanks Mr Geraghty,’ said Michael. ‘Can I ask what you’re doing here yourself?’

‘I’ve been sleeping in my car since the caravan got wrecked.’

‘Oh right. Well, night then.’

‘Night so Michael.’

Chapter 7

When Thursday night finally let Friday morning sneak in the back door of the world Michael carefully climbed out of Jim Geraghty's car. He looked around warily. The mob could still be roaming the countryside looking for him. Keeping his eyes peeled and his ears pitted he began the long walk back to Ballysuir.

As he walked Michael thought about how complicated his life was getting. According to the Second Law of Thermodynamics the entropy of a closed system will increase with time which meant that as time progressed the complexity of a system will tend towards chaos: a swamp of indistinguishable particles which will never revert to their more ordered states. Michael didn't know any of this however. He just thought things were really fucked up.

When he finally got home he collapsed into bed. If all dates were like that one he probably wouldn't make it to see his twenties. He was exhausted but just as he was drifting off to sleep he heard a knock on his door. A part of him worried that a small and extremely polite section of the bloodthirsty Fecktown mob had found him and now wanted to reef him from his bed but without disturbing the rest of the household 'cause they need their beauty sleep. When he opened the door however he was relieved to find his uncle Díarmuid.

'Ah Michael. I am glad I caught you,' said Díarmuid in a kind of voice Michael had never heard before from his uncle.

'Uncle Díarmuid. What's wrong?'

'Oh. Nothing. I am just sober.'

'Because of what I said?' said Michael, remembering his outburst. 'I'm sorry about that.'

'No. You were right Michael. I have been using drink to try to run away from myself but all it has done is keep me in exactly the same place. You know?'

'Not really.'

The late afternoon sun slopped over the top of the rock caked hill. Díarmuid stood at the top of the hill stopwatch in hand. Michael came charging up the hill no shirt on his back.

'Twenty four minutes thirty six seconds,' said Díarmuid when Michael reached him.

'Is that good?' asked Michael.

'The stopwatch?'

'No. My time.'

'Well, I wouldn't know. I've never got anyone to run up that hill before.'

'So why'd you time me?'

'I wanted to see if the stopwatch worked.'

'Does it?'

'Well, I wouldn't know. I've nothing to compare it against. Did it feel like twenty four minutes and thirty six seconds to you?'

Díarmuid shook the digital stopwatch and put it to his ear. Michael's breath was slowly starting to slow. He looked out at the view. You could see both Ballysuir and Fecktown from here. Both looked like resting animals, waiting for the next hunt. He wasn't sure which was about to hunt which though.

'I'm still not sure why I need to do all this other stuff. Isn't road bowling about just trying to throw the ball really far?'

'Michael. Throwing the ball down the road isn't just about throwing the ball down the road. You've got to think of it like throwing your whole life down that road. In that perfect couple of seconds you can lose all your fears and dreams. Put them into that ball and just let them go. Do you understand?'

For once Michael thought he did.

'Great. It's time for you to start throwing the ball.'

'Great!'

'Great.'

They looked expectantly at each other for a couple of seconds.

'Do you have a ball?' asked Díarmuid.

'No, I presumed you had one.'

'No.'

'Didn't you used to have one?'

'I threw it away.' Díarmuid reached into his pocket for some money. 'Head down to Foley's and get a couple of balls. I'll meet you by my place.'

Michael was starting to feel better about things as he walked down the tree lined road that led to Foley's – purveyor of fine meats and sports equipment. It seemed like Díarmuid had a plan and that was something. Admittedly the competition was tomorrow and it usually took years of training to be a great road bowler but surely Díarmuid wouldn't be doing this if there wasn't a chance it'd work out well.

But slowly his mind started to tune in to the rumbling sound coming from behind him. The way things had been going the past couple of days he doubted it could be a good thing. He turned to see a tractor come round the corner. It was driving flat out at ten miles an hour and billowing smoke. Michael squinted at the cab. He was pretty sure he could make out Níamh's manic smile behind the wheel. He didn't want to find out whether that smile was one of lust or bloodlust so once again he started to run for his life.

Díarmuid's stopwatch would have been impressed by the times he made climbing gates, running across fields, fording streams, scrambling through bushes and over uprooted tree trunks. All the while Níamh's slow but relentless tractor pursued him. He was pretty sure he could hear Níamh singing a merry song as she drove.

