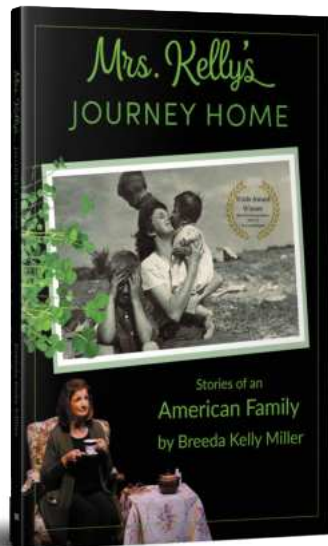


# Spilling the Tea

with  
Breeda Miller

By Linda Learman

*A mother's joy radiates from the 1950s candid black and white photo taken at the Irish seaside near Dublin. Barefoot babe in her arms, two young boys at her sides, her head is tilted back, face to the sun, eyes closed, smile wide, wind wafting through her dark hair.*

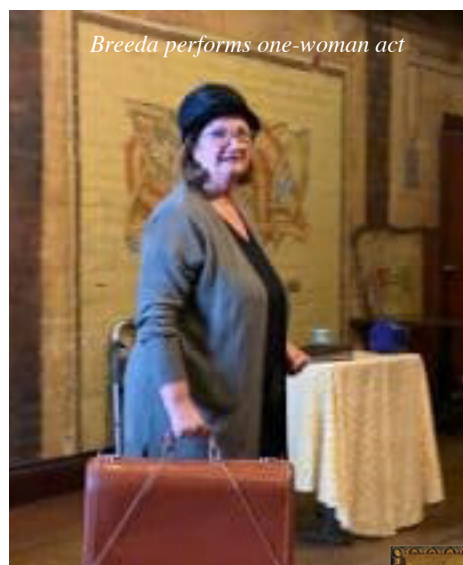


The infant gums at her cheek, as if he can't get enough of her. One boy, the middle child, sits close to his mother's shoulder, less delighted: elbows on knees, head in hands, sticking out his tongue. The eldest son, maybe age five, stands pensive behind his mother, back to the camera, looking away at something unseen. For Breeda Kelly Miller, Manchester resident, playwright, actor, author, and public speaker, the photo captures the indomitable spirit of her mother, Mrs. Mary Kelly, finding contentment and humor amid the chaos of raising a young family during a crisis of Irish economic instability. The snapshot — taken by Miller's father not long before the family immigrated to America, where Breeda and a younger brother were born, and decades before Mary Kelly's dementia diagnosis in a far-off and unknown future — graces the cover of Miller's most recent book, "Mrs. Kelly's Journey Home: Stories of an American Family," a follow-up to her poignant one-woman play of the same name.

The award-winning play, which aired live on Detroit PBS last December, has been a surprise success for Miller, who, when she penned it at age 62 during the COVID-19 pandemic, had never written one before. Since its 2021 debut in Ann Arbor for an

audience of 300, Miller estimated she has performed "Mrs. Kelly's Journey Home" about 50 times, in 20 states and in Ireland. Drawing from the stories of Miller's family, the play reflects its title character's Irishness, the immigrant experience in America, embracing a new home and culture, and eventually the challenges of dementia and caregiving. But perhaps what resonates most with audiences is the common human joy, sorrow, humor, vulnerability, foibles, and intergenerational family connections the play honors and celebrates.

The play's first half focuses on the Kelly family's arrival and settling into the United States where they knew no one. Leaving Ireland and everyone and everything they knew for better opportunities was her husband Tom's decision, not Mary's. But, as a dutiful wife in 1957, she made the move and made the best of it, raising her family and making a new life as a stranger in the strange land of Detroit with humor, grace, and tea — lots of tea. With an ever-present prop of a cup and saucer and pot of warm tea to sip and soothe through tears and laughter, the character Mrs. Kelly asserts, "Tea in Ireland is nearly a sacrament. I believe a good cup of tea can solve almost any problem."



Breeda performs one-woman act

The second half of the play turns to the last several years of Mrs. Kelly's life when her health declined and she moved in with her daughter Miller, son-in-law Jim, and their three children in their Manchester home. As dementia slowly seeps through Kelly's body and mind, Miller becomes her mother's full-time caregiver while also working full-time and raising a family, and the play explores the anguish, frustration, exhaustion, guilt, and ultimately the deep family bonds and love — not to mention the "heavenly" tea — that transcend the disease.

In 2011, as Mary Kelly's life neared its end, Miller recounted how she sat at her frail mother's bedside, feeling guilty and helpless. Sandwiched between her roles as mother, daughter, caregiver, wife, and professional, Miller felt like she wasn't handling any of them very well. With little else to do for her mom, she began sorting through the keepsakes of her mother's life, unsure of what to do with them. "I'm looking at these vibrant pictures of this young woman who was so full of life and so brave to come to this new country and start this new life," Miller recalled. "And my focus was on her life because dementia did not define Mary Kelly. So I scanned the photos, tried to fill in the blanks, tried to make it funny, and found ways to tell the stories," Miller said. The result was a photo book with a narrative, a family legacy for Miller and her brothers and extended family that could be shared with their children and generations to come. Miller titled it "An Irish Blessing."

Years later, as Miller showed her friend Brian Cox the family book she created, Cox (a writer, editor, and "theater guy," as Miller called him) had three words: "one woman show." Reluctant at first, Miller soon found herself asking, "What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?" She had once earned an acting scholarship to Michigan State University but ultimately chose a career path she saw as less risky. But, within about a year, and with Cox as director, Miller found herself performing her one-woman show to critical and audience acclaim. With the play's unflinching look at caregiving for a loved one with dementia, "People tell me it's honest and it makes them feel safe and seen," Miller said. And Mrs. Mary Kelly's life story, of an ordinary woman with an extraordinarily positive outlook and charm, makes people laugh and feel good.

Before becoming a caregiver, Miller explained, "I didn't know what I didn't know. All I knew was I loved my mom." But she learned how quickly and easily caregiving demands can lead to burnout. Wanting to help others feel less alone, Miller published her first book, "The Caregiver Coffeebreak," in 2018, followed by "Take a Break Before You Break" in 2021. Both offer support, inspiration, and practical tips for family and professional caregivers. Her most recent book "tells the bigger story" the play doesn't allow for and includes caregiver resources.

Besides her regular performances, Miller has teamed up with fundraisers, allowing them to keep profits from ticket sales to her show if a sponsor covers Miller's fees. She has also become a sought-after keynote speaker and offers a shorter version of the play for conferences or events. And she hosts workshops on how to create family legacy memory books that tell meaningful stories of the special journeys every ordinary family takes. In the unexpected turns her life has taken, sipping her tea, imitating her mother's Irish lilt in flattery, Miller, like her mother, finds herself grateful for all life's blessings. ■



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