A TRUE STORY OF KIDNAPPING, ROBBERY, FRAUD AND ABUSE

YOU SHOT MY DOG AND I LOVE YOU

ANONYMOUS

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To my firstborn son, for showing me
I was on the right road all along.

‘Every truth unspoken is a lie.’

– *my father*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This account of my early life is based on my own recollections and those of particular family members. However, names and certain identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of both the innocent and the guilty. And, moreover, to protect myself.

PROLOGUE

DUBLIN 1982

I knew I was in deep shit. And this time there appeared to be no way out. A rather hefty woman had trundled over to the side door of the post office and, while looking me straight in the eye, closed it purposefully. She then reached for the keys in her pocket. From the periphery of my one good eye I could see that the only available teller was beginning to close down her station, despite the fact that it was still early in the morning. Something was terribly wrong.

Time seemed to pause while I looked for a credible means of escape, but I could see none. The largely wooden, decaying interior of the building had only one exit, the very same portal that my mother had just used and which the hefty staff member now appeared to be locking.

For a moment I entertained the notion that I might be suffering from some sort of delusion or paranoia. Perhaps the women's behaviour had nothing to do with me? Maybe they were just going about their daily routine and I was imagining this perceived threat? With that in mind I decided to form a queue of one in front of the teller. But she cast me a look as if to say: 'I don't fucking think so, sonny.'

The look she gave me was unmistakable. We'd been rumbled.

Word must have circulated about a mother-and-son team working the Dublin area, and neither of these women gave the impression that they were about to let themselves be scammed by a twelve-year-old boy. I became acutely aware that if, by some miracle, I got out of this predicament, we would have to leave Dublin, and soon. The jig was up.

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Extraordinary days begin like any other and this day had been no exception. We had no inkling of what was to come as we drove towards the port area of the city that morning. As we hadn't 'done' that part of the city yet, my parents were keen to be early birds. This meant starting before lunchtime, which was unusual. Prior to this, we had generally begun our light-fingered antics much later in the day, giving the staff plenty of time to become tired and invariably let their guard down. Late afternoons were considered best.

On this pivotal day, however, we were out on the prowl early, perhaps too early for such shenanigans. It struck me that we might well be the first customers through the door, which surely was not wise? To add insult to injury, my dad had decided that both my mother and I were to go into the first post office and make two separate withdrawals, one after another. This was not normal practice either, especially at smaller branches – mostly due to the fact that my mother and I bore a striking resemblance to one another and, no matter how well we acted, it would be blindingly obvious to all present that we were related. My dad seemed unconcerned by this, but, then again, why would he be? He may have been a master forger and getaway driver, but he never committed any actual face-to-face crimes. He was, however, the brains of the outfit, so I put my faith in him and did as I was told.

As it was now over a month into our endeavours, both my mother and I had become quite adept at our technique. On such rare occasions at this, she would always enter first, while I lagged behind, making sure not to enter before her transaction was almost complete. On this sunny April morn, my mother was particularly quick and left the premises in record time with her spoils, leaving the counter free for the next in line: little old me.

But clearly the staff's suspicions had already been aroused. As the hefty woman fumbled with her keys and the teller reached for the counter blind, I knew that they were on to us. Still, I felt that I had little choice but to go through the motions. After all, I had a mission to complete.

I thought that if I was convincing enough then maybe I could quash their misgivings. My legs propelled me to the counter with considerable gusto, disregarding the teller's facial expression and ignoring the fact that she was clearly battening down the hatches. I placed my account book down firmly and, in what I hoped was the most trustworthy of voices, blurted out, 'I'd like to withdraw thirty pounds, please.'

Not only did I bear an uncanny resemblance to this woman's previous customer, but I was also taking out the exact same amount. The look on the teller's face made my stomach churn. I knew the additional line I had prepared about it being my birthday wasn't going to fly.

A sense of panic grew within my small frame. A mirror behind the counter reflected the frosted glass front of the post office, allowing me to make out something blue moving slowly along the street outside. It appeared to be the same colour as our getaway car, although I could not be certain. It looked as if my parents were absconding without me.

The teller ignored my request, choosing to stare me out instead. It was time to get out of there. Two outcomes beckoned: freedom or incarceration. So, abandoning my play altogether, I turned and charged towards the door, which was still being guarded by the key-holder. I summoned all the aggression I could muster and screamed: 'Open the fucking door.' She point-blank refused, standing firm.

'Open the fucking door,' I yelled again. The teller, offended by my colourful language, was now waving my account book and heading in my direction, no doubt to help detain me.

