Travels With My Harp

The Complete Autobiography

MARY O'HARA

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Second Thoughts

INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPLETE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

'MEL,' EXCLAIMED my sister Joan, 'why on earth are you writing your autobiography at your age? That's something you do when you are in your eighties.' She was right of course. But gauging that she was not in a receptive mood, I didn't even attempt to explain the pressure I was under. That was in 1977 – over thirty years ago. By the age of forty-two, I had experienced what some might call a 'successful' musical career, an early and very happy marriage, early widowhood, spent twelve-and-a-half years as a nun in a Benedictine monastery, and now was having another unexpected and successful career in music. I was beginning to lead a very busy life flitting between recording studios, radio and television stations and concert halls. I was getting tired of all the interviews and answering the same questions over and over, especially about my monastic sojourn. Up till then my life had been full of surprises, chock-a-block with the unexpected. How does one know that this is not the end?

But that's not why I agreed to write my autobiography when publishers came knocking on the door on the heels of that first TV interview I did with Russell Harty on the BBC. At first I kept refusing, saying I was far too busy; I was in the middle of a UK concert tour. Jo Lustig, my very capable and persuasive manager of just a year, assured me that once I put it all down in book form, people could refer to the book and stop asking me the same questions repeatedly. I was naïve enough to believe him because I wanted to believe him. And I did not have to lift a finger (or in this case, a pen), he said, for he had the perfect ghost writer for me, a journalist friend of his. I would talk to her now and again between concerts and eventually an autobiography would appear, supposedly written by me. That's how ghosts worked, he said. So, finally worn down, I signed on the dotted line. In those early trusting days I signed anything presented to me.

The publishers paid my manager the money. The manager shared it between the four of us – the ghost, her agent, himself and myself. I talked to the ghost and the ghost wrote what she wrote. I kept asking to see what she had written but I kept being fobbed off. That was how ghosts worked, I was told.

I was uneasy with this ghosting procedure. And then one day I spotted a magazine article about me written by my ghost and it impelled me to take action. She'd over-dramatised what, in anybody's view, was already quite simply a very dramatic story. I made a decision. The test of authenticity would be the way she treated my stay at Stanbrook Abbey. If she misconstrued the spiritual element, then no matter what, I could not continue with this ghosting arrangement. I demanded to see the typed manuscript and, as I suspected, she had indeed missed the bus. There was no way I could append my name to what she had written as my book. I quite understood that it was difficult for an outsider to get inside my mind, either during my stay at Stanbrook or during the whole period after my husband's death. I made a further decision: I'd write the book myself. As I drove home between concerts, I called into Stanbrook Abbey and explained the problem. They put me on to a lawyer friend of theirs, Michael Rubenstein, a quiet but firm man experienced in legal matters such as I was bound to face. It took some patient and protracted negotiations with my manager and some monetary exchanges to just get my own files back. My late husband's letters, photographs of my family, my diaries – the return of everything had to be painfully negotiated, leaving my bank account fairly well depleted. For a brief period I considered approaching a professional writer friend, whom I knew really understood the inner me, to ask him to take over the ghosting but when I discovered it would involve yet another agent I dropped that idea.

I realised I'd have to write the book myself. When I contacted my publishers, Michael Joseph, they were relieved and said that all along they were hoping that I would do so. On my way up to London to see them, I wrote the first chapter on the train. 'That's your voice,' Alan Brooke, the managing director, exclaimed. 'This is what we want.'

I had learnt a valuable, costly lesson: never trust others with your life story. You do the interpretations yourself. This 'problem with the book', of course, sowed lasting distrust between myself and Jo Lustig,

which was a pity, for he was a competent manager. Eventually we parted company. But now I was obliged to write my own story from scratch – and fast too, because the publishers' advance was dissipated. And that's how I came to write my autobiography at the age of forty-two. And I have never regretted doing so. I called it *The Scent of the Roses*, the last line of the song 'Farewell, But Whenever You Welcome the Hour' by the early 19th-century Irish poet Thomas Moore and a very popular song, like all the Moore's Melodies, in the Ireland of my youth. The song is about enduring friendship and love through the thick and thin of life.

> Let Fate do her worst, there are relics of joy,
> Bright dreams of the past which she cannot destroy.
> Which come in the night-time of sorrow and care
> And bring back the features that joy used to wear.
> Long, long be my heart with such memories filled
> As that vase in which roses have once been distilled.
> You may break, you may shatter the vase, if you will,
> But the scent of the roses will hang round it still.

It was a sentiment with which I empathised but though the title made a lot of sense to me personally, it could mean little to anyone who did not know the song and the provenance of that phrase. But I've always liked 'The Scent of the Roses/Farewell But Whenever.' It was the song that Joan Baez told me she treasured most on one of my early recordings, *Songs of Ireland* – the album that my husband Richard and I were working on together only weeks before he died.

Thirty years on I now see that there are advantages to writing one's autobiography in later life. For one thing, the passage of time gives one, for want of a better expression, a sociological perspective, the story becoming as much about one's own times as it is about oneself. It enables one to filter, revise and temper one's interpretations of people and events. I find this particularly true about the memories I have of my mother. It was only much later in life that I came to the conclusion that the *start* of my mother's problems was post-natal depression – a medical condition almost unheard of in the Ireland of the 1950s, let alone the 1930s. I've discovered too that the drink problem for both my parents started early on. Again, much later in my life, someone mentioned to me my father's propensity for gambling

on horses as a young man, which must have been held well in check by my mother, for I neither heard nor saw a sign of it when I was growing up and which could account for her holding the purse strings. All these things may have contributed to the marriage difficulties, and in the light of this new knowledge many other past events have taken on new meanings. Which is why I was tempted to call any updated version of my autobiography *Second Thoughts*. Instead I decided to call it *Travels With My Harp* – for reasons that will become obvious as I progress through my life.

