

by Maeve Quigley

My 48-year battle for justice after IRA bombing

IT was just a normal Saturday afternoon on March 4, 1972. Jennifer McNern, 21, and her sister Rosaleen, 22, were out shopping for a few bits. Rosaleen was looking at material for a dress for her forthcoming wedding that September.

"We decided to go for a coffee at the Abercorn restaurant — that's where we always went. It was very popular at the time," Jennifer says.

"There was a queue to get in and we were debating about whether we should go or stay but we decided to stay."

"Two girls around the same age as us skipped the queue ahead of us and we were kind of thinking well if they're that desperate. They sat down but they left shortly after and Rosaleen and I got a seat in the corner near where they had been sitting."

"We had our coffee and were in the restaurant about 20 minutes when a no-warning bomb exploded."

"It was a scene of carnage on the Belfast street that had been bustling with people. Ann Owens, 22, and Janet Berens, 21, two young Catholic girls like Jennifer and Rosaleen, seated at the next table to them, were killed instantly by the pair who had skipped the queue and planted the bomb. It has been attributed to the IRA but they have never claimed it as their work, though they have never denied they planted it."

"The two who left had walked into a packed restaurant and planted the bomb," Jennifer says, still incredulous as how someone could inflict such cruelty on other human beings. "We walked in with money in our handbags to buy coffee. They walked in with a bomb and just

My mother took our shoes out of the house before we came home

left it there. You wouldn't do it to a dog. I don't remember anything about the bomb at all. I woke up in the Royal Victoria Hospital days later and I didn't have a clue where I was or what had happened to me until a nurse told me I was in hospital and had been in a bomb explosion."

"I had a fractured arm which was in plaster so I remember looking at my arm but I must have fallen asleep again because I was heavily sedated. It was some time later my mother was in visiting me and I turned round in the bed to go to sleep and when I lifted the blankets, I saw that my right leg was missing. My mother heard me screaming and ran back into the ward along with nurses and a doctor and I was sedated again. The next day a doctor came round and told me the extent of my injuries. I had not only lost my right leg but I had lost my left leg as well."

"At this stage Jennifer had no idea that Rosaleen too had been seriously injured, losing her legs, an arm and an eye and was in intensive care at the same hospital."

"It seems strange that I wasn't asking where she was but I was on strong painkillers. A nurse told me there was a photo of myself and Rosaleen in the paper and I couldn't understand why so I asked Mummy to bring the photograph in. She was reluctant to do it but she did and I not only looked at the photograph but also read underneath about Rosaleen and found out what had happened to her."

"From that day the lives of these two young girls, brought up in a Catholic home in North Belfast, would never be the same. From being fun-loving young women just embarking on their careers and planning Rosaleen's wedding, they were thrust into a different world. "I had only started to get my own management and had been working for a year and a half and Rosaleen worked for the EBI," Jennifer says.

"The girls had two brothers and another sister but through the years passed away a few years previously. And it is unfathomable to think

Jennifer McNern and her sister Rosaleen lost their limbs and suffered horrific injuries by an IRA bomb. But she has had to take the Northern Ireland Executive to court in a bid to get victims of the violence the annual pension they deserve



Aftermath: Jennifer and Rosaleen in their wheelchairs, campaigning for change and Jennifer recovering in hospital

how their mother Teresa managed to visit both her girls in hospital, maimed and broken by the hands of two others just like them. "People ask how I got through time and I don't really know how we did," Jennifer says of her mostly young men who had been shot and they were paralysed and lying every day and I saw Mummy walking into the ward one day and she was just ashen. "The sisters spent months in hospital, moving to the rehabilitation centre at Musgrave Park.

"You have to go through very insensitive physio before you go to walking training as you have to be quite fit to stand up again with artificial limbs. "But we were in a ward with mostly young men who had been shot and they were paralysed and lying every day and I saw Mummy walking into the ward one day and she was just ashen. "The sisters spent months in hospital, moving to the rehabilitation centre at Musgrave Park.

"I tried to get back into work but there was no legislation for people with disabilities in those days. I was thrust into a world where I was a disabled person and society was not fit for that — it was not the way it is today. It was very difficult. We were sent back to a house that had steps going into it and stairs. My mother died three years ago and somebody said to me 'it was your mother that took all your shoes out of the house before you did their best to live again.



Fighting: Jennifer (left) today and above, before the bombing

ing. Jennifer was directed to the Wave Trauma Centre which specialises in helping victims of the Troubles.

