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Surprised by Joy

Michael Meegan

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Extract

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FOREWORD

In the summer of 2005 I was preparing for a trip to Africa to record a series of interviews for my *HARDtalk* programme on BBC TV. All the talk in London that June was of Bono and Geldof, their *Live8* extravaganza and Tony Blair's ambition to put global poverty at the top of the agenda at the forthcoming G8 summit in Gleneagles.

I had already fixed a series of interviews with prime ministers, opposition leaders and top diplomats—the typical Big Men of Africa—but something told me I needed more: a different perspective, a fresh voice.

An American journalist, Jennifer Glass, whom I'd known as a brave and tenacious colleague in Baghdad but who had previously spent years working in Nairobi, gave me a steer for which I will forever be grateful.

'Try a guy called Michael Meegan,' she said. 'He's doing unbelievable work in the Kenyan bush, and I guarantee he'll give you an interview you'll never forget.'

Three weeks later my crew and I were rattling down a dirt road into the shimmering heat of the Rift Valley. But as we headed towards Meegan's remote

clinic in the desiccated Maasai country my mood was gloomy.

In the previous days I'd had encounters that confirmed my worst fears about the crisis in African governance. In Addis Ababa, Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi—anointed by Tony Blair as the very model of progressive African leadership-had defended his security forces' suppression of opposition protests with lethal gunfire. 'A necessary defence against criminals' he called it, with more than a trace of menace. Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries on earth, was, it seemed, in danger of sliding into political chaos.

In Nairobi I'd found a Kenyan Government and opposition trading accusations about rampant corruption. The official charged with investigating allegations of kickbacks, money laundering and ministerial graft had quit, claiming intimidation. Ordinary Kenyans, facing a savage drought across much of the country, appeared to have little, if any, expectation of honesty or competence from their rulers.

And so I brought to my encounter with this Irish/English doctor, of whom I knew very little, a whole bagful of preconceptions. Another do-gooder I thought; a white outsider with a bleeding heart, fuelled by anger and guilt. An aid peddlar engaged in an ultimately futile attempt to overcome the failings of Western and African political leadership.

And then I actually met Michael Meegan.

He was youthful and wiry. If he was burdened with the woes of the world's poorest people, it didn't show. And he was, from the very first moment, a compelling, barely-pausing, continent-hopping teller of stories. He talked as if energised by the African sun itself.

Our conversation didn't develop in the way I had anticipated. I'd expected anger, cynicism and frustration. What I found was hope, wonder and yes, even joy. I asked questions about hopelessness and despair. I got answers about love and kindness.

Michael Meegan is no idle dreamer. I've seen the work he does; the local staff he's helped to train. His work on disease control has helped countless thousands, not just in Africa but across the world. But what sets him apart is how he's chosen to make his journey. With his heart open. With a conviction that love is the greatest healer of all. For those of us infected with cynicism, sometimes weary of a broken world, Meegan's life offers more than inspiration. It points us towards a cure.

– Stephen Sackur, *HARDtalk*, BBC Television.

INTRODUCTION

I met Mike Meegan not long after he died. He wasn't the first person I met who had died, either. The first person was a woman who had waited until the bank holiday weekend when her flatmates were away, and had taken a lethal overdose of medication. All weekend she lay on the floor in a coma, so that by the time her flatmates returned the parts of her body she had been lying on were rotting from lack of blood. She was alive, though, and she recovered in hospital. I watched her as she took part in the routine life of the psychiatric unit I was working in. She watched everything with a curious eye, looking at a cup of coffee she shouldn't have been alive to drink, a newspaper whose news should have happened after her death, whose news might even have included her death. No-one believed there was a significant risk that she would make another attempt, at least not right away. The detachment of her gaze was startling. Everything was curious, and nothing really mattered, because she had survived her own death and was seeing a life that came after it.

I didn't realise it at first, but neither, I think, did Mike. But he had died just before I met him, and was living the life that comes after death. It happened just

as he had always thought it would. It was down near the Tanzanian border in a place where there aren't any things on the map and, when you look, the map is just about right. Mike was down there when he suddenly fell very seriously ill. Too ill to think about trying to drive across the bush and back to the road. There was no other driver with him, just some Maasai, so there he stayed, being cared for the Maasai, as his temperature soared. His legs swelled up grotesquely, he became delirious, he went blind. But something in him knew that this was the time. He wasn't going to get better. And this didn't matter. He was here, under the wide African sky he loved, surrounded by the sounds of Maasai speaking quietly, being tended lovingly by those he had worked with and given his life to. He had come to Africa to give his life in the service of those who needed it, he had followed Jesus' challenge, he had given it all away and for his reward he was ending his life in a place that seemed the sweetest spot on earth, among people who are endlessly wonderful.

