

'Mark told me not to come to

Anniversary heartache: Hermione Duffy, wife of Rescue 116 Coast Guard Captain Mark Duffy, has recalled the tragic events of this day in 2017.
PHOTO: DAVID CONACHY



∴ Helicopter pilot Mark Duffy's wife reveals she had to 'resist the urge to get to him' after tragic crash on this day three years ago, writes **Catherine Fegan**



IT'S a conversation Hermione Duffy recalls with devastating clarity. She was lying awake in bed one night, talking to her husband about his job. More specifically, they were talking about what would happen if he went to work one day and never came back.

Mark, a search and rescue pilot with the Irish Coast Guard, had strict instructions about what she should do if he was ever in an accident during a mission.

"Do not come to the crash scene," he told her. "Don't come and don't take the kids. I don't want you to see that. You are to stay at home and I will come home to you."

Less than three months later, in what became one of the gravest trag-

edies in the history of the Irish Coast Guard, the helicopter Mark was flying in disappeared from radar on an approach to Blacksod, Co Mayo.

When the news first reached Hermione in the early hours of March 14, 2017, finding the strength to follow through on Mark's wishes was more overwhelming than she had ever imagined.

"I had to resist the urge to go to Blacksod," she recalled this week.

"It was an overwhelming urge because I wanted to get to him, wherever he might be. But I had to do what Mark wanted. I had to stay here and look after our children and wait for him to come home and that's what I did."

Today marks the three-year anniversary of the Rescue 116 disaster.

The bodies of Captain Mark Duffy and Captain Dara Fitzpatrick were recovered in the days following the tragedy. The remains of their colleagues, winch operator Paul Ormsby and winch man Ciarán Smith, remain lost at sea.

This week inside the Duffy family home, in Blackrock, Co Louth, the loss felt in the aftermath of that fatal mission is still palpable. Alongside his beloved wife, Hermione, who became a widow at 43, Mark left behind his daughter Esmé and son Fionn, who were 14 and 12 at the time of his death.

"Mark adored us and we adored him," said Hermione.

"We miss him every day and living without him is extremely tough, but we are incredibly proud of what he

did. We are so proud of the person he was and the lives he saved. He rescued people and saved people and when he couldn't rescue people he brought them back to the people who loved them most."

It was around 5.30am when the knock came to the door on that morning three years ago. It was the knock every SAR pilot strives to avoid. For the Duffy family, it was the knock that shattered their life of family idyll to pieces.

As well as informing Hermione of his wishes in the event of an accident, Mark and his colleagues had a policy of nominating three individuals to be a point of contact for loved ones in the event of an accident at work.

"It had to be three in case two were in the helicopter," said Hermione.

When she opened the door that morning, one of the men Mark had nominated, rear-crew paramedic Derek, was standing alongside two of Mark's friends.

"I said, 'what's going on?' and Derek just said, 'the helicopter is missing, and we can't find Mark,'" said Hermione. "I said no...no no no this can't be happening. It's a calm night. There is

no wind. And there was no wind and rain. There was nothing."

As the wife of a seasoned pilot, Hermione, in her own right, had amassed a wealth of knowledge on flying over the years. She knew the language, the systems, the procedures. Much to the amusement of his colleagues, Mark often did 'checklists' with his wife.

"We called it the checklist game," said Hermione. "I would go through all the checklists and ask him all the questions about the helicopter, the operations, systems, the rules, everything."

Hope

When the unthinkable happened and there seemed to be no obvious explanation for the helicopter disappearing, Hermione held on to the hope that Mark was still alive.

"My instinct was, 'Mark's OK. He's going to get out of that cockpit and get to the surface and he is going to be floating'. That was not to be the case," she added.

From that point on, the people around her helped Hermione through an unimaginable turn of events.

crash site if worst happened'



"It just snowballed from there," she said. "I was in my nightgown and nightie and Derek said, 'Hermione you need to get dressed. You are up now. You need to put the heat on'."

"I went into the kids and said: 'daddy's helicopter is missing'. That's all I said."

It would take 12 days before Mark's body could be recovered from the helicopter wreckage at a depth of 40 metres on the eastern side of Blackrock by Naval Service divers. A combination of weather and the constant swell around Blackrock, directly on the path of the Atlantic fetch, hampered diving efforts.

"The operation to retrieve Mark was torturous for the rescuers," said Hermione. "I did draw huge comfort from getting a body. But if he had been lost at sea, I would have accepted it because we had talked about that too. Mark had said to me, 'Hermione, if I'm lost at sea, I'm lost at sea. And I'm OK with that'. And I said, 'I'm OK with that too'. Mark's feeling was that when you are gone you are gone."

