

The Package.

Everyone has an old tin box or package tucked away somewhere with memories or treasured objects. My tin contains a small brown paper package of letters relating to a chance meeting with a Trilby on Bachelor's Walk, Valentia Island, Ireland in the 1980s.

This story of the origins of the package may have taken place a few years ago but I 'm writing with clear memories of a summer holiday in this beautiful place. Famous for the Marconi transatlantic communication cable that was finally laid in 1866 between the island and a tiny fishing village in Newfoundland known by the name of 'Heart's Content'! Valentia island is the most westerly point in Western Europe and is just five miles long and two miles wide.

My brother and his wife asked me to join them on their summertime trip to Ireland, sharing the car and the cottage accommodation in the centre of the island.

We drove to Fishguard, took the ferry to Rosslare, and drove across to County Kerry and to the village of Portmagee. The access point to Valentia Island via the Maurice O'Neill Memorial Bridge, built in 1970 and named in memory of a member of the IRA executed in 1942 for his part in the shooting dead of Detective George Mordaunt in Dublin. Not sure this really merits the attribution, but then this is Ireland.

We arrive at a non-descript cottage in a non-descript 'crossroads of a place'. My bedroom window overlooked on to the church of Saint Dorarca (patron saint of the island) and a chip and burger shop that did not appear to have any chips or burgers or any customers. However! On the Saturday evening the church was mobbed by families of Roman Catholic worshippers visiting Saint Dorarca's and afterwards Teresa's Chippie became the focus of young life with blaring music and burgers flying off the grills!

Saturday's coming-to-life moments quickly passed, and silent Sunday came, the island was observing the day of rest. All was still through my window, except for in the evening when everyone seemed to gather to use the phone box opposite. Was this part of the island culture? Phone a friend on a Sunday evening.

The days wandered on, the sun shone sometimes, and we explored the island as the week melted away in a calm, typically Irish way, becoming a grey, drizzled Thursday morning. I awoke early, the family was still in bed, no sign of movement or need for breakfast. I grasped an opportunity for me to wander abroad. Raincoat and trainers quickly on, off I trot down the road toward the main town on the island, Knightstown.

At a bus stop, way down the hill, stood an older, chunky man in a tweedy, grey suit jacket and a grey trilby hat. He smiled a sort of 'top 'o th' mornin' smile and stepped back from waiting at the bus stop to lean against a garden gate, the idea of the planned bus-trip well and truly parked in favour of the chance of good craic with a tourist.

The grey trilby hat sat atop a broad forehead with wide cheek bones. Bright blue eyes. Weathered skin. Slightly bluish-veined, possibly whiskey matured, nose. The gentleman introduced himself most politely as John O'Connor of Bachelor's Walk, asking my name and I soon found myself invited into the kitchen of the cottage behind the garden gate.

A large, hairy dog greeted me with affection, his paws paddling in a pool of water on the stone flagged floor, the fridge being in defrost mode. The interior of the cottage was set out as the simple, modest home of a working man, probably a bachelor, coincidentally living on Batchelor's Walk, the road down into Knightstown from Chapelstown.

The obligatory crucifix sat on the shelving next to the Seymour's of Ireland biscuit tin. Plain white cups and plates were stacked haphazardly. There was a well-used armchair and a stove with kettle set to boil on top.

James invited me to sit down at the small wooden, kitchen table and mugs of tea quickly appeared, together with bread, butter slices and a jar of homemade, elderberry jam. Simple fayre from someone who was possibly catching the bus to go shopping to replenish his fridge and larder.

Somehow, we naturally launched into lively conversation as if we had known each other for years. James told me his father had been the 'seanchai' for the island, the storyteller. With the stories being told in song. He remarked that he could tell from my speaking voice that I enjoyed singing and invited me to join him in songs in Gaelic which I stumbled through very clumsily, trying to lip read his mouth whilst laughing.

We soon reverted to more conventional, popular songs and we sang and talked together for about an hour and found great interest in sharing morsels from each other's lives. Worlds apart in so many ways and yet we had joined for an hour as if we were long-lost family. The time came for me to depart, elated and quite bemused from the uniqueness of this encounter, I left the cottage and continued my walk in the rain into Knightstown, eventually phoning my brother for a lift back to the cottage and the opportunity to relate my remarkable encounter.

I did not see James again, but I wrote to him on my return, and we exchanged letters for a few years, then life took over and he faded into the past. But I still have his letters saved in a brown paper package within that green tin box. They are all the same formats. Generally repeating the same words as if in a form of prayer. He always blesses my mother for giving birth to me. God and the Virgin Mary are mentioned often. They certainly do not reflect the distinctive person that I met for that fleeting time on a rainy Thursday on Valentia Island.

Maybe James the Trilby communicates best in song?