

A Dress for Kathleen

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**Story
Machine**

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Heaven Is Our Home



Every family has shadow people, the ones who slipped out of the story too soon, leaving a blank space where they should have been. In my father's family that person was his sister Kathleen, who died in December 1939 at the age of fourteen. Cycling home from work on a Friday night, on a dark country road made darker by the wartime blackout, she didn't see a local farmer, Robert McCahon, making his own way home by foot. Perhaps she swerved at the last minute: he reported feeling something touch his right hand and then hearing a crash. The fall knocked her unconscious, and she was bleeding from a cut above her left eye. McCahon lifted her to the side of the road and went for help.

There was a little shop nearby at a junction of country roads known as the Cross Keys, and the shopkeeper, Lily Canning, had a car. She drove Kathleen to the nearest doctor some five miles away in the village of Swatragh, and he in turn took her to the infirmary in Magherafelt where she was admitted some time after midnight. She died in the early hours of Sunday morning without ever regaining consciousness.

I knew about Kathleen from visits to my grandparents at their home in the County Derry town of Kilrea. Not that she was talked about – not at all. But she was buried in the graveyard of St Patrick's Parish Church, just a short walk up the road from my grandparents' house. If our visits fell on a summer Sunday the Kilrea cousins would take my brother and me for a walk. The town had limited places of interest

for us youngsters: a tiny play-park tucked away beside the primary school, a gnarled fairy thorn on Church Street, kept upright by rusted iron struts, and Kathleen's grave.

The plot was marked with a modest cross and surrounded by large white pebbles of the sort you might pick up on the beach at White Park Bay thirty-odd miles away on the north Antrim coast. Kathleen was buried beside her baby sister, Ruth. (Poor Ruth is hidden even further in the shadows than Kathleen. Born in 1930, the fourth of my grandparents' children, she lived only fourteen days. Her death certificate records the cause of death as 'congenital debility'. She was born weak, in other words, and in the days before the NHS and Special Care Baby Units the odds were against her.)

I was intrigued by death, as children often are. But I had little direct experience of it, being blessed with a full quartet of long-lived grandparents. Kathleen challenged my understanding of time and family. Could I call her my aunt when she had died twenty-five years before I was even born? Both my parents had a sprawling, fecund heritage where generations of women gave twenty or thirty years of their lives to pregnancy, birth and childrearing. Dad was one of eleven children, Mum one of eight. I found it impossible to conceptualise having a sibling who was decades older or younger than me. It was still more impossible to imagine what the death of a child might do to a family.

If you go to the churchyard in Kilrea now you'll not find the simple grave with the white stones around it. A wide new grave-surround was installed – polished black granite filled with quartz chips – after my grandparents died and were buried in the same plot. It's in a beautiful spot, as graves go, shaded by a venerable copper beech.

In the years since then the grave has filled up as Kathleen, Ruth and their parents were joined by two more of the

children – Anna and Jack – both of whom managed the full span of years their sisters never saw. The black granite headstone has grown crowded with names. Engraved at its base, partly hidden by grave pots and arrangements of artificial flowers, are the words HEAVEN IS OUR HOME.

There was nothing remarkable about Kathleen's short life, but it has become for me a doorway into unexplored corners of my family's past and the world they inhabited. My father was only six years old when she died, but the memory of that bleak December remained seared in his memory, and in the collective memory of his family.

Kathleen was born in 1925, the second child of Thomas and Hannah Hutchinson. Her father had fought with the 36th Ulster Division in the First World War, and survived the carnage of the Somme. After the war he joined the police and served during the turbulent years before and after the partition of Ireland. Thomas was an intelligent but difficult man. His childhood was blighted by blinding headaches that forced him to abandon his schooling early on, and as an adult he was prone to resentments and fallings-out. No doubt his experiences of violence both as a soldier and a policeman contributed to his temperament.

It was during his time with the police that he married Hannah, a farmer's daughter, who was twelve years his junior. She had played her own part in the war effort in her early teens, working in the household of a veterinary surgeon and travelling with his family to the military training camp on Salisbury Plain where he attended to the army horses.

By the time Kathleen was born her father had settled into a job with the LMS railway company. The family lived in a railway 'gatehouse' in the townland of Drumagarner, just outside Kilrea. The gatehouse stood beside the train line that ran from Macfin Junction to Magherafelt. In 1939, at the age of fourteen, Kathleen left school and began work as a trainee typist in the offices of William Clark and Sons, a linen

manufacturer in the village of Upperlands, six miles from the gatehouse. Every day, as summer turned into autumn and rumours of war became a reality, she made the journey to and from work on her bicycle.

