

Dear Friends and Family,

WARNING: this email is long.....and a bit graphic (not in a good way). To those of you who already know some of the story I am going to tell, apologies.

The first 8 days of our trip to Ireland were flawless and as planned including a night at an 18th century inn with gourmet food, a visit to Bunratty Castle & Park, a stop at the breathtaking Cliffs of Moher, followed by three days of activities with our family clan organization (Flannery Clan) in County Clare, and then a couple days at Foxford where I took watercolor lessons while Walter fished for (and caught) salmon on the spectacular River Moy. We moved on to County Sligo to a family guesthouse in Tubbercurry where we had stayed three years ago. Our plan was then to day trip in Sligo and County Cavan, places where my Irish ancestors were from. Now, here is the story of how those last plans took a detour:

We are just returned from 16 days in my beloved Ireland. We had planned to be there 14 days but providence smacked me good and our return had to be delayed until I was discharged from Sligo General Hospital in the beautiful west of Ireland. For those of you who don't know (despite my obsessive talking about my Irish ancestry), my g-g-g-grandparents were married in Sligo in 1832 and my g-g-grandfather was born there in 1841. The family fled the Great Famine in late 1846, leaving Sligo and sailing to Liverpool and then to NYC. While I had planned to do some days of wandering in the "old neighborhood" in Sligo, I hadn't planned for a total "immersion" in the local community complete with rescue by paramedics, treatment in the ER and admission to the hospital for surgery for a broken kneecap (busted into two scary-looking pieces.....did they really have to show me the Xray?). So, what precipitated the kneecap emergency and 6 days in Sligo General? In my "wanderings" out in the townland of Skreen, Sligo, we got a little lost and stopped at a house to ask for directions. (For those of you who don't know, once you go out of the bigger cities in Ireland, you find that street signs are rare in smaller towns and even rarer in the countryside.) It was the third time we had stopped for directions and after talking to the young woman (and her 2 sweet little girls), I was sure we were finally on the right road. It was raining, fine and lightly. As I came down the steep driveway of the house, I failed to apply the appropriate caution in traversing a metal grate at the foot of the driveway known as a "cattle grate". I took a flyer on the wet metal grate genuflecting with all my weight on my right knee and the deed was done. The purpose of a cattle grate is to deter pasture animals (sheep and cows) who are found in the countryside and may wander onto nearby residential yards uninvited. When they put their little hooves on the metal grating, they find an unfamiliar and disconcerting experience, leading them to turn tail and head in another direction. So, what I am saying to you is that, if I had the alertness and common sense of a sheep or cow, I might have avoided the flyer. Thinking (hoping) that the injury was "just" a knee dislocation, I begged Walter to "put it back in". He touched the knee and immediately knew it was in pieces and told me he knew he shouldn't touch it further.

The ambulance and paramedics came out from the city and took me to Sligo General. (I will leave the pain and suffering part to your imagination. The paramedics had "magic gas" and that helped me be able to bear them "realigning" my leg.) My paramedics, Stan and John, took very good and kind care of me and I was treated to some much-needed Irish humor on the 30 minute trip to the hospital. I went into "Casualty" (ER) and the nurses and aides were gentle and caring. (It doesn't hurt to be called "luv", "darlin'" and "poor pet" when you are in the condition I was. I'll bet none of you Americans have been addressed that way at the hospital.) At the ER, xrays confirmed the nasty break and the hospital adventure began. I should say right here that Walter was a saint during the whole time after I fell. He looked more frightened than I did (of course he did not have the benefit of morphine as I did). I was fitted with a huge (groin to ankle) temporary cast pending surgery and Walter thought he might be able to get me back home for the surgery. After a couple hours in the ER and the nurse saying "Luv, I cannot let you go", it was clear that I needed to have the surgery in Ireland. I had the surgery the following morning and the two pieces of my knee were reconnected with wires and tension banding. Although a large public hospital, Sligo General has no private or semi-private rooms.....just wards with 6 or 7 patients in each. I was in the ladies ortho ward with 5 other women, all Irish, but surprisingly from all over Ireland (Sligo, Tipperary, Carlow, Limerick, Mayo). I am very glad I was in the ward with other people. As crappy as I felt, my mouth was unimpaired and my captive audience answered my questions about them (what happened? Where are you from? Tell me about your family. How is the economy going over here?, etc) and were ripe to hear me tell the story of my 30-year genealogical search, etc. Then, as I came to myself, I insisted that Walter bring me my camera and I started photographing my fellow patients and the staff of the hospital (from doctors & nurses to food service and janitorial staff). Only one person (dear Margaret, the ER aide who came to see how I was doing post-surgery) declined to be photographed although some had to be "cajoled" a bit. My surgeon (called a "consultant" in Ireland) Andrew Macey enthusiastically posed for his photo (attached). When he first came to see me before surgery, he was introduced as **Mr.** Andrew Macey, **consultant**. (Doctors are commonly called Mr. rather than Dr.) I explained to Mr. Macey that I too was a "consultant" which, in the States, means a person without a steady job. I pretended exaggerated relief that his title meant something quite different.....and we immediately bonded. He is something of a rebel at the hospital, outspoken about government funding cuts and the closure of services at Sligo General. He is also a genealogy buff and has visited the stellar genealogical library of the Mormons at Salt Lake City. He said he was out that way a few years ago for "micro-skiing" (seminar on microsurgery with a side trip to ski). Just my kind of guy.

