

Glimmers of Light

By John Pepper

About 2.30pm on Friday 11th September 2020, in the presence of my wife Catherine, I was given catastrophic news by my Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon, the late Professor Michael O'Keeffe, when he told me that I would never see again, never drive again, and that I should take my name off the motor insurance on our cars. This news was to change my life, and by extension, that of my family, especially Catherine, in a manner that was unimaginable up to then.

When we exchanged our wedding vows, 37 years previous on the same day in September 1983, we did not imagine that our pledge on that day - “...*in sickness and in health...*” - would be put to the test in such an abrupt manner. As we sat in the car a short time later, both of us devastated and with tears in our eyes, Catherine reached towards me with her left hand and held both my hands so tightly with a vice like grip saying in the most loving manner - “*John, we'll get through this together and try and make the most of where we are. We'll do the best we can to get through this*”.

This was not the first time that Catherine said those words, or similar, in circumstances when unexpected challenges crossed our paths of life. It was through Catherine's generosity of rock-solid support that I managed to overcome the challenges that came my way. This was going to be the most difficult. Gone was the prospect of a retirement when we would enjoy our time together pursuing activities of interest and leisure that were beyond our reach due to the business of life up to then.

My world had suddenly shrunk, and what remained was dark, dreary, bereft of hope and any meaningful possibilities. I was blessed with the gifts of my scaffold Catherine, a loving family, which - with the generosity of “old pals of yesterday” - helped me stay afloat. The bleakness of the winter months superimposed on my condition is indescribable...there was not the slightest glimmer of light.

My situation remained thus...until... not only did a glimmer appear, but a shining star arrived to illuminate my world. That star was infinitely brighter than the star that led the Three Wise Men to the baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem.

On 19th December 2020, all our lives were blessed when our first grandchild came into our world, a baby boy, who was to be named Seán. Words continue to escape me as I attempt to describe the overwhelming ecstasy I experienced when I met Seán for the first time. The magic of that occasion, when Seán held the forefinger of my right hand in his little left hand with a grip matching that of Catherine's, some three months previous, will remain with me all the days of my life. What was unimaginable was suddenly ignited by that glimmer, that was and is the miracle of Seán Pepper, my precious grandson. My first contact with Seán on the afternoon of 21st December 2020, when my son, John, placed Seán in my arms for the first time on the shortest day of 2020, began the journey from despair and darkness to the prospect of meaning and purpose returning to my life.

What has happened since is truly remarkable. From the early months of his life when his mammy, Lisa, faithfully brought him to visit Catherine and I every Wednesday, my Sabbath day! Seán has and continues to envelop us with his precious

affection. From all the memorable moments with Seán, three stand out for me.

First, is the comfort I get by sharing the same bedroom with Seán when he joins Catherine and me for his sleepovers with us. Second, was on Christmas Day 2024 when he whispered to me, *"Granda, you are my best friend"*. Those words whispered by Seán on 25th December 2024, and frequently since, are more melodious than when Don Williams put those to music and song with his famous hit in April 1975. Third, was that special occasion, on Sunday 11th May 2025, when I was blessed to be with my son, John, and my grandson, Seán, to witness Louth win the Leinster Senior Football Championship in Croke Park. This was a momentous occasion as it was 68 years since the Wee County previously accomplished that honour in 1957, when I was four years old - the same age as Seán was in May 2025. The exhilaration I experienced as I grabbed Seán from my son, John's, arms, to raise him over my head when the final whistle sounded is indescribable, and is forever imprinted in my psyche.

I have chosen some lyrics of a song that manifests the meaning of Seán's life in mine, which he sings with the same conviction as Big Tom.

