

## Memories of a Dublin childhood

The gentle clink of silver teaspoons on fine bone china. The feel of a starched linen tablecloth on my knees, which in my child's imagination, became my wedding dress. The pouring of amber-coloured tea from silver teapots, which always came accompanied with a second pot containing boiling water to 'freshen' the leaves.

Little basins of fine white sugar and jugs of full-fat pasteurised milk. The centre of the table was decorated with a tiny posy of seasonal flowers, with the 'Baby's Breath' gypsophila surrounding the flowers in a cloud of white and green. The murmur of genteel conversations provided the soundtrack to this regular afternoon light repast.

The venue changed occasionally. Some weeks it would be the Capitol Tea Rooms situated behind the Metropole Ballroom and Cinema on Prince Street, just off O'Connell Street. At other times, it could be the waitress service basement in Bewley's Café on Grafton Street, or perhaps the Gresham Hotel at the north end of O'Connell Street. But the afternoon tea that was served in these establishments was always a treat to a small child.

My grandmother La Grue was a jovial, generous woman. She had a taste for style - the array of bags, shoes, hats, gloves, silk scarves and clothes which she wore was a constant thrill to a little girl with her eye on the finer things in life. Nanna thought nothing of wearing shimmering fabrics during the day. Matching, tailor-made coats and dresses, lined with a contrasting colour in silk or satin. Her necklaces were made of beads to complement whichever outfit she was wearing. Or sometimes it would be multiple strands of pink or cream pearls, held together with a clasp studded with diamonds.

Perhaps a longing for style is inherent, but I think that I probably acquired my love for all things clothes and accessories from this, my maternal grandmother. Time spent in the presence of this wonderful woman surely influenced her adoring young first granddaughter? Oh, and I mustn't forget the brooches, she always

wore a brooch which was quite daring in its size and colour. And it usually sparkled. Quite delicious!

The venue for our afternoon tea was chosen depending on where Nanna was shopping that day. Perhaps she might be visiting Clery's for a look at their linens - then it would be the Capitol Tea Rooms. Or if she was visiting Switzer's for the purchase of some shoes, it would be Bewley's. She was always welcomed in these stores by the floorwalker with a "Good afternoon, Mrs La Grue". I don't think floorwalkers exist anymore. Shopping happens at such a pace that the need for such an individual is defunct. And then on other days, she might decide to buy Philip or me a new outfit and this would require a walk to the top of O'Connell Street to visit "The Gay Child", a perfectly acceptable name for a shop in those sheltered times. On those occasions, we went to the Gresham for tea.

It was always the four of us - Nanna, my mother, Philip and me. Sometimes we would be joined by my Aunt Jean, the much younger beloved sister of my mother, and the baby in a family of eight children. I was in awe of Jean. She was truly a Sixties' beauty. Long blonde hair back combed and held in place by a white hair band, lots of black mascara and pale lipstick, and best of all, a powder blue leather suit with a mini skirt which just about paid homage to decorum.

On high days and holy days, my grandmother Ryan would accompany us, equally generous and equally jolly, but with less of an eye on style. When she accompanied us there would be the reading of the tea leaves at the end of the meal. She always managed to make us laugh with this performance and my Nanna La Grue would shake with laughter, her glitter and her diamonds sparkling in the light of whatever chandelier was above our heads.

The business of food was a serious one. We started with sandwiches, followed by scones and cakes, as well as pastries which made the mouth water on first sight. The texture was always light and delicate, melt in the mouth fantasies. And the ceremony of tea pouring was always done by my mother. Each adult cup filled

almost to the brim with the golden liquid, each child cup half filled with the same and topped up with an amount of milk so that small mouths didn't burn. The job of sugaring the tea was left to the individual and in this minor detail I got to feel quite the grown up. I would carefully take the spoonful of sugar from the little basin, slowly bringing it towards my cup, trying not to spill it.

Of course, there was generally a little spillage on the way but it was a small independence that encouraged the confidence of a young child. Then Phil and I would stir our tea again and again, seeing who could get the liquid to move fastest in the cup. At this point, order would be called by one of the adults and we would get down to the business of eating the delicious feast in front of us.

I don't remember the partings. Funny that. I think perhaps by then I was in a food coma and generally fell asleep on the way home. Sleep was never a problem to me then. I used to fall asleep in school up until about the age of nine! Philip would have a better memory of those days given that he was two years older and didn't know the meaning of the word sleep. For his whole life, four hours a night was the maximum he needed. I presume Nanna went home in a taxi accompanied by the parcels of shopping she had acquired that day and had decided not to have them delivered by the shop.

And each time we met there would be more shopping and more afternoon tea. Being a child, I didn't see this as out of the ordinary. I didn't see it as privileged. I didn't see it as anything other than meeting with Nanna and having tea with her in town rather than in her home. But as I do my own shopping in town these days, I always stop for tea or coffee, a habit I don't seem able to drop.

Of course, I don't frequent the salons of the Shelbourne or such like too often these days. That is only for special occasions. But wherever I do stop, the empty seats at my table echo with light and laughter from days gone by. Memories from a childhood in Dublin, where the haze of nostalgia blurs the realities of the time. And perhaps that is best.