I know the place, the people, all this is true. There is great peace out there. So Mike felt his life ebb without fear or regrets. Certainly, there was so much left undone, but the important thing was that he had given his life for what he believed in. Gradually, he lost consciousness. It was finished.

Of course, it wasn't. Gradually, he got better. It was a long time before he was able to drive, and for the first few years I knew him, Mike would have to get his legs massaged for half an hour every morning before he was able to walk. Even at that, he staggered around stiffly for the first half of the day. No-one ever knew what the disease was. So I missed the first Mike, the Mike who had a simple mission and who waited,

wracked with fever, like a ripe apple, waiting for God to pluck him For His Time Had Come.

The Mike I met was an unsettled, unsettling person. There are images of the first Mike, a gaunt, unshaven young man who seemed always to be holding an emaciated child when anyone photographed him (did he ever put them down, I wondered). He had written a book called *All Shall Be Well*, which seemed to me like the most blatant self-deception possible. Of course All Shall Not Be Well unless we get to work, I thought, and even then we stand to get very little done. It sounded to me like the sort of wishful thinking you could do if you didn't notice that All Was Not Well with the emaciated child in your arms.

How could anyone who found a child like this say something like *All Shall Be Well*? What's the point, I thought—the child may soon not be able to hear you. It will be dead. I have children. Any parent can imagine their little ones, trying to hold on to someone, dying. Any parent would tear their heart out sooner than see one of their children die like this. In a world where small children die like this, all is not well. And that's hard to understand.

I taught in Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy—in fact, I just missed teaching Mike. I was on the philosophy faculty. Between philosophers and theologians, there was no telling what sort of coffee break conversation you would have. One Friday the staff room was unusually merry. One of the other lecturers told me the story. The previous night there had been a meeting of prominent members of the Catholic laity and some of the theologians had been invited. Over refreshments afterwards, one wealthy and successful man was complaining loudly. 'Why

can't ordinary people see,' he asked, 'that whatever happens is God's will and is all for the best?'

'I don't know,' said the theologian. 'I reckon that believing in God is more like being married to the moors murderer. When He comes home in the evening, you give Him His tea. But you don't ever ask Him what He did today.'

It's hard to start life in your late thirties. And very strange to watch. I spent a lot of time with Mike, talking, arguing (it's what we Irish do best), drinking beer, walking around the bush, sitting in the sauna at the gym. We're both anecdotal people, Mike and I. But over the years, I've noticed a change in both of us. In Mike's case, the stories have got less simple and obvious. The first Mike wrote about the simple goodness of people, of a shepherd boy who gave the only piece of clothing he had to a little refugee whose language he couldn't even speak. Now I knew the full story—the shepherd boy wasn't just a saint, he was also a crook, who was fired for stealing and selling ICROSS goats. And that's what appealed to me about him.

We don't want to know that there are people on the face of the earth who are far more wonderful than we are. We want to know that we, too, are capable of better things. That even crooks can be kind. The present Mike is more difficult to read precisely because the moral isn't always obvious anymore. The story or stories chase one another through the pages, characters turn up, have adventures, vanish again, and the moral is less clear than ever. But the exhilaration is all the more obvious. Sarune, of whom Mike speaks a lot, is a remarkable person who speaks to the living and dead alike. He sometimes turns up in dreams. He arrived in one of mine, once. In my dream, we were

looking out over the bush and I saw some Maasai grandmothers walking in the distance.

I asked Sarune how the Maasai could walk such vast distances—Maasai think nothing of setting out to pay a call on someone who lives four day's walk away. Sarune smiled and said that you didn't think about the distance, or, if maybe if you did think about it, you thought that you were closer to your destination than the last time you thought about it. And in my dream I got very irritated by this sort of pocket Buddha answer, and I said angrily, 'But what if your journey has no destination?'

Sarune simply smiled and said, 'Then you are simply out for a walk.'

Mike is a person out on a walk. A good place to be.

– Dr Ronan Conroy, Department of Tropical Medicine, Royal College of Surgeons, Ireland.

PROLOGUE

We have forgotten the secrets of happiness and have lost the art of wonder. Our world is in pain, and the gap between nations grows. The problems seem overwhelming.

