

ONE OF THESE MEN

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Cormac O'Shea didn't share his first or his last name on that Saturday afternoon. He didn't share that the first thoughts to creep into his mind each morning and the last every evening were of the broken bodies he'd freed of their poor souls. He didn't share that it was easier to take the first life than it was to take the last. Those things he would share with me on a personal basis at a later date. He did, however, make a point to mention to me upon arriving at the hotel I arranged for the weekend's sessions that it would be the first and the last time he shared much of anything at all regarding a period of his life which began in 1970.

It was only my second time facilitating such a group. That particular weekend, I remember seven participants; Mr. O'Shea was followed by the widow of a British Army officer, two sisters whose mother passed away due to injuries sustained in one of the nineteen Bloody Friday bombings, a former policeman, a Catholic priest, and one Philip J. Knox. It is not uncommon for participants in these sessions to find connections in one another's stories. Thus could be considered a pivotal and almost necessary moment for any healing to begin to take root. But, had I known just how close of a connection could be drawn between the stories of Cormac O'Shea and Philip Knox, I am not certain that I would have ever scheduled them to participate on the same weekend.

Looking back now, perhaps it is best that I was as surprised as they to hear their worst memories collide. These are their stories, recounted in their own words a second time for my benefit, ten years after that Saturday afternoon—as best I can chronicle them.

Cormac O'Shea

1970

The walls in Belfast weren't so tall back then. They'd only just been put up the year before, and the government hadn't added all that extra wire on top. So it was pretty easy, you see, to get something up over the wall. My mother and I lived just on the other side of it—a little two-up, two-down house in a whole row of them. It was Catholic neighborhood, obviously. All of us were God-fearing Catholics. Ma taught at the Catholic school down the way; that's where I went to class, and all the neighbor kids did too. In 1970, I was eleven years old and hadn't ever met a Protestant in my life. All I knew—and all my classmates knew—was that the Protestants lived on the other side of the wall.

Well, in my case, the only thing standing between me and that wall was my front yard and a little two-lane street. The houses on the other side must've been just as close because sometimes I could hear them, people moving around and laughing and talking over there. I was on my way home from school one day, walking my bike up the pavement when something came flying over the wall and landed right there on our lawn. And it was a ball, a little white ball just big enough to get a good grasp on it with your palm. I mean, you can imagine how surprised I was. For some reason or another, I went over and picked it right up. Considering that people had just started chucking more dangerous things over the wall, it was probably more than a little thick of me. Maybe I thought that I'd keep it, but I'm not really sure because I got distracted by someone shouting across the street, on the other side of the wall.

It took me a good minute to realize they weren't shouting at me. No, it was two people shouting at each other. I couldn't really make out what was being shouted about, but they sounded like a couple of kids—like me. I guess I did what any dumb kid would do; I wound up my arm and launched the ball back over the top of the wall. It barely cleared the edge, but when it did the shouting on the other side shut right up. And after a minute or so, the ball came soaring back.

Philip Knox

1970

I remember seeing that ball bounce back into the backyard. It

was one of the spookiest damn things I had ever seen. My house backed right up to the wall, and our mum was always telling me and my big brother Will to be careful about playing out back. We were ten and fifteen though—and hardheaded—so when I dared Will to try and throw over the wall, you can bet he tossed it up there.

Neither of us really knew much about what was on the other side of the wall back then. We just knew those “bad men” lived over there. That’s what our dad called them—alongside some other not-so-friendly names—the “bad men.” I never knew him when he was anything but a soldier, but I imagine that he was set in his ways long before the British Army got a hold of him. He was probably a bit like Will, seeing as my brother spent large portion of his teen years parroting Dad.

I’m not sure I expected that Will would actually be able to get the ball over the top, because I was furious when it sunk in that we had just lost our toy. I sure as hell didn’t expect the ball to come flying back. Will looked at me and I looked at him, and we must have stood there for a good while before one of us made the decision to lob it back. I didn’t even realize it was me until the ball was already in my hand. Then we stood there, staring up at the cloudy sky and waiting. I think Will might have been holding his breath, and when a voice came through the wall it startled us both.

“Who are youse?” Just this thick accent came muffled through the stone, but it didn’t sound like a bad man. It sounded like a boy, certainly younger than Will but maybe about my age. So when Will didn’t say anything, I answered for us.

