

Travelling across America on a bike, love, fatherhood and writing in a cabin in snowy Maine are all part of Colum McCann's story, he tells **Barry Egan**

The story seeker

In 1986, 21-year-old Dubliner Colum McCann set off across America on a bicycle with his girlfriend Tracey. The plan was for the budding author to write the great Irish American novel at the end of it. The journey began in Cape Cod, and ran all the way down the eastern seaboard to Florida.

The next year, the pair pushed on to New Orleans, and he waited tables along the Mississippi riverfront. And it was there after Mardi Gras that they parted.

"We had a fabulous time, but life on the road is life on the road, you know what I mean, it's never easy," he remembers.

"She was just 19 and she went back to Massachusetts and we were both heartbroken for a little while, but everyone deserves at least one good heartbreak, I suppose."

Did they stay in touch? "I never saw her again," he says. "Though I thought of her often."

He set off for Texas, then south to Mexico, and back up north through New Mexico, all the way through the American west, riding the 18-gear Schwinn bike. He carried a tent and sleeping bag and slept "out under the stars" most nights. In California, he slept in "the belly of a burned-out redwood tree".

He was "reckless and joyful" and wanted to live his life "out loud". He met all sorts of people with a story to tell.

"That's when I learned how to really listen, that's when I started to develop my notions of democracy and storytelling, or rather the democracy of storytelling," says the 55-year-old, who is now a bestselling and critically acclaimed author: last year, he was longlisted for the Booker Prize for his novel *Apeirogon*, which has just been released in paperback.

The world is full of stories, he says. "We all have many stories. And we have the deepest need to tell them. And to be listened to."

"That's the dignity," he explains. "The dignity of listening." He spent a night in California in the house of a man "who had spent seven years in San Quentin prison for murder. He had been in the Vietnam War. He had studied opera."

He told Colum "that he liked me enough not to kill me". The next morning, Colum sneaked out of the house before dawn, only for his bicycle to blow a tyre a hundred yards from the house. "I thought he was going to come after me and kill me."

He can still remember "the laughing fear" he felt as he fixed the tyre and sped away.

That night was the exception as the people he met on that long trip were "friendly, open, generous and kind". They cooked for him and gave him a bed for the night. "I fell in love; I fell out of love. I kept going." All over the country he found incredible generosity; especially in the American south.

When Covid allows, Colum is planning to get on a bicycle again and retrace his journey through Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi, with his son John Michael, "and really listen and talk to those people again".

He knows Donald Trump has changed things, "or the Trumpian spirit has". He wants to think that these people are the same as they were 30-odd years ago. He believes the "decency" is still there.

"It just has to be mined; it has to be dug," says Colum, who is the founder of non-profit Narrative 4 story-exchange organisation, which aims to help students understand that their voices matter, and that they have the "power to change, rebuild and revolutionise systems".

He and the organisation work with schools in, for instance, Kentucky. "That's Trump country," he says. "That's coal-mining country. That's rural America to its core. It's white and it's conservative and it's Christian, whatever that word means."

He believes that if you give those young people a chance to tell their own stories, you soon realise how "deeply layered and complex they truly are... And they don't fit in with the simplified stereotype."

"That's what Narrative 4 is all about – bringing people together to shatter stereotypes," he says, "the disease in America now is the disease of simplicity," where everybody tries to reduce things down to a single idea. "It's also the disease of certainty," he continues. "Everyone thinking that their truth is the only truth. But it's so much more complicated than that – and we must learn to embrace the complications, I think. The truth is messy. And messy is good."

Is he a Biden fan? "I'm very fond of Biden. I think he has brought a necessary calm and level-headedness. I think he's down-to-earth and exactly what's needed to help a country that has been knocked off balance... I think he's visionary enough to be able to surround himself with visionaries."

“Everyone thinks their truth is the only truth but it's much more complicated than that. The truth is messy. And messy is good”



Allison and Colum in LA in 2010

He interviewed former British prime minister Tony Blair in New York as research for a section of his 2013 book *TransAtlantic* that related to Senator George Mitchell and the Good Friday Agreement. Blair has been accused of being a war criminal for his role in promoting the 2003 Iraq war.

"I think there was some great evil committed in his name, and his country's name, and in all our names, but I don't think it was a conscious evil, or a consciously willed evil. Perhaps, this is an equivocation on my part..."

He was once quoted as saying that he wasn't "messed up enough" to write the great Irish novel because he was this middle-class boy from the Clonkeen Road in Deansgrange who'd had a happy childhood. Does he still think that?

