

AUTOBIOGRAPHY

MORRISSEY

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My childhood is streets upon streets upon streets upon streets. Streets to define you and streets to confine you, with no sign of motorway, freeway or highway. Somewhere beyond hides the treat of the countryside, for hour-less days when rains and reins lift, permitting us to be amongst people who live surrounded by space and are irked by our faces. Until then we live in forgotten Victorian knife-plunging Manchester, where everything lies wherever it was left over one hundred years ago. The safe streets are dimly lit, the others not lit at all, but both represent a danger that you're asking for should you find yourself out there once curtains have closed for tea. Past places of dread, we walk in the center of the road, looking up at the torn wall-papers of brownish blacks and purples as the mournful remains of derelict shoulder-to-shoulder houses, their safety now replaced by trepidation. Local kids ransack empty houses, and small and wide-eyed, I join them, balancing across exposed beams and racing into wet black cellars; underground cavities where murder and sex and self-destruction seep from cracks of local stone and shifting brickwork where aborted babies found deathly peace instead of unforgiving life. Half-felled by the local council, houses are then left slowly crumbling and become croft waste ground for children to find new excitements with no lights for miles. Fields are places in books, and books are

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placed in libraries. We, though, are out here in the now, unchecked and un-governed; Manchester's Victorian generation having coughed to their deaths after lifetimes of struggle, and these waterlogged alleys have occasional shafts of greeny-yellow grass jutting between flagstones that have cracked under duress like the people who tread them. Here, behind the shells of shabby shops, that foul animal-waste waft from which no one can fail but to cover their mouths as they race past. These back-entries once so dutifully swept and swilled and donkey-stoned to death by the honest poor now have no future, for this now *is* their future, that moment when time runs out. Like us, these streets are left to their own stark destiny. Birds abstain from song in post-war industrial Manchester, where the 1960s will not swing, and where the locals are the opposite of worldly. More brittle and less courteous than anywhere else on earth, Manchester is the old fire wheezing its last, where we all worry ourselves soulless, forbidden to be romantic. The dark stone of the terraced houses is black with soot, and the house is a metaphor for the soul because beyond the house there is nothing, and there are scant communications to keep track of anyone should they leave it. You bang the door behind you and you may be gone forever, or never seen again, oh untraceable you. The ordinary process of living takes up everyone's time and energy. The elderly muse in bitter ways and the kids know too much of the truth already. Unfathomably, as we fester, there are casinos and high-living elsewhere; first-class travel and money to burn. Here, no one we know is on the electoral roll, and a journey by car is as unusual as space travel. Prison is an accepted eventuality, and is certain to turn you

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into a criminal. Penalties assessed, arrears called in, and dodging life's bullets is known as survival. It is only ever a question of *when*. In the midst of it all we are finely tailored flesh – good-looking Irish trawling the slums of Moss Side and Hulme, neither place horrific in the 1960s, but both regions dying a natural death of slow decline. The family is large and always admired, the many girls for their neatness and quiet glamor, and always attracting the leisurely stride of local boys. Naturally my birth almost kills my mother, for my head is too big, but soon it is I, and not my mother, on the critical list at Salford's Pendlebury Hospital. I cannot swallow and I spend months hospitalized, my stomach ripped open, my throat pulled wide, my parents are warned that I am unlikely to survive. Disappearing beneath a mass of criss-crossed blanket stitches, I grip onto the short life that has already throttled me. Once I am discharged from hospital, my sister Jackie, older by two years, is interrupted four times as she attempts to kill me, whether this be rivalry or visionary no one knows. We are not vulgarians, yet here we are, in rent-demanding Queen's Square backing onto the high walls of Loreto Convent, with its broken glass atop lest we, below, get any fancy ideas. The family is young and amused and all Irish-born but for my sister and I. The lineage leaps back to Naas, where Farrell Dwyer and Annie Brisk begat Thomas Farrell Dwyer who, somewhere, found Annie Farrell. Battling against the schoolmasterly dullness of detestable poverty, we Irish Catholics know very well how raucous happiness displeases God, so there is much evidence of guilt in all we say and do, but nonetheless it is said and done. My parents are both from the Crumlin area of Dublin, adjoin-



