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KATHLEEN O'SHEA

*Little Drifters*  
*Kathleen's Story*

A devastating account  
of a stolen childhood

HARPER  
element

*When we were young, wild and free  
The happiest times for all to see  
Had its moments of sorrow and pain  
But I would live them all again  
Brothers and sisters sticking together  
Mother and father in all kinds of weather  
Life can be cruel and often unkind  
Now it's a memory engraved on my mind.*

(‘Memories’, Anon.)

*Love and compassion are necessities, not luxuries.  
Without them, humanity cannot survive.*

(Dalai Lama XIV)

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## Prologue

I never had any intention of returning to St Beatrice's Orphanage. And yet here I was, standing in front of the house I had called home for five years. A home filled with misery, cruelty and abuse.

My eyes scanned the large black front door rising up from the path, the heavy wooden gates, the tree in the front garden, and I felt anger swell inside me. It was just a house. From the outside, you would never have guessed the secrets and sadness this place had hidden for so long. Now, nearly 20 years after my escape, it was no longer one of the houses run by the Sisters of Hope from St Beatrice's Convent. It was no longer Watersbridge, a home for children made wards of the state from myriad different personal tragedies. It was just an ordinary house. You might pass by this house and not look at it twice. It was just like all the others in the road – two storeys, small front garden, large Victorian windows, nothing special. And yet that's not what I saw.

I saw the children of my past in every part of the grounds, so real I felt I could reach out and touch them. So vivid, I could hear their voices. Here, on the roof, Jake squatted – keeping a watchful eye down the road for Sister Helen in case she came trundling down the road on her bicycle, ready

## Chapter 1

## The cottage

I loved to hear the story of how my parents met. Sometimes at night, when we were all gathered around the fire, Daddy would entertain us with his music and stories.

‘Tell us about meeting Mammy!’ we’d beg him.

Mammy, standing by the big sink in the kitchen, would tut and shake her head: ‘Sure, you’ve heard it a thousand times already!’

But Daddy, now flushed with the drink, didn’t need encouraging. He loved to tell us stories. He’d take a long swig of his Guinness, wipe the foam from his lips, then fix us all with a roguish grin.

‘I had never set eyes on your mother before,’ he’d start, and we’d all smile in anticipation. ‘Not before this day. I was 23, getting on with my own life, engaged to be married to a local girl. And who should turn up in our town but your mother with her mammy and sisters.’

‘I was out riding my bike one day when I caught sight of her in the chip shop window. I stopped then and there, right outside the window, and looked in. Jesus, but she was the most beautiful woman I’d ever seen in my life! Long golden hair,

sparkling blue eyes – all of 17, she was a picture. That night I went home and I told my sister: “Mark my words, I’ll marry that girl!”

‘So I called off the wedding and my parents went mental. But I didn’t care. The next day I found out where your mother lived and I went to call on her. And I just came straight out with it and told her she was the most gorgeous thing I’d ever seen and she’d be mad not to go out with me. And naturally, she said “yes”.’

‘Because you’re brazen as anything!’ my mother interrupted him.

‘And pure handsome of course!’ he added, a twinkle in his eye. ‘And that was that. My family went mad at me because your mother is from a travelling family and they didn’t like that, which is nothing but prejudice, so we ran away together, your mother and I. The police came looking for us but there was nothing they could do. We were madly in love. I bought a ring a month later and we got married.’

‘And that’s how all you’s lot came about!’ he’d finish off, laughing and poking at us all.

It was so romantic, so beautiful, we could all picture it – our father, the tall, dark-skinned, raven-haired man, and the young, slim blonde beauty. We never got tired of hearing that story.

Even as the years went by and the harsh realities of our lives took their toll, I kept that special story locked away in my heart. I held it there, like a secret, and told it to myself over and over again. When the darkness took over and the loneliness seemed to open up a cavernous hole within me, I’d reach for that story. And then I could hear my father’s voice again, coming to me through the night, reaching out to comfort me, stroke my hair and hold me close.

## The Cottage

*That was the time we were all together, I’d hear him say. That was where you came from, Kathleen. All you’s lot! You were part of something very special.*

By the time I was born my parents had already been together a long while and we were a large family, getting larger every year. I was just three but I can still remember the cottage we lived in, the hills, the river nearby and all the lush green fields where beets, spuds and cabbages were harvested according to the seasons.

The cottage sat pretty on an isolated hilltop, surrounded by wide-open countryside with a beautiful river running past the foot of the hill. Our nearest neighbour was about two miles away, a farmer who owned most of the surrounding fields. You could see horses and cows grazing within stone walls that defined the field boundaries. These walls stretched for miles, gliding up and down the hill, following the contours of the land. Groups of trees dotted the landscape, and there was a stream and a woodland close by, adding charm and tranquillity to the place. It was such an idyllic setting and, for us, the younger children, it was an adventure playground.