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine;
You make me happy when skies are grey;
You never know Seán, how much I love you;
Please don't take my sunshine away.*

The best birthday present promised to me by my son, John, and Lisa, arrived a day late, on 11th October 2022. While I was disappointed on the date, I have come to realise that another

day is neither here nor there when the present is one that has in its essence a current-day version of my wife, Catherine, when she herself was a child a few years ago! My birthday present for 2022 is our second grandchild, Méabh. Sadly, Catherine and I were deprived of precious time with Méabh during the early stage of her life due to Covid 19. What struck me most when I had the joy of holding Méabh for the first few times, apart from remarking about her dainty feet, was the sense of determination that Méabh's every call and move exuded.....our granddaughter was not only another glimmer of light to further brighten my life... that light was going to be further illuminated by a dynamo!

Méabh was only a few months in our midst when she put down a marker around the terms that would apply in any relationships anyone wished to have with her. As a first, Méabh decided that the consumption of fluids by her would be purely on her terms. And, to make the point, she took a unilateral decision to decline all fluids. In so doing she forced her mammy to come up with a variety of alternative and creative strategies for her required fluid intake. So, Méabh had to be given generously diluted solid baby food for several months. Eventually Méabh took the decision, in her own time, to spontaneously take a drink from a beaker which Catherine had left for Seán when both were staying over with us. Her sense of adventure, determination and independence was a cause for vigilance at all times. As Méabh's view of the world expanded, we began to witness the most beautiful feminine qualities emerge, complemented by the most loving attributes of compassion, concern and generosity. While my condition curtails my capacity to engage in many routine activities of daily living, these limitations have not escaped Méabh's attention. Even when she is engrossed watching her favourite cartoon, while singing along with "Elsa",

Méabh notices when I'm in need of assistance, and she abandons what she is at and promptly comes to my rescue. Touching examples of this are when she senses that I am looking for my shoes, or that I've mislaid my white cane. Not only does Méabh find essential items, in the case of my shoes or slippers, she places them in front of the correct foot and puts the cane into my hand, with the words "There you go, Granda". Méabh's expression of the words "There you go", are the words Catherine has been using when she is exercising hospitality when giving a guest or myself a mug of tea, a habit I never noticed at any time during more than 41 years of married life. It took Méabh just over two years to identify and model verbal expression with that of her granny, and by all accounts, bears a striking resemblance!

It is no surprise, therefore, that I find myself choosing lyrics from the famous chart-topping hit by Elvis in 1970 to capture the essence of the light and hope that my loving, caring and generous granddaughter has brought to my being.

*You give me hope and consolation,
You give me strength to carry on;
You'll never know the reason why I love you as I do, Méabh,
It's the wonder, the wonder of you.*

On Wednesday 8th March 2023, Catherine accompanied our daughter, Máire, and her husband, Daniel, for Máire's pre-natal check-up. Thankfully both mother and baby were in perfect health. Although I was unable to see the image of our next grandchild on the screen, I could hear with incredible clarity the heartbeat of the little human being, who, in a few months, would not only bring a glimmer of light into our lives, but would ignite a magic never before experienced by me. The reality of

the existence of the wonder and mystery of this miracle was brought home to me on the following day, 9th March, at Dubai airport, when, before Catherine and my departure home, Máire took my hand to feel her baby's movements as it made its way into a new comfortable position. Hearing the baby's heartbeat on the previous day was truly special for me - I was within a few centimetres of this wonderful little person when I felt the baby move, who would bring so much enlightenment and enrichment to my universe.

Shortly before midday on Wednesday 21st June 2023, Stephanie, a very special friend to Máire and Daniel, knocked on the door of the room, set up to be the nursery for the new addition to their family, where I was reciting to myself the joyful mysteries of the Rosary. Stephanie enquired if I would be ready to leave for the hospital in a half hour, and we could stop for food enroute. Coming towards the end of our meal, at 2.15, Stephanie's mobile rang. The caller was Daniel, with the wonderful news that Stephanie was now an aunty, and that I was also a grandfather to my second granddaughter, and to my third grandchild. Stephanie and I immediately stood up, she shook my hand and we joyfully embraced, and left in haste, almost overlooking the slight matter of paying the bill!

