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# **TO BEGIN, AND BEGIN AGAIN.**

## **An Exploration of Beginnings through Philosophy and Fiction.**

**Tomás Lally**

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(University of Galway)

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor*  
Discipline of English  
College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies  
University of Galway

April 2024

## **Declaration**

I, Tomás Lally, certify that this submission is all my own work and that I have not obtained a degree in this University, or elsewhere, on the basis of this work.

## **Acknowledgements**

Sincere thanks to my supervisors Professor Felix O' Murchadha and Mike McCormack for their support, encouragement and forbearance and the challenges they constantly set for me as this project evolved. They supported and advised me on many matters over the last six years, but they always respected the creative and scholarly process; they asked questions and suggested options but were never prescriptive. I believe they helped me get the best out of myself.

My sincere thanks to Pauline at the National Rehabilitation Hospital, Dun Laoghaire for her assistance with background research on some aspects of the project.

Thanks also to my sister-in-law Sarah for proof-reading my philosophy thesis. And finally, my thanks to my children, Sadhbh, Eoghan, Róisín, and my partner Collette for their understanding, support, and encouragement.

## **Dedication**

To Mam and Dad, and all the beginnings we shared.

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# **Bridging Document**

**Tomás Lally**

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor*

Discipline of English

College of Arts, Social Sciences and Celtic Studies

University of Galway

April 2024



## Introduction

In this bridging document I want to reflect on the origins of this project and how it has progressed over the last six years. I also want to reflect on how the completion of two different forms, a novel, and a thesis, alongside each other influenced the process and how as completed outputs they dialogue with each other. I also want to provide some background to the central character in the novel and the sociocultural milieu which he inhabits. Finally, I want to offer some concluding thoughts on the project.

## Project Overview

All adventures start with a first step and this adventure started with a sense that in combining a novel and a philosophy thesis I could generate a dialogue between the creative and scholarly. At the outset I only possessed a very hazy sense of this, but it became clearer during the process. To embark on this project was an exercise in trust and curiosity, trust that this project would lead somewhere worthwhile. As Brendan Kennelly writes “every beginning is a promise”<sup>1</sup> in the sense that every beginning suggests a capacity to deliver something new and hopefully worthwhile. It is also a commitment to achieving that aim, in spite of the inevitable challenges one will face.

In approaching my viva examination I searched for a way in which to encapsulate my six-year adventure. I found that frame in Seamus Heaney’s poem *A Found Poem* where he writes:

There was never a scene  
when I had it out  
with myself of with another.  
The loss of faith occurred off stage.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kennelly, Brendan. Staying Alive: Begin, *The Guardian* (1959-2003), 2002-06-29, p.B25.

<sup>2</sup> Heaney, Seamus. “A Found Poem.” *Irish Pages*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2014, p.9. *JSTOR*.

So for the last 6 years of my practice-based PhD project, I have been having it out with myself. I have been reflecting on my lived experience of beginnings and re-beginnings; my upbringing and formation within a certain faith tradition and my subsequent journey away from that inheritance. The question that presented itself to me as I approached my middle years was a question about beginning again. The philosopher in me posed a prior question: how did I begin initially? Perhaps an exploration of initial beginning might provide pointers to understanding the idea of beginning again. I chose two different forms in which to explore the question of beginnings: the philosophy thesis to explore my initial beginnings in subjectivity and a novel to explore the idea of beginning again with the central character a catholic priest, Fr. Gerry O'Dowd.

As regards Fr Gerry O'Dowd his loss of faith has occurred off stage to a large extent – the reader meets him as he wrestles with his final decision, whether to leave or remain. The question I have been having out with myself over the last six years is a question about my own faith journey from a faith-full devoutness, via a militant atheism, to a faith-free contentment. If I had written a memoir at 30, it would have been very much from the point of view of a practising Catholic. At that stage my self-narrative would have focused on my theistic approach which conceded much to the institution and emphasised the importance of self-discipline and forbearance in practicing one's faith. If I had written it at 45 it would have propounded a militant atheist's view. It would have been hypercritical of the institution, its doctrine and claims and would have emphasised the freedom of the individual – it would have viewed the 30-year-old as severely indoctrinated. Approaching sixty it is more balanced. It is a more humane and compassionate narrative, one that avoids the excesses of previous self-narratives.

So I have been having it out with the indoctrinated, faith-filled individual who initially took it all on trust; who embraced church authority and dogma without a thorough critique. The man who believed that a closeness to nature and the changing seasons inevitably led to God – the

groundedness of my rural childhood working closely with God's abundant creation nurturing an unquestioning panentheism.

Secondly, I've been having it out with the militant atheist. The man who tried to overcompensate for his prior commitment and unquestioning approach by going to the other extreme. Both of my former personae were all caught up in the faith storm. From my current vantage point I can see how both were misguided.

It has been a slow, methodical purgation of a habitual approach which no longer authentically frames my lived experience or the person I've become. For decades I sought answers to questions, believing that that was the way to live a meaningful life, forgetting that searching displaces the searcher from being, and defines him in terms of a becoming. In my earlier years, I answered questions in an orthodox fashion believing truth to be part of my faith inheritance. The 21-year-old who exited St Patricks College, Maynooth believing he knew so little about the world or himself was wise beyond his years. At 60, with almost four more decades of life experience, I know enough to tell him he was wise to leave. Wise also to subsequently fall in love, get married and have three children. Wise to get divorced after 30 years of marriage and begin again. Wise to free himself from his faith inheritance, to free himself in so far as possible from all manner of the institutionalised. Wise to have it all out with himself for once and for all, and then conclude the argument quietly, but definitively.

My philosophy thesis provides a framework within which to understand the human subject's initial beginning in subjectivity while the novel expresses the lived experience of the central character in attempting to begin again. Beginning again is a reality and a possibility for us all but with beginning again there are residual and legacy issues. There is spill over from the past, no way to say a final goodbye to who one has become. It is not possible to expurgate all the influences and the formation. However, it is possible to travel a distance down that road, deconstruct that initial formation, have it in the rear-view mirror or perhaps in the side view mirror where objects are always closer than they appear.

## Process and Output

Kieran Setiya distinguishes between telic and atelic activities in *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide* as follows:

Borrowing jargon from linguistics, we can say that some activities are “telic”: they aim at terminal states, at which they are finished and thus exhausted. [...] Driving home is telic: it is done when you get home.[...] Other activities are “atelic”: they do not aim at a point of termination or exhaustion, a final state in which they have been achieved. As well as walking from A to B, you can go for a walk with no particular destination. That is an atelic activity. So is listening to music, hanging out with friends or family or thinking about midlife. [...] They have no limit, no outcome whose achievement exhausts them and therefore brings them to an end.<sup>3</sup>

He goes on to write about the importance of the atelic in our project-driven lives and describes mindfulness and living in the present as an atelic activity. The concept of the telic and atelic is applicable to my project in a number of ways. In starting out to complete a novel and a philosophy thesis there is a clear goal, namely the completion of both, so in this sense it is a telic activity. However, the process itself is atelic. The creative and open exploration of themes in the novel and the grappling with a methodology with which to render the pre-linguistic expressible in my philosophy thesis has a clear goal but the journey there is unmapped, as Heidegger writes “thinking is its own way.” Journeys have destinations – they are telic: adventures on the other hand are atelic.

As regards my novel, the manner of its composition is atelic and it also possesses a certain atelicity in being written in the continuous present, thereby honouring the atelic quality of human experience as lived. It can of course be viewed as telic in that there is a clear output at the end, but it was a creative atelicity and openness which marked its construction.

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<sup>3</sup> Setiya, Kieran. *Midlife: A Philosophical Guide*, Princeton University Press. 2017. p.133-134.

Atelicity also informed the construction of the philosophy thesis. There was no clear, comprehensive methodology available at the outset with which to render explicit the implicit world of the pre-infant/infant. Much of my time was spent in developing a methodology which might bring us closer to an authentic understanding of the pre-infant/infant's pre-linguistic world. From the beginning, there was an unknown quantity about this project which combined two separate forms and the project retained this characteristic until the latter stages. What has fuelled this project from beginning to end is an open-ended curiosity about initial beginning and beginning again, a project undertaken in two separate forms without any clear, definitive roadmap. As such its completion and conclusions are tentative. Human experience of initial beginning and beginning again is explored openly and creatively. My curiosity about the how of beginning again brought me to the how of initial beginning, a curiosity that led me to produce a philosophy thesis and a novel which in the end dialogue through their difference and separateness, a difference and separateness which grounds the capacity for all authentic and dynamic dialogues. It is a separateness which leaves open the possibility for ongoing engagement and further dialogue. At times the dialogue is linear and direct in addressing their shared themes but more often than not the dialogue forms an undercurrent and proceeds in a meandering, indirect way.

Creative writing and philosophical exploration are both atelic activities, while producing a philosophy thesis, completing a novel and obtaining a PhD are all telic activities. The process of writing both was an atelic activity in the sense that while the goal was clear, the way to that goal only became apparent en route. The curiosity and spirit of exploration which fuel both endeavours is an ongoing openness to learning and further thought. Thought, as Heidegger writes, clears its own way. In the end I have cut a path to an understanding of the human subject's initial beginning and the process of beginning again. Others may wish to follow that path most of the way or may clear a different path to it. My philosophy thesis like the novel came to completion in an open-ended free construction. In the novel I followed the character's voice, while in the thesis I explored the question about initial beginnings. The structure of both emerged through the process. I believe

that given the nature of the project it was essential to approach both forms in this way. The approach I adopted made for a more dynamic contemporaneous engagement between the two endeavours; they both informed each others construction. Language and concepts fuel inquiry and both expose and conceal. Their imprecision and indicative quality is elaborated upon in the thesis vis a vis initial beginning. This is also highlighted in the novel where the character on occasion takes issue with the laziness and imprecision of words and expressions which people use. One could say the construction of any novel or thesis is about using the most appropriate words in the correct place and in the correct order.

By the time I started my PhD in September 2017, I had completed a rough and sketchy first draft of a novel about beginning again and I had a proposal for a philosophy thesis which involved exploring the possibility of grounding an existentialist ethic in lived human experience. The links between these were not clear but my first draft of the novel had been born of what appeared initially to be two very unrelated vignettes; one on the unfolding love story between a rural priest and a primary school teacher and the other, a piece about grieving the loss of a deceased father. Initially, I didn't see the connection but when it became apparent that for the character's voice these were related, I decided to trust that voice and journey to where that voice brought me. Some novelists start with an image to which they respond, others start with a character's voice. My novel started with a voice and because it started as such, initially it was expansive and difficult to pin down. An image can be a more fixed referent with which to begin.

As regards the philosophy thesis, during my first year I started to become more familiar with the thinking of Hannah Arendt, in particular her ideas on 'natality' and beginning. I started to read extensively around the theme. It became obvious to me that the novel was clearly posing a question about beginning again. The philosopher in me counselled against any exploration of beginning again in a philosophy thesis without a thorough understanding of initial beginning. So the themes and questions started to become clearer and interrelated.

## Central Questions

According to the late novelist John McGahern, there is a question at the centre of every novel. We might say that this is similar to the presence of a research question at the heart of every philosophy thesis. However the way in which the questions are presented and explored is very different. A character-driven meandering reflection with dialogue and soliloquy is not an acceptable format for a philosophy thesis. A philosophy thesis proceeds by claims, reasoned argument and explanation; all claims must be elaborated upon, argued for, not merely hinted at. Additionally, all subject matter must pay due deference to the established canon. While the philosophy thesis format can provide clarity and insight in its manner of reflecting on lived human experience and thought, it does not, as De Beauvoir writes, provide “the taste of another life.”<sup>4</sup> So it was clear to me from the outset that each form had the capacity to provide something lacking in the other.

We might characterise the way in which a question is entertained in the novel in a Heideggerian way, based on his remarks in *The Origin of the Work of Art*, as follows: a central question is accorded its own space at the heart of the novel, from which it can spring forth and invite reaction or response.<sup>5</sup> Of course the manner in which the question is posed is not directly as in the Philosophy thesis. The question in the novel emerges, perhaps in a similar way to the way in which the research question emerges, i.e., through much writing, rewriting and rereading, through a process. However it is not as if the answer gestured towards in the novel reveals a truth beyond itself. The truth revealed in answer to the question is perhaps no more than a truth about its relevance, its appropriateness, its status as an important question. The reader in his or her engagement with the work will consider the question and the answer gestured towards in the work but the reader may

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<sup>4</sup> De Beauvoir, Simone. *Que peut la Littérature*, p.82-83, quoted in Toril Moi. “What Can Literature Do? Simone de Beauvoir as a Literary Theorist.” Source: *PMLA*, Jan. 2009, Vol. 124, No. 1, pp. 189-198.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, Martin. “The Origin of the Work of Art” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed & trans Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

answer the question in a different way. What happens after is beyond the writer, the reader then makes of it what they will.

According to Milan Kundera, “The novelist is neither historian or prophet: he is an explorer of existence” and the novel’s wisdom is “the wisdom of uncertainty”<sup>6</sup>. Simone de Beauvoir writes about a good novel imitating “the opacity, ambiguity, impartiality of life; spellbound by the story he is told, the reader responds as he would to events he had experienced.”<sup>7</sup> The good novel draws the reader in and provides him/her with an experience unobtainable in a philosophy essay or thesis. The novelist sets out on an adventure with a vague idea of a question and a character posing it. The process of the novel is exploration. The first draft is where you tell yourself the story for the first time. A story that undergoes refining and shaping through a series of drafts before it is ready to be released as a creative piece. The philosophy thesis and the research question at its core goes through a similar process of refinement and clarification before the final thesis is completed. The manner in which questions are openly explored may be similar in but the way in which the process is presented in the writing is very different.

It is clear that the question which forms the heart of a creative work like a novel may be a question that has arisen from the writer’s own lived experience. This has certainly been the case with the question posed in my novel about beginning again. I will elaborate on this later. What is less clear is how a research question which forms the core of a philosophy thesis might emerge from our lived experience. Does the philosophical thesis we choose to defend not arise through rational consideration alone? The reality of course is that our experience informs our philosophical reflection, but it is bracketed – it is not acknowledged directly. Perhaps it might be seen as making the abstract subjective, undermining its objectivity. Generally, philosophising is conducted at arm’s length from human emotions and reactions. But what is it that informs philosophical positions?

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<sup>6</sup> Kundera, Milan. *The Art of the Novel*, Trans. Linda Asher, London: Faber and Faber, 1990. p.44 & p.7.

<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir, Simone. “Literature and Metaphysics.” In *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical writings*, Trans. Veronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison. ed. Margaret A. Simons. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2004. p.270.



Presumably, it is human experience which has been reflected upon. Do philosophers then inevitably end up arguing from their own experience, for their own views, their research questions fitting within an already-accepted framework? Nietzsche in *Beyond Good and Evil*<sup>8</sup> was clear about 2000 years of western philosophy consisting of autobiographical content. Whether or not Nietzsche is correct is arguable, but one thing that is clearly correct is that philosophical positions are not developed purely rationally. The Icelandic philosopher Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir addresses this idea at some length:

[D]isembodied philosophy with its idea of the invulnerable subject—as the subject aiming for rational control—has led to disembodied ideas about how to practice philosophical thinking in academic philosophy. As embodied, the subject is an affective and experiential subject. Yet, in the traditional training of philosophical thinking, we are actually trained to detach ourselves from the experiential basis of our thinking.<sup>9</sup>

In writing the novel I used my own experience to write and rewrite the character. The character of Fr Gerry is perhaps an alter/altar ego, an imagined projection of a type of priest I might have become if I had remained in the seminary.

As regards the philosophy thesis, my middle age posed some questions for me, about who and what I had become. I found myself reflecting on my early childhood, the place where I began. Suffice it to say curiosity, trauma, connection, separation, and the passage of time all played an essential part in my early childhood. The fact that they become core themes in a creative and scholarly project is hardly a surprise. The novel is clearly not a memoir, neither is the thesis a purely intellectual endeavour. Both endeavours, although different in form and using different

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<sup>8</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Horstmann, Rolf-Peter; Norman, Judith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.8.

<sup>9</sup> Thorgeirsdottir, Sigridur. “Shame, Vulnerability and Philosophical Thinking.” *Sophia* 59.1 (2020), p.4.

methodologies, are grounded in my lived experience. This ensures their authenticity, but it perhaps also forms part of their limitation.

The journey of the protagonist in the novel and my own adventures in beginning again intersected on numerous occasions over the last six years. My wrestling with the question about beginning and beginning again gained a new relevance one year into my PhD project. I found myself in the thick of it, living the question. I ended up separating from my wife of 30 years and at the age of 53 found myself living in private rented accommodation, beside a pub in the middle of Castlebar town, across the road from a betting shop and Supermac's! What could possibly go wrong?

I had not dated in 30 years, so online dating was a new experience about which I knew very little. But never being one to sidestep a challenge I got the profile picture sorted, one of me smiling. Anyway, long story short, after a number of non-starters, I met someone. It's difficult to explain how different it is dating in your fifties. I tried to rely on old knowledge. Many things have changed, but the basics haven't. The ability to express yourself in text and face-time someone is important now, but I'm happy to say kind-heartedness, honesty and a sense of humour are still important. Online dating is not for the faint hearted; in middle age no one is travelling light. Anyway, I will leave that there, otherwise this section is in danger of becoming a middle ager's self-help guide to online dating.

In the course of my six years, I also found myself purchasing a doer upper house and spent long hours renovating and extending the house to make it into a comfortable living space, re-establishing foundations, creating a dwelling space in which to reflect and come to terms with the happenings of my life, creating a space in which to begin again, a space in which to be.

Last year, in April 2023, my mum, who lived a long and healthy life into her 99<sup>th</sup> year, died. She never received a secondary school education herself, but she had a passion for education. I lived with her during the Covid pandemic for six months and we got closer than we'd ever been, not

only as mother and son but as two human beings. The Covid pandemic which took place during my studies also brought realisations about the necessity for touch and connectedness, the need for human connectedness in presence, and how that in person presence generates different engagements, different thoughts, feelings, actions and outcomes.

### **Childhood/Infancy**

Early childhood and infancy are explored in detail in my philosophy thesis and this exploration provides a framework within which to understand subsequent beginning, beginning again. Given this exploration and my comments on autobiography I believe it is important that I say something about my own childhood and infancy.

One of my earliest childhood memories is of gripping the wooden bars of my cot, pulling myself up and trying to push my cot from a darkened space in the middle room of our three-roomed traditional cottage towards the parallelogram of light coming in the open front door. I was about three years old at the time. My memory is filled with the brightness of the light, the effort I exerted and the sound of the cot-legs scraping across the concrete floor. Fifteen years later I came across Plato's Allegory of the Cave, and it provided a context within which to interpret my behaviour. Initially, I understood it in terms of the child seeking truth, enlightenment and being beckoned by the light. Many decades later I now realise that a more appropriate and less heavy-handed way in which to describe this event is in terms of a display of curiosity, a wish to explore, to discover the world.

I was a curious child and can remember once dismantling the insides of a broken alarm clock thinking I might understand something about time. Time appeared to be something of a ghost among the myriad of cogs and broken springs. My early understanding of story was from fairy tales and comics, and a large part of my secure grounding in the world was due to the fact that I had a guardian angel and a silent God who said very little. They could see everything and liked to hang around in the silence, particularly when it was dark; their presence was in silent absence.

My father was a farmer and labourer who believed in the honesty and importance of manual work. He was a man who didn't feel in the least bit overwhelmed, whether talking to another farmer in the pub or at the mart, or to the president of St.Patrick's College, Maynooth. 'You have to learn to plaster with the best of them, Tomás.' I'm still learning Da.

My mother was a homemaker who believed in the value of education. Neither my mother nor my father went to secondary school. They both practiced their faith and went to Sunday mass. My father never shared my mother's religious devoutness, and she never shared his unquestioning belief in the value of manual work. She was kind and full of heart and had little truck with emotional displays. She died last year, two months off her 99<sup>th</sup> birthday. She was resilient to the last. 'You can't be givin' in to things, Tomás.' True Ma, but there's also a time to let things go.

My childhood was spent in tune with the seasonal requirements of the farming calendar. In spring, we ploughed and harrowed the fields. We sowed oats, potatoes, cabbage, carrots and parsnips and other vegetables. I spent childhood summers in the bog saving turf and on the farm saving the hay. We cut and stooked the oats in Autumn and waited for the thresher to come. Then we dug the potatoes. A number of times each week I milked our two cows by hand and weekends were spent mending fences, rebuilding stone walls, dosing cattle, cutting firewood for winter, and attending to the various ongoing demands of animal husbandry.

We didn't get a television until I was 9 years old. I can still remember my disillusionment when I first saw Michael Dillon on *Mart and Market* giving out the livestock report; he was dressed in a shirt and tie with a sports jacket. He no longer wore the cap, and the brown jobber's overcoat with the dung stains on it, which he always wore on the radio.

We didn't get a tractor until I was ten, so hay was turned by hand and cocked in the fields. Then it was transferred to the hay garden beside the house to be built into a large store cock. My childhood was lived close to the land, in tune with the changeable weather, the farming calendar and the changing seasons – a late sixties, early seventies rural childhood.

## Overlapping Themes

In the novel Fr Gerry O'Dowd comes to understand how he began unknown to himself and underwent a formation, which he didn't choose, but which was set out for him. In his middle years an accident forces him to reconsider his life and he begins again in a different way. In middle age there is no beginning from the beginning as previously – this time the beginning is within language. Language and narrative are tools to enable character transformation, but these tools are not sufficient in themselves to effect transformation. Beginning again shares important characteristics with initial beginning – its possibility has a similar grounding. The infant initially begins in curiosity, trust, and relationality. The bodily 'I' is a product of instinctive sensuous engagement in a trusting, relational context. As the subject develops this sedimentation of an 'I' occurs through language and narrative which is a cognitive performance. However, the bodily 'I' gets overlooked – the embodied dimension neglected. Descartes' *Cogito ergo sum* is a cognitive performance achieved on the level of thought, but the bodily 'I' does not begin in thought. It begins in sensuousness; I sensed therefore I began. *Sentio ergo sum*, I feel therefore I am. But this still accords primacy to an 'I' already formed, who does the sensing. A better formulation is as follows: In sensing 'I' began, in flesh before word. The 'I' that begins is the bodily sensing self.

In the novel this is captured in the section 'Body' where Gerry relearns to negotiate his world from the confines of a wheelchair. In adapting and learning anew the possibilities of life with a disability there is a reflection of the child learning to negotiate the world. Just like the child is an explorer who has yet to discover limits and dangers, so too this is also an experience for Gerry. However, like the infant, he needs to possess a curiosity and trust in the context of a relationality which can afford him this possibility. His body will tell him its limits, not his mind. Thought and language effectively led him away from his grounded embodiment into stagnation.

The thesis can fix its gaze intently at initial beginning and consider it philosophically, using the philosophical canon with its various accounts of subjectivity and methodologies to render the

implicit explicit. It can maintain a clear focus throughout. The novel on the other hand attempts to answer its central question by taking a meandering, scenic route, a route which sometimes doubles back on itself and may seem at times in danger of ending up at a dead end or indeed looping back to the beginning. In the novel, beginning again is explored through narrative. Gerry reflects on the arc of his own story, a story about formation and received knowledge, with a view to understanding his beginning and subsequent development, the overall aim of which is a releasement, a letting go of the given to achieve an embodied mindful attending before the phenomenon in the present. That releasement is only fully possible in an embodied mindfulness not on the level of thought alone.

### **The Character of Fr Gerry O'Dowd and The Socio-cultural Context**

Fr Gerry is a product of his upbringing. His formation has been within the Roman Catholic tradition; a tradition which insists that its priests must be male and celibate. It is an institution that reserves the right to silence and take faculties from its priests if they do not follow church teachings. A belief in Papal infallibility on matters of faith and morals is part of that tradition as is a particular devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus.

There has been a notable decline in church attendances in Ireland over the last number of decades and the church has found itself continually criticised for its prohibition on women priests and its teachings in the area of human sexuality. In Ireland The Roman Catholic church campaigned against the liberal agenda which involved the introduction of divorce, abortion services and gay marriage. Over the last few decades it has been rocked internally by child sexual abuse scandals and many would argue that's its moral authority and credibility has been irreparably damaged.

This is the church Gerry O'Dowd belongs to. He doesn't consider himself to be 'old school' but sees himself as a liberal egalitarian. However, no man or woman can ever completely escape their upbringing or inheritance. In his journey through an exclusively male boarding school,

followed by his seven years in the seminary with other males, certain attitudes and approaches have become second nature. His attitude to women is not one of hatred; he is not a misogynist. There are a number of misunderstandings between Niamh and Gerry in the course of the novel, they are different people, they think differently. They are a product of different environments. Yes, there are elements of toxic masculinity and toxic femininity in the novel, but it is unhelpful to label either of these as misogyny or misandry. The dynamic drive of male sexuality is honestly represented in the book and there is an earthiness about the way in which sexuality is depicted. I believe this is refreshing given the widespread tendency to either vilify male sexuality or dishonestly portray it in an overly sanitised, innocuous way. Seán an Iarainn (Iron John) lays decomposing in Kilcrua graveyard – Nivea John is busy auditioning in his place, but at the heart of masculinity an unanswered question remains.

As author I have attempted an honest authentic portrayal of the central character – warts and all. The fiction writer has the freedom to avoid the policing of inner thought and the presentation of over-sanitised, insipid, inner voices. The authorial responsibility is to represent the character honestly and authentically; likability or political correctness cannot be authorial preoccupations. These considerations may of course inform the reader's critical approach, but realistic and honest representation must inform the author's approach. If political correctness and the scruples of the sensitivity reader succeed in policing the author's imagination with regard to the character's actions and thought processes then Kundera's 'explorer of existence' is on a fast track to becoming inane and harmless – opting for the armchair, pipe and slippers. The author working with the character can choose which thoughts to focus on, but thoughts often come uninvited, they do not arrive fresh after a lengthy rinse in the sensitivity washer. Clearly, there is a responsibility on the author to use his/her freedom wisely and not indiscriminately, but there is an equal responsibility to honestly voice the reality of human lived experience in its various manifestations. Silence, censorship and pretence are the enemies of honest expression and healthy debate, they drive legitimate concerns and fears underground to be reborn as radicalised extremist views. It is debate,

dialogue and disagreement rather than agreement and conformity which help us to understand, respect, tolerate and ultimately embrace difference.

### **The Apostate as Hero**

The word apostate originally came from a Greek word which meant runaway slave. It did not have a positive connotation as in the slave fleeing his enslavement and regaining freedom, but rather the apostate was seen as a deserter, as one displaying disloyalty. The value is seen in accepting one's fate and staying the course right up to the end. This trope is remarkably familiar in literature and film which feature priest protagonists. They stick to their task, embrace their lot with a stoicism which is generally portrayed as heroic and admirable. Doubt, discontentment and the dark night of the soul are all viewed as part of the faith journey; suffering leads to redemption – there is no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday. The apostate is seen as the deserter, the one who gave up, the disloyal one who couldn't keep his promise and is subject to severe judgment by the church, including excommunication. It is no surprise then, given these teachings and the incorporation of disillusionment and lack of faith into the faith journey, that very few priest characters seem to manage to extricate themselves from their faith but interpret their despair and darkness as all part of their faith journey.

Many decades ago I read *Help my Unbelief* by Fr Michael Paul Gallagher S.J.<sup>10</sup> In this book he writes about atheism in terms of a lack of faith, thereby viewing it from within a faith perspective. He does not view atheism as a credible stand-alone position which might be better described as being faith-free rather than lacking faith. The view of faith, which sees it as incorporating doubt and its opposite, serves to give it a large reach, even 'faith-less' moments are faith experiences. Literature has many examples of the devout ascetic priest who holds onto God regardless of the lure of flesh, the world or his own unhappiness. There's the priest in Georges Bernanos's *Diary of a Country Priest* who sacrifices and dies to himself in the interests of a duty to his calling. Fr Tom

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<sup>10</sup> Gallagher, Michael Paul. *Help My Unbelief*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1983.



Conroy in Richard Power's *The Hungry Grass* leads an uneventful life of stoic servitude. Power even references Bernanos: "a true priest is never loved," someone – Bernanos was it? – had said."<sup>11</sup> Declan Kiberd writes about how Power's novel broke "free of saccharine depictions of the Irish priest, that 'soggarth aroon' beloved of nineteenth-century novelists and twentieth-century Hollywood movies."<sup>12</sup>

There are also some examples of the romantic priest in film and literature: there's Father Ralph in *The Thorn Birds*,<sup>13</sup> and "The Priest" in *Fleabag*.<sup>14</sup> My own priest protagonist is very different. He has no delusions about his physical attractiveness or the trappings of wealth, authority or the uniform. He understands his difficult calling and the drive to make something authentic of the life he inhabits. He wrestles with whether he can reach contentment within the confines of religion, liturgy and a theology of fallenness. He wonders if he is merely a puppet of his past. He asks himself who he really is. Through his journey he finds that a life of faith for him is a bad faith project and, while one can never fully leave one's past behind, one can always start afresh and unlearn some of the life-denying dependencies – one can jettison the crutches which have hindered one's ability to walk unaided. Self reliance is key. The apostate's journey is a journey away, a patient undoing, one strand at a time of the ties that bind. Gerry learns self dependency and acts to recover the shamed body and that sense of autonomy which the institution buried with destructive dogma. He sets out on an adventure to rediscover himself, rid himself of the toxic influences and regain that innocence which allows him to approach the world in possibility again.

In the end, the everyday struggle is "enough to fill a man's heart"<sup>15</sup> it's about a commitment to living in the present, freed from the obsession with his past formation or concerns about his future

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<sup>11</sup> Power, Richard. *The Hungry Grass*, Apollo. United Kingdom, 2016. p.13.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p.vii-viii

<sup>13</sup> McCullough, Colleen. *The Thorn Birds*, Australia: Harper and Row, 1977.

<sup>14</sup> *Fleabag*, TV Series. BBC: Two Brothers Pictures, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955. p.123.

reality. He recommits to life and living. Life is a horizontal possibility, there is no space for a vertical distraction.

In John McGahern's short story *The Wine Breath* the priest reflects back on his life and his inevitable death. He finds moments of memory that seem to refashion themselves into an aliveness, a significance which makes that particular day "as good a day as any, if there ever was a good day to go."<sup>16</sup> There is a sense of loneliness and isolation, but there is also a stoicism and a belief that these memories are epiphanies of something more, something better. The light on the snow brings the memory of a funeral and how the eternal somehow shone in that white light on the snow – it takes a faith-full believer to see that. The light on snow to Gerry O'Dowd is a beautiful sight and it would stir him into expansive thoughts about living and being alive in the moment. It is not a harbinger of eternal or perpetual light.

At the end of *No Way to say Goodbye* Gerry O'Dowd comes to embrace life and its possibilities. In the faith-filled soul there is always the end view, the future hope of better and meaning. Gerry O'Dowd has no truck with this oppressive sense of better anymore, it blocks and prevents a wholehearted engagement with living and life. Life is lived on the horizontal, without the preoccupations of the vertical, the beyond. There are no grand epiphanies, fleeting or otherwise to satisfy the meaning-hungry heart. The everyday struggle is enough to fill any man's heart.

Fr Tom Connor in *Lovers* wants to fight to change the Roman Catholic Church's attitude to celibacy. He believes he should still be able to remain a priest after he gets his housekeeper pregnant.<sup>17</sup> Fr Gerry O'Dowd is not a campaigner. His disillusionment with the church is not tied up in any specific church teachings, although he clearly doesn't believe in celibacy. His difficulty is with his faith inheritance, his formation in a faith chosen for him. He is disillusioned with a church that has controlled and wielded power indiscriminately, which has shamed and undermined the

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<sup>16</sup> McGahern, John. *The Collected Stories*, New York: Vintage, 1994. p.187.

<sup>17</sup> Standún, Paraic. *Lovers*, Dublin: Poolbeg, 1991.

autonomy of the person, while its own members engaged in the most heinous acts of child sexual abuse. Gerry sees it as a church that has become morally bankrupt. His faith inheritance was an imposition, an inessential requirement. Life can be lived faith-free. Of course a systematic formation over 5 decades cannot be wiped clean, traces remain, and perhaps will always remain. There is no way to say goodbye; traces linger, but they no longer hold him prisoner.

Gerry's disillusionment with the church and his faith is ultimately a symptom of his disillusionment with himself and what he has become. Yes, the church needs to change but ultimately, Gerry O'Dowd has to change. It's time for him to stop flogging dead horses, stop expecting others or institutions to come around to his way of thinking. It's about freeing himself from the rubrics, the framework of his frustration and embracing a faith-free life. The priest protagonist who remains a priest in spite of everything tends to overlook a basic choice which seems unavailable – their heroism consists in staying and fighting against mounting odds, remaining within the fold rather than leaving. Habit and ritual forge sedimented identities and the thought of apostasy is somehow viewed as the most negative of alternatives.

Former priest Michael Harding, in his memoir *On Tuesdays I'm a Buddhist*, recounts his attempt to liberate himself from priesthood by throwing his ordination chalice into the sea.<sup>18</sup> He finds himself unable to do this and his attempt generates a reconversion to his faith inheritance. Gerry O'Dowd denies himself this comfort, this faith recapitulation. Gerry O'Dowd, placed in a similar situation would have cast the chalice into the sea. However, he would not concern himself with such melodramatic theatrics; authentic action is not symbolic or tokenistic, its significance and meaning is within it rather than beyond it.

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<sup>18</sup> Harding, Michael. *On Tuesdays I'm a Buddhist*, Dublin: Hachette Books Ireland, 2017.

## Grappling with the Questions

Over the last six years my attachment to the central questions grew. I often thought the question about the pre-infant/infant's pre-linguistic beginnings, to be an impossible question, but consoled myself with the thought that this no doubt served to emphasize its importance. Beginnings determine and influence subsequent decisions, often subconsciously, so the question about beginnings needs to be posed and it deserves a comprehensive answer. Philosophy and narrative are late to the scene of the pre-infant/infant's initial pre-linguistic sensuous beginning; so much has already happened. As such they are belated attempts to reach beyond themselves into the silence and the sensuousness of initial beginning.

For the last 6 years I have engaged with these questions about initial beginning and subsequent beginning. I believe I have made some solid progress on developing a more comprehensive philosophical understanding of initial beginning. Many approaches display a mentalistic bias and overlook the fact that the world of the pre-infant/infant is as Lawrence Hatab writes: "through and through an incarnate world."<sup>19</sup> The subject is flesh before word and is immersed in sensuous awareness prior to the development of self-consciousness which arises in a dialogue between the senses, the social environment and language. Far too often this sensuousness has been overlooked and what is implicit in the world of the infant is rendered in terms of adult concepts, where the direct unmediated sensuousness is read back from an adult standpoint. I have followed Heidegger and Hatab in understanding concepts as formal indicators, but their ability to formally indicate is limited. All conceptual probes are laden already with adult baggage and it is only concepts stripped of baggage that can uncover the pre-infant/infant's world in its reality. All concepts are indicators but their formalness is part of the reason they fall short because what they aim to render explicit does not possess a formality in itself. The sensuous pre-linguistic world is initially formless and

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<sup>19</sup> Hatab, Lawrence J. *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality and Literacy Dwelling in Speech II*, London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield International. 2020. p.86.

expansive, it is the concepts which give it form. Concepts need to be fashioned to render its formlessness. The initial formlessness is only graspable in sensuous engagement, a type of sensuous engagement which, I argue, is only experienceable in an embodied mindful attending. My conclusion emphasizes how an embodied curiosity, trust, and sensuousness draw us outward towards the world. How experiences like shame and anxiety, separate us from the world and make us negatively self-aware – how our fascination with narrative can both imprison us, where our lives can become lives in ‘bad faith’ and how reconstructed narratives can help free us from trauma and difficult experiences. It is not the narrative in itself that frees us but the conditions which support the construction of the narrative like connectedness and an ability to approach the world in trust and empathic awareness.

In the thesis I have argued for the use of concepts which are value neutral and are viewed as indicative rather than definitive. Avoiding mentalistic bias and the use of adult concepts is a challenge especially when one is working within language. There is a sense in which no concept can render the implicit explicit because we are moving between the flesh of the sensible to the expressions of language. This is why I elaborate on the need for an embodied mindful presencing, which is analogous to the pre-linguistic infant’s awareness.

Our movement toward and back from the world is ever changing and dynamic. We have an ongoing dialogue with the world around us and the other. The pre-infant/infant reaches into the world – the world draws the infant forward or pushes him or her back. Our first movement toward the world is tentative, but it is a movement born in curiosity and blind to doubt or anxiety. It is a sensuous acknowledgement of the need for the world and the other, a reaching out which is born of curiosity. Sensuous desire is born in flesh, the desire to touch, taste, feel; the desire of the eye to see, to witness sights, the ear to hear and experience sound, the senses becoming fully alive in sensing, the looking eye, the listening ear. This is how ‘I’ begins.

What emerges is that subjectivity develops in an original relationality in the context of the other and the sensuous world. The subject's development as an agent arises in this context. This is the ground of an initial ethical encounter which is pre-linguistic, and not primarily an intellectual achievement.

### **Borderlands - An Interdisciplinary Project**

In working in two different disciplines the challenge has been to understand and use their complementarity and their difference in supporting a comprehensive exploration of the central questions. The greatest challenge in this endeavour has been to gain some mastery in both disciplines and make both a scholarly and a literary contribution. Many times, I felt unequal to the task. It was as if I was falling between two stools, incapable of gaining sufficient mastery in either discipline. The temptation to focus on one was attractive at times. However, I persisted, sometimes out of stubbornness, but generally in the belief that this adventure was going to be worthwhile and that it should be possible to combine both endeavours in a mutually beneficial way. At times I felt like an outlier in both disciplines, a man with a foot in either camp but belonging to neither, some sort of academic stray lacking a confidence or a sense of belonging in either discipline. Apparently, imposter syndrome is common among PhD students conducting their research within one discipline.<sup>20</sup> So this must be at least doubled when one is working across two disciplines. At times I failed to grasp philosophical ideas until I returned for a second or third reading. Throughout the early years my supervisors both supported and challenged me and kept me on track. I think it was only when I was about half-way through the project that I began to feel my confidence grow. This was strengthened by the successful presentation of three papers at international philosophy conferences at the start of year four, five and six.

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<sup>20</sup> Nori, Hanna & Vanttaja, Markku. "Too Stupid for PhD? Doctoral impostor syndrome among Finnish PhD students." *Higher Education*, August 2022. p.675-691.

During this six-year adventure I felt like a pioneer. I was charting new territory, there was freedom in that, but I lacked a clear and definite map. A novel about new beginnings and a philosophy thesis on initial beginning seemed on the face of it to have something obvious in common. But maybe initial beginning and subsequent beginning are two completely different phenomena. The more I researched and reflected on initial beginning, the clearer the connections became. My research question brought me to the beginnings of subjectivity, in a sense beyond the philosophical self into the sensuous world of infancy. In that reflection at the borderland, philosophy itself comes under the spotlight in relation to its own beginnings. My contention is that philosophy begins in curiosity not wonder, it is more closely tied to a desire to make sense of the world rather than a sense of marveling at the world. Like language it is a late arrival to the pre-linguistic world of sensuous beginning.

### **An Exercise in Vulnerability**

Choosing to combine a philosophy thesis and a novel is, I believe, a decision to do philosophy from a vulnerable place. Choosing to focus my research on the pre-linguistic infant who arrives in language and philosophy belatedly is perhaps bordering on reckless. To combine both is to take a chance, to trust in a creative process. It is easy to become anonymous in the formal structure of a thesis, which comes together at arm's length from the vicissitudes of daily human life. Not so when one is writing a novel. Starting out I had the questions about initial beginning and beginning again hovering like Iris Murdoch's kestrel, the last six years have been an exploration of these questions philosophically, creatively and personally.

The combination of a novel and a philosophy thesis in a PhD project may be viewed by some as a second-rate project. I would have to disagree! A much more straight-forward project would have been to write a much longer philosophy thesis and not have to work within two different disciplines, on two different forms and then have something meaningful to say about the combining of both endeavours. A philosophy thesis of twice the length would not have been the

challenge that this project has been. Writing a novel is high stakes. In writing a novel one puts oneself out there and risks disapproval or worse ridicule. The prospective readership for a novel far outweighs the prospective readership for a thesis. Within the confines of a philosophy thesis one can explore the research question within the pre-established canon. As regards the novel, there are other philosophical novels, other novels where a priest is the central character and while these may serve as reference points or as comparators, to a large extent the novel stands or falls on its own construction and execution. As a creative endeavour it is not confined by any canon. The limiting factor is the imagination, ability and craft of the author. Writing a philosophy thesis is an academic challenge where one engages with thoughts and ideas from the canon, and one responds with one's own ideas, develops them and argues for them. Writing a novel is a full-blooded thought and emotional engagement with lived human experience in all its aspects. My sense is that doing philosophy from an authentic place is about doing it from a place of vulnerability, a place not only of thought but a full-blooded engagement with the subject. I agree with Sigrid Thorgeirsdottir's assertion that:

we have to learn to do philosophy from a vulnerable place as a place of openness [...] exposing ourselves to ourselves in a way that is fruitful for philosophical discourse, and also towards a liberating discourse. Vulnerability is in this sense a neutral and descriptive term, delineating the insecurity that is inherent to the practice of philosophy as a deep way or reflection, coming from a deep place where the emotional disposition is implicitly or explicitly reflected in the process of thinking.<sup>21</sup>

Combining a novel and a philosophy thesis, a work of art and a work of research is I believe an attempt to do philosophy from a place of openness, a place of vulnerability, a place of emotion, thought and biographical narrative. The novel and the thesis are philosophical endeavours, the

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<sup>21</sup> Thorgeirsdottir, Sigrid. "Shame, Vulnerability and Philosophical Thinking." *Sophia* 59.1 (2020), p.8-9.



manner in which they are executed is different but in the end they both complement, clarify and learn from each other.

### **A Symbiotic Dialogue**

Andrew Inkpin writes about the symbiotic relationship between Sartre's philosophical novels and his theoretical work. He claims that Sartre's literature:<sup>22</sup>

complement[s] his theoretical works by playing a distinct role as part of his overall philosophical project. In this respect, the most conspicuous and most important thing Sartre's literature can add to a theoretical work such as *Being and Nothingness* are detailed descriptions of how the phenomena that interest Sartre play out in human life. Especially in his novels, Sartre is free to develop fine-grained descriptions of the situations, behaviours and thought processes typical of our own experience as human agents making decisions about how to act and lead meaningful lives. He can also explore in detail the complications and conflicts introduced by the presence of others, the implications of our actions on them, their impact on our self-perception and so on.<sup>23</sup>

He goes on to claim that:

Sartre's work can thus be seen as a literary phenomenology, a variant of phenomenology in which literature plays an essential methodological role. [...] It is a literary phenomenology [...] because his literary writing is functionally equivalent to the operations required by Husserl's phenomenological method [...] The two kinds of text each have a distinct and irreducible function while complementing one

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<sup>22</sup> Inkpin, Andrew. "Sartre's Literary Phenomenology." *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 23, No.1 (2017), p.1-21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

another: without one his theoretical commitments would remain indeterminate, but without the other we would lack details of his theory's application.<sup>24</sup>

According to Inkpin, the novel provides a phenomenological account of human situatedness and explores that situatedness, through character and narrative. It grounds and tests theoretical commitments.

My thesis uncovers the relationality that grounds developing subjectivity in the infant, while the novel manifests the relationality that contextualises the possibility of beginning again. In their symbiotic dialogue the thesis and the novel complement each other but at another level they critique each other.

The philosophy thesis questions the imprecision and uncertainty of the novel, whereas the novel critiques the abstractedness and clarity of the thesis, a clarity that conceals the reality of uncertainty and the complexity of lived human experience. The novel explores the experiential ground in an experiential way, the thesis reasons, analyses and reflects on the ground. The novel reveals the ground, and both the thesis and the novel try to understand and interpret it. The novel is happy to take the scenic route, the long route which can often be the shortest way home: the route where things are not hurried, where there is time to stop, stare, to backtrack if necessary, get lost, experience the repetitiveness, not jettison the complexity and uncertainty in the interests of clarity and progress.

The process of writing both was a process of listening to each critique and allowing them insofar as possible to inform each other's development. As novelist I wanted to bring philosophy on a pre-linguistic, pre-philosophical adventure into the sensuous, pre-linguistic world of the infant, to do philosophy from a vulnerable place, where one can only use the philosophical canon as a rickety guiderail. As a philosopher I wanted the novel to engage in an in-depth exploration of

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.15.

its theme, to come to critical reflection on its method and realisation. Overall, both works have benefitted from the process in which they jointly came to be. Both works complement each other, their lasting critique of each other is primarily in terms of each other's methodology. That is of course inevitable given the fact that they are different forms.

### **Endings and Letting Go**

In the philosophy thesis I attempted a comprehensive answer to the research question and while I have formed a particular view and understanding of initial beginning, it is of course in itself only a beginning. The work is not finishable. It invites response and comment and that is its strength. Neither is the novel the final word. It ends in a space of beginning again. There is the possibility of a sequel to the novel where I pick up the continuing story of Gerry and his new realisations. There is the possibility of a sequel to the thesis where the grounding of an existentialist ethic is considered and developed. Perhaps there is a strong argument to be made for the advancement of another novel and a thesis together, like there is an argument for their separate advancement.

The novel I have written has been influenced by my academic studies. It has been created within that environment. Part of the ongoing challenge for me has been to keep academic and creative styles separate; to clearly segregate and edit lengthy philosophical meditations in the novel which at times became overly academic and philosophical. On the other hand, the thesis at times developed a conversational style more suited to the novel. Sometimes I set out to write a creative piece and ended up writing a philosophical reflection and vice versa. At other times my philosophical reflections, with severe editing, became throwaway remarks, sometimes they formed part of dialogues or became sentences in the narrative. By the same token dialogue and descriptions in the novel sometimes became fruitful for philosophical reflection. The earlier part of the novel 'Word' communicates the central character's habitation and stagnation in thought and the philosophical, whereas the later section of the book 'Body' moves towards action and movement,

unlearning and relearning. The final section 'Embrace' brings 'Word' and 'Body' back together in a more fluid and dynamic relationship. Gerry's disabled body has re-grounded his mind in the real, it has impacted its habituation.

As the novel ends, much has been written, much has been left unwritten, the work waits to come alive again in the reader's imagination. The reader will continue the journey which the writer has abandoned. Likewise with the thesis. It can only come alive in being read, in perhaps stimulating another mind to build on my thoughts and make of them something greater or to take the thinking in a different direction. I draw the project to a conclusion slightly unwillingly – more time would have brought further amendments and revisions. However, there is a clear sense in which it is as good as it can be for now. All work is unfinishable, but my attempt was honest, effected in good faith. It may trigger something for the reader, invite the reader to reflect on their own life; to consider what life it is that is worth living.

No word is ever the last word, there are always more words. In the end themes are shallow-buried, words are placed side by side which allow a certain restfulness, a certain after-storm calmness to take hold. The world becomes again a cool after-rain world with branches dropping hints of growth, and silence rising as heavy rain droplets form on leaves, and then fall from branch to ground. There is a groundedness at the end, the narrative rests, awaiting a reawakening in another mind.

As author there is a sense of letting go and letting be, attachment to questions can sometimes hold us in places for too long. As author I'm happy for Gerry O'Dowd, happy that he emerged from his chronic questioning to understand that life is for living and letting live. It took some work to get him there and there was an occasional temptation to let him spiral into an unravelling. It was an adventure to share his world, but it is a release to let him go. While there is a clear sense of letting go, there is also a sense of a fresh space opening. There is silence from which in time,

another voice, a different voice might emerge and be heard. The previous voice has been tired out, it has made way.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I gave the character of Fr Gerry O'Dowd the scope of a novel within which to thoughtfully rethink his life. A novel which through his voice structured itself into a liturgy; a liturgy of Word, Body, and Embrace. In the course of this project, I wrestled with the idea that he was the author writing his memoir. In the end I decided that his voice was too confining, I wasn't confident he had the required distance to make some sense of his situation, he was still too close to it all.

Fr Gerry's voice brought a liturgical rhythm to the novel. It became a sustained, honest expression of his existential angst until he achieves a certain releasement from the constantly echoing narrative of the past – the always beckoning future – into the possibility of now. A liturgy that in its repetitive rhythms and incantatory mantras created a clearing, a space free from a fixation on the past and a preoccupation with the future, a space of possibility in the present.

The novel as a form provided possibility and flexibility in relating this story and was, I believe, the form best-suited to this story. The mantras and repetitions in the novel honour the lived human experience. Many changes and edits occurred between successive redrafts, but the novel's title did not change: *No Way to Say Goodbye*. The novel holds the space open for the character's desire for resolution, his desire at one stage to leave the church, at another point to take his own life, but his desire to live is stronger. The greatest commandment is to live one's life, a life where one takes on one's personal freedom to take a place in the world; to free oneself from the inclination to acquiesce in the shadow of authority figures and institutions or the most difficult shadow of all to escape: one's own habituated self with its sedimented ways of being.

The novel questions the relationship between the individual and the institution and how personal freedom can or can't be accommodated there. In the end it charts an idea of personal freedom as a freedom for rather than a freedom from. Gerry now lives in his apartment, but he is still part of something. The liturgical responses still echo in his head, he is part of a community, a society, the releasement he effects is a personal one. He has managed to gain a handle on his past, to see it for what it was. He has freed himself from the pervasive human tendency to view the past with a toxic nostalgia or a corrosive contempt. He sees it matter-of-factly.

In the end *No Way to Say Goodbye* is a fairly straightforward story of one man's quest to take responsibility for his own life. In Gerry's case it took a disabling event to help him gain that insight. Gerry's hard-won realisation is about the importance of compassion and living one's life in personal, responsible freedom; allowing others to be themselves and experiencing the same freedom in return. His realisation is about being, not about becoming. To live authentically is to live in the possibility of the present, not knowing the answer to now, but living the question of now, refusing to fall for the meaning, refusing to get swallowed up in bad faith projects.

As regard my own journey, well the years have brought a certain calmness and reticence. Life is too wonderful a possibility to shroud with regrets about the past or concerns about the future. My former personae are part of my self-narrative, and I do not judge either of them too harshly. We are all vulnerable, we are prone to making mistakes, but we can learn. In the end, we each individually confront our longings and restlessness. Others can help but the ultimate responsibility rests with each of us individually. Accepting and living that responsibility makes life a precious adventure, and the prospect of death, while never wished for, becomes a more acceptable proposition too. It is sufficient to have reached a point of releasement. I hope I have many years left to experience that sense of releasement and explore it further both academically and creatively. However, if I don't, then it will be sufficient to have reached that space in my life and not fallen for the strawmen along the way. A life well lived is not about hiding behind doctrines or ideologies, or using them to wallpaper over cracks in our state of knowledge. It is about being comfortable

with not knowing, not needing to know, being happy to be alive and not falling for the meaning. As the decades roll by, the number of empty chairs around family dinner tables inevitably increase, but there's no reason to be anxious, death will come in its own good time. Until then we live and love, being gentle with ourselves and being kind to others. The PhD adventure ends here – the bigger adventure continues apace.

In conclusion, I want to acknowledge what I think I have brought to this project. I think my attempt has been honest. The project certainly extended me. I wouldn't have wanted it to be otherwise. Hopefully, this ageing rookie's efforts will lead to further projects of this kind. Moving towards my last paragraph I have a growing sense of getting my own voice back, freed from the demands of the central character's voice in the novel, and free also to some extent from the rubrics of academic writing.

And so it ends like it all began, in a movement outside written words, outside the liturgy of the form: outside the confines of plot, character and ending, in the opening silence of beginning. Chapters begin, chapters end, sometimes cleanly, sometimes straggly; there are more sentences that could be added. But the scraggly and the clean both do their work in the rhyming of an ending, where the author shallow-buries themes and lets things be; releasing words and thoughts back to recharge themselves with future potential in the omnidirectional silence.

# **HOW DOES 'I' BEGIN?**

## **An Exploration of the Human Subject's Initial Beginning in Subjectivity**

**Tomás Lally**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of *Philosophiae Doctor*

Discipline of Philosophy

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this thesis I explore the beginnings of human subjectivity. Part of the challenge in this thesis has been to develop a methodology suitable for approaching the pre-linguistic initial beginning of the human infant. The methodology developed involves the use of the Heideggerian concepts of thoughtful thinking, using concepts as formal indicators and the proto-phenomenological approach developed by Lawrence Hatab. My methodology also involves the idea of an embodied mindful attending to the phenomenon of initial beginning which I develop from Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit* or releasement and more recent literature on bodyfulness, and body memories. This enables a minimally cognitive, embodied presencing with the phenomenon of initial beginning.

I identify three initial grounding experiences of the embodied, sensuous pre-linguistic subject. Initial beginning is grounded in 1) curiosity and trust, not wonder and anxiety; 2) connectedness before separateness and disconnection; and 3) continuity and embodied attending, not a retentive/protentive temporality. I then provide an analysis of the origins of affectivity, with a particular focus on the origin of shame. The chapter concludes with a brief exploration of the infant's initial beginnings in language and the rudimentary evolution of the 'I'.

The comprehensive account which I provide as to the initial beginnings of human subjectivity, in an original and dynamically developing relationality, uncovers a pre-linguistic, embodied foundation for an ethical engagement with the world and the other.

## INTRODUCTION

Much of what we write is autobiographical, ranging from the thinly disguised to the well-hidden. Of course, to be able to write about oneself implies a certain distancing, the capacity to see oneself as an agent, an actor in the world. Nietzsche was clear in his claim about two thousand years of western philosophy consisting of “a confession of faith on the part of its author, and a type of involuntary and unself-conscious memoir.”<sup>1</sup> This is probably true in many cases if not all. It is hardly surprising that writers of fiction and scholarly work would be motivated to write about issues, concerns and questions which emerge from their human lived experience. Perhaps this origin is what ensures relevance and appeal. What is also true is that quite often what provokes, and fuels philosophical enquiry tends to bedevil it throughout and quite often the one thing the writer wished to avoid ends up haunting the work. All writing is haunted, not in a supernatural sense but every word could be another word, a different word, every word begets another, perhaps a better word but no word is the last word on anything, so the belief that anyone could come up with the last word is delusionary in the extreme. There are always more words to follow, some from yourself and some from others as Hannah Arendt suggests:

Each time you write something and you send it out into the world and it becomes public, obviously everybody is free to do with it what he pleases, and this is as it should be. I do not have any quarrel with this. You should not try to hold your hand now on whatever may happen to what you have been thinking for yourself. You should rather try to learn from what other people do with it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Horstmann, Rolf-Peter; Norman, Judith, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. p.8.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt, Hannah. Remarks to the American Society of Christian Ethics quoted by Margaret Canovan in *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. p.xx.

In writing a PhD thesis there is the ambition to advance scholarship and also the hope that others may connect with the thesis and find something of value there which, as Arendt suggests, they may build on or take in a very different direction. In approaching the question of how 'I' begins, I could follow my inherited thought, my philosophical formation within the canon and accept a turn as my starting point, be it a linguistic, a theological, a hermeneutical or a deconstructionist turn and not radically question that turn. I could follow Descartes and seek a foundation by using doubting as a method to arrive at clear and distinct ideas and eventually come to conclude that thinking provided the conclusive evidence of the 'I am' of the *cogito*. Doubt is an intellectual approach; it means entertaining an object of doubt. The context of Descartes doubting needs to be borne in mind, the *cogito* rather than bridging the gap between mind and body serves to emphasize it, the connection is merely intellectual. The sensual engagement and social dimension upon which the acquisition and development of language depends has been overlooked. The ground which founds the intellectual development of the subject has been ignored as Descartes searches for an intellectual bridging between mind and body. The beginning revealed by his methodic doubt is not an ontological beginning but rather a grounding of intellectual subjectivity, the 'I' of I think is preexistent. It is the 'I' of I think, the pre-reflective subject which is the object of my enquiry.

Doubt did not lead Descartes to the foundational beginning. This is not to say that methodic doubt cannot be a useful tool to employ in terms of a journey towards an understanding of beginning. Doubt can provide an approach which helps us avoid stopping short of a stop gap answer to the question of how 'I' begin, it can help us question any answer proffered, but the 'I' of I think does not begin in doubt, in fact it is quite the opposite as I argue in Chapter 2, namely the 'I' begins in trust and curiosity, in an openness, a sallying forth, which doubting would undermine from the get-go.

To focus on initial beginning is to focus on the opening of possibility and this is what Arendt does with her concept of natality. She sets the emphasis on living and the promise of natality rather than a preoccupation with the inevitability of death. The human being is defined in terms of natality not mortality: “If the Greeks defined man as the ‘mortal’, men are now defined by their natality, as the ‘natals’.”<sup>3</sup> Humanity is born to live rather than die, life is not simply a preparation for death. Adriana Cavarero describes Arendt’s focus on natality as bringing about: “...a subversive shift in perspective with respect to the patriarchal tradition that has always thrived on the category of death”.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that Arendt is indeed bringing about this shift but Arendt while refocusing us on natality does not ignore death but sees it also as a basic condition of life:

the decisive fact determining man as a conscious, remembering being is birth or ‘natality,’ that is, the fact that we have entered the world through birth. The decisive fact determining man as a desiring being was death or mortality, the fact that we shall leave the world in death.<sup>5</sup>

Past experience and memory generate expectations, but possibility rather than death is the context within which life is lived, being present in the present moment with its promise and possibility rather than interpreting our present in terms of some future death horizon.

Starting out on this journey to explore the origins of ‘I’ is a journey into the unknown, a reaching into the silent before, the pre-linguistic, pre-philosophical space. In that sense it is more of an adventure than a journey. The first turn in the road from initial beginning is a gradual deviated bend from an immersion in sensory awareness into language and thought. Thought

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<sup>3</sup> Bowen –Moore, Patricia. *Hannah Arendt’s Philosophy of Natality*, London: The Macmillan Press, 1989. p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Cavarero, Adriana. *In spite of Plato: Feminist rewriting of ancient philosophy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995. p.6-7. It is important to point out that Cavarero is critical of Arendt for conceiving of natality as abstract, disembodied and sexually neutral with no reference to actual birth.

<sup>5</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Love and Saint Augustine*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. p.51-52.

and language stand apart from sense and in naming and conceptualizing it, create a distance between itself and its object, thereby establishing an authority for itself over it. Initial beginning is the place from whence a creative or authentic unfolding in thought and theory originates. So, we go back to the beginning. Language can help us get there, but the adventure is about reaching that initial pre-linguistic clearing to try to manifest it and see how it has become a foundation for what has followed.

Descartes believed he had discovered his foundation in the thinking subject, Heidegger reflected on Dasein as the philosophizing self, but both Dasein and the thinking subject had an infancy, they started out pre-linguistically immersed in the sensory. It is interesting to note that Heidegger talks about the clearing, understood as the open space created by language, or perhaps better achieved through poetry. However, to the extent that that clearing is a silent or perhaps a mute space of possibility it is I believe similar to the original pre-linguistic clearing which we all experienced sensorially as infants. Heidegger did not journey there, he stayed within language, in the 'house of being,' the space in which the philosophizing-self dwells. He stopped short of seeing the original clearing or perhaps the footings upon which the house of being was built. This is the focus of my exploration, to explore that pre-linguistic space of sensory 'dwelling' or what is best described as the precarious, sensorially configured foundation where language came to dwell.

To begin means to initiate, to start something, and while it is often difficult in the flow and continuity of awareness to point to clear definitive starting points, it is possible to point in the direction of beginnings. Exploring my initial beginning in subjectivity both as a sensuously aware subject and an object of my own awareness is where we need to begin. Yes, there is an issue about how to find one's way into this subject. The object of my study is the emerging subject, the phenomenon of initial beginning lies initially in sensuous not cognitive awareness and is not at that stage even capable of standing as an object within consciousness. Language

and philosophy are late to the scene, they arrive belatedly and attempt to respond to what has come before. Subjectivity is caught sight of or experienced in process, not in clear definable beginning; it emerges into focus undercut with the dawning sense of ‘I’ and other. The experiencing subject can only catch himself in experiencing an otherness in his experience, namely as an object of experience, and can only catch otherness in the context of an appreciation of distance, i.e., that he stands apart from the object. There is a dynamic symbiosis at work here. Initial beginning is a process and when I use the term ‘initial beginning,’ I am referring to the pre-infant state which covers roughly the last trimester of pregnancy and infancy which lasts roughly for the first year of life.

Approaching the pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive initial beginning of the pre-infant/infant poses a methodological challenge – the phenomenon can only be rendered explicit through language and the use of concepts which the pre-infant/infant does not possess. As a result, it is inevitable that such an approach will lack definiteness and precision. However, the approach I develop in exploring the most primitive and foundational relationality of the pre-infant/infant to its world, seeks to mitigate this imprecision. This mitigation is effected through my use of concepts as indicators, coupled with a minimally cognitive embodied mindful attending to the pre-infant/infant ‘experience.’

This thesis is structured into the following chapters:

## **Chapter 1    Initial Beginning - A Methodological Approach**

This chapter concerns itself with how pre-linguistic initial beginning can be approached. How can we as habituated, linguistic beings make sense of the pre-linguistic – is it possible to render explicit what is implicit in the infant’s experience? I discuss Edmund Husserl’s idea of the phenomenological reduction and the shortcomings in that approach identified by Michel Henry. I also discuss Lawrence Hatab’s proto-phenomenological approach which is a customised

existential phenomenological approach to providing a pre-reflective phenomenology of the lived world. I adopt this approach and follow Hatab and Heidegger in understanding concepts as formal indicators or pointers with a caveat about appropriateness. I then proceed to develop an additional approach which is required. The approach required, I argue, is an approach which engages with the phenomenon pre-linguistically as well as pre-reflectively. This is achieved in a shift from the idea of remaining within cognitive awareness, which is always awareness of. Cognitive awareness emphasises distance and separateness from its object, and also a minimal element of affectivity towards the object. In sharp contrast to a cognitive awareness of the phenomenon is the idea of attending to the phenomenon, emphasising co-presence, a horizontal grounded engagement, where there is no hierarchical relationship of dominance or standing over, no attempt to interpret or translate. There is sensuous presence being there. This I characterise, following Heidegger, as a radical releasement towards the phenomenon where the infant's experience is approached in an embodied mindful attentiveness, an approach that attempts an encounter with initial beginning non-cognitively in the continuity and immediacy of presence.

My approach is best summed up as a proto-phenomenological approach which uses concepts as formal indicators and also deploys an embodied mindful approach. This methodology is appropriate to the phenomenon of initial beginning because language and philosophy come belatedly to the phenomenon; we are approaching something which happened previously in the pre-linguistic, pre-reflective space of initial beginning.

## **Chapter 2    The Pre-linguistic World of the Pre-infant/Infant and Three Grounding Experiences of Initial Beginning**

In this chapter I describe the pre-linguistic world of the pre-infant/infant with reference to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's ideas of situated pre-linguistic embodiment which is to be understood sensorially and affectively. I elaborate on the sensory foundations of our initial

beginning in embodiment and affectivity which provides the pre-infant/infant with a first awareness of the world and the other. I proceed to identify three grounding experiences of initial beginning, namely:

**1. Curiosity and Trust not Wonder, Anxiety or Doubt**

Here I theorise a perceptual proto-trust as the original concomitant of curiosity rather than anxiety or doubt. I use trust and curiosity as indicative concepts with which to characterise the unique sensorially constituted, pre-linguistic engagement the infant has with the world and the other. I deal with Heidegger's critique of curiosity and move towards an understanding of curiosity as an outward sensorially-constituted orientation towards the world and the other as manifested by the infant as a proto-trust.

**2. Connection before Separateness and Disconnection**

In this section I provide an account of the pre-infant's development from the tactile protective environment of the womb to becoming an embodied subject/object in the world. I develop an account of the relational origin of primitive shame and the development of empathic awareness. The model I use to understand the initial origins of primitive empathy and primitive shame can also be deployed more generally to gain a much fuller understanding of how the physiological components of other emotions also develop.

**3. Continuity and Embodied Attending**

In this section I seek to elaborate on the temporality of initial beginning and argue that the temporality of initial beginning is best understood in terms of a streaming continuity rather than the notion of a retentive-protentive temporality. I develop the Arendtian notion of the adult experience of atemporality in the gap between past and future as an analogy for the infant's lack of a retentive-protentive awareness. I consider whether the ideas of belatedness and



syncopated temporality as developed by Anne O’Byrne<sup>6</sup> based on Arendt’s concept of natality and temporality can provide us with an appropriate characterisation of the temporality of initial beginning. I argue that they cannot – the most appropriate indicative concept with which to characterise the temporality of initial beginning is as a streaming continuity.

I conclude the chapter with some remarks about the infant’s initial progress towards language acquisition and the evolution of ‘I’.

### **Conclusion**

In my conclusion I draw together the findings of the previous chapters. My conclusion is that ‘I’ begins pre-linguistically, sensorially in bodily affectivity. Initial beginning is belatedly accessed through language and narrative. “To be is to be with,” both initially and subsequently. The human subject’s initially beginning in subjectivity take place in sensuous embodiment. It is a beginning marked by three grounding experiences: a beginning in curiosity and proto-trust, in a present of conscious streaming continuity, in a gap between past and future, in the context of a relationality, a plurality. The relational understanding of human subjectivity developed provides a foundation for an existentialist, ethical engagement grounded in social proximity and mutuality.

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<sup>6</sup> O’Byrne, Anne. *Natality and Finitude*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010.

## Chapter 1.

### Initial Beginning – A Methodological Approach

We are unable to observe our own initial beginning in subjectivity. We are born, here before we know it, and arrive in language lately. Nonetheless, we all have some sense of what being an infant was like; some of us have early memories. My focus here is both on the pre-infant stage, beginning in the last trimester of pregnancy and the stage of human infancy which covers the first-year post-birth. As this stage, human development is pre-linguistic and pre-cognitive, the challenge is how it might be possible to access this stage of human development and gain some understanding of it. One approach might be to follow the Aristotelian idea of *Metaphysics*<sup>1</sup> as first philosophy. “There is a science that studies being insofar as it is being, and also the properties of being in its own right ...we are seeking the principles, i.e., the highest causes [and] the first causes of being insofar as it is being.”<sup>2</sup>

However, I do not see my endeavour as the type of metaphysical exploration characterised by Aristotle. My concern is not with first principles, higher and final causes, this approach tends to lead to a two-world approach which postulates a truer Platonic-type realm beyond appearance. While Aristotle generally resists this Platonic idea, his hylomorphic doctrine of natural bodies consisting of two intrinsic principles presents an abstracted metaphysical view. To understand *Metaphysics* as first philosophy is to tie first philosophy to an attempt to understand the nature of reality. My claim is that this is not first philosophy. First philosophy in a chronological sense is surely an attempt to understand the origins of the subject’s journey towards language, the pre-linguistic space, and the subsequent development of philosophy. To

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, Aristotle never used the term ‘*Metaphysics*’, the term was later applied to the books which were designated as coming after his books on *Physics*.

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Bk.4 Chap.1, in *Aristotle: Selections*, Irwin & Gail. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1995. p.244.

claim that philosophy begins in wonder is to already beg the question and to situate the beginning of philosophy in a theorising metaphysical context. The pre-linguistic space as origin is my focus not the world of adult contemplation where we reconfigure beginning through a type of retrospective projection, suggesting what it might be like to be an infant in adult terms by deploying adult concepts. Talia Welsh writes about Merleau-Ponty's view of the infant/child as a natural phenomenologist not a theorizing metaphysician.<sup>3</sup> a phenomenological approach is the best approach to deploy when attempting to understand this stage of human development. But what type of phenomenological approach and phenomenology as practiced by whom? I now turn to these questions.

Central to phenomenology is the concept of the intentionality or the directedness of consciousness, namely, all consciousness is consciousness of something or other. Sokolowski writes about how this concept overcomes the Cartesian and Lockean bias:

What phenomenology does through its doctrine of the intentionality of consciousness is to overcome the Cartesian and Lockean bias against the publicness of mind, which is also a bias against the reality of the appearance of things. For phenomenology, there are no "mere" appearances, and nothing is "just" an appearance. Appearances are real; they belong to being. Things do show up.<sup>4</sup>

Another concept central to phenomenology is the phenomenological reduction or *epoché*. This involves a movement from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude where we take a step back from our involvements with the world and its contents to create a reflective space.

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<sup>3</sup> Talia Welsh *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and Primary Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Psychology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013. p. xx & p.110.

<sup>4</sup> Sokolowski, Robert. *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. p.15.

Various terms are used to characterise this movement from the natural attitude to the phenomenological attitude such as the suspension of beliefs and the bracketing of the world and the things in it. Sokolowski explains the movement to the phenomenological attitude as follows;

When we enter into the phenomenological attitude, we suspend our beliefs, and we bracket the world and all the things in the world. We put the world and the things in it "into brackets" or "into parentheses." When we so bracket the world or some particular object, we do not turn it into a mere appearance, an illusion, a mere idea, or any other sort of merely subjective impression. Rather, we now consider it precisely as it is intended by an intentionality in the natural attitude.<sup>5</sup>

The target of the phenomenological reduction is lived human experience and in considering that experience phenomenologically we consider it in its appearance. Clearly, the 'lived human experience' of the infant is not accessible in this manner so we have to deploy a particular toolkit to approach this pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive realm.

My phenomenological approach here is not aiming to be a 'science of essences' in the Husserlian sense. I do not aim to extract essences, the nature of things, but rather my aim is to describe the subject's pre-linguistic experience of initial beginning, i.e., how the world and the other, features in my initial awareness which surrounds my evolving subjective awareness. My claim is that an authentic phenomenological reduction, to the extent that one is achievable, attempts to greet the phenomenon of initial beginning without investing or embellishing it; it is not a spectral apprehending but rather a grounded encounter based in the concreteness of the subject's horizontal lived experience. The phenomenological reduction, as Merleau-Ponty writes, is always partial;

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.49.

The most important lesson of the reduction is the impossibility of a complete reduction. [...] If we were absolute spirit, the reduction would not be problematic. But since, on the contrary, we are in and toward the world, and since even our reflections take place in the temporal flow that they are attempting to capture, [...] there is no thought that encompasses all our thought. [...] the philosopher is a perpetual beginner. [...] philosophy is an ever-renewed experiment of its own beginning [...] it consists entirely in describing this beginning [...] an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation. Far from being [...] the formula for an idealist philosophy, the phenomenological reduction is in fact the formula for an existential philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

The target of the reduction is human lived experience, i.e., our being toward and in the world. We adopt a phenomenological standpoint from our immersion and groundedness in the world of human lived experience. We do not forsake that world but rather we remain there within the world of lived human experience. This is the focus of existential phenomenology as distinct from an idealist or transcendental phenomenology which aims to analyse the structure of our conscious experience and extract essences. The primary focus of existential phenomenology is ontology not epistemology.

For Husserl, the transcendental or a priori can be uncovered through phenomenological reflection. However, in approaching initial beginning within this framework there is a difficulty. Yes, one is trying to move from a position of constitution to approaching the phenomenon in its appearing, but the difficulty is that the phenomenon of initial beginning is pre-linguistic and sensorial.

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<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception* trans Donald A. Landes Routledge, Abingdon Oxon. 2012. p.xxviii.

The epoché is an intellectual operation which targets the natural attitude in an attempt to approach the essence of things. It does not alter the world; all it alters is the manner of attending to the contents of consciousness. Husserl is not trying to advance a sceptical argument about the external world in a Cartesian manner. He is aiming for truth, an analysis that avoids presuppositions insofar as possible. It is worth considering what pre-suppositions are necessary to perform the epoché. The epoché can only be performed by an entity with linguistic capacity who has developed in a relational environment. The epoché is a grounded performance, an intellectual operation grounded in lived experience. The sensual equivalent of the epoché is, I claim, an embodied mindful attending; both approaches aim at a non-evaluative presencing with the phenomena. Ultimately the epoché is about a manner of attending to the contents of consciousness, which can include consciousness itself as its own object.

I have two concerns about the suitability of the Husserlian phenomenological reduction given the distinctive peculiarity of my focus. Namely, can the phenomenological reduction as developed by Husserl render the implicitness and pre-linguistic sensuousness of the pre-infant/infant's experience of initial beginning explicit or is there a danger that what is uncovered by this approach is a translation of this experience into language and concepts which retrofits this phenomenon and renders it in terms of something else. The central question here is how the pre-infant/infant's experience of initial beginning can be rendered explicit in terms of its own unique reality, namely its pre-linguistic sensuousness. In the realm of the prelinguistic the infant does not yet possess the ability to actively constitute the initial experience from an interpretative standpoint. As such it is correctly labelled as pre-intentional in that consciousness does not at this early stage possess the ability to actively co-constitute the awareness. The infant is cognitively passive, but the experience of initial beginning is actively, sensuously constituted by the exploring infant.

There are two issues with the phenomenological reduction as developed by Husserl which point to its unsuitability for rendering explicit the pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive world of the pre-infant/infant. The first is the fact that Husserl's phenomenological reduction is a cognitive linguistic performance which is achieved on the level of thought and concepts, but as the pre-infant/infant does not possess concepts or conscious content which can be the target of the reduction, the question is how such a reduction can be carried out. The second issue is the critique developed by Michel Henry, which questions the reduced sensual engagement with phenomena which Husserl's reduction achieves. I elaborate at length on both of these difficulties below. The pre-infant/infant's world is a non-cognitive, sensuous world, which is incarnate through and through and as such the reduction as practised by Husserl does not appear suitable for the task involved. The remainder of this chapter attempts to develop a 'proto-phenomenological reduction' which addresses these challenges and shortcomings and tries to make explicit what is implicit in the pre-linguistic sensuous world of the pre-infant/infant.

If the proper object of phenomenology is experience, then this first phenomenology has a more basic target: pre-linguistic awareness which is the human subject's foundational beginning. My aim is to approach this, reveal what qualities it possesses or perhaps more so does not possess, and from this begin to understand how the 'I' evolves. My claim is that this exploration will provide an opportunity to analyse and question some presuppositions and provide the basis for a different approach to understanding the formation of the human subject. My journey is not a journey back to cognise or re-cognise initial beginning and unpack it, thereby demonstrating a mentalistic bias, but rather to approach the event and process on its own terms, i.e., to attempt to understand it in terms of its own felt existential reality as in the living experience of the infant. Initial beginning is conceptually blind and effected in a pre-linguistic open space. My aim is to approach it in those terms.

My approach, as already pointed out, is not in terms of effecting a phenomenological reduction in the Husserlian manner. Husserl's idea that phenomenology could be a science of essences, intuited through our journey back to the things themselves, by way of a reduction, will not bring us to the essence of the pre-linguistic, pre-infant/infant experience. That search assumes a nature, a strict definable identity, discoverable by the method. The phenomenon of initial beginning is pre-linguistic and pre-reflective. Phenomenality is prior to language, and it is this phenomenality of the pre-infant/infant experience which I am trying to reach and render explicit. The infant experience is pre-intentional and as such is not targetable directly by Husserl's reduction. Michael Henry in his critique of the phenomenological method as recommended by Husserl identifies a broader issue with the reduction:

With Husserl, of course, the method remains at the center of the problematic, [...] the method constantly confronts the prior question of phenomenality; in fact, the method remains so dependent on phenomenality that its possibility as well as its many difficulties are based on it.<sup>7</sup>

Henry, in critiquing Husserl's approach, claims that phenomenology as method must become 'radically self-conscious' and question its presuppositions; it is in contextualizing the attempted reduction that we see its limitation. Henry goes on to pose the question regarding who or what is carrying out Husserl's reduction and he proceeds to expose the self-relation which precedes the attempted reduction. In other words, it is not an abstracted decontextualized entity which effects the reduction. In fact, Henry goes so far as to describe Husserl's phenomenology as in 'mourning for reality':

Material phenomenology neither uncovers nor reveals life. The task of making life advent to itself is really beyond its powers; [...] We are always already in life;

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<sup>7</sup> Henry, Michel. "Material Phenomenology and Language (or, pathos and language)." *Continental Philosophy Review* 32: 343–365, 1999. p.344.



always already life is given to us by giving us to ourselves in the pathos of its Speech. [...] the Husserlian method instinctually substitutes the transcendent essence of life offered to the sight of intentionality for this singular life which eludes it, a noematic essence which is at once irreal and given as irreal.<sup>8</sup>

According to Henry, the view offered to the intentional gaze is irreal, as in an abstraction from the grounded givenness of the real, and a self-relation precedes the attempted phenomenological reduction. Henry's analysis is in the main correct. What is required here is a return to the pre-linguistic phenomenality of the phenomena – this is a return to initial beginning. However, I do not share Henry's view regarding the priority of the self-relation. What I believe becomes clear in approaching initial beginning in the way I propose, is that the intentional self-relation co-emerges with the ability to see oneself as separate from the object of consciousness. The capacity for conscious self-relation and intentionality arise together. They feed off each other and deepen together. While a pre-intentional bodily self-relation does develop, the reality is that as regards the conscious cognitive self, that self-relation is clearly an intentional relation.

