

My mother, my brother

Jacqueline Nolan describes how, during the year after the Ryan report into institutional sexual abuse came out, her mother became very ill and died. What was the sad secret that devastated her?

In 2010, the Catholic church sexual abuse scandal spread from Ireland and the US and hit Europe's mainland. In the words of one journalist in the Netherlands, where I live, 2010 was the year the scandal went viral.

It was also the year I discovered I had an older brother. My mother had him in her late teens in a home for unmarried mothers in the Irish midlands.

My brother spent 10 years in foster homes before he was handed over to a Catholic institution where he was abused.

In May 2009, the Ryan report into child abuse at Catholic institutions in Ireland over a 60-year span were published. My mother died in 2010.

When the news about the five-volume report reached the Netherlands, where I live, it was packaged in statistics which, however shocking, seemed at a safe distance from my own life.

My sons and I visited my mother in Dublin that May, when the report came out,

and we walked with her in Howth, along the sea. In March 2010, I returned to Dublin for her 79th birthday. My mother could hardly walk. Something had happened in those 10 months to turn my mother – who always had a spring in her step – into a stooped, thin, old woman.

I got a phone call from my sister a month later. She told me I had a brother, Philip. He was born before my mother met my father and now, after 60 years, he had found her. He was living in northern England and had two daughters. My head was reeling with questions I didn't have the coherence to form and yet everything – the jigsaw puzzle of my childhood I hadn't realised was unsolved – seemed to fall into place at that moment.

I was born in the 1960s in a working class area on Dublin's north side. Our street was filled with kids, stray dogs and used prams whose wheels we used to make trolleys to tear down the hill of our cul-de-sac. I was the youngest of three sisters.

My mother rarely showed us affection. She showed her love through her cooking; baking endless bread and cakes.

At Christenings, communions or weddings, she always wanted to be the centre

of attention. When my sister adopted a baby girl and the biological mother took her back six months later, before signing the final set of papers, my mother wept and said she was devastated.

"No," cried my sister. "I'm the one who's allowed to be devastated. Me."

The radio was my mother's constant companion. On Saturday afternoon, there was an Irish music programme and the deep-voiced RTE broadcaster always finished with the words: "And remember, if you feel like singing, do sing an Irish song."

I often heard the announcer thanking the Artane Boys' Band for their contribution. I had no idea who the Artane boys were. As a little girl, I understood the sense of Irish wholesomeness they symbolised –

like the brown soda bread my mother baked. "I have to tell you that Philip spent some years at Artane," my sister said during the phone call announcing the existence of my half brother.

Paragraph 7.549 of the Ryan report reads: "Sexual abuse by Brothers was a chronic problem in Artane."

The institution used "severe punishment . . . to enforce a regime of militaristic discipline". The report describes the dominant climate of fear, the emotional neglect, bullying by older boys, punishment for whistle-blowers, the cold and the hunger.

Philip told me. "Everything you've heard was true, except it was 10 times worse."

My sister and I planned to visit him in Retford, Nottinghamshire, in November 2010, four months after I had first spoken to my brother on the phone.

She flew in from Dublin, I came from Amsterdam. Philip had called us incessantly for weeks beforehand.

I was fired with endless questions about where I was working that week, as if keeping track of every move I made would cement the certainty of our meeting.

Six days before we were due to meet up, my mother had a massive stroke. I had to

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My mother could hardly walk. Something had happened in the 10 months [following the Ryan report] to turn her into a stooped, thin, old woman

cancel my flight to Doncaster.

Instead, I sat at Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport waiting for a plane to Dublin, listening to my brother – a 61-year-old man – on the phone, crying inconsolably for a mother he would never have.

Anger towards my mother welled up in me as I thought, even in this she was claiming centre stage. When I got to her hospital bedside, my heart changed.

I imagined her as a pretty country girl working away from home in Kilkenny in 1949 before finding herself pregnant and scrubbing floors for the nuns in a home for “fallen women” in Castlepollard.

She blamed herself even though her baby had been taken from her against her will. My grandmother had 11 children and there were still some young children at home. One of my aunts tried to convince my grandmother to keep the baby, but she was unrelenting.

“I wondered how you got on and what did you do with yourself,” my mother wrote to Philip in March 2010. “I visited you once. You didn’t know me. You were so happy playing with other children and I decided to leave well enough alone. I couldn’t offer you anything.”

When my mother and father met and decided to get married, she pleaded with him to let Philip come and live with them. But he couldn’t deal with the perceived stigma of having another man’s child in his home.

Before she fell ill, I had asked her about Philip’s father.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said. “He wasn’t a nice man.”

She died the day my sister and I were due to meet our half-brother. At her funeral, the priest said many children in Howth would miss my mother who, stooped as she was, managed to walk as far as the local shop each day to buy bars of chocolate for whoever flocked around her.

I finally met Philip in the summer of 2011, along with my sister-in-law, Carole, the dog Jess, my two nieces and their five children.

Philip’s house is full of stuff he collects each week at the local car boot sale: his couch is lined with toy leprechauns. He signs the dog’s name on all the greetings cards he sends me. He hasn’t worked since his mental breakdown, which happened when the abuse scandal came to light.

Philip told my sister and I about the severe physical abuse and humiliation. On one occasion, the boys were doing a play written by one of the brothers. “Long, long ago, twice beyond the space of twice 2,000 years,” it began.

Philip got it wrong and the Brother – some 14 or 15 stone according to Philip – sent him “eight feet across the concrete with his fist. Then he kept pelting me on the floor with his belt for not getting up.”

