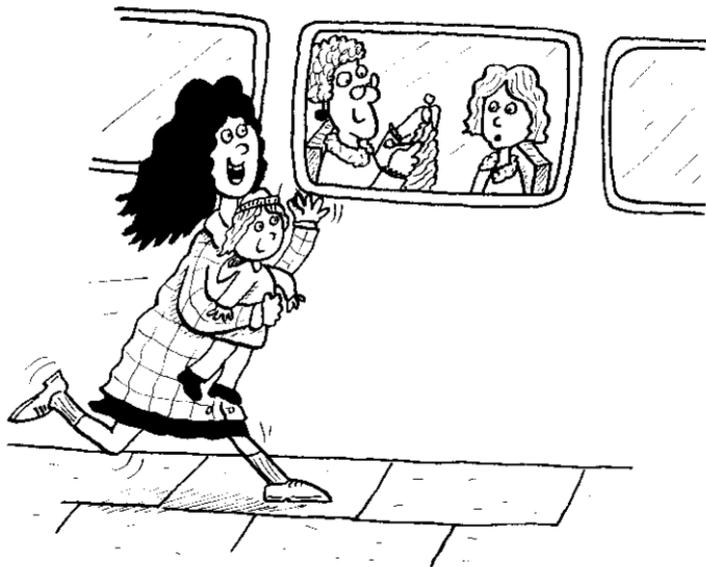


Chapter one



There was a sudden loud whistle, and outside in the corridor, I could hear the train doors whooshing closed. I waved at my mum and my little sister Rosie who were standing on the platform. Mum reached up through the open window and squeezed my hand.

‘Bye Megan. Be a good girl at Alice’s place,’ she said. ‘And remember, no silly hiding under

beds this time.’

I groaned. Mum *never* lets me forget what happened last year. You’d think I’d robbed a bank or killed someone or sent a computer virus around the whole world or something really bad like that. But all I did was try to help my friend when she needed me.

You see, what happened was, my very, very best friend Alice had moved from Limerick to Dublin with her mum and her brother, because her parents had split up. Naturally, Alice and I were really upset about that, so when she came to visit her Dad at Halloween, she came up with this totally crazy plan. (Alice specialises in totally crazy plans!) She hid in my house for days, hoping that her parents would get such a fright that her mum would move back to Limerick and they’d all live happily ever after.

It didn’t turn out that way, of course. Alice’s mother wouldn’t move away from Dublin, and Alice just got into loads of trouble.

Still, Alice's mum did let her visit Limerick a bit more often after that, so I suppose her mad plan sort of worked, in a funny, mixed-up kind of way.

Anyway, that was all ages ago, and everyone has managed to forget it except for my mum who has a memory like an elephant. Now it was spring mid-term, and I was going to Dublin to stay with Alice for six wonderful nights.

Just then there was a horrible screechy noise, and the train started to move. All of a sudden, Rosie started to cry. She stretched out one fat little hand towards me, and huge, sloppy tears began to drip down her face. At first I thought that she was crying because she was going to miss me, and that made me feel kind of proud and sad at the same time. Then I decided that she was probably just jealous because I was getting to go on a train, and she wasn't.

I put my face to the window. 'Don't cry, Rosie,' I called, 'I'll be home soon and I'll bring you back

sweeties. Lots and lots of sweeties. All for Rosie.’ Mum shook her head, and gave me one of her world-famous cross looks. If she had her way, sweets would be banned. Rosie was suddenly happy though. She stopped crying and beamed at me.

‘Sweeties for Rosie,’ she said.

I laughed. Rosie is cute – most of the time.

The train was moving a bit faster now. Mum lifted Rosie into her arms, and walked quickly along beside us. I wished she wouldn’t do that. It was *too* embarrassing, and it’s usually at moments like this that Melissa, the meanest girl in my class shows up, like I’m not embarrassed enough already.

The train started to go even faster. Soon Mum was almost jogging along beside it, waving madly. You’d think I was going to America for a hundred years instead of just Dublin for a week. Poor Rosie looked a little bit scared as she bounced up and down clinging tightly to Mum’s

neck. Mum's face was all red and sweaty and her hair-slide had fallen off so her hair was flying madly around her face. I wanted to shout out and tell her to stop making a fool of herself, and, even worse, making a fool of me. I couldn't do that though, I didn't want to hurt her feelings. All of a sudden I remembered that the dreaded Melissa had gone to Lanzarote on holidays, so at least there was no danger of her showing up and then telling everyone at school yet another story about my crazy Mum. Then I didn't feel quite so bad.

