



FRANCES BROWNE STORYTELLERS

Seeing Beyond Sight:
A Celebration of
Vision Impaired Storytelling

Seeing Beyond Sight: A Celebration of Vision Impaired Storytelling

By

The Frances Browne Storytellers

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Frances Browne
Literary Festival

Treasure Each Voice



**Comhairle Contae
Dhún na nGall**
Donegal County Council
Council of the Year 2025

Clár Éire Ildánach
*Creative Ireland
Programme*



Frances Browne Literary Festival
Donegal, Ireland
2025

Seeing Beyond Sight lives both on the page and online.

You can enjoy the anthology and learn more about the Frances Browne Storytellers project at **<https://www.donegalculture.ie/en/services/libraries/local-history/projects-and-podcasts/>**

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Foreword by Sinead Noonan

When I first joined Donegal Libraries and began working in Twin Towns Library, Stranorlar, I must admit I had never heard of Frances Browne. Learning that a literary festival was held each year in her honour inspired me to discover more about the remarkable woman behind it.

Frances Browne, the “Blind Poetess of Ulster,” overcame poverty, gender inequality, and blindness to become a prolific writer in the 1850s. From Stranorlar she went on to Edinburgh and London, where her poetry, fiction, and journalism gained international recognition.

Donegal County Council has long been committed to ensuring that her legacy endures. With the steadfast support of our Arts Officer, and the valuable involvement of our Economic

Development and Tourism sections, the Frances Browne Literary Festival has grown into a key cultural event for the region.

The Library Service has played a central role by developing the Frances Browne Collection in our Local Studies department, investing in a Storytelling Chair and Sensory Wall inspired by Granny's Wonderful Chair in Twin Towns Library, and curating exhibitions of her life and work. Collectively, these initiatives ensure that Frances Browne's legacy continues to inspire and to enrich our communities.

Within this context, I approached the Frances Browne Literary Festival Committee with the idea of paying tribute by offering blind and vision-impaired writers the opportunity to have their work published in both digital and physical form. This anthology is the realisation of that idea, made possible through the creativity and generosity of many.

I would like to acknowledge the guidance and editorial expertise of Isla McGuckin, the support of my colleagues in Donegal County Council's Culture Division whose support helped secure Creative Ireland funding to bring this anthology to life and the Twin Towns Library staff for their ongoing commitment to the festival. I also extend my sincere thanks to Vision Ireland, whose support for this project has been invaluable.

Finally, my heartfelt thanks go to the participants who shared their time, creativity, and talent by submitting work for this anthology. Without them, there would be no *Frances Browne Storytellers*. This collection is, above all, a celebration of their voices and a continuation of the spirit of Frances Browne herself - resilient, imaginative, and enduring.

Sinead Noonan

Donegal County Library Service



Introduction by Isla McGuckin

Sharing stories matters. Because stories are how we learn about other lived experiences and begin to empathise and form deep connections with each other. Working on this anthology project, I've had profound and affecting conversations - in person and, at times, just on email threads - that will remain with me.

Reading the submissions has prompted me to reflect on navigating life with disability and difference. There were pieces that made me think, pieces that made me cry and pieces that made me laugh out loud. So grab yourself a cuppa, get yourself settled in your comfiest chair and dive in!

Isla (Izzy) McGuckin
Editor of the Anthology

To you, Frances Browne

By Lisa O'Donovan

Born in Stranorlar, Donegal, a small rural town

She was named after her mother, Frances,

Frances Browne

With 11 brothers and sisters, she was the seventh
in line

A big family indeed! As families were at that time

But Frances was different. She couldn't learn to
read or write

This was due to small pox, which robbed her of
her sight

However, she was a curious, inquisitive child

She wanted to learn, her desire for knowledge
running wild

She listened to her siblings' homework, done
after school

She learned everything by heart, making her
memory a tool

To you, Frances Browne

(Continued)

Soon the bartering began, with family, friends
and neighbours

They would read to her in exchange for chores,
tasks and favours

Before long, Frances became the narrator, the
composer, the creator

Her boundless creativity, talent, ambition
becoming greater and greater

From short stories, to novels, to poems - she
wrote them all!

With poverty, geographic isolation, lack of
education, female, blind - she found her call!

More than a hobby or a pastime, her work was
popular and published

She was well-known, the title 'the blind poetess
of Ulster' established

She moved from Donegal, to Edinburgh, to
London, with her sister at her side

Her sister, Rebecca, acted as a reader, scribe
and guide

To you, Frances Browne

(Continued)

While her reader, scribe and guide changed,
her passion for writing did not
Her countless pieces are still being found, and
will never be forgot
Her work, 'Granny's Wonderful Chair', is one of
the most famous
Translated and reprinted, Frances has gained
literary celebrity status
She is an inspiration, a visionary, a shining
example to people far and near
With such legacy and spirit, one thing is
blatantly clear
She is deserving of more than a medal, a
trophy, an award, or a crown
So, in awe, we raise a glass, to you, Frances
Browne.

Hattie's Haiku

Composed at the Irish Guide Dogs Centre by:

Helen Gray (Hattie's owner)

Robert Creed

Mena Fitzpatrick

Joan Ann Brosnan

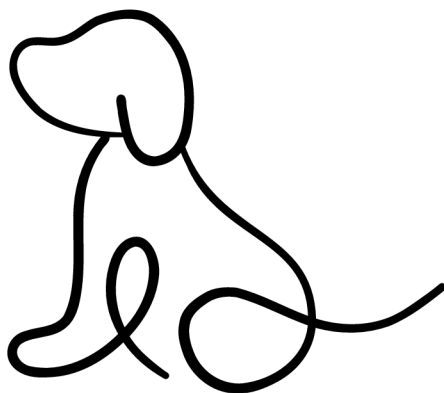
Siobhan Roche

Vitoria Alves De Oliveira

Paudie Cotterell

Aran Murphy

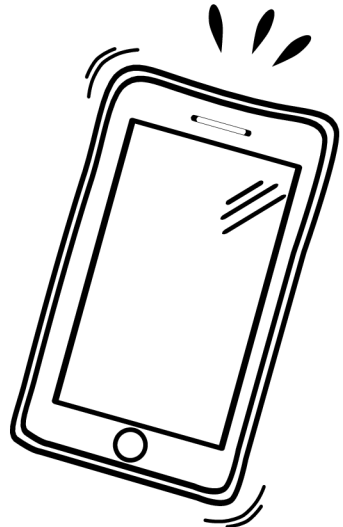
Happy Birthday to
Hattie. Sassy, soft and sweet.
My eyes on four feet.



Summer Saturdays

By Carmel Quinn

Saturday can be one of the loneliest days
Especially amid the Summer haze
The silence of the light
Gradually dying into the night
That balmy heat
Suggesting gatherings to meet and greet
Sitting alone, waiting for the phone
To ring...
Anticipation of something



Tandem

By Petrina Finn

I think about my tandem
sitting still in the shed
A steal of a purchase
from a generous stranger
Hoping to introduce me
to the sport of cycling

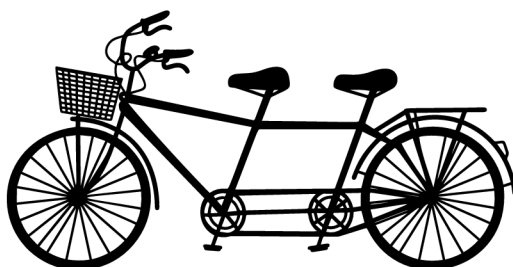
I think about the adventures
my co-pilot and I will have
As we roam through countryside
Cycling roads less travelled
To places of childhood memory
and areas yet to be discovered

Tandem

(Continued)

I think about my tandem partner
The trust I have in them to navigate us
on our regular cycles together
Building physical strength
While calming the mind

But that is all I do, think...
about my tandem still sitting in the shed



Here We Are

By Gerda Archer

What are the things that truly matter
Could peace on earth be a true factor
Would looking within be a starting place
To develop loving kindness for our race

What has caused the state we are in
When anger arises as a response thing
To justify indignation no matter what
Ignoring our state of mind or not

Accepting opposites as part of life
Would lessen the response of strife
There is right in wrong, and wrong in right!
Opening dimensions to brighter light

Here We Are

(Continued)

Each soul has its own special place
Travelling the earth at its own pace
Some are fast and some are slow
All are actors in a learning show

What a boring place this would be
If everyone was just like me!

Writing Group Trials and Tribulations

By Eugene Hancock

As I've said before, writing was never my strong point. In school, stringent subjects were more my forte. Hopefully my writing has improved since joining The Hardliners.

Unfortunately some bad habits never die. As normal I woke at about 7am. I had some breakfast. I then got dressed. I checked the time on my watch. I was a little early as the library in Coolock doesn't open till 10am. So, I lay back down on the bed and scrolled through my phone. I must have fallen back to sleep. When I woke, I looked at my watch. It was 1pm. I started to panic. I quickly gathered my writing stuff and rushed to the library. In my younger days, I used to think in my mind, "When God made time, he made lots of it". But when you get to my age, that theory doesn't apply anymore.

When I look back, I wasted probably the best years of my life. I wasted my younger days. I prioritised work. I worked every hour God sent me. I tried to improve the standard of living for myself and my family. One particular year stands out in my mind, when we had three foreign holidays. The third of which I spent in bed through fatigue. I wasn't good company for my wife and children on that particular holiday. As you go through life, you realise how important time is. It doesn't matter about the material things in life. As they say, time is precious. It doesn't matter how much money you have because you can't buy time.

