

The Irish Man

June 17, 2009

When I think of my father today, I imagine him laughing and lean, cruising through his McCarthy era adolescence like Arthur Fonzerelli. Except on four wheels.

How accurate this image is I'll never know for sure, but its backdrop is verifiable. Carmel. The central California coast artists' colony where Alfred Hitchcock filmed movies and Bing Crosby owned a house. Many celebrities did. Clint Eastwood owned a bar.

The fact that he'd been born and raised in Carmel was one of my father's three most self-referenced characteristics. The other two were his Roman Catholicism and the fact that he was a second-generation Irishman. No matter that I never knew him to go to confession or receive communion. No matter that his understanding of Irish culture ran exactly as deep as the Irish-American songbook and an unwavering loyalty to Notre Dame, a school he'd seen only in photographs.

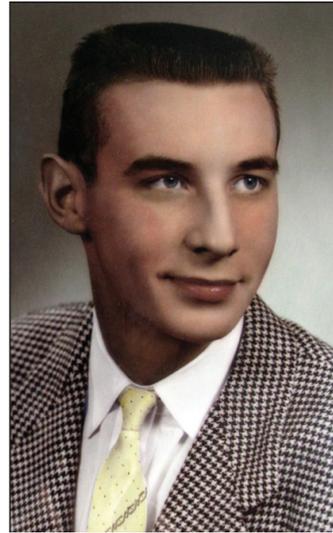
So far as my father was concerned, he was an Irish Catholic. Period. And so by the Grace of God, Knute Rockne and Frosted Lucky Charms was I.

In his youth, he'd been a varsity athlete. Football and basketball. Golf, too. He and his friends would sneak onto the greens at Pebble Beach to practice their swings.

Born of a one-eyed Irish émigré who supplemented the household income playing poker and a Spanish divorcee, Tom was a study in carefree charm over substance. "Casanova," they called him. A ladies' man.

He dropped out of community college to join the Air Force and that four-year tour of duty carried him around the world - Germany, Turkey, the North Pole - and to Sumter, SC where Airman First Class Brosnan met and married Corinna Ruth Guess, a piano teacher of the Southern Baptist persuasion.

Corinna was the only child of a soft-spoken plumber named Franklin Jerome and a domineering red-head named Mary. Their home towns were Greeleyville and Heineman respectively, spitting-distance railroad crossings in Williamsburg County at the broken heart of South Carolina's now infa-



mous "Corridor of Shame."

Inscrutable pair

Tom and Corinna married in 1958. He was worldly and popular, which she was not. She was bright and talented, which he was not. The West Coast Catholic bad boy who pronounced "sophomore" as "south-more" and "Woolco" as "Wilco" ... and the bookish Bible Belt girl whose love of learning was exceeded only by her love for her father, her "darling Tom" and, upon my arrival, me.

Tom insisted that his son be born in Carmel and so in 1960 Corinna gave birth to their first and last child in the same hospital where her husband had been born. Later, he would stand by as I was baptized at the same font where he'd been baptized inside the 200-year-old basilica Mission San Carlos Borromeo del Rio Carmelo or, as it's more widely known, Carmel Mission.

He settled his new family in San Francisco and landed an entry level white collar job at Cost Plus, the recently founded import-export company that 40 years on would become World Market. But Corinna's homesickness overcame her and, a year after their arrival, they traded Chinatown, The Golden Gate Bridge, Fisherman's Wharf, Telegraph Hill and The Presidio for Sumter, where the main tourist attraction was a tiny iris-lined swamp named after the pinioned birds held captive behind its chain link fence - Swan Lake Iris Gardens.

That's where I grew up - the town, not the swamp - spending summers back in California at my grandmother's house one block off Ocean

Continued ...



The Irish Man

Avenue, returning in the fall to feed my father's nostalgia with travelogs of his childhood haunts.

