Perpetual Hunger

By Michael Carolan

I am perpetually hungry. Between meals, my energy slumps and my stomach churns. Within seconds, the pang is a gut-wrenching emptiness. It's as though my insides are folding. I lose perspective, blame objects, people, the weather.

My father suffers the same affliction. He taught me to have crackers and peanut butter on hand.

I grew up well-fed. So much so that after dinner, my father gave leftovers to the family dog, admonishing my siblings and me with an "ah-ah-ah"—I can still hear him—every time we arrived at the garbage with half-eaten hotdogs, stray corn, potato chip crumbs. "Don't throw that away," he said. "The dog will eat it."

Today, I cringe at half-eaten plates of spaghetti left by my son, oatmeal that doesn't make it into my daughter's breakfast bowl. "Don't waste that," I say. "Finish your plate."

We have so much that we give it away to our chickens. They are better fed than I am. Now and again, I snatch the last piece of good bread from the shiny aluminum compost bin before it goes out to the chicken coop. Or a piece of still ripe fruit. I don't know why.

Lately, I've come to believe my perpetual hunger and utilization of every morsel of food is passed down by my Irish ancestors. There are other things Irish about me. My surname, for instance. It's a brand of tasty Irish crème liqueur. And O'Carolan was a seventeenth-century harper whose compositions are beloved to this day.

But I don't drink anymore and I am no musician.

What makes me Irish is the stomach and its daily growl. It is the physical inheritance, the connection to the processing of life, the sustaining of blood, bone, sinew—what *I* am left with every waking day of my life.

My great-great grandfather, after all, was among the Famine Irish.

I am five generations removed. "Irish" is a small slice of my ethnic pie. The grandfather's son married an off-the-boat German; their son married a woman of Scotch-

Irish-British-Prussian descent; their son married a Welch-German-Swiss-Native American mix; their son (me) married Irish with a sprinkle of Lithuanian and smidge of Brit. My ancestors lived lives of impulse and happenstance rather than planned pedigree design.

The point is that being Irish in America today is at once as random as the color of the shirt you picked out this morning and as meaningful as these mid-afternoon empty stomach pangs that I contend with daily. And my ancestor who struggled with this hunger the most happens to be Irish, born in Drumbaragh Townland, Kells Parish, County Meath, in 1844—the year before the potato crop failed.

It took me twenty years to find this birthplace, a feat much heralded by fellow genealogists wanting to claim their Irishness. "How'd you find that?" they ask. "We've been searching for years."

I tell them that it was mostly luck. But I say it was also longing, a hunger satiated briefly by each single moment I'd directed my attention toward the uncovering, the unearthing, and finally the rising up. For that's what actually happened: to seek is to have those sought rise up and greet you.

It was a quest that explained my bottomless pit of a stomach.

When I was twenty-five years old, I visited my great aunt in Florida to inquire about her brother, my paternal grandfather, who died when I was three years old. Though we rarely visited in person, my Aunt Ann had faithfully remembered my birthday with a yearly card. She was ninety and lived on an island along the Gulf Coast. She had a tuna fish sandwich waiting for me when I arrived, knowing perhaps the men in our family's empty-stomach-syndrome.

My grandfather and her had the "Irish" in them, she said, like their father, whose parents were born in Ireland. Her other brother was much more "German serious," like their mother, and so I asked her what that meant, Irish.

She told me that it meant a way of wearing the world loosely, especially in the bad times, of having a good time, of exercising one's sense of humor, whatever it may be. The Irish was *her* grandfather—my namesake—who came here during the Famine, that much she knew. I asked if she remembered him. No, but her brother did, and there were

two images from his youth: his grandfather's house moving slowly down a narrow Philadelphia street, pulled by horses tethered to ropes, and the man's belly sticking out of the top of the coffin at his funeral.

My aunt showed me the only photograph of him, an oval portrait made by a professional photography studio in the early nineteen hundreds.

He doesn't look ill-fed: he is thick-necked and large-boned, wearing a broad black sack coat. His left eye is in shadow, glistening slightly as though its pupil is screwed-up toward the ceiling. His beard is bushy and hides his mouth, making him look more Russian than Irish (Tolstoy comes to mind). Burly and wide with a furrowed brow, his face resembles an old-time blacksmith-turned-horseshoer in turn-of-the-century Philadelphia, which is what he was.

Shortly following my visit to my aunt's, I found the ship manifest recording his arrival in New York as a three-year-old with mother, father, and sisters. After more digging, more records rose to me—the census, a death certificate, his marriage to an Irish-born girl. They recorded his place of birth as merely "Ireland." And so a silence about this place ensued for the next several decades. Ireland. That is all he wanted anyone to know.

I began noticing it obliquely in the records, though, in the places he lived—"Upper Dublin"—the names of his neighbors—McCormick, Plunkett—the names of his children—Anna and Catherine—and their baptismal sponsors: Hogan, Coleman, O'Neill.

