

Ellen Fitzgerald (1929 – 1997)

Introduction by Yom (Eamonn) Daly

My name is Eamonn Daly, and my mother was Ellen Fitzgerald, who was born in Lower Grange, South East County Limerick, on 21st August 1929. Ellen died in Waterford on 25th February 1997 at the age of sixty-eight. From her birth, Ellen lived at a cottage on the New Line Road in Lower Grange until she relocated to Portlaoise with her parents and brother in July 1938.

I should explain my nickname - ‘Yom’ – it is derived from my name *as Gaeilge* - ‘*Yomeann*’, as a teacher in my school used to pronounce it – my school friends shortened it to Yom.

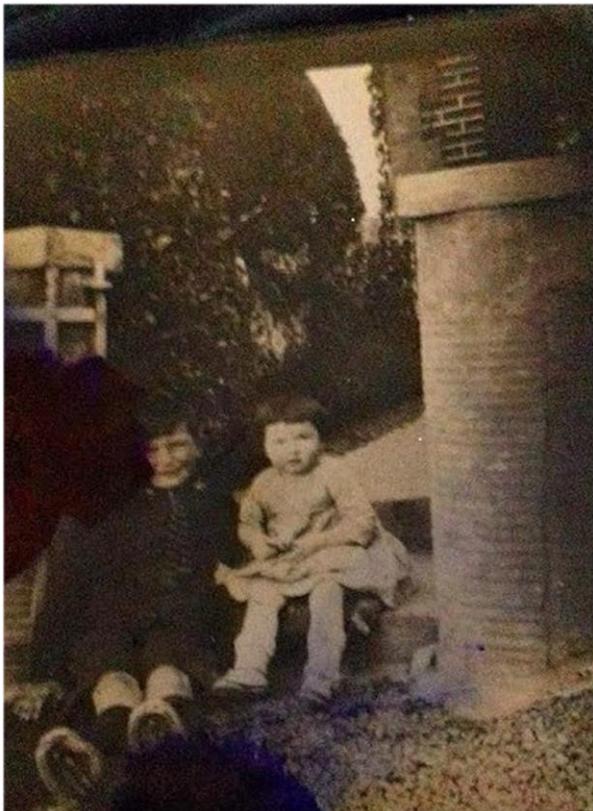
Ellen, my mother, loved Grange, the place of her birth, where she lived in a loving family setting, formed her first friendships and where she experienced her earliest years at school.

Ellen formed the habit of writing down her experiences of life and her thoughts and feelings about various matters. When she passed away, she left behind copious notes, especially about her life as a young child growing up in Grange and in Portlaoise after relocating there.

I have read and reread her notes over the years, with fascination and a growing understanding and connection with her early life. Ellen’s notes are full of detail, recorded with great passion, honesty and love. Encouraged by Miriam Gallagher of Grange who contacted me some time ago, I have assembled a single story of Ellen’s early years, which is the focal content of this article. As the notes upon which Ellen’s story, as told below, were written by her, I felt it appropriate to compile the story as a narration by Ellen herself, bringing her many accounts of her life experiences together in a single narration. In doing so, I have been true to the content of Ellen’s notes, her words, language and turn of phrase and where I considered it necessary to provide clarification as to the intended meaning of a particular word or phrase, I have done so within square brackets []. I have also taken the liberty of editing punctuation for the comfort of the reader – this does not interfere with the authenticity of Ellen’s original notes.

Ellen wrote lovingly about her carefree days in Grange, in the heart of the country, memories which I am certain remained close to her heart, as she spoke very fondly about Grange all through her life. She was shocked when it was necessary for her to relocate to the town of Portlaoise from her ideal country life in Grange, when her father, Patrick Fitzgerald, a prison warder at Limerick Prison, was transferred to Portlaoise Prison on the 29th July 1941. Ellen wrote about this traumatic event in her young life but

then went on to write about how she adapted to her changed circumstances, including the formation of new friendships in Portlaoise.



Ellen (right) with her brother, Paud (Pat), outside their home in Grange.

Ellen's story, which follows, is confined to her life up to the age of eleven. I consider it necessary to provide additional information in order to inform the reader about Ellen's family and her later life. This foreknowledge will be of benefit to the reader when it comes to reading Ellen's narrative about some of her childhood.

Ellen's Mother was Polly Ryan of Grange. Polly was married to Pat Fitzgerald of Grange. Ellen's grandparents on the Ryan side were Dan and Mary Ryan. Ellen had just one sibling – her brother, Paud (Pat).

Relocating to Portlaoise from Grange was tough on a little girl, and this is obvious from Ellen's notes – she was heart-broken. It must have been a difficult transition also for the other family members. It must have been a tough time for Ellen's mother, in particular. While Ellen wrote about her own feelings, she did not make reference to her mother's feelings. I suppose it was natural for Polly Fitzgerald to shield her children from the great sadness that she must have felt at leaving her home, relatives and friends in Grange, where she had lived all her life up to that point.