The Better Offer

By Michael Hayes

As I was enjoying a nice leisurely stroll along the prom in Salthill, I was in good spirits because my brother Peter who works as a pilot with Heathrow-based Atlantic Airlines had just been promoted to captain on the Boeing 757. This aircraft has a special place in the hearts of many pilots because of its performance and versatility.

My friend Colin, who was guiding me, said, “Dave, will you be going to that respite centre in Mullingar any time soon?”

“No. To be quite honest with you, I’m a little apprehensive about going back to that place because of Joshua and Jacob, two lads who used to bully me whenever they could. They used to call me hurtful names”.

Colin was horrified to hear me say this as he knew how much I enjoyed going to the respite centre and meeting other visually impaired people like me. He suggested that I touch base with the centre staff and report Joshua and Jacob. I thought this was a very good idea and made a mental note to mention it to my parents when I got home.

Meanwhile, I asked Colin how his sister Kayleigh was getting on in Waterford where she works as a veterinary nurse.

He replied, “Dave, I’m delighted to tell you Kayleigh is getting on really well. She’s on annual leave next week so she has invited you down for a few days.”

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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT. SCAN THE
QR CODE TO BRING YOU TO THE
STORY



The Bear's Tale

By Anne O'Brien

Teddy is my name. My name is boringly common apparently. If I was another bear I would have the same name. Most of us are named Teddy after the former United States president, Theodore Roosevelt, whose nickname was Teddy. He hated the nickname but his supporters called him that. Apparently he had gone on a hunting trip in Mississippi; a guide had caught a bear, stunned it and tied it to a tree and suggested that the president shoot it. Roosevelt felt that was unsportsmanlike and refused, sparing the bear. Manufacturers produced a well stuffed bear and called it Teddy. It became a best seller, brought the president's popularity up greatly, and the company made a fortune.

I am a rather mature bear having been manufactured in the 1950s in the UK. I was bought by a toy shop in Manchester. I was very lucky; I was purchased as a gift for a grandchild. Life was quite happy for a number of years and I was treated quite well, cuddled quite a bit by the grandchild, even getting an occasional washing. I didn't like it much but I suppose I came out clean, if wet. My owner would put me out in the sun if it was shining; if not I got a rub with a towel. I did prefer the sun rather than being rubbed dry.

The child was called Chloe and was from a wealthy family. One summer we went on a seaside trip, and on the beach one day there was a storm and I was blown away. When the storm calmed down I could hear Chloe crying out for me. I had been blown into the dunes and was lost and alone for the first time. Unfortunately despite the parents and other people searching for me I was not found.

As the days passed I became very lonely and was desperate for company and I had sand in my eyes. OK, I had a fur coat so wasn't very cold. But I remembered years when it had rained and snowed so the wish for an owner was in my mind.

One day a group with a dog came up to the dunes and the dog found me and picked me up in his teeth and brought me over to the family. When one of the little girls saw me she tried to grab me. The dog resisted and drew back holding me by my right ear when the girl pulled again. She succeeded in taking me but a small part of my ear was torn off. I survived and was taken home by the family.

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Those Good Old Days in Mayo

By Martin Kelly

As Pádraic Colum reminds us in his poem, “An Old Woman of the Roads”:

O, to have a little house!
To own the hearth and stool and all!
The heaped up sods against the fire,
The pile of turf against the wall!

To have a clock with weights and chains
And pendulum swinging up and down!
A dresser filled with shining delph,
Speckled and white and blue and brown!

Thankfully, the clocks have moved forward one hour and the calorie loaded Easter eggs are now only a fading memory. Moreover, the Spring birds are returning and frantically gathering useful materials to build their nests.

As the soil is gradually heating up and the dormant gardens are slowly awakening from their inert state. With the heating up of the soil, the Spring bulbs and shrubs are tentatively emerging from their Winter slumber. Meanwhile, according to folklore, daylight is extending by a hen's step each day as we head towards the Summer equinox.

So! Before too long, my school year will be winding down and the long anticipated Summer holidays will thankfully have come around again. Today is my penultimate day in 5th Class in the Primary School at the Curragh Military Camp with Mrs Costello. We've been informed that after we return for the new school year, Mrs O'Brien will take over as our class teacher.

We've all said our fond goodbyes to Mrs Costello and, before departing, we gorged ourselves with lemonade and biscuits before dashing across the large school playground and out the decorative iron gates.

The mind now focused on getting home and stashing my mála scoile (school bag) for the next eight weeks or so. After a ten minute trot home through the barracks, to McDonagh married quarters, I grabbed a piece of my mother's homemade bread topped with jam, before heading out to join with my friends.

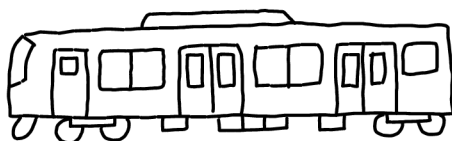
Although I had reduced eyesight due to a progressive eye disease, not to worry. Now with holidays in the air and Spring in my step, I joined in a collection of interactive games taking place around our endless Curragh Camp playground. Participating in children's games, ranging from Queenie-Eye-Oh using a small handball to hopscotch around a chalk-marked area using a small sand-filled polish tin to kick on one leg to move the place marker. On occasions, it was Ring a Ring o' Rosie using a small hankie as the deadly symbol.

More tellingly, on fine evenings, everyone around the married quarters joined in a communal skipping session, with children and adults joining together to enjoy this energetic exercise.

My mum's homemade bread had been baked in the oven of a heavy duty black iron range. The black range sat in one corner of our former British Army house which consisted of a small kitchen, an adjacent sitting room, a single upstairs bedroom and an extremely cold outside toilet. For a fridge, we had a built-in larder for storing the perishable food. There was a small white ceramic sink with a single cold tap. No mod cons to cater for all of our food storage along with washing and cleaning needs.

Nevertheless, with our annual holidays now on the horizon, apart from dealing with unending domestic chores, Mum was now focused on preparing our large holiday suitcase.

Filling it with essentials for our annual country visit to her birth place in County Mayo. While my dad, Mike, a sergeant in the regular army, had arranged a requisition to purchase our rail tickets from the nearby Kildare rail station to our destination in Claremorris. Our Triumph bicycles were cleaned and oiled for hours of gallivanting around the gravel roads and boreens of South Mayo. These sturdy bicycles will be our principle modus operandi once we arrive at my Uncle Johnny's holding off the Ballinrobe road.



After departing Kildare and a couple of train changes at Portarlinton and Athlone, it's onward and upward now on the Westport train as it scoots up Gallagher's Hill on the final leg into Claremorris Railway Station.

Claremorris Rail Station is acknowledged as a hub for pilgrims across Ireland and beyond as they make their way to the Holy Shrine at Knock where, in 1879, a reputed apparition began for a group of local villagers. The Knock Shrine is recognised by the Catholic Church as a place of faith, hope and healing and, during our stay, we also made a visit to the Knock Shrine, to pray for a cure for my diminishing eyesight.

Dan Lavelle, the local hackney driver, had already been primed to meet us at the station to whisk us back to Gortlough. Once everything had been loaded up, we set off with our suitcase and bicycles now securely tied down. However, after a couple of miles on a regular tarred road we turned right onto a dirt road and headed up Caltra Hill on the run down to Gortlough and our final destination. The Parish of Taugheen was my mother's birth place before she made her way to Kildare to marry Mike Kelly, who was then a soldier based on the Curragh Military Camp.

Once everything is off-loaded and, within a matter of minutes, our Sunday best is neatly stored away and it's into our conventional farming gear for the remainder of the holidays. My mother, Mary, dons one of her sensible cross-over aprons and we were suitably attired for our country holiday.

Naturally, adjusting to the unique features associated with a traditional thatched cottage was a challenge in itself. Adapting to no water on tap, a pottie under the bed or an outdoor dry toilet in the cart house wasn't pleasant but unavoidable. Moreover, we relied on a large tar barrel at the gable of the cottage to collect the rain water coming down off the roof, to cater for all of our general washing needs. Out of necessity, our drinking water was fetched from a local spring-well on a regular basis. During dry Summer spells, the emptied tar barrel was loaded onto the ass-cart and off we went to Lizzy Harley's bridge to fill the barrel from the gently flowing stream.

Unlike “An Old Woman of the Roads”, the cottage did have a dresser filled with shining delph and family life routinely revolved around the comfort of the large open turf fireplace. Apart from the unique smell of burning turf, the fireplace also comprised a rotating iron structure called a "crane" where the blackened kettle and cooking pots hung expectantly over the open flames. The fireside hob held the blackened skillet pot surrounded with hot coals baking the homemade bread.



Believe it or not, back in those “good old days” in County Mayo, everyone headed to mass on Sundays. For us it was a two mile trip to Carramore Parish Church. In undertaking this weekly sojourn, Mum and myself accompanied Granny Brennan in the family's time-honoured fancy trap, drawn by Henry, the wise old grey donkey. Us all neatly turned out in our Sunday best with a thick comfort blanket covering our knees. We trundled along the narrow gravel roads to the rhythmic sound of the donkey's hooves, clip-clopping, keeping in time with the jingling traces.

Before too long, we pulled into McHugh's yard (a public house) located within walking distance to the church. The faithful donkey was released from between the shafts before being presented with a tasty nose bag to keep him chewing happily until we returned to tackle up for our return journey.

In those "halcyon days", attending the Sunday mass was obligatory with the whole community coming together dressed in their Sunday best. As the church bell rang out to summon the awaiting gathering flock, we followed like sheep into the chapel.

