In Search of Spalding Gray

On the 31st of May 2002 the American writer, actor and master of the monologue Spalding Gray gave an interview on the Joe Duffy show. In it he described a car accident he had in Rosemount near Moate on the 22nd of June 2001. During the interview he was critical of the care he received at what he called a “country hospital”. His opinion was challenged by doctors from that hospital as well as others who had been well cared for there. Spalding went back to America where he turned his experience in Ireland into a monologue “Black Spot” which eventually appeared in a book entitled “Life Interrupted”. It is believed Spalding Gray committed suicide in January 2004 by jumping off the Staten Island ferry in New York. His body wasn’t found for two months. His death and depression were attributed to the injuries he received as a result of that Irish accident. He had brain injuries and a “dropped foot” (no feeling in his right foot)  which made it difficult for him to get around.  The “Black Spot” monologue instead of being a therapy (as his monologues often were) reminded him of something he wanted to forget but couldn’t. Overnight he had gone from being a very active sixty year old man who enjoyed skiing to a prisoner in his own body.

Listening to the Joe Duffy show I found it interesting  to hear an American be so critical of Ireland. Spalding had been to Ireland a number of times before his disaster, had performed in Dublin and at the Galway arts festival and had felt very much at home here. The accident changed all that. The Ireland he describes in “Life Interrupted” is one of superstition, inadequate health care and bad roads. The vet that hits him is a “F\*\*\*ing asshole”, the ambulance which takes him to the hospital is like a “World War II bread truck”, the patients who share his ward are “bashers and crashers…farmers that have hit each other with trucks and tractors, for fun or out of drunkenness”, the doctors who treat him look like “a seventh grade history book…from every part of the world except Ireland”. That bothers him because they don’t have the “same familiar gift of the gab”. We're not all bad however, the woman who attends to him at the scene of the accident sops blood off his face and tells him she lost her nine year old son the year before just about a hundred feet from where he was lying.

The accident intrigued me, I don’t know why, it just did. Where I wondered was this “black spot” he spoke about, who was the vet who hit him and who was the lady, like Saint Veronica, who attended to him? Where was this house in Westmeath he was staying in? He referred to it as the "Scanlon Estate", an old Victorian Mansion.

Fast forward to the 21st of June 2010. Spading Gray is again in the news. A new movie has come out entitled "and everything is going fine". Spalding Gray's widow Kathleen Russo is at a premiere in Edinburgh. Again the question of the accident comes up. The owner of the official Spalding Gray website www.spaldinggray.com writes to me asking for a photo of the black spot. I decide to renew my research with vigor. What do I know? Well according to "Life Interrupted" the accident happened near "Morte",County Offaly, that can't be right, must be Moate, Westmeath, we might have a preoccupation with death as Spalding attests but we're not that morbid. OK so Moate and there was a fatality 100 feet away the year before, that should be easy trace. I get in my car and head West for Westmeath, armed with Ordnance Survey map number 48 and my Sat Nav - first stop Moate.

On the way I have a bit of a surreal moment, there is an army jeep blocking the other lane staffed entirely by female soldiers.They have stopped a Micra driven by an elderly lady. They are fully armed and inquisitive. The Micra doesn't look like a terrorist (they never do) but the lady is terrified. In the field beside us, just a few feet away a bull is getting amorous with a few cows. The people in the traffic behind don't know whether to look at the soldiers or the cows. I am looking up at the sky. It is the longest day of the year, dark with ominous rainclouds.

Arriving in Moate I park behind a 1980 VW T25 campervan (hightop) It has no tax or insurance, I peer inside to see if there is a bed in the roof before the driver comes out of the butchers and asks me what I'm doing. I tell him I want to buy one of these vans but only if you can sleep in the roof. He recommends the “Autosleeper”. I cross the road to the police station and ring the doorbell, no answer, I then push the emergency after hours "Doctor Who" style button on the door and get through to Athlone garda station. They tell me that the one officer on duty is out on an incident and will be back shortly. I decide to call over to drive over to Athlone and speak to them in person.

I park at the library and head to the station on foot about a 10 minute walk. A wedding limousine goes past as I cross over the Shannon. Girls lean out the window whooping in delight. At the police station a garda asks me if I am the man looking for John McCormick's house. There were other people there but he only asked me, I must look like a John McCormick fan. What does a John McCormick fan look like?

The garda behind the counter looked long and hard to try and find anything on Spalding's accident. Nothing. Nothing on the boy who was killed nearby either. They refer me to the Superintendent who I must address in writing. I head back to Athlone library, the ladies there are very helpful. They get me the Westmeath Independent on microfile. I look though the whole of June and July 2001, not a thing on the accident. I am just about to give up when I decide to try 2000 for the little boy's accident. The library is about to close, I don't have much time. Within two minutes I find it, I feel the hand of Spalding guiding me. Diarmuid, nine years old, died January 2000 at a "picnic area" in Rosemount, County Westmeath. 100 feet from that is my black spot.