Did I feel a great urge to update my memoirs? Not at all. In the late 1970s I had given it my best shot. I am now very happily remarried and contentedly retired. Having returned from a six-year stay in Africa in 2002, I'm fully occupied in catching up on my reading and learning Spanish instead of Swahili, which I did in Africa. Having just completed five volumes of my harp accompaniments and given talks about *Travels With My Harp* in Australia, Europe and North America, perhaps I can rest on my oars, a la '*Óro Mo Bháidín',* which, to my great delight, has morphed itself into 'Sleepyhead', a hit number by the American electropop band Passion Pit. A case of my former manager Jo Lustig, now dead, having the last laugh, perhaps?

In 2001, the Australian playwright John Misto wrote a play about me called *Harp on the Willow*. It deals with my marriage to the American poet Richard Selig and the monastic sojourn brought about by his premature death. The play had a very successful run in Sydney in 2004 and in Melbourne in 2007, starring Marina Prior in the lead role on both occasions. There was another very successful production of the play by the highly regarded Wyong Drama Group in 2010.

To coincide with the Melbourne occasion, I had been asked if I'd consider bringing people up to date on what has happened in my life since 1980. Not surprisingly, I missed their deadline by several years but in 2009/10, the Burns Library at Boston College held a six-month Mary O'Hara exhibition which gave the project sufficient impetus for me to complete the task. Since 1980 many interesting things have happened to me but also many more things have come to light about the events described in *The Scent of the Roses*. The task of sorting (and reading) my letters and papers for this exhibition furnished me with a new understanding of many past events; research for my talks in 2005 also unearthed long-forgotten experiences. I discovered files and

documents containing correspondence and articles that I hadn't remembered reading before. Perhaps, I thought, the authors of some of the interviews came to know me better than I did myself. Browsing through this material helped inform my knowledge considerably and gave my memory a welcome nudge. In this present updating of my memoirs I have used this extra information, these newfound insights, and woven them into my previous writings. In fact at one stage I wondered if a compilation of past press interviews might not prove a lot more interesting than any memoirs I might put together. However, I resisted this temptation.

Much of the content of my earlier book, though augmented by new or reinterpreted information, does of course remain the same. The latter half of the book is new and covers the last thirty years of my life. I want to thank all those innumerable friends and, above all, my husband Pat, who patiently encouraged me to finish this project – 'if only for the archives' they kept insisting.

Inis Mór, Aran Islands. January 2012
www.maryohara.co.uk

The Scent of the Roses

PROLOGUE 1980

MID-MORNING, Easter Thursday. In the sunlit Methodist Hall the tension was almost tangible. A singing competition of the Sligo *Feis Ceóil*, the annual Festival of Music and Drama, which attracted competitors from all over Ireland, was drawing to its close. Anxious mothers sat beside their small fidgety bairns who had been thoroughly scoured and relentlessly groomed down to the last white sock (and gone through their songs until they could sing them in their sleep). Some pestered their parents with whispered questions such as 'Mummy, who do you think will get First?' But the fond mamas had their eyes and attention riveted on the god-like adjudicator, an august musical pundit down from Dublin, seated in potent isolation in the centre of the Hall, scribbling (endlessly it seemed to the watchers) page after page of criticism. The most miserable person in Ireland at that moment was competitor number 28, sitting near the back of the hall – a slender, pale and freckle-faced little girl of eight, with a huge bow on the side of her straight light-brown hair. Heavens above, she was thinking, she hadn't wanted to enter the wretched competition at all, but realising that to have said so would have made no difference, she'd gone ahead with it. Even at that tender age she'd sensed it was good for her character to do things, innocuous in themselves, but which she personally disliked doing. Oh but the terrible shame of it: she hadn't even been *recalled.* Out of those dozens of competitors only about ten had had their numbers called out. This meant that the adjudicator, dismissing the remainder as not good enough, would listen once more to the performances of the selected few and then decide who would get First, Second and Third prizes and 'Highly Recommended'.

The little girl, number 28, wished the ground would open and swallow her up. Floors had never obliged before so why should they be

expected to do so now? If only she could slip away unnoticed, run home and play tennis by herself against the side of the house, as was her wont, and forget the whole affair. But since her mother was sitting beside her, escape was ruled out. She'd just have to sit through the rest of the humiliating business of hearing the adjudicator call out the names of the prize-winners and analyse their performances.

The hush of expectancy now deepened as the adjudicator, with a bundle of papers in his hand, finally made his way to the platform. He paused for a moment, glancing abstractedly over the top of his spectacles at the sea of ultra-attentive faces before him. Then he spoke. 'I've recalled twelve competitors to decide which of them should receive second, third and fourth prizes. I didn't recall competitor number 28 because, after she'd sung, there was no doubt whatsoever in my mind that she'd be the winner of first prize. I've given her 98 marks out of 100.'