Mark had always wanted to fly a helicopter. From the age of three,



'He adored us and we adored him': Mark Duffy with his daughter Esmé and son Fionn, who were 14 and 12 at the time of his death

Christmas and birthday gifts involved model aircraft of some description. At his grandparents' home in Newry, he often spent hours marvelling at the British helicopters coming into land in nearby Bessbrook.

In later years, Aer Lingus turned down his application for fixed-wing training as he didn't have honours Irish, and he was driving plant machinery when he decided to borrow money from his mother and the local credit union for private flying lessons with Westair Aviation. After he secured his private pilot's licence,

he spent time in California, and then flew a Bell 206 Jet Ranger for businessman Declan Ganley.

In 2001, he landed his dream job as an Irish Coast Guard pilot for CHC Ireland at its Dublin base.

"He loved what he did," said Hermione. "In the beginning I was anxious, but he had such trust in himself. He was so confident, but not in an arrogant way. If Mark said he would do something he could do it."

"I trusted him to do the job well and I knew he would be the very, very best and he was. I remember when the

kids came along and I would wake up at night and think, 'Oh God it's dark, what if he's out there now and it's windy?' And then he would come home the next day."

As a couple, Mark and Hermione shared in one of life's great love stories. He was the dashing pilot with a gentle manner. She was the beguiling beauty with a mischievous laugh. Both from Dundalk, Co Louth, they met when Hermione was in her late teens. "I couldn't believe he picked me," she recalled.

They got married in 2000. Esmé was born in 2002 and Fionn in 2004. Life was exciting. Mark's roster patterns meant he often worked for three days and had three days off. They went on excursions as a family – hiking, canoeing, cycling. There were picnics on the beach and holidays in France.

Much of his search and rescue work was in the Wicklow mountains and the Irish Sea, and weekly training drills over the family home in Co Louth became a common occurrence.

"He loved doing that," recalled Hermione. "I could be out in the garden, where I could hear the drone of the

helicopter maybe 5km away and then he would fly by. I would get a wee wave and he would head off to the Cooleys. Mark would fly over at least once a week, maybe twice. Everyone in the village would know, 'Oh there's Mark saying a wee hi to Hermione'. People here miss it, the helicopter overhead. I miss it."

Their home is filled with pictures. Mark and Hermione on their wedding day. Mark and the kids snuggling up in bed. Mark standing next to a Sikorsky S61 in full uniform.

"He saw a lot of death in his job," said Hermione. "Particularly during the recession, when there were a lot of suicides. That's when death was in our home, that's when we started those conversations."

"I remember saying to him, 'Mark, if anything happens to me you are not to bring Raquel Welch into this house', and he laughed."

"He said, 'No Hermione, there is only one person for me and that is you. I will never fall in love again but if anything happens to me...you are not to be on your own.'"

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'I would've loved to have held his hand, just one last time... to squeeze it tight'

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"I said, 'Mark if anything happens, I can't do this without you. I can't look after Esmé and Fionn without you' and he said, 'You can Hermione. You're very strong and yes you will do it,'" she added.

After making the long journey back from Co Mayo, Mark was waked in the family home in Blackrock, where hundreds came to pay their respects.

"It was a closed coffin and I never got to see him," said Hermione.

"He had been under the water for days and it was the right thing to do. I know that I would have loved to have held his hand, just one last time. I would have love to have squeezed it tight."

While the equipment and clothes he was wearing are still evidence as part of an ongoing investigation into the accident, other personal effects, including a miraculous medal he wore around his neck and a pilot's watch gifted to him by Hermione, were returned to his family. Most poignantly, a wallet he was carrying has pictures of the kids and Hermione. Shingle and sand from the beach

were still inside it when Hermione took them out.

"I would have loved a piece of his clothing," she said. "Just something that had been close to his skin."

There is a poignant symmetry in Mark's short, but jam-packed life. His father Jimmy died when he was 13, leaving his mother Sheila to raise three young boys without him. The two women now share a common grief. For Hermione, the "grief lone-

'When I go to Blacksod, I see them up there and I get comfort from that'

liness" of her husband's absence has become part of who she now is.

"I am lonely for Mark," she said. "I am completely lonely for him. I miss him every single day. I would like to be able to go out for a drink with him on Friday evening and come home and watch TV. I would like to be able to go to dinner with him. Sunday lunches were something we always did and I just miss all of that.

"But I am not lonely in my life. I have Esmé and Fionn and I have my family and all my friends. The grief loneliness for Mark is very different."

