

The Third Time my Father Tried to Kill Me

by James Claffey

I lay on the bed for three days and waited for the swelling to subside. My left eye wouldn't open and the world through my right one was a sunburst, even through the closed drapes and the wet towel that covered my bruised face. We'd been at the neighbor's house, for a "session." Fiddle. Bodhrán. Tin Whistle. Bushmills. Guinness Extra-stout. They were Northerners. From Derry. Provo's my father said. Sympathizers. *Sotto voce*. They sang and clapped and stomped shod feet on hardwood floor, the smell of man sweat and bomb-making thick as perfume.

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When it came to the end, and they played "The Fields of Athenry," the players roared the chorus, "Did they beat the drum slowly, did they play the fife lowly/Did they sound the dead march as they lowered you down/Did the band play the last post and chorus/Did the pipes play "The Flowers of the Forest.'" They raised glasses, and the singer cried, "I...I... IRA, fuck the queen and the UDA." as everyone drained their drinks. I said something about how the queen didn't seem so bad and my father bristled.

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Fuchsia bushes, a monkey puzzle tree, and my mother's prize roses were the only witnesses. My head hit the railings again and again. Blood fizzed and ran down my face, a warm stream, and he said, "Never defend that bitch again. Never. Do you hear me?" With each word he spoke my skull met iron and the earth spun as he dragged me to the front door. She screamed when she saw the state of me. "Leave him alone. Bloody Royalist," he said. She helped me to the bedroom and brought ice and whiskey for the pain.

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The second time he tried to kill me we were paddling in the waves at Brittas Bay. I was in the water, looking for sea creatures in the clear ocean. Mam was smoking a fag in the shelter of the windbreak—the striped one with wooden stakes—and she couldn't see us from her vantage point. “Would you swim properly,” he said, pulling at my arms and trying to show me how to move them over my head, the way Johnny Weissmuller did in the Tarzan films. I sank, my lungs full of water, his foot on my back, holding me under. Maybe when my arms stopped twitching he got nervous, because next thing I knew, I was on the sand, lying on my back, and him pushing on my belly until the saltwater sprayed air and I turned blue to white and gulped air.

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The first time my father tried to kill me, I was swaddled between both my parents and couldn't stop crying. The curtains were pulled shut, the room black as my mother's insides. He kept muttering, “Aw, for Jesus' sake, can't you quiet that babby?” She tried. Soother. Gripe water. Rocking. The lot. I cried on into the small hours. She must have fallen asleep from exhaustion, and he placed his hand over my mouth and nose and pressed down. Only the 5AM milk delivery cart and its rattling bottles saved me. She woke to the tinkle of glass on glass, and he pulled his hand away like a schoolboy trying to steal a few sweets from a jar of Bullseyes.

