Welcome Home American Cousins 1932-2008

We walked along the River Moy past the Foxford Woolen Mills to the Mayfly Hotel. It was the only hotel in Foxford — a small building housing a bar, a restaurant, and a few rooms, where fishermen came from around the world to chase salmon in the Moy.

We entered the door of the Mayfly Hotel, which was to the left of the bar. We walked through the hotel's back hallway, entered a back door, and entered a small private party room. The first sight that greeted us was a giant, colorful green banner adorned with American and Irish flags and shamrocks, and large words spelling out:

Cead Mile Failte 1,000,000 Welcomes
Welcome Home American Cousins - 1932-2008

My first cousin, Tony O'Donnell, Sharon's dad from England, and his wife, Rose, greeted us. I received a hug from Sharon, along with a live four-leaf clover pin to affix to the lapel of my black sports jacket. Sharon was a dark redhead, bubbly and outgoing, the opposite of her mother. Sharon greeted my wife, Jeanne, my niece, Jennifer, and her family.

I looked around the medium-sized room, dressed in green shamrocks, Irish flags, and balloons, with a spread of Irish cheeses, deviled eggs, and bread on a linen-draped table in the corner.

We chatted about who was coming tonight, and I tried to keep all the names and their relations to me straight. I walked through the connecting door to the bar with Tony and Sharon to get a drink and to wait for all my relatives to show up. Cousin Sharon got me a Guinness with black currant, which she said made it sweet and palatable to my American taste. She was right.

Later that night, Sharon's husband, Gary, would rib me about drinking a girlie drink. Of course, he didn't drink Guinness because he was English and didn't like the taste. I didn't like the taste of Guinness either.

Cousin Seamus was the first relative to arrive. A powerful-looking man with a mustache and a balding head, he wore a suit and tie, giving him a professional look that defied my image of an Irish farmer. After ordering a Guinness, he turned to me and said,

"You know, John, those mills you passed on the way in — the Irish Sisters of Charity opened them in 1892. The Famine had devastated this whole area. The Sisters built the mills to give people work and a reason to stay. Not everyone left."

He said it without sentiment, like a man reciting facts he'd recited many times. I would learn later that he was the curator of the Folk Museum in County Mayo. He knew this history the way I knew the streets of the Bronx.

He continued like that for a while — facts, figures, economic history. I expected something more personal. I was starting to look around the bar for someone else to talk to when another first cousin, John Quinn, arrived with his wife Ann and interrupted the lecture.

We were all introduced, and he, too, ordered a Guinness. He lived up the hill, just five minutes away from the house where my mother and his mother, Bridget, grew up in Glanduff. Soon, a wave of cousins arrived. Maureen, my first cousin and my cousin Tony's sister, and her boyfriend arrived, and I met them. Then, more first cousins, John and Peter O'Donnell, arrived. They all lived in England.

We got Guinness, and then everyone went into the back room, the place where they had arranged the party for the night. Jennifer and I passed out over a dozen picture books I made of our family in America before leaving Los Angeles. Jennifer also made a special picture book for Aunt Maggie, which she showed all her cousins. The volume grew as everyone reviewed the photographs and connected the missing pieces of our family, the O'Donnells.

Before I left Los Angeles, I posted an ad on Craigslist for a videographer on the West Coast of Ireland to capture the reunion. I lucked upon a film student from Eastern Europe attending school in Ireland and shooting documentaries there. The videographer arrived early and, after meeting him in person, set up his equipment and began filming as I went from table to table, getting to know all my newfound relatives. I guess, being in the film industry, my first thought was to capture the reunion on film to share with relatives who didn't attend and to have something I could pass on in the future. It turned out better than I'd hoped.

Aunt Maggie, her son John, and Cousin Marie arrived around eight with Gary, who picked them up and drove them the half-hour ride down the mountain from Roosky and Glanduff. Aunt Maggie walked in first, leaning on her metal cane and stooped over as she walked. Her face beamed with a huge smile, and she became animated when she saw everyone. She wore a stylish red-and-green plaid jacket adorned with a St. Patrick's Day four-leaf clover pin and the Irish tricolor flag. Her hair was auburn-brown, and she couldn't have been five feet tall, yet she looked so powerful. Her skin was rosy and colorful, not pale and sickly like you would expect from someone that old. She looked and carried herself like a woman approaching eighty, not ninety-four.

All the kids rushed to Aunt Maggie, and she bent down until her face was at their level. She hugged each of them and kept repeating, "Hello, hello, hello." She vigorously shook their hands, smiling and laughing as if she were one of them. I waited and watched as she worked her way through the five girls and two boys, then approached, hugged, and greeted her again. She repeated, as was her way.

