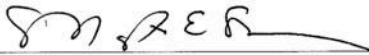
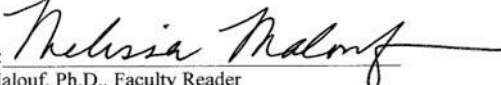



THE FAMILY BUSINESS
A Genealogy and Mythology of
My Family at War

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We tell ourselves stories in order to live, or to justify taking lives, even our own, by violence or by numbness and the failure to live; tell ourselves stories that save us and stories that are the quicksand in which we thrash and the well in which we drown, stories of justification, of accursedness, of luck and star-crossed love, or versions clad in the cynicism that is at times a very elegant garment. Sometimes the story collapses, and it demands that we recognize we've been lost, or terrible, or ridiculous, or just stuck; sometimes change arrives like an ambulance or a supply drop. Not a few stories are sinking ships, and many of us go down with these ships even when the lifeboats are bobbing all around us.

Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby*



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Dink Suddaby, who put me at ease in the moments before my admissions interview, will always be my first memory of Duke University, and my first experience of the warmth and genuine caring to be found in the Graduate Liberal Studies community. She and Margaret Dennis were always just a phone call away; ready to deploy their extensive knowledge or their problem-solving skills for us anxious and bewildered newbies.

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In that first semester I also wandered unawares into Dr. Thomas Pfau's *Moral Dilemmas in the European Novel*, where my rusty close reading skills were vigorously exercised. In *The*

Melancholy of Art, Dr. Pfau demonstrated his skill as an academic alchemist when he combined critical elements of art, science, philosophy, literature, and religion into a treasure of a course. And he introduced us to W. G. Sebald's writing; for that I am eternally grateful.

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singular joy in itself. Margaret's Unconventional Memoir course opened me up to the possibilities of pursuing a creative nonfiction thesis as my final project. Much of the work here was developed and sharpened in that course. I am grateful for her skills as a sensitive reader and a disciplined editor, but most importantly as a kind and generous friend.

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I salute you all.

BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION

*Why should I blame her that she filled my days
With misery, or that she would of late
Have taught to ignorant men most violent ways,
Or hurled the little streets upon the great . . .*

W.B. Yeats, "No Second Troy"

War is on my mind. I gravitate toward war in words and images. Any words. Any images. Any war. I look at several boxes of Afghan War photographs from over a century ago and recognize the terrain from recent snapshots made by friends and family. I look at images from the Civil War: ours, and Ireland's, and Russia's. I think about the two World Wars, about Korea, and Vietnam. I think about how effortlessly we turn all of this grief and suffering and destruction into tidy, prepackaged war bundles in our minds. I leave the reading room at the Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library several hours later and still none the wiser. I feel anxious. I don't know what I'm looking for in these various collections of war and catastrophe. Perhaps I'll find the one image, the one description, or the one experience that will unravel the knot of paradox at the center of war. Perhaps not.

At home, surrounded by mementos and images of my own family at war, I go over the digital collections again. I click on Benjamin Lowy's Iraq | Perspectives online exhibit¹ and sit back and watch. In the Photographer's Note that accompanies the exhibit, Lowy explains how this extraordinary collection of images came to be:

Confronted by a level of violence so high that walking on the streets to photograph was tantamount to suicidal behavior, I found myself confined to working with American soldiers, spending most of my time going on various missions in armored Humvees. My only view of Iraq was through inches-thick bulletproof windows.²

What Lowy saw through that bulletproof glass —“a fragment of Iraqi daily life taken by a transient passenger in a Humvee”—is rather mundane in terms of war photography; *how* he saw

¹ Benjamin Lowy online exhibit housed at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822395003>

² *Ibid.*

it is remarkable. Lowy himself admits the images are not intimate, but distant and detached. His intention, he tells us is

to create an “aesthetic bridge” that circumvent[s] the usual depiction of the war, and surmount[s] public apathy to conventional news imagery. I hope that viewers are compelled to question the meaning of these devastating events and their long-lasting effects on Americans and Iraqis.³

I stumble over the idea that Lowy is attempting to create a bridge by concentrating on a barrier. It is this paradox that the viewer collides with at each turn of the page or click of the mouse. The photographs advise us to keep our distance, to remain detached, while demanding that we engage with the reality that we *cannot* engage with Iraq. I feel as if Lowy wants more than our eyes to appreciate his work, or our hearts and minds to empathize with the Iraqi people. He wants our intellect to absorb the ramifications of this war.



Untitled image from Iraq|Perspectives, Benjamin Lowy Photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

³ *Ibid.*

The US military refers to deployments to the Middle East and Southwest Asia as “a trip to the Sandbox.” I recall my two deployments to Saudi Arabia and my own view through the window of a truck or a Humvee, traveling the few desert miles between where I slept and where I worked. The buildings, the roads, the uniforms; all were an exhaustive monochrome.

And so the vibrant colors in the image above are even more dazzling when one considers how the soldier’s eye has grown accustomed to dull khaki and tan. For a moment, the colors are enough. I savor the brilliant white of the dress, echoed by the two smaller splashes of white in the upstairs window.

The broken upstairs window. My gaze shifts down to the uninhabited shop, the deserted street, the empty dress. Is there more? It is impossible to tell. All of Iraq could be as desolate as this street scene. Or it could be a kaleidoscopic carnival of color and life, just beyond the frame. The point is hammered home, again and again, image after image. We don’t know what’s out there. We *can’t* know what’s out there.

I view the exhibit several times. The randomness of the compositions disturbs me. I see Lowy attempting to exercise what limited control he has over what his lens will see. But he’s not in control. In a very real sense, Uncle Sam is in the driver’s seat, choosing the route, deciding the speed and direction of the vehicle, dictating the content of the window’s frame. I think about the ubiquitous presence of Uncle Sam in my own life, first as a military child and now as a veteran.



James Montgomery Flagg's 1916 depiction of Uncle Sam. Public Domain.

But which Uncle Sam? The benevolent uncle? The crazy uncle? The deeply mythologized caricature—tall and slender, white-haired and white-bearded, with the steely eyes and the colorful, patriotic clothes? It doesn't seem to matter now. I've inherited his DNA. I'm part of his family, and he is part of mine.



Untitled image from Iraq|Perspectives Exhibit, Benjamin Lowy Photographs, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University.

This is the image I keep coming back to—an ageless Iraqi woman and her carton of eggs. She appears well dressed beneath her black cloak. A patterned, peach colored *shayla* covers her head and gathers itself gracefully around her neck. She is balancing the eggs in her left hand; an attractive leather handbag dangles from her left wrist. Her right hand hangs at her side. She is looking directly into the camera lens, but I'm not completely certain that she can see inside the vehicle. Perhaps she's looking at her own reflection in the glass. The African man in blue scrubs with a small child on his shoulders temporarily distracts me from the woman and her gaze. I

wonder about his presence here. Are there many Africans in Iraq? This question brings about a chastening admission: even after being at war for a decade, I know very little about this country and its people. I speculate about the market, closely framed by the deep-set Humvee window, whose steep angle further obscures the view. How large is the street market? Do the market vendors sell more than fruit and eggs? I can only speculate, because the window will not allow me to see any more.

Lowy says that in these images “the windows represent a barrier that impedes dialogue.” By allowing that hard metal frame to intrude into every image, Lowy forces us to think about the greater intrusions of war: the soldiers in the Humvee, the Humvee on the streets of Baghdad, the transport planes overhead delivering more soldiers, the generals surveying their maps, the politicians pontificating from thousands of miles away. Wendell Berry comes to mind: “The trouble was a familiar one: too much power, too little knowledge.” It’s all there in that obtrusive frame.

And we cannot choose which side of the frame to be on. We are not allowed the luxury of being passive observers, despite the illusion of distance and detachment outside the window. Lowy has placed us firmly inside the vehicle with him and the invisible, yet omnipresent, soldiers. Our soldiers. Yours and mine. The cavernous interior of Uncle Sam’s Humvee has room for us all.

Back outside the window, the woman with her fragile carton of eggs is still standing there on the streets of Abu Ghraib. I know that in the past the woman stood next to my mother on the streets of London during the Blitz, and on the streets of Berlin as my father’s B-17 flew overhead. The woman also stands on the streets of Kabul and Kandahar, Damascus and Tehran. My nephews have passed her in their own Humvees.

And still she stands.

I am about to tell a part of my family’s story of war. I wonder who will tell hers.

BECOMING THE FAMILY *SEANCHAI***I have old women's secrets now . . .**For none alive today**Can know the stories that we know**Or say the things we say.*

W.B. Yeats, "The Secrets of the Old"

Shortly after my father died in December 1994, my seventy-five-year old mother called me into her dimly lit bedroom. She opened the top left-hand drawer of her dresser and began rummaging past layers of stockings and slippers until she reached the bottom of the drawer. She pulled out a blue flannel Seagram's pouch and emptied its contents onto her bed. Out spilled several of Dad's military medals—National Defense, Good Conduct, an Air Medal and two WWII campaign medals—followed by a pair of stainless steel dog tags still on their chains, and finally his aerial gunner's wings. I picked up the dog tags and rubbed my fingers across the embossed letters that spelled my father's name. My mother went back to the drawer, pushed aside a few brassieres, and pulled out a dark blue rectangular box slightly larger than my open hand. "This is it," she whispered as she placed the box in my palm.

It was sturdy enough, mass produced but well made. The box was covered in a tightly woven dyed linen, which looked remarkably like fine leather. The top was decorated with two painted wavy gold lines, punctuated with a handsome fleur de lis pattern at each of the four corners. Perfectly centered, also in gold, in a bold modern font, were the words

DISTINGUISHED**FLYING CROSS**

The box hinged open at the top. The upper half was lined with pale gold silk, but my eyes were drawn to the worn, frayed, and dirty ribbon of textured cloth pinned to the buttery gold

* A storyteller, keeper of lore, repository of family knowledge, one who tells ancient tales and recites genealogies. Pronounced shawn-a-kee.

velvet base of the box. Just below the ribbon lay the medal itself: a flat, bronze cross with a four-bladed propeller cast in bas relief over the cross, and behind it a perfect square of sunburst rays. The back of the medal was smooth, burnished, and surprisingly cold to the touch. “I want you to keep these now,” my mother said, gesturing toward my father’s decorations spread out on the bed. It was not a request. It was a bequeathing.

HIRAETH:

THE FIRST STORY*

*Move most gently if move you must**In this lonely place.*

Yeats, "Long-Legged Fly"

Exile and diaspora are the inherent conditions of the two warrior tribes I was born into. Exile. The sound of the English word on my tongue is quick and hard, just like the look of the word on the page. Exile. Cut off. Alone. Solitary. It is a much less hopeful word than the Greek *diaspora*, which sounds luxuriant and looks seductively Latin to me, but carries within its soft letters its own sharp and exquisite pain. Diaspora. Scattering seeds with a broken heart. Putting down severed roots in new soil.

The roots of my mother's tribe are ancient and deep, intricately knotted and tangled in the labyrinth of Irish history. But despite this rich connection to people and place, within a single generation every child of my grandfather and grandmother would leave Ireland forever. Previous generations had fled because of war, rebellion, or famine. My mother and her seven brothers and sisters were economic exiles, a generation of wandering laborers fleeing the cumulative damage of the Great Depression on the tender new Irish Free State.

The Irish word for exile is *deoraíocht**, from the root word *deora*, which can be translated as "tears." And so the Irish exile, the *deoraí*, is "the one with tears." In my mother's family, Maisie was the first to go, sailing from Cobh Harbour aboard the SS President Roosevelt. She arrived in New York on 2 November 1928 and found work as a domestic servant, married another Irish exile in Hell's Kitchen and raised eleven children. Josie, the second-born, boarded a ship for a much shorter voyage to Liverpool and then on to Manchester by train. She also married an Irish lad and had three children. In short succession the rest of the Kavanagh siblings

* Pronounced *heer-eye-eth*

* Pronounced *joe-ree-ock*

crossed the Irish Sea. Nick, Babs, Jimmy, and Peg ended up in London. Sean chose Manchester, and Eamonn eventually went the farthest, sailing to Australia after the war, never seeing his family again.

My father left his Irish-American family in Pittsburgh and grafted himself into a 20th century tribe of nomadic warriors. It is through him that I trace my lineage as a military child. We military children spend our young lives circling the periphery of what appears to us to be a firm and stable civilian world. We savor the repetitive joy of traveling and discovering new places, yet we know that our joy will be tempered by habitual uprootedness, by dozens of small tears in the fabric of belonging. I grew up as a “third culture kid”—living in the spaces in between countries and cultures and kin—one of Uncle Sam’s many child wanderers, or (as we affectionately call ourselves) military brats. Within this tribe of military brats are several clans. Army brats and Navy juniors. Marine Corps and Coast Guard brats. And my own clan of Air Force brats. As much as we feel born and bred into our military family, we are at best foster children. Uncle Sam disowns us when we come of age. Stripped of our precious government ID cards we effectively become stateless, an invisible tribe in permanent exile.

Exile and diaspora each have their own evocative story. But it is the Welsh word *hiraeth* that truly captures the longing for an elusive home that military brats often speak of.

The Welsh word *hiraeth* has no equivalent in English. It often translates as “homesickness,” but the actual concept is far more complex. It incorporates an aspect of impossibility: the pining for a home, a person, a figure, even a national history that may never have actually existed. To feel *hiraeth* is to experience a deep sense of incompleteness tinged with longing.⁴

I first experienced this sense of *hiraeth* as a young nineteen-year-old still living with my parents in England after my father retired from the Air Force. It was early in 1977. My grandfather had fallen ill in Ireland and my cousin Liz and I were being sent to care for him. I

⁴ Introduction to “Hiraeth, Saudade, and the Concept of Longing,” accessed 9 March 2014, http://www.smith.edu/kahninstitute/shortterm_projects_hiraeth.php

caught the train from Cambridge to Liz's home in Manchester, then Liz and I took the ferry from Holyhead in North Wales to Dun Laoghaire, just outside Dublin. From there we decided to save a bit of money and hitchhike across the country to Charleville in County Cork where Granddad lived. We were picked up on the Naas Road by a lorry driver from Ulster who offered us a dirty weekend in Belfast—which we politely refused— before dropping us off in Limerick, just 25 miles from Granddad's home.

Jack and Elizabeth Kavanagh had been rehoused by the government in the early 1950s after the tenement house they had lived in since the 1920s was demolished, along with the other seven houses in the poor, squalid side street known as O'Gorman's Square. The occupants of the square fetched water from a shared well and emptied their sewage into a central cesspit.



Undated and unattributed photograph of O'Gorman's Square, Charleville. From clipping in family album.

The new house at Holy Cross Place was a vast improvement. It had an indoor toilet, a sink, a cast-iron stove, and two bedrooms upstairs. Downstairs there was a small sitting room on the left (which had recently become Granddad's bedroom so that, at 92, he didn't have to climb the stairs) and on the right was the kitchen and front room. Through the front room and to the left

was the sink, where pots and pans, dishes, and faces were washed. There was running cold water and electricity, and a small back garden sufficient for my grandmother's geese and hens.

My grandmother had passed away in 1968, and the geese and hens left soon after. Granddad had been living alone in the house for almost ten years. There weren't enough possessions for the house to be cluttered, but it was well lived-in. The furniture was simple: two beds, an upholstered wing chair, two wooden chairs, a bench, and a rough kitchen table. There were the obligatory pictures of the Pope, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and John F. Kennedy. One kitchen wall was covered with photographs of all the Kavanagh grandchildren and great-grandchildren collected over the years, forming a mosaic of young Irish-American faces. Peering out from that kitchen wall, full of the hope and optimism of America, the faces offered a visual record of my Irish family's personal diaspora.



