Notre Dame
MAGAZINE

Oh, Danny Boy

BY WILLIAM MEINERS

My brother Danny is some 40-odd years old. It's hard for me to place his age in my mind. My oldest brother, Mick, is 14 years older than me, born 10 years to the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. My closest brother, Bob, is seven years and a day older than me. Danny is adrift, maybe a year or two younger than the oldest. I think of him in Irish instances — funny and sad.

If Danny weren't retarded, maybe he'd go by Dan, or even Daniel, for professional reasons. I only see him at Christmas, though I missed the last one. My father, who visits him about once a month, says Danny's fat now. "Oh jeez, too fat," he says, "about 195 pounds." It must be all belly on his thin frame. He's losing his hair at last, a gene he and the rest of us can thank our maternal grandfather for.

If I saw him tomorrow, nothing would change. Every Christmas, Danny greets me the same. "Baby Bill!" Danny sings from a mouth of rotten teeth that opens higher on the right side. He holds on to the "ill" and repeats it over and over if he's wound up enough, shaking a pointed finger skyward. "Baby Bill! Baby Bill! Baby Bill!"

"Okay, settle down Dan," my father will say, patting him on the back. Danny will take a deep breath, and we'll stare at each other with wondering grins until I turn away. "A symbol of Irish art," James Joyce said once, "the cracked lookingglass of a servant."

At some point, a visitor will ask Danny to sing some songs. "Let's sing 'Danny Boy,' Dan."

"Oh Danny Boy," he starts off clear enough, before running all the consonants together. "Da pipes da pipes are dawling. Dumdeedumdee da da da da da da. Da da da da. Da da da da da da doh. Oh Danny Boy, Oh Danny Boy I da do doh."

He can carry most any tune, he's just not a real stickler for the words. "What's Bill's song, Danny Boy?" my father asks. Danny breaks into his own version of "Roll Out the Barrel." Somehow he's picked up on some of Baby Bill's vices.

Danny was placed away at age 9 or so, before my time, and he was beaten by other kids there who didn't care for his wailing and carrying on at first. (And tenors that make you weep sing, "It's you, it's you must go and I must bide.") In time he settled in with his unit in Muscatatuk, an unusual

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name for a town and one that I've always associated, if only for its sound, with mental retardation and high humidity days and car sickness and shagging baseballs in Muscatatuk meadows and green bars on the windows with screams — unmistakenly Muscatatuck — from the inside, where I would never set foot, and Danny shoving salad bar lettuce from a fork into his Muscatatuk mouth with an overhand motion that looks like he's digging up weeds.

My mother would remark that Danny must have been famished, the way he attacked a salad bar and Christmas meals. In Ireland of old, folks in the Potato Famine were said to have died along the road with green mouths, from eating grass while too weak to walk, waiting for their dying breath. Leon Uris painted that picture in *Trinity*. If we had no concept of a future, would we nibble to savor the present or gobble to feel fulfilled?

She'd greet my laughter with the disgust of a sister 10 years older — one as responsible as I was irresponsible, as committed to caring for the family as I was in disappointing it.

I remember the picture of me, a towheaded boy, looking up to Danny and his shaven brown head and his thin cocked arms under a Christmas sweater that my mother would sew his name into before he went back to the unit. The bottom of his white shirt crept out from under his sweater. From a green imitation crocodile-skin chair, I'm smiling up at Danny in my new Notre Dame sweatshirt. He was tall to me. I think even then I was curious as to what he had going on within that closely cropped skull. Old George Bernard Shaw said, "He who has never hoped can never despair." I'll never know enough to gauge whether he dreams or despairs.

I'm the youngest of some 30 grandchildren on my mother's side. I've seen home movie footage shot before I was born of the Christmases when all gathered together at Grandma's. It's the kind of jumpy old film that's hard to watch. It makes my sister Peggy nauseous, but she has trouble with caffeine and Excedrin as well. I know the scene is probably clearer in Danny's head.

