Vow *of* Silence

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Cover image: L-R: Callie (holding handbag), Joseph (in pram), Anthony (standing) and Suzanne kneeling down.

Introduction

I couldn't believe what I had just done. My sister Callie was laughing her head off but in the back of my mind I knew what I'd just done really wasn't that funny. I'd just spit on a grave. But it wasn't just any old grave. It was a mass grave – of nuns.

I was disgusted. Not with myself but with the grave, right there in front of me. It brought back so many horrific memories.

I'd decided to visit the cemetery near Dunleary, Dublin, to pay respects to my parents: William, who was affectionately known as Billy to everyone, and Ann, as well as my eldest brother Anthony, a member of the Royal Engineers, a regiment of the British Army. After laying flowers on their graves, my sister Callie and I took a slow walk through the cemetery when we came across the mass grave.

I was shocked and horrified that these nuns had been buried next to decent people. I felt it completely defiled the cemetery. Spitting on the grave had been an automatic reaction. My body just reacted to seeing a list of names that I thought were buried in my past. I had tried not to think of

them – Sister Concepta, Sister Josephine among others – and the horror they had inflicted on me and my sisters.

For my three sisters and I had been abused by these same nuns more than 50 years ago when, by a sad series of events, we were left in their care while our mother had to travel to London looking for work. We lived for four years in the orphanages of Dublin. No one knew of the horrors that happened behind the orphanage doors. I guess back then no one would've believed us anyway. Nuns being abusive? How could they? They were servants of God. They were revered and feared in equal measure by the community. But behind the doors of the church they were simply just feared by the children they ruled over. Beatings were a daily occurrence; even the babies didn't escape the cane or a lashing from the rosary beads for doing something as simple as crying or wetting their nappies. We were starved and given scraps while they feasted on hot meals, and then made to work from early morning until midnight.

The nuns might've preached to us about going to hell if we didn't behave but we were in our own hell every single day with no one to tell or turn to. We only had each other, and I think without my sisters I would never have survived.

We never told anyone what happened – certainly not our mother – after we were constantly threatened by the nuns. It was a secret we kept as children and had kept with us for more than 50 years – until the Ryan Commission was introduced by the Irish Government in 1999.

It took them 10 years to investigate what happened and many former victims came forward to give testimony

about the abuse and neglect they suffered in 60 different residential 'Reformatory and Industrial Schools' operated by the Catholic Church in Ireland. I had put my name down to testify but was never called in the end. They had so many thousands of people willing to come forward and speak about what happened that they didn't need my testimony.

At the end of the 10 years, in May 2009, the Commission published its report in five volumes, with an executive summary containing 43 conclusions and 20 recommendations. They said:

Overall: Physical and emotional abuse and neglect were features of the institutions. Sexual abuse occurred in many of them, particularly boys' institutions. Schools were run in a severe, regimented manner that imposed unreasonable and oppressive discipline on children and even on staff.

Physical abuse. The Reformatory and Industrial Schools depended on rigid control by means of severe corporal punishment and the fear of such punishment. A climate of fear, created by pervasive, excessive and arbitrary punishment, permeated most of the institutions and all those run for boys. Children lived with the daily terror of not knowing where the next beating was coming from.

Neglect. Poor standards of physical care were reported by most male and female complainants. Children were frequently hungry and food was inadequate, inedible and badly prepared in many schools. Accommodation was cold, sparse and bleak. Sanitary provision was primitive in most boys' schools and general hygiene facilities were poor.

Emotional abuse. Witnesses spoke of being belittled and ridiculed on a daily basis. Private matters such as bodily functions and personal hygiene were used as opportunities for degradation and humiliation. Personal and family denigration was widespread. There was constant criticism and verbal abuse and children were told they were worthless.

Reading the report at the time was like reliving it all over again. All the memories came rushing back. But even then I was still reluctant to tell anyone what had happened. I was still ashamed of what I'd been through, what my sisters had been through. It's not something you can just chat to someone about over a dinner party.

But finally, after seeing the nuns' grave, something in me snapped. I wanted the world to know what had happened. I wanted to shout from the rooftops what these awful women had done. They had been given these children to look after and care for but they had abused that right and privilege. But more than that, they had abused their position with God. And I so badly wanted them to pay for it the way I've paid over the years. And I've paid for it dearly with my health and throughout my life. I have Crohn's Disease and have suffered five heart attacks over the years. Once when I was in the hospital I had the Last Rites read to me twice. The doctors believe a major contributing factor is the neglect and malnutrition I suffered as a child. I believe it's all down to eating scraps every day and not being allowed to eat fresh fruit or vegetables or even meat, even though one of the orphanages had an orchard and another had a chicken farm.

All of those nuns are long dead now but the memory of what they did still lingers. It will never go away. But I hope that by telling my story it will help other victims come to terms with what happened and, hopefully, for me, finally lay some ghosts to rest.

Some names have been changed to protect not only the innocent but also the evil.

Chapter One

I will never forget the feeling of absolute terror, then the sick feeling of apprehension as I stood in the parlour of the orphanage facing the big wooden door.

Just moments earlier my mammy had said goodbye and walked away, out of the door and out of our lives. None of us can remember anything about the actual journey from home or our arrival at the orphanage in 1958, not even the parting from our mother. I don't know if she kissed us goodbye or what her parting words were. We must have been in shock since it was surely one of the most momentous events ever to have happened in our young lives.