Aunt Mabel and my cousin Peter Kavanagh feeding the hens at Holy Cross Place. 1950s.

The times we had spent at Granddad's house as children had been full of curiosity and adventure. I remember the story my mother used to tell of the summer when one of Aunt Maisie's sons had come over from New York. On his first morning at Granddad's he came down the stairs and asked for the toaster. My grandmother handed him a fork and a slice of bread and pointed him toward the fire. I knew the way we did things at Granddad's was peculiar, but I never thought of it as primitive. Until now.

By the time Liz and I arrived in Charleville, Granddad had been moved to hospital in Limerick. We settled in to the house at 77 Holy Cross Place, expecting Granddad to come home from hospital any day. Liz and I had very little money between us, and what little we had was usually spent on food. The cast-iron stove was the heart of the house. It kept us warm and fed us, as long as we fed it. To keep the stove fueled we would sometimes spend the mornings walking along the railway line picking up loose bits of coal that had fallen off the freight trains. It was usually a meager harvest. The stove doubled as our dryer on those days when the soft Irish weather precluded hanging our clothes on the line in the back garden. One especially rainy day Liz had placed our bras and knickers in the stove to dry and promptly forgot about them. As the kitchen filled with smoke she pulled the flaming underwear out with a stick and ran into the front garden, waving the bras and panties in an attempt to extinguish them. Curtains twitched across the street and on either side of us. By the next morning all of Charleville had been told, "them Kavanagh girls are burning their bras!"

If we wanted a bath we had to boil the kettle on the stove, drag the tin tub inside from the back garden and fill it, one kettleful at a time. I quickly learned how well one could bathe in an inch of warm water. A few weeks into our sojourn the tin tub sprung a leak and we were forced to exchange a few packs of cigarettes for a warm bath at Mrs. Nagle's house next door. She graciously offered a half-filled tub of water between us about once every two weeks, and dutifully informed all the shopkeepers on Main Street about our bathing schedule. Liz and I

would be told by the newsagent or the baker or the barmaid that we were having a bath on Thursday night.

Life went on, with Granddad still in hospital and our money running short. Liz and I tried to find work in town. The Golden Vale cheese factory hired us for a day before the workers went on strike. We picked up an odd job here and there, painting tree trunks to protect against insect infestations, and helping a local woman with laundry. Liz, at 20, was a pragmatist. She had been a member of the trades union movement from the time she left school at 16, working in Cusson's soap factory in Manchester and developing a sense of social justice and worker solidarity. She spent many evenings, over several pints of good Irish stout, trying to explain dialectical materialism to me. All I could grasp of this Marxist theory, as Liz explained it, was that it had something to do with striking matches on a bit of sandpaper. One evening we were enjoying a pint at the bar in Cronin's Hotel when we found ourselves in the midst of a rather chaotic meeting of "scabs" who were attempting to break the strike at the Golden Vale cheese factory. I think Liz demonstrated the matches on sandpaper for them before we left, rather hurriedly.

We spent our days hitchhiking or catching the bus up to Limerick to see Granddad in hospital, and we spent our evenings entertaining ourselves. Granddad didn't own a television, but there was a small transistor radio in the kitchen, which we tuned in to Radio Luxembourg to listen to the Top 20 countdown every Sunday night. Most evenings would be spent this way, either at home or in someone's sitting room, or at one of Charleville's many pubs, sharing stories and songs. I listened. I watched the faces, and I searched for the connections between us. I was familiar with the tradition, having heard my mother and my aunts and uncles passing on family tales in this way. But I didn't feel I had any stories of my own worth telling. That would change before too long.

Late one evening, Liz and I heard a knock at the door. I went to answer it and found a rather bedraggled, elderly lady standing there. She was wearing a crumpled hat, torn hose, and a dirty twill overcoat with a faded plaid pattern that carried just a hint of having once been pink.

—*Does Elizabeth Kavanagh live here?* she demanded.

Liz had been named after our grandmother, so I wasn't sure which Elizabeth Kavanagh the woman was inquiring after. In that moment's hesitation, the woman pushed past me with her small suitcase and went into the kitchen where Liz was seated at the table.

—*Who are you?* Liz asked.

—*None of your business. Fetch me a cup of tea, and be quick about it!*

Liz and I looked at each other with disbelief. We hadn't a clue who this woman was. Liz asked her again for her name and where she had come from. The woman gave no answer. She plopped herself down on the upholstered chair with a cushion and demanded a cup of tea again. With sugar.

—*We don't have any sugar,* said Liz.

—*Then you'd better get some,* said the woman.

—*And some jam for my toast as well.*

Liz wasn't having any of this. Having grown up in a working-class family of nine children, she was ready to put her negotiating skills to work. She grabbed the woman's suitcase, opened the front door, and sent the suitcase flying over the garden wall.

—*And you can follow it!* she shouted at the woman.

But the woman didn't move.

Now, I have to stop here and point out that a few months before coming to Ireland I had experienced a "religious awakening" of the sort that perhaps many Americans take for granted, but which I, a cradle Catholic, had taken deeply to heart. One of the tenets of my newly found faith was a certainty of, no longer a mere belief in, the existence of ministering angels. I pulled Liz aside and shared this tidbit of information with her.

—*I think this lady is an angel.*

—*What! Angels don't swear, Bridg, and they don't demand cups of tea and cigarettes!*

—Keep your voice down, Lizzie. I really think she's an angel. And if you throw her out, something bad will happen to us.

Liz was far from convinced, but she agreed to let the woman stay the night. I retrieved the angel's suitcase from the front garden as she made herself comfortable in Granddad's room downstairs. The following morning Liz and I again questioned the woman. Who was she? Where did she come from? Did she know our grandparents? Our parents? Why had she come? And how long was she going to stay? She told us nothing. All we got from her was a lecture, directed primarily at Liz, about minding our manners and treating the elderly with respect. We had barely enough money to feed ourselves, let alone a rude, belligerent old woman. But I clung doggedly to the belief that she had been sent to us for some grand metaphysical purpose. We met most of the woman's demands, but after three days our tempers were beginning to wear thin. Liz attempted to throw her out of the house a few more times, but to no avail. And then one morning our bellicose angel disappeared.

Over the next few weeks we talked about our strange visitor now and again, with Liz expressing her skepticism of the woman's heavenly origins in rough and colorful language. I was still on the side of the angels, and the dream I shared with Liz one morning was harder for her to dismiss.

It was late April and Liz and I were sleeping in Granddad's bed in the downstairs bedroom. I woke to find Granddad standing at the side of the bed, wrapped in a white shroud. He stood looking over us for a moment, then turned and walked out the door. I told Liz about the dream the following morning. Not long after, our cousin Regina knocked on the door. She had come to tell us that Granddad had passed away just hours earlier.

A few days after my grandfather's funeral I stood amid the 5th century ruins of Ardpark Abbey in the Ballyhoura mountains, a gentle summer rain falling all around and my heart besieged by the beauty and the loss. My mother's country overwhelmed me. I couldn't fathom its primordial history, its solidity, and its permanence. But I knew that here in Ireland magical things

would happen to me. Ordinary, crazy old ladies would be transformed into angels, sent to warn me and guide me. Dreams would come to life. Words would become concrete and tangible. History would flood over me as my own memories. I bore a physical resemblance to the people, reminding me that I was home. There were the familiar features of aunts, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers hidden within my own skin, and I could feel the power of the generations behind me. I was aching to get closer, to feel the strength of the land seep into my bones, and to make its stories my own. But the promise and the responsibility of belonging were too much for me to bear. My father's legacy of transience, born of thirty-odd years of military service, pulled me in another direction.

THE FAMILY BUSINESS

*I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies . . .*

Yeats, "A Coat"

War is the family business. Some families practice medicine, some practice law. Other families pass down a cherished plot of farmland; still others pass on a place behind a beloved store counter with the family name proudly displayed on the window front. My family goes to war, generation after generation.

My maternal grandfather, Jack Kavanagh, was an insurgent. He fought against the British forces occupying his blessed Ireland, and then fought against his former comrades in a bitter civil war. Less than 20 years later he watched his Irish sons don those same hated British uniforms to fight with the Allies in World War II. My paternal grandfather, Patrick McGill, a brand new first generation American, served in the US Army in World War I. He died in an automobile accident in 1939, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, but my grandmother Margaret McGill (née Quigley) was still alive to watch five of her six sons enlist. My uncle John, the odd one out, also tried to enlist but was medically disqualified. I have the original newspaper clipping from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette with individual photographs of the five McGill brothers.



The McGill Brothers: Edward, Daniel, Joseph, Patrick, and Thomas.

I remember seeing this newspaper clipping as a child, but I can't recall thinking there was anything remarkable about so many brothers in uniform together. Our family photo albums were full of pictures of men, and one or two women, in uniform. They still are.

My dad, Daniel, was the baby, but as a sergeant in the Army Air Forces he outranked all of his brothers. Uncle Pat, the eldest son, was just a private first class. Uncle Joe and Uncle Tut were both corporals, and Uncle Ed was a seaman first class. All five brothers came home from the war. I would like to say it was the luck of the Irish, but then I remember the five Sullivan brothers who were assigned to the USS Juneau when it was sunk by Japanese torpedoes on 13 November 1942.



Official Navy photograph of the Sullivan brothers aboard the newly commissioned USS Juneau, 14 February 1942.

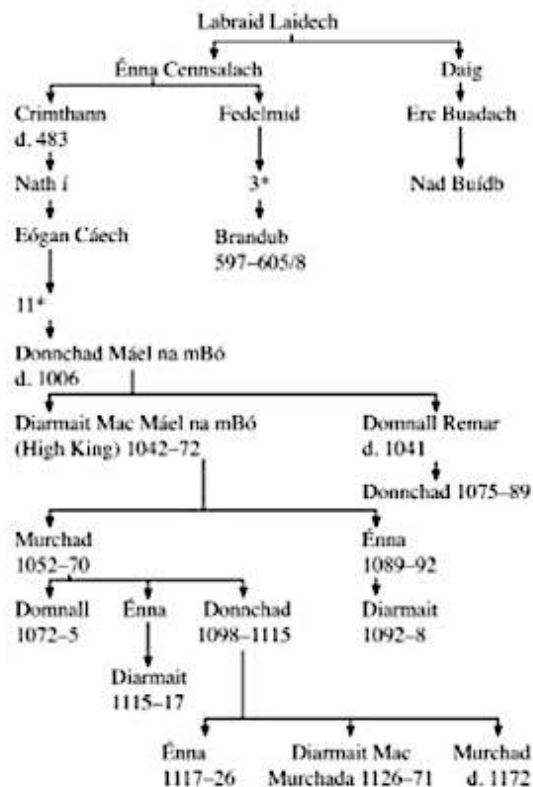
I look at these five Irish-American faces, each only nine months removed from death, and marvel at the sheer chance and utter randomness of the ferocity of war. The five Sullivan brothers perished in one single shudder of violent energy, while the five McGill brothers collectively survived dozens of combat missions against German and Japanese forces on the

ground, at sea, and in the air. Grandma McGill watched five of her sons march off to war and watched them all return home, rejoin the civilian world and carry on with their lives. I don't know why my father didn't last long back on Civvie Street in Pittsburgh. He didn't talk much about his life or his family. Or maybe I didn't listen. Within a year of being demobilized he was back in uniform trading his aerial gunner's seat in the tail end of a B-17 for the same piece of real estate in a B-29. Dad was no longer in the Army though. President Truman had established the Air Force as a separate branch of the military in 1947. With new planes and new uniforms, Dad was heading south to Hunter Army Airfield in Savannah, Georgia.

The warriors on my mother's side of the family are much more ancient. My mother told tales about the Irish chieftains and kings in our family, all the way back to Brian Boru, the great High King of Ireland who was killed fighting the Danes at the Battle of Clontarf in 1014. My grandfather spoke with pride of Art Mac Murrough Kavanagh, king of Leinster from 1375 until 1416. Art Mac Murrough Kavanagh caused a great deal of trouble for the English, obliging Richard II to cross the Irish Sea not once but twice in a futile attempt to quell Art's many rebellions. King Richard's second battle with Art in 1399 cost him his crown as Richard's cousin Henry Bolingbroke took advantage of the king's absence and installed himself as Henry IV.

The connection to a glorious Gaelic past of kings and chieftains was emphatic, despite the absence of any written proof within the family. The Kavanagh history was passed down through story and song, the actual genealogy often patchy and gap-ridden. In the family stories there were four hundred years of silence between Brian Boru and Art Mac Murrough Kavanagh, and another four hundred years of nameless and faceless ancestors between King Art and Jack Kavanagh, my grandfather. My mother passed on what she knew, what had been passed down to her, and the stories had satisfied me as a child. Three great warriors in one family were plenty. And I had no doubt that my grandfather was a great warrior, carrying on the perpetual fight against the accursed English invaders almost 800 years after they first set foot in Ireland.

As I began to research the patches and gaps, I found that the missing names between Brian Boru and Art Mac Murrough Kavanagh were hidden in plain sight. The oral tradition that survived in my family is only a threadbare remnant of a substantial and very well documented lineage going back to the 10th century and a chieftain named Donnchad Maél na mBó:



The Uí Cennselaig Kings of Leinster up to 1171, extracted from Furlong's Diarmat: King of Leinster.

The Annals of the Four Masters, a chronicle of Irish history purporting to record events from the arrival of the first men in Ireland on through the 17th century, opens with the entry for 2958 BCE⁵

Forty days before the Deluge, Ceasair came to Ireland with fifty girls and three men; Bith, Ladhra, and Fintain, their names. Ladhra died at Ard Ladhrann, and from him it is named. He was the first that died in Ireland.

⁵ 2242 AM. The annals use a dating system that refers to Anno Mundi, the “year of the world.” To get a rough estimate of standard chronology, take 5200 BCE minus the AM date; 2242 AM is therefore 2958 BCE

It is followed shortly after by this entry for 2670 BCE:

In this year the first battle was fought in Ireland; i.e. Cical Grigenchosach, son of Goll, son of Garbh, of the Fomorians, and his mother, came into Ireland, eight hundred in number, so that a battle was fought between them and Parthalon's people at Sleamhnai Magh Ithe, where the Fomorians were defeated by Parthalon, so that they were all slain. This is called the battle of Magh Ithe.