I remember, I just said, “I’m Philip.”

And when the boy on the other side of the wall answered, he said, “Alright boyo? I’m called Cormac.”

Cormac O’Shea

1981

I joined up with the Provisional IRA in 1981. I’d been aching to do it for years, but Ma was much more a Nationalist than a Republican. She wanted a united Ireland, but she didn’t care for the land to be soaked with blood when it happened; that’s how she always phrased it in class when she was talking to her students. But when Bobby Sands died, it

pushed the envelope too far for me. I signed on without her blessing.

At twenty-two years old, I was crazy mad. I was mad at the Nationalists like Ma who wouldn't support the fight. I was mad at the British. I was mad at the world. And I spent my days around other men who were mad at the world too. We all lived in this rat hole of a block of flats, all young IRA recruits itching for a chance to prove ourselves. The chance came along for me just weeks after Sands and his hunger strikers started biting the dust. There was this pub run by a Protestant man, and the building he chose to run his business in just happened to sit on the wrong side of the walls. From what I know, he wasn't anyone particularly special. The pub had stood there for years and not a soul was bent out of shape about it. But with tensions up, the Catholics that bought drinks there must've gone and got their feathers ruffled. They used the IRA to place a hit on the owner.

A couple of the older lads chose me to tag along with them, and I wasn't about to turn them down. We walked in like any other bunch of Irishmen looking for some pints, and we walked right back out after two rounds. Nobody noticed we left something behind.

They hooked it up right under our table. The thing was small enough to fit in Sammy Fitzpatrick's coat pocket, but when he set that timer and we slid out of there...

I had to be at least twenty yards out of the building when the explosion went off. It still knocked me flat on my face. The next thing I knew, Sammy was jerking me up by my collar and he set off at a dead sprint down the street. I bolted right after him, and my stomach was churning because I felt like I could taste that stench of burning men in my mouth.

We ran twelve blocks over before a car of IRA brothers picked us up. The driver peeled off with the tires howling and drove like a maniac to get us out of Belfast, into a safe house. I only looked back once, but it was long enough for me to catch a glimpse of what I know now was the devil's grin in those wicked curling tendrils of smoke.

Philip Knox

1981

By 1981, William was more like Dad than ever. He had enlisted

in the British Armed Forces just a couple years prior and solidified the proud-father-and-prodigal-son relationship they had. It left me to be the *other* son. Our father thought that being a soldier in the British Army was a man's highest honor. At the time, I didn't think being a soldier was doing enough to support Britain. I refused to enlist and was promptly cast out of our family home for finding my own cause in the ranks of the Ulster Volunteer Force.

It was a weight on Mum's shoulders to have her boys fighting all the time, but Dad and Will didn't seem to notice. Or, if they did, they were apt to ignore how much it worried her. Every once in a while, I would visit her during the day while they were at work. The house was the same one we'd lived in when I was a child, right there against the wall. In those days, though, most of the backyard was taken up by a metal fencing Dad paid to have installed over the patio and latter portion of the roof. It was necessary, as walking along the wall for even just a few minutes could get you hit by a brick or stone—or something more lethal—hurled over from the Catholic side.

With things being so touch-and-go at home, Dad and Will spent a lot of time down at the pub. They treated it like a second home, and Dad had been a patron there for years. Somewhere in the mess of lines being drawn and redrawn, it wound up on the Catholic side of the walls—even though its owner and his wife, Mr. and Mrs. Albert, had sat two rows in front of us in church for as long as I could remember. I suppose it was foolish of Mr. Albert to think that his business would go untainted in all the bloodshed.

The news of the bombing came to my mother's doorstep dressed in a police uniform. The officer gave her his condolences and a handkerchief; she gave me a phone call.

"Philip, honey? Are you there?" But her voice sounded so far away with the receiver dangling from the wall. It hung by its spiraled cord where I had dropped it as I slid to the kitchen tile in my tiny downtown flat. With my back against the wall and my head in my hands, I shed real tears for the first time since I was a child.

I will always regret the way I left my relationship with my father and brother, because Dad and Will were drinking at Mr. Albert's pub the night the IRA sent it up in flames.

