

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Round Ireland with a Fridge

Tony Hawks

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Author's Note

All the events described in this book actually took place, and all the characters depicted really exist. I have used real names except on one or two occasions when, out of respect for a person's privacy, they have been re-christened. I should like to express my heartfelt thanks to all of those who have helped me in the lead up to publication of this book, not least the characters about whom I have written. I hope I have done you justice.

Prologue

I'm not, by nature, a betting man. However, the pages that follow in this book do not bear testimony to that. In fact they exist wholly as the result of a bet.

I'm not, by nature, a drinking man. However, the making of the bet which led to this book does not bear testimony to that. Because I made it when I was pissed.

Everything you read from this moment forth is a tribute to what can be achieved as a result of a shabby night of booze.

Round Ireland with a fridge

Tony Hawks



IRELAND



1

If Only

IN 1989 I went to Ireland for the first time. I don't know why it had taken so long. Some parts of the world you make a conscious effort to visit and others have to wait until fate delivers you there.

When the moment arrived for me to set foot on the Emerald Isle, it was as a result of a badly written song. An Irish friend from London, Seamus, had urged me to compose a piece for him and his mate Tim to sing at an International Song Competition which was held each year in his home town. Qualification for the final, he explained, was a formality provided I agreed to do a twenty-minute stand-up comedy set for the audience whilst the judges were out. Seamus wanted to perform a humorous song, and had asked me to come up with something that would 'set it apart' from the other mundane entries. In the event, what would set it apart would be a quite significant drop in standard.

The song I had written was called 'I Wanna Have Tea With Batman'. Now I consider myself to be a good songwriter (in spite of my only commercial success being a one-off hit record called 'Stutter Rap' by Morris Minor And The Majors), but this song was . . . how can I put it? . . . yes, that's it - poor. To their credit, Seamus and Tim conjured up a performance to match it.

In an extraordinary gesture which was at best surreal and at worst embarrassing, they dressed as Batman and Robin. At least that's what they had aimed to do, but a limited costume budget had left them in borrowed tights, miscellaneous lycra and academic robes doubling as capes. They resembled a couple of children entered for a fancy dress competition by uninterested parents. Seamus seemed unconcerned, his theory of comedy being that if you had an 'outrageous' outfit, that was enough; and then he announced his master stroke that one of them would carry a teapot and the other a kettle.

One had to admire his courage, for he was performing in front of his home town and everyone he had grown up with was there. Friends, family, teachers, shopkeepers, barmen, drunks and priests were all rooting for him. If one was going to let oneself down very badly – and Seamus was most definitely going to do that – it would be difficult to imagine an assembled throng with which it would have more resonance.

Seamus and Tim took centre stage. The audience responded with an audible inhalation of breath. For them, there was little to suggest that the two characters before them were supposed to be Batman and Robin, and they were clearly taken aback by this magnificent fusion of colour, tights and kitchen appliances.

I watched from the back, experiencing for the first time a curious blend of wonderment and discomfort, and could see in the faces of both performers that their self belief in the costume selection was ebbing away with each elongated second. Thankfully, from the congregation, astonishment subsided into applause. The conductor caught the eye of our superheroes and they nodded to establish they were ready. The band struck up. The musical introduction finished but neither Tim nor Seamus began singing. They looked accusingly at each other. Paralysed with nerves one of them had missed their cue. Somebody near me allowed their

head to drop into their hands. Seamus, man of the moment, stepped forward and signalled to the conductor to stop the band. Astonishingly the maestro ignored him. He was pretending he couldn't see Shea's frantic signals. For God's sake, how bad could his eyesight be? Was it possible not to notice the flapping arms of a multi-coloured caped crusader brandishing a teapot in anger?

That conductor was more focused than most of us could ever hope to be. He had a long evening to get through and he was going to get through it in the shortest available time. Going back and starting again for those who had screwed up wasn't on the agenda, even if it was 'Good old Seamus' from down the way. And so, with all the obduracy of a first world war general, his head stayed firmly down and the band played on.

Time went into stasis. I simply have no way of knowing how long it was before Seamus abandoned his frenzied gesticulations, punched Tim, and they both began singing. Indeed, I can't recall how badly they performed the rest of the song. Who cares? The audience applauded, they won 'Most Entertaining Act', and so began my fascination with Ireland.

