

## Chapter One

### A Suicide from the Black Bridge

“Uhu! Hay man! You just stepped in something nasty looking!”, Rory said, with just a touch of mischievous glee in his voice. John curled his lip in disgust. He had been carrying his heavy, over-packed kit-bag upfront of himself so as to balance the even heavier rucksack on his back, but it meant that he couldn’t see where he stepped. He now tried to hurl the kit-bag over his shoulder so he could examine the underneath of his shoe, but his desk lamp fell out onto the ground when he did so.

“Ah, Jeasus”, he said, drawing out the word of emphasis. “Its sick! Fecking students! We’re on a fecking bridge, f’fexake, couldn’t they do it over the side?”

“I’d say they didn’t want to pollute this wonderful river, it is Ireland’s premier watercourse, after all”, suggested Rory.

John did a kind of manic dance as he tried to scrape his shoe clean against the edge of the path, staggering frequently under the weight of his bags. His four friends, each loaded up with several rucksacks and bags stood by waiting impatiently.

“Aw, man, come-on will you!”, Rory cried out at last, “you’ll walk it off.”

“You know, “ said John quietly, “you’re a mangy Clare bastard, Rory. You’re the feckin’ reason we’re carrying all this feckin’ stuff feckin’ miles through campus. You should just have apologised to the poor woman!”

“Poor woman!, “ shouted Rory, waving a bag in the direction of John, “She is the landlord from hell. She’s been looking for a reason to chuck us out since we moved in. It

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was nothing to do with the fire or the window, it was...”

“Lads, Lads, Lads... shut up,” said David, “We can’t stay here all night. Its nearly ragweek, we’ll have to go to the pub eventually.” He was always the voice of reason.

John gave Rory a final angry, piercing look and then marched off quickly ahead, bags swinging wildly as he went.

Rory let him gain some distance before setting off after him. Mike, always the quiet one, had found a comfortable spot by leaning up against the wall at the edge of the bridge. Although it was only early in the evening, it was already quite dark due to a huge threatening cloud hanging overhead. Down river a beautiful sunset and shepherd red sky was visible through a gap along the horizon. The sun itself was low in the west, but was at that moment blocked by the narrow Black Bridge, the ancient walkway that used to be the only connection to County Clare before someone decided to build a University here. Mike was attentively watching the silhouette of two old men standing on the Black Bridge. They were arguing.

“Are you staying?” asked David.

“I know one of those guys,” replied Mike and he heaved his bags over his shoulder. “Its one of my Physics lecturers. I’d recognise the baldy headed gimp anywhere.”

By the time Rory caught up with John he was stopped at the corner of Berlin Avenue. He had thrown all his bags in a pile on the ground and was looking very cross.

“Relax, John, Its just down the end of this street.” Rory didn’t look at him, he just marched right around him and the pile of bags and down Berlin Avenue towards the little

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old bungalow at the end of the street. Mike and David came along shortly afterwards and followed down the road.

All the housing estates on the 'Clare Side', as it was known, were built only a few decades ago following the University's expansion north of the river. They were originally built for the young families of the Industrial Estate workers but quickly fell to an invasion of accommodation hungry students. The original owners packed up one by one and moved to new, bigger houses farther out the country, while maintaining a tidy income by renting their old house to students. One or two traditional country houses remained, like islands of the past, from the time that all the Clare Side of the Shannon river was farm land.

"Ah, thank Christ!", said John as he reached the door of the small cottage and threw down his bags with a crash. The three other lads were standing beside a wall to the right of the door.

"Shhhh... John. Jesus, get your stuff up away from the door.", Rory said in a low voice, "We've all piled our things around the side out of sight. You lot stand around behind there and I'll go first..."

"What? I thought you said your brother knew we're coming?", said John aghast.

"He knows I'm dropping in, you lot are an added bonus. Listen, he's a good lad, I'll just break it to him gently. If you don't like it you can go fuck off."

