

Glasgow 1967.

You don't know you're a Fenian bastard until you come to Glasgow, and half the city tells you.

Which is mad, because the other half tells you you're fookin gargeous. When I first arrived in 1887, it seemed like a million lost souls were crammed like sardines in London Road alone, after some bright spark went 'I know, I'll invent one a them Industrial Revolutions' and the Paddies must have went 'I'm yer man for the work in that Glasgow' and fleets of wee ships full of slave's heads and faces came up The Clyde and landed at Broomielaw harbour. The whole city had turned into a giant, manky, black factory, spewing out soot, durt and chemicals, so that everyone's rags could do with a good scrub.

And with so many folk breathing each other's poisoned air, you shared everything. 'Here ye go, Missus Quinn, here's a wee drap disease fur ye' so it turned into Fever City an all. The women are wummin like back home in Ireland,

God bless her, and they're mostly midgets, but they say brilliant things like 'See me? See ma man? See mince? Hates it.'

And evrubdy loves to mangle and draaaag their wuuuurds and say 'By the way' at every opportunity.

So, it turns out you're not a Fenian bastard after all, you're a 'Feeeniaaaan baaaastaaaart.'

By the way.

It's not even Glasgow, either. If you're lady muck from Ingle Land, it's Glozgow. If you're a foreigner, from say Edinburgh, it's Glassgow. And, if you're common as muck, it's Glesga.

And they say it's me that talks like an arse, the fookin ayjits?

They've a wicked sense of humour, and every character has exactly the right nickname, like that one they call Mumph, who has the look of a gargoyle about him. And another mad thing. Listen to what they call themselves.

Glaswegians.

They have religion here, and there's Christians too, but

some are the right kind and others are the wrong kind.

They have every kind of joke about the Irish, that seem to do the job for any kind of Irish, like 'Have you heard the one about the Irish genius? No? Neither have I.'

And then, there's the right kind of Irish from Norn Irn that are beautiful blue and orange, the ones that get the work, and hardly drink or fight that much.

Then, they have the wrong kind of Irish that's horrible and green, all durty lying, thieving, ugly, thick, lazy, beggar Tims.

And would you believe it, they even have the wrong kind of Christian and the wrong kind of Irish in the one person.

And that would be me.

I shouldn't even have been here, and I don't know why, but I came to love the place and I don't care if it loved me back, because Alanna did, though I shared my love

between her and my bhoys, the Celtic Football Club. Alanna was a beautiful girl and perfect in every way, apart

from being a Protestant and supporting the Rangers.

She called these days the Swinging Sixties, and loved to rant how them Royalist Rolling Stones looked like real men, not like them Liverpool Beatles who look like little shaggy alter bhoys and are clearly some of your lot, ya poxy Papist poof.

She called that alliteration.

And she called me illiterate.

God works in mysterious ways, and I was pleased he got a job, because somehow, Alanna would come to take my surname, though I might take it back after all the name-calling.

Cheeky goat. I've never had the pox.

By now, you might be asking, how did I end up here?

Me, young, dirt-poor, un-educated Irish farm boy Michael Dillon, who loved life because of being around so much death, with the fookin gargeous face and voice that's far better than that Rod Stewart one, end up in Glasgow where I never knew a soul, a street, or the language? I can hardly believe it myself, but it's nearly a hundred

years old that story, like me, and you're invited to sit down and listen to it. And I just hope that I haven't lost my Irishness in the telling, like the McMick they Glaswegians called me with my two accents.

It's a fookin brilliant story, because it's about how I lost one family, and found two more.

First off, I was supposed to be on a Going to America boat to get away from that terrible Famine.

And wherever I landed in all of America, I could eat any kind of greedy snack I choose off fancy menus, as long as it wasn't any more potatoes.

Bloody folk with London as their capital.

We asked them for nothing and what did they give us?

Exactly that.

It was around then that I first heard those two

Godforsaken words. Suicide and cannibal.

Anyway, there was I, on this boat, then off to America, then off the boat.

