

Siobhan

On August 18th, 1937 my parents were going to name me after my Irish Grandmother, Siobhan Patten Murphy. It was suggested to them that they name me “Sheila” instead of Siobhan as it means “Siobhan” in Gaelic. They were gravely misinformed. Years later I attended the Brehen Law conference in Ballyvaugh, County Clare, Ireland. The Gaelic speakers there told me the truth. “Sheila” is the name of the ancient goddess of fertility, “Sheila na Gig”. Even though I was named Sheila, my fascination for my Irish Grandmother and her the name Siobhan never left me. In fact, over the years, my interest has grown.

The first Siobhan, my great-great-grandmother was shipwrecked on Achill Island in County Mayo many years before my Grandmother Siobhan was born. It is not clear in my memory whether she was from Achill, and

went to work in Scotland, or whether she was from Scotland and was saved by the islanders. So, little is known of this hardy woman.

My Grandmother Siobhan was indeed unforgettable. She left Achill Island at the turn of the last century. She took the ancient culture with her and never became Americanized. For instance, holy water was not to be touched with your fingers only, it was to be grasped in your full hand and sprinkled on your head. She told me stories of the fairies and how they frequented houses where there was sharing and laughter. I learned about the bad fairies too, that would lead you astray when you were coming home with the cow for the night. But then there were good fairies that if tragedy happened, you could be taken to another beautiful place temporarily. This gave rise to the expression “away with the fairies.” I learned about the seals who could turn into people and help children if their parents perished at

sea. But if anyone saw the seals, they would return immediately to the sea. And she often referred to sheep as “holy sheep.”

Later I learned the legend that sheep really are said to be holy as they saved St. Patrick when he hid in a ship returning to Scotland after being captured by pirates. Before he escaped, he took care of the sheep and learned to speak to them. So when Patrick was to be thrown off the boat, the sheep saved him by pounding their hoofs and wailing.

My Grandmother Siobhan showed me how to dance with her hands held stiffly by her sides. Even though she was very old she could still do a wee dance. I later learned that when she was growing up on the island, she never learned to read or write. But her brother, Sean, became the pilot of Clew Bay and took the great ships safely around the island on his ship called “Lily.” Her sense of justice was further formed by the injustice her nation suffered as a colony of Britain. The English had transportation

during her girlhood, or at least she knew of it. Since they cooked only on the hearth, she never ate fried food. Indeed she thought that fried food was invented by the devil himself. She would question anyone who tried to give fried food to her as to whether they knew that it would kill you.

Some of my most lasting memories of her was the way she prayed. Always in Gaelic of course, but often lifting her arms high toward heaven!

Food was not to be eaten until three crosses were made on the plate by her thumb.

Another one of her ancient practices took place once a year on the first of May. As soon as you awakened, you were told to go outside and wash your face with dew, your hands, your arms, etc. This was to protect you from danger and attract rainbows in the sky. And, indeed she was saved.

On a clear beautiful day, Siobhan's father told his wife that he planned to take a load of seed potatoes to Clare Island. He asked if he could take his son and daughter and another lad, Martin, with him. His wife begged him not to go. She told him that earlier that day she saw an omen in the sky warning her of danger for the family. Since there was no wind, the four of them boarded the wee boat called "currach" anyway and set sail for Clare Island.

After about two hours a terrible wind swirled around the currach overturning it in the storm.

When there was no timely return, the islanders joined the Patten family on the strand. Only her father's body was found several hours later. He was recognized by a knot in his sweater's knitting.

But the boat did not sink. Overturned, it slowly approached land. The islanders turned over the boat and there was Siobhan Patten, about

fourteen years old, still breathing air trapped under the capsized boat, cold and unconscious and with a death grip on the seat. She was taken to the first cottage where two women stripped her naked and held her between them in bed until she regained consciousness. A doctor told her to smoke a pipe to get the water out of her lungs. She did so daily into her nineties.

