

Jacqueline Doyle

## Traces of a Life

“Every man in the chapel hoped that when his hour came he, too, would be eulogized, which is to say forgiven, and that all of his lapses, greeds, errors, and strayings from the truth would be invested with coherence and looked upon with charity. This was perhaps the last thing human beings could give each other and it was what they demanded, after all, of the Lord.”

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

“No. I don’t need. I don’t *need*.” My father fought the paramedics who insisted on taking him to St. Joseph’s. It was the middle of the night, blood pooled under his head on the kitchen floor where he’d fallen, my mother stood by helplessly as they tramped to and fro in their heavy boots, checked their watches, conferred on crackling walkie-talkies, made notes on their clipboards, set up the stretcher. The doctors knew by then that his brain was riddled with new cancer, and that the end was surely near.

In the hospital he struggled to leave his bed. “I want to go home,” he kept telling everyone, but the doctors gave him sedatives instead. After three days and nights by his side, my mother went back to their apartment to get some sleep. He died before she returned the next morning.

He told us many times that he’d lived longer than anyone in his family tree. He was proud of that. At eighty-seven he’d also out-lived most of his contemporaries. At the sparsely attended service later that week, there was no one to remember the boy he’d been, or the young man full of dreams and ambitions who’d waited until he was almost thirty to marry. My mother knew very little of his life before they met. Perhaps she’d never been curious enough to ask, or had forgotten what she once knew about the man she’d lived with for more than fifty years. What remains are only faint, ghostly traces of a life.

\*\*\*

James Patrick Doyle was born in a town that no longer appears on any maps. Amatol, New Jersey was a “company town” built in 1918, the year of my father’s birth, the site of a WWI munitions plant. I don’t know whether his father worked construction, or whether he worked in the factory itself loading shells. The town of 10,000 disappeared into thin air after the war, as much of my father’s biography has disappeared into thin air. He was christened James Patrick after his two grandfathers, second- and first-generation immigrants from Ireland.

I don't remember him ever mentioning them. His brother Harry was born in 1923 in Kingston, Pennsylvania. Because of the gap in their ages, they were never very close. Even before the Depression their itinerant father had trouble finding work. There were years when the family couldn't afford to stay together.

Only a handful of photographs survive of my father as a young boy. In one, a sepia-toned snapshot, he stands alone on a city sidewalk, a row of apartment buildings behind him. His family moved so often, and he was farmed out to so many relatives in the Northeast and Midwest, that I have no idea where this could be. It must be in the mid-nineteen-twenties: he looks like he is about six or seven. He faces the camera with a broad grin, dressed in old-fashioned knickers and a matching belted jacket buttoned up to his chin, a blousy bow tie showing above the collar. His ears stick out. Although his thick black hair is neatly combed, unruly cowlicks spring up at the hairline. His expression is radiant. Joyous. It's painful for me to see such youth and joy and know he's dead.

The formal studio portrait of my father and his younger brother Harry is more serious. My father, a sturdy eight- or nine-year-old, looks very grownup in a heavy gray woolen sailor's suit. He stands upright, staring solemnly at the camera, his right hand resting on a velvet chair where Harry, a chubby toddler in white baby clothes, perches on the seat. It is perhaps the more characteristic of the two photos. By all accounts, Jimmy Doyle remained a serious boy—a diligent student and autodidact bent on making something of himself. In high school, when he wasn't studying and reading, he spent all of his spare hours in a makeshift darkroom in their Jersey City apartment developing photographs. After he began his engineering studies as a scholarship boy at Cooper Union, a college in lower Manhattan, he haunted the Greenwich Village bookstores, saved money for the ballet and the symphony and visits to museums. He drank at McSorley's Tavern with his college pals, who called him "the mole" because of his perpetually darkened room. When his mother died unexpectedly of a stroke, she left a hole in his life that was never really filled. She was only forty-seven. He was twenty-one years old.

\*\*\*

Before the service I hastily assembled a group of framed photographs to display in the entryway to the church: a large framed sepia wedding portrait of my mother and father, a black and white snapshot from their honeymoon in Williamsburg, and two smaller, framed color snapshots of our family at Christmas. In one the four of us are sitting on the floor in front of an enormous tree sparkling with decorations, piles of presents behind us. My father frequently took

## *Kestrel*

pictures with a tripod and self-timer, documenting the plenitude of our early family life with thousands of pictures, archived as slides and stored now in stacks of cartons in their Independent Living apartment in North Carolina. In the other Christmas photo, probably from the same year, my father holds my brother and me aloft, one of us on each shoulder. It looks like I am about six years old, my brother about four. My father wears a bright red sweater. He's laughing, and looking up at my brother with a tenderness that amazes me.

