

WHEN I was in transition year, a group of us spent a couple of days at the Corrymeela centre, just outside the village of Ballycastle on the north Antrim coast. It's the North's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation, set up in the 1960s by a Presbyterian minister concerned about brewing sectarian tensions.

Their mission is to 'transform division through human encounter', and one of the programmes back then included a residential stay for secondary school kids, bringing together students from different backgrounds so they could learn more about each other.

I'm sure we were all told exactly what it was about and why we were going before we boarded the bus in Dublin.

And bearing in mind this was a very, very long time ago, and my memory is a little bit sketchy, I'm also pretty sure most, if not all, of us were clueless about the actual purpose of the trip.

For us, a gang of 20 or so teenage schoolgirls, it was a couple of days away with our pals, and our primary concerns were about bagging a bed in the same dormitory and exactly how much teacher supervision there would be. There was little, if any, thought given to who we were going to meet and what we were going to talk about.

THE other group of schoolgirls came from Belfast. There were no long-lasting friendships forged over those few days. In fact, we barely spoke to each other. After a few initial shy hellos and self-consciously introducing ourselves, we all retreated to our groups and waited to be told what to do next.

There was a bus tour to the Falls and Shankill areas, where a bat was thrown at our window by a group of young fellas, which shattered the glass. It's unlikely it was a sectarian attack, just a gang of bored youngsters, possibly fed up with people driving through their communities in tour buses and staring at them like they were on exhibition.

Back in Ballycastle, we got stuck into the first exercise of the programme. About half a dozen full-sized flags were laid out on the floor. I can remember I recog-

We weren't blaming anyone for the Troubles... we just gave it little thought



Jenny Friel

ON CROSS-BORDER RESENTMENT

nised three of them: the Tricolour, the Union Jack and a white one with a red cross with a red hand in the middle of it.

We were asked what each of these flags meant to us, and how we felt looking at them. Our group had very little to say. Flags of any kind didn't really mean a whole lot to any of us. I'm sure some of the girls mumbled something about feeling a bit of pride looking at the Tricolour, while shrugging at the Union Jack.

A couple possibly recognised the Red Hand of Ulster flag from news reports on the telly. But that was it.

Then it was the Belfast girls' turn. Their reactions to each of the flags was visceral, especially

the Tricolour. It didn't take long before some of them began to cry, several just walked out of the room. We weren't all that sure why at the time; it had been a dramatic enough day and so it was decided we should just all head back to our dorms until dinner.

Looking back, I think it was our blissful ignorance that upset them most. We had no idea about their lives or their history, the stuff they had witnessed or the tensions they dealt with every day.

We lived little more than 100 miles down the road, but it may as well have been 5,000. And I'd be lying if I said we came away from those few days determined

to pay more attention to the situation in the North.

THIS, of course, is a massive generalisation and there will be those who fiercely disagree, but I think a lot of people who grew up in the Republic of Ireland during the '80s and '90s gave very little thought to what was happening across the border.

It's been suggested in recent weeks that southerners blamed Catholics and nationalists for the atrocities that befell them during those horrific years. That this was an 'orthodoxy in the south'.

I don't think that's true. I think



Connections: Collins signed the Treaty 100 years ago

the truth is we didn't even think that deeply about it, certainly not enough to have an 'orthodoxy' that said nationalists were to blame for their own misfortunes.

Which is probably worse, and I think the resentment some northerners feel towards the south is probably justified. We just didn't pay any of it a whole lot of attention; it wasn't on our radar.

Of course there were constant reports of bombings and killings on the television and radio, but these were things happening to people we didn't know in places we'd never been. And it was all over something there seemed to be little chance of changing.

It had all been going on so long. By the time we were teenagers and learning about Irish history in any sort of depth, it was difficult to make that connection between treaties being fought over, Michael Collins being shot and the reality of partition, to the horrendous events that were happening in the six counties.

There are no excuses for the apathy and disinterest. But perhaps we became immune to the relentlessness of it all and impatient, possibly intolerant, about the time it was taking to find any solutions.