Cormac O'Shea

1985

They kept us holed up at a farm about an hour's drive outside the city for a solid few months after that pub went up. By the time I was back in Belfast, things had gone all to hell. The Loyalists were picking us off one by one, claiming that for every Protestant killed, a Catholic death would follow. And the IRA had us doing just the same thing.

I didn't ask a whole lot of questions back then. The less you knew, the easier it was to follow orders. The other lads, they seemed real fired up all the time. They were still mad. I think that stopped for me when Ma passed away. She was sick, and there was nothing that could be done about it because the Catholic hospital didn't have the right type of doctor. I didn't want her to die thinking I was cross with her.

Don't get me wrong, I still loved Ireland more than any living thing in this world. But whatever it is inside a man that lets him take a life, I'd about used it all up.

It was the winter of 1985 when I almost landed myself a spot right next to Ma in the graveyard. A couple of the boys were out for a smoke after dinner when a car came around the corner, flying right down the road like it hadn't seen the stop sign. With those headlights glaring in our faces, I heard the first shot before I saw the shooter. One moment, Thomas McNally—a fresh face, all of 19 years old—was standing right next to me. The next moment, he was lying on the ground, bleeding into the snow.

I took off, and I didn't bother to look back as the shots kept ringing, or a car door slammed, or a pair of feet took to the pavement after me. I just kept running past the block of flats and down the street, turning up an alleyway the instant I had a chance. My heart about sunk to my stomach when I realized what a mistake that was. There was a fence strung up about halfway down the alley, but I didn't have the time to turn around; I felt like those guns were right behind me.

I'll tell you, I was praying to God and Jesus and everyone else as I climbed that fence. I didn't deserve help, but I sure was begging for it.

When I was just getting over the top, one of those bullets caught me in the leg—just there in my right thigh. I fell the rest of the way to the other side. The force knocked the wind clear out of my lungs. I swore

for a split second that I was going to die right then and there, on my back in that alley. The footsteps kept getting closer and I was scrambling to stand up; I hardly made it to my feet before a voice started shouting at me through the fence.

If it hadn't been for the barrel of his gun smack in the middle of us, I might've been looking this UVF lad right in the eye. He had dark hair, cropped real short like a soldier's. The rest of him I wasn't paying much attention to, but the way his hands and his voice were shaking wasn't because he was a squirrely new recruit on his first ride. No, they were shaking because he'd been out twenty—maybe thirty—times, and just like Thomas and the others, he was still right mad.

"Stop right there!" He was saying. "Stop!" And I did stop, because I was going nowhere fast on my bleeding leg.

And because if I *was* going die that night, it was going to be by some way more honorable than being shot in the back. I don't know how long I stood there watching him get ready to pull the trigger, but it felt like a day and a half. I couldn't hear much over the sound of my own beating heart, so I wasn't sure what he said when he opened his mouth, but I could see the shadow of that chain-link fence shift and pull over his face as he spoke. The next thing I expected to feel was a second bullet ripping me apart. It never came.

That man turned and ran back the way he'd come; he left me on the other side of the fence—still breathing, but vomiting up my dinner.

Philip Knox

1985

I am ashamed to admit that when the idea came about to start offing a Catholic for each Protestant death tallied, I was chomping at the bit to get a piece of the action. At the time, I was using my grief as an excuse to cause carnage. I know now that what I was doing was not grieving, but revenge-seeking.

In my quest for this revenge, I didn't keep track of how many IRA members I was asked to dispose of, or how many of their families I targeted. I did just as I was asked, like any other man. And like any other UVF man of the time, I did it with a certain enthusiasm. On one night in

1985—when I was part of a group sent to end a handful of Republicans on their own turf—that enthusiasm crossed the border into Catholic territory with me, but it didn't follow me home.

The rules of a drive-by were simple, one of them being that we were not to leave the vehicle unless absolutely necessary. Stepping a foot outside the car was a good way to get yourself killed. But that night—for whatever harebrained reason—when one of the targets ran, I ran after him. I chased him about a block before he made a turn down an alley, and I followed him right down it, right to an old fence about halfway between the buildings.

I didn't hesitate to take a shot at the stranger as he struggled to pull himself over the chain-link. I hit him in the leg, and he dropped to the opposite side like a stone.

And I screamed at him, because I thought that I wanted to see his face when I put another bullet in him. I thought that I wanted to know what real fear looked like. It wasn't until we were standing face-to-face that I realized... I thought wrong.