Recently, I was interviewed by Stephen Sackur on BBC's *HARDtalk*. In that interview, I was asked many tough questions, to which there are no easy answers. Stephen asked me about poverty, corruption, suffering and disease. He asked me why I do what I do and why I wasn't angry.

The huge response to this interview included an invitation from Maverick House Publishers to write this book, with all proceeds going to charity. It is the first of two books. It is a more complete reflection on the critical questions raised in the initial BBC interview, and an account of my life, my influences and the development of my beliefs and ideas over time, in an attempt to explain how I came to do what I do and be who I am today.

In a departure from their normal subject matter, they wanted to publish a book that would tackle a new way of looking at international aid, and agreed to cover the costs. Unlike many other works produced

for charity, this book, thanks to their generosity, will see the proceeds of every sale donated to ICROSS.

This book tries to answer the questions I am asked all the time. People ask me how all of this came about. They ask me why I am so happy, why I am not frustrated or tired, why I don't become burnt out with the endless suffering and extreme poverty we work amongst.

This autobiographical reflection attempts to answer some of these questions. Not every question, however, needs an answer, and not every challenge has a solution. Our world has become confined in limited ways of reasoning. We often think in boxes. We want people to fit into our mental constructs of how things should be. A lot of people want you to fit into the categories and boxes they create. They form very rigid ideas of what being spiritual means. They have expectations of how you should behave and how you should conform. I have always believed that in being ourselves we should do what is within us and live our own dreams, never relying on how other people define us.

This book is above all about living your own mystery and tasting life, believing in your heart. We sometimes let fear get in the way of our dreams and we conform because it is safe and familiar. Each of us is many selves, many parts, many intelligences, as this story of my life shows.

If we learn to explore life using all of our energies we will celebrate every moment in a new and original way. We will see everything with amazement and we will be awoken—we will become the energy and love we want in the world.

Surprised by Joy is in part recollections of a journey full of ordinary experiences made extraordinary. It's

about looking at life in a different way and sharing some of the lessons and knowledge I have learnt and gathered along the way.

Each of us has moments of doubt and frailty. All of us share the need to be cherished and hugged, and every one of us needs kindness and fulfilment. We all have dreams and hopes.

In sharing my own little journey, I hope that you will find within it something that can touch your heart. In my tears I hope you sense what I felt, and in my wonder I hope we share the same delight.

Of course there is tragedy, of course there is mindless cruelty. The bloodiness of man and the madness of war destroys so much hope. The suicides of lost and broken men, the tears of children and fears of starving mothers are here and now. Yes, there is apathy and corruption, and of course there is greed and oppression. Yet despite all of these things and more, regardless of suffering, there is also something else. I am increasingly amazed that despite all the badness in the world, there is so much love. There is so much raw goodness, pure kindness and compassion.

It is what exists despite the brokenness of humanity, its bizarre appetite for unkindness and perverse politics that make this story worth sharing. Having lived many lives and travelled many roads, the time is now right for me to illuminate some of the shadows, and try to share the joy I have been blessed with.

So many people ask me all the time if I ever feel overwhelmed in Africa. The answer is that of course I feel overwhelmed. I am overwhelmed by the happiness; the laughter; the fun and joy; the tranquility; the power and energy.

Deeper than these things is the realisation that we create happiness. It lives within this moment; in this miracle of now. The gift we give ourselves is this presence. We can take over our own lives. This story is not really about my being in Africa or about adventures. It is about being in ourselves and seeing the world through different eyes, with a new heart.

This reflection is about a very ordinary person with the same tastes and interests as most people. I dance and ski, love parties, enjoy restaurants and holidays with friends. Perhaps it is the things we have in common that make our different experiences meaningful. All of our lives somehow reflect the mystery and miracle of each other. All our experiences enrich each other. I share my life story with the awareness that it can never reflect the reality of experience. Our words are always shadows, dim shadows that vaguely hint at what we truly feel. It is only with our hearts that we truly speak, and only with each moment of our lives that we can give meaning to the absurdity and chaos of a torn world.

I share some of the lessons I have learnt in the hope that they might in some way be of value to others. This is a simple journey, a story of a child trying to find his way home, and of a pilgrim who has seen unimaginable suffering and sorrow, but also tremendous joy. There are simple paths that can bring us awesome joy and incredible pleasure. The secrets of joy are surprisingly simple and the way of compassion is a journey we become together. Perhaps the journey is not to practise acts of compassion but for us to become compassion itself.

Like all journeys, mine began in curiosity—excited and in awe of this fragile gift called life.

