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Chapter One

Family

“You don’t know who you are, or where you come from!” This is something that has stuck in my memory for fifty years now. At the time I was about nine years old and it did not really mean very much then, I did not understand the remark. As it was spoken by another child, I just dismissed it and probably thought “what a stupid thing to say, of course I knew who I was”. However, as the years have gone by, I realized that a child would not say such things without possibly hearing them from an adult. So I guess there must have been some conspiracy surrounding this remark which was yelled at me in the heat of an argument.

I was born in Londonderry, Northern Ireland, on the 26 April 1952. I came into the world to the strains of *On Top Of Old Smokey* playing on a distant wireless. I remember the tune to the words of “On top of spaghetti all covered in cheese”

I was quite a healthy baby with lots of black hair and

olive colored skin (which my mother said was probably due to the amounts of castor oil she consumed whilst pregnant). Yuk! It may have been one of her cravings.

I lived with my mammy and daddy (Bridget and James Harkin) in Marlborough Avenue in Derry. Bridget was a small-built woman with a heart of gold. She would help anyone out if she could. She had a friendly face although her eyes always looked sad. Her grey hair had tinges of yellow at the front, probably caused from smoking. Although she always tried to hide it from me, she was very troubled with her stomach, which caused her to be frequently sick. To cover up for her illness she told me a story about how she had swallowed a coin when she was a young girl, which she believed to be the cause of her constant vomiting. But she would always be there when I needed cheering up; I would sit on her lap and she would sing and hold me close to her bosom whilst rocking me gently.

Jimmy was a tall grey-haired bespectacled man. His features were very much like the French President Charles De Gaulle, he always looked stern. When he was not at home you could find him in St. Eugene's Cathedral, as he was a deeply religious man. He was a very highly regarded and respected member of the Church and a prominent businessman in Derry, being a partner in a shirt factory, not actually making the shirts but more on the packaging and boxing of the items. Derry was very important in the shirt industry in the 1950's.

He was so proud of me and called me "the apple of his eye". He taught me a rhyme in Irish, and to this day I

can remember it word for word although I still do not know what it means. I have tried numerous times to get it translated, but over the years my pronunciation of the Irish language has diminished.

Londonderry, or Derry as I have grown to know it, was a good place to grow up in. Who would ever have thought this wonderful city would know so much pain and sorrow in later years. There did not seem to be hatred or sectarianism while I was growing up in Derry. Although there was one thing I can remember is that a lot of the factories or business establishments were either run by Catholics or Protestants and if you applied for a vacancy it would depend on which religion you were as to whether you would get the job. I heard of this happening to some of my relations. So maybe it was slightly there all the time. Derry as a whole was a very friendly place. The street I lived in consisted of the majority of the families being Protestant but this never really bothered us, we all lived happily side by side. The area was known as the Bogside which has become known worldwide for the incidents of “Bloody Sunday.” It was very close to St Eugene’s Cathedral, the schools, town and the park and within a half an hour you could find yourself in the countryside.

It was ideal and I loved it very much. At my young age I was not really interested in the history that went with the Siege of Derry or the Battle of the Boyne. All I knew was that the Orangemen had a parade which went through the town on 12th August. They would all be dressed in suits and bowler hats with a brightly coloured sash around their necks which came down to a point on their chests. They would also carry huge banners

depicting the history of Derry.

At the front of the procession there would be a lad who would throw a baton high in the air whilst turning around he would catch it. As a child watching a parade like this you don't really care why they are parading. You just enjoy the spectacle and get caught up in the atmosphere of the day, but I guess to the adults watching the show, the marching Orangemen meant more to them than to us.

Our day was St Patrick's Day. We were given a day's holiday from school, when even the shops closed and everyone was in a festive mood. The little children would have green ribbons in their hair done in ringlets for this momentous occasion. We would also wear little harp badges of green and gold, not forgetting the bunch of shamrocks pinned to our chests. The day would begin by going to Mass dressed in all our regalia to celebrate the Saint of Ireland. In the evening there would be huge celebrations where lots of families would have a get together in their homes and the food, drink and songs would be plentiful. Everyone would have their chance to do "a turn", a song, dance or recital. It was a wonderful occasion which I shall never forget.

Although I grew up as an only child, most of the time I managed to amuse myself very easily. There were times, however, when I really envied my best friend Pauline Lynch.

She belonged to a large family of eight children. There seemed to be always something exciting going on in her house. I knew I must not envy them as this was a sin and I would have to confess this to the priest in

Confession. But it was very difficult especially when, after Sunday dinner for example, my mammy and daddy would fall asleep and I would have to occupy myself.

