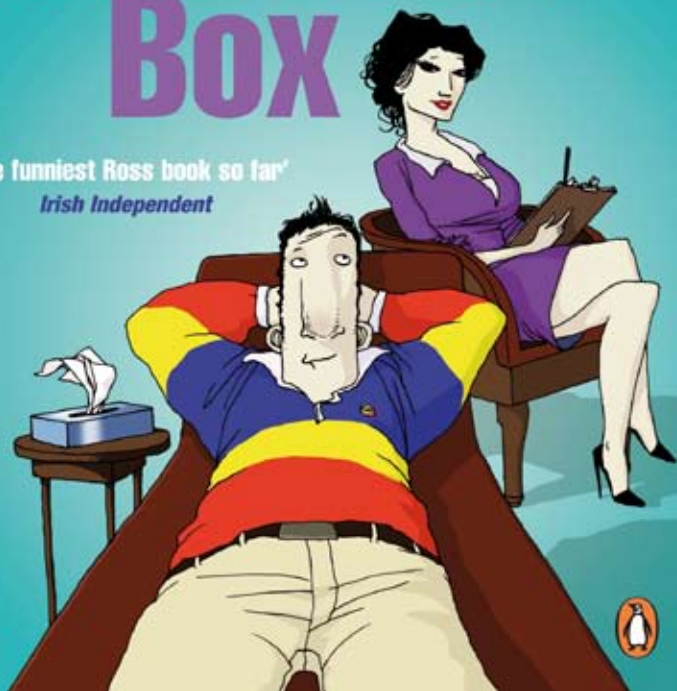


ROSS O'CARROLL-KELLY

# Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's BOX

'The funniest Ross book so far'  
*Irish Independent*



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Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's Box  
by  
Ross O'Carroll-Kelly

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# Prologue

‘Er . . . *run* that by me again?’

‘A Divorce Fair,’ he goes. And he’s, like, totally serious. In the RDS, of all places.

‘Divorce and fair,’ I go. ‘Two words I never thought I’d hear in the same sentence,’ which you have to admit is a cracking line. ‘Dude, *why?*’

Oisinn’s like, ‘Why not? We have wedding fairs, don’t we? Getting divorced is a bigger step than getting married. Definitely more expensive . . .’

I stare at the road and say fock-all. Don’t even want to think about it.

Fionn pipes up then from the back seat. ‘It’s certainly a step no one should take without the best advice. I think it’s a great idea.’

Then he goes back to reading an ortalce about – get this – loop quantum gravity.

‘Well,’ Oisinn goes, ‘I can’t claim all the credit. Erika was the original inspiration.’

Erika. Jesus. Even the mention of her name and I’m harder than Sebastien Chabal. ‘What’s the, er, connection there?’ I go, trying not to sound jealous.

He’s like, ‘She just rang me. I think she had the idea when she was in New York that time. They actually have actual divorce parties over there . . .’

‘I can understand how they could be quite cathartic,’ Fionn goes. Cathartic? That’s definitely made-up. It’s like he fills his mouth with Scrabble letters, spits them out

and that's a word. I don't pull him up on it, though. The poor goy's been through enough this year, what with Aoife and everything? The word is he's not going back teaching either.

'Erika's still focked up about her old pair breaking-up,' I go. 'A lot of people would say it's the reason she's never acknowledged her true feelings for me – fear of getting hurt, blahdy blahdy blah . . .'

They just ignore it.

Oisinn's like, 'Two things that Erika knows a lot about – divorce and partying. So she thought she'd set herself up as a divorce party-planner. That's when she rang me.'

I'm there, 'No offence, Dude, but why you?'

Fionn's like, 'Because he's twenty-six and worth a reputed twenty-eight million euro. She might have reasoned that he knew a thing or two about business.'

It's like, fair enough – I only asked.

'So,' Oisinn goes, 'I helped her set it up. Suddenly, she's getting fifty, sixty Ks a time to throw these parties for people. I would never have believed there was so much money to be made from other people's unhappiness. It was then that we hit on the idea of the Divorce Fair.'

Fionn's like, 'Erika's always had a good head on her shoulders, though. Very smart girl.'

I'm there, 'It's those lips I'd be more interested in. She could suck the nuts off an alloy,' and then I'm like, 'by the way, who the fock is this J. Oker?'

There's a cor in front of us doing, like, forty Ks an hour and refusing to pull into the slow lane. It's supposed to be the Stillorgan dualler. I'm there, 'Oisinn, flash your lights at him.'

He's like, 'Ross, it's a cop car,' like that means something.

I'm there, 'Two Honours in the Leaving gets you into

Templemore – it doesn't entitle you to drive like an old-age pensioner.'

The fucking turnip-muncher eventually gets the hint and lets us pass.

When we get to JP's gaff, his old man opens the door and his face lights up like a knacker on the Nightlink when he sees us. 'Been too long,' he goes, a rolled-up copy of, presumably, *Juggs* or *Adult Stars* in his hand.

I'm there, 'We thought we'd see did JP fancy driving around all the local dole offices with us shouting, "You fucking mendicants!" at the people . . .'

'Excellent,' he goes. 'It's just what he needs.'

Mr Conroy's never really gotten over the shame of his son turning his back on a career in property for – of all things – God. I think when JP had his breakdown and decided not to, like, join the priesthood after all, his old man thought two weeks in a darkened room with plenty of hot 7-Up and he'd be back at Hook, Lyon and Sinker before you could say *the spirit of gracious living*.

Fionn speaks for us all when he goes, 'So, how is he?'

'He's stopped babbling,' Mr Conroy goes, leading us through the house to the kitchen. 'The Psalms and Leviticus quotient is definitely down.' He stops at the window. 'We're still worried about him, though.'

We follow his, like, line of vision out to the gorden, where JP is wearing – get this – green overalls and digging what looks very much to me like a hole.

I just blurt it out. 'Jesus Manual Labour! What the *föck* is he doing?'

'It's called . . . landscaping,' he goes. Then he shakes his head like he thought he'd never have to say the word. 'He's turning that half-acre there into a contemplation garden. My son with a shovel in his hand. If this gets out, I won't be

able to hold my head up in the Oval Office in Shanahan's again.'

'Fock!' I go and I look at Oisinn and Fionn for, like, back-up? 'You can't say that that's right. That goy went to Castlerock – that used to mean something in this town.'

'I don't see anything wrong with it,' Fionn goes. 'I mean, if it helps him find inner peace . . .'

Glasses. Ridiculous. I have to actually bite my tongue, though.

Oisinn puts his hand on Mr Conroy's shoulder. At least he can see how much this is tearing him up inside. 'Look, we saw a lot of this shit at school. Taking a year out after the Leaving to work for, like, non-profit organizations – Simon, St Vincent de Paul, that whole crew. They all copped on when they found out how much do-ray-me there was in fund management.'

At last – someone's talking sense. It seems to do the trick as well because suddenly Mr Conroy perks up. 'So you think this is purely temporary?' he goes.

Oisinn's like, 'Look, trust me – six months and he'll be back at his desk, using pictures of women drinking champagne and men putting on cufflinks to sell people homes in some ant farm on the M50.'

Mr Conroy shakes his head, the smile back on his boat. 'So it's not all doom and gloom then . . .'