CHAPTER 1

That Child Won't Live

I DON'T KNOW if my mother ever harboured notions of my becoming a singer: I very much doubt it, but if she did she never mentioned it to me. But I do know from others that she was worried I might not survive babyhood, though I personally have no recollection of being a sickly child, or frail, or mal-nourished.

I was an Easter child, born in Sligo, a small town on the west coast of Ireland. It had been a busy port before World War II, with an extensive trade in timber from the Baltic, weekly services to Liverpool and Glasgow, trade in grain from South America and Australia and various goods from Europe. From remote times, the O'Haras were settled in the Barony of Leyney in County Sligo. Thurlough Carolan (1670-1738), the noted Irish composer and harpist, composed '*Cupán Uí Eaghra*' for Cian (Kean) O'Hara (1657-1719) who was High Sheriff of Sligo in 1703 and 1713. Cian's son, also named Cian (1713-1782), was a Drury Lane playwright of some note and is best known for his drama *Midas*. Our branch of the family, however, is descended from Oliver O'Hara, who took part in the Irish rebellion of 1641. Later, when Cromwell, the victor of the English Civil War, gave Irish Catholics the ultimatum of 'going to hell or to Connaught', the O'Haras were not immediately affected as they were already in Connaught, but Oliver O'Hara's family did forfeit their lands for participating in the rebellion. A section of the family conformed to the new religion and so retained their property. Soldiers figure along the line, including my great grand-uncle who, in 1863, fought as a cavalry officer in the Union Army in the American Civil War.

My mother (who by the time I was born had three children under the age of four) relied on our neighbour Lily Hession, a mother of

seven children, as the resident expert on all child ailments. My mother did not breastfeed and relied completely on cow's milk. When I, the latest O'Hara newborn, could not keep the milk down, an SOS went out for Mrs Hession. Lily's daughter Eileen remembers her mother arriving back from her visit somewhat distraught and making the solemn pronouncement: 'That child won't live.' This stark phrase stuck in Eileen's mind. Eileen came to a concert of mine in Poole on the south coast of England in 1980 and, not having met since childhood, there was a lot of history to rake over. I casually mentioned that I'd recently seen a herbalist who had taken me off dairy products because, she said, I was allergic to them. Taken aback, Eileen butted in: 'But, didn't you know that, as a new-born baby, you almost died because you were allergic to dairy products?' And it had taken me forty-four years to discover this!

By any account, my parents' marriage was not the happiest of alliances. It is still very difficult to understand why they married. My father was a mild-mannered man; my mother was wilful with sometimes a tyrannical streak. I often think that if Father had married somebody who was more of a home-maker it would have provided him with the foundation he needed to make him truly happy. And if perhaps Mother had shared her life with someone firmer, she too might have thrived; she needed to be controlled. Although there were admirable qualities on both sides, they tended to negate each other. Some years ago my father told me that at one time they had both considered doing medicine at university. But as far as I can judge neither would have been the right type. Their temperaments were unsuitable. The medicine dream was an aspect of their partial inability to come to terms with everyday life.

John O'Hara, as his family referred to him, had a restless nature and had always wanted to travel. He attended Summerhill College, Sligo, but left at sixteen and qualified as a 'wireless operator' at the radio college in Cahirciveen, County Kerry. Though the course usually took a year, he applied himself diligently and qualified in a record three months. The college principal was impressed enough to ask him to stay on as an instructor, but, as his only reason for doing the course was to get away to sea, he declined. For three years he sailed the world with the merchant navy. On the high seas he had plenty of time to think and study. He matriculated and entered University College,

Galway, where he met Mai Kirwan, a commerce student, who was to become my mother.

Mai Kirwan is reputed to have been very attractive and vivacious. Photographs confirm this. I've heard her referred to as a college beauty and very charming. She was musical, having played the piano in her school orchestra at Taylor's Hill Dominican School in Galway. Educated and consequently in one sense a liberated woman in her day, she was at the same time not *really* liberated due to her temperament.

John O'Hara graduated with degrees in civil engineering and geology while Mai Kirwan graduated with a degree in commerce. During their marriage, I seem to remember money being a source of dissension. Mother always appeared in my childhood eyes to be the aggressor with my long-suffering father never asserting himself, hoping in vain for a quiet life. She had a temper and he didn't. Only recently did I get to hear about my father's heavy gambling on horses during the very early years of their marriage. Not the most auspicious of starts.

After he qualified, John O'Hara, still hankering for adventure, planned to become a professional soldier with the British Army in India, but at his interview he was persuaded to change his mind. He ended up with the British Colonial Service and was posted to Nigeria. Mai Kirwan took a teaching job in the west of Ireland. They must have kept in touch and in two years John O'Hara came back to Ireland, married Mai Kirwan and together they returned to West Africa. He was twenty-seven and she was twenty-nine. Even then, Mother was beginning to show signs of neurotic behaviour.

Father told this story. They were on board the West African mail steamer, which had just started to sail down the Mersey with the pilot on board. Mother decided she'd investigate the as yet unseen cabin. Seeing the low bulkhead, she turned on Father and snapped: 'The ceiling is too low; get me off this ship at once.' He replied, 'If you really mean it, then you'd better hurry up so that you can leave with the pilot and get down by the Jacob's ladder.' Mother stayed.

