



Picture Diary

DEFYING GRAVITY: Ross Herlihy, from Cork, looks like he is floating on thin air, but he was actually caught in the middle of a break dancing routine at the one-day music festival in Skibbereen at the weekend

Picture: Richard Mills

Our fearless columnist bids us farewell

FOR his final column, Robert decided some lucky readers, picked from the phone book, would ask him about his struggles as a columnist and his plans for the future. Unfortunately, no-one who answered the phone had heard of him. Instead, we got people from the office to disguise their voices and ring him up so he would be none the wiser.

What was your aim when you started out as a columnist? Some writers try to change the world. That was never me. There is one thing that I have tried to change, though, that I've tried to change every day of my life — my underclothes.

Why are you giving up the column? I wish to spend more time on personal grooming.

You've been writing for a mere three years. Surely you have more to say? I have, in fact, had a column in this paper for 42 years, under various assumed names.

The picture above the column is my grandnephew.

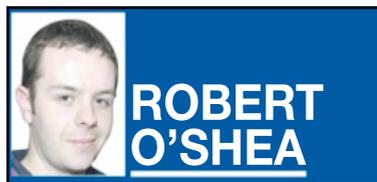
What advice would you give a

budding column-writer? If you haven't bothered keeping up with the news and are bereft of an opinion, try to find out something that happened on the day in history of the date of publication.

For instance, Oliver Hardy died 50 years ago today. Then make up some fantastical c**p about him, such as: "Hardy was allergic to the fabric in the ties he constantly furred on screen and it was this idiosyncrasy that eventually caused his death, although some film historians still blame Stan Laurel."

An uncle of mine is a taxi driver and he says one of your columns was word-for-word a conversation you had while he was driving you to Midleton one night? Several, if not most, columns are loosely transcribed notes of chats with cabbies to allow the journey be written off as a tax expense.

How do you plan your articles? I stare at the computer. It stares back. After 45 minutes it goes on standby; then I know I have won.



I'll sometimes mention something at the start, go on about something else for a while and then, in the last paragraph, mention that thing again in the last line so it will appear as if the article is a carefully contained and well-thought-out argument.

This is a cop-out on my part but readers never seem to tire of it. At least I don't anyway.

To put it more eloquently, I bring the reader down a rose path, meander off into the garden and before long we are in the middle of some shrubbery. Just when you think we are lost, I pee in the bushes.

Then I guide you back to the path and you realise I knew where we were going all along (you may want to wash your hands afterwards).

Who are your influences? Shakespeare, Stendahl, Orwell, Runyon. These are all writers I know I should have read at some stage. I was a great admirer of Ivan Lendl's backhand, though I suppose this is neither here nor there.

What story do you wish you had written? Not a story per se, but I always wanted to find a suitable analogy for this quote that appeared in a US paper in the 1950s:

"US Air Force General Dom Flickinger said last night that all chimpanzees used in space flights would be volunteers".

He was asked how they would volunteer. He replied: 'We hold an apple in one hand and a banana in the other. If they choose the banana, they are judged to have volunteered. They almost always choose the banana'."

What was your worst moment? When I was accused of plagiarising the Bayeaux tapestry.

What won't you miss? When asking an acquaintance if they have a

pen, them saying: "Ha! Ha! A journalist without a pen."

Bonus points if, when I am writing down an idea, they ask: "What are you writing?" These friends/bullies will always assume you are writing about them and say: "Don't say anything lads, he's writing it all down."

In the worst-case scenario they will try to grab the notes off you to see what you are "writing about them."

I once spent three minutes wrestling on the floor over a note in Cashman's Bar before I eventually stuffed it in my mouth.

Would you take up your pen again for a newspaper column? If I was paid by the syllable. Or if the president asked me to.

What will you do now? One thing I have never accused myself of is being lazy. Why bother, when other people do it for me? But, in some ways, I have been a victim of my own failure and it is unlikely anyone will ever hire me again.

Anything else? No, that's it.