Yesterday, Hermione made the solitary journey to Blacksod, a place that, like a magnet, draws her time and time again.

She collected stones from the beach, like she does on every visit, to bring home. The stones from Blacksod are dotted all around the Duffy family home. Reminders of Mark. Symbols of loss. Markers of hope.

"There are stones from Blacksod all over the garden," she said.

"I think that the waves that are washing over them have washed over the crew. There is just something about that place. The wind could be howling around you, but you are out in the countryside and there is just something meditative about it.

"I feel a strong connection to it because I feel that's where Mark is. He is there with Ciarán and Paul and Dara. That's where they last flew.

"Nearly every time I go there, I can see the helicopter in the sky.

"I see them up there and I get comfort from that."



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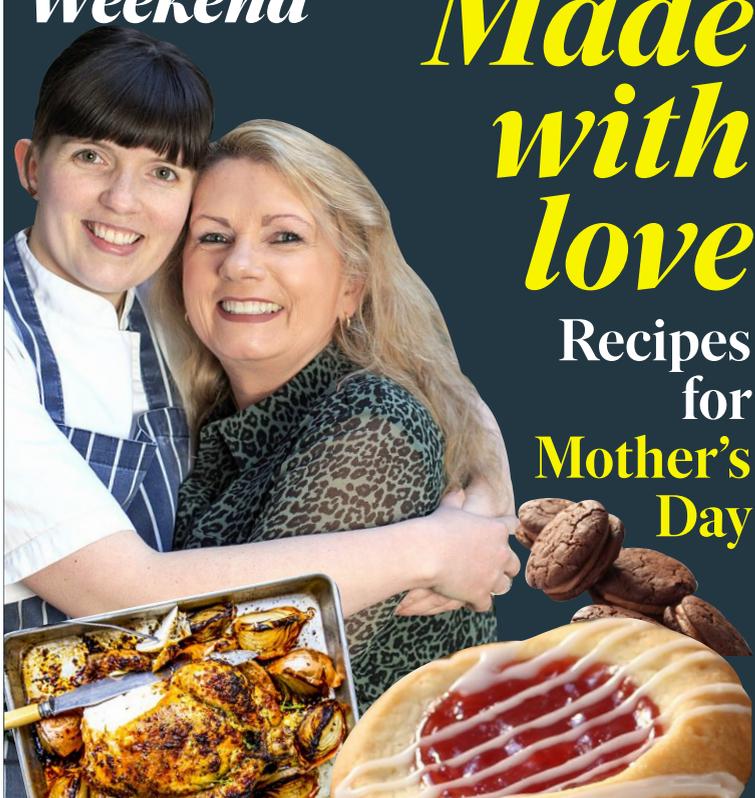
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'The cruellest goodbye: how virus took our mum'

Catherine Fegan



Daughter says mother was 'alone' during final days

A GRIEVING daughter has laid bare the harrowing loneliness and isolation her mother experienced in the days before her death.

Eileen O'Neill (88) died this week at St Vincent's Hospital in Dublin after testing positive for Covid-19.

In a heartbreaking interview with the *Irish Independent*, her daughter Siobhán spoke of the desperate toll on her family, and her mother's lonely final days.

"Mum had told me she was afraid of getting it," she said.

"For her to get it and then be put in isolation was extremely frightening for her. I know she was scared. I know that.

"That's the reality of this virus. You can't be with someone you love when they need you. All the normal things you do when someone is sick and approaching the end, like mopping their brow, holding their hand, whispering into their ear. You can't do any of that and that person is completely alone."

Even as the family grieves, "my friends can't come and pay their respects.

"We can't come together and mourn. People need to understand the devastating domino effect of this virus and all that it brings to your door."

Siobhán spoke out as it emerged the average waiting time for tests in Ireland is now five days. There are 683 confirmed cases in the country.



Lonely death: Eileen O'Neill, who spent her final frightening days in isolation

Full interview, Pages 4-5

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'You cannot hold their hand or mop their brow – they are totally alone'

Siobhán Cullen tells of the desperate emotional toll of watching her mother die in isolation after contracting Covid-19, writes **Catherine Fegan**



EILEEN O'Neill knew death was approaching. She had been in isolation since last Friday, shunted away from the people she loved and desperately frightened by everything she could see around her.

Faceless figures in biohazard suits, double-gloved hands checking her pulse, knowing glances behind medical-grade goggles.

She was lucid and conscious, right up to the very end, in the solitary company of a virus she had feared would come for her long before it did.

"Mum had told me she was afraid of getting it," her daughter Siobhán said.

