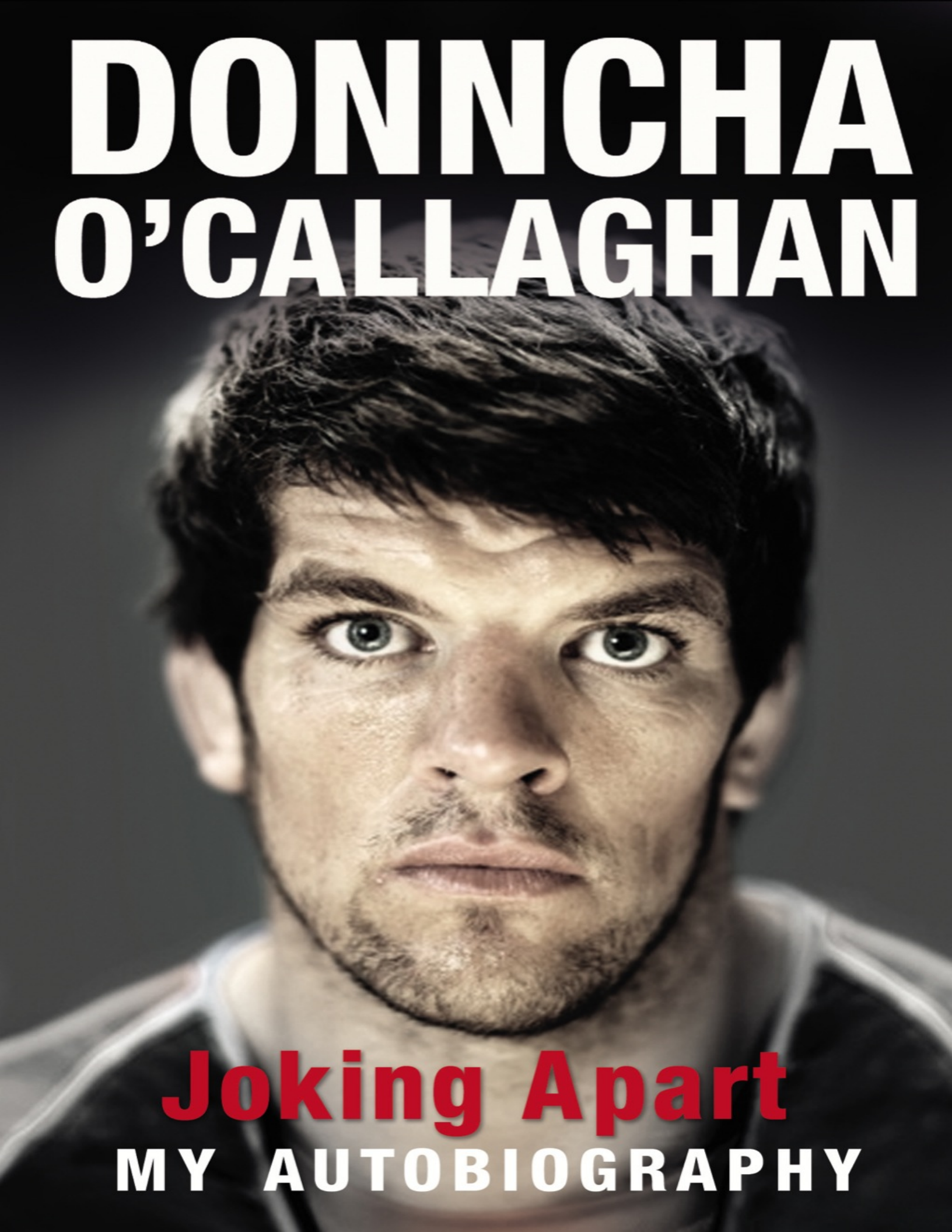
DONNCHA O'CALLAGHAN



Joking Apart

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

About the Book

Donncha O'Callaghan is one of Ireland's leading international rugby players, and a stalwart of the Munster side. He was a key figure in the Irish team which won the IRB 6 Nations Grand Slam in 2009, and has won two Heineken Cup medals and two Magners League titles with Munster.

But that success did not come easy. For such a well-known player with a larger-than-life reputation, his long battle to make a breakthrough at the highest level is largely unknown. In this honest and revealing autobiography, Donncha talks in detail about the personal setbacks and disappointments at Munster, and the unconventional ways he dealt with the frustration of not making the team for four or five years in his early twenties.

He had a parallel experience with Ireland, taking nearly six years to get from fringe squad member to established first-choice player. Donncha talks candidly about how he brought discipline to his game, and about his relationships with the coaches who had overlooked him and the second-row rivals who had kept him on the bench.

