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CHAPTER THREE Death of a Mother

Mary Moynihan

While there has always been the element of risk and death associated with the life-giving act of pregnancy and childbirth, maternal mortality in Ireland today is a rare occurrence. But when it does happen it can have devastating consequences for those left behind. Over the years, the national figures for maternal mortality have declined from 17 in 1970 to 1 in 2002 (Kennedy, 2002). However, between 1970 and 2000, over 145 women have died and their deaths are referred to as maternal mortality deaths.

In Ireland, maternal mortality is defined as the death of a woman while pregnant or within forty-two days of the termination of the pregnancy (Kennedy, 2002). Maternal mortality is further divided into direct and indirect obstetric deaths. Direct obstetric deaths:

... are those which result from obstetric complications of the pregnant state (pregnancy, labour and puerperium), from interventions, omissions, incorrect treatment, or from a chain of events resulting from any of the above (Murphy-Lawless, 1998).

Indirect deaths are:

... those which come about as a result of previous or pre-existing diseases or from diseases which developed during pregnancy, but which is not related to the pregnancy as such, although it is aggravated by the pregnant state (Murphy-Lawless, 1998).

Who are these women? What were their names? And what of their families and friends left behind? And more importantly, how and why did these women die? I know nothing about any of these women except for my own mother, Helen Moynihan, who died in 1981, seven days after giving birth to a baby boy.

There is no official body in Ireland charged with investigating the causes of maternal deaths and neither is there a detailed record of what happened to these women. Such a report is published in England, for example, where many health professionals and doctors are willing to carry out clinical audits into all cases of maternal deaths.

'Why Mothers Die? Report on Confidential Enquiries into Maternal Deaths in the United Kingdom, 1994-1996' is the fourth such report published and it continues a series of confidential enquiries into maternal deaths which started in 1952 for England and Wales, in 1956 for Northern Ireland and in 1965 for Scotland. These reports into maternal mortality not only identify the causes that lead to each death but also put forward recommendations for improving future obstetric practice. The reports recommend ways for doctors and midwives to review their work and help bring about dramatic improvements in modern maternal care.

These recommendations are important because, as the above report states, 'while some maternal deaths are inevitable events, many are associated with a degree of substandard care'. These enquiries help to ensure that lessons can be learned to help avoid future unnecessary deaths and to ensure that all women receive optimal care. Because no such report exists in Ireland today, we do not know how many women have died here because of substandard care. How can we be sure that women in Ireland are receiving optimal care in pregnancy and childbirth? In the absence of such enquiries, there is a strong lack of accountability. Families are forced to go through difficult and unnecessary processes to find out what happened, particularly because of the apparent codes of secrecy that operate in hospitals when patient care is questioned. And how can we be sure that statistics on the number of maternal deaths are correct without proper procedures for reporting and investigating maternal deaths?

Independent enquiries cannot bring back a loved one but they may offer some comfort to the families of women who have died unexpectedly while pregnant, or in childbirth, by giving people information about what happened. Some form of accountability is important, particularly if substandard care has played a part in a woman's death.

My mother died in 1981 from a brain haemorrhage (an indirect obstetric death), seven days after giving birth. She was examined by a doctor in the maternity hospital and sent home, only to collapse minutes after leaving the hospital. This fact is omitted from a very brief, one-page, clinical report conducted by the hospital into my mother's death. Unfortunately, a full investigation into her death was never carried out so, while we have our own suspicions, we cannot know exactly what happened. The following is my father, Eddie's, account of what happened to my mother on the day of her death:

She had headaches and her doctor came to the house, and he could do nothing for her. And he sent her back to the maternity hospital. She had only a bad headache at this stage, so I took her into the hospital. They gave her tablets and sent her home ... and on the way home, just around the corner from the hospital, she got sick, very suddenly ... she went semi-conscious. So I just turned around and went straight back up and the doctors came out and they were all flying around the place then at that stage ... and I thought they put her in the ambulance and brought her away down to the Richmond. They asked me did I want to go in the ambulance but I had to go home to get someone to mind the baby.

