

To the lighthouse

Des Ryan

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1



Figure 1.1: *The pier out 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the kids wake up, and I wouldn't have to suffer from the horrible problem of carrying around a bunch of unfinished, unpublished projects.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.

And I don't see any point me writing a summary of stuff we can both read on the Jimmy Internet.

Part I

Part 1. The mild, non-Atlantic Way

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 it 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 outerinner Northside and it drops you off at various points about two clicks from the Spire. After that you're on your own, mate. To the south of Blanch 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, snake through Chapelizard, push past Islandbridge and Heuston Station, and then emerge, 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. The stars are not aligned today, but there is enough sun to give me some morning glowry, and I ache to get closer to that blob of nice light in the sea of grey clouds above, and be enveloped in nothing else.

2.2 Liffey Valley

First though I have 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 wide 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 workers of industry riff-raff like the Guinesses and the Shackletons. The houses all back up on to the valley, with riverside gardens across the road, a few of them forged into treeless gaps for the sun to shine through from the southern side of the valley. 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 commute this beautiful road while my elderly parents had the good fortune of housing me between the age of 34 and 36, along with my wife and then very young child. This route was my refuge space, between childminding in the morning, teaching English in the afternoon and college in the evenings. For a few green kilometres every day, it was just me, and maybe a Patrick Winston YouTube lecture on machine learning. 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, if you couldn't be Gordoned doing both legs. My solution was to cycle in one day and park the bike in town overnight, then cycle home the next day. Whereas now in Blanch, if I don't want to cycle home of an evening, I'll lash the Paul van Dyk onto the Boola train, lock it to a handrail, and sit down with my feet up. 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



Figure 2.2: *The cycle path from Chapelizod to Islandbridge is a hidden gem*

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 permabenches 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 Liffey 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 kissing gates, 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 in and I've been using it ever since because parallel Conyngham Road is 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 by simply mirroring it. How anything irregular can be made beautiful simply by mirroring it.

I mosey on towards Islandbridge, through a wee gate and into the War Memorial Park which caters nicely for the half-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 why 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 spraff on 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 grey buildings have a blurred reflection in the sky. There is a random car parked on Ellis Quay, in the middle of the road, unmanned, with its hazard lights flashing. So I stall on 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 keep chasing the light instead of stopping for coffee in Grand Canal, although I feel like the proverbial dog chasing after the bicycle, as the sky's visage fades to grey.

2.5 Beyond the Pale



Figure 2.3: *My five-year old son still thinks that the Poolbeg Towers are an ice-cream factory and I don't know when I'll have the heart to break it to him.*

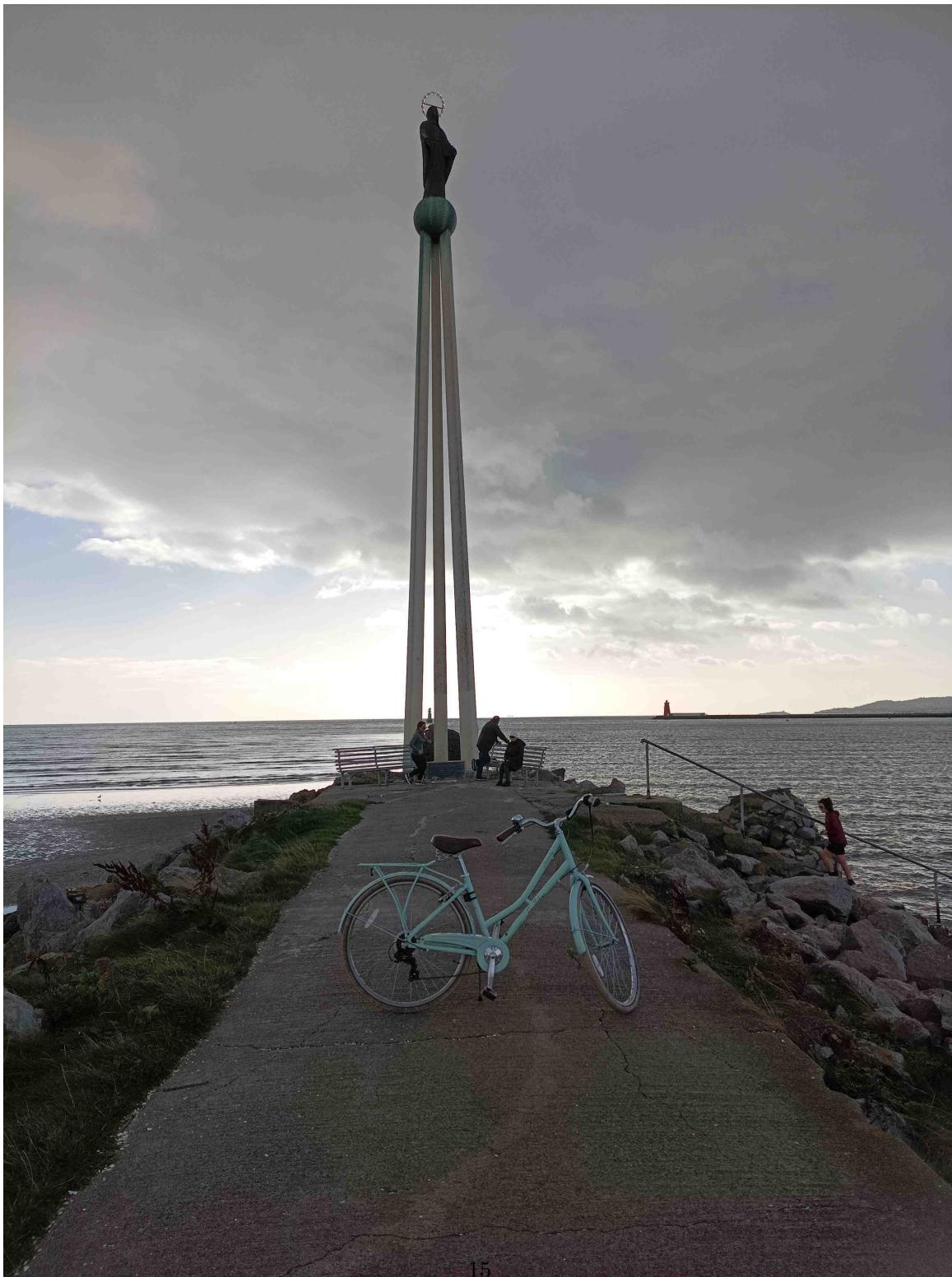
I cross over the scaldyball East Link Toll bridge, a rundown beggar of a road that ought to be ashamed of itself for asking people to pay to cross it. It is rare reminder of the visual state of Ireland back in the 1990s, like [looking at the moustaches in the Walkinstown Roundabout video after we beat Romania in Italia 90](#). Yet the bridge's griminess bleeds neatly into Dublin Port through 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, which stands proud at the end of 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.



Figure 2.4: *The North Bull Island lighthouse: A lot of major lighthouses have a necessary sidekick that understandably doesn't draw the crowds*

Hanging off the rocks at the end of the pier is a scatter of fishermen while early morning walkers come in and out of the picture. If I knew I was writing a book, I'd've taken a wodge of snaps. Instead, I take a video of the scene because that has been a hobby for some time, going places and commentating from afar on the punters passing-by, like a spineless David McSavage. The problem today is that it's not busy enough to make myself a fly on the wall, so I end up spraffing on to no one about the 360-degree views, with the gentle mountains to the south of Dublin Bay and the relatively unspoilt sandy north bay. It's a format that needs tuning. A ferry from The Mainland comes in to Dublin Port and you can see the lighthouses in action, between the bright red one here beside me and its green partner to the North, sitting on submerged rocks. I don't know why they are coloured this way or what their history is but perhaps I'll find out. I realise that there is very little stopping me from cycling to every lighthouse in Ireland and to see the whole island at its most rugged, unmanned edges. All I have to do is do it.

3 Bull Island



15

Figure 3.1: *Our Lady, Star of the Sea, stands where we might like the lighthouse to be, but squint through her legs and you'll see the real one in the background, a green companion for the more famous Poolbeg Lighthouse to the right.*

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 wife 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 today is Saturday and I'm in explorer mode. I need an unfamiliar path to speed up the relaxation process. Howandever, I don't want to be gone too long so I can't be going too far. 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, where the mind keeps getting dragged back to cars and lights and everyone else's business. 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.

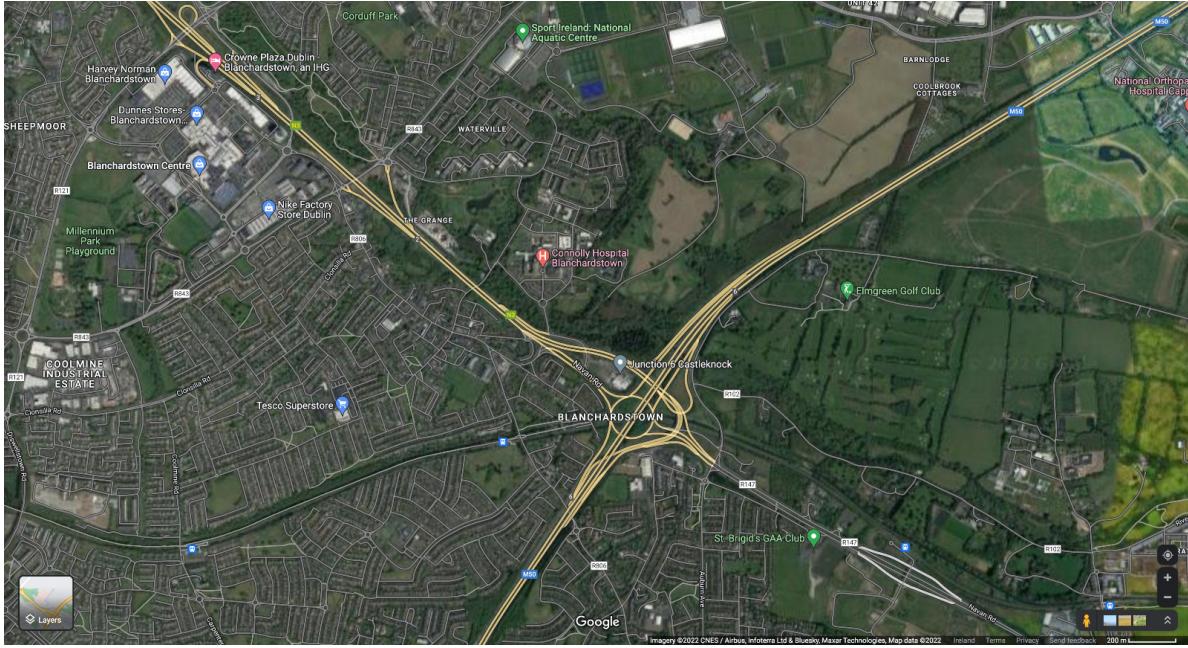


Figure 3.2: This junction does a great job of connecting major roads and breaking up the land into four distinct quadrants.

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 enough 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.

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 awful dose off choppyoffyness, yet it has managed to carve out a niche – 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. Hashtag bottomup.

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 featureless 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 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 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 AF, but its non-matching 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-clad 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.



Figure 3.3: *Tidal seaweed fields bouncing limegreen brightness.*

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.



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

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 stall off to Spain for some reliable beach bliss.



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



²⁴
Figure 3.6: *The road to heaven is nice and quiet this morning*

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 end of the pier where the statue of Our Lady, Star of the Sea has been standing aloft since 1972, having been sculpted by Cecil King and unveiled by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid. From here, 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 two lighthouses on its way to Dublin Port. The red Poolbeg lighthouse sits proudly at the end of the South Bull Wall, while the scatty little green one sticks up from a submerged causeway beyond where I'm standing.



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

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 3.8: *Lighthouses in action: The North Bull lighthouse (left) and the Poolbeg Lighthouse (right) work together to mark out a passage for boats coming in and out of Dublin Port.*

4 Dun Laoghaire 1

- refer Gogarty



Figure 4.1: *This lighthouse sells ice creams from inside an old military battery. That's either real progress or we've all just gone soft.*

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 the 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 flippin 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 gives 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. 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

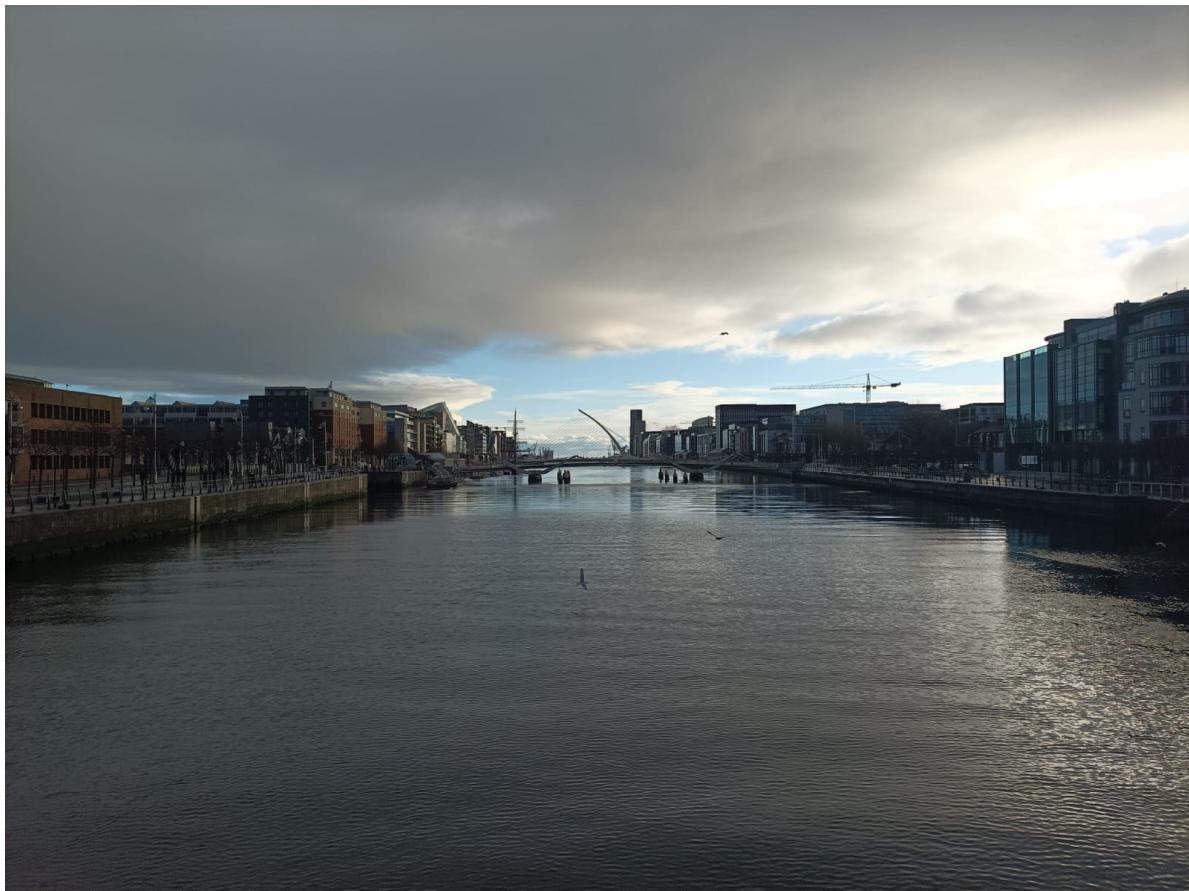


Figure 4.2: *Cycling along the Dublin quays of an early morning often feels like breaking into heaven.*

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 even the morning sun stays on the southside. 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 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, to be fair, the New Year.



Figure 4.3: *Do not remove*

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 4.4: 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 out of hospital 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 now cos this week the light is much better for photos.

4.3 Do the Strand



Figure 4.5: “*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 Gogarty¹

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 be the access point Oliver St John Gogarty suggests in his 1937 memoirs, where he writes “It costs one hour’s sleep and half-a-crown to ride out to meet the winnowing tide at Merrion”. The

¹Taken from: *A Dublin Anthology* (Douglas Bennett, ed.). Gill & Macmillan, 1994, p254.

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 Omani 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



Figure 4.6: Freddie Mercury would have really appreciated life here

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-assed bike lane award of the day goes to this Newgrangesque passageway. I come out at the Dort Station and I'm welcomed by a 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 pinta 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 actual 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 deeply perceptive 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 ridonculoid accent doesn't stand out here.

4.5 Dun Laoghaire pier

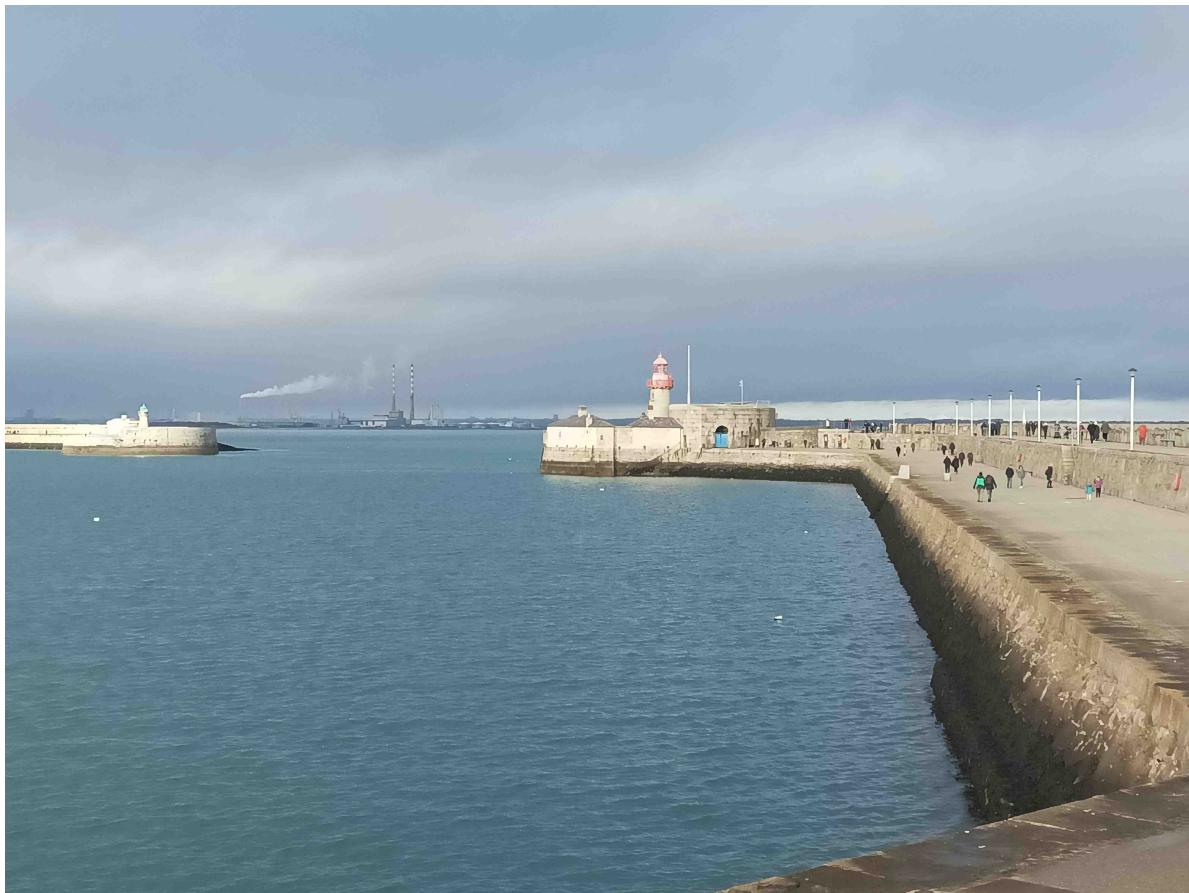


Figure 4.7: *A couple of cheeky lighthouses adjacent to your town centre does wonders for attracting daytrippers, even in the AM.*

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 Laoghaireó, 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 but 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 erstwhile bike mechanic David O'Doherty might advise against. But it's a quick fix and now I have coffee to go and sat up bike. I'm glad to be walking because my head is fried by now with all the thinkamejiggling. 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 splendiferous libro and multiplicity of 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 in abundance, 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, 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.

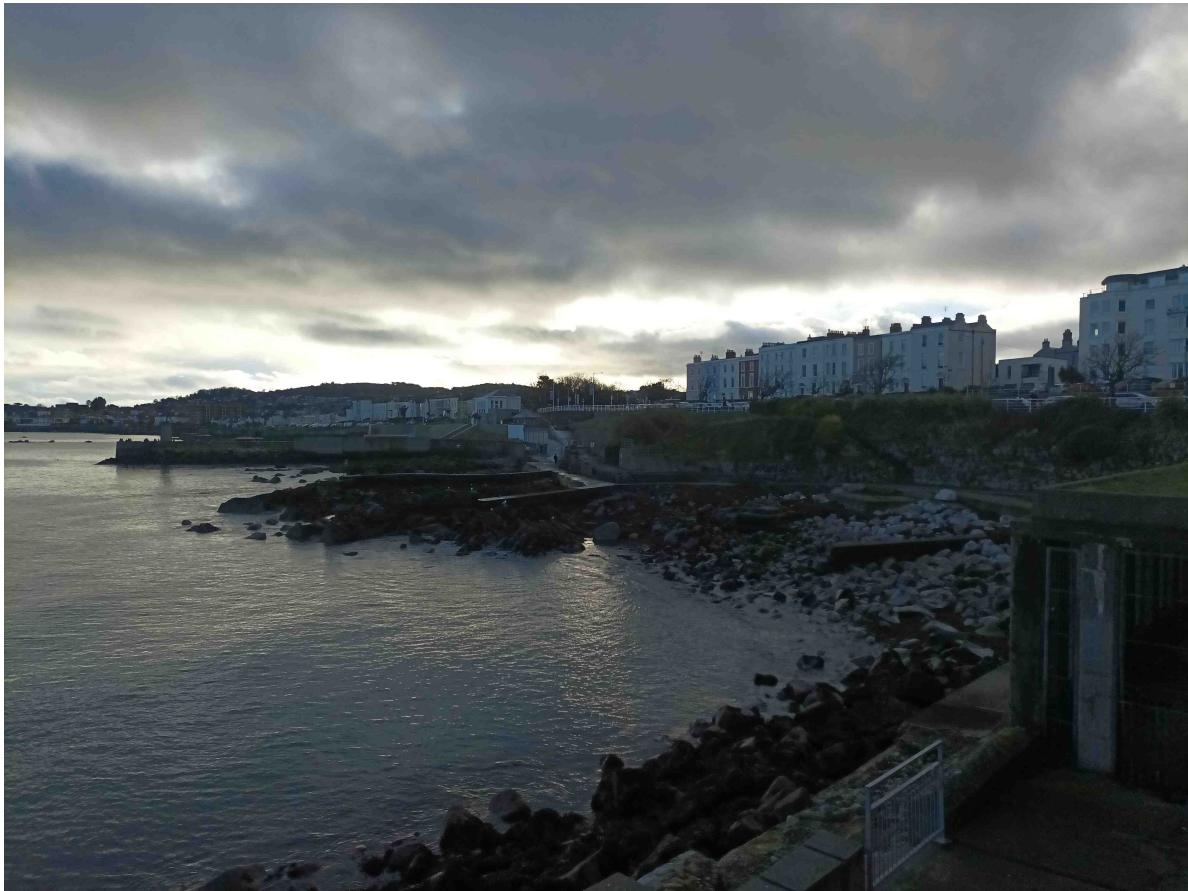


Figure 4.8: *I'd put money on the local council to do something decent with this rocky spot as the rest of the public spaces in the area are pretty jammers already.*

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 ways that makes being there a pleasant experience. The lighthouse at the end of the pier lives inside a rundown, open-air Martello Tower and there's a disused cottage or two, which presumably used to be populated by lighthouse keepers. It'll be interesting to see what happens to them when the war on vacant property finally gathers momentum. I'm also wondering why there was such

a need to store gunpowder and arms here.² A van sells ice creams 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 portaloops. 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 Laoghaireó, but most of it is already there, and it would go a long way towards unifying this city a little.

²<https://www.dlrcoco.ie/dun-laoghaire-harbour/harbour-history/east-pier-battery>



Figure 4.9: *These lighthouse keepers cottages will be snapped up quick once the war on vacant properties gathers real momentum*

5 Howth



Figure 5.1: *The Baily Lighthouse on Howth Head at sunrise. The well-traversed cliff walk path passes by its peninsular campus but public access ends at*

1048 Saturday Jan 7, 2023

I got some news yesterday and it split my soul in two, with one part being normal me and the other part being a freaked-out variant who has been taking over intermittently. On top of that, I can feel a bout of emptiness being triggered, more noticeable than ever before, and I know I need to take action. It's time to get on my bike and give myself a purpose. I don't get

depressed and sit in bed all day but everything becomes dull and worthless. I can't just sit here and play lego with my son because I can't stop thinking how pointless it all is. If I stay at home, I need to do functional stuff like cleaning up or rearranging furniture, although I'll still have a meltdown by about 11 o'clock, which is now. If I go out, it has to be *to* somewhere. I always need a purpose. A walk to the shops to get bread will pick me up. I've decided I am going to finally cycle out to Howth Head today. I took my son there a couple of months ago and had a glorious morning of it. I was supposed to be cycling there on my Tobler, but my bike prep routine woke him up and I realised he wasn't going back to sleep. So I lobbed him in the car, turned the L into a W, parked up at the summit and we walked down to the Baily Lighthouse as the sun was rising. So if you are sitting there wondering about the position of the sun at particular times of year – which I increasingly am myself – then that's why the picture above looks the way it does.

Another problem is that my purpose has to keep changing. I can't just cycle to the same destination every time I go out. I hate all training. I couldn't sit on an exercise bike or lift weights in a gym or swim lengths of a pool. Jogging is hell but running after a football is heaven. I played so much sport growing up. Rugby and cricket at the highest available levels. But I couldn't commit to it from the age of seventeen. All that training seemed like such a loadamebollocks, as did all the jobs my friends were aiming for. I wanted to become 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. But I didn't know how to do it and I got lost. I was too scarlet to even tell people I wanted to be a writer.

5.1 Roads not taken

I was reminded of my decision last week when I bumped into Kevin O'Brien in the playground in Sandymount. He's dunzo now. Ireland's most capped cricketer, out of contract, not selected for the World Cup a couple of months ago. Thirty-eight years old. Unemployed. Kids to feed. I remember that feeling well. In my mid-thirties, looking for 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 in a whole new proverbial field. We played with and against each other as teenagers, between Ireland, Leinster and our respective clubs. Kev and William Porterfield were in my cohort. The first Irish kids to make a career from cricket. Meanwhile, I chose the long and easy road, stopping in every Battle Cruiser on the way. Seeing Kev has reminded me of the sporting life I never tried to pursue and thus I'm reminded of the writing life I was supposed to pursue. In reality, I've filled my life with adjacent interests. Research on English spelling. Teaching English for pocket money. Building Siri for Apple for a salary. But the clock is ticking and I gotta write something. What you're reading is all I've got. And even if it is shite, then at least I gave it shot.

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 as it often does on a Saturday.

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. And then so are my family.

5.2 Circular North Road

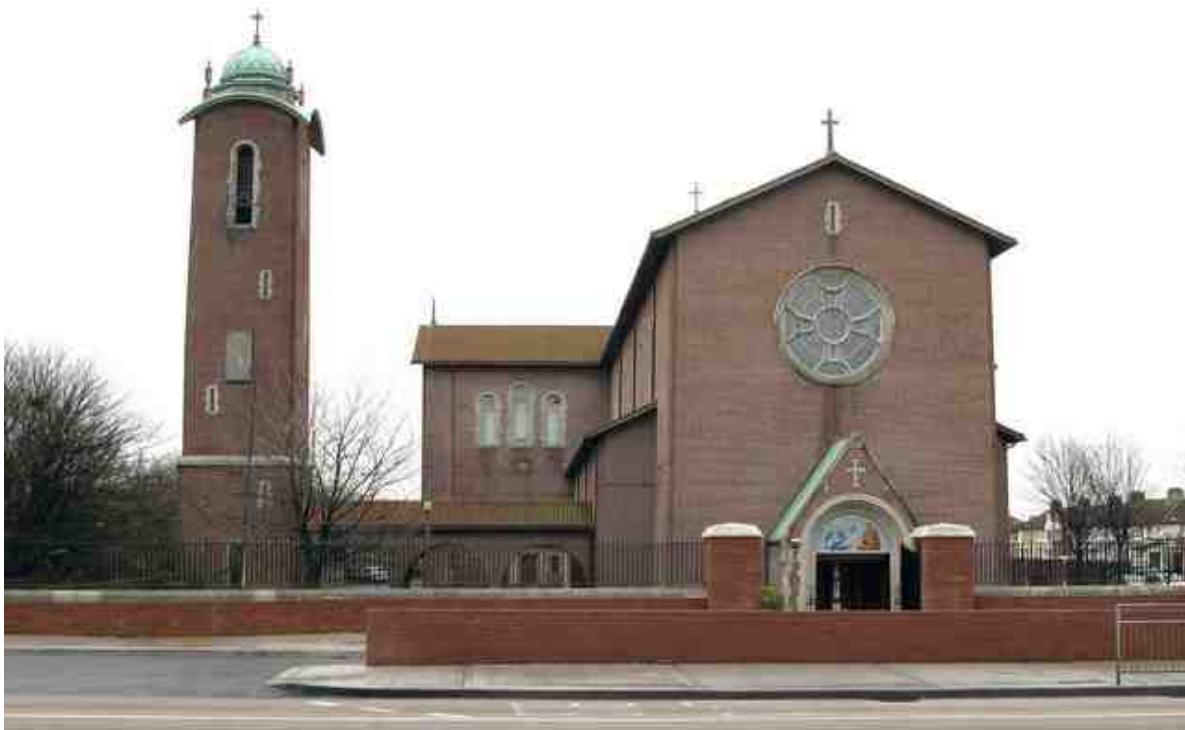


Figure 5.2: Catholic churches in mid-20th century Ireland got bigger and bigger, as if they were going out of fashion.

The Church of the Holy Child, Whitehall was ‘designed to accommodate a congregation of 1750 [people]’.