I remember one Christmas Day we had been to early Mass and come home to open our presents and eat the traditional Christmas Dinner. As usual after dinner my parents fell asleep and I decided to go and see if Pauline was coming out to play. I knocked on the door only to be told that Christmas Day was just for the family. I did not realize it till then but no amount of presents could make up for the loneliness that I felt. I really wanted someone to share my thoughts and time with on this special day.

Pauline was a couple of years younger than me. She was tall and thin and had short straight hair. I would have done anything to have had straight hair. She had a great sense of humor and could turn the worst situation into something funny. We were inseparable. I was quite the opposite in stature as I had curly hair and was a bit on the plump side. We both shared a special kind of trust, something that I cannot quite find the words to describe. We were there for each other through thick and thin. She had four sisters and three brothers. Needless to say that their house was very spacious it was three storey's tall. I would sometimes be allowed in to play indoors with them when it was raining. Her older sisters would make up games to play as they had such good imaginations. Mrs. Lynch was a typical country woman she was always baking and sewing for her large family. She encouraged her family to be self sufficient making jams from berries growing in the hedgerows. If there was a thunderstorm I can remember we would all kneel and say the rosary as the thunder and lightning went on around us. I don't

know why we did this - whether it was to help take our minds of the terrible noise or if it was to reassure and protect us from something we could not alter in any way. The ritual was also to cover all the cutlery and mirrors and to disconnect all plugs. But for whatever reason it did seem to help us through the storm even if it did make us a bit paranoid about thunderstorms as we grew older.

Sometimes Mrs. Lynch and her family would invite me to join them when they all went for a picnic to the country. We would not travel by car (the Lynch family did not have one) but would all walk happily along the roads and lanes till we were out amongst the cows and fields. Mr. Lynch would not join us. Neither did my mammy or daddy, probably as they were a bit older than Mrs. Lynch. If the younger members of the family got tired their older brothers or sisters would give them a "piggy-back". We would walk for miles to a place called 'Greenin' there were castle ruins there which we could climb and run about to our heart's content. Mrs. Lynch would set out the picnic and we would all eat heartily after all the fresh air we had inhaled. She would also tell us stories of her childhood in the countryside which would usually make us laugh. When I recall these times it was probably like a scene with Julie Andrews in the Sound of Music with all those children around her. All that was missing was a guitar to accompany the singing. These were times I loved.

My mammy and daddy would always make sure we went on a holiday. We nearly always went over the border to a place called Bunrana. Over the border the cigarettes, beer and spirits were cheaper due to it being a "Free State". It was neither a town nor a city. It consisted

of one main street, which was full of souvenir shops, ice-cream parlours and pubs. The hotel we stayed at was called "The Lake of Shadows" and was a big orange colored building. It had a large garden at the back and the front garden was covered with pebbles. You could smell the sea air as the beach was only a short distance away. To me it was quite a posh hotel where the waitresses and maids wore black dresses with white lacy aprons and little lace doily's on their heads. The dining room was spacious and immaculate, tables all set with shining cutlery and white tablecloths and napkins. But the thing I remember most was the delicious smell of cooked breakfasts and small dishes with "curls" of butter in them, as I had never seen these before.

We would quite often go on these holidays with aunts, uncles and cousins, so I always had company to play with. It would have been nice if Pauline could have joined us on one of these holidays. We would walk to the beach most days. My cousins would go into the water for a swim but as I could not swim I had to settle for a paddle with my mammy and daddy. The evenings were the most exciting to me as we would all go to the pub. At the beginning of the evening the men would all congregate in the bar while the women and children could only stay in the lounge or 'snug'. But eventually the men would join us and a grand old sing-song would take place. Everyone once again would do their party piece in a song, dance or story. I remember getting up to sing one of the songs my mammy had taught me. I always got a lot of applause and if they were feeling really generous I would sometimes get a couple of half crowns as a reward. This was quite a lot of money in those days.

Today it would only be equal to fifty pence. There was quite a crowd of us and I think the publican must have known the adults on first name basis as we brought him such good trade in those summer months. We all enjoyed our time in Buncrana, which would probably have only been about a week at a time. I guess it would have been very expensive to stay in a hotel, unless of course we got a discount for the amount of rooms we probably had.

