

STEPHEN BRADLEY

SHOOTING AND CUTTING

A SURVIVOR'S GUIDE TO
FILM-MAKING AND OTHER DISEASES



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MERCIER PRESS

Much of this book was written under the influence of opiates, steroids, antibiotics, benzodiazepines, antiemetics, chemotherapy, immunotherapy, with bouts of cold turkey, and sharp injections of love and good luck.

‘The day is now well advanced. And yet it is perhaps a little soon for my song. To sing too soon is fatal, I always find. On the other hand, it is possible to leave it too late. The bell goes for sleep and one has not sung.’

– Winnie in *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett

MONDAY, 18 APRIL 2016

I am anxious.

I leave a large Victorian house in Dublin and cross the road. It is freezing cold. More than it should be for this time of year. I walk parallel to a line of black iron railings and focus my eyes beyond them into a wintry park. It's an unexceptional tracking shot.

I took up residence here three weeks ago, departing London after ten years to begin the next part of my family's journey, back in our native Ireland. We can't afford the crazy rent for the house, but we've been offered places at an excellent local school and have thrown caution to the wind. The days since we arrived have been chock-a-block. Our children, Holly and Daniel, aged eleven and seven respectively, have needed to be settled in and convinced of the wisdom of a sudden move across the Irish Sea. My wife has been busy preparing for, then subsequently hosting, a live broadcast of the Irish Film and Television Awards. Deirdre O'Kane, actress, stand-up comic and television presenter, has a gratifying level of notoriety throughout the country. She is much in demand, and has gone away for a couple of days to record a radio play in Belfast.

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I am still walking beside the railings.

Still anxious.

Since my return, several people have told me that I don't look my usual self. How could I look my usual self, I reason, when I've just packed up a London family and speedily converted it into a Dublin one, all in a matter of weeks? That's a lot of boxes and furniture heaved into a removal lorry. Plus a long drive with a terrified English cat, who then proved determined to escape across the deck of an Irish ferry in the middle of the night.

Upheavals aside, apparently I just don't look healthy. So I am on my way to a doctor's surgery. I leave behind the frosty park and head downhill towards the sea, where a stone pier stretches out into the bay.

Naturally, I tell Dr McSwiney a few select but enthralling details about my family's international transfer. His youthful face is open and kind but discourages further small talk. I reluctantly admit to feeling exhausted and I report some unusual digestive issues that have emerged during the past couple of weeks. I helpfully suggest stress as a possible cause.

The doctor starts prodding and poking. He sticks a digital thermometer into my ear. 'You've got a temperature of 102. That's high.' He places a hand beneath my ribs. 'And I can feel that your liver is swollen. I could prescribe you some antibiotics for a week, but I don't think they would make any difference. I want you to go to the Accident and Emergency

Department at The Hospital, without delay, and I'll give you a letter of introduction to hand in at reception.'

I immediately feel faint, requiring a glass of water and a lie-down in my new doctor's office. It's nice to meet you; please accept my apologies for the fact that I'm already threatening to collapse onto your faded Persian rug.

Something is wrong with the body that I have taken for granted for too long. I breathe deeply, reminding myself that I am a catastrophic thinker, and so try to stop my thoughts in mid-gloom.

Everything will be fine.

BEGINNING

It was two birthdays later, at the end of August 2017, that I took possession of myself again. I had spent too many long days in our vast but comforting old bedroom, with a high ceiling that made it impossible to heat during the five darkest months. The same space where the sun's embers had often electrified my doubting soul at magic hour, as a couple of tough summers passed me by. I was remade into a child in that room. Now, entering adulthood once more, I knew that I had to take my leave of this sanctuary.

So I did.

According to the ancient traditions of storytelling, I should have returned from my ordeal with a hero's boon: the wisdom gained from a long journey across uncharted, obstacle-strewn lands; or, better still, by the rules of lore, I should have carried a tangible pot of gold in my newly restored and muscular arms. Neither of those rewards had been bestowed upon me. Because, as poor old Michael Finnegan will tell you in that famous children's song, if there's one thing more difficult than to begin, it's to begin again.