Everything before and after that point is clear in my mind though, even after 50-odd years, so it's not the passage of time that has made us forget but most probably the stress of the preceding few months. The ordeal of leaving our family and home was more than I and my two young sisters could cope with. Imelda can't even remember being in that institution at all. She has completely suppressed the traumatic memories.

But right at that moment as I stood in front of that door, I was trying not to cry. I wanted to be strong for my younger sisters Sinead and Imelda, who were each clutching one of my hands tightly.

We had no idea when we would see Mammy again. She was going to London to try to find work so we could all be together again. My daddy had recently passed away from cancer and Mammy couldn't afford to keep the house together and feed me, my three sisters and two brothers without a job. And she couldn't get a job in Ireland, a single mother with six mouths to feed in the 1950s. The only place she could work as a secretary to earn money was across the water in London.

So here we were. In the Catholic Church-run orphanage St Vincent's in Dublin, staring at a big wooden door, not knowing what or who was behind it. We were rooted to the spot, fixated on the highly polished brass doorknob as we waited for it to turn, fearful of what lay on the other side.

Our bodies tensed at the sound of approaching footsteps click-clicking importantly along the bare floorboards. My terrified little sisters, who were just five and seven years old, grasped my hands even tighter and desperately tried to hide behind me as the person paused momentarily outside.

I was only ten years old myself but in that moment, I became the adult. The one comforting object in the room for my terrified sisters. So I couldn't show fear. I didn't want them to see that I was just as frightened as they were. They were looking up to me now to be the big brave sister. So, I bent down to Sinead and Imelda and whispered, "It's going to be alright, you'll see."

Usually the job of brave sister was taken by our older sister Callie, but she hadn't come with us to St Vincent's right then; she was staying at home with Mammy for a little while longer to help with the task of packing up the house, and also as a comfort for her until she left for London within a few short weeks. She would join us later.

So we three felt so alone, totally bewildered and lost. We stood transfixed for a moment, almost without breathing. Even though we had been expecting it, we were startled when the door was thrust open and an intimidating-looking nun appeared. Completely filling the doorway, the enormous white starched headdress and long black robes accentuating her height, she looked like a giant, monstrous penguin and seemed just as terrifying. Sinead blurted out, "Who is that? I'm scared," while Imelda simply made a whimpering noise. I was so transfixed by the sight in front of me, I couldn't get any words out. I don't know what kind of welcome we had been expecting but we weren't too surprised when she just gave us a cursory glance and then, without even a smile or any welcoming words, raised her hand and imperiously beckoned us: "Come with me." Turning with a swish of her robes and clank of the rosary beads hanging from her waist, she strode through the doorway.

I had to pull on Sinead and Imelda's hands as they were rooted to the spot. Again I bent down to whisper as I didn't want the nun to hear me. "It's going to be okay, don't be afraid, she's just a big silly penguin," I told the little ones. They both giggled before clapping their hands over their mouths, afraid they'd made too much noise.

Of course their giggles were an immediate threat. The nun spun round, glaring at us. There were no kind words, no sympathetic caresses or even affectionate looks. We'd just been separated from our mammy for the first time in our lives but it was all 'business as usual' for the nuns. If she had any emotions, they were being well hidden under her veil. But even though those first few moments alone were scary and desolate, we had no idea of what lay in store for us over the next four years. Entering an alien world expecting to be cared for, instead we were to be abused and exploited by the representatives of the Catholic Church. Their doctrine of love for their fellow men didn't extend to the pitiful little souls in their care, as we were very soon to discover. Our crime, and that of most of the other children in the institution, was that we were fatherless and vulnerable – in other words: perfect victims.

The orphanage and Catholic Church dominated and dictated the lives of the mainly poor, working-class people of the district. It wasn't long after the end of the Second World War when jobs were very scarce everywhere in Europe, especially so because of the millions of soldiers that had returned from the war seeking work. Competition for jobs was extremely fierce. The majority of families in the locality were Catholic and extremely large, as women were expected to continue giving birth as long as they were able, no matter whether they were capable of doing so either physically or financially.

Because of this the orphanages in the 1950s and 1960s were filled with local children, just like us. It wasn't unusual for the children to still have a parent alive, trying to earn some

money and savings so they could unite the family back together again. It was a sad but not uncommon state of affairs. Of course, we didn't know this at our age. All we knew was that Mammy was going away and we had been separated from her and our brothers Anthony and Joseph, who had been taken to an orphanage especially for boys.

There was only one thing we could do. Still holding hands, we reluctantly followed the nun's black robes across the threshold to begin our new life as 'orphans'.

Chapter Two

We weren't complete novices in the art of institutional living, however. Just four years earlier, in 1954, when I was six years old, we had gone through the distress and upheaval of our mother's nervous breakdown, which had led to us spending time in various children's group homes in Dublin.

During the months that Mammy was hospitalised in the sanatorium, Daddy must have had his work cut out trying to juggle everything. As well as working full time at the Guinness Brewery in St James' Gate, alongside the River Liffey in the centre of Dublin, he made frequent trips to the hospital to visit Mammy and to both children's homes in different parts of Dublin to see all six of us children. My eldest sister Callie and I, along with our two brothers Anthony and Joseph, spent a few months in a group home called Linden, which catered for both boys and girls.

The two youngest girls, Sinead and Imelda, who were just babies then, had been placed in another home for toddlers and young babies located in a different part of Dublin. This home was called *Tír na nÓg* (*Gaelic* for 'Land of the Ever-Young')

after the mythical land of the Irish fairies. In Irish mythology, time stood still in *Tír na nÓg*; one never grew old, the climate was always temperate and there was no sorrow or pain. It was an enchanted place, full of love, where the inhabitants sang, danced and feasted all day.

