

Contents

Prologue	1
The Kitchen	4
Picnics on the Beach	11
Strawberries	20
Pasta?	23
Salad	26
Grace Before Meals	29
Lilt	31
Picnic by the Side of the Road	36
Chicken 'n' Chips	39
Teddy's Whippies	45
The Winter Menu	48
Porridge	53
Ham and Cabbage	59
Apples	65
Moondust in the Phoenix Park	68
Grandma's Scones	71
Irish Stew	76
Monkey Nuts	78
Meat Loaf	83
A Finger in My Mash	87
Peas	90
Grace After Meals	93
Banana and Jam Sandwiches	96
Sugar	99
Offal	101
Tray-bakes	104

Mould	109
Cadbury's Miniatures	112
Campbell's Meatballs	115
Onion Sandwiches	118
Fillamillu	122
The Drinks Cabinet	125
Christmas Cake	128
The Roast	134
Kevin's Birthday Tea	139
Delia	144
A Marathon	147
Wine	151
The Recipe Drawer	155
Gadgets	158
Tea-Time Express	164
Limits	168
Irel Coffee	172
Trifle	174
Milk Pudding	178
The Vegetable Patch	183
Pancakes	187
After-Dinner Cigarette	189
Easter Eggs	191
Blake's	195
Ice-cream Float	200
Scrambled Eggs	203
Gristle in her Gullet	209
Epilogue	214

Prologue

As my feet hit the cold kitchen floor I wish I had remembered to put on socks. I shiver as I fill the kettle and stand hugging myself tightly, waiting for it to boil. I stare out the window and can just make out the black and bare outline of trees in the back garden. It is still dark outside – there isn't even a hint of dawn breaking in the distance. I know I looked at my watch only a minute or two ago, but I've already forgotten what time it is – it's very early, of that I'm sure.

I look around at the mess in the kitchen and try to forget all of the work that still has to be done to make this home habitable. How could everything have changed so completely in one short year?

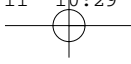
Our postal code has increased by ten, our mortgage has doubled, our income has halved, we have two gardens instead of one. Our sex life has quartered – then quartered again. Instead of eight hours' sleep, I'm lucky if I get five. Instead of several nights out a week, we can barely drag ourselves out for one. We are three instead of two.

Only the briefest while ago I used to pity the two-car, two-kid suburbanites whose days seemed so dull and routine. I would wonder how and why people chose to exist like that, while we were really living!

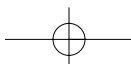
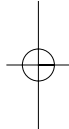
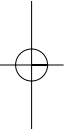
I can hear her cries getting more insistent, so I will the kettle along. As it comes to the boil I pour the bubbling water around the bottle and make my way upstairs. My legs are heavy and my back stiff – they could do with another hour or two of rest. I glance at our bedroom door and think of my side of the bed – still warm and snug with my shape pressed into it, and a fuzzy heat emanating from him. Unfortunately I'm not going to be able to take up that position again for some time.

I open the door to her bedroom and immediately the crying stops and instead her legs and arms start flapping excitedly. As I look into the cot a broad gummy smile cracks on her face. My insides swell to bursting point. Is it me or the anticipation of her bottle that has her so happy? I reach in to pick her up. *This* is my favourite part of the day. This is when I reacquaint myself with her wriggling body and gorgeous smell. This is life.

I sit down on the bed and, holding her in my arms, I start to feed her. She sucks methodically and contentedly. I close my eyes and feel them sting beneath my hot lids. My mind drifts off. I think of my mother doing this same thing almost forty years ago. I think of her holding me tightly and tenderly in this nurturing embrace. I think of all the toil and the feedings that are involved in rearing, not one but four children. How many bottles did she warm? How many tonnes of food did she purée and mash and blend for us as babies? How many thousand dinners did she lovingly prepare for us to enjoy? How many hours of her life did she spend standing at her workspace in our kitchen? My mother grew old standing in our kitchen, I see that now. I



see too with a hint of regret, mixed with a pinch of anticipation, that I now seem to be heading down that well-worn path.