The cottage itself was built from local stone and was a single storey with a slate roof. It wasn’t big, especially for 10 of us, but we muddled along. There were three bedrooms. The older children – Claire, 14, Bridget, 13, Aidan, 12, and 11-year-old Liam – shared a room, and the younger ones – Brian, five, Tara, four, Kathleen (that’s me), and our youngest brother Colin, two – occupied the other bedroom. Our parents were in the third bedroom. Later my sisters Libby and Lucy and brother Riley would come along, making 11 of us kids in total.

Each one of us was either dark like my father Donal, or blonde like my mother Marion – we looked like a salt and

pepper family! Tara had long dark hair, I was fair, Colin was dark, Brian was blond, Bridget dark, Claire blonde and the older boys both dark like my father.

Our mother kept the cottage neat and tidy as best as she could. Most mornings she put out a plate of sliced soda bread and a pot of tea on the wooden table in the parlour, where we all helped ourselves when we got up. We had a small parlour with a log-burning stove. Pots and pans hung around the stove on big metal hooks attached to the walls. The wooden table was under the window and we'd sit, watching her washing away with the laundries, squeezing and flapping the sheets loose before hanging them on the rope that was tied to two nearby trees.

Of course we all tried to help as best we could. In a family so large, everyone has a job, no matter how small. Water needed to be carried in buckets from the nearby river. Mammy would bring us to the riverbank where she'd find a safe spot and show us what to do.

'Now mind where you put your feet down,' she'd warn. 'Be careful you don't fall in the water.'

She'd scoop up the water and lift the bucket, moving away from the river's edge.

'Don't dip the bucket too deep,' she'd instruct. 'There'll be too much water and it'll be too heavy for you lot to lift it up. Just put it half way in.'

She'd let us do it ourselves as it always required a handful of us to make a few trips to fill up the big barrel. Usually it fell to Brian, Tara and myself as the older ones were with my father, working on the farm. But as the buckets grew heavier with each trip we'd set to squabbling, and by the time we got to the barrel we'd usually have spilt half the water on the ground.

## The Cottage

That wasn't our only job. We also had animals to tend to – some horses, a goat and a few dogs. My mother had a way with the animals; she was ever so gentle with them. Ginny the goat was a kid when my mother got her. Now she was a milking goat with just one horn as the other was snapped off during a fight with one of the dogs.

When my mother needed milk, she'd just walk up to Ginny and say: 'Come on now, Gin Gin. Come to Mammy.' And Ginny would come straight to her.

'Stand nice and still now,' my mother spoke gently, and Ginny would obey.

Then my mother would sit herself down on a stool, plant a bucket under her and support one of Ginny's back legs.

She milked and talked at the same time, praising Ginny like mad: 'Thank you, Gin. That's a grand bucket of milk there!'

My two favourite horses was a piebald we called Polly, who pulled the cart, and a big mare we simply called Big Mare. They were very gentle creatures. We played under the horse's bellies and in between their legs and they never once hurt us. The greyhound and the Alsatian were used for breeding and their puppies sold off for the extra cash, but Floss, a black and white sheepdog, was my father's favourite and his constant companion. He went everywhere with Daddy.

As our mother was always busy, we were left to our own devices for the rest of the day. We kept ourselves occupied playing with the animals or on the grounds. My mother would call on us occasionally from inside the cottage, checking we hadn't strayed too far.

In the evenings us younger ones got to spend time with Claire and Bridget. They were so loving and motherly to us that Tara and me jealously fought for their attention, trying to outdo each other to be closest to them.

'Bridget, can I do your hair to see if there are any nits?' I'd ask.

Bridget would lie down and put her head on top of my lap.

I'd part her hair carefully with my fingers and move her head around and then exclaim: 'Bridget, don't move! I found a load of nits! Don't worry, I killed them all for you!'

Then I'd click my two thumbnails and push down on her head making a sound like I was squashing the nits.

'Did you hear that, Bridget?'

'Yes, baby, kill them all.'

I'd be at it for ages, all the while Bridget praising me like mad, knowing perfectly well that she didn't have any nits, and I got the attention that I wanted.

We had no electricity in the cottage so our only light was from candles and the open fire in the parlour, where we'd gather and sit out the evening listening to our father's stories or his playing on the harmonica or accordion. He could play any tune even though he never learned how to read music. He'd have us dancing and singing along with a medley of old Irish folk songs, his feet tapping the floor, always in tempo. And he'd tell great stories too – sending us into howling fits of laughter. But always, always my favourite was the story of how they met.

