

CHAPTER ONE

My Entrance Into The World

As I sit at the head of our oval-shaped mahogany kitchen table and bring up the question of my entrance into the world, Dad takes my Mum's hand in his as she relates the story to me as accurately as possible. On my request that she leave no stone unturned and tries to remember even the most finest detail, no matter how irrelevant it might seem at the time.

"How could I forget you", she exclaimed, looking deep into my Dad's eyes, in that he might jog her memory on any of the fine points she may have forgotten.

"This is exactly how it happened. On the 27th of June, 1977, I was admitted with excruciating labour pains to Our Lady Of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda, two months prior to my due date". "Here I was greeted by a large round-faced nurse who brought me directly to the labour ward. At this stage I was very uptight at the thought of losing you just as I had lost your big brother two years previous to your birth"

"On my entrance into the labour ward, I was placed on a bed, asked to slip on a gown in order for the examination to begin. The doctor that I was in attendance with was called. At this point my anxiety began to grow worse and worse. All that was going through my mind was that this was going to be another *deja vu*".

"After the doctor had carried out his examination he told me that you were very small and that my membranes were ruptured thus placing your life in danger because of the risk of infection. The doctor informed me that I was to receive some injections and then I was to be sent back to the ward in order to obtain some rest"

"I received some more injections on the second day and was told to go back to the ward and continue my period of rest. I held the doctor by the arm and demanded to know exactly what was happening". "I have no news for you yet and cannot say for certain what is going to happen at the moment, but I would prefer if he was a little bigger, this is what the course of injections are for". "He also told me that these injections could only be given to me for three days. On the third day the baby would be born if I still had recurring pains".

"On the 30th of June, '77, I woke up at 6.30 a.m. with the previous back pain I had suffered days before. I called the nurse in the hope that she might be able to relieve me of the pain I was suffering".

"At around mid-day the doctor was called and I knew without a shadow of a doubt that to-day was the day you were going to be born. One hour later I was taken to the delivery room, where I had to wait for the doctor to come, in the hope that he would be able to give you safe guidance into the world. Waiting for the doctor was the most terrifying experience and the time it took for his arrival seemed like an eternity".

"I was in so much pain and discomfort, asking the nurse at every interval where in the name of God was the doctor. I pleaded and pleaded with her to deliver you, but she made it quite clear that it was not possible for her to carry out this procedure as I had already made arrangements with the doctor regarding the time of his arrival".

"She kept giving me oxygen hoping that it might aid in my relief. After everything that had occurred my temper was now getting the better of me and I didn't care what happened. I was going to let you make your own surprise entrance without his attendance. Just as this was going through my mind he entered the room saying, 'calm down, I'm here now'".

"Within a few seconds of his entrance, or so I thought, maybe it was longer, you had taken your first gulp of air and had seen the inside of the delivery room, but you didn't cry. I rose in the bed and said to the doctor, 'make him cry, make him cry', in a voice of frustration"

"He answered me in a reassuring tone, saying 'give him a chance, he's very small. It seemed to me as if you had died and I would never hear your cry. Just then I heard your little voice my heart was filled with delight and an overwhelming sense of relief".

On presentation I was wrapped in a thermal blanket, not too much unlike the ordinary everyday aluminium cooking foil used in the preparation of turkey, or fowl of that nature for the Christmas dinner.

According to Mum, my countenance was that of my Father and in her opinion I had inherited most of his facial features, such as, the lines across his brow, his wide eyes and top lip, which seemingly becomes more apparent in me even today as the result of a fresh shave.

On hearing this I headed in the direction of the hallway where the mirror was positioned, in order to see if I could find any fact to back up her last statement and detect any of the above features mentioned in my external physiognomy.

All the time listening to the goings on in the kitchen and getting more and more embroiled in the story as time went on. She began to talk of our precious moments together and about the time I was whizzed to the Special Care Unit, where I was placed in an incubator and connected to a variety of different machines, due to the fact that I was only 3 lbs and 5 ozs in weight.

She then explains how she was offered a cup of tea, but declined because she was too excited to even think of eating or drinking. Then she was wheeled back to the ward adjacent to the Special Care Unit, where she was to continue her period of rest after such an eventful day.

On her awake she enquired after me and the nurse informed her that the doctor would be making his rounds and he would have a better knowledge of how I was progressing.

