

Gloomy in Glenburn

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Brian Nolan was 11 years old and the boss of Merlyn Road in Dublin. His business was play and he was a born leader. His expertise lay in street games and all that went with them. He knew where to get such things as ropes (to make swings from lampposts), ball bearings (to be used as biggies in marbles), old pram wheels (to make go-carts), and perfect Y-shaped branches (for slingshots).

He took great pride in mentoring us younger boys—always boys, no girls allowed—in the precise details of games. For instance he would show you how to get the best chestnuts from the best trees. He explained that you then had to count them up, divide them exactly in half, and put the good ones at the back of your mother's hot press. Next you patiently waited for a whole year before taking them out. When you did they were as hard as cement and so you bored a hole through the centre (with a special thing for boring holes) and threaded a string through it. Now your wizened old conker could smash the chestnuts of the other kids in school to smithereens. It's no idle boast to say that I once had a conker of 27.

One of Brian's greatest skills was roller-skating. He was really fast, had great balance, and could do triple cross-overs, go backward, leap off the pavement, and do that clown thing where he pretended that he was going to fall but didn't. He also used his creative genius to incorporate "found objects" into games. One day he came back from a trip to the Sandymount dump with a bag full of old corks, which he placed on the road to create an Olympic-style slalom course. Next, all the kids took a turn weaving their way through the course. That night I went to bed and dreamed of an almost perfect 9.8 from the Russian judge. I used to practise my skating from early morning to night. Until one day I was told that I could no longer go out to play.

It was an ordinary May morning in 1959 made extraordinary when I was called into the front sitting room of our house on Merlyn Road. My uncle Joe—the husband of my auntie Marie and a kind of remote figure in my life up until then—loomed in front of the fireplace, jingled some loose change in his pockets, and told me that my father had been called to a better place. He then went on to tell me that there was no need to cry and that I was the man of the house now. I was not to disturb my mother with any questions because she was upset enough as it was. I tried hard to make sense of this, knew enough not to make a fuss, and then, like the good boy I had been brought up to be, quietly left the room.

Then they—I never really knew who *they* were—decided that it would be best if the children did not go to the funeral. I suppose they must have thought that the strain of it would have been too much for us. Maybe they were right, but I have my doubts. I have always thought that if I had been there I would have seen the coffin, I

would have heard the word *dead*, and I would have seen that coffin put in the ground. I would have seen my father dead and buried. I think I would have remembered that.

Instead, along with my sister, Candy, and my brother, John Paul, I was sent away for 2 weeks to stay with Mrs Clark in Clonskeagh. I have no memory of those weeks. When I try to recall them, all I have is a blurred image of me standing alone in a field behind her house crying. It is the last time I can ever remember crying with real conviction. I have tried hard over the years to remember just one other thing about those weeks and I can't.

Next we found ourselves back in Glenburn, my grandfather's house on Palmerston Road. It was where my mother had grown up and so it felt as if we really did not belong there. People were supposed to move on in their lives. There was something not right about it, and it was as if we were being punished for not having a father. But this was where we were expected to start our new life and where I was to learn to forget.

It was a huge house in a wealthy area, and to look at it you would think that the people who lived there had everything that such a house could offer—wealth, privilege, and comfort. But it had a cold, empty feel to it. It was not so much our home as a place that had been rearranged to accommodate us. There was a locked door at the top of the house to prevent access to the upstairs rooms. I was allowed in once or twice, under supervision. It was as if these rooms contained the ghosts of my mother's childhood—ornate dressing tables, large bedframes, old mahogany wardrobes. All of this stuff was covered with heavy white cloth and preserved as a ghostly memorial to her remote and privileged past. It sat above us like some purposeless mausoleum.

Granddad had retreated to 2 large rooms on the main floor and he no longer seemed to be the kind and gentle man I had known when we visited from Merlyn Road. He was older now and he just wanted to be left alone. Although he gave me money for odd jobs like cutting the grass or bringing in the coal, he had little patience with me. He was not like a dad and I felt confused by his remoteness. I longed for some sort of close contact, some sort of explanation about what was going on. Instead I felt like a nuisance around him. He kept the doors to his rooms firmly closed, and if I wanted to be with him, I had to knock and wait for an answer.

