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Baptized in Blood

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Baptized in Blood

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Peter Keith-Slack

B.A. Le Moyne College, 2008

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Irish Need Not Apply

The ship hasn't stopped her bouncing against the dock before they shove the wooden gangplank up her breach. I watch the faces as they start to come off, some scared, some curious, and some cocky as the devil himself. Just as I think the last of them are off, this boy, and he is no more than that, steps on to the plank. His face is the first I see that day that I know well enough, like he were seeing heaven and being told he could have everything in it. I felt it me self once. The lad could dance on me grave, and I still would feel him coming. He comes down the plank turning his head this way and that. As soon as he sets foot on the dock, he turns and looks back at masts and riggings that rise above the New York harbor.

I grab a sack of grain and tosses it over me shoulder, keeping him in sight. When he turns back, he has such a look on his face like you never saw the likes of. His face bulges around one of those cocky smiles. It's like someone put a shilling in his hand and tells him there is plenty more to come. Me heart goes out for him. No shillings here, lad. There's nothing I can do that I ain't barely done for me self.

He adjusts a tattered bag over his shoulder, pushes his cap to the side of his head, and makes for the street that goes into the city. From where I'm loading sacks on to the gantry, I hear his wooden heels clacking against the pier planks. But before he hits the shadows of the customhouse, he gives pause to stare down at a crate of potatoes near Vecchio's barrow. He picks one up and cradles it in his hand like it were a baby's bottom, squeezes it, turns it over, and squeezes it again. Vecchio comes running from behind his barrow.

"Hey, what's the matter for you?" he yells. "You gonna buy that or you just gonna stand there playing with my wares?" Vecchio isn't the friendliest corker about. He only arrived two weeks ago, from Palermo. Wheeled that barrow right down the gang plank, he did, full of crop,

and planted himself right there. He ain't moved since. Just buys vegetables off the tops of the barrels from the ships coming in and tosses them on to his barrow. Gets some bad ones now and then, but he doesn't care. Gets the same for them.

The boy stares at Vecchio. For a few seconds neither of them says anything. The boy smiles wider, and before Vecchio says anything else, he takes a fair bite out of the potato. Vecchio's eyes get big. His mouth drops open so far I can see his thick lips through his black mustache.

“Dem tha deagh buntata,” the lad says holding the potato out to Vecchio. “Craidh.”

I shout to Vecchio that the lad thinks his potato is good, but before I finish, Vecchio turns and walks to the back of his barrow, and I see him reaching down for his long stick, the one with the tip covered with dried prickly pear skins. The lad just stands there looking at the potato. I let the sack roll off me shoulder and make straight for Vecchio's barrow. Vecchio's coming up with the stick in hand. I reach into me pocket and pull out the few pennies I have. As Vecchio's coming around, I toss the pennies into his barrow. Vecchio stops and looks at me.

“What, do ya know this guy?” he says looking at the pennies and counting them.

“Naw,” I says. “Just be giving him a break. That's all.”

Vecchio looks at the lad and grunts before putting his stick back. I glance at the boy. He doesn't look at the stick. Don't know if the lad takes notice of it. He hasn't taken his eyes from the potato.

I can't begrudge the lad. I came here four years ago in '45 after the first blight hit. Spent a fair day or two looking for work and more than a few nights curled into a doorway. Always kept me hopes up. With the luck of the saints something would come along. Me friends back in Donegal had said there was plenty of work and money in America, but it seemed like every other

store had a sign in the window, *Irish need not apply*. Always wondered what it was I done to them. I had about decided, against me grain, to get back on the ship and work me way to England. I heard there was work there, and I'd be closer to home. When I got to the wharf, some blighter had dropped a bushel of greens, and they were scattered all over the dock. The sea water was getting all over them, and the super was going on at him. I remembered Pa saying it weren't no use cussing the wheel for breaking a spoke. I put the greens back into the basket and set it right. I figure I'd do me one good turn before I went home. The super looked at me and said I was hired and that I should go see the pay master. Me pa was smiling on me that day.

The boy hasn't taken a bite since the first, just stands there staring and squeezing. I put me hand on his arm. He looks at me and holds out the potato. "Deagh," he says. I take the potato and bite into it on the same side. He was right. It was good.

"What's your name?" I asks him. He doesn't reply. "De'n t-ainm a tha ort?"

"Eirnin," he says quickly.

"Strong, like iron," I says. "It's a good name. Deagh ainm." The words are barely out of me mouth when I spots the super coming toward us. I turns to him as if I'd seen him coming the whole time. "Weren't you looking for another strong arm?" I says. "I got two here for ya."

The super stops and eyes the lad down and up. "You know him?" he asks.

"He's me brother," I answer.

"Didn't know you had a brother."

"Neither did I."

The super shakes his head. "You bloody Irish are all alike," he says. "Have him see the pay master and tell him there's no eating on the clock."

Pictures of Heroes

Friday afternoon, April 28, 1916

The wall explodes, and I cover my face as best I can with one arm. I won't let go of my gun. I hear cracking sounds from outside. There's a sting in my shoulder. I can feel my blood. Someone cries out. I can't tell if it's me. My arms are yanked up and my gun jerked away. I don't know which hurts more, losing my gun, the wound, or the man dragging me away from the explosion. Something is burning inside me. I swear I wouldn't scream, so I force my teeth together and wait for the pain to stop. It just hurts all the more. Another explosion and someone - I can't see faces clearly - throws a blanket over me and tells me he'll be back as soon as he can.. The blanket smells musty. Blood is dripping down my arm. The warmth scares me. My brother, Sean, wouldn't have been scared; neither would Schoolmaster Pearse. I hope no one hears me crying under the blanket.

Hands grab at me through the covering, trying to pick me up. I hear a woman's voice yelling "over here." Whoever is carrying me is having trouble walking, shuffling through the mortar debris on the floor. Another voice, a man's this time, hollers "Down boys." Another explosion. The person carrying me falls. I need to be able to see. I fumble inside the blanket trying to pull it aside with my good arm. It falls away. Mortar rounds from the square outside stop, and a mist of fine dust falls from the ceiling. A man is laying on the floor next to me. His eyes are open, but they don't blink. I don't see any life in them. Was he the one carrying me? I remember seeing him when we were marching to the General Post office a few days ago. "Come on, lads," he shouted. "This will be a day Dublin won't forget." He was running among our ranks with his gun high over his head. "When they remember Easter Monday, they'll remember you." I glanced about me, but I didn't recognize a lot of the faces other than Derry and a few of my

classmates. "When they ask who gave Ireland its independence," he said, "you can say you did." We all shouted. I remember feeling a swell in my throat thinking Sean would have been proud of me, even though I broke our deal.

The others inside the GPO scramble and fire through the new holes in the front wall. The man next to me just lies there. Schoolmaster Pearse once said heroes are remembered even after they're dead. I try to think of this man's name.

"Help me with this one," says a woman with brown hair pulled tight to the back of her head. It's the same voice I heard before. I wonder what she's doing in here. Two schoolmates, Derry and Alleyne, move me to a cleared piece of floor near the postal counter at the rear of the room.

"You made a fair fight of it," says Derry. "You sit back now, and we'll finish it." His certainty makes me feel better. Derry was always there for me. He was already an upper classman at St. Enda's when I got there, but he didn't act the way the other upper classmen acted. It was nigh a year before I found out Derry had promised Sean to look out for me after Sean left home to join the Irish Volunteers.

"Aw, he ain't hurt," says Alleyne. "He just wants to get off the wall and hide back here like a scared rat crawling into the gutter. Don't you?"

"Back your face up, before I put it across the counter with me fist," Derry says looking up at him.

"All you Darkies stick up for one another," Alleyne retorts. "It's a wonder you ain't fighting in the street for the Brits."

Our black hair and dark complexions are why Alleyne doesn't like us. For Alleyne, this means Derry and me are descended from the British Aristocrats that settled Ireland

centuries ago. Alleyne chums only with his fair-skinned friends.

"You fighting them or us?" Derry asks Alleyne without looking up. "It don't seem to me like you're doing one of either."

Alleyne grumbles something and goes back to the front of the post office.

"You keep your head low and you'll be kissing your mother before the week's out," Derry says.

"And I suppose you'll be playing the doctor now?" It's the woman with the tight brown hair. She sounds like she's angry, but I trust the half-cocked and sympathetic smile across her face.

Derry gives me a kiss on my head and nodding to the woman, picks up his gun and heads back to the wall.

The woman kneels down with a pan of water and pulls my shirt aside. The water stings as she wipes my shoulder.

"Can you move your fingers?" she asks.

I can, but it hurts. I try to lift my arm. It hurts too, but it comes up off the floor.

"That's enough for the time," she says. "You got a bugger in there to be sure, but you'll make it through. We'll get you out of here as soon as we can."

"I don't want to go." It's her face looking at me, but it may as well be Sean's. I can feel his hand on my face just as sure as if he were there. I can hear him telling me he's proud of me in the same way Ma told him when he left.

"I'll check back with you in a bit," the woman says and picks up her pan.

There's another explosion at the front wall. The air is thick. I can't breathe.

* * *

Thursday morning, January 19, 1916

"It's cold out there," I told Sean as he was packing his bag. "Why not wait until it gets warm? There's a good fire in the *Teallach*, and we can sit beside it with a good tea."

"It's always cold outside and always will be," he answered without stopping his packing. "Besides, you're at St. Enda's now. I was never that smart."

I didn't feel smart. I didn't notice the things Sean saw until he brought them to my eyes. He always noticed the signs when the seasons were changing. He was the first to point out a crispness in the air when I just took it in as another day. He knew when the wind changed directions as if he were part of the land itself. I wanted to tell him I wasn't that smart.

Sean stopped packing. "Did I ever tell you that I was proud of my little brother? Wouldn't surprise me if you grow up to be someone great one day, and when that day comes, I'll dance about and tell everyone around you're my brother."

Sean finished packing the bag and tossed it to the floor. "Help with this, would you?" he asked. We tipped his cot to one side and leaned it against the wall. Sean pushed aside the stack of *Freeman's Journals* his friends picked up on the back streets of Dublin and wiggled a couple of floorboards free. When Ma wasn't about, Sean let me read the articles about the Sinn Fein's doings about town. I sensed a spark in him whenever the article told of a clash between them and the British militia. I never told him, but I felt a surge of twinge of excitement in my stomach too.

When Sean moved the papers, there was no dust under the bed, and I knew Sean was not one to be picking up after himself. Ma never badgered him about it. She kept the house in God's order, as she put it, all by herself.

From the cavity beneath the boards, Sean took out three rifles and several boxes of cartridges. He shoved two of them longways into the bag along with all but one box of cartridges. He tossed the other rifle to me. It was an old bolt action carbine. I noticed the "S" initial Sean had carved deeply into the stock. It stood out new and fresh as if it had been buried under the rotting varnish for too long. The other two also had carvings. One I recognized as my father's initials. The other had the mark of the Sinn Fein on it.

"Got it off a friend," Sean said. By the way he said "friend" I knew it was one of those friends he went out with late at night and often didn't come home for a day or two. It was one of those friends he didn't introduce to Ma or me. Ma didn't seem to mind. She would feed them a thick stew with a good piece of bread even if that was a fair portion of what we had at the time. Sean and his friends always went away with a hug and a full belly.

"You know how to use it?" he asked.

I shifted up the lever and snapped back the bolt like Dad had taught me.

"I thought as much," he said.

He took the rifle, closed it, and put it back under the floor with the cartridges. "It's there in case anyone comes looking for me and decides to take you or Ma instead. You hearing me, Keagan?"

I knew what he meant and helped him restore the bed to its place.

Ma was sitting at the table in the kitchen. I had never seen her as stern-faced and quiet. She didn't look up when we came in or when Sean set his bag on the floor. She stared ahead as if she were looking at some distant place beyond the fields outside the window.

There was a cotton gunny sack on the table with its top drooped open. It bulged, but I could only see a half loaf of bread. Ma got up and took a small bundle wrapped in butcher's

paper from the ice jar dug into the dirt beneath the kitchen floor. It had been almost a year since we'd had any pork from the butcher.

Without a word she placed the package into the gunny sack and secured it with a length of twine.

"Are you waiting for moss to grow on it?" she said.

Sean took the sack and stuffed it into his bag.

My brother was always so cock-sure about everything. When he told me things, I never had any cause to doubt him. He was the one who told Ma about St. Enda's and convinced her to send me. He returned from one of his late nights with the money needed to enroll me. Ma never asked him where it came from, and I knew better. He once told me there was a lot to be said for silence. But he was also the one who told me to use a big stick if I wanted to move a stubborn hog.

I followed Sean and Ma to the road. Sean gave her a hug before turning to me.

"I wish I had the brain God gave you instead of the sharp eye I was cursed with," he said. I heard the wind coming through the trees. It was blowing from the west, which it seldom did.

"Only some heroes are meant to fight. You understand?"

I lied and said I did.

"I'll make a deal with you," he continued. "I'll bring you back a country if you'll be here to take care of it. Do I have your hand on it?"

I heard Ma let out a breath.

"I'll be here." I promised him.

As he headed off I saw the neighbor woman, Mrs. Teague, strolling up along the stone wall that separated our properties.

"Off is he?" she asked. "Don't worry yourself none."

"I'm not worried," Ma said. "If I had five more like him, his father would still be here."

I stared up the road after Sean. He was gone, and I was still here. Ma had gone back in the house, and Mrs. Teague continued up the road. It was quiet except for the defiant breeze that was blowing in from across the fields. I shivered and went inside. Ma was standing at the teallach staring at the pictures that rested on the mantle: her and my father when they were much younger, Sean, and me. Ma had shifted Dad's and Sean's picture to the other side of the shelf and out of the sunlight that came through the front window. The fire from the teallach reflected in the glass. Their faces lit up in the red light, went dark, and lit up again as if the fire had forgotten something. It was the dark that scared me. In those few seconds it was like they didn't exist, like their pictures just vanished as if they were never there. I moved them closer to the front of the mantle where the dark couldn't get to them.

Saturday morning, April 29, 1916

A few minutes pass after I open my eyes, and I realize it's quiet. I see the streaks of sunlight against the far wall. It's morning. But which morning? My shoulder still aches, but it doesn't hurt as much as it had before I fell asleep. I see the woman with the tight hair coming toward me. I heard someone call her Liz.

"You're awake," she says.

I don't say anything. I don't remember sleeping. I didn't have any dreams.

"You're a lucky young man," she says. "Just a bit closer in and I'd be tucking you in for good. Oh, I took the time you were asleep to take that piece of metal from you. How are you getting on?"

I'm surprised to find out I can move my arm, but it still hurts when I do. I bend my index finger. Without the pressure of a trigger there's no pain. "I'll be all right," I tell her.

"I bet you will," she says. "I'll check back on you."

She goes to a boy lying next to me. His face is turned away from me, but when Liz turns it to her, I remember him from class. His name is Iain. His eyes are closed, but I don't think he's sleeping. His chest isn't moving. He offered to share his desk with me a few days after I came to St. Enda's. Liz covers his head with his blanket and nods to a man standing behind her. He picks Iain up and carries him off. I try to picture his face in my head, but I can only see him snickering when he showed me a half a bottle of his dad's whiskey he had snuck from under his pa's mattress. We split it after school that day. Ma didn't say anything when I got home, but I know she smelled it by the way she asked God why he gave her boys.

Derry comes over and sits beside me in the space left by Iain. I'm grateful. Nothing rouses him. He and Sean are a lot alike.

"That Liz is a corker, ain't she?" Derry says. "I can see her making a fine wife. You mind lending me your wound a minute?" Derry feigns a swoon but straightens himself again when he realizes Liz is looking at him.

When I laugh I feel the blood pushing against the inside of my shoulder.

"Listen to me," Derry says. "A crew of our boys moved a barricade up on Henry Street. There's a tunnel from the back room coming up just behind them. Mr. Pearse says he doesn't know how long they'll be able to hold their position, but they're going to take a bunch of you out once it gets dark."

"Is Schoolmaster Pearse going?" I ask.

Derry doesn't say anything.

"Are you going out?"

He doesn't say anything.

"I'm staying," I say.

"Have you seen what's going on outside?" Derry asks.

I shake my head. I can't see anything from the back of the post office.

"I take it you can move well enough."

I nod.

"Come with me, but keep yourself to the floor."

There's a jab of pain as I lean forward, but it subsides as I get to my feet. Derry's hunched over moving toward the front wall. I follow, making sure I'm no higher than him, which isn't hard for me. At a hole in the wall where a mortar shell hit, Derry gestures for me to come up to the other side.

"Keep your face behind the wall and peek a bit arseways at the square," Derry says.

Every foot or so a face topped in a flatpan helmet peers out over a row of sandbags that are stacked along the length of the square and back again. Behind them across the square, more British soldiers are gathering. Behind the soldiers and sandbags are cannons I had seen pictures of in the pamphlets the British Army recruiters had been handing out to the men and boys about the city. On the front of the pamphlet I remembered seeing the smiling face of a soldier with his helmet cocked to one side. These soldiers aren't smiling. A Red Cross ambulance is parked across the square, and two soldiers are leaning against it. They're not here for us. We have to count on Liz.

Derry isn't looking. I can see he already knows what's out there by the way he slams the bolt forward on his carbine.

"You're going out through the tunnel tonight," he says."

"I'll follow you out," I say. "But if you stay, I stay." I know this won't be the end of it, but I can't see me going home a *cladhair*.

"You stubborn arse of a" Derry starts.

"And what do you two think you're doing messing about here?" A large stern-faced man with a mustache like a walrus, is standing over us. I remember seeing him standing beside Schoolmaster Pearse while the schoolmaster read the Proclamation of the new Irish Republic on the front steps Monday. After Schoolmaster Pearse finished reading it, the man with the mustache shook his hand and accompanied him into the GPO.

"You see those guns out there?" the man says. "They'll put a hole in you as easily as they will this wall. Get back from here and help pile up those pieces of cement."

"I thought we were leaving," I say.

"The lot of you will when the time comes," the man answers.

"I'll help with the cement and see it through, Mr. Connolly," Derry says.

As I get up, Mr. Connolly catches me by the shirt. I wince, and when I open my eyes, he's looking at me.

"I thought as much," he says. "Get to the back. I'll not have your blood on my conscience."

When he doesn't take his eyes from me, I realize there is little use in talking, so I go back to the counter. I feel wounded in more than my shoulder.

Against the cement slabs that have already been piled, I see a row of dusty carbines and a stack of ammo boxes. The men are busy further down the row extending the wall across the lobby. They don't notice me steal one of the carbines - one with an S on the stock - and a box of cartridges. I lay it beside me, grab a blanket, and toss it over the top. I figure when the time

comes, I'll make my way to the wall and no one will know the difference. I picture Sean peeking out over a battlement someplace else in the city. I know he would approve even if Derry doesn't. The wound doesn't hurt as much now. I wonder if it's really painful to die, or if it's more painful to die without anyone knowing why. Ma once said God had a reason for everyone here put on the earth. I wonder if this is my reason. If I die here, I'll never find out. Some men over in the corner have built a small fire to keep warm. It reflects against their faces. I think about the picture of the mantle back home. Did Ma move mine over with Sean's and Dad's? Are they at the front of the mantle? The dark still scares me. I think it scares Ma too. She cried that night after Sean left. I waited until she was asleep before I slipped out, but it didn't matter. There was a gunny sack on the table. I took it with me.

I hear a voice outside, and a section of the front wall explodes. Pieces of wall and dust reach all the way back to the counter. Liz is pulling wounded away from the counter. I try to remember the Irish word for hero. *Loach...loach...loach*. It doesn't help.

Late Friday afternoon, March 3rd, 1916

Most of the upper classmen finished their lessons and had turned them in to Schoolmaster Pearse. They were in a hurry today more so than usual. Two or three of them almost tossed their papers on to his desk without pausing to take a breath. But Schoolmaster Pearse didn't seem to mind. He merely shifted any wayward papers to the pile at the corner of his desk with a single hand stroke and continued to write. There were no lectures about pride of heritage or making your life count for something. He didn't even say anything about the clamor that echoed from the center hall of

the Hermitage. Any other day he would have promptly risen from his desk and instructed them in that inscrutable clear Irish of his to remove themselves to the outside of St. Enda's.

Not today. He wrote diligently, scratched something out, and wrote again. When he looked up he didn't seem to notice us. It was as if he were looking past the walls of the Hermitage to a place only he could see. I remember my mother telling me he was too young to be a schoolmaster. He had a child's face but one that had grown into a man without losing the innocent look about it, but it was a hard look, like the stone statues with in Dublin Square, poised looking into the sun like nothing could hurt them.

The schoolmaster's eyes narrowed as he worked, and the corners of his mouth turned slightly upwards. Over the past two years, I had come to know this was as close to a smile as he got. But anyone who was the receiver of that smile instantly knew they had gained his favor, at least for that moment. There was a regal air about him that made it seem like he belonged at the Hermitage. Even when he was writing, which he had been doing a lot over the past couple of months, he looked like a Lord or a Head of State issuing a decree. I wondered if he was writing in Irish or Latin. They were the only two languages we were allowed to use at St. Enda's. Getting caught speaking English brought with it a very different look from Schoolmaster Pearse.

The Irish words on my lesson blended together, which according to the schoolmaster meant I wasn't concentrating. "Find the verb," he'd say. I remembered him telling me the verb was always at the beginning. "Action first. Everything worth doing begins with action."

I found the verb right where it should be, and the rest of the sentence became clear. I could almost feel the schoolmaster's smile. I looked up, but he was still writing.

