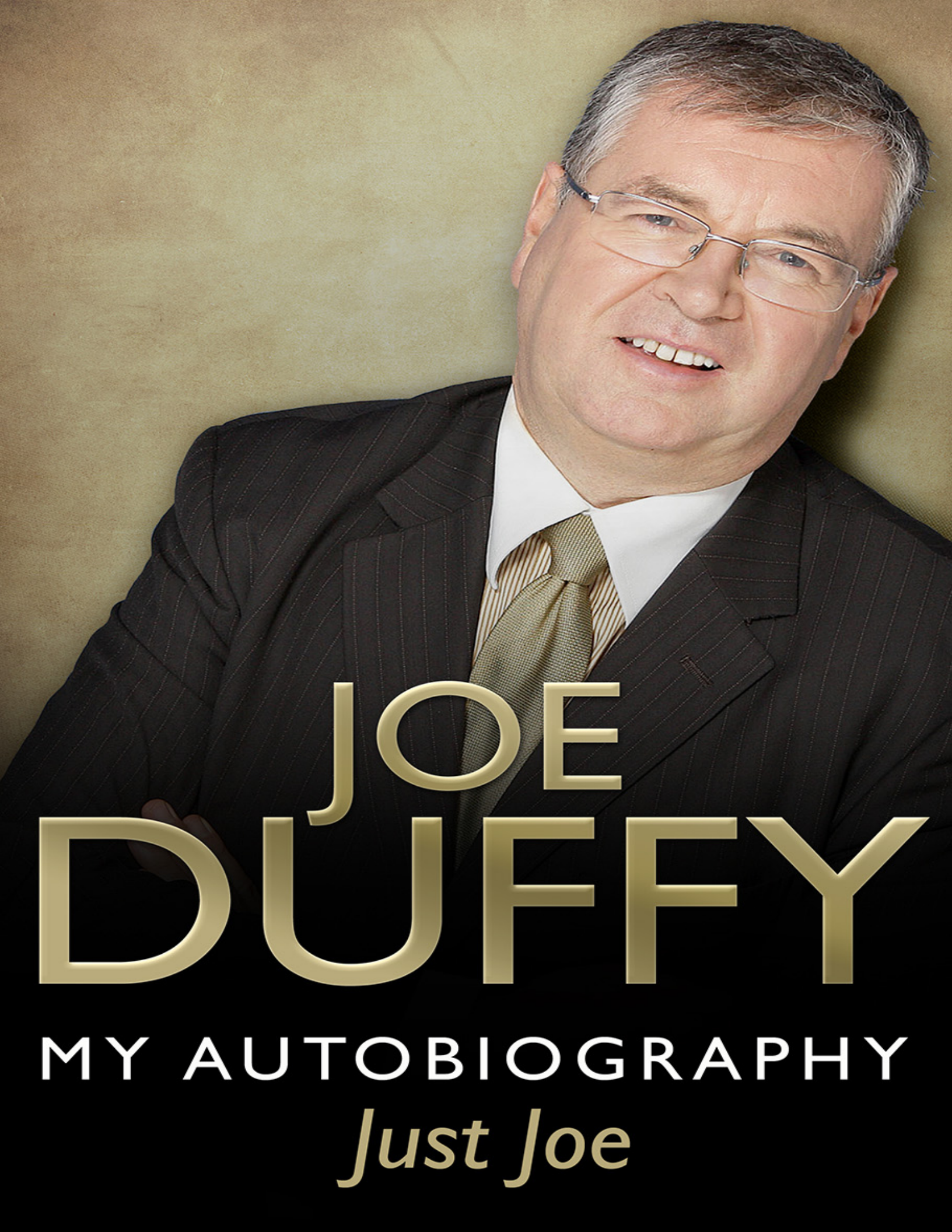

JOE DUFFY

MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Just Joe

About the Book

‘Dignity was our most valuable possession.’

Joe Duffy is a household name in Ireland. As the presenter of RTÉ Radio One’s *Liveline* programme, he takes the pulse of the Irish nation every day, often delving into highly controversial topics. Whenever somebody wants to get something off their chest, the advice is often: ‘Talk to Joe.’

Writing with raw honesty, Joe here recounts his difficult upbringing in working-class Ballyfermot. He paints a poignant, heart-breaking picture of family life with a hard-drinking father and hard-working mother. Joe writes with candour about the death of his youngest brother Aidan and about his often difficult relationship with another brother, Brendan.

Aspirations for a better life were rarely encouraged in Ballyfermot. Despite this, Joe was determined to escape to a different future. He became one of the first from his area to enter the hallowed halls of Trinity College Dublin, where he developed a strong sense of social justice, eventually becoming President of the Union of Students in Ireland, leading protests on campus highlighting access to education, and spending two weeks in Mountjoy Prison as a result.

