

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Letter to Louise

Pauline Collins

About the Book

In 1964, in a bare room in Waterloo, a young actress gave her baby for adoption. They were to be parted for more than 20 years. The actress was Pauline Collins and the baby was her daughter Louise.

This is a memoir of the months leading up to that day in Waterloo. In it, Pauline Collins recalls the idyllic time spent in rep in Killarney, playing in a different play every night, seven days a week, living in digs and falling in love. After the season had finished, she found she was pregnant. Frightened and alone now, she decided to have the baby, hiding the fact from family, agents and friends. Going to ground, she waited for the baby to be born in a home for unmarried mothers, buoyed up by the kindness and humour of the other residents, and the nuns who cared for them. Yet soon she came to realise that she had no choice but to give her daughter away. Reluctantly she got on with life, finally achieving success and personal happiness. But she never forgot Louise and their story has the ultimate happy ending, the day they were reunited 22 years later.

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Letter to Louise

Pauline Collins

*For Lou, of course.
And also for two mothers,
hers, Maria, and mine, Nora.*

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End

I REMEMBER THE last time I saw you. We were about six feet apart.

The kind man held you on his left arm near a second door to the room I had not noticed before. 'Say goodbye to baby now.'

I made some dreadful kind of sob sound and you turned your head sharply and looked at me with a thousand-year-old stare and I knew this moment would be imprinted for ever in our memories; I in a navy suit of an ungiving material, you in white wool, with leggings hanging loose and too big where I had taken out the ribbons, because they seemed too tight.

And then the man and you slipped softly out of the room.

Every day of my life I've relived that moment, replayed each second like a book of flicker pictures, clinging frame by frame to the last images of you; your sharp-turned head and startled starfish hands slowly turning away, away, away from me as you disappeared through the door.

Through the years I planned this letter, this book. I wanted you to know; to have knowledge. Reading about adopted people, having one who is a close friend, the one thing they all want is information about themselves and their blood parents.

I began it many times, always with the intention that I would arrange for it to be given to your mother, and that she would make the ultimate choice of when, if ever, you should read it.

Most of all I wanted to answer the question that would be uppermost in your mind. Why did I do it? Why did I give you

away?

Now in 1992, I still feel a blow in the solar plexus when I consider that question. I feel as if my soul is punched out through my throat.

Now in 1992, I cannot imagine why I did that terrible thing, why I didn't look harder for another solution.

Now in 1992, I am a little less arrogant in my self-sufficiency, a little more able to admit when I need help.

Now in 1992, I might have realized that you, Louise, are your own person and could rise above the difficulties of being an illegitimate daughter.

But in the summer of 1964, I couldn't see so clearly. I couldn't see hope - only despair - and so I made my choice.

Here now is something for you, a chronicle that may leave you a little wiser of how you came to be.

Killarney

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED change: new beginnings. Even now I am more thrilled by a year that begins with the calendar a complete blank, than by the prospect of carefully orchestrated segues from job to job. Too much security makes me nervous; afraid of missing all the surprises just below the horizon.

One of the terrors of a little success is the possibility of losing the ability to dare, to jump off the cliff. Too many secure Mondays might make a person complacent. I've always loved Mondays and never understood 'that Monday morning feeling'. My Monday morning feeling is exhilaration, anticipation after the silence of the weekend.

Just one such Monday brought me to Killarney.

I'd answered an ad in *The Stage*:

KILLARNEY REPERTORY SEASON

New Irish Players require Assistant Stage-Managers. Male and Female.
Play as Cast. London auditions.

It really appealed to me, that job. Not just rep but rep in another country, and that the birthplace of my grandparents. Also I'd never been to Ireland.

Glendalough 1936

Five young Liverpool teachers tumbled shrieking, laughing, down the hill from St Kevin's Bed.

'Don't forget now,' shouted the guide. 'As you leave St Kevin's Bed, you'll meet the man you're going to marry.'

At the bottom of the hill the girls banged into a group of fellows.

