**HOME IS WHERE YOU START FROM**

**Theo Dorgan**

I was a strange child, it seems to me now, because every memory of my family home that I call up comes with a subsidiary memory: me, looking around me, telling myself ‘you must remember this, you will need to remember this.’

Perhaps everyone does this.

Perhaps not.

Like this, then: I am 10, standing midway up or down the front steps, a summer’s morning, the hedge between us and Mahony’s next door crisp and newly trimmed, and over the hedge, coming out of the heat haze in the valley stretching away and down from our house, the domes and spires and chimneys of the city are starting to come into focus. I am completely, simply, utterly inside myself. I sit down, cross legged, the buckles on my new sandals scraping my bare calves. I smell dust from the warm concrete of the step, fresh-cut grass, the tang of exhaust fumes as a motorbike growls past. Gradually, I am filling up with all I am seeing and feeling and smelling, and I am aware of myself telling myself to remember all this, that I will want to have remembered this. And something else, too, something slight but certain that I can only describe as some faint, definite intimation of an older self reminding me that he, we, will need to have remembered this.

Thus me, at 10, at home.

I have always loved hills, the sudden slant of things, the trudge upward, deep and satisfying in muscle and bone, the vertiginous light-hearted downward plunge, giddy and flying free —and I have always loved flat places, vantages, rest places, ledges over the known and the unknown, but best of all is the quick alternation of one with the other. Now, revisiting myself, my undying childhood, I see all of this may have started from home.

My father and five of his friends bought a piece of land and divided it into six plots on which to build their houses to a simple, common design. Land on the side of a hill that meant steps up to each house from the road, Redemption Road, that fronted the plots. Each of those steps is a site of memory for me, each was a kind of landing stage, jetty or runway for flights of fancy, for jumping off, for sitting on in contented vacancy, places to pause on the way up from the gate or in an otherwise headlong flight downward.

Sometimes arrested by a sudden perception, more often rapt in thoughtful and absorbing play.

The six men worked as labourers on each other’s houses, bonded by work as they were bonded by friendship and by their membership of a hurling and football club, Na Piarsaigh, of which some, my father included, were founders. Such solidarity, such matter of fact mutual support. The builder who managed the construction was known as The Happy Man, because, of course, he was famously not. Such was, and is, the Cork city of my birth, where nothing is what it seems but everything is perfectly understood.

Solid houses, the men cast the concrete blocks on site. Solid steps, poured concrete that has never shifted or cracked. Plain houses, pebble-dashed, metal window frames, wide sills.

Working men, making their play for some kind of permanence in a life where nothing could be taken for granted, where nothing was taken as given except the assurances of family, trust in friendship, work.

And so, my birthplace, the house where I grew up. You stepped in through the gate from Redemption Road into a tiny space of packed earth, you turned right, took the first two small steps and turned left, a small sloping lawn between you and Mahony’s to your left, a smooth-plastered wall to your right, supporting the raised, and also sloped, front lawn. How that wall held heat in summer, your hand running pleasurably along its lightly-textured roughness as you climbed. Shallow steps, broad steps, the fan-shaped broad step where you turned to face the last four steps.

Before you, looming overhead, the modest-sized house that seemed not huge exactly but solid, substantial, the rose-draped pergola rooted in concrete planters each side of the front door. But we mostly used the kitchen door, along the gable, through the wooden gate where the round-topped high wall almost met the house, the wall parallel to the road below, fronted by grass, the outer perimeter of the private space behind.

A beaten-earth yard to the side of the house, then, high steps through the first terrace of back garden to the larger garden above, the steps flattening to a path. The washing line flanking this upper path, permanently burdened with its flags and pennnants. Down again now. At the back of the house, a concreted yard, continuation of the path that ran around the semi-detached house, the yard ending in to the wall dividing us from Twomeys next door. The kitchen window, then the diningroom window, another arch of rambling roses facing that window. My shy romantic father, planting roses for his Rose, my mother. Back in the side yard, over against the wall dividing public front from from private back, a lean-to shed — coal store, bicycle store, home to a glorious chaos of odds and ends, garden tools, paint tins...astonishing, how much miscellanea, how much of life’s near-detritus, can be crammed into a shed, as everyone knows who has ever had a shed.