Free in our pleasures, Jackie and I at Queen's Square, 1965



*Jackie and I, 1966, wondering how we can possibly leave
the world better than how we found it*

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ing streets at that, from large families of struggle. My parents are both striking lookers, and it is they who sail to Manchester as the great extended hordes follow, and soon three houses on Queen's Square are occupied by the maternal side of the family, by whom my sister and I are raised. We rarely see my father's side, but they too are splattered about Manchester, full of boys instead of girls, high in number and eager for glee. The Irish banter is lyrical against the Manchester blank astonishment. Walled in by cold-water dwellings, we huddle about the fire, suitable to our calling. Around us, the tough locals welcome this large Irish band as we roar and rage through the 1960s, pinned together by pop music, and by the suspicious absence of money (which, in fact, no one anywhere seems to have). Nameless turnings suggest nothing beyond, and we trudge to school ankle-deep in slush, half-thawed and half-frozen, musing on *My boy lollipop* by Millie Small. The school looms tall and merciless in central Hulme, as the last of the old order, a giant black shadow of ancient morality since 1842, invoking deliberate apprehension into every wide-eyed small face that cautiously holds back the tears as he or she is left at its steps – into long echoing halls of whitewashed walls, of carbolic and plimsoll and crayon blazing through the senses, demanding that all cheerful thought must now die away. This bleak mausoleum called St Wilfrid's has the power to make you unhappy, and this is the only message it is prepared to give. Padlocks and keys and endless stone stairways, down unlit hallways to darkened cloakrooms where something terrible might befall you. There are floors unused and cellars untouched in rooms unloved by ancestors who were certain that wisdom must lie in a keen

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self-loathing. St Wilfrid's is an asylum, of sorts, for Hulme's pitiful poor, and although it had been declared due for demolition in 1913, it grinds on, fifty years later, dragging we small children with it, plunging us into its own rooms of gloom. Children tumble in soaked by rain, and thus they remain for the rest of the day – wet shoes and wet clothes moisten the air, for this is the way. Our teachers, too, are dumped, as we are, in St Wilfrid's parish. There is no money to be had and there are no resources, just as there is no color and no laughter. These children are slackly shaped and contaminated. Many stragglers stink, and will faint due to lack of food, but there is no such thing as patient wisdom to be found in the sharp agony of the teachers.

Headmaster Mr Coleman rumbles with grumpiness in a rambling stew of hate. He is martyred by his position and is ruled by his apparent loathing of the children. Convin-
cingly old, he is unable to praise, and his military servitude is the murdered child within. His staff stutters on, minus any understanding of the child mind. These educators educate no one, and outside of their occupations they surely lament their own allotted spot? No schoolteacher at St Wilfrid's will smile, and there is no joy to be found between the volcano of resentment offered by Mother Peter, a bearded nun who beats children from dawn to dusk, or Mr Callaghan, the youngest of the crew, eaten up by a resentment that he couldn't control. When, in 1969, he spies a copy of the disc *Hare Krishna mantra* by the Radha Krishna Temple on my desk, his face cracks into a smile. He orders a record player from a musty and musky war-ruined stock-room, and he plays the record five times to an unwashed class whose nits sway in rhythm. Music, you see, is the key.

Mr Callaghan is momentarily unlocked, and is free of himself and his cauldron of spite for at least as long as the music plays. When it is over, his facial muscles collapse to their familiar soupy sourness. Favouring the girls, Miss Redmond lowers her eyes dispassionately at the pickpocket boys, for they are a dismal mass of local color. Miss Redmond smiles lovingly at Anne Dixon, a curly-haired girl whose mother is what the gibbering world term a Lollipop Lady. Miss Redmond is aging, and will never marry, and will die smelling of attics. The post-volcanic black worn by the school nuns and their monastic sheepish priests shapes the subtle effects of oppression; they know their time has gone, and the spinster-faced have seen the door close for the last time. Before them, a new race of youth with their lives yet to be lived, and the contrast between time gone and time to come burns dangerously. An inordinate number of teachers are unmarried, or possibly untouched by human hand, and this shows in the disdainful twist to the mouth. *'You touch me and my mum'll be down,'* I warn Miss Dudley. I am nine years old. Herself a sexual hoax, her lips thin and tighten as she drags me along the corridors of horror to the drooled gruel face of Mr Coleman.