Michael spotted a wall which looked solid enough that surely Níamh's tractor wouldn't be able to beat. He started to climb but slipped on a loose stone, fell back and caught his foot awkwardly in a root, twisting his ankle. With difficulty he righted himself as the tractor drew closer and closer. Frantically he tried to get his weakened foot into a cranny in the wall but it just wouldn't take his weight. He changed tack and started to hobble along the wall but his progress was slow. Níamh's tractor bared down

on him. He could feel it vibrate the ground beneath his feet. Seeing no escape he stopped and faced his impending doom. But as he did he saw something approaching from behind the tractor. It was a horse. With Emily atop it. Emily steered the horse round the tractor and up to Michael.

‘Give me your hand!’ she commanded.

Michael gratefully grabbed Emily’s hand and with her help swung onto the back of her horse. When he was secured Emily set the horse in motion and they galloped away.

In a wooded glen they came to a halt. The tractor couldn’t come close to keeping up with Emily’s horse and they hadn’t seen sight of Níamh for about ten minutes. Michael slid off the back of the horse and Emily dismounted efficiently.

‘I think she was trying to *kill* me,’ said Michael still dazed. ‘You saved my life. Where did you come from? I didn’t know you rode horses. Where did Níamh get that tractor? Am I ever going to be able to stop running away from things?’

Emily didn’t answer any of these questions. Instead she put a whole new raft of questions in Michael’s mind by quietly kissing him.

‘Oh,’ replied Michael.

It was the sweetest punch in the face Michael had ever had. There were no arm-wrestling owls this time. Instead his mind just played a single tone. Emily stood before him waiting hopefully for a reaction.

‘I...I can’t...I don’t know...I’ve got to go,’ said Michael and he walked away.

Michael found Díarmuid by his cottage watching the sun set. He sat down beside him.

‘Sorry. I had a bit of trouble.’

‘That’s okay,’ replied Díarmuid. ‘Did you get the balls?’

‘Bollocks.’

‘That’s okay. It’s getting too dark to bowl anyway.’

They sat in silence for a while. Then something occurred to Michael that he’d never thought to ask his uncle because it had just always been the way it was.

‘How come you never got married?’

Díarmuid sighed.

‘Well, I was in love once Michael. A long time ago. When your mother was pregnant with you actually.’

17 years before Díarmuid was having a great time. He was lying in a heap in the corner of a bedroom. The room was full of people laughing, drinking, chatting and singing. Díarmuid couldn’t see them but their legs kept him company down on the floor. Occasionally someone would reach down and refill his glass so all was good.

A pair of legs appeared beside him. They were a woman's legs. His favourite kind. Then his favourite face lowered itself into his eyeline.

'Cathleen,' smiled Díarmuid.

'Hi.'

'How's it going?'

'Okay. Do you think we should leave?'

'Nahhhh. This is the best party I have ever, *ever* been to.'

'You said that about last weeks over in Greeny's.'

'Greeny's was the best party I've ever, *ever* been to. Until this one.'

But Cathleen seemed unconvinced by his logic.

'Don't you think so Cathleen?'

'No, it's fine. I'm having a good time. It just sometimes seems like all we do is live for the next party.'

'Yeah,' replied Díarmuid unsure what else one could want.

'Maybe we should leave.'

'But we just got here.'

'Leave Ballysuir. I want to see what else is out in the world. How do you know what you really want from life if you haven't seen what's available?'

'I just want this.'

'I don't Díarmuid. I have to go.'

'But we just got here. We-'

At that moment a different pair of legs appeared and Seán reached down and picked Díarmuid up.

'Sorry Cathleen. I've got to take lover boy away from you.'

Díarmuid watched Cathleen's eyes disappear into the forest of faces as Seán carried him out of the party.

'Wait. I should probably stay. I should probably stay Seán.'

'No. You can't stay Díarmuid. We've got to go home.'

'I should probably stay Seán.'

'And she left that night?' asked Michael.

'In a way I wish she had. Then I might be able to tell myself there was nothing I could have done. Her heart left that night but she waited for a while. I didn't think she'd really go. Why would she go when we were having such a good time? All I wanted was for things to stay still but they couldn't. I just presumed she'd come back but eventually I realised she wasn't going to. Someone said she's in London.'