Donncha talks also with great warmth about a hectic childhood that was shaped by the death of his father when he was only five years old. One of the heroes of his story is his mother Marie, who with incredible strength and resourcefulness raised her family of five single-handedly.

Often deservedly regarded as ‘the joker in the pack’, Donncha is less well known for the serious attitude and intensely professional approach he brings to his rugby. *Joking Apart* gives the full, often surprising picture, showing sides of the man that will be unfamiliar to followers of Irish rugby.

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WITH DENIS WALSH

To my dad

Acknowledgements

TO JENNY, FOR your continued love and support. My rugby life is full of highs and lows but you remain the one constant.

To Sophie, I hope I can be an exceptional father.

To Mom, for your unconditional love and support throughout the years.

Eddie, I really respect you and aspire to be like you. To Eddie, Ultan and Emmet, for all the happy and fun memories of growing up together. You taught me great lessons that have stood to me in both rugby and life.

To Emer, you are so thoughtful and kind. I am blessed to have you as a sister and a friend.

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To all our supporters, who are always there encouraging us in good times and bad. You inspire us to perform beyond our limits. You really are the sixteenth man.

Prologue

16 January 2011 – Toulon 32 Munster 16

SOMETIMES, THIS IS my life.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning when I turned the front door key and walked quietly into the hall. Jenny and our six-month-old daughter Sophie were sound asleep. For me, sleep was out of the question. In the afternoon our Heineken Cup campaign had come to an end in the south of France. For the first time in my career as a Munster player we had failed to qualify from our pool. Twelve years. Our reputation was built on winning must-win games, time after time. In those situations one team always breaks under pressure. Today, it was us.

I sat down to watch the match. I didn't want to put it off, I wanted to face it. Closing my eyes wasn't going to make the nightmare go away. After thirty-three minutes I was sin-binned. It looked worse on television than it seemed at the time. Their full-back, Rudi Wulf, was chasing a kick from a quick line-out, I blocked his run and caught him high. I couldn't get into position quickly enough to get into his path and make him go around me. Wulf was offside when the ball was kicked but he hadn't been whistled for that and his infringement wasn't going to spare me now. The home crowd were baying for my blood. I tried to argue my case with Dave Pearson, the referee. I pleaded that there

was no malice in the hit. I asked him to take a minute. He consulted the touch judge. Yellow card.

I couldn't deny my stupidity. Indiscipline had been a problem for us in the first half of the season and we'd taken a lot of criticism on the issue. For the most part I'd kept my nose clean but in the pivotal game of our year I'd cocked up. In the sin-bin nobody came near me. Normally somebody would come over and say it was a harsh decision or some other fib. The gesture is always worth more than the words. They made me do without it.

I sat there with my thoughts, mortified. My right eye was black and swollen and nearly closed. I'd been hit with a swinging arm by one of their second rows and his thumb lodged in my eye. It felt like somebody had poured boiling water into it. My vision had been blurred for a few minutes, but sitting in the sin-bin everything was clear. Our Heineken Cup campaign was collapsing in plain view. We were ten points down when I left the field and twenty when I returned to the play.

I was replaced with about twenty minutes to go. That killed me. I was desperate to redeem myself. I had plenty left in the tank. I always feel that my fitness gives me an edge in the last ten minutes. I wanted to fight out every point and every minute. Instead I stood on the sideline, helpless. It was hell. The crowd was going crazy, we were being ripped apart, and I was a useless spectator.

In the dressing room afterwards Tony McGahan, our coach, went round to everyone. At half time he'd lost the rag a bit. It's not his style, but this wasn't a normal situation. At half time it hadn't felt like a Munster dressing room should. There was no buzz, no anger. On the field it hadn't felt like a Munster performance. That was our responsibility, the players. During the week we set the game up as something personal. Not just a professional challenge but a test of us as people. Our form hadn't been good so we went digging in our hearts for a performance.

Our paranoia about not getting out of the pool had grown over the years. We kept putting ourselves in tight corners and fighting our way out of them, like Indiana Jones. In sport, though, you don't always get the Hollywood ending.

Tony has never let us down. In his time with Munster we've never taken the pitch under-prepared. He looks for perfection every day. In the minds of the players there are big games and smaller games but in his mind every game is an opportunity for perfection. His desire to win is off the scale and his standards make all of us stretch. His working day starts before most of us have opened our eyes and it finishes long after we've stopped thinking about it.

We let him down. A performance like that makes you feel like a fraud. When he came over to me, I apologised. Tony has a strong grip on his emotions but, after that match, there were tears in his eyes. He didn't say much to the group but he called it straight. The way we played, he said, we didn't deserve to get a result. Nobody else really spoke. That wasn't like us either.

