

## Hearing the Birds Pause

Dan O'Carroll

I had just left St Pancras on the Eurostar, and hadn't had a lot of sleep. Waking at 4.30am from a dream of my granny, and drifting in and out of consciousness till six, I'd wandered out the front of the hotel and around the corner to the station. You couldn't have swung a cat in my room but it had been decent enough for £65 in London in 2019, and it was five minutes' walk from King's Cross.

Two women with South Dublin accents sat behind me on the train and started chatting:

'Do you know Marc O'Polo?'

'Oh, yes. I do, I do.'

'It's a great brand.'

'It is. It is a great brand.'

'Lovely fabrics.'

'*Gorgeous* fabrics.'

'You can count on them.'

'You can.'

'They're reliable.'

'They are. You know what you're gettin'.'

'And they've been around forever.'

'You're right. A long time.'

And they must have had plenty of money, these two. Because one of them had moved on to another clothing brand and the other had said:

'It's a shame you have to go to Paris for it.'

‘I know. It is.’

‘Sure if you pop over to London in a couple of weeks, we’ll go again and stay a few days.’

‘Do a proper shop.’

‘Do a proper shop. Exactly.’

There was lots more about ‘nipping’ and ‘popping’ in and over, all very breezy and matter-of-fact, but proud all the same. Proud that they could nip and pop, I mean. Like they’re heading into Dublin. Proud because, I suspect, once upon a time one or neither of them could have afforded to have done anything of the sort.

You could hear it in their voices.

I sat for a while trying to settle on an age for the two women, again from their voices. Sixty? Maybe sixty-five? I rolled up my jacket and stood up so that I could drop it into the overhead racks and have a look at both of them out of pure nosiness.

They were seventy-five if they were a day, one maybe closer to eighty. Nipping over to London. Popping over to Paris for *gorgeous* fabrics, because, you know, they’ve been around forever. And you know what you’re gettin’.

One of them actually looked like my granny, about the face.

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At the time, I berated myself regularly for over-checking my social media sites. I’d spent months trying to convince myself that the benefits outweighed the costs, and, taking it easy on myself that morning on the train because of the lack of sleep, I whipped out my phone. I had, after all, transcribed scraps of the women’s conversation into my notebook, and that counted as work in my book.

Facebook was first, and it was lovely to see the faces of people I had affection for but whom I would, in all likelihood, never see again. Then Twitter. A dangerous place, I would

argue, with a friend of mine, Joanne. She thought the ‘dangerous’ thing was unfair, so I challenged her before I left, to see how long it took her after opening the app to feel not only partisan, but near militant. Angry, even. And whether that was a wise place to go, you know, daily and on purpose.

You see, Joanne was someone I was equal parts drawn to and wary of. Like a whirlpool, or a loud noise in the middle of the night. Not someone I saw often, but someone who, on occasion, said, did, or posted something you couldn’t take your eyes off. And you had no idea in advance whether you’d be drawn to it or repulsed. Today, I couldn’t put words to it. Because three or four posts down from the top of my phone’s Twitter feed, Joanne had ‘liked’ a message that read: *‘People, help. Please. My infant son is back from surgery and it’s touch and go. I need your prayers. Every single one. Any one. Please.’* Underneath the tweet was the usual panel with numbers of retweets and likes and comments. And it snagged something in me. Two things, really. First was the weirdness of it. The incongruence. Of this man’s face – a man I had never met and knew nothing about – appearing on a small flat screen barely bigger than my palm, and pleading, to me and to anyone else who might read it, people who he had never met and had no connection with, to think of him and to pray – pray! – for his infant son who was then, at that very moment, recovering from surgery. And who might, I realised as I expanded the thread, die very soon.

The second thing that snagged with me was what may or may not have happened in Joanne’s head when she saw the tweet: do I like this, or retweet it? And ‘like’? *Really? Like?* My son, my baby is suffering and may die any minute. I am in pieces. Anyone. Everyone. Help me, please.

Joanne ‘likes’ this.

To my shame, my eyes skipped to the next tweet – what was I doing? – and it was a near naked woman, a New York artist I follow and had seen in Belfast once. Going on about

how happy she was to be in her hotel room, and how she'd found the wine, and how some kind person had left her a bath bomb and she had a lovely bath and yeah: life, man, I'm an artist, you know, and, you know, sometimes I just love my job.

I thought I was going to be sick.

#

When my grandmother on my mother's side died aged 73, there were four other people in the room, two sons and two daughters. The children – all twelve of them – took it in shifts to sit by her bedside and talk with her when she could talk, and to say the rosary when she couldn't or she was sleeping. Once upon a time I thought that that was primitive. Now I am ashamed of such a thought. The hospital was small enough and local enough to allow relatives to stay with her once the point where nothing could be done had passed. And her room was close enough to the woods to hear the leaves move, and hear the birds sing, through windows you could still open in those days.

