

'I asked, is John going to die? And the consultant said, probably'

Renowned artist John Kelly spent 45 days in hospital when he was struck down by rare condition, and the near-death experience has left him 'seeing the world very differently', he tells Emily Hourican



Artist John Kelly and his wife Christina at home in Reen, Co Cork



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Just over two years ago, I interviewed artist and sculptor John Kelly at his home, Reen Farm, in West Cork. At the time, he was busy creating an extraordinary and beautiful memorial, the Think and Thank Garden at Reen, which is where the very first deaths from the Great Famine were recorded in 1846.

That day, in July 2018, John was excited and eloquent while talking about his career, the garden and how he intended to display a letter written by NM Cummins, a justice of the peace who risked his own career by writing to The Times on Christmas Eve 1846 describing the appalling conditions in which the people of Reen were living and dying. But John was also bothered by a number of physical symptoms that had been troubling him for some time. He had had two very bad doses of flu earlier in the year, but there were symptoms of confusion, disorientation and agitation since that weren't readily explicable, and an incident that was initially believed to have been a mini stroke.

A month after we met, John collapsed one Sunday afternoon, and spent the next 45 days in hospital, and many more months in and out. That he is alive today is thanks to the astonishing professionalism of the Cork First Responders Unit and Cork University Hospital, and a number of blessed chances. In gratitude, John is offering the proceeds of one of his paintings, Castlehaven, being sold at auction by Sotheby's.

"I don't remember from the time I got out of the car until I woke up five days later in hospital," he says at one point in our conversation. "My son Oscar was at the end of my bed and I remember putting my arm out to him, and he reached out to me..." At this point, he breaks off, tears threatening to overwhelm him. "One of the really difficult things," he says then, "and something I feel very emotional about, is that doctors I had visited before I collapsed said 'there's nothing wrong with you'. You do need to tell your story, particularly as there may be other people who experienced something of what I went through."

Ironically - or maybe not; such is often the way - John was at the height of a brilliant career just before he became ill. "I was flying, physically and internationally," he says. "In 2017 I had an exhibition in Australia of 57 Antarctic paintings from my residency at the Australian bases; this coincided with having a book published, Beyond Woop Woop. I was then nominated for a prestigious Walkley writing award in Australia, and had completed a residency at the Venice Printmaking workshop."

This, for a man whose career began as part of a working-class family in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine, Australia, his parents had emigrated from England when he was six months old (his father, the youngest son of a dairy farmer, had left Ireland for England some years before that, driven by lack of opportunity). John's father worked in a quarry for 40 years, and when John got a place in art school at Melbourne, his mother told him "we can't afford to send you there". And indeed they couldn't. Except that secretly she had entered a Win-A-Wish competition, on the back of a Pura milk carton, and she won her wish: for John to get funding for art school (his brothers and sisters each got a BMX bike).

In September 2017, John's father died, and that seemed to be the beginning of a downward health spiral. First John caught flu in Australia, where he had gone to be with his father, and then again when he returned to Ireland. He couldn't seem to shake whatever he had, but no physical cause could be found. A Dublin GP prescribed amitriptyline, an anti-depressant and anti-anxiety medication, and referred him to

a psychologist. John developed shaky hands after taking the amitriptyline, to the point that he struggled to hold a knife and fork and couldn't paint or write.

"When the Dublin GP referred me to a psychologist, I talked about my father having just died, the things that I'd been through professionally as an artist, and he summarised by saying, 'John, you need to express yourself more', and charged me €130. And I said, 'I'm an artist, I write, how can I do any more?'. That put a huge amount of self-doubt into my psyche. It was very confusing - it was confusing to me, to Christina, confusing to our relationship; it was horrible, so difficult."

His symptoms - fatigue, disorientation, mood swings, anxiety (many are consistent with long-tail Covid-19) - continued, and at one stage he was brought to hospital with a suspected stroke. "That was the first thing they looked for. But I went to a neurologist and he said, 'you've got the healthiest 53-year-old brain I've ever seen'. There was no evidence of a stroke." And yet the symptoms didn't go away.

And then, August 2018: "I'd been with Oscar at David and Patricia Puttnam's house for lunch. We had a lovely day there, and on the way back, driving the Land Rover, talking to Oscar about politics, I felt quite good. I got back, and I parked the truck and got out."

At this point, Christina, John's wife - they met on a BA flight where she was an air stewardess - takes over the story. She hadn't been to lunch with them, as she had a friend staying, a retired radiologist, who was taking drawing classes. "John got back," Christina says, "He got out and sat down at the table. I asked him 'who was there?'. He just stared at me. I asked again, and still he stared at me. I knew something was really wrong. I said to Oscar, 'I'm going to call an ambulance'. I went inside, and in the meantime, John went upstairs. Thank God Oscar followed him, because that's when the seizures started. I was on the phone to the ambulance, and Oscar called down to say his father had gone blue."

In the first of several pieces of good fortune that saved John's life, the radiologist friend "went up and put him into the recovery position and got him breathing again".

Then, in the second piece of life-saving good fortune, Christina says: "Oscar rang a friend, the friend's mother phoned a local guard, and he bleeped a local GP from Clonakilty who is a First Responder who happened to be at a football match nearby. He got to us within six minutes. He was on the scene before the ambulance."