I go up for a shower and afterwards I declare the need to go for a cycle to help me process stuff. My wife and son are up for going to *Go Kids Go* nearby so I drop them there. It's less than a kilometre away but that's a massive yomp for her because the bambino is due on like Valentine's Day. Then I'm away on off at last out towards Howth. The cleanest and nicest route would be 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 loop around the Abbotstown quadrant towards Finglas and then hop onto the ringroad that pieces together the innerouter 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, part deux, albeit low on embassies and high on gigantor churches. Everywhere in the real Northside seems to be a road, not a place, much like Belfast. The road is wall-to-wall traffic lights and junctions and I wouldn't recommend it unless your goal is cartography or transit. A cop car keeps pulling up beside me and making me paro off me head. The road is lined with houses and gardens so you still feel like there is some life around even though you never feel you are in a village. Just a few units in a cluster now and again. It's not like the walled off estates in Blanch or New Lucan where you could pass through and barely see a single person among twenty or fifty thousand inhabitants. 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 was 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.

5.3 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 in 1948. He was a footballer for the Dubs and an accountant and a boozier, 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 and read up about now myself. My son is approaching that age and it's making me explore my own past too and my

family's. 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 her dad and his grandad on the piss together in Clontarf which apparently they would have been. My mam still treasures her father's medals because that's all that survived him. He is somewhere in this video, playing in [the 1934 All-Ireland Final](#), which Dublin lost to Galway.

After my granny died, Uncle Jack emigrated to Australia, aged eighty-nine and three-quarters, 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 a 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 five sisters and our fourteen kids (plus one in the oven).

5.4 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. A mother is on a bike asking her son if he wants to buy kale so that they can make cripes. 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 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 right now 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.

5.5 Bend of bay



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

The bike lane ends a bit before the x-shaped traffic jam at Sutton Cross, the tombolo connecting Howth Head to the mainland. If you need evidence that the land here 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 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 on Howth Head.*

5.6 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 but I'm not pushe as we came out here recently.



Figure 5.5: asdf

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



51

Figure 6.1: *The old lighthouse on Wicklow Head dates from 1781 and predates the nationwide flurry of lighthouses built in the early nineteenth century, including the active lighthouse nearby. This lighthouse sits atop a hill, rather than out by the sea, and it was lit by candlelight. Nowadays you can rent it out and stay there for a couple of nights at a time.*

0904, Monday, Jan 16, 2023

It's Martin Luther 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 nine-to-five drone, because normally when office workers are off, so are the kids and everyone else. So I cycle to school with the young lad running beside me, and then I'm free to ramble, as long as the roads aren'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 nearly 70k from Blanch. 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 these mountains because I love it up there and it's the only chance I'll have to write about them in this book. My guess is that it'll be icier 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 on the other side. 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 were expecting 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 slash naónra called *Teanga Beo*, where the kids could buzz about inside a sea of love. I miss Ballyfermot. It's a survivor from pre-Celtic Tiger Ireland with a proper community and there's a buzz in the village.. 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 me dropping the young lad off and my wife picking him up on the bus on her way home from town. It was a lot of travel but at least we kept some stability in his life while his early childhood was being ruptured by this country's failure to provide access to homes for enough 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 which 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 underfamiliar 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, back in the late Celtic Tiger era. There was always an energy in the gaff and everyone was always doing something. Johnny Rayge and Uncle Steve were in a band called ITO and they'd play covers in The Mezz every Saturday night . 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 out there was and still is a jake, although 5k seemed like an unbearable distance on the tiny incline home. What hasn't changed, however, is the difficulty of negotiating the traffic at the otherwise understated village at Terenure Cross. Thence, it's a straight shot up to the mountains.

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 still only 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.

6.2 Rising slowly



Figure 6.2: You can take the bike out of the city but you can't take the city out of bike.⁵⁵

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 6% for about 3.5k 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 have learnt to measure my lungs, my legs and my mental state. Today is mostly about leg strength cos Yvonne is a city bike built for flat terrain.

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 your legs than your mind wants to admit.

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.

6.3 Little fluffy grass



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

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 the south side of the grass but not the north.



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.*

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 stepped houses 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 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'yeh 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. The pain of the training drills were similar to this new pain of cycling. 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. 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.

6.4 Sally Gap



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.*

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.

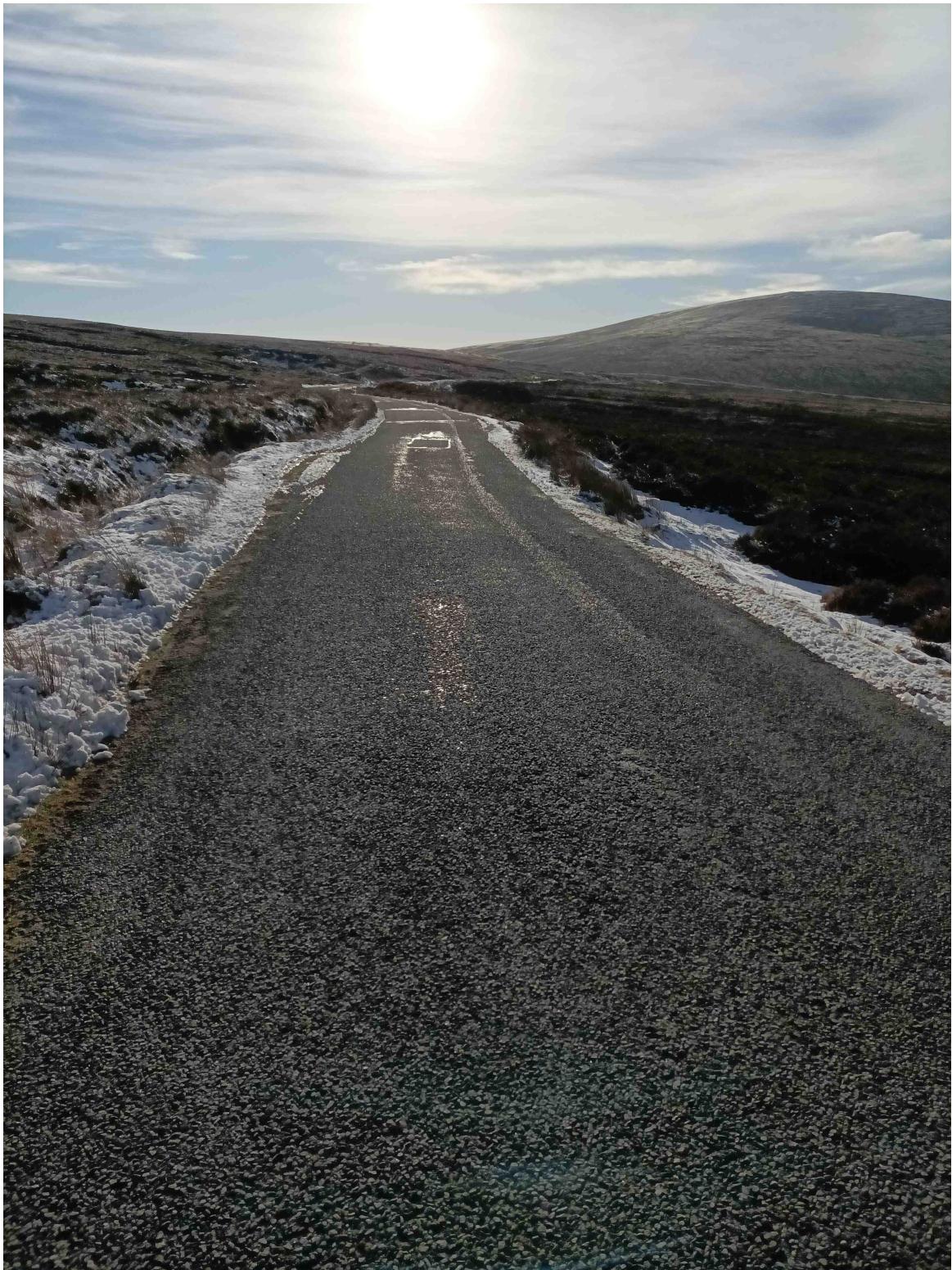


Figure 6.6: *The Sally Gap*. This is the ice on the papers were banging on about. Zoom in to the right and you'll see the road grinding up from the Blessington side.

I push on up the last of the pass between Tonduff and Kippure, and then the land plateaus for a few clicks along The Sally Gap. Thankfully there's no wind today and the climb has my blood back moving. It can be devilishly cold up here, even with much higher temperature. 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 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,



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.*

6.5 Guinness Time

The road goes right for 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. 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 have blocked the light. I stop off to look at the black and white lake and its teeny private flat valley. 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 or used to own 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, when he was old enough to move on to secondary school somewhere. His mother, Marina Guinness, 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 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. I last saw her [in the Indo a few years back](#), being interviewed about the band Kíla 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, Stewart Copeland, but he was off in America, and poor Paddy had to learn the drums from our music teacher in school, who definitely wasn't *Rolling Stone* magazine's tenth best drummer of all time.

Bar a few very close friends, I mostly lost touch with that world when I went to secondary school. Yet 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 the country, with life ousting work as the primary life motivation. In secondary school 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.



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

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 farmer 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 Wicklow 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 a last-minute 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 Gorden County.

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. I've been running the numbers and it looks like the best value in the country remains in South County Wicklow, where, for less than possibly 400k, you can still find that magic mix of the sea, the mountains and maybe even some community for my kids.

6.6 Ashford



Figure 6.9: *Taking inspiration from the Devil's Glen nearby, each of these eerie #NewHomes has an upside down cross on its frontispiece, and I feel like I'm in an occult outpost of the American Deep South.*

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?*, which the owners mostly won't be, as they'll both be off in work for three decades getting cash to pay for it. I feel like I need to do a tour of the world before I come to understand how it ought to be done, but I'm a hundred 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 feel like 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 village, like Dublin city but minuscule, 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 centre. 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 lahst 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 like an AK village 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 jake. 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.

6.7 Rathnew and Wicklow Town



Figure 6.10: *A few raves would be a good send off for these worn-out warehouses before someone replaces them with a wedge of seafront condos.*

The road to Rathnew and Wicklow town is nothing to write home about unless you want another traffic report, although I seem to have blinked and missed Rathnew as I see a big graveyard which means I must already be on the outskirts. The map says the sea is on my left but it's blocked off by a narrow lough and a peninsula slash barrier island in parallel. 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, like most new developments.



Figure 6.11: *The train and the sea suggest that tired old Wicklow Town ought to be a gateway to Dublin and a getaway for Dubs*

There is a bike lane now though, so I veer off left to cross the lough and it's a click or two 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 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 the 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 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 the south-east 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 be sticking high density housing here in the brownfields, right on the sea, a few minutes walk from town along the promenade.



Figure 6.12: This little lighthouse marks the entry to the small harbour in Wicklowtown. Bray Head and The Sugar Loaf are in the background.

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 its 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. I pop back down to the harbour, which is still a live workspace with timber waiting to be loaded onto a ship and not a whiff of tourism around. For the sake of exhaustiveness, I take the short walk down to the scuttly lighthouse at the end of the pier. I hadn't seen it on Wikipedia's [List of Lighthouses in Ireland](#). There's a Norman castle somewhere 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. The whole town is a bit of work-on but the potensh is yooge.

6.8 Trespassing



Figure 6.13: *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 main 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 wide 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.



Figure 6.14: *Sunset*

It turns out that there are three lighthouses here. 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, maybe less in fact, 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, barely habitable places.



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.

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.

I've come a long way and don't yet appreciate the importance of the site. The other two towers were also lighthouses in their day, lit by candles and mirrors, and dating from an earlier era

when refractive lenses had not been invented and only a handful of lighthouses were present on the Irish coast. 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.



Figure 6.16: 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 6.17: *The front lighthouse is a less impressive structure and looks like the lighthouse keepers' kids decided to have a go too*

6.9 Coda



Figure 6.18: *If life gives you lumps, make golf courses.*

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 unfarmable 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 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 Eugene the Estate Agent and we both agree that the town is the place to live, not off in one of the new

developments. He's off for a scoop in Tá Sé's, a real pub, while I pass the time in *The Brass Fox*, an empty gastro pub. In squareness, it is a Monday in the middle of January, and there is at least a ukelele 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 the 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 clearly could be.

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 Desiree Dorothy was born in mid-February, but life is stable at home now and my wife is well on top of it all. The baby has been an angel and Valentine, who'll turn six in May, is back to himself and more, having been alloverthegaff for a while. I

probably could have gone out sooner – my wife hasn't been holding me back – I just felt like I was supposed to be at home. 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. But I'm back to myself at last and ready to hit the Dermot. Then I'll have something to write about every morning for a few weeks.

7.1 Plan of inaction

Yesterday I was planning to cycle to Drogheda and then on to Dundalk, so I called Boring Mick and he said he was gaggo to join me on the second leg cos he was already at home home in Drogheda for Easter. But in the end, he was up to his eyes with his insomniac toddler so I had a rethink and decided to explore a bit of inland North County Dublin, where my dad is from, and if I make it to Drogheda in the rain, then happy days. Since I moved to Blanch, I've been out scoping the coastal towns from Malahide through Swords, Donabate, Rush, Skerries and especially the tiny fishing village of Loughshinny, where Leonard lives. 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 never have. Eventually, North County Dublin will be swallowed up by the city, just as South County Dublin was in the twentieth century, with Blackrock and Dun Laoghaire becoming part of the basically city.

So anyway I set Google Maps for Oldtown and then Ballyboughal cos my dad's 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 glovesocks 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. 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 Uncle 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.

7.2 Named after

I've never spent large amounts of time there, beyond day trips as a kid and funeral visits in recent years. My granny died when I was less than one so there was no matriarch or central force to keep the whole family together. The only girl, Monica, was a childless businesswoman who spent her best years in Switzerland. My dad got work in Leixlip and that's why I grew up in Lucan. The five other brothers lived and died locally, four of them in last five years. Oliver died during the meaningful Christmas of 2020 and hardly anyone was at his funeral. Aidan's was a proper affair, a year earlier, and a nice chance for me to catch up with his eight kids, a parallel family to my own. They also have five girls but balanced out by three boys, whereas I come in Paddy Last on my Tobler. Austin and Lorenzy, both in their nineties, died more recently. Their mother mustabeen a wil' woman for the big-ticket names. I found out at his funeral that Lorenzo was named after a Vatican big-wig who visited The Free State in the nineteen thirties. Cuddie's full name was Columbanus, the great Irish saint. And my dad is Valentine, born twenty minutes after Valentine's Day. That was also going to be my name, but when the nurse saw *Valentine Desmond* on the first draft of my birth cert, she pointed out that my initials would be VD – or *venereal disease* – so my parents did a switcheroo and called me *Desmond Valentine*, with Dessie being my mother's father. Instead, the name skipped a generation and my son is also *Valentine*, a name that pleased my wife because she and my dad get on like a house on fire. Our cat was born on actual Valentine's day but he ended up being called *Puddens*, a term of endearment that stuck. Maisoon suggested we call him *Cupid*, but that was too clever and never caught on. Amazingly, Desi Diaper was due on Valentine's Day, but she stayed in another week before bursting out in an awful hurry, although we did find time for my wife to grab a cheeky drive-thru Maccie D's on the way in. It was around then that my dad finally told me the story about him being born twenty minutes after midnight. His mother asked the nurse to change the time of birth to match the name *Valentine*, but the nurse said no. 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?"

7.3 Oldtown



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

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 far-off 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 usually 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 to the only pub and a pop-up coffee van. 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 passing through the village are the only sign of industry in the area. It turns out Cuddie's wife Catherine was there for last night's Easter events. Some kind of Rah jobbie I think, but I didn't catch the exact deets...



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 all know each other so it all feels alien to me. I've also 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, as you did back then. This actually explains yet another bit of my sense of displacement. So many Dublin people of my generation are the spawn of farmers 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 like whatever. I called him yesterday and he was in mass in Ballina, County 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 adopted exception of Tralee, where I used to hang out as a teenager with McCornFlake, and later a girlfriend I met through him. Nowadays, I ought to be in Oman but sadly my wife has been ostracised by her family, ever since our son was born, 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 the bidding is on next week.

7.4 Ballybockle



Figure 7.4: Ballyboughal church is older than Oldtown's so it must've always had more people⁸⁷

I push on towards Ballyboughal, three clicks away, and somewhere off-route is where the family grew up. I decide to leave that for another day and it's nice to scope out the empty village 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 Rah lads back in 1921. I do a spin up and down the village and I realise that it's actually your classic linear drive-through village and I have horrid thoughts about Rob Kearney's little 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, 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 by now.

7.5 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 to get there, 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 marinae. 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. I have been getting my info from the Wikipedia page called *List of Lighthouses in Ireland*. And if you keep scrolling down, you'll find that there are three tables. The first table shows lighthouses run by the Commissioner Irish Lights, the second table shows a sundry bunch run by whoever, and the last pile is of inactive lighthouses.

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 local 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.



Figure 7.6: *Balbriggan Harbour has been earmarked for an upgrade as a part of an effort to turn the town around.*

7.6 Stepping stones



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.

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 midlandsesque 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 the Allied Irish. 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 over time 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 Ballyfarout, which I had earmarked as the new Stoneybatter, although in reality that's the adjacent village of Inchicore with social expansion being curtailed by the trainline between them. Two years later I was one of several parents cycling my kids to the naónra 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. I'm defo coming back.

7.7 Exit Festival, Hypothermia



Figure 7.8: Rockabill lighthouse sits on an island beyond the island you can see. Zoom in for a poor quality view.

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 hypothermia 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 be arsed cycling back here. I drop in to the Leonards in Loughshinny 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 through the unremarkable roads of North West County Dublin.

8 Drogheda



Figure 8.1: *Three disused, spidery lighthouses stand among the grassy sand dunes in Mornington, awaiting conservation. Previously, these stilted structures would be moved in response to the shifting sand bars along the Boyne Estuary.*

1154, April 30, 2023

This time, I am off to Drogheda so I drive to Balbriggan and find an old-school car park between the sea and the park parallel to it, full of football pitches and screaming spectators. It's the kinda car park I love. Puddles and gravel, bounded by trees. There's fellas my age, ish, getting dressed for five-a-side, and chunflas in their Sunday Football Finest, walking into battle with their studs chomping orkwordly off the hard ground, as excited as a gaggle of ladies in heels heading off for a night out. As soon as I park up, I nip into the foliage and drain the lizard goodo. Then I whip Blue Thunder out of the boot, get myself dressed, and scope out a quick bit of kids' football. That sport breaks my heart. It used to be my favourite activity in life, to play, to watch and to read about. Yet I've grown up and it hasn't, so I've had to move on.



Figure 8.2: *The old road from Balbriggan to Drogheda is not a fun place to cycle*

I leave them at it and hit the Doolittle, painfully aware that my fun occurs in solitude, not in a team. This trip'll be a piece of piss: 20k as the commuter flies, 30k on the bike, as flat as a North Leinster pancake. The only dangers are intermittent shars and the drabness of the short Meath coast. As soon as you leave County Dublin, just north of Balbriggan, the coast line takes on the perimeter of a straight line. The road parallel is one of those horrific secondary roads, beloved of tractors, Bus Eireann and speeding locals. Wide enough to drive comfortably and fast, but narrow enough to make cycling loud and miserable. I really need a name for these roads. After a few minutes I can smell rain so I stop off at a bus shelter. It'll be a few minutes before the shars arrive but I know they'll be heavy and I won't get shelter elsewhere on this exposed road. There are some mute Ukrainians waiting for a bus and they must be being housed nearby. I see a sign for Gormontown Army Camp and perhaps they are staying there, the poor things. I think of Andy and Tanya and Lan, still cramped up with Oskar's family in Arnhem, and I pray to God that their lives improve soon. It was great to see them last year and we must invite them over here for a visit soon. The rain is taking longer than I expected, and it reminds me of the time that our big sister Maryanne took me and Maggs for a day out in Mosney, the Irish Butlins, not far from here. We were stuck on what mustabeen this road for donkeys, waiting for the boola bus. Yet the memory remains happy. The rain eventually buckets down and soon the bus arrives. More Ukrainians dismount including an old lady who starts getting out her neat little umbrella. I put my hand up to tell her to stall the ball five minutes so she sits it out and, sure enough, the rain stops three minutes later. She smiles in shock and thinks I'm a wizard, then scampers off, as do I. Of course I get hit by another shar a few minutes later so I get off, hide under a tree, and take the photo above.



Figure 8.3: “Mosney” is the Irish word for “Butlins” and, every summer throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, it provided good clean fun in contrast to the drab theocracy outside. Ironically, it is now a drab refugee reception centre contrasting against the whopper buzz the rest of us are having.

It's not long before I can turn off the road towards Mosney and it's a delight because I'm into hedgerow Ireland with fields and quiet roads. This is a nullspace of land trapped between the main road, the featureless coast and a mid-sized river cutting across Julianstown and Laytown. I cycle down to the [once-abandoned holiday centre](#), and I can still remember the excitement of the water slides and the G-forces crushing my nine-year-old body on the yellow spinning ride – *The Space Round Up* apparently. But now my emotional rush is for the refugees inside, locked behind bars in this repurposed reception centre. I think of Peter Sheekey and the English language school he runs in Ballybough to help these unfortunate people, each with their own hellish story, and I'd love to go back and teach more of them. There's cameras everywhere, a security booth and some kids running around on bicycles. I can't go in for a goo, which is a shame as I could do with a trip down memory lane. The Community Games used to be here – the Olympics for Irish teenagers – housing like twenty-five hundred of them every year, competing for medals and a shift, [as documented by RTE](#), where you can also catch a young Ryle Nugent sounding about 4% less Leinster Rugby.

8.1 The Meath Gold Coast



Figure 8.4: *Laytown is a seaside village with a frequent train in to the city, making it ideal for long-distance commuters gaggo for some landscape.*

I take a wrong turn and find myself on the way back to the main road but a dogwalker puts me wide and sends me over a pedestrian bridge to Laytown, on the other side of the Nanny river. I'm delira to see a small concave beach below, as the tiny estuary meanders into the sea, putting some texture on the coastline. It seems too shallow here for fishing boats. I stop in the village shop, *Pat's Supermarket*, and the view from here is a blissful mix of grass and river and sea and sand, which must make for an unusually varied hangout space. For Ireland, like. Cars have been superimposed, of course, many of them parked by the train station which must bring a disproportionate amount of life to this tiny village.



Figure 8.5: *Laytown beach is bigger than hip-hop and is used for horse racing once a year.*

I take a quick gawk at the vast beach around the corner and it glares back at me all the way to the horizon, wide and straight, a magnitude suited to the horse racing [which takes place here once every apparently year](#).



Figure 8.6: *The Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Laytown has kept the façade of the old church and lobbed a barn in the back overlooking the albeit sea.*

I stall it back to the coast road and see a lovely church with a few dozen congregants outside, dolled up for what appears at first to be a wedding, but turns out to be a First Holy Communion, with many mini-brides being offered up to our Lord. Communions remind my wife of ceremonies they have in Oman when barely pubescent girls are promised to their future husband, and I wonder if that is their origin here in Ireland, or if there was ever any #grabbing after the mass. I feel like I can't be taking a photo of the peopled front of the church but it's just as well because it is a filmset frontispiece, a survivor from the old church, with a short glass tunnel connecting it to the main hallway, a weird-ass modern jobbie built to house 800 sinners. Seemingly the church overlooks the sea, which is fairly Leinster Rugby.

8.2 Ancient network of lights



Figure 8.7: *The entrance to the Boyne River is bounded by two causeways and a stone beacon with a light that gets little, if any, appreciation in the Irish lighthouse scene.*

I continue along the coast road, through the entire census town of Laytown-Bettystown-Mornington-Donacarney, and the Bettystown segment suffers from having houses on both sides of the road, obscuring its inherent splendour. After the links golf course on the right, I'm in Mornington, my destination, a place I've never heard of. It sits on the corner of the large, unruly Boyne Estuary, making it less coherent than little Laytown, but that makes for more varied housing and exploration among the sand dunes. I dismount, expecting to walk some kind of pier to the lighthouse, but the causeway is unwalkable and the stone beacon slash lighthouse is on the other side of the river.



Figure 8.8: *Boasting both beach and river access, this bungalow sports a disused lighthouse and privacy afforded by mature hedges. With buses running regularly to nearby Drogheda, this property offers both coastal isolation and easy access to Ireland's largest town.*

There are sand dunes and pathways and the odd bit of tarmacked road scattered around. The complexity of the coast is more than I had bargained for so my lack of preparation means I struggle to understand the set up. It turns out there are three spidery beacons, standing on stilts, almost hidden among the sand dunes. One is black and looks at first to be burnt out, and nearby is a white variant. These are Drogheda East and West Lighthouses, while North Lighthouse sits in the back of someone's literally gaff, not far from an ancient stone tower. These lighthouses used to be moved around in response to shifting sandbars, and that is why they sit on stilts, and are not incorporated into the land like any normal building with foundations. The shifting sands problem seems to have been reduced by the causeway sticking out to sea. The same problem used to bedevil ships arriving in Dublin until the South and North Bull Walls were built, and much of the sand was dragged over to what is now Bull Island, so it is interesting to see the more natural state of affairs here, and how the transition

space between the sea and inhabitable land is a live situation, changing at unfamiliar pace somewhere between the quotidian and geological.



Figure 8.9: *Closed off even to knacker-drinkers*, The Maiden Tower used to be a lookout tower named after Queen Elizabeth I, while The Lady Finger in the background was a navigational aid shaped to line up with the tower at the entry point to the river.

Nonetheless, it's disappointing to find lighthouses buried within the land, where they are reduced to being disused machines rather than being that glorious embodiment of functional and symbolic. And the ugly fella sitting out at actual sea is a, to be fair, disappointment. It feels like I haven't conquered an endpoint and I'm walking around an old battlefield trying to reconstruct a more interesting time. Thankfully there are two old stone erections, pointing to an earlier era of navigational aid, the Lady Finger and The Maiden Tower, named after Virgin Queen Liz. The area merits further investigation, maybe with a curious dog, and I have categorised it like a lot of things in life as: *it's not shite, you just haven't worked out how to enjoy it yet.*

I follow the river for seven cloudy clicks back in to Drogheda, a town whose inner aesthetic I am also yet to unravel. I spent quite a bit of time on the piss here as a teenager with Boring Mick, and we even rang in the Millenium in his gaff, hoping to Jaysus that the Y2k bug wouldn't reset civilization. I know my way to the train station for a swift exit and it's not long before I'm in Balbriggan and then my Jammer and then home, thankful for the excellent transport links that exist on this unromantic strip of the island. I'm also delighted to discover a new approach to travel. Bike out. Train Home. This doubles your distances and trims off the misery of recapitulating your half-adventure on overly familiar roads. Plus, doubling your radius quadruples the area you can cover. Furtherplus, if you drive to your start point, cycle out and train it back to the MC Hammer, then your range is shaped like a washer, a ring of of possible journey around a circle of starting points. In this way, the entire island can become my oyster, and now I can now spread my wings and set my wheels in motion.

9 Greenore





Figure 9.1: *The disused lighthouse in Greenore lingers beside a busy industrial port which was privatised in the 1950s. The port was opened in 1873 and ferried passengers to Holyhead until after Partition. Across Carlingford Lough lie The Mourne Mountains in the overseas jurisdiction of Nairn.*

0650, Saturday May 6, 2023

I've decided to kill two birds on this trip, cos my cousin's stag is on in Carlingford all weekend, so I'm gonna cycle there, catch up with a buncha lads I don't know, for the afterneevening, and take in a disused lighthouse in nearby Greenore. There's also a couple of inaccessible lighthouses at sea, visible from land apparently, so I can tick them off today, while focussing on what is fast-becoming the *de facto* goal of this trip: cycling the entire Irish coastline. Seeing as I finished up in Drogheda last week, it makes sense to start there this week and hug the coast all the way to Dundalk, before turning right along the Cooley Peninsula towards the stag and the lighthouses. This way, I can finally find out whether County Louth merits its status as the forgotten man of the Irish coastline. Plus, I'm happy to stall along to the stag for just a few hours because I can't be on the sesh like I used to and I've long since done my nation plenty proud.

I'm up early and the weather is blanket grey so poor Co Louth won't be looking the Georgie Best. I bring a tasty pourover in the car with me, along with some crumby toast, and I drive directo to Drogheda train station, planning to park there for the Daniel Doris. It turns out that the car park has been colonised by Apcoa, and while I don't mind forking out three fiddy for a day's parking, there's something sinister about those pricks declaring so much land for themselves. Presumably, there used to be a bog standard car park here, looking identical to this one, with a possibly aulfella on the gate, when suddenly Apcoa declare it for themselves. Where does all that money go? Do they help maintain roads or reduce car-dependency? Me Jackson Pollocks, they do.



Figure 9.2: *The Drogheda wetlands belong more in the imagination of fantasy novelists and video game designers, than in the hearts of Irish holidaymakers.*

I wasn't in the humour for unearthing the hidden beauty of Drogheda Town, so I cross the main bridge and turn right onto the North side of the Boyne River, before stalling it the 7k out towards the sea, opposite where I cycled in last week from Mornington. The port is on the right, just out of town, but the tide is out and I'm struggling to work out how tidal ports operate. It must be awfully restricting for business to be confined solely to sailings at high tide, and you can imagine how frustrating the lives of the workers must be, as their schedules shift with the tides. We had a similar problem during Covid when my wife worked in the PCR lab, four nights on and four nights off, and her eight-day cycle looped slightly slower than our seven-day skedj. It was like living inside a piece of Steve Reich's phased music, where our lives only synced with glorious normality once every fifty-six days.

The estuary is untidy and there is a handful of old stumpy stone beacons used to guide boats. While this seems odd to me, having grown up with the neatly arranged Liffey River, it's a reminder of how messy the Liffey and Tolka estuaries might have been before the docks were built and land was reclaimed around your Ringsends and Fairviews. The geographic similarities between Drogheda and Dublin are evidenced by their Irish names: *Droichead Atha* is the "ford bridge", so I guess people must have crossed the Boyne River there and eventually built a permanent bridge. Meanwhile, *Baile Atha Cliath*, is the "town of the hurdle ford", which is a series of words I always knew but never understood. It seems to be a place where you cross (a ford) mixed with a buncha bits lashed down to help you cross (a hurdle), and [this old RTE clip](#) is set at the supposedly bridging point on the Liffey. It's not clear to me why Dzublin became the main city on the East Coast while Drogheda didn't, and I suspect that the distance - or navigability - to the sea played a big role. This stretch of wetlands between the sea and Drogheda town may have been less of a help than the deeper Liffey and its shorter

gap to the sea. Plus Dublin is closer to Britain, our big brother island.



