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HON1000

29 October 2014

A Snapshot in Time

~PRESENT DAY, 1990~

“What is it? What is it??”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” I chided.

My great-grandson Danny greedily ripped the paper from the box in one deft motion. It’s as if he’s been practicing this for years.

“A camera?”

“Well I know how much you love photography. It’s also for your birthday picture,” I said. “I had a birthday picture taken the first day I came to Detroit.”

Danny turned the old Polaroid camera over in his hands and proudly fit the strap on his shoulder. It’s not nearly as old as the ones from my childhood, but to him, it’s ancient.

“Here, let me take your picture,” I offered.

Danny carefully handed me the camera and stood by the doorway. He reminds me so much of myself at that age. I can’t help but think of the changes I faced when I moved to America from Ireland, and how I thought I’d never be able to assimilate into the new culture. He doesn’t realize it, but my gift to him is as much for documenting the present as it is for remembering the past through pictures.

I lift the camera to my eye. “Smile,” I say, smiling myself.

SNAP

~Detroit 1915~

The flash slightly startles me, and I blink.

“That’ll be a good one,” my uncle bellows to my parents and aunt as his contagious laughter booms through the street. It’s nearly impossible not to smile when you hear him laugh.

My mother, father, my sister Maggie, and I crowd back into the store after the family picture. This place is so different from back home. The sheer amount of people is astounding. Especially when we first arrived at the Michigan Central Railroad station in the western edge of Corktown.¹ That building was one of the tallest I’ve ever seen, and I stood, transfixed, staring at the top floor as people wove around me. I had never seen so many people in an area that small, especially in the streets. Back home in Bandon, or *Droichead na Bandan*² as my father fondly calls it, the streets were narrow, we owned a little thatched house,³ and everyone knew and cared about each other. Here, the buildings are enormous and the swarms of people appear detached from each other as they bustle through the crowded, concrete streets,⁴ intent on their own business. In this huge, industrial city, my small rural hometown seems even farther away. Immigrating to this country has already changed my entire life, and I’m suddenly afraid that I’ll forget my life in Ireland and become like the people on this street. But alternately, I’m afraid I’ll never fit in here.

¹ Delicato, Armando, and Julie Demery. "Early History." *Detroit's Corktown*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007. 22. Print.

² Cork Historical Guides Committee. *Droichead Na Bannodon: A History of Bandon*, 1970.

³ Kinmonth, Claudia. "Rags and Rushes: Art and the Irish Artefact, C. 1900." *Journal of Design History* 14.3 (2001): 167-85. JSTOR. Web. 25 Oct. 2014.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3527145?ref=no-x-route:18ec034919adb684f9cdfdcccdeb1074e>>.

⁴ Martelle, Scott. "The Auto Era." *Detroit: A Biography*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2012. 69-83. Print.

“Aiden!” my uncle calls, “You need your birthday picture. Just you. You only turn twelve once.”

A few years ago, before my aunt and uncle emigrated to Detroit, we would have huge birthday celebrations with our family and neighbors. My uncle was the life of the party, always telling us fascinating stories and old jokes with the occasional song for everyone to hear. I miss those memories of Ireland - the culture, the traditions, and the warmth of familiarity - but I don't dare voice this. My father's farmland dried up and he said a civil war was approaching between the Nationalist and Unionist Volunteer groups over the Home Rule.⁵ I don't really understand the cause of fighting or what exactly this is, but he said we had no choice but to leave and that America had better opportunities than in Ireland. These private thoughts and memories of home are just for me to keep.

My uncle's Laundromat on the corner of Sixth and Porter⁶ has been open for a few years now, but when he first arrived, he had a hard time finding any type of job. My father didn't tell me about the hardships he faced, but I read some of their letters, hidden away in my father's box under their bed (he always says I'm too curious for my own good). When my aunt and uncle first arrived in Detroit from New York, the community was less than welcoming. Extremely poor, my uncle and aunt lived in a shanty that was no more than a small, shabby home.⁷ It was even smaller than their home in Ireland, and it was dirty to say the least. Luckily, after a few months,

⁵ Darby, John. "Conflict in Northern Ireland: a background essay." *Facets of the conflict in Northern Ireland* (1995): 15-23.

