

AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON
My Battle with Male Cancer

MICHAEL MURPHY

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AFTERNOON

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Foreword by Mary Robinson

BRANDON

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*A las cinco de la tarde.
Eran las cinco en punto de la tarde.
Un niño trajo la blanca sábana
a las cinco de la tarde.
Una espuerta de cal ya prevenida
a las cinco de la tarde.
Lo demás era muerte y solo muerte
a las cinco de la tarde.*

At five in the afternoon.
It was exactly five in the afternoon.
A boy brought the linen sheet
at five in the afternoon.
A basket of lime standing ready
at five in the afternoon.
Everything else was death, only death,
At five in the afternoon.

Federico García Lorca (1898–1936), “The Goring and the Death”, published in *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (1935, translated 1995).

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Foreword

There is an old Irish custom of placing a light in the window. It has a three-fold purpose: to show people that they are welcome inside, to light the way forward for the stranger and to shine a light in the darkness. When I became President of Ireland, I placed a permanent light in the window of my official residence, Áras an Uachtaráin, to welcome into my home those who had not been welcomed there before, particularly the diaspora, those millions of Irish blood who have been scattered all over the world. The beacon was to encourage all of them now and in their future endeavours abroad by shining the light of memory on to our history as a people, demonstrating that the struggles of those who were dispossessed or displaced are not forgotten by us, and that we take a continuing pride in their soaring achievements. Finally, I wanted to shine a light in the darkness, a darkness of ignorance, of prejudice, violence, fear and hopelessness, all of whose spreading cancers assault us as human beings, and which attack at the roots the free flowering of the human spirit. I have tried as best I can to allow the spirit that inspired the gesture to continue to inform me and my work.

When I agreed initially to write a foreword for Michael's book, I did so on the understanding that male cancer does not receive as high a profile as female cancer. My intention was to

highlight that the suffering cancer causes to victims and their families is indiscriminate, but that the isolating, physical and emotional effects of treating the disease – incontinence and erectile dysfunction – can be compounded by the fact that men are more reticent than women to speak openly about those possibilities. The subtitle of Michael's book is "My Battle with Male Cancer". *A las cinco de la tarde* is also the time of the bullfight in Spain, that single combat which Michael movingly employs as an allegory for his own battle. His book is unflinchingly honest, and he breaks down the taboo around men speaking the unspeakable, by saying so live on air on the RTÉ afternoon-radio Mooney Show:

"That question. 'You know I have to ask you this...' and brutally, 'Is there any lead in your pencil?'"

"No, Derek – I don't have any lead in my pencil."

What I have realised is that in writing about all aspects of the cancer theme – traumatic assault, mortality, endurance – Michael has created a personal myth to live by. His memoir graphically treats of themes which take enormous risks of courage to put into words, but through the exceptional quality of his writing, they have become a pillar of light which has enabled him to continue on in the warmth of its lustre, despite his loss and the limits that have now been reached.

"I have told it like it is, what I have seen and what I have heard. I have said it, and my saying is true. Because of the cancer, there's no longer any space available to hide in; neither is there any time left over for being silent."

It is a freedom from the prison of silence that Michael has proven can be open to all. The welcome home in his book is for all whose lives have been touched by the many forms of cancer. It is a true house of the gathering, where the strands and themes of his narrative congregate to offer hope and a way forward out of the darkness that surrounds.

His writing can clearly be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the death of his brother Kieran, who died from cancer in his early forties. The death of a sibling is so deeply personal that it is akin to the death of the self. The emotional trauma it causes leaves a profound mark on the personality, so that, as Michael says, he has found himself living in “a beyond of death”. He has already had the terrible experience of the death of a person he loved, so that the shock of having cancer intensifies and deepens that first wound. The response of those who have been touched by cancer, the mustering of bravery involved in coming to terms with mortality, with, as Michael phrases it, “the terrible understanding of not being here any more”, has compelled him to seek out and to follow, in the dark, the faltering light of wisdom.

I found Michael’s memoir to be a love poem to Mayo, to its landscape, its heritage, above all to its people. And I see that Michael has described me warmly as “Mayo’s second citizen president”, following on John Moore’s short-lived presidency in 1798! Michael’s battle against the diminishing yoke of cancer is counterpointed by the struggle of our ancestors for the freedom to determine our own destiny, particularly around the time of the Land League. He has told the story of his grandfather, who was imprisoned in Galway Gaol for his political beliefs over a hundred years ago, and whose painful sacrifice has inspired him to endure, for this day.