"I spoke to Sandra the CEO and I explained to her how I was feeling. I was relieved to find out I wasn't the only one. I remember thinking I had two homes then — the home where I didn't talk about what happened and a home where I can go to where I can speak to others about what had happened to me."

"I started to meet other people who were living with serious disabilities due to the Troubles. Our stories were much the same in that we didn't talk about it and tried to keep everything as normal as possible but then eventually something can trigger you and everything falls apart."

"Once I got on the right medication and got talking to the right people I got back on track again."

And ten years ago Jennifer and others like her decided to do something about their situation, campaigning for a special pension to be given to those who had been injured in the Troubles through no fault of their own.

"Most countries in the world have pension schemes for their disabled citizens so we decided to go for it. I sat in my wheelchair outside the city hall on the streets of Belfast and collected signatures and we got the 12,000 we needed to bring the case to Stormont."

"But for a while there was very little movement other than what Stormont says was 'tea and sympathy.' We were let down so many times, she says. So many times we felt no one was listening to us and we were being treated with contempt. Eventually it was that time the assembly fell and we brought the campaign over to Westminster."

Jennifer says they brought everything back had, the stories of how Margaret was blinded when a bomb exploded outside her office and still needs treatment for the tiny shards of glass that came through her skin, of Peter whose father died of a heart attack at the

scene of the shooting that left him paralysed, of Raymond Trimble and others who died before a pension could be awarded.

"It was there that we were listened to. We got it signed into legislation by Julian Smith at the end of January this year and then was supposed to be ready for applications on May 29. Just days before it was supposed to open we found out it wasn't going to happen. We were told it was due to lack of finance but then shortly after that we found out that nothing had been done about it at all."

Most of the people in the group are in their 60s, 70s and 80s at this stage and some campaigners have already passed away.

The pension would be between £2,000 and £10,000 a year to just over 500 victims of violence — which isn't a lot of money — and at the root of the dispute is whether the British Government or the Northern Ireland Executive should pay for it, and the fact that Sinn Féin believe it will exclude some Republicans from receiving it.

Jennifer insists this should be a pension for people who were injured through no fault of their own and is heartbroken that even in this day and age, some corners felt there was a need to have a full-scale row about it.

So Jennifer did the only thing she felt she could and went to the High Court. It was a mixture of anger and that feeling of being let down again, she says.

"We were just swept aside. When the pension was signed into legislation at the end of January we were elated and to find out just days before it was supposed to be rolled out that it wasn't being done at all. There was nowhere else to go, only the courts. It was not something I wanted to go but it had to be done."

Yesterday at Belfast's High Court, Mr Justice McAlinden ruled that Northern Ireland's Executive Office deliberately and unlawfully refused to advance the scheme and described claims that it was permissible to delay allocation of the compensation programme for political reasons as "arbitrary nonsense."

"It demonstrates either willful disregard for the rule of law, or abject ignorance of what the rule of law means in a democratic society."

Before he died he said 'Don't let them forget'

He added: "The rule of law also means that no one, regardless of their rank, position or status, is above the law and all must comply with the law as it applies to them, and the law as it applies to an individual or group must be applied in a non-discriminatory manner."

Following the ruling, Michelle O'Neill said she would now nominate a department in Stormont to process the payments.

Jennifer now hopes that finally there will be movement on getting the pension sorted but for many of the campaigners, time has already run out while the toxic politics of the North got in the way.

"We have lost four or five people along the way," Jennifer says. "The first one Hugh Rowan, he was shot and had progressive paralysis then he was paralysed and he was away he was totally paralysed and before he died he said 'Don't let them forget'."

"And that has been our mantra from the very beginning. I just feel so passionate about it for so long. I know the trauma they have been through and there needs to be a more respectful and pragmatic approach taken to sort this out."

"It is about acknowledgement, recognition and having your voice through and acknowledging the position we have been left in."

I was asked if I wanted a fridge freezer

I think when I really broke down was when I was asked if I wanted a washing machine or a fridge freezer.

"So you can imagine I said 'no. This can't be.' After 18 years to be asked if you needed a washing machine was devastating.

"I had to seek medical help. I was very depressed and very low. For about a year I was constantly thinking about who planted the bomb, what did the police do? I wanted to see everything that was ever written about what had happened to me. I woke up thinking about it. I wanted to bed thinking about it. I was suicidal. It was a pretty low time."

All victims of the Troubles were given compensation from the Northern Ireland Office at the time but it was based on your earnings and how long they anticipated you might live with your injuries.

