That's Another Story

The Autobiography

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Extract

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'Five Years Ago Today' – The Beginning



'Five years ago today . . .'

It's my mother's voice. She is at the foot of the stairs, calling out the story of my birth, as she did on so many birthdays.

'Ten years ago today . . .'

It is Irish, a Mayo voice worn at the edges, giving it a husky quality, which, she told me once, some men had found alluring.

'Fifteen years ago today . . .'

Now it is soft with memory and buoyant with the telling. I was the fifth and final child to be born, each delivery producing its own particular trauma.

The first, my brother Tommy, arrived during the war in 1942. He never slept and continually scratched at his face, until eventually he was taken into hospital where his tiny hands were bandaged to prevent further harm. When Kevin, the second, was born three years later, my mother's screams of 'Put him back!' apparently reached the outskirts of Birmingham. This, according to my mother and much to our amusement, was due to the inordinate size of his head. The third, a girl called Mary, was stillborn, and in order to get me to eat eggs my mother had told me that it was Mary's refusal to do so that had caused her demise. This went on for some years until one day I challenged the assertion, pointing out that a dead baby wouldn't have been able to speak let alone have much of an appetite. And anyway, I went on, where is she? Where is her grave? My mother went quiet. I

was beginning to think she had made the whole thing up, that there never was a Mary, until my father chimed in with awful innocence, 'Well, she was incinerated, wasn't she? She didn't have a proper funeral. No! That's it! She was buried in, like, a job lot.' That was the first time I ever saw her cry and I didn't understand her grief, at least not for about another thirty years.

The penultimate birth was a late miscarriage, a boy, of which very little was said. Then after she was told it would be too dangerous to have any more children, I came along in 1950 on 22 February, apparently at three o'clock in the afternoon.

'My waters broke …' A slight vibrato begins. 'Your father and I got on the bus.' She knows I need to know and that she needs to recount it; again and again. 'I was passing your motions.' Well, perhaps I don't need to know this, but I'm not sure, and no matter how many times I ask, this last detail is only ever explained by further increasingly impatient repetitions of it. Now, of course, I know and see its significance: I was shitting myself. 'They should never have given me that big fish dinner …' I am now standing in the room in St Chad's Hospital, watching my mother, the said fish dinner having been thrown up over the pale-yellow counterpane. She is huge, about to give birth. 'The cord was around your neck.'

'God, Mum, I know this so well I feel as if I was actually there.' She ignores this.

'They got in the priest.' I can see him, well, not really. I cast Father Sillitoe in the part, our parish priest from St Gregory's church, round and avuncular, his red face testament to his fondness for altar wine. My brother Tommy, an altar boy himself, tells how Father Sillitoe would slip a hand under his elbow, forcing him to pour a lot more wine into the chalice than the usual mouthful. 'They could save only one of us … Your father had to choose.' My mother's incomparable sense of drama now removes all vibrato from her voice and this last statement is made with a terrible flat resignation. Like the best of actors, she knows that less is more.

'I chose you.' My father chipped in on this only once that I remember. His voice is gentle and unassuming with a big, full, Birmingham,

inner-city accent. He is sitting, his hair full of plaster dust, exhausted and weathered far beyond his years, in the kitchen at 69 Bishopton Road, wet shirts dripping from the pulley above him, smelling of turps and house paint and years of cigarettes. The cigarettes weren't just in his clothes; they were in his skin, in his sweat. He had smoked since he was ten. Even though he died in 1971, I can summon up that smell in an instant.

'He chose you.' Her voice is that of a sad, bewildered child. My mother's father never chose her.

'Yes but it doesn't matter. It was all right in the end,' my father soothes.

'The priest had to give me the last rites.'

'Yes but you were all right in the end.'

'Extreme unction.'

'Yeah but— Oh blimey . . .' He knows when to give up and does so with an ironic, forgiving little laugh.

'They took you away. I didn't see you for a whole week.'

No one speaks.

'Happy birthday, Julie.'