

This black and white photograph of my grandfather must have been taken some time in the Sixties in what was called the scullery of my grandparents' house. It was a Saturday, because we always had salad on a Saturday. There would be various pickles on the table- silverskin onions, sliced beetroot, and something called mixed pickles with turmeric-coloured cauliflower and gherkin. Slices of bread, and various jams, usually strawberry, but sometimes, rather exotically I thought, rhubarb and ginger, and gooey lemon curd. Afterwards we'd have stewed or tinned fruit for dessert with lumpy custard, until, to my grandmother's delight, Bird's created their trifle in a box. I think my grandfather looks like a comedian in the photo; the bow tie was made for him by my aunt as a joke. He'd wanted a dicky bow for years. My grandmother used to roll her eyes at the thought. I love how he is wearing it with one of his best shirts and a cardigan. I know by the expression on his face he was enjoying the laugh very much; he had a really dry sense of humour, and a quick wit. He was the finest man I ever knew.

My grandparents met when they were both nineteen. He saw her walking to the linen mill she worked in as a reeler, and fell in love with her. She was tall and pale, with black hair, and violet coloured eyes. Even when she was an old woman her eyes were still astonishingly bright and full of life. She had a perfect diamond-shaped strawberry birthmark on her throat; I thought it was wonderful.



My grandfather's nickname for her was Queenie. He said she was his queen. She'd roll her eyes at that too. She'd tell me great stories about her time at the mill, of how some of the girls wrapped cloths round their feet because they didn't have any shoes, and about impromptu 'concerts' at lunchtimes to entertain themselves, singing, yodelling, dancing, or how they had a sort of uniform which included a type of shawl called 'a wee cloud'. When there was any kind of family dispute, she would get a twinkle in her eye, and say "We'll have to have a meeting in the mill yard about this". It would always make me laugh.

When she was a girl my grandmother, Annie, lived in Ligoniel village in a whitewashed cottage. It was by all accounts a very poor existence. There were stone steps down into a main stone floored living area, and the back door opened on to a field where children would play, as near to rural life as you can get in a city, idyllic even if you are hungry.

Annie was brought up by her grandmother; her mother had died and left Annie and her younger sister in the care of her mother. Granny Carlin was the local wise woman, the one who would be called when women needed help in childbirth, or when it was necessary to lay out the dead. I suppose she was a sort of quack, the sort of person it is necessary to have in areas of extreme poverty where doctors' fees couldn't be afforded. Granny Carlin was respected, but she had a wicked temper and liked to have payment for her expertise with bottles of gin. Because of her sups of mother's ruin Granny Carlin was often drunk and incapable, and during drunken rages would beat

her two charges with wooden kitchen implements. Annie and Bridie learned to look after themselves, but because there was an age difference Annie brought up Bridie like a daughter.

The Carlin family were Catholic, and went to chapel religiously. There was shame attached to them though, in spite of Granny Carlin's revered position in the community. My grandmother's mother had never been married. Annie and Bridie were illegitimate. They never knew who their father was; nobody knew.

On the other hand, my grandfather's family were staunchly Protestant. His father had been a fireman, but rather unfortunately he'd been left a pub, which he promptly drank away, leaving his large brood of children without a home. That was how the Halls came to be caretakers of a mission on the Shankill Road. My grandmother would always say later, "The Halls thought they were something", and certainly later in life in spite of their very humble beginnings they all did well for themselves. There were five brothers- Malcolm, William, Walter, James, and my grandfather, Albert, and three girls- Minnie, Edie, and Annabel. Annabel worked for Jaeger. She would often say, "Our Albert looks like the King, except he doesn't have his clothes." There had also been twin brothers, and the story was that one boy had been hit on the back of the head by a swing in the park and had died in his sleep, and some months later his twin died, supposedly of a broken heart. I've never known of anyone else who died of a broken heart, although I've met some people who might have wanted to. It's always seemed a bit surreal to me, our strange family myth.

Albert and Annie's romance wasn't celebrated in any quarter. She would go to confession, give him up, and then he would stand and wait for her outside the mill looking miserable, and she would relent and it would all start up again. That went on for seventeen years. She would say later about unplanned pregnancy that "only good girls got caught", but in the end Annie wasn't a girl, she was thirty seven. She always maintained that "you only carry your first baby for seven months!" but she nearly didn't even make that. They were married at the end of March, and Irene was born at the beginning of November. Nobody knows where they were married- there isn't even a wedding photograph.

So there they were - in a mixed marriage, in Belfast in the late 1930s - the shame of it. People used to cross the road when they saw them coming, but at least they had each other. They moved into a council house in Ardoyne, made friends with their neighbours, made a home, and brought up their, by then, two daughters. They never had any contact with family, both ostracised by their nearest and dearest, and at some stage Annie had been excommunicated.