As Stephanie linked me through the hospital entrance, swiftly past reception, we were joined by a nurse to accompany us to the ward where I would have my first contact with our latest gift from God. It was during the course of this fast-paced journey that Stephanie remarked on the item I was carrying in my left hand, and wondered aloud why I was bringing a visibly well-worn sock with me into the hospital. Fortunately, the nurse failed in her vigilance around infection control, as the sock was still warm from the sweaty heat of my left foot, having swiftly

been removed from that foot some three hours earlier, when Stephanie announced our departure within a timeframe of half an hour! My well-worn and recently worn sock, to my great satisfaction, managed to escape Catherine's procurement of it for the washing machine, or worse, for its destiny in the recycling waste! Securely contained within the garment in my left hand was a gift of sentimental worth given to me by my grandmother in 1957, when I was barely four years old.

During my early life, I was blessed to experience the loving warmth and affection of my granny, which I recall with gratitude, which I believe contributed in a significant way to my formation. It was during one of those times that she gave me the gift of a small toy donkey that shook its head when wound with the key permanently in its abdomen. This toy donkey, which my grandmother could ill-afford to buy for me at the time, presumably as a symbol of her love for me, was shortly to find itself transferring from its custodian for the previous 66 years, to a new owner, my newborn granddaughter, 3 hours of age. Granny could not have imagined that her extravagant investment, all those years ago, would find its way, carried with the same love from her grandson to his granddaughter, as she had for her grandson in 1957. On entering Máire's room, Stephanie handed me over to Catherine and Daniel, and both escorted me to the gorgeous little baby, my latest gift of life, and the person who had given me another glimmer of light, with the brightness of the rising sun. As I kissed Sienna's left little cheek as she rested in her mammy's arms, I began to once again count my blessings which were multiplying. I gave the sock with its contents to Sienna's mammy for safe keeping, with love from both Sienna's great great granny and granda. This was a truly special event and a cherished occasion, not least because of the presence of my wife Catherine, Máire's

mother, and midwife at the delivery of her second precious granddaughter, Sienna.

Despite thousands of miles between us, Catherine and I have come to enjoy dedicated periods of time with Sienna in both Dubai and at home in Ireland, as well on family holidays together. We are privileged to witness and experience at first-hand the development of her unique personality.

Stand-out experiences for me were when I felt Sienna's heartbeat as she fell into a deep sleep while lying on my chest, and I felt the invigorating stimulus from the purity of her breath arriving on my skin. It touches my being when, on hearing the tap of my white cane on the steps as I descend the stairs, Sienna makes her way to the gates at the bottom, to assist me opening the gates, and then lead me carefully by the hand to the nearest bean bag where she plonks me down, and goes off about her business having taken possession of my cane!

The magic of Sienna's tight embrace, and the velvet feel of her hug when I arrived unannounced as she was having her breakfast on Saturday morning, 5th April 2025, will remain forever in my treasured memories. Sienna's concern for my need for sustenance, in preparation for our train journey from Dublin to Cork later that day, was borne out by her generosity of insisting that she feed me not only her little slice of toast, but every other piece on her mammy and daddy's side plates!

The person who wrote the lyrics for Joe Dolan's record that topped the charts in 1993, was prophetic, as thirty years later, these lyrics [slightly adapted], speak to the unique person that is Sienna Crouchman:

*I can hear your heart beat,
As you rest on my chest, Sienna,
That brings rays of light,
To my mind's eye. Your endless magic is beautiful, Sienna.*

While I am afflicted with a life-limiting condition that greatly limits my independence, giving rise to recurring frustrations for me and those around me, the glimmers of light in the persons of Méabh, Sienna and Seán have each, in their unique and special way, taught me so so much. They have become, and will always be, unique role models for me as I try to follow their examples of never giving up. I am both blessed and privileged to have Sienna, Méabh and Seán combined as the lights that illuminate my universe, and clear the pathway of my life, so as to enhance my appreciation of what is really important. Through their being in my life, I have come to realise that the pleasure from certain accomplishments, as well as the acquisition of sought-after material possessions, only provide transient gratification. The love, warmth, care and gentleness showered on me by Seán, Méabh and Sienna, will always remain in my reservoir of Treasured Memories that will radiate my existence for the remainder of my life's journey.

