

P. J. Kavanagh was a poet, writer, actor, broadcaster and columnist.

Born in 1931, son of the radio comedy writer Ted Kavanagh, he went to a Benedictine school, served in the Korean war during national service, and worked for the British Council in Barcelona and Indonesia. He acted on stage and TV – his last appearance in an episode of *Father Ted. The Perfect Stranger*, awarded the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize in 1966, describes his early life. His columns for *The Spectator* and the *Times Literary Supplement* (he called them substitute poems) are collected in *People and Places* (1988) and *A Kind of Journal* (2003).

Poetry remained his major occupation. His *New Selected Poems* came out in 2014. Earlier collections include *Presences* (1987), *An Enchantment* (1991) and *Something About* (2004). His *Collected Poems* was given the Cholmondeley Award in 1992.

His novel *A Song and Dance* won the 1968 Guardian Fiction Prize. His other novels are *A Happy Man*, *People and Weather* and *Only by Mistake*, and for younger readers *Scarf Jack* and *Rebel for Good*. A travel-autobiography *Finding Connections* traces his Irish forebears in New Zealand. He edited G. K. Chesterton and Ivor Gurney, and the anthologies *Voices in Ireland*, *The Oxford Book of Short Poems* (with James Michie) and *A Book of Consolations*.

P. J. died in August 2015 in the Cotswold hills, where he had come to live with his wife and two sons over forty years before.

Praise for *The Perfect Stranger*:

‘The writing remains vivid and detailed, full of concise pen portraits ... it’s hard to think of a memoir by a male author that describes the experience [of love] with as much honesty, passion and precision.’ David Nicholls

‘Patrick Kavanagh’s memoir is a small masterpiece of its kind, reflecting all the wit, unabashed frankness and literary elegance of its author.’ Max Hastings

‘I’ve re-read *The Perfect Stranger* many times and still think it, though unique, a model “of its kind”.’ Derek Mahon

‘To hear the truth so devastatingly and yet so joyfully encountered is rare in an age where autobiography has been flattened by the massed weight of political and public reminiscence. This autobiography, from its beginning to its bitter end, is a celebration of joy: joy in youth, in woman, in male camaraderie, in the struggle of art, in married love.’ *Times Literary Supplement*

‘[A] remarkable work of prose ... It won the Richard Hillary Memorial Prize, for in reality it was a testimony to the absence of the one person who could help him work out the puzzle of life, his wife, Sally.’ *Independent*

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‘Not sentimental nor self-pitying but vivid, humorous and bent upon describing a world in which the one person who had seemed to make sense of it had been lost.’ *Telegraph*

‘A fine memorial to love and youth.’ Michael Frayn

‘One of the best memoirs I have read ... humorous and poetic.’ Richard Ingrams

‘A terrific book, vivid, funny and moving ... The account of his narrow escape from the great battle in Korea is brilliant, as is in a quite different way the elegiac conclusion to the book.’ David Lodge

P. J. KAVANAGH

The Perfect Stranger

A Memoir of Love and Survival

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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I

RECENTLY I HAD to make arrangements for my gravestone. This came about in a certain way, the result of things that had gone before, and I felt a need to write down some of those things before it was too late – after all anyone’s gravestone is an understatement. And it seemed best to begin at the beginning I knew most about, in other words my own.

Certainly this is a personal book and perhaps that needs an explanation. Also it’s a love story and surely we don’t need another of those.

But because things happen in one way and not in another this is sometimes their point; and so for fear of missing the point (buried somewhere under the facts and nowhere else) the facts as they happened it has to be, and not done up into fiction.

This has its advantages (saves you having to invent) but lands you in difficulty. There are those who have come too close for you to describe them in the way novelists use – you can’t even see them, in any ordinary sense, although you see them better than anyone, but description gives a quite false idea of their distance. Even if you wanted to it’s not in your power to cash in on their specialness.

What you can do, though, is describe their effect on you, and the kind of life it was that they stepped in to, and this is why there are so many I’s and me’s in the story. But maybe

that's the most we can say about another person with any certainty; however we wish to celebrate them we only have the bits and pieces of ourselves to do it with.

I was thirty-three years old a few days ago and my blood on both sides of my family is Irish as far back as anybody can be bothered to trace. I was born and brought up in England, and not really among Irish people – I never knew my grandparents, and my four uncles were killed in the First World War – but this Irishness has always been important to me, I don't know why. People often claim a bit of the wild Celt on account of a Scottish great-aunt, or so forth, and when I was a boy I often said I was pure English just to show what I thought of this game – and I've never heard anyone else claim that, which is surprising. But I knew it wasn't true. I came of a conquered dissident race and I talked too much for it to be true. Certainly this feeling allowed me to fall in love with England when I was twenty-seven with a passion that wouldn't have been possible if I'd felt myself a native.

