



# Just Like The Mayfly

The life and times of Mary Callanan

## Chapter Two

### *Seán Bot's Daughter*

I was born on the 12<sup>th</sup> of May 1941. I was a fine big baby, 12 pounds 14 ounces. My poor mother. It was a natural birth, at home in Castleisland with a midwife. This was a rented house at the top of the town near the Technical School.



You didn't go into hospital in those days. When you were ready to give birth a midwife was called. My Dad probably would have been around the house at the time of the birth, but not in the room. That just wasn't done in those days. Men were banned. They had to parade up and down outside.

Angela was born first. She was called Angela because when she was born the Angelus was ringing. I was born 13 months after. There was no such thing as accidents or planning in those days really. That's just what life was. You had a married life and if you were pregnant, you were pregnant and if you weren't you weren't. That's why there were such big families. There were no contraceptives.

I wouldn't say Dad was looking for a boy and they never discussed that with us anyway. I suppose they were delighted when I was born. I was called Mary after Molly, my grandmother. Molly and Mary are the same name. She's my spirit guide now, I was told. She has been watching out for me all my life. One of my psychic readers told me this. I suppose I have always sensed there was somebody there but didn't realise who.

My parents were married on the 4th of July, 1939. They lived in a rented house, because even though Dad was a teacher, which was supposed to be a very good job, the wage wasn't very large. That was in Castleisland at the Technical School. A salaried job was very desirable. But then everything had to come out of the one salary because women didn't work once they married. In those days women just got married and had babies and raised their kids.

Dad was born in 1913 and went to the National School at the end of the road; he was the only one in his family who progressed at school. The headmaster had a lot of time for him because he was very bright, so he put him forward for a scholarship. He wouldn't have been able to afford to go to secondary school had he not got the scholarship. He would probably have gone out and worked on a farm, or got a trade

to become a carpenter, plumber, or an electrician. You learned your trade if you didn't go on to school. But he got a scholarship to a boarding school, Garbally College in Ballinasloe, that's in Co. Galway.



He liked being educated of course, but scholarship boys were always looked down upon by the people who paid their way there. They were called "schols." They never got the same breakfast as the others. They got porridge when the others got a fry.



*Dad in back row aged 18 – second from right*

He was brilliant at hurling. He was in the Galway minor team in the 1931 All Ireland minor hurling final (but they lost to Kilkenny) and also played for an Ireland hurling team. I never knew until recently that Ireland had a hurling team. I think it may have been at university. There were some other universities that gathered together and made a team and he was on the Irish team.

Dad got a scholarship to Galway University to study Agricultural Science. They only taught three years of Agricultural Science in Galway, so he had to go to Dublin for the final two years; he was in his early 20's by then. Then he came to Castleisland and met Mam.

Mam was born in 1918 and before they met she had left school, the convent in Castleisland. She didn't like school at all. She left aged 14 and went to work at McElligotts behind the counter. This was a big shop that sold hardware and groceries and had a bar. It was the main shop in Castleisland at the top of the town.



*Dad's graduation*

Then at about 16 she went to work in the Towers Hotel in Glenbeigh. They were looking for somebody and asked

McElligotts if they knew of anybody who could help them out for the summer. They asked Mam and she said she would like to go.

The Towers was a hotel with a shop. She went to work in the shop where the bar is now. That was a big hardware and grocery shop. She stayed there for about a year and then she went to work at the "Favourite". This was a lovely shop in Killarney that sold tourist things together with sweets and boxes of chocolates.

On weekends she used to cycle home to Castleisland, about 10 or 12 miles. She moved back to Castleisland to open her own little shop out front in her family home. She would have been 18, it was around 1937. She was selling cigarettes, bars of chocolate, sweets and fruit. This was in the house she grew up in on Main Street near the fountain.