I was particularly struck by the shining generosity of the women who grace Michael’s life. He acknowledges those women as “*deá-chroí*, good-hearted women”. They are the cancer survivors, Helen, Anna and Ursula, who shared their personal life stories with Michael so that he could make a full recovery. They nourished him with their words, giving him a life-giving transfusion which has enabled Michael to survive. He writes incisively, “Always there are those valorous women

whose strength is that of the true warrior, who take arms against the odds stacked against them, and who fight to the death only as a very last resort...” Ursula, the photographer, has since lost her fight against pancreatic cancer, but her spirit lives on in Michael’s poetry: “I pointed out that Ursula had kept her word: she endured to keep on this side of the river Styx for as long as she was able. As in her photographs of those great trees that had fallen some millions of years before, those traces of her presence were all she had to offer in the twilight days at season’s change, but Ursula had offered all, in love.” That loving mediation by women, particularly in health matters, is a radiant quality which can smooth the way for men to act. There is a vignette at the end of the Mooney chapter, where Valerie, who has suffered breast cancer, is serving Michael his meal. She says, “I’m always at my husband to go to the doctor and have the test done, and he never will. But after he heard you speak about it on the radio, he agreed. We rang the doctor when you had finished, and he has an appointment for Monday morning!”

Finally, I am delighted to have the opportunity to introduce a new Irish voice to the world. While Michael Murphy’s language is steeped in the culture of his native land, his writing takes its place in the wider European canvas of France, Germany and Spain; his is a voice which is born of a modern and changing Ireland, but which also draws from the well of a traditional, Irish heritage, which has reverberated for us down through the centuries. The title *At Five in the Afternoon* is from the poem by the Spanish poet, Federico García Lorca, and refers to “the inevitable ending of a final dance with God, a dance with Death”. The sensibility Michael expresses, his moral and aesthetic responsiveness, is underpinned by an unremitting emphasis on the truth, culminating in his final explanation: “I have told the truth to save my life.” And in that

final chapter he has the young bullfighter, Ismael Cuevas, “climbing the steps of a rainbow *ar shlí na firinne*, on the pathway of truth”, emphasising the redemption that Michael has found in facing the impossible reality of cancer head on, a trustworthy position woven from words that has guaranteed his footing, free from *an foidín mearaí*, the sod of confusion. If there is an overall impression to be gleaned about the way forward out of intractable situations, surely it is about the emphasis that Michael has placed on the primacy of language and on the transcendent, transformative power of words.

His book is about more than male cancer. Michael has drawn on his unique background in psychoanalysis, in the art of constructing television programmes, and on his broadcasting experience as newscaster where the human voice is privileged, to write a beautiful, layered work about the importance of saying, about putting the world of the imagination into words that are true. As he memorably phrases it: “The word is a rose that opens slowly for me, hiding at the heart of its corolla the Latin *praedicare*, to assert or proclaim publicly. This book is a predicate, that which is said of the subject. The way forward I’ve chosen is to predicate upon that earlier noun and base my actions on whatever I shall say, be it wild or barbarous, before the blown petals shall fall.”

Today, I am delighted to herald another golden light in the firmament, which strengthens us on our journey through life. It is shining aloft, defying the darkness of cancer, and illuminates for all of us the way forward and the way home.

Mary Robinson
May 2009

*To Terry, and to all who have been touched by cancer. Out
of the beautiful words that my mother gave me, I have
woven you a wreath, for valour.*

Part One: Origins

I've come to borrow my brother's saying since the doctor diagnosed me with prostate cancer. "And how're you now?" is what Tom says when he answers the phone. Commonplace, you may say, but he's the only one I know who does that. The rueful way he accents the "now" implies his sympathetic understanding of life's predicament, that although matters had been bad previously, the projected outcome will oftentimes be a great deal worse. And yet he's also saying, "Bring it on." For me, that's like the lethal, flourishing, blood-red gesture of a matador: the male equivalent of the tight skirt-strutting, killer-heel clacking, hand through the hair gesticulating, broadest "*Díga me*", that "Say it to me" greeting I so much enjoy hearing and observing in Spain. Such black humour continues the family conversation: "The Murphys of The Mall" advance, swords straight, aiming for the more difficult feat of the *estocada al recibir*, when a man receives the full force of the black bull's last charge.