I finished the lesson ahead of most of the other boys who had come to St. Enda's the same year I did. Quaid and Carlin finished before me. Quaid almost always finished his lessons first.

He ran out through the door before Schoolmaster Pearse could set a hand on his paper. I was usually one of the last to finish, but after I'd gained my "clarity of mind" as the schoolmaster described it, the rest of the lesson made sense. I placed it on his desk and waited. He didn't look up right away. I glanced at the neatly arranged, framed pictures over the blackboard. I knew the name of every Irish hero there, from Cúchulainn, the mythic hero of the Táin Bó Cuailnge to Robert Emmet, the martyr of the 1803 rebellion in Dublin. He was the schoolmaster's favorite and his inspiration for moving St. Enda's to the Hermitage. I did well on that lesson.

Every one of the heroes in the pictures died fighting. Sometimes, I could picture schoolmaster Pearse's picture among them, right next to Robert Emmet, standing next to him in Dublin Square holding a rifle and people listening to him. That's what a person needed to be a hero, a rifle and a voice. But I had never seen Schoolmaster Pearse with a gun. I felt the wisp of Sean's hand at the back of my neck. *Only some heroes are meant to fight. You understand?*

The schoolmaster finally looked up and nodded before going back to his writing. I tried to imagine myself sitting at that desk. I'd have to perfect the smile first.

Derry was at the end of the hall talking excitedly to his friends and waving a paper about. The Irish flowed from him so smoothly I couldn't wait to be an upper classman and make Schoolmaster Pearse as proud of me as he was of them. Derry turned to me as I approached.

"I won't be walking you home today, Keagan," he said. " You'll be fine on your own."

"Where you going?" I asked.

"We're going to war," he exclaimed. "We're joining the Irish Volunteers and be a free country."

I didn't know what to say, but in my head I saw Derry's and Sean's pictures mounted over the blackboard and heard the schoolmaster explaining the implications of their actions

with great enthusiasm. I thought of how my mother hugged Sean when he left.

"I want to join," I said to Derry inadvertently in English. I didn't think he heard me. His back was turned, talking to some other upper classmen. I grabbed him by the arm and yanked him around. "I want to join!" I repeated in Irish.

Derry just stared at me.

"Listen to this guy, would you," Alleyne said in English and laughed at me. "The volunteers don't need a *cladhaire* like you. You know what a *cladhaire* is?"

"I'm not a coward," I responded in Irish. From the corner of my eye I saw Derry smile.

"Yeah, well," Alleyne continued in English. "We'll just see if you feel that same way when some English bull's bullet comes crashing through your skull, tearing your little brain out the back of your head and spouting your blood all over your pretty little uniform."

"We're getting uniforms?" one of the junior classmates asked. Some of the upperclassmen laughed.

"Go home and tend to your barrow," Alleyne said, "and we'll tell you when it's safe to come out."

"Easy on, there," Derry interrupted, pushing Alleyne aside." He laid his hand on my shoulder and looked at me in the same way Sean had when he left home. *If I had five more like him...*

"Alleyne can be a mule's arse, but he's right about this," Derry said. "You're too young to get yourself killed."

"But Sean ..."

"Sean had a charge in him, and it needed to go off. Your mother doesn't need two of you running about."

"She was proud of him," I said.

"And she'll be proud of you too, if you stay here and finish your learning."

The older boys were grabbing their jackets and running out the door. I felt like I did the first day I came to St. Enda's and had to sit on a bench along the wall because there were no empty desks.

"We'll be going against the whole British Army," Derry said. "Chances are you'll be tending to my funeral."

"And there's a chance I won't," I said. "There's a chance we'll beat them."

"A chance *we'll* beat them," Derry insisted.

"But you'll come back heroes, and I'll just still be here."

"We're not doing this to be heroes," Derry said.

I let my face go expressionless, like stone, like the way I'd seen Schoolmaster Pearse do when he wanted to make a point. Derry either didn't notice or didn't care.

"I'll see you then," he said taking his coat.

The hall was empty. My classmates must have gone with the older boys. There were no coats on the coat rack, and the hall was quiet. I could hear Schoolmaster Pearse's footsteps against the marble floors coming out of the classroom behind me.

"Sir?" I said. "There's a chance we can beat them, isn't there?"

He paused for a moment but didn't take his eyes off the paper he was carrying. He didn't say anything before he continued on and disappeared into the room across the hall. I listened until I couldn't hear his footsteps anymore.

* * *

Early Saturday evening, April 29, 1916

The British soldiers are still firing into the GPO through the holes in the wall left by the big guns. I make my way to the wall of stacked cement slabs a few minutes after the big guns finish their rounds. I tell myself I didn't move sooner because it was getting too dark, and I fight off the idea that I'm scared. I keep thinking about the tunnel and the promise I made Sean when he left. But how can I leave and face Schoolmaster Pearse? What scares me is that I will never be able to go back to St. Enda's if I don't stand my ground with the others.

A bullet ricochets off a piece of cement and splinters my face. I drop down behind the wall and clutch my rifle so tightly I feel my hands ache. When I open my eyes, I notice a fine mist of plaster raining from the ceiling. The inside of the GPO is thick with it. As it thickens, the shapes dim in the fog. I struggle to find a face I can recognize, but they're quickly becoming lost to me. A man nearby falls away from the wall. I see blood oozing along the marble floor. He's screaming. Two men drag him off and two more take his place. It was like he was never there. The men dragging him don't look at his face. I not sure if they know him. How can someone be a hero without a face or a name?

The dust settles after a few minutes, and I see a couple new faces coming in from the hall at the rear. That must be where the tunnel is. Derry is talking to one of them. I wince as another bullet collides with the concrete. I hear a man yelling at us to hold our shots until we have a blighter in our sights. I swallow hard and peek over the top of the wall. The day is getting late, and in the dusk I can only make out blurred shapes through a hole. Tiny lights like fireflies go on

and off to the sound of cracks and pops. I look down my sights, but it's too dark. I feel a tug at my arm.

"Put your gun down," Derry says. "You're going out with the first group."

"I'm not," I shout.

"I haven't the time to bat about with you. Leave your gun, keep low, and move yourself into the back hall. The tunnel is dark, and they won't see any of you going out."

"Why should I leave my gun?" I ask.

"They'll need every arm they can keep their hands on."

"I'm keeping my gun," I tell him. "It's Sean's."

"Listen to me and keep your head about you."

I hear another bullet whizz through the air close by. Derry and I drop low. The voices along the wall seem far away. I've never known Derry to be afraid of anything before. I always believed if there was anyone who could win this war it would be Derry and Sean.

"I'm keeping my gun, and I'm -"

"Sean's dead," Derry says.

For a moment my mind is blank. If I'm thinking anything I'm unaware of it. Slowly, a thought comes to the surface, repeating itself louder against the silence each time:

Sean McKinney...Sean McKinney...Sean McKinney. I feel his name thumping in my ears like a drum. I see his picture over the teallach. I feel the carving under my hand. I yell. It's all I can do. I'm sorry broke my word. The gunfire at the front of the GPO is far away, but I am drawn to it, angry, as if it will bring Sean home.

"He and some of the volunteers were defending St. Stephen's Green a few days ago," Derry says glancing at one of the men that came in through the tunnel.

"And what was so important at St. Stephen's that it got my brother killed?" I need to know Sean will be remembered.

"They were delaying the troops," he says. "I might have been there myself had Sean not asked me to look after you."

I can't stop my body from shaking. I'm such an eejit. Sean didn't join to be a hero, but I couldn't see that. He didn't die to get his picture over the blackboard. He didn't know about those pictures, and they didn't matter to him. Just to me. *Give me your hand on it.* He believed in something. *I'll bring you back a country.* I don't know what a hero is, and I realize I don't care. I'm sorry, Sean. Sorry. Sorry. Sorry.

I smell plaster and black powder. I set my gun against the wall. Derry hands it back to me. "We'll do with one less," he says.

A figure moves in front of me. "You're living for the both of you now," Alleyne says. "You both have your medals." He points to my shoulder and grins at me. "You'll get a girl or two with that one."

In the dim haze that's settling in the GPO. I see a line of hunched figures moving through the white fog into the back hallway. I get to my feet keeping low to the floor. Along the counter at the back of the post office there is another line of bodies. Through the dust I can barely make out their faces but it doesn't matter. I'll remember them all the same. I'll hang their pictures in my memory.

I hear breathing and footsteps running ahead of me. *Only some heroes are meant to fight.* "I'll be here," I whisper into the dust. A breeze of fresh air is coming through the tunnel and the gunshots behind me are becoming more and more distant.

Walls

A sizable congregation had packed Saint Malady's pews and filled the room between its mortar walls with an ominous hum. It seemed to Father Joseph the crowds were getting larger since "The Troubles" began a few years ago. Although he appreciated the activity about the church, he wished the circumstances that inspired it had been other than what it was.

It took the rest of the morning and into the afternoon to sit patiently and grant absolution to the numerous lies the parishioners laid claim since their last confessions, the boys who stole the apples from the cart at Saint George's square:

"Would I still have to pay for them if I told you the vendor was a Protestant?"

Joseph listened and smiled in the privacy of the confessional, to the lad who had *impure thoughts* about the barmaid at Reilly's. Joseph couldn't help thinking that if he were going to have impure thoughts - if wanting to date the lass were to be considered impure - he could do a lot worse than Myra Malone.

"For penance you will ask the young lady to a lunch and you will mind yourself."

"I will, Father" he said in a voice he could barely contain.

"And then you'll come back here and say ten good Hail Mary's just as a bit of insurance."

Joseph was glad to see the boy's excitement didn't diminish as much as he thought it might.

Joseph emerged from the confessional when he didn't hear the kneelers on either side creak for a time. The church had cleared out except for three men sitting in the first pew. Joseph recognized one as his old friend, Tomas, but was still a bit surprised. As conscientious as he was, it was still unusual for him to attend Reclamation two Fridays in a row. Tomas had a mischievous part to himself, but it was a playful mischief like hiding Joseph's stole before mass or secreting a plastic mouse in with the chalice. Joseph had learned not to question whatever

providence brought him here. According to Father Michael, who had assumed the duties of Rector at Saint Malady in 1954, any soul redeemed from the Cregagh naba'chd would, by any right of humanity, be looked upon with divine favor, but it was better not to know names when the police came asking. Clerical privilege doesn't hold up in the back room of a constabulary station.

Joseph sometimes felt Father Michael was a might over-protective of the priests in his charge. Father Michael came to saint Malady in 1932, and saw the church through the second World War, and took in wounded when Germany bombed the Belfast shipyards. He watched Northern Ireland divide itself where, as he once told Joseph, even God was reluctant to lend a hand for fear of burning his fingers. Father Michael became Rector of Saint Malady in 1954 when he was fifty years old. Joseph realized how harsh the times had become when that same year, Father Michael started locking Saint Malady's doors at night and after that, rarely went outside the walls of the church.

Yet Father Michael loved greeting people after Mass on Sundays and was always excited when they came to visit during the week. He adopted Benedict Joseph Labre as his patron saint several years ago when "The Troubles" began. The Ragged Saint, as Father Michael often referred to him, was never accepted into a church and lived among people without any walls to separate them. Joseph suspected Father Michael envied that about the saint. Joseph would have been satisfied to preside over one less burial.

Father Michael seemed more intently engrossed in his weekly devotion before the Ragged Saint this afternoon. He was there every Friday for the past three years, ten minutes behind the hour of two and not moving until half past three. He was gripping his rosary tightly and

murmuring louder than usual. Normally he spoke to the saint so softly even the quiet of the church couldn't carry it.

That Saturday morning in 1972, Joseph found Father Michael standing in the north Transept holding a copy of the Belfast Telegraph and staring at the Ragged Saint. He handed the paper to Joseph and knelt on the floor with his face in his hands. Joseph could do nothing but watch his shoulders heave beneath the black cloth. The paper said the Provisional IRA had taken credit for the twenty-two bombs that went off the day before. Nine people had been killed. The first exploded at the Smithfield Station. It went off at 2:10 in the middle of a sunny afternoon. Father Michael began his devotions at exactly ten minutes after two the following Friday and escalated his insistence that his priests not venture beyond Saint Malady's Narthex until they know better the naba' chds about the church.

"The walls of Saint Malady are thick mortar," Father Michael once told him when Joseph first arrived at Saint Malady, "but they do little more than provide sanctuary. They have a way of making you feel safe even when you're not. You will learn sure enough where sanctuary ends." It was Father Michael's way of keeping his priests safe from the violence in the city.

But soon after Joseph accompanied a frantic woman, pleading with him in a thick brogue, to an alley on the far end of Cregaegh Road. A group of smudge-faced boys stood about watching another, much younger than them, bleed into a pile of broken bricks. A boy, nothing more than a "snapper of six years" his mother kept crying, would need to be given his last rites. But this particular boy was stubborn. He stared at Joseph without blinking, his lips set tight together, refusing to cry. The nearest hospital was a Protestant one on the other side of the Peace Wall. Joseph lied about the boy's denomination and got him admitted. He was grateful they

didn't question a Catholic Priest bringing a Protestant boy to the hospital, and he knew Father Michael wouldn't question his methods.

Just a few years later, Tomas Benedict Gallagher was donning an altar boy's frock and helping the priests at Saint Malady with Sunday mass. He was one of the youngest to be allowed into the Sacristy. After Mass on Sundays, Joseph and Tomas went back to the Rectory where Joseph would tell him stories of mythic Irish heroes: Cuchulainn who fought armies of a hundred or more and who took the land that later became Ireland and gave it to the Celtic people to farm; the martyr Padraic Pearse who stood up to several batteries of English troops and inspired those that just a few years later established the Free State of Ireland. These were the same stories Joseph's father had told him as a boy hoping Joseph would someday pass them on to a son of his own. Joseph felt in his own way he had fulfilled his father's wish.

Tomas always listened without moving or taking his eyes off Joseph. He told Joseph he admired the strength in those heroes and how they always won their battles. Joseph told him all one needed to be a hero was a commitment to knowing what was right and wrong and choosing to be on the right side. Joseph knew Tomas didn't understand at that age, but as he got older, he would.

Afterwards, from the Rectory window in his office, Joseph would watch Tomas go back to Cregaegh Road in the evenings and silently ask the Ragged Saint to let him return the next week. Tomas became a sliver of hope that the Peace Walls that divided Belfast might someday be obsolete. Joseph contained his pride as Tomas returned the week after and the week after that, bringing another manky face with him. Joseph welcomed each with a moist towel and a bar of lye soap. The wall would do with one less dirty block.

Tomas still had that cocky smile that had made the other priests at Saint Malady's believe he was always up to no good. But Joseph knew better. He was a talker, but not much more than that.

"The boy talks through his hat," Father Michael once told him. "And it's a big enough hat to make a speech through."

"He's young," Joseph told him. "And he'll grow into the hat." The hat was a green tweed Eight-Quarter cap Tomas' father left behind when he went off to America to find a new life for his family. He found a new life and a new family. The cap fell to Tomas *en absentia*. Tomas' mother stuffed rolled newspaper into the brim until it fit snug about Tomas' head. The newspaper had long since fallen to the wayside by the time Tomas stood a head and a half over Joseph who now had to look up at his cocky smile as he escorted him to the confessional.

"Bless me, Father," Tomas began from the other side of the confessional screen that separated them, "for all the acts I have done or may do that offend thee."

For all the acts I do or may do. Joseph let the words resonate in his head. If only his other parishioners were as divinely sent as Tomas, the church could rid itself of its confessionals. Yet it was a good blanket coverage that pre-empted a young soul confined to a mortal body. Joseph couldn't think of anything Tomas did over the years, and couldn't imagine anything he might do that would be offensive in the Lord's eyes. If there were any chance of peace in Belfast, it would lie in young men like Tomas.

Joseph finished giving Tomas reclamation, which never took more than a couple of minutes unless there was no one waiting, and then Joseph took the time to inquire as to Tomas' life and going's on. Joseph felt Tomas was hesitant at times, but that was to be expected of a young man in the prime of his life. Joseph had heard the older boys talking when they didn't

think he could hear or, being a priest, wouldn't understand. He felt like telling them he was not born a priest and even now that he was, he was still human. He would forgive Tomas for slips and falls he made in route to maturity. After all, there were some things a young man even in his thirties would not share with a priest. Joseph felt Tomas would confide in him in his own time, and on a number of occasions let Tomas off the hook with a snicker and a light penance.

Tomas' friends waited for him on a nearby pew. Many of the other young men Tomas brought to Saint Malady's became regular faces at reclamation which gave Joseph a chance to know them. Joseph supposed it would be the same with these young men. They seemed a couple years older than Tomas by a tibblebit, but Tomas was always fair-faced and looked much younger than his thirty-four years. It was a constant reminder for Joseph of the boy that grew up on the altar steps. And Tomas' friends were welcome into these walls. Each smiled with apprehensive anticipation as Joseph shook his hand. The shorter one straightened his jacket and brushed his scraggly hair back. It didn't help. Joseph could tell they came from the same naba'chd. The other young man stared at him intently as if he had known Joseph for a very long time. His steel eyes were not those of a follower but more like Tomas, a ceannard that led. At the same time, he looked as if he carried a burden as immutable as the church itself, a guilt that forced strength in him so he wouldn't break. He examined Joseph as if looking for someone who could absolve that guilt and was prepared for an archangel's task. Joseph didn't look away, afraid and yet grateful. If the church were built upon a rock, he had found himself a quarry in the Cregaegh Naba'chd.

Joseph spent a fair amount of time along Cregaegh Road when he first came to Saint Malachy's Church in 1947 directly from the seminary. Most of the buildings were occupied by shipyard workers that sat in the back pews of the church on Sundays, praying for their children

who were still finding unexploded Nazi bombs among the rubble in the alleys more than two years after World War II ended. The Protestant heavy government refused to send diffusing squads into the area citing the growing rebel factions in the naba'chd. Now and again Joseph watched a four-fingered hand drop a pence into the collection plate. He tried desperately to block the images, but they were hard to ignore when he administered last rites to a child dying because of an undone bomb or a stray gunshot.

Joseph was one of the few priests who was able to move about on both sides of the Peace Wall partly because of his friendship with Reverend Geoffrey Whittaker at Saint Thomas's Protestant Church a few city blocks away. Joseph felt the friendship granted both of them divine license to move about Belfast's City Central even though it was predominately Protestant. Yet whenever any of Joseph's congregation saw the two of them together, they greeted Joseph, and walked off before acknowledging Geoffrey. Members of Geoffrey's church seemed to regard the friendship as a mere intrusion into their sovereignty.

Joseph, like most Catholic priests, moved freely through the Cregaegh naba'chd provided he did so with blinders that kept him to his business. The Cregaegh naba'chd was still one of those areas down along the Lagan River that the easterners in Belfast avoided even during the day. At night when the rest of the city was lit and the spot lights around the dome at City Hall scanned the inner city as if it were a prison yard, the Cregagh naba'chd remained dark, a seething quiet, waiting. Footsteps moved in and out of the shadows through the breaks in the Peace Wall. Most of the street lights had been shot out and not repaired. Those that lived there refused to paint over the IRA graffiti that marked the boundaries. Only two of the Protestant districts on the other side of the wall complained about the markings but dared not come about the wall and make themselves a target for a rebel rifle. Joseph learned to keep his head low and his focus on

what needed to be done. He learned to ignore the periodic explosions that echoed off the faces of the buildings, to disregard the brief instances of gunfire that inevitably followed. Most of the newspapers condemned the bombings and called for a military contingent to clear out the Cregaegh naba'chd. But the violence spread to both sides of the Peace Wall. All Joseph could see was violence begetting violence. Not to a small degree, he was grateful the rebels crossed into the Free State of Ireland to receive absolution for their acts.

Joseph noticed the sudden emptiness of the church by the absence of footsteps on the aisles. Tomas and his friends were the last ones there. It seemed more people were coming to reclamation and filling the pews on the following Sundays.

"Pray for us, Father," the young man with the hard eyes whispered, "and pray for Ireland." He said it as if something should have come after it, but Joseph didn't need to hear the rest. This wasn't the first time Joseph had heard this particular request. "Body of Christ" he would say as he placed the host on to the waiting tongue of a young man. But instead of "Amen", he would hear "Pray for Ireland." Joseph knew his parishioners wanted the violence to end by the way they cautiously peeked from side to side when they left the sanctuary of the church or on their way to the market at Donegal Square. Most of all, in the way they stayed clear of the River Lagan Weir where the walls met. The IRA slogans were smirched on the concrete on one side. Those of the Ulster Volunteer Force added weight on the other. Yet within eyeshot of the warnings, "Pray for Ireland" would be added by some resolute soul who dared defy either.

Joseph paused a moment to watch Tomas and his friends leave the pew before glancing at his watch. Father Michael would be with the Ragged Saint for another ten minutes. He glanced at

the statue of Saint Benedict Joseph Labre and admired his courage to move about a violent world. *In this world we are all in a valley of tears.* But that offered Joseph little comfort.

The windows above the statue indicated a bright afternoon was still upon the church, and Joseph decided to follow the boys outside the church to Alfred Street. With Tomas gone and the Nave empty, the interior of the church seemed too disparate for his mood. He wanted to feel the afternoon sun.

