

Celebration of Our Autumn Years

*A collection of stories and poems
from the narrative of older people in long-term care*



compiled by **Gemma Gallagher**



Acknowledgements

This book is the result of two 'Recall and Imagine' 16 week projects which took place in 2004-2006. The project owes its success to Gemma Gallagher, Director of *Shadowbox Theatre Company*, who, along with Frieda Hand, so ably facilitated the group and one-to-one sessions with older people in residential care units in the community, within the former SWA. Through her skillful editing of the narrated material, Gemma has captured the essence of each individual piece and retained the accompanying emotion through the authentic language of the story-teller.

Very special thanks are due to:

the residents of the two community residential units for older people who participated so willingly and enthusiastically in the project, as well as to the relatives, carers and spouses who encouraged their loved ones to participate;

the Senior Management and Directors of Nursing, HSE, who gave permission for the project, as well as to healthcare professionals and allied staff working in the respective community residential units for older people, who competently created the environment to allow the project to take place seamlessly, with great enjoyment for all involved.

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Foreword

Faith Gibson's often quoted maxim '*Reminiscence and other creative activities are not expendable luxuries; they are life sustaining essentials*' underpins the philosophy and principles of the 'Recall and Imagine' programme run in two community residential units for older people in the former SWA.

The projects, to enable and empower residents to tell salient aspects of their life memories, were facilitated by the expertise of Shadowbox Theatre Company, who have extensive experience of working with older people with impaired cognitive and communication abilities.

The material garnered from the projects forms the basis of this book in which the reader will find poems and stories either written by the participants themselves or told through a narrator. The poems and stories reflect the meaningful perceptions and emotions of the participants, placed in the context of their lived lives.

This book is intended for personal reflection, as well as a means of communicating with older people. The content serves as a reminder of the humanity of all people, whatever their age, race, culture and circumstance.

Sheilagh Reaper-Reynolds

Acting Functional Manager, Health Promotion, HSE Dublin Mid-Leinster

Introduction

Shadowbox Theatre Company was established eight years ago and as part of its ongoing work has developed the Recall and Imagine® programme which incorporates elements of Reminiscence therapy, story work, creative writing and theatre making exercises. Shadowbox was delighted to prepare this publication as we believe that the use of arts within healthcare can be particularly effective when incorporated into existing care provision. As professionals, we have the privilege of spending focused time utilising our specific skills with the individual and the story they have to tell. We have the freedom to play, imagine, listen and communicate and this enables us to share experiences with group members and individuals.

The process of working with the many hours of video footage collected during two specific projects, has been a pleasure. During the process I have had the delight of reliving and celebrating wonderful moments and experiences with some extraordinary people.

The excerpts chosen have one thing in common; they represent very human moments, stories and discussions. These were sometimes discovered with difficulty, emotion and fear, but always expressed with a desire to be heard.

This book is written as a celebration of these very personal moments we have had the privilege of sharing.

Gemma Gallagher

Director, Shadowbox Theatre Company

the video camera

I see that little light there

You see ...

Because you leave room,

For us to play with,

If you put it on like that!

cockles

I'd eat cockles all day I would
I would boil them
I love cockles
(How do you cook them?)
Didn't care, I eat them
I remember ...
We ate them
I love them,
I'd eat them all night
Once I'd get at them,
You know that way
I think, I'd have another one

No I won't have any!
Two, out of me house again
I'd be gone Mondays
I'd be gone Tuesdays
I'd ...
And Wednesdays
I thought it was lovely.
And then wait till I tell ya
A man came over,
And he was somebody!
I don't know.



the photo

Interviewer Is there a photograph you wish you had with you now?

Ella Aye there is.
To be at home, at home.

Interviewer What are you doing in the photo?

Ella I don't know what I'd be doing,
Just at home.

Interviewer Rathmines?

Ella Yes that's right. (silence)
Rathmines, yes I'm from Rathmines ...
It's a bedroom.
It's just an ordinary bedroom and ...
People who's in the house with me.

Interviewer And who's in the house with you?

Ella Now, I'm on my own.

Interviewer But who's in the photo with you?

Ella There'd be me, mother and father, and my cousins.

Interviewer Was it a special occasion?

