

A lovely start to March. Not long now to a break from school. Going home on Thursday, thinking of tonight's homework. Get it done quickly, then some TV, bed and ... whoopee - Friday!

Nearly home. Dad was at the back door at half three- I wonder why.

"H all."

"What are you doing here Dad?"

"Only packing a bag. I'm off on the Heysham boat tonight to see some clients all day tomorrow. I'll be back Saturday, probably late afternoon as I will call and see the brothers in the shop and get Sunday's dinner."

"What time will you be back for your dinner?" Mum asked.

"About half five or a quarter to six", Dad replied.

And with that he got into the car, waved and drove off.

I got my homework done and watched TV. My sister and her husband came back from work in Belfast. They were not long married and living with us until their new house was ready.

At a quarter to six Mum announced that she was putting out the dinner. Dad must have been delayed and she would keep it warm. We ate as usual, chatting, laughing, keeping the wee sister in line and making sure the wee brother did not eat all the spuds! We finished and were just clearing the table, arguing about whose turn it was to wash and dry, when the back door knocked. People always knocked the back door. It really was at the side. My mother opened the door and a man she knew asked if my Dad was in. She replied "not yet". The man told her that there was a fire at Dad's business and the fire brigade were on their way, and could she ask him to go round as soon as he came in. My brother-in-law said he would go round, so the two men set off.

Mum was in a state and she and my big sister were talking, worried about the business, hoping Dad would be in soon or, if he had heard, was round at the factory. Just then the back door went again. It was a policeman and he asked Mum was Dad in yet, or did she know where he was. She explained that he was due in as he was catching the boat that night. The policeman said to send him round as soon as he came in.

After that my Mum was really in a state, wondering what was going on or what had delayed my dad. I said that I would go round, see what was going on and come back and tell them. So I put in my school overcoat and went out the door.

Once on the dark road I thought what a grown-up errand I was doing. I was, after all, a month short of fourteen and thus very responsible. I hurried as fast as I could but it was quite a distance to the centre of the town and then

down the lane to the factory. I don't know what I expected to see, but that was not the scene that met me. I went to the front door of the factory and



stood still. There were flames and smoke roaring out of the windows and the door and yet you could see everything inside lit up like a Christmas tree. A fireman came over and told me to move back, which I did, and as I did so I looked around. It was strange. There were many people standing there but they were behind a wire fence and they were all looking at me! It was so odd. Then I realised that I was a part of this fire scene, I was connected, I belonged. It was a very isolated place to find myself and it began to feel like some sort of play- a girl standing alone and they were the watchers.

Suddenly I saw my brother-in-law come down the stairs which led from outside to the upper floor. He came over to me and said sharply: "Go home! Right Now! Go home!"

I suddenly knew!

I said "No! I know what's happening. That's my daddy you are bringing down those stairs."

He ran back and in a few seconds a number of firemen and my brother-in-law carried my dad out of the building and laid him on the ground. My brother-in-law said to me: "Kneel down and say the Act of Contrition into his ear."

I was dumbstruck. I looked at my dad and he seemed asleep, with not a difference in him from usual. But I froze, could not move.

My brother-in-law said: "I will do it, but you must go home quickly and tell your mum what has happened. Your dad has swallowed a little smoke. The ambulance is on its way and she can be back here before it arrives as it has a long way to come, so go home as fast as you can."

I started to move away and a girl I knew fell in step with me. She had someone else with her- I never knew who. She talked and talked and I never knew what she said. It started to rain; I put up the hood of my coat and then a strange thing happened. I was trying to go as fast as I could but my legs would not do as my brain said. What was wrong? My legs were like lumps of lead and would not do as I wanted. It was as if they had a will of their own. I had to hurry. I had to tell my mother to get round quickly, Dad had swallowed a little smoke, he was alright, the ambulance was on its way. I rehearsed and rehearsed, tried to go faster and all the time the girl's voice went on and on.

How I ever managed to arrive home I will never know. I got to our gate and the girl said cheerio. I walked down the side and in the back door. Mum met me. "Well?"

"Well you have to go round to the factory. They found Dad inside and he swallowed a wee bit of smoke and they are waiting for the ambulance."

"Is he alright?"

"Well he looks OK but he's not awake."

With that my Mother grabbed her coat. My big sister got hers and Mum turned to me.

"Now you look after the wee ones. I hope we won't be long."

"OK."

And with that they were gone.

I looked round and my young brother and sister looked back with fear and confusion in their eyes.

What could I do?

I realised I had to take charge. I was in control and they needed guidance, so I said we would say the Rosary, which was normal enough.

But the little brother pointed out there was not enough to give it out.

Again I had the solution. I would give it all out and they could do the responses. I said nothing about Dad, except that our prayers were to make him better.

Then we began. It was unreal but it gave a sense of order and calm at that time.

Finishing with the 'Hail Holy Queen, Mother of Mercy', and the 'Help us in this vale of tears', I heard the back door open. Not mum but a neighbour. She came to see us. I told where Mum was and she went out to the kitchen and we did the dishes. She asked what to do with the food in the pots. I told her to leave as it was Dad's. He loved steak, cauliflower and potatoes. Another neighbour came and the first was quick to say that there was no word yet. I went to see the wee ones and the neighbours started to whisper.

A time later the door opened. My Mother was there and my sister. Mum came to the living room and closed the door. She took my little sister on her knee; my brother and I sat on each arm of Dad's chair.

She said "I must tell you that you Daddy had gone to Heaven tonight and we all have to be very brave.

I remember the hysterics of my little brother.

I remember feeling numb, confused and afraid all at the one time.

Relations started arriving from the city- his brothers, her brothers.... no Sunday dinner.

But that wet, dark 1<sup>st</sup> of March, the month before my 14<sup>th</sup> birthday meant one thing to me. Childhood was over.