Aside from the song contest débâcle, there had been another incident which had made this first trip to Ireland stand out in my mind. On arrival at Dublin Airport, I had been met by Seamus's lifelong friend Kieran and driven to Cavan. As we headed north and discussed Batman and Robin's prospects (Kieran was peculiarly guarded on the subject, but later I understood why when I learned that he had watched their rehearsals), I noticed a figure by the side of the road, hitch-hiking. I looked closer, as one does with hitch-hikers, to make that split-second assessment of their appearance to judge their suitability for travel companionship. This was odd. Very odd. He had something

alongside him and he was leaning on it. It was a fridge. This man was hitch-hiking with a fridge.

‘Kieran, was that man hitch-hiking with a fridge?’

‘Oh yeah.’

There was nothing in Kieran’s tone of voice to suggest the slightest hint of surprise. I had clearly arrived in a country where qualification for ‘eccentric’ involved a great deal more than that to which I had become used.

Years passed. (I’ve always wanted to write that.) The Song Competition had become an anecdote which was given an airing at dinner parties approximately once every two years, and a reference to the fridge hitch-hiker always accompanied it as something of a postscript. For some reason, the image of this man and his large white appendage was indelibly stamped on my memory. I could still see him there by the roadside, something in his face demonstrating a supreme confidence that the presence of his refrigerator would in no way impair his chances of a ride. Sometimes I wondered whether I had imagined him, but no, Kieran had witnessed the miracle too.

Had it not been for Kieran, I could have allowed my imagination to develop ‘Fridge Man’ into some kind of spiritual revelation; an apparition, an angel who had appeared to me as a symbol of optimism in a bleak, cynical world. I could be the apostle who spread the message that we could all transport our burdens with the ease of ‘Fridge Man’, if only we trusted in our fellow man to stop and help us on our way. I could hand out leaflets at railway stations and arrange meetings, steadily recruiting followers into a utopia where, when you opened your door to the world, a little light came on and illuminated your groceries.

Alternatively, I could pull myself together.

And that is exactly what I did. The fridge incident was forgotten, banished to the recesses of my mind where

matters of infinitesimal consequence belonged. It took alcohol in excess to throw it back up again.

The occasion was a dinner of party with some friends down in Brighton. A vast quantity of wine had been consumed and the atmosphere was, shall we say, lively. Round about midnight those present settled on a short discussion on the merits of the new fridge which Kevin had bought, and then, by a series of turns, our raddled attention was given to a trip he was planning to Ireland. The juxtaposition of the two triggered a triumphal re-emergence of my fridge hitch-hiking story, which I relayed to the guests via a long-winded collection of badly slurred words. Kevin's response was unambiguous.

'Bollocks.'

'It's not bollocks,' I countered. I had hoped this would see him off, but there was more.

'Yes, it is. Nobody could ever get a lift with a fridge.'

'They could in Ireland, it's a magical place.'

'Magical! So's my arse!'

I let the subject drop. Experience had taught me that someone mentioning how magical their arse was tended not to precede stimulating and considered debate.

When I woke in the morning, in a physical condition which served as a reminder as to what had taken place the night before, I found a note by my bed:

'I hereby bet Tony Hawks the sum of One Hundred Pounds that he cannot hitch-hike round the circumference of Ireland, with a fridge, within one calendar month.'

And there was Kevin's signature, and below it, an illegible squiggle which I took to be mine.

And so, the bet was made.

Now, it's no good me pretending that the gauntlet had been thrown down and that my honour was at stake if I didn't pick it up and rise to the challenge set down before me. I had

been drunk and so had Kevin, and if people were held to things said when sloshed, then we'd all be tragic heroes, ensnared in miserable lives enforced upon us by our own reckless words. I'd still be with Alison Wilcox who I'd told I would 'love forever' in the midst of a lager-sodden teenage one-night stand. I find it difficult to imagine us still together now – mortgage, kids and Ford Mondeo, given that the only thing we really had in common was a failure to remember each other's names in the morning.

In fact when I did get round to calling Kevin, he had only a very sketchy recollection of the whole sorry saga. The last thing he was going to do was to hold me to something he could barely remember having taken place. So why, a month later did I find myself seriously considering taking the bet on? There was no need, no need at all, and yet there I was looking at a map of Ireland and trying to work out the mileage involved in making its coastal circuit. Alas, I had been struck down with what psychoanalysts refer to as G.T.D.S.B.S. syndrome¹.