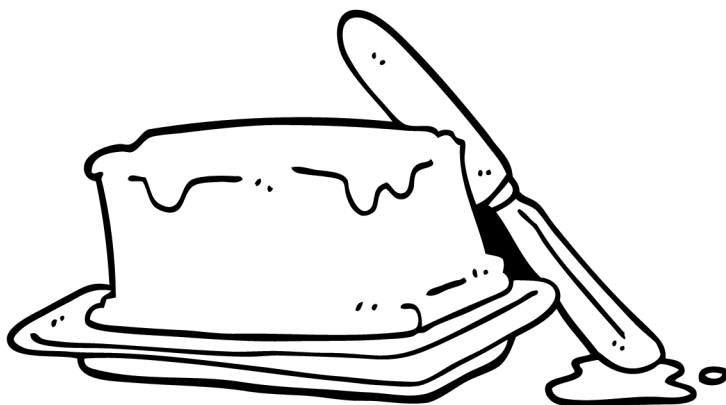
Slowly making our way up the main aisle, with the women and children taking their places on the left and the men suitably suited and booted, taking up positions on the right. Fortunately, living in a bucolic society meant that weekly church visits offered an ideal opportunity to check in with neighbours. In addition, allowing time to catch up on farming news or occasionally transact outstanding farming business.

Immediately on our return to Gorlough, the Sunday clothes were quickly stored away in their camphor-laden retreat. Before the family all gathered together to revel in the traditional Sunday dinner.

With the jelly and ice-cream under the belt, it was bicycle time for us youngsters so off we went exploring for the afternoon. While the adults relaxed with their cup of tea while perusing the Sunday newspapers. Back then in good old holy Ireland, Sunday was regarded as a rest day and only weather-related essential jobs were undertaken during this designated period of “unnecessary servile work”. So! Everyone hoped that the Sunday prayers for fine weather would be answered by the man above. However, the weather occasionally disrupted our planned Sunday adventures overruling the prevailing religious constraints as saving the crops always took precedence over Church dogma.

Given our state of semi-isolation and largely relying on self-sufficiency, our Sunday chicken dinner had earlier been peacefully picking up grubs and cackling happily around the yard before Aunt Mary selected a plump candidate to add extra flavour to the stew pot.

Meanwhile, as enterprising young farmers, our contribution to the Sunday special was a visit to the cottage garden to dig out potatoes and pull fresh vegetables to complement the Sunday treat. Just imagine! Fresh vegetables along with Arran Banner potatoes enhanced with a sliver of fresh country butter.



Speaking of country butter, the butter-making process involved the whole family participating as tradition required the household to give the churn handle a twist, believing this practice would encourage the process and bring the cream solids to the top for gathering.

The rhythmic beat of the churn changed as the creamy solids separated and rose to the top. Before being transferred into a large wooden bowl where salt was added to assist in the butter-making operation. Of course, nothing useful was ever wasted back then. The remaining butter-milk was retained for mixing with the flour and moulded into the desired shape, before being placed into the blackened skillet pot.

One significant memory for me occurred when visiting the cowhouse at milking time. With Uncle Johnny encouraging me to approach the cow for a closer look, before turning the cow's tit with hot milk into my angelic face. Leaving me scarred for life with an unexpected hot milkshake. However, once the evening's milking was complete and the household's share set aside, we collected our milk buckets to feed the young calves now anxiously awaiting their evening treat.

A firm rattle on a bucket handle soon brought them scampering enthusiastically along to the wooden gate to literally gallop down their own fresh milkshake fortified with some tasty calf nuts. To observe this ritualistic meal dance with tails rotating vigorously was certainly a sight to behold.

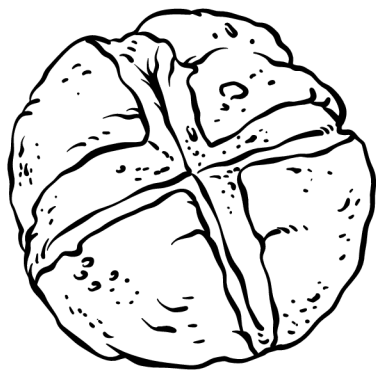
On inclement days with no work outstanding, we headed off to the family bog. Back again on the bikes and hit out for the large community bog to work on Uncle Johnny's turf plot. At this juncture, the turf had already been cut and spread out to dry around Easter time. At this point, the dried sods are already formed into dauphins, standing uniformly like well-trained soldiers on a military parade ground. The dauphins absorb the energy from the sun. While the gentle bog breeze passes over and through them. Depending on their density, turning them a colourful shade of light brown or solid black.

However, time moved along to stand down this colourful parade and remove the seasoned sods from their comfort blanket of soft purple heather bed. Thus moving the seasoned turf through the next phase in gathering this vital fuel source. The dried seasoned turf was now loaded onto wheelbarrows for transferring from its heather bed to a solid footing up on the gravel roadside. The heavily laden barrows were transferring the turf sods for Uncle Johnny, to build the well-shaped sods into a large turf reek.

Fortunately for us, a selection of wheelbarrows was generally available around the expansive bogland as, again, the meitheal system applied so we could borrow the neighbours' barrows. These large wooden hand barrows are specially designed for bog work, comprising an enormous wooden wheel at the front with two large solid squat feet beneath the handles to prevent the load bogging down in the marshy terrain.

In general, one of the roadside reeks was earmarked for sale, more than likely to a local "towny", thereby adding to the annual family income. The governing price was determined by the length of the given reek as the reek was sold by the yard.

Given that the family bog was quite a distance from the homestead and the work was energy sapping, we were always on high alert for Aunt Mary coming along the winding bog road on her ladies bicycle, carrying our picnic lunch. This normally consisted of bottles of tea wrapped in woolly socks with lots of freshly baked soda bread, along with our protein laden hard boiled eggs. Yum Yum! This was a feast fit for a king and not a crumb was left over to feed the skylarks singing melodiously above us and the mournful call of the curlew in the distance.



Once lunch was demolished, and while Uncle Johnny filled his dudeen (pipe) for a smoke, we took off like wild deer scampering over the marshy terrain in our private wilderness. Romping across the bogland and finding the widest bog hole to challenge our athleticism. However, after our short-lived leaping across bog holes, it was back to work and wheeling those enormous barrows again. As pioneers in the biodiversity movement, any surplus turf mole was taken home and distributed across the vegetable garden. On occasions, scattered across the pig house floor as potential bedding and a favourite with the fattening pigs. Doubling up as a warm dry bed or an enticing surface to forage through with their nosy snouts.

Unlike saving the turf, saving the hay was absolutely weather-dependent. Once Martin Woolly entered the grassy meadow with a heavy duty mowing machine attached to his Massey Ferguson tractor, the smell of freshly mown hay

would stimulate the most dormant of human senses. After the cutting of the meadow, it was time to roll up the sleeves, grab a hayfork or rake to begin the next phase in the haymaking process.

Firstly, came the scattering and loosening of the freshly mown grass to allow any moisture to evaporate. Once the grass had dried out into a pale greenish-yellow colour, it was ready to rake into neat large rows to prepare the next step of transforming the dried grass into solid haycocks. Not a grass coicheán of hay was wasted during the haymaking operation as the rakes' large wooden teeth gathered up every last wisp of dried grass, leaving the cut meadow as smooth as a well-tended bowling green.

By the end of a very long day, the meadow field had been transformed to a military display with symmetrical haycocks, standing uniformly in confirmation to our hard days labours.

After a couple of weeks maturing in the Summer sunshine, it was time to disrupt this tranquil setting and draw each and every haycock back to the cottage and the adjacent large garden area. However, not before yet again using the conventional meitheal system. Our personal “wagon train” of neighbours’ carts were assembled for the loading of the hay onto each cart and, like clockwork, we travelled back and over the road until the field was cleared, leaving a lush pasture. Before very long the after-grass had returned and the ruminants always enjoyed this luscious tasty treat.

In preparation for the Winter, the large garden area had already been prepared. Sticks and stones might break your bones but, on this occasion, the sticks and stones created a perfect foundation for the building of extra large garden cocks. The creation of these mighty structures was always great fun.

As children, our role was reserved to playfully tramping around the cock's circumference to compact the hay. In other words, innocently packing it tightly together while we were happily enjoying our homemade bouncy castle.

Unknowingly, embedding the haycock to prepare it to withstand the coming Winter weather. Given that the farm animals would be housed for several months and rely on this food source to sustain them until Springtime when the whole cycle would begin once again.

The next seasonal farming operation was the cutting and saving of the oats and barley. The fields containing these seed crops had been planted around Easter time and, since then, were happily maturing in a sea of green.



However, nature moved everything along and this emerging sea of green slowly converted to an eye-catching golden glow. While the lengthening strands fluttered and whispered gently in the Summer breeze. As the seed heads filled to bursting, it was time to focus on the cutting and saving of another important food source. Unlike the hay-making, this time it was rolling down the sleeves to protect the skin from chafing - as the strands might be prickly - as we bundled and tied the individual sheafs. Dropping them behind us and moving adroitly to gather and tie the next one.

Again, it was all hands on deck as we followed systematically after Uncle Johnny as his long handled scythe made a swishing sound as the sharpened, curved blade brought the long strands to their knees. Again, working efficiently as a well-honed team, we rolled and tied the wheat sheaves while next in line built the neatly-tied bundles into stooks.