'You!' he shouts at me, as if, at nine years old, I had already scarred England. But there will be no beating for any case that steps this far over the line, assuming the psychological; it is only the meddlers with pulpy hands who are whacked, and usually with a thin leather strap (and these are small children of eight and nine years). I am well turned out, soft to the eye, soft of voice, and absent of the Jackson Crescent muddiness, and this calls for a certain

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consideration. Many years later I will foolishly return to these rooms with a television crew, and I will find myself sitting once again with Miss Dudley, speaking through her teeth in a new darkness of advanced age. Miss Dudley recalls Jeane, my mother's almost-too-pretty younger sister, who, like sisters Mary and Rita, also served time at St Wilfrid's. As the cameras roll, I sit smiling with Miss Dudley, as a mortician might inspect a corpse, for practical and understanding we both might be in the now, but there is really no way of forgetting. I think back to that day when fat Bernadette wrapped a leather belt around her neck and proceeded to pull it tightly in both directions, thus possibly killing herself as she sat at her wonky desk in the classroom of B2. '*I'm gonna do it!*' she shouts at Miss Dudley, who casually reaches into her shopping-bag for her newspaper which she then unfolds on her battered desk – completely ignoring damaged and needy Bernadette, who is still shouting '*I'm gonna do it!*' Miss Dudley seems irritated only by the fact that she is taking so long.

When rakish and clanking Brian clumps to the ground in Assembly, he is carted away silently by grim-faced school staff, and the word goes around that Brian hasn't had food for seven days. But there is no gentle therapy for these deprived and confused inner-city slum kids, and there is no response to anything they say other than violence and more hurt. It piles up. This is the Manchester school system of the 1960s, where sadness is habit-forming, and where shame is cattle-prodded into kids who are in pursuit of bliss amid the unrelenting disapproval. Look around and see the gutter-bred – all doing as well as they can in circumstances that they are not responsible for, but for which they are

punished. Born unasked, their circumstantial sadness is their own fault, and is the agent of all of their problems.

'Ooh, doesn't this smell nice?' says my sister Jackie as she stretches towards me with an open jar of Pond's cold cream. As I lower my head to take a sniff, Jackie rams the jar of cream fully onto my nose. Jackie cackles loudly at this, as I scream and wave my hands. Aproned and full of *Jesus, Mary and Joseph!* declarations, Nannie charges from the kitchen with a handful of black pepper which she then rams up my nose with the hope that I'll sneeze the cold cream out instead of sniffing it brainwards. Life is thus. On another night, singing and swirling in front of an open fire as tea-time telly chortles and Nannie sets the table, I trip and fall towards the fire, burning a two-inch square area of skin off my wrist. A heavy bandage is worn with pride for months to come, teaching me all I shall ever need to know about attention and style. Jeane is asked to watch me one afternoon whilst everyone disappears to grapple with life's grim duties, and she feeds me rice pudding for lunch with a spoon so large that it locks in my throat and I can't pull it out. I panic, and run away from Jeane, who I am certain is trying to kill me.

My best friend is Anthony Morris, whose mother Eunice had been friends with my own mother. Anthony looked not unlike me, but with a small mole on his right cheek. A local nuisance with attractively badly cut hair, he invented little jokes and little bouts, wooing and spurning with a cold stare of sailor-blue eyes. We are the same age and the same height and the same weight and the same everything in an urchinular and picaresque Manchester way. Anthony lives in the new flats at the junction of Cornbrook Street and

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Chorlton Road, where Moss Side creeps up on Old Trafford. The flats still stand today, but were a nine days' wonder of progress only because of their flashy chutes and rooftop views. It didn't take long for the lifts to jam and the landings to stink, and for people to flee the flats like burning rats. There is much excitement one day when Granada Television film the famous Violet Carson, in cathode character as Ena Sharples, gazing mournfully from a mid-floor veranda, misty-eyed with old thoughts, as I squeeze in amongst the gathered crowd. The photograph becomes the jacket of a hardback book by H. V. Kershaw. These new flats had also been filmed for the opening credits of television's *Coronation Street* throughout the 1970s, panning from the flats over to Cornbrook Street and beyond to Harper Street, where I had lived as a newborn, swept up into someone's arms from Davyhulme Hospital.