A combination of fear and adrenaline awakened a brute strength. I pushed the key-holder out of the way and grabbed the door handle. To

my astonishment, it was still unlocked. Hey presto! The door swung open and I bolted. I ran as fast as I could, looking for my parents while trying not to panic. I could hear the women shouting after me, but luckily neither of them attempted pursuit. I was sure, however, that the guards would not be too far behind.

As I turned the corner, I could see my dad's car in the middle distance, driving away, albeit slowly. I saw two heads inside, confirming that my mother was safe. I kept running, shouting for them to stop in a volume that burned my lungs, the cold morning air slicing the back of my throat. Anxiety and excitement were essential fuel for my young legs as I galloped ever faster, gaining on the car with every stride. My parents must have heard my cries and the car began to slow a little – not to a complete stop, but just enough to allow me to jump in. I threw myself into the back of the moving vehicle, relieved.

Once my dad saw that I was safely inside the car, he hit the accelerator hard. There was a screeching sound accompanied by the stench of burning rubber, which immediately irritated my nostrils. Both my mum and I were pinned to the back seat as he showed off his impressive getaway skills. It was not dissimilar to being in a plane during take-off, only without the seat belts. We were unsure if anyone had taken down our number plate, but the car had to be ditched regardless, just in case. I had to be temporarily ditched too. The guards were sure to be looking for a couple with a young boy, so I had to be dropped off somewhere at my earliest inconvenience.

After a number of speedy twists and turns around some rarely used back roads, the car came to a sudden stop. My dad turned around and beckoned at me to get out, pointing in the direction of the local canal. He suggested that I follow it westward, back through the area in which we lived. He reminded me, however, that under no circumstances was I to approach our house. I was to stick meticulously to the plan we had made for an occasion such as this.

He asked me if I understood what had to be done and I told him I did. He leaned over and pulled shut the car door behind me, then informed me through the glass in muffled tones that they had to get going. They intended to set fire to the car and destroy their clothes. Before I could utter a word, the engine revved violently and my parents were gone. I could just about make out my mother waving at me from within the vanishing car. I was about to wave back, but before I could raise my arm a cloud of gravel and dust enveloped me. They were gone.

With a few pounds in my pocket, I headed in the direction my dad had suggested, looking over my shoulder the whole time. I was fully aware that under no circumstances could I afford to get caught. Once I reached the canal I removed my jacket and threw it into the stagnant water, the tartan lining becoming ever more entangled in weeds and beer cans as it faded into the darkness below. I then turned my T-shirt inside out, roughed up my hair and started to walk a little differently. I had to believe I was an entirely different person if I was to convince others. I succumbed to this new character with relish, soon feeling like I was someone other than myself.

Although the canal led all the way home, I did not want to be obvious and simply follow it blindly. For all I knew the guards were looking for me with the women from the post office in tow. If I was spotted, they were sure to recognise me, regardless of my efforts to disguise myself. So I decided to take the side streets in a zig-zag pattern, constantly crossing the putrid canal every few minutes. I had a good sense of direction and before long I was back in my local area, close to home.

As I was under strict instructions not to go to our flat, I paced the surrounding streets in circles – in effect, casing the joint. I was keen to know if the guards had found our abode, thinking it not inconceivable that they might well be searching the place right there and then. As I moved closer, I half-expected uniforms to emerge with arms full of my dad's forgery paraphernalia.

When the door did in fact open, it was not the guards who emerged. Surprisingly, it was my parents. They were each carrying a large bag and acting pretty normal for two people skirting arrest. I was tempted to make contact but decided it was best not to approach them yet, instead sticking to the plan my dad had drummed into me.

That plan (should things go awry as they most certainly did on this fateful day) was for us to meet at a specific location at a designated time. As I still had a couple of hours to kill before our meeting, and I now assumed my time in Dublin was limited, I decided to take a final walk around the city centre, enjoying all my old haunts one last time.

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It was hard to say goodbye to a city that had so recently become my home. I was fond of Dublin, mostly because it reminded me of London. Although only twelve years old, I already had an affinity with big cities. The larger population helped stave off the feeling of isolation I'd often had while living in rural Ireland.

As I walked down O'Connell Street, I replayed that morning's events, trying to pinpoint the exact moment the women became suspicious. Was it something I did? Maybe I was too obvious? Did I inadvertently make eye contact with my mother as we crossed paths? The potential reasons were many, but I concluded they were of no importance now. All that mattered was that I had escaped and, by doing so, had avoided borstal or possible jail time within the Irish penal system.