Then came the opportunity of a house transfer at the end of the 1950s, and, keen to make a fresh start somewhere nobody knew their story, they seized the chance. They moved into a newly built housing estate in North Belfast and had Protestant and Catholic neighbours, but as far as anyone who might be interested was concerned, the Halls were Protestant. When the burning out of the Catholic neighbours started in the Seventies, Annie was petrified that anyone would find out about her heritage, and she cried for every single one of them. There but for the grace.....

My grandfather worked all his life in the shipyard, and so did his four brothers for that matter, except they didn't speak to him. He hadn't only married a Catholic, he had married beneath him, so

Albert was sent to Coventry in Belfast by those who had loved him best. I read once about men in mixed marriages, or Catholics who worked there being thrown over the side of the ships into the water, and I often wondered if it had ever happened to my grandfather. If it had you'd never have known; he was the most easy-going man you could ever meet. He needed to be to live with my grandmother. She was house proud to the point of being obsessive, always changing the décor, and moving furniture. My mother still laughs about the day he came home from work and sat down to take off his shoes where there was usually a chair which had been moved. They all heard him fall heavily to the floor, and after a short silence he roared: "Hell roast that woman!" It's the only negative thing anybody ever heard him say about her.



The siren from the shipyard signalled the end of the working day at five. It was the cue for the potatoes to go on. Granda would come up the street half an hour later. When we were at the house my sister and I would run to meet him. There was always a smell about his overalls, like sulphur; I've often wondered if it was the smell of asbestos. She would make him take his overalls off before he came into the house. She always worried that what he was working with might affect their health- she was a very wise woman. Following a quick wash he'd sit down to meat and two veg. Afterwards he'd have a cigarette 'out the back' and if she thought he was smoking too many she'd go out, count the butts, and chastise him for it. He was branch secretary of the AUEW and once a month he'd go to the meeting. He liked to have a beer, and on his return she would point to the floor in front of her and ask him to stand there. She said she could tell how much he'd had to drink by looking at his feet. When she would make a great fuss about the smell of the drink on him, he'd reply "Now Annie, you know one smells as bad as twenty." In spite of it all, they still laughed together, and they'd sit together quietly reading the newspapers. She loved the News of the World; she'd tut at the indiscretions of the great and not so good. Her love of scandal amused him very much, but in an attempt not to engage too much in discussion about it, he'd pretend to be deaf.

The asbestosis was diagnosed in Forster Green Hospital in October 1975. My mother says she remembers looking at the consultant's face after he'd said the words, and replying, "Excuse me, are you telling us my father has ten weeks to live?" He *was* saying that.

Granda went to bed sometime during December and never got up again. His Christmas dinner that year was two Rich Tea biscuits and a cup of tea. I sat with him while he had it. It was the last time I ever saw him; he was very ill, but his eyes were still twinkling when he smiled at me. I remember he was always cheerful. He needed day and night care. He couldn't sleep because of the pain, and informed about his impending demise his brothers asked if they could sit with him at night. My grandmother reluctantly agreed, and so the vigils began. One evening she found two of them outside his bedroom door, crying. She had waited a long time to say it and so she did: "Your tears are a bit late".

On the day he died she waited alone with him until the undertakers arrived, and afterwards covered all the mirrors; then she opened the windows "to let him away".

She was diagnosed with cancer herself less than a decade later. The doctor said it would never kill her- amazing how accurate the medical profession can be, but after diagnosis she confessed that she

was afraid of dying. My mother contacted a friend who was a priest. He used to visit the house in true cloak and dagger style, with his coat buttoned to the top to hide his collar. When my grandfather had died he'd sent her a holy card, there was a picture of the Virgin Mary on it. She'd slept with it under her pillow ever since his death, and we knew she'd kept her rosary beads. Father Jim talked to her for a while, and then came out to talk to my mother. He said he'd asked her if she wanted him to 'fix' things, saying it would only take a few minutes. He said she had been emphatic, but she said "No" - she said she'd made the decision she had because she'd loved him, and she wasn't going to change things now.

A few months later she had a stroke. She couldn't speak properly, but she would raise her good arm up and talk into the corner, like there was somebody waiting for her. She'd murmur that she wasn't ready yet. Just before she died I was sitting beside her bed and she was holding my hand; she would squeeze it when I spoke so I'd know she'd understood. I could tell she was trying to say something - she was talking with her eyes. I was crying because I couldn't understand what she was trying to say. She was holding on to my left hand, pointing at my ring finger. My aunt came into the room and she was cross with me: "Deborah, you are only upsetting her". I cried more. I sobbed, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you are trying to say". She'd raised her head from the pillow- I know now what an exertion it must have been- she looked into my eyes and I remembered something she used to say to me all the way through her time in my life. I smiled and quoted it back at her: "don't marry the man you love, marry the man that loves you". She leaned back, closed her eyes, and squeezed my hand.