

TANDING OUTSIDE the large wooden gates of the Regina Coeli hostel, I felt like a child again. The home for single mothers was where I spent the first nine years of my life. I was an illegitimate child, hidden from the judgmental world of 1950s Dublin in this secret sanctuary on the wrong side of town. People would call us 'the unfortunates', but that's not how I have ever viewed myself. In fact, my life has been happy and successful. I have built up and sold several businesses and have been with my partner Yew-eng for 23 years.

I travelled to Dublin in late 2013 on a fact-finding mission to uncover the secrets of my childhood. More than 50 years on, I had an incredible urge to find out if the hostel still existed. Standing outside the forbidding three-storey grey-stone building, I knew I was opening a vault of memories that my mother had instructed me to keep firmly shut.

In 1947, six years before I was born, my mother Cathleen was 29 years old, unmarried and becoming increasingly fearful that if she didn't leave home soon her situation was never going to change. It wasn't that she felt a burning need to be married; she just didn't want to spend the rest of her days in Lucan on the outskirts of Dublin living a simple rural life exactly like her widowed mother before her.

Her elder brother Christie had moved to Dublin some years before and encouraged Cathleen to take up a job as a hotel chambermaid in the city. Not long afterwards, she met Christie's friend Bill Lewis. Bill was 45, but looked younger. He had jet-black hair and a moustache that reminded Cathleen of her heart-throb Clark Gable. There was instant electricity between them. But Bill was a Protestant; Cathleen a Catholic. Separating them was a chasm of historical bitterness and





Clockwise from above: Cathleen pictured in her 30s; a 12-year-old Gordon with Cathleen and their dog Brandy after they moved to London; Cathleen and Bill were reunited and married in the early 1960s

division. Bill's four sisters were resolute that a marriage would never work, as was Cathleen's mother. After four years of clandestine meetings, Bill moved to London, where he asked Cathleen to join him to start a new life.

Cathleen, however, chose to stay in Dublin for the sake of her mother, who was in frail health. As the years rolled by, Bill's letters from London grew less frequent. Cathleen took this as a sign that he had found someone else. He was the only man she had ever loved and she did not expect to meet anyone else who

matched up to him; she resigned herself to the life of a spinster.

However, in 1953 she had a brief affair with a businessman from Cork. He failed to tell my mother that he was married – until she discovered she was pregnant at the age of 35. As a Catholic my mother would not even consider an abortion – plus it was illegal. With the £300 (about £4,000 in today's money) her lover gave her for her living expenses, she concealed her pregnancy and told her family that she was going to live in England. Cathleen was a freethinker who refused to bow to social pressure –

she chose instead to live a double life.

I'm not entirely sure how she heard about Regina Coeli, but it was a haven for women like her who wanted to keep their babies – unlike the infamous Magdalene laundries across town, where the mothers were forced to put their illegitimate children up for adoption. Eight months pregnant, Cathleen arrived at the hostel signing in as Kay McCrea, a new name for a new life. The volunteers never

questioned it – women could go by whatever name they chose.

The Regina Coeli (meaning queen of the heavens) was home to 150 women. Most had one child, a few had twins. The women were housed in large open dormitories with bare stone walls, high ceilings and open fires that burned Irish turf all day, providing both warmth and basic cooking facilities. Expectant mothers slept in dorms of 20, with cots next to each bed. They bathed in communal washrooms and shared one toilet between 40.

The mothers had to work to pay for their keep. The hostel had a supportive network of business people who helped place the women in jobs around the city. There was also a cohort of 'caretaker' mothers, who would stay back with their own children and act as paid childcare for those, like my mother, who went out to work. Cathleen – 'Mammy' as I called her – worked six and a half long days a week in a restaurant in the city centre. Her employers were a German family who had fled the war. As outsiders they were more empathic than your typical Irish family – and they could keep a secret.

At the hostel it was an older woman, Bridie, who was assigned to look after me during the day. She and Mammy grew to be the best of friends and Bridie became my second mother. Bridie's son Joseph was five years older than me, and the four of us were like our own little family within the bigger extended family of the Regina Coeli. At 35, Mammy was one of the oldest. She felt very maternal towards the younger mothers, many of whom were still teenagers. They referred to her reverentially as 'the lady'.

Never once did Mammy take me to her workplace. Whenever I asked, she would change the subject. I was coming to understand her double life - that I was her big secret. It started with special rules that she instilled in me. 'You are never to go outside the big gates of Regina Coeli; always be polite and well-mannered; never speak to strangers, and under no circumstances tell people where we live.' The restrictions didn't bother me in the least. One of the best things about the hostel was the sense of space and freedom; the grounds were enormous and paradise for us kids. I used to call it my piece of heaven.

Mammy had a half day off on Tuesday or Sunday afternoons when, unbeknown to me, she would visit her mother, whose health had once again improved. My grandmother believed that Cathleen lived alone in a rented room somewhere in the city. If she or anyone else asked whether my mother had a boyfriend, she would tell them her days of dating were over. 'I'm 40 now,' she would say, 'and

far too old for all that sort of thing.

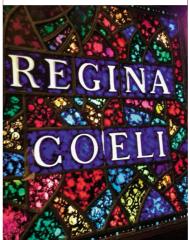
I knew I had no father but this did not seem unusual, as all my friends were in the same boat – we were one big misfit family. It was only when I ventured outside the gates of Regina Coeli to go to school that it occurred to me that I might be different. I was becoming aware that we didn't look the same as the children of the outside world. It wasn't just that they had more money for things like sweets, it was obvious in everything from the clothes and shoes they wore to the haircuts they had.

