

THE BIRTHMARK

Richard Maxwell

"I DON'T KNOW how to say this, Mrs Ryan, but your daughter Sarah is pregnant". The woman was speechless and Sarah broke down in tears. Not a word was spoken as they cycled back home.

It was the beginning of September and Sarah, a bright and well-mannered student, was going into third year in Secondary School. Her younger brother, Joe, was just starting first year. Sarah had been feeling sick on the previous day and one of her teachers had brought her home. As she was still not well, her mother had brought her to see the doctor, never imagining she would be given such a diagnosis.

Tom Ryan a gentle type of a man, was outside painting the gate when they arrived. "Come in Tom," Mrs Ryan said, as they left their bicycles in the shed. She told him the news they got from the doctor "Who is responsible for this?" he asked his daughter. "John Shaw," she replied, and, in a trembling voice, told him the whole story. Tom left the kitchen and went down to Shaw's, but John denied everything.

"Come into the sitting room," Tom said to his wife Rose, when he finally arrived back home. Sarah was left alone in the kitchen. Found guilty now, in her absence, she would have no place in the family home. The relevant authorities at the time had swung into action—the State, the Church and, most unusual of all, her parents.

Her suitcase was being packed and she dared not ask where or when she was going, it was like a closed order, everyone sworn to silence. Joe came home from school "How

are you feeling Sarah?" he asked in his innocent way "Much better, Joe", she lied.

Next morning, after Joe had gone to school, Sarah Ryan was taken from her home by her own people—a fate that befell every young girl who found themselves in her predicament in those dark days. They came to what looked like a big house or castle, drove up the avenue and stopped.

In gold letters Sarah could read CONVENT OF MERCY and beside the main entrance was a statue of the Virgin Mary with a baby in her arms. The front door was opened by a middle aged nun. "I am Tom Ryan, Sarah's father", he told her. "Come in, we are expecting you", she said.

They were taken down a long corridor and into the dining room. Tea and biscuits were brought in by a heavily pregnant young girl, about the same age as Sarah, who began to picture herself in the girl's condition in just a few months. The Reverend Mother took the suitcase. "I'll show you to your room", she said. Not a word was spoken as Sarah walked away. It was a sad and cold farewell.

There were six beds in the room. "You will be working in the laundry," Mother Theresa told her. "We have strict rules," she said, "you get up at six in the morning; after prayers, breakfast; you start work at eight o'clock; everyone has to be in bed by seven o'clock".

She was then called up to the kitchen. Tea was served, toasted bread and scrambled eggs. She was hungry now and ate all she was given. Six girls sat around the table. They spoke to her and welcomed her, some

of her own age and some older, all in the same boat as herself. Sarah was feeling happier now; it was a friendlier place than the one she had just left behind. She slept well and was awakened by the sound of the bell. Prayers were said. Tea, egg and toast for breakfast.

That morning she had her first viewing of the laundry. Clothes piled high, it was hard work washing, and ironing and she was glad when the bell rang at six o'clock. The days moved into weeks into months; no contact with the outside world. The news had now spread about Sarah at home.

Joe came home from school one evening. "Mammy", he said, "Jackie Flynn said in school today that I was going to be an Uncle". "Who told her that?" she asked. "Her mother", he replied. "Pass no heed on her," she said. "That mother has a very big mouth." When Joe asked about Sarah, he was told she was with her Aunt Helen in Kilkenny. Mrs Ryan and her sister Helen had a falling out over the sale of the family farm, and there had been no contact between them after that.

At the end of February, Sarah wasn't well and was confined to bed. A few days later she gave birth to a baby boy. "7 pounds 6 ounces", she was told as the tiny bundle was placed in her arms. Sarah was in tears as she looked at the tiny face and the blue eyes and couldn't help noticing the birthmark over his right eye. It was about the size of a sixpence. Suddenly he was taken from her.

