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From A Clear Blue Sky

Timothy Knatchbull

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Contents

For Isabella
to whom I owe everything.

Nicholas, photographed at home, before we set off for Ireland, August 1979.

The great events of world history are at bottom profoundly unimportant. In the last analysis the essential thing is the life of the individual. This alone makes history, here alone do the great transformations first take place, and the whole future, the whole history of the world ultimately spring as a gigantic summation from these hidden sources in individuals. In our most private and most subjective lives we are not only the passive witnesses of our age, and its sufferers, but also its makers.

C. G. Jung

Preface

We all have a car crash in our lives. To date I have had one; it happened to be a bomb. I was a boy at the time, on a small boat in Ireland. Three of my family and a friend died in the explosion. One of the dead was my identical twin brother Nicholas. My parents and I were the only survivors.

Over a period of months I pieced together a daily routine without my twin. I was pleased to demonstrate to my parents that I was able to cope, but later I found that the bomb had left me with a legacy of mental and emotional wounds which refused to go away. I kept these to myself. After more than twenty years I finally decided to try to heal myself. By then I had come to two conclusions: first, I could not do this alone; second, I needed to return to the place of the murders and confront painful truths from which I had been shielded as a boy.

With a series of visits spanning a year I pitched myself back into an intensely frightening episode in my life. It was at times a horrible and painful process but through it I entered a new stage of healing. My symptoms started to fade and I found a sense of inner peace that I had lost the day Nicholas was killed. It was not simply his death which

so devastated me. It was the suddenness of it; the violence of it; and my own inability subsequently to discover what had happened to him, or to make any sense of it, or to grieve for him.

By returning to Ireland and piecing together the story, I reconnected to feelings which I had briefly felt but which I had not been able to resolve as a child. This allowed me to undergo a vital process which had escaped me as a boy: the letting go of my continued emotional attachment to Nicholas. Put simply, I said goodbye.

Before setting out on the journey, I was frightened. My fear was that by returning and seeking the truth I might do more harm than good. Had I learned from someone else who had trodden a similar path I would perhaps have started my own journey earlier and found a more direct route. This has motivated me to share my story with others who have suffered trauma or grief. The book is an account of the path I took. I hope it will encourage others to find their own.

My story is a description not a prescription. I do not pretend to offer answers but I hope 'the validity of the questions raised will be evident'.[1] Where I cause harm or upset by what I have written or left unwritten, or by mistakes honestly made, I apologise.

There will no doubt be more difficulties for me to face in future; hopefully I will do so better prepared as a result of the journey and the subsequent healing which I describe in these pages. It is the healing that counts, and in this I think there are elements that are universal.

The bomb exploded in Ireland during the Troubles which killed over 3,500 people. By 2001 the killing had stopped and the political climate had changed enough for me to contemplate returning. I knew that by doing this I might arouse strong feelings in the area where the attack

happened. Some would be pleased to see me back; some no doubt would resent me; for others I would simply be a reminder of a painful episode which had faded with the years. I therefore proceeded cautiously, and more often than not I found a warm welcome.

The bomb was the work of the Irish Republican Army, the island's predominant paramilitary force. It is therefore inevitable that the IRA features heavily in the story, rather than other paramilitaries, the British Army or any of the other forces involved in the violence in Ireland. I recognise that as a picture of the Troubles, my account will be highly incomplete; but I did not return to Ireland to analyse the Troubles. I went to engage in a human process, not a political one. I went to understand my twin's death. Gaining a basic understanding of the IRA was one of a series of necessary steps towards that.

Following the attack, the years rolled by and I became increasingly interested in the idea of moving on and putting the attack behind me. To do this I felt the need to forgive but I found myself with more questions than answers. Was I capable of forgiving? Whom should I forgive? What had they done? And how? And why? There was precious little information available so I decided to look for the answers myself. By revisiting Ireland I slowly became better informed, and as I re-evaluated my experiences I eventually found the path to being able to forgive.

Some people have been amazed at my desire to revisit the bombing or think in these terms. Some have questioned my motives or found my interest in the details mawkish. To them I can say only that no offence is intended. Some have worried I would open up old wounds. I have found the opposite to be true. Countless times I have been told by those who have agreed to meet and help me that old wounds have healed through the process. Some have mistaken my endeavour as a plea for sympathy. Nothing

could be further from the truth. I am deeply aware of my own good fortune in escaping the sort of prolonged misery that many have had to endure.