A screenplay arrived unannounced out of the great wide blue. It was written by a man I didn't know particularly well. Nor did I know why he had sent it to me, of all people. I read it straight away, which I never do. It was called *The Safe*.

I loved the first third of the story and my heartbeat quickened as I turned the pages. Then it lost its way and lost me too. But I didn't write it off completely. Because I was, latish on in life, finally coming to terms with the demands of traversing creative minefields. I now understood some of the complex calculations involved: adding talent to blood, sweat and tears, multiplying by serendipity and subtracting expectation to equal a total of uncertainty.

'Please give me a very honest reaction,' the screenwriter said. So I did.

Wrote him some notes. Critical, constructive and to the point.

He called me a bastard.

It was a joke.

This screenwriter, this man I didn't know particularly well, was also a stand-up comic. One of the most respected on a comedy circuit that I had haunted for twenty years or more as a consequence of my marriage. In addition, this performer, who once possessed a natural shock of the reddest hair imaginable, was the author of fine poetry, numerous plays, a television series or three, and a film directed by a name you would definitely know.

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His hair was greyer now because he was older and wiser.
Secretly, he liked my bastard notes.

He asked if I would read another draft of the script in a few months' time.

I said yes. I would.

With good reason.

Because one of the main twists in the story was an uncanny reflection of something that had happened in my own life. Clearly, I can't reveal what the dramatic moment was, for I would be guilty of that most modern of mortal sins – the spoiler. But the extraordinary coincidence struck me as a good reason to engage. Sometimes the decision to proceed with the long and arduous task of developing a screenplay turns on such a personal connection. And obviously, I knew a lot about that strand of the story, from first-hand experience, so I thought that I could bring a new energy to help the writer with his endeavours.

I sent him an email, revealing those dark secrets of mine that chimed with his script.

'Fucking hell!' he wrote poetically in reply. 'If that isn't a good omen, I don't know what is.'

The writer had a name. Owen O'Neill.

His screenplay had already moved me to tears.

STILL MONDAY, 18 APRIL 2016

I am in an old taxi as it rattles along the bus lanes towards The Hospital. Deirdre won't be back from her radio job until tomorrow, so I activate the contingency grandparents option. Pamela and Brendan agree to pick our children up from their new school and await further instructions.

In the first of many coincidences that are about to grace my life over the coming months, my sister Suzie's office is a five-minute walk from the main entrance to The Hospital. I ring her to explain the situation and she promises that she will visit me as soon as I have signed in and presented my swollen liver. I feel a little better already, if only because wheels are in motion. Hopefully I'll be in and out pronto, maybe even cooking fish fingers by teatime. The taxi driver, clearly knowing more than I do, issues a very serious 'Good luck, pal' message as he swings to a stop outside the A&E.

I take another deep breath as I breach the double doors. There is only one family waiting ahead of me, an unusual occurrence in such a busy wing of The Hospital. Half of that family's members are pacing up and down, still in their dressing gowns. The other half are trying to find out who

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left the tablets lying around at home, thereby facilitating the attempted suicide of a loved one. Tears and recriminations suddenly surround and unsettle me.

I am soon called into the triage unit, where a Malaysian doctor confirms my high temperature and predicts that I will need treatment for a liver infection. I won't be going home today either, I am informed, as there are tests and examinations to undergo. I am nevertheless satisfied and relieved that the ailment sounds easily treatable, and so I settle into prime position on trolley number one. By the time Suzie arrives with an *Irish Times* newspaper and sandwiches for lunch, I am being hooked up to my second bag of intravenous saline fluid to combat dehydration. I have also been scheduled for an afternoon appointment with the computed tomography (CT) scanning machine.

The A&E is now busy, noisy and uncomfortably airless. The triage team has filled trolley number thirty-five. There is a member of An Garda Síochána in attendance to enforce a barring order against the father of a patient. The errant dad is roaming the department, looking for a chance to cross the barricades.