For the longest time now, I've been bearing in mind the valour of the matador in his costume of lights, facing death in the *corrida* at five in the afternoon. About six months after my next brother, Kieran, died from cancer at forty-two years of age, I was in Innsbruck one sunny Palm Sunday morning,

searching the skyline for the spires of a church in which I could attend mass to pray for the repose of his soul. Although lined with cars, the streets were empty. There was no movement. I became aware of the absence as I walked in the centre of an avenue which seemed, straight as a Roman road, to go on for ever. I turned around, but there was nobody behind me, just a silent kiss from the wind, a stooping down to brush the cold forehead *atque in perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale* with parted lips.

I heard a shuffling sound. It was like hundreds of the softest footfalls, louder, getting louder, marching in unison. I could hear the rat-tat-tat of the snare-drum. Out from a side-street in the distance stepped the eight-wide phalanx of a Tyrolean brass band in lederhosen period costume, row after row of men with red plumes cocked in their hats, the sun glinting off their instruments and multi-coloured banners waving in the breeze. The corps was wheeling around and heading directly up towards me. Wave after wave of musicians were coming, bands from every valley in Austria preceded by their standard-bearers, hundreds of people in marching boots, with white stockings and shirts and velvet Spanish-style boleros.

I moved to the side and reached for my camera. The leader looked me in the eye, pointed over at me with his baton, then hurled it heavenwards where it shattered the sun into stars. As he caught he struck it down, and every brass band began to play. The shock of the noise beat me back against the side of a car. It was awe-inspiring. And I realised that all of these people were making music just for me: there was nobody else to hear this explosion of joy. It was Kie. It was my younger brother Kie, who was saying to me in the trumpeting music of the massed brass bands, "And how're you now?" For certain I knew that this was his way of getting through to me.

Appropriately, the photographs didn't come out. I wasn't

able to focus the camera because I was blinded with grief: the tears wouldn't stop, and my sobbing beat time with the thundering loudness of the music, which was riotous. It burst the banks of the street in a glorious, reverberating, drunken defiance of the dark. The sound of the brass bands was so overwhelming, such an archetypal noise, that I was blasted by what my ancestors must also have heard in a long-distant past, speaking to me now through the vibrancy of this present moment. And the flags were waving, the music was playing, and the men were marching through.

Overlooking it all from the golden whiteness of the highest heavens was Kie, laughing and cheering and wielding his flag in a brilliantly courageous performance, a *faena de muleta* that drew rapturous music from those glittering brass instruments, the white kerchiefs of shirt and stockings undulating before me. Each of those musicians, line after line of them, acknowledged my presence by nodding his head as he passed on, blowing his horn and banging on his drum, and putting the terrorising blackness to flight. The roar of the music was a shouted affirmation that our living continues on, no matter what. The massed ranks just brushed aside the terrible waste that was Kie's death and that any time now could be my death. Just as suddenly they were gone, nothing left but the memories, swirled about by the wind.

On the morning of my father's funeral, Kie and I went into the bank to get some money to buy wellingtons against the long grasses of the graveyard. We were preparing ourselves for that gun-carriage moment of ritual, when his five sons would carry their father's coffin up to the family plot dominated by a monumental Celtic cross, the man's wife walking directly behind leading the band of mourners. And when the bank manager spotted us, he snaked out from his office, buttoning the jacket of his shiny suit. "Ye're welcome home to Castlebar.

It's always nice to see the Murphys of the Mall walking the streets on the right side of the Shannon."

Cork accent. We're the Wexford branch of the Murphys, who emigrated after the 1798 Rebellion, which was put down by the Cork Militia. We escaped into exile at Castletown in Queen's County, from whence my grandfather, the first Thomas Murphy, migrated to Mayo. On the twenty-second of August in that same year of 1798, three gleaming, white angels with massive wingspans descended from heaven disguised as frigates in full sail and appeared out of the sea mist at Kilcummin Strand in the north of Mayo, bearing with them the subversive gifts of liberty, equality and fraternity. A French expeditionary force of eleven hundred men under General Humbert had arrived on his forty-second birthday bringing salvation for all the people. During the "Races of Castlebar," the British occupying forces were routed by my fellow townspeople at Stab-all Hill with French encouragement, and Mayo became the cradle of a short-lived republic under our first president, John Moore. The inscription upon the tombstone over his grave on the Mall in Castlebar says he was of Ashbrook and Moorehall in Mayo, but a Spaniard by birth. That mirror image is a passionate connection I value now more than ever, because then I was the cross bearer, an altar server at the funeral ceremony for his reinterment, and now I too possess a piece of Spanish earth.