It's a shameful thing to admit. And it's something we may need to face up to if there is going to be any sort of meaningful reconciliation. Because as it stands, it's clear from the reaction to recent declarations about what people in the south believe that there are still deep-seated resentments.

None of this situation is helped when assumptions are made about what each faction believes or what 'orthodoxy' it holds. Maybe try asking questions, and actually listen to the answers. It might be possible then to move on.

Jamie's torso helped lift my spirits

Opinion is split on the real star of BBC1 thriller *The Tourist*. Is it Shalom Brune-Franklin (previously in *Line Of Duty*, far right) who is sensationally evil? Or Danielle Macdonald, the Aussie with a huge heart and whip-smart one-liners.

For me, though, the show-stealer is Jamie Dornan's torso. He's 50 shades of gorgeousness.

The Pope's insensitive criticism of those of us who are childless — saying: 'Renouncing parenthood diminishes us, it takes away our humanity' — is curious, considering that as leader of the world's Catholic priests, he has taken a vow never to father children.

Donald Trump's wife Melania hopes to raise €220,000 by auctioning this hat she wore for



the French president's visit to the White House in 2018. I fear that, like her husband, Melania's sense of self-importance has gone to her head.

Novak Djokovic's father likens his tennis star son to Jesus and says the Australian authorities are 'crucifying' him by detaining No-vac as they deny him

entry to the country. Christ endured hours nailed to a cross. Hardly comparable to a stay in a 4.5-star, air-conditioned Melbourne hotel.

Former Towie star James Argent admits he lost half his bodyweight through gastric sleeve surgery. If only female celebrities who took such dramatic action were as honest and didn't try to hoodwink us that they slimmed purely by healthy eating and exercise. Not mentioning any names...

Some legal experts say the very least Prince Andrew can expect is social exile, being stripped of his royal title and forced to sever all his military connections. Surely still living with his cling-on ex-wife Fergie is a life sentence for any man?

Ever since a rescue cat called Mostaccioli was likened to Queen singer Freddie Mercury, we moggy-lovers have been wondering who our own felines resemble.

My adorable Ted has wild white fur (with a few hints of ginger), balding patches, a fat belly and sneaks out to meet Lalya next door.

Sadly, I guess his alter ego is Boris Johnson.

In the latest episode of the risibly woke sequel to *Sex And The City*, the character played by the seemingly ageless Sarah Jessica Parker contemplates a facelift, eye lift, neck lift and almost-everything lift. Just guessing, but I don't suppose 56-year-old SJP needed much research to play the scene convincingly.

AMANDA PLATELL



IT'S almost 20 years since I was led up a staircase to a dingy storeroom above the old HMV store on Dublin's Grafton Street. In among the cardboard boxes stuffed with new CDs was this tiny woman with this huge, and I mean really massive, platinum blonde hairdo.

Her bright orange suede top was teamed with a matching skirt, both studded with magnificent turquoise rhinestones. But the brightest thing about this woman, by far, was her smile.

I'm only half joking when I say I had to stop myself from running straight into her arms. Dolly Parton – yes, the country singing superstar – does that to you. Her warmth is extraordinary and feels utterly genuine.

Which was lucky because I was shaking like a leaf. I was still a relatively young reporter on another newspaper and this was one of my first big interviews, an exclusive chat with the woman who wrote Nine-to-Five and Jolene, two of my family's favourite songs to sing over and over again, mostly at Christmas and usually just the choruses.

My joy, however, at landing a face-to-face chat with Dolly soon turned to dismay when I was briefed on some of the questions I was expected to put to the diminutive musician. It was a long list and included asking her what size her bust was and whether or not her hair was real.

In my mid-20s and still new to the game, I was horrified. But it was a job I needed so armed with a notebook and pen I desperately tried to think of ways to broach both subjects.

Needless to say my technique was clumsy. Once the niceties were out of the way, I nodded towards my own chest and told Dolly how people often felt the need to comment on my own ample assets.

She checked me out, roared laughing and declared: 'My, my but they ARE big.'