It was warmer than usual for the beginning of summer. The tops of the trees along Alfred Street barely moved. Tomas and his friends were talking across the street about something or another that seemed to be causing an agreeable amount of shoulder slapping and hand clasping. Then the young man with the gray eyes grabbed Tomas by the arm and glared over Tomas' shoulder. The boys stood rigor still and watched intently as a silver Austin-Healy moved slowly up Alfred Street toward Ormeau Street. Other people along the strand also took notice of the car. A woman pushing a stroller veered quickly into a store and watched through the window from behind a shelf of cookery.

Two men Joseph had not seen about the area were slouched low in the car. They glared at Tomas and his friends as they drove past. Joseph resisted a twinge of nervousness in his stomach. He had read of the political groups in the Belfast Telegraph, groups that often selected random victims in order to make a statement. One of Joseph's parishioners had been taken from in front of his home, and his body lay bare on the steps of Saint Malady two days later with a note spiked to it. According to the Royal Ulster Constabulary who arrived a few hours later, the note was a warning for the Catholic Republicans west of the Peace Wall. The man had been tortured and disemboweled. His genitals had been stuffed into his mouth as a warning to the growing Catholic population. Joseph remembered thinking as he listened to a sergeant's

indifferent explanation of the incident that Protestants did not give absolution. There would be no forgiveness for the man's abductors. The best Joseph could do was forgive the sergeant.

The car didn't stop. It turned on to Chichester Street and passed from sight. Joseph noticed Tomas staring at him as if invoking last rites. Joseph nodded and Tomas acknowledged with a slight smile before rejoining his friends.

By the time Joseph returned to the church, Father Michael was getting up from the floor of the Transept. He seemed to struggle a bit more each week. Joseph once asked him how long he would continue his devotions. Father Michael told him he would continue until he did not hear an explosion in the week he last spoke to the Ragged Saint. Joseph admired the Rector's tenacity but started thinking about having an altar rail installed at the base of the Ragged Saint to ease the pain on the old man's knees.

Joseph couldn't stop thinking about the car and its occupants as he looked out his office window. He considered reporting it to the police but knew the report would only get lost among the piles of incidents reported during the week. He imagined the police asking him if the occupants had done anything. Suspicion by a priest and an ex-altar boy didn't count for much even in a Catholic naba'chd. Instead, he settled for leaning back in his chair and let the warm sun through the window fade the image into memory.

Joseph ran along the Short Strand carrying the boy with the bloody face, looking for a break in the wall. The *balla* stretched along the strand like a fortress rampart over the hill to the other side. As much as he called the boy's name, the boy's eyes remained shut. Blood from his face dripped on to Joseph's cassock and was absorbed into the cloth.

At the crest of the hill, Joseph could see an opening in the wall further below. Two men with rifles stood there looking up the hill. Joseph knew if he could get the boy to the gate, the men would take care of him. But as he started down the hill, the boy got heavier. Joseph carried him as far as he could before setting him down on the grass. The boy had aged at least ten, maybe twelve, years in the few minutes Joseph had been carrying him. Joseph called to the men at the opening for help. They glared at him but didn't move. Joseph decided to make one more attempt to carry the boy to the men, but the boy was now a young man in his mid twenties. He hollered again to the men. The boy aged. When Joseph looked back down the hill the men shouldered their rifles and disappeared through the opening. The boy was gone. There was a patch of dead grass where he lay. There was nothing more Joseph could do but walk down the hill to the opening in the wall. When he turned back to see how far he had come, he noticed the trail of blood left by his dripping cassock.

Joseph's disorientation eased quickly as it always did when he woke abruptly. The salty smell of the bloody field was always the last sensation to leave. The sun was a few hours lower in the sky and shone through the glass with the intensity of a search light. Joseph reached for the blinds and let them fall into place. Something to be said about a small office where everything was within reach. The growing darkness made his grogginess worse, but he refused to close his eyes for fear of seeing the bloody face. He wondered how long he'd been dozing. He became aware of the clock's ticking. It was almost four, and Joseph realized he was behind his time to hear the evening's confessions.

This Sunday was Joseph's rotation to say Mass. The Nave of Saint Malady filled with parishioners Joseph had come to know by name and habit. He also noticed a number of newer

faces he was beginning to know. The pews were seeing more than their share of scuffed linen skirts and knees covered in canvas overalls. The thought crossed his mind that some good might come out of the shadows, but the sight of two stoic-faced men standing in the Narthex muddled it. One scanned the crowd in the church while the other watched the street; their bulky overcoats left Joseph little doubt what they were covering. They usually arrived early in the morning and waited on the church steps until the doors to Saint Malady's were unlocked. Joseph understood it was because they could pass through the gate in the Peace Wall before any officers from the Royal Ulster Constabulary could take their posts. The IRA's men would return after dark when it was no longer safe for the police to man the gate without finding a policeman's body there in the morning.

The line for communion was long this Sunday, and Father Michael came out to help. Joseph kept a watch for Tomas and his friends. Communion had become the canon by which he measured how many blocks he could remove from the Peace Wall and fortify the sanctuary of Saint Malady's. For the most part, he saw the same faces that he granted absolution every Sunday. But he was seeing more unfamiliar and anxious faces in the line. He took a moment to ask a stranger's name before offering the host. It was so much easier to forgive someone he knew than forgive a stranger. Sometimes, he saw a spark in their faces as if something inside had come alive. Other times, their eyes would look away, and Joseph found himself resisting a feeling of failure. He thanked God there wasn't time to question before another face took its place.

Joseph glanced over the two lines of heads that stretched to the doors and bent around the last set of pews, his to the left and Father Michael's to the right. The space between them divided the congregation neatly from the altar to the men standing in the Narthex. Joseph wondered why

Father Michael tolerated their presence, but then, Joseph hadn't ever asked them to leave their guns at the door.

One of the men seemed to be staring at Joseph, and he stepped into the center aisle. The people in line bowed around him as if deflected by an invisible force. Joseph hoped he wasn't coming forward to receive communion. But what if he did? Joseph wouldn't refuse the host any more than he knew Father Michael wouldn't. The man stood there a few seconds before nodding to Joseph and going back to the Narthex. The lines closed in and filled the aisle again. The woman in line who received the host from Joseph asked him to pray for Ireland. Joseph responded with Amen.

Joseph was relieved that Mass had gone on longer than it had the previous Sunday. The new people that showed up for Mass waited afterwards to greet him. Joseph wasn't sure if it was due to a reluctance to go back out to the streets or the hope that they would absorb God's protection and take it with them. Joseph didn't care. Fear dispelled hate, and if he were given the choice to disseminate one or the other, fear was the safer bet. Although Father Michael vigorously shook their hands, he appeared to be more tired than usual, but that didn't deter him from taking a chair at the back of the Apse to watch Joseph conclude the mass.

"So much fear it is that brings them here," he said as Joseph had to smile as he led him back to the rectory. "You'll be staying for lunch?"

"I'd like to, but I have a date," Joseph said. By the look on Father Michael's face, the joke was not well received. Father Michael had become distrustful of Protestants more keenly over the years, and Joseph's friend Geoffrey was not an exception.

"I realize he's a friend, but please take mind of who's about you on the quay," Father Michael said as if he had suddenly received a burst of energy. "And come back through the gate before it gets dark, mind you."

"I always do." Joseph wasn't sure if Father Michael's constant warning was out of concern for Joseph or his own fear of leaving Saint Malady. Joseph reassured Father Michael with a firm hand on his arm.

A slight breeze moved along Victoria Way that led to Donegal Quay near the River Lagan. The quay was lined with cafes and pubs that conveniently catered to one political denomination or another and was one of the few places in the city Catholics and Protestants could sit within a storefront of each other and exchange nothing more than a distasteful look over a pint. Joseph found a table at Murph's Riverside. Mary, a waitress he and Geoffrey came to know, looked up after wiping down a table across the way, held up a finger, and then two. Joseph glanced at the empty chair and responded with two fingers. She never failed to greet either him or Geoffrey even though the church didn't allow generous tips. Instead, she would take a few minutes to tell them about her dreams of someday having a small house on the shore and a large family all of whom she would keep far from the city.

Across the quay, barges loaded with refuse and scrap iron moved steadily along the River Lagan under the bridges and around the bend. A few walkers paused on their way across to watch. Joseph closed his eyes for a moment, took in the sounds of a peaceful Sunday afternoon, and waited for Geoffrey. His sermon at Saint Thomas' must have run late. Geoffrey loved to talk. He told Joseph the best way to rid a parishioner's mind of biased thoughts was to talk them into paralysis. A month ago, a pair of overdone gentlemen in the pub began arguing over the cost of a

pint of Guinness. Geoffrey stepped between them and sermonized about the evils of beer and the necessity of restraint for the sake of their souls and the descent folk about. By the time he was finished, one had meandered away in a daze and the other had put his head down on the bar. Geoffrey ordered a pint of Harp's and returned to the table.

Geoffrey turned the corner just about the time Mary was setting the Guinness and Harp on the table. Joseph handed her a guinea.

"Robbing the collection plate, are we Father?" she said with a hint of laughter in her voice. Her spirited tone made Joseph forget about the solemn mood of the mass. "I'll have to go down the quay a bit to get you some change. She left before Joseph could tell her they would probably be ordering a second round.

Geoffrey slipped off his collar and undid the button behind it as he sat down.

"It's a lovely day, isn't it, Joseph?" he said.

"You'll get no debate from me," Joseph said. "You can't argue with a Protestant while he's sober."

"And you can't dance with a Catholic when he's drunk," Geoffrey returned. "Here's to ya."

It had been a few years, but Joseph wasn't surprised Geoffrey wouldn't let him forget the Sunday afternoon they tried to join in a dance on the other side of the Middlepath Street Bridge from Donegal Square. The kids were still jumping about to the American music as they had been doing for most of the sixties and into the turn of the decade. Joseph missed the slower, more manageable dances to Artie Shaw's band music. But he wasn't about to miss an opportunity to bring another face into Saint Malady. He moved clumsily trying to imitate the young folks flailing about without looking too much like a pregnant cow. A part way through one of the

dances he slipped and wound up prone against the floor. Geoffrey laughed as he helped him up. The other eyes were more concerned but still bright with the mood of the dance. By the following Sunday Joseph had put a few more souls in his pocket. He was tempted to ask Geoffrey how many he collected for Saint Thomas.

" I suppose I could give you a chance to redeem yourself at an inter-faith dance," Geoffrey said staring across the table.

Joseph wanted badly to take him up on it, but knew it would only be an invitation for mischief. He was sure Geoffrey knew it too, but Geoffrey was more of an optimist than him. It was one of the things Joseph liked about him. Joseph too often carried his disappointment like a cross, and at those times he looked forward to these afternoons. He didn't know which was the better guilt-shedding therapy, Geoffrey or the pint. But who was he to question what providence or Mary brought?

"No, I suppose not," Geoffrey said looking a might dejected. "And what's this I hear about Saint Malady thinking about leaving their doors unlocked at night?"

"Just a thought that's been kicking around the counsel," Joseph said. "They feel making the church more accessible might help calm "The Troubles."

"Or be looked on as an invitation of the wrong sort," Geoffrey added.

"God forbid."

"I'm wondering if God has a hand in it anymore," Geoffrey said tapping his finger on the table.

Joseph realized he'd been piling the brown sugar cane packets, two rows, one over the next, interlocked like bricks, in a line across the table between him and Geoffrey. Joseph pictured the lines in the church and the man standing between them. Joseph placed his finger near the

packets, but they didn't move away any more than they did from Geoffrey's finger. He gathered them up and slid them back into the condiment basket. "Are you suggesting our churches may be contributing factors?"

"I hope not, but sometimes - "

A sudden blast racked the air and Joseph felt an intense heat against his face. The front side of Murph's Pub had exploded outward sending tables and chairs airborne across the quay. Geoffrey grabbed Joseph and yanked him to the ground. Joseph heard the splintering glass as the pieces collided with the stone walkway. People ran amidst the falling debris. He heard a man's voice shouting for someone named Ruth. Another voice shouted she was in the pub. A scream joined the high-pitched cacophony on the quay. Within seconds Joseph smelled the sulfur nitrates moving on the breeze past Murph's. He first smelled it several years ago when a grocery store frequented by the Protestant community exploded. He smelled the home-made concoction when the showroom of an auto dealer owned by a Catholic detonated killing the owner, his service manager, and six others including a receptionist and her fiancé Joseph was to marry that weekend. He remembered how the stench of it permeated the air over downtown Belfast, the ash and soot covering both Catholics and Protestants.

Joseph pulled free of Geoffrey's grip and pushed himself up where he could see in the direction of the blast. The front of the Bridge Street Pub was blown outward. Lines of smoke trailed out. A fire inside was gaining momentum. Among the bodies that lay about, a body that once had a face lay smoldering in burnt clothing near the opening. Mary lay draped over a table. A handful of shillings had fallen from her hand. The tablecloth beneath her turned red draining blood and dreams from her. Joseph felt himself yell. He couldn't tell if it came from agony or rage, but it was enough to muster what strength he had. He pushed over the table and sprinted

toward the pub. He didn't consider the possibility of a second bomb as the police had warned people in the newspapers to keep them from rushing in after family. If God wanted him, he could have him. Joseph scanned the bodies for any that appeared to move.

A young girl, seven, maybe eight, moved her fingers. Joseph scooped her up. The weight of her body fell against him as if it were searching for a place to rest. He could feel her trying to breathe.

"Look at me," he said.

The girl didn't move.

"LOOK AT ME."

A small sliver of white glistened through blackened eyelids. Joseph carried her to a grass knoll on the far side of the quay. In the distance he heard the hi-lo's coming; he heard the screams behind him drift off and become sobs; he heard the water beating against the bricks on the other side of the rail. The girl grunted as he lay her on the grass. She was looking at him. Her eyes were brown. Joseph needed to know that. He didn't know if she could see him, but it didn't matter. Her eyes were open, and that was all he could ask. He would stay with her until the Ulster Rescue arrived. He gently placed his hand along side of her face and smiled at her, a genuine smile, before looking around the quay. A number of people had arrived and were pulling the injured away from the pub, which was burning freely. Others stood about and watched, keeping what they must have considered a safe distance but close enough to satisfy their curiosity. The hi-los got louder.

Geoffrey was tending to a man who was sitting at a cafe next door to the Bridge Street Pub. Joseph recognized the man as a member of Saint Malady's congregation, but in the turmoil

nobody seemed to care. The injured were being tended by able bodies that Joseph instinctively knew had not asked their denomination.

As the first RUC arrived, a group of young men who were standing at the foot of the Middlepath Bridge pulled their hats low across their foreheads and walked steadily over the bridge toward the Queen's Quay across the river where a dark colored van was running. Joseph hadn't noticed the young men before and felt sure he would have. He recognized the tattered green tweed Eight Quarter cap among the obscure faces. Pray for Ireland.

Tapping the Table

Brody McCreah dusted the ornately scrolled, oak chair, meticulously placed in the front window of his shop on McLean Avenue in the Bronx, until he could see an almost clear reflection of himself in its finish. He took a minute - two actually - to admire his handiwork. Another relic, another piece of business done to perfection. He would ask the Dooley's, the chair's owners who lived in one of the mansions on the east side of McLean Avenue, if he could leave it in his window awhile. He knew they wouldn't mind, but he would ask anyway. The rich Protestants who lived in those magnificent houses across the street and brought him their tarnished antiques so he could give them new life, prided themselves on where they came from. Brody always asked about the history of a particular piece of furniture and received a history of the family in return. Sometimes it was difficult to convince the owners to take a piece home so he could replace it with another family's ancestry brought up through the layers of wood. These people lived in their exquisite past.

He situated each piece of furniture he restored so that its highlights, worn into the grain by time and family trapping, were easily recognizable by anyone passing the shop. The baroque console table belonging to Neale Harris that was brought over to America by his ancestors after the first potato blight, the Cyprus chest locker of Mrs. Brighton's that back in Ireland was delivered to her great aunt's door with her husband's body shot to Hades and back again by Irish Rebels, Mrs. Larson's antique refrigerator that belonged to her grandmother and was the first icebox in the neighborhood, and the rocking chair belonging to the neighborhood recluse, Mr. Dunn's that had a leg missing from its rocking rail. Brody made sure he knew each story before he began stripping away the layers of impurities that had built up over the years. It seemed that status on the east side of Woodlawn came with a family's history and history was in the blood.

Brody was convinced he lived on the wrong side of McLean Avenue, on the west side where on the meager front lawns, young children danced around plastic flamingos and Wal-Mart bird baths. The streets were chalked with kickball bases and hopscotch boards. The air was filled with their yelps and squeals as the parents sat and enjoyed sips of lemonade that they claimed could only be made in a Bronx kitchen. Brody nodded and responded politely when he heard them call his name. He smiled, waved, and felt sorry for them. Their lives began with the scream of an early morning alarm clock and were put on hold until their children went to bed that night. Their history seeped little further than their front gates. In the street, it mingled with those of the other families until each became non-descript. They lived and died and had nothing to show for it except a Wal-Mart receipt. But it was where his parents lived until they moved up and out, and it was where his grandfather lived until he was shipped back to Ireland to be buried.

When Brody closed his shop in the evening, he often crossed McLean avenue and strolled along the quiet east side streets watching for *For Sale* signs in the front yards. There weren't many. Not that he could afford a house on the east side, but that would change. His business was growing. He was receiving a call a week from an east side home to pick up an old chair, table, or dresser. Brody would shed his overalls and adorn himself with his best manners. He never let on how impressed he was with the rooms of antique furniture he passed through to get to the one that housed the piece he had been hired to restore. Brody never forgot his virgin white cotton gloves with which he hoisted the furnishing on to a carpeted cart and noiselessly wheeled it out the double doors. As he left he watched the great homes drift by as if he were a floating observer in an exquisite dream. He loved the view, the ancient roofs and gables the challenged the blurred skyline of distant Manhattan, the hundred year old oaks whose branches tapped against the second and third story windows.

Brody used his skills to distinguish his shop from the other stores on McLean Avenue. He refinished the mahogany columns that supported the lenth over the front of the store and installed a new orange tarp with the shop's name embossed in Old English lettering across it. Although the neighborhood was predominately Irish-American his east side customers would appreciate the lettering's style. Those who lived on the west side didn't seem to notice, and that was all the same to Brody. Most of the business he received from the west side consisted of quick fix repairs, except for the pews he re-varnished at the Saint Barnabus Roman Catholic Church.

Brody rarely missed an antique auction or an estate sale where a piece of furniture sadly in need of restoration could be bought at a price he could afford. In the back of his shop, he envisioned it coming from one of the elegant homes on the east side and restored it while making up a history for it, a history of his own making, a history that invoked his ancestors. He would only get halfway through the job before he started laughing at himself. His history stopped at the stories his grandfather, Enoch, told to the west side children from the porch steps of his house. Enoch always took time to tell the children stories he had heard when he was a boy. The neighbors and their children stood out his fence and listened. On occasions, Brody recognized an east side face in a group, but Enoch never seemed to notice.

Enoch had a substantial garden for a west side home, and the plants hung over the short, wooden fence at the front of his house. Enoch always grew more tomatoes than he would ever use, but he grew plenty because the neighbors liked them. He handed them out as soon as the first green balls blossomed into the Irish Crème Tomatoes, the seeds of which he had brought from the old country. And each tomato came with a story, more so as Enoch had gotten older.

He died less than a week ago, passed away at a hundred and four in his garden watching his tomatoes struggle to ripen. Brody closed and locked up Enoch's house slowly, slowly so when he turned around the neighbors would not see Brody had lost more than his history. The only thing Enoch fought was the horn worms that ate away at them and burrowed underground out of sight.

As much as Enoch loved the neighborhood, he chose to be buried in the Irish village where he had grown up, a few miles south of Galway along the bay. Brody flew to Ireland with Enoch's coffin along with several other neighbors who knew Enoch. Some were Brody's eastside customers, but there were a few from his side of McLean Avenue who could afford the trip. After the funeral, Brody greeted the eastsiders and thanked them, as was expected of him, but spent the bulk of his time listening to the westsiders repeat Enoch's stories.

Brody was disappointed his parents didn't attend but not surprised. His parents, particularly his father, often referred to the neighborhood as a dump site for drunken Irishman who could do no more than lift a pint off the bar on any day that began with a sunrise. His father's measure of success was how fast they could move out of the Bronx. Brody's father often warned him to stay away from Enoch, telling him he was too young to understand the old man. But Brody had never seen his grandfather stumble in or out any of the pubs on McLean Avenue. He only sat on his porch, told stories and gave away what he had, tomatoes and stories.

Enoch was interned on a hill overlooking the North Sound under a tree that shaded his grave from the east sun. The tree looked like it had been there for centuries. Enoch's friend, Caomh, who still lived in Ireland, told Brody the tree was called "Uncle Barney's Walking Stick" because of the way its branches grew at right angles every foot or so. A branch would begin growing one way and suddenly jut in another direction as if it were being forced from its

intended course. Older folks in Ireland cut branches from the tree and used them as walking sticks. Although the wood was bent, it was strong and capable of supporting the weight that was set upon it. Brody remembered Enoch's cane. Caomh brought it over to Enoch only a few years ago. Enoch refused to use it, telling Caomh the day he did he must resign himself to being an old man. He was good to his word, and the cane gathered dust by his door.

Brody was in considerable spirits this morning, which surprised him. Enoch had been buried a month, and Brody had finally summoned enough fortitude to go back to his grandfather's house. He moved slowly past the ghost sitting on the porch steps, the ghost boiling cabbage at the stove, to the kitchen table and chairs. It would be his own piece of history, however little, that he could display to carve himself a niche in the east side community. He had already cleared a prominent position in one of the front windows, making sure the floorboards were polished and the glass cleaned. Even they remembered Enoch's stories.

