

# **To the lighthouse**

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# 1



Figure 1.1: *The cobbled path to Poolbeg Lighthouse, less than an hour's walk from Dublin City Centre.*

As I write this, my fortieth birthday is fast approaching and, as I think about it, this book may well be my mid-life crisis, pondering my life while prancing around in lycra. I've wanted to be a writer since I was a teenager but I've struggled for a format and a topic until this idea coalesced and I decided just go for it. Cycling new places always triggers new thoughts and, as I ploddy ploddy forward, I start writing them down in my head. Later, when I stop for coffee, I can just log them on my till receipt, and wham bam, thank you ma'am, I've got my

outline. I've done this for years and I write some of them in my diaries or as blog posts, but blogs are an incoherent mess with no internal momentum, so no books have ever presented themselves. Then one day I realised that I could write them all up using *bookdown* or *quarto*, formats often used for writing the computer code textbooks I'm constantly reading in work. This way, I could publish the book as I go along, chapter by chapter, writing a wee bit every morning before the kids wake up, and I wouldn't have to suffer from the horrible problem of carrying around a bunch of unfinished, unpublished projects. As you read this, the book is most likely unfinished, yet it exists, and I am under no pressure to rush through it. [The ‘code’ is stored on Github](#), which is used for version control, so that you can both edit and keep your work, and not rely on documents labeled like “Book\_Final (7) version 2\_7th Oct 1997.doc”

I didn't begin with a lifelong passion for lighthouses. I just needed a target to get me up and out of the house and to revel the beauty of the Irish landscape. But the more I look at lighthouses, the more I understand their symbolic beauty too, like flags on the moon, marking territory. The bigger influence has been my parents who used to go off on cycling holidays together, first around Europe and once the whole way across Australia in 1997. They were no longer young on these trips but their example showed me a different way to age, unlike other parents, as they went off and explored the earth. My dad's back got injured but my mam kept going and went coast-to-coast across America in 1999, and many smaller trips after. I didn't get into cycling until I was thirty, and in 2014, me and my mam cycled from Mizen Head to Malin Head, the length of Ireland, with my dad in the car as back up.

As I write this, I've picked off all of the lighthouses around Dublin and Wicklow, and there's a couple more I can get to as day trips along the Mild non-Atlantic Way. Rosslare and Carlingford, for example. But once it comes to the big long looparooney running clockwise from County Waterford to County Down, I'll have to do it in spurts, mixing lighthousery with little family holidays, and maybe bring in various friends along the way. I'd also love to bring my dad in a carrier bike, and maybe my mam can cycle a bit too if she's still able. My wife will join and our bike-loving son too, and maybe we can throw the baby on the back for a few legs once she's big enough.

## 2 Poolbeg

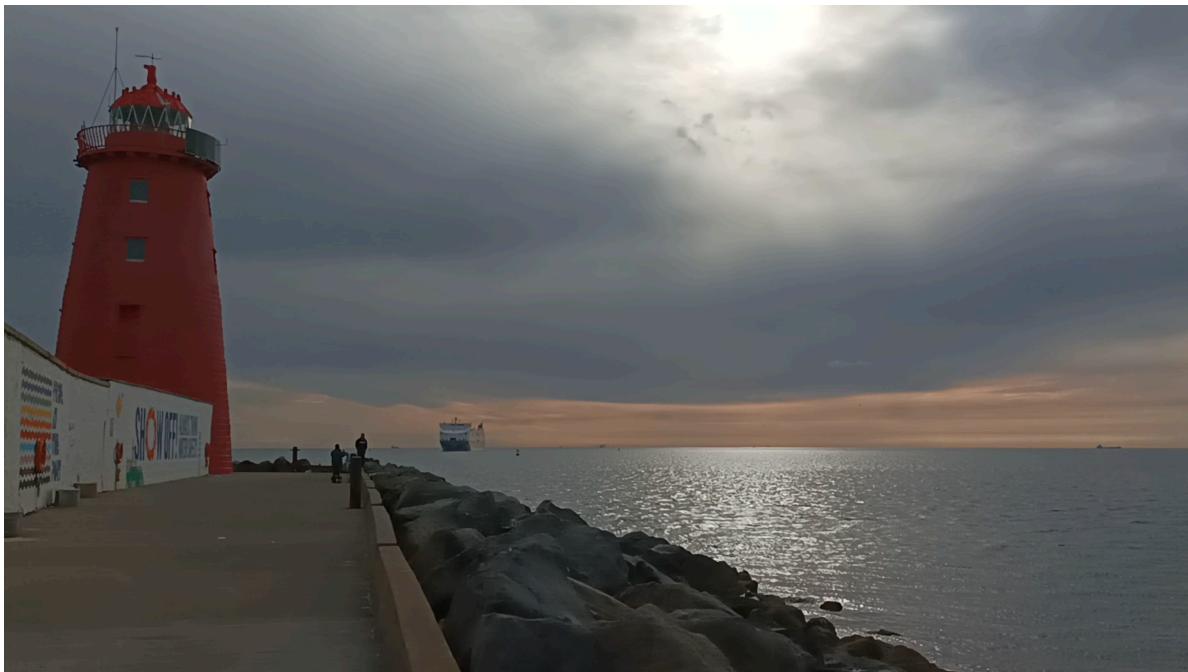


Figure 2.1: *Today I learnt that if you chase the light then life will bring you lighthouses.*

**0759, Sunday 28 August, 2022**

It was not my intention to cycle to Poolbeg Lighthouse today, or any other lighthouses for that matter. And I certainly wasn't planning on starting any new books. I just needed to get the flock out of the gaff and clear my head. The plan was to do a re-run of yesterdo's cycle, stalling in from my gaff in Blanch to Grand Canal Dock, where I would aim for another dark coffee and bright pastry in *Il Valentino*, then handwrite about that joyous trip. But I'm way too whimsical to do identikit journeys, so as I come out of my crap apartment block, I turn right instead of yesterday's left, and hit the River Liffey where I can catch some Vitamin Tree.

I'm blessed that there's a wodge of ways into town from my gaff cos my vision of hell is to go up and down the same road every day. While Blanchardstown itself is mostly devoid of geography, it sits between two fine cycle routes. There is a canal path circling the inner Northside and

it drops you off at various points about one click from the Spire. After that you're on your own, mate. To the south is the Phoenix Park, a gentle decline into town, and a miserable drag home. But the most beautiful route of all is a mild detour via the River Liffey. All I have to do is drop a quick perpendicular through a buncha shitbox housing estates, and then take the riverrun along the Strawberry Beds, snaking through Chapelizod, pushing past Islandbridge and Heuston Station, and emerging, foetus-like, out of the quickening cocoon and into the great wide open of the city and the sea.

## 2.1 Sunrise Fomo

It's a cloudy-ass day today but as I cross a dull suburban bridge towards the bleakly named Diswellstown, I see a patch of sunlight in the distance and I get a fierce dose of sunrise fomo, so I decide to chase it, along the river and east to the sea and sun. Not long ago I saw the most beautiful red sunrise in Cabra slash the Navan Road but I elected not to stop and take photos as it would hinder my famous cycling rhythm, and I've been chasing light like that ever since. Now Sunny Cabra is not renowned for its beauty, but when you are cycling along the Navan Dermot, downhill into town, and the stars are aligned, the place lights up like an afterparty in Ibiza, and you can see how this proto-dual-carriageway slash dynamic car park, which is actually lined with incongruously large houses, may have once been a broad avenue of trees, horses and opulent outdoor breakfasts. Today wasn't quite one of those days, but there was enough sun to give me some morning glowry, and I ached to get closer to that blob of nice light in the sea of grey clouds above, and have nothing else around me.

## 2.2 Liffey Valley

First though I had to get to the river, down Rugged Lane which might be County Dublin's strongest candidate for becoming a one-way road. It's a moderately steep valley descent, about the width of a big van, and the only way through is to pull in to the occasional driveways and let the other motorists pass. The potholes are like something from the 1980s and even cycling it is bumpy wumpy. At the bottom is the Strawberry Beds, a gently meandering, tree-lined riverroad with ramps to keep the cars away. Back in the Doris, motorcyclists would zip along here and stop off in *The Wren's Nest* pub, but the ramps are doing their job so now so it's a near-perfect commute for a cyclist, winding through dense foliage, with the river itself coming in and out of view, past scattered houses and cottage clusters, which historically catered for industry riff-raff like the Guinesses and the Shackletons. The houses all back up on to the valley but a few have forged treeless gardens on the river side of the road, with a brilliant view of the sun and the valley across the river. The road begins in Lucan village and the end is marked by a gastropub called *The Angler's Rest*, angled along Knockmaroon Hill, just before the back entrance to the Phoenix Park. For me, the real boozer is *The Strawberry Hall*, underneath the M50 Toll Bridge, which has no telly and used to only take cash. Just pints

and chat. In recent years a pop-up pizza parlour has popped up in the car park across the road. If you are feeling adventurous you can swim here in the river, accessed by a mud beach about the width of wide van. I've never sashed in the boozer of an evening, although I've often stopped off for a scoop while cycling home home to Lucan, and sat outside, facing the sun.

I used to often commute this beautiful road, especially while my elderly parents had the good fortune of housing me between the age of 34 and 36, along with my wife and very young child. This route was my refuge space, between childminding in the morning, teaching English in the afternoon and college in the evenings and weekends. For a few green kilometres every day, it was just me. A cycle path could be put in all the way to town, ideally crossing over the river to the wondrous new Waterstown Park in Palmerstown, on the south side of the Liffey Valley. It's a solid commute, but in a world of e-bikes, scooters and foldable bicycles, it's legit feasible to trek it one way and hop on the boola bus for the other. I used to cycle in one day and bus it home of an evening, then the next day I'd do the reverse. My vision is that we'll develop one long greenway running from Leixlip through Lucan demesne and village, across the river to Palmerstown, and then through Chapelizod and Islandbridge. This is the ancient route to the West, with villages all along, and now we just need to connect the dots and take advantage of this under-appreciated natural path.

## 2.3 Reflections

I climb up the shallower side of Knockmaroon Hill, past *The Angler's Rest* and then down the short, steep descent into bumpy, rampy Chapelizod; never an easy passage for cyclists. I spent a lot of time here during the miserable Level 5 Covid days, getting a takeaway coffee from *Baa Baas*, and sitting down with my laptop and blanket on the permabanches outside *The Villager* pub. The village is low on commerce but relatively high on energy, as the locals live right in it and there's a never-ending parade of passers-by, between M50 toll-dodgers and Phoenix Park walkers accessing the giant park via the twirly gate, after which another cafe is named. I turn right across the bridge and look down over the river where a few Dexter Gordons hang right over the water. I'm guessing this is what Town was like before the quays were put in, and I feel like this is where the washerwomen in *Finnegans Wank* wash their dirty laundry in public, banging on about "duddury devil" and whatever he did in the "Fiendish park" ([p196](#)). I chicane left after the bridge and wend past some redbrick houses and I think of poor Rob Carnegie who passed away a few years ago. I used to play cricket in the Park with him and his big brother Jamie, and then I bumped into aul' John Doran one day - on my way to see the Pope in fact - and he told me that Rob had died in an accident. I don't know which house is his home so I've never been in to pay my respects to their poor parents.

Access to the south side of the river is behind one of those bicycle-hating barriers so you have to dismount and verticalize your bike just to swivel through, but after that it's a free ride on a footpath with bicycles stencilled onto it. I didn't know about this path for years until Mick Barton filled me and I've been using it ever since because parallel Conyngham road is pretty



Figure 2.2: *The cycle path from Chapelizod to Islandbridge is close enough to the river that you could easily fall in while taking photos of its beauty.*

drab by comparison. I stop and take a few snaps of a riverbank whose leafy round undersides bounce back out of the river, and I reflect on how anything irregular can be made beautiful simply by mirroring it. How anything irregular can be made beautiful by simply mirroring it.

I mosey on towards Islandbridge, through a wee gate and into the War Memorial Park which caters nicely for the grown-up hipsters who now populate outer Dublin 8. We used to live in nearby Heuston South Quarter ourselves before the landlady decided flog the gaff and that's how we ended up out in Blanch, unable to find something in our comfort zone. There's a bevy of rowing clubs on the other bank, and I see a triathlon is centred around one of them, with punters transitioning from swim to cycle. I think about investigating it, seeing as I have been thinking about a) doing triathlons, and b) reporting on random events, but I think better of it as I remember that my actual goal is to talk shite about my own journeys, and I'll start reporting about other people's once that project runs out of juice.

## 2.4 Into Dodge

So that has me on Conyngham Road, approaching Parkgate St, and another of my favourite views in Dear Dirty Dzublin, the quays on a bright Doris. Or, as it is today, light at the end of the river, with grey clouds all around, as though the buildings have a blurred reflection in the sky. There is a random car parked on Ellis Quay, in the middle of the road, unmanned, and with its hazard lights flashing, so I stop up the road a bit and call the cops, cos God only knows what is going on. The quays do their thing after that, opening up into the broader docks, with the water and sky casting redyellowblue joy onto the grey city, and the big buildings being pleasingly far away from another, leaving space for the soul to breathe, like they do in Berlin. So I decide to chase the light instead of stopping for coffee in Grand Canal, although I felt like the proverbial dog chasing after the bicycle, as the sky's visage fades to grey.

## 2.5 Beyond the Pale

I cross over the scaldyball East Link Toll bridge, a rundown beggar of a road that ought to be ashamed of itself for asking people to pay to cross it. It is rare reminder of the visual state of Ireland back in the 1990s, like [looking at the moustaches in the Walkinstown Roundabout video after we beat Romania in Italia 90](#). Yet the bridge's griminess bleeds neatly into Dublin Port azough which I have to meander for a click or two, past the disused Ice Cream Factory, officially known as the Poolbeg Generating Station, and known to me as the Ringsend Towers, then on to the Poolbeg Lighthouse, via the Great South Wall, a 2k stretch of fat cobblestones that make me feel like I am Dylan van Baarle, soloing to victory in Paris-Roubaix.