Each stook generally contained ten sheafs with two on top, acting as a protective cover over each stook. At the end of the process, there were long lines of upstanding stooks now decorating the closely-cut stubbled area. Similar to the hay, once the moisture had evaporated, the stooks were ready to build into larger stacks.

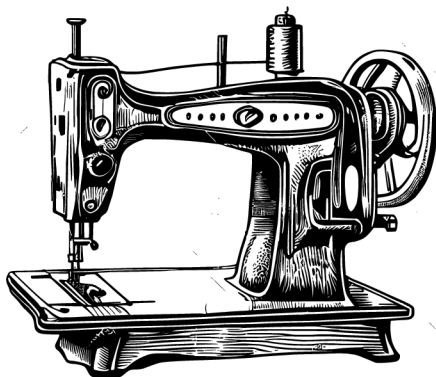
However, just like the transferring of the haycocks, these stacks were also loaded onto carts and drawn back to the large garden area close to the cottage. On completion, all standing proudly and colourfully beside the neighbouring haycocks. Unlike the hay, the corn reeks would soon fall under the rotating beaters of the threshing machine. Once again, the local meitheal system would operate as the neighbours came together, accompanying the thresher around the village to separate the “wheat from the chaff” during this delicate process to produce animal bedding or feedstuff and, if necessary, fresh thatch to bolster the cottage roof.

As this “beast of engineering” was off limits for children, our role was to stand by the seed shoots and fill the sacks then haul the filled bags into the prepared dry storage area.

The thresher arriving in the village was another noteworthy occasion as we all gathered together for the communal lunch which invariably evolved into a feast fit for a king as extra food was prepared to feed the horde of ravenous workers. Apart from the plates of ham sandwiches, homemade apple or blackberry pies were always a welcome treat. At that time, the adults took a well-earned smoking break along with their lunch as this incendiary practice was outlawed around the busy thresher. Once everyone was fed and watered and the cigarettes and pipes extinguished, it was back to work again to complete the threshing operation. Thereby, releasing this amazing machine to move - lock, stock and barrel - to the next small-holding on the thresher's list.

Living in virtual isolation, we always looked forward to the bi-weekly travelling shop calling to the end of the boreen. This facilitated some bulk-buying by Aunt Mary including large bags of flour, sugar and salt and also some animal feedstuffs and, more importantly, a fancy treat or bullseyes and emerald toffees for us children. The large cloth bags, once emptied, would be transformed into bed-sheets or pillow-cases as, back then, recycling was a necessity and, as I said, nothing useful was ever wasted.

My Aunt Mary had a hand-operated sewing machine and this was always on standby to repair damaged clothes or to create other tailored apparel.



As the Summer was drawing to a close, and some of the mature farmstock were ready for the market, a day at the local Claremorris Fair is yet another memorable occasion for me. Aunt Mary would wake us at some ungodly hour to prepare for the task. After a hearty cooked breakfast, we would head to the bicycle shed and mount our trusty steeds. Our role, on this occasion, was to cycle ahead of the animals to guard against the livestock straying off the direct route to the Fair Green.

On arrival, we found a suitable holding area for the livestock and stood agape as we observed the bartering process unfold with the mutual slapping of palms until a reciprocal price was confirmed. After this customary exchange, it was into the nearest hostelry to complete the financial element of the deal. Our reward, as participants, was a serving of soup and sandwiches while the adults sealed the deal with something stronger.

Regulations around alcohol and drink-driving were far more relaxed in those days as motorised vehicles were few and far between. As attending the celebrated market or fair was an integral part of country life, we never returned back to the cottage empty-handed. In general, time spent in the pub/grocers meant that essential groceries were purchased.

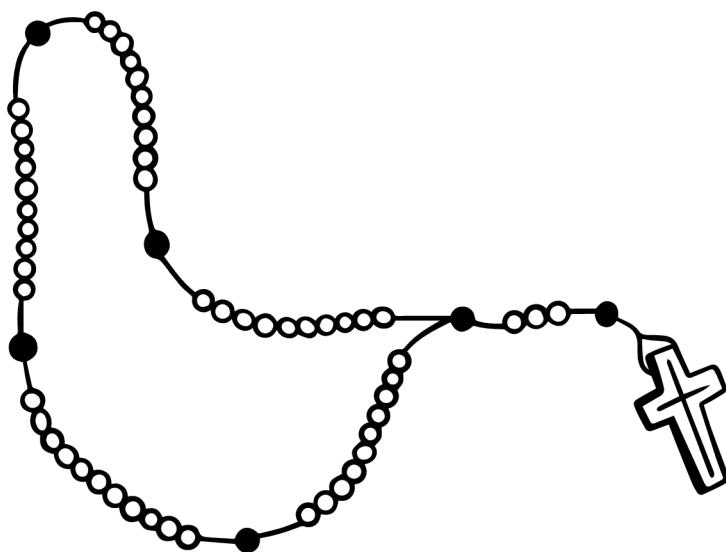
However, all good things must come to an end and the holidays in the extraordinary Gurlough thatched cottage were closing in for me. On our return from Claremorris, after another market day, my Aunt Mary informed us that "the men in suits" from the Land Commission had called to Gurlough earlier that morning. This resulted in Aunt Mary and Uncle Johnny travelling up to Castle McGarrett, the former landed estate of Lord Oranmore and Browne, the vast estate which the Irish Land Commission had purchased towards improving life chances for local small farmers.

Not surprisingly, my Aunt Mary was really keen to take us up to Castle McGarrett to view a potential site for the Brennan family to relocate. So! It was back onto our trusty bicycles once again to head for the Browne Estate. We entered through the northern gates and worked our way along a very run-down avenue, avoiding serious potholes as we carefully made our way to the designated site. As you can imagine, my Aunt Mary was all excited to take us around the site with timber pegs marking out the location of a bungalow, animal sheds and other outhouses. So we moved through the virtual rooms and outhouses, while trying to build a mind's eye picture.

However, as the sun was sinking in the west and twilight approaching, it was time to saddle up and head back to the tranquillity of the little whitewashed thatched cottage to carry on with the “daily jobs” before supper.

Closing up the henhouse in the evening, with the poultry now sitting serenely on their perches, brought each farming day to a peaceful end.

Alas! After our final meal of the day, we took our favourite spots around the kitchen and dropped onto our knees for Aunt Mary to lead a Decade of the Rosary. Then it was lights-out for everyone and the conclusion of yet another busy farming day in that memory laden “Little House”.



The Ass

By Denis Fahey

The boys sat contentedly in the hollow of a ditch, that backed on to the High Road at Carnahalla, before them spread the whole vista of the Golden Vale. They gazed at the evening sky. The sun had long since lost its power and was confined to a burning yellow streak on the south western horizon. Stars began to twinkle slowly into existence.

“Did you know that the stars up there are thousands of miles away from us, Davey?”

“Is that so, Packie?”

“Yeah, thousands of miles.”

“Brother Ryan says the heavens are like a curtain and the stars are holes in it, through which God shines his flash lamp.”

“That couldn’t be right,” Packie, somewhat indignantly, replied.

“Still though, who knows?” Davey countered.

“Sure everybody knows he’s a dotty oul’ eejit. Didn’t he say another time that the sun was a Silvermint. My dad says some of the stars are as big as the earth but because they are so far away they appear small.”

Davey began to ponder how far thousands of miles was. He knew Ardagh was three miles away and that was a fair old trot, if you had to walk it.

Meanwhile, Packie struggled with how a curtain could be that big or where you could find a flash lamp that big to shine through it. The biggest lamp he knew was the one Ollie the Poacher used for lamping rabbits and even that wasn’t that big. No, Brother Ryan was definitely an eejit.

“It would be great, though, if the sun was a Silvermint. Maybe someday a big chunk of it might fall to the ground and he wouldn’t have to scrounge Silvermints off Mongey Murphy, the shopkeeper’s son, the miserable little fecker.

Just then, in the midst of their reveries, it happened. A strange scrunching sound came from the other side of the ditch. Packie immediately signalled to Davey, forefinger to his mouth, to be quiet and then whispered, “It could be a fox or a badger.”

Trepidation immediately embellished Davey’s face with a white hue. Slowly the two of them rose to peer over the ditch to find the source of the noise. Two big ears and two big eyes looked back at them. ‘Twas an ass. How it had got there neither boy had a clue but there it was a big strapping ass.

“Whose ass is it?” Davey asked.

“Well, it is not John Joe Mahoney’s, his ass has a black streak down his back. Nor is it Bill Crowe’s.”

“How do you know that, Packie?”

“There’s a bit missing off one of his ears.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I wonder whose ass is it, then.”

After a cursory glance down the front of the animal in the dimming light, Packie stated with authority, “It’s a stray.”

“How the hell can you tell? Davey, mystified, enquired.

“Look at its hooves.”

The animal’s hooves, sadly, had overgrown to the extent that it was limping and walking for it was a torture.

“Poor ould devil. He is really hobbled, isn’t he?
Is there anything we could do for him?”

“Shoot him, maybe, to put him out of his
misery.”

“Ah shit, we couldn’t do that.” Davey was
horrified at the prospect and, after some
profound thinking, he came up with an idea.

“What if we got Paddy the Smith to put a set of
shoes on him?”

“And who’s going to pay Paddy the Smith,
Davey?”

“I have thruppence saved up for Xmas.”

“That should put one stud in one of the shoes.”
Packie shattered Davey’s initial enthusiasm with
his cost assessment.

“How much do you think it would cost, Packie, to
have him shod?”

“About ten bob, I reckon.”

“Feck, that’s a lot, Packie! Are you sure?”