In summary then my approach here is to effect a phenomenological reduction to render explicit the implicit embodied reality of the pre-infant/infant's awareness. There is no sense in which I see my journey as a journey to establish 'a science of essences' – such a quest suggests a detachment, an attempt to state the nature of things. To approach the phenomenon in such a manner is to already alter one's relationship with it; one's approach becomes a means. My approach is to let the phenomenon be; but the phenomenon does not exist for me without my considering it and to consider the phenomenon is to constitute it at some minimal level. The idea of the reduction is to strip away as much as possible of what I bring to it outside of my

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p.364.

awareness of it. But how I apprehend the phenomenon has to come under scrutiny also. It must be a neutral apprehending. My approach to initial beginning is to attempt to describe it in its existential reality as experienced. In a sense, I am sidestepping this long journey back through language and opting to attempt a description of initial beginning and engagement which precedes language acquisition – that initial sensuous engagement which lays down habit, and which progresses by curiosity. I am endeavouring to engage with initial beginning in its own space.

## 1.2 A Proto-Phenomenological Approach

Lawrence Hatab proposes a proto-phenomenological approach to the world of the infant/child which is an existential phenomenological approach customised to describing the unique world of the infant/child. As an existential phenomenology its focus is lived and situated human experience, not the transcendental constitution of objects. The world of lived human experience is not bracketed. Hatab describes it as a phenomenology of the lived world which “examines what it is like to directly engage the world in a pre-theoretical manner before it becomes an object of reflection. This *first* world is the domain of what I am calling proto-phenomenology, which is distinguished from some models of phenomenology that are still caught up in reflective or representational prejudices.”<sup>9</sup> Avoiding an overly cognitive approach and describing the infant’s pre-linguistic sensuous engagement with the world is precisely what I am attempting to do here. Hatab’s approach sounds promising, and at first glance it appears this ‘first world’ is the world I am setting out to investigate. A main characteristic of Hatab’s approach is his commitment to the use of indicative concepts when describing the world of the child: “Indicative concepts are not a matter of causal explanation or theoretical confirmation,

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<sup>9</sup> Hatab, Lawrence J. *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality and Literacy: Dwelling in Speech II*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Incorporated, 2020. p.10.

but simply a pointing to what is *shown* in a child's behaviour, environment, and social relations."<sup>10</sup>

He is keen to emphasize context:

Proto-phenomenology argues that philosophy cannot be grounded in abstract categories, refined perspectives of objectivity, or rigorous projects of justification; rather, it must begin with the meaning-laden lived world and its common-sense ontology – with what is already in place before philosophical reflection. Phenomenology calls for non-remedial attention to this domain of facticity. The “precedence” of the lived world is evident when we consider child-rearing, which is saturated with “folk” understanding and existential meanings that hardly seem optional, bracketable, or defeasible.<sup>11</sup>

Commenting on how philosophers and philosophy often forget the context which allows them to raise particular questions, he writes: “If I am a parent, there is a real child out there in the world, who is the same child I dealt with yesterday, who is not a bundle of impressions, who calls for my obligatory care, and who guarantees my not being a brain in a vat.”<sup>12</sup>

There is much to recommend this approach and I find myself in broad general agreement with this type of approach to understand initial beginning. My only concern at this stage about Hatab's approach is that it does not appear to allow for a pre-linguistic space. He accords language phenomenological priority:

Proto-phenomenology focuses on language as the core of world disclosiveness, as the circulation of language and world that is ever operative, even when we have

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.59.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p.60.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p.61.

experiences without speaking – because meaningful human “experience” traces all the way back to learning language as a child, which begins to shape how the world is engaged and understood. The phenomenological priority of language is not equivalent to linguistic idealism because language is situated in social, practical, and natural *environments*, and so not reducible to the lexical perspective of “words” alone. In any case, the world-disclosiveness of language should be understood originally in immersed, embodied, engaged, and presentational terms. [...] Language, in sum, is the constitutive power that informs both normal understanding and then, derivatively, the many refined expositions of disciplinary knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Hatab appears to collapse pre-linguistic sense experience into language. Language is perhaps the living room of being, but pre-linguistic sense experience is the original foundation where the house is constructed. We come to ‘dwell’ in language, but we do not inhabit language from the beginning. Language is the house I come to first as a guest, then as an inhabitant. Language is late to the scene; philosophy is later still.

Hatab’s idea that the pre-linguistic is better described as pre-reflective because the child’s journey to language develops in the midst of a ‘prompting linguistic environment’ may be correct, but there needs to be an acknowledgement of the pre-linguistic space occupied by the infant. The infant is immersed in sensory experience before language, and this early experience is not linguistic. A proto-phenomenological approach must exercise caution about seeing the child’s world in a retrospective fashion as simply a journey to language. This would be a retrospective reading, a reading of the former in terms of the latter.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p.2.

Hatab claims that by according phenomenological priority to language he is not engaging in linguistic idealism, and while he may not be claiming that the objects of experience are reducible to language, in excluding a consideration of the pre-linguistic space he is confining his exploration. Proto-phenomenology in Hatab's hands, while it has so much to recommend it, is a misnomer. It does not concern itself directly with 'first awareness' that is, the pre-linguistic world of the pre-infant/infant. In that sense it stops short. It also stops short in not acknowledging how some rudimentary bodily habituations are laid down in the pre-infant stage prior to birth.

### **1.3 Concepts as Formal Indicators**

One may well emphasise the limitations of certain words or concepts by labelling them as indicators. Indicators in the sense that they indicate their incompleteness or imprecision, that there are better ways of describing the phenomenon. Concepts can indicate, but what they gesture towards is not something ineffable or beyond language. In terms of describing the pre-linguistic space, concepts are indicative in the sense that what they try to capture is an 'experience' or 'encounter', which is before language or without language, but not beyond language as in subsisting in another completely inaccessible realm. To label it as such is to give it a meta-linguistic autonomy, metalinguistic in the sense of being beyond language. Commenting on lectures given by Heidegger at Marburg and Freiburg, Daniel Dahlstrom writes: "In [these] [...] Heidegger specifically outlines a "formally indicatory" method, a philosophical method that proceeds by "formally indicating or signalling" certain phenomena."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dahlström, Daniel O. "Heidegger's Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications." *The Review of Metaphysics*, Jun. 1994, Vol. 47, No. 4, (p. 775-795) p.776.

Philosophy then in Heidegger's hands has a tentativeness about it in that it does not hypothesise or make claims about the world for which he argues but rather indicates or signals certain phenomena. It does this, according to Heidegger, in a formal way. In what does this formality consist? It appears to reserve a certain autonomy for what is indicated, to rescue the indicated from the arbitrary. Or perhaps it is specifically just the method or the approach that is formal:

In the summer semester of 1930, for example, [Heidegger] acknowledges that, as soon as philosophizing is committed to words, it is exposed to an "essential misinterpretation of its content". That essential misinterpretation is precisely the view that everything, insofar as it has been articulated, has to be taken for something present-at-hand.<sup>15</sup>

To suggest that committing philosophizing to words means content is essentially misinterpreted could indicate the limitation of the words used in the communication. However, what is being referred to here is the fact that once committed to words the present to hand becomes objectified as the present at hand rather than the ready to hand. So, in that sense all words disrupt my relationality to the world. But what do they misinterpret, and how can this be known? Yes, one can think and then commit it to words, but is it not words and concepts that structure thought, that express it, that are the ground of its possibility. Words necessarily disrupt my relationality to the world, but it does not follow that misinterpretation is inevitable if one understands concepts as formal indicators.

According to Dahlstrom, Heidegger's Freiberg lectures clarify his idea of concepts as formal indicators:

That "fundamental sense" of philosophical concepts insofar as they are "formal indications" is based upon the phenomenological insight that the object of an

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.779.

interpretation must be so articulated that the determination of the object (in what sense it *is*) must emerge from the manner in which one originally "has" it, that is to say, the manner in which it originally becomes accessible (*wie der Gegenstand ursprünglich zugänglich wird*) [...]; in other words, philosophizing is nothing but a way of comporting oneself to an original, unreflected or unthematic (*unabgehobenen*) comportment, an attempt to "have" or "understand" the latter authentically.<sup>16</sup>

The attempt to approach and understand phenomena in an open, free, unbiased manner is a re-echoing of Husserl's approach through the phenomenological reduction. To understand phenomena in the manner in which they originally become accessible seems again to echo Husserl's hope for the 'authentic understanding', which the reduction might achieve.

In characterising concepts as formal indicators, Heidegger moves away from an understanding of concepts as denoting. Concepts have a suggestive content rather than a fixed content. However, language both interprets and creates our world, and this interpreting and creating while making the phenomenon accessible also constitutes the phenomenon. The phenomenon without language is mute and inaccessible; language interprets the phenomenon, but in interpreting it, creates a view of the phenomenon – there is a reciprocity here. Language makes the phenomenon manifest; the phenomenon lends itself to interpretation and provides language with content with which it can work.

For the infant, language interprets reality and creates that reality; it brings that bodily experienced reality into thought. Where previously there was mute sensuous encounter now there is the presence of the phenomenon to consciousness, a presence which is not only composed of external content but is an intertwining of dawning self-awareness, the external

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.781.

object, and a sense of relatedness. These arise together, they confirm each other, they depend on each other. Without the phenomenon, language is bereft. Without language the phenomenon is mute – in dawning self-awareness both come to life. The child's initial awareness of the object or the other begins to arise in a relationality similar to the way in which the child will come to view himself as an object and form a relatedness to that object as in the entertaining of the self as object.

The phenomenon which both manifests itself and conceals itself in expression and language is the initial beginning of a bodily subject which precedes language, a sensing subject which is further constituted by language.

Giorgio Agamben writes about this beginning as follows:

The idea of infancy as a pre-subjective 'psychic substance' is [...] as mythical as a pre-linguistic subject [...] For the experience, the infancy at issue here [...] is not a paradise which, at a certain moment, we leave for ever in order to speak; rather, it coexists in its origin with language [and] is itself constituted through the appropriation of it by language in each instance to produce the individual as subject [...] It is through language, then, that the individual as known to us is constituted as an individual and linguistics, however far back it goes in time never arrives at a chronological beginning of language, an 'anterior' of language.<sup>17</sup>

I agree with Agamben that there is no pre-subjective 'psychic substance' and that this subject is constituted by language. However, what is being constituted pre-linguistically is the sensorially constituted bodily self. As I will argue in the next chapter, it is only through an exploration of initial beginning that a developing embodied infant, who is drawn to the world in curiosity and whose senses predispose and seek engagement in the sensuous world, is

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<sup>17</sup> Agamben, Giorgio. *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron, London & New York: Verso, 2007. p.55-56.



revealed. What we arrive at is a pre-linguistic, sensorially constituted bodily subject or self which ‘ghosts’ the consciously linguistically constituted subject and gives the appearance of a substantive subject. What is clear from science is that a certain primitive awareness of oneself as a subject precedes language. In fact, if there was no bodily sense of self it is difficult to see how the idea could develop purely cognitively. What Descartes effectively does is bracket this awareness or consciousness in the interests of discovering a certain cognitive foundation for the existence of the self and the development of knowledge.

So, this is the context in which language acquisition occurs. Yes, concepts can be viewed as formal indicators, but they also constitute the object which they indicate. The phenomenon is the basis of the interpretation, but phenomena (the experienced) develop an accessibility in language. The interpretation and the phenomena feed off each other, the mute phenomena precede language, language is later to the scene.

Understanding concepts as formal indicators is to concede that all ideations of the phenomena are limited and incomplete but also that language alters the way phenomena are apprehended. Language can simplify, mystify, invest, and divest. Understanding concepts as formal indicators is a useful methodological approach but it does not excuse imprecision or generate a sense that appropriateness is not possible. To understand things in the ‘manner in which they originally became accessible’ to understand them ‘authentically’ is, I claim, to approach them in the pre-linguistic space and approach them in quasi-muteness, which is outside the intralinguistic silence, that is, the silence experienced as the lack of expression. Yes, language makes phenomena accessible, but there is a pre-linguistic accessibility which we need to consider, and which needs to inform our philosophising. Mauro Carbone’s claim that language doesn’t translate the mute sensible world but rather reconfigures it in another flesh is,

I believe, correct.<sup>18</sup> Language and expression are always tentative, the mute sensible world is there for articulation and re-articulation, new expressions, new concepts, but its initial accessibility is in sensuousness, and it retains that accessibility even though with language acquisition there emerges a flight from the body into the mind, a flight which tends to relegate the body to a secondary consideration. I will return to this in a later chapter.

My approach here is phenomenological in attempting to get to the core of the phenomena, the appearance of the thing in consciousness. I aim to reduce to a minimum the perspectives brought by the subject, to avoid the use of adult concepts, to use concepts as formal indicators, but to try to move beyond indicativeness to accuracy and appropriateness. Indicativeness can be too forgiving in terms of concept accuracy and promote a laziness in our attempt to do justice to the experience of initial beginning. So, my approach is not simply a belated cognitive journey back to recover the experience of initial beginning, but an attempt to place oneself in that place of beginning, to feel it mutely as I once felt it, to let the initial engagement speak as it were, to understand the connection between the experiencing subject and the world of others and objects at its most basic.

I am prepared to follow Heidegger and Hatab in using indicative concepts. However, the use of concepts, be they indicative or otherwise, calls for preciseness in application. We need to continually interrogate our choice and use of concepts for deployment in this endeavour. The area of which description is sought is indeed very difficult to pin down. We need to aim for appropriate descriptors and interrogate all concepts applied and their manner of deployment lest we posit the presence of something which amounts to an over-read or a newly-created different phenomenon.

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<sup>18</sup> Carbone, Mauro. *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004. p.39-40.

When we discuss the hermeneutics of initial beginning, we are speaking of the blind hermeneutic of touch, a carnal hermeneutic as Richard Kearney labels it, which offers “a philosophical approach to the body as interpretation”.<sup>19</sup> What is aimed at here is not simply a gesturing or signalling through indicative concepts but an attempt to uncover the primary sensuousness of initial beginning in terms of describing it phenomenologically reduced but sensorially enhanced.

The phenomenological reduction is always belated in the sense that the reduction is only possible after the experience. One can of course approach a repeat experience phenomenologically, but this approach is based on prior experience; the reduction is only possible at a cognitive level. It is conceptual and thus interpretative. The phenomenological reduction is a cognitive performance. My attempt is to largely sidestep the cognitive processes, to engage in an embodied mindful encounter with initial beginning. To place myself in that pre-linguistic space and feel the unknown-ness of the world and the other, to effect an embodied mindful encounter, an embodied presencing of the subject in the non-cognitive space is to experience being without knowing, a sensuous connectedness, to experience again the feel of initial beginning. This is not a thought experiment as such. Thought experiments are problematic, in that they very often merely beg the question – the scenario one is told to imagine already has been crafted to provide the conclusion sought. So, what I am suggesting is a sensuous-presencing experiment in embodied mindfulness to feel and understand the experience of initial beginning.

#### **1.4 Embodied Mindful Attentiveness**

In this section I attempt to characterise the type of reflection or mindful attending which is required in approaching the sensuous world of the pre-infant/infant; an approach in which it

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<sup>19</sup> Kearney, Richard. *Carnal Hermeneutics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. p.1.

can be attended to in an open manner free from mentalistic biases and a narrativizing approach. A manner of attending where the phenomenon is approached openly and non-judgmentally in its sensuous reality; where the subject can experience a presencing with the phenomenon, free from a cognitive conceptual retrofitting of the infant experience. This demands a particular manner of thinking. The key question to be posed at the outset, as already pointed out, is how we can approach and think this phenomenon. To think initial beginning is in a real sense to set out on an open, uncertain, adventure in thought. Heidegger expresses these ideas as follows:

Thinking itself is a way [...] In order to get underway, we have to set out [...] we have to open ourselves to the emerging prospect and direction of the way itself: and then, we must get on the way [...] The way of thinking cannot be traced from somewhere to somewhere like a well-worn rut. Only when we walk it, [...] by thoughtful questioning, are we on the move on the way. This movement is what allows the way to come forward. [...] Thinking clears its way only by its own questioning advance. But this clearing of the way is curious. The way that is cleared does not remain behind, but is built into the next step, and is projected forward from it.<sup>20</sup>

Thinking is not a strategy to get from one place to another. For my purposes here, I want to focus on the idea of thinking as an open, non-judgmental, adventure with an uncertain destination. I want to avoid the type of thinking, commented on by Heidegger, which assaults the phenomenon: “From time to time one has the feeling that violence has long been done to the thingliness of the thing and that thinking has had something to do with it.”<sup>21</sup>

According to Heidegger, such an assault can be avoided:

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<sup>20</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *What is called Thinking*, trans. J. Glenn Gray, New York: Harper Perennial, 2004. p.168-170.

<sup>21</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art.” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed & trans Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002. p.7.

Only if we grant the thing, so to speak, a free field in which to display its thinginess quite directly. Everything that, by way of conception and statement, might interpose itself between us and the thing must, first of all be set aside. Only then do we allow ourselves the undistorted presence of the thing. The thing is the αἰσθητόν, that which, in the senses belonging to sensibility is perceptible by means of sensations.<sup>22</sup>

Heidegger goes on to remark that the assault of thought on the thing “holds it [...] too far away from the body”, while sensations bring it “too close”. In both interpretations the thing disappears<sup>23</sup>

Overall, my thinking approach is to engage in a thoughtful, open thinking as urged by Heidegger. This thoughtfulness and openness facilitate an open presencing with the phenomenon, thereby avoiding an assault on the phenomenon with overreads or conceptually distorts. I am not approaching initial beginning by journeying back from the adult world and applying adult concepts to the world of the child, thereby describing the child’s world in an adult way. My aim is to approach the phenomenality of beginning in a way that does justice to its reality as ‘experienced’ by the pre-infant/infant.

Lawrence Hatab, like Maurice Merleau-Ponty, counsels against mentalistic biases in analysing a child’s behaviour, something which he sees occurring in even the best research:

It should be said that even the best research I am relying on can fall prey to mentalistic biases, which phenomenology can help interrogate. [Katherine] Nelson,<sup>24</sup> for example, in challenging cognitivist theories on behalf of a pragmatic, experiential approach, still finds herself deploying a “subconscious” version of representations and concepts to articulate early childhood, confiding

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p.7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p.8.

<sup>24</sup> Nelson, Katherine. *Young minds in Social Worlds: Experience, Meaning, and Memory* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press. 2007.

that “we cannot do without some such terms for subconscious mental processes, even at the earliest stages of postnatal existence.” I would disagree, unless such terms were used in a strictly indicative manner.<sup>25</sup>

I broadly accept Hatab’s approach but will elaborate on it further and in particular his indicative use of concepts in the following sections. Taking on board Henry’s justified concerns with Husserl’s approach, and Hatab’s point about mentalistic concepts, it is clear a different approach is required. What is required is an approach which, rather than bracketing or abstracting the infant’s lived world, places it at the centre.

A review of the literature on mindfulness clearly reveals two different approaches: the Stoic cognitive approach which urges reflectiveness, self-examination and self-mastery and the Buddhist/Western Mindfulness tradition which in general urges paying non-judgemental attention to one’s presence in the present moment; the focus is on awareness and presence in the present moment rather than cognitive self-mastery.

Heidegger gestures towards a minimally cognitive manner of attending to phenomena in his writings about *Gelassenheit* or releasement. He references Meister Eckhart’s original use of the concept to describe the releasement from self-will to an acceptance of the will of God. For Heidegger it is the releasement from self-will which is of interest rather than an acceptance of the will of God. According to Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* is a type of authentic thinking characterised by non-willing or releasement. What Heidegger means by non-willing is a manner of thinking outside willing. Bret Davis characterises Heidegger’s concept of *Gelassenheit* as follows:

This non-wilful thinking involves what we might call a participatory and responsive belonging, rather than a passivity in regard to some external being or

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<sup>25</sup> Hatab, Lawrence J. *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy: Dwelling in Speech II*. p.83.

foreign force. It is said to involve a “resolute openness [*Entschlossenheit*]” (143/93) and even a courageous “surmising” (148/97; also 165/106–7). Indeed, this “indwelling in releasement to the open-region” is said to be “the genuine essence of the spontaneity of thinking”<sup>26</sup>

There are tensions in this characterisation, e.g., the use of words like ‘resolute’ to describe openness and ‘courageous’ to describe ‘surmising’ are strongly suggestive of a willing component in thought. These adjectives are no doubt used to emphasise the degree of openness in this releasement, to emphasise the utter difference between wilful and non-wilful thinking. We might be tempted to label this type of thinking as contemplative thinking, which retains a directedness and a wilfulness, but this does not appear to be the type of non-wilful thinking envisaged by Heidegger.

In the foreword to *Country Path Conversations*, Davis writes about Heidegger’s attempts to avoid the active/passive dichotomy and move from actively willing to a non-willing receptivity: “...[Heidegger] is attempting to twist free of this very dichotomy, and indeed to think “outside the [very] distinction between activity and passivity.”<sup>27</sup>

But is it helpful to conceive of this releasement on the level of thought? My claim is that this “non wilfulness” as characterised by Heidegger is not achievable in thought but rather in a conscious shift from thought to awareness, to a being-there in presence where thought is suspended. In fact, according to Davis, Heidegger appears to appreciate this reality and conceives of *Gelassenheit* as a process:

*Gelassenheit* as releasing oneself from transcendental representation, is in fact a refraining from the willing of a horizon. This refraining also no longer comes from

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<sup>26</sup> Davis, Bret. “Returning the world to nature: Heidegger’s turn from a transcendental-horizonal projection of world to an indwelling releasement to the open-region.” *Continental Philosophy Review*, 47: 2014, (p.373–397). p.377.

<sup>27</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Country Path Conversations*. Trans. Bret W. Davis, Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2010. p. xi.

a willing, unless a trace of willing is required to occasion the letting-oneself-into a belonging to the open region – a trace which, however, vanishes in the letting-oneself-into and is completely extinguished in authentic releasement.<sup>28</sup>

The radical notion of authentic releasement described by Heidegger does not appear to be found within thought but rather in a manner of attending outside thought. What is missing in Heidegger's account is an engagement with the embodied dimension of mindfulness which grounds this attending as presence and makes releasement possible. The embodiment of Dasein is not dealt with in *Being and Time*, an avoidance by Heidegger which Søren Overgaard interprets as deliberate, as a way of emphasising the unity of Dasein and refusing to see Dasein as composed of different components i.e., mind and body:

I experience myself as one entity, not as two or three interconnected ones – but an entity with a peculiar manner of being. Much is thus lost if we adopt an analytic conception. We lose sight of the way we actually experience things: it is simply incorrect to claim that we experience each other as composed of a number of different entities, according to Heidegger.<sup>29</sup>

Surely the point is not that an engagement with embodiment is going to break up the subject but rather that it will provide a more complete account of the experience which is unified, an experience that has bodily and mental elements. The experiences of infants in the prelinguistic space are sensory, bodily experiences with minimal cognition. Acknowledging this and letting the predominance of the bodily inform our reflections on infant development in no way breaks up the subject. Overgaard goes on to claim:

One cannot accuse Heidegger of lapsing into a mentalistic conception of subjectivity, because such a criticism takes for granted the analytic conception of

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<sup>28</sup> Davis, Bret. "Will and *Gelassenheit*." in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, (p.168 – 182). Durham. Acumen, 2010. p.176.

<sup>29</sup> Overgaard, Søren. "Heidegger on Embodiment" *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 35:2, 2004, (p.116-131). p.125.



the human being – precisely the conception Heidegger is trying to overcome. It is only when one sees the human being as composed of a 'bodily' and a 'mental' side, that the refusal to deal with the former may legitimately be seen as an inappropriate elevation of the latter. Heidegger rejects this way of conceiving the entity that we ourselves are altogether [...] As he puts it in volume eighteen of the collected works, the being of the human being 'must be grasped as the corporeal being-in-the-world'.<sup>30</sup>

Yes, it is important not to break up the unified nature of Dasein and appreciate that the human being “must be grasped as the corporeal being in the world”. In the end Overgaard’s analysis raises different but more telling questions, namely, given Heidegger’s view of Dasein as a unified subject, why he neglected to grasp *Gelassenheit* or releasement as embodied mindfulness and why sensory awareness does not receive appropriate attention.

Notwithstanding the clarity offered by Heidegger regarding what authentic releasement is, his description appears to still focus on a type of disembodied reflection where mind is privileged over body, where one remains cognitively attentive and effects a releasement through a cognitive operation. My claim is that such a radical releasement can only be effected through an embodied mindfulness. What is required here is an appreciation of the place of the embodied subject, a subject who is flesh before word, who inhabits and experiences bodily awareness pre-reflectively or pre-linguistically. Mindfulness is correctly understood in terms of attentiveness and presencing rather than thinking.

The Stoic cognitive account of mindful attending claims that emotions and desires can be transformed purely on a cognitive level. This is based on a cognitive account of emotion. But any phenomenological analysis of emotion must acknowledge the pre-linguistic sensory reality where bodily sensations and affectivity first arise before becoming sedimented into habit.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

By the time the infant arrives in language it has learned to stand up, to have some sense of distance and perspective. It has also experienced the other and the physical world initially through touch, taste, sound, and smell and then subsequently through vision. In the context of emotion, we need to do justice to this pre-linguistic inheritance which grounds and informs gestures and emotions. By the time we reach language we have learned so much about the world, we are grounded by our bodies in the world, equipped with basic knowledge about proximity, colour, sound and touch. We are familiar with a world which when touched, touches us back, yields information about itself and the qualities it possesses in a relationship of co-presence. This is our beginning which we belatedly access through language as we begin again in a consciousness outside sensory awareness. We are flesh before word and in word we attempt to conceptualise flesh. At its most authentic this is not a reduction or a translation but as Carbone describes it, “a metamorphosis of the flesh of the sensible into the flesh of language.”<sup>31</sup>

Touch brings mind and body together, but the body has primacy as the feeling medium. The body feels the feeling, exhibits a learned reaction to a situation; the mind contributes a cognitive assessment, but habit may trump a cognitive assessment and emotions may persist despite the cognitive re-evaluation which assures me that, for example, most spiders are harmless. Attempting to control emotions solely through a cognitive approach often fails, sometimes spectacularly so. Body memory plays a constitutive role in emotion just like judgment, but sensations reside in the body. While the mind perceives a bodily sensation and plays a constitutive role in it, it is not simply a case of the mind moving the body; the body has its own experience as body. Perhaps this provides some understanding as to why bodily addictions, habits, are so difficult to overcome, even when the subject exerts great will power.

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<sup>31</sup> Carbone, Mauro. *The Thinking of the Sensible: Merleau-Ponty's A-Philosophy*, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2004. p.39-40.

However, there is also a sense of a full occupation of now which is not a preoccupation; it is not a deep contemplative engagement but a gentler attending. The image we can use here is one of listening. If I fill my mind with the concept of now and presence this brings me into now, all that is now for me, about and within at the level of awareness. Two themes already identified in the Buddhist approach to mindful attending provide the key to understanding my proposal regarding an embodied mindful attending, namely the idea that mindful attending is an unselfing and that mindfulness does not possess a retentive-protentive type of temporality. This exploration will, I believe, help to better characterise the radical releasement which Heidegger writes about and provide us with a way of approaching the pre-linguistic phenomenon proto-phenomenologically.

Iris Murdoch uses the concept of unselfing in an ethical context, but I want to use this concept in an ontological way to characterise the subject's engagement in a non-cognitive manner of attending. This I claim is close to the Buddhist notion of non-self, as in ridding oneself from the preoccupations with self. It is in an embodied mindful attending that an ontological unselfing or releasement can occur. Murdoch describes a moment of unselfing when she sees a kestrel outside her window, "I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared."<sup>32</sup>

Looking out of her window Murdoch becomes lost in the flight of the kestrel. The flight of the kestrel brought her out of herself and into an awareness of something else happening in the present in her surroundings. She forgets her current woes, became unselfed from an ongoing, anxious narrative and gets lost, as it were, in the majestic flight of the kestrel - she has been drawn into a releasement. The kestrel provides a releasement from present turmoil which is

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<sup>32</sup> Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*, New York: Routledge. 2014. p.82.

effected by a type of awareness directed to the external world. There is a shift from thought and turmoil into sensory awareness. Here in this moment, there is connectedness and a minimal cognitive awareness of self, we might describe this experience as an experience of the open and free capacity of the experiencing subject to get lost in an experience outside a cognitive, narrativizing engagement. Olsson describes unselfing in these terms and writes: “It is not, as some have argued, a matter of denying oneself. Rather, the idea stresses the need for a decreased egocentricity and a greater receptivity towards other beings and objects in the world.”<sup>33</sup>

Murdoch’s concept of unselfing understood ontologically and an understanding of mindfulness in terms of embodied mindfulness helps us clarify the non-cognitive aspect of releasement which is overlooked by Heidegger. Shifting the focus from thought to awareness allows us to treat the experience holistically, to include both cognitive, physiological, and sensory bodily elements. Embodied mindful attending is anchored in the body; it is not an intellectual operation. It occurs within the context of lived embodied experience. This idea of ‘unselfing’ is about undermining one’s cognitive preoccupation with self. It is not a sense of getting rid of the self but a reduction to a minimal sense of self-awareness, a sense of self as embodied presence. At the cognitive level we could view Murdoch’s unselfing as a distraction. However, it is the cognitive preoccupation which is a distraction from ones embodied presence as a sensory being in the world. The kestrel reorients the subject towards the world.

I have described a manner of embodied mindful attending which is externally focussed I now want to explore the bodily presencing to self in awareness? Christine Caldwell urges a body-centred contemplative life through breathing, sensing, movement and relating, which she

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<sup>33</sup> Olsson, Anna-Lova. “A Moment of Letting Go: Iris Murdoch and the Morally Transformative Process of Unselfing.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Vol. 52, No. 1, 2018, (p.163-177) p.173.

labels as bodyfulness.<sup>34</sup> Bodyfulness involves a joint engagement between mind and body. The mind attends to what is happening in the body: to breathing, movement and the subject's full sensory awareness. The mind, as it were, tunes "out of itself" and into the body. In his book *The Power of Now* Eckhart Tolle writes about freeing oneself from one's mind. In a section titled 'Enlightenment: Rising above thought' he writes as follows:

The present moment holds the key to liberation. But you cannot find the present moment as long as you *are* your mind [...] Thinking and consciousness are not synonymous. Thinking is only a small aspect of consciousness. Thought cannot exist without consciousness, but consciousness doesn't need thought.<sup>35</sup>

It would take far greater space than I have in this chapter to fully elaborate and defend the above statements but suffice it to say for my purposes here that I accept the distinction between consciousness and thought, that consciousness can exist independently of the activity of thinking. In the activity of thinking we display our powerful instinct to interpret and continually narrate our experience, dovetailing our current experience into a continuous narrative between what has already occurred and what might occur in the future. It is, I claim, possible to release oneself from this narrativizing instinct to greet the present in openness through an embodied attentiveness in the present, to let go, to resist a narrative.

In mindfulness and bodyfulness there is a joint engagement between mind and body. The mind attunes itself to the body and becomes immersed in sensuousness. It is a reengagement with minimal cognitive import similar to the pre-linguistic awareness of the infant who is flesh before word. I actively attend to my sensory experience and use this as a stepping stone to a stillness. I am being; I have switched off my incessant thoughts.

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<sup>34</sup> Caldwell, Christine. *Bodyfulness: Somatic Practices for Presence, Empowerment, and Waking Up in This Life*. Colorado: Shambhala, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Tolle, Eckhart. *The Power of Now*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999. p.19.

### **1.4.i Embodied Mindful Attending and Temporality**

I can occupy now in a reflective mode where I reconsider past events and experiences, I consider them and try to understand them, to see them as part of the unfolding narrative that I consider to be my life. We seem to have a deep sense that a story is what emerges from my life. But am I open to a ‘non-teleological’ story, or is it not the case that I will inevitably see my story as leading to here where I am now? The backward glance is a view purified of situational contamination at one level and at another level it is abstract because it does not include the sensory experiential component of past experience. It is a space where one can cast a cool eye, as it were; but this merely amounts to a mindful, reflective occupation of now which is past-focused. I can also occupy now expectantly where my now is filled with thoughts of the future. The future fills my present awareness; my now is preoccupied with thoughts of later and thoughts of tomorrow. But in embodied, mindful attending there is a releasement from the retentive-protentive temporality towards an atelic, minimally cognitive attentiveness to now.

In the journey back to initial beginning there is unselfing involved, as in an attempt to sidestep the instinct to appropriate the experience into a retentive-protentive temporality and to engage with the infant in the pre-self, pre-narrating state of openness. Murdoch’s concept of unselfing provides us with an indicative concept with which to characterise a pre-appropriative experience, an experience that is not yet taken up into narrative. Unselfing is not a pre-linguistic experience, as it can only be effected by a subject in possession of a self, but it shares some similarities with pre-linguistic experience in helping us characterise the primitive unselfed experiencing subject in a pre-narrating position before the phenomena.

In summary then, my approach has two aspects. The first is a proto-phenomenological approach following Hatab using indicative but appropriate concepts which avoids mentalistic biases toward the world of the infant, concepts which indicate or signal meaning rather than manifesting it. This approach avoids the retrospective refitting of the infant experience with

adult concepts. This is the first aspect. The second aspect to my approach is to describe the infant experience through an embodied mindful attending, which is a manner of attending to initial beginning as characterised above. This is a type of thoughtful attending where you co-presence with the phenomenon in its emergence and attempt to appreciate and understand its qualities and reality, according primacy to sensuous attending rather than cognitive attending. Both approaches aim to attend to the phenomenon openly and non-judgmentally, thereby effecting a radical releasement towards the phenomenon. This is to thoughtfully think the phenomenon of initial beginning. The first aspect of my approach is anchored in a cognitive approach whereas the second aspect of my approach is anchored in an embodied mindful attentiveness which co-presences with the embodied sensuous pre-linguistic infant on the level of affectivity and awareness. The epoché, radical releasement and embodied mindful attending are all linked as methodological procedures. Their primary aim is not truth as such but an open engagement with the phenomenon. The phenomena of the pre-linguistic space which have been accessed bodily prior to language acquisition can be signalled by concepts, but I claim that they can be attended to more authentically when approached in a minimally cognitive embodied mindful attending.

## Chapter 2.

### The Pre-linguistic World of the Pre-infant/Infant and Three Grounding Experiences of Initial Beginning

#### 2.1 The Pre-linguistic World of the Pre-infant/Infant

Initial beginning is our beginning in sense awareness, the beginning of ‘experience’ and while we may wish to agree broadly with László Tengelyi’s characterisation of experience as “the emergence of a new sense in conflict with previous expectations,”<sup>1</sup> this adult version of experiential learning is not applicable to the initial “experiences” of the pre-infant/infant:

Such early experience cannot adequately be described as a “perception” of “objects,” which is an expositied construction far down the road in cognitive development; it is better rendered as an ecstatic, affect saturated experience in which self and world are not differentiated as separate spheres with incommensurate properties (feelings and objects).<sup>2</sup>

The pre-infant/infant comes to engagements or encounters without the baggage of expectation and encounters the object pre-intentionally or perhaps more correctly with a minimal but dawning intentionality. While the infant has sensual awareness and experiences the world bodily, it does not have the required distance or self-awareness to separate itself from its engagements. As Hatab writes, “A child’s world is through and through an incarnate world.”<sup>3</sup> But not only the child’s world but also the world of the pre-infant/infant.

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<sup>1</sup> Tengelyi, László. *The Wild Region in Life History*. trans. Geza Kállay, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004. p. ix.

<sup>2</sup> Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy, Dwelling in Speech II*. p.86.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.92.



This pre-linguistic space is where ‘I’ begins. It is an open clearing, a space in which the infant is progressively beckoned and pointed toward language, an area which we can approach both obliquely and indicatively, rather than head on through an adult linguistic prism. Merleau-Ponty criticizes Piaget for employing adult concepts in his attempts to understand the child’s behaviour rather than approaching the child’s behaviour in a more phenomenological manner.<sup>4</sup> William James also adultizes the child’s experience in his description of the baby’s mind as a “blooming, buzzing confusion”:

The truth is that Experience is trained by both association and dissociation. [...] Our original sensible totals are, on the one hand, subdivided by discriminative attention, and on the other, united with other totals, – either through the agency of our movements, carrying our senses from one part of space to another, or because new objects come successively and replace those by which we were at first impressed. The ‘simple impression’ of Hume, the ‘simple idea’ of Locke are both abstractions, never realized in experience. [...] The baby, assailed by eyes, ears, nose, skin, and entrails at once, feels it all as one great blooming, buzzing confusion.<sup>5</sup>

Clearly James’s description is an adult description of what is happening. The baby or infant is being stimulated by all sorts of stimuli; his or her attention is being beckoned in all directions. However, the description of this as a ‘blooming buzzing confusion’ is simply an indicative concept supplied from adult experience. Indeed, all language which would purport to describe this experience has to be indicative in the sense that words are reaching into the pre-linguistic space. Even James’s description is an abstraction; the baby does not have those concepts. To

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<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Child Psychology and Pedagogy: The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, trans. Talia Welch, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010. p.192-194.

<sup>5</sup> James, William. *Principles of Psychology*. Paperback Ed. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1983. p.461-462.

describe the experience negatively as ‘confusion’ is an overstatement. How could the baby be disturbed or frustrated by the reality of his or her experience? These concepts being applied to the experience are not qualities of the experience; they are not within the pre-conceptual experiential reach of the infant.

### **2.1.i Initial Beginning in Embodiment**

The foetus begins initially in the tactile, protective environment of the womb, cocooned, and intimately connected in touch. There is extensive literature available on the phenomenology of pregnancy which reflects on this connectedness in utero and how rudimentary bodily habituations begin to be laid down in the final trimester of pregnancy. In this next section I want to look at the possibility of developing a phenomenology of pregnancy where initial pre-conscious motor intentionality begins to develop.<sup>6</sup>

Nicole Miglio in developing a phenomenology of pregnancy argues for the emergence of embodied selfhood in the later stages of pregnancy. She develops Husserl’s writing on this subject in *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*:

The child in the womb already has kinaesthesia and kinaesthetically moves its “things” – already a primordially at an originary level developing itself. [...] The infant, the newly born. [...] It is already an experiencing I at a higher level, it already has its acquisition of experience from its existence in the mother’s womb, it already has its perceptions with perceptual horizons. Besides this there are also new kinds of data, saliences in the sensory fields, new acts, new

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<sup>6</sup> The concept of motor intentionality is developed by Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception*. (p.112-114) It is a non-cognitive intentionality, bodily based which describes the body’s understanding of its environment and relatedness to objects in that environment.

acquisitions in the substratum, which is already pre-acquisition, it is already an I of higher habitualities, but without self-reflection, without developed temporality, without recollections at its disposition, streaming presence with retention and protention.<sup>7</sup>

Miglio goes on to argue that the pre-infant's body schema;

is generated and reinforced through the continuous interaction with the maternal one, which for its part is continuously modified and re-adjusted; furthermore, the gestating subject experiences the presence of another organism within own body as a form of incorporation, moving across a spectrum of alienation/participation affects where touch plays a fundamental role.<sup>8</sup>

Clearly an embodied notion of selfhood is emerging in this latter stage of pregnancy where both the pre-infant and the mother are sensitive to each other's movements and touch. The pre-infant in moving and feeling its womb environment, learning about the limits and capacities of this sensuous environment is developing a bodily orientation. Through a relationality and reciprocity, a primitive initial body schema is being generated as Jane Lymer points out;

Thus, very early foetal movement is regulated or 'practiced' in a manner which is not initially of foetal origin. Rather, the habituated movement patterns of the mother are underpinning, and thus structuring and regulating these early movements by literally repeatedly moving the foetus in certain ways by her body moving in certain ways. [...] What this means is that foetal structure is born out

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<sup>7</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*, quoted in Miglio, Nicole. "Affective Schemas, Gestational Incorporation, and Fetal-Maternal Touch: A Husserlian Inquiry" *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2019, Vol. 36, (p.67-99) p.78-79.

<sup>8</sup> Miglio, p.79.

of maternal body schema structuration and so will, from its very beginnings, emerge as an adaptive style of movement with his or her mother.<sup>9</sup>

Certain body habituations regarding movement and bodily relationality have been laid down in utero prior to birth. In other words, the foetus, by the time it is born, has already developed at bodily level a rudimentary operative intentionality.

In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes about Husserl's notion of operative intentionality and develops this concept further. Martina Reuter summarises Merleau-Ponty's development of the concept as an intentionality of the body-subject;

Merleau-Ponty's basic intentionality is the body subject's concrete, spatial and pre-reflective directedness towards the lived world. The pre-reflective moving body is in itself intentional, "reaching out towards the world". [...] The body here is not the physiological abstraction of the natural sciences, but the lived and experienced body.<sup>10</sup>

In the bodily traumatic event of birth, the baby emerges into a world where it is separate; it takes its first breath; it cries. This is the space where it continues to mediate a growing sense of bodily self primarily through touch and its foundational and grounding relationship with the primary caregiver.

The skin is the largest sense organ in the body and the first to develop prenatally. There is extensive literature on the importance of touch and tactile sensations for the developing foetus from the latter stages of pregnancy onwards. Tiffany Field examines in detail the benefits of

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<sup>9</sup> Lymer, Jane M. "Merleau-Ponty and the Affective Maternal-Foetal Relation" 2011 (p.126-143). Online <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/1187> p.137-138.

<sup>10</sup> Reuter, Martina "Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Pre-Reflective Intentionality." *Synthese*, Jan. 1999, Vol. 118, No. 1, Intentionality (Jan. 1999), pp. 69-88. Springer. p.71-72.

positive touch for the physiological and emotional health in the pre-infant/infant. She describes the touch environment of the womb as follows:

The fetus is suspended in amniotic fluid and receives active stimulation from the fluid and the mother and others as they touch her abdomen. The fetus becomes increasingly active as this happens. The fetus also touches itself by thumb sucking and grasping the umbilical cord. [...] The fetus gets a continuous massage for the entire nine months from both the amniotic fluid and the mother's "insides." In addition, a pregnant woman naturally massages her baby in the womb. Touch alters oxytocin (an estrogen-dependent chemical), which relaxes the individual, promotes touch, encourages bonding.<sup>11</sup>

Darcia Narvaez et al<sup>12</sup> investigate the role positive touch experiences play in stress reduction, behaviour regulation, and the initial and subsequent psychological health and sociomoral development of the infant, while Sari Goldstein Ferber et al focus on the changing role of touch from around 6 months when the infant gains better mobility and more autonomy.

The development of inter-subjectivity and joint attention as well as the emerging capacity to regulate affect, along with the decrease in the reliance on non-verbal communication around the age of 6 months, may be the basis for the significant contribution of touch to the experience of synchrony with the primary caregiver during the second half of the first year, compared with the relevance of touch for state and emotional regulation at earlier ages.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Field, Tiffany. *Touch*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014. p.49.

<sup>12</sup> Narvaez, Darcia et al. "The Importance of Early Life Touch for Psychosocial and Moral Development." *Psicologia, reflexão e crítica* 32.1 (2019): p.16.

<sup>13</sup> Ferber, Sari Goldstein, et al. "The Development of Maternal Touch across the First Year of Life." *Early human development* 84.6 (2008): p.363-370. p.368.

Post-birth touch facilitates attachment between the primary caregivers and the infant and provides the infant with a growing sensuous awareness of its embodiment and its intercorporeality. This process began already in the tactile environment of the womb. The pre-infant begins to gain an experience of a basic embodied self/other sensuous relation primarily in touch but also through the other senses, otherness in vision, the otherness of taste, the otherness of sounds and smells. In experiencing sensuous otherness, it also experiences its own reality, its own subjectivity. The smell and the capacity to smell, the taste and the taster, the sound and the hearer, etc. This bodily self originates and develops in the pre-reflective affective space of initial beginning. We sense and feel before words enable us to frame generalities about the world, to observe patterns, apply categories, and build an understanding on the initial particular and immediate world of flesh. In language we mediate this sensuous immediacy through words and concepts, figuring out its aboutness.

In the womb the pre-infant has experienced a sense of bodily connectedness while at birth the baby sensorially experiences separation: the chord is cut, and the baby draws its first breath. If it experiences the positive intimacy of touch as in the comfort and warmth of its mother's breast, the repeated and reassuring sounds of her voice, the smell and taste of her body then touch, smell, sound and taste will all bring connectedness and familiarity before vision highlights separateness. However, it is important to acknowledge that the infant's experience may not always be this positive and as Narvaes et al point out such experiences will have an impact on the infant's development. In the neonate, touch, smell, taste, and sound provide an experience of connectedness, in a sense it is attempting to instantiate in a very different environment the protective environment of the womb. In the infant touch becomes a heightened sense as it now operates in a less proximal, controlled environment. There is distance and differentiation, and the otherness and separateness of the world comes into focus. Vision in particular gives rise to a distance from the initial sensorial immediacy where touch is

foundational. Touch is more fundamental than vision. It is within this embodied, enactive framework that perception and cognition occur. Recent work around 4E cognition, by Shaun Gallagher, Lambros Malafouris and others, develop these ideas.<sup>14</sup> In the next section I want to explore how gut reactions and responses as embodied, tactile experiences are grounded in, and develop from the tactile environment of the womb and the birth experience.

### **2.1.ii Initial Beginning and Affectivity**

There is some considerable literature on the concept of gut reactions and the idea of ‘going with your gut,’ by which we mean following a hunch or your basic feeling about something. I now want to reflect on what might provide a grounding for this concept and how these affective physiological understandings of the world develop. We characterize gut feeling as in some sense instinctive as being in our gut; perhaps it could be termed a “gut sense” which develops pre-linguistically. Some might label it as something close to intuition. Carl Jung characterizes intuition as “perception via the unconscious”.<sup>15</sup> The question arises as to how this unconscious is formed. My focus here is in describing how these physiological understandings are formed in the pre-linguistic embodied space? The ‘unconscious’ label is unhelpful as the pre-linguistic space has some accessibility. By placing gut feelings in a relationship with the unconscious we risk disconnecting them from awareness and mystifying what I claim originally arises in bodily sense experience. My claim here is that the origin of gut feelings lie in the pre-linguistic space. It is an emerging ‘knowledge’ which arises in the sensual space, where gut feelings also

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<sup>14</sup> Gallagher, Shaun. *How the Body Shapes the Mind*. Oxford; New York: Clarendon, 2005. Malafouris, Lambros. *How Things Shape the Mind: a Theory of Material Engagement*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Storr, Anthony. *Jung: Selected Writings*, UK: Fontana, 1983. p.219. For a detailed discussion of Jung’s notion of Intuition see Nathalie Pilard, *Jung and Intuition: On the centrality and Varieties of Forms of Intuition in Jung and Post Jungians*. London: Routledge, 2015.

originate. Gut feelings develop with experience, but their initial content emerges from this early tactile engagement with the world and the other.<sup>16</sup>

Much has been written about the link between the brain and the gut, about how a troubled gut sends signals to the brain and a troubled brain sends signals to the gut and how one's gut is the seat of many emotions such as anxiety, fear, and anger. Brain and gut are connected physically and biochemically through the vagus nerve, and a large proportion of serotonin, the happy hormone, is produced in the gut, not in the brain as is commonly assumed. In fact, the gut is sometimes referred to as the 'second brain.'<sup>17</sup>

In the space of initial beginning, our 'second' brain was sending signals, and our brain was responding before we were even aware how it was happening. My suggestion is that both gut feeling originate as feelings in your body, initially as bodily sensual understandings which are gained without intellectual mediation in the pre-linguistic space.<sup>18</sup>

This account provides an explanation of how the initial physiological, affective component in emotion arises. My aim here is not to provide an answer to the much larger question 'What are emotions?' but to merely point to the initial sensuous reality which is bodily generated and grounds the physiological aspect of emotions. For some theorists, including Sartre,<sup>19</sup> emotions have an essential cognitive element. However, here at initial beginning there is feeling and response without cognition. Affectivity is at the core of this perceptual environment, and this is an area which must inform the debate about the place of cognition in emotion. At the early infant stage, feelings are completely configured by sense awareness; there is no obvious epistemic or cognitive component. The infant experiences a range of feelings. The infant is

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<sup>16</sup> See account of Damasio's theory of the construction of the self later in this Chapter.

<sup>17</sup> Gershon, Michael. *The Second Brain: The scientific basis of Gut instinct and a ground-breaking new Understanding of Nervous Disorders of the Stomach and Intestine*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1998.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of gut reactions see Prinz, Jesse J. *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>19</sup> Sartre, Jean Paul. *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions*. trans. Philip Mairet, London: Methuen 1971.



instinctively reacting to bodily cues, the need for food, feeling cold, feeling too hot, having an upset tummy. Feelings at this stage of development are non-cognitive; there is little conscious, cognitive mediation between stimuli and response. What I mean by non-cognitive is that there is no clear sense in which feelings can be mediated, or if there is, there is no early memory of it. If we assumed that there was cognition present what would that look like? Could cognition be present outside self-awareness? It appears that some minimal self-relation is necessary for the level of awareness required to generate memory. There are various claims made in rebirthing literature about adults being able to remember their birth by undergoing regression therapy, but what may well be happening in these situations, I suggest, is a projection based on what one surmises birthing was like, an adult retrospective view. Bodily memories could only be retrieved in bodily awareness. At this pre-linguistic stage, we hear tones not melodies, we see shapes not contours as Jesse Prinz argues.<sup>20</sup> There is a difference between a fear experience and fear recognition, according to Prinz, fear recognition occurs at a higher level of perceptual awareness. Prinz, following James and Lange, argues that emotion is a form of perception of patterned changes in the body.

We generally use vision as a paradigm of perception, but it is better to characterise perception in terms of being aware of; thereby avoiding the preoccupation with the seeing metaphor. We can be aware of something in touch; our bodily interoceptive awareness is on the level of touch. Pain and pressure we feel, but never see. The infant is anchored in his body. The initial awareness is of his body's internal conditions, and this is an awareness, an 'experience' which the body no doubt remembers. There is carnal memory, the memory of scars and trauma. Bessel van der Kolk in his book *The Body Keeps the Score* outlines how the body retains trauma memories in its physiology. Memory is being used here in a non-cognitive

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<sup>20</sup> Prinz, Jesse J. "Is Emotion a form of perception." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 36 (2006). p.137-160.

sense. Trauma brings physiological changes to body and brain, which can predispose us to disease and ailments.

The desire of flesh is contact, being in touch. It is touch which brings us into close bodily presence to each other in any moment. My pre-linguistic curiosity is bodily expressed in reaching out to feel the world: to touch it and be touched by it. My body seeks touch connection before my mind seeks truth and interrogates the given world; the curious flesh the curious mind, instruments of discovery; sensation to flesh as thought is to mind.

The pre-linguistic affective world of the embodied infant is a world in which interoceptive awareness plays a crucial role in the development of a pre-cognitive bodily self. Thomas Fuchs<sup>21</sup> provides a six-fold classification of body memories and explains how these memories become established in pre-linguistic space. These memories become bodily sedimented through repetitive recurrences and impact the positionality of the bodily subject towards the world. They become in effect bodily understandings of the world and the other.

Bodily feelings mediate me to myself in a powerful sensuous way. The crying infant, when experiencing pain or discomfort, mediated to itself by its feelings, develops a sense of itself as a sensuous presencing to self. This is of course an attempt to render explicit something implicit and my claim is not that the infant experiences a conscious subjectivity but that the infant experiences a sense of itself as a sensuous actor in the world, as someone who can move, feel, touch, and be in a world in a relationality, even though the infant has no words to describe it as such. This is the sense of bodily self which is antecedent to language. There is a sensorially constituted bodily self which becomes the basis for the linguistic subject.

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<sup>21</sup> Fuchs, Thomas. "The Phenomenology of Body Memory." In *Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement*. Koch, Fuchs et al. Vol. 84. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012. p.9-22.

### 2.1.iii Interoceptive Awareness and the Emergence of ‘I’

Neurologist Antonio Damasio writes of Descartes’ error in creating a dualism between mind and body and separating out reason and feeling.<sup>22</sup> He himself sets about providing a framework which can explain the emergence of consciousness and the self in a more integrated manner. He distinguishes two aspects to the self, the self as knower and the self as object. According to Damasio, these aspects form part of the evolution of the self; namely the self as knower is built on the basis of experience of the self as object:

We can imagine that the self-as-subject-and-knower is stacked, so to speak, on top of the self-as-object, as a new layer of neural processes giving rise to yet another layer of mental processing. There is no dichotomy between self-as-object and self as knower; there is, rather, a continuity and progression. The self as knower is grounded on the self-as-object.<sup>23</sup>

He then emphasises the importance of interoceptive awareness in the development of consciousness:

The importance of the interoceptive system for the understanding of the conscious mind cannot be emphasized enough. The processes in this system are largely *independent* of the size of the structures in which they arise, and they constitute a special kind of input that is present from early on in development and throughout childhood and adolescence. In other words, interoception is a suitable source for the relative invariance required to establish some sort of stable scaffolding for what will eventually constitute the self.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. London: Vintage, 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Damasio, Antonio. *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*, London: Vintage, 2012. p.9-10.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.193.

The self is built in stages. Our interoceptive awareness, according to Damasio, generates a protoself which further develops into a core self. The protoself produces primordial feelings “which occur spontaneously and continuously whenever one is awake. They provide a direct experience of one’s own living body, wordless, unadorned, and connected to nothing but sheer existence”.<sup>25</sup>

The next stage is the development of the core self:

The core self is about action – specifically, about a relationship between the organism and the object. The core self unfolds in a sequence of images that describe an object engaging the protoself and modifying that protoself, including its primordial feelings. Finally there is the *autobiographical self*. This self is defined in terms of biographical knowledge pertaining to the past as well as the anticipated future. [...] The protoself with its primordial feelings and the core self, constitute a “material me.” The autobiographical self, whose higher reaches embrace all aspects of one’s social persona, constitute a “social me” and a “spiritual me.” [...] the core and autobiographical selves within our minds construct a knower; [...] they endow our minds with another variety of subjectivity.<sup>26</sup>

Damasio clearly anchors the emergence of self-consciousness in the bodily development of interoceptive awareness, what we might label as the development of a bodily self. This provides the basis and foundation for the subsequent emergence of the autobiographical self, the self as knower. Damasio captures how the interplay of self as object and self as subject plays out. He sees the self as object prefiguring the emergence of the self as subject. From the point of view of the infant, this dawning awareness I suggest happens simultaneously rather than being a

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.21.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p.22-23.

sequential journey from a perception of self as object to self as subject. At the most basic level, the dawning sensuous awareness of oneself as an object suggests to me a concomitant awareness to the same degree of oneself as a subject. If as an infant I touch a hot stove and have an awareness of getting burned, I have both an awareness of myself as an object; an entity that got burned, and also the interoceptive awareness of what it feels like getting burned. This awareness reveals me as an object in the world but also as a pain-feeling entity. Damasio's claim of a continuity between the initial development of a sense of self as object and the subsequent development of the self as subject is not correct. There is a co-emergence of the self as object and self as subject.

#### **2.1. iv Environmental Factors in the Formation of 'I'**

Kym Maclaren emphasizes the situatedness of human potential, the way in which human development is a dialogue or interaction between the human organism and its environment. The environment offers affordances, and, as a result of that interaction, the organism develops in certain ways. She looks at three types of development: intellectual learning, bodily sensorimotor development, and emotional linguistic development. Commenting on sensorimotor development, she writes:

In sum, then, insofar as the neurological-physiological developments in the organism are brought about in part through environmental pressures, we need to reconceive the nature of potential. Not only is the potential retrospectively determined and realized; it also is not to be located within the organism. Rather, it lies in the larger system that is perceiving-organism-perceivable-environment.<sup>27</sup>

She characterises the development of perception as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> Maclaren, Kym. "Merleau-Ponty on human development and the retrospective realization of potential." *Phenomenology of Cognitive Sciences* 16: 609–621, 2017. p.616.

a new form of sensory experience is achieved which consists in a new organization or coordination of the body and which emerges out of a creative response to the initially indeterminate environmental demands. These achievements were not prescribed in advance; and it is only retrospectively that we can say that the neurological and physiological developments were a preparation for it.<sup>28</sup>

When considering emotional linguistic development, she references a case considered by Merleau-Ponty when examining child emotional and linguistic development. A toddler called Gricha is overcome with jealousy when a new sibling is born; but according to Merleau-Ponty, manages to overcome his jealousy through a linguistic development. The discovery of new verb tenses including the simple past, the simple future and the imperfect, institute for him a whole new way of being in the world.<sup>29</sup>

if we are to speak of potential at all in the human organism, it is only as a partially constrained, relatively indeterminate openness which will be given form and determinacy only through the organism's interaction with an environment that offers it certain affordances [...] [T]his reconception of potential requires also rethinking the locus of developmental potential: since such potential is determined only through the human organism's interaction with the environment, and only retrospectively, it seems more true to think of the determinate potential as a potential belonging (retrospectively) to the human-individual-in-situation, rather than to the human individual alone.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.616-617.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.618.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.620.

Maclaren's notion of development and potential echoes Arendt's notion of natality as potential. Potentialities are not predetermined and can only be seen as such from a future standpoint, a backward glance. Maclaren captures the uncertainty in our search for knowledge and understanding. She does justice to the lack of clarity and the trial and error that occurs in our learning about ourselves, others and the world. When we write the narrative of our formation, development and learning we need to do justice to the possibilities that lay in each situation. So much depends on the problem the world poses for me and the solutions available. Retrospective narratives of learning and development flatten the curve of learning and make it linear. They do not do justice to that initial sense of beginning; that open, pre-linguistic engagement. The retrospective view does not capture the openness to possibilities; the element of chance; the uncertainty; what could but did not happen; the feel of experience as lived in the living present.

In the next section I want to look in some detail at three experiences, which I argue are the three grounding experiences of initial beginning.

## **2.2 Three Grounding Experiences of Initial Beginning**

### **2.2.1 Curiosity and Trust, not Wonder and Anxiety**

As already argued, what is required to probe initial beginning and characterize it is a comprehensive account of pre-linguistic affectivity, that sensuous awareness that is prior to language. Touch connects me to the world of objects, and we might say it is wonder or curiosity which makes us touch and reach out to the world; but it is, I claim, our sensuous groundedness in the world which connects and beckons us forth. Our engagement is not initially on the level of language or intellect. The infant approaching the world and the other comes towards the world as explorer, as a natural phenomenologist, immersed in experience rather than a

theorising metaphysician. Talia Welsh writes about how Merleau-Ponty “contradicts Jean Piaget’s claim that the child is a natural metaphysician by portraying children more as natural phenomenologists”<sup>31</sup> and later she writes “Merleau-Ponty’s view is that children are natural phenomenologists in that they remain connected to experience and do not require a resolution in a theory [...] Children explore the world rather than analyze the world” The infant approaches the world atheoretically through its immersion in sensuous experience. She describes the infant’s initial experience as an asubjective awareness, namely an engaged interpersonal experience which lacks selfhood.<sup>32</sup> The infant has a sensuous drive towards the world as a sensuous creature in and of the world. The infant’s engagement is through the medium of sensuous engagement; his eyes see, his ears hear, his hands reach out to touch things, his mouth tastes, his nose smells. These senses are attuned to the world providing information to the subject long before words come on the scene. Our senses draw us to the world and to the other. When I enter language, my mind displays a similar desire; the hand wants to touch, the mind wants to understand. I am directed outwards into the world of objects and the other. This initial directedness of bodily senses toward the world which Merleau-Ponty describes as an operative intentionality is best described in terms of an outward projection towards and immersion in the sensuous world. It is not a marvelling at the world which the idea of wonder suggests but rather a curiosity bodily and sensuously constituted. It is an ontological curiosity. I can touch and feel my world and I start to learn about the world. I touch a nettle, it stings me. I cry. As a sensuous creature, I am immersed in the world, initially immobile but developing certain levels of mobility as I grow; a certain attachment and familiarity is growing through repetition with certain smells, sights, tastes, and sounds. By the time I get to language, so much has happened. I have literally been making sense of my world, it has existed almost

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<sup>31</sup> Welsh, Talia. *The Child as Natural Phenomenologist: Primal and Primary Experience in Merleau-Ponty’s Psychology*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013, p.xx & p.110.

<sup>32</sup> Welsh Talia, “Primal Experience in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy and Psychology,” *Radical Psychology*, 2007, volume 6, Issue 1.



exclusively in sense. My capacity to be affected by the world and my manner of responding is established prior to language. Hatab writes about wonder and curiosity as follows:

A child's world is mainly driven by affective attunement rather than "cognition" in the strict sense [...] But I have argued that affect also includes more subtle phenomena such as curiosity, which brings our attention to something obvious in a child's bearing from the outset: wonder. Plato and Aristotle claimed that philosophy begins with wonder, with a sense of strangeness in familiar things or a perplexity that prompts a questioning spirit. We may not directly know the character of infant experience, but we easily notice their transfixed stare and excited delight at simply witnessing and participating in the world. [...] Such primal wonder is a dawning of the human world, which is not simply an array of objectively present things but rather a world that matters, that draws our interest and curiosity. [...] Childhood wonder seems to be an original condition of ecstatic immersion, an absorbed fascination with what is there in the environment.<sup>33</sup>

In this passage on wonder, Hatab acknowledges, *en passant*, that curiosity is a more subtle phenomenon than wonder and attempts to make place for both. However, he does not appear to have fully thought through his account of wonder. If one describes wonder as a sense of strangeness in familiar things, then one must be familiar with things first before this sense of strangeness arises. While Hatab is no doubt using the idea of experiencing perplexity in an indicative way, my suggestion is that this is an over-read regarding what is occurring. It is surely not so much perplexity that prompts a questioning spirit for the infant, but a desire to engage. The infant's sensuous curiosity would in the first instant arise prior to perplexity. One could of course comment that the infant has left the familiar environment of the womb and has

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<sup>33</sup> Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy, Dwelling in Speech II*. p.62 – 63.

been through the bodily trauma of birth and that there is a sense of strangeness. However, the concept of wonder is at best being used here in an indicative sense. I suggest that the concept which we can use in a much fuller sense is the concept of curiosity. The infant might perhaps express surprise on occasion, but a temporality punctuated by occasional surprise at something different or new is a long way from wonder. What would a phenomenologically reduced indicative concept of wonder amount to? My suggestion is that the concept of curiosity is more appropriate. There is a general issue with the use of indicative concepts; the challenge is to find concepts that are more than indicative. Indicative concepts are useful to point or gesture towards a descriptive analysis, a proto-phenomenological account, but their imprecision and vagueness brings an obscurity and an ambiguity. That is not to say that the use of indicative concepts is not worthwhile, but the search must continue for concepts which capture in some sense what initial beginning is like, viewed from within.

So, when we come to discuss the fundamental orientation of the infant we are initially in the realms of curiosity, the directedness of the child to the sensuous world which is part of its biological orientation to survive and flourish. The sensuous encounter with the world beckons it on, but it experiences the world as a place of curiosity, pleasure, and pain. In language we attempt to interpret this experience. Heidegger, in writing about fundamental moods, claims anxiety is the fundamental mood. Perhaps if one has experienced an unwelcoming and hostile world, there is an inevitable insecurity, but this I believe is to privilege the exception. If anxiety were the resting point in terms of Dasein's approach to the world and the other, it is difficult to see how the subject would be able to summon the resources necessary to have faith in the possibility of the world or the other and step forward into the world. Anxiety would surely undermine effort and become chronically corrosive of all movement outward. Granted, it is important to understand Heidegger's use of anxiety as an ontological concept rather than a psychological one and understand how anxiety functions for him as revelatory of Dasein's

individual project, but what the infant displays is an ontological proto-trust in the world, not an ontological anxiety. I will return to a more detailed discussion of anxiety over the coming pages but first I want to engage with Heidegger's critique of curiosity.

### *2.2.i (a) Heidegger's Critique of Curiosity*

If we consider curiosity as a distraction, then we must consider what it is a distraction. Our answer to this question will, I suggest, reveal a prior metaphysical viewpoint. Curiosity is a manner of engagement, initially with the world and subsequently with the other. It is difficult to see how anxiety could precede curiosity; curiosity is a grounding engagement with the world. It is clear how anxiety could be a response to thwarted curiosity or dissatisfied curiosity. Curiosity clarifies the desire for engagement, the movement outward; anxiety, I claim, emphasizes a certain passiveness, a tentativeness. The desire which propels the subject forth is curiosity. You may object and say it is wonder that propels the subject forward but then the question must be asked: wonder at what? Curiosity is about something, but at least one type of wonder is wonder at. Curiosity is more general, whereas wonder appears to have a specificity. You could respond and say that wonder can also be about something, but my claim then is that that type of wonder is best understood as a heightened curiosity – something has been added. The way in which the object is entertained in awareness has changed. Curiosity as manifested in initial beginning is about open exploration; it possesses an atelic quality. Curiosity can clearly be object-focussed and move all the way from a general non-descript sense of curiosity or interest in the world and the other, to a fixation on acquiring understanding of the world or/and the other. The type of curiosity exhibited by the infant is non-cognitive and existential; it has no sense of the intensity that can inform or influence it; in the beginning it is vague and blind. Descartes offers an insight into this characteristic of curiosity:

So blind is the curiosity with which mortals are possessed, that they often direct their minds down untrodden paths, in the groundless hope that they will chance upon what they are seeking, rather like someone who is consumed with such a senseless desire to discover treasure that he continually roams the streets to see if he can find any that a passer-by might have dropped. This is how almost every chemist, most geometers, and many philosophers pursue their research.<sup>34</sup>

Descartes in this passage is arguing the need for a method. But returning to the infant and curiosity, it is clear the infant is not cognitively seeking a truth and has no sense of the possibility, impossibility, or improbability of success, so clearly the second part of Descartes' statement does not apply to the infant. However, the idea of blind curiosity directing the infant down untrodden paths clearly does.

Heidegger's critique of curiosity, as manifested by the philosophizing Dasein, is a critique of a curiosity that manifests a directedness, a hunger, or desire to see or understand. The Heideggerian distinction between present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) and readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) must be borne in mind here. The curiosity which Heidegger critiques is the curiosity which objectifies the world and creates an epistemological distance between the viewer and the viewed. He deconstructs this to emphasize the embeddedness, or what we might label as the pre-reflective availability of phenomena. A heightened curiosity can certainly create distance and disrespect the embeddedness of Dasein in the world, but the orientation outward to the world demonstrated by the infant, is a non-cognitive, sensuous engagement with the world and the other; it is not the type of curiosity described by Heidegger.

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<sup>34</sup> Descartes, Rene. *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*. Trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff & Dugald Murdoch in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volume 1*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985. p.15-16.

Heidegger claims that anxiety discloses Dasein's aloneness: "Anxiety individualizes Dasein and thus discloses it as 'solus ipse.'"<sup>35</sup> So is my experience of anxiety a type of limit situation, *à la* Karl Jaspers, which reveals my aloneness, my separateness? From my reading Heidegger will seek to claim that it is more fundamental than that; namely that it is prior to a social encounter with the other or any particular situation. However, it is difficult to accept this metaphysical theorizing of anxiety. It is easy to see how I am forced to reflect on my approach when the world or the other opposes me and my projects, but the claim that my individuation is mediated by anxiety prior to social engagement suggests that self-formation is also prior; I come to the encounter with the other already perceiving my separateness. An understanding of separateness presupposes an understanding of the distinction between self and other, an understanding of what it is to be self and what it is to be other. I do not accept that an ontological anxiety is the ground of this awareness, but rather that anxiety is revealed in the encounter with the other; Sartre similarly writes about shame being experienced in a social encounter which I will discuss below.

As already stated, the claim which I am defending is that curiosity is the most apt descriptor of our initial ontological orientation, the projection toward the other, the world and the desire to understand my situation. Heidegger claims that Dasein is a relation of being between what one is at any moment and what one can or will be as life unfolds over time into possibility. In other words, Dasein is future projected. It is easy to see how anxiety could be a foundational mood where Dasein is future projected. But I argue that this projection forward at the infant stage is far more subtle than Heidegger allows. The projection of the infant forward in initial beginning is an open sensuous movement towards the world and the other, which does not

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<sup>35</sup> Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. p.188.

possess a retentive/protentive temporal structure in the infant's awareness. I will return to this claim in Section 2.2. iii of this chapter.

### *2.2.i (b) Anxiety, Trust, and Care*

In the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty writes extensively on the concept of 'motor intentionality', i.e., how the body is already pre-consciously oriented towards the world. This is an orientation which, I claim, is properly unpacked in terms of a sensuous curiosity which lies at the core of initial beginning. Curiosity is sufficient to move the subject towards the world and the other. It is not a marvelling wonder, or a standing back in awe, or an over exuberant engagement shrouded in mystery. No, this beginning has a tentative affectivity; it is a gentle moving forth, but a moving forth, nevertheless. The desire at the heart of curiosity is to understand, to get to know the world, but in the infant that 'curiosity' is cognitively blind and instinctual. It is the self-same sensuous instinct which moves the infant to see, hear, touch, smell and taste its way around the world. This sensuous bodily instinct displays a desire or hunger for sensual satisfaction. It is a curiosity and hunger manifested long before the infant arrives in conscious self-awareness. My initial sense of my individuality or separateness is mediated by my senses; I exist in bodily-self awareness. Subsequently I become consciously self-aware, and the mind takes up a curiosity to understand all that has already happened, fed perhaps by my sensuous hunger. It is the body which anchors consciousness, which helps lay down initial instinctual pathways that feed the mind with data. The mind takes up the sensuous anchoring and orientation towards the world. Language is late on the scene. So much has happened; the world has already started revealing itself to touch, taste, sight, sound and smell.

Curiosity is descriptive of an orientation towards, whereas anxiety is a type of immersion in reaction or response. Anxiety, whether psychological or ontological, is about my relationship with and existence in the world. My curiosity is about the world, where I find myself. Anxiety understood ontologically is about a sense of lack or incompleteness. According to Heidegger,

in anxiety I feel detached, and free from the world; I have a sense of myself as separate. I feel an anxiousness that is about nothing in particular. My own sense is that what reveals my separateness is not anxiety but is the result of a lengthy engagement with the world on the level of curiosity. This is a growing awareness that develops over time; it is not a series of peak moments or a limit situation; it is far subtler than that. My growing sense of myself as separate does not 'convert' me away from my perceptual trust. In fact, my ongoing relationship with the world every day is a combination of trust and curiosity. The distrust and tentativeness at the heart of anxiety would cloud my trust, overpower it. Care begins in positivity, in a recognition of myself as other, but not in a recognition of myself as apart from the world. I am in the world and that relationship continues; my curiosity brings me towards the world. My desire to understand and my instinctive curiosity create an outward movement, a reaching out to the world and to the other. Anxiety is disabling and anxiety as the origin of care leads to a dependency and a neediness, which refuels anxiousness. Granted my relationship with the world will no doubt change over time, but my initial perceptual trust in the world will accompany me. As the child explorer, I begin to learn about the world. Over time I learn that my initial trust needs to be tempered with caution. Touch connects me, vision separates me, care originates in connection not in separation. There is a separateness necessary to establish the dynamic of care, but this separateness is subtle; it is a type of separateness properly characterised as a perception of difference, distinctness, a lack of the subject's co-incidence with the object of care.

*Sorge* is a type of worrying care, care weighted with a feeling of responsibility and duty towards self and the world. It is a care suffered as distinct from a solicitous or attentive and protective care. Heidegger claims that "Dasein's being reveals itself as care" but that it is in anxiety that Dasein is disclosed to itself.<sup>36</sup> *Sorge* is riven with a sense of temporal anxiety rather

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p.227-229.

than a sense of embodied presence or attentiveness. It is a care which is ontologically rooted in anxiety and a future-directed temporality, rather than being ethically rooted in interpersonal relationship. Continuity is at the basis of identity and subjectivity and this continuity can be categorised into past, present and future: memory, current awareness and imagining which are three separate interpretations. It may be interesting to view temporality under these categories but what is primary is now – all there is in immediacy is now. Care arises in the context of being-with and genuine care, it is clearly about presence in the moment, not a disturbing anxiousness which weighs heavily. *Sorge* appears to be an abstraction, a long way from a concept of kindly care or a free altruistic engagement. It seems to have lost its essential character and through abstraction become a very different concept. It is our experience of care, in being cared for as infants, which founds our outward movement in trust and curiosity to the world.

I do not accept that anxiety is what is what one catches sight of in a phenomenological approach to understanding initial beginning. My claim is that in ontologising the psychological concept of anxiety Heidegger fails to grasp and acknowledge the openness and possibilities which reveal themselves to a phenomenological approach. The pre-linguistic, pre-cognitive approach of the infant is non-evaluative. The infant's awareness is value blind in relation to the objects of its awareness but more importantly the orientation to the world and its objects is instinctively outward driven and gregarious rather than tentative and hesitant. My suggestion is that curiosity is the grounding orientation toward the world and the other, not anxiety. Anxiety is properly viewed as a response to a situatedness – it arises subsequently. Situatedness is about bodily orientation, our situatedness is grounded in body; body is what connects me. Without sensuous connection my situatedness would be severely limited; I would be stagnant, stationary, out of relationship with what is around me. The body situates me and my response to my situatedness is to a large extent determined by body; sensuous engagement feeds my



mental awareness. The diagnosing of anxiety as our fundamental mood seems to emerge from a particular fetish of the diagnosing subject. It does not appear value free; it appears loaded. It is an over-read, a foray by the subject into an interpretation of the experience rather than a phenomenologically reduced engagement with the phenomenon. It is a reaction rather than a response, when all that is required is a value-free encounter with the phenomenon. It is important to understand that for Heidegger anxiety is not a mental state as such, given his attempts to overcome a mind-body dualism, which I discussed earlier. Accordingly, we need to view anxiety as an embodied-mental state. While it is important not to psychologize Heidegger, what is clear is that anxiety as a fundamental mood has an ‘aboutness’ rather than a specific object. When we pose the question about the infant’s anxiety, we find that we are focused on instinctive bodily needs: warmth, food, shelter. But the important thing to note about the cries and protestations of an infant is that they are in the moment; their aboutness is about now, not about the future. Anxiety is future directed; natality is about beginning. The infant will experience anxiety as it grows through childhood, but at this beginning stage it is a time of openness, innocence, and curiosity; this is how ‘I’ begins.

Ulric Neisser<sup>37</sup> isolates two different modes of self-perception: the ecological self, which ‘is an active agent in the physical environment’ and an interpersonal self, which ‘is an agent in an ongoing social exchange.’ These each display differing types of affectivity:

The ecological self is a fairly cool customer, competent rather than passionate.

Navigating the world is occasionally exhilarating and sometimes fear-provoking, but mostly it is just something we do. The environment is always there for us, and we are always in touch with it. Encounters with persons, in contrast, are special.

We do not entirely control them. They occur irregularly, in ways that depend on

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<sup>37</sup> Neisser, Ulric. “The Roots of Self-Knowledge: Perceiving Self, It, and Thou.” *Annals New York Academy of the Sciences*, Vol 818, Issue 1 (December 2006), (p.19-33) p.20.

the presence and attitude of an essentially mysterious other. Only by the grace of that other can we reach the heights of joy that human contact may bring – or, for that matter, the corresponding depths of despair. This unpredictability must be especially poignant in the first year of life, before language, when the infant has no real grasp of other people’s purposes and or the constraints on their actions.<sup>38</sup>

It is curiosity and perceptual trust which draw the infant toward the world of sense experience. The infant is not suspicious of the world, in fact the default mode of the infant is to trust too much, until it realizes the world is sometimes dangerous. Neisser is correct in his assessment of the confidence with which the infant approaches the world. The world of the interpersonal is more tentative, although much will presumably depend on formative experiences which happen in the pre-linguistic space.