My father came home and told my brother Joe and me that our mother was ill and he arranged for someone to come in and mind us and he then went straight back to the hospital. My mother was transferred to the Richmond Hospital where she died about ten hours later, never regaining consciousness, and according to my father 'they were very helpful in the Richmond ... but by then it was too late, I suppose'. Obviously we are not medical people, but we do believe that whoever saw her in the maternity hospital should have treated her sooner. My father said:

It should have been diagnosed. I mean if you have a threatened brain haemorrhage, these experts should have been able to diagnose it. Because if it was now, I'd make a fuss about it, I'd insist on having these things checked out but at that time I was young and I didn't know the difference.

After all these years I still don't know exactly how and why my mother died and why we were left with a small baby to rear. It seems my mother had no serious illness during her pregnancy although she did have a threatened miscarriage early on and later she had swollen hands and feet. My mother's symptoms on the day of her death were described as 'severe right-sided headache, breathlessness and upper abdominal discomfort'. I find it strange that the clinical report omits the fact that my mother was seen and then sent home only to be brought straight back, in a semi-conscious state. I can only speculate that the hospital did not listen to her properly or take her complaints seriously. Would her symptoms, along with raised blood pressure, not indicate something was wrong? Was the fact that she had just experienced a difficult and demanding labour taken into account? What about her age, giving birth at thirty-nine after a gap of sixteen years? Why was she sent home?

In the course of writing this chapter, I made a written request to

the maternity hospital asking for the clinical records and nursing notes relating to the day of my mother's death. The request was refused because of patient confidentiality; even though my mother is dead more than twenty years now and all her immediate family supported the request. We were told that our only option was to contact a solicitor, which we are now doing. After all these years my family does not want to cause any trouble for the hospital, we only want information. Do all families face the same difficulties when trying to find out the truth? The maternity hospital did send me a very brief synopsis of my mother's death and stated that she had suffered a 'sub-arachnoid haemorrhage' whereas the internal hospital report for 1981 described it as an 'intracerebral haemorrhage'. For a laywoman like myself, this apparent confusion and/or contradiction only causes further upset and worry.

Without any proper report into my mother's death, our family can only speculate. Should the doctors have known what was wrong? As my father said: 'She had a bad headache, they were very slow about it'. After my mother's death my father did not ask the hospital about the cause of her death due to a mixture of grief, shock, a belief that it now made no difference because she was dead and the fact that he now needed to find a way to cope with a week-old baby to look after. Like many Irish families, we were encouraged to get on with life and not talk too deeply about our loss. But my family will always suspect that the situation was not handled as well as it should have been. Perhaps if the hospital had explained things better at the time, we wouldn't have been left with these lingering suspicions. Writing this chapter is like a journey for me as I go back and try to find out the answers to questions I've carried around for years but never dared ask. I may not get answers but it is like a personal healing journey for me, to try to bring some sort of closure to a very painful event. Writing about my mother's death is not intended to create fear around the joyful occasion of childbirth but rather to acknowledge those who have died, to remember them and to recognise the close links between birth and death.

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This is the story of my mother, Helen Moynihan, who died in 1981 aged 39, seven days after giving birth to a healthy baby boy, and the story of how those of us left behind tried to survive. A husband and father, two teenage children, a new baby, parents, brothers and sisters and friends, all trying to come to terms with an act that seemed to have

no justifiable explanation or meaning. The family had to deal with losing a mother who had just given birth, care for the new child and cope with the pain of death.

