

this life

by Caroline Preston

I REMEMBER MY GRANDMOTHER as a tiny woman with a halo of white hair like a dandelion clock. She wore pale blue twinsets and always with a single thread of pearls. I never saw her in trousers or, despite her diminutive size, in high heels. She seemed to have an untipped cigarette in her mouth all of the time. I suppose it was this that made her laugh sound low and cracked. I didn't know anyone else who laughed like that. Musical but broken. She liked Gordon's gin and humbugs and always had a bag of those black and white sweets in a brown sticky paper bag about her person somewhere. She lived with us in her latter years as her arteries hardened, and she helped with my arithmetic homework, blinding me with a science far beyond my comprehension.

As children this was the only glimpse we got of the woman she had been. She never talked about her own mother or of any of her family. She was Welsh, she said, and graduated from the University of Aberystwyth in 1918, one of the first women to do so. There were no photographs of her wedding. Perhaps this was because at that time thousands of men were returning from France after the war and no one wanted fairy tale weddings. It was enough to have survived. But maybe she eloped. There was much we didn't know about my grandmother.

The mystery was enhanced by the fact that in 1940 the RAF fished her out of a crumbling house in Westmeath to manage the Operations Room for Bomber Command in Lincolnshire. Her tired face disclosed the strain of those years. But her life prior to them had not been easy either. When she married, her father-in-law did not approve, and my grandparents headed off to prospect for rubber in Malaya where my aunt Joan was born and then to South Africa to grow oranges where Nick, Tony and my own mother arrived.

This was no grand colonial life. In Malaya they lived in a rough shack in a kampong. In South Africa they were housed in a cluster of thatched rondavels. When my great grandfather died they finally went to live in Westmeath and two more children were born. By this time, however, the house had fallen into serious disrepair from which it was never to recover. Going off to join the war effort in Lincolnshire must have been something of a relief.

My mother's childhood in Westmeath, despite the holes in the roof and lack



My grandmother liked Gordon's gin and humbugs and always had a bag of those black and white sweets in a sticky paper bag about her person

for her to send her son out over Germany night after night.

My mother devoted her adult life to recreating her own childhood for my sister, my brother and me. It too was idyllic. We lived in Tyrone and although the times were troubled we were sheltered from it. We lived in a tatty old farm with ponies and dogs, spent long summer evenings playing tennis to the sound of the Lambeg drums, had sumptuous afternoon teas with barm brack and chocolate cake, and made trips to the mountain lake to fish.

We learn our way of being in the world from our mothers, and inherit their karmic shadow. We learn our parenting skills from them. For my own children I have tried to provide the safe and happy environment that was created by my grandmother and my mother. I hope I have instilled in them the courage that they had, and the example they set for a new generation of women. I know that my daughter will do the same for her children.

I am left to wonder about the woman who did it for my grandmother.

of money, was idyllic. Photographs show her and her brothers and sisters playing in boats, fishing and riding donkeys.

As she entered her teens Nick and Tony, themselves aged only 15 and 17, were sent off to Australia to work on a farm for a distant cousin and the family pictures then seem strangely empty without them. I know my mother missed them dreadfully.

War came and the whole family joined up as soon as they were able and it was not long before my mother followed my grandmother and her eldest sister Joan into the WAAF and became a radar mechanic. She spent much of the war on the top of masts fixing the electronics. It was an unusual post for a woman in those days.

Years later she would be the one at home to fix the television set or the radio and change the battery under the bonnet of the car. I imagine had she lived that she would have embraced the technology revolution that has so baffled me. Nick and Tony joined the Australian forces, Nick as a Digger and Tony as a pilot in the RAAF.

Despite the splintering of the family by the war, they were to come together in extraordinary circumstances. Tony, for example, flew Lancaster Bombers out of the very airfield where my grandmother was posted. It must have been torture