Ella No ... I just came down.
(*Ella doesn't say anything else*)



north strand

They say ...
by mistake they bombed it.
I was only about 16
at the time.
I just heard the noise,
you know.
I got a fright.
It was a mistake they said.
What do ya get out of war?
Nothing.
Only grief.

*The first time
I thought I seen you,
You were tall
Now, when I looked over
You were very small!*

my twin

My aunt and uncle reared me
I was only six when me mother died
Two years old when me father died ...
There was a cousin used to visit me
We were like brother and sister,
He was a twin as well.
He only lived 6 weeks.
In them days they couldn't keep them alive you know.
If he'd been alive ... It would have been nice to have had a brother
Have you any brothers and sisters?
I had a bike and everything
Tricycle first then a bike when I got older
He had a girl twin and I had a boy
32 when she died
My father was only 28
They say he died of pneumonia
There was a grand park opposite,
We used to play tennis
You don't like being stuck here all the time do you!

nutmeg

Beautiful smell.

It's not pepper.

It's something like ...

It's like ...

Pencil cases!

You know it's like that

To me you know

Pencil cases

It's a lovely smell though!



mrs graf

Are you there Mrs Graf?
Are you washing the floor?
Or still looking for the
3p that I sent my daughter
For to get from you?
I hope
You went church, Mrs Graf.
Do you
Think I'm a fool?
With your
Twelve children not working
And that.
I forgot,
Two of them you have working.
I am a lady
And I see you have
Another into your home.

too fond of the talk

There was this woman ...
A long time ago
And she was a very good woman, now, you know!
But she was always talking, you know
If you said anything she told it back,
You know, that kind of a way.
So I got turned against that
So ... she was a nice woman and all,
But too fond of the talkin'
And I don't, I don't ...
I might give a little chat and that.
But going on about you me and everyone else
So I quit the whole bloody lot
And never bothered about her since!

the mask

At Halloween we had a session where one of the group tried on a mask

Mary I remember 'dress up' as youngsters ... make masks

Ellen We used to have concerts and make paper skirts and all.
(Ellen puts on the mask)

Facilitator Who's that in the mask?

Mary It's supposed to be ...

Facilitator Is it a man or a woman?

Mary Oh it's a man.

Kathleen It's a happy looking face.

Nancy It's not trustin'.
It's a face with a false smile on it.

Facilitator Would you talk to him?

Molly I would, because I always would!



first friday

It used to be all that!

Me mother an' all,

when she was young

It used to be all that

The first Friday

You had to go to mass

Now ...

you don't have to go!

hands

Hands, knees,
And bumpsa daisy
CRAZY!

*Bare hand – I don't know to the
Truth, nothing on hands.*

Do the messages, carry the messages,

Messages bread/meat

Thomas Street, like Moore Street sells fruit,

Dealers will be out selling cabbages and potatoes,

Buy a quarter or a half stone,

Stones.

Little pram to carry.

Mother's pram.

Was a baby in pram.

Present of a pram.

**A ring on my hand,
and I think its great.**

My hand washed for years

For ten people,

My hand was very busy for years

Rearing my children.

My brother lived with us

I hand washed for him as well,

I got married he left

He was an alcoholic

And he killed himself,

I met him at a tram stop

I fell in love with him ...

**Hard working hands
never stopped,
felt I never stopped.**



seeing it from here

Going my own way that's all,
Yes well seeing it from here
I don't know any more.
Mostly I did things my way.
I didn't let anyone,
Only the way I wanted.
Like going to America
Two friends in New York,
Nancy and Maura.
Not there now
Over 20 years ago.

the helper

During a session Mary begins to wipe the table as Kate looks on.

Facilitator Who's that woman cleaning the table?

Kate That's the helper.

Facilitator Are you the woman of the house?

Kate Yeah I'm the woman of the house, the mother who gives the orders.

Facilitator How come you have a helper?

Kate Well I'm a bit rich.

Mary Can't afford a maid!

Kate She's just a helper, gets two fifty an hour.

Facilitator She giving you two fifty an hour for the cleaning.

Mary Good ... Good!

