

To Calais and back

EOIN BUTLER

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All day long, they speak of Junction 6. I can't locate it on any of the maps in Paddy's glove compartment, but Paddy and Ger talk about it like it's Las Vegas. Junction 6, somewhere in northern France, is where we'll park up for the night. It's where we'll find food, rest, diesel and good company. 'There's even a nightclub,' Paddy promises. 'If you fancy an auld boogie.'

Paddy and Ger* are long-distance truck drivers, hauling loads of frozen Irish meat. This morning, by arrangement, I climbed into Paddy's cab in Dublin, and we took the ferry to Holyhead. Now, on this sultry afternoon in mid-August, Paddy and Ger chat constantly on speakerphone, narrating the progress of their respective vehicles through Wales and the English midlands, bound for Folkestone and the Channel Tunnel. They never mention the names of towns or cities, only road numbers, exits and service stations. Eventually I gather that Junction 6 is about an hour's drive south of Calais. Paddy and Ger are to swap trailers there with two other drivers, currently en route north from Italy. Tomorrow morning, all four lorries will turn around and head for home with their new cargo.

Ninety per cent of Ireland's imports and exports are transported via road haulage. Half the food we eat, and virtually all the electronics and pharmaceuticals we use, arrive into the country each week on the backs of articulated trucks. Without people like Paddy and Ger, Ireland's economy would grind to a halt in days. Yet most of us never give the work they do a second thought.

This summer, the refugee crisis in Calais has unexpectedly thrust their

**All drivers' names have been changed.*

industry into the public spotlight. In extreme cases, drivers have been threatened with iron bars, knives and broken bottles by refugees desperate to cross the English Channel. Drivers also face stiff fines if stowaways are found in their trailers. But, as I am discovering, the situation in Calais is far from the only source of stress in these men's professional lives.

Paddy is a wiry middle-aged man. 'Talibans love the UK,' he tells me, using the truckers' catch-all term for refugees of any origin. 'But I hate it with a passion. It's full of road works, congestion and ...' – here he raises his voice and honks the horn – 'STUPID FUCKIN' DRIVERS!'

Paddy's anger is most often directed at people and things he feels are impeding our progress: cops, traffic lights, other vehicles. 'You should be done for fuckin' loitering!' he yells out the window at one elderly driver.

His frustration begins to make a little more sense once you understand the constraints under which Paddy and his fellow hauliers operate. Onboard computers track each driver's location, speed and even how hard he hits the brake pads. This data is monitored by his employers back home. ('If I took a teaspoon of diesel out of the tank,' he tells me, 'they'd know about it.') A record of the lorry's movements is also available in printout form, should the local police wish to inspect it. Under EU law, a truck driver may never exceed 90km/h, or drive for more than nine hours a day, so time lost in traffic can't be made up later on. Missed rail or boat connections mean missed deadlines and, in the case of perishable cargo, spoiled loads.

In the other truck, Ger, who's in his early thirties, is a more even-tempered character. But he shares Paddy's concerns about our progress today. If 'Talibans' breach the Channel Tunnel tonight, or if there's congestion on the M20, we may not make it to Junction 6. We might have to settle for some lesser junction or even park up on a lay-by.

This is not an inconsequential consideration. HGVs parked in ill-lit or isolated lay-bys in rural France are vulnerable, not just to infiltration by refugees – who can slip inside the trailer, contaminate the load and land the

haulier hefty fines if detected by customs – but also from thieves looking for money, phones and food. Ger tells me he will sleep in his bunk tonight, with a seatbelt rigged to keep the driver's door from opening out. Other drivers use ratchet straps. 'I can't stop someone getting into the cab,' he explains. 'But this at least gives me time to defend myself.'

How do their spouses feel about them being away from home for prolonged periods, facing the dangers they do? Paddy has a story. To soothe his wife's anxieties, Ger recently had the bright idea of installing an app on his phone that would allow her to confirm his exact location at any moment in time. Unfortunately, it turned out the app was a little too accurate. One night, while parked up at Junction 6, Ger received an angry phone call. His wife wanted to know what the hell he was doing 'dans la fucking discotheque'.