There's a glut of fishermen here already and a few walkers. I stop to take videos of the surroundings because that has been a plan for some time, going to places and commentating

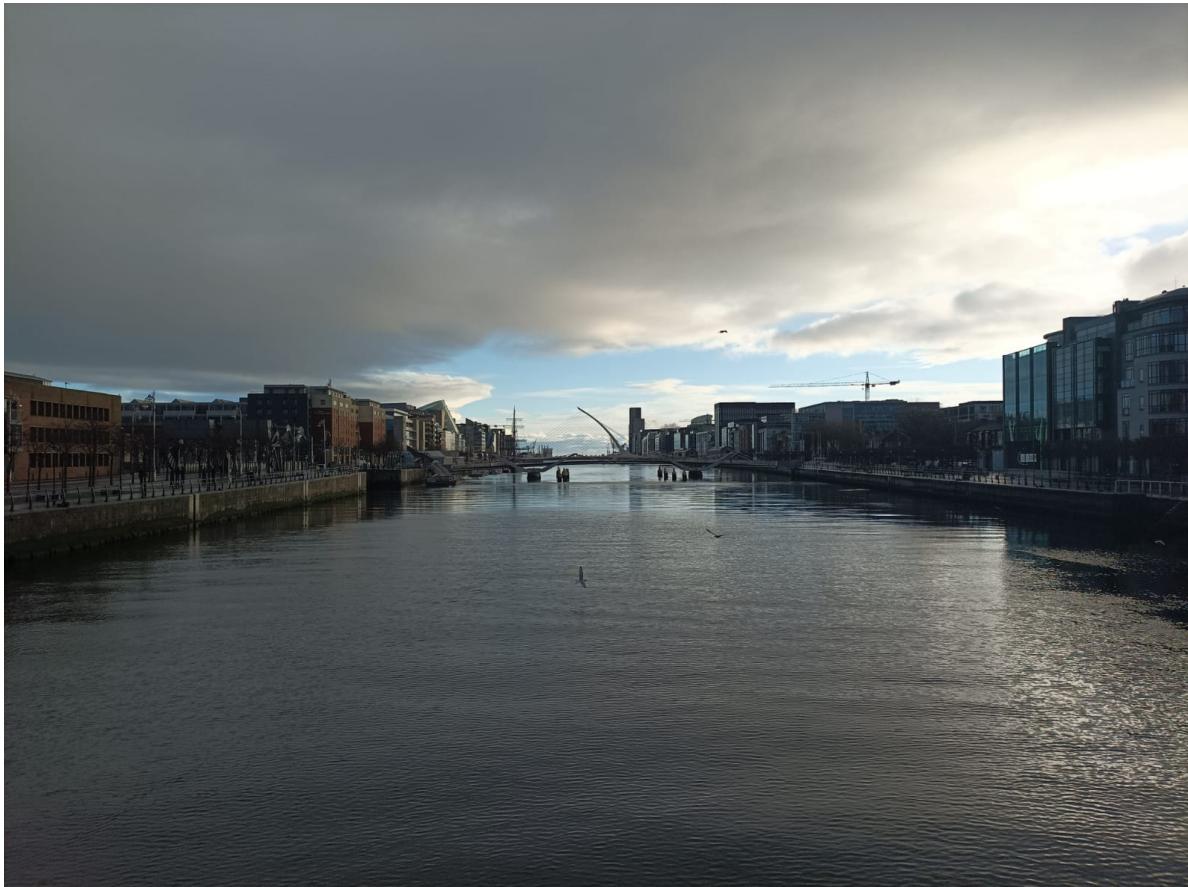


Figure 2.3: blah



Figure 2.4: blah

the punters passing by. The problem is that it's not busy enough to make myself a fly on the wall, so I end up spraffing on about the 360 degree views, with the gentle mountains to the south of Dublin Bay and the relatively unspoilt sandy north bay. A ferry from the mainland comes in to Dublin Port and you can see the lighthouses in action, between this one in Poolbeg and its partner in the Bull Wall. I realise that there is nothing stopping me from cycling to every lighthouse in Ireland and to see the whole island at its most rugged, unmanned edges. Although I expect I'll have to learn how to swim a little better before I can visit the little scatty green lighthouse sitting a few hundred yards offshore.



Figure 2.5: *A lot of major lighthouses have a necessary sidekick that understandably doesn't draw the crowds*

# 3 Bull Island

*0735 Saturday, October 22, 2022*

It's starting to get bright outside and I can feel the bike calling me but I don't want to wake up the chunfla and force my pregnant missus to wake up too, so I lash on a shitty coat and head out in my leisure pants aka pajamas instead of going upstairs to dig out the lycra. I'm only cycling Yvonne so it doesn't matter if I look like I'm nipping out for a baguette. I grab a spare t-shirt and use it as a scarf and then I can change later when I stop for coffee and the sweat turns cold. There's a high-viz jacket floating around too so I envelop myself in its brightness and I'm good to go. I haven't decided where yet. I'm not in the humour for driving somewhere first and I don't need to cos it's just about bright enough.

The lack of mountains on the Northside means that the sea calls even louder when I want at it, so I decide to go directo(ish) to Fairview whence I can let the open air blow away the busyness of my midweek life and the clusterforked urbanscapes which host it. The easiest route there is to follow the simple familiar path along the canal to Ballybough, then nudge off through a few traffic lights and bingo bango it's the sea. But it's Saturday and I'm in explorer mode and familiar paths slow down the relaxation process. I want to get back early enough so I can't be going too far today. I still haven't fully worked out how the Tolka works its way across the Northside and what impact that has had on the structure of the settlements surrounding it, so mapping that out is a good way to negate the interruptfulness of urban cycling. I've seen how the river sneaks past the back of Blanchardstown village and after that it weaves through a bizarre dead space where no cars go before reemerging inside the Tolka Valley Park which sounds more enticing than it really is.

## 3.1 More bridges than you've had hot dinners

Between my gaff and the Tolka Valley park is a spaghetti junction where the M50 and N3 meet, but the canal and train go through too, the river is nearby, providing the historical outline for the N3, and there's a cheeky aqueduct in the mix. *More bridges than you've had hot dinners*, as some wit has named the Strava segment along the canal cycleway. The junction even has space for a gym and a small shopping centre. The roads are seamless for longer-range motorists but their impact divvies up the locality into four quadrants, providing multiple barriers to whatever social cohesion might be found in a place like this.

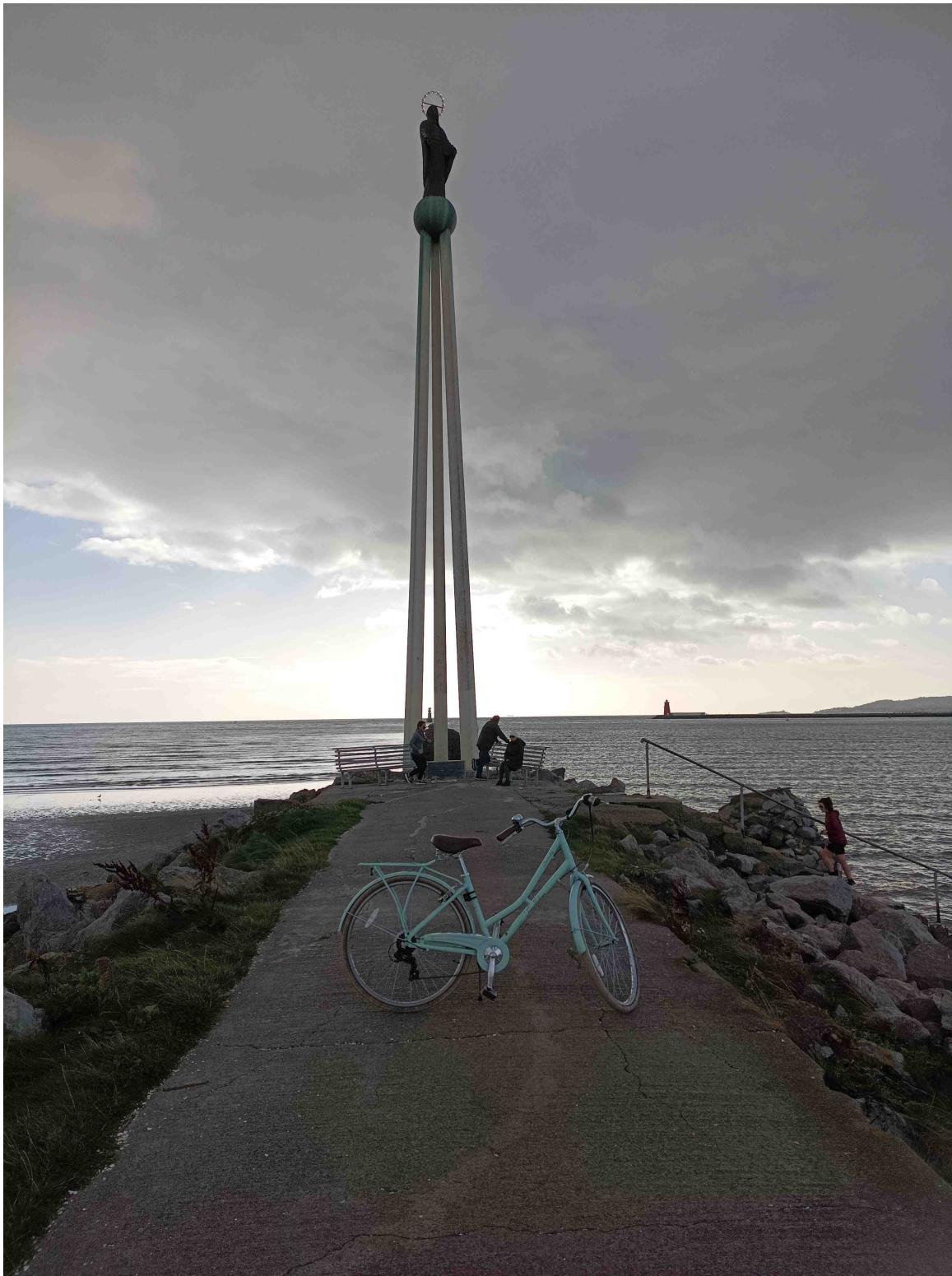


Figure 3.1: Our Lady, Star of the Sea

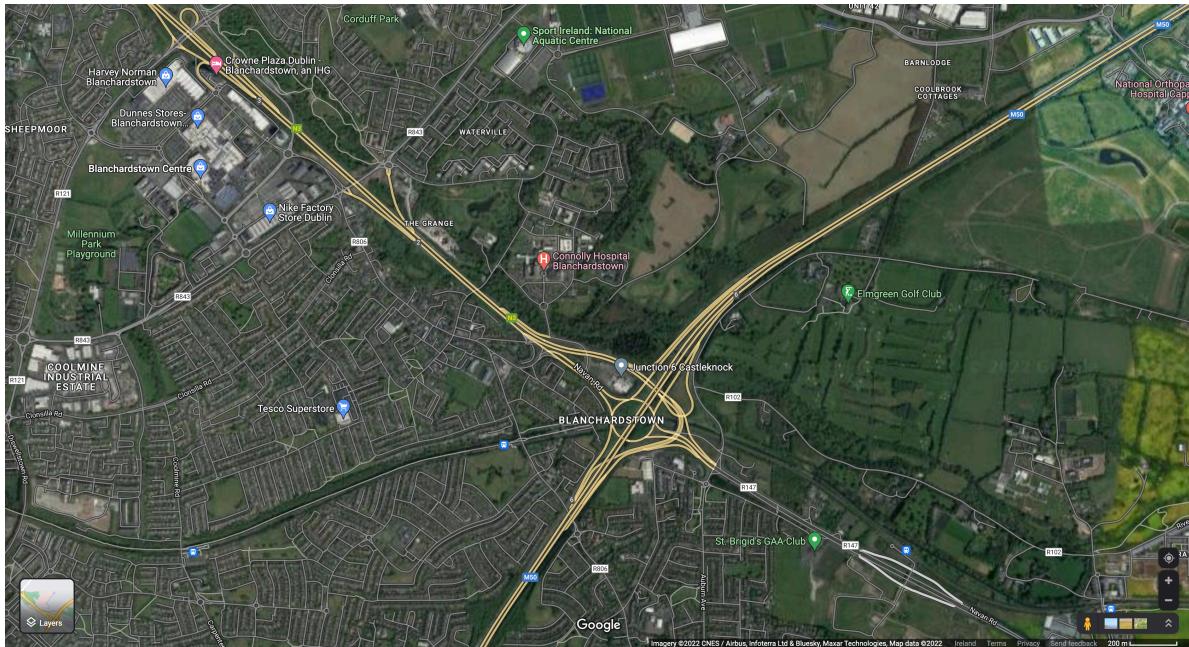


Figure 3.2: This junction does a great job of connecting major roads and breaking up the land into four distinct quadrants.

Castleknock is in the south quadrant, separated from Blanch in the west by the M50 and the canal slash trainline. The two morph westwards into Carpenterstown, Coolmine and Clonsilla. Blanchardstown village has suffered a bad dose of choppyoffyness, yet it has managed to carve out a niche, with several cafes, restaurants and bars, while the better known, soul-sapping Blanchardstown Shopping Centre is a smidge north-west, to the top left of the map, separated by perhaps the slowest traffic light system in Ireland. I find it a good spot to catch up on meditation exercises. The real commercial centre for locals is the Coolmine Industrial Estate, where you'll find papayas and falafels, mechanics and fitness studios, although no boozers or sit-down cafes. It's the only industrial estate I've ever seen which ought to transition to village status, and its existence shows how facilities can emerge over time despite shitbox planning.

In the Northern quadrant have been placed all of the large campus projects, so you get Connolly Hospital, Blanch IT, Corduff, and more recently, a swathe of high-end sports facilities, where the Olympic swimming pool finally got built, more pitches than a boarding school on roids, conference rooms for the FAI, and open spaces for equestrian events. This is where the Bertie Bowl would have been, and if you need an obscure placename to remind you of the halcyon Celtic Tiger days, try this: Abbotstown. Beyond is a wedge of #BusinessParks and then the land dovetails into the dull farmlands of Meath and North County Dublin.

## 3.2 Area D51

But it is the Eastern quadrant which I have never understood fully, as the land is undeveloped and there's no park to help you follow along the river. I try to access the quadrant from Waterville Park and Connolly Hospital but I end up back on the spaghetti junction, pass over the M50, and follow the signs down and around to the supposedly 'New' River Road. The entrance to the road is a right turn at a junction but I decide to go straight on instead up a marked cul de sac which runs parallel to the M50. It turns out that this is the longest frikkin cul de sac you'll find in a place without mountains, and there's not much happening, beyond the noise of the cars whizzing by overhead to the left. It feels like Dublin's answer to Area 51. There's a golf course, which explains a lot, and a nursing home, where the poor sods can be hidden away. There's signs for No Dumping and I take this as a red flag indicating potential criminal activity. Sure enough, a car is parked at the very end of the road, so in a freak out, with far too much time to think, I decide to make sure I'm not like a witness to some crime. I think about the kid in the desert in Season Five of Breaking Bad and decide against his fate, and I spin around and piss it back down the gentle decline. Afterwards, I realise that this is the entrance to Dunsink Observatory.