Linden, on the other hand, was anything but an enchanted place. The building was entirely functional and included a refectory for the children's meals, dormitories, classrooms, offices and a hospital ward. Wintry grey skies and the stark leafless trees in the grounds didn't help to improve its appearance. Bone-chilling winds whistled through our clothing as we played in the gardens under rain-laden skies, penned in by high red brick walls and huge wrought-iron gates. Although the bitter cold made our ears sting, teeth chatter and fingertips numb, we were glad to be able to escape from the staff and the strict routine for even a short while.

Being only six years old at the time, I don't remember much about my time at Linden. I don't recall the names of the staff or the other children, but I can recall many of the incidents that happened during our short stay there. There is one person I remember but only because of what happened afterwards: Mrs O'Riley was her name. She later became a victim of Nurse Mamie Cadden, an infamous back-street abortionist operating in Dublin at that time. Mrs O'Riley was left dying at the side of the road when her abortion went wrong. She had been living in Linden with her children while her husband was working abroad and became pregnant by another man. The trial of Nurse Cadden made headline news. She was sentenced to

death, which was commuted to life imprisonment, and she later died in an insane asylum.

The horrible institutional food was utterly unforgettable. Once, I was made to sit alone at the dining table all afternoon in front of a dish of cold, slimy, lumpy tapioca that we had christened 'frog's eyes'.

I'd made fun of the 'frog's eyes' in front of all the other girls. The dishes had been put down in front of us and straight away I used my spoon to scoop out a big serving of this lumpy, slimy slop and turned to Callie, thrust the spoon at her and imitated a frog. "Ribbit, ribbit," I mimicked from the back of my throat as Callie burst out laughing along with the rest of the girls at the table. Of course, no one in charge found it funny, especially when they ordered me to eat my 'frog's eyes' and I refused. There was no way that sludge was going in my stomach!

The staff didn't know just how stubborn I could be when they forbade me to leave the table until I had finished every single bite. I sat there with my lips clamped firmly shut despite threats of dire punishment. They would have had to break my teeth to force any of that glutinous mess past my lips. After a couple of hours I won the battle of wills: they gave up the unequal struggle and sent me back to class, with the dish of cold tapioca pudding still lying congealed and uneaten on the table.

It might've been a small insignificant defeat for the staff but for a six year old it was a momentous occasion – a victory! It's something that I even remember to this day with great satisfaction.

On one of his visits, Daddy brought us some sweet juicy oranges. Callie and I were in awe, turning them over and over in our hands, but the minute Daddy left, someone appeared, snatched them from us and said, "Give them here, no snacks allowed but I'll make sure you get them with your lunch. We'll share them out."

We didn't mind sharing with the other girls but once the oranges were out of our sight, of course we never saw them again. Strange as it may seem now, oranges were an exotic fruit in Europe in 1954 as they, along with bananas, had been in very short supply during the grey, austere years of the Second World War.

During those six years of war in Europe, German U-boat submarines sank hundreds of ships carrying essential supplies, which led to severe shortages in the war-torn countries of Europe and the rationing of almost everything. It wasn't until the mid-1950s that rationing came to an end and even basic goods were freely available again in the stores, so even though oranges and other fruit were on shelves, they were still seen as a treat in our house and we were heartbroken when those oranges disappeared.

I've had a myriad of health issues over the years, all tied in with the malnutrition and the time I spent in the orphanages. And even during the short time we were in the children's homes, I regularly fell ill. Developing big red styes on my swollen eyelids was a particularly painful memory for me. These styes were treated with eye drops by members of the staff, some of whom were rougher than the others in their application; one held my

head in such a vice-like grip that I'm surprised she didn't pull my head off. I can still feel it now. Then, as if things weren't bad enough, I also developed a fungus called 'ringworm' on the top of my head. They had to cut away the hair around it, leaving a bald patch so the air could get to my scalp. Then to top it all, I got extremely painful, pus-filled boils called 'whitlows' around my fingernails. What a pitiful sight I must have looked with my half-closed eyes, scabby head and throbbing fingers.

This was the main reason why I was sent to the hospital ward to attend lessons with the sick and disabled children who lived in the home. It was a strange sight to see the other pupils laid out in rows of beds with the teacher standing in front of a blackboard at the top of the ward. As I was the only able-bodied child there (although I was not actually disabled, in another sense, with all my ailments, maybe I wasn't what you would call completely able-bodied) I sat on a chair in the middle aisle between the beds facing the teacher. Perhaps I was in quarantine, who knows? The only question being: where did I acquire all the infections from in the first place? Nobody in authority could – or would – answer that question!

It's hard to describe the mixed emotions we felt when Mammy came to visit us in Linden shortly before her formal release from the sanatorium. Although it had only been about six months or so since we had seen her, I felt a bit shy in her company. She seemed remote somehow, a bit like a stranger really. This was possibly because she was wearing sunglasses and smoking a cigarette in a long holder. I had always thought she was beautiful but now she looked extremely glamorous too,

with her white trench coat and jet-black hair, just like a movie star, or even a spy, and so stunning.

Mammy didn't inhale the smoke, though; she just puffed at the cigarette and blew out clouds of smoke, a bit like Marlene Dietrich in the movies. In the early 1950s, part of her medical therapy had been an introduction to cigarette smoking, along with electric shock treatment, something that is now considered outrageous and barbaric in these more enlightened and health-conscious times. Once she took off her sunglasses and hugged and kissed us, the strangeness disappeared and she became our Mammy again.