"Hello, John Duffy, hello, John Duffy, hello, hello."

She asked me,

"How are you, John Duffy?"

"I'm great, Aunt Maggie."

I laughed, and she greeted my niece, Jennifer. Finally, after greeting everyone, she sat in the red booth against the far-right wall. Cousin Marie wore a red coat, and she sat next to me after I greeted her. Marie was a tall, slim, strong woman with glasses and no teeth, which made her self-conscious. She reminded me of a taller version of my mother. She lived alone and would ride her bicycle day or night up and down the mountain for half an hour to get to Foxford. John, Maggie's son, was a short, sixty-year-old man with a full head of brown hair who looked a little like an Irish actor.

The night before the reunion, I discovered the usual family politics, and that Tony was the diplomat and social organizer, a role similar to the one I played in my family and with my relatives. Tony mentioned that some cousins felt left out by how the reunion came together, and we needed to include and acknowledge them. We put together a little program with speeches or

toasts. I had prepped my daughter to play some Irish songs on her flute, and Sharon said she would write a poem. So we planned a little program for the night, including sharing the dozen picture books I'd put together to give to all my new relatives.

Tony started the night with a brief speech, welcoming us and introducing us to the families from Ireland and England. I got up, held my Guinness high, proposed a toast, and began speaking. I was shaking as if I had never spoken in public before.

"As I said earlier, I felt I was attending my wedding. I was so nervous, and I'm feeling more nervous now. This has been a miracle for me, and it started with Aunt Maggie."

I told them about my mother, how she always wanted to return home, and how I made this trip for her. When I finished talking, everyone applauded, and I felt truly welcomed — indeed, this was my family.

I then introduced my ten-year-old daughter, Sofia, who played "Danny Boy" on her flute while her eleven-year-old cousin, Georgi, held the sheet music before her. Sharon was tearing up on the side, so I went and hugged her. She told me they played "Danny Boy" at her grandfather's funeral, and how she missed him. Everyone clapped as Sofia finished, and then she played "Amazing Grace." She ended by curtsying as everyone clapped. I was so proud watching my daughter, happy that her world had grown and that she finally had family on my side. I felt a little sad that I didn't have the same experience growing up.

After the music, Cousin Seamus gave a historical speech, much like the one he'd given me at the bar. He started more personal and thanked Sharon for making this reunion of our family possible, and gave her a bouquet, and then he talked about how hard it was when it took six weeks back then to travel across the ocean to America or Ireland, and then he said,

"To all the cousins and family who haven't been to Ireland before, I have two words for you: Failte Abhaile (Fall-cha-a-wal-ya) — Welcome Home."

This was much more personal, and I started to understand and appreciate Cousin Seamus. I discovered that besides being a farmer, he was also the curator of the Folk Museum in County Mayo and had a third job as a bouncer.

Cousin Tony then introduced his daughter, Sharon, who read a poem she wrote:

"This is an ode to my family

Come with me on a journey

And I'll tell you how all this began

It started with Great Auntie Maggie

This lady born way up in Glan

She sat there last August

And told me a story of woe through her tears

How her two oldest sisters had walked down the hill

And how it's been more than seventy years…"

Sharon finished the poem by telling how she discovered us and connected with my niece, Jennifer, online. Together, they found and reconnected us with my only cousins in America, the Gavins. Sharon said she had called Aunt Maggie in Ireland to tell her she had found her sister's kids and could finally give Maggie peace of mind. She proposed a toast, and everyone cheered. And Aunt Maggie raised her hands, palms up, and said,

"Up the O'Donnells, up the O'Donnells."

I turned to Aunt Maggie and asked her to sing a song for us, as she had promised me last night. She laughed, composed herself, and sang in a powerful voice that seemed to come from a much younger version of herself, not a ninety-four-year-old.

"It was on a St Patrick's cold and frosty morning

As they tramped across that dark and dreary moor

It was when I remembered my mother's warning

As she plucked a three-leaf shamrock from Mayo

And the likes of it you'll never shall see more

Cause it grows around the lots of Irish Blarney

It is that little three-leaf shamrock from Mayo

And as I crossed the broad Atlantic Ocean

I would love to revel in that sunny American shore

There's nothing there that fills my heart with such emotion

As that little three-leaf shamrock from Mayo…"

Sharon was sitting beside Maggie with her arm around her, crying and hiding her face behind her as she sang. I was kneeling on the floor in front of her, tears rolling down my face. As she sang about County Mayo and three-leaf clovers, I flashed back to our Bronx apartment as my mother got us ready for the St. Patrick's Day parade. My mother seemed to come alive every March 17th; she would dress up in her finest clothes and beam happily. It was a better day for her than her birthday, better than Christmas, and better than New Year's. St. Patrick's Day was my mother's day.