Naturally, the adopted logic of those suffering from G.T.D.S.B.S. syndrome is flawed and can be easily exposed. I cite a short conversation I had with a mountaineer (mountaineers are probably the most common casualties of this phenomenon) as an example of how easily this may be achieved: 'Why, in the bitter conditions of an Alpine winter, are you tackling the dangerous and challenging northeastern face of the fearsome Mattherhorn?' 'Because it's there.'

'But so are your slippers and the TV remote.' Q.E.D., I think.

Why subject yourself to untold pain and deprivation when popping to the shops and back followed by a bit of a sit down, is an option? Why *explore* when you can *tidy*? Why *sail singlehandedly* when you can *read singlehandedly*, *trek* when you can *taxi*, *abseil* when you can *take the stairs*,

stand when you can *sit*, or *listen to Neil Sedaka's Greatest Hits* when you can *take your own life*?

And it's no good pretending that G.T.D.S.B.S. syndrome is rare, because we all know someone who has been touched by it. Someone at work, or their brother, or someone in the aerobics class, has run a marathon. Twenty-six miles. Twenty-six pointless miles. And do we know anyone who has enjoyed it? Of course we don't. They might pretend they enjoyed it, but they're lying. Life is full of mysteries, doubts and unfathomables but if we can be certain of one thing in this world then it is this:

Running twenty-six miles is *no fun*.

I think it was probably an American who came up with the adage 'if it ain't hurting, it ain't working'. It would be nice to think that shortly after he uttered those words someone smacked him in the mouth by way of demonstrating how well it was working for him.

And yet I was just as deluded as the marathon runner, maybe even more so. All logic defied what I found myself contemplating. I would sit up late at night weighing up the pros and cons. All right, the cons won hands down, but there were times when I managed to make the whole thing seem glamorous. An adventure, the unknown, the chance to do something no one had done before. Wow! – something no one had done before. That's something most of us can only dream of.

If you're not sure of the lengths to which people are prepared to go in order to set themselves apart from their fellow Man, then have a browse through *The Guinness Book Of Records* next time you find yourself with a couple of free minutes in the reference library. That's exactly what I found myself doing one morning – checking the entries under Refrigerators and Hitch-hiking, just to confirm that the whole Ireland/fridge venture hadn't already been successfully

undertaken by a seventeen-year-old biology student from Sheffield. Research brought relief when I discovered that nobody had done it, but honestly, you wouldn't believe some of the things they *had* done.

Akira Matsushima of Japan unicycled a distance of 5,244 km from Newport Oregon, to Washington DC, from 10 July to 22 August 1992.

Quite impressive given that most people would be chuffed just to make it across a room. But the efforts of Akira must have pissed off another aspiring unicyclist, Ashrita Furman of the US, who wanted to establish a unicycling record of his own, but felt unable to eclipse the feat of the one-wheeled Jap. So, what to do? Of course – it's obvious, isn't it? Start practising unicycling *backwards*.

Ashrita Furman of the US unicycled 85.5 km *backwards* at Forest Park, Queens, US, on 16 September 1994.

Well, I just hope his parents are proud of him. What an invaluable skill their son has acquired. Further study of this most bizarre of textbooks revealed that Ashrita was one of many who adhered to the school of thought that if you couldn't break a world record *forwards*, then your best bet was to have a go at doing it *backwards*.

Timothy 'Bud' Badyna ran the fastest *backwards* marathon - 3 hours 53 minutes and 17 seconds at Toledo, Ohio, on 24 April 1994.

I checked to see whether Timothy 'Bud' Badyna had also managed an entry under 'Biggest Wanker', but I was disappointed to find that he hadn't. Congratulations though to the Conservative MP, Edward Leigh.

Before I returned the book to its shelf, I scoured the pages for an entry under 'Most failed attempts to get into the *Guinness Book Of Records*', hoping to see a list of efforts like:

Most amounts of cheese eaten in a force 8 wind.

Most number of years spent attempting to startle a postman every morning.

Shiniest ears.

Biggest piece of wood coloured in, in crayon.

Widest dog.

Tallest fish.

Smallest pair of swimming trunks.

But alas, I found nothing. One day, I hope, the publishers will see the wisdom of introducing such a category.