I laugh. Paddy doesn't. 'Fucking eejit,' he says.

What about stowaways, I ask. Paddy harrumphs. 'It's a fridge unit back there,' he says. 'If there's any Talibans in it, they'll be dead by now. And good riddance to the cunts.'

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At the Eurotunnel terminus in Folkestone, Kent, Paddy hands our passports and some paperwork out the driver's-side window. (I'm listed on the manifest as his co-driver.) His truck is directed down a ramp onto the second of twelve parallel train platforms. Paddy guides this 30-tonne behemoth off the platform onto the back of a narrow flatbed railway carriage. The margin for error here is tiny, but he executes the manoeuvre effortlessly.

While we wait for the shuttle bus to bring us to the truck drivers' train carriage, he gives me a little nudge. 'Wait till you see,' he says. 'Me and you'll be the only Irish boys on here.'

Since the EU expanded eastward in 2004, and again in 2007, cross-channel

haulage routes into the UK have come to be dominated by companies from Poland, the Czech Republic, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania and the Baltic states. In advance of this trip, I spoke separately to half a dozen Irish truck drivers. Each of them recited a near-identical litany of grievances about East European drivers: that they don't wash, that they urinate and defecate in lay-bys, that they have horrendous body odour, that they refuse to spend money in truck stops and, generally, that they give truck drivers a bad name. One of the drivers I spoke to was a guy I went to school with. 'If there was a bathroom ten feet away,' he told me, 'they'd still piss and shit on the tarmac.'

On the shuttle bus, Paddy and Ger bump into another Irish driver they know, named Tom. The four of us are standing up in the middle of the moving bus, hanging on to straps for balance, when a group of East European drivers shuffle in our direction. Without provocation, Tom lunges at them aggressively, warning them of the consequences if they reach for the straps next to ours.

'Don't put your arms up or I'll puke right in your fucking faces,' he snarls. 'A bar of soap costs 40c in Lidl, you fucking animals.' The East European drivers turn away, avoiding confrontation. Tom turns back to us, triumphant. 'Fucking animals,' he repeats, appearing quite pleased with himself. Paddy alerts Tom to my presence. 'He's a writer,' he warns. 'My fucking biographer, like.' Tom notices the notebook and is unperturbed. 'You're not a racist then?' he says, shaking my hand warmly. 'Well, we'll fix that by the time we're done with you.'

It is not clear to what extent the racism and aggression of the Irish drivers is a proxy for economic anxiety. East European haulage companies pay their drivers a fraction of what Irish drivers are paid, and are thus in a position to work them in shifts of two. This means one driver can keep the truck moving while the other is taking his statutory breaks, and the vehicle can cover twice the distance in a day that an Irish truck can. It is hard for Irish firms to compete, and as a consequence the sector is under pressure.

In order to subsist on wages of roughly €40 a day, the East European drivers pack food and cook it in their cabs as they go. Since the major European routes are now dominated by drivers who don't spend money on food and who even bring their own cigarettes from home, some truck stops on the continent have gone out of business. Others have started to charge trucks for parking overnight, a cost the Irish hauliers never had to bear in the past.

The average Irish driver these days is a man in his mid to late fifties. New Irish recruits are few and far between. Most Irish companies employ East European drivers. Some have set up subsidiaries in places like Bulgaria, where local drivers, earning local wages, can drive Irish-owned trucks into Ireland, without having to pay the €4,000 annual Irish haulier's road tax. In this new economic landscape, the Irish drivers have begun to look like dinosaurs.

There is, thus, an irony in the scene I witnessed on the shuttle bus. The East Europeans are younger, leaner and more numerous than the Irish drivers. If Tom had actually succeeded in provoking a physical confrontation, there would only ever have been one outcome. Yet the East European drivers didn't take the bait. Why? Most likely because they grasp what I grasp, and what even the other Irish drivers will privately concede: that a guy like Tom is a relic of a bygone era.