The family settled down in Portlaoise. They lived in one of several houses provided by the prison service – a close-knit community where the residents looked out for each other, in a time when the war had broken out in Europe, bringing shortages and rationing of food and other of life's essentials. New friendships were developed and fostered by the adults and children alike – some lifelong friendships were cemented. Paud was sent to the Christian Brothers School and Ellen to the Presentation Nuns School.

Ellen loved school in Portlaoise as she had in Grange. She found that learning came to her easily – she excelled at school and she had a thirst for knowledge. She was fortunate to be able to go on to a Leaving Certificate education – coming from a small family with a father in fulltime employment permitted this. In those times of large families and unemployment, many children were unable to take advantage of a

secondary level education, and children had to take up employment after finishing primary level schooling.

Ellen obtained an Honours Leaving Certificate. She then applied to the civil service for employment and secured a post of telephonist with the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. She was assigned to the Portlaoise Exchange. She found the technology a bit daunting at first, but Ellen, as always, didn't shy away from the challenge, and she mastered the job very quickly.

Around this time in her life, Ellen started to enjoy her teenage and early adult life, and she had a few 'bob' in her pocket to spend. She loved the movies, and during her life she amassed a great knowledge of those old movies, especially the wartime romances and the music of that era. Diana Durbin's *The Lights of Home* was her party piece, which she sang, much later on, in our car coming home from day trips. I can still hear her singing this song as 'she hadn't a note in her head', but this never bothered her.

Subsequent to her employment at the Portlaoise Exchange, Ellen was appointed to the post of telephonist



Ellen (left), wearing a prison warden's uniform and Josie, her sister-in-law, Paud's wife, wearing her dad's army uniform. They put on the uniforms for a laugh.

at a small post office in Abbeyleix, another chapter in the adult life of the little girl from Grange. She worked there for a few months, staying in 'digs' as rented accommodation was called then. Sometimes she went home to Portlaoise at weekends, but she was gaining independence and growing into womanhood.

Ellen was a striking woman, and I think she liked the attention, but she held on to her little-village-girl traits and never acted above her station. One morning, she started work and discovered that the switchboard was faulty and required to be repaired, and a technician was contacted to carry out the repair. The technician arrived, a man named Ned Daly. In her own words, she was 'very taken by this young, handsome and eligible man and they got chatting'. The young man asked her for a date and she said 'yes' – little did she know that this poor love-strapped man was from Portarlinton, a town about 12

kilometres from Abbeyleix, and he possessed only a bicycle! But as was normal behaviour for the times, Ned cycled to and from Portarlinton to meet up with Ellen. The romance blossomed over the next year

or so – they fell in love and spoke about marriage. Ellen agreed to marry Ned, and their marriage took place in January 1952.

Subsequently, Ned was transferred to Waterford, and, once again, Ellen found herself on the move, saying goodbye to her parents in Portlaoise and headed to unknown territory. She often said that she had three lives: in Grange, Portlaoise and Waterford. At this stage, her brother, Paud, was in the army and based in Clonmel, where he married and settled with his wife and two sons – Pat and Noel Fitzgerald.

Around this time also, on 27th September 1953, Ellen's beloved mother died in Portlaoise, just as Ellen was settling into life in Waterford with her husband, Ned. These were sad days, indeed, for Ellen, but rather than permit her sorrow and sadness to overcome her, she directed all of her love and energy into her married life with Ned. Their first accommodation was a flat was in O'Connell Street in Waterford – the flat was over one of the most famous pubs in the city – *T&H Doolans*. They were blessed with the birth of their first son, Jim, in December 1952. Ellen was over the moon – Jim was a beautiful dark-haired and brown-eyed boy, who as an adult grew to be 6 feet and 4 inches in height with the finest head of black hair imaginable. In February 1954, a second son, Pádraig was born and they doted on him also. Pádraig grew to 6 feet tall in adulthood and became a fine flute and tin whistle player.

Ned was working hard to 'keep the ship afloat', and he worked away from Waterford a lot – he had become a 'cable jointer' with The Department of Posts and Telegraphs. Ellen was very busy at home, minding their two sons in the flat. They secured a County Council house around this time in a very nice estate on the outskirts of Waterford – 130 McDermott Road on the Cork Road. The house was luxurious compared with the flat – it had an inside toilet, 3 bedrooms and beautiful gardens to the front and rear, which Ned kept in immaculate condition – one of his great passions.

On June 30th 1956, Ellen gave birth to her third child, Eamonn (that is me, by the way!). I inherited my dad's brown hair and blue eyes. I am now a 6 feet tall adult and going bald like my dad was. The boys all went to Mount Sion primary and secondary schools, and we all played music amateurishly.

Life was going well at our house on the Cork Road when, on 30th December 1958, Ellen gave birth to her fourth child – a daughter named Maura. She was over the moon with a daughter, and we all loved Maura to bits, and she was spoiled by her three adoring brothers.