It was with Anthony Morris that a torrent of nervous energy unleashed itself in the ripped-out houses in the dangers of faltering light. It was he who told me the reason why girls fluttered around me at St Wilfrid's, and what it was that they wanted. He told me this because I didn't know, and even when I knew, I was less interested than when I didn't know. I had no idea that it was anything other than a mere spout. Many years later, by 1974, Anthony has jumped to stern custodian manliness, and for once his vicious glare is aimed at me: '*You like all those queers, don't you?*' he bites. By this he means my merging musical obsessions, and my heart sinks down into a new darkness. There is nothing I can salvage from this accusation, and the eyes pool, as I lose.

From left side to right side, Queen's Square's bookends

are the Bretts and the Blows, two overlarge and knowing Manchester families. Sitting on a thousand secrets, they are central to everything, vitalized and full of life – not rough, but happy – escapist and impossible to match. Both families welcome ours, the Dwyers, with doors always open in a way that modernists assume never actually happened. The Blows live at the end house in the square, rammed up against the high wall of Loreto, their annual November 5th bonfire drawing in all of the Square's residents, unifying the leathery old with the darting young. Even Mr Tappley, who lives alone under his flat cap, creeps out to watch, determined to be unimpressed. Life is taken as it is, and Roy Orbison sings *It's over* all the way to number 1.

Nannie Dwyer is Bridget McInerny of Cashel birth, the family ringleader, my mother's mother, chiefly a personality and the center of everything. Nannie remains of Moore Street in Dublin, of astounding memory and continual disgust; her past as the leader of Dublin's first all-female Queen's Theater Revue had been unexpectedly nipped in the bud by the unexpected bud of Dorothy, followed by Elizabeth (my mother), Patricia, Ernest, Anthony, Jeane, Mary and Rita, and from thereon self-deflationary battles with life's important truths, plus the usual Irish companions of shame, guilt, persecution and accusation. Nannie is afraid, and appears older than her years. Her every hysterical observation is steeped in the fear of God (a God who will not save her at the end of it all), and although her life is entangled in love, Nannie doesn't know it, or cannot show it. Nannie is married to Esty, but she does not like men, or indeed any gooey evaluation of family life. At Christmas dinners Nannie will eat last, setting a place for everyone

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but herself, yet she will rise first to clear away and wash the dishes. Most fun when most grave, she will play the upright piano for anyone who will listen, her too-long finger nails clipping across mock-ivory until Uncle Liam inevitably tells her that she is murdering music, and thus Nannie will step aside as *Pretty flamingo* by Manfred Mann lashes the lino. A few years older than Jackie and I, Rita screams at music, and every male singer is 'gorgeous'. Family life is chaotic and full of primitive drama as everything is felt intensely. There are no electronic distractions and all human endeavor takes place face to face. We are stuck in the wettest part of England in a society where we are not needed, yet we are washed and warm and well fed. The dull-yellow street lights have none of the eye-crossing dazzle of modern illuminating flash. We are fascinated by shop fronts that remain lit up into the night, often the only form of light for miles. The switching on of street lights each evening tells us all that we ought to be at home, or heading there, for where else? There is nowhere else to be. It is the Nelson Riddle intro of *The Untouchables* that orders me directly off to bed each night, and I wonder what it is about the frozen Eliot Ness that I shouldn't see. The clumsily cut transition of *The Wolf Man* from sane to savage sends me darting with fright, and *Dr Who*, with its lasered x-ray synth swirl, disturbs me just as much. The happy bubble of television shows me the earth and its fragile moments of fantasy, and I, with all the petulance of the pipe dream, am allowed to engage. In childhood and early youth there is no such thing as 24-hour television, and the two and a half available channels play the national anthem at each evening's *Close Down*, which shows a ticking