My mother was born Helen Brennan Roe on Saturday, 12 September 1942. She was from a tiny village in Kilkenny called Clogh, near Castlecomer and was named after her father's mother who came from Massford. Her official name was Helen but as she grew up her family shortened her name to Ellen. She was the eldest of eleven children, nine girls and two boys. Her father, James (Jimmy) Brennan Roe, worked as a miner in the Castlecomer mines and her mother, Mary (who I am named after), worked in the home, rearing her eleven children. She went to school in Clogh village and then, at the age of sixteen, emigrated to the United States of America where she first stayed with relatives. While my mother was in America she met my father, Eddie Moynihan, who had just come out of the American army and was now working as a plasterer on buildings while my mother worked for the Blue Cross (the equivalent of the Voluntary Health Insurance [VHI] in Ireland). My father was also Irish, from a place called Kilmacrane in Banteer, Co. Cork. He too had left home early to work in England for a year and then in America. My grandmother said she always prayed that my mother would meet an Irishman and not someone from another country because it was the only chance to bring her daughter home. My father knew my mother to see as they both belonged to the Irish community in New York and they met at a dance hall. My father asked my mother to dance and about eighteen months later they were married on Saturday, 3 November 1962 in Our Lady of Mercy Church, New York. My parents lived in the Bronx but both of them always wanted to come home and have their family in Ireland and a year later they did so.

My mother's parents hired a car and drove up to Dublin to meet them from the airport. This was the first opportunity for them to meet their new son-in-law and it was a big occasion for all my mother's younger brothers and sisters. From the airport, they drove straight back to Kilkenny and my parents lived there for a few months and with my father's parents in Cork, before they finally moved to Dublin. Through an advertisement in the papers, they found a beautiful place to rent. My father described it as 'a big place, three or four bedroomed', that was part of an old, very large house on its own grounds in Clontarf. Apart from my parents' apartment, the rest of the house was used as a secondary school for boys and was called Cosca College.



Mary Moynihan with her mother, Helen, taken in 1965

This was where my parents were living when I was born in 1965 and my brother Joe was born eleven months later. My earliest memories are of playing in the gardens and watching the children who lived next door who seemed to spend much of their time sitting on top of the high stone wall that separated the two houses. My father used to help the owner of the college look after the place and he was very disappointed when my parents decided to leave, but as my father said, 'we bought our own house in Coolock and we were delighted'. My parents then moved out to this new home in Coolock with two small children. My father started his own business as a building contractor and my mother looked after Joe and me. From my own memories and from talking to those who knew my mother, two things stand out about her. She was a very happy woman who was loved deeply by those who knew her and that she loved children. According to my mother's sister, Margaret:

there were nine girls in our family but Helen was always my favourite, to me she was always happy, that's the way I remember her. She loved life, she seemed to love life so much, but most of all she loved children. She had just had her second child, Joe, and already had the name picked out for the next one but of course she never had another child, not until Edmund came along sixteen years later ... but the only thing she ever seemed to want in life was children.

My mother wanted more children but for no obvious reason was unable to become pregnant. My grandmother would laugh as she remembered my mother saying 'the doctor said there is nothing wrong with me, all I need is a good man'. My mother would say this jokingly, while eyeing up my father to see his reaction.

Apart from not being able to get pregnant again, my mother was very happy. She did not work outside the home and enjoyed looking after my brother and me. My father started renovating old houses and while he did the external work, my mother was responsible for the interior decoration. She also became heavily involved in many cultural activities particularly with the local GAA club, Kilmore. My mother loved Gaelic games; she played camogie and became chairperson of the club, which was very unusual for a woman at that time. She was a set dancer herself and trained the club's juvenile set-dancing team. Joe and myself danced in the team and my mother was delighted when we became the Dublin set-dancing champions for two years running. My grandmother used to be full of pride speaking about my mother's involvement in the acting scenes for the Scor competitions in Dublin. My mother also loved to sew and could make anything from full-length curtains to wedding dresses. When her sister Margaret was getting married, my mother said, 'If you pick me as your maid of honour, I'll make the bridesmaids' dresses'. She did become maid of honour and she made beautiful purple dresses with white beading for all the bridesmaids, including a small one for me as flower girl.