The Kitchen

It was 1979 and I was nine years old, the second youngest child in a family of six. My world was small and at its centre was our house – a sturdy, block-like 1960s semi in South Dublin. A big square box containing all our living quarters, with a smaller square box – the garage – on the side. Our garage was attached to that of our neighbours, which in turn was attached to their house, and so on down the half-moon of the Crescent, up the Rise, into the Park, around the Grove and back along the Avenue. Each house was the mirror image, maybe slightly altered over time, of the one opposite and a carbon copy of the one next door. There was white pebbledash plaster on the top of our house and red brick on the bottom – it was only half a red brick.

My parents spent the first two years of married life in a one-bedroom flat until they had the deposit saved. They loved to tell, and for some strange reason we enjoyed hearing, how they moved in with nothing but a bed, two borrowed chairs and a small card table, plus a new baby – Catherine, my big sister – in a cot. The four of us children gazed on as they told us in unison how they saved for a sofa, put a deposit on a fridge and how Dad did most of the other work himself. They each gazed into the middle distance as they recalled those years, as if the images were projected into the space

above our dinner table and only they could see them. We hung on to every word as they spoke tenderly of life 'before us'. Their change of manner with each other during these moments was more of a revelation to me than the story I had heard several times before. Such vague and minute displays of affection between my parents were welcome – they seldom kissed in front of us. Though there were times when Mum would make an exaggerated leap for Dad and smother him in kisses, which he would then swat away in playful mock-horror. She would do this, I knew, as a form of reassurance for us, as much as for her own pleasure.

At the end of these musings one of them, usually Mum, would declare their exasperation at how young people today had to have everything in place before they moved into their new homes. The inference, understood through their tut-tuts and pursed lips, was that young people, the ranks of which I hoped to someday join, were soft nowadays; they suffered some weakness of character or lack of backbone, because they chose not to live in unfurnished, unheated and undecorated accommodation.

The front door of our house opened into a large square hallway. The floor was covered in a chocolate brown carpet with a tight pattern of faint cream and green swirls and concentric circles all over it – such carpets didn't show up the dirt, Mum said. The walls were a vibrant egg-yolk yellow. To the left were the stairs going up. To the right was the door to the sitting room; a rarely used dining room lay beyond this. Straight ahead was the kitchen. The nerve centre. The hub. The heart.

It was a large kitchen. Square also. My parents were pleased

to inform anyone who asked, particularly neighbours, how they had had the wherewithal to pay a little extra to the builder when buying off the plans to shorten the hallway by a few feet, thereby enlarging the kitchen by a vital amount. They were savvy in their own unassuming way and proud of it.

Opposite the entrance was a large window overlooking a generous back garden. The garden was south-facing, so the kitchen was almost always flooded with bright sunlight. Beneath the window on the left was the sink, on the right was the electric cooker, and in between the two was a countertop, with some presses underneath. This was where Mum spent most of her days. This was her production line. She moved from sink to cooker to countertop, then back to cooker. The flow of movement only changed if she had to go to the small fridge on the opposite wall or to the freezer in the garage. It was only rarely that I walked into that kitchen and did not see Mum's back as she stirred a pot on the hob or peeled some potatoes at the sink.

The right-hand wall of the kitchen held all the presses and more counter space. Dad made all of the units himself, along with most of the furniture in our house – carpentry and DIY being his only hobbies. A proud craftsman, he never rushed a job or cut corners – measure twice, cut once, he told me, passing on his words of wisdom as I patiently watched him laying his inch-tape across a plank of wood for the fifth time. The doors of the presses were made of the thinnest plywood and painted pure white, with arched white plastic handles – they gave a sharp click each time they were opened and closed. They received an annual painting to keep them looking respectable. The wall-mounted presses above held

all the cups, glasses and plates. The ones beneath held saucepans, bowls and lots of dry goods. As a small child, I sat for hours on the kitchen floor as Mum worked around me. I took out and examined the opened and half-used packets of flour, sugar, ground almonds, icing sugar, tubes of tomato purée, bottles of Worcestershire sauce, vinegar, and Irel coffee, asking Mum what each one was, playing 'shop', and making her buy them all back from me. I was amazed that she could tell apart the identical jam jars of bread soda, baking powder, Bextartar and salt. They all looked the same to me.