My father was born in New Zealand and brought me up to be more Irish than the Irish. And we did have some history of rebellion and uprising in the family, as well as six Cardinals I've been told, and of clinging to the True Faith. But the Irish, with blazing exceptions, I cannot like as a race; they seem to me a mean and envious lot.

My father, like most talented Irishmen, loved Ireland from a distance. His real passion was London. He knew it in loving detail and was only really himself when he was at large there. He used London as an Irishman uses Dublin; home was for recuperating in. He earned his living writing jokes – he was the scriptwriter for a radio show called *ITMA*, which was famous in its day, and so was he, and highly paid. At least he was when I knew him, but when I

was born we were poor, genteel poor. Not that my father was genteel, he was the only truly classless man I have ever met in England, but he had been a medical student on an allowance; he gave up medicine, the allowance stopped, and he and my mother and my brother, and then later me, descended from houses to flats to digs to dingy boarding-houses; I remember one of those. My grandmother died early in this progress, and after her deathbed had been surrounded by clergy was found to have left her money to the Church, and her son and his wife and baby nothing at all. My mother has never forgotten this. During this moneyless period which continued for perhaps ten years my brother (who is twelve years older than I am) remembers that my father just sat at home and read, his elbows and knees gradually becoming visible through his clothes. He never noticed things he didn't want to, and I suppose it was my mother who had to battle with the unpaid grocers and the landladies, and organise the moonlight flits.

He could be a very funny man, my father, and sing impromptu comic songs, and was in great demand for various unluccrative occasions. It took him twenty years to discover how to make a living out of what he did best, and that happened by chance.

In the very early days of radio he used to enjoy putting on his earphones and twiddling the cat's whisker on the crystal. One day he heard a comedian called Tommy Handley who made him laugh, so he wrote him a sketch and sent it in. (He remained all his life a connoisseur of comedians. When I was very young he used to drag me round the music-halls and down to the end of piers, and we would go back-stage afterwards where the comic always seemed to be sitting in his braces, morose, surrounded by Stout bottles.) It would be comforting to say that after this he never looked back,

but it was a long time before he was at all successful, and after that his success waned a little; but it is a moment worth recording because a man had found his métier.

That is such an important moment it fascinates me. To some it never comes, and for others it is often pure chance. Tommy Handley himself began as a singer. Engaged to do a broadcast in the earliest days of 2LO at Savoy Hill, there was some microphone trouble during rehearsal and the engineers asked him to say something into it. He recited ‘Thirty days hath September’ and the engineers behind their glass panel began to laugh. The microphone did something unexpected to his voice.

In the interval of whisker-twiddling and reading, my father was a protégé of G. K. Chesterton and he earned an occasional cheque by writing for his paper, *G.K.’s Weekly*. He was also much concerned with a Catholic version of Communism which was in the air in those days. It was called Distributism and was probably a bit back-to-the-land-y and Tolstoyan. Like most fair-minded but impractical ideas, it slowly ground itself down, and the last Distributist I know croons nightly over a tiny compost heap in Haywards Heath.

I was born during the slump, when the family fortunes were at their most pinched. By the time I was old enough to care, it was wartime and everybody was pinched.

There was some rather splendid bombing in Bristol. We went down every night to the cellar-smell until one dawn a tin-hatted warden stuck his head through the grating and shrieked at us to ‘evacuate’. Then we walked through the blazing city – even the barrage balloons were on fire in the sky – and I noted with satisfaction that my school was also burning. A young couple whom I liked used to read the

Daily Worker in the cellar, and I remember my father pointing this out to my mother in a way that made me realise they were 'odd'. A sign, I suppose, that my father was moving to the Right with age, a remarkable and almost invariable phenomenon. Gladstone is the only notable exception I can think of, and then only on certain topics; Ireland for instance. Robert Frost once said that he was never a radical in his youth in case he became a Tory in his old age.

I also remember the house next door being on fire and hoses being played against the outside of our walls to stop them cracking, while my father sat writing. I don't know whether I admired him for this, or copied the admiration of my mother.