It's not. Oisinn's talking total sense. But still, seeing the goy I know as one of Ireland's greatest ever fullbacks at underage level holding – of all things – a work tool totally weirds me out of it, and when we go out to the garden I end up approaching him with my hands up, as if to say, basically, stay calm, we come in peace.

'Hey, Ross,' he goes, apparently delighted to see me. 'Fionn, Oisinn – this is a surprise . . .'

It's like, never a truer word . . .

'We just wondered did you fancy haranguing social welfare recipients,' Oisinn goes. 'Like old times?'

JP pulls a face. 'No can do, I'm afraid. I want to finish digging this out while the soil's still moist . . .'

I just nod like he's just said the most reasonable thing in the world. He's still a mate.

'What's it going to be?' I go, 'as in, when it's finished?'

He's like, 'An introspection pond. I'm going to dig about a metre down. Fill it up. Put some nice fish in it – koi are beautiful – some waterlilies. Maybe some stepping stones.'

I'm there, 'Cool.'

'I know what you're thinking,' he suddenly goes. 'JP's off the Richter – Ross, I can see it in your face.'

I'm there, 'I make no apologies for being worried about one of my best friends. The word is you haven't even bought your Leinster season ticket yet.'

He sort of, like, pokes at the ground with the shovel, a bit embarrassed by the looks of him. Then he suddenly looks up and he goes, 'The greatest gift of the garden is the restoration of the five senses.'

I can't, like, hold my tongue any longer. I'm there, 'That better not be God you're quoting. I thought we'd heard the last of him.'

He laughs at that. He puts the shovel down and moves over to this little, I suppose, garden bench. I sit down beside him, roysh, and Fionn and Oisinn stand around.

'I never said I lost my faith,' he goes. 'Okay, so I'm not going to be a priest. It doesn't mean I've stopped believing in God.'

'Sorry, I just don't get that.'

'It's like Shane Byrne,' he goes. 'He's off playing for

Saracens, but do you think for one minute that he's stopped loving Leinster?

I fucking love Shane Byrne and JP knows that.

'I can't believe how uptight I was before I found gardening,' he goes. 'It's so calming and so rewarding. It's like balm – balm for the wounded soul.'

He looks up at Fionn. He's like, 'How are you doing?'

Fionn goes, 'Like the cliché says, one day at a time,' and JP nods like he understands.

Then Oisinn changes the subject because it's getting too heavy. 'Speaking of overweight rugby legends who are plying their trade abroad, what do you think of this dude?' and he flicks his thumb at me.

Overweight? That's pure fucking muscle.

JP smiles at me. 'When are you off?' he goes.

I'm like, 'Middle of November. Looking forward to it as well, even though it's a big ask. I mean, Andorra – it's where knackers go to ski. Wouldn't say they've a fucking clue about rugby. It'll be like teaching monkeys how to type. You know me, though – I love, like, a challenge and shit?'

'If you're going to put koi in there,' someone suddenly goes, 'you're going to need an aerator.'

We all look around and there's Fionn, roysh, staring into the hole that JP's dug.

'One step ahead of you,' JP goes and he points at this sort of, like, pump contraption that's just been taken out of its box.

Fionn, like, considers this for a few seconds, then goes, 'You know what would look good? A bank of clipped yews, sloping down to the water's edge. And over there maybe an organic vegetable garden. Unusual stuff – kohlrabi, physalis . . .'

Something passes between JP and Fionn. More than just a smile. It's, like, an understanding.

Without saying a word, Fionn picks up a hoe and I don't mean that in, like, a good way?

Me and Oisinn instantly know that we're going to be leaving here today without either of them.

And that physalis sounds like an STD.

## 1. For the people on the edge of the night

She's, like, pretty surprised to see me, though not as surprised as I am to see her, standing there under a banner that says, Mount Anville Class of 1997.

I had literally no idea.

She looks amazing in what I'm pretty sure is her gold Reem Acra dress with the Sergio Rossi shoes I let her put on my credit card and, I think, Dolce & Gabbana's *The One*, which she never used to wear – and straight away when she cops me, it's like, 'What are *you* doing here?' as in she's *not* a happy bunny to see me?

I'm there, 'Er, *hello?* It's Ron Black's, Sorcha, in other words a public place?' and then – possibly a bit, I don't know, childish this – I let my eyes sweep the bar and go, 'One or two familiar faces in here, it has to be said.'

Of course, that goes down like a fucking turd in a toybox.

'Hardly surprising,' she goes. 'You went through my year like a pathogen,' which is, like, *way* Jodie, if you ask me – even though I don't know what a pathogen is.

Did I mention that she looks amazing?

I'm just there, 'Well, you can relax, Babes. You don't have to worry about me *being* with any of your friends in front of you anymore. I'm actually going out with someone, *and* it's pretty serious.'

There's not even a flicker of interest from her.

I'm there, 'Her name's Melanie, before you ask. Wouldn't say you know her, though, she's from, like, Malahide?'

Still nothing. Of course, I can't just leave it at that.

‘I suppose, looking back,’ I go, ‘you’d have to say our marriage failed because we both wanted, like, different things out of life?’

‘Yes,’ she goes, while at the same time giving me an absolute filthy, ‘I wanted to abide by the vows we made to each other on our wedding day and you wanted to have sex with our daughter’s nanny.’

It’s, like, of course it’s going to sound bad if you say it like that.

I go to put my arm around her, roysh, but she swats it away with the force of a woman who’s been playing tag rugby for pretty much the entire summer. ‘*Ob* my God,’ she goes, ‘you *actually* need to get over yourself, you know that?’ and she storms off, and of course every set of mince pies in the place is suddenly on me, everyone thinking, looks like the old Rossmeister’s up to his old tricks again – that girl’ll never be over him.

I turn back to the bar and order another pint of the Dutch stuff. I’m tanning it in a major way, it has to be said. The next thing I hear is a bird’s voice going, ‘Hi, Ross.’

It’s Ellie Banaher, as in Ellie who played the lute in the joint production we did of ‘Annie Get Your Gun’? Or maybe it was the balalaika.

Whatever. I’ve had my sweaty way with her once or twice down through the years. She has a great boat race, it has to be said – a little bit like Rumer Willis – though the bod wouldn’t be the best, we’re talking two breasts short of a dinner-box here. Her bra fits her better worn backwards.

I ask her how she is, which of course isn’t a question – it’s, like, a figure of speech? – but all of a sudden she’s going, ‘Apartment, job, cor . . .’ and she’s, like, counting these things off on her fingers. When she reaches her fourth, as in her ring finger, she wiggles it at me, showing off this

diamond that's probably visible from space, and goes, 'Engaged,' and I'm thinking, that's the problem with these school reunions, you ask a simple question and you end up getting a focking PowerPoint presentation.

I grab my beer and slip over to where Erika, Chloe and Sophie are standing and I hang off the edge of their conversation. Chloe is saying that skobies love Argos so much because the little pens remind them of being in the bookies.

Sophie, meanwhile, is skulling the Gerry Thornleys in a major way. 'My Miu Mius are cramping my feet,' she says when I catch her eye. 'It's either take them off or drink through the pain.'

Erika just stands there, looking bored and beautiful. She eventually acknowledges my presence. 'Ross, what are you even *doing* here?' she goes. 'It's all a bit desperate, even for you.'