I welcome the new order in Northern Irish politics and I salute the achievements of its leaders in creating an increasingly peaceful province despite the evidence that implicates at least some of them in the murders of yesteryear. The future of Ireland depends on 'a measured and sane approach to its bloody past'[2] and I hope the line I have taken in this book passes that test. Needless to say, the views I express are mine and mine alone.

While researching this book I came across this definition: 'Happiness is a matter of one's most ordinary, everyday mode of consciousness being busy and lively and unconcerned with self.'[3] To this I add a caveat: to deny self is unhealthy; to be unconcerned with self is the key. I am now as never before at liberty to be unconcerned with self, and therefore to be of use to others. What more could anyone want?

Timothy Knatchbull
June 2009

PART ONE

FAMILY
1964–1979

Prologue

On the morning of Monday 27 August 1979, Paul Maxwell asked me the time. He laughed when I told him it was eleven thirty-nine and forty seconds. We were as carefree as skylarks, out together in my grandfather's small fishing boat off County Sligo on the west coast of Ireland. My identical twin brother Nick was a few feet away, tinkering with something in the cabin. We were fourteen, Paul was fifteen.

The sun was warm, and the sea flat and calm. We were enjoying ourselves like countless other families that morning. My grandfather was at the helm, looking very content. He was never happier than when mucking about in a boat. In this respect he was unremarkable; what was less normal was his life story. At his christening, Queen Victoria had been his godmother. He had joined the Royal Navy as a small boy and had retired having been the head of all British armed forces, a Supreme Allied Commander in the Second World War, and the last Viceroy of India. Now in old age he was still internationally famous. His name was Earl Mountbatten of Burma; to us he was Grandpapa.

A few paces away in the stern sat his daughter, my mother, her feet up in front of her. In her lap she had her little dachshund, Twiga. Not far from her in the middle of the boat was my father and to her left his mother, who now said, ‘Isn’t this a beautiful day?’

A few minutes later Paul, Nick and my grandfather lay dead in the water. A bomb had detonated under their feet. The wooden boat had disintegrated into matchwood which now littered the surface, and a few big chunks which went straight to the seabed. My grandmother was pulled into a nearby boat but died the next morning in the Intensive Care Unit of Sligo Hospital. She was eighty-three. I lay in the bed beside hers with wounds from head to toe. Surgical tubes led into my body. Opposite, my mother was connected to a machine that breathed for her; she was not expected to live. Her face was unrecognisable, held together by one hundred and seventeen stitches, twenty in each eye. In a nearby ward lay my father, his legs twisted and broken and multiple wounds all over his body. Between the three survivors, we had three functioning eyes and no working eardrums. The bodies of Paul, Nick and my grandfather were pulled out of the sea that day. Twiga’s corpse was recovered the day after.

The bomb had been hidden on the boat early that morning by two members of the Irish Republican Army. By killing my grandfather they hoped to draw attention to the long struggle for an end to British rule in Northern Ireland. They got plenty of attention.

> The world mourned. Every newspaper headlined the news of his assassination. Letters in their tens of thousands poured in upon the survivors. In Rangoon, Burma a book was opened in the Embassy for people to sign in tribute; for four days people queued before it, the line often stretching far out into the garden. In

> New Delhi, every shop and office was closed, a week's state mourning was declared. The rulers of the great nations hastened to express their sympathy.[1]

Paul was buried in Enniskillen in Northern Ireland; my grandfather's funeral was held in London; Nick shared one with our grandmother in Kent. Meanwhile, my parents and I lay helplessly in our hospital beds in Ireland. The kind nurses put my parents' beds together and wheeled mine opposite theirs. At night they held hands. It was the first time I saw my father cry.

When our injuries permitted, we returned to our home in England and a mass of supportive letters. Many of the writers were unknown to us. We replied to those who gave addresses.

Stephen Street, Sligo.
January 22nd 1980.