'Would you go looking for her?'

'London's a big place Michael.'

'The more you looked the smaller it'd get. I find once I start a job there's less of it to do.'

Díarmuid thought about this but didn't say any more. Instead he rose to his feet.

'Come on, let's get you home. You've got a hard day's training ahead of you tomorrow.'

'Eh, tomorrow's the competition actually,' said Michael following him.

‘Really?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Wow. Well, listen. Don’t worry about it. You’ll do fine. Just remember everything I’ve taught you.’

‘Right. Yeah,’ Michael thought back over it. ‘And what have you taught me again?’

‘Well, number one: don’t-’

‘Hello, hellooooo!’ cried Níamh appearing from behind Díarmuid’s gate. ‘Michael, it is that I must have you for mine own. I can be waiting no longer. You must now be promising me that we shall be together forever and evers. And is it, mmm, and yes. Oh, don’t be afeared. Much is the sorrow that I does have for what I did do to you. All for my own I does be wanting you and I couldn’t be in the letting of you to be being with anyone else. So I done tried to kills you. Please forgive me, o Michael, and I can do forgive you for what you has done with those other girls. Betrayed you did do done to me, but I can see now that they forced you to. Be joining me and together we will teach them never to mess with us. For only together it is that-’

Níamh’s impassioned speech was cut short by Díarmuid, in a most simple and respectful way, punching her unconscious. Níamh collapsed in a heap onto the grass.

‘Sorry Michael. That wasn’t the one you liked was it?’

‘No, no. That’s okay,’ said the stunned Michael.

‘I just couldn’t understand a word she was saying. It hurt my brain.’

‘Yeah. She can do that alright.’

Díarmuid continued walking giving no more thought to Níamh’s unconscious form. Not seeing what he could do for her Michael followed him. As they walked Michael noticed something on Díarmuid’s arm.

‘What’s that thing on your arm?’ he asked.

‘Oh, it’s a nicotine patch. It’s supposed to help me quit drinking.’

‘Mm. I think those are actually for smoking.’

‘Really? Weird. Okay. Listen I’ll see you tomorrow anyway.’ As they separated at the t-junction Michael watched Díarmuid head down the hill taking the nicotine patch off his arm, rolling it up and trying to light it like a cigarette.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning and Michael's face was a mess. Or at least the depiction of it was. Sinéad Byrne, the town's fastest but least meticulous entrepreneur, was selling t-shirts which read "Ballysuir's Finest" below a picture of Michael. They hadn't had time to commission a proper likeness of Michael from Pat Howell, who'd painted the excellent mural of St Patrick and the Yeti in the town square, so instead Sinéad's son had done his best with the three crayons, the pencil and the stick of charcoal that he'd been given. The result was a rather warped version of Michael with a lumpen forehead, smeared nose and green hair. They weren't proving popular with Ballysuirans. The Fecktowners however were snapping them up, delighted with the idea that this monster was "Ballysuir's Finest". She tried not to be seen by her Ballysuiran brethren as she slinked across the road to the Fecktown side for another sale.

There was plenty of activity all along the road. Gary Dunk was dispensing pints from his Mr Lippy ice-cream van. One fateful night while his car was being serviced he'd been driving home drunk in the van when he'd noticed how similar the ice cream machine looked to a beer tap. The locals had been sceptical at first but now people eagerly awaited the arrival of pints-cream season.

The queue for Mr Lippy idly watched as Father Garvey and his opposite number from Fecktown tried to outdo each other with how much they could bless their town's balls. They'd already cracked out the censer, chalice and sanctus bells. Father Gruntle's mobile font had been a killer move so Father Garvey was starting to wonder where he could get a sacrificial goat at this hour.

The two priests' invocations were lost under the sound of Tumbledown Trevor and the boys playing their curving, spiralling tunes from the back of a hay cart. One couldn't tell where one tune ended and the next began. Possibly they'd been playing the same tune solidly for the last 17 years.

Wherever they were in the crowd however everyone had one eye on where Whacker Jackson was as he strutted around flanked by his cronies.

'Well, Ballysuir. Where's your champ? I don't see him,' Whacker mimed a telescope. 'If he doesn't turn up then I guess you forfeit eh? That's what you really want to do. You'd be happy to just lie down and admit defeat, wouldn't you?'

