

In the Beginning

Those who knew Eamonn Kinsella—and were truly being honest with themselves—had to admit that were he born but ten miles to the west or north his murder would have been seen as the fitting end to a hard and brutal man. As his son, I do not make this claim lightly. Nor is it merely from spite. While it's true he near twisted my arm off when forcing me to turn over a pound note I'd received for my tenth birthday, not long before—his need to drink himself into another stupor far more important than my pain—that does not factor into my opinion. All it does is prove that my father was very difficult, in many ways and with everyone.

The fact is, it could take little more than a wrong word, here; a wrong look, there; or even a wrong touch on his shoulder to call forth some beast within. Then suddenly you'd find yourself on the floor with a split lip or blackened eye, and it would be your own fault for his reaction, no matter how improbable the cause. So expect no apology. With his height at well above six feet, weight of more than fifteen stone, and back still carrying the strength gained from a long-past position as a navvy, few were they who would take the dispute further. That was why as word of his death spread, the first thought on many-a-mind was he had finally focused his anger on the one absolute truth of existence—that there was always somebody bigger, stronger, meaner, and better with his fists than yourself, and that one day you were sure to meet.

His body was found off the Limavady Road, down a farm trail that would have offered a pleasant view of the River Foyle had it not decided to turn so sharply to the east. The morning air was cold and blustery, and the fields around him bleak and gray despite recent whispers of snow and the brightness of the sky. He had been dumped in a ditch, his coat pulled down his arms and his hands bound tight behind him. Rumors flew that he had been emasculated, never to be confirmed one way or the other. It *was* verified that every bone in every finger was broken, several ribs were shattered, an elbow had been dislocated and his face pummeled into the merest hint of a human visage. Blood soaked his shirt to his trousers, the knees of which were torn and scraped as if he'd been forced to crawl on them. Or been dragged. And it was said not one tooth was left in his mouth.

As for the Coroner's release on the manner of his death? It was the purest embodiment of callous simplicity. "Mr. Kinsella perished from the result of a bullet being fired into the crown of his head."

Mr. Kinsella *perished*.

He was not *murdered*.

Nor was he *killed*.

Or even *slaughtered* like a cow in the abattoir.

He merely *perished*.

A charming word you'd hear more often on the lips of someone claiming they're *perished from the hunger*. Or thirst. Or cold. Or the mere seeking of a job. Not once until that Coroner's comment had I ever connected the damned word with death. Which sent me to the library to dig into their dictionary and discover it actually *was* defined as such, with synonyms being *expire*, *wither*, *shrivel*, *vanish*, *molder* and *rot*, any of which might have been just as inappropriate.

He had lain on his back in a slight trail of dirty water until his clothing was soaked through and solid with ice. One unseeing eye open and tinted by blood; the other swollen shut. Well-preserved, he was. Refrigerated, even. Therefore, time of death was difficult to establish. That somewhere between midnight and four of that morning was decided upon brought forth a great explosion of anger, seeing as how it had been two nights since he was jostled out of McCleary's in his far-too-usual condition, just after last orders. And it was known that he had not returned to his hovel, nor had he been seen anywhere else, since. So to one and all it became a truth carved in stone that his torturers had enjoyed their game with him for two bloody days.

Adding to the horror of his lengthy demise was how the somewhat reticent undertaker handling the funeral arrangements had gently but firmly insisted on a closed casket.

"Considering the overall devastation visited upon him," he'd said to the widow, his voice soft and mewling, "well, there's only so much one can do, you know. And really, Mrs. Kinsella, it would be best to remember him as he was."

To which my mother began to wail, "My poor Eamonn." As was expected of her. Mrs. Haggerty, our immediate neighbor, was at her side. Which was how word of this travesty leapt from house to home with the speed of telepathy; that woman never knew a secret she couldn't spread faster than the BBC.

My elder brother, Eamonn, the younger was standing in the room, his fists clenched and his body tight. In a corner, my elder sister, Mairead, sat on a stool and wept. They both knew what he meant. I was also there, quietly leaning back against a wall, being quite the stoic lad, I'm told. But in truth I could make no sense from the quiet manner in which his death was being depicted by any and all concerned so had no idea how to act.

Oh, but did this news increase the dead man's stature. He turned from being a drunken bully to the truest of Irishmen, who did not release his hold on life as easily as others would have. Who fought to the end in order to return home to his kith and kin. Why, he even spat blood in the faces of his killers, that much was a certainty. Before the day was gone, he'd been elevated to the likes of Cu Chulain and Michael Collins and every other hero of Ireland's past, with any and all recent grievances forgotten.

Throughout the afternoon and evening, many a pub mate dropped by to offer kind remembrances of my Da's bleak eyes and long face, a visage that brought to mind tortured poets and sad balladeers. They wistfully spoke of how he could sing so well as to make the angels weep. Elegant tunes of Ireland's ruined past and her dead future. Others provided gentle smiles as they told stories about the stories he could weave. Melodious tales of fairies living in oak glens that once spread forever across the land. And of gods who roamed her once glorious green fields and forests. And exciting events wrapped around Grianán Aileach, the ancient ring fort but six miles and a hundred worlds away from town.