These were happy times and our dad, Ned, was climbing the ladder in the Department of Posts and Telegraphs. He was still studying and working hard in order to give his family a great and happy life. On

14th December 1964, Ellen gave birth to her last child, Helen, and we, her siblings, were old enough to remember the excitement at her arrival – we adored our second sister.

Ellen and Ned reared us well, keeping us in touch with and proud of where our roots were in Grange and Portarlinton.

Later, Jim became a technician in Eircom, he wrote plays and was the lighting technician at Garner Lane Art Centre in Waterford. He married Bernie Cunningham, and they had five children.

Pádraig became a master glass-cutter at Waterford Glass, and he also owned and operated an antique furniture shop in Kilkenny. He married Mary Blount, and they had two sons.

I (Eamonn) worked as a cable jointer in Eircom for eighteen years, just as my dad did. I also lived in Brisbane, Australia, where I worked in the prison service, just as my granddad, Patrick Fitzgerald, worked in the Irish prison service. I married Mary Dalton, and we have four children, one of whom was born in Australia and she never got to meet her grandmother, Ellen. Unfortunately, she missed meeting Ellen by two days – Ellen passed away suddenly two days before our arrival home from Australia.

Maura, similar to Ellen, became a telephonist in Waterford. She had one son named John who my parents adopted after Maura passed away.

Helen became a psychiatric nurse in Dublin and later transferred to London.

Ellen's life fell apart and our idyllic lives were shattered when Maura, her firstborn daughter, died. In 1985, Maura was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and she passed away at St Luke's Hospital, Dublin, in September 1985. She was 26 years of age. In June 1995, Ellen's second-born son, Pádraig, passed away from cancer also – he was aged 41.

Ellen was broken-hearted, and, to be honest, she never recovered from the deaths of her children, Maura and Pádraig – she passed away herself on 25th February 1997.

This was not to be the end of our family woes. In 2009, Ned died at his Cork Road residence, aged 80. After a lifetime of studying and hard work, Ned went on to become an area engineer with Telecom. Three weeks later, Jim, the firstborn son of Ellen and Ned, the tall dark-haired and handsome man, died of bowel cancer aged 56.

Following the deaths of our parents, Ellen and Ned, and our siblings, Pádraig, Maura and Jim, Helen and I (Eamonn) remain in the land of the living. Helen is a nurse in London and I am returned to Waterford



This is how Ellen looked before she died.

since 1997. My wife, Mary, me and our kids arrived back to live in Waterford two days after Ellen had died suddenly. Maura's son, John, now lives in the Cork Road house with his partner, Marianne Heaphy. John was legally adopted by Ellen and Ned, and, so, I count him as another brother.

If you are by now engaged by the story of Ellen Fitzgerald Daly's life, I think you will find her own words which describe her young life in Grange and later in Portlaoise up to her eleventh year to be captivating I hope so. Ellen's story follows on the next page below.

Best Regards,
Yom (Eamonn Daly)
August 2019

The Early Life of Ellen Fitzgerald as told by Ellen herself in her written notes

My life may not be of that interest to all who never met me, but it was so important to me to leave my story for the generations of my family that I will never meet.

I have often heard it said that one's whole life flashes across the mind at the end of their life. I really mustn't be near that time yet because I wonder how could mine [sic] be flashing across my mind at this stage of mine. I am 62 and a half now, and I have had so many different lives over those 60 odd years.

I was born in a little stone cottage in the townland of Grange, County Limerick, in the Republic of Ireland. My father worked in the prison service in one of the country's most notorious prisons at that time. He was a huge man in stature, well over the 6 feet mark. But he was a lovely man, and I loved him dearly. My earliest memory is of him cycling his bicycle on the road between Limerick city and our little townland of Grange. He hung his hat on that little hinge that was meant for a front light on his bicycle. I waited every evening, without fail, at 6.45pm at our front gate to get a glimpse of my dad cycling down that narrow road. Many an evening I would be disappointed, as the prison service never worked to the clock - there could be emergencies or trouble in the jail, but of course, I didn't understand any of that then. All I waited for was to see his lovely fair hair, his big broad smile and his big blue eyes greet me. My heart would thump in my chest when I would see him - I loved him so much. It's that special love that a daughter has for her father.

My father, Pat Fitzgerald, originally came from Graiguecullen in County Laois, bordering the town of Carlow. They were basket makers and weavers of wicker chairs, a skill that he would bring to the prison service, where he taught the inmates how to weave their own baskets and chairs during their recreation time.

I had one brother named Paud - that was a very small family, indeed, in those days. Paud was a very outgoing boy, very humorous and always up to some devilment or other. Often he would use me as a toy horse where he would tie twine around my neck and under my arms and have me gallop around the half-acre garden at the rear of the cottage where we lived, with him on my back. He was a bossy kind of lad and he used his age difference to his advantage to get me to do some of his chores, like gathering 'kiplings' [probably derived from *cipín*, the Irish for stick – *cipíní* in plural] over the fields to start the fire. Often he would drag a trunk of a tree from somewhere in the woods and get me to chop it into blocks for firewood - hard labour for a five-year-old girl at any time. Other times, he would borrow a cart from our near neighbour and good friend, Mickey Power, a farmer of means, and he would come home with

a trailer full of timber and a scattering of vegetables to boot. Those were the ways of the country folk at that time - close bonds and always looking out for each other in harsh times.

