

## Kiltimagh and Therefore Me

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It's early June in the summer of 2008. My entire family of five, our suitcases, and our ancient golden retriever are all packed into the smallest KIA sedan imaginable, driving down the narrowest road imaginable, and to top it all off my father is driving on the wrong side of the road. The scene may seem odd to an outside observer, but not if that observer is Irish. In Ireland most people have large families packed into little cars, the wrong side of the road is, for them, the correct side, and there are often animals in cars—sometimes even sheep. The only thing different about this summer is that we are not winding these tiny roads following the small black BMW whose driver committed them to memory when he rode his brother Ambrose's hand-me-down bike back before the roads were paved in the 1930s and 1940s. That driver, my grandfather Thomas John Flatley, died on May 17, 2008 of ALS (more commonly known as Lou Gehrig's disease) just a month before he would have made his final trek home to his birthplace and my family's summer home in Kiltimagh, County Mayo, Ireland.

I have always divided my summers into three parts: the time I spend in Cape Cod, the time I spend in Dublin, having fun with my cousins and friends in the pubs and enjoying the nightlife, and finally the time I spend in Kiltimagh, talking and having tea with old people. Now, about that last part. Don't get me wrong. Old people are cute when they a) slip you a twenty just because, and b) stroke your ego when they tell you how thin you are, then make you eat more of their delicious food, and c) repeat over and over again how you remind them of their favorite classic actress. In Kiltimagh, old people do none of those things. Their idea of a good night is sitting around telling stories about what Kiltimagh and Ireland were like in the old days

while drinking inordinate amounts of tea and complaining about the weather.

I could survive the tea and even throw in my own two cents on the weather, but those stories were another matter. I could usually predict how long I was going to be imprisoned in whatever dimly lit and musky smelling home I had been invited to that evening just by listening to the beginning of a story. I actually preferred the stories that started out with: “Well, when Thomasine (the Gaelic word for Thomas, i.e., my grandfather) was a wee lad...” because then my grandfather would say, “Aye, now she doesn’t need to hear that one again.” In truth I had never heard “that one” because each time he would stop the story from progressing past that point. I think he did this because he was a humble person who didn’t like hearing stories about himself. Or perhaps my grandfather could see my mobile phone vibrating from the many texts and calls I had missed from friends asking when I would be ready to go out. I thought of all this again now, as our Matchbox car wound around each bend heading to Kiltimagh. Squished between my little brother and our aged dog, I couldn’t help but wonder how much time would be taken up *this* summer with tea and stories.

As soon as we got to our house and dislodged ourselves from that clown car, my father informed me that we had already had four “calls.” In Ireland, especially in small villages like Kiltimagh, it is considered disrespectful not to let your family, friends, and neighbors know that you are in town via e-mail, phone call, or—if the person does not have a phone, which many of them don’t—by a letter. After you have let everyone know, they will “call” on you to figure out a good time to visit. And as my parents have warned me, “No, thank you, I’m busy,” is never an acceptable time.

The first call was all set up. My father and I would go visit my grandfather’s best childhood friend MC and his wife Mary at 2:00 P.M. after the 12:00 Mass at the local church, St.

Michael's. I was not looking forward to another one of these tea parties, and to make matters worse I had to put on possibly the itchiest sweater on the planet because Mary had knitted it for me from the wool she sheared from her favorite ewe, Phyllis. We arrived at their home and I wasn't even one shortbread cookie in before my friends were text messaging me, asking if I was done yet. They knew it would take almost two hours to get to Dublin to go to Flanagan's and they didn't want to miss any of the football game.

Our hosts politely ignored the fact that every few minutes my pocket lit up like a Christmas tree, though MC did look in my direction once and reflect that "no one can truly get away from it all anymore," an obvious passive-aggressive allusion to my mobile. I didn't care though, because—even though it was awful—I was banking on the possibility that maybe, because my grandfather wasn't with us, MC would have less to say to my father and me. I had it all planned out: we would drink some tea, eat some cookies, and I would be asked what grade I was in four or five times. Then I would comment on the weather; our hosts would insist that we leave early to escape the storm, sending some cookies home with us. Finally I would be awkwardly receiving that double-cheek kiss that European people use as a greeting and a goodbye, my brilliant plan would have come to fruition, and I would escape for a night of pub crawling and nightlife in Dublin.

But as soon as we sat down MC started off with some familiar words: "Ah, when Thomasine..." I looked around but soon remembered that my grandfather wasn't there to stop the story from unfolding. In defeat I sank down into a floral couch made lumpy from its life with a family of seven children and twenty-two grandchildren. I was expecting to be bored out of my mind and then bombarded with a slew of angry text messages, half of which would be in written in English and the other half in Irish, of which I speak very little and am able to translate even

less. But instead, as MC recalled growing up in Kiltimagh with my grandfather, I began to listen and ask questions.

In one of my favorite stories, MC, my grandfather, and their friend Seamus were playing handball, and my grandfather would pretend to lose the ball in the tall grass. They would look all over for it and not be able to locate it and finally Seamus would give up and head home. My grandfather would tell his brilliant dog Bruno to go find it, which he would, and my grandfather would end up with a new handball. At the end of the day MC and my grandfather would ride back home laughing all the way about their prank.

While listening to MC's stories I even surprised myself as I laughed along with everyone, imagining my grandfather with scraped-up knobby knees and missing the front tooth that MC had knocked out during a particularly heated game of Gaelic football. When it was time to leave I looked down and I was even more surprised to find that I had turned off my mobile in order to better concentrate on the stories. I no longer cared that my friends had left almost an hour before to make it into Dublin on time for the game.

Having said our goodbyes, my father and I stood for a quiet moment on MC's porch, admiring the amber glow of the sun setting before us on the sprawling Irish landscape. My father apologized for how long the call had gone and assured me that he would drop me off at the house before the next one. "It's okay," I said, stroking the top of MC's old sheepdog's head. "It's only our first night. I'll have plenty of time to hang out with my friends later." But I almost could not believe my own next words: "Can I come on the next call with you?" My father's eyes widened in surprise. Never one to easily admit to having been wrong (having inherited my grandfather's legendary stubbornness) I quickly added, "Because there's nothing for me to do at home anyway, since my friends have already left." My father replied: "Of course you can come,"

and he played along with my game: “And how generous of you, Maggie, to give up your time for me like that!”

As our Matchbox car swerved down the labyrinthine roads and roundabouts of County Mayo on the way to our next call, I looked out over Kiltimagh’s rolling green hills, the same hills that once greeted my grandfather each morning and under whose cover he now slept beneath each night. At the sight of these hills, which, until now had seemed so unremarkable to me, I remembered a Gaelic adage my grandfather used sometimes to end prayers and blessings when our family gathered together for holidays. It is directed towards younger generations, and in that summer of 2008, without my grandfather around to say it, I finally came to appreciate its message. The saying goes: “Cuimhnich air na daoine bho ‘n d’ thainig thu.” Its translation is, “Remember those from whom you came.”