I turn left onto the ol' New River Road, and enjoy my safety, at least for a few moments. This road may once have been the main road to Navan but now it is the Tolka River's paltry answer to the Strawberry Beds. The Tolka's River Road has only two undeveloped kilometres and its windiness parallels the meandering scuttiness of the Tolka at this point. No ramps have been put on the road to slow down the impatient motorists. I manage to prevent one overtaker with my outreaching palm, and wave them on after the bend, but the trick is no use for the next driver, a taxi, who passes me by on a bend and, as another car approaches, uses their taxi-driver skills to solve the needless problem they had just created.

## 3.3 Tolka Valley Park

There's a crossroads soon after, left up another dead end towards Dunsink, right to Ashtown roundabout and the main Navan road etc, and roadworks straight ahead, with access only for the canal-side apartment complexes in progress. The options aren't great, as you might expect in a null space, but I want to stick to the river, so I go straight and then have to dismount the bike in order to get into the appropriately named "Linear Tolka Valley Park". I'll hold my thoughts for now on having to dismount a bicycle to access a park with a bike lane, and I get in to find an under-landscaped, semi-kempt park. The place is in dire need of fifty years' worth of tree growth, and the linearity is a reference to the narrow impact the park makes on the surrounding urbanscape, rather than to the direction of the paths, which which interweave in response to the steepish river banks. The next time I'm coming here will be when me five-year-old is ready for a BMX. There is a handful of dog walkers and it might

be a bit early — or scary — for joggers so I plough on, disappointed that nothing pleasant has yet emerged along the Tolka, beyond my curiosity being satisfied.

The park kicks you out for a bit, forcing you to cross a wideish road, before letting pedestrians back in through a barrier-gate, so I just take the L and follow the road til I come to Glasnevin cemetery, through which the widening river flows, thence into Botanical Gardens. I chicane left-right around the cemetary walls walls and reemerge on Botanic Avenue where I encounter the neat Griffith Park, the first bit of pleasant, well-sculpted land I've encountered since leaving my gaff a dozen clicks ago. It's a sure sign that the Northside Riviera is nearby and I just have to negotiate Richmond Road first. Like anywhere in Dublin named *Richmond* it is run-down as fuck, but its unmatched buildings provide several glimpses of the rare aul' times when people ran their own unkempt business for unmadeup people.

### 3.4 Seaspawn

I can feel the clamping grip of buildings letting me go as I hit Alfie Byrne Road where the land ends and the soothing spaciousness of the sea begins, yeswithstanding the scaldiness of Dublin Port across the unreclaimed remainder of the Tolka River estuary. It doesn't matter that there are complex roadworks and orange signs and orange people directing us either hither or thither. Here now is the relative nothingness where the unblocked sun bounces limegreen brightness off the seaweed slimefields and the retreating seawater lures my space-craving soul into a crazed chase for freedom. I follow the coastal bike lane and feel the seabreeze on my face and my mind empties of thought for a moment or three.

I realise that this is an easy chance to check out a lighthouse, either here in Clontarf or yonder in Howth. I want to follow this cycle path of freedom all the way to Howth but I keep stopping to marvel at the brightgreen glory of the seaweed fields and I think of *AtlasPro's* simple observation that the whole world is covered in land, and only some of it is covered by sea. Here is a chunk that oscillates twice daily between being land, as we usually think of it, and being the snotgreen sea, an opaque world to man. I think of times past and future when this land will be habitable for mankind, and of Doggerland and other drownded lands which some other poor souls must have tilled or foraged for scran.

Taking photos has broken my momentum so I decide to avoid trekking to Howth and instead I decide to go to the Stella Maris lighthouse at the end of the Bull Wall. I turn right onto Causeway Road which also connects the mainland to Bull Island, twenty-four/seven. Amazingly, I've never been down here before, even though my mam is from Clontarf and I spent much of my childhood at the Bull Wall, watching her swim up and down the pier. It is extraordinary to approach this familiar place from a new angle and the road leads to the very middle of the expansive beach. There's dogwalkers and golfers and actual birdwatchers, and a derelict building with picnic benches suggests that this was once a heavily frequented spot, presumably before pollution dirtied the swimwater and everyone started to fock off to Spain for some reliable beach bliss.



Figure 3.3: *Tidal seaweed fields bouncing limegreen brightness*



Figure 3.4: *People must have come to Dollymount Strand in larger numbers before the sea retreated and trips to Spain became affordable*



Figure 3.5: *Not many investors have gambled on climate change turning this sprawling urban beach into a tourist resort and for now it remains a land of dog walks, jog walks, and non-metaphorical kite-flyers*

### **3.5 To the lighthouse**

I get to the beach but I realise that there's no way to transport Yvonne across 2k of sandy beach unless I actually lift her, so I double back on myself and do a looparooney towards The Wooden Bridge. It's still early enough that the place isn't jammers and I can peddle slowly along the pier all the way down to the Stella Maris lighthouse. From there the three-sixty views are immense. To the North is the Sutton side of Howth Head and the rest of the unspoilt Northside Riviera, encompassing Bull Island and the Sutton isthmus. To the south, you can watch the ferry nudge between the lighthouses on its way to Dublin Port .

I'm starting to take this lighthouse project more seriously and I'm thinking we're going to have to invest in a camper van or something if I want to make it happen. It's not like I'm going to be able to just nip off on my Tobler eighty or ninety times on overnighter trips to see lighthouses in Antrim, Donegal and Kerry. Our second bambino is on the way and getting out of Dodge takes planning now. This project will only work if we all go together and, while we're at it, we can check out houses to buy around the country. I want to live beside the sea even though it feels like an outrageous indulgence. But I understand now how my mam never recovered from moving inland from Clontarf to Lucan. The sea takes you out of your world and without it, escaping is a lot harder. And I need to escape. If I cycle to a hundred-odd lighthouses, and write about them all, then I'll probably buy myself a year or two of good mental health. It doesn't even matter if anyone actually reads it.



Figure 3.6: The road to heaven is nice and quiet this morning



Figure 3.7: *Dublin Port is a pot of gold that could redesigned as modern living for thousands*

## 4 Dun Laoghaire 1



Figure 4.1: *This lighthouse sells ice creams from inside an old military lookout tower. That's real progress.*

**0805, Sunday January 1, 2023**

It is, as ever, a slow start. You want to be gone but the bike says no. The back brakes are banjoed, which I can live with, and the fancy mudguard is dislodged, which I can't, cos it's dragging on the wheel. This stuff ought to be dunzoed the night before by my bike mechanic, but I am he, and here we are now. I've been tying up mudguard with a phone charger but

that's knackered now, so I need to dig out a longish bolt and *two* nuts to tighten it into place. Then I oil the chain and do a quick circle around the parked cars to spread the oil across the chain and the cassette, but the frikkin chain pops out of the bottom gear, and now the dérailleur is in the spokes. I'm at my wit's end with this bike. This keeps on happening when I'm climbing up hills. It did me in Chapelizard last week and it did me in Rockbrook a while back when I was testing out whether I could climb a bit of a mountain on it, partly out of curiosity, and partly to piss off all the allthegearmen themselves who forget that the mad bastards were doing the *Tour de France* long before carbon frames were available on the bike-to-work scheme. I bumped into Alan Lewis in Terenure on my way up and he was like, you're not going up there on *that* are you, with echoes of Barry O'D giving Kilroy the same grief out in Enniskerry over the hack of his Virgil van, but that attitude only gave me the extra urge of defiance to make it. Sadly, the chain was having none of it that day too and I had to abandon my climb at Mount Venus Road cos by the time I had it back on, it was time to go and pick up the chunfla from his babysitter.

## 4.1 And they're off

For once I know where I'm going. Dun Laoghaire lighthouse, or at least one of them. I head straight to the N3 cos I know I'll see the low sun there, instead of it being obscured behind houses and trees on the quieter roads, and it's a, eh, Bank Holiday Sunday today so everywhere will be doubly quiet. The mudguard has already started to come loose and of course it's because I've forgotten to tighten the two nuts so I have to dismount and tighten them with my fingers just. Sunny Cabra is looking particularly good and I flirt with finding the best spot to capture its tree-lined radiance but I start getting pissed off with all the stopping so I don't bother. It's plain sailing as far as the quays from here, and I roll through Stoneybatter all the way to the James Joyce bridge on the Liffey, which really does look, at least from this angle, like the open book it is supposed to, and more tantalisingly like the inner thighs of a supine lady with splayed legs. In squareness, it was the filthy man himself who made that connection, inasmuch as I can remember Dr John Nash eile telling us in college.

## 4.2 Negotiating the quays

I turn left onto the quays and I'm disappointed that the luminescent aperture of the Liffey estuary is not bookended by sunshine, because the last time I checked (Chapter 1), there were rays of light at the end of this grey tunnel, at this hour of the morning. But that was autumn and this is deepest winter, and with the slight north-eastward tilt of the quays, the sun seems to be hiding in the Deep South. I think about turning right over O'Connell Bridge, and actually I do, but I decide against the horrors of D'Olier St and the Protestant prison because again the sun will be blocked by buildings. So I weave along the skinny, tree-lined footpath on the south quays, using my bike's might to needlessly oust a hungover pedestrian who is already



Figure 4.2: *There's light at the end of the river again, but the morning sun is further south at this time of year*

struggling to negotiate a dry passage between the wall, the trees, and the puddles that form on the ruptured concrete. I'm actually surprised that town is this quiet, as you'd normally have more wandering tourists struggling to find a worthy breakfast, and few heads on the walk of shame. Maybe they were all just up extra late last night celebrating the dawn of the New, to be fair, Year.

I cross back over Butt Bridge and there's barriers everywhere cos some kind of event musta been going on last night. I saw a wodge of scaffolding th'other day when I was driving back over the East Link bridge. I actually get yapping to the foreman cos I stop and ask a worker for a loan of spanner to tighten my nuts and she gives a me a pliers in lieu. The foreman moves me outside the barriers - cos I'm in a technically work environment? – but he's actually sound about it and he tells me that Westlife were playing, plus a few decent acts on the smaller stages. He's been working there since lunchtime yesterday and he looks shattered, although I'd say he's seen a few decent acts in his day, judging by the cut of him, or lack thereof. I give up on the pliers and give it back to your wan and I have to say it's really nice to see young women working in construction, cos you never woulda seen that in my Doris Day.



Figure 4.3: Yet again, the rainbows in Dublin Port are screaming for attention

Anyways, so I'm over the East Link and I do a quick bit of visual penance through Poolbeg's industrial scaldscape, before coming back out onto Sandymount Strand. I actually got this far last week, planning to hit the very same lighthouse in Dun Laoghaire, but I dropped in to see Storan whose wife had a horrific accident off the bike recently. I was worried that him and the kids would be on their Tobler for Xmo. It turned out she was just home and they were able to spend it together in their new house. Thanks be to the hokey she's gonna be ok, with no spinal or head damage, despite dozens of broken bones, and it's a reminder to never undertake a bus or a lorry at a junction, until they've moved on or left ahead of you. She actually thought the lorry driver had seen her and was stalling until she cycled on, but unfortunately not. He hit her, knocked her over, and was halfway over her body before a passerby screamed and stopped the lorry, saving her life. By the time she told me the whole story it was too late to push on to Dun Laoghaire so I ended up giving myself a tour of the Dodder River on the way home, which is a bit of a work-on, in case you are wondering, but I'm glad cos this week it's much sunnier.

### 4.3 Do the Strand

So I take the pedestrian path along the strand cos the tide is out and the walkers are on the sand, and then at the end of the footpath I hop down a few rocks to the sand, carrying my obviously bike, and thinking I'm Wout van Aert now, doing cyclo-cross. I only do a few hundred jaggedy metres on the rippled sand before coming out at Sydney Parade crossing and there's a plaque there for Merrion Strand, distinct from Sandymount Strand. I wonder if *this* is where Stephen starts his walk in the Proteus chapter of Ulysses, and it seems to the access point Oliver St John Gogarty suggests in his 1937 autobiography, where he writes "It costs one hour's sleep and half-a-crown to ride out to meet the winnowing tide at Merrion". The only difference nowadays is that it is easier to rent a DublinBike than a horse. I have to stop again to fix the mudguard but there's sand in my literally nuts and it's hard to screw them back on. I say hello to a Saudi lady with a boxer dog, a combo I've never seen before, and later I wonder if she's an infidel like my wife, also married to an Inglesi, cos anyone with a dog like that is clearly here for the long haul.

### 4.4 We've got it all

I'm back on the Rock Raid but cycling here is mingin, even with the advantage of a half-arsed bike lane, and I'm looking to see if that park on the left will solve my problems. On Seafort Parade, opposite Blackrock actual College, a couple of lads direct me down through an arch and into the park, which does have a bike lane, but before you know it, we all get squished through a five-foot path between the Dort barriers and a stone wall. It's a pedestrian right-of-way zone, understandably, and it turns out that the half-arsed bike lane award of the day



Figure 4.4: “*You must not think that Merrion is like this every morning at the beginning of the year; certainly not. But I have seen it thus on occasions when beauty reigned in the air and made it receptive. All we have to do is dwell on such moments of beauty. Other moments matter little...*” Oliver St John Gogarty

goes to this Newgrange-esque passageway. I come out at the DART Station and I'm welcomed by a modest sign saying "Blackrock village: we've got it all". Except for modesty.

In fairness, the village is a model example of how to quickly turn a linear Irish village - as in, all of them — into a public space worth hanging out in. There's public benches alloverthegaff, and some of them are even arranged so that two or more people can have a conversation. Throw in a welt of cafes with outdoor seating, and I'd say the boozers are prone to the odd spillover too, and suddenly you have a village worth actually being in, for reasons beyond Snail Mail and picking up a pint of milk. It doesn't take a lot of effort and there's no reason not to do more of this everywhere. Basically just keep what you had during Covid and add a few nuts and bolts for permanence. Traffic is one-way but there's a caynterflay bike lane. Plus it's worth coming for the accents alone, if only to hear what your own kids will sound like in a decade or two.

