

THE NAPPY PIN

*“Come all ye young rebels, and listen while I sing,
For the love of one's country is a terrible thing.”*

I can't get that bloody song out of my head; over and over it drones on; it's very annoying! I'm tucked into a corner of one of the sand dunes, where we put up a green windbreaker to shelter us from the sea breeze. My mother always loved this place - Shelling beach - an hour's drive from Belfast but in the Irish Free State. She used to say that the air smelled fresher here. This is where my parents came courting and where according to family legend, my father proposed to her.

'The sky was streaked in orange and red ribbons and the sun was a big pink ball slipping into the blue sea,' my mother's soft voice whispers in my ear.

I have sat here every day for a week and seen at least three similar sunsets, each time thinking about my parents, when they were young and carefree before everything started to go wrong.

'Hey, Maureen, any news?' my brother comes up from behind, interrupting my ruminations.

'Nothing so far,' I answer, "they told me if they don't find anything by the end of the day, they'll be bringing in the bulldozers to dig up the whole carpark.'

'At least they're finally taking us seriously,' he nods towards the team of policemen.

I watch the tide going out; great sweeping waves proudly exposing its breathtaking sandy expanse. Scattered across the dunes, clusters of wild grass and long-stemmed daisies dance in the sea breeze. I take a deep breath and fill my lungs with the salty aroma, it feels so good.

'Do you want a fag?' Billy holds an open packet towards me.

'No thanks, I haven't had a smoke for a week now and I'm thinking of giving them up.' I say with less conviction when the smoke from his cigarette hits my nostrils.

'Good on you,' Billy takes a deep puff, 'I need them more than ever now,' he indicates with his head to the excavation work going on.

My eyes drift from dark, soggy mess of the dig to the smooth, clean sand and the sky reflected in the sea – the vast blueness stretching out as far as the eye can see until both become one with the horizon.

'The sea oh the sea, is gra liom ma chroi, long may it roll between England and me,' my father's voice sings in my ear.

A faint memory of him building sandcastles with us, probably on this beach, slips in unnoticed. Being the eldest, I have the best memories of my father. He died of cancer the year before my mother disappeared.

'Do you remember when Da made a train out of sand and each of us had our own carriage?' I ask Billy.

'He was a lovely man, our dad, it's good he wasn't around to see all of this.'
Billy blows more smoke in my direction, 'I wonder what was going on in
Mam's head when they brought her here.'

I was thinking the same thing earlier but I couldn't answer him because the
very thought strikes fear in my heart.

*"It banishes fear with the speed of a flame,
And makes us all part of the patriot game."*

The bloody song again...nothing banished fear, nothing. I have lived in fear
all my life, ever since that day so long ago. The Wolfe Tones' ballad plays like
a soundtrack to a film starring me and my family. I believe it would be best
described as a human drama with a tragic twist. How often have I wished
that I could turn back the clock, thirty-one years, five months and four days,
give or take an hour or two. I know it doesn't help to dwell on things
passed, on things you can't change but I would give anything to see my
Mam one more time, to hug her and breathe in her scent. There were so
many stories after she disappeared; they called her a *tout* for giving
information to the Brits, said that she had abandoned us and was living
with a British soldier. There was even a rumour that she'd had a baby by
him and they'd run off to live in England together. That would be a miracle
of science, considering she had a hysterectomy after our Freddie.

'A penny for you thoughts,' Billy nudges me gently with his hand.

I look at my brother's face, he looks much older than his 42 years but I can
still see the eleven year old staring back at me; the same face that greeted
me when I came back with supper for the kids thirty-one years ago.

Mam had sent me to get fish and chips for us all while she went to have a bath. The kids were behaving really well that day. They were alarmed by my mother's battered and bruised face, which she told them was from '*falling down stairs*', because she didn't want to scare them. A few nights before, some soldiers brought her to the door. It was her Bingo night, and I was babysitting. Thank god, the kids were fast asleep. She could barely stand and her hair had just been pulled out of her, there was blood on her nose, and her feet and hands were cut. I put her on the sofa and cleaned her up as best I could with a warm flannel. When I asked her who did it, she said the IRA had pulled her off the street to question her but she couldn't tell me why. I begged her to go to our grandparents on the Shankill Road, but she didn't want to put them in danger. They were Protestants and my mother had converted to Catholicism. She told me not to worry that everything would be okay, and I believed her because I wanted to.

'Don't be sneaking off for a quiet smoke with your friends,' were my mother's last words to me when I went off to the chipper.