After a stint working in the probation service, Joe eventually moved into a career in broadcasting, first as producer and then roving reporter on *The Gay Byrne Show*, before finally finding his niche on *Liveline*. Here, Joe highlights the major stories raised by the programme,

including child-abuse controversies and scandals in the Irish health service. Joe also deals with the shocking death in 2010 of his friend and fellow broadcaster Gerry Ryan.

This is a riveting, deeply felt and fascinating memoir which goes behind the public face of Joe Duffy to reveal a complex, passionate man.

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JUST JOE
MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Joe Duffy

TRANSWORLD IRELAND

For Mabel, Jimmy and Aidan, then and now;
for June, Sean, Ellen and Ronan, for ever.

To go to Rome is little profit, endless pain,
The master that you seek in Rome
You find at home, or seek in vain.

‘In time of crisis’, ninth-century monk’s prayer,
translation by Frank O’Connor

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Please, oh please do not do what I do when I see a page of acknowledgements at the start of a book – quickly glance through them in the belief that the author is simply nodding to those he forgot to mention in the text, or worse, those he has offended and wants to appease. These are not nods, but genuflections to those without whom this book would never have reached your hands.

On both knees firstly to my editor Brian Langan, who kept the book on the straight and narrow, reassured, cajoled and worked tirelessly, helping me make sense of a jumbled life and disjointed narrative. When self-doubt, lawyers and my own 4 a.m. wobbles kicked in, Eoin McHugh of Transworld reassured me with his calm demeanour.

A warm embrace to my relatives who have had to endure unusual questioning over the last three years – Aunts Renee, Monica and Patsy and Uncle Brendan for their great memories, in both senses of that word.

To my mother Mabel, my brothers James and Peter and my sister Pauline for overcoming their initial bafflement and no doubt belief that I had once again lost the run of myself with this project; for their recollections and delving into our collective past and accepting that this is my story told through my eyes.

To June Meehan, Ann Farrell, Tara Doyle, Sebastian Hamilton and Gay Byrne, who read early drafts.

People like James Hickey, Barry Cullen, Liam Maguire, Noel Kelly, Tony Byrne, Harry Crosbie and Joe Moreau advised and supported me – and for some reason believed I was able to play ‘senior hurling’ with the best of them.

The *Liveline* crew – as with all I have worked with in RTÉ radio and television – never get enough credit for their daily work, loyalty and forbearance; this brief thanks cannot hope to make up for their dedication. My current team deserve special mention for their endurance: Siobhan Hough, Sorcha Glackin, Tim Desmond, Rachel Graham, Ger Philpott, Elaine Conlon and Sandra Byrne are the real stars around whom I orbit daily. And this thanks goes right up the line in RTÉ, to the powers-that-be who trusted me, gave me the break and place their faith in me every single day.

To the *Liveline* listeners, especially those who 'talk to Joe', sharing their lives, often with great intimacy; having delved in that direction in this book, I admire and have tried to emulate your honesty and bravery. Thank you for adding to the great national conversation. Frank Byrne's incisive research for his thesis on *Liveline* focused my own mind on the power of the programme.

To my immediate family, June, Sean, Ellen and Ronan, who left me alone in my 'panic room'. This book is proof that I was not mitching from household duties, though I do now admit that I dusted a lot of my model fire engines during that time (they needed it). Whether or not the time was put to good use, I'll let you decide.

Through my eyes, this is how I saw it: the blinkers, jaundice, errors and omissions are all mine – though no doubt I will come to deny them!

Joe Duffy, August 2011

PROLOGUE

Footprints in the Custard

AS THE BUS lunged around the corner on to Claddagh Green, the teetering pot of custard finally toppled over. The thick, bright-yellow coating spread slowly across the open platform. By the time we reached our stop, the floor was a sea of custard.

The conductor looked at his ruined bus. Facing the prospect of returning to the garage, he let out an unmerciful roar: 'Who left the pots of custard under the stairs?' Losing his shift halfway through the day meant a big drop in income.

We all knew which passenger had brought her aluminium pots to the stew house in Lower Ballyfermot to get the free food ladled into her pots. We all lowered our heads and glanced around furtively. By our silence we denied that we were poor. Even Mrs Pender, the owner of the pots and a neighbour of ours, kept her head bowed.

The stew house was a lifeline for so many people in Ballyfermot, but you had to be on your uppers to avail of the free grub and be prepared for the public humiliation. Most of us would deny ever being in such a penniless state to need the help of the Little Sisters of the Poor who ran the facility. Bizarrely, even though the most well-off families in Ballyfermot – and that is not saying much – could only afford a dessert or 'sweet' on a Sunday, the stew-house users got pints of custard every day.