My mother didn't want an open casket or a wake at the funeral home. She didn't contact anyone, imagining all were as tight with their money as she was. "That's ridiculous," she kept explaining to her neighbors. "I'll tell them later. It's a long trip." She didn't want my husband there, or our son, or friends from far away, or distant relations.

Instead only my brother and I, a small scattering of my mother's bridge friends, acquaintances from their new retirement community, and their cleaning lady stood in cold pews in a church my parents had attended only once or twice, listening to a priest who'd never met my father. "Your mother keeps telling me he was going to be eighty-eight next week," the priest said earnestly beforehand. "So I'll talk about that." As if longevity and a pending birthday could be a central fact in someone's life.

Despite pressure from my mother, my brother declined to say any last words, whether from fear of public speaking, or his mixed feelings about our father, who'd after all been so angry and so unforgiving for so many years, so bitterly disappointed in so much. His only son had never finished college, never learned thrift or the value of an education. His only daughter had rebelled against his politics, had married a Communist, divorced and married a Mexican. Wrong, wrong. Not what he'd planned when he'd scrimped and sacrificed to go to night school for his B.S. and Master's degrees, moved out to the suburbs, worked hard for all those promotions, mowed the lawn every weekend, washed storm windows, pruned trees, shoveled snow, paid for piano lessons and braces. His marriage had not turned out much better. His wife always sick, it seemed, their quarrels so frequent they'd come to seem normal. Wrong, wrong. Something had gone wrong.

The priest failed to call the three of us up to the pulpit as we'd asked him to, probably because none of us had actually volunteered to speak. After nervously rehearsing a possible eulogy over and over again during the service, I interrupted the mourners moving toward the drafty parish hall to say a few words. "Excuse me, hello, I'm his daughter. I'd like to say something." The words sticking in my throat. How to sum up a life?

Time was slipping away, I was slipping, I looked into the faces of strangers milling in the doorway and (*how to sum up?*) spoke of

the love of Ireland and of literature he'd passed on to me (not saying, *whom he'd never forgiven*), the mathematical and scientific intelligence he'd passed on to his grandson (not saying, *whom he didn't really know*), the ability to fix and build anything he'd passed on to my brother (not saying, *whom he'd never respected*).

*Did he forgive, did he accept, was the love there, so gnarled, so stunted, too hard to express? Surely the Lord forgave those hopes and dreams so strong he clung to them his entire life, waiting for it all to cohere, to come together, unable to surrender.*

"Let us pray for him," I said. I stood with my hand on the closed wooden coffin, while the funeral home staff waited to wheel it away, and the retirees waited for the coffee and cold cuts.

\*\*\*

My father waited until he was securely established before he married. My mother was nine years his junior, a vivacious, outgoing girl from the suburbs. When I was two years old they bought a house in the small, upper middle-class New Jersey town where she'd grown up. A proud homeowner, he devoted himself to endless maintenance of our old, three-story stucco house, patiently refinishing floors, restoring woodwork, patching the roof, rebuilding porches destroyed by carpenter ants, putting in a new driveway, building cabinets for the kitchen. Every morning he left at 6:00 a.m. for the train, ferry, and subway commute to Gibbs & Cox in the Battery in southern Manhattan. Every evening he returned home at 6:30 p.m. It was during those years that James Patrick Doyle rose through the ranks from Senior Engineer to Vice President. He once described his job to me as calculating all the things that could go wrong with a ship. He lived his life in much that way too, pessimistically calculating all the things that could go wrong in an effort to control them in advance.

When my mother permanently retreated to their bedroom, complaining of chronic allergies and fatigue, he ran our household single-handedly, cooking his "hamburger concoctions" for dinner and overseeing our homework and education. There was always some extracurricular project for my brother and me: learning to recite poems ("Once more, with feeling," he'd say to me), memorizing "Fifty Great Moments in Music," completing pages of extra math problems (he'd taken Trigonometry twice in high school for the sheer joy of it), reading long lists of books in the summer (books like *Studs Lonigan*, *The Octopus*, *Babbitt*). He inspired me with a love of modern art and literature (Picasso, Calder, and Klee; Joyce, Dos Passos, and Yeats). But he was also an exacting taskmaster, prone to rages. Sometimes we walked on eggshells for days, tiptoeing around his white-faced fury.