I exit the village and pop down to Seapoint just to scope out the Jacques Chirac with the swimmers. There's dozens of punters here, freezing their bits off, and looking all the happier for it. I sit down for a breakfast of oranges and nut bars and soak up fragments of chat. Southsiders don't get enough credit for their banter quotient, being neither Real Dubs nor the proud culchies who moved here before spawning them, so nobody much fights their corner. This bizarre mix of being nobody's child and the nation's rich kids finds fullest expression in the extraordinary Ross O'Carroll Kelly novels but also in the fact that many locals can see the funny side of their spectacularly successful rugby culture. Or as GK put it: if you're a Leinster fan wearing a Leinster jersey, then you don't get the joke. Being here also gives me a rare feeling of fitting in, which is something I seldom feel because I kinda didn't grow up in one place, but my ridiculous accent doesn't stand out here.

## 4.5 Dun Laoghaire pier

The problem now is that I'm freezing my own bits off and I'll be stopping yet more at the lighthouse. I shuffle down to Dun Laoghaire, another town designed for people to enjoy living in, and I get the base of the main pier. There's a queue for coffee and signs for no cycling on the pier, so I whip out my bike lock and it's jammed. I ask the fella in Bryan's coffee for some oil and he comes back and solves the problem with some WD-40, which David O'Doherty would advise against. But it's a quickfix and now I have coffee and a locked bike. I'm glad to be walking because my head is fried by now. I start moseying on the wrong side of the pier walk, cos I want to see the coast before they do it up, as they no doubt will soon, given how much effort has been going into, again, making this a nice place to be. God Bless Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown county council, with their splendidious libro and many public spaces. I love coming here because the space is made for people to enjoy themselves, and you don't even need to spend money, although that option is there, from Teddy's ice cream to food markets and a stack of restaurants with outdoor seating. There's well laid out spaces to walk, benches,



Figure 4.5: Freddie Mercury would have really appreciated life here

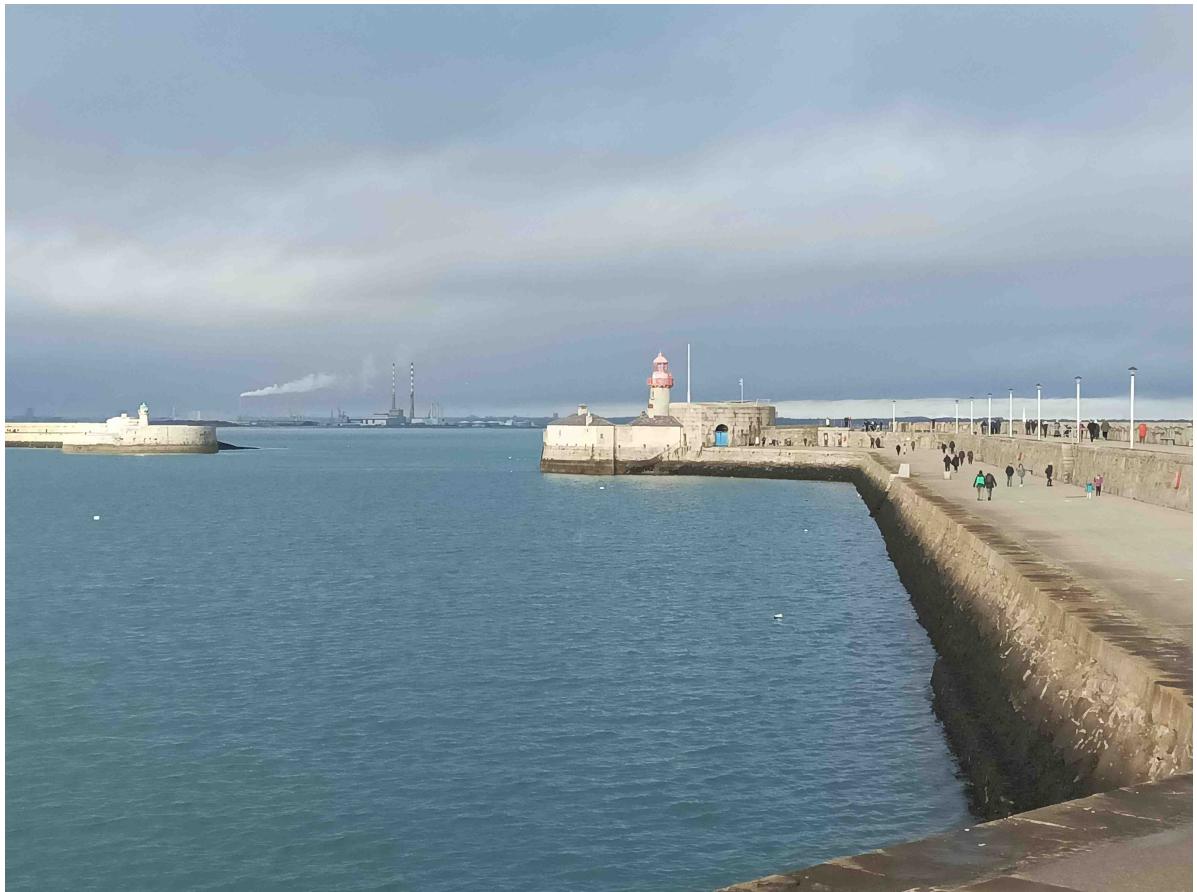


Figure 4.6: *A couple of cheeky lighthouses adjacent to your town centre does wonders for attracting daytrippers*

a playground, and the People's Park adjacent. It feels like an Italian piazza here where all ages intersect, giving an orchestral fullness to life.

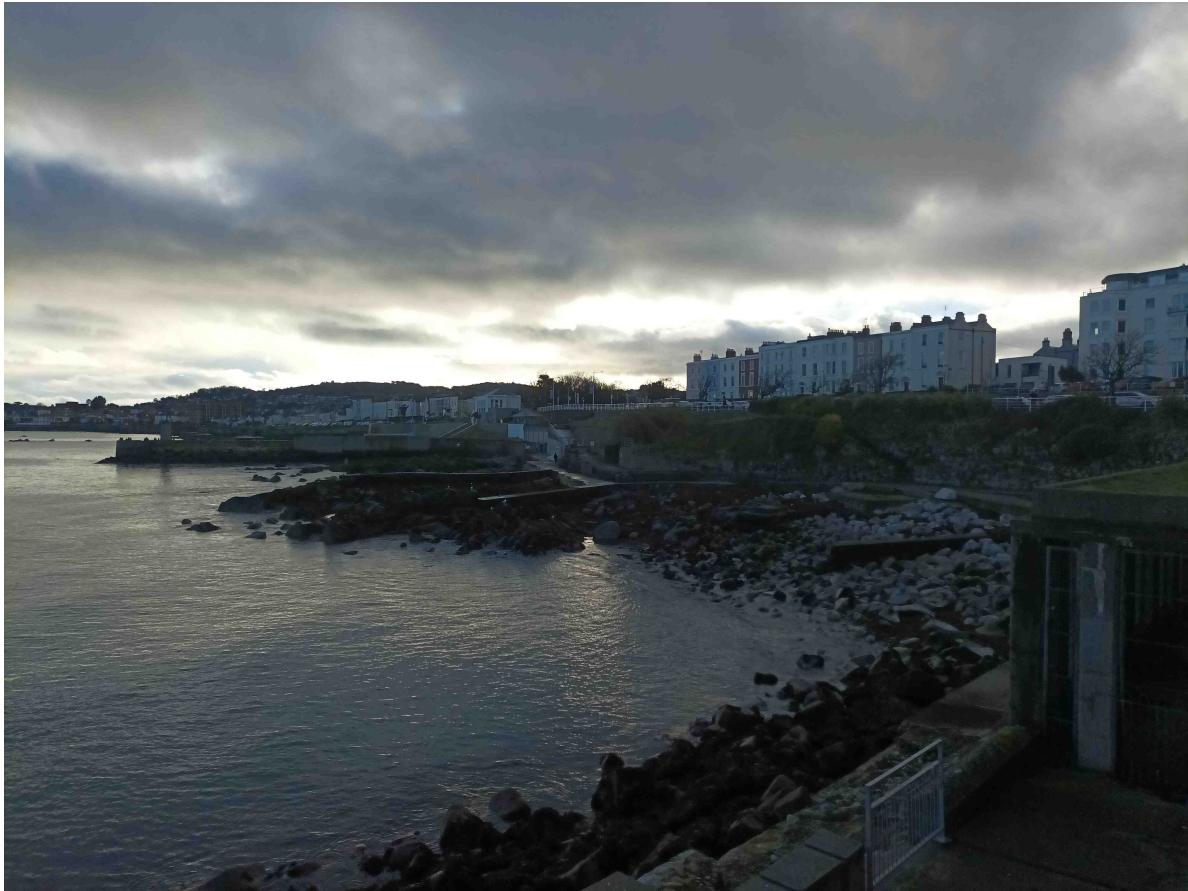


Figure 4.7: *I'd put money on the local council to do something decent with this rocky spot as the rest of the public spaces in the area are pretty jammers already.*

I get changed in a secluded spot - probably a classic location for knacker drinking - and I'm nice and warm again as I rejoin the masses making their way to the lighthouse. I hope that this pier can be a model of what is to come in the future of this country, as the population increases and more worthwhile coastal towns either spring up or expand in way that makes being there a pleasant experience. The lighthouse at the end of the pier lives inside a rundown Martello Tower and there's a disused cottage or two, depending on how they are defined. They sell ice creams from a van and I buy one off the world-weary shopkeeper who hasn't yet reconciled in his head the New Year vibes with the fact that he's just had to clean up a buncha portaloos. I lick my ice cream lustily on the walk back and then I'm on the bike for a surprisingly straight shot across the city on the diagonal running from south-east to north-west. There's little talk of a bike lane from Blanch to Dun Laoghaire, but it would go a long way towards unifying this city a little.



Figure 4.8: *These lighthouse cottages will be snapped up quick once the war on vacant properties gathers real momentum*



Figure 4.9: This is where they used to keep the ammo



## 5 Howth

*Once I had ticked off the North Bull Lighthouse, I was ready to use my momentum and cycle to Howth the next week, but while I was going through the early morning preparation rigmarole, I woke my son up and I soon realised that he wasn't going back to sleep. So I lobbed him in the car, turned the L into a W, and soaked up a glorious sunset from the bay-side walk near the Summit. So if you are sitting here wondering about the position of the sun at particular times of the year — which I increasingly am myself — then that's why the Baily Lighthouse in Howth is looking like it does above.*

**1048 Saturday Jan 7, 2023**

It's late for cycling, but I got some news yesterday and it split my soul in two, with one part being me and the other part being a freaked-out variant who takes over intermittently. On top of that, I can feel a bout of emptiness being triggered, in a way that I've never been so explicitly aware of, and I know I need to take action. I don't get depressed in the sit-in-bed-all-day kind of way but I do feel an emptiness in me whereby basic life seems so aimless. Like, I can't sit and play with my son because I can't stop thinking how pointless it all is, but if I take him out for a walk then we'll have a blast and I'll feel better. If I stay at home, I need to do practical stuff like rearranging furniture. If I go cycling, then it has to be somewhere because I need that purpose. And I have to keep the locations changing or rotating, otherwise the pointlessness envelops me. I can't train per se. I couldn't sit on an exercise bike or lift weights in a gym or swim lengths of a pool. I just get depressed. I played so much sport growing up but I couldn't take it seriously after the age of sixteen and sport, along with nearly every profession, just seemed so emotionally lacking. I could never again commit myself to the rugby and cricket I had been playing insatiably. All that training seemed like such a loadamebollocks. I decided I wanted to be a writer, like George Orwell, and write about how shite everything was, and I knew, from Samuel Beckett, that my career could last until my eighties, unlike with sport.

### 5.1 Roads not taken

I bumped into Kev O'Brien in the playground last week and he's dunzo now. Ireland's most capped cricketer, out of contract, not selected for the World Cup in the autumn. Unemployed now. It was tough enough for me in my mid-thirties getting a hashtag real job after I finished up my PhD slash vow of poverty, but I can't imagine how tough it'll be for him, scouring the world for a cricketing job or else having to start afresh. Especially with kids. We played with



Figure 5.1: *Baily Lighthouse in the autumn sunrise*

and against each other as teenagers, between Ireland, Leinster and our clubs, before I chose the long and easy road, stopping in every Battle Cruiser on the way. Seeing Kev is a reminder of the life I chose to pursue, and the need to write, as the clock is ticking. Bar technical writing, this is all I've got, and if it's shite, then at least I threw something at the wall.

In my twenties I poured booze into the hole in my soul. I played five-a-side football with the lads, and a smattering of junior rugby, but sporting fulfillment only came later when I discovered cycling. I was doing rehab from a knee operation and I had to bulk up my little skinny leg but I was no longer doing the gymwork. My physio Andy Watson told me cycle up hills, preferably in a higher gear, and one day I battled my way up the Wicklow mountains on my shitty-ass city hybrid bike, and I loved it like nothing I had ever experienced. Since then I have had an activity in life with all of the joyous brutality of rugby except now I had the time and space to ponder it all. A place where my endless thoughts could find expression, coming and going in response to the changing landscape. A mobile meditation of sorts.

## 5.2

So anyway, I'm in the kitchen, cleaning up after breakfast, and I can feel the emptiness. We've no plan for the day and I can feel the nothingness come at me. But I know too that the issues from yesterday are triggering the trauma of going to boarding school when I was eight years old, so I get the idea of putting on some songs from that era, because there are so few details that I can remember properly, but the songs remain the same. First I stick on *Glory Box* by Portishead, released in 1994, but my memories are actually from my early secondary school days, and then I lash on *It's my life* by Dr Alban, which was my favourite song in the autumn of 1992, and immediately I'm in tears. I'm only nine and I'm back home in my folks' gaff, and it's time to go back to school, cos it's Sunday evening. *Atlantic 252* have announced they are going to play the song any minute and I'm waiting and waiting cos I want to tape it and then I'll be able to listen to it all week on my walkman. But we have to leave during the song and the music is gone.