Figure 9.3: *Drogheda 6 - 3 Termonfeckin*

Very few people have elected to live along these wetlands, but as you hit the sea, [there is a row of south-facing houses on the left](#), with deep front gardens, overlooking the water, and then the village of Beltray where a Golf club has made use of the sand dunes. But the place is quiet enough that the locals must play bowls on the road, judging by the signposts urging caution. I turn left towards Clogherhead, but en route is the in-betweeny village of Termonfeckin, whose name is its most glaring attraction. A signpost says *Tearmann Feichín* and I'm trying to work out what a *Feichín* is - maybe it's "a little view" - but when I get there I see a school called *Scoil Naomh Fheichín* and realise it must be a boring old saint, and I'm disappointed. There's actually quite a lot of #NewHomes round here so I'm guessing these people are going for the living-in-village-near-a-big-town approach. Not a bad shout. I turn towards the coast road for Clogherhead which is Louth's answer to both Howth Head and Donabate, and on my way in, I see a colony of mobile homes perched by the sea. There's a holiday park with a big shop outside it and a few units and I'm gaggo to join in the craic some time. I'm always hearing about how much fun it is to spend your summer in one of these places, being outside all the time and the kids having good clean fun all day long. I love when people live on top of each other and can't go off and hide in their little caves. When you are in a four-bed hostel room, with shared bathrooms, then you make friends fast. Stay a while and you'll make enemies too. I've always wanted to be a front door person, sitting outside and yapping to passers-by, just waiting for craic to happen. Like an aulfella on the wall. I don't know how people can put chairs in their back garden and plan to stare at their own walls with no chance of outside life occurring.

I get to Clogherhead village and see a couple of cyclists coming in from the other direction and

I basically just follow them cos cyclists always go to the good spot. It turns out to be a cafe on the sprawling beach and I get yapping to them of course. They've come from Dundalk, after doing the *Darkness into Light* walk early in the morning, in memory of those who have taken their own lives. I think of Eamonn Donoghue, who is etched in my soul, and now poor Eabha Rosenstock, whose inner zest was probably compromised by living in The Matrix, where she did not belong. I can relate. Me and Eabha might well have been better friends, but now we never will be. I eventually nudge the chat in that direction but they don't bite and the lady tells me about how beautiful County Louth is, with both the sea and the mountains, and I'm glad that they've come from where I'm going cos things can only get better. I'm not a 100% sure if they are a married couple, but they remind me of my parents off touring the world on their bikes, at some indeterminate middle age where you have a perfect mix of energy, time and cash to go and do exactly what you want. I ask them if it's worth checking out the cliffs on the other side of the headland and they tell me to come back on foot some day, which I will. After that I get the head down and do some proper cycling.



Figure 9.4: *The mild, non-Atlantic way reaches its nadir in mid-County Louth.*

It's all been a bit stop-start thus far and sometimes my favourite part is to just cycle and forget that I've a book to write. It's 30 clicks to Blackrock, hugging the coastline, ish, and I aim to get there with an empty belly so that I can munch and listen. Almost nothing happens along this coast as there are no bays, coves, caves or cliffs. No sand dunes. No barrier islands, no muddy estuaries, no calm lagoons. No offshore skerries. No lighthouses, boats, harbours, ports or villages. It's like cycling through the fecund farmlands of Rest of Leinster, except that there's a gentle lake on one side called The Irish Sea. I do pass by the thumb-shaped micro-peninsula in Annagassan village and detractors will note that there's an obtuse headland

called Dunany Point, which even the coast road diagonalizes past. You can't see everything and I comfort myself with the recollection that no coastline is viewable in its mathematical entirely.

I know I've emerged from deep farmland into urban sensibility when I see a big-boned young lady on the pavement wearing undersized skinny jeans, as of course no legit culchie cares enough about fashion to get it that wrong. Blackrock is a very nice town, with boutique shops facing the rocky coast, and you can see why it recently won a Tidy Town award for Ireland's best small town. It is Dundalk's Dun Laoghaire, and I'd love to go to a cafe and listen to the people talk but I'm only 30 clicks from the stag now and I'd rather just get there asap so I can see my cousin and his crew. I see that he's online on WhatsApp so I give him a tinkle and he's sounding ok for 1030am on Day 2 of your own stag. He says they are going for a dip in a bit and then playing Tag Rugby at 2, so it looks like I'll go directo to them, say hello, and then buzz down to Greenore Lighthouse while they're playing tag, a non-contact brand of rugby that does very little for me. Like casual dating without the sex.

So I just get a rock'n'roll in a Centra and a pint of boiling soup, then I crouch outside to eat it. Opposite me is another mildly overweight cyclist but he hasn't got the memo that whenever you find someone in life doing the exact same thing as you, then you are supposed to acknowledge them. Thankfully he moves on quickly and an aulfella from presumably Munster squats down with his two Louth grandchildren licking ice creams, in spite of the dross weather. He tells me he migrated here to be near the family cos he was living in Kilkenny and the journeys were too much on him. I can see why someone would happily relocate here, being a seaside village near a big town, although he says he misses the bike cos he lives on top of a hill and isn't able for it at his age. I suggest an e-bike but he's having none of it so there's obviously more going on. It's bothering me whether he's actually from Kilkenny or legit Munster, cos Kilkenny accents can be pretty D'Unbelayvable, although I've scarcely ever been there myself. I used to lift a lot of animal feed with labourers from Goresbridge on the Carlow-Kilkenny border. My dad's shop would get big deliveries from Red Mills, and so we'd handball in a few hundred bags of animal feed every Friday, and yap away to the two lads on the lorry. The driver would always be a proper trucker, adjusted to the outside world, but the non-driver would often be a hand-to-mouth labourer, likely a boozer, sometimes boozing actively, and seldom with the ability to accommodate their speech to outsiders. Some people just don't get it. Irvine Welsh grabs this in *Trainspotting* when a convicted Renton and Spud respond affirmatively to a judge. Renton says "Yes, your honour", while Spud mumbles "Aye". Renton gets off and Spud goes down. It's no surprise that Renton was the one who skidaddled to Amsterdam, whereas Spud was just pure dead Leith.



Figure 9.5: *This beautiful dark grey church in Blackrock suggests I am entering a different geological area*

I push on, past a beautiful church and then I bypass Dundalk because that couple in Clogher-

head told me to take the main road around it. I'm surprised to find it actually is more pleasant than most main roads but then I turn right on to the Cooley Peninsula and suddenly I'm hit by the wind. All morning, I've had it on my back or side, but now it's driving into me and the child seat on my rear wheel is acting like a sail, as noted by the #realcyclist who pulls up beside me for a wee chuckle. We chat for a few minutes but I'm struggling to keep the pace and I tell him I'm going to have to take his wheel, so he drags me through the air for ten fairly dull kilometers. Eventually, I can take no more and I let him go, thanking him as I shoot out the back. Now you never see much when you are on the wheel of another cyclist cos your head is down and you are concentrating like mad on their movement. I've made the mistake of taking the easier path to my destination, along a main road. There's a gorse-decorated mountain to my left and I wish I was climbing over it, thinking about sugar and spice and all things nice, rather than worrying about potholes pushing you into the path of whichever scary vehicle is passing by. I completely forget about the Dundalk Lighthouse, which is barely visible from the coast and, like the ones in Mornington, it moves around on its spidery stilts. It's finally time to either push on to the Greenore Lighthouse or else take a left over the tail end of the hill to Carlingford, avoiding this miserable main road. I choose Option B because I want to catch Gish and his crew before they head off to play tag. That way I can kinda meet them twice, before the rugby, then Pat Rafter, as the drinking kicks off. And with an hour's bantersmash in me, I'll have my curiosity head back on for Greenore, cos I'm learning now that there's a limit to how much you can soak up on the continuously bike.



Figure 9.6: Medieval Carlingford faces the North, on the other side of the lough, while cloudy mountains in the Republic loom over it.

Carlingford sits on the nice side of the Cooley peninsula, with the steep mountain at its back and the wide lough to the fore. Across the water are the Mourne Mountains of County Down,

and clearly we are in a different geographic space now. The tourists' accents suggest that this is as more an extension of Ulster than an extremity of Leinster, and the yellow registration plates corroborate this. I decide against exploring the medieval town yet so I find the gaff where Gish and half of the lads are staying and it's great to see him, a big lump of everlasting radiance, here with his crew. He might be Ireland's most popular man, with thirty-plus people spread across two houses, and another few dozen who couldn't make it. I could see from the WhatsApp group alone how loved he is. Mercifully, there is little unity to the group at this hour as everyone is still recombobulating themselves after last night, so Gish is free for chats and to introduce me to a few of the lads, and lasses, as they come and go. It's the first time I've seen a heavily pregnant woman at a stag party. Fair play to everyone involved and to Paulie for putting on this show. I lash on the kettle and sit down at the kitchen table, with Gish stood opposite, and we have a bit of a date-with-an-audience, with our rugby lives being the conversational scaffold around which we bantersmash, bouncing our pasts off one another, and Irishly making sure everyone knows who everyone is.

Me and Gish would have spent a good bit of time together as kids, cos our mams are close, and he lived with our granny, but we drifted apart as teenagers when the four-year gap mattered more. Things were probably complicated by our granny having dementia and the impact that had on our mams, especially his, who had to look after her all the time. We started hanging out again as young men, when he was doing the Leaving and I was finishing college. It's only today, while we are all shooting the breeze in the kitchen, playing a rapid-fire game of Remember When, that he reminds me the reason we were meeting up in the first place was that I was giving him maths grinds. Those few lessons morphed into cans and gigs and we've been close since, even if the number of contact hours have never been that high. Those childhood experiences have a long half-life. But it's also reminder of how important it is to have structured activities between indirect relatives. Teaching maths to my nephew and two nieces was a great way for us to spend time together, and I also worked for years with my brother-in-law (their dad), in my dad's shop. Without such structure, it can be hard to bond across ages and sub-families.

The lads all stall off to the tag rugby and so I have time enough for a Brad, Paddy and a Mexican, although I've forgotten my razor. I change back into my civvies and then sauntercycle off to the lighthouse. The sun is out now and the landscape glistens. I follow the main road for a bit, then I nudge off alongside a beautiful golf course, where all the players seem to be women. I'm tempted to shout out some mock-sexist comments, especially with all that stag juice in my blood, but I finally see a male golfer and I'm glad I've kept my trap shut. The road passes by the serene village of Greenore, and round the bend to a forlorn chunk of seaside, with a joyless port to the left and a strand forgotten by all but dogwalkers. The lighthouse is disused and sits behind a wall so I have to lift my phone overhead to get a snap of the thing. Much more invigorating is the slim, elegant Haulbowline lighthouse, a click or two out to sea, dissecting the Eastern view of the lough. To the north are the Mourne Mountains of Nair Nairn, and it's strange to see it across a body of water, as an overseas territory. Normally you just drive there and the only difference is the colour of the roads plus that ineluctable foreboding.

The place fascinates me, being both Our Land and not Our Land, and it'll be great to soak it up from the discomfort of my bicycle.



Figure 9.7: *Purpose-built in 1873, Greenore village looks like a film set from a period drama, bar the boola Jammers*

Dotted around are posters explaining the curious history of this purpose-built Victorian village, in filmset condition, and I stall the ball to soak it up. A deepwater port was built here as an alternative to tidal Carlingford, and the village housed the workers. A ferry provided a northern connection to Holyhead, for cattle and passengers, while a little train line connected to Dundalk and Newry, bringing kids to school and keeping this remote peninsular village connected to the mainland. The passenger ferry was discontinued soon after Partition, and the cargo ferry and trainline were closed down in the 1950s, making redundant a local teenager by the name of Jimmy Magee, who soon after began his legendary career as a sports commentator. Sadly the station and its luxury hotel have been demolished, along with its warm seawater baths, according to this *actual trainspotters' forum*. Nowadays, there is a shuttle ferry connecting to the Northern side of the lough, saving locals a 50k round trip, while the port continues to ship cargo, emitting dust-bearing lorries that rattle along at the frightening speeds of the overly familiar. The village, being set back from the main road, escapes this horror, and it feels like a time warp. The tea rooms survive, with a museum inside, and the lady tells me that the village's 150 year anniversary was only last week. It's a shame to have missed out but it occurs to me that I might start coinciding some of these trips with local events. A barrage of cyclists arrive and I leave her to it, rather than going to the museum, so I mosey round to the other residential street whose single line of terraced houses faces the entrance to the golf club.

Greenore golf course runs a tiny old train line which used to bring passengers from Dundalk

and Newry to the Greenore ferry which provided a northern passage to Holyhead, although it was discontinued soon after Partition. In the background sit the Mourne Mountains in The Black North, partitioned naturally by the obscured lough.



Figure 9.8: *Hanging out the back of the village are golfers who maintain a little life in the area*

On my cycle back I think of the late, great Jimmy Magee. He was one of my heroes as a kid, commentating on everything and co-presenting *Know Your Sport*, which me and my dad watched religiously every Monday, seeing if we could get the answers faster than the contestants. Being a sports commentator was one of the only jobs I wanted to do as a kid, like Michael O'Muircheartaigh or Gabriel Egan, and, as an adult, Michael Corcoran who brought European Cup Rugby to life. I ended up doing a wee bit of it in Lansdowne and I commentated on all their matches when they won their first AIL in 2012-13, with Tadgh Beirne and John Cooney on the team. I loved it so much but I've just never been able to commit my entire existence to sport cos I have this weird thing where nothing fills my soul except for writing. Still, I really ought to get back to it for the lolz.



Figure 9.9: *Gishapalooza: Tag rugby is an excellent activity for a stag party, optimizing the simultaneous desire for competition, exercise and cans.*

Back at the stag party, the lads have booked a pitch in Carlingford Rugby club, and I find Gish in his element on the field of play, with his dinky kicks and no-look passes. You can see how happy he is and how happy everyone is that he is happy. The tag rugby tournament is entering its latter phase and the semi-finals are about to kick off. Any noobs have been being subbed out by fellas looking to double up across teams, getting as much game time in as possible. Part of me would love to be out there playing but a stronger part just couldn't give a rats. I'm on the sideline, kicking and passing the ball, like old times, but the urge to compete isn't there. My relationship with sports and games has changed over time, like I've outgrown them and I'm searching for something more. It's like a mini version of my relationship with life in general, or at least how other people live it. While others scramble to play by the rules and have some fun while making ends meet, I am half in and half out. I've been working for the man for three years now and I've almost caught up with the gang, cos we've just been mortgage approved. The question is whether we want to commit to twenty-eight more years of working for the man so that we can live at home near family and friends, with lots more boola jobs around, or if we should just up sticks and live a cheaper life elsewhere, freeing up time to travel and write, and do the things we want. Sharifa wants to grow a garden and have some animals and have her own art studio. I just want my time back. I'm at my best when I have the freedom to explore and investigate. And I know that if I keep writing and keep doing interesting data projects, then I'll converge on the right format for expressing myself.

The tag rugby ends and we stroll back to the gaff where a hog roast has been cooking. I get yapping to the ladies serving the food and it turns out they are driving the van back to Drogheda, Pat Rafterwards, and they say they can give me a lift back. This means I don't have to worry about finding a Joer or, God forbid, cycling another 25k to Dundalk train station. I hang around for a couple of hours, scranning hard with the boys, who are all spruced up now and kitted out in Hawai'ian shirts, ready for the dark hours ahead. It's hard to remember who is who because I was just getting used to them in their sleeveless tag gear, spaced evenly across the pitch and memorable by their movements. Like a commentator would. It's fun now catching up with Gish's mates. We're talking double weekends as a front rower and the rebranding of Killester as Clontarf North. One lad in a foot brace tells me about the option of sea kayaking out to the inaccessible lighthouses, which is something I hadn't thought about. It turns out he's an instructor for water sports and he banjoed his leg jumping onto rocks in shallow water. That kind of carry on would bring a whole extra dimension to this project, and the idea is planted. I say goodbye to those around me and lob my Paul van into the back of the actual van and then I sit in the middle seat up front. I ask the ladies for a selfie with the three of us so that I can assure my wife I'm alright. We have a few laughs and they tell me about travelling all over the country and the ideas you get and the craic they have. I'm home by 10pm, early enough to put the chunfla to bed as he has waited up to see me, and I nod off in the knowledge that I've had a very, very wholesome day.

10 St John's Point



120

Figure 10.1: *St John's Point Lighthouse sits erect on low-lying land like a rocket with bright bumblebee hoops.*

My wife is says that this is how she wants to live. We are renting a mobile home in a field in the Dromora Hills, Co Down, and all around is green and open, with lumpy hills growing out the side of other lumps. It doesn't matter if you are inside or out, you can watch the grass grow while washing the dishes or dining al fresco. Our son can run around like a gobshite and last night I stepped out into instant peace where I could get my bike ready for this morning. As soon as we crossed the border, she said this place was different. I told her she was talking bollocks but then I remembered that it is a different geological space up here and there's every reason for it to look different, beyond the road markings and signposts.



Figure 10.2: *The Dromora Hills in County Down are lush and lumpy. Slieve Croob is well worth hiking for the panoramic views across the Mourne Mountains and the Irish sea, over which the sun rises, declaring war on the mountain clouds.*

It's my birthday today, the big Four Oh, but I didn't have it in me to organize any parties. I've not been myself since I got home from Spain, it's been pissing rain every single day, and I haven't even once gone to the beach with the chunfla. He's pissing around our apartment with no school and little purpose. And I'm just frustrated, squirrelling away money for an expensive shite gaff, doing a well-paid job that brings me down. We're not sure if we can go on holiday holidays while my dad recovers from his illness, although he no longer needs round the clock care. I've lost the confidence to just pick up the Tony and ask people to come and see me, but now that we are finally out of Dodge, I can feel my energy lifted. It's good to be out with my little family, even if it's only for a few days, and maybe when I'm forty-two I will have the answer to life, the universe and everything, and *then* we can all party.

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The trip today is fairly simple. I just have to descend towards the main road, turn left and make my way towards the coast thence hug the wide bay until the lighthouse. It's a nice downhill start, with the odd uphill lump, although I've got Google maps in my ear telling me

to turn left in 800 quote-unquote feet, which is a shite unit of travel. Yesterday I missed a right turn, driving up here, because I couldn't believe that 200 feet could be so little. It was one of those frightening exits they love up here on their 1980s dual-cabbageways. You have to slow down in the fast lane and then pull across oncoming traffic and pray. When I was a kid, those roads looked so advanced, straight and bumpless, with a thick red hard shoulder, and we'd all be in awe as soon as we got through the army checkpoints at the border. But now the road quality highlights the lack of progress Up North while things have steadily improved Down South.

So I skip Google's suggested route because I want to go to one of my favourite childhood memories, a silly valley on the road to Castlewellan, where the road goes down and then right back up again, like a BMX-ramp on roids. We used to come here because my mam's best friend (Pauline) married a farmer from nearby (Tony), and they moved up from Dublin in the mid-Sixties, just before The Troubles kicked off. Pauline and Tony also had six kids, so we each had a partner child. They'd always stall down to Dublin for New Year's Eve and stuff, with a carload of duvets and blankets. By the time I came along, we'd go on holidays to Sligo, every year, although by then it was just their younger kids and ours, jumping into the ocean waves, or stuck inside, playing Jack Changes and listening to Atlantic 252. It was only years later I found out that our gaff in Dublin had been their refuge, throughout the Seventies and Eighties, whenever things were spicy up North. But as things quietened down in the Nineties, ish, I found myself up here quite a lot, and I spent a whole week in Pauline & Tony's as a seven year old while my folks went cycling along the Danube. I remember looking across the fields and being told of IRA training camps, although I always sensed that they were the enemy, and still to this day, when someone knocks on my front door in the middle of the night, I still think it's the 'Ra, here to finally get me. I never heard anything about Brits or the UVF and my first memory of them was the Loughinisland Massacre, just a couple of miles from Pauline and Tony's, as several people were gunned down while watching Ireland beating Italy in Giants Stadium during the 1994 World Cup. Who else would do that during the football?

I enter the valley near its trough, in a village called Annsborough, and there's a signpost pointing to an integrated primary school. It's astonishing that twenty-five years after the Good Friday aka Belfast Agreement, over 90% of children still go to segregated schools, so kids grow up without ever meeting anyone from the other side, until they go to uni or work. This even happened among Nordies who came Down South to Trinity, and I'll never forget Den and Simon being mates, and drunkenly hugging each other cos they'd never known anyone from the other side. Sports are also informally segregated, with Catholics playing Gaelic Football, and Protestants playing soccer or rugby, depending on social class. Of course, The South is also segregated along similar lines. This is obvious to the tiny number of remaining Protestants who often go to schools with a historically Protestant ethos, and who [can even avail of a grant towards their school fees](#). But it is not at all obvious to the vast majority of Catholics who simply never meet any of these Protestants. I only noticed this cos my primary school was inter-denominational, so like 70% Prods, and it was a big shock when I went to a Catholic secondary school and no one knew about marmite.

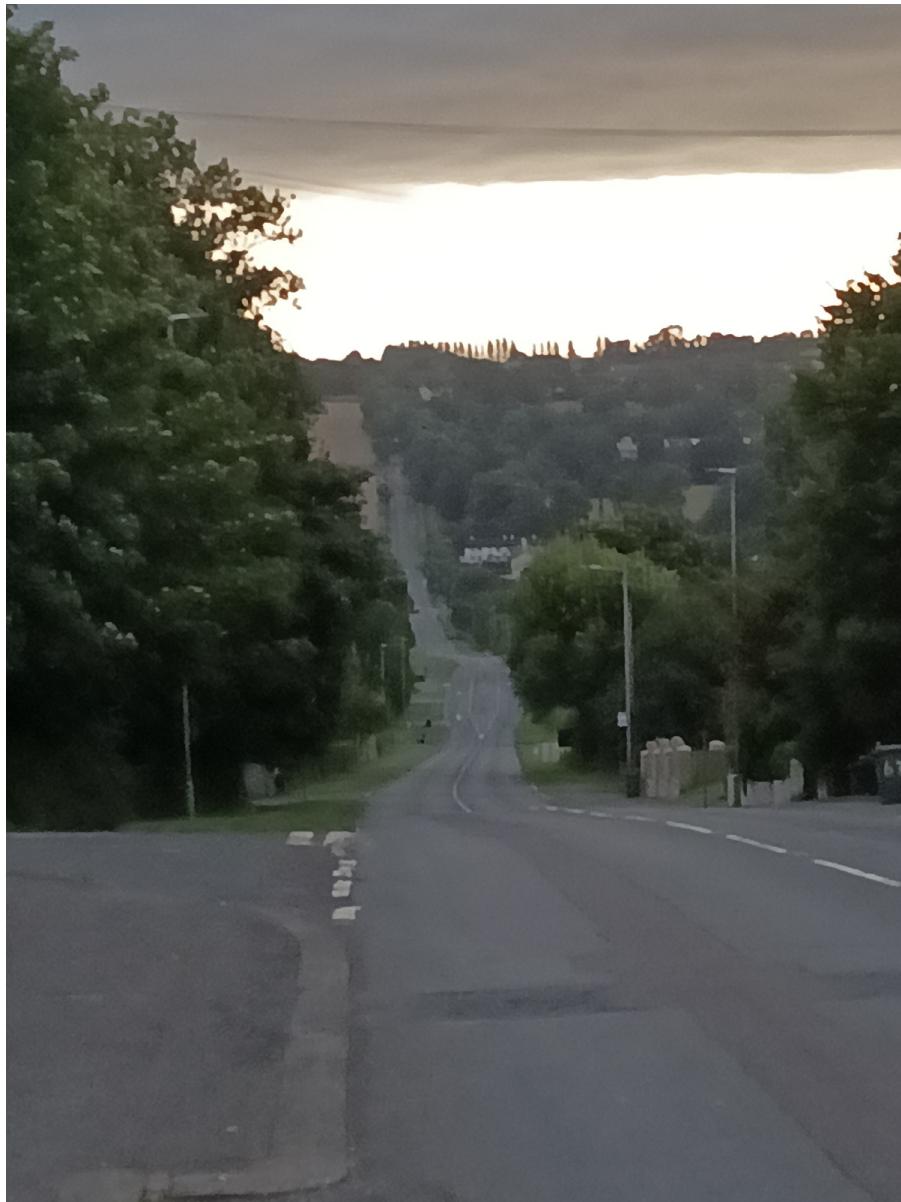


Figure 10.3: *The downhill-uphill road into Castlewellan seemed like an outrageous undulation as a child but less so as grown up.*

I decide I want to cycle up both hills so I turn right towards Castlewellan, away from my destination, and I stop for moment to rearrange my clothes, else I'll be sweating my Brits off. It's actually fine, no more than four or five percent, but it's a good warm up for the lungs after a few clicks of morning descent, and I make it up in the big ring without having to worry about my misaligned front derailleur. I piss it back down and then back up the shallower side

and I wonder how such a strange valley could occur. Maybe it is the meeting point of two mountain ranges. The edge of the Mourne Mountains on one side and the Dromora Hills on the other. I follow the road for seven clicks to Clough, and I'm glad it's early on a Saturday cos it's one of those fast one-lane roads that make for miserable cycling. Clough greets me with dozens of flags espressing the village identity. I'm well used to Union Jacks and Ulster flags, but these lads have several more I don't recognise, and it is extremly intimidating. I stop for photos but it's hard to capture the flags as they ruffle in the light breeze. I chicane right-left out of the down towards the coast and it's quiet roads at last. With the hills behind me, I could be anywhere in Ireland's Ancient East, bar the odd roadsigns (*Humps ahead*), and big statues of Our Lady outside the Catholic churches, marking territory. There's a small bridge over a neatly patterned river estuary and a few minutes later I notice the soil looks sandy, as though I'm at the sea, and it turns out I am, so I nip down to Tyrella Beach for a sconce at the waves.



Figure 10.4: *Tyrella Beach with St John's Point Lighthouse in the distance (squint bang centre)*.

The beach is long and my lighthouse destination marks the end of the bay to the left slash north. There's a fella parked on a camping chair and his hello is pure dead Ulster but his speech turns out to be Welsh and it turns out him and the wife and the mother-in-law drove 40 clicks here cos it's an accessible beach. It takes me two or three gambits before I realise he's properly up for the chats, so once we've smalltalked through local geography and the perils of Brexit for a Welshman going home from Nair Nairn, I throw in the rugby gambit, asking how things are in the Welsh camp, knowing that it's obviously a shit show. Suddenly it's like listening to myself banging on about the game, only much more informed, and he's off on one now about interpretations of the law, and not just Barnesie versus Jaco Peyper, but his own reading of how the game should be played. Cos it turns out he used to be a referee before his accident, and I feel immeasurable pain for this crippled man who used to travel around

Wales and England, facilitating joy. Instead, he's plonked here, while his loved ones wander the length of the beach. His regrets are not the injury - at least not out loud - but rather than he didn't start refereeing sooner, and I'm thinking I ought to get myself into it, potentially as the chunfla grows up, cos my future in the game is in those lone-ranger roles, refereeing, commentating and maybe coaching. I could yap all day to this man but I need to hit the Dermot and I leave him sat there with the wind blowing in his beard.



Figure 10.5: *Humps ahead for 440 yards. It's the little differences...*



Figure 10.6: *The road to the lighthouse (top right) is never a straight line.*



Figure 10.7: *The whole of the Northern Ireland seems to be an area of outstanding beauty, according the English and Welsh.*



Figure 10.8: *I can't tell if this is a campaign to tell tourists to keep away.*

The rest of the cycle is bliss, following the coast road along the mellow bay. The road is quiet bar the odd motorbike troupe sampling the *Mourne Coastal Route* slash *Strangford and Lecale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty*, a designation which reminds me of just how much beauty exists on this island, cos there is nothing outstandingly outstanding about it. I pass an Artist's Gallery with a manicured garden right on the coast owned by one of those people who decided that they were going to buy a house on the sea and have a nice garden. It seems to be part of a lovely UK-wide initiative where passers-by can come and chillax in your Dexter Gordon as long as they throw a few shekels in the charity box, so I resolve to pop in on the way back if it's open. A fork in the road leads to the lighthouse and before I turn down the final cul de sac, I stop to read a sign telling us to stay a-basically-way, as far as I can tell. But I'm confused that the website is *irishlights.ie*, rather than like Greenpeace or someone ecomological.



Figure 10.9: *The apine-coloured lighthouse sits low on a tongue of pasture land jutting out at the end of the long bay.*

The clouds begin to part as I arrive at the lighthouse and it's yellowy-yellowness beams out of the ground like a cross between a space rocket and an ice lolly. The approach is low and doesn't feel peninsular, as there are fields to the right. But the lighthouse and its campus are surrounded by low rocks and if I didn't know better, I'd nearly pop in for a swim or a cheeky bath in between the rocks. Any such fantasies are shattered when I see a shrine to Baby Noah who died here aged just fifteen months. Maybe he slipped and banged his head and got drowned by waves. Today would have been his seventh birthday and suddenly I'm a blubbering mess. You always feel a special connection to people who share your birthday. Snot drools out of my nose as I write him a birthday card. I think of Tiffer who died at 28, and all the fun of life that he missed out on. Poor little Noah only got one year at it and how must his parents feel. I can hear The Velvet Underground ringing in my head for some reason. *How does it feel to be loooo-ooooved? How does it feel to be loooo-ooooved?*



Figure 10.10: *What a place to wake up!*

I am not alone here. There seem to be people staying in the lighthouse keepers' lodges, and there's a camper van parked facing the waves, with an empty-nest couple having their breakfast inside, and I'm half tempted to ask them for a cheeky coffee. I get yapping eventually to Messrs Murphy of Killough, a father and son combo with a large camera and worthwhile opinions. I actually think I met them in the Giant's Causeway a couple of years ago. I remember that dad saying, in his equally hard-to-locate accent, that he taught his son everything before the school taught it to him and I thought that that would be a great goal. There are always photography enthusiasts in places like this but these lads are here for the specifically birds. My avian knowls are brutal and I'm not even able to ask any questions to get the yap moving in that direction. Instead I ask about the signpost I saw en route and the dad tells me that there is a push to replace the lighthouse light with shitbox LED lights (not his actual words), all to save a few (he might have said) bob. He says it's *like replacing an old Rolls Royce engine with a Ford*, and I remember those words cos I have a perfunctory old Ford car myself. The lads make tracks and for my next trick I approach the lady from the camper van as she is now hanging out the back of it. She tells me it's the best thing they've ever done and I'm well jell. We really have to get ourselves a camper van. What a place to wake up!