'Oh God,' said Eileen. 'Which one's mine?'

'Hello, Schubert.' The dark handsome one smiled at Nora Callanan, nicknamed for the bow she always wore in the back of her hair.

'How do you know my name?' said she, amazed.

'It's me! Tony McArdle. I'm Josie's brother.'

'Oh yes! How are you?'
'Fine. This is Jackie and Gus.'
'And who's that over there standing a little higher than anybody else?'
'That's Fat Collins. He's a London teacher.'
'Oh, you don't mix with the plebeians then?'
'A scholar forsooth,' smiled the young man on the hillock.
'Fat Collins meet Nora Callanan.'
Three years later they were married. My parents.

I never knew how many takers Jim Mooney had, but having filled at least a page with my untried talents, I was auditioned in a small, London rehearsal room and a week or so later, learned I'd got the job.

Jim and I both recalled afterwards, that as I left I said: 'I hope you have me.'

'Oh, so do I,' said he, all red hair and energy and humour. Oh, the innocence of it.

I felt elated as the train pulled into Killarney Station. I hitched the window strap down and let the sweet, new air fill my lungs. That's my kind of litmus test for new places. Some delight. Some don't. No good reason. Just a kind of olfactory OK! New York and Calcutta are wonderfully similar, spicy, energized; Surrey is damp and draining; Wiltshire witchy, disturbing.

From the moment I smelled Killarney, I loved it. There was a sweetness and a blessing in the air that instantly befriends the soul. I've since felt that all over Ireland, but this was my very first taste.

I humped my suitcases down on to the platform; matching white Revelation, two sizes bought in recognition of my leaving home. I felt good, a little blasé even.

I felt quite smart too. I was wearing a butcher-boy hat, the height of fashion. It was a vaguely Dickensian affair, shaped like a soft almond tart, with a button in the middle and a jaunty peak over the brow. Mine was white straw and I loved it.

As I walked along the platform, empty of all but a handful of people, I saw a girl ahead of me, standing and looking

towards me, also wearing a butcher-boy hat. Hers was brown velvet and sat cheekily on her strawberry curls. All at once mine began to feel a bit tacky and curiously tall on my beehive hair.

I knew, however, that the chic one was almost certainly a fellow actress.

‘Are you for the theatre too?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Pauline, ASM, and small parts.’

‘Jacqui, juvenile lead’ . . . and she had a vanity case.

We decided to get a taxi together but a porter moved in with a barrow and a soft Kerry voice: ‘Are ’oo for the Town Hall Theatre? I’ll walk ye there.’

It must have been the hats.

Killarney was a station that impinged as little as possible on the scenery, a platform, a bit of a ticket office, then straight out past the Great Southern Hotel and into the town.

We followed our luggage past the jarveys waiting to give you a ride on the jaunting cars, past the tea and gift shop, along the grey walls of the demesne, with all the rhododendrons just beginning to bud.

It was all much smaller than I had expected, more compact, more like a little French town than anything in England; low-built pastelly buildings, shops with the name of the owner written large in a variety of scripts. You couldn’t always be sure what a shop sold, or whether indeed it mightn’t be a bar. All the fronts were similar, some obscured by opaque glass.

And there was the Town Hall, a fairly decent pillared affair.

The porter took us in to a kind of marbled entrance hall, and unloaded our stuff.

‘There ye are now. They’ll all be across in the hall.’ He gestured vaguely across a kind of grassy courtyard and left with his tip.

We looked around the entrance hall and saw the box-office and beneath it a sandwich-board displaying all our pictures.

Now Booking. New Irish Players
in a season of plays, direct from
the Abbey Theatre, Dublin.

(Carefully worded! Plays from the Abbey - not players.)

First Night. 28 May.

Dear God, less than three weeks away!

Jacqui and I walked across the grassy yard until we came to an open door. We looked in, and saw a hall filled with stacking chairs like those found in a school, and on our right a good big stage. We heard voices and banging, and couldn't see anyone.