She met Dad when he came in to buy cigarettes. He used to wear plus fours with knee socks. The men's trousers were called plus fours. They came down below the knee and were tied with a band. The socks had a diamond design up the back, very snazzy looking. He was supposed to be a very snazzy dresser. He was five years older than she was, so he would have been about 23. I suppose he fancied her and

that's when he asked her out. He was quite a catch and he wasn't a Guard. Her father wouldn't have liked her dating a Guard. I don't know why he didn't like Guards, but he never approved of them. Not that they were not good enough, but I think it was something to do with the political scene in Ireland. A lot of her older sisters would have been in the



*Mam and Dad in Tangney's 1939*

Cumainn Na Mban, helping to do the fighting for Ireland. The Cumainn Na Mban was a group of women that helped the freedom fighters for Ireland. A type of the IRA, they would be on the run, and then the women would give them safe houses and hide them. That's why they didn't trust the Guards.

Dad would have been a salary man. They were going out together for a couple of years, to dances and the pictures. They got married in Castleisland. She paid half a crown for her wedding shoes 12 shillings for her suit. They had the reception at home.



*Mam and Dad's wedding photo 1939*

Once married, she closed down the shop and went to live at the top of the town in a rented house. She closed the shop because in those days you just didn't work if you were a married woman. Once married, you left home and you became a housewife and looked after your husband.

I would say he liked teaching but I suppose he wanted a bigger school. I don't know how big it was in Castleisland but they set one up in Killorglin and he applied for a teaching post there when I was 13 months old in 1942. He got the job in Killorglin, but there were very few pupils going to the school. So, he cycled all over the countryside,



*Aged 3, a fairy in a play*



*Aged 3, over at Auntie Cissy's*

to Keel and Castlemaine and he canvassed every house where there would have been a child eligible to go to school. He could cycle up to 20 miles over and back. He asked them all to come to the school in Killorglin. And they did, they all cycled back. He did that because there were

probably more subjects taught at the school if there were more pupils there. If there was only a small attendance people wouldn't send their children. They ordinarily wouldn't have sent them to secondary school at all, but he was passionate about education. His degree was agricultural science and he taught Botany. He was called Bots. That was his nickname, Bots Callanan.

When I was two we were living in a row of four houses overlooking the Laune. As you come up the hill you turn right at the first crossroads and it's towards the church. There are four houses up high on the left; you go up steps to them. Ours was the fourth house, a lovely house with a big bathroom. You went down steps at the back and you went up steps at the front. We were there from 1942 until 1947.

I don't remember a lot really. I was sharing a bedroom with Angela. Angela said we used to have somebody working for us. Mother was always baking and knitting. She baked sponge every day and she knitted all our clothes. You can see some in the pictures. She knitted all our dresses in different colours. I remember seeing the line full of knitted dresses hanging out to dry behind the Carnegie, the school which overlooked our house.



*Aged 4 with Angela, in the dresses  
Mam knit*

I went to the National School in Killorglin. We walked to school every day from Sunhill. There were separate boys and girls schools next door to each other. Mrs. Kelly and Miss O'Doherty were the two main teachers. They were lovely and taught us cooking and everything and it was a very happy school. I don't think I ever got into trouble. They were very happy times in National School.



*Sixth class in National School, (fourth from left at rear)*

When I was seven we moved up to Sunhill because Daddy wanted to do a bit of farming. So he rented a place in Sunhill. A long house, I can't say it was a lovely house because there was no running water. There were no conveniences, no bathroom or anything. But there were outhouses and fields, so he planted everything that he should and we had chickens, pigs, and calves. There was no running water so it was our job to go to the well and get gallons of water from the spring when we were seven or eight. Angela and I had to go for the water, Pat was too small, Pat was only

four at that stage. A very hard time; hard times because my mother got sick there. She wouldn't have had the conveniences that she had in town and that she grew up with.

She had always had the conveniences of town, like a bathroom, and everything that she should have really. So it was a tough time for her. She had to go to town for her messages, and walk up with the bike because I think the car was broken down most of the time. Daddy used to cycle to school and we used to walk. It was about three miles, a steep hill when you're going up. Coming down it's fine. It was hard when Mam was going up with messages.

She got breast cancer at that time then. She noticed there was a little lump in her breast so she went to the doctor and was sent to Cork. She had it removed as a precautionary measure, she was told that anyway. Whether it would have ever developed or not I don't know, but she did have a mastectomy. She would have been 29. There was no way she could stay in Sunhill after that because she couldn't climb up and down that hill with messages on her bike anymore.

I remember the day she went to the hospital. She bought coats for us because she sent them on by post via the shop. They were beautiful new coats she had picked out before she went into the hospital.

