

DONOGHUE

WARRENPOINT

# DENIS DONOGHUE

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A MEMOIR



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# WARRENPOINT

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# WARRENPOINT

DENIS DONOGHUE



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*For John,*

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*who died*

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I Think of It as A Town  
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# WARRENPOINT

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JOHN DONOGHUE



**I THINK OF IT AS A TOWN**, not as a village. In my private dictionary a village is a community surrounded by fields: the people are farmers, or they serve farmers and their families as shopkeepers, nurses, doctors, teachers, priests. At Sunday Mass the men wear caps, not hats, and after Mass they stand around the church to chat, gossip, or stare at the hills. A town, small or large, is not dependent upon the land that surrounds it; it opens on a different world. Tullow, in County Carlow, where I was born on December 1, 1928, still seems to me a village. No disrespect is intended. When I stand outside my brother Tim's shop—boots and shoes—in Bridge Street, I smell cows. On one side of Tullow there is Rathvilly, a village, and farther still, in the direction of Dublin, there is Baltinglass, another village though it regards itself as a town. In the other direction Carlow is a town, because it is big enough to make you forget the fields surrounding it. One street in Carlow leads to another much the same: it is the kind of town that Yeats hated, though he probably never saw it. He saw many towns like Carlow and passed through them with distaste—Mullingar, Athlone, Athenry, I suppose—on his way to Cool Park, Lady Gregory's estate in Gort, County Galway.

Warrenpoint is a town because one side of it opens upon the sea. If you look at a map of Ireland you find Belfast, come around the Ards Peninsula and Strangford Lough, and mark Ardglass, Newcastle, Kilkeel, and Rostrevor, you'll find the next town is Warrenpoint, where Carlingford Lough narrows till it ceases being a lough at Narrow Water and becomes the Newry Canal; not much of a canal these days. Warrenpoint looks across the lough to Omeath, a meagre town though it has Newry on one side and Carlingford on the other and the Cooley Mountains behind it and one of the mountains is called the Long Woman's Grave. Warrenpoint is in Northern Ireland; Omeath is in the South. A ship of the British Navy now sits in the middle of the lough to prevent incursions of the Irish Republican Army, deemed to be rampant in the woods and villages between Omeath and Dundalk. Weapons, bought in Holland or otherwise acquired in Libya, are somehow delivered to the IRA in the North. A few of these deliveries are probably made by small boats at night from Omeath or Carlingford, despite the vigilance of the Navy. In my time such vigilance was not required. We had a dock, and coal boats regularly arrived with supplies for Kelly's Coalyard, but there was no cause to assume that the cargo included guns.

Warrenpoint was a seaside resort, if you please. I don't recall that the local Urban District Council displayed coloured pictures advertising the charm of the town; nothing like "Come to Sunny Prestatyn" in Philip Larkin's poem, with a laughing girl in a swimsuit and, behind her, hotels with palm trees expanding from her thighs and arms. Nothing as grand as that. As a resort, Warrenpoint relied not upon laughing girls or golden weather but upon three more reliable considerations. One: you could get to the place easily from any part of the North by train, since it was the terminus of the Great Northern Railway's branch line from Newry. No longer; the train is gone. Two: Warrenpoint has the largest square in Ireland, a great place for amusements, circuses, swings and roundabouts, ice-cream carts, parades, celebrations. The square was promiscuous in the wiles of display. Three: the licensing laws for the sale of alcohol are stricter in the North than in the South, mainly because Presbyterians keep the Sabbath more severely than Catholics do. If you came to Warrenpoint for a Sunday trip, you would find the public houses shut, but you could go by ferryboat across to Omeath, an open town on the Sabbath, for drink and noise. Meanwhile, children and their mothers passed the Sunday on a rough pebble beach in Warrenpoint and watched the yachts and rowing boats in the lough. If the pleasure of



watching other people enjoying themselves wore off, the mothers could walk to the town park and see their betters playing tennis. Or walk along the coast road to Rostrevor, a smaller and prettier town than Warrenpoint and socially several cuts above it. Warrenpoint had tea shops, but Rostrevor had the Great Northern Hotel, a place of emphasised elegance. Not now: it was decisively bombed some years ago by the IRA, and the remains of it have been removed.



I REMEMBER NOTHING before Warrenpoint:

*I remember, I remember  
The house where I was born,  
The little window where the sun  
Came peeping in at morn.*

I don't, unfortunately. It was customary for an expectant mother in my mother's time to go back to her own people for several weeks before and after the birth of the child. My mother's family was divided in two parts. Some of the children were reared with their parents in Clonmel, County Tipperary, and some with more remote relatives in Tullow. My mother and her sister Ciss grew up in Tullow, so she went back there when her time came. Whether I was born in the house in Bridge Street or in the local cottage hospital, I don't know. Probably in the house, a big ramshackle affair containing a shop, run by Martin Coady, my mother's uncle. The shop was reputed to have sold, during the few years of its splendour, more bacon than any other shop in the east of Ireland. In my time it sold virtually nothing but bacon and, for specially favoured customers, butter and cigarettes. Martin Coady, a man of relentless gloom, as I recall him, was also the local representative of the Graguenamanagh Sack Hiring Company, and he had a barn behind the shop where he spent the winter days mending torn sacks in preparation for the harvest season. Silently he spread the damaged part of a sack across his knees and darned it with a large, curved sacking needle and thick brown twine. I watched him till my silence, matching his, became oppressive to both of us. Meanwhile Ciss attended to the shop. She did not stand behind the counter but sat in the little sitting room reading the sporting page of *The Irish Independent* and choosing two horses to back for a double. She never attended a race or learned anything about horses, but she took advice from *The Irish Independent's* racing correspondent and waited for the day on which both of the chosen horses would win. A double would make her fortune or so she thought. During the racing season she put a wager on two horses every day and, since it was not respectable for a lady to enter a bookmaker's premises, sent me there to place the bet. Except for the great occasion on which, like everyone else in Ireland, she backed Lovely Cottage to win in Galway, she regularly lost her bet. But her mild little gamble passed the time: most of the morning was spent picking the horses, the afternoon held the excitement of waiting for the result, and at least an hour or two in the evening she spent wondering what had gone wrong.