So, given the efforts of Ashrita Furman, Timothy 'Bud' Badyna and friends, I was able to conclude that my plans were rational enough, as for the most part I would be moving in the direction known as 'forwards'. Happy in the knowledge that I hadn't lost my mind (in fact I was so happy that I was doing a little jig and singing at the top of my voice in the High Street), I was able to give consideration to another factor in the decision making process. That of regret.

I was reminded of something Nigel Walker had said: 'There are two words I don't want to find myself uttering as an old man, and they are "If only . . ."' If only. We all have our own 'if onlys'. If only I'd studied harder, if only I'd stuck with those piano lessons, if only I'd spoken to that girl at the bus stop, if only I hadn't spoken to that girl at the bus stop, if only I'd remembered Alison Wilcox's name in the morning.

Nigel Walker is a former Olympic hurdler who gave it all up and became a Welsh International rugby player. I had the privilege of meeting him at a corporate function I was hosting, where he was giving a talk about his life with particular reference on the 'need to adapt'. There could have been few people better qualified to talk on the subject. His talk was punctuated with video clips of his sporting achievements, and one particular sporting failure. The 1984 Olympic 110m hurdle semifinal and the culmination of four years of dedicated, exhaustive and sometimes punishing training. As Nigel showed the clip of the race, we all

watched in horror as he caught his leading foot on the seventh hurdle and went crashing to the ground. In that moment, everyone present felt Nigel's disappointment as if it was their own – that sudden destruction of a dream held for so long, aspirations of glory brutally subverted by pain, both mental and physical.

Nigel stopped the video clip and smiled. (It must have been a few years before he was able to pull that trick.) 'So, what next?' he said, with characteristic Welsh understatement. He went on to explain that although he had considered a career change at this low moment, it wasn't until he failed to qualify for the 1992 Olympics that he felt he ought to make the change to rugby. Friends and colleagues advised him otherwise, but he was determined, not least because he didn't want to find himself saying at a much later date '*If only* I'd had a serious go at playing rugby'.

The clips that followed were all the more significant. They were a compilation of Nigel's magnificent international tries for Wales, and they left the corporate audience uplifted in a way that I had never seen before. But never mind, the managing director's speech, 'Corporate re-structuring in the domestic marketplace', soon put paid to that.

However, before the managing director proudly strode behind the lectern and embarked on his speech which would deaden the senses of a now uplifted audience, I was required to join Nigel on stage to conduct a short interview. There was one question I simply couldn't resist asking him.

'Nigel, was there any point when you thought to yourself, as you were lying prostrate on the Olympic track alongside an upturned hurdle with two badly grazed knees, "*If only* I'd jumped a bit higher . . .?"'

¹ G.T.D.S.B.S. syndrome = GOING TO DO SOMETHING A BIT SILLY syndrome. (Source – Freud, *Dreams and the Unconscious*, published 1896.)

A Prince And A Coconut

OF COURSE, THE question I had asked Nigel had been a tad cruel, but the laugh which followed easily justified its inclusion. (In my book anyway.) Nigel had been able to laugh along with the rest, enough healing time having elapsed since his horrors of 1984. And although I had made a joke about it, the fact was that I believed that Nigel was offering a first-rate perspective on life. I liked the idea of doing all you could to reduce the chances of you, as an old person, saying 'if only'.

The deeper point behind my question, if I can pretend there was one, was to illustrate that 'if onlys' are inevitable, an inescapable part of life. If only that plane hadn't crashed, if only that volcano hadn't erupted, if only I hadn't stepped in that dogshit. The trick is to be masters of our own destiny in so far as we have control, and take the rest on the chin with a wry smile. But we must go for it. Only a fool would squander the rich opportunities which life affords us. And so it was that I found myself in an electrical superstore looking at fridges.

And my, there are some magnificent models on the market.

Darren was most attentive. I knew his name was Darren because he had a badge on saying 'Darren', with 'I'm here to help' written underneath. He must have been in his late

teens, early twenties, and was sweating nervously. He wore a tie awkwardly and with an obvious reluctance. The company 'uniform' of blue sweater and matching slacks hardly communicated a message of corporate success when Darren was its model. For him, 'style' was little more than a word between 'stutter' and 'stymie' in the dictionary. Everything about him suggested that he was in the job not because he was ahead of the rest of the pack when it came to selling electronic goods, but because the reward for doing it was a magnificently insubstantial hourly rate.

