

# A Visit from My Father

When my father knocked on the door of my cottage, I knew that he had made the long and tedious journey to say more than a father-to-son hello. I believed I knew what he had come to say and I did not consider myself strong enough to stand in the refuge of my living room and listen to the words coming out of his sneaky mouth. This is why I did not open the door. This is why I retreated to the darkest corner of the room and leaned my back into the wall and waited. I waited for my father to abandon his knocking, to walk around the house, looking in through all of the windows, seeing the general disarray, coming to understand the nature of things here, to understand what had become of my life. I waited all this time, in the darkest corner of the room, until I heard the car door closing, and the engine starting up. And when I heard the car tyres bouncing off the uneven, neglected driveway as it descended the steep slope, I knew that I would be all right for a while longer, now that my father had come and gone.

Safe in the knowledge that I could not be seen, for the windows of my cottage are small, and the road below the cottage is 150 metres away, I stepped to the window to have a look at his car as he drove away. It was an old Toyota Corolla, similar to my own, but a different colour. I watched it turn onto the road and I watched it pass in front of the cottage. The person driving resembled more my long dead mother than my long-haired father, but it must have been him for he was gone now and the place was once more silent.

And then the car was gone, disappeared behind the trees as it drove away. I went to the front door and opened it to find my father standing on the doorstep. He had his back to me and was facing down the meadow. 'As reclusive as ever,' he said, without turning around. I closed the door and went back inside and put on the kettle and while I waited for the water to boil I made him an egg and tomato sandwich and then I made a pot of tea and when I had it all on a tray – the teapot, the sandwich on a plate, the carton of milk, the sugar bowl and spoon, the

two mugs – I carried the tray outside to where my father was sitting on the wall at the front of the house. He was smoking a roll-up and when he saw me with the tray he flicked the cigarette into the meadow and said ‘Good man, I could do with that.’ He ate then, and drank his tea, and I sat on the wall several feet away and we sat like that for fifteen minutes and not a word was said.

‘I told Agnes to come back for me in a couple of hours, in case you’re wondering,’ he said at last. He had taken his tobacco from his shirt pocket and he was rolling a cigarette. I remembered Agnes. I had met her once, over ten years ago, in a pub near the Victoria and Albert Museum, where I was meeting my father to take him to see La Boheme in Covent Garden. It was a treat of mine. I knew he loved that opera, knew he loved opera in general, though I also suspected that he had probably never been to the opera. I had made contact with him in an attempt to mend fences, to perhaps heal the rift that was between us. Of course he ruined the evening by arriving at the pub drunk, then getting drunker in the pub, and finally falling asleep for most of the second half of La Boheme. Twice I had to poke him in the ribs with my elbow to stop him snoring. I was annoyed with him, but I also understood that the nerves may have got to him, which prompted him to have a few too many before we met. Agnes, I recall, was rough looking but striking in a very distinctive way, with wild, shocking hair and a laugh that turned every head on the premises. She spoke harshly with a no-nonsense Cockney accent. I remember my father at one point saying she was the real deal, whatever the real deal was. She didn’t seem remotely interested in me and appeared not to have much more of an interest in my father. Her main interest seemed to lie in speaking loquaciously and loudly about some people she knew. Now and again I caught him looking at me insouciantly, as if I was no more than an unimportant add-on to his drinking-with-Agnes evening. And this despite the fact that we had not met for ten years, had not spoken a word to each other during that time. Meanwhile Agnes droned on, more drinks were ordered, until finally I had to practically drag my father out of the bar and into a taxi in order to get to the opera on time. We didn’t go

for a drink afterwards, I being in too much of a sulk, my father being only interested in making contact with Agnes.

And now, here he was, over ten years later, looking twenty years older, looking like an old man, I suppose, sitting on my wall far far away from where his comforts lay, which were always city-related. I sat there on the wall beside him and I couldn't bear to think about what was to come next. I knew what he was here for, I just didn't know how he was going to say it. I didn't feel like talking myself. I had nothing to say. He was my father, he had always been my father, but for over half of that period he had been absent, and for the rest he had been absent in a different way. I think I preferred his physical absence more than the absence that was around him when he was physically present.