My mother travelled down to Kilkenny regularly to see her parents and as a child, I always felt I grew up half in Dublin and half in the country. We always had wonderful times in Clogh, walking through the fields and visiting friends and relatives. My mother used to spend hours talking with her father and would always take him out for a drink (my grandmother wouldn't go into a pub then) and my grandfather would be delighted. Like my grandfather, my mother loved to play cards and Margaret remembers that, as children, we would arrive down to Kilkenny, take out our pack of cards and badger my grandfather to play with us. My grandfather would be horrified saying 'Oh God, what is she thinking of (referring to my mother), letting them children play cards'. He believed it was a sin for children to play cards and that we would all turn out as gamblers, but we played anyway. My mother would always do what she believed in and was not afraid to stand up to anyone who thought differently. Throughout the years she also had a very equal and very happy relationship with my father.

My mother's sister, Margaret, would often go up to Dublin, along with her husband Danny and three children, to stay with my parents for the weekend. My mother always welcomed them and she loved people calling to see her. Margaret could never get over all the friends my mother had:

She was always very popular. We used to love going up for weekends and there would always be people around. We always got out for a drink and even though we would always be in company, it was never just your mother and father, Danny and me, there were always friends of your parents with us.

As a child, our house always seemed to have callers and even my own friends who called up would spend more time with my mother than with me. Margaret remembers my mother during those years as always being:

very, very happy, very jolly. She loved Coolock and her home. I'm sure if she was still alive today, she'd probably still be living there at number 39 Kilmore Crescent.

My parents were happy over the years, my father's building company was successful and life was good. When I was about eight years old, my parents decided to adopt because as my father says 'your mother wanted to, she liked having children, she wanted more children'. So, they adopted a baby girl when she was a month old and they called her Eileen. Eileen soon became a part of our family and was with us until she was a year and two months old when she was taken back from my parents. Her mother had, months earlier, refused to sign the final adoption papers because she was now uncertain about the adoption (she had signed the earlier adoption papers), but she changed her mind and wanted the child back. According to my father:

We were stupid at the time because we should have insisted on the papers being signed earlier rather than letting things drag on. The adoption agency knew the mother wasn't signing but they let things drag on. And your mother got very attached to the child and it broke her heart when she had to give the child up. It was wrong for the child to have been left so long with Helen and then have her taken away. When we realised the mother wasn't signing we eventually did put pressure on the adoption agency to find out what was happening and then things ended very quickly. They made us bring the child back and hand her over. It was very cruel. Your mother was very upset and I was too, we loved that baby, but there was nothing we could do.

My parents did try to keep Eileen, they contacted a solicitor, and my mother held onto the child longer than she should have and she even spoke about running away, but there was nothing they could do. In the weeks before Eileen was taken, my mother said it was as if the child knew something was wrong. Every evening my mother would put Eileen to bed and she would lie on the bed with the baby who would put her little arms around my mother's neck and hold onto her tightly. She probably felt my mother's anguish and pain. After Eileen was taken, my parents did try to find out how she was doing. Officially, the adoption agency could give them no information but one person in the agency would talk to my mother and told her that the baby was fretting and crying all the time for her. According to Margaret, my mother's sister, my mother would pray that Eileen would fret so much that they would bring her back but that was never going to happen. My mother told Margaret about receiving a call from the adoption agency saying they wanted to see her:

she got straight into the car and drove like a lunatic, but when she arrived at the agency they had a little boy, another child for her to see. The agency told her this child would be hers from the moment she walked away with him, but your mother said no, she wanted her own child back, that was how she saw it.

The adoption agency asked my mother to see other children with a view to adopting but my mother refused because, as my father said:

it's just not the same, she didn't want other children, she only wanted Eileen, she only wanted her own child back, she was very cut up about the whole thing.

I remember late at night hearing my mother crying in her room, with the door closed because she did not want Joe and me to hear. Both my parents were devastated over losing Eileen and Margaret said:

all your mother would do was cry and cry and cry. For a long time, your father didn't even work after Eileen was taken, they were all upset. It was like a child dying, only worse, because with a death you can grieve. It was like a child going missing and you spend all your life looking and wondering.