The idea that Dolly Parton, owner of possibly the most famous breasts on the planet, had judged me to be generously endowed is a story I dined out on for years. She was being kind of course, my nervousness was

Dolly might be fitted out with a few fake parts, but she is a genuine hero



Jenny Friel

ON THE DAY SHE MET A MUSIC LEGEND

making my voice wobble and the palms of my hands sweat, I could barely take notes.

She had decided to go easy on me and answered all of my obnoxious questions with aplomb.

'I've always put them out there and they've served me well,' she told me about her famous bosom. 'It doesn't bother me at all, people asking me about them – in fact I like to get it off my chest.'

Of course now, with the benefit of a bit of maturity and after reading and watching countless Dolly interviews, I know she constantly gets asked about her boobs, her hair, her taste for flashy clothes and even in recent years her sexual orientation.

For a long time it was rumoured she was in a long term relation-

ship with her best friend Judy Ogle, even though she's been married to husband Carl Thomas Dean since 1966. She has denied it every time it's been put to her.

Dolly has always answered all these queries with a cheeriness and honesty that is as disarming as it is endearing. Of course she may be quietly seething on the inside, having to answer the same questions over and over again.

For all we know, when she gets home each night she possibly rips off that bright yellow wig, throws it across the room and snarls at her husband Carl about all those 'stupid, dumb reporters'.

But I doubt it. If there's one thing we've learned about her in recent years, it's that she's not only a supremely talented song-

writer and performer, but she's also an extraordinary business-woman. And her sweet-tempered personality is a huge part of the legend that draws people in.

Just last week she featured for the first time on Forbes list of the richest self-made women in the world. Thanks to a new album, *A Holly Dolly Christmas*; a Netflix film, *Christmas on the Square*; a new perfume, *A Scent From Above*; and of course her theme park in the mountains of Tennessee, Dollywood, her net worth for 2020 came in at around €350million.

But perhaps what is most impressive about Dolly is that she could probably be a whole lot richer if she wanted to be. Through her Dollywood Founda-



Authentic: Dolly Parton is worth around \$350million

tion, her literacy programme has posted out more than 100million books to children across the world.

Almost 850,000 kids, including many in Ireland, get a book from Dolly once a month.

She's raised and donated money to the American Red Cross, HIV/AIDS charities, animal preservation schemes and to various individual hospitals and universities. While last year she donated \$1million to the Vanderbilt University Medical Centre to help their development of the Moderna vaccine.

Last week we learned she used royalties she earned from Whitney Houston's cover of her song *I Will Always Love You*, to invest in an office complex in a black neighborhood in Nashville. She said she thought it was an apt way to honour the singer, who died in 2012.

And this week it was revealed she has completed a new novel, her first. Co-written with best selling author James Patterson, *Run, Rose, Run*, will be released next year and tells the story of a young woman who moves to Nashville to pursue her music-making dreams. Something 75-year-old Dolly knows a little about.

Reading about her this week I was transported back to that afternoon in that dingy storeroom. It was definitely one of my career highs, not because of the interview, which in the end was decidedly pedestrian, but because of the kindness she showed a novice and visibly trembling reporter. The hair, eyelashes and several parts of the body might be fake. But the benevolence is 100% authentic.



At the top of the British royal family tree, up there where the air is rarefied, a group of powerful men wring their hands in dismay. Beads of sweat pop on their foreheads. Frown lines furrow and deepen. Eyes roam over headlines, searching for succour, finding none.

This grime-primed bomb of bad news has been heading their way for more than ten years, perhaps even for 20 – but nothing of note has been done to stop it or to try to address the issues that threaten to detonate under their noses.

The men don't know what to do, so they have started to blame each other. You should have done something. No, *you* should have!

Who are these cowardly mudslingers and guilt-dodgers, hiding behind the gilt frogging of royal

Andrew's silence simply makes him look tarnished

privilege? They are the princes and courtiers, the lawyers and dukes, the knights and commanders who form the patriarchy in excelsis. And now they are the patriarchy partly in a panic, too.

For this week, Virginia Giuffre fired the only arrow left in her quiver of vengeance. Now aged 38, she has launched a civil lawsuit in New York in which she accuses Prince Andrew of battery, sexual assault and causing emotional distress when she was 17.