John retreated meekly around the side of the little cottage after the others. Rory went up to the door and, after a moments hesitation, knocked. Nothing happened. He could hear the TV on quietly in the sitting room but he knew that wouldn't be his brother Rob. Rob

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didn't watch TV anymore, he just studied these days. Rory routed into his pocket and pulled out his mobile. Rob answered immediately.

"Rory." answered Rob. "What's up? You in trouble or something?"

"Rob!" said Rory falsely cheerful. "How'r'ya?"

"I'm busy, Rory, and broke, so with that in mind, what do you want?"

"I just want in, you friendly bastard, I'm outside your front door. I told you only a while ago I was coming over" said Rory indignantly. There was a short pause at the other end.

"Ah, feck it. Sorry, man, I completely forgot. Be there in a tick." He hung up. Half a minute later the door opened. A dishevelled Rob slouched in the doorway. He wasn't so much dressed as simply enveloped by a pile of mismatching clothes. His eyes were red and bleary and his mouth hung slightly open with the sort of defeated expression of someone straight from the trenches. Rory was shocked.

"Fuck," he said with sympathy, "You look absolute shit."

"Huh?", Rob was taken aback, "Well, I've been busy. I've got my F.Y.P. presentation next Thursday, been working through my data from the Q.G.F. , need to fit it to theory, hard you know."

"What?", Rory was mystified. "What!? What's an FYP? What's QGF? Anyway, its Ragweek now, why are you still worried about that crap? Its Ragweek, man, Rag-week!" His message didn't seem to be getting through.

"Rory," Rob attempted an parental tone, "College is a bit different in fourth year, stuff gets serious." He looked at his watch. "Anyway, I have to go back to the lab, got a meeting with my supervisor, need to look at the Q.G.F again." He began pulling on his

coat over his other layers of jumpers.

“What? Its after eight. Its pub time! What’s wrong with you?”

“Listen, I’ll be back later. Hang out here if you like, Harry’s in with the T.V., just need to check the Q.G.F”

Rory stood by the doorway, slightly bewildered, watching Rob walk away back towards campus. When he was out of sight, he called to his friends and they all piled in the door of Rob’s bungalow.

The sun had set by the time Rob reached the road bridge. About half the street lamps had come on, the others were presumably broken, casting an eerie orange light on the hoards of drunken students flowing noisily towards the numerous campus pubs. The path, which had been clean when Rob had used it only an hour previously to walk home, was now an obstacle course of cans, beer-bottles and puddles of various human excretions. Rob was too distracted by worries about his project to notice any of it, not even the carelessly discarded desk-lamp that nearly tripped him. Rob had less than a week to prepare for his final year project presentation. This dreaded event would take to form of a trial by inquisition. In front of all the physics department staff and students, and under detailed cross examination by them, he must explain his work over the past six months, his experimental design and results and his understanding of them. His performance would be rated by the staff members and would form a sizable fraction of his degree results.

His worries only began with his lack of meaningful results. He knew that O’Dwyer, the extremely tall stout optics lecturer, would eat him alive. O’Dwyer wouldn’t interrupt his

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presentation, he would quietly listen, taking notes the whole time. Then at the end the questions would come. 'Why use a Q.G.F. in this project? Why not use a...?' 'Don't you think that calculation is a little sloppy?' Question after question would be hurled at him, tearing the project to shreds. Rob had watched O'Dwyer do this year after year to each new batch of 4<sup>th</sup> year students, but of course, it had seemed entertaining then as he hadn't been a 4<sup>th</sup> year himself.

It was generally thought to be the job of the project supervisor to protect his student from the worst of O'Dwyer's onslaught, but Rob's supervisor Santerre, a short bald Frenchman, never stood up for his students. Wan, Singh and the others were more protective, and much more helpful generally. Santerre was intimidated by O'Dwyer. Come to think of it, everyone was intimidated by O'Dwyer. The man was at least two meters tall and built like a bear. He careered around the college finding fault with everyone, lecturer and student alike. Rob thought he probably felt he owned the place, being the only Irish member of staff. It was easy to see why everyone, particularly the lecturers, hated him.

