

Forty Years Ago by Dessy Walls

"I'm late for my date," I said.

"I'll drive you to the station" Daddy volunteered in friendly fashion, though his mood seemed to change once we were on the road.

"Weren't you already out this week?" he asked "Thought I told you to limit going out to once a week during college term?"

I didn't answer. What nineteen-year-old goes out once a week? This was Saturday. Everybody's out on Saturday. But I said nothing. I couldn't win that fight. I had flopped my first year in college and was repeating. I didn't want to be in college at all but I'd lost that argument too and this was no time to resume the debate; my train was coming.

"Thanks Dad" I said curtly as I got out of the car. I slammed the door and walked to my train without looking back. I never saw him again.

It would have been nice if our last conversation had been more agreeable; if we could have sat down man to man and looked for solutions. But our final encounter on this earth was a stand off and a slammed door. And you can't change the chronological order of things.

Memories, on the other hand, are not confined to such limits.

There were many happy times in Daddy's car. Like the first time I drove on Dollymount Strand sitting on his knee; I was about four. It was an old model twelve which he had converted from two old model twelves. Some of the doors were dark green and some were black. Nevertheless to me it was a great car and I was driving it. Barely able to see over the steering wheel and Daddy working the clutch and brake, but I was driving. That's a warm memory.

Or when I was seventeen and Daddy let me drive his Humber Super Snipe. He sat bravely as my passenger. We sped all around the lonely east Cork roads; me driving, him encouraging, both bantering and laughing a lot. Then there was the time, when I was about eight, and he was driving us through the Wicklow Mountains. My sister, Clare, and I looked out the window and our mouths dropped open.

"There's a wheel passing us" Clare shouted.

"Where did that come from?" asked Ma, craning her neck from the front seat, "It looks like one of ours."

Daddy stopped the car. The back right hit the road with a "clonk"! Meantime the wheel was rolling into a ditch fifty yards ahead. There's another sweet memento; better than a slammed door.

I remember Daddy's face when I won the race in Banteer. I didn't think I could win as Stephen Hennessy had beaten me ten days earlier and Michael Murphy was the guy who'd introduced me to running. How could I beat them? Especially Hennessy as this mile race was even more suited to him than the half mile over which he'd beaten me in Carrigtoohill. Daddy assured me I could do it.

"After all," he pointed out "you've trained for ten days, which is ten days more than usual."

I remember Hennessy trying to crowd me off the track throughout the last lap but I held my half yard advantage to the line where my sibling supporters cheered and Daddy smiled fit to bust. He was proud of me. On days like that I could conquer the world. That was the under seventeen's championship under my belt, next step, I thought, the '68 Olympics in Mexico City.

Daddy said "focus on your studies first. Let your running and your music be your hobbies."

Daddy believed in hobbies. He had almost as many as he had children. His job as an oil refinery manager was not in any way the centre of his life. We were; and his hobbies were. For him, it was a good life.

He wanted a similar life for me. Daddy had encouraged the band when I first put it together but when he saw how obsessed I was he began to see it as a threat to my education and my future.

"You must prepare yourself for making a living" he said. But I wanted to make my living doing what I loved and I loved music.

Ma said I wasn't being practical. The world doesn't treat dreamers well. Most musicians struggle all their lives. Daddy agreed with her. He wanted to agree with me because he was a dreamer at heart but he wasn't going to let me risk destroying my opportunities. I thanked them both for their love and guidance and told them I was sorry my view of reality didn't match theirs. But it was my life!

"And what would you know, at your age, about life?"

To try and find a balance Daddy offered to manage the band. I favored that idea but the rest of the boys wouldn't hear of it. My Dad, to them, was the man who thought "bloody" was a curse word. They didn't want him around our Rock 'n Roll experience. It broke my heart to tell him this.