“Well, it won’t be cheap anyway. Of that, I’m sure.”

“Did you know Dan Brien has a couple of sets of donkey shoes and winkers left in one of his outhouses. He doesn’t use them anymore since he got the horse for the ploughing.”

“What are you thinking, Davey?”

“Well, sure, he’d hardly miss them.”

“But we’d still have the problem of Paddy the Smith.”

“Maybe we could do a deal with him.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, his smithy is always cluttered and all over the place. Maybe we could help him tidy it up and it certainly could do with a coat of whitewash.”

“I hate fecking whitewashing.”

“I was just thinking, if we got this ass up and running, we could enter him in the Donkey Derby on Corpus Christi. He might be in with a shout. He’s a good, strong-looking animal - apart from the limp - and there might be few bob in the bank for us, if we won it.”

“Yeah, I heard Tim Delaney got a pound note when he won last year.”

“Janey, that wouldn’t be half bad, Packie.”

“Yeah, but where will we keep him until we get him to Paddy the Smith?”

“What about Sarah Quirke’s?”

“It’s as good a place as any, I suppose. But there’d be no bedding there.”

“I’d say I could nick a bale of straw from my father’s barn, he’d hardly miss it, and I could bring a rope and winkers with me as well.”

“Yeah, sure there’s a fine big room in the front of that old house and we can block the door to keep him from straying.”

“Well, we’d better get cracking before it gets too dark.”

“Hold on a minute. Maybe if we catch him by the forelock, we mightn’t need the winkers to get him up to Sarah Quirke’s.”

Sure enough, the ass responded to being led by the forelock. This was a good sign as it meant he was comfortable with being led by people.

“He’s a big ass isn’t he, Davey?” Packie observed.

“Yeah, Paddy Coffey had one like him a few years back.”

“But that was a mule, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, maybe it was.”

“What should we call him?”

“What do you mean, Davey?”

“I mean if we are going to enter him in the Donkey Derby, he’ll have to have a name.”

Packie thought for a moment, “What about Big Mickey?”

“Big Mickey?” Davey laughed.

“Yeah! Can you imagine it, Davey? Willie Burke on the loud speaker, ‘And here comes Big Mickey up the final straight. He is really tearing the arse out of it. Yes! Big Mickey is going to do it. Big Mickey has won the Derby.’ Can you picture the look on the ould canon’s face? ‘Mrs Rainsford, what is the name of that donkey again?’ ‘Big Mickey, Father.’”

Davey could not contain his laughter. “I think we’d better call him something else other than that otherwise we probably won’t be allowed to run him,” he just about managed to say when he had stopped laughing.

“What about Carnahalla Prince or King or somethin’? After all, we found him in Carnahalla.”

“King sounds good to me, Packie. It’s a strong name, isn’t it? Carnahalla King.”

“Carnahalla King it is then. I’m OK with that,”
Packie agreed.

Sarah Quirke’s presented a stark new residence for the ass. It was an abandoned house, with the roof still intact and most of the windows had glass. It had a plot of ground at the back and was a long way from the road. Which made it an ideal place for hiding something you wouldn’t want people to know about, like a stray ass. Whereas it wasn’t exactly a palace for an ass with kingly aspirations, it nevertheless could be made comfortable. The boys immediately set about doing just that.

A working brush left in an outhouse was procured and the floor in the front room was swept clear of rubbish. A large, old skillet pot was cleaned of dust and filled with drinking water, while Davey went off to get a bale of straw for bedding. In the interim, Packie managed to drag an old mattress and some blankets and fallen curtains downstairs.

After a good shaking and beating the dust off them, they made a pleasant resting place for his highness's royal rump, rather than the bare slabs of the floor. Initial mission accomplished, the two boys boarded up the door and abandoned Carnahalla King to what they hoped would be a restful night in his new abode.

"How will we approach Paddy the Smith, Packie?"

"I suppose we'll just tell him the truth, Davey. He'll know we didn't buy the feckin' ass anyway."

"And the shoes and the winkers?"

"Well, anyone could have given us them."

"Do you think Danny Brien will miss them?"

"Sure he hardly ever goes into that shed, Packie."

“How do you know?”

“I give him a hand sometimes bringing in the cows and straining the milk.”

“Oh I see. Well, if you think you can get them, go for it. We’ll need them to keep our spending with Paddy the Smith as cheap as possible.”

“What will we do with Carnahalla King tomorrow?”

“We could let him out into the paddock at the back. There’s a big gap in the corner into Ned Farney’s field but there is a hay feeder we could roll into the gap to block it.”

“Will we be able to lift the feckin’ thing onto its side?”

“Ah, we should. They’re not that heavy.”

“As it happened, the feeder turned out to be an ideal fit for the gap and the boys were happy Carnahalla King wouldn’t stray too far. He had plenty of grazing in the paddock as well, as the grass hadn’t been touched in a long time.

“Tomorrow. we’ll let him out into the paddock before we go to school. Then, on Saturday, we will take him to Paddy the Smiths. I’ll get the shoes and the winkers in the meantime.”

“Sounds like a plan to me, Davey. See you tomorrow.”

“See you, Packie. Carnahalla King for the Derby.”

“You betcha, Davey!”

The two boys parted company, dreams of future glory and money firmly entrenched in their minds. They now had a new goal: winning the Derby on Corpus Christi.

In the morning, the two of them met early at Sarah Quirke's. The peaceful night they hoped Carnahalla King would have hadn't quite materialised as he had taken to neighing at the top of his decibel range.

"What the fuck is up with him, Davey? Half the country will know we have an ass up here."

"I'm not sure, Packie. He's probably just lonely."

Fortunately, sweet apples Davey had stolen from someone else's orchard and carrots from Tom Bradshaw's garden distracted him from his lonesome cries. After, they quietly grabbed him by the forelock and led him to the paddock to while away his day in the luscious grass. Later, they would return after school to check on him.

They couldn't wait for school to finish and the bell to sound to get back to their new hero, Carnahalla King.

Neither could they restrain themselves from talking about the ass to each other, whenever they got a chance. Here, they had to be extremely careful as they didn't want the other boys in on their subterfuge. They would probably want a cut of the action or interfere in some unwanted way.

When they finally got to the paddock, they found Carnahalla King resting contentedly on a nice growth of tall grass. As they approached, he did a belly roll on his back, either to relieve an itch on his back or out of sheer exuberance. Packie noticed some blood sucking ticks, locally called crabs, on the underside of the ass's head. They were swollen with blood. A vet had told him to remove the heads as well, when removing them from an animal. So a tweezers was found in Packie's mother's make-up bag and King's red bites copiously daubed with TCP. Nothing but the best would do for his royal highness. Further investigation revealed at least half a dozen more ticks on various parts of his body.

Saturday came and the two boys made their way to Paddy the Smith. Davey had come straight with Dan Brien and had secured the shoes and the winkers in return for helping him with some chores around the farm. All in all, most of the people around were quite decent when it came to giving things away or helping others.

Nevertheless, it was with trepidation that they approached Paddy the Smith, as he was not a man renowned for his charm and social graces. Years of haggling with tight-fisted farmers had made him rough and churlish. Packie and Davey knew he wouldn't endure free-loaders easily. Dressed to the chest in his leather apron and nearly as wide as a pike of hay, all six-foot-four of him made an imposing, if not frightening, sight to the two boys.

“What do you two sparrow farts want?” he growled at them as he brought a lump-hammer down on red metal with arms the size of tree-trunks.

“We have an ass, Paddy, and he’s lame.”

“I can see that and what do you expect me to do?”

“We were hoping maybe you could fix him up.”

“Were you now, and who’s paying?”

“Well, we were hoping maybe we could do a deal.”

“I have thruppence,” Davey blurted out before Packie could continue.

Paddy stopped what he was doing and gave the two boys the silent, vacant look, like they had landed from another planet.

“Of course, that would only be a deposit. We would whitewash the forge for you, trim the ditch at the side and cut the nettles to make it easier to walk round the back and tidy up all your tools and put the scrap-metal at the front into the one vat and tidy up anything else that needs doing.”

“We could also give you a hand during the summer holidays,” Davey added, pleadingly.

“Let me have a look at that ass.” Paddy lifted the front hoof of Carnahalla King and then set it down gently. “Jakers, he’s a big fecker, isn’t he? Are you sure he’s an ass?”

“Of course, what else could he be?” Davey stated emphatically, as if he was an expert on the genealogy of asses.

“When will you start the whitewashing?”

“Today,” Davey answered before Packie could open his mouth.

“I have the lime. Have you got buckets and brushes?”

“Yes,” Davey replied without hesitation.

Packie said nothing as he knew Davey sometimes had a miraculous way of producing things he didn't have. As it was, Tom Bradshaw's drills of carrots were looking distinctly sparse in places and he wouldn't always continue to blame rabbits.

Shortly afterwards, the boys returned to the forge armed with a hedge-clippers, billhook, brushes and buckets. Packie started on the weeds and moss on the walls, while Davey tackled the briars, nettles and thistles that obstructed movement round the back. Later, Paddy's wife called with tea, curnie buns and jam. The buns and jam went down well, but Paddy liked his tea strong and you could trot an elephant across it never mind a mouse.

Slowly, the forge began to glisten like a white pearl as the whitewash went on. And the gutters, too, were cleaned so they didn't spew water over the side any more. All in all, Paddy was quite pleased with the boys and their work. Carnahalla King was reshod and with his repaired winkers on he looked - if not distinctly regal - at least the way an ass should look. Even more important, he had now lost his limp and was ready for the Derby.

