

A Galway Halloween



Halloween (or *Ducking Night* as we called it) was one of the best times for children 60 years ago in County Galway. A few days before, the older children would cycle out to *Cnoc Ma* (the *Hill of Maeve*) to collect hazelnuts in the woods. The old women, who spoke Irish among themselves and called that night *Oiche Samhain*, told us about how Maeve, the queen of the fairies, was buried standing so she could look out over her dominions. Everyone reminded them about taking salt with them, so their souls couldn't be taken by the fairies.

The older boys planned raids into the fields where apples grew. They would always help me over ditches, and used my *gansi* that my mother had knitted from different coloured scraps of left-over wool as a sack to carry the apples back.

Tough, hardy turnips came from the back yard. They needed big people's hands to cut the top of their heads off and dig into their insides until they were hollow. The older children carved out the jagged mouth, slit nose and unnerving eyes. We little ones weren't even let touch the lighted candle that was held upside down inside the turnip, so the wax could dribble to the bottom. The long tallow would then be pushed into its own soft dripping and held until the melted wax was stolid around the stem.

At home our mothers were making bracks, a white cake full of currants, raisins and sultanas. The younger members of the family stuck their heads under their Mammy's elbows, making sure they didn't forget to put in the ring and coin, wrapped in paper. Most people didn't have a range, so the cake was baked on the open fire, in a black, iron pot on top of a grill. The mummies had an air of blacksmiths about them as they rattled among the red-hot sods in the fire with a long-handled tongs and placed glowing cinders on the lid. These ovens created cakes that filled our mouths with sunny sweetness from faraway lands – and told the future. On the night itself, the brack was part of the tea in each house. Whoever got the ring would be marry that year and the coin meant wealth.

Then the furniture was pushed back. A tin pail, filled with water, with pieces of apples, nuts and a few coins at the bottom, was placed on a stool. We lined up and waited our turn hold our hands behind our backs and duck our heads until the water went up your nose and you thought you were going to drown. Then you had to go back to the end of the line. The big ones were able to push their heads to the bottom and pick up the money in their mouths. I was lucky if I managed to wrap my mouth around a nut and bring it up before

spitting it on the floor and shaking my head like a dog.

The next game was to pick a saucer, blindfolded, to know what the next year held in store. There were only four options: the saucer with water meant you were going overseas, the one with the ring was marriage, the one with the rosary beads was a religious vocation and the one with the clay was death.

The older girls would peel an apple and throw the skin over their shoulders to see if it would form the initial of the man they would marry. I remember too they would talk about looking in a glass at midnight to see the boy who would be their true lover. We little ones weren't interested in those things or even in trying to bite the apple hanging from a string in the doorway.

What we wanted was get our turnips with the lighted candles and go out into the dark night and knock on doors and ask for a farthing or half penny. The big ones told us this was dangerous – we needed to hide our identity so we wouldn't be known. No one had different clothes to wear, so we would turn whatever we were wearing inside out, blacken our faces with soot and mess up our hair before stepping out into the shadowy street of houses shrouded in dusty light.

Lampposts hadn't yet arrived to our town, so we fused into a mist of darkness where blazing eyes and raging-fire, saw-gap mouths swam along the street where we had played on during the day. Shivering and clinging onto each other, we had to pretend we were only acting the fool when the floating apparition turned out to be a friend holding a turnip. For ages, we tripped and stumbled, helped only by the dim reflections from windows, to where we thought the doors of our neighbours were, and knocked.

The door we most wanted was our own one. We all knew that night Our Own Ones would be coming back from the Other World. We used the excuse that we needed to go back home to help Mammy clean the house. Then we went to bed so Our Ones could wander around the house in peace.

I sometimes wonder which of the houses of her children will my own mother spend the night of Oiche Samhain in.

Catherine Vallely grew up near Tuam in County Galway, but has spent much of her adult life in Spain

Featured image is *Fairy Fortress Atop Knockma* by Corey Taratuta
www.irishfireside.com