'I did sneak off for a smoke before I came back,' I confess to Billie.

'Ah, Jesus, Maureen is that why you're not smoking now? For god's sake, take a fuckin' cigarette. How many times do I have to tell you, it's not your fault! It's those bastards that took her and soon we'll know what they did to her,' he hands me a lit cigarette and I take it gladly. The first puff after a week is like heaven. My mind goes back in time.

I wasn't gone long, but when I got back there was no sign of Mam. The kids were all screaming and shouting. I didn't know what had happened. When I

got them all to settle down, Billy was the one, who told me everything. A few minutes after I left, a gang of men and women burst in and dragged Mam out of the flat. Him and James, who was only nine, ran after them, but they threatened the two of them with a gun and told them to 'Fuck off'. While I was puffing a cigarette outside the chipper, my younger brothers and sisters were watching our mother being thrown like a bag of potatoes into the back of a red van which then speeded off. I can never get that image out of my head. When Billy told me that Denny was one of the gang, I knew that if I'd only come back sooner, or not gone at all, they'd never have taken my mother. I told the kids to lock the door and me and Billie ran out to look for her. We spent the next few weeks taking care of the kids as best we could and searching for Mam during the nights. I looked all over for Denny as well; I wanted to beg him to bring her back. He'd once asked me out and I'd said I wasn't interested in him— the vicious bastard was having his revenge on me.

Billy and I usually split up when we went searching for her, until one night; some big lads grabbed him and took him into an empty house, tied him to a chair and beat him up badly. They threatened to shoot him in the head and they stabbed one of his legs with a knife. They told him they'd kill him if he didn't stop asking questions about our mother. Only animals could treat a little eleven-year-old like that. I stopped taking him with me on my night searches. He was too scared to come anyway. Things began to get out of hand, it was hard to feed the kids and no one in the neighbourhood offered a helping hand. I wasn't surprised, my mother had never been accepted by her Catholic neighbours. 'Once a Prod, always a Prod!' I remember

hearing two fat bitches mutter about my mother, while they watched her slim, pretty frame bend over to wipe one of the younger one's noses. Of course, jealousy had a hand in cementing my mother's fate, but in the end, she was a Protestant widow living in a council flat in the Divis complex – the Catholic, Republican outpost in West Belfast – her fate was set one way or another.

'I'm sorry Billy,' I tell my brother.

'For what, Maureen, don't you go strange on me!' he gives me a look.

'I should have done more to keep us all together,' I feel a bit weepy.

'You did the best you could, you were only a kid, you're not to blame,' Billie pats my shoulder, 'the only ones to fault are the people who took Mam and not you. It makes me sick to think of all the years we were labeled as *'abandoned by their mother'*. No one went looking for her. If the police had listened to us, when you and I made the complaint the night after they took her, they might have saved her.'

It's only recently that Billy and I became close again; the way a brother and sister should be. We are the only ones still living in Belfast, but we rarely meet up, unless by accident. It's convenient to use the busyness of life as an excuse but the fact of the matter is that all seven of us were split up by social services and we stayed split up. It was just too painful to be together. I take full blame for that too, as I was the one who made the call, a call that I regret to this day. I should have made a bigger effort to keep us together, that's what Mam would have wanted. But I was only fifteen, and I got tired

of all their demands, of trying to keep them clean and fed. I just wanted to be like any normal teenager with no responsibility. I was sure we'd be allowed to stay together but they didn't care what happened to us and within a matter of weeks we were all sent to different orphanages; some of us fared better than others, but none of us were shown any love or compassion.

Billie points at the excavation area; the yellow police tape is blowing in the wind. One of the policemen is waving at us to come down to him. I can't get up, my legs are numb.

'Come on, Maureen, it's going to be okay,' Billie heaves me up.

How? I think, how is anything going to be okay?

'We've found something?' the Garda comes to talk to us.

'Is it our mother?' Billie asks him.

'We can't be a hundred percent sure, not until the coroner does a proper forensic check. Do you want to come down to the site?'

'Yes,' Billie says linking my arm and pulling me with him.

Part of me holds back, I don't want to know, it's the end of my fantasy of ever seeing her again. Then again, maybe it's not her, bad things happen every day, maybe it's some other poor person lying in a shallow, cold grave beside this beautiful beach. We walk, propping each other up, beside the policeman. Billie holds me with one hand, while he talks to James on the mobile with his other.

'They've found a body. We don't know yet. You better prepare the others.'