Figure 10.11: *The layered transition between land and sea is very apparent at Rossglass Beach on the way home.*

Having blended up the place, as the Omanis say, it's time to hit the hashtag and I just double back on myself, soaking up the coastline views along the sunsoaked bay. The tide is out and the layers of transition between the land and sea are very apparent here, from the grassy verge along the road, past the beached boulders, to the seaweed line where high tide reaches. Beyond it is a rocky ecosystem of tiny pools and my sudden arrival has scared off hundreds of birds who had been gorging themselves. Their departure shows how they had been clustered by species and I'm beginning to understand what birdwatchers must be watching. I remember being puzzled how Alex Christie-Miller, back in college, volunteered to stare at birds, when he wasn't off on the Trans-Siberian Express, catching up on all of the other Nabokov novels. But I guess he was just twenty years ahead of me and maybe his dad had always brought him to these far-flung locations, like Messrs Murphy of Killough.

I stop off at a car park to admire the view and read the sign explaining the local flora and fauna. A jeep parks up and out steps an elderly farmer in a barber jacket and yellow, festival-bird wellies that match my cycling jersey. I ask him if we can swap footwear and he laughs and then we trade inquiries about livestock and accents, and he is bemused by my brand of Germanic. He's going in to say a prayer in the church opposite. His wife died of cancer three years ago, during lockdown, and his pain is still raw. She was alone in the room, unable to hug her family or even hold her husband's hand. As he tells me this, he is clutching my handlebars as if he is holding her fingers, desperately trying to hang on. We didn't get the fifty, he says, referring to their gold anniversary.



Figure 10.12: *Sunrise in La Mata, Spain, the morning after the night my dad didn't die.*

It's only now that I've been in there with my dad, holding his hand as he nearly died of Covid-19, that I can understand some of this man's pain, and his wife's, and the horror of what so many people went through during High Covid, with no oxygen and no one by their side. There is no way that my dad would have survived without our support and the Spanish hospital even told us that in their report afterwards. That meant a lot because even though you think it to yourself, you also doubt it. My dad didn't want to sleep at night because he was afraid he wouldn't wake up, and he was a day or two ahead of us on that. We'd be in there all night, willing him to sleep and rest, but he couldn't relax. On the Saturday night, after the hospital had basically given up on him, we all sat there the whole night, me, my mam and three of my sisters, resigned. He spoke briefly on the phone to Monica, his last surviving sibling, and she told him she'd take him to the races when he got home, knowing full well this was the last time she'd ever speak to him. But she knew she had to give him something to look forward to. Then Babs said her husband was picking the fruit in his garden while we were all away. I said my wife would make some jam from it. At 1am, two of my grown nieces arrived and I'll never forget the bright blue light in my dad's eyes, the surge of energy he got on seeing them, and he asked if they were over on holidays. An hour later my last two sisters arrived and gave him another burst of energy. Around 3am, my wife told me on the phone to get some fluids in to have some hope, because the doctors stop giving them when the patient is actively dying. So I told the nurse that he had no fluids and, shocked, she lashed in an extra litre of isotonic, saying she'd monitor his heart in an hour. By 5 or 6am it felt like he had survived. The room emptied as we tried to get a bit of kip in the car park or head off to find some nosebag. I walked down to the beach for a swim and took photos of the sunrise on the night that my dad didn't die. The next day we got him out of the bed in his chair, despite his concentration camp legs, and we started saying *Viva Valentine!* to the hospital staff to keep their interest in this seemingly doomed man. I'm welling up now as I write this because we never thought he'd make it. But he did, bit by bit, because he didn't want to die. I didn't understand before what it means to fight death but my dad did it. A couple of weeks later, he was flown home in a freezing ambulance and he's basically himself again now, back out in his garden at eighty-eight years of age.



Figure 10.13: *The curvaceous Mourne mountains.*

The grieving man goes off to say his prayers and I saunter off in the sunshine. I should really jump in to the water for a bit but I'm feeling way too sofack so I push on. In the distance, the Mourne Mountains sit pretty, like a factory for breasts before they put the nipples on, all sizes equally beautiful. The trip back to Clough is slower than I expect, and when I get there I decide to go to French's Bar and Restaurant which Winifred, our Airbnb host, recommended. I ask a chunfla at the bus stop if there's anywhere else, just to get a second opinion on the matter, and he says it's the best spot. He's got a bag of gear and a blue football jersey saying Something Rangers on it, and I regret not asking him a bit about the community. There's a flag on every single lamppost on this street. I'm pretty scared cos I've never eaten under an Irish Union Jack but when I get inside I'm shocked that half the staff are Catholic. I tell the first waitress about Pauline and Tony and she's trying to work out if she knows them cos she herself is from Loughinisland. The second waitress asks me about the All-Ireland final which is on today, featuring Dublin apparently, and she tells me how Down just beat Meath in the Tailteann Cup final. A repeat of the 1991 All-Ireland, my first day in boarding school. Pauline's kids came down and Hill 16 was red and black instead of Dublin blue. It's amazing how sport connects people. And disconnects them. But wages bung you all together. I suppose there's doesn't be enough employment in rural areas that people can pick and choose. I devour a fat-ass Ulster Breakfast and then I scribble my thoughts at breakneck speed over a couple of macchiati. Writing is easy when you know what you want to say. I call Pauline and we arrange to meet tomorrow. Then I saddle up and drag my dadbod up the Dromora Hills, where the signposts are in both English and Irish.



Figure 10.14: *Some parts of Nairn now sport signposts in both English AND Irish, and not an italic in sight.*

11 Hook Head



Figure 11.1: *Hook Head: the Big Daddy of lighthouses*

0810 Friday August 4, 2023

Graham sends me a picture of Hook Head lighthouse because he can see it across the water from his living room in Dymore East, where he is summering with his wife, toddler and fresh bambino. In between the two landmasses is the large, n-shaped Waterford harbour, and the plan today is for the both of us to cycle from one lighthouse to the other and back, seventy clicks, up the Waterford side, across on the boola ferry, and then down the Wexford side to the Big Daddy of all lighthouses, Hook Head, which has been keeping her lit since like the twelfth century, *anno domino*.

I'm only halfway there, sitting in an Applegreen Service Station in Paulstown, Co Kilkenny, desperately trying to finish off a report for work by hashtag end of week. I zipped down here first thing, but I'm anxious to dunzo the work before meeting GK, as he is known, although you might know him from [Graham's Mustard](#), whose condiments have, since the peak of the recession, been adorning the plates of discerning food lovers. I had actually planned to stall it down last night but this report clogged up my plans, so now I'm sat in a Costa Coffee, the Marks & Spencer of cafés, where everything scores 6.8 out of 10. I always work well in their lower-upper-mid-quality decor, and the gentle lighting (ish) does be good for my delicate

brain. I'm also glad of the break visually and intellectually, because the M9 is the most boring motorway in Ireland, and it breaks my heart to waste my good morning brain watching grass dry.

After the pit stop, a few hills emerge north of Waterford, and the rush-hour traffic turns out to be the most interesting part of the drive. My brain gets rebooted by the act of looking at something. I remember arriving in Paris once, after eight weeks in North Burgundy, the Leitrim of France, and the concrete jungle got my ruralized brain back moving. This is worth remembering, should we decided to move to the countryside to save cash and buy some space. By the time I slingshot out to Dunmore, I'm adequately stimulated, and I have fond memories of hanging out here with Grimey, aka the 'late' Brendan Walsh, who had to stall out to New Zealand forever. His soon-to-be-ex-partner wanted to go home home, so her and their chunfla went first, while Grimey came out in his own good time, to find that he had been dumped, and thus had to either go home alone or co-parent forever on the other side of their world. At Graham and Sophie's wedding, in Dunmore, Grimey stopped the (after)party to give himself a eulogy of sorts, as he knew he wouldn't be seeing anyone much again, and I really hope I haven't lost the video I took of it.



Figure 11.2: *And they're off...*

It's nearly ten o'clock by the time I get to Dunmore, but GK's rented bike still hasn't even been delivered. Parking outside their gaff is a mare, with signs and traffic cones telling the tourists to Foxtrot Oscar. But the orkwordness brings the community together and immediately I'm being introduced to a neighbour with whom I'm going to be doing a parking switcherooney. I then whip Blue Thunder out of the boot, cos I still haven't been arsed fixing my road bike, and I get down to some low-end maintenance. I've got bicycle shorts for Graham, which he'll defo be needing, but he claims my spare jersey is too tight, and I'm disappointed cos I like to

think that my five foot high, two foot wide physique would map neatly onto the chassis of his leanish two-ish metres. Both of us are, after all, fourteen and a half stone. Instead he goes all underarmer on the problem but I put my foot down on him taking a sweaty backpack. He's never cycled anything like this distance, the furthest was a trip out to Howth and back with me about two years ago. So when Ralph comes to deliver the carbon-fibre bicycle, Sophie starts rinsing Graham, saying he'll never be able for the journey. Ralph, who is a bit of a bog-man jack-the-lad, doesn't even respond to her, and asks Graham if she'll be quiet soon. He tells us a bit about the bike and I ask a question about the gears, to which he tells us that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, demonstrating the bike mechanic's knack of making cyclists feel like dodos. So I don't bother asking him to help with my bike. Ralph legs it, I tighten my brakes and attach some cleat pedals. We're on the road by 11, with me lugging beach towels in a bag on Blue Thunder's child seat.



Figure 11.3: *Dunmore Strand and Lower Village*. Graham & Sophie's wedding was in *The Strand Bar*, which guards the beach.

The start of the cycle is a punctuated affair, touring around Dunmore. GK's gaff is down in the lower village, where *The Strand Bar* guards the striking beach, set between low cliffs to the left and a rising hill-cliff to the right, up to the main village. Strong walls keep the water at bay and when the tide is in, punters can walk straight in from the road. When the tide recedes, out come the buckets, spades and footballs. Graham and Sophie's gaff is close enough that while you wouldn't walk into the water before brushing your teeth, you could easily excuse your self from dinner, and sneak out for a quick swim while there others think you are downstairs in the Barryer. Downstairs, because their gaff has been inverted, with the bedrooms by the front door and the living space upstairs, affording sea views and Hook Head in the background.

We ask a couple of DryRobes to take a picture of us and the volunteer does the job at holiday speed. We scale the hill up towards the main village, and in the narrow park between the road and cliffs, several ageing ladies are learning tennis, with the Pet Shop Boys inexplicably blasting out. This is what it's all about round here. Wholesome lower-upper-mid-level holidaying, which is as posh as it gets in Ireland. Long weekends away from the city, drinking Pyms if you have an in-the-know friend. Entire summers of golf, and not a whiff of amusements and arcades. Graham says he actually has a game of tennis lined up soon with a fella he met in the pub the other day, and I'm not surprised that he fits in here so well. The Good Life oozes out of him, and while someone did once call him a diamond-jumper faggot, he never brings any rigid-bodied stuffiness to proceedings, but rather an infectious lightheartedness, and no one makes me laugh more.



Figure 11.4: *Hook Head lighthouse can be seen across the water from everywhere in Dunmore*

We descend to the well-maintained harbour, with its twelve-sided lighthouse, a neat little structure. I get Graham to read out the badly-written plaque while I scope out angles to photograph this lighthouse and Hook Head in the background. The theme of the plaque is that everyone should be saved at sea, friend or foe, and it's a reminder of the beneficence inherent in lighthousery. Meanwhile, the sight of grown men processing oysters is a reminder of the physical hardship goes into earning a basic crust in a foreign country. Once the photoshoot is over, we are on the road proper, doubling back on ourselves before exiting on an eliminator hill, as Graham calls it. Of course, my front derailleur fails on me so I'm on the side of the road, putting it back together and I'm delighted to see he has stalled the ball for me at the top - cos there are plenty who wouldn't. But I'm even more delighted that he has had no trouble with the climb, as neither of us is sure how able he will be for the cycle. We've played five-a-side with him for years, on and off with our mates, and he's not a mechanical engine-room player like me, of the kind that translates naturally into the workaday nature of cycling. Graham's

always on a wing or up front, where his tekkerz and micro-explosiveness can burst in and out of the action. The land undulates all the way to Passage East on the quiet roads and he is shocked by the speed of the descent into Woodstown as he adjusts to this kind of bike. On the flatter sections, there is a little time to yap and talk about the plague of house prices, as both of us are still renting in Dublin with two young children. We stop off now and then to admire a fine lawn or flowery garden, and we take snaps as we enter the village of Crooke.



Figure 11.5: *We'll get there, by Crooke and by Hook.*

Later on, our tour guide in Hook Lighthouse tells us that during the 1649 siege of Waterford Oliver Cromwell used to ask his troops to take it *by Hook or by Crooke*, meaning from the peninsula east or west of the sea lough. This is believed to be the the origin of the phrase, but it turns out, [the phrase is actually recorded](#) from 1380 in the writings of John Wycliffe, the great pre-Reformation translator of the Bible, so it was long in existence. Looking at Google's n-gram viewer, which lets us track phrase usage in their library of yoinked books, in the print era, we can see a major spike in late 1620's. This was a little before Cromwell, after whom so many Irish boys have been named in recent years, was in his destructive pomp. My feeling is that Cromwell's crew possibly knew the phrase already, and would have had serious lolz in mapping it to the task at hand.

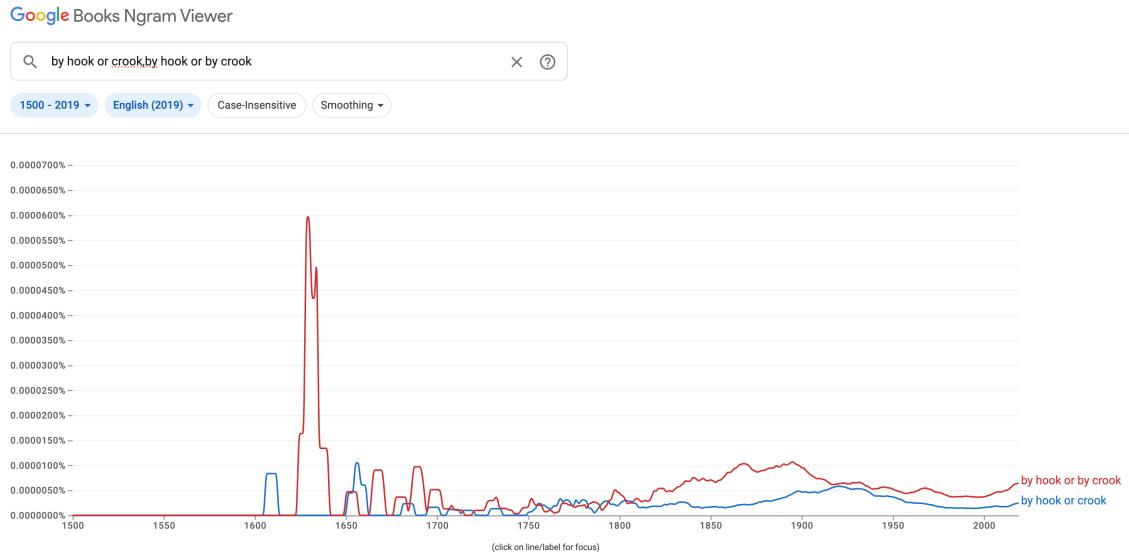


Figure 11.6: *The phrase “By hook or (by) crook” predates Cromwell’s siege of Waterford in 1649, having peaked in the 1620s. The lads must’ve had plenty of lolz with the phrase.* [data](#)

The main road on the Waterford side of the harbour is mostly set back from the sea lough because of sand deposits on this side of the water, and it is only after descending to the picturesque fishing village of Passage East that the history of this area becomes easier to view. You can see several settlements at once, nestled into coves among the cliffs, like a cloudy Cinque Terre. Less than a kilometer across the water is the tiny village of Ballyhack, to which the ferry shuttles back and forth all day long, and just south is the larger Arthurstown, set in a bigger bay. We miss one departure but only have to wait twenty minutes for the boola boat to come back and collect us. Time enough for us to have a few proper lolz and for me to monster the fig rolls, to Graham’s horror. It’s four nicker return for cyclists and the weather-faced ticket collector tells us that a quite a few people commute into Waterford City from the Wexford side of the harbour. This is good intel, because I could see myself living round here, in a village by the sea, with a city nearby for jobs and coffee. Graham is wondering if I’d move to Dunmore East, but it’s too dear for somewhere so far away, and probably a bit too nice for me. The kind of place that people with money move to for The Good Life. I’d rather arrive somewhere cheaper and scaldier, and gamble on living through its growth, with a cheap enough mortgage, rather than pledging myself to the proverbial man until the day I pretty much die. Across the water in Ballyhack, Graham grabs fluids in the shop while I needlessly scale the fourteen percent hill and have a quick bit of micro-bant with the locals. We push back along the coast to Arthurstown and Duncannon to the south. These towns are on the Norman Way, a Wexford-based tourist trail which focuses on the very visible ruins of that hybrid culture which dominated these parts in the late Middle Ages. The presence of such

ruins, dotted along the peninsular coastline of South Wexford, makes it easier to reimagine the past, and later on our tour guide reconstructs that life for us a little.

Once we get to beach town of Duncannon it's me who knows the way better because I was here last year with the fam, on a one-night camping trip, testing out whether we would enjoy the misery. In theory we did, but the tent wouldn't stay up and my wife was freezing her pregnant tits off so the whole hashtag experience wasn't the Kanye West. Of course, I jumped on the Paul van early in the morning and took the coast road to Fethard-on-Sea, but guilt got the better of me and I didn't cycle the whole peninsula to Hook Head. That missed opportunity was something that sowed the seed for the current adventure. A week later I was cycling to Poolbeg Lighthouse and starting this book. The road rises out of Duncannon and Graham is disappointed that it hasn't flattened off yet. He's used to looking at the long, flat, treeless peninsula from the other side, with Loftus House sitting exposed on its Tobler. Apparently it is going to be turned into a boozer, and Grahams says his in-laws are looking forward to boating over from Dunmore for a few scoops. I think we're both starting to realize that we've been missing out on a whole extra realm of travel. For now though, we actually have a few clicks to go before hitting the strange peninsula. We stop off to gawk at a ruined church and then take on the headwind on the long straight road to the lighthouse, with the sea nearby on both sides. Graham is starting to worry that he won't make it home because his legs are screaming.



Figure 11.7: *The lighthouse campus has been turned into a major tourist attraction with the old keepers' lodges being repurposed into a visitor centre.*

I'm shocked on arrival to see that the lighthouse campus is jammers, and the familiar lighthouse loneliness has been replaced by modern man on tour. Cars are parked inside and outside the walls; camper vans occupy micro-peninsulae along the cliffy edges. Kids play in a boat-shaped

playground, and a real-life pirate wanders among the picnic benches looking to dazzle the sprogs. Bikers huddle near a supposed rack for push bikes, but it's one of those knee-high jobbies into which you wedge your back wheel, waiting for it to topple and buckle, while your front wheel gets optionally stolen, so I'm having none of it. GK is in getting the Wilsons for an upcoming tour, so I ask a grumpy attendant where else I can park the bike. He assures me there's a chain behind a big metal buoy but I can't find it so I lock the bikes to a signpost.



Figure 11.8: *The view from the cafeteria in the visitor centre at Hook Head, validating the cost of the sambo.*

We've got 45 minutes to kill before the four o'clock tour, and it's time to refuel. Graham had originally scoped out a fish restaurant for the return leg, but we need to take the L on that because needs must. I grab a plain pizza for a tenner in an outdoor van, and Graham comes back to tell me that's he's been unreliably informed that the £16.50 prawn sandwich is the bees knees. It turns out there's a cafeteria inside, with views to match the price of the sambo. I open up my pizza, unload my pockets, and we kick back to reflect on a great day out so far, although I'm half-expecting some busybody to come and kick me out for bringing in my own food. And sure enough, some Battleaxe does barge in the door, making an urgent appeal to the owners of the two bicycles locked outside, as though we had double parked a camper van on top of an ambulance. She really wants it and she's picked a fight with the right man because I'm having none of her bolloxology. I tell her, indignantly, that never in a life of locking bicycles to lampposts have I had trouble from anyone, and she's like *People can't read my signpost*. So I have to stall it outside and it's clear that she has already made a scene out there because there's a handful of onlookers ready to see the guilty party. Thankfully, there's one lady who has also never seen anything like it, which calms my blood a bit, but there's also another member of staff, male, early twenties, well built, and he thinks I must be a career criminal. I ask him why I can't lock the bikes there and he says it's the rules. I ask him why,

but that's above his pay grade. He's starting to get thick with me and I remember how my wife always knows when people aren't worth fighting with, so I ease off and cool my jets. But you can feel the siege mentality of the staff, dealing with the public all day long, and at last they have a scapegoat for their collective seething. The lad shows me to the famous chain beside the buoy, but it's basically a metal shoelace behind the wall, dating from a buoy-gone era, and you'd sooner chew it off with your teeth than break my bike lock with an angle-grinder. I saunter back in to GK, with a prawn-sandwich eating grin all over his Brendan, and the two of us giggle like schoolgirls.

The lighthouse itself is huge, thick-set like a one thousand-year-old tree, except painted in giant black and white hoops. The walls are twelve feet deep at the base with tiny windows, and a winding staircase spirals around what is basically a medieval apartment block, with three circular, vaulted halls stacked on top of each other. The lighthouse keepers used to live in here until the nineteenth century, and monks before them, along with other fiends looking for trouble, warming themselves from fireplaces the size of a king-size bed. The ancient tower is seventy-two feet high and plonked on top of it is a modern lighthouse, the usual white with red trimmings, and a spinning light whose power cannot be appreciated by day, unless you see it in a dark room, which we can as part of our tour. The ground floor of the lighthouse used to be a coal storage room, with walls and ceilings as black as a fireplace. In the middle is a disused Fresnel lens, the beautiful chiselled sphere which lighthouses have been using to refract light since the nineteenth century, sending out those iconic spinning beams of light. Our guide spins it, like the Alberto Pomodoro sculptures in Trinnerz, The Vatican and elsewhere, and the lens sends out a bright blue beam around the coal-blackened walls of this room. I'm glad I have my Irlen lenses on because even though I look like an obviously knob, it's good to be protected a little from this spinning strobe light which could (and should) illuminate a techno festival. The lens upstairs, we are told, is much bigger than this one which has been taken from another lighthouse, presumably replaced by a scatty LED light. Clearly this is what Messrs Murphy, the birdspotters in St John's Point, were harping on about. In front of me is their so-called Rolls Royce, a truly beautiful piece of engineering, and the people of Killough want to keep it spinning in their lighthouse, rather than replacing it with some Ford-like functionality to save a few shekels.



Figure 11.9: *Our guide, John, has a writer's knack of seeing the big picture in the little details, connecting this outpost to the heart of our lives.*

There's a glorious new viewing room built low down on the landless side, with a 270 degree arc of windows, and our tour starts here with John, who explains, in his curious accent, that this area is known as the graveyard of a thousand ships. This is where four bodies of waters meet, making it the third most dangerous spot in the world, after Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope. To our right slash south-west are the Celtic Seas and Atlantic Oceans, although I don't understand where one ends and the other starts. To our left slash North-East, is St George's Channel, bringing Atlantic-bound ships from Wales and England. Our guide reminds us that emigrants from these lands would have passed by here, including the Titanic, which is logged in the lighthouse's notebooks. He has a knack of seeing the big picture in the little details. The ships connect Old World emigrants to the New World tourists here today. The medieval knight, William Marshall, who built this lighthouse and later signed the Magna Carta, is actually a forefather of modern democracy. The New Ross tapestries are the Norman way of taking selfies, and the young children in the tour are the inheritors of a venerable oral culture which we adults must strive to pass on. John's monologues are delivered at 2X speed with silence trimmed, doubling his value, although it's probably heavy going for non-native speakers. The tour ends on top of the lighthouse with panoramic views and we thank our guide, before extracting a few bonus stories from him on the way down, when really he needs to unwind. It's a tiring job and his voice is not yet ready to relax. I loved being a tour guide but the comedown is tough and booze is an easy solution. I also hated giving the same tour twice in one day because I could never remember if I had told that story already and my brain would frazzle. My cache memory needs to be wiped before I can repeat the act. I was lucky because I'd have the Colosseum for breakfast, the Vatican for lunch and sometimes the centre of Rome in the evening. Or two thereof. But in a place like this there is only one tour to give, on repeat, and it must be grinding. All the same, I resolve to come back later this

weekend with my family.



Figure 11.10: *The graveyard of a thousand ships. If you look closely, you can see two bodies of water meeting here at the end of the peninsula. To the left is The Celtic Sea and to the right is Waterford Harbour with a lighter colour. In the background is Dunmore East.*

The trip home is a gentler affair with the wind on our backs now, and this time we take a detour to the East of the peninsula, via Hookless Village, Baginbun Beach and Fethard-on-sea. I want to check out some holiday homes for sale in a complex where, for some reason, there are like five for sale. I don't know whether it would be feasible to raise a family all year round in a remote place like this but I want to get the vibe, so we go in for a quick spin round. I really like the set up, with the houses being detached yet connected by the large open lawn on which they sit. This looks ideal for kids to play while remaining in view. It's also easy to talk to anyone so I approach a middle-aged man out painting his walls, which is something you'd want to enjoy in a sea-swept place like this. He's got kayaks on his wooden balcony and I tell him I'm interested in one of the gaffs for sale over there. The wife comes soon after and we quickly get the vibe that they've had enough of the place. There's mention of a nasty neighbour and I could do without another one of them. Meanwhile, The Ukraines have all moved in to the rental houses on the other side and now there's no tourists, no one to bring cash in to the area, and the nearby boozer is dínta. They have a face of regret, of being stuck here now, and it's clear they don't recommend the place.



Figure 11.11: *I took this pic of Carnivan Bay last year, while out galavanting. Unfortunately, it's not safe for swimmers, only surfers.*

It's a few clicks along the coast towards Baginbun beach, a place that seems to be gathering traction, but beside it is the even more beautiful Carnivan Bay, a surfer's beach which is not safe for swimmers. We sit on the bench and admire the glorious view, where the turquoise colour of the water remains apparent despite the total cloud cover. A couple of days later, during my second visit to Hook Lighthouse, another guide tells us, with heartbreak fresh on his face, that he put this bench here, to remember his wife who died. They would come here, despite her condition, and she always said there should be a bench. We pop down to Baginbun on the other side of the headland and its mere nine-out-ten-ness seems like a let down after Carnivan. I love this beach and came here thrice within 30 hours last year. Once to check it out with the family, once on the bike the next morning as an endpoint, and again that afternoon for another family day out. I seldom rush back anywhere, but this place is special. The beach is a cosy cove of five hundred odd meters, with little grassy cliffs behind, adding the green and brown you never knew you needed at the beach. It's big enough to have space but small enough to force interaction between everyone, adding atmos to the gaff. I can't stand big

fuckoff beaches like Portmarnock and Donabate where the endless space recommends people run away from each other. I want people on top of me, like in a hostel, where you can choose between getting on with them or being a weirdo on your Tobe. Far too much of modern life accommodates reclusiveness, with everyone boxed off in their rooms and their cars and their little bubbles. The beach is also sloped, meaning the tide doesn't go far out and your kids don't edge off to the horizon. The only work-ons are some rocks and seaweed in the water at the entrance end, and we make our way to the far end. Another striking feature is that people wallop sliotars about, as if there is no danger of taking someone's head off. This just seems to be de rigueur here in the hurling counties. But it's too cold today for hanging out and it's swimmers only. The slope means that the water is instantly deep, preventing the death by a thousand cuts which you get wading through shallow water. It turns out that this is to Graham's liking and he's even more of a teabag swimmer than me. In and out. In and out. Out for good. The lack of sun makes it all the harder because there is no radiator to warm up your body, and with all the stopping and starting, it's not like our core body temperature needs to be reduced. I'm delighted to lash on my spare cycling jersey, the one that didn't fit Graham, and we are ready again the 30k cycle home.

But first, we stall the ball for a coffee in the little coffee hut, although Gk orders builders' tea for reasons I have never understood. The beach facilities are all very new, only a year or two old, including a car park, a sauna hut and a kayak school, and it's fun to watch the interaction and hierarchy among the workers as they have little to do on this cloudy evening. Like me, Gk thinks that kayak outings are a loadamebollix, because you're always just doing pointless exercises and going nowhere. *Ok guys, just paddle to the left there and we'll all form a nice circle.* He's glad to hear that the kayakers in this place visit the caves. It reminds me of the dog which him and his dad got years ago, a hunting dog which was always on duty, watching. Neither of them would have any interest in a sit-around dog. Graham's dad died maybe ten years ago, in his sixties, and it's a big absence in his life, although he doesn't exactly bang on about it. Since he died, Graham has just done a lot. He spent a year or two fixing up their dilapidated holiday home in County Clare, and he began a mustard business, just as his dad had been a sausage man. It's been a long but independent struggle and it's the reason why he can just show up here of a Friday. I wonder how much easier it would have been for him to have had that guidance. Then again, it might have been a disaster for all I know, with his aul' fella lurking over his shoulder, clogging up his big chance to fail and grow, fail and grow.

On the way back, I'm bothered by the gap between the beach and the local village, Fethard-on-Sea, and the two places miss out on the synergy that comes from having one another, like in Dunmore East or Dun Laoghaire. It'll be very interesting to see how this beautiful place grows in the coming years. The return leg to the ferry is an inland affair, and the villages contain little beyond gastro pubs for tourists and very old churches, another reminder of the deep history in this area. Graham gets to the ferry in Ballyhack before me cos I'm dillydallying and, as I cruise in, he has to get off the ferry which is about to leave. We sit it out over a quick pint, but GK doesn't like mid-activity boozing so he's understandably not happy when I call it and get another cheeky half, meaning we have to wait twice. His legs survive the last fifteen k of up and down, and both of us are delighted now to sit down for a celebratory scoop

in Aggie Hayes pub, on top of the hill outside Dunmore. It's been a great day out and I'm glad I've recruited a partner in crime for this brilliant way to see the world.

