

The Real Thing

Today's short fictional story is by Niamh O'Sullivan, of Mallow, and is a fictional account of the Hillsborough football tragedy, told through the eyes of a young boy who loses his dad in the disaster

“JUST hold on! Hold on!” I can see him just in front of me, trying to reach back, trying to grab my hand. “Hold on!” I hear him say again. It’s warm, very warm, the sun is shining on my face, but there is more heat, too much heat. I feel pinned into my jacket and try to shake it off. But it only seems to wrap itself closer around me. It’s Mark’s jacket, his pride and joy, pounds scraped together so he could afford another crest, worn open upon his chest such as not to obscure his lucky jersey. “This is the real thing, mate. The real thing. Guard it with your life!”

The persistent hand finally finds mine. I seize it. I didn’t expect it to be this cold, this wet. I have to readjust my grip so I don’t lose it again.

I feel drops of sweat forming on my brow. Very soon they are going to start rolling down my forehead, my nose, my cheek. The heat is unbearable. The man to my left jolts forward and his hat hits me on the shoulder. I try and shake it off before I realise that he won’t be able to retrieve it if it hits the floor. I hold still as he reaches for it. Seconds later it’s back on his head, his arm strangely suspended somewhere the height of my shoulder. I try and lean into it to move it on but it’s wedged between us. The April sun is beating down on us, I can feel it warming my head. Maybe I’ll start with the scarf.

With difficulty I untangle my left arm from the hip next to me and wriggle it upwards so I can undo the bright red banner Dad bought me on the way in. “You’ve got to have one of these! It’s your first one, it’s a special day, you’ll need something to remember it by!” I poke the bald man in front of me in the ear and mumble “Sorry mate!” He can’t hear me but I feel better for saying it. The man next to me sways into my ribs and I pull down too hard; the scarf wraps itself tighter around my neck, too tightly, too tightly, I gasp. “Dad!” He’s right there in front of me, his arm bent uncannily backwards, like that time Mark was trying to teach me the police grip.

I stare at his oddly distorted limb, then suddenly feel how strongly he’s grasping my hand. He can’t hear me above the roars. “Dad!” I try again, my voice fading thinly once again. Stop pulling, I tell myself, and try the other side. The shorter end of the scarf comes off more easily and relieved, I shake it off. It falls onto my chest, and lingers for a moment, then continues on its journey to the floor. I can’t bend down. “I’ll get it later.” I tell myself. Just then an excited roar ripples through the crowd and flushed faces raise themselves eagerly as their bodies try to follow, hundreds of sweaty, hot fans, a sea of red, now writhing, surging as one. “Beardsley. It was Beardsley!” I hear a man shout at his friend, who, like me, can’t see. Has the game even started?

But before I can understand how the other man can see what so many of us can not, almost immediately, there comes the disappointed “awww” as we try to take a few steps back from the people in front of us. I don’t know the cause of our collective groan but then the answer comes from a few lads further back. “The bar, he hit the bar!” So close. But it’s early days yet, early days, that’s what I’m sure Dad just muttered into the crowd.

Our bubbles have long since merged into one gelatinous mass, rolling forward like a wave crashing towards the shore, on the verge of sharing a moment we thought was the beginning of the victory everyone was expecting, then retreating back in search of a more spacious vacuum. Except there is no space. No room to move. I cannot direct my feet



NEVER FORGET: Liverpool fans pay tribute to the victims of the Hillsborough disaster of 1989 during a match at Anfield earlier this year

to go where I want them to go. The sun is stinging my eyes. Or is it the sweat. I can’t wipe my brow, but then it suddenly gets roughly taken care of on the bald man’s shoulder as we get bumped forwards once more.

Dad’s hand slips out of mine and falls away. “It’s OK son, I’m here. I’m here.” We try to reach around a stone-washed trouser leg but it’s no use. A few feet away I see the high wire mesh separating us from the pen to our left. My feet are not my feet, they are being commanded by another force and my body sways with the men

on either side of me, in front of me, behind me. I don’t want to lose him. I glance at the fence. Knuckles dig into the back of my ribcage, an elbow swipes my neck, meeting my head with an involuntary blow. I try to shake them back but there is no give in the mass around me. Then suddenly a surge, as a sweaty-faced man yells expletives, then falls silent. The once steadfast buttress behind me, rows of man upon man ten or so deep, has suddenly gone limp. I manage a few sideways steps. Then a few more. The fence looks high. It’s less crowded over

there. “Dad! Where are you Dad?” I see his head bobbing in front of me, further to my right now.

“Hold on! Just hold on! I’m coming.”

Dad’s voice sounds distant, though he is only a few feet away. Odd and high-pitched. Not like Dad.

