

The Granny, the Grocer and the Cobbler

by Eileen M. Cunniffe

The phone roused me near midnight, and I pulled back the covers and stumbled toward it. I'd hardly managed a hoarse hello when my mother's voice rushed at me from the other side of the Atlantic, wide awake and seemingly oblivious to the five-hour time difference.

I could tell from her voice everything was fine. More than fine, it seemed.

"How's the trip?" I asked as I climbed back into bed and propped a pillow between my back and the knobby brass headboard.

"Great," she yelled. "We're having a grand time. We're in a pub."

Mom was shouting, no doubt because of the noise around her, but also because she was unaccustomed to speaking to me from so far away. Mostly, I think she was yelling because she was—uncharacteristically—a bit tipsy. I pictured her always-pink cheeks flushed a shade deeper. I imagined the comical scene in a dark, smoky pub as she and Dad had figured out how to place an international call.

My parents had been gone for more than a week. I'd been tracing their itinerary on a map on my dining-room table: Shannon to Galway, Mayo to Sligo, and now Derry, in Northern Ireland. They'd been planning this trip for months, dreaming it for years. All their parents were born in Ireland and emigrated to America. Each couple had met in Philadelphia, made their lives in that city, and never once went back to where they were from.

Now in their mid-50s, their parents long gone, my parents had finally made the journey "home." Almost no one from my grandparents' generation was left—just two of Mom's aunts, Ciss and Aggie, and one uncle. But both my parents had cousins scattered across Ireland. Before the trip, they'd swapped countless letters with these cousins, most of whom they'd never met. Each exchange uncovered another

connection, another invitation, another branch of the family that couldn't wait to welcome them.

"How was Aunt Ciss?" I asked, knowing they'd seen her in Sligo. Ciss and her sister Ena had visited when I was eight.

"Oh, she was fine," Mom replied. "I'll tell you about her when we get back. But guess what? The most amazing thing happened today. I met my granny!"

"Your *granny*?" I asked.

"My granny," she repeated, giggling.

"We went to Magherafelt, and we found Pop-Pop's house," she continued.

She said the name of the town just as her father had, with an audible sigh where the silent *g* and the *h* brush against each other. As a child I'd been fascinated with that strange-sounding word, which my grandfather loved to say.

"Then we met my granny."

Mom's voice wavered on the word "granny," and even from 3,000 miles away I could tell there was an urgency to this call. I knew something about her discovery didn't quite add up. My grandfather left Ireland after his mother died—that much I knew, and little more about his early life. How could my mother have a grandmother who was still alive, a grandmother none of the Irish relatives had mentioned before?

"My cousin Pauline gave me her address. A tiny old lady opened the door. Before I finished introducing myself she said, 'Yes, of course, Rose Marie. Michael's daughter.' So we went in and she made a pot of tea and we just sat and talked. Imagine—I have a granny," Mom said giddily, for the fourth time.

"But, Mom, how can you have a granny you didn't know about?"

"I guess I skipped that part."

Mom explained that her grandfather, a shoemaker, had remarried after my great-grandmother died, and his second wife was much younger than him. Which explained how the ninety-year-old granny could still be alive, but did not explain why every relative except Pauline had seen fit to keep her a secret. But our phone call was up, I'd have to wait for the rest of this story.

I am the oldest of seven brothers and sisters, and the most sentimental when it comes to our Irish ancestry. So Mom had made the right call: if anyone was going to share the excitement about her long-lost granny, it was me. I should have wept for joy to learn I had a “new” great-granny.

But I didn't.

Because the little old lady who'd shared a pot of tea with my parents was technically just a step-granny to Mom, and a step-great-granny to me. And this particular “step” seemed contrived: only in theory had Mom's step-granny ever been my grandfather's step-mother; he'd left Ireland long before she'd stepped into the picture.

“Granny” wasn't even a word we used, which made Mom's repetition of it as strange as the news itself. We'd called both of my grandmothers “Nanny.” Mom was now a grandmother herself, and she'd chosen the hip moniker “Grandma Rosie.”

My parents took only one picture of the granny because the flash bothered her eyes. In the photo, her straight grey hair is parted down the middle. She has a long, thin nose and thick glasses with large, plastic frames. She's squinting up from an armchair, Mom crouched beside her, grinning.

When my parents got home, I heard more about Mrs. Annie Henry. Aunt Aggie hadn't mentioned her step-mother, even though she'd been so excited to meet my parents that she'd dragged them upstairs to see her son, who was laid up with a back injury, and she'd phoned her daughter in England and handed the phone to Mom to say hello.