Mary carries on cleaning in silence.

hairstressing tips

This is what you should
Just a little bit every night
You see the bottom goes off fine
But the top just grows.
Just get your hair that way
Just cut that much off it
You know the way your hairs all stickin' out
It's great for your hair
Don't cut it all together like
Only cut little picks
And then there's (thinking)
Don't cut it real short now!
Only a little bit
(shows me miming cutting behind her ears)
like that
little weeney piece
the rest!
Then stop after a few weeks
Let it grow.

blue eyes

look
nice naive Polish,
I like my nail Polish +
Red color, Red is my
colour is it. always
all sort color.
my Lipsticks.
hand + red, as
Red? MARK
as always ways.
always?
Blue eyes.

the toy

The group has picked an object, a small toy stuffed cat. They decide it belongs to a five-year-old girl called Tilly. This session came after a good number of weeks working with the group at which time they had played characters and fictional stories. What is interesting here is that they decide to do it without any prompting. In particular, the group member who instigated this had, in earlier sessions, been extremely resistant to work with the imagination as she had been repeatedly told as a child not to daydream.

Facilitator Who gave Tilly the toy?

Anne I'd say her nanny, she had it herself and she gave it to her.

Nelly Because it's special.

Anne Not only because it's special, but the little girl looks for things like it. I'm the little girl.

Facilitator Have you been looking at this long?

Anne Hoping I'd be given it, but Nanna kept on to it.

Facilitator Who's Nanna?

Nelly I'll be nanny. Give it to her!
Put it in the case and hold it there for another 30 years.

Eileen She's your mother, and she should be left to it, 'cause she's going to look after it, and she's going to wash it and clean it and everything else.

Nelly The two of you could play with it together – might make you closer.

Anne Pink to make the boys wink (*looking at the ribbon on the toy's neck*).

Facilitator Who taught you that?

Anne I don't remember.

Facilitator Was it your mammy?

Anne Could have been my mammy but I don't think in those days the mummies were looking after little things like that.

Facilitator Was it your nanny?

Anne I don't remember a nanny.

Nelly I'm your nanny.
You don't remember me?
My God! (*laughs*)



glasgow

I was born in Scotland,
Glasgow,
We were living there,
My father was in the army.
It was a lovely big building ...
Somewhere!
You know ...
like you get out here, you know.
But things now were very cheap in it,
And I was born and all in it,
So it should've been cheap (*laughs*).

***My mother
was wonderful
But she lost
all the good looks ...***

(This writing began by being dictated to a facilitator until the group member insisted on taking the pen and writing the last sentence)

Wash that floor
Clean the table off
And polish the brasses off
Polish your glasses
Polish the furniture
Right now go upstairs and make the beds
And after you do that
Go in and clean the toilet
Wash the curtains, they're very dusty
Have you got enough time?
Hurry up,
I want to go down and polish off
A pint!

she's beautiful

Eileen has been sitting in silence for most of a 20 minute session, reaches out and touching a small teddy bear on the table and says

She's beautiful ... she's gorgeous.

They'll laugh at me now when I say this, but,

When Billy seen it first

He was terrible taken up with it.

And I think that he's afraid that

They might do something to him,

That'd be hard on him.

And I think that's why he gave it up.

But I don't know ...

It's beautiful!

I know if I had her,

I wouldn't leave the house.



shirley temple

I used to love

Shirley Temple

And Deanna Durban

Deanna

D — E — A — N — N — A

My favourite was

Nelson Eddy

apple pie

During this session the group prepared an apple pie, peeling and cutting apples and rolling pastry throughout. In addition to this they created fictional characters of three sisters Josie, Lily and Eta and their friend May.

Lily

Do you want to peel them?
Do you want to or cut them in rounds,
and I'll try to keep peeling them?

May

Will I do that for ya? I'd be afraid of you cuttin' your hands.

Lily

Do you know when you get a few together, they'll pile up on you and you'd nearly have one or two ready to put in, you know.

Josie

Yeah, you want to mix the flour first,
the flour needs to be mixed in the bowl.

Lily Oh that's the flour bowl?

Josie Yeah.

Lily *(starting to roll the pastry)*
But you can do the bottom and then the top,
and one goes over that again.

Josie We mix it up first.

Lily Ah yeah, my mother always taught us, now that's going back along time ago, she'd make it and keep us a bit for school so we'd go to school, you know.

Eta How can I roll the pastry with my gear on me?

Lily Get a plate, it will save markin' the table with the knife.
Have you got a knife not to chop the table?

Josie A little bit at a time, not a big bit.
(Josie shows Eta how to roll the pastry)

Eta She's doing fine?