It was Sunday, the only day the shop was closed, but Brody was anxious to begin working on the table. It was constructed from thick Whitebeam planks and looked like it had seen more hardship than Brody cared to think about. The chunky banister legs were once stair posts from a rich landlord's house. He got the table from a pub in Dublin before it burnt down. Brody promised Enoch right after Brody's grandmother, Mary, died, he would refinish the table. Enoch offered to help. He told Brody he still had a fair amount of strength, but Brody knew it was only because he tried to ignore the painful aches that showed on his face whenever he stood for a long time. And besides, Enoch seemed pleased that Brody *wanted* to do it and told him refinishing the table would be like bringing back a part of the old country.

Brody couldn't see them until Enoch pointed them out, but hiding discreetly under the plank top, two wings could be extended in either direction making the table big enough to sit a company of eight or ten people. Brody couldn't remember that many people at his grandparents house. If there were any more than four or five, Brody could hear Mary asking if they were living in a bar or a brothel. Brody always loved that expression, especially the way Enoch laughed after she said it. It erupted in long sustained waves that forced Brody to smile even though he didn't know what a brothel was at the time.

There were only four chairs that came with the table, but Mary always made sure extra company had a place to sit and sleep, if it came to that and it often did. There always seemed to be friends from the old country coming by for a day or two. Sometimes Enoch would introduce them. Other times, Mary would usher Brody into the living room while the men spoke in low voices in Irish. Brody remembered trying to listen. He loved hearing their tongues click as they spoke.

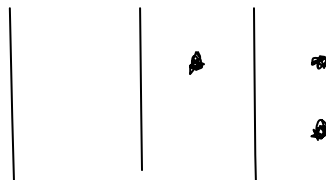
The table was as Brody remembered it, rough hewn and badly in need of refinishing. In the center there was a stain in the shape of a circle. But the circle was interrupted as if part of it had dropped into the wood and was hidden. Brody remembered the clay pot that sat on the kitchen table. Although it was chipped at the base, Mary wouldn't throw it away. Her mother had given it to her. Mary just turned the pot so the crack faced away from the window. She said the roots were less likely to come poking through out of the sunlight. Water that leaked from the crack stained the table and left a mark that told Mary exactly how to replace the pot after she passed it under the faucet. One day when Mary's back was turned, Brody turned the pot around, but Enoch saw him and turned it back. "You like taking the sword from Gabriel's hand, do you, lad?" he said and laughed that laugh of his. When Mary came in and asked what the devil he was going

on about, Enoch put his hand on Brody's shoulder and told her they were sharing a joke. Brody remembered feeling glad Mary did ask who the joke was on.

In the pot Mary grew Shamrocks she had brought with her from the old country. Each leaf had a darker center that Brody couldn't see unless it was shaded out of the sun. Mary called it a peace shamrock. She said it took awhile for it to take root and it didn't bloom until they came to America. It sometimes withered a bit from the bright sun but none the better for the wear. This was usually in late winter when the sun was low and brief. Dried, tissue-thin leaves hung off brown threads and jostled only when a body walked by. Enoch told him not to worry his crown about it. They would be back. "You can't kill a Shamrock," he said. Mary plucked the thread-thin stems from the pot and waited until the new stems broke the soil. Whenever Brody saw the Shamrock, he felt like Enoch and Mary knew something he didn't.

The dust from the table kicked up by the sander had a strange odor to it. Brody had smelled ground Whitebeam before, particularly Whitebeam dry-soaked with dark lager, but this odor was more pungent and penetrated Brody's nostrils as if it had its own will. He sanded down the scratches and gouges, meticulously bringing the untapped grain of the wood to the surface. A century's worth of grime, stain and varnish passed under the course grit of the sand paper.

At a corner of the table top the sander uncovered three heavily gouged lines and pits as the first layer of hardened dirt was cleared away.



These marks weren't the same as the others that were randomly and more than likely, unintentionally inflicted. The depth and straight angles of the marks told Brody these gouges had

been purposely set deep into the wood. Scattered around the gouges were a number of dark stained rings about the size of the bottom of a glass. These sanded out easily, but the gouges stubbornly remained.

Brody paused a couple of times. He kept feeling that he might be grinding away a piece of his grandfather's past. He shook the notion away and leaned into his work. The water stain from the shamrock pot, like the corner marks, refused to grind away. Several passes with the belt sander only diminished them. Brody could tell where the crack in the Shamrock pot had been and where the water had leaked on to the table. It pointed to the gouged corner, which was nothing more around it than unfinished grain now. It straddled two sides of the table, one of which was where his grandfather always sat. Enoch's friend, Caomh, who often came over from Ireland when Brody was young, always sat on the other. They would laugh, tell stories, and drink their beer. When their glasses were empty they turned them bottom side up. This was always followed by a resounding tap against the corner of the table.

When Brody was fifteen, Caomh told Enoch Brody was turning into a grown scrapper and that he'd be tappin' the table in no time at all. Brody remembered Mary scowling at him.

"They'll be no tappin' for this one," she said. "The two of you are enough that it hasn't put me in the ground already."

Caomh laughed and clicked his glass against Enoch's. Enoch tried to hide his smile, but Mary brought her hand up against the back of his head so swiftly Brody barely saw it until he heard Caomh bellow another wave of laughter.

"I'm in dead earnest here," she said. "You two can have at it all you like, but let the boy be." She grabbed away Caomh's beer and gulped down the last half before slamming the glass

upside down on the corner of the table. Brody had never seen Mary drink a beer. Brody stared at her. He suddenly felt he had been missing something. Mary had always been *a strong sort* as Enoch often remarked, but it seemed now more than before she was determined to have the last word. Brody wondered what she was so up about. What was left of the beer ran down the sides of the glass and formed a bead around the rim of the glass for a brief moment until it flattened into a dark stain on the table.

Enoch and Caomh stared at the glass expressionless as Mary left the kitchen.

"You know," Caomh said. "I think she means it."

"It sure enough sounded that way," Enoch answered. As he took a sip of his beer, Caomh righted the glass Mary had finished and set it in the center of the table near the shamrock. The glass had left behind a dark brownish, almost black, ring. Brody thought it looked a lot like the ring under the shamrock pot. Enoch looked towards the living room doorway and tapped the ringed corner of the table flatly with his outstretched fingers. Caomh took Enoch's beer and after a sip, tapped the table. Brody felt his eyes drawn to the glass, but he didn't know why. There was only a swallow left in the glass when Caomh placed it on the table. Brody realized both of them were watching him. Enoch kept half an eye on the doorway. The room had gotten very still. It was as if the world had ceased revolving. Mary would not come back through that doorway. The shamrocks wouldn't grow another inch. Not a breath would be taken in that kitchen until he made the decision to pick up the glass or leave it. Caomh had come to visit so often Brody came to think of as a second grandfather. Brody didn't need anyone to tell him they had been friends a very long time, and he was being presented with an opportunity to be a part of that.

Brody took the glass and drank the last swallow in one gulp, set the glass on the table, and tapped the corner of the table.

Caomh put his arm around him and kissed the top of his head. "You'll be all right, boy. You know who your friends are. Ain't nothing' more important than that."

When the last spot on the table top had been ground away, Brody groped for the latch that released the two side leaves which slid out from under the top. He was able to wiggle them, but something underneath held them tight. He remembered trying to help Mary ready the table one Easter during his first year in college. The leaves needed to be extended because, according to Mary, one family sat at one table. Mary clicked her tongue in her Brogue for Enoch to help. Before Brody could bend down to watch what he did, the leaves were free of their bondage.

The air in the shop was thick with more than sawdust. For a moment he thought he still saw the water ring from the shamrock pot. It had to be the way the lights were shining off the table. He closed his eyes and was afraid to open them again. The mark would be there, and Enoch would be sitting across from it sipping his beer and passing the glass to Brody. What would Brody say. He felt himself shaking. The air had gotten heavy as if something had entered the shop and there was not enough room for the two of them. Brody forced himself to take a breath...and open his eyes. Nothing. The vent sucking the dust out of the shop was humming quietly in the background. Brody walked over and shut it off. Quiet. He ran his fingers over the top of the table. No bumps, no stains. He felt like laughing at himself. The top had been stripped of its years, but Brody wouldn't let it forget and tapped the corner. Somewhere in the air behind him, he could feel Mary scowling and Enoch trying to hide his smile.

Brody's second attempt to free the leaves proved to be as useless as the first, so he turned the table over hoping to discover something he couldn't feel with his fingers. Outside of a pair of cross members that held the legs in place, the leaves seemed to merely lie effortlessly inside a

wooden cradle. When he tried to move them, they didn't wiggle as they had when the table was upright. But in the space between the leaves there was a small, black strip of iron. When he pressed against it he heard a snap, and the leaves popped free.

"I've found your secret, Grandpa", Brody said quietly to himself. Yet he felt uneasy about discovering the latch, as if he had no right to know about it. But there was still the promise to keep. Brody pushed the leaves to the outside. Beneath the leaves was a wooden bar that kept a tray in place against the underside of the table. The bar was held in place by a pair of wooden blocks mounted on the table top supports. With the table upside down Brody was able to slide the bar easily from under them and lift out the tray. A brown, leather-covered book bound by a strap and a tarnished buckle lay on the underside of the table top. There was no writing on the cover except the same marks that had been gouged into the table top. Brody took the book from the table. It was cold even in the warmth of the shop. Something tugged at the back of his thoughts. How many times did Enoch open the table's leaves. If he knew about the latch, he knew about the book.

The cover was brittle, but Brody was able to get it open without breaking it. On the inside he recognized Enoch's name written in Irish. He knew. The rest of the book was in Irish. Enoch loved speaking in what he called the "old tongue." There were a few English words, but most of the pages he couldn't read. Some were divided into columns and lists. The only symbols he recognized were dollar and sterling pound signs preceding a number of words. Brody never thought of Enoch as a businessman. But why was the book hidden in the table? If Enoch knew it was there, why didn't he mention it to Brody. Brody began to suspect he wasn't supposed to find the book. Something told him Enoch intended it to remain entombed in the table.

Brody set the book aside and finished sanding the table's leaves and legs. The scratches underneath weren't as deep but resisted Brody's efforts to smooth them. Like the book, they were a part of the table's history, a piece of history that had been ripped from it. The world had moved on and left them behind as reminders of the past. A dead past. Enoch and Mary were gone, and the book was to remain buried along with them.

But Brody had the book, so the past wasn't really dead. He wondered if there was some infinite design that wanted him to have it. Something stronger than the hands that put the marks in the wood. There was something in their refusal to die. New coats of stain and varnish would let them out. The scratches and gouges were the table's marks of honor. The stains were testimonials to its endurance, the pints of ale that spilled over the rim of the glass, the water that leaked from the shamrock's pot.

There was still plenty of cherry stain to finish the table. As Brody applied it, the wood eagerly absorbed the stain as if it had been thirsty for decades. Each scratch and gouge appeared and stood out like a miniature dark void. They formed intricate patterns that revealed where company had set their plates, picked up their forks and knives, and set down their glasses. But there were a few deep gouges that seemed out of place for the household. Some looked as if a knife's tip had been plunged into the wood deep enough to leave the knife standing. He had never seen Enoch or his friends do anything like that. Mary wouldn't have allowed it, unless the marks had been carved before Enoch brought it over, before Mary ever put a peace shamrock on it.

Brody had smoothed over most of the marks from the table top with the sander, so the stain went on smoothly with only a snippet of contrast here and there. But, as the brush ran over the corner of the table by the stain of the cracked watering pot, the same three lines dots he had

seen on the strap of the book floated darkly to the surface. Brody hadn't noticed these marks before, but then a number of the gouges were so light he had missed them. Brody noticed these marks had been inflicted by a determined hand and a will strong enough to keep them from being ground under. The sound of fingers tapping the wood was deafening.

The table and chairs took several days to finish, and Brody dedicated more and more time to it. He took his usual espresso to the back workshop, and on both Monday and Tuesday neglected to finish it. In the time it took the layers of varnish to dry Brody tried to decipher the book he had found in its table's bowels, but it was little use. He wished he had listened more when Enoch tried to teach him Irish. There were a few west siders, like Bill Casey, who knew the language, and he was sure no one on the east side spoke Irish. Bill Casey had a sign in front of his house offering to teach Irish for five dollars a lesson and slipped an Irish word or two into his conversations to promote business. But when Brody showed him the book, Bill opened it and silently looked over what looked to Brody to be a random page. Brody watched his lips form words without sound. A half a minute later, his eyes grew round, and he slammed the book shut.

"Where did you come by this?" he asked.

"I got it from a piece of furniture," Brody replied. He knew he could trust Bill to keep something to himself, but that wouldn't stop him from talking to Father Mulchaney in the confessional. Something in the book gave Bill a stir.

"Then you put it back there and forget you found it," Bill said.

"Can you translate it?"

Bill handed the book back to Brody. "I can," he said, "but I won't. Your grandfather was a good friend. We passed the collection plate together at Saint Barnabus."

"Couldn't you-"

"I never saw this," Bill said and got up indicating the conversation was done.

Brody took the book back to the shop and looked through it one more time hoping to catch sight of a word he might recognize. Maybe one English word. There were none and only Enoch's name in Irish inside the cover. But it was the marks on the book strap that intrigued Brody. The marks occupied his thoughts for the rest of the finishing process. Bill Casey didn't seem to notice those.

By Wednesday Brody had finished the table and brought it into the showroom. It was late, and the sun was dropping behind the east rooftops darkening the street outside. Brody adjusted the table in the front window and redirected the spotlights to bring out the table's luster. The glass was like a mirror and reflected the table top and the marks on the corner. Brody shifted the table, but the marks merely moved back and forth across the inside of the glass. Brody could almost see Enoch's and Caomh's faces staring from the glass. Enoch was gone, but Caomh was at least a decade younger than Enoch. Caomh had tapped the table almost as often as Enoch, and Brody wondered if he would also be able to translate the book. Business was winding down for the season, and the first touches of color were showing on the tops of the trees along McLean Avenue. There weren't as many strollers along the avenue when the air caught a chill. Not as many window gawkers, not as many people to ask where a chair or dresser came from, not as many histories to tell. Most of his east side customers held on to their furniture until the spring. He couldn't stop thinking about his meeting with Bill. Brody turned off the spotlight in the window and let the table fall into the shadows. Just as well for now, he thought. Then he went to his office at the back of the shop and booked himself a flight to Ireland.

* * *

Rural 336 was paved going west out of Galway toward Carrowroe along Galway Bay, which made the ride pleasant. Brody was only able to pick up four English speaking channels on the radio. A number of the villages along the bay coast had gone back to speaking Irish as their first language, and most of the airwaves were promoting their sense of nationalistic pride.

Within a kilometer of Barna, he turned off on a one lane dirt road that seemed to head directly toward the bay. Clusters of sheep formed white splotches on far hills. The sides of the road were dotted by stucco houses sectioned off by flat stone walls. Brody wondered if this was where they took pictures for the travel posters. It had a peaceful beauty about it that looked as if it had always been that way, the way Enoch described it in his stories.

Near the end of the road was a house that looked like most of the others except it looked older and had a stick-built gazebo off to one side. Caomh sat there with a bent cane lying across his legs. He had a makeshift easel made of skinned branches and an artist's pad attached to it. He didn't look up, but he sketched away with his pencil just the same. As Brody approached, Caomh began talking as if he had expected Brody. Caomh said he liked to draw the gulls when they walked along the shore as if they didn't have a care. He liked to draw them when they glided over the waves like it was their earned right. He asked Brody if he'd had been to see his grandfather. Brody told him he hadn't yet but was planning on it before he left.

"That's good," Caomh said. "He's buried on his own soil, you know. Quite a time we had of it, he and I." Caomh never took his eyes from the gulls. "They pick and choose whatever they will and take whatever it pleases them to take. So many times I'd wished I'd had wings. Aye, but that's God's gift to give to those who deserve it. You can bet your grandfather has his and he's flying' about overhead laughing at the two of us."

Brody didn't count on the idea that Caomh might be losing his reason, but he hoped he could still translate the book. He let Caomh go on a bit before taking it out from his jacket and handing it to him. Caomh glanced at it and put aside his easel. For a moment, Brody saw him as he knew him almost forty years ago, sitting at Enoch and Mary's table, slipping Brody a taste of beer when her back was turned, tapping the table and laughing when Brody did the same.

"Knew he was writing them things down," Caomh said. "Told him once if them papers got into the hands of the Royal Ulster Constabulary they'd be cutting us good. Best I could convince him was to leave the names out." Caomh tapped the strap and slowly opened the book. "They didn't really know," he said, "but back then they would burn or kill on suspicion alone." He thumbed through several pages. He stopped on a page about halfway through. His lips moved, and he smiled. "Wouldn't forget this," he said. "Didn't know if I were ever going to see him again, at least on this soil."

It was a little past three in the morning. My friend and I moved quietly along Henry Street and barely cast a shadow against the crumbling mortar buildings. I knew this wouldn't be the case when we got to Sackville Street. Civic Hall in Dublin had begun replacing the gas lamps with those new electric posts more than two years ago. Our only consolation was that most of the damned English were piteously slow in doing anything that helped anyone but themselves, leaving Henry Street in shadows after the sunset. Sackville Street, where there were banks and mansions, was well lit on either side of the bridge. The RUC was not taking any more risks since the General Post Office had been taken over that spring by a handful of rebels that held them off with a few old carbine rifles and fatal determination.

I hadn't yet reached thirty but felt older than my years. My commander, who brought me into the Irish Republican Brotherhood almost twenty years ago, told me war will do that to a body, particularly when you're fighting for your own country on your own soil. You don't just fret about yourself. There's the missus at home and the wee ones about that can catch a stray bullet. My missus couldn't wait to get out of Ireland. She said one plot of land is as good as another as long as it's not the plot they put you in. I used to think like that when I was much younger. I'd walk along side my pa while he was plowing our field. But the year our tater crop failed and Pa couldn't pay the lease on the land, they dragged him from the house and buried him with an English bullet still in him. I watched them take the few good taters that were still left while Mom and I packed. She died a couple years later and I took to helping out in the pub on Henry Street. That's where I met Alroy. He and his friends always sat at the same table and left me a couple of guineas. He told me one day he'd be leaving me Irish coins.

My friend watched the shadows along Henry Street, grabbing the pistol butt at every other step. Although he was barely eighteen by a day more than a barber's razor, he already had the growth of a firm red beard about his chin and he stood more than a head above me. He often boasted he could pull a cart full of enough dung to fertilize an entire field of potatoes by the hairs on his chin. I had little doubt he could do a mule's share of work on two legs that resembled beer kegs.

I stopped and turned an ear to the dark end of the street, but all I could hear was the periodic clip of horse hooves echoing off the walls. It told me Sackville Street hadn't quite cleared of the night's traffic. If we moved as if we didn't care, and with a steady gait, we could make it across the main fare with barely anyone the wiser.

"Keep to me side and tell me all about the play you saw at the Abbey tonight," I said.

"What bloody play are you talking about?" my friend asked.

"Just keep your hole going till we cross the fare," I said, "and try sounding like you had a grand time of it."

We paused for a moment while I glanced up the strand and scratched at the scar on my forehead, a reminder, I was told, to mind my place and not answer smartly to the constable that saw fit to speak to me. I remembered thinking it was a wee bit of pleasure shoving my shive into that constable's stomach and watching his innards spill out on the RUC's armory floor when we raided it for arms barely a week and two days later.

When there was only a lone buggy in sight up Sackville Street, I draped his arm around my cohort's shoulders and urged him smartly on to the street. "I haven't seen a rendition of Cathleen Houlihan like that in years," I said in a voice not quite loud enough to be heard by the approaching carriage, but enough so that anyone in the shadows of the doorways would have no doubt of where we'd been.

"You'll get no argument from me," my friend spouted. I could see him smiling in the brighter glow of the electric light.

By the time we made it to the median separating the lanes, the buggy was almost upon us. I started to shift my cap across my face, but noticed that the man driving the horse was more interested in the lady next to him than in two strangers crossing the strand. As the carriage passed, I recognized the lady and wondered if she charged any more for a swell than she did for the likes of our sort.

"I wouldn't mind taking in that show again if it comes about and I have a quid in my pocket," my friend said.

"You move it along now or I'll have that quid in *my* pocket."

He laughed and followed the other across Sackville Street. We kept to the shadows on the far side of Henry Street.

Brody sat back in his chair. "The man in the book," he said. "That was Enoch."

Caomh nodded his head. "And I was the other. I had a lot yet to learn back then, and your grandfather kept me backside intact through those years."

"He killed a man." Brody looked out over the bay. It was quiet. The gulls were riding the water at the mercy of the currents. Brody remembered Enoch telling him about the old country and talking about it as if, in Enoch's words, it was a pastured slice of heaven that had fallen and landed in the water just so the winds of the world would have a place to rest.

"It weren't the first he laid to the devil," Caomh said.

"Is that why he left Ireland?" Brody asked.

"There's a bit more to the story if you care to hear it," he said. "Killing is a part of war."

"What war?"

"There's always been a war here," Caomh said. "And that's what sent your grandfather to the states. But he had to have that blasted table, and he talked me into helping him with it. Had it been me, I would have told him to let the bloody thing burn and be done with it. But then, I weren't Enoch. It took me a while to figure out why that bleeding table was so important to him."