Our teenage rebellions came as a shock to him. The paths we

chose in college and after were a bitter pill he never fully swallowed. Alone at home with my mother, he devoted himself to endless financial projections for their retirement, and to Irish genealogical research and photographic archives of his forebears, producing a slim family history of the Kings, on his mother's side, filling a file cabinet with materials preparatory to a family history of the Doyles. My mother's ailments abated temporarily. For many years she played duplicate bridge, earning a Life Master Certificate. But he remained an antisocial, critical, intensely private man. The two of them bickered constantly. "It's like a war zone," my second husband said when he visited. The crossfire seemed never to let up.

"The man was a saint, a real saint," my mother repeats over and over since his death. It's hard to know what qualities she's referring to. Perhaps the monastic precision of his habits, or his unflagging sense of duty, the way he nursed her through illness after illness, shouldering the management of their household without complaints. Or his rigid integrity, both a virtue and a failing. Maybe she's simply forgotten their life together, what he was like, preferring the comfort of cliché to remembering how things were.

What I remember: the fierce love of that young father, his life-long hard work and sacrifice, his cold anger in middle age, his silences and withdrawal, the sheer size of his hopes and dreams. How we played chess every morning before he left for work. How he stretched out on the couch after dinner to listen to Mussourgsky's "Night on Bald Mountain" and Tchaikovsky's "Violin Concerto in D." How he read Lewis Carroll aloud to us, and bad Kipling poems, and James Thurber stories. His impatience when I cried over his extra credit math lessons. His pride when I graduated from college. His aloofness from my family. The warmth in his eyes as he bent over a map of North Carolina with my six-year-old son, and traced the highways with his finger. "This is where we are. Here."

\*\*\*

The last time I saw him was on Father's Day weekend, 2006, five months before he died. In my twenty-odd years in California, he never once visited my family, whether from parsimony, or fear of flying with a pacemaker, or prejudice against my Mexican-American husband, I was never sure. When my son got older, the three of us usually visited my parents in Asheville once a year, often in June when school let out—polite, somewhat strained visits, where we chatted about report cards and the weather, the plane trip and the traffic, our jobs at a state university and the California state budget. That year I was talking about a new course on autobiography and memoir I was teaching, and I asked him if he'd ever considered writing a memoir

himself.

“You write it,” he said. Ever the methodical engineer, he pulled materials out of one of his file cabinets and laid them out on the couch: a thick c.v., a tattered bundle of report cards from high school and college, a folder of pay stubs dating back almost seventy years. Though he’d never been a storyteller, and was often taciturn to the point of silence, he settled back in his tan armchair with the Irish tweed pillow, and adjusted his glasses as he straightened the c.v. in his lap, preparing to tell his story to my son, my mother, my husband, and me.

“William Francis Gibbs was a self-taught engineer,” he started. I was taken aback that he would start his life history with the name of his boss—a benefactor but hardly a friend, not someone he’d ever socialized with. “His father didn’t think much of engineering.” My father smiled to himself, at the mysterious ways of the very rich. “But he told Francis he could do what he wanted, as long as he went to law school first. So Francis went to Harvard, and then Columbia Law, and in 1922 he and his brother started designing ships. It was the beginning of Gibbs & Cox.” He paused and smiled again.

“They were doing pretty well, and then the Second World War came, and they started doing *very* well. Francis negotiated a deal whereby he was paid individually by the ship and not the design, for every Gibbs & Cox-designed ship the Navy built. That meant thousands of ships.” My father shook his head in admiration. “In the end they drew up the plans for about 75% of all our naval vessels in the war. They made a fortune.” My father was clearly gratified, though it would be years before he even came close to sharing that wealth.

“I’d just turned eighteen when I started at Gibbs & Cox in November 1936 as an office clerk, copying letters and filing blueprints. They paid me fifteen dollars a week. I studied drafting, and became a draftsman. By then I was earning a degree in mechanical engineering in night school at Cooper Union, where poor boys could study for free.” He loved Cooper Union, and had been sending them large sums of money for years. “I wouldn’t be where I am now if it wasn’t for them,” he often told us.

He detailed his scholarships, his degrees, his years studying nights at Cooper Union and NYU and Stevens Institute of Technology while he worked full time at Gibbs & Cox, his slow, steady rise from copy boy to draftsman to engineer to Chief Engineer to Vice President and Member of the Board. He lingered over each promotion, reminisced about his year heading their Washington, D.C. office, turning over the pages of his c.v. slowly, proud of his achievements. A dry recital of the facts of his career was not what I’d been looking for. But it was probably the most he’d ever said in the presence of my son. Our visits were so short, and Ben barely knew his grandfather, so stern

## *Kestrel*

and reserved, so private.

My father talked on, as the light dimmed outside. I don't know what my son took away from his last encounter with his grandfather. For me, there was one episode in the biography he regaled us with that afternoon that was infused with particular vitality. It was from his youth—before marriage, before children, before the houses, before the promotions.