Sometimes he allowed me in if I behaved myself. He would sit in a big armchair in front of the fire and say his prayers, either reading from an old, tattered, black prayer book or muttering decades of the rosary while he fingered his beads. Occasionally he would let me turn on the wireless. I loved the glow of the little green light as it tuned into the foreign stations, but he always changed

it to ceilidh music on Radio Éireann. Mostly though, he just wanted peace, and so I would lie quietly on the floor and stare about. It was a dark, melancholy room, and the only warmth came from a small coal fire. The big heavy furniture, old paintings, and threadbare carpet added to the gloom, and when darkness descended he hardly ever turned on the light. In an odd sort of way I enjoyed the gloomy sadness. It was kind of comforting and made me feel less confused, as if while I was in there I didn't have to try and work things out.

We lived downstairs, at the back, in what once would have been the maid's quarters. We were told not to use the front door of the house, but a side door that had been cut into the wall along Cowper Road. The old kitchen became a living room and the small scullery was now our kitchen. We shared the upstairs bathroom with my grandfather, a big, cold room with dark, rusty stains on the ancient bath and sink. I slept in a converted pantry, my sister in the old maid's room, and my mother and brother in what was called the *return room*. Our perfect little home on Merlyn Road had been abandoned for this untidy back of a house, and it felt like we were no longer a family but a lonely collection of isolated individuals.

This house was not a happy place for me, and I spent a lot of time there brooding and feeling sorry for myself. It was as if I had been living a perfect suburban life and then, out of nowhere, I was crushed by some huge object. It overwhelmed me and I was unable to act normally. When I look back on it now, I think that I was literally stunned by my father's death. And so when I tried to work it out, my mind would go blank or I would get confused. Maybe Merlyn Road—the playing, the friends, the perfect family, and of course my father—had all been just a dream. Maybe it was taken away from me because I was bad. Maybe I had never lived there at all.

But I was 9 years old and my main business was still play. My new play was no longer fun and games; it was mostly solitary. This was how I began to deal with my father's death. I would slip out the side gate with a ball. I would kick it against the wall and let it bounce once. I would kick it a hundred times. Then I would repeat the game letting the ball bounce twice, then 3 times. Or sometimes I would imagine

a square made of 10 bricks and kick the ball at the square, then at 8 bricks, then 6. Then I would try and kick it higher and higher without it going over the wall. Pass it to the bricks and have the bricks pass it back. Kick, kick, kick. I remember thinking that the order and numbers were somehow important. This meticulous kicking was one way of transforming the internal chaos of my mind into a sort of external order.

I spent hours, days, weeks kicking that ball. It was senseless and pointless—a mindless thing to be doing and a total waste of time. But time went by, and during that time I was able to fill my mind with thoughts of just kicking the ball against the wall: me, the red bricks, and the ball. When I was kicking the ball I did not have to think about my absent father. I suppose I didn't have to be grieving and I didn't have to be 9 to mindlessly kick a ball against a wall of bricks. But it helped.

Over the years I have gone back many times to look—well, mostly to kind of furtively glance—at the side of the house and its red brick wall. And I have always been surprised by that kind of strange paradox that happens to anyone when they go back to visit a childhood place. Although the place obviously remains the same, it somehow seems to change with time; in my case I am always surprised at how small the wall has become. Of course I know it isn't the wall that has changed, but me. And anyway it isn't the wall that interests me so much as why I keep going back there. It is too much of a coincidence that I end up there every time I go back to Dublin.

At first, I think, it was a kind of nostalgic return to unhappy times: a chance to wallow in my own gloomy memories. Later I visited it out of a kind of guilt. As if now being a relatively happy, well-adjusted adult I felt it somehow important not to totally abandon the young boy I once was: to acknowledge all those emotions that I had learned to deny. Most recently I seem to visit it as a duty, a kind of pilgrimage, to the birthplace of my future self. I'd like to think that it's more than just an exercise in pure self-indulgence—but I can't really explain why I keep going back. And I always have this nagging fear that when I am there someone from the road, from my past, might recognize me and ask me what I am doing. I suppose I



could say that I am just trying to turn my life around. That I wanted one more chance to be that 9-year-old boy, but with a clear mind. Back then my mind had taken a turn down the wrong road, lost control, and begun a confused and chaotic way of thinking.