When the nurses' shift change happens at 8 p.m., I am relieved to have my own trolley wheeled into a windowless grey cell that seems to me to have all the privacy of a plush hotel. My sister stays with me as late as is humanly permitted. There's a reason why her childhood nickname was 'Suzie Angel'.

Then I'm on my own.

In the middle of the night, rupturing my already uncertain and trolley-bound sleep, a ghostly figure arrives to cart me off for a chest X-ray. I make no protest, not knowing whether this is real or a dream.

In the early morning, everything comes into sharp focus as the doors of my cell are suddenly blasted wide open. The gastroenterologist enters like the wind, energetic and forceful, with three junior doctors in desperate pursuit. I sit up, startled and bleary-eyed. There follows an interrogation. An inquisition. From the gastroenterologist's point of view, there is an urgent necessity for information.

'Do you drink a lot? Who do you drink with? When? Do you drink spirits? How much does your wife drink? How often would you drink a bottle of wine? How many nights a week do you drink? Are you a secret drinker? Is this your first time in hospital recently?'

She immediately has me on the ropes and I mumble my answers with embarrassment in front of the all-female posse. When they leave (after listing all the future tests that are going to conclusively and unavoidably expose me as a substance abuser) I have already convinced myself that I must indeed drink to excess. Up to this point I hadn't believed that I ever consistently consumed too much in the way of alcoholic beverages, but it is possible that I have been deluding myself. Perhaps I have, in part, even returned back to Ireland to escape

what everyone in London has been saying about me behind my back for years: that I am a chronic secret drinker?

It hasn't taken long to make me doubt myself and become paranoid. That's the level of vulnerability I am feeling inside the cell's grey walls, now closing inexorably in on me.

By the time Deirdre returns from Belfast, I am full of apologies for having apparently thrown my life away on the booze. If there is something seriously wrong with me I will only have myself to blame and I will have wasted my opportunity to fulfil the role of husband and father, let alone son or brother. I am a pathetic wreck.

Deirdre almost slaps me back to my senses. You do not drink to excess by any normal standard, she berates me. And, as the blood tests and scan results start to roll in, the gastroenterologist, whose name is Juliette Sheridan, also realises that I am not a practising alcoholic, but more like a scared mid-lifer who is prepared to consider a false confession under duress. She gives me strong intravenous antibiotics to battle various digestive infections, and pinky blood products to lift my iron levels.

Over a period of forty-eight hours I begin to feel human again. Dr Sheridan is immediately caring, charming, expert and attentive. There is some undefined quality about her that is reassuring to behold. For the next week, I am going to be under her care while the gastroenterology team resurrects my system.

But, for now, we make two clear discoveries together: firstly that, in a strange coincidence, she and her family live four doors along from our newly rented house; and secondly that, while it is true that I have plenty of the predicted infection throughout my digestive tract, there is also something more alarming in play.

The CT scan shows a shadow covering half of my liver.

It indicates an abnormal growth of large and worrying proportions.



'MUCH OF THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF OPIATES, STEROIDS, ANTIBIOTICS, BENZODIAZEPINES, ANTIEMETICS, (CHEMOTHERAPY, IMMUNOTHERAPY, WITH BOUTS OF COLD TURKEY, AND SHARP INJECTIONS OF LOVE AND GOOD LUCK.'

In 2016, at the end of the promotional tour for his latest film, writer-director Stephen Bradley was diagnosed with stage IV cancer. Supported by his wife, actress and comedian Deirdre O'Kane, as well as the rest of his inner circle, Stephen started down a difficult but vital path — one full of twists and turns, coincidences and hard-earned realisations — back to health.

Shooting and Cutting: A Survivor's Guide to Film-making and Other Diseases details Stephen's journey through life-changing treatment, provides war stories from his twenty years in the film and TV business, and documents his attempts to return to film-making and a comparatively normal family life once over the worst of the cancer treatment. Honest, moving and often devastatingly funny, Stephen's story shows that, even for a seasoned filmmaker, life can often out-do the most outlandish of scripts.

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