

# What Did You Do in the War, Mother?

*by Angela Mairead Coid*

*L'auteure nous fait part des expériences de sa mère comme propriétaire d'un hôtel en Irlande du Nord pendant la Seconde guerre mondiale.*

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When Hitler invaded Poland, my mother bleached her hair blonde. The drab depression years were over, my father (a merchant sailor) had a shore job, and Mother was determined to face the threat of the Third Reich with a Betty Grable hair-do. These Hollywood looks required a more elegant residence than a terrace house in Belfast, so she took over a small hotel outside Carnalea, enlisting the family as staff. Carnalea was a dormitory village on the shore of Belfast Lough, close to the Hollywood army barracks and the camp at Crawfordsburn. A dormitory is a cold lifeless place and a war is a miserable life-taking affair, but Mother could see the possibility of extracting some warmth and profit out of both.

A good hotel serves good food, so Mother joined the black market. The food officer became the sworn enemy of the family. My older sisters were warned, "Don't breathe a word of this. Yer man could put me in jail for seven years." In his quest for food that had escaped from the registers of the ration books, the food officer became a frequent visitor at the hotel. My father would pour him a Guinness and a chaser of Bushmills while the "black marketeer" organized a flight of elicit "eatables" into a secret cupboard in the main bathroom. A Hollywood bubble bath fueled by black market soap, was run and into it stepped my voluptuous eldest sister, the naked guardian of sides of bacon, Free State butter, and a hundredweight of lard. Sometimes the food officer stayed for a fry of bacon and eggs, with scones that tasted as if they were made with real butter. "You're a wonderful cook, Missus."

The Allied troops also enjoyed home-cooking and a drink with their meals. It was impossible to get a liquor license, so Mother became a bootlegger. Hugh, the plain-clothesman, was a constant customer. Drawn to the hotel by my mother's easy wit and the presence of Empire girls, he was blind to her crimes. The Empire was a music hall

in Belfast and the chorus girls, as part of their war effort, were entertaining the troops on and off stage. Carnalea was conveniently close, and the hotel developed a reputation for putting on a well-fed, fornicating weekend.

Lovers like to give gifts, small objects for the big objects of their affection. My mother realized the opportunity and became a jewelry smuggler. Her ally in these transactions was a Jewish watchmaker who had escaped the Nazis. He had a little shop on Main Street and business was depressingly slow until he met my mother. She provided him with an army of eager customers and a supply of merchandise. The frequent excursions across the border to Eire brought my mother home corsetted in a chain mail of Swiss watches, weekend wedding rings, and quality costume jewelry. Customs officers joined the ranks of food officers as enemies of the family.

Some people at that time were very serious about the war. Kay, the barmaid, had a boyfriend who was an Irish nationalist. He earnestly believed that a victorious Germany would establish Ireland as a united republic, and he was sworn to help. One day, Hugh stopped by with no time for whiskey; he had come to arrest Kay. She had been passing on information about the nearby bases to German sympathizers. Her maps must not have been too accurate, for when the Luftwaffe did bomb Northern Ireland, they missed the important installations and hit Ballyholme, a seaside resort miles away. Kay's sister, Angela Mairead, was killed in the blitz. "Poor innocent soul. What a lovely name," said my mother.

Wounded men became a more common sight at the hotel. Big Mac, a handsome young Canadian pilot with a smashed leg, arrived with his nurse, Mary. They were terribly in love, and all the women at the hotel were terribly jealous of Mary. For Mac, it seemed was the only man in Ireland with pressed trousers—just like in the films. A merchant ship hit a mine in the Lough, and my sisters swam out to salvage the booty. This flotsam furnished a great engagement party for Big Mac and Mary.

My mother was sick for weeks after the do. She finally went to the doctor expecting a diagnosis of the worst female disease. It was a case of a blonde in her middle forties being three months pregnant. My eldest sister said, "They'll think it's mine!" and promptly fainted. Hitler and Eva Braun withdrew to their bunker, and my mother grew big with child. She had survived the war with a surplus.

*Angela Mairead Coid is the wife of Irish-Canadian writer, George McWhirter and the cousin of Irish novelist, Maurice Leitch. Angela and Maurice share a great great-granny, Ellen Maguire, with the actor, Kenneth Branagh. Granny Maguire survived the Famine, but that's another story.*