But life goes on. My mother never really got over Eileen but learned to live with it and carry on, as we all do. For my family it was the biggest disappointment of our lives. Shortly after my parents lost Eileen,

the adoption laws changed – making it virtually impossible for such a situation to happen again to other families. Even today my father often wonders how Eileen is doing and where she is but we know there is probably no way to ever find out. Wherever she is we hope she is well and happy. At the time, everyone was concerned that my mother would pull through and she did. But she never spoke again about having children until about eight years later when she suddenly discovered she was pregnant. I was now sixteen and Joe was fifteen.

I was with my mother when she found out she was pregnant. She came out of the doctor's surgery and got into the car where I was waiting. She sat still, staring straight ahead, in absolute silence. She then said in total disbelief and shock that she was pregnant and she started to laugh. My brother Joe remembers when she told him that she was pregnant how 'she was so excited that you couldn't help be happy and during the pregnancy she looked so well and was so happy'. Margaret also remembers being told about the pregnancy:

I knew she had been to the doctor so when we went up to visit, I asked her 'what's wrong with you, are you sick?' And she started to laugh and she said 'Do you not know?' And I said, 'Know what?' I mean, being pregnant was the last thing on my mind, and she said 'I'm pregnant' and the laughs of her and the laughs of us.

A few months into the pregnancy, my mother started bleeding and had to stay in bed. It broke my grandmother's heart to see her lying day after day in bed because my mother was always so active and my grandmother would say to her 'Would you not get up and leave it in God's hands' and my mother replied 'Mammy, I'll hold onto this child if it kills me'. (Afterwards my grandmother would say 'O God, little did Helen think'. And my grandmother would be full of regret saying: 'I should have insisted more, to make her get out of that bed, if she had lost the child maybe she'd be alive today'.) My mother looked after herself during the pregnancy especially when she thought she was losing the baby and on 28 November 1981, she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy whom she called Edmund, after my father.

Seven days after giving birth, she died suddenly from a brain haemorrhage. Her death so soon after the birth was a terrible shock to everyone. Along with his own grief and pain, my father was left with two teenage children and a small baby to care for. He says that:

Everyone was giving me their opinion about what to do, to foster the baby, give him up, but I decided to rear him myself and I got someone to mind

him during the day while I was working and you and Joe were at school and that's what we did.

My father's brother, Denis and his wife Doreen, who also lived in Dublin, took us into their home in the week after my mother's death. According to my father:

Doreen was a very good woman, a very smart woman and she showed me how to mind the child, how to feed and bathe him and change him. And then after a time, I said right, I could manage it myself and we brought the baby home and that was it. You and me and Joe, we spoilt him rotten.

It seemed like death and loss were everywhere in our lives at this time, because six months after my mother's death, Doreen died from breast cancer. She had two small children and although she was ill when my mother died, she still found time to look after and help us through.

In the years after my mother's death, I found life very hard and even now, over twenty years later, I still find it hard to remember those times. I learned to live without my mother and get on with life, we all do, but I have always missed her. I would like to see her again some day, and for someone who is not religious, it is this thought that makes me hope, perhaps selfishly, that there is some form of afterlife. After my mother's death, I think that having to mind the baby kept us going in some way. My father was very good to all of us, keeping our home going, cleaning, putting food on the table and minding his new son. At that time, there was probably a reluctance to talk openly about death and my father especially found it difficult to talk. For him:

at the time, we didn't talk about it because we couldn't ... I couldn't be seen to be talking about it, you had to ... I had to put on a brave face on things, for you and Joe and everything had to continue on, but ...

My father felt that he had to be seen to be strong in order to cope and to help us cope and this meant not talking openly about my mother's death. I found not talking about the death a difficult thing to do.