All this had happened a couple of years previously and our lives had since returned to comparative normality. 'Normal' was something we had taken for granted once and probably would again in the future when the insecurity of our experience, if not exactly forgotten, had become more of a distant memory. I sometimes think our time in that place might also have implanted a small seed of cynicism in my soul. Up until then it had never occurred to me that there might be some adults who didn't like children and could be vicious and nasty for no apparent reason. It was also the first time we had been so dominated by figures of authority in such a closed community.

Now, though, we were home again, and all was right in our little world… but sadly not for long.

Chapter Three

Our home was in the leafy Dublin suburb of Clontarf, just a few minutes' walk from the seafront at the Bull Wall, an island at Dollymount. The beach was nearly two miles long with beautiful white sands and hilly grass-spiked dunes.

In the summer it was a haven for the poor people from the city slums. Families spent long summer days on the beach relaxing from the stresses and strains of their lives; the mothers boiled billycans over open fires to make tea and cook the crabs the men caught in the rock pools alongside the sea wall, while the children played in the sea and built sandcastles on the beach.

I look back with fondness at our picnics on the beach, eating sandy jelly sandwiches and sipping from a shared bottle of soda. Callie pretended to swim by moving through the foamy waves with her hands on the sea bottom. Back then, I didn't realise it was sleight of hand and was very impressed by her swimming ability.

Surrounded by fields and woods, Clontarf was a perfect place for families with children; you wouldn't have guessed that we were only about 15 minutes' journey by car from

Dublin city centre. Our house bordered the massive St Anne's Estate just across the dusty lane at the back of our house. All this land, consisting of approximately 250 acres, was our playground. It had once belonged to members of the Guinness brewing dynasty who had lived in the white mansion at the top of the long tree-lined drive. This was later demolished because of fire damage, after which the Guinness family sold the land to the City of Dublin in 1939. The grounds of the estate later became a public park that stretched all the way down to the seafront at Bull Island Nature Reserve overlooking the horseshoe-shaped Dublin Bay.

We knew everybody for miles around and were on first-name terms with lots of people, both children and adults. It was a very sociable, carefree life. Along with our vast army of friends, we organised sports days in the fields of St Anne's Estate and played tennis at Eason's tennis club on Mount Prospect Avenue even though we didn't know the rules of the game but made up our own as we went along.

Some summers, families of tinkers – Irish gypsies or travellers – made their camp in the fields. They had hordes of unkempt children and their horses and dogs roamed unfettered around the fields. The tinkers' shelters were made from bits of tarpaulin thrown over the bushes and they lit fires at the entrances to cook their food and to keep warm at night. Blackened pots of water swung from wooden branches arranged over the fires.

To supplement their food, the men made traps and caught some of the numerous hares that ran freely among the grassy mounds before disappearing down the numerous burrows that

dotted the fields. The men called at all the houses to ask the housewives if they wanted their kitchen knives sharpened, and the gypsy women, with babies in their arms and small children clinging to their skirts, tried to sell us 'lucky heather'.

After a while, just when we had got used to their presence in the fields, they disappeared like phantoms in the night. The only visible reminders of their existence were the piles of garbage they left behind.

On summer evenings Callie and I eagerly waited outside the tennis clubhouse to see the big girls arrive for the weekly dances so we could admire their beautiful dresses. Big flouncy skirts and stiletto heels were fashionable then. We stood, agog, outside the clubhouse watching as the girls danced the jive and bopped around as their ponytails swung and their skirts bounced. Though we longed to be like them it wasn't our time as we were destined to be 1960s teenagers.

But oh how we longed! I would memorise the steps as the girls whirled round and round the room. We watched the dancing, standing on tiptoes so we could peer through the windows, until someone came out and shooed us off home. They would tell us: "You youngsters shouldn't be out at this time of the night. Be off home with you now." We did as we were told but were back again the next week with our noses pressed against the window. Callie practised the jive with her friends and sometimes co-opted a protesting Anthony into being her partner to dance the boy's part, while I would lie in bed at night and imagine it was me jiving and bopping around the dance floor. I didn't need a partner, it was just me, flying light as a feather with nothing to hold me down!

Chapter Three

When I was about eight, some new houses were built at the top of our road. We were fascinated by all the activity and spent hours sitting on a pile of bricks watching the builders work and asking endless questions. One bricklayer was nicknamed Curly because he was completely bald. He was so friendly and patient and always welcomed our company. We marvelled at his ability to carry big loads of bricks over his shoulder in his wooden brick hod and greatly admired his skill at bricklaying. The boys envied his muscles and tried to flex their own non-existent ones. Curly loved having such an appreciative audience and played to the gallery. At the end of the day, if we were still there, he would give us a lift home in the wheelbarrow. He'd tell us, "Hop in!" and we took turns hopping in and out along the way.

An old white-haired night watchman called Ned, who could have been any age but must have been somewhere between 60 and 80, set up home in the builders' tent when the building site closed for the day. I wouldn't image that he would have made much of a watchman, as he couldn't run very fast if he had to chase burglars because he was so old and rickety. Every evening he lit a great big blazing fire and boiled his billycan to make tea. Later he stoked up the fire with lots of wood for extra warmth in the chilly small hours of the night.

When we finished our dinner, we older children told our mothers that we were going to say hello to old Ned, who was just like a grandfather to us. We joined him around his fire for a singsong of Irish rebel songs and sang our little hearts out. Two of my favourites were "The Wild Colonial Boy" and "Danny Boy".

At eight o'clock on the dot, our mothers would call us home and we obeyed, protesting that we were not tired enough for sleep during the light summer evenings.