I'm there, 'Well, for your information I'm actually going out with a bird – a good-looking one as well,' and Erika's like, 'Spare me – you're following Sorcha around like some lovelorn teenager. You know Cillian is here?'

I shrug. It's a boozier. I've as much right as he has.

'You look incredible,' I tell her, 'even by your standards,' and she smiles for the first time since about a month ago, when she found out that Claire from Brayruit was working in Caddles Irish Gifts.

'Yes,' she goes, 'I do, don't I?'

I put my hand on her bare shoulder and she tells me to move it or she'll break my fingers, which she probably would.

I tell her fair focks to her about the Divorce Fair. It's pretty cool that she's taken her anger and bitterness towards her old man for doing a legger and channeled it into something, like, positive?

She doesn't answer me, just stares at me, then has another sip of her mint julep, while Sophie says, *oh my God*, did you see who Riley Coren brought? Simon McCourt, as in Michael McCourt's *little* brother, which, she says, is, like, *totally* random and Chloe says she's doing a total Rhys Ifans on it, which is like, *oh my God*?

The next thing, *roysh*, I notice that Sorcha's stood on a low stool, with a microphone in her hand, going, 'Can everyone hear me?' and immediately there's, like, total silence in the bor.

'Thank you all *so* much for coming,' she goes. 'It's hord to believe that it's been fifteen years since we entered into Mount Anville, all young girls unsure of ourselves and our place in the world. Today, we gather as adults and it's great to see that everyone's looking so well and doing so well for themselves . . .'

Everyone claps.

She goes, 'I, for instance, have a beautiful baby girl and I'm running my own fashion boutique in the Powerscourt Townhouse Centre, with exclusive Zak Posen and Betsey Johnson lines . . .'

Not a Charlie Bird about getting married to me, of course – probably doesn't want to have to go into the whole separation thing.

'Last year I met one of my all-time heroes – apart from obviously Aung San Suu Kyi and Ayaan Hirsi Ali – and that was Stella McCartney . . .'

Another round of applause – you can see *why* she was headgirl now? They lap this kind of shit up.

'We were very lucky to have a year in which everyone got on *so* well and it's no surprise that so many of us have stayed in contact with each other. I really value my friendships from my time in school, as I'm sure all of you do.

‘A couple of girls have sent apologies, which I promised I’d read out. Bryana Kavanagh sent a card and it says, “Sorry, I can’t be there tonight. But just to let you know, after getting my BA in Business Management (Leisure and Recreation) from DBS, I got married to a really, really nice guy called Barry. A stylist who used to work with Ken Pavés did my hair for the wedding . . .”’

A lot of *wows!*, more than a few *oh my Gods* and then more clapping.

‘You probably all remember Sarah Moore,’ Sorcha goes. ‘She left at the end of fifth year to go to the Institute. She says, “Hi, everyone. Sorry I can’t make it. I’m actually writing this e-mail on a yacht in the Mediterranean, drinking a strawberry daiquiri. I’ve lost two stone since most of you saw me last and I’ve got seventy-two friends on Facebook . . .”’

Another big clap for that. God, Mounties are *so* fucking polite.

Then Sorcha tells the room that in a few minutes there’ll be, like, trays of food coming around – we’re talking miniature Mediterranean quiches, we’re talking caramelized onion and Soignon goat’s cheese tortlets, we’re talking paramentier potatoes with a shallot butter – and everyone should eat as much as they can because the biggest threat to the Earth in terms of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions is rotting food and not discarded plastic and glass, as is popularly believed.

Then she says thank you and steps down off the stool and as she does, roysh, she smiles at someone in the crowd and does this little girlie wave and I follow her line of vision across the bar and there he is – *he* as in Cillian – giving it loads, clapping harder than anyone else and basically *begging* me to go over there and deck him.

He’s in his fucking work suit as well, a Magee job – Dorce’s crowd – and he’s got his security swipe card hanging

from his belt loop, like the knob that he is. Of course, I can't resist moseying on over there to try to, like, wreck his *actual* head?

'Hey, Ross,' he just goes, like we're actual mates or some shit. 'How's life?'

'Life's LL Cool J for me,' I go, 'don't you worry about that. You know, if it gets any better, I'm going to have to hire someone to help me enjoy it.'

It's mad, roysh, but whenever he's around me, Cillian always pins his shoulders back and puffs up his chest to try to make himself look bigger.

I can't believe the birds think he looks like Jake Gyllenhaal.

'What are you doing at the Mount Anville reunion?' I go. 'I didn't know you were raised as a girl,' but he tries to ignore me, the smug prick.

I'm there, 'Is that, like, Dolce & Gabbana perfume Sorcha's wearing?' letting him know I was up close and pretty personal with her earlier on.

'It is, yeah,' he goes, secretly bulling.

I'm there, 'Weird – she never *used* to wear that?' and he's like, 'Well, we *all* move on, Ross,' which is a definite dig at me.

I'm there, 'Well, I certainly have. I'm seeing this new bird, as in Melanie? I don't want to be writing my own reviews here, but the sex is so good that the people next-door light up a cigarette afterwards,' which is actually horseshit, roysh, because after three weeks she still hasn't let me into her pants.

'Lucky her,' he goes and before I can hit him back with, I don't know, some really, really funny line, Sorcha arrives over and gives him this big, like, kiss on the lips – putting on a performance basically.

'Have you one for me?' I go.

She looks at me like I'm cryptosporidium. 'You're drunk,' she goes. 'Why don't you go home, Ross – get a taxi outside.'

I'm like, 'Oh, I didn't realize you still cared so much.'

Cillian steps in between us and it has to be said I'm impressed. I honestly didn't think he had it in him. But then I realize it's only because there's a bouncer behind me.

A hand tightens around the top of my orm and a voice in my ear goes, 'The girl's giving you good advice,' and I'm suddenly dumped out onto Dawson Street before I even manage to say that the girl happens to be my actual wife.

I've worked out, roysh, that it's not the smell of the Joy I hate most, it's actually the attempt to disguise it. Two hundred cream crackers making the effort for the day – it's like someone filled the sprinkler system with *Sbb* by Jade Goody and *Adidas Urban Spice*, then switched the fucking thing on.

The trick is to get into the visiting room and over to the table before the focker cops you and makes a holy show of you in front of, like, two or three hundred people. I've never managed it. Twenty yards is as close as I've got.

Today, he actually cups his two hands around his mouth and goes, 'Here he comes – like a bad penny!' and then, turning to various randomers around him, he's like, 'Fasten your seatbelts, ladies and gentlemen. We're about to experience some ribbing, joshing, *with*, I dare say, a little good-natured raillery thrown in for good measure . . .'

I sit down – totally morto – and I'm there, 'You know, according to Ronan, it only costs five Ks to get someone whacked in here. All I'd have to do is sell that Ronald Ossory Dunlop original in the study, find the right man and . . .' I make the shape of a gun with my hand, put it up to his forehead and go, ' . . . *Poosh!*'

The old man sort of, like, stares at me for a few seconds,

then bursts out laughing and tries to get everyone else in on the gag by going, ‘See what I mean? It *never* ceases!’