Living in the hostel made all of us - both mothers and children - seem older than our years. When we were small we were surrounded and influenced by older companions and grew up quickly. We were cut off from the outside world in one respect but were worldly-wise in another. I believe this worldliness gave me a head start in my business life. At around nine, I had already started to understand the importance of money - mainly because I never had any of my own. Money, I realised, gave you freedom and was a bridge to independence. My mother's hard work meant that we were eventually able to afford a small, private bedroom in the hostel for Mammy, Bridie, Joseph and myself. I had more sweets and better clothes than most of the other kids. My mother pointed out how hard she had to work to make things like this happen and instilled a great work ethic in me.

My academic life, on the other hand, was a disaster. Schooling was very basic and I remained pretty illiterate; all I really knew were Bible stories. My walk to school with the other children increased my appetite to see new things and I often ended up roaming the streets once lessons were over. One day I became hopelessly lost and was picked up by the garda [police]. Being brought back at nightfall by a police car was the ultimate shame – the volunteers were keen to avoid any kind of scene that would draw attention to the











The Regina Coeli hostel for unmarried Catholic mothers, above and left, was unlike the notorious Magdalene laundries in that it aimed to keep mothers and babies together

hostel. This episode must have set my mother thinking about our future. She never once mentioned my biological father but it was obvious I needed a father figure.

In 1962, when I was nine, Bill came back on the scene. He and Cathleen rekindled their romance; Bill proposed and Cathleen needed no persuading to move us to London with him. I remember a thousand thoughts racing through my head. How could my mother have a friend I knew nothing about? I had never thought about the life she had before she had me, and I wasn't sure I liked the idea. I didn't want to share my Mammy with anyone else.

But Bill was a sweet-natured man and buttered me up with sweets and trips to Dublin Zoo and we began to build a relationship. Mammy's farewell party was memorable: everyone, cried, sang and drank which was of course against the rules, but even the volunteers joined in. They all clubbed together to buy her some expensive Egyptian cotton bed sheets as a going-away present. It was a testament to how loved and respected she was in our small community. My mother became famous for being one of the very few women who left Regina Coeli to get married.

Before we left, I met my grandmother. It must have been >

 ✓ an enormous thing for Mammy
 to come clean about the son whose
 existence she had kept secret for
 nearly ten years. She asked her
 mother and sister Lily to respect her
 secret – and they took it with them
 to their graves. When I started
 researching my past last year and
 got in contact with members of my
 Irish family, they had no idea about
 me. It was a shock for everyone.

 ✓ an enormous thing for Mammy

We took the boat to Holyhead and travelled to our new life in London. I called it 'The New World', but it was here that reality kicked in. We moved to a rented flat in Finsbury Park. I felt lonely and isolated without my Regina Coeli family and school continued to be a disaster. On the upside, the large classes of around 50 pupils made it quite easy for me to play truant. I was a master at never getting caught. I found it difficult to settle down; I had a thick Irish accent and people had difficulty understanding what I was saying. I knew I was a 'bastard', although when one of the girls at school taunted me, I nearly knocked her freckles off her nose. It never entered my head to question my situation or ask about my father. There was a triangle of secrecy between my mother, Bill and me. We had an understanding that when we had embarked on this new family life. the past would never be spoken of. Bill never questioned me about my time there, and as the years rolled by, my mother thought I had forgotten about it. But I never did.

Bridie and Mammy wrote letters over the weeks, until news arrived only months after we arrived in London that Bridie had died. I wanted to go back for the funeral but Mammy made the excuse that we had no money for the journey. Unlike me, who thought Regina Coeli was a paradise, Mammy seemed to have sad memories of the place. For her it was a miserable, hard part of her life and she was fiercely determined never to look back. I never brought it up, for fear of upsetting her.

Mammy and Bill married in 1962, shortly after we settled in Finsbury





My mother gave me the most wonderful gift – she believed in me



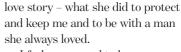
Clockwise from above: Gordon as a ten-year-old schoolboy; a back view of Regina Coeli - the hostel now helps women with addiction issues; Cathleen with Bill in 1984, and Gordon today

Park. People in London assumed my mother was a widow and she did nothing to dispel that notion. My first years with Bill were difficult. I was not used to men, but as time passed, I realised he was a lovely person. Bill was a master carpenter and worked on film sets. I begged him to take me to the theatre and it was here that I decided I wanted to work in the entertainment industry.

At 15, I left school – a relief for everyone – and I got my first job as a messenger boy at London Weekend Television. Like Mammy, I was determined, personable and a doer. I quickly moved up the career ladder. By 24, I had set up my own production company and made commercials and TV shows. I've

worked with many well-known artists, from Rod Stewart and Elton John to Queen and David Bowie, producing their music videos. Around this time, I bought my mother and Bill a home; it was my mission to make their life more comfortable.

I was on holiday in Cyprus in 1989 when my mother died, aged 72, of pneumonia. When I think of my mother now I feel she gave me the most wonderful gift – she always believed in me. Bill told me she had said that I had surpassed all her expectations. I never set out to write a book, but as I grew older, I wanted to reveal my mother's incredible past and her struggle to have me. I saw my mother's story as an unusual



I feel very proud to have come from Regina Coeli. I was surprised to find the hostel still doing charitable work – these days the volunteers look after women with addiction issues.

Immediately after my visit, I sent them a donation. It's nice to be able to give something back. I'm not overly religious but I call it good karma. I don't feel I have any form of baggage from being an 'unfortunate'; on the contrary, I believe it was the lessons I learned at Regina Coeli and my mother's single-minded strength of spirit that have made me the man I am todav. Regina Coeli is still a secret - in fact, most people living in Ireland have no idea it's there - but it's a happy secret. **Y** Secret Child by Gordon Lewis and Andrew Croft is published by HarperCollins, price £7.99. To order a copy, go to you-bookshop.co.uk; p&p is free for a limited time