In any case, I give my place of birth as c/o Martin Coady, Bridge Street, Tullow, County Carlow, Ireland.

Tullow comes into the reckoning because my father, a policeman in the Royal Irish Constabulary,

was stationed there when he met my mother, a girl named Johanna O'Neill. Her father, too, was in the RIC, stationed in Clonmel. My father was promoted to the rank of sergeant in Tullow when the reigning sergeant, named Morris, went mad and ran from the barracks, for reasons known only to himself. My father was the man in the gap and he got the job, the only preferment he ever enjoyed. When the Government of Ireland Act (1920) divided Ireland into two parts, with a parliament in Belfast to govern the six northern counties, it was ordained that any member of the RIC would have the right to go North and take up the same rank in the newly formed Royal Ulster Constabulary. My father, having seen enough of Ireland and of police work in a violent time, spent two months trying to find an alternative job. He and my mother went to Chester, where he tried to establish himself as an insurance agent, till someone started a rumour that he had murdered a man in Ireland and was "on the run." My father gave up and went to Northern Ireland to take his rank in the RUC. He always maintained that the lapse of five months in his official career, taken in association with his Catholicism, made any further promotion in the RUC impossible. I believe him. During his years in the RUC it was not yet necessary for the authorities to show goodwill toward Catholics or to promote them above the rank of sergeant. If my father had been twenty or thirty years younger and in the same profession, he would probably have been selected as a token Catholic and raised perhaps to the rank of Head Constable or even District Inspector to placate the natives. In the event, he retired on pension before such a concession became necessary. "Too late, too late, he cried in vain."



MY FATHER WAS BORN in a mountainy cottage in County Kerry. If you go from Killarney toward Tralee and turn off the main road into the Black Valley and keep going till the road ends and you can go no farther except on foot, you'll come to three or four houses in a townland—not decisive enough to be a village—called Cloghernooch: the postal address is Cloghernooch, Beaufort, Killorglin, near Killarney, County Kerry. The stone walls of my father's house are still there, but the roof is gone. My father's father never made a living from the few square yards of land he owned or the few sheep he put on the mountain. He earned some extra pounds by renting a horse to visitors, mostly American tourists, who wanted to cross the Gap of Dungloe from Kate Kearney's Cottage, and by rowing the same or other tourists around one of the lakes of Killarney. We never learned what happened, how it came about that he was drowned, along with the several Americans he had in the boat. My father was twelve at the time and the eldest of several children. The family survived, and as the children grew up they emigrated to America, most of them getting jobs in the vicinity of Watertown, Massachusetts. The first time I came to America, to teach at the Harvard summer school, my father's sister Mary, whom I had never met in Ireland, entertained me as if I were a conquering hero. Which in some sense I felt myself to be. I was a professor. She had emigrated to Watertown, found a job in the local telephone exchange, married an ice vendor named Torres, and developed a fairly lucrative skill in interior decoration. Her brothers lived in the environs of Watertown. I don't know about other sisters except for one, who disappeared in America for many years and was not heard of till, after her death, we heard that she had left America, gone to England, and worked as a priest's housekeeper in Hastings. There was a photograph of her in the parlour of the barracks in Warrenpoint, and I gathered from my father that she had in some way gone wrong. Evidently not. Nothing wrong with a priest's housekeeper; it's a decent occupation.



IN WARRENPOINT WE LIVED in the police barracks, or rather in half of it, the other half being given over to the official business of the police, centred on what was called the Day Room. There was a thick concrete wall about six feet from the building, protecting it against an attack or a riot. By locking two small gates and one large one, you could close off the barracks and hold out against a siege. The barracks had two cells, or lockups, as they were called, one for men, one for women. I remember my father lifting me up to look through a metal slit at a man he had arrested. The cell had a wooden platform instead of a bed, a small barred window good enough to let in a dim light, and a drain in the corner so that the cell did not need to be cleaned; it could be hosed out instead. It smelled of a strong disinfectant, and the walls were whitewashed. In a smaller room beside the stairs there was a wooden chest filled with revolvers, rifles, hand grenades, and tear-gas canisters for the dispersal of crowds. Behind the barracks there was a parade ground for the constables, and behind that a garden of sorts which housed for protection the telephone exchange for Warrenpoint and the surrounding district.

