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Kevin O'Hara: A Filipina shakes up Ireland

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By Kevin O'Hara

PITTSFIELD — Forty years ago, with hopes of becoming a thatcher, I moved to Ireland with my new wife Belita. I had conceived the notion after my grandmother's farmhouse — thatched for two centuries — had to be shingled with slate, as there were no more thatchers working in her locality. She grieved the loss of a golden roof that had kept her warm in winter, cool in summer, and where songbirds nested in the eaves. Where once rain had fallen softly upon her bonnet of Shannon reeds, it now resounded off the black Bangor slate like an angry drum. Her lament pulled at my heartstrings, and evoked my whimsical calling.

Belita and I settled in my dad's native county of Longford, where I put notices in a dozen provincial newspapers, hoping to find a thatcher willing to teach me the trade. Upon receiving a promising reply, we'd hitchhike the roads, never stuck for long, thanks to Belita's attractiveness and the open-heartedness of the Irish people. After six months, I found a champion thatcher up North in County Tyrone, who proposed a three-year apprenticeship. Not prepared to make such a lengthy commitment, I had to decline his offer, and sadly abandon my romantic dream.

Our stay in Ireland was far from fruitless, however. Belita learned how to spin wool and knit Aran sweaters, and I mastered the pouring of a perfect pint of Guinness, as barkeep at the Longford Golf Club. We visited my relations frequently, and traveled a wealth of the country, from Cork to Donegal. Those evenings, in far-flung parish pubs, Belita would attract attention, not just for her loveliness but for the novelty of her Filipina features — not many Asians knocking about rural Ireland in 1977. "From where in the world might ye hail?" the wizened old pensioners would ask her. Belita was inclined to play along. "You guess."

The elderly bachelors would hold her by the chin and lead her to window or hearth-glow, and appraise her like a delicate piece of Belleek china. "I'm thinking ye're a lovely seniorita from Mexico, or a yellow rose from Texas," chanced one, perhaps an avid viewer of Wild West movies aired every Sunday on Irish TV.

"Arragh, not a tall!" bellowed his mate. "A blind man could see she's from Barcelona, with her smooth olive skin and dazzling almond eyes."

When Belita finally divulged she was from the Philippine Islands, one ancient crow squawked, "No wonder Magellan and his crew were mad to get there!"

Drunken louts

But not all comments about my wife's exotic looks were pleasantries. Toward the end of our stay, we spent a few days in Galway City, where we booked into a modest B&B. Knowing that a pint differed little in price — whether served in smoky shebeen or grand hostelry — we opted for the barroom at the luxurious Great Southern Hotel on Eyre Square. Taking seats by a cheery turf fire, I ordered a pint and Belita a Bailey's, and we leaned back to marvel at our splendid surroundings.

Our enjoyable interlude was soon marred by remarks from a nearby group of drunken businessmen, some of which verged on the lewd. I finally felt the need to stand up and approach their table, asking them to kindly keep their rude comments to themselves.

That settled them down, but our pleasure in the place had been tainted, so we hurriedly took our leave. A Galway gentleman, who had witnessed our unsettling scene, stopped us at the door and apologized for the men's behavior. He next handed me his business card, saying, "Go to our local airport in the morning, and present this card at the front desk. There'll be a treat waiting for you." I thanked him and glanced down at the card — Aer Arann.

Sure enough, the next morning we were greeted by a friendly staffer who led us to a small prop plane revving up on the runway. "Good day," a cheerful pilot called from the cockpit. "I've been instructed to fly you out to the Aran Islands. So hop aboard, we have a full day planned!"

With a disbelieving glance at each other, Belita and I joined hands and boarded, the only passengers on the tiny plane. We soon found ourselves winging across sparkling Galway Bay toward Inishmore, the largest of the three Aran Islands. Our hands clutched in terror as our pilot made a bouncing touch-down on a strand, scattering flocks of sheep.

Once disembarked, a fun-loving jarvey was waiting with horse and trap, who took us on a long circuit through the village of Kilonan, and up to the prehistoric cliff-side fortress of Dun Aengus. A delicious meal of fish and chips followed at Joe Watty's Pub, all gratis.

On our return to Galway that evening, the pilot flew us over Inishmore's neighboring islands — Inishmann and Inishere — where he pointed out ringed forts and other megalithic ruins. "Tis such a grand evening," said our tour guide, "let's fly up the Clare coast, so you can have yourselves a birds-eye view of the Cliffs of Moher and the rocky Burren beyond." Belita and I gazed in wonderment at the sweeping vistas below, still holding hands throughout this thrilling flight.

Once back at our B&B, we were still in awe over our unexpected outing."

How will we ever top that?" asked Belita, twirling before me. I caught her by the arm.

"Let's go back to the Great Southern."

She gave me a quizzical look: "The Great Southern?"

"Yes," I answered with a sheepish grin, "but tonight you should wear a mini-skirt."

A sharp poke to the ribs was my bride's only reply.

Kevin O'Hara writes an annual St. Patrick's Day column for The Eagle. Visit O'Hara's new website, thedonkeyman.com

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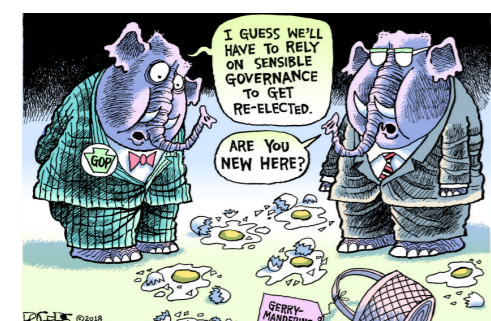
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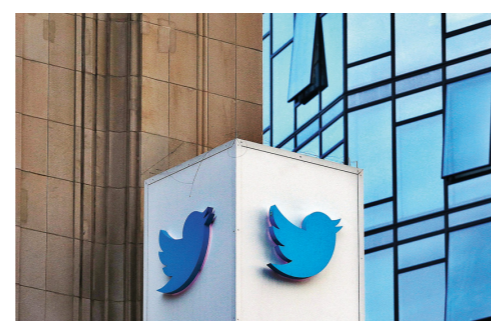
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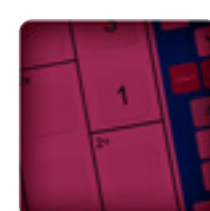
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