Aunt Ciss hadn't volunteered information about her step-mother either. But once she learned Pauline had, she felt compelled to add some color commentary. She implied the granny had been pregnant before she married the cobbler and that her father hadn't fathered that child. And she gave Mom the distinct impression that the cobbler's children had not taken kindly to their step-mother.

Three years after their first trip, my parents went back to Ireland, and this time I went along. We visited every relative they'd met the first time, and they showed me each of the four homes where my grandparents were from. Three of these homes were still in our families, although one had been reduced to a crumbling outbuilding behind a

newer house. The fourth—the one we reached last—was the house in Magherafelt; my parents had seen it from the outside on their first trip, but the people inside were strangers.

On our way to Magherafelt, we made one other stop. Mom couldn't wait to see her granny again, and she was determined I should meet her, as if this would close some ancestral circle. But the granny's health was failing and she was in a hospital. Although this visit was important to Mom, I wondered if we had the right to intrude on the old woman's privacy and ask her to entertain her American "relatives" from her sickbed.

When we stepped into her room, I knew I needn't have worried. The lively old lady my parents remembered was now a frail little bird who barely made a bump under the bedclothes. Mom set the flowers she'd brought on a table and pulled a chair close to the bed. When she reached for the blanket that covered the sleeping granny's legs, I excused myself and went to the lobby.

The tears that had failed to fall when I'd first learned about the granny finally arrived. Not because my step-great-granny was dying, but because it never occurred to me until I saw them together that maybe she and Mom had both been missing something until they'd met. Mom had let Annie Henry step into the void where her real grandparents never had been, and I knew she knew this was a stretch, even if she didn't say so. And the granny had her own child and her own grandchildren, so she too must have understood the difference.

After I left the room, the little bird woke up and squeezed Mom's hand. Both my parents felt she remembered them and understood they'd come to see her again.

Because my grandfather lived with us while I was growing up, his was the family home I thought I knew best. I'd always pictured a farmhouse, with enough room for thirteen people, and a big yard. Not that he'd ever described it that way, I suppose. But long ago I'd seen a pastel-tinted photograph of him with his parents and ten brothers and sisters all posed on a lawn, and my mind must have conjured the kind of house I thought belonged with that family.

I held onto my image of the Henry home right up until the day I stood outside it. I'd seen pictures my parents took on their first visit, but my mind had simply refused to reconcile the real house on Church Street with my idea of it until I stood there in front of a grey, pebbledash row home on a narrow street in a busy market town.

It had been fifteen years since Pop-Pop died, and still it was hard to forget how sullen he'd been in his last years, how hard he'd been on Mom. But he'd come alive anew for us on this trip, especially when we'd visited Aunt Ciss, who still called her brother "Sonny" more than sixty years after he left home. I'd only ever heard him called Michael or Mickey. I'd laughed with her over how he used to tell us he'd once been a little girl, because he wore whatever hand-me-downs fit, even dresses.

Dad stood on the sidewalk opposite the house, camera in hand. Just as he snapped a picture of Mom and me, the wide wooden door swung open and a middle-aged man stepped out. We quickly explained why we were photographing his house.

"Please come in," he said warmly. "My father and sister live here, I know they'd love to meet you."

He ushered us past the brass "46" on the chocolate-brown door, through a narrow hall and into a tiny living room, where the elderly father and his daughter sat. We explained our connection to the house, and the old gentleman recognized the Henry surname right away. "Of course, I knew the Henrys," he said. "They were a fine family. Your grandfather," he offered, looking directly at Mom, "was a cobbler, and this room we're in was his workshop."

At first I thought he was just being polite. But then he began to remember names—Jack and Barney were the ones he mentioned first. He was ninety-three, his daughter told us, so my grandfather and his siblings would have been his contemporaries.

"I remember Mickey, he worked at the food co-op," the old man said. Mom was pleased to report Mickey had found similar work in Philadelphia and eventually owned a grocery store. She'd grown up working in that store, and living upstairs. The old man seemed pleased to know this. He asked his daughter to show us through the house, which she gladly did. Upstairs were four tiny bedrooms. How had thirteen people lived there? From a back window I saw a patch of grass, far too small to have been the

setting for the photograph I half-remembered. Downstairs was a modest kitchen and the small living area that had doubled as a workshop.

“Show them the hallway,” the old man instructed. His son led us back to the passage where we’d come in. “Stand here,” he said, then waited as we took turns stepping into a well-worn dip in the floor. “Right here,” he said, pressing his hand against the wall, “was a window. Customers would pass shoes back and forth through it. Over time there was so much traffic it bowed the floor. We closed up the wall, but there’s your proof of the cobbler’s shop.”

The elderly man seemed to have exhausted his memories of the Henrys. Mom hung on every word, hoping for new information that might shed a little light on the scant facts she’d collected on her first visit to Ireland, but none was forthcoming. Our two families parted with warm handshakes all around.

