

## In Space

There was a lot of room in that car; a big green Zephyr Six with green leather bench seats and a shiny chrome zed on the dashboard, just like the ones in the cop show that my brothers and I used to like. Was Eddie in the car then? I can't remember. And where was Frank, my younger brother? Were we all in the car together? Maybe. Probably. I can't recall any conversation, or squabbling even, but I remember the heater cooling and the darkness and the seemingly endless wait. We were waiting for my baby sister.

Every now and then my father would appear at the window with an unlit cigarette hanging off his lip. He'd knock the glass and get us to unlock the door. He'd juke into the driver's seat, slamming his big broad back into the dent in the puckered leather, and sit holding on to the plastic wheel for a while before telling us that everything was going to be all right. He might even have told us that he loved us that night. He must have, because why would I think that otherwise? He never usually told us that.

Even though he hadn't lit his cigarette, the sour wreak of tobacco still clung to the head-cloth when he got back out and closed the door behind him, twiddling his fingers up and down to remind us to lock the door again. Even here there could be hippies or beatniks hanging around just waiting to steal children. That's what they always said, my mother and father. He stopped a few yards away, and turned to give a little wave, then took his lighter out of his trouser pocket – the right one – and lit up. I remembered him doing just the same thing the night Frank was born. In just about

the same place. At least I thought I did. A couple of sparks danced momentarily around the glowing tip of the cigarette before shooting skywards towards a mean sliver of a moon. Then nothing. When I looked back towards the hospital entrance my father was gone too.

Eddie was in the car. And so was Frank. Now I remember. It wasn't a conversation. Just a few words. Two from Eddie, to be precise; as nasty as a cornered tomcat. 'Shut up!' he said. I was only seven or eight, but even so, I knew that it was no way to speak to a three year-old. All Frank had said was, 'We get uvver baba?' Usually Eddie would have laughed, or mocked him playfully. Even Eddie.

We were waiting for our baby sister.

I thought about her. About playing with her. Helping our mother to look after her. Keeping an eye on her. Making her giggle. Feeding her a segment of Mandarin and watching her little pink gums and tongue mangle and mush it until it was just a thready mess sliding down her little round chin. I imagined her tiny hand reaching out towards me, indicating that she'd have another piece, the dimples above her doll-like fingers pooling with the dribbled juice. Her joy at seeing Nipper the Collie's deft antics on the coal bunker lid as he grinned his toothy grin through the kitchen window, desperate to attract attention. I thought about holding the little fruit – whole – out to her, moving it slowly from side to side, dodging her tiny little fingers, orbiting it around her little head, her bright eyes locked on to its every move. I'd uncross my legs, stand up. I'd hold it in my outstretched hand and then slowly move it towards the chandelier. I'd stand on my tiptoes so that it was as high as possible, let it hang there for a moment, like some vibrant, pock-marked, waxy planet, then bring it

hurtling back down towards us, zooming it close to her face and frantically levering fingers. And she would gurgle and giggle again. I thought about her sounds, her smell. The need to protect her.

I wiped condensation from the rear door window and peered up into the cold, black sky. It went on forever. Like this night. A tattered, smoky cloud drifted in front of the dulled moon, its segmented shape reminding me again of the fruit I'd shared that afternoon. It seemed miraculous that a year or so earlier they'd put a man up there – and brought him back to Earth again.

Our sister wasn't coming back.

We always went to Gramps and Gran's for tea on Saturdays. I couldn't wait to see them again. As usual things were getting frantic as the light began to fade over the farmyard and my father appeared at the kitchen door, kicking his boots off and smelling of dung. We'd been warned to be out of the bathroom. 'Your daddy will go crackers if he has to wait about,' my mother had said. We didn't have to be told twice. I was feeling pleased with myself because I'd managed to sneak in first. I hated having to get into Eddie's bathwater, almost as much as I hated having to share a bedroom with him.

I don't remember a scream. You'd think there would have been one, but it's not there in my head. There was something though. Commotion from above, or just a wave of cold air that swept down the stairs before my mother burst in from the hallway and brushed past my brothers and I, the soft, familiar pink and yellow bundle cradled in her arms. I couldn't see Anna's face.