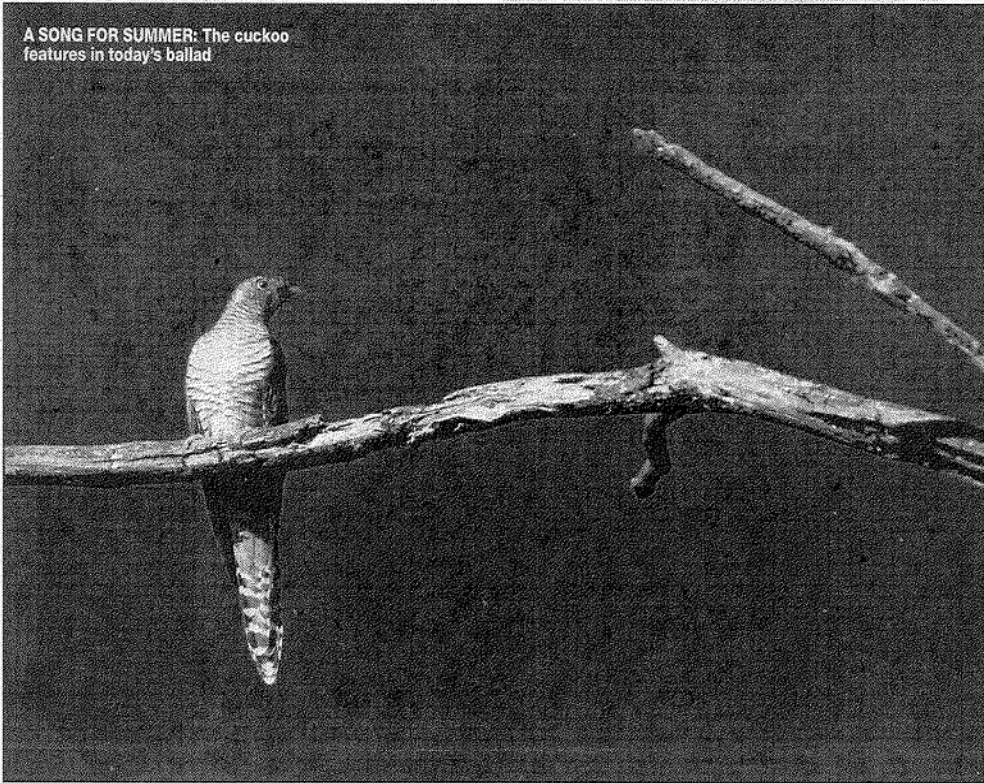
The bodies close in. “Adam! Stay close!” I look up, gasping for air. Hands are reaching down. I try to grab them but I’m not tall enough. The April sun strikes my eyes, an overwhelming wave of burning light, too bright to bear, its glowing core summoning me. I avert my gaze and look instead at faces, hands, hoardings, almost within reach.

Another surge and suddenly I am higher than the crowd, there are those hands again, outstretched, inviting me upwards. I cling to an

“Our bubbles have long since merged into one gelatinous mass, rolling forward like a wave crashing towards the shore. No room to move. I cannot direct my feet to go where I want them to go.”

No. 337: Home With The Cuckoo

A SONG FOR SUMMER: The cuckoo features in today's ballad



I AM very grateful to Billy McCarthy for taking the time and trouble to wrestle with the spirit of inspiration to compose this sweet summer song.

You will remember the fine ballad he gave us for the column some time back about the curfew during the Troubled Times, *When Shandon Strikes Nine On The Banks Of The Lee*.

Whenever a new song is discussed or an older song located, the conversation is naturally governed by the intricacies of verse-play and assonance, the context of the time and of the song and a hundred other variables that songwriters must address. I didn't know Billy was such a fine songmaker himself until he came up with those extra verses in *When Shandon Strikes...* "out of his own imagination", as John Spillane says, which were cleverly inserted to that song which mentions some many immortal players

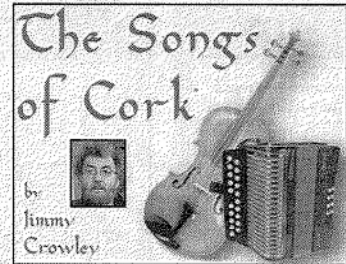
of the Troubles like Sergeant Chance, the famous Black and Tan, and Sean Hegarty and the First Cork Brigade, not to mention the dreadful curfew imposed on the people of Cork.

Billy asked me about my fortunes in America, about living in Florida for the winter, how the music was accepted over there, and how it felt to be home. I told him, as I have told you many times, that the sadness in an exile's heart is contained by poignant, simple, beautiful things that we place no value upon in 'normal' life; but are brought centre stage and illuminated when one leaves their native land. I particularly mentioned well-known Leaside hostelrys, cafes and urban attachments like Mangan's Clock that seem to cling to our souls like fog around a wooden pier. I waxed enthusiastic about going to matches in Thurles with my son Jamesey

and I told Billy about the sailing trip we musician-sailors undertake each June, "Ceol fé Sheol" around the Carberry Coast, the bike trip I try to make in May and, of course, hearing the elusive cuckoo. These are all necessary if innocent condiments for the rich pot-pourri of a fertile Irish summer.