Having looked at initial beginning as a beginning in perceptual trust and curiosity rather than anxiety and doubt I now turn to the original relationality of initial beginning.

## **2.2. ii Connection before Separateness and Disconnection**

### *2.2.ii (a) The Origins of Shame*

This section looks at the original relationality of initial beginning and in it I provide an account of the origins of shame, which although focused on shame, could be applied more generally to the sensuous bodily origins of many other emotions. This discussion is anchored in an exploration of separation anxiety which Martha Nussbaum<sup>39</sup> claims is the origin of primitive shame. Hatab also discusses separation anxiety, and it is notable that in his treatment of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>39</sup> Nussbaum, Martha. *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004.

separation anxiety he strays from his own commitment to the use of concepts as formal indicators.<sup>40</sup> He appears to be simply applying the concept of separation anxiety directly. A more critical approach to Heidegger's use and perhaps overuse of that concept would have served him well. As already pointed out in the previous section, the infant does not approach the world anxiously but with a trust and a confidence. Heidegger's claim about anxiety individuating Dasein seems to smack of the idea of suffering building character – perhaps trust is what builds authentic character. Suffering can build character, but it also destroys character. In fairness to Hatab, he acknowledges this, but he seems to cling stubbornly to the primacy of anxiety, although he has some misgivings:

The universal phenomenon of separation anxiety and its role in child development may provide some support for what I always thought was a rather tenuous or groping claim in Heidegger's *unheimlich* manoeuvre: namely, that anxiety is “more primordial” than world-familiarity, indeed that the latter is a “mode” of the former, and that “anxiety is always latent in being-in-the-world.” If separation anxiety operates at the very dawning of selfhood, Heidegger's claim seems much less of a stretch.<sup>41</sup>

Separation anxiety is properly viewed as an indicative concept when applied to the space of the “dawning of selfhood.” Anxiety may be manifested but it is not a conceptual engagement by the child any more than is the infant's response to an upset tummy. To experience a separation anxiety means one must have some comprehension of connection, connectedness, company, and a sense of this being desirable. There is no sense in which anxiety is primordial. We could see birth in terms of sensuous rupture, the severing of our carnal connectedness. This first experience is addressed and ameliorated by nurture, the attachment to the mother's breast,

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<sup>40</sup> Hatab, *Proto-Phenomenology, Language Acquisition, Orality, and Literacy. Dwelling in Speech II.* p.71-72.

<sup>41</sup> Hatab, Lawrence J. “Dasein, The Early Years: Heideggerian Reflections on Childhood.” *International Philosophical Quarterly* Vol. 54, No. 4, Issue 216 (December 2014) (p.379–391). p.391.

the connectedness of flesh. This is reconnection, but what is happening here is disconnection and reconnection. The connectedness through the umbilical was direct and unmediated in the sense that there was minimal sensuous separateness, no unpredictability about the possibility of nurture. It was automatic. Birth brings separateness and a new type of sensuous dependency which arises in disconnection, but it also brings a sensuous autonomy.

The infant cries when it is hungry and when it is uncomfortable. This is how it communicates and expresses its needs. The infant, while demonstrating a dependency, is still able to impact its environment, to communicate its needs. It is distance and separateness which motivate communication. In response to the infant's cries, the mother offers comfort and nurture. We can conceptualise birth in terms of primal separation and rupture; however, we can also conceive it as a first step towards autonomous identity and healing. The body itself heals the physical wound of rupture. Birth can be conceived of as something that happens to us, but it is also something we bodily respond to, in communication of bodily needs and bodily healing.<sup>42</sup> The new-born communicates its bodily needs to the world and the other, and in reconnection trust develops, the new-born develops a bodily expectation that the world will respond to its needs. Birth affords the new-born the opportunity of bodily autonomy. This is the way in which pre-linguistic trust develops: felt need, expression of need, response, and satisfaction of need.

As regards separation anxiety and fear of abandonment, Martha Nussbaum, in *Hiding from Humanity*, theorises primitive shame in this direction. She describes the emergence of primitive shame as follows:

When an infant realizes that it is dependent on others, and is [...] aware of itself as a definite being who is and ought to be the center of the world, we can therefore

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<sup>42</sup> Birth is traditionally conceived of as passive, something that happens to us. While it may be a stretch to conceive of it in the middle voice, as in referring to an easy birth or the baby birthed easily, nevertheless it does not seem appropriate to conceive of it as totally passive given that the baby already has the capacity for bodily movement.

expect a primitive and rudimentary emotion of shame to ensue. For shame involves the realization that one is weak and inadequate in some way in which one expects oneself to be adequate. Its reflex is to hide from the eyes of those who will see one's deficiency, to cover it.<sup>43</sup>

She goes on to claim that primitive shame occurs prior to the acquisition of social norms:

Shame [...] is an awareness of inadequacy that precedes any particular learning of social norms, although in later life it will become inflected with social learning. [...] The sense of emptiness and defeat that accompanies it requires only the dyadic, and initially symbiotic, relationship between infant and caregiver [...] shame is connected to a fear of abandonment by the source of good.<sup>44</sup>

She acknowledges that shame requires some rudimentary sense of self and goes on to suggest that "shame emerges gradually over the course of the first year of life, perhaps becoming the full-fledged emotion only after a sense of one's own separateness is achieved."<sup>45</sup>

On the face of it, Nussbaum's analysis appears to impute a highly cognitive framework to the infant, where the infant *realizes that it is weak and dependent and has expectations* of being the centre of the world. I do not believe this is Nussbaum's intent. Her claim appears to be that we can understand the infant's behaviour in these terms, and this is relatable to the subsequent development of shame. Infants cry and throw tantrums when they are hungry, cold, too hot, have a dirty nappy, or simply want to get their own way. Shame would suggest withdrawal and passivity, not a drawing of attention to oneself to gain the support and attention of another. Of course, the infant may subsequently experience defeat by not getting its own way, as Nussbaum suggests, and then experience a desire to reconnect with the caregiver. The point is that the

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<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum, *Hiding from Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law*, p.183.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

infant's initial default mode is to assert itself actively, to connect. As has already been pointed out, Hatab, like Merleau-Ponty, counsels against mentalistic biases in analysing a child's behaviour: theorising backwards from adult to childhood phenomena and reading something initial in terms of something subsequent. This is not a phenomenological engagement with the phenomenon. Theorising shame based on a fear of abandonment is a questionable strategy, and classifying something which clearly requires a self-concept, the acceptance of a normative framework, and a resulting negative self-judgment, where none of this is possible is, to put it mildly, a stretch of credibility.

Nussbaum's approach does not do justice to the reality as 'experienced' by the infant. Theorising primitive shame narrowly in the direction of a fear of abandonment and dependency is to overlook the sensuous connectedness and immersion which form the relational context of the infant experience. It is similar to William James's description of the child's mental state being like a 'blooming buzzing confusion' discussed previously, which is of course an adult projection. To experience confusion would require the infant possessing a sense of what clarity is so it can judge its current experience as confusing. If James is using this description indicatively then we can relate to it. The child is experiencing many sensuous stimuli, inner and outer bodily awareness and beginning to link words and objects and all this amounts to what we might label as adults as a "blooming buzzing confusion."

Nussbaum's approach is a retrofitting of the infant/child experience with adult concepts. At best these concepts are indicative as already outlined in that they merely point to something, rather than providing a causal explanation. A proto-phenomenological approach is required, which approaches the phenomenon on its own terms to make explicit what is implicit. Nussbaum admits primitive shame is very different to adult shame. But how different does it need to be? Perhaps the difference resides in the fact that primitive shame has been inadequately theorised.

Shame clearly originates in an original relationality, a relationality which develops as the infant develops. It is difficult to accept that shame can develop in the absence of some rudimentary negative self-judgment or sense of self. Yes, at a certain stage of development the infant may fear the loss of the relationship with the caregiver. The infant needs some understanding of proximity and its value in order to fear the loss of this caring relationship. Shame involves my relationship with the other. The epithet 'proto' can be used in a random way, and unless we can clearly discern some similarities between the 'proto-type' and its subsequent version, then the proto-type characterisation appears to be, at best partial and lacking, or at worst arbitrary. Theorising primitive shame narrowly in terms of a fear of abandonment is a backward overread. It does not acknowledge the relational origins of this self-other conscious emotion, instead it argues for an introspective origin, a capacity which the infant does not yet possess.

### 2.2.ii (b) *Shame, Empathy and Self-other Awareness*

Phillipe Rochat in his book: *Others in Mind, Social Origins of Self-Consciousness*, provides a similar account of primitive shame as Nussbaum, but goes further:

Empathy is [...] an emotional derivative of shame [...] It arises first from the generalized fear of being rejected and separated from others, both counterparts of the basic need to affiliate and maintain social proximity. [...] (T)he corollary of the fear of social rejection and separation is attachment, hence affiliation and social fusion. These are two sides of the same coin, and empathy as an emotion is as are pride and contempt, derivatives of fears and tensions correlated to both separation and attachment.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Rochat, Phillipe. *Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-consciousness*, Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009. p.115.

But if they are “two sides of the same coin” why privilege fear of abandonment over attachment? In fact, Rochat goes on to state that:

Although I have been insisting on separation, in my mind separation anxieties always express a correlative drive for social fusion. Separation and attachment are indeed *totally interdependent* [my emphasis]. [...] However, separation anxiety tends to have greater heuristic (explanatory) power in relation to self-consciousness. The rationale is that we are self-conscious primarily because we are afraid of being rejected. [...] The fear of rejection is comparatively more motivating than the drive to fuse with others. It all probably boils down to the issue of describing a bottle as either half-full or half-empty.<sup>47</sup>

It is not clear that separation anxiety has more heuristic power in relation to self-consciousness. Self-consciousness does not require a negative motivation. A certain type of self-awareness may develop in this way, where one experiences the type of self-consciousness associated with embarrassment and negative self-judgment. But there are other ways of being self-conscious. One can have a self-awareness that involves a positive self-judgment as in feeling confident, autonomous, or proud, and also a more neutral sense of self presence as in meditation when one is self-aware in a non-evaluative way. Rochat’s account seems to have little heuristic power in relation to these types of self-awareness; it also overlooks the role played by touch and connectedness in grounding and developing the infant’s understanding of self, the world and the other – what Richard Kearney labels ‘Carnal Hermeneutics’.<sup>48</sup> The infant is an explorer, who learns fear. In general, the movement of the very young infant is better characterised as a movement in curiosity and trust rather than fear. It is important to note that it is our senses which possess an outward drive to the world and the other, the ear to hear,

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.116.

<sup>48</sup> Kearney, Richard. & Treanor, Brian, *Carnal Hermeneutics*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. This book discusses at length the way in which our carnal embodiment shapes our understanding and experience of the world and the other.



the hands to touch, the nose to smell, the tongue to taste and the eye to see. Yes, connectedness and separation play a significant role in developing self-awareness, but self-consciousness or self-awareness does not simply develop out of a fear of rejection.

Dan Zahavi<sup>49</sup> describes shame not as a self-conscious emotion but as a self-other conscious emotion, emphasising the relationality which lies at the heart of shame. I now want to explore the infant/child's developing experience of self and other. I am using the term empathic awareness to describe a basic bodily level of self-other awareness. In the pre-linguistic world of the infant, which Hatab correctly asserts is 'incarnate through and through', how does the infant develop a primitive sense of self and other? This is the area that has been neglected in accounts of primitive shame.

The word 'empathy' originally had an aesthetic meaning as in the ability of the subject to project one's own feelings into objects, an imaginative merging of the subject with the object of contemplation. It subsequently came to be used to describe the subject's ability to understand and respond to the other. In its original aesthetic sense, the word captures our connectedness with the shapes and objects of our world.<sup>50</sup> It is in this sense that I am focussing on empathic awareness as an evolving appreciation of sameness and difference. It is difficult to understand how I could feel shame before the other if I hadn't already developed some sort of empathic awareness. I am not offering a comprehensive definition of empathy here, but suffice it to say I agree with Edith Stein's<sup>51</sup> claim regarding the non-cognitive, sensual groundedness of empathy:

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<sup>49</sup> Zahavi, Dan. *Self and Other: Exploring Subjectivity, Empathy and Shame*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. p.234-235.

<sup>50</sup> Lanzoni, Susan. *Empathy: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Stein, Edith. *On the problem of Empathy*. trans. Waltraut Stein, Washington: ICS Publications, 1989.

Empathy in all forms, according to Stein, has a sensual basis, but it is enlarged and deepened by way of knowledge about the state of the empathee and by way of the empathizer's attending to the experiences of the empathee.<sup>52</sup>

My claim is that it is the instinctive drive for social proximity and connection which generates empathic awareness. Stein writes about the primacy of sensual empathy and both Dan Zahavi and Luna Dolezal suggest that it is a relationality that lies deep at the heart of the origin of shame. Dolezal argues that it is our human need for belonging which underpins, and is the fundamental driving force behind, shame. Shame highlights, as she writes "our ontological need for social bonds and belonging."<sup>53</sup>

Her claim is correct. The accounts of primitive shame provided by Nussbaum and Rochat do not anchor this sense of belonging. They do not adequately interrogate the origin of the fear expressed in separation anxiety or the fear of abandonment. Nussbaum's account of the origin of primitive shame does not afford adequate consideration to the developing empathic awareness of the infant and how this is central not only in its relation with the other but in the evolving sense of self.<sup>54</sup> From the infant's view, the desire or drive for satisfaction is primary; to impute fears to the infant or claim that the infant experience is appropriately described in this manner is an over read. Fear is a learned response as a result of previous experience, it involves an epistemic component. The behaviours of the infant as in crying, attention seeking,

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<sup>52</sup> Svenaeus, Fredrik. "Edith Stein's Phenomenology of Sensual and Emotional Empathy." *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17.4 (2018): p.741-60. Web. p.759.

<sup>53</sup> Dolezal, Luna. "Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre's Account of Shame." *Human Studies*, 40, 421-438. 2017. p.436.

<sup>54</sup> Writing about Stein's concept of Empathy, Patrizia Manganaro acknowledges how empathic awareness not only forms the roots of intersubjectivity but also intrasubjective experience: "intrasubjective experience is not simply introspection because it cannot take place without intersubjectivity." ("The Roots of Intersubjectivity – Empathy and Phenomenology According to Edith Stein." *Empathy*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2017. (p. 271-86.) p.283.) Dan Zahavi makes a related point when writing about the foundation of interpersonal understanding: "The foundation of interpersonal understanding is not to be found in detached belief-ascriptions but in a far more primitive sensitivity to animacy, agency and emotional expressivity." ("Empathy and Other- directed Intentionality." *Topoi* 33.1 (2014): p.129-42. Web. p.141.)

etc., are not primarily expressions of fear, but expressions of wants, needs and bodily discomfort.

As pre-infants, our journey into self-other awareness begins in connectedness in the protective, tactile environment of the womb. At birth, the infant sensorially experiences separation, the pain of rupture and separation. Touch, smell, sound and taste all then bring connectedness and familiarity before vision highlights distance and separateness. But touch not only brings the infant into touch with another body or object; it also brings the infant into touch with its bodily self. In touch there is a movement towards connectedness, separateness, and autonomy. It is this initial sensorial experience of connectedness and autonomy which grounds primitive shame. This ‘proto-empathy’ sensorially experienced in connectedness and touch both nurtures and meets in a basic sensory way the drive for social proximity and connectedness. It is the infant’s need for social proximity and belonging and its experience of connectedness and ‘proto empathy’ which precede and ground the development of primitive shame, not simply a fear of abandonment. In fact, as Dolezal correctly points out, Sartre’s account of shame, while emphasising conflict, points to our need for connectedness:

If we read Sartre’s account of pure shame as making salient the ontological structure of our inherent vulnerability and dependency on others for our being, then his account is precisely illustrative of the nurturing and supportive relations we have with others. Shame is not about the lack of those relations, but instead highlights their centrality through making prominent our ontological need for social bonds and belonging.<sup>55</sup>

While Sartre accepts that there is an irreducible distance between self and other, he makes the further claim that conflict is the original meaning of intersubjective relations, but this

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<sup>55</sup> Dolezal, “Shame, Vulnerability and Belonging: Reconsidering Sartre’s Account of Shame.” p.436.

conflict has a grounding in our need for social proximity. Empathic awareness and the perception of conflict are closely related. The perception of sameness and difference as alluded to already are co-dependent, they are two sides of the same coin, they do not arise in separation from each other. As Zahavi writes in *Self and Other*:

[A]n emphasis on the inherent and essential individuation of experiential life must be seen as a prerequisite for getting the relation and difference between self and other right. One of the recurring ideas found in both classical and more recent accounts of empathy has been the ideas that empathy presupposes a felt separation between self and other, presupposes a preservation rather than an overcoming or elimination of the self-other differentiation.<sup>56</sup>

The theorising of primitive shame in terms of a fear of abandonment does not give a complete picture. When we reflect on the infant's journey, we can appreciate how the infant originally exists in the connected, tactile environment of the womb. The infant experiences the pain of rupture and separation as in the umbilical cord being cut. It sucks its mother's breast and experiences the intimacy of touch. It is literally in touch and connected with its environment before the world comes into view. If you wish to experience how vision brings us out of touch and touch brings us into touch, simply close your eyes. What happens is that you develop a heightened awareness of what you are touching, and what is touching you, as well as a heightened awareness of bodily feelings; your attention comes back to yourself as a feeling subject. Touch is the original sense, the only unmediated sense, as Aristotle claimed. Touch, as Richard Kearney writes, is:

primal for life. [...] To touch and be touched simultaneously is to be *connected* with others in a way that enfolds us. [...] And precisely because it mediates

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<sup>56</sup> Zahavi, *Self and Other* p.189.

between a self carnally located “here” and an other located “there,” it is, at bottom, what allows for empathy. [...] The capacity to feel with others in and through distance.<sup>57</sup>

It is only with an appreciation of the role of touch in the pre-linguistic phase of the infant’s development that we can correct an over privileging of vision. Shame is a visual emotion, about being seen in front of the other. But we are in touch with the other before the other comes into view. It is against this background of connectedness that the fear of abandonment viewed as primary by Nussbaum and Rochat develops.<sup>58</sup>

I have discussed Nussbaum’s account of the origin of primitive shame in the infant’s fear of abandonment by the source of good and Rochat’s claim that empathy is an emotional derivative of shame. Using a proto-phenomenological approach, to avoid mentalistic bias or retrofitting the infant’s experiences with adult concepts, I have reflected on the origin of primitive shame and empathic awareness to uncover the infants original drive to relationality and social proximity, which precedes fears of abandonment. The origins of shame lie in the development of the ‘bodily self’ which exists prior to the infant’s immersion in language. The beginning of this ‘bodily self’ lies in the sensory experience of connectedness which begins in the womb and the sensory experience of separation, autonomy and dependency which begin at birth. This development of the bodily self clearly anchors the emergence of self-consciousness in the bodily development of interoceptive awareness, an awareness which according to Damasio, as outlined in Chapter 1, leads to the subsequent development of the cognitive self grounded also in connectedness and separation.

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<sup>57</sup> Kearney, Richard/Treanor, Brian. *Carnal Hermeneutics*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. p.21-22.

<sup>58</sup> Perhaps the reason why the story of Adam and Eve and ideas of shame and fallenness resonate with us is due to some surviving bodily sensory memory of the perfect Eden of the womb, which is immediately followed by birth, and bodily separation and dependency.

My reflection clarifies how sensual empathic awareness occurs prior to the development of shame. The rediscovery of touch and connectedness as primary resituates the exploration of the origins of shame and empathy in a different context. Separation is understood as a lack of connection; this is the context in which separation anxiety makes sense. Primitive shame just like pure shame feeds off this developing empathic awareness and the drive towards connectedness and social proximity. This is where the roots of primitive shame lie, and this serves to address the incompleteness in Nussbaum's and Rochat's accounts and provides a comprehensive and more complete account of the beginning and development of primitive shame. In effect, my account of initial connectedness is an account of 'proto-empathy,' a basic other acquaintance, which Zahavi and Rochat describe as "a central precondition for experiential sharing and emergence of a we."<sup>59</sup>

### **2.2.iii Continuity and Embodied Attending**

Without continuity and duration there is no identity, as identity is a time-related concept: the persistence of a certain degree of sameness over time is foundational for ascribing identity. Continuity is the basis upon which the concept of identity is intelligible: a subject persisting through time. It is necessary for a narrative to unfold, but the interpretation of events, experiences, thoughts, and the distillation of these into a story is a creative act, an act of abstraction, reduction, and embellishment. In short, narrative is an imposition of structure. We experience continuity but we do not experience narrative. Continuity and duration are the basis upon which we can construct a narrative. An account of continuity and duration is essential to understand the perception of the subject continuing over time. What is essential to the

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<sup>59</sup> Zahavi & Rochat, "Empathy ≠ sharing: Perspectives from phenomenology and developmental psychology." *Consciousness and Cognition*, Vol 36, p.543-553.2015-11. p.551.

perception of self is the ability to step outside the conscious flow with its content and perceive continuity. This perception of continuity is a perception of continuing consciousness, a perception of consciousness as consciousness of consciousness with content. I now want to develop an understanding of the temporality of initial beginning.

The organisation of perceived continuity into past, present and future is a feat performed by the perceiving subject, a rational classification, similar to the generalisation of occurrences which follow each other into cause and effect. The crucial difference is that past, present and future are distinct categories, whereas cause and effect supposedly display a relationship in reality. To theorise that what has already happened will determine what is or will happen is to treat these categories as if they have an empirical existence beyond a conceptual classification. Time, as observed by David Hume, is the perceived effect of succession not the cause of succession; it is a secondary rather than a primary quality.<sup>60</sup> I perceive a continuity, a succession of events; I perceive things changing, but I do not perceive time. Time and tense are an application of a framework, a structure to the experience of continuity.

I can occupy now in a reflective mode when I reconsider past events and experiences. I consider them and try to understand them, to see them as part of an unfolding narrative that I consider to be my life. We seem to have a deep sense that a story is what inevitably emerges from my lived experience. I see my experience as inevitably leading to here, where I am now. The backward glance is a view purified of situational contamination at one level and at another level it is abstract, as in missing the sensory experiential component of past experience. It is a space where one can cast a cool eye as it were. But the perspective gained will not of itself lead to transformation, merely a mindful, reflective occupation of now which is past-focused. Of course, I can also occupy now expectantly, where my now is filled with thoughts of the future. The future fills my present awareness, my now is preoccupied with thought of later and

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<sup>60</sup> Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature* London: Penguin Books, 1969. Book 1, Part 2.

thoughts of tomorrow.

When we consider the ‘temporality’ of initial beginning, my claim is that it is an experience of continuity rather than a consciously experienced retentive-protentive temporality. Shortly I will consider the type of temporality-consciousness associated with meditative practices and mindfulness, which I claim will provide us with some sense of what a pre-linguistic, pre-reflective experience might be like. Granted, the approach is through language and the established self, but the aim here is to attempt a description and characterisation of the open non-cognitive temporal awareness the infant in initial beginning.

Husserl in writing about the bodily operative intentionality of the infant mentions the fact that the temporality as experienced by the infant is not a retentive/protentive temporality. Compared to the pre-infant he states that the infant is already,

[A]n I of higher habitualities, but without self-reflection, without developed temporality, without recollections at its disposition, streaming presence with retention and protention.<sup>61</sup>

According to Husserl the infant ‘experiences’ temporality as a type of streaming presence without retention and protention. The question then is how we might characterise this awareness. We have already seen how a bodily operative intentionality can exist for the pre-infant, so is there an indicative concept with which we can unpack this rudimentary awareness of ‘streaming presence’ in the infant. My claim is that an apt concept with which to render explicit what appears to be implicit in this awareness is the concept of continuity. The non-retentive/protentive awareness is experienced by the infant as open possibility in ongoing

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<sup>61</sup> Husserl, Edmund. *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität III*, quoted in Miglio, Nicole. “Affective Schemas, Gestational Incorporation, and Fetal-Maternal Touch: A Husserlian Inquiry” *Humana Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies*, 2019, Vol. 36, (p.67-99) p.78-79.



uncompartmentalized presence. A presence which from the infant's point of view is not categorizable as before and after but which manifests as an ongoing awareness of continuity. The concept of duration also has some appeal in terms of unpacking this initial experience of temporality, however, continuity I claim is a more appropriate concept to use. Duration also suggests ongoing presence but generally connotes a measure of continuity as in marking the duration of a particular experience. The infant's experience is ongoing and 'streaming' to use Husserl's word. From late pregnancy to birth there is some rudimentary experience of continuity although the infant cannot classify its experience as such. In view of the heightened sensuous engagement with the world and the other which occurs once the pre-infant is born, this awareness is consolidated further, becoming part of the developing infant awareness. My focus here is not on pinpointing exactly when this temporal awareness begins but rather to characterise the awareness in a way that respects its unique character and avoids classifying it as an experience of a retentive/protentive temporality. In attempting to conceptualise the temporality of initial beginning, my claim which is in agreement with Husserl, is that it is not the retentive/protentive structuring which gives rise to an experience of continuity, but it is rather the other way around. The ongoing conscious stream, classified here as a continuity, provides the ground upon which we can subsequently conceptualise it in retentive/protentive terms.

I previously used Iris Murdoch's concept of unselfing in an ontological rather than an ethical manner to characterise a manner of open attending, which permits a minimally cognitive engagement with the phenomenon. I then proceeded to outline how this unselfing can lead to a manner of releasement towards the phenomenon in an embodied mindful attending. So, let me now elaborate further on the temporality of this embodied mindful attending which will help to further describe the temporality of initial beginning.

If we understand an embodied mindfulness as a manner of attending rather than a thought process, then thoughts, emotions, physiological states, bodily sensations all form part of that awareness; we are not confined to what solely occurs in thought. It is an attending that is characterised by a detachment from its possible objects. In the activity of thinking, we display our powerful instinct to interpret and continually narrate our experience, dovetailing our current experience into a continuous narrative between what has already occurred and what might occur in the future. Is it possible to release oneself from this narrativizing instinct, to greet the present in openness through an embodied mindful attentiveness in the present, to let go, to resist a narrative?

As adults when we engage in an embodied mindful attending there is a joint engagement between mind and body. The mind attunes itself to the body. It is a reengagement with minimal cognitive import similar to the pre-linguistic engagement of the infant who is flesh before word. In embodied mindful attending I actively attend to my sensory experience and use this as a stepping stone to a stillness; I am being, I have switched off my incessant thoughts.

Murdoch's concept of unselfing and the understanding of mindfulness in terms of embodied mindful attending gestures towards an opening up to an experience, which lies outside cognition and is immersed in the sensory. Shifting the focus from thought to awareness allows us to treat the experience holistically, to include both cognitive, physiological, and sensory bodily elements. Embodied mindful attending is bodily anchored, it is an approach in presencing rather than a cognitive approach; it is an unselfing and a minimally cognitive sensuous presencing in one's living embodiment.

I argued in Chapter 1 that the concept of radical releasement or *Gelassenheit*, which Heidegger writes about, can only be fully grasped in the context of an embodied mindful attending. As already indicated, the awareness which embodied mindful attending tries to achieve is a particular temporal experience of now. Hannah Arendt provides us with a way of

conceiving of this temporal consciousness, a way in which we can recover and open up the present as a gap between past and future. She provides us with a way of rethinking this gap, to recover this gap as a clearing, a space of possibility for thought and action.

Arendt writes about a ‘non-time space in the very heart of time’:

This small non-time-space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past; each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.<sup>62</sup>

This non-time-space becomes the ground for possibility; the space of recovery, the space where the possibility of action resides. It is the present, the now of possibility.

The temporality of embodied mindful attending is a type of non-time-space at the very heart of time. In embodied mindful attending we move into a now consciousness to become aware of oneself as possibility, a conscious potentiality. In this context the idea of ‘unselfing’ is about undermining one’s preoccupation with self. It is not a sense of getting rid of the self but a reduction to a minimal cognitive awareness of self. It is not only in an embodied mindful attending that we experience this non-time-space, there is also a similar non-space-time at the very beginning of subjective time, a time which is belatedly accessed, as temporal awareness grows.

This reflection on the temporality of initial beginning is situated in the context of Arendt’s writings about natality and beginning. When Arendt writes of natality she starts with our factual

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<sup>62</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993. p.13.

beginning, our birth, which happens to us before we know it, a phenomenon which Anne O’Byrne describes as leading to and creating a ‘syncopated temporality’:

We stumble into the world on the offbeat. Natality has its own syncopated temporality according to which birth happens without our knowing and every one of us is here for years before we realize it, before we come to find ourselves in the midst of things.<sup>63</sup>

The offbeat is the fact that we are here before we know it, there is a time lag, we can only understand ourselves belatedly.

For Arendt there is our initial birth, our primary natality when we appear in the world and are born into a pre-existing world or community with others. She emphasises how each person, by virtue of their natality, is positioned in the gap between present and future, a gap, she explains, which is not:

a flow of uninterrupted succession; it is broken in the middle, at the point where “he” stands; and “his” standpoint is not the present as we usually understand it but rather a gap in time which “his” constant fighting, “his” making a stand against past and future keeps in existence.<sup>64</sup>

According to Arendt, my primary natality is not simply my entry into a temporal causal sequence, rather it is a continuum which I break and interrupt with my birth into it, the beginning of my beginning, which is a birth into a community with traditions, beliefs, and a pre-existing culture. For Arendt we develop and grow through our parenting in the private sphere and education in the public sphere which prepares us for our ‘second birth’:

Education is the point at which we decide whether we love the world enough to assume responsibility for it and by the same token save it from that ruin which ...

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<sup>63</sup> O’Byrne, Anne. *Natality and Finitude*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010. p.107.

<sup>64</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. p.11.

except for the coming of the new and young, would be inevitable. [...] (E)ducation [...] is where we decide whether we love our children enough [...] to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world.<sup>65</sup>

The focus of education is a preparation for our 'second birth' as Bowen-Moore describes it:

Through the pre-political activities of play and education the child is introduced to his capacity for beginning as a potentiality for action of a political sort [...] when he divests himself of his playthings and his childhood preoccupations, he enters the stage of the public world where his words and deeds will be heard and seen and judged by others [...] at this moment [...] primary natality assumes the character of the political.<sup>66</sup>

While Arendt herself uses the phrase 'second birth', she emphasises the connection to our primary natality. This is the ground of all natality and our insertion into this political world is by word and deed in which we begin to actively occupy the gap between past and future: the clearing, the space which our birth has given us and which we "ploddingly pave [...] anew."<sup>67</sup>

With word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world and this insertion is like a second birth, in which we confirm and take upon ourselves the naked fact of our original physical appearance. This insertion is not forced upon us by necessity, like labor, and it is not prompted by utility, like work. It may be stimulated by the presence of others [...] but it is never conditioned by them; its impulse springs from the beginning which came into the world when we were born and to which we respond by beginning something new on our own initiative.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>66</sup> Bowen-Moore, *Hannah Arendt's Philosophy of Natality*, p.40-41.

<sup>67</sup> Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, p.13.

<sup>68</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998. p.176-177.

Through birth I become part of this world, as I journey towards becoming subject. Vulnerable and dependent I invite action from others, their care, their protection; my natality provides possibility for others, but also for me. She writes:

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born.<sup>69</sup>

Natality provides the ontological possibility for action, but my beginning, my natality happens before I’m aware of it. It is something I access belatedly. O’Byrne writes about this belated access in terms of a syncopated temporality which, according to O’Byrne, is: “a mode of being in time that can grasp itself only belatedly, and only in the context of an anteriority we have to struggle to understand [...] the event of my coming into the world only later turns out to have been *my* birth”.<sup>70</sup>

Yes, there is clearly a gap between being and knowing which is well articulated in terms of a belatedness. However, tempting though it might be to characterise the temporality of initial beginning as a syncopated temporality, a type of belated accessing of what has gone before, this would be an incorrect and inappropriate characterisation. The concept of a syncopated temporality is an apt descriptor of what it feels like for the adult or developing child to reach back into the pre-linguistic, pre-reflective space of initial beginning, when the child or adult has developed an understanding of what an on beat and off beat is. Peg Birmingham, commenting on O’Byrne’s book, writes about a natal anxiety being privileged because it arises:

out of our natal thrownness, [...] it is the condition of our being here at all and therefore as that which "gives access to possibilities which we project ourselves

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<sup>69</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p.247.

<sup>70</sup> O’Byrne, *Natality and Finitude*, p.95.

as futural beings." Most importantly, natal anxiety emerges in the uncanny understanding that we are not the source of our own being, that there is an inappropriable past "that put us in place" and which "makes natal being also historical being".<sup>71</sup>

As pointed out previously, this is a backward read on natality where natality is taken up into a narrative rather than encountered as the grounding event. This analysis is from an adult standpoint. The important thing to note here is that for the infant there can be no clear sense of time as syncopated as this would require the infant to possess certain concepts and abilities which it cannot at an early stage. The temporality of initial beginning is not experienced as syncopated but is rather experienced in a far more basic way as continuity, continuity as an ongoing conscious streaming awareness which provides the minimal requirement for remembering and conscious habit formation. This is what is available to the infant in the space of initial beginning.

In summary then, I have characterised the pre-linguistic affective world of the embodied pre-infant/infant as a world in which interoceptive awareness plays a crucial role in the development not only of emotions and gut reactions, but also the generation of a pre-cognitive bodily self. I have presented the three grounding experiences characteristic of initial beginning as experienced by the infant, namely: the infant's beginning in curiosity and trust as distinct from wonder and anxiety; secondly the infant's beginning in relationality and connectedness which provides a grounding for the development of shame and other emotions; and thirdly the temporality of initial beginning is experienced as continuity; as an open wide-ranging attentiveness which we might characterise from an adult standpoint as a radical releasement toward the phenomenon; a radical releasement which is initially free of a structuring

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<sup>71</sup> Birmingham, Peg. "Natal Finitude: Syncopated Temporality and the Endurance of the New." *Brill Research in Phenomenology*, 2013, Vol.43 (1), (p.141-148). p.142.

retentive/protentive temporality. I am using curiosity, trust, and continuity as indicative concepts, i.e., as the most appropriate concepts with which to unpack the initial sensuous experience of the infant. The infant is unable to apply this framework to his/her experience but the philosopher approaching the infants experience from within language and in attempting to avoid an adultizing or a rendering of the experience mentalistically can use this approach to gain some foothold in understanding what that pre-linguistic experience is likely to be like. My use of Murdoch's idea of unselfing as an ontological concept and my development of the concept of embodied mindful attending helps us to describe in an analogous way the unique aspects of what the infant's initial experience is like.

These grounding experiences are characteristic of initial beginning. Subsequent experiences will undoubtedly inform subsequent beginning and may infuse initial curiosity with anxiousness and doubt. As regards temporality, continuity is later taken up into a retentive/protentive temporality where it becomes backward focused in reflection or future focused in a protentiveness. It is taken up in past or future concerns, thereby effecting a displacement from the present of presencing. Continuity and experience get structured in an evolving narrative and anxiety and doubt can inform our future-directedness to the world and the other.

For the purposes of this study, I have separated out the pre-linguistic stage of sensuous embodiment from the linguistic phase. Such a separation is justified in terms of the clearly identifiable development stages in infancy. Hatab collapses the pre-linguistic into the linguistic and emphasizes how the drive towards language is evident from the infant's initial beginning. The beginning of the human subject in language is a significant development, so in the interests of completeness and comprehensiveness I now want to provide a brief account of the infant's initial beginning in language.



### 2.3.i The Infant's Initial Beginning in Language

We have already seen how body memories become established in the affect-saturated pre-linguistic space. Michela Summa elaborates on the role these body memories play in meaning formation. He argues, following Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, for an operative intentionality on the level of the body, which is responsible for the constitution of perceptual meaning in Husserl's account of *Typoi* and typological apprehension:

Husserl constantly stresses the relation between lived experience and meaning, and progressively comes to thematize not only the peculiar temporal-genetic constitution of meaning, but also its historical roots in life-world experience. Husserl's account of *Typoi* and typological apprehension is particularly connected with the latter point. Yet what is a *Typus*? And which function does it fulfil in the process of constitution?<sup>72</sup>

To answer this question, he gives an example of how the *Typus* "coffee" might be constituted:

The most basic form of *Typus* consists of the synthetic connection of sensible data, characterized by a peculiar internal regularity. So, for instance, the simultaneous presentation of visual, tactile, taste, and smell sensations in drinking of a cup of coffee, and the reiteration of such presentation in different contexts, allow us to implicitly constitute the *Typus* "coffee" out of a synthesis of similarity between the different experiences. By the repetition of our experiences with different coffees, we will notice that there is a common core, even if we will probably taste different coffee blends, and we will drink coffee sometimes with and sometimes

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<sup>72</sup> Summa, Michela. "Body Memory and the Genesis of Meaning." *Body Memory, Metaphor and Movement*. Vol. 84. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012. p.31.

without sugar or milk. Thus, we will progressively constitute *Typoi* of different levels, refining our senses and becoming able to immediately distinguish the *Typus* German coffee, from the *Typus* Italian espresso, caffè macchiato, and cappuccino. By each new experience with this drink, then, we will implicitly reactivate our fund of experience, and recognize (or typologically apprehend) the kind of coffee we are drinking by the first sip.<sup>73</sup>

We can describe the infant's orientation in an analogous way. The infant will be engaged in typological apprehending, recognizing re-occurrences of tastes, smells, sounds, touch, and images. Initially this is not a conscious cognitive apprehending by the infant, but a sensuous bodily apprehending driven by curiosity, instinct, and a perceptual trust in the world and the other. The first words uttered by the infant are instances of this connecting of words with objects or people. This is a manifestation in the linguistic space of something that has been developing at pace in the body – the generation and constitution of body memories in the manner already described.

There is a continuity between the development of bodily memories in the pre-linguistic space and the subsequent linguistic descriptions of objects and the other. We are flesh before word and in word we attempt to conceptualise flesh, but as Carbone argues, word, at its most authentic, is not a reduction or a translation but as he describes it, “a metamorphosis of the flesh of the sensible into the flesh of language.”<sup>74</sup>

Language is not configured as a second layer” which translates a primordial layer.

[...] Instead, language is conceived as the “metamorphosis” of the primordial layer, a metamorphosis that renews the carnal configuration of the mute world, but in another flesh. Like the sensible (which, nevertheless, always envelops

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Carbone, Mauro. *The Thinking of the Sensible*, p.39-40.

language with its own silence), [language] functions “by encroachment [*empiètement*]”, and so – by virtue of its own being – it itself brings the Being to expression [...] a ray of Essence shines through its nets.<sup>75</sup>

James Conlon characterises this relationship between word and thing as akin to the relationship between music and dance, where dance represents music:

In its essence, human language is neither a denotative tagging of prediscursive experience, nor an *ex nihilo* construction of it. In language, word and thing, expression and intuition, are equiprimordial; they arise together and are intertwined like music and movement in an improvisational jazz dance. In such a performance, the musicians are as attuned to the dancer as she is to their music.<sup>76</sup>

This is an interesting characterisation of language; word is to thing or phenomena as dance is to music. Dance expresses in movement the rhythm within the music, it interprets the music, articulates the musical rhythm and draws attention to them, just like words articulate the world of things and draw attention to those things. However, in initial beginning language is experienced differently. In this initial space language has a staccato about it, it is a type of denotive tagging initially, albeit in a socio-cultural, relational environment, as the infant matches words to things. While in the linguistic context, word and thing are equiprimordial as Conlon states, it is important to note that things and others have been present pre-linguistically and body memories have already been shaped by all that has happened on the sensuous level. In initial beginning, the infant is journeying towards language, which we might describe as the infant learning the linguistic movements. Once one is immersed and begins to understand the power of words and develops the capacity for narrative, yes one then develops a sense of the appropriateness or inappropriateness of words, how words can shape thought, alter experience

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Conlon, James. “Against Ineffability.” *Forum Philosophicum* 15(2010), (p.381-400). p.396.

and understanding. We develop an understanding of the capacity of language, a language, which as Carbone states, renews the carnal configuration of the mute world, the sensuous world of the pre-linguistic which envelops language with its muteness.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises the embeddedness of language acquisition and how that embeddedness motivates the infant's approach. "Language, as an expressive phenomenon, is constitutive of consciousness. In this perspective, to learn to speak is to increasingly coexist with the environment. To live in an environment is for the child, the incentive to recapture language and thought to make them his own."<sup>77</sup>

The infant/child makes the journey from staccato tagging to sentence making, from a staccato appreciation of the tonal qualities of notes to prose and eventually to the poetic which in a sense is a distillation of words. The poetic in this context is seen as an expressiveness which invites silence and contemplation in the after-word space, a space that is within language, while outside language there is the felt sensuous, a linguistic muteness in the world.

As regards the infant's language acquisition in the first year, Merleau-Ponty, commenting on Gregoire's study, writes:

From the end of the second month the nursing infant laughs and smiles, not only to manifest satisfaction, but also to respond to surrounding smiles. This already supposes a relation with the other that precedes the language that will appear in such a context. This is why it is artificial to consider the first words as spontaneous. Well before their appearance, attitudinal responses existed [...]  
From birth, there is a capacity for relation with the exterior which doesn't stop growing during the first weeks of life.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy, The Sorbonne Lectures 1949-1952*, p.33.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8-9.

Commenting on how the infant is pointed toward language by the environment in which he exists, he writes:

from the environment the child receives the “direction” of language. Imitation plays absolutely no part in this stage but it is important to underline the importance of the child’s involvement with the way in which people speak in his environment (the rhythm, pitch, etc.) The effect of all this is a general attraction toward language [...] it is the relation with the environment that points the child toward language.<sup>79</sup>

So how might we characterize the infant’s experience? Commenting on the relationship between thought and language, Merleau-Ponty writes: “We can only say that language makes thought as much as it is made by thought. Thoughts inhabits language; language is its body.”<sup>80</sup> Language both reveals and conceals. We develop a system of communicating our thoughts to one another, an ability to understand what each other is saying – we can reveal our thoughts in language. Would a thought be possible without language? It would surely be possible to consider a flower, a view of a landscape and be sensuously affected by it. Possible also to feel heat and cold on one’s body but be unable to describe it as such. Assuming I am not colour-blind, I could see different shades of colour, but not know their names; I could like a particular colour and not like another one. In the case of the infant, it develops bodily sensory understandings; it reacts if its bottle is too cold or too hot. It instinctively responds based on its discomfort about the taste or temperature of food, or a dirty nappy. It can communicate before it acquires a verbal language. Language facilitates its developing sensual experience and furthers its instinctive desire to understand. However, much has been deployed already in this

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.9-10.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., p.57.

task. Language and vocabulary develop in a relational environment. The infant comes to understand what words describe through repetition.

Hatab writes about how the development of self-consciousness emerges out of what he describes as “the social field of language practice.”:

In developmental psychology, the notion of “inner speech” or “private speech”—meaning self-directed verbalization—accounts for how language is implicated in self-consciousness. Research shows that inner speech is the most important factor in the development of self-awareness, the capacity to become the object of one’s own attention, one’s own thoughts and behaviors.<sup>81</sup>

There is no doubt that this is for the most part correct but it needs to be noted that interoceptive awareness is not language dependent. Bodily awareness of pain discomfort is experienced and responded to without any inner speech – there is an immediacy here that does not require the mediation of language. The experience of pain by the pre-linguistic infant and the ability to respond, as in seek attention, by crying is indicative of felt bodily awareness. The infant has an awareness of pain which will later become verbally expressed when the infant has an ability with language. Wittgenstein writes about the child learning a new pain behaviour which “replaces crying [but] does not describe it.”<sup>82</sup>

What is clear is that interoceptive awareness, while it may be linguistically expressed, does not require the mediation of language. The bodily self, constituted through body memories, is already being formed; language is later to the scene.

My experience of myself as a developing subject and the way in which the application of concepts and language acquisition can distance me from immediacy, by giving me the ability

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<sup>81</sup> Hatab, “Dasein the Early Years, Heideggerian Reflections on Childhood.” p.385-386.

<sup>82</sup> Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1958. Section 244.

to stand apart and take a perspective, helps me to see myself as separate, and provides the space within which reflection can occur. However, language can also serve to dislocate me from my immediacy. I develop an awareness of myself as standing apart from, as distinct from. In language I have the capacity to stand outside my experience and reflect on it, and while this reflectiveness suggests an autonomy that is grounded in subjectivity, the reality is that there is a relationality that grounds it. My ability to stand apart from is a relation to what I am standing apart from; it is to stand in relation to what I am reflecting on; the context of my reflectiveness is a shared language. It is a consideration of my subjectivity in relation to the world and the other. I cannot stand outside this relation; I am in relation, and it is this relation that grounds and informs my reflection. My experience occurs within a relational context: myself vis a vis the other and the world. A shared language is, as Heidegger suggests, the “house of being”, but this house is founded and built on a relationality. It is not a construction out of individual subjectivity; it is the shared context of my existence. This is why solipsism is unutterable and why the suggestion of being alone is to overlook and ignore the context of such a suggestion. The expression of being alone is only possible in an utterance, a communication. It is self-defeating as it undermines its literalness in its expression and communication. Of course, one can feel alone or lonely which is different to being alone. Language while providing the capacity for understanding also provides the capacity to misunderstand, and when language is put in the service of such rumination, the foundations of language, its origin and development, are overlooked.

Language and concepts provide the capacity to distance oneself, to hold one’s experience and awareness at arm’s length as it were, to develop some understanding, but often such understanding can ignore the context within which understanding is possible, that is within a shared language. What I am expressing here is a thought similar to what Wittgenstein emphasises in his account of language games: essentially the social aspect of language.

Language is essentially social, which does not rule out the possibility that a lifelong solitary *Crusoe* might indeed develop a linguistic code to describe the world to himself and gain some understanding of his world. There are various accounts of feral children developing in the company of dogs or wolves who when discovered had developed postures and similar vocal abilities as the animals with which they shared their time.<sup>83</sup> These developments serve to underline the shared context within which ‘language’ or communication skills develop. Agamben writes about there being an optimum stage for language acquisition to occur:

If there is no exposure to the esosomatic inheritance during a certain phase of brain cell development (which, according to Lenneberg has its upper limit in the full development of the cerebral hemispheres around the age of twelve), then linguistic capacity is irretrievably lost.<sup>84</sup>

My basic claim is that language is essentially social. Hatab concludes that, “In sum, mature development, individuation, and self-consciousness are the result of an internalization of the social-linguistic environment, mediated by inner or private speech.”<sup>85</sup>

This is partly correct. Language leads us to a growing sense of self but the basis of this has been formed in the pre-linguistic space. There is an evolving sense of self-awareness attaching to the infant in his sensory world. This awareness is not language dependent and is perhaps properly viewed as a template for the type of relationship which will develop in language. Language provides the distance to understand the experience or interpret it, albeit that there are many possible interpretations as many experiences have already occurred. Sensory experience is not language dependent. Self-awareness develops and grows and is mediated by inner or

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<sup>83</sup> François Truffaut’s film *The Wild Child*, based on a true story, portrays the infant as an uncivilised savage who needs to be shaped into a socially acceptable adult.

<sup>84</sup> Agamben, Giorgio, *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*. Trans. Liz Heron, London & New York: Verso, 2007. p.65-66.

<sup>85</sup> Hatab, “Dasein The Early Years, Heideggerian Reflections on Childhood.” p.386.



private speech, the narrativising instinct. This builds on what has gone before and also what is happening now; language has something with which to work.

It is important to acknowledge that language acquisition is an ongoing process for the human subject. Traditionally the infant is viewed from an adult perspective as an entity which becomes adult. The infant stage is seen as a developmental, transitional phase, as ultimately giving away to adulthood. However, this is to overlook something. Stefan Ramaekers and Joris Vlieghe in their reading of Agamben and Cavell reference the concept of educability with reference to both children and adults:

Agamben and Cavell also demonstrate that it is precisely childhood which allows for educability, i.e. for the possibility of true transformation taking place. To be very clear on this point, we consider the possibility of a new beginning as an ever present modality [...] To us it seems more productive to explore the [...] idea that we all remain children [...] and that the possibility of transformation at a later age is only made possible precisely because of this structural condition.<sup>86</sup>

So rather than seeing our initial acquisition of language as a historical occurrence in the development of the human subject, this ability is seen as ongoing and grounding the subsequent development of the human subject. One is always developing one's facility with language so in a real sense one is always approaching language and expression in an open curious manner, open to its capacity to reveal something as yet unexpressed or acknowledged but often already experienced bodily.

Initial beginning is about my initial phenomenological encounter, the beginning in sensual awareness before language. But the challenge here has been to approach this initial pre-linguistic experience without rendering it linguistic, and making something of it that it is not.

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<sup>86</sup> Ramaekers, Stefan & Vlieghe, Joris. "Infants, childhood and language in Agamben and Cavell: education as transformation." *Ethics and Education*, 9:3, 2014. (p.292-304). p.295-296.

The challenge is to avoid the translating, disconnecting, analyzing effect of language. There is a certain teasing apart that is inevitable when exploring the composition of initial beginning and how it re-meshes once again. Merleau-Ponty writes of the notion of intertwining but in order to understand this we need to tease out the intertwining insofar as possible; only then can we understand how the linguistic and the pre-linguistic mesh, where they overlap and where they differ. The teasing out suggested is not an unravelling, as this would skew the analysis; rather, it is an attempt to understand what is intertwined and the manner of its intertwining.

### **2.3. ii The Evolving ‘I’**

According to Neisser there are two basic modes of self-perception, the ecological and the interpersonal: “Available from earliest infancy, these modes are the foundation on which other forms of self-knowledge are built.”<sup>87</sup>

He distinguishes them as follows:

Where the ecological self is an active agent in the physical environment, the interpersonal self is an agent in an ongoing social exchange. That self, too, is perceived: we see ourselves as the target of the other person’s attention, and as co-creator of the interaction itself [...] Like its ecological counterpart, the interpersonal self is an active agent in a real environment. You are aware of your own interpersonal activity, and of what its result should be. You then perceive its actual result, the appropriate (or perhaps inappropriate) response of your partner [...] Human beings confirm one another’s selfhood in so many ways that it is impossible to list them all.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Neisser, “The Roots of Self-Knowledge: Perceiving Self, It, and Thou.” p.20.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

He locates the beginning of interpersonal perception, like ecological perception early on in life:

Even newborn babies are interested in human faces, and sometimes imitate their expressions (Meltzoff & Moore, 1989). By eight weeks or so babies have become exquisitely social, perhaps more than they ever will be again. They return their mother's embraces, listen to her voice, look at her face, maintain eye contact. Such infants are still a long way from speech, but when speech is addressed to them they may goo-goo cheerfully in return. These "proto conversations" (Bateson, 1975) between babies and mothers are by no means neutral in tone. They are often happy, punctuated with surges of joy that are systematically coordinated with the mother's own feelings.<sup>89</sup>

According to Neisser, these basic modes of self-perception bear similarity to Martin Buber's distinction between I-It and I-Thou encounters, and they form the basis of our acquisition of self-concepts and eventually our self-narratives. However, one concern about Neisser's account is whether he adequately considers interoception; he appears to be mainly concerned with exteroception when he discusses the ecological self.

Neisser proceeds to discuss the acquisition of self-concepts as follows: "I am inclined to place the beginnings of conceptual thought near the end of the first year of life. At that point, the ecological and interpersonal selves are already firmly in place".<sup>90</sup> He then explains, how the self-concept originates:

It probably begins in a subset of the occasions of shared attention just mentioned—namely, those in which the object of joint interest is the child herself. These are the occasions when a mother says "That's a good girl!" or "Did you do that?"—

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p.31.

when she speaks *to* the child *about* the child. The result is that the child, like her mother, now takes herself as an object of thought. She begins to think of herself as having traits, attributes, worth and value.<sup>91</sup>

However, it will take more time for self-awareness to develop:

It may be another year, before she notices that her facial appearance matters to other people. Typically, it is only then, when she is nearly two that she begins to use her mirror image as information for her own appearance, and to display the behaviors that some theorists take as reflecting the beginnings of self-awareness.<sup>92</sup>

Neisser locates the gradual emergence of a self-concept early on, long before the child stands in front of a mirror image. The standing in front of the mirror immersed in self-awareness is not an epiphany but a point on a journey. He then outlines the journey into self-narrative which he claims happens around the third year, when the child possesses the memory skills on which narrative depends.<sup>93</sup>

William James distinguished between ‘Me’ and ‘I’; the former refers to the self as an object of experience; the latter to the self as the subject of experience. Mateusz Wozniak discusses this distinction and makes a number of suggestions around how we can understand it. One way in which Wozniak suggests we might understand the relatedness of these concepts is in terms of a hierarchy: “to treat both of them as just different levels in the hierarchical structure of the phenomenal self-model an approach which can be (and implicitly is) shared by recent theories of the self.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p.31-32.

<sup>94</sup> Wozniak, Mateusz. ““I” and “Me”. The Self in the Context of Consciousness.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, 2018. (p.1-14). p.12.

Effectively, the 'I' is nothing more than a higher order 'Me'. Wozniak goes on to discuss how the 'I', as the experiencing subject, is a study for metaphysics not phenomenology, unless we understand the 'I' as a higher aspect of the phenomenal self. This is the understanding of the human subject that emerges from my exploration. Wozniak's thesis is a credible thesis, namely that the 'I' is a higher aspect of the phenomenal self. The subject is the cohesive unit within which processing takes place and the subject's understanding of itself can only be achieved in observing itself. The evidence for one's beliefs, attitudes, lie in phenomenal reality? Part of the complexity about this topic is generated by the fact that we begin in an initial open engagement with the world in the sensuous world of flesh, an engagement which becomes increasingly cognitively focused as we grow older. The 'I' is not an abstraction from experience, but is the perceiving agent who experiences, processes, and responds. It is grounded and impacted by experience, its capacities evolve over time, as already outlined in the previous chapter. The 'I' is not over and above the phenomenal realm, it is immersed in phenomenality, it comes to awareness in awareness.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has attempted to provide a phenomenological account of the initial beginnings of human subjectivity. Traditionally, approaches to a description of the world of the pre-infant/infant have been subject to mentalistic biases, which consist of a retrofitting of the infant's experience with adult concepts. These approaches prevent an authentic approach to the pre-linguistic world of the pre-infant/infant on its own terms. The world of the pre-infant/infant is a world of sensuous engagement where concepts, even when viewed as formal indicators, struggle to appropriately capture this pre-linguistic world. My approach has involved being economical in my use of concepts and applying minimally descriptive concepts that do not overread the situated experience of the infant by imputing mental abilities to the infant. I have

followed Hatab's proto-phenomenological approach but have outlined some reservations and limitations of the approach he takes.

I have emphasised an alternative approach which, rather than grasping the phenomenon in cognitive, linguistic awareness, aims at an attending to the phenomenon, emphasising co-presence, a horizontal engagement, rather than promoting a hierarchical relationship of dominance, thereby sidestepping an attempt to interpret or translate. This is a thoughtful thinking of initial beginning, an empathic approach which seeks to render explicit what is implicit in the pre-infant/infant's world. This I characterise, following Heidegger, as a radical releasement towards the phenomenon where the infant's experience is approached in an embodied mindful attentiveness, an approach that attempts an encounter with initial beginning non-cognitively in the continuity and immediacy of presence.

My approach is best summed up as a proto-phenomenological embodied mindful approach. This methodology is appropriate to the phenomenon of initial beginning because language and philosophy come belatedly to the phenomenon. We are approaching something which happened previously in the pre-linguistic, pre-reflective space of initial beginning.

I have charted the evolution of the experiencing subject from initial sensuous engagement in flesh to developing a rudimentary self/other, empathic awareness as it journeys towards language. The context of this ongoing development is an original and ongoing relationality.

I have identified three initial grounding experiences of the embodied, sensuous pre-linguistic subject. Initial beginning is grounded in 1) curiosity and trust, not wonder and anxiety; 2) connectedness before separateness and disconnection; and 3) continuity and embodied attending. I theorize shame and other emotions as emergent from an original embodied, affect-saturated, sensuous relationality. Initial beginning is facilitated by proto-trust rather than anxiety or doubt; it is directed by an instinctive curiosity born of a dynamic bodily

orientation toward the world and the other; it is effected in a connectedness, a relationality. The temporality of initial beginning is now focused. I describe it in terms of an occupation of the present continuity of the now of possibility, that Arendtian gap between past and future. I have argued for an understanding of infancy which rather than being viewed as a historical, transitional event in our biography provides us with an essential ongoing orientation to the world and the other, thereby facilitating the continued development of the human subject.

My account of the initial beginnings of human subjectivity, a biography of the 'I' in an original and dynamically developing relationality provides a grounding for an ethical engagement with the world and the other. Philip Pettit in his book *The Birth of Ethics* provides an account of how morality might have emerged. His basic claim is that:

Habits of mutual reliance, essential to human survival, are likely to make it more or less inevitable that creatures like us, possessed of natural language, should have developed practices of avowal, and pledging and thereby put themselves within reach of ethical space.<sup>95</sup>

Having uncovered the origins of the development of subjectivity in sensuousness, relationality, proto-trust, curiosity and within a temporality of continuity rather than a retentive/protentive temporality, I have provided a solid grounding which, to borrow a phrase from Pettit, puts us "within easy reach of ethical space." The context within which subjectivity develops is already a relational, ethical space, a relational ethical space which is grounded in an existential, horizontal reality, a reality in which the vulnerable subject has developed a rudimentary empathic awareness, through an understanding of the emergence of subjectivity, in the context of self/other awareness. My reflection has clarified the relational context in which subjectivity develops. It points to the futility of certain preoccupations within philosophy, the

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<sup>95</sup> Pettit, Philip. *The Birth of Ethics*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. p.299.

so-called 'problem of other minds' which is rooted in a lack of understanding of the relational context within which subjectivity develops, and the Cartesian mind/body dualism which overlooks the embodiment of consciousness and the unity of the perceiving subject. In thoughtfully rethinking our initial beginning what emerges is that the human subject, the 'I' begins in a relationality, oriented toward the world in curiosity, in a temporality of continuity and possibility. This is how 'I' begins.

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# No way to Say Goodbye

**-A Novel**

**By Tomás Lally**

A novel submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

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*“I love you with what in me is unfinished. I love you with what in me is still  
changing...”*

- Robert Bly. *In the Month of May*.

# WORD

## 1

The first time I met Niamh she had no distinctive perfume smell, just that warm woolly smell from her clothes and her Orbit spearmint breath. She was covered with clothes, little skin showing, cream polo neck, grey woolly blazer, black slacks, small gold hoop earrings, her hands and head the only parts not covered; the winter west of Ireland hijab without the face cover. All wrapped up. Presented. Together.

Lying here beside me now with her naked back to me and her right hand holding the duvet cover up around her neck, I think how unlikely it seemed at the start that we'd have ended up like this. The priest and the primary school teacher from the neighbouring parish.

Anyway, the longer I go on the more I believe in unlikely.

The red varnish on her fingernails is about one week old judging from the unpainted area of new nail growth at the base. Sometimes I think she's the sort of woman I might have ended up being if I was a woman myself or became a woman. A man's woman you might call it, not much into pink stuff, but I would probably wear red nail varnish. I'd never have the stamina to keep dolling myself up day after day though. I mean of course I'd make a decent effort an odd time and would then probably let it all unravel over the following weeks.

My mother was a bit like that.

We first met when she attended the interview for the teaching job that became vacant due to the retirement of Pat Moran. I was all suited up chairing the interviewing panel. We shook hands, a nice firm handshake, then we sat down and I introduced the panel. Mary Sweeney; one of the parent's reps. from our Board of Management and independent panellist Padraic Ó Gallachóir, a school Principal from Achill, militant gaeilgeoir and part-time alcoholic.

We had divided the interview questions between us. I asked Niamh and the other candidates about the challenges of teaching in a small rural school. Having a relationship with the local curate was not one of the challenges I envisaged at that stage. Regarding the question about challenges she said something about the neighbouring half-parish of Bailebriste being her home place and that while the urban environment offered so many opportunities it didn't have the reflective pace of rural Mayo. Besides, she wanted to be closer to her aging father. She had gained valuable experience working in Dublin for the previous twelve years with five years in a rural school in Cavan before that, her first job when she finished training. She had an easy confidence which I liked and I judged her to be kind-hearted. I expected we'd be friends if I could give her the job. Mary Sweeney would defer to me as the Chair of the Board of Management, but Padraic O'Gallachóir was very impressed with thirty something Aisling Nic Con Iomaire, a fluent Irish speaker from Connemara.

–I'm thinking Aisling's the woman for this job Fr. Gerry.

–And what are your thoughts Mary, I said, rolling the dice.

–Well Gerry, I have to say I liked Niamh Barrett. She seems a bit more settled in herself than Aisling, a bit older as well and she'll probably stay in the job with her having the local connection and looking after her dad.

–I'm inclined to agree with you Mary. I said it as if I had considered everything they'd both said in a detached way. Pat could be a stubborn so and so according to his parish priest Fr. Mick Lavelle, so there was no point in going head-to-head with Pat.

–So what do you think Pat?

–Ah sure Niamh is a grand girl, but I think Aisling might bring more energy, she'd be more innovative. I am not entirely convinced by Niamh, there's something a bit nunny about her, maybe it's the clothes. And I couldn't work out whether she's in a relationship or not. She's early forties like, biological clock Gerry, she might be gadding off on maternity leave if she gets her feet under the desk.

–Well Pat sure we don't know about Aisling either, both of their biological clocks are ticking, as to which of them will go off first sure who's to say.

We consulted our scoring sheets for the four candidates and did the tots, checking the addition on each other's sheets. I then did the combined scores and passed them to Pat and Mary for double checking.

–Well looking at the combined scores, Mary and Pat, Niamh is three points ahead of Ashling.

–Sure we can scrap them Gerry if we want to and do out new sheets putting Aisling ahead if we think she's the one for the job, said Pat.

–Well as chair of the panel I think we have to stick to our original scoring.

–Ah sure fair enough so Gerry if you want her in the job sure that's it. You're the Chair.

–Well she did score highest of all the candidates.

–Well I'm very happy with that Gerry, said Mary.

–Sound, sure at the end of the day ye'll be the ones working with her, said Pat.

–Aisling will be second on the panel, Pat.

–That's sound Father Gerry. So if Niamh doesn't take it, we'll offer it to Ashling and can we let that panel be in place for a year?

He was giving Aisling every chance.

So Niamh got the job and Aisling was on the panel for twelve months.



I met Niamh the following weekend with Mary Sweeney at the school and we talked about the school and future plans.

–Father Gerry and Mary, thank you both so much for putting your faith in me, I am going to give it my best shot.

–We’re looking forward to working with you Niamh, I said.

She was all wrapped up in woolly clothes again, the same as the day she attended for interview – well in fairness it was late March and cold. Her slacks had bits of fluff on them, probably washed them with something woolly, they could have done with a good rub to gather the fluff into a ball and throw it away. I find that relaxing, rolling bits of fluff into a ball on a pair of trousers I’m wearing. My navy chinos are desperate for attracting fluff. My brown ones never do, different material perhaps or maybe different colours are more inclined to show up fluff.

Niamh was finishing in Dublin at the end of June and was going to move down to Bailebriste in early July. She would be well settled back by the time September came.

–Have you someone to help you with the move Niamh?

I was being helpful, employer’s duty of care to a new employee and all that.

–My ex-boyfriend will help me out.

–Ok Niamh, well if you need help with anything let us know and we’ll see what we can do.

–Thanks Father Gerry.

– No problem, we want to make sure you’re all set for September.

Ex-boyfriend helping with the move west, well at least they parted on decent terms.

I met them in Kinsella’s *Costcutter* the day he helped her move. She introduced me to him.

–Fr Gerry, this is Mark.

Turned out he worked in financial services. He was a few years younger than Niamh and they’d been together five years. He was a personable sort, probably not given to holding strong opinions, easy going, the sort who would go along with most things, a chip personality, vanilla you might say.

Anyway Mark turned up in conversation a few times in the beginning.

–Well Mark is history now, it's over. He had his priorities, got a great career opportunity in London, one he'd been chasing for some months, wanted me to come with him but I couldn't go. I couldn't see him moving back again, we'd end up living our lives there. So with Mark London bound, there was nothing keeping me in Dublin. Mark's the sort who will be married within a year and have a few kids in quick succession now that he's finally got the job he's been after.

Clearly, Mark was in the past, that chapter was complete.

In September Niamh established herself in the school. I visited twice a week, calling around at 12 o'clock in the run up to lunch, everyone looking forward to a break after the long slow-moving hours of morning. I'd speak to the junior and senior classes, about football, holidays, sometimes God, what's cool and what's not, whatever was on their minds:

–What do you think of the Kardashians father?

–I don't think that much about them, what do you think about them, Jimmy?

–They're stone mad, father.

–Sure they're like most families so, Jimmy.

Smiles and the more probing questions always from Martin in sixth class.

–Should priests marry Father?

–Only if they love one another, Martin.

–What?

A disapproving look from Ms Corbett, corruption of youth – one portion of hemlock with my name on it.

–To answer your question Martin, I think when two people love each other and want to get married, yes, they should get married.

While Sinead Corbett was on yard supervision I spoke to Niamh about the state of the world, the ailing church, and we enthused about ways of building community in the half parishes, snug-fitting jigsaw pieces on a map.

Over the weeks the facts of our lives just fell away like loose clothes. I was now aware of her smile, her lively eyes, her mouth, her legs crossed towards me, the way her lipstick was sometimes misapplied, perhaps in a room with poor light or maybe in front of a cracked mirror. Part of her upper lip wasn't covered properly, a sweet neglect that was striking and which became a go-to thought on many mornings at mass as I gazed down across the great divide of empty seats at the sea of faces sitting towards the back, looking up at me. With my arms outstretched praying, I replayed our laughs, our looks, our silences which echoed and harmonised. Continually telling myself that this was going to be another close friendship with coffee, laughs, but separateness guaranteed.

Niamh's dad Martin died towards the end of May the following year when the whitethorn was in bloom. I'd wanted to give her a hug when I sympathised, but I stopped myself, fenced myself off, professional boundaries. We moved like repelling magnets around each other, keeping each other's bodies at a distance, only our hands reaching across capable of connection, my handshake strong, warm and lingering, trying to say something more. I used both hands, shook her right hand with my right hand and then covered our hands with my left.

–I'm sorry about your dad, Niamh.

–I know Gerry, thanks for coming.

*Thanks for coming.* Sure it's inevitable, I couldn't but come I'm the priest. I moved away, saw the tears in her eyes and hated my strait jacket restraint. It was almost six months later I gave her that strong squeeze of a hug I had wanted to give her when I sympathised with her at her dad's funeral.

Hugs? Well they're something I used to stock up on at Christmas and Easter, and Fiona Joyce always gives me a hug whenever we meet. Her husband Martin died some years back and

she still seems to appreciate whatever I did at the time. I was just being there really, but she still remembers it. Fiona's always very tactile and while I like her hugs and how they remind me that I am hug-able and connected, they're distant cousins of the hug I had wanted to give Niamh. But a hug's a hug and though they don't fix, they soothe, they earth some of my sad thought static. A static I used to earth by letting my left and right hands hold each other, create an internal flow, a recirculation, something like the internal air recirculation switch which doesn't work in my car.

About six months later I fully released that suppressed hug and what a powerful release! I held Niamh so tight, never wanted to let her go, eyes closed, perfect fitting jigsaw pieces faces side by side in the moment and then our mouths finding each other's, opening, our tongues licking each other's lips, before they roll and caress each other in play.

She's lying here motionless now, easy to love when she's like that, and when daylight fully breaks and our morning gets underway it will be a headlong crash into the tyranny of the usual. Old wounds scabbed over in sleepy silence reopening again as we walk the well-worn tracks of what our lives have become.

She moves and snorts in the bed. Dreaming? She was laughing in her sleep last weekend; couldn't remember what the laugh was about when she woke.

Our first time?

Six months after her dad died, a hurried job in the back of my car, the night of Paddy Durcan's removal to the church. She walked around the funeral home sashaying as she went, sympathising with the mourners. Her face full of compassion, wearing the same clothes as the day I met her. 'How's Gerry?', she whispered as she passed. I acknowledged her but maintained my outward priestly pose.

–Nice to see you again Niamh and how are they all in Bailebriste? I said with auto priest composure. Then she moved to the back as I began to enunciate authoritatively a decade of the rosary, projecting the words like epistemological ejaculations from my mouth; I could see her camouflaging a smile as I auctioneered my way through the hail Marys.

I suggested to her outside the funeral home that we go for a drink in town. She agreed. We drove to town separately and still uniformed I sat in the small snug area in *Larkin's*, a perfectly private spot. Father Gerry O'Dowd, curate in Kilcrua, discussing an issue with the teacher from the primary school. Halfway into the second drink, I reached for her right hand which was resting on the table. She did not withdraw it, continued to talk and then she squeezed my hand, our hands now bridging our separateness, grounding powerful charges. She offered me a taste of her Bailey's with Brandy. I could feel the warmth her lips had left on the glass, the faint waxy-sweet taste-smell of lipstick. I wanted to taste her mouth but something kept telling me to kill it, knock it on the head, drown it like the kittens in the brown canvas bag with the stone tied to it that I watched slowly sink in the dark river as a child, fighting my desire to rescue them.

We sat in my car. I suggested a short drive down by the lake, the moon shining down. Too cold for a blanket on the ground. We walked by the lake admiring the moonlight shining on the water and as we returned to the car we held hands, and kissed, before making our way into the back seats, exploring each other's bodies as we went. Years of abstinence pent up inside me, I came quickly. Overcame myself I suppose you could say. A rushed job lacking any control, any grace, but you have to start somewhere. My mother used to use that expression. Not about sex of course.

So while Larkin's snug offered occasional respite in the early weeks, secrets don't last long around here. Not that I care that much anymore, gossip is the community glue here. Niamh is far more sensitive about it. Well there's her job, a catholic ethos in the school and all that. They all know but they have never caught us at it so there's a certain respect here for the idea that no one knows what goes on behind closed doors. They overlook it for now and I don't shake it in their

faces. Maybe they like the fact that they see me as severely compromised when it comes to challenging them. The greatest hypocrite of them all. There's comfort having one of them in your parish, especially when it's the priest. They all gawk when Niamh and myself are together in the same room, waiting to witness some giveaway expression or gesture, a wink, a nod, a discrete touch. I've seen their disapproving looks, the ones that are supposed to make me feel shame, but I refuse their moralising, their 'I'm better than you' looks. We're rarely together in public here, we lead independent lives with regular texts, just 3 miles apart as the crow flies with Kilcrua hill between us.

She's 5' 8" Niamh, small hands, fit, good body shape, blue eyes. I'm sitting up in her bed now watching the orange glow from my cigarette, brighten with each pull and then dim in the thinning darkness of early morning. That line is in my head once again:

*Cigarette, you are sweet*

*While you last,*

*Like the memory*

*Of love when it's past*

It was written in pencil inside the cover of a second-hand poetry book I'd picked up in *Charlie Byrnes* one wet November evening.

Winter is established, the swallows have departed, and I have been hearing the swan's loud gabbling at the lake and witnessing their comings and goings these cold frosty mornings. Winter storms are brewing far off but there are still calm days left to tie things down before storm force winds whip the looseness of things and prize open the poorly fastened. The barnacle geese are here from Greenland, making a squawking racket as they fly in v formations. It's time for thermal vests, which I wear all winter and have some difficulty changing out of when better weather comes, comfortable old shoes held onto before you start wearing the track of your foot into something new.

Niamh is still sleeping so getting up I keep the noise to a minimum, pick up the knotted condom off the floor, walk to the toilet, throw it in the toilet bowl and piss on top of it, my shot load. Da used to say education was no load. Smelling the fishy sex smell off my hands I walk to the washbasin. Couldn't be giving out communion with those hands. I splash my face with cold water, the dead leg of water in the hot tap all night. I remove a piece of caked grit from the corner of my eye, wash and rinse the smegma from my penis. There's a word you won't hear mentioned on *Sunday Miscellany*. Smegma. Then I towel dab my wetter parts, I'll let the rest dry off, it will waken me. In the mirror my wrinkles seem more pronounced, you'd think things would flatten out overnight.

Do I frown in my sleep?

Back inside the bedroom there is silence apart from the even tick, tock of the clock. Tick tock, that's the way I was taught to hear the clock, tick-tock, one two, march time, question-answer, beginning-end, anticipate-resolve, build-fall, tick tock, tick tock, listening closely, I can hear it tock, ticking, reversing, syncopating, falling-building, ending-beginning. But listening more closely I find clocks don't tock at all, they just go tick, tick, measuring time in half seconds. Could I get a clock that ticked out time in triplets, tick, tick, tick, or would I hear that as tick, tock tick? At least the final beat is tick, unified, upbeat, unresolved. But time passes regardless of my manner of attending to it, whatever musical beat I give it.

I'm listening to the heavy persistent rain falling on the roof. It's that type of quiet perfectly vertical rain that wets everything, stays for hours and glosses slated roofs to reveal chimney shadows. I could easily lie down for another hour except I have mass at ten.

They say opposites attract. I used to think that and sure maybe it's true when you're young, but at my age I don't know. Maybe it was inevitable, Niamh and me ending up together.

Sitting on the side of the bed, I pull on my thermal vest, and start reversing everything I did almost 8 hours earlier, pulling on everything I was wearing last night. I showered yesterday evening and put on fresh socks and underwear, I'll get another day out of them. I root around in

the darkness to find them, having jettisoned them earlier in my hurry to get naked with Niamh. Hadn't been thinking about having to find them again in the dim light of morning. I pull on my boxers over my semi-erect penis, a bit feckin late now dick, looking for a second chance, trying to salvage last night's lengthy farce with a rerun only for a repeat failure. When I needed you to show supreme arrogance to be the cock of the walk you bottled it, got all self-conscious and apathetic. Ended up a hand job. Blowies are off the menu these times, not that I remember being asked. Need to speak to chef. Probably best to leave well enough alone. I pull on my boxers, slap my semi erect penis to one side. Don't be annoying me. Anxiousness, that's what Niamh said it might be. But sure what was there to be anxious about?

– Don't worry Gerry, it happens.

Yeah shit happens. Niamh humouring me, trying to make me feel ok about it, but deep down I knew what she thought, what she felt. Her care for me could eclipse it for now, but part of her fantasy about me was dying, another rerun and it would lead to a further nailing of my fate.

Niamh wasn't the sort to keep experimenting with stuff that didn't work. Yes there had been nights of abandon when our bodies gyrated and pulsed in unison, but of late it had been stop start, patchy, sporadic, a machine gun mechanism jamming. It's in your head that's what the agony aunts say, all in the mind, but it's not, willing doesn't always make it so. Maybe it's all my formation, all that repetition about the evils of the flesh. It's a slow conversion, the conversion of the body from the trauma of shame. Thinking about it as something foreign to the mind, thinking about sexual pleasure it as if it were for the other, to fulfil Niamh's expectations. My own pleasure wasn't central, it had in some way been offset by my sense of being a servant, a functionary, a servicer of other's needs. Maybe to come I had to let myself go. Shame runs deep. If there was a mirror available when I masturbated, I could never look myself in the eye and smile or just fully embrace the pleasure of it. It still felt wrong. My body traumatized through shame, abstinence and control had developed a mind of its own. Then I heard Fr. Jim Stanley's voice in my head.



Fr Jim was leading the Easter retreat for third year seminarians and one of his talks was on sexuality. Masturbation came up. Fr Jim looked down over the packed oratory and with seven words he changed everything. He courageously proclaimed:

*–Lads, don't worry, we all do it!*

Silence! You could have heard a tear drop!

Afterwards, Fr Jim heard confessions. I took my place in the long queue that ran all the way down the long corridor filled with the excitement of finally clearing a heavy conscience, jettisoning the excess baggage.

I came clean about everything to Jim, even added some anticipated future occurrences as well.

I emerged purified, de-shamed, a weight lifted.

Fr. Jim, a man of courage and integrity.

*–Lads, don't worry, we all do it!*

*– Well don't worry Jim, some of us are still doing it!*

I pull on my socks and brown chords, Niamh moves in the bed.

–Morning Gerry, what time is it?