"For her to get it and then be put in isolation was extremely frightening for her. I know she was scared. I know that. That's the reality of this virus. You can't be with someone you love when they need you. All the normal things you do when someone is sick and approaching the end, like mopping their brow, holding their hand, whispering into their ear, you can't do any of that and that person is completely alone."

Less than a week ago, 88-year-old Eileen, a glamorous, independent woman who had overcome numerous health battles, entered an isolation ward in St Vincent's hospital, Dublin.

She had fallen ill at home in Loughlinstown and paramedics recorded a high temperature. She was immediately tested for Covid-19.

Eileen was put in an isolation ward and her family were not allowed to visit. Her test result on Sunday was positive.

"When I got the call from the hospital I knew straight away that was it," said Siobhán. "I knew it would take more than a miracle to pull her through this. I asked (the staff) had she been told and they initially said no. I was relieved to hear that because she herself was so frightened of Covid and I knew it would have a negative effect on her. And then there was the fact we couldn't be with her, I knew that would compound things."

From that point on, Eileen O'Neill's end-of-life journey took a path her heart-broken loved ones had to send



Lonely end: Eileen O'Neill, who died of Covid-19 on Wednesday afternoon. Right: Eileen with husband Michael and daughter Siobhán on Siobhán's wedding day. Eileen is wearing the blue outfit she had wanted to be buried in

her on alone. The protocols were clear. Under no circumstances could any family members go to see her. Instead, communication would be done by phone. Two years away from turning 90, Eileen was still working off an "old brick mobile". There would be no Facetime, no picture exchanges.

"It was extremely difficult," said Siobhán. "But we knew how serious the virus was and that we had to abide by the rules."

For Siobhán Cullen and her family, the news that Eileen had become infected with the deadly virus came as a shock. Due to her underlying respiratory issues, all the necessary precautions had been taken to ensure she was protected long before any cases were recorded here.

"She was completely immobile due to a previous stroke," said Siobhán.

"The past two weeks she gave no indication that there was anything wrong with her, apart from being tired. We were all very, very cautious around her. She hadn't been out of the house since February and she had only seen five people, all of whom had been taking precautions. Her two carers have tested negative for the virus and the other three people, including me, were all family."

Alone, frightened and unaware of the growing pandemic claiming lives across the world, Eileen counted the hours in silence.

"She was alone," said Siobhán. "I know she was getting the best care, but I also know there was no one sitting beside her. I know she was looking at all those people coming and going, suited and booted, and she would have known why. That's heart-breaking for me to think about."

Last weekend, as the nation got to grips with a sweeping set of measures, Siobhán remained at home, powerless. She was now in self-isolation, following the advice of her GP, waiting to be tested. Updates on her mother's condition were regular, but she knew there was an increasing climate of caution. She began to

'Nothing prepares you for what you have to do to see a loved one dying from this'

make plans for the possibility that her mother might not survive.

"I asked the staff at St Vincent's Hospital if we would be allowed to get in to see her if it came to the end," she said. "Through no fault of anyone, the protocols on this are changing on the hour. One lady I spoke to said yes, arrangements would be made... and the next time when [Eileen] was moved I was told there were no guarantees. That was hard for me to hear." By Tuesday, Eileen had been moved



closer to a nurses' station where she could be monitored more closely. The following day, Siobhán got a call, asking her to come to see her mother.

"I knew it was time. Nothing prepares you for what you have to do to see a loved one dying from this."

In an isolated area behind a reception desk, Siobhán and her brother Kenneth took instruction from two nurses and a doctor on how to robe up for entry into the isolation unit: covers over their shoes; a full-length gown with full sleeves; two pairs of gloves, one placed over the other. Each step of the way, washing their hands.

That was just the start. "There is a beanie-type hat for your head that you tie at the back," recalled Siobhán. "You have a facemask but it's not the normal facemask that you tie at the back. It's much tougher and it completely seals your mouth and nose. It expands as you breathe."

"You have a pair of goggles and then over the goggles you put on a full facial visor. They have hand gel there and at every step you are washing your hands as well. My mum was totally conscious when we walked in like that."

As they were guided along a corridor, Siobhán and Kenneth were told that once they were with their mother, they could not touch her face, but were permitted to hold her hand. "I was very conscious that if we

didn't abide by that we wouldn't be let in.

"That was my big fear because the protocols were changing daily. I was just so happy to get to see her that I didn't want to put a foot wrong."

"My brother couldn't stay. He just couldn't do it. We had to tell her who we were, but that wasn't because she wasn't conscious or didn't recognise us, it was because everyone looked the same."

Faced with a situation that was growing ever more beyond her control, Siobhán decided not to tell her mother that she was nearing the end of her life.