This is her last gasp in a geyser of accusations that have drenched the prince in shame for years.

He can't recall ever meeting her. She is tired of being ignored. And now his legal team's strategy of

snubbing Miss Giuffre's claims and refusing to co-operate fully with her lawyers or the American authorities seems to have backfired immensely.

The reaction of the royal in-house posse? To worry about the queen. **THE QUEEN!** They fret that this nasty business might spill over and spoil Queen Elizabeth's platinum jubilee in 2022.

What is going on? The feelings of Queen Elizabeth seem to be the primary concern here, not the trepidations of a young woman who believes herself to have been sex-trafficked by Jeffrey Epstein then wronged by a prince. That can't be right.

This week, her lawyer David

Boies claimed Prince Andrew and his team 'have totally stonewalled'. He said: 'He can ignore me. And he can ignore Virginia but he can't ignore judicial process.'

At the moment, Prince Andrew has no legal obligation to talk to anyone: he is not the subject of any criminal investigation and no criminal charges have been brought against him.

Despite what his worst enemies think, he remains an innocent man, one with the right to remain silent.

The problem is that his silence is not golden. And it makes him look more tarnished by the hour.

JAN MOIR

Fertility clinics here rake it in but pandemic limits options for couples

IN amongst the doom and gloom, a pandemic can throw up some accidental success stories. For instance, the fertility business appears to be booming – with a reported 20% increase in demand over the last year.

There are a few reasons for the surge in interest, they reckon. One is all that money some people have been saving during the lockdowns. For those struggling to conceive, it's been a chance to store up some cash to help with the very large bills that come with any kind of fertility treatment in this country.

Another is that because house prices have gone up so much, young people, through no fault of their own, have been slower to buy their first home.

And by the time they've been lucky enough to get a mortgage, they're then finding it difficult to get pregnant.

And then there's the travel issue. All those people who would have gone abroad to clinics in places like Spain or the Czech Republic, not only because they're cheaper but because of their excellent reputations and success rates, were grounded because of the pandemic.

With the world still in a state of flux, a lot of those people feel they have no choice but to stay here now to do their treatment. A captive audience of sorts – never a good thing.

I would have hated to have had that decision taken out of my hands. We went abroad, first to Poland and then to Spain. After several appointments with two different clinics in Dublin, the second of which discovered I had a 'touch of endometriosis', I couldn't bring myself to give them our business.

It all felt like a massive money-making racket, every time we sat down in front of someone, I swear I could feel our credit card starting to pulse in my purse. Assisted baby-making is really expensive. According to those who run the clinics, it's because of the cutting-edge science involved, which requires ongoing research, and it's all very labour-intensive.

In fairness, they are doing out miracles every day; people who would have had little to no chance of ever having children, ending up with the dream they most want

fulfilled in life – a family. But in Ireland, where there is no support for those who need assisted reproductive technology (ART), it can leave some in such a desperate state that they won't think twice about emptying bank accounts or re-mortgaging houses in their quest for a baby.

We're the only country in Europe, apart from Lithuania, that does not provide any publicly funded fertility treatment. In the UK, depending on where you live, you're entitled to at least one, but possibly up to five free rounds of IVF through the NHS.

At the clinic we went to in Krakow, we couldn't get over the number of young people sitting alongside us in the waiting room. The doctor there told us there was a serious fertility issue in central Poland, because of pollution. I don't know if that's true.

But I do know the treatment all those young people were getting was free, and that the same doctor was utterly horrified at how much we were charged in Ireland for something he considered to be basic healthcare.

The part that infuriated him most was that here you must pay upfront for your entire round of IVF, no matter how far you get in the process. I remember him looking at us, shaking his head, asking why would people pay for procedures that may never happen?

You might get only as far as an egg retrieval – after that they're mixed with sperm in a lab to try and create an embryo. But it's often the case that the eggs don't fertilise. And that's the end of it, the treatment is over.

'You will only pay us for what work we do,' he told us. 'I think anything else is not correct. I

don't understand why you accept this in Ireland.'

