The New York Times
SPECIAL REPORT

The Lost Children of Tuam

Ireland wanted to forget.
But the dead don't always stay buried.

By Dan Barry

Behold a child.

A slight girl all of 6, she leaves the modest family farm, where the father minds the livestock and the mother keeps a painful secret, and walks out to the main road. Off she goes to primary school, off to the Sisters of Mercy.

Her auburn hair in ringlets, this child named Catherine is bound for Tuam, the ancient County Galway town whose name derives from a Latin term for "burial mound." It is the seat of a Roman Catholic archdiocese, a proud distinction announced by the skyscraping cathedral that for generations has loomed over factory and field.

Two miles into this long-ago Irish morning, the young girl passes through a gantlet of gray formed by high walls along the Dublin Road that seem to thwart sunshine. To her right runs the Parkmore racecourse, where hard-earned shillings are won or lost by a nose. And to her left, the mother and baby home, with glass shards embedded atop its stony enclosure.

Behind this forbidding divide, nuns keep watch over unmarried mothers and their children. Sinners and their illegitimate spawn, it is said. The fallen.

But young Catherine knows only that the children who live within seem to be a different species altogether: sallow, sickly — segregated. "Home babies," they're called.

The girl's long walk ends at the Mercy school, where tardiness might earn you a smarting whack on the hand. The children from the home are always late to school — by design, it seems, to keep them from mingling with "legitimate" students. Their oversize hobnail boots beat a frantic rhythm as they hustle to their likely slap at the schoolhouse door.

A sensitive child, familiar with the sting of playground taunts, Catherine nevertheless decides to repeat a prank she saw a classmate pull on one of these children. She balls up an empty candy wrapper and presents it to a home baby as if it still contains a sweet, then watches as the little girl's anticipation melts to sad confusion.

Everyone laughs, nearly. This moment will stay with Catherine forever.

After classes end, the home babies hurry back down the Dublin Road in two

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FIRST COMMUNION FOR MOTHER AND BABY HOME CHILDREN, CIRCA 1950.

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE MOTHER AND BABY HOME SITE TODAY.

Beyond those glass-fanged walls lay seven acres of Irish suffering.

From Page 1

straight lines, boots tap-tap-tapping, and disappear behind those Gothic walls. Sometimes the dark wooden front door is ajar, and on her way home Catherine thrills at the chance of a stolen peek.

Beyond those glass-fanged walls lay seven acres of Irish suffering. Buried here somewhere are famine victims who succumbed to starvation and fever a century earlier, when the home was a loathed workhouse for the homeless poor.

But they are not alone.

Deep in the distant future, Catherine will expose this property's appalling truths. She will prompt a national reckoning that will leave the people of Ireland asking themselves: Who were we? Who are we?

At the moment, though, she is only a child. She is walking home to a father tending to the cattle and a mother guarding a secret, away from the Irish town whose very name conjures the buried dead.

Part 2
Ritual and Remembrance

In Ireland, the departed stay present.

You might still come across old-timers who recall how families in rural stretches would clean the house and set out a drink on the first night of November — the eve of All Souls' Day — in the belief that the dead will return. How it was best to stay in the center of the road when walking at night, so as not to disturb the spirits resting along the wayside.

Even today, the Irish say they do death well. Local radio newscasts routinely end with a recitation of death notices. In a country where the culture of Catholicism, if not its practice, still holds sway, this alerts the community to a familiar ritual: the wake at the home, the funeral Mass, the long gathering at the pub, the memorial Mass a month later, and the anniversary Mass every year thereafter.

Wry acceptance of mortality lives in the country's songs, literature, and wit. A standard joke is the Irish marriage proposal: "Would you like to be buried with my people?" A standard song describes a thrown bottle splattering whiskey – from the Irish for "water of life" — over a corpse. Thus the late Tim Finnegan is revived at his wake; see how he rises.

Respect for burial grounds runs deep, with crowds gathering in their local cemetery once a year to pray as a priest blesses the dead within. This reverence for the grave may derive from centuries of land dispossession, or passed-on memories of famine corpses in the fields and byways, or simply be linked to a basic desire expressed by the planting of a headstone:

To be remembered.

Some 60 years have passed since Catherine's primary school days. It is a gloomy June afternoon, and she is walking the grounds once hidden behind those shard-studded walls. As rain falls from the crow-flecked sky, she drapes her black jacket over her head, almost like a shawl.

Her name now is Catherine Corless, née Farrell. At 63, she is a grandmother with a smile not easily given, and any fealty to Catholicism long since lost.

True, she occasionally volunteers to paint the weathered statues outside the local country churches: the blue of the Blessed Virgin's eyes, the bronze in St. Patrick's beard. But this is for the community, not the church. She finds deeper meaning in her garden, in the birds at the feeder outside her kitchen window, in the earth here at her feet.

Few photographs exist of the grim building that once loomed over this corner of Tuam (pronounced Chewm), perhaps because few desired the memory. In its place stand drab rows of subsidized housing and a modest playground. A silvery swing set, a yellow slide, a jungle gym.