From the age of six until I was eight and the war broke out I went to school at a girls' convent in Barnes. I suppose the upbringing I had in England was like an Irish one in many ways, that is to say, Catholic. And the sense that gives you of being in a minority remains with you all your life. But if the people all round you don't share your special superstitions, neither do you share theirs. The nuns, for instance: they weren't sinister, mutilated figures but jolly, round-faced girls who hugged me and gave me things and seemed to be always laughing. Perhaps they were over-scrupulous, I don't really know. In a gentle little talk on stealing I remember a beloved nun of mine telling us that if we found even a pin we shouldn't keep it, but find out whose it was and give it back. For some time afterwards I went about with my eyes on the ground hoping for a pin I could give myself the pleasure of returning.

The big girls gave a performance of *Macbeth*, and in the Witches' scene I was fascinated and strangely moved by their bare pink feet padding around the cauldron. I kept creeping

nearer to see these more clearly. I was about eight and constantly in love. I had a real passion for a huge, blouse-bursting Amazon called Bridget. I couldn't think how to express my devotion, so like an adult I decided really I hated her and threw an apple at her as hard as I could. It hit her in the eye. Rubbing one and looking through the other, she asked me to tea, which was just what I'd dreamed about snug in bed at home. It seemed, however clumsy one was, the beloved *understood*, in a way no one else ever could.

I was very spoiled. Girls my own age, and older, used to kiss me when I wasn't looking and then run away. This surprised and delighted me at the time and surprises me now because I was very far from beautiful. I once had a photograph of myself at this age in a much-prized navy-blue nap overcoat and cap to match. I looked like a little old man cut down, a wizened leprechaun. But what with the nuns and the girls and my mother I began to take for granted the love and forgiveness of women and return it with my whole heart. I needed women more than life itself; they were life itself, and when later I went to boarding-school and was cut off from them I wanted to die. I willed myself to. And then I took to hiding near the Matron's room (an elderly, cross moustache we called The Bitch) just to hear the rustle of her apron and the sound of her sensible heels, distinguishably feminine only to the loving, obsessed ear.

To my mother I owe a special debt of gratitude. For twelve years she tirelessly made me feel the centre of the Universe. When I felt the centre slipping at all I got her to walk behind me, as I strutted before in my beloved overcoat, and call out over and over again: Who is that *handsome* little boy? Who is that *interesting* little boy? until I felt better. At twelve she let me go my own way, with scarcely a struggle; this seems to me perfect; or, at least, uncomplicated.

All the spoiling I had was luck, a kind of preliminary bonus; it wasn't for being a good little boy. In fact I must have been horrible. I managed to knock out several of my mother's teeth with my head, on purpose, and tried the same trick on my brother, splitting his lip. The only thing I remember with pride is announcing that I didn't believe in God. This took courage because I'm sure I'd never heard of anybody who didn't, and it made me a minority of one. Of course I *did* believe in God, possessively, secretly. I suppose I didn't want my God confused with theirs.

At some stage during the bombing of Bristol I began to ponder the chances of Eternal Punishment and became very frightened indeed. My father was listening with his head cocked to the sound of the explosions which were only a few yards away. It seemed a good moment to confide my fears – that I hadn't been to Confession, wasn't in a State of Grace – which was all that mattered at such a moment I'd been told. Usually so gentle, he turned on me with a contorted face: 'Don't be so bloody silly!' he said.

I pondered his reaction and it rather cheered me up.

THE B.B.C. REMOVED to North Wales and we went with them. There I was very happy in a house that looked over the cheerful Menai Straits to the green-check bedspread of Anglesey. I went to a tiny libertarian preparatory school and was taught very well. The parachutist scare was on and I worried if I would be brave enough to defend my mother if a German soldier hammered on the door. Should we offer him a cup of tea, all hot and sweaty in his harness? I'd read somewhere that this was 'collaborating', but I felt I should be tempted to, unless he was a bully, and then I wasn't sure what I'd do. I dug a defensive trench just in case behind the coal-shed. In the spring I sat out in the field at the bottom of the garden and played the Swanee whistle to the lambs to see if music could encourage them not to become as dull as their parents.

After school we played war-games in the steep woods that led down to the Straits, keeping in a group to protect ourselves from the Elementary schoolboys, who set on us if we ventured out alone. I was small but I had a reputation as a boxer, and the others used to enjoy setting me on to fight boys bigger than I was. I wished to be popular, above all things. One of our group, a big boy, became unpopular with the rest for some reason, and encouraged by the others I found myself fighting him. Even as we were poking at each

other I wondered why I was doing it; I had no quarrel with him. Afterwards was the first time I felt sick inside myself, and frightened, as though I'd done something that had changed me and I'd never be the same again. I think it was the end of my childhood.

I stayed there three years and was happy except for that, and then I was sent away to boarding-school where I was very unhappy indeed.