In Spain, where we went for a different treatment, we felt we were dealt with in a similarly fair manner. And I know that even with flights and hotels, it cost us several thousand euro less than it cost a friend who had the exact same procedure done here a couple of years later.

There are stresses and strains that go with heading abroad, and for a while most of our holidays were used up going to foreign clinics. But in much the same way that no one is still able to explain to me why I can buy a packet of paracetamol in Northern Ireland for 52p, while down here you're talking at least a couple of euro for the exact same



Regulation call: The Merrion Clinic's Prof. Mary Wingfield

product, I don't understand the discrepancy in prices.

And don't think that you get substandard care if you go away, an accusation often levelled at dental or cosmetic surgery treatment. In fact, it's Ireland that still has no regulatory body that oversees the fertility industry. Despite repeated calls by some of the clinics themselves, here they just come under the administration of the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

'The industry is regulated by the HPRA but it's more from the point of view of the quality procedures surrounding the management of human tissues and cells,' Professor Mary Wingfield of the Merrion Fertility Clinic has said. 'It's not about the social, medical, ethical and legal realities.'

For a start, there needs to be more transparency, because don't think for a second that the price listed for a round of IVF on a clinic's website is what you'll pay. The extra costs for different tests and procedures, some of which have been accused of being 'add-ons' not medically proven to improve your chances of having a baby, would make your head spin.

In 2019 it was announced that the Government was ready to start the process of introducing publicly funded infertility services, they expected IVF to be available in 2021. We know what's happened in the meantime.

At the end of September, Health Minister Stephen Donnelly told the Dáil that the Bill on AHR is being drafted and a model of care has been developed. But it's still months away from being finalised.

So, despite these new satellite clinics being opened, Irish people have even less choice than usual, because they're understandably reluctant to travel. Another layer of unfairness to an already desperately unfair situation.



Jenny Friel

ON THE OBSCENE COST OF IVF IN IRELAND

Ri-Ri impresses in dress but Nensi frocks shock

THIS is one of the creations of new, must-have designer Nensi Dojaka, who says of her £1,500 plus (£1,750) 'frocks' that she 'doesn't like anything too pretty or too exposed, I have an eye where to stop'.

Crikey, if a bit of gossamer thrown over your undies is what she thinks is fashion, I'd say it IS time for her to stop!

A LONDONER winning the prize for the oldest working iron (a Morphy Richards bought by his grandmother in the 1940s) is an inspiration. So I'm hanging on to my Sony bedside clock radio, bought in 1985 and still going strong, in the hope I'll one day win a prize for the longest ever bedside companion. It's seen me through one marriage, four engagements and various



romantic entanglements. Thank goodness these antiquated clocks can't talk.

EVEN if her fashion empire is struggling, it's a bit crass of Stella McCartney to launch a Beatles fashion line to coincide with the new documentary of the Fab Four. Her Strawberry Fields jumper costs £895 (£1,050). Time to stop milking your dad's fame and let it be, Stella.

OF ALL the contraband confiscated from the stars on I'm A

Celebrity, – including Oxo cubes and Fruitellas – most surprising was DJ Naughty Boy's nail file. Given that he threatens nightly to flee the set, Mummy's Boy should have smuggled in a hacksaw to help him escape... and put the series' dwindling number of viewers out of their misery.

THE Home Alone house is now available to rent via Airbnb over the festive season. Why would anyone want to stay where Macaulay Culkin's character was abandoned by his parents and tormented by two robbers?

ACCEPTING her National Hero of Barbados award

Rihanna, 33, right, looked gorgeous in a golden gown, seemingly without a shred of underwear and revealing her wonderfully womanly, wobbly tummy and fulsome breasts as she embraced Prince Charles. Let's hope he had some smelling salts to hand.

THROUGH to the quarter-finals and tipped to win the glitterball, Strictly's deaf dancer Rose Ayling-Ellis says she turns down lucrative deals to endorse hearing aids, refusing to promote any devices not provided by the NHS which has cared for her since she was a child. Can Rose get any more adorable?

AMANDA PLATELL

