

Four sisters, three aunts - Part two

Before we were old enough to go to Sunday school Martha and Lily read us Bible stories from colourful picture books. God's Heaven with white-winged angels for the saved, the horned Devil stoking his fires for sinners. And always, God watching you, knowing what you were thinking and doing. While the Ten Commandments were beyond us then, we were gathering a list of sins. And quickly got a sense of how simple it was to err under God's eye: disobedience, fibbing, fighting. Other more serious ones were later added: stealing, cursing, playing with the Devil's cards, gambling, smoking, the list got longer. They taught us the Lord's Prayer; although its nightly refrain never settled in our own house.



Lily, mother Lizzie, cousin Peggy, Jean and Aunt May, at Stranmillis Belfast c 1950

We spent some Sundays there too, flat inside days. No playing or laughter outside. A day for church and bible study. Maybe 'Songs of Praise' on TV. To Martha and Lily at that time, life appeared full of danger and risk. When hunger drove us back from the field red-faced, panting hard, with scrapes and the odd bruise we would hear dire warnings that our 'hearts might burst'. One that I particularly remember was being told that so-and-so 'got blood poisoning from a rusty nail, and watched a poison move up his arm, into his heart and killed him.' Ferocious cleaning with splashes of Dettol would follow. Inside the house there was danger too, 'You're sitting too close to the fire, you'll melt like a jelly baby.' And one that frightened me at first, after I swallowed chewing gum, 'That dirty gum it'll stick to your insides, and everything will stop working.'

While much of this apprehension must have been related to Lily's early diagnosis of heart disease, the impact of the failure of their father's coachbuilding business must also have come to bear. In later years he was said to be painfully shy, almost a recluse. My father too had an aversion to risk, unlike my mother, and was happy to let life run smoothly with no appetite for change as long as problems stayed away from his door.

Over time the influence of Martha and Lily's cautious natures was offset by experiences elsewhere. Particularly so at our grandparents' farmhouse in County Leitrim. Here farm life was a more basic struggle against the forces of nature; more precarious, with some level of jeopardy part of daily life. From a young age, we were regularly called upon to help with some farm job or other.

Halfway through my time at primary school, Martha opened a small shop on High Street. She had for some years been an agent for Kays mail-order catalogue, garnering sales from friends and neighbours. The shop sold biscuits, sweets and some basic foodstuffs. It was next to the family's first home and her father's coachbuilding workshop. For two years it was on my route home from school, and a welcome stop. Martha was generous with sweet treats.

After about ten years of shopkeeping, she applied to be postmistress of the new post office in the Ballykeel estate. There was spare floor space for a shop as well. She sold babies and children's clothes this time. Martha's sister Jean and my mother soon became involved. Small in stature, Martha didn't lack grit and resilience and in time appeared to throw off any effects of her father's timidness. She clearly was a good bookkeeper and had enough business acumen to keep both enterprises running through difficult years. During the Troubles, the post office was raided by gunmen a couple of times, but she kept going. Martha had a wicked laugh, often in response to something that went against her religious instincts.

The sisters were happy in Ballymena and had little desire to travel. The Free State was a foreign and distant place. And I am not sure if they ever understood, or even forgave, their brother for marrying a woman from County Leitrim. While my mother was a member of the Protestant Church of Ireland, among Ballymena Presbyterians the church appeared closer to the 'Church of Rome' than to their own faith.

Over the past couple of years, while I have been writing these pieces on my families in County Antrim and County Leitrim, I have been struck by different patterns that appear across several generations. Patterns that influenced individual lives and their journeys. In Leitrim, as part of a Protestant minority, there appeared a restlessness, a hunger for something different, whether through emigration, ambition or simply expanding their farms. In Ballymena, by contrast, there was apparent contentment in lives dominated by strong religious belief and practice; where there was no desire to look too far beyond their own place, happy in their trades and with their lot.

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