Brody began to regret leaving the table in his shop window. No doubt one of his customers would ask about it when he got back. What would he say? It was his grandfather's? He killed a man and fled to America? He thought about Mrs. Brighton's Cyprus chest, her husband's body.

Brody could wave his east side customers goodbye while he closed down his business. He would move the table to the back of shop when he got home and move it to his house after it got dark.

Caomh thumbed through the book until he came to a page further in.

Our friends in the brotherhood had already broken out the lights in the alley and lights along the alley and stuffed the gas pipes with raw clay earlier in the day in anticipation of our arrival at the back door of Mahoney's Pike and Powder Pub. I drew a flat bar I had brought with me from beneath my jacket and slid it gently into the crevice between the door and the jamb. At the first creak from the aged wood, I glanced up and down the alley to make sure we were alone, but my partner was already looking out for my back. He was a good man for the fight, and I appreciated when the brotherhood gave him to me to train. I trained him as I was trained, as every soldier in the brotherhood was trained. It wasn't until after he received a fair beating at the hands of the RUC for blocking an alley and pretending not to speak English, that I realized I had also trained a friend. It took a number of blows by constables almost as big as he to bring him to a knee. It gave my comrades and me time to slip down some cellar stairs and out through a shop's front door to a crowded street. The constables were too engrossed in their duty, as I had heard it called, to notice us.

The door held its own, giving a bit, but taking it back just as quick.

"Is it stuck?" he asked.

"It's not stuck," I said. "It'll go in its own time."

"Why didn't you ask Paddy for the key? He would've given ya one."

"That he would've."

"He lives a bit up the strand," my friend said. "You want me to rap on his door?"

"You want to see him strung up by his wrists in the back of a constable's station?"

"I don't at that."

"What he doesn't let on will keep him out of harm's path," I replied. "Best to make it look like we're breaking in."

"Seems to me that's what we're doing. You mind if I have a go at it?" He reached over my head, which wasn't a far stretch for him, and leaned his weight against the door. The jamb snapped like it had no substance to it at all, and the door flung inward. It might have slammed against the back wall and sent an echo down the alley, had I not anticipated his strength and caught the door a *fertach* or two into its swing.

There was a dim light shining in through the window at the street side of Mahoney's. The tables and chairs were scattered about in a random manner with two set in the shadows of a wooden partition that shaded them. The partition was on the window side of the pub and was made of thick lattice affording a man sitting on the pub side an ample view of the window and the front door. Anyone entering would have to move past the partition to see who was sitting on the other side. I had spent a fair number of years at this table with his back to the wall and an eye to the window and, was where I introduced my large friend to my brothers in the IRB.

"That one over there," I said pointing toward the front of the pub.

"They're all the same," he replied. "Why not make off with one of these near the alley door?"

"That one," I insisted. I didn't want to say too much more. I had learned the less you know, the safer you were.

"You telling me there's a difference?" he protested. "They're all going to be ashes tomorrow anyway. You heard that wanker at the armory before you stopped his gop hole."

“Will you let me keep to my own will,” I said. I didn't mean to be rash with him, but sometimes he asked too many bloody questions. He wasn't an eejit or anything of the sort. He was just a curious fellow. And a good-hearted one at that. I made me self a mental note to apologize to him later.

"Fine," he grunted. "I'll be a bollock when our boys hear of this."

We made their way across the pub. My friend was the first to notice the bottle of Guinness on one of the tables. It wasn't like Paddy to leave anything lying about. He was the orderly sort, if you know what I'm getting at. At closing time you could roll a guinea down the bar, and it wouldn't nick a bump or a crumb. He could set a fuse so the bomb would go off right when he meant it to. The bottle of Guinness on the table wasn't like him at all. Then I noticed the bottle was full, and it was sitting upon a piece of paper.

I kept a watch toward the window. Nothing was moving outside. No shadows. I searched my pockets for a matchstick but didn't find one. My friend retrieved one from behind the bar and placed himself between the partition and myself.

"We'll take it with us," my friend said.

"We'll have it now," I said shoving the note into my pocket. It was the least we could do for him and the most now. I should have known he wouldn't leave Dublin after the shanks found out about the bar. We tried to convince him, God love him. He said he wasn't leaving this land till they carried him out. He was a stubborn bugger, but I knew what he felt.

I peeled off the wire cap and drank a long, deep swallow before handing the bottle to my friend. "Leave a bit at the bottom for a fella in arms," I said.

There was barely a grain or two at the bottom when he placed it on the bar.

"Why don't you fetch the cart," I said.

* * *

Caomh took a piece of paper that had been wedged into the book's binding, opened it and handed it to Brody.

You'll find a cart in the back room. I've greased the wheels well.
I know you'll do right by us in the states. I'll remember that
when they come for me. Have a last one on me. Paddy

Brody didn't say anything but watched Caomh set the book on his lap and place his hand on top of it like a priest at mass blessing a bible after reading a gospel passage. He had shut his eyes. His jaw was pushed forward giving his face an added strength that he had kept hidden since Brody arrived. It wasn't until a cloud passed overhead and shaded his face that Brody noticed the moist bead at the edge of his eye. Brody wondered how well he knew the owner, Paddy. From what Caomh read, it didn't seem like he knew him well. It seemed like Paddy was a closer friend to Enoch. Enoch never said a word about anyone called Paddy, but there was something between the words in the book that Enoch was also not saying. Caomh must have seen them even though they weren't in the book. Maybe he didn't need the book. He knew Enoch well enough.

"The book's in Irish," Brody said. "But this guy, Paddy, wrote his note in English."

"Paddy had been around longer than the lot of us," Caomh said and opened his eyes. "Like most of the people who moved to town after their crop failed, most of them spoke English. The Brits took their tongues when they took their land. Some of us like your grandfather took it back. Paddy was a good friend, but he never got the hang of it, and it didn't matter by then."

Brody remembered the sounds of the tongues clicking in Mary's kitchen and how many times Enoch repeated a phrase trying to get Brody to repeat it. Brody understood the sense of

loss Paddy must have felt. There was always that click of a distance between Brody and his grandfather.

"I didn't know him all that well outside of spilling a pint with him now and again," Caomh said. "But I would've taken his place when they came to burn the pub that morning." Caomh stared off across the field as if Paddy, himself was standing there listening to him. "Bugger wouldn't come out of that pub and dared any one of them to come in after him. Damn bloody hell."

Brody sat there quiet and confused. He didn't know him, but he'd take his place? "Why that table?" Brody finally asked.

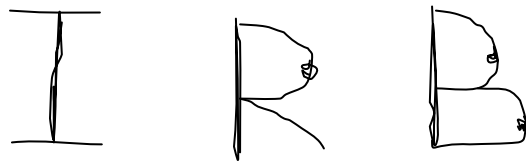
Caomh tapped the strap of the book.

Brody shook his head.

Caomh picked up the easel and turned a page. He picked up a pencil and drew the lines and dots. "You know what a brotherhood is, don't you lad?" he said.

Brody stared at him. Him and Enoch in the kitchen, Enoch telling stories on the porch, the neighbors in the street sipping lemonade, the kids in the front yards. Brody nodded.

Caomh added a few more lines and tilted it to Brody.



The lines filled in for Brody on the table, and he got a queasy feeling in his stomach. He was beginning to piece together his grandfather's past from the reading, but somehow, seeing the letters come to life on Caomh's easel brought the reality to bear on him. He saw himself, a boy

again, taking what was left of the beer Enoch and Caomh left for him, and tapping the table. He could hear Mary voice, "They'll be no tappin' for this boy."

"Brotherhood is..." Caomh started.

He asked Caomh to keep reading, not so much because he wanted to know more about Enoch, but because there was still something in the spaces between the writing that was older than the book itself, something that Enoch knew and Brody needed to understand it. It wasn't in the table, but it was important enough for Enoch to risk his life and eventually leave Ireland.

The Ormond Quay was deserted, and the narrow barge at a bank of the River Liffey bobbed with the force of the water in the dark. The wheels on the cart had performed as Paddy had promised. The quay was deserted and we pushed it across to the river bank. A lanky figure stepped on to the quay from the barge and waited as we approached.

"What are ya taking yer whole house wid ya?" the riverman asked?

"Just this," I said. "You have my bag?" I knew by the impatient voice that he was not one of us. He took money that was paid him and did the job he had taken the money for. By morning he would be taking a shilling from the constables to show them where the ship was waiting for us in the harbor. But I would be long gone by then. It would be a long time before I saw any of my friends again.

"Yeah, yer people dropped it a piece ago," the riverman answered. "Now you'd better get your arse on the flat before one of em dry shites comes by an grabs the lot of us into the station."

My friend hadn't waited for the riverman's invitation and was already loading the table and chairs on the barge. In the time it took the riverman to cast off the mooring lines, it was boarded and covered with an old tarp that was lying on the deck.

I wasn't watching him. I was busy memorizing what I could see of the Dublin skyline against the few beams of light the dared to rise this early above the buildings. All I could hear was the humps of the heavy mooring lines being thrown to the deck. My friend moved quietly up beside me.

"You'll be getting away from all this, ya know," he said.

"I know."

There was a heavy silence between us that lasted, in fact, only a few seconds. But, generations lived and died and were born again in those moments; a baby's cry, a young lad's first kiss, and an old man's last breath. I had seen them all from Dublin's doorways and alleys. I'd kissed a fine share of buxom barmaids when the pubs closed and watched the lights fade in the eyes of too many young men who wanted to be heroes. I saw the anger in their mother's eyes when I tried to tell them their sons didn't die for nothing and hugged them as if it would make up for it.

Maybe I should have been glad to be leaving, but then, a man can change what he sees but not what he remembers.

"I won't pretend I don't know what you might be thinking right now," my friend said. "But think about the missus before you go getting any ideas. You said that to me, remember?"

I knew what he was talking about but sometimes regretted not doing what I wanted at the time. Too many friends died for the sake of a free country, but I wasn't willing to spare this one. I buried the last man I trained and still saw his face in the dark at the quay.

"O'Hara was a good man," I blurted. "He and I'd been friends a long time."

"He'd been in that station for three days ... more," my friend retorted. "They walked him in the front and carried him out the back with not even a tarp over him to keep the blood from

catching on the ground. You stay about and they'll be carrying you out too. And I won't be the one to carry your bones back to your missus. By the way, has the missus left yet?"

"She's been gone a week with the wee one to the states," I said. "Happy as a porky sow and squealing twice as loud."

"I always thought she was the smart one between the two of you."

"It'll take some getting used to."

"You'll be busy enough. I probably shouldn't say nothing, but they been talking over at Mahoney's more than a month now. They been thinking about sending someone over to loosen a few dollars from the rich folks over there. They all got money in America. Needed someone with the gift. You came up a couple times. The dry shites grabbing O'Hara just made it happen a bit sooner." He glanced out toward the end of the quay and I took those few seconds to listen to the water beat against the Irish shores. "Hey, I hear they want you to lay hands on some of those Thompson Machine guns they got over there. If you get some, ship one over for me. Beats this rusted tube iron I got now."

"You've been a friend, even if you are only a scrapper," I said. "When they send someone to come collecting, I hope they keep you in mind."

"If they don't I'll put it on their minds one way or another. There's a cargo boat waiting on you in the harbor. Get yourself down the river before it gets light."

"He was good at what he did, ya know," Caomh said closing the book. "Swear he could talk a walking stick straight given the chance. Made good on his promise to send me one of those guns. Saved my arse from a constable's station more times than I care to remember. It was the money and them guns that helped us take our land back." Caomh handed Brody the book and tapped the

strap as he reached for it. "Ya know he wanted to come back when they struck a deal."

"Why didn't he?" Brody asked. "Mary?"

"She had a fair hand in it," he said. "She didn't like living in a country that wasn't her own but wasn't liking the idea of losing Enoch to the cause. She said America was its own country. You took it from the same blighters we did ours. That was good enough for her."

"It must have been hard," Brody said. "I mean leaving like that."

"That's why he took the table," he said and handed Brody the book.

Brody didn't say anything. In the few moments of quiet he heard the gull's cries.

"You head on up and say hello to your grandfather," Caomh said and picked up his easel.

Two gulls sketched in pencil glided low over the water. Another drifted on the water's surface. Brody knew Caomh had said all he intended to say. Brody saw a little of Enoch in him.

Enoch had been buried a bit further along the coast of the bay. The gull's calls along the shoreline seemed to follow him as he drove. Only now they sounded more like an impetus. The sky was theirs. The water was theirs. No one could take that from them.

Brody didn't remember the tree being as big as it was. At late noon, it shadowed the grave letting through shards of light like tiny explosions flashing against the headstone when the wind blew the branches from west to east. When it blew strong enough, Brody could taste the salt water in the air. He didn't notice it at first glance, but as the lights danced across Enoch's name, he saw the three lines and dots carved into the granite. Brody didn't remember them being there during the funeral. They had been set in deep as if they were meant to withstand time and weather. He remembered watching Caomh trace his fingers over the lines on the book, the way the lines formed the backing of the letters and the dots, the loops. Brody's eyes traced out the I, the R, and the B. Even Enoch's name had not been ground in as deep. In the wind he heard

Caomh asking him if he knew what brotherhood was. A gull screeched and then another. The calls came in pairs as if they were drawn from the same breath. Enoch and Caomh weren't tapping allegiance to the IRB as much as tapping allegiance to their friendship. Mary didn't understand that. Enoch was taking his friends with him when he left Ireland, the spilled pints and plans ingrained in the wood, the courage and fears sanded over until they couldn't be seen, stained memories varnished clear and hard to resist the tarnish that built up over years. Brody was glad he left the table in the window. He closed his eyes and listened to the wind. Overhead, he heard the tree branches tapping against one another.

Reap the Harvest

Part 1: A New Ireland

It seemed to Erin that all the other girls cut and bound the barley slower than her. She had twenty or so bundles standing upright in the field to their eight. Yet, by the time the sun was directly overhead, the other girls migrated into the nearby woods surrounding the field, sipping their cider and arguing over which boy *they knew* would ask them to the Harvest Dance. Erin used that time to tie an extra bundle or two, so Old Man McDonough would hire her next year's harvest recess.

Most of the other farmers from villages like Fuerty, on the outskirts of Roscommon, were buying combines. Erin wondered why McDonough still hired the school children from the village to cut his barley. He seemed not to notice the sounds of the engines upwind as he rode his old mare, Polly Anne, bareback through the scythed fields, towing the lunch cart behind him. He always paused to inhale so deeply it looked as if his chest were about to burst before continuing on as if the sharp scent of the fresh cut barley had invigorated him. Then he pulled the cart into the shade of the woods beyond the plow line, ringing the bell attached to Polly Anne's mane by a piece of twine, and parked it just short of the creek that ran between the trees. By the time the kids came in from the fields, McDonough had Polly Anne unhitched. He would brush the burrs out of her coat with a twiggy switch from a nearby bush and wait until the kids arrived. A quick reminder about the Harvest Dance and he and Polly Anne returned to the barn. It was enough to get everyone talking about who was going with who, a favorite topic of talk in a village where if a girl sneezed in the morning, the women in town were dropping by to offer condolences on the deceased by noon.

Erin wanted no part of their blather. She also wasn't concerned which boy would ask her to the dance. No one had asked her last year or the year before. And this year was not promising to be any different. What boy would even look at a girl in canvas overalls when they could have an eyeful of the ones in the knee-high skirts and jumpers the other girls wore beneath their leather aprons, which Erin noticed were shed whenever a boy came along the herd path that bordered the fields. The fields around Fuerty were full of their kind, and the boys drove their cattle along the herd paths that gave them the best view.

Still, the new clothes were something different and interesting in Ireland's changing economy for Erin. She kept a couple of magazines from the continent buried under her mattress, and at night, when she was sure her parents were asleep, she pulled one out and let her imagination spill out across the page, across the brightly colored satins and frills. In the hours before the sun came up over the fields, her legs were shaved, her hair stylishly pulled back to reveal bright red lips and eyes that shimmered. This girl lay her head on a linen pillow and dreamed of necklaces and high-heeled shoes but woke on thread-bare cotton and put her unshorn legs into the canvas overalls she wore the day before and before that.

She noticed the way the other girls pranced about at McDonough's farm as if it were more important to impress the boys than cut the barley. She admired their carefree attitude. Life couldn't touch them. She wondered how *she* would look at school with her knees and ankles showing. At least the girls had enough sense to wear their field boots, although Erin looked the other way and snickered when a loose stalk lashed across their legs.

Erin had pointed out some of the new fashions to her mother when they went shopping in Roscommon, easing her way to the shorter skirt styles. On one occasion she held a skirt to her waist and asked her mother what she thought. Her mother turned away without saying a word.

But Erin caught a glimpse of herself in a mirror. It wasn't her looking back. That girl was pretty. Erin decided to ferret away a Euro here and there inside a sock at the bottom of her drawer.

She finished her line of bundles well before the girls returned from the woods and decided there was enough time to gobble down the roast pork and cabbage sandwich her mother had packed for her. McDonough had set the cart in the woods more than forty minutes ago, but Erin wasn't expecting any of the girls to make room for her, so she took her time as if she didn't care to be a part of their *buidheann*. But their eyes cut more deeply than their scythes. It wasn't as if she didn't want their friendship; she just didn't want to be like them. They left no room for a girl who came from country well outside of town.

Erin relished the cool of the woods as soon as she passed into the shade. The cart was only a hundred or so feet in from the plow line. As soon as she rounded the bend, the voices around the cart got quiet. Erin ignored them and made her way to the box at the head of the cart. Although her father wasn't able to afford a lunch for her every day, today was a special occasion. He had been given a promotion at the brickyard in Dublin with a generous raise of fourteen Euros a week. There would be no more missed lunches because of vacant pockets, her dad promised her when he gave her the new silver, thermal case. That morning was the first time she was proud to put her lunch in with the others.

But the box was empty except for the slab of dry ice McDonough always put in there. Erin glanced about the front of the cart before she noticed the other girls stifling giggles. She let the box lid fall. The bang made a couple of the girls jump. That would have to be her only satisfaction before facing her father and telling him she had lost the case. Maybe it would be better not to say anything. Erin headed back to the field more angry than hungry.

She paused abruptly as a small herd of cattle crossed in front of her. They were being driven by a short, muscular boy who turned to smile at her. He stopped in front of Erin and dropped his eyes to the ground. Erin thought she heard a hello but wasn't sure. The boy stopped and hesitantly looked up at Erin but noticed his cattle had continued up the herd path without him. He nodded and ran after them. She stepped out and stared. The boy caught up to his herd and glanced back. He actually looked back. Erin pushed back her hair, but by then, the boy reached a bend in the path and disappeared. He actually looked back, she thought.

The other girls were coming out of the woods along the field like mosquitoes after a hard rain. Erin decided she had better get back to the barley so she could finish her rows before it got dark. Maybe with a bit of luck she might see the boy during the week. It would take the other girls at least that long to finish the field and move on to the next.

By the time the sun glared across the tops of the barley, McDonough and Polly Anne returned with the cart to take the girls back to the farm where they would part ways and head for home, them to Roscommon, and her the opposite way toward Fuerty. Once in a very long while, when her father finished his piecework on time, he caught the early train from Connolly Station in Dublin. On those days, he would meet Erin along the road that ran past the McDonough Farm and walk with her the rest of the way into the village. She never knew whether he was on the train, but she would wait patiently. Her father hadn't been on an early train since he began the new job. She could usually hear the train's steam whistle, even in the farthest fields of County Connaught. But lately, the whistle seemed far away.

As the cart passed McDonough's hog trough, Erin caught sight of a silver swatch being rooted through the mud by a pair of determined hogs the size of small ponies. The girls on the cart giggled again.

"All right," came a voice from the other side of the cart. "Who's gonna go get it?" One of the girls, Carrie, who had just moved to Roscommon with her parents a couple of years ago, was standing at the front of the wagon with her arm crossed in front of her. She had smiled at Erin from time to time in school. She glared down at the other girls. The giggling stopped.

"I would," said Rose, a girl who always followed close on Carrie's heels. "But . . ." Rose looked at the hogs and lowered her head.

"It should be the lot of you rooting around in the mud for all the good it'll do ya," Carrie said and jumped off the cart. "Don't know why I hang about a bunch of gacks like you." She grabbed a hoe that was leaning against the fence, gave the hogs a stiff push and wrenched the lunch case from the slop. With the end of the hoe she rinsed it off under the faucet at the end of the trough and flung it to Erin.

"Will that do ya now?" Carrie asked.

"Thank you," Erin said quietly. She was surprised when Carrie leaned in close to her and whispered in her ear.

"Don't let 'em be putting it to you," she said. "You're a right girl better than the lot of them." Carrie held out her hand. It was calloused.

The hogs had done their damage getting to the food inside, but the case was not beyond repair. If nothing else, no one would touch it again for fear of putting their painted nails in a place where a hog's teeth had been.

By Sunday, the air around County Connaught had gotten warmer than usual for that time of year. The ceiling fans that dangled from the overhead arches at Sacred Heart Church in Roscommon were whirling at such a pace Erin could hear the blades ripping through the air.

Father Jessup wiped his face with a silk cloth as if performing an arduous task. He neatly folded the cloth and ascended to the pulpit. Erin remembered the first time she saw him. She was five. He looked old even then and much scarier. His voice sometimes still touched a nervous place.

She sat quietly beside her mother as she had been instructed to do so many times in the past. Her father sat on the other side of her mother. Erin knew if she sat with her back flush to the pew she could avoid her father's "mind yourself" glares. She got them quite often when she was younger and fidgeted about during mass, and had since learned how to remain nearly motionless – as her father told her a proper Irish girl should be - for the forty-five minutes they spent in the church.