No need to describe the commonplace brutalities of a third-rate English boarding-school. This one was Jansenist-Irish and English-Puritan all at once and seemed to isolate all the coldest elements of these until only the rules and the fear were left. Extraordinary, the sense of being watched. Once it becomes part of you it remains on your skin like a disease.

At the end of every corridor (we called them cloisters, it was a monastery school) there was always a black figure in long skirts and silent rubber shoes; at the end of the dormitory, at the back of the study-hall, at the end of the shrubberies near the cricket-field – the only place where we were allowed to walk – a stationary silhouette, glasses winking pruriently in the light, the expression at the corners of the mouth containing all the knowledge necessary of the fallen nature of man, and boy. The odd thing is that, watched, you feel guilty, however much contempt you summon.

'Come here!' Walking along the cloister a year later on the first day of term, trying not to cry in front of the others, I heard myself called from fifty yards away in the gloom. The figure remained perfectly still and expressionless until I was exactly in front of it, arms folded beneath the shiny, worn habit, entirely at ease, waiting. He looked down: 'Stop walking along the cloister as though you owned it.'

That moment still stuns me almost as much as it did then, a first hit in the face.

Not all the monks were as bad as that. The rest, for the most part, were good-humoured and incompetent. Any ninny who joined the monastery could teach as soon as he ceased to be a novice. Some of our classes were given by men who not only didn't want to teach but who'd sometimes failed to pass even the ordinary school examinations a couple of years before. For this our parents paid large fees. As the monks were of course not paid, and as the food was horrible, I can only presume the money went towards the building of the new Abbey Church in which we spent nearly the whole of our one free day attempting to praise God.

The school, being a Catholic one, was not subject to Ministry of Education inspection, otherwise I imagine none of this would have been allowed to continue. Nor would the food. It was wartime, and it must have been difficult, but there could have been no excuse for the terrible filth served up to us. Sometimes a whole refectory of one hundred and fifty hungry boys returned supper to the kitchen untouched and nobody, *in loco parentis*, seemed concerned that their charges went to bed hungry. It's so much easier complacently to concern yourself with someone else's soul.

But the monks suffered just as much. We'd see the younger ones shamefacedly stealing sour apples from the orchard, concealing them in their habits held up like aprons and running to the laboratories to cook them over Bunsen burners. I felt vaguely ill the whole time I was there and regarded it as a normal part of life. Compulsory Rugby after a succession of untouched meals is a misery without parallel in later life.

Cricket I loved, and the summer terms. The hairy-legged, hearty, slightly brutal monks who supervised Rugby would

go into hibernation and a taller, more languorous breed would take their place, or so it seemed to me in my relief. Cricket is often associated with a sort of self-conscious 'gentlemanliness' but to me it meant gentleness, a quality I thirsted after as I found myself becoming more and more violent.

We had an old Nottinghamshire professional called Shipston of unrelieved gloom. I never heard him give any coaching advice at all except: 'Joost stay there. Roons'll coom. Roons'll coom.' But even he couldn't succeed in making cricket dreary. Sometimes watching county matches or reading newspaper articles on the decline of cricket I remember Shippy and his invariable advice. The decline of cricket, if such there is, began a long way back.

My particular friend was Spud Murphy. He taught me to think I could distinguish between the songs of a garden-warbler, a white-throat and a willow-warbler, even when they were all singing together. He could dive into a thicket and uncover the perfect globe made by a gold-crested wren as though by divination. He made it seem so easy; I have often tried to do these things without him, but with no success. Thrushes' and blackbirds' and finches' nests were to him mere commonplaces; he'd uncover a dozen in the course of our too short walks. Once he discovered a meadow pipit's nest – a real rarity that – in the middle of the Rugby field. And another time we had a feast of partridge eggs boiled over a fire we made ourselves. He made himself climbing-irons that he attached to the insides of his legs and clambered dizzily up into rookeries and came down with eggs in his mouth. He taught me how to hold a thin tube over a Bunsen burner, draw it out like elastic, carefully break it when it was cool and there you had two little pipes

ideal for blowing birds' eggs. He kept a ferret and a Little Owl, in secret of course, and his favourite literature was *Exchange and Mart*, to which he used to send for all sorts of things to make hutches out of, and snares, and heaven knows what. He had a way with animals I've never seen in anybody else; he was like one himself. Together we won the Natural History prize two years running with our collection of birds' nests in their natural habitat. We waited till the chicks had flown and then we carefully extracted the still fresh nest, whole, cutting down most of the surrounding tree with it. It was one of the few things we should have been stopped doing. Spud swam the width of a gravel pit in his clothes and swam back drawing the huge stinking raft of a Great Crested Grebe's nest between his teeth. He was one of the most interesting people I have ever met.