Our family of eight never had to go to the stew house. But we did suffer other public ignominies. The older Duffy

boys – James, myself and Peter – regularly had to take a long trek through Ballyfermot for free fuel (and abuse) from the turf depot at the far end of the ‘scheme’. This trip was a nightmare. We would queue for hours, only to be manhandled by the guy shovelling the turf into our bags. We would then set off on the long uphill trek from the bottom of Ballyfermot to our home near Cherry Orchard Hospital, the sacks of turf balanced precariously on our baby brother Aidan’s pram. Thankfully, he wasn’t in it at the time.

For those unfortunate enough to need the stew house, there were two ways of collecting the food: stack the pots and pans in the baby’s pram or carry them on to the number 78 bus and store them under the stairs. And that is exactly what Mrs Pender, a small, strong woman with ten children, dressed in her overcoat and scarf, had done that day.

As the bus came to a standstill, the coagulating custard began to drip over the edge of the red platform on to the road. Who would be first to walk through the mess? Of course, it was Mrs Pender herself who stood up and, head held high, led the sludgy, yellowing march off the bus. Wiping our dripping soles, we watched her and realized that, while she had left her pots and food on the bus, she was walking away with her dignity.

Dignity was probably our most valuable possession in Ballyfermot.

The Boy from Ballyer

CHAPTER 1

Family

IF, AS THEY say, our lives flash before us just as we are about to leave this earth, it will be images of buildings that will dominate my life's movie: the Georgian house on Dublin's Church Street, where two rooms served as home for members of my father's family for well on sixty years; another tenement about a mile east in Mountjoy Place where I was born in 1956; add to that 6 Claddagh Green in Ballyfermot, Dublin 10, where I was reared; Trinity College, where my life was changed irrevocably; nearby Mountjoy Prison, where I was both prisoner and worker; and Donnybrook in Dublin 4, where I have spent most of my working life in radio, and you have a pocket atlas of my life story.

I had always believed that I was the quintessential Dubliner, mainly because we had no country cousins to visit during the summer school holidays. While our neighbours headed off to relatives in Monaghan or Meath, the Duffys of Claddagh Green became the Duffys of Dollymount for a day each summer. We simply knew nobody outside of Dublin city centre. Our lives were encircled by the Grand and Royal canals, whose two placid, watery arms embraced the centre of the capital.

However, I later found out that, although my mother's mother, Grace, lived all her married life in many different addresses, all within shouting distance of the Liffey, she was actually born in India. My father's family did not have an Indian connection; they all hailed from those tenement

rooms in Church Street in the heart of Dublin. But I was later to discover a link to Knockcroghery in Roscommon and nearby Athlone on my mother's side, and a very tenuous connection to Ballymahon in Longford with my paternal grandfather, also called Joe Duffy.

Still, my mother and father were reared in very similar circumstances in the Dublin of the newly founded state. My father was born in 1926, in the same tenement room in number 89 Church Street where his own mother, Agnes Carroll, also saw the murky light of day twenty-three years earlier. With a few hiccups in between, Agnes's family eventually left there in 1960.

I still find it hard to explain to my teenage children today that in the course of two generations we went from that existence to the comfort we have today. I have lived without doubt through the single most cataclysmic time in our history. In the space of five decades we have gone from rat-infested Dickensian conditions to become a modern, appliance-led, educated, well-fed nation. More so than most, my family has made that jump – and we ain't going back!

Church Street was at the heart of tenement Dublin. At one time, fifty thousand families lived in these inner-city tenements – old Georgian houses formerly belonging to English landlords, who, having fallen on hard times, simply rented out the many rooms in the tattered four-storey houses, now owned by the new Irish business class.

The corridors and stairwells were a riot of children, with the constant noise of teeming families – up to one hundred people in each house. Doors remained ajar; apart from giving an extra sense of much-needed space, people were always coming and going. The communal parlour was the street: all human life and more was there. Screaming, running, pushing, shoving, coughing, spluttering, wheezing, sneezing – scores of noisy young kids tumbled up and down the wooden stairways, invariably in bare feet.

There were four families sharing number 89: the Clarkes, Stephensons, Carrolls and Leeches. My granny's family, the Carrolls, as well as her uncle Christopher Leech and her two cousins, all lived in two rooms at the top of the house. The 1911 census records 12 people sharing this small space, with the youngest being my future grandmother, eight-year-old Agnes. They had no running water, no electricity or heating apart from the open fire that was also used for cooking. The single, shared toilet was to be found in the back yard, alongside an outside sink. There was little incentive to maintain the buildings. The only representative of the owners who visited, every week, was the rent collector. For some members of my immediate family these types of living conditions still existed in 1966, when my other grandmother, Grace, was living in the last remaining example of such housing in the notorious Keogh Square in Inchicore.

