

Bourne
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creative writing
workshops

Kate

by Mary Brannigan

Austerity pleased her - it gave her the comfort of sacrifice. There was nothing warm or cuddly about her. She was all sharp and prickly like needles in a pincushion. I often felt like the pincushion as she verbally stabbed at me. Religion was her close helpmate in these attacks. When lost for a wounding phrase she often resorted to quotes from the bible, specially the old testament. Proverbs also came to her aid.

When I was seventeen and getting ready for an evening out she watched me like a cat watching a mouse. Then out it came ' a bonny bride is easy dressed '. In other words, I needed a lot of improvement. I almost answered ' then why do you take so long '. But I knew better than to goad her. Then I would have got 'honour thy father and thy mother'. And so it went on through my teens and into my twentieth year.

My father was largely absent during these torments. He kept out of her way being either at work or in the pub. In any case she knew better than to goad him. I kind of took it for both of us. I sometimes wondered how she would have given vent to her martyrdom had I not existed.

Much of her time was spent in our local Catholic church. The nature of this organization was in keeping with her need for self-flagellation. The highlight of her year was the 'three hours agony' on Good Friday to which she dragged me. Aside from this she went regularly to partake in 'the stations of the cross', pausing at length to observe the bloody torments of Christ's last journey.

After these visits she seemed to emerge in a somewhat better frame of mind. This only lasted till the evening ritual of the holy rosary said on bended knees in our front room. As these times usually coincided with my fathers visits to the pub she often said 'we'll offer up our prayers for poor daddy'. I found myself wondering why she said it, as 'poor daddy' was having a merry evening in McGoldricks, while we knelt on the hard floor.

I was sixteen before I realised she was not as other mothers. By then I'd begun spending time round at my friend Una's. Her mother was a jolly women who delighted in having a full house for evening meals. I contrasted these times with the austerity in our house. By the time I was nineteen a little voice kept telling me I must get away. I had no idea how or to where. Then one of my work colleagues applied, and was accepted for nurse training at an English hospital. 'That's a way out' I thought. So I did the same and followed her three months later. It soon became obvious utterly unsuited to the work. A fear of blood was not conducive to life on the wards.

I left and made my way through various clerical jobs till I got a place at university. I had got away. But not before being told God's judgement would be upon me for deserting my post at home. I managed to shake off the sense of guilt enough to spread my wings in this new world. Life was good and the years passed, till before I knew it old age crept up on me. I never went back home till I heard news of my mother's death at the age of ninety. She ended her days in a nursing home with the onset of Alzheimer's.

Shortly before the end she was heard to exclaim 'I was raped you know'. Five little words that might go some way to explain her rejection of life's riches, which were always beyond her reach.