⁶ Delicato, Armando, and Julie Demery. "Early History." *Detroit's Corktown*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007. 27. Print.

⁷ Barrett, James R., and David R. Roediger. "The Irish and the "Americanization" of the "New Immigrants" in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930." 3-33. *JSTOR*. University of Illinois Press, n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014.

he found work at a shoe and boot factory called H.P. Baldwin 2d & Co,⁸ while my aunt worked as a seamstress. The biggest surprise to him was the divide between the rich and the poor Irish immigrants. The poorer immigrants who worked with my uncle resentfully complained about the “lace curtain” Irish⁹ who had already established businesses in the city and were doing well for themselves. On their way home after work, the richer Irish would call the throng of Irish workers “greenhorns” or “shanty” Irish¹⁰ because of their living conditions. My uncle said that they were once all new and that there was no need for this divide, but most people didn’t seem to see this. After a few years, my aunt and uncle had saved enough money to buy the Laundromat, and they soon saw what it was like to be perceived as the “lace curtain” Irish. Unlike this perception of business-owning immigrants, he believed that immigrants, especially within the Irish community, should support each other and see to it that assimilation into the new culture was as easy as possible.

I jog back to him, smiling. The camera flashes again. My uncle ruffles my hair and puts his Brownie back in his tattered coat pocket. His fascination with photography started when he saw the Kodak Brownie¹¹ featured in the Detroit Free Press in 1909,¹² and he saved enough money to buy both the camera and the Kodak Developing Machine. With this, he said he can develop the pictures himself, even without a darkroom.¹³ He likes how anyone can capture a second in time,

⁸ Burton, Clarence. *The City of Detroit, Michigan 1700-1922*. Vol. 3. Detroit-Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1922. Print.

⁹ Barrett, James R., and David R. Roediger. "The Irish and the "Americanization" of the "New Immigrants" in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930." 3-33. *JSTOR*. University of Illinois Press, n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Munir, Kamal A., and Nelson Phillips. "The birth of the 'Kodak Moment': Institutional entrepreneurship and the adoption of new technologies." *Organization Studies* 26.11 (2005): 1665-1687.

¹² "Display Ad 18 -- no Title." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*: 6. May 01 1909. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Oct. 2014.

¹³ Lothrop Jr, Eaton S. "The Brownie camera." *History of Photography* 2.1 (1978): 1-10.

however candid, and how it establishes a history of its own through the photos it creates. Although my aunt thinks it's a waste of money, I think it's fantastic.

He slips me a small package, wrapped in a torn piece of newspaper.

"Open it quickly while your parents are still inside," he winks.

I hastily unfold the paper, and my very own camera presents itself against the black and white background. This memory will always stay with me. I realize that with this, the possibilities are nearly endless. I can capture any moment and remember it forever. I wordlessly look up at my uncle as he bows and says, "Don't mention it, my boy."

At dinner that night, we have corned beef, potatoes, and bacon, a delicacy in Ireland.¹⁴ My aunt and uncle explain that it's only for my birthday that we eat such a traditional Irish meal.¹⁵ After this night, dinners mainly consist of soup and bread to save money, but I don't mind. Especially, when my father is trying to find a job and my uncle is managing a small business. I understand the expense of food, and I appreciate their attempt to bring a bit of Ireland to America. Sometimes, in this little home of ours, I forget I'm in America if only for a second. Then I remember the loud and busy American streets and the unfamiliar neighborhood. I don't know if we'll ever be able to integrate into this society, but I secretly want to be more Irish than American. Regardless, we make do in the cramped living space above the Laundromat - just happy that we all made it to America.

That night, I try not to hear my father and uncle whispering in the kitchen about the gift he gave me. My father thinks my uncle has already given us enough after helping to pay for our

¹⁴ Clarkson, Leslie, and Margaret Crawford. *Feast and Famine: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920: Food and Nutrition in Ireland 1500-1920*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

¹⁵ Ibid.

trip to America,¹⁶ like many other Irish families did, but my uncle insists that the gift will help me document my new life in America which is what a newly coined "Irish-American" will need. He thinks it'll help me remember the changing world and my new experiences here, and possibly help me better understand American culture. My father concedes, but money troubles are still on his mind. Even so, he's very thankful that we didn't have to move into the filthy and crowded tenements that many immigrants lived in. Little did we know that mere weeks later, our prayers would be answered and a new opportunity would change our lives.