One day, a few years back, Catherine began to inquire about the old home that had stoked her schoolgirl imagination. She set out on an amateur's historical quest, but whenever she focused on the children who lived there, so many questions arose about the children who died there — the ones who never made it to the classroom, or even past infancy.

What, then, of Patrick Derrane, who died at five months in 1925, and Mary Carty, at five months in 1960, and all those in between, children said to have been "born on the other side of the blanket"? The Bridgets and Noras and Michaels and Johns, and so many Marys, so many Patricks, their surnames the common language of Ireland.

Would people pause at their graves? Would they be remembered?

In asking around, what Catherine heard was:

Ah, them poor children. Them poor children.

The more she dug, the more a distant time and place was revealed. Now, standing on the sodden grass, she can nearly see and hear all that was. The polished halls and bustling dormitories, the babies' nappies and nuns' habits, the shouts, the whimpers, the murmur of prayer.

Part 3
'Waiting for the Crucifixion'

The women and their newborns often arrived after the inquisitive streetlamps of Tuam had dimmed. They came from towns and crossroads with names like snatches of song. Portumna and Peterswell, Claremorris and Lettermore, Moylough and Loughrea.

And now they were here at the St. Mary's Mother and Baby Home, a massive building the color of storm clouds, a way station for 50 single mothers and 125 children born out of wedlock.

The building opened in 1846 as a workhouse, but almost immediately it began receiving victims of the Great Hunger, a famine so horrific that the moans of the dying, The Tuam Herald reported, were "as familiar to our ears as the striking of the clock." It later became a military barracks, serving the new Irish government formed after a treaty between Irish rebels and Great Britain in 1921. One spring morning during the civil war that followed, six prisoners — republicans who disagreed with concessions in the treaty — were marched into the yard and executed against the ashen wall.

The government repurposed the building to be among the institutions intended as ports of salvation where disgraced women might be redeemed. These state-financed homes were invariably managed by a Catholic order, in keeping with the hand-in-glove relationship between the dominant church and the fledgling state.

Given the misogyny, morality, and economics that informed the public debate of the time — when a pregnancy out of wedlock could threaten a family's plans for land inheritance, and even confer dishonor upon a local pastor — imagine that naïve young woman from the country: impregnated by a man, sometimes a relative, who would assume little of the shame and none of the responsibility. She might flee to England, or pretend that the newborn was a married sister's — or be shipped to the dreaded Tuam home, run by a religious order with French roots called the Congregation of Sisters of Bon Secours.

CATHERINE CORLESS

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

An empty candy wrapper given to a hungry child. A prank, then a lifetime of regret.

Their motto: "Good Help to Those in Need."

You rose early and went down to the nursery with your infant. Mass at 8, then porridge and tea for breakfast. Breast feeding next, after which you rinsed your child's diapers before moving on to your daily drudgery. You might polish the dormitory floors with beeswax or clean bedsheets stained with urine.

"An awful lonely ould hole," recalled Julia Carter Devaney.

Born in a workhouse and left in the care of the Bon Secours, Julia became an employee who lived in the home for almost 40 years. Although she died in 1985, her rare insight into this insulated world — one she described as "unnatural" — lives on in taped interviews.

The gates remained unlocked to accommodate deliveries, but so powerful was the sense of cultural imprisonment that you dared not leave. Save for the chance gift of a cake from the bread man, you starved for love or consolation over the loss of your innocent courting days.

"Many a girl shed tears," Julia said.

The Bon Secours sisters who watched your every move were doing the bidding of Irish society. They, too, existed in a repressive patriarchy with few options for women. They might have experienced a spiritual calling as a young girl, or simply desired not to be a farmer's wife, having seen overworked mothers forever pregnant, forever fretting. A vocation offered education, safety and status, all reflected in clean, freshly pressed habits.

And Julia remembered them all.

Mother Hortense had a big heart, yet was quick to punish; Mother Martha was more enlightened, but a thump from her could "put you into the middle of next week." This one hated the mere sight of children, while that one used kindness the way others used the rod. So it went.

The sisters frequently threatened banishment to the mental asylum in Ballinasloe, or to one of the Magdalen Laundries: institutions where women perceived to be susceptible or errant — including "second offenders" who had become pregnant again — were often sent to work, and sometimes die, in guilt-ridden servitude.

You preferred instead to suffer at the mother and baby home, bracing for that day when, after a year or so of penitent confinement, you were forced to leave — almost always without your child. Waiting for that moment of separation, Julia recalled, was "like Our Lady waiting for the Crucifixion."

Typical is the story of one unmarried woman who had been sent to the home from a remote Galway farm. Determined to remain close to her child, she took a job as a cleaner at a nearby hospital and, for several years, she appeared at the home's door on her day off every week to say the same thing:

That's my son you have in there. I want my son. I want to rear him.

No, would come the answer. And the door would close.

For the children left behind, there were swings and seesaws and donated Christmas gifts from town, but no grandparents and cousins coming around to coo. They lived amid the absence of affection and the ever-present threat of infectious disease.

"Like chickens in a coop," Julia said.