Munster supporters had travelled in big numbers as usual. At the airport some of the die-hards came over to sympathise. Somebody said, 'Thanks for everything, we've had great years,' and you're thinking, 'It's not over! We're not finished!' We've been hearing that line too many times over the last while. Some supporters always travel on our chartered flight. I don't know when the tradition started but for years they've been applauding us on to the plane. Some days you don't feel worthy of their loyalty and affection. That day, there was no applause.

In the middle of the night I watched every minute of the match. When it was over I went upstairs to bed and stared at the ceiling. Monday was a day off. Some of the lads were meeting for coffee and a chat in Douglas, a suburb on the southside of Cork city, close to where I live. I couldn't face them. I didn't want to risk meeting a Munster supporter on

the street. I'd felt embarrassed meeting them in the airport. After a big defeat, that feeling lasts for days.

Professional sports people all over the world will tell you what their jersey means to them. A lot of them are lying. Some of them will say it about a different jersey next year. With us, it's not like that. To us, the red jersey is like a second skin. Munster's biggest wins have been among the greatest days of our lives; Munster's biggest defeats have been scarring experiences. It only matters if you care. I sometimes think that we're bi-polar as a group. We can't separate our mood from our results.

On Tuesday morning I went to the gym before training. Sometimes I need to flog myself to get over a bad performance. It's part of the recovery process. When I got back to the car there was a missed call from Tony on my phone and a voice-mail message. My blood ran cold. He said he wanted to talk to me about selection. I knew that could only mean one thing. I rang him back and he gave me the bad news. I was dropped. Mick O'Driscoll was going to be Paul O'Connell's partner in the second row for the final pool match against London Irish.

It took me years to make a breakthrough with Munster, but once I got in I was basically first choice. Over the course of a season there is a limit on the number of games Irish internationals can play for their provinces, but apart from that forced rotation I had been picked for every important Munster game since 2003. If I was fit I was in. I never took it for granted. I always trained and prepared like I was fighting for my place. That was the mentality that got me there in the first place and, in my mind, it was the only mentality that would keep me there. Playing for Munster was a huge part of my identity. It wasn't just my job, it was part of who I am.

Tony said we could talk about it later.

Before training there was a team meeting and a video session. At the team meeting Tony grabbed hold of us. Our

first goal every season is to win the European Cup. That was gone now but the season was only half over and we owed it to everyone to make the second half of the season a success. He spoke about the Magners League and the Amlin Cup and Saturday's match against London Irish and he made it clear to everyone that we were starting again and driving on. There wasn't going to be any moping around or feeling sorry for ourselves. He said we were going to be slaughtered by criticism in the media and elsewhere but we had to be man enough to take it and move on.

Like all of our video review sessions it was frank and harsh. I was in the firing line. The message was clear: there are some penalties that the management were prepared to accept and some that they weren't. My penalty was unacceptable. I couldn't argue with that. In the dressing room after the game I didn't stand up and apologise to everyone for the sin-binning because, to me, 'sorry' didn't cut it. Telling them that I was gutted – what did that matter? My feelings about what happened were beyond words.

Being dropped felt like somebody had put their hand down my throat and ripped my heart out. The rule in Munster is that you can be sour about it for a day if you want but that's it. Not everyone follows that rule but I wasn't going to break it. I could suffer in my own time. I was determined not to go around with a long face. I was determined to train well that day, as if nothing had happened. I didn't want to be a drain on anybody.

My conversation with Tony was brief. He insisted that I hadn't been dropped for my yellow card. He said that against London Irish they needed other line-out options. I pushed him on a couple of points, but when you're dropped you never get any satisfaction from those conversations. At the end of it I wanted to let him know that I respected his

call. ‘If I play for eighty minutes on Saturday or eighty seconds,’ I said, ‘you’ll get everything out of me.’

Micko and Paulie came up and had a word. Dougie Howlett gave me a high five and said nothing. Nobody knows what to say, people just know that you’re hurting. I appreciated that. When I got back to my car after training there were texts on my phone from Marcus Horan and Jerry Flannery, two of my closest friends in rugby. I still have the text from Jerry on my phone. It started with a quote: ‘“The block of granite which was an obstacle in the pathway of the weak became a stepping stone in the pathway of the strong” – Thomas Carlyle. Honest hard work always wins through. Stay the course and be the best you can be. It always comes right.’

When I got home I let my emotions out. People might think that’s strange behaviour for a grown man, and maybe it is, but you have to understand something about us. The success of Munster over the years was built on a lot of things but the most important thing was that people cared. It mattered. There was no other way for us to be a success. People talk about putting your body on the line but that’s the least of it. When you give your heart and your soul to something, that’s where the hurt comes from.