Ideas for ways I might explore Kathleen's life emerged slowly. I tracked down her birth certificate and death certificate, but there was little in between except two photographs and my elderly dad's memories. I thought I knew more about my grandparents, Thomas and Hannah, but when I reflected about it more deeply I realised they were nearly as mysterious to me as Kathleen was. My father's life had taken him much further away from home than might be suggested by the forty miles between Kilrea and Belfast, where we lived. We visited his parents two or three times a year, and they were shy and silent in the presence of this son who'd gone to the big city and made good. All I really knew of them were fragmentary anecdotes that had been told and retold so many times they bore little imprint of the real experiences they described. But where knowledge runs out imagination takes over, and in re-imagining Kathleen I also re-imagined Thomas and Hannah. This book is a blend of fact and fiction, and the life stories of Kathleen, Thomas and Hannah are told through glimpses of their hidden lives.

Kathleen's death left a deep wound between her parents that I suspect never really healed. Tragedy casts a long shadow, but our lives are made up of light as well as darkness. I hope I have captured both in the words that follow.

Kathleen



8th January 1925 – 17th December 1939

Night-thoughts in the Gatehouse

There's a gun buried out in the moss. Daddy won't say where.
He'd rather it was lost forever than hand it in.

The walls sweat in the winter.

The table is only big enough for three. We take turns to eat.

Daddy found an orphan fox cub. He gave it to the boys for
a pet. They kept it in a cage. It wouldn't take the food they
offered.

There's a girl at school is an only child. She says she has a
bed to herself.

I like the night before washday best. The bolster case is soft
with a week's worth of dreams.

Sometimes I think I hear a train coming. Daddy says it's
just the rails talking in their sleep.

Train Times

The first train passes by just after eight, a sign for us to finish our breakfast and get on our way to school. We walk along the train track into Kilrea. At dinnertime I find a quiet spot in the schoolyard and listen for the whistle of the midday train from Magherafelt. I think of Daddy, at work on the line or in the station. I think of Mammy, raising her head from her housework to watch from the gatehouse window until the train passes.

After school we take the long way home. It's not safe to walk on the track then, with the afternoon train coming through.

The weeks when Daddy's on gatekeeping duty I go out to help him in the evenings. The late train in wintertime is my favourite. I love standing in the pitch-black cold, waiting for it to thunder out of the darkness, its chimney a cloud-maker, its wheels spitting sparks.

Seamstress

When I was wee I thought the Moores were special people. There was always someone walking up the lane towards their house, carrying a parcel. Mammy laughed when I told her. ‘Not at all,’ she said. ‘They’re bringing their coats to Tillie Moore. They’re wanting them turned before winter.’

One day I watched Walter Tuppen pass by with a package wrapped in brown paper, and return again empty-handed. I ran up to the Moores’. Tillie was in the back room. ‘Can I see how you do it?’

‘You’ll be here a while,’ she said.

She was right. It was a slow business. She had a wee blade to unpick the stitches. First the lining came out. She hung it on the chair-back. It looked like the coat had shed its skin. And then she took the coat itself apart, seam-by-seam. I’d never thought about it before – how many parts there are to a coat.

‘Take this bit to the window,’ she said, handing me a sleeve. ‘See the difference between inside and out.’

Even unpicked, the sleeve had the shape of Walter Tuppen’s arm. The elbows were shiny and bagged with wear. Rippled creases where his elbow bent looked as if they’d been there forever. Inside, the fabric was darker, the nap lush.

‘Quality worsted,’ she said. ‘It pays to buy the best you can. He’ll get a good few years out of it yet.’

That winter I watched Walter Tuppen at church. His old coat like a new coat. All the wear and weariness hidden on the inside.

Disapprovals

Daddy has a long list of them: Baptists and Catholics, Presbyterians and Covenanters – dissenters of every stripe. Bosses and communists, sergeants and socialists. Land owners, home owners, horse owners. Long-nosed Bellingham and his holy-roller wife.

Wee Sister

Rosie Diamond sent us up the lane to Mrs Agnew. ‘Stay away till you’re sent for,’ she said. The fields were ripe with barley. Mrs Agnew was milking the cow in the byre, singing hymns to the beast like she always did. *Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness, high on his heart he will bear it for you.* I held Doreen’s hand tight.

Lily Agnew took us to see the kitten. A wee black and white tomcat. He was still with his mammy. She hissed when we came too close.

It was near dark when we lit out for home. Mrs Agnew gave Bertie a pail of milk to take with us. ‘Youse can bring the pail back the morrow,’ she said.

Daddy was standing by the fire when we got home. Mammy was up and dressed. ‘You’ve a new baby sister,’ she said. We all rushed to peer in the crib.

‘What’s her name?’ said Bertie. Mammy said she was called Ruth. She was ever so wee. Doreen looked like a giant beside her.

The baby was very quiet. She never cried. Mammy tried to nurse her. Doreen and I sang to her. *Low at his feet lay your burden of carefulness.* ‘Don’t let your daddy hear you singing that black-neb hymn,’ Mammy said. Rosie Diamond came every day to help with her. ‘I don’t think she’ll do,’ she said. Then she saw that I was listening and sent me outside.

We were sent up the lane to watch the barley being harvested. Doreen started gurning and wanted to go home, but Bertie said we’d to stay out a while longer.

When we came back the baby was gone. The crib had been put away. Daddy didn’t come home for tea. Mammy said he was away a message.

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