'Let's have a look in there.' She pointed to a door half open, on the other side. That led us into a bit of corridor at the end of which lay two big rooms. In the second, I saw Jim, banging a mirror into place. The room was filled with trunks and clothes-rails, and sitting in the midst of chaos with a cup of coffee, was a tiny, round, good fairy with a beautiful face. Jim looked up as we came in.

'You're here. You made it. Great!'

The lady came over, smiling, to shake hands. 'Welcome to Killarney. I hope you'll be very happy with us.'

'This is Pat,' said Jim. 'Pat Turner, Co-producer. Leading character lady.'

'Come and sit down and have a cup of tea. Then you can go off and find your digs . . .'

Now I'd pictured all kinds of first footings in Killarney, many of them centring round lovely pubs and Guinness and soda-bread teas, but having to find myself somewhere to live had never occurred to me. Jacqui, however, was a seasoned tourer. She asked for the Accommodation List, which looked massive, but it seemed most of the company had got there before us, and had bagged not only the best, but also all known addresses where they 'kept people'.

However, with assurances that all we had to do was bang on a few doors, and we'd be OK, away we went, Jacqui and I, up and down the streets of Killarney. A soft rain had started.

I am naturally a rather shy person, so to take the curse off this humiliating experience I found myself affecting a plaintive Irish accent after the fifth door or so.

'Do ye keep people?'

Those we disturbed were kindness itself with one brusque exception - 'No theatricals.' Bang.

We were given tea, scones, potato cakes, advice, opinions, further addresses, but no beds.

As the day wore on the rain set in softly but persistently. Jacqui's corduroy-velvet hat remained relentlessly chic and her curls unbowed. Mine lost its crispness within the first half-hour and by six o'clock looked like a failed meringue. We were sodden and hopeless by the time we returned to the theatre.

There we met another company member, Joan Steynes.

'Ah, God, look at them. Come on down to our digs and let's see if there's a corner for you.'

71 New Street was the best digs in town - run by two sisters - Sally and Cis - they didn't just keep people. It was their vocation. Not just lodgings, proper digs, very near the theatre - four meals a day. Lodgers' sitting-room. £3.10s per week.

'I have a room,' said Sal, 'but it's reserved for a teacher. However, you can have it till she takes up the post. You'll have to share a double bed.'

Jacqui was not delighted at this prospect. I would happily have slept with three sailors and a dog.

It was a wonderful room - an attic, stretching right across the top floor, with two huge windows overlooking New Street. It was well furnished but, because the floor was roughly polished boards, it had an air of almost monastic simplicity. There was a low chair by the window, a plain rug in the middle of the room.

We went downstairs and met Cis, the older and quieter of the two sisters. They were a perfect team, Sal and Cis. Sally was the 'front man', Junoesque, always frocked and heeled, with a ready smile. But there was a firm glint in the eyes behind her specs, that ensured there was an order of things. Meals were served and eaten on time. The sitting-room was available but not taken for granted. The house was ours but not all of it. There was an unspoken understanding that discouraged the lodgers from straying into Sal's quarters or the back kitchen.

That was Cis's domain, Cis with her gentle smile and her poor feet spreading out of her slippers. I never saw her seated. Ever. Whenever I snuck in to say hello, she would be propped against the range on one tired leg, yellow-white hair drifting round her exhausted parchment face. I know she slept because I once glimpsed a nether region beyond the back kitchen. A bit of a bed, a cupboard, swiftly closed behind a door.

But that first evening I'd only seen the main kitchen when we sat down to our inaugural meal at New Street.

Joan was already seated with two other members of the company when we came down. John McMahon, who must have been in his mid-sixties then, stately, striking, glamorous in the way of McLiammoir and McMaster. He shrugged off his greatcoat with the shoulder cape, as Sally leaned over him with the oxtail soup.

He eyed us, the new girls, as he lifted off his broad-brimmed hat and put it on the window ledge.

