

St. Patrick's Day

O'Malley's puts on a big St. Patrick's Day party every year – the biggest in the city. It attracts people from all over, all walks of life, not just ruggers or O'Malley's regular barflys. It's coming up next weekend and we are looking forward to it. There will be a little diversity in the crowd and that's a good thing. The rugby bunch starts to seem a little anemic as we wend towards the end of the season. We've been around each other too long.

O'Malley generally hires us, the Caballeros that is, to help with the party. He needs extra staff and we're available. He pays us a minimum rate and all the funds go into the club coffers, a good fundraiser. Individually, we get into the party for free, have a few hours of half-work, then most importantly, pretty much drink free. Since we're passing out the beer, friends and teammates seem to get a few on the house. O'Malley knows this and lets it slide. It's part of our compensation. What he makes from the St. Pat's weekend carries him through the rest of the year. The crowd from the rest of the city is outstanding. And, by the way, the prices are jacked, just a little.

This year, the rugby team from a prestigious Irish-American university happen to be coming to town for the St. Pat's weekend. They're here to play one of the local schools, but we are responsible for hosting them. Our seconds will play their seconds following the marquee match. Just a social thing. But it should be good fun.

Genie and I are back on speaking terms. Actually, it's getting a little better than that. She's going with me to St. Pat's. It will be a good thing. I'm looking forward to it. After the little emergency room fiasco, I thought my chances went to nil.

On Friday, the college games are played. Saturday, being March seventeenth itself, is reserved for festivities. Irish U easily handles local U and our seconds easily handle Irish U two. At this time, college rugby is more fraternity than sport. Sure they play, and they play hard, it's just more of a social thing. Practically none of them have any experience when they get to school, since there's no high school rugby to speak of in the U.S. They learn the sport and the social graces at college.

After the games, we retire to O'Malley's. St. Pat's is basically a whole week for O'Malley. Friday night is going strong. We move to the head of the line and get in free – the benefits of having connections. The rugby teams congregate in the back patio. There's a special keg set up for us where there's no charge. It is a rugby party after all, folded into a rite of spring. The crowd, though, is too dense to organize any singing or the usual antics. We concentrate on chatting up the girls and the random cutting up. The uni kids think they've gone to heaven.

At some point, I look around and notice none of the college team are around. I wonder what happened to them. Did they have an early call? Couldn't be. They played tonight so they would have tomorrow off. They're marching in the parade, but that's later. What's up?

At that moment, the back gate opens and in they come.

“Ohhh—eeeeeee-Oh!”

They are doing an elephant walk! Butt naked, each man with an arm between his legs and the other holding the hand of the man in front. In lock step they come in the gate, man after man after man. Every one of them.

“Ohhh—eeeeeee-Oh!”

The crowd parts in front of them. Girls in delighted horror. Guys laughing from the gut. The laughter rolls over the crowd. The chatter is gone. The background music is gone. The only noise is the laughter. They've got the attention of the hundreds jammed in the patio, getting closer together to make space for this fantastical performance.

Then, “Ohhh—eeeeeee-Oh!”

They head in to the bar proper. Every one of them. The door swings shut behind them.

The crowd has merged back together and the noise level is still low, a murmur wafting over the assembly, all stunned and mesmerized by the event.

“Did you see that? Did that really happen?”

The crowd is just regaining its composure, the din returning to normal, when the back door opens again and out they come. A reprise.

“Ohhh—eeeeeee-Oh!”

The crowd parts and they pass through again, out the gate and into the realm of legend.

Stunning. Amazing. What commitment. What teamwork. What purpose. I

consider myself a team guy, but I couldn't have done that. Not in front of this crowd. Not here. I'm in awe.

As I said, collegiate rugby isn't too strong. On the field they're still growing and learning. Off the field, though, they've perfected the social arts. They're champions.

They filter back in, one or two at a time, clothed now, red-faced and grinning. The crowd welcomes them back, especially the girls. Those guys are getting laid tonight.

The next day, Saturday, is St. Patrick's Day proper. I'm working an early "volunteer" shift supplying beer to the assembled masses. I'll work my regular O'Malley's shift on Sunday. Genie's working too. As an O'Malley's regular she also volunteered. I pick her up around one. Our shift starts at two. It seems early for us, after going the distance the night before.

There's already a crowd. Where do these people come from? Well, all over Houston, and that is a pretty big area. Some are driving thirty or forty miles to get here. They know the place to be on St. Pat's and they want to be a part of that collective unconsciousness, collectively heading for oblivion.

The parade's already over and that's why the masses have arrived. They had no where else to go. O'Malley's is one of those places, an Irish pub, where families go. Kids are everywhere. They've been brought in tow by their parents, straight from the parade. Not that there's much for them to do. They just gather in packs and rove the grounds. They'll be gone by nightfall.

Genie and I get our booth. We're outside, handing out canned beer. Our luck is good as we get a shady spot. It's a bright day. Standing in the Houston sun all day would not be conducive to an extended evening of revelry.

We start handing out the beers. The system is that we take tickets for beer – no cash. The guests have to go purchase tickets from a few locations around the bar, then they trade them for beer, food and whatever else may be available. O'Malley, and rightly so, doesn't trust his volunteer army to handle cash. It's too fungible. This is the system of control.

It takes the guests awhile to understand this. They keep trying to buy beer and we keep telling them, "No tickee, no drinkee."

They usually leave in a huff, but come back shortly with a ticket. One guy offers to bob for a beer. I say sure thinking this will be quite the spectacle with little risk of success. Am I wrong. At least on the second part. He dunks his

head into the slush of the sixty-gallon beer bucket, but comes up quickly, head soaking, with can in teeth. I'm impressed. You've got it. He walks away smiling.