Many survivors have only the sketchiest memories of those days, a haze of bed-wetting and rocking oneself to sleep. One man, now in his 70s, remembers being taken for a walk with other home babies, and the excitement of seeing themselves in the side-view mirrors of parked cars.

"We didn't even know it was a reflection of ourselves in the mirror," he recalled. "And we were laughing at ourselves. Laughing."

Until they were adopted, sent to a training school or boarded out to a family, the older children walked to one of the two primary schools along the Dublin Road, some of them calling out "daddy" and "mammy" to strangers in the street. Shabby and betraying signs of neglect, they sat at the back of the classroom, apart.

"I never remember them really being taught," Catherine said. "They were just there."

Teachers threatened to place rowdy students beside the home babies. Parents warned children that if they were bad they'd go right to "the home." And even though the babies were baptized as a matter of routine, there remained the hint of sulfur about them.

"They were the children of the Devil," recalled Kevin O'Dwyer, 67, a retired principal who grew up just yards from the home. "We learned this in school."

Still, when a bully targeted a young Kevin during one recess, the child who came to his rescue was a home baby. *You leave him alone*, the older girl warned. *I see you doing that to him again, I'll get ya.*

The man has never forgotten his protector's name: Mary Curran.

One September day in 1961, a rare and ferocious hurricane howled across Ireland, downing power lines, destroying barley fields, battering cottages. As gales flicked away slates from the roof above, Julia helped lock the doors of the mother and baby home for good. Its conditions were poor, some of its staff untrained, and County Galway officials decided not to proceed with a planned renovation.

Abandoned, the massive H-block building devolved into an echoing, eerie playscape, where games of hide-and-seek unfolded in dull halls once polished with beeswax. Even the old chapel became a place where children became the priests and confessors. "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I shot Brother Whatever," Kevin recalled. "That kind of thing."

The years passed. Galway County moved forward with plans to demolish the home and build subsidized housing. And the memories of hobnailed pitter-patter faded, replaced by the faint sounds of children outracing the home baby ghosts that inhabited the property at night.

Part 4
In Pain, Finding Purpose

Catherine still wonders what led her to the story of the mother and baby home. Chance, perhaps, or distant memories of the little girl she once teased. Despite her bone-deep modesty, there are even times when she feels chosen.

She thinks back to her solitary childhood, her best friend a dog she called "Puppy," her time spent navigating the sadness that enveloped her mother. She admired the woman's deep empathy for others, but was puzzled by her refusal to say much about her own people back in County Armagh, a good 140 miles northeast of Tuam. *Sure they're all dead and gone,* is all she'd say, and God help you if you pried much further.

"A troubled soul," her daughter said.

Catherine graduated from secondary school, left a Galway art college for fear of lacking the necessary talent, and found satisfaction as a receptionist. In 1978, she married Aidan Corless, a man as gregarious as she was shy, a fine singer, nimble on the accordion, comfortable on the community theater stage.

VIA CAROLINE GORMLEY

THE HOME'S GOODS WERE AUCTIONED OFF IN THE EARLY 1970S.

The police said they were only famine bones. A priest said a prayer. And that was that.

Four children quickly followed. Before long, Catherine was minding the children of neighbors as well, immersing herself in the homework, play and exuberance of the young.

Her mother, Kathleen, died at 80 in 1992, leaving behind so much unsaid. Catherine eventually headed up to Armagh to examine public records that might explain why her mother had been so withholding, so unsettled.

As if part of some cosmic riddle, the answer was provided in the absence of one. On her mother's birth certificate, in the space reserved for the name of the father: nothing.

Her mother had been conceived out of wedlock.

Other telltale strands to the woman's early years came to be known: Fostered out, moving from family to family before finding work as a domestic. Then harboring until death a secret she found shameful enough to keep from her husband.

"That she went through her life, that she didn't like telling us," Catherine said. "That she was ashamed to tell us . . . "

In this patch of pain and regret, a seed was planted.

The revelations about her mother fueled in Catherine an interest in understanding the forces that shape who we are and how we behave. While attending a rigorous night course in local history, she learned an invaluable lesson:

"If you don't find something, you don't leave it. You ask why it's not there. You use 'why' a lot."

With the children grown, Catherine began contributing essays to the journal of the Old Tuam Society about local history, all the while grappling with debilitating headaches and anxiety attacks. The episodes might last for days, with the only relief at times coming from lying on the floor, still, away from light.

Burrowing deep into the past, though, provided welcome distraction, and at some point she chose to delve into the subject of the old mother and baby home: its beginnings as a workhouse, its place in Tuam history, the usual. Nothing deep.

But there were almost no extant photographs of the home, and most of the locals were reluctant to talk. Every question Catherine raised led to another, the fullness of truth never quite within reach. Why, for example, did one corner of the property feature a well-manicured grotto centered around a statue of the Blessed Virgin?

Oh that, a few neighbors said. A while back an older couple created the peaceful space to mark where two local lads once found some bones in a concrete pit. Famine victims, maybe.

The story made no sense to Catherine. The famine dead weren't buried that way.

Who were these boys? What did they see?