'So now you're the new blood.' He had a fairly strong north of Ireland accent, coming as he did from just outside the six counties, and this gave him a rather dismissive manner. I got the impression as we talked that he had little time for young ones of either sex. But he did look incredibly like my grandfather Callanan, and beneath the gold-rimmed glasses I thought I saw great humour. I wasn't wrong.

Tucked in the corner watching us while we had the once-over from John, was a thin and whimsical elf. 'Hello, I'm Liam. Liam Sweeney.' Little smiling mouth, rabbity teeth. 'You're very welcome.'

He sat smoking instead of soup, legs crossed and arms laced over his thigh with his ciggie dangling loosely in his right hand between drags.

As Sally was bringing in steaming plates of stewed lamb with dumplings, the door burst open and in came a rosy-faced woman with snowy hair.

'Kitty, you're late.'

'Sally, I'm up to my eyes in hem-lines.' Kitty slumped into her chair. Then sat bolt upright, spreading her fingers on the table. 'Look at my hands. The veins are bursting out of them. If I see another full skirt, I'll scream. And I've no eyes left at all.'

Kitty. Kathleen O'Sullivan, alteration hand at Hilliards Department Store. She was probably sixty then. Cosy, funny and very open to anything that life brought her way. She was not married and between her and John McMahon there crackled a familiar *badinage*. I think she once made a pass at him and he'd fled in terror. She was one of the most loving people I'd met in my life and as far as I know she never found anyone to give it to.

After dinner we walked up the road into Main Street with Liam and Joan. Liam was wearing jeans. They didn't really suit his little thin legs, but they were real Levi's bought in Canada where he'd done some work. They took us for a drink in the Grand Hotel next to the theatre. I drank schooners of sherry the size of teacups, and felt as though my real life was beginning. I was not yet twenty-three and away from home for the first time.

That night as I lay in bed with Jacqui, wishing I was on the window side nearer the sky and the lights, she turned to me and said, 'If I roll into you in the night, it's not because I fancy you.'

February 1942

I love it here.

Everything is bright and whitey. There's a white pillar behind Mama and me. And a white tablecloth. A man is bending over me with a dish. I like him, because he's smart and has a black bow on his shirt and smooth black hair.

'Here we are, little maid.'

I'm excited and can't stop breathing fast. Mama helps me with my spoon but I can do it. I can do it! I'm a grown-up girl.

'What a grown-up girl. How old is she?'

'Eighteen months.'

'My, my, my. What a clever girl. Anything else, madam?'

'Just a pot of tea.'

I love this place.

December 1942

Mag lets me play with the dollies again today, china dollies.

She sits me on the soft couch in the front-room and opens the cabinet and takes out all the china dollies and lays them beside me on the big cushion. I like the little boy and girl best. They're very, very small. I lay them on the cushion and cover them with a lace doily. They're my babies.

Maggie May is in and out.

'I won't break them, Mag.'

'I know you won't, my sweetheart. You're my grown-up girl.'

I love Mag.

We live in Mag's house. We live in the big front bedroom. Mama and Dada in the big bed, me on a camp bed and Gabe in the cot.

I love our room at night because the street lights make patterns on the walls and I can hear the people walking and laughing.

Jack lives here too - up more stairs. Mama says he's another lodger. What's a lodger? He's handsome and I love him. I'm his best girl.

In the little room on the half-landing is Julie, Mag's auntie. In the day she sits in the big chair in the kitchen. She's round and old.

February 1943

Denzil and Graham gave me a pig. I think it's a pig. It might be a beetle. I thought they said pig. Maybe pig-beetle. I love it. It's my friend. It's black and shiny with two wiggling shaped ears. And it runs quite fast. I gave it a flower to eat; a yellow primrose. I think it's full now.

It wasn't a pig. I've seen a pig now and it's very big and dirty. It was a beetle but it ran into the heather and I can't find it. Maybe I'll have a pig now.

The next morning Jacqui and I walked up New Street to the Parish Hall where rehearsals would be held.

