Eulogy for Carmel Conway 1930-2014

by

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Requiem Mass, Church of the Holy Family, Duniry

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It is a particularly cold April. The late afternoon holds that curious light, that nether light which is neither winter nor spring, but spring all the same. The year is 1952. An old one-carriage train rumbles along the tracks until it reaches its final destination, a sleepy little pastoral town nestled among emerald fields and limestone walls beside a lake at the foot of the Aughty Mountains in east Galway. The train approaches, thunders alongside the platform, and with a final blast of steam comes to a halt. Loughrea.

There is nothing distinctive about the scene. This old train does the daily run to and from Attymon. Its passengers from Loughrea to Attymon are mainly young men and women meeting the train from Galway to Dublin, emigrants bound for London and Boston in search of a better life. Some go no further than Dublin. Very few passengers come back to Loughrea on that old train except for the few more well-off women from the town doing a bit of shopping in Galway.

There is nothing distinctive about the scene, until an elegant young woman in her early twenties with an infant in her arms descends the steps of the train, her black high heels settling unsteadily on the rough gravel. She looks anxiously from left to right. She is wearing a light grey tailored wool suit, pencil mid-calf skirt, white cotton blouse and pearls, all of which accentuate her slim frame. Her auburn hair would have cascaded down on her shoulders were it not for the thin black velvet ribbon drawing it back. Her eyes are the colour of porcelain blue and she is wearing red lipstick. An observer in a Thomas Hardy novel would no doubt wonder about this woman. Clearly, she does not belong in these parts. Who is she? What is she doing here?

A man in his early thirties looks around him, steps forward. His movement is furtive, slightly embarrassed. The anticipation in his eyes is contained, appropriate for a man born in the local hills of Kileenadeema where reticence and restraint are cultural norms, where tribe and pride prevail against poverty and oppression and historical imperative. Where young men marry good strong women wearing sensible shoes. But it is the early 1950s now and there is hope in the air, a hope as fresh as the spring breeze of this late afternoon. There is hardship indeed but the Civil War is 30 years behind, World War Two is over, rural electrification has come to some parts, young lambs in nearby fields are leaping over stones, hedgerows are green, and the distinct smell of freshly-ploughed fields fills the air. The man is dressed in a tweed jacket and pants, cap, brogue shoes. Medium build, his hair is dark, slightly auburn. He nods at the woman, picks up her suitcases and the two of them walk towards his Ford car, bought by his old uncles from Sweeney's garage in Loughrea. The car had been owned by Eamon DeValera.

That woman was Carmel O'Connor, now Carmel Conway, our mother, and she had just arrived from Malahide, Co. Dublin, a prosperous little town just outside Dublin city. The man was Michael Conway, or father, and I was the two-month infant in her arms. Her brother and my father had both been carpenters working on the construction of Bus Arus in Dublin and her brother set them up on a blind date. Marriage followed. She came from an old Malahide family, solid stock, her father a member of the powerful carpenters' union, also a member of the old IRA who had trained with Kevin Barry in the Dublin Mountains just before 1916. Her mother was a west Cork matriarch who went to Dublin in the early 1900s as a young woman and found a job as a cook and later lady-in-waiting to Lady Talbot in Malahide Castle.

My father brought my mother to Walsh's old house in Limehill, that late afternoon in 1952. There was no electric light, no running water, no toilet. Dampness had seeped into the walls. The next day her high heels were forfeited for a pair of wellingtons and he instructed her to assist him planting potatoes. One week later she was back on the train to Dublin, infant in arms, with pneumonia. One month later she was back again in Limehill. Her pragmatic Cork mother told her firmly that she had made her bed and she could now lie in it.

Neighbours were curious. Brother and sister Jack and Maggie O'Malley were the immediate neighbours and it wasn't long before they came to visit to see "The Dublin Woman." Other neighbours inquired of Maggie what the Dublin woman was like. "She's not thin but slim," said Maggie euphemistically. A thin woman would be no good to work the land, of course, but with a bit of stirabout and buttermilk she could gain a bit of strength in herself. Slim was deadly altogether. It was a word you'd hear in advertisements on the wireless to connote the glamorous women of the 1950s.

This glamorous Dublin woman, Maggie was reporting, couldn't bake a cake, churn, make butter, or milk a cow. And she was making the quarest dinners, some fancy Dublin thing called "Shepherd's Pie." She knew nothing about bacon and cabbage. What in the name of God got into Micky Conway's head anyway to bring a Dublin woman down here? Weren't there any amount of nice solid country women around the place?