If my math is correct, there were nearly 300 years of peace in Ireland between these two chronicle entries. And then the Irish took to fighting. There are thousands of entries recording a spectrum of violence from cattle raids to hostage-takings, blindings to beheadings, and wife-stealings to all out wars. The third entry in the year 1072 CE is a lament for the death of Diarmaid Mac Maél na mBó, one of my earliest recorded ancestors:

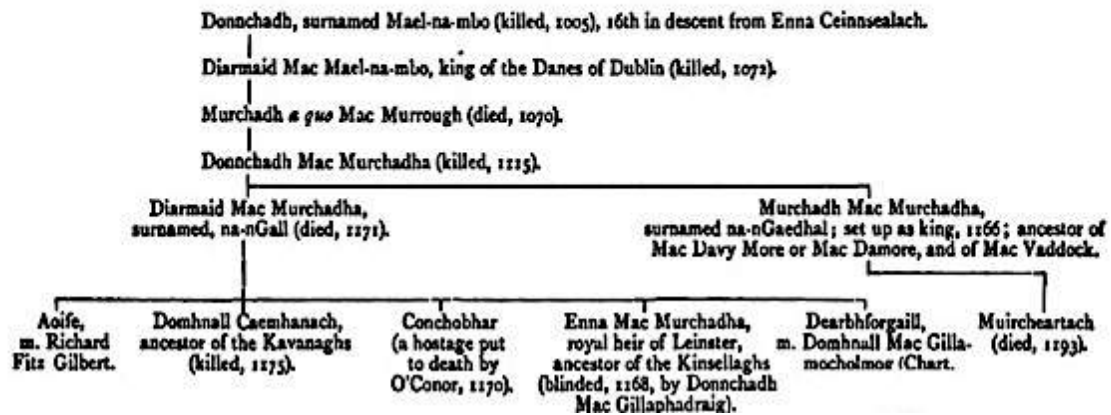
Two, seven times ten above one thousand,
 From the birth of Christ is reckoned,
 To this year, in which Diarmaid,
 First man in Leinster, fell.
 Diarmaid, of the ruddy-coloured aspect,
 A king who maintained the standard of war,
 Whose death brought scarcity of peace,
 The loss of the heroes of Ladhrann, with their ships.
 Comely youths were cut down there,
 Together with the head of Claire and Cualann.
 It caused in the breeze a noise not pleasant,
 The loss of the King of Riada of great valour.
 Until at Muillenn-Chul was slain
 A brave chieftain of a strong fortress,
 Until the furious fire-brand fell by treachery,
 They found no hero who dared with him contend.
 It is a red wound through my firm heart;
 For the host from Caindruim it was not just
 To destroy our noble chief they had no right,
 It has quenched their spirit greatly,
 Diarmaid of the laughing teeth under violent sorrow;
 There is not on account of his death banquet or feast;
 There will not be peace, there will not be armistice.⁶

⁶ *Annals of the Four Masters*, Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) Edition, M1072.3, p 903.

Diarmaid of the laughing teeth begat a few sons before his death, and they in turn did their own begetting until a man named Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, anglicized as Dermot Mac Murrough, was born in 1110 CE, and the archetypal trouble of all modern Irish troubles began.

Dermot, in the common practice of medieval Ireland, was fostered out as a child. When his father, his older brother, a cousin, and then a second brother died in succession, Dermot found himself elected king of Leinster and Ui Cennselaig (Kinsella) at the age of 16. He would reign as king of Leinster, king of Ui Cennselaig, and king of the Norse for 46 years, and as dramatic and clichéd as the construction is, Dermot would change the course of Irish history.

PEDIGREE OF DERMOT MAC MURROUGH.



Extracted from The Song of Dermot and the Earl, a manuscript dating to early 1200s.

The short version of this very convoluted story goes something like this: Dermot, as a very young chieftain, had something to prove to the other neighboring chieftains. He staged a few cattle raids, destroyed a few castles, blinded a few rivals, and even burned St. Brigid's holy abbey in Kildare. Dermot created alliances with other chieftains, and with the Norse settlers in Dublin and Waterford. These alliances were fluid; yesterday's ally would often become tomorrow's enemy.

After several decades of raids and counter-raids, in 1167 Dermot found himself on the losing end of an alliance between the High King, O Connor, and the king of Breifné, O Rourke. O Rourke's wife, Dervorgilla ended up in Dermot's bed and Dermot ended up deposed of his lands and his kingships and forced into exile. He traveled through Wales, England, and France and arrived at Henry II's court, where he asked for Henry II's assistance in reclaiming his land. Henry II gave permission for Dermot to gather an army, and Dermot swept up a number of wayward knights and barons between France and Wales. Along with several of the Welsh princess Nesta's offspring (including the bastard grandson of Henry I) Dermot managed to enlist Richard de Clare, the 2nd Earl of Pembroke (known as Strongbow) in his cause, promising him lands in Ireland and his daughter Aoife* in marriage.

Over the course of two years, Dermot's mercenary armies crossed over to Ireland and fought alongside him to regain his lands. In 1170, Strongbow and an army of a thousand or more landed at Waterford and ravaged the town. Immediately after the victory at Waterford, Strongbow and Aoife were indeed married. The event was recorded contemporaneously by Dermot's scribe, Morice Regan, and several years afterward by Giraldus Cambrensis, the nephew of one of the Cambro-Norman knights who helped fight for Dermot's lands. Both scribes devoted a single line to the occasion, which can be accurately summed up as: Strongbow married Aoife in Waterford.

But perhaps the most striking record of the marriage, and one filled to the brim with the raw ingredients of powerful myth-making, is the massive painting by the Irish painter Daniel Maclise in 1854, nearly 700 years after the event. The original painting is sixteen feet by ten feet, so obviously this small photograph cannot communicate the concentrated drama being played out on the canvas. The work was commissioned as part of a series of fresco paintings highlighting great moments in British history, meant to adorn the walls of the new Houses of Parliament. Two of Maclise's paintings depicting the battles of Waterloo and Trafalgar hang in

* Pronounced *ee-fa*

the Royal Gallery, but for various reasons, Maclise declined the commission for this painting and it eventually found its way back to Ireland where it hangs in the National Gallery in Dublin.



Marriage of Strongbow and Aoife. Daniel Maclise. National Gallery of Ireland. Dermot is seen behind and to the right of his daughter, Aoife.

The belligerent Irish nationalist in me half-wishes that such a subversive painting as this had found its way onto the walls of the English seat of government. To me, the painting is much more a lament of the loss of Gaelic Ireland than a celebration of Norman conquest. Dermot and the Norman knights are in shadow; Aoife, her bridesmaids, and the defeated Irish are bathed in otherworldly light. Examining the detail of the lone harpist, head bowed over the broken strings, my imagination is filled with the romantic heartache of my mother reciting the lyrics of Thomas Moore, the 19th century Irish poet:



The Harp that once through Tara's halls
The soul of Music shed,
Now hangs as mute on Tara's walls
As if that soul were fled.
So sleeps the pride of former days,
So glory's thrill is o'er,
And hearts, that once beat high for praise,
Now feel that pulse no more.

No more to chiefs and ladies bright
The harp of Tara swells:
The chord alone, that breaks at night,
Its tale of ruin tells.
Thus Freedom now so seldom wakes,
The only throb she gives,
Is when some heart indignant breaks,
To show that still she lives.⁷

Dermot Mac Murrough died less than two years after he gave his daughter Aoife in marriage to Strongbow. He didn't live to see the birth of his grandchild from that marriage, Isabel de Clare. I don't know if he would have been as surprised as I was to find that the

⁷ James W. Flannery, *Dear Harp of My Country: The Irish Melodies of Thomas Moore* Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1997), 147.

monarchs of Scotland since Robert the Bruce, and the monarchs of England since Henry IV, as well as five of Henry VIII's six queen consorts (Anne of Cleves being the sole exception) would all trace their lineage through her, and thus through dear old Dermot.⁸

In his 2006 study, *Diarmait: King of Leinster*, Nicholas Furlong notes that the reputation of Dermot suffered greatly over the years after his death. By the time the four Franciscan monks compiled the entries for the Annals of the Four Masters in the 1600s, Dermot's name was hated and reviled.

Diarmaid Mac Murchadha, King of Leinster, by whom a trembling sod was made of all Ireland, —after having brought over the Saxons, after having done extensive injuries to the Irish, after plundering and burning many churches, as Ceanannus, Cluain-Iraird, &c.,—died before the end of a year after this plundering, of an insufferable and unknown disease; for he became putrid while living, through the miracle of God, Colum-Cille, and Finnen, and the other saints of Ireland, whose churches he had profaned and burned some time before; and he died at Fearnamor, without making a will, without penance, without the body of Christ, without unction, as his evil deeds deserved.⁹

Furlong believes that the character of Dermot made a convenient scapegoat for Ireland's many failed rebellions against the new Norman overlords and the subsequent defection of Ireland's ruling families. This would explain the sentiment expressed by Rose Kavanagh, a 19th century Irish nationalist poet, when she says

Many a time (in my very young days) it was a source of deep delight and even of consolation to me, to read how constantly my [Kavanagh] namesakes were up in arms for their country. In a measure, this used to make up for the pain it was to recollect Dermot Mac Murrrough.¹⁰

And perhaps it helps to explain why the name and exploits of poor Dermot, a warring chieftain aspiring to become High King of Ireland and going about the family business, ceased to be spoken of at all by one small branch of his many descendants.

⁸ *The Complete Peerage of England, Scotland, Ireland, Great Britain and the United Kingdom, Extant, Extinct or Dormant*, G.E. Cokayne et. al. ed. (Gloucester, U.K.: Alan Sutton Publishing, 2000).

⁹ *Annals of the Four Masters* Entry 1171.4, p 1183.

¹⁰ Rose Kavanagh, "Rose Kavanagh. Some Scraps from Her Life and Letters" *The Irish Monthly*, Vol 19, No. 220 (Oct 1891), 512-521.

LUKE FINNEGAN AND MY TWIN

*We had fed the heart on fantasies,
the heart's grown brutal from the fare;
More substance in our enmities
Than in our love . . .*

Yeats, "The Stare's Nest by My Window"

I clicked on the link and the photograph opened on my computer screen. I gasped. What was I doing in this photograph? Why was I dressed like that? Who were those other people, the man and woman beside me? I processed those thoughts in a few milliseconds before recognizing that, of course, it wasn't me in the photo. It couldn't be me. The photo was taken sometime before 1920. And yet . . .



Left to right: Mary Finnegan, Luke Finnegan, Bridget Finnegan.

The similarities between this woman and myself are uncanny. I showed the photo to my husband. He said the woman on the right was my twin. I sent it to my brother and sisters. They all agreed that the likeness was remarkable. My best friend from high school noticed that the mystery woman and I shared the exact same odd, asymmetrical hairline.



My nephew Robert discovered another copy of the photo, this one with a full caption, on an Irish genealogical website. “Aunt Bebe,” he wrote, “you won’t believe this. Her name is Bridget.”

Bridget Finnegan. On the night of Sunday, 31 March 1901 the small island of Ireland—politically connected to Great Britain by the Act of Union of 1801—conducted a census. The eight-year old Bridget was counted as the fourth of Patrick and Anne Finnegan’s eight children. The Finnegan family was one of only three households in the townland of Gortduff, about six

miles northeast of Dunmore, near the border where County Galway meets County Roscommon. Gortduff is the anglicized name of the Gaelic place name Gort dubh, roughly translated as “the black enclosed field.” Looking at Gortduff today via Google Earth one does indeed find a clearly delineated verdant farmland with patches of deeper, darker soil scattered across it. Over a hundred years past 1901 there are still only three or four households there.

CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1901.
(Five Examples of the mode of filling up this Form are given on the other side.)

FORM A. No. 100 Form A.

RETURNS of the MEMBERS of this FAMILY and their VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c. who slept or abode in this House on the night of **SUNDAY, the 31st of MARCH, 1901.**

No.	NAME AND SURNAME		RELATION TO HEAD OF FAMILY	MARRIAGE CONDITION	SEX	AGE	BIRTH	EDUCATION	RELIGION	MARRIAGE	MARRIAGE DATE	MARRIAGE PLACE	MARRIAGE DURATION	MARRIAGE OCCASION	MARRIAGE NOTES	MARRIAGE REFERENCE
	Given Name	Surname														
1	Edward	Finnigan	Head	Married	M	40	1861	Common	Protestant	Married	1885	Co. Galway	10 years	1st time	Co. Galway	
2	Ann	Finnigan	Wife	Married	F	40	1861	Common	Protestant	Married	1885	Co. Galway	10 years	1st time	Co. Galway	
3	Michael	Finnigan	Son	Single	M	16	1885	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
4	Mary	Finnigan	Daughter	Single	F	15	1886	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
5	Luke	Finnigan	Son	Single	M	11	1890	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
6	Bridget	Finnigan	Daughter	Single	F	8	1893	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
7	Patrick	Finnigan	Son	Single	M	6	1895	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
8	Ann	Finnigan	Daughter	Single	F	4	1897	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
9	Thomas	Finnigan	Son	Single	M	2	1899	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
10	Sarah	Finnigan	Daughter	Single	F	9	1892	Common	Protestant	Single		Co. Galway				
11																
12																
13																
14																
15																

I hereby certify, as required by the Act 62 Vic., cap. 6, s. 6 (1), that the foregoing Returns are correct, according to the best of my knowledge and belief.

I believe the foregoing to be a true Return.

James Miller, Const. (Inspector of Enumerators.)

Pat. Finnigan, (Inspector of Enumerators.)

1901 Census form for the Finnegan family of Gortduff retrieved from National Archives of Ireland.¹¹

In the 1911 census, Michael, Mary, and Luke have left home and a 77-year-old widow, Mary Cruise, is listed as the family’s servant. I found Bridget’s brother Luke far from home, listed as a Royal Irish Constabulary officer, 24 years old and single, assigned to the Stirrupstown barracks in Killalon, County Meath. At some point between the census taken on the night of

¹¹ <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai000820563/>

Sunday, 2 April 1911 and the night of 20 January 1920, Constable Luke Finnegan made his way to a town called Thurles in County Tipperary.

The old Irish saying that from a prince to a peasant takes five generations was certainly proved true in one particular Irish family. Over 700 years after King Dermot Mac Murrough's death, the 1911 census records one of Dermot's descendants, John Kavanagh, known as Jack, the same age as Luke, living on Quarry Street in Thurles, married to Lizzie and raising three children, Mary, Johanna, and Edward.

CENSUS OF IRELAND, 1911.
Five Examples of the mode of filling up this Table are given on the other side.

FORM A.
No. of Form B. 158

RETURN of the MEMBERS of this FAMILY and their VISITORS, BOARDERS, SERVANTS, &c. who slept or were in this House on the night of SUNDAY, the 2nd of APRIL, 1911.

NAME AND BIRTHDAY	RELATION to Head of Family	MARRIAGE CONDITION	EDUCATION	AGE AND SEX		DATE IMMIGRATION OR NATURALIZATION	PARTICULARS AS TO RESIDENCE			MARRIAGE BOND	OTHER LANGUAGE	REMARKS
				Male	Female		Whether "British," "Irish," or "Foreign."	Whether "British," "Irish," or "Foreign."	Whether "British," "Irish," or "Foreign."			
1. John Kavanagh	Head	Married	None	74		Irish	Thurles	5	3	3		
2. Lizzie	Wife	Married	None	57		Irish	Thurles					
3. Mary	Daughter	Single	None	5		Irish	Thurles					
4. Johanna	Daughter	Single	None	3		Irish	Thurles					
5. Edward	Son	Single	None	1		Irish	Thurles					

I solemnly swear, as required by the Act 33 Edw. VII, and 1 Geo. V., cap. 31, that the foregoing Return is correct, according to the best of my knowledge and belief.

John Kavanagh, Signature of Head of Family

1911 census form for the Kavanaghs of Thurles retrieved from National Archives of Ireland.¹²

The next child to be born to Jack and Lizzie Kavanagh would be Nicholas, followed by Bridget. Edward died just a few months before the next child, Margaret, was born in November 1919. Margaret. My mother. Then would come James and Sean. The baby Eamonn would be born in 1927 after the family moved from Thurles to Charleville.

¹² <http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/reels/nai003337709/>

Jack Kavanagh was deeply involved in the Gaelic Athletic Association, which had been founded at Hayes Hotel in Thurles in 1884, just two years before he was born. The GAA served as a cultural arm of the Irish nationalist movement, and although not every GAA athlete was committed to the political cause of a free Ireland, there were enough connections between the GAA and more militant factions, such as the Irish Republican Brotherhood, to make its activities worth watching by the British forces in Ireland. Jack was a pretty good hurler in his day. He made the All-Ireland team for Tipperary in 1908 and 1909, when he was 22 years old.



