

chapter 3 ireland: summer holidays

a real story — not a hollywood film

2nd edition

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Figure 1: my mother

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chapter 3

ireland: childhood summer holidays

In the period immediately after the war, we went to Ireland most summers. We stayed in Ireland with my grandparents, who lived in Johnstown Avenue. After Auntie Mary's stories about the Duineshee, I gave that banshee's stone, especially in the dark, a very respectful wide berth. Even in the mornings, passing it would send a spasm or shiver through me. When my grandmother, Nanny-in-Ireland, sent me, on my own, on an errand to fill a jug of milk in the dairy or buy mackerel from the quay, going past the stone, while looking the other way, was a trial of nerve. The lane and all the houses in it have long been demolished; the stone is still at the entrance to the lane, the eternal throne of the banshee?

On the Boat: Fishguard to Waterford

It is a long journey: six hours from Paddington to Fishguard on the train followed by another six hours through the night on the boat to enter the estuary of the Suir, and disembark

on Waterford quay at six in the morning.

My mother refers to going to Ireland as “going home”. Most Irish immigrants even of twenty years standing do the same. You can hear them in the bars or in the lounges or up on deck, where-ever they meet,

“When were you last home?” to other passengers on (or in?) the same boat. Another common theme, especially when the conversation flags, is

“You’ll never die on your own at home.”

It draws down a hallowed hush, accompanied by confirming intakes of breath, nods and silent aahs all round, and puts the finishing touches to the talking.

My mother is acknowledging the heartfelt difference between her experience of the gut comfortableness of the customary ‘in and out of the open doors’ in the lane and the singularly English ‘polite distance’ between households and the difference it makes to the relations between people.

Is the traditional, personal, English reserve sculpted in brick?

There are exceptions, of course, which is why I think she took so readily to my father’s adopted family before the war. However, the longer she lives in England, as I am growing up, the more she takes on and prefers the English custom.

Back on the boat, however, along with other emigrants assuaging a diminishing but never vanishing, residual guilt for leaving Ireland, she is keeping faith with the customs and ways of her homeland, by reminding herself and others of a final inducement to return at the end of her days — knowing full well she never will.

Grandad Sargent: On the Quay

My grandfather, like clockwork, meets us at the quay in a pony and trap on which, curiously, the passengers sit sideways to the direction of motion. After the long haul of the journey, he is such a great sight, a dapper grand-daddy of a man.

Characteristically, he wears the original grandad's white shirt — with stripes, I think, like a nightshirt. It is done up at the throat with a stud; a second stud protrudes at the back on which to attach, in a typically Irish way, the collar he never wears. Most of the year without a jacket, he dons a smart black waistcoat which matches his black trousers and black boots. When he is out, he pulls on a dark cheesecutter, to sit jauntily on his head.

His thick mop of white hair, combed neatly and parted on the side, remains flattened to his head when he removes the cheesecutter.

Grandad always appears clean, well scrubbed and wholesome-looking — an image that my mother desperately tries to achieve with us. His thin face, deeply lined and old, frames his light blue eyes, made young by an everpresent twinkle.

When he meets us, the twinkle sparks a warm grin which goes from ear to ear. Not a great one for words — he rarely puts more than two together — but slim, active and strong with massive hands, he loads up the cases on the trap, and we're off, exhausted and weary but so excited, trotting up the high street to breakfast at Nanny Sargent's.



Figure 2: Grandad Sargent with Bronwen c. 1967

Irish Butter

It was a certainty, an article of faith, with my mother in Ireland: how superior the butter, the bacon, the vegetables, the bread and the potatoes were. Triumphant, she took back to London some boiled bacon and Irish butter from every holiday. And there was the perennial difficulty, which I never managed to overcome: to say butter in the Waterford way which sounded to me like ‘putherr’ with a soft roll on the r.

The local water was spoken of reverentially as a 'cure all ills' — it's true it was much softer than the hard water in the Paddington taps. The guinness was extolled as the genuine article made from the Liffy water.

What got to me every time, was the smells and taste of Irish sausages, the black and white pudding, egg and bacon, and the bread and butter. However, there was a price to pay for the first morning's feast: I would come out in hives by the next day — the effect of the different food — put down to the eggs, or the water. I didn't mind; it was painless and only lasted a day.