Facilitator Do you think she's done this before?

Ita No I wouldn't say so.

Lily You don't like them too thick.
You don't like them too thick, sure you don't?
I do them that way because they do quicker.
(Ita is peeling an apple and May takes it off her)

Ita She's after taking it!

Facilitator Who is she, what would you say to her?

Ita I'd tell her to buzz off

Facilitator She's not taking any notice of you, is she stubborn?

Ita *(softly)* I'd say she's more industrious.

Josie What's she doing?

Ita She's taking all the things.

Josie I'll get her afterwards.

May You'll get me afterwards over what?
I'd flatten you in about two minutes.

Ita Oh my goodness gracious.

May I would you know.
(May sits down, Ita goes back to peeling the apple and Josie watches.)

Ita You'd do better with a small knife, this is not much good.

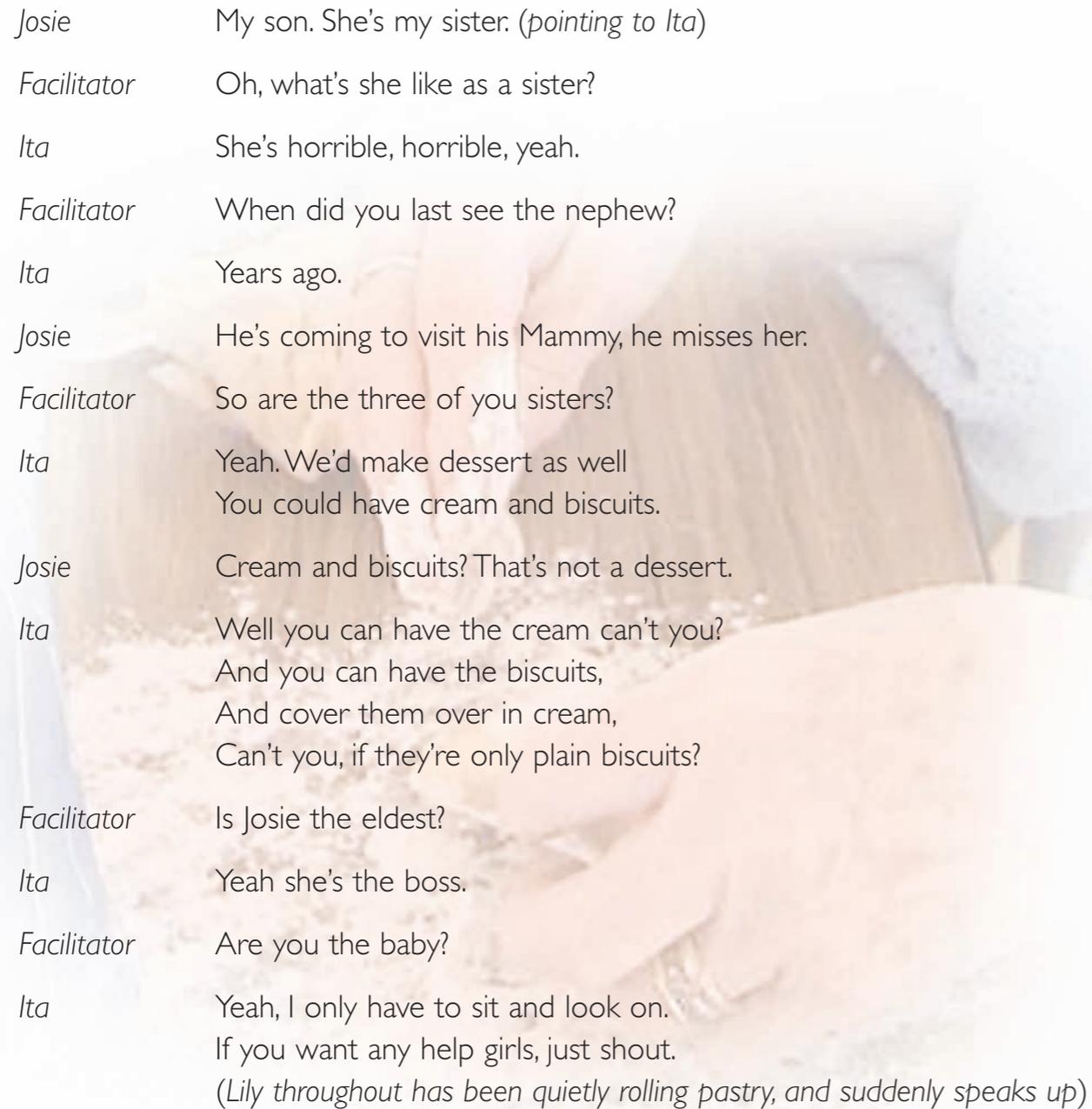
Josie She's pickin' half the apple off.