Training was in Cork that day and the Limerick players were staying over that night. Dinner was arranged for a place in town. Going out for a meal was the last thing I wanted to do but you can’t wave the white flag. Marcus started the slagging, the bastard. ‘Is it too soon?’ he said in the restaurant, knowing that I’d have to put up with it. That’s the other thing about us: the slagging is merciless and nothing is off limits.

For the third night in a row I didn’t really sleep. Ronan O’Gara wanted to meet for a cup of tea the following day. We’ve been friends for years too and we’re room mates in Ireland camp. I knew he meant well but I just wanted to park the issue until after the match. I didn’t want to be the

centre of anyone’s attention or sympathy. I just wanted to do my work and do what I could to help us win.

On match day I carried on as normal in the dressing room. I didn’t speak any less or any more. In the warm-up I didn’t know what to do with myself. During the match I tried to be a little bit detached and a little bit involved but after half time the game started going against us and I couldn’t sit quietly any longer. I asked Tony to put me on. I didn’t really get a response, but two minutes later he called for changes. Shaun Payne, our manager, was doing the paperwork and they said something about waiting for the ball to get out of our half, but I just ignored them and sprinted on.

We were seven points down with ten minutes left and scored three tries to win it. We didn’t play well but we kept going and we got away with it. What we did in the last ten minutes was more like us. It wasn’t the kind of performance to turn our season around but we won a game that we’d looked like losing. We didn’t disgrace the jersey.

Afterwards Tony thanked the bench for having a serious impact on the match. For the first time in my life I cried in a Munster dressing room. Some of our lads would lose it watching a Disney film but I’m not like that. I keep my emotions on an even keel and when you see an expression on my face it’s usually a laugh. It wasn’t a reaction to what Tony said either, it was a build-up of emotion from the week.

For me, all of this is personal. There’s more to me and my life than rugby, but at the same time all of me is in the jersey: the best of me and the worst of me. That week I felt doubted and distrusted. I couldn’t just take off the jersey and walk around as a different person for the week. I can’t make that separation.

This is the life I’ve made. This is the life I love.

1
Marie

I WAS FIVE when Dad died. Hughie was only forty. It turned our world upside down. You live with the hole in your life without the hole ever being filled. As the youngest in the house my sister Emer and myself were shielded from the impact of Dad's death in the beginning, but there were consequences for all of us. It didn't take long for me to see that. More than anything else my childhood was shaped by Dad's absence, Mom's incredible strength and our togetherness as a family. For my two oldest brothers, Eddie and Ultan, it meant leaving school at fifteen and getting a job. There was no choice. Money was tight and we were a big family. They took on that responsibility. As a family we stuck together. Mom made sure of it.

20 March 1985 – I remember the day clearly. In the morning, after I woke, I went to my parents' bed. On a normal day they would have gotten up by then but the bed would still be warm and I'd snuggle into it for a few minutes. That morning it was cold, like it hadn't been slept in at all. I got up and went down to the kitchen. Aunt Angela was there. Even at that age you can pick up the feeling in a room when something bad has happened.

My dad was a plasterer. After years of working on the sites he had just started a new job with Cork Corporation a

few weeks earlier. He was doing a foxer for a friend after work when he got the heart attack. They rushed him to hospital but they couldn't do anything for him. He was a smoker, which didn't help, I suppose. It must have been stressful, too, trying to earn a living in the building trade in the 1980s with five little mouths to feed at home, but I wasn't old enough to notice something like that and I don't ever remember Mom saying it. A job with the council was a bit of stability but he didn't live long enough to get the benefit of that. Mom didn't even get the pension because he needed to be in the job a bit longer.

He drove a Honda 50. Obviously that was a problem for family outings but we all used to take turns to have a day out with Dad on the motorbike. It might only be a spin to The Lough on a Sunday to feed the ducks and the swans but it was the attention, I suppose, the fact that you had Dad to yourself for a few hours. He'd pop in for a pint on the way home and I'd be sitting there with my orange and crisps.

For the summer we used to rent a house in Myrtleville, a seaside place a few miles outside the city. Dad would only have a couple of weeks' holidays but he'd come down every Friday after work to stay for the weekend. I still remember the excitement of him arriving. He always had sweets, and that was the slag: 'Are ye happy to see me or do ye just want the sweets?'