At that time, Dublin had the worst living conditions of any city in Ireland or Britain. In 1913, during the height of the Larkin lockout, when Dublin was brought to a standstill by a massive, bitter strike, the landlord called to a neighbouring tenement in Church Street. As he made his rent collections in the dusk, he heard an unmerciful roar and literally ran for his life as the tenement collapsed into the street opposite Father Mathew Hall. Two families were wiped out, with only one young child surviving. The tragedy was to lead to a massive upheaval in Dublin, but to little long-term effect. The subsequent inquiry uncovered political corruption and inaction. Sixteen councillors on Dublin Corporation owned tenements and endorsed 'light regulation'.

It took until the early 1960s, after two other tenements collapsed and an elderly woman was killed when a lorry ploughed into the already derelict building where my father's family was still living for that festering sore on the face of a so-called modern city finally to be eliminated. This

was just a few years after the sixth child of Breda Fagan, one of the survivors of the 1913 Church Street disaster, wrote about poverty and triumph in the Dublin of the 1930s and 1940s; Christy Brown's *My Left Foot* is still a classic.

Most of the families lived in a single room; in some cases, two or more families shared the one space, separated by an indoor clothes line. Often a dozen people or more slept, cooked, ate and existed in a space no bigger than what we would consider today to be a normal living room.

The death rate among this class was 32 children for every 1,000 born. Contemporary descriptions of these conditions talk of rampant illness: bronchitis, rheumatism, tuberculosis, and many other infectious diseases. The home was the most dangerous place to be.

Little wonder that many men effectively lived their lives on the streets. Alcohol featured prominently in inner-city lives. My God, the warmth of the snug or the comfort of the wooden bar stool had to be a better option than squabbling for an upturned tea chest in a dark, dank, fetid, overcrowded room surrounded by sickly, snotty-nosed children! My father was among the many who chose the easy option: the public house rather than the private squalor. My grandmother Agnes would later recall that her own mother, Catherine, was a serious alcoholic who took to going to the funerals of strangers in the hope of a few free drinks.

There were only two ways out of tenement life: the British army or the British 'mainland'. Agnes's two brothers, Christopher and Tom Carroll, walked to the British army recruiting office in Brunswick Street – now Pearse Street – in late 1914 and joined the Dublin Fusiliers. Christy and Tom were shipped off along with thousands of other Dubliners to the green fields of battle-locked France in early 1915. 'Uncle' Tom survived the war, returning to Dublin with a bullet still lodged in his shoulder. But Christy

was not so lucky. Within weeks of arriving, he was gassed at Mousetrap Farm in Belgium. He survived but was sent to the Somme, where he was killed on 16 April 1916.

Eight days after Christy's death, Church Street was one of the centres of the Easter Rising. Irish people, including my granny, thought the volunteers who attacked the nearby Linenhall Barracks were, in her own words, 'mad'. Unbeknownst to his family, as the Rising threw his home city into turmoil, 23-year-old Christopher Carroll was being buried in a military grave in Bienvillers in northern France. He had died fighting for the army that the rebels in his home city were now attacking. Agnes Duffy was proud of her brother Christy and her family took out a pictorial front-page '*in memoriam*' in the *Freeman's Journal* on his first anniversary.

According to my Aunt Renee, Agnes prided herself on the efforts she made as a 17-year-old in 1920 to help a young Kevin Barry after she witnessed him taking part in a botched ambush on soldiers who were collecting bread from Monks bakery in Church Street. Three soldiers were killed, and Kevin Barry was captured hiding under a truck – inadvertently betrayed by an unsuspecting neighbour, who warned the British soldiers: 'Don't drive over that chap under the lorry.' This poor woman was forever chided as an 'English-lover' by her unforgiving neighbours. Kevin Barry was later hanged by the British in Mountjoy jail. Agnes later took the Collins side during the civil war, and hated de Valera, whom she described as 'devious and sly'.

My paternal grandfather, John Joseph Duffy (Joe), a house painter originally from Ballymahon in Longford, lived further up towards Phibsboro. He first met Agnes at Doyle's Corner, which at the time was a gathering point. They were married in the early 1920s, and lived first with Agnes's family in the increasingly overcrowded tenement in Church Street. My father, Jimmy, was the eldest of their

eight children. As with many families of the time, not all of Joe and Agnes's children survived: they had twins, one of whom, Anthony, died at just a few months old; another child, four-year-old Gerard, was hit on the head by a rock while playing on the street, and he was declared dead on arrival at the nearby Jervis Street Hospital.

