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| **After the bomb** |
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Lord Mountbatten’s grandson lost his twin in the IRA attack that killed their grandfather. Thirty years on, Timothy Knatchbull speaks to *Rrishi Raote* about his journey of healing.

It is disconcerting how easy it is to like Timothy Knatchbull. “Please call me Tim,” says this jeans-clad grandson of Lord Mountbatten, and godson of Prince Charles, before we sit down on his publisher’s balcony in Delhi. It’s a joyously sunny day, and in close proximity with this aristocrat his blue blood is plainly visible: there are blue bags beneath his eyes.

That is jet-lag; but they, together with the outdoorsy wrinkles around his eyes and stray gray hairs, are signs of his age. He is 45, yet he is oddly boyish in appearance, with an open face and the slight frame of a teenager. In most people this would be unremarkable, but not in Knatchbull. In some ways his life came to a standstill in his 15th year, shortly before noon on August 27, 1979.

On that bright day he and other family members were on Lord Mountbatten’s fishing boat off the west coast of Ireland. They were enjoying their annual holiday at Classiebawn Castle in County Sligo, one of their ancestral estates, and were to spend a restful day on the water. Instead, at 11:46 am, a powerful bomb hidden on the boat exploded, tearing it apart.

Knatchbull and both his parents were badly injured. The bomb killed four people: the teenaged boatman, the former viceroy, Knatchbull’s other grandmother, and his identical twin brother Nicholas.

It was 1979 and the IRA was carrying out attacks in Northern Ireland as well as in free Ireland, where the Mountbattens had their land. The IRA had nothing particular against Lord Mountbatten, by then aged 79 and long retired, but he was a public figure and an obvious target.

Knatchbull still carries physical scars from the attack, which also blinded him in his right eye. His book, From a Clear Blue Sky: Surviving the Mountbatten Bomb (Hutchinson, 2009), however, is much more about the emotional scars. Every member of the family paid in suffering, but Knatchbull bore the added burden of having lost his twin. The two had scarcely spent a few days apart in their whole lives, and looked so alike that even close relatives would check under Knatchbull’s chin for the mole that identified him from his twin Nick.

He describes their bond as “sharing a mental and emotional space with another human being, which is underpinned by biological symmetricality, so that both in nurture and in nature you feel almost as if you are part of one whole”. At 14, Knatchbull adds, “We hadn’t reached that part in our development where we had differentiated and gone our separate ways... The moment of his death was the moment when I lost something that was unique and unobtainable again in my life.” Losing Nick, he realised later thanks to another “lone twin”, was “not so much a bereavement as an amputation”.

Nor did he have the opportunity at the time to grieve, to obtain closure. “After the attack I had been too badly injured to go on functioning as a thinking human being. I was sedated, anaesthetised, I was in intensive care, I was in bandages, cocooned from the real world.” So while other family members, including his five surviving siblings, dealt with doctors, press and funeral arrangements, Knatchbull was in hospital. He did not see Nick’s body. From the hospital, he and his parents were helicoptered away to England.

The loose ends festered for years, despite Knatchbull’s professional success. His father Lord Brabourne, who died in 2005, was a film producer (credits include A Passage to India and Death on the Nile), and Knatchbull went into documentaries, for some years for the Discovery Channel, among other things. He says he coped with the sense of loss, “an emptiness and a loneliness”, by becoming a workaholic. Other things worked out: he got married, became a father (five times over), and “bit by bit I reached a point where I was ready to undergo a deep transformation myself, which was to go back to the place of the murders and to confront the painful truths from which I had been shielded”.

And Ireland is where his story finally turned into a book. During 2003-2004 he visited Sligo regularly, locating and speaking with people involved in the events surrounding the attack — “shopkeepers and fishermen and farmers and neighbours and friends and churchmen and women” — to get a detailed, moment-by-moment picture of the attack and its aftermath.

Knatchbull, so far as he was able, found out how the IRA carried out the attack, who was involved, and, most troubling, the degree of acquiescence if not support the IRA had in the local community. All this helped plug the gaps in his knowledge and memory, and thereby reduce the pain. He says his local interlocutors often found they “had a need to speak and to offer their own comments of sympathy.” It was not just the injured who needed healing.

The culmination of the book, and of Knatchbull’s path to recovery, is when he finally learns exactly what happened to Nick’s body and how. There is no great revelation here, but by that point even the reader shares some sense of the catharsis.

Little of that emotion is visible in Knatchbull’s demeanour. The chief clues, apart from the words, are the first time he mentions Nick, at which point he briefly touches his chest, and occasional modulations in his voice. He seems, and says he is, happy. Unlike most adults, he does not appear weighed down by past or present — and perhaps it is this which confirms the impression of youthfulness.