*Nannie at the age of hope, and still Bridget McInerny
of Tipperary*



Mother, always nearest the heart. Staten Island, 1975

clock – as if ushering us up to bed with the burden of our own thoughts. Television is the only place where we banish ourselves from the community of the living, and where the superficial provides more virtue than the actual. We watch in order to find ecstasy, for at last we can survive in someone else. Our conclusions are our own, yet the landscape is infinite. Cross-legged, I sit on the floor and lean into the screen for *Champion the Wonder Horse*, where a boy and his horse find sunlit adventure in an America that permits everything, just as *Skippy* introduces us all to Australia, where a boy and his pet kangaroo find similar sunlit adventures in a world where adults are understanding and have time to explain and to sympathize with the peach-cheeked kids – none of whom resemble anyone that I know. Quicksand and rattle-snakes are passing dangers, but both boys in these shows never remain at the same point for very long, and are rarely discontented or fenced in. Where, I wonder, can such stylishly fitted jeans be found? Not in Manchester Play Streets, where children can only encumber. Where are there such boys who are fully and entirely content with simply *being*? Not in Manchester by-streets, which are exactly what they sound like. Schoolboy misadventures with *Just Jimmy* are the British version of boy-prank subterfuge, as Jimmy Clitheroe apple-raids, catapults, conkers and water-pistols his mother's nerves to blustering fussiness. These, though, are giant leaps on from the slapstick of *Mr Pastry's Pet Shop*, *Deputy Dawg*, and the pop puppet piglets *Pinky and Perky*. *Fireball XL5* calls my bluff, and each day brings five full minutes of *Captain Pugwash*, where paper characters shift across a screen of painted backgrounds, and where only left-to-right eye movements signify

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reactions aboard the sea-faring Black Pig. The French *Belle and Sebastian* once again shows the world beyond England as a better place for kids, and I am already ripe for disappearance. Funniest of all is *Batman*, so glamorous against our homegrown *Ask the Family* stodge or *Candid Camera* humiliations. Television is black and white, so therefore life itself is black and white. Gasps of color can be found only at the Odeon, the Gaumont, the New Oxford, the Trocadero or the Imperial, where the cinema screen gives you the hope of other people's happiness. Television flickers and fleets, and must be watched closely lest what you see is never seen again. Whatever you see you will never forget. I know so little compared to Canada's *The Forest Rangers*, whose lead boy is unleashed and free and stylish in his manly kindness. I sit on a stool by the fire and I watch the kids called the Forest Rangers who moralize and are never accountable, and who are too self-assured to ever think cruel thoughts. They heartily shake the hands of adults – something I have never once been called upon to do. Turn and look at me – in affectionate childhood distress, the last in the asylum, by a frosty Manchester fire. Could there be hope? *Animal Magic* offers none at all, and conjuror David Nixon smiles an honest half-smile. *Orlando* is played by Sam Kydd, a boat-builder on London's docklands where kids run wild and are given credit for being funny. *It's a Knockout* offers international games in madcap costumes, and *Honey Lane* is the damp bed-sit drama of East End market traders – our squatty England against America's *The Big Valley*, where, even in the Old West of 1870, Victoria Barkley has no trouble kitting herself out in Christian Dior. An annual flash of glamor is the *Eurovision Song Contest*, whose voting

system is heart-stopping, as is the Grand National turf accountant's dream of *Miss World*, as all of England places their bets on the beauty of young women whose full human potential is limited to one frozen expression; their bodies are for others, but not for themselves. Live from the Lyceum Ballroom (could I possibly know that, several lifetimes hence, I would one day become a someone on that very stage?), *Miss World* is unmissable high drama, a spectacle of heaven in Eva Reuber-Staier (Miss Austria 1969), and Marjorie Wallace (Miss USA 1973), never-to-be-forgotten world rulers. Breathing lulls throughout *Miss World* transmissions as British families ram into chocolate-strewn settees for a genuine glimmer of glamor, where cabaret battles the convent as the finalists huddle together backstage awaiting the announcement of the juicy winner in a severed condition of meaningless tragedy. The seconds prior to this announcement cause wet heaps of tension throughout Britain. It is magnificent, and its results are the talk of the entire country. In telly-land, *Miss World* and the *Eurovision Song Contest* are the highlights of each passing year, not only because they are competitions, but because we who know so little are allowed a view of the greater world. I recall Miss Brazil in 1970 waving at the camera as she walked into the final, and it was she alone who made me wonder about Brazil. I recall Spain beating the United Kingdom by one vote in the dying seconds of the very last count in the *Eurovision Song Contest* of 1968, and thus I wondered about Spain – my jotter on my knee, my own private scoring system profoundly at odds with the final result. There is no such thing as *Mr World*, perversely enough.