

Searching the Wardrobes

Darius Whelan

Sunday, two days after the phone call. It's a dull, cold November day in 1986. We're watching as our father opens the front door of the new house. The house is nearly completed; it just needs painting and finishing. Dad unlocks the door, hesitates, and shouts in, "It's OK, Tomás, you can come out, we're here." There's no reply. We follow him as he proceeds from room to room, checking all of them very carefully. His knees tremble and his hands shake as he walks. He opens all the bedroom cupboards to look inside. "Maybe he's unconscious in one of the wardrobes," he says. The floors are bare grey concrete. It makes no sense that our brother would be here, but nothing makes sense any more, and we're terrified of the alternatives. Dad checks behind every door and in every nook and cranny, just in case. We follow dutifully. The search is unsuccessful. Dad sobs, and we awkwardly try to comfort him.

Friday, two days earlier. The phone call. I'm sitting in the UCD Students' Union office and am told that there's an urgent phone call for me. The guards have been trying to track me down. My mother is on the line, calling from home in Limerick. She quietly tells me that my brother's car has been found parked beside the river that morning. All

his clothes, apart from his underwear, were found in the car. He had been out drinking and it seems he had gone to the river on his way home.

“Listen, Darius, this is very serious, we can’t find Tomás, you need to come home,” she says. After the phone call, I try to keep my composure but the enormity of this hits me, and I break down in tears as I try to relay the news to my friends. They help me with the practicalities, bringing me to the chaplaincy office. A staff member there offers to drive me to the train station. I watch as she puts a dust cover on her electric typewriter before we leave the office. My thoughts are racing, and I’m screaming internally to her and to the world. *Why are you acting as if life’s going on as normal? How can you be so matter-of-fact?*

On the journey to the train station, I hear myself speaking out loud about subjects I never allow myself to think about, never mind talk about. I tell her we’re just an ordinary family, we communicate with each other by slagging each other, we’re not particularly close. On the train, I’m thinking that Tomás was sexually assaulted, this would explain why his clothes were left in the car. I’m wondering, has his abductor killed him? My father collects me from the train station. There’s no hugging; we don’t do hugs.

At home, my mother’s very quiet. She’s wearing drab clothes. Her eyes are glazed over and she’s barely functioning. That evening, my father tells us that if the worst happens, he thinks Tomás should go to Kilmurry Cemetery. I can’t fathom how we can possibly be discussing that when Tomás may still be alive.

Saturday. My father takes my brother and me down to the river. Gardaí comb the banks, accompanied by volunteers. Divers from local sub aqua clubs are checking the river. Somebody has put holy candles in a reed basket and floated them on the river. They believe that the basket will be carried by the current and stop where the body lies,

if there is a body.

We're waiting, still waiting, dreading and hoping at the same time. I'm thinking of the clothes left in the car beside the river. Was Tomás sexually assaulted, then imprisoned in a basement? I wonder has he escaped and will he be found on the side of the road, battered but alive? Or has he been taken away to another country? Did he meet someone who fought with him, strangled him and then drove him to Cratloe Woods, brutally stashing his young body six feet under, never to be found? Will we ever see him again, alive or dead? I think maybe he was swept away by the current, he got to the shore, and has been stuck in some bushes since then, calling for help. This means we'll see him again. But wait, did he jump in the freezing, black, rushing water, get into difficulty, desperately seek to get back to the shore, gulp in water and become weak? And then did the silence descend as the life left his body? Has his lifeless body floated out to the Atlantic, never to be found? How long will it be before we know what happened, if ever? Was it just an attempt to sober up after a night drinking?

Sunday morning. We spend most of the time at home in stunned silence, sometimes almost bored. Neighbours call to make us sandwiches and tea. There's a graduation picture of Tomás on the mantelpiece. We discuss his life and our strange situation with friends, neighbours, priests. We look at pictures of our times in Spanish Point. Tomás is in his red swimming togs. We would spend most of the school holidays there. We talk about how we'd spend all day at the beach and how our mother used to dote over all of us. We had a deeper connection then, before we all grew up and went to college.

Tomás is smart and studied civil engineering in UCG. He co-authored a paper for an academic journal with one of the lecturers. As it is the eighties, he needs to emigrate for work. He's due to fly to America within the next few days to take up an engineering job. In his college yearbook, there's a black and white picture of him sitting on the

bonnet of a car, grinning, with two of his best friends. The caption says:

"Tomás Whelan.

Visited a field in Gort once.

Much sought-after flatmate.