We also kept a goat at our place, where a fee had to be paid to the County Council to graze him in the fields - a sort of tax, I suppose, in a roundabout sort of way. Every evening, my mother and I would go over the field to milk the goat, and we had to go through a gap in the field that was locally known as *Burke's Hole*. It was stepped but was always very slippery and I used to be terrified that I would slip in and fall straight into the stream that ran beneath it. The goat was named by my mother as 'Jim-Jim', you could hear my mother calling Jim-Jim in her broad County Limerick accent. Immediately, the goat would come running towards her as if to greet her like a long-lost friend. She would throw him a handful of maize or grain. While she was chewing, my mother would milk the goat into a small metal milk container, called a billy-can. If the milk was plentiful, she would let me have a go at milking the goat at times - I loved it, I guess I was a country girl at heart all my life.

There was a time when my mother was feeling poorly, and she asked Paud and me to go and milk the goat. Off we went through the fields until we came to *Burke's Hole*. Again, I got this scary feeling over me - I really didn't want to fall into the stream. My mother was always there to help me over and hold my hand, but this time I was with my brother and I didn't want him to see that I was scared. I suppose, even at that tender age I was a proud and stubborn girl, and I held my breath and went for it - I got over no problem, albeit with a scared feeling but satisfied that Paud never even noticed - so there was no pride lost to me and I also achieved the milestone of getting over *Burke's Hole* unaided for the first time.

The last laugh was actually on me that day, as there was no way Jim-Jim was coming over to my brother Paud. 'Jim-Jim', he bellowed but not a budge from the goat. Paud was furious - 'stay here', he said to me, and off he trampled back through the field over *Burke's Hole* towards the house until he was out of my sight. About ten minutes later I couldn't believe my eyes - there was Paud dressed in one of our mother's old dresses and hat! Well if I didn't faint from laughing that day I never will - I can still see him walking through the fields in my mother's dress and hat. 'Watch this', he said! 'Jim-Jim', he bellowed once again. Well, low and behold, Jim-Jim responded - over he came - Paud made a right fool out of the goat. I was in stitches, and I still get a grin from it to this day.

We tramped back towards home again with our 'billie' [billy-can] full of goat's milk - me, and Paud in the dress. Once again, I negotiated *Burke's Hole* unassisted, and I was mighty pleased with our evening's work. And me with the fear of falling into the stream gone from me, a great day altogether! Sometimes the goat had kid goats and my mother would allow me to rear one as a pet. She said I could keep one until their horns grew. I walked the kid goat around in a dog collar and leash. I adored those kid goats

and I prayed to God that their horns would never sprout, but they always did, which meant my pet kid goat would be taken away to a new home. Then I realised they were brought away to be slaughtered for the meat. I never ate goat meat, but I believe it's very tasty.

My mother once raised a bonnén [bonham] pig; I loved this little animal. I played out in the fields with the little 'nive' [sic] pig, running around in circles, one of us madder than the other, but alas the day came when my mother told me the pig had to go. I cried so much that day; my mother brought the pig to Limerick to be slaughtered, I'm sure. She got £4 for the pig, which was a fortune back in 1936. I remember when she arrived home - she had a hairband for my hair and a new pair of gloves, and I thought I was the bee's knees - I still remember them to this day. My grandmother lived with us, or I should say we lived in her house. I called her *Nana*, and she always wore long black clothes and a shawl. I loved her so dearly, also. She was a very kind woman who had lived a very hard life. Her husband (my grandfather), Dan Ryan, died when the kids were very young. My mother was only six at the time. She reared two boys and two girls: Tom, John, Kate and Polly, my mother, all on her own - so, times were very hard indeed. She died when I was only five years of age, and it was to be my first confrontation with death at that young age. My beloved Nana was to be the first dead body I ever saw, and I have total recall of the evening that Nana was laid out in the coffin. The coffin was placed on the kitchen floor, and I remember my mother 'Mama' and how she cried. It was so upsetting for me to see that - Mama asked me to go into the wake room, and I saw a bed laid in white with candles surrounding the bed. I said, "What are all the candles for?" - "to protect the spirit", said someone. The coffin was brought to Grange Church, the very same church where I was christened in August 1929. The body was to be laid to rest, and it was the first time I really noticed the church - I looked all-around at the Stations of the Cross, and I was amazed at the stain glass windows and the smell of the candles. I really wanted to stay there, I was so engrossed in my little world as to the importance of the occasion.

I was then duly whisked away by my cousin, Paddy Harty, on the bar of his bike. I can remember him cycling the *Old Road* to the bridge - there stood a post office, which was owned by the Bulfins - there was a pub there previous to that run by their grandfather, George Clancy. The pub was known as *The Hamlet* - it was owned by the Barrys, who I remember had a son a priest. From there, we cycled up the *New Line*, and by this stage, my 'arse' was getting numb, as I can remember. He then brought me home to the cottage, where there was a gathering of all the neighbours after the Mass.