## 5.3 Circular North Road

I go up for a shower and afterwards I declare I need to go for a cycle to help me process stuff. My wife and son are up for going to the playzone area nearby so I drop them there and then head out towards Howth. The cleanest and nicest way there is to take the canal into basically town and then jump on the cycle lane all the way up the coast from Fairview but I'm in the humour for piecing together more of the Northside, so I take the Abbotstown quadrant around towards Finglas and then hop onto the ringroad that pieces together the inner outer Northside all the way from Finglas Village to what turns out to be Killester. The road starts out life as Glasnevin Avenue and then it's Collins Avenue, but it's basically a North Circular Road,



Figure 5.2: Before the supernova exploded, churches in mid 20th century Ireland got bigger and bigger, as if they were going out of fashion.

part deux, albeit low on embassies and high on churches. It's wall-to-wall traffic lights and junctions and I wouldn't recommend it unless cartography or transit is your goal. Everywhere in the inner outer Northside seems to be a road, not a place, kinda like Belfast. Houses and gardens line the roads and, even though you never feel you are in a village, everywhere there is some prospect of life in a way that you don't get in siloed Blanch or New Lucan. Every so often a church emerges, the size of a football pitch, yet they look like placeholder prefabs, made of cardboard, and erected to ensure the newly housed residents could get mass while the real church is being built. Even the names are grandiosely Catholic, plucked from a game of Vatican Bingo. We're talking [Holy Child Roman Catholic Church, Whitehall](#), which was 'designed to accommodate a congregation of 1750'. We're talking, [Our Lady of Consolation](#), Malahide Road.

## 5.4 Maternal routes

After the Malahide Road things get more familiar. My mam's relatives are from around here. Killester, Marino, Raheny, although I certainly couldn't draw you a map because I was always driven here. I see from a shopfront that I'm actually in Killester, and I feel a warm memory of my mam's Uncle Jack. I'm very young and he's in his rocking chair, making an imaginary mouse run up his arm. The whole extended family used to have big card games a few times a year, with all the men in one room, smoking cigars and playing poker, and all the women and children in the other room playing newmarket, whose rules I can't remember. My mam was the only woman in the poker room. The older generation all died out, including my grandmother who was a widow for fifty-seven years. Her husband, Desmond Brennan, had died in 1948. He was a footballer for the Dubs and an accountant and a boozer, and he was only thirty-seven when he died. All four digits on the shared gravestone were different. 1.9.4.8 and 2.0.0.5. I can't imagine the loneliness for my nana after he died. The kids were four, six, eight and ten, and my mam was off to boarding school in Longford a year later, aged seven, a double trauma that I'm only beginning to understand now myself, as my own child reaches that age, and I try to explore my own past, and my family's, to try to minimize the inter-generational trauma that I don't yet understand. You can still see my mam get triggered by frozen memories, or even by imaginary fantasy-memories, like when she sees Drico on the telly and she imagines his grandad and her own dad on the piss together in Clontarf. My mam still treasures his medals because that's all that survived. Here he is, playing in [the 1934 All-Ireland Final](#).

After my granny died, Uncle Jack emigrated to Australia, aged nearly 90, to be with his daughter. *The Star* did a piece on him as Ireland's oldest emigrant. He was a lifelong swimmer well into his eighties and he must have been a great role model to her just as she has been to me, fending off age with exercise. Jack died ten years later, a week shy of his 100th birthday. I've often thought of putting a few bob on my mam to live to 100, just as Shane McGowan allegedly bet on himself to live to 50, then used the cash as a cheeky windfall. The older generation are all gone now and I don't know if any of my generation are in contact with each other, but my mam and her cousins still meet for dinner a few times per year and it's nice

that they stick together. It's a reminder to make sure that we keep up the full-size family occasions, with my all my sisters and our many kids.

## 5.5 St Anne's Park

I've been trying to make my way north, and to the sea, so that I can follow the coast road to Howth, but I'm still a bit lost. It's like trying to navigate life using childhood memories, although perhaps that's a good explanation of adulthood. I end up at yet another church, which turns out to be St Brigid's Church in Killester, from the 1920s, with a more Irish name. I give in and look at Google Maps and realise I'm beside St Anne's Park, which I've been studiously avoiding on my trips to Clontarf, cos I have cold but indistinct memories of the place. I weave through and there's a pop-up market on with loadsa burgers and organic vegetables, and there's a mother on a bike asking her son if he wants to buy kale so that they can make cripies. There's wide open spaces and the kids have no trouble making use of them but the adults are crouch-standing in huddles to eat their food cos there's nowhere for them to sit and eat and chill. Basic recreation is something that just doesn't seem to be understood deeply in this country. Please just stick a few seats down so we can all enjoy ourselves. Picnic benches. Fold-up seats. Anything. It's doesn't have to be a beanbagged chill-out space run by fans of *The Orb*, with lashins of herbal tea on the go, although I'm not gonna pass on the chance to advocate that.

Meanwhile, my infamous mudguard is giving me trouble again and I'm amazed to find out that there's a [bike repair spot](#) here. The lads are sound and the son tightens it back with two teeny bolts and I feel brand new. There's a stream running through the park so that takes me to the obviously sea and now I'm on the bike lane with a functional bike and a massive wind on my back. The water is in today and it comes right up to the bike lane so Doggerland has vanished. The grey sea seems dull now compared to the seaweed fields from the last day, but it's fun to ride this close to the water.

## 5.6 Bend of bay

The bike lane ends a bit before the x-shaped traffic jam at Sutton Cross, the tombolo which connects Howth Head to the mainland. If you need evidence that the land is made of sand, try playing rugby against Suttonians and see how your skin shreds on the soil if you don't lather up in vaseline beforehand. Sutton Cross splits two ways. Straight on brings you to Howth village, and the Dart station, from which daytrippers can indulge in hikes to the summit and the finest range of fish-and-chip options on the island of Ireland, and there are a few swimming spots for the hardy. But when you are ready to mix it up, check out the bay-side of the peninsula, visible in the picture above, with its warren of walkways, and some very hidden beaches. Quite a few people live here and, as you continue along the peninsula, sticking to the coast as much



Figure 5.3: *Cycling to Howth Head: May the water not rise to meet you, and may the wind be always at your back.*

as possible, the houses start to get genuinely interesting, which is not something you would normally say on the island of Ireland. Some are right on the sea, others are raised high and I wonder how many of the ageing residents will have to install mini ski-lifts just to get up to their front door. I follow the Strand Road as far as I can and then have to climb some decent gradients to get back to the main road. It's pleasingly difficult on St Fintan's Road, around 10% gradient for a few hundred metres, and doubly enjoyable because I've only ever been up the main road here which is steady but dull 4%. When I re-emerge on the main road, I'm astonished to find that there are actual horses here. I can't put my finger on why I'm so astonished, as they are everywhere on the island of Ireland, even in people's gardens, but these eastmost grazers seem out of place.



Figure 5.4: I'm astonished to find horses grazing in open fields here

## 5.7 Summit

The road grinds on to the summit, with the views now cordoned off, and it's just a breathing exercise to get to the top. There's a lad who races past me out on a steepish part but then I sit on his wheel to get a rest, and, when the road rises again, I spit him out the back on my way to a glorious victory. I take a cheeky look back down the road as I turn right up to the summit car park, and, to my delight, he is struggling, but he'll make it. I lock the bike in the car park and get ready for the slightly scary walk to the lighthouse, but I'm running out of time cos I've to get back and bring the chunfla for his Craig David vaccination at 4 o'clock. I don't have time to walk out to the lighthouse and back, so I decide to cheat, because we walked to this lighthouse so recently, and the sunrise light was so much better. I sit down and take a windy video, as my bike chewed up my earphones on the way here, and then I'm offski. The descent is straight and fast and I stop and see if I can take photos this time. It's a bad decision because a descent like this clears the head, and I resolve to minimize such stoppages in the future. Much as I adore the brain-filling joy of climbing, and the depths you need to go to just to keep going, the intense focus of going downhill washes the mind clear of thought, like restarting your computer, or downing a skin of pints after work on a Friday, which is how I used to do it.

I take the clean route home, along the seaside bike lane to Alfie Byrne Road and then I scooch over to the canal and piss it home to pick up the others. My bad feelings from earlier have been kicked to touch and I can take on the week from the yellow zone, not the red zone. On the coast road, I get in behind a couple of lads doing a steady pace into the strong wind, and we get chatting at the lights. Gary is selling his carbon-fibre bike and we exchange numbers. The next day I go over to test it out but it's just too big at the saddle for my squat legs, and I have to pass. But the seed is sown and I have to get me a decent Paul van before taking on the the lighthouses scattered around the other 3000 kilometres of coastline on the island of Ireland.

## 6 Wicklow Head



Figure 6.1: It'd be rude not to include a snap of sunset.

*0904, Monday, Jan 16, 2023*

It's Martin Luthor King Day, and because I work for an American company, I'm offski for the Doris so it's a good chance to take in a lighthouse. These American Bank Holidays might be unpaid but they are a special kind of me-time you don't normally get as a 9-5 drone, because when we are off, so is everyone else. So I cycle to school with the young lad running beside me, and then I'm free to ramble, as long as it isn't too icy. The problem is that it's proper cold for Ireland, only zero or one degree this morning, rising to just three degrees by midday. I suspect

that it'll be a smidge colder up the Wicklow Mountains. I'm heading to Wicklow Head today, 56k south of Dublin city, and I could buzz into town and take the flattish route via Bray, or I could take the fun route over the Dublin slash Wicklow mountains. The problem is that if it's a bit icy here, it's gonna be an ice rink up there.

I'm gaggo to go over the mountains because I love it up there and it's the only chance I'll have to write about those mountains in this book. My guess is that it'll be icy on the Dublin, aka north, side of the mountains, and that once I get over the first big peak the sun will be melting any ice. But I'll have to take it very easy on the descents, which doesn't bother me cos I'm way to scared to push it at the best of times. Normally I wouldn't risk it, but I have work to do today, getting to this lighthouse *and* taking in the mountains, so I'm pretending to myself that it's all ok, even though I know that ice and heavy wind are legit reasons to stay off the bike, unlike rain and a cold breeze. It was only afterwards that I found out there was a [status yellow ice warning](#) overnight, with special mention of the Sally Gap, although they did expect it to pass by noon.

## 6.1 Getting to the mountains

Getting to the mountains from Blanch is a pain in the gulags and it's yet another reason why I miss living in town. From the city centre, you can warm up on your way to the mountains, take in a good climb and then roll home, all within two hours, and quicker if you're pushing it. I make my way across the back roads to Chapelizard and then up the steep hill to Ballyfermot. I spent a year doing this route, between the bike and the car, lugging my son in the morning to a really great creche called Teanga Beo, where the kids could buzz about inside a sea of love. I miss Ballyfermot. It's a proper community and there's always a buzz about the village. It's like a survivor from the Ireland before the Celtic Tiger. We lived in nearby Kilmainham before the landlady decided to flog the gaff and the housing crisis forced us to emigrate to Blanch where we know no one. So for twelve months we back-and-forthed every day, with my wife picking the lad up on the bus on her way home from town. It was a lot of travel but at least we kept a little stability in his life while he was one the many children whose early years are ruptured by this country's failure to provide access to homes for people. We'll be moving again no doubt, once we have saved up a deposit to buy our own home, another sub-scandal in itself, and a big part of today's trip is to check out gaffs in South Wicklow where we might be able to afford.

I misjudge the diagonalization from Ballyfermot to Rathfarnham and Google maps wants me to do a weavearooney through a heap of unfamiliar spots but I'm not in explorer mode yet, so I cut back across from the Walkinstown Roundabout towards Terenure, past a whopper session gaff I used to live in, where a band called ITO used to live and practice. There was always an energy in the gaff and everyone was always doing something. Johnny Rayge and Steve were in the band. Imogen was a photographer. I was trying to write about the letters of the alphabet. JJ was a street performer and used to dress up as a skeleton and scare drunk

people for money in Temple Bar. And everyone's mates and mates' mates would just knock about. I first started cycling back then, in and out of town, as we all did, cos the bus was and still is a jake, although 5k seemed like an unbearable distance on the incline home. What hasn't changed, however, is the difficulty of negotiating the traffic into the otherwise beautiful Terenure village. After that junction it's a straight shot up to the mountains.

## 6.2 Catching my breath

But before I start climbing I have to stop off in a chemist to get an emergency ventolin inhaler because my lungs struggle when the temperature drops this low - I'd say it's about two degrees now. The pharmacist takes forever, like a solid twenty minutes for one item. I can never understand why pharmaceutical companies can put so much ingenuity into creating miracle medicines yet no one has worked out a way to dispense tablets quickly. Surely the back of the pharmacy should just be one big vending machine, supervised by a pharmacist who can talk to the customer. Instead, they piss away their time and yours by counting beans in the back while front of house is occupied by non-specialists who either don't know anything or aren't allowed to discuss it with you.

## 6.3 Rising slowly

After Terenure, it's Rathfarnham Castle, which could be a cardboard cutout for all I've ever seen of it, and then a brief urban-to-rural continuum as the road rises slowly. Once I go under the M50 the gradient increases, 2, 3, 4, 5 per cent up to the Merry Ploughboy before cresting briefly, and it's a good chance to get a feel for where the lungs are at. To feel your first wind. I think I finally understand the concept of a second wind. When a game starts, you run round headlessly and get out of breath because you haven't yet matched the pace of the game to your fitness, but once you find your own level, then that's your second wind, an acceptable level of exertion which you can maintain. Once the road rises from the interlude valley, I need to find my second wind because it's about 3.5k at 6% from here to the turn for Johnny Fox's, with a good stint at 8-10%. It's no rampa inhumana, but it's the hill against which I can measure my lungs, my legs and my mental state, and I can't even use the lowest gear so this is all about leg strength today.

Every time I come here I have to go to the well a little bit, just to keep my legs grinding. Thinking of the late Eamonn Donoghue got me up here once, and he'd've been forty in November, God rest his young soul. My mam's illness in 2014 too. And more prosaic difficulties in my own life. Getting through the PhD and my troubles with the booze. Little issues at home. Whatever is really wrong in my life will always come to me in the depths of this particular struggle. Suddenly I'm thinking about that other concern I have and so I just breathe and cycle, breathe and cycle. Yet I realize that when that problem is gone, everything else in my

life is now in a good place. We've got a baby on the way in a few weeks, and my wife is healthy and our son is well, and our relationship is good. My mam and dad are good and I am satisfied inside myself. Between the bike and the writing, the hole in my soul is filled, and for once I can't hear a scream, but a contented fulfilment. Nothing aches inside me and I smile ear to ear as the gradient keeps on giving. You think you are there but there's a blind bend and another steep rise, but it's all good. After the junction, the incline flattens out and there's a handy 3k to go before the Killakee viewing point, although there's a spot you always think is the resting point, and it's not. Mind you, a dog runs out after me, quicker than his owner can call him back, and it's great encouragement to keep going. There's always more in there than your mind tells you.