We surveyed the fridges. A mass of white filled an entire corner of the superstore. Who says choice is a good thing? This amount of choice wasn't going to make my life any easier and you could be sure it made Darren's an absolute nightmare.

'What exactly is it you're looking for?' he said at insufficient volume.

Difficult one that. What *are* you looking for in a fridge? You can't answer with the obvious - 'Well, I'm after something which will keep things cold.' What other considerations are there? It's not like buying a car, is it? I can't express a preference for an automatic, or demand power steering or even spend time deliberating over what colour. All their fridges were white. White, pristine white. So, denied the comfortable ease of 'Well, Darren, I'm looking for one in a light blue', I found myself offering up, 'What's the lightest model you sell?'

Darren went pale. Nothing in his superficial training had begun to prepare him for this.

'Lightest?'

'Yes, lightest'

'Why? Are you going to be moving it about much?'

'You could say that, yes.'

I didn't make a purchase that day. It wasn't Darren's fault; in fact his spectacular ignorance of 'all things fridges' endeared him to me greatly. I don't want a load of technical

jargon – what I’m looking for is exactly the kind of exchange I was able to have with Darren.

TONY: ‘Ah, this one is another fifty quid, it must be better.’

DARREN: ‘I suppose so.’

Darren understood that the customer is always right. For him this was founded on the supposition that he was almost always wrong. But I made no purchase because I didn’t wish to become embroiled in the secondary selling which these poor salesmen are required to engage in. Having already got you to commit to a purchase by telling you how efficient and reliable the product is, they then embark on getting you to sign up for an insurance policy by pointing out how inefficient and unreliable the product is. It’s a difficult stunt for the salesman to pull off and I didn’t wish to see Darren attempt it. I had too much respect for the man.

Besides I had some negotiating to do with Kevin before making any purchase. I wanted to take a small fridge which was about two feet square, because one like this would fit on the back seat of a saloon car and greatly enhance my chances of a ride. OK, the original hitchhiker I had seen all those years before had been heroic enough to undertake the task with a full-size fridge with freezer at the top, but the chances were that he was only going up the road and wasn’t attempting a journey of similar magnitude to mine.

Negotiations were easier than I expected. As it turned out, Kevin didn’t for one moment believe I was actually foolish enough to see this thing through, so had no problem agreeing to my request. In fact he was predictably smug about the whole thing.

‘Size isn’t important,’ he quipped.

I have never adhered to this view. As far as I’m concerned, people who say size isn’t important, aren’t big enough to admit that they’re wrong.

Kevin included one stipulation. After a glance at the map he insisted that my journey should take in Tory Island at the

extreme northwestern tip of Ireland, Cape Clear Island in the extreme southwest and Wexford in the southeast Apart from that I was free to take whichever route I saw fit, provided I was hitch-hiking. With a fridge. I was allowed the luxury of taking a bus for the first few miles out of Dublin, and my argument was accepted that Northern Ireland be excluded since there was a distinct possibility the fridge might be mistaken for a bomb. It's difficult to put a price on a bet worth risking your life for, but £100 falls some way short.

Now, it would be foolish to take on a journey of this nature without rigorous planning but, given the ridiculous nature of the challenge, making any adequate preparations wouldn't have been in the spirit of things. Instead I felt that the best course of action in the weeks prior to my departure was to close off my mind to the reality of what lay ahead. Although I was talking about the trip a good deal and gaining kudos from friends and colleagues who had a nagging admiration for what they saw as a romantic whimsy, when it came down to considering basic logistics I would quickly find something else to think about I was just like any self-respecting schoolkid - I wasn't going to do my essay until the night before it needed handing in, and then it would be sloppy and rushed, but just competent enough to keep me out of trouble. At least I hoped so.

I had decided that I wanted to make my journey in the month of May, a time which I hoped would see Ireland dryish and warmish but not overrun with tourists. My agent and I had arrived at a suitable departure date. I had been asked to do a six-minute stand-up spot at the Prince's Trust Royal Gala at the Opera House, Manchester. The plan was to perform in front of HRH The Prince of Wales and a two-thousand-strong audience at one of the star-studded theatrical events of the year, and then bugger off to Ireland the next morning and stand by the side of the road with a fridge. As plans go, it had a nice shape to it The words

chalk, sublime, cheese and ridiculous immediately sprang to mind, but not in that order.