–A quarter to nine. Listen sorry about last night.

–It's sound, it was great to get together like that, come here to me.

I leant over to her in the bed and we hugged and kissed, her warmth and the morning after smell of sex like a finger beckoning me back.

–I'm going to grab some breakfast and get myself ready for mass at ten. I sat up again on my side of the bed. Niamh threw back the bed clothes and sat her side of the bed, back-to-back now. I turned to see her quickly grab her night gown and exit the bedroom for a shower.

I open the curtains; everything is getting saturated with that rain. I open a window to let in some fresh air. *A breath of fresh air*, that's what Niamh said I was the first time she looked me in the eye and gave me a lingering hug, her comment distracting and throwing me for the rest of that

day. A slobbering, tail-wagging dog or maybe an excited pup pissin' all over the place without even lifting its leg.

Niamh returns from her shower, surprised to see that I'm still in the bedroom looking out the window. I pick up some coins that fell from my trouser pockets the evening before. Niamh sits the other side of the bed putting on her bra. She clips together the back clasps at the front and then pulls it round so the clipped section is now in the middle of her back. She snaps the straps onto her shoulders, snap, snap and then a final snap of the knicker elastic as she discreetly pulls them on, snap, snap, snap, game over, case closed. Undoing all we'd done earlier, dressed up again. This morning like all the other mornings I make my start again. Built for constant restarting and inevitably ending up in the same places, performing the same rituals, the same questions presenting themselves as the early possibilities of morning dry up. Sometimes I wonder about putting myself in the way of the unexpected so it has no choice but to happen to me.

Yesterday I drove into town to have a coffee in *The Coffee Pot*. I hadn't been in years. There were the usual salutations, the enquiries about how I am, the saecula saeculorum of weather talk, and I ended up reading the *Irish Independent*. Linda gave me a newspaper when she saw me there looking out the window. I think she believes an idling mind is a bad thing, fellas looking out windows plotting mass murder or something. These days it's a suspicious activity, with everyone looking at screens or papers, so inevitably I got caught up in the headlines. Trapped and grounded once again in the run of the day. I leaf through the paper. The page five headline stops me in my tracks: Tuam Priest on Child Sex Abuse Charge. He's not named but I know who it is. He was in my class – Terry Carroll. Never liked him; smarmy, fat fingers, always well dressed. I wonder have the rest of the café read it? It will mean more looks and stares and paedo taunts from teenagers. I don't think Linda handed me the paper because of that headline. In fairness, it was on page 5, she wasn't to know.

The radio is on, the news at one makes way for 'talk to Joe'. Thankfully Carroll doesn't make the news. Previously Linda used to have the dial turned to local radio blaring out track after

track of country and western music, punctuated with local news on the hour. At the end of every news summary they predict more news in an hour, *we'll have news again at 3*. I have often heard the 3'o clock bulletin and they don't have more news, it's just a rerun of the earlier news. Empty promises. But that's the thing about news, you have to hear it before you can work out whether it's new or not.

I'm in the living room tidying. I take the half-finished mugs of tea to the sink, bin the Kit Kat wrappers and sweet papers. It's some sort of instinct when I'm in someone else's house. Walking with the ashtray to the bin I think about the blackness of my lungs, riddled with tar and crap.

The New Year, the New Year, I ease my fear.

## 2

Mass at ten is for Paddy Tuffy. I can still see him kneeling in a seat halfway down the church with his beads in hand rattling against the seat.

Housebound Jimmy Barry is expecting me at a quarter to eleven on my communion round, then Caroline and Sean Moriarty are coming at 12:30pm to see me about their crumbling marriage. Caroline's description not mine. I suggested an appointment with a professional couple counsellor in town, but Caroline said it is an emergency. People and their emergencies. Caroline and Sean returned from England last year after being away for 10 years. The voodoo of distance had somehow convinced them that Kilcrua hill had got greener, a nostos nostalgia had gripped them and lured them back. Their homecoming myth turned out to be just that; another unhelpful metaphor, unrhymed by time.

I too had filled my student days with thoughts of going home, coming home, getting home, away from the weary, unpredictable world. Home, a place whose static contours I knew oh so well. Kilcrua wasn't the place Caroline and Sean had imagined. They came to Sunday mass, tried hard to integrate but they were outsiders now. Impenetrable cliques had already formed and Caroline and Sean didn't have the time and energy for the cumbersome rites of passage for returned natives who'd become outsiders.

I'm driving around Kilcrua Hill which separates the two parishes. It's speckled white this morning with hardy black faced mountainy sheep that wander far and wide to satisfy their hunger

in the rough grass and heather. Rusty barb wire and pallets tied in gaps with frayed blue baling twine no longer restrain their voracious appetites. This is a place where time is punctuated by annual events in the sheep farmer's calendar; lambing, shearing, dosing to kill fluke and worms, dipping against maggots in the heat of summer, treating putrid smelling foot rot and foot scald in the wet cold winter with Copper Sulphate. The lives of small single farmers preoccupied with animal welfare. Tending their flock by day and at night retiring to cold beds in damp rooms, to lie on sheets stained with piss drips, sweat and semen, rooms of snores, groans and sighs cast on deaf grey cold stone walls where mouldy silence grows. West of Ireland Trappists fighting wind and rain, with whiskey to melt the chill in the bone. Men who shelter close to the draughty back doors of Kilcrua church on Sunday mornings, their madness and wildness temporarily tamed with a decent Sunday coat and a quick razor rub. Men numbed on the outside by weather, on the inside by habit.

It's poor ground this side of Kilcrua, a mix of rocks, whins and rough bog, a place where silence squats like a dark rain cloud ready to burst, a place where flesh has become numb to touch, bruised and hewn like the rocks in stinging driving rain and scalding hail. The roads are deserted, covered in floods this morning. I slow down to ensure the water doesn't get splashed up onto the alternator and conk the car. I'm only expecting the few diehards at mass this morning, the faithful ones who come regardless.

It's a five-mile trip to Kilcrua from Bailebriste, only 3 as the crow flies but the road meanders around the hill. On a summer's day you can see the jets pass overhead on their way to America and Canada and rush hour is between 8:30am and 9:30am as some of the locals head to work in town, returning home again between 5pm and 6pm. Between times there's only a trickle of cars except in summer when lost tourists stop to look for directions. Like every village we have our local shakers and movers, but the things that shake most around here are salt cellars at kitchen and dining room tables. There's seldom much conflict but then there isn't much difference. They dutifully attend each other's funerals, salute each other at mass, in the pub, when they meet in

town and they talk about weather, about who's dead or 'on the way out', who's 'playing around', who got a new car – who bought the old one, who won at bingo, who's pregnant and if she's not married, who's the father. They talk of children, where they are now, how well they're doing for themselves, and as one year turns to the next, the rattle and hum of rural static continues.

The trees and the ditches go through their seasonal motions largely unnoticed, blooming profusely in spring, flowering in summer and dying back in autumn. There's a cold winter cut in everything now, something bordering on anger. A snarling dog, that's winter, the season that does endings best and prepares beginnings. It brings autumn's half-heartedness to a deathly end and then hands spring a canvas to work on.

I drive over the humpbacked bridge at the bottom end of the village. 'Welcome to Kilcrua' says the faded sign erected by the tidy village committee a few years back. The village is doing well in the competition, increased its overall points in the tidy villages competition two years ago, a source of much pride. The drive-throughs comment on how lovely the village looks, pride of place has taken hold and parts of the village now look like rural suburbia with manicured lawns, garden gnomes, box hedging and picket fences.

On the left is the new graveyard, sited where percolation tests and soil depth proved favourable:

–A grand graveyard, said Paddy Maher, 'people will be dying to get into it.'

A comment that ricocheted through the village to raucous laughter the first time he said it, but three years later it was well past its funny date. Paddy Maher was still dining out on his one hit wonder, still collecting the laughter royalties, especially off visiting tourists who thought it hilarious when they heard it.

Kinsella's pub is on the right just past the graveyard. The everyday regulars Jimmy Macken and his crew of slurring high-stoolers imbibe their daily quota here, each day delivering their lines, life-long method actors who never heard of Stanislavsky: '*Hab? And did he play in the backs or the forwards?*' Here in the wild wet west the pint-sized blond with the black skirt is a curious mistress.

Optic-gazing Jimmy and crew speak daily of the harsh weather, the hail and wind on the bare barren waste of the hill, their daily fight with the elements that earns them this high stool comfort. They sit where their fathers sat. Back then they sat around tables at the Fanta-Tayto-Dairy Milk funerals and watched the froth rings of time form on the insides of emptying pint glasses. Jimmy and his crew are the last remaining survivors, their great friend and mentor Sean-an-Iarainn is busy decomposing above in the graveyard and with him the fight, the pride and strength of hairy white chested men whose forearms, necks and faces got sunburned in the summer sun, at hay or in the bog. Work and time etched deep its lines on their big rough calloused hands and bristly lived-in faces. Their wisdom is that the fairer sex can't save them, they'll save themselves if they want to, but sure who's to say what salvation is anyway. They laugh at the new young men who have sought refuge from and for themselves in kitchens and bathrooms: tea towels over their shoulders prepping meals when they're not moisturising in the bathroom or doing the ironing. Ironing John.

Kilcrua like other villages is littered with bungalows, houses made from off the shelf plans echoing one another. The parochial house beside the church is a bungalow constructed in the mid-seventies. The church is a short distance up the east side of Kilcrua hill and from the parochial house and the church grounds there is an open vista across Lough Cloon. The best land is between the church and the lake and of late the Bailebriste farmers are buying up these tracts of land – the local geopolitical map changing. It has become a talking point since I landed here over five years ago.

So how did I end up a priest?

A mother's vocation?

Well mam was certainly happy to have her son a priest, but I never felt pressured by her. When I considered leaving after four years in the seminary, she was supportive. *It's your life Gerry, only you can decide, whatever you do is fine by me.* She was very religious so I suppose some of that rubbed off on me, but as regards being a mother's vocation: not guilty. I entered Maynooth in 1980, the

year after the papal visit. In Maynooth we were known as the pope's vocations. I don't think the pope had an awful lot to do with it in my case, although there certainly was a feel-good factor being there in Ballybrit and it lasted for a long time after.

So was it just me who made the choice to live out this life? Sure hadn't God made the choice to call me and weak creature that I was I was unable to fight him. Gerry O'Dowd powerless in the face of God's choice for him. Follow me said Jesus, leave the trappings of earthly life behind, we're going on a big adventure Gerry, saving souls, bringing salvation, and meaning to God's people, maybe even go on the foreign missions. Sound man Jesus, I said, count me in!

Through my Maynooth years I somehow managed to hold that picture in my mind. A prize that would be mine at the end of my studies and formation, a life of thought and ritual, a meaningful way to spend a life, dispensing forgiveness, listening, healing, nurturing love, freedom, positivity in people's lives. Even the greying cynics in collars didn't set off my alarm bells. No, I was going to be different. I wouldn't end up like them, when I made promises I kept them. That's who Gerry O'Dowd was, a man of his word who'd do anything for you. God was powerful and he could make everything sound if I could just trust him, hand him over all problems and sure he'd sort them, maybe not in the way I wanted but he'd sort them: let go and let God. God wouldn't let me down, everyone said that, and sure even if I couldn't understand what was going on with me, God had a plan and I just had to listen and say my prayers. Those around me seemed convinced. At night in the silence of the boarding school dormitory, the inner voice told me to follow my hunch, just keep going. This was my path. But I'm very young I told myself, sure everything I think might change, but my faith in God won't change because God doesn't change. In God's loving eyes I'm something and he has a plan for me. Sure doubts and difficulties are part of God's plan too.

And so I journeyed believing God was calling me, while all the time being formed through habit and ritual; things becoming second nature. And while the adventure of the African missions excited me in the *Far East* and *Africa* magazines, there was the mission fields of home. They kept



repeating that, the mission fields of home. It sort of grew on me and thoughts of Africa departed. During my seminary years I told myself I must keep going, keep trusting. Often when awake late into the night staring at the ceiling I consoled myself with thoughts of that spring I spent serving all the station masses in the parish with Fr. Doherty.

Sitting in the passenger seat of Fr. Doherty's black Morris Minor, with the factory fitted clear plastic protective cover we drove into the outlying station areas along the lonely hills, where wild mountainy sheep survived on scarce pickings.

I looked out the windscreen and passenger door window, the Morris Minor purring away approvingly while I occasionally glanced at Fr. Doherty when curiosity got the better of me. What was he thinking about, apart from God?

Outside the station houses the men stood in line on the paint splattered concrete footpath, a Mexican wave of cap removal as the black soutaned priest approached with his server following him carrying the big brown station suitcase that contained everything required: vestments, chalice, cruets, communions, paten, bottle of altar wine.

While Fr Doherty vested, I removed my folded soutane and surplice from my *Bests* canvas shopping bag and put them on. I lit the two candles on the small makeshift altar table as Fr Doherty put on the chasuble. A reverential silence descended on the packed room. Fr Doherty closed his eyes, joined his hands, and gathered his thoughts.

*In the name of the father, the son ...*

His gentle voice called the gathering to prayer and their loud responses filled the small room with a warm, comforting certainty.

After mass we moved into the sitting room to a table covered with a white linen tablecloth, all set for breakfast, where I sat with the man of the house and Fr. Doherty.

–What will father have? They'd say as if they were asking him about someone else.

–Are you alright there luveen, the women would enquire off me, suspecting I was at sea in this strange adult world.

Grapefruit to start. The sourness didn't bother Fr Doherty at all. I could only ever manage a small segment with some sugar on it but Fr. Doherty encouraged me and so I fought the good fight with the grapefruit.

–Keep trying it Gerry, you'll develop a taste for it, good lad.

In most of the houses the women understood that altar servers seldom ate grapefruit. Not even hardened mass servers who landed the plum job of serving all the station masses in the parish had a stomach for grapefruit. So they just gave me a bowl of cornflakes, boiled egg, tea and toast. When Easter came the stations were over and I had enough money gathered to buy myself a watch, I showed it to Fr. Doherty.

–Good man Gerry, a watch is a wise purchase, everyone needs a watch.

Right now I'm wondering what Fr Doherty would do if he was here. I doubt Fr Doherty would say Niamh is part of God's plan for me. Sure maybe she is, God put her in my life to force me make a decision. Poor aul God tired of me claiming it was him who called me.

*'It wasn't me Gerry'.*

One thing is sure, I know Fr. Doherty wouldn't have got himself into my situation. Placid and composed, that was Fr Doherty. He was sometimes given to a moodiness when we were doing liturgy rehearsals at Easter and anytime the Archbishop was coming to do the confirmations. We'd be practising processing up the aisle with Fr Doherty taking the part of the Archbishop and using the long handled candle quencher as his crozier. We'd process up the church in twos but on one occasion when we arrived at the sanctuary we didn't leave enough space for Fr. Doherty to insert himself seamlessly into the middle of us servers with two either side of him. So standing on the inside left I got a whack of the candle quencher on the arse.

–Make space for the bishop in the middle let ye!

Fr. Doherty's sermons went on and he tried to make them relevant. Every Sunday he had some handwritten writing pad pages which he took from his breviary when it was time for the homily. They didn't always make sense to me, but it was clear Fr Doherty had spent time on them.

He fought with a microphone that didn't always work, that he didn't stand close enough to, and a coughing congregation.

An avid gardener, in spring and summer Fr. Doherty could be seen out in his garden, stripped to his white undershirt of a fine day, often being mistaken for the caretaker by visitors. The exertions of physical work seemed to discharge an anxiousness, and impatience which occupied him, an anxiousness which lodged in his facial expressions rather than his words.

The following September I headed off to boarding school and met Fr. Doherty only when I came home on holidays.

–How's boarding school Gerry?

–It's alright Father Doherty.

–Do your best Gerry, I'll be praying for you, good man.

–Thanks Fr. Doherty.

In my final year in boarding school news came through from home that he was digging his own grave and had started making his own coffin out of a school desk and an old church pew.

The last time I saw Fr. Doherty he was sitting up in a hospital bed, his breviary on the top of his bedside locker, I had thumbed a lift home from Maynooth via Galway and called in to see him.

–Are you a relative, the nurse asked?

–No just one of Fr. Doherty's former altar servers.

–Well don't stay long, Fr. Michael is not well.

He was asleep, half sitting up in the bed wearing a striped pyjama top, his glasses still on and his left hand still holding the *Irish Independent* which was about to slide off the bed and separate into sheets.

–Father Michael, there's one of your parishioners here to see you.

He stirred himself up and stared at me for a moment before he slowly extended his right hand. I shook it, it was weak. He pointed to a chair and indicated to me to sit down. Sitting there looking at me he saw the watch on my left hand and smiled.

–The watch is still going Gerry.

–Yes father.

–And how is Maynooth? His voice was dry and weak. He pointed to the water jug and glass on his locker.

I poured him half a glass and handed it to him. He drank it and looked at me. I made no response thinking he'd forgotten what he asked me, then he asked again.

–So how is Maynooth?

–Going well father, I'm settling in.

–Good man Gerry, and how are your father and mother.

–They're good.

The pauses were lengthening, silence growing.

–Very good Gerry. He drank some more water from the glass.

–You'll have to say some prayers for me Gerry, I'm not well,

–I will Father. He offered me his hand again and I shook it once more.

–God bless you Gerry, he made a miniscule cross movement with his right hand.

He died a few weeks later in March. They buried him beside the church in the grave he dug but they didn't use the coffin he'd made. They stood around and gave out about his long sermons and how he couldn't be heard behind a newspaper, they laughed about him digging his own grave and making his own coffin. As his coffin was lowered into the grave, no one seemed in the least bit sad. Was this all his life meant? In the end perhaps they reasoned he was just an aging priest who gave long winded boring sermons and had dug his own grave.

I watched them filling in his grave, saying my own quiet goodbye through glassy eyes to Fr. Doherty, my sadness tempered by the belief that he had gone to his eternal reward.

I park up close to the sacristy door and run in. Mary, the sacristan has the Gregorian chant tape on. I'd made the mistake of telling her one morning that Gregorian chant helped me focus before I said mass. Now every morning she puts the tape on when she gets to the sacristy. It does help me focus, reminds me of seminary days with the choir singing in the college chapel, the smells and bells, being part of something universal. On this rainy morning being part of something solid, well-constructed is some sort of scaffold to stand on.

–Morning Mary.

–Morning Father.

She's dependable. Sometimes I think she likes being surrounded by all the trappings of liturgy and mystery, other times I think she likes the sense of importance it gives her. She's the sort who would be in the crib for Christmas if there were places going. I keep her at arm's length, she specialises in a line of indirect questioning which would impress an FBI agent.

She did her best at the beginning to put me right, to induct me into the historical conflicts of Kilcrua, a narrative of incidents, of people taking sides and residual grudges that had lasted for decades. She was keen to put me right about who I should have sympathy for. I stayed out of it, and just ignored these handed down narratives composed by the great and good of Kilcrua. Everyone was entitled to a fresh start with me. Her introductory antiphon was always the same, 'Ah sure you wouldn't know it Father but...'

–Ah sure you wouldn't know it Father but some of the Morans took the soup the time of the famine. They did and they had no luck for it, it came back on the future generations of them, two of them killed in a car crash one side of Bailebriste bridge 20 year ago.

–Lord have mercy on their souls, an awful tragedy to befall anyone. Anyway, the past is gone Mary, it's about living in our present.

–Oh it's not gone at all father, sure the past is always with us.

Beating on, boats facing forward, riding the slap of the waves that judder and rock.

–Ah for some it is Mary, but we keep on going on, we have to leave the past behind.

–I wouldn't agree with that father, sure the life you continue to have is the one you've had.

– An interesting take on life Mary.

Interesting. It's a word of interest to me. A gentle, non-committal way of not agreeing.

–Right Mary, are we all set?

–All set Father.

–Thanks Mary.

–In the name of the Father, son, holy spirit, Amen. Good morning.

–Good morning father.

Seven: the number of deadly sins: Three men and four women, six over sixty, the ones with time. I look down at them, they look up at me and I go through the motions, standing, sitting, genuflecting, standing, the words tumbling out of my mouth. In my head I go for a stroll and just keep my mouth open for auto-priest and his words. Those early risers deserve better, so I take back control, break the auctioneer styled riff, use more inflection and start experimenting with transferable pauses: *Lord you are, holy, indeed a fountain, of all, holiness ...*

Afterwards there's talk of Maggie Moran, a regular weekday attender, just turned 68 but fighting a poor prognosis.

–No sign of poor Maggie this morning, Jack.

–Going downhill fast Father, there's surprise and concern in Jack Cusack's voice, they're of an age himself and Maggie.

Going downhill fast, freewheeling.

I'm driving over to Jimmy Barry's but going to call in to our local mechanic Johnny Durcan to arrange a pre NCT check on my Fiesta.

He's busy when I call, down in the pit under his pride and joy, a Vectra estate which he brought home from England three years ago when he came back to look after the mother.

–She’s going to turn a lot of heads Johnny, that Vectra.

–D’ya know Gerry I’m just after getting a box of parts I ordered from England, another couple of days and I have her looking the finest.

It was great to see him enthusiastic. He kept to himself mostly and had gone in a bit on himself since the mother died six months ago. She almost made the hundred. 99. According to Johnny it was *spite that kept her going*, wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of the space to himself, *‘Not while I’m alive will that strap darken this doorstep.’* That’s what she said about Sinead Cahill when Johnny and herself were an item briefly after he returned from England.

I’d suggested a nursing home back then, but as he said himself, she was too bad to be left on her own but too good for a nursing home. He’d got her a home help because he was busy in the garage, but that didn’t work out. She ran Agnieska, the polish home help: *‘No tarted up foreigner is going to make money on me. Here for the bare hour and most of the time on her phone, that sort of help I can do without.’*

–You’ve made a comfortable corner for yourself in here, Johnny.

He had an armchair, a Superser, a free-standing lamp, a coffee making area with a microwave and an old record player belting out clarinet music from a vinyl LP, like a pan of sausages sizzling away. It looked inviting but it seemed like a created stage set, props positioned for a drama to unfold.

–I’m here most of the day Gerry so I decided to have a bit of comfort. Brought that record player home with me from England and that small collection of LPs there, mainly Jazz, picked then up in a charity shop in North Finchley. Arrah Gerry sure listening to the wireless would drive you round the twist, bad news and giving out all day.

–What’s that piece of music that you have playing, it sounds familiar.

–A jazz classic *Bourbon Street Parade*, Ken Colyer, he has other great ones on that album as well.

He reached for the LP cover which was beside the record player and looked at the back of it.

–*Goin Home*, that’s another great song Gerry. Here I’ll put it on. Ken loved New Orleans and the jazz scene there, somewhere I never was Gerry but I’ve seen documentaries on the telly about it. During Mardi Gras in spring the place is electric, alive, jumpin’!

I was thinking what a pity it was he hadn’t this space set up when himself and Sinéad were briefly an item.

*Goin Home.....*

*If home is where the heart is, then my home’s in New Orleans,*

*Take me, to that land of dreams,*

*Cause if I don’t leave now,*

*I won’t be goin’ nowhere.*

–That’s music to get lost in Gerry.

–Any more thoughts of heading off back to London.

–I’m getting too old now Gerry to feck off to London. See Gerry when the mother was here I forgot me age, she was the aul one I was young. But sure now I’m the aul one, gone 60, it’s about winding down not starting out with new things.

–It’s never too late Johnny. Never too late. So will you manage a pre NCT test on my Merc sometime? I’ve her booked for the test next week.

–I could do it next Saturday morning Gerry or Friday afternoon, whatever suits.

–Sound Johnny I’ll drop it to you early Friday afternoon after 2 O’clock.

Jimmy Barry was happy to see me, he always is. Last month when I called it was late evening, getting dark, he didn’t have the light on. I usually light a candle and say a prayer before I give out communion. I asked Jimmy had he a candle. He told me he had a flash lamp if that was any good to me.



The doorway of his cottage frames him as I walk up the hill. He's storm ready, has '*battened down the hatches*' as he said himself and not a hatch in sight. Another hero making a stand against the harsh weather. Jimmy used to be 'bad with his nerves' as they say, in a perpetual state of brainstorming with his eyes blinking furiously. Scatter thought detonations happening all over his brain, spreading idea shrapnel. Shrapnel shards with jagged edges which Jimmy then voiced, but which went nowhere, and Jimmy all the while convinced he was working with well-fitting jigsaw pieces.

He was quieter of late, the tablets had slowed it all down. There's a docility about him now, they'd put out the raging fire but the spark had gone too. I try to hold him in conversation, but he seems unreachable, beyond me. We used to share words and pauses between us. Not anymore, the tablets had taken that. Their chemical voodoo had worked, shared silences or pauses lasted only moments now before he broke them up with throwaways like 'Ah sure that's the way. You'll have that', and he'd hum some tune to himself. Jimmy now present but somehow absent in every moment.

My communion round completed I'm heading back to the house; I have given of my time to my parishioners.

*'Time, the most precious gift one can give'* according to Fr. Brian Donnelly, priest, motivational speaker and keynote speaker at our last priests in-service in November. An annual event, been going to the same Hotel for the last ten years, a package deal I suppose. In the early years they'd ask, '*What are you driving now Gerry?*' A genuine question to which a good answer was an Audi or a Passat but then they stopped asking me. I was dropped from the dick measuring game. With their Audi's and Passat's, their designer vestments, valuable chalices, and clerical garb, they're all properly accessorised. Some have four legged accessories: Ciaran has a golden retriever, Martin a red setter, Francis a Bishon Freise crossed with a Pomeranian - a Bishonaranian called Gilbert and then others have cats, with exotic names like Macavity, Spinoza, Rupert and Sheeba. I'm more of

a dog man myself but they tie you down, you have to be ready for a long-term relationship when you get a dog.

Maybe if I was properly accessorised I'd have a more confident clerical swagger about me, no longer be the clerical vagrant, an embarrassment to the grandeur and dignity of the office. Yes, one day I might stand around drinking brandy from a proper brandy glass and suck on a fat Cuban, cigar. At least I'm a smoker, I know how to smoke, not like those careerists who pose with fat cigars but don't inhale. In my student days when the Bishops' Conferences were on in Maynooth, I'd watch from my New House 'book depository' window as Alibrandi's big black car purred its way up Joe's Square to the main entrance and later observe the Bishops from the same window processing up and down Joe's Square in their purple belly bands and skull caps. Afterwards observing the thick cigar stubs they jettisoned on their walks, which now littered the ground. Maybe if I'd headed off to Rome and lived in that rarefied environment around the Vatican I'd have a better feel for all that.

*'And how is Niamb?'* some of them ask.

Poor aul Gerry getting himself all caught up in a relationship. Get yourself a dog Gerry if you want a relationship, and if it's sex you want well there's plenty mobile numbers available on the internet. You might have to travel a bit but sure that's all part of the build-up, the anticipation, the best sex there is, anticipation. Poor aul serious Gerry, deluding himself, getting in over his head.

I have little in common with most of my colleagues, have far more in common with the no shows who had decided some years ago that this pretence was not for them, but I continue to go: Gerry O'Dowd always doing his best not to give in to himself. In fairness they had some inspiring speakers lined up down the years, but I can't remember what most of them said. They were interesting at the time I remember that. At least the no shows avoided the farce of being in the same room as bastards who bullied and battered them in their teenage years in boarding school. Bastards you were now expected to relate to as colleagues. Equals. I never felt at home there, even

though I played the 'all grown up now and moved on' game. I thought some of the newly ordained would offer hope of new beginnings, and down the years some did, but of late they were all throwbacks, in love with the uniform, the magisterium and of course themselves. Corporate Apparatchiks, Machiavellian Princes of mother church. To them I was just an infantry man with no sense or regard for high office or even my own elevated status.

The last in-service was about team and I had some sense of being on a team but they never seemed to trust me with the ball, didn't get a touch in many games. They didn't trust what I might do with it. So arriving early I'd hover at the edges. A classmate I hadn't seen in a while might strike up a conversation with me out of the blue, a conversation that ended as abruptly as it had started when he saw a colleague he was genuinely friendly with coming through the door, his regular glances over my left shoulder during our conversation now making sense. At a loose end I'd wander around the function room, look at booklets, pictures, paintings on the walls, reminding myself quietly of things I knew about some of the landmarks in the pictures, using my own knowledge to engage myself and pass the time. As the event was getting underway I'd make my way to the circular table at the bottom of the function room nearest the exit with empty chairs around it, to sit in the company of Fr. Martin, the deaf octogenarian, his young curate, Fr. James Hession and Fr. Willie Lavelle who was generally in the throes of a major rant.

—Those wankers up there at the bishop's table, Gerry, licking his arse looking for better parishes, titles and plum jobs. I know what I'd do with them, send them off to the islands, knock some sense into them. You know young James some of them so and so's never had to work in a parish, never had to get their hands dirtied with the crap of the everyday. Degrees coming out their ears and all they want are positions, caps, and belly bands. I hope he sees through them Martin.

—But sure he can't afford to lose them, we're a dying breed. Sure there's fellas getting jobs now and they'd never have got them in my day Willie. There's no competition now. Fellas just falling into promotions these days once they keep their copybooks clean. You had to serve your time in our day Willie to get anywhere.

–Correct Martin. That’s the way it was. It’s all been dumbed down.

And so the evening passed with talk of the changed times, Fr. Willie ranting, Fr James saying nothing, Fr Martin agreeing mostly and me listening: Functionaries in the function room.

Driving back through the flooded roads on this breezy morning, I remind myself that very soon the year will turn, the daffodils bloom and the New Year will build a momentum all its own as every New Year does. There’s no one waiting for me when I arrive back at the parochial house and there’s a message from Caroline and Sean to say they’re going with my suggestion of a couple counsellor in town. Result.

I make myself a milky coffee and sit and have a fag and a few digestives in the kitchen. Most of my colleagues would probably gut this place if they were posted here. In fairness I did make some effort with house decoration when I arrived, the place was in a worse state back then after aul Canon Kiernan died. I got a painter in to do a job on the living room, kitchen, bathroom and bedroom. I had intended getting around to the spare bedroom and study in the early days but somehow life took over, and over the last ten years it’s like the house has been slowly working its way back into that poor state again. It takes wherewithal to decorate. There’s all that moving of furniture and everything. Sometimes I think that’s why I’m still here. It just takes too much organisation, with logistics, packing, unpacking. You spend so much dead time doing all that.

Anyway my good intentions regarding painting the other rooms came to nought. Sure what’s a house anyway but background, a context, a quiet place to just be. It’s not as if I need anything major, just the basics. The closest I got to redecorating was the last time the bishop came for the confirmations but in the end I just cleaned and tidied, made himself and the secretary a cup of coffee here in the kitchen and then headed off to Kinsella’s for lunch.

My heating system is on the way out. I wear woolly jumpers mostly, throw a higher tog duvet on the bed in winter and change to flannelette sheets. Trouble with me is that if I make myself too comfortable somewhere I’d never ask to leave. Discomfort is important, keeps me on

my toes. A bit to eat, some heat to temper the cold, a warm shower every second day, some clean clothes, a book to read, and a car to get me around. Sure what else would a priest need? Since Niamh came on the scene she's always on to me about making myself more comfortable. Sometimes I think she's trying to get me settled here.

–You deserve comfort Gerry.

But Niamh has that wrong. See it's not about me being deserving or not deserving. I just put no stock in it. Niamh seems to think I'm punishing myself. I'm house proud but in a different sort of way. Proud that I'm different to most of my colleagues who have animated discussions over lunch and dinner at diocesan meetings about fitted kitchens, coffee makers, and the new fad; prep islands, nothing to do with a course for a posting out on one of the Aran Islands. At the last meeting they were giving out about the hefty increases in house insurance. I didn't tell them I never bother, sure what's there worth taking here. There's insurance on the building alright, it comes with the church insurance. Package deal like. But I wasn't going to take out my own policy to cover my possessions. Waste of time.

### 3

And so each day comes and goes. Up at 8:30, wash. Put water in the kettle and make a mug of coffee, light a fag, listen to the radio, look out the kitchen window. Starting again, similar thoughts to yesterday. If thoughts about leaving were cumulative I would have left years ago, but they're not. Then I tell myself that timing is important, a hasty decision could snap backwards on you like an extended spring. There had to be clarity and resoluteness otherwise it wouldn't last. It's always a quick half hour 9:15am to 9:45am before I walk over to the sacristy for mass at ten. In primary school it was the longest half hour of the day.

My days fill easily, even the ones with large blocks of free time. I leave the sliding porch door open, never ask anyone to go away and come back later. Life sometimes only gives people one decent chance to deal with something and it's important to be available when people seek help. Windows for positive intervention tend to be small. Very small.

I still call to the primary school once a week, usually on Fridays around lunchtime. Occasionally I forget myself and lapse into a slight over familiarity with Niamh when Sinead Corbett is present, but on such occasions Niamh is quick to steer the conversation in a different direction or shoots me a look so I can effect a decent recovery. She was on yard duty when I called yesterday. We were chatting in the yard when little Katie Gannon from senior infants fell and scraped her knee on the tarmac. A sore dose. Poor Katie was bawling while Niamh tried to console and reassure her.

-You poor loveen. We'll have to give it a little clean. Niamh gathered her in her arms and brought her into the staff room. I followed.

-You sit here Katie and we'll get this sorted.

I got the first aid kit from the window ledge, opened it and handed it to Niamh.

-Thanks Gerry. Will you have some *MiWadi* and a biscuit Katie.

Katie nodded her head.

-Fr Gerry will you dilute some *MiWadi* there for Katie and get some biscuits from the press over the sink. I went to the press and got the digestive biscuits and diluted the orange *MiWadi*.

-There you go Katie.

The shock had made her thirsty. She took a mouthful from the *MiWadi*, still heaving intermittently but she had stopped crying.

I watched Niamh gently wipe the embedded pieces of grit from the wound, not really knowing what to say.

-This will sting a little Katie, but I need to get all the dirt out of it.

Niamh continued to remove the pieces of grit until the raw wound was fully clean.

She dried the wound and then placed a large plaster on it.

-Now Katie, you're all sorted. Big hug. You're a great girl. Isn't she a great girl Fr. Gerry?

-A brave girl.

-Thanks Miss.

Katie was now munching away on a digestive, drinking her *MiWadi* and then she started to stare at us.

-Is Fr Gerry your boyfriend Miss?

I was just about to ask Katie what made her ask the question, but luckily Niamh took control.

-We're very good friends Katie. It's lovely to have friends, isn't it Katie.

-Yes Miss.

–You sit there and finish your *MiWadi* Katie, and you can rejoin your friends in the playground when you're finished.

I said goodbye to Katie and acknowledged Niamh's skilful handing of Katie's question as I left. It's the only time anyone around here has directly asked that question.

I had a sleep in until 10am this morning. I'm marrying Paul Hegarty and Nicola Sheridan this afternoon, well witnessing really, they're the ones marrying each another. Nicola is local, she met Paul in London, been nursing over there these last three years. I'm scribbling down a few thoughts for the homily. I'll put in the one about a relationship being like a good loaf, always wholesome never stale. They'll end up eating their share of stale bread for sure. There'll be days they'll be glad of any bread but it's not a day for highlighting that. Important to have a sense of occasion Gerry. Speaking of which, they've chosen Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: Chapter 13 verses 1 to 13. It's one of the suggested readings in the marriage book, couples nearly all go for it. Had a teacher once who played rugby in Galway with Corinthians, front row, hardly any neck on him, head on top of a torso. I used to like that reading 'Love is patient and kind.... it does not insist on its own way, it is not irritable or resentful ...' But it's far removed from the messy wonder that is human love, just some abstract idealised notion that's not an emotion at all. I'll balance it in my sermon, talk about the mess, the difficulty, the importance of trying, beginning again, over and over when all seems hopeless. I'll use 'difficult' instead of 'hopeless', a better word, about beginning again when there are difficulties, when you're upset and angry. No I won't use upset and angry, I'll use disappointed and annoyed instead.

After communion Rob, the middle aged, roll-your-own Brummie with the ponytail and the sleeper in his left ear, plugs in his mini guitar amp and plays Nick Cave's *Into my Arms*. Beautiful deep voice, silence in the church, *Into my arms, Oh Lord...* Niamh isn't as much into hugs these days, functional hugs yes, when she sees me unsure of myself or struggling, but my body has survived years of occasional hugs. No hugs in boarding school, no hugs in the seminary, my hug



starved body is somehow suspicious of hugs, short of hug memories. But often with Niamh I still feel that sense of connection and completeness in a loving hug.

Paul and Nicola are getting stuck into each other, a full-on kiss after Rob finishes. I find myself staring so I immediately folded my hands in my lap and looked down at them in prayerful pose. Let the mood settle after Rob.

I thank everyone, wish Paul and Nicola all the best and walk with them into the sacristy to sign the register.

–You’ll be along at 5:30 to say grace for us father.

–Yes Paul I’ll be there, I said, as Greg Mahon the photographer got busy arranging photos, two with me in them.

–I’ll leave you to it folks.

I let myself out the back door of the sacristy and walk over to the house. I stand with my coffee and fag near the living room window and watch them taking more couple and group photos among the trees outside the sacristy, photos that will make their way into an album that will occupy a special space on a shelf for many years. An album which in the early months and years will be taken down and opened when visitors call, and which will eventually becoming something historical, a record of the dreams and smiles of another time.

I never bothered with an ordination album. Just have the one framed picture in my bedroom giving Mam and Dad my first blessing. The rest are in a shoe box somewhere.

The wedding party are still posing for the photographs, and then the best man misplaces his foot and falls headlong into the privet hedge. Laughter all around, the everyday slapstick.

I feel alone looking out the window. Then I hear his words;

*You don’t need to do anything about your feelings Gerry, just acknowledge them, accept them.*

My spiritual director Father Eamo, who hadn’t followed his own advice. He’d fecked off to America with a Dublin nun a few months ago.

*Acknowledge them, accept them*, like they were a cut or wound on your hand which you cover up and expect to heal in the darkness of inattention. Or maybe the best treatment for a wound is to let the fresh air caress it, dry it, soothe and heal it. I place my left hand over my right, join them not in prayer but in a closed clasp, completing a circuit, feeling a charge flow. I'm leaking old tears now, long past their cry by date.

Six when I suffered my first deep wound, when the old man in the hat with the soft eyes and big hands died. I can cry now, no fear of standing out and embarrassing anyone. Him and me can now stand hand in hand looking into that hole with the coffin in it, the forest of legs around as clay thuds on wood. They were all there but I can't remember their faces. We can linger here now, come back again tomorrow and the next day if we need to. I hold your hand tighter, it's like we're turning a bend for home together.

The wedding party are standing around chatting before they head down to the lake for some photos.

*You can park those things*, said Fr. Eamo who I always suspected led a controlled quiet life of walks, reading, and meals, encased in his silent shroud. Nice fella but fierce dry. His voice soft and gentle like the shampoo, his language measured, each word prepped and dressed before he released it. Appropriate. The right words in the right order at the right time. Sitting in his armchair unreactive to my turmoil, me talking to the Eamo wall. I visited him on Tuesdays every two weeks and each time I came away wondering why I wasted my time there. Two years, one hour, 11:30 to 12:30, Fr. Eamo sitting in his armchair, me on an upright chair with a cushion on it.

–We'll start with a prayer Gerry and he'd pick up his office and say a prayer from it.

–Amen, we'd both say to the prayer and then Eamo would offer his opener.

–So how have you been since the last time Gerry?

–Up and down Eamo, sure you know yourself.

–So tell me about the up.

–What?

–Tell me about the up, the up of the up and down.

Eamo didn't allow throwaway remarks, he wanted everything examined.

–Doing the best I can like, getting on with things.

–So that's the up.

He said it as if it wasn't all that much to be up about.

–Sometimes that's as good as it gets Eamo.

–And how's Niamh? Eamo zoning in for a direct hit.

–Niamh is Niamh.

–Last time you were here you spoke about your anger that Niamh was not reciprocating your feelings. He was consulting his notebook now. You spoke about taking your anger out on people.

–Well I was in great feckin form the last time, wasn't I. Thinking out loud Eamo, that's what that was. I'm sure you do that sometimes. I wasn't sure at all, but I just said it to distract him.

He didn't respond just held the question in his expressionless face and reflected it back to me without blinking an eye.

–So you are in control of your anger now Gerry.

–Well I wouldn't go that far; it controls me sometimes.

–And how does that feel.

–Frightening.

And so it went. Me sitting in the chair looking out the window watching the tree branches waving in the breeze while I engaged with him about the unresolvable facts of my life. Eamo with his protruding purple-blue veined white hands, in need of time in the sun. Sitting in his room where everything was in its place; the highly polished coffee table with the two coasters on it, the smell of furniture polish like the smell from a wooden staircase inside a convent entrance.

Every second Tuesday unflappable Eamo asked me questions. We went nowhere but I kept going just in case. How could he be so detached from all my angst. Detachment, for the

clients benefit perhaps, you can be a more effective mirror when you are detached, throw a curve ball at Eamo and it would bounce right back for you to catch it, to feel it's contours, its shape.

–Being aware is half the battle, Gerry.

–It's always the other half I have difficulties with Eamo.

And so the conversation went. Then one Tuesday I noticed an empty beer bottle beside his armchair.

–You were partying Eamo?

He looked at me curiously.

–The bottle beside your chair.

–Oh, he said, and he got up, took the bottle and went into his kitchen with it, he came back and sat in the armchair.

–Sorry about that distraction Gerry, he said, resuming his calm, expressionless demeanour once again.

So where did you have the sense of humour bypass Eamo? The Blackrock Clinic, Vincents, VHI job was it? Made you a better priest did it. A better listener I suppose. My Tuesdays with Eamo, at some level reminded me of how free I felt compared to Eamo. Eamo perhaps had special training to achieve this detached state. Being honest I felt sorry for him sitting there bored listening to my shite, my inability to make decisions, my constant repetition of the same fuckin' questions. At the end of the session he would offer a brief summary:

–Well Gerry you seem to have identified the question for yourself again, so pray and reflect about it and we'll no doubt come back to it. We trust the process, embrace what we see clearly and accept that more will become clearer in time.

He'd then open his black A5 diary with the leather cover and mark the date of our next appointment, writing in it with his silver cross pen. I never saw what he wrote perhaps Fr Gerry, Gerry O'Dowd, Hamlet O'Dowd, Gerry, then he closed it which indicated we were finished.

Then one morning a short note arrived in the post.

*Dear Gerry,*

*I have decided to take some time out and will be unable to continue our appointments. Fr. Kevin Lawlor over at St. Dominics in Galway may be able to take you on,*

Take me on! And in the blue corner Fr. Gerry...!

*I took the liberty of letting him know that you might be contacting him. Every blessing on the journey.*

*Eamon.*

Eamo taking time out, I later found out he had eloped to America with a nun from Dublin. Nuns from Dublin, you know yourself.

Eamo in America, Boston I heard some time later, and here was I with my questions. Maybe my procrastination had helped him make his decision, me helping him. Perhaps there was much I could have learned from Eamo, but I had let my dislike of his organisation and demeanour get in the way. Hadn't used the Tuesday space fully, got preoccupied with looks and external objects as if they were of prime importance. Fr Eamo's order and neatness angered me and I had mistakenly thought it was because it reminded me of how disorganised I was which of course it did, but at a deeper level it reminded me of what I hated most: my ordered life lived by others rules. Far removed from the child who just wanted to roam free and feel the summer breeze on his face and catch butterflies. The child who felt fear the day Da caught the pike in the river when he hit its head on a stone; the child who cried at six and felt confused when they told me to stop. That six-year-old with his heart on his sleeve who played with the old broken wind up clock, winding it up, taking the back off it and watching the cogs moving, lost in some connection, the cogs in his head in hypnotic movement with the clock, in balance.

I haven't seen Niamh in two days. My emotions are in murmuration mode, longing to see her but feeling ambivalent too, hating the emotional hold she has on me, the feelings she churns in me, feelings which refuse to go away, which dance around looking for attention: look at me, look at

me, they run around with outstretched arms pretending they are airplanes, making turns left and right.

And what am I doing hanging around with Niamh when it's going nowhere? Well there's comfort in predictability, the familiar comfort of acquiescing in indecisiveness. And sure where does it need to go? Does it need to go anywhere? Well it does because everything is in motion, it's the way of things, perpetual motion, but sure me and Niamh we're just going around in circles. So why is she still with me? I haven't asked but I'm happy to leave it as I imagine it, leave well enough alone. I mean we both have responsible positions, she's the teacher, I'm the priest, we both stand outside the community, our roles tied to the parish and its parishioners. It's complicated.

Does she love me? Sure what's love? Some sort of wish to understand someone and be with them, someone who gives you something you need but haven't got. Maybe when you really love someone you don't have all those expectations, expectations about what you believe you're entitled to get back, promises and commitments, scaffolding erected to negotiate unpredictability, promises that breed expectations, promises to childishly hit each over the head with,

*'You promised, you promised.'*

But I promised blind, I didn't know my future thoughts, beliefs or feelings. There we were promised to each other, to all intent and purpose married, not formally of course but both signed up to an unwitnessed verbal contract of care.

I've been taking a break since our last conversation, trying to process it:

–You could probably do better than me Niamh.

–Maybe I could Gerry but I'm with you now, we've shared our lives over the last four years. Maybe it's you who thinks you can do better?

–Did you ever write that on a report card Niamh? 'Could do better.'

–I have and still do when the children are not doing their best.

–Do your best, that's what they all say, isn't it, but when you're making efforts how can you know when you're doing your best.

–By giving something your full attention Gerry. Making the best effort you can.

–Yes, but no matter what we do, can't we always do more? And you don't know until afterwards, it's like you can't know at the time. You can only see the impact afterwards and sometimes outcomes are delayed. Do we ever do our best?

I sometimes think there's part of me subconsciously withdrawing from this relationship. Of late I can imagine a life without Niamh, a lack of that feeling tied and grounded, a greater space opening up. But then when I think I've wrapped it in a decision, she makes contact and the warmth in her voice reels me back in again. We meet and I can't help myself wanting to hug her, be close. She sets off this reaction in me with her lively smile, her occasional reassuring hugs, our conversations that go all around the houses. Then later I'm hating her for the hold she has on me, not that it's Niamh I hate but my own neediness. I wish I was stronger.

–So you're saying you could do better as in meet someone else better than me.

–I'm saying maybe we both could, of course we might do worse, that is also a possibility.

–Gerry, I'm forty-four next birthday, I've buried both my parents, my Da in the last few years. I just want to chill and be with someone I care about and who cares about me.

–And what about children, Niamh?

–What about children?

We'd talked about children before, talked about the need for security and commitment, a very idealistic approach when all a child needs is care and to feel secure, not a whole institution put in place to eschew all unpredictability.

–Are you saying you want a baby?

– It has crossed my mind.

–So you want to become a real father, well I'm afraid that boat has sailed.

Looking out the window I remember a small white wooden boat with a thin red line around it just below the deck and a white cloth sail that Santa once brought me. I watched it float and move in the river as I held it by the string that Da had fixed to it so it didn't float away.

–Sure all it takes to bring children into the world is a bit of madness and spontaneity.

A spontaneity which Niamh and me no longer had. It's not so much that I want a child now but effectively ruling it out, see I just can't tolerate that sense of finality about things, suddenly our relationship is limited. I love expanses of possibility.

–My children are the children of the parish Gerry, and your children are your parishioners. Sounded like something a theologian would say in a long-winded tome.

–Fair play Niamh, you've it all thought out, all thought out!

–Yes, isn't it time to have it thought out, I'm in my early forties, time to have it sorted in my head.

She annoys me when she goes on like this, behaving as if she has discovered some truth when all she has done is decided something. She goes about her house all organised, cleaning and house making, exuding composure in her well-fitting clothes and her measured words all thought out. There's no arguing with her clarity, her decisions which she canonises as sacrosanct revelations, her offensive against chaos. It looks like I want this relationship to go somewhere, but it's going nowhere, just now here. Maybe it's part of my indoctrination about movement, that things are always moving in a direction, wanting everything to lead somewhere, always wanting to become instead of wanting to be. But the main problem is her closing off of possibility, something I have done myself. Gerry the priest, the servant, being something, becoming something for my parishioners every day.

The people of the parish, 'my children', for fuck's sake!

My phone beeps. I enter my pin to read it. 'thinking of you. x'. Niamh was thinking of me and was telling me. Then I realised it was a message from an unrecognised number, had she got a new phone. But why would she send an anonymous text? Being romantic, mysterious perhaps, nice touch if that was it. I decided to text her on her normal number, maybe I'd call over, no I'd text back, let's see 'Are you still thinking about me, or have you recovered? X' no 'Hi Niamh, good



thoughts I presume but if they're bad even better, x' no 'Hi Niamh, was thinking of calling in lunchtime if u r around. X'. I hit send.

Niamh replied within seconds, 'Great, will have a light lunch ready, Niamh x'

I look at the anonymous text again as I get into the car to drive to Niamh's. 'thinking of you, x'. She hadn't used a capital T, a bit un-teacherly, maybe indicative of a slight bit of impulsiveness, I would ring the number when I got there and see if I could hear it ring.

I parked up in front of Niamh's house. Feck this going around the back, hiding.

–Gerry! A hug and a kiss from Niamh in her painting dungarees!

–You're not leaving the car there are you?

–Sure what the hell, I'm tired hiding.

–Gerry, discretion always that's our agreement, ok.

–Ok, I'll park it around the back.

I got into the car and I controlled my desire to just drive away, leave this shite. A man nearly fifty parking his car behind someone's house to pretend he's not there, an awful place to be at this age. I yanked the handbrake, got out of the car and went in the back door of the house.

–You're painting.

–I've made a start, going to work through the house room by room. I was just thinking this morning that we hadn't been in contact in a while.

She put the kettle on.

–It's been a while Niamh. How's all been?

–Grand really, decided to use my free time to get started on the painting.

–It's looking good, I like that green colour.

–It's called Renaissance.

–And what about that mustardy colour in the other room.

–Salinger.

–Renaissance and Salinger. Nice colours. So any thoughts about our last conversation?

–Not a lot really. How about you?

–Some thoughts about where we’re heading.

–Well you reckon we’re all heading for an afterlife don’t you, Gerry.

–No I meant you and me. Us.

A question more complex than the one about the afterlife!

She made the coffee and we sat down

–You and me, well you’re the priest in the neighbouring parish, I’m the teacher here, people know about us but we don’t publicise it, they turn a blind eye for now, but we can’t bank on that.

–So my car will be forever parked discreetly outside the back door. No chance we might end up heading off together, you and me against the world.

–Both of us leave our jobs for an uncertain future, maybe unemployment? You’re not thinking straight Gerry.

Fed up of thinking straight. I wanted to end the conversation. She’d missed the point, all bogged down in talk about work and jobs, security bullshit.

–See Gerry I’m happy here with my teaching, I’m not so sure how I would deal with you leaving.

–What do you mean?

–Leaving this place, that would be difficult.

Suddenly I was leaving by myself. Right!

–I think we need to think more about this, things are good the way we are so let’s leave it for now.

–Choices! Leaving is a choice and staying as we are, that’s a choice as well.

–Look if you’re going to leave you plan your exit strategy, line up a job first, talk to the Archbishop he’ll sort out something. Then we can see what’s possible.

–It’s not all about exit strategies and a job, I want to live my life. So what are we, just a temporary crutch for one another?

–Gerry it’s complicated!

Here we go again.

–Well here’s one question you can answer, did you text me this morning?

–No, you texted me remember, and said you were coming over for lunch. Anyway Gerry getting back to the topic, if you decide to leave that is totally your decision.

–And what about you, what are your plans?

–Look Gerry being practical about this, I’m the teacher here that’s what I do, have done for years, that’s what I expect I’ll continue to do.

–It’s all so fuckin predictable for you isn’t it, all neat and tidy.

She’s sitting there with her knees together, trainers flat on the floor, her back stiff straight as if someone had told her to sit up and look at the blackboard.

–I don’t want to hear another rant Gerry, save it ok!

The text ‘thinking of you x’ flashed across my mind, me and my assumptions.

–We’re friends, sometimes more than that, that’s how it is most likely to be, unless things change.

–Unless what changes?

Usually at this point it was time to create a turn in the argument, ease off and head for the safety of shore when things were unravelling, say something like, *I value our friendship Niamh, we’ve a lot in common, we want many similar things*. Except I didn’t. Let it roll I heard himself say, step off the merry go round, Gerry the juggler dropping the balls.

–I like what we have Gerry.

–See I don’t think we’re going anywhere, we’re going nowhere, that’s the truth of it Niamh.

–Sure where do you want us to go? Maybe we can just be now, here.

–Now, here, but we’re going nowhere.

–Everything doesn’t have to be about where it’s going.

–I'm tired of living this pretence, trapped in this in-between world with my car hid outside your back door.

–Well you have to make the choice that suits you.

–You know what Niamh! You're absolutely right!

The words kept re-echoing in my head as I got up out of the armchair and made my way out the back door to the car.

–What about lunch Gerry?

–Fuck lunch!

–Shouldn't we try to talk some more.

–No! I'm fuckin sick of talking!

There is purpose in my walk. I'm not sure where it comes from but I embrace it and am driving out the gate before I know it. I stop myself looking back but honk the horn aggressively, a 'fuck you' honk. I salute the drivers in the passing cars, an automatic acknowledgment, no change of expression, they salute back, they nearly all smile. Pat Canavan is driving towards me in the tractor, he smiles and raises his full arm in a grand hah ha! ya boy ya! Salute. *There's Fr. Gerry now, he tells his classy Massy, He's coming from Niamh's, probably after the ride, getting his bread buttered on both sides the horny bucko. Fair play to him!*

## 4

Christmas. It's about the mass returners, the memories perhaps getting the better of them, so much invested down the years; hard to deny yourself the habit of Christmas. There's positivity. Everyone reaching out beyond themselves. Just too difficult to ignore the tinsel, the story of one more man who wanted to save the world, who in the end became delusional and wanted to be crucified. A fitting end for a saviour – could have walked away but was too far gone at that stage to extricate himself. He had followers, they had expectations, had become a slave to his words, a sacrifice was needed to haunt the minds of the followers, a death to release a ghost of absent presence.

It's Christmas Day in Kilcrua. Niamh and me have agreed a Christmas ceasefire. The congregation are all dressed up, new trousers, jumpers, coats, jackets, skirts, shoes, new hairstyles, the Christmas Day fashion parade. I've turned up the heat in the church, it's not a day for scrimping or scraping. There will be other days for that. It's packed, the choir ready to go. I stare at myself in the sacristy mirror, check the altar servers are ready. Away we go.

All sorts of perfumes hang in the air. Kinsella is up near the front with his round jowls. Maurice Sterne the secondary school principal is on the other side with his wife the anxious looking Martina who told me in confessions she gave Marty Moran a blowey in Marty's car at the back of Kinsella's one Saturday night when she had too much to drink. I admired the matter-of-fact way she divulged it and I gave her one Our Father for her penance, although I imagine giving Marty a blowey was enough penance in itself. Personal hygienic wouldn't be his forte. I probably shouldn't

have even thought that with the confessional seal and all that but sure thoughts come and go, a man gets tired of policing them all.

–In the name of the father, the son ...

It's a full house with some of the regulars standing towards the back, displaced by the returners. A loyalty card system might be the answer. A stamp for every Sunday mass attended and 39 required for an allocated seat on Christmas Day.

–The Lord be with you ... A sea of faces looking up at me, thirty in the choir this morning.

–That I have gravely sinned ... for what I have done and what I have failed to do.... bad because of what we do and bad because of what we don't do...

–And so we ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Davy Padden is doing the readings. I knew there was something I was dreading. He was next on the list. I knew, he knew and sure everyone knew. What could I do? Hadn't planned ahead and rejigged it. Off he sets in his cranky, nervy, over projected voice, laying waste commas and full stops in his path, pausing for breath in the middle of sentences and using mike popping as punctuation. They nearly all pop at the microphone, I wouldn't mind but I organised training for them all on microphone technique, but they still forget to change their angle to the mike to prevent the pops. Others never stand close enough. I walk over to the pulpit and angle the mic closer to them and what do they do but step back further. I gave them books with the readings in them and they still show up and read it as if its double Dutch.

I distract myself and look over at the servers. They're animated this morning, probably looking forward to getting back to PS4's, IPAD's, X Boxes, I Phones. Bit of a disagreement there earlier about whose turn it was to ring the bell, and who was going down the back with the paten. I stayed out of it. They've sorted it; server empowerment. Darragh always gets here early, does all the jobs, devout like I was back then, my mind fired with the pictures and stories of priest adventurers in *The Far East* saying mass out in the open under a bush, surrounded by smiling black children.

Davy is now lost in the depths of the responsorial psalm shouting RESPONSE at the end of each verse, digging the congregation in the ribs to get them to respond. I should have never put him on the list, but hardly anyone was coming forward at the time and I ‘trusted the process’ as they say. Sure with a little bit of training and a few pointers he would come good and he might inspire better readers to come forward in time. Then he might drop away when he realised he wasn’t as good as the rest. It didn’t happen. I had tried to decommission him two months earlier.

–About the reading Davy, if you find it very stressful or demanding you could take a break for a while.

After taking a break for a while he mightn’t have the confidence to come back.

–Ah sure it’s no trouble at all father. I don’t feel nervous anymore, in fact I’m enjoying it now Father.

What could I say to that?

He got to the end of the responsorial psalm and did an upward inflection like a plane coming in to land suddenly aborting and taking off again. Then he took one step back from the lectern, did a ninety-degree turn, bowed twice towards me and walked back to his seat.

Joe Moran, the vice principal in town, was doing the second reading. He approached the altar carrying his missal although he always read from the big missal on the lectern, some sort of security thing in case someone messed up the page markers on the missal. When you were following Davy Padden you couldn’t be too careful.

Joe started by taking his glasses from their case and proceeded to read. His pace slow, he projected well, had good diction but was prone to insert pauses and commas where there were none. At least everyone could hear him and he commanded a silence which was interesting. Joe was the sort you expected to begin paraphrasing and explaining what he had read, always the teacher. Finished, he’d remove his glasses and replace them in their case which he snapped closed, only then starting a slow ponderous walk back to his seat looking like a man convinced he was forgetting something but who couldn’t for the life of him remember what it was.

–The Lord be with you... A reading from the holy gospel according to John.

Coughs suppressed and runny noses ignored during Joe's performance were now attended to. A wave of coughing ricocheted through the church.

–This is the gospel of the lord.

The homily was my usual attempt to build on the good feelings that abounded, get people to think about how fortunate they were compared to others and thank everyone.

–I want to extend a *Céad míle fáilte* to everyone this morning, a welcome to all visitors back home for Christmas. It's great to see you all and to have a full church. The servers were telling me Santa came in style, fair play, no better man... And on it went, my feel-good words, harmless complacency massagers that shut out the broken world outside the parish and the broken one inside it too. Words that contained the pain, words to keep the best side out.

–Please stand for the creed. I believe in one God....

I belted through it, every other phrase accusing me of hypocrisy. Then off into the Eucharistic Prayer on auto priest, second Eucharistic prayer, the short one, *Lord you are holy indeed, a fountain of all...* Can say it off by heart now. Then into the Sanctus, *blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord*, say no more, *Blessed be God for ever*, ding a ling, ding a ling, consecration. Concentration required now, special moment. Have to mean the words otherwise transubstantiation won't happen. So they taught us in the seminary. Extra effort, ding a ling, ding a ling, mystery of faith, *Christ has died, Christ has...* I intone the first phrase aloud then fade and the congregation carry the remainder, that's about all I believe of it at this stage. Then a prayer for the dead, and the name of the person this morning's mass is offered for, the name in my little black book. This morning it's Jimmy O'Connell from the cross, then freewheeling into the doxology, *through him, with him, in him, in the unity...* Amen. The great amen sounding anything but great more like a throwaway 'sound' 'ok' rather than a resounding 'YES'. Then the *Our Father*, into the home stretch now, the sign of peace, shaking hands with the people we like or can tolerate, avoid the ones we don't like. There's a feel-good vibe all the same as we belt into the Lamb of God, the seats



empty into the centre aisle for communion, the choir sing *Adeste Fidelis* and sure you'd be forgiven for getting caught up in it all. The contagious smiles, people shaking hands with visitors in the communion queue, it's Christmas.

–The body of Christ.

Should have clipped my fingernails, noticed them yesterday. Went looking for the nail clippers but got distracted. Doesn't look good giving out communion with longish nails. Not going to sweat it, important to help toughen up the parishioners immune systems. Most of them take it in the hands now not on the tongue, less chance of getting spit on my finger and thumb and transferring bugs. A few still take it on the tongue, tongue out, sometimes a brief whiff of a rotten tooth or the sight of one, tea, coffee stains, and with some a faint smell of mouth wash. *The body of Christ, The body of Christ*, they respond with loud and quiet Amens.

The clean-up complete I sit and listen to the choir singing *O Holy Night*, part of the Christmas Canon now, everyone quiet, listening. There's a thorn in my thumb. It's annoying me, I try to squeeze it out, it won't budge. The choir finish and I count to ten to give everyone time to come back out of the moment, and then thank everyone, the choir, church care team, servers, readers, Eucharistic ministers, and heading for the feel-good peak I suggest a round of applause for all those giving of their time voluntarily, wish everyone a happy and peaceful Christmas, say the final blessing and process down the centre aisle of the church.

The back row leave quickly to form a number of huddles outside the gateway. The rest of the church is emptying slowly, people are meeting people home for the holidays, the students back from college, some with boyfriends and girlfriends, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters, reminders of years past.

I'm standing outside doing the meet and greet.

–Happy Christmas, Father Gerry.

–Many happy returns Cathy.

–Happy Christmas Father.

A peck on the cheek from Geraldine Murphy and so the Christmas greeting litany continues until the church had emptied and everyone has joined their cars, ready now to drive away.

Alice White who lives in the bungalow the south side of the church is waiting for me.

–Gerry, I want to ask your prayers for my sister, she’s seriously ill in London.

–Of course Alice what’s her name?

–Catherine.

–I’ll keep her in mind over Christmas.

–Thanks Gerry.

–Are you still painting.

–Yes Gerry doing a bit but not as much as I’d like.

–Happy Christmas Alice.

Thanks Gerry.

She headed away. She only comes to church at Easter and Christmas. She gave me a landscape painting a few Christmases ago which I hung in my hallway. One of a sunset casting light across Ballybriste bog. I liked it initially, but the appeal of the colours soon wore off, far too much use of Guantanamo orange and H-block brown.

When I get to the sacristy the servers are already togged in. I give them a fiver each and they head off. I’m taking off my vestments and replacing them in the wardrobe when Mary the sacristan comes in.

–I’m away now Father, I’ll be back at four to lock up.

–Thanks Mary, Happy Christmas.

–Many happy returns Father. She goes out the sacristy door.

Everyone is gone now. I light a fag and walk down the church checking to see if anyone had left stuff behind. I find an assortment of gloves, toys and two scarves under the seats which

I place on the newsletter table at the back of the church. If someone comes back looking for them they will find them there.

I stand at the church door, it's cold but the winter sun is shining and smoke is billowing from houses. Inside fires are raging and turkeys sweating juice in ovens, as children play with presents. Past Christmas's come to mind in mishmash fading images, visits to Santa, presents at the end of the bed Christmas morning, and then the year I'd spotted Sellotape on Santa's beard. The memories come and go and sadness weaves its way around them; a face pressed against a cold window pane. Cold comfort, but the trees are nodding. The wet slated roofs with the chimney shadows can feel it too, as can the cars parked up outside each house. All the while Jimmy O' Connor's black faced Suffolks stare at me through the sheep wire fence – my presence has disturbed their cud chewing. Then the Angelus bell rings and brings me back again. I'll make myself a quick coffee before I drive over to Niamh's and have one of Mary's mince pies with it. At least Mary uses spicy mince in these pies not butchers mince which my mother used the first time she made us mince pies, a sort of traditional literal, rural twist on the mince pie. Sure they tasted fine with a shake of salt and as I since found out the original mince pies contained butcher's mince.

I light a fag after the mince pie and I sit looking over at the fibre-optic snowman in my window. I'd surprised myself last Christmas by buying him. When you plug him in he lights up, something calming about him, think I bought it to humour me into some sort of Christmas mood. I thought about naming him Olaf, Frosty, Parson Brown, but he didn't react to any of them, just continued to throw that cool fixed snowman grin back at me. I ended up calling him Snowman, he doesn't strike me as wanting to be anything other. I can see a cool compassion in Snowman's eyes. I think we get each other, there's no great mystery. I turn him off when I head for bed and turn him on again in the morning. There's no promises or expectations. I don't think me and God were ever like that. Always big promises, big expectation, God always the one with the best cards, me bluffing. Yes, we shared great silences together one time, but when I stopped working hard to keep him there, he seemed to slip away. Loving something to set it free maybe, but he hasn't come

back. I'm not sure I want him back at this stage. Think I'll take my chances with snowman. At least, he doesn't take himself too seriously. Snowman there is just coolness personified, there's no great story about him, he's part of no big plan, he's just something calm to observe. I can talk to him and he just looks back at me like some non-directional counsellor saying, yes and do you want to tell me more about that, but if you don't feel like it that's totally cool. As long as I'm turned on, says Snowman, I'll do my thing until someday I overheat and my circuits perish. No pressure says Snowman. Speech or silence don't bother Snowman. *Cool, chill hearted snowman, I place my trust in thee.*

I finish my fag still looking at snowman, sharing our space and silence of equals. I never felt like that with you God. You were always Mr. Big, the lad with the pack of Emeralds in the playground when I didn't have enough money for a penny bar.

The road is quiet as I drive to Niamh's. Christmas songs on the radio, Chris Rea, *driving home, can't wait to see those faces, ... red lights all around, a thousand memories.*

I park around the back at Niamh's. They've all seen me but it's Christmas Day. Niamh is all dolled up, looking sexy, black shoes, black tights, pleated skirt, white blouse, red Christmas apron, tinsel in her hair, glass of sherry in her hand when she meets me at the door.

–Gerry! She says as if she's totally surprised to see me. The Christmas ceasefire is going to hold.

–Come in! A hug and a kiss on the lips. Christmas.

–You look fab.

She does a twirl and a Miss Piggy flick of her long hair back off her face.

–Happy Christmas Niamh. I hand her the box that Aisling wrapped for me in Fallon's Jewellers.

–Happy Christmas Gerry, another kiss.

She hands me a bag with two wrapped presents in it and a large measure of brandy in a brandy glass, we clink glasses.

–Good luck! We say in unison, we smile.

–To the New Year, new beginnings! says Niamh.

–To the future whatever it brings, I say preserving the ambiguity of Niamh’s new beginnings. I sip the brandy and sit in the armchair one side of the stove which is blazing with timber and small bits of turf.

–So are we going to open the presents, Niamh says with childlike excitement.

–Right, it’s a small box, not a pair of boots anyway.

She opened the wrapper and then opened the box,

–Wow Gerry. You won’t believe this, I was admiring that necklace in Fallons a few months back. You shouldn’t have, of course you should, it’s Christmas. Come here to me you.

A big kiss, open mouth, tongues, sherry taste, sliding, lingering, withdrawal for air then a hug

She puts on the necklace and looks into the mirror over the fireplace.

–It’s gorgeous, thank you, now open mine.

They were both soft, items of clothing, probably a shirt and a jumper. Hopefully not a clerical shirt.

–I unwrap the presents. A grey long-sleeved shirt with navy stripes and a dressy navy, half zip merino wool jumper.

–Thanks Niamh.

–They go with your jeans or chinos.

I try on the jumper. I hold it by the back of the neck and gather it in folds between my two hands, the same way I put on an alb. I didn’t realise it until Niamh remarked it, just like I didn’t realise that I always leave the spout of the kettle facing right because I’m left-handed.

–Fits perfectly.

–Thanks Niamh.

–You’re welcome, thank you for the lovely necklace.

I grab her around the waist, pull her towards me and pressing her close I kiss her strongly on the lips; our kiss continuing, I squeeze her buttocks, right now I want her as our tongues career and slither in each other’s mouths, I press my hardening penis against her so she can feel it too, she pulls back and grabs my erect penis through my trousers.

–Gerry looks like we got a situation down here.

–A situation we could do something about.

–Not now Gerry, later my horny man, she whispers in my ear, we’ve dinner to sort and all that.

Yes Niamh, later when we’re tired, sleepy, spent, the time is now. My penis slowly softens, running down the flag, a tired dog replacing his disappointed head back on his outstretched front paws. The timer goes off in the kitchen and Niamh is there already. I adjust my nethers and take a big slug from my brandy, don’t know who put a slug in it but anyway. I sit with Niamh’s parents, Stella and Joe staring at me from their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary frame. They celebrated it six years ago and died five years ago within six months of one another. There are lots of pictures of them on the sideboard. There’s also a paint catalogue folded open behind the pictures with some colours circled on it, bright hopeful colours describe them well. Not that I have much experience or knowledge of colours.

–Can I give you a hand there Niamh?

–All sound, everything under control.

Out the window across the field young Johnny Fallon and his father Jimmy are out feeding his sheep. The minute Jimmy shakes the nut bucket at the top of the field all the sheep lift their heads and they run towards him. Circling him they push and jostle him as he makes slow progress to the feeding troughs, Jimmy moves along the trough spilling out the nuts and the sheep move back and forth hoovering them up.

–Jimmy is still renting the fields off you Niamh?

–He is, six acres in it down to the river, a few hundred and a lamb in the freezer every year, we might have a leg for the New Year, all organic Gerry.

–Lot of work in that I hear, but the only meat worth eating these times.

–Well at least the organic farmers are not trying to poison us with chemicals. Right dinner in about half an hour Gerry, Oh there's Jimmy and Johnny, I've a selection box there for Johnny. Will we go for a walk down the boithrín? It's a bit mucky so you'll need boots.

–No bother I'll get my graveyard wellingtons from the boot.

The lane was mucky, the ground frosty, our foggy breath visible in the cold. I wanted to hold Niamh's hand but she had placed her gloved hand deeply into her wool coat pocket, the selection box held under her oxtail. The sun shone through the low, bare hedges and big ash trees projected their shadows across the lane.

–I think I showed you before Gerry, that's where the old house used to be, over there.

She had. She was pointing to a spot where Jimmy's cattle were now munching away heedlessly on a silage bale, standing motionless, their bottom jaws rolling as they chewed silage which they pulled from the feeder. They turn their heads toward us, in a chewing trance feeding their great hunger.

–How's Niamh, Fr Gerry. A happy Christmas to ye! Jimmy shook hands, his son Johnny held onto Jimmy's trouser leg and hid his head partially behind Jimmy's hanging arm. Peek a boo.

–Tis a raw one, but at least the rain's staying away.

It wouldn't have been Jimmy to introduce a question or complaint without offering a balancing observation.

–Did Santy come Johnny, what did you get?

–Johnny, tell Miss. Barrett what you got.

–A bike, Miss.

–Lovely, you won't feel until fourth class now Johnny, soon you'll be in the big room. Here you go, a few sweets. She handed him the selection box.

–Thanks Miss.

–You're welcome, Johnny.

I used to get selection boxes for the servers at Christmas but then Tesco started that three for five-euro lark. A dumbing down of the Selection Box, something similar had happened Family Circle biscuit boxes some years earlier. Selection boxes just no longer had the same cachet. So I decided to move up the sweet chain. Now I bought them boxes of Emeralds instead.

–It's a while since that bottom field was under water Niamh.

–I remember that field being flooded when I was a child.

In fairness it was no wonder, I mean if any field was going to flood it would probably be the bottom field. Niamh talked away, little Johnny had chewed his way through the Crun of his Crunchie, the chie partly covered by his small fingers. My mind was drifting off when I made eye contact with Bruce the border collie.

–Good dog, I said. He ran towards me, jumped up on me pawing gutter all over the front of my trousers.

–Lie down Bruce, lie down!

Johnny laughed, his mouth opening full of the yellow and brown crun-.

–Daddy, the priest's trouser is all dirty.

Fuckin' dog!

–Sorry Father Gerry. He might have smelled another dog off you or something.

Didn't know I smelled of dog.

–Only a bit of dirt Jimmy, no problem, it'll dry out and I'll brush it off.

–Right we better get you home, Niamh said, as if I was after having a playground accident.

–See you Jimmy, see you Johnny, Happy Christmas!

–Fuckin dog!



–It was your own fault Gerry, you communicated with him. Gerry O’Dowd what will we do with you at all. She started to laugh; you can wear one of my dresses while I wash out the trousers.

–Yeah right!

–Well my jeans won’t fit you, although wait I think I have a pair of Dad’s old trousers in the top of the hot press. I have a bag of them packed for the charity shop, lucky now I didn’t get rid of them.

There was hardly going to be much action and me wearing her father’s trousers.

–I’ll go home and change, Niamh.

–Arrah sure why would you do that, aren’t you around at my place for the Christmas.

Back at the house after some rooting in two black plastic bags she produced the trousers.

–Probably a bit short and too wide in the waist but sure you’ll get a wear out of them; I won’t put it on Facebook.

More or less what my mother said. Not about Facebook but when the parcels came from America packed full of ill-fitting trousers with oversized arses on them. When would those American cousins of mine stop fuckin eating and lose weight?

–Here Gerry, have a warmer upper. She hands me a generous measure of whiskey, before busying herself in the kitchen. I changed into the trousers thinking of sex with Niamh but those thoughts get buried in the purposeful sound of water spraying from kitchen taps and pots clattering in the kitchen. Christmas dinner ritual.

Soup, Chicken and Ham, trifle, and an Irish Coffee.

–That was fantastic Niamh, thank you.

–You’re more than welcome let’s relax on the soft chairs.

With our stomachs full and our speech drifting towards politeness we moved towards the soft chairs. The soft chairs were opposite each other either side of the stove and the two-seater

sofa sat in front of the stove. I sat on the two-seater keeping options open, Niamh sat on one of the armchairs, I stretched out my legs, leaned back and watched the fire flames.

Cooking has never been one of my fortes, I find it difficult to work up the enthusiasm to make myself meals. Thankfully there are so many delis now, for a few euro you can get a dinner plate or a big, hefty ham salad roll. Since Niamh, I'm more conscious of what I eat. She watches all that cookery stuff on TV, Darina, Neven, Rachel where every dish turns out gorgeous, fantastic, lovely and they never have to face into a wash up afterwards when all you want to do is relax and nod off. It's hard to be going to so much bother if there's just yourself. Sometimes I make a big beef stew and I'd get three days out of it, but mostly I eat out. I am eating less of late, a bit overweight. Did one of those lifestyle questionnaires in the paper, answered questions about my height, age, weight, eating habits, and the exercise I get, worked out my score at the bottom. It said I had to be very careful. Am in the at-risk category for heart disease and becoming obese. At least it didn't mention becoming morbidly obese. Isn't obesity enough to cope with without having to cope with morbidity as well.

It was dark when I woke, ten past six according to the clock on the mantelpiece, I could hear Niamh in the kitchen washing up. The last time I looked at the clock it was ten to five, over an hour sleeping, I lifted back the throw that Niamh had put over me and with a cough announced my waking up.

–You're awake Gerry.

–I don't know where that tiredness came from. Sure I knew well, the big dinner.

– I'll give you a hand with them dishes.

–I had a nap myself, only woke up there ten minutes ago.

I grabbed a tea towel and started drying the dishes.

–So new beginnings in the New Year Niamh?

–Yeah, good time to start things, spring cleaning, de-cluttering, more painting, might replace those fireside chairs.

A general answer. Much ado about nesting!

And how about us? I didn't ask it, just got two mugs and made Niamh her strong, no sugar, drop of milk tea and my own strong one sugar, dash of milk coffee.

–Will you have a drop of the cratúr?

–Go on it's Christmas.

I poured a capful of whisky into Niamh's mug, and a few glugs straight out of the bottle into my own. I placed our mugs on the coffee table and banked up the fire. Niamh's stove is different to mine, to open it you turn the handle clockwise from 7 to 9, to open mine you turn the handle anticlockwise 7 to 5. They open in different directions, but they rest closed at 7. We retook our seats on the two-seater by the banked up fire, we clunk our mugs and watch the fresh ash timber spitting, frothing and cracking.

–You can't beat the smell of ash wood burning.

We sip our drinks as the fire commands our respectful silence.

–So do you think we'll still be here next Christmas, I say, staring into the fire.

–I expect we will.