In the drivers' train carriage, Ger and I take seats together. Paddy and Tom sit in the seats behind. A Eurotunnel staff member acts out some rough equivalent of the airplane safety routine, with a level of enthusiasm that makes your average Ryanair flight attendant appear highly motivated and professionally fulfilled. 'Do not be alarmed if the train comes to a halt at any time,' a soothing voice on the P.A. instructs. 'There are many reasons for the train to stop in the tunnel.'

Tom taps me on the shoulder to offer his own running commentary. 'If your feet begin to feel wet, Eoin... start running.'

As the train descends into the tunnel, Paddy mentions to Tom that a mutual friend of theirs, Alan, was caught last week with refugees in his

trailer, unbeknownst to him. Paddy seems genuinely upset for Alan. But Tom interrupts him. He thinks he can top Paddy's story. The week before that, he tells me, he was caught in a major tailback in northern France. A refugee had escaped into the Channel Tunnel at Calais and the whole complex was shut down for seventeen hours while the authorities went in to look for him. 'Can you imagine, Eoin?' he marvels. 'Gendarmes chasing some madman down the tunnel, while traffic is backed up to fucking Paris behind them?'

There are some types of people who give a writer a pretty wide berth when he's on assignment. There are others who are drawn toward the notebook. Tom belongs in the latter category. He desperately wants to be a part of my story. He sees his name in lights. He wants all of my attention and, after a while in his company, that becomes rather grating.

When Ger offers me a coffee from the machine at the back of the carriage, I tell him I'll go with him to get it. The sight of the two of us rising from our seats simultaneously is enough to tickle Tom's funny bone. 'Going to join the Mile High Club are we, lads?' he quips, to uproarious laughter in the carriage – his own, mostly.

When I return, with a frothy Americano, it seems he isn't quite satisfied with that final bon mot. In fact, he'd like to have another crack at it. 'On second thoughts,' he says, tapping my notebook, 'don't put in Mile High Club. Put Mile *Under* Club.' We are, after all, hurtling through darkness 75 metres below the sea bed.

'There'll be action tonight, boy,' says Paddy warily, as he scans the skyline at Gare de Calais-Fréthun. The headlights of his Scania Streamline R560 seem bright enough to illuminate a football stadium. Smoke is rising from the makeshift refugee camps and sirens are flashing in the distance. As he steers

the vehicle up a winding slip road, the headlights pick out a group of young African males, in their late teens or early twenties, wading through the grass on the motorway margin. ‘Whaddid I tell ya?’ he exclaims. ‘Taliban bastards.’

The current refugee crisis is arguably the largest global displacement of men, women and children since the Second World War. Across Europe, barbed wire and riot squads have been deployed to insulate the privileged from the grim realities of conflict and global inequality. In the midst of this unfolding calamity, Calais is little more than a local flashpoint. The right-wing press in London may enjoy depicting Britain as a country under siege by mooching migrants, hell-bent upon exploiting its soft asylum laws and generous social welfare provisions. But that thesis does not hold up to any objective scrutiny. Turkey is currently housing 1.8 million Syrian refugees. Lebanon, a country of 4.5 million people, is hosting 1.2 million. The 3,000 or so refugees living in the ‘Jungle’, a makeshift settlement on the outskirts of Calais, represent a tiny fraction of those who have arrived in Europe this year. A report by the French charity Secours Catholique found that less than a fifth of ‘Jungle’ residents set out for Calais with the specific intention of travelling to Britain. Most ended up here having failed to find housing or employment elsewhere in France.

That is not to deny that what’s happening in Calais is a crisis. While Britain may not be under siege, the Channel Tunnel at Calais most assuredly is. Each night hundreds attempt to enter tunnel, either on foot or hidden in the backs of lorries.

Tomorrow, on our return leg, we’ll run the gauntlet at Calais. For now, we press on for Junction 6. Paddy has repeatedly expressed doubts about the professional competence of the driver scheduled to meet us there tonight and swap trailers. The other driver works for the same company Paddy does. Paddy claims not to know his nationality (‘Polish or Czechoslovakian or some fucking thing’) and refers to him, in fact, as ‘that Taliban guy’.

