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Kevin O'Hara: Rising from the dead in a well-told tale



James O'Hara (1911-1992) Kevin O'Hara photo

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD >> Last spring, I ran into Joe, Tom, and John Toole at The Olde Heritage Tavern in Lenox. Though we'd been friends for decades, it was seldom I'd run into these three brothers together. Pulling up a chair, I reminded them fondly of how their mother, Marie Kenney Toole — who turns a vibrant 100 next week — was the first to befriend my mom, Lella, when our family emigrated from England to the Berkshires, back in 1953.

"Your mother, along with Phyllis Coakley, invited my mom to a Rosary Sodality meeting at St. Mary's Church," I recalled. "It was one of her first outings in America."

"Sounds like our dear mom," John the youngest jested. "Nothing like a good old-fashioned church service to get a friendship rolling."

"Your parents would often visit our house after that," added Tom. "Your mother was a lovely woman — your dad always referred to her as his 'bride.' What a jokester, he was. He once asked me if I was married — and I was only nine at the time!"

Joe, the eldest, chimed in. "Our dad would always ask your father to tell us a story before they left our house. Us nine kids would gather around him, because we thought he was a leprechaun — no kidding! He was short, as you know, and had these dancing blue eyes and the richest of brogues."

"He'd always fire up his pipe, too," added John, "and its cherry-scented smoke would weave around our heads like Irish spirits."

"Do you remember any of his stories?" I leaned forward.

"I remember one," said Joe, "but I can't imitate his brogue."

"That's OK, neither can I," I urged him on.

Now, one could blame the Guinness, or Joe's fine rendition of the tale. But as sure as St. Patrick had converted the unruly Celts, I heard my dad's lilting voice clearly through his own.

"When I was a wee lad, a donkey and cart pulled up in front of the Longford Courthouse. Inside the cart lay a bruised and battered drunkard named Scanlon, whose arms and legs were plastered right up to his sockets. Why, he looked like a mummy who had escaped the Great Pyramids. With much ado, four hefty orderlies transferred this wailing invalid onto a gurney, and rolled him before Judge Hanlon — a hard nugget — and his sleepy-headed jury.

"Your Honor," he strained to speak, "my name is Corky Scanlon. I was leaving a vigil at St. Mel's Cathedral last Friday night, when I fell into a black abyss that shattered me bones like brittle china. After I collected me wits, I climbed out of this gaping hole and found meself in the middle of Shop Street. Aye, Shop Street!"

"Rising from the pillow to plead his case, he continued, 'By gum, your honor, but the chasm I'd fallen into wasn't a faery portal, as I first believed the bottomless chasm to be, but a manhole without its cover. Through me pain, I deduced that a council worker, in his haste to quench a Friday thirst, had forgotten to cover up the hole. For such negligence, I'm seeking 1,000 guineas in damages."

At this point, I could hear my father through Joe, continue in a confiding voice.

"Of course, no such incident occurred, for Scanlon himself had concocted this preposterous scheme. As for his healthy limbs, he simply had them plastered by a traveling quack. The jury, however, who despised the despicable judge, ruled gleefully in the plaintiff's favor, which left Judge Hanlon no choice but to compensate the drunkard fully.

"But before handing over the sack of coins to the plaintiff, the cruel judge made the stipulation that if Scanlon was ever seen standing upright on his two shanks again, his next address would be Mountjoy Prison.

"But Scanlon had a ready-made plan for Hanlon's unmerciful clause. 'But your Honor,' says he, 'once I leave your courthouse today, I have instructed my orderlies to assist me by coach to the seaport town of Rosslare, Co. Wexford. From there, a night steamer will transport me to Cherbourg in France, where four French orderlies will put me on a train bound for Lourdes. At this miraculous site, they'll dip me into its blessed waters. And, by gum, with the intercession of the good saints above, I've no doubt I'll rise from that sacred stream free from all bodily aches and deformities.

"Furthermore, your Honor, before I return home to Ireland, I have plans of catching the 9:10 train to Gare du Nord station, where I'll spend a full month exercising me new legs in the grand dancing halls of Gay Paree!"

Joe Toole concluded my dad's story: "Judge Hanlon, knowing he was duped and duped badly, pounded his gavel in disgust."

"Bravo," I cheered Joe. "Sounds like my dad, but that's a tale I've never heard before."

Tom jumped from our table. "Kev, another Guinness?"

I looked down upon an empty glass. "Show me a bird that can fly with just one wing?" I joked, sitting back to enjoy this rare night out with old family friends.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle.

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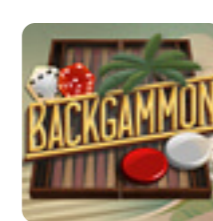
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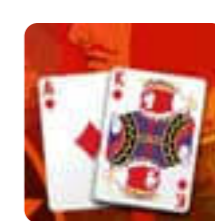
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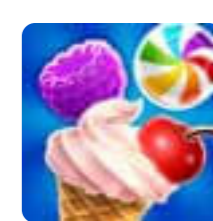
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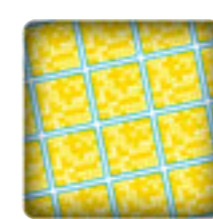
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