Frannie Hopkins was about 9, Barry Sweeney, about 7. The two were at the fledgling stage of boyhood mischief as they monkeyed around some crab apple trees, all within view of the deserted home that figured in their fertile imagination.

Some evenings, Frannie's father would delay his pint at the Thatch Bar, at the top of the town, until he had watched his son race down the Athenry Road, dodging ghosts from the old home to his left and the cemetery to his right, all the way to the family's door. But on this autumn day in the early 1970s, the boys were daring in the daylight.

Jumping into some overgrowth at the property's southwest corner, they landed on a concrete slab that echoed in answer. Curious, they pushed aside the lid to reveal a shallow, tank-like space containing a gruesome jumble of skulls and bones.

Frannie nudge-bumped Barry, and the younger lad fell in. He started to cry, as any boy would, so Frannie pulled him out and then the two boys were running away, laughing in fun or out of fright. They told everyone they met, prompting Frannie's father to say he'd get a right kick in the arse if he went back to that spot.

County workers soon arrived to level that corner of the property. The police said they were only famine bones. A priest said a prayer. And that was that.

In adulthood, Barry Sweeney would go to England to find work, and Frannie Hopkins would travel the world as an Irish soldier. Both would return to Tuam, where their shared story would come up now and then in the pub or on the street.

People would tell them they were either mistaken or lying. Barry would become upset that anyone would doubt a story that had so affected him, but Frannie would take pains to reassure him.

Barry, he would say. *The truth will out.*

Part 5
The Marys, Patricks and Johns

Now, 40 years later, here was Catherine Corless, amateur historian, trying to unearth that truth, applying what she had learned in her community center research class: Use "why" a lot.

When her headaches and panic attacks eased, she pored over old newspapers in a blur of microfilm. She spent hours studying historic maps in the special collections department of the library at the national university in Galway City. One day she copied a modern map of Tuam on tracing paper and placed it over a town map from 1890.

And there it was, in the cartographic details from another time: A tank for the home's old septic system sat precisely where the two boys had made their ghastly discovery. It was part of the Victorian-era system's warren of tunnels and chambers, all of which had been disconnected in the late 1930s.

Did this mean, then, that the two lads had stumbled upon the bones of home babies? Buried in an old sewage area?

"I couldn't understand it," Catherine said. "The horror of the idea."

Acting on instinct, she purchased a random sample from the government of 200 death certificates for children who had died at the home. Then, sitting at the Tuam cemetery's edge in the van of its caretaker, she checked those death certificates against all the burials recorded by hand in two oversize books.

Only two children from the home had been buried in the town graveyard. Both were orphans, both "legitimate."

Neither the Bon Secours order nor the county council could explain the absence of burial records for home babies, although it was suggested that relatives had probably claimed the bodies to bury in their own family plots. Given the ostracizing stigma attached at the time to illegitimacy, Catherine found this absurd.

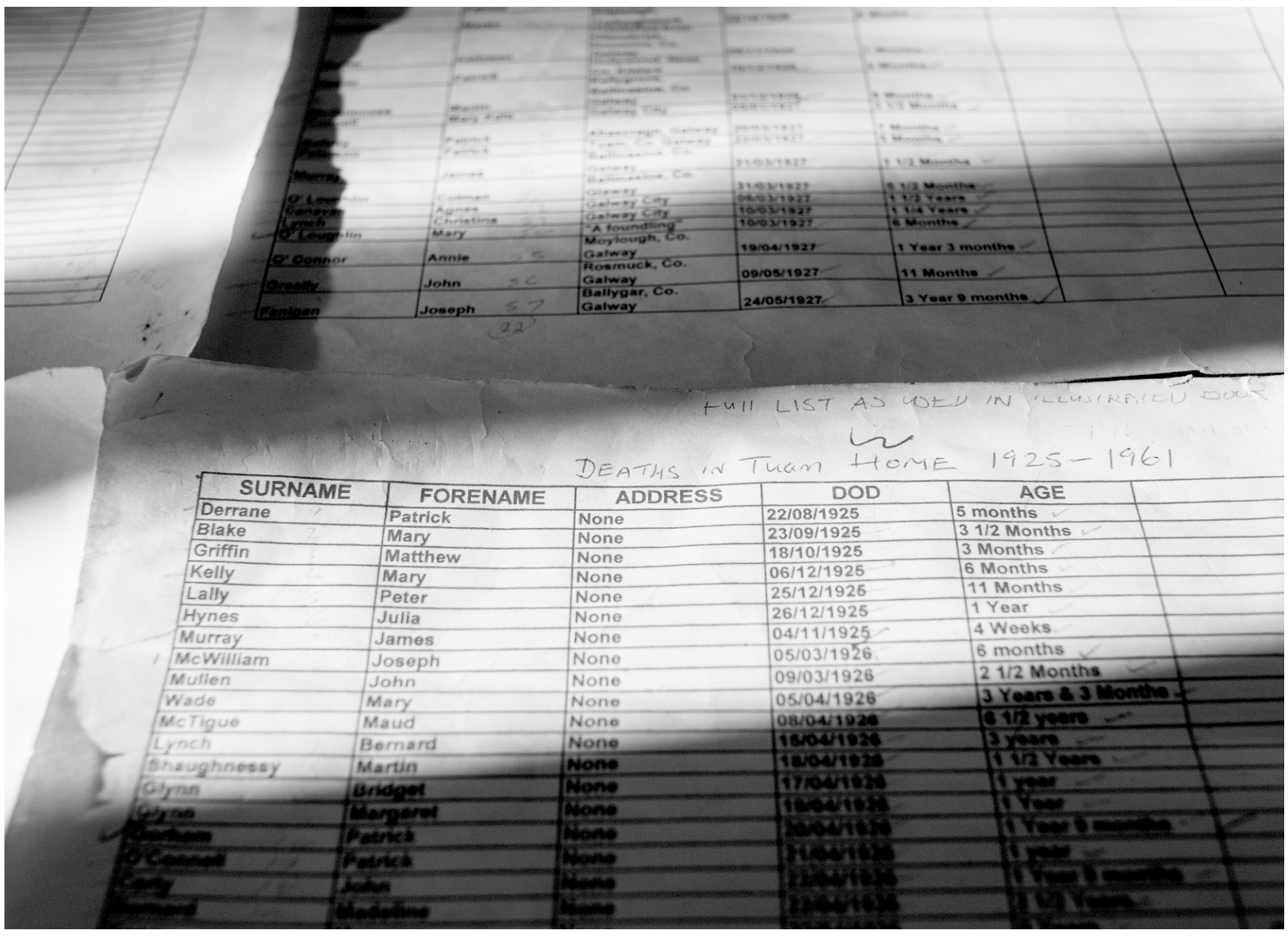
In December 2012, Catherine's essay, titled "The Home," appeared in the historical journal of Tuam. After providing a general history of the facility, it laid out the results of her research, including the missing burial records and the disused septic tank where two boys had stumbled upon some bones.

