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Imeacht Eire (Leaving Ireland)

My grandmother was born in Ireland in 1919, in Cork County. Her mother, my great grandmother, was a teacher of great skill. She was brought into the homes of the poor who didn't want to send their children, so useful around the house and farm, to county schools. She taught them English, Math, History, and other languages such as French and German. During this time, Ireland was experiencing great poverty; I remember my mother telling me how my grandmother's mom would confine herself to a slice of bread a day so that her two children could eat. But she didn't like the odds.

No one likes betting on the horse whose ribs you could count. So after a year of saving up the money she earned, she sent my grandmother and her younger brother to immigrate to America. My grandmother was only ten, her brother, Tim, only eight. They slept outside The Department of External Affairs in Dublin before the line moved in their favor. They got visas, passports, and then went to the Department of Labor to obtain emigration cards. They spent a few days packing up meager food supplies, a change of cloths, and left on a boat to Boston.

In conversations I had with my mom, she mentioned how her mother and her mother's brother had small pieces of jewelry that were gold and silver to purchase them from any extra trouble they might find on the ship to America. Apparently, grandma's

mother had heard stories of child rape occurring on some of these ships and had given them those pieces to buy themselves out of that situation. She had explained this to them bluntly and insisted they stayed together and with at least two other children at all times for safety in numbers. I still have the silver Celtic cross and the gold, three leaf clover pin with a jade stone in the center, but the other two pieces were used to convert to cash to purchase clothes later on.

There was a rape attempt made on my grandmother by a fellow immigrant, however, thanks to staying amongst the other children they all managed to fight him off, some of the kids already being hard and carrying dinner knives with them as weapons. I suspect that was a particularly long voyage for Margaret Mary O’Keeffe. Four immigrants traveling with them suffered from food poisoning, and yet another one got sick from a rat bite. Apparently this memory, along with the sight of the ship rats stuck with my grandmother and she had a horrible fear of rats since then until the day she died. All the children were put to work cleaning and serving water and food to their fellow immigrants. One of the immigrants committed suicide by the simple means of jumping off the boat.

Despite the harshness of the ride, they managed to survive and arrived in Boston with their documents intact. They had to wait two days and most of a morning before they got to the place that would stamp their visas and emigration cards. They ate a biscuit once a day at this time and had to avoid the gangs who wanted to bring them in for profitable crime labor. This was accomplished by Tim lisping every time he talked and my grandmother shouting at them in Gaelic, pretending not to understand English. This got them heavily beaten, but otherwise left alone.

They began life in Boston because they had an aunt who lived there who took them in, fed them and saw that they were schooled. The apartment they lived in is, if my mother's recollection of my grandmother's story was accurate, only slightly bigger than my bedroom. The water was always cold and always brown. Child labor was still happening then, but my grandmother's aunt managed to keep both my grandmother, Margaret, and her brother, Tim, home and away from such jobs, though my grandmother wanted to get work back then to contribute.

However, letters from her mother strongly discouraged this, saying that education would set her working in a cut above the textile wage slaves. I remember the meals she described. Everyone only ate once a day, that was if they were lucky, and the size of the meal portions would make a cat laugh. The aunt would make huge casseroles that she would stretch to make a full week and a half worth of meals. They would go down to sections of the harbor and catch two whole fish a week no matter how long it took them to do it, and made them last for three weeks, eating everything except for the tail. Apparently the eyes and the brains of the fish were not wasted. They used fish gut scraps from previous catches to bait the hooks.

While going to school there, my grandmother managed to dodge the groups of child thieves always looking for more members. She also managed to avoid the child brothel employees who liked to scout in sets of two in order to get a child secured quickly. My grandmother assured my mom that it had been nothing more than luck and the speed of her legs, because they knew school routes and they knew which children were working in factories or mills. They knew who would be missed and who wouldn't be.

Her brother Tim got involved in one of the child thief gangs and even though my grandmother would ream him one, the aunt took whatever proceeds gained and looked the other way. She took my grandmother aside and pretty much told her that this wasn't about getting rich and it sure as hell wasn't about encouraging thievery; it was about survival. Because rents get raised and wages get lowered and sooner or later something was bound to break so please keep your mouth *closed*, child; you can always re-educate the boy later.

So every once in a while, Tim would be out until two or three in the morning, they'd get flush suddenly, like a miracle, everyone pretended real hard that it was and mostly it worked. Tim lost a finger one of the times it didn't, though not via the aunt or my grandmother. Some men got right mean when they catch your hand on their pouch. After that, their aunt decided that maybe Boston wasn't the place for them anymore and moved them into the countryside of Massachusetts where they lived in the guestroom of a farmer and his family, in exchange for all three working out in the fields for no pay. The aunt agreed to this and there they all lived until both my grandma and Tim reached their majority.

My grandmother moved to Springfield when she was eighteen, and began work as a seamstress and was paid a dollar fifty an hour. When WW2 broke out, she, along with other women to support the troops, would knit socks, scarves and gloves for the men over there. This led to correspondence between her and the man who would eventually be my grandfather, Gerard Roberge. He was army, stationed in France, and then later on in Japan. When he got back, they began a courtship that ended in his proposal and her acceptance. Now, his father had built a house in Springfield, with only himself as the

crew with plumbers and electricians working alongside them. My grandmother moved into that house with him and they lived there until the day both of them died.

You can look back and feel the holes in that story; things not mentioned, though not likely through memory loss. No, I'd say it was more likely her mind's self preservation kicked in and blocked certain things out. What she did remember, she passed on well enough; told my mother so that she'd realize that life could be so much worse. That one is traveling across the sea into the land of the free is a pretty thought, but the reality of the journey she and her brother had undertaken was anything but. It was grim, it was harsh, and one ended up in a country that displays in a hundred different ways just how little it cares about you, your family-your entire ethnic *kind*, for cripes sake.

Having a good education didn't get my grandmother anything until she was old and able to manage her own money in a world that had gone 'modern' and at least had the decency to forget to separate one set of white folk from the other. I'll close it off with a scribbled memorial she'd left on one of those paper Jesus cards you get at memorial services, in that case, a memorial for Tim that sums up most of the immigrant experience pretty well. *You never had one good day in this life, brother mine. Sleep now.*