Dear father

Dublin, New Year's Day 1972

Behind the bedroom door you are sleeping, I can hear your snores rattling down the stairs to our ruined sitting room. Here among the broken chairs, the overturned Christmas tree, we are preparing to leave you. We are breaking away from you, Da.

Last night you crashed through the silence, dead drunk and spinning in your own wild orbit into another year of dreams. This would be the year of the big break - of Hollywood, you said. Oh my actor father, time was, time was, we swallowed those lines - but no longer.

Before leaving I look into the bedroom to where your hand droops out from under the covers, below it the small empty Powers' bottle, and I say goodbye.

And at seven o'clock on New Year's Day we push the old Ford Anglia down the driveway - my mother, brother and I. We push because the engine might wake you, and none of us can face a farewell scene. I don't know what the neighbours think, if anything, when they see a woman and two small boys stealing away in the grey morning, but I don't care, we're heading south with everything we own.

The day I turned 12, which was four days later, you called to say Happy Birthday. You were, as I remember, half-way sober, but you didn't say much else, except to ask for my mother, who would not come to the phone.

In the background I could hear glasses clinking, voices raised, and you said: "Tell her I love her," and then the change ran out, and I began to understand what made love the saddest word in any language.

Christmas that year and you had access to the children. We met in Cork station. I remember your new suit, your embarrassed embrace, the money you pressed into our hands, and the smell of whisky. We found a taxi and the driver stared at us, throwing his eyes to heaven and shaking his head.

What I see now are many such faces; the waitress at the Old Bridge Cafe where drinks were spilled; the couple who asked for an autograph and watched your shaking hand struggle to write, before they beat a mortified retreat.

And on through pubs and bookie shops to one last cafe where Elvis was crooning, "Love Me Tender, Love Me Sweet," on an ancient radio, by now, nobody able to speak.

There was a taxi ride home, we children in the back, you in the front, and what lives with me still, always, is the moment of leave taking, Christmas 1972. Because as the car drove you away from our lives I saw through the steamed-up windows that your eyes had become waterfalls.

I was too young to understand what you knew - we were lost to you, broken away. Down the years we struggled to find one another, but I was growing up and away, and you were drifting closer to darkness. And at the end I gave up writing, gave up calling. I gave up.

Until one night my cousin called to say you were gone. It was a few days after Christmas, and your heart simply gave up in a small room in the town in north Kerry where you were born. I remember that you sent me the collected stories of Raymond Carver for Christmas. I had sent you nothing, not even a card. Now I would send you a thousand but I have no address.

Fergal

My dear son

Hong Kong: It is six o'clock in the morning. You are asleep, cradled in my left arm, and I am learning the art of one-handed typing. Your mother, more tired, yet more happy than I've ever known her, is sound asleep in the room next door. Since you've arrived, days have melted into night and back again.

When you're older we'll tell you that you were born in Britain's last Asian colony in the lunar year of the pig and that when we brought you home, the staff of our apartment block gathered to wish you well. Your mother and I have wanted you and waited for you, imagined you and dreamed about you, and now that you are here, no dream can do justice to you.

We have called you Daniel Patrick. Your coming has turned me upside down and inside out. So much that seemed essential to me has, in the past few days, taken on a different colour. Like many foreign correspondents I know I have lived a life that on occasion has veered close to the edge: war zones, natural disasters, darkness in all its shapes and forms.

In a world of insecurity and ambition and ego it's easy to be drawn in, to take chances with our lives, to believe that what we do and what people say about it is reason enough to gamble with death. Now, looking at your sleeping face, inches away from me, listening to your occasional sigh and gurgle, I wonder how I could have ever thought glory and prizes and praise were sweeter than life.

And it's also true that I am pained, perhaps haunted is a better word, by the memory, suddenly so vivid now, of each suffering child I have come across on my journeys. Looking at you, the images come flooding back.

Ten-year-old Ani Mikail dying from napalm burns on a hillside in Eritrea, how his voice cried out, growing ever more faint when the wind blew dust onto his wounds.

The two brothers, Domingo and Juste in Menongue, southern Angola. Juste, three years old and blind, dying from malnutrition, being carried on 10- year-old Domingo's back. And Domingo's words to me: "He was nice before, but now he has the hunger."

There is one last memory, of Rwanda, and the churchyard of the parish of Nyarabuye, where, in a ransacked classroom, I found a mother and her three young children huddled together where they had been beaten to death. The children had died holding onto their mother, that instinct we all learn from birth and in one way or another cling to until we die.

Daniel, these memories explain some of the fierce protectiveness I feel for you, the occasional moments of blind terror when I imagine anything happening to you. But there is something more, a story from long ago that I will tell you face to face, father to son, when you are older.

It begins 35 years ago in a big city on a January morning with snow on the ground and a woman walking to hospital to have her first baby. She is in her early twenties and the city is still strange to her, bigger and noisier than the easy streets and gentle hills of her distant home. She's walking because there is no money and everything of value has been pawned to pay for the alcohol to which her husband has become addicted.

On the way a taxi driver notices her sitting exhausted and cold in the doorway of a shop and he takes her to hospital for free. Later that day she gives birth to a baby boy and just as you are to me, he is the best thing she has ever seen. Her husband comes that night and weeps with joy when he sees his son. He is truly happy. Hungover, broke, but in his own way happy, for they were both young and in love with each other, and their son.

But the cancer of alcoholism ate away at the man and he lost his family. This was not something he meant to do or wanted to happen, it just was. By the time his son had grown up, the man lived away from his family, on his own in a one-roomed flat, living and dying for the bottle. His son was too far away to hear his last words, his final breath, and all the things they might have wished to say to one another were left unspoken.

Yet, Daniel, when you let out your first powerful cry in the delivery room and I became a father, I thought of your grandfather, and, foolish though it may seem, hoped that in some way he could hear, across the infinity between the living and the dead, your proud statement of arrival. For if he could hear, he would recognise the distinct voice of the family, the sound of hope and new beginnings that you and all your innocence and freshness have brought to the world.

Fergal