

Being away from home for more than forty years, I discovered that I missed so many pivotal family experiences. Aside from the obvious birthdays, Christmas and Easter celebrations, I missed seeing nieces and nephews coming of age and witnessing key, earth-changing moments in their lives.

Recently, I got a glimpse of one such moment that I never experienced before. My niece, Caitriona, lives and works in Germany as a translator for the Bayer Pharmaceutical Company. Being a "home bird," she loves, not only to Skype her family almost daily, but she never misses being home for Christmas. Her German boyfriend, Christian, a relationship of eight years, spent Christmas Day with his family in Germany. With some preplanning and secret negotiations, he appeared in our kitchen the day after Christmas to surprise his soul mate. The surprised moment and the subsequent detective work by Caitriona was filled with warm fuzzies.

The subsequent conversations between both of them was peppered between English and German, depending on the level of intimacy involved and the proximity of family members.

On Sunday afternoon, both of them went for a walk along a country road. Such an occurrence was not unusual but, this particular time, the usual became surprisingly unusual. Like all children growing up, Caitriona had her own favourite places both indoors and outdoors. The romancing couple came to one of her outdoor favourite places by a lazy, meandering stream canopied by a stone bridge. Christian, aware of the significance, paused briefly, and, coupled with some butterflies in his stomach, he reached into his pocket and produced the evidence that would back up his question of "Will you...?" We are not sure if he popped the question in English or German or both. But, from that moment a different journey had begun.

With family gathered around, on such an appropriate Sunday as the "Feast of the Holy Family," the official announcement was shared amid tears, joys and celebrations. Of course, aunts, uncles, cousins had to receive a phone call that began with the words, "We have an announcement to make..." Later, champagne flowed freely in celebration.

Everyone wondered how Christian was able to not only find the right ring but also the right size. It seems both he and Caitriona had been out walking and paused outside a jewellery shop. A certain ring in the window caught Caitriona's attention. The seed was planted. Later, Christian made a special trip from his parent's home to the particular store where recently, he had seen the ring. Not knowing the ring's name, whether or not the ring would still be displayed in the same window place in the jewellery store or what size ring to purchase for Caitriona; all the pieces of the puzzle came together, mysteriously. Now, all that was needed was the right moment to purchase and propose. Both worked magically.

Plans began to evolve. A legal wedding would take place in Germany with family and friends in attendance in 2015. A more lavish church wedding would take place in Ireland in 2016. Of course, I was asked if I would be available to perform the church ceremony. I remembered some years earlier, Caitriona saying to me, "I want you to perform our wedding ceremony because all the weddings of family members that you performed, they are still married."

My first Christmas home in forty years was treasurable, being able to celebrate it with family for the first time. I wondered would there be anything special or significant to make my second Christmas at home memorable. Now, I know that it, too, had its outstanding special moment - an engagement and hope for the future. Now I know, the best is yet to come.