Soon, word comes from the logistics people in Ireland that the other dri-

ver has made better time than us, and the trailer-swap is relocated to a different junction, north of Junction 6, somewhere in the darkness of northern France. I don't get out of the cab, but I can hear the exchange between Paddy and his colleague. The other driver is considerate and friendly, asking after Paddy's family and wishing him a safe drive home. 'Fucking imbecile,' Paddy spits, the moment he's back in the cab.

By this point, Paddy has received phone calls from his wife, who needs him to collect her from the airport in Cork the day after next, and his daughter, who says there are children outside her house throwing stones at her window. He makes a decision. We won't stay here for the night, or press on for the fleshpots of Junction 6. We'll turn back and spend the night in Calais, in hopes of making the early train to Folkestone.

Handover completed, Paddy relaxes. In this kind of form, he's actually an OK person to be around. Our first point of rapprochement is when we discover we're both major fans of Hank Williams. Paddy allows me to peruse his collection of CDs and DVDs. I notice he owns copies of both *Taken* and *Taken 2* on DVD. We haven't discussed it, but I'm guessing Paddy and Liam Neeson's character share a broadly similar attitude to Albanians.

There are also some motorcycle-racing DVDs. 'I wrote off four bikes when I was younger,' he admits. Really? 'Yeah, I had more hits than the fucking Bee Gees.' Why did he stop? 'This thing happened, you might have heard of it. Called kids?' His daughter is 24. She's got two children of her own and she's separated from her partner, whom Paddy says he never liked to begin with. He feels guilty about being away from her so much of the time. He pays her mobile phone bill every month because he dreads the thought she or her children would need him and be without call credit.

His boy is twelve. I ask if the kid is into trucks. 'No, thank fuck,' he laughs. Paddy never finished school. He wants the boy to get an education. Although he hates soccer himself, his son is a fervent Manchester United supporter. Last year Paddy brought him to Old Trafford to see United against Liverpool.

'After the stadium tour and the megastore, it cost me the guts of a grand,' he says. 'But fuck it, better that than snorting it up my nose.'

It also emerges that Paddy and I both worked as labourers for the same dodgy Irish construction company in London – he in his twenties in the 1980s, me as a teenager in the 1990s. We compare notes, and it becomes clear that not a lot changed in the interim. I tell him I worked for months with a crew of six guys who I considered my close friends. Only much later did I discover that I had not known a single one of them by his real name. One was an Argentine pretending to be Spanish. One was a Ukrainian pretending to be Dutch. The others were all English guys, using the identities of Irish labourers who'd since returned to Ireland, to work while they collected disability benefit, and their live-in girlfriends collected single mother's allowance for their kids. Paddy's experience was pretty much identical. He says he knew guys who were collecting disability under four or five aliases and spending all day in the pub. 'There were dead men working overtime for that company,' he says. 'Weekends, bank holidays, you name it.'

We both laugh. Then he curses. Gendarmes are incoming. We avoided the M1 all the way through England earlier today, because Ger's tinted side windows contravene some obscure English by-law. Now we're driving a curtainside trailer after 10.30 p.m. on a Saturday night, which is technically illegal in France. We could be fined and forced to park up on the side of the road for the night if we're spotted. The gendarmes pass us by. Paddy checks his mirrors. We're in the clear. Then he smiles again.

It's always snakes and ladders. It's always cops and robbers in this life.

Around the stainless-steel table at Pidou, things are getting messy. This place is a sort of 24-hour off-licence cum cash-and-carry warehouse, located on the

outskirts of Calais. Tom is heating a chicken burger in the microwave. It looks absolutely revolting. The empty cans of Heineken are beginning to accumulate. After the delights I had been led to expect at Junction 6, this feels rather a comedown.

The Irish drivers are paid €120 per day. Considering they've been on the go for about seventeen hours now, between ferries, trains and motorways, that works out less than they'd earn per hour working in McDonald's. So most supplement their incomes where they can.