Sometimes it can be difficult outside of the psychoanalyst's consulting room not to overhear what a person is really saying. And the bank manager's patronising double entendre, "It's always nice to see the Murphys of the Mall walking the streets . . .", made me recoil, but I could sense Kie's delight in being handed a justification for battle, and he moved closer to me so that we were standing shoulder to shoulder.

"I always like to keep up with the doings of our customers. And of course, we all know Michael from the television."

Kie said nothing, just continued writing on the withdrawal slip, but his elbow was digging into my waist.

“And how is ye’er father?”

“Not too good, actually,” said Kie, writing away.

“Oh . . . And why is he not too good?”

Dad’s pastime was reading cowboy books, which we borrowed for him from the library. And in a personal tribute, Kie raised his head like a sheriff, looked across the counter at this outlaw and gave him both barrels right between the eyes: “He died yesterday.”

The Mall is the linden-lined walkway of fluttering leaves which cuts across the side of a large, circular park in the centre of Castlebar town. It leads from Lord Lucan’s demesne and the British military barracks to Christ Church, the Protestant church. But locals have always referred to the whole of this rich expanse of grassland as the Mall. It’s still surrounded by the massive chestnut trees, their large white candles standing gloriously erect above the spreading branches, which Lucan had planted. It was his cricket pitch: his soldiers and his tenantry played many’s the match there once upon a time. As children we played our own games in the new-mown grass (the dogs involved were Lassie Mellett and Tatters Chambers) of what was our front garden, in those for ever summers when the light barely faded and the towering trees and a necklace of looping iron chains protected us from what was outside.

My father was born in a gracious four-storied building called Burleigh House, which abuts the Mall. The story goes that he didn’t come home one particular night and that he met my grandmother at the doors on her way out to the eight o’clock morning mass – the brasses polished and the washing already drying on the line – as he unsteadily began to clamber up the eight steps to the entrance hall, evidently the worse for drink.

“And what is it this time, Thomas? Twelve hours of snooker in the Forester’s Hall?”

Dad looked up in Granny’s direction: “And Jesus meets his afflicted mother.”

“Thomas,” she reprimanded, “I asked you a question. What were you doing all night?”

Dad gave her one of the lopsided smiles that I’ve associated with Kie, but realise now for the first time where he got it from, and by way of a reply, he said, “Ma’am, I was walking round and round the Mall looking for the house, but I wasn’t able to find it.”

Embracing him in a look, she retorted, “Thrué fo’ ya, Thomáisín, thrué fo’ ya, as Maggie Burke would say,” borrowing language from a neighbour in Ellison Street, to distance herself from the disappointment at her son’s weakness. And she stepped past him on her way down to the Church of the Holy Rosary, tilting her latest Langan’s hat in response to his drunken salute. As no team was bowled out, the match on the Mall ended in a draw. Honours even.

My now frail, eighty-seven-year-old mother was spotted by John Joe out in the rain last week with a bag of groceries from Shane’s in her arms. John Joe is a neighbour from next door, and he holds an emergency key to her hall door in what used to be Granny’s house on her retirement.

“How’re you, Mrs Murphy?”

“Oh, John Joe.” She recognised him. “Tommie hasn’t come home for his tea. He promised me he’d give up the drink. I wonder would he be down in Tansey’s?”

When it was related to her a day or two later what she’d said to John Joe, she chuckled. “Come on! I know I’m bad, but I’m not that bad. Perhaps, if the story were less far-fetched . . . You know that I’d never say anything like that to someone outside of the house.”

She never spoke about her own father, so she did keep her counsel. But there must have been times when keeping silent wasn't easy. Reverting glimpses are beginning to slip out from the damp paper bag that was holding them in for so long. Like Jackie Kennedy, who marvelled that she hadn't gone mad, the wonder is that my mother didn't begin to lose it sooner, in her case as a result of the aftershocks of an explosion that was to shatter the certainties of her comfortable childhood world into smithereens.

