

TWO LIVES APART



THE
SHEPHERD
AND THE
MORNING
STAR

WILLIE ORR

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Willie Orr was born in 1940 in Northern Ireland. After a public school education, he had a variety of jobs, working for a time in the Belfast shipyards and also as an actor in theatres throughout Ireland. He then moved to Scotland and spent time in the Iona Community, before becoming a shepherd and later a teacher and a counsellor. A prolific writer of newspaper articles, poetry, plays and fiction, his previously published books are *Deer Forests, Landlords and Crofters* (1982) and *Discovering Argyll, Mull and Iona* (1990). He now lives near Oban in Argyll.

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Two Conversations

I am cutting grass when he appears round the corner of the house. Two sparks of recognition flash in my head. First, it's my brother – instantly dismissed as I know he's in Canada. Secondly, my father – again dismissed as he is dead. Yet the resemblance is uncanny.

Are you Willie?' he asks.

'Yes.'

'I'm your father's illegitimate son.'

'Good God!'

'No. Just James, I'm afraid.'

There is no doubt about it. He is more like my father than any of the family — the same impenetrable brown eyes, the same restless eyebrows, the same coal-black hair swept back elegantly over the ears.

I am seventy-three and he, I guess, is about sixty.



The phone rang one morning in August 1974.

'Hello. Is that Willie?'

A very well-spoken English lady.

'It is.'

'It's Julia. You may remember that we met earlier this year.'

Of course I remembered. My father had been visiting us in the West Highlands and had left rather quickly, claiming

the need to attend a meeting. After he left, my wife and I decided to take the children for a day out in the car and, as we crossed the road to reach the car, another vehicle came towards us and stopped suddenly some distance away. I thought it was his car but, not sure, hurried the five feral children into the back of ours. His car started again and stopped behind us. Out of the passenger door emerged an extremely elegant young lady in a beige camel-hair suit.

‘This is Mrs Stone,’ he said, ‘Julia Stone’.

‘Could you not have come up a more convincing name?’ I thought.

That must have been more than a year before the phone call.

‘Yes, Julia. I remember.’

‘Do you know where your father is?’

‘No, I’m sorry. Have you tried the houseboat?’

‘Yes. He’s not there.’

‘Perhaps he’s in Ireland in the constituency.’

‘No. Someone has tried there. Have you no idea?’

‘No, Julia. We really don’t keep in touch. Christmas, birthdays, that kind of thing. The last visit was the first for years. I really can’t help.’

‘You must have some idea. It’s very important.’

There was an urgency, if not panic, in her voice.

‘I’d like to help but there’s nothing I can do.’

‘He should be here. There are some very influential people here — John Gorst and other MPs. We’re in Caxton Hall and we’re about to get married but he hasn’t turned up.’

‘I see. I think it’s just as well. I’m afraid he is still married to my mother.’

‘What rubbish! What a dreadful thing to say. He’s divorced.’

‘No, Julia. You’d better check it out.’
The beginning of the end.

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The bonfire spews flames and smoke into the night sky like the dragon's breath in my bedtime book. It roars and its heat burns my bare knees but I'm too excited to move back. Flames coil round the man in the middle of the fire, scorching his clothes and melting the peak of his hat. The flames light the faces of the people round the fire. Their eyes glisten and the teeth in their smiles glow like coals. They cheer as the man bursts into flames, his armband with the swastika falling from his arm. I look up at my grandmother who is clapping her hands and I wonder why she is crying and laughing at the same time. My mother is in the city having a baby and my father is still away at the war.

May 1945. The war was over. There were other bonfires all along the coast of Ulster. I could see them flickering on the sea. They were burning Hitler too. There would be no more sirens. That pleased me more than anything as I was afraid of that wail in the night and the drone of the German bombers, monstrous and malevolent in England. I had heard the distant whine of the bombs and I had seen houses burst open by the blast. I knew what could happen. When we heard the siren we used to scuttle downstairs, my mother carrying my sister, and I could see the fear in her eyes and in the white dimples at the corner of her mouth. It made me afraid to look at her. Sometimes, when the bombs were near, she grabbed my arm and hurried me along, her

fingers trembling. Then I wanted to cry but I had been taught to be brave like a soldier, like my father.