Dear Timothy

> This is just a short note to let you know that we all in Sligo appreciate that your loss in the tragedy in Sligo was very special.
>
> I hope that your injuries are now healing well and that time is taking the sharpness from the pain of the great loss of your brother.
>
> There is now a great responsibility on you to help your parents through this terrible year and also since you have been close to the tragedy to be an example to the civilized community and to the oncoming generations.
>
> Soon in the future when all this trouble will be over I hope you can enjoy this lovely part of the world which God put here for us all to enjoy.

Again Timothy my deepest sympathy and try and understand and forgive Ireland for your terrible loss.

Yours very sincerely,
Dr Desmond Moran
Coroner for Sligo Borough & North County Sligo

Having read the letter I withdrew into a room at the back of my parents' London home. I wanted to read it again without interruption and think. It was the first time someone had expressed what was already in me: the wish to return to Ireland.

On the day we had left Ireland I told my family that I was going to return. They told me that would never happen. I repeated myself but they were firm. In the circumstances they were right. The security services had already visited my father in hospital and told him that we would always remain possible targets as survivors of an attack that had received so much publicity.

Twenty-four years later, I did what I had always wanted. I spent a year travelling back and forth to Ireland, staying for up to ten days at a time. I wanted to discover what had happened, and understand it; and forgive. I wanted to meet old friends and say the goodbyes I had missed. I wanted to stop hearing the sound of the bomb as I went around my daily business. I got everything I went for and much more. This book is that story.

I

Twins

The heart of a human foetus starts to beat three weeks after conception. Mine started beating in the middle of March 1964. A few millimetres away another heart was beating alongside mine. It belonged to my identical twin. Our hearts beat in loose synchronicity over seven hundred million times until he was killed, aged fourteen.

His names were Nicholas Timothy and he was born at 3:40 on a cloudy Wednesday afternoon in November at King's College Hospital in Camberwell, London. Twenty minutes later, I was born, to be named Timothy Nicholas.

In simple terms, identical twins are produced when a fertilised egg splits and develops into two embryos. Essentially one human divides at an early stage and emerges from the womb as two genetically identical clones. It is not just that they look the same; to all intents and purposes, they are the same. Even DNA analysis will not reliably tell them apart. It has therefore always surprised me that Nick was half a pound heavier than me and remained so for the rest of his life. We never paid any attention to diet and rarely looked at the bathroom scales but whenever we did, there were always eight ounces more of him than me. For such apparently identical children, it

was equally surprising that we had feet of different sizes. More precisely, we had three feet one size, while my left foot was half a size bigger. This frustrated my mother whenever it came to buying shoes.

Our parents lived in a large eighteenth-century house on the edge of Mersham, a small village in Kent. From our first day at home we were put in a shared bedroom and dressed in similar clothes. To differentiate us my mother put a small gold bracelet on Nick's left wrist. We were the youngest of seven children. My eldest brothers, Norton and Michael-John, aged seventeen and fourteen, were away at boarding school. Joanna and Amanda, then nine and seven, went to school in nearby Ashford. Philip was less than three years older than us and leader of our little triumvirate. He was more immersed in our twinhood than anyone else. Sometimes the closeness was too much. One day Nick lay down with a headache and someone asked what was wrong with him. 'Too much Phi,' he replied.

My father John had grown up in Mersham before going away to boarding school and then serving in the Second World War as an infantry soldier. His father had died suddenly in 1939 in India, and his only brother had been murdered by a Nazi soldier while a prisoner of war. When my father returned to Kent after the war, he had inherited the family's farming estate, and he settled there to build it up slowly from years of neglect. He also took himself to London and entered the film industry as a production assistant, rising to become one of the most successful producers of his generation, as well as a respected businessman. Because of his work my parents kept a London house. My mother joined him there at least one or two days a week, while she worked for charities such as the Red Cross and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. She was also a magistrate in Kent and this took a great deal of her time. We therefore had not

only the love and attention of our parents and siblings but also a doting family nanny, Helen Bowden. ‘Nanny’ joined our family shortly after Norton was born. She lived with us and looked after all seven children in turn, retiring only when Nick and I went to boarding school. By then she was eighty-one.