Pigs Trotters

"Nanny and granddad never eat with us."

I complained to my mother as we were setting off on a visit to Tramore after a breakfast of cereals and a fry-up.

"They don't eat what we eat."

was my mother's pained, abrupt explanation, which brooked no reply.

When we enter the house on our return, they are supping soup at the table. It's a chance to find out what's different about their food.

I run over to Nanny,

"What's that your eating?" I ask her before my mother has a chance to get through the door.

"Pigs trotters"

she replies, giving me a knowing smile as she relishes the horror of my turned-up nose as I watch her dipping her bread in it. I look at her face to see if she is kidding me —

but there they were: pigs feet, swollen, translucent, hideous and so unappetizing, floating in the clear watery soup.

And then, as she and mum are laughing, they start to rave on about pig's tail, pig's head, pig's eyes, pig's . . . and how nothing goes to waste.

The House in the Lane by the River

The lane, as it was called, was an L-shaped cul-de-sac. As you turned the angle into the short arm of the L, in which were just three houses, it ended abruptly at a two-foot-high wall looking out on the river.

At high tide, my grandmother would sometimes sit on the wall in warm weather with the other women who, invariably, were dressed from head to toe in black; they were wrapped in black shawls whenever they went out. Once they had had children or reached a mature age they all dressed in this characteristic style. I wondered if they were dressing up to look like nuns — maintaining an aura of piety, to make up for missed vocations.

They would sit on the wall, passing the time of day, feeding odd scraps to the swans coasting in the deep water. On the other side of the river was a busy thoroughfare, which met the beginning of the high street at the bridge. Sitting on the wall overlooking the river offered them a grandstand seat to watch life go by through the open railings on the far side.

From here we could see grandad's own grandstand perch, atop the centre stone of the bridge, his legs dangling, waving his feet. Grandly seated, as much a feature at the bridge

as the ebb and flow of the tide, he met everyone to-ing and fro-ing in the high street.

All the houses were on one side of the lane; on the other was a huge whitewashed wall. The honeysuckle and its heavy, sweet odour hung from the top of the wall on light summer evenings.

My grandmother was the odd one out in the lane. She had four children Billy, Mary, Ellen, and John. The other mothers had more; seven and eight were commonplace; twelve and sixteen in two of the houses — made all the more remarkable because the houses were identical and so small.

Number eighteen had two tiny bedrooms each of which might just about hold a narrow double bed and precious little else. The living area — the original open-plan design — with a front door into the street and a back door that opened onto the yard, had an Aga-type peat or wood fired stove and a large table in the middle of the room. By the front door, a narrow ladder stairway, too steep for Nanny to climb, led to a small area in the loft where we stayed as kids.

The Shirikeboukee

The characteristic dank, muddy smell of the river at low tide could be picked up in the tiny backyard on the way to the outside tap and lavatory. Getting across the yard at night or in bad weather would make me shiver before I reached the haven of the sentry box shed and the cosy squat on the wooden lavatory seat and yet another, dry, musky, familiar and safe odour.

Inside, the white walls were adorned with the odd shirikeboukee (snail) or spider. The essential, torn-up newspaper squares were hung from a nail on the inside of the door. Unexpectedly, even without lighting at night, the contours and outline of the house and the yard were clearly visible; the bright whitewash on the walls radiating a welcome, illuminating glow.

It was hard to imagine in such circumstances how parents managed to raise four children; but twelve or sixteen?

Bare Feet and Sunday Mass

When I was able to swim, I joined many of the older kids in the river at high tide doing a frantic doggy-paddle across to the steps on the other side. Diving and jumping off the wall and the steps in the summer months was good fun and different to life in Lydford Road; but even that did not compare with going on the train to the seaside at Tramore: the real business of being in Ireland.

As often as we could persuade my mother to treat us, we would go riding on the steam train, hanging out the window, braving the smoke and grit in our eyes, for a day with buckets and spades on the glorious strand, a sahara of sand by the sea — the highlight of the holiday.

I used to wear plimsolls to play in the lane until I realized all the kids played in bare feet; I wanted to join in, not be different. The soles of my feet soon toughened up playing hurling in the long arm of the lane — the regular game for all the kids big enough to wield a hurling stick or anything that would pass for one. The advantage of living on the

short arm was that the kids wouldn't play hurling there or any ball game for fear that the ball would go over the low wall and into the river. Number eighteen was the end house bar two, and sat in the short arm by the wall; it was perfect for playing quieter games; some we imported from England. A peaceful and attractive place to be.

