

Echoes of Ireland

By
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DEDICATION

This play is dedicated to the Sullivans and Sheas of County Cork, Ireland and the Pettis and Rafaniellos of Napoli, Italy from whence I sprung.

STORY OF THE PLAY

Echoes of Ireland is a series of four interrelated monologues that follow the saga of a single Irish family from County Cork in 1860 to present day New York City. Beginning five years after the end of the potato famine in Ireland, *Echoes* sees the Cunygham clan on their journey across the ocean to the ports of Manhattan, through the lowly existence of immigrant life in the States, to the assimilation and rebirth of their family as American citizens who never forget from whence they came. The journey is part tragedy, part comedy, part history lesson and all undeniably human.

Past Performances

Echoes of Ireland was most recently produced in County Cork, Ireland, by Skibbreen Theatre Society in 2013, featuring Fachtna O'Driscoll, Breda Herlihy, Catherine Field and Declan McCarthy. It was also produced in 2010 by Dragonfly Performing Arts in Cairo, NY, featuring Ron Morehead, Susan Yzquierdo and Chris Coyne. The monologue "2001" has been performed frequently as a stand-alone during September 11 memorials throughout New York State.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(2 M, 2 W)

MONOLOGUE ONE (m), 40s+, Irish-born Cork native, victim of the potato famine, at turns angry and heartbreakingly sad.

MONOLOGUE TWO (f), 20s, Irish-born immigrant to America, feisty, able, filled with life.

MONOLOGUE THREE (f), 40+, a hard-working 1970s New York woman of Irish descent.

MONOLOGUE FOUR (m), late 40s, modern-day New York Irish fireman, funny, relatable, devoted to family.

Echoes of Ireland

County Cork, Ireland, 1860

MONOLOGUE ONE (m), 40s+, Irish-born Cork native, victim of the potato famine, at turns angry and heartbreakingly sad.

Have you ever been hungry? Not that late-for-supper growl you get on your way to a meal, no. I mean the in-your-bones hunger, the kind that nary lets you think of ought else. The two days since and for all you know two days hence type. The hunger stirred in the pit of your belly, borne of far too many days providing less than what a belly require, less than what a proper soul depends upon to thrive. Have you known that hunger, lads?

To understand me, to comprehend how I stand before you ten years hence breathing the air upon the wind of County Cork, and all the seeming health that sails with it...you have to know the hunger that can turn a proper soul improper. There were crimes enough. There are judgments we've yet to repay, dwelling on this earthly green. And there were crimes enough committed 'gainst us, that are beyond any earthly judgment I can reckon. And at the root of it all, tangled up in its sinew and vine, forcing all that blackness up through the ground and into God's light there is one word, one notion-- hunger.

Crops had failed before. I had heard tell, having tilled a parcel with me father since I were a wee lad in service to the same landlord. I worked me land, but I didn't truly own me land, you see. But t'were mine nonetheless. Me Da, he taught me every stone of the place, and after he died out in that parcel is where we buried him. I knew that land like you know a woman. Actually, thinking about what I know of me Caitlin, I believe I knew the land a tad better. It fed me two girls. It gave me what little I had in me pocket any given time.

It provided me any right I had, at eight and twenty years of age, to be calling meself a man. I asked no more than to be doing me work, to have a meal for Caitlin and the two young ones at the end of the day, and to share a spot with the boys at Jimmy's Pub upon the odd Friday-- and Lord knows no more was ever visited upon me. Simple wants and simple pleasures. I was married and familiated as we all were. We went to church Sunday as we all did and prayed with the same words. I yelled too much, or drank too much on the rare occasion, did me penance, and moved on, fresh to pull the crop from the ground once again.

'Twasn't a surprise when the famine come. We'd heard it coming in gossip and whispers. But to actually see those pieces of coal staring out of the ground like the cold, black eyes of the old serpent himself... What's a potato? Not much. A bit to feed a soul. Wasn't there corn enough? Weren't there cattle enough to slaughter? And there were. On ships leaving the ports of Erin each day, off to keep England in beef and the rest of the world in corn, while those who tended the land... Everything we raised we sold, see. If you wanted to keep your land and not be turned out by the landlord, you did so. Potatoes alone could be grown enough to eat and sell as well. All the tenable land raised grass to feed the cattle. Only potatoes took hold in the leftovers. Hills and plains of rolling emerald, green the like of which there's none to match in the known world. Cow food. What we ate, and lived upon, and fed our children with...t'was brown. And now t'was black.

The small farmers fell upon the mercy of the large crop farmers. The big farmers pled their cases to the landlords. The landlords turned to the absent owners, far away in England...there were no mercy to be found there. And you can be certain no mercy trickled down to the poor of Cork. Those who could afford to feed their own locked their hearts to us. The church locked its front gate. And poverty locked its chains upon us. But the ports, they stayed open, every day without fail for five years, sending our food to foreign soil

while Ireland's children starved. While me own children starved. When the last of what little we had was gone and the prospect of replacing it were gone as well, we fell into a routine of survival, Caitlin and meself. I took the man's role, and went into town each day to try to find work with the Irish relief, on the off chance they'd throw me a few scraps to dig a ditch that was of no earthly value to anyone. Caitlin took the woman's part, traveling to a neighboring town with the girls to beg in the streets. I couldn't have her doing it in me own town, see. Not if I were a man who aimed to keep me pride. So I sent me own wife and children out to strangers to do me begging for me. So's I could keep me pride intact, see. That was the theory.

After months of living on the scraps we could beg or steal, Caitlin began to leave the girls at home and venture out herself. When she brought back more than she had before, I didn't ask how or why. I should have. But I didn't. I didn't want to know what I already knew. Because how could a man live, knowing such a thing? The depths a mother would plumb to feed her children. So I remained unawares.

So why not just leave, you may ask, and not having been there 'tis a fair enough question. The simplest answer is that leaving took fare for passage, and hadn't we enough just keeping body and soul together. But there were other answers too. Caitlin's mother, who she fed the best she could until the fever finally stole the poor old woman's breath. And our cottage, small enough to be meaningless to anyone but us, but still the place we watched our girls take their first steps—the older one careful and tentative and the younger one running headlong to beat the devil. It was ours. The only place meself and the lasses ever called home. Until the filthy landlord blaggards turned us out like shiftless beggars. And damn my soul, there was the land I thought would come back to me like a long lost love. The air, the grass, the sky I knew and loved all me life, even after it betrayed me. The land I couldn't bring meself to hate...until I came home from digging me latest ditch to find the girls'

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