One day when we were toddlers, Nick’s gold bracelet broke, fell off his wrist and was lost. I realised everyone was going to be confused about which twin was which and I felt a flash of fear as I wondered if they would ever sort us out. The bracelet was never replaced because by then our family and friends had started to tell us apart by looking for a mole on the left side of my neck, underneath my chin. It seemed like an indelible proof of my identity but, like any such device, its potential for misuse made it a double-edged sword.

Our identical appearance confused everyone including us. To identify ourselves in photographs we had to ask Philip. As toddlers, mirrors sometimes confused us. Once I walked into one because I thought I saw Nick on the other side. Later I saw him but was cautious; I moved one of my arms and it was only when my image did not move that I decided it was safe to go to him.

Our bedroom was immediately above our parents’ and for the first few years we shared it with Nanny. On the very rare occasions Nanny was away, my mother would sleep with us. Once she was away as well so my father slept with us. Nick and I thought this was great fun because he was obviously an amateur at managing the potty and we felt at a considerable advantage over him.

Our home was called Newhouse and we were never bored there. We bicycled round and round the driveway, often racing until one or other flew off and ran screaming to Nanny with skinned knees. In summer we each kept a small patch in the kitchen garden. The crop which gave me

most pleasure was my radishes; I would pick and wash them and keep them safe until my father came home from work. They would then be served on the dinner table. I would already have had my supper in the nursery, and after my bath would rush downstairs and stay close to my father at his end of the dining-room table, proudly sharing the radishes. Their taste was hot enough to bring colour to my cheeks but I loved them because he loved them. When he told me I had ‘green fingers’ I later checked them for greenness.

At school, pupils, teachers and parents alike were amazed by our similarity. By now we shared our genes, names, clothes, habits and hobbies. We did not share our toys, his were his and mine were mine; and we were very different characters. In some respects we were opposites. He was neat, I was messy. He was focused, I was easily distracted. He was perfectionist, I was slap-dash. He would lie awake at night if he had something on his mind, I would fall asleep. He liked to organise, I liked to perform. When our brother Michael-John, known as Joe, introduced us to *Monty Python* at the age of six we both loved it, but it was me who used to perform long recitals of it for family and friends.

Occasionally we fought and then it was often Nick who got the upper hand. But the fights were quickly forgotten. Our twinhood provided us with fun when we wanted it; constant companionship and total empathy. We made it central to our lives and became each other’s closest friend, protector and partner. If one of us were in difficulty, the other would immediately help. Likewise we shared any worries. In the summer holidays of 1972, when we were seven years old, Nick often lay awake and talked of his concerns about the school year ahead. He was apprehensive about learning joined-up handwriting, especially as we would be under a strict new teacher, Miss

Barwise. I wanted to go to sleep but instead I lay awake and listened to his worries. In some ways we were married to each other, and in our early years we never doubted that our relationship was for life.

At the age of nine we joined our brother Philip as boarders at the Dragon School in Oxford. Just before we were due to start our second term, Nick caught German measles so he was kept back while I returned with Philip. It was one of the very few times we were ever separated. As an end-of-holidays treat my mother took Philip and me to visit our father at the film studios where he was making *Murder on the Orient Express*. We visited the set, met the stars and had lunch with my parents, but our hearts were heavy because we were aware that in the evening we would be on the school train. Perhaps I concealed my feelings better than Philip for my mother wrote: 'Phi got paler and quieter in usual pre-school form, poor lamb.'[1]

At school next morning I tore open an envelope during our morning break.

TOP PRIVET
Do not look
23/4/74
Dear Timmy and Phi and . . .
I hope you aren't feeling to home sick.
The time now is eleven o'clock and time for eleven'sy', try not to be to bad while I am away and I will soon join you at school with mummy.
I wonder if this term is going to go fast? and I also wonder if you are eating biscuits all over my beautiful letter. I hope you had a nice time at the studios yesterday, with dad.
... Please show this letter to Phi as soon as possible please.
With ton's of love from

Nick'y?
xoxoxoxo

The next day a similar letter arrived saying he was still sick and would be staying away a third day. Later he wrote to our grandfather about his experience: 'I had a lovely time but I was a bit lonely without Phi and Timmy.'[2] When my mother drove Nick back to school she noted that I was 'delighted to see him'[3] and we all went for tea together at a local hotel. I kept the two letters he sent me. They turned out to be the only ones I would ever receive from him because after that we were hardly ever separated. We spent individual days away from each other but even these amounted to no more than a handful in the remaining five years of his life.