CHAPTER ONE

'Remember it is never your picture that is too big; sometimes the paper you are given might be too small, but whatever you do, make it as big as you want. Don't stop because of the paper.'
- My old primary school teacher, Sr Oliver

If your awakening is full of joy, so too shall be your day. If you are awake in your dawn, you shall see miracles unfold before you. That is an idea I live by.

I had a wonderful childhood, spent in amazement and discovery. I had such a great time that I decided to spend the rest of my life exploring. I decided to always love that child within me. The thing about curiosity is that the more doors you open, the more things there are to fill you with delight.

As a child growing up in Lancashire, I lived in Freshfield. It was an old cosy village like the ones in the Agatha Christie films. Mrs Cotgrieve ran the greengrocer's and no one ever remembered seeing a policeman. The police station was in Formby, and so was the toy shop. There was a great pine forest with a red squirrel colony and I used to go and feed them, and thought that everywhere must smell of flowers and plants. We never had television and never missed it, but we did have a childhood filled with innocence and wonder. It was a simple, unhurried world, and left an indelible impression upon my world view that something this great was worth sharing.

We moved around a lot, between England and Ireland, where my granny lived, and this gave me a great sense of a world outside of my family, my house, my neighbourhood.

My mother was a teacher and was loving and gentle. She had an understanding of what it meant to view the world as a child and was quite happy to let us discover it in our own way and at our own pace. Mum taught art and never looked at anything in a conventional way. She always saw shades and shadows, profusions of colours and subtleties of light. There was a tenderness in her art, and another pleasure for her was gardening. Mum never saw a cloud bringing rain; only one that added colour to the sunset or a new vista to the heavens.

One of the interesting traits of my mother was her complete lack of materialism. She did not have the remotest interest in possessions and things, and this too was to leave an indelible impression on me.

Children in Europe now seem hurled head first into a frenetic charge of video games, noise, distraction, barraged with adverts and the 'hard sell'. When I was a child, there was no cultivation of the idea of 'more more more'; there was always simply enough. From a very early age, I had an unspoken sense of myself, that it was truly enough. There was in me a private content, and a pleasure in playing with my rabbits in the garden or drawing pictures that no one needed to see because they were for my own delight.

In an ineffable way, a part of me never needed approval or external acceptance. I never felt the impulse to be recognised in anything because I had enough recognition of myself. Perhaps that came gradually, but it was to be a trait of my personality for better or worse .

I was surrounded by animals; every conceivable type of animal. My mother had a rare gift with animals—snails and slugs, worms and bats. We had frogs and tadpoles, rabbits and snakes. We had a spider monkey and lizards. My mother taught biology as well as art, and as a child I remember seeing injured mice and toads and pet ducks following her everywhere. My earliest memory of her was nursing a sparrow with a broken wing. Our garden was always full of frogs, injured animals being nursed, hedgehogs, snakes, rabbits, spiders and beetles. We had stick insects and cats, always lots of cats. Mum told me that birds should never be kept in cages because they were made to be free. She had within her a core of the druidic nature, possessing genuine wonder, marvelling in living things. My mother still has guinea pigs and hamsters, rats and a very large asthmatic black cat that looks like Garfield and waddles slowly. Often in our lives we see birds with broken wings, strangers with nowhere to lay their head, frightened creatures in need of protection, cats in need of a plate of milk.

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From the very dawn of my life there were many lights that shone, guiding my way. There were people who changed me forever and awoke within me infinite possibilities. The windows of wonder were flung open, constantly, by awesome people who were fully alive. These people would teach me how to celebrate the amazing gift of life.

All of us have those fantasy figures we look up to, and as we get older they sometimes change into other things. Like all children growing up, I had heroes. My heroes were always somewhat atypical though. Most

of my friends were into Batman and George Best and, as they grew older, James Bond and The Man from UNCLE. They liked Thunderbirds and soccer players, but I was more interested in what was directly around me. Beside our house there was a retirement home for old missionaries and on occasion I would go and visit them. I was fascinated by the various characters. They were my earliest heroes and made a great impression on me. It was to be my first contact with a new place that filled my imagination, Africa . . .

There was one very big old man who looked hundreds of years old, with a big long white beard that went down past his waist. My friends all thought he was Santa's grandfather because he was way too old to be Santa Claus himself. Fr Walsh had ridden into Khartoum with Gordon in 1885. We never understood what that meant, only that Fr Walsh was deaf and blind and had a very friendly chuckle as he sat in the garden like Merlin.