Once when we were leaning against a luke-warm radiator on a particularly freezing day the Headmaster walked past. After telling us not to lean on the radiator and rebuking us for stuffing indoors, he looked at us both and said pensively and with no affection: 'Birds of a feather ...' This was aimed at me and reflected on poor Spud, who took on even more of his furtive indoor appearance. I suppose in any school his virtues would not have been prized. He was nearly unteachable because he wasn't interested and soon left altogether.

My consorting with such a dullard and obviously rough fellow was a source of disappointment to the Headmaster, because he was an old friend of my father and expected better things of me. Quite what he never divulged. My father knew a great many rough fellows and would have particularly loved Spud. However, the disapproval and disappointment of this Olympian figure – at least he was a gentleman and a scholar and was strikingly handsome and had played

cricket for Warwickshire – lay heavily on my snobbish and hero-worshipping schoolboy’s heart. But by now it was all too late. I had turned inwards, I felt all the time, through a haze of resentment and fear and pig-headedness: ‘All right if that’s the way you want it’, and I kept all my vulnerabilities doggedly to myself.

I think I must have admired him because his ill-opinion was the only one that hurt at all. As we grew older we were allowed to sit in his study in the evening and smoke until the room began to sway and tilt with nausea. He sat at his desk examining *The Times* column by column, his pipe between his teeth, a picture of peace and the kind of continuity and connectedness that I longed for; surrounded by the drawings of Thomas Derrick, the Sargent sketch of Alice Meynell, and the framed doodles of his hero G. K. Chesterton, whom, I believe, he had received into the Church. It was in those days that he and my father had met. I longed to be approved by him, to talk to him, but I was not his kind of boy. And so I played up grimly to the picture he seemed to have of me and read my beloved Francis Thompson (his beloved too) wrapped in the lurid covers of a Bulldog Drummond novel: my defiances had become those of a slave. A year or so previously when I had been more successful than usual in my book-smuggling, when I had discovered Yeats and undergone the really tremendous excitement of *Prufrock*, he had written privately to my father that I continued to show no interest in intellectual matters. This filled me with a kind of despairing wildness. I didn’t seem to be making contact with anybody. Between the self I walked about inside and other people there seemed to be a lens that played tricks like the old-fashioned box-cameras you looked down into, at certain distances the image turned wrong way up.

There were monks whom I must celebrate: young Father Clement with his delicate Irish obliqueness; handsome Father Anthony striding along the cloister, his habit tied round him like a toga, covered in oil stains and sawdust from the workshop where we took crashed fighter-planes to pieces; Father Stephen who always looked as though he'd rather be having a siesta, but if he had to be awake then he was going to make sure we were awake too, and interested; puffing, nicotine-stained Father Dunstan who loved the theatre. And the two lay masters, Mr Greer and Mr Welch, who *knew* something and wanted to impart it and in their different ways actually liked boys. A litany of human beings, potent even against the penetrating dismissive glance of the migraine-ridden Headmaster.

Years later, when Father Ignatius was dying in hospital, my father diffidently suggested that I might visit him. But I wouldn't; to see me could have given him no pleasure save that of being remembered by an 'Old Boy'. And I didn't feel I was one in anything but name. I had forgotten these years, wiped them from my mind. And indeed until now when I have tried to give an impression of what they were like, I've scarcely thought of them. But they must have left their mark. For one thing, a paranoid attitude to authority – that no good was to be expected from it. And the slightly insane, or at any rate psychically dangerous concept of a private, unshared bargain; you broke the rules, you were caught and beaten, and that was about the extent of your relationship with the grown-up world. I think I really preferred to be caught. Not that I wanted to be punished; I didn't feel I deserved it, but I had no desire to win: that would have implied a competition between us, a dialogue. I preferred

total estrangement; always made a point of saying ‘Thank you, Father’, after I was beaten (at one time I held the record for the number of strokes in a given period) partly out of bravado and partly to keep the terms of the bargain clear in my mind. Even my religion remained more or less intact, because authority’s interpretation of it seemed to me ludicrous and anyway a kind of trick. The virtue of humility, for example, was turned into a device to stop you asking questions of people who wouldn’t have been able to answer them.

It was a cold world this created. I tried to keep warm by the faith, on slender evidence, that I had talent. If only I could hang on to what was inside me everything, eventually, would come clear.

If you have enjoyed these sample chapters from *The Perfect Stranger*, you can buy the book from September and all good retailers.



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