Billy wasn't exactly writing down my words like a reporter; but he was listening. Little did I know that my humble musings were posterity bound and a few days ago he sent me this new ballad.

I thank him for it and am glad to say that the fleet weighed last Thursday for West Cork with a fine crew of musical sailors and friends; somewhere between Crosshaven and Cape in some cozy seagirth tavern like Mary Casey's in Glandore, may we meet and sing an old song or two. For now is the time to be out, with June bursting out all over:



I'll be home with the Cuckoo in springtime
To the promise of summer's long day,
When the skylark soars high o'er the meadow
And the scent of the blossoming May.

With my troubadour travels behind me
I'll be back to my roots once again,
And I'll warble my way around Ireland
In the sunshine, the wind and the rain.

And I'll call to The Corner, The Spailpin, 'The Hall'
And sing many a well-weathered song,
And old Benjy I'll strum as each chorus I hum
Sure 'twill make for a great sing-along.

For the pubs on the northside I have an auld grá
Where they talk of the great hunting men
And the name of Con Doyle is spoken with awe,
Hear the hunting horn sounding again.

And we'll sing about Ringwood, the bould
Armoured Car
And we'll lift up our glasses at will,
With the brass bugle sound sure we'll toast that
great hound
And we'll drink to the Boys of Fairhill.

We'll talk of our travels around by Kinsale
And of nights in the old Folk House Bar,
Where the liveliest session could end in
depression,
With the dread of the auld Bandon Car.

I'll spend a good time in sweet Carrigaline
Where the Cogans will all welcome me,
And I'll sing an old tune by the light of the moon
On the banks of the old Owenabue.

And I'll stand on the hill above Camden
There a dirge to old sailors I'll play,
And I'll grieve for the loss of The Asgard
Out there in the Bay of Biscay.

Now I'm packing my gear for the journey
And the liner is out in the bay,
So if everything works out according to plan
I'll be home with the Cuckoo in May.

outstretched arm, then another, and several heavens later I am lifted above the sea of red. "Dad!" I see him just below me, he is trying to reach my feet. "Hold on, Adam. Just hold on. Pull, lads, pull. We've got to get him out of there." More hands reach for me. "Hold on mate. That's it lads, we've got him." Hands grab me and pull. My feet walk themselves over the hoarding, I am not alone, never alone. I meet firm ground and am out of the sun's angry gaze. "Dad! Dad!"

Screaming faces down below. They are shouting, crying, grown men are yelling, pleading. Further down a man is slumped forward, onto another man who is still. A woman is wailing, her mouth wide open but I don't hear a sound. A group of lads with their faces painted cling together, their expressions pained. Screaming faces. And many, oh so many still faces. Silent faces. Where is my jacket? Mark's jacket! He's going to kill me. "Dad!"

My father lost me in the crush when the

alarm went off. I tried to hold onto his hot, greasy, safe hand. But I was losing it. I grabbed harder but it slipped away. "Dad!"

Every time the same. The faces. The heat. The sea of red. The smell of sweaty, swaying bodies. The sunlight on my head. The noise. People shouting. Yelling. Cursing. Beseeking. The uncontrollable lean as I am the crowd, unsure whether to writhe this way or that, a single headless mass. My body is moving in and out with the tide around me, yet we are rudderless, we can only move as one. The arms pinned to my side. The smell, oh the putrid, sticky smell. The jacket. And Dad.

Sometimes I manage to hold on for longer. But I always let go, I always let go.

I lie back in my bed, remembering that morning.

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"No, you're too young. You've never been to a game, Mark was fourteen before he went."

"But Dad! That's a whole year! I'll stay close to you, I promise!"

"The answer is no. It's a long enough trip and there will be people everywhere, there'll be a fair crowd, sure there's hardly a more important game than this semi-final. We have them, we almost have them!"

"Come on, I'll wash your car every week for a month. And anyway, what will you do with the ticket? You can't waste it, not today. And Nicky and the lads are all going too, and Rob's Dad said there were still tickets left so no one would buy it anyway. So can I Dad, please, can I?"

"Maybe he'll be OK." Dad had reassured himself hopefully, with a nod of the head in

Mark's direction.

But just then Mark's ash-green face had appeared from the depths of his blankets. He shook his head and that had sealed my fate. Within minutes I was ready and back in his room, and when he had taken a sip of the ice water. Mum had handed him. Mark had pointed at his wardrobe with a shaky hand. "Take it. You can wear it. It's the real thing, mate. The real thing. Guard it with your life!"

Mum and I are sitting on the long wooden bench, the long corridor full of people. As she brings the hot cup to her lips with shaking hands I see a man in a white coat making his way towards us. He stops in front of a group of girls, and my attention is caught instead by a young man with a blood-soaked bandage around his head. He seems to be walking around aimlessly, why is there no-one with him? Just then I turn my head and the bearded doctor has reached our bench. "Mrs Jones? We have found your husband."