No one responded so Whacker idly pushed a passing man into a bush.

'Hey Mikey!'

Michael had his head down as he marched towards the competition. He was hoping no one would notice him. The more people cheered him on the more he worried that he was about to let them down. Luckily most people just asked him if he was going to show Fecktown who's boss to which Michael could just say yes. Any follow up questions however would very quickly reveal that Michael mostly suspected he was about to show Fecktown that Fecktown was the boss.

'Mikey!'

Gregor's voice snapped him back to the present. He looked over to see Gregor carving a proficient drawing of a penis into a tree trunk. Michael made his way over to him.

'How are you feeling?' Gregor asked when Michael reached him.

'A bit nervous I guess.'

A passing woman wheeling a pram almost ran it into a lamppost when she saw Michael. 'Wahey! Show them who's boss Michael!'

'Thanks, thanks a lot.'

Michael manoeuvred Gregor behind the tree so they could be further out of the view of passers-by.

'So. Do you think you can beat him?' asked Gregor.

'I've no idea.'

'Well, you must know how your distances are compared to Whacker's best, right?'

Michael sighed and slumped against a stack of wood covered in a tarp. The stack sagged under his weight though and craggy face appeared from underneath. What Michael had thought was a pile of wood turned out to be an old man trying to light a cigarette. He grinned as he saw Michael and grabbed his elbow, breathing what felt like hundred-year-old smoke into his ear. 'Good luck Michael...and good luck...and don't let them...yeah...'

'Okay, thanks,' replied Michael as the man departed satisfied. When the old man was out of earshot Michael leaned in towards Gregor conspiratorially. 'I haven't actually, completely tried throwing the ball yet.'

'You haven't tried bowling the ball yet?!' bellowed Gregor. Several people looked around. Michael grabbed Gregor's arm and pulled him away from the alarmed Ballysuiran faces. When they were safely behind a shed Michael continued.

'I just...I haven't had time. Things have been really busy.'

'What's more important than road bowling?!'

'Pretty much everything around it, it turns out.'

'Okay, okay, okay. No need to panic. You'll have a natural ability at it. Just like your uncle. There's no need to panic. I mean, sure, the fate of Ballysuir rests on your shoulders but that's nothing to panic about. Are you panicking?'

'Well, I wasn't before. Have you seen my Uncle Díarmuid?'

'Yeah, good thinking, a few last-minute tips will sort you out. That's all you need. That's exactly what will save the day.'

'So, have you seen him?'

'No. No sign of him at all. I don't think he's here.'

'Okay.'

Michael stared at the ground but he couldn't find any answer there. Gregor perked up.

'I know! You just need to concentrate, right? That's what athletes do. Head behind Taylor's and try and relax and not think about letting everyone you love down.'

Taylor's was the pub that lay on the road between Ballysuir and Fecktown. It was an unofficial neutral zone. When the elders of each of the towns had wanted to meet to

discuss which would be the neutral zone between Fecktown and Ballysuir they hadn't been able to agree on where would be an appropriate neutral zone for the neutral zone talks. But unofficial or not nobody gave anybody hassle in Taylor's. Mr Taylor was always extremely calm, quiet and mild mannered. No one had ever seen him lose his temper. Which made everyone afraid of what he'd be like if he did.

Taylor's pub also had a long straight stretch of road outside it. Although many had found it to change into an incredibly winding and treacherous one when leaving the pub late at night. The straightness of the road in the daytime made it the perfect venue for the road bowling every year. Mr Taylor was trusted with officiating over the competition, not only because he was seen as a neutral party but also because his official involvement meant that when his windows occasionally got smashed by an errant ball he was more likely to be forgiving.

Michael slipped into the backyard of the pub. He needed to get his head in the game. Even if he still wasn't really sure what exactly the game was all about. He closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on the ball and visualised himself throwing it down the road and everyone being delighted with him and cheering. But other thoughts kept popping into his mind. Thoughts of Ali. And Emily. How could he choose between them and make them both happy? He imagined Emily's hopeful face. He could almost hear Ali's silky voice.

Actually, he *could* hear it.

Michael opened his eyes to find Ali smiling at him.

'Hi,' he tried. It was a safe opening. Didn't say too much, came just short of saying too little.