When he settles down, he mentions that he hasn’t seen me all summer and I mention that I’ve got better things to do than sit staring across a table at a sad sack of shit like him, especially now that he’s Keith Flint and I’ve found another sucker to bankroll me.

‘Of course,’ he goes, ‘you’ll have been busy with this new job of yours. When are you leaving us?’

‘Middle of November,’ I go. ‘Can’t come soon enough.’

Again, roysh, he can’t let it be just me and him – he has to bring everyone else in on the conversation. ‘You’re looking at the new national rugby coach of Andorra,’ he goes to Lex, who has a visit from his solicitor. ‘Ever been to Andorra, old chap?’

Lex is there, ‘The brutter was – skiing,’ which makes total sense.

I look at my watch. The fucking time in here drags. Five minutes. Would it be rude to just leave now?

‘So,’ the old man goes, trying to come up with shit to talk about, ‘they’re finally closing the Berkeley Court . . .’

I look at him as if to say, and this affects me *how* exactly?

‘A sad day,’ he goes. ‘I, er, went to see your friend and mine in here. John. Ask about maybe getting some compassionate leave, just a few hours. Has somebody died, he said. Quote-unquote. Frankly, yes, I said – a way of life. They are closing down the Berkeley Court. Now, John, I said, I know you’re a humanist and you’ll treat with the most scrupulous fairness my request to spend just a few final hours in the bar with my two favourite Hennessys, i.e. Coghlan O’Hara and XO . . .’

I’m there, ‘Are you saying he let you? I’d have organized a fucking picket of the place if I’d known.’

‘Alas not,’ he goes. ‘The – inverted commas – powers-that-be wouldn’t wear it. Didn’t technically qualify as the passing of a close family member, according to John. Do your time, he said, you haven’t long to go.’

He stares into space then.

‘They’re selling it all off, you know. Fixtures and fittings and so forth – auctioning the lot. I’m wondering who’ll end up with our famous stools. People would come in, you know, sit in our little spot at the top of the bar and they’d be told – chaps, you’re more than welcome to sit there, but it’s absolutely mandatory that you vacate them in the event of Charles O’Carroll-Kelly and his world-famous solicitor, sidekick and long-suffering golf partner turning up. That, by the way, is when the real show starts.’

I’m there, ‘It’s amazing how in a few months I forget what a total and utter penis you are.’

‘Of course, Hennessy wasn’t there that famous night in 1990 when I shared a drink with the famous Chairman of the Board . . .’

I made the mistake of going, ‘Who?’ which is exactly what he wants me to say.

‘I’m talking about Mr S,’ he goes. ‘The Voice. Old Blue Eyes himself . . .’

‘Horseshit.’

‘Frank Sinatra . . .’

‘You’re talking out your hole.’

‘It happened, Ross, just as sure as I’m sitting here, languishing away in Joshua Jebb’s folly!’

‘Talk fucking English. What happened?’ I go, like a fool, actually *inviting* him to bore me to death?

‘Well, he *stayed* there, Ross. He was playing Lansdowne Road, you see. With Sammy and Liza. Deano wasn’t with them, of course. Well, Hennessy left early that night – had

a case the next day, assault occasioning bodily harm or some such.

‘I’m sitting at the bar, thinking, I’ll have one more before I venture home to your mother. Then in he walks. “Gimme some gasoline,” he says to your bar chap. Gasoline was his *word*, you see, for – what’s this he drank? Oh, Jack Daniels! Jack Daniels, if you don’t mind.

‘Chairman, I said, put your money away. I would consider it a signal honour to buy a drink to wet the throat that sang ‘Last Night When We Were Young’, fullpoint, new par.

‘What does he do next? He sits down next to me on Hennessy’s stool. “Cheers,” he says. “You’re platinum, Charlie.” I thought he knew my name, maybe he’d heard one or two stories around the place. Turns out that’s what he called you if he didn’t have a name for you.

‘Well, it seems he couldn’t sleep. All those years getting up to all sorts with this Ratpack of his, I expect his body didn’t know day from night. Three hours we sat there, me and Mr S, putting the world to rights.’

I’m like, ‘Three *hours*?’ refusing to believe anyone could spend that long in a bor, in my old man’s company, without glassing the focker. ‘What would *you* have to talk to Frank Sinatra about for three hours?’

‘Everything,’ he goes. ‘Life, love, how to eliminate glitches from your upswing . . . You could say we bared our souls to one another that night. He told me secrets, Kicker, that I’ll take to the grave with me. And I told him things that I’m sure were never repeated outside of that bar.’

I’m there, ‘Some loser who stuck his hand in his pocket to buy him a drink – do you think he gave two focks about anything you had to say?’

He pretends he didn’t hear it. He’s like, ‘Oh, we tired ourselves talking. When it was time to go – I’ll never forget

this – he drained the last of his Jack Daniels, shook my hand and said, “Eighteen karat, Charlie.” I’ll always remember that. Eighteen karat . . .

‘He never stopped loving Ava Gardner, you know. And he bedded them all, Ross. Or so they say. Lauren Bacall. Jackie Kennedy. Marlene Dietrich. Angie Dickinson. I mean, Marilyn, for heaven’s sake. And on that point, we agreed – we all have just one true love . . .’

For a few seconds, he’s, like, totally lost in thought.

‘Pity yours was a fucking hog,’ I go.

She’s on the phone, showing – it has to be said – absolutely zero interest in her granddaughter. She’s on to Penguin, the scabrous beast, wanting to know why she hasn’t had her mug in the paper or on television in the past week, as if one look in the mirror couldn’t answer that question straight away, the fucking grouper.

I can hear her in the old man’s study. ‘I’m the biggest selling author in Ireland,’ she’s going. ‘We should be reminding people of that every second day. Or *every* day, if need be.’

Honor’s chatting away to me. Or trying to. She has no actual words yet, though I thought I picked out ‘powder-blue stoneware’ from her constant stream of babble and, given the amount of time her mother spends in Meadows & Byrne, I wouldn’t be altogether surprised.

It’s obvious what this is about, by the way – the old dear just can’t stand the competition. There’s a new face on the scene and it’s a lot easier on the eye than hers. Everyone is suddenly talking about Charlotte McNeel, the new popular fiction writer who is currently banging on the door of stardom and also banging the old dear’s former agent and squeeze, Lance Rogan. It’s all too hilarious for words.

*Indian Summer* is in the window of every bookshop in town. You know the story. Neeraja, a young Indian girl, flees Mumbai to escape an arranged marriage to a man she's never met. She ends up in Clonskeagh and meets a young medical student called Ashok, who also left India to avoid an arranged marriage. They fall hopelessly in love and of course the twist is that theirs was the marriage their parents were trying to arrange all along.

It's the biggest piece of shit ever squeezed between two covers, but *TV Now* has already called it charming, while *Company* called it funny and touching, and I only know that because I absolutely insist on reading every review that appears to the old dear, personally.

This morning I told her there was talk of a movie, with the bird from *Bend it like Beckham*, which is the real reason she's on to that crowd of hers now.

'You must be able to get me on something,' she's going. 'What about *The Restaurant*? I can't believe I haven't been asked on that yet.'

Speaking of books, I must get one or two for the gaff here, just to have for Honor when I have her here. For now I'm having to make do with a Mitchell & Sons Wine Merchants catalogue that I found on the old dear's dresser, the soak.

