## BOY ON A BICYCLE



Conan Kennedy



MOKE ROSE FROM HIS CIGARETTE. I noticed that from a distance. And decided that he was being thoughtful, sitting there on the bench. But maybe he wasn't, maybe it was just that the sight of someone sitting alone and smoking a cigarette gives rise to that impression.

"You took your time" he said as I cycled up.

"It's bloody far on a bike" I told him.

I parked the machine, upright, pedal against the kerb in traditional manner. People don't do that anymore. And it'd be unwise, very. These days a bike needs to be locked securely to some immovable item of street furniture. A bike left casual against a kerb these days? Say goodbye. Sayonara. Goodnight Vienna, all that.

"It's the same distance on a bike as in a car," my father said, "and don't say bloody. Your mother doesn't like it."

"May be the same distance..." I muttered, and sat down beside him.

And so we sat there for a while. Myself tired from the ride and he thoughtful with his cigarette. Thoughtful or whatever that mood he was in, he was alone with his cigarette anyway. I didn't smoke. But then I

was only fourteen, going on fifteen. Though come to think of it, even when I was older and did smoke he never once offered me a cigarette. And he lived to ninety two. Never once offered. Have a cigarette? No. Never. Not once. Maybe he didn't approve. Which was strange, because he worked as a travelling salesman for a cigarette company. Not that approval mattered one way or the other...because when older I just swiped his samples from the cupboard anyway. And thus as a teenager I always had cigarettes. Which made me popular among the boys I knew. Yes I was nearly going to write *among my friends* just there, but decided that'd be stretching it a bit.

My father and I sat there on the bench in Shankill with our backs to the Catholic Church. A position that we both more or less maintained throughout our lives. He for the simple reason that he was a Protestant and I, a Roman Catholic, for more complex reasons of faith and idealogy. Had he not married a Catholic I too would have been a Protestant. More relaxing in some ways, or so I sometimes reckon...sometimes reckon not. Being a writer bad enough, and an Irish writer worse, not sure at all how I would've handled that triple whammy of being a Protestant Irish writer.

He'd bought me the bike in Kilmacanogue, in the garage there which had a little shop attached. One of his customers, as he described them. Being a travelling salesman for a cigarette company was a popular calling among those customers. And deals and favours were exchanged, and I suppose he likely got a few bob off the price of the bike. He once explained to me why cigarette salesman were very popular among shopkeepers...it was because of the war.

"The war?"

"The war, before you were born. There was cigarette rationing. Shops tried to get as many cigarettes in as they could." And he drifted his hand in the air. That sort of gesture translated as *under the counter*, or as *you know how it is yourself*.

"Your mother and I never went short of tea," he added. And no, they hadn't. In my dimmest memories I recalled biscuit boxes of tea hidden in backs of cupboards.

Left over from the war. Illicit rationed tea.

"But it's not the war now," I pointed out, "it's bloody years since the war."

"Yes but Irish shopkeepers are very conservative. They think there could be another war at any minute. Probably right. And don't say bloody, your mother doesn't like it."

"So it's just they want to keep in with cigarette salesmen?"

"Exactly, exactly."

And so he had bought the bike at the right price in Kilmacanogue and we had driven down there to collect. It turned out to be a plain black simple bike, and I'd probably been expecting something a bit more flash, but a bike was a bike. A Raleigh, it had dark green piping edging the black enamel. And the lower part of the rear mudguard was painted blinding white around the shiny red reflector.

"You like it?" he said.

"It's great," I told him, "I'm going to ride it home."

"I was thinking we'd put it in the boot."

"No I want to ride it, try it out."

He shrugged. My father wasn't interested in taking decisions. Familywise he left them to his wife. And as to the rest, he drifted. We arranged that he'd wait for me in Shankill, and we'd see how it was going from there. Because after all there was Killiney Hill ahead, and I might be tired of cycling. So off he drove and I followed on the bike. It wasn't a motorway then, but a fair old busy road enough. And cars whizzed by too close and I felt the first stirrings of that animosity between cyclist and motorist. Bastards, I thought. And heard my father say don't say bastards, your mother doesn't like it.

I cycled on.

