

# Peggy, in her own words

*The life of Peggy Doyle, as she told it to Clare, October 2026*

For Mam, on her 85th. Every word is yours. Love, Clare, Michael and Anne.

## Water in the kitchen

I was born in Ballina, County Mayo, in 1942, the fourth of six, and the first thing I remember is water in the kitchen. The Moy came up in the winter of 1947 and my father carried the hens upstairs one by one, swearing at each of them by name. I thought it was the best thing that had ever happened. My mother did not.

The house was two rooms up and two down. Six children, my parents, and my grandmother, who lived with us and snored like a tractor through the wall. We had no electricity until I was nine. I do not say that to be pitied. I say it because when the light came on in the kitchen for the first time, all eight of us stood and looked at the bulb like it was the Pope.

## Nobody ever died of a bit of work

My father was the postman and then he worked at the creamery. My mother did everything else, which is how it was. If I came in complaining she would say, without looking up, "Peggy, nobody ever died of a bit of work." I have said it to my own children more times than I can count, and I hear her voice every time, not mine.

I was bold. I climbed the church roof for a dare and I bit a nun once, which I will not explain further except to say she had it coming and I was six. The nun who mattered was a different one. Sister Agnes taught me to read properly, not just to get through the words, and when I was eleven she gave me her own copy of *Jane Eyre*. I wanted to be a nurse, then for about a fortnight I wanted to be a nun like her, and then I wanted to be a nurse again. She was not offended. She said nursing was the same thing with better hours.

## A pound for my mother

My first job was behind the counter at Lipton's in Ballina. I was fifteen. It paid one pound and two shillings a week, and the pound went to my mother and the two shillings went to me, and I have never felt as rich since.

I met Tom at a dance in Enniscrone in 1961. He stood on my foot in the first dance and apologised for the whole of the second, and I thought he was a bit of an eejit, but a kind one. I was right on both counts, and I was glad of both for fifty-one years.

We were married in August 1964. It rained sideways, the cake fell off the table at the Downhill Hotel, and Tom's brother was drunk by three o'clock. It was a wonderful day. Anyone who tells you a wedding has to go right has not been to a good one.

## Harehills Lane

We went to Leeds the next year for the work. Two rooms on Harehills Lane and a bath shared with the floor. I cried for a month. Then I got on with it, which is what you did, and Leeds became home in the way a place does when your children are born in it.

Michael came in 1966, in a snowstorm, while Tom was at the works and could not be reached. Clare came in 1968, talking, and has not stopped. Anne came in 1971, the quiet one, who watched everything and still does. I have one story about each of them that I will tell them myself, because some things belong at a kitchen table and not in a book.

Next door on Harehills Lane was Bridie Flynn, and she was next door for forty years. She knew before I did, every time: when I was expecting, when Tom was hurt, when my mother was going. I do not know how. I have stopped asking.

## Nights at St James's

I nursed at St James's for thirty-one years. I was good at nights and I was good at the frightened ones, and I could get a tray down anyone, which the doctors never learned. In 1979 I told a consultant he was wrong about the Jenkins child, in front of the ward, and he was wrong, and the child went home. I was not thanked. I did not need to be.

The hardest year was 1983. Tom had his accident at the works and was off for fourteen months. I did nights at the hospital and days at home, and I do not remember sleeping. We did not go under. That is the whole of what I have to say about that year, and it is enough.

The thing I would do differently is 1976. My mother was dying in Mayo and I went for four days, because of the children and the shifts and the money. I should have gone for longer. I know it was not possible. I would still do it.

## What I made

I made a quilt from all our old clothes. It took eleven years, on and off, and it is on my bed now: Tom's work shirts, the girls' school dresses, a piece of the coat I wore to the dance in Enniscrone. People ask if it is valuable. It is to me.

I make my mother's brown bread with no recipe, because there was never a recipe. You know by the feel. Clare has nearly got it. Anne has it exactly and will not admit it.

The best year was 1994, when all three of them came home for Christmas with the first grandchildren and the house was full and too hot and nobody could hear anybody. In 2001 Tom and I went back to Ballina. The house was gone. The river was exactly the same. We stood on the bridge a long while and did not say much, and did not need to.

## What I know now

I believe now that people are mostly doing their best. I did not believe that at thirty; at thirty I thought most people could try harder, and I said so. Thirty-one years of nights will teach you otherwise, if you let them.

What I am proudest of is the three of them, and thirty-one years without a complaint on my record, in that order.

What I want my grandchildren to know is that I was bold, that I was once fifteen behind a counter in Ballina with two shillings in my pocket, and that none of it was planned. Not Leeds, not nursing, not Tom standing on my foot. You do the next thing, and then the next, and one day you have a life.

I had a good run, and I'm not finished.