Honor doesn't care, of course. It's all about the pictures at that age. I'm leafing through it for her and she, like, puts her hand on each page and I go, 'Château Angélu 1995', or 'Château Ducru-Beaucaillou St-Julien', or whatever it happens to be and she cracks up laughing.

She has an amazing laugh. Really, like, giddy. When you hear it, you can't help but laugh yourself and it's funny, roys, because for the first twelve months she couldn't look at my face without, like, bursting into tears.

It took us, like, ages to bond, though in fairness I never really made the effort. I'd be told to, like, take her out for the day, to give Sorcha some me-time, and I'd just bring her to Dundrum Town Centre, thinking, if she takes after her mother, she's going to end up spending ninety per cent of her life in here, so I might as well get her acclimatized to the place.

I might as well admit it – most of the time I just dropped her into the crèche for the afternoon and focked off shopping. Once – the famous day of the Hugo Boss sale – I actually went home without her, and it was only when I was hanging my new black Rosellini Cinema suit in the wardrobe that I remembered her.

The staff in the crèche have nicknamed me Not Without My Daughter, which I have to admit is funny. But ever since that afternoon – well, *and* evening – I haven't let her out of my sight and, it has to be said, I've discovered the joys of, like, bonding with her, as in *actually* bonding with her?

Now she can't stop laughing – at pretty much everything I say.

'You're not going to end up a dipso like your granny,' I'm going, tickling her under the chin.

*Ha ha ha ha.*

'Are you? Are you going to end up a dipso like your granny? An ugly, gin-soaked sot . . .'

*Ha ha ha ha.*

'With a face like a melted welly.'

I can't remember what life was like before Honor. Or Ronan. Just that I hadn't a bog what it was all about. It's probably a sign of, like, growing maturity or some shit, but I think family's, like, so important.

'Will you keep your big focking air-raid siren voice down?'

I shout in to the old dear. ‘No one in this room’s interested in hearing your bullshit.’

But the old dear’s too busy going, ‘You’re Penguin, for God’s sake – I expect you to ruin this girl. Dig up *something*.’

Any word from Christian, he wants to know – obviously hasn’t heard the news. The dude rang me from the States the day before yesterday, in focking tears.

Oisinn’s pint stops in midair, just before it reaches his lips. ‘The baby?’ he goes.

‘No,’ I tell him, ‘that’s all fine. I mean, Lauren’s pretty tired – the usual story – but everything’s cool that end. No, they were, like, tears of happiness. See, George Lucas, roysh, is opening up, like, a *Star Wars* themed casino in Vegas and – get this – he’s asked Christian to be, like, the project manager for it?’

‘Shit the bed and kick it out,’ Oisinn goes, speaking for pretty much both of us.

So I’m there, ‘I mean, they’re not actually moving to Vegas until, like, the baby arrives. But we’ll have some focking holidays over there when he does. On the big-time lash – you, me, Alan Titchmarsh and Monty focking Don.’

He cracks his hole laughing, in fairness to him. Then he just shakes his head. ‘I gave them a bell earlier,’ he goes, ‘to ask did they fancy having one or six with us tonight? They were in – wait for it – a garden centre!’

I’m like, ‘What – together?’

He nods. ‘Buying pyracanthas and hibiscuses.’

‘Fock! And they’re not worried about how that looks?’

‘Apparently not.’

‘Because it looks pretty focking fromage frais from where I’m standing. Jesus!’

Kiely’s is pretty rammers for a Wednesday, it must be

said. I don't agree with showing soccer on TV in pubs – it tends to attract the peasantry. Actually, I don't agree with soccer, fullstop. It's one of the few things me and the old man agree on. I loved that slogan he had when he ran in the local elections – 'tough on soccer, tough on the causes of soccer'.

'You still going out with that Melanie?' Oisinn goes over the din of people ordering cider.

I'm there, 'Er, *seeing* her, yeah.'

He was actually there when I first met Melanie.

'I mean, she's a ringer for Sarah Chalke,' I go, for some reason feeling the need to justify myself.

'Sounds . . . great.'

'Yeah, it is actually. I mean, she even wants to meet Ronan. The three of us are going late-night shopping tomorrow.'

'Whoa,' he goes, 'sounds like that's getting serious.'

I'm there, 'Well, I need to hit the Great Outdoors – get some clobber for going away. Ro wants a balaclava as well. With the eyes and mouth cut out. Of course, he's only saying that to freak the shit out of me. Although with him, you never know.'

I get the round in. Two more Vitamin Hs.

'I want to show you something,' Oisinn goes, suddenly producing this, basically, cardboard roll. It turns out it's a poster.

In big letters, it's like, 'Unhappy Ever After?' and then underneath, 'Find Out How To Untie The Knot At Ireland's First Ever Divorce Fair – November 4 & 5, RDS Simmonscourt,' and smack in the middle there's, like, an old black-and-white wedding photograph from, I don't know, the sixties or something and it's, like, ripped in two.

'Pretty impressive,' I go.

It'd be fair to say, roysh, that I've never seen Oisinn this

excited, even about *Eau d’Affluence*, his scented holy waters, or any of the various orcs and cyclopes he’s gone out with over the years.

He says it’s Erika’s doing and my back is, like, immediately up.

‘She’s just full of ideas for exhibits,’ he goes. ‘Obviously we’re going to have, like, lawyers there, answering questions about alimony, child access, people’s rights and obligations. But there’s, like, two or three dating agencies taking stands as well.’

‘Dating agencies?’

‘Yeah, for people who want to make a new start. Trapped in a sexless marriage for years, you’re going to want your Bob Dole.’

I’m there, ‘I have to say, in my case, the sex got even better after I got married.’

‘Yeah,’ he goes, ‘it’s a shame Sorcha found out about it, though,’ which earns him an instant high-five, even if it is *slightly* out of order? ‘Then there’s, like, divorce *cruises*.’

‘You’re shitting me now?’

‘Seriously. Erika said they’re, like, huge in the States. You take your ex for a few hundred Ks, then you’re cruising the Caribbean with your b’atches.’

‘Fock. I hope she hasn’t told *my* ex that.’

‘Divorce,’ he goes, ‘is from the Latin word meaning to rip out a man’s testicles through his wallet. I think it was Robin Williams said that. Erika’s going to have it put on, like, a brass plaque for the office. Did I tell you we’re getting an office together?’

I can’t tell you how jealous that suddenly makes me feel. ‘Oh, *very* cosy,’ I go, like a focking child. I could be back in Wez.

‘Yeah,’ he goes, not picking up on it, ‘on Stephen’s Green there. Huge place.’

‘Bit, er, risky, isn’t it? I mean, the property market’s supposed to be slowing up. The economy, blah blah blah . . .’

He’s like, ‘Ross, the divorce rate in this country is only going to increase – so is the number of newly single women with enormous five- and six-figure payoffs, just waiting to be spent in a frivolous manner.’

‘Sounds like you two have it all worked out,’ I go.

He’s there, ‘Of course there’s a serious side to marital break-up as well – I don’t want to seem insensitive here, Ross . . .’

‘Hey, it’s cool.’