My father was in charge of seven or eight regular constables and about the same number of part-time policemen, called B-Specials, whom I hated and feared because they were, to a man, Protestants and Unionists. In 1920 an armed force of Special Constabulary was established. Special Constables were Protestants, recruited mainly from the Orange Order, a body of extreme loyalists, as we would now call them, formed at the end of the eighteenth century to celebrate forever the victory of William Duke of Orange, over King James II at the Battle of the Boyne on July 1, 1690. The remainder of the Special Constabulary was recruited from the Ulster Volunteer Force, a paramilitary body ready to take up arms to prevent the formation of a united, independent Ireland. Special Constables were divided into three categories: A's, who served as full-time policemen; B's, men who had ordinary jobs in the towns of the North but also served as part-time uniformed and armed policemen; and C's, a militia ready to be called up for emergencies. The A's and C's were soon disbanded, but the B-Specials remained in force and could become full-time policemen if necessary. In 1922 sectarian conflict in the North resulted in 230 deaths, and a new armed police force was established, the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to deal with the situation. In theory, one-third of the RUC were to be Catholics, but in the event, few Catholics joined. The RUC was obviously a Protestant organization, its chief aim to keep Catholics in check. The fact that my father was one of the few Catholics who joined the force was easily explained: he had no choice, no other job was available, and the RUC could not reject his application.

The B-Specials are still in force as auxiliaries to the RUC, but now they are called the Ulster Defence Regiment and are part of the British Army.

Our half of the barracks, the "married quarters," had a parlour, a kitchen and scullery, three bedrooms, a bathroom, and an outhouse. The parlour had a black upright piano, a circular mahogany table, and a trolley for the wireless. There were two photographs on the wall above the piano. One showed my father and mother, shortly after their wedding, I suppose. He is in the uniform of a sergeant in the RIC: he sports a moustache, firmly twisted at the ends, unwaxed but as if waxed. He is sitting on a high-backed chair; stern, unyielding, as if nothing but duty called him. My mother is standing beside him. Both are facing the camera. She is wearing a long dark skirt, a white blouse, and a small brooch. Her hair is tied in a bun, her face resolute, unsmiling. Her right hand is placed upon my father's left shoulder; a marriage declared come what might. The photograph is oval, blurred at the

edges; the frame is oblong. Husband and wife: my parents are looking at the world in that relation answerable to a civic as well as to a religious contract.

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The second photograph showed my father's sister, the one we thought had gone wrong. She had blouse much like my mother's, tight to the neck, its severity mitigated by a circle of lace. She was not looking at the camera but in profile, off to the left, as if already planning to emigrate.

A third photograph was not, as I recall, fixed to the wall, but it stood in a small case on the piano. It is a photograph of my younger brother, John, the one who didn't survive an attack of pneumonia. He is in his pram, smiling. The photograph was taken in the gap between the barracks and the protective wall. John died when he was fourteen months old. That left four of us: Tim, my sisters Kathleen and May; I was now the youngest. I recall my father, on the day of John's funeral, carrying the little coffin down the stairs. I wasn't allowed to go to the funeral: three days after Christmas, 1932, if my memory is accurate on this point. I was sent across the street to the Heatleys, neighbours though not intimate friends, while the funeral procession walked from the church to the graveyard at Burren, a mile and half above the town. I stayed at the Heatleys', fingering the piano. I never heard John mentioned again in our family, except by my sisters many years later, when my parents were dead. In Ireland, and perhaps in other countries, a dead child is either talked about in the family as if still alive or is never mentioned again after the funeral.



MARY DOUGLAS has a paragraph in *Natural Symbols* about the decencies of working-class homes:

The first thing that is striking about the English working class home is the attempt to provide privacy in spite of the difficulties of layout. The respect for the privacy of bodily functions corresponds to the respect for the distinction between social and private occasions; the back of the house is appropriately allocated to cooking, washing and excretory functions; the front parlour, distinguished from the living room-kitchen, is functionless except for public, social representation. Space by no means wasted, it is the face of the house, which speaks composedly and smiles for the rest of the body; from this room a person must rush if he bursts into tears.\*

Our house was similar and different. It was continuous with the official half of the building. There was no visible separation between the dayroom of the barracks and the sergeant's married quarters. As such, it presented an image of authority to the town by being larger than it had to be and by appearing to be entirely official. The wall that ran along the entire front of the barracks, breached only by an iron gate in front of the main door, enhanced the implication of authority but also made one wonder at the need of it. It seemed at once assertive and vulnerable: else why did it think it necessary to assert its authority?

The married quarters were different in certain respects from the ordinary working-class home. The kitchen and the parlour were at the front of the house, equally in view if they could have been seen behind the barrier of the wall. The common life was conducted in the kitchen, and the parlour was reserved for special occasions. But many activities constituted a special occasion. Listening to the radio was special; so was the formal occasion of schoolwork. I did my lessons on the parlour table

which gleamed in preparation for the social life we rarely had. The smile to which Mary Douglas refers was displayed in the table, the piano, and the radio. So it was a serious matter when I spilled a bottle of ink on the table and the stain could not be removed. It was concealed by a doily and on special occasions further concealed by a vase of flowers. The parlour was kept remote, however, being reserved for these spiritually superior purposes.

Not that the comparison with an English working-class home should be forced. We were neither English nor working-class. Not working-class, because my father's hands did not need to become dirty: he was not a manual or an industrial worker; he used a pen and, more rarely, a telephone. I would say we were lower-middle-class Catholic, but my father's membership in the RUC raised him formally and professionally, if not socially. By being in uniform, he was better dressed than a lower-middle-class Catholic would normally be, and this made his social image somewhat ambiguous. Whether we wanted this to happen or not, some authority from the RUC adhered to us in our social lives. We were Sergeant Donoghue's family in a town that knew how to estimate such things.



