

# The Egg Story

Excerpt from *Not The Kennedys* by John O'Hern

The night after my first visit to the psychiatrist, after first tucking Declan in and later reading Max to sleep, I sat down with a pad and pen and pondered the rock in my head under which my childhood memories lived. I didn't actually lift it up and let any light in. I just inspected it, walking around it, gently nudging it with my foot. Just touching the rock set off images in my head, like sparks from poking a fire long untended but still smoldering just below the surface. The clink and rattle of unbuckling brass preceding the breath-halting hiss of Dad's belt as it slipped through the loops of his trousers. The shaking of the floor as his adult weight thundered its way upstairs mixed with the shrieks of terror from whichever one of us had set him off. I could smell Mom's cigarette smoke, fresh brewed coffee and baked apple pie. I could faintly hear infantile melody tinkling out of the Mr. Softy Ice Cream Truck as it inched its way through the parking lot at the beach on the Cape and the weight of a silver quarter in my swim trunk's pocket, purloined from the pile of loose change on my father's dresser, the sound of the waves and gulls, the twang of a screen door spring pulling tight, the hammering clap of wood on wood as the door slams shut. I recalled my long dead Catholicism and was suddenly smacked with memories of Christmas Mass, an altar boy inhaling the pungent smell of incense like it was the breath of Jesus. Memories came at me like a swarm of misdirected bottle rockets, making my heart ramp up in a panic until I settled on just one, a vision of something I had completely forgotten: the eight of us in our pajamas kneeling before the living room sofa at bed time, hands clasped, heads bowed, Dad kneeling off to our side and leading us in the Our Father and Hail Mary, the nightly ritual ending with the chorus, "...and God bless Karen, Danny, Susan, Johnny,

Charlie, Tommy, Debbie and Kevin, Mom, Dad and Aunt Mary and Poppa. I was all the way back now; I could hear the sound of their voices calling my name.

Mom and Dad had eight children. They would have had fourteen of us if Mom hadn't lost six potential O'Herns to miscarriage and still-birth. I don't recall them ever saying to any of us they'd planned it that way from the get-go. I heard what they gave out for public consumption like everyone else, that each child was a surprise and a welcome gift from God. My father was a devout Catholic, so a good portion of his drive for procreation was propelled by religious dogma. Condoms were forbidden in the Catholic church...so what was a fella to do? As for my mother...religion was a trivial matter...I don't remember her ever speaking about whatever Christian Sect she stumbled out of...Methodist...Lutheran...Quaker, who knows. She was a high school graduate headed for the anonymity of some secretarial pool when she fell for my father the doctor. Whatever religion made her husband happy worked great for her too. In any event I doubt she was ever consulted.

I suspect there were more earth-bound explanations behind their profound fecundity. Dad was an avid horticulturist who planted large gardens on either side of his property, flower beds exploding with iris, tulips, and roses. It never occurred to me as a kid that Dad bought our house, not for its location or size, or the quality of school districts even, after all it was two bedrooms short for a family of ten—there were five boys in one room and all ten of us shared the one bathtub—but for its sizable attached greenhouse where he cultivated orchids, cacti and geraniums. When that wasn't enough to satisfy his botanist's lust, he plowed up the front lawn and put in rows of beets, peas, tomatoes and brussel sprouts. It was most likely the farmer's zeal

in him that got my mother pregnant all those times. He had a wife who was receptive to seeds and he liked watching things grow.

It might also be worth noting that the era Dad grew up in marked him with a dark, fatalistic approach to things. Life was far more precarious in his day. He lived through World War II, Korea, and Vietnam where families lost sons by the handful. He often praised the miracle of penicillin and in the same breath remembered schoolmates of his, who, by the dozens had gotten tuberculosis and were taken away to sanatoriums, never to be seen again. The generation before him had been decimated with other diseases that had no cure, like influenza pandemics, tuberculosis, and polio. He knew better than any of us that there were no guarantees in life, that you could sire a boatload of children and still end up with only one surviving adult.

Finally, the era we were sired in had its own influence. This seeding my father performed all took place in the fifties and sixties, the zenith of the Kennedy era. To suggest that our house was pro-Kennedy is a laughable understatement. Before we marched out of the house to the bus stop for school in 1960, our hair and teeth were brushed, shirts tucked in and on our collars and blouses a JFK and LBJ button was pinned firmly in place. A well thumbed paperback copy of *Profiles in Courage* was buried under the mountain of newspapers, magazines and books that littered Dad's desk in the living room and when film clips of the Kennedy clan, swimming, playing touch football, sailing or posing, exquisitely dressed in front of embassies around the world were shown on the television, we all sat mesmerized, studying them like they were the home movies of close relatives."Oh my god," Mom gushed every time she watched an excerpt featuring the president and his wife, "what a handsome couple they are."