"Do you mind if we leave payment until after the Donkey Derby on Corpus Christi, Paddy?" Davey ventured to ask Paddy once they had completed their jobs round the forge.

"I suppose I can wait. I'm not in the poor-house yet," Paddy replied. "So you plan to win the Derby, eh?"

"Yes, that's the plan," the boys replied in unison.

“Have you ridden him yet?”

“No.”

“Well, you had better get started. Methinks he is a feisty bit of a devil, so be careful.”

The boys acted on Paddy’s advice and took Carnahalla King to a field at the back of Davey’s farm. It was a long wide field and would give Carnahalla King ample room to stretch his legs. Packie, being the taller of the two, was elected as the rider. Getting on board a saddleless Carnahalla King proved to be a bit of a challenge, even with Davey holding the winkers tightly. Carnahalla King didn’t seem at all comfortable with somebody wanting to sit on his back. Once Packie was mounted, Davey let go of the winkers and Carnahalla King shot off like a bat out of hell. Speed was not going to be an issue as he seemed built for it.

The problem was: would Packie be able to control him? He shied at a lone clump of nettles in the middle of the field sending Packie airborne, over his head, and just about avoiding a right ould stinging.

Davey rushed up the field to check on his partner, “Are you alright, Packie?”

“I’m grand,” came the winded reply.

Packie had just about held onto the reins and let go when Davey took charge of the winkers. Davey reached over and gave him a hand up.

“No wonder whoever owned him got rid of him. He’s as mad as a brush!”

“Maybe we can calm him.” Davey patted Carnahalla King along the jaw-line and produced another one of Tom Bradshaw’s carrots to reassure him. “Do you want to have another shot at trying to ride him?”

“OK, I will. But don’t let go of the winkers until I tell you.”

“I won’t. Don’t worry.”

Eventually, the two boys decided to walk Carnahalla King round the field with Davey holding the winkers in an attempt to get him used to Packie on his back. After a while, it seemed to work. But, when Davey let go of the winkers, Carnahalla King once again took off like a rocket. This time, Packie managed to stop him. Albeit his dismount was hasty and lacked finesse, to put it mildly. Nevertheless, there was light at the end of the tunnel and King, as the boys now began to call him, might not run away with them on Corpus Christi. So went their training sessions until the big day of the Donkey Derby itself.

Packie felt he had achieved moderate, if not complete, control of King.

Things might not go too bad on the day and, one thing was for sure, King was fast. Corpus Christi, the day of destiny, had arrived at last. The two boys, after the procession was over, made a beeline for the field at the back of the Community Centre, where they had tethered King to a tree. That morning, he had received the royal treatment befitting his noble rank. Tom Bradshaw's carrots went down well, as did some apples from various orchards. A good brush down, a check for any last minute ticks and King, with his refurbished winkers, was ready to go.

“Do you think we should just call him King instead of Carnahalla King, Davey?”

“I think so, Packie. Willie Burke might not be able to spell Carnahalla anyway.”

“Yeah, he's a bit of a thick, isn't he?” Both boys laughed and, King untethered, they made their way to the sports field where the great race would take place.

A smallish crowd had gathered, which no doubt would get larger when the opening ceremonies and bullshit speeches would start proceedings. Both boys noticed that King got a bit more edgy when he saw the crowd but they tried to keep him as calm as they could. They hit on the idea of just registering King and taking him up to the starting post at the last minute. Willie Burke didn't even ask for King to be brought to the starting line, where a motley band of donkeys had now begun to congregate. He merely looked at the ass in the distance and registered its name and rider for the race.

Davey, with a lot of stress and strain, eventually got King to the starting line. When the race started, King took off in his usual manner; like he wanted to get this race over with and get out of there fast. He took a very wide circuit. So wide, in fact, some of them moved back a little, out of fear.

Packie was behind on account of taking such a wide sweep of the course. But on the final straight leg of the course, King - for reasons known only to himself - took the inside channel and belted up the field to pip the other donkeys with a yard or two to spare. Davey was ecstatic but it took Packie another two hundred yards or so to stop King. He awaited the announcement on the loudspeaker of the winner and riders of the first three donkeys. The committee on the podium seemed to be taking a while to establish who they were.

“Congratulations,” Willie Burke announced, “to Tim Delaney on winning the Derby on Apple Blossom for the second year in a row.”

In an equally loud response, Davey, exasperated, shouted, "But that's wrong! Our donkey, King, won the race."

For a moment, Willie Burke was stopped in his tracks but continued, “The second place...”

“But the child’s donkey won the race.”

This time, it wasn’t the voice of a disgruntled child but the gravel bellow of Paddy the Smith. Willie stopped immediately and returned to the committee for a consultation. Paddy the Smith, while not being in the foremost echelons of the local community, was nevertheless a well-respected man. The angry, disappointed look of the crowd hadn’t gone unnoticed either by the committee. After a conflagration, Willie returned to the microphone.

“It has been deemed by the committee that Packie O’Brien, the jockey on King, was not in full control of his mount and ran outside the boundaries of the course...”

“Where are the markers for the boundaries?” Paddy the Smith boomed again and Willie hastily returned to the committee.

After a long conflagration, somebody from the crowd shouted, "Give the child his money!" which was followed by a positive heckle.

Willie hastily returned to the microphone. "It has been decided by the committee, in the interests of fairness, that Apple Blossom, Tim Delaney's mount, and King, Packie O'Brien's mount, be deemed co-winners of the Donkey Derby and each receive the prize money of one pound."

There followed an enthusiastic cheer.

Packie, having tied King to the tree they had tethered him to that morning, had returned to his friend in the crowd near the podium. "Feckin' hell, Davey! Ten bob each, we're millionaires."

"I don't think I ever had a ten bob note in my life, Packie."

“We still have to settle with Paddy the Smith. I suppose we’ll be lucky to come out with a half crown each. Still, it’s better than nothing.”

The two boys approached Paddy the Smith carefully as he stood with his wife, waiting to watch one of his daughters in the egg and spoon race. He had noticed the two boys’ approach from the corner of his eye and turned to them. Paddy had the type of look and physique that made dogs cower and grown men lose their bottle.

“I suppose you two sparrow farts have come back to fix up.”

“That’s right, Paddy.”

But before Davey could ask how much they owed, Paddy continued, “I hope you two buckos don’t think you can fleece a poor ould blacksmith like me.”

"Oh God, no, Paddy, we wouldn't do that, would we, Davey?"

"Definitely not, Paddy."

"Let's see, now. Ye whitewashed the forge, cleared the drains, cut the briars and nettles back and tidied up the metal and tools and everything. I shod the ass and mended the winkers." Paddy thought deeply or pretended to do so. "Supposing we just call it quits."

Davey, with his hand on the ten bob note in his pocket, had momentary lockjaw and was only able to mumble the word, "quits," at his astonishment at being able to keep the note. Packie was so delighted he could have hugged Paddy, but that definitely would not have been appropriate. The two boys, exultant in their win, enjoyed the rest of the day feasting on ice cream and sweets. King even enjoyed a sweet apple, for once, legally purchased.

King would never run again in the Derby, for when the boys' mothers got wind of their escapades and the dangers involved, they put a stop to any further outings. But he lived out a good life in Sarah Quirke's plot, well looked-after by the boys and local farmers. And where the boys, now grown men, buried him with a simple cross with his name, King, on it.

Now, as I stand by the cross, I think of King's intrepid rider, my friend Packie, who now lies in a graveyard not too far away, along with Paddy the Smith and others who loved King. And I think of the day when fairness prevailed and the goodness of human spirit stood forth, and we won the Derby.

The Magic Cues

By Margaret Kelly

The knowing nod

The wiley wink

The mind your business nose tap

The be quiet finger to the lips

The inquisitive eyebrow

The oh so Irish smiling eyes and lips

The I don't know shoulder shrug and rolling eyes

The maybe yes maybe no tilting hand

The come hither curling finger

The give me a hug outstretched arms

The goodbye waving hand

The blown kiss

The silent tear

And now the magic cues are gone a trick of the
fading light perhaps

Or maybe a never ending childhood game of
blind man's bluff

The Saddle of the Sea

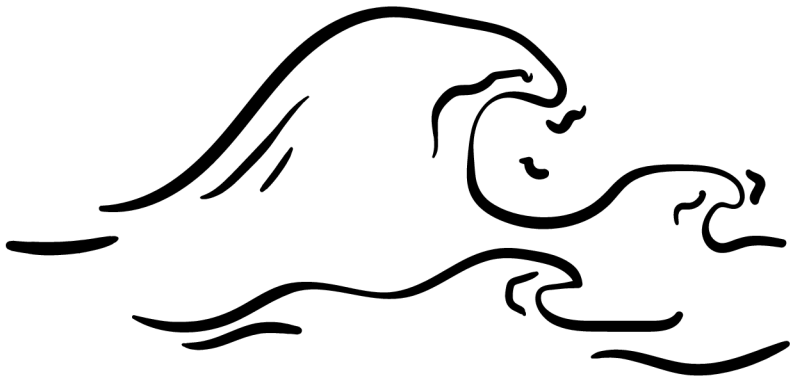
By Margaret Kelly

As I sit and look upon the saddle rock
The waves at its foot like a frilly frock
Bringing comfort and reassurance of the world's
continuity and endurance
How many have sat and admired as it rode the
sea and never tired
Sometimes a sea of peaceful beauty or, at
others, a storm-filled fury
From Brackna, Sandport, Port Mor or the pier
It may seem to some cold and austere
But to the man who toils the sea, a welcome
beacon it must surely be
If it could only its story tell, of the changes
wrought by ebb and swell
Being at once the bountiful giver and a purveyor
of death, making us shiver
But its power and beauty are like an addiction
and I wallow in its glorious perfection

The Saddle of the Sea

(Continued)

As I watch a wave, another chasing, a salty taste
upon my lips and pulses racing
This wild and wind-swept coast will forever be
the place I love the most
And, in my heart, it gives me pleasure to close
my eyes and view my seascape treasure



Reflections Unseen

By Margaret Kelly

As I look into the mirror and wish that I could
see

An unfamiliar face looking back at me

For I haven't seen it lately, nor indeed for many
years

So, I smile a timid smile to cover up my fears

For aging is a process that etches a design

And tells a life story written line by line

On turning from the mirror, with nothing there to
see

A myriad of memories come rushing in on me

Some are luminescent, some foggy and unclear

Reliving times of happiness, sorrows and of fear

But the spirit is resilient and it fans the flame of
hope

And in God's design is written you can surely
cope

Cards

By Lisa O'Donovan

I look down at my cards and take in my hand,
I hear the whispers
-you poor thing
-how tragic!
-it's so difficult
Looking down at my cards I realise something,
I quite like my hand!
In acknowledging that,
Accepting that,
Embracing that!
I smile,
Because I've already won the game.



