

# A Mother and Another

By Sandra Ní Leathlobhair

26 Greenfield Park was a solid detached house, in a calm, beech-tree-lined suburb in Dublin 4. It should have signalled security, yet for my grandmother, Anna, it was nothing like the life she was meant to live.

Anna was born in 1914 with high expectations. As a young girl she was a vivacious beauty, her raven hair styled in loose, 1930's waves and dancing brown eyes that crinkled with mischief. Yet more than anything she disarmed with an intense intelligence and razor-sharp wit. Her Irish-American father was a renowned opera singer, trained in Italy and fluent in Italian. He was a striking and charismatic man with silent-movie star looks and an unconventional attitude to marriage. She and her sister had toured America and Europe with him as young adults, delightedly stepping in for their mother, a homebird, who hated to travel. They accompanied him to La Scala in Milan; they met the Roosevelts and holidayed with the Kennedys in Hyannis Port; they discovered oysters and sipped on Manhattan cocktails in the Waldorf. She was ready for a life bigger than the one Dublin had to offer.

Brid was an 18-year-old from Coolea, in West Cork. She was fifth in a family of eight, who eked out a basic existence on the family dairy farm, instilling in her a life-lasting passion for fresh milk and butter. A Gaelic speaker, and a smart girl who did well in class, her dreams of becoming a teacher faded when

she failed to hit the right note in her music exam. With her best friend, Nuala, she arrived to work in Shrewsbury Road, Dublin 4, for a barrister and his glamorous wife Anna, with Bríd as cook, Nuala as housekeeper, both hoping for a life bigger than the one they had.

Fourteen years later, life moved off its axis when Anna's husband, just weeks after his diagnosis, succumbed to cancer. Having recently buried her sister and her father, unequipped for further loss of any magnitude, Anna took to bed with the solace of books and an endless supply of gin, almost forgetting she had three desolate young children.

As Anna opted for oblivion, Bríd cooked, cared and befriended. The 1950's morphed into the 1960's, Shrewsbury Road downsized to Greenfield Park and Nuala moved on to a bigger household. Looking back at this time, my mother cannot remember a single family meal around the table as a child, after her father died, except at Christmas. As Anna's appetite for mothering diminished, her dependency on liquid and savoury escapism grew. My uncle recollects being sent at age 13 to pick up foie gras in Magill's Delicatessen in Clarendon Street. He remembers weekly deliveries of oysters from Molloy's in Donnybrook, dispatched with a bottle of gin, but can't recall a regular grocery shop. He talks about the erratic life and the exotic food he associates with his mother, and even today his unaddressed, ever-lingering sadness of childhood loss emanates. He speaks of the multiple boarding schools he merry-go-rouned from, none able to manage this newly wayward boy. My mother, in contrast, found her family elsewhere, popular with her boarding school friends, class prefect every year from the year her father died and voted Head Girl in her final one, yet always looking out for her little sister, just a few classes behind her. When they returned at weekends, Bríd provided the nurturing wraparound of comforting meals they craved. She would get the children to "*flúich an tae*." She'd bake her fruit soda bread with them, allowing them to criss-cross it to let the fairies out, smothering on thick layers of her beloved butter as it emerged hot from the oven. She'd seat them around their long

mahogany table and make something out of Sundays.

When I was seven, secure in a world of steady maternal love and oblivious to unspoken tensions, Sundays in 26 Greenfield Park were a treat and I adored both women. I'd fling open the hall door, dash upstairs into my grandmother's room. She had stopped indulging in gin at this point, but reading remained her passion. I'd prise up the embroidered eiderdown, clamber into the warm bed beside her and get her to read to me. She devoured books. I loved the way she'd start with the last page first, so she could relax into the book, already knowing the ending. I loved her overflowing dressing table, dabbing myself with her heady Shalimar perfume in its Baccarat bottle, disappearing into powder puffed clouds, applying rouge to her lightly crinkled cheeks and brushing her hair with her monogrammed silver brushes that alluded to that former life. Most of all I loved that mischievous glint in her eyes, delighting in her memories of travel and food, always interlinked, of post-war alpine skiing and fondue, of Mediterranean sun and moules marinières; of what she ate and who she saw with whom in Russell's on Saturday nights. I was surely a more receptive audience than her adult children, who had long gone past listening.

On those Sundays the smell of Bríd's roasting chicken would waft up from the kitchen. We knew there'd be stuffing, more butter than bread, chicken perfectly tender and juicy, mounds of just-so crisped up skin. She knew that a good roast chicken would draw all sides in like a magnet, to meet around the Sunday table, where only after her blessing-"*Beannaigh sinn a Thiarna*"- would we be allowed tuck in, my sister and I tussling for the wish bone or the wings. Around that table, Bríd spoiled, and my grandmother sparkled, holding the room as three generations united over a temporary mealtime truce. For my sister and I it remains a treasured, love-infused memory, but I see now it was likely a poignant reminder for my mother of what might have been.

Yet my mother emerged fully rounded, with a dedication to mothering, to food and family, fun-loving with a mischievous sparkle, a product of both mothers.

Brid loved with simplicity and nurtured without reserve, rescuing my mother, and indeed my grandmother, with her roast chicken and soda bread. Despite her faults, Anna nurtured in her daughter and in her daughter's daughters a desire for adventure and travel to the sun, of exotic food and occasionally exotic men. She encouraged her grandchildren to explore life beyond this island, in a way that grandmothers usually didn't, sending sharp-witted letters, littered with risqué jokes, as we did so. Her abdication as a mother, but captivating force as a grandmother, remains her nuanced legacy, with the latter too often overlooked in the simple retelling of her life, a life smaller than the one she'd hoped for.