Turned out to be not America.

Near Skibbereen, Ireland 1887.
Days before leaving for not America.

I had to bury my lovely Mother.

She was dead of course, weighed less than a drink of water and I've seen more fat on a hen's face.

When I tell you I've buried my Ma, I don't mean them undertakers pretending they're solemn, the big funeral and them big, fancy, black shiny cars, a line of the proper amount of respectful mourners, a right good wake with witty stories told about how brilliant you were from a Priest you hardly know, and a skin-full of the strong drink.

That's for rich folks.

No, I mean a DIY funeral, doing all of it yourself,
everything, the digging of the grave an all.

And right in the middle of a terrible winter.

Those that hadn't perished of famine fever but staggered
about like drunken ghosts, said it was the worst winter
they could ever remember.

And there was I, all alone in the world in the wee, frozen,
dirt-patch fields in the gloom, barely a shaver, swinging
this big pick that was heavy as me into ground that was
cold and hard as Trevelyan's heart.

Heave, grunt, swing, crunch, ooyah, damn, oops, God
forgive me. Heave, grunt, swing, crunch, ooyah, damn,
oops, God forgive me. The ground kept sending these jolts
through my spaghetti arms, like electric. I had never heard
of greedy spaghetti back then, and I wondered if I'd like it,
and sure enough, I do.

We've only ever had the Irish Flowers, potatoes, every
day, forever and ever, until the crop just died on us. It kept
dying too, year after year after year, just to make sure all
the people around here did, an all.

And we don't have the electric either, because that would

only be for folks in the big city of Cork that's millionaires. So, I'm digging away and my eyes are all red and puffy from dirt and sweat in them, even in this God forsaken cold and my gargeous black hair kept getting in the way. And here was I, burying my hairdresser, with a brilliant view of The Celtic Sea for her to stare at, if only I could make any kind of hole in the ground. And those blisters were bursting and there was blood on the handle that made it slippery.

I remember saying 'Ah, for the love of God' and I did love Him, but at that minute, name me any Saint whose faith would not be shaken?

We were hardly religious by the way, said Ma in that lovely, kind, soft-mannered but quietly insistent way she had, and Da, a fighting man, said we were the flyweight Catholics in all of Catholicdom Ireland.

You always knew when Ma was in the mood for some of the insisting, as she'd tilt her head to the side, smile, then insist. And she insisted that I should just concentrate on the basics. That means the names of just the right Popes and Saints, communion and catechisms, Hail Mary's and

novenas and just tell everyone, you're so Holy, you can hardly believe your knees still work. And, she insisted religion was responsible for all the world's fools and heartache and that there's plenty more where that came from, and that I would be better spending my time with the history. That's her favourite teacher Mr. Downie's doing, for he always insisted that, and drummed it in with a ruler across the back of the knuckles, and more's the pity the likes of him's not around, or any other left alive, to drum things into your head, Michael.

Anyway, next thing, I throw my pick to the ground and it hits my big toe, so I grab my foot and shout and hop around a bit, then fall on my arse in the snow.

But, none of this was digging this grave for me or poor, patient Ma, so I just had to keep going at it.

It started to get dark and the thought of all the spirits swirling about, and there'd be plenty, made me hurry.

And that was the story of how I dug my Ma's last resting place, God rest her soul. My hands hurt like Bejaysus, nothing like the pain I would eventually get with one of them, but sore as a starving stomach.

It was time to get back to the house and have a shower, then put the Sunday roast on. House? Shower? Roast? I'm having a laugh.

Our wee place rested against a sloping hill, and as I walked toward it, looking at the sorry state of it, I must admit I had to smile.

House? That's a grand word for our hut.

We rented a few wee scraggy fields, a million miles from anywhere that led to the cliffs above the sea, because them that's near Wales wouldn't let us buy land. Not that we'd the money, anyway.

And the house was just a tiny wee place, more hovel than cottage, with more leaks than roof and plenty of room as long as you were the child of a goblin with a bad stoop.

