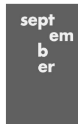
The perfect stranger

A MEMOIR OF LOVE AND SURVIVAL

P. J. Kavanagh



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Message

When you fell silent and still in a holy place,
Unwontedly so, abstracted, your thinking face
Averted from me as you stared at an ancient stone
Statue of some milky beast under Javanese sun
In Borobodur, I suddenly felt on my own,
Unwontedly. I, who tether my dreams, whom symbols
appal,
Who as close as is possible cling to the actual,
Now wonder if such an abstraction so long ago
(As lives are counted) has led me to see as I do,
Suddenly, that the loss of my young self and you
Can no longer be distinguished; that when I yearn
For you, it is for me; in that sense on my own,
As I felt when I saw you were drawn by symbolic stone
Towards an impersonal form of entire concentration,
Which – for our link is unbroken – you want me to learn.

May 1990

Or will one's wife also belong to that country
And can one never find the perfect stranger?

from 'Eclogue between the Motherless',
Louis MacNeice

I

RECENTLY I HAD to make arrangements for my gravestone. This came about in a certain way, the result of things that had gone before, and I felt a need to write down some of those things before it was too late – after all anyone's gravestone is an understatement. And it seemed best to begin at the beginning I knew most about, in other words my own.

Certainly this is a personal book and perhaps that needs an explanation. Also it's a love story and surely we don't need another of those.

But because things happen in one way and not in another this is sometimes their point; and so for fear of missing the point (buried somewhere under the facts and nowhere else) the facts as they happened it has to be, and not done up into fiction.

This has its advantages (saves you having to invent) but lands you in difficulty. There are those who have come too close for you to describe them in the way novelists use – you can't even see them, in any ordinary sense, although you see them better than anyone, but description gives a quite false idea of their distance. Even if you wanted to it's not in your power to cash in on their specialness.

What you can do, though, is describe their effect on you, and the kind of life it was that they stepped in to, and this is why there are so many I's and me's in the story. But maybe

that's the most we can say about another person with any certainty; however we wish to celebrate them we only have the bits and pieces of ourselves to do it with.

I was thirty-three years old a few days ago and my blood on both sides of my family is Irish as far back as anybody can be bothered to trace. I was born and brought up in England, and not really among Irish people – I never knew my grand-parents, and my four uncles were killed in the First World War – but this Irishness has always been important to me, I don't know why. People often claim a bit of the wild Celt on account of a Scottish great-aunt, or so forth, and when I was a boy I often said I was pure English just to show what I thought of this game – and I've never heard anyone else claim that, which is surprising. But I knew it wasn't true. I came of a conquered dissident race and I talked too much for it to be true. Certainly this feeling allowed me to fall in love with England when I was twenty-seven with a passion that wouldn't have been possible if I'd felt myself a native.

My father was born in New Zealand and brought me up to be more Irish than the Irish. And we did have some history of rebellion and uprising in the family, as well as six Cardinals I've been told, and of clinging to the True Faith. But the Irish, with blazing exceptions, I cannot like as a race; they seem to me a mean and envious lot.

My father, like most talented Irishmen, loved Ireland from a distance. His real passion was London. He knew it in loving detail and was only really himself when he was at large there. He used London as an Irishman uses Dublin; home was for recuperating in. He earned his living writing jokes – he was the scriptwriter for a radio show called *ITMA*, which was famous in its day, and so was he, and highly paid. At least he was when I knew him, but when I

was born we were poor, genteel poor. Not that my father was genteel, he was the only truly classless man I have ever met in England, but he had been a medical student on an allowance; he gave up medicine, the allowance stopped, and he and my mother and my brother, and then later me, descended from houses to flats to digs to dingy boarding-houses; I remember one of those. My grandmother died early in this progress, and after her deathbed had been surrounded by clergy was found to have left her money to the Church, and her son and his wife and baby nothing at all. My mother has never forgotten this. During this moneyless period which continued for perhaps ten years my brother (who is twelve years older than I am) remembers that my father just sat at home and read, his elbows and knees gradually becoming visible through his clothes. He never noticed things he didn't want to, and I suppose it was my mother who had to battle with the unpaid grocers and the landladies, and organise the moonlight flits.

He could be a very funny man, my father, and sing impromptu comic songs, and was in great demand for various unlucrative occasions. It took him twenty years to discover how to make a living out of what he did best, and that happened by chance.

In the very early days of radio he used to enjoy putting on his earphones and twiddling the cat's whisker on the crystal. One day he heard a comedian called Tommy Handley who made him laugh, so he wrote him a sketch and sent it in. (He remained all his life a connoisseur of comedians. When I was very young he used to drag me round the music-halls and down to the end of piers, and we would go back-stage afterwards where the comic always seemed to be sitting in his braces, morose, surrounded by Stout bottles.) It would be comforting to say that after this he never looked back,

but it was a long time before he was at all successful, and after that his success waned a little; but it is a moment worth recording because a man had found his métier.

