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# THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON SHAMROCKS



## The Travel Agents for Guilt Trips

Living in sin, with sin, by sin, for sin, every hour, every day, year in, year out. Waking up with sin in the morning, seeing the curtains drawn on sin, bathing it, dressing it, clipping diamonds to it, feeding it, showing it 'round, giving it a good time, putting it to sleep at night.

I'm not sure if the writer Evelyn Waugh was an Irish Catholic, but when he wrote those lines in *Brideshead Revisited*, *The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* in 1945, he described perfectly the oppressive chokehold that sin and the guilt of an Irish

mother have on our soul.

You remember the definition of “near occasions of sin” from the Baltimore Catechism: “all the persons, places, and things that may easily lead us into sin.”

Not very specific, is it? That was all part of the plan. To make sure we all color inside the lines, the Catholic education system labeled everything as sinful and to avoid sinning, we were taught to stay clear of just about everything that was pleasurable.

Being Catholic means sliding out of the birth canal as a sinner, which is why as babies, we were swaddled in white clothes and taken to the church within days of birth so that the stain of Original Sin could be removed from our souls in the sacrament of Baptism. You wouldn't want your kid to live for a few days, only to die and go to Hell like a dead bulb that never blooms into a tulip, would you?

We were taught that the human condition is like the Gulf of Mexico waters: God made this pristine ecosystem for us to pollute with black poison that spewed from a pipeline of our wrong choices and sinful ways. I could almost sign up for that, but how do you explain a baby being blemished with the ink of sin from Day One? It is one of the many contradictions in our faith that defies logic.

If Catholic school was our foundation of guilt, our mothers were the travel agents for the guilt trip. I remember many a Sunday morning when a Saturday night bender made it near impossible to get up for church.

“I'm sure Jesus didn't want to get up the day he died for your sins,” my mom would say.

“I didn't ask him to do that for me,” I'd reply in defense, but the damage was done.

With those words, she would start a grease fire of guilt in my bed that consumed me until I could no longer stand the heat of the covers.

“I remember getting the ‘10 stitches speech’ growing up,” recalled one friend on the barstool next to mine as we compared notes on our Irish mothers. “She’d look forlorn and say, ‘10 stitches. ’Twas 10 stitches they used to sew me up after I had you and if I knew you were going to (insert bad deed here), I would have never went through the pain of birthing you!’ She was unreal.”

I think that one had my mom beat and I pray she is not reading this. She doesn’t need any more ammunition!

Through marriage to a Jewish woman, I have discovered that mothers in that faith do a number on their kids as well. I remember my father-in-law winning the Physician of the Year award for his cutting-edge cancer care at one of the large hospitals in New Jersey. We all attended the awards ceremony.

“You must be so proud of your son that he won this,” gushed one of the nurses to his mother.

His mother rolled her eyes.

“He should win the award for man who calls his mother the least,” she said with a grunt.

Sure, I can tell myself all I want that I am 44 years old and I have finally broken free of my mother’s influence as I raise my own family.

But I know I am an Irishman, which means that my mother will be in the sidecar commenting on every pit stop on my route. When I flip through The New York Times on my luxuriant deck on any given Sunday, a little voice that sounds remarkably similar to hers says, “When you miss Mass, you damn not only your own soul, but the souls of my granddaughters who don’t get to go based on your bad example.” When I try to cut down on the portions at dinner and empty food into the garbage disposal, that voice gently reminds me that there are starving “mission babies” in Africa who would kill to have what I am throwing out.

“Dude, there’s medicine for that,” my friend at the bar says, rubbing my shoulder as he shakes his head when I say this out loud.

Yeah, right. An Irish mother’s guilt is etched in your soul. Kinda like sin, apparently.

*Mike Farragher is the entertainment writer for the Irish Voice and IrishCentral.com. This is an excerpt from his second book, "This Is Your Brain on Shamrocks," due in February.*