–But would it not be nice to take some time out together, see something different like.

–You mean a career break, a sabbatical?

–Yeah a sabbatical, Niamh.

–You're going back to our parked conversation. Do we need to do this now?

–Sure it's been going around in my head, probably in yours too. Maybe we need a change Niamh, I'm tired of being a functionary, I want the chance to be different somewhere else.

–Not sure about that idea of being different somewhere else, maybe that works for a while, but would you not eventually end up being the same somewhere else?

–Maybe we end up being the same, but the important thing is the possibility.

–Sounds like an awful lot of upheaval, would be a lot easier to work on changing the things that are giving you grief here.

The logs burned bright now and an anticipatory silence hovered in the room. The ceasefire was holding.

–Funny Gerry the way I said new beginnings and imagined small things, you said nothing and you’re planning big changes.

–Nothing decided, just thinking out loud.

The clock was ticking away.

–Sure you might never come back if you went away?

–Well distance brings perspective Niamh, but I want us to continue our relationship.

– So how do you see us working out, Gerry?

–Well if I did head to New York or somewhere we could arrange breaks together every couple of months perhaps, see where we are going Niamh.

–I told you before we’re here together, why are you obsessed with this going somewhere.

–But we seem to be at a standstill, I don’t know.

–Standstill, you don’t know! Well you seem to have your plan all worked out in that head of yours.

–I haven’t, I’m thinking out loud.

–Thinking out loud. Well here’s some thinking out loud, you’re never happy Gerry. You want me but you don’t want me, you want to dump me but not dump me, so what am I, am I just the ‘ride on the side’, a *cing a sept*, is that what you call me at those priests’ meetings you go to.

–Fuck sake Niamh, I’ve never seen you like that!

–Haven’t you? Isn’t that the way most paid-up members of the boy’s club talk about women.

–That’s unfair.

–The old boys club, misogynist-fucking-central!

–That’s not true. There’s a massive difference between misunderstanding women and hating women, most of them have never been in a long-term relationship with a woman.

–It doesn't stop them despising women though and seeing them as second-class citizens.

–Yes, some have old school attitudes but those are based on ignorance or maybe bad experiences.

–Well that doesn't excuse them.

–Of course not. Anyway this is not about the boy's club, it's about me and you. I can't keep going on like this, people are ignoring it for now but that can't go on indefinitely.

–So you're going to leave and feck off out of here. Is that it?

–That's not what I'm suggesting.

–And what are you suggesting?

–We don't seem to be going anywhere, just repeating the same stuff week in week out.

–Yes Gerry, it's called life!

–No it's not, it's called existing! We're trapped Niamh, trapped in role plays.

–Yeah well you're the priest, if we were two teachers we wouldn't have this problem.

Bottom line Gerry you're not supposed to be in a relationship.

Two teachers! At least it wasn't that bad!

–Well we are where we are but things are not the way they could be.

–And how could they be Gerry?

How could they be different, perhaps they couldn't, they could be different if I left, but was I prepared to put faith in Niamh and me. Faith was the one thing I no longer possessed in anything. Did I even trust myself. What was I beyond the role I inhabited, what was I beyond my habits, the formed entity who reacted to situations as I had been taught. And Niamh likewise, another puppet. And then, when all was good this sense of possibility hung between us that love and care could transform and bring us happiness.

–I don't know Niamh, maybe this is the only way we can be, given the complications.

–Well unless you leave it will continue to be complicated.

–Are you suggesting that's the solution?

–Gerry, you’re the one who brought up the idea of things being different.

I felt myself drowning in my inability to decide, my unwillingness to decide, my preoccupation with constant thinking, my fascination with not wanting this internal debate to stop, thought masturbation, anticipating, building then not wanting to finish, holding back, then not being able to finish, instead of abandoning myself to a decision. But it’s so pleasurable, the anticipation of abandon, of a pleasure pulsing through me that I am not controlling. Could I let myself go, let myself come, stop myself making presences and entities out of absences as if they were anything more than shadows, contexts, surroundings, negative frames around presence. Maybe I just needed a good ride, reboot myself, stop this sexual frustration manifesting itself as existential angst.

–You’re not happy Gerry. That’s the bottom line here.

–Happy? Sure none of us know what that is, but we have hunches about it.

–Say it whatever way you want, you are not happy here.

–I just don’t know where we’re going me and you.

–Where is there for us to go, Gerry? You’re the priest, I’m the teacher it’s so bloody complicated. I don’t think you know what you want. You want us to be friends, you want sex but it doesn’t work of late. You seem disinterested, unhappy, full of anger, you want us to be something more and then it’s as if you want to end it. You don’t know what the fuck you want.

–And what about you, do you fuckin know what you want?

She hesitated, backed away from saying anything.

–Oh look sure maybe none of us really know, maybe we need time to decide, time apart, not see each other for a while, have a sabbatical from one another as you call it, get perspective.

When she said that I could feel a distance between us, an interesting distance which part of me wanted to watch grow and grow; the ferry leaving the harbour. Part of me wanted to traverse the distance, colonise it once again, chase what was beginning to leave me.

Niamh went to the kitchen to make another coffee and as the clock ticked the seconds into minutes I stared at the lively fire flames, the burning timber glowing red, orange, gold, yellow, and all shades in between. Feeling the comforting heat I closed my eyes.

## 5

I woke after nine in my own bed with my head throbbing. Stephen's Day, mass at ten. Feel sick, it's not just physical, I just want to turn over and wake up in a different head space. Drank too much yesterday, said too much, more than I can remember, it's always the way. Hate this place, wondering how much I did say. I get out of bed unknown to myself. If I wait to decide I won't. I'm working against myself now. I look in the bathroom mirror. Rough doesn't name it. Exhausted looking, face drawn, my starey dead eyes, it's been months since I lingered in this place of stares and judgement, hating myself for what I do to myself. The half empty bottle of Jameson is on the kitchen table. Had a drink when I came in as well, I vaguely remember driving home, locking the car and thinking about having another drink.

I open the curtains on the kitchen window, the light spikes my eyes. I grab the whiskey bottle and take a mouthful from it, it wakens my mouth and gullet. Hair of the dog. I take another swig to charge me up, I'm beginning to fire. I place the whiskey bottle back in the cupboard and get into the shower, ease myself with warm water, shampoo my hair, a quick body wash, rinse off and then I start turning the shower dial towards blue. Freezing. I hit the off button. Enough! Get uniformed up again, comb the hair and have a quick shave. I look better now on the outside, it's just my insides that are rotten. I have a craving for scrambled egg but the sight of a runny egg would sicken me now, important to get something into your stomach, an old statement from years



ago. Perhaps my mother's, maybe Da, doesn't matter. I put on two slices of toast, only fancy one but I don't want the toaster elements burning each other out. I drink a glass of water, rehydrate, should have drank some water last night, I eat the slice of toast but I don't feel any better. I sit on the toilet; nothing. I hope I don't end up getting sick saying mass. I need fresh air. I make my way to the back door open it and light a fag, kill or cure, ride it out, it will pass, everything does. I need the toilet now here we go, I pelt my half smoked fag into the toilet bowl and sit down just in time. I can smell yesterday's rich gravy off it, then when I think I'm finished I stand up only to realise this is a two-act play. I sit back down, ten minutes to ten, need to hurry this up. Stephen's Day mass, the first martyr, can understand people fighting for freedom, but dying for your belief in a God and a belief system, that seems obsessive. Of course Jesus started it, but you can be sure there were many before him, it's mainly suicide bombers these days who die for their beliefs.

Maybe it's those few thoughts that have distracted me but I'm feeling a bit better, able to stand up and exit the toilet and be confident I won't be running back in again in a minute.

In the sacristy Mary is all talk as are all the servers.

–Did you have a nice Christmas father; she asks as if it's all over.

–Grand Mary, grand.

She starts giving an account of her own, the minutiae of sprouts with bacon pieces and the turkey and ham. I submerge myself in a meditative pose.

–Ok Mary, lads, everyone ready.

–Yes father. I ring the small bell and off we go.

Fifteen at mass, belting through it as fast as I can, probably be about twenty five minutes. It's the day after Christmas Day so I'm putting in some additional pauses, a couple of thoughts after the gospel, not really a homily, trying to give it the feel of a mass that's somewhere between an ordinary weekday mass and a Sunday mass. I make my way through it, my empty stomach rumbling away, I empty the chalice, no soakage, my father wouldn't approve, then I reach the winning post, 'Go in peace, the mass is ended.' *Thanks be to God.* Then I experience the great

hunger, the hunger sharpened by the alcohol, the false appetite brought on by drink which my mother gave out to my father about for years.

I get changed in the sacristy, give the servers 2 euro each and tell Mary I am expecting an important phone call at the house.

Once at the house I lock the door and make my way to the kitchen. I'll give it five minutes for all the cars to go in case there's anyone insisting on knocking at my door. I light a fag and finish the dregs of the milky coffee I made earlier. On the radio they're talking about the idea of sexual consent, saying yes or no, as if it was something Irish people were good at.

I often said yes just because I wasn't practised in saying no.

Not about sex of course, often said yes as in maybe, often said no when I wanted to say yes, polite refusal and all that. For years I had thought about making a decision to leave but there was no intent in my thinking, no reflection. I was just walking trance like through my constant thoughts, mistaking them for reflection – as if thoughts by themselves led to action. I had told myself that my life could have meaning only in the service of others and for years I got away with that lie. I had my big silent God with me, always there, listening, watching. In the early days I didn't need to seek his face to see how things were registering with him, I had a confidence that I knew already. Then when I became unsure, I sought his face and he provided reassurance. But as the years passed his face grew expressionless. Some sort of paralysis I reasoned, I could no longer make it out, but I relied on what I'd learnt. Eventually, anytime I looked he appeared to be walking away, his back towards me.

I remember reading a book years ago titled *The God of Surprises*. Well God, we stopped surprising each other years ago. You might retort and say I'd become boring too, but at least I didn't know the outcome at the beginning. I mean you must have known how this was going to pan out. We shared an interesting silence where possibility echoed but then you just became a big unresponsive silent lump. You became predictable, the spark was gone, and you know when I talk

like this it's like you're worming your way back in in that insidious way you did for years. Just when I thought you were gone, you're back on my mind again, and yes, I'm wondering where this will end, if this will end. At least now I know I'm just talking to myself about myself, like I was for years when I imagined myself talking to you. I'm the one listening not you. I suppose in my innocence I was impressed by you being all knowing and all that, but it just bores me now. I feel for you in your omniscience, what a buzz kill that must be.

In my thoughts about leaving I had avoided practical considerations. A give-away indication of half-heartedness. I mean how could I get rid of all the stuff I had accumulated over time. For years I had dreaded the prospect of being moved to another parish because of the upheaval involved. I told myself it would take courage to leave, and if I left would I end up running back like many others into the comforting arms of structure, the womb-tomb of my upbringing, abandoning the journey in the final stretch, the unknown frightening me and finally settling back in for more of the same, never to look at a way out again.

The cars have gone. I make my way back to bed my mind doing overtime on thoughts about leaving.

Some of my classmates had left in the first ten years and those who remained became career focused, or resigned to their lot. Others spent their energy and time being involved in the Association of Complaining Priests. I took some comfort there for a while, but it was only a talk shop. We talked out our frustrations but did nothing, ended up hoping and praying about our situations, victims of both an active and a passive faith, misunderstanding our temporary shared camaraderie for a solution to loneliness.

I wake up thinking about the time it will take to pack, to go through everything I have accumulated over the years, I have a garage full of stuff out there, over spill from the house. Could give some stuff away, maybe bring some of it to a car boot sale, or bow to the inevitable, get a skip

and just feck loads of stuff into it. Maybe just take the stuff I want to keep and then let Pat Canavan loose in the shed, Pat will take anything he gets for nothing and sees some use in.

It's 3 o'clock, too late to finish and too early to start anything, but never too early or late for a coffee. Out the kitchen window I see Siobhan Gallagher is back from town with a boot full of shopping bags, a great woman for shopping and always looks glam. She's been siphoning off €50 per month from the Children's Allowance, for the escape fund for the last five years. Told me about it in confessions, didn't say she was going to stop, but she said an act of contrition and I gave her absolution. She said she was going to use the money some day when the children were well on in secondary school and perhaps the spark between her and Martin was well and truly gone. The rest of the Children's Allowance went on things for the house, new bed linen, children's clothes, a hair do, and maybe a shirt for Martin. She felt secure knowing the escape fund was there and as she said herself if things were working well between her and Martin at that stage then it could be spent on a family holiday and some renovation to the house. It was a holding operation for now, the morality of her actions somehow held in abeyance. In confessions I always urged people to have another go at things, I told myself the same. Inside my old familiar didn't want change, his eyes were fearful, his face pale struggling for breath, fighting for survival when the prospect of change surfaced, that old familiar who gets thrown anytime I take holidays, not that it happens that often. Five years ago I worked in a parish in New York for three months. It took me weeks to settle back after that. I get thrown when I break routine, find it stressful trying to reinsert myself back into my life, like fitting a present back into tight fitting wrapping paper without ripping it.

I make my way to Kinsella's for a cure. A nice sized crowd in, lively vibe, the locals meeting the home-comers, excitement in the air, fashion and flesh on show, aging men suddenly getting notions. I make my way to the counter, there are some empty stools but they're taken, occupants have gone outside for cigarettes, pints on the counter with beer mats covering them like palls over chalices after the consecration; pub code for 'gone for a fag'. I order a pint and sit on a free stool.

–Fr Gerry!

Grace Prendergast, all dolled up. A kiss on the cheek, I'm sure she's left lipstick on me.

–So Gerry my man, how goes it?

–Sure it's Christmas Grace, it's all g! isn't it?

–Yeah Gerry my man, it's all g! and she hugs me and gives me another kiss.

What's all this slobbering about?

–So how's Dublin?

–A pain Gerry.

–Oh!

–Yeah, does my feckin head in.

–How's Declan, is he still working as an architect.

–That's over Gerry, six months.

–I'm very sorry to hear that.

–Well I'm not, relieved actually.

–Ye seemed good together.

–Well appearances can be deceptive Gerry, can't they?

–True.

She leans in close to me, pressing her breasts against my shoulder and whispers in my ear.

–So how is your love life Gerry?

–Up and down, you know yourself!

She high fives me and then leans in close again.

–I often wondered what it would be like to ride a priest.

–Me too Grace but I've never bothered, I imagine it could be disappointing.

–You are fuckin mad man, wayyy haaay! Such a pity your spoken for, she whispers in my ear as she places her hand on my lower left thigh. She calls over her friend Mary Foley. Another

Mary, sure rural Ireland is full of Marys, it can be hard to keep track of them all. If you forget a woman's name here, make your first guess Mary, you have a good chance of being right.

–Mary, Gerry's going to give us a few numbers for priests who are up for the ride.

She's getting loud now and cocked ears are rotating heads in my direction.

–Grace, keep it down, I don't want the whole pub looking for numbers.

–Sorry Gerry, sorry.

She gets up on the high stool beside me, her skirt riding up as she awkwardly negotiates the stool revealing her upper thighs. I can't stop myself looking, lingering, the curves, her ass. I'm going to have to get out of here, this is too much.

She's facing me but talking to Mary who is standing beside her stool. Her skirt still high, it turns out she's not wearing tights, the red stocking strap of a suspender belt is now visible. She unconsciously slides forward another few inches, the uncovered flesh above the top of her stocking on her right leg now visible.

I stand up to break my view, it's torment this admiration. I take another big mouthful from my pint to dull my thoughts about staying here, living it, going for it, possibly having a grace-filled moment.

–Right ladies, let ye take it handy.

–Ah Gerry you're not going. By the way where are those numbers?

–Next time Grace, see you, Mary.

## 6

It's Monday. I've decided to call in and say hello to Johnny Durcan. He was out washing the Vectra estate which was parked in the driveway at the side of the house when I passed last week. I honked the horn and waved. The car was shining in the watery December sunshine; even the hubcaps were gleaming.

The garage door is slightly open and as I approach, I can see there's some notice pinned to it. As I get closer I can read the handwritten note in the plastic poly-pocket duct taped to the garage door:

CAUTION, DO NOT ENTER

POISONOUS GAS!

I can smell the fumes alright, probably doing emission testing or something but there's no sound. I raise my jacket sleeve to cover my nose and mouth and push the slightly open sliding door back another bit.

– Johnny! You here?

No answer.

– Johnny!

The name echoes back when I call out, then the silence seems to thicken and everything changes as my eyes adapt to the semi darkness and the outline inside the windscreen of his Vectra. I reach my right hand back behind me to slide the garage door further open, make my way to the

driver door, hesitate, then open it to find Johnny slumped across the front passenger seat with his right foot one side of a concrete block.

–Johnny? I said, expecting no reply, the name suddenly devoid of reference, an arbitrary word, now echoing around my empty mind.

Dead.

I shake Johnny's arm. Nothing. Feel his forehead. Cold. Holding Johnny's right arm I start to say an act of contrition in the general direction of his ear, but then I stop myself.

–Sorry Johnny, force of habit.

There's a white envelope on the dash with Gerry O'D written on the front of it. I walk from the garage with the envelope in my hand and pull the door slightly closed after me. Standing by the stone wall at the house gable, I light a cigarette and pace the driveway phoning the guards and the ambulance. Leaning against the wall I open the envelope and read through the letter. Across the fields the sheep are grazing, Jimmy Goggins's dog is barking, the rain had stopped and the wind, now a gentle breeze is shushed with disbelief and expectancy in the bare trees.

–Fuckin hell Johnny. I whack my closed fist off the end of the garage door putting a dent in it. Pain. Cradling my sore hand I throw the fag butt away and take a series of deep breaths. He's left everything so neat, even the bins are out at the gate for collection tomorrow.

So this is how it ends Johnny after all those years. The years of childhood, your mother minding you in case you fell, your hard work renovating the house, making ends meet when you had nothing, was it for this that you were born to live and then to die at your own hands. The years you spent looking after your mother, the hopeful day when you finished the garage, last spring repainting the house after your mother died, all the cars you fixed down the years, building your business and what was there now, a neat house, a fine workplace and a great black silence over it all with your ghostly voice incanting *sure you do your best when you're living, isn't that what it's about, until one day you start to fall out of the habit of your life, you have enough, simple really.*



Staring at his house I notice how the western facing living room window frames the new graveyard. Headstones faced your gaze, family plots staring dumbly east to the rising sun that blinds them to the world around them and then everything is darkened in the sun's absence. Grey rain veils process gently across the mountains in the background driven by a south wind, grey clothed silent refugees in search of a better life, and bared trees with their branches reaching skyward dream of leaves and the comradery of rustling whispers in a warm summer breeze.

Across the fields sheep graze, their back ends raddled. Some red, some blue telling the owner the weeks to lambing. Some who have eaten enough are lying down chewing their cud and eyeing up the ubiquitous gap-blocking pallet tied with blue baling twine to a fencing stake.

The white car pulls up the front drive and a Garda with her hair in a bun gets out. She opens the back door on the driver side and takes out a notebook and a plastic bag. She approaches. MY 55 it says on her epaulettes.

Fiona, she says introducing herself.

–Gerry O'Dowd, we spoke on the phone, friend of the deceased.

–Close friend?

–Close enough.

–So let's have a look.

She opens the plastic bag and takes a pair of bright blue gloves from it, places a small mask on her face and looks at the notice on the garage door before sliding it back.

NAC, standing for name, address and contact number, that's all you're obliged to give at the scene of an accident, I remember that from some talk I attended years ago.

–A caring sort, Fiona said.

–Did you know Johnny?

–No, just judging from his warning on the door. Had a case in Dublin where the person who discovered the body in a similar situation ended up with carbon monoxide poisoning. Her radio crackled and a voice came over it and she responded.

– At the scene now Sarge, having a look, taking some prelims from the caller, will secure the scene shortly

–You were in here already.

–Yeah, my fingerprints are probably all over the place.

–Well we'll try to rule out foul play first, check you have an alibi.

–What?

–Joke. You're the local priest here aren't you? I presume the car door was fully closed when you got here and the garage door slightly open.

–Yes sorry I forgot to put them back the way they were.

–No problem. Your friend obviously knew what he was doing. See without some air circulating in the garage the car could have conked out, could have ended up a botched job, brain damage, a wheelchair perhaps. Timing is important in these situations. He had to make sure someone didn't come on him and intervene. Probably the worst thing anyone could do, save someone in the advance stages of carbon monoxide poisoning. He didn't phone you beforehand by any chance.

–No.

–Some do that to provide themselves with a final opportunity to change their minds but they usually phone a close friend to know exactly where they are in case of an unexpected visit. It can often have the opposite effect and alert friends to what's going on. I take it he was fairly confident you weren't going to call.

–He left this letter on the dash.

I hand her the letter, she looks at the handwriting on the front, opens the envelope and reads down through the letter.

–Left you with some instructions I see. I'll take a detailed statement down at the station later. You're happy this is his writing.

–It's Johnny's alright.

Martin Cahill's donkey brayed in the low field and a sudden rush of wind rattled the garage door.

–A storm coming by all accounts Fr. Gerry – calling this one Deirdre. The crime scene lads are in the area so they'll have a look and then we can get the body moved. Is there a next of kin?

–Had a younger brother Harry in America, but he died a couple of years ago, he left a wife but no family.

– You can give me those details later and we'll try to make contact.

She continued to write in her black notebook and then raised her head and looked at me.

–That's the fourth in the county this year. But you probably know that, no more than myself you're involved in the mop up exercise, giving the survivors the news, listening to all their questions and standing there letting all their surprise and shock go in one ear and out the other.

– Shock! You hear it all the time on the news about people being treated for shock. How exactly do they do that? Is it Valium or some other sedative and why would something like that be newsworthy.

– Interesting isn't it? Shock being a medical condition and not an electric cable in sight!

I take the packet of fags from my jacket pocket and offer her one.

–I shouldn't but go on.

I take a lighter from my pocket, shake it and roll the flint wheel. It sparks but doesn't light, I shake it again and on the second attempt it lights but the wind blows it out. Another shake and I manage to light my cigarette using one hand for shelter around the cigarette, and suck on it strongly to get it lit. I hand Fiona my cigarette, she places the lighted end at the end of her cigarette and sucks on her cigarette until it glows orange.

– Vintage cars are best for this job Gerry. No catalytic converter, a better concentration of emissions, speeds things up. She hands me back my cigarette.

–It was the first thing the mother would reach for if she got a shock or upsetting news, a cigarette.

Fiona smiles, the smoke from our cigarettes takes flight into the breeze.

She gazes across at the lake.

–Grand view here, so would you have tried to save him if you'd come upon him earlier in the car Gerry?

–Probably, it's instinctive to try to save life isn't it?

–But maybe you've no right to interfere in his choice.

–Maybe, but you see a man out in a river drowning and he's not shouting you assume he's mute or something, don't you still throw him the life ring or get in and try to get him out. Lesser of two evils I suppose, at least you save the man who wants to be saved but can't communicate with you.

–And the one who doesn't want to be saved, you force him to live.

–Perhaps at some level everyone wants to be saved.

–So you reckon always save someone you think is drowning.

–Well at least you don't let someone die who wanted to be saved.

–It's no fun living with brain damage after partial carbon monoxide poisoning. You would have condemned him to a living hell.

–Would be hard to have something like that on my conscience, I mean mind. Yeah, we all assume that saving people is the right thing and it probably is generally. I suppose you could ask the man in the river if he wants to be saved, but then say he answered no. You might think he was being sarcastic, think he was so depressed he couldn't make an informed response. I think we assume everyone wants to be saved.

– No way out of it I suppose Gerry, can't help ourselves, need to operate on the basis of what is mostly the case. Carve up the world in bite sized pieces to cope with it.

She stubs out her cigarette on the top of the stone wall and inserts the butt into a crevice in it.

–The instinct for life is strong, it's what our bodies know, survival. You probably have to surprise it to overcome that drive. It will fight you.

She goes back into the garage and I follow.

–Get some air in here, she said, pushing back the sliding door about halfway.

She walks along admiring the shelving, tools stored neatly, some in plastic boxes, some on wall holders, and she turns around and looks into the car again.

–An organised man, all dressed up too, you didn't help him do it did you?

–Of course not.

–No, you priests don't believe in euthanasia yet.

I decided it best not to engage.

–So what happens now?

–Well we'll have to get the body removed from here. We've designated undertakers that do that in the county.

–Really, I thought you could get any undertaker.

–No, not for a suicide. Then it's a postmortem and an inquest in a few weeks. We'll try to get things sorted as quickly as possible. I'll need you to come down to the station at maybe 17 hundred hours if that suits and give me a detailed statement. In the meantime I might get to write up my own notes. The joys of paperwork, there's not as much paperwork being a priest.

–Oh there's enough of it, best thing is to keep it oral, word of mouth, only write down what you have to.

–You can head off Gerry, start thinking about the funeral, your instructions. I'll get in contact with his brother's wife in America. We'll try to get the paperwork sorted.

I stub out the cigarette butt inside the sliding door. She looks at the butt and then at me. I pick it up and put it in a hole in the stone wall.

–See you around 5 o clock. Fiona

–Good man.

–Here’s my mobile in case you need to call me.

–No need, I have it already.

–You do?

–You used your mobile to phone it in to the station Gerry.

–I did, didn’t I?

I get into the car, put the note on the passenger seat and am driving down the road before I’d even decided where I was going? The wind fired the rain sideways against the car and the wipers are at full pelt. I’m heading to Niamh’s.

I drive around the back at Niamh’s without thinking. I light a cigarette before tapping on the glass.

Niamh comes to the door.

–Hi Gerry, are you alright? You look flustered.

– I’m after finding Johnny Durcan dead below in his garage.

–Oh Jesus, I saw him Saturday, he looked the picture of health.

–No it’s suicide, exhaust fumes from his car, in the garage.

I take a long drag from my cigarette and exhale. Niamh comes up to me and gives me a full-on hug.

–Here, come in, sit down, let me make you a coffee.

I sit down and finish my cigarette.

–Johnny Durcan! Did you get the guards and the ambulance?

–The Guard is over there now. They have to get a designated undertaker to collect the body.

–You’ve got a terrible shock Gerry, she placed a milky, whisky coffee in my hand.

–Thanks Niamh.

Was that what my disbelief and upset amounted to, shock.

–I think I'm more surprised than shocked Niamh.

–I'd be surprised if you weren't shocked after finding him dead.

Niamh surprised about me not being shocked, had I given her a shock?

– Did you give him the last rites?

– No, sure Johnny had no truck with that.

– It might have made you feel better.

– Yeah it's something to say when you're in that situation. Give the scene a religious dimension, claim it for the church, but sure it's only a word formula.

–You might have felt better though.

–Well it's not about me feeling better.

–Poor Johnny, he seemed in great form on Saturday.

–Probably had his mind made up, his exit planned, his final solution, which he could never experience just anticipate, obliterate the problem by obliterating the subject.

–A questionable logic.

– A type of logic that the world is sadly full of with people making choices to live by obliterating choice. Johnny with one final choice to end all choice, taking back his life completely from all those who would take it from him, but taking it from himself as well.

–He must have been in great despair Gerry.

– He didn't seem depressed.

–When did it happen?

–Guard reckoned late last night.

– The end of the week, he wasn't going to face into a new week.

–Well his pain is over now, at least I didn't get there before he died.

–Why would you say something like that?

–Because I didn't know about the effects of carbon monoxide poisoning so I'd have tried to save him instinctively and could have condemned him to a life living with brain damage, a silent slowly unfolding nightmare. I would have done it out of ignorance.

–But if you're ignorant of something, sure you're not responsible.

–Ignorance is not an excuse we have a duty to inform ourselves. Yes, I'd have saved him and condemned him because of my ignorance.

–I see what you mean, where did you find out all this?

– The Guard Fiona was explaining it to me. If I ever came on a situation like that again I wouldn't intervene. Probably stand outside the garage door, smoke a fag and wait, listening to the car engine ticking over. Perhaps even leave the scene, grab a coffee in Topaz, have a quick read of the newspaper headlines and then drive back to turn off the engine when I was sure, maybe check for a pulse first.

–He's at peace now anyway, Gerry.

–The peace of not living. That whiskey coffee tasted good Niamh.

–So you're going to have sort out the funeral.

–Have to go down to the Garda station and make a statement later and see where things are at. He left a letter with instructions regarding his funeral.

–He had it planned so?

–And I was too fuckin dumb to cop it.

–Gerry it's not your fault.

–It's everyone's fault, if we were a proper community, this wouldn't happen.

–You can't go there.

–Can't I?

–Please don't Gerry.



–Left funeral instructions in his letter, to be cremated in Dublin, ashes scattered on Grogan’s Hill. Asked me to bring his body to Dublin for cremation and bring Paddy Ronan with me for the spin.

–Sure you’re not an undertaker, you don’t have a hearse and why does he want Paddy Ronan with you?

–Don’t know, they’re his last wishes. He wants to be driven in his car, the Vectra estate.

–Sure that’s mad. He couldn’t be thinking right when he wrote all that.

–Well Johnny is entitled to his last wishes. I’m not going to be the last one to let him down.

–I know you want to honour Johnny’s wishes but this is bound to cause trouble. Would he not understand your difficulty.

–He probably would.

–Is his letter a request or a demand.

–It’s a request alright: ‘Gerry, I would like you to transport me to Dublin for cremation in my Vectra, have a humanist ceremony for me on Grogan’s hill and scatter some of my ashes there.’ Anyway, I wouldn’t be doing the ceremony as the priest, but as a friend.

–Can’t see it being seen like that.

–I know, once a priest, always a priest and all that.

–What about bringing the body to Dublin for cremation, do you not need permission to do that?

–Well the guard knows already so it’s just a case of getting a death cert and arranging a time with the crematorium. There has to be a postmortem first. That car was his pride and joy, it’s fitting that it should bring him to the crematorium.

–Why does he want you to bring Paddy along?

–Ah they were pals. Paddy used to keep an eye on his mother when Johnny was away in England. He was like a son to her. It was a phone call from Paddy that brought Johnny home from

England. It was getting to a stage where it was either a nursing home or having someone there all the time.

–I know you want to honour Johnny’s wishes but it’s going to cause trouble.

–It’s not that difficult to cause trouble around here. Anyway I can’t let them have the final say. Feck sake, I’m out of fags. Do you need anything in Kinsellas?

–No I’m sound for everything, am heading to town later.

–Sound Niamh.

–Be careful about all this. I see trouble.

Sensible Niamh. We hugged.

–Keep me posted Gerry, mind how you go.

The news spreads throughout Kilcrua. Richie Geraghty had spotted the Garda car and he told Seamus Power who rang the station in Castletown and got talking to Joan Moran’s cousin, the sergeant, who told him the news in confidence. Seamus, knowing his 15 seconds of fame had come at last proceeded to spread the news by telephone and in person among his friends, his chosen introductory antiphon on this occasion being: Isn’t it awful about Johnny Durcan, to which the response was: Why, what happened Johnny Durcan? To which Seamus replied: Well Johnny Durcan is after, he’s after, killing himself, he was found in the garage by Fr. O’Dowd.

In Kinsella’s *Costcutter* Josie Lally spoke:

–It’s an awful thing to do especially around Christmas, Father.

Mary Roche said:

–Sure I don’t know what to think Father?

Not knowing what to think as if everything would be solved if she did somehow know what to think.

And so the news travelled on the air over fields, hummed around the black and green silage wrap snagged on barbed wire fences.

I walked to the checkout where Jimmy Lavelle was in full voice:

–That’s awful sad news about Johnny Durcan, no way to say goodbye, is it Father?

–Sure maybe he wasn’t saying goodbye to anyone Jimmy.

–And I hear that he won’t be giving us any chance to say goodbye either Father. A sort of private ceremony, not in the church, sure it’s never been done like that around here before. It’s not long since the likes of him wouldn’t even get into a graveyard.

–Well he’s entitled to his last wishes.

–Aul Tom Horan from out the New Road went a bit soft in the head like that before he died and told Canon Houlihan he wanted no funeral mass. Sure the family put a stop to that nonsense. Canon Houlihan said the mass and Tom got a decent funeral whether he liked it or not, sure wasn’t it the right thing to do, of course it was Father.

– It didn’t honour Tom’s wishes.

– And what if it didn’t, everyone ends up in a box in the church, that’s the swing of things. Even them above in Dublin that spend their life giving out about the church, in the box in a church at the wind up! Oh many is the hearty laugh I’ve had for myself Father watching their funerals, their coffins in the church at the foot of the altar in the end, the Church and God havin’ the last laugh at all their aul goin’ on.

–Well sure everyone makes up their own mind.

–Making up their own mind, arrah, sure what’s there to make your mind up about, you die, you have a funeral, people come to say goodbye, everyone is part of the community, dying is a community thing.

–It’s a great pity that living isn’t as well.

–What?

–That living isn’t a community thing.

– Well one thing I know is that he was part of this community whether he liked it or not.

A lot of us brought our business to his garage.

–Well he didn’t feel much a part of this community, weren’t most of his customers from town, most of ye only called him when ye couldn’t get the shower from town to come out and sort ye out.

–And sure wasn’t that his own fault, keeping himself all to himself and not being like everyone else. Odd. I couldn’t make the man out at all, you’d be talking away to him and he’d be smiling back at you and you wouldn’t know whether he was havin’ a good laugh at you or just in good form and then since the mother died he was smiling even more. Himself and Paddy Ronan were great pals for a while and then that all changed the last few months. Anyway I hope you’ll do the right thing for this community Father.

–Sure you know me Jimmy, don’t I always do the right thing?

–Good luck Bronagh, see you for the paper in the morning if the good lord spares me.

Jimmy left the shop with his milk, spelt loaf, ham and daily paper.

–When did you start here Bronagh. I repeated the name quietly in my head, a wistful name to get lost in.

–Just before Christmas father.

–It’s not that long since your confirmation. Oh the time don’t be long passing.

– Did you get any petrol or diesel, Father?

–No, not today. Just 20 Major please.

I paid for the cigarettes and glanced at the newspaper headlines on the way out: Young male killed in a single vehicle crash, a celebrity wedding, a picture of a bikini clad model with one of her tits hanging out on holiday in the Canaries, a wardrobe malfunction apparently or maybe it was staged.

I overheard them behind the detergent section when I was reading the headlines.

‘They’re right picky cunts, is right, ‘fire another slice of ham on that like a good girl’, ‘put another spoon of coleslaw on it’, ‘put more butter on that,’ ‘don’t cut it into four,’ ‘cut them diagonally.’” Hannah Moran was telling her classmate Aoife Hartigan all about her experiences,

having worked three weeks in the *Costcutter* Deli. She spotted me as I turned the corner into the frozen food aisle.

–Oh hello father.

I manifest a serious, disapproving look in her direction, counted to three and then I smiled.

–Fierce picky is right. I was going to say ‘cunts’ for the pure shock value but I sidestepped the inclination. It wouldn’t be very priestly. Would be the talk of the village.

*Fr Gerry said ‘cunts’!*

Priestly? Yes, I was all that in the early years. Full of reverence and faith bravado in the face of all, even death. Always giving expressions of disbelief and fear a religious spin, claiming it all for God. Even good living atheists were just anonymous Christians - Rayner came up with that idea. Non-Christians who act in a Christian manner are anonymous Christians. A bit arrogant, the world according to the Christian neatly collapsing into Christian, Anonymous Christian and non-Christian. At the start being priestly meant having something comforting and significant to say in most situations. Silence the enemy, a space where questions fester like wounds, invade healthy faith spaces, colonize them and then rot the core. So, I habitually fought the silence until eventually I copped that just being present was more important than having something to say. I try to be there in the silence now. A silence I always thought that I was sharing with a greater power but I have now come to realize that it’s only me in it, me listening to my own silence, being present in presence. Some might say I’ve come full circle. I haven’t. You can never approach what’s past in the same way you first did, you approach it from after. Memories never were, they are now, you take something of something that was and you experience it now, from where you are now. You replay aspects of it in a different space.

And so the news of Johnny’s demise travels the parish like the strengthening wind, whistling through electric wires, creating a deep rumble in the trees, testing wire connections on poles, dimming lights, getting in under galvanise roofs and flapping loose sheets, rattling slates, making dry rusty signs creak and squeak for oil.

–Ah poor aul Johnny the cratúr and sure many is the pint we had together, Joe Hoban said.

Throwaway pleasantries shared with the deceased were now elevated to moments of deep intimacy. Sympathy became the order of the day. A tear laden cloud settled over the village ready to release a downpour on cue, parking itself alongside the cloud of whys, shock and disbelief about how anyone could do such a thing.

The litany continued:

–Isn't it awful about Johnny Durcan, poor man, Mary Maguire said

–A terrible tragedy, said Dermot Heffernan

–The nerves, bad with the nerves, said Tom Maguire.

–The depression is an awful cross to bear, said Sadie Moran.

–Did it for spite I reckon, said Joey Mahon, but no one listened to Joey.

That was Joey, said what he thought and more often than not what others thought but wouldn't say. When everyone wanted to play with safe words, the tried and tested, spanner man Joey threw some new ones into the mix. Joey Mahon who wasn't afraid to stand and get wet in the pouring rain with everyone running for shelter.

–I don't mind the rain Father, you just get wet but you dry off again, don't you Father.

–Of course you do Joey.

He'd be sucking the bejaysus out of a Major and exhaling when everyone inhaled.

–All they want is comfort Father. Comfort and Persil fuckin automatic, washing and softening life's rough itchy fabric. T'was revenge Father, plain and simple. I knew Johnny too, one final statement.

–Not sure about that Joey.

–I'm tellin' ya father, anger, rage, and revenge, plain and simple. Not a doubt in my mind.

Bridgie Brown was annoyed:

–That selfish man has taken the good out of the Christmas now for everyone with a funeral now hanging over the village and Santa not long gone!

And so bushfire conversations broke out and briefly burned brightly, in the shop, outside the church, over boundary walls and field gates as men in caps used sticks to scrape cow dung off wellingtons, tap field gate bars and draw lines on the ground or sever briars that had overgrown into gateways. But as quickly as the fires burned brightly, they dimmed again starved of fuel, and got all choked up in the avalanche of banalities, the rural static that made up each day: cold water poured on dying embers sending puffs of steam mushrooming into the air and silence establishing itself once again. The news that had brought people out of houses to talk to one another quickly grew old, became worn into a piece of information that became part of the shared experience of Kilcrua, like time and the bushes and briars had stitched Martin Friel's aul Morris Minor to the ground in his top field, now covering it so that it was only in winter, when everything had died back that you could see the roundy top of it shining in the low sunlight. It was just part of what everyone expected to see now when they looked into Martin Friel's top field from the road. Removing it would have meant a new view, an adjustment would have to be made and part of that process would involve a time of looking when all anyone could see was that the Morris Minor wasn't there. Soon the connection would fade and it might be remarked that it was the place where Martin Friel's Morris Minor used to be and everyone would know the place being referred to. It would take some time.

I call over to Paddy Ronan to tell him the news about Johnny and his last wishes in the letter. He'd heard about Johnny already.

–He left some last wishes in his letter Paddy.

–Ashes scattered on Grogan's Hill. He told me about that a good few months ago. We were pals Fr. Gerry but these last few months we didn't see that much of each other and when we did he didn't have much to say. He was all caught up in doing up the Vectra estate.

–He wants us to transport his body to Dublin for cremation. I watch for Paddy’s reaction as I say it.

–An unusual one Fr. Gerry but sure I won’t let you go alone, if you’re going I’m going, Johnny’s last journey in his pride and joy.

–It wouldn’t be for a good few days anyway, we’d have to sort out a death cert. and arrange it with the crematorium.

–Well just let me know Gerry whatever you decide is sound by me.

Whatever I decide.

Fiona is sitting at her desk in the Garda Station writing on an A4 page with her head focused on the page when I walk in.

–Take a seat there Fr.Gerry.

That was the thing about guards according to the mother, they’d see you without looking at you, special training in Templemore apparently. Just like the advanced course us priests do in Maynooth on putting curses on people and of course football teams.

–I have most of it written so if you can have a read of it there Gerry and see if you agree that it’s an accurate account.

I read it through, it was exact, I could see myself in the scene.

–These instructions you got, I’ve got you a copy. She handed it to me.

–You know where I am if you need any Garda assistance when the time comes.

–Thanks Fiona, at least you won’t be stuck out in the pouring rain directing funeral traffic all evening.

–Gerry, if that statement’s accurate will you sign it there at the bottom.

I signed it.

–I’ll be in touch Gerry.



## 7

I fill the diesel into the tank as Johnny had instructed. The Vectra turns on the second attempt. She sounds confident, steady, ready. I pull the door closed. A reassuring one tone sound. My Fiesta driver door makes two, the alignment is off, too much banging. I put her in first gear, she purrs away.

Johnny is dressed in his navy suit in the wicker coffin in the boot with a woollen Foxford blanket on the lid.

I drive slowly out the low road to collect Paddy Ronan. This is Johnny's last journey through the village. Not that he was any more aware of what was going on no more than the big boulder at the side of Brennan's house. When they see the car passing people bless themselves, others stand and stare, not knowing what to think or do, gaps left in their formation.

Paddy is all set when I call, he locks the back door of the house and gets into the car.

–She's still smellin' a bit, Fr. Gerry.

–Hard to get rid of the smell of exhaust fumes, they just get absorbed into materials, the Magic Trees are the best I could do Paddy.

Paddy sucks on a fag and looks out the window. I watch the road. It's still winter. The Buddha earth leaning back exposing its southern belly to the sun, the sun now setting in the southwest behind Pat Corley's empty hayshed.

–I didn't think we'd be making this run Gerry.

–Nor did I. Life throwing us the unexpected Paddy.

We both fall silent and the music from Lyric FM once again fills the space where speech has been.

The rain is driving against the windscreen, fields are flooded and cattle are gathered in corners around silage-filled feeders under sheltering trees. The Vectra feels strong on the road, secure.

–You alright back there Johnny? Said Paddy, laughing. He’s happy now.

–You reckon Paddy.

–Course he is, he has it over him.

–He seemed happy the last few days anyway, the relief of finally deciding I suppose. But then do you ever know whether or not you’ll change your mind, you could be convinced about doing something and you could change your mind at the last minute. There must have been one final yes he said, a final act of faith, a decision to go into the great unknown.

–Sure wasn’t it an act of despair more than faith Gerry.

–Well maybe that’s what faith is Paddy an act of despair in a chaotic world. Faith, suicide they’re similar, they’re both a sort of dying.

–But one is final the other isn’t.

Faith a despairing act, suicide an act of despair. Despair. A word with tick, tock rhythm, inflecting downwards at the end, it’s the ‘rrrrr’ sound, sinking down, a skidding car wheel going round and round, sinking further down.

Vectra’s engine rises and falls with the slightest pressure on the accelerator pedal, no slack in the cable, Johnny had checked it.

–This is a grand bus. He picked her up second hand in England before coming home. They look after the motors in England.

In the fields on the right a farmer is driving a red quad with a small hay bale on the back of it with a small flock of sheep following him.

–I love the colour Paddy, British racing green, like Martin’s aul Morris Minor Traveller. It’s an unusual colour for a car like this. You’d see a lot of cars this colour one time but it’s mainly black, metallic grey, silver, navy and red these days.

–He did a power of work on it these last few weeks, had the parts sent over from England, from a mate of his who worked with him in the Vauxhall plant in Luton. He was a supervisor there, did you know that?

–Can’t say I did, I knew he was working there as a mechanic alright.

–Sure he’d have settled there but for the mother. The younger brother Harry was out in America. He was in a bad way when the mother died, and sure he died himself a few months after. Left a wife, no family.

–They’d lost contact over the years I think Paddy.

–Ah sure no more than myself he got caught up looking after an ageing parent. It could have been the making of me if I got to England or America, but the brother Tommy got away before me and I got left with aging parents and the job of fattening cattle on rough grass and rushes. For years me brother said he’d come back but sure life intervened. A woman, marriage, then kids, school, work situations, house prices, maybe next year they’d say and it became a mantra for a time, and then he just stopped saying it, resigning himself to one day getting a phone call, packing his black tie in his suitcase, catching a standby flight, hiring a car and standing in a funeral home greeting sympathisers. It was no longer a journey on trains and boats with leather belts tied around suitcases.

Paddy, another victim of long-living parents, he looked after them until they died and farmed the nineteen hungry acres which sucked his time and energy out of him and gave so little back.

–Nineteen acres, half of it in rushes, doing my best with my dead father’s voice always in my head barking a litany of instructions.

*'You'd need to top them fields if you want decent grass for your sheep', 'Them briars are taking over the place, you'd want to trim them back.'* *'Sure you have to look after land'.*

Paddy living in his nineteen acres bounded in the space between dry stone walls.

–He spent the guts of twelve hundred on this car. Sure he'd have a top job if he'd stayed beyond in England.

–Ah the mechanic was in his big hands Gerry. He had an instinct about how things were put together – fixed an aul wag of the wall clock for me once. He had it opened up one evening when I came to collect it. Says he: *hands, cogs, springs and a pendulum weight correctly adjusted, that's what adds up to the correct time.*

– Twelve hundred and they were proper parts not them spurious parts you can get. This car will run for years.

–Will you keep it?

–Sure his sister-in-law might want it.

–Doubt she'll have much heed on it. But a house and 12 acres is no joke to land on your lap Gerry and the two acres below in Porthleen is the best of it.

–But he got no payments off that land for at least two years.

–Bastards in the Department fecked him about they did. He had a fella out for a full day measuring every bit of land he had and then they stopped his payments because of an over-claim. I saw the letters they wrote him, you'd need a degree in law to understand them. They're always giving out about the crowd in Social Welfare, Gerry, but they're nowhere as bad as the bastards in the Department of Agriculture. Proper bastards and you know some of them are farmers themselves. Oh it's a bad ass that'll eat its own straddle.

–You're not the first I heard say that Paddy.

–Indeed and I'm not and I won't be the last either. Those bastards don't realise that its small farmers are keeping them in jobs, in 20 years we'll be gone, then they won't be needed when all the big farmers take it over. Sure that's what they want, if we counted all our hours and the

payments we get we'd find out we're working for feck all. Seen it over the last five years at the mart, there's very few young lads there now, every year there's faces missing and the rest are getting older and paler. They keep screwing the small man, he has the same level of red tape as the big man, just like they want us all living in towns. They'd love to shut down rural Ireland for good and make walks and bicycle tracks in it for the townies. Ah sure they don't understand our lives, Gerry, they stopped us having a few pints in the pub and driving home, now they have made our hobby and livelihood into nothing short of an industry, standards for this, that and the other.

The Angelus bell bonged, I grip the steering wheel tightly and notice Paddy out of the corner of my eye going through the external motions of the Angelus: removing his cap, blessing himself, the heart thump at *'the word became flesh'*, and the twitch of a genuflection from his right knee.

–Sure that's the way of things Gerry, says Paddy replacing his cap on his head. Johnny's mother was a hard woman to get along with, she brought the fight out in him and I suppose when she died he had no one to fight with but himself.

The voice that had rebelled against another now rebelled against itself. No tune to dance to, the music gone, he turned in on himself.

We pull into Applegreen in Enfield to stretch the legs and use the toilet.

–We'll need to be quick Paddy, we're a bit behind schedule, no matter how quick you try to be at these stops you always lose about 20 minutes.

We make a quick exit and get going again, I have *Vectra* in top gear in no time, Paddy eating a bar of Cadburys *Fruit and Nut*, one square at a time and me munching into a bag of *Tayto*.

–Is there an ambulance in the distance, I swore I heard a siren there Gerry.

–Feck, guards, behind us.

I pull in and the Garda car pulls in in front of us.

–The speed limit, shit! This speedometer is in miles not kilometres.

A uniformed garda gets out and places his cap which he holds in his left hand onto his head, with his right hand he takes a black book from his pocket.

–Oh, the book is out Gerry, we’re fecked now.

He looks at the number plate, then the windscreen discs, tax, insurance, and is about to start writing when he holds the book to one side and taps my driver door window with his ring finger, one of those thick wedding rings the size of the copper rings they use in plumbing joints. I roll down the window.

–Well lads, d’ye think it’s a getaway car ye’re driving? Hah!

Guards and their rhetorical hah’s.

–The speedometer is in miles not kilometres. I forgot.

–You forgot! Where are ye headin’?

–Glasnevin in Dublin.

–Jeez I didn’t know there was another Glasnevin somewhere else, two Glasnevin’s or sure maybe there’s three.

He was looking at the *Fruit and Nut* bar on Paddy’s side of the dash and the half-eaten packet of crisps I had on the dash in front of the steering wheel.

–Off to the botanical gardens in Glasnevin I suppose. Are ye into the flowers lads?

–No, the crematorium.

–And if you don’t mind me askin’ which one of ye is getting cremated. He let a loud laugh out of him.

–Johnny in the boot.

–Johnny in the boot?

He looked towards the boot and saw the rectangular shape in the boot covered with the blanket.

–So lads are we talking gangland or what?

–We’re just bringing our friend Johnny to the crematorium.

–Right, so what’s the name? He said looking at me. *The name of what ...?* Guards and their unfinished sentences.

I take my driving license from my wallet and hand it to him.

–Gerry O’Dowd, it says here, and what do you do for a living Gerry O’Dowd.

–I’m a priest.

–You’re a priest, hah, well how come it doesn’t say that here.

–I didn’t bother putting it on the licence.

–So are you out foreign or have you a parish somewhere.

–I’m in Kilcrua down in Mayo.

–And what about the *Fruit and Nut* man over there?

–Hello Guard, said Paddy nervously. Paddy’s the name.

–Paddy who, have you got ID?

–Nothing guard, sure Gerry knows me.

–And who does this vehicle belong to?

–Johnny in the boot.

–Johnny in the boot, well I suppose we better check on Johnny in the boot. Right so let’s have a look at Johnny in the boot.

I open the boot and pulled the blanket from the coffin.

–Nice coffin.

–Will you remove the lid there like a good man ‘til I see the contents.

I lift the lid off the coffin.

–Right so that’s Johnny and have ye any ID for him?

–Paddy will you have a look there in the glove compartment and see if his driving license is there.

Paddy found it and passed it to me to hand to the guard.

He looked at the body and looked at the license.

–Had a beard here on the license and was a lot younger.

–He wasn't dead either, guard.

–You're right there Gerry O'Dowd. Tell me now did you take that name at ordination or something.

–No it's my real name.

–Not every day you meet a priest with the initials GOD. Sounds suspect to me. Paddy Fruit and Nut can you step out of the vehicle and make sure you have your hands where I can see them. He lifted his cap to scratch his head.

–Right lads, we have a situation here, not one I've come across before, I have to say. What's with the hands *Fruit and Nut*?

Paddy was standing beside the car with his hands up.

–Put them down, put them down, just keep them out of your pockets.

–Call Garda Fiona Mulcahy in Castlebar, she knows all about this, here's her number.

I handed him Fiona's number.

–Right so, we'll have a word with Fiona.

He walked over to the Garda car and sitting in the driver's seat with the door open he talks into his phone.

–We could end up in a cell Gerry.

–Doubt it, doesn't strike me as the type that likes paperwork, anyway Fiona will clear it up.

–MH28, why don't they wear their surnames on their breast pockets like the army do.

He walks back slowly oozing unpredictability and hands me the licences.

–Well lads it appears to be above board. Had a word there with Garda Fiona Mulcahy, she is aware of ye and what ye're at so ye best be going. You might sign this mass card for me, it's the poor aul brother-in-law, he's on the way out.

He handed me the card and a pen and I signed it.

–I suppose you'll need something for that.



–It’s sound, no worries.

–Sure I better give ye something or ye’ll say I’m mean. I couldn’t have that.

He went back to the car and came back with two high vis jackets individually wrapped in plastic.

–They might come in handy lads.

Back on the road, drizzle, disjointed dots on the windscreen, wipers back and forth, intermittent cycle.

–Jeez you couldn’t write it could you. The chances of getting stopped with a body in the boot. I’d say Johnny is having a good laugh.

–Couldn’t write it is right Paddy.

Paddy stared out the window as he searched for his packet of fags.

–Here Gerry, have a Sweet Afton.

–I won’t Paddy, I never got in on the non-tipped.

He took a fag from the box and holding it perpendicular to the front of the box tapped it twice before putting it in his mouth, took his lighter from his pocket with his left hand brought it up to the cigarette while raising his hand in front of the flame as if he was trying to light it in a gale force wind, then put the lighter back in his pocket, let his window down slightly and drew the first satisfying drag on his Sweet Afton.

–It wasn’t easy for him looking after the mother with the Alzheimers. She lived so long with it, sure many of them do. In her late eighties at the wind up, a grand jolly woman in her day, a word for everyone.

Paddy painting a pretty picture.

–It was a relief to him when she died Gerry.

*I’m free now Gerry, free!* Tears in his eyes as he said it at her funeral; sadness, joy, guilt, excitement and fear all rolled into one.

A knot in my own stomach now as I remember him saying that haunt word 'free', echoing, rippling, shimmering. Free man Johnny released from the ties that bind, free from it all, no more getting over, no more falling under, no more time, finished.

–True enough Gerry, he had done his duty, kept her out of the home

– He was never the same after though.

Her voice still in his head after she was gone... Wipers on to clear the windscreen.

–Isn't that the strangest thing Paddy, the voices of those gone command a greater presence with us. Like those radio voices there, simple, direct, uncomplicated by pictures, expressions, distractions, they're harder to ignore – wipers off – harder to get away from.

– The dutiful son, looking after his frail mother, that he may have the light of heaven for it.

–Sure he didn't believe any of that.

–He didn't, but God is good, he'll overlook that.

–You reckon.

–Course he will, and he'll meet his mother again, she'll be waiting for him, the Alzheimer's gone off her. The man above will look after us all.

The man above? It was a woman actually. A Saturday night in Ballinrobe, the circus in town, the sweet smell of whisky off men's breath, the woman was walking the tightrope with a balancing pole, I watched her with my 8 year old eyes, frightened she would fall. Everyone clapped when she made her first journey across. I was relieved. but then she started walking backwards, so dark, poor light she would fall, my heart raced. She didn't and once more the applause warmed the cold air. Many nights after I relived it step by step, watching each step she took on that tightrope and me willing her to the other side, she was probably walking that tightrope again in some other town.

–So is one life not enough for us, Paddy, like go and do it now if you're going to do it, aren't some happy memories enough to have.

–You don't want to see your family again?

–Way I see it Paddy, we've had our chance, it would be kind of awkward meeting them all again, I mean you sort of get used to life without them, would be very traumatic to have them back, wouldn't be the same anyway, couldn't be, people change. Some say you never grow up while your parents are alive, did you ever hear that Paddy.

–I did not and whatever smart Alec came up with that must have had very mean parents.

–I think he meant that once parents go you're down to yourself, the buffer zone is gone, you have a clear view of the horizon, like there's no one in front of you anymore, what was in front of you is now behind you, you hear the voice from behind you rather than in front or beside you.

–But you're right there Gerry, he wasn't the same since she died. He said it was a release when she died. His voice was quieter when she died, Gerry, softer somehow, as if an edge had been sheared off it. Do you remember when he fractured the bone in his foot when the clutch plate fell on him. That wasn't long after the mother died. He went to physio, worked hard to get back full power in the muscles again, made a great recovery. All the work he put into that and now this.

–A different time.

–And sure what was different?

–The mother wasn't long dead Paddy, he was still caught up in grief, grief slows you down, engages you.

–He felt he'd nothing to live for Gerry.

–Sure what do any of us have to live for, aren't we just living, isn't that enough?

–Well if I committed suicide there's lots I'd miss, said Paddy fielding my throwaway remark. I'd miss Daisy's bark and the way she yelps when I'm going to feed her. Her going around the kitchen with her tail wagging back and forth, she brings me out of myself Gerry, and there's the sheep, I'd miss minding the sheep, the taste of lamb cutlets, the smell of cut hay, the cuckoo in April, the smell of purple heather in July when I'm saving the turf, a few drinks in the pub on

Christmas Eve and reliving good memories of years gone by, the feel of strong handshakes. Sure it's small things that satisfy us, unless you start looking for too much and then it can only end bad. And sure I'd miss going to mass every Sunday Gerry, not that I'm awful religious but I'm there looking up at you, often times knowing you're struggling like the rest of us, with the everyday struggles that are enough to fill a man's heart. It's important for you to see me there, you need our support, it's not only religion Gerry that brings me to mass on a Sunday.

So there I was saying mass every Sunday because they keep coming and Paddy was coming to support me saying mass.

—It's a sad day Gerry, a sad day.

Sad according to Paddy because Johnny wasn't able to find a way of living but had got involved in the adventure of killing himself, an adrenalin rush with the very thought of it, the preparations, the thrill when he turned the ignition key. Or was it all humdrum, banal, just something he had to do, no other way, a final decision, a duty demanding compliance.

How long was he thinking about it before he finally found his heart in it? Did he have any second thoughts when he was making all those preparations: putting enough diesel in the car, making sure everything was working, servicing it, cleaning it. Did he get distracted Sunday morning when he was enjoying a boiled egg for breakfast, did his plan escape his mind until he saw the gleaming Vectra parked outside and then he remembered and stared? When he attached the hose was he thinking of his dead mother's smile, his father's strong handshake, or just thinking about the peace of an ending, a peacefulness he wouldn't feel; did the irony strike him at all? Did he have second thoughts after he'd made good the seal between the hose and the exhaust pipe with duct tape or when he led the pipe through a hole he had cut in the spare tyre well in the boot, sealing it tight with filler and then leading the hose through to the front of the car? Did he do a trial run to see how quick the fumes would build, check for leaks in case it ended up a botched job, use one of them carbon monoxide alarms to test it all?

–His head had to be in a mighty quare place to do that to himself Gerry. I was reading a piece about it in the paper and they were saying that this, what did they call it, yes this ‘mild euphoria’ that was it, that it takes hold of them in the wind up because they now know how they’re going to solve all their problems.

‘Mild euphoria’. But how did it feel before he made up his mind? When did he make up his mind anyway? The parts for the car had been delivered four weeks earlier, was it before or maybe after the delivery. Decisions have shadows, their opposites projecting from them. Was his decision to do up the car to make it roadworthy and comfortable for himself or was the decision to kill himself all tied up in it? Directly intended or an unintended consequence. Decisions are nebulous things. Like chameleons their colour changes in different contexts. And so the ‘mild euphoria’ of Johnny’s suicidal mind made us both stare out the windscreen, courting silence in search mode, searching for word to unlock it. There were no such words, so we shared a wordless silence. Fan on to demist the windscreen.

–I suppose he was happy in the end Paddy, maybe our sadness is just about us.

Rain-spray-driving-rain, wintry. Wipers on the fast cycle.

–Wasn’t it funny the way he went back on the fags after the mother died. Was off them over ten years and then went back. You’d wonder why he did that.

–Comfort maybe, it’s hard to get shut of them.

–But he’d been off them ten years, told me he didn’t miss them.

–Habit. He went back as bad as ever.

–Remember him saying, ‘ah sure the fags won’t kill ya.’

–He was right about that.

–An early sign of his unravelling maybe?

–Old habits dying hard, isn’t that what they say.

–Old habits. I repeat.

Silence re-establishes itself once more. Traffic is moving well, we're making good time. Paddy is looking out the windscreen and then he whistles a six note tune, *dob, me, fab, fab, me dob*, six notes of equal measure, metronomic, palindromic, beginning-middle-end, a mirror, moving from the base note, taking two steps, then one to reach the unresolved *fab*, resonating like a question with the need for resolution, then the sure footed backward movement to *me* and *dob*.

Paddy's six note whistled throwaway, punctuating the wordless silence.

## 8

We pull around to the unloading area at the back of the crematorium. Stephen, the heavy set black suited, black-tie attendant in his whiter than white shirt with silver cufflinks and short clean fingernails explains everything that's about to happen. Fifteen years in the job he tells us, still displaying enthusiasm.

A recent upgrade to facilities means less ash due to higher temperatures achieved in 'the combustion process', he explains.

—So the gentleman you've brought is scheduled for 12:45pm. I just need to go through this checklist with you first.

He takes a clipboard from above his desk which hung by a thick string from a hook and proceeds to double check the details he had already about Johnny, including whether or not he had a pacemaker fitted. It could cause an explosion in the cremation chamber apparently.

With the questionnaire completed he pauses, looks at his watch and then indicates that's it's time to place the coffin on the steel cart.

—If you can sign in the box there at the bottom of the questionnaire, normal signature in the box please, print your name below it.

He was repeating what it said on the form.

—You wouldn't believe the amount of people who mix those things up, he said responding to my silent criticism of his repetition.

We place the coffin on the cart and wheel it into the quiet room where two candles are already lit and a large bunch of flowers sit in a vase on a side table.

–If you wish to have some quiet time here to offer prayers or some final thoughts then you may do that. I will be back in ten minutes.

‘Final thoughts’ the words floated around in my head, like one of those banners attached to the tail of an airplane. What were my final thoughts? What was a final thought anyway? Were they something like prayers? I assumed my prayerful pose, coffin, lighted candles, vase of flowers, before I knew it my left hand was searching in my jacket pocket for my stole. I stopped himself and looked around the room, Paddy had his cap held in his right hand resting on the coffin lid, sadness in his eyes and breathing heavy, some sort of final thoughts I suppose.

–Shouldn’t we say a prayer, or something Father Gerry?

–He doesn’t want any of it, sure what would we be praying for?

–For the repose of his soul.

–Maybe say a silent one Paddy.

I feel naked here, I’m not godded up in my stole, holding the black book with the funeral rite and prayers; the armoury of prayers and a ritual no longer available. Silently I hold some memories of Johnny. He’s looking out the open garage door which frames him and looking down at the lake in the valley, the same music is playing in the garage as that day I arranged the pre NCT check:

*Goin Home.... cause if I don’t leave now, I won’t be goin’ nowhere.*

*If home is where the heart is, then my home’s in New Orleans,*

*Take me, to that land of dreams,*

*Cause if I don’t leave now,*

*I won’t be goin’ nowhere.*

Paddy takes out a hip flask and two small shot glasses from his jacket pocket. He fills two glasses of clear liquid and hands me one.



–Happy days.

–No lonely nights.

We clink the glasses of p<sup>ó</sup>itín together and fire back the contents. Paddy fills them again, this time we take it slower, my mouth still on fire from the last mouthful. Stephen then re-enters the room walking like Alfred Hitchcock, motionless from the waist up. If you couldn't see his legs you'd think he was moving on a horizontal escalator. He removes the coffin lid and eyes the body up and down.

–Around six one, 90kg's I'd guess, will take around 90 minutes. Ashes should be ready for collection after six, so if you call at 6:30pm I'll have everything ready. It's usually a next day collection but my boss Maurice has explained that because of the distance involved we're doing a quicker turnaround. So unless you have any more questions, I'll see you at 6:30pm.

We hadn't asked any questions.

–Oh yes, you'll get back about three litres of ash, enough to fill three one litre milk cartons, but of course it will be in a proper urn not milk cartons. He smiled.

–What you get back is about 85% remains, 15% coffin. I think I've covered everything. Paddy seemed confused.

–You're saying we'll only get back 85% of the remains what happens the rest of the remains?

–Oh no you misunderstand, you get back all the remains, but 15% of what you get back will be the coffin ash. Funny now, that's the first time anyone asked me that question.

We move the steel frame on which the coffin rested to another area.

–Have to complement you on the name plate on the coffin, blue Bangor slate neatly attached to the wicker with black cable ties, nice touch, the sky blue script is lovely. You don't mind do you?

He takes out his phone and takes a picture of it.

–Attention to detail makes all the difference. I'll remove the name plate and give it back to you with the ashes.

–Grand we'll see you later so.

–Just ring the bell at the side door. 6:30pm.

He signs a sheet on his clipboard and then ticks a box in the bottom right-hand corner of the sheet, places the clipboard under his arm and walks purposefully towards the exit.

Outside we stand around smoking cigarettes and flicking our cigarette ash on the ground, ashes to ashes.

We walk to a nearby café and order tea and sandwiches.

–They incinerate them separately so there's no mix up, said Paddy with the crematorium brochure in his hand. Like bringing a lamb to the butcher you'd want to be sure you were getting your own back.

Paddy continues to read the brochure and tucks into a club sandwich. I sip a latte wondering again about Johnny's final moments:

When he sat in the driver's seat with his forefinger and thumb ready to turn the ignition key, did he depress the clutch pedal with his left foot and rattle the gearstick to make sure it was out of gear. Did the first smell of fumes tickle his nose, probably not, he was well used to exhaust fumes as an everyday smell. Johnny making an act of faith, not knowing the outcome, would someone find him and save him, would it end up a botched job, his last thought perhaps as he stared at the slightly open garage door, happy that he could still see the elongated rectangle of greyish light out the windscreen, not darkened by the shadow of someone coming to rescue him. He trusted his preparations, his planning, but so much was outside his control, in the lap of the gods you might say. A final act of trust, a final rolling of the die. Would he roll a six or maybe he'd get a disappointing one?

–It’s getting a lot more popular, cremation, Gerry, the grave plots don’t come cheap but I still think it’s more natural to rot away in the clay.

–I’ve seen people buried in oak caskets Paddy and it’ll take a hundred years to rot them.

Yes I’d seen someone buried in an oak casket? but they didn’t stay in it for more than 12 years. The gravediggers didn’t go deep enough when burying it and when the man’s wife died it had to come up to be buried deeper, not much fun taking up an oak casket. The gravediggers rang me on a Friday afternoon. What were they to do and the burial at lunchtime Saturday. I told them to do what they had to. As I later found out it involved two sledgehammers and plenty strength, breaking an oak casket apart and reburying a decaying body two foot deeper covered in oak casket pieces is not for the faint-hearted. At least his wife’s dying wish to be buried with her husband was honoured, they ended up closer together than most.

–You’re not wrong there Gerry, I’ve seen them too. Don’t the Muslims just wrap the body in a few sheets and bury it, you’d make dust fairly fast like that.

– People and their preferences.

–Have you ever had a death bed conversion in your time Gerry?

–One or two, not that I was trying to convert them. But yes I’ve seen that fear fill their wide staring eyes:

*‘Tell me it will be alright Father’,* and me responding with *‘everything will be fine Jimmy, don’t be worrying just try to rest, relax now,’* and I’d put on my stole and start the anointing.

–Big men Paddy who drank and fought their way through life, who no one ever bested, now reduced to this, their strength gone, the grip gone from their strong hands.

In their presence, uniformed with confidence and authority, I reassured them, told them what they wanted to hear, no time for thoughts of an indifferent, absent God. I helped create a sense of calm, blathering some reassurances which I didn’t believe but doing it convincingly out of habit. Eventually I learned to find solace in those spaces between and after words, gestures and silence working with the solemn words, godding up everything.

–Some don't convert themselves Paddy but get posthumously converted by relatives. Dead and boxed they end up in front of an altar, their own wishes paling into insignificance beside the wishes of the living. For the relatives it's often about what everyone else does, having their own relative's funeral as good as the last, soup and sandwiches for everyone afterwards.

Modern day soupers.

–You remember Pat Garvey's funeral.

–Indeed and I do Paddy.

–They brought him all the way home from England to have his funeral and he couldn't get out of Kilcrua fast enough when he was sixteen. Only came home once in twenty-five years and that was for the mother's funeral, didn't you have to put back the mother's funeral by two days Gerry because he couldn't be found beyond.

–And he headed back in the afternoon after the burial.

–By all accounts back again to the life of work, women and drink he had carved out for himself in West London.

–He should never have been brought home but the sister Bernadette was adamant about him being brought home.

*–We've decided to bring Pat home Father.*

*–Do you think that's what Pat would have wanted, Bernadette? Would he have expressed those wishes to his friends in London.*

*–Friends Father! Alcoholics, prostitutes and ne'er-do-wells that's the sort of friends Pat had over there. If he was thinking straight he'd have wanted to come home, of course he would.*

*–It's just that he'd been away so long and only came home the once.*

*–He was happy enough there Father but sure home is home, isn't that it, sure if his friends come over we'll do our best for the day or two to make them feel welcome. Is there a problem with having poor Pat buried here Father?'*

*–No there's no problem Bernadette, I'm just a bit surprised that's all.*

Surprise, a surprised priest, God help us what's the world coming to? She beat on regardless.

*–We were thinking about a Saturday funeral, mass on Saturday at 11:30, Saturday week.*

I decided I would have nothing to do with it, another circus, a pretence. I picked up my diary, and staring at a blank page said:

*–I'm not around myself that weekend Bernadette but we can check with Fr. Declan over in Bailebriste I expect he'll be around that weekend. I think he does a few house calls after morning mass on a Saturday so 11:30 might be a bit early, the earliest he'd manage might be around 12 noon.*

*–That would be a late funeral Father, we wouldn't be at the soup until after 2 O' clock, it's a bit late.*

*–Sure maybe tell Declan the time ye want the soup, and sure he'll probably do his best to work around it.*

*Unless you went for Sunday at the normal 11:30 mass, Declan could make it a requiem mass.*

*–I'm not really gone on Sunday funerals Father. We had a talk about it last night in the family and Saturday was what we came up with.*

Family, the highest institutional authority there is, one predating the church.

*–You'll need to talk to Fr. Declan, Bernadette.*

*–Sound Father, I'll talk to him and maybe write out a few thoughts to help him with his few words.*

*–Sound.*

Each time I visit this cold death-room, thoughts come in short breaths and words don't make sentences, grief pulses in short throbs, consumes me briefly and then eases again until the next wave breaks and washes over.

... Fighting traffic on the Curragh line the Hospital rang to say you were critical Da and to come quickly. It was pouring rain, wipers on full speed, cars slowing down because of the rain, red brake lights on and off, stuck in traffic and Da dying. Just another driver in a car trying to get somewhere in a hurry. Got there too late, you were gone, your body perfectly still in the bed. A candle lighted, nothing we could say to one another anymore, beyond spoken words now. What

had we last said to each other, still can't remember, probably 'See ya Da', something like that. I'd have shaken your shovel hand I know that, I always made a point of shaking your hand anytime we left each other. Your joined hands felt cold like they often felt when our hands inadvertently touched out mending fences in wintry weather. I stared at your expressionless face in disbelief, the solid ground where I'd stood opening up. I'm sinking, don't feel like saying any prayers at all, but mam expects it I know, well that's what priests do isn't it, so I rattle off a decade.

The following day before they closed the coffin I felt your forehead. Marble cold, your big strong hands that held shovels and wore down a sléan in the bog, now had a beads draped around them and they're joined across your chest. You never held a rosary beads that close, always held them at a distance, in your right hand by your side or at a distance in front of you, dangling from your outstretched hand over a church pew as you knelt down. Why didn't we leave your hand down by your side with the beads in them. It wasn't you Da, two hands across your chest holding beads like a religious cissy. And why leave you facing up. You always slept on your side, a nice restful pose. Of course the funeral goers wouldn't be able to have a good look at you then at the funeral circus and remark how well you looked, dead. Lines of people shaking my hand saying sorry, hadn't seen some of them in years, taking their part in the sympathy storm.

–Sorry for your loss Father.

–Thank you for coming.

I kept repeating it and each handshake drove home the realization that you were gone now. There was no part of me wishing for a miracle to have you somehow magically come back. You were gone now and while I would have done anything to help you hold on while you were alive, with you gone, I let you go, magic had no place here. I was 5 years a curate out in Connemara then, caught up in my professional role at my Da's funeral. Gerry the priest not Gerry the son. I should have worn a shirt and black tie and been sitting with my mother but there I was going around trying to treat Da's death as just another death in a parish.

After a week everything was back to normal, the funeral circus had left town, business as usual, everything exactly as it had been, but grief doesn't leave with the circus, it remains and starts changing things, it burrows its way through the maze of control foisted upon it. I was left with sadness and a catalogue of images, clip art from a life together and apart, stock images, happy days, days worrying about each other, rainy days spent sheltering in the hayshed waiting for a shower to pass, sharing some thoughts but mostly the in-between silences.

Stephen had everything ready when we arrived back at the crematorium at 6:30 and we headed west with an urn and the Blue Bangor slate nameplate on the back seat.

I was determined that Johnny's ceremony on Grogan's Hill wasn't going to be the usual template job which I breezed through having done some research about the deceased among family and friends, mentally noting things, listening for reactions and comments made in the pub and around the place following the death, getting a rounded view to inform my homily and then opening up my laptop in the office, scrolling down through my templates to have a look. Baptism, First communion, Marriage, then Eulogy Template. After about five years of racking my brain writing homilies, I spent one full week devising templates for different ceremonies and all I had to do each time was insert some particular details to personalise it.

The opening was always the same:

*I would like to welcome you all here to St Mary's Church this morning to the funeral of our parishioner / friend (insert name of deceased). A special Céad míle failte to those who have travelled long distances to show their support and be with the family at this sad and difficult time. (special mention here to anyone who has come from overseas).*

*The first time I met / spoke with (name of deceased) was the day / night (location and time of year). He was (where was he going or coming from?). (if first meeting was banal then invent, the only person who can contradict your account is dead). : [name of deceased], [something interesting that happened the year s/he was born], (s)he was a family (wo)man, he was proud of his children, he was a great man for the cards, loved his border collie (insert name*

*of dog), a great man for going to the bog, liked his couple of pints, had a word for everyone, a great man for having the craic, oh now I wouldn't be repeating some of his jokes from this pulpit, no I wouldn't. [a funny story or his favourite joke], [a saying he had which might have a religious angle], [names of his family and where they're living].*

Funerals didn't generally happen one after another so by the time the next funeral came around parishioners had forgotten the structure of my few words, but with people recording stuff nowadays there was an increased chance they would cop on a lot quicker so I needed to continually vary it.

Anyway, it wasn't going to be a template job for Johnny.

I carry the urn containing Johnny's ashes as I lead the procession quietly to the top of Grogan's Hill, which stands in the shelter of the mountain. There's some mountain ash trees growing near the top and a walking track all the way up. In the last few years the power walkers and the walking clubs have worn a clear path through it. There's a panoramic view of the village from the top and on the odd occasion I've wandered up here by myself I've found a peaceful silence here, an ideal place to cast Johnny's ashes to the breeze, let him float, swirl and pirouette suspended in the dance of air, over trees, over the deep paths trodden by feet on the ground.

In the main group there's just Paddy, myself and Johnny's immediate neighbours, the Lydon's, the Fitzpatrick's and of course Niamh. I was glad Niamh came even though I knew it was difficult. I needed her support, told her I really appreciated it, there were a few gawkers on the fringes, Tom Maguire and Jimmy Corbett were cast in prayerful pose, beads and caps in their joined hands across their bellies, intent on religionizing the event, Maurice Sterne the principal is here too. Maurice was probably out walking and spotted the goings on.

—And so we carry out your last wishes Johnny, cast you to the wind, to float and fly freely on the breeze, back to the silence from which you came on your journey.

We're trapped in that journey metaphor of late, it's something to hold on to, the idea of going somewhere, having a destination, it's about something beyond. More metaphors, indulging



our wish to be able to explain something in terms of something else. They're all incomplete, just fixed up images trying to give meaning. Then I hear coughing, gentle at first but then it gets louder. Niamh signals I'm delaying too long.

I start to scatter the ashes and they take flight in the breeze. From the hill Johnnie's ashes fly between the trees in Peetie's wood and down the hill they make for the valley, hitting obstacles they swirl and flutter to ground, light weight ashes, cast to the breeze they go everywhere. Bits will get into people's eyes, their hair, before finally falling to ground, then journey on further on the soles of shoes and boots and the hooves of animals all over the place, some remnants even making their way in the open Church door and down the aisle, to be wiped up by Kathleen from the church care team with a J cloth as she complains about dust accumulating everywhere.

—And so we say goodbye Johnny. We thank you for the good you did and we're sorry for the ways we failed you, for the ways we were unable to reach you and help you feel accepted here. We're left with our questions, questions we live with because that's what we do with questions, we own them and we journey on resolving to support each other in every way we can. And if its guilt we feel about our failure then let us resolve our guilt not with sorrow but with learning, learning to keep reaching out to all, being there for each another. And so we play the song you requested Johnny, *Going Home* as we attempt to say goodbye.

I had it written out, stuck to it verbatim. I knew if I improvised I'd end up breaking into prayer, so I focused on my every gesture and word to ensure I didn't slip up.

And with Ken Colyer's *Goin' Home* playing on the CD player I gazed across the valley. Trusting myself and what I was doing, this I believed in. I thought about Fr Doherty digging his own grave as the sun was peeping through the clouds and the breeze was getting the trees to sway in time.