That is such an important moment it fascinates me. To some it never comes, and for others it is often pure chance. Tommy Handley himself began as a singer. Engaged to do a broadcast in the earliest days of 2LO at Savoy Hill, there was some microphone trouble during rehearsal and the engineers asked him to say something into it. He recited 'Thirty days hath September' and the engineers behind their glass panel began to laugh. The microphone did something unexpected to his voice.

In the interval of whisker-twiddling and reading, my father was a protégé of G. K. Chesterton and he earned an occasional cheque by writing for his paper, *G.K.'s Weekly*. He was also much concerned with a Catholic version of Communism which was in the air in those days. It was called Distributism and was probably a bit back-to-the-land-y and Tolstoyan. Like most fair-minded but impractical ideas, it slowly ground itself down, and the last Distributist I know croons nightly over a tiny compost heap in Haywards Heath.

I was born during the slump, when the family fortunes were at their most pinched. By the time I was old enough to care, it was wartime and everybody was pinched.

There was some rather splendid bombing in Bristol. We went down every night to the cellar-smell until one dawn a tin-hatted warden stuck his head through the grating and shrieked at us to 'evacuate'. Then we walked through the blazing city – even the barrage balloons were on fire in the sky – and I noted with satisfaction that my school was also burning. A young couple whom I liked used to read the

Daily Worker in the cellar, and I remember my father pointing this out to my mother in a way that made me realise they were 'odd'. A sign, I suppose, that my father was moving to the Right with age, a remarkable and almost invariable phenomenon. Gladstone is the only notable exception I can think of, and then only on certain topics; Ireland for instance. Robert Frost once said that he was never a radical in his youth in case he became a Tory in his old age.

I also remember the house next door being on fire and hoses being played against the outside of our walls to stop them cracking, while my father sat writing. I don't know whether I admired him for this, or copied the admiration of my mother.

From the age of six until I was eight and the war broke out I went to school at a girls' convent in Barnes. I suppose the upbringing I had in England was like an Irish one in many ways, that is to say, Catholic. And the sense that gives you of being in a minority remains with you all your life. But if the people all round you don't share your special superstitions, neither do you share theirs. The nuns, for instance: they weren't sinister, mutilated figures but jolly, round-faced girls who hugged me and gave me things and seemed to be always laughing. Perhaps they were over-scrupulous, I don't really know. In a gentle little talk on stealing I remember a beloved nun of mine telling us that if we found even a pin we shouldn't keep it, but find out whose it was and give it back. For some time afterwards I went about with my eyes on the ground hoping for a pin I could give myself the pleasure of returning.

The big girls gave a performance of *Macbeth*, and in the Witches' scene I was fascinated and strangely moved by their bare pink feet padding around the cauldron. I kept creeping

nearer to see these more clearly. I was about eight and constantly in love. I had a real passion for a huge, blouse-bursting Amazon called Bridget. I couldn't think how to express my devotion, so like an adult I decided really I hated her and threw an apple at her as hard as I could. It hit her in the eye. Rubbing one and looking through the other, she asked me to tea, which was just what I'd dreamed about snug in bed at home. It seemed, however clumsy one was, the beloved *understood*, in a way no one else ever could.

I was very spoiled. Girls my own age, and older, used to kiss me when I wasn't looking and then run away. This surprised and delighted me at the time and surprises me now because I was very far from beautiful. I once had a photograph of myself at this age in a much-prized navy-blue nap overcoat and cap to match. I looked like a little old man cut down, a wizened leprechaun. But what with the nuns and the girls and my mother I began to take for granted the love and forgiveness of women and return it with my whole heart. I needed women more than life itself; they were life itself, and when later I went to boarding-school and was cut off from them I wanted to die. I willed myself to. And then I took to hiding near the Matron's room (an elderly, cross moustache we called The Bitch) just to hear the rustle of her apron and the sound of her sensible heels, distinguishably feminine only to the loving, obsessed ear.

To my mother I owe a special debt of gratitude. For twelve years she tirelessly made me feel the centre of the Universe. When I felt the centre slipping at all I got her to walk behind me, as I strutted before in my beloved overcoat, and call out over and over again: Who is that *handsome* little boy? Who is that *interesting* little boy? until I felt better. At twelve she let me go my own way, with scarcely a struggle; this seems to me perfect; or, at least, uncomplicated.

All the spoiling I had was luck, a kind of preliminary bonus; it wasn't for being a good little boy. In fact I must have been horrible. I managed to knock out several of my mother's teeth with my head, on purpose, and tried the same trick on my brother, splitting his lip. The only thing I remember with pride is announcing that I didn't believe in God. This took courage because I'm sure I'd never heard of anybody who didn't, and it made me a minority of one. Of course I *did* believe in God, possessively, secretly. I suppose I didn't want my God confused with theirs.

At some stage during the bombing of Bristol I began to ponder the chances of Eternal Punishment and became very frightened indeed. My father was listening with his head cocked to the sound of the explosions which were only a few yards away. It seemed a good moment to confide my fears – that I hadn't been to Confession, wasn't in a State of Grace – which was all that mattered at such a moment I'd been told. Usually so gentle, he turned on me with a contorted face: 'Don't be so bloody silly!' he said.

I pondered his reaction and it rather cheered me up.