'Hi,' Ali responded. Michael hadn't seen that one coming.

'Just trying to get my thoughts together. Before the road bowling.' Ali just stared back at him. Michael was unsure what to do so just kept talking. 'Little bit nervous. Hoping I can do the town proud. And you.'

'I don't mind if you win,' smiled Ali.

'Oh, of course, yeah.'

'I mean, I wouldn't even mind if you conceded.'

'Oh. Cool.'

'Or just didn't try very hard.'

Michael felt the conversation swimming around him.

'Y-eah.'

'Or even just tried to lose,' Ali continued sweetly. 'I'd be totally okay with that.'

'Well...I dunno if...'

'Honestly. Let me prove it to you. Lose. Lose on purpose. Just throw the ball into the ditch. And I'll still like you.'

He felt the currents pulling him this way and that. He was losing his footing on the conversation's riverbed.

'Yeah...but...everyone's...'

'I don't care about everyone else. Do you? Does it really matter what they think?'

And then the flow caught him and he was pulled downriver.

'No. Of course not,' lied Michael.

Ali kissed Michael. It was a masterly debating manoeuvre. They should use it in the Houses of Parliament.

‘Great!’ she said. Then when Michael didn’t say anything else she continued. ‘So say it. Say you’ll lose. For me.’

‘I’m going to lose. For you.’ Well, he was probably going to lose anyway. What was the downside to saying he was doing it for Ali?

‘What?’

Michael wondered at first how Ali could be talking without moving her mouth but then realised it was a different female voice. Michael’s head spun to see Emily standing in the back door of Taylor’s.

‘Emily!’

Michael wondered how much she’d seen and heard but her face told him that however much it was it was enough. More than anything she looked embarrassed. She turned back into Taylor’s and disappeared. Without thinking Michael chased after her.

The main room of the pub was empty. Everyone must have been outside getting good positions for the competition.

‘Emily wait.’

‘What?’

Michael was sure there was something right to say here but he had no idea what it was.

‘Uh...’

‘Michael, if you like her that’s fine. I just wished you’d told me.’

‘I like you.’

‘You just said you were going to throw the competition for her.’

‘I’m not. I’m going to win. I promise.’

‘What?’ said Ali from the doorway. Michael spun around again.

‘I mean...I didn’t mean-...I mean, I’m going to...’

A voice came over the loudspeaker outside. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, the competition is about to start please take your positions.’

Michael looked backwards and forwards between the two women. Every future flooded before his eyes. It was overwhelming. He just couldn’t pluck out the right one.

‘So what’s it going to be?’ asked Ali.

‘What do you want Michael?’ said Emily.

‘Uhhh...’

Mr Taylor came in the front door of the pub.

‘Michael, we’re starting now.’

‘Yeah, uh, just a second please.’

‘Sorry Michael, I can’t hold these crowds any longer. They want road bowling.’

Michael looked at the two girls and silently walked out.

The thunder of the crowd hit him as he stepped out of the pub. He couldn’t tell who was cheering and who was booing. It was just a wall of emotion. And one figure stood in the middle of all: Whacker Jackson. Whacker’s feelings towards Michael were clear through his silent, still, steely grin.

Michael walked out to the middle of the road. Once he’d stepped into the middle of it the crowd closed behind him and Michael couldn’t even tell where he’d just come

from. The only signpost was Whacker. Whacker stepped out from his Fecktown boys and walked to the middle of the road.

Michael looked up at Whacker.

Whacker looked down at Michael.

Neither blinked.

Though one of them gulped.

‘Ladies and gentlemen!’ shouted Mr Taylor, stepping up beside them. ‘This is the 138th annual road bowling competition between the twin towns of Ballysuir...’

A cheer went up from the Ballysuir crowd.

‘...and Fecktown.’

A howl went up from the Fecktowners.

‘Fecktown are reigning champions having won for the past five years. Representing them today is Whacker Jackson who has bowled and won for the past three years almost matching the record set by Díarmuid Doyle not so long ago. Representing Ballysuir this year is the nephew of Díarmuid Doyle: Michael Doyle. Three attempts each. Whacker will bowl first. You all know the rules so we’ll begin. Whoever throws the ball furthest wins!’