Mum began to slow down. I leaned out of the window and saw that she was running out of platform. Soon, if she wanted to keep going she'd have to run along an empty track beside the train. And even my mum isn't *that* crazy. At last she stopped running. She stood still with a very sad look on her face. The train kept going, and soon Mum and Rosie were like miniature versions of themselves on the faraway platform.

I gave one last wave, and then I sat down in my seat.

Free at last!

★ ★ ★

I could hardly believe it was true. It seemed like only yesterday that I was first allowed down to our local shop on my own. And I was only allowed into town if I spent half an hour promising to be good first. Now here I was, on a train to Dublin, all by myself. I felt like pinching myself to see if it was true, then I realised that was the kind of thing that kids only do in books, so I resisted. Instead I just sat back and smiled and smiled until I noticed the old lady sitting opposite giving me funny looks. I stopped smiling, and she went back to her knitting. She was making a jumper out of disgusting bright orange wool. It looked all stiff and scratchy. Some poor child would have to wear that, I thought. Now I had two reasons to be happy. One – I was going to spend six whole

nights in Dublin with Alice, and two – the knitting-lady wasn't my granny.

I put my hand into my jacket pocket and pulled out the e-mail Alice had sent me a few days earlier. I'd already read it about a hundred times. I read it once more, slowly, enjoying every single word.

Hi Meg,

I can't believe I'm going to see you so soon. And for six whole days!!! We are going to have the best time ever. EVER!!!!!! EVER!!!!!! I have it all planned. I've saved up loads of money and every day we're going to do something special. We're going to go to the cinema at least twice. We'll go to town and we can get our nails done in this great place I know. And there's a shop where you can design and make your own soft-

toys. I'm going to make a bunny for Jamie (you know how he loves bunnies) and you could make a teddy for Rosie. And there's this place where you can get the yummiest hot chocolate with heaps of marshmallows - it's all yummy and frothy - not a bit like the stuff you make at home. And Mum says we can go to this cool new Quasar place not far from our apartment. We are going to have soooooo much fun!

Luv

Al

I smiled to myself. I was really glad that Alice hadn't any crazy plans for this trip. Life always became very complicated when Alice went into what I called 'crazy-planning-mode'. I just wanted to spend a few days hanging out together. A few days free of organic vegetables, and Mum's efforts to save the world. All I

wanted was a few days of fun.

I closed my eyes and thought of all the cool things that Alice had planned. Alice always had the best ideas. Suddenly I felt all kind of tingly and excited. This trip was going to be great. I just knew it.

I folded up Alice's e-mail and put it back into my pocket. There was another piece of paper there. I sighed as I pulled it out. It was the sheet of paper Mum had pressed into my hand as I boarded the train. I opened it up, and then I sighed again. It was like the ten commandments, only there were about a hundred of them, in Mum's ultra-neat handwriting, covering both sides of a very big page. Mum believes in lists – the longer the better – and this time she'd got completely carried away.

Don't talk to strangers.

Don't forget to change trains at Limerick Junction.

Help with the housework.

Wear your coat when you go out – it's still only

February.

Wear your gloves and scarf. (I couldn't obey that rule even if I wanted to because I'd taken my gloves and scarf out of my bag when Mum wasn't looking, and hidden them at the back of my wardrobe.)

Don't eat too much rubbish.

If there isn't any healthy food, buy yourself some fruit every day.

Phone home at least once.

Don't stay up too late.

Don't go anywhere on your own.

Don't go out after seven o'clock.

The list went on and on and on. A huge long line of do's and don'ts. (Mostly don'ts). I felt as if Mum had climbed onto the train and was sitting there beside me wagging her finger in my face. I stopped reading and gave yet another big sigh. I knew Mum meant well, but sometimes she went a bit over the top. She badly needed to take a few chill pills.

I read quickly down to the end of the list just in case she'd written something crazy and

wonderful like – *I've hidden a hundred euro in the bottom of your bag, or I've arranged for a daily delivery of sweets to Alice's place.* (She hadn't, of course.) Then I tore the paper into tiny little pieces, and squished them into the small metal ashtray beside my seat.

I checked that the woman sitting opposite wasn't looking, and I gave another huge smile. Six whole days. Six days doing cool stuff with Alice. Six long, wonderful days before I had to go back to my own boring house, and all my stupid chores, and dinners with funny-looking beans in them. Six days of heaven!

It really was almost too good to be true, so I gave myself a small pinch, just to be on the safe side.