

Death Comes Amongst Us

When Time Stood Still in the Shadow of Death

Sunday 18 February 1990 will forever be indelibly imprinted on my mind. It was a beautiful day, and better still we were on mid-term break. In those days I had a particular routine on Sundays. I always went to 11 o'clock Mass, followed by lunch. I frequently visited relations, sometimes went for a drive, or othertimes spent the afternoon reading the paper and dozing. That day, instead of going for a drive, Mary and I went for a short walk after lunch. We passed Cathal and one of his friends, P.J., chatting by the bridge. The bridge spanned a small stream, which flowed gently along the bottom of our lawn, and was like a magnet for all the children around. We stopped for a few words with the boys, and continued our leisurely stroll. I did not know that I would never speak with my child again. When I was sorting the material relating to Cathal for this book, I found a tear-stained note written by Mary looking back on that Sunday:

My last words to Cathal on the Sunday he died were, 'Cathal, you don't talk much to your Mam'. He just laughed at me and went off on his bike. That morning he had left a little note on the table saying he was going to Mass with us. Little did I think that that was his last Sunday at Mass with us. If we only had gone visiting, things might be different today.

After lunch I lay on the couch and read the paper, alternating between reading and dozing. It was so peaceful and relaxing. The world was a friendly and safe place. Then at 3.50 p.m. the doorbell rang. It continued to ring shrilly, urgently, persistently. I opened the door to find Alan, another of Cathal's friends, there, terror in his eyes. His words are still clear in my mind: 'There's been a terrible accident,' he stammered. He did not say who was in the accident and it never crossed my mind that my child was the victim. I went to the road to see what I could do, and saw Cathal lying there, as if he was asleep. There was no blood, and I assumed that he was unconsciousness and would soon wake up. It was incomprehensible that my child had been fatally injured. The thought never crossed my mind. Mary, on the other hand, kept saying, 'Cathal is going to die, Cathal is going to die'. I felt irritated with her and said, 'Of course he's not going to die'. I felt no panic because I did not think that he was badly injured. Perhaps I blocked out such an unimaginable thought. I never noticed his mangled bicycle, or the deep dent in the roof of the car, which struck him as he emerged from a side

road. I wasn't in shock, but felt helpless. The sister of the driver of the car asked to use the phone to contact their parents, and I felt a surge of rage at this for no apparent reason. My main concern was to see that Cathal was kept warm, so we got a blanket and covered him until the ambulance arrived. I examined the face of the nurse, who was our neighbour, for reassurance, but could see none. Still the incomprehensible had not registered with me. Mary and I followed the ambulance to the hospital in Cashel. I had changed my VHI policy some time earlier, and was unsure of Cathal's cover. I worried that I would be presented with a large bill for his stay in hospital, and hoped it would only be for a few days.

When we arrived at the hospital, the ambulance driver was outside the door smoking a cigarette. Wisps of smoke curled slowly upwards and vanished into the air. He looked serious, and I merely assumed that he was an unfriendly person. I wondered aloud when I would hear that Cathal had recovered consciousness. The driver's gloomy face and lack of response to my statement made me uneasy. Even then I failed to realise that Cathal had been seriously injured. When I entered the hospital I met a nurse who told us to 'pray hard'. This shocked me, and for the first time I began to recognise that my youngest child was in a serious condition. But I still could not comprehend it. How could I contemplate that my son might die! I was in total ignorance of what it was like to be bereaved. I had never experienced the death of anyone close to me. I am an only child, and my parents were then in their early seventies. How could such a thing happen to me? I dismissed the thought and awaited my child to regain consciousness, and then all would be well again. Perhaps he might have broken a leg, and would miss some school. Even the thought that he might have suffered brain damage never occurred to me. Yes! A broken leg, at most.

Bill was the only member of our family with us. Our kind neighbours, David and Eileen, (who were the parents of P.J., Cathal's close friend, who had been with him until shortly before the accident) had travelled to the hospital hoping, like myself, that Cathal would recover. They met Bill and his girlfriend walking on the road, and brought them to the hospital.

