

FIVE ALBATROSSES, A GREAT IRISH ELK, AND A GRAVE IN GLASNEVIN

Boats, my nineteen-year-old son accuses me. Meaning opportunities missed by me. Perversely, he tells me. Almost on purpose, he suspects. The World's Champion Boat-Misser.

- I've caught a few boats, I remind him. Real ones. Not metaphors. The Canberra. The France. The QE2. - Poet and Artist Afloat. Performing my Works and Poms for Passenger-consumption.

- Yes, I've caught quite a few boats. And I saw five Albatrosses once. On the Pacific. Circling in slow beautiful formation twenty feet above the Boat Deck. For two hours almost. Cleaving the air with their great wings. Five Albatrosses. Five. I wish my father had been there. He spent his whole life dreaming of seeing an Albatross. But all he saw was seagulls. On his single sea-crossing with my mother to the Isle of Man and back. Only seagulls. And he could see these any day, over the River Liffey. Or Sandymount Strand. Or the Bull Wall. Or Howth Head. Or even Glasnevin Cemetery. But an Albatross was what he always wanted to see. Bird of Good Omen.

He knew Coleridge's Rime of the Ancient Mariner off by heart. All one hundred and forty two stanzas. Starting with the first quatrain:

It is an Ancient Mariner.

And he stoppeth one of three.

"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye

Now wherefore stoppest thou me?"

He'd recite whole sections of the poem to us regularly. In the kitchen. At evening. His blue far-away eyes clear as coral pools. Other times, he'd sing some of his favourite songs. Like a Golden Dream. When Other Lips. Just a Song at Twilight. And then his Grand Finale, Many Brave Hearts:

MANY BRAVE HEARTS ARE ASLEEP IN THE DEEP.

SO BEWARE.

BEWARE.

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Sailor, we all called him. Since I was about four years old. The summer he and Mother came back from their week's holiday in the Isle of Man. Father was wearing a navy-blue seaman's cap. Exactly like the one on the packets of Player's Navy Cut Cigarettes which he smoked all his life. Three packs a day. En route to his first coronary.

Mother kept telling him to take off 'that ridiculous cap'. That he was making a laughing-stock of himself in front of the neighbours. Why couldn't he be his age? Last month, it was trick-riding down the street on his racing bicycle; standing on the saddle, with his hands in the air and a silly look on his face. And now acting the fool again in this ridiculous cap.

But Father simply laughed, and sang Popeye, The Sailor Man. A juvenile school-yard version, that he'd heard some young Dublin day-excursionists singing on the Ferry.

He wore the cap indoors and outdoors for the next month. Maybe to defy Mother. Maybe to cover up his too-soon balding head. Maybe because he simply liked it.

It was at that time we started to call him Sailor. And the name stuck. Right till the day he died. Michael was his real name. After the Archangel. An angel with clipped wings and a sailor's cap. Sailor, the Boat-Misser. My precursor maybe.

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My son wants me to tell him more about my father. Even a few anecdotes. How come, he says, you never spoke to me about him till now? How come you never even visit his grave?

I promise that when the time is right I will tell him more about my father.

Today, four months after my son's request, the time seems right.

Because, yesterday, I visited my father's grave.

For the first time since I watched the brass-plated oak coffin, containing what is euphemistically called his mortal remains, being lowered into the lumpy clay in Glasnevin Cemetery. One wet winter's morning thirty-two years ago.

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Now that my memory is loosened, now that my heart is opened, what memories of my father shall I pen for my son? What can I tell that will reveal Father - simply, openly, truthfully? My real father. Not the 'Born Loser' ~~that~~ my uncles ~~labelled him~~ *CONVINCE a Mother who'd married*

Father. A small mild-tempered man with few apparent ambitions. Few apparent regrets. Retired prematurely from his limousine-business, because of recession and an early coronary thrombosis. Bald. Bespectacled. Self-effacing. Fond of strong tea. Grilled kippers. Gingerbread. Whist Drives. Cycling. Gramophone records - Operatic and Music Hall. Sitting by the fire or by the window. Smoking. Reading the Evening Paper. Saying little.

A Born Loser, Mother's relatives labelled him. And I was too young to question their glib evaluation. Too young to know my real father, till it was too late to manifest the love we'd all denied him when he was alive. By making Mother the shrine of our lives. And Father its unremarkable appendage.

I promised my son that I'd pen some memories of my father for him to share. When the time was right. Now that the time is right, and scores of submerged memories re-surface, which shall I share? Incidents? Sad. Funny. Painful. Beautiful. Epiphanies that linger and haunt and sustain? Epiphanies that reveal ~~the~~ that Father was a Poet. In the true sense of the word. Not someone who ever wrote poetry. But a man whose whole commitment in life was to keep searching. To keep trusting. To keep loving. To keep accepting. To keep faith with himself and the world. To get in touch with that beyond himself. To be a person without walls. A man who lived his heart out. Knowing that time resolves all. Redeems all. Recovers all.