One memory has haunted Philip. “There was this fella who used to soil the bed at night. The brother would take him to the top of the stairs and strip him. We were

made watch.

“They beat him and left him there all night with no clothes and no blankets. It felt like being in the amphitheatre. For every night he soiled the bed, he’d have to spend the next one at the top of the stairs.”

Sitting on the sofa in their tiny, terraced house Carole told me about how Philip had kept the Artane abuse a secret – even from her – until the Catholic church scandals came into the media spotlight. “He said he thought I’d leave him if he told me.”

He couldn’t bring himself to talk to me about the sexual abuse but named the brothers who came to him at night.

Before his placement in Artane Industrial School, when he was 10, the authorities had sent him to St Brigid’s hospital in Carlow. “They put pegs on my head,” Philip said.

At Artane, he was also sent for psychiatric treatment – “I went around like a zombie” – and was warned by the brothers to keep it hush.

The events since my sister first phoned to tell me about Philip’s existence rushed through my head like flashes from a film: how I went up to anyone I vaguely knew in the supermarket the next morning announcing I had a brother; imagining what Philip would be like as I spoke on the phone to my new family with their northern English accents, hearing that he had been in Artane and the moment when I asked if he had been abused.

But nothing had prepared me for the shock of hearing that my brother, as a 10-year-old, had been subjected to electro-convulsive therapy. I had a son the same age. It was if the electric waves went through my own body. I realised that my mother, the country cook all her life, had ultimately chosen to semi-starve herself to death in the kitchen of her self-imposed atonement. I understood her response and her double loss when my sister had to give back her adopted daughter, how she must have relived the parting with her own son after spending more than two years with

him in Castlepollard.

My family’s story was getting too big for me to absorb, so I imagined I was in some Mike Leigh film, looking for humour to sweeten life’s savagery. I pretended I was in a cinema looking at close-ups of the leprechauns on the couch.

The scenes before I left were difficult. Philip drove somewhat recklessly to the station, asking if I could stay longer. He hadn’t slept all night. My nieces and some of their children were there to wave me off. On the

platform in the sweltering heat, there was a lot of girl talk as I twisted the woollen coat, which I had been wearing when I left Amsterdam, with sweaty hands.

“We’re going to say goodbye to you now,” they said as their eyes turned in another direction. I followed their gaze. Philip was standing in a corner on his own, weeping. I went over to him,

the two of us left on the platform. His need for me almost repelled me at that moment. Without Carole’s amicability and my nieces’ banter, the tragedy of Philip’s life and that of my mother’s could not be played down by my film fantasies.

The train arrived. I hugged him and he thanked me profusely. On the train, I looked at a photo of his wedding – he was handsome then, and Carole pretty and slim – and a letter from the Christian Brothers Philip got in January 1969 after he had re-

quested a birth certificate to get married.

“Dear Mr Nolan, I wish you every happiness and success in married life and I hope you’ll be able to pay a visit to your old school while on your honeymoon,” wrote a brother in neat handwriting.

“Lovely place to bring your bride,” I said to him later. He texted during my journey home to say he had forgotten to give me two brown soda bread loaves he had bought for me. “I’ll ask at the post office if I can send it by post,” he wrote in a letter he sent a few days after I got home.

My brother is a wounded man. Philip’s daughter, Rebecca, recently described how, during sessions at his psychiatrist, he often recalls a memory from Artane as if it were happening to another boy.

“He’s looking in through a window at himself. But it’s really about him.”

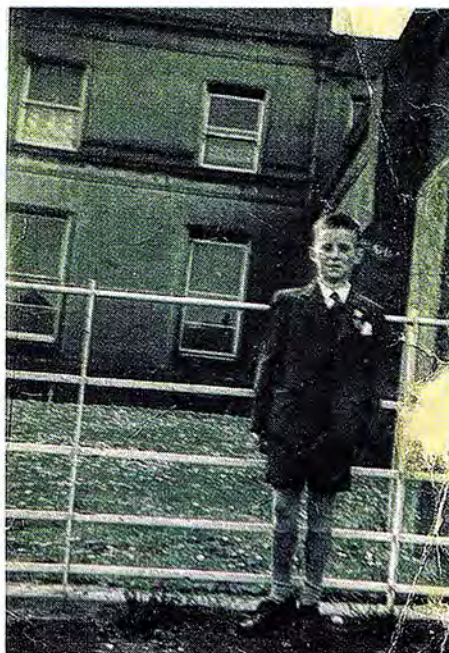
Rebecca is the only person, besides professional carers, he will talk to about the sexual abuse. “He quivers and shakes when he’s telling his story: the footsteps coming in the night. That’s why he can’t sleep now. The posh rooms he was taken into, often a few boys at a time. How he would look around the room and look at the different life the brothers had.”

The abuse that took place in Artane – just a few miles from where I played freely with dozens of children on the street – was part of a world I knew nothing about; and yet it was present in so many memories from my childhood, embedded in my mother’s darkness.

Philip and I talk regularly on the phone, about the weather, his dog, the mundane details of daily life. I have become a sister and mother in one. I used to sing traditional Irish music. When I feel like singing now, I can’t sing an Irish song, not for the moment. It seems too big a lie.

My mother Margaret was born on March 10th, 1931. Giving a voice, finally, to the silenced events which cast a shadow over her life – events, which, in my niece’s words “have destroyed generations” – feels like my birthday gift to her.

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■ Above: Philip as a boy and right, Margaret Nolan on Howth pier, May 2009