WARRENPOINT HAD ITS SEASONS, but they were economic and political rather than natural. The rhythms of natural life were available, but the town did not appear to take account of them. The tide came and went out. At certain times of the day one could walk along the stony beach, cross the breakwater—a device, this breakwater, to retain the small amount of sand in one section of the shoreline—and dig one's footprints into the sand. At other times the waves at that point came high enough to crash over the wall on the shore road. It was necessary to run to the other side of the road or get drenched. Walking up to Burren or along the shore road to Rostrevor, one saw evidence of the seasons: trees shed their leaves and in due course displayed new growth. But the town didn't seem to advert to the sequences: it did not sink into itself in winter, stir in spring, or burst into full sail with the summer. Or if it did, the reason was commercial, as if on principle, and natural only by coincidence. The town was made for crowds rather than for the individuals who came to Warrenpoint because it was there to be seen. We had a tourist season, a short summer constrained by the vagary of weather. The climax of the year was "the marching season," the few weeks before and after the twelfth of July. The town prepared itself for the tourists, not to make them feel welcome in any personal sense but to give them the annual satisfaction of finding shops freshly painted, boats as merry as the waves, tea shops and ice cream parlours pretending to be new. The tourist season over, the paint began to fall from the walls, the old concrete was allowed to yield to the wind and the salt spray. The town went out of season, waiting for another June, the trains, the hired buses. Behind the walls along the sea-front, the boarding houses, bed-and-breakfast places, lodging houses, private hotels, there may indeed have been private lives, walking to a different tune, beating time to entirely different rhythms, uncommercial and spontaneous. But it was hard to see the evidence. We seemed to have crowds, or we had nothing, leaving of all ourselves. Even those, like my family, who had no part in the mercenary life of the town, waited for it to come to life in the only form we knew: gregarious, haphazard, noisy.



APART FROM GIVING ME the bare details of his early life, my father didn't engage in reminiscence. So far as I could see, he was not unhappy or conscious of being disappointed, but he didn't bask in good times or occasions. He was grimly related to the present tense and determined to gain a better future for his children, so he hadn't much time for nostalgia. He seemed to consider his life as merely preparation for someone else's; mine, to be specific. He had an acute interest in the future, but it was my future rather than his. I find it strange, though, that he didn't take an interest in the harmless nostalgia of the photograph. Walter Benjamin has a memorable paragraph about photographs in one of his essays:

In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value.... But cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture. For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty\*

But there is another profile to the face. Susan Sontag has noted, in her book on photography, that photography was hardly invented before it was used by the police in Paris for mug shots of criminals and suspected criminals. The aura, in those cases, belongs not to their melancholy beauty but to the air of desolation. In photography the portrait speaks of the sitters in their isolation, making them either beautiful or terrible in that capacity. Still, I wonder why my parents showed little or no interest in the possession of such images. Or why, in my turn, I haven't bothered to gather together the few photographs we had. My sister Kathleen, more given to such memorabilia than I have been, has retained them, including a school photograph of me, taken when I was about seven, my hair short and laid bare in a fringe, my cheeks tight as if testing the risk entailed by a smile.

My father showed no interest, so far as I know, in the possession of images. He did not need to look at his wedding photograph. As for the only known photograph of John, presumably he knew that, having seen it once, he would not need to consult it again. It still exists. Kathleen has it. When I see John smiling out of his pram, I think, with some irritation: What had he to smile about? But then I wonder: Why do I feel irritated?

Perhaps the explanation is that I am irritated by the signs of naiveté. The body is a naïf: among the senses, it knows only the present. It can't even imagine a future, except notionally: debility, sluggishness, creaking limbs. A body in pain can't believe that it will ever be relieved of the pain: the present moment is the only condition it believes in. From the moment of his birth John was a child who would die after fourteen months, but he didn't know that. During those months his body was indifferent to a fate it couldn't foresee. It thought it would live forever. The smile, caught by the Brownie box camera and fixed in my mind so long as I recall it, is the sign of a child's body in its felicity. Let be.



IN "THE PHILOSOPHY OF COMPOSITION," Poe decides that "melancholy is ... the most legitimate of a

the poetical tones” since “beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears.” The next question is: “Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?” Death, obviously. “And when,’ I said, ‘is this most melancholy of topics most poetic?’” The answer is again obvious. “When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty*: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world—and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of the bereaved lover.” Poe’s argument is convincing so long as it is designed to hold the perfection of poetic sentiment imprisoned in the lyric words. There is no reason why the lover’s complaint should ever end or why he should want to escape from the poetic circle. But the death of a child had the advantage, as a poetic theme, over that of a beautiful woman: that intimations of waste, pointlessness, God’s indifference, and so forth, prompt the mourner to practise an irony even in the enjoyment of such favours as he receives. The force willing to see a child die may strike again at any felicity. The sentiments of Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* prompt the singer to retain a mental reservation even in the most extreme passage of mourning, enough to effect his escape from the song and to remind him that precaution is necessary. The German language is gifted in establishing, within a compound word, a narrative firm enough to point the speaker on his way beyond the sentiments phonetically linked in *Kindertotenlieder*: children, the dead, the songs the mourners sing.