A quarter-century has passed since Mom called to tell me about her great discovery. All that time I’ve carried around in my head what little bits I’d heard of the cobbler’s story. I’ve turned them over so often—like a snow globe—that what I knew for certain eventually blurred. Unconsciously I’d invented new scenes and extra twists in the plot. I’d forgotten who’d first told Mom Annie was still alive, and who’d implied the rest.

Only lately have I started wondering in earnest about the cobbler and his family, trying to make the picture come clear. I began with what little I knew about my grandfather: He was twenty-three when he sailed for America in 1929 on the *S.S. Albertic*. Before he left he was a hardworking butter-and-egg man and a decorated Irish football player. In Philadelphia, he built a successful business. He mentioned Magherafelt often, but almost never the names of his people there. He took his family obligations seriously and was a good provider and a generous, though stern, father and grandfather. And I don’t remember him ever being happier or more charming than he was that summer and fall when Ciss and Ena came to visit.

Around the same time I began wondering about his backstory, Mom decided to divvy up our family photographs. I asked if I could see—or even have—the Henry family

portrait, which I hadn't seen in decades. The one I mis-remembered as a smiling, relaxed clan in some bucolic setting.

I have that old photograph in my possession now—the original, tinted copy mounted on cardboard that my grandfather must have carried in his suitcase. How many times did he take it out and study those faces? The names are recorded on the back in Mom's neat handwriting. It's a formal pose, with a leafy green backdrop that's clearly fake. Everyone is wearing his or her Sunday best. Two little girls sit on sheepskin rugs in front of two rows of older faces, all with similar features: thick, wavy helmets of unruly hair, some dark, some fair; deep-set eyes and thick brows that all slope downward at the same angle; and thin lips, only a few of which suggest any effort at smiling. The ones whose shoes are visible—including my great-grandfather, right leg crossed jauntily over left, one shiny black boot all but touching the hem of his wife's long dress—seem to be well shod, as one might expect.



There they all are, together: the Henrys of Magherafelt, County Derry, in the late 1920s, as best we can guess. Mom knows Martha was the oldest and Aggie was the

youngest, but she doesn't know where the rest of them—Michael (Sonny), Rose (Ciss), Barney, Jack, Mary, Ena, Patsy, Daisy and Kay—fell in terms of birth order. How could I not have known I had a great-aunt named Daisy?

Pauline told Mom their grandmother had all her teeth pulled shortly before the photograph was taken. Her false teeth weren't ready, and she'd wanted to reschedule the portrait. Because the cobbler insisted on having the picture made as planned, my great-grandmother Rose's mouth appears as the merest hint of a line above her chin.

Mom and I recognize a stubborn streak that maybe kept the cobbler from rescheduling. But we might be wrong. Perhaps there was some urgency to having the portrait made, a sense that the little house on Church Street wouldn't contain them all much longer. Martha looks to be wearing a wedding band. Maybe one of the brothers had just booked his passage out of Ireland—Barney to America, or Patsy to Australia. Patsy seems too young to be leaving, but the resolute look on his face and his crossed arms suggest he's ready to bolt. If one of the boys was about to leave, it could explain the solemn faces. Or were they told not to smile? Is that why Aggie looks so cross, or did she not like being made to sit on the floor?

The edges of the image are soft and out of focus, like the bits of family lore the American relations have cobbled together. Ena and Daisy each have one arm that fades into the background. Kay and Aggie are in white, probably their First Communion dresses. Four little girls in all, maybe ranging from seven to twelve years old. My grandfather looks to be about twenty, so it won't be long until he and Barney, Jack, Patsy, and their mother Rose are all gone from the picture, leaving the cobbler with a houseful of young daughters.

Nothing we've heard makes us think Annie helped the cobbler raise his other daughters after their mother died. It seems more likely they'd all left home before the cobbler remarried.

My grandfather would have learned about his father's second marriage through the mail—the only way he ever got news from home, until late in his life, when he or Ciss occasionally splurged on a transatlantic call. Did his father write to him directly, or did one of his siblings tell him about their new step-mother and step-sister? I imagine he

was relieved to be on the other side of the ocean. I remember him as proud and proper, mindful of appearances and what the neighbors might think.

His brother Bernard was also in Philadelphia, and I imagine them speaking about their family. But Barney died young, and that subsequent visit with Ciss and Ena when they were all in their late fifties or early sixties was the only other time my grandfather spent with any of his siblings after he left Ireland. Surely, they must have discussed their father.

As a child Mom was vaguely aware that her grandfather had remarried, but she was so far removed from the experience of being anyone's granddaughter that the news didn't mean much. "They always said she was very good to him," Mom remembers hearing (or more likely, overhearing), "but they said it kind of grudgingly." She remembers her father receiving a letter telling him his father had died. After that she never heard another word about her step-granny for almost half a century.