"People would get more in their wages for a year now," Jennifer says. "I was only working for a year and a half so it was very limited. It didn't take a lot to work out that you would end up on the benefits system and there's something just not right about that."

Rosaleen dealt with things differently and wasn't as badly affected as Jennifer but after seeking help for the depression she was suffer-

ing, Jennifer was directed to the Wave Trauma Centre which specialises in helping victims of the Troubles.

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THE cows outside in the field could only stare in with their big brown eyes as the red carpet event took place on the farm in front of them. Louise Nealon sashayed around in an emerald green frock, purchased for the special occasion while her siblings, their partners, and her parents adhered to the black tie dress code. It was a book launch like no other and it was, Louise says now, the best day of her life so far.

The 30-year-old has just published her debut novel Snowflake as her landing a six-figure deal for this book and one more. Before Snowflake even hit the presses, the rights were snapped up by Ed Guiney's Element Pictures, the company behind the international smash TV adaptation of Sally Rooney's Normal People.

Her family, she says, aren't big readers and so expected a red carpet event and, thanks to lockdown, the farm in Co. Kildare was treated to a bit of Hollywood glamour. "It still doesn't feel quite real yet," Louise says of her book Snowflake finally being out. "I was secretly delighted that I wasn't able to have a real life launch as my family don't really read books and they have never even gone to a book launch and they were expecting a black tie affair."

"They didn't realise people come after work and stand there like a load of

'I spent my whole 20s not really having a job'

introverts having to have a conversation and then go home.

"The online launch was great. I could have anyone I wanted at that and we have quite a big family so we were able to celebrate ourselves and I wore a big dress that I wouldn't have been able to wear if I had been in a bookshop. We had dancing and I didn't burst their bubble of it being such a special black tie event. We even got a few kegs in. I was thrilled with it to be honest — I had the best day."

One of the things Louise is most relieved about is the fact that well-meaning friends of her parents will no longer send them advertisements for jobs in the civil service for her. Her heart had always been set on being a writer but it has taken her until now to get published and she is aware that she is one of the lucky ones.

"I spent my whole 20s not really having a job. I was a waitress but I wasn't very good at it. I worked in a bookshop but I didn't really thrive at it. I always wanted to be a writer but I didn't know it would happen," Louise says, speaking from her home on the family farm as the same cows stare in the window.

"You're not really expecting it to happen to you. I'm glad that I had a year to process it before the book came out because I think it would have been all too much together."

"I'm just really happy that my parents aren't worried about me any more. That my mum is not always phoning to the neighbours and say "Yeah, Louise is grand," that that people aren't sending me CVs for service jobs for me. It's really nice to have the security that I know is sure in the arts and creative world and I am so grateful for that."

Snowflake is a work of fiction, of course, but Louise is happy to say that her own experiences coloured the ages and experiences of protagonist Debbie, who lives on a dairy farm in Kildare with her uncle, Billy, next door in a caravan and her mum Maeve who records all of her dreams in books.

Debbie is thrust into college life, where the pressures of succeeding and negotiating adult life, coupled with a bereavement, and her mother's falling mental health

IT CAN BE A LOT FROM MY WEIRD STATE and it all turned out OK in the end

She's got a six-figure book deal and a no.1 bestseller, and having grown up surrounded by imaginary friends, Louise Nealon admits...

send her own into a spiral. Louise, too, struggled with her mental health when she landed at college, returning but finding herself in a full breakdown at the age of 21. She had, she says, always been a bit different and struggled to find her "connection to the world." An introverted child, her sisters, who were close in age, played with each other while Louise played with her imaginary friends by herself.

"As I grew up, that became less socially acceptable," she admits. "It wasn't great in secondary school to be seen going around on your own at lunch break. I made friends and they are brilliant people and still my friends today."

But she was searching for something more as she couldn't find a

way to express herself or explain how she felt, except through reading and writing.

"I was afraid of the world and of the future"

kind of girl and I wanted to be something different. Writing really gave me that freedom."

Louise felt pressure, as all young women do, to dissuade herself of

her writing notions and fit in somewhere.

"You'd go to a guidance counsellor at school and they'd say, "you should go into computers" and I was very impressionable and I'd think, maybe I should, even though I hated computers. But I was so afraid of the world and afraid of the future."

"Now, looking back, I just want to say to that girl, just try to have the craic and follow your passion, don't be too bothered about what other people think."

