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|  | http://www.hindu.com/icons/hindu_w150.gif  **Date:01/11/2009**  AUTOBIOGRAPHY  **The road to recovery**  ADITYA SUDARSHAN   |  | | --- | | A moving account of a mourning so courageous and a healing so complete, as few people manage. |   *Of the many important insights Knatchbull has to offer, one that is crucial is the difference between grief and mourning.*  **From A Clear Blue Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb;** Timothy Knatchbull, Hutchinson, $36.  On August 27, 1999, on a still, clear morning in County Sligo in West Ireland, Lord Mountbatten was out at sea, boating with his family, when a bomb planted by the IRA exploded and he was dead. Three others died in the blast, including Nicholas, Mountbatten’s grandson and Timothy Knatchbull’s twin brother.  “Our hearts beat in loose synchronicity over seven hundred million times, until he was killed, aged 14.” It was the deepest relationship of Timothy’s young life: “to be so completely on the wavelength of another human being... was a gift. I was to realise this only once I had lost it.” *From A Clear Blue Sky* is the story of how, over the course of the next 24 years, Knatchbull overcame that loss.  Getting over grief  Now of course, grief itself is commonplace. As Knatchbull points out, “we all have a car crash in our lives.” So it is perfectly fair to ask, at the outset: Does his own story rise above the ruck? Is it really deserving of a book? The answer is ‘Yes’, and not because of the political turmoil at the back of it, or who Mountbatten was; these details are interesting, but ultimately only incidental.  It is obvious that Knatchbull isn’t trying to cash in on a famous tragedy. Nor is he merely airing his sorrows. He is not ‘using’ his writing to get over his brother’s death. He has already got over it; he is writing to tell us how. In doing so, he offers an account, always sincere, often moving, of a mourning so courageous and a healing so complete, as few people manage.  A human process  Of the many important insights Knatchbull has to offer, one that is crucial is the difference between grief and mourning. In the aftermath of Nicholas’ death, he returned quickly to physical strength and an outward ebullience. But “becoming strong again did not mean physical strength alone, it also meant emotional strength. Had I spent more time actively mourning, then I would have healed more quickly and suffered less. Instead, I just let grief float over me on an occasional and passive basis.”  There is a suggestion, also, that the stiff upper lip, and the sense of humour — revered British institutions both — can hinder one’s facing the facts.  So at 31, despite a seemingly happy professional and personal life, Knatchbull diagnoses himself afresh. He has mood swings, bouts of misery, the ‘sound of the bomb’ still plays in his ear. He decides then to take “an almost impossibly difficult but necessary step... to return to Ireland and finally address what had been holding me back for so long.” To engage, as he puts it, ‘in a human process’.  Series of encounters  From here on we follow him through an exhaustive series of encounters with the world of his childhood and the day of the bombing. He speaks with the staff at Classiebawn Castle, the family’s old August retreat, “a place where normal life was suspended and dreams were played out”; with locals in Village Sligo; with his rescuers; doctors and hospital staff; with the security forces assigned to Mountbatten.  Through these meetings and interviews, Knatchbull is able to reconstruct the environment at the village and grasp for the first time the complex politics behind his grandfather’s assassination. He is able, also, to confront the image of his murdered brother.  Farewell and forgiveness  During this account, what is particularly striking is the contemporaneousness of Knatchbull’s personal healing and his forgiveness of Thomas McMahon, the bomber. It seems clear that his mission to ‘say goodbye’ to Nick would not have succeeded, had he not made his peace with the murderer. To achieve this takes hard and careful work.  While he wants to learn about it, Knatchbull is careful to avoid probing too deep into the conspiracy that led to the bombing; he is not interested in rooting out every last culprit or pointing fingers at local sympathisers (of whom there were plenty).  What he aims at is only a sufficient understanding of events to accept, “that if I had been born into a republican stronghold, lived my life as dictated by conditions in Northern Ireland, and been educated through the events of the 1960s and 1970s, my life might well have turned out the way Thomas McMahon’s did.”  The point here is not that it would have — it doesn’t seem likely — nor that McMahon’s crime was at all justifiable. The point is that the crime was human. And a book that culminates with a truth like that has told a story worth telling.  © Copyright 2000 - 2009 The Hindu |