12 Rosslare Harbour



Figure 12.1: *St Patrick's Church, Rosslare: Sometimes you can't get to the lighthouse, but there's always a beacon for Our Lord.*

12.0.0.1 0733, Friday August 25, 2023

I've been trying for months to do this day trip to Rosslare but the stars never aligned. There were three American bank holidays in May and June, which should be good cycling days for me, but the first one was my son's birthday, and then my octogenarian father was sick throughout June so me and my sisters were off in a Spanish hospital for the month, helping him hoik up black phlegm, night and day, as he battled off a deathly dose of covid. Right now I'm on technically holidays, meaning that I'm off work for a bit, but I'm still in Ireland, and a couple of nights of camping was understandably enough for my breastfeeding wife, so we are back home and I'm itching to get out. It's been a mare trying to organize real holidays this year, with the Costa Living and Schengen visas and saving up for a gaff.

I wake up at stupid AM and check the weather on *Yr.no*. It's going to piss in Dublin and later on in Wicklow but it's looking fairly Canada Dry down in Wexford, bar the odd shower, so I decide to go for it. I have to clean the kitchen and empty the car of all the camping gear, then I lash my revamped Falcon bike into the back of the boola Jammer and it's half seven agin I'm

on the road. I drive about an hour to Wicklow Town where I park my car in the train station, because I'll be coming back here later on the train from Rosslare. Our old friend, Apcoa, are taking voluntary contributions in the car park. The bastard app won't take my three fiddy, but luckily there is a QR code and they take €4.50 for the convenience. But I know it'll be a long day and I will be very happy to get straight into the car later on. Google Maps says it's a 108k cycle, but I want to hug the coast and that brings it up to about 120k, a distance I've barely ever cycled.

12.0.1 SDNW migration

I drop in to *Nick's Coffee* to plan out the trip because I haven't got the finer deets nailed down. I hate planning stuff in advance. I'd rather just do stuff then redo it better. I know that I'll be taking in Arklow and probably Courtown but I've no idea after that, or how many beaches I'll be able to sneakily visit. I also want to have a peak at Rosslare Strand, because it falls into that niche category of seaside village near a big town, with affordable house prices. But it turns out that the train home is at 1730, not 1830, and now I can see a big orange light flashing for the day, telling me to keep going, cos I'm going to be up against it. It's already 0930 and there's six cycling hours ahead of me, so that leaves only two hours of mickeying around, including my current cup of lower-end high-end coffee. Six hours is fine for a legit cyclist but a ticking clock ruins the bantersmash.

Nonethenevertheless, I still have a few minutes to scoop up some Wicklow Town vibes from its presumably coolest cafe. *Nick's Coffee* used to live under an arch in Ranelagh, spitting out espressos at near-Italian prices, but for some reason they had to migrate here, presumably for not ripping people off and thus bringing the area into disrepute. There's seats outside but I'm staying warm inside for now where I can hear Wicklow's two-accent thing in a newer form. Now it's between the older locals and a new breed of South Dublin / North Wicklow heads who are coming here for the hashtag quality of life. There's a mother-of-two in the queue, a former session bird with a booming city voice, quipping repeatedly about the hardship of dragging kids through a long summer, but she's getting no actual laughs out of anyone when all she needs is one token chuckle and maybe a cheeky hug just to get the day off on a manageable note.

Of course that could be me next year, or my wife, as we are thinking seriously about moving here, or even Wicklow's less glamorous sidekick, Rathnew. Now we've missed the boat value-wise, but I still think it's the best place in Leinster for us to live, given that we both want to live beside the sea, and I love cycling up mountains. South Dublin and North Wicklow are too expensive and I haven't even bothered to show up with my magnifying glass. North Leinster is too boring geographically, with its flat coast and flat land, and I know from living in Blanch, how much of a toll that takes on me. I also can't face spending the rest of my life in edgeless, inland suburbia, so it has to be a self-contained town. It feels like the difference between eating dinner on a table of six people, with a sense of unity, versus a long table of eight or twelve or twenty, where there is no centre and everyone's focus is constantly shifting. The

best option in North County Dublin would be Rush, but it's a bit like the Lucan I come from, a village with a ballooning population and very little to come home to bar the resplendent beaches, upon which the sun also rises. I'm actually convincing myself as we speak. Ideally, I'd rather be in a town with more facilities, like Balbriggan, which I've discounted ever since someone threw a stone at me on the street, and Wicklow or maybe distant Arklow, which I'll be visiting this morning. There you can do everything on foot or bicycle, unlike living in the middle of nowhere, where you need to drive twelve minutes every time someone wants a lollipop. Later on today I'll be investigating the long, East Wexford coast, but my travels around South Wexford suggest the county will be just too farmy for the likes of me. And of course, I am discounting, for now, the beautiful West of Ireland, with its incessant rain, and the Responsorial Psalm of *So you're Dub then, is it?*

So before parking up, I actually popped in for another quick sconce at a buncha new builds we viewed in May. The estate is part of an ongoing effort to fill in the remaining gaps between the featureless village of Rathnew and the geography-rich town of Wicklow. Eugene the Estate Agent thinks they are in the middle of nowhere, cos it's like 2.5k from his office in the town centre, but the primary school would be an eight minute walk away and that's our most basic unit of travel. The bus to Dublin is right outside, as is the motorway, so the exit strat is decent, and you can dodge some, but not all, of the town's infamous traffic. Plus I live on a bicycle anyway, so 2.5k is a non-distance to me, like a ten minute walk. We viewed the gaffs a couple of months ago and they told us to stall on til at least September. Then last week, a handful of gaffs came up, only the email went in to my forking spam folder and they were gonzo agin I got back to them. The next batch are due in like October slash November, which is a pain in the Gulags cos now we'll be looking at breaking up the school year for the chunfla. The problem with new builds is that they are so frikkin dear and we'd have to either buy a terraced two-bed or do an equity share with the government. And you don't leave home to go live in a far-off two-bed, especially if having a third child is up in the air. On the plus side though, a new estate means that you are immediately dialled in to a community of other families, namely people with mutual needs, which is the lubricant of human interaction. The fear is that we'll end up in jobs in Dublin and have to travel bucketloads every single day. But if I limit myself to hybrid work, which I probably can, I'll be grand, whereas my wife's career remains a concern, and her travelling lots does worry me. But we are in no rush, so we can take our time looking for jobs that suit our needs.

12.0.2



Figure 12.2: *Wicklow harbour, with the Wicklow Drumlins in the background, bouncing into the sea.*

12.0.3 The empty coast

I decide to get straight to Arklow, 25k, then Courtown, another 25k, for lunch. These are distances I can cope with and then I can worry about the rest of the day from there. I get a quick snap of Wicklow Harbour and soon I'm passing the back of Wicklow Head lighthouse. I'm very happy to be on this bike, although I'm shocked at how hard it is to turn the big ring on the undulating terrain. Last week I finally fixed the issues I was having on the Balbriggan trip like three months ago. I installed a new crankset, which includes the two rings at the front plus the arms onto which the pedals are screwed on. I got myself some variable pedals, with cleats on one side for real cycling, and flat on the other for stalling in and out of town. I also had to put in a new bottom bracket to hold it all together. That's the cylindrical fella which goes into the mysterious little pipe at the bottom of a bike frame. But I decided to up my training regime and get a bigger ring, thinking I was Victor Campanaerts, and now my unpracticed legs can't turn the feckin wheels, so it feels like I'm dragging my four-stone six-year-old on the back. There's no way I'll be able for six hours of this, and I'll have to get used to it on short midweek rides, so I settle in to a rhythm for now using the smaller chainring, inasmuch as you can with the never-ending up-and-down roads on this lowlumpy island.



Figure 12.3: *The sparsely populated South Wicklow coastline is characterised by small cove beaches, low cliffs, and occasional caravan parks.*

The coast road to Arklow is surprisingly empty with no proper villages en route, unless you include caravan parks, or the blink-and-you'll-miss-it Brittas Bay, and it feels like some distributional law of mathematics is being broken. Surely it must be possible to get mass or source a pint of stout either side of a day's labour? But the coast is cliffty, and there are no harbours, thus no fishing villages. Dwelling-wise, there seem to be a lot of sizeable houses locked away behind thick electric gates, and plenty of them must own a chunk of the coast. [Later inspection](#) shows that these are the East Coast's electoral districts with the lowest population density. The low-ish cliffs are broken up by intermittent strands, including the famous Brittas Bay and a delectable smaller variant we went to this summer, Magherabeg. Unlike the smaller (sic) Magheramore just north, which is owned and guarded by Wolohan's caravan park, Magherabeg has a makeshift field nearby for parking, but then you have to drag your beach gear along in festival-like fashion. It gave me real pleasure to hand over five nicker to some local teenagers, rather than three fiddy to faceless pricks with fat yellow clamps. Another few coves dot the coast before Arklow and I spot one or two swimmers re-emerging, like amphibians with car keys, and that sense of having already won the day.

12.0.4 Arklow



Figure 12.4: *An old lightship light sits stands by the Avoca River in Arklow Harbour, but the nearby marina, with its spiky masts, clogs up the view and reminds us how a lighthouse's beauty relies upon the emptiness around it.*

Arklow, it turns out, is a river town near the sea, like Dublin or Wexford or Drogheda, and you have to make a little effort to get to the coast, whereas in Wicklow the sea is right there, so you can instantly dodge all the towniness, like Dun Laoghaire. I cross the bridge, where they seem to be adding a boardwalk along the river, then I turn left towards the harbour - still the river - and then I remember there stands a light taken from an old lightship. I grab a photo from the other side of the quay, but the light's internal prettiness is masked by the visual overload of its surroundings, with a round block of apartments nearby and masts sticking up irregularly from the marina behind. By contrast, I recall another lightship light sitting resplendent on a roundabout connecting Arklow to the motorway, where its complex beauty is highlighted by its simple round grass frame. Roundabout art is rare in Ireland and we could really do with more of it. They are like a modern version of the lighthouse, marking out spaces to avoid along our travel paths. My wife says they are on a different level in her native Oman, and it's yet another thing to see there when we are finally welcomed.

I reconned Arklow a couple of months ago when we were stalling it down to Wexford, and I was more impressed by the outdoor facilities emerging north of the river than the main town arcking up a hill on the south side of what must be a trafficky bridge. The place, to be fair, was as dead as you'd expect on a Bank Holiday Monday, but that only highlighted my diminishing interest in Irish towns with their Battle Cruisers, bookies and perfunctory shite like estate agents and solicitors. And cars parked everywhere. I'm just waiting for the big day when the towns all get pedestrianised and turned into long piazzas full of places to hang

out, where adults loiter on the edges, drinking their pints of bubble tea and kids recreate their video games in the flesh. We might even see unobtrusive sports like bowls and badminton. Careful inspection shows that this situation already exists for like eighty metres at the top of Dublin's recently pedestrianised Capel St. Malahide has also introduced a pedestrianised street, although I don't recall that anyone thought of the kids, or indeed anyone who would like to be there without spending cash.



Figure 12.5: County Wicklow is replete with #vernacular signage voicing the feelings of the community. "PLEASE THIS BEACH IS NOT A DOGS TO LET".

The river feeds, unsurprisingly, into to the sea, and roadworks block the path. There is a definitely a sense of urgency in this town that people are living here and need facilities after a supposedly brutal dose of recession. I nudge through the traffic cones before coming to Arklow South Beach, which is a bit of a #LeinsterBeach, but there's a few families here using the sand as a free babysitter, and I'm asking people if they know whether I can cycle along the coast. The problem is that there is a quarry in the way, with a big pointy hill getting its guts nibbled out. Google Maps wants me to avoid it, even though it does display road-like paths between here and the other side. Everyone claims not to be local, so I punch on inanyways and a local dogwalker tells me there is a gravel path around the quarry, if I stay left of the fence, which I do. I come to The Cove, a slightly nicer beach where a boulder welcomes us with a spraypainted announcement that *This beach is not a dog's toilet*. I've noticed quite a lot of these signs around Wicklow where the people really seem to be standing up for themselves. There's also quite a bit of community art around the place, another strong sign that a lot of fucks are indeed given round here.



Figure 12.6: *The quarry in the background has turned this area into a shambles, but it's worth punching on through for the beaches and walks.*

Back on the rough gravel path, I'm worried I might get a puncture, although I'm glad my 28mm tyres aren't stupidly skinny. Did I prepare properly last night and pack a puncture repair kit and pump? No, your Honour, I took a needless chance this morning. The path is very steep in parts and hard to grip, so I have to dismount at one point, then I incorrectly choose a left and come to the sumptuous Hanging Rock Beach, to which I'll be returning. The climb back up the slippy terrain is a nice workout for the legs and the cleats on my new pedals are a real help. From the top you can see more little beaches with caravan parks hanging out the back of them, and [here is some tasty drone footage](#). I descend out the other side, into the last couple of kilometres of the wondrous county of Wicklow in which I think I want to live.



Figure 12.7: *Hanging Rock beach will be well worth a full visit on a sunny day.*

12.0.5 County Wexford

While I'm not yet in technically Wexford, it feels like I've already entered a new place now as the terrain is that bit flahher. I'm excited to finally see the domestic tourism scene in this county, where you hear reports of hashtag Real Dubs coming and supposedly overrunning the place, although that sounds like decent craic to me, at least for the first three hours. The first sign of life comes from an explorer aunt out on her bike, and a few clicks later I see a gastro pub on the side of the road advertising an upcoming performance of Roddy Doyle's *The Snapper*. But there are no people. Just road and farms, and the odd sign for honey and eggs for sale. I continue on around Tara Hill, where an elderly lady refuses me permission to photo [her cute house](#), then I turn left for Ballymoney and Courtown, where the mobile homes start to stack up, and then the housing estates for some possibly long-distance commuters. I'm delighted to have this chunk of the trip dunzoed and I'm ready for a swim and some scran. It's 1215 now so I'm on skedj, but I won't have time for a thorough investigation.

I expected Courtown to have a long sprawling beach, like what everyone bangs on about in Wexford, and which I've been half-avoiding, but actually it's a fishing harbour with low cliffs at the south end, and little scatty beaches scattered along the shore. It's not even obvious where I ought to swim but I see a few teenage Dubs in wetsuits who look like they've been transplanted here from Grand Canal Dock and they are climbing down some awkward steps to get to the water. Other people are walking along a path in the grass. My problem is that I

don't have a little lock for this bike cos the poundshop lock I bought has rusted and the key is stuck. The sociologist in me is gaggo to follow the lads, but the item-heavy middle-aged man in me is telling me to push on. A German couple tell me there's a beach at the end of the short road, Keltennel Bay beach apparent, which bizarrely sits in an evergreen wood. No one is here except for a humourless couple with a toddler, doing their duty, and a grandad with his maybe nine-year-old granddaughter, trying to convince her to get in to the water without setting any kind of example himself. I whip out Kilroy's tiny swimming jocks and lounge in the instantly deep water for fully two minutes, a season's best. Rain starts spitting as I get out and I'm bricking it cos I've got seventy k to go and less than five hours before the train departs. But a change of jersey is very welcome and my light jacket keeps the spitting rain out.

I don't have time for a sit-down meal so I order fish and chips from a takeaway, which is not a great mid-exercise choice, and while I wait for it I sit round the corner with a meh coffee, jotting down notes for what is written above. I'm also trying to soak in the atmos but it's not a people-watching paradise, due to its clusterfucked layout. Your classic seaside pattern goes sea, beach, parallel promenade, shops, and road behind. People watching is easy because they come and they go, paralleling along like everything else. But here it's all mixed up. The harbour is at the centre, with a small river cutting diagonally across. The beaches are split either side of the town, with that small cliffy headland to the south, and the village cuts back perpendicularly from the harbour. Parked cars soak up what could be a small piazza, and there's nowhere much to sit out and eat. This cafe has some low wooden benches and high wooden casks, but the cask makes it easier to hide my food on my lap while I have the odd sip of coffee. I gobble up the fish and put half the chips in my teeny backpack, using them to separate my little wet towel from the last of my dry clothes for the train home. The kiosk in the car park is particularly pretty so I ask the aul fella if I can get a snap. He says yes and that a lot of people take a picture, then I feel guilty and order an ice-cream, which is exactly what I don't need. I misframe the photo so I'm not printing it here. I've actually go no even half-decent photos of Courtown, possibly because its layout doesn't lend itself to a 2D shot. I hit the road in a flurry and I'm disappointed that I haven't rested my brain enough for another couple of hours of observation.



Figure 12.8: *Tidy Towns have done a lot of work in Kilmuckridge, but this house is setting the pace.*

The next forty five kilometres are very much the loneliness of the long-distance runner, so I just keep my head down to get them dunzoed. I lash on a podcast for once cos I need a break from my unrested brain. Signposts indicate Curracloe, 30k away, so I use that as my next goal even though I no longer expect to see its famous beach. I'm starting to understand that this so-called coast road is actually just an inland distributor road, running parallel to the coast, and you have to turn off it to get to the villages and beaches. So instead of Cahore Point on the coast, I get to see inland Ballygarrett, which is full-on Heart of Darkness stuff, with petrol pumps outside a small shop, and a monster church built after Emancipation for a population that can no longer fill it. 8k later is the larger village-town of Kilmuckridge, which has been colonised by the Tidy Towns people. Its coastal partner is Morriscastle Strand. I stop off for fluids in a surprisingly fancy Centra, which has modelled itself on post-merger Super Valu, but of the Superquinn kind, rather than the shoddy Bogger Valus that used to drain rural cash in exchange for limp carrots. The place seems to be a magnet for ageing ladies, dressed to the sevens, hoping to bump into their next social engagement. Across from the Centra sits Wexford House which may well be a factory for hanging baskets. 9k later I'm in Blackwater, an ancient-looking village, with a couple of shops older than your granda. It looks like it has worked hard to preserve its history, but some very modern tractors plough through it, being harvest season, and we all get stuck behind some roadworks. I can feel my legs now missing their sparkle on the short uphill exit out of the town, although I have a nice little race against one of the tractors as it struggles to negotiate the traffic cones which mark out the roadworks. Yet again it's like 8 or 9k to the next village, Curracloe, whereby no man is ever more than 4 or 5k from his pint or priest, that being as far as one could reasonably walk to and fro on the reg. Sure enough, it's just a junction village with a road to the nearby beach, so I sit down for a suppa water then punch on a few more clicks to Wexford Town.

12.0.6 Wexford Town



Figure 12.9: *Like Dublin, Wexford is not a seaside town, but a river town near the sea.*

Arriving in Wexford Town gives me that now-familiar joy of arriving back in civilization, and the upsloping settlement across the wide river looks deloosh in the sunshine. It's 345 now and I've got thirty mins max to go all Ford Prefect on the situation, so I make a beeline for the boozer where I can get a quick Britney and a packa peanuts. I almost feel like [these Tour de France riders](#) from back in the hashtag who would run into cafes and steal a wedge of booze and stuff it back into their jerseys, to be drunk while they chase back on to the peleton. In my case I hit The Undertaker, which should be outdoor pinting heaven, but the bar is understaffed and the aul lad takes fifteen full minutes to serve me a sharp pint of Moretti. I slobber it down and barely have enough time to sort out all the shite in my pockets before it's time to leg it. This place should be people-watching heaven but again, that's not a task for the frantic. It's 415 now and the train is at 530.



Figure 12.10: *Nearly there: I haven't felt this good since Jason McAteer scored against Holland in 2001*

Google Maps is sending me on some roundabout journey, turning 17k into 24, and putting me under severious time pressure. The signs are telling me otherwise and I realize that something is up when it tells me to take a left *off* the N25 down some L-road, when all the Jammers and lorries are zipping along this, the Rosslare road. Obviously some gom in Google Maps has confused Motorways with National roads, cos I've since started to notice a pattern. Now lookit, you wouldn't plan your Sunday spin around this noise but you'd certainly take it over missing your Boola train and being stranded in one of the four corners of Ireland. I also have to take the L on scoping out Rosslare Strand as a place to live, but I'm no longer pushed because I know I don't want to live anywhere in Wexford. If I'm going to be this far from Dublin, then I'd rather be somewhere more dramatic. Mind you the pancake flat land out this side of the town is working in my favour and I can finally power towards my final destination in the big ring. There's a sign saying 6k to Rosslare Harbour and I haven't felt this good since Jason McAteer scored against Holland in 2001. I can see the top of the ferry in the distance, beyond the flat fields, and it looks like the roof of a circus tent, advertising itself via shape and colour. The built up area arrives and I feel a rare sense of synergy with the place as everything relates to my destination, the harbour, to which all the lorries and many of the cars are headed. After the traditional village of Kilrane, everything starts to scream at you, American-style, from the side of the road. Eat here. Sleep here. Refuel here. The pyramidal church from the 1960s confirms the modernity of the place. I stop to take stock and a lorry spatters me with minutes-old rainwater, but it feels lucky, like birdshit on your shoulder, and I'm reminded that I've dodged God's pee all day long. I think about grabbing some scran and a celebratory beer for the train, but I decide to just get to the station, buy my ticket and then head to the lighthouse, planning to pig out on the two-hour train ride back.



Figure 12.11: *The little lighthouse is inaccessible to the public unless you make prior arrangements with the harbourmaster or like whatever.*

The road descends to the harbour on the left, while a low cliff to the right provides a perch for the locals to live. There is no train station, just a platform and ticket machine behind a wedge of makeshift fencing. A train worker is arriving in work and I ask him how I get to the lighthouse but he tells me it's inaccessible, and the only way I'll even see it is from the cliff above. So I grab my bike and, thinking I'm a cyclo-cross hero, I lug it up fifty-odd steps whence I can look back over the scaldyball harbour whose aesthetic, one might argue, operates at a magnitude greater than that of the individual. I still have fifteen minutes to play with so I ask the security guards if I can stall in towards the lighthouse. I make it through the first two entry levels but the last one gives me a hard no, and it's fair enuffski, as this isn't some pissy tourist operation we're dealing with here, like Hook Head. It's also not the last disappointment of the Doris Day. I cycle back with my tail between my legs and, on boarding the train, I find that they no longer sell food or water, let alone cheeky cans. This has been the case ever since Craig David, according to the smug conductor, who squeezes in a cheeky bit of beration for me not booking a spot for my bike. I am thankful for the cold, soggy chips in my bag and the lady opposite offers me half her water bottle. I offer her chocolate in return and we talk camper vans for a while, but I need to write and she wants to read. I change into some vinegar-infused clean clothes, and two slow hours later I'm back in my car, craving a McDonalds milkshake. I find a recovery drink in a petrol station and hit the motorway, thinking I might be doing this drive a lot more, #goingforward.

13 Mine Head & Youghal



Figure 13.1: *Mine Head lighthouse sits on a perfectly normal patch of rural Ireland, except for the 60m cliff on the far side.*

0354, Monday November 20, 2023

I knew I'd wake up early cos my mind has been racing of late although I didn't think it'd be this frikkin early. I don't even bother wasting time trying to go back to sleep. I throw my bike into the MC Hammer and I lob my mam's hoover in too cos I keep forgetting to drop it back to her, and their gaff is kind of on the way. I'm still not outta my gaff til 450 and I've to drive 200 clicks to Dungarvan, on the Munsterier side of Waterford county. From there, I'm aiming to see Mine Head Lighthouse in the Waterford Gaeltacht, then Youghal Lighthouse in the People's Republic of Cork, the county I'm most excited about exploring. The cycle will be an 85k loop, from 8am to 4pm, with sixty-odd clicks along the coast and then a mouldy ol' cycle back along the N25 because they ripped up all the trainlines back in the Doris.

13.1 The Benga Bus

On the motorway my mind is composing beautiful sentences, and I have them all written down in my head, but I can't hang on to them like I can on the bike. The world changes at the wrong speed. This becomes even more obvious after I drop off the hoover, because Google Maps sends me across the back roads from the N4 to the M7, and now I'm burning good brain energy in negotiating narrow roads in the dark. I could have vetoed Maps and doubled back along the dual carriageway, minimising brain use, but the complaint ends up being academic because the entire journey is an exercise in wasting good energy, negotiating car after car in the dark. By the time I park up on the near side of Dungarvan at 8am, I've pissed away the best of my day's brain power and I'm not even on the Paul van yet. I decide to test out the theory that Dubstep works best in the dark, so I lash on Mary Anne Hobbes's legendary [Dubstep Warz radio show](#) from 2006, a buncha mini DJ sets showcasing the best producers and MCs from the era, but my real #learning is that a 200k drive in the morning is a bad use of good energy, like having meetings in the morning, and henceforth I'll need to sleep in the vicinity of my starting points. You want to be putting your best energy into the most important part of the journey, exploring new places, and translating that into words. Because as the day progresses, I can't generate as much thought, and that's why these pieces are always so opening heavy and then reliant on photographs as the day progresses. To put it another way, I am reminded that cycling is good for my writing. Something about its speed and physicality engages my brain at the right pace, kinda like classes with a marker on the whiteboard, where the teacher's writing matches the speed at which students can absorb information, unlike like Powerpoint which is for showing (off) what you know.

13.2 Tour de Waterford

The M8 is as unremarkable in the dark as the light, and when it brings me near Waterford City, I turn right onto the N25 for Dungarvan, a half-decent national secondary road, with

commuters coming in the opposite direction, presumably praying that they'll one day stick in a motorway between Cork and Waterford. The rain has been bucketing down the whole way through Rest of Leinster, but *Yr.no* says it is to be clear on the coast after sunrise, while the radio says there'll be nay rain shars araind. Sure enough, it's nice and bright on my arrival in Dungarvan, which sits like a miniature Dublin, inside into a protected bay, a river splitting it in two even-ish parts, and hills to its admittedly north, although it'll be a few decades before they have to fend off the sprawl. I would have cycled here from Dunmore East by now, as there is a lighthouse nearby, but I'm saving that trip for whenever GK is free. Today, I've got a play-it-by-ear coffee appointment arranged with an old friend's brother, so I'm marginally less #chill than I'd normally be, or else the drive has just put me on edge. I park up outside Dungarvan's Pay and Display zone, with the goal of having a good gawk through the town. It's nearly 9am by the time I get the bike out and re-prep my oversized bag, a scarifying little backpack, with a full change of gear, emergency tools and enough scran for the entire Doris. The town is jammers with parking issues and school drop offs so I punch on through, across the river and out the other side. In theory I could take the main road to Youghal, by-passing the wide, D-shaped peninsula on which Mine Head sits, then loop back along the coast, taking in as much as time allows, but the itch in me wants to see the entirety of the coastline, despite the hassle. So I decide to take the main road on the return leg and I send Fitzy my live location cos he says he'll catch up with me once the kids are in school.

13.3 Ringsend Gaeltacht



The left turn off the N25 brings me towards the tiny Waterford Gaeltacht, which is a peninsula off the peninsula, and I'm guessing its double isolation slowed the spread of the national tongue. The road signs are in Irish only and the English has been perversely deleted in [an exercise of quotuquote equality](#). Luckily I can work out the placenames. *Ceann Heilbhic* is Helvick

Head, where I'm going now, even though it's a smidge off route. The 'vick' is also 'wick' of *Wicklow*, being Old Norse for 'bay', and might even be the 'vik' of *viking*. *An Rinn* is *Ring*, like Dublin's Ringsend, meaning 'headland'. It has an Irish-speaking boarding school, and I'm looking forward to seeing its coastal setting. *An Seanphobal* is Old Parish where the Fitzgeralds are from, and it's nice to see their homeland. Me and Richard Fitz were very close in the first few years of secondary school, bonding over our shared soccer obsession, supporting Blackburn Rovers, and reading the likes of Brian Clough's autobiography. My interest in football plummeted along with Blackburn's demise, while Fitzy doubled down and soon began to focus on the managerial side of the game too. He was reading about CEOs long before it was popular or profitable. Nowadays [he's building a media empire in the Middle East](#), and it was great to catch up with him at our twenty-year school reunion last year when he somehow managed to fly home from Dubai, do a half-Ironman in Youghal, stall up to meet us in Blessington and then fly back, all within 36 hours. I texted Richard last night about places to see on my trip and he told me to check out Ardmore and give his brother James a shout.



Figure 13.2: Even a lost Yank could work the meaning of this sign from its colour, shape and position, and it's a good example of how language learning works in context, and you can't just pick it up from the ground.

Richard and bunch of the lads from our secondary school boarded in Ring for sixth class and came into first year with what seemed like fluent Irish. All I knew from my #InterdenominationalEducation was *Ní raibh scamall sa spéir*, the first line in the solitary textbook I had ever seen, *Bog Liom*. Our secondary school just lobbed all levels in together and I never managed to get up to speed, a problem that was aided by my attitude to the language and my lifelong refusal to work hard on things I'm not interested in. I remember really pissing off my Irish teacher in fifth year because he caught me down the back of the class, reading

some novel in French, and soon enough I just dropped to Pass Irish and made it my eighth subject for the Leaving. But in fairness to Nugent, he spoke Irish to us in class, unlike many Irish teachers, and all of our French teachers, which is mental. If you never hear the even bastardized version, you can't just lick it up off the page. I know from 5000 hours of teaching English as a foreign language (and yeah I've counted, and yeah I miss it) that you actually can teach people from scratch, using objects and tasks and body language, and it's a shame that such methods weren't applied in our Irish teaching. I've sent my son to a Gaelscoil, even though I've never developed a real grá for the language, because I feel like it's the least I can do to help the language revive, and there is legiterally nothing to be lost for him, except for daily interaction with the children of foreign-born parents, making it weirdly unlike most of twenty-first century Ireland.