My father was a tall, strapping, handsome man with jet black hair, swept back on his head like a film star. He always looked smart, dressed in suits and shirts, working away from home a lot in different villages or towns. He was a jack of all trades, trying his hand at anything from building to roadwork, farming and breeding horses.

Before he lost touch with his family, my grandmother, Daddy's mammy, would come to see us and tell us stories about my father as a lad.

## The Cottage

'He was the Madman of Borneo, your daddy,' she'd cackle. 'They called him that because he was wild as anything. A real live wire. He would often be heard coming into town, shouting his head off, standing up on the horse and cart with the reins in his hands, his shirt sleeves rolled up, galloping as hard as he could, grinning, laughing, pure brazen without a care in the world. Everyone had to jump out of his way or risk being flattened to the ground!'

At the weekends, my father took Bridget and Claire to the village pub where they were paid to perform as a trio. For my sisters, it was the highlight of their week and they'd dress themselves up to the nines, putting on make-up and doing their hair.

'We want to come! We want to come!' Tara and I would beg my father.

'No, babas, you're too young. I'll take you when you're a bit older,' he'd console us.

I was always so envious, watching my sisters dolling themselves up, getting ready for the night out. The two of them, so beautiful, always attracted the attention of the boys in the village, who bought them drinks all night long. My father loved it too, knocking back Guinness and whiskey and chatting away to all the locals. My mother waited up all night for him to come back and always used to tell us he could talk the ears off anyone.

Since our only means of transport was the horse and cart, if we wanted to get anywhere we'd have to walk. It was three miles along a narrow winding road to the village, which had a grocery shop, church, garage and three pubs.

If we had a bit of money the four of us – Brian, Tara, myself and Colin – would walk into the village to buy our favourite sweets: Bull's Eyes and Silvermints. We knew all the routes so

we'd take shortcuts through the fields and woods, often straying to climb up a tree to get a better view of the birds or some nestling chicks. Then we'd head to the hay barn, which was along the way, and have a wonderful time climbing the stacks of hay, pushing and throwing each other off. We found it hilarious. We'd get winded and bruised sometimes but we'd get up and get on with it.

When we got tired of the hay barn, we'd walk on to the village, always keeping an eye on anything we could turn into play.

Having had our sweets, we'd pop in and out of the pubs. We loved chatting with the old folks and the locals, people we knew, the ones that called us 'Donal's kids'. They would often get us a packet of crisps or a bottle of lemonade. We made sure we headed home before it got too dark to see where we were going but more importantly we wanted to avoid 'the headless horseman by the big tree'. We'd been repeatedly warned of this ghost by the elders and weren't that keen to see it in the flesh!

My mother had just finished giving us a bath one day after we came home soaking and muddy from a downpour.

'Empty out the bath and stay out of my sight,' she commanded as she raced towards the kitchen to prepare the dinner.

We were draining the bath water when we saw the school bus pull up and stop at the end of the narrow road. I saw Aidan and Liam walking up the hill together and Claire and Bridget lagging behind. The boys greeted us with a tap on the head as they walked in the door but Bridget dragged in behind them, not looking at all happy.

Bridget had big green eyes and her hair flowed in big waves down her back. The sun highlighted the different shades of

auburn that ran through her hair. My mother called her Sophia Loren because she had beautiful high cheek-bones. She was so gentle and kind we all adored her. Bridget scooped me in her arms and gave me a big hug. But as she put me down her eyes crinkled and she sighed.

'What's wrong, Bridget?' I asked, concerned.

'Nothing, baby, just got a bit of a sore head,' Bridget replied as her hands reached up to massage her temples. She didn't look at all well. 'I think I'm going to bed and sleep it off and hope the headache will go away,' she added.

That night we all ate dinner together as usual, tea and bread with half a boiled egg each, except Bridget didn't join us because she was still asleep. We weren't long into the meal when we heard a loud bang from the bedroom. We all jumped, startled, and my father raced towards the loud noise, with a few of us tagging along out of curiosity. There was a terrible stench and we could see smoke seeping through from under the bedroom door. Daddy quickly opened the door and thick smoke bellowed out – the room was on fire!

'Get away! Get out of here! All of you – get out of the house!' my father shouted frantically as he rushed in, pulling Bridget out of the bedroom.

'Aidan, Liam – get the water and blankets!' he yelled again, panic now rising in his voice.

The rest of us gathered outside the cottage, sheer terror in everyone's faces, all our eyes transfixed on the door as we waited anxiously for our father, Aidan and Liam to come out.

It seemed like a lifetime when eventually they emerged from the house, blackened, dirtied and pure exhausted from their efforts tackling the fire. My father was still shaking. Somehow they had managed to keep the fire under control and confined to one bedroom.