‘He will be home soon,’ she used to say. I did not believe her because she said it so often and he seldom appeared.

Tonight I open my grandfather’s diary, expecting to find a page welcoming the peace and mentioning my father’s return to Ireland. The entry is brief.

‘Mon 7th May — Slight showers. Working in garden. News this evening that the great European war has ended.’

A month later it records briefly that my father returned on leave and adds, ‘Slight showers again.’

I’m tempted to say that I was confused by his return, that I was shy, that I was resentful of the intrusion or that I was pleased to see him, but the truth is that I recall only two emotions. He brought home a red metal toy crane with green winding string and a weighted hook. I was delighted with that. He said it came from Germany. In the evening I watched him from an upstairs window. He was down on the shore, kneeling on the ribbed sand, building little dams with his hands. He was completely alone in the dusk. I remember a feeling of sorrow as if I sensed his solitude, his need to turn away from us. Of course the memory could be tainted, for I have nursed it as a part of my portrait of him, the man who became leader of the Ulster Unionists, the Imperial Grand Master of the Orange Order, a public figure engulfed in media attention. His urge to find peace, to relish the tranquillity of a trout stream or the silence on the shores of Lough Gill, diminished as he ascended and, as that interest faded, I lost the only thing we shared.

I was nearly five on VE day and he has been dead for twenty years. I can’t say that I knew him, for he spent most of his time away from us. I visited him in hospital when he was dying. I found an old man slumped in a chair, unable to

raise his head or shuffle to the toilet. His brown eyes stared at the floor as if there was an abyss at his feet and he drifted in and out of disturbed sleep.

‘We never talked much,’ he said in one of his rare moments of lucidity.

‘A great pity,’ I replied.

It was, perhaps, his way of expressing regret.

I helped him to urinate into a cardboard bottle.

Twice he jerked out of sleep gasping with terror.

‘They’re coming!’ he shouted.

‘Who? Who is coming?’

The IRA? The police? The Orangemen? His women? Who knows?

I took his hand and stroked his head.

‘They’re coming.’

‘It’s the nurses, father. No-one else.’

The man who had spoken with such assurance and eloquence in the House was reduced to a pathetic creature haunted by shadows. For the first time I felt a strange affection for him. With all his faults — the philandering, the duplicity, the greed for power and acclaim — he had possessed irresistible charm and generosity and, far inside, that homunculus of romance and creativity which drew him into solitude.

How very different the patient from the man who returned from the war! I have a framed black and white photograph, a posed portrait, taken in 1940. It could be that of a film star like Omar Sharif. He is dangerously handsome, an affliction, in his case, which led to a succession of betrayals. Expertly lit, his sleek, dark hair merges with the black background and the light, filtered from above, emphasises his elegant jawline and sensitive lips. It is taken from the side and he is looking down as if

absorbed in a book. A portrait of a thoughtful, creative young man — a poet or a painter or a musician but certainly not a reactionary politician.

I am intrigued, baffled even. How does a dreamer, a playwright, a young man entranced by the Celtic revival in Dublin before the war become a schemer, a ruthless manipulator, an equivocator? What changed the student who hired a horse-drawn caravan to explore the wilds of Galway with an actress who was not yet his wife? And what did the transformation do to her, for the actress became his bride and my mother? Was it a rapid change or was it a slow metamorphosis which she failed to notice till it was too late? So many unanswered, and perhaps unanswerable, questions.

There are, however, a few fragments which help to illuminate the dim territory of his past. There is a letter to my mother expressing his fury at De Valera's decision to keep Ireland neutral. Could this account for the change of allegiance? Or did his experience of battle and the blitz draw his sympathies away from the Ireland of Synge and Yeats to the Britain of Churchill and the King? He told us that he had faced the enemy in France. Yet his military record shows that he never left England. He was a wireless instructor in Windsor. No experience of battle nor in any more danger than the land girls in the fields or the families in the East End.

There is another explanation. He obtained a commission in the Life Guards and fraternised with eminent members of the British elite. He had to borrow money from my mother to pay the prodigious mess bills of the cavalry regiment. Perhaps the lavish lifestyle and the affluent, influential company were so seductive that he could not relinquish them after the war. Certainly he developed a

taste for extravagance which could not have been financed by the meagre and unreliable income of a writer. Any affection for Irish republicanism would have been anathema to his new companions. It is scarcely surprising that he worked for a position of power and influence on the conservative wing of politics. Yet I have no proof of his motivation. His ambition remains a mystery.