I remember helping Daddy build the tennis court, the small swimming pool, the large shed, the kitchen extension. I remember him showing me simple tunes on the piano. Later he would teach me how to work bass parts and chords around the melody. I remember a swarm of his bees attacking him. He was saved by jumping in the swimming pool and keeping his head down. I remember his life being saved a second time. This time thanks to my brother, Kevin. During construction of the large shed a heavy wooden section began to topple. A quarter ton of timber was falling on Daddy's head. Kevin shouted and Daddy jumped back. The huge weight crashed down missing him by a centimeter; raising dust across the whole back yard.

I remember a warm Sunday morning in March sixty eight. As I lay in bed, I heard Daddy calling Ma to hurry because they were late. He had to catch early mass or he'd miss his plane. I remember feeling relieved that he'd be away a couple of days because I was still sore at him. I remember, around noon, standing on the railway bridge with my friends and marveling at the blue sky which contained hardly a cloud. I remember arriving home for lunch to find Ma sitting by the phone with the receiver dangling from her hand. I remember taking the phone from her and hearing Uncle Arthur say "your dad's plane is missing over the Irish sea". Then I don't remember much for a while. I don't remember telling Peter Daddy's plane is missing but, of course, Peter remembers that. I don't

remember what Ma said or I did next. I remember Granny falling against the washing machine saying to Granddad, “We’ll never see our baby again” and only fully realizing at that instant that Daddy had been somebody’s child. I remember Bertie, another of Daddy’s brothers, arriving in the driveway and walking towards Ma at the front door. I remember Ma saying “any news Bertie?” and Bertie replying “No, Clare, and there won’t be.” She collapsed helplessly into his arms. I remember that none of this was happening; because, I would not take it in. It was nothing to do with real life as I had known it before.

Ma was sedated and put to bed and a thousand aunts took over the running of the house. I tried to be strong and didn’t cry. I’m not sure what I did. I must have wandered back to the railway bridge because I remember talking with friends. Joe Moroney’s dad had been killed on the road the previous year and he was so grateful for how my dad had helped him at the time. Now both our fathers were gone. Later David Saunders, a friend and neighbor, took me to see my girlfriend, whom I hadn’t known for very long and she didn’t really know what to say and neither did I. I went home again and tried to find out how to be the man of the house but there were a thousand aunts and uncles taking care of the chaos. Then, suddenly, Ma stood at the kitchen door and everybody said “you shouldn’t be up” and she said, “Well I am” and, in that moment, she took control and everything got back in order and that was how it was for the next thirty eight and a half years until she went to join him. Clare, my sister, tells me that Ma cried like a baby in her own mother’s arms but I didn’t see that. Ma was shattered but Ma was strong.

1968 was the year the world lost Bobby Kennedy, Martin Luther King and off the coast of Wexford an Aer Lingus Viscount went down losing all 61 passengers and crew. The newspapers said one of the passengers was a brother-in-law of a government minister and the father of twelve. Those were mere details; they didn’t really know you, Daddy.

If they wanted to know you they needed to be with us when we went fishing and caught three mackerel only to meet three fishermen on our way home who’d caught twenty five mackerel that same evening; and the following evening to see us catch twenty five mackerel only to meet the same three fishermen with a catch of one hundred and twenty five. Then, the third time out see us catch five hundred and twenty five mackerel and six bass and laugh ourselves silly because we met nobody on the way home.

When you sensed the plane was in trouble did you think about us? I know you thought about Ma and how she would be completely devastated but you knew she would cope to start with and eventually blossom again. I know you thought about John, not yet one year old, and how he’d never know you. You may have hugged us one by one in your heart as Ma did in her frail arms when she left us. If you thought about me I know it was not of an angry young man slamming car doors and walking away but of a confused young man for whom life would probably be difficult. Well, Dad, a difficult life can turn out to be a very happy and fulfilling one but we never got to finish that conversation.

It’s been only forty years, yet you and Ma have sixty descendents on earth. Today all sixty salute the great-granddad they never met, the granddad they never knew and the Daddy I loved with all my heart. Those of us lucky enough to have known you have loved you enough for all.