

[Story of the Divided Blanket](#)

An Irish Narrative on Elder Care for our time.

If you give your son an inch of his way, he'll take a yard.

***Ma thugann tú órlach da shlí dod mhac tógfaidh sé bánlámh.*-Irish proverb.**

By Robert F. Lyons

There is an ancient Irish Law (Brehon) which mandates: “When you become old, your family must provide you with one oat cake a day, plus a container of sour milk. They must bathe you every twentieth night and wash your head every Saturday. Seventeen sticks of firewood is the allotment for keeping you warm.” There is also an ancient cautionary tale regarding elder neglect found in an Irish folktale taken from James Loughran, a farmer, in County Louth in 1963 that is a re-packaged version of the identical narrative about old age that is found in a thirteenth-century France fable (a fabliau) ¹.



The folktale is called: The Divided Blanket and takes place in a family of three generations: grandfather, son and grandson: The grandfather is about to be thrown out of the house by his ungrateful son. His little grandson intervenes and gives the old man, his grandfather, half a blanket as a protection against the cold out there on the streets. The young boy promises that when the time comes for him similarly to throw his father out, he will then hand him the other half of the blanket. Predictably, given this unexpected warning, the son then repents and allows the old man, his father, to stay.

In Irish tradition, there are four divisions of life: twenty years a-growing, twenty years in bloom, twenty years decaying, and twenty years when it's all the same if you are there or not. For the Irish as well as the French, old people in their final stage were seen as useless. Old men were depicted as seeking nothing more than hogging coveted space by the fire. Old women had long ceased to delight but might be useful as child minders. Looking at the situation from the point of view of the elderly, what could the old do to remedy their plight, according to these stories? Absolutely nothing, if the old have been foolish enough to divest themselves of all their possessions to the point of being as naked “as a peeled twig.” Children were not always kind to useless mouths. An Irish proverb warns: if you give your son an inch of his way, he'll take a yard (*ma thugann tú órlach da shlí dod mhac tógfaidh sé bánlámh*).

The story of the Divided Blanket resonates in our fiscally stressed decade and conveys the perennial wisdom with the same implied advice: Mind your children and your assets! And may you hope for such a wise grandson [or nephew or niece], if need be!

¹This article is adapted from: Narratives of Old Age in a French Fabliau and an Irish Folktale, Grace Neville, University College Cork. (Proceedings of Harvard Celtic Colloquium: Vol. 18/191. 1998. 158-168).

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