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| **A twin brother's act of devotion** |
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| **Lakshman Menon / New Delhi September 16, 2009, 0:45 IST** |
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Thirty years ago, on the morning of August 27, 1979, an elderly but still vigorous gentleman took his place at the helm of his fishing boat off Sligo in Ireland. Members of his family clambered in after him—his daughter, son-in-law, his son-in-law’s 83-year-old mother, his 14-year-old twin grandsons, Nicholas and Timothy, and 15-year-old Paul Maxwell, the boat hand.

It was a glorious summer morning; “the sun was warm, and the sea was flat and calm.” Paul Maxwell asked what time it was. “11.30 and 40 seconds,” Timothy replied. Moments later a stash of explosives hidden aboard the boat was remotely detonated and Timothy’s life changed forever; the boat “disintegrated into matchwood which now littered the surface.”

It was carnage. Earl Mountbatten, Nicholas and Paul were killed instantly. The Dowager Lady Brabourne (herself the widow of a former acting Viceroy of India) died the next morning. Mountbatten’s adored eldest daughter Patricia and her husband Lord Brabourne were so dreadfully wounded it was feared they would succumb to their injuries; Patricia Mountbatten’s face “was unrecognisable, held together by 117 stitches.” Her husband’s legs were “twisted and broken.” He had multiple wounds all over his body. Timothy himself was literally battered from head to toe. “Between the three survivors, we had three functioning eyes and no working eardrums.”

The bomb was the work of the Irish Republican Army and the purpose of the assassinations was political. As Timothy Knatchbull writes, “By killing my grandfather [the IRA] wanted to draw attention to the long struggle for an end to British rule in Northern Ireland. They got plenty of attention.” Mountbatten was the highest-profile victim the IRA has ever assassinated and the world was stunned and transfixed by his murder.

But Knatchbull’s book, From A Clear Blue Sky: Surviving The Mountbatten Bomb offers a different, often achingly poignant perspective. “I wanted to discover what had happened, and understand it; and forgive.” He also wanted to come to terms with the sudden, savage loss of his twin and perhaps to absolve himself of “survivor’s guilt”—the nagging sense that somehow, the “wrong twin” had died that August morning.

“The heart of a human foetus,” Knatchbull writes, “starts to beat three weeks after conception. Mine started to beat in the middle of March 1964. A few millimetres away, another heart was beating alongside mine. It belonged to my identical twin. Our hearts beat in loose synchronicity over seven hundred million times until he was killed, aged 14.”

The twins were literally inseparable. “Our identical appearance confused everyone including us.” The only way they could be distinguished was by a mole that Timothy has under his neck, which Nicholas did not. “Our twinhood provided us with ...constant companionship and total empathy. We made it central to our lives and became each other’s closest friend, protector and partner.”

How, then, to accept the abrupt and violent severance of such affinity? To say goodbye and, in that most ghastly of all American phrases, “achieve closure”?

From A Clear Blue Sky is at once both a public love letter to his dead brother and the story of an intensely personal spiritual journey. Slowly, painfully, but ultimately joyously, Knatchbull is able to emerge from haunted shadows and bask in sunlit memories of an idyllic twinhood. He revisits the spot in Ireland where he and his family had spent so many happy summer holidays before that horrifying day. He is able to discuss both the IRA and the bombing without a trace of bitterness. He is even able, somehow, to forgive and, remarkably, to understand.

This is an exquisitely written book; at times the language is bracingly matter-of-fact, at times it is utterly lyrical. Although it deals with unimaginable loss, there is not a single mawkish sentence or overgilded sentiment.

There is a happy ending too. In 1998, Knatchbull married Isabella Norman, to whom this book is dedicated. They have five children. “The noise at home became tremendous,” he writes, “but every mealtime now felt like a party with my closest friends.”

**FROM A CLEAR BLUE SKY
SURVIVING THE MOUNTBATTEN BOMB**

Timothy Knatchbull
Hutchinson
432pp; £20