This irrational strain in her character lingered on. Years later we were living close to the harbour in Sligo. For some reason or other Mother was in bed during the day and the heavy dray horses pulling their noisy carts over the cobbled stones alongside the house got on her nerves. She ordered Father to go to the Town Hall and get the traffic stopped. He never did.

It seemed an extraordinary partnership. I do think that Father really loved Mother in his own way. All his life he was very loyal and faithful to her, and he never mentioned the constant friction to anyone outside the family. If ever he overheard us children grumbling among ourselves about what we deemed to be our mother's irrational behaviour, he'd pull us up gently.

I have a theory that Mother did not have a strong maternal instinct and wanted only one child. This was my eldest sister, Joan. Thinking about it years later as an adult, it seemed to me that Mother saw Joan as an extension of herself. There was a companionship between them that was not shared by the rest of us. Joan had the dubious privilege of having her cot in Mother's bedroom. Later on, when my brother and I came along and we were taken out for walks by the 'girl' (our 'live-in' maid, though we were never allowed to refer to her as 'maid'), Mother would say, 'Now the babies are all out we can sing and dance together,' and she and Joan would dance around the room.

Mother found child-bearing and rearing difficult. When the second child was born, fifteen months after Joan, it was too much. She couldn't cope, so Angela was reared by our paternal grandmother. There was always antipathy between Mother and her mother-in-law, but it was one-sided and it didn't stop us visiting Granny, who lived nearby. I was extremely fond of Granny. Poor Angela had a difficult life and died young but that is another story. Sometime during the war Angela came to live with the rest of us for a short while, but she and Mother did not get on and soon she was away again. Perhaps their fiery temperaments were too alike. So, from the start and until her death in 1972, Angela was to me, most of the time, a remote figure and I never had the opportunity to really get to know and understand her. When my brother Dermot appeared on the scene, Mother spoiled him in a different way from Joan – I think she felt sentimental towards him because he was the only boy. I was one year and twelve days younger than he, (though for many years I was telling people there were just twelve days between us), and we were very close, right up to the time we went to boarding school.

Eileen Hession, some years older than me, remembers me in my pram as a thin, snotty-nosed little baby – which throws light on something puzzling my mother said to me in my early youth: 'I was ashamed of you when you were a baby. I used to keep you hidden in

the pram,' she remarked. I didn't dare ask why. I must have recovered rather quickly because snaps of me show a healthy, chubby, cheerful baby. As a child I remember being kept in bed sometimes with tonsillitis and I recall my paleness being remarked upon. Angela, given to rhyming, used to chant: *Pale Bale* (my mother's pet name for me) *is frail*.

I think I must have sensed very early on that I would have to stand on my own two feet and fend for myself. Which is precisely what I proceeded to do at the age of seven months. My first steps were not only taken alone but were running ones. It was a mild December day and the family had driven out to Strandhill, a seaside resort five miles outside Sligo. Leaving me lying safely on a rug on the strand, the grown-ups started to take a walk along the edge of the sea. Suddenly, there was a noise and turning round they saw me running towards them. To this day I love speed.

Very early on I also learned to pull myself up in my pram and would sit there unusually straight-backed, grinning at the world. Worried that I must have something wrong with my back, Mother took me to the doctor but all was well. Later, I cultivated an upright stance and my boarding school reports, which got progressively worse, had one redeeming gleam of light. Beside the word deportment, the word 'excellent' invariably appeared.

I do think children ought to be told not only that they are loved but also that they are attractive, or at least made to feel they are. I grew up assuming that I was physically inferior to everyone else – the Plain Jane of the family. Some of this was due to the fact that Joan was blessed with an abundance of self-confidence about her appearance – about everything, in fact – which was wonderful and always endorsed by Mother's compliments. As a teenager she had her poetry published and one of her plays publicly performed in Sligo – by a group called 'The Sligo Unknown Players'. As a small child it always puzzled me how they could continue to be called 'Unknown' after we saw them perform. Now and then I'd overhear Mother quoting admiring remarks made by others about my sister's looks. Matters were not improved by my mother's tendency to dress me in Joan's cast-off clothes, which, since her colouring is completely different from mine

(Joan looked marvellous in browns and dark colours) only emphasized my paleness. When I was older Mother once told me that when, as a small child, I fell and hurt myself I would run straight to Joan. I am delighted to know this now but when I was first told about it, it seemed very strange indeed because I recall finding Joan a distant person who rarely smiled – almost a stranger. Decades later when I mentioned this to my sister she said: 'Yes, and I used to *push* you away.'

It was only in adult life I discovered that at this period of her life Joan was preoccupied with her own problems.

Mother was conventional and curls were the 'in' thing in those days. My hair was very fine and straight and would probably have looked well with a proper cut, but curls were a must. She went to town where bows were concerned. Very large multi-coloured objects became permanently attached to the side of my head. I didn't object to these, perhaps because I couldn't see them. Then one day when I was about eight, Mother decided I must have a perm. This was an awesome business, and secretly I felt I was getting preferential treatment. Stoically I endured the hot irons clamped tightly to my head and after several hours I emerged from my first visit to the hairdresser with a halo of fuzz. Everyone was delighted, nobody more than I. In fact, in the long term, it did my hair good; and from then on, bit by bit, it became naturally wavy, and today there are times when it is decidedly curly, especially in damp weather.

Another time when I was very small, Mother suddenly got the whim to cut my hair very short and put me into a pair of shorts. I suffered this humiliation in silence, but after the job was completed I disappeared. Eventually, I was found hiding behind the pantry door, crying quietly. My explanation was, I'm told, 'You're trying to make a 'shame-boy' out of me.'