"I just didn't want to frighten her," she said.

"I didn't want her to know why I was there, and when she asked I just said that I got fed up not being able to hold her hand. The doctor played along. I think that deep down my mum knew why I was there. I know in my heart that she knew the truth, but she went with it."

As day turned to night, Siobhán kept vigil at her mother's bedside, listening as she struggled to breathe, but clung to life. Anything that went into the room could not go out, so she had no mobile phone and was unable to communicate with family.

"I stayed all night," she said. "I was there, in all that gear, holding her hand. I talked to her all night long, about my dad, about when we



were young, about her grandkids. I talked and talked and talked. I told her daddy was waiting for her. I said rosaries out loud, rosaries in my head. "She kept telling me to go home. Her breathing was very poor and deteriorating. She was literally fighting for a breath. At one stage she said to me, 'Do you think I'll pull through this?' I said, 'I don't think so, Mam.'"

It was a lonely night, recalled Siobhán. She had kept vigil before beside people who had died and the reassuring visit of a nurse on those occasions, in and out in a show of support, had always been a comfort. Covid-19 denied her any such humanity.

"I was so aware that no one could come in," said Siobhán. "You don't have the staff coming in and out to check on you or comfort you. Nobody was coming in unless they absolutely had to. It was so cold and clinical."

Eileen passed away shortly after 3pm on Wednesday. She struggled until the very end.

"She had a horrendous death," said Siobhán. "When she died, I sat with her for an hour, holding her hand and then I had to be pragmatic about what would happen next. I knew there was a chance we wouldn't get her personal belongings back so I had to remove all her jewellery and take it there and then. It sounds so mercenary but that's what I had to do."

The most difficult conversations came next. Siobhán was told that

her mother's body would be "double bagged" in a high-spec body bag. Eileen would not be taken to the chapel of rest, but instead to a specially designated area in the morgue.

"The staff there had to leave. The people who met us had to be gowned. We couldn't touch her, and we got 10 minutes with her. I want people to understand how devastating that was."

This week, as she self-isolated, Siobhán prepared for her mother's burial in circumstances that are hard to believe.

Consultations with the undertaker have had to be done via video-link.

She asked me: 'Do you think I'll pull through this?' I said: 'I don't think so, Mam.'

Mourners have not been able to call to her home. Grief is being held in suspension while Covid-19 tightens its grip over a family in a very surreal time of despair.

"Death is very much a part of life," said Siobhán. "Here in Ireland, we commemorate the dead so well. For us, trapped at home at the mercy of this virus, there are no arms to fold into for a hug. My friends can't come and pay their respects. We can't come together and mourn. People need to

understand the devastating domino effect of this virus and all that it brings to your door."

Struck down by coronavirus at the age of 88, the long life of Eileen O'Neill will today end with a short ceremony at a funeral parlour in Dublin.

It will not be the ending she wanted. Her funeral wishes, expressed long ago to her nearest and dearest, included carefully selected hymns and readings. She had picked out the flowers, the gifts, the pall-bearers. She wanted to be dressed in the navy outfit she wore to Siobhán's wedding.

None of that will be possible. Today, in a small funeral home in Dublin, four people will gather to say their farewells. Communion will be passed around on tissue paper. There will be no burial Mass.

"This virus is vicious, and it leaves people to die an extremely lonely death. My mother will be buried with just four of us present. Her coffin will have to be disinfected after we leave her and none of us can grieve with our wider family and friends because we have to self-isolate until we are tested.

"This is the cruellest end to a life."

In memory of Eileen, Siobhán is asking readers to consider donating to Feed The Heroes at www.feedtheheroes.com

WORLD

Death toll in Italy soars by 627 in one day – as UK finally shuts pubs, cafés and schools

Crispian Balmer
ROME

THE coronavirus death toll in Italy has leapt by 627 to 4,032, an increase of 18.4pc – by far the largest daily rise since the contagion emerged a month ago.

Italy had already overtaken China as the country to register most deaths from the highly contagious respiratory disease.

The total number of cases there rose to 47,021 from 41,035, a rise of 14.6pc, the Civil Protection Agency said.

In its most complete analysis of the outbreak yet published, the national health institute (ISS) said the average age of those who died was 78.5 years, with the youngest victim aged 31 and the oldest 103. The median age was 80.

Some 41pc of all those who died were aged between 80-89, with the 70-79 age group accounting for a further 35pc.

The ISS report, based on a survey of 3,200 of the dead, said men accounted for 70.6pc of the deaths and women 29pc. The median age for the women who died was 82, and 79 for men.