To conclude, I say to my Three Treasures, "The happiness of having you, Seán, Méabh and Sienna, makes my world a place worth living in".

Christmas Morning 1964

By John Pepper

Christmas morning 1964, my father put his head around my bedroom door at 6.15 and said, "*John, we need to get ready for Mass*". I jumped out of bed, washed my face and hands, got

dressed, putting on the shirt and jumper that had come some days previous in the big box from my uncle Tom in Canada. I also donned my short pants, my knee-length socks and my black shoes polished the night before. I had a cup of water, as we had to fast for 3 hours before receiving Holy Communion.

I took my surplice and soutane from the hanger over the cooker, both of which my mother had starched and ironed, and I carefully folded them before putting them in my small black bag.

We took our two bicycles from the barn and I placed the black bag securely on the silver carrier of my red Humber bicycle, which had been purchased the previous June in McQuillan's in Capel Street and was brought home in the boot of our neighbour, Patsy Kieran's, white Ford Anglia car, YZA 136.

My father and I headed off on our bicycles for the three Masses in St. Mary's Church, Inniskeen, which were celebrated on the hour: 7.00, 8.00 and 9.00.

The morning was so bright - lit up by a beautiful full moon, clear sky and twinkling stars - that we hardly needed to switch on the flash lamps on the bikes. I have a vivid recollection of the beautiful image of the morning as we dismounted from the bikes to walk with them up Murphy's hill. The air was sharply cold as I inhaled its invigorating purity. The silence of the morning was magical, apart from the occasional interruption by cattle calling in the distance. I shall never forget that very special experience.

I don't believe that I've ever seen the moon shine so brightly, as it highlighted both our shadows, the sparkles of ice on the

rough surface of the road, and the white frost on the hedgerows. This is one of the most truly magical and spiritual experiences I've ever experienced in my life - being with my father, just the two of us, as we pushed our bikes up Murphy's hill at about 6.30 on Christmas morning 1964. That uniquely spiritual experience revisits me every Christmas, and whenever I travel up that hill towards Inniskeen, from all those 61 years ago.

Some years later during my time at the CBS Secondary School in Dundalk, I came to appreciate the writings of the great poet, Patrick Kavanagh, also from Inniskeen, especially '*A Christmas Childhood*'. This extract from that beautiful poem resonates with that precious memorable experience:

*'In silver the wonder of a Christmas town land,
The winking glitter of a frosty dawn'.*

Further on down the road, we were overtaken by a neighbour and his family in his brand-new dark-brown Volkswagen Beetle. I confess that, although I'd been taught at Inniskeen National School, to avoid the sin of envy, and had been to confession for Christmas, my human frailty kicked in and I resented the socio-economic gap that separated our respective families, that morning.

On arrival at St. Mary's Church, we parked our bicycles at the usual place beside Ned Keenan's house, and as my father chatted with other Mass-goers, I ran to the church vestry to get into my Mass serving outfit. Inside the vestry, there was a respectful quiet excitement as, with the other four boys, I speculated on Santy's generosity.... although some of the boys had already seen their presents, including one who'd got the

Meccano Set that he'd asked for, from Santa. I had made the same request, so was eager in my expectation to be treated no less favourably.

About 6.50, the Curate, Father McDermott, entered the vestry in his customary breezy manner, with the aroma of Malton tobacco wafting from the furnace of his pipe, which was in full tilt. He briefly checked with us our respective roles during the three Masses, and reminded us of some of our additional duties, given the morning that was in it. Then off we headed through the doors of the vestry, ahead of Father McDermott, on to the altar. The congregation stood to greet us, and to the left of my eye I saw my father, in his usual place at the end of the third row, on the right-hand side, holding his rosary beads.

