

Chapter 2

Welcome to Ireland

DEPARTMENT OF ENTERPRISE, TRADE AND EMPLOYMENT
IRELAND

Application for Working Holiday Authorization

Personal Details

Surname: DEVEREAUX

Other names (add any previous): CHRISTOPHER DEVEREAUX

Male: Female: Date of Birth: 01/01/1981 Birthplace: _____

Telephone No. _____ E-mail: _____

Present address: _____

Passport No. _____ Valid until: 01/01/2002

Marital status: M Spouse Name: KERRYN Nationality: AUSTRALIA

Educational Record

School/other education: _____

*Two roads diverged in a wood and
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

– Robert Frost

Brisbane Airport, Australia, Tuesday afternoon, August 21, 2001

Kerryn and I exchanged hugs and kisses with our family and friends.
‘See you. Bye. Enjoy yourselves. We’ll miss you!’

Kerryn’s Mum and Dad hugged us. ‘Take care. Send us a postcard.’

My Grandma waved as we stepped onto the escalator and descended to the Customs level. I was very excited. We each had a Working Holiday Visa, which permitted us to work for up to two years in the Emerald Isle, although we only planned to stay until early to mid 2002. I felt a previously unknown sense of freedom.

The fine print on our visas advised that any work we accepted could not be a continuation of our careers. The fine print didn’t worry me much; I interpreted the words literally. I fully intended to work in my trained profession as an engineer, which I saw as a *job*, not a career. I’ll explain why: in the 1990s, after I graduated

from university with my hard-won degree, the construction industry slumped. Employers had plenty of eager graduates to choose from, and negotiated tough conditions with low pay. I spent my early working years wrestling with uninspiring numbers, formulas and diagrams. I took phone calls from irate builders and received lectures from unsympathetic bosses. I drove home at the end of each day, cooked dinner, ironed my clothes and slumped into bed.

I'd become disgruntled and depressed before Kerry'n came along to change my life. I met her one night at Doohley's Irish pub. (In a way, Ireland brought us together before we'd even been there). Kerry'n quietly told me about her fund-raising work with Red Cross and her university studies in business. Her politeness and self-possessed manner impressed me.

Kerry'n's reserved exterior gave way after we started dating. Once, I went on a skiing holiday to the Snowy Mountains and returned to see her two weeks later.

'You know, if you hadn't sent me a postcard, I would have broken up with you,' she said, looking at me steadily with her brown eyes.

She had a big thing about postcards. There was a bizarre one of Rowan Atkinson as Mr. Bean in his underpants in her photo album. I felt reassured, because she obviously went for skinny men with big noses.

Anyway, back to our departure for Ireland. I had struggled a fair bit with the idea of moving to the other side of the world. Europe wasn't a real place to me; it seemed like a fairytale land that I watched on TV. Things happened that I didn't understand. Europeans came up with bizarre ideas like the SMART car—I mean, why would anyone have wanted a tiny little car like that? (In 2001, large V8 powered cars still roared around the streets with glee in Australia.) Most unbelievable of all was the choice of music available in Europe. I was upset to discover that some Europeans actually liked boy bands. (I would have been horrified if I'd known that I would learn to like [one or two] boy bands later.)

The plane flight was difficult for me. As is the case with most long-haul international flights, we were offered food at times when we weren't hungry, the internal cabin lights were turned off to aid sleeping when my body wanted to be awake, and the video player for in-flight movies must have been somehow coupled to

the engines; as I tried to increase the headphone volume, the noise of the jets seemed to increase as well. By the time we landed in Heathrow, we'd been locked in for 22 hours.

'I just want to be able to move my shoulders and legs,' I groaned, willing to accept the sounds and sights of almost any type of music or tiny car, as long as I could get off the plane.

We had to change airlines at Heathrow, which involved a commute from Terminal Three to Terminal One.

'I think we have to catch a bus from *here*,' said Kerry.

A locked bus waited outside the glass door, but we couldn't see any sign of the driver. I walked up to an attendant sitting at a small window, in a colourless uniform.

'Is this the right place to catch the bus to Terminal One?'

'The bus is straight outside them doors, love,' replied the attendant.