Oh, he had a true Irish heart in his use of words, was the general sentiment. And to a man they swore that in another time and under better circumstances, he'd have given the likes of James Joyce and Sean O'Casey a challenge as the nation's bard, for each tale had been brought to life with such beauty and perfection you'd have thought he lived through each and every one.

Which put me off. I'd heard Da's stories and singing voice, and not been much impressed. But when I said so, the usual response was, *Oh, you poor wee lad, how could you know? Or, What a thing to say about your poor dead Da. Or, This is what happens when you're simple.* The last one usually followed by a wink and nod to whomever was seated next to them.

Simple! I was labeled that thanks to my mother, and once you have the reputation you cannot remove it. But would a *simple lad* be smart enough to know now was not the time to remind the bloody hypocrites of the money borrowed but never repaid? Or drunken rants along the road, or the beatings and the bursts of howling fury and the theft of any money we'd managed to pull together, all in the service of drink? Would a simple lad wonder at how much viciousness and cruelty could have been poured into one man in fewer than thirty-six years, while others just accepted it as part of him?

I grant you, he was hardly the only Irishman filled with anger. It was the one honest emotion those like him were allowed to hold. And if my mother was seen at market with fresh bruises, or was out in the cold night air walking us around till our lord and master had sworn himself into weary, drunken sleep? Well, her nails had left scratches deep on more than just his back, and her quick use of an iron skillet to the head had not gone unnoticed.

But still it hit me wrong. It wasn't till years later that I truly understood how hypocrisy is just good manners, at a wake. So the bad of my father was made quiet and the best cried aloud.

His funeral was well-attended and partially paid for through the intercession of our priest, Father Demian, who'd so often visited our home in times of distress. The rest was provided by the widow's one sister, Maria Nolan, who had rushed over from Houston.

Texas.

It was she who'd sent me that pound note.

She saw that everything was arranged as well as possible in our sad little hovel, and kept my younger brother and sister at her hotel room to give them peace from the nonstop clamor of adults in the house.

She was also shocked at the condition of our two-up-two-down wreck of a home. So when she spoke to the press, she emphasized that the new widow had five children, with another soon due, yet was living in a structure that was all but condemned and had no prospects for better. She was vocal enough that she actually shamed the bastards who ran the town like their bloody fiefdom into at least promising new lodgings once the last tower of the Rossville Flats was completed.

If there were room still available on the queue, of course. *Can't make promises one might have to keep.*

I think they expected that, as with most catastrophic events, soon all would be over and done with and life would return to normal once the confusion surrounding us had drifted away. Then they could return to ignoring our plight. And would have but for one small and final detail that proved more than important.

Eamonn Kinsella lived and died in Derry, in the North of Ireland. *Londonderry* for those who cannot be bothered to learn the city's true name. A Catholic town taken hold of by Protestants in the way an abusive man might take hold of a woman he fancied, refusing to let her go even if it meant her destruction. So when it was learned that my Da had been killed by two drunk Protestants, that well-mannered hypocrisy and general anger turned to fury.

It didn't help that the bastards swore to heaven and earth they'd only meant to have some fun with the *Taig* and it was his own fault things got out of hand to the point he had to be shot. Like a mad dog. Which was accepted as *the most reasonable explanation* by the powers that be, despite his vicious and

extremely well-known injuries. So thus was the martyrdom of Eamonn Kinsella to Mother Ireland manifested as the truth of his former existence vanished like a ghost.

The year was 1966, when several other Catholics were killed for being Catholic and Catholic schools were attacked by Protestant fools, all because the Catholic minority in the state had the nerve to want the same rights as any Protestant. It was as if the latter thought continuing to hit the former, who are only asking you to stop hitting them, would make them shut up and let you continue the beating. To add to this insult, Protestant leaders insisted the Catholic population was, itself, responsible for the discrimination against it so no quarter would be given to make amends for the past transgressions they, themselves, had caused.

It never ceases to amaze me how easy it is for too many people to refuse to see the reality of what is happening around them. That trying to keep their world as it had long been was no longer an option. That if they would only compromise a little, nothing more would be needed and everyone's life would be so much better. But to follow that course would have taken intelligence in a land where arrogance and stupidity held sway. So what followed was all but pre-ordained.

Already being one to keep to himself, I was unaware that my world was building to an explosion of the most vicious death and cruelty, ever. An explosion made only the worse by it happening in a supposedly civilized part of the fast-dwindling British Empire.

But what child of ten can see the growth of history around him when few adults can? Things happen, and you either rejoice when it ends well or weep when it doesn't. Thus, my father's death held resonance for me in only the most selfish, limited, and inconsiderate of ways—that a man I feared was gone, and I could now live my life in the manner I chose, that of a lad filled with hopes and dreams and prayers and promises, thinking himself to be in a place of safety.