Family Records: Jack Kavanagh is in the center row, second from the left.

In January 1920, Jack, now 32, was serving as a member of the Irish Volunteers in A Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Mid-Tipperary Brigade. I found his service record in a handwritten roster scanned in to the Military Archives of the Óglaigh na hÉireann, the Irish Defence Forces. Granddad's is the last name on the page in the third column, five spaces below the name of his first cousin, Thomas Dowd, who was the witness at his wedding, and whom we visited with as

children when we took Granddad back to Thurles in our big American car. (Thomas Dowd also happens to be the singer Boy George's grandfather, but that's another story, and another genealogy altogether.)

Boy. Rolls - A Company 1st Bn. 2nd Liff. Bde.

TAB: A 2nd Lt. 21/12/21

25th Critical Date. Par. No. Leary. Leary. (23)

William Brady Capt. ✓	Michl. Prodan ✓	Michl. Gorman ✓
James Collins ✓	Paddy Prodan (2 nd Lieut) ✓	Michl. Ryan ✓
James Grece X ✓	James Coppinger ✓	Thos. Harold ✓
Thos. Keogh ✓	Thomas Morrissey ✓	Phil Lyons ✓
Patrick Boyle ✓	James Power ✓	John Quinlan ✓
Pat Dowd ✓	William Ryan ✓	Michl. Quinlan ✓
Michl. Dowd ✓	William Barrow ✓	X Wm. Butler no 22777?
James Maher ✓	John Keane ✓	Patrick Butler ✓
Joseph Purcell ✓	John Healy ✓	Stephen Gray ✓
Michl. Carroll ✓	Michl. Egan ✓	Thos. Arnold ✓
James Dea ✓	Thos. Griffin ✓	Wm. Arnold ✓
Thos. Daly ✓	John Ryan ✓	Edward Loughman ✓
Thomas Woney ✓	Joseph Evans ✓	Michl. Loughman ✓
Martin Boyle ✓	Thomas Ryan ✓	James Loughman ✓
Maurice Gleeson ✓	Patrick Ryan ✓	(Edward Ryan) ✓
William McCormack ✓	Patrick Loughman ✓	Martin Drew ✓
Philip Egan ✓	Michl. Swan ✓	Thos. Dowd ✓
William Bond ✓	Michl. Cleary ✓	Dennis Warren ✓
James Brennan ✓	James McLoughney ✓	Harry Mc Bill ✓
Patrick Kiemen ✓	James London ✓	Peter Mc Manis ✓
Patrick McGuine ✓	John Cleary ✓	Thomas Ryan ✓
Patrick Nugent ✓	Mark Evans ✓	John Kavanagh ✓

P. T. O. 22

Commandant James Leary's handwritten roster of A Co., 1st Bn., 2nd Mid-Tipperary Bde.

The family stories about my Aunt Maisie also originate from around this time. The first-born child, then in her early teens, was often dispatched to smuggle food and drink to her father and other IRA men who were in hiding from the British forces and the RIC. When my mother told these stories about her older sister, she always emphasized the danger Granddad was in and the bravery of Maisie to venture out into the countryside now swarming with angry and heavily armed Black and Tans.



Raids and searches by the Black and Tans in Thurles, in North Tipperary, Ireland, 1921. From the A. E. Bell Collection. Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images.

The IRA was fighting a guerrilla war, an insurgency, in and around Thurles. RIC police officers were routinely targeted for assassination and their barracks firebombed. As I researched the story of the photograph of my lookalike, Bridget Finnegan, I discovered that the connection between my family and the Finnegans was not through Bridget, but through her older brother, Luke:

On Tuesday 20th January 1920, around 10.15pm, Constable Finnegan was making his way home from the police barracks in Thurles to his home on The Mall. As he approached his front door he was fired on by three men in fawn overcoats who had been standing some 10-15 yards from his house, the street lamp having been extinguished. Shot in the stomach, he staggered home crying " Oh Mary, I'm shot!" to his wife whose screams could be heard throughout the street. As he collapsed at his door some neighbours came to his assistance. He said again "Mary, I am done. What will you and the babies do?"¹³


I wondered whether there was any record of who had shot and killed Luke Finnegan. What if my grandfather had been one of the three men in fawn overcoats waiting in the dark to murder the young constable? I found my way through a maze of recently digitized files in the Irish Military

¹³ "Royal Irish Constabulary Forum Constable Finnegan 65234" <http://irishgenealogyqueries.yuku.com/topic/722/Constable-Luke-Finnegan-65234>

Archives and read through dozens of IRA witness statements. None mentioned the names of the three assassins. Then I found the lengthy statement of James Leahy, the commandant of my grandfather's brigade:

DUPLICATE

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY 1913-21 BUIO STAIRÉ MILEATA 1913-21 NO. W.S. 1454
--

KOINN  COSANTA.

BUREAU OF MILITARY HISTORY, 1913-21.
STATEMENT BY WITNESS.
DOCUMENT NO. W.S. 1454.

Witness
James Leahy,
8, McDonagh Street,
Nenagh,
Co. Tipperary.

Identity.
Commandant, No. 2 (Mid) Tipperary Brigade.

Subject,
Irish Volunteers, Irish Republican Brotherhood
and Sinn Féin activities, Thurles, Co. Tipperary,
1914 - July, 1921.

Conditions, if any, Stipulated by Witness.
Nil.

File No. S. 790

Form B.S.M. 2

Finnegan was compiling a list of men whom he suspected of being involved in the recent attacks on the R.I.C. barracks. I decided it was time to put Constable Finnegan out of action.

On the night of 20th January 1921, Jerry Ryan, Mick Small and John McCarthy (Goorty) and myself, all armed with revolvers, watched for Constable Finnegan in the vicinity of his own home in the Mall. He was returning from the barracks at about 10 o'clock and was about 10 yards from his house when we fired at him. He was badly wounded and died the following morning.

Later that night the R.I.C. and military ran amok in the town. They fired shots at random and went through the streets discharging shots through the doors and windows of the houses and business places of Sinn Fein supporters. On the following

Extract from James Leahy witness statement. The year listed as 1921 here is later corrected to 1920.

I scoured the handwritten roster of A Company, 1st Battalion, to see if Jerry Ryan, Mick Small, and John McCarthy were in Granddad's unit. Jerry Ryan and Mick Small were serving above Company level as commander and vice-commander of the 1st Battalion, directly in my grandfather's chain of command.

Luke Finnegan's murder triggered reprisals by the RIC and the British forces stationed in Thurles. IRA men were shot in their beds, followed by more RIC officers being shot in the streets. My grandfather may have pulled the trigger on one of the many retaliatory killings. He may have firebombed RIC barracks, or executed informants. He may have been labeled a terrorist.

Chancing upon this image of Luke Finnegan—and finding my own reflection there beside him—conjures up notions of how many other stories lie trapped within such random images. Old photographs, like civil wars, are only romantic and bloodless in a cloistered imagination. Scratch the surface and the violence and havoc break through.

OUT OF IRELAND

Out of Ireland have we come.

Great hatred, little room,

Maimed us at the start

I carry from my mother's womb

A fanatic heart.

Yeats, "Remorse for Intemperate Speech"

After the brief civil war in Ireland between the Free Staters and the Republicans, Jack and Elizabeth Kavanagh moved from Thurles in Tipperary to Charleville in Cork around 1925. Jack found work as a cattle drover while Elizabeth raised the children as best she could in the cramped tenement house in O'Gorman's Square. It was here that the last Kavanagh child, Eamonn, was born in 1927. A year later, Maisie would be in New York and, by 1935, four of the eight Kavanagh siblings were in London. Nicholas, Babs, Margaret, and Jimmy each found their way to 6 Warwick Avenue where they rented rooms from a woman they called Auntie Derkes.



The Kavanagh siblings in Charleville: Bridget (Babs), Sean, and Margaret (Peg). Seated are James (Jimmy), Granddad Jack, and Nicholas (Nick). Not pictured: Mary (Maisie), Johanna (Josie) and Eamonn.

My mother Margaret was still a teenager when her older brother, Nick, found work for her as a maid for the Baroness Catherine d'Erlanger. Baron Frederic d'Erlanger, a banker, was also an accomplished composer, with his operas being performed at Covent Garden and in opera houses across Europe and the United States. In a side note, Auntie Babs worked for Sir Lennox Berkeley, also a famous composer. The Berkeleys moved to 8 Warwick Avenue in 1947. Oddly enough, the Berkeleys trace their lineage back to Robert Fitzhardinge, who in 1167 hosted none other than Dermot Mac Murrough at Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire. But, back to the other aristocrats.

The Baroness d'Erlanger was a mainstay of London society and entertained constantly at the mansion at 24 Rutland Gate, which the Baron had occupied since 1899. The house at Rutland Gate was 14,000 square feet of opulence. The family also owned a townhouse in Piccadilly, which once belonged to Lord Byron.



Magazine articles describing Baroness d'Erlanger's Piccadilly townhouse.

After growing up in the crowded and primitive conditions in O’Gorman’s Square, Margaret must have been elated when she saw her new workplace. I recall how her eyes would sparkle with delight when she told me stories about the baroness’s magnificent clothes and jewelry, or her luxurious baths and perfumes.



24 Rutland Gate, Knightsbridge. Baron d’Erlanger remained here until his death in 1943. Public domain photograph from English Heritage Survey of London, Volume 45, Knightsbridge, Plate 74c.

Nick took a great deal of interest in Margaret’s work at the d’Erlangers, and asked her each week what she had done, who she had seen coming and going, who was at dinner, and whether she’d heard any gossip from the other servants. My mother claimed that it wasn’t until years later that she figured out she had been an accidental spy for Nick’s efforts as an intelligence officer for the IRA in London.

This all took place before 1939 and the outbreak of World War II. Like his father, Nick was an Irish nationalist, a Fianna Fáil and a de Valera supporter. But he was not as insular and closed-minded as many in Ireland were at that time. He recognized the threat that Hitler posed,

and hoped that de Valera would join with the Allies. After waiting several months to see if his own country would join in the war, he suspended his IRA service and enlisted in the Royal Navy.



Nicholas Kavanagh, British Royal Navy, and his younger brother Sean, British Army. Jimmy also served in the British Army but I have yet to locate a photograph of him in uniform.

By the end of the war, over 25,000 men from the south of Ireland joined over 26,000 from the north and donned British military uniforms. Irish citizens were not subject to conscription, as they had been in WWI. Those that served did so voluntarily. Two of Nick's younger brothers, Jimmy and Sean, both enlisted in the British Army. Eamonn was still at home in Ireland, being only twelve when the war broke out. So, just like the McGill family, all but one of the Kavanagh boys fought in WWII.

Meanwhile, back on Warwick Avenue, my mother was pregnant with her first child. Patricia Elizabeth Crilly was born on Margaret's 20th birthday, 13 November 1939, at St. Mary's Hospital in Paddington. Patsy would soon be evacuated from London, like so many other

children, spending the war years in a stranger's home with other evacuees. But it would not be before the first German bombs began to fall on London.



Map generated from data at Bomb Sight (www.bombsight.org version 1.0) showing bombs dropped during Blitz. Red ovals show location of 6 Warwick Avenue in relation to Nancy Mitford's home at 12 Blomfield Road.

The novelist Nancy Mitford was living just around the corner from 6 Warwick Avenue during the war. She describes in a letter to her mother on 12 September 1940 one of the early bombing raids:

We are catching it here all right as they are gunning for Paddington . . . 2 pm the house next door got an incendiary and caught fire so I (in my night dress) put the children into an eiderdown, got a taxi and put them to bed at Zella's [her former governess]. Came back here, having been nearly blown out of the cab when Fitzjohns Avenue went, and shot at by the home guard on the way for not stopping. Then we had a rare pasting here - five houses in Portsdown Road just vanished into smoke, two bombs in Warwick Avenue, one in Blomfield and three in Harrow Road . . . I don't at all advise you to come to London, it is not very agreeable I assure you.¹⁴

¹⁴ Harold Acton, *Nancy Mitford: The Biography Edited from Nancy Mitford's Letters* (London: Gibson Square Books, 2009), 51.

Paddington, along with the rest of London, was indeed catching everything the Luftwaffe was dropping on it. London was bombed relentlessly in the 267 days between 7 September 1940 and 21 May 1941. At the start of the bombing campaign, the city endured 57 consecutive nights of air raids.

This is what those 267 days worth of bombings looks like:



Map generated from data at Bomb Sight (www.bombsight.org version 1.0) showing cumulative results of 267 days of bombing on Greater London.

My mother and her older sister Babs, spent the entire five and a half years of the war surrounded by enormous, industrial-scale destruction. Tens of thousands of Londoners died, millions of buildings were damaged or destroyed. But the stories my mother passed on were not focused on the devastation of this great city, but on the exhilaration of being young and alive and acutely aware of the absurdity of it all. Lara Feigel, writing in *The Love-Charm of Bombs*, her fascinating profile of five writers in London during the war, quotes author Graham Greene describing this exhilaration

The nightly routine of sirens, barrage, the probing raider, the unmistakable engine ('Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?'), the bomb-bursts moving nearer and then moving away, hold one like a love-charm.¹⁵

One anecdote my mother loved to repeat illustrates the humor and absurdity perfectly. Mom, Auntie Babs, and Auntie Derkes were at home at 6 Warwick Avenue when the air raid sirens went off late at night. They rushed out of the house and into the dark street—blackout was in effect so there were no streetlights lit. As they ran the few blocks toward the underground at Warwick Avenue Station, Auntie Babs spotted a small child in front of them. She scooped the little fella up and continued to run, but the little fella hollered and cursed and kicked his legs, demanding to be put down immediately. It was then that Auntie Babs realized that she had scooped up a dwarf, a little person, and not a child. My mother wondered how often this happened to the poor man as he, like every other Londoner, sought shelter night after night.

Feigel's book also captures the heightened passion and intensity of young men and women facing the likelihood of imminent death. She quotes the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, recollecting the Blitz as

a kind of protracted debauch, with the shape of orderly living shattered, all restraints removed, barriers non-existent. It gave one the same feeling a debauch did, of, as it were, floating loose; of having slipped one's moorings.¹⁶

Whether my mother slipped her moorings or not, in early 1940 she married John Anthony Crilly, a young Northern Irishman from Antrim, and the father of my sister Patsy. On their marriage certificate his occupation is listed as a hotel porter. John Crilly, like the Blitz itself, came and went with no words ever again spoken of him. By 1943, it was a young Irish-American infantry officer from Pittsburgh who stole my mother's heart at the Rainbow Corner Club in London's West End.

¹⁵ Lara Feigel, *The Love-Charms of Bombs*, (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.



Margaret at the Rainbow Corner Club in London's West End, 1944.

For decades this picture sat pasted to a page of a family album—you know the kind: heavy cardboard covers wrapped in faux leather and filled with deep black construction paper, all held in place by two metal posts. Over time, the white backs of the photographs absorbed the black from the mounting paper. Some of the photos were glued in place, like the one above. Others were held firm by those tiny black paper photo corners. Still others were crudely taped down. No one knew these snapshots were such treasures back then.

