Thomas Lynch

The Fifth Addition

It is the summer of 2001 and I am adding a room on to the house in West Clare. A small room, 12x12, enough for a bed and a bureau and a chair. P.J. Roche has put up the walls and Des O'Shea is roofing it after which the work inside might proceed apace — flagstones and plaster and décor. There'll be a window to the east looking out on the haggard and a glass door to the south looking down the land, over the Shannon to Kerry rising on the other side.

It is an old house and changing it is never easy.

My grandfather's grandfather, Patrick Lynch, was given this house as a wedding gift when he married Honora Curry in 1853. He leased 26 acres from Ralph Westropp, the English landlord. The house had, according to the records, "stone walls, a thatched roof, one room, one window and one door to the front." In 1855 the Griffith Valuation assigned it a worth of 10 shillings. No doubt to accommodate his ten children, Pat added a bedroom to the south.

In 1890 one of his younger sons, Thomas, looking out the west window at the mouth of the River Shannon and the sea beyond, considered his prospects and booked passage for America. He was twenty-four. He settled in Jackson, Michigan where a new prison promised work and where he would father, in consort with Ellen Ryan from around Kilrush, a daughter and two sons — one a priest, one my grandfather.

Thomas's brother Sinon stayed on and kept his widowed father and raised, with Mary Cunningham from Killimer, sons and daughters, the youngest of whom, Tommy and Nora, born in 1901 and 1902, waited in the land and tended to their aging parents. The census of a hundred years ago records a house with stone walls, a thatched roof, two rooms, two windows and a door to the front. Early in the last century another room was added to the north and divided by partition into two small rooms. The farm, at long last, was a freehold. Cow cabins and out-offices appeared and a row of whitethorns that Pat Lynch had planted to shelter the east side of the house.

This is how I found the place in 1970 when I first came here — stone walls, stone floors, thatched roof, three windows and one door to the front, three windows and a door to the back, four light bulbs, strung by wires, one in every room, a socket for the radio perched in the window, a socket for the kettle and the hotplate, and a flickering vigil to the Sacred Heart. Otherwise the house remained unencumbered

by modernity — unplumbed, unphoned, dampish and under-heated, unbothered by convenience or technology. It resembled, in its dimensions, the shape of a medieval coffin or an upturned boat, afloat in a townland on a strip of land between the Mouth of the Shannon and the North Atlantic. Nothing in Michigan had prepared me for such beauty. I was the first of my people to return.

My great-grandfather never returned to this house nor ever saw his family here again. My grandfather, proud to be Irish, nonetheless inherited the tribal scars of hunger and want and hardship and was prouder still to be American. He never made the trip. Still he included in his prayers over Sunday dinners a blessing on his cousins in the old country, "Tommy and Nora" whom he had never met, "on the banks of the River Shannon," which he had never seen, and always added, "don't forget." We never did. My father never understood the pull this place always had on me until ten years ago, a year before he died, when he came along on one of my frequent visits.

In February 1970 I found the place as my great-grandfather left it and the cousins we'd been praying for all my life. Tommy was holding back the barking dog in the yard. Nora stood in the door way smiling. It was wintry and windy and gray.

"Go on boy, that's your people now" the taxi man who'd brought me from Shannon said. I paid him and thanked him and grabbed my bag. I've been coming and going the thirty years since.

Tommy died in '71. He was laid out in the room I sleep in now. After his funeral I rented a TV for Nora from Donnelans in Kilrush, thinking it would shorten the nights. An elderly woman living on her own, she got the first phone in the townland in 1972. She added a room out front to house the half-fridge and the cooker. She closed in the open hearth for a small firebox. In 1982 we ran a water line in from the road, through the thick wall, into a sink that sat on an old clothes press and gave her cold water on demand. In 1986 she built a room on the back in which went a toilet and a shower and a sink.

Nora died here in '92 in the bed I sleep in now. She left her home to me.

P.J. Roche pulled up the old flags and damp-coursed underneath them, then knocked an inside wall to open the kitchen, put storage heaters a back-boiler, radiators, and new windows in. The place is dry and snug and full of appliances. The conveniences of the 20th Century — electric light and running water, TV and central heat, the telephone and toilet and tractor and motor car all came to this place in the past fifty years. Still, little in the landscape out of doors has changed. The fields green, the cattle graze on the topography that rises to the sea out one window and leans into the river out

another. The peninsula narrows to its western end at Loop Head. Folks love and grieve and breed and disappear. Life goes on. We are all blow-ins. We all have our roots. Tides come and go in the estuary where the river's mouth yawns wide into the sea — indifferent to the past and to whatever futures this new room might hold.