"Is it possible that a large number of those little children were buried in that little plot at the rear of the former Home?" she wrote. "And if so, why is it not acknowledged as a proper cemetery?"

She also shared her own memories, including that joke she and a classmate had played on two home babies long ago. "I thought it funny at the time how those little girls hungrily grabbed the empty sweet papers, but the memory of it now haunts me," she wrote.

Her daring essay implicitly raised a provocative question: Had Catholic nuns, working in service of the state, buried the bodies of hundreds of children in the septic system?

Catherine braced for condemnation from government and clergy — but none came. It was as if



A LIST OF THE DEAD.

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Measles. Influenza. Gastroenteritis. Meningitis. Whooping cough. Severe undernourishment.

she had written nothing at all.

There was a time when Catherine wanted only to have a plaque erected in memory of these forgotten children. But now she felt that she owed them much more. "No one cared," she said. "And that's my driving force all the time: No one cared."

She kept digging, eventually paying for another spreadsheet that listed the names, ages, and death dates of all the "illegitimate" children who had died in the home during its 36-year existence.

The sobering final tally: 796.

Five-month-old Patrick Derrane was the first to die, from gastroenteritis. Weeks later, Mary Blake, less than 4 months old and anemic since birth. A month after that, 3-month-old Matthew Griffin, of meningitis. Then James Murray, fine one moment, dead the next. He was 4 weeks old.

In all, seven children died at the mother and baby home in 1925, the year it opened. The holidays were especially tough, with 11-month-old Peter Lally dying of intestinal tuberculosis on Christmas Day, and 1-year-old Julia Hynes dying the next day, St. Stephen's Day, after a three-month bout of bronchitis.

Measles. Influenza. Gastroenteritis. Meningitis. Whooping cough. Tuberculosis. Severe undernourishment, also known as marasmus.

Nine home babies died in 1930. Eleven in 1931. Twenty-four in 1932. Thirty-two in 1933.

The Tuam home was not alone. Children born out of wedlock during this period were nearly four times more likely to die than "legitimate" children, with those in institutions at particular risk. The reasons may be many — poor prenatal care, insufficient government funding, little or no training of staff – but this is certain: It was no secret.

In 1934, the Irish parliament was informed of the inordinate number of deaths among this group of children. "One must come to the conclusion that they are not looked after with the same care and attention as that given to ordinary children," a public health official said.

Thirty died in the Tuam home that year.

In 1938, it was 26. In 1940, 34. In 1944, 40.

In 1947, a government health inspector filed a report describing the conditions of infants in the nursery: "a miserable emaciated child . . . delicate . . . occasional fits . . . emaciated and delicate . . . fragile abcess on hip . . . not thriving wizened limbs emaciated . . . pot-bellied emaciated . . . a very poor baby . . . "

That year, 52 died.

Catherine felt obligated to these children. Continuing to plumb the depths of the past, she eventually cross-checked her spreadsheet of 796 deceased home babies with the burial records of cemeteries throughout counties Galway and Mayo. Not one match.

"They're not in the main Tuam graveyard where they should have been put initially," she remembers thinking. "They're not in their mothers' hometown graveyards. Where are they?"

Catherine, of course, already knew.