A case of wine that costs €12 in Calais can be sold on to hoteliers and restaurant owners in Ireland for €30. Even if a driver stays within the personal allowance of twenty cases, that represents a tidy €360 profit. And French customs turn a blind eye to drivers exceeding their personal allowances. Duty has already been paid on the wine in France, so they don't really care. If questioned, the standard response from Irish drivers is to say they have a family christening coming up. The French think this is hilarious. 'Ireland must be full of babies,' they say. On the UK side, customs are only looking for stowaways. They couldn't care less about wine.

That heavy lifting done for the night, it's time to kick back and relax.

A driver named Dermot from Cavan tells an anecdote about an argument Tom had with a black cafe owner in the UK, over a parking space, in which Tom prefaced his remarks with the words 'Now listen here, nignog.' The other drivers shake their heads, but I'm not sure if it's Tom's racism or his foolhardiness (the incident occurred in front of a roomful of black patrons) they are appalled at.

I'm at the end of my tether. I grab my Dictaphone from the cab, put it on the table and press record. I wonder if the red light will put some manners on these guys.

People are drowning in the Mediterranean by the hundreds, I begin. Ten people died in the Tunnel this summer alone. Clearly, these people aren't doing this for fun. Clearly, they feel they have no choice. Do you feel any

sympathy for them whatsoever?

‘Not one fucking bit,’ says Paddy. ‘They’re making my life very hard. But I do feel sorry for the women and children.’

But if any of us were in these men’s shoes, we’d surely do the same thing they’re doing?

‘Oh, we would,’ they reply in unison. ‘Of course we would.’

So why not look at things from that perspective?

Paddy is not for turning. ‘Just say I got the wrong bunch in the back of the trailer,’ he says. ‘I got a knife or something stuck into me. And I was badly hurt or, God forbid, killed. Who’s going to ring my wife and kids and tell them I’m not coming home? Who’s going to look after them?’

Honestly, I’m not sure if Paddy is really a racist. Real racists, surely, know the pejorative terms for every race and nationality. Paddy cannot distinguish between a Polish truck driver and a Sudanese lost boy. I think he’s just an angry guy working a poorly paid job who is inconvenienced on a routine basis by extraneous bullshit he does not even try to understand. But Tom ... Tom is another story. He has wedged himself as close to the Dictaphone as is humanly possible. ‘Believe it or not,’ he says, a little grandly, ‘I’ve seen women with babies trying to get into the back of trucks. I opened up a pallet carrier here one day and there was a girl with a baby inside. That would break your heart. I’m a father. I have two kids. But the damage these people do to the trailers is just...’

He waffles on a while.

Eventually, I ask Tom about the incident with the East European drivers on the shuttle bus in Folkestone. His response is a little flustered. ‘Right, I might have been a little vulgar,’ he concedes. ‘But if you’re standing next to a man, and his oxters are up like this, and he’s not showered in a week, you’re going to get sick. I’m sorry, I’m not an angel.’

Paddy is still stuck on his last point. ‘Young Ger there,’ he continues, pointing at his colleague. ‘He’s got a small child and another one on the way.’

Am I going to call his wife and say “Sorry, you don’t know me, but your husband has just had a fucking screwdriver stuck in his neck in Calais?”

‘Nobody should have to go to work in fear for their lives,’ Ger chips in. Then he reconsiders. ‘Well, maybe if you’re in the army or something.’

Ger won’t have a drink. He’s decided to move on to a secure spot called All4Trucks, a few hundred yards away, where hundreds of trucks are parked up for the night. The rest of us are staying put. We’re more vulnerable here. But the onboard computer requires truckers take a nine-hour break from driving each night. We’ve been here over an hour. If the truck were moved now, the timer would reset and we’d have to stick around an extra hour in the morning.

Paddy gives me the top bunk in his cab. At about 5 a.m., I come to and am momentarily terrified. Paddy has put up a sort of elasticated blanket fastener designed to prevent me from falling out in the middle of the night. It feels like I’ve woken up in a coffin. I pull away the fastener and get out of the truck. The beer from last night is still in my system so I walk over to the edge of the car park to urinate.

