

# SONG FOR ROSALEEN

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*For Mum*

*'Have you asked her if you can write about her?' said my writer friend.*

*'She's dead.'*

*'I know. But have you asked her?'*

*'I'm scared she'll say no.'*

*Before I could pluck up the courage, Mum came to me in a dream, wading out of a lake, the hem of her skirt dragging in the mud. 'You haven't forgotten about me, have you?' she said.*



*Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;  
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.*

— Dylan Thomas

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## CHAPTER ONE

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# SPEAKING OUT

‘WHAT’S THE ONE thing you can’t say?’ asked the voice at the other end of the phone.

Without warning, a picture of my mother filled my mind. She’d been dead for six years, had vascular dementia for almost as long before that. When she started forgetting, she was in her early seventies, a widow, living alone. My four sisters, brother and I rallied round her as best we could while she fought the disease she didn’t know she had. It was a sad, bewildering time that tested our certainties and bonds.

The caller was from the 2015 TEDxWellingtonWomen team. Barely back on New Zealand soil from two years overseas, I’d been invited to speak at their event and was struggling to come up with a topic. Her question cut through my confusion. The one thing I couldn’t say was that I still wanted to write about my mother.

I'd been wanting to write about Mum since she died. The decision seemed simple at first. It was my story to tell; Mum wasn't around to veto or be hurt by it. But it was also my siblings' story. While some supported the idea, others had misgivings. These were around keeping our mother's memory — and memory loss — sacred and intact and private. Just like Mum herself, a back-room girl, never one for the limelight.

I mostly believed that putting our experience into words would help my family and perhaps others come to terms with the heartbreak that is dementia. But I couldn't guarantee that. Memoirs tear some families apart. I had hit an impasse: my right to speak out, others' for silence. I sensed Mum's hand beyond the grave packing me off to Timor-Leste with my husband Pat for two years. Time out to cool my heels. But now we were home and her story continued to tug at my sleeve.

Delving into my past and revealing other people's lives was not new to me. While Mum had dementia, I wrote *Trust*, a book about a group of Wellington gang women with whom I'd lived and worked in the 1970s. As I struggled with my responsibilities to them and their stories, my tutor told me, 'Write as if everyone's dead and worry about people's feelings later.' Good advice for unleashing creative flow, no use for unpicking ethics.

Ethics were my focus on the wintry May afternoon that I stood in the red TEDx circle in the Wellington City Gallery, sick with terror that my mind would go blank as it had at the dress rehearsal. The thought of my daughter Megan in the 100-strong audience steadied me. I took a deep breath and projected the phrase 'Compassionate Truth' on the big screen behind me. Historian Michael King's litmus test for biographers came close to my own, I said. Yes, we must be fearless in the pursuit of truth but we must be equally compassionate towards those whose lives we trample through in search of it.

Using my gang women experience, I talked about the power of stories to heal and connect us, but also their potential to

re-traumatise even willing subjects and to expose unwitting bystanders. Back and forth I went between the merits and perils of baring our souls, searching for the alchemy between truth and compassion that would make everything all right. The best I could come up with was that comparing notes as honestly as we can encourages us to stand back and reflect on our lives — and when we reflect, we find compassion, not just for other people but for ourselves.

Finally I put up a photo of Mum two years before she died, holding her great-granddaughter Avah. Mum's head is bowed over the sleeping baby, her crooked fingers cradle Avah's perfect ones. Old life greets new. I acknowledged I wanted to write about Mum and said for now I had to sit with the *don't know*. My final words were a warning: 'Proceed with caution. Lives and relationships are at stake when we decide to tell a story, even one we regard as our own.'



AS I WALKED offstage, I felt giddy with relief that my memory hadn't let me down. But beneath this euphoria was a growing clarity. The tension between speaking out and shutting up was never going to go away. Not writing about Mum wouldn't solve the angst, just shuffle it around. Somehow the answer lay in the doing of it, fraught and messy as that might be.

I already had the scaffolding for the story: thousands of emails between me and my siblings that chronicled our care of Mum after she got dementia. During this time I'd noted down some of my key conversations with her. Even more precious, I'd captured her voice on tape reminiscing about her childhood. Letting me record her memories had taken some persuading. She was a listener not a talker; she couldn't imagine why her life would interest anyone else. But when her brother Des came

to visit from Adelaide in October 2003, I'd pinned them both down.