My granny was a woman of deep faith and, although I often saw her tired – she was riddled with arthritis and spent a fair portion of her life beside an off-white Rayburn in the back kitchen of a house in Mill St, Cushendall – I never, not once, saw her unhappy. And I heard the story separately from three of the other four in the room that when the time of death came, they all knew, they just knew without anyone saying anything, that here, now, this was the time. Granny was leaving us. And they all simultaneously stopped the rosary and remained silent, as the birds too, which had been twittering and tweeting all morning, slowly, over a period of a minute or so, petered out and slowed down... then stopped.

And no-one looked at the others and all of them knew and felt something strange and powerful and unquestioningly peaceful and at ease. For two minutes.

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Three.

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With just the deep, slow hush and swish of the leaves in the trees outside.

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Until the first bird started again. And then another. And another. Whereupon Hugo, the eldest son, took up his beads again, and resumed the rosary precisely where they had left off.

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I thought of that moment often. Reframed it during my agnostic phase. Dismissed it during my atheist phase. Appreciated it for what it was when I realised what I believed didn't matter a jot.

I thought of it especially when I had my first jolt of death-by-autoplay, only a few weeks before encountering the pleading father. I thought of it now with the boy lying, struggling, in recovery.

The first time was a mid-week, finished-work-for-the-day 'quick check' of messages. You know the one: work mail, personal mail, social media, close the lid. A 'quick check' that can eat up a precious hour of your life when you're already tired.

Anyway, I spot a face, an old familiar face at the bottom of the screen and next thing – whoosh – I'm in a hospital I worked in long ago.

'Go ahead, daddy,' says an old school friend. I see his face in the corner of the screen, and my heart bruises a little.

The picture shakes and flickers a bit, then settles near an old man's bedside. Zooms out. Zooms in. Settles and focuses. The man is clearly ill, and emaciated, and tired.

And yet there, on the screen, he begins to sing a song. He is a man I once knew in full health and had great respect and affection for. And it's a beautiful folk song that the man wrote himself, recorded by numerous singers over the years.

I can't get my head round it. My friend moves his phone from his father to himself, to the others in the room. They're all singing the song. All joining in. And I begin to cry terribly, right there, at my desk.

Because there is no warning for this. And there is no context for this. The video is squeezed between an acquaintance doing a charity challenge and an advertisement for an event I have no interest in. It is clear from the morphine drip, and the tear-wet faces, and the singing, that this is the end. This is the parting glass. And it is lovely for them to be singing together. It really is. But I selfishly resent my friend for sharing it. Because in my mind it doesn't fit the moment. Or the stature of the dying man.

But mostly I am sad because I didn't know that he was dying.

#

'Are you going to go for the linen?'

'I am going to go for the linen. Sure it's still the summer.'

'It *is* still the summer, and you might as well.'

'I might as well, you're right.'

The two Dublin women behind me were still at it, and I envied them the easy rhythmic bonding of their conversation.

I had grabbed a sandwich and a coffee and had settled into the journey, but I wasn't feeling any stronger-willed. It had been a long night after all, and it had left me tired, and scattered.

I picked up my phone to check on the boy.

And the photo was there, as before, with the anguished father in the foreground, and the infant son behind a pane of glass to his right and on a drip, covered in tape and tubes and surrounded by machines.

I don't think the boy was conscious but there was no way to tell. He was still alive at least (*Joanne likes this*). And I knew this because the father had been leaving little 'like' hearts here and there and even replying to some of the comments and statements of support and solidarity. The last reply was only a couple of minutes before. The picture had been liked and shared, liked and shared, cycled and spun into the digital ether like a Tibetan prayer wheel with its own collective mantra: *please let the boy be fine, please let the boy be fine, please let the boy be fine.*

And I thought of the little boy himself then. What if he was still conscious but couldn't show it? What if there was no efficacy in prayer, of whichever sort or intensity? What if the boy could see his father taking the picture? What happens when we separate our attention from our intention?

I didn't know.

I did know that if I were suddenly sick and I was rushed to hospital and there was a chance – even a slim one – that I would not make it through the day, that I would want those who were there with me to be with me. And no, this is not a judgement of the father because this man, the tweeting man, is mad with grief and worry. He's beside himself and crying out for what he thinks will work, so what right have I to judge?

None.

But I opened the photograph. I pinched and zoomed in on the little boy's face. What if his eyes were to open suddenly, but only briefly? What if he were to see his father there, outside the plate glass? What if he were to wonder why his father was flicking and scrolling, when this, here and now, this was the time? And his eyelids drooped and then fought to stay open, and his father checked him just at that drooped moment but missed the next moment? When the boy fought and succeeded in seeing his father one last time. Flicking and scrolling.

Liking and typing.

Drifting and floating.

Neither watching, nor waiting.

Nor hearing the birds pause.

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