On the morning after he died Mom was very strong for all of us. She explained it to me completely and left me in no doubt that Dad wasn't coming back. I was at an age where they could have spun me a yarn. She understood straight away that this was the best way to handle it. There was no point in giving me false hope. 'Holy God needs your dad now.' The way she put it to me it was as if we were doing Holy God a favour. She left me in no doubt too that everything was going to be all right. I distinctly remember that feeling of reassurance.

Myself and Emer were kept away from the graveyard but we went to the funeral mass. At that age you don't really know what's going on. You don't understand grief. When I saw Mom and my older brothers crying, that's when I got upset. I've never forgotten the smell of incense from the church. Even now it gives me an empty, sickening feeling.

In the weeks that followed there was no shortage of callers to the house. Eventually, though, that stopped. Then one day I saw Mom bawling her eyes out. It must have been about three months after the funeral and it was as if the whole thing had just hit her in the face. The sight of Mom in that state probably affected me as much as the funeral. It was the only time I saw her grief get on top of her. Whatever pain she was feeling she kept it hidden from us. Being strong for her children was the first thing on her mind.

We used to have these family meetings. Pow-wows, we called them. If somebody wasn't pulling their weight around the house they'd be told, straight out. At the first meeting Mom laid it out for us: 'We're on our own now so we've got to get really tight. Some people will have chips off you because you don't have a father and they'll think you're out of control. That's not going to be the case. We're going to look after each other.' Our behaviour was a big thing with Mom. She always felt that people would dread the thought of the O'Callaghan family arriving for a visit – four wild boys and Emer. The pressure was on us to be extra good.

We couldn't keep that up – not all the time. Stuff happened on the street, like it did with all kids. I remember one day Emmett and Ultan got into a serious scrape. Emmett was teasing a girl who lived a few doors down – calling her names or throwing stones or something stupid like that. She went in and told her dad, so he came out and grabbed Emmett. Ultan was playing ball on the green, saw

the commotion, came steaming over and, bang, laid yer man out. Ultan was a big young fella but he was still only about fifteen and the guy he flattened was a grown man. Highly embarrassing for him.

Ultan went in and told Mom what had happened. She went out and tore strips off the neighbour. Then she ripped Ultan to pieces. That was the way it was. Mom would stand up for us against anybody but she wouldn't leave us get away with anything. Nothing.

I don't know how she managed to keep the show on the road. Years later our next-door neighbour, Mr Mahony, told me what a nightmare we were to live beside. He took huge pride in his garden but we'd be hopping over the wall every two minutes to retrieve a ball, trampling over his plants and flowers. In Mom's house there are still dents in the walls from the rows we had as kids. We were big lads and we used to be hopping off each other.

Emmett probably got into more scrapes than any of us. I was too young to hang around with him but it didn't stop me trying. When he got to fourteen or fifteen I was only nine or ten and it was bad for his image to have a younger brother on the scene. In those days it was cool to wear a Parka jacket and smoke fags, and that's what Emmett did. One day I got thick with him for chasing me away and I showed Mom his secret cigarette stash. Mom went off and bought the strongest cigarettes she could find and made Emmett smoke them nonstop until he got sick. She thought that would cure him of the habit. Emmett, though, took the punishment in his stride, got sick, and smokes to this day.

I was no angel either. One day in primary school one of the lads brought in a deck of playing cards with pictures of naked women on the back. We were at an age where we probably didn't have a clue what we were looking at but we knew enough to know that it was bold. Anyway, we were caught looking at the cards behind one of the prefabs and I was singled out as the ringleader. In this case it was a

massive miscarriage of justice but my reputation for devilment went before me. I was brought into the principal's office and Mom was called to the school. I was on the school Gaelic football team and we had a chance of playing in Páirc Uí Chaoimh – a big deal for us. For my punishment, I was dropped. To make things worse, Mom absolutely ate me when we got home. That's what she had to put up with.

Were we happy? Absolutely. I wouldn't want anyone to think that my childhood was hard. It wasn't. We didn't have much but it didn't matter. I know that's a cliché and it's the kind of thing our grandparents used to come out with, but it was true in our house. What we didn't have we did without. When you opened the cupboards in our kitchen you needed sunglasses for all the yellow pack stuff. It was always Flakes of Corn, it was never Cornflakes. If any of the boys in school had Milky Ways in their lunchbox we regarded them as posh. Going on school tours was out of the question. It wasn't even an issue. Our classmates went off on the bus to Fota, or wherever, and we went into a different class for the day. All of that was normal to me.

We didn't lose any privileges when Dad died because they weren't there in the first place. Dad worked very hard to make sure that we had what we needed but little extras didn't come easily. It was Emmett's eleventh birthday the day after he died and Mom gave Emmett a pair of adidas World Cup boots that Dad had bought for him. They were the cool boots at the time but they were expensive. Dad wouldn't have been able to buy them if he hadn't been saving for weeks.

