Chapter 1: Green Are the Hills Far Away

'Where did you put the suitcase with all the old photos?' I asked my sister, Kathryn, as we sat in her flat one Sunday morning in May 2005. It was a chilly, grey day in London and rain was drumming against the sash windows. It was good to be inside. Why was I always surprised by the cold when I visited from South Africa? I should have known better, having spent years of my childhood and early adult life in England … 'I'm sure it's in the attic', Kathryn said. 'I've tried to batch the photos in envelopes; they'll be easier to sort through that way.'

I found the old-fashioned brown suitcase with its rusted, battered hinges at the back of the attic and passed it down to Kathryn, who put it on the settee. She went into the kitchen to make coffee. 'This should warm us up', she said. 'We've got loads of time, we only need to be at the Pink Rupee at seven o'clock.' We'd arranged to meet up with friends and family for an Indian dinner at our favourite restaurant in Cricklewood. It was a standing arrangement whenever I was over from South Africa; it was an easy way to catch up with everybody.

I knelt on the carpet and took a deep breath before opening up the suitcase. The particular photos I was looking for were from Cyprus. I hoped that they would bring back memories of a moment I was writing about in my book, *Remember Me?* which was nearing completion at last.

Once I'd started sifting through the photos my parents had accumulated over the years, it was hard to stop. As I opened the old albums and untied ribbons around packets of letters, our childhood and my parents' life together began to unfold before my eyes. In amongst the bundles at the bottom of the suitcase I saw a yellowing exercise book, RAF issue. It was filled with my mother's expressive handwriting. At the top of the first page she had written the title, *Green are the hills far away.*

Intrigued, I moved over to the armchair and placed my coffee mug beside me. In a nest of plump cushions, with my feet curled up beneath me, I opened the exercise book and started to read my mother's story.

I am writing this story for you, Kathryn and Mary, from Johannesburg in 1988 where I'm visiting Mary and John. I'm getting old now and I want you to know about my early life in Ireland.

I know I haven't spoken to you much about my childhood; it has always been a bit of a sore subject with me. It was such an unhappy period of my life, but I think the time has come to explain to you why I have always been so reluctant to go home to Ballinrobe. It holds bad memories for me.

My father died of consumption six weeks after I was born in 1917, leaving my mother to bring up my sister Marie and I single-handedly. He had been in the sanatorium for six months before he died; consumption was rife in Ireland in those days. He had worked in a draper's shop and earned enough to keep the family in food and shelter; there was no need for my mother to work. Now here she was with very little money, two small children and a small widow's pension. She always considered herself as being from the better part of town, living as she did on High Street, and she hated the thought of having to earn a living. But the reality was that she had to generate some form of income, so she begrudgingly took to dressmaking and doing alterations for people in the town. She kicked against it, always considering herself to be above this, preferring to think of it simply as a service she was providing for her friends.

From my early childhood she always made it clear that Marie was her favourite, the intellectual of the family. No chance of Marie being sent to the well to get water every evening. She couldn't be parted from her studies. That duty always fell to me. The bucket was heavy to carry and I was scolded if I spilled too much on the climb back up the hill.

'You'll never make anything of yourself', my mother said to me. 'You'll come to no good … Marie is such a lovely, sweet child. I don't know where you came from. We would all be better off if you had never been born.' So continued my mother's almost daily refrain. I couldn't understand why both she and the nuns [at school] were so heartless. They were supposed to be holy people; my mother went to Mass every day and was a pillar of the church. How could she spend her life abusing me like this? Even as a child I realised that there was a contradiction between her fervent faith and the hand raised to beat me at every opportunity. And all under the gaze of the myriad of statues of Our Lady.

I turned to Kathryn who had been listening intently as I read aloud. ‘I knew she wasn’t keen on going back to Ballinrobe but I had no idea how rough life was for her there’, I mused.

‘I know—it struck me too when I read her journal’, Kathryn replied. ‘That must be why she was always so careful to treat us both equally, never showing favouritism. It makes sense now; she took it to the other extreme, keeping things so impartial. Do you remember her favourite saying: “You are no better than anyone else and no one is any better than you”?’

‘How could I forget it? It’s something that has stayed with me always’, I said, gazing out at the grey skyline. ‘It has helped me to get past what happened with John, I know I deserved better and that I will survive. There’s no point letting what has happened in the past ruin my future, I refuse to become bitter and twisted. She got on with her life and so will I.’

The rain still falling steadily, I read on:

‘Kathleen O’Toole, come up to the front of the class!’ was a common refrain from the nuns at school. I had misbehaved yet again and had to take my punishment …

We were beaten with a black belt the nuns wore around their waists and when … older, with a wooden slapper. One day I took the slapper from the nun’s desk, broke it and put it in the dry toilet.

One day the circus was in town, I knew I would be kept in while the rest of the school would be going to the matinee, because I couldn’t do my garment (mauve). I decided to play truant, or mitch as we called it. I left the house and was just going around the river when Nora O’Malley who lived near us came on the scene. I literally dragged her crying with me. We went up the green and hid in the burnt out army barracks. Unfortunately I peeped out and a woman called Dandy Biddy saw me.

The next morning the bell was rung. I was marched to Our Lady's statue on the grand stairs and my green ribbon was taken off me. My green ribbon, the one got before we became a Child of Mary. The Reverend Mother slapped me across the face and said to me 'What boys were in the barracks?' Boys hadn't even entered my head. I was only 12. Also she said, 'Why aren't you like your sister Marie, never gives the nuns any trouble, Nora O'Malley wouldn't have played truant if it wasn't for you.'