I stall the ball at the Viewing Point although I don't find that it's a view which improves with repetition. Maybe I should come here with my full-strength glasses, as my prescription shades are a notch or two weaker than my latest specs. Inland from the beautiful coast, Dublin just looks like a flat sprawl with few notable landmarks or patterns. Even the river is too narrow to show up the Dubberlin Wall, the supposedly great divide, and the sprawling low-rises expand both North and West. Relief only comes here in the south and you can see how these hills have acted as a natural barrier to expansion. I was here once with the above-mentioned Johnny Rayge and the landscape helped him to reimagine the Vikings and the Brits coming in. That's the level you can see from here. How the lay of the land has shaped the history.

I'm getting cold now with all the standing round so I push on towards the open mountains and I hope the road is clear of ice. The first few hundred metres are through one of those evergreen deserts, and the trees block the light and prevent the ice from melting. Soon they fall away and it's open bog all round. The roads are clear but the grass is white with ice, the sky is California blue, and the sun is blindingly low. It's incredible. I've seen this place looking variously green and yellow or purple and red, and I've even seen it burnt to a black crisp, but now it's long white streaks of ice diagonalizing out of the ground. I go round the bend and as I look back, I see the grass is all yellow. The sun has melted the ice on one side of the grass but not the other.

I keep my momentum to get to the top before stopping to take more snaps, and on the descent I barely recognise where I am from how different the landscape looks, so my recognition has to come from my familiarity with the curves and slopes on the road, which itself seems narrower and more cracked up than normal. There's a graveyard of trees now and each narrow stump has a plastic domino erected beside it. Then there's a sign saying the Sally Gap might be inaccessible in winter and here's an easy road left to Enniskerry, but I'm in no mood for half-assery, nor for that fast straight descent down to the waterfall, so I punch on and I'm actually glad there's another hill to climb now because I'm so cold that I need the hardship of climbing to warm me back up. This climb always looks less steep than it really is because it's open and roads always look steeper when there are trees or other markers to highlight the hardship. I end up having to get off the bike at one point because it's too difficult for me. Or, more accurately, I've gone into the red because I've misjudged the difficulty. Or more accurately again, I've gotten off the bike so many times now that stopping due to pain has become a legit



Figure 6.2: You can take the bike out of the city but you can't take the city out of bike.



Figure 6.3: *The road is clear now but it's still icy on the dark side of the grass.*



Figure 6.4: *What were the bogs like when you were young? / They went on forever and they, when I, we lived in Glenasmole / And the bogs always had little fluffy grass /... / it was beautiful / The most beautiful bogs as a matter of fact / The grass was purple and red and yellow and on fire / And the grass would catch the colors everywhere.*

reason to rest. And that's yet another problem with taking snaps en route. It banjaxes your cycling rhythm and it takes your head out of the game, and your mind doesn't get to go deep inside itself, either by accident, cos you are in the zone, or by design, as in this case, because you need to go to the well just to keep going.

That to me is the greatest beauty of climbing, getting access to the well of experiences inside you, because as your legs struggle and your body says no, your mind thinks of something painful from the past - which you overcame - and you can use that as motivation to keep going. And now the current physical experience can get added to the well, so that the next time something is equally hard then you don't need to rely on emotions, cos you've got the bodily memory to refer back to. It is literally like *D'ye remember the time you were on Kippure and you kept going?* And that memory tells you that you've done this before and you can do it again. When I started cycling first I had to think back to rugby training, cos that was the only relevant experience I had had, and the pain of the training drills I had done over the years. Paul O'Connell used to always talk about going to the well, but he was talking about doing in the middle of a match, which is something I find odd, because I find rugby too fast-paced to have time to think back in your memory. Maybe he's doing it just before packing down to a scrum, or else he has game-speed access to his history of experience. But for me, I need slash love the slowness of cycling pain to help me go there. My goal is not to find the limits of my physical capabilities, but to understand the limits of my own inner self. To know who I am and how I was shaped.

It turns out I have become someone who stops on the side of a climb to take photos. I time my rest to coincide with a parking spot used by drivers to view Lough Brae, with its steep rocky walls making it look like a big mixing bowl filled with black water. There is no one foolish enough to brave this freezing bowl of water today although I've often thought this'd be a fun place to hold a triathlon. Swim in this lake, cycle the roads and run around the gorse. I must start hiking out here too and get a different view on these hills. After all, this is a massive national park which is still underappreciated. Everyone knows about the West of Ireland but Wicklow is just as beautiful and, if hiking was your job, you could easily commute here daily from Dublin city centre.

I push on up the last of the Tonduff-Kippure pass, and then the land plateaus for a few clicks along The Sally Gap. Thankfully there's no wind today as this place can be devilishly cold, even if it's like 8 degrees, and the climb has my blood back moving. Bizarrely, a fella pulls up on the road in front of me and whips out a big pro camera and I give him a photobomb wave, but he actually flags me down. It turns out he's a freelance photographer - by the name of Damien Eagers – and he asks me to double back and go again for a better shot. He takes my name and tells me he'll be sending photos into the newspapers and I wonder how they'd feel about the worst equipped cyclist in Ireland out slugging through icy roads. I push on, wishing I'd told him about my lighthouse trip, and then I stall on again at the exposed crossroads, where the Old Military Road, which I'm on, meets the road up from Blessington slash Manor Kilbride. This spot functions as a great endgoal in your mind but it can be a rough stopping



Figure 6.5: *Lough Brae. This is where I'd set a triathlon. Jump in to that lake, preferably off the cliffs, swim a few lengths, then jump on your bike to race up and down the mountains, before legging it round the boggy paths.*

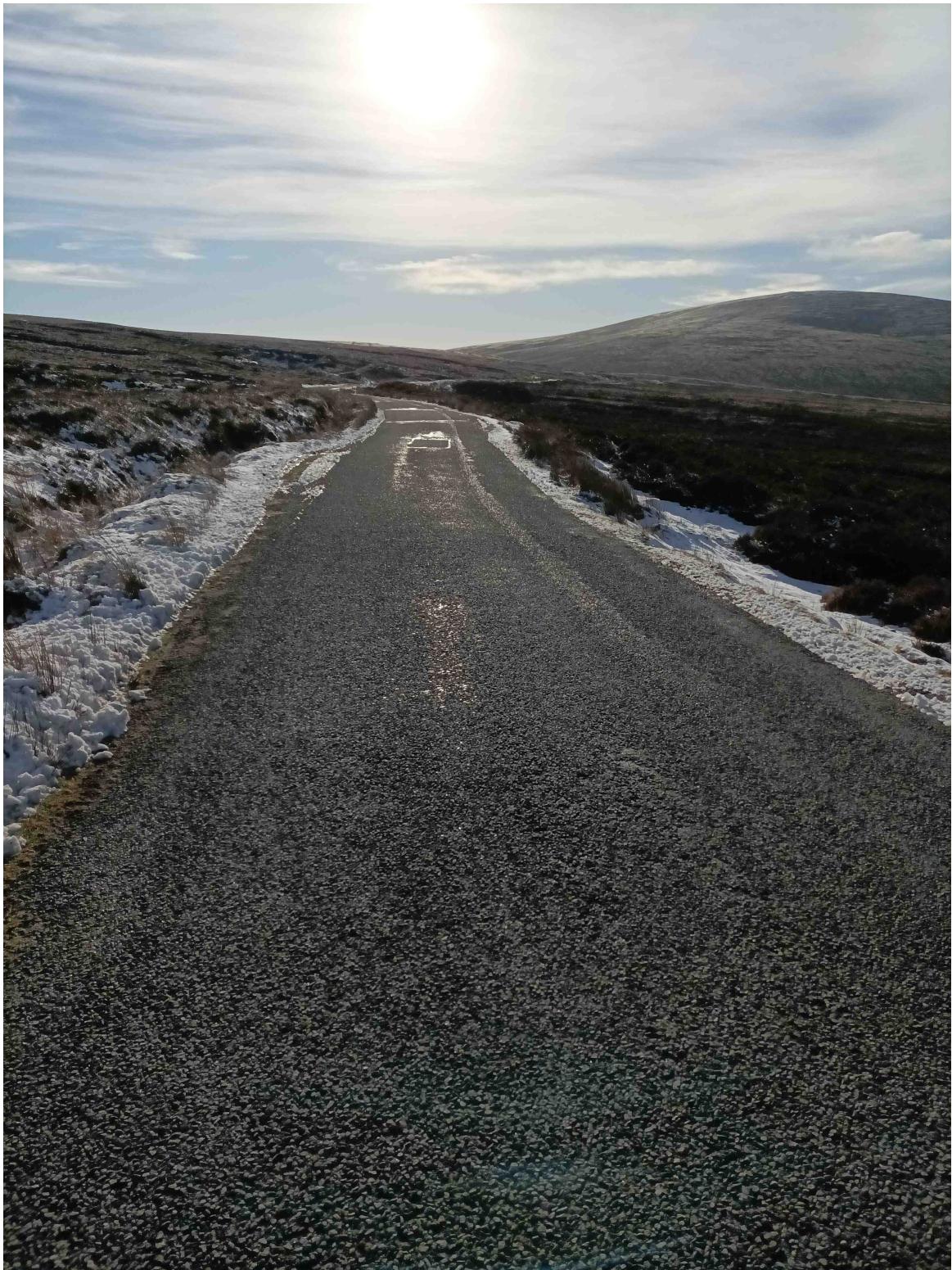


Figure 6.6: *The Sally Gap. This is the ice on the papers were banging on about. Zoom in to the right and you'll see the road grinding up from the Blessington side.*

point on a windy day cos there's no shelter. I'm trying to take arty photos of my bike at the toppled signpost and then Damien reappears, and we have a proper chat this time. Before I bounce, he gets me to do another looparooney so that he can get Kippure in the background, with its snow and big fukov TV mast,



One road goes to Glendalough and the Wicklow Gap, but I turn left for the Guinness Lake and Roundwood. This is less familiar territory now cos I'd usually swing around at the Sally Gap, descending towards Brittas, but it's handy enough this way too as it's mostly downhill, and I just have to be careful to dodge any ice, which only crops up whenever coniferous trees block the light. I stop off to look at the black and white lake and its teeny private flat valley and it's like looking at the past from above, when Ireland was divvied up into estates, with peasants out of view and aristos having afternoon tea in the gazebo. Some member of the Guinness family owns this land and I remember that I must pick up Paul Howard's book about your man from this branch of the family whose death was documented in The Beatles' song *A day in the Life*.

I want to know more about the Guinness family because I was friends with Patrick Guinness in the bizarre boarding school we both went to as kids, but I haven't seen him since I was ten,



Figure 6.7: *The Military Road feels like the road to nowhere until you get to the crossroads and lots of options emerge. Spin round and roll home or push on into deeper Wicklow for Glendalough or Roundwood.*

when he was old enough to move on to secondary school somewhere. His mother, Marina, was the kindest of souls and she'd rescue foreign kids for the weekend, as they would otherwise be locked up in school for three whole months at a time. Presumably she felt a lot of conflict between feeling sorry for the individual kids and the aristocratic habit of sending their eight-year-olds off to be raised by gangs of nine, ten, eleven and twelve year olds. I saw Marina intermittently down through the years as she used to buy her chicken feed in my dad's animal feed shop, although unlike most customers she'd be more interested in hearing about us, rather than unloading their latest goss or their dog's hardships. Still though, you'd hear stories of her letting travellers live on her land. I last saw her [in the Indo a few years back](#), being interviewed about the bands Kila over practising in her gaff. The presence of such people in my childhood gave me a glinting awareness of a rock'n'roll world which never seemed to seep beyond this Hidden Ireland of castles and estates. Paddy Guinness's dad was the drummer from The Police, Stuart Copeland, but he was off in America, and poor Paddy had to learn the drums from our shite music teacher in school.

I mostly lost touch with that world when I went to secondary school but somewhere in amongst it all I picked up a chunk of the Anglo-Irish insouciance, as they seemed to live in a parallel world to the rest of us, with fun ousting work as the primary life motivation. I jumped ship for secondary school, but I never felt at ease with the workaday world of respectable jobs which characterised its hard-working, well-salaried Catholic families. I feel I need to go and find those people I grew up with in primary school and learn about them and the mad world we were reared in. Every so often I meet one of them on the rand and the familiarity is like meeting a person from an island you grew up on but can never go back to. There's a photo of us all in 1993 and it'd be a very cathartic project to find and interview them all and write a book about it.

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After Luggala, the descent transitions from mountain bog to farmland and I emerge on a busy one-way rural road that is the worst kind to cycle on. Cars zip by at the limit slash recommended speed of eighty clicks a Paddy, and when you're not getting overtaken at breakneck speeds, then you're in a tractor's cavalcade, rubbing wing mirrors with filthy jeeps. It's only 3k to Roundwood so I stick it out and I'm curious to check out this village, seeing as I'm kind of on a mish to scope out South Wickow as a viable and affordable place to buy a house and live. Instead, I listen to Google Maps and a rare pedestrian who both guide me left towards Ashford just before the village of Roundwood emerges. I know I've missed a beat cos I remember me and Mono stopping here for a carvery nearly ten years ago and watching Jimmy Gopperth missing an extra-time dropgoal by a cunthair, preventing a particularly unmemorable Lonster team from reaching another Heineken Cup Final. Such are the hashtag margins. But as I say, I'm on a mish to check out a few villages and this is the one I'm least interested in, being a piece of the midlands which has leaked into The Garden County.



Figure 6.8: *Luggala, aka the Guinness lake. Once the site of the biggest session gaff in Ireland.*

It turns out that the Wicklow Mountains are not quite parallel to the coastline, and Roundwood and its lakes lie in a bit of a plateau between the mountains proper and a harmonic overtone of hills through which I'm about to pass on my way to the coast. For a few clicks, I'm back in the Ireland I've never had much interest in. Lumpy fields and nothing happening. Many people think this is idyllic and I can even see why Kim and Kanye took [their honeymoon in Offaly](#), but to me it's just livestock and jeeps, an outdoor factory for churning out nosebag, and we're not welcome, unless you are on tea-drinking terms with the farmers. From the viewpoint of someone squashed into a shitbox duplex in the burbs, it's an inefficient use of our beautiful country, and I wish we could find a better way of divvying up the land between the need to accommodate people, the need to produce food, and the often forgotten need to reforest the island's natural habitat for the poor bastids who got turfed out.