The left wall was unencumbered by fixtures and fittings, as our table was pushed against it when not in use. It was the only wall in the kitchen with wallpaper – an inoffensive pale peach colour – yet it was continually covered in pictures and posters. It became over time an informal 'educational' space. It always had a large map of the world in the centre, stuck on with Blu-Tack and beside that, for many years, was the annual Mitchelstown calendar – a poster-sized calendar with a photograph of an agricultural scene depicting cows, green pastures and blue skies on the top, the twelve months of the years on the bottom, and a large hamper of cheeses, yoghurts and milk spread out across the middle. Postcards from friends and relatives who travelled Ireland and abroad filled any gaps.

For a long time a height chart filled the last free space on this wall and over the years we logged our progression upwards. I flew up that chart with frightening rapidity. When we had all soared above the top and it had lost its use, Dad replaced it with an anti-drugs chart he brought home

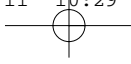
from his office in the Eastern Health Board. Aimed at teenagers and their parents, it was part of a campaign to inform, educate, but primarily to scare youngsters away from ever trying drugs. This chart used colours to represent the level of danger that each drug posed, starting with pale yellow for alcohol and tobacco, getting a hint more orange for hash and grass, and moving on into bright orange and red with explicit details of how cocaine, heroin and crack cocaine can affect your body and mind. I studied this chart closely and wondered if I would become the kind of teenager brave enough to try such bizarre substances. I tried to imagine what 'hallucinations', 'trips' and 'psychotic episodes' were. Then this chart disappeared overnight. Dad was unsure if giving us so much information was not actually encouraging us to experiment in some way. Cuttings from the newspaper about switching lights off to save money and Lenten campaign posters showing small black children with flies on their lips made their way onto this space instead.

The back wall of the kitchen was where the small fridge was plugged in. Beside it was a wing chair and Mum's trolley. An engagement present, this trolley was gold and had two levels. It was only used for visitors, when it was wheeled into the sitting room, looking like a cross between a stately pram and a tea-lady's trolley. The top tier would be laden with rattling cups and saucers, sugar and milk and, hidden under an oversized tea cosy which Mum had crocheted, sat the teapot. Plates of sandwiches, shortbread biscuits and a flan filled with fresh cream and tinned pears, with a dusting of sugar on top, crowded the bottom shelf.

We ate most of our meals in the kitchen. Only on rare occasions were we allowed to eat in front of the television in the sitting room: Wimbledon – semi-finals and finals – or when Jimmy Connors was playing (Mum never missed a Connors match); Christmas night, eating turkey sandwiches and Lemon's sweets, while watching *The Sound of Music* or *Some Like it Hot*; breakfast cereal in front of *Swap Shop* on Saturday mornings.

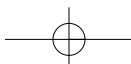
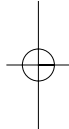
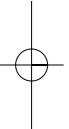
The kitchen was the room from which I heard muffled shouts and raised voices in my bedroom at night. Trying to sleep and to listen at the same time, I'd hear Dad's bellows and Mum's shrill tones rise through the floor from the kitchen below. They'd be sitting at the table talking loudly. I'd hear one of them walk out to the garage and slam the door, only to walk back in seconds later and shout again. I'd hear fast footsteps on the stairs and their bedroom door shutting gently but firmly as their voices went quiet. Then I'd drift off, only to wonder as I opened my eyes to daylight what the atmosphere would be like in the kitchen that following morning.

The kitchen was where we children also took our fights when we were looking for a referee. When Catherine and Lucy cut the beautiful blond hair off my Sindy doll, it was into the kitchen to Mum that I went running and sobbing, holding that less-than-ideal image of womanhood in my small hands. When Lucy borrowed Catherine's favourite Benetton green-and-white-striped cotton 'rugby shirt', they both stormed into the kitchen to see which of them was most justified in being hysterical – the borrower or the borrowee. When Kevin cursed for the first time in front of



Dad and was dragged up to his bedroom for punishment, once again it was into the kitchen that I ran crying, looking for comfort from Mum.

