

I Heard it on the Grapevine

I was just emerging through the tunnel, down from Dublin airport into the bright sunshine and enormous blue skies with the panoramic view of colourful cranes decorating the skyline, when the taxi driver said "Did yer man enjoy his stay in Ireland then"?

'Man, what man', I thought to myself, mentally turning back the pages of my diary trying to remember what I'd been doing the previous week. It was, after all, still early as I'd been on the regular red eye from Cork at 6am, even though there was none of the hassle of international travel at the airport. Up the escalator, through security, grab a cup of coffee before boarding. Thirty minutes max. The automated safety message on the flight always made me giggle "in the unlikely event of landing at sea", I finished the sentence "we'd be going the wrong way".

"Ye were after coming in together from Heathrow and went to Bewleys in Grafton Street" the cab driver continued. Jesus, Mary and Joseph & the wee donkey, was he going to tell me what I had for breakfast I wondered, recalling the perfect bowl of steaming porridge so comforting after an early start. Oh yes I remember. A colleague from my previous job had been on the same flight and came over to say hi. It seemed only polite to offer him a lift as I explained a driver would be waiting for me.

"But it wasn't you who picked me up last week", I said. He chortled, "The cabbies always chat about you, and keep track of where you are and what you are doing. You're the big news these days. Only the other day the Health Minister was in a cab talking about you, telling her friend that you are going to look after us in our old age".

I registered that he said 'a cab' and not his cab. It was beginning to make sense. A few weeks previously I had flown to Galway to yet another conference and a friend had picked me up from the airport. Several days later in a different part of the country, the cab driver said, "I hear you know Charlie then".

Now I'm a Londoner and if you get into a black cab there might be an amiable chat and that's that. Not so in Ireland. Apparently if you scratch your nose it gets relayed round the fleet of drivers. "What yous don't realise" said my chatty driver "is that the first thing folk do is make a call on the mobile thinking they are in a private space. But we drivers overhear the conversations with the speaker on so we get the whole story. Some of the goings on! The newspapers would pay a fortune. It would make you blush. Better than having a microphone in a confessional box I'd say, and a lot more interesting".

Mother of God, better tell the lads to 'houl yer wheesht' in a cab lest their conversations be overheard.