When it came to Christmas time Eddie and Ultan kept myself and Emer under control. Just because we still believed in Santa didn't mean that we were getting away with murder. One Christmas I was looking for something ridiculous – whatever the in-toy was that year – and Eddie pulled me aside. 'You can't get that, it's far too expensive.

Mom still has to pay Santa.' The following year I didn't ask for much at all. Mom took us to one of the Santas in town and he asked me what I was getting for Christmas. So I told him, and he said to me, 'Ah, you'll surely get more than that?' I remember thinking, 'I might be able to get a bit more if you'd lower your prices.'

When BMX bikes were the cool thing to have and all my friends were riding around on them, Emmett modified a clapped-out old bike to make it look like one. I knew it wasn't a BMX and my friends knew but I didn't care. We were brought up to appreciate what we had.

A bigger issue for Mom was keeping us fed on a tight budget. To save a few bob she used to do her grocery shopping in town. We'd meet her off the bus at the top of the park and her hands would be raw from carrying all the bags. To make things stretch she did a lot of baking at home but there was no feeding us. I remember once we gobbled up a week's worth of baking in a day: loaves of bread, apple tarts, the lot. Mom didn't get upset very often but she cried that day. She wasn't caught like that again. If she needed to keep a sliced pan to make our sandwiches for school she hid it. It was guerrilla warfare.

Meal times in our house were chaotic. When I first started going out with Jenny she couldn't get over it. Everything was put on the table at the same time – starters, main course, dessert – and you fought for what you could get. It was all elbows and the survival of the fittest. Mom would have worked out that it was the only way to do it.

She devised all kinds of strategies to keep us in check. On Sundays she taught swimming classes at a pool in Churchfield on the northside of the city. From our house in Bishopstown on the southside it was about a two-hour walk. We could have got a bus into town and another bus out to Churchfield but she wanted to wear us out. So she marched us up to the northside and marched us back again. We were in the pool for a couple of hours and on the way home we

got a packet of Burger Bites as a treat. The alternative was a day spent playing on the road, tormenting people. Instead, we got home at tea-time flattened, only fit for bed.

I'd say it was the same thinking with our summer holidays in Myrtleville. The day we got out of school we were loaded up and packed off. Mom organised a lift with one of the neighbours and we took half the house with us – pots, pans, duvets, you name it. I used to get a hard time from the others for getting car sick. Myrtleville is only about ten miles away but we might have to pull over three times. I'd still be fine for a 99 when we stopped in Carrigaline though.

We rented a pokey little house from a local farmer. Two of my cousins used to come along so eight of us would be stuffed into it. There was no telly and we didn't miss it. We went out every morning in our shorts, whatever the weather. Mom wouldn't see us again until lunchtime when we'd wolf down a jam sandwich and head off out again, catching crabs or playing ball. The same families went there every year so we had our summer buddies. For young fellas it was paradise.

The United Beach Missions were active on Myrtleville beach but we abused their goodwill. They'd organise beach volleyball or beach soccer with cool nets but when the time came for the Bible stories we made ourselves scarce. They were really nice people but we had a busy schedule.

The one thing that didn't change from our normal lives in town was my desire to hang around with Emmett. Sometimes he'd send me off to the shop to get me out of the way, and if he was in a good mood he'd let me keep the change. On other occasions he'd pick me up by one leg and dangle me over the wall above Myrtleville beach, threatening to drop me on to the rocks below if I didn't get out of his face. That worked.

Eventually I did fall on to the rocks, but it had nothing to do with Emmett. We were behind Bunny Connellan's pub

one Sunday and I wanted the cartoon section from one of the papers. One of the lads wouldn't give it to me and he threw it over the wall. Like a fool I climbed down after it and slipped. I managed to climb back up and I lived with the pain for two days before I told Mom. I knew I shouldn't have been in behind Bunny Connellan's and I definitely knew I shouldn't have been chasing a cartoon supplement down the face of the cliffs. The pain was bad, but the thought of Mom's reaction convinced me to put up with it for a couple of days before I finally came clean.

After Mom chewed the head off me I was brought to hospital and was kept in for three months. I had thrown my hips out of line and I needed daily traction. For the rest of that summer I lay on a hospital bed with weights hanging off my legs. The funny thing is I don't remember being miserable. I was only seven or eight and they probably spun me a yarn that it was cool to be in hospital.

It's only when I look back that I can see how much of a strain it must have been for Mom to raise five kids on her own. Even something like that – me in hospital in town, the other four kids below in Myrtleville, Mom trying to get up and down without a car in the family. Dealing with bits and pieces of hardship became a way of life for her.