My father believed that we still had a good life after my mother died, as we had each other and no other major problems, except for the fact that we didn't have a mother. I'm not so sure. I feel I lost a certain number of years out of my life as I tried to get back on track. My brother Joe feels that 'it split up the family'. He moved into a flat

about two years after my mother died and so did I. While there was no falling out amongst us, he feels that we all drifted apart. My brother feels that a mother keeps a family together and perhaps, if my mother had lived, we would have stayed at home longer. When someone dies, part of your life disappears with that person. Friends of my mother would have drifted away from the family and no matter what way you look at it; my mother's death changed all our lives completely.

My grandmother often spoke about my mother, remembering the days before she died. My grandmother remembered that she would catch my mother just staring at the new baby and saying: 'I don't believe it, I don't believe it'. On the day before her death, my mother was ill and lay on the couch resting while my grandmother looked after her and the baby. After the doctor arrived, he examined my mother and arranged for her to go back into the National Maternity Hospital to be checked. My father was at work but came home soon after to take my mother in. My mother went up the stairs to get dressed and as she was walking back down my grandmother asked her: 'What way is your head now?' My mother replied that her headache had just gone and my grandmother said: 'Now Helen, if they want to keep you in that hospital you will stay' and my mother put on her shoes and her last words to my grandmother were 'I'm coming home. I'm not going to stay no matter what they say'.

My mother died in the early hours of Saturday morning, 5 December 1981. She was waked for two days and buried on the following Monday. The rain was torrential the day we buried my mother. I remember being driven away from the graveyard in the black funeral car, my father in the middle and holding me on one side and Joe on the other. The day was black and as we stared in silence at the heavy rain, my father spoke: 'It rained the day I married your mother and it is raining the day I bury her'. To this day, I always think of my mother when I look out a window at heavy rain falling.

Even though my grandparents had eleven children, it seems that Helen was always their favourite. Her death had a terrible effect on them. I will always hear my grandfather's voice as he came to our house for the funeral. He arrived at the house and was crying and he called out: 'Why couldn't God have taken me instead of Ellen?' He was willing to die for her because he loved her. According to Margaret:

Ellen was always mammy and daddy's favourite and I remember saying to granddaddy after Ellen died, 'If you had the choice daddy, and if God said to you, I'm going to take one of them, could you choose?' And he said 'I

would have told him, he can take the whole lot of you, and give Ellen back'. And we said to him 'Do you mean that?' and he said 'Yes, I mean it, he can have all of you, if he'd give her back'.

My mother always kept in touch with her parents and while my grandmother would travel up to Dublin regularly, my grandfather always preferred to stay in Kilkenny, he hated to travel. There was always a strong excuse needed to get him to travel to Dublin. My mother was pregnant with Edmund and the baby was due any day. It was a Friday evening and my grandmother was going up to Dublin on the bus the next day to see her. Margaret remembers calling to see her parents on the Friday evening, and granddaddy suddenly said, 'Myself and mammy (he always called his wife mammy) are going to Dublin in the morning to see Helen'. Margaret was amazed that her father was travelling up to Dublin for no reason as he could easily have said he would wait until the baby was born and then go up.

So my grandparents got the bus up to Dublin the next day and when they arrived out to our house in Coolock my father told them my mother had only gone into the hospital that morning. And they were in the house an hour when the phone rang to say she had given birth to a baby boy. My grandparents went in to see her that evening and, as my grandfather was going home on the bus the next day, Sunday, he went in to see her again on Sunday before he left. And he said 'She was standing there at the window in the hospital looking out and there was a pub across the road and she said: 'See that pub over there Daddy, I'd love to be going in there with you now'. They both laughed and then my grandfather got the bus back to Kilkenny. As it was so unusual for my grandfather to travel to Dublin that time, in the years after, he would often speak about how he could never understand why he went up when he could easily have waited. But he often said: 'If I had waited, I would never have seen her that one last time'.

My brother Joe only has a few memories of my mother's death and doesn't think it is good to talk about it too much although it does not upset him to do so. He tries to get on with life and remember in other ways. My brother remembers as a teenager, priests trying to tell him that God needed my mother and that's why he took her, but for him and us, her baby needed her just as much. My brother remembers my mother as someone who was very outgoing and who enjoyed life:

She was well-liked, especially in Kilmore, even today I'd meet fellas from Coolock who remember her and always ask about her and talk about her, saying she was a great woman, a lovely woman, so people obviously liked her. She had a good personality.

