

## The Rings

*by Marion Urch McNulty*

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JOSEPHINE LEANT HER FOREHEAD AGAINST THE PLANE WINDOW and gazed down at the wide sweep of the Irish sea below. If only the distance between her own childhood and her life in England could be spanned so easily, but forty long years stretched in between like thin threads unravelling across the water—and now, with the death of her mother—she felt cast off, adrift, as if the last thread had finally been broken.

A woman travelling alone, on the early flight from Manchester, there was hardly a trace of the girl who'd left Ireland all those years before. Her 'almost new' suit was from the church jumble sale and her grey hair was brushed neatly away from her face. She wore no make-up and no jewellery, not even a ring on her fingers. When she was young, she'd longed to go unnoticed but her dark hair and blue eyes had marked her out. In the town-lands around Mullinamore people said, 'those were the kind of looks that cause trouble', and at home, her mother pecked at her constantly like a hen pecking away at seeds.

Josephine smoothed down the fabric of her slightly faded skirt. Her sisters, Kathleen, Annie and Eileen would all be very smart, she could be sure of that. She pictured them, sleek and plump with the same powdered faces and coral lipstick. She'd always been the odd one out, while her sisters were as proud and unrelenting

as their mother. It was her own fault, she knew that. She'd been foolish and she'd paid the price.

In the hospital in Sligo Town, the undertaker's assistant was bathing Bridget Ellen while her children were flying or sailing across the Irish Sea from scattered points throughout England. In trains and cars, others were nearer, Ignatius, the youngest of all of them, even had time for a drink.

Josephine thought about her mother and sighed. When they were children, it always seemed to be Josephine who caught the back of her hand or the quickness of her tongue. Dreamy, they called her, like Daddy, who let the farm go to ruins as he wandered the fields, brooding on what might have been. Josephine looked down through the window. The sea was obscured by clouds now and the plane seemed to nose ahead just ahead of the fog.

She arrived at the hospital way too early, flapping helplessly along the corridors like a trapped and panicky bird. She asked the nurses and the undertaker and even the cleaner if she could spend time with her mother, but they all shooed her away. 'Just a few minutes,' she'd pleaded. 'It'll be busy when the ceremony starts. There'll hardly be time to think.'

'Time enough, there's time enough.' The undertaker shook his head and

guided her toward the door. 'We've to prepare your Mammy. Now, when she's laid out, then you can see her. She was a proud woman, your mother, she'd want to look her best.'

Josephine clutched his arm. 'Just a few minutes.'

He pushed her gently through the door. 'You can't hurry the dead.' he said.

Outside the hospital, people were coming in from the farms around Mullinamore, wrapping heavy coats, hats and scarves against the first freezing temperatures of winter. Family, cousins, neighbours: they all stood in small, silent groups as the fog thickened around them. Beside the entrance, Josephine stumbled into the unsteady arms of her brother, who enveloped her in a cloud of whiskey and talcum powder.

Ignatius sailed through life with the defensive curl of a smile on his lips, and even now, he retained the rakish air of his youth, though his swept back hair and long sideburns were now completely white.

'And Kathleen, is she alright? How's she taking it?' he asked.

The night mists were settling over the mountains behind them and Josephine's words trailed off as she spoke. 'There's still no sign of them.'

'They'll be awful upset if they miss the removal.'

Josephine nodded and looked away. Her three sisters, travelling together,

mourning together, and now caught in the fog together—wouldn't have given a thought for her, she was sure.

From within the hospital, a rectangle of light, stained blue by the curtains, shone against the darkness of the mountains. Behind the glass, the movements of people inside cast silhouettes like shadows of what might have been.

Josephine huddled closer to her brother as more people gathered around the door and along the road. As she searched through the fog for faces she knew, dread seeped into her as steadily as the moistness of the night. She tried to light a cigarette, but her trembling hands defeated her.

Dusk fell like a blanket, muffling low voices to whispers. By the time the undertaker in his stiff blacks opened the door, Josephine was eager for the light. Inside, the walls of the annexe were crumbling, the plaster powdery beneath a layer of fading purple paint, the room bare except for a large statue of the Virgin in one corner.

Bridget Ellen was laid out in the middle of the room, with the undertaker standing on one side and a tall thin nun on the other. She was lying in a heavy oak coffin lined with paper lace, a picture of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin resting on her

chest. Her robe was white, her hands locked around wooden rosary beads, the paper lace folding up around the coffin like petals. Her face was waxy pale and her wrinkles had fallen away. With her eyes closed and the set of her mouth relaxed, she looked almost serene, though the jut of her bones was thrown into sharp relief. It was impossible to imagine the world without Bridget Ellen there to set it right.

Ignatius was the first to step forward. When he grasped Bridget Ellen's face in his hands, her skin crinkled against his fingers. He planted a firm kiss on her forehead.

Josephine was more hesitant. When she reached out, coolness seeped up through her fingers, as if she was touching marble. 'I'm sorry,' she whispered.