To be sure, there were some similarities between the Kennedy Clan and our motley crew. Like the Kennedys we also had a house on Cape Cod and we played outdoor sports too, but there

the resemblance ended. Once all of us were born, and you lined us up against a wall and really took stock, taking note of the hand-me-down clothes, the slack jaws and vacant eyes, the notion that we might measure ourselves to the Kennedy standard, that one of us might be of presidential timber was, as the Irish like to say, hilarious—if it weren't so tragic. Yet Dad glowed with every telling swell of our mother's belly, seeming to crow to the world at large, "My seed is the stuff empires are made of!"

I was twelve when my mother was pregnant for the final time in a vain attempt to match the other booming Kennedy-wanna-be-clan in town, the Harder family, who had outpaced us by bringing nine children into the world. I had heard Mom swear up and down the year before, after Kevin, the youngest was born, that she was done with the baby making game. Yet here she was pregnant again and when she complained aloud about her condition, one of us, too young to grasp that Mom and Dad were not equals in the bedroom, pointed to the bump in her midriff and said, "Well, how did that happen?" Mom just frowned. Even as a grade schooler I could see that this frown contained more colored nuances than a simple look of irritation or disapproval. There was sadness in it with shadings of disappointment and betrayal. That a good measure of her existence was out of her hands. Worry was in there too; maybe fear even. How much more punishment could her one-hundred-and-ten-pound frame take? Only now, with two grown children of my own, do I understand the added stress another child must have meant to her, another seventeen-year sentence to a dreary cycle she knew by heart; again with the diapers, the bottles of milk, the baby food and clothing, the teething, the mumps, the chicken-pox, one more plaintive wail added to the symphony of complaints and cries constantly playing in her head.

One afternoon, as a teenager just coming into a vague awareness that there might be problems in the world other than my own, I burst into the living room and found Mom sitting in

front of the television watching General Hospital while sorting through a large laundry basket filled to overflowing. On the coffee table next to her were her constant companions, a lukewarm cup of coffee and a half full ashtray, a lit cigarette smoldering and wedged in the corner of her mouth. “Hey Ma,” I said, and while making a beeline for my room upstairs I added, “whatcha up to?”

Her eyes never left the screen, but she acknowledged my cheery utterance with a distracted nod and then let out a long smoky sigh, as she separated what needed to be ironed from what didn't. For perhaps the first time I caught her mood head on and stopped mid-step halfway up the stairs. I turned, came back down, and bounded back into the living room.

“Don't worry Ma,” I flung my arms out like the bearer of great news, “Danny and Karen are off to college, Susan goes next year, then I go after that.” I came at her from behind and gave her a sympathy smooch on the cheek. “I see light at the end of the tunnel for you.”

She was holding her head to the side, keeping the lit end of the cigarette away from the first of a dozen bath towels that required folding. The cigarette hanging from her lips bobbed as she spoke making delicate circles of smoke, “Oh,” she said, her eyebrows arched in my direction and the free corner of her mouth cinched upwards in a tight grin, “...there's a tunnel?”

Once, when Mom's sister Doris came to visit—everyone called her Dokey—I overheard them having a chat in the kitchen over drinks and smokes. I'd come into the kitchen to grab some crackers but when I got my handful and tried to make my escape, Dokey snagged me by my elbow, pulled me to her side and put an affectionate arm-lock around me. “Our step-mother was a shrew,” Dokey said dryly, responding to something Mom must have said while sipping her gin and tonic and giving my ribs a squeeze, “she only married Daddy so she and her two kids could have a roof over their heads.” I had no idea Mom had a step-mother in her past let alone that she

might have had an unhappy childhood because Mom was not inclined to talk about her past in front of us children, and we were too wrapped up in ourselves to ask. While Dokey spilled secrets Mom shot me nervous glances over the rim of her sherry glass. “The way she treated us after Daddy died was just despicable,” Dokey said, shaking her head in a cloud of smoke.

“She wasn’t that bad,” Mom said, trying to take some of the poison out of Dokey’s lament.