Once more in 1973 during my eighth grade year, my father tried to establish himself in California. We took up residence in a Carmel Valley apartment complex while he sought his fortune flipping houses, but the money ran out in 1974 and we retreated to Sumter where he spent the rest of his professional life pushing paper in a textile factory.

Death

Looking back on it now, I think that my father had been trying to do what the salmon do. I think he was trying to get back home.

But as the salmon sometimes are, he was plucked out of the river and eaten by a bear, his bear being the onset of the recession.

Tom Sr., my grandfather, died a literal death soon after that and Lourdes, my grandmother, moved to Sumter where she died of culture shock, I would imagine. Her body was returned to Carmel for burial.

Tom and Corinna's marriage died, too. We were traveling by station wagon from Sumter to Carmel – something we did several times while I was in elementary school ... 3 days in, 4 days there, 3 days out – when they called it quits at a desert motel. All I knew to do was walk away, so I started walking.

They picked me up a few miles down the road.

By some means or other, divorce was averted, but that saber hung prominently on the wall so that my earliest memories of Tom and Corinna are not of two people in love, but of nascent alcoholics tethered to each other by parental responsibility. They were unhappy with themselves and with each other and year after year of exposure to their unhappiness wore away whatever affection I'd felt for them as a child.

By the time that Tom's alcoholism was diagnosed in the mid-1990's and he agreed to treatment, I'd long since lost interest in either of them. We were no longer on speaking terms. When my father lay dying of a terminal illness, I ignored the phone calls from family friends urging me to visit him. I didn't attend his funeral and have never seen his grave.

Autopsy

Here's what I remember: his late-night returns from the Elks Club, glassy-eyed and quietly beligerent. Her boozy needling. Yelling and door slamming and long, uncomfortable silences during awkward holiday meals, just the three of us, and tension. Always tension.

I also remember their devotion to me.

He called himself "my biggest fan," which was true enough. Every time – and I do mean every time – I walked onstage in Sumter, he was in the audience. Or pacing nervously behind the audience.

His wife's love for me burned even brighter, a needy, cloying love, one that I rejected with the smooth arrogance he'd taught me by example. We were quite the dysfunctional threesome, my parents and I. The loving and the needing and the ouch.

Exhumation

When I went back to Sumter in 2006 to watch my mother die and manage her estate, I went with no expectations of anything but enough money to pay off the mortgage on my house.

It did.

Which is where this story might end, had I not discovered two small things tucked away in a drawer.

One was a grainy, 5-minute reel of film – no audio – taken of Tom and Corinna Brosnan at their wedding reception in 1958. Until that moment, I'd been unaware that any moving pictures ever had been taken of either of them.

The other was a bundle of letters they'd written to each other during their courtship while he was stationed overseas.

These keepsakes, tied up with yarn, were my introduction to people I'd never met. Happy people. Friends. Lovers. People who had silly nicknames for each other.

She called him "Tammy" and he called her "Pokie" and watching the digitized transfer of

Continued ...



The Irish Man

that 50-year-old 8mm film, probably the first person to see it since the day it was shot, I missed them ... because I *had* missed them... by about a lifetime.

I'd never known Tammy or Pokie. I'd known Tom and Corinna.

Tom's passion had been golf and his weakness had been alcohol, a taste for which Corinna had dutifully acquired. Cigarettes, too, with a vengeance. Kents, then Kools. Virginia Slims for a while. She bought them in bulk. The formerly white walls of her condominium were yellow with tar by the time she died a widow.

But the film and the letters told a different story, one they'd kept to themselves for all the time I'd known them. Maybe because they didn't think I'd believe it. Maybe because the telling would have made it too real.

The story was simply this: that I was derived not from a James Dean wannabe and his oppressed debutante wife, not from two irreconcilable wrongs making a marginal right, but from a couple of starry-eyed lovers, Tammy and Pokey, sighing at each other across the Cold War distances, counting the hours until their next embrace, looking down the road ahead of them with eager anticipation, having no idea what lay ahead.

Revised April 29, 2012