Ambition: to own a wench."

In college, he was thriving, stimulated, full of life and surrounded by friends who loved him. He was on the editorial committee for the yearbook. Those few lines about him probably say a lot to his college friends; we'll ask them to explain them when we get a chance. Did they know the real him, better than we knew him? He left college a year ago, and moved back to Limerick. Maybe he found real life, after college, too difficult? Was he under pressure, feeling the weight of making such a drastic move from Ireland to America, away from Limerick, Galway and everything he knew best? Had his interactions with us been too distant, not loving enough? Was it suicide? Was he depressed? Was he anxious about moving to America in a few days' time? What did he want? Did my father's rows with him become too much for him? Was my mother too distant from him? Why didn't he just drive home and sleep off the drink? Did we really know the real him at all? Who was he?

My mother is still very low. She's not talking much. She doesn't want to go to the river, or to the new house. We sense that she's already feeling the loss of a son whom she loved deeply.

John is the eldest and is a year older than Tomás. John is trying to appear strong, but I get the feeling he's missing a brother who was always by his side. Growing up, they were like twins and did everything together. They laughed, and also fought like demons. They both went to college in Galway and when they were sharing a house, their fights were so intense that Tomás put his fist through a wall in anger.

Tomás is often angry with the world. This includes being angry with

me. Even though he bullies me, sometimes violently, he can also be gentle and kind. I'm willing to forgive him his bullying if he'll just walk through the door, alive, and explain why he went into hiding. He loves building and DIY. From an early age he was mixing cement, laying tiles and climbing ladders to fix things. My father and he bond over this, but also fight constantly. They almost come to blows. My father can be controlling, but Tomás is also well able to stand up to him. They care so much about every detail, and they show how much they care by arguing over it. The new house is their big project and they're excited that it's nearly finished.

Dad says, "You know, in the past few years, I sometimes had dreams where Tomás died and was in his coffin." I find this weird, and I also feel guilty for wondering if my father has ever loved me enough to imagine me in my coffin. Dad is much closer to Tomás than me and he also knows there's a dark side to him, which appears on the surface as anger but runs much deeper. My father is very happy with my academic achievements, but can't understand why I'm so incompetent at DIY.

Sunday afternoon. My father comes up with a new possibility. He says, "Maybe Tomás got out of the water, he was embarrassed that he was nearly naked, and went to the new house to hide and warm up. Let's go to the house to check." This theory is absurd, but nobody can distinguish between reality and absurdity any more. We're worrying about Dad as we go to the new house and he does his thorough search. Is he losing touch with reality? He's normally the sensible, practical Garda sergeant who's not disturbed by peculiar events.

Monday. Down at the river, Garda sub aqua divers arrive. We're introduced to them as they put on their gear. My father has a special connection with them because they're part of "the force," like him. He trusts that they will do a thorough job. They have better equipment and better training than the local diving clubs. I wonder

how they can act in such a practical manner when the world is shattering all around me. It's not normal to be searching for my brother's body. Dad tells us, "If a body is found, don't worry, a signal will be passed to us, so that we can leave and go back home as it's being brought in." He's preparing us for the worst. I wonder, is my brother's body really in the river? What will it look like if a Garda diver comes across it? Will it be bloated and unrecognisable? How did Tomás change from the guy grinning on top of a car, full of life, to this?

Tuesday. We're at home in the morning when another significant phone call comes, the one that tells us that his body has been found. We've experienced the longest four days we've ever lived through. Now at least we know that he's gone and there's no hope of finding him alive. There's a relief in that, but also a terrible realisation that our family has been torn apart.

Thirty-eight years after the phone call. It's two a.m. and I'm chatting with my friend, Justin. We've had a bit too much to drink and I'm talking about Tomás again. Tonight, I've spent time thinking about how those years must have been for my parents. They never mentioned the possibility of suicide, but it was always in the air. How was it for them, wondering how Tomás was feeling in those final weeks? Did they question whether they had contributed in some way? Did Dad replay those rows with him and regret being too harsh with him? What was it like, never speaking to anybody, even each other, about this? My Dad died in 2019 and my mother in 2022. Tonight, I'm also saying to Justin that I'm pretty sure Tomás killed himself. But I know that in a month's time if I have the same conversation I might just as easily say that he didn't, he just went for an innocent swim to sober up and was swept away by the river. The doubts, the torment, the grief, the anger, the guilt, the sadness, the anxiety, the confusion are sometimes as severe as that day searching the wardrobes.