He had just gotten out of the hospital after a hernia operation, had just met my mother, a pretty and lively nurse, whom he married two years later. He was between jobs, he said. This in itself was surprising enough to me; I had always heard that he worked at Gibbs & Cox from age eighteen straight through to retirement. Passing by a shipping office with a sign out advertising for machinists, he impulsively went in and signed on for a six-month voyage to India and the Middle East.

As a child I'd loved rummaging through a cardboard box in our storage room marked "Jim-Personal," filled with ivory curios from Calcutta, and Egyptian leather billfolds from Port Said, along with an impersonal trip diary that described the sweltering heat in the engine room, and native women with teeth stained red from betel nuts. There was a small, framed photo from the trip on a bookshelf in his den: three men clowning around on a city street with a tiny, dark-skinned boy in native dress in the foreground. My father stands slouched in the center, relaxed and grinning, with a cigarette in his hand. He's wearing a pith helmet, and a work shirt half unbuttoned that shows his undershirt.

He was in his late twenties when he took the trip, excited to be out on his own, and so far away. It was the most adventurous thing he'd ever done. Late one night, he said, he went up on deck alone. The SS Sea Scorpion had dropped anchor in the Hugli River, at the entrance to Calcutta. The moon was shining on the dark choppy water, which washed against the hull with a rushing sound. It was a bright crescent moon, high in the sky, and the blue-black heavens overflowed with stars, more than he'd ever seen before. He could see the North Star, and the Big Dipper, and the soft blur of the Milky Way. Except for the quiet splash of the water, all was silent and still.

"I said to myself . . .," he told us, with all the wonder in his voice and expression that he must have felt at the time, some sixty years before. "I said to myself . . . 'This is the life.'"

\*\*\*

My mother says he'd been talking aloud to me when the priest visited them for Last Rites the day before he died, though I was still three thousand miles away in California, frantically making arrangements for a flight. For a long time it was a source of great anguish to

me, knowing he'd hallucinated my presence because I wasn't there. Perhaps he populated the hospital room with more phantom visitors to keep him company in that final hour—his wife Peg as the flirtatious nineteen-year-old girl who'd loved to dance so many years ago, his college buddies Jules and Ferdie, full of irreverent high spirits, his fellow sailors from the *Sea Scorpion*, his brother Harry in uniform, laughing, genial, long dead.

Or maybe instead he came face to face with his own solitude, a life of increasing estrangement from others culminating in that final moment.

He died alone, much as he lived alone, waking in the predawn hours in a narrow iron bed, no one nearby but a passing nurse, who noted the rattle of his breathing and called my mother to come back. He must have noticed the gray light filtering through the half-closed venetian blinds, heard the hushed clatter in the halls of the hospital. Remembered the priest's words. "May the Lord Jesus protect you and lead you to eternal life." Did he reach out his hand, groping, to find nothing?

\*\*\*

James Patrick Doyle was born on October 26, 1918 in Amato, a town that has disappeared without a trace. He grew up in Philadelphia, Brooklyn, Barahona in the Dominican Republic, Chicago, St. Louis, Wilmington, and Croton, New York, in a house that an Irish immigrant ancestor built out of stone. As a young man he moved to Jersey City, traveled in India and Egypt, and then settled in Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, where he lived for over thirty years. The distances between us were more than geographical. I trace his life on a map with my finger, whispering, "This is where you are. Here." I stop at Asheville, North Carolina, where he died among strangers on October 11, 2006.

But it's too unbearable for me to leave him there, facing death alone. My absence from his bedside, the empty pews at his makeshift funeral, the inadequacy of my improvised eulogy haunt me. He tasked me with finding some coherence in his story. And so I write out of guilt for the miles never bridged between us. Out of sorrow. Out of forgiveness. Out of love. Out of my desire that he not be lost.

I like to think that he was immersed in a memory of childhood at the end. During his last weeks he leafed through stacks of old photography books, a frail, silver-haired old man peering through bifocals at pictures of the past: turn-of-the-century New York, Chicago, Boston. The scene I imagine him inhabiting is so vivid I feel I know this, but I don't know how I could: a cold, gray October day, twilight on a city street where he plays with other boys, his face warm and

## *Kestrel*

tingling in the chilly air, snowflakes wet on his tongue. “Jimm-eee . . .,” his mother calls from their apartment window above. “Jimm-eee. Harr-eee. It’s time to come hooo—ome.” And he turns to run home, glancing for just a moment behind him at the boys scattering, their game over, the snow falling silently in the dim light. Far off in the distance, he hears a last, exuberant shout in the street.