"I'm not sure if I ever said that... but if I did, I did... I am over that neurosis," he says. "I'm not interested in writing the great Irish novel – because I know I can't. I'm interested in a great novel, if it comes along. But the great Irish novel belongs to others, not least Joyce, and someone else who will come along in the future."

Apeirogon is his seventh novel and tells the story of the unexpected, real-life friendship between a Palestinian, Bassam Aramin, and an Israeli, Rami Elhanan, who both lost their daughters: 10-year-old Abir killed by a member of the Israeli army, 13-year-old Smadar by a suicide bomber. "An Israeli, against the occupation," he writes. "A Palestinian, studying the Holocaust."

"It was a controversial book to write – I mean, let's face it, Israel and Palestine – but it is something I'm very proud of... I get more letters about it, in a non-letter-writing age, than I do about all of my other work combined. I loved getting to know Rami and Bassam."

On the day we speak, *Apeirogon* received the Jewish National Book Council novel of the year award. "I was astounded as I am one of the few non-Jewish writers ever to get it in 70 years." Two weeks ago, the book won the Best Foreign Novel in France [Prix Etrangers].



Picture by
Steve
Humphreys

He probably never imagined scooping such prestigious literary awards when he started out. He was working in Texas in 1988 and 1989 as a counsellor in a wilderness centre for juvenile delinquents. During his time off, he wrote two novels, *Uncle Saccharine* and *The Wilderness Llamas*.

"They're pure shite," he says of the books now. "But I didn't know that at the time. I was spreading my wings; I was learning how to write. And I got a whole load of rejection letters from New York."

So many, in fact, that he literally "wallpapered" his bathroom in Texas with them. "I could sit on the throne and think about those miserable [people] who had rejected me! Of course, they were right."

In hindsight, he feels "lucky" his books were rejected "because I hadn't learned my craft. It's heartbreaking sometimes but necessary. And you have to experience the vivifying air of failure."

In 1990, he studied English Literature and American History in Austin at the University of Texas. He also worked in bars and wrote short stories. He first made it into print in 1991 in a small literary college journal, *Analecta*, with a story called 'Sisters'. An agent in Scotland, the late Giles Gordon, read it and signed him up.

But it was a miracle that Colum was alive to be signed up by a literary agent at all.

One night in Texas, a man held up the bar where he worked. "He crouched down and pointed the gun at me, and I thought I was going to die because I was running right at him because I was trying to do the hero thing, I swerved out into traffic and he didn't fire."

He remembers thinking, "Don't hit my spine. I want to be able to move in this life." That's what a lot of my life was like in the early days," he says now. "I was moving, moving, moving. I was so thirsty for experience. It's different now, of course. Most of my recklessness is in my work, or in my imagination. Back then it was in the world."

He travelled to New York that year to try to hawk one of his two novels to publishers. The trip was unsuccessful – except that he met his future wife Allison. "That was glorious good luck."

He had gone to stay with friends in Long Island and they introduced him. She travelled back to work in New York for the day and he hung around the local train station for hours, hoping she might step off an early train. "I pretended, of course, that I was just passing by that station. 'La-de-dah, oh, fancy meeting you here.' I asked her out. She thought about it. I mean, I was a student, living in Texas, a bit mad, I didn't really have a job.

"I was bartending and studying, writing and falling in love. I was squeezing every moment out of my days. I don't think I slept all that much. I was also playing football for a Texas pub team." He played right fullback.

Allison was teaching, 1,500 miles away in New York. They wrote letters back and forth, "more or less every day. It seems so old-fashioned now".

He had a dream of being a writer. "But she believed in me. She took a chance. Let's just say that."

And after a year and a half of a mostly long-distance relationship, they got married in Long Island. The newlyweds soon moved to Japan, to a town called Kokura.

There weren't many "gaijin" or foreigners in the town, he says. "It was sort of lonely for me. But that was good. I needed the loneliness and the time to write. And I wrote and wrote and wrote."

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He finished his collection of stories, *Fishing the Sloe-Black River*, in Japan and it was published in 1994. The book was well reviewed. He was 28. "I thought I was way too old. It's ridiculous to think about that now. I was in fact very, very young. But I was lucky that it was a quiet enough book. And I was lucky also to be writing at a time when Irish writing was finally being celebrated. Roddy Doyle was blazing the way. And Joe O'Connor. And publishers were open to Irish voices."

In Japan, he also wrote his first proper novel, *Songdogs*, "which is a deeply flawed novel but one I'm still fond of in certain ways. But, in Japan, I had time to think. And space for my imagination. It was like a cooling down period after the recklessness of my early travelling years in the States."