The advent of social media has made things worse for the youngsters who find themselves outside the societal norms and Louise found herself sliding in a downward spiral for which she had to seek help. "We got the internet in 2009

and that thing with Facebook having brackets really bothered me because my invisible friends did not have Facebook accounts. "I had 20 friends in real life and in my head 200. That made me question my self worth."

"It is so easy to focus on what other people make of you rather than be your weird self. I thought that people wouldn't like me being my weird self. But I kind of just gave into the weirdness and it all turned out ok in the end."

In Snowflake, characters of all ages face their own very different struggles that today would fall under the 'mental health' bracket and this is something Louise wanted to look at in the book as she finds people are too

ready to believe it's a 'one size fits all' issue.

"It was an attempt to try to explore mental health in a more creative way because the conversations I hear about mental health kind of seem to be all the same sort of noise," Louise says.

"Well-meaning noise of "mind yourself" and "it's okay not to feel okay" — that's all fair enough but I didn't see my experience reflected in that and I wanted to get specific.

"Nearly every character has some sort of mental health issue or struggle but each of them has a different experience of it as is true for everyone. I found that reading books really helped me and took me out of a difficult place. If I could write a book for my 18-year-old self —

someone who is young and struggling a bit — to help them find their place in the world, that's really what I wanted to do."

Snowflake is a read that's full of heart and humanity — with all its flaws — so much so that every generation will see themselves reflected in among the pages.

There is a message there too that you are never too old or young to seek help.

"We need to place trust in professionals and find the sort of help that works for you too," Louise says. "I went through a lot of different kinds of therapy and different sorts of psychiatry and medication and it was such a mixed bag."

"There's so many different types of professional help out there and you need to be resilient and



Not letting success go to her head Louise Nealon brought sessions with a therapist with her book advance

going well, but if I'm not happy in myself, nothing else matters really. I could have all the book deals in the world and still be miserable.

"That would be a tough place to be in because not a lot of people would understand that. I would be the first to say I'm not completely recovered and I am still working on myself and I was so relieved to have the money to go back into therapy and keep learning about myself."

Knowledge is power and once you realise happiness is an inside job you could be sweeping the streets and be the happiest person in the world. Our society has a massive thing about success and failure that is really unhealthy.

"When I was working in the bookshop or being a waitress and I ran into someone I'd know they would say, "You were so smart in school" as if to say, "What happened you?"

"I was still that person and I'd find it very frustrating. Even when people are treating me differently now and saying I'm great, I have always been great!" Louise says, laughing.

She couldn't have written Snowflake anywhere other than her family farm but she says Debbie's life is not hers. She did have to ask a garda for directions to Trinity when she arrived in Dublin — "we live 40 minutes away but I just never went there!"

"I seem to be a bit of a space cadet," she ponders. "The way that I take in the world is a bit different — I have a weird memory. There's a great freedom in fiction that I use my own experiences but when I give them to a character it kind of takes on a life of its own. You are just spinning tales and it is great to have the freedom to do that."

"If I told you my life story it would be so boring, you just wouldn't want to read it."

In fact, Louise admits that meeting Tommy Bowe on Ireland AM seems like a figment of her own

'I seem to be a bit of a space cadet'

imagination too as none of this seems particularly real to her.

Snowflake has just hit the number one spot on the bestseller list but for Louise, little will change. She is still single — "radically so," as she lives in a house with other couples and believes she'd have to find someone special to be bothered to fight the way couples do.

She still plays canogie with her team at the weekends — this week they bet that she couldn't get the word 'betty' into her chat with Tommy Bowe. She's still Louise, the airy fairy, space cadet who lives with her siblings on the family farm. Sure, she might have a six-figure book deal but that has to last as it took her ten years to write the first one. She's hoping the second one will be quicker but there are no guarantees so fancy houses and fancy cars will have to wait.

"I still have the same car," Louise says, laughing. "It actually died on me outside Ireland AM. I had to get a lump start. It was so embarrassing!"

"Being aware of how lucky I have been in life is huge. Even talking about mental health, I feel like I have a responsibility, not even towards other people but just towards my younger self to express that and say, "You can have all you've ever wanted and life is still s**t sometimes. When your dreams come true they go into reality and there's going to be good and bad in there."

"Just because something went great in my professional life doesn't mean everything in my life is great. I was afraid I would get really down because everything seemed to be

'I'm lucky I can afford to talk to therapist'

around. You see your big head in the newspaper and it's all a bit daunting.

"More resources and more choice needs to be there for people rather