Joan walked with us, incredibly smartly dressed in a well-cut beige skirt, crimson jumper and matching shoes, very high heels. She had a great figure, was witty, attractive, about thirty-five then, but not married. Were the men of Dublin mad? She was a trained nurse and when not touring she lived with her mother in Dublin. There was a man – but not for marrying.

It was sharp and bright in the May morning and I felt that uplifting, breathcatching exhilaration you get when the season changes.

We found our way through a garden, round the back of the hall, and up some dusty stairs to a huge room with five big windows.

Round a long refectory table most of the company was already seated. This is the moment that we in the theatre in time grow accustomed to. More than most jobs, I suppose our profession is like one encounter group after the other.

This is the moment in each job when you meet the people who are about to become closer than family over the next few months. These are the people you will trust nightly with your talent, your vulnerability, your strength. They are the people to whom you will be forced to turn for companionship and support. You wouldn't necessarily choose them, but you will grow to understand them and therefore to love them – an arranged marriage.

There was always, too, the possibility of romance! Today might be the day I found the love of my life.

A quick shufti at the company round the table in the Parish Hall that morning told me that there was no immediate threat to my virginity. There were two late-middle-aged character actors, Noel Dalton and Cecil Sheehan.

Noel had rheumy eyes and a terrible wheeze which was not helped by his chain-smoking. He had a yellow stain

which seemed to run from his fingers, up his arm, over his teeth, through his moustache and up to his hair. He was very gentle and easy-going.

Cecil by contrast was a sharp-witted Cork man - a baker in Dublin in the winter.

Jacqui's opposite, the male juvenile, was a nice but intense young man called Stephen whose very pretty wife was on his arm and at his side for the duration.

Pat and Jim presided over us all with a warmth and affection that made me feel uniquely at home. I'd never been a member of a company before for any length of time and I liked the sensation that we had a long way to go together.

Yet to come was the male ASM, Vincent Smith, on his way from Dublin. Maybe my dream man?

So there we all sat listening to Jim explaining his way of working: rehearse three plays in the three-week rehearsal period. Working plan: Saturday opening with a repertoire of three, then continue to rehearse as we played until we had ten plays.

We offered a different show every night, so each morning there was a ten o'clock call to fit up and dress the new set - except on Sundays when the call was after ten o'clock Mass. Sundays? We played Sundays? Gasps of disbelief from the English contingent. Nobody ever plays Sundays. Yes they do. I also sensed a certain terror in those who did not dig with the left that they were to be dragged into some papist net, trapped into religious observations that they did not hold with.

'Mass, I take it, is not obligatory,' said Jacqui firmly. Jaze no!

I was astonished as we read the first play, *The Country Boy* by John Murphy. Amazed at the beauty of it, the humour and the sadness of it. I think I was expecting a farce or a mystery, run-of-the-mill weekly rep stuff. Not here! Still in my opinion one of the best plays I've ever performed.

I was surprised too that when Jim read out our characters, I had a really good part: Eileen, a young girl in love with Curly, the juve lead.

I could see Jacqui was a bit fed up about this. She had a wonderful character. The leading lady, forty-year-old alcoholic wife of the returned Yank. But she was only twenty-seven, and was very put out to be playing an older woman.

Still everybody settled into work and as the week went by I began to feel more and more that I had come home. You know that feeling when all your energies are flowing in the right direction, you're going with the current and all seems right with the world.

I was relieved when Jim decided that my duties as ASM were to dress the set and sit on the book as prompter for the other plays in which my parts would be very small. I was spared the humiliation of everyone finding out that my 'cleating' was below standard. Cleating is the action of joining two flats together with ropes by means of deftly lassoing two adjoining hooks of metal with one casual upward flick of the wrist. I've never got the hang of it.