“Now, just wash and brush up your memoirias a little bit.”\*



Do I REMEMBER accurately that our kitchen had brownish-red stone tiles, a gas cooker, an old cast-iron range, a wooden box for holding odds and ends, a sofa with the horsehair stuffing falling out of it and the springs sagged, a Singer sewing machine, four wooden chairs, and a linoleum-covered table with one corner of it broken or hacked off? Is that likely? What would make me certain of these things, as certain as I am that in the scullery my father always kept a large bottle of cod-liver oil and drank from it twice a day? And when I refused to drink the stuff, he compromised by buying a bottle of Kepler malt, which contained enough cod-liver oil to appease him and enough malt to remove the vile taste? I’m not sure about the table, and yet I feel that I’m merely introducing a doubt as if miming a scruple I’d like to be seen showing. The corner of the table was broken or hacked. Which, I can’t say. About the linoleum, I’m sure enough. There is a curious passage in Nabokov’s *Transparent Things* where he says that “when we concentrate on a material object, whatever its situation, the very act of attention may lead to our involuntarily sinking into the history of that object”:

Novices must learn to skim over matter if they want it to stay at the exact level of the moment. Transparent things, through which the past shines.\*

I am not sure that I understand him. What is that past which shines through transparent things if it is not a sense or a recollection of those things? And if it is, how can it be other than their history? I cannot distinguish between the past and my sense of those objects which detain my mind. The difficulty is that the more I concentrate my mind on a particular object, the more opaque it seems to become, as if it developed its own personality by virtue of being noticed. Is this what Hopkins means when he says

in one of the journals, that what you look hard at seems to look hard at you? If I believed Walter Pater I would expect to find that when I think of the kitchen table, I see it dissolving before my eyes in flickering impressions, gone as soon as come, till nothing remains but my sense of myself, my mind. But I don't find this at all. The table becomes opaque, almost sullen under my attention, as if it wanted nothing of my mind or interest. It's like taking a word, any word, and speaking it aloud, and repeating the word fifteen or twenty times, and then you find it recoiling from you as if your voice were a blow and the meaning of it goes dead on you. Thinking of the table, I recall the linoleum, and the wetness of it when my mother cleaned it after a meal, and the stickiness of my hands on it, and my thumb as it traced the line of the broken part. Is that what Nabokov means by sinking into the history of an object? All I know is that the table doesn't dissolve into my impressions of it—Pater is wrong about that anyway—but seems to return my stare, without welcoming my attention.



MY MOTHER WAS a minor presence in comparison with my father. I remember her as frail, delicate, never in good health for long. Every few weeks she suffered an attack of some kind. We were told it was epilepsy, and perhaps it was. Kathleen maintains that it was merely a symptom of hormonal imbalance. The immediate sign of an attack was a long, high-pitched wail, and then my mother would collapse. The important thing was to make sure that she didn't hurt herself. We were to remove her dentures, keep her well away from the stove, put a cushion under her head, and run for Mrs. Crawford. Mrs. Crawford, wife of Mr. Crawford the teacher, had been a nurse before she married. The Crawfords lived at Innisaimor, a few houses up Charlotte Street, and Mrs. Crawford would know what to do. When I carried my mother up to bed and left her to the attention of adults for two days. When I went in to see her, she always said: "I suppose I gave you a fright the other night."

These attacks nearly always happened at night, except for one occasion, when my mother, Kathleen, and I went for a walk along the Mount Road, and my mother suddenly gave the wailing sign and fell. Generally, I associate the wail with darkness and with my father's absence on duty. There was something called a meet patrol, every few weeks, when my father would meet, by arrangement, the sergeants-in-charge of Rostrevor and Mayobridge to compare notes, pool their information on anything that might be going on in the area. I hated those occasions. My father always prepared for them in the same way: got his carbide lamp ready, pumped up the wheels of his bicycle, and set off about midnight, long after bedtime. I dreaded the possibility that my mother would "get a turn," as we called it, while my father was out on this patrol. If I was asleep, maybe I wouldn't hear her and she might fling herself out of the bed and hurt herself on the floor. I still hear the hiss of the lamp and see my father's hand twisting the carbide container home.



I ASSUMED THAT my mother was as content as her circumstances allowed her to be. Her debility set clear limits upon her enjoyment of life: she could not be expected to dance. But within those



constraints she seemed not unhappy. No question of psychological or spiritual import was deemed to arise. We were encouraged to believe that contentment depended upon one's health. "If you have your health," my mother used to say, "you'll be all right," and she had every right to an opinion on the matter. My father agreed that one's health was paramount: if you were not well, not sound in wind and limb, you could not face the world. But the question was not turned in my mother's direction. I assumed that facing the world was something my father would do for her and that he was well able to do it. She was provided for.

So far as I know, the most reliable sign of my mother's well-being was her humming a tune. When she was silent, it was impossible to know how she was feeling: she did not comment on the matter. But silence, over a period of several hours, was a bad sign: she might be thinking terrible thoughts. When she hummed a tune, all was well. She didn't sing the songs, she merely hummed a phrase here and there, as if quoting them. If she heard, on the radio, the supreme Irish tenor John McCormack singing "I Hear You Calling Me" or "Bless This House," she would hum bits of the songs over the following few days. When I heard her humming these snatches, I silently added the words as McCormack sang them:

*I hear you calling me:  
You called me when the moon had raised her light.  
And so I went with you into the night.  
I hear you calling me.*

But the favourite song was "Bless This House," not because it sounded like a hymn but because McCormack's voice while singing it spoke of warmth and good-fellowship; it was like having turkey at Christmas and going to midnight Mass:

*Bless this house, O Lord we pray,  
Keep it safe by night and day.  
Bless these walls, so firm and stout,  
Keeping want and trouble out.  
Bless the people here within,  
Keep them pure and free from sin.  
Bless us all, that we may be,  
Ever open to joy and love.*

My father liked to hear my mother humming. It was a good sign. "She seems well, doesn't she?" C was the evidence of a few bars of an old song. What she really felt about her life, we never thought or dared to ask.