Pathologies

By comparison, the median age of those who tested positive for the illness was 63.

A deeper analysis of 481 of the deceased showed that almost 99pc of them were suffering from one or more medical condition before catching the virus. Some 48.6pc had three or more previous pathologies.

A total 73.8pc had high blood pressure, 34pc had diabetes and 30.1pc had heart disease.

In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson last night announced a UK-wide shut down of pubs, cafés, gyms and restaurants.

Mr Johnson warned it was "becoming clear in order to drive that curve down, to reduce social gathering, we now need to be making absolutely clear that we are going to enforce these closures".

Businesses shut to the public would still be allowed to offer a takeaway or delivery service, he added.

Meanwhile, the scientific advice on which the UK

government has based its strategy was released yesterday, giving a grim insight into the expected progression of the virus and calling into question some of the strategies.

Documents studied by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies showed that social measures to keep people apart may need to be in place for most of the year to control the spread.

Millions may already be infected according to worst-case modelling.

The government published the papers a day after Boris Johnson said he expected the tide to be turned in the fight against Covid-19 within 12 weeks. Modelling shows the crisis could last far longer, with the virus potentially returning next winter.

In Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster said the educational work of schools has come to an end due to Covid-19.

They are being "repurposed" to provide online planning and resource packs.

The German states of Bavaria and Saarland said yesterday they were imposing restrictions for two weeks aimed to keep people inside their homes.

"It's not easy to take these decisions," the state premier of Bavaria, Markus Soeder, said. "We take these decisions according to the best of our knowledge and conscience. There will be a Bavaria after corona, but it will be a stronger one if we don't look away."

The western state of Saarland announced similar measures, saying people were only allowed to leave their homes to go to work, do essential shopping, visit the doctor or take exercise alone. The restrictions would be in place until April 3.

Chancellor Angela Merkel is due to meet the leaders of Germany's 16 states tomorrow to review measures required across the country to slow the spread of the virus.

In the US, The White House last night announced that a member of Vice President Mike Pence's staff had tested positive for coronavirus.

Mr Pence's spokeswoman said that the staff member, who is not being identified, did not have "close contact" with either the vice president or President Donald Trump.



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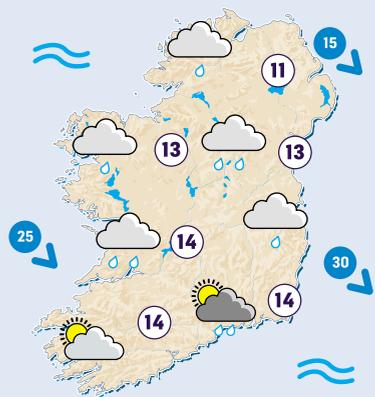
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TV listings are in Weekend magazine

Today's weather

Bight spells in the far south but it will soon turn widely cloudy with heavy rain across northern areas will sink southwards during the morning before easing to turning to showers later. Gentle to brisk northerly winds but strong in the far west.



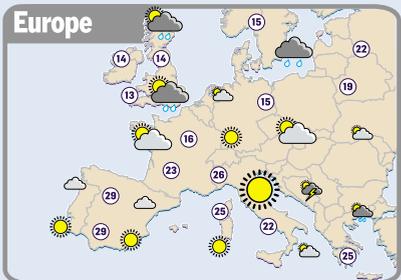
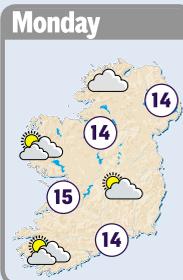
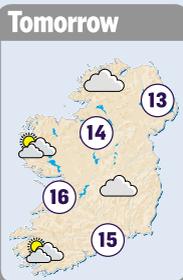
	AM	PM
Athlone	Drizzle 12C	Cloudy 13C
Ballina	Rain 10C	Drizzle 11C
Bantry	Rain 12C	Showers 13C
Belfast	Rain 12C	Cloudy 12C
Carlow	Drizzle 13C	Drizzle 14C
Carrick-on-Shannon	Rain 12C	Cloudy 12C
Castlebar	Rain 12C	Rain 12C
Cork	Cloudy 12C	Cloudy 14C
Derry	Rain 12C	Rain 12C
Donegal	Rain 12C	Rain 12C
Drogheda	Rain 12C	Drizzle 13C
Dublin	Drizzle 13C	Showers 13C
Galway	Cloudy 10C	Cloudy 11C
Kilkenny	Drizzle 13C	Drizzle 14C
Killarney	Cloudy 10C	Cloudy 11C
Limerick	Drizzle 13C	Cloudy 14C
Portlaoise	Rain 13C	Rain 12C
Roscommon	Rain 12C	Cloudy 12C
Tipperary	Drizzle 13C	Cloudy 14C
Tralee	Drizzle 10C	Cloudy 11C
Waterford	Rain 12C	Cloudy 14C
Wexford	Rain 12C	Cloudy 14C
Wicklow	Drizzle 12C	Showers 13C