I closed my eyes, it could have been New Orleans.

Later that afternoon in the sacristy, I placed some ashes I had saved in the old tobacco tin which I inherited from the previous incumbent Fr. Houlihan, I put a big label on it 'Ashes for Ash Wednesday'. The local great and the good will be going around with bits of Johnny on their foreheads. He'd have enjoyed that. A powerful symbol of death, wearing the ashes of a dead parishioner on Ash Wednesday.

It was Sunday afternoon and I hadn't been to visit the graveyard over Christmas. It's a place I used to visit regularly on short Sunday walks. There would be others visiting and more often than not there would be a conversation or two to be had.

I park up at the graveyard and start making my way around the graves, names triggering memories and stories as I go. Mags Heraty, the widow, and her spinster niece Deirdre; late forties, are on their biannual tour of the graveyard. Mags was an occasional visitor to Kilcrua, having left the place in her late teens to study nursing in London. She married there and returned to settle in Ballisodare, Co Sligo and rear three children with her late husband Trevor. Each year they visit the graves of the previous generations in Kilcrua and Ballybriste, from whence their people came. Deirdre is a regular morning mass attender, she's big into the angels. She once told me in confessions that she thought Bridie Hastings was an angel. She could see an aura about her apparently. I said that what she was after telling me was 'interesting' and gave her a decade of the rosary for her penance. Thanks father, she said appreciating the additional penance. Some people put more stock in it if they get the longer penance. I know who's who now, at the start I went easy on everyone.

–Afternoon Father, a grand day thank God.

–Lovely, great to feel the heat on the bones.

May not have been one of my more appropriate comments, but apt perhaps as on sunny summer days like this, one could imagine the skeletal bones of graveyard bodies feeling the heat driving out the dank wet decay and loneliness, feeling the company of the pleasurable heat through

the surrounding soil. The beckoning feel of heat on a bone shoulder in this grave cave. A nice thought but the heat hardly penetrated that depth of soil. Anyway Mags and Deirdre were on their graveyard tour.

I say mass annually in the graveyard, it helps people to keep the graves half decent, the thought of the parish descending on the graveyard and people gawking is enough to get people to tend neglected graves. Let the dead visit the dead, but I still have to bury them. Although I often think someone else would do burials better than me now, not like the memorable ones I did in my early years, my authoritarian voice projecting, echoing, commanding presence and papering over all faith gaps, even my own.

Later that afternoon the wind strengthened. The power is out, somewhere along the line a cable weakened by storms Deirdre and Frank snapped with Gertrude's force. Candles, tea-lights and torches are located after thorough house searches and promises are made about being better prepared the next time. Kettles not used since the last camping trip now sing away on gas hobs as water boils, people are giving out about things not being where they expect to find them. Self-awareness is heightened in the cold darkness, and everything is visible in a darker golden yellow, flickering candlelight, the clock's ticks sound louder and outside hailstones ping the window like uncooked rice grains. The wind started it but now the trees are joining in, shouting their rage. The electric wires and wind combine to hum a tune, while the loose galvanise sheets on the shed flap up and then down, shouting 'Stop!' 'Stop!'

Sitting here in the kitchen of the parochial house I wonder have I just been coddling myself down the years. Saying mass after mass, driving around doing communion rounds, and trying to help people out. But I suppose no matter what you do, you inevitably end up coddling yourself. You can cod yourself with religion, with drink, with sex, people coddling themselves with all their beliefs and seriousness and people coddling themselves with none. Pretending there's something for them to be and then going about it in all earnestness. Cod yourself with the idea that you could

stop coddling yourself. But if I'm coddling myself then there must be a truth I'm denying and sure what truth might that be? My cod is that I god them, I feed their god habit, I'm the godder, the do-gooder, who does the godding, that voodoo that I've learned to do so well.

*–Father Gerry, I loved your sermon, it touched something in me.*

*–Glad it meant something to you Sinead.*

And I went on being appropriate, always being appropriate with my auto-priest banter:

*Good man yourself, fair play, you're mighty, Good woman yourself I don't know what we'd do without you Mary, (find someone else), weren't the choir marvellous this morning, we show our appreciation, God bless you one and all, Good woman Bernadette, I'd be lost without you, will ye come in for a cup of tea or maybe something stronger, ha ha! (no I won't be offering you a drink).*

Fr Gerry the vested eunuch, nice jovial Gerry whose cock had supposedly atrophied into a comatose piss tube, coddin' myself with my aul shite, my aul talk that used to put a bland gloss on everything. Fr Gerry putting the blather into conversations. What an insufferable bollox I'd become – a caricature. I played at being something for them, delivering pointless scripts, same words, different funeral, same words different wedding, same shit, same people, different day.

I'd grown lazy of late, bottom line I just don't believe in it. Deep down I always hated show, all the things we did growing up because of the neighbours. As if they gave a fuck, and sure even if they did, fuck them anyway. All that imposition as a child to shut up, be seen not heard, the imposition to be talkative, be mannerly, be polite, give granny a kiss and a hug, pretend not to be inconsolable when granda died, be a six year old man holding it all together, pretend your exam results were better than they were, pretend to be interested in grown-ups when they ask you questions, pretend everything was alright when it wasn't, it's grand, no problem, sound, pretend because that's what everyone expects you to do. No one wants truth. They had worked hard to get to this enlightened place where 'grand' and 'sound' say all there is to say, the rest belongs to silence. So just talk in dead, blunt words which say nothing, exchange the dry tokens between each

other and discard them immediately, throwaway remarks, words to pass oneself with each other at the shop, in the pub, words that float around the place and add to the aroma of wellness, to give the appearance of normality. Everyone a contributor paying the wellness tax and watching the river roaring in freedom past the hump backed bridge threatening to take it out of it. A fear taking hold that the bridge would give way, that it couldn't hold out anymore. There was no way to control this now. Prayers were offered for the rain to stop, that the storm would pass, that less rain would thunder down from the hills, rushing and raging to get to the lake and eventually eddy into the sea, rain that came in off a deep depression that originated as a hurricane in the tropics. Angry rain.

I feel the raging torrent from the window, mesmerised by its power, foaming and flinging itself at the bridge in complete abandon, calling it names, laughing hysterically, raging, raging, weakening the structure with all its might, breaking it with force, threat, promise, breaking. Come on water, break it, do it, don't let this pile of concrete and stones slow you down or divert you. Clear it out of your way, come on water, break it, destroy it. For hours it raged. The following morning when I woke the grey light of early dawn visible through the curtain in the bedroom window was beginning to dilute the darkness. It was calmer now, the water no longer raging just quietly in a hurry. Everyone relieved now the storm had passed, the wind's waves of anger no longer giving voice to everything in its path, it had broken up into disjointed noise.

It would take a stronger wind.

People were venturing out of houses to inspect damage, doors unhinged, bins blown over, rubbish scattered, trees down, plastic bags and bale wrap snap-flapping in thorny ditches in the now gentle breeze. Oh to become part of the breeze and grow into a powerful wind, to avoid the snagging on thorny ditches and barb wire fences. I feel like going back to bed. I don't want to see anyone. . I have nothing to say. I just need to be alone sleeping, sleep it off and the turn will come. I've thought about medication when this mood comes but I would prefer to negotiate all this stuff

by myself not with some chemical cocktail. It would be hard to know how much of any decision you made would be down to yourself and how much of it would be down to tablets.

I look at my watch, it's half eight. Another hour's rest before mass at ten.

I give out communion to a succession of loud Amens. I swig the post communion wine remnants from the chalice, swirl it out with some water and dry it with the purificator.

–Let us pray.

I read the prayer, they say Amen, and before I know it, I'm saying 'Go in peace the mass is ended.' 'Thanks be to God', they respond. I have the chasuble over my head before I reach the sacristy door, unknot the cincture, take the two end tassels of it and fold it in half, then half it again put a loose knot on it and place it in the drawer.

Young Danagher, the mass server has everything put away, I hand him €2.

–Good man Robbie, I don't know what I'd do without you.

–Thanks Father Gerry.

–Put up your hood or you'll get drowned in that shower cycling home. Maybe give it another few minutes it looks like it's only a passing one.

I put the alb and chasuble on the hangers in the wardrobe.

Eileen Fahey comes in to get a mass card signed.

–The name of the dead woman is Beatrice Kelly, B-E-A-T-R-I-C-E.

I write the card and take out a A5 sized black diary.

–Poor Beatrice, she went fast in the end.

–The poor aul divil was riddled, sure they didn't get her in time, Father.

–I can put her in for next Wednesday or Wednesday week, whatever suits you, Eileen.

–Next Wednesday will be grand.

–Right you be, next Wednesday it is.

She hands me €15.

–You don't need to give me money for masses Eileen.

–It wouldn't be right if I didn't.

–I'm saying mass anyway so you don't need to give me anything, buy yourself something in town.

–Thanks very much Fr Gerry.

–No bother. You're keeping well yourself?

–The hips are at me Father but apart from that I'm not too bad. Thanks again Father.

Eileen like many more across the country was part of that national grouping who were 'waiting to get the hips done.'

I was just about to leave and have a cigarette when Jenny Sweeney shuffled in. Just turned 67, and now in the final stages of her own battle with bowel cancer.

–It's only a matter of time Father. She was tearful, I'm going to nothing.

–I reached for her hand and held it.

–I thought they had it all wrong Father, sure I felt so good the last couple of months.

She had been coming to mass every morning now since the diagnosis and each morning I pray for Jenny she thinks I'm praying for a cure for her, but I'm not, I'm praying for her to accept it.

–I don't think I'm going to be able to come anymore Father, I found it a struggle to manage to get here this morning.

It was the first morning I saw her without her make up on. She looked frightened.

–I want to get better, if I could only get my body under the control of my mind father.

–There's no need to come Jenny, you should be resting not putting your body through more stress. Can't I drive around with communion to you after mass if you'd like, it's only a short drive.

–That would be great Father.

–No problem, Jenny.

Then I became conscious that I was still holding her hand so I gently released it, but she gripped my hand tighter.

–I won't see me grandchildren Father. It's not fair. Why won't this God of yours help me?

My God? I said nothing just stood there and placed my other hand on the back of her hand.

–I was a good mother Father, looked after Jimmy till he passed away. Stuck with things Father, didn't complain and this is my repayment from your God, dying one year after getting the pension. There's people do scandalous things and they live long and satisfying lives, some of them into their 80's and 90's.

I could have offered thoughts about not knowing the mind of God, God's ways not being ours, the sort of trite God-speak I had offered in the past when I'd been a cold and callous functionary.

–If there's anything I can do Jenny just ask.

–Thanks father, she started crying.

I held her bony delicate hand a little tighter.

The gestures, the motions are the last to leave me. I have already left this place, but my body repeats its learning, what has become second nature to it. My body knows how to be here, my mind doesn't anymore.



## 9

Everything is conspiring to distract me, reengage me. The green light on my Huawei mobile is flashing, new emails, texts. I've got up late, there's no coffee. Was convinced I bought some Saturday, looks like I only thought about buying it. I remember saying to myself I'd come back for it after I got milk, but I forgot to go back down that aisle. Will have to settle for tea. I'm feeling behind, outside the rhythm of this day. It can take hours to get rid of that feeling and catch up. I'm off balance in a falling-partly-recovering manoeuvre, the rhyme off, beats missed. Nothing moving in time this morning, there's an improvised jazz shape to everything, words won't settle.

I watch that phrase float like a helium thought bubble off into the sky, carried by the breeze. The beat is off but not even off enough to syncopate, just off, missing in fractioned, fractured time, full stops jarring in incomplete sentences, syllables shaved off word endings falling into empty spaces, bursting silence trapped in sentence endings, a DJ on the radio crashing song lyrics, time without rhyme, beats missing, anticipation cannot build, only suspense.

There's a hint of an undercurrent building. I tell myself to act as if nothing is going on, just embrace it. Shaving provides a distraction. I focus on making a soap lather for my face, the scrape of razor across stubble, the foam building in front of it, the scraped shaving-filings falling on the wash basin. I rinse the razor and then scrape more filings. Sliding my fingers around my face I search for the remaining rough areas. With smoothness achieved I light a cigarette and rest it on the plastic ashtray. The sound of tap water spraying on the washbasin, my face in the mirror and with the cigarette smoke billowing upwards I think of the lake:

I'm staring across the lake I can see myself sinking, my chin touching the cold water underneath. I'm picking my footsteps on the brown stony bottom, one step after another until nothing supports my next step and I fall and sink downwards, into a broody boggy darkness. I accidentally drop water on the lighted cigarette, it's disapproving tssssh's distracts me. Clumsy.

You could spend a lifetime staring at lakes, an entranced metaphysician wondering. Why wonder? Jump in, learn to sink or swim. Outside the clouds were thinning out, patches of blue appearing. The rain had stopped completely. There's an after-rain freshness in the air with branches dropping, hints of growth. My mind settles on those last four words. I watch the rain beads hanging on the branches, some slowly swell and then fall to ground, a wren plays hide and seek with herself in the hedge, startling herself with her play. I'm standing here sidestepping my urge to structure and put together the picture they showed me on the jigsaw box, disjointed pieces unified in a composition. Me and Niamh another composition, histories converging, our beginning over, present now, the future possible with an ending inevitable.

The space that Niamh occupied is empty. I have it back as absence for now. Fr Eamo used to say it was all about processing as in understanding rather than processing in a procession, but is understanding all that different to making a solemn formal movement in a set direction? Isn't that what we do with experience, process it, carry it solemnly like a blessed sacrament held at arms' length, repeat it until we bridge the space of worship in between, until we own it, the solemn walk becoming the process, the processing in the process is the understanding. And all the while imagination has been getting ready to play, accessorise experience with associations, reminders.

I'm getting lost in thought again, so I stand here now and wait for the next thought train. Can't see which way the signals are pointing, from which direction it will come full of passengers, people getting on and getting off, on off, on off, stop start, stop start, whistle toots, green flags.

If I do leave, I'd prefer to leave unexpectedly and dodge a choreographed finale where I get gifted some dust gatherer and everyone gets caught up in sentimental outpourings. The Chair for life of the community council Martin Fadian would want a picture for the paper, he'd write

about the presentation in the community centre, would probably use the phrase *In grateful appreciation*, appreciation for what, for going easy on them? They might give me a crystal bowl which would sit on a sideboard for years and when moved years later would reveal a preserved dustless circle under it like an upturned stone in a field. *In grateful appreciation*, Martin would find a form of words to cover it in the parish notes section of *The Western*, the protocols and customs around departure and retirement as much a part of the place as the whins, rocks and briars. Things that had to be done. The done thing. Optics! All those years I helped them with the optics, walked with them in the formulaic rituals which they believed linked them with the chain of things done before – incensing their coffins at the steps of altars. Fr. Gerry O’Dowd the continuity man linking present to past, and the past through the present into the future, claiming each baby, each relationship, each death for the tradition with ritual and formula, awakening the past into the present with voodoo words and solemn movements, the smell of incense deepening the moment, making this present part of the rapidly growing present-past.

Would my thoughts about leaving inevitably perish against the formation of the years. Man behind bars, trained not to disappoint. I would have to start working on my habituated body too, the genuflecting, instinctive bowing, the automatic offering of prayer and supplication, my own body acquiescing in the familiar. How long does it take to break a habit, six weeks according to someone on the radio.

But small changes can lead to big ones so I removed the holy water font from inside the porch door of the Parochial House. I took down the ‘footprints’ poem, the one about a single set of footprints: the time you thought you were alone but God was carrying you. More like you carrying God, the God that some parishioners credited with saving Joey’s daughter in the bus crash but remarkably wasn’t blamed for killing Mary’s son. The serenity prayer had always been my favourite. Asking God for serenity, courage and wisdom, none of them in God’s gift but in my own. A sweet sorrow taking hold of me as I plotted departure, throwing away old comfortable well-worn shoes, the track of my foot well-worn into them. Finally losing my stickability, one of

the great virtues according to the Jesuit priest who led our retreat in first Divinity, hanging on, breathing oxygen into the purple blue mouth of faith, death our exotic destination, our eschatological preoccupation. Stickability, the ability to hold on in spite of everything. I'm losing my velcrocity, there's nothing for it to stick to anymore. There's a litany of voices on the long corridor I walk,

*'You'll have no luck for it. we'll pray for you.'*

*'You're very selfish, we'll pray for you'*

*'You're upsetting people. May God forgive you for what you're doing.'*

*What about your promise Gerry?*

In confessions I often talk to people about promises, urging them to stay faithful, to bring their children up as catholic, to stay practising. We talk of lives made safer by promises, young soon-to-be married couples building houses and dreams on hugs and kisses, promises made to create expectancy, to solidify, lock in. We talk about temptations to abandon promises, the promises made with limited knowledge. I tell them about the good things about promises, there's security and then I focus on how things could be a lot worse, a game of brinksmanship, talking up the endgame, poor health, unemployment, addictions. I reorient them back to their ordinary lives of love and responsibility, being happy with what they have. Sure there's nothing bad that couldn't be worse.

–If only I won the lotto Father. The things I'd do.

–Sure you never know as the advert says 'it could be you'.

–It could be me Father, sure if it's meant for you, it won't pass you by isn't that what they say Father.

–That's what they say.

Habit is so hard to break, each mass, each prayer another link in the chain leading inexorably to the next, until you decide to break it and embrace the fact that life goes on even when habits are broken.

I exhale a large breath full of stale fear and darkness, it dissipates in the cold air like steam from a boiling kettle, toxic output from internal combusting. A tiny green shoot is visible in the clay, vulnerable to weather, predators or just careless animals, caring enough to open up, to take a chance to send out a shoot, to believe in possibility. From here I can see a pattern, how previous decisions and actions dovetailed into each other and led constantly around in a circle, at best tip toeing on the circumference, there was no going back now with a current of momentum carrying me forward.

I look at the window frame and I see the cross dividing the four glass panes, framing my view of the tree branches in their supplicating pose stretching skyward for heat and light to blossom and grow. I hear a wave of voices in my head, 'sure that's the craic', you'll have that,' 'sure we'll have to keep going anyway', 'thanks for the chat father'. My parishioners buzzing with positivity at Christmas, hand shaking and hugs, Gerry O'Dowd unlearning habits, not reacting to bells, not blessing himself, well only at mass, no dipping his fingers in holy water fonts.

*'You're throwing out the baby with the bathwater', someone says,*

*Everyone needs God.'*

They felt they deserved God so they created him out of their nothingness, and then agreed 'indeed it was very good'. They rest on the seventh day with their creation, their uniform to shield them from adversity. With God and religion they now had something to say to silence, something to say to loneliness too: *fuck off loneliness, fuck off silence we've got God now.* They ritualised that fuck off in structure with prayers and movements, things to say and do when all was bleak, no need to be awkward or vulnerable in the bleakness anymore.

But would it be all that difficult to stay and continue with what had become my life. Go with the flow, have an occasional sermon rant about hypocrisy and gossip but continue on, bite my lip, humour them, humour myself and sure they'd continue to turn a blind eye to me and Niamh. Yes, if I put my mind to it I could find some comfort here. A secure job, steady wage, my creature comforts looked after. Niamh's friendship, occasional sex, many a fifty something married

man would be damn glad of something like that, instead of living with a wife in separate rooms in the same house, hating each other but both too stubborn and too institutionalised to change anything. The price of staying; well it meant preserving the status quo, being an efficient functionary, putting up, often times shutting up, becoming one of them, stopping the war, calling a ceasefire, moving on by staying put.

They were arriving at the church now, ‘good mornings’ once again making the world reorient itself in a familiar way, fitting it into all that went before, into what sleep and dreams had failed to break, to the well-worn path of days. Arriving in numbers their best feet forward in their Sunday shoes, their words rippling hopes across the air, strength in numbers, the ‘c’ word. Community.

And what about Niamh? I don’t think she listens anymore. Maybe she never did. Hears her own stuff and then she reacts. Well that’s what yesterday’s conversation was like.

–Do you ever feel like giving up Niamh.

–Giving up? Like Johnny did.

–Well maybe not that, but feeling you’re on the cliff and a feather could knock you over.

–Not really, you just keep going, when you get there you distract yourself.

That’s the way Niamh coped, getting lost in all sorts of things. Distract yourself, it feels like a sort of lying to yourself, like you’d distract a child having a tantrum. Lots of people around here seem to live in a state of permanent distraction, eschewing any time to think.

Does anyone listen anymore? Everyone seems so caught up in themselves, no room for anyone to feel down anymore, everyone in need of distraction.

–You just take a deep breath Gerry and get on with it.

Niamh and her fascination with breathing.

–And what if that doesn’t do it for you?

–Well you take another breath and then another and if none of that works there’s counsellors.

Commercialized compassion, €60 an hour.

–You’re depressed Gerry and you’re bringing me down.

–Well I’m not trying to bring you down, but isn’t it important to be honest, why pretend or is real not acceptable anymore.

–You should listen to yourself and the way you’re going on.

–Why? What way am I going on?

–You’re just feeling sorry for yourself, lots of people have it far more difficult than you.

At that point I decided to withdraw from the ‘being grateful you’re not someone else routine’, counting your blessings, all that malarkey. Those comparisons have to be the most odious of all. Niamh was right about one thing though; I did need to listen to myself. It was about my only option apart from paying a counsellor. She often told me that I needed to express my feelings. Then I started getting reasonably good at expressing them, but if I overdo it I get a counselling referral.

–By the way, I’ve heard from Archbishop Tony. Meeting scheduled for tomorrow morning. That should be a bit of craic.

–Listen Gerry we’re going around in circles here. Call around and we’ll talk after your meeting tomorrow. The best of luck with it. She gave me a hug.

I was wondering what advice I would give a couple if they came to me with an issue similar to the one between me and Niamh. I’d probably tell them that you can’t make others love you the way you love them, or used to love them. It’s about loving each other in the way you each know how. Deep down I’m not sure Niamh believes we’re going to last, she’s being circumspect, but at other times she’s fully into it, can’t make up her mind, hedging bets, each way punts.

When all is said and done and yes there’s always more thought than said and more said than done, it was becoming clear to me. I was making the same mistake, trying to recreate a security in another place. I thought faith, God and a vocation was all I needed, now I’m falling into the same habit, once again trying to complete myself with something beyond, diving head first into

the liturgy and grammar of sexual love. But completion is not my goal, living is. Yes it's nice for the boy to finally get the girl, but that's a poor substitute for him getting himself. An institutionalised love is not going to bring deep joy. You can't be defining yourself in terms of someone or something else. This wasn't a quest for a replacement saviour.

Let go and let God that's what some retreat director said many years ago. Let go and let God, as if god was going to take the lead, God my leading man. So where are we heading today God?

Silence.



## 10

I face the car for home and back into a space to the left of the main door. Archbishop Tony's Black Labrador Bruno comes up to me wagging his tail.

–Good Dog Bruno, at least you're happy to see me, but ye dogs are not very discriminating, maybe there's a lot to be said for it.

I pat him on the head. He stands still for more patting and then goes to the front left wheel of the car, cocks his hind leg and does a short piss on it. I climb the three steps to the recently painted white door and ring the bell. Bruno is processing his way around my car, stopping to perform a ceremonial leg-raising at every wheel: incensing a coffin with a thurible at the corners.

–Ah Fr. Gerard. Archbishop Tony's secretary, Fr. Francis answers the door.

We walk down the corridor, it has that inside-the-front-door smell of a convent.

–Have a seat here, Fr Gerard, I'll inform the Archbishop you're here.

I stay standing, adjust my tight collar at the neck and listen to the loud clop, clop of Fr Francis's leather footfalls along the wooden corridor. My own shoes squeak, I wait for the clop, clop then take a step myself, then I do it again, clop, clop, squeak, clop, clop, squeak, Fr Francis stops walking and turns around.

–Different soles Francy, I say pointing to my shoes and taking another squeaky step.

–Indeed, Fr Gerard.

He turns right at the end of the corridor. I walk around and look at the portraits of former Archbishops on the corridor walls, and light a cigarette, there's a golf caddy halfway down the corridor. I'm tempted to take one out give it a swing but I stop myself. Then I hear Fr Francy's footsteps returning.

–Archbishop Tony is ready to see you now, Fr Gerard.

He opens the door into the Archbishop's office and announces me.

–Fr. Gerard O'Dowd, cc Kilcrua.

I walk in and shake Tony's hand.

–Will there be anything else Archbishop?

–No Fr. Francis, that's all for now.

Francy exits and pulls the door closed behind him.

–I'd say that fella's a godsend to ya, Tony.

–Great attention to detail, meticulous, good legal brain too.

–Sure isn't that what you need these times.

Tony takes an ashtray out of the top drawer of his desk and places it in front of me. It's years since I was in this room but it's as I remember it. The large sash windows, the heavy curtains, the oak desk and chair, everything speaking of strength, durability and continuity. Tony pours a liberal measure of whisky into a crystal glass. I accept the glass and smell the sweet honey nose on it.

–Great nose on that Tony.

–Special reserve JAMESON 1912, the Papal Nuncio brought it last Christmas.

–Well a good whiskey is something to be enjoyed regardless who brings it.

–Good luck, good health, I say raising the glass and taking a generous mouthful from it. I let the whiskey swirl around in my mouth warming and wakening my taste buds, feeling the sweet cut before I let it hit the back of my throat. It goes down well.

–You’re getting ready to play a round, Tony.

–Play around?

– A round of golf.

–Oh, yes it’s the diocesan golf classic tomorrow.

–All ye tigers will have your woods out so.

–They’re titanium heads these days. You never took to the golf Gerry.

–Never appealed to me.

–And you never took me up on the discounted car loan to replace that aul Ford Fiesta out there either.

–It gets me from a to b, sure that’s good enough. I see Francy’s Alfa Romeo outside. Still likes the pizza and the pasta, I suppose.

He ignores my remark and goes behind his desk, motions towards the chair in front of his desk with his outstretched right hand, inviting me to sit down.

–I have to say you’re looking well Gerry.

–I’m so so. I stub out my cigarette in the ashtray.

–Anyway, you know what this is about Gerry, I’ve had complaints.

He lifts a file from his desk and takes out a handful of letters.

–The latest one I have here is a phone call taken by Francis from a John Joe Kinsella only half an hour ago claiming you put a curse on him.

–A curse for what?

Tony puts on his reading glasses.

–Apparently you told him he’d have no luck for not sponsoring the active retirement group party.

–Kinsella doesn’t believe in curses he’s just trying to make trouble for me. Ever since I decided to have tea and light refreshments in the community centre after the communions and confirmations. He’s just sore that he’s not coining it like he was.

–We can't be messing with people's faith and their beliefs Gerry. You're upsetting a lot of people. What were you thinking of, transporting a body in the boot of a car.

–Honouring a dead man's last wishes, a man who didn't want to be ripped off by the funeral director, it's the guts of €5,000 now for a funeral circus with the soup and sandwiches, crazy money.

–And if that wasn't enough, you went and had that pagan ritual for him up on Grogan's Hill, bringing the church into disrepute.

–Disrepute! Ah now in fairness Tony there's many have made a far better fist of that than me. I was just honouring a man's last wishes.

–You're corrupting the faithful Gerry.

–Johnny's last wishes were sacred.

–You didn't need to follow them to the letter, you could have improvised, the greatest good of the greatest number we learned that in first philosophy or were you busy recovering from a hangover that morning, after a night in the SU and climbing the gates on Newman's Erektion in the early hours of the morning. So what if he wants a pagan service on the top of the hill to send him off, fine. I don't expect the local priest to be leading it.

–It's like this Tony, I found Johnny dead in his car, he ended up there because we all failed him, failed to connect him into living. We let him wander off to the cliff edge and he started telling himself a story about an ending there. We failed him in life, the least I could do was not fail him in death, I gave him the dignified send-off he wanted.

–C'mon Gerry I mean who has a private funeral. What's that about? Anyway one thing is sure you won't be anywhere near Grogan's Hill for anymore impromptu 'liturgies' anytime soon, not as a priest anyway.

–So you're going to move me.

–They don't want you Gerry, I've had six complaints.

He started leafing through more letters in the file, the book of evidence which Francy had put together. That's the thing about places like Kilcrua all you have to do is put a couple of noses out of joint and the next thing you have a big crowd gathering to teach you a lesson.

–So are you going to be swayed by them, are you not going to support your man?

–I'm not going to take on a fight with a small community, we don't have the personnel to wage wars or campaigns anymore.

–So the local mafia get their way.

–C'mon Gerry it's not Sicily you're in, ye didn't have that many 'drive bys' last year? It's simple Gerry the needs of the community outweigh the needs of the individual. That was, is and always will be the way. Yes Johnny was entitled to his wishes but you could have stayed on the margins. 'In your element' that's how Maurice Sterne the local principal described you. In your element, I can't believe that you are still so impressionable at fifty.

–Sterne. I wouldn't put too much stock in what he says. He was all over me like a rash when he wanted the principal's job in the school in town and bigger fool me I bought his bullshit.

–He's only human Gerry like you and me. You expect far too much from people.

–No, I'm just not prepared to let people off the hook like you are.

–Looks to me like you let yourself off the hook a long time ago, there you are in a relationship with the teacher Niamh Barrett, acting like a married man, and going around undermining people's faith with your mumbo jumbo scattering ashes on top of a hill.

*If celebrating a life is mumbo jumbo, what would you call mass?*

–Gerry you're leading a double life.

–Double life? Jesus I don't even have one decent life! Perhaps a clerophiliac – hypnotised by the gentle swish of a soutane or the mystery beneath – could have saved me from all this decades ago, Tony. But I resisted all that and the clichéd story about the lost man saved by the love or devotion of a woman, rather than God. See I opted for the love of god instead but we lost faith

in each other. Too much disappointment down the years. Hurt too. Naïvely I imagined my personal relationship with God or Jesus as a relationship of equals.

–Bottom line Gerry; I'll support you to get yourself out of this mess but that's it. Perspective is important, we're part of something far bigger than any one of us, a tradition, it's important to remember that.

Tony warmed to the theme of distance giving perspective. When all that distance ever does is give a more remote view, less detailed, taking in more context, altering the focus with a zoom out. Still the same view though, it's only time that changes perspective. What he was on about was a change of scene not perspective, an uncustomary lapse by precise Tony.

–Ah tradition Tony, the great tradition that tells us all we're guilty sinners, then they tell us about the forgiveness antidote, confessions, infect them with the sickness then administer the patented cure.

–Yes we give them a story Gerry, a meaning for their lives. If we didn't give it to them they'd invent one, probably a worse one, something pagan perhaps where they might end up sacrificing one another. At least we're saving them from that. People are fallen Gerry. We all are: we offer comforts to the fallen.

–Fallen? We've crippled people with the idea of how powerless they are, taught them compliance and assent, not leadership skills, there's nothing to salvage from these ruins that we're part of.

–I'm repeating myself now Gerry, you can't be going around upsetting people.

–Sure that's the gospel Tony, if it doesn't upset people there's something wrong.

–Gerry it's about bringing people with you. We're not going to change the world, why don't you accept that and just do what you have to. I could understand some rookie out of Maynooth getting all disillusioned. But you Gerry, you have over twenty years behind you.

– More than twenty years, and sure what have I achieved, just fed mediocrity and pretence. I've grown tired of them. They don't believe in better, they don't even believe in themselves.

And as soon as I said it, a voice in my head started turning it back on me. *It's you Gerry, you're the one who doesn't believe in yourself, if you did you'd have left by now.*

–Look Gerry we offer people hope, mark life events, births, deaths, marriages give them a spiritual significance, we give them the smells, the bells, the sense of a good ending. What's so wrong with that? At our time of life Gerry it's time to start taking it easier, smell the whiskey, play a few rounds, be available. We're servants Gerry, we must never forget that.

–Servants! Functionaries. Dispensing explanations, which we dress up as reasons or arguments, as if our explanations ever amounted to arguments, the subtlety of the distinction lost on us. Convincing ourselves and dressing the arguments up as doctrine and dogmas, a subtle sleight of hand, the trinity of the three card trick.

–People want what we offer Gerry, they may have fallen away but they'll come back.

That's what the consultant told me about my varicose veins, regardless of how much walking I did.

–You really think so Tony.

–We do the best funerals and weddings. People vote with their feet. Anyway Gerry what's happening here is that you're having a breakdown. I've seen it before with others who sat that side of the desk, and you're giving scandal with your actions, upsetting people, so it's time to deal with it.

–Giving scandal? It's not as if I'm messin' with the altar servers Tony. I'm doing my best, trying to be honest and I'm giving scandal.

–Honesty is often more scandalous than lies, Gerry.

–Upsetting people, and if the man himself came back you can be sure he'd be upsetting all before him. Hyperbole that's what we claim, 'see Jesus was exaggerating, he didn't really mean that about the camel and the needle.' It just doesn't suit, so we water it down, soothing their well-healed mediocrity.

–Gerry what we offer is tradition and continuity, simple as that, we are servants, serving the needs of the faithful.

–The faithful, as if it was faith they were full of and not fear, the fearful, that's what they are bishop that's what makes them stay, that's why so many priests stay too. Fear. Outside the cosy priests' club they'd be lost as ordinary citizens. When you're stripped of the trappings and the protection of a collar it's a different ball game.

–So is that what's keeping you here, fear?

–Touché Tony! Back of the net! Walked into that one. Well Tony If I'm honest, it probably is, but I wouldn't want to scandalise you with the truth!

I light another cigarette and take another mouthful of whisky from the glass.

–There are many priests who accept their lot Gerry and get on with it. They're happy to belong to a worldwide organisation and live out the humble life of a servant, then there's some like you Gerry expecting to change yourself and the world.

I was looking out the window across the playing fields of the boarding school, thinking that it's fear not conscience that makes cowards of us all.

–It a long time since we were out there Tony dreaming of playing for Mayo.

–Over 30 years ago which reminds me I need to sort out a get together for our jubilee next year, 25 years, hopefully you'll join us wherever you are Gerry.

–Sure I might be in America, Tony.

–Well that's an option, a change of scene Gerry, the church has always had rebels. You can symbolise something if you are still within and of course we can ensure your needs are catered for. All over the world Gerry there are catholic churches. Most postings are only a phone call away, basically what happens is I go to the parish, give the talk about you needing time for reflection, tell them you've had a breakdown and are taking some time out and then something wonderful begins to happen; they start feeling sorry for you, you're seen as human and a way begins to open for you



to return as the prodigal once you've done your time away. Coming back as the prodigal that's when you become a real powerful symbol, you fell but you got up again, you recommitted.

–Yes Tony, but this is my life. I'm not a character in some over-scripted Machiavellian melodrama.

–Well let me spell it out Gerry, you either take a sabbatical or you leave for good, those are your options.

–So you want rid of your troublesome priest.

–The community don't want you Gerry, there are people in that parish that have stood by us through thick and thin. See Gerry they have a feel for the complexity involved in organising things. Jesus didn't have that, he had the privilege of going around saying how things should be but we're left with humanity and trying to organise things. It's a nightmare. Here I am trying to motivate deadweight priests who don't believe in anything, who haven't the courage to leave but would rather stay and spread their cynicism and lethargy to the rest. Then I have some really good men, and a big group of fence sitters, same as every other business Gerry, no different.

He picked up a thick spiral bound report from his desk and held it up.

–Six-month performance reviews for all priests, that the latest recommendation to stir up the slackers. Where they think I'll get the time to do that I don't know.

He let it fall to his desk.

–So that's the new magic bullet, recommended by some consultant I suppose, between that and the financial guidelines, looks like the lads will be spending plenty of time on administration, busy administering instead of ministering, meanwhile our communities fall apart for want of leadership, the means has become the end.

–Well it's important to get that stuff right, there's a lot to be said for excellent administration.

–That sounds like something Francy would say.

– Anyway Gerry I’ve had a word with Fr. Colm in St. Aloysius in New York, he can take you on for a year or a bit longer if you choose, you just keep the head down and take it easy. Maybe bring Niamh out for a break after six months, just be discreet that’s all I ask. People like you can be accommodated Gerry on the fringes, perhaps more contemplation would suit you away from the demands of a parish.

–You seem to have it all worked out Tony.

I was still standing at the window looking out across the playing fields thinking that if Jesus had lived long enough he’d probably have ended up believing in nothing, died at the height of his belief, thirty-three. I was one naïve fecker at thirty-three when I think back now, still thought I knew things.

–Well you understand my offer, Gerry, you have a week to make up your mind. I have another appointment shortly, so I’m under pressure. I don’t have the resources for a battle in Kilcrua. The community there decides its future, they don’t want you and I’m not going to inflict you on them.

–Inflict me on them, c’mon Tony that’s insulting, you know I tried hard in the early years, bent over backwards to facilitate people, they became my life, I immersed myself.

Immersed myself I had. Lost myself among them until I started to disappear like Paddy Feehan’s aul Morris Minor which he parked behind his hayshed five years ago. The briars grew around it, stitched it to the ground, eventually found their way inside it, it sits there now all covered over, going nowhere, grounded now with the rust weakening it. Try to move it now and it would fall apart.

–You signed up for a life of service that’s what priesthood is about Gerry.

–Is that what keeps you going Tony?

–I realise how insignificant and miniscule I am in the grand scheme of things, that’s what helps me keep going. I’m part of something that has survived for centuries and will continue on with or without me.

–You still believe that triumphalist rubbish Tony.

–It’s not just my belief, history testifies to it. We may suffer further losses but there’s so many still looking for baptisms, weddings and funerals, they’ll still come Gerry. Saecula-Saeculorum, that’s the swing of things.

–Sunday after Sunday Tony, I look down at a sea of expectant faces staring up at me. I feel like telling them to ‘go home and not be wasting their time’ but I don’t. I just take a deep breath and get on with it.

–We give people what we know they want and need and maybe sometimes they catch something more. Change comes slowly Gerry, it’s not the people who burst their guts trying to change things that end up making or benefitting from the changes. Often, it’s the ones who come after, who have an easier less traumatic passage in the wake of the wave breakers.

–But without the wave breaker there’s no change.

–Yes I think you’re right there, but whatever way you want to say it, it amounts to the same thing, you’re an idealist with unreal expectations, I’m a realist, Gerry. You think you can change things.

–And you think you can’t, that’s the truth of it Tony.

– Truth Gerry, what is that?

We both laugh.

–Have a think about what you want to do over the next week and get back to me Gerry, the pope has made some interesting statements recently.

–Yes an honourable man, but it's just repackaging, putting things in a less objectionable package, it amounts to the same thing.

My attention is drawn to the folded local newspaper sitting at an angle at the far edge of Tony’s desk, noticing the headline about the Saw Doctors

–And there's talk the Saw Doctors are breakin' up Tony.

–A sure sign we're living in the final days.

There's a sound of a car coming up the short avenue.

–Looks like your next appointment is arriving.

–He's a classmate of yours.

–Oh!

–Terry.

–Carroll, the paedo Bastard. Now he's the one you need to pack off, pack him off to prison. Is it five complaints now or more? Suffer little children. People like him make me wish I believed in hell. Youngest victim ten years, the oldest thirteen. Scumbag.

–Everyone is innocent until proven guilty, Gerry.

–Yeah Tony, we always say that and yet according to our religion we're born guilty with original sin. The legal system has more faith in human goodness than the church does, fancy that!

–Gerry you know my offer, one week remember, get back to me, mind how you go.

–Sound Tony.

I shake his hand. Exit the room and walk down the corridor listening to my shoes making that squelching noise again.

–You're leaving us Fr. Gerard?

–Headin' for the hills, Francy.

He opened the front door to let me out and I see Carroll climbing the steps up to the front door in his flash navy suit and grey clerical shirt.

–Well if it isn't Gerard O'Dowd, long time no see.

–No long enough, you paedo scumbag.

–Innocent until proven guilty, remember that, he says wagging his finger and smiling an arrogant smile, with not a hair out of place and reeking of aftershave.

I make a fist with my left hand and punch him into the solar plexus, there's a look of terror and disbelief on his face when he sees my fist coming towards his smooth-shaven face, he moves

right because I showed my left fist first, I allowed for his evasive move in my swing and so my right jab connects flush on the nose.

–Stop Fr. Gerard, shouts Francy and he makes a half-hearted effort to restrain me. I push him aside and he runs back into the house. Carroll falls backwards and lets out a shriek amidst his gasping and struggling for breath. Bright red blood flows from his nose. The sight of it beckons me to punch him more, my left leg is ready to kick him in the balls. It’s as if my leg has a mind of its own – leg memories. I embrace it, launch a swift strong kick, he’s too busy with his hands on his nose to protect between his legs. I connect, ready to launch another, I want to keep going but I stop myself. I hate this control, just when my aggression is flowing beautifully like the blood from Carroll’s nose. Then Fr Francis emerges with kitchen roll.

Francis tends to Carroll, gently wiping the blood off his face. Francis doing the Veronica on it. Terry stumbles to his feet holding his crotch area, he’s recovering, I’d love to thrash him, but instead I light a cigarette and inhale.

–I’ll see you in court O’Dowd, you horrible man.

–Yeah, yeah Carroll, you’ll be someone’s prison bitch before that comes up.

I start to walk to my car, hoping he will try to hit me or retaliate so I can do a proper job on him. He doesn’t. Francis is still tending to him. Tony is looking out the window, I think he’s been watching all along. Bruno walks around me with his tail wagging, I pat him on the head, the touch earths me, eclipses my anger, I exhale.

It’s pouring rain as I drive through town, wipers going full speed, energised by Carroll’s bloody nose. There’s a speed and intensity to my thoughts. A week from Bishop Tony to make a decision, stay a priest and take a sabbatical, or leave and stay around or move away. A week to roam in that familiar place of the back and forth of thoughts, the for and against, all giving off an aura of undecidability.

It’s still pouring when I park up at Niamh’s. She has a fire down and has some soup on.

–A day for the soup. Looks like it’s down for the day.

–It’s been at it here since morning. So how did it go?

–More or less as I expected. Tony wants a decision from me, has given me a week to decide.

–Did he give you any options?

–Basically either go to America and take some time out or leave the priesthood, he’ll help with my exit if I decide to go.

I was still standing, pacing around with no desire to sit down.

–You look worked up Gerry, something’s after happening.

–The meeting with Tony was sound but I met Terry Carroll coming up the steps to the palace when I was leaving. I hit him a few clatters.

–You hit him!. You actually hit him.

–Wanted to hit the scumbag some more but I held myself back.

–Jesus Gerry, what the hell got into you, he could do you for assault.

–If he does, he does.

I sucked on a fag and could feel my anger rising as I thought about him.

–You know what Niamh; I enjoyed whacking the scumbag.

–Gerry, you’re not a violent man. That’s completely out of character.

Out of character? I’d gone off script.

–If he presses charges? You could end up doing time.

–They might put us in the same prison, that would be a bit of craic.

–Gerry, this is serious!

I didn’t share Niamh’s concern, as I stubbed out my cigarette in the ashtray I had just one solitary thought: I should have hit the fucker harder.

–Anyway one week to make a decision, that’s more serious then Carroll’s bloody nose right now.

I took the last mouthful from my soup and fought the urge to reach for another fag.

–You broke his nose.

–It was his own fault he moved when I punched him.

–Oh come on Gerry, did you expect him to stay still when you attacked him. I'm sure a judge will take that into account.

–I didn't attack him, I just hit him a few thumps.

–A few thumps, well it's still assault, probably GBH.

–Thanks Niamh, I'm already feeling better about the whole thing.

–Come on Gerry, it was a crass stupid thing to do. I'm so surprised you did that.

I'd surprised Niamh.

–Right Niamh, I'll make tracks. It's been an eventful day.

–You're not going already are you? You've only after finishing the soup.

–I'm heading home, might get a short walk in and have an early night. New day tomorrow.

She hugged me. I tentatively hugged her back, it was some response.

–Will you call over tomorrow?

–Hardly, I've plenty thinking to do but I'll text at some stage.

## 11

Out my living room window I watch the sun sinking in the West, the tree shadows lengthening towards me. Soon they will disappear as the setting sun slips behind the mountain plateau. Daylight is fading fast, a gentle breeze stirs the tiniest tree branches. There have been other evenings like this, looking out this window thinking thoughts but I always had a confidence then about how and where these thoughts would go. Nowhere. They would stay now and here. But the horizon has opened, now they have an urgency to go somewhere. I have to follow them, think them through. Fully.

I pick up my Breviary, the book marker is still at evening prayer for Stephen's Day the evening I discovered Johnny, my last personal prayer. I've fallen off the wagon – more a case of falling back on that particular evening. Hadn't said it for weeks earlier but that evening I searched my faith inheritance for solace in the face of darkness. A predictable but pathetic gesture. I ended up angry and full of self-loathing – coddling myself again.

Now the sun sinks further and its reflected light catches the underside of white clouds making them golden toffee-brown.

How could I help my thoughts come to a bottle neck, evolve into a decision. I could keep entertaining possibilities, doing columns for and against, then allow my emotions to colour my thoughts in. You need to think thoughts a lot to get to know how you feel about them. Idealists don't know when to give up, realists give up too soon. The trouble is I keep thinking instead of deciding, all caught up in my stubborn habit, refusing to give up. Maybe it's my expectation that



something might happen to turn this around, absolve me from making a decision. I keep telling myself that faith must involve doubting, otherwise it's not real faith. Everything surrounded and immersed in its opposite. I'd taken breaks previously but maybe the battery won't take another recharge. But in the stillness of another morning as light brightens, possibilities will dawn again. Hang on to hope I hear myself say, but hope is a pointless passivity, hoping against hope, hopes that can line up with and against one another, compete with each other because they are passive, aspirational. You express hope, what is it but wishing with a bit of intent.

Then again there are many who struggle with faith like me but they don't leave, they stay. They make a virtue out of their inability to choose, their lack of courage. They have spent decades expressing their unhappiness but no one has really listened, now they don't even take themselves seriously anymore. During formation they taught us the importance of not taking oneself too seriously, treat yourself with some disdain, have a laugh at yourself and others, regularly. And so intent gets toppled in a laugh, the wave broken, only to build again to be toppled by a doorbell going, an alarm, maybe a song on the radio. Toppled like all crescendo building thoughts with some banality or fear gripping you at the last minute, pulling you back, waking up from a frightening daydream.

As days and nights pass thoughts surface, recede and then resurface again.

Mornings come; I open curtains. See the same tree in the same position outside my window but small buds are becoming noticeable, small changes visible to the regular watcher and when their time comes in the mildness of a spring day they will burst open and reveal their foliage to the world. The daffodils bloom every year against the odds, while the world is still cold and frosty they carry on regardless, they will not survive to feel the heat of the high summer sun, to hear the bees or feel the brush of warm summer breezes. Their hour upon the stage is too early for that. They are in the front line heralding the re-emergence from darkness into lengthening days and as quickly as they come, they go again, with spring established their time has passed.

People say faith becomes a choice, something initially you catch like a virus, a sort of trust in providence. It's on the breeze around here, in Dia Dhuit's, and the Thank God's and God blesses that litter every conversation, you can't escape it. The local strain is highly contagious and logic resistant. One nurtured by ritual and habit it infiltrates your way of thinking, infuses your everyday actions and awareness with God and his presence, a tea bag diffusing in hot boiling water. Filtering out that brown claret colour is difficult, impossible maybe, you have to keep putting fresh clear water into the container keep diluting it for clarity, but there are always remnants, memes left, so you live with it, aware of its promptings, it's demands, it's dance, you the host feeding the virus with the haunted bread, a host for a host. The first step towards recovery is to stop feeding the virus, stop the rot, break that habit, the repeated ritual.

It started with words. They replaced a peaceful presence of silent curiosity with formulaic words, mantras that shaped us through constant repetition and led us deeper and deeper into the woods where we caught sight of ourselves and each other. Then they conquered us with forgive and forget, took our experience and gave it back to us repackaged. No need to ever look outside they told us, you have all you need now to negotiate the journey to ensure your safe arrival at death and an after-life. Somehow death got the upper hand and was now the prize after the long dark road of disappointment. They broke us, divided us within and in the spaces they created they put their dogmas and doctrines, divided, fearful and lost we clung to what they gave us. For years repeating the responses they told us to repeat, knowing it all by heart eventually, didn't even need to think anymore, second nature, automatic.

And so they silenced that curious innocent child all those years ago and now I belong to an institution which reserves the right to silence people, to take peoples voices away. My commitment to the institution; my orthodox suicide, my years praying to an indifferent God, mediating an indifferent God to my parishioners. My years in the seminary looking at the solid stone-built structures, the spire reaching into the sky, piercing the heart of Ireland. Something

bigger than one life, than the lives of everyone put together, and yet ironically one life, one death responsible for it all.

We follow the boundaries set for us by the institution, well more or less, ignore the probing questions, how easy it is to tame everything in a small suburban garden, a postage-stamp front lawn, the limits of your horizon set so narrow. It's just maintenance once the garden's planted. You might occasionally introduce a herb, a smelly lavender perhaps to improve the aromatics. With clear boundaries you know the space you operate in, it saves on arguments, disputes, even though sometimes it feels fixed up, contrived, fields reduced to lawns, ever decreasing rectangles. Down in the village at the bottom of the hill the new houses have their patchwork lawns, there's better grass on the lawns than in the overgrazed, wet poached fields. In summer the fields get to compete with the lawns but apart from that they looked stressed, the poor relation, lawns that you seldom see anyone sitting out in, fields for sheep and cattle, lawns for show.

As each morning dawns across the valley my parishioners head to work, fortified with hot coffees, cereals, light breakfasts and cigarettes, children to school to be instructed in the way of continuing on as their parents have, a job, a car, a house, a family, a religion, set up for life, for death too, even an afterlife, the five piece jigsaw of normality you could do with your eyes closed. Everything seeking to perpetuate itself, but when you broke up the jigsaw there was little motivation to put it together again, it never gives that same sense of achievement after the first success, just repeating something. A jigsaw story which goes like this: you are an fallen sinful creature whom only a God could truly love, a God who perfectly loves imperfection, but he's moody from all that perfect loving so he needs a sacrifice now and then, an offering to help him respond positively to humanity's salvation request. Enter his only son who then dies for everyone's wickedness and wins salvation. But even after that he's still one moody so and so, so we pray to Jesus and Mary, *'will ye have a word, humour the aul lad into being half decent,'* and people will tell you that man is made in the image of God, so the story goes with masses and confessions, communion and sacraments to keep everyone suitably starved and fed.

From the pulpit in boarding school they spoke about love and Jesus, but in the classroom and the study hall it was moody God battering us black and blue. Stripped to their shirts, collars removed and sweating from their battering workout. Punishments that, according to Fr Mickey Feeney '*didn't do us no harm*'. The truth preserved by his double negative, two wrongs making a right for a change. Dressed now in the uniform worn by those who battered and bullied; our ambivalence towards ourselves understandable, all the one now, same firm. Sometimes after a few drinks we strayed there, remarked it but left it again. *Different times* someone would say. Dressed up now in the image of our abusers, we'd be criticising ourselves if we criticised them, accomplices in our own undoing, our formation more complete than we ever imagined. Some fell into despair along the way and exchanged a tight collar for the tightness of a rope, our habit of avoidance had won for us some respite in the face of it all, best to leave well enough alone.

My silence is troubling me, the statements about the past being *a different country*, that *that was then this is now*, somehow not ringing true, battered into obedience, trained to follow orders. We're shepherds of souls and when dark voices come and unsettle us, that's the devil, the one they taught could be exorcised with faith every time he shows up. And so all doubts, thoughts of running away, of having steamy sex with Breeda and Anita in first Arts, separately or jointly, were offered to the darkness in my bedroom in masturbatory moans and groans; the distant hum of a freight train on the Sligo line heading west with the devil and God looking on, both feeling cheated.

It's four years since I went to confessions, I just breathe out any residual guilt now and with guilt gone there's space for renewed attempts to be more compassionate and humane. I've started to learn how to forgive himself, they take that away from you early on and give it to God, sure why go around guilty when you can make amends and dump it. There I was an eighteen-year-old standing beside the stone spire of the college chapel gazing upwards, feeling as small as a stone stuck in the tarmac, embracing tradition and history, the thousands who stood here and saw this sight and marvelled, bowed and prayed, I had been taught awe and wonder, embraced an adoration stance.

Twenty-four years later I'm still a priest, a sign, a symbol pointing to something else, through me, with me, in me, a bridge between people and god, committing my life to service a story, a construct that limits the possibility of discovery, a character in a handed down and handed on life.

I caught up with Niamh on Wednesday.

We'd been texting on and off in between. She was house cleaning when I landed. I parked around the back as usual. She's thinking of changing the carpet in her bedroom. I displayed a modicum of enthusiasm about it and surprised myself by offering her the thought that a deep pile, lighter coloured carpet was probably best in a bedroom. She agreed.

–So how's the week going, are you getting close to a decision?

–My thinking has been all over the place Niamh, but in the end it boils down to two options either leave for a sabbatical or leave for good. Leaving is what's common to both.

I paced the living room floor, fag in hand and once more gazed out Niamh's living room window at the sheep in the fields and Kilcrua hill in the background.

–I think it's obvious. I'm done, my vocation is over. It's time to move on.

–I've been thinking too. See Gerry you've been looking for something from me which I don't seem to be able to give you. What we have is good but it's just so complicated. Sometimes I think I'll never be able to give you what you need from me, other times I think you don't know what you need.

– Maybe I need time away from all this to see things a bit clearer. I'm too close to it all. You are too.

–Yes you're right Gerry. We're both immersed in it. But I do think we're both looking for a very similar thing but it gets lost in all the complications of our situation.

– That's true. We don't have a chance to just be as a couple and to let each other be.

– That's it exactly.

–There’s no template here. Our situation is different, it’s up to us.

Leaving would uncomplicate things, it would be a freer space for me, for us.

Outside grey rain veils were now curtaining across Kilcrua Hill. Niamh said something but I didn’t hear her words, I was imagining myself floating across Kilcrua Hill suspended in the soft rain.

I left shortly afterwards, we hugged when I left.

It’s Friday already and my thoughts are still taking me all over the place. If I do leave I will have a lot of packing to do. Where to start, decisions about what to bring with me, what to store, what to dump. I’ve accumulated so much crap, it’s like I never intended leaving here. I’d been good with books only ever kept a small bookcase, mostly full of ones I kept returning to. There is always something comforting about being in the company of books. There are about twenty of them that I have found to be good company, my inner circle if you like, you can always return to them no matter where you’ve been. There’s that comforting sense that you are in the company of fellow travellers who once walked a similar road. I’d have them any day before statues, ever since the day I dropped the statue of the Blessed Virgin and it broke into painted chalky lumps. I’ve grown closer to some and more distant from others.

*The Confessions* of St. Augustine is there. It appealed in my early years but I’d grown to dislike his despising of his early life in flesh, as if his conversion had somehow made him into something greater. Heaney’s *Death of a Naturalist*, I always thought it his best collection, a gap in my poetic formation perhaps, I kept going back there, the only other poem that gripped me was Clearances about his relationship with his mother. R S Thomas is there. According to Mick the hat from outside Louisburgh, when Thomas was out walking, he used to jump behind hedges to avoid meeting some of his parishioners, apparently his parishioners often did the same to avoid him. Not many hedges to jump in Kilcrua – it’s mainly stone walls here. I have developed my own

way of avoiding my own local sickeners: it involves donning my deep praying-and contemplating look and nodding in silence at them as I pass, even when they address me.

*Oh sorry Father, you're praying*, they say and the men if they're wearing caps, sometimes remove them.

*Ulysses* is there, don't know how many times I started that book, got two thirds of the way on one occasion. McGahern, Healy, and McCabe are there. *The Butcher Boy*, McCabe's high point. There's *The New Jerome Biblical commentary*, a few books on theology and of course books by Camus, Sartre, Beauvoir and Beckett and Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. A motley crew, not forgetting Darina Allen's *Ballymaloe Cookery Course* which I obtained on a weekend cookery course for priests many years ago. My adventures in the kitchen ever since veering from occasional to non-existent. And last but by no means least, a signed-by-the-author copy of my only published parishioner, Jimmy Fairweather's memoir, imaginatively titled: *Memories for Company*. He used part of a gratuity he received when he retired from the ESB to self-publish it. It was filled with wistful accounts of his idyllic childhood, his loving parents and a smattering of local obituaries: each one offering another 'best-cow-died' scenario, where locals were eulogised beyond recognition. A sentimental hue cast over unlived lives of fastidious mediocrity.

–What did you think of my book father?

–I found it interesting Jimmy. It must have taken you a lot of time to put it together.

–Thanks father, ah not too long, I kept doing a bit at it these last few years.

Interesting.

It's a useful word to disapprove gently of something, while giving the opposite impression. The reality was that it was just another book that would have benefitted from a serious number of rewrites, severe editing and many more years in gestation. Bookshelves the world over are full of these. Impatience and a lack of fastidiousness leading to premature publication.

I could give some of the accumulated crap to Charity shops, bring some stuff to a car boot sale. You don't see many priests selling at car boot sales though. There was always Pat Canavan, Pat would take most aul junk and put it with all his other junk which he had accumulated over decades behind his house. Pat Canavan and his obsession with the idea that things might '*come in fierce handy someday*' The sun would have burnt itself out before days would come for all the junk Pat had accumulated to come in handy. Pat was the go to man for whatever you were after and he would set about looking for what you wanted, confident he would find it in what looked like pure chaos, but being gifted with some sort of photographic memory when you told him what you needed, Pat would stand still, stare at the ground as if maps and routes to parts and things were written there and then take you to a certain section of the back field.

Whatever was left after I dispersed stuff in charity shops in Galway and Pat Canavan took what he wanted I would dump. Peetie Moran had offered to bring up the sheep trailer and leave it parked at the side of the house last spring when I was thinking of cleaning out the garage.

–Sure I'll throw th'aul trailer up to ya one a th'evenings, leave it there for a few days, fill it and I'll get rid of it for ya Father, no trouble at all.

–Thanks Peetie but I don't want it dumped in the nearest bog hole.

–Sure won't they do the exact same thing if you hire a skip, they'll just feck the lot of it into a hole, same feckin thing Father but I'm burning less diesel and not wasting your money. But don't be leaving receipts or envelopes with your address on them, the bastards below in the council will fine you if you do.

In bed I closed my eyes placed my right hand under my pillow as if looking for a weapon, then stretched out my hand to free it of all the tension. I gathered in the pillow towards my head, took a deep breath and thought of boxes and black bags, three piles CHARITY SHOP / PAT CANAVAN / PEETIE MORAN.



Morning comes around so quick. I sit on the side of the bed, think about getting dressed and fighting the temptation to get back into bed. I want to lie down and sleep, stay sleeping until something changes and I wake in a different space. I'm not in shape for living this day, out of sorts, going to be a struggle, the day running away from me, trying to catch up, the only thing that's getting me up is my looking forward to returning here later.

I look desperate in the bathroom mirror.

A blue sky slowly appears outside as the sun burns off the fog and mist. A morning like the day of my ordination but it was warmer in June 1987. Mass, first blessings, hotel reception, speeches peppered with euphemisms about the journey ahead: the ups and downs, *bends in the road, no Easter Sunday without a Good Friday*. There is exhaustion etched on my face in the bathroom mirror this morning. I look away, try to wear a relaxed look on my face and look back in the mirror, I don't look any better, my face is beyond my control now.

I think of Niamh.

What if I leave and we move in together, I'd probably start regretting the inconvenience early on, the thrill of the chase over. Then apathy setting in, eventually despising her for the hold she had on me. Johnny had found a solution to it all, but he wasn't around to experience the relief. Anyway I do still care about Niamh. That counts for something. But will we ever be anything more than friends with benefits. Ten years from now will we still be going nowhere. Gerry O'Dowd dead horse flogger. It used to be a lot easier to get off this thought train, to change the broken record.

I'm a ball of knots, chest tight, struggling to draw in breath, trying to calm my despair, to catch it on my outward breaths! Exhale it! Sleep! Sleep, would be the thing to settle all the dirt worked up in the water barrel by the stirring stick. I back into the cold kitchen wall, wet with condensation. It breaks into cold sweats each time heat moves across its surface. I feel its wetness behind me with my flat hands. In Kilcrua I have allowed myself to get dragged into their worlds. Johnny had brought me into his, I'm still in it, feeling his absence, half expecting to see him in the

usual places, his car parked at the shop, occasionally thinking I might head over to see him before I remind myself.

Johnny's life, a story, the last chapter of which he wrote in silence. A story about trees not bending but breaking in storm force winds, a story of an ending when there was no one there to understand the motivation or challenge the solution, to help him trust again in living, in going on. Here I am telling myself a story about being all out of faith, and what is the difference between being in and out of faith. Perspective?

Johnny had ended his story with its old jingle. Some say he had passed, they like to say that around here, like it was a driving test or getting the leaving cert. There he was now, floating off into the 'afterlife' with two A's, Three B's, a C in pass maths and a D in honours Irish. He'd passed on, that's what others say, passed on the dessert, passed on a race baton like a relay runner, a disease, a virus or something. Passed on.

Johnny was dead.

Right now I want to sit on a high stool at a counter and glass in hand gaze at the bar optics. Sitting at that high altar embracing silence in front of the tabernacle of bottled spirits, bottles to liberate alter egos. Spirits awakening behind the bar, *Paper Moon* playing, if *you believed in me*. The bar stools filling, a voice symphony of conversation. At first muffled voices through a closed pub door, then a loud cacophony greeting me as I enter. The wink and elbow laughter, hands busy fleshing out words and phrases, some eyes looking over shoulders, some backs slapped, raucous laughter, and in the corner Fr. Jimmy tucking into the black soutaned pint with the dog collar ...

–Mother's milk, Gerry. He laughs.

People said he was an addict but sure what's an addict only a weak-willed creature of habit. His weakness appealed, it allowed room for others including me. We were fond of a drink but not in Fr. Jimmy territory. Eventually he mastered it and after 7 years of complete sobriety he

was diagnosed with liver cancer, the damage done, too late the conversion. His drinking pals on their high stools chewed the gristle, fat and lean of Fr Jimmy's life.

–Oh the body keeps the score, that's what Martin Staunton said as he cleared the head and shoulders off a freshly pulled pint of Guinness in one mouthful.

–A waste of a life, one of the nicest men you could meet in a day's walk, said Franky Roberts ...

Fr Jimmy was long since dead. A gentle man. The memory of his early death reminding me of the urgency of living, the need to curtail my circular addictive wondering. Just get on with it.

# Body

## 12

I can't move my left arm. My legs feel trapped, but they don't seem to be. Concentrate, focus, more intent. Still no movement. Footsteps, someone's coming. I turn my head around slowly to look out the shattered driver's window, the car is angled sideways, my head is close to the ground.

A young woman is approaching.

–Oh Jesus Christ! She says and puts her hand to her mouth when she looks at me. I look at her shocked face. It must be bad. Worse than I can appreciate from my angled ground to sky view.

–Are you in pain?

–I can't move my arm or legs.

–I've called an ambulance.

–Good, were you calling them when you swerved into me?

–Swerved? I'm not aware I swerved. She'd read the Insurance company advice about not admitting anything at the scene of an accident. Looked like an accountant in her black pinstripe suit, maybe a solicitor, heavily made up, pretty, long tanned legs.

–You did swerve, and I swerved to avoid impact.

–What can I do, I shouldn't move you in case I do damage.

–Can you do something about my nose it's bleeding isn't it, put something under my head, the car metal is hurting my face.

She went back to her car, got her handbag and placing it down one side of my head she started rooting, eventually taking out a lipstick-stained tissue. Women and their crowded handbags.

–That won't do much fuckin good.

She wipes my nose.

–The blood is still coming, I don't have a towel. She was still rooting in her bag and eventually tipped out the contents.

–Over there, I say looking towards the fringes of the emptied bag contents, is that a tampon?

–Yes.

–Just stick it in my nose.

–Ok.

She got the tampon.

–Just stick it into the nostril that's bleeding the most.

She stuck it in my left nostril.

–I'll get a rug from the car to rest your head on.

She returns with a tartan rug which she got from the back seat of her car, rolled it up as she walked towards me, went on her hunkers and then knelt beside me, bent forward, lifted my head and placed the rug underneath, her pale green top falling forward revealing a pink bra. The rug felt soft against my face, probably smelt of some fabric conditioner like Comfort or Lenor but I couldn't smell it with my bleeding nose.

Then her phone rang and she answered.

–There’s a man here, a priest, he can’t move. Then she turned her back and I couldn’t hear any more of the conversation, just saw her gesticulating with her phone free hand to the person on the phone.

–Did you call the Guards? I shouted.

She turned around, put up her forefinger to indicate she had heard me, and would respond in a minute.

Looking at the cottony cloudy blue sky I’m wondering if this is how it ends? Lying here trapped. Powerless. No sign of a bright white light yet, I want to see blue flashing lights.

–Yes I called the guards. The ambulance should be here shortly.

–You wouldn’t have a fag would you?

–It’s not a good idea to smoke right now.

–Do you smoke?

–Have the odd one.

–How come you don’t have them in your handbag?

–Would smoke too many if I had them with me all the time. I keep them in the glove compartment.

–Light one and give me a drag.

Glove compartment. She arrives back with the cigarettes.

–Silk Cut Purple! Sure they’re like sucking fresh air.

–I’ll leave you a drag or two but you better not get a fit or something because it’s not my responsibility if you do.

–Understood. What’s your name?

–Sinead.

–Gerry.

She held the fag to my mouth, I took a pull from it. Red nail polish, large watch face.

–Apologies for the lipstick.

–Can't taste it.

The drag I took off the cigarette feels a bit like my first, goes right to my head. I exhale, she held it for me to take another pull, another charge runs through my body. I can hear the distant sound of sirens. Then everything grows quiet.

–Don't go asleep on me, stay awake, the ambulance is nearly here, don't go asleep!

–They always say that don't they in the films: *'don't go asleep, stay with me now, stay with me.'*

–Should we say a prayer or something?

–Why would we do that?

–It might help you stay awake.

–It's the ambulance I need not prayers.

I've seen those badge thingies, *'in case of accident please call a priest,'* well in my case unless the priest has medical training call a doctor or a paramedic.

–Sinead could you do one other thing, just itch my nose towards the tip.

–Thanks.

The siren sound gets closer and next thing I see a paramedic in green trousers and a white shirt coming towards me from the ambulance, he's snapping on blue gloves.

He's talking and running, I'm allowing myself drift off now. His colleague is around the other side of the car, says something about getting in from that side to release my left leg.

It's all becoming a haze, I'm drifting ...

I'm on a trolley, strapped tightly across my chest, one moment I'm looking up at the cotton ball sky, the next I'm looking at the lights in the ceiling of the ambulance. They bang the back doors closed and take off with the sirens going. There's shaking and juddering. I'm thinking about the way adults move pushchairs along pavements, sliding them down kerbs, up kerbs with no natural incline or dip, totally unaware of the juddering, the shaking they were giving the baby in the chair. I suppose babies, toddlers, children like movement, but juddering I doubt they like that.

I am still staring at the light in the ambulance ceiling, the engine revving and then falling back as the driver moves up the gears and resolves the tension of the lower gears, then we're at cruising speed again. The siren is off but when we start to slow down the siren comes back on again.

The paramedic tests the straps around my body.

–You're well strapped in, the less movement until we get you assessed the better, prevent further damage and get them to work on you. His voice tails off. The next I hear is the beep, beep, beep indicating the ambulance is reversing. Then the rear doors open and a blast of cold air rushes in. They slide me out into the darkening evening, the sound of swinging doors being arsed into and then slapping closed, lights on the ceiling down the corridor, then someone taking my arm in her hand, a nurse.

–Sorry Gerry just going to feel a small prick now. I'm giving you some sedation.

*Often felt a right prick.*

–All done Fr. Gerry.

The rest of that evening is a haze of voices, and nurses checking in with me. They've done scans, x rays to assess the situation. Then a nurse tells me to rest and get some sleep and that the doctor will be around in the morning to chat to me.

Niamh shows up, she's crying and hugging me. I'm drifting. She says she'll be back to see me properly the following day.

–Good afternoon, Fr O'Dowd, Dr John O'Driscoll, senior house officer.

He shakes my left hand before pulling the curtains around and makes some space on the food trolley for his folder, he starts leafing through it.

– I'm just going to run through the initial assessment from scans and x-rays with you.

–Sound.



–Your right hand is bandaged because you have a radial fracture, it’s not serious, should come right in a matter of weeks, there is no significant nerve damage there.

His voice was loud, the pulled curtains were poor sound proofing. He kept talking, my attention drifted as I watched him constantly resettle his glasses on the bridge of his nose and draw air up his nostrils when he came to the end of a sentence.

–You have a deep wound on your left leg so we’ve put some stiches in a gash you have there. The surface stuff we’ve dealt with. I will get a physio to call around and decide on what light movements might be helpful right now. The more serious matter is that initial assessment shows damage to the spinal column at T7. There’s swelling there at the moment so it’s too early to say what level of movement you will regain overall, with intensive physio and rehab we will get you back as good as can be.

As good as can be, not back to the same, back to different. I couldn’t concentrate. He continued to go through an inventory of my wounds, factually informing me of the trauma my body had suffered.

– We have already made contact with Dun Laoghaire to get you a place in Rehab, but first its stabilisation surgery in the Mater. The sooner we get you stabilised the better. We expect to transfer you there in the next couple of days. We take each day as it comes and do our best, ok Fr. Gerry.

–Gerry

–Good man. Is there anything you want to ask?

–No John, thank you.

–No problem Gerry, anything we can do let us know. Talk to you tomorrow. Jenny here will be keeping an eye on you for the next while.

Jenny smiles and takes my pulse, my blood pressure and does the rest of the obs.

–You’re a popular man Fr. Gerry. We’ve had phone calls from concerned parishioners already enquiring about you. Niamh rang, you were sleeping when she called so she said she’d be back in an hour.

–Is there some way to go private here, like not have any visitors?

–Intensive care.

–I suppose you couldn’t put me in there for a few days.

–Of course not Fr. Gerry. This is a public ward so it’s difficult to restrict visitors. We can say you’re tired and don’t want visitors on the phone but they’ll still come, we can’t be asking everyone their business. I’m sure you were a good man to come in and visit your parishioners yourself when they were in here.

–They expected me to visit so I did.

–So they’ll just be returning all the good deeds you did them, ‘when I was sick you came to visit me’, isn’t that in the bible.

–Pay-back time.

Every week for years I did hospital visits. It’s what priests do, turning up at hospital bedsides, praying, blessing, reassuring, full of healing intent and sincerity in the early years, head fixed at a 45-degree angle of compassion, my sympathy sugar-coated in fairy tale promises. Still no miracles to show for my sincerity, but I continued to go and sit with, saying prayers, an accomplice in the creation of false hope but there’s no denying it provides comfort to some. I’m good at being sincere, have learned to shut down my opposition, it’s what I do, my role. Good at being sincere, is that a contradiction?

–We’ll tell everyone you need rest Father Gerry so if they do come and they are staying too long just call me and say you need the toilet.

–Thanks Jenny, can you please stop calling me Father.

–Ok, Gerry, now get some rest.

I visited my hospitalised parishioners regardless of church attendance. Tom Maguire was the only man ever told me to ‘fuck off’. Tom had no truck with religion for years but it would have been mean of me not to pop in and say hello. Besides sure Tom might have a hospital bed conversion. It happens. He caused a scene on the ward, another patient started shouting at him telling him that was no way to talk to a priest. Tom told him to fuck off too. I walked the hospital corridors carrying the mini ciborium doing the communion round, people blessing themselves as I passed. Years earlier when Sr. Oliver was still alive she used ring a bell to indicate *Father was processing with the holy eucharist* and she had a candle lit on the small table one side of the nurses station. The only bells here now are emergency bells, not a candle in sight. I’m sure they have a few they take out when people die. They’re run off their feet here, too busy for those melodramas.

It felt like only a few minutes and then Niamh showed up. Her eyes fixed on me as she gripped my hand.

–Gerry!

She hugged me and kissed me on the lips. Then moving back out of the hug she looked at the bandaged hand and the bandaged leg and the cuts on my face.

–I can’t move them Niamh, my legs, not looking good I think, the Doctor won’t say. Too early to make a call apparently.

She started to cry and hugged and kissed me again.

– I’m so sorry.

–Sure what’s there to be sorry about, it’s not your fault?

–You can count on me Gerry, whatever support you need I’m with you all the way.

–Thanks Niamh, I squeeze her hand.

Not that I fully believe her, she’s responding emotionally now but when things settle she might not feel like that. She was holding my right hand, her hands felt cool and bony or maybe they felt bony because my hands were slightly swollen.

–Your hand is hot Gerry, feels swollen.

–Maybe the drugs or something, your hands feel cold.

I heard the last sentence coming out of my mouth, heard the words but I hadn't even thought them. Niamh's voice becomes muffled, I could see her mouth moving but couldn't hear anything, she looked serious.

When I woke up she was gone, but had left me a copy of the *Irish Times* with a post-it note on it.

*Gerry, you need your rest my luv. Will call back tomorrow. Got the paper in case you fancied a read at some stage.*

*Niamh Xx.*

How she thought I was going to manage to read a broadsheet with only one fully functioning hand I don't know. Still there was no point switching to a thrashy tabloid just because one of my hands was messed up. She could have got the *Irish Independent* though, tabloid with broadsheet values. Anyway, I wasn't in the mood for reading.

Dr Johnno arrived the following morning with what he told me was some good news.

–We have you booked for stabilisation surgery at the Mater tomorrow afternoon so you'll be going on a journey. We'll sedate you so you will be more comfortable and with a bit of luck you'll sleep for most of the journey. We'll have you tightly strapped in on the ambulance bed so you'll be more relaxed with sedation.

–How long will I be there?

–Just a couple of days to recover from the surgery and then back here until we get you that bed in Dun Laoghaire.

–So two long journeys but as I said we'll sedate you on both, for your comfort, you won't feel the time passing.

After he left I was looking at the front page of the paper when in walked Mags Murphy, Chief News Reporter with the Kilcrua Bugle and the Ballybriste Sentinel.

–Ah Fr. O’Dowd, lord save us and bless us, you’re in a bad way, she said as she blessed herself. I let the newspaper fall to the floor.

– Mags, tis yourself!

–Oh Father, I’m so sorry.

A tsunami of sorrow, she reached down and picked up the Irish Times with the post-it still on it.

–Nothing only bad news Father, she said as she pretended to read the main story but read the post-it note instead.

–I’ll leave it there on the locker for you, she said smiling.

–A bad crash Father, on a straight stretch of road, I hear?

I said nothing, just stared at her as if I was suddenly trying to remember who she was.

–You’re all bandages Father, your legs, and your right hand, but you write with your left hand don’t you Father.

–Write with me left, wipe me arse with me right.

–I’was Sharon Duffy the trainee solicitor from Glencorrib that banged into you.

I started laughing.

– She was a fine tall young one anyway.

–And the car turned over, Father.

–Has Dessie the turf home yet?

She stares at me, unsettled by the sudden turn in the conversation.

–Sure isn’t poor Dessie dead this last five years, didn’t you bury him.

–Gosh? And was it a big funeral?

–Fair to middling, you need your rest Father, so I’ll leave you, you’re not yourself at all God love ya.

–Sound Mary, sure I’ll be back saying mass for ye before long with the help of God. Say hello to them all for me. Tell Bridie Gaughan that I will get that book for her the next time I’m in Knock.

–You buried Bridie Gaughan this time last year.

–You’re trying to confuse me Mags, wasn’t I talking to Bridie only yesterday.

–I’m very sorry Fr. O’Dowd that this has happened you, a young man like you, she said.

–Sure God is good, God bless Jenny, thanks very much for coming.

She waved as she walked out the door.

In Kilcrua there would be talk of all the minutiae of the accident, the who, what, why, when, where, I’d end up repeating myself ad nauseam with every other visitor who came in. Was there some way to do a group session, maybe do up a FAQ handout. If I was on Facebook, I could get the nurse to post something.

Jenny the nurse arrived back with the pain killers.

–Was that woman I met in the doorway in to see you.

–Mags Murphy, on a fact-finding mission. She’ll have all the gories for them at the bingo tonight.

–Gerry, you need to rest, not be getting all worked up. Breathing Gerry, breath in one two, out one two, in one, two, out one, two. Close the eyes, in one, two, out one, two.

Jenny left. I stayed with the breathing and began to drift off, the warm pillow cradling my heavy head.