The war transformed us all. My memories, though few and no doubt coloured by time, are surprisingly vivid. Most of them are set in Camberley in Surrey close to where my father was stationed as a wireless instructor. My mother's brother, Desmond Hughes, must have been stationed nearby when he flew his Mosquito over the house and dipped his wings in salute. Desmond, the fourth top night fighting ace with more than eighteen victories, was awarded the DFC and, after the war, the AFC, and became Air Vice-Marshal. Desmond must have been the only air ace to have a stowaway in his aircraft. In 1942 his terrier 'Wee Scruffy' leapt into his Beaufort at the last minute and accompanied his master as he shot down a Junkers over the North Sea.

Another visitor to the house was Paddy Donnell. He used to carry me on his shoulders, acting as my steed, as we careered through the pine woods. The coarse epaulets of his Commando battledress scraped the back of my knees but I urged him ever faster, holding tight to his fair curls. Paddy became Lieutenant Colonel in 47 Commando and led the attack on Westkapelle on Walchern Island to secure the landings in 1944. After the war he worked for the Shakespeare Memorial Company, organising tours in Eastern Europe. Mother's eyes always lit up when Paddy visited and she seemed to blossom in his company. She often spoke of him with great affection. He was my hero

then and I still regret losing touch with him. Father was different. He had dark, angry eyes, a foul temper and was used by Mother as a threat and a means of control.

Out on the moor near the house there was an abandoned tank, its turret blackened and its tracks broken. What a temptation to a four-year-old boy! I walked out over the heather and climbed into the cockpit, pretending to drive against the Germans. When a young couple parked their car on the road and sprinted towards the tank I couldn't fathom why they were so agitated. I had not noticed the red flag on the hill and they explained breathlessly that I was sitting in a target and that shells could land at any time.

We didn't have many toys through the war but I had a superb source near at hand. There was a searchlight station beyond the woods with a Nissen hut where the men were billeted. They had to learn to recognise all the aircraft — British, German and American — and to help identification they were supplied with model planes. Many of these found their way to my collection so, by 1945, I could distinguish a Junkers from a Wellington or a Mosquito from a Messerschmitt. The men adopted me as a mascot, taking me to football matches and allowing me into the searchlight cabin at night to watch the beam and the small luminous screen.

Occasionally today the TV will replay films of the 'doodlebugs' — the V1 and V2 — which were aimed at London but sometimes landed short of the target. I still react to the distinctive drone of their engines and recall the fear of adults when they were heard. Once, on recognising the sound, I crawled down under the blankets only to find, when the threat passed, that I was stuck, the bed being made too tight. That moment of panic returns at times when I remember the bombs.

Most people of my age respond to the wail of the sirens, always a signal for disruption as we hurried to hide under the stairs or in a shelter. Strangely, I never felt really afraid during the night raids but then our house had never been hit.

Towards the end of the war my mother taught me to change my sister's nappies so that I could show Father how to do it when we were returning to Ireland. I can't recall why she was remaining in England, unless she was pregnant at the time. Anyway Father, sister and I travelled by the night train towards Stranraer and I dutifully instructed Father on the art of changing a nappy. Halfway to Scotland we had to disembark and switch to a bus as the line ahead had been bombed. That was unpleasant in the cold dark night but worse was to come. When we reached Stranraer the Irish boat was delayed due to submarine activity and we had to spend the night on a covered pedestrian bridge over the railway.

My father's military career was quite uneventful. He joined the Royal Ulster Rifles in September 1939 and was sent for Officer Training. His first commission was with the East Lancashire Regiment and he was posted as a full Lieutenant to the Royal Army Corps in 1941. He was promoted to Captain to train cadets until he was posted as Wireless Officer with the Household Cavalry in April 1944. He joined the Life Guards in May of that year and, on his official release in June 1946, was granted the honorary title of Captain, a title that he used in his Parliamentary career. His records show that he was awarded the Defence Medal and the War Medal but no Military Cross. After the war he claimed to have been decorated with the MC and provided my mother with the MC ribbon which she kept in her jewel box. This fraudulent claim led to a serious rift in the family,