Our immediate neighbours, the Burkes, lived on the right-hand side of our cottage, (probably where the name *Burke's Hole* came from). They were great friends of our family, and I visited them regularly. Joe Burke and Jessie Burke were the son and daughter. Also living there was a woman called Nonie Hogan - I can't remember the connection, but she was a great old pal of the family. Patrick Clancy was there; he

was an ex TD - The Labour Party. His brother, George, was shot during the troubles by the *Black and Tans*, and this was still spoken about in all the houses as if it had just happened. My aunt, Kate, was there - Mama's only sister - she lived over the fields in a cottage we called the 'Ranch', but for the life of me, I can't remember why it was called that.

After Nana died, I suffered a lot at the thought of death, and I was unable to talk about it to anybody. As it was in those days, children should be seen and not heard, and so it remained confused in my 5-year old head. Really, I should have been counselled, I suppose, but I survived the best way I could and came to terms with mortality at that tender age.

School

April 1st 1935 was the beginning of a whole new world for me and gone were the carefree days of milking goats and running around after 'bonnives' [bonhams]. I started school - the school was 2 miles away from our cottage, a long straight road - the *New Line*, as we locals called it - the same road that my cousin Paddy Harty cycled after Nanna died with me on the handlebar. My cousins and my brother, Paud, were already attending the same school. The school was a 4-roomed single-storey building. I walked the *New Line* with my cousins, Peg and Moll, Dolly Ryan - John's daughter, John Harty and my brother Paud. The chit-chat all the way down the road made the journey seem very short, and I walked into that school with eyes wide open in anticipation as any child on their first day at school would. Mrs O Donnell was teaching that day. I was allowed to sit in with my cousins and brother for that first day. I was amazed at the order the teacher had over the children in the class - *Seas suas* she bellowed, and everybody stood up. *Suí síos* and everyone sat down. Next thing the *Our Father...* was recited - every child in the class recited the prayer to start off the school day. The day passed by reasonably well, and I enjoyed what I was hearing, and from that day I knew I would love the school experience. We all headed back along the *New Line* again after school, all chit-chattering all the way home. I walked behind the older kids, listening to all the talk of the school day. Paud and I arrived home together, and my mother was there to greet us with a big smile on her face, and it was lovely to see her that day. I knew then that I was safe in the bosom of the home again. She asked me all about my day in school, and I duly obliged her - my jaw was sore after telling her all I said and heard that day. She had a lovely supper prepared for us both, a nice bowl of Irish stew which I galloped (gulped??) down with speed as I was famished after the long walk to and from school.

The next morning I was awoken by my mother's voice calling out "Ellen, time to get up for school". I leapt out of bed with ease. She washed me in a metal basin and scrubbed me from head to toe, and I was like a new pin and wide awake. I had a bowl of porridge for breakfast, and she had some goat's milk and

2 slices of bread for my lunch and the same for Paud. He kept saying “You’ll know all about it today Ellen”, and I wondered what he was on about. We went outside the cottage and waited for a while. I was anxious to get going, but Paud said “Steady on we will wait for our cousins who should be heading this way any minute now”, and, sure enough, as true as his word I could hear the chit-chattering of my cousins’ voices coming down the road. Once again, we walked the long *New Line* road for my second day at school. We were full of the joys of youth, buzzing away like young hens clacking away to each other, as we headed for our day’s learning.

We arrived at the school in good time, but there was a difference - we were split up into groups, each according to our age. I was put in a line of all the first-class children, Mrs Power’s class. We were brought in as a group, and this was my first taste of independence. Mrs Power was a lovely person with knowledge to burn. She had a great way about her and could communicate her knowledge skilfully to us newcomers. Once again, we started with a prayer, the *Our Father*. The little desks faced a window with all sorts of toys placed on them. There were dolls cups and saucers with a *Mickey Mouse* design on them, and *Cupán agus Fo-cupán* were written above them - my first words learned in Irish. Mrs Power then handed out to each new pupil our first new school books. “*A for Apple, B for Boot and C for Cat*” - I knew straight away that the world of reading and writing was opened to me, and I was eager to learn. I found out as the days went by that this was easy for me, and I relished in the lessons that Mrs Power was handing out. We also did ‘sums’ (maths), writing with pen and ink, with ink being allocated to each desk and poured into ink wells carved into our desks. We also used pencils to write with sometimes. Prayers were also very important to Mrs Power, and she taught us all the prayers - a new one each week until we could recite it off by heart as a group. In first-class, the day finished at 2.30pm, but my cousins, Mary Dooley, Nonie Hogan and Cissie Dooley and my brother Paud, finished at 3.30pm.

