

Poor Josie

by Maria Hetherton

I met Noreen in Cork, the year after my mother died. She welcomed me around a table crowded with cousins I'd never met, all of us drinking tea and eating cake and the men sipping whiskey. Everyone laughed when my husband confused a salt cellar with a sugar bowl and put salt in his tea. A few well-placed f-bombs made our discourse pop. We discovered a shared failure as children to keep our mouths shut during school. It all added up: these were my people.

My mother rarely mentioned these cousins in Cork, and was mostly mum on the subject of her childhood in Ireland. She told me her family were among the poor given baskets from the grocers on Boxing Day, and that pregnancy made her mother very cross. The eldest daughter, she was often charged with the care of younger siblings. Sundays, she'd earn a penny escorting her blind aunt to Mass, a penny she refused to relinquish when nuns at school asked alms for children in Africa. A few of her memories bordered on the political, like the rhyme she and her friends enjoyed as children: *Colman's Mustard, Colman's Starch, tell Mr. Colman to stick it in his arse*, Colman's, of course, a British brand.

Noreen and I still correspond. We exchange cards at Christmas, our families' latest traumas scribbled into the white space, and emails at random times of year. She'll share memories of growing up alongside a river in a mill town near Cork. Sometimes we exchange insights from ancestry profiles. *Did you know our grandmothers share DNA with the Somerset Cheddar Man?* And sometimes, Noreen reveals stories about poor Josie, my mother's mother, a woman I never knew.



Cissie was Noreen's grandmother, and Josie was mine, sisters raised in Tralee, County Kerry. The only photo we have of Josie includes Cissie and her husband, taken perhaps on Cissie's wedding day. The young couple sit while Josie stands centered behind them. A brimmed felt hat frames Cissie's pleasant face. Her hands clutch a pair of gloves.



The brim of Josie's hat bisects her crown at a jaunty angle. Her eyes project a hint of defiance. Her right hand rests on her new brother's shoulder, pulling him in, telling a story all its own. Josie hasn't yet met the man she'll marry, a half-English veteran of World War I. Her hand on the new brother's

shoulder conveys a sense of protection. All things considered, there is also a prescient sense of *Cissie, you got the good one.*

The sisters came of age during the Irish War of Independence. The 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty marked its terminus. Britain agreed to withdraw its military and police presence and accord Ireland the status of a Commonwealth country like Canada or Australia. Yet Britain would continue to maintain naval bases along Ireland's shores, and require the sworn allegiance of Irish Parliament to the monarch. The northern counties of Ireland would be partitioned to Great Britain.

Only a small majority within the Irish Republican Parliament approved the treaty. Civil war ensued.

In the years Cissie and Josie became young mothers, Kerry was a hotbed of guerilla warfare and reprisal killing among the Irish themselves. County Kerry would tally more violence and fatality than any other county in Ireland during the Irish Civil War.

In a series of emails, Noreen introduces an image of her grandmother Cissie, the fireside raconteur. Cissie warms her porter by inserting a red-hot poker into her mug. She doesn't hate the occasional pinch of snuff. Huddled close to the hearth, she regales the children with stories of ghosts. The ghosts are loved ones who wandered into alternate histories and never returned. One such ghost is poor Josie.

I read Noreen's emails and forget I'm in front of a computer monitor. My focus is that fireplace in a simple Irish home, Cissie narrating the story of my grandmother. It all begins to make sense.

Noreen writes: *Cissie's description of the War of Independence in Tralee frightened me as a child. She described a woman showing her son's chopped off fingers to Noch in a bloody white hankie.*

"Noch" was Honora, Cissie's and Josie's mother, a woman twice widowed and from whom war took two sons. First Tadgh, who died in France at the end of the first world war, and then Patrick, the activist who disappeared.

Noreen writes: *Cissie always maintained that if her brother Pa could get six good men, he'd have freed Roger Casement as he was brought into Tralee.*

"Pa" was Patrick.

And Casement was a knighted official in the British Foreign Office. He grew to reject British colonialism and took up the Irish cause. Britain exposed his plot to arm Kerry rebels with weapons smuggled from Germany. He was hung for treason in 1916, around the time Cissie and Josie worked the woolen mill as young teens. Their brother, Pa, a republican activist, went away.

They never heard from him again.

And then, the civil war.

Noreen writes: *Cissie talked of the Ballyseedy ambush, but I don't remember why. It is quite possible that family connections were related to those killed in the ambush.*

In March of 1923, Irish National Army officers removed eight Anti-Treaty prisoners to Ballyseedy, a remote area outside of Tralee. They tied the prisoners together with rope and detonated a land mine in their midst.

A few weeks later, Josie gave birth to my mother.

The Irish Free State was established later that year, but troubles in Kerry prevailed to the brink of the Second World War. Josie's oldest son, my mother's favorite brother, fled Tralee to join the British army. He feared retaliation after refusing a mission IRA associates had assigned him, one he could not in conscience perform. Josie saw him to the train, late at night, and never saw him again. How it must have compounded her grief—first two brothers and now a son lost to war.