I woke to find Niamh sitting in the armchair on the left-hand side of the bed reading the paper she’d bought me, her right hand resting gently holding the exposed fingers of my bandaged left hand, the paper supported on her crossed legs. I rolled my eyes around to take everything in.

–Gerry, you’re awake again, she squeezes my left hand tighter.

I only moved slightly and she still saw me out of the corner of her eye. Women and their peripheral vision.

–Heard you had a visitor.

–Mags Murphy, I pretended I was hallucinating and that I thought her husband Dessie was still alive.

–You’re bold Gerry O’Dowd.

–What day is it?

–Its Wednesday.

–You’re not in school, Niamh?

–Took some time off.

–Thanks for coming, have you been here long?

–About half an hour or so. Is there anything I can get you?

–When did I have the accident?

–Monday.

–I’ve lost track of time.

–I brought you some pyjamas and a toilet bag with razors and a few bits.

–Thanks, you’re a star.

–I’m going to have to get back now but I’ll call again tomorrow evening after school.

–Thanks Niamh. She put her arm around my neck and kissed me on the lips.

–Safe Journey.

–See you in the Mater if I can but if not I’ll be here as soon as you get back. I’ll text you so keep the phone charged and if you can, text back.

I picked up the Irish Times with my good hand and started to read some headlines. Usual fare: the Middle East, the EU, Health Service, the next budget. Twelve months from now it would be full of the same themes, an opinion piece on Friends with Benefits. I place the paper on the

bed and with my right hand I manage to open it and fold it so it is now tabloid size and I can attempt to read some of the article.

I had only started it when I grew tired and couldn't concentrate. I'd read it another time.

They got me ready early the following morning. Jenny packed my bag, including *The Irish Times* containing the unread article about friends with benefits. She was going to bin it but I asked her to pack it. I would read it when I could concentrate better. The journey was uneventful, I slept for most of it and arrived in the Mater about 6 o'clock, the Angelus bell was sounding on the radio as they wheeled me down the corridor to the ward.

One hospital ward is like another, and hospital days are long days. You fall out of the punctuations of familiar time. Now time is marked with doctors' rounds, meals, food smells, changing shifts, brightness and darkness outside the window, the grey sky, sometimes blue. Bells sounding, beeping monitors, curtains around beds, someone snoring in the middle of the day, beds on the move down to theatre and back. Hours lose their relevance, healing and health has its own rhythm, its slow, deliberate, gradual. There's waking at all sorts of times and if you don't lose yourself in reading or more sleep, they feel even longer. Here in the ward there's a small television positioned high on the wall near the ceiling, it's on from morning 'til night, I don't think anyone ever hears it. It's just there like some mental-er talking to itself all the time, repeating the same news every half hour or so. How them presenters can look so animated retelling the same news all the time I don't know. It's background presence, a reminder of the everyday world outside here.

I sleep on and off, there's nurses coming and going. I'm due in theatre in the morning. I'm fasting now. I wake during the night and can't go back to sleep. I'm full of thoughts and questions. Will I ever be able to have sex again?

I feel more alone than I ever have.

There's a rush of activity in the morning. There's been a cancellation so I'm second on the list.



Nurse Geraldine is looking after me. The anaesthetist has been around, he's interested in my weight, my height, have I any crowns, he gets me to sign the consent form. A different doctor arrives.

–Just a tiny scratch now. She's putting in a canula. And then in minutes they're wheeling me down to theatre.

–Hi Fr. Gerry, just checking your wrist band. A nurse or doctor in greens writes something on a form.

–I signed the consent sheet already.

–Yes you did. Then the anaesthetist arrives and tells me he's putting me to sleep. You're going to feel sleepy now, don't try to stay awake, just relax, you can count backwards from 20 if you like.

*20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, they didn't give me enough...*

Then I hear a voice echoing in the distance but getting closer.

–Fr. O'Dowd, hello Fr O'Dowd, you're back with us.

Ceiling lights and voices echoing like swimming pool voices.

–We're taking you up to the ward.

I was moving again, wheels rolling, passing ceiling lights like broken white road lines. I move my head slowly to see what I can see of myself.

–We'll get you on to the ward and the doctor will see you shortly.

–Thank you. I was hoarse, my throat was sore. I felt so tired.

–We're moving you onto your bed. I hear the bed pedal being pushed, raising the bed to the same height as the trolley to slide me across.

–Ok, Fr O'Dowd, we're going to lift you across now. Everyone ready, one, two, three.

I feel the coolness of the white pillow as my leaden head sinks into it.

–Get some rest Fr. O'Dowd

–Call me Gerry.

No one responded so maybe I hadn't said it only thought it.

–We'll get you something to eat later on, just rest for now.

Had I asked for something to eat instead of telling them to call me Gerry?

Dry mouth, feeling sick, can't smell anything, not even a hospital smell. I'm awake but no one knows it yet, I could ring the bell, no I'll let them find me awake, I can see two men opposite, one in bed sitting up reading a paper and the other in his dressing gown looking out the window.

–Ah Fr. O' Dowd you're awake.

It's Geraldine the nurse.

–How are you feeling pet?

–Dry mouth, thirsty, I say opening my mouth and sticking out my tongue.

–Your mouth is very dry, here wet your lips with that. She handed me a wet spongy thing on a stick, I put it in my mouth as she takes my blood pressure.

–Tastes like vinegar.

–Wine, no we can't give you wine to wet your lips pet, just relax, you're still not fully out of that anaesthetic. I'll get the kitchen to bring you some tea and toast and I'll get you lifted up in the bed. Ok Father Gerry, be back to you in a minute.

–Gerry! Gerry!

–Just relax pet, It's hard to make out what you're saying at the minute.

She left the ward. Would I have to buy one of them Star Wars t shirts and put 'I AM NOT YOUR FATHER, THE NAME'S GERRY' on it. She returned with a care assistant and they raised me up in the bed, then the tea and toast came,

–Zoogar and melkh for you?

–One sugar and a dash of milk.

–How much milk?

I nod to her to pour, she pours and I then indicate to her to stop by raising my left hand, she is used of these mimes. I look at her name badge.

–Thanks Agnieszka

–Enjoy! She smiles.

I smile back. The toast and tea mixed together in my mouth tastes metallic, only with the last mouthful does it taste anything like tea and toast should taste.

I have this sharp pain in my side as if someone had knifed me. Just then Geraldine walked in.

–You had a decent rest there Gerry, good man.

– I have this awful pain in my side, feeling a lot of pressure, feels like I have a boil that needs lancing or something.

–You have bruising there, slight rib damage so there will be some pain. Remember pain is not a bad thing it means you are having sensations, I'll get you something to ease the pain.

Yes, hospital days are long days, looking at ceilings, waiting for wounds to heal. My traumatised body refusing to be taken for granted anymore, filling my awareness. I have fallen through a tear in reality. Words and bits of sentences come within earshot then take off somewhere else. There are footsteps on the corridor, the trundly wheels of the drug trolley. The sound of pages turning, doctors leafing through files, charts, doctors walking slower than nurses.

The long days are passing, the long nights too. I wake up at strange hours, generally between 2am and 4am, neither late nor early just in between. According to Margaret the nurse on nights, a lot of people die during those hours. Not sure if she was just rising me. I wake up at 2am after about two hours sleep and think it's time to get up. It's as if my body is ready to get up again. I get back to sleep eventually and when I next wake up I feel even more tired. Geraldine the nurse said she'll give me a tablet for that, I suppose it's no harm but those things can be addictive. I said

that to her and she assured me my dose wouldn't be addictive. I suppose they know what they're doing. It was something I used never have problems with, sleeping, went the full night no problem.

Then Dr Tony McConnell arrives one morning, some days after my surgery to tell me I'm going to be on the move again, back to Mayo General to heal for a while until they get me that bed in Dun Laoghaire. They'll give me sedation, I won't feel the journey.

I'm back in Mayo General, back to what previously had become familiar. Dr John O'Driscoll fills me in on the surgery and the prospect of an early transfer to Dun Laoghaire. He walks the corridor and the ward with files in his left hand constantly looking as if he's trying to remember something he's forgotten or left somewhere. There's the sound of a church bell in the distance, I'm here recovering, don't have to go anywhere or do anything now because I hear a bell, its peal is tolling for others.

There's something freeing about that.

We used to pull the bejaysus out of the church bell when we were altar servers, first bell at a quarter to, final bell at five to. Often got double rings out of it as the chain pulled us about four foot up the church gable wall on the swing back, each ring saying hurry! Hurry! the double ring hurry up! hurry up to fuck! People rushing off to grab raincoats, jackets, car keys, *Come on! Get into the car! We'll be late! We'll be late! Last bloody minute as always!* Our ten-minute-fast clock always kept us on time. Over time we learned to allow for Mam's forward clock adjustment.

I'm not able to read much at the minute, can only focus for a short while. Jenny says it's the medication that has blunted my sensation of pain, my focus, my sense of presence. I'm feeling a tentative engagement with reality of late, like we're floating away from each other, only hanging on by a thin elastic thread that's close to breaking point. If it breaks, I will float off like a helium balloon into the sky, my mind, demagnetised of attachment, no more thought to Velcro me to the real or even the imagined, just drifting off to a place where sentences and words are just arrangements of letters.

Niamh is back visiting me again. She texted me every single day I was in the Mater, I replied as often as I could. Her texts kept me engaged. I found myself looking forward to seeing her again, looking forward to feeling her hugs that seemed to awaken my body to life, ground me in a place, making me feel more present not only to her but also to myself. I'm happy she visits but I don't know how I should feel about her visits, her hugs kisses and tears. Sometimes I want to respond but I hold back, we talk for a while but then I begin to detach. I start hearing the silences between words, the off-beat as words break up into syllable sounds, floating about in the silent darkness, broken word-shards jig sawing themselves into nonsense.

Dr O'Driscoll tells me I have to embrace the unexpected, stop imagining that I'm still living my former life. 'Uncharted waters' he said. I wonder has he got a yacht, some of them consultants do. 'Your world has been turned upside down', he said. It sounded like an exaggeration when he said it. He checks in on me most days and the physio Fiona gave me some gentle exercises to do.

Jenny is looking through my bag for clean underwear. She finds the old copy of The Irish Times.

-You have that old paper back with you again.

-Leave it there beside me Jenny, I might have a read later.

That unfinished article is in my head, the one I started reading whenever it was, the one about the friends with benefits. I find the page and fold the paper so I can start to read.

According to the author, friends with benefits are doomed to failure. In friendships between men and women of similar ages it was inevitable that sex would become an issue. She mentioned the movie *When Harry met Sally*. Once there was sex in a relationship, regardless of the frequency it was going to be next to impossible to contain the relationship and set limits around it. Sexual intimacy would demand more sexual intimacy which was the result of emotional intimacy. It was a female view, at least she admitted at the end of the piece that the male view might be very different. I found myself thinking of Sinead Garvey who told me in confession that she still loved

her husband but not in a sexual way. The sex was something she wanted him to sort out for himself, safe sex of course. She was happy with that. I told her whatever worked for them was fine and once the sex he was having was consensual I saw no problem. Sure the church always overcomplicated sex, elevated it to a soul activity rather than a bodily function and need, all in the name of controlling people.

It was time for me to ask Dr Johnno the big question.

–John I have a question I want to ask you privately.

–Ok Gerry. He said lowering his voice.

–What about my penis, erections, sex, all that?

A smile broke across his face. He paused, was it bad news or what?

–Sorry Gerry my mistake I assumed you were a catholic priest. Well Gerry, as I'm sure you know the penis is not a muscle, so as long as there's good blood flow and there's no nerve damage it will get hard. Ejaculation may be difficult but they have people in Dun Laoghaire who are experts on this, they will go through all this with you.

–Ah sure if it was a muscle, lads would be spending hours in the gym trying to make it bigger and harder.

–You may need catheterisation but it is possible to deal with that so it doesn't get in the way. Early days but outlook is promising. He smiled.

–By the way I *was* a catholic priest, John.

–Oh right, ok, I thought it was a case of once a priest, always a priest.

–Well John as I'm sure you know it doesn't shrivel up and just become a piss tube after saying a thousand masses.

–No, surgical intervention and hormone therapy would be far more effective.

–Jaysus John that might be a bit severe.

–Perhaps. Anyway I have some good news Gerry, we've heard back from Dun Laoghaire, and they will have a place for you in a little over a week. Generally it takes longer but they've been

allocated a budget for two extra beds apparently, so looks like that God of yours might be fast tracking you.

If Dr John O'Driscoll thought fate or some invisible power was working on my behalf then I was going to leave it like that. Who was I to correct him on his hypothesis? Of course if God was fast tracking me on a waiting list then he was making someone else wait longer. Obviously O'Driscoll's God didn't have an absolute belief in queueing or fairness. John was still talking when my attention strayed back to him.

–If you have any more questions just ask, the goal in Dun Laoghaire rehab will be to get you back as much independence as possible.

–A journey to independence.

–In six months you may even be able to go back to your job, your workplace, but it will need some adaptations. Anyway that's some time away, the main focus here now is to help your body heal. Do the light physio, take the medication and rest, you'll need all your energy for Dun Laoghaire.

It's morning, breakfast trays are being delivered around the ward and there's a smell of toast.

–Good morning, Gerry. How are you this morning pet.

–Wouldn't mind a cup of sugary tea, bit of toast and a cigarette Jenny.

–Breakfast will be along shortly, but I can't help you on the cigarette front.

I bent my elbows and driving them down into the bed I was able to move my torso upwards, but I felt a dragging sensation at my hip joints: my lifeless legs.

Eight people on the ward, four opposite four just like The Siege of Ennis, won't be doing one of them anytime soon.

Later that day I fell asleep and when I awoke Niamh was sitting in the armchair on the left-hand side of my bed, reading *Woman's Way*. Was there an alternative? Her light green coat draped over the back of the armchair, her protruding breasts, her skirt, bare no tights legs, fake

tan, sexy Niamh. I pictured her pulling the curtains around removing her blouse then getting up on the bed, straddling me, my hands reaching up inside her skirt discovering how wet she was. I was staring at her legs as she sat on the chair, her skirt had slid up about a foot above her knees. I must have let my eyes linger.

–Gerry, you’re staring at my legs.

–Lovely legs Niamh, just thinking about where they lead.

–You have to concentrate on getting better never mind thinking about my legs.

–Bossy Niamh. Nice.

–Gerry, stop that going on.

–I’m hoping things will still work down there Niamh.

–Well that’s good news and you’ve one good hand so you’ll be sound, she said as she adjusted her position in the chair and fixed her skirt so that it covered down to just above her knees.

–Three months in rehab Dun Laoghaire they tell me, Niamh. A good chance I’ll get a place in the next ten days or maybe earlier, will improve the outcome if they can get me there soon. Significant damage to my spine, wheelchair territory even though they won’t commit.

–Well Gerry I’ll be here, there wherever you need me, you know that.

–A journey into the unknown so we’ll just have to wait and see.

She leaned in over me, hugged me and kissed me on both cheeks.

–Thank God you’re safe.

Safe? I mean it wasn’t as if I’d escaped from some catastrophic event.

–Thank the paramedics for getting there in time and looking after me.

She reaches for my hand, I pushed myself forward with my good hand.

–So we’re talking rehab, I’ll be there for you anyway I can, you know that.

–Thanks Niamh.



I didn't know exactly what she meant but now wasn't the time to pursue it. People say things on the spur of the moment. Maybe she felt sorry for me, pitied me, if that was it, it wouldn't last. It would morph into resentment in time when pity wanted pay back. Maybe she did really mean it, in which case it needed to be embraced with both hands, because connections don't happen that easily, it takes time and timing, but I don't want to be withdrawing compassion and care from some account that I cannot pay back – no point being in that type of negative equity.

The next ten days flew, me impatient to get to Dun Laoghaire and my parishioners coming and going. Full of sympathy for *'poor aul Gerry the cratúr, sure when all was said and done, he wasn't the worst, arrah sure God love him.'*

Sickeners!

Kinsella turned up as well, with his big mountainy shoulders growing out from the side of his jaws.

–By all accounts you're not in great shape O'Dowd. I was in visiting aul Johnny Nevin down the corridor, he fell and broke his hip.

–And there was me thinking you came in especially.

He smiled.

–No I'm not in great shape, but sure if I end up back in Kilcra I'll still be able to have a pint in your place, haven't you a wheelchair accessible toilet.

A pale hue of disappointment seemed to colonise Kinsella's face.

–Didn't you put it in when Mary's brother Martin ended up in the wheelchair?

–I did, you're right there, he's dead now this four years God be good to him. Only used that toilet two Christmas's in a row.

–So how's Mary keeping?

–Sound, she said to say hello, she'd be in but she's spending a few days with Cliodhna above in Athlone.

–Well tell her I was asking for her, she always has a welcome for me in your place.

–Anyway you're going to be here a while by all accounts.

–Another few days and then off to rehab in Dun Laoghaire.

He picked up the newspaper and looked at the headlines.

–Th'aul world is upside down. He put down the newspaper and walked over to the window, saluting the other patients as he went.

–There's a grand view of the town from here. He started to amble back to the end of my bed again.

–Anyway I have to go to the cash and carry, so I'll be off. Mind yourself, you're in better shape than I thought. See ya O'Dowd, the first pint is on me if you call in.

He shook my hand with his shovel hands.

–Right Kinsella, mind how you go.

He waddled out the door, his leather shoes echoing down the corridor. Maybe one day I would take up Kinsella on his free pint, his Guinness was always good, the best pint around. I looked at the paper to see could I see the upside-down world that Kinsella saw.

I had my wheelchair fitting last Thursday at the Wheelchair and Seating Clinic. They took all sorts of measurements, my shoulder chest and hip width, the distance from the seat to the top of my shoulder and the distance from the seat to my elbow, my upper leg length and lower leg length. My customised manual wheelchair will be ready next week and will ensure I have proper back and arm support. They gave me one to get some practice on for now. I thought it would be a fairly seamless transition to becoming an accomplished wheelchair user, but not so. See I have this tendency to take left turns too tight – my left-hand knuckles are skinned from two door jamb scrapes already. The first one was the most painful. I was flying down the corridor and tried to negotiate the ward entrance at speed by slowing my left wheel and pushing hard on the right wheel. I whacked my knuckles into the door jamb and scraped paint off the ward door with the footrest.

When they saw the state of my knuckles they gave me one of them hurling gloves with the knuckle protection on the back to protect my left hand. It's ideal for the job and has saved my knuckles from a number of further scrapes already.

Wearing a hurling glove, and not a sliotar in sight.

The following days Niamh called again and there was a steady stream of priests, Sean, Mark, Dermot, Paul, Martin, most of them I hadn't seen since the last annual in-service day a few months back. Then in walked Bishop Tony, briefcase in hand one afternoon, wearing his big cross on the big chain, dog collar, his ring with the purple red stone in it and the hair all Brylcreemed. Put a pair of sunglasses on him and he'd look the complete liturgical Don.

–Tony! You look like a man on important business.

–Formal dress for the deanery meeting this afternoon Gerry, he shook my hand.

I looked down at his shoes, looked like they'd come out of a box that very morning, a box that had perhaps arrived by DHL from some clerical outfitters. Anyway here was Don Tonio Murphione standing beside my bed, mother church's well groomed, faithful servant.

–So how are you keeping Gerry?

–Pain more or less under control. Off for rehab in Dun Laoghaire soon for a three-month intensive course in living independently. One leg fecked, the other one might come sort of right with physio, a decent fitness regime and a good diet, I should be all set for the next Paralympics.

– You haven't lost your sense of humour anyway. Unfortunately!

–And you still haven't developed one.

He smiled.

–So three months in Dun Laoghaire Gerry.

–I can't say Dun Laoghaire featured in my sabbatical thoughts.

–Well perhaps you can start your sabbatical after.

–I'm not thinking that far ahead right now, Tony.

–Day by day Gerry that’s the height of it. You’ll want somewhere to stay when you come home.

–I’m not thinking that far ahead yet Tony.

–Well you can leave that with me, I’ll keep an eye out. Would you take a place in Galway for a few months if there was one available.

–I like Galway Tony, appreciate you keeping an eye out but I’m a long way away from that right now. Have you a packed agenda today?

–Going to introduce annual parish workplans and annual performance reviews, sort of business-like model, increased paperwork so there will be resistance.

–So the back of the fag box and the envelope days are gone.

–Have to put things on a corporate footing, Gerry, we’ve had a firm of consultants draw up templates so it’s just a case of filling in the blank boxes.

–Líon na bearnaí. I’d say you’ll get great support with that initiative, Tony.

I thought for a moment he was going to open the briefcase and start showing me these templates, thankfully he displayed some sensitivity.

–We have to bring a more professional mind set to the job Gerry. With his right hand he picked a bit of fluff off his jacket. A professional mindset, he repeated as he searched his jacket for more fluff, his chin resting on his chest.

–Anyway best get to this meeting Gerry.

He didn’t move, his body heavy, the task ahead rooting him to the spot. He would have to strengthen his resolve.

–Tell them I’m tired and need rest, I can’t bear the thoughts of a further plagues of priests descending on me.

–I’ll make it as clear as I can Gerry. Our former professor, Fr Enda is in hospital in Galway. He’s getting a couple of stints put in.

–Do you remember the time he was going on sabbatical, and he had us up in his rooms boxing his library books in Maynooth?

–I think he was heading to America for a year or something.

–Do you remember me showing you what was written on the badge he had among the paperclips on his study desk.

–I remember it surely Gerry.

–It said, “Ordain Women or stop baptising them.”

–That it surely did. A different time Gerry. Anyway I better get moving.

He stepped towards me to shake hands, he was smiling, looking relieved to have found his feet again. I was still thinking about the badge and how it filled that particular Maynooth day with the possibility of a very different future church.

–Look after yourself Gerry, I’ll be in touch.

–Sound Tony, best of luck with the meeting.

Walking out the door, he turned and made the sign of the cross, a sort of informal blessing of the patients and the ward.

## 13

The sun was shining the morning I left for Dun Laoghaire, lots of blue in the sky and the words of Dr O'Driscoll echoing in my mind: *Commitment, persistence that's what will pay off in the end Gerry.*

They loaded me into the accessible taxi in the wheelchair. Siobhan the health care assistant was accompanying me: pretty, mid-twenties, average height, long fingers, straight hair in a scrunchie, a few extra pounds on, as they say. Dermot was driving, a former Guard it turned out so we were safe, unless they'd sacked him for crashing squad cars.

–So this is the 46A.

–What's that Fr. Gerry?

–The bus, 46A.

–46A?

–Yeah, the bus to Dun Laoghaire, *fecksake, he's old enough to get it.*

–We'll have to stop to pick up my guitar...

–Siobhan was half listening but the whole thing was going way over her head, so she stayed looking at her phone screen.

–Did you forget something Gerry?

–I hope there's no drunks on this bus.

–Oh Right Gerry, of course the song, good one, slow on the uptake this morning.

Slow? How about feckin retarded.

–Are you comfortable there now? Siobhan asked in a matronly way as she checked for messages on her phone.

–I’m grand.

–Right folks we’re moving. Ok there Gerry, have you your seat belt on Siobhan?

We were taxiing, albeit in first gear, but there was movement.

–We’re all set back here, Dermo.

I was half expecting safety announcements; *In the unlikely event of us landing in water...*

–Are there life jackets in this taxi Siobhan?

–Life jackets?

–Yeah, they’re generally orange coloured or yellow, they keep you afloat in water.

–I know what life jackets are, doh! Why would you need them in a car?

–In the unlikely event that we end up in water.

– Oh my God, are you having a premonition of us ending up in water, priests have those don’t they?

She left her phone back in her bag.

–My friend had a premonition about her dog. She dreamed that her dog, a lovely hairy Bishon Freise called Molly was going to get hit by a car and die, and you know what, two days later, splat! Molly ran straight out in front of a car, killed stone dead.

Siobhan had certainly mastered the art of the short story.

–Your friend must have been very upset about that.

–She was heartbroken for a few days, but she got another Bishon Freise a few weeks after.

One just like Molly, she called her Polly. *Working their way up the alphabet, no doubt!* When I say like Molly, I mean she looks like Molly but she has a different temperament altogether, a lot more grouchy, bit of a handful. Do you have a dog?

–No, I grew up with dogs but never had one of my own. Might get one yet when I have my own place.

–What will you get?

–A proper dog, a border collie, a Labrador maybe, not those little shits of things.

–Ah the Shit Tsu’s are so cute. My parents have a dog, a Yorkshire terrier called Brandy, he’s gorgeous.

They could have called him Hennessy or Napoleon but I suppose that might be going too far.

Dermo was up front in the cockpit, a cup of coffee in the cup holder, country music on the radio, a beads hanging from the rear view mirror and a Padre Pio protects sticker on the front left hand side of the windscreen.

–I’ve seen a lot of crashed cars in breakers yards with them stickers Dermo.

–What’s that Gerry?

–I’ve seen a lot of crashed cars in breaker yards with them Padre Pio Protect Us stickers.

–Oh right yeah, the wife put that there, works for some I suppose.

Works for some. I was getting feck all change from Dermo as we cruised along at 60km an hour.

–Are you expecting us to crash or something Fr Gerry?

–Don’t know Siobhan, but at the speed Dermo’s going it’s likely.

–He’s not driving too fast.

–Exactly, check out the stats Siobhan. People driving at inappropriate speeds cause accidents. He’s driving too slow, drivers behind him will get frustrated and take chances passing out. See what speeding actually does is increase the severity of accidents not necessarily the likely occurrence, there’s research on it. The longer you spend on the road the greater chance there is of an accident .

–Will we hear the death notices Dermo? *Will we be feckin on them?*

–I’ll turn it up after the news.

–Sound Dermo, thanks!



–I suppose you always listen to the death notices, being a priest like.

–Part of the job Siobhan, but generally I hear of the local deaths before they feature on the death notices. I get the phone call, to go and give the last rites, hear confessions. I just fancy listening to the notices this morning and not having to do anything for a change.

No funeral to go to, no grieving family to go and see, no sitting in kitchens drinking coffee with nothing to say.

–When my nan died the priest had a lovely sermon, but my mam was very annoyed when he turned up at the house wearing a pair of black jeans, a brown woollen jumper and a navy jacket.

–People like formality and uniforms, the uniform gives presence, gravitas, a sense of occasion, people relate to it.

–The death notices are on now Fr. Gerry, I'll turn them up.

–Good man Dermo, fair play!

*The death has occurred ... peacefully at his residence ... in his ninetieth year.*

I used always try to make the offertory procession personal, you might have nieces or nephews bringing up a sod of turf if he was a man for the bog, a deck of cards maybe if he was into a game of 25, a jersey or flag if he was a GAA man.

*Removal this evening from the community centre ... requiem mass tomorrow at noon with the funeral proceeding to the adjoining cemetery. House strictly private. Family flowers only, donations if desired to ...,*

House strictly private. They never hear that. Their compulsion to do what they always done always wins out. They'll arrive regardless. Like they did when Martin Fortune the shop owner in the village died suddenly. There was Patricia and the three lads, John, Jack and Mattie, aged 14, 12, and 10 beside themselves and people hanging around talking to one another having the craic, laughing, she felt like she was hosting a celebratory event.

–Did you know anyone on the death notices Fr. Gerry?

–No Dermot.

Siobhan was busy on her phone texting and then she was making a funny face into the phone, probably taking a selfie.

–Who’s your local priest Siobhan, I probably know him.

–Fr. Sean Cotter.

–Seanie! A great man for the *cupla focal* and the GAA! Is he still into the jogging?

–Yeah, still see him out jogging occasionally, he’s put on a bit of weight though this last while.

–Well when you see him won’t you tell him Godoh was asking for him.

–Godoh?

–A nickname in Maynooth, the initials of my name G-O-D with oh added at the end, usually they add it on to your first name like Gerroh but the initials of my name just proved to be too appealing.

–Yes, I’ll tell him.

She was stuck in her phone again, making faces. More selfies.

–How’s it looking now Dermo up there?

–Going well Gerry.

–Good man Dermo, no harm to leave you at it.

We were on the motorway, stuck in the slow lane, people constantly passing us out, then this car comes up alongside us and as it is passing out this child mouths what I think is ‘loser’ and gives me the middle finger, so I give him the middle finger back, he sticks his arms forward touching his mother’s shoulder, probably telling her I gave him the middle finger. She looks across, I smile, raise my hand and mouth Hi. She smiles back and then turns to face the road ahead, the child is still watching so as they move ahead, I smile and give him another middle finger. They’ve passed before he can respond.

–I suppose you’ll sit up front with Dermo on the way home Siobhan.

–No I’ll sit here and get a nap, catch up on some sleep.

–Out clubbing last night?

–Early night, got home at half one, I knew I had this run this morning.

Dermo was now tapping out a beat to *Wagon Wheel* on the steering wheel:

*Rock me mamma like a wagon wheel, rock me mamma any way you feel.*

–Can't beat th'aul bit a country to get people going Dermo.

–I love the country music, Fr Gerry.

Dermo with his country music for company, Siobhan on her phone and me making conversation. Sure what was I at? Leave them to it, I had my phone but it was still difficult to manage it.

–I fancy a fag Dermo, we might stop in a while.

–Well I don't usually stop, Gerry. I like to keep moving when I'm on a journey.

–I know that feeling Dermo, sure I'll just light one here and let the window down. I knew he wouldn't go for that, not with all the no smoking stickers around the place and the fresh smell of the car. A dilemma for Dermo.

–Sorry now Gerry but I can't let you smoke there, I'll pull in at Applegreen and you can have one.

–Good man Dermo.

Apple green, Strawberry Red, banana yellow, orange orange, Blueberry Purple, not sure why they went with Apple green, it was granny smith green not golden delicious.

–Do you smoke Siobhan?

–Never do, they're bad for you.

–I've cut back bigtime myself, had no choice these last few weeks but I still have one whenever I can. Siobhan will you just search in the front left corner of the small green knapsack you'll find the fags and lighter there. I'll be ready when Dermo stops.

–Just pull up there one side of the shop, Dermo, you can park in the disabled place.

– I don't have the blue badge.

–Sure won't they see me in a wheelchair?

Dermo's tapping on the steering wheel stopped and he makes a noisy clunky gear change as we drive around the parking area. Siobhan drapes the anorak over my shoulders as she prepares me to exit the taxi.

–It's only spittin' a bit, a passing shower Siobhan, there's no need.

Dermo puts on his anorak, zips it up and picking up each ramp individually, fixes them in place and then indicates to Siobhan that it is safe to take me out the side door backwards.

–Now Gerry you can have your cigarette.

–Thanks Dermo.

Dermot removes his anorak and sits back into the driver's seat, takes a flask from a well-preserved canvas shopping bag and pours what I imagine is tea, sipping it looking out the windscreen he's a picture of serenity. One steady man, whatever he's seeing out that windscreen has him enthralled, there's a fixed intentness in his gaze. Perhaps it was whatever people were talking about on the radio that was engaging him.

–So are you looking forward to Dun Laoghaire.

–Ah yeah, I'm lucky really to be going so soon, Not going to be easy I hear but going to give it my best shot.

–Have you tried the e-cigarettes at all?

–No and have no intention, seems to me like a totally empty engagement.

No ritual, just a quick fix. A solo engagement. Like having a wank when you wanted to make love, satisfying an urge, cheaper but clinical, devoid of touch, more about addiction than desire, though they're similar. They're both future focused, addiction is about the next fix which will generate a further desire for another fix, while they both rob the present of now.

–Are you angry about the accident?

It came from nowhere and hit me across the face. No lead up, just out of the blue. That's youth for you.

–I should be, shouldn't I but right now I'm doing my best to get better.

–Are you angry at God?

–Completely pointless directing your anger at something like God, who I don't believe in anymore, he was just a crutch to lean on.

Funny that, I spent my life going around leaning on a crutch, now I'm in a feckin wheelchair.

–How can a priest not believe in God?

–Loads of priests don't. We do a job like you or Dermo, you know what's expected, you know the drills, the rituals, nurses do ward rounds and OBS, I do communion rounds, I say mass, hear confessions, you change beds make patients comfortable, give them bed baths, I listen to people's problems and encourage them, you do the same, you look after the body, I look after the soul; a sort of projected spiritual body, which lives on faith, fed and nurtured by communion, mass, confessions. We do very similar jobs Siobhan, but I don't need to believe in a God or Heaven. You can be a very effective functionary but almost completely disengaged from what you do. You can do a job without believing in its value for you, while seeing the value others get out of it.

–I always thought priests believed in God.

–So do you believe in a God?

–I believe there's something alright but not sure what it is, I'm more spiritual than religious.

–Not sure I buy that distinction any longer. Spiritual, religious, call it what you want, you still believe in something made up, the fact you don't ritualise it is neither here nor there. See Dermo there looking out the windscreen. I reckon he believes in God, reckon he turns up every Sunday. That's what I used to be like, devout, committed, kept the questions and the doubts at a distance and then realised I was only fooling myself. I just embraced something handed down, passed on. To completely believe anything is a delusion, it's like pretending you don't have a choice,

that's the problem with faith, it's a chosen response to reality which persists regardless of evidence or experience, it's basically just a rigid construct.

–That's way too deep for me. You lost me there a couple of minutes ago.

It wasn't deep but Siobhan disengaged, bored perhaps with my wittering on. Dermo was still in the car looking out the windscreen, Siobhan back on her phone and I sat there sucking on my fag with the trees waving and rustling in the breeze for company. Niamh was back in school, teaching the children, everyone in roles being something, me just here being, feeling my unbearable heaviness in this chair.

–So did you like Fr. Ted? She asked without looking up from her phone.

–Made priests look like awful eejits but sure it was close enough in some ways, there's a bit of the Fr. Ted in us all.

–It was brill, I have the box set, throw on a few episodes on quiet evenings and have a Tedfest.

–I suppose comedy sometimes gets closer to the truth than all the documentaries. Often the comedy comes before the documentaries, it takes time and research to uncover the factual basis of the comic. *Of course child sexual abuse was never mentioned even though it was in the news at the time.*

–That's interesting about comedy and the truth of things. She was looking up from her phone.

–Priests think about all them deep things don't they.

–Some priests do, I've met priests who don't have two deep thoughts to rub together from one year to the next. Right Siobhan will you stub that butt out for me and grab me a takeaway coffee in the shop. I handed her a fiver.

Back in the car, Dermo is fixated on the road ahead, driving at a steady 90 km p/h, optimum fuel efficiency apparently at that speed. He taps away on the steering wheel revitalised with the tea and the cling film wrapped ham salad sandwich on brown which he had just consumed. The Irish economy will make feck all out of Dermot on this trip.

–Won't feel now Gerry. The home stretch, about an hour.

–Good man Dermo, keep the pedal to the metal.

Meanwhile Siobhan is posing, taking another selfie.

Outside the cars are speeding by to our right. To our left, the green fields; cattle and sheep are out grazing happily oblivious to the noise of traffic, a noise unheard because it wasn't listened for or focussed on, herd immunity passed on from one generation to the next. The grey sky is threatening rain, and silence is filling the spaces between us inside Dermo's adapted Berlingo 151 MO. Then the rain teems down.

There's something comforting about rain. Water falling, released from those heavy clouds, finding its way, flowing down rocks into gullies, moving with a cleansing momentum, washing and moving debris as it goes with its gravity induced momentum. There's no more living with the question wondering if it will rain, it's raining now. There's something reflective about rain, it draws me in, slows me down, makes me linger, look out windows, appreciate the many shades of grey. There's a release when rain pours down, the wetness of that heavy almost vertical rain from a slow-moving shower.

–Have you got the referral letter, Siobhan, asked Dermo.

–No Dermo, I thought they gave it to you.

–They didn't.

–I have it Dermo.

–Gerry, will you check the drop off point, is it the main entrance.

–Yes, it's the main entrance on Rochestown Avenue.

–Right we'll have to turn right at the next lights, then the second exit at the next roundabout and that should get us there.

Siobhan and myself were swooning at Dermo's taxi-speak, while Dermo was relieved he wasn't going to waste any diesel or time by choosing the wrong approach and having to back track.

Minding mice at crossroads wouldn't have phased Dermo. His clean shaven face, combed hair, 5' 11' frame dressed in clothes that looked measured for him, was brought to a certain completeness in his slow deliberate movements which allowed him brain time to assess options before committing to choices or actions. Dermot wasn't the sort to get stuck in right away. No Dermo would carry out a feasibility study, a scoping exercise before he even put on his anorak. The likelihood of rain, the sky colour, evidence gleaned from his previous experience, drops or the absence of them on the windscreen. Dermo wasn't into waste, he assessed and responded and I imagine he almost always got it right. Life hadn't managed to throw him a curve ball – yet!

I was disturbed from my consideration of Dermo by a bad smelling fart. It wasn't mine and I knew Dermo would never fart anywhere but in a toilet or when alone outdoors, he just hadn't it in him. Siobhan was in the frame. One of those pungent baskers that smelled of rotten egg, and curry mixes. Foul. She kept tapping away on her phone as if nothing had happened. I wanted to open a window but I decided to put up and shut up, allow it float up to Dermo and harass him. I waited, then it hit Dermo, he had his window down in seconds and had his snout stuck out, then he put on the fan to give a blast of cool air around the car. He probably blamed me for it. I was feeling tired now and nodding off, a combination of the journey and the latte, it's afternoon heading towards evening, we're very close, meeting traffic jams and driving at funeral speed between sets of traffic lights, the next I hear is the ignition being switched off.

–We're landed, Dermo announces.

One giant leap for mankind.



## 14

I made my way to reception assisted by Siobhan. Dermo placed the ramps back in the van in that methodical way of his, and informed Siobhan he was going to use the facilities before they left. I handed my letter to the receptionist.

–Fr Gerry O’Dowd, we’ve been expecting you, said the middle-aged receptionist.

She taps the keyboard, confirms my address, date of birth, next of kin. I hesitate.

– Eventually I give Niamh’s details.

–Religion she asks.

–None, former Catholic.

She looks at me wondering if I’m being sarcastic, trying to work it out without having to ask.

–No religion, she repeats, filling in the form, undecided about what she thinks of my revelation.

Dermo had emerged from the toilet rubbing his hands together, he’s trying to speed up the drying off that the quick session under the hand-drier hadn’t managed to complete. He’s letting them air dry, leaving them moist like that keeps your hands feeling fresh rather than having them warm and soft and sleepy when you leave them under the drier for too long.

–We’ll be heading west now Gerry, do you have everything? You left nothing behind you in the car.

–I have everything Dermo.

–Right Gerry the best of luck with everything.

He shook hands with me as did Siobhan who also wished me luck.

–Thanks Dermo. Thanks Siobhan, safe journey home, mind how you go. A superfluous entreaty – Dermo was driving.

I waited with my bags beside the reception chairs for the nurse and the porter to come to collect me. It was still dry outside so I decided to go outside and have a fag while I waited.

Five pulls into the fag I see a nurse coming towards me, one more deep drag on the fag and I put it out by pressing the butt against the metal hub area of the right wheel.

–There you are faggin’ away. You know you shouldn’t be smoking even out here, we’re trying to make this a smoke free campus.

–Campus? Sounds like I’m back in Uni. again. They’re doing that with the hospitals aren’t they, every second hospital is a university hospital now, sounds good and not a University within an asses roar of most of them. Dressing up and dumbing down, sure it’s all the rage.

–I’m Fiona, Fr. Gerry isn’t it.

–Hi Fiona, you can call me Gerry.

–Ok Gerry. I’m only joking there is a smoking area here. One of us will show you later. Right let’s get you inside.

‘Inside,’ well it was better than ‘admitted’. She wheeled me in through the reception area, a slight lad in a denim jacket sped past in his motorised chair, nice fluid movement, then he slowed and effected a 180 degree with his gloved left hand on a joystick and taking earphones from his ear he said:

–How’s Fiona this afternoon?

–Good Mick, I’m good.

–Is this the new man? O’ Dowd the priest.

–Gerry.

–Well you’re welcome, Gerry.

–I’m back for a couple of days to give a few talks, finishing up Friday and headin’ back to the hills of Connemara. Right Gerry, give me a shout if you fancy the unofficial tour of this place before Friday.

–Great Mick, catch up with you soon.

He put his earphones back in, swivelled around and off he went at speed down the corridor, whistling some song which presumably he was listening to in his earphones and then he sang the phrase *le lacs du Connemara*....

Calais, daytrip, 1985, Breda and me. Drinking coffee and listening to Michelle Sardou on the jukebox in the café, it could have been Paris. Scanning through all the French song titles on the juke box I saw Connemara and the homing instinct grabbed me, so I selected it. Think it might have been a B side, can’t remember the A side. Still, a time of A sides and B sides, just numbered tracks now. Was working in Co. Kilburn that summer, helping out at the church on Quex Road and working behind the bar in the club. Breda, an arts student in Maynooth was working in her uncle’s pub *The Archway Tavern*. Met her through a friend, friends nothing more, but sitting in that Calais café I was tinkering with the possibility of being something more, all dressed up against each other despite our chats, our laughs, sometimes our smiles which made us look each other in the eye. If I was back there now I wouldn’t hold back. Couldn’t give myself permission then, permission to indulge a passion. I had fantasized in advance about losing control, the adventure that would have been. Breda and me unshackling ourselves, however nothing happened. Don’t know where she ended up. She was heading off to Spain to teach English as a foreign language last time we met, over twenty-five years ago now – probably married with kids. Breda was a bit like Niamh. I can see similarities, maybe there’s a type of woman I fall for. Fiona was talking but I wasn’t listening.

–Sorry Fiona what were you saying?

–Mick is a great guy to chat to Gerry. He comes to talk to our new intake every few months, been in that wheelchair for about ten years now.

We waited at reception and just like Fiona had promised the doctor arrived moments later.

–Dr Declan Dwyer’s the name I’m in charge of your rehabilitation, you can call me Declan or Deco, no bad names or I’ll get badly pissed off, puncture your wheelchair or accidentally let your brakes off when you’re at the top of a slope, maybe even carry out some surgery when you’re asleep.

–Yeah, sound Declan.

–I’m joking of course. He smiled.

I just looked at him, held fire and returned his smile.

–You’ve read the leaflets Gerry, so to put it in a nutshell, you’re going to get three months here, 90 days to put the basics in place so you can lead an independent life. It’s going to be intense, we’ll put you through your paces. Give it 100% we’ll get the best outcome possible, get lazy about it, nothing much will change. Bottom line Gerry, it’s up to you. From your hips down to your toes is like a warzone. The route from your brain to your feet is made up of a series of blown-up bridges. We’ll have to retrain your body to re-establish connections from your brain down as far as possible.

–So there’s hope then.

I couldn’t believe I’d used the word, hope! I’m a no hoper when it comes to hope.

–There’s always hope but you’ll have to be patient Gerry, it will take a lot of effort on your part. From the scans and assessment it’s an incomplete T7 injury, so good upper body strength, a manual wheelchair. You’ve to work hard Gerry, fight your way back to get the best possible outcome.

–I’m used to fighting with myself. It’s about action isn’t it, very little to do with hope!

–Precisely! Diet is important, we need to get you into shape, you can lose a couple of pounds, tone up. So diet and a fitness regime, they’re going to be key. The cigarettes have to go.

–I won’t be able to get rid of the fags, Deco.

–Of course you will, we’ll get you some help.

–Help?

–We'll get you patches to take the edge off the craving.

His confidence was misplaced but there was part of me wanted to believe him.

–By the way people with strong faith can do well here, you just got to channel that view you have of the mind as master over the body. You'll be able to use that attitude to your advantage and continue to believe in improvement regardless. I'll get one of the psych team to talk to you, so we get that mind of yours into the right place.

Could I fashion my old faith commitment into self-belief and determination, replace hope and passivity with action and determination?

–Tomorrow we start Gerry O'Dowd, 9am.

–I'll call you DD, you're sound with that?

–Yeah, course I'm sound. DD that's a new one, I like it!

As he walked out the door, I had a hunch he'd get the best out of me.

Over lunch I met some of my fellow residents. Declan, a thirty something from Carlow wore a scapular, a miraculous medal and a big smile on his face, a trinity which I think he believed would help him walk again, Johnno in his early twenties from Cork who alternated between anger and silence regularly punctuated by Tourette roars of 'fuck, fuck fuck'. Then there was fifty something Paddy from Sligo who said very little, he was getting ready to leave us at the end of the week, his 90 days up. There I was in the middle of them, full of a resolve to do my best every day, to channel all my energies, make myself better.

The following morning they had me up and dressed at half eight, grey track suit bottom, white socks and an old Irish jersey that Fiona the nurse got me from stores. Saved by the jersey from looking like a complete wheelchair junkie. I told Fiona the junkie grey was a once off, I never dressed in grey trackies when I was able to walk, why would I start now. Didn't ever wear that pretentious clerical grey or the clerical navy either.

–Now you're all set Gerry, said Fiona turning down the collar of the jersey.

–I'll change you back into your other clothes when we get back. Important to keep getting dressed.

I don't understand these people who laze around in their pyjamas all day. I saw a picture on the paper of two of them in a shop, popped out for milk from the flat nearby. Maybe I'll do it one day just to find out, no point in living with assumptions is there, get the facts when you can, become experienced, engage, embrace, feel it, live it. We're approaching the gym.

–So what's this going to be like Fiona?

–Challenging Gerry but you'll start to enjoy it. Do your best and you'll reap the rewards.

– I'm dying for a fag Fiona, DD told me yesterday I'd have to quit.

–When did you last have one?

–Yesterday. DD is organising patches, but I tried them before, they're feckin useless.

–I'll show you the smoking area on the way back and you can have one then. But you're better to get used to the patches.

–You're a star Fiona.

She wheeled me into the gym area which was filled with weight presses, rowing machines where five residents in sleeveless vests were already pumping iron, wheelchair users hour at the gym. DD showed up on the dot of 9am with a young student doctor.

–Morning lads, nice work, keep it going, keep pushing, you can always do more, never forget that. This is Siobhan, the intern she's on placement with us for a few weeks, she'll be observing our routine. And we have a new recruit here with us this morning, Gerry O'Dowd, so I know you'll make Gerry welcome.

I waved.

–Hi

–Hi Gerry, they responded.

DD walked into an office followed by Siobhan and Fiona. I followed.

–Ok Fiona, thank you. Right Siobhan as you can see in the notes here there are a number of lacerations to the spinal column, currently Gerry has no movement in either of his legs but we are hopeful that he will get some movement back. How much, is difficult to say at this stage.

He spoke to Siobhan about the diet and the exercise regime geared towards achieving ‘maximum mobility and independence.’

–The correct mental approach is key, none of this feeling sorry for yourself or asking questions like why you, those questions are pointless, anyway you know all that you’re a priest, God’s ways not being our ways and all that stoical offering up of suffering.

Still expected to play the priest!

–This morning is about setting up your exercise routine, getting you started very gently, we like pain here Gerry because when you feel pain it means you have sensations, it means connections are working, pain we work with, numbness, deadness we fight that. So we’ll start by using some needles to plot the areas of paralysis so there will be pain when we place needles in certain areas, remember pain equals nerves still working, messages getting through. Anger is good here too, so too much of that religious acceptance and hoping is no good, this is no place for hoping, remember that, anger and resolve we welcome.

I wheeled myself to the gym area with Fiona’s assistance and DD came along with his clipboard.

–Right lads if I can have your attention, I want to hear you roar this morning and we’ll start with our newest recruit Gerry. So roar your anger Gerry, c’mon feel that power.

He took me by surprise, I was new in this situation. I let out a moderate roar.

–You can do a lot better than that Gerry. Come on start thinking about something or someone who makes you angry.

Spoiled for choice but I just wasn’t in that angry place. I could pretend so I thought about how I felt the day I whacked Carroll! Should have hit the bastard harder. Getting into the zone

now. I let an almighty roar, put on my iconic Brendan Smyth face and kept the roar up until I started running out of breath.

AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHH!

–That’s what I’m talking about lads.

It felt good so I let another one.

AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGHH  
HHHHHHHHHHHHH!

This one was even more powerful. Whatever initial circumspectness had attached to my first roar was completely gone now, I was roaring freely, what a release, I gave it another go.

AAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGGGGGGGH  
HHHHHHHH!

I felt alive, powerful, I was ready to fight, after that roar I felt invincible, nothing could undo me.

–Ok Gerry you get the prize, best roar in Dun Laoghaire, now let’s hear the rest of you.

Each in turn roared. They were more controlled roars, more shouts than roars, and Declan couldn’t even let a proper roar at all, sounded somewhere between a girly shriek and a strangled shout. Then the supervisor Derek took me through an exercise plan he had done out.

–It’s all about gentle movements to start, then gradually building.

He went through the routine with me. He gave me light weights because my grip was poor and my left arm was weak. He left me to continue the routine by myself. I tried again and again to exercise with the weights, thinking that more determination on my part would resolve the issue, of course it didn’t, it was my ability to move my hands that was lacking. My body was unable to respond to my determination. I had to retrain it, work with my disability.

And so the regime had started, each day structured, my body pushed to the limit, DD constantly urging me to do more and me and the others in my group shooting the breeze, me



roaring like a lunatic at appropriate and inappropriate times, frightening people with my own roaring therapy.

Fiona arranged a visit for me to the smoking area on most days in the late afternoon when things were quiet and before she had to do handover.

–You’d wonder what it’s all about Gerry wouldn’t you, but then you’re the expert on that.

The man with the answers.

–Yes Fiona but the answers they gave me have just turned into questions. Questions about the answers and questions they provided.

–You seem to be getting into the programme Gerry.

–Yeah I’m giving it socks for now anyway.

Fiona introduced me to the other smokers. There’s Ben mid-forties, scouser, wife from Dublin, been in Ireland 15 years, he’s a complete T7 due for discharge next month. Eighty percent of the total number of occupants here are men. Two women smokers are regularly here. Brenda, late 50’s an incomplete T5 and Debby mid-forties like myself an incomplete T7. Ben holds court regularly, hard to get a word in edgeways when he’s here.

–So Fr Gerry, this God of yours, a right fuckin comedian eh, putting us in wheelchairs!

–Well Ben I’m happy to say I no longer believe in a God. What one do you believe in?

He’s thrown by the question; the conversation has taken an unexpected turn for him.

–Oh I believe in God alright but he’s no fuckin comedian. He was sucking on his rollie as he pontificated. See there has to be a meaning to all this, no one can explain it not even the scientists. There has to be a God otherwise why are we here?

–We’re just here because we’re here. Why would you need anything more than that?

–Gerry my man, you’re mistaken.

–So Ben why are you in a wheelchair, is there a reason for that?

–Yes, there’s an explanation, I got injured in a car accident, but I have to find some meaning in this event. We all do. Otherwise, you top yourself, you can’t live without hope.

Ben had it all worked out in his head, Brenda and Debby chatted among themselves while Ben wittered on. I finished my fag and had started to push myself gently along when Fiona appeared.

–Good man Gerry you’re making efforts.

–I’ll try to make the full journey myself today Fiona if you just walk alongside.

–That’s the spirit Gerry.

The conversation was stilted as she walked by my side. I could pay closer attention to a voice when it was coming from behind me, there was no eye contact, no face to look at, to get trapped in. With her walking beside me now, there was something more anchored, more grounded about this conversation. Physical space had closed in on our words, our physical embodied presences. Our one pace togetherness influencing our words.

Niamh phoned later that evening, enquiring how I was settling in and if I had any update on things.

- All sound Niamh, getting to know the run of the place and the staff. They seem like a sound bunch. Lots of young people in wheelchairs here.
- What’s your day like?
- Up at 8ish, breakfast 8:30am and then it’s physio, off to the gym, back for lunch and rest in the afternoon, go for a fag if I can and go for a wheel around.
- You sound as if you’re getting into the swing of things.
- Going to give it my best shot, what else can I do.
- Great to hear of your positive approach.
- So any news in Bailebriste or Kilcrua?
- Nor much craic here, same old, same old, one day following the next.

- Sounds riveting! Missing feck all so. Still, there's a lot to be said for same old, same old, at least there's no bad news.
- No, no bad news, thank God.  
As if God had anything to do with it.
- Anyway, great to hear all well. I'll be up to see you next week.
- That's great Niamh, look forward to it.

The following day Mick gave us his talk about wasting energy wishing things were different, grieving the loss of mobility, feeling sorry for oneself rather than learning to live in a different way, living a life in which you refused to compromise, in which you learned to dance in the rain.

–You're not around to accommodate anyone lads, to make anything easier on anyone, it's your life, you live it. If you were a cranky bollox before your accident well why shouldn't you be a cranky bollox in a wheelchair and if you were a decent guy beforehand why shouldn't you still be that. It's up to you.

He moved back and forth in his motorised wheelchair, swivelling around to change the angle at which he viewed the group, at one stage moving towards the window looking out as he spoke and then coming back to rest behind the desk; pacing the classroom in his wheelchair.

–Gotta channel your anger into motivation lads, a motivation to relearn, to find new ways to do things, new ways to be sexual, to have fun, new ways to engage. The past is over folks, you move on and relearn or you stay where you are and slowly die. A new chapter, one you write, you and your chair. Look, there are loads of people out there who don't get it. Some of them will feel sorry and pity for you, others thinking sure what the fuck good are you for anything in that wheelchair, leading your pathetic dependent little life, you can't even defend yourself if someone attacks you. You could be able bodied and shite at defending yourself but as long as you are upright and mobile no one questions it. But new questions get asked when they see you in a wheelchair. Yes, you'll meet decent people too, people who see you first rather than the chair, people who want to support you rather than obstruct you.

Mick finished up by urging us to 'be the change'.

–Make things happen folks, get off your arses, make it happen.

We clapped as he paced in his wheelchair. I pulled up alongside him as we left the room.

–Thanks for the talk, Mick.

–Talk is the easy bit, Gerry.

–Was it Michel Sardot you were listening to on the Walkman the last day in the lobby?

–The very man, *Les lacs du Connemara*, one of my favourite songs, I live back Casla side. Do you know that song is worth hundreds of thousands to the Connemara economy, loads of French tourists visiting Connemara every year.

–Really?

–Yeah, Sardot is big in France, they know the song they identify with the sentiments.

Then he burst into song:

*Là –bas au Connemara*

*On sait tout le prix du silence*

*La bas au Connemara*

*On dit que la vie, c'est une folie*

*Et que la folie, ça se danse*

He translates the final two lines in speech.

–Where they say life is madness and the madness dancing. Mighty words.

Dancing.

–Well I won't be doing much dancing Mick.

–Why not? Sure it easier to dance when you've dead legs, one less thing to be conscious of. Sardot had a song about your crowd as well, did you ever hear it?

–No never did.

–*Le Cure*, and he burst into song

*Ab, bon Dieu, si l'on était deux!*

*Ab, bon Dieu, si l'on était deux!*

–You get the drift.

–Yes Mick I do, even with my inter cert French.

–Right I'm away Gerry if you're ever back Casla way give me a shout.

–Sound Mick, will make it my business to catch up at some stage.

He sped down the corridor occasionally snaking left and right, dancing in his wheelchair.

Niamh and me are texting back and forth but I'm keeping it to a minimum in so far as I can, just giving occasional information updates on what's happening. She called to see me Saturday afternoon.

–You're looking well Niamh.

–Ah I decided to wear my light blue jumper and my grey boot cuts for a change. Do you like the boots? Got them online, saved €40 on them, got them for €45.

Saved €40. An alien concept, don't think I ever focused on what I saved when I bought something, always focused on what I spent.

–They're lovely, nice buckle detail on the side, well wear.

She sits down and I update her on what's been happening. I've told her some of it by text already but it's different repeating it in person. There is a certain self-consciousness about her today which I don't think I've seen before. She strikes me as someone who is trying very hard to behave in a certain way. There's an animated awkwardness about her attempt. Clunky.

–Niamh I just want to say, I appreciate you coming to see me but I don't want you to feel you have to. Things are different now, they're going to be very different. I just don't want you to feel you have to be involved in all this. Didn't want her saddled with commitments, which while mitigating an unknown future, in time would just become too much.

–Gerry, I'm happy to come, if I wasn't I wouldn't be here. I've already told you I'm going to be here or wherever for you.

–I know Niamh, but this is even more complicated than what we did have, which had a lot of complications.

–Yes different complications, but it's early days, we don't know how things are going to turnout.

–True, but commitments that make us feel secure today may become prisons in time. I don't want you feeling you owe me anything or have to be here.

What I was really thinking was that the last thing I wanted was a pity love, based on feeling sorry for me. When you're in a wheelchair you have to guard against that. A bit like a woman with a beautiful body needing to be sure she's loved for who she is not only her beautiful body.

–Listen Gerry, she says, grabbing my hand, I've always cared about you Gerry and I care more for you now than I ever did.

–Care is good, and I've always cared for you Niamh, but this is not Waltons Mountain. John Boy is not here to craft a few neat sentences and solve it, before the lights go out.

–I want us to be together Gerry like we were, better than we were.

Like we were. I don't believe in going back, it's about moving on. I was thinking of Richie Moran who got itchy feet after 20 years of marriage and started seeing Siobhan Duffy, a woman ten years younger than his wife Bernie. Richie moved out and lived with Siobhan but about two years later he ended up going back to Bernie. Told me about it in confessions. I think he expected me to tell him he'd done the honourable thing. *Barking up the wrong tree there Richie.* Within two months he regretted his return. No sex life, living like brother and sister, having the same rows they had before, but not as often. A life sentence, but too late now to change it. He'd gone back, he should have moved on.

–Returning is a myth Niamh. We never go back to what we think we'll go back to. You don't ever get to have what you had before, you're in a different place, your perspective has altered. Other things have changed as well.

–Yes, but I want us to take this on together, be together trying to deal with this.

There was lots I could say in response, but I rein it in for a change.

–Thanks for coming Niamh, I appreciate you being here.

–I’m happy to be here, sure where else would I be?

There were a couple of possible answers but she didn’t expect an answer. I obliged.

According to DD I will be able to drive. That’s good, driving is something I would miss. Some of my best thoughts occur to me while driving, the thrumming engine providing the background noise, thoughts building, falling, turning, pirouetting, floating, in and out of awareness. Dancing thoughts. Maybe if I got a motorised wheelchair it would feel like that but I doubt it, you’re not sealed off like you are in a car, you’re still engaged in your surroundings, corridor or pavement traffic, saying hello to people, responding, looking, engaging. Of course if you wore headphones, plugged into a phone you could zone out, but then the music would take over, maybe music turned down low almost inaudible and then you could get away with a series of nods, finger movements, like you can from inside a car.

A few days later I met the chaplain here Fr. Sean Stack, late twenties, no collar, just black trouser, check shirt and navy jumper. Full of faith in his God and by the looks of things his God has the utmost faith in him. I think he expected we’d be some sort of double act. I put him right at the start.

–I’m on my way out Sean, leaving the club.

He didn’t understand. To Sean I was just some priest going through a clichéd period of doubt, precipitated by a very unfortunate event.

–Sure we all have our ups and downs, part of life, I will keep you in my prayers Gerry.

–This is different Sean, I’m packing it in.

–Arrah sure what would you do something like that for. Gerry you’re having a few doubts about things like us all, you’ve had a bad aul knock. God is good Gerry, he provides for us in the end, hand it over to him, he’ll sort it.

–Hand over what to him.

–Your troubles, your suffering, your doubts. Trust me Gerry, God provides.

I didn’t have enough faith to have faith. Sean kept his distance after that, left me to my own devices, still saluted me, maybe secretly hoping his interventionist God would eventually work his magic on me, God’s time being different to human time, far more sophisticated than mere cogs, springs and properly adjusted weights and God’s ways not being our ways and all that jazz. Declan in the corner bed embraced what Fr. Sean was offering and Fr. Sean spent most of his time with Declan who had his bedhead draped with beads. Each to their own I told myself.

The following week Fr Sean decided to start holding weekly prayer meetings. According to Nurse Fiona he’d never bothered with prayer meetings before. Perhaps my presence demanded a resolute robust response from mother church, a subtle well focussed weekly exorcism that undid any progress I was making in harvesting souls for Satan. Not that I was on a campaign, I said very little to Declan. Watching him go about his morning prayers reminded me of how resolute I once was. What were we but two forces, cancelling or balancing each other out. Sean hopelessly thinking I would soon see the error of my ways, rouse out of my temporary atheism and capitulate to the one, true catholic and apostolic. Meanwhile there was I convinced that given another decade or two Sean would probably end up where I was now.

He started turning up all uniformed: collar, black suit and a new priestly swagger, the sort of swagger that the wearing of a uniform can give a man, his voice now stronger, more gravitas, a more assertive presence. Uniformed, he spoke more slowly, gave the impression he was listening when all he was probably doing was delaying his pre-prepared response. He reminded me of someone I used to be, although I don’t think I ever had his seriousness. His unquestioning approach and a trust in providence, yes I had that.



With all the paraphernalia on Declan's bed and his insistence on calling Sean, Fr. Sean, I suppose it was inevitable that Declan would become Chaplain's pet.

–I'm going to Lourdes next month Fr. Sean.

–Great Declan, we'll all be praying hard for you, won't we lads.

–Lourdes, what's bringing you to Lourdes Declan? I couldn't resist.

–Praying to Our Lady for a cure, healing, maybe a miracle Gerry.

I said nothing.

–Great Declan, said Sean, there's a wonderful peace there and while you don't always get the cure or miracle you pray for, your prayer might get answered in a different way, we'll be praying hard.

Good man Sean prep him gently. I'd trotted out the same crass nonsense myself down the years, preparing them for the disappointment, using mystery and the unknowable ways of God as my cover. I would send Declan off with all my best wishes but I'd be ready to pick up the pieces when he came back uncured. Better for Declan to do his exercises but he was only making half-hearted attempts. That was worrying, he was building up his hopes. There's that pointless word again 'hope'. Sure wouldn't it be a completely crazy world if miracles happened, I don't think I ever seriously prayed for a miracle in all my years.

Even when I was feeling the cold marble forehead of my father in the coffin, I briefly imagined him coming back to life but I was aware that I didn't want that to happen. His life was over, this was death, we were having his funeral, I would have done anything I could to keep him alive when he was alive but he was dead now. I regretted not being by his bedside when he died but that was how it happened and what would I have said or done anyway, maybe held his hand, looked into his eyes and smiled. He'd know I was there, that would have been enough.

No, I never believed in miracles, of course it didn't stop me asking for good exam results. Right God give me a display of your power, help me get a two one in theology, should be right up your street, it's supposed to be all about you, presumably you're the expert, but I knew it was up

to me. No, I never believed in miracles, but I did believe in something like a steer in the right direction. I lately discovered that the times I was putting faith in God, trusting him you might say were the times I was really trusting myself, I had managed to dump that fear of me undoing myself. God had nothing to do with it, but there was a feel-good factor in believing that some all-powerful being cared about me.

Declan told me he found it difficult to imagine there being no God. Difficult I suppose to imagine absence when you've started imagining presence, when you've defined the space of silent absence as presence. But you have to know what is the absence you're imagining, entertaining. Perhaps Declan has no grasp of what the imagined non-existence of God would look like. Would God's absence look any different to God's silent presence. Anyway imagining is not just some random free act, it involves effort. Imagining is an active process. Maybe Declan didn't want to imagine there being no God? I could easily imagine there being a God, well I had spent four decades accepting it so no surprise there, I could also accept there was no God, God wasn't here only in absence. The fact was whether he existed or not made no difference, it amounted to the same. Call him an absent God, call him a non-existent God, call him a projection, a pretence, call him, her, but there is a space prior to the choice of a present or absent God, there is a space to reclaim for humanity prior to being ransacked with an absent present, present absent God.

I've come to take back what they stole, my Godless beginning where they wrote their words on a blank canvas and I allowed them to do it. It's my learned resting point. Words and actions are my way in here, they can be my way out too – unlearning the habit, snapping the ties that bind, one by one until I can again experience the openness which I first saw in my first engagement as an infant. Back when everything started for me, when awareness gravitated phenomena towards me before I had words.

But it's always difficult to pinpoint a beginning, how much had I been exposed to before my first awareness grew in me, where do I hang my hat. I hang it on my first awareness, my first foray into it, my confident coming forth in exploration, the world coming to be about me as a

subject, beginning to be a being in the world with others who I discover are both with and without me.

Declan didn't show up in the gym the following morning. He didn't seem committed to the struggle for independence anymore. I wheeled myself back along the corridor from the gym and turning into the ward I could hear Declan and Father Sean talking behind the partially pulled bed curtain.

–Don't be paying any heed to Gerry, he's an angry and bitter man and it's understandable Declan, we must be kind to him, you stick to your faith Declan, keep praying, Jesus will answer.

–I will Fr. Sean.

Bitter? That was unfair.

–God will help you Declan, I know he will, you must keep faith in him.

–I don't know what I'd do without you Fr, Sean, you understand me.

I coughed and broke into; *Rock me mamma like a wagon wheel...* as I entered the ward. *Rock me mamma anyway you feel...*

–Lads pull back them curtains or people will think ye are up to something.

–Hi Gerry, said Fr Sean.

–So have ye it all solved?

Fr. Sean did his mock humility, pompous routine and took up a grounded stance as he looked out the window, a uniformed man marshalling all the gravitas he could, then he spoke,

–We over complicate things, that's the problem Gerry.

From Fr. Sean's mouth it sounded like something he'd read on one of them 'thought for the day' calendars.

–Keep it simple, I'm all for that Sean.

Declan wanted a miracle and had started to believe he might get one, might get to leave his chair in Lourdes and walk again. How simple and uncomplicated was that! Sure why bother booking a return flight, he could thumb his way home.

–Why wouldn't you go to Knock instead of Lourdes Declan, support a more local apparition site, shop local like, I said.

–More cures in Lourdes.

Sounded like a Rhyme.

–More cures in Lourdes, more rocks in Knock.

–Rocks Gerry?

–Yeah rocks from every county in Ireland around the basilica. Well they used to have them there.

Sean made no reply just resumed his conversation with Declan. Anyway the only possible miracle for Declan would be for him to accept his wheel legs and start getting on with things.

While Declan looked forward to Lourdes I fought to make my lower body obey my wishes. Three weeks in I had some movement in my lower back, had relearned to balance myself. It's a whole new thing living and dragging dead weight legs. You tend to forget about them because you can't move them but you have to factor them into every movement. Will they pull you forward, sideways or backwards, your fulcrum changes, me and my unpredictable dead legs creating a new centre of gravity.

Johnno is in the bed directly opposite. He's 21, was out celebrating his birthday, a front seat passenger hadn't worn his seat belt either. C5 injury, he would never walk again, Johnno's fight was with everyone and everything.

–Deco you're a fuckin loser man, all that religious shite, talk to the priest cripple over there he'll tell you.

Priest cripple. The question was did Johnno see me as a cripple who still happened to be a priest or a priest who happened to be a cripple. I suspected it was the former, but it wouldn't be true for long more.

–I'm not a priest anymore Johnno.

–Yeah whatever man but all that shit Deco is going on with, that's pure crap man.

–Declan believes it so live and let live, none of us know the answer.

–No we don't Gerry, but I have faith John.

–You have faith Deco, faith in some all-powerful, supposedly loving bastard who put you in a fucking wheelchair for the rest of your life, so why did he do that, did you piss him off or something'?

–Accidents happen.

–Right so why didn't he prevent it then if he's God fucking almighty.

–Maybe there's a reason for this that I don't know.

–That you don't know, and you expect to go to Lourdes and get him to suddenly change his mind. Oh look, says God, Declan is in Lourdes, one big miracle coming up, dah dah! Fuck sake man wise up! You're fucked, we're all fucked.

He started to roar. FUCKED!

–So Johnno how are we going to do this?

–Do what?

–Deal with being cripples?

–I'm fucked if I know, Gerry. What can I fuckin do. I shouldn't be in this fuckin chair none of us should, my fucking life is over, I'm only 21. 21!

–Your life isn't over.

–Fucking well is. Had a steady girlfriend, we were planning to go to Canada, she's been in to see me twice, first time she was all fucking tears, hugged me, kissed me on the lips, a week later a hug and a peck on the cheek, haven't seen her in three weeks. That's that fucked.

–You don't know that Johnno?

–I fucking know man. So much for our love finding a way. She's probably off with soft hands Ciaran, he's probably giving her a caring, get-over-Johnno fuck right now, the smarmy cunt, helping her get over me and the trauma of seeing me in a fucking wheelchair. How about me? She can fuck off to a different boyfriend and I'm stuck here rotting, still caring about her, she could at least help me get over her? Isn't that what people who love one another do? You don't just fuck off, switch it off like a fucking light switch. You work it through.

The tears were streaming down his face, he was looking me straight in the eye. I wheeled myself over to him and placed my good hand on his shoulder

–We can't let it beat us Johnno, we'll beat it or go down trying.

I stretched out my fist. He punched it gently, no conviction, he just didn't want to leave me hangin'.

–C'mon Johnno.

He wiped his tears with his sleeve.

–We're going out on the town some night Johnno and the place won't know what hit it, you hear me, and we'll get the shift as well, right, it's only a matter of time.

–Whah da phuck. Says Paddy, incomplete C5 with a brain injury, who arrived two days ago.

–Err ya phuken seer ri us Sherry.

–Of course I'm serious.

–Yar taken da pish, ya phucker.

–At least you'll sound pissed Paddy from the get-go, said Johnny.

–C'mon Johnny, that's out of order.

–Phuck ya, ya sheeky kunh.

–Sorry Paddy, I didn't mean it. Just having a laugh.

–Lads, come on.

The physio has me doing painful stretches on my lower abdomen, says it'll help me get more control back. The base of my back is like sensation central. There's buffers there where everything terminates just before everything is numb around my lower back, the termination point for all sensations going downwards. All the cabling is intact going downwards but it is severed here, no junction box to join them up, no current getting through. I have to keep going, keep pushing, give my body every chance to improve as much as possible. I concentrate with searing intent when I try to make movements. We're all so full of intent here, hungry for improvements, like athletes pushing to make a few seconds difference, small gains, the fine margins sporting people talk about. Each day it's incremental. With me it's trying to push harder, lift heavier for longer, some days I feel I am going backwards, I still can't fully trust my left hand to hold onto things, it's weak. Previously, I knew it's power, now I have come to know it's weakness.

When I'm focussed and determined, in the zone they say, I can tolerate more pain. I'm learning to fight the instinct to avoid it and stop, to push through it, mind over matter, hold the stretch for three more seconds, one, two, three, then two more four, five, then the relief of stopping, I want to try it again, I'll hold it for five more now, perhaps seven the next time, control this body, make it submit. I wake each morning with stiffness, lactic acid build up but I feel more alive in the pain, getting stronger the physio says. I'm still unsure about trusting a half a kg weight in my left hand. I started by holding half-full plastic cups of water at room temperature, at least if I drop them I won't scald myself. I held a takeaway coffee cup in it yesterday but was holding it too tight, the cup was collapsing, overcompensating for my distrust. I'm learning to loosen my grip, it will take time to judge it exactly, there's a lack of sensitivity in my left hand too. I can't fully feel the paper cup. I can feel the heat better, that numbness may go eventually they tell me, but I must keep exercising. The physio gave me this stress ball which she wants me to keep squeezing. Over the last week I have noticed a small improvement, slightly better control in my left hand. The consultant is happy, he says there's no muscle wastage developing in my legs, not yet anyway, but I will have to keep exercising them, or getting them exercised to maintain that,

stop them becoming dead stick legs, they don't bring me anywhere anymore but they balance me. Their weight brings my top frame forward makes me sit upright. They anchor me in this way, stop me having a tendency to always fall backwards apparently, keep me upright, my fulcrum in the middle. They're dead but I must take care of them, be extra careful I don't bump them into anything. If I do they'll bruise. Might get ulcerated, tissue alive and functioning but no sensations. Have to mind my dead legs. Apart from balancing me they make my frame look normal. To look at them you wouldn't think they are dead legs.

Me and my dead legs; they used to carry me, now I'm carrying them.

The Angelus bell rings at 12 noon and 6pm each day on the radio. Mostly I tune out, hear it in the background and if it does find my ear I distract myself, repeat a few bongs and smile. This evening was different, I heard each bong, three, three, three and then nine, eighteen in total. There was something reassuring about it, the way it punctuated time's passage, something to hang onto, like I'd hung onto lots of things, old clothes, old books, old shoes with leaky soles that wet my socks, something reassuring. Constants in the mathematical equation that had been my life, just like mass and all the rest, it drew me in, drew me back again. I could remember the comfort it once offered, that feeling of being involved, being part of something. I miss that sense of belonging that old habits give. Could I convince myself, find a way back. Part of me felt that need and was growing excited with the prospect of that reembrace: Gerry O'Dowd had made a big mistake, threw the baby out with the bathwater. Had my pride and arrogance got in the way, made a knee reaction when what was needed was a calm considered response. Had I the energy for this fight, the wherewithal to decide to walk an old road again but with a different mind-set, a more detached take on everything.

The following Saturday Niamh showed up.

–You're doing great Gerry, looking better and sounding better than the last time.

–Making an effort Niamh.



–I’ll be there for you when you come back out.

Just then it sounded like a threat, a hit man waiting for someone to be released from prison.

–Won’t see you stuck, Gerry.

*Won’t see me stuck.* Were we friends now looking out for one another? She was all talk like she was the first day we met, all together, grounded in her story but where was I in it? I watched her mouth move saying words but I began to lose interest, she was filling space with a word avalanche, trying to convince herself of something.

Silence re-established itself, she was looking at me now. Maybe I should be talking, but all I could feel was sadness gripping me, I felt alone. A patient now, a receiver of care, a passenger in other’s stories.

–You’re making great progress, you must be happy Gerry.

–Happy. Sure I’m over the moon. Why wouldn’t I?

–I didn’t mean it like that.

–Happy? I don’t know how I’ll live like this.

–Well you learned before as a child growing up.

–That was different, I just became part of everything through growing up, I wasn’t in a wheelchair.

–I know but you dealt with stuff that happened you and you adapted.

–You reckon.

I wouldn’t call it dealing with stuff, not properly, you just try to get on with things when you’re growing up and you park things you can’t deal with.

–I survived, kept going.

–Can’t you do the same in this new chapter.

–New chapter!

Niamh's attempt at inspiroporn was beginning to wear really fuckin thin. You know what Niamh, how about fucking off and being wonderful somewhere else. She wasn't finished either, she kept going.

–Yes, this is a new chapter, a new experience, there's an after and a before. There's always an after when there's a before.

–Not so, there isn't an afterlife.

I was half expecting she was going to get a board and start drawing diagrams on it.

–All I'm saying is that we're in the new chapter already. It's happening.

She'd been doing some thinking about it all.

–Yes, I get all that but this chapter as you call it is about me and my traumatised body. What makes you so sure it's a chapter, maybe it's a different book.

–Maybe it is a book, anyway the point is we all live with trauma, this is massive I know, but you've dealt with stuff before, you know how to do it.

–Do I?

–Yes, you've lived all your life in uncertainty, we all do but we hold onto what we can and we let go when we can't hold on any longer. You believed in God for decades. You don't now. But no one is stopping you believing in yourself.

BANG! A fuckin direct hit. Defence shield taken out. No answer to that but I managed to find a cliché.

–Talk is cheap.

–Listen Gerry. I want to support you in whatever way I can, you know that. This is a new beginning.

Beginning. The word drew me back to childhood and my earliest memory. I must have been about three years of age, standing up in my cot in the dark cottage living room, a rectangle of bright daylight framed in the open front door casting a parallelogram onto the floor. I wanted to see out, to be there. So with all the effort I could gather I held the cot end and pushed the cot. With each push the cot scraped across the flagged floor. I pushed until I got there and stood in my cot in the bright light. The curiosity of a child.

–I appreciate what you’re saying Niamh. It’s just very difficult right now.

–I know Gerry, it’s all going to take time.

Here I am now, Gerry the wheelchair user, as if by choice I had opted to accessorise myself with a wheelchair. Wheelchair Gerry, a rolling stone that had fallen into a hole, which the briars, moss and long grass would eventually cover, and under which would develop a menagerie of creepy crawly life.

–I think I’ll get some sleep Niamh, I feel shattered.

–Do you need a hand to get back into bed?

–No I’m grand, I have to start managing these tasks myself.

–Ok Gerry, I’ve a union meeting this day week, so I’ll get across to see you then.

–Sound Niamh, see you then, safe journey home, mind yourself, thanks for coming.