I visited old Philadelphia churches with names like Holy Cross and Immaculate Conception, photographed narrow-fronted row houses now occupied by new immigrant Puerto Ricans and Koreans. I searched for the dead through cemetery groundskeepers; I cold-called the living whom I found in telephone books or on the next-of-kin boxes on burial forms.

Nearly every paper trace of him in this country rose to greet me when I sought it. The pounds of "Potatoes (Irish.)" produced in one year (1859) by the Pennsylvania farm upon which his family first settled: 2,500. The number of employees at his blacksmith shop: four ($1.60 paid per day to a skilled mechanic and $1.25 to ordinary laborers). His membership in the Montgomery County Society for the Recovery of Stolen Horses and Bringing Thieves to Justice. The number of children delivered by his wife by the year

nineteen hundred: eighteen. The number of children still living: six. The hour at which the carriages met the trolley to bring mourners to his funeral at Saint Veronica's in 1906: eight o'clock.

What strikes me today is the amount of detail about an unremarkable American life that simply awaited my arrival. Time passed.

One night, last winter, I happened upon an Internet site that advertised church parish records in Ireland. For a small fee, I plugged in his name, the names of his parents, and the year I suspected that he was born. Suddenly, my screen showed a likely match. My heart pounded. I clicked the link.

I glanced quickly at the parent's names and the date. The parish record of my great-great grandfather's birth! In Kells. For a moment, I thought someone must have made it up and put them on the Internet just for me.

Then it struck me as I sat there, the surname even spelled correctly, the maiden name matching the one I had long known, the dates almost exact with the death record found across the Atlantic. This was *the one*, shining on my screen, newly transcribed from a musty stone church basement three thousand miles away to a fleeting Internet page.

Kells parish is an hour northwest of Dublin by automobile and noted for its ancient monastery and illuminated manuscript, "The Book of Kells." Its population dropped a third during the Famine.

Land records there show my great-great grandfather was born on a plot of land smaller than my front yard today—two thousand, seven hundred and twenty-two and a half square feet to be exact, otherwise known as ten perches, an old English measurement. It was likely a mud cabin with a pig and a fireplace. His grandfather, Michael, is listed as the tenant and paid $4.75 in rent (in today's currency) for the "garden" and $42.79 for "the house" for one calendar year. A ticket on a sailing ship to America cost the equivalent of $350 today.

Father Nicholas McEvoy, the priest who baptized my great-great grandfather, wrote to the Governor of Ireland the year before they emigrated, pleading for the "saving

from death by starvation upwards of four hundred entire families," of which my family was very likely one.

In the letter, he complains that one prominent landlord, the Marquess of Headfort—whose property lies next to the estate where I find my family—donated only "the sum of ten pounds!!!" (exclamations included) toward the relief of his renters.

"Human life will, I feel painfully convinced, be immediately and extensively sacrificed," McEvoy wrote, and as history showed us, it was.

Thomas, age forty, and his wife, Elizabeth, thirty, walked their three children for forty miles to Dublin, with belongings on their backs or in a cart. And they brought the neighborhood with them. Just before my family's name on the ship's passenger manifest were the Reillys, the Sheridans and the Farrells, names I found in the land records, living on the same large estate.

In Dublin, a ticket agent told them that across the sea, "a common laboring man received high wages … sat at the same table and ate with his master … where everyone was on a perfect equality in America." History tells us everyone *but* the Irish, African Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and others were on "a perfect equality." And so my family took a leap of faith, like all of the other ethnicities who arrive at our shores or on our borders these days.

In Dublin, they got their first taste of the Atlantic by crossing the dreadfully rough Channel for Liverpool, where they arrived "ripe for plucking at the hands of an assortment of unscrupulous "runners," lodging house keepers, ticket brokers, and other crooks." And they weren't even in New York yet.

They found passage on the American-built, three-mast sailing ship, the *Patrick Henry*. With two decks, it was one hundred and fifty-nine feet long or about half the length of a football field. Enough room for the hundreds of passengers and a full hold of cases, casks, crates of iron and tin. Accommodations were notoriously lousy—my family traveled in the retrofitted cargo hold—but the ship was one of the fastest and most dependable during the great age of sail. Its captain, Joseph Clement Delano, was the great uncle of the future President of the United States. "With mutton chop whiskers, a closely cropped beard and mustache, and a Panama-type hat," Franklin Delano

Roosevelt's uncle Joe sailed my great-great grandfather's family three thousand miles for a month. And we have been Democrats ever since.

Of course, we now know that the thirty-four-day voyage—from June 23 to July 27, 1847—was likely terrifying, lice-ridden, and cold. One regulator quipped that the Irish were "less than a box of goods, and handled with less care, as they did not break, nor, if injured, require to be paid for." The New York newspapers announced its arrival and printed the names of the eighteen cabin passengers—Mr. Ashton, Master Ward, Miss Hay, etc. They also printed the name of my family: "300 in the steerage."