Rob found his way nearly blocked as he tried to pass by the Stables. This was the centre of ragweek on campus. Hundreds of eager drunken students thronged outside the old stone complex waiting to have their ticket checked and get their hand stamped with that ultraviolet ink they use in Disneyland. The air was reverberating with the cheers and screams of excitement from within and the repeating thud thud of the base music shook the ground. Rob had to push his way through to get past. The crowd smelled like Friday night - a mixture of cheap alcohol and vomit. Girls wearing little except a pair of

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zogabons danced and sang together to the distorted music emanating from the pub, oblivious to the cold. Fellas staggered around, staring at the ground with a bottles of cider in their hands, trying to accomplish the difficult task of simultaneously drinking and standing upright. Everyone was downing their drink before reaching the top of the queue. The Stables didn't allow outside drink in, and employed several stocky bouncers to maintain the rule.

Rob had nearly reached the end of the crowd when the huge projection TV screen that filled the back wall of the Stables was switched on. The beautiful face of UL TV news, Jen Keogh, appeared. Rob was shaken from his worries and stopped to watch. She was apparently inside the Stables, in front of a huge inflated bouncing castle trying to interview a boisterous gang of fellas, but with the deafening music still booming it was impossible for Rob to hear what this was about. Jen was a campus celebrity. All journalism students were well known as they were required to work for one of the college organs - paper, radio or TV, but Jen was famous. She did a nightly campus news program that was compulsive viewing - at least for the male student population. It was, Rob had heard, even rebroadcast sometimes in other European universities. It helped that she was extremely beautiful. It didn't help Robs studies that she lived across the road from him, on Berlin Avenue. Rob tore his eyes away and continued on towards the Physics building.

Rory and his former housemates stood in Rob's hallway surrounded by mounds of their bags for about ten minutes arguing in whispers about what to do. John was not at all

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happy with the situation.

“Why in the name of fuck didn’t you just stop him and ask for Christ’s sake?” John looked to be at boiling point.

“Calm yourself John,” said Rory, “We’ll just have to explain it to him when he gets back.”

“We?! Bollox to that. He’s your brother, you’ll be doing the explaining.”, Said John, a little too loudly.

A voice came from the sitting room. Everyone froze.

“Would ye lot of mangy first years ever stop the fuck arguing and come in here and show yerselves. Its not only Rob’s house, you know.”

Rory hesitated, glancing at David with a slightly scared expression. David shook his head in disgust and, after disentangling himself from the mess of bags and muttering ‘cowards’ under his breath, marched into the sitting room and introduced himself to the figure in the arm chair in front of the TV.

Harry shook David’s hand without standing, leaving down his vodka glass or taking the smouldering fag from the corner of his lip. “How’r’ya?”, he said simply.

“Er, and this is John, Mike and Rob’s brother Rory,” continued David.

“How’r’ya?”, said Harry again. “Ya, I’ve met you before once, haven’t I.” Harry pointed the neck of the vodka bottle in the direction of Rory before using it to top up his glass.

“Are ye all Fizzy-Cysts like Rob himself?”

“Gosh, Heaven Forbid!”, replied David, “Only Mike here has fallen into that trap. I’m doing second year European Studies and these dossers are in first year Business.”

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“Ah,” said Harry slowly, following it with a sip from his glass and a drag from his cigarette, “Good, solid wasters the lot of ye then. Welcome!”

“What do you do, then?” enquired Mike.

“Me?”, replied Harry, the question seemed foreign to him, “I watch TV. That tasty bimbo, Jen Keogh is on. Grab yourselves some glasses from the kitchen and join me.”

The group stood for a moment to admire the image on the screen. Jen was now talking to a barman in the Stables, who was pulling armfuls of pints at a time. John was heard to mutter ‘She’s some roide’.

“Er, we’re actually thinking of stepping out. Looks like a good night to me.” The camera had pulled back to show a crowd several thousand strong bouncing to the music under the ‘rag-top’, a specially erected tent covering the courtyard area of the Stables. The Limerick Knacker’s, a local band, were playing wildly on stage. In the corner of the screen an fight was being broken up by hefty bouncers.