'It's locked. I couldn't see the driver anywhere.'

'Oh, 'im. 'Ee'll be along shortly.'

We waited for half an hour, until 8:00 p.m.. Kerry approached the attendant again. 'Um, excuse me. Do you know when the driver is going to arrive? We've got to catch a plane to Dublin at 9:15 from Terminal One.'

'I'll put out a call for 'im then, love,' she smiled apologetically.

'Thanks.'

A few minutes later the bus driver arrived. He produced a key from his uniform jacket with a flourish and smiled at us. His teeth shone whitely. 'Hello. Which terminal are you going to?'

'Terminal One, please,' we replied.

'Okay,' he said. 'We'll just wait for a bit and see if anyone else comes along. Are you from Australia?'

'Yeah, from Brisbane. We're going to live in Ireland for a while. Where are you from?'

'I'm from Trinidad. My family is still there. I came here for work, you know?' He gestured at the grubby terminal. 'Ah, the weather here, it never stops raining! I miss home, but there's no work there.'

The bus driver kept talking while Kerry and I looked at our watches nervously. Although it was normal for me to worry about schedules, there *really* was a problem if Kerry was worried. She had always been a whirlwind of activity, with her leisure activities

squeezed for every last second of available time. Before we got married, she would arrive home at her parents' house, put her car keys down in any convenient location and talk non-stop to whoever was around to listen. After a while, she would realise she had to be at a friend's place on the other side of the city in 15 minutes. She would scurry off to the bathroom to shower, get changed and brush her wavy blonde hair. 'Dad, Mum, can you please help me find my keys?'

Sometimes, the keys and purse turned up underneath a kitchen utensil or behind the sofa. (On other occasions, she would give up and retrieve a spare key from the back of her desk). She'd race off in her red two-door Daihatsu Charade without her purse. The level of chaos generally increased, as she stomped on the accelerator, veered wildly around corners and turned up the volume on the radio. This drowned out the noise caused by one corner of her skirt flapping outside, under the door. All of this drove me nuts, of course; but Kerryn added a creative randomness that had been missing from my life.

'Thank you for helping me find my keys,' she would often say, in gratitude for the *order* I'd brought to *her* life.

Back at Heathrow, the minute hand on my watch flicked to 8:20 p.m. We had booked a hostel room in Dublin, and we didn't really have spare money to pay for accommodation if we missed our 9:15 plane.

'Sorry, do you think we could get going now?' I said. 'There's no-one else here and our plane leaves soon.'

'Well, we'll wait two more minutes and then we'll go.'

We finally managed to get there. We negotiated Customs and checked in with just enough time to visit the bathroom and refresh ourselves.

Ireland's national airline is called Aer Lingus and their two-toned green planes have a clover emblem on their tail. The seats inside the cabin were also vibrantly green. I listened happily to pleasant conversations around us, in Irish accents. Many of the passengers carried expensive looking bags from clothes stores and bottle shops. Ireland seemed more real and exciting to me with every moment.

Our plane followed another jet out onto the runway and took off smoothly.

'Hello, ladies and gentlemen,' a voice said over the speaker system. 'This is Sean Murphy speaking. I'm your co-pilot on this

flight. We left the ground at 9:15 p.m. and we have a slight tail wind, so we should be able to reach Dublin a few minutes ahead of schedule. The weather there is cloudy, but dry, with a temperature of around 10 degrees.'

Kerryn peered out the window at the lights of London. 'Oh wow. It's such a big city. Look how far the lights go! I wonder how large Dublin will be, compared to this?'

'12 million people or so live in London,' I replied. 'There are about one and a half million people in Dublin.'

Clouds blocked our view of the Irish capital at night, as we got closer. Just before we prepared to land, I saw a huge flash of light from the corner of my eye, like someone had taken a photo, from the *outside* of the jet.

'What the hell was that?' I asked.

'I'm not sure,' Kerryn replied.

'Good evening ladies and gentlemen,' said our co-pilot. 'We are now approaching Dublin airport. We're just waiting for clearance from the control tower before we make our descent. Some of you may have noticed a flash of light outside a few minutes ago. Our plane was struck by a bolt of lightning...'

Was that an omen?