She would have been there a couple of weeks. Daddy looked after us, packing our lunches every day. One day I remember it was pancake night and we didn't know how to make pancakes, so one of the ladies, a lovely girl next door called Bernie O'Reilly arrived with a big plate of pancakes. We couldn't believe our eyes.

The house was pretty basic. It has been restored now, quite beautifully, about four years ago. I was delighted to see it restored. If you want to see it just drive up to Sunhill and before you come to Pa Grady's there's a big two-story house on the right, and then next to that there's a little road going past several houses. The house is just opposite these.

Mam was delighted when we moved in 1950. They decided to buy a place in town then. They were going to buy that house at the corner which used to be the purple house there on the corner before the school car park. It's still there but it's not purple anymore. They were going to buy that, but they were great friends with Auntie Bridie and Uncle Denis who thought Mam should open up a little business. So when this little house came up for sale they borrowed the £300 from my Uncle Denis to buy it.

I suppose it was a lot of money in those days. Denis Moran was married to Mam's sister Bridie. He had shops everywhere. He was a great businessman. He was a kind of entrepreneur.

The house was rented by the ESB, the electricity company, so there was a shop window. There was a little room at the back with stairs going up and a big open fire. At the back there was a little yard. The rooms upstairs were pretty much the same as they are now. There were three bedrooms and a bathroom. They covered in the yard to make an extra room in the back with a shingle tin roof with a skylight. I remember coming and going while the work was going on. We were still in Sunhill. We moved in before it was finished, delighted to be flying up and down the stairs because there had been no stairs in Sunhill.

It was coming up to Puck Fair and all the tinkers were coming into town. I remember Puck Fair when I was young, all the traffic on the Killarney road and the Tralee road and up by St. Mary's cottages where they used to park with all their round caravans, all the old-fashioned carts with horses. We stayed up watching all the fights around the town. All the tinkers would be getting drunk and fighting.

Puck Fair is a three-day festival where you celebrate a goat as King of Ireland for three days and three nights. The story is that the goats saved Killorglin from the Cromwellians way back in the 1600s. The goats woke them up so they were ready for the Cromwellians when they arrived. The puck goat has been king ever since. Every August the 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> there's a celebration with a big cattle and horse fair and lots of fun.

We moved in when I was nine and my grandfather died of a stroke when I was ten. Jim Tangney, the carpenter. I remember hearing that he had died but I don't remember being at the funeral. I don't think we were ever taken to funerals. I just remember hearing that Grandad was very sick and the next thing he died. That was around Puck Fair too.

We were thrilled to bits in that house. Life changed because you had more freedom, you weren't a country girl anymore really. You were in town and you could come and go, play games, and you had other children, and friends. We were always skipping with ropes and playing ball near Mack's corner. There was a big wall there which everybody used to play ball off with tennis racquets. We played games in the middle of the hill at night, when there was no traffic. Everybody just came out and played street games, particularly

on the flat pavement with chalk.

There were streetlights but they were quite dim. There were loads of electricity poles and on market day, a Tuesday, all the donkey carts would line up along the street and they would be tied on to the electricity poles. I remember everybody would be filling up their baskets and their carts after coming out of the grocery shops, filling up with eggs, and big candles, sides of bacon and bags of wheat.

We played in groups. Pat might have been a bit too young for us at that stage but we had the same friends. Mary and Ann McCarthy would have been Angela's friends and we were all living within a small area around the square.



*Pat on his bike at the top of Upper Bridge Street circa 1955*

In the house the radio was always on. There was some detective on but I can't remember what it was called but we would always listen to him. I suppose we had Radio Eireann and Radio Luxemburg. We would be doing our lessons with

the radio on. Mam would do her knitting by the fire and Dad would be doing something else. Dad was always looking after little enameled dishes that he would set for the children at school. He would keep them in the hot press and he would take them out and check them. He was always testing seeds for his farm students. He wanted to make sure that the seed would be right. So, he would bring them and set them for them and he would make sure that they weren't going to die on them and they would have a good crop that year.