Midway through the evening the doctor came to see her with the news that I was very small and she would have to wait before the question of my survival could be answered. According to the doctor he would have some indication on whether or not I would live after three days.

My Mum went on to talk about the way she felt at that moment and how her heart was nearly pulled from her chest with grief as she began to contemplate over the question of my survival and pray, as she clung to the bed clothes in the hope that they might give her some comfort, in a strange kind of way.

Mum said to me, "everytime I got the chance I would pull the intravenous drip, to which I was connected, in order to give me the appropriate fluids following your birth, through the long narrow corridor, as the wheels rotated squeakily along the polished surface of the floor with the aroma of disinfectant catching in the back of my throat".

"I was horrified at the thought of your appearance. Thoughts were flashing through my mind on what I should expect. The doctor gave me some indication of your predicament. No matter how much information I received I would never have been prepared enough for what I saw through the window of that unit at first glance".

"Tubes were coming from all different parts of your anatomy, as you lay there and struggled for life. I awaited a doctor's report, in the hope that it might be filled with some encouraging news, nearly afraid to ask even the most simplest of questions, for fear that the glimmer of hope would be extinguished in my heart". "Once I could see your face, no matter how small it might be, I knew between a combination of prayer and your Father's support that you were somehow going to pull through, regardless of the consequences. Nevertheless anxiety began to grow and I couldn't wait for the end of one day and the start of a new one. But the minute hand on the clock, that hung above the incubator seemed to be going through a period of repetition, even if it was only in my mind".

"I was approached by the doctor in charge of the Special Care Unit, 'if it is possible for him to hold on for the three vital days, his chances of survival will be greatly increased', he informed me".

"As I lay wearily on the bed, my eyelids heavy and exhausted for lack of sleep, my heart became a hindrance and told my mind I didn't need sleep. I made the best of my insomnia, and at every available opportunity, let it be day or night, I headed in the direction of the Special Care Unit, just praying your little lungs would still be functional and that your rosy cheeks would not be filled with the grey and purple look of death". "Your Dad tried to be an ideal pillar of strength, hiding his feelings and acting as if he knew the end result". "What did you want me to do", he said. "I knew you were grief-stricken at the thought of losing yet another child. I was trying to keep a brave face as much for your sake as for mine".

"What did you think I was doing?", he asked, as he placed his hand on her shoulder. *I know every tile on that hospital floor, every brick on that hospital wall and every damn cup in that canteen. Yes Nuala", he continued, "that's what I was doing when I went for a walk, not thinking about today, just thinking about tomorrow and every time I looked at you, looked into your luscious green eyes, I saw your face waiting for some form of comfort from me, waiting for me to say that everything was going to be alright, waiting for me to probe the doctor's mind in the hope of getting some kind of straight answer. I was just as bad as you, just as heavy-hearted and every time I looked through the window of that Special Care Unit, a lump came in my throat just as it did in yours".

"All I could think of was how could I make things right, how could I take the pain away from your heart? You didn't have to be a genius to know that you were hurting, it was written all over your face, so don't think that I didn't feel the same. I felt just as bad, maybe even worse, after all I had two to worry about. In the event of anything happening Desmond, what was going to happen to you? it was all a question of keeping a brave face, in the hope that you wouldn't be able to read my mind. To even think of trying to mislead you was a ridiculous idea. I know that now. We have been through so much together, it is virtually impossible, after all you can read my mind. At this stage you almost know what I'm going to say before I say it at all".

Mum began to discuss the contents of the doctor's report and talk about what happened on the third day, and I began to joke in order to set up a relaxed atmosphere and begin prompt discussion. I entered into the discussion raising my left hand towards the centre-piece of the kitchen ceiling and tilting my head backwards jokingly.

"It's the third day. How can things go wrong on the third day, sure' Jesus himself rose on the third day. I don't think there was any question of me dying".

I wasn't exactly sure if my family was impressed with the class of joke I picked to draw their amusement, so I interrupted Mum hastily to ensure she understood that my last remark was not derogatory and that there was no blasphemy in any shape or form intended.

"Tell me what you can remember from that day", I asked either of them but Mum as usual was quick to respond.

"I'll tell it to you exactly as it happened. It's a memory that's as fresh in my mind as if it only happened yesterday".