Giving or Taking?

By Lisa O'Donovan

I went to Canada for a camp for the blind and visually impaired. I wasn't long after receiving my diagnosis - legally blind - and I really didn't know what to expect. Not to get all into the camp, but it was amazing, a real eye-opener. (Get it?!).

The memory that has stayed with me, however, is one which I have thought about often. I have replayed, pondered and laughed at it many times. And I am going to share it now.

I was sitting at a table in the dining hall, listening to the chatter around me. I took note of the conversation between two women who were discussing their eye conditions. They were talking about what little difference it made to their lives.

They agreed that, if given a choice, they would keep their conditions, their visual impairments, their blindness. I was horrified! I remember thinking that these women must be nuts; damn Canadians. How, or why, would anyone choose to be blind? This made no sense to me. None, whatsoever.

Now here I am, over a decade later, and I get it. My visual impairment has become such an integral part of myself that I wouldn't know who I was without it. In giving me my sight back, a part of me would be taken away. Giving or taking... I guess the real question here is, if offered, would I take my sight back? I don't know who I would be, if sighted. I just know I wouldn't be me.

The general social perception is that, if you have a disability, you would want to get rid of it. It never dawns on people that a disability might also be an integral part of someone's personality, their life.

So much so that maybe it's worth keeping. I find it ironic - even hilarious - to have come to this conclusion. I didn't understand what those women meant, all those years ago. And I don't think everyone will understand my perspective now. More than likely, they'll just think that I'm nuts, too! I do wonder, though, if anyone with a disability will understand.

The Bulb

By Cian McEvoy

I found a bulb,
A bulb on the ground,
When I saw this it made me think,
Think of lovely flowers.

I picture the petals,
Sitting on the leaf,
I put out my hand and say,
“That’s mine to keep.”
I pick up the bulb,
So nice and soft,
I considered on taking it with me,
And give it a good plant.

The Bulb

(Continued)

I have the image,
The image of the smell,
In my head I said,
“This will make my garden well”.
I will look at other plants,
Oh yeah I will,
But no flower is better than the daffodil.



Jimmy's Birthday Party Gone Wrong

By Geraldine Conway

Jimmy was really excited! Very soon, he was going to be ten years old, the age when all young mice were allowed to have their first official birthday party and have all their friends and family there. It would be even more exciting as it was just before Grandad Dan's 90th birthday. Guests were coming from as far away as the USA and New Zealand and it looked like they would be here in time for his bash.

Jimmy lived in a town in County Carlow with his older brother, Jack, and his parents, Anne and Paul. They had recently moved into a new shed in the side garden of a big house beside the golf club. The shed was fab and they had made a lovely home there. It was dry, warm and clean with lots of space and places to explore.

But they had to be careful, as the owners of the house did not like mice. (Imagine humans being afraid of small little mice!) The mice had easy access to the house, as the human kids often left the doors open. It was a strange house, with the bedrooms downstairs and living area upstairs, but this would be to their advantage as they found forgotten treats in the rooms – chocolate and popcorn – yum yum.

Jimmy's mum, Anne, was the youngest of her family and had seven brothers and sisters: Maria, Helen, Donal, Larry, Noel, John and Geraldine. Maria and Helen were fun but sometimes Jimmy wished they were not so generous with their big sloppy kisses. Geraldine was funny as she had poor sight and often mixed them up. She also missed steps, sometimes, or even walked into things. Once, when they were playing with their football outside, a neighbour passed by and Geraldine told them to be careful not to hit the gentleman.

But the ‘gentleman’ was Mrs Brown who hurried away.

Donal was a big hit with them as he was President of the NMSA, the National Mice Soccer Association. He would get him and Jack tickets - with their Dad - to attend the big matches up in the city when the national team was playing. Jimmy loved soccer and going to these matches. Jimmy also loved the leftovers they got from the big burgers that were served there. He had recently joined his local team, Mouseville United, and dreamed one day of playing for their favourite team; the greatest team in the Premier League!

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Mindful Morning Musings

By Maura Meaney

Morning sun shatters shadows
Of the night, the world wrapped
In warm embrace.
A gentle breeze whispering through hair
Turning strands to tousled dance.
Feeling each moment in the heartbeat of life,
Basking in the rhythm of a new day.

Birds chirping in trees slowly shedding
Summer's leaves.
Scattered golds, yellows, auburn hues
Caressing grassy verges, mini
Meadows of unkempt wilderness.
Nettle and dock leaf side by side
Reminders of childhood rhyme

Mindful Morning Musings

(Continued)

Lamppost gardens pour pretty
Pinks, purples, and snow-white flowers
Flaunting beauty from on high, magically
Mingling with the bright blue sky.
Smiling down as I pass by
A feast for the soul,
Balm to a restless heart.
Cars purring engine's song while
whizzing by in the busyness of life.
Dogs straining leash
Yearning to be free,
To run untethered curiosity in
Green grass beneath tall trees
Discovering nature's mysteries

Mindful Morning Musings

(Continued)

In this moment it is the
Universe and I, watching, waiting
Holding hope in this new dawn of possibilities.
While the world weeps tasteless tears
For wars that never cease, in this here and now
I find poetic peace in
Life's loveliness.



Glimmers of Light

By John Pepper

About 2.30pm on Friday 11th September 2020, in the presence of my wife Catherine, I was given catastrophic news by my Consultant Ophthalmic Surgeon, the late Professor Michael O' Keeffe, when he told me that I would never see again, never drive again, and that I should take my name off the motor insurance on our cars. This news was to change my life, and by extension, that of my family, especially Catherine, in a manner that was unimaginable up to then.

When we exchanged our wedding vows, 37 years previous on the same day in September 1983, we did not imagine that our pledge on that day - *"...in sickness and in health..."* - would be put to the test in such an abrupt manner.

As we sat in the car a short time later, both of us devastated and with tears in our eyes, Catherine reached towards me with her left hand and held both my hands so tightly with a vice like grip saying in the most loving manner - *“John, we’ll get through this together and try and make the most of where we are. We’ll do the best we can to get through this”*.

This was not the first time that Catherine said those words, or similar, in circumstances when unexpected challenges crossed our paths of life. It was through Catherine’s generosity of rock-solid support that I managed to overcome the challenges that came my way. This was going to be the most difficult. Gone was the prospect of a retirement when we would enjoy our time together pursuing activities of interest and leisure that were beyond our reach due to the business of life up to then.

My world had suddenly shrunk, and what remained was dark, dreary, bereft of hope and any meaningful possibilities. I was blessed with the gifts of my scaffold Catherine, a loving family, which - with the generosity of *“old pals of yesterday”* - helped me stay afloat. The bleakness of the winter months superimposed on my condition is indescribable...there was not the slightest glimmer of light.

My situation remained thus...until... not only did a glimmer appear, but a shining star arrived to illuminate my world. That star was infinitely brighter than the star that led the Three Wise Men to the baby Jesus in the stable in Bethlehem.

On 19th December 2020, all our lives were blessed when our first grandchild came into our world, a baby boy, who was to be named Seán. Words continue to escape me as I attempt to describe the overwhelming ecstasy I experienced when I met Seán for the first time.

The magic of that occasion, when Seán held the forefinger of my right hand in his little left hand with a grip matching that of Catherine's, some three months previous, will remain with me all the days of my life. What was unimaginable was suddenly ignited by that glimmer, that was and is the miracle of Seán Pepper, my precious grandson. My first contact with Seán on the afternoon of 21st December 2020, when my son, John, placed Seán in my arms for the first time on the shortest day of 2020, began the journey from despair and darkness to the prospect of meaning and purpose returning to my life.

What has happened since is truly remarkable. From the early months of his life when his mammy, Lisa, faithfully brought him to visit Catherine and I every Wednesday, my Sabbath day! Seán has and continues to envelop us with his precious affection. From all the memorable moments with Seán, three stand out for me.