In this photo, Mom appears as a disembodied head and hand, white against the black background and her black dress. She's reading a newspaper or a magazine, her right hand resting on a table covered with a lace tablecloth. Her head is tilted down, her wavy, dark brunette hair just light enough to contrast with the darker background. Her smile is genuine, although something about the pose seems slightly staged. I wonder whether the photo might have been taken for a Red Cross newsletter, but I'm not certain of this. What catches my eye now is the

silver of the paratrooper's jump wings pinned to her dress. I must have looked at this photo dozens of times as a child, yet I don't remember noticing the jump wings back then.

But I do remember now, many years later, the English afternoon sunlight coming in from the kitchen window and Mom standing at the sink rinsing our tea mugs. I remember hearing the water running slowly, not dripping, running smoothly and slowly till she stopped it. I was at the kitchen table, pregnant with my son, Nick. We had been talking together about nothing in particular and suddenly she was telling me about Jimmy Cooney.

I was watching her, listening intently, afraid to speak or even to breathe because I sensed her fragility. My mother's face mellowed, the years rolling away from her right there in front of me. She was a young, vibrant, beautiful woman in love with a young, vibrant, beautiful man. "The love of my life," she said, speaking to him now, as I think back on it. The kettle boiled and whistled urgently and Mom laughed and said "Up Sean Moylan, the kettle's boilin'!" And the moment was gone.

This dark photograph reminds me of all that I never knew about my mother, and all that I never asked. I know now that the shiny paratrooper's wings pinned to her dress belonged to that young infantry officer named Jimmy Cooney.

Jimmy Cooney brought Mom down to Devon where his unit was rehearsing its role in the still secret D-Day landings. The US Army had set up an elaborate training site along the coast, between Woolacombe to the north and Westward Ho! to the south. Mom told me about the train ride from Paddington Station through the English countryside. She told me about the little cottage they stayed at, and how he had only a few days of liberty to spend with her. I found out on my own that Jimmy Cooney married my mother only weeks before he left Devon for those deadly Normandy beaches.



Still photograph from National Archives footage of US Infantry troops in North Devon, rehearsing for the D-Day landings.

When their few glorious days in North Devon ended, Mom boarded the train to resume the nurse's training she had recently begun in London. Soon after she left, the love of her life crawled onto an amphibious landing craft headed for France. He never came back.



Margaret in Devon in Spring, 1944.

I find myself drawn to this photograph of my mother, beaming in the cold English spring of 1944, and a handful of lines from another Irish poet come to mind:

Another woman moves
In painted daylight; nothing in this bare
Closet has been lost
Or changed. I think of what great art removes;
Hazard and death, the future and the past,
This woman's secret history and her loves . . . ¹⁷

It would be a different Irish-American lad from Pittsburgh, my father, Daniel McGill, flying high above the English skies on his way to drop bombs on German cities, who would eventually win my mother's shattered heart.



Official Air Force photograph. 100th Bomb Group Mission, Cologne 1944.

¹⁷ Eavan Boland, "From the Painting 'Back from Market' by Chardin" *Collected Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1995), 3.

GUNS, DEATH, AND MURDER IN PARADISE

*I see my life go drifting like a river
From change to change; I have been many things . . .*

Yeats, "Fergus and the Druid"

I don't think the Air Force recruiter lied; he just didn't do his homework. He told me I would be a Russian linguist, guaranteed. After basic training, I would be spending several months at the Defense Language Institute in Monterrey, California. What the recruiter failed to take into account was my French husband, Bernard. During the last week of basic at Lackland AFB in San Antonio, I was summoned to the Central Base Personnel Office and told that my husband's foreignness precluded me from obtaining a Top Secret security clearance, a requirement for any military linguist.

After being given about two minutes to make a choice between becoming an Air Force cook or an Air Force weapons instructor, I quickly chose the latter. Instead of flying off to sunny and sophisticated Monterrey, I remained deep in the heart of Texas and made the ten minute bus ride from basic training to the small arms technical school across the base. I was going to spend the next nine weeks learning how to fire weapons—with real bullets—at targets shaped like people, so that I could teach my fellow airmen how to fire weapons at targets shaped like people.



Howard AFB, Panama, 1983: Assisting an airman with sight corrections at the small arms firing range.

Prior to enlisting, I had seen the military police on base carrying rifles over their shoulders and wearing pistols in their holsters, but despite growing up on military bases, I had never held a weapon myself and certainly had no interest in firearms. So I surprised myself with how quickly I learned this new skill, and with how comfortably and naturally I took to shooting. I loved the feel of the Smith & Wesson Model 15 revolver in my hand. The knurled walnut grips over the carbon steel frame seemed to fit the palm of my left hand perfectly. The revolver was beautifully balanced and the trigger smooth and delicate beneath the pad of my index finger. The M16 rifle, on the other hand, irritated and annoyed me: the pressure of the molded plastic rifle butt digging into my shoulder, the brass casings deflecting into my face or onto my right forearm, the constant malfunctions. I preferred the 12-gauge shotgun to the rifle, and surprised myself even further by developing an affinity for the machine gun.

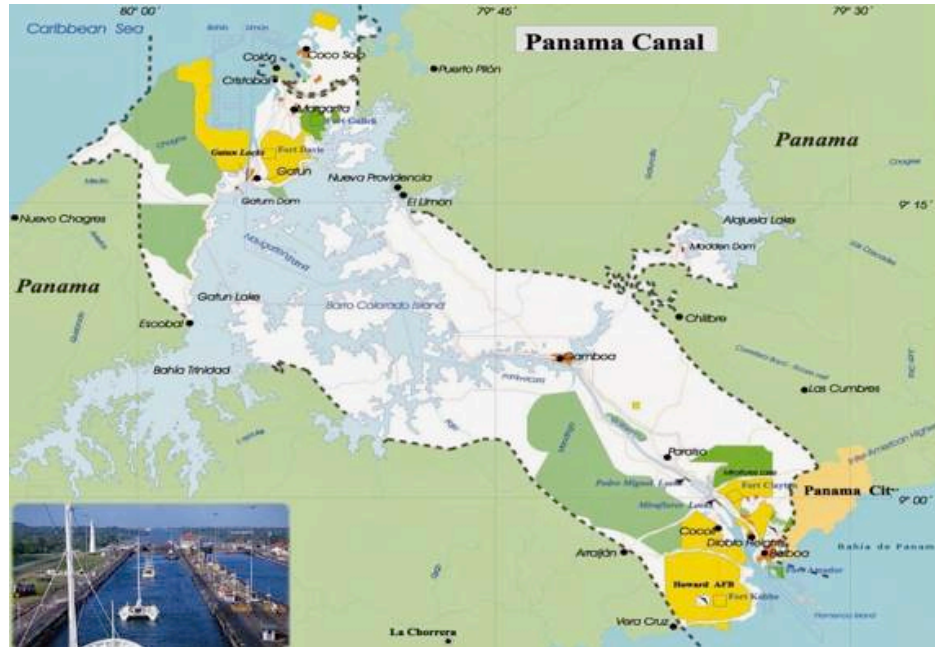


Firing the M60 machine gun for the first time at Camp Bullis, San Antonio, Texas. March 1982. Note that the neck brace and cast on my right leg were no obstacle to getting behind the gun!

At the end of nine weeks of intensive training, I was an expert marksman with the .38 caliber revolver, the .45 caliber pistol, and the 5.56 mm rifle. I was also proficient with the 12-gauge shotgun, the 40 mm grenade launchers, and the 7.62 mm machine gun. I had safety-checked, fired, disassembled, cleaned, and reassembled each of these weapons multiple times. And I had seen my first dead body.

A fellow tech school student, nineteen-year-old Airman Duane Bescheinen, killed himself in our barracks. We found Duane's body at about 0630 on Monday, 8 February 1982. When Duane failed to show up for his morning details, Airman Sye, the barracks chief, knocked on his door to rouse him. When Duane didn't answer, Sye opened his door. I was vacuuming the hallway and heard Sye scream. I looked up and saw her running toward me, shrieking hysterically, her mouth wide open and her hands framing her small, dark face. Airman Shawn Plumb then walked into Duane's room, and within seconds walked back out, speechless and shocked. I ran over to Shawn and asked him what was wrong. His face was pale and he simply stared at me, his jaw moving, his mouth half open but silent. I turned and walked into Duane's room, expecting to see something horrific, but Duane just looked like he was sleeping. He was stretched out on his bed with his feet crossed and his arms folded over his chest. He had a clear plastic bag over his head and a wet towel wrapped around his neck. I went up to Duane's head and saw a small butane gas can inside the plastic bag. Then I noticed condensation inside the bag and thought that he might still be breathing. I stood at Duane's right shoulder and reached across his chest to remove the towel that was wrapped around his neck. As I tugged on the towel, his right arm moved. It was stiff. Rigor mortis. Duane was dead.

One of our tech school instructors, Staff Sergeant Walter Clackum, escorted Duane's body home to Minnesota, while the rest of us finished tech school and moved on to our first duty stations. I was on my way to Howard AFB, Panama, where Bernie and I enjoyed three years of rainy season, followed by dry season, followed by rainy season.



Map of the old Canal Zone with the Miraflores Locks inset. Cocoli and Howard are at bottom right of the map.

We shared a small apartment on Via Argentina in Panama City with several thousand cockroaches, and slowly adjusted to the small adventures (and misadventures) of life in our tropical paradise. Like the time we took one wrong turn out of the city and nearly ended up on the Atlantic side of the isthmus. Or the time the man serving monkey meat next to the bus station shooed Bernie away. The women waiting for their buses held handkerchiefs over their noses. The crazy homeless guy who directed traffic in his underpants, even he wouldn't stand near Bernie. Because Bernie smelled. Bad.

It wasn't his fault. It was dark. He'd been walking along the sidewalk on Via Central. There weren't any streetlights. He stepped into thin air and landed neck high in the one sewer opening that was missing its manhole cover. His shoes and trousers were drenched in thick Panamanian sewage. His arms and legs were cut and bruised, but he managed to climb out of the sewer and walk to the bus station on Central. The bus driver was not happy, but took Bernie's fare and told him to stand in the bus's doorway. Bernie got off the bus on Via Argentina and

walked up the stairs to our apartment. He dropped his clothes at the door and jumped in the shower as I bagged up the clothes and took them down to the dumpster.

The next morning Bernie drove to work with me, his arm hanging out the car window. We pulled up at the stoplight on Via España, next to a truck carrying several Brahma bulls. I glanced over just in time to see one of the bulls raise his tail and deposit a large amount of excrement on Bernie's arm, which was still hanging outside the window. Splat. It really did sound like that. "Onomatopoeic," I thought. Bernie shook his head, along with his soiled arm, and looked stricken. When I got to work, I told my boss about the sewer and the Brahma bull. "Just another shitty day in paradise," he deadpanned, lifting his coffee cup to his lips.

A few months later we finally made it to the top of the waiting list for Army housing at Cocoli, beside the Miraflores Locks on the Panama Canal. We traded our apartment cockroaches for termites and bullfrogs, wild jungle sounds, and a hell of a view.



National Archives: Panoramic photo of construction of Miraflores Locks in 1913. Cocoli is behind hill to the left.

Our 1930s wooden frame house was built on stilts only a few hundred yards from the French Cut, the name for the abandoned attempt by the French to slice through the isthmus in the late 1890s. At night, Bernie and I would often walk from our house to the hill above the Miraflores Locks and watch the ships make their way through the Canal, mesmerized by the

beautiful precision: the sound of the locks slowly filling with water, the ship steadily rising, and the tiny locomotive mules on either side of the ship guiding it safely into place.

After almost a year at Cocoli, I was promoted to senior airman and we were rewarded with a beautiful French colonial house on Albrook Air Force Station, complete with maid's quarters (but no maid) and a neighborhood gardener to tend the banana and mango trees in the backyard. Shortly after moving into Albrook housing I decided to take a part-time job as a film projectionist at the base theater on Howard AFB.



Howard AFB, Panama, 1984: Working the 35mm projectors at the base theater.

My supervisor and trainer was a guy named Bob Jones who, like Bernie, was one of the few civilian husbands married to military wives. Bob had been working at the theater for several years and doted over his two 35mm projectors. Much like my experience with disassembling machine guns, I found that I loved operating the projectors, listening to the rat-a-tat-tat of the celluloid film moving through the sprockets and timing the transfer of reels from one projector to the next so the changeover was seamless and completely transparent to the audience. I loved the idea of being a part of the machinery, invisible to the audience, embedded high up in the back wall of the theater like a human moving part in the midst of the clockwork mechanism.

One night in the summer of 1984 I was showing *Terms of Endearment* to a full theater. It was about halfway through the film and I had loaded the next reel into the second projector. I peered out through the tiny window between the projectors looking for the cue in the top right corner of the screen, just a small punched out circle or sometimes a scratch in the frame. First cue. Count to eight. Start the second projector motor. Second cue. Hit the footswitch, the changeover douser closes on the first projector and opens on the second projector. The new reel begins to project on the screen. Flawless. I nearly jumped out of my skin, as did most of the audience, as one of the many tear-jerk moments with Shirley MacLaine and Debra Winger gave way to the sights and sounds of a massive, fiery red and malevolent 1958 Plymouth Fury filling the screen. I had accidentally grabbed a reel from the following night's movie, *Christine*, and loaded it into the projector.

I somehow managed not to get fired, and after one of my matinee shifts I met a young Panamanian man outside the theater. He was walking a gorgeous miniature Collie. We struck up a conversation and soon became friends. Alexis Santos Olivardias was living in the maid's quarters of an Air Force officer's home on Howard AFB. His aunt was a maid and had arranged for Alexis to move into her quarters after he had been paralyzed in a shooting at a nightclub in Panama City the previous year. After several months of meeting for coffee, coming over to our house for dinner, and generally sharing time together, Alexis asked if I would take him out to the range to learn to shoot. I thought it was a great idea, but had to check with my boss for permission.

My boss, Ed Corley, didn't think it was such a great idea. After I explained that Alexis was confined to a wheelchair, Ed asked how he had been injured. When I mentioned the shooting, Ed shook his head and said he wouldn't feel comfortable bringing Alexis out to the range. I broke the news to Alexis and he seemed to take it well. Less than a month later he murdered a female soldier in her home a few blocks from the theater. Shot her through the head with her own Army-issued .45 caliber pistol.

On the surface, Panama was a sleepy paradise, but just before Bernie and I arrived, the country's leader, General Torrijos, had been killed in an unexplained aircraft accident and General Manuel Noriega had emerged as the new strongman. I didn't speak Spanish and I didn't follow the local news at all, so for me life within the American bubble of the former Canal Zone and the military bases was not often penetrated by events in the rest of Panama.

Bernie, who was working as a detective for the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, occasionally traveled outside the bubble to facilities on the Atlantic side. One of his coworkers was a young man named Abdul Jamal Mondol. Abdul invited Bernie and me to his home, halfway between the newly named Torrijos Airport and Panama City, for dinner. Abdul thought I would enjoy meeting his parents since they were both Olympic pistol marksmanship judges. We had a lovely dinner and pleasant conversation. Then Abdul's father showed us his private weapons and ammunitions cache and shared his elaborate plans to defend his home once the revolution against Noriega began. We lost touch after leaving Panama in 1985, but I wondered how Abdul and his family reacted when it was American forces and not Panamanian rebels who overthrew Noriega in 1989.



Official Air Force photograph of Major Tom Regal, Air Force combat controller (center) training Honduran military circa 1983.