"But, Mammy, we're not at all tired," we would protest.

"Don't 'But Mammy me'. You're almost asleep on your feet. You're so tired you'd sleep on a harrow," Mammy would tell us. Of course, she was right: we were usually asleep as soon as our heads touched the pillows.

Charlie the Ice-Cream Man was one of the summer attractions we most looked forward to and was one of the highlights of our day. Charlie was a well-known local character who pedalled around the district selling ice cream and candy from a big container on the front of his bike. His pedalling powered some kind of generator that kept the ice cream frozen. On hot days we would see him coming up the road furiously pinging the bell on his bicycle, while his face turned bright red from the effort and he sweated profusely from the combined effects of the heat and the cycling.

At the sound of his bell pinging in the distance as he made his way laboriously along the road, children would appear from all directions and dash into the houses.

"Quick, quick, Mammy, Charlie's here. Please can we have some money?" we'd beg. Mammy would dole out a few pennies. We grabbed the money from her outstretched hand and ran out the door. "Make sure everyone gets a share," she shouted after us.

We sprinted up the road after Charlie with our pennies clutched tightly in our hands. Sometimes we bought 'lucky bags'

which he had made up himself. If we were lucky they contained more than just a few candies: some of them might contain a little toy as well and that was how they got their name. The older boys would try to distract Charlie while Paddy Fagin (whose family later won a fortune on the Irish Hospitals Sweepstake – the forerunner of today's big state lotteries) and his friend, Spud Murphy, tried to steal a few candies. Charlie was always too quick for them, though.

"I know what you're up to behind my back sonny, don't think you can get away with it," Charlie would say.

They all laughed because they knew it was just a game and they would try again the next time. On the odd occasion they were successful, but not very often because Charlie was just too sharp for them: "I've got eyes in the back of me head, so I have, sonny. I know all your tricks, so don't think you can outfox me."

Chapter Four

The area was full of young families and almost every one had, at the very least, a couple or more children, except for the Protestant families who didn't seem to produce nearly as many babies as the Catholics.

Europe's baby assembly line was in full production in an effort to replenish the populations recently decimated by the Second World War. Ireland was doing more than its fair share for the cause even though it had remained neutral during the conflict and hadn't lost even a fraction of the number of people that other European countries had.

Parts of Europe lived under the yoke of the Catholic Church. Ireland and Italy, in particular, were staunchly Catholic, so there was no problem when it came to producing lots of babies, either wanted or unwanted, to fill the churches on Sundays.

Our family of six children wasn't even considered large in that context. There was one family just up the road who had 18 children, something that wasn't unusual or remarkable in Ireland at that time. Artificial birth control, such as today's freely available birth control pill, just didn't exist then. The Catholic

Church was one of the controlling forces in Ireland and it was the Church to which the politicians deferred. Catholic doctrine preached that it was a member's divine duty to God to procreate and contraception was a sin.

The reality of this policy was that sex became either a case of abstinence or the production of ever more unwanted children, sometimes leading to back-street abortions when people became desperate. Most people obeyed the Pope's edict without question, whether they could afford to feed, clothe and educate a large family or not, and unfortunately most of them couldn't.

Still, what did it matter to the Catholic Church – they always had a full congregation in the church on Sundays to pay their dues both in cash and kind. They also had a ready supply of pupils for their schools, which were subsidised by the government; so the more pupils the better, as each one meant extra money for the Church.

Our house had nothing much to distinguish it from the many others in our neighbourhood, but it was a great achievement for our parents to have a house in the suburbs along with a mortgage.

As was the case in most suburban houses, the sitting room at the front of the house was reserved for more formal occasions. The room most used was the comfortable combined family room and dining room with polished wooden floors and flowery wallpaper. A big dining table stood in the middle of the room and the window looked on to the garden framed by the trees in the wood just over the unmade lane. An old wooden clock ticked away on the mantle shelf over the open coal fire

and a framed print of Frans Hals' painting of the 'Laughing Cavalier' looked down at us from the wall.

There was a big sideboard along one wall that the boys used as a stagecoach when they played their games of Cowboys and Indians, with Anthony sitting on top as the driver and Joseph the Cowboy sitting in the bottom section firing his guns at the chasing Indians. We girls were the Indians, of course.

I wasn't interested in playing their game and Mammy would try to persuade me: "Go on, please do it for me, Suzy, so I can get on with things." I'd finally relent and agree to play: "Okay Mammy, but just this once, I don't like playing stupid Cowboys and Indians and I want to read my book."

In the evenings Daddy helped us with our homework while we all sat around the big table. Anthony and Daddy both loved maths and spent long hours together doing equations. Curly-haired Anthony was very clever and studious but with a quiet, laid-back sense of humour. His great ambition was to go to university. He was very witty and loved to tease us and play pranks, especially on Imelda and Sinead, who fell for his tricks every time.

Although there was an eighteen-month age difference between them, Sinead and Imelda looked almost like twins, both dark-haired and blue-eyed and nearly the same size. Sinead was the younger of the two but the more dominant one. They played together all the time and were constantly bickering over their toys. In fact, they quarrelled over everything and anything.

Sinead had been born feisty. When she was a baby she would stand up in her crib, scream, defiantly grab the side rails and rock it across the floorboards to bang her head against the

wall in a fierce temper because she didn't want to go to sleep. The Irish saying for her was, "That one suffers from a double dose of original sin," meaning she was double trouble. That certainly proved to be the case; she was always defiant and usually in some sort of trouble – a real hothead!