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One ephiphany suffices. At the National Museum. To see the Great Irish Elk. When I was eight years old. Father held me by the hand almost all afternoon. Not possessively. Not restrainingly. Simply with total love.

I mention it with heartache and with gratitude approaching veneration. Because in all my years of childhood I had never been touched so gently and firmly.

But back to the Great Irish Elk: Skeletoned. Massive. Magnificent. Cutting bored navy-suited Attendants, and bored Sunday visitors down to size. Except for the children. Eager-eyed. Ready to merge with the Mystery.

I stared. And stared.

- That's it, Father said (still holding my hand in his). The great Irish Elk. Extinct but still around. After twelve thousand years. Defying Time. And Place. Take a good look at those giant antlers. And remember us - me and you.

The last six words were only a faintly-audible addendum. But he did speak them. Sublimely. As an Archangel might ~~perhaps~~ speak. Or an Albatross. If an Albatross could talk. (I suspect it can. A language of supreme generosity that might transfigure us if we could hear it.)

Yes, Father, I looked. I am still looking. Looking backwards and forwards in Time. Clearly and clairvoyantly. Because now I perceive.

The Great Irish Elk. The Great Loser. The Great Winner. The Great Zen Master. Stripped of power and pretence. Into final selfhood. Final endurance. Into touch with that beyond itself. Close to the Mystery. The Mystery at the heart of Time. The Central Mystery that can only be hinted at.

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Yesterday, I visited my father's grave in Glasnevin Cemetery. The white marble tombstone with the black indented lettering

gleamed in the August sunshine. IN LOVING MEMORY, MICHAEL, DEVOTED HUSBAND, FATHER. I am the Resurrection and the Life.

I touched the slightly-warm tombstone. Touched the slightly-warm clay. Gently. Humbly. Gratefully. Then I left. Lighthearted. Lightfooted. Free. In touch at last with that beyond myself. A Poet almost. Like my father.

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A final word about the Great Irish Elk. There was no such creature. So, I am definitively informed by A Manual of Extinct Terrestrial Mammals of Ireland in the National Museum. I quote:

THE GIANT DEER: Megaceros giganteus. "Because of the similarity in appearance of the Antlers of the Giant Irish Deer to those of the Elk, Moose and Fallow Deer, it has, in the past, been erroneously referred to as the 'Great Irish Elk'."

So much for the murderous machinery of words. But they can't impinge on Epiphany. The Giant Irish Deer is the Great Irish Elk which father and I stared at so long ago. (If anything, I expect, those Antlers will have possibly grown perceptibly. Maybe a sacred millimeter.)

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I had thought of re-visiting the Museum. As a last tribute

to Father. To tell him I am still looking. Still cherishing our shared Epiphany. The Moment-Out-of-Time that can't be obliterated. Ever.

Yes, I had thought of going back some Sunday afternoon to re-savour all that's lost; and all that can never be lost. But I've decided against going. I could never face those Printed Notices saying PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH.

DO NOT TOUCH. The injunction of our times. One human touch can challenge the Past and its incertitudes. One human touch can quiver us to a new identity. One human touch can threaten all the cherished instability of forced bravura in the face of our own and everyone else's vulnerability.

Better to talk than to touch. Talk is what we do to one another. There's only one problem. Talk can never undo talk's inflictions. Or sorrows. Or scars. But touch can. And touch does.

No, I won't go back again to gaze at the Great Irish Elk (alias Giant Irish Deer) at the National Museum. Or at the printed Notices saying PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH.

Instead, I'll go upstairs (now, right away) to the guest bedroom, where my son sleeps when he stays here. And I'll feast my eyes, and my fingertips, on the silky-smooth, bark-stripped, four-foot long, driftwood tree-branch, which he re-claimed from the sea at Killiney Beach two years ago.

He has left it lying outside the white candlewick coverlet on his divan bed - for anyone who visits to share. On the beautiful bark-stripped glossy surface he has inscribed, in bright acrylic blues, reds, greens, yellows, the following invitation:

TOUCH. FEEL. CARESS. I AM DEAD BUT GIVEN LIFE BY YOUR PERCEPTION.

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Some of our overnight-visitors find this beautiful. Those who reach-out. Others, afraid of the Merge, smile in discreet bafflement, and say nothing. But the splendid transfigured driftwood-branch, like the Great Irish Elk's magnificent antlers, will endure. Transcending, in Time that cannot be timed, Man's fear of Commitment. Man's fear of Beauty. Man's fear of the Merge.

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