Frank and I stood in the doorway of the living room. Just as we'd been told. I like to think that I had my arm around him, but I'm not sure. There were a lot of things different about that Saturday evening. Strange things. Alien things. My father may have been dressed only in a towel as he knelt on the rug in front of the fire. He may still have been wet. He was breathing into my sister's mouth, then, pausing, listening, before trying again. Every once in a while he would straighten up, shake his head, look around. The lost expression on his face unsettled me. I didn't know this man, this scene. That's when I saw Anna's little face again; her skin grey, her lips blue, her open mouth black and cavernous as the heartless sky that would bear down and engulf us all later that evening.

From the hallway I heard my mother say, 'We'll come right now,' and then the heavy clunk of the receiver.

I don't know where Edward was when this was happening, but later I remember him telling us that Anna was dead. That was the first time Frank had said 'We get uvver baba?' Edward had told him to shut up then too. He'd always had a mean streak. Like the time our Catsby's kittens had been stillborn and he'd thrown one into the slurry pit, just because he knew that it would upset me.

Anna wasn't dead then. Not while we were sitting in the old Zephyr, cold and waiting for something to happen. Praying for a miracle bigger even than putting a man on the moon. She wasn't dead until my father came back and lit a cigarette and told us that it was so. He'd been wrong. And everything wasn't going to be all right. His hands were shaking.

There was a lot of sitting about in silence at our grandparents' house. On knees, mostly. Waiting for something to happen. The unbearable silence in the parlour was that of another world; encumbered with another unspoken – and unspeakable – language. If my brothers or I broke it we were hushed. It was hard to keep still. I had no idea whether we were to remain this way for minutes, hours or days.

Frank started to cry. Maybe not because of Anna. Maybe just because he was three and he was tired and perhaps a little frightened, just as I was. My mother reached out and held his arm. I saw another strange thing then. I saw her fumbling for the usual affection she was used to finding for us all, come what may, but now it was mixed up with fear and suspicion, and for a moment it seemed like she was actually holding him away; like she thought that she might break him. I tried to catch her eye, but it was like she no longer knew any of us.

Then my grandmother leaned out of her dining chair and scooped Frank up. 'Come to me, *Baba*,' she said and kissed him on the ear through his blonde curls.

'Baba.' Frank was now the baby of our family again.

Pops, my other grandfather – my mother's father – came to the house to add to the silence. He never really said a lot. Accustomed to decades of chiding from his late wife, he had perfected the art of saying nothing. Silence was his weapon of choice. Eventually she had given up, my mother said. I didn't remember all that much about her, other than her flowery apron and her white hair, which she screwed into a tight bun at the back of her head. She had a kind, round face, but her mouth

became knotted, pinched, when my grandfather drew near. She reserved a barrage of tutting and scolding for him alone.

‘Could the wee one have been lying on her back?’ Pops said, at last, eying my mother.

It unnerved me that in the hours that had passed since the wait outside the hospital, no one had used Anna’s name.

‘No, Daddy.’ The words were as if spoken by a ghost wrung dry.

‘They just said it was some kind of virus, Mr Mallaghan,’ my father said. He was sitting at the table with his face in his hands. He didn’t look up.

Pops shook his head and went back to fingering tobacco into his pipe. He was sitting on a dining chair between Gran and Gramps. I had never seen all three of our grandparents seated in a row like this before.

I got to stay with Gran and Gramps that night. I don’t know where Frank and Eddie went. The next morning, Gramps fetched the calendar that he’d brought back from Canada and I continued to copy the portraits of Eskimos into my big sketchbook. After lunch, Gran gave me an empty margarine container and I painted it to look like the Robinson family’s spaceship. I had my little pencil-top eraser robot and a few of my toy soldiers in my pocket and for a while I played at the big dining table. I tried to explain the characters in my game to Gran and Gramps, but deep down I knew that they weren’t really listening to me. In truth, I wasn’t all that interested either. I got to make up some fizz and was allowed to drink as much ginger ale as I wanted, but somehow even that seemed flat. I didn’t even try to

amuse them with my 'Give-me-a-shot-of-Red-Eye!' routine. Usually they would have danced and liggid around or taken me out to the garden for a kick-about, but the silence from the previous evening hung in the air and no one suggested putting a record on the big Decca music centre or venturing out into the cold.

How long did I stay there? One day? Two, perhaps? Three? Each one of those few days seemed as long as whole summers, yet they lacked any of the delicious promises of real holidays.