Past those premises which are now the *Avoca Woollen Mills*, that fashionable pit stop for ladies who lunch, buy Ballymaloe cookbooks, and rarely cook. I don't know what the place was in those times. And didn't really care. Just cycled on, past all that land on the right which my family now owns, now *Brennanstown Riding School*. Well, here I use the

term *my family* at its loosest, it being actually my sister who owns it. And I'm none too sure how *family* she considers me. Doubt I'm in the deeds. It hardly matters. Families come and go, as does ownership of land...and the land hardly cares so why should I?

I cycled on, and on. And reached a fork in the road, and a fork in the mind too. To veer left and go down through Bray or continue on the main road to Little Bray....decision? I decided on the route through Little Bray. Something about that road I always liked, and still do. Perhaps because it winds the river, and something ancient appeals. And one is on the trail of ancient journeys. Another thing, it has the air of the glory days of motoring. One expects an open topped tourer to come around the bend. Driver in goggles, his bobbed haired companion in a cloche hat. I've never actually seen that scene but I reckon it's somewhere in the senses. From pictures in old books, magazines. Whatever, I definitely sense all that on that particular piece of road. But that is now. Back then I neither sensed nor thought nor knew. Mysticism was at a low level.

Into Little Bray. I've always liked the concept of Little Bray. And actually as a child wondered why there wasn't a Little Dalkey, or a Little Dún Laoghaire. It just seemed appropriate to have a place, and then another but smaller place of the same name beside it. Young people have interesting minds, before they get gummed up by life and experience and rationality. Adulthood another word for early Alzheimers? No doubt.

Around Sunnybank next. Sunnybank which I didn't know then should more correctly be called Bloody Bank. Its proper name. Bloody Bank because of old battles and slaughter. Mountainy tribes coming across the Dargle to rape and pillage...Dubliners trying to stop them. What else is new? Apart from the name of the place. Bloody Banks. Sensitive souls just changed the name.

Next the Solus water tower, black and white over there like the packaging of one of their light bulbs.

Clever in its imagery.

Ireland needed more of that back then.

And now we've gotten less.

But onwards, ever onwards.

After the Solus water tower the road changed in those times, and still changes now. It became and still does become more rural, old fashioned somehow. One definitely senses that golden age of motoring mentioned, the golden age of cycling too. Perhaps it's those huge old trees that do it. And that Crinken Church, like somewhere heart of England.

"They're not really Protestants in there" my father told me once.

"What do you mean, not really?"

"They're disconnected. They don't recognise the bishop."

"What do you mean they don't recognise the bishop?"

"His authority. It's complicated. We're the ancient Irish church you know, the Church of Ireland. And we're complicated."

"The Protestants split from the Catholics," I corrected, " Martin Luther."

"Not in Ireland. We were here first. The Pope sent people to take us over. We resisted. That's why we're still here. Not many of us though. When I was growing up a quarter of Dublin was protestant. Look at us now."

I did.

I pedalled on, past that big house *The Aske* where my uncle lived way back. Not that I knew that then, as boy on a bicycle, I merely cycled by. Past the cemetery which wasn't a cemetery in those days. Just fields, waiting for flesh as fields do. No need for that cemetery then. All the people buried there were still alive. Some hardly born. But the earth waiting for them. Ever so patient, the earth.

Onward, ever on. Past that housing estate where my sister lives right now. Not that she knew that back then, doing her Leaving in *The Holy Child Convent*. On into the village of Shankill. Up the hump to the railway bridge. And down again. And across to the bench beside the church where my father sat.

In different times, these different times he would be sitting almost opposite the nursing home where my mother was to die. Though he went before her, and never saw her there. But did he know, did he know back

then as he sat there waiting maybe thoughtfully? Did he know that one day he might sit there as a ghost, thinking of her?

Hard to tell.

But it was there for him to know. As indeed all the future is. Life is much like going though IKEA, following that arrowed winding path. But there are hidden doors to circumvent that tedious arrowed path. Hidden in IKEA for the staff, and in life for the wise.