*At 5.30 a.m. approximately on the third day, I got out of bed with the drip, just as I have described to you before. I went to have what I thought might be my last look at you through the window of the Special Care Unit. to see if you were still alive and to my dismay I saw a collection of doctors and nurses gathered around the head of your incubator, pushing the tubes aside so that your face was visible".

"I ran up and down the corridors, completely forgetting that the I.V. was still engorged in my vein. I had no regard for what I was doing or for that matter, how many patients I awoke. Quite willing to jump to conclusions, screaming at the top of my voice, 'my baby's dead, my baby is dead!. My worst fears have come true', repeatedly saying this, much to the annoyance of the doctors and nurses gathered in the unit and drawing more attention than Godzilla".

"Then the nurse from the Special Care Unit ran to assist me."

"Mrs. Doherty", she said in a baffled tone resting her arms on my shoulders. "What is the matter and what are you doing up at 5.30 a.m., you should be in bed recuperating after your ordeal".

"Tell me what is wrong with my child". Mum cried. "He's dead isn't he, he's dead?"

"What on earth gave you that idea", replied the nurse. "Explaining to her what I'd just seen, I asked her what was happening.

"Come on in here with me", she said, stretching her hands out in a welcoming gesture, as if she had to tempt me inside. Holding the drip firmly and tilting it sideways to make it possible for me to gain entrance into the room, she guided me to where the incubator was placed. The doctor stood back in amazement and to the surprise of everyone you were taking a little drink from a bottle that they had prepared. They were very surprised to see you drinking from a bottle being two months premature and so small".

"It wasn't a whole lot to drink in relation to the bottle content, but for the doctors and I, it was the start of your progression".

"A doctor congratulated me on your progress and told me you were a great little fighter. He was proud to be at such an auspicious occasion. Never before did he see a seven month baby sucking from a bottle, at least that's what he told me, whether he was being lenient with the truth or not I'll never know, but he aroused my sense of hope and gave me confidence. This was the first step that eased my anxiety and the bond I had for you began to grow stronger and stronger with the event of each passing second".

"All my good news seemed to come at once", she said with a glimmer in her eye. She paused for a moment, scratched her head and continued, "or so I thought, The doctor told me of how you would be discharged at a weight of six pounds, provided your progress went ahead at the rate expected and not into a relapse"

Mum was released from hospital and told that she could visit me as often as she liked but that she was not to put herself under any strain or unnecessary anxiety. "How could I leave you there?", she asked. "It was unbearable for me to think of you lying in that incubator. I knew that you were too young to understand that I was present but nevertheless I felt very uneasy the moment I left your bedside".

"Your Dad and I came to the decision that for the duration of the time you were to be in hospital, we would make regular and frequent trips. The day I walked out the hospital door, knowing that you were left behind, I was no longer at home than the car was put into reverse and headed back up the long narrow roads and winding turns, passed the river Boyne, back to the hospital".

Then she began to explain her daily routine to me.

"First thing in the morning I lifted the phone and dialled the number, not having to think of what order the digits were in. It was engraved in my mind and dialling that number became a regular part of morning life, before going to the toilet or eating breakfast. I would explain to the doctor or nurse on the other end of the line how my day's schedule was laid out.

"On completion of breakfast, at the same time every morning we started the visit".

I interrupted the conversation to ask, "How did you both pass the time travelling in the car and what did the conversation entail? Were your minds always filled with thoughts of my well-being and did it get in the way of any normal conversation that takes place between a husband and wife?"

Dad began to speak of how the synchronisation took place between him and Mum. They had to arrange it in such a way that Dad could be available to take time off work, in which he was so involved, because of the money needed for travelling expenses and all the other necessities that life demanded. He went on to say how much confidence he had in Mum as a driver and that he had no worries about her travelling alone other than her being unaccompanied at a time when he was needed as a shoulder to cry on, and that his concentration at work would be insufficient for the job at hand. While these thoughts were running around in his mind and the lack of family support, because of commitments they had to families of their own, life continued as normal for all around us. They continued this schedule for two long strenuous months and my bedside became what Mecca was to the Arabs. Making two trips a day, one in the morning for my first feed and one in the evening before the night nurse came on duty. With each passing day I gained more weight and my physique grew broader in appearance.

Eventually the day came when I reached my target weight, much to the anticipation of both my parents. I was discharged, still with the features of a new-born baby, after all my time in hospital.