Ita Well what could you do if you haven't got a knife.

Josie Jeez, half the apple is after coming out.

Ita This is all I can do, you know, it's very hard.

Facilitator Who are you making it for?



Josie My son. She's my sister. *(pointing to Ita)*

Facilitator Oh, what's she like as a sister?

Ita She's horrible, horrible, yeah.

Facilitator When did you last see the nephew?

Ita Years ago.

Josie He's coming to visit his Mammy, he misses her.

Facilitator So are the three of you sisters?

Ita Yeah. We'd make dessert as well
You could have cream and biscuits.

Josie Cream and biscuits? That's not a dessert.

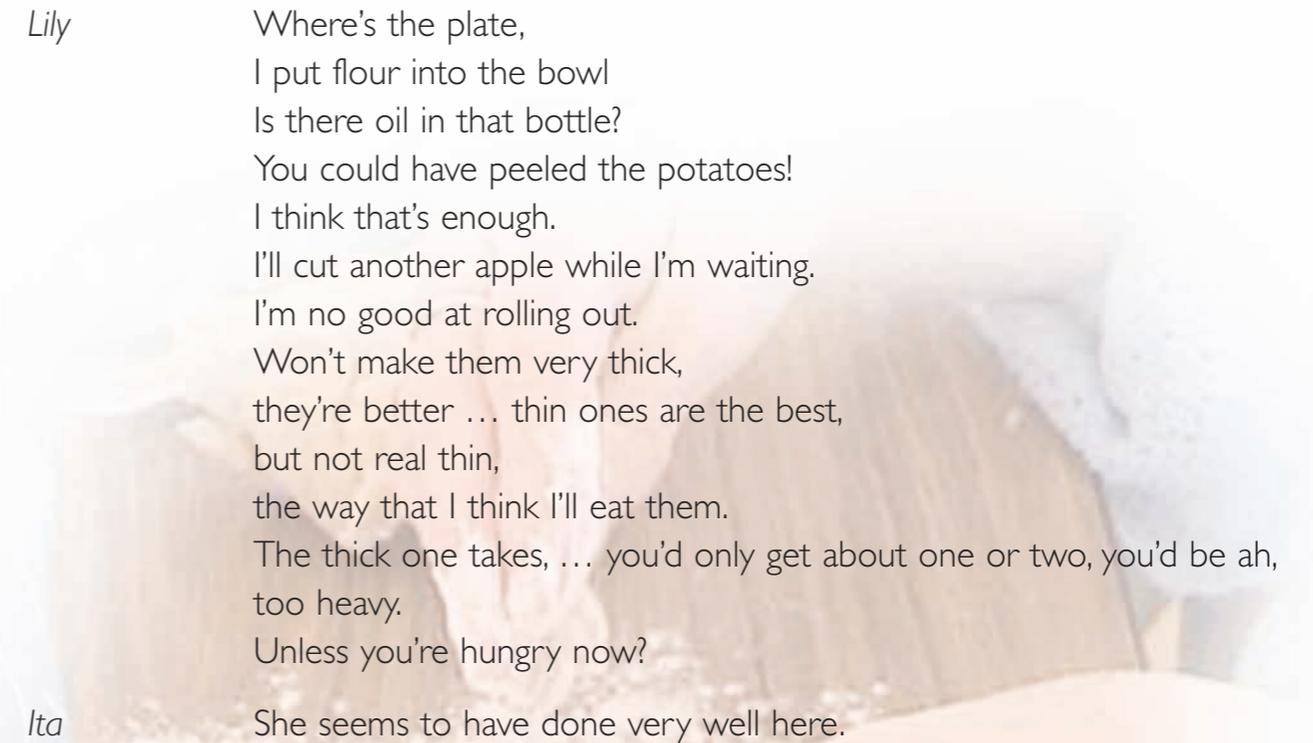
Ita Well you can have the cream can't you?
And you can have the biscuits,
And cover them over in cream,
Can't you, if they're only plain biscuits?