These events help me understand Mom's mood the evening we saw my brother off to basic training and then Viet Nam. I was seven.

"Why are you crying?" Mom asked me. Her tone conveyed a hint of scorn.

I reckoned the answer was obvious.

Dad tried to reassure me. "Don't worry. He's a noncombatant. He'll probably be on a typewriter the whole time he's over there."

We watched my brother disappear through a gate at LAX, and waited at the window until his plane ascended from the runway. I wiped my nose on the sleeve I'd pulled taut over my wrist. Call it stoicism passed from Josie to Mom and then to me, when the only choice is to wish goodbye and godspeed to a brother or a son.

Noreen's serialization of Josie's life begins to merge with small stories my mother told.

Noreen writes, *Cissie always referred to her sister as "poor Josie." She said Josie never wanted to leave Tralee, and it upset her so much she got sick and never recovered. She blamed Josie's husband for taking her and her family away.*

Josie's family inhabited a dark and crowded apartment in a barracks vacated by the British. My mom remembered her pulling coin from the coffer she earned knitting fair isle socks so her husband could go buy a pint, while he repaired the occasional bicycle. Irish men struggled to find work in the years between the Irish Civil War and the Second

World War. It is possible his half-English heritage made him less employable than most. It is true he'd enjoy a better future in England.

Josie had no say in the family's move to London. When they arrived in England, she left the boat on a stretcher and died the next day. Mom said it was Bright's Disease, kidney failure.

Mom never spoke of Josie's death without the deepest sense of sorrow. I doubt she could absorb it then. Her father soon met a woman with no interest in Josie's children. Mom shouldered Josie's role, managing seven younger siblings in the basement of a home in Kilburn. Her father and the new woman lived upstairs.

Like Josie, Mom navigated family survival in times of war. They gave the tunnels a try when the air raids commenced but could not abide the dark and the cold.

"We decided to stay home. If we had to die, at least we'd die together," Mom said.

And, like Josie, my mother married a soldier, a sweet-natured Canadian she'd meet in a London dance hall. He was sent to the front in Belgium, while she gave birth to their first child during an air raid. She hated the way washed diapers never dried, hung outside in that dismal climate. When the war ended, she shipped out to Canada with other military wives.

Her husband returned, carrying the baggage of war. Rage and panic supplanted his sweet demeanor. For a time, they spoke of parting ways, by now a daughter and a son between them. But she stayed, adding three more children to the family after my father moved them to Los Angeles. She loved their little house in Vancouver with a view of Mount Baker, but like Josie, she had no choice except to go.

Mom used to wait with me for the bus that took me to kindergarten. My timing was perfect, waiting for the doors to hiss open, and then bolting down the street. Instead of chasing me, she'd wait on the sidewalk in front of our house. Once the bus resumed its morning roundup, I'd turn back home. Wordless, we walked up the driveway and into the house.

She would put me in front of the TV to watch *Sheriff John* after equipping me with one of my father's handkerchiefs draped over a fork—a flag to hold as the sheriff pledged allegiance to a country mine, not hers.

The sheriff and a long nap were all my antics gained me. I didn't dare argue a case for more mom-time. I knew I'd encroached enough into the routine of her day.

Confiding in me decades later, Mom would distill in one story her role as oldest daughter of an overwhelmed mother raising nine children. That's when Josie tasked her with taking her infant twin sisters out in a pram. Because the pram was dirty, Mom pulled it through a stream of water. When the babies contracted pneumonia, Josie berated my mom for the negligence she believed made the babies sick. Mom was just a kid. She couldn't win for trying.

What a shock it must have been, not only Josie's death, but assuming full responsibility for her siblings—in a war zone.

If I could talk to the little girl that I was, I'd try to reassure her. *Your mom's just tired. She's been taking care of children all her life.* But I don't think she'd understand.

Noreen writes, *Our great-grandmother, Noch, instilled a love for religion and the ritual of religion in Cissie and Josie. Cissie prayed morning and evening. She used her prayer book for this. When I was young, she prayed the Angelus at noon and at six pm. She always finished with, "My Jesus, mercy. Mary, help."*

And maybe Josie did the same. My mother had her own routine, praying beside a stone-cast statue of the Blessed Mother in our living room, an end-table shrine. She clutched her rosary, and stared with no attention to external distraction. It is the most grounded act of contemplation I have ever witnessed, a grounding in the mystery of a suffering mother.

It was a retreat into a realm we children never dared interrupt. Had we gained entry, we might have felt what it meant to lose a mother young or be three countries removed from the motherland.

But in a house with two bathrooms and a yard for children to play in bright California sun and with plenty of food to eat, surely her life was better than poor Josie's.



Maria Hetherton is a retired teacher with a past in academia, focusing on women’s oral narrative while earning her PhD in folklore from Indiana University. Having time to write has become the dream of a lifetime. Her nonfiction appears at *Discretionary Love*, *Herstry*, *Hippocampus*, *The Malahat Review* and the blog at *Dappled Things*, among others. She lives close to the Rio Grande in New Mexico, where she and her husband are sworn vassals to a pair of semi-feral house cats.