It was a quiet day out in the countryside of north Roscommon. Occasionally, the sound of a tractor or a lorry or a car would drift across the lazy countryside towards us from the far road, a road that led from one place to another place. The narrow road that my old cottage was built on led from no place to no place. It was a connecting road that a hundred years ago must have had a purpose but which today was the emptiest, quietest road in Ireland. That's how it felt. That is what I liked about where I lived. A light breeze blew up from the meadow, rustling the tall grasses and the leaves of the trees I had planted, blowing softly onto the back of my neck. My father's neck was shielded from the breeze by his mass of long, thick, grey hair that lounged over his shoulders. He had remained a sort of hippy all through the years, had sustained his strangely outmoded lifestyle through the emergence and progression of Apple and Google and the high-tech society that had grown up around him and left him behind in a state of ignorant bliss. He still lived in the sixties, in his head and in his way of life.

I knew he had come looking for what he regarded as his money. He had already paid a visit to my sister in Dundalk and to my brother in Bray. My sister had sent him packing, telling him to never dare call to her home again, then immediately experienced a savage attack of guilt and promptly sent him a cheque for the ten thousand he had come looking for. My brother

simply told him to fuck off and felt no remorse afterwards and sent on no cheque. I knew about these two visits because both my sister and my brother had called me to warn me that he was almost certainly on his way. Both were unexpected calls, as I had had little or no contact with either of them since I'd moved back to Ireland a decade earlier. We were never close as a family. My brother rarely got in touch with my sister and my sister gave up on him a long time ago. We all, I suppose, blamed this familial detachment on our father. Fair enough, there was much to blame about his diabolical behaviour down through the years. But sometimes I had the feeling that the three of us wallowed a little too easily in his failings as a father. Personally, I blamed myself as much as I blamed him for the way my life had turned out, for the way I had turned out. All the choices, good and bad, that I'd made, were my choices, not his. Sometimes I think it is just too easy to blame others for our failings. A bit of owning up to being a complete fucking eejit might do everyone whose life is a mess some good. Rather than always looking for a scapegoat.

My father was coughing now. It sounded real, like he was not hamming it up, as he was well capable of doing. Actually, it sounded pretty awful, like the cough my neighbour had before he disappeared the previous March into hospital only to re-emerge in a wooden box three weeks later.

'Are you not well?' I heard myself ask, but he couldn't answer because he was bent double and the coughing was horrible now, more like retching, and then gasping for a clean breath. There was no shortage of good clean air around him but it didn't appear to be doing him any good. At last, as coughing fits almost always do unless they kill you, it subsided, and straightaway he was launched into what sounded like a prepared speech. I instinctively turned away. I did not want to hear it. It would be full of false remorse, of self-pity, mixed in with a healthy dash of bitterness and resentment and the occasional loss of control as he spat out some nasty remark about how we had all failed him. I got to my feet and walked to the far side of the narrow front garden and I stood there, looking down at the meadow, trying to listen to

the birds, but it was early August and the birds had long gone quiet and the cuckoo had long since departed, only the woodpigeon hiding away in the native woodland in the field next to mine was making her presence felt, with her tendentiously sounding broad-vowelled call, as if she had a point to make and she would continue to make it whether anyone was listening or not. Hers is the sound I would like in the background as they lower me into my hole in the ground when it is all over for me, whenever that day comes. Over the call of the woodpigeon I heard my father's voice. He was not spitting his usual verminous remarks. He was not, either, and surprisingly, filled with self-pity or remorse. There was no evidence of bitterness or resentment. Instead, he was telling me that he was proud of me, proud that I was standing on my own two feet, proud that I'd somehow, against the odds, managed to find a place that I could call my own, even if I appeared to him to be unhappy.

'We are all of us unhappy,' he said. 'Every damn one of us. We're just bloody good at hiding it. But why bother hiding it? What is wrong with being unhappy?' I could feel him looking at me. 'I would say you are in a good place at last,' he said. 'Are you in a good place?' 'I guess I am in a good place,' I said, 'considering.'

He stood now, and stretched, then turned to look down at the meadow, and across the valley, to the mountains and the ten windmills on the ridge, their blades turning lazily in the light breeze. 'Good man,' he said. 'That's all I came for,' and he turned and walked away from me and down the potholed driveway. 'Don't you want to come in?' I called after him. 'Don't you want to see the inside of the cottage?' He stopped halfway down and turned and looked back up to where I was standing, where he'd been sitting a moment ago. 'I don't need to,' he said. 'I saw everything I needed to see through the windows.' 'But won't you wait here until Agnes comes back?' I shouted. 'I won't son, I won't,' and he turned and continued on down the driveway. I watched him walk along the road until he disappeared behind the trees and not once did he turn his head, or raise an arm, and in that way he didn't see my arm rise up into the air, he didn't see me wave a last goodbye to my long-haired father.

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