The covert war that the US was fighting further north in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Honduras was hinted at in stories shared by some of the guys we trained at our range: Air Force combat controllers, and helicopter aviators assigned to the 2nd Air Division, a unit flying covert ops and drug interdiction missions throughout Central and South America. Kim Jordan and I, the two female small arms instructors in our unit, had endeared ourselves to the aerial gunners by providing extra range time and assistance with spare parts and maintenance, since the major assembly groups of the ground and aerial versions of the M60 were interchangeable. And word quickly spread that Kim knew the M60 better than any of the male instructors assigned to our small unit. She could predict when a weapon was about to malfunction simply by observing the ejection pattern of the brass casings as they flew out of the ejection port on the right side of the weapon. Kim shared her knowledge and expertise and I volunteered to work extra time on the range to accommodate the aerial gunners' unpredictable schedules. To show their appreciation one of the helicopter crews took us out on a training mission aboard their UH-1.

The Huey is an iconic piece of military hardware. Think of the countless hours of news footage from the height of the Vietnam War with Hueys in the background, rotor blades whirring and soldiers and reporters bent double to avoid instant decapitation. Better yet, think *Apocalypse Now*.

After a long orientation and safety briefing—"if we have to ditch in the ocean the helicopter tends to roll over on its left side"—Kim and I put on our helmets and headphones and strapped into the safety harnesses behind the machine guns mounted in each door of the helicopter. The pilot had tuned in to the local American Forces radio station and 1980s rock was blasting through our headphones. It was a thrill to be flying just a few hundred feet above the luscious Panamanian coastline, standing behind the M60D, a smaller version of the .50 caliber weapon my father had spent hundreds of hours firing, tucked tightly into the tail end of his B-17 over North Africa and Europe. I remember the pure exhilaration I felt with my fingers wrapped around the spade grips of the machine gun and the toes of my jungle boots just inches away from

the edge of the open helicopter doorframe. I could recite the nomenclature and the specs for the M60D: an air-cooled, gas-operated, disintegrating link belt-fed machine gun capable of firing 600 rounds per minute at the cyclic rate of fire. I still had not fully comprehended the awesome firepower at my fingertips; the 7.62mm ammunition leaving the barrel at a velocity of 2800 feet per second would have cut a human body in half. But this lethal knowledge was far from me at that moment. I was just along for the ride.

KHOBAR AND KILMAINHAM:

TWIN TERRORS

What is it but nightfall?

No, no, not night, but death;

Was it needless death after all?

Yeats, "Easter, 1916"

My ride as a small arms instructor lasted just under four years. As much as I enjoyed being out in the jungle all day listening to the howler monkeys protest our presence on the range, and examining the odd, prehistoric-looking insects that would cling to the ammo truck as we drove through the jungle each day, after nearly four years I didn't find the work challenging. I took advantage of an opportunity to retrain into a different career field once my initial enlistment was up and swapped small arms for nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons.

After nine weeks of technical training in Denver I received orders for Aviano Air Base in northern Italy, at the foot of the Dolomites. My joy was short-lived though, as Uncle Sam decided that RAF Bentwaters on the Suffolk coast had a greater need for my skills. I spent the rest of the 1980s taking part in an elaborate and expensive game of make-believe. I participated in monthly field exercises preparing our many European airfields to survive hypothetical Soviet air attacks and to withstand imaginary Warsaw Pact tanks lumbering across the Fulda Gap in Germany. I trained my fellow airmen how to properly wear gas masks and bulky, hot, uncomfortable charcoal-lined chemical warfare defense equipment. I taught specialized teams of airmen how to decontaminate aircraft, vehicles, and other military equipment. I taught other teams how to operate shelters and collective protection systems. I learned how to accurately plot nuclear, biological, and chemical attacks on a map and predict where the hazards would be and how long they would last. In the space of a year I had gone from counting the number of bullet holes in human-shaped targets to assessing how many thousands of my fellow human beings would succumb to the devastating effects of weapons of mass destruction.



RAF Mildenhall, 1989: Goofing off in the NBC Control Center during a Local Salty Nation exercise.

On 2 August 1990, less than a year after the Berlin Wall came down, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait and our decades-long pretend war in Europe became a reality somewhere else. The enemy planes and tanks were still Soviet, but they were lumbering about 5000 kilometers east of the Fulda Gap, across the Iraqi border into Kuwait. By October 1990 we had tens of thousands of troops in Saudi Arabia. On Thursday, 17 January 1991, American fighter planes started strafing and bombing Iraqi forces in Kuwait.

Monday, 21 January, was the Martin Luther King, Jr. Federal holiday. I was at home with my three-year-old son, Nick, when my boss, Senior Master Sergeant Carlos Rodriguez-Alfonso, knocked on my front door. He stood in the doorway and informed me that I had received orders to deploy to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. I needed to come into work, gather all my mobility gear and process through the deployment line the following day. My initial reaction to the news was excitement and eagerness. Then I glanced behind me at my son playing on the living room floor, looked back at Sergeant Rod standing in the doorway and felt the irreconcilable tug of these two separate worlds. I felt my heart sink into the pit of my stomach and mumbled “Yeah. Okay.” That night I wrote in my journal

I’ve been trying to carry on as normal all day but this war has suddenly landed right on my doorstep; it’s not just on the TV anymore. I can’t stop thinking about having to leave Nick. The biggest worry is not knowing for how long. He’s only three years old . . . no one likes to talk about it, but there is always the possibility that something could

happen and I might not come back. Will Nick remember me? Does he know how much I love him? Will he be okay without me?

The next few days were filled with the usual uncertainty that accompanies any military operation. I completed all of my mobility processing and then was told to stand down. The following day I was told I would be leaving on the 23rd, and then I was told that Sergeant Rod was going in my place.

So, instead of Riyadh, I ended up aboard a Merchant Marine vessel moored off the coast of England in the frigid North Sea. The MV Green Ridge was carrying tons of munitions to resupply those American fighters and bombers in Saudi Arabia. Together with another airman, I wrote “To Saddam With Love” on one of the many thousands of 500 pound bombs securely racked in the cavernous hold of the ship. I remember being appalled. Not at the massive payload of explosives but at the spelling mistake scrawled in chalk on another nearby bomb. “This time it’s personnel,” it read, rather than “This time it’s personal.” That’s as close as I got to the shooting war that ended on 28 February 1991.



MV Green Ridge on its way to Persian Gulf 1991. Photo courtesy of Central Gulf Lines.

Life quickly returned to normal. Five years after the war, we still had thousands of Air Force troops in Saudi Arabia, patrolling the no-fly zone over southern Iraq as part of Operation Southern Watch, the multinational peacekeeping operation, which was a mirror image of Northern Watch based at Incirlik AB in Turkey. Both operations were designed to keep Saddam’s

forces boxed in to the center of Iraq. If anything moved south of the 32nd parallel or north of the 36th parallel it was fair game. Deploying to Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War had become routine. Several of my friends and coworkers had done short tours of duty at one or both locations. My brother-in-law, Ed, had just come home from Dhahran in May 1996, with pictures of himself riding a camel, plenty of per diem cash and exotic souvenirs.

On the night of 25 June 1996 I was in a hotel bar in Eindhoven, Netherlands, having a beer with several other NATO tactical evaluation inspectors. We had just finished a no-notice inspection on nearby Volkel Air Base, testing the combat readiness and ability of our Dutch comrades to launch their F16 fighter jets. The television above the bar suddenly switched to the Dutch version of “breaking news.” We watched as a noisy and chaotic scene played out on the small TV screen. We could see that a multistory building of some sort had been bombed. The face of the building had been sheared off, revealing floor after floor of empty, gaping rooms. There was a large crater in front of the building, its edges swarming with men in flowing white robes, uniformed police, and what we now clearly deciphered from the rapidly shifting images on the television as American military personnel. I recognized my fellow airmen darting across the screen in their desert camouflage uniforms. The major sitting next to me at the bar was an Air Force doctor stationed at the military hospital at Landstuhl, the primary treatment location for American casualties being medically evacuated to the US. The major quickly downed his beer and said, “We’re going to be busy.”

The next morning I drove my rental car back to Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam and caught my flight to London. When I arrived at Heathrow I called my husband to let him know I’d be home in a couple of hours, in time for our 16th wedding anniversary. He told me that my boss wanted me to call immediately. I hung up and called my boss.

—*Hey Master Sergeant Bower, it’s Bridgid. Bernie said you wanted me to call.*

—*Yeah. Headquarters is looking for volunteers to go to Khobar. Do you want to go?*

—*Khobar?*

—*Yeah, where we just had the terrorist bombing. Do you want to go?*

—*Sure.*

And so I went. My enlisted performance report dated 22 January 1997 says that I was “first in line to volunteer and deploy to King Abdul Aziz Air Base, Dhahran, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to assist in recovery operations and investigation procedures after the terrorist bombing in June 1996,” and that I “assisted the Federal Bureau of Investigations Task Force and recovery crews by sifting through debris for evidence, repairing buildings, and constructing sandbag revetments for additional force protection.” I was fully prepared for all those things. Over the previous ten years I had trained relentlessly, mastered the techniques and procedures to prepare for and recover from dozens of theoretical disaster scenarios. But I wasn’t prepared for the emotional and spiritual turmoil I encountered as I came face to face with the aftermath of the carnage at Khobar Towers.

I spent five weeks in Dhahran performing recovery operations following the terrorist bombing that killed 19 airmen. I listened to the stories of the survivors, people who had suffered minor physical injuries, but had been damaged nonetheless by the raw, destructive power of the blast. I talked to Technical Sergeant David Cook who tried to perform CPR on a mortally wounded airman, the only airman killed in his building. Airman Christopher B. Lester, 19, a civil engineer troop, had just arrived from Wright-Patterson AFB near Dayton, Ohio a few days before the blast. Christopher Lester was assigned a room in “Plumbers Paradise,” the name the occupants had given to their fourth floor apartment suite. He was sitting on a couch in the apartment eating a slice of pizza. The couch was facing the large sliding glass door that opened onto the balcony overlooking the parking lot where the truck bomb had been placed across the street.



Khobar Towers Building 131. Photo taken a few days after the blast.

TSgt Cook walked me through the damaged structure, past the deep cracks in the floors and walls, over the broken, splintered doors and dried pools of blood, up the four flights of stairs, and, finally, into his room. His eerily pristine, undisturbed room. I felt the hair on my arms and neck rise as I looked around me. Nothing had been touched by the blast. His bed was still made, his wardrobe still upright with his uniforms hanging neatly inside.

Only a few steps to our left, the bathroom door was off its hinges. Large, jagged chunks of white porcelain lay scattered across the floor, remnants of the toilet that had been blown to bits. The small bathroom window frame was twisted out of shape and its glass scattered underfoot. A few steps to our right, the bedroom of another airman was visible through the damaged door that the bomb's massive shock wave had split crazily in half, like a crude Dutch barn door. In the room beyond, the bed was overturned; the air conditioning unit had been blown out of the wall and lay near the head of the bed. There was glass and blood and splintered wood and broken tile everywhere. I leaned against the bedroom wall and felt the tiny shards of glass

embedded in the plaster dig into my back. We walked back into Dave's room. He pointed to a delicate paperclip sculpture on his desk. He reached over and pushed the tiny sculpture and it swung gracefully as he touched it. He shook his head. Outside his door was mayhem and he couldn't fathom why his room, and he, had been spared. Neither could I.

Because I came after the blast, I didn't hear the sound that 20,000 pounds of TNT makes when it detonates. I didn't see the shattering glass. My bones didn't shake from the immense shock wave pummeling vehicles and buildings and bodies. I didn't hold my breath in those few moments before the breathtaking silence gave way to confusion and chaos as hundreds of airmen ran from the scene, while dozens more ran toward it.

I came after the bodies were counted and the wounds were bandaged, but I saw the bloody footprints leading toward the Desert Rose, and I saw too many smeared and bloody handprints running down staircase walls. I know the exact spot on the exact couch where that nineteen-year-old airman was sitting when a piece of glass the size of a dagger pierced his heart.

I came after the barricades were breached. I didn't see the truck with its deadly payload pull into the parking lot. I didn't hear the screeching tires of the getaway car. I didn't hear the sentinel knock frantically on my door as he hurtled down all those flights of concrete steps in a desperate, superhuman effort to raise the alarm.

I came after the blast. And I posed like a tourist beside the bombed-out building. The shutter clicked, and the muezzin sounded the call to prayer from the mosque behind us.



Khobar Towers. Photo taken on 4 July 1996.

I've looked at this photograph dozens of times now, trying to pry every speck of information out of it, attempting to understand who I was and what I was doing there. In the photograph, everything is the color of sand. Our camouflaged uniforms are the color of sand, intentionally. We are all squinting into the camera, our eyes dazzled, not by the blast but by the brilliant Arabian sun. A flash of green foliage in the corner of the photo is more noticeable than the sheared and jagged face of the building behind us. Some of us are smiling. I want to read more into my expression. I want to think that I look stricken and deeply troubled by what I am doing—posing like a tourist at the site of death.

I left Saudi Arabia in August 1996, just days before the entire Joint Task Force Southern Watch packed up and drove 500 kilometers down the Arabian Peninsula's Route 10, in a long convoy from Dhahran's breezy Persian Gulf coast across the desert to "Al's Garage," the slightly disrespectful name we had given to the sprawling air base near Al Kharj, about 100 kilometers

southeast of Riyadh. Nineteen airmen were dead, hundreds were wounded, and the commanding officer, Brigadier General Schwalier, found his military career had also been blown to bits.

Back in England, the images from Dhahran still filled my mind. I hadn't experienced the bombing first-hand, but the seismic reverberations of the blast had shifted the intellectual and spiritual ground beneath me. I found myself questioning everything I thought I knew about myself, about my family's tradition of service in the military, and about my country. In the absence of any substantive answers to my new questions, I busied myself with work and home and school. I was only one class away from finishing my undergraduate degree, so in October 1996 I registered for a field study course in Ireland with the University of Maryland. I put in for leave, packed my suitcase and headed to Dublin, very much looking forward to being back in my mother's country.

In Ireland we read Joyce and Yeats, Thomas Kinsella's translation of the *Táin Bó Cuailnge*^{*}, and dozens of translations of early Irish poetry. We discussed Irish history. We saw a few plays at the Abbey Theatre, and visited several historic sites. Two places in particular intrigued and unsettled me: Newgrange, a Neolithic burial mound; and Kilmainham Gaol, the execution site of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rising.



National Library of Ireland: Young girl at entrance to Newgrange circa 1900.

* The Cattle Raid of Cooley. Pronounced Toyn Boe Coo-ahn-yeh

The passage-grave at Newgrange was erected about 3200 BCE, predating the Pyramids by almost 1000 years. Massive carved stones, featuring circular images and lines that would later be associated with the intricate, delicate designs of the early Celts, surround the passage-grave. The guide described how, during the winter solstice, a band of light seventeen centimeters wide enters the passage-grave through an ingeniously placed gap in the stone entrance way. This band of light illuminates the inner burial chamber for about seventeen minutes. I stood in the central chamber and touched the ancient stone, trying to grasp the meaning of the place. But the mythology of Newgrange eluded me. I didn't know these Neolithic Irishmen or their gods. I didn't understand their need to capture winter light to illuminate the dead. I felt the power of the place, as did the other students there, but it was the force of age and stone and death, tempered by the passage of time, rather than the power of a living, breathing tradition.