In 1964, the call from Vatican 2 had not yet fully permeated the ecclesiastical psyche of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Mass was celebrated through the medium of Latin, with the celebrant facing the altar, his back to the congregation, the people of God. We, Mass servers, answered the prayers in Latin.....*Dominus Vobiscum, Et cum Spirite Tuo, Deus Caritas Est, and Pater Noster (Our Father)*. Furthermore, microphones had not yet arrived in the little hills of Monaghan, so the celebrant's exhortations to Heaven, and our responses, had to be pitched at decibels that were respectful, while at the same time, could be heard by the congregation.....all in a language that the natives of South Monaghan did not know, or could not understand!

While serving Mass that morning, I rotated between ringing the bell, bringing the water and wine up to the priest for consecration, and holding the paten, while Father McDermott placed the host on the tongues of the faithful, who knelt at the

altar rails with their hands carefully concealed under the starched, white altar cloth. This was to ensure that if the Body of Christ happened to fall as the priest was placing it on the individual tongues of the communicants and bypassed the paten in the server's hand, it would not fall to the floor of the Church.

After the three Masses, Father McDermott opened a big box of sweets as a reward for our efforts during the year.

I cycled home in front of my father with great energy and in the expectation that Santy would grant my wish that a Meccano Set would be waiting for me when I arrived home.....Anyway, Christmas 1964 was not to be the year I would have my wish granted.

That year, Santy brought me a Compendium of Games, which contained Snakes & Ladders, Ludo, Draughts and Tiddlywinks, along with the Dandy and Beano Annuals for that year.

Although somewhat disappointed, I ate the steak which my mother had fried, as was the customary breakfast on Christmas mornings, and then headed out to the byre to hand-milk the cows.

The following year, 1965, Santy was no further persuaded by the case I made in my letter for a Meccano Set. In fact, I was treated even less favourably than the previous year. On returning from the three Masses on Christmas morning 1965, I found waiting for me, a silver torch with a bright red plastic surround on the front of it to keep the glass securely attached, along with three Ever Ready batteries. This torch was supplemented with that year's edition of the Hotspur, for which I hadn't the slightest damn interest....!

My bitter disappointment was compounded when, after Christmas dinner, at about 4.30 that afternoon, my father politely asked me if he could borrow "*Santy's torch*" to go out to the fields to collect the cows in the dark! I was utterly disgusted, but managed to muster up a grudging reply, and handed him my torch.

This episode merely reflected the reality in the Pepper household in the mid-sixties, where my mother and father, like many others at the time, had to stretch the pounds, shillings and pence to try and make ends meet. Sadly, I was not as aware of their daily miracles, "*of the loaves and fishes*", as I should have been at the time, as I was still a firm believer in the mystery of the generosity of Saint Nicholas.

In later years, I was to become familiar with the adage, "*Fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice, shame on me*". And despite my faith in Saint Nicholas, and the hope that Santy would come good on the second asking for the Meccano Set, I was bitterly disappointed with his conduct. I felt I deserved better treatment from him!

I was determined that Christmas 1966 was not going to herald a further "*obair in aisce*" with the third attempt to make a case to Santy for my much-coveted Meccano Set. So, I set out on St. Stephens night '65, to make certain that would not happen. I decided that in the event of the third attempt not being lucky, I would have a fall-back position. This would involve my accumulating every red penny and halpenny during the following 12 months so that if Santy ignored my request, the following Christmas, I would hopefully have sufficient financial reserves to purchase the coveted Meccano Set.

Thankfully, it was third time lucky. I did get my red and green Meccano Set, complete with screws, washers, nuts, bolts, spanners and screwdrivers, with instructions for assembly.

But, sadly, in the process of making sure I eventually got my wish from Santy, I encountered, yet another disappointment on Christmas Eve 1966.

That is for next year's Christmas Story.

