

THE ROAD TO NAB END – Chapter Sixteen

My name is Billy. I spent my childhood in Blackburn, which in the 1920s was a very different place.

When I was about ten, I became closer to grandmother Bridget than to my own family. Hardly a day went by when I was not in her house. With Jenny and Brenda in the mills, it fell to me to help her keep it clean. I ran errands. When things were especially bad, I'd bring a shilling or a half-crown from mother to buy food. Except from me, she never accepted help gracefully.

In the mid-twenties grandmother fell on bitterly hard times. Having lost her job in the mills, she tried to survive by doing people's washing, never satisfied until it was whiter than snow. It used to infuriate me the way some of the workers robbed her. 'Tell her I'll give her the money next week' they said when I delivered the laundry, beautifully wrapped in clean newspaper.

At that time, she was living in a doll-like house, shaped like the tip of a flat iron. It had one tiny room downstairs and an equally small one upstairs. Apart from two windows (one up, one down), a corner in which to cook and another in which to wash, a broken rocking chair, two stools, a rough table and a bed with a wooden chest at its foot, there was little else. Anything of value had long since gone to the pawnshop.

As grandmother got older she often talked about Ireland; about her birthplace, County Clare, with its ruined castles and the ghosts that haunted its broken walls. She also spoke of her life as a girl before she met grandfather Thomas. She told me about the balls she'd been to. She had had a passion for dancing. No matter how much she tried to conceal it, I detected a sadness.

On occasions I managed to persuade her to take a short walk. With her hat and her jacket and her silver-topped cane and her cracked shoes, all of them relics of her better days, she looked quite a toff. Even when she had been a slubber in the mills, she had refused to wear a weaver's shawl and clogs. Poor or not, she retained her dignified bearing.

Eventually she got so weak that I began to do all her cleaning. That's how one Saturday evening when grandmother had gone to our house, I came to open the box that stood at the foot of her bed. I was astonished to find a whole lot of fine clothes there. Among them was a beautiful blue ball dress decorated with imitation pearls. As clothes meant food, I brought it up when she returned.

'Why don't you pawn them?'

'They're not for pawning, Billy boy, not my best feathers. Not those.'

After a long pause she spoke up.

‘Would you like to see me in my best feathers?’ There was a note of mischief in her voice. I said yes for I knew it would please her. I looked up a few minutes later as I heard her feet on the stairway. What I saw made me catch my breath. She was wearing the dress; the pearls glowed softly as they caught the firelight. Around her neck she wore a long fluffy boa. On her feet were the elegant slippers. From her wrist hung a little book.

‘Grandma,’ I gasped.

She pretended to consult her little book. ‘I believe you asked me to dance this one with you’ and she extended her hand toward me gracefully. I don’t know how long we danced. It ended when I fell over a stool and could go on no more.

I didn’t see anything of grandmother the next day. Two nights later I entered her darkened cottage. There was no sign of her. I saw her empty purse on the table and knew something was wrong. I ran upstairs. There was no one there. When I lifted the lid of the trunk at the foot of her bed, it was empty. I ran home and told mother.

Two days later uncle Edward walked into our house to tell us that grandmother Bridget was dead and buried. Wearing her ball dress, she had stumbled all the way to the workhouse and had died there a few hours after being admitted.

For the first time in my life, I knew what it was to be scalded with grief.