At Kilmainham Gaol there was no such temperance. The rough stone walls seemed to me to be permeated with a frightening, intoxicating violence. This was my first visit to Kilmainham, but I had been inside these walls many times before. I had participated in the romantic rituals of Irish nationalism, the recitation of English crimes, the waving of the green, white, and gold. I knew the songs. I knew the stories. As a child, listening to my mother's soft, clear voice sing Irish rebel songs, I had imagined the grey stone wall where Pádraig Pearse was shot. I had seen in my mind the brave James Connolly, strapped to a chair and falling into "a ready-made grave." An image flashed into my memory of me as an angelic three-year-old singing

God's curse on you England, you cruel-hearted monster
Your deeds they would shame all the devils in Hell.
There are no flowers blooming but the shamrock is growing
On the grave of James Connolly, the Irish Rebel.¹⁸

The words came back to me with no effort to recall them, they were on my lips, fully formed and without conscious thought. Such is the power of myth. And propaganda.

¹⁸ The author of "James Connolly the Irish Rebel" is unknown. I've quoted the lyrics from memory.

I reached out and placed my hand against the cold, dirty wall, speckled with bullet holes from English guns and stained with the blood-memory of Irish martyrs. As I leaned my body against the wall, I felt the electrifying power of the zealous belief that had torn my mother's country apart. I felt the dread and the loss in the pit of my stomach as I realized that this very same exhilarating faith in righteous vengeance had also shaken the walls of Khobar Towers in Dhahran. Islamic fanaticism and Irish nationalism were blood brothers.



*An Easter Rising commemoration service in the exercise yard of Kilmainham Gaol, 27 March 1938.
Photo courtesy of Patriot's Inn Gallery.*

TALISMANS

Too long a sacrifice can make a stone of the heart.

Yeats, "Easter, 1916"

On September 11, 2001, I happened to be stationed once again at another American air base in England. I was the superintendent of Wing Readiness, assigned to the 100th Air Refueling Wing, which traced its lineage back to the 100th Bomb Group, the unit my father flew with in WWII.

We had already moved through a quiet, uneventful morning, and were settling in to the last few hours of the workday. Oddly enough, that day I was developing plans for a joint British and American anti-terrorism training exercise. I received a call from my boss, Lieutenant Colonel Dewey Parker, shortly before 1400 telling me to turn on the TV. I saw the second plane hit the South tower. The image lost none of its shocking power as it was beamed from 3000 miles away on the other side of the Atlantic. William Langewiesche's description of the collapse of the twin towers captures the essence of that power.

For thirty years the Twin Towers had stood above the streets as all tall buildings do, as a bomb of sorts, a repository for the prodigious energy originally required to raise so much weight so high. Now, in a single morning, in twin ten-second pulses, the towers released that energy back into New York. Massive steel beams flew through the neighborhood like gargantuan spears, penetrating subway lines and underground passages to depths of thirty feet, crushing them, rupturing water mains and gas lines, and stabbing high into the sides of nearby office towers, where they lodged . . . Ambulances, cars, and fire trucks were smashed flat by falling debris, and some were hammered five floors down from the street into the insane turmoil erupting inside the World Trade Center's immense "bathtub"—a ten-acre foundation hole, seventy feet deep, that suffered unimaginable violence as it absorbed the brunt of each tower's collapse.¹⁹

A few minutes later I looked out my office window and saw the wing commander's admin clerk racing around the building with a checklist on a clipboard, wearing an ill-fitting Kevlar helmet on her head and a canteen (but no pistol) on her webbed pistol belt. She was

¹⁹ William Langewiesche, *American Ground: Unbuilding the World Trade Center*, (New York: North Point Press, 2003), 3.

covering the sign in front of the wing headquarters building with a small piece of tarp in order to conceal the identity of the building from some as yet unknown would-be assailant. I remember thinking how absurd her actions were and how outdated and ineffective this Cold War checklist response was. And then I remember thinking, “We are going to war.” Against somebody. Anybody.

And go to war we did. First, in a fit of righteous (and understandable) national revenge, we targeted Afghanistan and the Al Qaeda training sites. Then, inexplicably, two years later, we attacked Iraq. The unimaginable violence from 9/11 that Langewiesche describes had not yet been quelled in Afghanistan. It was not even close to being absorbed and dissipated in Iraq.

I volunteered, politely requested, and finally begged to deploy for Operation Enduring Freedom, the catchy name given to the war in Afghanistan. Most of the political pundits assured us that Afghanistan would be a repeat of the first Gulf War in 1991; short and sharp, with minimal cost and few casualties. We were not prepared for one long and protracted war in Southwest Asia, let alone two. If someone had said to me in November 2001 that four of my nephews, three of them still in high school at the time, would be deploying for years after me, I would have been astonished.

When my nephews did eventually leave for Iraq and Afghanistan, I gave them each one of the objects my mother had bequeathed to me in that dimly lit bedroom over ten years earlier: something associated with my father’s combat service and small enough to fit in their wallets or their pockets. My father’s gunner’s wings from WWII, the ribbon from his Distinguished Flying Cross, his National Defense Service medal, his dog tags; each was given by me as a talisman, with the unspoken understanding that the object would somehow ensure my nephews’ safe return. That moment of silent exchange, heavy with the specter of mortality, was made bearable by focusing on the talisman. I believed my father’s wings would carry our fear and our uncertainty, and I had faith in their power to protect. Dad had worn them for forty combat

missions over North Africa and Europe, dodging German fighters and flak. Surely these wings could withstand a few roadside bombs and sniper rounds in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Robert was the first to go; a 20-year-old infantryman departing in the heavy humid heat of a Midwestern June for his first combat tour in Iraq. It was 2005. I was stationed at Scott AFB in Illinois, when Kerry, my youngest sister, called from North Carolina to tell me that her son would be leaving from Camp Atterbury, in Indiana.

I had only a vague notion of what Robert could expect to find on the ground in Iraq, despite my having previously deployed to the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), part of the Joint Task Force Southwest Asia, shortly after 9/11. Robert would be traveling thousands of miles of open and dangerous roads in northern Iraq. My job, performed in the relative safety and security of Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, was to manage all of the Air Force nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare defense assets in theater, which at that time consisted of fourteen air bases spread over eight countries. I had returned physically unscathed, but mentally exhausted.



Official Air Force photograph of the Combined Air Operations Center, Prince Sultan Air Base, Saudi Arabia, January 2002. My console seat is on the right with the two red computer screens.

The global apparatus of destruction that I had become a part of left me troubled and morally conflicted. I watched, with others, the live video feed of unmanned Predator drones launching missiles at fleeing Taliban fighters. The video was projected onto a small screen in the CAOC—a screen someone had dubbed “Predator Pay-Per-View.” There was blood and burned flesh and shattered bone on the ground in Afghanistan, but here in the CAOC there were no sounds or smells of battle. The exploding Taliban bodies appeared only as varying shades of grey amidst the blurry pixels on the screen.

The body of Sergeant First Class Nathan Ross Chapman, assigned to 3rd Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group in Ft. Lewis, Washington was not an abstraction on a computer screen. He was the first military combat casualty in Afghanistan, killed in Gardez on 4 January 2002. My journal entry for 5 January 2002, on duty at the CAOC, reads

No one on Services desk after midnight. Received a call from Captain Le Beau at CFLCC [Coalition Forces Land Component Command] in Kuwait requesting assistance from AF mortuary affairs to ensure the body of SFC Nathan Chapman arrives without delay at Landstuhl, Germany. Called Lt. Col. Blankenship in his quarters and advised him. He said he trusted me to work the details. Contacted Joint Movement Center and found that the body was on board a C-17 enroute to Incirlik from Kharshi Khanabad in Uzbekistan. From there it would be transferred to a C-5 from Incirlik to Ramstein. Called Incirlik Command Post and spoke with Sgt. Smith, mortuary affairs NCO on duty and advised him of flight details. Then contacted Ramstein Command Post and spoke with Sgt. Skinner to ensure SFC Chapman’s body would be transferred to Landstuhl and then on to Dover.

I found out later that SFC Chapman was also an Air Force brat, born at Andrews AFB just outside Washington, DC in April 1970. Coincidentally, my dad was stationed at Andrews at the same time. I distinctly remember being in elementary school and celebrating the first Earth Day in DC on 22 April, the day before SFC Chapman was born.



Handing over the reins at Joint Task Force-Southwest Asia to Master Sergeant Brian Harris, March 2002.

In March 2003, a year after I left the CAOC, the US invaded Iraq. I had been transferred to the Air Mobility Command headquarters at Scott AFB in southern Illinois, where I served alongside Chief Master Sergeant Eric Brooks, who had worked the same position at the CAOC just a few months after me. At AMC headquarters, Eric and I were responsible for filling all the wartime deployment taskings for our small career field. We had numerous conversations about the two wars, and I expressed to Eric my sense of shame and regret over our country's decision to invade Iraq. Throughout 2003 and 2004 not a week went by that we didn't hear news of an injury or a death in Iraq. The port mortuary at Dover AFB in Delaware belonged to Air Mobility Command and we received briefings regarding significant milestones, such as the arrival of the 1000th fatality at Dover in September 2004. But on 3 May 2005 the war came much closer to home when Eric's nephew, US Army Staff Sergeant William Jerome Brooks, age 30, was blown to pieces by a roadside bomb in Baghdad. He left behind a wife and two daughters, Ayana and Aaryan. He was one of 942 Americans killed in Iraq that year. Now Robert, my own nephew, would soon have his boots on the ground in ancient Babylon, and I was scared to think about what awaited him there.



Eric Brooks in the CAOC after the move from Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid, Qatar 2003.

Shortly after I'd returned from my deployment to the CAOC in March 2002, a colleague there forwarded an email that contained photographs of captured Afghan prisoners en route to the newly opened detention center at Guantanamo. The men were blindfolded, hooded, handcuffed and secured to the floor of a US Air Force C-130 cargo plane by 2" wide cotton webbing tie-down straps.



Photo origin unknown. Prisoners captured in Afghanistan on flight to Guantanamo.

In another photo, US soldiers, mouths open in command and arms raised threateningly, hovered over the prisoners. The photographs haunted me. Receiving them made me feel complicit in the treatment of these men. Within a day, my colleague had sent an urgent email asking us to delete the photographs.

On 28 April 2004, a new batch of photographs appeared, this time on CBS News. These were from Abu Ghraib in Iraq, Saddam Hussein's notorious prison outside Baghdad. If the first set of photos I'd seen hinted at trouble, these photos screamed it. Iraqi men, naked, hooded, beaten, bloodied, humiliated. US soldiers smirking, pointing, laughing, and orchestrating the humiliation. Another Irish rebel song sprung to mind as I thought about the implications of these Abu Ghraib photos:

Just before he faced the hangman,
 In his dreary prison cell,
 British soldiers tortured Barry,
 Just because he would not tell.
 The names of his brave comrades,
 And other things they wished to know.
 Turn informer or we'll kill you
 Kevin Barry answered "No"
 Another martyr for old Ireland,
 Another murder for the crown,
 Whose brutal laws may kill the Irish,
 But can't keep their spirit down.
 Lads like Barry are no cowards.
 From the foe they will not fly.
 Lads like Barry will free Ireland,
 For her sake they'll live and die.²⁰

Something had gone terribly wrong in Iraq, and within our military.

Meanwhile, back at Camp Atterbury, Robert Kennedy was about to leave for war at the same age his grandfather had. Robert joined the North Carolina National Guard in 2003 while

²⁰ The author of "Kevin Barry" is unknown. I have quoted the lyrics from memory.

still in high school in Pembroke, where he had been the student commander of the Army Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps (JROTC). Robert never did anything in half-measures. After graduating from Purnell Swett High School, he went off to Fort Benning, Georgia for nine weeks of basic training, followed by five weeks of advanced infantry training. Robert was going to be a soldier, a grunt, a leg, nicknames for the infantrymen who take pride in slogging it out on the hard ground of the battlefield. When he was five or six, Robert told his grandmother that he was going to be a doctor, but it was soldiering, not medicine, that eventually called him. He'd certainly learned how to fight, growing up in a house full of raucous boys. It seemed every game the Kennedy brothers played was physical, and the game didn't end until someone got hurt. So Robert had learned how to take care of himself, like his own father—a Vietnam vet—and his grandfather before him.



Left: Sergeant Ryan Kennedy being presented with the Purple Heart by General David Petraeus at FOB Salerno in Afghanistan. Right: Sergeant Robert Kennedy after receiving the Purple Heart in Kunduz, Afghanistan.

Maybe Robert's desire for soldiering reached even farther back, to some ancestral heritage that we were only vaguely aware of. From his earliest days, my mother always called him Robert the Bruce, a reference to the legendary Scottish warrior. She dubbed his twin brother Ryan the King. I remember questioning my mother about the choice of nicknames for the babbas (the family name for the twins), especially why the Scottish warrior king when we were so very Irish? My mother was adamant. Our Robert was Robert the Bruce and that was the end of it. I think she saw something at the heart of these rough wild boys that others couldn't see. Something fierce, yet noble.

Something my father must have understood. In November 1943, after completing basic training, aerial gunnery school and survival school, Daniel McGill flew to an American airfield in Tunisia, North Africa, climbed into the tail end of a B-17 heavy bomber, and proceeded to shoot his Browning .50 caliber machine gun at German fighter aircraft. He did this a few times with his Fortress crew before they were transferred to Thorpe Abbots in Norfolk, England, picking up where he left off and flew his first mission with the Bloody Hundredth on 26 February 1944. Somewhere between that mission in February and his last on 27 April 1944, my father earned the Distinguished Flying Cross, the United States' oldest military aviation medal, awarded for heroism or extraordinary achievement during aerial flight.

According to my mother, my father's medal was awarded for heroism. There was a vague story about him saving his pilot's life. It might have been after he flew in the first daylight bombing raid over Berlin, on 6 March 1944, in the same formation as General Jimmy Doolittle. It could have been on any of the missions he flew before or after. We may never know when and why the medal was awarded; my father's military records were destroyed in a massive fire at the National Personnel Records Archive in St Louis in 1973.

Dad seldom talked about his wars—WWII, or Korea, or Vietnam—but one morning in 1974, while sitting together at the kitchen table, my father told me that General Curtis E. LeMay had presented him with the Distinguished Flying Cross (DFC) at Thorpe Abbots, one of the

airfields Dad was assigned to in WWII. On this particular morning Dad had purposely placed his ribbons on the wrong side of his uniform, hoping that I (being in high school ROTC) would be sharp enough to notice. But I was in ROTC solely for the noble purpose of evading gym class, not out of any deep and abiding desire to follow in my father's footsteps. After waiting several minutes for me to look at him long enough to spot his deliberate mistake, Dad gave up and removed his ribbon rack and placed it on the table. I looked up from my cereal and asked about the ribbon at the top. Dad told me it was the DFC, and that it had been on his ribbon rack for thirty years. I was a bored teenaged girl with aspirations to be a hippie and that morning at breakfast I didn't think much of Curtis E. LeMay, the ribbon, or my father's experience in WWII.



My father's copy of an official Air Force photo of General Curtis E. LeMay.

I can't recall exactly when I realized that it was odd to have this photograph of General Curtis E. LeMay in our family album. We were not blood relatives, and no one (except Dad) had ever met the man. But the General was very much a part of our family. I was born in Riverside, California, right next to March AFB where my father was assigned to one of General LeMay's new strategic bomber squadrons. General LeMay died at March AFB in 1990. It was not until after I myself joined the Air Force and had to study its history and lineage that I realized what a big deal that guy in the photo album was.

Now, over sixty years after General LeMay pinned the Distinguished Flying Cross medal to my father's chest, I was standing in the Indiana heat, listening to officers give their obligatory speeches about glory and honor and duty, while soldiers and their families struggled to stand together in the sun. Some did not fare so well and passed out before the longed-for command, "Dismissed!" But the command finally came and Robert made his way toward us. He remarked about the weakness of soldiers who can't take the heat.