Fr Tom Hughes was only in his 80s, which was young compared to the others. He had been in Uganda, and much to our delight, told stories of the early days in Africa. The thing that I liked most was that his eyes always smiled and there was a warmth in him that was very different to other adults. He didn't seem to know everything and he was much happier than all the other grown-ups. Fr Hughes had spent 20 years in the African jungles and had built schools, and for years he walked through the undergrowth to his missions across the great plains of Africa among lost tribes. He rode a horse from one village to the next until he got a motor bike. I found all this really wonderful and loved the stories and adventures. Fr Hughes also had a mynah bird that could recite the *Pater Noster*, which I just thought was amazing. The old

Mill Hill missionaries in Herbert House were always patient and kind, always welcoming and always, always had the door open. This was something that was quietly leaving an impression on a child's mind, quietly awakening something.

Although I wasn't conscious of it at the time, the happy hours I spent in their company were to have a lasting influence on me, and would shape the decisions I would make many years later in life.

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In my primary school, Vaughan House, I was taught by a mountain of a woman who never thought like any teachers I was to meet afterwards. Sr Oliver was Austrian, from the Tyrol, and she had a huge influence on me. Like me, she wrote backwards and was left handed. She encouraged me to be myself despite other teachers trying to teach me to write like everyone else. I could write backwards and upside down and always felt happier doing so. To this day my diaries and notes, letters and drafts, things to be typed, are all written backwards.

One morning in art class, I was making a picture of my rabbit Noah, who was a particularly large rabbit, and as I continued off the page, my creation took place largely off the paper across the work bench. The old nun shuffled around clapping her hands with glee at each little masterpiece and then I proudly showed her Noah, my rabbit. She peered a little closer, and then closer still at my expansive bunny rabbit and told me that she thought it was the best bunny she ever had the pleasure of seeing. She turned to the class and said something that has stayed with me always, 'Remember dearies, remember it is never your picture that is too

big; sometimes the paper you are given might be too small, but whatever you do, make it as big as you want. Don't stop because of the paper.'

Although I was only seven years old, I remember promising myself that I would never stop at the paper. I was perpetually amazed at the magic of sight and the power to be able to see things. Insatiable curiosity grew within me and never stopped growing. That appetite was to open my heart and awaken possibilities I never dreamt of. I had the most fabulous childhood and felt cherished and wanted. My little victories, pictures and Plasticine, play dough and stories were always greeted with glee by my mum. She always made time to listen to my adventures and the stories from my imagination. I remembered my dreams and would tell them to her, acting them out, and she would be enthralled. I was flooded with love and thought everyone else was too.

It was in 1966 that I went to Bishop's Court. Even though I missed my Austrian teacher, life there was great fun and again I have to say that my childhood in general was absolutely fantastic. My mother had a great sense of humour and believed life was to celebrate. I remember my classmates feeling pressured by parents or hassled by study, but this was something I was never part of.

The school belonged to another age, a different century. It was a delightful, happy and tiny English private school. Such schools for some odd reason were always referred to as public schools yet there was nothing remotely public about them or their pupils. I went there because Mum taught there, but most of the kids were the children of old money, the aristocratic families, some dating back to the Wars of the Roses. It was like those black and white films of schools where there was a graciousness, a dignity.

The school was run by a kindly old gentleman called Mr Burroughs. He retired, selling the school to the Augustinian monks. We were taught about things that mattered: courtesy, respect, honour. There was a strong culture of thinking about others. There were only 120 pupils. I can't imagine a better place to have gone to school. There was no bullying and there was no unkindness that can be typical of boys. People were allowed to be themselves and there was a very English eccentricity to everything. There was fair play and an absence of the pretension or snobbery found in the *nouveau riche*. Nobody boasted about how much land their father had, because there would always be some Indian prince with more. It was never about one-upmanship. We were all too young to be vain and too sheltered to be stressed. I never recall being anxious or tired and I had no concept in me of anger or loudness. I went to Bishop's Court with no clue as to the world that existed outside my realm of happiness, and I was delighted.

I never liked team sports; they never struck me as being very gentle or calm, but ice skating was different and for four years I spent a lot of time on the ice. I also loved to ride horses and would spend hours riding over acres of ground that is now, sadly, an industrial estate. My best friend, Christopher Kenny, was shy and, like me, stayed away from the sports field.

I had a taste for languages and loved reading books about far off places. I read about the jungles of Borneo and the Himalayas and the great cities of the Aztecs. I was, like many children, enthralled by the ancient civilizations long gone and the old kingdoms of the world. It was a world of legends and heroes.

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