13.4 Fitzgerald country



Figure 13.3: Ireland's best dressed cyclist and his soon-to-be fashion designer.¹⁶⁹

Helvick Head is less striking than I'd hoped, although the grey clouds hardly draw out the sparkle from the concrete harbour, or even the wide vista across the whole bay, and you'd probably want to walk beyond the cul the sac to see the best of the rock. I fish around in vain for good photos and I'm about to stall on when James Fitz pulls up beside me in a white SUV, delighted that the live location feature on WhatsApp has resolved our Ronde-AV problem. He tells me to double back down to the harbour, where *Solas na Mara* sits, a wellness centre with a cafe, and the place is so clean that I take off my cycling shoes before entering. James is appalled at the hack of me, with my ancient bike, high-viz jacket and bag on my back, but he's too polite to say anything. Yet. We've never spoken before. James was two years ahead of us in school. But boarding school is a shared experience, so it's a wee bit like going on a movie date, except the film was six years long, with slightly different characters, and there's been two decades of aftermath.

The people here know him and it's nice to watch a teeny bit of the tightknit rural community in action. It's something I have always craved. He asks for the physio to come over when he gets a chance and then we sit down with our coffees for some rapid-fire catch up. Richard being Richard. William, their younger brother, who works in Silicon Valley now, and whom I would have met out there only for Covid lockdown and my panicked exit from The States. The physio comes over and James is eager for me to tell all about my lighthouse escapades. It's nice to hear myself presented from a different angle cos you don't want to be always volunteering unsolicited plans to everyone. James then tells him about his banjoed knee, how it gave in during the Dublin City Marathon a few weeks back, and he points to his beanie commemorating the event. He was on course for the family record but the knee gave in and Michael, the youngest brother, still holds it at around 3.30 or so. It's beautiful to watch the family rivalry, four brothers and two sisters, pushing each other, whether conscious or not. I see it a lot among my four eldest sisters, stacked back-to-back across six years, with three of them playing hockey. The last time I had an ongoing sporting rivalry with was playing tennis against my fifth sister, when I was thirteen and she was sixteen, although just last week I did come back from the dead and beat my grown-up nephew in bowling; and that felt *extra* good.



Figure 13.4: James Fitzgerald has opened up this triathlon shop on the road in to Youghal, but it's closed of an understandably Monday.

It turns out that James has spent years flogging cars for Brendan Keary from my year in school, but he has recently opened a triathlon shop in Youghal. He's only off today cos it's Monday. He's curious to know exactly what I'm lugging on my needlessly back and as soon as I start explaining he cuts me off because he knows I'll explain it all away. Last week he was out for a hundred k with nothing but a water bottle and an energy bar, but I explain that I'm out for a day's work. We end up talking about the day-to-day pressures of stocking a shop, and tight profit margins, and how to balance it all against the joyous intensity of child-rearing. I want to ask him about his motivations for doing triathlons because as a child I followed my mam around the country as she swam, cycled and ran her way through what I've always imagined to be unresolved trauma. Her father died when she was six and then she was shipped off to boarding school. The Fitzgeralds had a similar upbringing. But we are either too short on time or I don't know how to ask the questions. What's exciting though, is that James is up for coming on a cycle with me in the new year, and I'm looking forward to stepping it up a level. I'm guessing we'll go from Youghal to Roche's Point lighthouse, on the eastern entrance to Cork Harbour, and maybe look at Ballycotton lighthouse from the land, as there'll be no ferries running til later in the year. It'll be great to get to know him better and re-experience his intensity across the timeframe it deserves.

Before leaving, I ask about getting to Mine Head lighthouse and it turns out that it is on private land, like the lighthouses on Wicklow Head, so I'll need permission to get there. I feel like a Yank out of water, a clueless Jackeen who doesn't understand how life works round here, and I can see this on the faces of James and the barista but they tell me I'll be grand. They both of know the family - Paidí and Josephine - and the barista explains that they're the welcoming type. Curious not aggressive. I'll just need to knock and ask. What if they

aren't there, I worry. They will be. They're farmers.

13.5 The lighthouse farmily



Figure 13.5: *The lighthouse campus and laneway are owned by the Commissioners of Irish Lights, but the road and the surrounding land belong to a cattle farmer. Thus the lighthouse is advertised on local tourist signs and yet you are not supposed to be able to access it. Welcome to Ireland.*

I set off and it's good to be on the properly road after so much tomfoolery all morning. It's only like 10k to the lighthouse and I'm there before I know it. The coast around here is a series of protruding cliffs, and the bigger ones have their own road. When I get to my one, I'm met with a sign saying *No access to lighthouse*, but I know to plough on and I stop at the farmer's bungalow. There's no car outside and no one answers the door, but thankfully the collie dog is #chill cos dogs and bicycles are like oil and water. I decide to head on inanyways but soon I hear a car behind me. I turn around and wave and cycle back up to him. The farmer introduces himself as Paíd Morrissey, and his accent reminds me of Eurosport commentator and voice-of-my-kitchen, Mr Seán 'The King' Kelly, even though he's from 50k away. It just shows how little I know this part of the country. Paíd is as gentle as the collie at the door, a compliment I plámásingly drop, and I tell him that I was just with James, whose daughter is in naíonra with Paíd's granddaughter. I ask him to tell me a bit about the lighthouse and he starts out in proto-tour-guide mode with a spiel about it being built in 1851 and it being the highest lighthouse in the country, but I can now hold a conversation about a lighthouses so he chillaxes a bit and we just talk for a while. He's not sure why the tower itself is so high [21m], given that it's perched on top of a cliff [63m] but there's nothing but effin fog around here

so maybe the height helps with visibility. The problem is that the records have all been lost as they were burnt in the London Blitz, wudyabelieve. He regrets that he doesn't know who owned the land back then, and I forget to ask him how long the land has been in his family. As with other lighthouses, there seems to have been a bit of brouhaha over ownership of the land, although Paíd is too mild-mannered to grouse directly. The lighthouse and grounds belong to the Commissioners of Irish Lights (CIL) but the road is his, but he put his foot down when they wanted to whip out the old Fresnel Lens. Their trump card, I later learnt, is the presence of mercury, a substance that may have been the ruination of many's a lighthouse keeper, and I can really feel the tension here between tradition and the bolloxology brigade. We chat a bit about James and his triathlons and he wants to know if I'm as much of a header, and I tell him I'm in it more for the adventure than the challenge. I could chat all day to this man and, after a few false starts, we part company.



Figure 13.6: *It's hard to get a good angle on the lighthouse without falling off a cliff.*

The road down to the lighthouse is as rough and sloppy as on any cattle farm and I probably should walk in case I get a puncture. But it's fun to do a bit of cyclo-cross even though I misjudge one corner and skid into a manure-filled puddle. Luckily I stay upright and plough on as far as the lighthouse campus. There is a red gate, in need of paint, with the now-familiar CIL welded into it, and a sizeable wall along the laneway to the lighthouse and around its grounds' perimeter. One of Páid's fields fills the space between the lane and the sheer cliffs below, so I rest the bike against the gate and plod across its sog. I scale the wall at its lowest point and stroll down to the tall tower, with its two vacant cottages, designed for two families, with a neat rectangular plot apiece for growing fruit and veg, as everyone once did, whereas nowadays there'd be a trampoline squatting in the corner. The cottages remain vacant but they could become holiday homes, once the property dispute is resolved between CIL and Paíd, although I can also just see people living here permanently as it's actually quite a normal place,

bar the massive drop off a cliff on one side.



Figure 13.7: *The cliffs jut in and out along this coast for several miles, leaving normal farmland on top and a mostly inaccessible coastline below.*

I'm always amazed at how sturdy lighthouses can be, as shockingly gargantuan in stature as a forward in international rugby. This one is painted black and white like a Barbarian, or a poor man's Hook Head. Some NASA-looking machines sit inside one of the cottages and I assume this provides a control room for the technicians whenever they come along. It'd be nice to join them some time and see what the Jacques Chirac is. I've been reading a book about rock lighthouses (*Seashaken Houses*), written by an architect, Tom Nancollas, and because they are offshore, he has to head out with the technicians and gets to see inside. I might just give the CIL a shout and see what they say cos I'm tired of not knowing the deets and I'm sure plenty of you would like to know something about an actual lighthouse by now. Before leaving, I mosey about the field overlooking the cliff and thankfully there's an electric barb wire fence preventing me from going dangerously close to the edge, cos I'm shit-scared of heights.

13.6 Cycling country



Figure 13.8: *It's cycling heaven round here and I'm on the Euro Velo route which has the decency to include Waterford and South Wexford, unlike the Wild Atlantic Way.*

It's time to punch on. Not a lot done, much more to do. It's 29k to Youghal and 32 if I go via Ardmore, so I decide to check it out for completion, as Richard Fitz did suggest it. By now, it's as mild a day as you'll get in November, twelve or thirteen degrees, with the sun breaking out from the clouds, yet the wind remains fierce and its prevalence is carved into the echelon-shaped trees. All day I'm putting on and off my magic gloves. I barely meet a car and I get lost in thought so I must have been in the zone. One day these serene roads will be filled with leisure cyclists and, in preparation for their coming, they have already been marked out as part of the [Euro Velo project](#), which has the decency to include Wexford, Waterford and East Cork, unlike the Wild Atlantic Way which begins in Kinsale. For now, the tourists remain glued to the West Coast, yet everyone there has to compete for space along the few roads that got built along its craggy terrain. Here, where the land is good enough for cattle farming, and oodles of road connect it all up, cycling is perfect, because cars and lorries stay on N25, to the north, while no one comes to this appendix zone. It's a fabulous place but it has the same misfortune as the forgotten second- or third- or even fourth- prettiest sister in a family of stunners. I stop off for a (very) quick dip slash wash in Curragh Bay beach and a pair of passers-by make sure to have a needless dig at me for being in and out so fast. I tell them I was in longer than they were and then sit myself down for a slightly rushed lunch of mangoes, cheese and crackers.

13.7 Ardmore



Figure 13.9: *Curragh Bay Beach, just outside Ardmore, a pretty seaside village.*

Time is getting tight now and my trip to pretty little Ardmore turns out to be a bad decision because I could have kept this precious time for Youghal. The village is empty and windy and I don't have time for a warm meal. The main shop closes at 2pm at this time of year and they've already turned off their coffee machine in preparation. I pop in to *Garden Kitchen* for a half-decent macchiato, charge my Tony for ten minutes and lash down some notes while chatting to a Corktrotting pensioner from Middleton who warns me about the school-collection traffic in Youghal. I'm on the road soon enough though cos it's going to be dark soon and the trip back up to the N25 is into the wind and slightly uphill. I've got 16k to cycle now but it's only seven or eight k as the crow flies. There used to be a Lee Scratch across the Blackwater from Ferrypoint to Youghal, a swimmable distance from a sand spit sticking out into the water, but it was discontinued in the 1960s after seven hundred years of use. God bless the motor car.

13.8 Costa del Youghal



Figure 13.10: *Youghal from the far side of the River Blackwater. The town clings to the cliff slash river bank, like a formation of ancient barnacles.*



Figure 13.11: *This sign alerts the visitor, on arrival to the People's Republic of Cork, that everything here is done with the aplomb required to execute a bicycle kick.*

While I have to skip a wee bit of coastline in favour of the main road, entering Youghal from the Waterford side is truly beautiful. The town sits across the wide estuary and the bridging

point is a few clicks north of the town. It's good to be in Cork at long last, and I expect to see a lot of it in the coming year(?)s). I think back on my travels thus far through counties Waterford, Wexford, Wicklow, Dublin, Meath, Louth and Down which together may have less coastline than jiggly jaggy Cork, with its seventeen active lighthouses and three inactive. Today, however, will have to be a bit of quick hello cos it'll soon be dark and I don't want to be hit by a lorry.



Figure 13.12: *Welcome to Cork: Ireland's ancient east.*

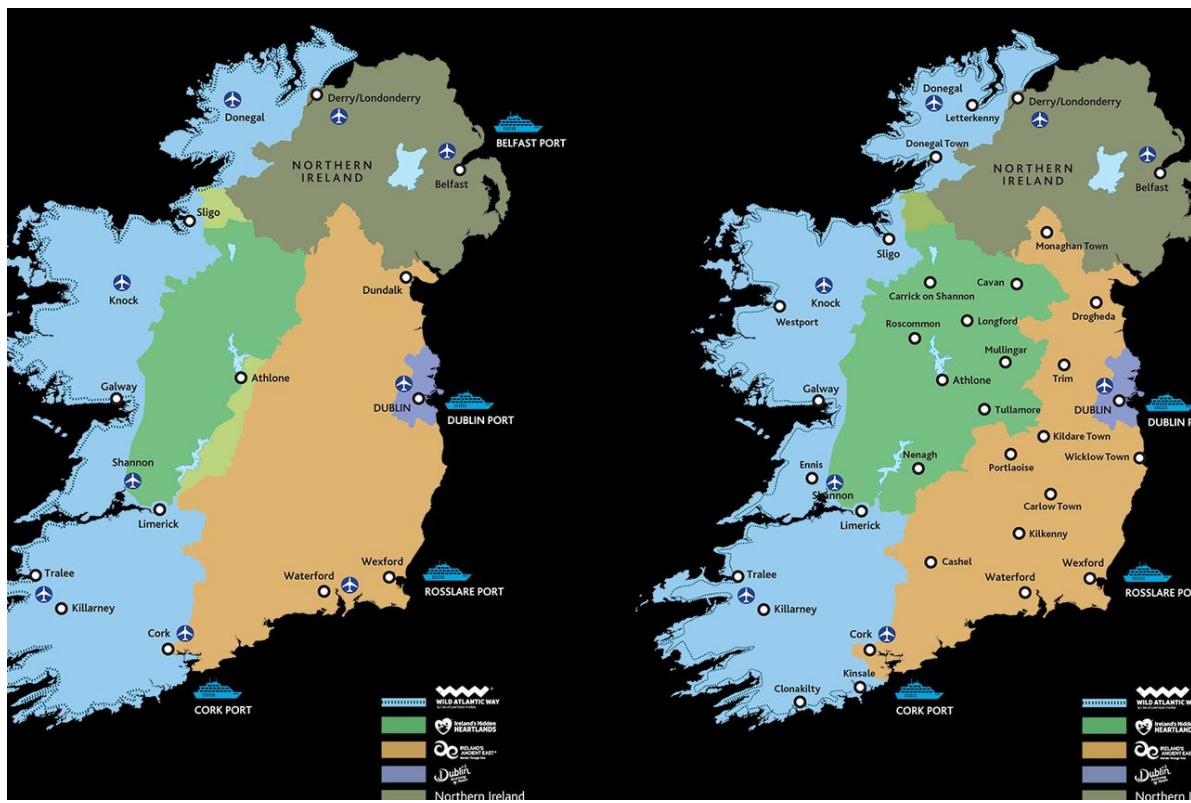


Figure 13.13: With the success of the Wild Atlantic Way (blue counties), two more regional units were carved out by the marketing department. The improbable Ancient East (orange), stretches from the south coast up as far as The Black North. The more coherent Hidden Heartlands has grown in size, as several midland counties understandably defected, having seen more value in accepting their inland reality. Note how eastmost County Cork is part of the Ancient East, presumably being identified with the Norman south-east, and I must check if it's actually part of the ancient province of Leinster. Graphic yoinked from The Irish Independent who took it from Fáilte Ireland.

The first thing I see, once over the county border, is a sign indicating Ireland's Ancient East. This bizarre scenario arises because, as noted above, the *Wild Atlantic Way* kicks off in Kinsale, west of Cork City, and the rest of Ireland simply *had to* have some marketing status. East Cork needed to be put into some category and the gerrymandered solution created problems that never previously existed. Thus Ireland's *Ancient East* loops from East Cork, through Waterford, then all the way along the Lonestar Coast, minus Dzublin but plus Monaghan, because the early marketing gurus truncated Ulster into Northern Ireland. The Ancient East used to include the likes of Longford - itself a former county of Connacht - but that has been legitimately recategorized as the *Hidden Heartlands*, which includes inland Connacht, outlaw

Leinster, orphaned Cavan, and, the heart of Darkness itself, East Clare. Back at the local level, Youghal is branding itself as some kind of medieval beach town, like something on the Italian coast, with its ancient clock tower on top of the billboard and the sundrenched beach, *dubh le daoine*. I'm just raging I didn't get a snap of the signpost.



Figure 13.14: *Youghal lighthouse welcoming arrivals to the Blackwater estuary. The near side is East Cork, the far side is West Waterford.*

The town itself is a skinny pair of one-way streets wedged between a cliff and the sea or, technically, a river bank and a very wide estuary, and it's a shallow ascent up to the lighthouse on the far side of the town. As warned, I get held up behind a Bus Eireann school bus and I can't mount the footpath for all the parents, prams and phalanxes of chicken-fillet-munchers. Beyond the town centre, there is space enough for a wedge of large summer houses and hotels overlooking the water. Some of these are Victorian and others Celtic Tigerish but many of them are derelict and it feels like the town would benefit from a blast of global warming, or maybe a train line to Cork so that people could feasibly commute to work and take advantage of all this natural beauty. Some new apartments are being built alongside a large Victorian house and this suggests the town is a hashtag transitional neighbourhood, so I'd imagine you'd want to be fairly prepped for some early-stage gentrification if you're out there looking for a cheap gaff.



Figure 13.15: *Youghal appears to be getting regenerated, with this Victorian building being chopped up into apartments alongside the modern building adjacent, although I'm not a hundypee whether that structure is coming or going, and it feels like the whole of Youghal is stuck in that state.*



Figure 13.16: *Costa del Youghal*

The stubby lighthouse sits right on the main road, with its campus leading, out of sight, down to the water. It's a typical, nineteenth-century lighthouse, designed by the main man himself, George Halpin, but the site has been used to light a flame since the 12th century. I climb up onto an embankment on the other side of the road and sit down for more nosebag, hoping that

the council workers below, yapping to each other, don't drag me down. The view from here is fantabulous, with the low sun illuminating the lighthouse and the land across the wide river, but you'd have to stall it round the corner to look out to the Celtic Sea, a task I'll hopefully do on my way to Ballycotton. For now, I need to Rock'n'Ryle Nugent cos it's ten past three and I've got 32 undulating kilometres ahead of me.



Figure 13.17: *Youghal clock tower, the most distinct of several beautiful old buildings in the town.*

As I exit Youghal, having failed in my haste to speak to a single Corkonian, I spot [several](#)

gorgeous old buildings which demonstrate the longevity of this town and, how it may be simply be in a bit of a trough, being without the feasible compass of both Cork City (58k) and Waterford City (75k). But a long-term surge in airline flight prices would do wonders for the town, along with some clever housing in the flatlands north of the town, and the coast to the south. A greenway is being developed along the old train line, which means the train line will never be restored, but I do hope the surge in cyclists will be of help to James Fitzgerald's new triathlon shop, which I pass by in the industrial gap between the town and the N25.

13.9 Coda



Figure 13.18: *26k doesn't sound like a lot but it sure feels like it when cycling against the gloaming on an undulating road whose openness hides the steepness of the climbs*

The sun is setting behind me and the autumn colours glisten off the glorious hedgerows. The wind may be on my back but the road keeps rising to meet me, and the return is a long-ass slog, with several uphill drags, steeper in my mind and legs than on paper. The view over Dungarvan is extraordinary from a height, even with the clouds, mist and near darkness. The descent is a welcome finale and I stop off in a petrol station and nail a Fanta, thinking I'm Remco Evenepoel after a breakaway victory, but I still have to eke through to the other side of the town to get back to my jammer. My belly is in a jocker from all the grazing and I don't stay for dinner cos I just want to get home. The drive home in the dark feels shorter than the trip here and I even flirt with stopping off in Kilkenny for a quick sconce. But I decide against it and end up hitting the UPFs in Paulstown Service Station, then I'm home to kiss the kids goodnight and catch up on a well-earned kiparoney.

14 Dún Laoghaire 2



Figure 14.1: *Dún Laoghaire at dusk with the Dublin Mountains in the background snuggled up in their immovable blanket of clouds. The photo is blurred because I was shaking with frostation.*

14.0.1 Rural South Dublin loop plan

0950 December 29, 2023. A Friday apparently

It's six degrees and windy in Dublin today, but it's bright and no rain is expected, although I forgot to check the Dublin mountains which I'll be quote scaling later on. I'm heading to the other Dun Laoghaire pier, the one with the green lighthouse, and because I like to make things difficult for myself, I've decided to map out the South Dublin Rural route which I've been piecing together for years and reckon I can finally nail today, doing an anti-clockwise semi-circle around the unspoilt lands beyond the burbs. You start out on the River Liffey, in town or wherever, and follow it upstream and west to Chapelizod and Lucan village, along its admittedly North Bank, then you rise slowly through Backweston, Hazelhatch, Newcastle and Sagart, before taking on the Dublin Mountains, stopping off for a Brit Award in Johnnie Fox's, Ireland's highest boozer, and then whizz downhill to the coast to cool off in the sea if the descent hasn't already sucked the heat out of your blood. Your endpoint could be

anywhere in the built-up coastal suburbs of Dun Laoghaire, Dalkey, Killiney, although there is probably a rural(ish) path to Shankill, an area I don't know well yet. You could also take the more-or-less bike lane back in to town along the coast and loop back your start point on the Liffey, but I know it'll be too late and cold and dark for me this evening so I'll be on the boola Dart. The only rule is that you have to stay in County Dublin throughout, a county whose underappreciated beauty is a hill I'm willing to die on, although in designing the route, I was unable to dodge a few hundred metres of spillover into County Kildare because further growth in Adamstown has necessitated it.

In my case, the endpoint will be Dun Laoghaire East Pier, a lighthouse which I have been saving up until I have the right moment. And that's today. It's the Perineum Week, the gap between Xmo and New Years, and I'm ready to get out of the Roisín while my family are still happy to chillax at home. I'm not ready early cos I like to look after the bambino in the morning while my sleep-deprived wife catches up on kip, so it's nearly 10 o'clock agin I'm on the Dermot. I had only planned to go on a smallish spin with Arthur but he ended up on the lash with his new bird, so it's just me, myself and the Falcon. I lash on a body warmer, a cycling jersey, a windbreaker and one of about seven orange bibs I've been guiltily hanging on to ever since I quit Cabra football. Downstairs, I'm wearing long johns on with cycling shorts over them, the wrong socks and my cleated cycling shoes. One day I'll sort it all out. I pack minimally, with just a spare jersey in my back pocket and a wifebeater as a snood, to double up as an undergarment on the train home. For sustenance, I grab an apple, an avomikado, three small nartenges, some salted peanuts and some qualobant Spin 103.8s I got for my delighted wife in the Halal shop last night. She lobs some vitamins into my water bottle and gives me a fibre sachet along with a coke-bag of spirulina. The bike has a slow-release puncture, but I reckon I'll be grand cos I pumped it up before bed and it barely flattened overnight, so I give it a quick blasteen and say my prayers. I need to buy a new frame pump, but. The wind should be on my mostly back, as it's coming from the south-west, as per, and I'm cycling mostly eastward, bar the first chunk.

14.0.2 D15 micro-choppyoffiness

I need to get to the Liffey first so that involves Manhattaning through Dublin 15, from my gaff to the Strawberry Beds, just as in the first paragraph of this book. Since then, I've learnt that its lack of soul is caused in part by the distributor roads which save you from ever passing a property, as these are all walled away and disconnected from the outside world. As you sit in the miserable traffic, the only people you see, ghosting along the pavements, are the careless poor or youths, hungry for interaction and generating it out of thin air or vapes. Weaving across this matrix are the more adventurous walkers, often armed with a dog, a tiny number of cyclists, and a growing fleet of e-scooterists, squeezing through what few pedestrian gates they've been granted, as these walled demesnes are designed to keep out strangers rather than make life liveable for residents. Frequently, pedestrians will scale walls to save themselves a nonsense looparooney and close inspection often reveals bits of waste furniture placed strategically to

provide a leg up. The design derives from rural Ireland, except now the inaccessible fields are semi-inaccessible housing estates and apartment complexes. It's not long since this was all just fields and my dad would come here to assess weeds among the crops and advise farmers on how to #spray them. An unlikely survivor from this era are the blackcurrent bushes in his garden - and now my sister's too - because in like the '70s, a fella told him to come over and grab whatever plants he wanted from Coolmine Estate, before it was turned into two schools and a leisure centre. Other survivors include some grave yew trees and giant sequoias outside Scoil Oilibhéir and the adjacent Millennium Park, while some dead tree trunks have been beautifully carved into huge wooden sculptures, as part of Fingal's stealthy efforts to improve their virgin parks.

14.0.3 Shackletown



Figure 14.2: *The Anna Liffey mill, bought by the Shackleton family in the 1850s, operational until 1998, and waiting since 2002 for Fingal County Council to actually do something with it.*

Yet getting from Blanch to Lucan on a bicycle is a joy because the two West Dublin suburbs are separated by the narrow Liffey Valley which provides a tunnel of riverside reprieve between their respective faceless sprawls. I turn down the newly-paved Rugged Lane, where eking past other cars is now purely a matter of driving dexterity and good manners, but no longer a potholed-infused hazard for your vehicle. Unlike in the Poolbeg chapter, I turn right along the Strawberry Beds for Lucan village this time, and before long I pass the Shackletons' defunct mill. Seeing my home territory afresh, I think of Ernest Shackleton himself and his descendants who were a few years behind me in primary school, but only my dad knew them as they came into his shop. It's not long since I took up Mono's recommendation to read *Endurance*, [Alfred](#)

Lansing's amazebant book about Shackleton leading his crew out of the Antarctic, and I must text Marco cos we've agreed to start compiling a list of adventure stories, as I want to plot out my next book. Plus *Empire* podcast are doing a two-parter about it and I just can't get enough.



Figure 14.3: *The weir in Lucan village and an isolated walkway adjacent. Fingal is to the right slash north, and South Dublin to the left. The walkway goes all the way to Leixlip village, bar the Italian Embassy grounds, which the South Dublin Council have recently bought and will open as some kind of connecting hub.*

I stop at the bridge into Lucan village to look at the Doddie Weir and the river is nearly bursting its banks. There's an old-timer there doing the basically same and he tells me it burst a while back and nearly got up to the apartments, and suddenly we are reminiscing on the floods of June 1993 when the Griffen tributary round the corner flooded Kenney's pub while he was in having a restorative morning pint. In fairness to him, I remember it being a Saturday, cos its was Half-Term in boarding school and Sports Day was cancelled. That evening was one of the happiest memories of my childhood as me and my dad went for a walk together, a rarity back then, to scope out the other flood point, below the Spa Hotel. We took a disposable camera, which was something you only did when you want on like holidays, and I remember being devvo when the snaps didn't come out.

So your man reminds me that the council are after buying the Italian Embo and he reckons they'll have space enough to lash in a car park which would do wonders for the village, which I reckon could become the nicest village in inland Dublin. I start banging on about #greenways and he even suggests putting a cycle path in to town, and it's good to see the idea in the local ether. My brother-in-law reckons Shackleton's mill ought to be turned into a tourist attraction in its own right - maybe lash in a wodge of Antarctic memorabilia while they're #atit. We

still haven't fully grasped low-key river tourism in Ireland, beyond the Jack Charlton fishing approach, and I'd love to do a tour of France cos Dexter, ithinkitwas, says the place is awash with river amenities these days. Fake beaches and whatnot. Blake-Knox might know more cos he's a wil' man for some river swimming, where the water cleanses your skin and the parasites clean out your probably insides.

14.0.4 My little corner of the world



Figure 14.4: *A large part of my life has been spent waiting at the bus stop opposite this petrol station. The cars in the background are parked by the entrance to Lucan Demesne along the river, which awaits connection to the village.*

I buzz through the village and grab some jam from a lone street vendor who does be outside the Protestant Church, flogging twenty-plus varieties his wife makes. I get some experimental marmalade cos there's never any shortage of berry jam in my folks' and then I can nip in to my aulfla for a quick hello. I turn right at Courtney's and up Primrose Hill and then think about turning left by his old shop on this side of Tandy's Lane, but as I see the petrol station which we still call the *BP*, I can hear Yo la Tengo in my head singing *My little corner of the world*, with the bus stop into town and the entrance to the Lucan Demesne, where we came to see those floods thirty years ago. The demesne is a magic spot, with a linear park along the river, and it keeps my parents and others sane amidst this sprawl. I can't wait for the path to feed into the village, connecting Lucan and Leixlip in parallel to the horrendoid dualler along the high esker. Back in the David Norris, town people used to stall it out here on the boola tram for the spa water, hence the Spa Hotel above. There used to be a path down, but I don't remember it, just the roadworks as the dual-carriageway was being put in, and I was amazed to see in an old photo that there used to be some shops here when my big sisters were young.

McDonalds have long recognised it as a place that ought to be a micro-hub - like the bottom of Bow Lane in Kilmainham - with the another little tributary flowing into the river, and it's already busier since Adamstown burst its banks into Dodsboro.

14.0.5 Big Val

I swing on up to my folks via the dualler and I haven't brought my 300g of needlessly keys so I have to knock on the sitting-room window where Big Val is having his mid-morning doze. He jolts in his medical chair and then hobbles to the door with his stick and lets me in. He says my mother has gone out for a break and he laughs and he's delighted I've brought him marmalade. He has a fierce sweet tooth and my mam is stickler for simple food so you nearly need to smuggle it in. We'd normally go for a walk up and down the estate, or we'd drive down to the Demesne, but I have to leg it as I know it'll be tight for light this evening. It's curiously offensive to not have a quick cup of tea. I don't like rushing in his presence, partly because he won't be around for long, but really because his nature is so calming. He has never lived in the past or the future. He's just right there, in the moment, like a cat who can crack jokes all day. Looking after him is not a chore but constant laughter, as long as you don't try to give him a shower. I explain today's route around South County Dublin, all places he would have cycled around for about twenty adult years, but he's struggling to piece it together and his memory for names is poor now, especially since Larry David nearly killed him last summer. If it was North County Dublin, where he spent twenty childhood years, it'd be burnt into his brain. He laughs when I mention that Slade Valley is on top of a hill. He can't remember the name of the carer who was just in doing his exercises with him, though it was the good one, not like some of them. But he remembers she's from up near Tesco where your man is from who married my sister (actually they were #livinginsin). This narrows it down to two carers so I ask if she was a young wan. Of course that's a useless question cos when you are nearly 89, everyone is a young wan. So I ask if she was 25 or 45 and, bursting into laughter, he says 35. I hit the Dermot and leave him back to the empty day ahead, although he'll be glad of it today after six family events in the last five days. As I'm leaving, he asks for my wife, whom he loves dearly, but he can't think of her strange name either.