— *How are they gonna make it in Iraq, when they're carrying a 50-pound ruck in 120-degree heat and hunting Hajis?*

I was troubled by Robert's question, by the way he had already adopted the use of "Haji," taking an honorific reserved for Muslims who have completed the Haj and turning it into a casual slur. But I understood what was at the root of Robert's comment about his fellow soldiers. I had been looking at the young faces in formation and wondering how many would come home—whole or not at all.

Robert posed for photographs with his mother, his brother, and me. We made small talk. And then it was time for him to go. I pressed into his hands the thin sliver of metal, covered in tattered, finely woven red, white, and blue cotton cloth.

—*This is the ribbon from your Pappap's Distinguished Flying Cross. He would be so proud of you today, Robert. You have to bring this ribbon home safe, okay?*

Robert looked down at the ribbon resting in the palm of his right hand.

—Thanks, Aunt Bebe. I'll keep it safe.

He pulled his black leather wallet out of the back pocket of his battle-dress uniform and placed the ribbon inside.

We hugged each other and I kissed Robert's clean-shaven cheek, now a deep red from the sun. My baby sister kissed and hugged her boy. Her eyes welled up, but she didn't cry. She looked helpless and defenseless as she watched Robert sling his ruck over his shoulder and board the bus that would take her 20-year-old son off to war.

My nephew Danny was named after my father. In that strange way the universe has of weaving life stories together, Danny was also the only grandchild born in Dad's hometown of Pittsburgh. A quick swaddling and a rush to the intensive care unit accompanied Danny's entry into our world. No breath, no heartbeat, and no time for his mother to hold him and welcome him—Danny's presence sparked flurries of activity from the moment he was born. His childhood was spent in constant motion, with Danny at the center, a frenetic blur of a boy. His hair mirrored his disposition: wild, uncontrollable curls that framed his face like a blonde halo. As I try to write about him now, I realize that as a child he embodied every cliché ever written about boys. His wildness was driven by insatiable curiosity and tempered with pure delight. His Irish grandmother, my mother, often remarked that her Danny could charm the leg off a chair.

Like his grandfather, Danny never finished high school. He was too impatient to sit still for all those hours, reading and writing about things that he just didn't care about. He moved in and out of odd jobs, from a hibachi chef to a fashion model to a volunteer firefighter, until he found his niche as a damn good vehicle mechanic. He finally secured a steady job with the Army at Fort Bragg in North Carolina, but the company he'd signed on with soon lost its contract and Danny was one of the first to be laid off. In September 2006, when Danny was 24 years old, he received an offer to go to Baghdad for a year to repair bomb-damaged Army vehicles. The

money was good, better than he'd dreamed, and most of it tax-free. With a wife, a mortgage, and no income, he decided to accept the offer.

The day Danny left for Iraq, a small crowd of family members drove with him to the airport in Fayetteville. Danny's wife, Tiffeny, didn't come in. I watched through the plate glass sliding doors as she hugged and kissed her young husband in the parking lot, then turned quickly, slid into her car and drove away. Growing up as a military brat, as Danny did, ensured him an easy familiarity with constant goodbyes, but Tiffeny had lived her entire life in Cumberland County, North Carolina. People didn't come and go so easily in her world.

After a few minutes checking in his bags, we headed upstairs to the small restaurant right outside the security gate. We found a large table, ordered drinks and a few sandwiches, then sat and talked and laughed together to fill the hour until departure. Danny was full of his usual nervous energy, his feet tapping under the table and his hands darting back and forth from plate to glass. At the next table were several soldiers from nearby Fort Bragg, dressed in their desert uniforms, on their way to yet another combat tour. They looked much younger than my nephew, but so much more experienced. Our Danny was heading off to a war zone in dirty jeans and a faded AC/DC t-shirt, a wallet full of contractor cash, and no combat training. My nephew did have one thing in common with the soldiers at the next table, though. Dog tags. Under that grubby t-shirt, my father's dog tags were hanging on a chain around Danny's neck.

In 1943 my father was issued a pair of oblong stainless steel identification tags that read:

MCGILL DANIEL S
AF 33394523523
BPOS
CATHOLIC

Each tag had a small notch on the left end, adjacent to the service number. This notch was rumored to be just the right size to wedge between a dead soldier's front teeth in order to keep the jaws open. It may have been, coincidentally, just the right size for that, but the only real purpose the notch served was to hold the blank tag in place on the embossing machine.

My father wore those notched dog tags in his gunner's position at the tail end of a B-17, flying over 40 combat missions through the deadly winter skies of Western Europe. They were there next to his skin, under his thermal underwear, flight suit, flak jacket and a Mae West floating device. After VE Day in May 1945, he wore them on a Navy ship sailing across the Pacific to Guam, then on to Okinawa as part of the Allied occupying force. He wore them home to Pittsburgh in 1946. At some point after his three wars and 31 years of military service, he took his dog tags off and they ended up underneath my mother's lingerie in that dresser drawer. Until his grandson, his namesake, put them on and carried them off to another war.



Thorpe Abbots, Norfolk, England, 1944: Dad resting at the end of another combat mission.

BECOMING THE WARRIOR SEANCHAI

*Come away, O human child!
 To the waters and the wild,
 With a faery, hand in hand,
 For the world's more full of weeping than you
 can understand.*

Yeats, "The Stolen Child"

Shortly before my mother died we were sitting at her kitchen table talking and laughing together about her childhood in Ireland. She reached into the pocket of her housecoat and placed a small silver brooch on the table between us. I'd seen the brooch many times before, the three delicate leaves climbing up the stem of a rose in full bloom. Barely two inches in length, the clasp on the back broken, I picked it up and examined the fine filigree work on the leaves and petals.

—Tell me the story again, Mom.

And she did. A sweet and slightly mystical story of a small child, walking with her mother down the old Limerick Road on the north end of Charleville. As the sky turned to dusk they stood still in the road, the child and her mother inclining their heads toward the field to their left.

—Whisht now. Listen! Do you hear it, Peg?

—I do, Mammy! I do!

The child heard the faint sounds of music coming from behind the hedgerow. She could barely contain her excitement as her mother told her to peer through the hedgerow and tell her what she saw.

—I see lights, Mammy. Flickering lights!

—Run over there now, Peg. The fairies have left something for you!

Peg ran through a gap in the hedgerow toward the lights. She found a small circle in the grass, stooped down, and wrapped her tiny hand around a lovely silver brooch with a broken clasp.

It has taken me twenty years to understand and act upon what my mother passed on to me that day in her dimly lit bedroom. It was not my father's military medals themselves that were important, but, like the fairy brooch, it was the stories attached to them. I wonder now, after twenty-five years wearing my country's uniform, whether another lesson might be learned from my mother's Irish tribe—the lesson of valuing and honoring the work of the seanchaí, the storyteller, as highly as that of the warrior and the chieftain.

I've listened to, and told, war stories my whole life, marveling at the diversity of experience wrapped in the deceptive uniformity of service. In 2012 I interviewed several veterans for the Library of Congress Veterans History Project, including WWII veterans Kathleen Godwin Smith and Portia Cassidy Dennis. Both women were gracious and generous with their time. Honoring their stories is a sacred act.

It is the end of December 2009 and my son Nick and I are in DC to see the musical *The Fantasticks* at the legendary Lincoln Theatre on U Street, next to the equally famous Ben's Chili Bowl. The theater is nearly full. Nick and I have good seats, about nine rows back, just off to the right. Over the audience chatter we can hear an indecisive young couple discussing where to sit: in the row of seats directly in front of us or in the wide walkway between our section and the next section of seats. As they try to decide, the young man looks at me and says

—You'll have to excuse us. We're kind of new at this. I used to have legs.

I notice his familiar “high and tight” haircut, glance down at his empty khaki pants legs, and then settle my gaze on the massive wound on his left forearm; it is nothing but lumps of scar tissue ending in a mass of deformed fingers. They choose the wide walkway as it is easier to

manipulate the bulky wheelchair and the two of them settle in just moments before the house lights dim and the show begins. The handsome young actor playing the role of El Gallo sings to us from the stage.

—Try to remember when life was so tender that no one wept except the willow . . . deep in December it's nice to remember without a hurt the heart is hollow.

The play is mesmerizing, but throughout the performance I find myself wondering what he thinks of it. The curtain closes for the last time and the audience slowly leaves the theater. I start to follow my son as he turns left toward the exit. As I reach the end of our aisle I turn right instead and walk over to the young soldier.

—Thank you, I whisper as I gently touch his wounded forearm.

He looks surprised, but not offended, by this gesture of intimacy. I don't know what else to say, but I know I have to say something in this slowly emptying theater in the heart of our nation's Capital. I have to acknowledge in the flesh what we unthinkingly call "service" or "sacrifice." It isn't a perfect offering. We both know it isn't nearly enough.

I imagine Kathleen, a 24-year-old newly minted Army nurse, must have touched many such wounded bodies as she cared for American war casualties in an Army field hospital nestled between quaint English villages and American airfields chock full of 8th Air Force bombers.

— I enlisted in the 65th General Hospital in July 1942. We were sent to Fort Bragg, North Carolina for assignment to a military hospital. We were shipped to England on the first Queen Elizabeth, a voyage I will always remember.



National Archives: US Army nurses arrive in France on 12 August 1944 from field hospitals in England.

Kathleen's unit was originally based in Worcestershire in the fall of 1943, but moved to East Anglia in March 1944.

—The day the 65th General Hospital arrived, the 8th Air Force had sent 1000 heavy bombers to attack Berlin. That night the hospital received 23 fresh casualties from the returning crews.

My father, Daniel McGill, was kneeling in the back end of his B-17 Flying Fortress, his hands on the grips of his .50 caliber machine gun, up there among those heavy bombers flying over Kathleen's hospital on the first daylight bombing raid over Berlin. Almost seventy years later I was having lunch with Kathleen, now 93. I commented on how spacious the dining area was at the retirement village where she lives in Durham.

—Someone said the other night how odd it is that there are so many more women of my age here than there are men. I told her the men of my generation didn't come home.

Kathleen wouldn't speak about her wartime experience. She gave me a written account of her service instead. The World War that Hollywood has glorified bears little resemblance to the procession of human carnage Kathleen witnessed every day for 20 months. Even seventy years isn't long enough to erase that pain.

—We're having to do a combat landing, everything goes black, everything goes quiet, then boom we get down there, we land and immediately everybody says "Alright! Move it! Move it! Move it!" We have to hop out of the plane, we're running on the flight line and we're seeing in the distance, in the background, like huge fireballs in the city of Baghdad, all you see is smoke billowing everywhere, big red glows above the city. And it's . . . I think that's when it hits you. You're in a war zone.

Danny endured two deployments to Iraq as a vehicle mechanic installing much-needed armor plating on convoy vehicles, trying to help Donald Rumsfeld's poorly prepared military ("You go to war with the Army you have, not the Army you want") survive just one more roadside bomb. He went through numerous mortar and rocket attacks on the base, broke a couple of fingers, and breathed in the toxic stew of smoke from the burn pits.

—I was sitting on top of a Humvee looking at the GPK unit making sure the turret system works . . . I was standing up there and all of a sudden I notice my chest starts hurting and it's getting a little bit hard to breathe. All this smoke from the burn pit is billowing inside the building . . . a couple of guys had already gotten sick to their stomach . . . all of a sudden, boom, I fall onto the tailgate, the turtle shell, then I fall off onto the floor and start convulsing, my whole body is shaking.

Danny won't have to battle the VA for compensation. He deployed as a defense contractor. He went for two reasons: money and patriotism. This is a potent mix in the best of times. In the wild, wild West atmosphere of war-torn Iraq, it was absolutely toxic. Danny's physical injuries were fairly light. He came home, unlike the 2000 plus defense contractors who

have died in Iraq and Afghanistan without ceremony or public acknowledgment over the past thirteen years. But Danny's deployments left scars of a different kind, scars shared by countless numbers of active duty military and the families they leave behind.

—The hardest thing was leaving my daughters, Madison and Savannah . . . Savannah was only a few months old when I left . . . when I came home a year later she just didn't recognize who her dad was . . . Little things like changing her diaper, trying to feed her, trying to hold her— she thought I was a stranger. I was still a young dad . . . and that will tear you up right there, your kids don't know who you are, you're not my dad, you're just some guy. I still hear it from my wife to this day. When me and my wife hit our four year mark she said "You know, you've been gone almost half our marriage." It's always gonna be there. Always. Your daughters are always gonna remember that daddy wasn't there.

Danny's words conjure up a long-forgotten image in my mind. I am transported back to 1966. I'm playing in the street outside our house at 479 Milky Way in Vandenberg Village, near Lompoc, California. We have moved from the nearby air base to this fairly new subdivision, where civilian families surround us. I see a few of the children point at me and laugh. "She doesn't have a daddy." I protest vigorously that I do have a daddy. He's just gone right now, but he'll be back soon. A year is an eternity in the life of a young child.

Another image pushes the first one out of the frame. It is many months later and I'm playing in the street once again. I see a handsome man in khaki uniform with a duffle bag over his shoulder. He's walking up the street toward us. As he draws near I recognize him and shout for all the neighborhood to hear.

—Daddy! It's my daddy!

I had to endure few such lengthy absences as a child, only being around for Vietnam, the last of Dad's three wars. I am nearly inconsolable at the thought of military children since 9/11

who have suffered multiple traumatic separations as their mothers and fathers deploy over and over and over again. Danny may be right. Maybe we children will always remember.



Danny with his daughters Madison and Savannah just before his 2nd deployment to Iraq in 2009.

Portia's mother died when Portia was still a child. Her father contracted tuberculosis and was sent to a sanatorium where he died. Her infant sister died after only four weeks on this earth. Her baby brother Johnny fell from a window and was crippled for life. Her "Irish twin," Rosalee, died at age 17. Portia endured unfathomable sorrow and tragedy in her young life. And then in the midst of World War II she joined the United States Navy.

—I liked marching. I liked the uniform. I liked everything about the Navy!

After basic training at Hunter College in The Bronx, and yeoman technical training in Iowa, Portia received orders for, of all places, Treasure Island.

—See, all that stuff I wouldn't have seen if I hadn't gone in the Navy. Wouldn't have met my husband . . . would have had kind of a dull life. It just opened up the world to me.

Portia pulls out a black and white photograph of a handsome young Navy officer, with a stunningly beautiful Navy WAVE at his side. We're talking 1940s movie star drop-dead gorgeous. The photo was taken the night they met in San Francisco, when Portia was trying to impress the eye-catching Ensign Dennis.

—*Do you like Billie Holiday?* she asked.

—*She's my favorite singer!* he said.

—*We'll go to the Martinique, that's where she is.*

Portia was trying to sound cavalier and confident in front of this handsome sailor.

—*The band members were outside and I asked "Is Billie here?" And out she walked with her cigarette and her flower and said, "Yes hon, I'm here!" She pretended to know me! "You want your favorite seat down front?" She sat us down front and sang Them There Eyes to us, and at the end of the evening she gave her flower to my future husband.*

Portia tells me the Navy was the best thing that ever happened to her. She says it got her out of her sorrow. But she didn't need to tell me. I could see it in her eyes, and hear it in her voice. The sound of a child's scars being oh so gently caressed, tenderly pushed aside to make room for a wonderful new life, as the beautiful Billie Holiday sings to her from the stage.

“Round the house and mind the dresser!”



My sister Colleen, scattering Mom's ashes near the Giant's Causeway off the coast of Antrim, Northern Ireland.

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