First, is the comfort I get by sharing the same bedroom with Seán when he joins Catherine and me for his sleepovers with us. Second, was on Christmas Day 2024 when he whispered to me, “*Granda, you are my best friend*”. Those words whispered by Seán on 25th December 2024, and frequently since, are more melodious than when Don Williams put those to music and song with his famous hit in April 1975. Third, was that special occasion, on Sunday 11th May 2025, when I was blessed to be with my son, John, and my grandson, Seán, to witness Louth win the Leinster Senior Football Championship in Croke Park. This was a momentous occasion as it was 68 years since the Wee County previously accomplished that honour in 1957, when I was four years old - the same age as Seán was in May 2025. The exhilaration I experienced as I grabbed Seán from my son, John’s, arms, to raise him over my head when the final whistle sounded is indescribable, and is forever imprinted in my psyche.

I have chosen some lyrics of a song that manifests the meaning of Seán's life in mine, which he sings with the same conviction as Big Tom.

*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine;
You make me happy when skies are grey;
You never know Seán, how much I love you;
Please don't take my sunshine away.*

The best birthday present promised to me by my son, John, and Lisa, arrived a day late, on 11th October 2022. While I was disappointed on the date, I have come to realise that another day is neither here nor there when the present is one that has in its essence a current-day version of my wife, Catherine, when she herself was a child a few years ago! My birthday present for 2022 is our second grandchild, Méabh. Sadly, Catherine and I were deprived of precious time with Méabh during the early stage of her life due to Covid 19.

What struck me most when I had the joy of holding Méabh for the first few times, apart from remarking about her dainty feet, was the sense of determination that Méabh's every call and move exuded.....our granddaughter was not only another glimmer of light to further brighten my life... that light was going to be further illuminated by a dynamo!

Méabh was only a few months in our midst when she put down a marker around the terms that would apply in any relationships anyone wished to have with her. As a first, Méabh decided that the consumption of fluids by her would be purely on her terms. And, to make the point, she took a unilateral decision to decline all fluids. In so doing she forced her mammy to come up with a variety of alternative and creative strategies for her required fluid intake. So, Méabh had to be given generously diluted solid baby food for several months.

Eventually Méabh took the decision, in her own time, to spontaneously take a drink from a beaker which Catherine had left for Seán when both were staying over with us. Her sense of adventure, determination and independence was a cause for vigilance at all times. As Méabh's view of the world expanded, we began to witness the most beautiful feminine qualities emerge, complemented by the most loving attributes of compassion, concern and generosity. While my condition curtails my capacity to engage in many routine activities of daily living, these limitations have not escaped Méabh's attention. Even when she is engrossed watching her favourite cartoon, while singing along with "Elsa", Méabh notices when I'm in need of assistance, and she abandons what she is at and promptly comes to my rescue.

Touching examples of this are when she senses that I am looking for my shoes, or that I've mislaid my white cane.

Not only does Méabh find essential items, in the case of my shoes or slippers, she places them in front of the correct foot and puts the cane into my hand, with the words “There you go, Granda”. Méabh’s expression of the words “There you go”, are the words Catherine has been using when she is exercising hospitality when giving a guest or myself a mug of tea, a habit I never noticed at any time during more than 41 years of married life. It took Méabh just over two years to identify and model verbal expression with that of her granny, and by all accounts, bears a striking resemblance!

It is no surprise, therefore, that I find myself choosing lyrics from the famous chart-topping hit by Elvis in 1970 to capture the essence of the light and hope that my loving, caring and generous granddaughter has brought to my being.

*You give me hope and consolation,
You give me strength to carry on;
You'll never know the reason why I love you as I
do, Méabh,
It's the wonder, the wonder of you.*

On Wednesday 8th March 2023, Catherine accompanied our daughter, Máire, and her husband, Daniel, for Máire's pre-natal check-up. Thankfully both mother and baby were in perfect health. Although I was unable to see the image of our next grandchild on the screen, I could hear with incredible clarity the heartbeat of the little human being, who, in a few months, would not only bring a glimmer of light into our lives, but would ignite a magic never before experienced by me. The reality of the existence of the wonder and mystery of this miracle was brought home to me on the following day, 9th March, at Dubai airport, when, before Catherine and my departure home, Máire took my hand to feel her baby's movements as it made its way into a new comfortable position.

Hearing the baby's heartbeat on the previous day was truly special for me - I was within a few centimetres of this wonderful little person when I felt the baby move, who would bring so much enlightenment and enrichment to my universe.

Shortly before midday on Wednesday 21st June 2023, Stephanie, a very special friend to Máire and Daniel, knocked on the door of the room, set up to be the nursery for the new addition to their family, where I was reciting to myself the joyful mysteries of the Rosary. Stephanie enquired if I would be ready to leave for the hospital in a half hour, and we could stop for food enroute. Coming towards the end of our meal, at 2.15, Stephanie's mobile rang. The caller was Daniel, with the wonderful news that Stephanie was now an aunty, and that I was also a grandfather to my second granddaughter, and to my third grandchild. Stephanie and I immediately stood up, she shook my hand and we joyfully embraced, and left in haste, almost overlooking the slight matter of paying the bill!

As Stephanie linked me through the hospital entrance, swiftly past reception, we were joined by a nurse to accompany us to the ward where I would have my first contact with our latest gift from God. It was during the course of this fast-paced journey that Stephanie remarked on the item I was carrying in my left hand, and wondered aloud why I was bringing a visibly well-worn sock with me into the hospital. Fortunately, the nurse failed in her vigilance around infection control, as the sock was still warm from the sweaty heat of my left foot, having swiftly been removed from that foot some three hours earlier, when Stephanie announced our departure within a timeframe of half an hour! My well-worn and recently worn sock, to my great satisfaction, managed to escape Catherine's procurement of it for the washing machine, or worse, for its destiny in the recycling waste!

Securely contained within the garment in my left hand was a gift of sentimental worth given to me by my grandmother in 1957, when I was barely four years old.

During my early life, I was blessed to experience the loving warmth and affection of my granny, which I recall with gratitude, which I believe contributed in a significant way to my formation. It was during one of those times that she gave me the gift of a small toy donkey that shook its head when wound with the key permanently in its abdomen. This toy donkey, which my grandmother could ill-afford to buy for me at the time, presumably as a symbol of her love for me, was shortly to find itself transferring from its custodian for the previous 66 years, to a new owner, my newborn granddaughter, 3 hours of age. Granny could not have imagined that her extravagant investment, all those years ago,

would find its way, carried with the same love from her grandson to his granddaughter, as she had for her grandson in 1957.

On entering Máire's room, Stephanie handed me over to Catherine and Daniel, and both escorted me to the gorgeous little baby, my latest gift of life, and the person who had given me another glimmer of light, with the brightness of the rising sun. As I kissed Sienna's left little cheek as she rested in her mammy's arms, I began to once again count my blessings which were multiplying. I gave the sock with its contents to Sienna's mammy for safe keeping, with love from both Sienna's great great granny and granda. This was a truly special event and a cherished occasion, not least because of the presence of my wife Catherine, Máire's mother, and midwife at the delivery of her second precious granddaughter, Sienna.

Despite thousands of miles between us, Catherine and I have come to enjoy dedicated periods of time with Sienna in both Dubai and at home in Ireland, as well on family holidays together. We are privileged to witness and experience at first-hand the development of her unique personality.

Stand-out experiences for me were when I felt Sienna's heartbeat as she fell into a deep sleep while lying on my chest, and I felt the invigorating stimulus from the purity of her breath arriving on my skin. It touches my being when, on hearing the tap of my white cane on the steps as I descend the stairs, Sienna makes her way to the gates at the bottom, to assist me opening the gates, and then lead me carefully by the hand to the nearest bean bag where she plonks me down, and goes off about her business having taken possession of my cane!

The magic of Sienna's tight embrace, and the velvet feel of her hug when I arrived unannounced as she was having her breakfast on Saturday morning, 5th April 2025, will remain forever in my treasured memories. Sienna's concern for my need for sustenance, in preparation for our train journey from Dublin to Cork later that day, was borne out by her generosity of insisting that she feed me not only her little slice of toast, but every other piece on her mammy and daddy's side plates!

The person who wrote the lyrics for Joe Dolan's record that topped the charts in 1993, was prophetic, as thirty years later, these lyrics [slightly adapted], speak to the unique person that is Sienna Crouchman:

*I can hear your heart beat,
As you rest on my chest, Sienna,
That brings rays of light,
To my mind's eye. Your endless magic is
beautiful, Sienna.*

While I am afflicted with a life-limiting condition that greatly limits my independence, giving rise to recurring frustrations for me and those around me, the glimmers of light in the persons of Méabh, Sienna and Seán have each, in their unique and special way, taught me so so much. They have become, and will always be, unique role models for me as I try to follow their examples of never giving up. I am both blessed and privileged to have Sienna, Méabh and Seán combined as the lights that illuminate my universe, and clear the pathway of my life, so as to enhance my appreciation of what is really important. Through their being in my life, I have come to realise that the pleasure from certain accomplishments, as well as the acquisition of sought-after material possessions, only provide transient gratification. The love, warmth, care and gentleness showered on me by Seán, Méabh and Sienna, will always remain in my

reservoir of Treasured Memories that will radiate my existence for the remainder of my life's journey.

To conclude, I say to my Three Treasures, "The happiness of having you, Seán, Méabh and Sienna, makes my world a place worth living in".

White Foxglove

By Carmel Quinn

I went on a walk
With a group from Dundalk
To Carlingford by the sea
A girl walked with me
Describing the scenery
On the way, nestled among the green
Was a beautiful white foxglove, slender and slim
Braver than brave among the green
I had to stop and take a photo
Of the white foxglove
The only one I'd ever seen
Thrilled to pieces by such
Precious glimpses
Of nature's magical species





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