in the sweet bye & bye

John Paul Evans

"in the sweet bye & bye - fragments of memory in the wake of mo(u)rning"

To say that my father and I never saw eye to eye would be a considerable understatement. Although I was the youngest child and shared his Christian name, we were souls on a different journey.

I still lived at home when he became seriously ill. My brothers had left some years before and had homes and families of their own. Rather than fulfilling my caring role as a dutiful son, I abandoned my responsibilities and the day to day chores fell upon his close friend who lived in the same row of council houses a few doors down the road.

My father and his friend had both grown up in the same village and as adults they had gone to work on the railway in a time where the transportation of coal played an important role in the country's prosperity. His friend was a kind and caring man who would have been referred to as a 'confirmed bachelor' in his day. During my adolescent years, some of the local teenagers targeted him as a figure to ridicule. Small villages are often celebrated as representing the life-blood of a national identity, but they can be places where examples of 'otherness' are not welcome.

After my father's death I moved to a nearby city and although I kept in touch, I visited my father's friend more and more infrequently. When I heard of his death I went alone to his funeral. I had been in a relationship with Peter for more than 20 years, but it seemed inappropriate for me to revisit the home of my childhood with my same sex partner, even if it was to commemorate a dear soul who had been so helpful to me in time of difficulty. Such is the power of early social conditioning.

I went to sit at the back of the Anglican church for the service. In our village the Anglican church was where the well to do people seemed to gather, from what I could gather, having been brought up in my early years in the local Baptist church.

I was christened in the Anglican church apparently. My mother as a catholic wanted me christened in the 'true faith', but my Baptist father refused absolutely, so they compromised with the church of England, or Wales in this case. I felt the emotional triggers that always occur in such situations and was determined to stay composed until a hymn was sung at the request of the deceased. The nineteenth century lyrics by S. Fillmore Bennett have the melancholy chorus line "In the sweet bye & bye, we shall meet on that beautiful shore" which triggered my early Baptist memories to open the floodgates and my tears flowed uncontrollably.

I often think of my father's friend when I take my morning walk to Otter Head, a place where the Otter river meets the sea in the town where I now live. It made me want to make a visual response as a personal memoir to the passing of time with my partner Peter who is now entering his 80s.

When I started this work, my mother had a massive stroke and died 2 days later in hospital. As a nightclub singer, her glamorous presence inhabits most of my early memories as a child fascinated by her process of transformation from mother to stage performer. In my teens when I declared I was gay, the catholic guilt of her influence was fuelled by the maxim "my mother made me a homosexual". To which the only useful response is "if I gave her the wool, would she knit one for me". On the day of her funeral my closest friend had a car accident, which unbeknown to us at the time was to be the beginning of the last 5 months of his life. These events have to some extent overshadowed what was initially a memorial to a dear friend and has become a performance of melancholy and loss, memorialising the passing of those nearest and dearest.

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