I’m standing there, half asleep, in my T-shirt and boxer shorts, relieving myself in the dirt when I spot three Middle Eastern guys – one of them thirtish, the others perhaps in their late teens – not fifty feet away from me. If they were initially walking towards the truck, they’ve changed course slightly now. They smile at having caught me in such an awkward position. I smile back at them and put my fingers to my lips.

I want to talk to Alan, Paddy’s friend, in whose trailer a number of migrants were discovered last week. We don’t get a chance to speak at length until after I return to Ireland.

Alan tells me he was en route back to Ireland from France when he stopped in a service station in the English midlands town of Stafford. Unbeknownst to Alan, a family in the car park heard screaming and banging from the back of his parked truck. The children were upset and the parents approached two other truck drivers, a Welshman and an Englishman, looking for help.

Alan's load was a fridge unit. He was bringing bread from France, so it was running at 12 degrees – chilly, but survivable. But the two British drivers had no way of knowing that. In a desperate panic, they switched off the power to the fridge unit and forced open the back of the truck. Nine refugees jumped out and scattered in every direction; some ran across the motorway and were lucky not to be killed.

Alan was paying for parking when he was approached by the two drivers. 'They said, "Is this your truck?" My initial thought was maybe someone was trying to get out of a parking spot or something. But they made it clear what had happened fairly fast.'

By that stage, Alan says, 'The police and ambulance had already been called. But when I seen the damage the migrants had done to the load, my first port of call was to ring my own boss and explain what had happened.' The load of bread, worth over €200,000, was condemned. Police questioned him at the scene. How had nine people got into his trailer? He told them he'd stopped for a shower in Calais, but that had only taken ten minutes. After seeing how the refugees had rearranged the pallets, creating a little cocoon for themselves in which they managed to slip through the French and UK border scanners unnoticed, he reckoned they must have been in place since the night before.

He had been parked that night four and a half hours south of Calais. He figured the traffickers must have seen his Irish registration number, and noted the fact that he was parked up in a service station on the northbound side, and made their move. It is not possible to lock oneself into a lorry

trailer; clearly someone helped the nine people, perhaps members of a criminal gang involved in trafficking them. The plastic fastener that seals the lock, with a serial number matching that on Alan's docket, had been opened and glued back together so seamlessly that the French customs officers who'd inspected it hadn't noticed. 'I'd checked it myself,' he says. 'It was so well done, you wouldn't detect it unless you had a microscope or something.'

After Alan had spoken to the cops, the ambulance people questioned him. 'That annoyed me a bit, if I was to be honest,' he says. 'I was in shock. I felt, I had just dealt with the police. I was after giving them all my information. Next thing, the ambulance crew are asking me how many people were there? How long were they in there? What temperature was the fridge? Did they look okay? Sure, I hadn't even seen the migrants. They were gone by the time I got there. The police and the ambulance people only seemed to be concerned for the refugees' welfare. All this time, no one had thought to ask how I was feeling.'

The refugees were soon rounded up. They were taken to temporary accommodation. There would a preliminary asylum hearing for them, Alan was told.

Alan, for his part, was taken to the police station for another three hours of questioning. 'In my mind, I was arrested without the handcuffs. The police were fairly nice to me but, at the same time, they still had me held there. I mean, you can put a name on them, immigrants, or refugees, or asylum seekers, but to my mind that was criminal damage they done to the truck. That was breaking and entering. But they were being looked after. Whereas I was the one being treated like a criminal.'

After a background check, and a telephone conversation with the Chief Immigration Officer at Dover, Alan was finally free to leave. He was told no criminal case would be taken against him. He was pleased, believing it was his own clean record and the fact that he had been delivering bread that got him off. (The logic goes that, if he had been an accessory in getting those

refugees into the truck, he'd put them in some night he was carrying dishwashers or car parts, something that wouldn't spoil.)