There were seven children in my mother's family: the sepia photographs show the girls dressed in the latest flapper fashions, the boys in skinny ties, and, as in my father's upbringing, there were helpers, a housekeeper and a cook to look after them. They had a thriving business in Ballinamore, County Leitrim; to the back, a pub, and in the front, a grocery shop. Rice O'Beirnes owned the first car in Ballinamore, and the family visited Dublin regularly with their children for concerts, the operas and to conduct business; they all ate in the fashionable restaurant, Jammet's. And always there was music: everyone played piano and the violin for sing-songs, and for dancing there were the latest 78s on the wind-up gramophone. Like Granny Murphy in Castlebar, my grandmother in Ballinamore grew up in a hotel, so she was a capable organiser, who made preserves with gathered fruit from the trees and bushes she had planted in the garden, directing operations with jars and huge copper pans in the heat of the kitchen. She grew flowers which the girls carried carefully down the back way to decorate the church: larkspur and foxglove, baby's breath, phlox, bellflowers, gladioli and lilies, sweet pea and chrysanthemums. But the undertow bringing death and destruction, which was set off by the explosion that happened a generation earlier, now hit the family with full force.

My great-grandfather, Charles O'Beirne, was imprisoned in Galway Gaol by the British authorities for giving his public support to a Mayoman, Michael Davitt from Straide, who had founded the National Land League in October 1879, in the hotel across from us on the Mall. This was an organisation of tenant farmers, objecting to the exorbitant rents being charged by the British absentee landlords, who agitated under the slogan "The land of Ireland for the people of Ireland." We've the letters that my great-grandfather wrote home from prison, which have been carefully passed down the generations. They are selfless; full of concerns for his family, for the shop boys and for the business. His was a fight for liberation, for his family and for his neighbours, and he paid the ultimate price. The British broke his health after months of torture on the treadmill. When Charles was returned to his family, he lived for only the shortest time, and the explosion caused by his early death has marked all subsequent generations of the family. His four young sons were left with no father, no direction, and without a proper introduction to the outside world. Charlie, the eldest, had emigrated to America, so the business fell by default on to the shoulders of the second son, my grandfather, Rice O'Beirne, who then became the head of the family. He married Susan McGauran from the Railway Hotel on the other side of the Main Street.

But my grandmother died, and she died of cancer, a disease that lives for ever in our genes. Mama was only forty-eight, and my mother was just twelve, an incalculable loss for such a young girl. This second early death unleashed something terrible for the whole family. My grandfather, Papa, married again almost immediately, but it was a *mésalliance* which foundered; his new wife soon returned to her family home with her baby son. The first family had scattered. At the same time, the O'Beirne family home and the business that had been built up

over generations was repossessed by the Ulster Bank, a neighbour from just three doors down the street, and it was auctioned off. Rice O'Beirne, without a wife, a family or a home, took to the road as a commercial traveller, and for the first time, in his fifties, he also took to the drink. The main reason for the collapse of the family business was the accumulation of individual debts that were run up by the people of Ballinamore and its environs, who were suffering hardship under Britain's Economic War. So for a second time, another generation of the O'Beirne family paid a catastrophic price for Irish freedom. When Mum took the bus home from boarding school in Castlebar on her first school holidays, she was met by her Uncle Charlie, newly returned from America, who took her into his home and who eventually was to pay for her wedding.

My grandpapa's alcoholism is another form of cancer that continues to wither generations of Irish people, because nobody speaks truthfully about the secret which everyone shares. The contagion is like a lighthouse beam that searches out replicas of itself in order to pass on down the generations the blight of the suffering to the family that it causes. My mother had five sons within the space of eight years with a husband who also suffered from that disease, and who broke out occasionally. It's thanks to the enduring lessons of her family history, allied to her intellect, that she had the resources to strike back for the emotional well-being of herself and of her fellow townspeople: it was my mother who brought Al Anon to Castlebar.

They say that Grandpapa died in an asylum in Dublin. He never visited his daughter or his grandchildren in Mayo, but the flowering of those terrible sufferings which tragically left him dispossessed and a prisoner of drink, and those of his father before him in whom they'd fatally taken root, but whose spirit was able to triumph over prison to yield a towering immortality, have seeded in me possibilities of absence and

of presence, a dual heritage which I've only lately begun to examine.