So, the next big thing for me was to walk the *New Line* road by myself. The first day that I walked home alone I loved it, and I went through all the lessons that I learned that day over and over in my head - I suppose you could call it mental homework. I loved religion and I would recite a prayer between each P&T [Post & Telegraph] pole to pass the time away on my walk home. I also loved the sound of a buzzing noise that came from the copper wires on those poles on a sunny day and the smell of fresh tar that was laid to cover the potholes by the Council. I picked primroses and cowslips, and I stopped at gaps in the ditches to look at cows grazing in the fields. The smell of summer country air was in my nostrils. Every so often I was startled by the noise of a quarry that was blasting rock, and I was fascinated as to know what was going on in there - a little frightened as well! Sometimes I would meet Uncle Jim, who was married to Auntie Kate, on the walk home. He worked for the Council, laying tar for the potholes. He would always stop to chat with me and ask me about my day, - he was a lovely gentle countryman who wouldn’t harm a soul.

On 21st May 1936 I received my first holy communion - this was just the most wonderful day for me. I remember I had to fast (refrain from food) from midnight until I received the host in Holy Communion. That morning, my mother bathed me in a tin bath out in the yard - it was a sunny morning and I never felt so clean. The night before I had been to Confession with Father Carroll, and that morning I never felt so close to God, and I don't think that I have ever felt that close to Him ever since. Mama made my dress from my christening robe, and I had a beautiful pair of white buckled shoes. I had a veil with *Lilly of the Valley* on each side. My godfather, Jim Harty, arrived with a shiny new 6-penny bit, and it was the first time I ever handled money.

I was over the moon with excitement with all this attention hailed upon me. I was the only girl making the First Communion that year among 14 boys - I was the only girl at the proper age. It was a beautiful ceremony and I remember that all the village residents were there in their best attire and all looking very smart. The host stuck to the roof of my mouth after receiving it, and I wondered what I was doing wrong and if any boy 'receiving' had the same thing happen to him. All these silly things were going through my young girl's head - but it was important to me at that time as I was always looking for answers to everything. Afterwards, I told my dad, and he grinned and reassured me that it was perfectly normal. I was relieved - I could always rely on Dad to have the answers.

I remember it was a lovely beautiful day in May when we were all walking back to our house, and I felt like a princess in all my finery. We had a picnic in our back garden. Mama, Dad, my godmother - Delia Ryan, my brother - Paud and all my cousins. We had a great day, I remember my mama had to check me at one stage for being naughty, as she said. I was over-excited, running around the garden like a headless chicken. I learned a lesson that day that when one is at the height of excitement you can be taken back to earth very quickly. I was very hurt at being checked in front of all my relatives, and I ran through the fields to get away from that feeling. I met Paddy Clancy while I was there, and he asked me what was wrong. I explained that I was running away with guilt, and he gave me another magic 6-pence, and he walked me home, catching my hand. By the time we got back to the cottage, I was down to earth again. That's all I remember of that great and eventful day.

School life continued for me, and by this stage we were in a mixed class of six boys and six girls. Our teacher was Mr Lynch, another great teacher, and some of his teachings have stuck to me to this day. I found no difficulty in learning, unlike some others in the class who found it a very hard time in their lives. Sixth standard [class] pupils were in the same room as us. My brother, Paud, was in that class. I worried a lot about him, and I would worry that if he got his spellings wrong, etc., he would be punished. I realised then that I was a worrier by nature and I still am to this day. After second-class, I passed into third with

ease, and I was back with Mrs O'Donnell teaching us once again. I was learning something new each term, and I had no trouble retaining this information - thank God, I was progressing forward nicely. That year, when the summer holidays came along, I passed the time helping my mother in the household chores. The cottage consisted of 2 bedrooms and a loft as we called it. It had a big kitchen with a big open fire with all types of pots and a kettle hanging from an iron rod across the top. A bellows was at the side of the fire with 2 wheels and a leather strap like a belt which turned both wheels to fan the fire. One of my jobs was to turn the wheel closest to the floor to boil up the kettle and the big black pots called bastible with lids on them, which were held down by 'cotawáns', which were dried cow dung like cement. Paud and I collected them in the nearby fields. I also learned to ride a bicycle for the first time that summer - Paud taught me, and after some failed attempts, he held the back of the bike as I staggered down the road, and eventually he set me free on my own. I can still remember that feeling of the air running through my hair and the sight of the fields as I went sailing by - it was like sailing through the air, and I loved that feeling.

We had a lovely well opposite the house with the finest of drinking water in it. Passers-by would be seen stopping there and filling up their containers with the beautiful fresh spring water. One day, I remember a huge horse and cart stopped at the well and a man staggered off the cart to fill his container with the water. Just then, the horse reared up and was out of control - the man was obviously the worst for wear from drink, and I was frightened out of my wits. Mama came running from the house and immediately settled the horse and held on to its reins until he settled. She then got the man from the well and placed him back on the cart and set him on his way - I thought she was the most wonderful woman at that time.