Neither of us particularly wise, my father and I sat there on that bench for a while, me getting my rest, him smoking. Then he stood up, dropped his cigatrette, and stamped out the butt with his heel, twisting like it was alive and might escape. He asked me if we'd put the bike in the boot and drive the rest. I told him no, I might as well finish the journey. And he said please yourself, and drove away, a decision made for him. And I got back on the bike and cycled on. And near Ballybrack it was time for me to make another decision. Up Killiney Hill and down again? Or through Ballybrack Village and along Church Road and past Killiney Golf Club? Then up Ballinclea Road to Killiney Road and home?

One route was hillier and harder, but shorter.

The other flatter and easier, but longer.

The choice...hmmnn...one of those tricky ones.

Like Robert Frost I took the road less travelled, and not for the last time. Yes, I took the hillier. And yes, the reader tells me told you so, yes half way up Killiney Hill I regretted it, getting off to push. Ah well. Many times through life I have regretted the journey, and have gotten off to push. But still and all, on arrival in Killiney Village I was glad. And celebrated with an icecream from Rita's Shop. Big Rita, big big haired Rita. Her husband was a carpenter. Fell off scaffolding in the building of the *Holy Child Convent*. Got serious compo. Spent the rest of his life in the pub next door, *The Druid's Chair*.

Stories? Yes, I've got stories.

From Killiney Village it was all downhill from there on in. Literally, in every direction. No matter which way chosen. It was impossible *not* to go downhill. Easy. Reckon in life you do get to that place, eventually.

And once there?

That phrase again...might as well finish the journey.

I got on the bike and freewheeled down.

Past the house where Séan Ó Faoláin lived. He was a writer, I remind the reader. And why? Because it's necessary to remind. Dead writers are dead in a much more complete manner than non-writers. Anyway, my father ran over Séan Ó Faoláin's dog and killed it. Right there outside that house. The incident was more or less my father's only connection to the world of literature.

I freewheeled on.

Past that big posh house whose teenage daughter had an affair with the conductor of the 59 bus. An affair that was regularly consummated in the bushes behind Killiney Village called *The Rocks*. Kind of apt name, in those circumstances. I just couldn't make this up. And how the bus kept leaving late and that's how it all came out in a scandal. No, her parents weren't that pleased. But of course all the other parents around Killiney were, mightily. The posh people in that posh house were generally considered to have lost the run of themselves.

Her name was? And she married?

You're kidding me, this is not that sort of book.

But stories? As mentioned, I've got them.

But I hadn't many then, boy on a bicycle. Back then I was just going home, or so I thought, going home. But of course I wasn't. I was fourteen going on fifteen. And I had a bike. And I was leaving.





WENT TO DONEGAL. Myself and the new bike. In fact the main reason I had the new bike at all was the fact that I was headed for Donegal. I needed a bike in Irish College. Or so said the instructions. And there were a lot of instructions. In two languages. But they strangely omitted to tell us to also bring food and blankets and a personal psychiatric advisor. We'd be needing them.

I went to Gortahork in Donegal with Philip Boucher Hayes. No, not the present day RTÉ journalist, but his father of the same name. We were schoolboys together and were off to learn Irish for a summer month. We'd come back native speakers, so many mini-Padraig Pearses, not to mention mini-Pearsettes.

It was a noble dream.

And we were part of that dream, and proud.

And also hoping to meet lots of mini-Pearsettes and get into, if not their knickers, at least their bras. In those days getting into the former was slightly more ambitious than the culture of the times allowed.

We gathered our hormones at Connolly Station. Still called Amiens Street then, it was much the same as now. But smellier with steam and smoke from great rumbling engines. Quite dramatic really. To us Dublin suburban youths it was something like heading off on the Venice

Simplon. To the unknown, to an exotic place. And I suppose we were.

We were going to Bogland.

Gangs of us, fourteen, fifteen, that age. Each boy stood beside a bike. And mine stood out. I hadn't actually wanted it to stand out. Because by extension that would lead to myself standing out, and teenage boys like to fit in. It's the gang culture. But my father had a notion. The bike was a month or so old but he didn't get to be a cigarette salesman for forty years without planning ahead. And he had saved the bike-shaped cardboard factory wrapping that the bike originally had in Kilmacanogue, saved it for just this occasion. This was necessary, very necessary. Or so he said. Because the bike would be thrown in the guard's van and scratched and wrecked on the journey. Or so he said. So best to wrap it back up again.