The 1950s

Maggie and Jack are visiting every morning and they ramble in of an evening too. The reports got better as that decade progressed: The Dublin woman has Walshe's house spick and span and there is a lovely fire in the hearth. Bridie Quirke showed her how to bake bread, churn and make butter. She is out in the fields tramming hay, up in the bog footing turf. Bridie showed her how to milk a cow too and you've never seen anything like the way she can do it. By the end of the 1950s, our mother had three more children: Mary, Joe, and Georgie. By the end of the 1950s, Maggie and the neighbours couldn't believe how hard the Dublin woman was working.

The house filled with neighbours of an evening: Jack Quirke, Frances (Fanny) and Bernie Dwyer, and Mena; Patch Kilboy from Kileenadeema; and always Maggie and Jack. Fanny Dwyer married John Hawkins and Bernie married Jack Quirke. The village of Leitrim brought more friends: Mary Ann Geraghty and Tess O'Malley. Back and forth those women visited across the fields, crossing the river at Finnerty's Mill.

In the summer evenings, my mother donned her high heels and costume and cycled with my father into the pictures in Loughrea to see the films of the day, films such as Gregory Peck in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*. Her city ways never left her.

The 1960s

There was one morning in the early 1960s which changed our mother's life significantly. Jack arrived in the kitchen this particular morning, thundering. A set of circumstances had taken place where he was being pressured to relinquish his land in Cloonacastle to the dreaded Land Commission. He told my mother he wanted to give her that land rather than give it up. He was by then in his seventies and arthritis had compromised his ability to run the farm. The deal was that she would look after him in his old age. He was like a father to her, a grandfather to us children. After some time he also gave her his land in Limehill. She fulfilled her side of the bargain to the end.

Having achieved the independence she always wanted, our mother set about looking after Jack, building up the farm and raising her family. She bought calves from Joe Sullivan in Abbey, bargaining with a seasoned cattle jobber as Joe was. Every morning she fed about 30 calves and milked about 15-20 cows. She lowered three cans of milk into a drain by the road every morning for the creamery in Nenagh: one 12-gallon can and two ten-gallon cans. She was up every morning for lambs dropping in spring. She raised and educated six children.

My mother was a true feminist, a woman ahead of her time. Like the suffragettes who fought for women's right to vote, she wanted equality. Her notion of marriage as an equal partnership was at odds, however, with the prevailing prescriptions of the time by Archbishop John McQuaid, the firm dictate that women's role was subservience to husbands. Eamon DeValera's notion of womanhood connoted comely maidens dancing at the crossroads or tied to hearth and home surrounded by rosy-cheeked children. These narratives confined women to the private sphere of the home, dependent on men, the public sphere of politics and business and the professions the prerogative of men only.

Our mother had no time for our father's philosophising and poetry. A pragmatist, she saw these pursuits belonging to the realm of the golden circle elites. Paddy Kavanagh might have written poetry, but the country poet died in poverty. Our mother quietly got on with her business. She was a business woman after all. She had a farm to run and a family to support, with two more children added, Carmel and Bridget. She was always on the go, quick-stepped, get-the-job-done. Often she could be seen milking a cow, her lips moving in prayer, always to St. Anne. There were worries and troubles, of course.

The 1970s

Jack died in the early 1970s. That decade saw emigration and marriages and grandchildren. Mary and I emigrated. I married and left England for Canada. Mary returned home and married a Kerry man. The hard work continued. Cloonacastle was a long way away for herding but Dot Duane proved to be great friend who always welcomed our mother with a cup of tea in her lovely home.

The 1980s

From the 1980s, Carmel got a job which brought in a nice income. With the sale of nine acres of land in Cloonacastle, auctioneered by Pat Lyons, our mother built the new house. Carmel married Gerry Martin and raised her family in our mother's home, assisting our mother in making that home lovely: there was painting and decorating and furnishing and carpeting and new china and a lovely Stanley range. There were lawns tastefully created with rhododendrons and heather and roses, four yew trees planted beside the gate and a lovely palm tree planted beside the garage, sallix trees planted along a wall built around the house. A cotoneaster miniature tree graced the centre of the front lawn. There was a new car and shopping in Galway. Carmel had become her partner. The two of them loved one another and fought one another, as close partners do.

The 1990s

In the 1990s our mother's youngest child Bridget also had a good job. One day Bridget filled out a form for our mother's passport and off they went on holidays. The photographs from the 1990s show Mammy smiling beside the sea, sailing on boats, sitting in cafes in warm sunny places like Portugal and Spain and Crete. She is always smiling into the camera, wearing a variety of sun hats and sun glasses.