We've all done well in our different careers but Mom is still fiercely independent and self-sufficient. I've been grocery shopping with her from time to time and she's still comparing prices and looking for bargains. Over the years she's loved travelling to Munster's big away matches in the Heineken Cup but she'll only do it if she has the money. If there was a big game coming up she'd take in students to raise a few bob and fund the trip that way. If she couldn't get the money together the last thing she'd want was for me or any of the others to pay for her. She never got anything soft and that's the only life she knows.

During the Celtic Tiger years I lost money in property deals that went sour. I feel angry about the money I lost but

I feel more ashamed that I put myself in a position to lose it because we weren't brought up like that. I should have done more research into those projects but I accepted bad advice and pissed away money that I should have minded better. Mom couldn't afford to waste a bob.

Soccer was Dad's game, but he had a passion for all sports. Eddie is ten years older than me and he remembers Dad keeping himself and Ultan up late at night or getting them out of bed early in the morning to watch big sports events on telly. When John Treacy won a silver medal at the Los Angeles Olympics in 1984 the lads saw it live, regardless of the time difference. Emer didn't play much sport but all my brothers did. When he was alive Dad ferried the lads here, there and everywhere to training and matches. After he was gone Mom took up that role as much as she could. She wasn't a big sports fan but she knew how important it was to us and she always encouraged it. She liked the discipline of sport and I think she saw it as another way of trying to keep us on the straight and narrow.

Dad's absence always hit me on the big days in my career. I remember the hug that Brian O'Driscoll's dad Frank gave him after we won the U-19s World Cup, and I remember the embrace between Ryan Jones and his father in a hotel lobby in New Zealand when Ryan was a late call-up on the Lions tour. Ryan's dad was in tears. They wouldn't have shared many moments like that in their lives, but that opportunity was lost to us.

Bishopstown GAA Club and Highfield Rugby Club were close to where we lived. There were plenty of soccer teams around the place too but Emmett was the soccer player in our family. I tried my hand at Gaelic football until I was about fifteen and then I played basketball for a while with Blue Demons, a team on the northside of the city. Being honest, I played them both like a rugby second row. Awkward and dangerous.

I played corner-back in Gaelic football and my buddy Aodhán Bohan played in the other corner. We were ruthless. The ball would go up the field and by the time it came back down the corner forwards would be on the ground. We were so strong at that age we got away with murder.

In basketball it was much stricter. That didn't suit me. For a non-contact sport there's a lot of stuff goes on in basketball, but you have to be cute about it. My job was to win the rebounds and give the ball to Trevor, our best player. He was only about the size of Peter Stringer but he was a point-scoring machine and once he got enough of the ball we had a chance. Other teams, though, would try to rough him up, and there were days when I lost the head a bit. I didn't know the rules of basketball very well but that wasn't the reason why I was fouled out of so many games. I'd have a perplexed look on my face as I walked towards the bench, as if to say, 'What was that for?' The coach was a neighbour of ours from Bishopstown. He always had the answer: 'You punched him!'

The games were in the Parochial Hall, the old heart of Cork basketball. After matches we walked into town to catch a bus home but we got up to all sorts of desperate messing on our way down Shandon Street. The basketball was great craic, and it was good for me because I was quite a podgy teenager. Some of the physical training was savage. We did these things called suicide runs where you had to touch every line on the basketball court. For a big lad like me that was torturous.

I lost touch with the coach, Kieran Foley, but I bumped into him in town years later. He shouted at me across the street.

'I'm glad you made it at the rugby.'

'Thanks a million.'

'Because you were brutal at the basketball, boy.'

Typical Cork.

2
Four Play

BETWEEN OUR HOUSE and Highfield Rugby Club there was a short cut through the GAA fields. To get into the rugby grounds, though, you had to scale a high wall, and I couldn't manage it without Ultan hoisting me over. He was the biggest reason why I wanted to be there in the first place. When Ultan was only about seventeen he broke on to the Highfield senior team and they won the Munster Senior League, which was an important competition in those days. I remember the excitement of that match and I remember the thrill of being Ultan's younger brother.

I was born on Ultan's eighth birthday, which at the time wasn't a great thrill for him. Mom tells a story of Ultan being brought into the hospital to see the new arrival.

'Look what we got you for your birthday, Ultan,' she said. 'A little brother.'

Ultan started bawling his eyes out. 'But I wanted Subbuteo!'