The surgeon soon arrived. He was dressed in long leather boots, and had obviously been out riding or hunting. And then, twenty minutes later, the nurse came out and said, 'I'm sorry, we could not save him'. It was only when I read the inquest report as part of the research for this book did I realise that Cathal could not have survived, and that no

doctor could have saved him. The poor child suffered extensive fractures to his skull and bleeding to his brain.

I immediately understood the reality: death had come to my family. I was not hysterical, but felt a numbing sense of shock. I climbed the steps of the hospital in a daze, and was unaware of anyone else around me. Then I heard Mary screaming. The staff did not want her to go into the room where Cathal lay. I could sense her anger as she pushed them aside. I stumbled after her. We stood beside the narrow bed and stared down uncomprehendingly at our child. I began to experience that dead feeling within me. Cathal looked so peaceful at the beginning of his eternal sleep. I stroked his hair, just as I had often stroked it when he was asleep in his room at home. I often wondered then if he knew I was there, and was pretending to be asleep on those occasions. As he lay in the hospital his hair was so soft, and his skin was warm. This added to the unreality. Bill was with us in that small room. For him it was 'just chaos, a blur. I vaguely remember it not being real'.

Strangely, at this moment of awful pain I felt my faith and my spirituality coming to the surface in a powerful, unexpected surge. I began to pray silently, and I remember clearly the words I used: 'Jesus, I offer you my child.' I could see a timber cross, and I could feel it crashing down on my shoulders. I felt my body buckle beneath its weight, but for whatever reason, I felt comfort in the midst of the shock and pain. I had always been a spiritual and religious person, but in these years had become rather apathetic and indifferent. Now I was experiencing a powerful religious and spiritual feeling. This was my individual experience, but I have to say that the comfort did not last for very long.

Cathal's sisters would have to be told. Someone rang Tom to contact Breda, and when her phone rang her sense of foreboding had now passed, and she cheerfully greeted Tom. I don't know who contacted him, but having heard the bad news he worked out how he would tell her. 'Breda, I've got some very bad news for you', was the simple, quiet address. Breda recorded the panic and fear she felt at those words:

My stomach immediately knotted, I panicked, it had happened – that something that was in the back of my head. Inside I was screaming, 'Please God, not my mother', outwardly saying, 'Tom, don't tell me, I don't want to know, I'll go crazy'. He said he'd pick me up at Northolt tube station. I hung up & went into my flatmate, I was out of control. 'My mother is dead; I know she is, what will I do?' Oh God!

Somehow Breda got a taxi, and headed for Northolt station. She doesn't remember paying the driver as she got out. Tom was already at the station and she rushed towards him, 'but hoping that I'd never get there'. Tom hugged her and said, 'Darling, you must be very brave. Be strong for me; you promise?' Breda continues in her diary:

I was bewildered, confused, irrational. 'It's my Mam, she's dead, isn't she?' 'No darling, she's not dead,' he said. 'It's my dad then, he's dead' (I was always afraid my father would die before I told him I loved him). 'No, it's not your dad.' 'Then who? Deirdre? Frances? It's Fran isn't it?' Pictures of her being stabbed somewhere in New York were floating through my mind. I was going totally crazy. 'Breda, it's Cathal.' 'No, no, he's hurt, oh God, what happened?' No reaction from Tom. Cold realisation. 'He's dead. Tell me he's not, Tom, please.'

When Tom explained that Cathal had been killed in a road accident Breda screamed, and went into shock, which she described as being cocooned in 'subconscious protective cotton wool'. Breda's cotton wool image would not describe the violent sense of shock that Bill or I felt. For me it was like a shotgun blast in my face, leaving a heavy grey cloud suffocating me and closing down my senses. For Bill it was like being kicked violently in the face by a 'size twelve, steel toe-capped boot ... it is as though some force has reached into your brain and unplugged it'. Apart from that, Bill describes the memory of how he reacted as 'blurry':

I could not process what I was told. Tried to understand it, but it simply did not register with me. I remember being more impacted by how upset David was, and trying to understand how serious this was. I recall trying to figure out what I should do next. It did not hit me. I was confused.