Yet my three-year-old great-great grandfather and his two sisters—Annie, age one, and Catherine, age four—survived. Three years later, their father is working as a Pennsylvania farm laborer and life is likely a little less wretched than it was in Ireland. There are two horses and three cows, according to the 1850 U.S. Census, and to celebrate, more children. "Sex being one of the few outlets from their wretchedness," writes Tim Pat Coogan, "the Catholic peasantry produced children in such numbers that not even the virulent fevers of the time could prevent a population explosion." Five more are born to the couple in the next decade. But the next generation suffers. Michael's family moves from farm to city in the late nineteenth-century and loses twelve children within seven years to fever and stillbirth.

In April 1992, when I visited my aunt, she also told me about her own father—my great grandfather Matthew William, the first generation born in America in 1871. He evidently couldn't get my aunt down to the Catholic Church to be baptized fast enough: his German wife wheeled my aunt down to the Lutheran church, which is why my family is today Protestant.

Rejecting his religion, she ejected him as well in the mid teens, but never divorced. The reasons were complex, stemming from what I now gather was a combination of German rigidity, Irish alcoholism, gambling, and general tomfoolery. My aunt moved schools eight times in her childhood.

"I recall him coming home from a faraway place," she said. "And he had been drinking and I pleaded with him to stop." She showed me another photograph, this time of her father, as tall as his father Michael was wide. He is stoop-shouldered, with a high

forehead, deep set, sad eyes, and an unmistakable grin. In one photograph, he is dressed in a loose-fitting overcoat and poses with his father-in-law, a much shorter sharp-jawed German man with a pipe in his hand.

Toward the end of his life—Matthew William died at age seventy-one in 1942—he worked as a night watchman at a large factory in Philadelphia. He was what the writer Peter Quinn calls in the essay collection "Irish Hunger," a vagabond proletariat who "went wherever there were jobs that required little more than muscle and a shovel, who wandered off, or their children did, their descendants rapidly losing any conscious sense of an Irish past or identity."

In fact, no one told my father, William George, that he even had a grandfather until a relative said that the nice "old man living down the street" who died was indeed my father's real grandfather. To be an "old man down the street," unable to be a grandfather to your grandchildren seems to me a sad unspoken thing, and sad unspoken things are passed down to the children.

Shortly after my visit with my great aunt, her brother with the German disposition, my great uncle Matthew George, called me to say he was coming East from Arizona and would I drive him to his old neighborhoods in Philadelphia. I drove up from Washington, DC, and took him to the house in which he, my aunt, and grandfather were born.

I had been drinking a lot then and word had reached him about this, probably through my mother. I was in my early twenties and recently exiled from the place of my birth—Kansas City—to the East coast, where I began my career. I remember that he told me that the drinking would ruin me if I did not watch it. That I should quit altogether. He said that his father drank but that he drank too much, that he himself decided not to drink, and that I might want to decide that as well.

I did a few years later, but that day we drove for a while in silence and then came to the house in which he was born. He was delivered by the same doctor who attended his dying grandfather, Michael, the three-year-old famine survivor, in the last six days of his life in 1906.

I asked him whether his father, Matthew William, had truly carved his mother's name in the woodwork of an upstairs window. His sister Ann had just told me the story in Florida.

"I don't know about that," he said, and looked sadly onto the two-story row house on Wyoming Avenue in northeastern Philadelphia. A couple of African American kids, maybe twelve-year-olds, bounced by with a basketball.

Next-door was an identical brick row house that had been condemned, crisscrossed with plywood that had been spray painted with graffiti.

"Look what they've done to the neighborhood," he said.

I thought he choked up and cried a tear, but I couldn't tell.

"What?" I asked. "What'd they do?"

"They've ruined it, these damned people."

He was referring to the Puerto Ricans and the Koreans, the Vietnamese and the Central Americans, all new immigrants who had moved into the inner city neighborhood that the old Irish and German immigrants had once had the run of and which used to be, when he was a little boy, the outer edge of the city.

I didn't have the information I have now to tell him that he'd had a good run—that his people came from very little, seasick and with no money and hardly a scrap to eat and lucky to be alive at all—and that he and my grandfather and great aunt had risen up, received educations, married, prospered, had children, grandchildren, and so-called "assimilated into American society," and that now, it was the other "damned" people's turn.

I do not think he would have understood. He died the following year.

What he *did* understand that day, sitting in my tan Subaru sedan near his birthplace, was that it was late in the afternoon and that he was hungry. He grinned the handsome grin of his father and asked whether there was anything to eat in the automobile.

I realized that I too was famished, but I didn't have any peanut butter and crackers. I took him instead to the safe and the familiar—an American fast-food restaurant.