There was more time now for her friends: Fanny Hawkins, Tess O'Malley and Mary Ann Geraghty. Nellie Fahy became a friend. Nan Sheil was a good neighbour as was Nuala Quirke. And the house was always full of Georgie's and Joe's friends. There was tea to be made and bread to be baked to entertain them all. There were grandchildren now, Carmel's children Mary and Gavin to be minded. There were visits to her beloved son Georgie, and his wife Mary and their son Evan in Galway. And there was now time to return home to her beloved Dublin, short visits up to her sisters Florrie in Howth and Chrissie in Portmarnock. There were visits to her sisters Sheila and Maurie in London.

Georgie was the son she adored. He was like herself, hardworking, intrepid, gregarious, a shrewd business man. It was she, after all, who had taught him how to do business, how to negotiate, how to close a deal. A pragmatist, her motto was to work hard and get ahead. She had no time for living in the past. She never made any major decision without Georgie's input.

The Decline

From the late 1990s our mother's health failed. Slowly, all her independence fell away as her body betrayed her, left her wracked in pain. The latter years were spent in and out of hospitals. She had many carers, including Martha Malloy and Sheila Breslin. She particularly liked Martha's penchant for high heels – she always liked a woman who liked her high heels. Sheila kept the house shining. Our brother Joe visited her most evenings, making her a cup of tea, sitting beside the range with her while she watched Fair City and Coronation Street and all the old films of her youth. Noel Glynn visited often. Having returned home after being gone 36 years, I became part of her life negotiating her through hospitals and consultants and various surgical procedures. But she eyed me with suspicion. She would never forget *that* book. She took umbrage not with my criticism of the Catholic Church but because I had revealed family troubles. Our mother was a private person and I had crossed a line. All through the controversy after my father broke with the Catholic Church, she remained stoic in the face of public criticism of him. She always said that beyond any church was God. She went to mass like everyone else. She said her prayers every night.

Her last days were spent in St. Brendan's Nursing Home in Loughrea. She was broken-hearted at the loss of her home, her independence. One by one her sisters and brothers all died. Her friends and neighbours all died. By the time our father died seven years ago there was a truce between them. When her best friend Fanny Hawkins died a short while ago she was bereft.

The home in Limehill she loved so well is empty now. One day as I was passing while walking the dogs I looked in the kitchen window. There was her big armchair beside the cold range, the chair from which, despite becoming immobile, she still commanded her own army, issuing commands to be carried out in accordance with her high standards, dispensing blessings and curses with equal measure, condemning politicians, issuing threats and warnings, celebrating triumphs, laughing, weeping. On her little table beside her chair were all the things that mattered to her in the end: her telephone to phone her family; her address book to phone plumbers or buy turf and so on, to keep her house going; the TV remote control for her films and soaps; a cough bottle needed for the cigarettes; a biro and notebook. Underneath the table were her slippers and three baskets of medications. The kitchen table was empty, the door to the hallway left slightly ajar, dust covering the table and window sills and pictures. A cold silence stared back.

But it was the clock on the wall that drew my attention. The clock had stopped at exactly 4.44, but curiously the minute hand was still straining on the forty-fourth minute, struggling valiantly, fighting, as it were, to tell the time, the power in its batteries slowly draining away.

How do I end our mother's story? Her intrepidness? Her sad end? That clock on the wall?

It's the 1950s again, a long summer's evening. She has on her pencil skirt and high heels, her white blouse, red lipstick. She is not thin but she is slim. Her lovely auburn hair is tied back with a black velvet ribbon. She and my father have just come from the pictures in Loughrea, the film adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca*, starring Joan Fontaine and Laurence Olivier. It is nearly eleven o'clock at night but the midsummer light is luminous. The air is filled with the sweet scent of woodbine and freshly-mowed hay as they come up to the cross at Aille. They are on their bicycles cycling and laughing – as they often did. They aren't going directly home. They never do after the pictures. Jack is babysitting us at home as he always does. There's no hurry, no hurry at all. They'll head for the village of Leitrim to visit Mary Ann and Willie Geraghty where they'll laugh and gossip and smoke cigarettes. The innocence of it all back then.

Just past Aille cross, the road takes a steep downward turn in the direction of Dalystown cross. Here it is: no more uphill, no more struggle, the bicycles gaining speed and momentum. And she's flying – she's flying through the sweet night air rushing through her hair. Down past Kilteskil cross and the bicycle is speeding through the midsummer night, and she is laughing at the thrill of it all, as the road and the bicycle and the night and the warm summer air all come together in – the scene shifts.

The scene is now the room in the hospital where she lay dying last Sunday morning. She is taking her last breath. Here it is: no more uphill, no more struggle, her spirit gaining speed and momentum, leaving her body. And she's flying – she's flying through the sweet air, speeding through to the light and the peace and the love of the Great Spirit in the great beyond, all of which come together in one eternal moment of sweet freedom that will last, that will last forever.