Allison worked full-time teaching English while Colum taught part-time. He had a class of elderly Japanese ladies who loved to sing 'Danny Boy'. He still gets letters from one or two of the women, who must be very old now. "They called themselves 'The Danny Boy class'."

In 1994, the couple moved to New York. They "lucked" into getting a rental on the Lower East Side – he wanted the "street cred" of living in that part of Manhattan. He was still teaching part-time, but his writing was taking off. "And that's when I started writing a novel called *This Side of Brightness*," he says, of the book that gave him the belief he had a career in writing.

Writing aside, it was the birth of daughter Isabella in 1997 that was one of "the greatest moments" of his life.

"I knew it was going to change me, but I was happy for the change. I had lived things well enough up until that point and now I was ready to be a father," he says. "I was definitely conscious that I had other responsibilities now."

Now 24, Isabella is "beautiful and driven – deeply political". She carries a copy of the US Constitution around with her. John Michael was born in 1998; and another son, Christian, followed in 2003. The former is the poet, the activist and the reader. "He's a dreamer. And someone whom I trust to read my work." Christian is finishing high school and on his way to college. "He's the river one – quiet and deep." Also, like most of his generation, quite political. "Christian likes to wear his Freedom of the Press t-shirt," says Colum proudly – his own father Sean was a journalist.

In the 1990s, Colum bonded with another Irish man in New York who would become "a father figure" for him. He got to know the writer Frank McCourt when *Angela's Ashes*, the bestselling memoir of growing up impoverished in Limerick, came out. They travelled around Germany together on a book tour when Colum was promoting *Songdogs*.

"We became very close. He was a friend, but he was also a father figure in a way. He would call up and leave long rambling messages on our phone."

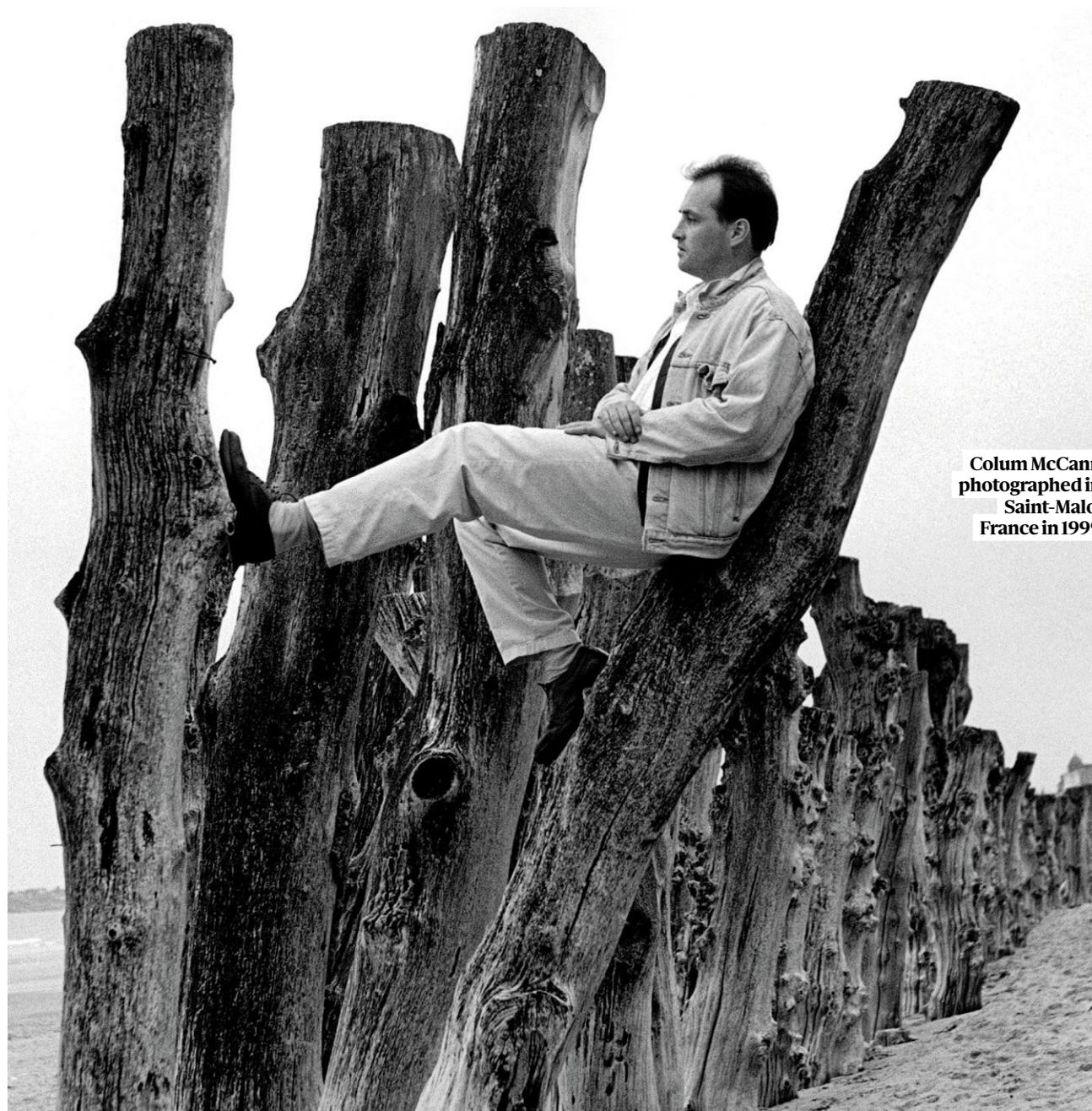
In 2009, as Frank was dying of cancer, Colum would visit him on the 16th floor of the hospice in New York.

