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Mustn't Grumble

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Extract

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Prologue

This finely honed little tome, through which you are thumbing before returning it, unbought, to the bookstore shelf, is by way of what they call in Dublin a 'follier-uppier' to my last oeuvre, *Is It Me?* That went surprisingly well, except with a little old man in Belfast. I'd gone there, in the grand tradition of bookselling, as part of a tour of the UK, hawking my little book shamelessly from Reading to Cambridge, from Norwich to Bristol, from Bath to Belfast. Jolly crowds greeted me everywhere, some even bought the book. A man in Reading rushed to my side in the bookstore there, and asked me fervently to sign his prayerbook. I did so, with an even-handed flourish. He looked a little puzzled, smiling wanly as he left. The sales assistant was most sympathetic: 'He thought you were Terry Waite,' she explained.

For reasons that now escape me, unless it was the usual one of a boys' night out, two of my underlings from *Wake Up to Wogan*, an obscure radio show that need not detain us here, accompanied me to Northern Ireland for the book tour. Paul Walters, my producer, otherwise known as Dr Wallington P. de Wynter Courtney Claibourne Magillicuddy Walters, or, for short, 'Doctor Wally', was one, and hanging on, like grim death, to our coat tails, Alan Dedicoat, otherwise known as Deadly

Alancoat, the Wealdstone Weather-Boy, the Voice of the Balls, or, to keep it short, 'Deadly', was the other.

Naturally, Deadly was not allowed to travel with us across the Irish Sea, but magically materialised at our hotel outside Belfast. Walters and I had made the mistake of travelling with him once before, on British Midland. Appropriately enough, the Voice of the Balls was seated on the other side of the blue curtain which, in all aeroplanes, separates the well-to-do from the riff-raff. As Paul and I toasted each other in lukewarm champagne, on the other side of the curtain the unfortunates were being doled out dishwater and rolls wrapped in clingfilm. Deadly made the mistake of thinking the customer might choose the filling in his stale roll. 'Ham?' he mildly inquired. 'Have you got ham?' The impertinence of the request struck the ancient stewardess dumb, but when she found her voice, the whole plane heard it: ''Am?!' she shrieked. ''Am? There's no 'am 'ere! That's on the other side of the curtain! There's cheese or tuna, which d'ya want? 'Am! Honestly, some people . . .'

The great Michael Devine had come up from Dublin to drive us around Belfast. Michael Devine is one of those rare beings, who, quietly and without fuss, can do anything, make all your dreams come true. This is a quiet-spoken, gentle Dublin man, who looks after all the celebrities and stars who come to Ireland. Julia Roberts stays in his little house in the Dublin suburbs when she craves anonymity. A few years ago when Julia wanted to be alone, Michael borrowed The Edge's (of U2) house on the banks of Lough Corrib in Galway, and looked after the superstar there. Julia gave him her apartment in New York when Ireland were playing in the World Cup in the Big Apple. When Julia got married a year or so ago, she flew Michael and his family to the

West Coast to attend the joyous nuptials. And guess who, *in loco parentis*, gave away the biggest female film star in the world? A Dublin taxi driver named Michael Devine. Whenever Ireland won the Eurovision, which it seemed to do every second year in the nineties, I'd get in touch with the great Michael. He catered for our every whim in Dublin, but his tour de force was the Big Night. Up to our hotel would roar a full police escort. Into Michael's limos we'd get and off we'd go, at breakneck speed, to the Point, where the Contest was being staged. Through the narrow streets and backroads of Dublin we'd scream, ignoring red lights and roundabouts, pedestrians, cyclists and other road-users, as first one and then another police motorcyclist roared ahead of us to hold back the traffic. You can keep your roller coaster and your Wall of Death – these were white-knuckle rides I will never forget. At the end of it, we were deposited at the front door of the Point, and Michael slipped the sergeant-in-charge a handful of crisp oncers. 'Right, lads,' said Michael, 'off you go to the Park.' And off the bikes would roar to the residence of the President of Ireland. I often wonder if she knew that we had first use of her escort. . .

As we travelled from one book-signing to another, Michael tried to explain the intricacies of Northern Ireland to the eejits from England.

'This is green,' he would say, 'a Republican, Nationalist area.'

'How do you know?' asked Deadly.

'You just do,' explained Michael, 'and this is an Orange street.'

'How do you know?'

Michael gave a sigh: 'You just do. A couple of streets over there, it's all Black.'

'Ah,' said Doctor Wally, 'like Brixton, in London.'

'No,' said Michael Devine, struggling to keep a pitying look off his face, 'Black Protestants.'

The Doctor and Deadly fell silent.

'That's a Catholic dog,' I said.

'How do you know?'

'I know from the look of it . . .'

It's very difficult to explain the religious differences that separate Northern Ireland to a secular Englishman, but trying to explain that you can tell a Nationalist from a Unionist, a Catholic from a Protestant just by looking at them is impossible. An Irish person, whether of Northerly or Southerly persuasion, knows immediately what you're talking about. My wife thought *I* was a Protestant when we first met. I had the look of one, she said. To think that that foolishness still prevails in certain parts of these islands makes you want to weep . . . And if you can't tell them apart by their looks, you can tell by their names, or how they spell them. Don't ask . . .