She gave me a hug and a kiss on the cheek, some half-formed tears in her eyes. Poor Niamh I thought as she blew me a kiss and exited the ward door.

One thing I do know about myself, I’m a trier, a returner, the sort who comes back to things; it takes me time, but I do. Niamh was no passing fancy though. When I wasn’t with her I thought about her, but now I’m confused about it all. What was clear was the depth of Niamh’s sense of belonging, to the school, the children who had been with her since junior infants, watching them grow up and there would be a new intake every year for Niamh to get attached to, links in a chain connecting past, present and future. Whenever we meet my old feelings reawaken – a stick

stirring up settled sediment in a rain barrel. I had wanted us to launch together into the world and still in some corner of my mind hadn't given up on that, sometimes finding looks, smiles, silences between us that seemed to firm up that likelihood. No, I don't give up easily, I've chased my share of lost causes, wasted time for little reward, just like I soldiered on regardless with the lost cause that has been my vocation. Holding on just like I hold on to old clothes in my wardrobe, shirts I haven't worn in three years. But things come back into use, I've found that, it's important to take a longer view.

Two weeks later Declan had gone to Lourdes, his empty bed still adorned with scapulars, beads and miraculous medals, like a cure site where people leave tokens. My own mother had put a scapular on me going to boarding school, to protect me she said. It wasn't effective against bullying I can confirm, absolutely fuckin useless if you really want to know. I wheeled myself over and placed the picture of the Madonna and Child which Declan had on his locker face downwards, her gawking over at me was getting too much.

–We should wait until Deco gets back to go clubbin' Johnno.

–Clubbin? Are you fuckin mad, we're not goin' clubbing.

–We feckin well are Johnno and we'll bring Declan, he'll need a lift after Lourdes. I'll get onto Fiona to make it part of our rehabilitation plan.

–She fuckin fancies you Gerry.

–Does she feck, we're just friends.

–We'd be a fuckin laughing stock.

–Will we feck, sure maybe Declan will drive us after he leaves the chair in Lourdes.

–You're fuckin bad man, but look if you're going I'm going.

–Is Coppers wheelchair accessible Johnno.

–You know something I've been in it and I never noticed.

–Google it and see, or make a phone call.

Lights off, Declan's empty bed, Johnno snoring across the way.

I feel alone now, beyond the good wishes, the banter, the craic, a weariness engulfs me. I keep thinking this weariness might take me but it probably won't. I'm eight weeks in, still on pain killers thinking I'm part of some adventure. Some fuckin adventure. Bottom line I'm a cripple in a fuckin wheelchair for the rest of my life, that's the reality and here I am pretending. Still the creature of habit I always was, humouring people, still wanting the security of everything, change happening on the inside, but that's not the way things change is it. Thinking by itself never changes anything, only actions do. I had made so little use of my body to change things down the years, apart from the learned liturgical gestures which preserved the handed down and helped to hand it on rather than changing anything. I'd followed the direction signs, stayed off the grass, performed everyday liturgies and rituals, the ones they expected. I took charge at funerals, told them about the Christian hope of resurrection. But I'm getting so tired of trying all the time, I just want to be left alone. The fighter is all fought out. I just want to lie down and sleep a long sleep, my body feels sick, my mind's not far behind, they're coming out in sympathy with each other. I'm finding it hard to talk to people who stand up and engage me in conversation. My neck gets tired looking up, it's more comfortable looking ahead. To look back I have to swivel round my chair, I might spend less time doing that because it means I have to decide to do it now. Looking back is part of auto priest like the liturgical hand movements, the blessings, the 45-degree angle of compassion that has built up certain muscles in my neck. I think my head tends to gravitate to that pitying 45-degree angle. When morning comes I check it in the bathroom mirror, a relief to see that my head only defaults a little sideways. Looking out the window I see trees in silence, standing in wait for what I don't know. But they're not waiting, I am. It's some sort of company for me to see them waiting too. They're just there, and I'm just here.

Through all the thoughts, sleep and silence I have come to another morning. Everyone else is sleeping and everything is standing still, nothing is moving in my field of view. I'm looking

at a still. I am waiting but what is there to wait for? The trees are still, but I am in the present anticipating something, getting impatient when nothing happens and nothing or no one comes and when they come and thwart and raid my waiting with their noise, their projects, their purpose, their intentions, their presence, my sense of here and now will be surrendered to their projects, their plans. My thoughts trail off into the silence from which they came, I watch the stillness of the tree, less of a wait on me. I'm breaking out of this waiting, there is nothing to wait for, I'm here.

I'm immersing myself in my recovery plan, flirting with Fiona to break the monotony and sometimes fantasising about her when the frustration gets too much. The tiredness brought on by my exertion and rehab efforts ensures I sleep soundly most nights, my body getting used to the daily serotonin hit I got from the exercises, but my thoughts kept drifting back to Niamh. This inability to let go of her bothers me. I decide to be fastidious, I wasn't going to text her for at least a week, and then I ended up texting her two hours later, saying how grateful I was for her weekly visits, she had stirred me up again. I had given her that power, could I take it back, did I want to?

Paddy Ronan called in to see me on Wednesday:

–I decided I'd strike off there yesterday Gerry and give the free pass an outing. Sure I haven't been on the train in years, can't even remember the last time I was on it.

–And how's all in Kilcrua?

–Arrah much the same Gerry. Fr. Declan is filling in for you these last few months. Jenny Sweeney is very low, not long left by all accounts. The family was called in last Sunday but she has rallied again these last few days. I brought the newsletter for you.

I glance through the newsletter.

–Fr. Declan always mentions you in the mass prayers.

–Good man Declan.

–How’s the animals and the farming going?

–Still going, tippin’ away at it. Daisy’s going deaf according to the vet, she’s 13 this year, a big age for a dog.

–A big age.

–So how’s everything looking from your side Gerry? You’ll be here for another while. I met Niamh in Kinsellas shop the day before yesterday. She said you were doing well.

–A few more weeks and then I’m back out into the real world. Hoping to get settled in Galway for a while at least.

–A fine city, more a big town than a city. That’ll be another outing for my free pass.

–You might knock some value out of that travel pass yet.

We went for a coffee in the outdoor area. Paddy fancied a fag. He was smoking Silk Cut Purple.

–That’s a big change in the smokes. Have you forsaken the Sweet Afton?

–Had a chest infection there a month back, was off the fags for a week, started back on these, there’s less tar and crap in them. They’re sound for now.

–I’ve cut down myself as well, only smoke a few now most days. I’ll smoke one with you now.

We lit the cigarettes. It was mild and sunny, one of those pet April days.

## 15

Niamh calls to see me each week and we're still texting back and forth in between. I'm keeping it basic, exchanging information about what's happening and putting two small x's at the end of each text. Being consistent, not burning bridges although part of me smells smoke. Two x's are safe enough, they could be friendship kisses.

Each time it starts with a hug and kiss. I thank her for coming and she replies.

–Sure why wouldn't I come?

Today I feel like answering that question.

–Well Niamh, life with me is full of complications and as I said previously, I don't want you feeling obliged to be here.

–Jesus that's pretty full on and I haven't even taken off my coat yet!

Should have delayed it until she had the coat off. She takes off her coat and woolly scarf, drapes them over the back of the chair and sits down.

–Right Gerry, a direct question for you, do you want me to leave now or what? Because I am getting the distinct vibe that you don't want me here.

–It's not that I don't want you here. I just don't want you to feel you have to be here.

–How many feckin times do I have to tell you that I want to be on this journey with you?

–Ok I appreciate you saying that, but neither of us know how difficult this is going to be.

–We're agreeing to try to tackle this together as two people who care for each other.



–Care. I don't want care, I fuckin hate that word. Love me, hate me but don't fuckin care for me. I'll take you as a lover. If I need a carer, I'll get onto the HSE or pay someone.

The carer role was an old familiar for Niamh. She'd looked after her mother and father.

–If it's just about care Niamh, I don't want it.

–That's harsh, why would you turn down care, you're getting all worked up on the word care.

–Yes because I don't want to be wheelchair-Gerry who needs care, I'm Gerry or I'm nothing.

–Of course you're Gerry, but you're in a wheelchair now and you need support, help and care. That's the reality.

A bit of reality therapy from Niamh.

–Yes, that's all true but bottom-line Niamh I don't want you as a carer or a friend, I want you as an equal like I always did, that hasn't changed

–So much for the accident making you more realistic.

–Realistic about what?

–About what's possible.

– Right so I'm supposed to give up because of some new limitations, I don't expect you to tell me that Niamh, I expect you to encourage me not undermine me.

–I'm not undermining you.

–Well it feels to me like you are, I'm not saying you mean to but that's how it's landing. See Niamh, things are different now. I wasted so much of my life all caught up in other people's stories when all any of us have is our own story.

–You're off again. This is hopeless.

–Hopefully it is!

–What the hell is that supposed to mean?

–I don't want hope, I don't want care, I just want to be. I have no idea what tomorrow holds and whatever it holds is none of my concern. I only have now.

–Why are you being like this?

–Is there a way I'm supposed to be.

–Oh, I don't know...but not going on like this.

–Sounds to me like I'm supposed to settle for whatever I get and should be happy with that. Grateful almost. Well fuck that!

–You don't need to be grateful, just be realistic.

–Realistic, there's that fuckin word again.

–You weren't happy with us before the accident and it sounds to me like you're not going to be happy now either.

–Well why should I settle for something second rate because I happen to be in a wheelchair.

–Is that what you think we are, second rate? I don't believe the way you're going on.

–Realistic. Do you seriously think I became a priest because I was realistic? It's a no brainer, Niamh, do you know me at all?

–Yes, and another thing that's a no brainer is that you're still the same pain in the hole you always were, you and your always wanting more, no correction, you're not the same, you're worse, ten times worse.

I felt like applauding her the moment she said it, a rush of fondness for her passed through me. Ten times worse, obviously she must be teaching the ten times tables these days.

–I reserve the right to be a pain in the hole Niamh, a pain in the hole wheelie.

She was staring out the window. I wondered what she was really thinking and then I stopped wondering. Pointless.

–Listen Gerry I hear what you're saying, right now we just have to continue to be together and see how we go.

See how we go. More going around in circles. I don't think she really understands me. Her world feels so matter of fact and rigid, don't think I can blossom there. There's nothing more I want to say now.

I'm tired of this.

Real love doesn't die, it stays with you like the first crush in national school, a sleeping seed that given the right conditions might bloom again. Difficult to get rid of love and its memory, you can't obliterate it, can't recover the time before it existed, but you can control its urge to deepen more. In the end it's not real love until you express it, give it away and see what happens, will it come back. I close my eyes, feel my head heavy on the pillow, the ward sounds retreat into the background.

... we're walking through the busy Saturday evening Galway streets, my chair opening a path in front of me as I go, people moving left and right making way, people letting the wheelchair user past, I move through the crowds, with Niamh by my side at times and then at times behind me as we go single file. The sun is sliding slowly down in the western sky as warm perfumed smells waft out the doors of pharmacies and clothes shops, the smell of alcohol out of open pub doorways.

–Well sexy what or who are *you* doing tonight? Yeah you with the nice ass in the blue jeans with your brother in the wheelchair!

Two burly lads with half empty pints in their hands, we keep moving.

–Hey, we're talking to you. They walk up beside and block our path.

–Could you move out of the way we're going somewhere?

–You hear that Shanie the wheely wants us to move.

–Go ahead man! We just want to have a word with your sister.

–She's not my sister.

–Ok your carer, your assistant who wipes your arse for you and feeds you with a spoon, says the skinny one.

Meanwhile the muscled one is talking to Niamh.

–So sexy lady, how about us hookin’ up for a good time, we can drop Mr. Wheely somewhere for the evening and we can hit the town.

–Right I’ve asked you politely once, so for the last time can you move, we are in a hurry to get somewhere.

–A cripple with attitude, Shanie.

–You’d want to be careful what you say cripple, learn some manners, and muscles empties a couple of mouthfuls of beer from his glass over my head. He laughs, Shanie does too.

–Nice one Tone.

–So emptying that over my head made you feel good.

–Yes cripple it has and he laughed. Hey sexy got a big present for you down here babe, have you singing babe, and he grabs his crotch.

–Just fuck off and have a wank.

–You are one fuckin lippy cripple, I’d have you fucking wasted by now if you weren’t in that chair.

There was rage in his eyes. I stared, I was depending on something, a trace of humanity. Something his mother or father had said to him as a child that he might remember – something about not terrorising vulnerable people.

–Look lads we’re going somewhere, what are you looking for.

–We want a go on sexy, cripple man, give her what you can’t isn’t that right Tone.

Tone grabbed his crotch again and moved closer to Niamh who had her back to the wall.

–You feel that babe,

–Get away from me.

–Attitude, Shanie, I like that, sexy would put up a good fight.

–Niamh come on let's go, get the fuck out of here.

–Oh Nee avh is it, sounds so nice Nee avh!

Me and my fuckin big mouth, he had her name now.

–Look fuck off and let us go about our business.

–Shut to fuck up cripple, I'm seducing your carer.

He had his back to me now, I noticed his shoes, the way his Achilles was showing clearly.

While Shanie was admiring Tones performance, I rolled back a foot or so and with all my strength I pushed myself forward and whacked him with the metal foot rests straight into the Achilles, he roared as he fell in a heap.

–You're fuckin dead when Tone gets up, a crowd was gathering now and Niamh was crying

...

I awoke disorientated but relieved and reached for a glass of water to wet my dry mouth.

I felt the water quench my thirst.

It's Sunday, I'm here in the ward by myself, the rest of them are gone to mass. I toyed with the idea of going with them, parking at the back and observing it all, but then decided against it. I'm thinking about Mick. News came through yesterday that he had died. No visit to Connemara so. According to nurse Fiona his *heart gave up in the end*. Mick had been all heart, '*giving up*' was an unfortunate choice of words. But people use words without thinking, they just trot out hackneyed phrases to pass on information, dead words that don't bring you anywhere, words that just short circuit silence, close off enquiry, consideration. '*Gave up*', I hated her throwaway remark that explained it all away so glibly. A trite, thoughtless statement which battered and numbed the rattle and hum of living – stale words tasting of dry ashes, drying your mouth and making you hoarse in their articulation. Go speak your dead words that tumble like dead weights through the air somewhere else. Let me sweep up those dust collector dead words that have fallen on the floor.

Old, hackneyed words and phrases wrinkled and numbed by their popularity, old past-it celebrities, making uneventful appearances.

–He fought until he could fight no more, Fiona.

–That’s true Gerry, he certainly was a fighter.

At least we had left the giving up idea and in the reframe we were respecting the fighter Mick was.

Johnny is back in my head, again.

I have found myself looking at ceilings. Looking at the wooden crossbeam in the toilet. Well, I think it’s wooden. I turn my head and feel the caress of my shirt collar against my neck. I imagine a rope, it’s tightness making me feel the rage of life as it ebbs away. Can’t shift the thought, it has just started to unpack its things and live here. Where could I get a rope, a strong enough one. At least with a wheelchair all you’d need to do is secure the rope, put the brakes on the wheelchair, tip forward and fall out of it. Would that be enough of a drop? The rope would have to be as tight as possible, no give in it. Otherwise you’d more than likely injure yourself, make a bad situation worse.

I refuse to get up the following morning, I just want to sleep. When I get enough sleep I might start again, I don’t think I’ll ever be able to get enough sleep though. I couldn’t force myself out of the bed this morning, they don’t understand this tiredness, they just think I got a poor night’s sleep. It’s nothing like that, it’s just like being sick with tiredness all the time and unable to do anything about it, it’s like nothing can fight this.

Fiona returns to make a second attempt.

–I’m going to get you up and dressed Gerry.

– Fuck off Fiona, I need sleep.

–Gerry, you know the deal, you’re not allowed give up here.

–Don’t care anymore, just give me tablets and let me sleep for good.

–I'll have to get the psych team over to you.

The psych team came. First an out-rider student doctor talked to me, asked me about how I felt. I didn't even look at him, just closed my eyes, lying here with my eyes closed, hearing his questions and not really caring, I just kept answering his questions with 'I don't know.'

Then the consultant Dr Fidelma Collins called over, they were sending in the heavies now. She announced herself, sounded young, a sexy, well-kept body voice so I opened my eyes. Tall thirty something, shook my hand, red dress, my eye giving her the up and down, Christ! What a body. I couldn't help myself.

–We have to find a way of getting you out of this bed.

Show me your tits Fidelma and I'll agree to get up.

–So what are you thinking Fidelma, I said trying to cover my own thoughts.

–Well we need to look at this situation calmly.

–You won't get better in bed.

–Get better, I'm not fuckin going to get better, you fuckin know that.

–Ok but you are going to improve your situation by sticking with the programme.

–The programme, I'm sick of the fuckin programme, every fuckin day, killing myself and all for what, so I might be able to wiggle my big toe, I'm not going to improve anymore.

–You don't know that, no one does, all you have to do is keep working, keep fighting. If you stay in bed you will deteriorate rapidly. It's not an option. We'd prefer you worked with us, we'll give you another day off and then you resume the programme. A rest is permitted. I'll get Fiona to give you something to help you rest.

–I'm not taking any more fuckin happy pills, to delude myself into keeping at this shite. So don't bother, either give me enough pills to flatline or don't give me any.

–I'm prescribing a mild sedative, it will help you rest. I'll talk to you later this evening.

I didn't eat much that day, felt full all day. I eventually took the pills, ended up sleeping for 6 hours, but it only felt like ten minutes, and I still felt tired. I've often had better power naps. Fidelma was back again in the evening.

–So how are you feeling now Gerry?

–No change, still tired.

Not sure what she expected, some sort of dramatic conversion, Jolly Gerry with the 'sure everything will be grand outlook', positive Gerry holding the darkness at bay, pretending it wasn't there. When I looked in the bathroom mirror yesterday afternoon, I didn't recognise myself, just saw blankness, a shell staring back at me. That rope heavy around my neck is in my head again. I'm thinking of my neck as this delicate connecting point, easily severed, the weak point, I'm thinking again of places here where there are strong fulcrums to swing from, ones that won't give way, there's a clarity about these thoughts.

I'm walking now in this place of swaying trees, but I can't hear the breeze, there's silence, or maybe the noise has deafened me. The nurses come and go, doctors too, repeating themselves. If I refuse to get up tomorrow they'll send me back to hospital and give my place to someone else who is prepared to give this their best shot.

–Right now you are withdrawing Gerry, we all know where that journey leads, high levels of dependency and possibly institutional care, you won't have the wherewithal to look after yourself.

I heard all the words but none of them registered. Well the phrase 'institutional care' did, the contradiction that it is. I see a flock of birds in the distance flying across the sky. Then they sent in a psychotherapist called Adrian, he asks about my anger, because *'it's anger that has you here.'* He seemed convinced, standing there making statements trying to jump start me, I knew what he was at, could see his strategy like seeing the Sellotape on Santa Claus's beard all those years ago. People can be so careless can't they, it's always important to pay attention to joins, make them neat.



–Institutional care will be your future.

It registered.

–A structured life where you fit in with institutional schedules. But then you're used to structure so you may take to it very well.

He was in full flow now.

–Someone will be deciding when you eat, when you get up, when you go to bed. But sure who's to say it's any worse than depressive independent loneliness?

Yes, it would be about fitting in with staff schedules, dressed in grey track suit bottoms, no choices to make, no agonising, just go with it all and down size, becoming a shadow of my former complicated self, more controlled, contained, with a chemical cocktail of different coloured tablets to make me manageable to others and to myself too, memories of independence would fade fast. Some might say I was a sad case. The story of a man who gave up – a cautionary tale for others. Roaming the corridors of an institution in my wheelchair, being pushed around, waiting to get pushed around. I'm an object moving from one place to another, an object to be moved, lots of motion and effort adding up to nothing, just chemically induced contentment. I wouldn't have the wherewithal to consider killing myself, would lack that motivation and end up just existing, sucking life from everyone around me, their energy, their care, their time. That wasn't me, I had no right, to do that, do my best or end it, those were my real choices.

The following morning Adrian the psychotherapist called back again. I was watching his mouth moving and thinking that psychotherapist is a funny word. Imagine having 'psycho' and 'rapist' in your job title and you're supposed to be the professional who is helping people. He looked like a bit of a psycho did Adrian, shirt and tie all spruced up, clean cut, all there, walked in a fluid, purposeful manner, somewhere around 70 footsteps per minute, similar to a relaxed pulse rate, was considered in his response to everything.

He was not the man to motivate me. He annoyed me. The more I looked at him the more I wanted to punch his fuckin' lights out.

–Look would you ever fuck off. Go and talk shite somewhere else.

He stood still and stared at me full on, not used to being told to fuck off. I stared back.

–Please yourself.

He turned and commenced his 70 beat per minute walk out of the ward.

–Fuckin psycho rapist!

He turned around and stared at me, I think he wanted to throttle me.

Hopefully he doesn't prescribe something to get back at me, he can't, he's not a psychiatrist, have to watch what you say to them feckers, they have access to all the medication, could have you whistling Dixie in a very short time. Talk, not medication that was his bag, but he might convince the psychiatrist to prescribe something.

Later the same day the consultant Fidelma came round. Not that she had been out of it or anything, she seemed a bit spaced but it was probably me. Had she been experimenting with some of the mind-blowing cocktails she has access to? Occupational hazard, curiosity; what will happen if I take this one? I remember having a communion and altar wine lunch a few days as a seminarian, soul food, filled me up, lasted until dinner but the communions don't provide much soakage for the wine. Fidelma had big staring eyes, they seemed to lock onto me when she spoke. She didn't blink mid-sentence, but closed her eyes for a second at the end of sentences and then opened them again.

–How are you feeling now Gerry?

I should have been asking her.

–Tired and emotional.

–OK.

She started writing stuff down on a page circling things and drawing arrows, maybe some sort of analysis that would add up to a prescription.

–You are going through a particular stage at the moment Gerry which you may need some help to negotiate. Your mind may not be capable of making the best decisions now.

Here we go, one chemical cocktail coming up.

–So I can get you onto some medication that will help.

Right put me on something that will mess up my head, make me into some sort of fuckin compliant zombie.

–No thanks Fidelma, I’ve met some of the outcomes of psychiatrist prescriptions down the years.

–Gerry, anger is not a bad thing you know, you just need to work with it. It takes time, you’ve only got a short time here, so you have to engage fully in the programme.

–I understand that.

–Good, well we’ll hold off for one more day on the medication.

I wouldn’t take it anyway – not something she prescribed. I’d pretend, hold it under my tongue until she was gone and then get rid by squashing them between two spoons and throwing them into my half empty cup of tea. She never once changed her expression as we spoke, reacted to nothing I said. She walked out the door and turned left onto the corridor, presumably she’d signed the Hippocratic oath. I could have that much confidence in her but then I’d made a promise to be celibate. Promises, promises, the tyranny of promises: waging war on freedom, ending choice.

Then Johnno started on me.

–This feeling sorry for yourself is going to get you nowhere Gerry. Everyone here is doing their best for you, you’re dragging your feet.

–Dragging my feet, Johnno? Yes, they’re fuckin paralysed, remember!

–You know what I mean, stop being a smart ass and listen. You have to fight now, even if your mind is disengaged and you have lost your will, just let your body keep working, you can tune out, occupy your mind with music or something, let your body do the work.

Johnno was emotional, red face, hitting me lightly with his fist on my shoulder.

–Come on Gerry, you know with a bit of help you can do this.

The world is still there outside the window, looking as it always has, but I don't feel part of it. My drive to engage is instinctive but my sense of belonging is learned. I feel so tired. I wonder will I ever wake again. The heaviness of my body in the bed, sinking down, dragged down and back by my dead legs. It takes so much effort. I can't continue if I can't depend on myself – it's about dignity. No, I don't mind help and support but when you get to a stage where you are in negative equity; your continuance demanding intensive resources, well there has to be a decision. One you make yourself. Is this worth it? Have I got any right to expect what no one should have a duty to provide? Do I want to end up in a nursing home and be seen as a biological unit to be fed, toileted, medicated, kept warm, clean but otherwise encouraged to decay to facilitate staff rosters, staff hobbies, in a so called care environment, a functioning biological organism in the abyss of institutional care, where they might give me counters to play with at a table, or a jigsaw. Dead not buried. An exhibit in the care zoo where carers tell visitors: *Oh the fella in the wheelchair used to be a priest, had a car accident, ended up in the chair, this woman around his own age comes in to see him regularly, some say they used to be an item.*

I know these care zoos, have visited people there down the years. They take away your voice there too, they start talking for you, answering questions in their auto carer lingo: *good man, you're a great man, you ate all your dinner, will you have jelly and ice cream?* On Tuesdays in one particular home they bring people for a spin on a bus, it does a 20-mile loop, non-stop, no one gets off, no one gets on – the weekly outing.

Bottom line: if I don't regain independence, I will be fucked into some nursing home to slowly die, will lose my will to live but they'll kill my will to die also. I'll be there will-less in a prison, the prison's they've built because everyone's too busy working to pay mortgages on big houses, too busy with no time to care.

So what about beginning again?

Could I begin again at the place I previously finished? But that would be about continuation not beginning. Could I begin again back at the start where I previously began unknowingly, filled with curiosity with a before-words drawn-ness to the contents of the world. Go back to the beginning except this time it would be a different beginning. I could now argue against myself. Can I find a way to fight and live unhindered again? This is it, my life amounts to this decision, all my life has been leading me here, to ask and answer this one question. Will I continue, will I give up. Will I sidestep this last temptation?

Outside the window the trees were waving and swaying in the breeze, I am relieved they're not standing still. They sway with their grounded roots pushing downwards and outwards to anchor their expanding growth of trunk and branches, their flexible spines able to bend and take the wind, branches reaching outward and upwards towards the sun. The romantic sees above ground, the philosopher looks below. The Platonic converse. Roots in darkness growing, seeking food and nutrients for the tree. The light unseen by the roots necessary for them to grow, to continue their blind movements below ground, roots that will never see the sun – capillary roots absorbing what is needed from the dark soil womb of earth.

One thing was clear.

I couldn't put myself in that world of nursing homes with roaming empty long corridors and the silence they housed. The wheelchair priest, Fr. Wheely they might call me, and I'd end up a big bodily lump, with my mind subdued, wrecked with their timetables, staff rosters. 'Inappropriately placed', that's what they call it, A middle-ager in an old folk's home, reading the local papers and *Ireland's Own*. My new curacy: resident chaplain in an old folk's home!

Alone now, but at least I still have these thoughts. An aloneness without these thoughts for company would be worse. I am thinking about the movements of my indoctrinated body blessing myself, bowing, genuflecting, quartering the air while giving a blessing, my indoctrinated body embracing it's subservience to an arrogant mind. It's been happening for Millenia, but it's

the body makes the person, isn't it, the body that brings you all the places, brings you into touch with reality, tables and chairs, the furniture of the universe. Mind can only bring you there imaginatively, in an imagination that has been previously bodily fed. My dead unfeeling legs still here, they could be part of the wheelchair, blood still transporting oxygen through them but no movement possible. I am left to carry around this dead piece of me. I carry them with me, have to keep carrying them, it's about shorter distances, staying places, wheeling myself along short distances is a journey now. Never really made maximum use of my legs when they worked, most of the time I just followed well-worn paths, habitual journeys. Legs that trod well-worn paths with purpose for many years, legs that continued to walk in habitual ritual when purpose was gone; tentativeness and uncertainty masked by habit, now paralysed with the certainty of their immobility, unreachable in their motionless, distant world.

Messages go through my hands now to the wheels, to move faster, slow down, turn, I am learning to move as one unit, me and the chair. A projectile moving through space, less wind resistance than when standing and walking. With practice a certain gracefulness is possible, two wheels pushed forward together. A sitting duck now. Can't run out of the rain, shelter in a doorway or get in between outdoor tables and chairs to shelter under a canopy. Exposed. I've mastered a quick swivel to look behind me but it takes more effort to look back now, my attention is taken with what's here now, where I'm going. At least I'm able to push myself. It was so disconcerting being pushed from behind. I felt so insecure, would I be pushed out in front of a car, would I get pushed into a door. I'm thinking again of babies and toddlers in pushchairs, being pushed from behind, do they feel insecure about the invisible force propelling them forward. Perhaps they just like motion, movement, are unaware of the danger, they trust, they haven't yet learned fear.

I'm so grateful for my hands. Better to lose a leg than a hand, so much you can do with a hand. A leg just moves you through space, gets you places. Hands can massage, ease limb pains, they can scratch an itch, you shake hands, they enfold the outside towards you, push it away, they make and fashion, they stroke, they caress, they hit, they make a fist. I'm relieved I have both my

hands. I feel bad saying that about my legs, it seems ungrateful after all the places we've been down the years, all the stairs climbed, the escalators, up Croagh Patrick down Croagh Patrick, up alleyways, through forests on walks, treks with groups, leg memories, the reminiscences of my two dead trunks placed on the chair rests.

It's a strange feeling touching them, I don't expect to feel anything when I place my hand on my leg anymore. But I am gentle with their deadness, a deadness I can feel with my hand, the coolness of my legs. My hands can still bring me close to my legs, numbness and feeling all together in the one body. There's a point close to my hips, a place where my feeling ends and numbness begins and then it moves to deadness. It's hard to describe how it feels, sometimes words pinch at the edges of things. But those song lyrics quoted by Mick keep repeating on me, seeking my engagement: *Where life is madness and the madness dancing*, I would have to learn to dance in a new way –wheelchair salsa.

My last dance was last October at Tony O'Malley's and Sharon Mulvey's wedding. Anytime I stayed for the dancing I ended up *dancing it out* as they say around Kilcrua, whatever the 'it' was that I was dancing out. It was an old-time waltz with Mary Henry, late forties married to Joe. My left hand and her right hand joined, my right hand resting just below her bra strap, my thumb on it at the join, feeling the tautness, the tension, the strong elastic, you could hang a man from one of them I'd say. Whenever we both ended up at a function there was a dance to be had with Mary. Lively and bubbly, that's Mary. Her perfume filling my nose, couldn't tell you what it was, a married man might know those details, probably not though, but anyway it smelled lovely. Her left-hand resting firm but gently on my shoulder.

–Jeez Mary, you're lookin' a million dollars.

She laughed.

–Sure I'm no oil painting Gerry, but I have all me organs.

We both laughed and such was the force of the laughter that I bumped into the award-winning dancers John and Joan Fallon, my heel coming down on John's instep and as I struggled to regain my balance I stood on his toes with the front of my shoe.

John and Mary were professionals. With posture and poise, they moved across the floor perfecting seamless fluid revolutions on corners, hands resting delicately in each other's, such finesse, John in his wet look shined black shoes. They never spoke when they danced. Etiquette I understand, dancing being a serious business. A few years ago I was in their house when they had the stations, and they had a long sideboard filled with a horde of trophies and medals they had won down the years. John's white shirts were marvels, blinding white and from the stiff, creaseless collars and cuffs Joan must still be using the starch. With his cuff links, tie pin and close shave, slightly balding John was the sort of man you knew had agonised over the attractions of a hair mat but in the end had opted for Grecian 2000 and a partial comb over. Joan in her late fifties was well preserved too. John now retired from his management job in Eircom changed his car every second year, pristine inside and out, no empty crisp bags, chocolate wrappers or flicked pieces of dried snot quarried from nostrils on quieter country roads lying on the floor of that car.

–Sorry about that John, sorry Joan, I just lost...

He was fuming. I decided to keep dancing. Mary was laughing profusely, tears running down her cheeks. She was trying to say something but couldn't with the laughing.

–You stood ... on ... both his feet.

–I did not.

–You did ... he's after sitting down.

–He is not.

–Look! She would need oxygen if this continued, tears rolling down her face.

–You stood on both of Flatto's feet. He's in a bad way. Look he's after hobbling over there to the nearest chair to sit down.



We waltzed around the floor Mary and me smiling, bonded in that funny moment for all time. Feeling a lightness, a closeness; the closeness two people always have after they laugh together. I swung Mary around the corners, tightening my grip, looked into her eyes as if I was hypnotising her, pulled her a little bit closer. We played for those few minutes. Silly but memorable even now that last dance makes me smile. One of my better dances.

She came to see me on a quiet Friday afternoon when she was up visiting her daughter Aoife who is doing Science in UCD. I was sitting in the wheelchair.

–Mary.

–Gerry.

We hugged.

–Great to see you Mary, let me guess you’re here to bring me to Coppers tonight.

–She smiled a sad smile through her glassy eyes.

–You’ll have to sit in me lap Mary and if Flatto is there I’ll drive over Flatto’s toes with my wheels, take them clean off him this time.

–She was laughing now, tears of sad laughter.

–How are things Gerry?

–Mary I just want people to see me, not this bloody chair. Is that too much to ask?

People’s vision is so limited. Some travel the world but stick to what they knew or thought they knew already, they never go off map, it takes an adventurer to find adventure. Often it can be found very close by.

–I won’t get to climb any more mountains Mary or take in the view from the top.

But when I did get to the top in the past I wasted my time. I’d take a fleeting glance around, take a photo and then start my descent, youth wasted on the young, mobility wasted on the mobile. She sat and chatted. There was no news in Kilcrua, just business as usual, same old, same old. Then she opened up the brown bag she had with her and placed a bottle of Lucozade and a punnet of grapes on my locker. She laughed.

*Lucozade*, grapes, *MiWadi*, flowers and chocolates in various combinations that's what most visitors rock up with. I've never seen a combination of *MiWadi* and *Lucozade* it's usually one or the other and likewise with grapes and chocolates.

–Something to give you energy Gerry.

–So you didn't bring me any fags. Well I'm very disappointed Mary.

–No fags. So how are you holding up?

–Hanging in there, good days and bad.

–I was talking to Niamh. Niamh is ..., well she's very worried about you.

She was looking me in the eye.

–Well worrying wont change anything.

–True. But I don't think you understand Gerry. I wish you could hear the way she talks about you.

–How does she talk about me?

–Fondly, she really cares Gerry.

–Well, it's not a carer I need.

–She knows that. She's not a quitter Gerry. So don't you ... be quitting on her. She doesn't deserve that.

–Fair enough Mary, you're in straight talking form. Yes, she does deserve better Mary, better than a fuckin cripple in a wheelchair, I'm not much of a catch right now Mary.

–Niamh's not thinking like that. That's not the way she sees you.

–So how does she see me?

–Do you really not know? She has a path worn to you since the accident.

–Well maybe she feels sorry for me.

–So why can't you just accept her sincerity, maybe you're the one who's feeling sorry for yourself.

She was still looking me straight in the eye.

–Well thanks for coming Mary, you’re really making me feel a whole lot better.

–Yes, well someone has to say it. I’ve seen you together. You can make each other happy. Just stop being distant and difficult. I think you’re being too hard on her.

*Don’t be going hard on people.* My father’s advice to me when he heard me giving out about people and making judgments.

*You’re not the only one with a story.*

–Maybe you’re right Mary.

–I know I’m right, please don’t throw it away Gerry. Anyway, I’ve said enough, I’ll say no more.

There were tears in her eyes. Looking into her face I forgot myself. Sadness gripped me and sorrow followed.

We hugged.

–Thanks so much for coming Mary and for your honesty and straight talk, I appreciate it, I really do. There were tears in my eyes now.

# Embrace

## 16

I'm getting stronger, watching what I eat for the first time in years, only smoking a couple of fags each day. It's too awkward to smoke here. Anyway I don't want to be working against my improving fitness. They arranged an appointment for me with a solicitor last week. He reckons I should get a tidy sum out of the accident, enough to get accessible accommodation somewhere.

I'm waking earlier these mornings. Woke at half six this morning. All still quiet, everyone asleep, there's something strange about being awake when everyone is sleeping. I expect the unexpected in that darkness just before dawn, the thrill of light breaking to reveal everything again.

Going to bed last night I was impatient for morning to come, like a child going to bed Christmas Eve. My head buzzing, imagining the effort I am going to put in the morning in the gym. I am eager to leave the bed and immerse myself in the day but it's too early yet. I will get myself up as soon as Johnno wakes, he will give me a hand, the wheelchair is in an awkward presentation, and it will take so much effort to change it. I look over at Johnno he's sound asleep, he usually doesn't wake until half seven, I try to nod off with the hum of morning traffic starting outside the window.

In this darkness in another room I could hear my father topping his breakfast egg, first some static from the radio, then the shortened O'Donnell Abu tune and then the six pips for half six, the sound of tea slurped, bread cutting, then dishes being moved to the sink. He would then call into my mother in their bedroom. I think he used give her a kiss before heading to work, then open the almost closed door to my room and look in. I pretended to be asleep, he sometimes lingered there, happy I'm sure that I was sleeping soundly in my warm bed as he ventured out into the cold morning. I wish I had opened my eyes and spoken to him those times I was awake.

I'm thinking of times we had hay cut for small bales, looking out the window wondering would the rain stay away long enough. Later, he'd lean over the field gate wondering what we were going to do, *wrap the feckin lot of it in big bales and have done with it...* I'm beside him pulling the seed heads from the long meadow grasses and looking up at him wondering what else he's thinking. He wanders in and out of my mind these last few days, sometimes smiling at me through the face of strangers. I'm thinking about times we stood in the hayshed sheltering together and watching the rain falling in silence, a place we still own, a place of silent thoughts and occasional words. Plenty time now to share that silence in the way we didn't back then. I can stay here in that moment now, watching the rain turning persistent, sharing our together silence with my mind running through our last times, the last time we cut turf together, our last pint. I'm finding it difficult to isolate the last one, it's like memories have grouped themselves under headings, 'pints with da' and I am faced with some sort of composite, made up of jigsaw pieces, lots of different times and different conversations. Anyway we weren't aware it was our last pint together when we were having it. It would have been different if we had been aware; would have been artificial, stilted. Sitting there having our last pint together we wouldn't be enjoying it, just taking small mouthfuls making it last, our usual engagement broken. Difficult to know what to say when you're having your last pint with someone, hardly what you'd usually say, could end up slobbery and emotional but knowing us that wouldn't happen.

Fighting through the traffic on the Curragh Line was no way to say goodbye but if I'd got there in time what would I have done? Well I'd have shook your strong hand, left my hand there, a lingering handshake rather than a hand holding. We might have smiled, said something, nothing gushy though, I would have been happy there, would have held it together. You'd want me to, I'd want myself to. We'd see each other's sadness but there would be no tears, sitting there we'd say our goodbyes without words – just like all those years previously we got to know each other before words.

It's that time of morning when everything is waking, journeying back to what it was before. Johnno has sorted out the chair for me and I move what used to be my default religious body into the chair, my mind now teaching my body new movements and my body repeating old movements, posing questions for my mind. Why did you make me learn this asks the body? Making the sign of the cross was in my hands but I stopped them doing it. I'm getting to a stage where it's becoming an unlearned learned movement. I just did it there now, just to see, my hands still know it, but gone is the relationship of subservience, the slave before the master, the sinner before the almighty, second nature no more. I'm relieved to be unlearning about original sin, the evil that I am and have been since birth, or presumably since conception if we are strictly logical about these things. Goodness from God, evil from me for which he forgives me, he'll reward all my efforts when I die. Must be careful with words, they bring things to life. Before God there was silence. Birth, separating us from our maternal host, birthed out into the world to search for oneness again, the instinct directing us towards the other. God becoming the invisible image of completeness, our desire-filled heart restless until it rests in the perfected other or so that story goes. A story about a lack of fastidiousness, a lack of rigour, a laziness that baptised idle imaginings into speech, a stubborn refusal to stand naked in front of the questions in the garden of Eden. The God-desire man's downfall, a refusal of life.

Thoughts of Niamh resurface. I am thinking of texting her, I know if I don't stop this thought I will end up texting her, then afterwards I'll be annoyed at myself for doing it. Looking

at my phone, waiting. Getting all caught up in Niamh and a possible response, thoughts of Niamh taking over my awareness. I won't text, I will let this day unfold itself, allow it its own momentum. Relax, be aware of being in the stream, let the current carry me. Focus on what is present rather than absent, not allow what's present to keep pointing to what is absent. Once you think the absence of something, it is already present, my thoughts of Niamh making her present as an absence.

My dead legs are present-as-other beyond my control, I touch them and it is as if I am touching something else. They are alive but dead to me, I can't feel their hurt. Do they feel hurt? What is their hurt that I don't feel?

They've all been getting onto me again about involving Niamh in the process, Adrian, Fiona and Jenny the sexuality and well-being nurse. I've dragged my heels on it.

They keep repeating how important it is to involve the person you're in a relationship with, so they understand the situation. I tell them maybe ignorance is bliss but eventually agree to invite Niamh to the next review meeting. She'll either embrace it or pull back. Don't know what she'll think. At least when she's well informed about everything she can decide where she wants to be.

Later that evening I texted Niamh about the review meeting.

*Hi Niamh, Hope all well. Just wanted to let you know there's a review meeting on Thursday looking at my progress and plans for the future, they feel you should be there. So you're welcome to come if you'd like. Gerry x*

She replied within minutes:

*Hi Gerry, All well here. Of course I'd like to come. I'll call you now if it suits and we can chat. Xx.*

I replied back:

*Great Niamh, chat shortly. Xx*

I explained about the meeting.

–Gerry are you sure you want me there?

–If you want to be there that's sound by me but only if you want to.

–Sure why wouldn't I want to.

–They’ll be going through lots of stuff, at least you’ll get the full picture.

Niamh getting the full picture, I was still undecided about the merit of Niamh getting to know what she might be letting herself in for. At least she would know the truth of my situation.

The following morning Archbishop Tony called to see me.

–Ah bishop, I hope you’re not here to bless the Blueshirts.

–Blueshirts?

–The song.

–Right, by the way you know they didn’t sail to Spain from Dun Laoghaire, it was Galway.

–Didn’t know that Tony.

–Anyway how are you keeping Gerry?

–Making progress Tony, another three weeks to go.

–So hoose dis sham with the big shooz.

–Paddy, this is Bishop Tony, the boss man. Tony meet Paddy.

–Faher Tawny. Paddy raises his left hand slightly in a acknowledging gesture.

–Faher Tawny and Faher Sherry. Tawny Sherry.

Paddy starts to laugh, and we all laugh. Paddy launches into a fit of laughing and drools some bubbly spit from the left side of his mouth, which he wipes away with two swipes of the knuckle of his index finger. Tony is looking perplexed.

–It’s just an in-ward joke Tony. The drink, a tawny sherry.

–Right. I suppose it depends on your sense of humour.

–Hey Faher Tawny I oonder-stan nnnormal halk, my halk ahs sortha phuked, boh me hears arendt phuked.

–Sound Paddy. I just didn’t get the joke.

–Necks hime.



–Anyway Gerry, another three weeks you say. I could arrange something temporary, a month or two convalescing and then if you want to come back I could fit you in somewhere quiet, get some adaptations done.

–Tony, I know you mean well, but my new wheels are going to change some things for me, but a converting back, or perhaps a deconversion, well it's not on the cards. Why does everyone expect poor feckers in wheelchairs to be religious?

–Conversion can happen in different ways Gerry.

–Fear and desperation are pretty good motivators.

–You need plenty time Gerry to assimilate what's happened.

–So my life has changed, getting around is challenging and frustrating but my beliefs haven't changed, it's a physical disability Tony not an intellectual one. I can still think for myself. See the thing is Tony being in a wheelchair doesn't make sense of nonsense, it just makes it all the more feckin bizarre.

–I don't think you've thought things through, Gerry. You're dependent now, you need help.

–I need the same as everyone else, somewhere to lay my head, something decent to eat, some money to get by.

–We're dinosaurs Gerry. Old school, a dying breed. I see the young priests now, their style, feeling good in Gammarelli. It has become an external church.

–I have a few bob in the credit union Tony and according to the solicitor I'll get something out of the accident eventually, might buy a small place somewhere in Galway, rent somewhere to start.

–We'll chip in something to help out.

–I'm not looking for handouts Tony.

–It’s not a handout we always pay a gratuity to help people out, anyone who leaves a job deserves a leg up. I know an elderly man who has a ground floor flat for rent Gerry, he just wants a tenant who won’t give him any hassle.

–Well that rules me out.

–Well you’ll hardly wreck the place on him, I can have a word if you want, it’s around €500 a month, down the Claddagh somewhere.

–A reasonable rent for Galway, but I don’t want strings, if I’m making a break it has to be clean.

–No strings, it would probably suit you both, I will just put you in touch with one another, that’s all.

–Sound Tony.

–His name’s Brendan Fitzgerald, his wife died a good few years ago, has a daughter working here in Dublin somewhere, she visits him most weekends. He’s a decent sort, not a man to be in your face or anything like that, I’ll text you his number after I’ve had a word.

–Sound Tony, thanks for that.

–By the way that business with Carroll on the steps of the palace, it’s sorted. You’ll hear no more about it. And in case you’re wondering there was no money involved.

–That’s good to hear. I took one for the team.

–More a case of you giving him a few for the team. Anyway it’s history now. I’ll firm up details with Brendan about the accommodation. I’ll be a place for you for a while.

–Sound Tony, thanks again.

–No bother, mind yourself Gerry.

At the review meeting Adrian from the psych team was quick to point out that Niamh was a late comer to the process.

–Normally we involve partners at an early stage, this is last minute really, only two weeks to go.

–Well our situation is a bit different than normal.

I only involved Niamh at this late stage because I didn't want to make any presumptions. They kept at me, telling me she needed to be involved. I suppose I feared it would somehow convince her that wheelchair Gerry was dependent and in need of a carer. I don't want to fall into all that. Dependency breeds reliance and just as I was never fully convinced pre-accident that we were going to last why should I suddenly start believing it now. I always valued independence and self-reliance, learned that in boarding school but you don't learn much about emotional independence there, you just park all that.

Dr John went through my routines around bowel management and catheterisation.

–So Niamh, Gerry has managed to become very good at performing these tasks.

–Yes, have become expert at sticking my fingers and plastic tubes into places I never did before.

It's been a case of trial and error.

–Yes, Gerry but you've stuck with it. There still may be accidents but if you follow the diet and plan ahead things should work most of the time.

–So how you feeling about all this Niamh?

–Well some of it I knew, I've been reading up on it. No excuse for ignorance these days.

Then it was Jenny's turn to do the sexuality and well-being piece. Long story short, erections were possible, maybe some Viagra needed at times, but the possibility of ejaculation was hard to predict. Probably not possible. She spoke about how exploration was important and practice, mouth, hands, erogenous zones, giving and receiving pleasure, aids like the IntimateRider, straps, support wedges and all sorts of paraphernalia. Niamh was listening intently.

–We've covered this with Gerry already, have you any questions Niamh or anything you want to discuss.

–Not really, some of this is new but these are all things we can discuss and talk about together. She reached for my hand and looking me straight in the eye said.

–We want each other’s happiness.

–We do, I replied.

We smiled and looking at each other it was as if there was no one else in the room.

Over coffee after we chewed the fat on some of what we’d heard but mostly we just enjoyed the time together. I told Niamh I wanted to make it to Galway by train under my own steam.

–Are you sure you don’t want me here.

–No, I want to make this journey home myself.

–Well I’ll be waiting for you at the station. And I’ll get the stuff I packed away in my shed from the parochial house and make contact with Brendan in Galway.

–Sound sweetheart, that’s mighty. I’m looking forward to getting home.

I was sad leaving Declan, Johnno and Paddy on that sunny May Day. Ships built to sail the open seas, not remain in port and all that. One of my Maynooth classmates Ed had a poster with that written on it on the wall of his room. “Ships are built to sail the open seas, not to remain in port.” My first and last seminary crush. Organised, feminine Ed who for a time partially eclipsed my clarity about my sexual leanings. I left it in the fantasy zone and never let it see daylight, ships sailing at a safe distance. Our paths crossed occasionally over the first few years and when they did we chatted about our experiences of working in parishes and our seminarian naiveté. Don’t think he had a crush on me, well I know he didn’t. Anyway I suppose a certain early questioning of my sexual leanings was inevitable when you spend so many years in an exclusively male environment.

Declan was heading south to Dungarvan, still hoping for a miracle, Johnno was Sligo bound and Paddy had a couple of months still ahead of him. We made plans to meet up, put each other’s numbers in our phones and picked a date, six weeks’ time.

–We'll text back and forth lads on the details. I said my goodbyes to the staff and thanked them for all they'd done for me. Nurse Fiona had wished me well the day before.

When I got to the reception area Nurse Fiona was there. She'd come in on her day off.

–So this is it Gerry, you're heading for the hills as you'd say yourself.

–Heading for the hills Fiona.

–Well you know where we are if you need anything.

–Thanks Fiona. We hugged and then I handed her the envelope I was going to leave at reception for her and the rest of the ward staff; a thank you card with a €50 donation to the staff Christmas party.

–Thanks again for everything Fiona, you saw the worst of me at times.

–Ah, sure you had your moments, but you weren't that bad really.

–There's a little token gesture in that for you all.

–Thanks Gerry.

The taxi arrived. Fiona walked alongside me with my bags as I wheeled myself to the taxi.

–You take care Gerry and give me regards to Niamh. We hugged again.

I got in the taxi. As the taxi pulled off we waved each other goodbye, if I'd been driving I'd have honked the horn. As I headed to Heuston to catch the lunchtime train to Galway I felt the world was on my side. Thinking it was me against the world was just melodramatic bullshit. People made way when I exited the taxi. I purchased my ticket at the lowered counter. My movements in my chair felt fluid, my arm movements well coordinated. All the practice in Dun Laoghaire was now standing to me on the outside. I made my way to the Galway Hooker for a pint and a fag. It's been months since I had that combination.

I was sitting enjoying my pint when this couple in their sixties approached.

–Are you Joe Ferguson's brother? The woman asked in a polite enquiring way.

–Oh so you know Joe, I said tentatively.

–You must be Jimmy.

–Jimmy Ferguson, I repeated in a non-committal sort of way.

–We were very sorry to hear about the accident Jimmy.

–Oh a bad do, but sure shit happens as they say.

–Well you’re looking well Jimmy. Then the husband got in on the conversation.

–Fair play Jimmy and you still have the Mayo accent. Ah there’s satisfaction in people that don’t take accents.

–Arrah sure there’s not much point in taking accents, be proud of who you are and where you come from.

–You’re just like Joe.

–We’re hurrying for the Cork train, so won’t you tell Joe we were asking for him.

–Who will I say was asking?

–Joe and Mary Butler.

–Lovely to meet you Mary and Joe, safe journey.

–See you Jimmy, mind how you go.

They turned around to wave before they disappeared from my view, I waved back. Off they went to catch the Cork train, Joe and Mary Butler, friends of Joe Ferguson and now his brother, wheelchair Jimmy.

The train journey was uneventful but momentous too. Here I was out in the world again, I’d survived, I had more time to come alive. It had the excitement and optimism of my train journey west at Halloween break from Maynooth during my first year as a seminarian.

Niamh was at the station in Galway to meet me. Dressed in summery clothes, skirt above the knee, low cut white top, denim jacket, tanned legs, hair cut short. It suited her. Sexy.

–You look a million dollars.

–You’re looking good yourself.

She hugged me and kissed me on the lips. I hugged and kissed her back.

–It’s so good to see you out in the world again.

–Great to be out, but in fairness they couldn’t have done more for me in Dun Laoghaire, fantastic team there.

–I like the haircut, Gerry!

I had given my long overdue two fingered salute to my medium length wispish hair. We exited the station and reached the taxi. The taximan had ramps out ready, he pushed me up the ramp I helped by pushing my wheels.

Niamh sat in a seat facing me, her lovely legs angled sideways.

–Thanks for sending on the pictures of the flat, it looks great.

–Brendan seems like an alright sort, reminds me a bit of you.

–Really?

Maybe I could handle someone a bit like myself right now.

–I brought up all the boxes from my garage that you said, think you’ll have the essentials for now anyway.

On the pavement outside the house I gazed at my new surroundings, just a few hundred yards from the shop at the corner, a nice push of the wheels. Brendan emerged from his house walking slowly with the aid of a walking stick. Cripples united! We shook a strong handshake, he smiled,

–Welcome to Galway, Gerry.

–Thanks Brendan. I’ve always had a grá for Galway.

– If you need anything you’ll get me here or you can ring that number: he handed me a Dunnes Stores receipt, porridge, milk, coffee, digestive biscuits, with his number written on it.

I wheeled myself around the apartment admiring the open blank space, a new canvas. Niamh changed into her grey jogging pants and black t-shirt, and we started going through boxes. A new fridge, bed, microwave, and wardrobe had been installed. Brendan had facilitated their delivery and installation. I went to the kitchen and while Niamh emptied boxes I made us coffee,

work-surface a bit high and lots of high cupboard space which wasn't going to be any good to me, I would put together a snag list, Brendan probably knew someone who could do these jobs at a reasonable rate. I went to see the toilet; the grab rails were well positioned. I tried it out. I checked the bedroom; the bed was at the same height as the seat on my wheelchair which meant it would be easy to transfer from the wheelchair into the bed. I had given the measurements to Niamh previously, she had passed them to Brendan so they could be factored into the mattress thickness.

Niamh had brought a nice picture. A4 size, slightly impressionistic, a still life of wild meadow flowers.

–You'll find a spot for it.

–It's lovely, very colourful.

–I thought you might like it.

We hugged. I admired the colours; wasn't sure I would have bought it if it had been up to me. But Niamh meant well. Down the years I had spent too much time accommodating others choices, finding places for all their gifts in my life space, gifts I wouldn't have chosen. Get me something I can eat or drink or even them 'One4all' vouchers. I'm done renting out my personal space to well-wishers and their kind thoughts. Of course Niamh just saw herself giving me something colourful and lovely to look at, she was helping me see and notice the beauty of wild meadow flowers. Because it was from Niamh, I decided to allocate it some space in the hallway leading to the living room. Live with it in the hallway first, it might progress to the living room in time. I'm not being unkind. I appreciate that people spend time thinking about me and what I might like, wanting to display positive feeling towards me, but in the past they mostly got it wrong. See it's important to decide where things are going when you get them or soon after, otherwise things get left in places or others make suggestions where they should go, and you maybe agree because you haven't thought it fully through. After a while you get accustomed to the sight of them there and you rarely end up making a choice to move them. So many things end up in locations as a result of indecision not choice.



The afternoon passed punctuated with cups of coffee, me admiring Niamh's ass and her midriff which she exposed when she stretched. Niamh all business trying to get my flat sorted for me and me getting horny and falling for her all over again.

She was unwrapping the Louis Mulcahy tea pot which she got me years ago, holding it at a distance. She was admiring it as she threw the wrapping, *Irish Times sports section* into the pile of rubbish.

–It's great to be here together.

She smiled, left the teapot on the work surface and walked towards me.

–It most certainly is. She kissed me hard on the lips and whispered.

–Let's go into the bedroom.

–Are you sure about this.

–Do we need to be sure? We have to start practicing at some stage.

She walked ahead of me and in my excitement I moved too quickly and hit her left leg just above her Achilles with the footrest.

–Oh me foot! She fell forward onto the bed.

–Sorry, clumsy me, here let me give it a rub.

I grabbed her foot and rubbed it as she sat on the bed.

–Sorry, I'm so fuckin clumsy and awkward sometimes.

–No worries, the rubbing is helping.

I have her foot in my lap rubbing it, then she moves it to my groin and starts to move it rhythmically around my penis. I start to get hard as she moves her foot up and down along the shaft.

–I'll give you an hour to stop that!

She took off her black t-shirt to reveal a pink bra and taking her foot out of my groin stood up and took off her grey jogging pants, She was wearing matching pink lacy panties. Adjusting the

wheelchair armrests she sat gently in my lap still supporting her weight by herself, she reached her right hand into my trousers and took my erect penis in hand.

–All good here Gerry.

–Let’s get on the bed.

She unstraddled me and moved onto the bed, I put the brakes on the chair and moved myself across onto the bed with Niamh holding my lifeless legs and using my elbows I moved myself up the bed and rested my head on the pillow.

–He’s falling asleep you’ll have to wake him again

Niamh walked around the bed to the other side.

–I’ll wake him, no worries.

She stood naked, smiling at me, my eyes taking her all in.

She got into bed and lay gently on top of me putting her weight on her forearms and placed my now hard penis between her legs and let it slide up and down between her fanny lips, making oily slappy sounds and then she placed it in her, she began to gently move up and down on it, more of my penis entering her each time, we moan and groan, I move my hands to feel the wetness between her legs letting my moist hand slide between her bum cheeks and squeezing her buttocks I move my hips towards her to get deeper inside.

–Oh, she moans.

She leans forward and pulls my head into her breasts.

–Fuck me hard now Gerry, fuck me.

Fuck me! Is this the real Niamh?

Then her moans grow louder.

–Yes Gerry.

There’s no sign of an ejaculation. I wanted it but we both had been told about this in Dun Laoghaire. Still it felt good just to feel sexual again, to desire her and her body.

–Gerry. Is there anything I can do?

–Don't know Niamh, we'll just have to experiment and see what works or doesn't.

–I'm all for experimenting, and she took my penis into her mouth and began to suck it.

I concentrated on the pleasurable feeling and not the idea of finishing as they had advised.

There wasn't going to be a finish.

–You better come up here Niamh before your jaw goes into spasm.

She laughed, I laughed too.

We kiss, cuddle up side by side, our bodies entwined, Niamh pulls the duvet over us and closing my eyes I think of nothing, just feel our bodies together, touching each other. Lying here I'm convinced there's nowhere else I want to be right now, just here in each other's embrace. Outside there is the noise of traffic and the pavement busy with the purposeful footfalls of people coming home from work.

When I awoke Niamh was sitting on her side of the bed with her panties already on, she is snapping on her bra straps, her hair still wet after a shower.

–Hey sweetheart, I drifted off.

–I manoeuvre myself towards the wheelchair in a series of movements lifting my legs one by one, then moving my torso until I was positioned parallel to the chair. I sit in and once secure made my way to the shower.

–Niamh! Could you lower the shower head for me.

–Sorry I completely forgot; I'll remember the next time.

She lowered the shower head for me, kissed me on the lips.

–I love you Gerry O'Dowd and she handed me the shower gel and shampoo.

And while I showered, I wondered if this could last, me and Niamh. But I let the thought go. I was entertaining an old, irrelevant question. I concentrated on the smell of the shampoo as the water sprayed on my head and all over me.

## 17

The following morning Niamh had to leave early to get back for 9:15am. As she was getting dressed I sat up and draped my dressing gown over my shoulders. Then I manoeuvred myself into the chair and while she was in the bathroom I put on the kettle and made two coffees.

Niamh emerged from the bathroom all dressed up.

–Jeez, it’s just as well you’re teaching in a primary school Niamh. You’d be distracting young lads in secondary school.

–No I wouldn’t.

–You most certainly would.

–Ah you say the sweetest things – sometimes!

We laughed. Our smiles ricocheting back and forth between us as we drank our coffees.

–Great being here with you and having time together yesterday and last night.

–A lovely start to life in Galway.

–And sure when you get a car sorted, you’ll be down to Bailebriste.

–Ah yeah sure don’t you know they’ll have the bunting up and you’ll have the tin whistlers from the national school out.

She looked at her watch and took the last mouthful from her coffee.

–Right I best get on the road.

We kiss and hug, it’s awkward with me sitting in the chair so we take it slow.

–I’ll text later, take it handy.

–Sound Niamh, will do, chat later.

I wheeled myself outside and we exchanged another kiss and hug before she got into the car, started the engine and moved off. She beeps the horn, I wave. Then another beep on the horn. I linger for a while listening and watching the birds. On this May morning they have a new energy, spring has come and established itself again despite and in spite of everything. Daffodils have burst through the ground to hear birdsong, tree buds have unfolded into leaf in the mild breeze, even though there is still a possibility of late frosts or storms until we're well into May.

There have been and will be more losses along the way.

Deep inside the trees, the growth of last year has hardened and a new soft ring has developed. The word 'hope' hovers in my head but I refuse it. Hope is passive, there's a powerlessness about it, a handing over rather than an actively embracing. Nature doesn't hum a hope tune or wait around, it takes a chance. The daffodils set about their blooming journey in the silent winter womb darkness of the nurturing earth, their urge to life and growth too strong for moody weather to hold prisoner. They wage their life impulse with an energy stronger than hope's gentle hum, they have broken through from underground to face the elements.

The days pass and I grow accustomed to a new order and rhythm.

In the morning, doorways along the street open one by one, heels clip-clop the pavement, children head for school, students to college and soon all that is left on this street is out of work fathers, people off work sick or on leave, stay at home mums, dads, babies, toddlers and me. The woman in number 5 goes off to mass in the cathedral every morning. She offered to bring me the morning after I moved in, assumed I was religious. Nothing new in that. I suspect she goes to Knock too and prays for invalids like me. She means well. I'm in number 3a and there's a young couple in number 1. Mark and Ann, hear them having the odd row, celtic tiger apartment, poor insulation, saucepans getting clanked off one another, aggressive wash-ups, plenty of chipped delph there I suspect.

Here in my space the clock tock ticks away and I'm listening to my breathing and the small movements I make in this chair. I can see the green Cathedral dome from here in the distance. I think it's getting smaller, certainly not as imposing as it is up close from the bridge. It blends in better from here, just another tall building in a growing skyline. Out my front window I see the man across the road has just walked out onto his front lawn still in his dressing gown drinking what I presume is a mug of coffee. He scratches his crotch area, looks at the sky, takes a final sip out of his mug and fires the remnants from the mug onto the base of the rose bush. My view is now empty of people once again, just street, houses and grey sky filling my view. The morning rush is over, a daylight silence settles on the street to be occasionally disturbed by a delivery van.

Each day I plug myself into my daily plans, my creature comforts. Wash, eat, read, relax, listen to music. My mind at first impatient with this stillness wanted to fill it with thoughts but it's now getting used to a gentle attending. Here in this disengagement, this apartment, there is peace, but I am still only in early recovery, learning that contentment comes mostly unbidden, unearned, alights upon your shoulder gently. Sometimes my mind gets pre-occupied. I've read books about reflection and writing down the years and some use the image of digging. But it's an overly aggressive image for something which sets out as an attempt to gain understanding or insight, silence without the thought traffic is maybe as good as it gets. Digging only contaminates what's beneath by letting air and light penetrate down.

I can breathe in the space here. It's uncluttered, a place of possibility. The Parochial house had become cluttered in thoughts and old words like 'should' and 'shouldn't'. It started to live up to its name. Here now there is space for new words, less words, better grammar. This is Gerry O'Dowd's house.

Well it's an apartment not a house.

I make my way down to the social welfare office.

Department of Social Protection it says over the door and there is that logo of the bird flying out of the hand. It's encouraging to see something pictorial like that in these times when most logos are about colourful letters curved and shaped in different ways.

I'm in a queue. When I was able bodied, I hated waiting. Since the chair I've come to accept a slower pace, a smaller world, the centre of my world is close to hand not distant. Distance means effort, planning. I stand out now because I'm in the chair, more than I did when I was standing, a case of having better standing sitting.

A small child walks over chewing on a raggy, grubby toy and touching the left wheel of my wheelchair and looking back to his mum announces 'wheel' with a wonder reminiscent of stone age man. Then he crouches and looking at the hub where the spokes come together his face reddens. He's doing something in his nappy. I don't have any sweets, I used to have sweets, jellies for when I would meet kids, but I don't anymore. Not so much because of the paedo associations, I just tend to eat the lot myself these days. The child looks over at the security man. From his instructions to everyone coming through the door *'take a ticket please and have a seat'* I suspect he's Polish, maybe German. He's over six foot tall, brick shit house, white shirt, black trousers and black highly polished boots. The child says, 'big man' and looks up at him. Piotr or whatever his name is, doesn't wear a name badge and doesn't react. The job description didn't say anything about humouring children. We all sit around and wait our turn, wait for the number clock to show the number on the ticket in our hands. Davy the toddler is off exploring while his mum with her long, greasy hair holds the grubby toy he has handed her. Where's big Davy I wonder, not here, did he feck off to London or somewhere when he couldn't take it all. I hope he sends her money, if he does, she doesn't spend it on herself.

There's a man around pension age, sitting next to me.

–Not a bad day out there.

–Lovely and mild.

The security apparatchik looks over, stage one alert, people voicing opinions in the public area. Then a middle-aged man in a leather jacket and a black hat enters.

–So how are we all this morning? Hey, Bernie, where’s the radio, he asks the counter clerk, ye used always have the radio on here.

Bernie ignores him and continues to serve the customer in front of her at the counter and the pensioner now smiling tells me.

–That’s Fran O Sullivan, he used to sing in a band for years. The drink got him.

–Any singers in this morning, *Rock me mamma like a wagon wheel, rock me mamma anyway you feel...*

–Take a ticket and sit down sir.

–I’ll take a ticket, but do you know I think I’ll stand.

Fran continues to move around and sing wagon wheel, I join in for the chorus, the child’s mother smiled, and the child says.

–They’re singing mammy.

We were singing.

Stage three alert.

–You are causing a disturbance you must stop singing sir.

–Feck sake, sure can’t we sing if we want to.

–You are causing a disturbance sir, you must stop or I will have to ask you to leave. You are using aggressive language.

–Aggressive language? Disturbance, sure who is being disturbed, no one here is complaining, you’re the only one that’s getting excited. You’re the one being the asshole.

–Right, that’s enough, out you go.

–Hey, come on, leave him alone he’s only having a bit a craic, I move towards the security man, it’s not a feckin crime to sing in this country, not yet anyway!

–The man in the shirt and tie behind the desk indicates to the security man to leave it.



–Just sit down Sir.

–I’m sitting down already.

–Can you go back to your place sir.

Back to my place, I take the scenic route back.

Eventually the number clock reads 79, bingo, check. I make my way to the counter, the middle-aged blond woman hands me a 30-page application form for what’s called Disability Allowance. She mentions Longford twice. I should send the form to the Social Welfare office there, she doesn’t know how long it will take I’ll have to ask the people in Longford about that, they just give out the forms here apparently. I take the form.

–Just complete the form, get it off to Longford and they’ll write to you if they need anything else. She tells me it could be eight weeks.

–What am I going to do for the next eight weeks?

She tells me to go and see the Community Welfare Officer and that they will sort out something for me in the meantime. She’s looking at the wheelchair and still not saying I’ll definitely get it.

–I can’t say whether you will or not, Longford will decide the claim.

Longford, Longford, I don’t think I’ve ever heard that place mentioned as much, sounds as if Longford is the disability allowance main hub, wheelchair central, Longford.

– If you need help filling the form you can go to Citizens Information.

–Father O’Dowd, how are things? A voice from inside the counter, I look and see Sean Purcell from Ballybriste standing with some brown document wallets in his hands.

–Sean! Didn’t know this was where you hang out these days.

–Here for the last five years, Gerry. How’s the recovery going?

–Not too bad, just got out of Rehab in Dun Laoghaire there last week. Progress slow but steady.

–A bad do.

–At least I’m still knocking around.

–I hope Bernie here is looking after you. Bernie, this is Fr. Gerry O’Dowd, many is the mass he said in St. Josephs for us when Fr. Declan was away.

–Mind yourself Gerry, best of luck with everything, mind how you go.

–Sound Sean, all the best.

Bernie seemed flustered.

–Sorry Fr. O’ Dowd, I had no idea...

–Anyway Bernie sure I’ll get these filled in and send them to Longford. I suspected Bernie might be the sort to believe in priest’s curses so I stared a quizzical piercing stare at her as if at that very moment I could have been putting a curse on her.

–Sure if we can be of any help Father, come back and we’ll help you out.

Now she was going to help me. I made no response to her final comments just placed the forms on my lap, turned on my wheels and headed for the exit.

–Keep singin’ my friend, we can’t let them win. I high fived Fran on the way out.

I went back a couple of days later with the completed forms. My new GP Dr Barry Browne from the practice around the corner had filled in his section on the form. Bernie was there, all smiles, had the hair done, *Jaysus Bernie you were expecting me.* Long queue, so I took a ticket again and waited my turn, eventually making my way to the counter. Bernie gushed a ‘Good morning, Fr. Gerry’.

–There’s an interview room here around the side if you want somewhere more private Father.

Private Interview room! *What’s on your mind Bernie?*

–I just want you to check that these forms are filled in correctly, that’s all Bernie so we can do our business here.

She seemed disappointed. She worked her way through the questions checking with me about my answers as the queue lengthened. I was conscious of delaying people as I became part

of Bernie's little drama, her guilt purge about being a right bitch the first time I came in. I tried to hurry things up.

–The doctor's report is there, and I signed and dated the form, so I think it's fine. You're busy so I'll send it off in the post.

–There you go, you can post it off in that envelope, she said handing me a brown envelope. I decided not to say thank you, she was just doing her job.

–By the way Bernie I'm no longer a priest, I've jacked that in.

–Oh right Father.

Bernie was thrown now. She was paying her mortgage by telling people about forms, ticking boxes, being a surly bitch to anyone she judged was beneath her and sucking up to anyone she thought her better, while filling in figures, letters, codes, names and addresses on the computer.

On the way home I decide to grab a coffee in the corner shop, I wheel myself up alongside the coffee machine.

Using my right hand I extracted a cup from the holder and placed it on the grill under the coffee dispenser, I stretched and reached the latte button. So far so good, the machine steamed, cac rattled and made its keh, keh, keh sounds, dry air making its way through hot pipes, then liquid poured forth from the nozzles. I placed the filled cup on the lower work-surface, got the milk carton and poured some milk into the cup. I got a sachet of sugar held it in my left hand and ripped the top off it with my right before pouring the contents into the cup, then took a wooden stirrer from the cylindrical holder and stirred the contents. I couldn't see any lids. I looked around again.

–Sorry where are the lids for the cups, I said to the young fella behind the counter.

–Have you checked on top of the machine?

–No.

Didn't pay the extra to get a decent scissor lift on the chair!

–Hold on, I'll get them for you.

He came towards me and got the pack, took one from it and gave it to me.

–Sorry about that, they should have been placed in their proper holder, you would have been able to get one if they’d been placed there.

He took about half of the leaning tower of lids from the clear plastic wrapping and placed them in the holder.

–Sorry again, you shouldn’t have had to ask.

–No problem, Michael thank you for your help.

I fancy something salty, so I pick up a bag of Tayto and pay for the coffee and the Tayto at the counter. I make my way outside and manoeuvre myself into a parked-up position at the end of the picnic bench. I tuck into the bag of Tayto; I’ll have the coffee after. I watch people passing by customers entering the shop, some emerging quickly and some slower.

It’s over a week since I left Dun Laoghaire. There has been no contact from any of the Rehabbers, Johnno, Declan or Paddy. I hadn’t expected to hear from Declan, he was probably planning a trip to Medjugorje with Fr Sean. As for Johnno, well your guess is as good as mine, people just fall away from your life that’s the way of things. Paddy is probably busy with the programme; he still has about eight weeks to go. As the days go by, I’m not so sure I want us to meet up again so soon. I just have this sense of back tracking anytime I think about it.

I tilt-tip the Tayto bag into my mouth to reach the final broken salty crisp bits at the bottom of the bag. Then I flatten the empty crisp bag to extract the air, fold it lengthways a half inch at a time, ending with a tightly folded bag which I then knot in a bow knot. How little space the bag now occupies. It’s second nature to me to fold crisp bags like this, don’t know when I started. I stare at the asphyxiating knot I have placed on the crisp bag; I untie it and leave it loose.

Re-entering my front door I find a letter on the mat inside. I recognise the handwriting on the envelope. Niamh! A letter, pictures, and tickets for Richard Hawley in the *Black Box* tomorrow night. Wow Niamh! I read through the letter:

*I’m looking forward to tomorrow, Gerry, managed to get these concert tickets last week but said I would wait to send them to you. It’s a stand-up concert but I’m sure they’ll allow you to sit in your chair!! Ha ha!*

Yes, one of the benefits of the wheelchair, every concert is sit down.

*I've repainted the bedroom and the living room, decided it was time to brighten it up, have included a few pics.*

I look at the pics. The living room has been repainted a restful greenish colour, the old dresser is gone from the living room. She had repainted the chairs, two chairs at the kitchen table. A picture of the back door. Why the feck did she send a pic of the back door? It's still the same colour.

*Looking forward to seeing you tomorrow evening. We'll grab a bite in town so no need to cook.*

*See you then.*

*Niamb xx*

I look at the pic of the back door again. It looks different.

A ramp.

She's installed ... a ramp.

I text her immediately:

*Hi Niamb, Got your letter and the tickets. Thank you so much, really looking forward to it, can't wait to see you tomorrow evening, Will be a fab evening. Xx*

Words from a Richard Hawley songs come to mind from his *Lonesome Guitar* album. I find the CD and put on the track.

*As the dawn breaks...* I look around my apartment, my attention falling on the empty silence shrouded chairs, the clock ticking away... *There's something in those deep blue eyes...* my thoughts stretch like finger slide trails along cold foggy morning windows, stretching in this space which I am beginning to inhabit with my smell, my words, my smiles and snores, a space very quickly becoming place, the nowhere that becomes somewhere when you stay for a while. *I hear a songbird's melody...* been looking out windows for decades but been blind to so much... *And she's singing just for me...* well not just for me, for everyone, but I can hear her song now, no need to own her, to-get-her, just understand and allow, engage a gentle curiosity... *A simple songbird's melody.*

Looking out this street window reminds me of views from other windows, dormitory windows looking out onto football pitches and manicured lawns, another window that looked out onto a green square, the college chapel spire and crow-filled trees. Those early disorienting high windows of National School where I could only see skyscape and the tops of chimneys and telegraph poles in the distance. Then the first window I remember, a back window occupied by an old valve radio in an old cottage.

A beautiful well-defined rainbow appears outside, a colourful inverted smile across the grey sky, the branches of the copper beech shake themselves in the sudden breeze. The old familiar silences in which I've lived seem to have made way. There's a new silence, not a silence to occupy but one to move in until one day a final silence quenches me and returns my voice to silence, my body to water and carbon, and my spirit to other's memories and the wind.

The daffodils are at peak bloom. Within days their crepe papery heads will stare the ground until their dying weight weakens the stem and they collapse. Summer upon us, the cherry blossoms have already confettied the ground with pink. The cuckoo would soon perch on the electricity wires that stretch across Kilcrua bog and underneath them a handful of men will turn and foot turf to her exotic accompaniment. Nesting swallows will flit in and out of hay sheds and barns with ill-fitting doors.

Got a bit sentimental there earlier about Hawley's song. He has other songs. My favourite is probably *Tonight the Streets are Ours*. I put it on ... *Don't let fear of feeling fool you. What you see sets you apart, And there's nothing here to bind you. It's no way for life to start ...* that's more like it. *These lights in our hearts they tell no lies ...* They don't tell lies, we just misinterpret them and chase all sorts of Gods to steady our restless hearts, our restless hearts which keep us alive. Restless is the heart until, it rests – and beats no more.

It's a ten-minute wheel to the prom and an expansive horizon if I want to get lost in distance. Last Friday evening it wasn't the expansive vista that engaged me, just the foreground, the waves breaking, dogs frolicking, people jogging, couples holding hands, everyone zipped and

hooded up against the cold, the hardy swimmers with their muscular physique, a purposeful motion about everybody.

The man walking and then dallying with the child on the sand, the child about three, picking shells, showing them to the man and then looking up at him as the man said something. The child swaggered, then ran and looked behind, encouraging the man to run after him, *can't catch me... Yes, I can.* The man caught him and swung him up to himself, then the child grabbed the man's face between his hands and pressed his face into the mans. I could hear the child laugh and say *yuk!* as the man gently rubbed his stubbly face against the child's. The man laughed too, then he put the child down and they continued their game of run and chase along the beach, getting further and further away from me. I might see them here another time, perhaps I wouldn't, they might just be here for the day. I might be saying goodbye without ever knowing it.

On my way back I was passing St Mary's when I heard the choir singing *The Lord's my Shepherd*. Different, a version I hadn't heard before. I wheeled myself to the entrance and negotiated the swing doors. Post communion reflection time at mass. I listened. The choir finished and the priest resumed the recessional prayers.

–Go in peace the mass is ended.

–Thanks be to God! The congregation responded.

I watch the church empty. The mass server weaves his way through the seats picking up hymn books. He gets to the back of the church as I make my way to the back door and holds the doors open for me.

–Thanks very much. Buy yourself some sweets, I hand him two euro.

–Thank you.

–You're very welcome.

I wheel myself back to my apartment, grateful for the soft, slow-falling rain; I'd forgotten my clip-on wheelchair umbrella.