He had this scruffy look about him, just like I imagined all IRA fanatics to have. There were circles under his eyes, and his hair had the appearance and color of unkempt straw. He wore different clothes; he had a different face; he believed in everything I didn't. But in that moment—standing there with just that fence and my finger on the trigger between us—I felt like I was looking in a mirror.

Tell me, if I was looking in a mirror, and at the same time I was looking at one of my father's "bad men," then where was the good man in that alley?

"God forgive me," I said it not for what I was about to do, but for what I had already done. I was afraid of my own hands the night I turned my back on that man—so much so that I dropped my gun on my way back to my unit, left it there on my side of the fence.

Cormac O'Shea

1970

"Are you one of those Catholics, then?" The question confused me. I don't guess that I'd ever been asked about my church habits before. Everyone knew who was Catholic and who wasn't. And if you didn't

know, you didn't ask.

I stepped forward to pick up the ball, which had rolled out to the pavement as I'd stood there gazing at the wall, trying to come up with an answer.

"Sure I am," I shouted back, and I tossed the ball over alongside my words. "Are you one of 'em Protestants, Philip?"

Philip Knox

1970

The next time, I was ready when the ball came back to us. I remember jogging a few steps to catch it, and the dull force of the thing landing in my palm echoed the pang in my gut when the other boy turned my own question on me.

I opened my mouth to answer but the words never came, stolen instead by Will's hand on my elbow. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I recognized the sound of Dad's car pulling in the drive. My brother saved me from what could have been quite the gruesome tongue lashing if our father had caught on to what we were doing out there in the garden that particular afternoon.

Without answering his question, I turned my back on that Catholic boy and went inside to wash up for dinner.

When Cormac O'Shea and Philip Knox met again, it was in 2007. I worked for an organization funded by the British and American governments, intended to instigate healing between individuals who were involved on all sides of the aisle during The Troubles. These two men sat with five other strangers and told their stories one by one, Philip taking his turn just after Cormac. The entire room was speechless, but I do not think anyone was as taken back as the pair of former paramilitary fighters who only knew each other's names from a shared childhood memory, some thirty years prior.

Both Mr. O'Shea and Mr. Knox were reluctant to tell their stories at all that first time, but both kept in touch with me in the years to follow. Now—this being the month of August, 2017—they have allowed me to publish their experiences as two stories woven into one. I thank them for

the opportunity to do so, and the patience they had when I asked my many questions during the construction of this piece.

I will leave you with this:

There is a neighborhood on the south side of Belfast where a wall used to stand. Two years ago, the government voted to remove that wall in the interest of promoting peace and healing past wounds.

On one side of the street where the old wall used to stand, there lives a man who still flies the Irish flag in his window, and who holds his granddaughter's hand on their walk to mass every Sunday. His blond hair has lost color with age, but his brogue hasn't faded in the slightest. He still walks with a limp in his right leg.

On the other side of the street lives a man who will never be found seated while the notes of "God Save the Queen" still hang in the air, and whose son is an airman with the Royal Air Force. He doesn't frequent pubs, and he doesn't talk politics. He does, however, make time to coach a cricket team for the boys from the area secondary school.

When there is a sunny day—of which Belfast sees few—one might catch these two men wave at one another from their respective front porches. Should these two men be standing in line at the post office, other patrons might hear them exchange greetings. Around Christmas, neighbors might peek through the front windows and catch a glimpse of one of these two men seated at the other's dining table.

These men do not consider themselves friends. The pair do not place any title on the way they view their relationship with each other. From an outsider's perspective, I will call them *brothers*. Even that does not reach the meaning that I would like. What binds them together is thicker than blood.

It is hope.

One of these men put a bullet in the other, just as he had put countless other bullets in countless other men.

One of these men aided in planting the device which would kill the other's father and brother, and the fathers and brothers of people he will never know.

One of these men had a grandfather who refused to leave the Scottish Highlands until it was in a casket.

One of these men will proudly tell you that his Irish ancestry predates the one and only Saint Patrick, himself.

One of these men was a Protestant. One of these men was a Catholic. *Both* of these men fought for a better Ireland, and both of these men see strength and peace returning to their beloved homeland today.

But one of these men is called Cormac, and the other is named Philip.