I have always believed that most adults remember a time when they began to think for themselves. Maybe I'm wrong. In the Catholic church we used to call it *the age of reason*: the age when we could finally be responsible for our own thoughts and actions. My problem was that I could not think straight and I would do anything to avoid thoughts of my father. So I developed a way of getting through each day without him. I began to blank things out that made me cry, avoid thoughts that made me sad, forget things that upset me, and always deny that anything was wrong. I also learned how to shut people out of my life, how to lie, and how to avoid intimacy. But mostly my thinking was all confused and I knew that I had to cover this up by pretending that everything was normal.

I now know that my immediate reaction to my father's death was not unusual. The American psychologist Maxine Harris says in her book on parent loss in childhood, *The Loss That is Forever*, that the death of such a monumental figure as a father "registers as a 10 on the child's emotional Richter scale."¹ After the death of a parent most young children understandably become emotionally overwhelmed. Typically

they either completely shut down or they develop abnormal psychological traits that last a lifetime. And in his book, *Fatherloss*, author Neil Chethik describes some of this emotional turmoil in greater detail.² Young children who have lost a parent have intense feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, emptiness, and guilt. It is also common to spend a lifetime avoiding closeness in relationships in order to never again experience loss. They say it takes a lot of work to deal with these feelings, but no matter how you do it, you have to dig deep to bury your father.

The death of President John F Kennedy in 1963, 4 years after my father's death, was one of those tragic events that seemed to unite the whole world. Few who were alive at the time will ever forget the image of his 3-year-old son, John Jr, standing beside his coffin with his arm raised in a salute. In 1963 it was common practice to counsel young widows to rid their homes of mementos related to the lost parent and to refrain from talking about the death: the belief being that paying undue attention to the loss might produce a depressed child. Jackie Kennedy ignored this advice and she helped her son mourn his father in 3 important ways. She encouraged him to talk about his father and to keep mementos such as photographs around the home, and she maintained in her son's life a familiar masculine presence, his uncle Robert. My mother did none of these.

The research has also shown that talking about the dead father helps a son to deal with his grief. It sounds simple. But when it is not done, life becomes complicated. I suppose one of the problems with children is that they don't make appointments to talk about things. They just blurt stuff out when they need to have conversations. And so when I first tried to talk to my mother about my father, she would always seem to be busy. Then when we did talk about him she would get upset and cry. Of course I did not want to upset her, so I gradually learned not to talk about him, and very soon I found it difficult to know what to call him. He was not Daddy or Da or Dad, but my dead father. He was quickly becoming a stranger.

Thus began a lifetime of not talking about him. It was easier that way, and whenever the subject came up I would blank it out, wait for it to pass, or leave the room. I could not stand seeing my mother upset; I needed things to be normal and I knew that if I did not want to make her unhappy I should never talk about my father again. All I had to do was deny that he had ever existed.

In fact I was nearly 50 when eventually I got up the courage to talk to her about him. By this time she was living in a small house in Ballsbridge. I would visit her on my trips back from Canada, and we would sit opposite each other around a fire of peat briquettes in her living room. We would talk about all sorts of things—children, the news, politics, and gardening—anything but the topic that I had spent a lifetime avoiding. But more and more I felt a need to talk to her about him before she herself died. I also knew it was ridiculous that it had taken so long to have what should have been a simple, straightforward conversation. However, when the moment came I still did not know what to call him—it would have felt awkward and false using a word like *da* or *dad*. And so I said to her: "How did your husband die?"

She answered: "He was snoring and then he stopped snoring. I phoned a friend of his who was a doctor. He said to put the latch on the door and that he would be over. He later told me that he was shocked. I suppose I was too."

That was all. These few words were so important to me that I wrote them down in a small notebook. It was as if my whole life had been building up to this one moment, and I wanted to always remember exactly what she said. And so I was left with the fact that he had died in his sleep: nothing more heroic or tragic. It had been a simple and almost mundane death. It happens every day: a man dies and leaves a wife and children. But for me it was the most important death that had ever occurred, and it has defined my whole life. And ever since, for all my avoiding, not a week has gone by that I haven't thought about him.

My mother seemed strangely unemotional as she talked about his death, detached even, and when I asked her to tell me more she told me about the practical side of things. That my father had no savings or insurance. That as she had never worked and had no money, we had moved back in with my grandfather. She said that she

was still employing a maid for 10 shillings a week and had had to let her go because she couldn't afford her anymore. I tried to move the conversation away from the mundane and get her to talk about what I thought was important: the emotions that had never been acknowledged. Her reply was short and banal. She had had to wear black for a year.