We took every advantage of being identical. When we signed up in a doubles snooker competition at school, we played well through the early rounds but at a later stage I started missing shots. I looked at Nick and without a word he knew what was in my mind. From that point on he stepped in and took all my shots. We still lost the match. Another day I wanted to skip a football match so Nick turned up in my place. No one spotted the substitution.

We felt the world was our oyster, and when it suited us it was going to be a very confused oyster. Our parents' London house was run by a kind and conscientious housekeeper, Scotty, and despite her no-nonsense attitude and parsimonious character, Nick and I liked her very much. She indulged us every morning with chocolate biscuits but our mother had ruled that we were to be given only one each. One morning Nick was preoccupied with some task and I slipped away and claimed my ration. I left, hid the biscuit and returned seconds later to duplicate the request. Assuming I was Nick, Scotty gave me another. A minute later I appeared a third time; Scotty told me to

clear off. I protested my innocence. She was scandalised by Nick's apparent duplicity and gave me two further biscuits. I scarpered before Nick arrived and caught her wrath.

At the end of the holidays my mother would normally put us on the school train back to Oxford. She hated the goodbyes as much as we did and we would watch her stand forlornly on the platform waving a hanky until she was a dot in the distance. Very occasionally her work meant she could not take us to the station and she would then break the news to us that it would be our father's mother, Doreen Brabourne, who would see us off instead. Although we were fond of our grandmother, she was no replacement for our mother at such a tender time. I discovered this when still a small boy. Holding back tears, I kissed my mother goodbye and climbed into the back of my grandmother's chauffeur-driven car where she was sitting bolt upright. As we pulled away down the street, Nick and I craned our necks and waved. Our grandmother commanded, 'Don't look back, boys.' She was not someone we could easily disobey and I was torn between watching my still-waving mother and submitting to the authority and firmness in my grandmother's voice. I waved as long as I reasonably could and then turned and faced ahead so my grandmother could not see my brimming eyes. The steely inflexibility in her came from somewhere I could not fathom. When in 1933 she had said goodbye to her own small boys and sailed to India in the service of the Empire, she knew she would see little of them again until they were men. Her long life had been marked by painful separations and loss, and these appeared to have inured her to pain. She seemed as hard as nails but underneath, as I would discover in 1979, she wanted nothing more than to protect her children and grandchildren.

Our Brabourne grandmother lived in Knightsbridge just around the corner from my parents' London home. We

often visited her and she regularly accompanied us to museums, restaurants, theatres and cinemas. One night we went with her to see the Second World War epic *A Bridge Too Far*. All evening we had been on best behaviour but when we arrived at the cinema late, Nick uncharacteristically forgot his manners and darted into the auditorium ahead of her. Her spindly hand grabbed his collar and without for a moment losing her poise she hitched him back into place behind her and swept majestically past.

Our grandmother joined us now and again at our home in Kent. The longest and best times we spent with her were the Christmas and summer holidays hosted by our Mountbatten grandfather, who unfailingly included her. They were very different characters. She was an instinctively shy and private person, physically fragile, socially reserved and unconcerned with the past. Their commonalities were also many: physically attractive; vain; mentally strong; fiercely loyal to their causes, their staff and their family. They endured long removal from their children for their public service; were bad with money; had their spouses as their greatest partners in life and saw them die young. Both were the children of Marquesses, both had family murdered in the upheavals of the twentieth century, both sat on the Viceregal thrones of India. The first half of their lives led them on parallel but separate tracks, their children brought them together, their grandchildren made them friends; but it was their deaths together in Sligo that would finally link them.

Given our facsimile experience of life, it is perhaps unsurprising that Nick and I often had very similar thoughts. We frequently started the same sentence with the same words at the same time. We were often asked if we were telepathic. Once, as small boys, we were at home on

our own on two different floors when suddenly I felt frightened for no apparent reason. I ran down the corridor, around the corner and onto the staircase. Here I collided with Nick at the very centre of two symmetrical paths which we had simultaneously run. Neither of us could explain what had prompted this and, bemused, we went back to what we had been doing.