Rosemount is a small village, 9km outside Moate, about a twenty minute drive away. On the night of the accident Spalding, his wife, John Scanlon and some friends were out to dinner in John Scanlon's favourite restaurant, he doesn't say where it is, I presume it is in Moate though it could have been Athlone. Spalding criticizes the Irish food, his duck being dry. Kathie is the designated driver, Spalding does not have his seatbelt on. They come to the intersection at the end of the village beside the GAA pitch. They have stopped to turn right, the Scanlon Estate is less than a mile away. It is 10:30PM the 22nd of June, twilight, the "blue hour", a popular time for fairies and car accidents. Suddenly out of nowhere Spalding looks up and sees out of Kathie's window what looks like a "cartoon of a van" speeding towards them. There is just enough time to register it is there before it hits them head on. The car spins round and Spalding is thrown out onto the road. The driver of the van is a local vet heading to a sick calf Spalding alerted a farmer to earlier.

I am at the same spot almost nine years to the day. The picnic area is indeed 100 feet away, there is a memorial stone to the young boy Diarmuid who died there consisting of a stone with his first name and a large piece of bog oak. Across the road some young lads are practicing their hurling. There is no sign saying "Black Spot" as I expected, just a small well with a yellow pump. I take a few snaps for the Spalding Gray website, get back in the car and head towards Coolatore House, the "Scanlon Estate" Spalding referred to in his book, the directions for which I got from the local shop.

I have to check my Ordnance survey map to see where it is. I find "Coolatoor or Grouselodge". There is a small hill nearby and a quarry. Dotted all around are these little red circles. The legend tells me they are ring forts or "fairy forts".

County Westmeath has a few well known fairy forts and quite a few not so well known ones (there are over 3,000 in the county, two near the site of the accident) As well as that there was a public gallows on what was called "Knockdominy hill" (now called "Knockastia") which is right beside Coolatore and probably belonged to the lord of the residence that was there before Coolatore. So lots of superstition and ghosts in the area.

When you observe the townland around Rosemount on Google Earth, the "black spot", Coolatore house and the two fairy forts form a fairy-path or ley-line, a sort of fairy "Bermuda Triangle" which it is considered bad luck to cross over at night time. Spalding and his group crossed over and into one of these "fairy paths" on their way back from the restaurant that night, on what was probably the worst night of the year to do it, the day after the summer solstice, June the 22nd. The cows in distress and his walks through the fields earlier (across lay lines) probably didn't help either.

Of course that is all just folklore and there probably is a more logical reason why the vet in the yellow van did not see them on the road that evening.

In 2001 Coolatore House was the part time residence of John Scanlon, a famous American publicist who worked with Bill Clinton during the Monica Lewinsky affair. He had invited Spalding and family over to celebrate Spalding's 60th birthday but died two weeks before they arrived. His wife asked them to come anyway, They were only two days there when the accident happened. Built in 1866 Spalding says the stone manor reminded him of the isolated hotel in "The Shining", the Stanley Kubrick movie starring Jack Nicholson. The woods around he describes as "Harry Potter" woods. I spoke to an employee of Grouse Lodge which is part of the same estate. They confirmed to me that Spalding did stay at Coolatore House in June 2001 when it was owned by John Scanlon. Grouse Lodge now has a recording studio and a residence for artists to stay in. It is across the road from Coolatore House and was falling down when it was taken over by Paddy Dunning in 2002 and turned into a recording studio. Michael Jackson and REM have stayed there.

No one working at Grouse today remembers Spalding's stay, as Coolatore passed into new ownership after John Scanlon’s widow returned to America, and all the staff working there, in Grouse Lodge, in Bishopstown and on the farms are new. Coolatore house has been altered and renovated since Spalding’s stay so chances are there would be few reminders of his time there. The house is not open to the public out of respect to the privacy of the guests.

There concluded my search for Spalding Gray on the "longest day", I did not get to meet the vet or the lady who tended to Spalding. I would still like to speak to them to get their side of the story though I am aware of the sensitive nature of the subject and do not want to bring back any painful memories. Part of Spalding's art was to embellish his monologues and to be economical with the truth if it stood in the way of a good story so by the time they came to be printed they were a version of the facts if not the facts themselves. However accounts of the accident I have read from his widow Kathleen Russo concur with everything that is said in the book. He does name the vet in his account though I can't believe this is his real name as Spalding sued him for damages when he returned to America. The Garda records of the accident are only open to family or insurance solicitors. The same with Spalding's medical records so without the permission of his family we may never know if his critical account of his time in Irish hospitals and the incredible stories he told are exactly what happened. Joe Duffy in his interview in 2002 asks Spalding if he was a "difficult patient" to which he replies he "wasn't bad". Under the circumstances I think he was excellent, there is a lot of humor in "Life Interrupted" and though some of the Irish who cross his path are the butt of his jokes there is a great understanding there too and empathy. Life Interrupted is subtitled "The Unfinished Monologue" for me the mystery of the accident remains the same. Unfinished.

July 2010