MY MOTHER'S RIGHT ARM was noticeably thicker than her left. When she was a girl, she tended shop

her uncle Martin's place in Tullow, taking turns with Ciss. They did not have a bacon slicer or any other machine, only two large knives. I never saw my mother slicing rashers, but I saw Ciss engaging in the only shopkeeping mystery she practised. To keep the meat intact, you had to cut each slice fairly thick, and when you came to a bone, you had to use the knife as a hammer and break through it. It was a question of tact to decide how much bone and rind you put on the weighing scale. Generally the rind was left on the rashers, but most of the bone was discarded; all of it, for a favoured customer. The weighing scale had a white plate of heavy delft and a copper pan to hold the weights. It was my job to stack the weights in due order on the counter, starting with the four-pounder and going up to the smallest, half an ounce. No finer adjustment was possible: half an ounce tipped the scale one way or the other. My aunt then took pencil and a scrap of paper, worked out the price, and threw the scrap of paper into the till; the only form of bookkeeping she maintained.

Short-tempered and tetchy, Ciss dominated my mother in the shop and throughout the house. It was taken for granted that whatever my mother did, she did badly. Not that Ciss liked to be interrupted in her day's work with *The Irish Independent* or her calculations on the racing page. My mother was welcome to the shop while Ciss was estimating the chances of a horse repeating, at Leopardstown on a dry day, its recent success at Mallow on heavy terrain. It was customary for the racing correspondent to supply the record of each horse's three previous performances, so Ciss had to decide whether a horse marked 030 might be ready to win or another one with better form—231, perhaps, or 301—might be too tired to try his best. If a customer arrived while Ciss was deep in such cogitations, my mother was summoned to attend to her, at whatever risk to domestic economy. But if Ciss had committed herself to a bet, she had nothing more to do and took command in the shop. My mother joined in the conversation but took no part in the business transactions. There were innumerable ways of making her feel redundant.



MY SOCKS WERE always too small for me, so I wore holes in them. My mother darned them, using a rounded block of wood to hold the sock where the heel should be. The wool was rarely the same color as the sock. To conceal the darn, I pulled the sock so far down the sole of my foot that I wore a new hole an inch or two above the heel. When she sewed a button on my coat, there was no choice of thread: ink or boot polish confused the issue enough to make the coat presentable. We had a Singer sewing machine, which ran according to the speed with which my mother worked the spindle up and down. She could not achieve a straight line or adjust the patch to the hole it was supposed to cover. She was neither stupid nor indifferent, but the implements she had to use—cloth, thread, meat, vegetables, the gas cooker, the stove—were invariably at odds with her need of them.



THE CLONMEL BRANCH of my mother's family seemed to me socially superior to the Tullow branch mainly because it included her brother Seamus. In the house at 13 Bolton Street, Clonmel, there was

photograph showing my mother's father, her sister Jenny, and Seamus. Her father was a tall, white-haired man, not as military in his bearing as my father was but still a well-made man. Jenny was sharp in feature as in manner. Seamus received a far better education than his sisters: he became a teacher, taught in Rockwell College, a majestic place. It must have been a cause of dismay to his father—an RIC man—that Seamus was a fervent nationalist, a rebel, and in the years before the Easter Rising of 1916 second in command to Sean Treacy, leader of the IRA in south Tipperary. In the photograph his father is wearing a long frock coat of heavy serge, but Seamus is wearing Celtic garb: tasselled stockings, the kilt, cloak, and Tara brooch. I doubt if he ever held a gun; he mainly organised nationalist sentiment and maintained communications throughout the country. But he was ready to do whatever was required. In the event, the Easter Rising turned into a debacle everywhere except in Dublin, mainly because the leadership of the rebels was split between those led by Padraig Pearse who wanted to go ahead with the Rising on Easter Monday, and those led by Eoin MacNeill, who thought it prudent to wait. Pearse took it upon himself to order his men to rise, but MacNeill countermanded the order. On Easter Sunday in Clonmel, Seamus did not know whether or not the Rising was to take place: one rumour displaced another. When news arrived that Pearse had proclaimed the Republic of Ireland from the General Post Office in Dublin, Seamus O'Neill went on the run, hiding out in the Gaeltacht in Ring. He wanted to see Ireland free and united in that freedom but he cared even more deeply for the revival of the Irish language and Irish cultural forms than for the political independence of the country and its release from the British Empire. When he was arrested, he was jailed first in Dundalk, later in Lewes and Frongoch. When he was released, he gave up his political and military life, took no part in the Civil War. After the Treaty the new unarmed police force—the Garda Síochána—was established in the South, and there was need of educated men as officers. Seamus joined the force, was promoted in a matter of days to the rank of Inspector, and eventually became Superintendent in charge of Galway, mainly because Galway included certain Irish-speaking areas, notably the Aran Islands, and some court cases were conducted in Irish. When my sister Kathleen enrolled as a student in University College, Galway, she lodged with Seamus and his family in a fine house in Lower Salthill.