"In the hospice where he was dying, he had lost his voice. Everything was being recorded on a plastic clipboard with an eraser. Frank would write things down. 'What is this, an Irish wake?'"

Colum realised that Frank's last words were being written in marker and then erased so he ran out and bought a giant writing pad.

When he asked Frank where and when he would go dancing and drinking now, Frank took the pad, went out on the balcony in his Stephen Colbert T-shirt and wrote: "Every Sabbath. And next Sabbath I'll go dancing upstairs with the great JC and the Mary M and the 12 hot boys. And in the morning, all will be forgiven."

"I just love that," Colum says. "It's pure Frank: 'In the morning, all will be forgiven'.



Colum McCann photographed in Saint-Malo, France in 1999

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In the hospice where Frank was dying, he had lost his voice. Everything was being recorded on a plastic clipboard with an eraser. His last words were being erased



For the last month, Colum has been writing in a snow-covered cabin (above) in Lake Megunticook in Maine, US

"Frank had his demons, but he enjoyed himself. He came out on top. I miss Frank."

For the last month, Colum has been writing his next book in a snow-covered cabin in Lake Megunticook, just outside Camden, in Maine. He's not quite alone. He and his neighbour Gabriel Byrne hang out together and have been on a couple of walks.

"He's one of most brilliant – and funny – human beings that I know," he says of the actor and writer.

It all sounds a bit Unabomber – a cabin in the middle of nowhere?

"Inside, it's the furthest thing from Ted Kaczynski," he says of the cabin in the woods that a film director friend has lent him. "It's a beautiful place."

A few days ago, he went out on the frozen lake with some local fishermen. They were a bit wary of him at first with

his "city clothes" and "stupid orange hat". But after a while, they showed him how to drill the ice and set the bait. "And I caught a rainbow trout, brought it home, gutted it, stuffed it with apple and onion, and cooked it. Best meal ever," he says.

The fishermen have become his friends now. He even gave them a copy of *Apeirogon*, though he's not sure they'll be reading it any time soon, "but they were very thankful to get it".

He travelled to the lake to write his new novel, which he is loath to talk about "because I don't want to lose the mystery, but it's very different to *Apeirogon*. It's setting up to be a love story set in Amsterdam."

How far along is he? "At the beginning, I bought myself a typewriter to try to wake myself up to a new way of thinking. A new way, which was actually an old way, since I started out on a typewriter. All those years ago. It's a beauty. A 1931 Royal portable."

The new book is a much more "contained" book than *Apeirogon*, he says. "It isn't experimental. It's quite logical. It celebrates the smaller moments, even the mundanities of life."

Is it more difficult to write a simpler book? "Nothing is ever simple, especially simplicity. But I don't know the answer to your question yet."

He emails me the "tentative first sentence" at two the next morning: "It was the sort of love, he knew, where he might follow her quite quickly, and it was odd to think of death so sharp on the heels of death, but he had heard of it happening once or twice with others, and he felt it could be his way too, an inevitable murmuring into the sky of his life, after her, a vesper flight, a graceful upward swing into the outer dark.

"So, it's a love story... of sorts."