Jimmy was effectively fostered out to his Aunt Kitty, who also lived in number 89. This was not unusual in those days; with the rest of her large family in two rooms, unmarried Kitty did the decent thing and helped her sisters Agnes and May with their kids. So Jimmy and his cousin Kathleen were reared by their aunt from an early age. Jimmy's siblings were jealous of the arrangement, as Kitty 'kept a good table' and had fewer stresses and outgoings than her sisters. Kitty, a formidable, stern woman with a soft centre, apparently lived off a British army pension and some earnings from moneylending.

Kitty's room also had the added attraction of a Mullard Radio, a big, brown contraption whose acid batteries had to be carried to a local garage and refilled on a regular basis. It was the only wireless in the whole house, and it began my father's lifelong love of the medium, something I inherited from him.

So my father was spoiled – well fed, well clothed, it seemed he wanted for little compared with his brothers and sisters, Joseph, Brendan, Vincent, Kevin, Rose and Renee. He went to North King Street primary school, around the corner from Church Street, but, like so many, he left to find work and earn money for the family. (His younger brother Brendan recalls using his deceased older brother Gerard's birth certificate so he could legally leave primary school even earlier.)

Tragedy was to strike the family again when my grandfather Joe Duffy died in his forties of a heart attack in 1948, leaving Agnes and the younger children destitute. The family faced eviction from their two rooms above a

shop in Ormond Quay, where they had moved some years earlier. They found temporary accommodation in St Joseph's Place in Dorset Street, thanks to friends, but this was abandoned when the landlady turned out to be an alcoholic.

In the early 1950s, they found themselves living in Ballyfermot, when Agnes, in desperation, agreed to look after the four children of a widower. A short sojourn in Drimnagh followed, but in the late 1950s their path again led back to Church Street, where they returned to the same tenement room in number 89! But Agnes loved living in Church Street; it was cheaper, for a start, and in truth was a wonderful location: a busy, bustling junction in the heart of the city beside the colourful fruit, fish and flower markets. To this day, it has firmly implanted Dublin city centre, especially the northside, in my DNA.

But when number 89 was hit and badly damaged by a truck in the early 1960s, the family was given emergency housing by Dublin Corporation in St Eithne Road in Cabra. At last, a place of their own. Going from two rooms in a shared tenement with no running water, inside toilet or electricity to a new three-bedroomed house in Cabra with its own kitchen, bathroom, toilet and a very large garden was, in the words of my aunt, 'like moving into a hotel'.

My father was lucky; apart from a brief stay with the family in Ormond Quay, he remained living with his Aunt Kitty in Church Street until her death in 1951. He had become a confident, gregarious man-about-town while the rest of the family moved from home to home around Dublin.

Meanwhile, a few hundred yards across the Liffey, in York Street, my mother was living in one of the many homes she was to inhabit – if only briefly at times – as a child. My mother's family led a nomadic life, moving from house to hovel and onwards. My aunts once counted that they had

lived in 19 different homes in and around central Dublin during their childhood.

Grace Murphy, my maternal grandmother, was born in India in 1904. Her father, James Ganly, from Knockcroghery in County Roscommon, joined the Connaught Rangers in 1894 at the age of 17. Three days before Christmas 1896, he married Elizabeth (Lizzie) Dowling of Strand Street in Athlone – and was promptly dispatched to India, leaving his new bride at home. He marked his twenty-first birthday on the high seas, arriving in Bombay on 4 February 1897. He took the train inland from bustling Victoria Station to the massive British army fort in Ahmednagar, where he would spend most of the following 12 years. As a soldier of a colonial power, he lived a charmed life in occupied India. For most of his stay, there was no war on, no counter-insurgency, so James Ganly had little to do except better himself – and, like other soldiers, drink.

Despite only being married seven months, his wife Elizabeth gave birth to a baby boy back home in Athlone on 31 July 1897. Jack Francis Ganly was five before he met his father. By that time, James Ganly had been promoted to sergeant and so was entitled to bring his family out to India. His wife and child travelled by sea from Ireland, a journey that took a month. Within a year, Jack was to have a new brother, Edward. My grandmother Grace was born in 1904, almost exactly a year later, followed quickly by two other siblings, Christy and Mabel.

Their life in Ahmednagar was idyllic. The army barracks was a completely self-contained town, fortified by a massive, impenetrable wall and set apart from the impoverished, teeming nearby Indian town. It was more like a holiday camp than a military establishment. Life was easy, the climate temperate, and I have no doubt that my grandmother’s first three years of life were simply her happiest. She would have played safely in the green fields

of the fort with her brother Edward (or Arnold, as he was called by the family).