After a brief wander, I arrived at the designated meeting point: Bewley's Tea House. It was a beautiful old building, smack bang in the middle of a bustling shopping street. My parents would dine there often, mostly in order for my dad to reach his weekly cake quota. On one such occasion, it had been decided that it would be the perfect location for

us to regroup if something went wrong. So there I perched, at the right time and in the right place. Unfortunately there was no sign whatsoever of my parents.

Bewley's was not usually the kind of place in which a young boy could hog a table, but one of the waitresses was kind enough to look the other way. For a good while she let me be, but eventually she came over to ask if I wanted to order anything. I had very limited funds and did not want to spend the little cash I had on an unnecessary beverage. I told her I was expecting my parents at any moment and she agreed to let me wait a little longer, but told me that if they didn't turn up soon, she would need the table back.

It wasn't long before it became painfully obvious that my parents weren't coming. I had stuck to the plan meticulously and could not understand why they had not done likewise. I wondered if perhaps they had visited Bewley's earlier and hadn't seen me? If so, they would no doubt have assumed that I'd been apprehended. If that was the case, they were sure to leave Dublin without me.

I was pondering various scenarios when I received an abrupt tap on the shoulder. It was the manager. He was clearly suspicious of a young boy sitting on his own and made no secret of his desire for me to leave. I had been taking up valuable dining space for far too long and my time was up. I left without issue, nodding my thanks to the waitress as I descended the steep staircase onto the busy street below.

By now it was late afternoon and little sun remained. As I navigated my way through the streets, it dawned on me that a decision had been made on my behalf. I would have to disobey my dad's explicit instructions and risk returning to the flat. I had little choice. I had barely any money and nowhere else to run. As I walked back through the city I had to face the distinct possibility that I may well be on my own. It was a terrible realisation and I felt abandoned.

The evening air was chilly and I was ill-equipped for it, due to being jacket-less after the morning's shenanigans. No matter what time of year it was, it always seemed to be cold in Ireland; at least London had warm stretches during the summer. On the way home I made a tentative plan to leave for England the following day. Whose door I would knock on after my arrival remained something of a mystery, although I was fairly sure the skills I had learned from my parents would enable me to gain free passage back to Blighty in no time.

However, before I could commit to such a thing, I had to find out if I was, in fact, on my own. Could my parents really have left Dublin without me?

I knew that it wasn't safe to simply walk up to the front door, so I surveyed the house, keeping an eye out for any suspicious guard-like activity. I decided to position myself in a doorway opposite the end of our street to observe any movement. The squat beige house in which we lived was wedged into a terrace of similar buildings that continued in uniform towards the horizon. Our house had three outward-facing windows, but on this dark evening they shed no light.

I sat in the cold for some time. There were no comings or goings whatsoever. I kept my eyes peeled, but it soon dawned on me that nothing out of the ordinary was occurring. I was finding the temperature a little hard to bear and needed the warmth only four walls could give.

I got up from my hiding place, crossed the busy road and crept along the narrow pavement until I reached our front door. I slid my key into the lock, trying not to make any noise. The entrance gave way to a pitch-black hallway. All was piercingly quiet. Not a single light burned in the entire building.

I made my way upstairs to my bedroom (which, uncharacteristically, was separate from my parents' living quarters below), avoiding the squeaky floorboards as I went. I opened the door and fell onto my bed, exhausted

from the day's events. Sleep very nearly overtook me, but I resisted; this was no time to let my guard down. I was also exceptionally hungry, but alas, all our food was locked away in my parents' flat downstairs, and that was a key with which I had never been entrusted.

In my room everything was exactly as I'd left it, the only difference being the amplified silence. Had it always been this quiet? As the night stretched on, the nothingness was only broken by the clanging of hangers inside a small, brown wardrobe, caused by the passing of any vaguely powerful vehicle. It was abundantly clear that no one had been in my room since I'd left that morning, neither my parents nor the guards. If the law had paid a visit, I was sure that my room would have been turned upside down.

After a while, I moved from the bed to the window ledge, peering down at the street. The house was relatively small and even though I was on the first floor it never really seemed that high up. I soon became lost in thought. With every passing reflection my eyelids grew heavier and fighting the urge to sleep became more difficult. However, my attention was soon drawn to a strange noise coming from outside. I could hear the distinct sound of metal on metal, and it seemed to be getting closer with every clang.