Sunday meant Mass. Sunday Mass meant dressing in Sunday best; out would come my suit and the best dresses for the twins. For the kids from the lane it wouldn't mean much of a change except that they would go in bare feet, their shoes tied together and worn round their necks. They would put the shoes on just before entering the church; take them off again once outside and hand them to a brother or sister going to a later Mass. I had to wear my black plimsolls to Mass; my mother wouldn't let me tie them around my neck.

Nanny Sargent

I noticed that my grandmother retired to her bedroom every day when I was young; at about fifty, she took to her bed for good. I was concerned for her — she was in pain as she huffed and puffed around the living room when she came out of her bedroom or rose from the high-backed armchair which was reserved for her by the stove.

It wasn't until my mother was severely affected with osteoarthritis in her hips that I twigged why Katie had taken to her bed.

When I first knew my grandmother, she was about 5'8" tall, standing in a wide circle, at about thirteen stone. On top

sat a large, rounded-oblong, strikingly regal head, her open face with regular, big features tilted high. Her full lips were tinged pinky blue — taking on a wonderful rosy colouring in warm weather. When it was cold her lips would turn bluer and appear thinner; the effect made her look unwell as if she was suffering from the cold.

The difference in the colours reminds me of the huge cerise, blue and pink blooms of the ubiquitous, wild fuchsias which grow in abundance along the banks of the river Suir.

Her long black hair was streaked with grey and she usually wore it loose down to her waist. Startlingly big, deep-blue eyes sprinkled with tiny shards of black stood out against her very fair translucent skin, the singularly fine grain noticeable on her arms and shoulders; it made for classical Irish Celtic colouring — except she was probably of Spanish descent.

Uncle John got his looks from her, I would say. He had the same unusual colouring around the lips and her big eyes with that exact shade of blue. My mother had undoubtedly inherited her beautiful skin and my grandad's light blue eyes.

Katie

Katie, as she was called in the lane and how my mother referred to her, was as sharp as a razor when it came to knowing how many beans make five and what was going on around her. 'I didn't come over the bridge yesterday' — my mother's warning to us when we were trying to pull the wool over her eyes or underestimate her — could only have come from Katie.



Figure 3: Nanny Sargent

When my children speak to me or treat me as if I am easily fooled (if only I could be unaffected) I am often more annoyed with their assumption that they can get away with it, than whatever it is they are trying to get away with. Won't they wise up: don't they know I have inherited their sharpness?

Katie was in charge. It hadn't always been that way; she hadn't been able to control Tommy's drinking. More to the point(pint), he seemed unable to separate his drinking

money from the house-keeping even on pay-day.

My mother was bitter about his behaviour as a young man and the consequences for her as a child. “We could have been well off, Tommy earned good money as a docker but Katie rarely saw hide nor hair of it.” She loved her father, but Tommy didn’t rate in my mother’s eyes as Katie did. She considered him to be feckless — made a fool through drink. Katie, on the other hand, had done the business in an impoverished environment that she hadn’t bargained for, and which my mother saw as avoidable, if only Tommy had done his stuff.

Tommy shocked me because I, as young as ten, could see through him. Perhaps the drink had got to him by this time but his wiles were no match for a ten year old from the Paddington streets. And when he had a pint — that’s all it took — his brains were beaten into retreat. Now, emphatically, Katie was in charge.

The Smart One

“Now, Tommy, Now.” she says to my grandfather peremptorily, “c’mon and fetch an errand for me.” Tommy, quick on his feet, goes scuttling off down the lane after being fully appraised of what is required. It is hard to see how, the Tommy that I know now, would ever have gotten away with anything at all with Katie.

On other occasions when Tommy isn’t there, with a congratulatory wink, which contorts her whole face emphasizing the lines and wrinkles, and several signifying nods, which even the artful dodger couldn’t better, she tells me often, in

case I forget,

“Now! David, you’re the smart one, I want you to fetch some errands for me. You’re the one.”