I always looked up to Ultan and as I got older I turned to him a lot for advice. In Dad's absence Ultan and Eddie became more than older brothers. You don't think of it like that at the time but that's how our relationships developed. When I started playing rugby I wanted to be like Ultan, right down to the last detail. Part of his pre-match routine

was to clean his boots and get his gear bag ready on Friday nights before *The Late Late Show* came on telly at half nine, and that's what I did as soon as I started playing. I suppose I wanted to join him in his world.

I was big for my age, but I lacked aggression. In the beginning that was a problem. I was still a bit of a mommy's boy. Mom says that I was very clingy to her for a good while after Dad died and I was probably a bit soft by the time I started in Highfield. The coaches didn't give out to me about it until one day I lost the ball in contact in an U-12 match. Pat Morrissey was one of the guys in charge of the team and he said something to me that I'll never forget: 'When we give you the ball the least we expect is that we'll get it back.' That has stuck with me. I was the biggest young fella on the pitch and the other crowd had taken the ball off me. That must have driven the coaches demented. On the Munster and Ireland teams now there are more explosive ball-carriers than me, but the promise I make to myself and the team is that when I take it into contact it will come back on our side.

As young lads we were lucky with the coaches we had in Highfield. Pat Morrissey, Pat Halloran and Ted Stack had a fierce passion for rugby and they gave us that love for the game. They piled us into their cars for away matches and bought us stuff in the shop on the way home. Most of all they gave us their time.

We had a good team too. When Munster played Australia at Musgrave Park in 1992 there was a competition to find two teams for a mini-rugby exhibition at half time. We were beaten in the semi-final and it broke my heart. I still went to the match, and it's my first memory of watching Munster. Australia were the world champions, and on a miserable day Munster beat them with an injury-time drop goal from Jim Galvin. Nobody ever talks about the penalty try Munster scored when the pack pulverised them in the

scrum at the Dolphin end of the ground, but I got a great kick out of that. The fancy stuff didn't interest me.

The first time I pulled on the red jersey I was sixteen, playing for the Munster Youths. Like all of my friends I went to the local secondary school, Bishopstown Community, where rugby wasn't played. The inter-provincial youths' championship was for the best club players not in the rugby schools system. Ultan and Emmett had represented Munster at that level and following in their footsteps was my first big ambition as a rugby player.

Our first match against Ulster was also my debut in Thomond Park. There was only a tiny crowd and no atmosphere but none of that reduced its significance for me. The Heineken Cup had only just started around that time, in the mid-1990s, and the Munster phenomenon hadn't got going yet. The status of wearing the Munster jersey, though, existed long before the crowds and the hype. Being picked was an honour, and in all the years I've worn the jersey that feeling has stayed with me. I never took it for granted. That feeling for the jersey has always been a huge part of my performance.

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I don't remember anybody telling me that I was a talented player with a future in the game. As a teenager that thought didn't occur to me – probably with good reason. But I must have done something to get noticed because after the Junior Cert I was approached by Christians and offered a rugby scholarship. The Christian Brothers College (CBC) and the Presentation Brothers College (PBC) are the two big rugby schools in Cork city. It was a fee-paying school so there was no chance I could have gone there unless I was invited. I was old enough to have the final call on a decision like that but I knew Mom wanted me to go and I didn't have to agonise much over what to do.

I spoke to Ultan, Eddie and Emmett about it too, and something Ultan said banished whatever tiny doubt was in my mind.

‘Do you know who’s coaching Christians?’ he said.

‘No.’

‘Garrett Fitzgerald. Do you know who Garrett Fitzgerald is?’

‘No.’

‘He coached Munster to beat Australia.’

I knew I’d get a bit of stick from my friends. Around our estate anybody who went to Christians or Pres was labelled ‘a posh kid’. For years I was one of the fellas dishing out the slagging. I could cope with that but I was worried about fitting in. I was happy in school, I loved Highfield, I had great friends around the estate, but going to Christians was going to impact on all of that. Were people going to look at me differently? What if it didn’t work out? Would it be worse coming back and trying to pick up the pieces of the life I had before?

It seemed to me the only thing I’d have in common with the lads in Christians was rugby. But that was enough. More than enough. It was probably the first time that I realised I was really ambitious about rugby. I wanted to get better, and this was a challenging new environment where I could improve. Our house was only five minutes’ walk from Bishopstown Community school but there were days when I was nearly the last boy arriving in class. To get to Christians I had to get up about an hour earlier, but I bounced out of bed every morning. I loved the place.

It was the start of pressure rugby for me. Christians hadn’t won the Munster Senior Cup for nine years, which was an eternity for them. I had been signed up on a scholarship and I didn’t need to be told that helping to win a Senior Cup was the purpose they had in mind for me. During one of my early matches the other school’s supporters started chanting, ‘What a waste of money!’ The