I spent a lot of time with my aunt Mimi, who was a really lovely person. She was a Hegarty, not a Harkin. I say aunt but I did not know the exact relationship to Bridget or Jimmy. The Hegartys' lived on the Creggan Estate. Mimi could not get about very easily due to her size and the amount of *Gallagher's Blue* cigarettes that she smoked. She was nevertheless the most jovial and happy lady with the roundest face and enormous bosoms. I did not know Uncle Hughie (her husband) very well except that he did like his drink. They had a family of three girls and two boys. But there had been other pregnancies that Aunt Mimi had lost. Sue was the oldest girl and she did most of the cooking. Teresa was next, she was a very precise person and everything had to be just perfect. Pam the youngest was really pretty and full of fun. The two boys Hughie and Danny were never around very much. But they all adored their mother.

My other relations were the Harkins; they only lived across the road, so it was quite usual to see aunt Rose in our house. My aunt Rose was a tall forbearing person with whom you would not like to cross swords. She would always say what she thought, sometimes without thinking about the consequences that such a remark may have. But never the less she would also be willing to help

Bridget or Jimmy in what ever way she could. She was married to Paddy. They had six children.

Apparently once when I had the measles, Rose brought her children over to stay with me, so that they also would catch the disease. She thought by doing this she could get the measles all done and finished in one go. I can't remember if her strategy worked or not.

Bridget's relatives were the Villas. Her brother was called Dinny (Denis) and his wife Francis. My uncle Dinny also suffered badly with his stomach. They had fourteen children. The closest of these in age to me was Sharon. Sometimes Yvonne her older sister, would be allowed to join us for our holiday at Bunrana.

Lastly, there was Peggy, who was like an older sister. I can't remember if she ever lived with us, but she would come on holiday with us to Bunrana. She was always there to help me if things where not going too well, especially when a photograph was being taken. I would never be in the picture if I could help it, I really hated cameras. But Peggy would always be the one to coax me into the picture.

These holidays conjure up lots of different memories for me, all of them good ones - from simply paddling in the sea in an elasticated ruched swimming costume to the evenings in the pub with lemonade, crisps and lots of attention.

Chapter Two

Childhood

School days: “the happiest days of your life.” I know you will have heard this many times, but whether it be true for you or not I can honestly say I enjoyed my school days. I loved being with other children. I was a satisfactory pupil according to my school reports, I knew I was not exceptionally clever at all subjects, but some I really enjoyed and excelled at. These were English, History and Religious Instruction.

I began my education at the age of five when I attended the St Eugene’s Primary school. The school was quite close to where we lived, and well within walking distance. It was run by the nuns, as was the Middle school. They were very strict, especially on the basic things like manners, cleanliness and time- keeping, which I can say I managed to adhere to easily. I was a shy timid child who rarely got into any mischief. I think I may have been the ‘teachers pet’. As my daddy worked in the shirt factory, if the nuns required any boxes he would

gladly provide them, so I may have had a slight edge over the other pupils when it came to favoritism.

My fascination with the Sisters who taught me was great; they were my role models. I was very interested in reading especially about the lives of the Saints.

My mammy even bought me a nun doll. There was one Sister whom I admired very much. Her name was Sister Bernadette. She did not look as frightening as some of the other nuns. She was a lot younger and looked immaculate in the long black robe with stiff white collar and veil, always with a smile on her face. I made a promise to myself that if I had not got married by the age of twenty-one then I would become a nun and devote my life to God. I did not tell anyone this as my friends may have laughed at me but I knew that my mammy and especially my daddy would have been so proud if I had chosen the religious life.

The sights, sounds and smells of the first school will always remain with me: the dark oak floors, which were highly polished, and the walls covered with interesting charts and pictures; the colorful beads with large holes for little fingers to thread on to the long laces; the crates of tiny milk bottles which were never cold, but always warm from standing in the sun. I was never a lover of milk unless it was at a very cold temperature. These would be given to us with a straw at midmorning. In the afternoon I can still remember we were told to put our heads down on our little desks and have a short sleep. While attending the First school, one of the hurdles to overcome was to make your First Communion. This was a very special day for a six- year- old, but probably for the

wrong reasons. It should have been the receiving of the Holy Sacrament, but I think for most of us the treats afterwards were actually what we looked forward to. Preparation for this great event would have started months before to make sure that everything would go smoothly. But you can't guarantee anything where children are concerned! Before the big day we would all be marched over to the Cathedral to make our First Confession. For without this there was no way we could take the next step of First Communion. In our religious lessons one of the things we were told was that if we had told a lie we would then have a black mark on our souls. If we then happened to be unfortunately involved in a car accident and died, we would go straight to that fiery furnace called hell! This was very frightening, so we would always endeavour never to have a black mark on our souls. Some people would say that this was not an ethical way of teaching religion, but if you have never known anything different it was just accepted. We also practiced receiving the 'Host' on our tongues. This was to be left on the tongue until it dissolved and not chewed or touched by our hands in any way. As this was the "Body of Christ".