Oftentimes rows of horses and carts with bags of wheat and animal feed passed our cottage and to a young girl they seemed huge, and I loved watching these parades. We also got a radio for the first that summer; it was a battery-operated one. After all, it was 1936 - great excitement altogether. I recall that my dad had to fill the cells with acid, and he was so careful not to spill any on his trousers. In those days, that would be a major catastrophe because it would leave little holes in his trousers. This was a great addition to our lives, as on Sundays when there was a match on, we had crowds to the cottage and there would be great 'gas' with all the excitement of the men shouting at it [radio] as if the referee and players could hear them. I remember my dad listening to the 'News' also - he loved politics, and he was a staunch Fianna Fáil supporter - he passed that interest of politics onto me, and I still have a great interest in politics to this day, ever since I was 8 years of age. Little did I know that this was to be the closing of my idyllic life in Grange and its surrounding countryside that I got to love so well. That summer my dad was transferred from Limerick Prison to Portlaoise Jail, which meant, like army personnel, the family moved with the job

Portlaoise (Maryborough)

July 29th 1938 was Paud's birthday and also the day we left Grange and our lovely cottage that I was growing up so nicely in. I was heartbroken, and I knew that day that I would never walk those country roads again with my kid goat, my pet dog, *Neata*, and our greyhound, *Carlou*. My childhood friends, Mena Donovan, Nora Power, Nonie Hogan and the Dooleys - my cousins - Nellie, John, Paddy, Joe, Mel and Peg. After many tears from Mama, Paud and I, we got a bus to Limerick train station. This was the first time I ever saw a train. I recall it was a wet and miserable day which covered up a lot of tears. There was very little talk between Mama and Paud and me on that train journey from Limerick to Portlaoise. I looked out the window, as the raindrops ran down the window, staring out at the countryside and the green fields with cattle in them, all huddled up together to escape the rain. The telegraph poles appeared one by one as the train hurdled past them. There was the rhythm of the engine ringing in my ears and a heavy heart for a little girl to endure. Looking back at it, we were devastated and heartbroken. I often wonder how some families felt as they were forced into emigration from this country for foreign lands, never to return for most of them. We were lucky in a way, as Dada had a job in his own country of birth, where he could be with his family by his side, but in those days we knew in our hearts that Grange was a place we probably would never see again. The train suddenly started to slow down as we approached Portlaoise station, and I could hear the grinding of the brakes on the wheel - this made a very loud noise which frightened me a bit, and I grabbed Mamma's hand for comfort and reassurance and safety. As we slowed right down, I saw a sign *Maryborough Station* written on a board in the platform. As we came to a halt, Mama went and got our 2 cases with all our earthly belongings in them. It was still raining as we got off the train, and my heart leapt in my breast, just as it did when I used to see Dada cycling his bicycle down the long mile road after his day's work.

Dada was waiting for us at the platform, and I could see he was thrilled to see us. He was wearing a big raincoat and cap, and his face lit up with pride, and love was all over his smiling face. I immediately ran towards him, and he raised me up in the air and swung me around like a human roundabout and gave me the biggest kiss on my cheek that I even can feel to this day. He then hugged Mama and gave Paud a big hug that nearly squeezed the life out of him. You could safely say he was a happy man that day. Suddenly, I felt safe again in the bosom of the entire family, and now I started to get excited about the whole new world that was about to be opened to me. Dada had a hackney car hired for us, which was waiting for us at the outside gates. The bags were put into the boot and into the hackney. On the journey, Dada said to me, "Ellen my dear, from now on I will be home every night, and you won't have to wait at the gate waiting for me to come cycling down the road wondering will I be home at all".

He sang, and I saw the lights of home as we approached our new house in the Hackney. This seemed a very strange place to me as I was so used to open spaces and country fields. These houses were all in a row, 34 of them in total. Our house was numbered 17. They were all specially built for prison staff and their families. They all had electricity installed in them, which I had never seen before, and also an outside toilet, which also I had never seen before. There was a fairly large kitchen with a big range in the centre of it and a scullery off that and 2 bedrooms. Without a doubt, I realised that life for me has completely changed. The houses numbered 13 to 20 were allocated to smaller families, which we were classed as in those days. There was a gateway at no 13 which led to a big wall, and I later realised that this wall was part of the prison security - we were practically going to live on prison property.

As the week went on, new families arrived with all their luggage, and I could see that they were going to be a lot of children for me to play with - as each family arrived, most had children with them. A family arrived and moved next door to us, they were called Kelly, and they had 3 children - the eldest was called Geraldine, Leo who was Paud's age (a friend for him) and Rene Kelly who was my age. I was excited at the thought of having a new friend in Rene, as I loved company. I started school very quickly after arriving. I went to the Presentation Convent School, and I started in 3rd class. My next-door neighbour, Rene Kelly, was also in the same class, and we were put sitting next to each other in a double desk, as we were new arrivals and vaguely knew each other. Sister Philomena was our teacher. She wore a long black habit with a long braided rosary around her waist and a cross dangling down the front of the habit. The first thing I noticed was when the nun asked me my name, "Ellen Fitzgerald" I replied, and I realised right then that my accent was different than all the other students in the class. I called my parents Mama and Dada, but they used the terms, Mammy and Daddy. I quickly changed my way of speaking in order not to be considered different. When I started calling Mama and Dada as Mammy and Daddy at home, they were amazed and said it was a borrowed accent. I settled down with the nuns very quickly, and they were to be a great influence on me throughout my life. I loved their deep devotion to Jesus and Mary, and I loved their long Rosary Beads. They taught us well; reading and writing was a priority with the nuns. Those lessons stood to me throughout my whole life, and I am eternally grateful for this. Rene Kelly, my neighbour, and I became the best of friends. We were more like sisters than friends, and we were to share our growing up experiences from that day onwards. I loved her so much, and I was grateful and lucky to have met such a true and loyal friend.

