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**Out of the blue**

**On a sunny August day 30 years ago, the IRA blew up a boat carrying Lord Mountbatten and his family in the sea off Sligo. Among the dead was Mountbatten's grandson Nicholas Knatchbull, but his 14-year-old identical twin Timothy survived. As Knatchbull prepares to publish his cathartic account of the aftermath of the atrocity, Keith Dovkants reveals this tragic but ultimately redemptive tale**

By [keith dovkants](http://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/) *Sunday August 23 2009*

When they pulled Timothy Knatchbull from the sea by his hair, the rescuers thought at first they were dealing with a severed head. Shrapnel had scythed through the right side of his neck and face, blinding one eye and leaving a terrible wound. Nearby, his grandfather Earl Mountbatten was dying. Tim's parents, Lord and Lady Brabourne, had appalling injuries and his paternal grandmother, Dowager Lady Brabourne, had shock and wounds from which she would not recover.

Amid the wreckage of their bombed boat were the bodies of two schoolboys.

One was Paul Maxwell, the 15-year-old whose summer job had been to help out on Mountbatten's fishing vessel. The other was Nicholas Knatchbull, Tim's identical twin, his "other self" and the person from whom separation was not to be contemplated.

Accounts of how the Provisional IRA turned this holiday outing into a scene of horror have been well documented. Yet the full extent of the emotional and psychological carnage the murder of Nicholas Knatchbull wreaked on his twin brother has never been explored.

Now, 30 years since that dreadful day, in his book, From a Clear Blue Sky, Tim recalls what happened, how the bomb wreaked unseen damage by breaking the bond with his twin and how he managed to recover from it.

Despite rank and wealth, the Mountbattens have suffered episodes of cruel fortune, and Tim's experience is part of what some have identified as a cycle of personal catastrophe. Even now, faced with the imminent publication of details of the Mountbattens' worst tragedy, there is disquiet among some family members. They feel suffering should be borne in private and worry that the inevitable clamour aroused by Tim's book will focus unwelcome attention on an intensely personal matter.

A number of relatives, including Tim's eldest brother Norton -- Lord Brabourne and heir to the Mountbatten earldom -- have been concerned about Tim baring his soul in public. There is a suggestion the book has prompted a froideur between the brothers.

The view, held by some members of the family, that the 30th anniversary of the murders should pass off sotto voce is linked to the fact that the Mountbattens are closely aligned with Britain's royal family.

Tim's grandfather, Earl Mountbatten, is credited by historians with engineering the first meeting of his nephew, Prince Philip, and Princess Elizabeth, the future queen. Tim's mother, Countess Mountbatten, 85, is a great-great-granddaughter of Queen Victoria. The Duke of Edinburgh is her first cousin. Thus, the two families are powerfully linked and it is the Mountbattens' closeness to the royals that raises questions over the wisdom of Tim Knatchbull's decision to go public with his story of loss and recovery.

It was not a decision he made easily.

Today Tim, 44, is a successful and happy man. In August 1996, just 17 days short of the 17th anniversary of his brother's murder (this is how he recalls the date precisely), he experienced a coup de foudre.

He had been invited to the Bahamas by his cousin India Hicks. Among India's guests was a pretty, dark-haired girl called Isabella Norman, who worked as a Montessori teacher. The day after they met, Tim and Isabella went for a walk on a long beach. As he later recalled, they walked for hours, spoke about everything they felt was important to them and, as they returned along the deserted seashore in moonlight, he knew he had found the person with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life.

The queen, and others from her family, were guests at their wedding, where Tim made a moving speech about his twin.

Tim's career as a filmmaker, and later consultant, took them to America for a while; they now live in Hampshire. They have five children and when their eldest, Amber, was born in 2000, Tim was convinced he saw Nicholas in her eyes. By then, he was well on the way to learning how to cope with what had once seemed an insuperable loss.

Timothy and Nicholas's childhood was defined by love.

Although the Brabournes had a house in Knightsbridge, the family home was at Mersham in Kent. This is where they brought up their seven children -- one son, Anthony, was stillborn. Tim and Nicky were the youngest, the other boys are Norton, Michael and Philip and the two girls are Joanna and Amanda. Lord Brabourne, who died in 2005 aged 80, was a highly successful film and television producer -- A Passage to India and Murder on the Orient Express were among his credits -- and he often invited his film industry friends to Kent. One was Stewart Granger, one of Britain's biggest stars. Granger recorded an intriguing impression of the family in his autobiography. "I remember envying them their perfect life," he wrote. "They obviously adored one another, had a beautiful home with a magnificent park, lovely children and no money problems."

The centuries-old house, still the home of Tim's mother, is filled with treasures, but few more precious than a photograph of Earl Mountbatten at Broadlands, his home in Hampshire, at Christmas 1978. He is smiling happily, surrounded by members of his huge family. The following summer, a few weeks after his 79th birthday, he was dead.

They had been staying at Classiebawn Castle in County Sligo on the west coast of Ireland, a favourite holiday spot. On the morning of August 27, Mountbatten, as was his custom, paid an early visit to his twin grandsons. Because it was impossible to tell them apart, he used a family trick to identify them individually before kissing them. He lifted Tim's head to check for a tiny mole on his neck. Nicky had no mole -- it was the only difference between them.