We were having tea one afternoon when Gran showed me the card. She reached down to the big tan handbag, which never left her side, and pulled out a crisp, white envelope. She slid it across the cloth towards me, tapping a painted nail on its surface to indicate that I should look inside. I guessed immediately that it was a birthday card, but probably looked confused; mine wasn't for another six weeks. There may have been a large 'one' on the front, which should have spelled it out to me. And perhaps a fluffy rabbit, or a puppy or kitten, or maybe even a duck. But I was still confused when I looked inside and found that it had not been inscribed.

'That was for little Anna,' my grandmother said, her bottom lip quivering. 'I bought it ages ago.' She fiddled with the heart-shaped gold locket at her throat as she spoke. Inside it, face-to-face, lay tiny photographs of my sister and my father. Gran had shown it to me many times, always fearful of splitting a fingernail as she levered it open. Gramps had joked that he would need to buy her some more jewellery so that she could wear a picture of each one of us around her neck.

'She would have been one next Wednesday,' Gran said, taking a tissue out of the sleeve of her cardigan and daubing at her eyes.

I stole a glance at Gramps and saw that he was looking out through the window, towards the greenhouse, staring hard at something that wasn't there. Gramps sported a carefully clipped beard and a shock of ashy hair. My father was clean shaven and wore his jet black hair short and slicked back. It had never really struck me that they looked alike, but now Gramps wore the very same expression that I had seen on my father's face as he tried in vain to breathe life into his only daughter. They might have been brothers rather than father and son; lost, frightened brothers.

As darkness began to fall over my grandparents' garden, so the heavy silence engulfed us again too. The evenings were terrifying and long and everything seemed to grind to a halt. Gran made no effort when we tried to play Scrabble. Usually she was ruthless and unbeatable.

I wondered what was happening at the farm. When I would see my mother again. I suppose I must have asked. I wanted to go home, despite the fact that I would have to endure Eddie tossing and turning above me in his bunk bed. Everything in our family had revolved around Anna, I realised. Without her, things had stopped turning. In her absence it seemed like we would be forever floating without purpose. I felt guilty that I had stuck my tongue out at her a few days earlier. Why had I done that? A weak moment, perhaps. Jealousy? Had I hurt her? It was nothing to the sort of thing that Edward was always doing to all of us, our parents included. But my mother had seen me, and she had certainly been hurt, even if little Anna had been unaware of the offence.



I'd asked Gran to leave the curtains in my room open. She'd tucked me in and told me not to worry. She'd said that Anna was safe in the arms of Jesus now. Safe in Heaven. That was up there. Out there in space somewhere, in the vast, black sky. Her words didn't comfort me at all. I was afraid to sleep, especially on my back.

Auntie Izzy wasn't really our auntie. And Uncle Ronnie wasn't our uncle. They were friends of our parents. My father had been at school with Uncle Ronnie. I liked him. He made me laugh. He reminded me a little of Stan Laurel, although he didn't actually do or say much. He didn't have to. Somehow he was just funny.

I can't remember how I got from Gramps and Gran's to Auntie Izzy and Uncle Ronnie's house. I'd only ever been there before when their children were around, but they were at school on the day of the funeral and Uncle Ronnie was at his factory. Auntie Izzy had been baking when I arrived. She was a serious, gentle woman with huge, dark eyes. She wiped the flour off her hands with a tea towel, gave me a little hug and then sat me down to a huge plate of wheaten bread and homemade blackberry jam. Later, she led me down a long, broad hallway and pointed to a freshly painted cupboard door.

'Young Ronald keeps some of his toys in there, Ethan,' she said, and left me to it.

Ronald and Lucy had so many toys. Things that Eddie, me and Frank could only dream about. I'd been collecting tokens for a second Action Man for ages, but here in front of me was a big wooden box full of things I'd only ever seen in catalogues. Walkie-talkies, a remote-controlled car, a Dinky Daktari Land Rover,

'Magic Robot' and Clackers. A tangle of limbs – gloved and booted hands and feet – protruded from the box and I tugged at a white-trousered leg and gasped when the figure revealed itself to me fully. It was Neil Armstrong. Buzz Aldrin. A perfectly modelled astronaut. The helmet had pivoted so that he appeared to have his head on backwards. I twisted it back into place, straightened his limbs and held him up close to my face, gazing at this wondrous object, the reflection of my eye filling the mirrored visor completely. It was magnificent.

I took him outside and held him up towards the clouds. I moved him slowly across the grey sky, my breath billowing upwards towards him as he defied gravity and relayed his messages back to Mission Control. I imagined myself inside that suit. Floating. Weightless. For a little while it almost made things better. I coveted that Action Man. I wanted to take him home with me. I made it clear to Auntie Izzy that this was the best toy I'd ever seen. For an hour or two I fancied that she'd tell me just to take him home. That he was mine. After all, I'd lost my baby sister.