That cardboard covered bike beside me on the platform made me look like a prick. Not to mention making me the subject of mockery and general derision. It was not a role I cherished, though in adulthood I've just had to come to terms with its continual re-emergence. But I suppose any psychological trauma wasn't my father's concern. He'd had a cold shower upbringing, a be-a-man-the-natives-are-restless-upbringing. And his interest was in protecting his investment. Buying me another bike was not on his agenda. One son, one bike. A sacred mantra to him, much like one man, one vote. Well, much like one man one vote would be to the majority of people. He himself wasn't too keen on that notion. Particularly if it involved Roman Catholics.

The bike was thrown into the guard's van and off we set. The journey took us first to Derry city, thence Letterkenny, and then from there to Gortahork. Somewhere half way along the journey the boys got tired of taking the piss out of me, so that was ok. And there were lots of girls on the train, from Muckross College. So that was better. Their destination was the same as ours. Learning Irish. And they all looked very pretty. Even the ugly ones, desirable. But I decided to save those ones for later and start at the top, working myself downwards to the natural level appropriate to my personal charm and attractiveness.

I struck up conversation with a very pretty ponytailed blonde.

Looking back now there seems to have been several pony tailed blondes in my story of those times. Maybe they were just a type, common in those days. Olivia Newton John as in the movie *Saturday Night Fever* reminds me of those girls. If perhaps a slightly older version.

This particular PTB (pony tailed blonde) was from the Trees Road in Mount Merrion. Or so she told me, and why would she lie? I didn't know anything about Mount Merrion, it was beyond bicycle range. I actually thought Mount Merrion people were quite exotic. Somehow less primitive than us Dún Laoghaire folks. They had bowling alleys and shopping centres. We had the sea. And Killiney Hill. And the sea.

Now let's get serious. Gortahork in those days was neither Dún Laoghaire nor Mount Merrion. It was a squalid moonscape of dereliction and decay. Of weedy thatch and thin lipped women, disappointed men. But they did speak Irish, and whether that was connected with the state of the place is probably both here and there. The Irish language has no word for litter.

So, now that my gaeilgeoir daughter has disowned me, I will move right on.

On arrival we were taken to a hall, it was bleak. With the atmosphere and design standards of a concentration camp processing facility. Functional. There we were divided into groups, as if some for gassing, others for hard work. Well, the boys were processed in this manner. The girls had somehow vanished by then, hustled off elsewhere by hatchet faced old bats. There were a lot of hatchet faced old bats around. They spoke Irish. A later wisdom tells me now that they probably farted in Irish...through those square backsides they hid in tweedy skirts.

I have died and gone to hell, I decided.

I hadn't.

I had gone to Bogland.

Guided by a mentor on a bike, a group of six of us cycled off into the hills. This was an improvement because those were the days before all that monstrous Donegal planning corruption and everything was still very picturesque. Around us were mountains and, yes, bogland, but it was

picturesque. And the landscape was marred by few enough bungalows, just dotted with traditional cottages mostly. We were those kids in John Hinde postcards. I wished I'd worn a red jumper. It was all quite nice. I felt aesthetic emotions rising.

It wasn't to last.

At the bottom of a lane the mentor stroke guide stopped, and pointed up a track. You lot up there, he said, the *bean a ti* is expecting you. Well he didn't actually say those alien words, but we supposed that to be the gist of his Irish language instructions. And then he turned his bike and his back and cycled away towards Gortahork, towards a life I could write in an easy paragraph.

A student teacher then, this was his summer holiday. Handy for a few bob. Yes he did eventually become principal of a Christian Brothers school in a Dublin suburb. Married. A childhood sweetheart? Probably. Had three children. Died. And yes there's probably more, much more, certainly more, but I don't have time nor space nor words for every life that touches me. Barely enough time nor space nor words for my own.

The mentor left and we were alone. And it was getting dark.