“Suit yourselves.”, said Harry, a little disappointedly, “So, are ye lot moving in or what’s the story?”

“Er, we were hoping...”, piped up Rory.

“Ya, Rory got us chucked out of our house.”, added John.

“...There was an unfortunate incident with a box of matches and some spilled lighter fluid on the couch...” continued Rory.

“No bother.” interrupted Harry. “Some real students at last! Rob has been right boring the last few months. Feck yer stuff into the empty room after the kitchen and just leave the back door unlocked if you want to get in later. Rob won’t notice anything so long as there

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are some clean plates in the cupboard. He doesn't do anything anymore but study and complain about the dishes. Enjoy yourselves.”

Harry turned back to the TV. Jen Keogh was now talking to the female lead of the Knacker's. John looked pleased for the first time in hours.

Rob finally reached the entrance of an austere factory-like building that stood behind the library and swiped his student card to open the door. The narrow hallway was nearly pitch dark and completely silent. Rob suddenly had a great feeling of relief and calm. All the noise and chaos of the Stables would remain outside this corridor. Everything after this point was predictable and understood. This was the Physics Department. Rob happily closed the door behind himself. Half way down the corridor a flashing security light cast a faint red glow on an bronze bust of Sir Robert Boyle. Perhaps it was just the odd lighting, but Rob had always thought that the old man wore an expression of great displeasure. The reddened face seemed to stare angrily at the door opposite, from underneath which a thin slit of white light emanated. Rob walked up to the door and again used his card to gain access. The door swung open and dazzling white light burst out of the room, engulfing him. A silhouetted figure came forward and spoke.

“Aw, fuck it anyway. Jesus Rob, you could have knocked!”, Brian said crossly before flicking a switch and turning off the bright light. The glare was still in Rob's eyes, but he could now make out the huge bulb and sensor arrangement on the wooden worktop near the door. Brian had been calibrating his experiment on spectral scattering. Rob realised his sudden entrance had disturbed the sensitive equipment. He looked up at Brian, whose

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face was grey and sickly and whose eyes were horribly bloodshot from tiredness and overwork, and mumbled a meek apology.

The room was full of people, nearly everyone in his class. A few of his classmates mumbled a hello to him, some without even glancing away from their computer screen or circuit board. With the final presentations so close, everyone was trying to eek out the last sliver of useful data. Rob was worryingly far from that stage. He meandered his way down through the menagerie of bizarre experimental apparatus, carefully trying not to bump against or disturb anything, towards his own work area. An expectant mixture of hope and fatalistic dread welled up inside of him. It had taken him months longer than expected to construct his experiment, far longer than his classmates'. He had, in fact, only completed it to his satisfaction a few days previously and had taken the following time to carry out some final testing before switching it on. He had finally started it up that morning and had watched it run throughout the day, only leaving it, when it seemed absolutely safe, to dash home and eat. He was now returning, and if everything had continued to work, he should finally find some results waiting on the screen for him.

His heart sank when he caught sight of his apparatus. There were no flashing lights and he could hear no satisfying hum. The grey metal case filled with stacks of circuit boards seemed quiet and quite dead. Rob flopped down on the stool in despair, threw his hands in the air and swore loudly.

“Er, Don’t get cross now Rob, ‘ol buddy, ‘ol pal,” began Gabriel, who was slouched in a chair nearby wearing a guilty grin, “But it didn’t look good so we pulled the plug about half an hour ago.”. His explanations, Rob knew, were never very informative.

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“Didn’t look fecking good?!”, cried Rob in disbelief. “What the fuck do you mean, didn’t look fecking good? How do you know what its supposed to look like?”

“Hay, calm down old man. I was the one who unplugged it.” confessed Allan, who was sitting in front of a computer, proof-reading Gabriel’s presentation. “It was making some weird crunching noises, and there was a bit of a burning smell, so I, ahm, thought it safest to...”

Allan stopped when he saw the expression of utter defeat on Rob’s face.