Although there were no really halcyon days that I can recall, nevertheless Dermot and I shared many happy childhood times. Father was a great pal to us, and we played a lot together. Dermot and I used to tumble about on Father's bed and he was unendingly patient with us. We were extremely lively, but he never once admonished us for all the shouting and squealing and pulling at him that we delighted in. If he failed to wake up when we yelled into his ears, we would pull up his eyelids and shout into his eyes!

As a small child my father would take me out for a walk while my mother took Joan elsewhere. One day Father said to me: 'Would you like to come with me to Liverpool?'

I was delighted and off we set. Very soon we were at the huge, now empty, timber warehouses by the docks. Written in large letters over one was 'LIVERPOOL'. I didn't hold it against him though!

Dermot and I frequently got into trouble together; like the time, when we were three or four, our next-door neighbour found us lying on our backs systematically eating her carefully grown peas, row after cherished row, which ran alongside our fence. She chased us away into a field of shin-deep nettles, and when we came home in tears smarting from the stings we rightly got little sympathy, so we comforted each other over our bowls of soup.

People sometimes ask me if I ever smoked. My answer is that I gave up cigarettes when I was three years old. Dermot and I used to puff away *under the bedclothes.* My parents, who were both heavy smokers, noticed that their supply in the spare bedroom was dwindling. They suspected the maid until one day the little clandestine mound of cigarette butts, secreted in some private corner by my brother, was found. He got punished, I didn't.

Joan would come home from school full of her new learning and eager to impart it to us two little receptive ignoramuses. She made us sit before a blackboard where she would chalk up her day's knowledge and, reversing her role of a short while before, make us be the pupils. She told me that she had a little cane and whacked us if we gave the wrong answers!

Later on when we were a bit older, she started writing plays which we all performed for the family. The one I remember best had a farmer in it, played by the maid, who was swathed in a curtain and shod in Mother's white leather mosquito boots. I was a rather superior fairy and, adopting a dramatic stance, was carefully coached by Joan to stare at a certain Victorian print on the wall and proclaim with raised magic wand, 'I am the fairy Zakufranzpenromanisk.' Dermot stole that show, dressed up as an exceedingly pretty fairy in a confection of yellow tulle, wearing bright red lipstick. Halfway through his bit he got an uncontrollable fit of the giggles and the 'curtain' had to be drawn.

I started going to school aged four. Dermot started at the same time. I remember it vividly. Father drove us there and, having said good-bye, left us at the little gate which was too small for a car to drive through. It was the national school, St Vincent's, run by the Ursuline convent and staffed by some members of the community, but mostly by lay women. We must have arrived late for there was no one to be seen anywhere. For some reason I was carrying Dermot's coat over my arm. We knocked on the door of the Low Babies' section of the building (next year we'd be in High Babies). At the sound of Father's car starting, Dermot let out a wail, dashed into the yard and belted towards the gate crying his heart out, leaving me alone with the coat to face the music. My new teacher, conducting me inside, put me at a desk near the front. Smiling to hide my painful shyness I produced a hankie and held it pressed to my face. The teacher, Miss Ruhane, gentleness itself, finally managed to get the hankie away but I spent the rest of the morning with my face buried in my hands, my head down on the desk, too bashful to face all these new children.

I was full of admiration for these self-confident ones. Even Dermot, when he was finally lured back, settled down with no apparent self-consciousness and with his customary charm. I can see him now, walking into the Low Babies' classroom, having attended to the necessities of nature, his trousers still undone, and in an enviable matter-of-fact way heading straight to the teacher's desk, loudly requesting, 'Please, Miss Ruhane, will you do me braces?'

It was about this time that we moved to Harbour House, formerly the Harbour Master's house. It was a large, eighteenth-century stone building, supposedly haunted by a sea captain. Some areas inside were in permanent twilight and there was a particular passage between the breakfast room and the kitchen which was decidedly stygian and figured in my nightmares. I couldn't go down this passage at night without a tightening of the abdominal muscles and *very* loud singing, moving at top speed. At night, when I was sent upstairs to fetch something, I would sing with such volume and intensity that I'd forget what it was I'd been told to bring down and would have to call out 'What did you send me up for?' Joan told me that she was so scared in Harbour House after dark that if she happened to find herself alone, nothing – not even inclement weather – could persuade her to stay

inside. She would simply wait outside, swinging on the railings, or sauntering up and down, till someone arrived home. Father said he believed the house was haunted: for instance, doors would close unaccountably. The four large attics were so spooky that I couldn't so much as look at the winding stairs leading up to them once darkness had fallen. In the morning we would ask Father, 'Did you see any ghosts last night?' and he would reply something like, 'No, but I saw some pixies.' (These were the Little People or fairies which we used to read about in our story books.)

'What did you say to them?'

'Well, they asked me if I would like to be a pixie too, but I said no thanks because I think Mary and Joan have enough pixies already.'

He was referring to our little woollen pointed hoods which were also called pixies. This would have us laughing delightedly and our fear of the dark night and the ghosts would be temporarily allayed.