Part 6
The Truth Outs, a Nation Reels

Catherine lives simply, almost monastically. She favors practical clothing, usually black, and has never been one for a night at the pub. She doesn't drink alcohol or eat meat. Give her a bowl of muesli at the kitchen table and she'll be grand.

Those headaches and anxiety attacks, though, remain a part of her withdrawn life. Aidan, her husband, has become accustomed to attending wakes and weddings by himself. A few years ago, he booked a Mediterranean cruise for two; he traveled alone.

"A very quiet, introverted person, wrapped up in her own thoughts," Aidan said of his wife. "Suffering, if you like."

But thoughts of the dead children of Tuam pushed Catherine beyond her fears. Believing that the body of even one "legitimate" baby found in a septic tank would have prompted an outcry, she suspected that the silence met by her essay spoke to a reluctance to revisit the painful past — a past that had consumed her own mother.

Now she was angry.

Adding to her fury was the knowledge that when a Tuam hospital run by the Bon Secours closed in 2002, the religious order disinterred the bodies of a dozen nuns and reinterred them in consecrated ground outside the nearby pilgrimage town of Knock.

"I feel it at times: that those poor little souls were crying out for recognition, a recognition they never got in their little, short lives," Catherine said. "It was a wrong that just had to be righted some way."

Seeing no other option, she contacted a reporter for The Irish Mail on Sunday, a national newspaper. Not long after, in the spring of 2014, a front-page story appeared about a certain seven acres in Tuam.

It became the talk of Ireland.

All who had been quiet before — the clerics, politicians and government officials — now conveyed shock and sadness, while the besieged Bon Secours sisters hired a public relations consultant whose email to a documentarian did little for the religious order's reputation:

"If you come here, you'll find no mass grave, no evidence that children were ever so buried and a local police force casting their eyes to heaven and saying 'Yeah, a few bones were found — but this was an area where Famine victims were buried. So?'"

The news from Tuam had shocked many in the country, but the dismissive email reflected the lurking doubts about Catherine's work. She was, after all, only a housewife.

Mary Moriarty was getting her light-blond hair done at a salon in Tuam one day when the beauty-parlor chatter turned to this troublemaker Catherine Corless.

The entire matter should be forgotten and put behind us, someone said.

Mary, a grandmother well known in town for her advocacy work, would have none of it.

Well, she said. *Every child is entitled to their name, and their mothers could be any one of us but for the grace of God.*

She left the salon, introduced herself by telephone to Catherine, and recounted a story that she rarely shared.

In 1975, Mary was a young married mother living in one of the new subsidized houses built on the old mother and baby home property. One morning, close to Halloween, a neighbor told her that a boy was running about with a skull on a stick.

The boy, Martin, said he had found his prize in the overgrown muck, and there were loads more.

What the boy mistook for a plastic toy was actually the skull of a child, with a nearly complete set of teeth. "That's not plastic, Martin," Mary recalled saying. "You have to put it back where you found it."

Mary and a couple of neighbors followed the boy through the weeds and rubble, across the soft wet ground. Suddenly, the earth beneath her feet began to give, and down she fell into some cave or tunnel, with just enough light to illuminate the subter-

The End

Articles in this series explore how we die and what it tells us about how we live.

ONLINE *Watch our video about the mother and baby home in Tuam and hear from survivors and the woman who made it her mission to uncover this national tragedy.*

nytimes.com/tuam-video

FRANNIE HOPKINS

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

‘If the parents found out, they’d tell them to keep away from that lad, you don’t know where he came from.’

ranean scene.

As far as she could see were little bundles stacked one on top of another, like packets in a grocery, each about the size of a large soda bottle and wrapped tight in graying cloth.

When her friends pulled her up, Mary’s legs were scratched and her mind was on fire. What had she seen? That very morning, she reached out to a person in town who might know. Soon a stout older woman arrived on a bicycle, her faithful dogs trotting by her side.

Julia Carter Devaney, who used to work at the home.

“Ah, yeah, that’s where the little babies is,” Mary recalled her saying as she came to a stop.

Julia bent down at the hole and peered in. Mary never forgot what the older woman said next: “Many a little one I carried out in the nighttime.”

Mary did not know what to make of this. Perhaps these were the bodies of stillborns – and therefore unbaptized. Stillborns. Yes, that’s what they must be.

Eighteen months after falling into the hole, Mary gave birth to her son Kevin at a Tuam hospital run by the Bon Secours sisters. After breakfast, a nun presented her with her newborn, who was swathed like a little mummy. The young mother’s mind instantly recalled those stacks of graying bundles, and straightaway she unwrapped her precious child.

Now, after listening to the woman’s tale, Catherine asked whether Mary would be willing to tell her story on national radio.

Of course.

Part 7
The Dead and the Living

The veteran geophysicist guided her mower-like contraption over the thick grass, back and forth across a carefully measured grid. Equipped with ground-penetrating radar, the machine sent radio waves through the topsoil and down into the dark earth.

The curious machine was hunting for secrets concealed in the ground of the old mother and baby home, all beneath the gaze of a statue of the Blessed Virgin.