Another cheer went up from both crowds as Whacker strode to his corner and picked up a shiny metal ball. It looked like a delicate egg in Whacker’s big, meaty hands. Michael half expected it to crack open and a bird to fly out and into the far distance, securing Fecktown an unconventional victory.

Whacker took some paces back and a tense silence descended on the two crowds. He closed his eyes and kissed the ball. Then in a burst of speed somehow ill-fitting for such a large man he strode forward, whipped his arm around and released it. The ball shot down the road repelling the crowds before it. When it came to a stop people applauded, nodded and muttered. It was a good shot but not a game finisher. This was beatable.

The man with the flags placed a marker flag by the ball and Michael felt all eyes turning to him. He turned to the table where his three balls were sitting. To give the impression that he knew what he was doing he picked one up and tossed it gently from hand to hand in a way that he thought would look like he was appraising it. When it fell out of his hand and thudded dully onto the ground he nodded his head thoughtfully like he was adding that into his calculations: ‘Tends to fall out of hands.’ He picked up one of the other balls and walked out into the middle of the road.

This was it. This was where the town would find out if they could hold their heads high once again. This was where Ali and Emily would find out which one he had true feelings for. This was where life would find out if he was a hero or a loser. And this was where Michael would find out all those things too.

He looked around the crowd. The people of Ballysuir hoping for him to succeed. His family hoping for him to find confidence. His friends hoping for him not to embarrass himself. Emily hoping for him to just try. Ali hoping he wouldn’t. Nowhere in the crowd could he see his uncle though. So instead he closed his eyes and tried to concentrate on him, to channel what he remembered of how Díarmuid used to bowl. How did he move? How did he feel?

Michael opened his eyes, took a deep breath, then began his run. He strode forward, windmilled his arm around and released the ball. It sped from his arm striking the road like a whip and bouncing up right into Jim Geraghty's shin.

The crowd gasped in shock. Jim danced around trying to shake the pain from his leg and breathing like a vacuum cleaner with a piece of paper stuck in its tube.

'Sorry Mr Geraghty!'

'No!' said Jim between gulps of air. 'I'm sorry Michael. I think I must have been standing in your way a bit. Don't worry. You'll get them next time!'

There was a pause as people weren't really sure what happened next. Should they just continue? Was there any kind of first aid person here? Who was in charge of that kind of thing anyway?

Whacker's guffaws broke the silence. 'Good one kid,' he said as he sauntered out from his station to the middle of the road. 'Looks like I'm going to have some tough competition here.'

The man with the flags took a while to walk the distance back up the road to plant Michael's flag almost right by the starting line. Jim used the flag to take some weight off his damaged leg, so at least there were some pros to its proximity.

Almost absent-mindedly Whacker bowled his next ball. Even his ball sounded like it was laughing as it skitted down the road surpassing Whacker's previous throw.

The Fecktowners cheered rabidly. They could feel the victory in their hands. Another year of being lords of the county, of having Ballysuir cower before them, of having absolutely no difficulties in their bedrooms once the door was closed.

'Come on Michael!'

The Ballysuir crowd started to cheer. All wasn't lost yet.

Michael dug deep. He tried to shake the thoughts of his last bowl out his mind. Just a misfire. Could happen to anyone. It wasn't representative of his normal shooting abilities, whatever they might be. He still had two bowls left. He could do this. Couldn't he? Wouldn't he? Shouldn't he? Didn't he want to?

The ball was flying out of his hand before he'd even noticed. His mind had been so lost in thoughts it hadn't seen what his body was doing. The ball was a slick, silver sword of silence as it smacked right into Jim Geraghty's stomach.

'Ah! Fuc-...mother of...' wheezed the winded Jim Geraghty.

The Fecktowners roared with laughter. This was even better than last year's competition when the Ballysuir competitor had been silently crying as he bowled his last ball.

'No! No, don't worry. I'm alright. There was a really good speed to it Michael. I'd say it would have gone far,' expelled Jim, mostly towards the ground.

There was more howls of laughter and victory from the Fecktown crowd and hopeful cheers of hope from the Ballysuirans before Mr Taylor quieted them down again.

'Quiet now! Whacker Jackson's third and final bowl for Fecktown! Mr Jackson please.'

Whacker was chuckling as he took his position. He strode forward but when his hand opened the ball just trickled out of it and hit the ground by his feet. It rolled about a metre before coming to a stop. Whacker smiled.