“What are you talking about,” Dokey yelled like she’d been slapped. “She treated her own daughters like princesses and the rest of us step-kids like scullery maids. You’re the one who ran away... twice I might add, and then Mama had to call the Pinkertons to track you down in that flop house you were hiding out in.” Mom’s eyes were locked on me now and for my part I tried to remain impassive, pretending like I was adult enough to handle sensitive information like this responsibly. “We were all proud of you when you pulled that stunt,” Dokey added. Mom stepped to the counter and poured herself another inch of sherry. “When you met John-the-doctor and then he proposed, we all called you Cinderella, remember that?”

Mom turned back to Dokey, her eyes narrowed, her face exposing a rare seam of grit, the kind a runaway kid might have. I thought she was going to tell her sister to shut her mouth but just as suddenly, a laugh started to play across her face. She pointed to the load of dirty laundry waiting by the back door to be taken down to the basement and then waved a hand at the pile of dishes in the kitchen sink. “That’s right,” Mom chuckled, “Cinderella, that’s me.”

Dad promised Mom that he’d hire help for her around the house once we kids started arriving but the closest he came to honoring that pledge was when Mom went to the hospital to deliver, he’d hire a sitter to come to the house for a few days to cook, do laundry and watch out

for us hellions till Mom got back on her feet. One evening before Dad got home from work, Tommy scared the hell out of our sitter when he tried to slide down the stair banister from the top of the stairs but slipped and fell six feet, landing on the phone table in the hall below with a tremendous crash. He bounced off the table, landed on his feet and walked into the kitchen as if nothing unusual had happened but the poor sitter raced into the hallway every time she heard someone come down the stairs for the rest of the afternoon until Dad walked in the back door. We never saw her again.

On the mornings Mom was scheduled to have her baby delivered via C-section we'd all kiss Mom goodbye before we raced out to catch the bus for school. Then Dad would drive Mom to the front door of Albany's Brady Maternity Hospital, a Catholic birthing factory, on his way to work, in the same way he dropped one of us kids off at school if we missed the bus. This was back in the time when men weren't required to go to the delivery room and take part in the spectacle of horrors that unfolded there, but then again, Dad was a thoracic surgeon, he cut people's chests open for a living. He'd done a war time stint in the Philippines putting blown up soldier's bodies back together in makeshift operating rooms so it's probable that child delivery was too pedestrian in his mind, like removing an ingrown toenail or a planters wart, not worthy of his attention. It may even be that he was not allowed in there, the last thing any obstetrician in charge would want is an ego maniac surgeon/husband standing over his back correcting him at every turn.

If mom went into labor on a weekend, Dad would forgo the expense of a sitter and bring all of us kids along for the ride. Perhaps being a doctor imbued with a fatalistic frontier mentality, there lurked somewhere in the dark of his mind the very real possibility that

something could go wrong; bringing us kids along was an opportunity to say a last goodbye to her, just in case.

It was only on these trips that I ever saw him open the car door for her and then guide her to the front of the familiar four-story brown brick building with its huge white cross perched on top. While we waved and shouted goodbyes at her from the car, the two of them walked up the steps to the entrance, Mom clutching her suitcase in one hand, in the other a small brown paper bag full of sucking candy to stave off her nicotine cravings, her coat pockets stuffed with magazines picked up from the pharmacy on the way. Our faces pressed to the car windows, we watched as Dad offered a chaste peck on the cheek while nuns in their penguin outfits scurried past. Once back in the car Dad rolled his window down and turned to Mom who stared back at us from the top of the steps. “Good luck, honey,” he called out, then added over his shoulder as we pulled out, Dad, waving like Santa departing with a sleigh full of elves, “have a good time.”

On Saturday or Sunday mornings when Mom was still in the hospital recovering, Dad always took a turn as chef and made us breakfast. Somewhere along the line he’d convinced himself he was an excellent cook, but the truth was he’d only mastered the art of blueberry buckwheat pancakes and in the summertime turning a slab of meat on the grill. On these mornings we all prayed for those pancakes but when the smell of bacon wafted upstairs a quiet dread crept into the house because we knew it was going to be a fried egg day. Making the bacon, then frying the eggs in a half inch of bacon fat along with toast for the whole crew was a time-consuming affair so Dad shortcut the process by undercooking everything. The bacon came out of the pan limp and rubbery, though to be fair, it was usually possible to choke it down without gagging, but the eggs he served up were an abomination. This was because Dad timed



the affair to the toaster which he always set on ultra light so when the toast popped up the eggs came out of the pan regardless of their condition. They were so undercooked that you could see through the top of the egg and make out the floral pattern on the plate beneath.

“Who’s ready,” Dad growled from the kitchen to the crowd of us cowering in the living room in front of the TV, glum expressions all around, each of us politely offering the lead position to the others in an idiotic attempt to forestall the inevitable.

