

## **“Pandora’s Box of Memories”**

Soon after my book *Love Child* was published, I got a message on Facebook from a Joanna O’Neal. The name didn’t ring a bell. When I saw who she was, my heart stopped beating. It understood the message before the words unfurled in my conscious mind. Joanna wrote that she was Griffin O’Neal’s wife.

I hadn’t seen Griffin since we were both thirteen, over thirty years ago. I was living with my sister, Anjelica, and Anjelica was living with Griffin’s father, Ryan, who swung from fun to frightening at warp speed. Griffin and I were allies. We shared his bedroom (there was never any question that his sister, Tatum, would share hers) and his king-sized waterbed. He was small and freckled with sea-green eyes, elfin and elusive. When my sister left Ryan, shattering our improvised family, I felt like I was abandoning him.

If we’d had email and cellphones, perhaps we wouldn’t have lost touch--but the twentieth century was a different world. All I knew of Griffin’s later life was what the lurid headlines at supermarket checkouts told me. None of it was good. Even so, Joanna’s message fired me with an astonished delight at the thought of hearing Griffin’s voice once again.

I lost a lot of people during my childhood, starting with my mother, who died in a car crash when I was four. I lived in a different house, with different people, almost every year after that. I learned, unconsciously, not to look back. My heart callused easily. Emotion became superficial and transient, like wind on the surface of a cold, dark lake.

This deadness was accomplished, I should add, without the use of drugs. Its only agent was the inexorable mental process that packages the chaos of life into a neat narrative, defanging the feelings involved. These narratives, under the guise of memories, take on the familiarity of truth--and only if you examine them stringently, as you do when you write a memoir, do you realize how treacherous they are. Things don't add up; they stop making sense; the memories shape-shift and mock you until you have no certainty about what happened at all.

The memories I had carried through my life turned out to be, not lies exactly, but at least partly fictional. That shocked me; it felt like a loss. In the past year, the space they left has been filled by something entirely unexpected: a different kind of memory, the heart-stopping, time-stopping rush that I felt when I read Joanna O'Neal's message. There's no "Oh, I remember," no words or places or names. It's a wave that swamps me and tumbles me into a disoriented, strangely comforted pulp.

This happened to me, in spades, in Ireland last December, when I went to visit Paddy Lynch. Paddy was my dad's groom and driver; his two youngest daughters were my friends when I lived there, before I left at the age of seven. As I entered the house with his oldest daughter, Mary, Paddy emerged from another room, so small he barely reached my shoulder. He was 85, and he had, to my amazement, the most beautiful skin I've ever seen: the skin of a debutante, creamy and smooth over the high cheekbones that were suddenly so familiar. "It's great to see you, Paddy," I said, or something like that, as I embraced him.

Then Mrs Lynch appeared, no taller than Paddy, perfectly coiffed and made up, wearing a raspberry-colored two-piece suit. The instant I saw her, I broke down in

tears. I don't mean that a few picturesque tear-tracks wended their way touchingly down my face. I mean I was a soggy heap of streaming nose and heaving chest, trying desperately to keep myself presentable.

"Mrs Lynch. I'd know you on the street. You look exactly the same."

I heard the words come out of my mouth before I thought them. I knew at the time it was nonsense, but I heard myself saying it again and again. I wouldn't have known Mrs Lynch on the street, though I might have recognized Paddy. All I remembered of her was that she made her kids banana sandwiches: I had in my mind no picture of her face, no sensation of her touch or her voice. I didn't know her first name. Yet it was the sight of her, not Paddy, that undid me.

Later, I tried to analyze it. When you're seven, people between fortyish and sixtyish look pretty much the same--not young, not old. Mrs Lynch, at the age of 80, looked twenty years younger, which made her the living image of my child's-eye picture of her, secretly archived for decades. That hidden picture ambushed me, flooding me with something that wasn't joy, or grief, or remembered loneliness, or anything else I could name. The overwhelming sense of recognition was an emotion in itself. It seemed to prove--as if it needed proving--that my life was of a piece, not disconnected fragments; that I was capable of caring; that my seven-year-old self was still alive within me.

I was older when I knew Griffin; his eyes, his freckles, his love of music, and his sad, mischievous sweetness had all lodged in my conscious mind. But why did I trust that he would be the same person I'd wished I could protect, after the drugs and guns and violent deaths that had marked his life? On the phone I could hear he was

damaged, and that he knew it; he kept stopping in mid-sentence, protectively, as if the misery and dysfunction he was describing might infect me.

When I went to California for work, I took an extra day to go to San Diego to see him. We had lunch in a dark restaurant overlooking the beach, with Joanna and their little son. It could have gone badly, I suppose, but it didn't. He builds guitars for a living now--meditative work--and against all odds he'd become a kind man, a tender father. This made me intensely happy--for him, that he'd made it, and for me, that the sense of him that I'd cherished for so long, despite the headlines, was true. The swell of that emotion I can only define as memory lifted us and carried us through the bare hour we had. We caught each other up on what had happened in our lives, but the events seemed hardly more than details. The heart of our hour was not specific memories, but memory itself: a hot-wire to the sense of being intensely alive; a circling back, a loyalty to one's past, a lifeline stretched across the broken decades.