I had given up all hope of seeing my parents. I was therefore mystified by what unfolded in the street below. First my dad came into view, accent first, followed closely by my mother. Both of them appeared to be riding brand new bicycles and they were bickering avidly. My dad spotted me perched on the windowsill and waved up with surprising enthusiasm.

I was baffled. My parents were fully kitted out with camping gear, each of them wearing a bulging steel-frame rucksack complete with sleeping bags attached at the bottom. My dad also had an enormous tent strapped to the underside of his rucksack with bungy cords. It all looked extremely heavy and cumbersome. Once he dismounted, I noticed that his bike was still pressed firmly against the asphalt. The weight of overfilled saddlebags

clinging to his back wheel gave the impression that it had a flat tyre. What on earth could they be carrying?

The clanging I had heard from afar was soon explained; it was my mother. Attached to the back of her rucksack was a selection of aluminium pots and pans, which swung from side to side, creating a sort of tinny rhythm in time with her pedalling.

It was difficult to know how to react to what I was witnessing. My dad seemed genuinely pleased to find that I was still at large. My mother, however, gave the initial impression that my being home and free was an inconvenience. Apparently it was my dad who had insisted on one final check of the house before they left for France.

'France?'

The look on my face must have been one of complete bewilderment. Why were they both suddenly equipped for a two-wheeled adventure? It wasn't part of any plan I'd been made aware of.

My mum was still astride her bicycle out on the street when my dad came bounding up the stairs. Up until that point, it felt like I had been watching this farce play out in slow motion; it was only when my bedroom door flew open that I finally snapped out of the trance. My dad was beaming and I half-expected a hug. This would have been the prime moment in our joint existence to deliver one, but alas it was not in his nature. Instead there were a few seconds of awkwardness and confusion followed by, 'Jesus, we thought you'd been caught', while he hovered uncomfortably in the doorway.

My father explained that they were convinced I'd been picked up by the guards, probably close to where they dropped me off that morning. Believing this to be the case, they'd decided it was best to abscond under the cover of night. But this tall tale made me somewhat suspicious. Was I some sort of patsy in all this? Had they expected me to fail from the outset? Were they hoping that my apprehension would be enough of a

distraction for the guards to ensure their escape? This would certainly explain why they never bothered to show up at the tea house.

My mother had clearly become irritated with waiting outside and dragged her bicycle loudly through the hallway into their flat. It seemed that my avoiding arrest had ruined their immediate plans. I felt like excess baggage that they had hoped to shed.

My dad asked me if I had seen the letter they'd left for me. 'What letter?' I enquired. It was then that he ushered me out of my room towards a small table at the foot of the stairs, the kind that becomes overgrown with pizza menus and the unwanted post of previous tenants. Atop the pile was a small white envelope with my name on it. My dad picked it up and handed it to me.

Inside the envelope was a scruffy piece of paper with holes torn along the top. It was an insignificant scrap of notepaper that just happened to contain the first words to ever make me cry. It was an incredibly difficult read, not least because my dad's spiky handwriting could have benefitted from subtitles.

The letter explained that they were taking the night ferry to Cherbourg. They wished me luck and stated that if by some miracle I had not been apprehended, it would be best for me to make my way across the Irish Sea to my grandparents' house in London. There wasn't any money in the envelope, so how they expected me to make that particular voyage was one of life's little mysteries.

My mum had written the slightly more legible sign-off at the bottom: 'We won't forget you, son; we will come for you, love Mum & Dad'.

I looked up to see my dad's misguided smile. He was waiting for some sort of reaction, but I was finding it difficult to swallow. I folded the letter ever so carefully and slid it back into the envelope, my heart just a little more broken than before.

TOLD FROM THE AUTHOR'S PERSPECTIVE AS A YOUNG BOY, THIS IS A HARROWING STORY OF PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ABUSE INFLICTED ON HIM AT THE HANDS OF HIS PARENTS. SET IN IRELAND AND THE UK IN THE 1970S AND EARLY 1980S, AND WRITTEN IN A DARKLY COMIC STYLE, HE DESCRIBES PARENTS WHO PUT HALLUCINOGENIC DRUGS INTO HIS BABY BOTTLE, OFTEN STARVED HIM, AND LATER INDOCTRINATED HIM INTO A TRANS-EUROPEAN LIFE OF CRIME, AS WELL AS A FATHER WHO INFLICTED NUMEROUS SAVAGE BEATINGS. WRITTEN ANONYMOUSLY TO PROTECT THE PROTAGONISTS' IDENTITIES, THIS IS THE TRUE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD NO ONE WOULD WISH ON THEIR WORST ENEMY.

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