This subterranean trawling was being conducted on an early autumn day in 2015 for the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes, a panel created by an embarrassed government in response to Catherine’s research. Its charge: to examine a once-accepted way of Irish life in all its social and historical complexity.

The commission’s investigation into the homes — a network that by the late 1970s was falling into disuse — is focused on 18 institutions scattered across Ireland: in the capital city of Dublin, and in Counties Clare, Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kilkenny, Meath, Tipperary and Westmeath. The high infant mortality rate in some of these facilities was startling. In the Bessborough home in Cork, 478 children died from 1934 to 1953 — or about one death every two weeks.

The investigation’s broad mandate also includes scrutiny of the network’s links to the notorious Magdalen Laundries. The apparent coercion of unmarried mothers to surrender their children for adoption, often to Catholic Americans. The vaccine trials carried out on mother-and-baby-home children for pharmaceutical companies. The use of home-baby remains for anatomical study at medical colleges.

It was all part of a church-state arrangement that, decades earlier, a longtime government health inspector named Alice Litster had repeatedly denounced, mostly to silence. This system marginalized defenseless Irish women, she asserted, and turned their unfortunate offspring into “infant martyrs of convenience, respectability, and fear.”

The Tuam case incited furious condemnation of a Catholic Church already weakened by a litany of sexual abuse scandals. Others countered that the sisters of Bon Secours had essentially been subcontractors of the Irish state.

But laying the blame entirely on the church or the state seemed too simple — perhaps even too convenient. After all, many of these abandoned children had fathers and grandparents and aunts and uncles.

The bitter truth was that the mother and baby homes mirrored the Mother Ireland of the time.

As its investigation continued, the commission would occasionally provide cryptic updates of its work in Tuam. In September 2016, for example, it announced that forensic archaeologists would be digging trenches to resolve questions “in relation to the interment of human remains.”

While she waited for the commission to complete its work, the woman responsible for this national self-examination, Catherine Corless, returned in a way to those days when her children and the children of neighbors packed the house. Only now the ones gathering about her were in their 60s and 70s, with hair of silver.

Home babies.

Often lost in the uproar over the many children who died at the Tuam home were the stories of those who had survived. And once Catherine’s research became international news, they began calling and emailing her, seeing in this introverted woman their only hope of trying to find out who their mothers were, who their siblings were — who they were.

Catherine assumed the role of pro bono private detective, following paper trails that often led to some cemetery in England, where many unmarried mothers had gone to start anew. The children they were separated from, she said, needed to hear that their mother had “fared all right.”

Before long, some of these survivors were gathering at the Corless house for a cup of tea and a chat. In their habits and manners of speech, they reminded Catherine of someone close to her who also had been born out of wedlock.

“They all have a kind of low self-esteem,” she said. “They feel inadequate. They feel a bit inferior to other people. It mirrored, really, the way my mother was.”

During her research, Catherine had built a detailed, wood-and-clay model of the home, large enough to cover a dining-room table. It had helped her to visualize.

Now she and Aidan would occasionally remove the model from a high shelf in the barn out back so that survivors could do the same. They would touch the gray walls and peer into the small windows, as if to imagine themselves in the arms of their mothers.

P. J. Haverty, a retired mechanic, sat at the Corless kitchen table one day, sipping tea and eating a ham-and-butter sandwich. He was born in 1951, the son of a 27-year-old woman who had been left at the home by her father when she was eight months pregnant. Eileen was her name, and she seemed to vanish a year after giving birth.

The white-haired man remembers only a few snapshot moments of the home. Wetting the bed mattresses that would then be propped against the window to dry. Seeing himself for the first time in a car’s side-view mirror. Walking out the door with his new foster parents, the father choosing him because he looked sturdy for farm work, the mother because he had smiled at her.

P. J. was happy enough until his teens, when he was called a “bastard,” and people avoided the pew he sat in, and girls at a dance tittered at the sight of

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE CATHEDRAL OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY IN TUAM.

him. "If the parents found out," he said, "they'd tell them to keep away from that lad, you don't know where he came from."

He considered drowning himself in the fast-moving river that coursed through his foster father's field. "The things that I was called," he said. "I just thought everyone was against me."

Thanks to a hint dropped here, a secret whispered there, P. J. managed in adulthood to locate his birth mother in South London. Plump and with graying hair, she reassured him that she hadn't abandoned him. After leaving the Tuam home, she had taken a cleaning job at a nearby hospital and, for more than five years, returned every week to demand that she be given back her child — only to be turned away at the door.

P. J.'s voice caught as he recalled what his mother, now dead, had said she told the nuns to no avail.

"That's my son you have in there. I want to rear him. I want to look after him."

Part 8
'Chamber of Horrors'

It was true.

In early March of this year, the Mother and Baby Homes Commission reported that "significant quantities of human remains" had been discovered on the grounds of the Tuam home.

The ground-penetrating radar and delicate excavation had revealed what appeared to be a decommissioned septic tank. And in 17 of that septic system's 20 chambers, investigators found many human bones. A small sampling revealed that they were of children, ranging in age from 35 fetal weeks to three years, and all dating from the home's 36 years of operation.