He remembers, however, the sense of disbelief that gripped him:

The unbelievable had happened. My brother had been tragically killed at the young age of thirteen. What the hell is going on? ... People consoled me. What the hell is going on? ... People crushed me. What the hell is going on? My family, once a happy lot, are shattered ... what the hell is going on? My friends can barely look me in the eye. What the hell is going on?

Mary, Bill and I seemed to have been sitting in the small room for an eternity. A nurse eventually came and gave us sweet tea to allay the shock. I was utterly dazed, but somehow

in my befuddled state of mind I knew that Frances and Deirdre would have to be contacted. My mind and sense of competence were rapidly closing down as the reality of what had happened sunk in. I was unable to give any thought as to how I would prepare Frances and Deirdre for this news. I simply said that I would ring them, and must have sounded quite normal to those around me as I explained this. The nurse led me to a telephone, and I rang Deirdre first, telling her the news without any preparation. I could hear her screams echoing down the phone line. She was in Killoran, a townland only a few miles from our house, with Denis, her boyfriend, now her husband. They were in a pleasant domestic setting, sitting down to tea with Denis's mother, Nan, and other visiting members of the family. Deirdre vividly described her reactions when I rang:

My immediate reaction was to scream hysterically. I felt disbelief – this can't be happening; it's only a dream; I had misheard Dad. I felt huge panic. I remember screaming repeatedly, and Nan coming to me, holding me very tightly. I remember doing my level best to escape from her grip, to run out of the house and get home. I recall kicking and lashing out at Nan in order to get free. I recall Denis's aunt saying that they would have to give me something to calm me down.

Deirdre's screams unnerved me. I retreated further into a world of darkness. In a robot-like fashion I grappled with how I would contact Frances who was working at the famous Pete's Tavern in New York City. I must have seemed not only normal but composed and efficient to those who observed me contacting the telephone exchange. I remember calmly telling the operator that my son had been killed, and that I needed to contact my daughter in Pete's Tavern, New York. He quickly got me the number, and I dialled and asked for Frances. I was so overwhelmed that I did not think of asking for the manager to break the news to her. When she came to the phone I was barely able to stammer out the fateful words that her brother had been killed. I heard her scream and then the line seemed to go dead. I cannot remember what happened as I stood there with the silent phone in my hand, but Frances takes up the story of how the horror overwhelmed her when she got my call:

It seemed like any ordinary Sunday. Business was fairly slow. We were laughing and joking around ... One of my co-workers told me that I had a phone call. My blood ran cold. Somehow I knew it was bad news. My Dad was on the phone, his voice distraught & cracked. Without any preamble he said, 'Frances, Cathal was killed today'.

Everything stood still. My head spun. I dropped the phone, ran into the back and collapsed. I didn't come to for a few minutes. I don't remember how I communicated the news. I remember feeling compelled to get home as soon as physically possible. That became my sole focus.

I feel so sad when I consider how bluntly Frances and Deirdre were told of their brother's death. I was in no state to prepare them for the news, nor indeed was I in any state to have made such sensitive and traumatic phone calls. These calls should have been made by someone else, and Denis and the Tavern's manager should have been contacted first, to ensure that some support was in place for my two daughters.

Frances needed as much emotional support as she could get when confronted with this unexpected and ghastly news. Unfortunately, such support was not forthcoming:

My boyfriend & I left work to get the next flight out. We had just enough money for the cab fare to the airport, and a one way ticket. I desperately wanted him to come with me. I didn't know how I would do this alone. He rationally explained that one of us had to earn money for rent. I didn't want logic. I wanted a love that would walk me through the worst time of my life, then and since. I remember thinking that I would never allow him to face something like this alone, no matter the cost. It was the death knell of our relationship.