‘We’re going to have, like, financial advisers there. Estate agents – obviously JP’s old man’s going to have a pitch. Experts in the whole area of midlife crisis. Private detectives. Even a DNA lab offering paternity test results within twenty-four hours.’

I’m only half-listening now. It’s that wedding photograph – could be wrong, but it looks very much like . . .

‘That’s not Erika’s old pair, is it?’

Oisinn’s like, ‘Yeah, it is – why?’

‘On their wedding day?’

‘Yeah.’

I actually laugh out loud. ‘She’s going to go fucking Hertz Van Rental when she sees that.’

Of course I end up nearly falling off the stool when he says that Erika did the posters herself.

One of the, I suppose, nicest things about having kids is, like, watching them when they don’t *know* you’re watching them? As in, standing there while they’re engrossed in, I don’t know, whatever it happens to be, looking at their little faces – their excitement, their sadness, whatever – and

thinking, oh my God, I'm *actually* responsible for giving that person life.

Ronan's watching *The World's Dumbest Criminals* and he's, like, so glued to it he doesn't even know I'm in the room. He's sucking the last bit of pleasure out of one of his famous rollies and sort of, like, tutting to himself whenever a cor chase or an ormed robbery ends badly, then giving his verdict – either 'Fooken amateurs' or 'If you pay peanuts, you'll get monkeys'.

'Ro!' I suddenly go, at the top of my voice, and the poor kid gets such a fright he ends up pretty much levitating.

'Ye doorty-looken fooker,' he goes then, trying to catch his breath again. 'Thought me number was up, man.'

I'm there, 'Sorry, Ro,' and he sits down again.

Hilarious.

He goes, 'Were you folleyed?'

I'm like, '*Hello?* No offence, Ro, but who in their right mind would follow someone into an estate like this?'

That seems to, like, satisfy him.

'Reet enough,' he goes. 'Sorry, Rosser – new Super on the Manor. Has me paranoid to fook, so he does. I've already had to postpone one or two blags I had going down.'

I sit down on the sofa, although I think these people call it a settee. 'So you've finally met your match?' I go, basically playing along with him.

'You're tellin' me,' he goes, pressing the last of his cigarette into the ashtray, then immediately lighting another. 'He's not only smart, Rosser, he's lucky.'

'Some combination.'

'Better fooken believe it. Kind of fella walks into a revolving door behind you and comes out in front – know what I'm saying?'

'Pretty much. Anyway – are you ready?'

‘Ready?’

‘Yeah, we’re going late-night shopping. With Melanie, remember?’

He stares at me blankly for a few seconds, then suddenly smiles. ‘I like your style,’ he goes, like it’s the first time he’s heard this. ‘Filth would never open up on me with a lemon in the picture,’ and he gives me a little wink.

At the bus-stop, he suddenly turns to me and tells me I got lucky. ‘When you snuck up on me like that . . .’

I’m like, ‘Or maybe, Ro, you’re just losing your touch?’ and straight away I regret saying it because he sort of, like, looks into the distance, sadly, and goes, ‘Happens to the best . . .’

Melanie’s waiting for us at the entrance to the Stephen’s Green Shopping Centre. Before we hit the Great Outdoors, she wants to get, like, a pink cover for her Vaio. Ronan lays on the chorm in a major way, telling her he doesn’t know what a girl like her would see in a goy like me and that she’ll eventually see sense, like all the rest, and drop me like a hot snot.

You can tell that he’s not at all what Melanie expected.

‘He’s kind of, like, *old* for his age,’ she says to me when he stops to talk to the security guard outside Knicker Box. ‘He’s very cute, though,’ and I’m like, ‘What can I say? It’s in the genes.’

She laughs then, but at what I said, not at me. It’s great to find someone who likes me for who I actually am.

‘I love kids,’ she goes. ‘I’ve got two nieces and one nephew – Dylan, *ob* my God, he’s *so* cute – and I absolutely dote on them.’

I’m like, ‘What ages?’ showing an interest, which is obviously important.

‘Daisy and Molly are twins and they’re, like, six? And Dylan’s fourteen months.’

I'm there, 'Wow, same as Honor. They're amazing at that age.'

'They're amazing at any age,' she goes.

'I do this thing with Honor and it's like, round and round the garden, like a teddy bear . . .'

'Oh my *God*, my mum used to do that with me . . .'

'She loves it. I mean, the squeals of her when I tickle her under the orm. Actually, it's even before that? It's, like, the anticipation of it more than anything?'

'That brings back – *oh my God* – so many memories for me.'

'The other thing,' I go, 'is that it's a major attraction for birds – seeing a goy with a baby.'

She suddenly stops walking. Looks me up and down. 'Sorry?' she goes, though not in, like, a pissed-off way? Even after a few weeks she's already used to me putting my foot in it, roysh, and she actually enjoys me trying to squirm my way out of it.

'I'm just saying . . .'

'*What* are you saying, Ross?'

'Just that.'

'Just what?'

'I mean, it's the whole strength *and* sensitivity thing – that combination. Kind of bloke who could, I don't know, fix your boiler, then write you a poem.'

'Fix your boiler?'

'Doesn't *have* to be a boiler.'

'Then write you a poem?'

'Well, yeah. I mean, you *all* love that, don't you?'

'I don't know – you're obviously the expert.'

'I'm just saying, that's all.'

'I don't think you know what you're saying, Ross.'

'Well, it's, like . . . do you remember that poster? *You*

must have had it. That dude with the big muscles holding the baby. You must have. I've been in a lot of girls' bedrooms over the years – ninety per cent of them had it on the wall.'

'I know the poster you're talking about,' she goes. 'What about it?'

'Well, I saw this documentary about the actual dude in the picture? I mean, he spent his life . . .'

'What?'

'You know . . .'

'I don't – what?'

'Basically banging like a monkey at a piano.'

She suddenly cracks her hole laughing. Of course, I'm all embarrassed now as well. She puts her arm around my shoulder and goes, 'You're right, Ross – it's your strength *and* sensitivity that I fell for,' and even I have to laugh then.

I wait outside the Sony Centre because I hate going into shops with birds, especially when they're shopping for themselves.

So I'm standing outside, roysh, basically checking out the forty-inch Bravia in the window, when all of a sudden – *whoof* – my old dear's big pilchard face is suddenly filling every inch of the screen.

I actually take a step backwards, it's *that* horrible to look at. She's bad enough as it is, but you should see her in HD. Someone's focking botoxed her as well – you could fit a coathanger in her mouth sideways – and she's tarted up to the nines as well, the ugly smelt. Monica John has obviously had a visit.

I don't believe it. She's on *The Restaurant*.

For some reason I can suddenly feel my actual blood boil, to the point where I can't even hear what's being said. All

I'm picking up is, like, odd words and phrases. *Not cooking but passion-cooking . . . Food suited to the way you live . . . Lightly blistered balloumi . . .*

She's cooking what I immediately recognize as her Lebanon Ramadan Half Moon Pancakes with peach and plum Habanero salsa, and I'm hoping that Doorley dude hates them. Which he won't, of course, because she's an unbelievable cook, the fucking Grendel.

Right enough, he ends up milling into them like they're the last bit of food on, I don't know, Earth – and so does the other dude, with the beard.

I even hear the word 'triumph' used once or twice.

Then it's back to the kitchen, where the old dear's already started on dessert and it's, like, key lime meringue torte by the looks of it.

