

## Living in an Irishman's Skin

By Dennis Payton Knight

An Irishman's face is never a mask. We can't help it. We burn, we freckle, and we blush. It gives us away when we spend too much time in the sun, it gives us away when we've had a drop too many, and it gives us away when our thoughts become, well, maybe a bit too Irish.

An article in *The Irish Post* by Aidan Lonergan in April of 2018 blames it all on a genetic mutation. He reported research at Penn State University that identified SLC24A5 as the gene that controls skin pigmentation, and mutation number A111T as the culprit that makes the Irish so infernally white. It all started with a man who lived in India or the Middle East some ten thousand years ago, before his descendants carried the mutation to Ireland via the Iberian Peninsula.

Over time, those charming Irish freckles fade away or become subsumed into the wrinkles and discolorations of aging. We can wear sun-blocking lotions and hats to fight the sunburns, or if not, we can hope the dermatologist has a little something for the damage.

But blushing is the true and unmanageable betrayal of an Irishman, and it never seems to stop. It is involuntary. It comes from the same system that activates our fight-or-flight responses, a matter of adrenaline. Our blood vessels dilate to improve the blood flow and oxygen delivery, and our cheeks respond accordingly.

There are countless things that make us blush. Or I should say countless things that make *me* blush, because I don't know what it is that makes *you* blush. Maybe it's me, and maybe you're doing it in sympathy.

A psychologist would say it is social anxiety that makes me blush. Or is it a guilty conscience? The reddening of my cheeks may be a simple reflection of discomfort at being the center of attention, or it may be an activation of the same system that sends lie-detector machines spewing ink off the charts.

But I was an altar boy, after all, and so it must be the center-of-attention alternative that reddens my cheeks. Well, pretty girls make me blush, too, but that's what altar boys are supposed to do, is it not?

I am reluctant to write about what things really do make me blush for fear that, just by writing it, I will fall into such a radiating blush that storm clouds will form. But for whatever it is I may blush at the moment, there is one other thing that will makes me even blusher, and that is knowing I am blushing, and it's just plain embarrassing.

Mark Twain, who had in him no small amount of the blood and blarney of the Irish and must have more than a few times himself felt the reddening flush, condensed and explained all we need to know about the misery in one very quotable remark, "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to."