Father Jessup cleared his throat, and a sea of heads looked up. The stone face he maintained for the first part of mass turned to a scowl as if anticipating the congregation's reluctance to believe anything he preached without the show.

"This is not the town I was brought up in," he said. "I see Lucifer's influence at every garden wall. People in Dublin call it prosperity. In the *Irish Free Times* they're calling the 1990's the decade of the Celtic Tiger and this year of our lord, 1992, its finest. The country's becoming rich they say. But the tiger has claws, and if they think for a moment it can be tamed, they may as well try to get a worm to dance." He grabbed the sides of the pulpit and pushed himself up. The lights over the tabernacle formed an aura about him.

Erin looked at her mother and leaned forward slightly to glimpse her father. Both were staring upward as if the rest of the church around them had disappeared. Her father nodded.

"And if you think the devil's affairs are confined to the city," Father Jessup continued, "you are mistaken oh so badly. Look about you now.

Erin did so almost instinctively. On the other side of the aisle, Carrie and Rose were

slipping up the hems of their long, Sunday skirts and looking at their legs, being careful to keep their knees below the top of the pew in front of them and away from Father Jessup's scrutiny. They whispered and giggled until the next crescendo of Father Jessup's voice forced them to look up.

"The tiger prowls," Father Jessup said. "He knows no boundaries between city and country. All of Ireland is his hunting ground. He carries greed, vanity, and desire on his back. And I see it here in Roscommon and from the villages you came from this morning. I see it in our young people in their speech, in the clothes they wear." He looked at the section where Carrie and Rose sat.

Carrie grinned while Rose looked as if God's hand had come right out of heaven and pointed at her.

"In the music they listen to."

Erin heard a barely audible "Amen" from a woman in the choir loft.

"In their behavior."

Erin thought about her lunch bag in the hog pen.

"Our Magdalene Schools are filling at a frightful rate, and I fear we may not be able to save our girls quicker than the tiger can take them."

Erin heard of the Magdalene Schools. A girl named Kaylee from her school stopped showing up for class about a year or more ago, and her friends got quiet after that. But, the whispers about the school yard didn't quiet themselves. A few days after the girl stopped coming, Erin learned she had become pregnant by a boy she had been about town with. According to the gossip that passed from ear to ear, her parents, with Father Jessup's hand, had her sent to a

Magdalene School in Dublin. Erin would have felt sorry for her, but as Father Jessup often said, we must live with our choices.

"Yet, in as much as we must fight this beast and keep our young close so they are not consumed," Father Jessup bellowed over the congregation, "we must also cherish those of our young people that are not influenced by the beast. And they are out there. I see them in the villages and the fields, particularly during this harvest season, uncorrupted by the greed and shame spawned in the city. They are deserving of our trust."

Erin felt her mother's hand on her shoulder.

The following Wednesday, a week and a half before the Harvest Dance, Erin packed her father's lunch and watched him bicycle down the road to the Roscommon train depot. Any other day of the week her mother would have made his lunch, but her mother had recently begun work mending clothes for a tailor in Castlecoote just a few miles to the west of Fuerty. She left on foot for Castlecoote just a short time later. Erin hid her lunch case under her mattress, took the money from the sock at the bottom of her drawer, and tore a picture out of a magazine under her mattress. A girl her age was posed in a black skirt and a shiny blouse. She stuffed the picture in the pocket of her overalls.

The price of Barley had gone up, and McDonough had paid his help accordingly. Erin had eighty-two Euros to spend on whatever she wished. She waited an extra half an hour to be sure the train carrying her father was long gone from the depot before she took her bicycle and sped off to Roscommon's town centre mall. The girl in the picture had long hair like Erin's, and she was pretty.

The mall had changed over the eight or nine years since her parents first started bringing her to Roscommon after mass on Sundays. The carts and makeshift shelves built by the store owners had disappeared from the cracked sidewalks. The sidewalks themselves had disappeared, and a smooth brick roadway had taken their place. Cars no longer rambled in front honking at the crowds to let them by. There were no more tailpipe backfires or drivers leaning out their windows shouting at an obstinate pedestrian. The mall street had been blocked off by shiny yellow poles mounted firmly into the ground at the intersections. Bright colored sports cars whizzed by the walkway entrance, slowing only when an officer of the Guardain was present.

The shops had shed their clapboard and plank exteriors in favor of distinctive colored stucco exteriors and ornate wooden signs mounted high over large glass windows that displayed samples of their inventories. Erin read the Irish economy was growing at an accelerated rate in the Dublin paper her father occasionally brought home. The *Celtic Tiger*, as some of the magazines from America called the booming Irish economy, must have been good to the shop owners. Many of them stood in the doorways greeting people Erin suspected they had never met. Yet even when the customers passed they continued smiling. Her father once remarked they only smile at the customers that have money jingling in their pockets. But that was the kind of money her father was used to. Erin couldn't remember ever seeing him with a paper Euro until he got the job in Dublin. Even then he eyed it suspiciously before accepting it. "As long as I can trade it for food or rent before the ink wears," he mentioned at the supper table. Her mother would merely smile, but sometimes Erin caught her sneaking a glance at a dress from France or America in one of the windows. Erin wondered what it would be like to talk on a cell phone or have a stereo in her bedroom, now that their house had electricity. But the paper Euros only paid for ice cream from Antoine's at the far end of the mall and, once in a while, a dinner at one of the

new restaurants. Until recently, no one had ever seen a Chinese restaurant or a pizzeria, not to mention clothing styles from outside Ireland.

Looking in the windows, Erin began to wonder how long Ireland had been behind the rest of the world. She imagined the women across the channel wearing those clothes as if they didn't have to answer to anyone. Erin suspected they did as they pleased. They had their own place in the world, their world. Erin admired them and thought about how she was going to hide what she would buy. What did the girls in her school do? Did they wear their skirts home or change back into overalls? Did they even care? Maybe they stood up to their parents in a way she would never be able to do. Erin rubbed her hands on her pants and felt the roughness against her palms. Suddenly she didn't blame the girls for throwing her lunch case into the hog trough.

Kilkenny's Boutique was two blocks from the mall entrance off Banal Street. Erin had heard a few of the girls at McDonough's mention it was where they bought their clothes, although Erin had never seen them about the mall on Sundays. The entrance to the store was set back from the street a bit and was shaded by four large yellow and white pillars. The mannequins at the front of the window were shiny black figures with large lovely eyes, pert little noses set firmly over thick, painted lips. They strutted confidently in front of the window on slender legs, jutting from tight skirts. None of them wore overalls or canvas pants, no boots or farm hats. They lived in a beautiful world even if it was only the length of a store window. To the rear of the window, a group of grainy burlap covered mannequins with no eyes or mouths stood with their heads turned toward the shiny mannequins. Erin wondered what they saw. Their skirts draped low about ankles that were poised so tightly together they could have been bound. Bulky sweaters hung from their shoulders like wool sacks.

The inside of the store smelled like lilacs. A sales girl in a fitted black dress looked her over. Erin began to think she had made a mistake. She could never look like the girls at McDonough's not to mind this girl. A sudden panic ripped through her, and she looked back at the door. People were passing by noticing only what was in front of them. When Erin looked back, the girl was still looking at her. Erin froze. The girl walked to a rack of long hemmed housedresses, the kind Erin had seen on the older women in church. Erin just stared. The girl wrinkled her nose and smiled. Erin let her breath go. The sales girl nodded, took Erin by the hand, and led her across a narrow aisle.

"I know what you feel, love," she said. "My mom almost had a heart condition when I bought this dress. Only thing that kept her from throwing me out the house was I made more money than my dad and bought her a new Easter coat for the spring."

Erin giggled. It was hard not to like this girl.

"It's a bit of a new world out there," the girl continued. "Long about time we caught up with it. Don't you think?"

Erin couldn't help staring at her. Her smooth black hair ended in curls that bounced on her shoulders as she walked. Her makeup was so neatly done she could have been a mannequin. But her face was alive, and she moved with a quick pace as if she could part the racks like Moses parted the sea. She was the new Ireland Erin wanted to be part of.

The faceless mannequins dressed in slacks and long bulky skirts became fewer and were replaced by bright eyed laughing mannequins like the ones in the window as she followed the salesgirl toward a brightly lit sign that read: Junior Fashions.

"I think this is what you're looking for," she said and leaned in closer to Erin. "I'll only be a shout away. Call me when you find something you like." She disappeared between the racks,

and the sea closed in behind her. From across the aisle Erin noticed two older women staring at her. She moved further in until a sale sign obliterated their scrutiny.

Satiny blouses hung effortlessly from the rack and reflected the overhead lights. Erin was afraid they would crumble into pieces if she touched them, but the thought of going to the dance in canvas overalls was worth the risk. She removed a silver one and watched it shimmer. It was light and as smooth as a scythe's blade when it was newly sharpened. Erin instinctively drew her hand away. But the polished texture got the best of her, and she pulled the blouse across her cheek. It tickled. She wondered where she could hide it until the Harvest Dance. Maybe in new clothes this year would be different. No more watching a band from behind the food table while she helped Mrs. McDonough set out the plates. Maybe someone would notice *her*.

"And who's cutting the east field today?" a voice came from the other side of a tall clothing rack. When she looked up, a section of hangers closed together. Erin heard giggling on the other side. The hangers pulled back again, and Carrie peered out at her.

"Mr. McDonough gave me a day," Erin said.

"Aye, right," Carrie answered. "More like you're cutting out sick like us I'm hearing."

Erin looked away.

"Aye, don't let it bother you," Carrie said. "It could make you bonkers being there every day. Bloody hell, we wouldn't be doing it if it weren't for the fellas that come down the path."

"The money isn't bad either," Erin said.

"You got a point, but wouldn't you rather be making a yoyo doing what that vixen does?" Carrie said nodding toward the front of the store. "Bet you ain't ever seen her in rough togs."

Erin quietly agreed.

Carrie glanced at the blouse Erin was holding. "That'll feel bang on in some fella's arms, eh?"

Erin put the blouse back on the rack.

"I told you she was a right one," Carrie said turning to Rose. "She just needs some schooling." Carrie came around the rack, took the blouse, and held it to Erin. "That's deadly," she said. Carrie ushered her to a mirror a short distance away and held the blouse to her from behind.

Erin gawked at her reflection. It was another person in the mirror. Someone that wanted more out of life that Fuerty could offer. She pictured herself in a short black dress greeting customers that walked in off the street.

"I can see it," Carrie said. "Let's get you fixed up proper." Carrie darted toward a rack of skirts. She returned a few moments later holding a short black one with a slit down one side. "C'mon," she said, grabbing Erin by her arm. "Fitting room's this way."

The fitting room was barely big enough for Erin to lean forward and slip off her canvas togs, but she didn't need any room to step into the skirt. It felt odd not feeling anything against her legs, but in that freedom she felt the promise of a new life she was determined to get used to.

She was putting on the blouse when she heard a rumbling in the stall next to her. Rose's voice echoed. "Are you sure the blue one looks better?"

"Don't be an eejit," Erin heard Carrie say. "Of course it does."

The gentleness of the material felt odd against her skin. It hung loosely around her breasts and hips and didn't scratch at her like the farm shirts. The skirt fit easily over it, and Erin didn't need to tuck it in by hand. There was a mirror just outside the stall, and Erin approached it cautiously. Putting silk on a pig, she thought. But the girl looking back at her in the mirror

wasn't a pig, and it wasn't the girl that left home this morning. It wasn't until she took a deep breath and watched as the girl in the mirror did too that she saw herself and liked it.

“What size you take?” Carrie said from the doorway.

“What?” Erin asked.

“Size?” Carrie said pointing at her bare feet.

Erin tried to remember the size boots her mother bought her for Easter that year. “Thirty-eight, I think,” she answered.

Carrie returned a few minutes later carrying a pair of black high-heeled shoes. Erin awkwardly slipped them on. The girl in the mirror had risen. Erin laughed. She couldn't help it but couldn't stop until her eyes began to water.

“You all right?” Rose had come out from the stall next to hers.

Erin tottered away from the mirror and back into the stall. She folded the blouse and skirt into a neat pile and carefully placed the shoes on top. The sales girl had returned by the time she left the dressing room.

“Did you find anything you liked?” she asked.

Erin held up the clothes.

“Nice,” she said. “Just what I would have picked out for myself.”

“They all say that,” Carrie whispered.

Erin didn't care. She handed the girl the clothes and followed her back to the checkout trying to imitate the casual way the girl walked. Erin noticed Carrie overplaying the girl's walk and Rose overplaying Carrie's. It annoyed Erin. The girl had an elegance about her Erin admired. She would practice the girl's walk until the Harvest Dance.

Carrie and Rose waited outside the store while Erin paid with most of the money she had saved. Carrie and Rose didn't buy anything. Apparently, Rose didn't like whatever she was trying on in the fitting room.

"There's a café down the way with outdoor tables," Carrie said as Erin came out. "And we can get some sodas." Erin followed her and Rose to a storefront that was draped with white and green awnings. Carrie led them to a table obscured from the mall walk by a number of tall and slender potted shrubs. The table had not yet been cleared off from the previous customers, and Erin noticed the clean tables near the entrance but said nothing. She kept her bag in her lap. Carrie called to a busboy that came out of the café and circled her hand above the table. The busboy glanced around at the other tables but came over and cleaned the table. Carrie aired a thank you without looking at him.

"You won't look the jibber in that get up at the dance," Carrie said to Erin after the busboy left. "Who you going with?"

Erin felt embarrassed. No one had asked her, but she thought about the boy she had met on the herd path. "I know this boy," she answered quietly. She noticed Carrie was staring at her.

"You ain't pairing with no one are you?" Carrie said.

Erin didn't say anything.

"Aye, I thought so. Don't let it put a stitch in your stockings. They'll be plenty o fellas there by themselves. You can always tell them. They'll be standing about like a bunch of monkeys, letting on about how they did this thing or that. They're always talking. All you got to do is walk by and take your choice. You dance with them a bit before you take a walk down the path. It ain't a chore now that the old folks don't come. You just have to watch for McDonough, but he's always helping his missus putting food on the table.

Erin didn't say anything.

"Haven't you ever gone out to the fields with a fella?" Carrie asked.

"She ain't ever had a pogue," Rose said grinning.

Erin didn't know what to say. She had heard the word scuffled about between the other girls but wasn't sure what it meant. She didn't dare ask any of the other girls for fear of being ridiculed all the more and certainly wouldn't approach any of her teachers or her parents with such a question.

"You ain't ever kissed a boy?" Carrie asked.

Erin didn't know what she should say. She didn't want Carrie to think she was a jibber, but she was starting to feel like a pig again.

"I done a kiss or two," she lied, but I haven't ..."

"You haven't what?"

Erin dropped her head in the quiet seconds that followed. Then Carrie started laughing as if she had suddenly understood the gist of a joke. Rose stared at Carrie blankly.

"She thought we were talking about, you know," Carrie blurted out.

It took Rose a second or two before looking at Erin with large eyes. "Could you imagine what Father Jessup would be saying about the dance if he thought something like that were to be going on? We'd be in the pew for the whole afternoon."

Erin felt a tiny wave of relief settle in her chest. She'd seen a few movies from America in town and felt sure she could manage a kiss. She thought about the boy on the path.

"Don't let it bother you none," Carrie said. "You ain't gonna be no bogtrotter no more. It's all different out there now. We'll school you right enough. You give them their kiss and leave

them waiting on a church for the rest. You'll have so many fellas you'll be pushing em off like gnats."

Erin felt a twinge in her stomach, but it was a grand twinge, a tickle. She heard music playing inside the cafe. In the air she smelled something good, something sweet cooking inside.

"And I got a feeling," Carrie continued, "you probably got more hair on your legs than a half-grown heifer. I know a place. We'll take care of that."

Erin reached below the table and tugged at her pant leg to make sure it was all the way down.

A boy a bit older than the busboy came over to their table. Rose smiled at him and took off her coat. The blue satin blouse was unbuttoned just enough to show she was no longer a little girl.

The newspaper called it a Harvest Moon. It was so bright it could be seen hovering above the horizon even though the sun hadn't set yet. According to the newspaper, it had a magical influence over anyone that danced under it. Legend was a young girl would find her love in its glow. Erin hoped the boy she met on the herd path would be there that night. She had waited until her folks had gone to sit on the front porch before she detoured through the barn in back of the house and retrieved her parcel from under the loose boards in the loft. She would stop in the gully by the creek around the corner from McDonough's *sabhal* where the dance was held. She couldn't wait to shed the ankle length cotton dress her mother had made for her and feel the satin against her skin again. No pigs tonight.

A number of her co-workers had already filled the barn by the time she arrived and more were pushing their way past her to get in. Mr. McDonough and his wife were setting out the food

on a linen-covered plank supported by sawhorses. When he looked up and saw Erin he waved her over, but as she approached she could see the expression on his face turn to one of curious disapproval.

“I heard about your lunch case being tossed into the hog’s pen,” he said looking her over. “I also hear they didn’t damage it too much. Nonetheless, lass, I feel a bit responsible, and I want to replace it.” He didn’t take his eyes from Erin, but his expression softened. Erin debated if she should ask him not to mention her clothing to her parents.

A dark shadow swooped down across the table. Mr. McDonough waved his arm at it. “Bloody Barn Swallows,” he said. “Thought we got rid of them when we cleared their nests out.” It perched on a low rafter and flicked its head as if it couldn’t get enough of a view at a single glance. It had a shiny blue head and wings and an orange belly that captured the glow from the string lights that had been hung on the barn walls.

“It’s pretty,” Erin said.

“It may be at that,” Mr. McDonough said. “But it’s a nuisance. Diving at you whenever you walk into the barn. Confident little buggers. Always thinking better of themselves than they are.”

Erin stepped away from the light over the table and tugged at her skirt. It inched down a bit. She started to feel exposed. She was glad there were no mirrors in the barn.

“Probably hiding in here from the Scops Owl outside,” he said. “Been hearing that thing for the past few nights now. Sounded like one you girls was screaming. Never heard one before. Somebody told me they was coming across from the continent. First time I heard it, I went out with a load of buckshot. Darned if I could find it. Aye, that little shiny bugger is probably better off showing off his colors in here.”

“You made it,” Carrie said. “Would you mind if I took her from you for a while?” Carrie asked McDonough.

“You youngin’s have a time,” he responded without taking his eyes from the swallow.

Carrie yanked Erin away by her arm. Rose followed close behind.

The center of the floor had been swept clean of hay and swallow droppings clean to the rolling doors at the far end. The descending sun through the doors had turned the floor crimson. It reflected on the band that was playing on a makeshift barn plank stage elevated a meter or so above the floor. It was as if the platform and its players had been brought up from the depths just to lure anyone listening on to the dance floor. Carrie was leading her toward a group of boys that were standing near the doorway.

“C’mon,” she said. “Better than standing there letting that old blighter stare you up.”

“I wouldn’t say he was ...”

Before she could finish, Carrie hooked her by the arm and whirled her around until they were facing the boys near the doorway.

“Oye, Babs,” a tall boy standing near Carrie said. “Where’d you go? I looked about and you’d gone off. Who’s this?”

“It’s a friend a mine,” Carrie responded. “Her name’s Erin. We work together in the fields, but she ain’t no bogtrotter, at least not no more she ain’t.”

Erin remembered seeing a few of the boys around McDonough's farm but only from a distance. If they weren't tending the cattle or the pigs, they were hanging around one of the girls working the fields. None of them ever stopped by her fields, but then Carrie was probably right; she was a bogtrotter, or at least had been. She became conscious of the way her satin blouse felt

against her skin, and even more so, the way the way the boys were looking at her. She felt her blood rushing to her face; only this time it felt good.

“Good meeting you, Erin,” the tall boy said. “I’m Kyle, and this here’s me crew. We’re up in the old man’s stockyard.” Kyle stepped toward Erin and extended his arms. Carrie stepped in between them.

“Don’t you be getting your hopes up, mind you,” she said. “Didn’t bring her here for you.”

“Hey, girl. Didn’t mean nothing.”

“Yeah, I know what you’re meaning”, Carrie said. She turned toward Erin and winked at her. “Been with you enough to know how you and your boys are. Only one of you even got a bit of manners in you. Get out here, Doyle.” The other boys laughed and pushed a shorter boy with sandy hair out front. Erin recognized him. He was the boy she met on the herd path that afternoon.

Silence. Erin noticed he had cleaned his field boots.

“Don’t be an eejit,” Carrie whispered in her ear. “Say hello and go dance with him.”

Silence. Was he looking at her?

“Well ain’t you gonna say anything, Doyle?” Carrie asked. “You only been talking our bloody ears off for the last few days.”

Erin looked up gingerly. He *was* looking at her.

“Erin,” she said and took a breath.

“I remember you from the field,” Doyle said.

“I was working, and I was dirty from the barley, and it was hot and ...” Erin broke off. She didn’t want to give him the impression she was a gack. The band had just finished playing a tune she didn’t recognize and began playing a song by Van Morrison. Her parents had given her a CD

player and two CD's her father picked up at the Dublin Market at her last birthday. Erin knew it was all he could afford. One of the CD's was Van Morrison's *Avalon Sunset*. Her father didn't know the artist or the CD, but the vendor at the market had told him young people liked it, so he bought it for her. Erin's favorite song on the CD was "Have I Told You Lately." This band's version was a bit off, but she could picture herself liking it just fine with Doyle. She waited.