With two days to go, instead of focusing my energies on preparing for a performance at the Royal Gala which could greatly further my career, I was taken up with worrying about what would follow the day after. My imagination was working overtime in providing pictures of bleak rain-swept roadsides and uncompassionate drivers. I had begun to do something very close to panic.

What had seemed amusing in the pub had now become a reality. Suddenly I was making calls trying to get a friend of a friend to purchase a fridge for me in Dublin, looking at different kinds of trolleys which might be best suited for its daily transportation and staring at a map of Ireland trying to decide whether to go clockwise or anti-clockwise. But I was scared. I was scared that I was heading towards a deep embarrassment. I'd been embarrassed before – who hasn't? – but I felt I was headed for the kind of big-time embarrassment which leaves a scar on your soul and can disrupt sleep patterns.

When I was about ten years old I used to go and watch Brighton and Hove Albion football club with my father and we would stand on the East Terrace at every home game. I used to stand on a box and thrill at the whole spectacle. I was mesmerized, not just by the football (it was Brighton and Hove Albion after all) but by all the cheering, chanting, ritual display of partisan colours and the rattatatt sound of the rattles. The rattles particularly. I don't think you see or hear them anymore, they seem to have fallen out of fashion, but then it was very popular for fans to swing a wooden rattle whenever the fancy took them.

One Christmas I got given a toy machinegun. When you pulled the trigger it made exactly the sound of a rattle. I decided I would take it to the next home game and fire it off in exactly the same manner as the other 'rattlers'. I can't think why, but my heart was set on it, and my father and I

embarked on the twenty-minute walk to the ground and I carried my toy machinegun in my hand. Just before we reached the turnstile two much bigger boys saw the gun and put their hands in the air shouting 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!' Suddenly all eyes seemed to be on me. There was much laughter. I felt humiliated, frightened and ludicrous all at the same time. The moment passed quickly but there were still a few little jokes being made about the gun by the people in the queue behind us. I was distraught, frantic with worry that when we went into the ground the whole crowd would turn towards me and shout 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot!'

I looked up at my father and he was smiling at some of the jokers. It was all right for him – it hadn't been *his idea* to bring the gun. What an idea. What had I been thinking of?

I asked him to take the machinegun and put it under his coat. He told me not to be silly but then when I asked him again, and he could see the tears welling up in my eyes, he did what a father has to do in these situations – he had to watch a football match whilst holding a toy machinegun.

I was now beginning to feel that I was heading for an embarrassment as deep as that. I would just start to pull the fridge to the roadside to begin my hitching and someone would make a wisecrack and that would be me finished – the whole escapade shot to pieces at the first instance. And I wouldn't have my father to suffer my embarrassment for me this time. That's growing up I suppose – you have to hold your own toy machineguns. Or be like most people and use toy machineguns for playing with at home and fridges for keeping things cold in kitchens.

The night before I was due to leave was a very sleepless one. There are occasions when the night can seize upon problems and worries and magnify them to such an extent that by about 3.30 am they seem completely insurmountable. I genuinely started to fear for my life. What if I got stuck on some remote rural road, miles from

anywhere and simply couldn't get a lift and night fell? If the temperature dropped (it had been snowing recently) and I failed to find adequate shelter I could die of exposure.

The next morning I went straight to London's top camping shop to look into the purchase of a tent and sleeping bag. When I got there I immediately dismissed the tent idea, even the smallest ones were too large, and I knew I would die of frustration trying to erect the thing before the threat of exposure had even begun to become a factor. Instead I bought the top-of-the-range sleeping bag. It was small and light and over a hundred quid, but on leaving the shop I felt death to be a more distant proposition than it had been the previous night.

I packed in sombre mood. I'm very rarely jolly when packing anyway because there are few things I dislike more, unpacking being one of them. I was in a hurry because packing is something which you always do at the last minute. Anyone who packs two days before departure should seek counselling. Balanced people are still shoving stuff into their bag as they are leaving the house. That's normal.