I have no memory of our co-workers' reactions.

By that stage I was overwhelmed. I could not bear to hear the screaming and pain of my surviving children. I felt the energy leaving my body after telling Frances; I felt myself further retreating into a world of helplessness. I had always been seen by my family as a competent go-getter; a person who decided what he wanted to do, and went ahead and did it. I was seen by them as a great achiever. Bill was especially conscious about how I had been, and how I was that night:

My father was shattered. He was a rock of strength – a harsh father but a rock – and here he is devastated. This did not make sense. This is my most lasting memory.

I became so distraught that I was unable to make even the simplest decision. Making further phone calls was too much for me. Somebody else would have to make the appropriate arrangements for Cathal's funeral. I could not even think of the fundamentals, such as getting a grave. Little did I think that I would need a grave for any of my family. Somebody else would have to do it. Bill had more recollection and more strength than I had. In the midst of his pain and mental

chaos he, and his uncle Tim, set about getting a grave. Bill, in fact, picked out three graves together ‘... for Cathal, Mam & Dad – imagine that! I often wondered after that how I thought so clearly.’

My shocked family had to struggle through that afternoon and evening, when time lost all meaning for us. Deirdre, having heard the bad news, could not, and cannot to this day, recollect leaving Denis’s house and getting to Cashel hospital. All she can recall is ‘a constant feeling of extreme numbness’. Mary and I waited in the small room for Deirdre to come. Bill was so upset that he would not go in to see Cathal, but was with us in the waiting room when she arrived. Deirdre felt as if it was an eternity before she was allowed in to see her brother. She recalled how upset Mary was, but apart from that she felt frozen, ‘as if I was no longer in control of my own body, as if I was not really physically present, but in another place’.

When she was allowed in to see Cathal, she stumbled into the little room where he was laid out and I can remember her horror-struck face when she saw her brother on the bed. I felt so helpless. I wanted to support my children, but I was unable to support even myself. I had mentally, but not emotionally, accepted that Cathal was dead. Deirdre could not accept this reality, especially as her brother looked as if he was asleep. This is the image that stuck in her mind:

When I saw Cathal in the hospital I began to believe that he was only sleeping. He looked so peaceful, looked the same as he always did. I really began to think that he would most definitely wake up any minute, that he would move, even a small movement to show us that he would live. I felt very strongly that he wasn’t dead, that he would come home, and that the doctors were wrong.

Meanwhile in London, Tom, knowing that he could not protect Breda from the pain of grief, was doing everything in his power to console and support her, and help her find her way home to rejoin her shattered family. She recorded those moments in her diary:

I packed my case, pulling out my black clothes with a macabre logic. Tom drove me to his house, where his wife, Vourneen, put her arms around me, and made me a hot whiskey. By now I was in a complete state of shock, completely and utterly oblivious to the painful reality, my mind was numb ... I vaguely remember ringing my work associate & friend Katie & telling her calmly why I wouldn’t be in for a while. I remember trying to estimate for her how long I would be gone, as if I was

going to a wedding. Totally unreal.

Tom put me on a 9 o'clock plane to Dublin. Time lost all meaning. I first had to get there, but inside my mind was in turmoil. I was almost wondering, 'why am I going home'. My uncle Tim and his wife, Mary, met me, but I was feeling mentally & physically drained & hardly functioning. I had only a deep sense of nothingness.

Frances had a much longer flight to make. I cannot imagine what that seven-hour trip must have been like for her. She attempts to describe it:

The flight home was totally surreal. I could not process the reality of this truth I had been delivered. This happened to other vague people somewhere dimly out there. Their pain never impinged on our world, never mind a tragedy like theirs. The horror that it might be true was under the surface for the entire flight. I had to see his dead body to believe. Nothing less would persuade me.

I remember nothing about the journey from the airport home, not even who drove. I remember nothing about meeting my family, or entering the house. I was consumed by the need to see Cathal. It was like a force driving me forward.