I don't remember an awful lot of Christmases really. I spent my money on penny bars. Penny bars were enormous. I even remember buying Mam a penny bar for her birthday. They were grand. There weren't many lovely shops around that you could go in to buy a variety of chocolates, but you got a lot for your money. Everything was substantial.

There used to be a train station in Killorglin. A steam train coming into town down from Cork through Glenbeigh and Cahirciveen. It was amazing.

Mam made us dresses for the confirmation. We dressed up the night before for our neighbours across the way. We spent a lot of time over there and we used to gather there in the evenings. Everybody gathered in Dodds because they had a fire in the shop. We got a half a crown and two shillings on confirmation day. A half a crown was a lot of money.

I remember Shrove Tuesday. That was a very fun day, snap apple night, and pancake night. It came just before Ash Wednesday, which was the start of Lent. There were no sweets or anything eaten during Lent so there were lots of things happening on Shrove Tuesday night. During the day

we were let out of school earlier than the boys because we had to get a head start on them. The tradition was that years and years ago if you didn't get a girl to marry you before Lent you had to wait for a whole six weeks because you didn't go to dances during Lent. So, that was your last chance and the tradition was that if you lassoed a girl with your rope, you took her off to Skelligs Island to marry her. Skelligs is an island off the coast of Kerry. That was an old tradition and it passed down into a fun day for children. So the boys all bought ropes at the hardware stores and they ran after the girls and they tied them up to the poles. However, we used to have blades and we would try to cut their rope so then of course they would let us go. They wouldn't lasso us as such. There would be a guy at each end of the rope so you would be running and they would run after you, catch you and tie you up. We let ourselves get caught, of course, especially by the guys you wanted to capture you. You would see them up and down the streets and anywhere there were poles. It's still going on now.

When you went home at night there was snap apple and there were apples hanging from the ceiling with money inside the apples. Then the children's hands were tied behind their backs and the apples were swung, and whoever caught the apple in their mouth got whatever money was in the apple.

Lent was very strict all together. No dances, no sweets except for the jar that you had in your bedroom where you stored any sweets you were given during Lent. You could break the fast on St Patrick's Day the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, usually the middle of Lent. Then you started all over again. All very strict, no meat on Ash Wednesday, no meat on Friday ever because that was always a fish day.

Daddy would try to give up cigarettes but he would find it very difficult. He might last for Ash Wednesday and that was it. And maybe a week sometimes but he really couldn't, he smoked a lot. I suppose he smoked 40 or 50 a day. Mam loved to eat chocolate so she would give up chocolate and we would go to early Mass every morning during Lent.

I remember a very special thing with my Dad. Everybody got an Easter rig out. We always got new clothes and dresses. One Easter Mam went to buy an outfit for Angela. I was at home with nothing and Angela had a lovely outfit. Dad looked at me and he said, "Come on, Molls, we're going to get you an outfit." Molls was his pet name for me. "Come on, Molls," he said. So the two of us went off in the car and he brought me into a beautiful chic serious shop called The Vogue. He bought me a beautiful chic costume, a jacket and a skirt to match.

I was the bees' knees Sunday morning.

## Chapter Three

### *The Galway Summers*

When Dad had his holidays we went to Galway and spent the whole two months there and it was the most amazing time of my life. I think that is why I remember Galway so well. It was so wonderful because we had such freedom. We had the orchard, and we had the thrashing and the cutting of the corn. We would go upstairs at night with our candle sconces, and we would be in an open landing, the doors to the bedrooms would be open and we would lie in bed listening to the people gathered downstairs by the fire. All the neighbours would come in, and they would be chatting, and the clock would be ticking, and the radio might be on, and they would just be playing cards or something. It was always so much fun. Something happening all the time. The open fire, and the crane, the kettle hanging off of it, the dinner cooking in the open fire, the bacon hanging off the ceiling; it was just magic. It smelt of freshly baked bread when you came in to the kitchen. It was just beautiful. The lovely oil lamp in the parlour – no wonder I love antiques.