Elizabeth was busy rearing her young family, but with a school, hospital, food and accommodation supplied, she was enjoying life. Then, in 1907, tragedy struck: Arnold died suddenly, which effectively ended their idyllic existence in India and my grandfather's army career. Within four years, my grandmother's brother and mother were dead, she had returned with the remaining family to Ireland and to much reduced circumstances, her father had remarried and she had acquired a wicked stepmother.

How five-year-old Edward 'Arnold' Ganly died in India is still uncertain. All we know is that this young Irish boy never saw Ireland; he was born and died in Ahmednagar. There is a poignant photo of him perched – in full British army uniform – on his father's knee, watched by his doting mother.

In 2002, when she was 98 and close to death (though it was not obvious at the time), I spoke to my Nana – Grace – about her past. I asked her if she had any regrets. She said she had always wondered about Arnold – what happened to him and where he was buried. At that stage, we did not know for certain that Arnold had even existed, but Grace spoke of him so often, so movingly, we felt he could not be a figment of her imagination.

I eventually got to Ahmednagar in 2007, for an episode of the TV series *Who Do You Think You Are?* We found the beautiful whiteboard church where Arnold and Grace were baptized. We found her birth certificate and his death certificate, which testified that he had died of 'dysentery'. Nana had always argued that this mysterious brother had died from a snake bite – which would have been possible. Along with other deceased Connaught Rangers and their children, Arnold was buried in the nearby cemetery in an unmarked grave.

Arnold died on 13 August 1907. The family was back in Boyle within a year, and my great-grandmother Lizzie Dowling died in her late twenties, almost two years to the day after her second-eldest son. Grace always insisted that she died from an illness picked up in India. Fifteen months later, Sergeant Ganly, now living beside the Connaught Rangers Barracks in Boyle, married Gertrude Brown (19), with whom he was to have three more children.

Mysteriously, in the 1911 census in Boyle, only Jack, his eldest child, was recorded as living with his father and his new wife. Where were his other three children, all aged under seven? The answer can be found in the same census: Grace (7) and Mabel Ganly (5) are recorded as living in the Summerhill Orphanage in Athlone; I presume Christy (6)was there too.

James Ganly left the army in 1920 and took up a job as a caretaker in the Kings Inns in Dublin. While the Gandon-designed building cuts a magnificent figure on Constitution Hill, my granny's family lived in squalor in the workers' cottages hidden behind the eighteenth-century complex. Nana recalled her life in the Kings Inns with horror. The living quarters for the serving staff were Dickensian – and it seems her stepmother did not treat her well. She told me that her cruel 'mother' fed her on chicken feed!

I have a strong memory of walking up Dublin's Henry Street when I was a teenager with my mother and Nana, and meeting a woman who had also lived in the servants' quarters of the Kings Inns, less than a mile away. Nana insisted on this stranger retelling the hard life they had working for the barristers' organization – including the chicken-feed story – to which this bemused but kindly woman vehemently assented. Indeed, she added that Grace was only telling us 'the half of it'.

Ironically, when I became president of the Union of Students in Ireland in 1984, one of the issues we were asked to take up was the living conditions of some staff in

these self-same cottages. I found the Benchers of the Kings Inns formidable opponents, who lived up to their motto '*nolumus mutari*' – we shall not change!

In 1925, at the age of 49, James Ganly died of tuberculosis. By this stage, my granny had met and married Peter Murphy from Portland Place in the heart of Dublin, an employee of the Post Office. My grandfather Peter's family was unusual: his father married again after his first wife had died young, leaving a large number of children – but the widow he married also brought a bunch to the household, bringing the number of children to twenty-two. Not knowing many of his newfound siblings, apparently, my grandfather was warned by his own father to be careful whom he danced with in the local halls – as she might be related to them!

Grace and Peter married in 1922 in Arran Quay Church in the centre of Dublin, a few hundred yards from where my father's family was then living, the same church where a young Éamon de Valera had married Sinead Flanagan 12 years previously. Nana's first child died shortly after birth, but another four arrived within five years, including my mother, Mabel (named after her aunt), who was born in 1929 when Grace was 25. With a number of miscarriages in between, four more children later arrived. With six daughters and two sons, it was a big brood and a tough existence.

My mother is uncertain where her family was living when she was born. In fact, from the North Circular Road and Dorset Street, via Kimmage, Crumlin, Inchicore, Cabra, Eccles Street, Summerhill, Ballyfermot, Russell Street, York Street and places in between, Peter Murphy and Grace Ganly lived the 38 years of their married life on the move. Their eight children – Annie, May, Mabel, Agnes, Monica, Patsy, John and Willie – were shuttled around the grey city, packing, unpacking, finding their space in cramped accommodation, getting into a new school, settling into a

new class, only to be uprooted again, at least once a year. Moving and not improving.