A week later she went back to working in the laundry. She was at her lowest point now, the future looked bleak, but she had become friendly with the ladies in the office. Mary Wallace, who was from Kilkenny, knew her Aunt Helen. Mary gave her notepaper and an envelope. She wrote to her aunt, who was a nurse in Kilkenny and

told her about all that was after happening to her. Mary posted it, for poor Sarah had not even the price of a stamp. About a week later the Rev. Mother called Sarah into her office. A well-dressed woman sat on a chair. "Hello Sarah," she said, "I heard you were here. "Aunt Helen" she answered in a faint voice "You were small when last I saw you Sarah," "but you still remember me, I have put my name down as your guardian and from now on I will be looking after you".

"When can I go"? she asked the Rev Mother. "You can go now," she replied. "Your aunt is responsible for you from now on; she has signed the necessary documents. Get your things and do not make any contact with the rest of the girls". "You auld strap" a rejuvenated Sarah said to herself, as she ran to her room to collect her belongings. Her Aunt Helen was now her knight in shining armour and had come to rescue her.

A huge sigh of relief surged through Sarah, as they drove out the convent gate and on to Helen's home. She had lost so much—her youthful innocence, her freedom and her little baby, but now she was safe at last. She gave her Aunt a big hug and went to bed and had the best night's sleep in a long, long time.

Next day, Helen got Sarah some school books and a part time job in Flynn's newspapers in the city. In September Sarah started school in the Ursuline College and was determined to study hard for her Leaving Certificate. Three years later, when the results came out, she was delighted and decided to take up nursing as a career.

After five years nursing in a Dublin hospital, she was anxious to see a bit of the world. Sarah applied for and got a job in New York, in the US Military Hospital. The war was raging in Vietnam at that time and the wounded were being brought home. She

bade a tearful farewell to her aunt Helen. As it was Sarah's first experience of the horrors of war when she started work, she found it tough for a while helping the wounded, mostly young lads who were conscripted into the army and sent abroad to fight someone else's war. She soon knew them by name. One day when she was reading Peter Stevenson's chart, she couldn't help noticing his date of birth, 28th February 1952, the same date and year her baby boy was born. Peter was recovering well and was having the bandages removed from his head. Sarah could not believe what she was looking at—a birthmark over his right eye.

"I am Peter's mother", said a lady who had come to visit. Peter added "I was adopted when I was only four weeks old and I was very lucky to be in the care of a lovely family. I would, of course, love to meet my birth mother; I believe she came from Ireland." Sarah was in tears now and excused herself. "You seem very upset about something," the woman said to Sarah when they met in the corridor. Sarah said "I have something to tell you." Mrs Stevenson was dumbfounded as she listened to her story "We couldn't have children" she explained, "and we found Peter at an adoption centre in Ireland in March 1952. I'll tell Peter what you are after telling me, both of you will have to have a test done to know for sure".

The tests were done and three days later Peter and his adoptive Mum arrived at the hospital. Peter could not contain himself. "It's true, it's true, you are my birth mother", he exclaimed and ran into Sarah's arms. This was the greatest day of their lives for each of them. Sarah went into the ladies' room. "There is a God after all", she said to herself, remembering all who helped her, especially her Aunt Helen.

How lucky she was on that morning, so long ago, to have noticed the birthmark.

THE CALVIN' RAP

Frank Whitney

Tis calvin season
She's ready to push
But she needs a hand

Take the strain
Pull the leg
Two legs out
Roll your sleeves
the head is up
Pull like feck

Work the snout
Check the tongue
Pull the head out.
Check for life
pull pull pull

Get past the shoulders
Check calf is ok
Check yer cow is ok
Pull pull pull

Get out past the hips
Move straw in place
She needs a soft landing
Pull pull pull

The calf plops out
Move the calf about
to the cows head
The cow
licks her licks her licks her

Spray iodine on navel
Make sure the calf is alert
Move the calf to a bedded area
Release yer cow to her calf

Watch the bond,
slip sliding away
now standing and sliding
Suck suck suck
Now off to bed
Its snooze snooze snooze