The film trembles with quick-moving cousins, who flutter about like hummingbirds on the screen. Two girls, sisters born in the same year — Irish twins — wearing early 1960s mismatched clothing, do serious-faced Irish Jigs for their bald Irish grandfather. The old man plays a silent accordion. The girls lift little knees, looking as if they'd been skipping rope in Catholic school paved lots for years. Mothers you can't believe were ever that young smile at the camera or turn for some unheard cry. Children old enough to socialize circle each other in some spontaneous game, new cowboy hats and holsters on Brother Bob and Cousin Pete. A group of girls in unfashionable eyeglasses, sisters Peggy and Kathleen, cousins Mary Kay, Mary Theresa, maybe Mary Pat (because nearly every first-born girl was Mary Something), all about the same awkward age, act like mothers to the dozens of toddlers.

Danny circles alone in a corner. All the kids look skinny, but Danny looks frail. Maybe it's the way he positions himself, spinning in a red sweater with bent arms in a five-after-eight fix. Grandpa Gavaghan comes out later in a red suit with a brown bag over his head: the unknown Santa. I think he frightens the smallest ones.

Christmas at Grandma's predates me. Maybe that's why I'll always be Baby Bill to Danny, somehow newer than Christmas in his fixed memory. Danny remembers all the names of the cousins and aunts and uncles; "Aunt Anna Riita! Donny Nooolan! Bobby Bateechta!" He could go all the way down the line, and it doesn't seem to matter that their faces put on at least another year each time he sees them. I don't know if anyone else could do that. I've got uncles who shake my hand saying, "How ya doin' there Bobby?" I tell them fine.

When Danny doesn't have the floor, he paces it. It's a short march back and forth, arms swinging. There's a low grumbling of some sort of unrecognizable soliloquy, like a rumbling in a sink. The rest of the family sits about watching *Holiday Inn* with Bing Crosby or playing hearts at the card table. If someone tires of having Danny pace, they ask him to relax in a rocking chair. He wears them out. A rocking horse winner who's never been thrown, he rocks back each time with the full force of his legs pushing from the ground.

After some internal consternation, as if he pondered the subject while walking or rocking, Danny announces that he wants to go to Grandma's. "I wanna go to Graand Maw's," his plea a drawn out moan. "I wanna go to Graand Maw's." Grandma's been dead going on 20 years.

"Grandma's in heaven, Danny Boy," my sister Peggy says.

"I wanna go to Graand Maw's."

When he sings, which is probably the easiest way to get hold of Danny's sound, he seems to be gargling "r's" in his mouth before shooting them out, like word clippings from a lawn mower. This guttural approach to music can be best heard in the bridge of "Irish Heartbeat" off the same-titled album of Van Morrison and the Chieftains: *"There's a stranger and he's standing at your door. May be your best friend, might be your brother, you may never know."* Danny's lyrics, however, are almost entirely indiscernible. I wonder if Danny hadn't had his melon squeezed, if the synaptic flight of his

thoughts wasn't so askew, if he were only a bit twisted with angst, could he have not been unlike some tortured soul like Pearl Jam's Eddie Vedder. "Dooan call me Danny!"

I got certain phrases of Danny down when I was younger. On Christmas Eve, before anyone else got home, I'd get my sister on the phone and tell her to talk to Danny. "I wanna go to Graand Maw's," I'd moan into the phone. It was like hitting a button.

"Grandma's in heaven, Danny Boy," she'd say quickly, prepared to repeat her phrase as many times as Danny would repeat his. She'd greet my laughter with the disgust of a sister 10 years older — one as responsible as I was irresponsible, as committed to caring for the family as I was in disappointing it.

When Danny seems most on the brink of lucidity, round-shouldered in a straight-backed chair, and my mother some place where she can't ask him to sit up straight, one would think he's primed for explaining his thoughts about the normal turbulence which is his mind. He's finally relaxed. "How ya doin', Danny?" I'll offer.

"Howdoin', Danny?" he retorts.

"Feeling alright?"