I was having an especially bad time because I'd dug out an old rucksack for this journey and I had forgotten what displeasing items of luggage they are. Their only advantage is that you don't need hands to carry them, but that's not enough; the same can be said of contagious diseases. I seemed to have the worst model available on the market – it was like a kind of inverse tardis. Big on the outside, it seemed to hold sod all. The inclusion of two shirts, a jumper, a pair of trousers, shoes and a healthy quota of pants and socks left it overflowing, and a measure of undignified 'shoving down' of things was required before the bloody thing would shut. Or close. Or whatever it is a rucksack does when it isn't open anymore. Then I remembered that I hadn't included waterproofs. So, I had to tug once again at the abundant array of strings and cords which seemed to be

all over it in order to get the bloody thing open again, take everything out and go through the whole infuriating process one more time. I hoped that my relationship with the fridge would be more serene. Anyway, I had done it, I had packed everything I needed. I was starting to feel rather pleased with myself when my heart sank, because there in the corner of the room sat the sleeping bag.

‘Well, I wasn’t going without that – it could save my life. I slumped down next to the rucksack and tried to work out what I could sacrifice to make room. Pants? One month without pants hitching round Ireland with a fridge? No, I was doing it with pants or I wasn’t doing it at all. I stared at the rucksack and resisted the temptation to get up and give it a good kicking. Then I suddenly realised that all the tags, tassles, cords and ropes which hung from it weren’t just there to make the carrier of the bag feel like an accomplished traveller, but that they did, after all, have a function. The designer of the bag had realised that he had created one which held next to nothing and so had made provision for numerous items to be secured on the outside. An hour and a half and a good deal of swearing later, the sleeping bag was successfully tethered to the exterior of my rucksack. I forced my way between its shoulder straps, hauled it around on to my back and stood proudly in front of the mirror. I was pleased with what I saw. I really did look a hardy and experienced traveller. But for the bedroom slippers.

I was ready. I waited for the taxi to arrive and remembered that it was Royal Gala day. I wondered if the other artistes had been preparing for performance in the same way that I had.

I was going to fly straight on to Dublin the following day, so I was wearing the gear I would be in for the next month. I had my suits for the performance and after-show reception in a suit holder which my agent would bring back to London

after the show. Carlton Television were providing the taxi to take me to the airport where I would fly up to Manchester. Hardly worth getting the plane for such a short journey, but they had offered it and somehow it seemed more glamorous than the train. I wasn't dressed for glamour - windcheater, scruffy trousers, hiking boots and holding a rucksack. The taxi arrived, except it wasn't a taxi but a stretch limo. The TV company must have got me mixed up with Phil Collins. I expect he was well pissed off with the seven-year-old Datsun Cherry waiting outside his door.

And so my neighbours were treated to the unusual sight of a scruffy hiker having a peak-capped chauffeur holding the door open for him whilst he climbed into the back of a shiny black stretch limo. It may have appeared that I hadn't fully embraced the true spirit of backpacking.

In Manchester another impressive car was waiting to meet me at the airport. I remember thinking that I should enjoy this, the zenith of travel experience, for the nadir was surely to come. I arrived at the theatre to find hordes of photographers and autograph hunters. Were they here for me or was there just a chance they might be more interested in The Spice Girls, Phil Collins or Jennifer Anniston? I emerged from the limo and a wave of confusion engulfed the onlookers and, at a stroke, their excitement was supplanted by bemusement. Was there a band called The Backpackers on the bill? Was there a new member of The Spice Girls called Itinerant Spice? I made my way to the stage door, rucksack over my shoulder, and a strange kind of silence fell over the crowd. It almost felt like resentment. How dare I get out of a car like that and not be someone they were excited about. If a frown made a sound, the noise would have been deafening. As it was you could hear a head drop.

The show went fine. Not great - just fine. I wasn't sure how well I had done but as we lined up for the finale bow, one of the dancers from Kid Creole And The Coconuts gave

me the thumbs up. That was enough for me, I was happy to have the approval of a Coconut That's why we do it. The show's producers, whilst rewarding me with a position in the front row for the curtain call, had put me right at the end of the line which meant that when I was required to turn to my right and bow to the Prince, I was so far across the stage that I was just bowing directly into the wings. There before me, instead of HRH Prince Charles, the Prince of Wales, was a fat member of the stage crew who acknowledged my bow by giving me the wanker sign and pissing himself with laughter. I smiled, largely because I couldn't think of what else to do.