Even then she was sceptical. 'If we get a wriggle on we can be finished by lunchtime,' she said as I arrived to the smell of fresh coffee and homemade shortbread.

'I hope not,' I said. I'd put aside the whole day for this and was in no hurry to swap the tranquillity of Mum's house for the teenage-boy hubbub of my own. I set up my tape recorder at one end of her oval dining table that seated 12 at a squash. Through the sliding doors, a medley of pot plants vied for space on a narrow deck.

Des appeared and wrapped me in an awkward hug.

'Who wants to go first?' I asked when Mum had cleared the cups.

'I go first,' she said — so unlike her.

Des tipped his head in her direction. 'Yes. Oldest.' At 73, his big sister could still pull rank.

'Rosaleen Mary Desmond.' Mum gave her married name in clipped vowels, followed by her date of birth: 'Eighteen — eleven — twenty-nine. Born in Roxburgh Cottage Hospital.' Des came four years later. They had an older half-brother, Gerard, from their father's first marriage, but he was away at boarding school and didn't figure in their young lives.

As Mum and Des relaxed, a familiar tale emerged: immigrants arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1860s and 1870s in search of gold, land and a better life. On their father's side were the Waighths of German and English descent — 'austere', Mum said; on their mother's, the outgoing Kearney clan, Irish through and through. I recognised some of the names from the family tree that Mum had embroidered as a young woman, and which still hung in her lounge.

John Harry Waigth was nearly 50 when Mum was born. Orchardist, mayor of Roxburgh (like his father and brother), a pillar of the Catholic Church, he seemed more like a kindly grandfather to his two younger children. His second wife, Mary



*left*  
Mum, about  
five years old.

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*below*  
Mum and her  
brother Des,  
around 1939.

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Rose, was 20 years his junior and had grown up on a sheep farm in Ranfurly.

Despite being babies of the Depression, Mum and Des had a secure and bountiful childhood in the modest brick house set in lovely grounds off the main road of the small Central Otago town. There were veges and chickens in the garden, milk delivered to metal cans at the gate, apricots and cherries from the orchard established by their grandfather. All year round the whole family slept on the open verandah, canvas blinds the only buffer against winter nights that froze sheets on the washing line and water in the pipes. 'It was a very healthy upbringing,' said Mum, who on this mild spring day in Wellington had her wood burner cranked up to sauna levels.

As the young wife of an important man, Mary Rose cooked and sewed, bottled and pickled, had a talent for flower-arranging, was on the church cleaning roster and the school committee. She didn't read much, Des said. 'She was a very proud lady, proud of her presentation. Always well dressed and her hair well done. All those Kearney girls were.'

He could have been describing Mum, except Mum usually had two books on the go, one upstairs and one for bed. I glanced across the polished table at her. In spite of her love of good food and the cream that laced her coffee, she'd become gaunt in the ten years since Dad died. But a bright lipstick offset the striped blouse buttoned to the neck to hide her wrinkles. Two gold chains hung over it, matched by discreet gold earrings. Her hair was permed, face powdered, cheeks rouged, just like every morning, visitors or not. Elegance ran in her blood, it seemed.

My fear that Des, the schoolteacher, might dominate the conversation quickly faded. Brother and sister had an easy rapport. Before my eyes, they turned back into whispering, wide-eyed children, free to play in the gum plantation behind the house, go tadpoling in the creek and bake at the swimming baths on long summer afternoons.

A cast of unconventional adults populated their lives. Foremost among these ‘homegrown characters’ were their mother and her sisters, Sarah and Vera. These women were not just classy dressers but forthright, spirited women, practical jokers with a strong attachment to each other.

They loved the races, Mum said. ‘I can still see her’ — she meant her mother — ‘sitting listening to the trots over the radio, and she’d be riding.’ Mum bounced up and down in her chair like a jockey, flapping her arms.

Sarah, the oldest, was partial to a port wine and brandy before lunch. To demonstrate the effect of her aunt’s whisky-laced trifle on Mum’s four-year-old cousin Laurette, Mum rocked back and forth before pitching headfirst into the table. I couldn’t remember when I’d last seen her so animated.