Rene's mother died on the 13th of October 1938, only 4 months after moving next door to us, and we were all devastated. Rene was heartbroken, as I remember, and started to get very close to me and Mammy, and she stayed with us a lot and actually became like one of the family. We prayed at my bedside every night to her mammy to look after us and keep us safe from all evils and to take away Rene's sadness. We decided after a time to get on with life as best we could and used school as a distraction. I found the

sisters were a great resource and excellent teachers. Third-year went by reasonably quickly, and I found myself well settled after the term was finished.

War broke out in Europe in September 1939. We knew very little about what was going on over there as Ireland was a neutral country. Having said that, we suffered also in the form of shortages of food items such as tea, butter, milk and bread - the basics really. My dad, who used to smoke cigarettes, found his supply hard to get, and often I would have to walk the streets of Portlaoise going from shop to shop in the search of tobacco to feed his habit. I would get one cigarette here and another one in some other shop - I still have hatred to this day for cigarettes. It always brings me back to those dark nights drudging the streets of Portlaoise, making a beggar out of myself looking for them. It must be a terrible addiction if a father can let his young daughter go out at night to look for cigarettes with very little regard for her wellbeing. I know they were different times, but I still think about it. While we had ration books for food, clothes, 2 ounces of tea and a quarter pound of butter, my mammy kept a lot of those hardships from us - I am sure about that.

My memory of that time is that in front of the prison there was a large lawn with beautiful shrubs where all the children of the 34 houses were allowed to play tennis and handball against the prison wall. Occasionally, we would lose a ball over the wall, and that was the end of it as there was no way we were allowed to retrieve it until I said it to Dad, who the next day would return the lost ball, and we would be thrilled. As these playthings were very scarce, all the children of the prison houses remained great friends - which still lasted all down the years. It was like our own village, and we were like one big family. It's a pure miracle how our worlds crossed paths at all, but God works in mysterious ways as we say. What a strange place to grow up when I think back on it now - straight opposite our house were the gates of the mental hospital, where a family lived in the cottage. They were named Millers. The father was the groundskeeper of the hospital. Mrs Miller became a great friend of my mother. They had 2 sons, Oliver and Joe. I got very friendly with Joe - I suppose he treated me like a sister, but my little childhood heart had a crush on Joe, and it was the first time I ever had that feeling. I became one of the family almost. Rene Kelly and I would pal around together with Oliver and Joe. We went to the cinema all together for the first time ever. I was so excited that we were going to the "Talkies" - that's what we called them in those early days of cinema. Then we started to call them "The Pictures". I loved "The Pictures" - It introduced me to a whole new world of romance, mystery, drama and adventure, just as in the early days of school, when books enlightened me so much and introduced me to another world. It was as if 'the pictures' were an extension of all that, catapulting me even further into this whole new experience. There were 2 cinemas to choose from in Portlaoise, *The Coliseum*, which was the newest one, and an old cinema we called the 'flea box', not to the amusement of the owner, Paul Delaney, who insisted we call it 'Pauls',

so we did. These cinemas were a great comfort during the war years or the 'Emergency' as we called it. We would escape real life for at least an hour and a half every Saturday.

Around this time, my brother, Paud, and his best friend and our neighbour, Leo Kelly, joined the army. I am sure they were influenced by the army that was billeted in the old hospital during the duration of the emergency. I carried on at school, and I really loved it. Looking back at it now, I really did settle down in Portlaoise and became one of the locals and am very proud of that fact also. I loved learning all about the history of *Laoighise*, my new adopted county. I was always intrigued as to where that name originated from. I learned that in *the plantation* of *Laoighise* during the reign of Queen Mary, the name of the county changed to Queen's County, another example of how our beautiful Irish named counties and towns were ruined by the Anglicisation and lost in translation - *Portlaoighise* became *Maryborough*. I loved the fact that we returned to the original beautiful names after we regained our independence. I often visited the *Rock of Dunamase*, which was another historic site close to home - it was once the home of the O'Moore clan, a historic family from that era. I remember visiting a place close by also called *Dysart*, where they were hermits' caves - they lived underground in common prayer. I once found the entrance to one of their cells, and at that time I could fit through the gap and walk around the underground room. As I was only 11 years old at the time I had to be accompanied by my dad.

ENDS