

Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills
By Lorri Anderson, MS Homeopath, CCH

My family came together in the farm country of western Illinois during the 1960s, and that turf was almost two decades behind me before I ever heard of homeopathy. Regarding health, we had few complaints; and regarding health *care*, it was mostly 20 or so miles away. But a notable exception to the 20 mile maxim was Jamie O'Malley*, the pharmacist in the small town where my grandmother lived.

Mr. O'Malley was a pharmacist; his shop was where we went for all our first aid supplies. And his shop was where we went to pick up the rare prescription which had been made by a doctor. And once in a while we would end up in his shop just for advice – especially advice of the do-we-need-to-go-to-a-doctor variety. Jamie O'Malley was just a pharmacist, albeit one of his own time and place.

As such, he would also: answer the pharmacy phone at any time of any day; listen to your whole story; wrap a sprained ankle, knee, or other part; apply one heck of a splint; remove stitches; and deliver a variety of services and expertise that no contemporary pharmacist could even consider. These activities were exceptions, mind you; and I never knew him to charge anyone for any of them. And once in a blue moon, his exceptions would also include a powder, tincture or ointment which “definitely won't hurt you and just might help.” He didn't charge for those either.

And I don't imagine any of his customers gave those extras any thought. I know we never did.

Jamie O'Malley had been the pharmacist in that small town for some generations, and he was an old man all my life. The older folks like my grandmother had real history with Jamie, and I can only guess how his products and services must have changed during his tenure. Jamie himself never steered me wrong, but

My cousins and I developed a healthy skepticism and eventual cynicism to what we called “Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills.” Whenever there was a death in or near our family, our grandmother (who lived across the street from the funeral home) would come around every one she could catch with this brown glass bottle. She would pour little white pills from the bottle and stick them inside our lip, praising Jamie O'Malley the whole time. None of us ever felt a thing from those pills. And none of us ever knew what they were or really any more about them other than that Jamie O'Malley had given them to grandma years ago.

We learned to try to duck her and the Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills process because it seemed a pointless demonstration of grandmotherly ownership, similar to being swiped with her handkerchief or spit-cleaned with her thumb. As we grew old enough to mock her, we all mastered a passable impression of her oft-decried, “I just couldn't do without these.” sentiment about the pills. But eventually, we adopted the strategy of our parents and other elders. We simply submitted in order to humor her. Without effect, the pills seemed harmless enough; and they clearly meant a great deal to grandma. We may have taken them with our eyes rolling, but we took them.

At every death in our lives.

* Name changed for the purposes of this writing.

In this way, Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills became a part of our family lore. A little inside joke which could give us all a chuckle and a good eye roll at almost any family gathering. Not to mention a lipful at any funeral.

Flash forward some decades, beyond the closure of Jamie O'Malley's pharmacy, beyond my last contact with the infamous brown bottle, beyond my grandmother. I had come to suspect that Jamie O'Malley was actually a homeopathic pharmacist who had transitioned through both the heyday and the waning days of homeopathy. And I had contented myself with uncertainty, because there were few left to ask. Flash all the way forward to homeopathy school and a materia medica lecture on the remedy, Ignatia.

I listened to the lecture with an ever-growing conviction that what my cousins and I had come to call Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills were actually Ignatia 200C. My grandmother brought them out for every funeral, but only for funerals – a clear connection to grief. She loved them, “couldn't do without them” even though no one else in the family noticed any effects – not homeopathic to any case but hers.

And grandma herself was an excitable woman, sweet in her way without being especially nice, more likely to verge on tears and sigh helplessly than stand up to any crisis. Not that she was to be underestimated. She was always going to “box (someone's) ears”; and if crossed, she could get so angry that the corner of her mouth twitched. In fact, my father (her favorite) could get her so worked up that one of her limbs would go still for a day or two.

She was very sensitive, especially to the heat. But I only ever saw her perspire in one thin line, above the top of her lip. A small woman whose scalp you could see through her hair, I will never forget her trembling voice asking if she could still write checks to the hairdresser during the reading of my grandfather's will. I can practically see the younger version of her prevailing upon poor Mr. (also younger) O'Malley, distraught at such a level as to result in getting a very large bottle of Ignatia.

That infamous bottle of Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills. It had to be one of those 4 ounce round brown glass bottles. Filled with very small white pills. I was really sure, and yet

Under the heading of a longshot, I finally called my Aunt Jeanette, grandma's sole surviving child and then-resident of grandmother's house. I asked her about Jamie O'Malley's Death Pills and if she knew what they really were. She laughed and said she had no idea. But she thought she had the bottle in the linen closet (Really? Yes. But that is *another* story.). She could look.

And when she did – Ignatia 200C. A little less than a quarter of the bottle still left, I was told.