By about Thursday of the first week's rehearsals, a kind of unease was to be felt in the Parish Hall. Stephen, playing the part of Curly, the brother who stayed at home, and Jim playing the *émigré* and directing, were finding that they had very different ideas about acting. Stephen had been Stanislavski-trained, after a fashion, and wouldn't learn his lines or say one until it felt right. With three plays to rehearse before opening, Jim was understandably driven yampy.

By Friday Stephen and Jim had amicably agreed that he should be 'let go'.

By Saturday Jacqui decided that the delights of Killarney and forty-year-old leading ladies were not for her. She was out of the town by midday. One night too many sharing a double bed with me no doubt.

Jim and Pat then spent the weekend routing through the CVs of those he'd auditioned in London, looking for replacements. Meanwhile, the part of Curly went to Liam. We were delighted to be playing opposite each other.

We heard each other's lines till we were cross-eyed and by Sunday-night dinner, Kitty decided the best thing for everyone was to go to the dance.

Now every Sunday, there was a dance somewhere. In some hotel or hall there would be one of the big showbands or one of the lesser ones belting out dance music, always with a singer, miked to carry fifty miles round the countryside.

It was an entertainment, an introduction bureau, a licensed grope, an opportunity for great conviviality and a possibility for great loneliness.

We went as a gang, Joan, Kitty and her younger friend Mary, me, and Liam, squiring us all. This one was at the Gleneagles Hotel in a great barn of a hall with the boys one end and the girls the other. Seated on benches between were the ever-hopeful pushing forty or fifties, still on the lookout for that farmer's son living with his mother, who might be persuaded to change one safe haven for another.

I don't know why it was then that so many men wouldn't leave their mothers. Maybe it was that those who did, left utterly, for England or America, and for a different kind of woman from Brooklyn or Liverpool or Manchester.

Liam got us all started with a dance apiece, and then we were on the market. I was whirled around, stamped on, breathed on and groped by a variety of beaux until I finally settled for a quiet boy with red hands from out the country. I've always hated dancing, I have no messages from head to legs, but no one ever believes me. Declan and I sorted out a kind of gentle motoring movement that took nothing out of us. He was a good-natured soul who stood me several sherries and a vodka. I liked him apart from his rather

strange smell. I found out later he worked at a slaughterhouse.

Spring 1943

I go to Miss Lacy's school.

You just go past the goats behind our house and there's the school. It's not really our house. It's Miss Lacy's. But she's got a bigger one.

I wish I could go all day to school. I only go in the morning. If you go all day you can have a hot potato off the stove. Once I took one. It was Venetia's and her Dada gives Miss Lacy coal, so she shouted at me. I had to stand behind the dressing-up curtain in disgrace. It was quite a long time so I put some of the clothes on and peeped out with different hats. To make them laugh. Miss Lacy didn't.

Anyway Mama makes me potato cakes and lovely food and I have milk in a little jug from the goats.

Summer 1943

'Close your eyes.'

Dada's just come in from camp and he's looking smiling and secret. It's quite dark and I'm sitting on the edge of the hearth in my nightie.

I put my hands over my eyes. I feel like a picture in a book. I feel quite pretty, because my nightie has flowers on it. Also good. Mama let me stay up because I'm a good girl. I played with Gabe. I made her laugh. I put lots of hats on and made them fall off and said, 'Whoops.' And every time I said 'Whoops' in a special way, Gabe laughed so much she fell over.

'Now keep your eyes closed - tight! And hold out your arms.'

Something soft and silky is jumbling in my arms and snuffling and licking.

'Can I open them now?' I do.

It's a puppy! Blacky, brownny, wriggly.

'Oh, Dada.' I'm hugging Dada's legs and the puppy and Mama's smiling and holding Gabe.

I love the puppy.

I love my Dada. He's a sergeant.

I love my Mama and my Gabe.

Christmas 1943

I've swallowed a baby penny. The one with a robin on the back. Every time I go to the lav I listen for the clink. Mama says it'll come through eventually.

I've stopped going on the chamber now. I go out the back. It's quite cold and a bit tall, but I feel grown up. It's like a big round oil drum with a