My mammy had bought me a whole new outfit from head to toe. This consisted of a white dress, veil, white socks and shoes, new underwear, gloves, hanky and not forgetting the little white bag to hold my prayer book, and hopefully all the Money I would receive from friends and relations after the service.

Then there was the photographer to capture the memories of the day for many years to come.

We would all congregate at the school afterwards for a special lunch, as we would have had to abstain from food for an hour before receiving the 'Body of Christ'. Through the service little stomachs would be rumbling and some children would faint with the heat, hunger or just the overexcitement of the day.

St Eugene's Middle school was the next step. Here the work was harder as we then began to prepare for our eleven plus examination to see if you would go to the prestigious Thornhill College or St Mary's Intermediate School. I cannot remember ever sitting my eleven plus, unless it was done without the pupils actually knowing it was the 'Big' one. But anyway I must have failed as I went to St Mary's. I was really pleased about this result as Thornhill was a long bus journey to endure each morning, and I could walk to St Mary's in about fifteen minutes. Besides, most of my cousins had attended St Mary's and they had done really well. My mammy and daddy were proud of me no matter which school I attended...

But before I could leave St Eugene's there was once again another religious event in my life: Confirmation. Now we were becoming: 'Soldiers of Christ'. This involved choosing another name preferably a Saint that you admired. This name was added on after your middle name.

So I became Geraldine, Patricia, Bernadette Harkin. Quite a mouthful! The Bishop would perform the ceremony, which entailed being tapped on the cheek with his ring.

There were lots of Holy Days and each one usually

meant a day off school, providing we went to Mass first thing, and most of the children thought this was a good exchange. Ash Wednesday however was not a holiday. I could not quite understand what this was all about. I remember being taken over to the Cathedral after school to receive the Holy Ashes from the priest. We would slowly queue up and kneel down at the altar where the priest would then place a cross of blessed ashes on our foreheads. (cold of course) I remember feeling so proud with the black cross on our forehead, as everyone could see it. It was like being touched by a favourite pop star. You didn't want to wash it of. You would even feel envious if someone else's mark was more prominent than yours. But this could be easily rectified by putting your hand up the chimney and retrieving some soot!

Most famous of all was the ritual of 'The Wake' when someone died. Firstly, a large black silk ribbon was tied in the shape of a bow and placed on the front door of the deceased persons' house. Neighbours and friends in the street would draw their curtains in respect for the deceased.

The corpse would be brought home for one night before the funeral; this was to let family, friends and neighbours to pay a last visit and to pray for the soul. The coffin would be placed in the front room surrounded by candles. The lid would be left open so that the person could be seen, for one last time. Adults did not seem to worry too much about the effects this may have had on children or younger members of the family. They were never forced to look at the deceased but nearly always persuaded to do so. Death is a frightening thing at the best of times and the thought of a dead person in a house

can be very traumatic, especially for children. In this room people would talk quietly and decades of the rosary would be said.

In the other rooms, however, there was a slightly different atmosphere. Here people would be drinking, eating and generally telling stories about the deceased. The drink and food were in abundance and would flow well into the night, but worst of all was the feeling that it was all so false, especially when you would sometimes hear folk haggling over the possessions of the deceased.

Pauline's mother attended a 'wake'. Unfortunately it did not go smoothly for Mrs. Lynch, she was quite a tall woman, and had to bend considerably to look into the coffin. Every one was quiet and in prayer and so no one noticed that standing so close to the coffin, Mrs. Lynch's coat started smoking as she had accidentally brushed against one of the candles. When she did notice, she was unsure what to do. She ran through the house followed by a line of people trying to put the fire out. Luckily she did not get burnt, only her pride was hurt.

Our house was a three-bed roomed terrace with pebbledash walls. The large front door opened into a small porch with another door, which had a brass plaque with the name HARKIN on it. The step was cardinal red as were a few others in the street. When the weather got hot, my mammy would put up a large brightly coloured striped curtain over the front door. This was done to protect the wood from the heat. The front room was kept for special occasions; we mainly lived in the dining room at the back of the house. The kitchen, or scullery as we called it, was small and narrow. We did not have a fridge

but had a cupboard with a wire mesh front where we kept the meat, milk and butter. There was also no washing machine; everything was done in a large boiler on the stove or by hand in the sink. Further on from the kitchen was the bathroom which was quite big and very cold. At the top of the stairs on the first landing was a large statue of the Virgin Mary next to the first bedroom. Up a few more stairs were the other two bedrooms. I shared the main front bedroom with my mammy and daddy, as the other two rooms were used for lodgers.

