

# *Sketch*

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## The Oldest Irishman

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# The Oldest Irishman

Tom Harkin

## **Abstract**

I took two bottles of cold beer from the refrigerator, opened them carefully so they wouldn't foam, and stepped outside...

“You better get out a here. Don’t come in no more. Shouldn’t a come in here to start. He never hurt you.”

— Shouldn’t have come. Better leave. Didn’t hurt me. Yes.

I left the bartender bending over the drunk and walked out. Somewhere outside my skin something was drawing my guts out slowly, leaving nothing but a conscious nothingness. The night air was clean and brisk and there was the welcoming darkness

which now, as then, comforts me.

And even when the sun is gleaming, I shutter my eyes to melt into that soft stillness of the welcoming darkness. But I try not to think of this. Yet in my lightless room at night, pale smoke phantoms of the past float in the air and I touch the naked chain about my throat and remember. But this is not often.

And sometimes not at all.

## The Oldest Irishman

*by Tom Harkin*

I TOOK two bottles of cold beer from the refrigerator, opened them carefully so they wouldn’t foam, and stepped outside. The screen door slammed shut behind me and I started on the path that led through the orchard to the garden. The gentle summer breeze did little to cool the noon sun, which scorched the earth through a cloudless sky.

Beyond the peach trees I could see Uncle Joe pushing the plow down a row of potatoes, his back to me. It was a big garden; and, since Mom died, we didn’t bother planting anything in it. Uncle Joe, however, who lived just a stone’s throw up the road, saw to it that the garden was never empty come harvest time. Every year he planted three crops: Irish potatoes (they were really Idahoes but

no one cared to tell him any different), sweet corn, and watermelons.

I emerged from the orchard and sat down beside Joe's chair, which he had placed under a big apple tree at the edge of the garden. After these many years I knew his routine thoroughly: plow up one row, back down another, sit down in the shade for a few puffs on the pipe and then up and ready for another row of weeds.

He had just reached the far end of the garden, turned around, and was coming back. His body lurched with each foot or two of weeds he plowed, stopped, then lurched forward again, his arms moving forward and back in a rhythmic motion. It was one of those old-fashioned plows used by strong farmers before the machine age. I almost believed Uncle Joe when he told me his great-grandfather used it to plow up the sod in old Eire and that his father brought it over to America on the boat — except that there was a metal tag on the wheel which said "Made in U.S.A." One night I slipped into the garden and removed that false tag and buried it. Now I nodded my head and said, "No kidding," when he told me where the plow had come from, for who was to say differently?

When I was sure he was close enough to see me, I yelled, "Hey, Uncle Joe," and held up the enticing bottle of beer. He stopped, pushed back the big straw hat, and shaded his eyes from the glaring sun. He knew who was there and what I had; still he took a long look. Satisfied, he nodded his head, mopped his face with a red bandana, and resumed his plowing, more vigorously than before.

"Sure, and she's a hot one today, she is," he said as he gingerly placed himself on the rickety, wooden chair.

"Yes, it sure is. Here's something to cool you off a little." I handed him the cold beer.

"Oh!" (As though he hadn't noticed it before.) "Much obliged, much obliged." He tipped the bottle to his parched lips and took a long swallow. The tears welled in his sad blue eyes.

"Sure and I can't drink this stuff like I could once."

Those eyes. They told a story of a long, hard life; of

youthful years spent working on the farm with no time for school or play; of two depressions and two farms lost; of the long days and nights spent praying for six sons who were off fighting the devil.

"You know, me and Danny and Pat used to make real beer back on the homestead. The men used to come around and wait and wait for us to invite them down to the cellar for a drink; and if we never, they went away hurt, by golly. They tell me you're goin' to college this fall, eh?"

"Yes, I guess so."

"Sure, and that's a fine thing, you three boys gettin' an education. When I was your age, you know, I was hitched up behind a team of horses and out workin' the fields. Och, those days are gone now though." Joe lapsed into silence and his eyes looked off into the distance.

"How's the garden coming along?"

"Oh, pretty good, pretty good. This dry weather ain't helpin' a bit though."

"What did you plant this year?"

"Oh, some sweet corn, some Irish potatoes, and a few watermelons. You know, every year the kids come around and take most of the melons and then I act real mad about it afterwards." His eyes twinkled and his mouth formed a big smile, showing two rows of tobacco-stained teeth. "Sure, and I don't give a hoot if they take 'em all. They don't hurt a thing and there's always a few left over for my grandchildren. Why, when I was a lad there wasn't a watermelon patch safe for miles around. I remember when old Dade McCarthy shot Tom Flannery right in the seat of his britches with a shotgun one night. Laid him up for a few weeks, too."

"Say, Uncle Joe, what came between the Flannerys and my grandparents?" I had asked the same question hundreds of times before.

"Well, I'll tell you. You see, Aunt Jennie married old Bill Flannery and he wasn't a Catholic. He always said he'd become one on his deathbed, but one night while he was sleeping, the good Lord saw fit to take his soul. May he rest

in peace." Joe's wrinkled hand made a fitting movement across his face as he blessed himself.

The story of the Flannerys changed to the story of the Mulvihills and then the Meades and how the leprechauns came to Ireland and why Ireland is always green and what the Bible says about the Antichrist and about the fight between Father McDonald and the devil and what heaven was like and a thousand other things. I had heard each one many times before, but something like a magnet—maybe his eyes—drew me close to this old man.

The sun began to fade and the gentle breeze stopped blowing. The quietness pressed in and enveloped us. Just the two of us sitting beneath an apple tree, one reliving the past, the other held fascinated by a saintly old man.

"—and that's why the Lord loves the poor."

A drop of water splattered against my arm and brought my senses back to the present.

"Hey, Joe, it's starting to rain."

"By golly, it sure looks that way! Sure, and that's just what we need. Well, I guess I'd better be gettin on home now." With great effort he lifted himself out of the chair and worked the kinks out of his back and legs. He handed me the empty beer bottle and started off toward home.

"Good-by, Uncle Joe."

"Good-by, now. Say a prayer that we get a good rain."

"I will."

I watched all the goodness in the world hobble off down a dusty road, its straw hat bobbing up and down.

There were four rows left to plow. I picked up the old plow, and aimed it between two rows of potatoes. My body lurched forward, stopped, lurched again. The weeds began to disappear.