There is no doubt that it was evictions for non-payment of rent that propelled my mother's family from address to address, and it still deeply pains my aunts even to talk about this. In many ways, they are baffled by it; their father was a hard worker, if low paid. Neither of their parents drank to excess; indeed, my own mother seldom if ever takes a drink to this day.

Looking at the map of Dublin at the time, it seems the Murphy family was like a pinball in a gaming machine, bouncing around the city from room to room, within a three-mile radius of the Liffey, never settling for long in any community. I can't begin to imagine the fear and insecurity in my mother and her seven siblings with the constant evictions. Is it any wonder that, when I tried to encourage Mabel to move out of her house on Claddagh Green, literally fifty feet across the road to a magnificent new old folks' complex with support services, she fiercely and angrily resisted. She refused to give up her home of over 50 years, paid for week by week. At 82, despite living in one address for the last 53 years, she had had 20 different abodes in her life.

No wonder my mother is still confused about where she was born. Mabel attended five different primary schools – including St Joseph's in Dorset Street, then across the city to St Agnes's in Crumlin, and on to York Street – even though her education finished when she was twelve. My mother recalls making her First Holy Communion in St Joseph's in the mid-1930s, but still wonders if she ever made her Confirmation, as she has no recollection of it. Neither did she do any exams: while school attendance had been made compulsory three years before she was born, the primary cert was voluntary until 1943. Up to the late 1950s, very few went on to second-level education, with

fewer than ten thousand students sitting the Leaving Certificate each year at that time.

Grace took her daughters out of school at an early age, not telling her husband, so they could work and bring in money. This seemed to be the only objective – survival. My aunts talk with some anger about their mother making them chop sticks and sell them door to door for firewood when they should have been at school. It seemed a haphazard existence, but in many ways – apart from the constant evictions – was it very different from countless other families across the country at the time? Remember, children's allowance in any form was not introduced in Ireland until 1944, and even then it was a pittance paid to the father for the third and every subsequent child.

So, at an early age, like the rest of her family, my mother entered the world of work. She worked in a local factory, followed by a spell in Lamb's jam factory in Bluebell, and then moved on to the Post and Telegraph depot in John's Road, where she worked at repairing the Bakelite telephones, along with three of her sisters, Annie, Agnes and Patsy.

It was a busy household, and you would wonder how they ever got time to go to work or school. With six girls spread across eighteen years, there was a great liveliness and sisterly competition and conviviality between them, which made for interesting times, to say the least. With no electricity and no radio, and such cramped living conditions, the main source of entertainment for the six Murphy girls would have been going out to the 'pictures' or dances. It was at one of these dances that Mabel would meet Jimmy.

*

'Nana' Grace Murphy was a tough, resilient woman. Short, thin and wrinkled, and always wearing a turban-like hat to cover her thinning grey hair, when I knew her, she was very

much the archetypal granny. Her life was deeply influenced by the fact that the material comforts of her time in India had disintegrated in the space of a few short years from the day she left India in 1908.

I remember walking to my home on Claddagh Green one afternoon to be accosted by Nana storming down the road. She started shouting at me, her finger wagging, instructing me to tell my mother, her daughter, that she would never talk to her again. I was dumbstruck as she yelled at me that she would 'not allow anyone to talk to me like that'. I was scared out of my wits. When I reached my hall door, I was shaking with fear and could not tell my mother of this encounter. What the row was about, I will never know.

Nana Murphy was at this stage living – not for the first or last time – in Ballyfermot. Her husband Peter had died suddenly in January 1960, a day after my fourth birthday. My recollection of him is of a large, imposing, gentle man standing at the door of his house on Sarsfield Road in Ballyfermot. He was idolized by his children. His daughters subsequently insisted that their father was a good provider but that Nana simply frittered money away on frivolous things. Her daughters tell tales of her constantly redecorating or buying unnecessary household goods.

Within ten months of Peter's death, the newly widowed Grace was evicted again for non-payment of rent. At this stage, only two of her adult children, John and Patsy, were living with her. Patsy describes the feverish telegrams to Annie, the eldest daughter, living in Coleraine, to try to get money to pay the rent arrears to Dublin in time. It was not to be. Late at night, the sheriff arrived and Grace's furniture was loaded on to a horse and cart. John disappeared into the night and twenty-year-old Patsy was left to her own devices. She landed on our doorstep in Claddagh Green, where she lived with us for two years. The family was finally sundered.