Soon I'm back on hillier terrain, with equestrian centres replacing the sheep farms, and suddenly the coast reemerges in the distance, reminding me that I might soon reach this lighthouse. The hard work is done and this trip is now about exploration, looking at housing developments and getting the lay of the actual land. We're talking Ashford, Rathnew and Wicklow, where new homes (might) still cost less than 400k, and I can find that magic mix of the sea, the mountains and, I hope, some community for my family to be a part of, even if that will always be a little alien to me.

## 6.4 Ashford

As I arrive in Ashford I'm greeted by New Homes on both sides. I recognise the name of one of the developments and go in for a quick spin and there's about a hundred cookie-cutter Roisin Gaffneys with a block of young grass in the middle. I want to cycle round the path at the back but the pavement is five or six inches off the road, and I can immediately see how this will be a problem for kids cycling round. It's not a dealbreaker of a problem but it's the sort of detail which shows how little care goes into making housing estates habitable for when you're actually like *there?* I feellike I need to do a tour of the world before I come to understand how it ought to be done, but I'm a hundert percent sure we're doing it wrong in Ireland. Nearby is another development but each house has an upside down cross under the gable roof at the front and I feellike I'm in a horror movie in the Deep South. I make my way down to the village via some roadworks and I'm delighted to see that these developments are only a five minute walk from the village, exactly how I like to live.

I see a charity shop and I go in and buy myself a light fleece-jumper for a fiver and it warms me up goodo The lady's accent is very posh but not quite West Brit and I'm like this is going to be interesting. I go in to the cafe next door, *The Hen and Hog*, and I quickly clock that this is a two-accent town, exactly like Dublin city, and the name of the cafe kinda describes this. One accent dates back to the medieval English brought here by the Normans and this is only spoken by bonafide locals, of the right – or wrong - background. In Dublin, they

are condescendingly called Real Dubs, although to me that sounds aspirational, seeing as I couldn't name a single distant relative born in the other thirty-one counties of Ireland. But my people don't come from the old city. Then you've got your West Brit accent which came in centuries later and modern blow-ins develop gradations off that. In Dublin that has ended up as the D4 accent among younger people, but I'm not sure if it's as uniform among the older generations. The lady next to me is telling her lunch companion about laast week when she went awf shopping in Dun Laoghaire, and meanwhile the waitress is saying sarry she took so lo-ong, it's only her first da-ay, in that down-to-up accusing tone that *Real* Wickla people have. I must go back and see what [Hickey](#) has to say about these East Coast accents in Dublin, Wicklow and Wexford.

Ashford looks a nice size to live in. Enough going on to keep you fed and watered and the kids in school, but definitely not a town. By the time I leave, it's school collection o'clock and there's a logjam of traffic. My sister afterwards explained that there's feck all infrastructure down here to cope with the growing numbers. Even the train timetable is a joke. This morning, I had hoped to make it home on the 2:45 train from Wicklow Town, but if I miss that, and I will, I've gotta wait til the 7:15 train back to Dzublin. On a day like today, that's a cheeky excuse to faff about. But it's a black mark against the place being a viable place to live.

## 6.5 Rathnew and Wicklow Town

The road to Rathnew and Wicklow town is nothing to write home about unless you want another traffic report, although it's not quite clear exactly where Rathnew actually is, or if it's just town sprawl with a name known to outsiders. Given the warnings I've accrued in advance of my journey, I bet this is where all the council estates were put, allowing Wicklow Town people to maintain their distance from the riff raff. The sea is on my left, and the coastline is surprisingly drab, being neither rugged nor a bay, and it's a reminder how lucky we are in Dublin to have such beautiful coast.

The map says there's a narrow lough and a peninsula slash barrier island in parallel, so it looks like you've got all your transport systems there to my left. Coast, island, river slash lough, trainline, road. To the right is a long hill, stencilled with ineluctable houses not worth looking at, although I'd say many of them are decent to look *out of*. I pop into a sizeable development of new houses, Tinnakilly, which fills in a hilly gap between the road and the sea, but it screams amenity desert to me, and traffic galore. Like most new developments.

There is a bike lane now though, so I veer off left to cross the lough and it's a short kilometre into town. The peninsula is a post-industrial shitpit but a less scaldy promenade appears, full of walkers and scraps of amenities such as playgrounds and a dogpark, with gastro pubs hanging out the end of it. It's immediately clear that I'm cycling along on the future of this town, but there's not a crane in sight and you could still host a cheeky rave in the disused warehouses. I'd say Craig David lockdowns were the best thing to ever happen this place and that it was rammed with takeaway pinters in the summer of 2021, with the only downsides



Figure 6.9: If they repurposed those warehouses then a few hundred people could stroll into town along the sea whenever they needed a pint of milk or beer.



Figure 6.10: Post industrial shit pit

being the presumably breeze and the hill to the west knocking off a solid hour of evening sunshine. This place reminds me of La Manga in bottom right corner of Spain, a skinny strip of land which has recently been filled with condos and clubs. There's no reason why this town couldn't become a getaway town for Dublin, and a better train would zip you up and down in forty minutes. Like if the Victorians were stalling it out to Bray for the avo, then we should be buzzing down here. And if they are plonking low density housing in the greenfields on the edge of this town, forty-five road-laden minutes walk from the town, then they ought to sticking high density housing here in the brownfields, right on the sea, twenty minutes from town along the promenade.

Down near the harbour, I cross a tiny bridge back into the town centre, and I eke my way through some side streets and up onto the main street. It looks like the town is transitioning into a genuine hangout space, with the likes of Nick's coffee having reclaimed some roadspace for his clientele, and a few more micro-piazzas having great potential, but I can't help but feel that this town, like so many in the state, have suffered the deleterious effect of being left to the natives for a century.



Figure 6.11: I don



Figure 6.12: blah blah

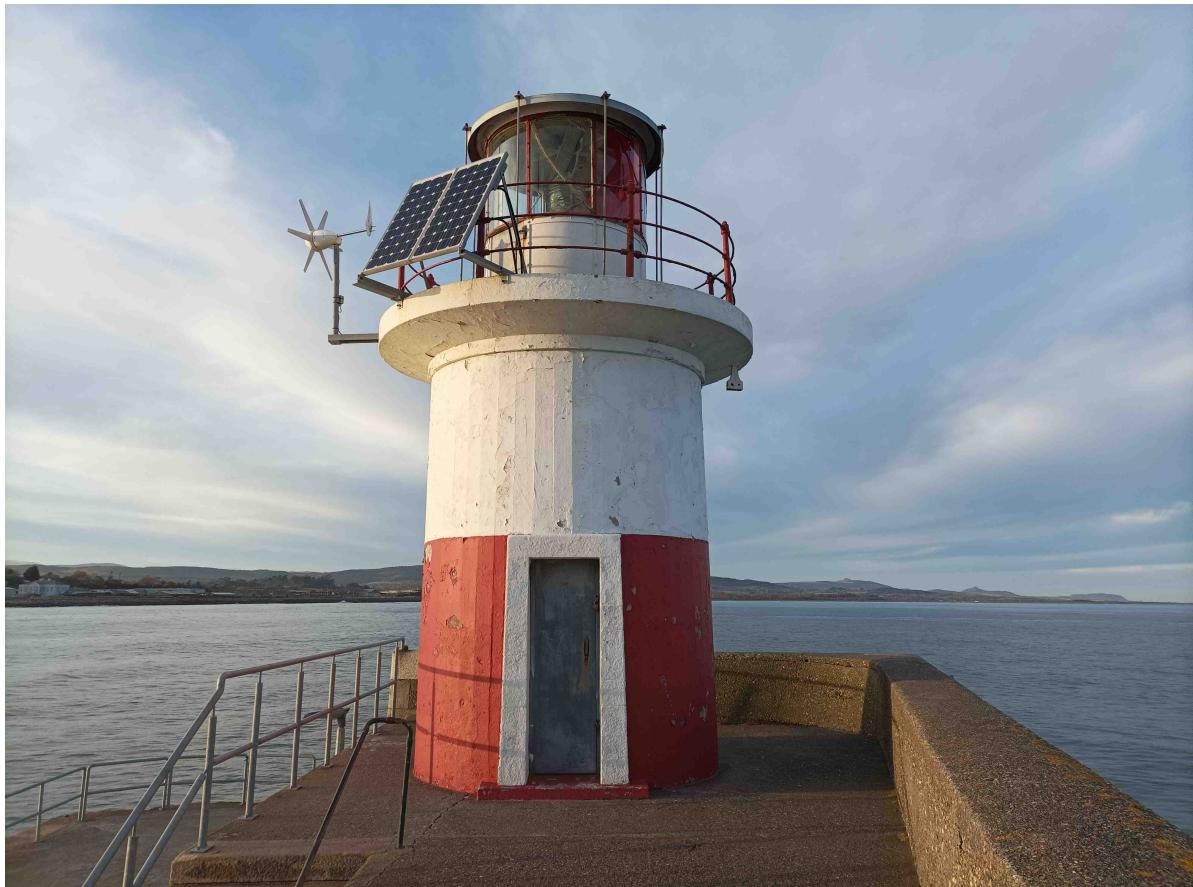


Figure 6.13: *This little lighthouse is so near the town that it might well have been operated by a local publican*

I pop back down to the harbour, which is still a live workspace and not a designed for tourists. For the sake of exhaustiveness, I take the short walk down to the scatty lighthouse. The whole area is a work-on for the town but, again, the potential is huge. There's a Norman castle here too and some explanation of the history and purpose of the town, but fish and fortification is good enough for me and I leave the castle for my next visit, with the kids next time, cos this place is a diamond in the rough.

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Figure 6.14: *The road to the lighthouse is a boreen (left) off the main road (right). This takes you onto a small, isolated headland and you've no reason to be here unless you're a resident or scoping out lighthouses.*

It's three or four clicks from the town to the lighthouse, past a tidy golf course and then down a boreen off the main road. I'm only following Google Maps and haven't done my obviously research, so I'm pretty shocked to find notices saying that the road is private. There's a couple of houses and I hear someone about to leave the gaff with a few dogs so when she

comes out I ask her the Jacques Chirac and she says it's grand, that there's a grumpy farmer who is always moaning about the gate being left open. I feel like a criminal all the same but I'm relieved to see a few Spanish tourists out taking selfies and when I get to the gate I just open and close it like the basically door that it is. I now feel like a kid sheepishly retrieving his football from a neighbour's garden. There's yet another gate on the way to the lighthouse, with *CIL* welded into it and only later do I learn that this means *Commissioners of Irish Lights*, so I no longer need to be worrying that said farmer is coming out with a shotgun. But I still am. Unlike a lot of Irish people, I don't have a well of trespassing experiences to draw upon in order to help me through these nerves.

It turns out that there are three lighthouses on this campus. The working lighthouse is on a lower knob of land jutting out of main headland and to get there you have to descend a few steep hairpins. It's your classic lighthouse, complete with red and white paint, and a house adjacent for the erstwhile lighthouse keeper and family. The views from here are quite poor, by the high standards of the genre, so you can only look 180 degrees out to sea, and to some pointy cliffs which you'll want to avoid if you're on a boat. This is the Eastmost point of Leinster and you'd really want to be here in the morning for sunrise. This is the sort of detail I didn't appreciate until I started voyaging out to these plantless, houseless places.

On my way down is a father and son combo, obvious from their matching gaits, but I'm not sure if they live here or are just visiting. The dad looks out towards the cliffs and the son pops down under the gap in the gate to go and have a moment to himself on the far side of the wall. I get yapping to him after and he tells me a bit about the battle between the farmer, who owns the land, and the I think council who the road. He's the kind of lad you would seldom find in any other county, with a Druid's goatee so thick and long that it's hard to see his lips and whenever I struggle to understand his accent, then my only back-up is to tongue-read his speech. The lads bounce and I hang around to take photos and savour my disappointment. It's a long way to come to find such a mediocre setting for a lighthouse.

What I don't fully appreciate is that the other two towers were also lighthouses in their day, lit by candles and mirrors. I don't hang around long to work out the situation because the sun is setting and I need to cycle back into town before dark. I'm gonna file that under learnings and work ons.

#### Coda

It's a long way home from here and the train isn't for another two and a half actual hours. On the way back to Wicklow Town, I stop to look at a tiny valley which has been manicured into a beautiful green by the golf club, and it's a chance to reflect on how mankind can turn the most useless of land into something useful and beautiful. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I feel that golf courses might be world leaders in turning Ls into Ws, along with Japanese gardens. Every beach in Ireland has a golf club hanging out the back of it with sandy dunes converted into pure recreation. It'll be interesting to see how land gets developed in the future as more people live in tighter spaces and need more resources. It looks like Wicklow has begun the



Figure 6.15: *The modern lighthouse is at the bottom of a winding road, as far out to sea as possible on this stubby headland.*



Figure 6.16: *Some cliffs to avoid if you are on a boat*



Figure 6.17: *The rear lighthouse dates from 1781 and sits on top of Wicklow Head, not at sea.*



Figure 6.18: It is a beautiful octagonal structure offset by ever-smaller round windows climbing up the tapered tower, and nowadays you can rent it out and kip here.



Figure 6.19: *The front lighthouse is a less impressive structure and looks like the lighthouse keepers' kids decided to have a go too*

process of sprucing itself up but a lot more vision and investment will be needed to transform its coastline so that it becomes a day trip resort, and no doubt this lighthouse complex could do with a visitor centre too. I stall the ball in the town, pop in for a chat with an estate agent and we both agree that the town is the place to live, not off in one of the new developments. I pass the time with some pub grub in an empty boozer, but it is a Monday in the middle of January, and there is at least a ukulele class on in the background to take the edge off the cavernousness. Waiting for the train home I get yapping to a Ukrainian lady who has come to Ireland for a five day holiday. She arrived today and, for reasons she hasn't got the English to explain, she has come here. Her face screams disappointment but I feel hopeful. On train I talk bikes and mortgages with a bike shop mechanic who has to work 11-7 because of the train skedj and I just hope to Christ that the right people get on the case and turn this town into the special place it could be.