Standing there that night in Foxford, I finally understood something about my mother.

Every March 17th, she stood for hours on Fifth Avenue waiting to see the County Mayo contingent march by. As a kid, I never understood why it meant so much to her.

Now I did.

For a few moments every year, the parade must have taken her home. She would have that same look in her eyes that I saw now in Aunt Maggie's. It was as if she couldn't get enough of watching the contingents march and listening to the Irish music.

Somehow, it must have transported her home to the place she missed so badly. For the first time, I understood that my mother had been homesick her entire life.

My tears were flowing as I watched and listened to her younger sister sing about the pain that my mother must have felt. As Aunt Maggie finished the last verse, she clapped her hands repeatedly and laughed just like a little girl. After the clapping died down, she started singing a second song.

"An Irish boy was leaving his native home, crossing the broad Atlantic,

Once more, he wished to roam, and as he was leaving his mother

While standing on the Quay

He threw his arms around her waist, and this to her did say.

A mother's love is a blessing, no matter where you roam

Keep her while she's living. You'll miss her when she's gone.

Love her as in childhood. When feeble, old, and grey

For you'll never miss a mother's love 'til she's buried beneath the clay."

I was still kneeling before Aunt Maggie, remembering the sweet and bitter moments I had shared with my mother. I thought for a second about how my cousin Sharon had the bartender add sweet cherry-flavored syrup to my Guinness to make it less bitter. This sweet-and-bitter Guinness was like my mother's life in America: sweet but still bitter.

I had a rush of childhood memories, walking everywhere in the Bronx to find sales, while my mother tried to stretch the little money she had from the two Social Security Administration and Veterans Administration checks that supported us growing up. We would even walk across the Willis Avenue Bridge to shop for sales in Harlem. I remembered feeling uncomfortable being one of the few white kids shopping in Harlem, but my mother seemed comfortable anywhere.

I missed my mother so badly at that moment, yet I was so happy to be here with her sister and my family, and to have a moment I never would have, or could have, imagined happening in my lifetime.

After Maggie finished singing and everyone clapped, the party continued as the kids played with balloons and danced around the room to Irish music. I watched all the girls, arm in arm, dancing in a circle to Irish music, and saw Jennifer's little boy, Matthew, dancing with his arms around his cousin Katherine. Four generations of my family were there in that room, sharing the magic of family in a way I never knew growing up.

I set up my laptop and opened a video of my mother in her seventies playing with my niece Jennifer and her brothers when they were little kids, and I showed it to Aunt Maggie. The light from the laptop's screen lit up her face like we were sitting in a dark movie theater, and I watched her as she watched her big sister, my mother Ann, whom she hadn't seen since 1932. She laughed as if she were there with my mother and moved her hands and body as if she were playing with the kids. I was tearing up again, overwhelmed by the miracle unfolding before me. I was just amazed to be standing here in Ireland on St. Patrick's Day in 2008, watching my mother's youngest sister, born in 1914, watch her sister on a laptop.

The room's volume had increased as everyone talked and laughed. A band out in the bar area started playing, and the sound leaked into the back room. We immersed ourselves in sharing memories and creating new ones. I decided this was the time to ask Aunt Maggie for another song, and she agreed. The room grew silent, and she belted out another Irish song.

"Oh! My thoughts oft go back to that dear little spot,

To my brothers and sisters, and the little thatched cot,

To my poor widowed mother — I'll ne'er see her more,

Twas a shame, but I left her because we were poor

I left Ireland and Mother because we were poor."

Every one of her songs seemed to give voice to my life, and this one hit me especially hard. Growing up poor, I felt the words. I remembered when my mother died, and my brother and I buried her. At the time, we were too poor to give her a proper burial, and the words cut right into my heart.

Aunt Maggie spent the rest of the night with my sixty-five-year-old cousin Marie, playing with the kids. The kids were throwing balloons, Aunt Maggie was swatting them with her cane, and Cousin Marie slapped them away, laughing like two kids. Before the night ended, we gathered everyone around the banner and took a family photo to remember a memorable evening. The night had gone too fast, and soon it was time to take the kids home and put them to bed. The adults lasted a little longer, and Aunt Maggie was still going strong as we said our goodbyes for the night.

I wished my brother Pat had joined us. I would have enjoyed it more if he were there.

As I walked past the church my mother had attended and the road she once walked as a girl, I felt something I had never felt before.

For the first time in my life, I knew where I came from.