'There ya go kid. See if you can beat that one.'

The Fecktowners all laughed. The Ballysuirers all went quiet. They looked defeated.

‘Thank you ladies and gentlemen! Last bowl for Michael Doyle!’ shouted Mr Taylor.

Michael walked out past him carrying his final ball. His body felt weak. His spirit even weaker. He could barely look up as his eyes drifted across the Ballysuir crowd. He could see the worry for him in his parents’ eyes. The confusion in Gregor’s eyes. The fear in Gemma’s. The smile in Ali’s eyes. Emily couldn’t meet his eyes.

So maybe he’d made his decision. Subconsciously he didn’t want to win. Because he liked Ali. It made sense. It made total sense. But. At the same time it was wrong. He felt it was wrong. He knew it was wrong. In that moment he knew what he really wanted. And it didn’t matter what anyone else wanted. They weren’t going to stand in his way.

Michael closed his eyes. He let everything go. He stopped trying to push the doubts out of his mind and with that they disappeared. Everything faded from his busy mind. He could never tell you why but for some reason Michael found himself sitting a café. Clean and shiny wooden surfaces thrust across the room, bold and rich. In front of him sat a cup of some kind of foam crusted, flavour dusted beverage that Michael had never even dreamed existed. Through the large windows Michael could see a modern city built upon the heart of an ancient one. People and cars passed outside but all within was calm and careful. Warm sunshine melted through the café making Michael smile wistfully. Then, from somewhere, came the roar of a crowd.

Michael opened his eyes. At first he couldn’t tell who was shouting what but slowly he started to realise no one was looking at him or each other. All eyes were focused down the road. A metal ball was still skipping along it. Michael looked at his hands and saw that he wasn’t holding his ball any more. The ball shot past Whacker’s last flag, smashing it in two as it did. As it came to a stop Michael threw his arms in the air in delight and the Ballysuir crowd exploded with victory. Everyone cheered and cried while the Fecktowners swore and shook their heads in refutation.

Michael started to celebrate but slowly he began to notice that no one was actually looking in his direction. Instead their gaze fell over his shoulder. Michael turned around to find his uncle being lifted on the shoulders of his townsmen as they whooped and hollered in delight. Michael’s mother appeared at his side and gave him a pleased hug.

‘What happened?’ Michael asked.

‘Díarmuid won!’ said Síle.

‘But...I don’t understand.’

‘He came out of nowhere. Just ran up and let one fly. He won!’

‘What happened to my throw?’

‘Ah, sure you hit Jim Geraghty again.’

Michael looked over and saw Jim Geraghty crumpled over unconscious at the side of the road.

‘Sure, if that was a new kind of game you’d be the best at it. Definitely. Hands down,’ said Síle.

Further down the road Fecktowners were shouting in the face of Mr Taylor who was waving his arms in unsympathetic dismissal. Whacker’s goons were getting more and

more angry as Ballysuir's boys moved in in support of Mr Taylor. A shove and a kick and a fight broke out.

'Oh Jesus,' said Síle. 'I can't believe they've started fighting without me.'

She ran off to join in the fun. Michael didn't have time to be concerned for his mother's victims though. He ran over to Díarmuid atop his crowd throne.

'Uncle Díarmuid! Uncle Díarmuid!' said Michael.

'Michael! I did it! I got my throw back!' said Díarmuid.

'Yayyy!' said the crowd.

'But how?' said Michael.

'I'm drunk again!' said Díarmuid.

'Yayyy!' said the crowd.

'But I don't understand. I thought you lost your throw because of drinking. And now you get it back because of drinking? How does that make any sense?' said Michael.

'I don't know Michael. I can't make a judgement on that kind of thing at the moment I'm far too pissed,' said Díarmuid.

'Yayyy!' said the crowd.

And with that final cheer the crowd carried Díarmuid off and fell into a field.

Michael turned away and started to run through the mess of people that were swarming over the road. The fight had now spread to most of the crowd and Michael had to weave and dodge to avoid wild kicks and loose punches. Eventually he found Ali who was somehow standing in the middle of everything but not getting hurt.

'Ali, I've made a decision. I'm sorry but I don't want to go out with you any more. I'm really sorry.'