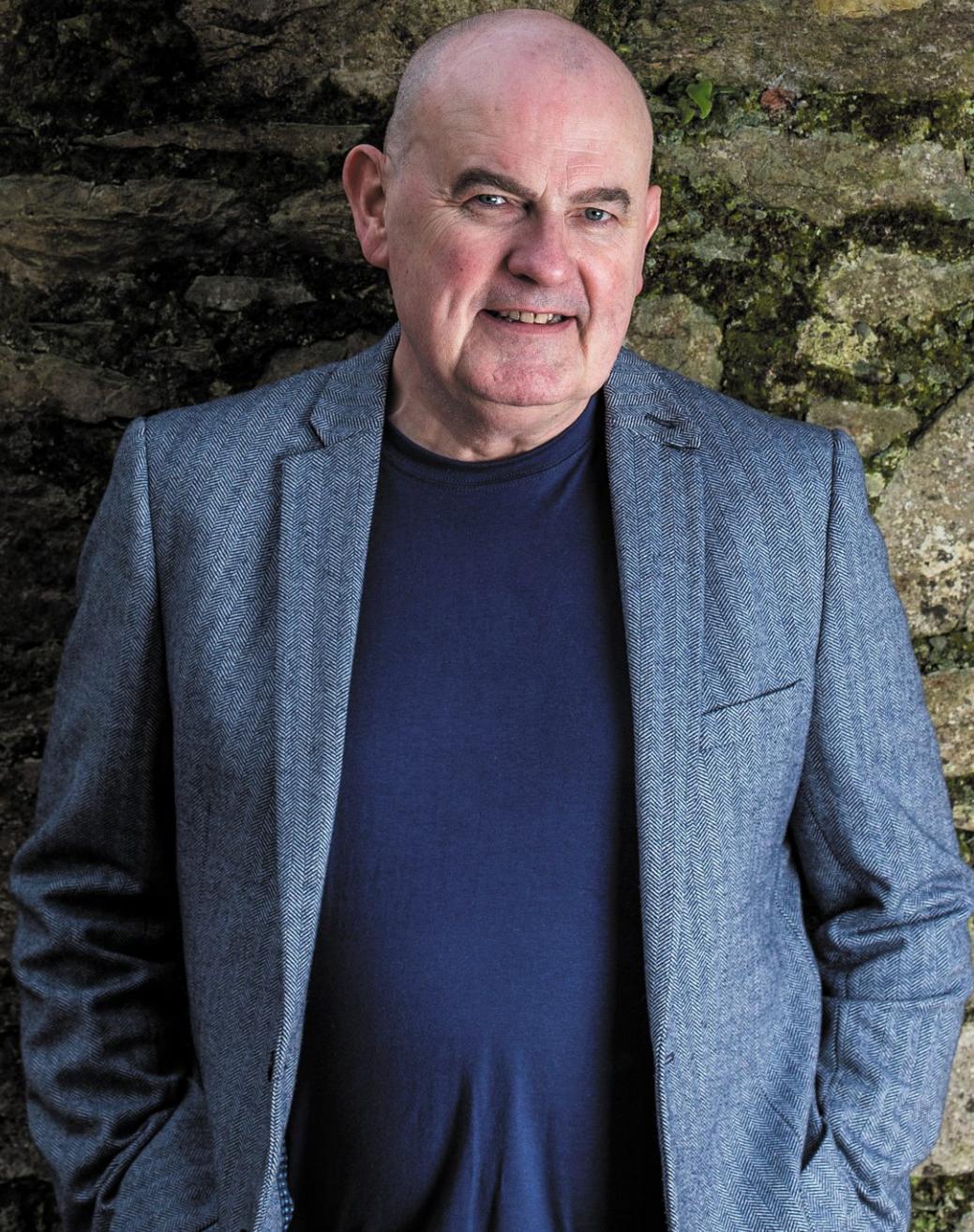
SundayIndependent

28 March 2021

People & Culture

**'I am grieving a life
that I will not have'**

*Gareth O'Callaghan confronts the pain of abuse
in his past, his fears for the future – and the joy of now*



Interviews: Meet Nancy Hollander – the inspiration behind Jodie Foster's latest role. Crime writer Sharon Dempsey on the new wave of Northern Irish women authors. **Books:** Eilis O'Hanlon chooses the best new Scandi thrillers.

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Former DJ Gareth O'Callaghan tells **Barry Egan** about the horrific abuse he suffered as a child, battling depression, his diagnosis with a fatal condition, and the healing power of love

'Why would you forgive someone who stole the timeless beauty of your childhood?'

It was Gareth O'Callaghan's 60th birthday last Wednesday. He and his wife Paula spent the afternoon in their back garden in Cork. "We listened to music," he says, "and relaxed in the unexpected sunshine."

The former RTÉ broadcaster deserves a bit of sunshine in his life. In March 2018 he was diagnosed with an incurable neurological disorder, multiple system atrophy (MSA), and he retired later that year. He doesn't know how long he has to live.