The Sligo National Primary School was just down the road from Harbour House. Looking back, the schooling system seems a curious set up. There was St Vincent's, the national school, where the teaching was excellent, and it was free and attended by a mixture of pupils from both professional and working-class backgrounds. Not far away, separated only by a camogie pitch, was a small private fee-paying primary school, and then there was the big secondary school, which catered for day-students and boarders. Each member of our family started off at St Vincent's, until he or she was ready for the secondary school. But I only stayed there until I was eight. One day during recreation I was accidentally charged into and broke my collarbone. Mother decided the school was 'too rough for Mary', and I was sent instead to St Anne's, the private school further down in the grounds, where I spent the next two years before joining my two older sisters at secondary school.

My early years coincided with the war. Father, always seeking adventure, joined the British Army as a commissioned officer and for some time was stationed in Northern Ireland. We used to drive up and spend long weekends with him in Ballycastle, County Antrim. I recall loaves of white bread being smuggled into the Free State in the boot of the car. There are other memories too. There was 'Snowball', a charming woman who stayed in our hotel. Years later we heard that she had been a spy for the Germans.

After training in Ballycastle, Father was posted to India. From there, he wrote to each of us. I looked forward to his letters (which towards the end I could read for myself), which were chatty and affectionate and always ended up with 'take care of Mumsy' or 'do what Mumsy tells you'.

Mother was left on her own to cope with three young children. As I've said, Granny was rearing Angela. Mother very often had me sleeping with her in her bed so we developed a camaraderie of sorts. I recall with pleasure the umpteen times she took me with her into town shopping and the cosy sit-down ice-creams we had together in the *Café Cairo*. Invariably after her shopping in Sligo town she would come home bearing cakes and bars of chocolate for us. Then there was what I called 'the bouncy thing', which I adored. On the way into town she would hold out her arms and stiffen them. Holding on to her hands, I would leap into the air. I loved that part of the trip. And Tuesday was 'comic day', a really big day for us. Who would get to read the *Dandy* or the *Beano* first? Dermot usually won.

I was not a great reader (Joan was a voracious one), but there was one particular book that I read over and over again. It was called *Long, Long Ago* and was the Greek and Roman myths retold for children. I'd probably be very disappointed in the illustrations now, but to me at that time, they were exquisite. It takes no effort to conjure them up seventy years later: 'While Proserpine danced the great king watched her', and poor old Pluto looking so innocent and well-intentioned. 'Prometheus chained to a rock' – with that vulture at his liver. 'Europa and the bull' – all those daisy chains; yet another chain: the one binding the diaphanously clad blonde-haired maiden to the sea cliff where she waited for the unseen monster to come and gobble her up. But of course, Perseus always got there first.

I think it must have been during this period that Mother's drink problem set in but I was far too young to realise with what demons she may have been wrestling. Because I had been at boarding school and Mother died when I was seventeen, there was no opportunity for an adult's relationship with her and I'll never know for sure what lay behind the problems of my parents' enigmatic marriage. Alcohol abuse predominates in my memories. I developed ways of disengaging my inner self from the misery, as a means of survival. I think I was

affected but not damaged by it all. And there was a very positive side to it. From an unusually early age I could see something was radically wrong, and I learned a lot about what a marriage should be from observing one that was, to my mind, a disaster.

Mother would sometimes make me miserable by getting me to sing for her friends. Out of shyness I hated doing it but I'd never refuse. As a four-year-old she taught me *lots* of songs like 'Little Sir Echo' which we sang together – I being the Echo, of course. Then there were the innumerable times when Joan and I stood around the piano in the sitting-room and we sang the latest popular songs with Mother accompanying us. Songs like 'The Umbrella Man', 'At the Balalika' and numerous others, some of which I was later to record and sing on television and in concert.

I was given the day off from school when Father came home from India. There was great excitement. He had trunks full of exotic presents for us: carpets and rugs, silks, rings, silverware, swords, sandals, to name just a few. And there was all the news to tell him. Very soon, however, the disagreements resumed. Even as a very small child I used to pray that my parents would separate. I knew I would stay with Father – everyone knew I sided with him in the interminable conflict. Joan, I assumed, would stay with Mother. Both parents by now were drinking heavily. I took to playing tennis 'out the back' on my owney-o, bashing the tennis ball against the side of the house. I was happy there, all by myself, absorbed, and away from the tensions inside. It was my big release. By the standard of the times we were comfortably off. There were many times when Father would have preferred to go abroad again and sometimes they reached a stage where a house was purchased, whether it was Sheffield or Malta or wherever, and at the eleventh hour Mother would have a 'health crisis' and say she was not going and would 'take to the bed'. They were always senior well-paid positions and Mother thwarted many of his best plans. He was a very gifted man – if only Mother could have been flexible and met him half-way. Of course, as I now know there were failings on Father's side too. But I can only write as I recall. Mother's failings were more glaring in my youthful, inexperienced eyes. Perhaps she tried harder than any of us ever knew.

Years later, when I was in the monastery, I started having a recurring dream. In it Mother had become a totally reformed character: an attentive caring wife and mother. She never spoke a harsh word and was frequently engaged in gardening, something I don't ever remember her doing. Perhaps this was a sign that she had attained complete happiness at last. This dream had an unfailingly soothing effect on me.

Every Easter week found Sligo in the febrile grip of the annual *Feis*, which is the gaelic word for festival. There were two organisations: the *Feis Ceóil* and the *Feis Sligigh*. Both involved competitions for singing, reciting, the playing of musical instruments and dancing. There were solo, duet and ensemble contests. The Sligo *Feis Ceóil* was the older institution and the standard was reputedly as high as, if not higher than, that of the Dublin *Feis Ceói*l. Competitions were in the Gaelic language in the *Feis Sligigh*.

