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**THE WORD SHED**

BY COLUM MCCANN

Every afternoon, when my father arrived home from his job as the features editor at a newspaper in Dublin, he disappeared into his writing shed. To get there, you had to squeeze your way past the coal bin, the lawnmower, cans of petrol and paint, ancient bicycle parts. The shed always smelled damp inside, as if the rain rose up out of the carpet. The bookshelves sagged. The low-slung roof had a murky skylight with a hat of gray Irish cloud.

From the house, I could hear the tattoo of two-fingered typing. The ping of the bell. The slam of the carriage return. It all sounded like a faint form of applause. My father’s books—“The World of Sean O’Casey,” “The Wit of Oscar Wilde,” “All the World’s Roses,” “The Fighting Irish”—sat on the coffee table in what we called the D. & D. room: reserved for the dead and the dignified. The books didn’t mean much to me. I wanted to be what every other boy wanted to be: a professional soccer player.

In his youth, my father had been a semi-professional goalkeeper. Nothing very glamorous. He played second-string for Charlton Athletic, in London, and got paid ten shillings and sixpence a week. What he remembered most vividly was having to polish the boots of the first-team players, and sweeping the rat shit out of the canteen in the morning. He never played for the first team, but he didn’t see this as a failure so much as an adventure in limitations. He came back to Dublin, had a family, and began to write.

One winter evening, when I was nine years old, he came into my bedroom, carrying under his arm a sheaf of papers, some of them two or three feet long. (Like Kerouac, he used large rolls of industrial paper in his Olivetti.) It was a carbon copy of what he had been writing for the previous few weeks: a book for kids titled “Goals for Glory.”

“Read it for me, will you? Tell me if it’s awful or not.”

I read it by flashlight. Georgie Goode was a sullen Gypsy boy, fifteen years old, with long black hair. He travelled around the fens of England in a battered caravan, with a father who was sometimes there, sometimes absent. Georgie had no money for soccer boots, so he slipped around in the muck in his plimsolls. It was the stuff of children’s myth—Georgie had an eye for the back of the net and a left foot like chain lightning—but it all seemed plausible.

Years later, I would read James Joyce and mull over the idea that literature could “re-create life out of life,” but back then what stunned me was that another boy could emerge from my father’s ramshackle shed, as real to me as the dirt that caked on my own soccer boots. This was new territory: the imagined coming to life. My father’s typewriter sounded different to me now. More and more, I disappeared into books.

When “Goals for Glory” was published, the following year, I took the hardcover to school. My teacher, Mr. Kells, read a chapter aloud every Friday afternoon, that time of the school week when the world promises escape. We sat in our prefab classroom and waited for him to crack the spine.

In the last chapter, Georgie’s team had to beat the rival team, Dale Rovers. Georgie had been given a new pair of soccer boots. The championship was at stake. I knew the ending already, but my classmates didn’t. They were latched to their desks. Of course, Georgie started the game off badly, and of course he got rid of his new boots, and of course his father arrived late to cheer him on, and of course doom loomed, as doom so often does in a good story.

I will never forget Christopher Howlett, my red-headed desk mate, jumping around like a prayer in an air raid as Mr. Kells reached the final page. Georgie scored the winning goal. The classroom erupted. The kid from my father’s shed—that tangle of hair that had somehow sprung up from behind a typewriter ribbon—was carried with us outside the school gates, down Mart Lane, through the swamp, and into the field at the back of Dunnes Stores, where, with a soggy leather ball at our feet, we all became Georgie, at least for a minute or two.

Such euphoria seldom lasts, but the nostalgia for it remains. My world had changed enough for me to know that I would try to write a character into it one day—not a Georgie, necessarily, but perhaps a father, or a son.

A few years on, when I was a teen-ager, my father sat me in the shed and recited, from memory, Philip Larkin’s “This Be the Verse”: “They fuck you up, your mum and dad. / They may not mean to, but they do.” Fair enough, and I knew what he was trying to say, but I also knew that sometimes—just sometimes—the father you get is the father you want.

Colum McCann has written two collections of stories and six novels, including “Let the Great World Spin” and “TransAtlantic.”

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