In the nearly thirty years my mother's parents were married, my grandmother always handled correspondence with the Irish relatives—including all those Henry in-laws she'd never even met. She sent photos, money, notes of congratulations and condolence, even a First Communion suit for one of my grandfather's nephews, Mom recalls.

When my grandmother died, Mom inherited the task of corresponding with the Irish relations. Pop-Pop's step-mother never made it onto his Christmas-card list. Yet somehow Annie managed to keep track of him, because even at ninety she'd known who my mother was and how they were connected.

My parents have told me everything they recall about their first meeting with the granny, which was all polite conversation, a visit that lasted as long as a pot of tea. If they talked at all about the cobbler, Mom doesn't recall what was said; and if they had, she almost certainly would.

Still, I keep asking questions. Mom answers by digging up every scrap she can find—prayer cards confirming when my great-grandfather and step-great-granny died, a letter from Church Street saying we were welcome to visit again. She hands over each treasure as if it will answer my questions. I have the frayed white jacket my grandfather

wore in his grocery store. I have his passport, and my grandmother's, and their marriage license. I have the journals my parents kept on their trips to Ireland. On that first trip, Mom wrote that they were "completely enchanted" by the granny, and she described their meeting as "the most remarkable event of the trip." She also noted that one of her cousins said their grandfather had been a great cobbler: "He could just about spit nails into the heel of a shoe."

Mom had received a letter from the granny's daughter, Kathleen, after our hospital visit, and we knew my step-great-granny died six days after we saw her. But by the time I started asking questions, this letter had gone missing. Then one day Mom called to say she'd found it. "It's yours, of course," she told me.

Kathleen was responding to a Christmas card from Mom. From the seven-page, hand-written letter we learn (all over again, because of course we both read it when it was new) that we just missed meeting Kathleen at the hospital that day. We re-learn that my step-great-granny had six grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren. We calculate that Kathleen was four years older than Mom, Kathleen's oldest child four years older than me.

And thanks to that letter, we now know even less than we thought we did about the cobbler's children, and his second marriage.

"I remember your father's photo which was always on the sideboard of your grandfather's house in Church St. where I lived from the age of 7 until 12 ...," Kathleen wrote. Which begs the question of where she lived before she was seven, and what it might mean that she referred to the cobbler as "your grandfather" and not "my father" (or "step-father").

And then there's this: "... I want you to know something very specially. Would you please let Ciss know that Mammy didn't have her address when she moved and that she asked for it or the phone number on many occasions but it was not forthcoming! Mary and Ciss never forgot her over all the years and she would so much have wanted me to write or call to say so. I do hope you can put that right."

Mom would have done her best to convey this message to ornery Aunt Ciss, knowing, as Kathleen surely did, that it wasn't always easy to put things right with a Henry, or even to know what was wrong in the first place.

All we can do now is read between the lines. From the warm tone of Kathleen's letter, and the cool undertone of everything else Mom heard from other Henrys, it seems reasonable to conclude that the day my middle-aged mother turned up on Annie's doorstep was the first time one of the cobbler's grandchildren had jumped for joy at the chance to call her "granny."

The cobbler's house in Magherafelt is gone now—my Uncle Mickey went looking for it and found it had been torn down. Ciss and Aggie died long ago, and our favorite Henry cousin, Pauline, died too. There's no one left to ask about the people in the picture, the missing parts of their stories, or at least no one we know well enough. Public archives could fill in some blanks, but they wouldn't tell us the stories we wish we knew; at best they'd help us cobble together a few more dates or add some branches to the family tree.

I ask Mom what she remembers knowing as a child about her father's parents. "He never talked about them," she says. And although neither one of us says so, we both know this is the real mystery we are still trying to solve.

I've revised the scenes in my snow globe that I'd fictionalized over time. I've written down only what I believe to be true, or can reasonably surmise, about the cobbler, his wives, their children and grandchildren.

With one exception: I have, quite consciously, allowed myself to invent a scene at the end of that long-ago day when my mother met her granny. I imagine that after she kissed my parents goodbye and closed the door behind them, she picked up the phone and dialed her only daughter's number.

"You'll never guess what happened today," she began, then blurted out the news before Kathleen could reply: "I met my granddaughter."



Eileen Cunniffe's nonfiction has appeared in many literary journals, including *Superstition Review*, *Hofstra Windmill*, *Bluestem Magazine* and *The RavensPerch*. Occasionally, her stories present themselves as prose poems. Three of her essays have been recognized with Travelers' Tales Solas Awards and another received the *Emrys*

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