As a child I dreaded Easter because the very word evoked thoughts of a week of unmitigated discomfort, occasioned by my having to perform at innumerable competitions. Competitiveness is alien to my nature, so I would never have voluntarily entered the *Feis* arena. It was my school teachers who did me the bad/good turn. I considered it a penance: all that relentless assault on the nervous system. But it was also a blessing in disguise, for it trained me successfully to cope with and effectively control that agony of nervousness which is the common lot of most performers and artists, whose ranks I was destined to join nearly ten years later. The exhilaration of winning was tempered by the knowledge that one would be 'entered' again the following year. The Christian significance of Easter was lost on me then and I would have looked at you with incredulity if you had told me that twenty years hence the Easter mysteries and particularly the Resurrection, would assume such importance for me.

Preparations for the *Feis* started months ahead: some parents I suspect may even have built their year around it, becoming obsessed with the performances of their offspring. With single-minded dedication they would have their child licked into shape well in advance of the Big Event. Then, at the appointed hour, they would lead them forth to the venue, thoroughly scrubbed and dolled up in their best outfits.

While their children went through their paces, some parents could be observed in the audience following every syllable and mouthing it with them. The rivalry could be quite acute. One year it was bruited that certain parents had invited the adjudicator to tea! Rank bribery was intimated. The high-tension point of each event was that awesome interval between the final competitor leaving the stage and the adjudicator mounting the platform to announce the results. Breathing was more or less suspended. Then the winner was announced and the charged atmosphere cleared. The audience discussed and compared notes among themselves and slowly the hall would empty while people waited patiently for the next competition.

The ability to bi-locate would have been invaluable for those of us who found we had been entered for two or more competitions at more or less the same time on the same day. Believe me, it did happen. I've already described my winning of a singing competition at the Sligo *Feis Ceóil* at the age of eight. In the same year I had been entered for a *Feis Sligigh* competition at the Town Hall. No memory of sunlight there but a sense of dust and dryness everywhere. My first song was '*An Caitín Bán*', a lament for a little white kitten. The other was about a little girl called Mary, '*a bhíos i gcónai 'gáire*' (who was always smiling). That adjudicator also caused me unnecessary agony, this time by reading out the prize-winners in reverse order. I wasn't even among those highly recommended, or third or second prize-winner. Then, I heard my name and number read out as First prize-winner. To compound my painful confusion at this unexpected turn of events, shot through with pleasure of course, I heard the adjudicator say, 'Would this competitor please come up on stage so that I may congratulate her.' Veiling the acute shyness with my customary giant-sized smile and with thumping heart, I gracefully climbed on to the stage and received my prize. But I made a less graceful exit, slipping on the wooden steps, bumping my head and landing on my back at the foot of the stairs, completely winded. I was carried outside by the adjudicator, with worried mother close at his heels. As a concerned crowd gathered, I regained my breath and the adjudicator gently remarked, 'You have a lovely voice and I hope you'll never get a swelled head.' I almost did…

In 2009, the steering committee of the Sligo *Feis Ceóil* wrote to me. As one of those who had won the Children's Cup, they asked me to jot down my childhood memories of the *Feis Ceóil*.

> My memories are mostly of nerves, I have to admit, and the inner dread that descended on me as Easter Week approached. I was sent in for various competitions each year coached for the singing ones by the gentle Mother Brendan at St Anne's, never daring to say: 'Oh please Mother don't send me in again.' And how very glad I am that I covered up my reluctance because the exercise stood me in great stead when later I became a professional performer.
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> About the Children's Cup: I'll have to take your word for it that I won it. I honestly don't remember having done so. What I do recall is almost winning it the year it was won by a boy whose voice was already on the verge of breaking. Rumour was rife in Sligo that he'd won it because his mother had invited the adjudicator to tea that Sunday before the competition.
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> Among the other things I remember was the time my brother Dermot who had gone in for a recitation competition was recalled but couldn't be found. He'd fled as soon as he finished his piece and went home to play … sensible boy.

'Out the back' was our favourite place for sulking, being alone or nursing a hurt. During the war Mother tried to economise on children's new clothing. She gave one of her suits to a tailor to have it reduced and made into a 'new' suit for Dermot. Now, 'reduced' is the operative word for the man did more or less just that with the jacket. He turned up the hem leaving the pockets where they originally were and, worse still, also left the waist as it was. The first day Dermot was put into the outrageous garment he vanished almost immediately – and was missing all morning. He was finally located 'out the back' in tears. When he was asked what the broken heart was all about he said: 'It's this suit. I wish that a lion would come and eat me up – me and this awful suit.' He'd been listening to those verses about the little boy who let go of his nurse's hand and was eaten by the lion at the zoo. Thereafter this monstrous garment was referred to by all and sundry as 'the lion suit'.