Anthony loved to make fun of Sinead and Imelda. When Sinead's legs got sunburned, he called her "old beetroot legs". Outraged, she went to find Mammy to complain: "Mammy, that Anthony's a very bad boy. He called me 'leetloot legs'." Mammy was bemused: "Leetloot legs? What?" Exasperated Sinead repeated it: "You know, leetloot legs."

Mammy had to ask him, "Anthony, what's she talking about? What did you call her?" And she was left laughing when Anthony told her he'd actually said: "Beetroot legs". Then we all fell about laughing together and Sinead stomped out of the room in a temper. Meanwhile Leetloot Legs became her nickname for a while, a moniker that she hated.

Imelda, by contrast, was the 'good girl'. She always did as she was told and tried to please everybody. Her only vice was that she loved anything sweet, especially chocolate. Imelda was always the first suspect if any of our candy went missing or the cookie jar was empty. We usually didn't have far to look for the culprit, although sometimes it could be said that she was unfairly blamed, being the immediate suspect even when it wasn't her fault; some people were known to take advantage of that fact!

When we were all in bed, and hopefully asleep for the rest of the night, Mammy and Daddy relaxed and listened to the wireless on a small table beside Daddy's armchair. On the

other side of the fireplace Mammy had her own armchair and a bookcase filled with her much-loved and well-read collection of books and poetry.

This was in the pre-television years as the technology had only recently been invented and financially was out of reach of most people anyway, our family certainly. Only the rich could afford them, and it would be quite a few years yet till it became generally available and affordable for the general population.

This meant we made our own entertainment and spent hours outside making up stories and playing in the woods. We had our own special tree that we nicknamed the Crow's Nest. It was our favourite tree because it was small enough to manoeuvre our way up through the branches which spread out in such a way that it was easy for us to climb. Sitting on top of it, we could see the ships sailing into Dublin Bay, heading up the River Liffey to tie up beside the quays to unload their cargos.

We were also extremely proud of the fact that our family home stood on the site of the historic Battle of Clontarf, which took place on Good Friday in the year 1014, when Brian Boru, the legendary warrior and last High King of Ireland, was victorious over the invading Danish Vikings. Shortly after winning the battle against the invaders, some stray Norsemen who were fleeing the battlefield stumbled upon his tent and killed Brian and his guards.

It wasn't difficult to imagine that in the distant past other people might have sat on top of our Crow's Nest to spy on the Viking ships sailing into Dublin Bay and beaching their longships on the strand at Clontarf.

Chapter Four

Like most children, we had wild imaginations and would spend hours concocting and then acting out our made-up stories while then having the freedom to play outside and in the woods. Little did we know that soon that freedom we took for granted would be cruelly taken away through forces beyond our imagination or control.

Chapter Five

It was just another lazy Sunday afternoon. Without warning, a great commotion erupted from the kitchen. Imelda ran into the hall, quickly followed by Sinead and Joseph. They looked as guilty as hell. What had they been up to this time? Mammy appeared in the doorway, looking hot and harassed: "I can't do anything with all of you in here. Go out and play or do something, but just give me some peace and quiet."

She looked imploringly at Daddy: "Billy, will you get these children from under my feet for a while so I can cook the dinner without constant interruptions." Daddy put his paper down: "Who wants to come for a walk?" "Me," said Joseph. "Me," Sinead shouted, echoed by Imelda.

Sinead and Imelda ran out of the back door in a state of great excitement. It was what Mammy called their "mad half-hour" when they needed to let off steam as they were so full of energy that they usually got into mischief of some sort or the other. This usually happened on Sunday afternoons without fail, for some reason that nobody could fathom.

"Ann, what time do you want us back?" Daddy called. Mammy put her head around the door with a look of relief on her face: "About an hour. That should be plenty, thanks."

We all began scrambling around to find shoes and coats. I hated wearing shoes; as usual, they had gone missing and I was looking for them but struggling to find where I had last discarded them. Eventually I found them, randomly thrown under the dining table.

Daddy leaned down from his six-foot height to help me tie my shoelaces. He and I looked most alike out of all the family. The other girls took after Mammy with their dark Celtic looks, whereas Daddy and I had blonde hair, probably inherited from some Viking ancestor. Both boys had brown hair, midway between the dark Celtic and blonde Scandinavian.

"You'd lose your head if it wasn't attached to your shoulders," Daddy laughed. I giggled, grabbed hold of his hand and smiled up at him: "Please take us to St Anne's, Daddy." He smiled and tenderly stroked my head, telling me, "Anywhere you want, Suzy."

It wasn't difficult for me to get my own way. Apart from my blonde curls, big blue eyes and angelic looks, I was a little shy but this only seemed to enhance my appeal. I could usually get away with blue murder as nobody thought I could ever do anything wrong. Old women, complete strangers, were always giving me candies and money. They would say, "You're such a little dote, so you are." A 'dot' is an Irish expression meaning 'a lovely little thing'.

I shouted to Mammy as I dashed past the kitchen door, "Bye Mammy, see you later." She called back, "Bye Suzy, have a good time."

The two girls and Joseph were already at the top of the garden. I quickly caught up with them. Joseph was standing on the railings of the gate swinging it back and forth. He was nearly eight now and a bit small for his age, probably on account of his asthma, the debilitating respiratory condition he had had since babyhood. The rusty hinges of the gate squeaked as he swung back and forth. Sinead wanted to climb on the gate too but he wouldn't stop to let her on. She was getting really angry. Her little face was contorted in fury as she shouted at Joseph, "You horrible boy. If you don't let me on I'll tell Daddy."