Gareth's latest book, his seventh, *What Matters Now: A Memoir of Hope and Finding a Way Through the Dark*, is published this week. It is an extraordinary read.

When we meet to talk about the book he looks well and is full of chat. You would never guess that he is in agony.

That morning when he woke up, for example, the pain in his body hit eight on a scale of one to 10. To reduce the pain, he took Sinemet, commonly used to treat the symptoms of Parkinson's. He also spent two hours inhaling molecular hydrogen.

His book describes his pain regime, and his treatment. And he writes about grieving for his own death.

"I am grieving a life that I will not have, even though right now I am alive," he tells me. "It's a life that carries terms and conditions. Slowly, pieces of that physical life I have always felt are being taken away and being made impaired. Physically, I am slowing shutting down."

"The grief I feel is immense, but I think if I didn't allow myself to feel it, and to go through the different grieving stages, I would lose my mind and never survive emotionally. I am grieving for the vibrant

life force I see in others who are fit and healthy and well.

"I grieve for each feeling inside that reminds me I am no longer on the road I once was, but I also remind myself that this is a new road which must be travelled and experienced to continue to live fully.

"I would like to think I will still have a reasonably good quality of life this time next year," he says. "I don't look beyond that. I am at peace with the prospect that I will die from this illness at some point."

For most of his adult years, though,

Gareth O'Callaghan's life has been one without peace. He suffered from severe depression throughout the 1990s and until 2015. He considered taking his own life in the late 1990s. What stopped him was the thought that his three children, Aibhín, Kerrie and Katie, from his first marriage, would have to grow up with the stigma that suicide might bring.

In 1999, the 2FM DJ had lost three stone in less than two months, and his 6ft 3in frame weighed in at eight stone.

A doctor put him on antidepressants, which he continued to take for two years. Then in 2005 he left RTÉ after 17 years. Later that year his marriage ended "officially". Broke, he moved into a small flat on his own.

For many years, he had found it difficult to manage the darkness inside his head. That trauma entered his life without warning when he was 11 years of age.

One summer in the early 1970s, he went with the Scouts to stay in Clara in Co Offaly. The house, St Anthony's, was run by the Franciscan Brothers. A brother invited

him to work in the kitchen. He showed him how to bake bread. "I felt really important," he remembers.

On the third night, he was woken in the dormitory in the middle of the night. There wasn't a sound. He was shaken by the shoulder, he recalls, "and this dark figure [was] standing there."

"I will never forget the stale cigarette smell off his breath. I could also detect alcohol."

"He said to me: 'Are you awake? Quick, come with me...'"

He was led out of the dormitory and, in the dead of night, across the grounds to the big house.

"We went upstairs on to the first floor. He just opened the bedroom door and said: 'Go on in there and get into bed. I will be in in a minute.'

"I got into bed."

The brother, who had gone into the bathroom, came back into the bedroom and switched off the light. The only other light in the room was the red glow below a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Beside the bed was a wooden crucifix.

"I was lying in the bed."

Confused, he was asking himself, "What is going on here?"

"He took my pyjama bottoms down, and then he moved himself over on to me. He took my hand and put it down his pyjamas. I have vague memories of a couple of sexual acts that happened. I have no idea."

He can't figure out how long he was in that room.

"But clearly as soon as he'd had enough,

'I am at peace with the prospect that I will die from this illness at some point'

Picture by Clare Keogh

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that was it.”

Just as it was starting to get light, the brother walked him back across the open space to the door of the house where the dormitory was.

“Don’t tell anybody that you’ve been here,” he said.

Gareth got into bed but couldn’t sleep.

One of the other boys in the dormitory woke up and asked him: “Gar, are you OK?”

He said nothing.

Then the boy asked him where he had been.

Gareth told him: “I wasn’t well. I have a stomach bug.”

The next morning, the same brother turned up in the kitchen. “He told me to go into the cold room to get something. I was terrified. He told me: ‘If you ever tell anyone what happened last night, I will make sure that you are disgraced, and the guards will be called.’ I said: ‘What did I do?’”

“It will never be discussed,” the brother told the child he had raped.

He wasn’t abused that night. But on the following night, it happened again.

“He tried to get my pyjamas down. I pushed him away. I don’t know where the strength came from, but I pushed him away. I got up and left.”

The week before Christmas of that same year, the brother turned up at Gareth’s house on the Navan Road in Dublin.

“He had nice gifts for my mother. He was decked out in the clerical gear and looked the business.”

He shook hands with Gareth’s parents, before sitting down to have dinner. He also stayed the night.