Sure enough I am. Well I am! I am determined to please my grandmother by being useful as a reliable errand boy. I find out early in my life (at about seven) how Tommy feels under the confidentially beckoning index finger of my grandmother. Her heavy left hand on my right shoulder leaves its imprint, as she stares into my eyes, making every detail of the errand as crystal clear as Waterford glass.

No detail is too small. Every detail is worth repeating on each trip. “Now, David, make sure the mackerel are fresh — still jumping.” She chuckles at her exaggeration; but she means it; and, what is a bit galling, she laughs at her own jokes. Pressing a halfpenny into my hand, she firmly closes my fingers over it.

“Now.” she ends emphatically, “You’re off!” Her command is the starter’s pistol, and like a shot, I’m on my way, out into the lane.

On the long run for fish, Katie’s, “Be quick, now.” ringing in my ears, I race, weaving in and out of the people on the pavements on their way to Mass; I go zigzagging onto the road — ‘Watch out for the pony and trap, the car, the muddled walker, the bus, the huddle of talkers, the stamp of the dray horses on the cobbles,’ checking from time to time the valuable halfpenny with the harp on one side, and renewing my grip on it, all the way down the high street to the quay and the smell of fish.

Fine Feller

When fetching the errands from round the corner, I look forward to: the musky, fruity, so characteristically damp smell of the greengrocer's and the fresh creamy smell of the dairy, when I enter armed with a small pail for a pint or two of fresh milk. The dairyman encourages me to ladle out the milk directly from the churn.

Everywhere I go, I get a warm welcome as Katie Sargent's messenger and the introduction to anybody and everybody in the shop: "Now this fine feller is Katie's grandson over from London."

My grandmother isn't a talker. She doesn't prattle on as so many in the lane do putting their invasive questions and unsubtle presumptions to a 'well off' London boy. I appreciate that about her. She appears formidable, but I catch her throwing sideways looks at me.

In that moment, so much mystery, so many stories and so much knowing show in the glances. Before she has a chance to look away, I catch, tucked in the very corner of her eyes, the tell-tale sign that she is very fond of me.

I realize that the description I am giving of my grandmother is as a grandmother. I have little information about her as a young woman — a wife and a mother. My mother told me of the hard life that Katie had led with Tommy. I wish I had more, but I have gleaned scant else apart from a few snippets.

Eire: Tales from a Different Era

Katie was a film buff as a young woman. I was curious about the way she pronounced ‘film’ as ‘fillum’, and tempted, when I was young, to correct her. I didn’t want my grandmother mocked because of her mispronunciation. Fortunately, my natural deference to authority saved me from making a fool of myself, as I came to appreciate that saying ‘fillum’ was as universally Irish as shamrock or guinness. The ‘cinema’ she went to had a piano playing during the silent film, the dialogue and commentary projected onto the screen in between scenes.

When Katie went to see a film there would be another projection — her own version of audience participation. A standard scene in the silent, black and white, cowboy films, which Katie was so fond of, was the hero flushing out the villain in the rooms above the saloon. Tom Mix, gun drawn, would open each door and enter warily. The piano score would heighten the tension. When he came to the room in which the villain was hiding, Katie, totally absorbed and invariably an ally of the good guy, would help out by shouting, “Look out Tom, he’s behind the door!”

People in the lane would often tell my mother she had lost her accent since she had left Ireland. Some would chide her, with an edge to remind her that she didn’t ‘belong’ anymore, especially when she was adamant that she wasn’t about to return to Ireland. But she sounded ever more Irish — like a different person to me when we were in Ireland — especially, when she was talking to Katie.

They never argued or rowed in my presence. Hard to believe with my experience of her, that my mother could be so

well behaved over a period! Rarely would my mother raise with Katie the subject of their life together in my hearing.

An Irish Wolfhound

An exception to this was their recollection of the family dog. My mother spoke often of ‘Rover’ the Irish wolfhound they owned as children. It struck me as an incongruous name for an Irish wolfhound, especially, when I saw a full-grown one. I suppose I expected a romantic Gaelic name that conjured up visions of great wolf-like dogs hunting boar or the fabled, now extinct, Irish elk in the wild over the bogs.

At home, when I was older, I would sometimes interrupt her, bombard her with suggestions for alternative names and ask her why she hadn’t tried names like ‘Tír na nÓg’ dog, or ‘Port Lairge’ — the gaelic for Waterford.