But Joseph wasn't intimidated by her threat and swung even harder while Imelda and I stood and watched the entertainment. "Daddy said we could go to St. Anne's," I told her. At that moment Callie came up the path behind us followed by Daddy. Her long black curly hair tumbled around her shoulders. She looked like a smaller version of Mammy and was just as beautiful.

"Get off that gate before you fall and hurt yourself," she told Joseph. She thought she could boss the rest of us just because she was the oldest, but we usually did what she told us anyway because she was a natural born leader. Joseph wriggled away from her grasp as she tried to grab hold of him and gave us a cheeky grin over his shoulder as he ran off across the dusty lane and along the path we had trodden through the long scratchy grass leading to the woods. "Don't go too far ahead. Wait for me at the ditch," Daddy warned us.

We stood behind Joseph in single file, waiting at the side of the shallow ditch while he jumped down onto the big tree branch at the bottom. From long practice, we were accomplished at

crossing the log. Balancing carefully with outstretched arms, we ran the few feet across and grabbed the bushes at the edge of the ditch as we climbed out into the cool green of the woods.

This ancient wood was one of our favourite places to play. The tops of the trees formed a canopy and through the sides the sunlit green fields stretched off into the distance as far as the eye could see. Standing amongst the trees was like being in a tunnel and the only noise was the sound of the soft wind rustling the leaves and occasionally the movement made by a small animal in the bushes.

We picked big bunches of bluebells and wild daffodils here in the spring and proudly took them home to Mammy to display in a vase. In the fall, we collected the fallen nuts from beneath the big chestnut trees and threaded them with string to play a game of conkers. Almost every day during the summer holidays we took jelly sandwiches and a bottle of water with us and spent most of the day playing in the woods and fields, climbing trees, running up and down the grassy hills. Other times we played our own version of baseball.

In later life, I found refuge in this beautiful place again but this time only in my dreams. When times were bad I would dream that I was playing here again with my brothers and sisters, once more a little child without a care in the world. It was my calm, go-to place that I kept stored for when times got tough.

Callie had nicknamed one of the hills 'Fairy Hill' because there was a fairy ring near the base. A fairy ring is a naturally occurring ring of mushrooms sometimes found in forested areas. In folklore, fairy rings are thought to be the location of gateways

into elfin kingdoms or places where elves and fairies gather and dance. We liked to imagine sometimes that we caught a glimpse of a fairy out of the corners of our eyes. All in all, it was a special place and seemed to have a magic all of its own.

Another of our favourite activities was collecting birds' eggs from their nests and sucking out the contents through pinholes at either end of the egg so as to preserve the shells without them turning bad.

We fished for tadpoles and frogspawn in the little streams that ran through the woods hoping they would hatch, but to our disappointment they never did. Sometimes we visited a farm a few miles away to watch the pigs in their sty, and would poke them with sticks when the farmer wasn't around. We also especially loved exploring St Anne's Estate, though, because there was so much to see and do.

Clutching his handfuls of pebbles, Joseph told us excitedly, "I'm going to throw stones at the dead dog in the lake to try and sink it." He ran off towards the woods bordering the long drive leading to the ruined mansion. Imelda looked at Sinead: "Race you." They sprinted after Joseph. Callie automatically shouted after them, "Don't go near the water."

I strolled along on the tufted green grass with the warm sun on my back. Although the summer was nearly over, we would still play here in the fall and winter. We especially loved it when it snowed and we made huge snowmen, rolling giant snowballs around the fields, competing to see who could make the biggest one.

Callie and Daddy strolled a little way behind me. She was 12 years old now and not so interested in our childish

games anymore. As I glanced back, the two of them were deep in conversation.

When I reached the edge of the woods, the others were waiting for us to catch up while they stopped to get their breath back. Joseph was completely out of breath and wheezing away after his run up the fields. Because it wasn't unusual for us to see him like this, we weren't at all alarmed because we knew he would get his breath back in a minute. His asthma didn't deter him from doing anything he wanted, though, and he enjoyed all the rough and tumble of most little boys his age.

On one occasion Mammy had taken him to hospital for treatment and settled him into his bed in the children's ward. She kissed him goodbye and said, "I have to go now. I'll be back tomorrow. Be sure and be good for the doctors and nurses." Joseph smiled up at her and said, "Don't worry Mammy, I'll be okay."

She fretted all the way home: "Will he be okay? I hope he won't be lonely? Still, he should be okay. There are lots of other children in the ward and he's a friendly little boy so at least he'll have company." Her conscience troubled her, though, at the thought of him all by himself in that lonely hospital bed. She hated leaving him there. She did a few errands in the city and when she arrived back home she got the surprise of her life: who should be sitting in the armchair but six-year-old Joseph with a big grin on his face.

A stunned Mammy asked him, "How did you get here?" Joseph just smiled and told her, "On the bus!" So you can imagine that this little stroll in the woods on a Sunday was

nothing to a great adventurer like Joseph, in spite of his medical condition. After a few minutes he recovered his breath.

"Look what I've got." He opened his fist to show us a handful of little stones he had collected for throwing in the water. "Give us some," demanded Sinead. But Joseph was stubborn and refused to hand any over: "No, get your own." Sinead demanded, "Where'd you get them from anyway?" Keeping them tightly in his fist, Joseph admitted, "In the back lane."

Sinead scrambled around under the trees looking for stones but there weren't any loose ones as the ground was compacted hard. She found some little twigs scattered around which she gathered up and put in her pocket before turning to Daddy who was standing nearby: "Daddy, tell Joseph to give us some of his stones." Daddy smiled down at Joseph: "Be a good boy and give your sisters some." Never one to refuse anything Daddy asked, he grudgingly handed each of us one little stone.