“I was f**king terrified. My mother had put him in the room opposite my room.”

Gareth forced himself to stay awake, but fell asleep at about 4am.

When he woke up the next morning, he heard the brother’s voice downstairs chatting to his mother.

“The first thing I did was I actually lifted the blankets to see if my pyjamas were still on. They were still on. That was a victory.

“When I got dressed and went downstairs, [the brother] was like a best friend of the family. He said, when I walked in: ‘Here he is!’”

“When I sat down, my mother said: ‘[The brother] has got some good news for you for the Easter Holidays.’

“You’re coming down to Clara for a few days,” he said.

He then had his breakfast.

“He ate the full fry, like a pig,” Gareth remembers.

“From Christmas until the whole way up to Easter, I was completely consumed with every minute of every day and through every night with going back there,” he says.

He tried to will himself to tell his mother. But he just couldn’t. Instead, the 11-year-old wrestled with something he couldn’t understand.

“I had never even heard of the word ‘abuse’. So immediately I thought it was something that I must have encouraged or brought on. I thought if I tell my mother, I’m going to be in trouble with the police, and he’s going to say: ‘He encouraged it.’ And I didn’t encourage it. What did I encourage?”

When Easter came, Gareth took the train from Heuston with his little brown suitcase in his hand. At the train station in Clara, he walked into the car park and saw a hand waving from a car.

“I wanted to lie down and cry, and tell people: ‘Don’t let me go there.’”

His abuser drove him to St Anthony’s.

“I was defenceless at this stage. I was the only kid at the house. This is what I couldn’t understand. Why was I arriving on my own at the invitation of a brother in his early forties?”

“It was early to bed that night,” he says. “It was game on.

“He gave me a spare room which was adjacent to where he was sleeping. There



Gareth has thought a lot about the prospect of assisted suicide.

Picture by Gerry Mooney

was an adjoining door. So, that was it. On the second night he fell asleep, and I had a plan. I slipped out of bed and ran down the stairs and out the door at 5am.”

He ran down the driveway. He was dressing himself as he ran in a panic. “There was a heavy mist that morning.”

He was terrified that the brother would appear out of the mist. He knew there was a train coming through from Galway that stopped at 7am.

At the train station, he stood beside a woman with kids. Gareth kept looking behind him until he was finally on the train to Dublin.

He got to Heuston and then took the bus home. He told his mother that the brother had to go away. She never thought to ask Gareth why he didn’t have the little brown suitcase.

For years, Gareth had nightmares that the brother was coming to get him. In 1976, he began to have suicidal thoughts. He went so far as to ring the Samaritans one day. Then, in the run up to his Inter Cert, he told his teacher he was sick and left school early.

He went to the Pro Cathedral on Marl-



I felt the weight of the world had been lifted. My mother assured me that it was not my fault

borough Street. He decided he would go into confession and tell the priest what had been done to him.

“I said: ‘Father, a Franciscan Brother brought me into his bed. He took my pyjamas down.’”

“The priest said: ‘What?’ And I thought, ‘He’s on my side.’”

He couldn’t have been more wrong.

“The priest bellowed at me: ‘How dare you come in here and take that man’s good name. Get out.’”

He opened the confession box door. There were 15 people looking him. He ran out of the church and all the way to Eden Quay.

“The wall of the Liffey seemed especially low with a high tide.” He couldn’t swim. He just stood there looking at the water.

What stopped him from throwing himself in, I ask.

“A CIE guy said to me: ‘What are you looking in there for? You won’t see much in there.’ I said: ‘I’m waiting for the 38 bus.’ He said: ‘You’ll be waiting for the rest of your life to get the 38. The 38 is over there on Aston Quay.’”

When Gareth got home he burst into tears and told his mother everything. He



Gareth on the beach aged three, above, at the 2FM studio, right, and with his wife Paula, left, who he says was 'sent to me'



didn't want to go to the guards.

"But I felt the weight of the world had been lifted. My mother assured me that it was not my fault."

When Gareth was 20, he was at Clonliffe College training to become a priest. One day, he attended a ceremony.

"I was all dressed in the clerical gear. I walked through this door and walking towards me... was him in full clerical gear. He stopped in his tracks and he looked at me. I thought: 'I'm either going to vomit or pass out.' I turned around to run. He said: 'No, wait.' I ran. It was so shocking to come face to face with him. I kept running."

He never saw his abuser again.

In November 2008, he went back to St Anthony's. He wondered how many poor young boys had suffered here like him. He looked on the crosses in the cemetery for his abuser's name but he couldn't find it. He now assumes he is either dead or very old.