Any gaelic name would probably have satisfied my romantic yearnings. I’d ply her, irreverently, with ‘Were’ to go with wolf(hound), or ‘Major’ to follow the family surname, ‘Sargent’. As a last resort, I’d ask her what the gaelic for ‘Rover’ was, like barristers do, knowing full well that she didn’t know the answer even if one existed. She would give me one of her withering Irish looks, a contemptuous flick of the eyes to heaven, carry on totally unruffled by my attempts to derail her, and describe how, when they were small, up to three of them together would ride on its back down the lane and try to get it to gallop. It was such a huge friendly dog, and so good with all the children in the lane ...

They were heartbroken when the dog was killed by the doctor’s car on the main road outside the lane. An accident

made more difficult to come to terms with, perhaps, as my mother would add,

“... occurring as it did sure, at a time when there were very few cars on Waterford streets.”

Scandals

I earwigged desperately to the two of them for intimate and scandalous revelations without success. If they spoke in this vein, they did so when I wasn't present. The conversations that I was 'allowed' to overhear had more of a bantering than a personal tone.

In one, my mother went on about some Cork people she met on the train from Dublin passing through Waterford. How they thought they were superior to people from the other counties; because they had practically declared independence from Ireland in 1916 — never mind England. In contrast, by way of flying the flag for other counties including Waterford, my mother would extol what I thought were dubious county traits to be proud of, like feuding. She would declare,

“Nobody would be at each other's throats like the Waterford (rats) and the Kilkenny (cats).” Katie would be nodding her head smiling in agreement as my mother sped on.

Uncle John and the Weather

During each visit, they would drift into talking about the changes since we were last over — who in the family had been 'home'

recently. At some stage, my mother would be sure to insert a coded reference to uncle John,

“How was the weather when John was over?”

They would laugh like drains.

Every year as a single man, uncle John would take his annual fortnight’s summer holiday in Waterford, courtesy of his free pass from British Rail. He would spend every night till the early hours in the pubs and dance-halls and the whole of the day-time in bed recovering — never to see the light of day. The standing joke in England was to ask John how the weather had been on his holiday.

Attitudes

My mother’s question was a shorthand shaker for an Irish cocktail of archetypal attitudes — to (uncle John’s) over-indulgence in the craic; perennial attitudes in ferment in the Irish psyche.

I could pick out some of the roles my mother and grandmother might play in turn, and have a guess at the attitudes the roles gave rise to:

mother — indulgent yet concerned,

wife — knowing yet cynical, envious yet dismissive,

sister — celebrating yet competitive,

Irish matriarch — condoning yet disapproving,

old crone — amused yet scornful ...

Many more ingredients, a list as long as your arm, contradictory and juxtaposed, well mixed, and each striving to be dominant, make up this so typical Irish cocktail.

Great Nanny ‘Oregon’

Religiously, on every visit, they would trek through my mother’s contemporaries — what they were doing, how they were getting on, who else among them had left Ireland since we were last over. They would eventually become more serious: the discussion ranging over who had died recently or was ill, and, always as a matter of deferential concern, how great auntie Mary was keeping now that, “Nanny ‘Oregon’ was gone. God rest her soul.”

When I was about four years old I was taken up to the square in Johnstown to see my great-nanny “Oregon”. She was just under a century old. She looked incredibly old to me — on a huge four poster bed with light curtains around it — a tiny figure surrounded by big pillows, heavy sheets, a large area of stiff linen counterpane on which they sat me, and a dry musty bedroom smell.

A Wake

She died soon afterwards and I have very faint memories of the wake: a bucket of holy water at the foot of the open coffin in which lay great-nanny ‘Oregon’, people crossing themselves with the holy water, such comments as, ‘How peaceful she looks.’ ‘Beautiful, beautiful.’ and ‘God rest her soul.’

It was much later on that I was able to put together the slang expression for dying, ‘kicking the bucket’ with the bucket of holy water at the foot of Nanny ‘Oregon’s’ coffin.

According to my mother, Katie in her whole life never set

foot outside the county of Waterford, apart from one trip to Paddington just after the war. I have an indelible memory of her, her suitcase swinging in her hand, rolling, huffing and puffing up Lydford Road from the bus stop in Walterton Road.

After she took to her bed, she never again set foot outside the short arm of the lane.