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DAYLIGHT
Sun rises: 04.59
Sun sets: 21.48
Lighting-up: 22.19

MOON PHASE
Last Quarter June 13
Rises: 23.54
Sets: 06.17



News

'Tracing lost brother



In focus

Siblings who were abandoned in tartan bags six years apart say their mysterious story is far from over

THERE is a baby in the front seat of my car and I don't know who owns him," Claire Pullen told the operator.

It was a freezing cold night in January 1962, and Ms Pullen, the wife of a Belfast GP, had just discovered a baby boy, tucked inside a red tartan duffel bag. The following day, the story of the baby left in a driveway appeared on the front page of the 'Belfast Telegraph', but no one came forward to claim him.

Across the Border, six years later, Donal Boyle, a lorry driver from Macroom, Co Cork, was on his way to Belfast when he stopped in Dundalk to make a call. Inside a phonebox close to a local hospital, he found a red tartan duffel bag with a baby girl stowed safely inside. The little girl was wearing a handmade dress and the bottle placed next to her was still warm. Again, efforts to trace the baby's parents proved unsuccessful.

Without birth records or parents, the two abandoned babies were adopted and grew up as David McBride and Helen Ward.

They both led happy lives, David in Lisburn and Helen in Dublin, but fundamental questions about identity, about when and where they were born, meant a reckoning with the past was inevitable.

"When I was 17, I asked my [adoptive] dad," Helen told the *Irish Independent* this week. "He said, 'Let sleeping dogs lie' and I think he said that because he wanted to protect me."

Helen, now 52, made several fruitless attempts to discover more about her origins, including a 2012 interview with the *Irish Independent* which led her to Donal Boyle and an appearance on RTE's 'Liveline'. Separately, David launched an appeal for information on the radio in 2002 and appeared on the Gerry Kelly TV show in the North, also in vain.

"I had sort of given up a wee



Emotional journey: Helen Ward and David McBride prepare to board a flight to Kerry in January; Helen (far right) and David (far right) as children. PHOTOS: HELEN WARD



bit," said David, speaking from his home in Birmingham this week.

"I did a newspaper article in 2012 but that was it then. It is like hitting your head against a brick wall sometimes, so you go through phases."

Despite several news stories at the time, no one ever made the connection about the tartan bags. Helen just south of the Border, David north of it.

That is until Ariel Bruce, a social worker who has made a career of tracking down long-lost relatives, entered the frame.

"My sister encouraged me to send my DNA profile to Ariel to see if she could find a match," said David.

Separately, Helen had entered her own DNA on to the system a year before, a 50th birthday present from her best friend Eimear.

"It was the best gift anyone has ever given me," Helen said.

Through the advances of modern science, there then followed a remarkable discovery. When Ariel put David's

DNA into the online database, she discovered he had a perfect match.

Not a parent in fact, but a sister, a full sister. It was Helen.

"Ariel had never come across anything like it before," said David.

"Helen doesn't know this, but I was asked to send a second profile. I think they wanted another test because at that point they had spoken to Helen and they wanted to confirm exactly what they found. I ended up doing two DNA tests."

What followed was an emotional meeting, featured last weekend on 'Long Lost Lives, Born Without a Trace', an ITV programme that tracks down lost relatives. In an extraordinary moment captured on screen, David and Helen met for the first time.

Tears were shed, stories exchanged. And they were left with more questions than answers. The show has not been broadcast in Ireland, prompting the siblings to tell their story here, in the hope

through DNA was the best gift I ever got'



that they can piece together the missing parts of a puzzle that kept them apart for years.

"We know there are people in Ireland who know something," he said. "We would appeal to those people to come forward and confide in us. We deserve to know about our parents."

As the programme revealed, when researchers trawled an ancestry DNA site, they found profiles that matched Helen and David. Family members connected to both their parents had uploaded their DNA, leading the team to establishing who their mother and father were.

David and Helen's mother was Catholic who had a love affair spanning almost 40 years with their father, a married man with 14 children. Both lived in Dublin.

"Our father was a musician who played in a Dublin dancehall and I presume that's how they met," said David. "Our mother worked in retail. She was from Kerry but had moved to Dublin. We know little about their relationship as it stands."

