

## Grandaunt Mag - Joan Morrissey

Dear Aunt Mag,

I remember you as an elderly lady with grey plaited hair wound round a head that framed a tiny face with large brown eyes.

On my visits to you I was far more interested in the lollipops, bulls-eyes and clove-drops that you kept on the dresser for us children than in the tales you like to tell of your youth in a time when there was no running water in houses and you would have to go to the river to wash your clothes. Having hung them on the nearby hedges to dry, you would un-braid your dark hair and let the gurgling water rinse away the soap that you had lathered on it.

But you didn't tell me everything did you? It was long after your death, when my ears were unplugged by the indifference of youth that I found out about your bravery, found out about the part you played in our country's history.

The soldiers had dragged you and your siblings out of the house to the back-yard to watch as they held your father at gunpoint. They threatened to kill him if he didn't tell them. Eventually and reluctantly he called out the name, the name and directions to the place where the young rebels were hiding.

The soldiers immediately stormed out of the yard and piled on to the open truck that stormed through the village. And you followed them, didn't you? I am told that their cockney roars didn't drown out the torrents of abuse and curses that you lashed from your mouth. Even when they raised their guns you kept following them. And it had the effect that you had hoped for. Firing into the air towards the sky their shots must have echoed on the peaks of the Kerry mountains. The sound of gunfire certainly reached where you had hoped it would. The men quickly left their hiding-place and scrambled to safety.

When you married your childhood sweetheart you both emigrated to America and by the time you came back to live in Ireland perhaps some of your generation had passed away and the village may have forgotten your bravery. But the old man that I met in the village last year told me how his parents loved to talk about the beautiful girl with hair the colour of a raven's wing who risked her own young life in order to save the men. The men, he said, who had fought for Ireland.

I left that man feeling very proud. Proud to have had such a brave grandaunt. A woman who can rightly claim to be one of Ireland's unsung heroes. Or should I say heroines! Proud to have had an aunt who can rightly find a place among the unsung heroes or our country. Or, should I say heroines!

With love from

Joan