It was a gentle, summer's day in Dublin, bathed in the soft yellow light of Ireland, and we were heading up to the newly opened Dundrum Shopping Centre, passing by the Central Mental Hospital. I was idly wondering in my mind whether my grandpapa had died behind those high walls, out of sight and on his own. I'd never met him, and I don't know where he died or where he's buried. Terry's mobile rang, which he passed over to me.

"Hello – who is this?"

"It's Fiona McGoldrick, Michael. The result of your PSA test has come back – that's one of the blood tests which targets the prostate gland – and the prostate specific antigen is a little raised."

The ivory fist clenched around the haft of the steel blade, held up behind the hooded head.

"There's probably nothing to worry about, but to be sure I'd like you to get in touch with a consultant."

With force he brought it forward . . .

"The surgeon's name is David Mulvin, and can I give you his number?"

. . . and down, so that the blade entered cleanly between two ribs and pierced me to the heart. I pretended to take down the figures, "987 . . .", but my concentration had evaporated.

"Thanks, Fiona – I'll get on to it right away."

I saw the sign for a post office and we pulled up outside it. I escaped from the car, dropping the mobile phone into the gutter. Inside I asked them for a telephone directory to get the number of St Vincent's University Hospital and rang it for an appointment three months hence.

Terry and I didn't speak nor look at each other. It seemed unmannerly somehow to draw attention to the fact that we

were panicked by the shockingly casual nature of what had been set in train. It felt as if my skewered heart were dangling from the end of a bloodied blade, held in the terrifying immediacy of the present moment by a powerful, hooded figure dressed in black, who'd interposed his bulk between the two of us, cleaving us apart. With hindsight, it was a mercy that neither Terry nor I could give any consideration to the massive explosion ahead, when each of us would be blown apart by the reality of male cancer.

While I'm known in Ireland for the thirty-five years I've spent as a broadcaster, my university training both here and in France has been in psychoanalysis. Four days a week I work with clients at my rooms in Dublin 4; Friday is a study day. Nine months before the prostatectomy operation, I had a cancellation one morning in late spring, when the air was crisp and the daffodils were blooming. I took advantage of the break to clear my head of the statements of pain that I'd been listening to intently and fled the practice pursued by others' phantoms to walk down to Donnybrook Fair. I'd buy additions to the salad for lunch: some slices of barbecued chicken, a tub of bean salad and fresh olives from Spain. As I walked back carrying my paper bag, there was a showering down of pink and white confetti in the wind, petals shaken like droplets off the umbrellas of flowering cherries. I was admiring the various trees spreading and weeping, clusters of blooms covering the branches with five petalled flowers in pink, over there thousands of them in white. And I knew it was over. The thought arrived unannounced. I've always valued thoughts, but this one had captured me. The certainty of it was an absolute, so overwhelmingly present that there was no room for doubt. It was over.

One of the trees had almost black leaves fluttering in the sunlight, perhaps an ornamental plum. Petals had stuck to my

navy jacket. Leaves of loss began to bury me, creating a cairn of leaf mould, damp with the spreading desolation. Gerard Manley Hopkins' desolation looking out over St Stephen's Green: "Margaret, are you grieving over golden-grove unleaving . . ." I realised I was listening to the closing cantata of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* playing in my mind: "*Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder, und rufen dir im Grabe zu: ruhe sanft, sanfte ruh . . .*" We sit down in tears and call to you in the grave: sleep softly, soft sleep . . . I questioned whether I'd picked up some unexpressed feelings from the clients I'd been working with earlier, but no, that wasn't the case. Was it Kie's death? My father's death? The knowledge of death continues to inform me, and I deepen into the terrible understanding of not being here any more, particularly as I get older, but it wasn't a perfect match with the hopeless inevitability of what I was feeling, which was a fatigue, an inability to respond to a situation that I seemed to have been overexposed to. The hooded figure had entwined his bony limbs around me in an obscene intimacy, bundling me up into the dank, smothering heaviness of his cloak, which robbed me of presence. His was an exhausting weight to drag around with me whenever I moved, blind and unseen, my skin withdrawing in revulsion from the feel of his touch.