We washed, slept and relaxed in the other rooms of our symmetrical box, but it was in the kitchen that we lived.



Picnics On The Beach

Throughout the summer months we watched the weekend evening news religiously – to get the weather forecast. The news itself was half watched as Dad read his newspaper and Mum flitted around the kitchen, popping her head in every now and then to see what she was missing. When the weather forecast was announced, Dad put the paper to rest on his stomach and, with her rubber gloves still on, Mum stood in silence at the door, staring intently at the screen. Any signs of high pressure, isobars spread far apart and a capital H in the centre, and we, like thousands of other families, made our way to the seaside in Wicklow. There was a sense of urgency about getting a ‘good day’ on the beach – a day without rain, a day we could treasure during the long winter months ahead. The merest suggestion of temperatures topping the high teens was enough to make Mum and Dad organise a Saturday by the sea.

The weather that summer did not disappoint, and it was with great excitement one Friday evening that Mum and Dad told us that we were heading to Wicklow for the last beach trip of the season. I got up quite early – as I always did on beach days – and put on my favourite sundress, the one with tiny red love hearts all over it. The straps tied together to make a neat little bow on each shoulder, and the beads which dangled from

their ends would clack together noisily as I ran. When I entered the kitchen, I saw by the amount of work Mum had already done that she'd probably been there since sunrise. Tall, with a broad back, she had a sensible kind of frame for a mother of four. Her greying hair was completely flat on one side from her night's sleep, though later she would dampen and vigorously brush her thick wiry curls, pressing errant strands back into place in front of the bathroom mirror. This she did every day. The belt of her dusty pink dressing gown was tied tightly around her middle and her dry and cracked heels were spilling over the back of her slippers. She'd covered the kitchen table with cups, flasks and sandwich parcels and she greeted me without turning around or stopping her work. I was given brusque instructions to eat my breakfast and then waken Dad and tell him he had to pack the car.

It took a few hours to get us all up and ready, then we squeezed into our laden Opel Kadett and crawled out on to the main road south, the N11, joining the long queue of cars shunting in the same direction; a parched snake heading slowly for the coast. Magheramore beach, on the outskirts of Wicklow town, was our family's 'secret' beach. Mum and Dad heard of it in hushed tones from a colleague of Dad's nine summers before, when Mum was heavily pregnant with me. From that day onwards they rarely went to another beach. Brittas Bay and the Silver Strand were visited only occasionally, as Magheramore had stolen our hearts. It lay at the end of a narrow and bumpy dirt track where branches slapped you in the face if you left the car window open – which I did for the thrill of it. Deep potholes tested the suspension of Dad's overburdened car.

The limited parking at the end of the lane was haphazard – you might get your car in but you were never guaranteed you would be able to get it out, as more and more Dubliners squeezed into the small field throughout the day. Dad usually left our car on the grass verge by the side of the lane, pointing outwards for ease of exit. With the car tilted at an angle, and the two left wheels suspended over a ditch, we all shuffled out the safe side. Then out of the boot came the togs bag – an old plastic compost bag holding six towels and many more pairs of togs – two tennis racquets; tennis balls and beach balls; a Frisbee; two large chequered rugs; two plastic bags full of food; a windbreak; and a bag with Dad’s newspaper and camera. All of this had to make its way down a steep and slippery slope to the beach. Dad carried most of it, over his back, under his arms, in both hands, strapped across his shoulders, while the rest of us carried a token ball or rug. Mum was always terrified of slipping and twisting her ankle so she used a tennis racquet as a crutch to help her down. She would snap at Dad if, unchivalrously, he left her too far behind and she grew embarrassed if a stranger offered to help her down – Dad would always get an earful later.