All my brothers and sisters had come back to Belfast, as soon as we'd heard that the police had got a tip about where to find my mother. We were taking turns keeping watch over the excavation, although I was here all the time.

We walk over to where all the police activity is focused. The Garda lifts the yellow police tape to allow us to get closer. The turfy soil is dark brown like dried blood; I shiver in the cool sea breeze.

'What a lonely place to lie for so long,' Billie says. I can feel him shaking beside me.

'The preservation in damp, boggy soil is very good,' the police woman says to us.

'So is it our mother?' Billie asks his voice is hoarse with emotion.

'We can't tell at this stage,' the police woman says, 'do you remember what she was wearing when she was taken?'

I look down into the pit, that they've dug, and I see some bones with scrapes of blue material covering them. What colour was her bathrobe? Maybe, it wasn't her robe, maybe she was still wearing a dress? Now is not the time to be playing tricks on me, I tell my fickle memory. My mother loved the colour blue, I think it was her favourite colour but I can only remember her red bathrobe. Then again the van they drove off in was red, could that be confusing my memory.

'Is there a nappy pin?' Billie asks.

We both watch as the woman checks the clothing. She gently folds back the brittle material and then suddenly we see it; the large safety pin. My heart stops for a second; the small pile of bones lying in the shallow, dark grave are what's left of my mother.

'What a lonely place to lie for so long,' I say out-loud.

'Can you tell how they killed her?' Billie asks the police woman.

'Not for sure, not until we do a proper post-mortem but judging by the state of her skull, it looks like they shot her in the back of the head,' her voice was matter-of-fact but sympathetic at the same time.

'Execution style,' Billie says, 'IRA style!'

There is a general hum of agreement from the Gardai standing around. I feel a huge emptiness but also strangely relief. The Gardai leave us alone for a bit.

'It's Ma,' Billie tells James on the phone, 'tell everyone to meet at my house, the key is under the doormat.'

We go back to the car and drive for most of the next hour in silence, each of us probably thinking the same thing. What was the last thing we'd said to Mam, or she had said to us. Was she thinking about us when they pulled the trigger?

I am sure there is going to be a crowd waiting at Billie's house when we arrive – news travels so fast in this neck of the woods – you'd expect that

wouldn't you; a sympathetic group of neighbours waiting to greet us; to express their sorrow at our loss, to ask for our forgiveness. But the street is quiet, almost as if people are staying in to avoid meeting us. I'm sure that I see some curtains moving in the front window of Billie's neighbour's house.

'They're ashamed of themselves,' Anne comes out to greet us.

Mary, Ursula, James and Freddie are sitting in the living room and there is a big pot of tea with mugs and biscuits on the small coffee table. We sit on the sofa facing them and Anne pours us some tea. There are no hugs or kisses; that wasn't our way, another side effect of our childhood trauma. Billie tells them that they've found our mother.

'It makes me sick to the stomach,' Billy says, 'to think of Mam lying dead for thirty-one years and the men and women responsible for her death are walking around scot free.'

Denny is a taxi driver on the Falls Road and Billie says that he sometimes takes his cab without realizing it. Denny treats him like any other customer. I've seen Denny's wife, Rita, who was also one of the gang that dragged my screaming terrified mother out of our home. I usually stare at her until she shouts at me 'leave me alone, you mad woman,' and then I simply smile at her knowingly until she turns away in shame.

'How are they so sure it's Mam?' Anne asks. 'I mean, they haven't completed the post mortem and there can't be anything more than bones left after so long.'

Billy just says 'they found the nappy pin,' and we are all quiet, all thinking, about how my mother went into a frenzy of cleaning after my Dad died. And with so many of us, one child or other was forever losing a button or needing some other repair, she always had a large blue safety pin – we called it the 'nappy pin' – fastened to her clothes.

None of us has any doubt now.

I look around at the pale, worn-out faces of my siblings; Billie catches my eye and then looks around at each and everyone one of us.

'Mam would be happy to see us all together in one room,' he says, 'this is her victory over those bastards, the unification of her family.'

'It's the people not the country who betrayed her,' I say.

Her fine body twisted, all battered and lame

*They soon made **her** part of the patriot game.*

My gentle, peace-loving mother was made part of fight she wanted no part in. But this battered and torn country preserves its own and her remains will bear evidence to what was done to her in the name of patriotism.

'Finally, justice will be done,' Anne says.

'Amen,' my mother's voice whispers in my ear.

'Amen!' I repeat out loud to my family.