Sundays are always my favorite. The rest of my family is close behind as we take the now-familiar walk to Most Holy Trinity Catholic Church.¹⁷ I wear my nicest shirt and clutch the small cross around my neck. My faith is very important to me, and this church is a central part of community life here.¹⁸ I take the small camera out of my pocket and take yet another picture of the mint steeple above the orange bricks as people file in the church's large doors. Back home, our church was much tinier and the walls were plain,¹⁹ but this church is fancier with high, vaulted ceilings.²⁰ I love how my faith can connect this extravagant American structure to the small church in Ireland. We are all here for the same reason, and I feel a sense of community. This is when I realized that Detroit wasn't so completely different from home.

One of my favorite aspects of this Detroit church is the many types of people that it welcomes. Ireland was homogeneous, but I think it's nice that everyone has a common tie to the

¹⁶ Lehman, Jeffrey. *Gale Encyclopedia of Multicultural America, 2nd edition*. New York: Gale Group, 2000.

¹⁷ Delicato, Armando, and Julie Demery. "Early History." *Detroit's Corktown*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007. 9-22. Print.

¹⁸ Delicato, Armando, and Julie Demery. "Early History." *Detroit's Corktown*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007. 9-22. Print.

¹⁹ Eason & Son. *Chapel, Interior, Midleton, Co. Cork*. 19001939.

²⁰ "HOLY TRINITY." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*: 1. Aug 08 1875. ProQuest. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 .

parish, regardless of their background. Families from countries like Ireland, Germany, Italy, Mexico, and Malta fill the pews,²¹ and Father Savage is welcoming to all. He's even helped raise money to build the parish school.²² I always feel a swell of pride for Ireland when I hear the deep sound of the organ that signals the beginning of the Mass, and I hope that they feel the same about their countries.

My father was happy to hear me say this, as he is a new member of the *Conradh na Gaeilge*, or Gaelic League.²³ He thinks it's important that my sister and I never forget our heritage, so he teaches us Irish and about our history and culture. I always catch my uncle and father discussing the importance of this. My uncle mentions that becoming somewhat American is necessary, but he refuses to forget his past. He's seen how some Irish immigrants become more concerned with the future of their business and their advancement in the city than the old traditions.²⁴ They completely assimilate and forget their history. My father is always reminding us of Irish culture and telling us stories of his childhood in Ireland and folklore. We even went to a St. Patrick's Day celebration at the Neighborhood house²⁵ with some friends from our parish. Singing "Danny Boy" and "Finnegan's Wake,"²⁶ watching everyone dance, and eating cabbage and corned beef reminded me of home, and I knew that these would always be a part of my life. I took lots of pictures to help me remember my past (as I didn't have the camera when I was in

²¹ Metress, Seamus P., and Eileen K. Metress. *Irish in Michigan*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2006. Print.

²² Russell, John. "'CORKTOWN'S' LAST RALLY." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*: 2. Jun 29 1919. ProQuest. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 .

²³Ríona Nic Congáil. "'Fiction, Amusement, Instruction": The Irish Fireside Club and the Educational Ideology of the Gaelic League." *Éire-Ireland* 44.1 (2009): 91-117. *Project MUSE*. Web. 28 Oct. 2014. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/>>.

²⁴ Barrett, James R., and David R. Roediger. "The Irish and the "Americanization" of the "New Immigrants" in the Streets and in the Churches of the Urban United States, 1900-1930." 3-33. *JSTOR*. University of Illinois Press, n.d. Web. 25 Oct. 2014.

²⁵ "SOCIETY." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*: 1. Mar 21 1915. ProQuest. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 .

²⁶ Vallely, Fintan, ed. *The companion to Irish traditional music*. NYU Press, 1999.

Ireland). After the party, my father swears that he will not let America change his values and affect his family, but this is before he starts working for Ford.