Both birth parents have sadly passed away. Their father died in 1993, aged 82, and their mother in 2017 at the age of 90.

The siblings have also learned that their mother was 34 when she had David, and 41 when she gave birth to Helen – never marrying or having any more children.

Illegitimacy and the religious divide sealed David and Helen's fates; their mother's death three years ago meant some mysteries would always remain unsolved, some wounds impossible to heal.

"If we had met her before she passed, I probably would have wanted to know why she did what she did," said Helen.

"From that question you would probably get answers as to the times, as to the circumstances, as to her choices."

Out of respect for two families they are still trying to get to know, both David and Helen have asked that, for now, their birth parents are not named.

They have four older sisters and 10 older brothers on their father's side and extended family members on their mother's side, and they are still making tentative steps to learn more about each parent.

"We are hoping this will help jog memories," said David.

"In Kerry, someone might recall something. With a bit of luck, it might jog the memories of our mother's side too. People might say, 'Look, we have kept this under the carpet for too long, we need to come out and reveal this, particularly because Helen and David need to know.' Our mother and father have passed away. They were our parents and we have a right to know what went on between them."

Central to their shared story, the siblings believe, is the Ireland of the 1960s, a time and place that was a cold house for unmarried mothers.

Back then, a child born out of wedlock was a scandal, but a child born to a Catholic mother and a married Protestant father was another scandal entirely.

After meeting each other for the first time last October, the siblings journeyed to Kerry, where they laid flowers at their mother's graveside.

"It was a journey I never thought I would make with a brother," said Helen.

"She was our mother and we believe she wanted the best for us. In doing what she did, she sentenced herself to a lifetime of suffering in silence."

As part of their journey together, each has visited the spot where the other was found and they both now have theories on why their parents did what they did.

In 2012, Donal Boyle told Helen that he recalled there was a car parked close to the phone box – and while he was inside, this car circled around before driving off. It is a detail that still niggles.

"There are a few different ways of looking at it," said Helen. "Until we find out more, we can't actually say, right, 'It was your mum and dad who put you in the phone-box that night'. Was it a friend? Was it a grandparent? Was it an aunt? Friends of my father, friends of my mother?"

Although lockdown has prevented meetings with extended family members on both parents' sides, David had a brief meeting with some of his relatives before Christmas.

"I met some of our mother's family in Kerry," he said.

"I learned that she had a personality very much like Helen's – she was a dressmaker, like Helen. She was sociable and articulate and very kind."

Like his sister, David believes someone helped his mother on the night she left Helen and that their parents may have been influenced by other people when decisions were being made.

"I think there are people who assisted our parents," he said.

"I am almost certain the lady who was seen the night that Helen was found was our mother. I also think it was our mother who placed Helen in the telephone box.

"Whether the gentleman

'In doing what she did, she sentenced herself to a lifetime of suffering in silence'

that was in the car was our father, or a family relative of our mother, I don't know.

"It may have been that the individual who went along with our mother that night may have been going along to make sure that Helen was placed in a telephone box to make sure what they had agreed was happening."

The siblings believe shame and fear may stop them getting to the full truth.

Several themes run through their story, close-knit communities in rural Ireland, the influence of the Church, the attitude of society to unmarried mothers, and the bubbling tensions in the North.

"There was a lot at stake," said David.

"If they had been found out, their lives were over. They would have been sent to prison and cast out by their families."

As Helen and David spoke via a shared video-call this week, thoughts returned to the almost identical bags each was placed in as babies.

The siblings have learned that their father was born in Scotland and moved to Dublin as a baby.

Was the red tartan a nod to his heritage? Or is the simpler explanation that their mother wanted someone to make a link between her two



Discovery: Helen Ward with Donal Boyle, who found her in a phone box as a baby

said David. "There was a huge mistrust between the RUC and gardaí at that time.

"I would question how much co-operation there was between the two jurisdictions at the time and whether or not there was a concerted effort to link up."

To date, the siblings have no knowledge that their parents had any link to the North.

Again, they are looking for answers about why David was placed there, on a quiet residential street, under the cover of darkness.

"Our story didn't end with the programme," said Helen.

"It brings us to another chapter, one we will share together as we try to find out the truth.

"I hope our story will encourage people to let the secrets of the past be free, for their own peace of mind and for those who need answers."

children? "I think there is a connection with the bag," said David.

"There was six years between us. Our mother or father, or both of them, had to find the same bag, which was the same colour and the same make. I

think someone wanted a connection to be made."

The question of how no connection was made until last year is one they have both discussed.

"We were found in two different jurisdictions in the 60s,"



A Heartfelt
THANK YOU

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BROWN THOMAS