No one was at the Immigration desk at the airport when we arrived. Kerryn was concerned we'd be thrown out of the country if our passports were left unstamped. So we hunted around and finally found an airport official. He didn't seem too worried about illegal immigrants. He didn't even want to *see* our passports until Kerryn demanded he put arrival stamps in our documents.

She was still frowning as we walked out.

I grinned at her. 'Told you, Kez.'

This is Ireland, not Australia. I knew they wouldn't be worried.'

We walked under a huge advertisement for an Irish boy band: "Westlife—a world of our [their] own". Clearly we had arrived in Europe.

The double-decker bus lurched around a corner. The driver tramped briefly on the brakes and we were thrown headfirst towards the seat in front of us. The driver pressed on the accelerator just in time and our heads rolled backwards, just before our teeth collided with the seat.

I clutched Kerry'n's hand and jammed my feet tightly against the floor. Was the driver training for some kind of Bus Grand Prix event? He tested the entire power range of the engine as he raced towards the city. He also changed gears and floored the engine every time he hit a bump in the road, which made the bus leap spectacularly into the air.

I looked out the window through the softly falling rain with interest. There were a lot of grey coloured buildings. There were also a surprising number of people walking around, considering it was midnight. Masses of small cars and scooters jockeyed with the bus for position on the busy road. I'd finally made it to Ireland for real!

I'd wanted to come here since one of my primary school teachers had told my class about it: Ireland is split into two separate countries. Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom and is home to around two million people. The Republic of Ireland [or "The South" as it is known] is an independent country with no ties to Britain. It has a population of about four million people. The physical partitioning of the land is a symptom of the religious and political divisions of its population. I hadn't really understood, at seven years old. Ireland sounded like an odd place, a place where the people were all Christians, but fought about which name the church should hang over the door. I'd wanted to know more.

After an hour of jolts and bumps, our bus screeched to a halt.

'Lower Gardiner Street!' shouted the driver.

This was the stop for our hostel. Kerry'n and I swung on our packs, grabbed our suitcases and stepped down into the rain. After two days of travelling, I felt exhausted. I rubbed the dark circles under my eyes and stumbled up to the hostel door. It seemed to be locked. I pushed again.

I groaned.

'I'm sure we'll be able to get in,' said Kerry'n. 'Look, there's a light on.'

(I guess I should mention that I was a bit neurotic back then. I'd grown to expect the worst in life. If things went right, I'd be

pleasantly surprised. This attitude came in handy as an engineer, as my job was to think of all the things that could go wrong and find ways to prevent most of them from happening.)

Suddenly I heard a buzzing noise and a man gestured behind through the hostel window next to me. I pushed at the door and fell into the hallway on top of my suitcase.

‘We’d like to check in please,’ I said, from the floor.

The desk attendant had untidy clothes, messy hair and unshaved stubble. He consulted a list and did not meet my eyes. He seemed a bit shifty to me. A doorbell rang; two girls in skimpy tops waved at him through the window. He pressed a button to unlock the door for them.

‘Hi girls how are you?’ asked the desk attendant. ‘Where have you been? Did you have a good time? Got any plans for tomorrow? Did you see the football? Did you go shopping?’

He continued on for some time. I sighed loudly. The attendant waved to the girls and turned to face us.

‘Can I have your credit card, please?’ he asked.

I passed over my card and he swiped it through the scanner. It made a sad beep and spat out some paper.

‘I’m sorry, it’s not working,’ informed the desk attendant.

‘Could you try it again?’ I asked.

The phone rang. The desk attendant picked it up and talked for about five minutes. He swiped my card again and looked up. ‘This card is not working.’

‘Try typing in the number manually,’ I said, grinding my teeth.

The phone rang again. With phone cradled between shoulder and ear, the desk attendant typed in my credit card number. The scanner gave another sad beep and spat out a little roll of paper.

I had flown on three aeroplanes, waited around in four airports and been on one hell of a scary bus ride during the last two days. I’d barely had a wink of sleep and I was feeling seriously cranky. To top it all off, I had used this card yesterday in Singapore and it had worked fine. I clenched my fists and moved towards the desk attendant, but Kerryn grabbed my arm and passed over her own credit card, smiling sweetly.