"Feelin' awright."

He mimics your pitch with slurred words in his own tone; Joyce might say, "a base barreltone voice."

The first Tuesday of every December, buses full of retarded kids go to the Moose Lodge in Indianapolis for a Christmas party. It's always the same night that Indiana plays Notre Dame in basketball. The Irish usually lose. If I'm in town, I sneak into the adjoining bar to watch the game. Sometimes some clowns, who make balloon animals for the retarded kids, sit and drink long-neck Buds. They're still wearing green hair and balls for noses. I tell one uncle, an I.U. grad, "Hey Uncle Joe, they're some clowns in the bar cheering for the Hoosiers."

Actually these retarded kids are adults, many beyond middle age, but they're friendly and unreserved like kids. They like to shake hands and ask how you're doing. Many of them have Down syndrome, but they're not called mongoloids anymore. Some wear hockey helmets for protection, because they thrash about. Once a woman with a gummy grin scolded me for not calling her father. I stood there stiff, a terrified smile on my face: a jerk.

Some of the men like to dance with my sister and my aunts. Often the ones with Down syndrome dance like 50-year-old white guys to "Proud Mary" at a wedding. Arms bent like that of a boxer swivel from side to side; an out-of-sync clap is thrown in the middle.

Danny leaps onto the dance floor as soon as he hears the cheesy band start to play. It's some sort of country and western Christmas, and I wonder if the drummer is cursing his luck for having such a gig. Every song sounds like "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer," even when they play "Silent Night."

Danny is more vertical in his dance. He bounces off one leg and lifts the other waist high in a joyful jig that makes him look like a high jumper about to take flight. He leaps about until he's covered in sweat. His right arm waves above his head, as if directing his own arrhythmic orchestra. The music always takes his attention immediately. I wonder if his speeding or colliding thoughts aren't somehow fused by the melody, or just lined up in such a way to make him want to leap out of the building. Baby Bill Butler Yeats said, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

I go see these Irish bands in Chicago at Gunther Murphy's. They kept the Gunther from when it was a German place, but probably lost most of their German clientele. I enter a bit stiff and still too awkward. I figure it's whatever German roots I've left in me. I goose-step through the crowd, and it takes me a few pints to get my third-generation Irish up. Why do I bind up now? Shaw observed, "We are ashamed of everything that is real about us; ashamed of ourselves, of our relations, of our incomes, of our accents, of our opinions, of our experience, just as we are ashamed of our naked skins."

I've seen folks, and been one, only slightly pissed on beer, listening to these Irish musicians take hold of the place. There's a lad on a tin whistle. The song starts with an almost traditional melody that my parents would like. Quickly though, lean fingers bounce up and down over the holes, calling up the sounds of children running through green fields. My mind sees kids at play who are still too young to have any worries. A stand-up drummer beats with a two-headed stick in his right hand, while burping the hollow back of a bodhrán with the shadow of his rough left. His sound offsets the pitch of the whistle and seems a rumbling beneath their fields of play. A guitarist, sometimes electric, tells the story, the narrative lead behind all this running about. But what's got the whole place moving — what's got everyone and his brother bending at the knees and contemplating flight — is this guy trying to saw through his violin with a bow. He rakes over the strings in wails that can be confused for either maniacal laughter or prolonged bawling. From bow through string it waves through the crowd, moving them sure as they'd been immigrants on a boat. Just when the crowd thinks the band has reached its apex, the players build to another level. The man with the bow, his face aglow with perspiration, has by now many times bent and raised from his waist, in gut-wrenching effort. It seems to be the soul of the piece. It's why we came to listen in the first place.

I see a tall guy take to the air. His body turns in midflight, forming a question mark. I'm drunk and Irish enough that I could weep. I think it's Danny flying. It's Danny at Christmas without restraints on his energies. It's Danny on film in his red Christmas sweater, spinning in his own silent corner at Grandma's house. It's Danny unmedicated. It's Danny's perfect soul in perfect sync with the music. □