'I try to cook every day, even when I'm writing,' she goes. 'Actually, I probably should mention that I'm currently working on a new book and it's one that I think has been crying out to be written in this country. It's a love story set against the backdrop of the new multicultural Ireland, focussing on the relationship between Dermot, a truck-driver from, I don't know, Ballybrack or one of those wretched places, and Nadia, a Romany girl who lives with her extended family on a roundabout on the N<sub>3</sub> . . .'

While she's saying this, roysh, she's cracking eggs and separating the yolks with her actual hands, letting the slime dribble through her fingers and it looks like – I don't even want to *think* about what it looks like – and worst of all, she's giving these dirty little smiles to the camera, like Nigella Lawson, or a bird from a cheap meat flick.

'So the story will follow their efforts to form a relationship in the face of almost insurmountable social and cultural obstacles. Not to mention basic sanitation.

‘Okay, I’ve sliced the lime in two and now I’m spearing both halves. Now, when you’re doing this, don’t be afraid to really *disembowel* the lime . . .’ and she really drags out the word.

I hear a couple of sniggers behind me and I whip around, roysh, and realize she’s drawing a fucking audience here. There’s, like, six or seven blokes and they’ve all got dirty big grins on their faces.

‘She’s a fine thing, isn’t she?’ I hear one of them – this total bogger – go.

I can’t help turning around and going, ‘I *hope* you’re joking.’

He’s like, ‘No, beggorah, the woman who writes the bukes – jaysus, she’s a fine thing,’ and there seems to be, like, general agreement among them that it’s true.

‘Maybe if you’re from Cavan or somewhere. Look at the head on her. When *she* walks into the bank, they turn *off* the cameras.’

She storts mixing the sugar and the egg whites then. And while she’s doing it, she gets her dig in about Charlotte McNeel.

‘I think too many of our so-called writers have ducked the whole multicultural issue,’ she goes. ‘But I think as artists we’re *required* to look and see that there’s a new Ireland, a modern Ireland, with a growing immigrant population, and we must ask ourselves, how can we represent that? I think the one or two writers who have attempted it have gone off and done it half-cocked . . .’

Half-cocked. The lads love that word. They stort yahooing, like they’re at a fucking GAA match.

‘Big mickey lips on her,’ one of them goes and before I get a chance to deck him, the old dear suddenly stops mixing and licks the spatula. Not just licks it either – fixes the

camera with what she obviously thinks is a sexy look, then puts the entire blade in her mouth and slowly pulls it out, running it down the length of her tongue.

The old Malcolm's doing focking somersaults.

'Are you okay?' a voice suddenly goes. It's Melanie.

I'm there, 'Er, yeah . . .'

'Ross, you're white as a sheet.'

'Think I need some air,' I go. 'Can we get out of here? As in, now?'

What are *they* doing here?

The funny thing is, I can see them asking each other pretty much the same question. 'What's *he* doing here?'

Then *he* comes over, the tosser, in his good Bugatti coat, giving it, 'Well, well, well . . .'

and of course loving the sound of his own voice.

I'm there, 'Mr Lalor, how the hell are you?' thinking, you know, it's nice to be nice.

'Much happier now that you're out of my daughter's life,' he goes. 'You know, I really thought I was going to have to kill you to get you away from her. So it's all worked out rather well in the end.'

I give Sorcha's old dear and her granny a wave, thinking, let's keep it civil, but the granny turns her big grey Afro head away in pretty much disgust and the old dear stares straight through me. Then the two of them sit down, about six rows ahead.

'I gather you've been bothering her again,' Sorcha's old man goes, for some reason taking a sudden interest in the tip of his umbrella.

I sort of, like, shift in my seat. 'I'd hordly say *bothering*,' I go. 'I didn't even know she was going to *be* in Ron Black's. I was pretty hammered as well, in fairness to me. You know

me,' I go, still trying to keep it light, 'know the one that's one too many, and make it a double!'

He can't actually believe I'm knocking out one-liners at a time like this.

'You listen to me and listen good,' he goes. 'Family law is what I do, and I do it well. So remember, you're in *my* arena now. And I'm going to ensure you never, *ever* bother our daughter *or* our granddaughter again.'

I'm like, 'Oh, you're going to stop me seeing my kid, are you? Hennessy'll make shit of you before it ever gets to court.' Which is true. Hennessy's an animal when it comes to this sort of shit.

It's fair to say, roysh, that Sorcha's old man has come close to killing me loads of times, but never closer than at that exact moment. He looks over my shoulder and it's like you can hear what he's thinking: too many witnesses.

It's the Berkeley Court, for God's sake.

He eventually focks off to his seat, stopping once or twice to give me major filthies over his shoulder. I go back to my brochure and it's only when I go to turn the page that I realize my hand is, like, shaking – and we're talking big-time shaking here.

I try to concentrate on the various, I don't know, lots, I think they're called. They're flogging off pretty much everything – corpets, paintings, bed linen, even the crockery, but what I want is on page . . .

Suddenly, there's, like, two loud bangs – one after the other. The sound of the dude banging the hammer to stort the auction.

It's a good hour-and-a-half before my lot arrives, by which time Sorcha's old man, I notice, has bought a ninety-six-piece Denby dinner service and a William John Leech original sketch, but lost out – to Michael O'Leary, of all

people – on a crystal chandelier styled on the famous Lyman Frank Baum one from the dining room in the Hotel del Coronado, if all that means anything to you, which it doesn't to me.

All I know is the bidding got serious and the dude couldn't take the heat.

'The next item,' the auctioneer goes, 'is a pair of stools from the hotel bar,' and you can tell from the general, like, hubbub in the room that no one's really interested. They're all still talking about the five-figure war they've just seen between two Clongowes old boys over basically a light.

'Do I have fifty euro?' the dude goes and up goes my hand.

He's like, 'Fifty – I have fifty. Do I have any advance on fifty? Seventy – anyone?' and no one stirs.

'Okay, fifty it is,' he goes. 'Sold to the gentleman there in the baseball cap. Going, going . . .'

But then, roysh, at pretty much the last minute, up goes Sorcha's old man's orm. 'Er, one hundred,' he goes and you can see Sorcha's old dear looking at him as if to say basically, *what the fock?*

It's pretty obvious what's going on here. It was the second the goy mentioned my baseball cap.

'A hundred and fifty,' I go.

But then Sorcha's old man raises me another fifty and suddenly there's a serious buzz in the room again.

'Do I hear two hundred and fifty?' and I think about it for a minute and give him the nod.

The focker cranks it up another fifty and I can see Sorcha's old dear turn to him and, like, wave her finger at him, obviously not a happy camper.

People sitting around me are, like, egging me on. 'Go on,' they're going, 'take him,' so I go to three-fifty, but he immediately raises it to four.

He actually turns around in his seat at that point and looks back at me.

‘Wipe that fucking smile off his face,’ someone behind me goes and it sounds very much to me like Michael O’Leary. So I give him the nod for four-fifty.

Then it’s five.

Before I know it, the bid is up to nine hundred sheets and all eyes are on me.

It’s at that stage, roysh, that I decide to wuss out. Seriously, I wouldn’t pay the guts of a grandington for two stools even if you told me that Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan had sat on them fucking knickerless.