For the next 6 days Mr. Macey, his ortho team, the nurses and "physios" (physical therapists) tried to work me towards release in a condition where I could fly home. I first had a second groin to ankle cast (half plaster, soft in the front) and then a strapped brace (groin to ankle.....which I am still wearing) that allowed minimal bending of my knee to get me into a wheelchair, car and then plane. (The airlines have the right to refuse passengers with "stiff leg" casts so they wanted to make sure I didn't get the boot by the airline.) I call the accursed brace my "medieval torture device".....for a reason. It was a three hour drive from Sligo to the Shannon Airport.....not fun. And then there was Continental Airlines, without compassion and using the situation to demand an up-charge of \$3200 (plus a \$500 processing fee) to change our economy seats from an August 4th flight to an August 6th flight. The only thing they did allow was for me to use accumulated miles to upgrade to business/first class for no "additional" charge. So kind of them. Bastards.

The journey to Shannon took place in the middle of the night as we had to be there by 6am (Continental could only give us seats on the early flight....not the afternoon flight). We had to drop off a rental car and by the time we got to the front of the terminal I was wondering how I would make it through the rest of the trip. Mercifully, there appeared Tony Maguire who works with the Shannon Airport as to disability/medical support services. That amazing man stayed with us from the moment he got me into a wheelchair (and went across the terminal to find a "better" wheelchair once he saw the shape I was in) until the moment 2 hours later when he personally helped put me into my seat on the plane. He tried to decline the tip we offered but we insisted and he reluctantly accepted it. He got us through check-in, security, VAT desk, and to the departure gate.....always trying to find the least taxing way for my sake. He greeted every person at the various airport desks/functions by name. He was a saint. (I should tell you that when we got to Newark, their services could not compare and were a pale shadow of those at Shannon.) Thank God the flight took off on time from Shannon and at least we were "pampered" and well-fed due to being in business/first (now we see how the "other half" lives.....pretty good). We arrived on time this past Friday and after a real challenge getting my leg into the car, we made it home. I will be seeing an ortho doctor on Monday for a post-surgery evaluation, to have the staples removed from my knee, and find out the prognosis and plan for the coming weeks. It will be a while on the road back especially since it is my right (driving) leg.

I will always be in the debt of the folks at Sligo General and I will never forget their kindness and gentle care. I will be making them a Shutterfly photobook so they can see their photos. (There was some competitiveness among co-workers: one of the men, rather than asking to see his photo, asked to see that of his co-worker Ian.....got a kick out of that.) My friend Teresa, the innkeeper at Tubbercurry, had me write a small thank you note to the hospital staff which she said she will get published in the local paper where she is sure the staff will likely see it. When I am more recovered, I will write the whole story of my hospitalization including the stories of my fellow ward patients and the stories they told me about themselves and their families, grandparents, etc. My favorite will be the story (true) of the "wee sooty man come down from the mountains of Sligo" who was treated in the Sligo ER a couple years ago. There will also be stories of John and Gerry, the feuding, elderly brothers frequenting the Tipperary pub owned by a fellow patient's father. And then there is Mary, who came into our ward after being clipped by a car and knocked to the ground crossing the street in Sligo. She was on her way home after having her hair done and, in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, the female paramedic said: "Your hair looks wonderful, who did it?" Picture Mary breathlessly propping herself up on the stretcher to say "it was Pauline". The woman in the bed next to me broke her ankle at the Leonard Cohen concert at the historic Lissadell House grounds. The concert had ended and she decided the line for the porta-johns was too long so she decided to take a couple tissues and step into the woods to relieve herself. She tripped over a wire and went down. Twenty-thousand people had attended the two concert events that weekend. The ER staff told her she had the distinction of being the only concert "casualty". This is only a small taste of the stories to come. Buckle up.

Some of you may remember the story of Asenath Nicholson, told in my book. She was an American (Protestant) social/charitable worker who visited Ireland just before and then during the Great Famine. She wrote the book "Ireland's Welcome to the Stranger" in which she described the warmth and kindness of the poor suffering Irish and the particular generosity and welcoming of the devastatingly deprived and oppressed Irish Catholics who she met, visited and broke bread with. One hundred sixty-three years have passed since that book was written but I found the people unchanged in their kindness to another American stranger. Some might say my view is romanticized by the circumstances. I say not. Times are tough economically in Ireland today.....even worse than here in the States from what we saw and heard. Just the same, the "stranger" was welcomed with gentle concern and kindness.

Best regards,

Maureen