But not so dark that we couldn't see a ditch beside the lane. And in that ditch a running stream of water, red water. Hey lookit the water, one of our number said, it's red. It was. We looked at it. Hey lookit that donkey, another of our number said. We looked at the donkey. It looked at us. That was about it, donkey wise. We set off up the track. The surface was very stony. We're going to get punctures coming down here someone said. Probably the same boy who had pointed out the donkey. Any group of six includes that someone.

The stony surface was shaped like the letter W, in that there were two deep ruts on either side of a mound in the middle. Some of us walked in one V of the W, the others in the other. I walked in the V at the side of the road that was next the ditch. And I noted as we climbed the hill that the water in the ditch got redder and redder. I didn't like that, I didn't like it at all. It was a sign! And the sun was going down.

We arrived, and mostly wished we hadn't.

The cottage was long with many doors and more windows, small windows that weren't going to say much until they knew you better. I noted at one end of the cottage how the windows were not glass, but slats of wood, as if someone had broken up a pallet and nailed bits there. They had, of course, as I was to learn later, much of Donegal's traditional architecture involved the use of old pallets.

Towards that end of the cottage there was a man and a boy. The boy was at the door, the man sat outside. Something was going on. We watched. The boy slung a sheep out towards the man, and the man cut its throat. And blood gushed out and flowed across the yard towards that ditch we had noted coming up. They were slaughtering sheep. And there was a pile of them dead against the wall of the cottage.

"Guess we'll be eating sheep," said the wit of our group. Who was Philip Boucher Hayes, father of the RTÉ journalist of the same name.

We went to the central door of the cottage. It stood between windows that had glass and evidence of light within.

"What do you boys want? said the *bean a ti*, in English. She wore a housecoat. I'd never seen a housecoat. Sexy it wasn't. But I suppose they were useful in areas where contraception was difficult to obtain.

"We've come to stay, we're from the College."

"Well I told them I could only take two, three at most. I've only two beds. My sister's over from Luton."

"But where will we go?" we asked.

It was dark, darker. The old man slaughtering sheep now seemed to be squeezing green liquidy stuff out of intestines. It mixed with the blood at his feet. They make sausages out of that, said the boy who had pointed out the donkey. The boy who prophesised punctures.

"Maybe we'll be having sausages," said Philip Boucher Hayes.

"Where will we go?" we asked again.

"Oh for fuck's sake come in, I'll sort it in the morning" said the *bean* a tí.

We went in. There was a hen walking round the kitchen floor. We looked at the hen. The hen looked at us. That was about it, hen wise.

- "Would you like some sandwiches?" asked the bean a tí.
- "What are they?" someone asked.
- "Slices of bread with something in the middle" said another boy.
- "They're sandwiches," said the bean a tí, "sandwiches."
- "I mean what's in them?" said the boy. And added "I like ham."
- "Well you're not getting ham sandwiches here" said the *bean a tí*, "it's tomatoes. We have a greenhouse. A tomato greenhouse."
  - "Have you any cheese sandwiches?"
  - "We've tomato sandwiches."
  - "That'd be very nice," I said. "Go raibh maith agat."
  - "Ceart go leor" said the bean a tí.

I'm a native speaker already, I thought.

She divided us up. The beds were actually big double beds, so there was three of us in each. Philip Boucher Hayes was one of the boys in mine. He told us ghost stories late into the night. The next day we were all divided up, and he went to another cottage. And I didn't really see him again, we were never particular friends. I don't think I liked him much, he and his family had a tiff about themselves. But who I liked and who liked me are facts as meaningful as the falling of a single leaf in a single year, a single year of...oh God must be forty.

Forty years went by and my mother had dementia now. But she also had a lot of money, so she had a carer. Lots of carers, a rotation of carers. And one morning my mother and I and one particular carer sat around the table in my mother's dining room. And I sat precisely where I used sit at Christmas dinners long years ago, my grandmother to one side, my Aunt Polly to the other. Their chairs were empty now.

I sat in the chair that was always my chair because from there I could help my mother with the serving, moving dishes back and forth. And I suppose I sat there from habit now. Just as from habit my mother sat at the head of the table where she had always sat. In authority. But now she didn't quite know who she was. And complained that she found it difficult, remembering, things. I told her yet again she'd had a fall, she'd fallen down the stairs, fractured her skull and that had caused confusion.