It was where Daddy was born, Daddy's old home. That's where his brother Bob lived, and his sister Annie. It wasn't huge but they made it huge because they made everybody welcome. It was a two-story house but it didn't look like a two-story house from the outside. Whenever you went inside it was wonderful, like an open landing. It wasn't even a two-story inside. There was no ceiling over the kitchen. It was just up to the rafters and somehow they made room for everybody. I don't know where they slept when we stayed. Nobody ever said anything about it. Mam and Dad got Uncle Bob's room and I don't know where he went. We must have gone in the other room upstairs. There were three of us. I know Grandad always had his own room. And when we would be leaving for home at the end of the holiday he would climb upstairs. He would slip into his room and go to his coat hanging behind the door. We would see him go into his pocket and get money for us, a half crown each as we were going away. We used to arrive by bus and Uncle Bob would meet us in the trap, the pony and trap.

We would go by bus because Mam and Dad didn't have a car. First we would stop off at Auntie Mary's house in Ballyshrule which was also a little country shop. Then we would go to my dad's homeplace and there would be a big meal waiting for us. Everyone would sit around a big table. You would go out and you would pick the apples off the tree, and the smell of the apples, and cabbage growing around the tree in the orchard, it was amazing. We would separate the milk with a little separator in the kitchen and make butter with the butter churn. But Pat wouldn't eat that butter so there had to be special butter bought for Pat from Kerry. They would say "The Killorglins are coming, we must buy shop butter." We went for about five years until we moved to Upper Bridge

Street. Then we were each allowed to go on our own.

They were very special years. They would bring in the hay, the cocks of hay. Now it's the round bales of hay, but it was the cocks of hay back then. For a cock of hay you would start at the bottom with a big round ring of hay which you then piled up. And it gets narrower, and narrower, and narrower as it goes up, like a cone. Then it was tied down with ropes so it wouldn't blow away. It was left to dry and was taken in at the end of summer. You pulled on the rope to take it in. I can still do it all in my brain. We sat at the back of the haycock while it was being brought home. Every single cock of hay had to be brought from the field into the yard individually, pulled by horses – a special hay cart.

The thrashing machine would come into the yard and everybody from all the farms around would know there was a thrashing on in such a day. They would all gather for the thrashing and then there would be a big meal for everybody. When thrashing you'd be pushing the machine, and the corn comes out one end and the stalk comes out another end. When you're out thrashing corn or making hay, the tea comes out to the field. Tea in the can, and that tea just tasted so different from any other tea you ever drank. And homemade bread. Everybody had their own mugs handed around and that tea was just like honey it was so beautiful. Our memories are always sunny. It was always summertime, July and August, and I never remember wet days anyway. I remember feeding the chickens in the yard too, throwing out the corn to them.

It was different than our farm at Sunhill, but then there was a bit more to it. But then again there was no inside

bathroom or anything. You had to go way down to the field to the outside toilet. You had a chamber pot under the bed at night. And I'm selling them now in my shop. People say they were the good old days but I say these are romantic notions really. They were hard days. These were hard days for the people that used chamber pots and for those who had to empty them.

I did go to Galway on my own once without Mam and Dad, but they drove me up however. I stayed in my grandfather's house, but he was dead at this stage. That was my first time ever going away on my own for a holiday. I got the big sum of 10 shillings for my pocket money and it was a huge amount of money to get. I suppose it would be about 30 pounds now. I would be there for three months. Anyway, I put this into a little purse but then I lost it and said nothing about it to anybody. Uncle Bob was very close to me and he was always looking out for me. He was a gentle giant. He was the most amazing uncle anybody could ever have. He was so kind and so caring and he always wore a cap and he brought me everywhere on the bar of his bike. He was big tall man.

He never married so he was always working on the farm while Auntie Annie was doing the housework. He said to me one day: "Mary, what's wrong?" I said nothing. He said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "I've lost my money." And he said, "Oh, how much was it?" I said, "10 shillings". "Oh," he said, "right." Now, he could have given me 10 shillings, no problem. But he knew that I was very upset so he left a little note in the church and they announced it after Mass on Sunday. If anybody finds a little purse with money in it that they should leave it at the church where it would be collected

because it was lost by a little girl. And he made so much of it. He gave me the 10 shillings but the fact that he went to that trouble - I'll never forget him for it. My wonderful Uncle Bob died suddenly in 1961 at the age of 52.

He was very disappointed when I cut my plaits. He said, "Oh, why did you cut your plaits?"



I was growing up and I didn't want plaits anymore. I suppose I was getting notions!