Pauline and I were playing upstairs once, in the front bedroom. I happened to open the wardrobe for something and I stepped back suddenly in fright of what I had just seen. We both ran from the room until we could pick up enough courage to take another look. Hanging in front of us was a long brown tunic with a hood and sandals on the floor. I did not question my parents about this but it really frightened me for quite a long time after the incident. What was it? Whose was it? Why was it hanging in my parent's wardrobe? So many questions but I did not know who to approach to get the answers. I do not know if Pauline mentioned this to her family but we did not talk about it again. It seemed a lot easier to blank it from our minds. But I was to find the answer in years to come. I found it difficult to sleep in this room from that moment onward, but found comfort knowing that my parents were not far away, at the other end of the room.

The back yard had a small garden mainly consisting of rose bushes. A white wall about ten feet high surrounded the garden. On top of the wall were lots and lots of pieces of coloured broken glass, which were

cemented on. I guess it must have been some sort of deterrent against burglars. The back gate led out to one of the numerous back lanes in the area where I lived. The area was a large maze of rows and rows of terraced houses, each with a back lane behind them. Each lane was connected to the other. As children, we found these places excellent for playing games which consisted of two teams - one the runners, the other the chasers. It was probably not the cleanest area for children to play in, as I am sure the back alleys were also home to vermin and other wild life. But it did not do any of us any harm either mentally or physically. There was always a crowd of us, both boys and girls who played together. We would attach a rope unto the lamppost, where we would sit on the end and swing around it. Pauline and I would organise what we called a 'Fun Fair' (equivalent to what is known now as a car boot sale) with the help of my mammy. It would be held in the back yard with lots of things like comics, toys, games and refreshments for sale. We would also have games where you could have a go at winning - such as trying to drop a coin over a sixpence or thruppenny bit which would be situated at the bottom of a bowl of water. These fairs helped us get some extra pocket money. We would also do "messages" (errands) for neighbours especially on a Friday night, as the Catholics in Derry would not eat meat on a Friday. Going to the chip shop for a few fish suppers could earn us a shilling or two.

My daddy used to run what they called the 'Slate Club' in a small hall near the town centre. I am not sure really what it was. On a certain evening once a week, people would go and pay money. I guess, looking back, it

must have been something like what we call today a credit agency or even a loan shark.

Except I could never think of my daddy as the latter; he was much too honest and sincere to do anything immoral. But of course others may have seen him differently. It may even have been just a savings club.

One day my cousin and I were selling raffle tickets to friends and neighbours. We knocked on the door of a bungalow with a large porch, and unbeknown to us a large fierce-looking Alsatian dog had made its way around the side of the bungalow. Not having had much experience with dogs, I was terrified and the more we screamed the more it barked and growled at us, baring its large teeth for us both to see. She pushed me in front of her when suddenly the dog made a charge at us. It started attacking me, ripping my summer dress to shreds but it could not defeat my Liberty bodice. Eventually after what seemed like eternity, the owner of the house came to the door. She managed to calm the dog down and invited us both into the house, where she gave me an orange and a pound note for a new dress. I do not think the matter was pursued any further, but to this day I do not like Alsatis. Of course we know now that if a dog senses that you are frightened it makes things a lot worse. But I can honestly say that my Liberty Bodice saved my life. I did not like wearing it, as it was quite thick with buttons down the front, and not very pretty. This was worn over a vest, so it kept you really warm.

My mammy was such a good cook. Each Sunday after Mass my cousins would call on us with a large tin container. My mammy would fill this with home made

soup for them. She would never moan about this chore and I don't know if they ever offered to pay her anything for the ingredients. We were not rich but my parents would never refuse me anything. I guess I was spoiled, but I do not think I played on this as some children would do. Although some of my clothes were cast-offs from my cousins, I didn't really mind. My school uniform for the Secondary school was acquired from Pauline's mammy and relations. But for one of my birthdays my parents bought me a bicycle. I can still see it, shining brand new silver and light blue. I was so proud of it. It must have cost a lot of money. I was frightened to ride it at first, as I did not have any experience of riding a bicycle. I can not remember having a small bike or trike. But I practiced and practiced until I mastered it. This was difficult at times as Marlborough Avenue was a very steep hill. But in time it became another phase and the bike sadly got put aside.