14.0.6 Back roads at last



Figure 14.5: Barge community

I climb up the ramp to get off the N4 and turn left for Celbridge. I've long since learnt to avoid this road, so I turn left back towards Lucan Golf course and right up Tubber Lane, which is now a cul de sac for cars, ever since the Shackleton development in Adamstown slash Dodsboro pushed back the suburban boundary. Despite the new estates behind the hedge, I'm out of the city at last and it feels good. These are the roads I used to cycle up to my dad's shop in Newcastle for all the summers I worked there before the recession put an end to it. I know I've entered Co Kildare when I see a signpost for Arthur's Way, a route celebrating good old Arthur Guinness, who first brewed the black stuff in what is now Boyder's gaff in Leixlip village, with its Dexter Gordon backing onto the Liffey. On the t-junction in front of me is a house where a dog used to lie in waiting and then chase me every morning, and I'm still afraid that a dog will one day catch me on the bike. The road becomes the county boundary for a bit, and the left hand side must be Dublin. I pass Hazelhatch train station and turn left for the canal bridge where McEvoy's thatched pub has carved out a beautiful niche for itself, beside the barge residents, whose number has grown significantly since those glorious Celtic Tiger days.

14.0.7 “Hello, Val Ryan Agri-Centre, Newcastle?”



Figure 14.6: *Auld Dick Smith use to sit at this wall watching nothing go by all day long, bar [the solar eclipse](#) of August 1999 which we watched in turn, through a piece of broken welder’s glass.*

It's a couple of clicks up the Hazelhatch road before turning left to Newcastle village, where McEvoy's old thatched pub lies in burnt out ruins, but the rest of the village has finally been populated with houses and shops, giving it the contiguity it never had. Newcastle is not on the road to or from anywhere so people need a reason to come here, and there were precious few. For twenty years, our shop brought in all sorts and was the biggest melting pot of Irish people I've ever seen. Local farmers would get feed for their cattle, sheep, hens and horses. Lar Harney, Mary's brother, would saunter in, sporting odd wellies and a stench of manure. Horsey people came from North Kildare or the Dublin mountains nearby. Another breed of horse owner came from the estates in Clondalkin and Tallaght, most of them second and third-generation city people. Then there were Travellers living in uncharted gaps on the map, with a brogue I couldn't understand at first. Many customers converged for races held on like the Naas Road of a Sunday morning. Some met for dog fights and I remember a handful of regulars being sent down for it. Unlike horses, anyone can have a dog, so that brought in suburbanites from Lucan and Celbridge, and they might grab a few bits for their little gardens, while being shocked at the hack of the actual place. The banter quotient was something else and we had a nice comfy chair nestled among stacks of animal feed. Some customers would just sit there and soak up the craic or looks for tips for the horses. The Celtic Tiger put cash in the pockets of everyone, and that added an intensity to the manual work which hadn't been there in the 90s. I remember coming up here with Babs when I was really young and the place was dead in the summer. Dick Smith would sit on the wall outside, watching nothing go by, and Trisha

Smith, no relation, would come down from the hairdressers upstairs and drink tea with Babs. She was still lifting bags when she was heavily pregnant and later her husband took over for fifteen years. Big Val himself joined forces when the original branch in Lucan had to close in 'A3. I'd work long slow summers, intense Saturdays throughout the year, and any other gaps in the academic calendar. The whole operation went tits up in the recession and there was talk of someone washing money nearby. I'll never forget the misery and shame of being out of stock and losing customers every day, around 'A8 and 'A9. Customers said you couldn't give horses away. It was tough going on my dad and especially my brother-in-law who tried to keep the show on the literally road before packing it in fully. We were fifteen years behind the curve on mechanisation because there's only so many bags of feed one person can handball per day per year per life. But by Christ was it good craic dealing with all those people coming, going, and often loitering, especially for a little sheltered kid like me.

14.0.8 Sagart & Slade Valley



Figure 14.7: Rural south-west County Dublin is legit horse territory and segways into the little known hills of North East Kildare.

Between Newcastle and Rathcoole slash Sagart is a #BusinessPark which gets bigger every time I come here. The slow drag on the road increases incrementally and soon the hills are very near, across the N7. I stop off in Sagart for coffee in Insomnia and a bite of my provisions, thinking I'll get some nosebag in Johnny Fox's in about two hours. It's midday now and my brain is freed up as soon as I thrash out a thousand thoughts and I'm back on the Dermot making an indulgent detour up and over Slade Valley. I remember cycling here the day Lady Di died - on one of the very few occasions I came out cycling with my folks as a chunfla - and I'm trying to rewrite the headlines but the words are *too* similar to make good puns. The

climb is easy in this direction and there's nothing to contend with bar micro-ramps of fifty or a hundred metres, and on top there's a good view over South-West Dzublin from up here, if that's what you're into, a golf course, and a stop-off point for dogwalkers to park up and explore the woods. The descent is fast but it's miserable on this bike cos I'm all cramped up, even though I had a longer stem put on, with a sexy Italian flag engraved into it, and wider handlebars for my rhino shoulders.



Figure 14.8: *From Ballinascorney you can see the city and Howth in the distance. Hanging out the back of that hill on the right is the wondrous Glenasmole valley where I'm going.*

I come out on the N81 to Blessington - a road to be avoided on a bike - and the wee lake behind the hedge looks more swollen than usual. I turn right and then a quick left into the tiny village of Brittas. There's a left up Mount Seskin, which is a quiet alternative to the N81 if you're ever heading back in to Tallaght but I punch on and follow the road to Ballinascorney cos I'm trying to loop back to the Glenasmole valley and then up to the Military road. It's proper rural here and the mountains in front look deloosh. There's a very steep valley descent towards Kiltipper and the outer burbs but I hang a sharp right for the mountains.

14.0.9 Glenasmole Valley



Figure 14.9: *Glenasmole valley has a pair of thin walkable reservoirs in its centre, surrounded by steep hills, making it feel like an outdoor cycling track or the Circus Maximus.*



Figure 14.10: *Clouds love it here too and the come and go faster than you can say Yr.no*

The Glenasmole realm is shaped like the Circus Maximus, with a road looping around the Bohernabreena reservoir at its centre, feeding townwards into the Dodder river, and mountainwards up to Kippure. My problem is that it has started raining. Sparse but thick droplets

with no mercy are getting in to me. This is classic Irish misery. A bit of rain. A bit of cold. A bit of wind. Like fighting three dwarves at once. It's a good time to stop and refuel because the hard climb is just ahead of me, so I park up at the wee bridge and huddle under some winter foliage, then I tuck in to those delicious dates which have been marinading in salty peanuts. I'm in heaven as I dunzo the most of my water. A few families are out for a wander but no one is in yappy form, either because of the weather or cos they are a bad advertisement for the Dublin populace .

14.0.10 Going to The Well



Figure 14.11: *Suddenly the weather is beautiful and all I have to worry now about are the 14% gradients.*

The 3.5k climb up to the Military Road averages 8% but it varies a lot. I'm trying to zigzag my way up by the road is too narrow and I'm so slow that the sheep might start chasing me. It's hard to get a rhythm on this ancient bike as I lug almost seventeen stone up it, between my ineluctable self (13 stone), the Paul van (2 stone), and some evenly-distributed blubber which isn't failing to insulate me. Nowadays you can lash twelve cogs on a back wheel and keep your cadence as you transition seamlessly between them, but older bikes didn't have space for that, so in order to get this yoke up steep hills I've had to install a seven-speed freewheel with one huge cog for emergency steepness and six normal-sized ones for everything else. Right now I need about fifteen gears plus a granny gear on the front but the bike apparently can't support three at the front either. I was up here early in the summer with Kilroy and, fair play to him, he nailed it. But Blue Thunder's chain kept coming off even though its gearing is otherwise very good, so I had to dismount twice and fix it. I think it's fair to say that I've earned the right to a good road bike.



Figure 14.12: *The ascent seemed shorter than I remembered until I realised I was nowhere near the top.*

When I get to the top of the steepest wall, a car stops to let me pass and, as I thank him with a nod, he gives me a little clap and I break into a huge smile which gets me through the next few hundred metres, but the climb just keeps on going. I have to go deep but again the lack of rhythm means I can't find it and have to stop. My head is not calm enough. Eventually, I remember previous pains like nasty rugby training or the horror of suicide when people can't keep going and that urges me to push on, and then I recall some tough times in my own marriage and overcoming that gives me one last push. It's like methodical drill now. I struggle. I reach for known bad stuff and I keep going, and when I can't go any more I have to find unrecognised bad stuff, and then it gets added to The Well.



Figure 14.13: Arriving on the Military Road at the top of Glassamucky mountain, where county Dublin turns into Wicklow. It might not say “Kelly Roche Earley Kimmage” but “Well done Dawg” does mean a lot.

At the top, the road is frighteningly windy, like don't-go-cycling windy, but my only choice would be to descend from whence I came and not complete today's journey. So I punch on left to stay in Dublin and the cold is in me now. This is clearly how the lads in the Giro musta felt in the wind and rain and cold nearly every day this year. I stop off at the viewpoint and take a quick snap of the city below, and I descend further towards the veerright off to Johnny Fox's. As I take on its short, entrance ramp I'm suffering and have to stop where the hikers park for Tibradden Woods. A cycler-by asks if I'm ok and I say I'm just wrecked and need a break. But it's slowly dawning on my how bad I am and he can probably see it. I feel lightheaded and it reminds me of a time I got dehydrated but I'm not thirsty. Just miserable and weak. Later on my wife suggests I might have mild hypothermia, and that would explain my slurred speech. I may already be past the shivering stage. Right now though I'm thinking some scran and a Britney in Johnny Fox's will sort me out in 6k's time. I've always loved this valley cos it's a gorgeous but carries neither the pain of climbing nor the stress of descending. Just the false flat decline of joy.



Figure 14.14: *The skinny valley between Killakee (over the hill to the right) and Johnny Fox's pub in Glencullen.*



Figure 14.15: *Plonking my bike outside Ye Olde oIrish Pube only complicates the needlessly picture.*

14.0.11 Johnnie Fox's

I get in and order a pint, a coffee, some water and crisps. I badly need a meal but it's 315pm now and I don't have time with the light fading. Luckily people vacate the big table by the fire so I set up camp, and hang my windbreaker and shoes on the grill to dry out, then I put my back to the fire, angled slightly towards three ladies having the lolz cos I don't want to ruin their chats with my misery. The place is too busy to be a refuge but the layout works because squashing people in tightly provides a good pathway for atmosphere. I'm in no state for joining anyone's conversation, nor to soak up minor variations among the tourists, bar the Yank Boomers out front, talking about the joys of massive rental yields, *par example*. So I ping a lads' group on WhatsApp to see if anyone is round Dun Laoghaire for a pint in an hour and I get one biter so that gives me something to look forward to. I'm out the door after nailing the pint and I leave my wee a voice message for my wife but it's a bad idea cos the cold and pain hit my body as I speak, and I can hear myself slurring, but it's not the beer.



Figure 14.16: *From Glencullen, Killiney Hill (right) and Howth Head (left) feel like siblings guarding Dublin Bay.*

On the tricky descent, I see Killiney Hill and Howth Head at once and it's a siblingship I hadn't thought about before, two humps marking the boundaries of Dublin Bay. I chicane through Kilternan and then down the bendless shallow descent of Ballycorus Road and now the pint in my system has kicked in and it makes me feel nineteen again, unfrightened and at ease with myself and the bike. The road from the N11 rising to Killiney Roundabout is as good a set up as you'll get on an urban bike lane in this country, and then I discover another bike lane hiding behind the trees on the road down to Glenageary slash Dún Laoghaire. It's a good thing cos it's getting dark now.

I'm tempted to sit down for food and a pint now cos Stafford should be here by now, but I decide to nip down to the lighthouse first and tick that box. This turns out to be a good decision cos it's actually a 3k spin from the Dart Station to the end of the East Pier, past a boatload of sailing clubs. I ask a lady if you can traverse the pier and she says 'not on a bicycle' in that scornful manner typical of pass-remarkable Irish women. There are quite a few walkers out and their unleashed dogs convert the pier into a slalom course. There are two levels so the lower one - maybe seven metres wide - is slightly sheltered and I stick to it, halving my view of the Dublin seascape in the dark.

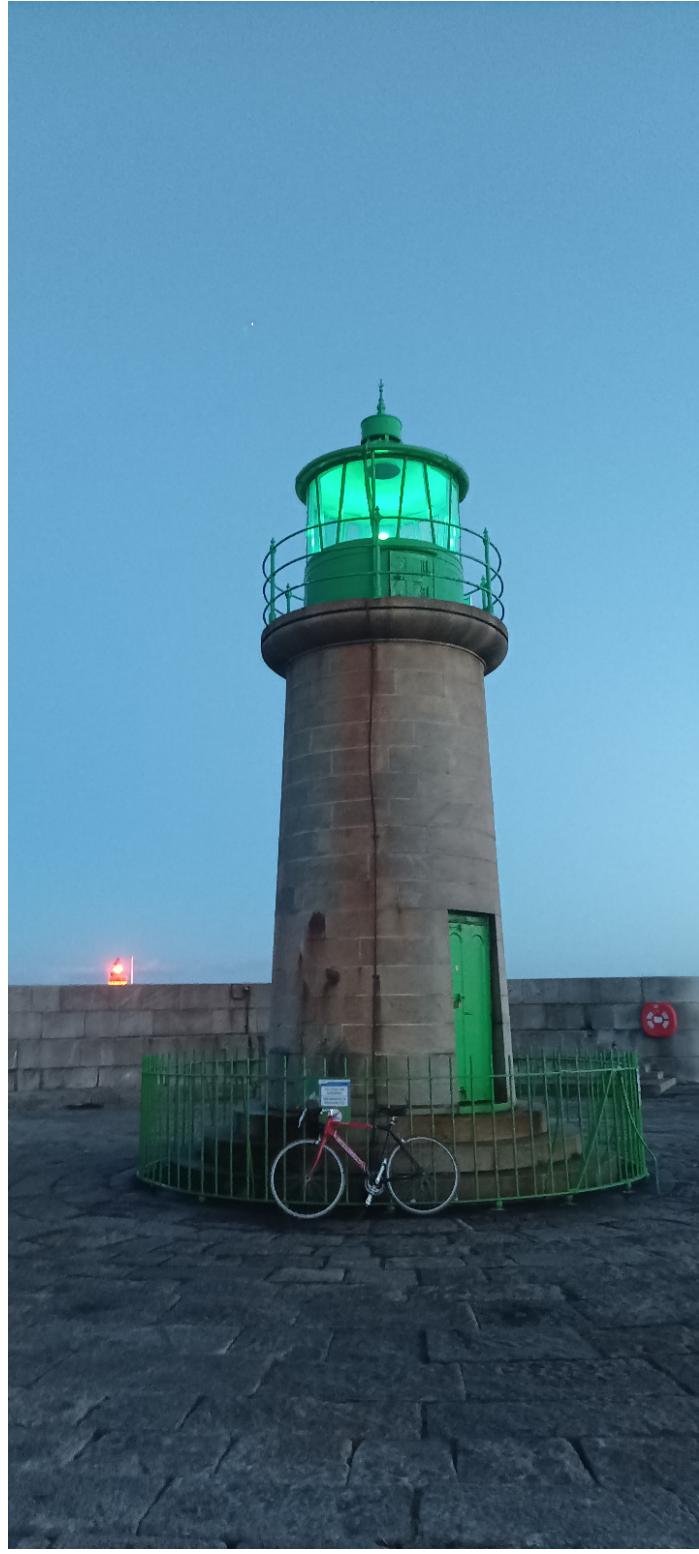


Figure 14.17: lighthouse

The lighthouse is a lot more beautiful than I had expected, its classy stone (CHECK TYPE) complementing its beautiful green glow in the last of the gloaming. Dun Laoghaire looks resplendent with its tall church tower and town lights, while the mountains cling to their duvet of clouds. I cycle back into the fierce breeze but I'm feeling good now. I check my messages and it turns out that your man had been replying to a different pint request so I'm back on my Tobes now with no bike lock. The inspector in the dart station lets me leave my bike in his office and he suggests eating in a boozer which turns out to be dúnta. I don't know that many people in Dun Laoghaire. I could have texted Dorgan nearyby, or Ros who might be home from London although she'll have the bambino. I'd've texted Eabha if she hadn't passed away last year, the poor thing. So I end up going in and out of several boozers hoping to hit the jackpot. McLaughlins is jammers and foodless so I stall it back in to the Lighthouse bar,s which tries to be all things to everyone, except for those of us who don't want to pay an extra €5.50 for some skinny chips with their kid's portion chicken burger for €12.50. Afterwards, I stall it back to Dunphy's for two swift ones at the bar and I hear all about Johnny from Ballybrack's dogwalking schedule, then I'm back on the Dart station where the ticket inspector has kindly stored my bike. In my carriage, there's a horrendified young wan from Donaghmadourravit, screaming into her Tony about being left all alone in Dun Laoghaire and how she's not responsible for what her little brother does to the people who left her here stranded. Thankfully the Maynooth train is waiting for me in Connolly and I'm home by eight where my wife has cooked some roast beef and mash, and she gives me a blanket to warm up and a scolding to cop on.

15 Ballinacourty, Dungarvan



Figure 15.1: *Ballinacourty lighthouse sits beside what is now a private house, and a full-time caretaker is required just to mow the lawn. In the background sits Helwick Head on the other side of Dungarvan Bay.*

0845, Sunday February 4, 2024

I got in to Dunmore East at 9ish last night but Graham and Sophie eat like Spaniards so we tucked in to some needless vino and, as if in a postmodern novel, veggie burgers from Graham's own home delivery range, *Halfway There*. Afterwards, we tried to plan out our route on Google Maps, which really didn't want us to follow the Copper Coast road, westwards across Waterford from Dunmore to Dungarvan. We are heading to Ballinacourty Lighthouse today, on the eastern side of Dungarvan Bay, the one I leapfrogged on my way to Mine Head and Youghal, cos I was saving it for this trip with Gk. From his gaff, it's at least a 110k return journey, back and forth along the hilly coast-road cliffs, whereas Google Maps is insisting we take the longer flatter inland route along the much-loved Waterford #greenway. 130 clicks is too far in the short days of the Irish winter, so we decide to drive our Boola Boggers to Tramore, home of multiple lightless lighthouses, then hug the Copper Coast and check out the #greenway on the return leg. This means skipping a biteen of coastline but you can't win 'em

all. We pencil in a solid 90 clicks and Sophie is on call in case it gets too dark to cycle this evening.

Our exit strat this morning is a step up from our last trip but the timing coincides with the kids' morning routine so GK changes their nappies and has a bit of Txiki horseplay with the bambino, while the toddler settles down for her Peppa fix. I faff about, munching eggs and prepping my pared down cycling bag, and engaging in some lowkey pressuremongering; then we're out of there by 845. It's only fifteen bogger minutes to Tramore, plus a pit stop for Graham to grab a can of unannounced cola, which I would have enjoyed partaking in as we've brung zero scran for the Dermot.

15.1 Tramore



Figure 15.2: *It's a grim morning and parking was easy to find along Tramore Strand, a sand spit which contrasts against the cliffs that characterise the Waterford coast.*

We park at the top of the long Tramore strand and whip out our Paul vans. It's a pissy grey day and I've been too scared to look again at the forecast, a luxury I can half-afford as I've got my shit to-prettymuch-gether, gearwise, after the frozation disaster the last day. I finally stalled it over to Decathlon where I was kitted out by a chatty chunfla called Hugh Butler whose dad, Paul, used to be a pro. It was nice to be chatting to a #realcyclist and it's high time I joined a club and learnt more. So anyway, I'm wearing a skintight bodywarmer base layer with chest padding, which is the permanent version of shoving a newspaper down your jersey, and a wine-colored outer coat which looks like the red leather jacket I picked up in actual Dalston during the peak recession, peak Being a Dickhead is Cool era. *¿Before hipsters were even known as hipsters? I've actually lashed my yellow jersey on top for visibility, maximising the Ital*

Disco slash gaybar vibe, and then I've gone and ruined it all with a shoddy dark windbreaker. Meanwhile, GK is making do with a bright yellow sailing jacket which protects him from the external elements but exposes him to the internal ones. He's borrowed a mountain bike off a different Ralph this time and he's happy with his lot.



Figure 15.3: *At the western end of Tramore Strand are some typical Waterford cliffs. The Metal Man sits atop the headland (squint to view three towers) and in between are some quality swim spots.*

From Tramore Strand you can see a set of lightless columns on either arm of the wide bay. Two on Brownstown Head on the Dunmore slash east side, which we won't be cycling to, and three on the Tramore slash west side, where a dude called the Metal Man waves to mariners, and that's our first port of call. These towers were erected in 1826 after the horrific *Seahorse* tragedy of 1816, where almost four hundred people lost their lives in Tramore Bay, and two hundred more elsewhere that same night. The Seahorse lives on in the logo of Waterford Crystal and in the crest of Tramore.

15.2 A treasure trove of coves



Figure 15.4: *Newtown Cove would be ideal for a cheeky rave. The Metal Man is visible from here but I didn't take a photo of it cos I eejitingly assumed we'd be able to get up close to it.*

There's wee warm up climb out of Tramore, at the top of which we get a cheer from a local, and then we turn left along the coast road where we find not one but [two fine swimming](#) spots. The Guillamene seems to be a diving-in point for advanced swimmers and sure enough there's a walrus in there battling the swell. Round the corner is Newtown Cove, a glorious inlet where three ladies are taking a casual ice bath, because they can.



Figure 15.5: *The Metal Man and its towers sit on an inaccessible field so you'll just have to imagine his friendly face.*

The Metal Man is clearly visible on the other headland but I don't take a photo because I'm thinking we'll just be able to cycle up and take a load of selfies. Of course it turns out to be on a private farm and there's not even a laneway to it because it's not a lighthouse and doesn't need routine maintenance. I should really know better by now. Lighthouse Pete told me about the Metal Man last week when we met for a scoop in Clonee. He's been writing [a blog about Irish lighthouses](#) since the mid-noughties - something to keep himself going since he quit the punk scene - and I've been wanting to catch up with him for ages. Seeing as I'm getting out of Dublin 15 any day now, I got my finger out and we caught up. He's an unassuming, self-confessed anorak, and it felt like meeting a real-life character from a Nick Hornby book, minus the melodrama. He's a fiend for the football history too, as was I as a chunfla, and finally someone can confirm to me that the goalkeeper in the 1956 FA Cup final did indeed break his neck and play on. "Bert Trautmann", he says, "from Germany. Imagine what it must have been like for a lone German in England after the war." This sympathy for the lone ranger may well explain why he has written a whole book about people dying at Irish lighthouses where life was disproportionately harsh, and he kindly gave me a copy of his book about fatalities at Irish lighthouses. He's got a collector's determination too, and he tells me all about the lesser known navigation aids dotted along the coast, unfinished lighthouses and, of course, errors on Google Maps. I'm delighted to be standing on the shoulder of anoraks, and Pete's knowledge will be even more invaluable as I plan out the awkward trips to the islands along the west and northern coasts.

15.3 Farm coast



Figure 15.6: *Much of the so-called coast road sits well back from the sea while the cliffs jag in and out*

The so-called coast road from Tramore to Annestown is up and down through a buncha farms and we don't see too much of the sea. It's catch up time for me and Graham and we're having the lolz, despite our subject matter. I'm banging on about a marketer slash banter merchant called Rory Sutherland who has given me a timely reminder me of the world beyond charts and graphs and data and AI, where I've been for the last four years, because I'll be losing my boulot job and I'm searching for a more benignant purpose, despite our subject matter. Meanwhile, at the coalface, Gk is on Instagram looking for customers, getting #Influencers to push his wares. It's a tough hustle for fellas of our age who learnt the Jimi Internet as a second language and now have to compete with the old digital natives coming up from behind.

I don't recall much of the landscape and I'm not sure if it was uneventful or if I'm distracted by the chat. Cycling chat is different from hiking where you can get into the depths of conversation, pounding out the entirety of a topic in time to your relentless march. But on the bike, the road interrupts your jabber. A steep ramp. A car whizzes by. The views change and merit remark. When cycling alone, continuity is retained in the mind, at least for me. I'm worried I'm corrupting my writing by cycling with another person. My sense of observation might be being corroded by sheer fun. I'm going to have to keep an eye on this issue if I am to get more people involved in the coming trips. But cycling together is a beautiful task, always unequal, so it's my job today to keep GK going. It's high time I found people to mentor me into being a better cyclist. I make the mistake of telling him that we are still two hours from the lighthouse and it's killing him. His manageable unit is 10k at a time, it turns out.

Mostly I keep quiet on such matters cos I know from five-a-side football how much he hates micro-management. He's his own man and I respect that.

The arrival into Annestown is welcome delight. A little valley of fields morphs into the strand with a lake and possibly marsh area around it. The tiny village sits on a very steep hill, guarded at its base by a pleasingly conspicuous pink house on one right and a less visible #bighouse on the left. Graham takes a quick detour left - unannounced, which I really love about him - to check out the beach where a few shrieking bathers jump the waves, washing away their Bank Holiday excesses. The skedj is tight so we don't hang around. We scale the village hill and Graham spots a nice scene where aged congregants hover outside a small church after mass, although they're gonzo agin I get back to photo them. There's a football pitch with long grass and ancient dugouts still standing, untouched, and the village feels like both a dying community and a newfound hub for seaside revelry. As a kid, I saw a picture of the Third Lanark football club and that image of an abandoned football pitch has always haunted me for some reason.

15.4 Copper Mines



Figure 15.7: *The jagged, undulating cliffs result in some strangely shaped roads, down to the bay in one S-shape and back out in another.*

The road from Annestown to Bunmahon is a proper coast road, with scenery as good as the best, and the highlight is the wider Kilmurkin Beach where a handful of beach-clad bathers queue for the sauna pod before their cold plunge. At this point, the road takes a fascinating

path, with a sigmoid curve down one cliff and another back up the other cliff, and then we're back on the plateau.



Figure 15.8: *In Tankardstown lie the remains of a rare mining boom in Ireland, between 1824 and 1875, where fellas used to hoist copper out of the ground.*

The Copper Coast takes its name from the copper mines which used to be along this stretch, between 1824 and 1875, and some ruins survive from this rare burst of Irish Victorian industry, when up to two-thousand workers slaved here, pulling copper out of the ground. There is no obvious evidence of their habitation. We stop off at the ruins where a “freestanding rubble stone chimney” distinguishes the site from any normal ruin, and the inner workings of the main “engine house” are explained in detail that certainly doesn’t underestimate the audience: *“This building is a winding engine house. It houses a steam engine which pulled materials up and down the mine shafts. The design of the internally mounted beam engine was basically the same as that of a pumping engine, other than the reciprocating motion converted into a circular motion through the connecting rod and internally mounted flywheel.”*

15.5 Gourmet House Cafe, Bunmahon

It's time for some elevenses so we stop off in an empty Gourmet House cafe. Coffee isn't Graham's cuppa tea so he orders the latter and we ogle the delicioso cakes. His belly doesn't scream like mine so he just orders a carrot cake, while I'm trying to maximise the calorie-to-cash ratio, being the scabby fatso that I am. The only nutty offer has peanuts and honey, a combo I maxed out on as a sprog, so I choose a homemade bounty bar, which is deloosh but insufficient, so we get some Fulfil bars for the road. The friendly proprietress behind the

counter opens with a question about our accents, which is easy for me, given Dublin's range of known accents, but Graham keeps his *zeh-actually-Navan?* gob shut. So we tell the lady we're checking out the Copper Coast for the Doris, and she breaks into tour guide mode, extolling the virtues of coastal living and I'm just there, thinking, "Yeahno, nono, no I know like", cos she's preaching to the converted and I'll be moving to Wickla any week now, with sea views in the morning and saltwater air in my lungs, once the solicitors bother their Gordons to push their pencils in harmony.

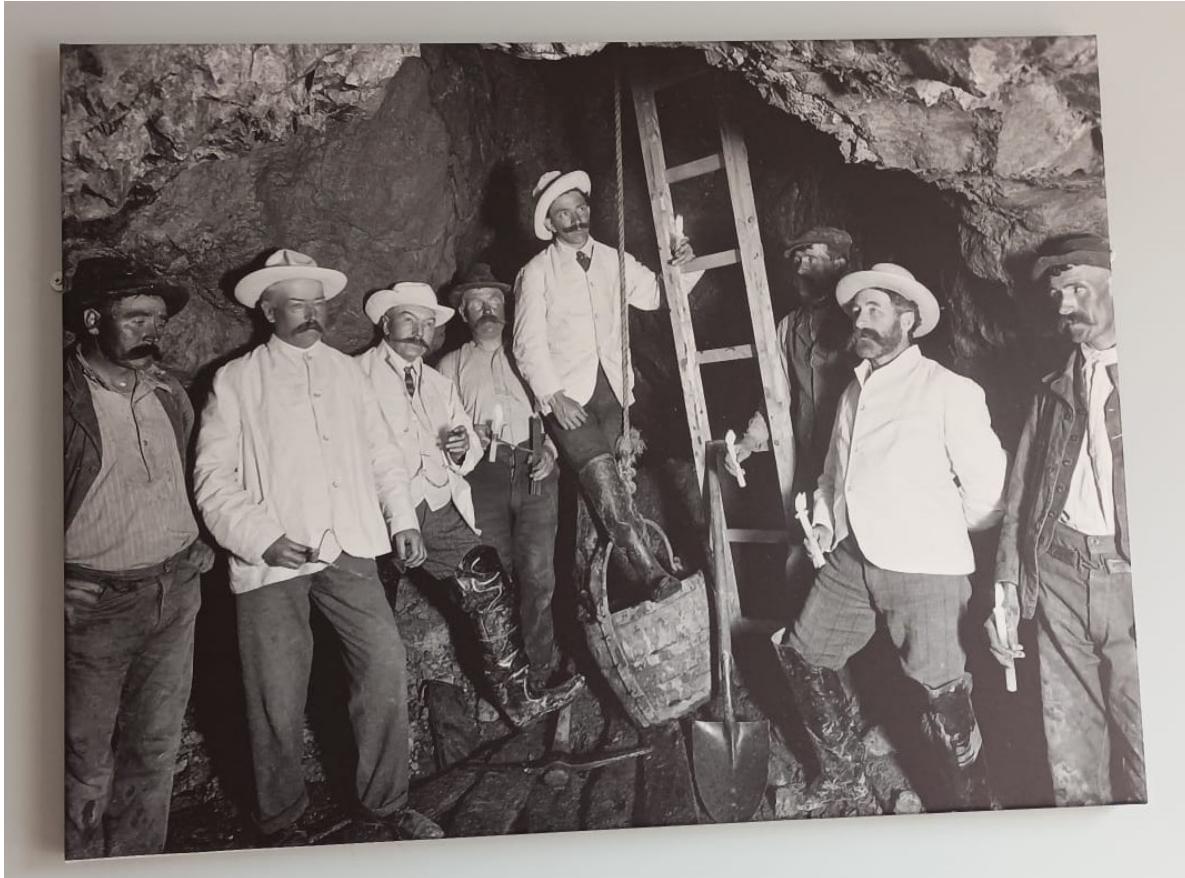


Figure 15.9: *In the good old days, before fake smiles, people were much happier.*

There's a print on the wall of the copper mines, looking like a scene from Victorian Britain not Ireland, with prospectors dressed in splendid white and knackered miners in the shadows, the lot of them united by their stern poses and over-the-top moustaches. I ask Orla, with whom we are now on a first-name basis, where they all lived and she says they lived in a shanty town and all that survives are some houses for the prosperous, a group she seems to identify with. Yet she also tells us of the hardship of the people's lives back then and of one poor lady during the famine who walked here from West Cork, fully two hundred miles away, to join her

husband. On the way, she lost three or four of their children to hunger, and on arrival she found him dead. After that she lost her mind. I tell her of my own mam's troubles, when she had her first bout of mania after cycling through Northern Spain on her Tobler, shortly after her own mother died. Now Orla is telling us of her grief for her father who died last year, and it's like it happened yesterday. We are in the depths of it now and Graham tells us about the shock of his father's death, ten years ago, and how long it took for him to recover. It's not the time to mention that my dad's nickname is Lazarus but I do feel deeply #grateful he is back well again after being given hours to live last summer, and he'll be eighty-nine next week. But my wife's mother has recently become very ill all of a sudden and it could go either way.