Being an educated man and an officer in the Garda, Seamus O'Neill was socially far superior to us, so a visit from him made a special occasion. He was always well dressed and spoke with a certain elegance. In deference to my mother, who did not know enough Irish to carry on a conversation, he spoke English, but when he and I were otherwise alone, he reverted to Irish, causing me a little difficulty, since his dialect was Munster and mine was Donegal. We corresponded without difficulty in Irish, the differences between the dialects arising mainly in the pronunciation of the words rather than in diction or spelling. He married an Irish poet, Una ní Cuidithe: one of the few books I owned was a small volume of her lyrics.

Seamus's nationalism was not an embarrassment to us. My father liked him well enough and respected the range of his education. It was silently agreed that we would talk of domestic matters, not of politics. We knew that he regarded the Civil War as a disaster from which the country had not recovered, but we did not pursue a sore topic. Besides, domestic matters, schooling, health, the cost of living, and the problem of acquiring an education and getting ahead in the world filled the available space. My mother, between policemen and a rebel brother, kept her own counsel. She was gifted in that respect.



FOR SOME REASON I go through my shoes unevenly: the right one is more heavily worn than the left. My father mended our shoes. He had an iron last, a hammer, pincers, boxes of nails and tacks. Always leather, except for the heels, which were rubber. His favourite leather was Dry-Ped, a pale-green substance thinner than ordinary leather but supposedly of harder grain. With a scissors, he cut a pattern of newspaper to fit the sole of each shoe, then cut—the knife curved as if already intent upon its chore—a channel in the Dry-Ped along the edge of the paper. Sometimes he steeped the leather in water for an hour or two, to make it supple. Then he nailed it carefully and finished it off with a rasp. He smeared the sides of the Dry-Ped with polish—but if my father had time, he would warm a piece of wax over a candle and work it into the new edges. Heels were easier to attach. The rubber was easier than the leather to cut. Some skill was required to ensure that the nails were driven down straight, so that they could not be seen on the surface. My father had a gadget for driving the nails a little farther into each hole of the heel: in a perfect piece of workmanship, no nail protruded or caved into a buckle. “There, now,” my father said when the work was done, “that’ll keep you off the street.”



WHEN SHOULD ONE BEGIN to remember? I am dismayed to discover that the first three and a half years of my life are a blank. I remain sceptical about the powers of memory that other people claim, though in some cases the evidence is firm. One of my favourite books is Henry James’s *A Small Boy and Others*, and my favourite chapter in it is the fifth. But one passage strains my credence. In 1848, at the age of five, James heard that Louis Philippe had fled to England. The news caused consternation among James’s parents. “I had heard of kings presumably,” James recalled, “and also of fleeing: but the idea of kings had sometimes to flee was a new and striking image.” He told his parents of a scene he recalled from his earliest presence in Paris:

I had been there for a short time in the second year of my life, and I was to communicate to my parents later on that as a baby in long clothes, seated opposite to them in a carriage and on the lap of another person, I had been impressed with the view, framed by the clear window of the vehicle as we passed, of a great stately square surrounded with high-roofed houses and having in its centre a tall and glorious column. I had naturally caused them to marvel, but I had also, under cross-examination and questioning, forced them to compare notes, as it were, and reconstitute the miracle.

The view, parents and the mature James agreed, was that of the Rue St.-Honoré, as the family crossed the Rue Castiglione and saw, “for all my time, the admirable aspect of the Place and the Column Vendôme.”

Is this to be believed? James doesn’t merely claim that at the age of two he saw the Column Vendôme, but that he was “impressed” by it. How could he know that the sensation he felt was one of finding something impressive? In comparison with what? The only evidence for his “observation

monumental squares” is that he couldn’t have seen such things in New York or Albany or even in London, “which moreover I had known at a younger age still.” I don’t claim that James was a liar, but I can’t believe that he remembered seeing the Colonne. Perhaps on one of the many occasions on which, in his adult years, he saw the scene, he happened to recall, as a very young child, travelling somewhere with his parents and someone else and looking through the carriage window. He then, for whatever reason, joined the two images in his mind and let the conjunction pass for a recollection. I refuse to believe that he was precocious enough to commit the scene to memory in his second year. Genius or no genius.

But the question is not simple. Within a page or two James makes the point that while his early life was spent in notably amiable circumstances and surrounded by warm-hearted people, “the scene on which we so freely bloomed does strike me, when I reckon up, as extraordinarily unfurnished.” He doesn’t explain: unfurnished in comparison with whose life? What it apparently comes to is that the members of the James family had, for company, one another and, in crucial addition, each had himself, his inward life:

How came it then that for the most part so simple we yet weren’t more inane? This was doubtless by reason of the quantity of our inward life—ours of our father’s house in especial I mean—which made an excellent, in some cases almost an incomparable, *fond* for a thicker civility to mix with when growing experience should begin to take that in. It was also quaint, among us, I may be reminded, to have *begun* with the inward life; but we began, after the manner of all men, as well we could, and I hold that if it comes to that we might have begun much worse.