“I like my toast dark,” Susan mumbled just loud enough for Dad to hear but Dad didn’t take orders, he gave them.

“You’ll take what you get and like it,” he yelled back.

Other than our nightly bedtime prayer ritual, or kneeling at the altar in church to receive communion, this was one of the few times that we beseeched God without prompting, each of us hoping for a miracle of some kind, that the phone would ring and it would be the hospital needing Dad to come in for an emergency or maybe a friend would call and invite that lucky one of us over to their house to work on a joint homework assignment, though neither option was likely at eight o’clock on a weekend morning. Like condemned prisoners already strapped in the electric chair we shot nervous glances at the black rotary phone on a small bench at the bottom of the stairs, waiting in grim silence for a reprieve.

I volunteered for the lead spot that day thinking that Dad wouldn’t be in such a rush with the first batch but my stomach clenched as I watched the two jiggling eggs slip off the greasy spatula and land on my plate with a soft plop. As I headed for the dining room, I shot a glance back at the chef, trying to gauge his mood. Under his apron I caught a glimpse of his belt, a thick strap of shiny brown leather cinched around his waist.

Alone at the table I wolfed my toast and gummy bacon, drained my juice and sighed at the two unblinking orange eyes that stared back up at me. I cut into one egg, testing its firmness, hoping for a texture that I might be able to swallow but when I broke the skin of the white part of the egg, clear, uncooked albumen poured out like water. Usually, particularly on weekends, I skulked around in a trance, a half-awake dream state, but on this morning, self-preservation kicked, in blowing the fog right out of my head. Almost without thinking I stripped off a sock and holding open the top I scraped the eggs into it as quickly as I could before the next sibling came into the room with their pile of gelatinous goo. I looked around the room searching for a place to stash it. There was a baby grand piano in the corner of the dining room that no one played except for the one or two half remembered happy tunes that Mom occasionally banged out, music from the nineteen thirties that she'd learned when she was in her teens, when the promise of an exciting life still lay before her. Unfortunately, there was just open space underneath the piano and Dad would spot a lumpy, wet sock leaking orange yoke under that in a second. Beneath the dining room picture window was a wall length radiator covered with a painted metal panel on top and a decorative screen that ran along the front. It was just the ticket. The sock was already bleeding drops of yoke into my palm when I chucked it towards the radiator where it hit the floor with a sodden thump, then skidded underneath and out of sight. With a rare last second bit of quick thinking, not wanting to get caught with one bare foot, I removed my other sock and stuffed it down my pajama bottoms.

Just as I sat back into my seat, Charlie came into the dining room staring forlornly at his plate. When he saw that my eggs were gone, not even a trace of yoke on the plate, all hope deserted him, and the tears started coming.

“Dad,” he said in a quivering voice that was half protest, half surrender, “these eggs aren’t cooked enough.”

“What are you talking about,” Dad rushed into the dining room trumpeting like a bull elephant, “they’re fine.” Dad jabbed a finger in my direction. “Look at Johnny’s plate. He didn’t have any trouble and I cooked yours exactly the same.” With his position on the eggs firmly stated, Dad hurried back to the kitchen, rescuing the next batch of eggs from being properly cooked. Charlie’s eyes went to my plate and then to me. He was looking for help and I gave him nothing in return. He knew me well enough to understand that I had done something underhanded, that my empty plate involved chicanery of some kind. He looked around just as I had done, searching for a way out. I’d noticed he was barefoot when he came to the table so I was about to offer him the spare sock in my underwear when my older brother Danny came in, also sockless and equally dismayed. I did not have a four-egg sock and after Charlie’s complaint, three perfectly clean plates would surely raise suspicions. There was nothing I could do for them and so, leaving them to their fate, I carried my empty plate away from the table under the beaming smiles of our martyred President Kennedy and the Pope, both of whom lived on the mantle for as long as I could remember. Susan passed me on her way into the kitchen after I had dropped my plate in the sink and headed for the stairs. She had already begun to sniffle and mumble words of despair despite not even having been handed her plate yet. Susan had a tendency to mumble when she was upset with Dad, which was often her undoing because backtalk with him was a mistake, whether he could hear the words or not. “What’s the matter with you?” I heard Dad snap at Susan as I made my escape.

I didn’t catch her mumbled retort but just as my foot hit the bottom landing, I heard the jingle of Dad’s belt buckle along with the little hiss it made as it snaked through his belt loops.

By the time the screaming started I was safely locked in the upstairs bathroom sitting on the edge of the tub with my hands over my ears.