

May 2011

## Memories on a Breeze

### *The heaven of childhood haunts and disturbs our hearts forever*

Summer days and childhood memories! When they come together, they twist our hearts without warning. The remembered smells, sights, feel of summer so often strike, with painful intensity, at the tender, forgotten and sleeping magic of those special years. There is a pathos, a poignancy and the strangest sadness in those moments of memories ‘that bless and burn’, as my mother used to say.

This year I feel unusually vulnerable to the mixture of feelings within me as another summer blesses us, and as flashes of my childhood return. You may write it off as sentimentality but, in recent weeks, something within me opened up when I heard, within the space of one afternoon, Eva Cassidy singing Fields of Gold, Frank Sinatra’s The Summer Wind and Val Doonican’s The Special Years. It is never easy to put a name to the emotions that are stirred when that indelible and invisible grain of our tender psyche is touched again.

Another such occasion occurred some weeks ago at a small family reunion. Swaying bluebells were all over the wooded areas near the Lancashire pub where my sister, my brother and I had a meal. Maybe because we were reminiscing about when we were small, a memory, or something deeper than a memory – more like a vivid, subliminal experience – came flooding back. When I saw those shy bluebells under the trees, I was instantly transported to another place – to Rathmore, in the south west of Ireland. At that moment I could remember exactly where I was standing, over 60 years ago! It was near St Joseph’s convent, across the road from our little shop. I was barefoot.

There was an afternoon sun slanting down the roof of the church. My mother was standing talking to a neighbour in front of our small shop window. They were leaning on some makeshift metal bars that my father had erected to protect the glass from the shoppers’ bicycles, often thrown carelessly against it. (What they usually wanted, on their way home from a long shift at the new Fry-Cadbury’s chocolate factory, was a packet of Sweet Aftons and a copy of the weekly Kerryman.) I was closing the green gate with the awkward, rusty handle. My sister and I were holding bunches of bluebells that we had picked in ‘the nuns’ field’, for Our Lady’s altar. I remember thinking, ‘They’re looking at us, they’re smiling at us and they’re talking about us.’ Is it the light that makes a moment unforgettable?

I mentioned that I was barefoot. We used to shed our shoes on the first warm day in May. There is a timeless thrill that fills me when I remember, and almost physically experience again, that first day of summer when we ‘went barefoot’. To feel the warm texture of the road tar, the dry sensation of the little wooden bridge, the coolness of the stone flag outside our door, the soft, wet grass, the sharp gravel, the oozing mud between our toes in the shallow stream that ran through the four green fields behind our house! How is it that my memories of touch are stronger through my feet than through my hands? Strong and gentle as the touch of the human hand is, maybe there is a sensitivity in our feet that carries the more lasting memory.

But back to our mini-family reunion, as we were saying our goodbyes, we noticed a hawthorn bush and a lavender tree growing in the car park. In the soft air of that Sunday afternoon, their aroma was strong. ‘Do you remember John Sullivan’s field?’ my brother asked, as we inhaled the smells that stirred the memories of our hearts. Not only did we remember that sloping field, but, in a moment of pure gift, we



were transported back there – and back to all the fields of our childhood. It was as though that particular experience, brought on now by breathing in the scent-filled air, had lain untouched and undiminished within us. Maybe this is what Gerard Manley Hopkins meant when he wrote about ‘The deepest freshness deep down things’.

Once or twice during this May and June, as though suddenly released from captivity, all kinds of forces have rushed into my consciousness – bright and vivid images from the distant past. Perhaps it has something to do with my recent transition, moving from Yorkshire to Lancashire. (There are, to be sure, winter ones too. But for now, let me stay with summer.) I keep recalling a poem I have always loved. Fern Hill by Dylan Thomas still brings an elusive poignancy to my whole being. It allows me to remember with gratitude the times I revelled in being young and new, especially during one long summer morning of childhood:

... It was all shining: it was Adam and maiden.  
The sky gathered again  
And the sun grew round that very day.  
So it must have been after the birth of  
The simple light in the first spinning place ...

Before she died, I used to ask my mother what was I like when I was small. She invariably said that I was always full of joy, wanting to celebrate everything, forever looking for reasons to break the routine of things. She said my world was a playground. I was a hero; I was a rebel – and I was full of wonder. Much too slowly, each dawn arrived, wrapped in another mystery, another adventure. My every breath, she smiled, was drawn in excitement.

Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs  
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green;  
The night above the dingle starry;  
Time let me hail and climb  
Golden in the heydays of his eyes.

My mother said I was always laughing, and always dreaming, and always wanting more than my head or heart or arms could hold. Effortlessly I moved between the real and the really real. Looking back now, I must have been living in some kind of Sacramental world. Everything was now, and everything was forever.

And honoured among wagons, I was prince of the apple towns,  
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and leaves  
Trail with daisies and barley down the rivers of the windfall light.

My mother also believed that I was one with nature then. I clung to the high branches of the swaying trees when the Atlantic summer winds blew magic around our house in the Valley of the Rushes. There was music everywhere for my bare and dancing feet. There was a green bough in my heart and the singing bird came to it every day. As Jesus himself said, this must surely be what heaven is about. But, I sometimes wonder now, what if that green bough withers? What if that childhood laugh and dance and music grows too silent, too soon, within us? What if the bluebells no longer send us catapulting inward to our magic places? This is what worried the farmer-poet Patrick Kavanagh when he felt that his adult sophistication had muted the distant drumbeats that still echoed somewhere inside him.

Upon a bank I sat, child made seer  
Of one small primrose flowering in my mind.  
Better than wealth it is, said I, to find  
One small page of Truth’s manuscript made clear.....  
The years that pass like tired soldiers nevermore have given  
Moments to see wonders in the grass.