Years later Siobhan married Michael Murphy. Like his wife, he was illiterate, but he had a fine memory for music and songs. He loved to sing with his wonderful Irish tenor as much as Siobhan loved to dance. They lost two babies, John and Patrick, in Ireland and left for America with their surviving children, Agnes, Mary, Michael and Catherine, to start a new life.

Her husband, Michael Murphy, was a hearty worker in the Port of Cleveland, and a wonderful husband. He loved to care of the four children and sing to them at night. He would urge Siobhan to go to the step dances. Their last child was born in America. They would call him "Martin"

after the lad that drowned with Siobhan's father and brother. Baby Martin was only six weeks old when his father Michael died a tragic death of blood poisoning. A piece of ore pierced his hand and it would not come out. He was sent to the doctor who operated with a dirty knife. Gangrene set in. First they amputated his hand, then his arm, then death finally came. The only photograph of the family was taken at the funeral. Daughter Catherine is not in the photo. She was eight years old when she died of whopping cough.

Siobhan took her children to an orphanage so she would not be deported. She could neither read, nor write, and spoke only Gaelic. She scrubbed floors six days a week in the Beeman's Gum factory. On Sundays she would bring the children for the day to her sister's, Catherine Patten Cooney, home. Later to a small house she managed to purchase. My Dad became a feminist at an early age. He was in the orphanage when his

appendix burst. He cried for hours before finally getting to the hospital where the Doctor said there was no reason to operate, he would die anyway. A nurse begged him to operate. "Listen," she said, "he can still sing. He will live." His life was saved by a woman!

Years later when my Grandmother (his Mother), told me to study hard and become my Dad's secretary, he said, "No Maw. Sheila is a real leader. She will make a fine lawyer. Maybe I will run her for office someday. It will make my load lighter."

Dad stood up for me when my boyfriend asked for my hand in marriage. David told my Dad that he was about to graduate from John Carroll University and would perhaps become a lawyer like him. But first he wanted to get a Ph.D. in English at Oxford or Cambridge...etc. After a half hour of hearing David's plans for the future, he was told, "You have talked for a half hour about your future and you never once mentioned

Sheila's name. You are not the right one for my daughter even though I will always have a sweet place in my heart for you."

And so, as Siobhan was saved from the sea, I was saved. Dad saved me to marry Patrick Racey who grew up where winter lasts 10 months followed by 2 months of tough sledding along the shores where the docks once stood of Lake Superior. Patrick worked his way through university playing the trombone, working in the cafeteria, building stage scenery and eating peanut butter sandwiches. After our marriage I became a grade school teacher and he became a Naval officer....and spent time on a ship, "The Sullivans" named after five brothers who perished in World War II in the Pacific Theater. Even after our son, Patrick Martin, was born, Patrick continued to encourage me to go to law school: "I will take vacations and mind the children when you have your exams." And so he did. Our daughter Brigid was born during law school. He helped me day

and night. Patrick, like my Grandfather Michael Murphy, has a beautiful Irish tenor.

It is more than once that I have thought that a merciful God would give my grandfather, Michael Murphy a second life to live. I love to dance, and Patrick loves to sing...and so it is that from Siobhan's choice of a great husband, I knew one when I saw Patrick at Marquette. Was it Michael and Siobhan who helped Patrick choose me?

The last time I saw my dear Grandmother Siobhan – she had had a stroke and lost her ability to speak English. Dad translated her Gaelic for me right out of her past – “Let me go to school. I need to learn to read and write. Please, please.”

She can rest easy now on her balcony of eternity. Her great granddaughter Siobhan reads and writes in three languages, is a Professor in Estonia, and teaches human rights in her lecture and writing.

I am told that when my Grandmother Siobhan died in Colorado, a giant wind circled around the family's garden on Achill Island in Ireland. They knew the sign. Siobhan had a "touchdown" one last time on her way home.