'No,' sighed Ali. 'I'm the one who should be sorry. I was kind of using you to piss off Whacker. I thought it'd be the ultimate "fuck you" for me to start seeing the Ballysuir road bowler.'

'Oh.'

'And then I tried to get you to lose because I knew he'd be intolerable if he didn't win his precious road bowling. So I manipulated your emotions to make you want to throw away the most important thing in your life.'

'Mmm. Okay,' said Michael trying to absorb all this. 'Well, I'm glad to see you're not too upset by my decision anyway.'

'Listen, you're a great guy in many ways Michael. I guess it was never really going to work out between us though. We're from different sides of the valley.'

'So why *do* you speak with an English accent and why did you transfer to a school in Ballysuir if Whacker is your dad?'

'Oh, he's not my father. He's my lover.'

At that moment Whacker's huge bulk was pushed backwards into their vicinity by a haymaker from a donkey.

'Shameful. But not illegal,' said Whacker as he righted himself.

Michael was dumbfounded by this.

'Listen kid,' continued Whacker. 'I'm sorry for being so angry with you and all. I've just been in a bad place for quite some time. It's a very pressurised sport as I'm sure you'd agree. I was afraid of the elements of chance that are inherent in all pursuits so I tried to control everything around me. Today has put a lot of things in perspective

though. I don't want to be so mean all the time. From now on I want to be more of a loving person, y'know? Well, I'd better get back to the fighting but why don't you stop by our place for dinner sometime? We can play Jenga or something.'

'What's Jenga?' said Michael, trying to grasp on to the least relevant part of Whacker's speech, but it was too late as Whacker charge back into the mêlée.

Michael continued on his search through the battling towns until he found Gregor and Gemma watching the action from on top of a wall.

'Pretty good fight this year, eh Michael?' said Gregor.

'Yeah, yeah, pretty good. Hey, have you seen Emily?'

'I think I saw her heading off towards the river,' said Gemma. 'She was looking pretty pissed off. Did you-?' But it was too late as Michael had sprinted off.

Mr McCleary, Mr O'Riordan and Mr Scully watched Michael running away from the madness on the road.

'Can we say that was our plan all along?' asked Mr O'Riordan.

'Sure,' said Mr McCleary.

'Emily!'

Emily didn't turn around but kept marching. Michael had found her in the woods across the river. The woods were pretty thick and mossy which made Emily's progress slower but her determination to get away from Michael more evident.

'Emily! Please! Sto-!' said Michael as he caught up with her. She had stopped around halfway through his 'stop' so he'd stopped.

'What?!'

'I made a decision.'

'It's too late Michael. You made your decision.'

'Yes, that's what I'm saying.'

'No. You made your choice when you tried to lose on purpose.'

'But I didn't. I thought I was losing on purpose and so I must like Ali but then I realised that...I really am that bad,' Michael said it like it was the greatest love poem anyone had ever written. 'I am *terrible* at road bowling. I may be the worst road bowler Ballysuir has ever known. I tried my absolute hardest and I failed. And I think I did it for you.'

Emily thought about this. Then she looked up and deep into Michael's eyes.

'That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard Michael. Goodbye.'

And with that she turned and walked away. Michael was trying to think of what else he could say when he was struck on the back of the head and fell to the ground. He looked up to see Jim Geraghty standing over him, beaten and crazed.

'You ruined my life ya bastard! You ruined my business, my accommodation and now my body! What the hell is wrong with you?!'

'I was...I was just trying to please all the...all the people...all the time.'

Jim Geraghty didn't care much for Michael's reply and he turned without a word or a change of expression and marched off into the woods rubbing his head.

Michael lay on the dirt feeling like dirt.

'Are you alright Michael?' said Seán walking up beside him.

Michael slowly sat up.

‘Not really Dad.’

Seán helped him to his feet.

‘What happened to you?’

‘I messed everything up. I didn’t get the girl. I lost the competition. I got everything wrong!’

Seán put his arm around Michael as they made their way out of the woods onto the rocky path that led past the slowly fading gravestones of the old graveyard swaddled in the roadworks that were expanding the main road to accommodate the expanding cars of the expanding people who were travelling from all over to all over to see each other seeing each other.

After a thoughtful pause Seán spoke.

‘Sure, that’s living son. Just try and enjoy it.’

The End.