Patsy took this wrench badly. She was without doubt the daughter most open in talking about the difficulties with her mother. It was clear when I spoke to my aunts after she died that my grandmother was not a happy woman.

My granny ended up living in Keogh Square in Inchicore in Dublin, where the conditions were similar to those in Church Street, which my father's family had only left a few years previously. But Keogh Square really was the lowest of the low. In the Dáil in 1965, the then Fianna Fáil minister for local government Neil Blaney admitted that the houses in Keogh Square were 'substandard as regards their suitability for human habitation'. We seldom visited, but when we did, braving the dark stairs smelling of urine, we only stayed long enough for the novelty of a heel of batch loaf crisply toasted on an open fire.

Most of Grace's children took the earliest opportunity to get out from under her feet. A coming of age surely in all our lives is the realization that those whom we naturally adore – parents, grandparents, teachers – may not after all be superhuman, but in truth are like the rest of us, complete with flaws, weaknesses and foibles.

When her son John, who was regarded as vulnerable because of a childhood illness, fled to the UK, Grace promptly boarded the cattle boat to Holyhead, and did not rest until she got to London, tracked him down and brought him home. John spent a lot of his life in institutions, particularly St Ita's in Portrane, and Nana was devoted to him. She worried what would become of him if she predeceased him, as, inevitably, she felt she would. She never missed a weekly visit to him, right up to her death. I visited John myself in the controversial institution. He thought I was my father and seemed to be happy, once he had access to cigarettes. Nana was very close to her daughter May, too, and lived with her and her children for many years.

Grace died at the age of 98 on 6 November 2002. Her son John died of natural causes thirty days later.

My father began his working life in his teens, with one of the biggest employers in the capital, Brooks Thomas, a builders' providers, whose yards and shops dominated the capital from Marlborough Street to Ballybough and much of Dublin's docklands. His father and many of the extended family worked there also. He later regaled me with stories of how the workers were dispatched from their Marlborough Street base to help out with the harvest after the Second World War or 'The Emergency', sitting in the back of open Brooks trucks as they bounced their way to the countryside to help with – or hinder – the harvest. He had no previous experience of rural life, and he loved it.

On another occasion, my father would recall how, during a strike at Brooks, he invented a new weapon to beat the 'scabs', as he called them. As the strike-breaking drivers waited to be dispatched from Marlborough Street, he would embed a nail in a matchbox and hide the upstanding weapon under the front tyre – which would promptly burst as it moved off.

By 1951, my father was back living with his mother in Ormond Quay, following Kitty's death. Jimmy was developing a drink problem, according to his sister. There was even talk of going to the St Vincent de Paul Society about the issue – though what they would have been able to do about what was surely a common problem in Dublin, heaven only knows.

Jimmy had by this stage 'moved on' from his job in Brooks Thomas – unusually, as his family was embedded there. A job as a barman in the Catholic Commercial Club in Upper O'Connell Street followed. But giving the bar to a man who was inordinately fond of the drink was letting the thirsty cat loose among the pigeons – so it wasn't long before the cat was out of the bag, and he departed. (He

would often talk about this gentleman's club when we walked past the premises, which closed in 1954, but his main claim to fame is that he had taught the ten-year-old John Bowman how to play snooker, as his father was a member. Thankfully, John gave up the snooker cue and took up the microphone.)

My father then got a job in Wigoders wallpaper shop in Talbot Street, around the corner from Brooks. He worked as a sales assistant, complete with his brown shop-coat. I suspect he was rather good at this as, like my brothers James and Peter, he was brilliant at dealing with the public.

Jimmy seemed to be a real Jack-the-lad. He was always well dressed, in a Crombie and waistcoat. Indeed, in his sisters' words, 'That Crombie kept us alive.' His sisters Rose and Renee would head off every Monday morning to the pawn shop, unbeknownst to Jimmy, with his best Crombie, which gave Aggie her few bob until pay day, when the immaculate coat would be retrieved in time for Jimmy's weekend activities.

My parents were living close to each other in the city centre, and they met in the Ierne Ballroom in Parnell Square, which in 1950 had a reputation as a dance hall for 'culchies'. Jimmy was slim, dapper, witty, a snappy dresser who took a drink and smoked and was apparently popular with women. My mother Mabel was not his first girlfriend. She was a bright, attractive, elegant, slim, blonde woman, and a fine dancer. Indeed, she herself was not without her suitors.

Jimmy was 24, Mabel just over 21, and they hit it off. They made a handsome couple, stepping out together. However, Mabel lost interest after a few weeks and called it off. It wasn't so much the hand of fate but a glove that brought them back together: Jimmy found one of Mabel's from their final date, reappeared with the missing item and their courtship was reignited.