Behind her, she heard her brother's voice. 'The fog must be awful bad. There's still no sign of Kathleen and the others. We'll have to start without them.'

By the time Josephine stepped back to join the rest of the family at the head of the coffin, the undertaker had opened the doors and a stream of people began to file in. One by one, they shook her hand and then moved down the line of brothers beside her. 'Sorry for your troubles,' they murmured.

'And Kathleen, Annie and Eileen, where are they?'

When she was greeted by the question, her mouth tightened in response.

In the passing faces, she looked for signs that she might have grown up with

this person or be related, searching for a flicker of a face she might have known thirty or more years ago. Most of the people who'd known Bridget Ellen recognized Josephine now, because over the years she'd grown more like her. The lines of her face were forming into the same pattern, the mouth becoming pinched and drawn. When a second cousin stepped up, her face opened in recognition and the two women clutched each with both hands. '*Aragh*, she was a grand woman, your mother, a grand woman.'

The callers kissed Bridget Ellen or made the sign of the cross on her forehead.

'Sorry for your troubles.'

'Sorry for your troubles.'

As the mourners snaked around the room, the voices began to echo. Josephine became aware of the hands squeezing hers—palms cracked from working too many winters or calloused and bulbous, swollen red or purple by angina or problems with circulation.

'Sorry for your troubles.'

'Sorry for your troubles.'

The words seeped into her and the consoling hands edged into the gap around her heart.

‘Sorry for your troubles.’

‘Sorry for your troubles.’

Her eyes drifted from her mother’s face to her fingers looped with beads. She remembered those hands, red from the stream and twisted with arthritis, raw where the metal handles of the buckets pushed into her palms, her rings worn to a thin sliver on the inside curve. Fingers so swollen she couldn’t have removed the rings had she wanted to. She still wore those two rings now, the plain gold band of her wedding ring, so worn it looked almost silver and another ring set with a rough crystal, that Ignatius had given her.

Her hands were white now, the rings loose on papery fingers.

Josephine squeezed her eyes shut and rejoined the prayers but a voice was ringing in her ears. ‘*Aragh* Josephine, have you no sense at all?’

When the service was over, the nun disentangled the wooden beads from Bridget Ellen’s fingers and slipped off the rings. With the beads and the jewellery in her hands she turned, then wavered. Ignatius nodded towards Josephine who glanced nervously toward the door.

She had a vision of her sisters bursting through, eyes blazing, Kathleen flanked by Eileen and Annie. ‘The rings go to the eldest. They belong to Kathleen!’

With her palms outstretched and the nun about to fill the cup of her hands, Josephine felt caught between guilt and a growing feeling that was spreading. Could it be possible, that the weather had conspired to choose her, just this once, as being in some small way special?

She looked at the nun uncertainly and the nun responded with a reassuring smile.

The undertaker had been quietly watching this family who all went to England. When the nun gave Josephine the rings, he saw her face light up. For a brief moment she was radiant. He saw the young girl smiling through the years in that look upon her face. He was remembering a blushing, smiling girl in a summer frock covered in a pattern of yellow roses.

At that very moment, the doors flew open, the wind ballooning the curtains into the room. Annie and Eileen supported Kathleen between them, as wild eyed and distraught, she stared at Josephine and the nun.

Josephine closed her fingers around the rings and the beads.

‘She had no right,’ whispered Annie.

‘She must know that,’ echoed Kathleen.

‘Sure, of course, she does.’

Josephine glanced over at her three sisters. A wall of mourners stood between them, separating them more effectively than their mother had ever done. For once, it was Josephine nestled beside Bridget Ellen and her sisters who lingered by the door.

‘We’ll get them from her later,’ Eileen whispered.

Josephine stood her ground, beads and rings clutched to her chest.

The nun marked a last cross on Bridget Ellen’s forehead, then she and the undertaker folded in the lace and lifted the lid. Josephine watched intently until the last glimpse of her mother disappeared.

Outside, the fog hung like a shroud as the mourners dispersed. Josephine sat in the back of the car behind the hearse, aware of her sisters caught up in condolences outside. Her hands were numb from all the handshakes but she could feel the beads pushing up like bulbs against her fingers. She opened her hands and picked the two rings from the tangle of rosary beads. The crystal was scratched and chipped, the backs of the rings almost worn away. The metal felt cool against the heat of her palm. The rings slipped easily onto her fingers. They fitted her perfectly. She could hear her mother’s voice ringing out but she shook her head with an affectionate smile. Bridget Ellen was part of her now, whether she liked it or not.

**Marion Urch McNulty** is an award-winning artist and writer. Her first novel *Violent Shadows* (Headline Review) was published in the UK in 1996. Her second novel *An Invitation to Dance* (Brandon 2009). Various short stories have been published in Ireland, England, Canada and the US. Her video works are held in galleries around the world and archived by the University of Dundee.