Lug comes by and wants a beer.

"Take your pick," I tell him.

He grabs a can and disappears back into the crowd. This is part of the "volunteer" pay. All our friends drink free. Not to mention ourselves. It's basically, one for the guests, one for me. Good thing this shift is only a few hours.

Genie and I chat between rushes at the beer barrel. Mostly we're just people watching as the crowd rolls by. Nothing special just letting the time breeze along.

Lug comes back by for another. Dopey's with him. They're both well on their way. Lug's hat is crooked and he's spilled something on his shirt. Dopey's eyes are just glazed. I guess that's what they're here for, but it sure is early.

O'Malley hires cops as security. They keep a visible presence making rounds with the revelers. I know one of them, an O'Malley's regular named Scott. He stops by to say hello. In uniform, of course, he's not drinking. But he'll be off soon and back to O'Malley's in his civvies, hell bent on partying with the rest of the city.

Finally, we get relieved from our post. After a few hours of drinking, we need to eat, so we head for one of the booths. Something in the stomach can't hurt.

Michael and Ana are ready to eat too. They just got off from their booth. We had planned it this way. Put our time in, then we'd have the rest of the evening to hang together. We get your basic festival food, sausages on a stick, and eat standing up, while watching the crowd pass by.

The way O'Malley's is set up, the crowd tends to make a clockwise rotation. There's a little path down the left side of the building. People gravitate from the front porch, down the path to the back patio. Then they go in the back door, work their way through the inside, stopping off at the john if needed, and out the front door onto the porch again. It's the natural order. Stand in one place and eventually you'll see everybody come by. Get caught up in the flow and you could circulate for hours and not ever see your best buddy who's riding the crest ahead of you.

We stand off to the side in a little eddy out of the main flow, chomping on

sausages. Jerry and Cy come by, both looking fresh by comparison to the rest of the crowd. They stop long enough to say “Hey” and are back in the flow again. They don’t have time for us. They’re trolling – looking for that connection. Jerry will probably hit. He usually does. He’s got that yuppie-back thing going that just melts the girls. Cy, on the other hand, if he keeps at it, may get lucky around closing. He’s got persistence. He’ll probably make it to the end. The question is, “How’s his luck?”

Michael and I, on the other hand, have brought dinner from home to the buffet. Not that Genie and, especially, Ana, can be considered a cheap meal. We’re not all that hungry anyway. Well satisfied, you might say. It’s just that there is so much on the table. That attracts the guys to the party, which, in turn, attracts the hotties. It’s a building spiral of energy that ends up making St. Pat’s at O’Malley’s what it is today.

We finish our stand-up dinner and ease back in to circulation.

It’s dark now. Michael and Ana have flowed away somewhere in the current. It’s just Genie and I, arm in arm, meandering down the dark side of the building toward the back. There are three or four bands playing at any moment during the party, spread out on the porch, patio, parking lot and inside. We’re being blasted, right now, by the country group playing in the parking lot behind the fence to our left. The volume encourages us to keep moving.

As we near the back, and the light brightens, there’s a scuffle in the crowd at the corner of the patio. A fight has broken out.

I leave Genie and dive in to the crowd to help break it up. As a member of the Caballeros, not to mention an employee, this is our bar, and we have some possessive tendencies towards it. We take care of it, and the people in it. I feel it’s my responsibility to quell the scuffle.

By the time I get there, though, it’s already subsided. Michael’s there and he’s holding back Lug. The cops were there quick too, and are holding back another guy.

Of course it’s Lug. He does get ornery when he’s drunk and he was that hours ago.

The cops talk to the various parties as tempers cool down. The one guy calms down quickly and they let him go back into the crowd. Lug, though, is way too many sheets to the wind. They decide to take him down to the tank and let him dry out. He isn’t the first one who has gone tonight. They bundle

him out, into the car and off to pokey.

Who knows what started it? Does it matter? It's likely that chip on Lug's shoulder that comes out every time he imbibes a little too much. Whatever it was, it's put an end to Lug's good time tonight. And to his lovely bride Nancy's as well. She's kept a low profile at the party, but she has to leave to go bail him out.

Genie and I are back in the flow and make a few more revolutions, stopping here and there to chat. Genie's friend Sharon and Cy have hooked up. Could it be his lucky night? Or maybe hers? Who knows? Only the continued flow of time and the mass of partiers around O'Malley's little establishment will tell. And we're an incestuous group, anyway. A small group of ruggers and an even smaller group of girls who like ruggers. There's a tendency for the hook-ups to go around and around, too.

After a few more circuits, Genie and I come back out the front door. There's Lug! And Nancy. Back from the tank already. It hasn't been that long. He's even beat the cops back.

I try to talk to him over the din of the rock band playing on the front porch. The best that I can make out from hearing every other word is that getting put in the cruiser was a shock to the system. He sobered up in a hurry. By the time he got down to intake, he was his sweet, eloquent self again. He sweet talked his way through the process. With Nancy there to throw his bail, he was back out on the sidewalk in minutes. Now he's back here at O'Malley's, beer in hand, ready to go another round at it.

Even though he's had some ebbs in his life, Lug's got the charm and intelligence to weather them, for the most part, and keep on rolling. He's certainly done that tonight. You can see it by the smile on his face. He's got a story to tell of how he beat the system, again. With Nancy in tow, he's back into the crowd.

The night winds down. It turns out that Sharon and Cy do hook up. When the party's done, they go with us, Michael and Ana to, where else, but Antonio's for a little Mexican before calling it quits on the night.