Moments later the curtain had dropped and I was in a line waiting to be greeted by Prince Charles. As he worked his way up towards me I could hear the kind of mind numbingly superficial conversation that he had to engage in. This kind of social intercourse clearly wasn't something that came naturally to him but years of experience had left him accomplished enough in the brief inanity. I felt sorry for him – but for an accident of birth that could have been my gig.

Finally, he arrived at me, having had the relative ease of chatting with performers from Cirque du Soleil who had made life easy for him by coming from all over the world and having performed a spectacular and unusual act involving contortion and acrobatics. It all went rather well – there was even a slight moment of amusement when he asked the Russian girl how she got her body into that position. Then me. The bloke who came on and talked to the audience for six minutes, got a few laughs and then went off again. He shook my hand. I could see from his eyes that the poor guy could think of absolutely nothing to say to me. A moment of complete silence. What is it about me? I haven't got the rucksack on now. I looked into his eyes – he looked right through mine. He wasn't focusing, he was trawling his brain for a suitable question.

‘Have you had to travel far to be here?’ he eventually managed.

‘Not really, London.’

I hadn’t given him much to get his teeth into there. He could hardly say,

‘Oh, London – that’s where my mother lives – she’s got a little place in SW1.’ Again the flash of panic in his eye. Come on Charles, hang in there – two more questions and you’re on to Frank Bruno, he’s going to be much easier.

‘And were the audience difficult?’ This was better, but although meant well, isn’t exactly a question a comedian longs to be asked. In an ideal world you would have been so funny and the audience would have lost themselves in laughter to such a degree that a question like that would have been redundant.

‘Oh, they were okay.’

I wasn’t really helping him very much here but I suppose there was a part of me that didn’t want to. What *was* the point of this? My instinct was to say ‘Look, let’s talk properly or not at all’, but there seemed little point in making this thing any more gruelling for him than it already was. Prince Charles seemed to relax slightly, perhaps in the knowledge that however unsuccessful his next conversational gambit might be, at least it was his last one with me.

‘And what are you up to next?’

I waited a moment and then offered in my best deadpan delivery, ‘I’m hitch-hiking round Ireland with a fridge, Your Highness.’

His response was a Royal masterstroke. He simply smiled and pretended not to hear. Or understand. Or both. And who can blame him? My answer had invited the kind of follow-up question for which there simply wasn’t time. I warmed to him as he smiled again and moved on – after all, why ask when you don’t care? Oddly our little exchange had afforded him a rare opportunity to show some honesty. For that, I’m sure he will be eternally grateful.

The flight from Manchester to Dublin is only forty minutes or so. It feels slightly longer when there is a stag party three rows back. I was sat next to a matronly looking middle-aged woman whose tuts and sighs were more irritating than the unpleasant noises emanating from the stag boys. It was only 11.30 am and they were already quite drunk. Nothing like pacing yourself. The woman was reading a very impressive, thick hardback book. I couldn't see what it was called but the chapter she was on was entitled 'Domination and Hegemony'. I concluded that she was either an academic or a sado masochist. I closed my eyes and let the gentle rhythm of the safety instructions lull me to sleep. I was woken soon enough by the stag party who had broken into song. I wanted to stand up, turn round and say 'Please stop, I beg you' but I didn't need to because matronly lady had taken roughly the same approach only with a less supplicatory tone. Needless to say, her words had the reverse effect, causing an increase in volume and the personalisation of a number of songs in her honour. Suddenly I found it all more relaxing. The lyrics were more entertaining now they had found a focus, and the woman's increasing discomfort somehow had a soothing effect upon me.

Ignoring the surrounding turbulence I began to study my map of Ireland. I knew very little about the place and had no real idea of the distances involved, but my brain wasn't up to the taxing task of trying to work them out now. I gave some thought to what I might try and tackle on my first morning. My intention was to get a bus out of Dublin in the direction of Cavan and try and start hitching in roughly the area where I reckoned I had seen the original 'Fridge Man' all those years ago. This, I decided, was somewhere around Navan. I looked out of the window. It was raining. Ireland is good at that. To cheer myself up I started to scan the map for places with silly names. I noticed a Nobber and another place Muff. Muff was on the coast and I was momentarily

amused by the idea of going there and attempting to hire some diving gear.

The plane touched down. The Odyssey had begun.