

THE REGISTERED LUNATIC

Dermot Healy

THE FIRST BOOK I wrote was called *Banished Misfortune* after an Irish reel.

When the book was published I was away in London England, a proper global, living in a squat and working as a laborer. Prior to the books appearance I had painted my English publishers office. Publication was probably my payment.

I was flown back to Dublin in first class to find myself supping coffee in The Shelbourne Hotel where it all happens. The book was to be launched on the morrow in Listowel in the County Kerry and I arranged to meet my publisher at the Railway station next morning at nine. I arrived shamefaced at 9.20 to find the train was gone and the next one was not due out till ten. Well I went to get a ticket, and found the cost, even back then, was around £1.4 shillings. I had £1.6 shillings and I stood back to take stock. I would have only two shilling to spend on the journey. That was tight. I was thirsty. I was now approached by a young man I'd known in another life, before I had gone abroad. He was togged out for the West.

How's things?

Not so good.

What's wrong, he asked.

I explained about the cost of the journey.

Never mind, he said, I'm a registered lunatic and can travel for free.

Is that so.

It is, he said, take my pass, go up the ticket seller and you're away for free. But you'll have to give the pass back to me.

Well I did what I was told, got my ticket, and came and gave me man his pass back.

Now, he said, when you are asked for your ticket on the train, they'll look at it and ask for your pass, says you I don't have it, my mother won't let me travel with it, in case I lose it. Have you got that?

I have. In case I lose it, right. Good luck, I said.

Good luck with the launch.

I got on the ten o'clock train, humming happily, met a conductor and asked was the bar open, no problem, I got a bottle of stout, settled down in a seat opposite a young business man reading the Irish Times, bade him good morning, spoke to two women and a man on my left, we all broke into conversation, and as we talked of what we did in the real life and I was about to pop me new book out of its bag I heard in the distance, 'Ticket's Please'!

I got my ticket ready, cowered, the conductor the man I had met earlier appeared, snapped the tickets off the people next to us, then clipped the business man's ticket, turned smiling to me, took mine, studied it at length, looked at me, looked at the ticket, looked at the bottle of stout, and said sharply

Pass please.

I don't have it.

No?

I'm sorry, I said, the mammy would not let me bring it.

You what.

The Irish times opposite shot up in the air and the ladies turning away in disbelief.

I'm always losing it you see.

Have you any identity with you.

I'm sorry — oh yeh — let me look, let me see now.

I looked into my bag and there was a shirt, underpants, pair of socks, and twelve copies of *Banished Misfortune* with not only my name on them, but a big photo too.

No, I said, I've nothing

Whose meeting you?

Me aunt Mary in Listowel.

Your aunt Mary.

Yes.

Well you know what you'll do.

What's that?

Ring your Aunt Mary at the next stop and tell her to meet you there because that's where you'll be getting off, and he went on.

The air stiffened about me. We were hardly out of Dublin. I put my hand over my face, and through my fingers took stock of my neighbours, then watched the conductor till he made it into the next carriage. I got up and followed him in, tapped him on the shoulder.

Yes.

All the people in the other carriage took pity on me and offered me the money for the ticket, and I left down the 24 shillings.

Aren't they very good, he said, and he gave me a ticket.

I returned and sat back down.

I had sixpence in my pocket. Silence. There was not another word spoken between there and Listowel which was a more than a couple of hours away. It was the most embarrassing journey I was ever on, and it was my first book launch.