Facilitator Is Josie the eldest?

Ita Yeah she's the boss.

Facilitator Are you the baby?

Ita Yeah, I only have to sit and look on.
If you want any help girls, just shout.
(Lily throughout has been quietly rolling pastry, and suddenly speaks up)



Lily Where's the plate,
I put flour into the bowl
Is there oil in that bottle?
You could have peeled the potatoes!
I think that's enough.
I'll cut another apple while I'm waiting.
I'm no good at rolling out.
Won't make them very thick,
they're better ... thin ones are the best,
but not real thin,
the way that I think I'll eat them.
The thick one takes, ... you'd only get about one or two, you'd be ah,
too heavy.
Unless you're hungry now?

Ita She seems to have done very well here.

coddle

Meat ...

Potatoes ...

Rashers ...

Sausage ...

Onions

The kids love it!

Hands that do dishes

Can feel soft as your face

Mild blue Lux

I bought a pair of socks

For my granddaughter!

gentlemen callers

Lovely things

And gentlemen callers

And look at the hair

And look at the coat that's on him

Oh,

He's a very expensive man

Rich and famous

Rich and famous

She's lovely,

sweet and gentle she is

She's my friend.



the dance

“Excuse me could I have this dance?”

“Come on let’s glide.”

“Then you’d say, jigger off Marky!”

what else

A few cats ...

Doesn't matter, it's only a joke.

What else after that?

How much do I give?

What you give.

what I'm putting in, is it?

... a fiver.



the wedding photo

My husband and his brothers
And the father and me brothers.
And me sister done bridesmaid for me ...
It was a good day, it wasn't raining anyway ...
I remember that ...
Cause I was in a white dress.
A white dress with ...
With a two-month baby on me stomach.

*I often wish I had it because,
Me Daddy and me brothers were in it.
I was young
I was 21 you know.*

**Bride and groom, both mothers and fathers
And other relations
I had my own friend,
My girlfriend that we used to go around together.
Her name was Nelly, we went to school together
She's not around now
Ah it was great.
I lived in Rialto
And she lived
In a place opposite Rialto
Her name was Nelly.**



**Me and me sister got a bouffant hairstyle, you know.
So we sat up all night to keep the hair in
It was, a big bouffant, it went up.
They back-combed it.
We were afraid to go to sleep that night!**

my story

We had a bit of fun, but it ended up alright.

You see in that time some people do have little difficulties and end up fighting and arguing and this and that ... the drink.

And when they go outside they're nearly eatin' one another:

"What do you know Mary, and what do you know Kathleen and what do you ... go tell anything"

That's all you get for some places, and for other places it's different. But still and all we got on.

And he's dead and buried now and *(pause)* I buried two babies ... yeah. I had two, yeah, one after the other. I don't know what was wrong with them, but the doctor said they were in bad health.

The two of them died and he died as well.

And now!

He's dead along time now, because I never bothered gettin' married again. I wouldn't ...

I would not get married again, not for all the sins of the world I wouldn't get married again.

You're going around and you have a little free life with ya. I mean your worrying if the kids are somewhere else. Well I wouldn't have that anymore, 'cause I got too much of it.

Then if I didn't stay in and mind the kids me mother gave out to me.

She'd mind them some nights and then once the humour was on, she'd mind them another night.

Same ... It's all one *(pause)*

When my fella died he was in bad health.

They're all married now their-selves, the whole lot of them.

One boy and I'd three girls, four girls one little one died and then I had the other girl but she was deaf and dumb. *(pause)* I had to give her away, but she's still alive.

I was nearly on the way for her, you know, and whatever happened to me I fell, I don't know whether I fell or slipped or something but whatever happened it happened to her.

But the doctor said
"she'd be alright" she said
"but she'll be very, she be, she be ... wouldn't be right walking".

That means that she'd be a cripple, yeah and she's still away in the home, she's out in ... she's deaf and dumb.

This leg she can't use, but this one is not very good either.

And sometimes they do have to wheel her around in a little car. But sometimes she's alright and this arm is the same she can only just put it up and then put the hand down again, but when you go out to her she does be all excited to see somebody, and when she sees her brother and all, she runs, tries to, dragging the leg after her to go over to him.