Uncle Ronnie must have taken me home in his Jaguar – without Neil Armstrong. I hardly recognised the farm as we approached the house. The cows were all bunched up at the paddock fence, like they too were wondering what was going on. There were cars everywhere; in the front yard, up the back lane, in the long field. The house was full too. There were people in every room, some of whom I'd never seen before. Most of them ignored me. I pushed my way through to the kitchen. Every surface seemed to be covered with food. I'd never seen so many sandwiches; great towers of them teetered above me. Through the window I caught a glimpse of my teenage cousin, Mary, who was up on the back garden, pushing

Edward on the tyre-swing while holding Frank in her arms. She was wearing her best Sunday school dress. Someone had chained Nipper to his kennel and he was straining to join in the fun.

I don't know where my mother was, but my father appeared and put his hands over my ears. They were warm and smelled like they'd been scrubbed for hours. Suddenly a space opened up around us and he crouched down and held me by the elbows. A waft of Christmas aftershave hit me and I couldn't even smell cigarettes off his breath. Somehow I wished that I could. 'Do you want to see her again?' he said. I thought he meant my mother.

'Yes,' I said.

He gathered me up in his arms and carried me upstairs. When he opened their bedroom door I expected to see my mother waiting there for me, perhaps with her sister or one of her friends. Instead, the room was dark and the curtains were drawn. On the big double bed I could just make out the tiny figure of my sister, laid out on the eiderdown.

'Do you want to say goodbye to her, Ethan?' my father said.

I can't remember what I replied. Or even if I replied. But I do remember being held over her, floating above her little limp body, defying gravity. And I remember kissing her cold cheek and thinking that she did not look as she had when I had last seen her. She didn't look like Anna either.

Back downstairs I searched quietly but frantically for my mother through the forest of adult limbs in dark suits. I couldn't find her. Someone was saying a prayer in the good room. I pulled at a stranger's sleeve and said, 'Where's my mummy?'

loudly. Mary appeared behind me and shook my shoulder before telling me to shush. All the windows were open and I wished that I had been allowed to wear long trousers. But my Sunday clothes had been waiting for me at Auntie Izzy's, so I'd had no say in the matter. I stomped up and down in my sandals a few times in a vain attempt to dispel the goose bumps on my bare legs.

There was movement in the hallway and then the sound of the stairs creaking in an unfamiliar way. I knew every idiosyncrasy of that staircase; every squeak and how to avoid each one of them, and Eddie and I knew how to descend it in no more than three bounds. Mary took my hand and started to lead me towards the porch and the front door. The front door was only ever used for special visitors. Regular visitors called at the back and came directly into the warmth of our kitchen. The front entrance was now bathed in sunlight and, despite being crammed with people, the hallway and porch now seemed impossibly vast. Picking our way through the throng, the journey from kitchen to living room to hallway had been unbearably slow. The prayers in the good room had ended and people started shuffling out from that side of the hallway too. That's when I saw my mother; harried and stooped, as misshapen and unlike herself as my baby sister had seemed. Her face was bloodless. A tight knot of her friends had clustered protectively around her. I tugged at Mary in an effort to get closer, but just then a group of men in matching tailed suits emerged from the stairwell, and the mourners cleared a path to allow the tiny white coffin to be passed overhead, from one pair of outstretched hands to another.

I looked up at the little box, high above me, momentarily silhouetted in the doorway against the spring sun. That thick silence had descended again, snaking its way around the throng of strangers and tightening around my throat and chest.

There was too much silence for so many people. Suddenly I was seized by panic. I wanted to see Anna again. Just one more time. 'I want to see her again!' I said, pulling at Mary. Someone put a hand on my shoulder, tenderly, but firmly too, somehow pushing at the unseen thing that threatened to erupt from deep within me. 'You can't, sweetheart,' a voice whispered in my ear. 'You just can't.'

I stretched my free hand out across the chasm of the hallway, towards my mother. 'I want to see her again, Mummy!' I called, as the coffin disappeared from view.

Someone was holding her arm too, but she lifted a gloved hand and held it out weakly towards me, a sad, worn-out expression on her crumpled face. Years later she told me that all she'd really wanted was to be able to crawl into a small room – a cupboard even – to hold her three boys close and never let go.