Our childhood fort, too, our vantage point, sprawled on the hot tarred felt sloping roof overlooking the road and its passing parade — as, we imagined, mailed warriors or men of the 5th Cavalry kept watch from their parapets, sighting along the length of our hurleys, or side by side with our spears laid up alongside. No point bringing bows or arrows onto that roof; rising to use them we would be immediately exposed and vulnerable to the enemy without. That six inches of rounded coping on the front wall was the difference between death and life, our safety and our salvation.

And beside the shed, between shed and hedge, a narrow, secret passage that I would take care to keep open when it became my business to trim the thick privet that bordered the property on each side.

The property. How alien that word when applied to what we knew, in all its layered and clouded complexity, simply as home. First world, sufficient and minutely known.

Steps and flat places, slopes and flat places. Our goings out and our comings in, our stoppings and startings, the sudden freedoms of two, three steps at a time, outward bound, the sudden tiredness of my mother, labouring up from the front gate, laden with shopping bags; my father stopping, his bike over his shoulder, to turn and look backwards at something that had caught his attention on the road below.

Leaving the house, that lovely airy freedom, the opening out into infinite possibility; coming home, that lovely folding around you of the familiar and known, climbing into the secure. Into a place so deeply and thoroughly known and studied it was, in truth, an extension of the self.

Coming home in Autumn, school not long before begun, the crisp outside air meeting the warm inside fug as you open the back door. The larder to the right, never quite full, by a miracle it seems to me now never quite empty. And, ah, the red and yellow square tiles of the kitchen, carried out into the hall towards the pebble-glass front door with its four panels. Always (but perhaps I need to imagine this now) the smell of cooking. On the tiles, if you squatted down in the hall to roll a marble, the smell of Mansion House polish. How intriguing it always seemed, that the tiles were never quite level. Such a minute and exact knowledge I had once, of where a particular tile was faintly raised above the others , where another dipped, so that to reach the front door from the kitchen door with a coloured marble or a Dinky car with wobbly wheels called for skilled propulsion of a high order. Or, overmastered by a sudden black impatience, simple brute force — and the inevitable following sense of disappointment with yourself. Always that doubling self, that voice whispering ‘remember this, you will want to remember this’ .

Dining room to the left with its never-quite extinguished fire, always clothes drying on a clothes horse in front of it. One night it will catch fire and I will walk calmly into the room, fold it in on itself and walk through the kitchen to throw it out into the yard. My mother staring at me, myself amazed at this unexpected coolness, decisiveness, myself pondering, even as I’m doing it, how crisp and decisive and unafraid I’m being. Eldest son.

Beside the dining room, front of the house, the almost empty room we call simply the front room. Empty all through my childhood because on rainy days, when we have to play inside, better to do it in an empty room. Near shock, years later, mid teens, to watch it being furnished.

The stairs. The fuseboard facing it almost unfindable, so many coats hung on the hooks in this shallow recess beside the front door. Changing a fuse for the first time, Dad still at work.

Eldest child, responsible from the start — easy enough to say responsible for what, to write out that catalogue if I choose — but there is also that sense, faint but sure, of being responsible *to* something, or someone.

I observe that this box of memory is in the hands of me aged 9 or 10. Well of course, but I have to go back to the dining room, the arch of rambling roses outside its broad window. To the right of the fire, the table with the wireless on it. I was that age, 10, when I first turned the set around to watch the valves heat up, to smell the particular dust that comes with old radios, their lit interiors. And, in the other alcove, the one nearest the window, the three shelves of books, *The Pears Children’s Cyclopedia* with its engraved line illustrations, the set of Companion Book Club titles that my father, at some stage, collected. *The Ascent of Everest*, *The Phantom Major* ( the story of how David Stirling founded the SAS, a book that will come back to life for me, years later, when in a London pub where I’m working as a summer barman by nights I come across Davy, 20 stone Davy, an original member), and so many others, *The Surprise of Cremona*, *The Epic Voyage of The Seven Little Sisters*, *The Lost World of The Kalahari*... I believe I could list them all if I put my mind to it, I believe this because when, at 10, I began to make my way through those books I was telling myself ‘remember this, remember this’. And not just, I want you to understand, ‘remember what is in this book’, I meant also ‘remember yourself reading this book, remember how it felt, what thoughts it spurred, where you were sitting or standing or lying, what kind of day it was, what the paper felt like, the smell of the ink...’

That was when I began to be twice in the world, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say, that was the age I was when I began to notice my way of being twice — for I’m sure that, even then, I was remembering having always been like this.

