

The Day of the Eye Test

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MARGARET HARNETT was eight when an eye inspector, on a visit to her small rural school, discovered she was short sighted. Margaret's eyes needed further examination so an appointment would be sent out for her to visit the clinic in the town the next time it was held. An optician attended about once every six weeks or two months, always on a Tuesday, her mother was told. She was the only pupil in the school to have an eyesight problem so she would have to walk the three miles each way to and from the town by herself, as her father had died the previous summer and her mother, Ellen, had taken over from him as the school's principal. Aunt Josephine's house was halfway so she could stop there for a drink of water and a word of encouragement if she needed to.

An appointment card for Margaret A Harnett to attend Dr. Mahon's clinic in the town came in September. It was for the following Tuesday. Margaret felt scared as she set off in the morning unsure of what was going to happen to her. It was a bright warm autumn day. She felt the rays of the sun on her back. The fields on either side were green with the after grass from late mown hay. Cattle grazed here and there among them.

When Margaret saw her aunt's house

in the distance the knot in her chest eased. She loved the feeling of relief. She called from the road and Josephine came out wiping flour from her hands with her floral pinafore.

'Well, Margaret. Are you all right, child? Come in for a cup of milk or water if you prefer.'

'I'm okay Auntie Joe. But am I all right for time? I have to be at Mrs Crann's at eleven.'

Josephine turned to the big clock inside in the dark hall.

'Loads of time, dear. Loads of time. It's not half ten yet. You'll be there in no time. Make sure you call in on your way home. I'll have a nice cup of tea for you then.'

Other people, mostly adults, were now walking to the town. While she didn't know them, many of them knew her. James Glynn passed in his pony and trap and offered her a lift. She climbed on to the seat beside his wife Mary.

'Just so, Margaret. Are you away from school today? Your poor mother needed some messages, poor thing, I suppose,' Mary said.

Before she could answer James launched into a hymn of praise about her father.

'The master was a lovely man. He was tip-top, aye indeed, tip-top. Dang

it, it was a terrible thing that happened to him. He's sorely missed. I mind the time he'd come over to the little pond in the bottoms catching eels. He was a great man for the eels, God rest the master's soul'.

'Ah, your poor mother, you're a good child, a great help to her, to be sure, just so,' Mary Glynn added, resettling her basket of eggs firmly on the floor between their feet.

Margaret was too full of shame to tell her neighbours the reason for her visit to the town so the three fell silent. She heard the slow clip clop of the pony as he pulled the trap up the hill before the town. The pony was in fact a genet, a strong creature so that once the hill had been negotiated they trotted easily down onto the town's main street. Margaret thanked them for their kindness and headed for the makeshift health clinic, a room in Mrs Crann's house. She stopped at Willie's sweet-and-barbershop to buy chocolate with the money Ellen had given her that morning.

Mrs Crann ticked Margaret's name off a list.

'Wait in there like a good child,' she said, pointing to a room on the other side of the narrow corridor. The house was one of several known as the 'tin' houses. The walls and roofs were

indeed made of galvanised tin, brown and rusty towards the bottom where the walls met the ground. Weeds and wildflowers grew around the edges.

Several elderly people, or so Margaret thought, were already seated in the dark waiting room. One tall sun-wrinkled man was puffing on a long brown pipe. The women and other men were almost all smoking too. They all wore glasses with gold wire or red tortoise shell rims and varying degrees of thickness. Margaret kept her head down and sat beside the man smoking the pipe. She loved the smell of smoke. Her father had smoked a lot and now that he was dead no one smoked in the house. She missed the smell. The group fell silent when Margaret first entered the room but gradually began to chat in short sentences, even monosyllables, to each other. They made some comment about her as she sat down.

Mrs Crann, a school friend of Ellen's, came in and announced to the waiting patients that the Dr. Mahon would take Margaret next. She was too young to be kept waiting and had a long way to walk. None of the adults demurred. The child would go next, they agreed.

Margaret entered the dark eye-testing room. It was in reality Mrs Crann's parlour. She could hardly make out the figure of the be-speckled man who peered out at her over his glasses as she entered. Gradually her eyes adjusted to the gloom.

'This is Margaret Harnett, Doctor. She's just eight. Your youngest patient

today'. Mrs Crann's voice sounded louder because of the darkness.

'Come in, child' the doctor replied. 'What a great little girl you are. Sit up there'. He helped her onto a chair that had several cushions piled on it, one on top of the other in readiness for her.

'Have you had your eyes tested before?' he asked.

'I had them done in school, Doctor. With all the other pupils. I was the only one who couldn't see right. That is why I am here,' Margaret said in a low shy voice.

'Well this won't take long. And I'm not a dentist, so it won't hurt.'

The man was kindly and she was no longer afraid. She had noticed that Mrs Crann had stayed in the room with her and felt happy that she had.