As soon as my feet sank in the soft shifting sand, I ran ahead to see if ‘our’ spot was free. If another family ever had the audacity to spread their rug in our place, I would give them my most withering look and then try to find the next best location, one that was equidistant from all the other families and would meet with everyone’s approval.

On the beach my priorities were to swim and eat; Catherine (fourteen) wanted to get a tan; Lucy (twelve) wanted to swim too; and Kevin (seven) wanted to stay sand-

free. So as soon as our rugs were laid out and Dad had pounded our windbreak into the sand to mark our patch for the day, I stripped off, put on my togs and plunged into the icy Irish Sea.

Regardless of how grey or blue the sky and water were, whether there were exciting waves or just a gentle lilt to the sea, Lucy and I, as the water babies of the family, would walk at a steady pace straight up to our waists and then dive under for several seconds to wet our heads and shoulders – this time was no different. As the first to get wet, we were greeted with a loud cheer when we resurfaced, both satisfaction and pain clearly visible on our faces. Kevin somewhat reluctantly waded in after us; he was not that happy about being forced in for a swim, nor did he want to be associated with Catherine, shivering in her first bikini in two inches of water. Mum's approach was to glide into the water with a breaststroke that would have been graceful had it not been for a loud spurting of water – looking and sounding as if it had come from a blocked hose – that came out of her mouth on each upward stroke. Dad was the only one to enter the water backwards. He stood with his back to the horizon and the oncoming waves, stretched out his arms like a scarecrow and made big circles with them as he collapsed back into the trustworthy water behind him. We each had our own entry style but Catherine's was the most tortuous. By the time we had all splashed around, played D-O-N-K-E-Y with the beach ball and practised some swimming, Catherine had turned grey in the shallows, goose bumps all over. Bored pleading with her to get under, Dad and Kevin started splashing and chasing her to make



her topple and fall in. As she fell, my chattering teeth told me to get out. Catherine ended up swimming alone.

It took a while to get warm again; this I did under the cover of the towelling robe. Mum made one for each of us girls – to protect our modesty. She'd got a long piece of towelling, threaded elastic around the top and then stitched the ends together. The elastic stayed around my neck as the towel hung down, covering my body from the gaze of onlookers. I liked being naked under that private tent, the air drying the salt water from my skin and the sand from my bottom. I then put on dry togs and reappeared from under my robe, placing my wet togs on the rocks to dry. Dad shook out the rugs and Mum arranged the picnic.

First out were the sandwiches. There were several parcels, each one wrapped in the saved waxed paper of previously eaten loaves. Most popular were the ham sandwiches, made with white bread and a thick layer of butter. There were

rounds of cheese sandwiches made with pale slices of the only cheese we knew, Calvita. Protected in its small cardboard box and foil wrapping, an entire block was required for our picnic. There were egg sandwiches, now soggy and misshapen, with a little chopped chive, made with brown bread. Just for Mum, there were the more elegant cheese and apple sandwiches. She offered to share them with us but had no takers. Why did she put a nice crisp apple into a perfectly good cheese sandwich and ruin both of them? Obviously an acquired taste. The sandwiches never ran out no matter how many we ate. But before they were even half eaten, Mum took out some home-made fruit scones, which she had buttered that morning. All of this was washed down with diluted orange drink for us kids, poured from a large Tupperware container into plastic cups. Chilled in the fridge before we left home, this drink was by now tepid, which spoiled its usually enjoyable thirst-quenching properties. Mum and Dad preferred real mugs for their tea, which they made with their flask of hot water, and with tea bags, sugar and milk kept separately in used Coleman's Mustard jars. No picnic would be complete without a final treat of some kind and ours was usually Mum's flapjacks or queen cakes.

On many occasions we were joined on the beach by close friends and extended family, those in the know with regards to its location. Aunt Mary from England, and her husband and sons, would join us if they were in Ireland on a visit. Aunt Eileen and my only girl cousin Jean often made it down the treacherous slopes to join us too. So did our neighbours, the Devitts. The ages of the Devitt children were such that a convenient pairing of sorts took place. During



these days more chequered rugs were spread out and picnics very similar to our own were devoured. I strained to see what goodies were pulled from their bags and shamelessly hovered nearby in the hope of being offered a spare biscuit or some extra cake.