Under the stairs in the hall was chaos, a kind of indoor twin to the jumble of the shed outside minus the bicycle and the coal. I remember watching my father screw the tops of jars to the underside of shelves in there, then screw the jars full of rusting nails, nuts, washers and bolts to the lids. I thought that was very clever indeed, may even, like Frank O’Connor observing his father, have thought there was hope for the old fella yet.

The stairs, down which we would jump in the evenings when we couldn’t think of anything better to do, the trick being not to skull yourself on the slant bit of ceiling overhead that followed the angle of the stairs. I claim the record of eight steps, have a clear memory of banging my head any time I attempted nine. My brothers and sisters, the older ones anyway, may dispute my claim — and here they are now, crowding in, my seven brothers, my seven sisters, our lost Nuala buried in faraway Carrignavar. I will be 17 when the youngest is born — but I have not the time nor the space nor the energy here to take on the task, Herculean seems to fit the case, of describing the human ecology of that house, the turbulent whirlpool of feeding, clothing and educating us all, the to and fro of relationships, the ebb and flow of needs and troubles and elations small and great, the give and take that became, of necessity, what bound us together, the many miracles of watching distinct and individual personalities grow and evolve in that soviet of energies and cares. Three bedrooms, boys, girls, parents, one bathroom, one kitchen... and one wage to feed us all.

Even then, my ten year old fetch, only half the family yet born, was entranced by the blunt and fascinating question, how is all this being managed? Yet, without charity or handout, with the help of the blessed Children’s Allowance, somehow managed it was.

I feel him drawing away from me now, that child I was, that child who has never left me, who doubles my steps through the world, watchful, thoughtful, matching me step for step, perpetually interested to see how this will all eventually pan out. He knows it will take a book, perhaps more than one book, to give anything like an accurate depiction of what that was like, to grow up as first child in so big and near-chaotic a family. He is severe, this boy I was, this boy still with me: they have each their own story, my brothers, my sisters, and at the heart of each story some moment, some feeling, some perception absolutely necessary to, uniquely meaningful to, them and them alone. Not my business here. He wants no distractions, I see this as I watch the words emerge here before me on this blue screen, he wants me to say one thing that will bring him guiltless ease.

He wants it said, I think, that he liked our house best — no, not best, but particularly — when it was empty. Ever a planner, he would decide from time to time, when the need for silence and space became pressing, that wandering away off into the garden by himself, or off on one of his solitary rambles through the high fields behind the house, was not exactly what he needed. He would decide he was sick, would effortlessly persuade my mother he needed a day off school. A day to wander slowly through the house, touching things, tracing the texture of things with his fingertips or with his cheek laid against a wall, a curtain. Once, taking the mirror off a dressing table, from an upstairs window he passed away an hour signalling Collins Barracks high on its hill across the valley ’Help, I am being held prisoner...’ His disappointment at getting no answer from those soldiers, his doubt that the book on the windowsill was giving him the accurate morse letters...

It was only play, of course, but curiously detached play. He didn’t care if they answered or not — truth to tell he would probably have got the fright of his life if someone had answered, and besides, sober realist that he was, he knew that he would not have been able to decipher any answer that might have come. I knew it then, I see it now, plain as day, he was simply conducting an exercise for his own private amusement, signalling not so much to the barracks as to the void, the void inside himself in which he was more than happy to amuse himself, forever if need be.

Fortified and protected, of course, by being in sole possession of his known place.

For all that, was he happy, that boy in the house of his childhood? I was, sometimes, but even then I did not believe there was some necessary, absolute, relationship between ‘home’ and ‘happy’. Even then I knew there was more to this mysterious business of being in the world than could be encompassed by ‘happy’. To tell the truth, I thought happiness, as usually understood and meant, a slightly ridiculous concept and ambition.

Then, as now, all I ever wanted was to feel fully myself and at home in the world.

Home is where you start out into the world from; you are never truly completely there, and you never leave. But you do. You are always leaving, leaving... but somehow there is never a sure ‘there’ to leave.

I think he knew that, then, the boy I was who is here inside me now, alive here and now as absolutely as he ever was in the moment by moment of way back then. I know he knew that, because here inside me as I type, here in my hands, I feel his hands enclosed in, articulate in, mine. I feel his mind in mine. I feel his mind intuiting this moment in the future, as I feel my mind near lose its moorings, summoning up the past, struggling, and failing again, to understand — and all we have to agree on is that house, that vivid and actual house neither he nor I can ever truly and fully live in, not then, not now, not ever again, not ever.

**END**

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