Figure 6.20: *If life gives you bumps, make golf courses.*

## 7 Balbriggan



Figure 7.1: *Balbriggan beach and harbour: I took this snap two weeks later when I brought the family back for a sunny day out in Dublin's most underrated town.*

**Monday, April 10, 0857**

It's a Bank Holiday Monday and another good chance to get out on the Paul van. I haven't been out for a big one since baby Desiree was born in February, but life is stable at home now and Sharifa is well on top of her shit. The baby has been an angel and Valentine, who'll be six in May, is back to himself and more. In fairness to Sharifa, she hasn't been holding me back. I just felt like I was supposed to be at home and yet that has done nothing for my

mental health, especially as I already work from home, and I've only emerged now from what she reckons has been a week-long anxiety attack. It is something I'm gonna need help for, although I'd still rather throw cycling, writing and meditation at the problem than prozac, as long as I can, although, to be fair, I'm not always arsed. Thankfully I'm back to myself now and I'm ready to hit the Dermot and have something to write about after.

Yesterday I thought it might be time to hit Dundalk via Drogheda so I called Boring Mick and he was gaggo for it cos he was already at home in Drogheda for Easter, and he said he'd join me for the second leg. But in the end, he was up to his eyes with his insomniac toddler so I had to go out on my Tobler and find somewhere to go in the pissings of rain. I decided that it was finally time to go and explore a bit of inland North County Dublin, where my dad is from. Since I moved to Blanch, I've been out scoping the coastal towns from Malahide through Swords, Donabate, Rush and Skerries. Most of all I've been in the tiny fishing village of Loughshinney, where my mate Leonard moved to a few years back. There's good odds that we'll end up buying a gaff in one of those towns cos the area ticks a buncha boxes, being beside the sea and connected to the city by the train, and maybe the kids will feel like they are actually from a community, in a way that I don't. I reckon that area will become the new South County Dublin as the city explodes North and all the towns get swallowed up, just as Blackrock and Dun Laoghaire did over the twentieth century. The question, of course, is whether we could be arsed being part of the relatively early migration.

But inland North County Dublin is a funny old place to me because my dad is from there yet I've never spent serious amounts of time there, beyond day trips as a kid and funeral visits in recent years, as his five brothers have all died, including four in the last five years. Thankfully their sister Monica, in her mid-eighties, is still alive and kicking, and she still brings my dad along to the races with her. The whole family had big-ticket names. Cuddie's real name was Columbanus, the great Irish saint, and Lorenzo was named after a Vatican bigwig in the early 1930s who came to visit Ireland. There was Austin, Aidan and Oliver, which is now like the most popular baby name in Ireland and Britain, and my dad was Valentine, born twenty minutes after Valentine's day. That was also going to be my name, but when the nurse saw *Valentine Desmond* written down, she pointed out to my parents that my initials would be VD - or *venereal disease* - so they swapped it to *Desmond Valentine*. In the end, we named our son Valentine, which Sharifa was up for because she and my dad get on like a house on fire. Our cat was also born on Valentine's day but we never managed to name him appropriately, despite Maisoon's excellent suggestion of *Cupid*, and the poor unnamed creature ended up being called *Puddens*, which is really a term of endearment. Amazingly, our daughter Desiree was due to be born on the Valentine's day just gone, and that was when my dad told me the story about him being born a few minutes late. His mother asked the nurse to change the time of birth to match the date, but your wan said she couldn't. The story makes me feel like less of a spoofe because people regularly ask us if our son was born on Valentine's day, and I've long since given up being like "*Almost. His grandfather was born the day after Valentine's day?*"

So anyway I set Google Maps for Oldtown and then Ballyboughal cos the family are from

somewhere between the two, although I've only ever been driven there, so I don't remember exactly where. It's pissing rain when I leave and after about three minutes I realise that it's also cold enough to need gloves, but instead of doubling back on myself and disrupting the fatherless breakfast party that is about to begin, I decide to dig out my spare socks. I packed minimal clothing to wear home on the presumably train but I'd much rather have wet feet on a train than cold hands on a bike. And that's not just because I don't give a rats about future me. There's times where I'd rather be naked on a bike with gloves on than the other way around.

The cycle itself is fine but following Google Maps on a bike is more of a hassle than being wet and I'm all the time pulling over and taking off my glove-socks and recentring and doing doublebackarooneys, but the trip itself is otherwise pretty mellow cos the roads are quiet and it's just great to be out. It's 20k to Oldtown and I barely remember it, and even Strava didn't bother to record it. There's moments where you'd see a bit of featureless flat farmland and think, ooh, this might be where we used to drive down to Cuddie's or whatever, but I'm not sure. There's a sign saying 3k to Oldtown and it's the first time I feel emotions, but it's actually a pang of pain about my first day in boarding school, and my sisters all being there and I think they were probably too horrified ever to go back, bar Babs who'd come and collect me sometimes at the weekend. I remember Oliver and his wife Rosaleen coming down one Sunday evening and Rosaleen was horrified by the place. It's one of the few moments I have of adults having explicit feelings or opinions about my strange upbringing. She was always lovely and I have great memories of having fun with Suzanne and Derek, my slightly older cousins, who had a dart board and a snooker table that Santa had to leave outside.

## 7.1 Oldtown

Oldtown village is tiny but the church isn't and it hits me on arrival. Cuddie was buried here and I've a memory of an off-kilter local fella in a high viz jacket doing his bit to herd us all from the church to the cemetery. Cuddie ran the post office and a grocery shop, and then his son Andrew became the postman for a bit. Once or twice the two of them came out to run my dad's shop when he was away and that was gas. I can't remember why cos me and my sisters always ran the shop ourselves when my dad was off on holidays with my mam, usually cycling the world. As I'm cycling in to Oldtown village I actually think I see Andrew, under an umbrella, and I call his name, but it's not him, and I push down to the main crossroads where the only pub is and a pop-up coffee shop. There's a young wan making coffee, two middle-aged ladies getting caffeinated before the races in Fairyhouse, and two possibly father-and-son barmen outside cleaning up last night's heroics. I ask them about my family and the younger barman says they are not much of a drinking family. No one seems to know exactly where Derek's farm is, where my dad grew up. Seemingly it is up a lane past Keogh's, of crisps fame, and their lorries are the only sign of industry in the area. It turns out Cuddies' wife Catherine was there for last night's Easter events. Some kind of IRA celebration I think, but I didn't catch the exact deets.



Figure 7.2: Oldtown's church is big enough to sleep the whole village



Figure 7.3: *Oldtown village has one battle cruiser and no traffic except for lorries exporting Keogh's crisps which are made round the corner.*

I've never had a proper local pub where people know each other so it all feels alien to me and I've never even stayed overnight here as the cousin from the city because we lived near enough to go home in the evening, even after a few tipples. This actually explains yet another bit of my sense of displacement. So many Dublin people of my generation are the spawn of jumped-up boggers, so they would have gone down the country and put in serious time there, and many of them still do. Kilroy still hits up Enniscrone in Sligo, and Storan would hit Bantry in West Cork, or whatever. I called him yesterday and he was in mass in Ballina in Mayo, with his wife, warming up pews for Sleepy Joe's coming visit. Even my sister Emer has been in Monaghan all weekend with her husband and their kids, who still alternate Dublin and Monaghan gaelic jerseys. I've never had that other place, with the brief exception of Tralee, where I used to stay as a teenager with McCornFlake, and for a couple of years when I was going out with a girl who I met through him. Even that was only serious enough to stall down for a Stephen's Day piss-up with all the lokes, rather than a full-on Christmas. Tragically, my wife is no longer accepted by her family in Oman, since she had a kid with me, so we can't and don't go there. Instead, we hang out in my sister Barbara's, who is much older than me, and has always doubled up as part-sister, part-mammy to me. I was only ten when her first son was born and seeing as they lived about a mile away, I'd stall down there whenever, and I still do. Her and her grown-up kids now provide that second layer of family to my kids and it is something that I am eternally grateful for because everybody needs a refuge, and that connection keeps us nearby more than anything. A house has come up five minutes walk from her gaff and, if we can, we'll take it.

## 7.2 Ballyboughal

I push on towards Ballyboughal, three clicks away, and somewhere off-route is where my dad grew up. I decide to leave that for another day and it's nice to scope out an empty Ballyboughal without there being a funeral, and me not feeling like an outsider amongst dozens of lookalike cousins. The church is much older than Oldtown's which makes sense cos this village is on a road to somewhere. There is a plaque on the nearby pub about some Ra lads back in 1921. I do a spin up and down village and I realise that it's actually your classic linear drivethrough village and I think about Rob Kearney's brother who was knocked down by a lorry aged five, crossing a road that was probably like this, and poor Gordon Cooney, our next door neighbour who died at that age, long before I was born. The road continues on to The Naul, eight lumpy clicks north, and I follow it cos Leonard said Naul Village was nice. It's nice to have some gradient after thirty clicks on the flat, but the village is a bit of let-down, mostly cos I hate linear villages, but possibly cos it's a Bank holiday and everything is dúnta. So I turn right for Balbriggan, another eight lumpy clicks towards the East coast. I don't know the plan yet but I'm defo stopping there for some nosebag because I'm Hank Marvin at this stage.



Figure 7.4: *Ballyboughal church is older than Oldtown's so it must've always had more people*

### 7.3 Balbriggan



Figure 7.5: *Balbriggan lighthouse and harbour from the blind side.*

As I approach Balbriggan, houses start popping up and some purpose-built schools, and soon I see the boozer where we had pints after Frankie Gaffney's dad's funeral a few years ago. The town itself doesn't feel like a coastal town and it turns out that the train line chops off access between the town and the sea, so you are looking at underpasses and walkways galore. On my way to the harbour, I meet functional beachgoers like dogwalkers and grannies with spadewielding grandkids, but there is not a lot of casual integration between the town and the coast, like in Dun Laoghaire, where you can't miss the sea. I approach the harbour from the blind side, via the Protestant church on high, and I am delighted to spot a lighthouse, as I hadn't realised there was one here. It turns out that the Wikipedia page is split into two tables: lighthouses run by the Commissioner of Irish Lighthouses, which I had been planning to visit, and then a sundry bunch of lighthouses run by whoever. This explains why the lighthouse in Wicklow Harbour wasn't on my list, and it's a good thing I nipped over to it for the sake of exhaustion. That lighthouse is run by the harbour, and so is this one. I stop to ask a fella

with a work van if the lighthouse is in use and he parks his disbelief before telling me it's the second oldest functional lighthouse in the country, and that he's after getting a new boat for himself that he's in the process of doing up but that it's hard to get out now with the new baby. His dad was a fisherman but he just gets out for a few mackerel now and then and they are going to clean up the harbour soon which is badly needed. He says it's a great spot to bring up kids and that his wife is from Tallaght and they lived there for a bit but it wasn't for him. We part ways and I push down to the lighthouse for a goo at the rusty fishing boats and an unreadable plaque stating how old the thing is.

## 7.4 Stepping stones

I stall back up to the hipstery part of town, which may just be a single cafe and a scrannery beside the train station, and these establishments function as stepping stones between the midlands-esque town proper and the beach addendum for enthusiasts who are arsed making the short journey. I do feel very much at home in this so-called tapas restaurant serving fry ups, as the place is jammed with wankers. You've got a few tech workers still wearing Palo Alto t-shirts and there's a long-haired fella here too, as well as couples with very young kids, trying to keep the brunch dream alive. The staff are all Brazilian and I'd love to map their dispersal across the country because they are a lead indicator of where the future of gentrification lies. Back in the recession they were populating your Dublin 8s and your East Walls, long before *Legit Coffee* and *Two Pups* were in serving filter coffee to broke post-grads like me. The Brazilians diffused out of town after that, and by late 2019, I had reports from students living in Ballyfermot, which I had earmarked as the new Stoneybatter, although in reality that's Inchicore. Two years later I was one of several parents cycling my kids to the naoinra in Ballyfermot. I stopped teaching English in 2020 so I'm not privy to the latest movements of Brazilians, but if they are working in Balbriggan, you can be one hundred percent sure that the rest of us will be on the way, once the infamous scald factor has been sufficiently diluted. In the cafe opposite, I get chatting to a couple with big dogs and the lady shows me the paint on her hands because they're doing up the three-bed they've just bought for 330k. She's from Skerries and it's too dear there for them there. I realise that Balbriggan is the poor-man's Wicklow Town, a big-enough town on the coast, with a harbour, a beach and a train to Dublin, making it a nice option for life. Rush, Lusk, Skerries and Loughshinny are all too small and, despite being nearer to the city in terms of kilometres, the exit strategy is too difficult, as the M1 is too far away. In Rush, you have to exit from a scrum in front of your own posts, every single day. In Balbriggan, it's only a lineout just inside your 22, and you can kick, run or maul.



Figure 7.6: harbour



Figure 7.7: *Cabana cafe* is a stepping stone between the main street (at the very end of the road, under the grey cloud) and the railway station slash beach area (under permanent sunshine). The lady with the yellow face told me I oughtn't to be taking such photos, which I normally don't, although I believe she is not right on this.

## 7.5 Exit Festival, Hypothermia

Nonetheless, today's exit is one of the least pleasant cycles of my life. First off I go down to scope out the beach walk, but the rain starts again, so I take refuge in a six-foot tunnel along with like twenty other people. It's a great spot to pick up a bit of intel on the locality but I'm suffering from frostation because the cold sea breeze is being funnelled through this tiny chasm and my core is still cold from being rainsoaked earlier. I bounce before the rain dissipates but it's just too rainy so next up I'm under a bus shelter listening to a lady telling me about her poor dad in the Mater hospital. I could take two trains home but I know I'll need the miles in my legs, so eventually I brave it. But now the chain keeps popping off my bike cos the front derailleur is too tight and I'm not able to tweak it back into place. After about ten drops I give up and leave it in the small ring and it's enough to keep me driving into the wind. I take a minor detour through Skerries and even get a long distance shot of Rockabill Lighthouse, just in case I couldn't bearsed cycling back here. I drop in to the Leonards in Loughshinney for a quick hello and they suggest a back road to Lusk and then take Blake's Cross for Ballyboughal. I do the first bit but I don't have the emotional bandwidth for another trip down memory lane so I brave the N1 all the way Swords and it's barely safe for cars let alone cyclists. Leonard once told me they'll be opening up the greenway from Rush to the Donabate slash Swords estuary, and it can't come soon enough. I scoped out that peninsula a few months back but Google Maps had me cycling over actual water so I decided to veto their suggestion. After Swords, and another torrent of rain, which I collect this time cos I just wanna get home, I have to brave the exposed roads beside the airport with winds of up to about forty clicks a Paddy. I feel like I'm in Belgium and I can see poor Tim Declercq's grimace on my own pained face, but it's the only way home now, and after that it's more Google Maps through the unremarkable roads of North West County Dublin.