Joseph took off before Daddy could persuade him to part with any more, running around the edge of the lake and stopping every so often to peer into the murky water looking for the golden-haired dog. Sinead and Imelda followed him. I stood at the edge of the water and lobbed my stone into the muddy depths. It made a plop and disappeared without a trace. Sinead and Imelda followed Joseph around the lake. They reappeared from behind some shrubs with poor Joseph wheezing and gasping for breath again. He was bent forward with his hands on his knees, struggling for air.

As soon as he could talk, his little face crumpled with disappointment. He told Daddy, "The dog's not there anymore."

Daddy tried to console him: "Never mind Joseph, whoever owned it probably took it home to bury." Joseph was upset but tried not to show it too much: "But I wanted to throw stones at him and sink him."

We half-heartedly threw some more pebbles and bits of stick in the water but eventually lost interest after realising how hungry we were. I had a hollow feeling in the pit of my stomach: "I'm starving. Can we go home now Daddy?" I wasn't the only one who was hungry and looking forward to the Sunday dinner, so Daddy corralled us all to head home: "Okay Suzy. Come on everyone, we'll head home now. You three now be careful how you go and don't get too far ahead." Daddy and Callie kept us in sight all the way home, continuing their conversation as they walked along behind us at a slower pace, arms linked.

Extremely hungry now and ready for our dinner, we crashed through the back door and into the dining room; Anthony was already seated at the table holding his knife and fork, waiting for us to sit down so he could begin his meal: "You should have told me you were going for a walk. I'd have come with you."

We'd totally forgotten about Anthony as we'd all dashed out the door for our walk. "You were out and we didn't have time to look for you." Anthony crossly told us off: "Well, you could've tried. I was only up the road on my bike."

Anthony was disappointed to have missed an opportunity to go for a walk with his father, whom he adored and always followed everywhere. He was 11 and gradually becoming more and more self-sufficient. His friends now were the big boys and he played more with them these days than he did with Joseph.

Not that Joseph cared much anyway because he was very popular and had loads of friends himself. Anthony didn't like his brown curls anymore and had recently persuaded Daddy to let him have them cut off at the barbers. It made him look so much older. Callie and Anthony were great friends and spent a lot of time together when he wasn't out with the big boys. He admired her because she was so strong and fearless and a match for any boy.

As usual, Callie took charge of us as we all dove for the table: "Make sure you all wash your hands before you sit down, especially you Joseph, you're filthy. How do you always get so mucky?" Joseph grinned and went off to wash his hands. "And don't forget to wash that dirty face while you're up there," Callie added.

When we were ready, Mammy served our Sunday dinner. For a few minutes there was no sound except the contented scraping of knives and forks on plates as we polished off the food like a pack of starving hyenas.

But before long Joseph was chattering away: "Anthony, guess what?" "Let me tell him," Sinead shouted impatiently and before Joseph could get a word in, she said, "We saw some squirrels. They eat their food like this." She made little nibbling movements with her mouth. Annoyed, Joseph shouted over her, "I was talking to him first. Anthony, the dead dog isn't in the lake anymore." Callie screwed her face in revulsion: "Ugh, Daddy, tell him not to be disgusting when we're trying to eat." Daddy suppressed a smile: "That's not a nice thing to talk about at the dinner table, Joseph. You can tell Anthony all about it after dinner." "Okay Daddy," said a subdued Joseph, as he hunched

down in his chair. He soon brightened up, though and began telling us some silly jokes.

This was a typical dinner time in our household with everyone chattering away or telling jokes. When our meal was over, Daddy swallowed some tablets and lowered himself painfully into his comfortable armchair beside the fire. He gently closed his eyes and drifted off into a doze.

He got tired very easily now and spent a lot of his time dozing in the chair. One of his favourite pastimes had been swimming at the Bull Wall in the evenings and he could no longer manage to do that or even play football with the boys in the fields. Mammy put her finger to her lips: "Shhhh, be quiet and don't wake Daddy. He's not feeling too well so go off and play for a while. Callie, please help me in the kitchen."

They tiptoed out of the dining room into the kitchen and closed the door. Lately, they seemed to have lots of secret conversations that would stop when any of us came near. It was so intriguing. I wondered what they were talking about now but I couldn't hear anything with the door so firmly closed.

We weren't aware of just how serious Daddy's illness was. Leukaemia was something we had never heard of. In those days, children were very unworldly compared to now. We didn't have very much contact with the big world outside of home and school. There was no television or technology, and we got all our information from parents and schoolteachers and the church.

Most people didn't have home phones and to keep in contact with our relatives we either had to write letters or travel to see them. Besides, with Daddy it had happened so gradually

that they were able to keep it from us till almost the very end. Looking back now through adult eyes, I just don't know how we never realised what was happening.

Anyway, how could they have explained to us that he would soon be dead? We weren't really old enough to accept the concept of our father's death; very old people died but not our young father.

We didn't know then that Daddy had just a few short months left to live. Of course, we knew that he couldn't work because he was ill, but we didn't ever imagine that he was going to die. There was no inkling of the terrible tragedy that was unfolding and of the shattering events that were soon to befall us.

Within a few short months our happy little world would be torn apart. Maybe it was better we didn't know because we couldn't have done anything about it if we had. They say ignorance is bliss and we didn't know it then, but at least we had those last few months of innocence before our whole world changed forever.