We ask Orla about getting to the greenway and she lights up and starts plotting out our route, but she has us doing too much of a doublebackarooney for our time constraints. Before leaving, I tell her about the lighthouse book and she tells me to send on a link and to look up [the cafe on Instagram](#), which she seems to be all over, but I'm recoiling at the thought of mutual backscratching, because self-promotion fills me with shame, even though a lifelong lack of self-promotion fills my life with paid work about which I barely give a rat's Gordon.

On leaving, we decide to turn left for Stradbally along the inland coast road, up a steep exit hill, at the top of which is a chunfla having a giggle at the hack of us. It's lumpy terrain and it's not long before we nod our hellos to a farmer who does that delayed second reaction thing comedians talk about. First he nods an automated hello and a moment later he has the same smirk as the chunfla, knowing better than to be cycling around this terrain. It's quite the theme of the day because all of these towns and villages sit in the cracks between the endless cliffs. We had it exiting Tramore - *fair play to you for getting up that hill, lads* - and also a smartarse comment from a fellow cyclist in Annestown, whizzing downhill as we huffed uphill. Graham realises he also hears it in Dunmore, where climbing the hill on foot is seen as an achievement in itself, a mini-pilgrimage with a no-nonsense Battle Cruiser on top.



Figure 15.10: *The coastline at Ballyvooney Cove forces the road to contort towards the limit of traversability.*

We're back in farmland now, shooting the breeze, and Google Maps wants us to stall into Stradbally village but we take an equidistant detour downandup by Ballyvooney cove, the sort of horrenjus looparooney that could only occur on a road where the natural topography of the land must be obeyed. It's a tighter version of the road in Kilmurrin, and it feels like we are following the edge of a half-eaten Pringle that's also been nibbled by a mouse. Nobody would design a cycle path in this shape, but generations of sheep and swimmers have hacked out this ridonculous but necessary path which brought me joy of the kind you'd never find on a road designed by a committee.



Figure 15.11: *The imposing gates to Woodstown Estate allow passersby to peek in at the idyllic valley, but we know who's boss.*

We get to Stradbally, dodge the village and follow a lush valley parallel to the sea for a welcome change, past a #bighouse with forbidding gates outside which make me feel that the whole gaff has been flogged off to some Continental magnate with zero relationship to the community. It turns out that it is actually owned by an Irish-American billionaire whose event list seems to have dried up in recent years, although there's plenty of cottages to rent for your hashtag getaway.

15.6 Legendary Greenway

It's not long before we arrive at this legendary greenway that everyone is banging on about, and we jump off the road and lift our bikes across a short access point. The vibe here is spectacularly amateur, reminding me of Sunday afternoon at a music festival which has gone mainstream. Families are out in force, couples, joggers, dogwalkers, and only the odd Italo Disco fan whizzes by. One cycling couple emit a whiff of perfume. Another young lady jogging looks like she has been re-animated from an Instagram photo. The path is straight and narrow, following an old trainline, with hairy hedges on either side hemming us all in, and no canal to provide breathing room. Occasionally the spectacular landscape opens up along the bridges over the valleys. The Comeragh Mountains are to the north, blocked by the mostly clouds. The path's simplicity makes cycling as mellow as walking, a disconcerting feeling after the drama of the coast and the addictive stress of the road. A few work-ons remain, and with popularity will come more structure. They will have to introduce updated road markings to help everyone negotiate the crossroads, and the staggered red gates are only a first approximation at solving

the problem of slowing down cyclists. Unleashed dogs remain an issue as they simply do not understand how bicycles move and it's disappointingly dangerous for both groups to be sharing spaces, an issue I find myself banging on about a lot.

15.7 At the lighthouse



Figure 15.12: *There's nothing the Commissioners of Irish Lights love more than to control the environment on the final approach to their lighthouses.*

We come off the greenway and cycle down the small triangular peninsula, past a golf resort, towards the lighthouse. We stop at Ballinard beach where two daytripper continentals are out posing for their camera, and another sits on the beach. The lighthouse is not visible from here, despite what I read on Lighthouse Pete's blog, but maybe the tide needs to be out. The lone lady leaves and we ask her about accessing the lighthouse. She says it's down the laneway parallel to the golf course, but on private land. It turns out there was another lighthouse enthusiast here recently, a nurse from Ballycotton apparently, who was asking the exact same thing. The lighthouse sits next to a private house with a jeep outside, but everything is plonked

together at one end of a huge snooker-table lawn, like furniture waiting to be put back in place after the floor has been mopped. We head straight to the lighthouse but this leaves us within doorbell-pressing distance of the house, so I knock just in case the owner is there, as I'd rather be a polite pothole than a silent trespasser. Plus they might divulge some juicy lighthouse goss if we massage them nicely. But there is no answer. There's not really much we can do with the lighthouse from here, short of patting it on its back for being a good lighthouse, so we climb up on a short wall for some photos to mark the occasion, before stalling off for lunch in the golf club hotel around the corner.



Figure 15.13: *Ballinacourty is a minimally perfect lighthouse, doing everything expected of the genre, yet without flamboyant colour, excessive size or dramatic location.*

15.8 Nosebag for the lads

The Gold Coast Hotel Bar is jambots but it's not clear whether that's because of the new Bank Holiday or just general Sunday carvery vibes, with families, pensioners, some couples and even a few #lads all looking to fill their bellies. Normal basically people who want to eat in public without the cost or stress of being in a poncy-ass restaurant, which is almost all of them nowadays. I don't understand why there aren't eateries on every street corner or in every estate or apartment complex. When I studied in Edinburgh Uni, we'd stall over to the Mosque kitchen, sit down on canopied benches and smash a cheapass curry for a Lady Godiva. You could just make one or two hotpots every day and flog it for an affordable price - a Caitlyn Jenner, tops. The kids would run around entertaining each other, and you'd have someone to chat to when you eat. Instead, every household slaves away on their respective Toblers, shopping, cooking and cleaning for every single dinner, while the kids zone out on their lonely screens. It breaks my heart.

Ideally we'd be sitting by the window overlooking the entirety of Dungarvan bay but we're in the back, watching punters queue for their Joey Carvery. The spuds and veg are as bland as in any carvo but the leg of lamb is deloosh and Kimchi Jjigae is happy out with his basically Chineser. I grab a Britney from the bar and the barman is wondering if I'm part of the ten-mile run that was on in Dungarvan earlier on, presumably part of the new Bank Holiday weekend. No one seems to know what to be doing with a spare Monday in February, although the runners clearly know that attack is the best form of defence in the Irish winterspring. As we eat, I'm lashing down my notes and it's a bit of a scramble because darkness will fall on the way home and every minute will count now. I feel bad for Kimchi because it's his down time and I'm still kinda working. The imbalance is less obvious on the Paul van cos we both have to cover the distance. I can feel him lowkey pressuremongering now so I hurry up and we hit the proverbial, along the Gold Coast Road and back to the #greenway. There will be no time to revisit Dungarvan.

15.9 Return leg

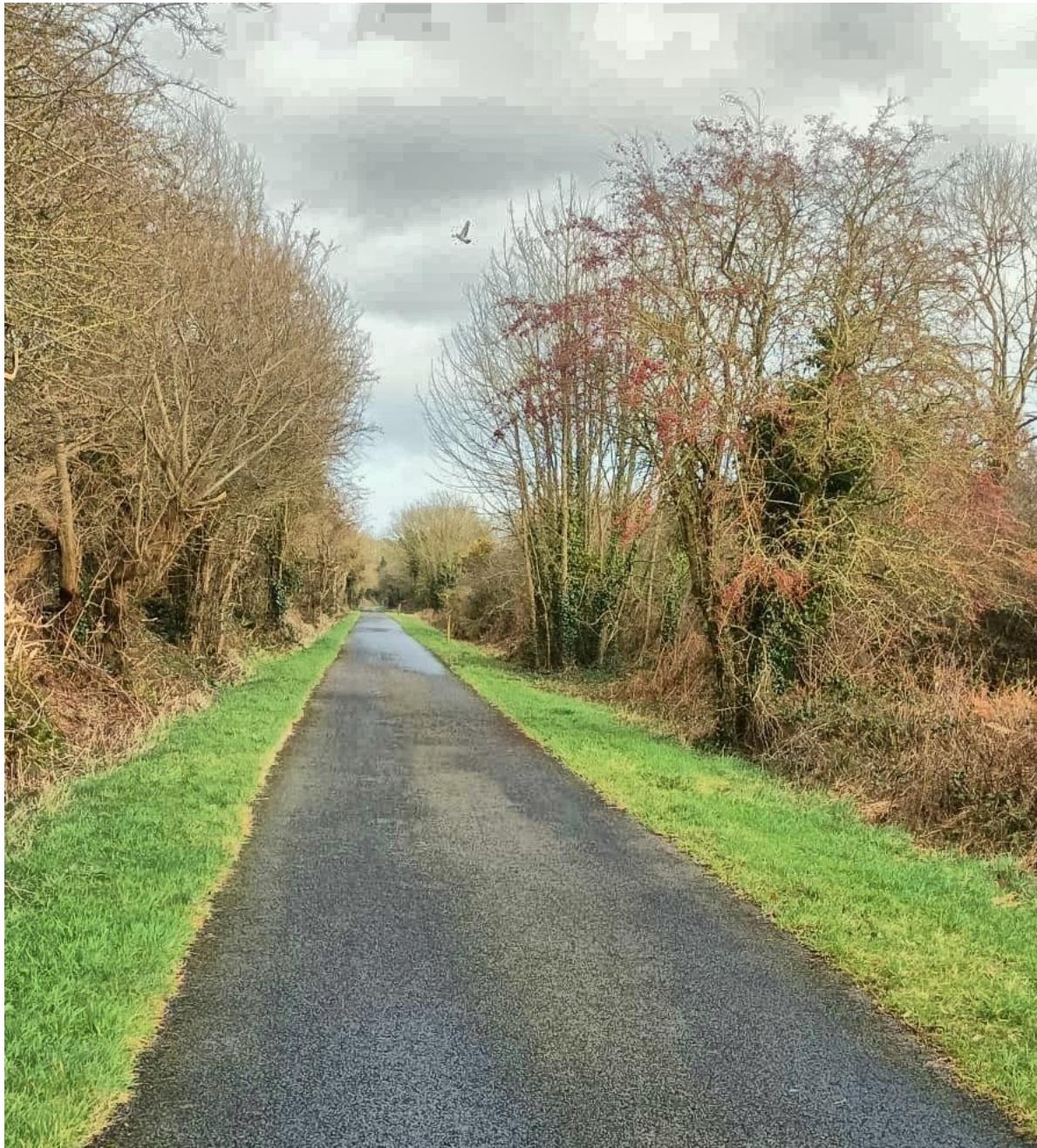


Figure 15.14: Compared to the nearby Copper Coast, the mellow-yellow greenway from Waterford to Dungarvan is about as exciting as the disused train tracks it replaces.

The trip home starts out as simple as cycling gets, and we make good ground along the greenway, which GK says is like being an exercise bike. His Gordon is at him now and also his Sharon Ní, so he's glad of the path's flatness, especially the subtly downhill parts where we're feeling brand new, and I make the mistake of telling him that, *actually*, that was the easy bit and the next few Ks look a smidge uphill. I don't pester him with too much chat, even though the simple terrain facilitates it, and he soldiers on. The hardest part is the unlit tunnel at Ballyvoile, which is not fit for cycling as you can't see the road below your wheel, and an aulfla, clearly afeared for his life, dismounts and walks. We stop for breaks and get a quick coffee in a container-sized cafe, then the owner shows me to the Union in a nearby furniture workshop. I stop briefly in the showroom and the smell of wooden desks and lavish carpets make me long to be warm and ensconced in a cosy gaff. But there's plenty of work to be done first. This path is going north-east and soon we need to cut south-east across to Tramore, from Kilmacthomas or Kilmeadan, or like wherever. The sun is dropping low in the sky and it's getting worrying. Google Maps is insisting on us taking the 33k route via the greenway when we are only like 22k from our cars. The only hack is to pick an arbo stop-off and then it plays ball. Ish. We don't have time for this nonsense. We could call Sophie but it'll be a mare for her to deal with two sprogs, two lads, two bikes and no locks. Plus we can still make it if nothing goes wrong.



Figure 15.15: *Flahavan's Mill of Kilmacthomas sits in one of several valleys along the greenway, with spectacular views along the bridges.*

We pass by Flahavan's Mill, sat in another of these steep valleys, and eventually we come to a disused old train station, where we join the road again, before quickly getting lost trying to negotiate the steep rural terrain. Google Maps wants us to double back and go up a grass track unfit for a tractor. Gk wants to give it a shot and I eventually decide to disagree but commit. We have to hike it with our bikes hoisted and pray we get out the other side. But

it's in vain. So we do a double-doubleback-arooney and we've lost that crucial ten or fifteen minutes of light. My phone battery is dying and the directions in my bluetooth earphone are gonzo too. Eventually we come across a motorist - that's how empty it is round here - and they direct us on to the Waterford-to-Tramore road. After that it's really just us and our crappy-ass bike lights saving us from the terrors of the Irish motorist.

Part II

Part 2. The Wild Atlantic Doris

16 Black Head



Figure 16.1: Black Head, Co Clare, seen from Salthill on the northern side of Galway Bay. Up close the rocks are grey, but from afar, they appear black, especially as the sun sets on the Atlantic Ocean beyond. The lighthouse is out of view because the peninsula is convex, and it's pretty scaldy inanyways.

0558, Friday, November 24, 2003

I can't see more than three or five metres in front of me and I'm #brickingit. The cars can see me but my front lights aren't strong enough to illuminate the road, so if I stumble into an obscure pothole or skid on something slippy, I'm down, and at the mercy of passing traffic. I only see the full road when cars approach me from behind because their dip lights push back the darkness. They can see me because of the red light blinking under my saddle and and my high-viz helmet and jacket. But most cars are coming the other way, probably getting to work in Galway before its inexcusable traffic kicks off. Their lights blind me, cancelling out the little torch I've sellotaped to my handlebar stem. I can't tell the difference between a filled pothole and an extant pothole so I have to dodge more often than I need to. But mostly the surface is good, here in South East Galway, on the N56 heading from Oranmore down to Kilcolgan.

16.0.1 Stakeholder management

I'm heading to see Black Head lighthouse in North Clare and soon I'll be turning right for Kinvarra, before entering the barren Burren, whose north coast I'll be tracking all the way to the upjut of Black Head which marks one extremity of Galway Bay. I'm on another hundy k round trip, and I thought I'd stall off with sunrise at 8ish then be back before dark at 4ish, leaving me enough time for lunch and a gawk at the layks. But it turns out my #StakeholderManagement has been suboptimal and my wife thought I was only heading out for a morning spin and that I'd be back in time for the 1pm check-out which I have, in fairness to me, negotiated with the hotel. So last night we had to work out a new plan. Clearlo, it'd be too much for her to take on the Galway public transport system with a teething infant and an active six-year-old, so me not being #round in the post 1pm sequence was a non-gayer. Now lookit, lives will change forever once she passes her driving test, although she still hasn't fully grasped its magnitude, for good or ill. Not only will she be able to head off wherever for the Doris, with or without the kids, she'll also be able to drive out to lighthouses to rescue her craic-absorbing husband from the misery of cycling back. My mother always said the worst part of cycling coast-to-coast trips was getting there and back. She's cycled Mizen to Malin, Land's End to John O'Groats, the length of Vietnam, the diagonal width of America, from San Fran to Maine, and, with my aulfla as far as Melbourne, Perth to Sydney. And the biggest difficulty, in her memory at least, was getting to the start and back from the endpoint. So let me tell you, getting home from lighthouses on a bicycle is a pain in the neverendingly Gordon and - and that's a stressed 'and' - with the journey's goal achieved, it's almost as deflating as cycling without the air in your tyres.

16.0.2 Lighting up time



Figure 16.2: *Getting ready in the car park at stupid o'clock. The sellotape comes from the hotel's reception*

In the end I agree that I'd just drive to Kinvarra, start there with the sunlight, cycle 30k out to Black Head, double back and then drive back to the hotel for 1pm. But it feels wrong cos I kinda want to cycle the whole of the Irish coast and I'd be left with another missing 25k. As it happens, I wake up at 4am and I can't help myself. Suddenly I have the chance to do the full trip, as long as I brave the dark. So I grab my unedited bits'n'bobs from the hotel room and head out to the car where my Paul van has been sleeping for the last two nights. I've parked it under an overhead light so I'll be able to see what I'm doing. The night porter wakes up as I head through reception and I ask him for some duct tape for my torch. He has none but a role of sellotape will do. I start putting my bike back together in the car park. Before driving here on Wednesday, I left the bike upside down in the morning rain so I could soften up the filth it absorbed on Paíd Morrissey's farm, then I gave it a quick rinsearoney and loaded it in the boot of my MC Hammer. For some reason the back wheel fell off and, while that was handy for lobbing the bike in the boot, I now need a forking spanner to put it back on and for some reason I've not brought one. So I have to tighten the wheel with my fingers and then reconnect the chain. Afterwards, I give the unwashed drivetrain a once-over with WD40 and I'm hoping it'll kinda clean itself over the course of the Caelan. It's a little hack I learnt from the Worldwide School of Halfarsery. Lastly, I spray WD40 all over my filthy fingers to give them a wee wash, and then I do a lap of the car park to check the bike is working. It is, but I'd feel better if those nuts on the back wheel were fully secure. So while I'm dropping the car keys back to the hotel room, the night porter digs deep and fetches me an adjustable wrench, ledgebag that he is. I'm finally ready to Morocc'n'Ryle Nugent but before embarking,

I ask him about the hack of the roads en route. The man is neither nosey nor a yapper but I have unlocked a specialist subject and he starts banging on about the entire 50k ahead of me. It's information overload but I do at least find out that I have to swing a Human Right in Kilcolgan in order to stay on the N56. That's all a cyclist cares about. Road numbers, turns, hills and traffic. The porter also mentions avoiding some hill but I'm not bothered by that because I was out that way once before and I know you couldn't pave a Burren hill so it won't be much of a climb.

16.0.3 The bright lights of Kilcolgan



Figure 16.3: *The bright lights of Kilcogan bring huge relief from the pressure of cycling in the dark, if only briefly.*

I turn left out of the Oranmore Lodge, away from the village, and then a right at the roundabout. The road is lit for the first half k and it's only then that I get the shock of the darkness. I can't see a thing bar stars. The cars are in my eyes. The worry builds. I know I should go back but I can't do that. I punch on for like seven clicks, dodging leaves and potholes and praying I am seen by every driver. Eventually come to a little village of Clarinbridge which has lights. I can feel my body immediately relax, like I've shifted from an apocalyptic movie back in to civilisation, and I'm reminded of how much effort goes in to making the world a safe place. But in truth the only danger comes from those man-killing tanks we all drive around. It's dark again until Kilcolgan, which is a drive-through village specialising in petrol stations. I don't need another coffee yet but I could do with recharging my emotional batteries, even though I've hardly been out for 30 mins. The Circle K is a hive of activity and there's a long-haired workman with hundreds of tools splayed all over the floor. I ask him for a shot of his duct tape and then I secure the wobbly torch in place. Then I grab a croissant and ask

the coffee machine to make me an Americano, but I pull it out early cos I don't want to drink watery tar. I get yapping to the very kind manager at the counter. He asks me how I am, leaving me the chance to tell him the answer. Scared. We talk roads, and the perils of tour buses around here, and wet leaves on bike lanes in Dublin, and that triggers the doom and gloom. His 83-year-old mother says the Wisht of Ireland will be gan by 2050 and she's glad she lived here life when she did. A little more reassuring is that there's a bike lane between Ballinderreen (two miles from here) and Kinvarra (another seven k I'd say). I leave him to his work and finish my coffee outside in the cold. It's not exactly Baltic City, Belarus out there, but an indoor perch goes a long way when it's, youknowlike, nine degrees?

16.0.4 Bike lane to Kinvarra



Figure 16.4: I'm out earlier than expected and the bike lane from Ballinderreen to Kinvarra is legiterally a life saver in the dark.

The right turn to Kinvarra takes me to an even darker, much narrower road, and a frightening sign saying you can drive up to a hundy clicks a Paddy. All the same, I'm half glad there's no hard shoulder now because you can't trust the sneaky bastids with their variable width and unkempt surfaces. I go in and out of Ballinderreen village with no sign of a bike lane and I'm aghast. Eventually it shows up and I expect to feel calm, seeing as I'm no longer in danger of death, and yet I'm just the same. I've actually just been afraid of falling over and that's even more likely to happen on an unwashed bike lane. It turns out to be smooth enough bar the leaves and I start to trust it except for some needless barriers which I almost crash into. The bike lane then criss-crosses the main road, which is a complete hoss. *Do bike-lane designers not understand that cycling is about rhythm, like dance music, and you just wanna put the needle on the record and dance to the sound of the underground.* Kraftwerk grasped

this connection in their *Tour de France* album, having already captured the Autobahn and, less brilliantly, the Trans-Europe Express. Movement is rhythm is meditation, and stopping breaks the spell. Imagine if DJs stopped their records for three or eleven seconds, every so often, and bouncers checked your ID again, like passport controllers on an overnight train.



Figure 16.5: *Cycling from darkness into light. Look carefully and you'll see that that's not a black and white picture.*

It's still dark when I arrive in Kinvarra and, at 0718, according to my bank records, I grab a bottle of isotonic in the Eurospar. Outside, I savour the colour of the buildings nearby. In some parts of the Wisht, they've gotten the memo that painting your buildings fun colours takes píosa misery out of Ireland's greyness. Kinvarra is one of those towns and I'm looking forward to seeing it in its splendour on the way back, as it's shaping up to be a cracking morning. I passed through here back in 2014, cycling the inland route, northwards from Ennistymon, as part of the Mizen-to-Malin trip I did with my mam, and on to Tuam later that day. I punch on, expecting another hour of darkness before sunrise, but it's bright enough to see the road ahead of me and I can just #chill and happily do what I love.



Figure 16.6: Jobs for the boys

Now that I'm not worried for my own safety, I start thinking about how people eke out a living here. Clues come from the signposts and, as I am welcomed to Co Clare, I am directed to several artisan ventures that no one presumably commissioned, bar those in need of subsistence after settling on this infertile landscape. Chocolate factories. Fine Art. Woollen mills. Later I see a sign for a perfumerie. And those are the ones successful enough to have signposts. People's lives here may be the converse of what most of us do, living in ugly inorganic suburbs because commissioned work is nearby.



Figure 16.7: Low lie the fields of The Burren's north coast

By 0755, radiance emerges from behind the mountains and the stark landscape starts to open up. We're in The Burren now, and the coast is to my right, with low-lying fields vanishing into the mellow, -shaped Galway Bay. Tombolos connect some small islands to the land and an [old castle tower](#) sits on one, alongside a family of holiday homes, while yonder sits a old lookout tower. Further again is my destination, Black Head, a huge slab of a hill, maybe 10k from here by sight and 15k by bike, but no lighthouse is visible around its convex bend. These islands might well be in the Frank Ocean long before 2050, maybe even before our abovementioned 83-year-old friend kicks the Hyacinth. To my left are those smooth-from afar Burren hills, laid back like supine boobs on the beach, only with the texture of cracked hands, and I think of Aphex Twin's Windowlicker video. As I proceed, the land quality degenerates so that even the fields by the coast are becoming grassless and replaced by row after row of thick slabs of rock and sod-all soil for plants to grow in. This is a [Unesco Geopark](#), a limestone landscape known as karst, a formation that attracts more tourists than lifers. The legendary description of The Burren says that “[t]here isn't a tree to hang a man, water to drown a man, nor soil to bury a man”. You could, if pressed, hang a cat from one of the wind-angled trees. Astonishingly, I find some sad donkeys munching on what few plants do grow here. No source of fresh water presents itself until I'm closer to the lighthouse when I find an old stone building, like a micro-chapel, with a tiny stream inside and a sign marked drinking water. It takes little imagination to reconstruct The Great Famine of the 1840s, and the occasional derelict buildings aid in the process.



Figure 16.8: Donkeys munching on whatever they can get their hands on

I turn right in Ballyvaughan, and at long last I'm on the home straight now. Directamundo to the lighthouse, eight or nine k, and no more need to be sifting through Google Maps. Some nice light is emerging from a hill behind me and maybe I'll catch its beauty on my way back. For now though, almost everything in this direction remains grey. The sea. The clouds. The

land. The road. Some colour emerges outside a hotel declaring its new purpose of housing refugees, with a sign erected in the blue on yellow of the Ukrainian flag, itself a simple rotation of the Clare flag. The Ukrainian flag represents their blue skies above yellow corn fields, and at this hour it's not obvious how such vibrant colours snuck into the Clare flag, which would be greyscaled if based on the landscape. Exceptions include the autumn-brown ferns that populate the scabby land, and the very occasional patch of moss brings bright green joy. The exception are grassy fields or gardens right on the coast.



Figure 16.9: *Below this ancient edifice is a stream containing drinking water, a welcome relief from the permeous rocks.*



Figure 16.10: *The nice light is behind me as I head westwards along Black Head.*

Standing on the road, at the entrance to his homestead, is a man wearing a Connacht Rugby gilet. I say hello and he looks like he's up for the chats so I stop and yap, before remembering to stfu and listen. It's a bit of a frankly work on of mine. I can fill any gap with shite talk so I have to remember to stall the ball and let the other person take a moment if they need it. It turns out he's waiting for a delivery of concrete to pave the garden and give the daughter a patch for cycling. I forget to ask him if she'd be allowed out on the road to cycle because that's one of the big issues with rural Ireland. It's just not a safe place unless you're inside a vehicle, and even then there's a hierarchy. It's a big reason why I've never wanted to live in the countryside. He tells me about the marauding buses and points to a corner on the road where they get jammed up. If they meet there at just the wrong time, it can take fully half an hour to clear the build up of cars. He said he's offered a bit of his land to the council so they can widen the road, but to no avail. The delivery lorry approaches and I stall on, wondering to myself how much land the nation's farmers would be willing sacrifice as part of a safer journeys program.



Figure 16.11: *Black Head lighthouse is a poor specimen although a bang of spray paint might liven it up and add some gloss to this Godforsaken beauty of a place.*

The lighthouse itself is as disappointing as I expected, being just a wee light on top of a scaldy box. Some commissioned graffiti would liven it up and bring some colour to the bald hill. But the real disappointment arises from the convex shape of Black Head causing the land to curve away from the eye after a couple of hundred metres in either direction. There is none of the usual sense that the lighthouse marks the land's endpoint and [its position can only be appreciated from an aerial view](#). The situation feels like a miniature version of the entire planet, where you must content yourself with your local surroundings, and the bigger picture can only be seen from a satellite. A tiny locked gate marks the thin path to the lonesome building and a sign says no entry. Of course I step over the low wall and scuttle around in my bicycle shoes trying to find a good spot for a snap, but soon I have to be careful as the rock drops irregularly into the sea. I sit back down by the gate for a breakfast of pistachios and oranges, and try to admire the view of Connemara across the bay, but now I can feel the teeny wind in my cold body and there is no shelter. It's like begging on the Ha'penny Bridge, so I just hit the Dermot and soak up the last of the sunrise on the way back.



Figure 16.12: Splitting

I aim for a real breakfast in Ballyvaughan and, when I get there, I push straight on to Kinvarra to get the clicks under my belt, savouring the blue skies all the way. By 1030, *Wild Beans* cafe is hopping, with its Nordy owner setting the tone, so I guzzle a pair of quality Americanos and scribble down some notes, while finally getting in a wee gawk at local latte drinkers, some of whom are tourists. The cycle home is a joy for once, with the wind on my back and the blue skies blazing. After Kinvarra, I see a sign saying “No splitting of farms for greenway”, and it seems that this is the faultline over which the battle will take place in the coming decades between farmers and those looking for safe cycling routes. A similar argument was made in the Save the Glen campaign twenty years ago, when the protesters, camping in the ancient woods, argued that the natural habitat of the animals would be ruined. I’m back in time for checkout at 1, and we all stall off to Salthill to check out the Atlantaquaria, a marine zoo. Outside, Black Head is visible across the bay, with its blackness highlighted by the setting sun.