Almost immediately Dr Mahon placed his large smoke-smelling hand over her face pulling down gently with his thumb on the bottom of her eye. She could just make out something that looked like a pen in his other hand. Then she felt a cold substance being dropped into the inside corner of her right eye. She flinched backwards but the large hand held on firmly, repeating the exact same action on her left eye. When the doctor took his hand away she drew her face back instinctively. She blinked to regain her vision but the vision would not return. Everything was a blur. She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her fists but there was nothing, only the shallow, watery view you got if you opened your eyes underneath the

sea. Not being able to see almost caused her to lose her balance on the chair.

'Now, there's a great girl,' Dr Mahon said as he wiped the excess liquid from her face. 'Try not to rub your eyes, Margaret. We have to wait for a few minutes for the drops to take effect so go out to the waiting room and we'll call you back in soon'.

Mrs Crann helped her off the chair and led her out of the room. She sat on a low stool in the hallway near the front door as she told Mrs Crann she was feeling weak. Smoke and chat were flowing out from the waiting room. The adults wouldn't want her in there no more than she wanted to be with them. She needed to be quiet now because she couldn't see properly. Things were as dark as in the nights since the school eye test when, terrified of going blind, she'd search the room to notice a sliver of brightness in a parting or a tear of the bedroom curtain.

Her sight became weaker and weaker. She could only now see the outlines of even the simplest items near her. Only shades of colour remained. The dark patches were doors or furniture like the chair and stool beside her or was it the dark wainscoting of the lower part of the walls, that were the dark shadows coming towards her? The upper part of the walls, the ceiling and the rectangle of the open door were a grey white colour, like fog. It too swirled towards and away from her streaming eyes, just like fog would.

How would she get home, Margaret wondered? How would she see to get home? Mrs Crann placed a cup of tea in her hand and pointed to the marmalade biscuits she left on another stool beside her.

'Thanks, Mrs Crann,' she said. She was glad of them.

The voices, the smoke, the whiteness and blackness swirled around her. Figures came and went. Figures pounded down the linoleum floor of the hall and out the open door onto the street. Some voices said 'Good luck now, child,' as their giant legs passed her low stool. Her eyes continued to drain and swim in liquid.

Mrs Crann came and took her hand and led her back to the doctor's room.

'Up you sit there now,' he said and she mounted the pile of cushions again.

'Lift up your head now, Margaret'

Dr Mahon placed a cold heavy metal frame on her face pushing back her curly brown hair to adjust it firmly behind her ears. It weighed heavily on the bridge of her nose. Was this how glasses really felt? Some strands of her hair got caught in the thick shafts of the frame pulling them tightly away from her scalp. She could feel the doctor's breath on her face.

'Chin up, like a good girl,' Dr Mahon said as he fixed the frame more securely behind her ears. Satisfied at last with its arrangement he turned his body slightly away from her and bent over a large brown case, containing row upon row of metallic circles, maybe six

or more rows, each with small metal knobs attached. The case was on another chair just in front of her. It looked like it might fall off, it was so big. The doctor selected several of these circles that Margaret later came to know as lenses, returned some to the case and chose others instead.

Margaret sat very still, her head erect, observing his movements with lowered eyes. At this closeness she could see better, the watery nature of her more distant vision giving way to a kind of magnifying effect at close range. The strangeness made her feel nauseous. The circles clicked together like tin chimes when Dr. Mahon handled them. He placed a glass in one eye of the frame and covered Margaret's other eye with a piece of cardboard.

'Now, then Margaret, tell me can you read the last line over there?' The doctor shone a powerful light behind her head and pointed to a chart in the corner of the room. There were large and small black letters graduated in size on a white background. It was similar to the one they had used for the eye examination in school.

Margaret read all she could, the glass was changed, she read again.

The doctor tested her other eye using the same method. Margaret couldn't say whether one glass was better than another, whether she could see better on one side or the other when the doctor asked questions.

'Is this better than this?' he asked, changing the glass circles around.

'A bit better, I think', she replied while just not knowing whether it was or not. Occasionally the doctor sighed. Was he annoyed with her answers, but she just couldn't be sure what was better or not as he switched and swapped lenses.

At last the examination ended. Dr Mahon seemed satisfied that he had got a result. He was writing and ticking things off on a paper pad.

Mrs Crann helped her from the chair and led her out of the room and onto the street.

'Tell your mother that the glasses will be sent out in the post to you. Is that alright, dearie?' Margaret nodded to the blurred mass of pink that was Mrs Crann's face. 'Ok then, take care on the way home, won't you? And tell your mother I was asking for her'.

'I will, and thanks'.

Margaret turned for home, the street ahead a swarming movement of exaggerated shape and noise with the lower parts of the walls and the road coming up to meet her watery gaze. She stayed close to the houses, rubbing her hands against the wrought iron railings of the gardens and along the walls of the houses that were directly on the pavement.

Once she had passed Willie's sweet-and-barbershop and had reached the top of the hill she began to feel safer. She was on the open road, half way was her Aunt Joe's where she could have a drink and in another half she would be at the school.