



Playing Ketchup with Granny

By Mike Farragher

Though you were born in America, there is something about the fork in the road on the n17 on the way to your grandmother's house in Ballyglunin near Athenry that tells you that you've arrived home.

You are loathe to buy into reincarnation, but there is an undeniable sense of silent company walking with you down a hill on the thin tongue of black top between Uncle Matty's house and your grandmother's place next door. The hills that your grandfather worked and so suddenly died on are a green patchwork, with cobblestone

fences dividing the fields from our neighbors.

You can hear the soft murmur of the livestock braying at either side of you and lambs calling out for their mothers as dusk settles. A rickety car makes its way toward you and a man you do not know waves his hand in greeting anyway. That's the kind of people that live here. The smell of the bog belches out of the chimney in soft black puffs, telling you that Granny Farragher has lit the turf fire and it is time for dinner.

You walk in and there is a weathered table on your right. There is butter and crumbs from the morning's bread where 'herself' would have sit, her hawkish blue eyes devouring the contents of the newspaper that lays folded near the mug of tea. Sensing you are judging the dirty dish, there is a call for you to come into the parlor.

She is there, her hair an impossible shade of brownish red that is pulled back into a hard bun. She tried going to her natural color once and when she saw pictures of the gray hair at 87 she exclaimed, "jaysis, who is that old woman staring me in the face" before quickly dyeing it again.

Her thin frame is perpetually in motion, contained within a thick blue apron of a dress that she wears regardless of the weather. She smokes half of an unfiltered cigarette, the other part of the 'fag' with the filter in the top drawer because it is her way of only smoking half of what she used to.

With a knowing glance here and a head gesture over there, she directs the aunts in putting out the big spread without ever saying a word.

Irish ham, cold cuts, and cheeses are rolled up into tight logs, fanned out on the plate like spokes on a wheel. In the center of each dish is a perfectly symmetrical tomato and a yellow potato salad, homemade of course. Mugs of tea and high glasses of orange soda are never allowed to go below half full, thanks to the wordless nods of the head by herself.

"Tell me about your life in America," she would say, her bony hand taking yours as her intense eyes are magnified through thick smudged bifocals. You prattle on about your good grades in school, the minor victories you have had a sports, and the great essays you've written in English classes.

“He is good-looking and modest,” she would say through pursed lips. It’s not until later that you realize her sharp tongue and intellect have dissected you and put those boastful ways in their proper place.

“Do you have everything you need, pet?” she would ask, proudly surveying the spread that has been put out before you.

“I didn’t see any ketchup, Granny. Do you have any lying around?”

An eyebrow is raised, a head is tilted, and the uncle’s wife is dispatched to make the five mile ride into Tuam.

“Well, God blast yeh,” she says, half-laughing. “Sure, the Lord Jesus Christ could cook the Last Supper with His own two hands and this Yank’d ask for the ketchup.”

The ketchup would be at every meal from that point forward, even if it was toast being served, just to prove that you’ll never catch her flat-footed again.

The suitcase is packed, tears are shed, and a few hundred Irish pounds are crumpled and placed in your palm. You smooth them out in the backseat on the way to the airport and soon realize that there is the equivalent of your father’s weekly wage in your hand.

The most valuable gift, however, is revealed when you open your suitcase and find a 1 ‘litre’ bottle of Kande Great Value Family Pack Tomato Ketchup as a memento of your dinner. There is a note taped to the bottle. “Now if you are without ketchup it’s your own fault.”

From that point forward until the woman’s death, you will bring her a bottle of Heinz 57 as a souvenir from America. She will shrug, shake her head, lift her eyes to the heavens, and laugh with a rattled cough before stabbing her turf fire with a spike.

You lean into her hospital bed to give her a kiss for the last time, her lungs filling up with water by the millisecond. The woman in the bed next to her is wailing out to no one in particular, lost in her own madness. Your grandmother bristles for a second and between labored breaths says, “sure, I wouldn’t be in here a’tall if I had her lung power.”

When you open your suitcase in your bedroom after making the trip home from her house, you will find packets of ketchup in your shirt collar, pants pocket, and medicine bag.

You will take that 1 liter ketchup bottle into every apartment or house that you will call home from now on, the red container producing a smile each time you look at it. It makes you think back on the life of an amazing woman and provides a past connection of your own sly sense of humor and the obsession with always getting the last word.

Mike Farragher is a regular contributor to the Irish Voice and IrishCentral.com. His book "This Is Your Brain on Shamrocks" is due February 2011