"Well?" Carrie said and jabbed Doyle with her elbow.

"Would you like to dance?" Doyle asked. His voice was stronger than she remembered which made it easier to say yes. He took her hand and led her to the floor. It was already crowded. More people must have liked this song than the last. Erin could blend in.

As they danced Erin could feel his body pull her along. He had a reassuring strength she could lean on. It didn't matter how poorly she danced. Her high heel caught a floor board, and she stumbled once, but Doyle held on to her while she repositioned her foot back into her shoe. She could feel his muscular body beneath his shirt. Little wonder why the cattle he was leading that day didn't resist. The rhythmic beat of the song filled her, and by the song's end she didn't care if there was anyone else on the floor.

Erin lost track of how many songs came and went in the time she and Doyle were on the dance floor. Finally, Doyle asked her if she was hungry. She wasn't but said yes. Doyle led her to the food table McDonough had been preparing. He handed her a plate and began filling one for himself. She watched him. He reminded her of her father. Her mother once told her a strong appetite is a sign of a good sturdy man. The kind of man that will build you a home and a family. Erin smiled and placed a share of cabbage salad on her plate.

There were chairs against a far wall that were empty for the most part. Erin followed Doyle to a pair away from the other that were sitting along the wall. Erin held her plate in one

hand as her mother had taught her to do in public. Doyle forked food into his mouth as if he were tossing hay into a loft. But then her father did the same thing, often to her mother's embarrassment. She didn't see Carrie approaching through the crowd until she flopped on the chair beside Erin.

"Bout time you guys took a break," Carrie said. She looked down at Erin's plate. "Is that cabbage? You know what they do with the outside leaves on those, don't you? They put them in the slit bucket for the hogs. But then they got extra if they run outta salad."

Erin put her fork down.

"Just putting you on, Erin." Carrie looked past her to Doyle who was still busy with his plate and leaned toward Erin. "He's got an eye for you, you know. Saw him peeking at your legs when you were going for the table. Play him good, and I'll see you out back later." Carrie jumped out of the chair and disappeared into the crowd.

Erin placed her plate on her lap and tried to casually inch down the hem of her skirt. After each tug it slipped defiantly back into place. Erin glanced at Doyle. He didn't seem to notice. Had he really been looking at her legs? They weren't thin and full of shape like Carrie's but full of bulky muscle from walking about. The other girls on the dance floor were also well rounded like Carrie. They were modern girls. Erin thought of the salesgirl at Kilkenny's and looked down at her plate. There were still a few soggy cabbage leaves left.

"You look real nice," Doyle said.

Erin wondered if he had heard Carrie or if he noticed her tugging at her skirt. Either way she suddenly felt out of place and wanted to melt back into the crowd. "You want to dance some more?" she asked hoping he would. Doyle took her plate and his to a disposal can near the food table. As he walked back, Erin began to feel better. He *was* looking, she thought. But her relief

only dulled her anxiety. He said she looked nice, but this wasn't really her, only a part of her. A new part she wasn't sure of. As they started to dance, she thought about the salesgirl again. Maybe someday she would have that confidence, but right now she felt she needed a way to tell Doyle this was only a shell put on in a boutique in Roscommon. The real Erin was the girl in canvas togs he met on the path near the woods that day. But would he have looked at her legs if he could have? Would they be dancing now had she kept her mother's long dress on?

The band started playing a slow song, and Erin felt Doyle slip his arm around her waist. She wondered if he thought she were fat. She remembered coming home from school one day and seeing her father humming and dancing with her mother in the kitchen. "You're a plump one," her father told her mother. "But you still have a crook for me arm and that'll do me fine." Erin had her own crook. It may have been more muscular than some of the other girl's, but so was Doyle's arm. "Everything in time," she heard her mother say in her head.

Erin felt the music whirl about the walls of the old barn and sweep in about her. The strung lights overhead made the rafters of the dilapidated barn glow with new life. She and Doyle danced, talked, and danced again until the sun outside the sliding doors had long gone and the trees outside were brightly lit by the light the harvest moon provided. Erin felt like the world was lit just for her. She was, for a little while, a princess in linen and satin and hi-heeled shoes.

More people arrived. Those that couldn't squeeze on to the dance floor, bopped, whirled, and hopped about near the chairs. The air coming in through the doors was still warm from the day, yet it had the sweet smell of the night sweeping across fresh cut fields. Mr. McDonough was sitting high on the edge of the loft, looking pleased with himself, surveying the dance floor. Had the older folks still come to the Harvest Dance, it would have been breaking up by now. The

women would have been collecting their dishes, and the men would have been finishing their speculations and arguments about the year's crop prices. But this was a new Ireland, a modern Ireland, a young person's Ireland and the old folks – other than Mr. McDonough – celebrated the harvest at the feed store in the village, which was more convenient for talking about politics and the rich economy.

Erin untucked her shirt and shook it to keep it from sticking to her.

“You care to take a walk?” Doyle asked.

“Can we?” she said. “It's a might hot in here.”

She and Doyle pushed their way through the crowd. Erin breathed in the cool air just outside the doors. Doyle paused a second and began walking toward the barley field behind the barn. He stopped at the corner and stared at the moonlit fields like a general surveying a battlefield. Erin's blouse was still damp from her sweat, so she let it hang loose hoping the night air would dry it out. She walked up beside Doyle. He took her hand and slowly headed down the herd path. He appeared lost in thought. Erin wondered if they were thoughts about his future. She wondered if she would have any part in them but then quietly chastised herself for jumping ahead of the rabbit as McDonough would say. Maybe Doyle was just enjoying the sweet night air.

Along the herd path, Erin heard branches crackling and an occasional giggle coming from the woods. But the moonlight only penetrated a half a meter in, and beyond that, darkness hid whoever was there. At one point Erin heard Carrie's voice followed by her snorting laugh. Doyle didn't seem to notice. He glanced at her now and again but didn't say anything. The way his fingers intermingled with hers and held them snugly was enough for her. She grew confident that whatever Doyle was thinking she had a part in it. She thought about her mother and father and

what it would be like being a wife and mother herself. Would they be farmers? Would they move to the city and take jobs in one of the new office buildings that her father told her were springing up on almost every block? Maybe they would go to Roscommon and open a small shop. In that moment her parent's life didn't seem so backward. There went that rabbit again. Erin tightened her grip on Doyle's hand. He looked over, smiled and nodded further up the herd path.

The music from the barn had long faded and the air from the field smelled sweeter than ever when Doyle stopped. A pair of sunken wheel tracks crossed the path and disappeared into the woods. Erin recognized them from Mr. McDonough's cart. Doyle was looking at her. In her head she heard Carrie's and Rose's voices. *She ain't ever had a pogue. You ain't ever kissed a boy?* She saw the salesgirl in the black dress. She saw her mother and father dancing in the kitchen and saw her own kitchen in her own house. When she lowered her head, she noticed her black shoes were covered in pieces of barley stalks. Her feet looked tiny like little black stumps in the dim light. She followed Doyle into the woods.

They came across McDonough's cart a short distance in. Doyle boosted Erin on to the back of the cart where there was room to sit, before hopping up and sitting alongside her. The woods were damp, and Erin could barely make out Doyle's form except for the instants when the breeze parted the branches overhead and briefly lit his face like a flickering candle. She felt his hard callused hand slide along her cheek and nudge her face toward his. His face was warm, and she could smell the saltiness of his skin. It reminded her of how the air smelled when her parents took her to the shore last year. Erin pressed back against his lips. She wondered what her first pogue would feel like. She kept her face still and waited for the second.

She waited barely a heartbeat before she felt Doyle put his arm around her shoulders and gently pull her close to him. She inched herself closer until she felt her hip against his. The breeze

blew time around them. Doyle eased Erin back on to the cart and lay beside her. His hand stroked her face, neck, and dropped to her chest. Erin shivered. She didn't want to push him away or spoil the night, but she knew she had to make a line. She took his hand and lightly pushed it aside. Doyle leaned back on to his side.

"I was just playing with you," he said.

"We'd best mind ourselves," Erin answered quietly.

"Then what'd you come out here for?"

"The same reason that Carrie and the others came for," Erin answered. "I thought you wanted to kiss me"

"We could 'a done that back at the dance."

"With Mr. McDonough looking down upon us? He'd shame us both."

"Who gives a bloody hell what that old bullock thinks," Doyle snapped back.

The breeze through the tree tops struck a queer pattern of stripes across Doyle's face. His expression had changed. It scared Erin.

"Maybe we should go back to the dance," she said trying to steady her voice.

"When I've had my come up'ins."

Erin tried to pull her arms in, but she felt Doyle's weight move on top of her. She felt a tug at her skirt and tried to kick him off, but Doyle was strong and her skirt gave way. A cold wind lashed over the cart. Somewhere in the woods Erin heard the Scops owl.

Over the next couple of days, Erin made sure she left early for school and went straight for her room when she returned, bypassing her mother's bewildered expressions. When questioned about her day at the supper table, she found it easier to choke out one or two word answers. She

was afraid of breaking into tears. In town, no one questioned her silence. For the first time she appreciated having a reputation about the village of being a quiet loner. She didn't see Doyle except to pass him in the hallway at school a time or two. Only once, when he was with his friends did he look at her and grin, but it wasn't a warm grin. His friends slapped and punched his shoulders as Erin had seen them do after scoring a goal on the rugby field. When Doyle was alone, he didn't acknowledge her at all. It was as if she were a wispy face in the crowded hallway. But she was grateful for his feigned blindness. And jealous. She wished for her own blindness, a place where she could exile the memory of that night and not see it. She was forced to contend with the nights alone in her bed. But then she had the sheets to keep her face dry and the down mattress to muffle her cries.

Erin avoided Carrie and Rose. She knew Carrie would ask her about her first pogue and she wouldn't know how to answer her. A part of her wanted to talk to Carrie, but Rose would be there. She was always there as if she were an ornament Carrie wore about her waist for lack of anything better. Erin didn't trust Rose to keep anything to herself. Fortunately, the new economy had allowed their school to expand, and there were enough classrooms to duck into and hallways to take the long way around.

On a Saturday morning, when Shaughnessy's Market received their weekly shipment of fresh vegetables, Erin volunteered to do the shopping. She had discovered running errands for her mother was a good way of escaping the stifling weightiness of the house. Her mother didn't question her offers any more than she questioned her silence.

The truck carrying the vegetables backed in, and the waiting crowd made their way to the rear of the open bed. Erin hesitated until the thick of them had passed. There was always plenty,

and what the crowd didn't take would be piled on to Shaughnessy's shelves. It gave her that much more appreciated time.

"Well ain't we the bloody li'l learner."

Erin turned and saw Carrie walking toward her followed closely by Rose. She felt her stomach jump a loop.

"I haven't seen you since the dance," Carrie said. "Having it on your own now are we?"

Erin said nothing and wished she had moved with the crowd.

"You get her some new togs and becomes a bloody vixen," Carrie said to Rose in a mocking tone. "We're telling you about getting a pogue and your hoisting your hems. What! You been fooling with us all this time?" She laughed and grabbed Erin by the shoulders. "Aye, don't pay me no mind. I'm just acting the maggot. Didn't figure you, that's all."

"It's not how you think," Erin said. She hadn't realized it before, but she hated the way Carrie laughed. She hated it even more now that she thought Erin was her friend.

"Aye, right," Carrie responded.

"I didn't ..."

"Nah, you didn't," Carrie said and laughed.

"Doyle ..."

"Heard you were on him like a flea," Rose said. "Doyle and his crew told everyone..."

"Get off," Carrie cut her short, but not soon enough.

Erin's stomach turned again and jumped into her throat.

"Aye, look here, Erin," Carrie said. "Some of the fellas and us girls are cutting out next Friday and going into the city. You wanna hook up and go along? Doyle's tagging in. Maybe you could have another go with him."

Erin ran behind the market and heaved until she felt there was nothing left inside her. She knelt, her arms crossed over her stomach praying she could push everything out of her, the dance, the clothes, Doyle, Carrie,...Rose. Maybe if she prayed. She clenched her hands together, but all she could see was Doyle's face going in and out of the moonlight. So strong, so ugly. She put her hands over her face and let the rest of herself out.

Some time passed before Erin found the strength to right herself and sit against the market wall. She didn't know how long she had been there, but she was empty. The ground beside her had absorbed all the pain she had heaved on it without leaving a trace. It was as if nothing had happened. It was the way it was before she got there and would be that way when she left. In that nothingness, Erin pulled something from herself that allowed her to stand up. She breathed in and smelled the vegetables on the breeze. It was sour. There was a spigot jutting up from the ground. The water felt cool, reassuring against her face. She wiped her hands against her canvas pants and walked out from behind the market. Carrie and Rose were gone. Erin wondered if they peeked behind the market before they left, but she was surprised to find she didn't care.

The crowd had made their selections for the most part, and the market was thinning of people. No one paid her any mind. She didn't care. Three ears of corn, a green pepper, and a tomato. Nothing more. The girl at the register was wearing jean overalls and a bogtrotter's smile. She rang up Erin's picks and looked at her blankly as if nothing in the world existed for her but those vegetables. Erin envied her. The girl didn't care. She didn't need to. There was strength in that emptiness. Erin wiped her hands on her canvas overalls and hugged the girl. Whatever was in her was gone. There would be no more crying for what couldn't be undone. She would put that night and the lot of them into the ground with her misery.

Over the first few days at school after harvest recess, Erin began to feel more like the person she had been. She noticed some people she had only seen in passing said hello to her. She smiled back, which was getting easier now, and nodded. By Wednesday, she discovered she had made some new friends. She was talking with two of these friends at the end of her noon Irish language class when the office secretary, Mrs. McAurley approached her and requested Erin escort her to the Monsignor's office. The Monsignor's door was closed, which was rare. He seemed always glad to have student's drop by to say hello. He had even admonished Mrs. McAurley that any student who wished to see him should be allowed to do so without interference.

Mrs. McAurley told her to wait, but the wait wasn't long. Within a few minutes, Monsignor Sullivan came out with Doyle.

"I'm very disappointed with you, lad," Erin heard him say. "I would've thought you would have had more self control than that. Go back to class, and we'll speak later."

Doyle briefly glanced at Erin as he left.

"Young lady," Monsignor Sullivan said in a sterner voice he had used on Doyle. "I don't know what to say to you."

Erin started toward his office, but Monsignor Sullivan caught her by the arm before she could go in.

"That won't be necessary," he said. "You will be excused for the rest of the day. I want you to go directly home. Do you understand me, young lady?"

Erin swallowed hard and thought about the patch of dirt in the back of the market. "Yes sir," she said quietly.

There was a black car parked on the dirt easement in front of her house. A priest in a black hat sat behind the wheel. He was an older man with a thick jaw that made his face look almost perfectly square. He didn't turn to look at Erin as she passed.

Her mother and father were in the sitting room with Father Jessup. Her mother sat with her knees together and her hands tightly folded one over the other. Although she didn't look up when Erin came in, Erin could see her face was wet. Her father's face was set in a stern expression she had seen when he was still a farmer and negotiating a price for his crop. He had told her, there were times when it was best not to regard friends and family.

"Come in, child," Father Jessup said.

Erin sat on the floor and hugged her book bag. It was still warm and sweaty from her back. She needed that warmth.

"Tell us about the dance," her mother said.

"I don't want to hear anything about the dance," her father snapped. "All we need to know, woman, is right here." Her father tossed the clothes Erin had hidden back in the barn after the dance. They were still soiled from Mr. McDonough's cart.

"Women were brought from the rib of man as a foul temptation," Father Jessup murmured. "Only through the redemption of God can they take their rightful place beside man."

Her mother started crying.

"Where did these come from?" her father asked.

"I got them in Roscommon," Erin said into her book bag.

"Don't I keep you and your mother clothed?" her father snapped again. "Do you see your mother wearing this ... this ..."

Erin felt her hands shaking.

“Curse the time the wretch of the world outside of Ireland laid its claws to our young girls,” Father Jessup said clasping his hands together. “It's not you that they wound, child.”

“What do these do for you,” her father said holding out one of the hi-heeled shoes. “Can you work the farm in these? Can you bring in the harvest? Can you girl?”

“We reap what we sow,” Father Jessup said to him laying a hand on his shoulder.

Erin's mother put her face in her hands. Father Jessup put his arm around her.

“She's not lost to you,” he said. “She's not lost to anyone. Are you child?”

Erin's throat closed in on her. All she could do is shake her head.

“I'll pack her some clothes,” her mother managed to stutter out.

“They'll provide her with everything she will need,” Father Jessup replied.

“I'll burn these,” her father said dropping the clothes from the barn to floor beside him.

Her mother bolted off her chair and embraced Erin. “We'll be here when you get back.”

“She will write you,” Father Jessup said. “Father Teague runs the school. He and I came through the seminary together. He'll make sure of it.”

Erin's father grabbed her mother by the arm and yanked her away.

“She'll come back as the daughter you've known,” Father Jessup said. “And a woman fit to be proud of. She won't need these either.” He took hold of Erin's book bag. Erin gripped tighter as if the last piece of her were being torn away.

“Let go of them, child,” Father Jessup said. “We'll give you new ones.”

Erin held on.

“I'll not see you embarrass us any further, girl,” her father yelled and grabbed the bag away.

Erin felt naked. Even more so than when she first stepped out of the fitting room in Roscommon. She was alone. She didn't recognize the people in front of her. The sobbing, silent woman, the angry man, and the patient man in black ... black. She couldn't be a part of them. She remembered the piece of ground behind the market and wondered if everything she had retched into it was bubbling to the surface.

Father Jessup reached down to help her up. Erin moved her arm away from his hand. Her father started to say something, but Father Jessup waved him off with a gesture. Erin stood up and walked to the door. This was not her family. She didn't live here anymore.

Father Jessup held the back door to the car open for Erin and got in beside her. The priest in the black hat didn't say anything. Neither did Erin.

Reap the Harvest

Part 2: Our Lady of Charity

Erin stripped off her clothing and dropped each item into the cardboard box as she was instructed. Father Teague said nothing. He merely leaned back against the desk and watched intently. She tried hard not to cry, but she felt the hot air of the office against her breasts, and the first tears rolled down her face. She tried to hide them by lowering her head more than it already was, but Father Teague caught her by the chin and pulled her head upright.

“Don’t pretend modesty here, girl,” he said in a calm voice. “I am well aware of why you are here. Mary Magdalene came into the service of Christ after much of the same lifestyle. You will follow in her wake and find Christ yourself. Continue.”

When the last of her clothes was in the box, Father Teague removed a folded garment off his desk and shook it open, a brown cotton dress with large buttons down the front. She reached for it, but Father Teague draped the garment over his arm and slapped her hand. Erin felt a draft of hot air that penetrated her worn, cotton underwear and tried to cross her arms in front of her.

“Stand there, girl, and do not be presumptuous,” he said in a temperate but impatient voice. “That part of your life is over, and you will atone for it here.” He tossed the dress on his desk.

“Father,” Erin started.

“You will speak only when you are addressed by myself or one of the sisters,” he said. “And you will do as you are instructed by us. Am I clear on this point?”

“Yes,” Erin whispered. She pulled her arms in tight against her sides and fought off the urge to cry again.

“You will address me as Father and the sisters as Mother,” he said. “Try again.”

“Yes, Father,” Erin said.

Father Teague picked up a paper from his desk and read it for a very long time before looking up at her, “Erin,” he said. “What would possess your parents to give you such a name? Unless...they were given a divine clue as to what you would become. Your name here will be Maura after Saint Maura of Troyes. She was a woman who earned God’s grace through obedience and servitude to the church. Try not to disgrace the name you’ve been given.”

He handed her the brown dress and watched as she put it on. Erin felt as if the entire world was peering in on her. She buttoned it up as quick as her fingers would let her and kept reminding herself he was a priest. God had purged earthly urges from him. And if God had done that, what did he grant him in its stead? Who was she to question God or Father Teague for that matter? She couldn’t bring herself to look at him. In the back of her mind she could see the short black skirt and the satin blouse, covered with the straw from the cart when she hid them under the barn boards. They were filthy, filthy. Why hadn’t she cleaned them? She had the opportunity. Maybe they didn’t deserve to be cleaned any more than she did.

There was a knock on the office door, and Father Teague responded by telling the knocker to enter. A woman Erin thought to be in her late sixties, clad in a brown dress similar to the one given to Erin, came in. She lowered her head as soon as she entered as if she had been doing it a very long time. Father Teague gestured to the box on the floor. The woman picked it up and scurried out of the office closing the door behind her.

“The other women will instruct you as to your duties, which I trust you will, at the very least, be able to handle adequately,” Father Teague said. “If not, I will leave any corrective measures to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. Sister Carleen will be here at any time now. You may have a seat on that chair.”

“Yes, Father,” Erin said quietly.

“Is that all you have to say?” Father Teague said not looking at her.

“Thank you, Father.” Erin paused to see if he would say anything else, but he went back to his work at his desk. Erin sat quietly with her hands between her knees.

She wasn’t sure how long it was before Sister Carleen came for her. When she did, she was holding a green metal box with a large padlock on it. Father Teague took it and thanked her.

Sister Carleen beckoned to Erin. “Come with me, girl,” she snapped.

Erin followed Sister Carleen with her head bowed and hands folded, the way she had seen the altar boys follow Father Jessup, so not to irritate Father Teague, but he didn’t look up from his desk. A hand struck her on the back of her head.

“I haven’t the time to waste on you... ” Sister Carleen looked back at Father Teague.