So many things have changed. Not long after my father began Ford's \$5 day,²⁷ we moved to a larger, two bedroom apartment and rented it from my uncle's friend who was also a parishioner at Most Holy Trinity. My aunt and uncle's place was too crowded, and my father feared it would hurt his chance for the higher wage.²⁸ Back home in Ireland, the small farmhouse was cozy although not kept particularly tidy. Here, my mother has to clean and organize the house for fear of a failed inspection from Ford's Sociological Department.²⁹ Even Maggie and I are forced to follow these standards. My mother says we aren't proper enough, especially when I run around the houses with our German neighbors.³⁰ Our parents make us stay off the streets where our friends play, bathe regularly (which I particularly hate), dress neatly,³¹ and attend school at Most Holy Trinity.³² In Ireland, my friends and I could play anywhere and my shabby jacket was a comfort, not something with which others judged me. Here, we have to be the perfect American family, just like every other family working for Ford, and I have to play the role of the perfect American son. Sometimes, living in this city makes me feel uniform without the unity found with community.³³ I know my father needs to keep his job by following these

²⁷ Ford, Henry. *Ford Manual: Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees*. Detroit: Ford Motor, 1915. Print.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Martelle, Scott. "The Auto Era." *Detroit: A Biography*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2012. 69-83. Print.

³⁰ Metress, Seamus P., and Eileen K. Metress. *Irish in Michigan*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2006. Print.

³¹ Ford, Henry. *Ford Manual: Helpful Hints and Advice to Employees*. Detroit: Ford Motor, 1915. Print.

³² Delicato, Armando, and Julie Demery. "Early History." *Detroit's Corktown*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Pub., 2007. 27. Print.

³³ Rybczynski, Witold. *City Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995. Print.

rules from Ford, but these changes make me feel like I'm someone I'm not. The recent pictures I've taken reflect the new changes and make me feel as if I have a whole new identity.

Also, the eight-hour day has taken a toll on my father too. He comes home at night, too exhausted to do anything but eat quickly and sleep. His job is to stand before a conveyor belt and hastily turn the screws on the passing wheels hour after hour.³⁴ He says he is lucky to have gotten a job at all as some of our neighbors have yet to find work. I can see that the work pains him, but it's "necessary for us to live here", he says. He's stopped participating in the Gaelic League meetings and rarely reminisces about his life in Ireland. I can feel him becoming more like the Irish immigrants that he once discussed with my uncle. They started forgetting their past traditions and began "stitching themselves to the flag." Sunday's are the only days he has off, and it often feels as if attending church is the only thing we kept from Ireland.

I flip through the pictures I keep under my bed. I didn't know what I truly expected of America, but the pictures show a slow change in our family. I see the smiling faces of my family on the first day we arrived next to the "Americanized" version of us from the most recent photo. In this, we stand outside our new house. Our clothes are American. The house is American. *We* have become American. Corktown is no longer Irish, but rather very American, where the old traditions are memories and are turning into local folklore.³⁵ In the past, Corktown was predominantly Irish, but those folks have grown up, gone out to develop newer sections of the city, and factories took over residential areas.³⁶ After families died out and other nationalities moved in, the city was no longer strictly Irish.³⁷ The Corktown that I've known was fighting to

³⁴ Martelle, Scott. "The Auto Era." *Detroit: A Biography*. Chicago, IL: Chicago Review, 2012. 69-83. Print.

³⁵ Russell, John. "'CORKTOWN'S' LAST RALLY." *Detroit Free Press (1858-1922)*: 2. Jun 29 1919. *ProQuest*. Web. 28 Oct. 2014 .

³⁶ *Ibid*.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

hold onto the traditions that separated them from the other immigrants, but now we are all American. The dreams that we once held as our own are shared throughout the city and are no longer unique to us. I close my eyes. Even though it hurts to think about Ireland, I know I must remember my life there, even if my family doesn't. I look at the camera, which helps me remember my new life in America, and the picture of the small Irish boy on his twelfth birthday. I promise to myself, that when I have children, and they have children, I will teach them about the Irish culture and traditions that I can remember. I will not let them forget their roots, but I will also keep an open-mind to American traditions and values, as it is the only way to fit into this new world.

~PRESENT DAY, 1990~

These photos and box of memories are old, as am I, and I wonder now, as I share them with my great-grandson, which snapshots in time he'll choose to treasure and how many changes he'll see in his lifetime. I hope he'll appreciate his Irish heritage and one day be able to share that with future generations. I may have thought I would never assimilate, but I now realize that becoming American means being a part of this great "melting pot" that connects us all.