It's probably true of many mothers that they don't realise how sensitive little children are about the clothes they are made to wear, and how hurt they can be. My Confirmation Day was a mortifying

experience. Mother had decided that, for the ceremony, I should be clad in Joan's once-best dress. It was an expensive silk dress, but salmon pink – beautiful on Joan but a disaster on me with my different pale, nondescript colouring and skin tone. In a newspaper article, years later, Joan described me as having been a 'fawn-coloured child'. It was also short. I loathed the garment but knew better than to say so and provoke an argument I couldn't win. Being wartime, ever since the supply of petrol for civilians had ceased, the car had been laid up on blocks in the coach house. There was only one taxi service in town and the man had been booked to bring my brother and myself to the cathedral. For some reason the taxi failed to turn up. It was getting perilously close to the hour of the service, so Mother decided to get out her bicycle and ferry us on the carrier through the rain, one at a time. The cathedral was a good ten minutes' cycle away. By the time we were both deposited inside the door, Dermot was lachrymose. The ceremony had begun. The boys in an assortment of garments were seated on one side of the church. On the opposite side sat the girls in serried ranks, all wearing – to my utter consternation – *long white dresses*, complete with *white shoes* and socks. Dressed glaringly in my short salmon-pink dress, white socks and *brown* sandals, feeling like a cross between a fish out of water and a Christian martyr, I had to march up the aisle in full view of everyone and join this radiantly white troop of potential soldiers of Christ. I deserved an award for bravery.

Out for a walk one day and skipping ahead of my mother and her friend, I overheard the latter remark: 'Mary's got dancer's legs.' Since compliments (I took it to be one) were thin on the ground where I was concerned, I was thrilled but too diffident to enquire what was meant. Mother decided I should learn ballet. This prospect gave me unspeakable pleasure. There was one woman in Sligo who taught ballet, and Mother made arrangements for me to begin lessons. Then, unexpectedly, my would-be teacher left town. That was that. I took it all philosophically. I would have loved to have tried dancing. It seems to me to be the most satisfying form of self-expression, engaging, as it does, the entire body from head to pointed toe; also the silence of the art appeals to me. It wasn't until I was nineteen and

living in Dublin that the opportunity of having lessons presented itself again. I attended ballet classes there and enjoyed every second of them, but by then my singing career had begun to take off and occupied most of my time. Besides, I'd always been told that dancers must start as young children and not be too tall and I am five feet seven and a quarter inches in my stockinged feet. I think perhaps one reason why I enjoy tennis so enormously is because of the grace of the game. Some movements on court approximate to the dance.

I've always had a natural aptitude for sports. When I moved on into the senior secondary school in Sligo, I started to play *camógaí* (Gaelic spelling), also called hurling, a ball and stick game, played by women. The only time I took part in the Annual School Sports, I won the running competition. I loved movement, and when I was chosen to act as goal-keeper in my first and second year at day school I was too inhibited and diffident to say I hated the inactivity and could I please be allowed to play out in the field. So for two whole years I endured this penance, until I was sent off to boarding school.

As we grew older I played less and less with Dermot. I was at St Anne's school and he was at the Christian Brothers' school on the far side of town and immersed in a world of gangs to which, of course, little girls were never admitted. Dermot had an endearing habit of getting some words slightly wrong. He announced one evening that he was 'clergic' to eggs. And my favourite one: he was trying to do his homework and the rest of us were being noisy when he flung down his pen and cried, 'Can't you have a bit of *constipation* for someone who is trying to study?' He was a very affectionate little boy and very protective of me. When I broke my collarbone and he heard the news from a school companion who said, 'I hear Mary was taken home in a coffin', he was so frightened and angry that he fought the other boy. And later, when I had to have my appendix out, he burst into tears, ran upstairs, locked himself in the lavatory and cried for hours.

On the two occasions that I spent in hospital, Mother did not visit me. For some reason she could not face it, but I was prepared for this, remembering her reaction to my first accident. I'd been wheeling a dolls' pram when a very plump girl I was playing with sat on the pram causing the whole thing to tip over. My hand caught in the handle and, unable to free it, I was dragged down the slope of the concrete road for several yards. Spurting blood, I dashed into the house and

Mother was so upset that she promptly disappeared, leaving Father to deal with me. He held my finger under the running cold water tap. The finger was broken and the chemist fixed it up. Mother didn't accompany us, and I fully understand now that she just did not feel able to cope. She knew I was fond of her and I knew she was fond of me, but I took it for granted that she would stay away from the hospital and that Father would take over as usual. She was inordinately fearful of illness. She suffered from bronchitis, but would never have her chest examined in case she had tuberculosis. She grew up at a time when the disease was rampant in Ireland and entire families died of it. I do think she could have benefited from psychiatric help, but in those days and in that part of the world, ailments of that nature were synonymous with mental sickness and treatment was not available as far as I know. She was subject to black depressions.

I had a reputation at school for being gentle and biddable, but I must often have been very difficult and fractious at home; I remember Mother once turning on me saying, 'You're a street angel and a house devil.' Boarding school was soon to put an end to that.

Father wanted to send Dermot to Stonyhurst, the Jesuit School in England. There was some family hitch at the last moment and Dermot was sent instead to Blackrock College, Dublin. The following year when I was thirteen it was decided that I too should go to boarding school. I was sent to Sion Hill, run by the Dominican Sisters and next door to Blackrock College. That was handy for everyone, especially for my parents visiting us. As things turned out, with Joan now also in Dublin at the Abbey School of Acting and Dermot and myself at boarding schools there, my parents decided to move to Dublin. Going to boarding school was something I'd never dreamt of. Joan told me that she used to wish she'd been sent to one, so in a way I felt privileged.

It was the end of an era for the family, an end of living in Sligo.