With more people around, there was more sport to be had once the food was gone. We would run off our lunch by playing a personalised version of cricket or rounders, using a tennis racquet, tennis ball and balled-up jumpers as bases or stumps. The games were dumbed-down to ensure that Kevin and I, as the youngest, stood a chance of hitting the ball. On several occasions Mum or Aunty Mary sprained their ankle running from jumper to jumper around the pitch, bringing the games to an abrupt halt.

I loved the last swim of the day. By four in the afternoon, and after many swims, I'd be used to the cold water, and it didn't wind me on entry. I stayed in for as long as I could,

until Mum shouted for me to get dressed, it was time to go home. Though this really meant it was time for a last mini-picnic before we started the trek back up the slope.

This was when the 'shop stuff' came out: a litre and a half of Club Orange, a six pack of Tayto crisps, a family pack of Fox's Glacier Fruits or Ritchie's Milky Moos to suck on the hike back to the car. The taste of the sand and the sea were washed away by the bubbles and salt of this picnic, making me forget the sand itching in my knickers and my matted wet hair as I licked cheesy fingers and tipped the crisp packet into my mouth to get all those tiny salty crumbs out of the corners. I loudly sucked on as many boiled sweets as I was given as I trudged my way back along the now busy beach, full of windbreaks and rugs and families, sprawled out, shouting, eating, running, splashing, chasing, and sunbathing. I'd feel momentarily sad when I turned around from my vantage point at the top of the slope and took one last look at the wonderful scene below. I hated leaving the beach behind.

Sometimes we stopped for ice creams on the way home. This treat was Dad's prerogative – the gift was either bestowed upon us or not, and I never dared to ask outright for an ice cream. The not knowing if we were to stop or not kept me alert in the sticky car, fighting the temptation to doze off. I was anxious not to miss Rathnew – the last place in Wicklow that Dad would stop. Silently my heart would sink if the car kept going past the tiny grocery shop on the right. Sometimes the indicator tick-tocked, the car slowed down and Dad pulled in to the side of the road. A few minutes later he'd return with a delicious selection of ice

creams. Gollybar for Mum, Choc Ice for himself, and a mixed bag for us to fight over. There'd be the stale crumbliness of a Brunch, a sweet, tangy Orange Split, a Loop the Loop and another Gollybar. We'd snatch at them quickly – any one of them was welcome and each had its own attraction. I was always particularly happy to be left with the simple softness of the unadorned Gollybar.

After sucking the wooden stick dry to remove the slightest trace of ice cream, I'd doze off in the car, utterly content. Hot from the sunburn already glowing crimson on my cheeks and shoulders, I'd feel damp and gritty and smell clean and dirty at the same time. So deliciously tired. Only waking as I sensed, somewhere in my core, the familiar swing of the car turning up our road.

Strawberries

PLEASE DON'T EAT THE FRUIT was the most ineffectual sign that was ever ignored. It hung on the gate at the entrance to the field in Malahide where we went strawberry-picking. It was incredibly naïve of the farmer to assume we would obey it.

I was given a green cardboard box, pointed in the direction of the day's beds and told to get picking. It took a while to get used to crouching and bending but I'd soon get into my own rhythm: one for the box, one for me, one for the box, one for me. I stopped caring that I was getting muck on my bare knees and in between my toes and under my toenails. Initially, sibling rivalry worked to my parents' advantage as we each tried to fill our boxes the fastest. I'd thrill when I brushed aside a few leaves to find a cluster of strawberries that previous pickers had missed. Glossy red and luxuriant, they huddled together, as if knowingly hiding from greedy fingers. It took a lot of willpower for me to place any of them in my box.

Mum preferred to pick, and eat, raspberries. She'd set off into the next field, claiming it was easier on her back. Dad usually kept close to her and left us kids down at ground level with the strawberries. Once our bounty was weighed and paid for, Dad lined the boot of the car with neat rows of boxes, and I spent the long journey home from Malahide