I got back to the practice and I looked up the word in the dictionary to see what I meant. "Over" is a postpositive adjective which means finished, from the Latin *finis*, end, or boundary: to come to an end: the death or the absolute defeat of a person. The word began to access all of the memories which cluster around such a list of concepts and which clamour to be heard like the waving arms I remember from a classroom of children in St Patrick's national school in Castlebar, asking to be freed, "*Bhfuil cead agam dul amach?*" Back then our demand was to be given the time and the space to put as much

of our thoughts and feelings as was possible into speech, a running to and fro with words so that we could be heard. More than all that, we wished to draw from any adult a loving smile of recognition for our wanting, which shyly held back in the words' resonances. Now I see it as a want of being, which makes a space in words for each tiny individual to become present and which has enabled me to be more in spirit than the manifest sum of all my sentences.

When eventually I sat in front of Dr Fiona and told her of the fatigue and the attendant symptoms, I was crying. I told her that something which was off to the side, that I barely saw out of the corner of my eye, that had not even registered yet, would one day take centre stage and threaten me. She listened in silence and then said that she wanted to put me on Zispin, because all the signs of depression were there: deep sadness, difficulty in performing day-to-day tasks, disturbances in sleep and feelings of anxiety. Intellectually I knew the origins of the thought had to lie in the past: there was nothing in the present I was aware of that triggered it, and the future had not yet arrived in all the baroque splendour of its horrifying pageantry. So from out of my memories, is it the fatal Freudian question that life poses for a man of how to deal with the father? Freud had a creative illness about it lasting six years, during which his father died. He concluded a hero is someone who courageously rebels against his father, and overcomes him. Jung's illness also lasted six years, which he referred to as his *Nekiya*, after Ulysses' journey to the Sojourn of the Dead. My odyssey in writing this book about male cancer seems to be, to overcome both death and my father. Such a banal prospect fills me with reluctance, because I shouldn't have to wait out those six years, if miserly Death were to parcel out the time for me. And I already know the answer to that question about the father: you dry your tears, and you sit

to the table as though nothing had happened and stoically continue to smile. You are not to have your say. But does that impassive effacement lead on to the present moment where I break down and blubber in front of a kindly doctor, mourning something that didn't have a voice in the past, or that was unheard, not recognised, so that now it returns to haunt, stalking me like the ghost in Hamlet?

One afternoon in mid-January 2007, I was lying on my back looking at the two hundred and ten ceiling tiles in room 312 of St Vincent's Private Hospital in Dublin, my grasp on reality distorted by the injections of morphine from the pump that I was pressing for the pain. It's a room twelve paces by five, which has a panoramic view over Elm Park golf course. I wore earphones to block out the suffering of having no protection against the outside, concentrated on the Canadian musician Glenn Gould interpreting Johann Sebastian Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 1. At the beginning of most manuscripts by Bach, you can read the ejaculation that I was using over and over, "JJ": *Jesu Juva*, Jesus help me. Gould's mother was a music teacher like mine, and she taught him to play all of Book 1 by the time that he was ten, each note articulated clearly like the vowels of good speech so that one didn't obscure another. I had the thought that this series of preludes and fugues encompasses all you ever need to know about music. The revelation was that all of music is worked out here in these forty-eight short pieces, which is the *opus summum* of the keyboard. It's truly a book about everything, and I entered into it like a newborn soul enters into the universe.

God knocked on the door of the room, introduced himself and walked in to have a chat: "I'm cold and uncaring, so I'll only be a moment." I was amazed to meet him after so long an absence – his or mine? It's a jigsaw piece I keep coming across in the most unlikely of places. The first thing I'd say is

that he's not at all as I'd expected him to be. He's very like the unconscious: playful, punning, insistent and overwhelmingly present, painting word pictures with a great sense of humour. Intellectually, I did have some idea of him being in the language of which we are dispossessed: "*Dia Dhuit*. Hello – God be with you." "*Dia 's Muire Dhuit*. Hello yourself – God and Mary be with you." An Irish formation of the unconscious deep in our psyche, a language based on being in which there's no verb "to have." My Gaelic ancestors worshipped the Supreme Being who speaks in the human voice: the English word "god" comes from a root word related to the Old Irish "*guth*." Those Celts were so overwhelmed by the wonder of spoken expression that they shared their naming with all of the Germanic peoples, which was felt to push up beyond our threshold of experience. In the course of a conversation in which I felt grateful, I was given to understand that he'd be guided by me, that I was responsible. He also said, "Michael, we got the entire prostate; I assure you all of it was removed. However, there was one square tumour about the size of my thumbnail on the left-hand side, and that was attached."