Verona Murphy, president of the Irish Road Haulage Association, confirms the details of Alan's account. Like me, she is entirely convinced that Alan had no knowledge of the people in his trailer and that he hadn't been negligent. But she doubts that he is out of the woods with the UK authorities just yet. The British rarely pursue criminal charges against drivers in cases like Alan's, because complicity is almost impossible to prove. But they will pursue a civil claim, in which the onus will be on Alan to prove he was in compliance with the law. The standard fine is £2,000 per refugee, meaning Alan's company could yet be hit with a bill for £18,000.

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Breakfast in an off-licence is as much of a treat as it sounds. I wander the aisles at Pidou, looking for anything that resembles food. Pretzels. Dry roasted peanuts. Giant crisp packets. I end up opting for Tom's €2 microwave chicken burger. I heat it in the microwave by the stainless-steel table we were drinking at last night. I eat about half of it and throw the rest in the bin. By any measure, this is a low point in my trucking career.

After Paddy and I have washed ourselves at sinks in the off-licence bathroom, and brushed our teeth, we check the computer: still 38 minutes before we can leave. I get chatting to Dermot from Cavan. He's on his way to Heathrow today, bringing fish from ... 'What's that country after Italy?' he asks. Greece? 'Yeah, Greece.' At Heathrow, he's picking up tuna from California, bound for Ireland.

His worst ever job, he says, was bringing Irish lamb to Tunisia, back in the 1990s. It took forty-nine hours on the boat out of Marseilles. When he got to Tunisia, the client had some quibble about the load. For three days, there

were phone calls back and forth between the vendor back in Ireland and the client in Tunisia. 'Meanwhile, I'm parked out on the tarmac in 45 degree heat with surrounded by fellas running around with machine guns.'

Eventually, we get going. The area around the entrance to the Channel Tunnel reminds me of the West Bank: miles and miles of barbed wire, road-blocks and bored-looking gendarmes. We arrive into a massive holding area, where the truck has to drive around a circuitous route, like we're in an obstacle course or a beauty pageant.

The French border guards look like Bond villains. They must be ex-Legionnaires. They check the seal on the lock and compare the serial number to the number on the docket Paddy has given them. Next, sniffer dogs are brought out and the outside of the truck is swabbed for drugs. Paddy tells me about a driver he knew who started running drugs for a criminal gang. He got too flash, spent too much money and drew too much attention. He's in prison now.

'They approach you in truck stops and lay-bys. They say, "You want to make money?" They put the stuff in the truck. You never see it. They follow you from Italy or wherever. Then they have someone in Ireland to open up the truck, who knows where to look. But it's not worth it. Marriage gone? Kids gone? It's not worth it.'

At the same time, Paddy is convinced some drivers caught with drugs in their trucks are genuinely innocent. 'Remember I gave you the keys of this truck last night to go out and get your Dictaphone? For all I know, you could have stashed something in the cab. That's all it takes. It's really just that easy.'

We pull off. UK customs is next. The British customs officers are smoking cigarettes and chatting amongst themselves. A few minutes pass before they even glance in our direction.

'When is all this going to stop?' Paddy asks Ger on speakerphone. He means the refugees. The Jungle. All of this madness.

‘When someone gets killed,’ reckons Ger.

‘One of us?’ ask Paddy.

‘Nah. One of them. A French cop. Or an English cop. Then they’ll send in the bulldozers.’

We go through the scanner in UK customs. A buzzer goes off. The customs officer looks at the manifest. There are ceramics in the back of our truck. That’s probably what tripped the alarm. She asks Paddy to drive into a shed and turn his engine off. She could just open the trailer and look inside if she wanted. Instead she comes out with one of those scanning devices they use in the airport.

It’s a tense moment. I glance at Paddy’s face. For once, he’s not annoyed. He’s anxious. He mutters to himself: ‘If there’s someone in there, he’s a fucking genius.’

Finally, we’re given the all-clear. A broad smile appears across Paddy’s face. He lights a cigarette and pops his favourite country CD in the tray. We’re away.