Having said that, one of the things that made me potentially the greatest Irish outhalf ever back in the day was my ability to spot openings that didn’t appear to be there. I look at Sorcha’s old dear and she’s getting ready to stand up.

‘Nine hundred euro *is* the bid,’ the goy goes. ‘Do I hear nine hundred and fifty?’

‘Keep going,’ people are whispering to me. ‘What’s fifty quid to anyone?’

‘Do I hear nine hundred and fifty?’ the goy goes.

‘Go on! Do it!’

But I don’t move a muscle. I sit perfectly still and remember the concentration exercises I used to do, back when I made penalty kicking look as easy as a BESS fresher with two vodka-and-cranberries in her.

I manage to block out everything and everyone in the room – the auctioneer, the clamour, the pressure – everything except Sorcha’s old dear, who I watch closely as she rises, in slow motion . . .

‘Nine hundred euro *is* the price.’

. . . then helps Sorcha’s granny up out of her seat.

‘Nine hundred euro for the final time?’

Timing is everything here.

‘Nine hundred euro . . .’

Sorcha’s granny links her and they make their way out of the row, with apologies to everyone for having to move their knees. Sorcha’s old man follows them with his eyes. His mind is no longer on the game. His wife is . . .

‘Going . . .’

Out the door. And he’ll find her, sulking in the Seven Series, the two of them, her *and* her old dear, madder than a barefoot woman in a roomful of rocking chairs.

‘Going . . .’

Not worth it, he’s thinking, as he takes a look at them disappearing out the door, both with a strop on. Not worth the Hoff. Aggravation times two. Surround-sound nagging all the way back to the Vico. So what does the hot-shot divorce lawyer do?

He pisses his pants.

Well, not *actually*? He stands up. The second he does, I shout, ‘Nine hundred and fifty,’ and suddenly there’s this, like, spontaneous round of applause. It’s not usually allowed, but people can’t help it – what can I say, they appreciate a player with the big-match temperament.

Sorcha’s old man stops in the aisle and for a second he thinks about getting back in the game. But he knows it’s over. He shoots me one last filthy – a big-time one – then he’s out the fucking door.

I can honestly say, roysh, I haven’t felt an adrenalin rush like it since I lifted the Leinster Schools Senior Cup. People are coming up to me and they’re all, like, high-fiving me and whatever else.

The next thing, roysh, I feel this hand on my back and this voice goes, ‘I see you haven’t lost the fire.’

I whip around and it’s, like, Sean Dunne. He was always

a big supporter of mine. Used to go to all the games. He told my old man he stuck on grand on in the bookies that I'd be playing for Ireland before my twenty-first birthday.

Actually, I hope he doesn't want that money back.

'Your father's stool,' he goes. 'You know, many's the night I stuck my head into the bar at last orders and there Charles would be, sat with Hennessy, putting the world to rights. At a thousand decibels, of course.'

'Doesn't sound like them,' I go and we both just crack our holes laughing.

'Did he ever tell you about Frank Sinatra?' he goes and I end up nearly collapsing on the spot.

'I thought it was, like, horseshit?'

'Oh, no,' he goes. 'I was there that night – I saw it.'

And he tells me the story, word for word the way my old man told it.

Ten minutes later I'm out in the cor pork and I'm loading the two stools into the boot of an Andy McNab.

I hear *her* before I see *him*. What I hear is, 'Edmund! Don't do anything stupid!'

'Oh, don't worry,' he goes. 'This little . . . *rodent* isn't worth that!'

Sorcha's old man's back for afters.

'I've always liked a good loser,' I end up going, not even knowing where it came from. 'You're possibly the greatest loser I've ever known.'

I see his fists just, like, tighten and it's taking every bit of strength he has to stop himself from, like, throwing a dig at me.

'Something's about to happen that's going to wipe that smile off your face,' he goes. 'Permanently.'

I'm like, 'Oh, yeah – as in?'

‘Edmund!’ *she* goes.

I’m there, ‘Tell me.’

But he doesn’t. He just goes, ‘You’ll find out. Soon enough.’

I’m in the gaff, roysh, watching Seoige and O’Shea really getting into this report they had on this nine-year-old victim of a happy slapping who was helped out of a coma by *X Factor* finalists The Conway Sisters.

It’s actually pretty moving and I’m still thinking about it, roysh, when they come back from the ad break and announce that they’ve been joined this afternoon by Ireland’s newest popular fiction sensation, the girl who’s been described as the new Fionnuala O’Carroll-Kelly – our very own Charlotte McNeel.

And there she suddenly is, full of smiles, great Peter Pan, her humungous chuffed-to-bits hanging out of her silver Mandalay dress, which I happen to know – from personal experience – goes very well with the corpet in this bedroom.

‘Charlotte,’ Grainne goes, ‘you’re very welcome.’

‘Turn on RTÉ,’ I shout at the top of my voice. ‘Lance’s new girlfriend is on,’ and back comes the old dear’s response. ‘I’m *watching!*’ she goes, pissed-off before the girl’s even been asked a question.

‘*Indian Summer,*’ Grainne goes, ‘your debut novel, has rocketed to the top of the Irish bestseller list. Without obviously giving too much away, tell us a little bit about it,’ which is what Charlotte does and it has to be said, roysh, it’s a little bit like that *Love Actually*, in that the more you think about it, the worse it actually gets.

‘She’s really raised the bor,’ I go, loud enough for the stupid wrasse to hear. She doesn’t answer.

‘Now,’ Grainne goes, obviously about to bring up some-

thing a bit, I suppose, sensitive, ‘your success has apparently pricked at least one ego. One or two bitchy comments made about you. It’s all happened for you at such a young age – you’re still only twenty-four. How do cope with something like that?’

Charlotte just, like, flicks her hair, like she doesn’t actually give a shit, and goes, ‘Em, I take those kind of comments as a back-handed compliment, really. I think if other writers feel threatened by me, it means I must be doing something right.’

‘Focking brilliant!’ I shout.

Did I mention that she looks like Holly Marie Combs?

‘Let’s be specific here,’ Grainne goes, ‘I read an interview with – I think I can say it – Fionnuala O’Carroll-Kelly, in which she described young writers who were a bit green but who were, as she put it, making all the right mistakes for people with no real life experience. How do you respond to that?’

‘I take the high road,’ she goes. ‘I have no feelings, ill or otherwise, towards Fionnuala. She’s the other side of fifty and she’s probably conscious of the fact that she only has a limited number of years left and she has to earn what she can now.’

I’m like, ‘Whoa – that’ll hurt, come winter!’

‘Might even be hormonal,’ she goes. ‘It’d be wrong to judge her. I haven’t been through the menopause – I don’t know what it’s like.’

‘I should have married that focking girl!’ I shout.

That’s it.

I whip out the old Wolfe and I leave her a voice message, telling her basically fair focks to her, the stupid sow had it coming to her and, by the way, just in case you want to slip it into your next interview, she’s on the old Leptoprin –

we're talking two hundred yoyos a bottle – to try to lose some of the fat off her orse. 'Well done,' I go again.

I go out onto the landing and give the old dear's door a good bang. 'That put you in your focking box, didn't it?'

But she doesn't say anything. All I can hear is the sound of her crying, the attention-seeker that she is.