It was out before I could help it: "*Ciotógach*, cack-handed! I've always led with my left hand in a right-handed world."

He roared laughing, and said, "Put it there." It's the first time that I shook hands *ciothóg* to *ciothóg*.

I can hear God speak through the music of Bach and also through the human presence of Glenn Gould's background but audible singing at the keyboard. I can see Bach seated at his desk, dipping his quill pen in brown ink and signing off on his manuscripts with the letters SDG: *Soli Deo Gloria*, for the glory of God alone. In the rapturous way that Glenn Gould responds, humming along to the music that Bach composed, I can hear him affirm, "I believe in Bach's God," and his faith touches me deeply. All there is really is music.

I remember studying in a stuffy classroom at St Mary's Priory in Tallaght in the days when I was a Dominican student for the priesthood. It was a metaphysics class on Thomism, and the lecturer, Fr McLoughlin, had posed the question, "What is of the highest importance?" to which the answer was self-evidently "being." I knew it instinctively. But the two or three students he pounced on seemed bewildered and gave answers which had no relevance to what he'd asked. In exasperation, the lecturer began at the back wall of the class and worked his way up student by student, row by row, to the front, but nobody knew the answer. With the tension building, I wondered whether there was a conspiracy afoot of which I was unaware to deliberately frustrate this lecturer, Fr McLoughlin, a very brilliant man. We were privileged to be in his masterclass, so why treat him like a fool? Fear stepped out of the darkness and bullied me as the questioning went on, taunting me to doubt myself, so I leafed through my notes to make sure that I had the external comfort of an answer written down. Bernard Mercier didn't have any idea; Pius Horgan gave the wrong answer. I was called after the order's founder, and my name in religion was Br Dominic.

"Br Dominic?" he called out, and his face was red from exertion and anxiety.

"Esse est supremus: being is supreme."

The lecturer gestured Gallic fashion, a shrug of the shoulders with both hands in the air, and sank down wearily into his chair, a long lock of white hair obscuring his spectacles. What d'you expect? That's it – *ça y est*. That was it: being is the only answer to everything.

"Feelin' That I Got It Made" is the title of a song of mine that won first prize at the Castlebar International Song Contest. I was in my early twenties, and the cheerful, ragtime music presented clearly how I felt about life beginning to

blossom. My youngest brother Fintan was in the group that sang the winning entry: “Ain’t got nothin’ to do but die, don’t give a damn if life is passin’ me by . . .” As La Salle advanced upon the massive audience and launched into a key change for the final chorus, the enormous Royal Ballroom took off, sensing that this would be a first for Castlebar, and it began to soar. Ian McGarry, the RTÉ producer, was the drummer that night, and he pounded out the triple figure signalling the *rallentando* before the end. Liam Lyons from Westport snapped the photograph of Kie and me in bow ties and dress suits sitting side by side. There was just the dulled hush, and it was pleasant. We could see beyond the blue, unclouded horizon, and anxiousness dropped away like sandbags. The group on stage began to turn in slow motion for a final kick out to the left, and we saw Fintan singing his heart out, playing the guitar, but the only sound was the breath of God, a tendency. Mum and Dad were in New York that autumn, a gift for their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. People around us were standing on chairs, cheering and clapping, hoarse that a victory was coming home. A wind of considerable force became a roaring hurricane, and we were enveloped in the thunderous ovation that broke overhead and rolled towards the stage for La Salle’s final gesture, guitar hand raised, emphasising the triumph of a win. There was pandemonium. Shay Healy, one of the judges, gave a thumbs up as I walked on to the stage. Mr Howick, from Guinness’s, recognising shock, reminded me to smile as he handed over the cheque. “I got everything goin’ for me, I got life, I got love, and I gotta be free, I’m feelin’ that I got it made!” Castlebar had won the contest. The applause went on and on for about twenty-five, maybe thirty minutes. Back then it was easy to shine from the highest heavens within the generous, supportive embrace of a gathering of my own people.

AT FIVE IN THE AFTERNOON

But now that I'm in my sixties, imprisoned by the thought that it's over following the doctor's deadly diagnosis of prostate cancer: "And, how're you *now*?"