I wondered if she was lonelier than she let on. After Dad’s death, she’d kept going without complaint, filled her days with useful tasks, cooked nutritious meals for one and seemed to cherish her solitude. Perhaps she’d had no choice, I thought. Unlike the generations of women before and after her, Mum didn’t have a safety net of sisters to fall back on. She blessed her five daughters with that gift — the complex love borne of shared genes, shared gender, shared history — but she had to walk through life alone.

Except for us, of course, her six children and 18 grandchildren. Like me, my younger sisters Rose, Ginny and Kate lived nearby. During school holidays, my older sister Liz often made the four-hour trip from Hastings with a carload of kids, while my only brother Matt yo-yoed between his work in South East Asia and family in Wellington.

But Mum needed company her own age. I was pleased that Des and his wife Chris were taking her down south to visit descendants of the relatives they’d been talking about. ‘Your bloody cousins,’ Des said. He was quoting his older cousin Jack, he explained at our looks of surprise: my balding, softly spoken uncle didn’t usually swear.

Jack had Alzheimer's disease, Des said. 'Occasionally he and his wife went downtown to Alexandra to do some shopping, which is not very big, and when he came out, he couldn't find her or his car. Everybody was helping him to look for a yellow Holden. They eventually found her sitting in a blue Datsun.' He chuckled.

'It's not funny, Des,' Mum said quietly. 'It is when you're your age. But it's not funny at my age.'

Undeterred, Des carried on. Jack's family asked his doctor to say he wasn't fit to drive. But when Jack turned up for the medical, a locum gave him the all-clear. So his children took his car keys. The last time Des had called in, Jack thumped him on the chest and said, 'It was your bloody cousins that did it. 'Not "my children" but "your cousins",' Des said.

Everyone joined in the laughter this time, including Mum. We stopped for lunch and she produced macaroni cheese in individual ramekins out of nowhere. There was no more talk of finishing early. Once undammed, her memories flowed as deep as the Clutha River that skirted Roxburgh but was too dangerous to swim in.

When we resumed, the talk turned to boarding school, the only option for small-town Catholic kids seeking an academic and religious college education. Mum's main memories of St Dominic's College in Dunedin, 100 miles from Roxburgh, where she was one of 30 boarders, were of early homesickness, the dreadful wartime food rations, and the 'absurd' discipline of the Dominican sisters.

She pushed a faded blue magazine across the table towards me. '*The Dominican Star*, December 1947', I saw on the cover. 'You can read it later,' she said.

As the afternoon darkened, the stories began to circle back on each other. Mum was looking tired. 'I think we're all running out of puff because I feel as if Des and I are starting to get a bit boring now,' she said in her no-nonsense way. 'We probably need a port wine and brandy.'

‘Will gin do?’ I asked, turning off my tape recorder. I took the stopper out of the decanter on the walnut sideboard, a Roxburgh heirloom. When we all had a glass in hand, I proposed a toast to their South Island trip.

Back home I pored over Mum’s school magazine, spirited away in a drawer for more than 50 years, and found her everywhere in its pages. She returned to college as a senior boarder a week late because she was ‘tripping in the North Island’, according to a gossipy diary entry. She took the part of Our Lady in a school play. R. Waigh topped the list of Form V ‘optima students’. She won prizes for literature and history and passed an advanced senior elocution exam. Even more thrilling, she won the ‘Wreath’, a special prize decided by pupils. (Des later told me she won it an unprecedented two years in a row.)

But the biggest shock was finding Mum in a photo of the debating team that competed in the Bishop’s Shield, a regional competition between seven Catholic colleges, boys and girls. Not only did the team win their debate but Mum was also the best speaker. I was flabbergasted. The first time I heard her make a speech was at a family birthday when she was in her seventies. While Dad was alive, she rarely ventured an opinion in public; he did the talking for both of them. I wondered when the intelligent, popular, articulate young woman in the black gym frock holding the shield had lost her voice, and whether she might be finding it again.

A week later, Mum was back from the South Island. Everything had gone well, she said. But it was good to be home.

That night, Des phoned. He came straight to the point. ‘I’ve got bad news, Pip,’ he said. ‘There’s something wrong with Rosaleen.’