This GP was able to say, when the ambulance arrived and proposed taking John to Bantry hospital, because it was closer, that he should be taken straight to Cork University Hospital as Bantry wouldn't have what he needed. Then, "as part of the rapid response unit, there's an extraordinary trauma doctor who lives along the route," Christina says. "From what I understand, the ambulance didn't have the drug John needed so they contacted this doctor, and the ambulance stopped in Clon and he jumped in, did what he needed to do, jumped out and off we went again. If one of those people hadn't done what they did, John wouldn't be here today."

At the hospital, a radiologist spotted micro-spots of blood on John's brain that indicated what turns out to a very rare condition, a type of vasculitis. "Even then, they didn't know what exactly it was. They put John into an induced coma for four days because he was bleeding so badly," Christina says. She and Oscar were "warned that, if he came through, he would be very, very ill for a long time".

Through it all, she says, there was the consolation of the extraordinary kindness of friends and neighbours. "Out of awful situations, lovely things happen. People could not have been kinder and more helpful. And Oscar was amazing. When the doctor said 'your husband is a very, very sick man', I was crying when she left, and my son put his arm around me, and I said 'Oh Oscar, I should be comforting you', and he said, 'Mum, I'm 17'." Here, Christina breaks down for a moment, then rallies to add: "All through it, he never ever wavered..."

John says: "I'm not a religious person, I'm agnostic. But my Jewish friends asked rabbis to say prayers for me, other friends went to Knock and said prayers for me - if you believe in the power of prayer, you can just feel it. When it was very serious, my sister Margaret flew over from Australia and helped me greatly as I improved."

Oscar had just started his Leaving Cert year at boarding school in Dublin. "You do what you've got to do," Christina says when I ask how she coped. "Oscar was in Dublin, John was in Cork; I thought, 'I've got to look after John, I've got to look after Oscar', and that's what I did." She stayed at Brú Columbanus, "an extraordinary place". "I made juices and meals for John and visited every day. The staff let me stay all day till very late. I could calm John down, I could wash him - the nurses had a ward full of people, all in dire straits, and they were so good with them all."

John spent the next 45 days in hospital. "The first month, I don't know much about it," he says. "I was interpreting things really strangely. I thought I heard these voices from behind the curtain of the next bed. I thought they were being very critical of me and Christina, and threatening. Christina assured me it was an elderly couple, with a very sick middle-aged daughter, but I didn't believe her.

"She got me out of bed, and she wheeled me around with the excuse of going to the toilet, and I looked in and there was an elderly couple with their sick child..." Again, tears are close, and Christina continues: "Somehow that broke this dream world he'd been living in, where the place was on fire and people were terrible. He then understood that some of what he saw was hallucinations. From then on he'd say to me, 'is this real? What's real now?'"

In October, John got out of hospital and was home to show Bob Geldof, who had heard of the famine memorial and wanted to visit it, around Reen Farm. But soon he was back in again, and getting sicker. "He got worse and worse," Christina says, "and one day in March the consultant told me, 'we're doing the right thing, but John isn't reacting well'. I said, 'is he going to die?' and she said 'probably'. It was like John's brain was starting to be covered by what looked like a fine dust."

Christina even asked John if he had a last wish. "He said, 'I want to get the Think and Thank walled garden done, and promise me you'll have the NM Cummins letter laid if I don't come through this'."

After intensive international consultation, the team at CUH determined that John was allergic to a particular medication. "They swapped what they were giving him," Christina says. And, John chimes in, "three or four weeks later, I walked out of the hospital. Now I'm playing tennis, painting, living a normal life. There are still things I'd notice, but it's been an extraordinary recovery. My condition is not advancing - I'll probably have to live with it for the rest of my life - but it's in remission. I'm like so many people who have underlying conditions."

His condition was so rare that it is still not diagnosed officially, and his recovery has been miraculous. "I feel very different about life now," he says. "It's strange, what happens to your priorities. You come out of something like this and you see the world very differently. During Covid-19, my thoughts have been with the nurses and doctors. We've got to learn from the Famine, from Black '47, which was not dissimilar to what we're seeing now with Covid-19 and the right-wing politicians saying, 'we've got to get the economy going again' while people are dying. If you don't learn from history, you're condemned to repeat it."

The experience will, he says, "never be behind me, but it's further down the tracks. Does anyone ever recover from such a thing? It's up and down. But I am making art. I've lost nearly three years, and three international exhibitions I was not able to fulfil. But when I got out of hospital it was confirmed that my painting was collected into the Yale Centre for British Art, something I could only dream of as a young student on a scholarship to the Slade School of art."

Now, he says, "I want to thank everybody who saved my life through that period. I want to think about a broader humanity, and what we're going through."

Castlehaven by John Kelly will be included in the Sotheby's auction, Irish Art, including works from the Collection of Sir Michael Smurfit, London, September 9. Travelling Exhibition, Royal Hibernian Academy, August 27-30. By appointment only, complimentary tickets can be booked through Eventbrite <https://bit.ly/2ZBOyQa>