But I didn't tell her she had brain damage from the fall, and was never going to get better. And then she asked me "why, why did you let me fall down the stairs?"

Yes, I had long realised she thought she was a little girl, and that I was her father. And it was a cheerless realisation. So I shrugged at her and smiled, and she smiled too, forgetting that she'd asked a question, and questions came with answers. I looked at my fingers on the mahogany table, and remembered setting the places for those family Christmas dinners. We'd come from old decency and had silver and good glass. Pointy silver grapefruit spoons with one serrated edge, that sort of heirloom. One just has to be born to it really. No gentleman buys his own furniture, all that. Sorting out cutlery and glass and silver centrepieces and setting that table had been my job. I set a good table to this day. Not that I know why I was given the task as a teenager, I having five sisters. But I suppose they had other jobs. Prettying themselves for the party, and that. The younger ones wore velvet dresses with detachable linen collars. Queen Elizabeth was on the throne across the water, Queen Elizabeth the Second. But that Christmas table was more reminiscent of the First.

The carer and I chit chatted. An older woman, she wasn't the pretty busty young one I liked so I didn't flirt. Just chatted. My mother interjecting with inconsequential remarks. I said yes Mum. The carer said yes Mrs Kennedy. And we went on with the talk. And then my mother stood up and wandered off. Is she ok, I asked the carer? She's ok, she assured. And soon we saw her out there in the garden, ok, pottering, looking at plants. She had been something of a gardener. I doubt she knew their names now. Or even what plants actually were in the scheme of God's creation.

"It's hard for the family," the carer said.

I agreed. But that was about all there was to say about the matter so we continued to talk of other things. Gossippy things. She knew I was in the writing business and told me that her son-in-law was the journalist Philip Boucher Hayes. And I said oh, it's a small world. Because it was. Because I went to Bogland with another Philip Boucher Hayes. And I

remembered.

That pretty Muckross girl on the train?

Didn't get next to near her in the amorous stakes. But worked my way down to a plainer and more suitable version. We lay behind a turf stack, the rest is history. Well, it's history if history be betrayal. Because in the years or so to come I'd see her at Dublin dances, and more or less ignored her. Because by then I'd worked my way higher up the food chain to prettier girls. I can still see her looking at me, across those crowded halls where the *Greenbeats* played. And other bands with names like *Bees Make Honey* and musicians with names like Deke O'Brian and Gerry Cott. I danced in those places and she did too. And now I feel bad for ignoring her. But then a man feels bad for lots of things. And I try to console myself that I was only a boy on a bicycle then, and not the fine rounded individual of grace and culture that I soon became. It offers no consolation. But rather desolation for a lost friendship, a lost sharing.

And Philip Boucher Hayes, father of the journalist of the same name? Decades after Bogland I met him at the urinals in the *Bailey Pub* in Duke Street. Life hadn't been great to him, by appearances. But he still had that arrogant tiff about himself. It's a family thing. And he responded to my conversation with ascerbic remarks. Ascerbic to the point of dismissive, even contemptuous. Nothing I said impinged on his scheme of things. So outside the jacks we parted, he in one direction, I in the other. And the crowded bar swallowed us up in that slosh of laughters and conversations. Like we were items on a shore, washed by an incoming tide. And that was the same night an old man in a homburg hat came up to myself and my companions. An old Jewish man. He had a bunch of paintings under his arm, selling them. And we looked at them. They were cheap, but we were cheaper and didn't buy. Pity really. It was Harry Kernoff.

The years passed. My mother fell down the stairs. And I was writing in the *Irish Times*. And I had just written an article about an old school rugby photograph I had. And then my mother's carer said her son-in-law's father was in that photo, and would it be possible to get him a copy?

It was, and I did. And one Philip Boucher Hayes sent the photo to another Philip Boucher Hayes in England. The son to the father. And then very shortly after that the father died. Yes I have noticed that. Sometimes I meet or have vague renewed connection to people I knew long ago. For no reason, they come out of the blue, in conversation or coincidence. And then they die. As if their reappearance was their saying goodbye.

And it probably is.



## Also by Conan Kennedy

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THE SNAKE DANCER OF SATI CHOURA

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