‘He’s just doing his job,’ whispered Kerryn, as we walked away with the room key. I grimaced.

This was only the second time I had stayed in a hostel. My first stay had been in a little YHA hostel in Canterbury, England,

one year earlier. Friends of mine had taken me on a weekend trip to Kent and Sussex. I'd had visions of a run down building with carpet reeking of cigarette smoke and windowpanes replaced with plywood. I'd fully expected the other guests to be thieves and drug addicts (Neurotic nature combined with overly active imagination). I'd been happy when we'd parked in a white gravelled car park next to a lovely well-kept English garden. The beautiful little three-storey brick building would have been world heritage listed if it had been in Australia.

Unfortunately, my approach of expecting the worst but hoping for better didn't work for our *Dublin* hostel. Kerryn and I entered the hallway across carpet that smelled of alcohol and cigarette smoke. The walls were painted in a sort of grime-yellow colour, with stains everywhere. The stairs creaked alarmingly.

On the positive side, it was warm, all the windowpanes still had glass in them, and any place to sleep was welcome at this stage.

I put the key into the door of our room and tried to turn the handle. It didn't move. I turned the key back to its original position. The handle still didn't move. I turned the lock back and forth – 10 degrees left, 5 degrees right, 30 degrees left and about 10 or 20 other positions. The lock emitted an annoying shriek with every movement.

'OK. That's *it!*' I shouted.

I shook the door, kicked it and twisted the key simultaneously. At least if I didn't beat the door into submission, I'd scare the heck out of that attendant out on the front desk! Finally the door opened, content with its victory.

'Thank goodness,' we said in unison and walked in. A tousle haired figure dragged himself sleepily back towards bed.

'Oh shit, there's someone in here,' I whispered.

'You can turn on the light if you want,' said our roommate. 'I'm already *awake!*'

Rather than embarrass ourselves further by floodlighting the room on the poor guy, we unpacked, made our beds and chain-locked our suitcases to a bed in near total darkness. I wasn't sure if our unfortunate roommate got back to sleep because I couldn't see and I couldn't hear for the noise of Kerryn or myself falling over the suitcases. Eventually we got to bed, Kerryn on the top level of one bunk and myself on the other. I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

Thirty minutes later I was awake again. I had been dreaming of a jet engine roaring beside my right ear.

Our tousle haired roommate snored on the bunk below me. I found it hard to believe a sleeping human could make such a racket. The saying “a sound that could awaken the dead” seemed pretty accurate. He could have been used as a “control” for the upper limit of human noise tolerance experiments. I waited for about half an hour, hoping the noise would die down.

The snoring continued: ‘Hrrrrghh... Hrrrrghhh... HRRRRRGGGHHH!’

I squeezed my eyes shut and groaned. Either I could be nice about this, or I could be sneaky.

Being sneaky and crafty had been my usual approach when I was younger, along with my brothers, Lachlan and Andrew. We’d grown up on a farm on the east coast of Australia and the nearest town of any significance was ten kilometres away.

Our neighbours were a family of farmers who grew citrus fruit. Unfortunately, they also liked to race around on motorbikes and shoot at the migratory magpie geese that nested every year in the wetlands at the bottom of our farms; magpie geese eat wetlands grasses and sedges, they do not eat fruit. We discouraged them from shooting at the birds by throwing rocks at them as they were aiming their rifles. I remember one occasion vividly, when we hassled the fruit [cake] growers with stones from the safety of a corrugated iron shed.

‘Where are those f***ing rocks coming from?’ one of them yelled. ‘Some kids must be throwing them!’

‘Let’s get ‘em!’ yelled the rest of them.

They fanned out and moved towards the shed. We made a run for it and disappeared like shadows, shit-scared, into our uncle’s banana plantation. At least we temporarily stopped them shooting at the birds.

Back in the Dublin hostel, it was time to be sneaky again: I shook the bunk back and forth violently. The frame squeaked and groaned. After about five minutes of rocking, our roommate leapt off his shaking mattress; I stopped moving and closed my eyes. He groaned and lay down again, unaware of my efforts as snore saboteur. I don’t know if he got back to sleep or not, but I slept beautifully.