Joe now has two beautiful children himself and his only regret is that he would like our mother to have seen them:

I would love them to have met her, for her to have met my children. My children are a pleasure and my mother would have loved it, that's the one thing I feel cheated on.

He says that:

I think deep down, you do hope there is a heaven where she is happy. That's not saying I believe in God and maybe it is selfish, it's just that I hope she is happy somewhere. I don't believe in saying that if I die I'll see her because I don't want to die, I want to spend time with my kids, but I do hope she's happy somewhere, maybe in heaven ... but I'd still like to have a mother and do feel that I've been robbed of something.

Like Joe, my biggest wish is to see my own three children grow up and be happy and I regret too that my mother never knew them, or they her. Like me, Joe would also have a fear of childbirth, for his wife Siobhán, and he was very nervous when she gave birth to their two children, afraid that something might happen.

My father reared Edmund himself, until he got married a few years later to Bridget Kelly. Bridget became a mother to Edmund and both Joe and myself were very happy for my father and Edmund to find someone new and special in their lives. It could not have been easy for Bridget but she was a great help to my father and they have been very happy together. When Edmund was older, he gradually became aware of the fact that his birth mother had died when he was born and both my father and Bridget have always been very open about this. While Edmund is aware that Bridget is not his biological mother, he calls her mother and she is in every sense because she raised him and loves him as her own son, just as my mother loved Eileen as her own child. As Edmund says: 'even though she didn't give birth to me, she is my mother in every other way'. Edmund was too young to be affected by my mother's death and it has not really affected his life, as he says:

Except for the fact that I have three grandmothers and three grandfathers and a load of relations down in Limerick, where Bridget is from, that you and Joe probably don't know very well.

All these years, Edmund has believed that he was the cause of our mother dying:

In a way, I am responsible, I was born and as a result she died, but I wouldn't necessarily feel guilty about it, it's not something you can blame yourself for.

Edmund was surprised to learn that none of us ever blamed his birth for my mother's death. We all knew how much my mother wanted a child and how much the pregnancy contributed to her death is something we will never know but we certainly never blamed Edmund for her dying. In the last few years, all my family have become very close again, maybe because Joe and I now have children of our own. Their grandparents are very important to them and so is 'Uncle Ed' and children do help bring people closer.

Margaret remembers that when my mother lost Eileen:

She never spoke, it really broke her heart, all she did was cry and cry and cry. That's why I thought it was so cruel that when she did have another baby she died a week later. I thought that was the cruellest thing to happen, even if she had been given a year or six months with the child.

My father too says:

It's the one thing I feel so sorry about, that she didn't have the pleasure of rearing Edmund. She was delighted when she got pregnant, delighted. It was worth more than a million pounds to her.

Margaret says:

I always took her to be a happy person, you know, she had a great personality. I can still hear your mother laughing, can you believe that! I can still hear her talking and laughing; I can still hear her laugh. I have my own memories of her that will stay with me for all time.

Someone once described death to me as 'turning off the light, because the dawn is coming'. Death is sometimes associated with darkness but death in the Celtic tradition is seen as an eternal world close to the natural world of nature and you are 'going back to where no shadow, pain or darkness can ever touch you again' (O'Donoghue, 1997). When we are born, we come from the darkness of the womb into the light, 'at birth you appear out of nowhere, at death you disappear to nowhere' (O'Donoghue, 1997). I am afraid of death, but know that in order to find peace, I must accept this part of my life. I

have always felt that the dead are gone from us, yet are always near in ways that we cannot understand. None of us will ever know where this place of death is, but hopefully it is a place of peace. Death is a subject we can find hard to talk about but, for me, it is important that I talk about my mother and keep her memory alive. I want to remember her without being morbid and without pain and I want my children to know about her. I think she, Helen, would have liked that.