My First Book

By John Pepper

The first book I can recall reading was *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell, which Santy brought me at Christmas 1963, two months after the assassination of President John F Kennedy, in Dallas on 22nd November. I distinctly remember that the arrival of *Black Beauty* to my then embryonic library, coincided with our kitchen table having piled upon the corner of it bundles of newspapers containing voluminous information about President Kennedy and his family. One dare not disturb or rearrange them, without the express authorisation of my late mother. This collection of newspapers sat under the picture of the Sacred Heart, with its flickering red light beneath the frame illuminating the image of Christ, whose countenance was one of acceptance and suffering, while at the same time the image depicted His blood dropping from His wounded heart.

While I read and re-read the story of that little foal, *Black Beauty*, repeatedly, and privately lamented its life of trauma and hardship, albeit with an ending in an environment of

deserved comfort, the story never ignited any motivation to '*put pen to paper*'.

In my early youth, I immersed myself in reading about the lives of Irish revolutionaries who fought during 1916, in the War of Independence, and the Civil War, such as Dan Breen, Michael Collins, Liam Lynch and Eamon de Valera. But my instinct for reading material, other than that which would serve my academic and vocational pursuits, were parked to one side for the best part of sixty years. An exception was the writings of the great poet and writer Patrick Kavanagh, who hailed from our neighbouring parish, Inniskeen, in Co. Monaghan.

I am privileged to say that I saw Paddy, as he was known to the locals, on several occasions. Firstly as a schoolboy at Inniskeen national school and, some years later, as he travelled on the CIE bus coming from secondary school in Dundalk. I recall all of us pupils in the schoolyard during lunchtime running to the wall and gate when one of the boys would announce, "*Here's Paddy Kavanagh coming*". Paddy would be walking to his home in his townland of Mucker, having spent some time in Dan McNello's pub after getting off the bus. More often than not, Paddy would ignore us, and the rare occasion when he spoke, it was in a gruff manner and tone, usually complemented by a fit of spluttering and coughing. Both of which had become a characteristic hallmark of his persona following the removal of one of his lungs when he developed TB in the early 1940's.

On one of his trips home, on our school bus from Dundalk, I witnessed at first hand Paddy using - to great effect - his post-TB disability of prolonged coughing and spluttering to successfully avoid paying the bus conductor the fare to

Inniskeen. His only concession was to offer the bus conductor a mouthful of Powers whiskey, from the half noggin bottle he took from the inside pocket of his stained and threadbare shower coat. This was only after he, Paddy, had taken a mighty slug from it himself in the presence of the bus conductor!

The bus had stopped to put the non-paying customer off. But the unfortunate bus conductor, having declined the medicinal generosity from Paddy, pressed the bell in a gesture of resignation, and the CIE bus brought the great poet to his next destination, Dan McNello's pub in Inniskeen. There, the patrons would give him a wide berth lest they find themselves referenced in any of his writings. It is for this reason, sadly, that Paddy is reputed to have said on various occasions and written, *"What did the school children see in me, while the grown-ups in Inniskeen village went out of their way to avoid my company?"*

Having read Patrick Kavanagh's *Tarry Flynn*, *The Green Fool*, as well as all his poetry, I am privileged to have seen this truly exceptional genius and heard his spoken word in real life, albeit in manner and tone removed from what would be expected from such an accomplished human being.

Despite my deep admiration for Paddy Kavanagh and his literary genius, and even though we were *'neighbours' children'*, I did not have the desire to undertake any writing other than that necessitated through my studies and work.

While composing this piece, the question crossed my mind, had our teachers at primary school in Inniskeen seized the various opportunities presented by Paddy Kavanagh walking past to enlighten us about the richness of his writings, would I have

waited until I reached '*the sunset years of life*' with '*most of my spuds eaten*' to put pen to paper? Who knows. Perhaps us schoolchildren unconsciously and unwittingly saw more in Paddy Kavanagh, as he walked past our schoolyard in the early '60's, than those entrusted to our formation at the time.