Does he believe that the abuse he suffered, which caused decades of depression and unresolved trauma, ultimately led to his terminal illness?

"Yes," he says. He believes that trauma like this means "the child is utterly

destroyed while still being left physically intact. But, he says, the trauma leaves an indelible scar that continues to burn deep into the fragile human brain.

"It makes perfect sense that such emotional damage over many years will eventually reveal itself physically by way of a serious neurological illness."

This story doesn't have a happy ending. But within it there's a story of a deep healing love that has, in recent years, helped him through it all.

In March 2015, at a low point in his life, he met Paula Delaney. He was not a great catch when they met. In December that year his credit card was declined at the ATM. He found €157 in an old credit union book, enough to get him through Christmas.

"She was sent to me," he says now. "The years before I met Paula had become intensely lonely and isolating and solitary for me."

"A dear friend, the DJ Tony Fenton, had passed away almost a fortnight before Paula and I met. I remember in the days following Tony's death, listening to the beautiful tributes that were being paid to

him by his radio colleagues almost daily, [and] asking him to end the loneliness I was feeling," he says. "I believe Tony played some part in getting the two of us together from wherever it was he had gone to after his death."

In early 2016, he started to feel strange sensations. "My heart was pounding like a hammer in my chest."

Then, one day in late 2017, he fell over a sofa at the radio station Classic Hits (where he had had a show since 2009). The following March he was diagnosed with MSA at the Mater Hospital. He held Paula's hand as she cried into his shoulder.

"It felt like a sudden loss of everything that was so important to me," he says.

He and Paula married in Cork Registry Office in September last year. She says she doesn't allow herself to think about the inevitability that one day she will become his carer.

"Gareth is my husband and I married him for better or for worse. I don't ever focus on a time that he won't be here," she says.

Every morning, Paula lights a candle in the kitchen of their home in Cork. "Some days are so dark within my heart that I need that flicker of hope," she says.

"It's difficult to have a discussion with the woman you love about death," says Gareth. "But in a gentle and prompting way, we have found ourselves chatting about the subject."

He believes that without Paula he would be already dead; that MSA would have already taken him.

When this progressive condition leads to a place where his quality of life is zero is assisted suicide an option?

"This is something I have given a lot of thought to," he says. "I have drawn up a short list of medical directives that I have sent to my solicitor."

"The human body reaches a point where it knows when the time has come to be allowed to naturally die, as in the case of grotesque neurological illnesses and incurable cancers. Modern medicine has discovered new ways to prolong human life, even though that life is running very low on quality and purpose, and any genuinely real reason to stay alive."

He doesn't want to prolong a chronic condition that is slowly robbing him of the joy of living. Right now, though, he still retains that deep joy and connection.

"However, once that joy has been extinguished, then it's palliative care that I will opt for, and the personal choice to bring closure to my own life at some point in the future; not any further medical intervention that will effectively prolong the physical act of 'being alive'."

"For what purpose?" he asks. "I can't find any."

He believes in God but not the orthodox version of the deity that he was taught to believe in at school.

He visits his local church to ask his God for strength. Could he find it within his faith, within his soul, to forgive his abuser?

"I have found peace within my soul," he says. "Who am I to forgive a bastard like him, when I now know that I wasn't the only one he abused and raped? I can't forgive him, not when I know there were others whose voices would never be found and heard. There will never be any forgiveness for a rotten, dirty bastard like him, who lurked in darkness waiting to drag you back into the night shadows, knowing, as I suspect, that there were others who had to know what he was up to, in order to facilitate him. They had to know."

"They were there, and they were as evil as him. There is no forgiveness for him, or for any of the others, ever. Why would you want to forgive someone who stole the timeless beauty of what your childhood should have been each time you look back? I don't anymore."

"It's important that I allow this small boy to allow himself to forgive himself for thinking and believing that he had done anything wrong. This was not the young boy's fault, even though he was made to believe it was, and he was forced to carry this rotten secret with him for decades."

"The only forgiveness that I can consider is to allow that small 11-year-old boy to feel the peace of forgiving himself for believing he was at fault."

'What Matters Now: A Memoir About Hope and Finding a Way Through the Dark' by Gareth O'Callaghan, is published by Hachette Books Ireland and is available online from bookshops now

If you've been affected by childhood abuse, contact Connect Counselling, a free telephone counselling and support service for any adult who has experienced abuse, trauma or neglect in childhood. The service is also open to partners and relatives. Phone 1800 477 477 or connectcounselling.ie. Alternatively, contact the Samaritans Ireland on freephone 116 123; samaritans.org