Expressing shock, the commission vowed to continue its investigation into "who was responsible for the disposal of human remains in this way."

Once again, Ireland's past had returned to haunt.

His voice trembling with passion, the prime minister, Enda Kenny, addressed the Irish legislature on what he called the "chamber of horrors" discovered in Tuam. In the "so-called good old days," he said, Irish society "did not just hide away the dead bodies of tiny human beings."

"We dug deep and we dug deeper still," he said. "To bury our compassion, to bury our mercy, to bury our humanity itself."

Though the prime minister said that "no nuns broke into our homes to kidnap our children," others directed their wrath at the Catholic Church and, of course, the Bon Secours order, whose only response so far has been to express its "continued cooperation and support" for the commission's work.

The Corless household, meanwhile, became an international newsroom, with family members fielding the constant telephone calls and accommodating the television crews forever at the door. Catherine answered every question out of duty, not vanity. But when Ireland's most popular television program, "The Late Late Show," invited her to appear as a guest, she balked.

There was her ever-present anxiety, which now limited her driving to little more than weekly five-mile runs to the SuperValu grocery in Tuam. More than that, she feared being accused of self-aggrandizement at the expense of dead children.

With her family all but demanding that she accept — *Imagine how many home-baby survivors, suffering in silence, might be reached* — Catherine reluctantly consented, but only if she would already be seated when the program returned from a commercial break. She did not want to be summoned from the curtain to unwanted applause.

Aidan drove her into Galway City to buy an outfit: black pants and a black top, of course, brightened slightly with a silver trim. Then up to Dublin.

"I was a mess," Catherine recalled. "But I said: 'This is it. I have to do it.'"

When she finished telling the story of the Tuam home on live television, the audience rose in what the host described as a very rare standing ovation. Catherine nodded, smiled slightly, tightly, and exhaled. Watching on a monitor in an adjacent room, her husband fought back tears.

"I'm married to her for 40 years," he said later, still astonished. "And I don't know her at all."

Part 9
Catherine's Final Quest

Photographs of grandchildren adorn the tan walls. A silver kettle rests on the stove. A laptop computer sits open on the counter, beside a window that looks out on a garden, a bird feeder and, beyond, an undulating field of grass.

This is the kitchen of Catherine Corless, and her office. She conducts her online research here, and keeps assorted documents on the kitchen table for easy retrieval when yet another call comes in. *Can you help me find my mother, my sister, my . . .* She never refuses.

The future of the Tuam grounds that her questioning disturbed has yet to be revealed. The government is grappling with many complexities, including the sad fact that the remains of infants and children, the Marys and Patricks, the Bridgets and Johns, are commingled.

One option is to leave everything as is. Another is to disinter the remains for possible identification and proper burial — although it is unclear whether DNA evidence can be recovered from those who died so young, and so long ago.

Other issues also need resolution. Potential compensation for home baby survivors; litigation against the Bon Secours sisters, who run a vast health-care network; the propriety of children playing above the bones of other children.

And there remains the maddening mystery of why a Catholic order of nuns would bury these children in such a manner. Was it to save a few pounds for the cost of each burial? Was it meant as a kind of catacombs, in echo of the order's French roots?

The baptism of these children entitled them under canon law to a funeral Mass and burial in consecrated ground. But perhaps the baptismal cleansing of their "original sin" was not enough to also wipe away the shameful nature of their conception. Perhaps, having been born out of wedlock in an Ireland of another time, they simply did not matter.

Her auburn hair cut short, Catherine stands now at her computer, gazing through the window at the garden that blesses her with a sense of oneness with it all. Her begonias are blood-red bursts, her lobelias the bluest of blue, her mind forever returning to the past.

A candy wrapper. Empty.

She has searched school and government records many, many times. So far, though, she has been unable to find the name of one particular little girl from the mother and baby home, her long-ago classmate.

"It would be nice to meet her," Catherine says, leaving no doubt as to what she would say if given the chance. □

Dan Barry reported from Tuam, Ireland. Kassie Bracken contributed reporting from Ireland, and Megan Specia from New York. A list of additional sources can be found at **nytimes.com/tuam**

PAULO NUNES DOS SANTOS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

TUAM, IRELAND, 2017.

At Tuam

Among the hundreds of children who stare up at us from their septic tank
are James Muldoon, who died in 1927
at the age of four months. At least he would never be forced to thank
the Lord for mercies large or small. That cry to high heaven
must come from Brendan Muldoon, who died in 1943
at a mere five weeks. A teenage nun bows before an unleavened
host held up by a priest like a moon held up by an ash tree.
In 1947 the eleven month old Bridget Muldoon, a namesake of the mother
who would shortly give birth to me,
has already distinguished herself as being a bit of a bother
while Dermott Muldoon, three months old in 1950, is about to join the ranks
of my foster-sisters and foster-brothers
in that unthinkable world where a wasp may recognize another wasp's face
and an elephant grieve for an elephant down at the watering place.

PAUL MULDOON
OCTOBER 27, 2017