Rob knew immediately what this meant. With a heavy heart, he slowly removed the topmost circuit board from his experiment. Three vital components were black as soot, scortched and cracked, with a faint whiff of smoke drifting up from them. These three parts had taken weeks to order and could not be replaced before the presentation.

Rob sat on his stool for ten minutes thinking. He wondered whether he had been right to come back to college after all. He had failed before, in second year and third year and had had to leave to find work and earn enough money to repeat. Maybe he was too old now. He was years older than the others in his class. Or, maybe physics was just too hard for him, maybe he should just pack up and go home again. Not everyone was cut out for university, he thought. His housemate, Harry had once been a student, but had one day decided against it. Maybe this was his day.

“Hay, Rob, Gabriel just heard your supervisor Santerre go into his office, you said you were looking for him earlier...” Allan said gently, bringing Rob back to reality.

Ok, thought Rob. Ok, now was a good time, he could go and tell Santerre his decision. He would free himself of all this nonsense of presentations and worthless projects.

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He stood up, still clutching his burned out circuit, and strode from the lab back to the dark corridor without another word to anyone. Santerre's door was open and light steamed out into the corridor. Santerre was not an easy man to deal with. He never seemed to properly understand Rob's questions and Rob could rarely make sense of his answers. Rob had often blamed this on the language barrier until once, in one of Santerre's more lucid moments, he explained his behaviour. He told Rob, in all seriousness and in the tone of imparting a great kernel of wisdom, that "a teacher should be at all times unclear and confusing, as this serves to open the student's mind to the need for understanding." Rob paused near the office door to assemble his thoughts but he was quickly distracted by the loud rustling and stamping noises emanating from inside. Santerre was an extremely quiet person. He was compulsively organised, keeping every scrap of paper neatly filed, and never seemed to lose anything. The noises in his office sounded very like a large bear searching for honey. Rob peaked around the door.

Inside stood something not unlike a large angry bear. Piles of files and boxes of papers were strewn about on the desk and the floor. Every drawer was thrown open. The enormous figure of Professor O'Dwyer stood bent over an open filing cabinet, leafing quickly through papers. Rob let out an involuntary gasp of surprise and O'Dwyer looked up. The two men stood staring silently at each other for several seconds, each feeling that they had been caught. O'Dwyer spoke first, attempting to disguise his guilt with anger.

"What do you want this late?" he said crossly.

"I, am, looking for Santerre...", Rob felt like adding, 'It is his fucking office!' but knew better. Again there was a tense silence, as each sized up the other.

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“*Doctor* Santerre has gone home,” replied O’Dwyer, the emphasis on doctor was not to give respect to Santerre but to put Rob in his place. “He has asked me to bring him some important documents.”, continued O’Dwyer. He now stepped out from the piles of papers that surrounded him and walked swiftly toward the door. Rob backed up a few steps, unsure of his intentions. O’Dwyer grabbed Santerre’s keys from the outside of the door and snapped “I’ll inform him that you want to meet him” before locking himself into the office. Rob was flabbergasted, and stood in the dark corridor for some minutes wondering what to do. Eventually he decided to go home, dropped the useless circuit board back onto his work table, said a general goodnight to his classmates but told nobody what had happened, and set off for home. His worries about the presentation were gone, and he spent the journey home replaying his bizarre encounter with O’Dwyer. When he was rounding the corner of Berlin Avenue he saw a Garda Car parked outside his bungalow. His brother, Rory, must be being taken away, he thought hopefully. As he got closer he saw a Guard sitting up against the bonnet, his arms folded in that uniquely impatient stance that only Irish Guards seem to manage. He stood up as Rob approached. “Good evening, Lad, would you happen to be Rob Hussey by any chance?” Said the Guard in a serious tone.

“I am.” said Rob, shocked for the second time in an hour.

“Rob, Lad,” said the Guard, “I’m afraid I have to inform you that a Dr. Andre Santerre, who I believe you know, has been found dead not two miles from here.”

Rob’s jaw dropped. He didn’t respond, he didn’t know how.

“We have reason to believe that you may have been the last person to speak with the

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deceased, and I would like to ask you a few questions. Perhaps you would like to sit down...”