The supreme instance, for James, of the practice of the inward life was his father: admittedly he practised it in default of an outward life which might have included a proper degree of recognition among his peers. In the virtual absence of such recognition, he had no alternative but to concentrate his mind upon its inwardness:

Of our father’s perfect gift for practising *his* kind I shall have more to say; but I meanwhile glance yet again at those felicities of destitution which kept us, collectively, so genially interested in almost nothing but each other and which come over me now as one of the famous blessings in disguise.\*

James is honourable enough to acknowledge that he, like his sister and brothers, and father and mother, could afford these felicities of destitution because his grandfather had left them enough money to enable them not to make a living but to rest upon one.



I WONDER ABOUT the status of things we forget. According to my family’s history, I was brought to the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932. It was in the summer, in Phoenix Park, and the Pope celebrated Mass, and McCormack sang “Panis Angelicus,” and thousands of people came from a

over Ireland to take part in the ceremonies. I have not the least recollection of being present. I was three years and seven months old, and the whole episode is blank to me. But I remember vividly John's death six months later. The first thing I remember was a death in the family. Isn't it strange that I developed—if that is the correct way of putting it—the power of memory just in time to employ it upon the first event worth remembering?

I am told that I have a notable flair for not remembering, especially when the forgotten, suppressed or transcended event reflected badly upon me at the time. It is not true. I cut a poor enough figure, but I seem to me, in many of the episodes I recall. When have I ever been heroic?

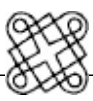


I CAN'T BELIEVE that I have suppressed the experiences I have forgotten or that they must have been painful if they required such disposal. Many of the episodes I remember are trivial and were even the most trivial: the feeling of running my fingers along the iron surface of the watering trough in the square; the pleasure, while watching the coal boats at Kelly's Coalyard being unloaded, of anticipating the moment at which the huge buckets threw the coal on the pyramid; the thrill of the day on which I graduated from short pants into long ones and knew that my knees would no longer be on display; the night on which Duffy's Circus played in the field behind the barracks and my father got me a free seat on the excuse of inspecting the ticketing arrangements. As for the multitude of events I have forgotten: no matter, they can have amounted only to more of the same.

In Borges's "Funes the Memorious" we read this:

Locke, in the seventeenth century, postulated (and rejected) an impossible language in which each individual thing, each stone, each bird and each branch, would have its own name; Funes once projected an analogous language, but discarded it because it seemed too general to him, too ambiguous. In fact, Funes remembered not only every leaf of every tree, every tree of every wood, but also every one of the times he had perceived or imagined it. He decided to reduce each one of his past days to some 70,000 memories, which would then be defined by means of ciphers. He was dissuaded from this by two considerations: his awareness that the task was interminable, his awareness that it was useless. He thought that by the hour of his death he would not even have finished classifying all the memories of his childhood.

Borges claims for Funes "a certain stammering grandeur." An aura of nobility surrounds the project of enumeration, consistent with the satisfaction of knowing that Funes did not in the end proceed with it. The desire does him credit, since he proposed to be in the world but not to interfere with its objects and arrangements. Unfortunately, as Borges observes, "to think is to forget differences, generalise, and make abstractions." In Funes's teeming world, "there were only details, almost immediate in their presence."\* Much as I love Hopkins's poems, I find his nagging insistence on individuality, detail, and *haecceitas* tolerable only because he did it for the glory of God.



LET ME GET a few dates straight. My father's date of birth is not known to me. It's hardly worth the labour of finding it in the Public Record Office or the Custom House. He joined the RIC on March 1913. He and my mother married in Tullow on April 21, 1920. He left the RIC on disbandment of the force on April 11, 1922. They went to Chester on June 6, 1922, and stayed there unhappily till September. On September 28, 1922, he joined the RUC and left on pension on August 31, 1946. I think he was born on some date in March 1887; he died on August 15—the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin—1957. So he was about thirty-three years old when he married. That seems reasonable: he did not do things in a hurry. Frances and I were married on my twenty-third birthday. My father thought I was far too young to be rushing into the responsibilities of matrimony, but he could not deny that according to his own criteria—a permanent and pensionable job in the Civil Service—I could afford to get married if I wanted to.



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Certificate No. 18960

ROYAL IRISH CONSTABULARY.

Form 37/3

Certificate of Character.

On discharge of No. 67143, Sergeant Denis Donoghue, who joined the above-named Force on the 3rd. day of March 1913 and was discharged on the 11th. day of April 1922 in consequence of disbandment. His general conduct during the period of his service was: very good.

Description on Discharge.

Age: 35 $\frac{1}{2}$  years.

Height: 5 ft. 9 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches.

Colour of hair: dark.

Colour of Eyes: grey.

Complexion: Fresh.

Special distinguishing marks (if any): nil.

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Royal Irish Constabulary Office,  
Dublin Castle,  
16th. May, 1922.  
Pension Number: 18438.

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Ex-Sergeant Denis Donogue is hereby informed that he has been awarded a Pension of £ 11:3s.:0d. per annum, in respect of his service in the Royal Irish Constabulary, such pension to date from 11th. April, 1922.

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Certificate No. 1274

ROYAL ULSTER CONSTABULARY.

Certificate of Character.

On discharge of No. 2807. Sergeant Denis Donoghue, who joined the above-named Force on the 28th day of September 1922 and was discharged on the 31st. Day of August 1946 in consequence of retirement on age limit. His general conduct during the period of his service was: very good.

Description on Discharge.

Age: 59½ yrs.

Height: 5' 9¾"

Colour of Hair: Grey.

Colour of Eyes: Grey

Complexion: Fresh.

Special distinguishing marks (if any): none.

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