Many people could tell us apart if they had us both to look at, but if one of us walked into a room without our twin we would often be asked, ‘Which one of you am I talking to?’ Aged fourteen, the number of people who could identify us in isolation was probably in single figures.

Part of the joy of being twins was intellectual. It gave us the sensation of amounting to more than the sum of our parts. It was as if we could tap into each other’s knowledge and processing power. The year before he was killed, Nick and I had studied astronomy at the Dragon School under an eccentric academic from Oxford University. We had thrived on subjects such as red giants, white dwarfs, black holes, the speed of light, antimatter and the tantalising possibility of time travel. Six months later we sat up late one night with Amanda and described our interest in the topic. She soon made us feel as if all she had ever wanted was a class in astronomy from a pair of fourteen-year-olds. Nick and I flew into overdrive. Each of us in turn explored the frontier of our own understanding and then passed the intellectual ball to the other. The receiving twin would carry on intuitively. The seams in our shared intellectual tapestry appeared faultless. To be so completely on the wavelength of another human was more than fun, it was a gift. I was to realise this only once I had lost it.

At the Dragon School we gently competed with one another in an unspoken way. This helped our academic performance and after three years we were placed in the top stream, and the following year we sat three days of

scholarship exams for Gordonstoun School. Our results were within 1 per cent of each other and the school was unable to decide how to award the scholarships on offer. When we travelled to Scotland to be interviewed we made a vivid impression on the headmaster, John Kempe. ‘I asked Nicholas the first question and he talked so much that I didn’t think Timothy would get a look-in. Needless to say he did, and he was given a chance, and there was a kind of competitive exuberance which was refreshing.’[4] Unable to identify the stronger candidate, he awarded us the top scholarship jointly. We were over the moon as well as privately relieved that neither of us had been knocked into second place.

We knew a bit about Gordonstoun from Norton, Joe and Amanda who had already passed through the school, as had quite a few cousins. It was a ten-hour train journey from London into the far North of Scotland and was famously Spartan. Somewhere in its ethos seemed to linger the notion that *Chilliness was next to Godliness*. A school rule mandated that every warm shower was to be immediately followed by a cold one. We slept in poorly heated dormitories of up to thirty boys. Occasionally the mug of water I took to bed froze. We were woken by a ship’s bell at which signal we would have to change into shorts and take a bare-breasted run. When the run was cancelled by snow, ice, rain or the complete absence of daylight, we would cheer.

At first the school was rather daunting but it was reassuring to be placed in the same class as another boy from the Dragon School, Simon Jones. It was also a great help to have Philip, now in his penultimate year at the school. We talked to him for guidance and support and on one occasion he was my protector. ‘Robbie’, a boy in the year above me, used to push and trip me as I walked into assembly each morning, to laughter from his cohort. When

I admitted this to Philip it reminded him of his first days at the school when older boys had bullied him. Without my knowledge, he and several of his mates walked into ‘Robbie’s’ boarding house one evening and gave him a good hiding, to the approval of other boys in his dormitory. He later apologised and stopped bullying me.

By the summer of 1979 we were enjoying the school. Neither of us was a star on the sports pitch so we took up cross-country running. At the end of our runs, feeling sick and dizzy, we would walk around with blinding headaches having obstinately refused to let the other win. As a result we built up our pace and stamina and were surprised to find we could out-run almost all of our classmates. The same dynamic occurred in the classroom where we occupied neighbouring desks and usually scored top grades.

Gordonstoun was not all cross-country runs and cold showers. I adored working with clay in long, tranquil pottery classes which were punctuated by the irreverent wit of our teacher. It was one of a number of gentle counterpoints in a school which otherwise might have been overbearingly rugged. Another was fishing. On Saturday evenings in the summer term, Simon Jones, Nick and I went fishing on a loch a few miles away. On still evenings we were captivated by the beauty of the loch and its mirror-like surface, disturbed occasionally by the splashing of a trout.

We missed our parents and treasured the detailed weekly letters they each wrote. They visited us once a term, and as our father was a governor of the school this gave him the chance to see us for an extra evening or lunch. Twice during the school year we had a half-term break to go home. These visits and the school holidays were like beacons by which we navigated our year,