After breakfast at Classiebawn, the family group drove a mile or so to the harbour where Earl Mountbatten's boat, Shadow V, was waiting. The weather was perfect. It was warm, sunny and the sky was a clear blue.

Lord Brabourne's mother, the Dowager Lady Brabourne, Lord and Lady Brabourne took their places in the boat, along with Earl Mountbatten and Paul Maxwell and the twins. Paul called out: "What time is it?' They were less than a mile from their mooring. Tim replied: "It's 11.39 and 30 seconds precisely."

At that moment a package of high explosives, hidden below the decking of the boat, was detonated by radio control by someone watching from the shore.

Countess Mountbatten remembered "a huge ball of fire" climbing upwards before she was struck down by the blast and flying splinters. Among other wounds, she had appalling damage to her face that required 120 stitches to repair. She later described the surgery she had to undergo as "my IRA facelift".

Her husband Lord Brabourne had serious leg and other injuries. Tim was pulled from the water into a boat by a couple who had been nearby. He was drifting in and out of consciousness, unaware at that stage his twin and his grandfather were dead. Lord Brabourne's mother died the next day.

A few days after the bombing, his sister Joanna told him Nicky was dead. So began his other life, his life of being without the person he felt was woven into the fabric of his own being.

He, like the rest of his family, was determined to survive, not just physically, but mentally and emotionally too.

Tim finished school at Gordonstoun and went on to Cambridge and Harvard. Outwardly, he seemed to have made a good recovery. Inside, as his book reveals, he was in agony. Joan Woodward, who is now 83 years old, spent her early career as a psychotherapist, specialising in helping families and children. In 1989, the success of a paper she wrote on twin bereavement prompted Joan to establish the Lone Twin Network. Tim knew Joan's network and talked to her often. When she published her book, The Lone Twin, 10 years ago, he made a significant contribution, writing for the first time about what had happened to him and his family in his own words. It was the beginning of From a Clear Blue Sky, a personal memoir.

"Talking was the greatest cure and I was good at that," he wrote. "I wasn't good at crying, though. I did cry of course, sometimes alone and sometimes with my family. But we were all so completely crushed by the bomb, we needed not just to survive, but to signal to others that we were surviving.

"And when we were all so devastated it was hard to say, 'I'm hurting, I need more time, more energy, more support, more listening'. The one thing I wanted most was to give support and strength to my beloved family at the worst time in our lives -- and the first way I felt I could do that was to show that I was all right, I was coping, not to worry about me.

"I knew they were very worried I might not be able to carry on as a lone twin, so I automatically felt I should give them the all-clear signal as soon as I was out of hospital.

"I fooled them but, worse, I fooled myself. My emotional and mental scars were terrible and took years to come out because I clamped down on them and kept them from view."

He began hearing the sound of the bomb in his head "day after day", he wrote, and he knew something was seriously wrong. After meeting other lone twins through Joan's network, he met a young man called David Loftus, who had lost his twin John through treatment for a brain tumour and when he and Tim met, Joan said, they instantly "clicked".

David, also in his 40s with a growing family, was an illustrator who has become an award-winning photographer, and he is currently working on his sixth book with Jamie Oliver. When Tim and Isabella married at Winchester Cathedral, in July 1998, David was joint best man with Tim's brother Philip.

Countess Mountbatten was thrilled to see Tim gain strength from the friendship and his brotherly closeness to David. She calls the pair her "youngest". She is also understood to be in favour of Tim publishing his book. She sees it as part of a healing process, a view Joan Woodward shares. But is the opening of one's innermost heart to the world at large the correct thing for a grandson of Mountbatten to do?

Philip Ziegler, the distinguished author and Mountbatten's biographer, encapsulates the situation neatly. "You can see how the book will help to heal scars. It may be a cathartic exercise and, for the author's sake, members of the family may welcome it. But if your family had suffered such horrible tragedy, who could blame those who would not wish to see it all gone over again in public?"

This is the heart of the matter. Tim's brother Norton -- Lord Brabourne, who will one day inherit the earldom -- also had to endure the pain of the murders. Nicky was not his twin, but he was his younger brother. When Norton's first child was born, a son, he called him Nicholas. Thus, the Mountbatten title would one day be borne by a man named after a beloved brother who was snatched away. But young Nicholas Knatchbull was to cause his father agonies of worry.

For the past few years, Nicholas (also a godson of the Prince of Wales, like his uncle Nicholas) has been fighting an addiction to hard drugs.

He dabbled in heroin and cocaine and his father was advised to take legal steps to ensure that, if he suddenly died, Nicholas would not automatically come into the family fortune.

After years of therapy, Nicholas has abandoned drugs, returned to education and is now living quietly in London. But his addiction put his parents through hell and Lord Brabourne could hardly be blamed if he wished to draw a line under the family's troubles, particularly as one of Nicholas's sisters, Leonora, had died of cancer aged five.

He may feel that will be impossible now, with the publication of Tim's book and the inevitable interest it will excite. According to one source, he and Tim have relatively little contact -- an unusual situation among siblings once so close.

When soon after the bombing Countess Mountbatten attended Norton's wedding, racked with pain and in a wheelchair, she was determined to show her family would not be torn apart. It would be tragic indeed if what the IRA could not achieve by vile murder was accomplished now by an attempt to heal.

Keith Dovkants © The Conde Nast Publications

From a Clear Blue Sky, Hutchinson, €14.99.