I suppose what I wanted from the conversation was some sort of insight into what had happened to me back then. I knew it was a selfish need but one that only she could fulfil. But she had nothing else to offer me. It was more than 40 years ago; she was now in her 80s and she had obviously "moved on" years ago. Anyway her mind was already going and it was too late for the conversation I had wanted. For it to be of any use it should have taken place years earlier.

Obviously if I could have spoken to her as a child, what I would have most wanted would have been to talk to her about my father. When I was young I craved to hear simple stories about him. I also wanted to be able to ask the kind of questions for which I now know there were no answers. What would it have been like to grow up with a father? Would he have continued to play with me as I grew up? Would he have come to watch me play rugby? Would he have given me fatherly advice on how to live my life? And as the years went by, would he have always remained the great man that I thought he was, or would I have gradually grown away from him? What would it have been like to know him as a mature adult? Would I have become someone else if he had lived and would I still have spent my whole life trying to be him—the man my father was?

You see, his death had elevated him from simply being my father, who worked as a doctor, to being an almost supernatural being. He was now present all around me and yet just beyond this natural world. In dreams he took on this mystical floating presence that brought me untold happiness. There he would be a tall, blond, smiling vision who was always doing good deeds in difficult circumstances. Then when I would awake he would remain right there in front of me just before slipping away beyond my grasp—this was always my loneliest moment and would lead to another unhappy day. But there was one consolation and that was confirmed by my mother, my aunts, his colleagues, and his friends. I was just like him. As a result I knew from early on that I had been chosen to take his place in the world. I would become a doctor just like him. It was to be my vocation and destiny. I had no other choice.

It was impossible to talk about my father among my school friends. They would ask me straight out why I had no father and then stand there waiting for an answer. This would embarrass and confuse me, and I would try to make something up on the spot. Sometimes I would deny that he was dead and say he had just gone away for a few years. I told others that he was a no-good drunk and that as a family we were better off without him. But mostly instead of answering their questions I would just run away and keep to myself. I was ashamed not to have a father.

However, it was not so easy to brush off adults with that kind of stuff. They would say to me that it was a shame that he died so young; that he was a fine man, tall and handsome, a good husband and father, and, of course, a great doctor. But what good was that to me. He had abandoned us, left me without a father, and destroyed our dreams. And so there were times that I hated him. Not just him but all his stupid, golf-playing, prosperous friends. I had learned tricks for putting my father out of my life, but it was as if his old friends went out of their way to remind me he was gone. They would call around to our house, pat me on the head, and give me 10 shillings now and then for my troubles. They could condescend to me all they liked but they could not control my thoughts. It was these thoughts—streams of confusion, abandonment, fear, loneliness, and sadness—that would swirl around in my head and feed into a bigger river of anger. And it was only with anger that my thoughts could become clear. I could hate anybody and I did not need a reason.

The people that I often hated the most were the kids that I had become closest to. How this worked was that I would become best friends with someone and work really hard at nurturing the friendship. Then, out of the blue, I would cut them off and have nothing more to do with them. I would not answer the phone when they rang, or if they knocked at the door I would hide behind a curtain and pretend I was not at home. Then I would watch as they walked away from the house looking puzzled. I did not need them; it was best to be rid of them; they could not be trusted. I suppose the fact that I could disappear out of their lives, just like that, and have them know what that felt like gave me a perverse kind of pleasure.

I craved comfort and compassion from my mother, but she was unable to give it. Frank O'Connor, the Irish short-story writer, once said that children only see their side of the story. And so one thing I never understood as a child was that my mother, too, was grieving. From my perspective she was always sad, and I wanted a mother like my friends had: one who could be happy and care-free and give me what I wanted. I never understood that the reason she did not give me money was that she had none. That the reason she worried so much was that she was afraid of losing us too. That the reason she was no fun was that she was devastated by grief—she had lost a husband, a father, a mother, and a brother in a very short period of time. And that the reason she got angry was that she must have lived her life overwhelmed by a sense of the injustice of it all. The perfect life that she had hoped for had been disrupted by death.

And for all my avoidance and denial, that death has shaped my life. Since I was 9 I have been kicking the memory of my father against the brick wall I built in my mind to keep him out. In his absence he has become an overwhelming presence in my life. 

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Competing interests

None declared

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