I thought, as I'm so bad I might as well give them as much trouble as I can. So when someone gave me an autograph book I wrote there, 'love none, trust few, always paddle your own canoe.' Of course Sister Margaret Mary caught me in front of the whole school. I was marched again this time to the kitchen to burn the book because I had written the word 'love.'

'She always made light of her rebelliousness, it must have been awful for her at school … Do you remember the story of the nuns' long johns?' Kathryn nodded, handing me another cup of coffee. 'She writes about it here', I said. 'Listen.'

Part of the curriculum was domestic science. So what did that entail? Why doing the nuns' laundry of course! We stood in the basement of the convent swirling their long johns and bodices around in steaming vats of water, our hands red and burning from the harsh detergent. One day it got too much for me and when time came to iron their undergarments I decided to starch their long johns and stand them to attention along the passage. You can imagine the response that evoked. Kathleen O'Toole beaten mercilessly with the strap again, not to mention the hiding from my mother when I got home.

'She was always such a rebel, wasn't she?' Kathryn said. 'Fred [my pet name for our father] was always the quiet one.' I had started calling my father, whose name was Paddy, by the name of Fred when I became a teenager. I suppose it was my way of showing that I was growing up, I felt uncomfortable calling him Daddy. He didn't object to it and would look at me with his soft smile when I called him Fred. He was a gentle, patient man. I remember my mother at a function at the army base in Oakington in the late 1970s, coming outside to see the sergeant major's hat and gloves laid neatly on a table. Memories from her childhood of the Black and Tans in Ireland came back to her and she promptly put the hat and gloves on the floor and proceeded to dance on them before my father ushered her out quickly, a smile on his face.

‘Mother must have been quite something with the boys’, I replied, grinning.

1943

I went to the usual Sunday night hop at Gannon’s Maple Ballroom in December 1943, as I always seemed to be bored with Ballinrobe life. The usual gang was there: Dan and Josie Loughrey, the Gannon’s. Nancy was married by then. It was a very dull night until Wilson Jennings (he owned a pub on Bowgate St.) bet Paddy he wouldn’t kiss me. They all got in a circle; he went to run away. I grabbed him and kissed him! You may wonder, as I didn’t know him well. He never danced and only came to the hall when the pubs were shut. But Wilson had said if he kissed me he could have two free pints. I knew he was unemployed and I thought, why not? That’s how our romance began.

He was so shy he hid afterwards for a few weeks. That was fatal for him seeing what I am like. I waylaid him up the town and he hadn’t a chance! One night after the dance he asked could he walk me home as far as the Mill Bridge. All hell broke loose when the romance was discovered. I was locked in, beaten. My Uncle Peter refused to let Paddy in to the Town Hall dances. He had to wait outside until the dance was over. Uncle Peter was secretary of the Town Hall.

Mother told me if I gave Paddy up she would give me cottage and land on Creagh Road; when I refused she went to Fitzgerald solicitors and left it all to the Chinese missions.

Despite my mother’s difficult upbringing, she and my father had given us such a stable and happy family life. Her love for my father was a constant theme through her journal:

Paddy was so different from all the rest I flirted with. I was lucky he was so kind, gentle and understanding of all my moods and capers. I felt at peace when I was with him and safe.

After all the hardships of her early life in Ireland, my mother was indeed lucky to have known the enduring love of a good man. I had expected the same, but after twelve years of being with John, life turned out so very differently. I couldn't understand why he didn't return from his three-month trip to Australia. He just had to come back. I battled financially, searching for him constantly.

It had been nine months now, and as Christmas approached I travelled to the airport to meet the weekly flight from Australia, believing that he would come back. I was dressed up for the occasion, wanting to surprise him, only to ruin my make-up as I ran crying to the Ladies each week when I realised he wasn't on the plane. I had taken out Australian visas in case private investigators were able to track him down and I would need to travel to Australia at short notice. They'd expire and I'd renew them, never giving up hope. I felt so very alone. My mother must have felt similarly lonely when my father died. I cried softly as I read on.

Since 29th July 1984 life is just one day at a time. There are times that I wouldn't be able to carry on but I know he's around somewhere, helping me along like he always did in his quiet, good-humoured way—Just waiting—Paddy.

I have had a very good life: a wonderful husband, two daughters that never gave me a minute's worry loved them both equally. They have been so good to Paddy and I, gave us everything they possibly could and more. I hope they'll forgive me if I sometimes did things 'my way'. Just remember, I used to be known as 'the red one on the hill'. I hope you both will too always be true to yourselves.

I shivered, suddenly cold; it was as if I were reading a message from the grave. By writing my story I was indeed "being true to myself". My book was going to be my story pure and simple, with no recriminations, no bitterness: just simply a record of how life had been for me and how I had overcome the obstacles put in my way. My mother had given me self-confidence, the ability to understand that I was indeed as good as anyone else and that no matter what hand I was dealt I would survive. I had been having doubts about writing my book, but Mother's journal gave me the strength to continue. Holding her journal in my hands all these years after her death, I realised how much I owed her. Through writing my own story I knew I would put to rest the bleakest period in my life.

I looked up. The rain had stopped and it was time to get ready for our outing to the Pink Rupee. I closed *Green Are the Hills Far Away* and placed it carefully in the old leather suitcase. It was so opportune that I had had the chance to read the journal now; the words of my mother served to give me the confidence they had always given me to do the best I could. I knew my parents would be proud of the journey I had undertaken since the disappearance of John. I must not disappoint them. I wanted them to be proud of the person I had become.