One room was for cooking, when you could beg or borrow but never steal something for the pot. Ma insisted being beggars is alright because you're a poor, starving man, but that shouldn't make you 'A durty thief, is it? Ah'll cut yer fookin hands off!'

Anyway, you'll eventually get used to the shakes and the buzz in the head from nothing in the stomach, she

insisted.

But I'll never get used to something important that I really miss. The farting.

There's nothing quite like a good old, blasting trouser-trumpet, but I haven't sniffed one in an age.

Our grate used to have Ma's stool in front of it when you wanted to sit and warm your arse. It was a milking stool when we had the cow, before it got stole by some durty thief for the eating. And there was little burnt bones in the grate from when we had the pig and saved its little trotters for last. Pig's feet are very tasty, unless you're the pig, of course.

The animals became friends and had names, but I don't like to use them, because it's like I ate my pals.

Our walls used to be some kind of white colour, but now looked like somebody had smeared porridge on them.

Porridge is the finest start to the day, by the way.

We also had a rocking chair, because there it is, bits of it in the grate for burning when we ran out of wood, or strength to gather any.

And there's Ma and me and Da in an old, worn brown

photie that was sitting on a shelf that Ma kept insisting in her posh voice was called the mantle-piece, how'd you do. There was never anything else on Ma's insistent mantle-piece.

The curtains hung like lovely Granny Starkey's hair, thin, grey and straggly and never kept any cold or light or moths or bats out, at all. Just as I said, like lovely Granny Starkey's hair.

Ma was very proud of her carpet, but we had to burn that too and it lasted quite a while, but smelt like Da's feet in Summer, or any other time, now I think on it.

I remember that day I came back from the fields, standing in the middle of the room and looking around and thinking 'We're poor. I don't want to be poor' and swearing that one day, some day, somehow, the family wouldn't be poor.

And although inside was the pauper man's place, if you looked outside, there was riches beyond your dreams.

One day Da said 'Would you want a picture to hang on that wall, mother?' and Ma just laughed and said 'Look outside, daftie. There's the prettiest picture.' Da laughed and had to agree and said 'I'll just frame that window then'

but he never did, though he could do any kind of thing with his hands and when he said that, he would wink at Ma and her face would go every shade of beetroot.

Ma was right. It was a grand sight out the window.

The fields and hills led to far away peaks, all covered with snow and down the hills, you could see miles of green that sloped down to lead you away to temptation. Because right there, smiling and twinkling at you like a fine garl, was the Celtic Sea. Crane your neck this way and on a good day, you can just about see Skibbereen, where they had them soup kitchens in the Great Famine. Ma was born there ten years after, in 1855, near Caheragh Road, when the famine's bite was worst, she kept insisting.

Her Da, my Granda, was the local blacksmith, a huge, barrel-chested, cheerful man, and he proposed to her Ma Rosie, a farm girl, every time she brought in Connelly, the horse, so's he could shoe him. He was the last, as all the rest had been ate.

When Granda died, a shadow of himself from over-work and starvation but mostly from collapsing into the furnace, Ma was only twelve and her mother died a year later from

a broken heart.

My Ma insisted that they ran out of coffins to put corpses in, so they made these hinged bottomed ones so's bodies just plopped out and ye could re-use the coffin, so ye could.

And when I was able and could walk down to the cliffs, if I craned my neck the other way, I could watch out for the bloody place up from France, where Da would curse and spit, or take a piss at. That was because his Da, my other Granda, who used to own a den of iniquity, a public-house in Cork, the lucky, thirsty bastard, died fighting one of about a million fights with them durty Ingles. But, he was ancient anyway, forty two is plenty time on earth.

That was exactly the same age Da's own Ma died from eleven years of famine, the fever taking her old heart out. She was a weaver, a shy, simple lovely Ma, the best in the world, my Da said.

And look, if I crane my neck that other way so it hurt like a scrawny Christmas turkey, I could imagine the promise of all kinds of greedy things to eat.

In America.