After two years without any contact with her family or friends, a young Irish girl returns home.

'B'jesus yer safe!' says her father. 'Thank the Lord – we were worried sick! Why didn't you contact us?! Why didn't you let us know you were OK? The last two years have been a nightmare.'

'Sit down, Da. There's something I have to tell you.'

He sits down and she continues, 'Da, I've become a prostitute.'

'You WHAT?! How could you?! How dare you . . .'

'Da, don't . . .'

'Whaddaymean, DON'T? I'll give you DON'T! What reaction did you expect?! And what are you doing here anyway?'

'I came here today to make amends. I have the deeds for me Ma to sign for a £450,000 detached property in County Cork; I've booked you both on a "round the world" cruise for six weeks whilst the removal men take all yer stuff from here and move it to the new place – I've even arranged for a private designer to come and talk to me Ma about how she wants it fitted out; I've bought a horse each for the two bairns and have paid for their tuition fees at the fancy girls' school in Dublin – only the best for me little sisters! And I've got me brother his very own pub in Templegate – he can run it as his own and get out of that rough Tinker-owned Clover place down the road – he can make his fortune. And for you, Da, just for you; here are the keys for the E-type Jaguar you always wanted . . .'

'What is it you said you'd become?'

'A prostitute, Da!'

'Oh that's fine – I thought you said a Protestant. Come and give your auld Da a hug!'

The funniest Eurovision incidents always happened in Ireland: hardly surprising in view of the ever-cheery nature of the inhabitants of my native place. Ronan Keating was one of the presenters about five years ago. He was, even then, a huge international star, as the lead singer of Boyzone, and certainly Ireland's most famous export and probably the best-known face in the country. After the show, we all repaired to a huge barn of a place in the University College Dublin grounds, for the usual, terrible, overcrowded, anti-climactic post-Eurovision party. Loyally enough, Ronan himself turned up. He didn't get in though. The woman on the door turned him away because he didn't have an invitation with him . . . It was the Irish, not the Australians who invented the 'tall poppy' syndrome. 'Sure, I

knew his oul' fella.' Actually, I didn't, but my dear brother Brian knew Ronan Keating as a lad; his family lived nearby. In view of Brian's two stunning daughters, it's no surprise that Ronan and the local Lotharios hung around my brother's household quite a bit. Ronan always wanted to sing, to be a pop star, and one evening Brian offered him a word of good advice: 'Now listen, Ronan. Give up all this old pop-singing nonsense; it'll get you nowhere. Concentrate on your studies. Do your exams, and make something of yourself.' We fast-forwarded some years, and my brother and his old jalopy are held up in traffic near his home. A limousine with blacked-out windows slows down opposite Brian's car. The window slips noiselessly down, and Ronan Keating looks out: 'Ah, there you are, Mr Wogan! How're ya?' The brother winds down his creaky window: 'Ronan!' says Brian. 'Well – was I not right?' . . .

Michael decanted us at a bookshop where I was to sign a couple of hundred of my books, but it wasn't to be a public appearance, as I had already flung myself at the unfortunate denizens of Belfast at a public meeting the night before, and another bookstore that morning. Publishers get their money's worth. As I sat in a corner of the store, signing away good-oh, with the beginnings of repetitive strain injury nagging at my shoulder, a little man materialised at my side. He was about seventy, neatly dressed in quiet sports coat, slacks and suede shoes, and appropriately hatted. He had an umbrella over his arm, always a wise move in Ireland. He leaned over me. I smiled encouragingly.

'You're a lickspittle,' he said. No, he snarled it.

I watched him as he walked to the door, his every fibre quivering with rage. He turned.

'*A lickspittle!*' he shouted.

He exited, and walked off down the street, a nicely dressed, respectable, harmless old man. And one with 'hatred' in his heart. For me.

OK, I'm not Saint Anthony, and I understand that as soon as you stick your head above the parapet, somebody's going to want to knock your block off. Dislike I understand. The more some like what you do, on television or radio, the more will find you a pain in the proverbial. But *hatred?* Splenetic, fierce loathing? And 'lickspittle'? Old-fashioned, Edwardian, a preacher's curse. Only in Norn Iron. No. My mother was born there, in a British Army barracks. I love the place, as I love my Dublin, my Limerick. Some of my funniest correspondents to the Radio 2 morning extravaganza write to me from Ulster. 'The Crooked Man of Old Bangor Town', or as we know him 'Crooky'.

Spring has sprung, the week's begun
Ready to be filled with Godfrey fun.
Your other listener can fear no harm
When surrounded by her bouncy charm.
Since May's well out without a doubt
She'll be casting many a fleecy clout.
And make us privy to home-life facts
Delighting chaps in dirty macs.
With charming anecdotal quips
About her bathroom and its drips.
Tilers, plumbers, painters too
She'll eagerly discuss with me and you.
But since she acts so prim and proper
Nobody's got the heart to stop her.

For ever since the Beeb began
No totty's been toppier than our dear Fran.

Whether they love me, I would not presume to conjecture. As long as I keep to myself in Britain, I'm OK. The Irish, like the Scots, have always preferred 'the King across the water' . . .