Oh there's lovely girls out there, all lovely girls, you'd be surprised.



Different plants,
you know

A lot of roses,
you know

There'd be a lot of green fly on them,
you know

He ... had a spray,
you know.

ROSES

way, way round

He says, oh, oh, oh
You have to go to me mother
I think he was trying to put on with me (*smiles*)
I never thought of it.
Because anyone,
A fella,
A young lad would.
I don't know ...
Long way, way, round!
Yeah, but I didn't notice this man calling
But he had his dinner ...
I didn't know where to get any, unfortunately
And now Passy (*waves finger and lowers voice in a drawl*)
"Come in any time, come in any time"



the salesman

- Josie* Knives and fork and things, and packets of custard and jellies.
He had everything.
- Maura* No he'd have little stockings and little trousers and that, for the kids.
- Mag* Yeah and little knickers and that ...
- Maura* Or little frocks, anything like that; little things what they get, you know.
- Josie* (*miming picking out a dress*) Here's a pink one.
How much is it? Two and eleven?
- Maura* Oh, I'd say more than that.
- Josie* How will I fit it on the baby? She's very fat.
- Facilitator* Is a bigger one more expensive?
- Maura* No, it'll be just a, a just bit more, three and eleven.

Facilitator The price is going up.

Maura It's not going down!

Josie You're fierce dear!

Maura But the shops are dearer.

Josie I'll take that one, it'll do for Christmas.

Facilitator Who is it for?

Josie It's for Brid. She's five.
She's my daughter.

Facilitator What colour is the dress again?

Josie Pink, oh and I'll get that flower for in her hair, with the pink dress and yellow flower *(laughs)* Oh, stockings, two pairs – One for Christmas and one for Stephen's day.

Maura That all?

Josie That's all. That's four ... three and eleven,
Four and eleven, five and eleven I owe you.

Maura You're very good! It's nothing very much,
but I'll take it from you just the same.

Mag *(looks in the case and sees it is empty)* Men's socks. Mens socks!
Where are the socks? Jesus, Mary and Joseph there's nothing in there.
Are they ladies, gentlemens or childrens?

Maura Half was gentle, and the other half was childrens, but you can pick them out! You know, let on to pick them out, and then we'll all be satisfied. *(laughing)*

Mag What the hell are you laughin' at? *(laughs too)*

Maura I'm only asking you to let on to pick out the stockin'
And if you take them ...

Mag As long as you don't pick your nose by mistake.
(all laugh)

Maura How much would ya say they'd be?

Josie One and eleven.

Mag That's not bad. This lady gone into business now has she?

Josie Yeah, buy a pair for your husband, your sons.
How many sons do you have?

Mag Emm ... *(long pause)*

Maura She can't think.

Mag Liam ... Pdraig and Conor.

Josie You'll need three pairs anyway!



my way

*My way is your way,
I'm no good for writing anything like that
I think that's all ...
Now and again I get going out
I go out for a while but then
I have to go back again,
Because the kids were always fighting
With one another and
I had to get back to the kids
That's all I have!*

this evening

*I felt very good here this evening.
I was looking and laughing at everything I saw.
I should have been gone home.
I'd like to have a go ...
Quickly,
My Mother is very sick this evening.*

sunny days

I'd like to go out
in the sun and sit there
I'd like to get something to drink
while I'm out there
Doesn't look as if I'll be able to,
Because I don't think
The weather will last that long.

two children

Are you waiting on your pal to come? Is she?
If it had have been another night now I would have, but I'm up to this ...
And her two kids. They drowned themselves.
They jumped into the water ... they didn't know.
They're buried like, they had to be buried then.
They got them like, they got them out of the water,
But they died.
They're about six or seven ... they mightn't be seven.
They're only about that height, they're lovely kids.
I'm upset over this.
I couldn't even go to the funeral.
I'll see you all and tell you all after.
Like there's nothing more to be told.
two children
One for me, and one for you
I don't want her to ...
Slide away on me
Say a prayer



**What else to finish it off ...
I'm very fond of you
Cause I like to talk to you.
Today's the 30th
the 1st October.
I don't like the wet ones
The rainy days
I love the fine weather.**



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