

## Four sisters, three aunts

### Part One

My dad had four sisters, May, Lily, Martha and Jean. No brothers. May and Lily were born just before the 1911 census, when their father, Hugh was running his coach building business in a workshop at the rear of their house on Albert Street, Ballymena. The business was failing. Few wanted a horse and carriage. The car was taking over.



Sisters Lily, Martha and Jean in Sligo in 1949

The early years of the young family were shaped by the collapse of the business, shrinking the family's life and aspirations. It appeared to have a devastating impact on Hugh. Martha, Jean, and Tommy were born after they moved into a smaller rented terrace house at 45 Princess Street. Here there were a number of families who were closely related to Hugh and Lizzie.

Hugh was a very religious man, raising his children after his own severe fashion, and was a staunch member of the Orange Order. The story goes that he spent a night in Carrickfergus gaol and walked home, after 'standing up for his faith' in defying an order to cross Harryville Bridge, most likely during an Orange Order protest against Home Rule in the early 1900s. He was a strict adherent to Sabbath Day observance and demanded the same in the household: Sunday's food preparation was carried out the previous day and there was no work or play of any kind. Sunday was for church attendance, prayer and bible study. After their parents died, and during my first years staying with them, my aunts continued this strict weekend regime.

May, the eldest got married locally and became Mrs Templeton. The wedding in Kells Presbyterian Church was at some distance from the family's home church. This was done most likely in reverence to it being at the iconic epicentre of the Ulster Revival (a religious revival in 1859) which strongly influenced May's father and grandfather. May died in 1943 not long after the birth of her first child, Maurice. Hugh and Lizzie, May's parents, felt her death was preventable and fell out irreconcilably with her husband's family; an aunt and cousin I never knew. Next, Jean married Tom Williams. Tom had been in the Military Police during the North African World War 2 campaign and was stationed in Northern Ireland at the end of that war. After marrying they moved to Lurgan, where they got a house and Tom found work. Tom was a Welshman, proud to recite the poetry of Dylan Thomas. Lily and Martha never married.

Martha and Lily doted on my brother Ivor and me. We looked like twins as they pushed us in buggies around the town, their friends stopping to admire our blond curly heads sticking out of the fur-lined hoods of our suits. Their mother Lizzie, my granny, was still alive then. I recall her as a severe woman with none of the laughter or fun of her daughters. Each of the girls had taken a trade, and probably worked for a short while in one of the town's mills. When she was in her thirties Lily was found to

have a serious heart condition and never worked outside her home again. Living as she did on the steep hill of Princess Street, neither did she walk it again. A few years later after another 'turn', her doctor advised her to move her bedroom downstairs and strictly avoid anything strenuous. Preparing the Sunday dinner on Saturdays in a small dark scullery was the extent of her work. She rarely went out, not even to church.

My brother and I fell into a pattern of spending Saturdays with Martha and Lily, at 'Princess Street' as we referred to it. This gave my mother some relief and time with our younger siblings Elaine and Nigel. At Princess Street, we were joined by my cousin Gareth after his parents returned from Lurgan when Jean wanted to be nearer her family and church.

The laneway outside the tiny backyard with its larder and toilet, dropped sharply down to a field below. It was triangle shaped. At its broad edge away from the town was a field of allotments. My father worked the family plot there before he married and continued for a few years afterwards. The field narrowed towards the town into a laneway near the Memorial Park on the Galgorm Road. We played on the unused part of the field, joining the town's children, shouting and squealing as we rolled down the bank and played various games while Saturday afternoons flashed past. The field was silent on Sundays. There we discovered the street skills of chewing bubble gum, spitting and cursing, trying them all out until hunger drove us back to the red-bricked terrace. Our highly religious aunts were mortified at the state we would often return in, but their outbursts of laughter often took any sting from their rebuke. However, I got a stunned reaction trying out the 'c' word during one of the regular Saturday evening fry ups. Uncle Tom was there and lent greater gravitas to my telling-off, although I later discovered his army background tempered his anger somewhat.

It was on a Saturday that the coalman came stooping through the front door, him blackened carrying his large sack, walking over papers on the carpeted hallway then through the living room to tip the sack into the small cubby hole under the stairs, the coal clattering into a heap. And also on a

Saturday came the rent collector, a small suited man called carrying a rent book and pencil. His coy manner was unbroken by the jokes and taunts of Lily and Martha as he stood stiffly marking off their payments. Before their mother died and against her wishes, the two sisters turned the house from its hard linoleumed dull brown tones into a carpeted home, softer and brighter, prompted by colourful images from Kay's Catalogue that was regularly perused.

Continued