

The Price of Feet

My father lost his feet in the late autumn of 1987; they had travelled sedately, like a royal couple in a state coach, down a lift shaft towards the hospital incinerator precisely one hour before his spirit flew north. A lifelong cowboy fan, he had spent three days crafting an epitaph.

‘He died with his boots on,’ was allowed to remain despite a small flurry of protests that was finally surrendered. The stone mason stopped short of chiselling in Palatino, even if it did rhyme with *Palamino*. In the end, it was botched anyway, 90 per cent of a body sent back to Ireland and scattered on the *Maigue*.

My aunts said this was ‘typical’ of my father, although I hadn’t seen him since I was seven, due to circumstance and a certain skulduggery, missing his ending by 15 years. They said there was a blue sky, yet no meteorite or thunder flash to mark the passing of his soul, just some cheese sandwiches and a weak cup of tea.

But even the most ordinary of lives (and my father didn’t have one of those) can loom large in a son’s heart and mind, a firstborn’s duty vague and hard to discharge.

There was no soul in the world that year, it fell around my ankles and disappeared, bound for a hellish underground, terminus unknown.

By the winter, a new father had appeared, year zero was declared and I was not allowed to speak of the past nor of the man who ‘loved women more than us’. That’s what our mother said and she knew best after all. We were cut like fruit from a tree, no

roots and left to blossom or decay. James ate it up, called the man ‘dad’, but he was younger I figured and couldn’t remember much.

It was 1970 and back then feelings were swept away like dead leaves and when social services came interviewing for the adoption, we looked up and smiled, nodding our assent, keeping it up for a whole year.

‘Your son seems to be fighting a lot...’ My feet hung like two slabs of meat in a breeze, in the sour-metal chair, started to swing back and forth.

‘Well, I don’t know why that would be. We’re a happy family, although of course there are some adjustments to be made moving to a new school,’ then changing gears: ‘He was just fine before he came to you.’

She had never heard the term *folie a deux*, had failed to realise the magnitude of her foolishness in declaring the past erased to appease her new man and had stuffed the memory of my father inside me, as if sewing a kitten into a sack. I was born in the year of the tiger, so perhaps it was a mistake. Worse, he looked just like me.

Jimmy Greer, the oleaginous bully in my class, catches the first wave. He is picking on Stephen Day, brushes me aside then swings; gold dust, a legacy from art class, falling from his fringe. He is twice as big, a birth mark on his forehead, which supplies the target I need. Is he down? Yes, he is, after a false start, his

layers of fat condensing into a ziggurat, upside down, head first and weighted in my favour, like a Foreman for a young Ali.

I pity him but want to poke his dark heart, smash the pride out of his bragging mouth, but can never supplement calamity with cruelty. Rage would continue to break out of me, but no killer blow, my instinct mainly to awaken those asleep. 'Forgive them Lord, for they know not what they do,' always sticks on me when I am about to pop someone in the mouth. I wish it wouldn't. I did set Suzanne Convery's hair on fire in assembly when I was 14, but didn't know she had on hairspray or what it would do. The evacuation went on past lunch.

In the end, I found it better to turn all that rage inside, pour alcohol down a tube, tear up the wine box and cut open the aluminium bag for the final drops, by 22. Without knowing it, I had decided to die: there was no-one to talk to, no help on hand; grief ballooned like pesticide.

'We just cannot understand you,' one of them held up the school report while the other glared. 'We do everything we can for you and still you don't try.... Look at this, look at this! We are paying a lot of money for this school and how do you repay us? You bloody drink.'

I had, she said, to be grateful to 'dad'; we all did.

'But, he is not my dad!' I said.

She had forgotten to mention the affair she had two years after meeting new dad, the affair she had embroiled me in before he found out, before he blamed me. That, above all things, could never be spoken of, its secret inviolable, its pending release threatening to collapse the new family, now a budding corporation. I don't think I ever told James, it just didn't occur. It is hard to explain innocence, its absolute neutrality, or to know the power I had in my hot little hands.

Instead, it jostled in the sack with the angry cat, held back by a ten-year-old's innocence, fear, and loyalty to those who pretended to be adult, shored up with money and shiny careers. But it never did wash. I never did tell her new dad had thumped me in the stomach.

I liked the lover, a countryman in tweeds, all golden curls and gentle ease even though, as she later told me, he broke into the house one day, ransacked her knicker drawer like some afternoon serial killer starting out on a spree. I was packed off to a penfriend near Le Mans when the new father tried to run him over near the post office in his mauve Allegro.

That was the beginning of the end, I spent the following ten years leaving. But how and when do you look for a parent brainwashed, whitewashed out of history? Should I? Could I? After a number of false starts...

‘You will hear news of your father when you get home,’ said the voice. I was on a men’s retreat, now 40, ten of us, brewing ritual for a week. Anything was possible, even intercessions from the gods.

A brown envelope was waiting, contained his death certificate. I had been living a mile away at the time, it turned out, probably saw the steel-grey plume bearing what was left of his feet, spiralling into a cirrus sky. I found his sisters a few months later up in Leicester where he had spent his final days, where I had been working.

‘They told him you were going to Australia for a new life and that if he loved you, he would sign the adoption papers. He cried for a month, spent much of the time drunk. Eating those takeaways really didn’t help his diabetes.’

‘He could have been lying to save himself,’ I said. But two others confirmed the story.

‘He was born in the poorhouse in Dublin, was given away by our mother to an English couple who took him back to England. This was way before she met our father. She had to leave her village in Limerick.’

‘He went back to Ireland to find his family, only to discover we were in London...she never did tell him who his father was. She refused, it was absolute.’

A priest-rapist floated into my mind’s eye, a flying brown bird, but it was probably a lie.

My father was 53 when he died, spent his life looking for love, but instead became a lover – a very different thing, laced through with need – fathered seven children from five women, left this world without his feet, unable to walk into the next dimension, cursed maybe.

Synchronously, I stopped drinking one month after he had died, his gift to me, sobriety. I finished my psychotherapy training ten years later, find myself working with orphans and scapegoats – and, just occasionally, school bullies. I have eliminated, as far as possible, all toxicity from my life. The cat is finally out of the bag.

I realize, there are no green shoots without exile, no health without humility. Ask any Celt and they will tell you this: a myth is something that never happened yet always is.

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