“Maura,” Father Teague said without looking up.

“How nice,” Sister Carleen said. “I trust you thanked Father Teague.”

“No, Mother,” Erin replied softly. She felt another slap on the back of her head. “Thank you, Father.”

Sister Carleen stared at her from outside the office door. Erin followed and closed the office door as softly as she could. She heard Sister Carleen’s footsteps moving down the hall and caught up to her.

“Stay behind me, Maura,” Sister Carleen said. “The less God sees of you, the less you will offend him. Keep your hands together.”

Erin watched the gray, speckled tiles pass under her feet. They were spotless. So were the mortar walls, at least what she could see of them. Erin wondered what was behind all the doors but decided it was better not to ask. She almost bumped into Sister Carleen when she stopped to

unlock an arched wooden door. While Sister Carleen fumbled with a set of keys she had removed from her tunic, Erin peeked to the far end of the hall. There was a tall, wooden door bordered by thin windows. Bright sunlight glared in almost blinding her. Erin felt sure it was a door to the outside of the school. She had been delivered through a rear door that was much older and not kept up as well as this one was. If she ran fast enough, Sister Carleen in her tunic would probably not be able to catch her before she made it through the door, but what then? Erin heard Sister Carleen insert her key into the door in the wall.

Sister Carleen pushed Erin through in front of her and locked the door behind her. There was a flight of stairs going up through a plaster tunnel. The space between the door and the first step was barely big enough for her and the Sister, and Erin didn't dare step up over Sister Carleen. She squeezed herself against the wall trying hard not to rub against the Sister's tunic. Erin waited until the sister passed before she moved.

The stairs echoed through the tunnel. A single light bulb hung at the top of the stairs. As Erin followed Sister Carleen, she searched for each step, being in the sister's shadow. The hall at the top was dimly lit and much longer than the hallway they had left. There were no more cleansed tiles on the floor. Erin couldn't tell what color they were. She wasn't sure if she cared. A faint sound of steam hissing echoed down the hall, but she didn't dare look about her. The sound got louder as they walked.

They had gone a considerable distance before Sister Carleen abruptly turned through an archway, beyond which was a large room with at least thirty or forty other women, a few Erin's age, one or two younger than her. The girls her age were operating steam presses the length of a mule or more. They loaded laundry on, pressed them, and took it off again like this was all they had been doing for a very long time, the same cycle at the same pace. Something about it scared

Erin. Load, press, unload, fold...again. She looked about for some break in the routine. She noticed a girl with short, black hair that looked familiar. Erin stared at her. When the girl turned to take a piece of laundry from the cart, Erin drew in a breath. It was Kaylee, the girl from Roscommon who was sent away last year. Erin felt her stomach tighten. After she left, nothing had been said about her. There were only the rumors and very few of them. Erin wondered if it was true about the baby. Where was the baby? Erin watched as the older women pushed carts in from an archway at the back of the room. Was this what the younger ones would become? Was this to become her lot? Another turn tightened, and Erin put her hands across her stomach. A strong hand grasped her shoulder.

“Keep your eyes to your front, child,” a stern voice said.

“This is Sister Zinna,” Sister Carleen said to Erin. “She will place you.”

The hand clamped harder on her shoulder and pushed her toward another girl at one of the steam presses. “Watch her,” Sister Zinna said and let go.

Erin peeked to the side and saw Sister Carleen pick up the box with her clothes and leave through the door at the rear. She got scared. She wanted her clothes back. She would burn the clothes she bought in Roscommon and work Mr. McDonough’s fields for nothing if she could only have her clothes back and go home.

A hand slapped her on the back of her head. A harder slap this time. Erin looked down at the floor. Her eyes watered. For a moment, the cement floor looked like the ground behind Shaughnessy’s Market, but the floor was wet. Steam hissed.

When she heard the Sister’s footsteps moving away, she slowly looked up. The girl standing next to her was taller but not much older. Her short, red hair was pulled back and banded by a length of cloth. She didn’t look at Erin as she spoke.

“I’m Caira,” she whispered sneaking a glance toward the front of the room. “Just watch what I do, and you’ll be okay. Grab a tablecloth from the bin.”

Erin removed a cloth from the cart near the press and handed it to Caira. It was a finely woven tablecloth with a design etched into it, the kind Erin had seen on the some of the restaurant tables in Roscommon. Caira laid it on the press and closed the top in one fluent motion. The steam gushed out the press' seam and scorched Erin’s neck and face. She stepped back.

“Hold your ground there, girl,” Caira said looking quickly at the nun who had propped herself behind a desk near the front. “You’ll get used to it.”

Erin stepped back to the press wondering how. Then she noticed Caira’s hands. They belonged to someone much older, sixty or maybe seventy. They were sorely lined and so red the freckles on her arms disappeared below her wrists.

“Please God,” Erin whispered.

“He can’t hear you in here,” Caira said. “So you better learn to do without the bloody beggar.”

“You’ll be quiet or I’ll put me stick across your backsides,” another voice echoed across the room. The presses hissed in response.

“That’s Donelle,” Caira said. “I hear she’s been here since nineteen fifty something.”

Erin tilted her head toward the press but shifted her eyes in Donelle’s direction. A much older woman with gray and white hair pulled into a ponytail and wearing a dress similar to her and Caira, strutted along the wall. Her hands, clasped behind her back, held a long thin rod that wavered like a lizard’s tail.

Caira's press hissed. "Watch what I do, and you'll keep clear of her, that is, unless she gets a bug for you." Caira lifted the press lid, shifted the sheet away from her, and closed the lid. Hiss. "Throw another on," she said as she opened the press and drew the sheet off. Erin pulled another from the bin and positioned it on the press while Caira folded the pressed sheet and placed it in another bin. "Keep it coming," Caira said. "We don't want to end up with the short stack."

"It's passing the hour of seven," Sister Zinna announced. "Finish what you have and shut down."

Erin's arms felt rubbery and ached from deep within. But she had kept up with Caira. Erin saw the other girls who were loading the presses wheel their bins to the front of the room and scurry back. Caira nodded her head in their direction, and Erin pushed her cart alongside the others. When the last hiss had faded from the room, the girls lined up in the aisle. Sister Zinna put away her embroidery while Donelle inspected the bins. She whispered to Sister Zinna.

"All but Theresa and Maria will follow me," Sister Zinna said. Erin heard a muffled cry from a girl at the next press. She guessed it was either Theresa or Maria.

Sister Zinna proceeded down the hallway, and the rest of the girls followed her. They were no more than a few doors when Erin heard the shrieks from the laundry room. No one looked back. They followed Sister Zinna through a maze of hallways and up another staircase that kept going from landing to landing. When they arrived at the top, Sister Zinna produced a set of keys and opened the door. She stood by while the line of girls filed past her into an open room with an arched plaster ceiling and bare wood showing through in spots. There were several rows of two by four post beds that hadn't even the pretext of being painted or cared for. Each was neatly tucked in with clean white sheets and coarse, brown blankets.

“I will check on you presently,” Sister Zinna said and left closing the door behind her. Erin heard the key.

“You did okay today,” Caira said. “You’ll be a good partner. Get your togs from the end bed and bring them over here next to mine.”

“That’s my cot,” a lanky, dark-haired girl said to Caira.

“The new girl’s sleeping with me, and you can shut your hole about it,” Caira snapped.

The dark-haired girl took a small packet of neatly folded clothes from under the bed and walked off toward the end cot. Erin retrieved her packet – two folded brown dresses similar to the one she was wearing, four pairs of thick white socks, four pairs of white cotton underpants, and a long flannel nightshirt – and brought them back to the bed next to Caira.

“What’s your name?” Caira asked.

“Erin.”

“Is that your name or the name they gave you?”

“Mine,” Erin said.

“What are they calling you?”

“Maura.”

“Get used to it and forget about who you used to be,” Caira said. “And best get used to the idea you’re going to be here awhile.”

Erin picked up the pile of clothes and gripped them against her chest. “What are you saying?”

“Look about you,” Caira said. “Some of these bloody women been here thirty or forty years, and I don’t know how long that eejit’s been about.” Caira looked up in the direction of a woman slipping on her nightgown. Her face looked as if it had been chiseled from stone, and the

bits of her hands that weren't burned from the press had blue veins protruding along their backside. Course gray hair that reminded Erin of saddle wire fell just short of her shoulders.

When the woman looked up Erin noticed she had the same color eyes as her own and felt a surge in her stomach. "How long have you been here?" she asked Caira.

"Three years I think. Maybe more. I used to count, but it doesn't matter anymore. I ain't got no family, and I ain't got no one that's gives a bloody damn."

Erin glanced back at the woman who was slipping her feet beneath her blanket. The feeling in her stomach rose into her chest. She forced a breath. She didn't know what time it was, how long she had been in Father Teague's office, how long she had been in the press room. She couldn't even tell how long she had been in the dorm. Erin looked about for a clock. The stucco walls of the dorm were dotted with holes where the plaster had fallen out, and wood strips shown through and gray splotches where the strips had been plastered over. But there was no clock, no movement of hands, no indication that time ever existed in here. Kaylee was putting on her nightgown a few cots down. She didn't seem to recognize Erin, but then, they had never been close at school. Kaylee lotted herself with the town girls.

"What got you in here?" Caira asked.

Erin was grateful for the sound of Caira's voice. "I liked this boy, but he took advantages."

"At least you had some fun," Caira said and grinned. "The most I ever got was a kiss, but one of them even paid me for it. Would 'a let him do me the dirty for a few more. Oh, what the bloody hell."

Erin heard the door unlock. Sister Zinna stepped to one side. Theresa and Maria walked to their cots clenching their hands in front of them. Sister Zinna shut the door and locked it. The

shorter one, a girl with light brown hair that came down around her shoulders, tried to sit on her cot twice before running into the bathroom at the far end of the bedroom.

“Aye, wipe your bleeding hole before I come in there and wallop ya me self,” said the other girl who had come in with her. She was a tall, muscular girl who could have passed for a boy had she a deeper voice.

“That’s Theresa,” Caira said. “I’ve seen her get the lash and smile the whole time. A strange one, that one is.”

Erin noticed the other women in the room had become quiet. She didn’t hear the girl in the bathroom either. She felt sorry for her and appreciated getting paired up with Caira.

The other women in the room were busy shedding their dresses and wiggling into their nightgowns. Some let their dresses fall from under their nightgowns while others stripped to their underpants in full view of the other girls in the room. Two women in the next row had stripped and were facing each other. One gently stroked the other’s breast. The other shot a glance at the door and gave her a kiss on her cheek. Erin looked about. None of the other girls took notice. It was as if they didn't care, or worse yet, it was part of their time here. Erin turned back to her cot and purged the image from her head.

“You better get changed before Sister Zinna gets back,” Caira said. "She expects us to be in our cots or you'll be put in for penance." Caira pointed to a door near the entrance to the dormitory.

Erin was not one to bare herself in public and found it constricting to slip her dress off from under her nightgown. She wondered how long she would have to do this. How long would it take her father to forgive her? She would write him tomorrow and tell him how sorry she was for not being a proper daughter. Maybe her mother had changed his mind. Maybe he would come

get her and bring her home. She heard Sister Zinna's footsteps on the floor outside the door. The women hastened into their cots and pulled their blankets up tight against them. Erin followed their example. She forgot about the girl in the bathroom.

Sister Zinna open the door and looked about. "Where's Maria?" she said.

No one said anything.

Sister Zinna went into the bathroom. Erin heard a slap and a sharp cry. Sister Zinna reappeared holding Maria by the hair. When she let go, Maria ran to her bed, changed into her nightgown, and got under the covers. Erin could see the pain on her face as she slid her legs in. Sister Zinna strode back to the door, turned and surveyed the room. Her face was expressionless. Erin had seen the look before and knew it would be awhile before her father came for her. She would write him anyway. Sister Zinna turned out the light and locked the door. The dormitory was dark except for a stained glass gable window that reflected a dim light from someplace far away. Erin gripped her blanket until she felt her palms through it. Silence.

"My name's Ulicia," Cairra said from her bunk.

Erin became grateful there were no clocks in the convent. She remembered being in school in Fuerty and waiting for the last few minutes of class to end. It took forever, and it scared her to think forever was all she had to look forward to. Time was suspended above them like an endless snake that took delight in choosing its next meal. It pleased itself by spitting out the seconds of the month, the hours of the year until they were too numerous to count. The sisters dictated their comings and goings that began their days and ended them. In between there were the meals unless they were behind in their work allotment. The nights were the longest, and that was when the snake hissed the loudest, taunting them with memories and striking at the first muffled cry.

Erin learned to block the snake out by screaming inside herself while letting her body keep at its task. She watched the other women and learned as closely as she was able under the scrutiny of the sisters. The sister's strict daily routine made it easier. Every so often, Caira would slip her some advice. For the most part, Erin was able to avoid any serious admonishments except from Donelle who seemed to enjoy her occasional whip to the back of Erin's legs. "Strong sturdy farm legs" she once whispered in Erin's ear. Her breath sickened Erin.

With Caira's help Erin also learned how to feign sleep to the point of resisting a stick strike across her buttocks through the blankets without stirring. She was able to avoid penance on a number of occasions by volunteering to read scripture at supper. The sisters sometimes locked one of the women into the closet as punishment. It was just big enough for a tall woman to kneel and touch the inside of the door if she extended her toes. A crucifix hung on the back wall although it couldn't be seen once the door closed. Alone with God and her thoughts in the dark, a woman was supposed to think about why she was in there and beg God's forgiveness. The few times Erin was in there she only felt alone.

Most of all, Erin learned to judge the time by the embroidery on the linens that passed through their hands. The Springs and Summers had linens with brightly colored flowers and leafy scrolls, the Autumns had red and yellow leaves, and the Winter linens were mostly dull blues and grays. There seemed to be more of those than any other, and they marked each year as it passed into another and another.

Early on a particularly cool morning, before sunlight touched the dormitory's gable window, Erin woke and heard coughing from a cot down the row. Kaylee was heaving about under her blanket. Her head was sticking out and her close-cropped hair was wet. A few of the girls had hair as short as Kaylee's. That was the sister's punishment for not finishing their share

of the work during the day. The sister's claimed it was because they were thinking too much of themselves and not enough about their tasks. Erin's hair was still draped down past her shoulders. Caira had been a good teacher.

Erin had learned the sister's rule of being out of one's cot before the sister's arrival but crept to Kaylee's bed. Erin knew some of the other girls were awake. She also knew no one would risk helping her. Erin's promise to herself that she would not become like the others had since dissipated. She had become adept at avoiding a stick whipping or penance by lying or stealing from someone else's laundry tally who deserved it. She almost enjoyed slipping a folded sheet from Theresa's pile to her own when the sister's were engrossed in their own work. But it seemed lately, Theresa's tallies were not being counted, not since the sisters began taking her to Father Teague's office.

Kaylee was drenched in sweat and hot with fever. Erin ran to the bathroom and soaked a cloth in cold water. On her way back, she heard the floor boards creaking under her feet and knew if there were any of the sisters in the hall below, they would hear her. She was in the midst of changing Kaylee's sheets when Sister Zinna entered. Donelle was close on her heels like a hungry barn dog awaiting its master's orders.

"You're outta your cot," Donelle sneered.

Sister Zinna stood quietly at the door.

"Kaylee's sick," Erin said. "Her bed's wet. I was just trying to help her."

Donelle started for her, but Sister Zinna held out her arm. "Christ also healed the sick, but you are far from his shoes," Sister Zinna said. "Get back to your cot."

Erin did as she was told. Sister Zinna motioned to Donelle who went reluctantly to Kaylee's cot, giving Erin a vicious look as she went by. She finished replacing the sheet and

informed Kaylee the wet sheet would be added to her wash load along with her nightgown. Kaylee told Donelle her other nightgown was already in the wash. Donelle seemed to take delight in ordering her back to her cot in her present one.

By the time daylight filtered the room, Kaylee was not much better. Sister Zinna told her to remain in the room that day and one of the girls would bring her meals to her. At breakfast, Sister Zinna instructed Theresa to take Kaylee her meals. Theresa filled the tray with ample portions while the sisters nodded approvingly. Sister Zinna had her do the same at supper.

When the girls returned that night, Erin noticed Kaylee was crumpled tight in her cot.

“How are you feeling?” Erin asked.

“Did you bring me something?” Kaylee asked.

Caira nudged Erin aside and produced two pieces of bread soaked with gravy from her dress pocket.

“Are you still hungry,” Erin asked. “I thought you were getting plenty to eat. They brought up ...”

“Theresa brought up the food,” Caira said.

Erin watched as Kaylee devoured the bread.

“No doubt the bleeding bitch sat right there on her cot and ate it right in front of Kaylee,” Caira said.

Across the row, Theresa drew a slice of browned apple from her dress and ate it in two vicious gulps.

“Someone should tell Sister Zinna,” Erin said.

“She knows,” Caira said. “They all know. You think they care a blasted bit? Haven't you

bloody well seen Theresa coming back to the dorm late? She's getting blessed, and Sister Zinna ain't going to bugger Father Teague."

Theresa *did* come back late now and again accompanied by Sister Zinna who would let her into the dorm room and almost immediately exit and lock the door behind Theresa instead of watching her go to her bunk and change as she did the other girls. Sister Zinna also didn't punish Theresa for taking extra portions at meals. It seemed to Erin being blessed by the church meant you had certain privileges.

Caira dragged Erin away from Kaylee's cot. "See here," Caira said. "Either she'll get better or she'll croak. And it would be better for her if she croaked. Otherwise, she's gonna have to make up for the laundry she missed while she's been sick."

Erin stared at her trying to find a sign of compassion, but Caira's face was stone, and she went about her routine of stripping herself of her clothes and squirming into her nightgown.

When the bread was gone Kaylee stared at her hands as if her gaze alone could cause another gravy soaked piece of bread to appear. But none did. Kaylee wiped her hands against her bed sheet and curled on top of it like a child.

"Kaylee," Erin said.

Kaylee twisted her body and looked up at Erin without lifting her head from the bed. Erin tried to remember what she was going to say, but realized it wouldn't have made a difference anyway. It wasn't just Kaylee's illness. Something in her face had crumbled and left empty skin behind. The girl that sometimes pulled her blanket over her head and mimicked the sisters so only the other girls could see, wasn't there. Erin remembered Kaylee mispronouncing words when it was her turn to read scripture over dinner and stifling a sly smile even after receiving a slap from one of the sisters. Erin believed if there were anyone the place couldn't touch, it was

her. She wished she could say something to bring her back, but she couldn't. Nothing mattered here, not her, not the girls, not their lives. Erin looked up at the stained glass window. It was dark, but she could still make out the colors. She promised God, if he were there at all, she would not become like them if he would make Kaylee well. She told Kaylee she would bring her something from the breakfast and supper table tomorrow.

Erin filed into the meal hall as usual that morning, the sun dimly lighting the narrow windows. She was grateful it was not her turn to read from scripture during meals that day. Sheelah was an enthusiastic reader and generally kept the Sister's favor. Erin had heard her telling Father Teague she wanted to enter the convent. Father Teague told her she would need the church's blessing. She must have received it because she wore the black dress of a Sister's apprentice and was moved out of the dormitory.

The sisters weren't looking when Erin slipped an extra piece of fruit and bread into her pockets. Over time she had gotten good at taking more than one portion with one pass of her hand. She had become adept at looking about without moving her head. She had learned the more effective excuses that would allow her to leave the line. Cairra was a very good teacher.

Erin waited until the trays were piled up after the meal and the women lined up to leave the room. She clutched her stomach and let out a low but audible groan. Sister Zinna glared at her. Some of the other women muffled their giggles. Sister Zinna didn't seem to notice. Erin made a pretense of trying to straighten herself.

"Is there a problem, child?" Sister Zinna demanded in a stately voice.

"My stomach hurts, Sister. May I use the bathroom?" Erin clamped her hand over her mouth.

“I’ll not be cleaning any mess in this room today,” Sister Zinna said. “Be quick.”

Erin ran awkwardly to the stairs, half hunched. She heard Sister Zinna order the other women to their work rooms.

Kaylee was awake and seemed pleased to see Erin. She didn’t bother to brush the lint off the food but choked it down as soon as Erin drew it from her pocket.

“You saw me run into the bathroom and heard me throw up,” Erin said quietly in case anyone had followed her up and was listening at the door.

It made Erin feel good to watch Kaylee eat. It was as if Erin had found a tiny bit of redemption in herself, something telling her she would not become hardened like the other women in the convent. Even if it meant stealing. Erin convinced herself God would understand and grant her absolution in Kaylee.

But Kaylee looked worse than she had during the night. Erin helped her change into one of her own nightgowns keeping an ear to the hall and changed Kaylee’s bed linen. Both were saturated. Erin flattened them together and wrapped them around her waist under her dress. She didn’t know who would be reading scripture in the laundry room today, but she felt sure the line of laundry carts would be lined up along the wall near the washroom. She would only need to sneak past the pressing room. Bouts of illness *can* cause a person to lose their bearings. She would need to be quick. The hissing got louder as she approached. Small wisps of steam escaped the doorway and dissipated into the hall.

“Would you have me believe you have been in the bathroom this entire time?” Erin heard Sister Zinna say as she tried to get past the door. Erin pretended not to hear and quickened her step.

“Remain right where you are, Maura,” Sister Zinna demanded. She used her name. Erin pictured Donelle’s grinning face and heard the sound of her stick whipping up and down through the air. She tried to quickly unfasten the sheet and nightgown through her dress, but Sister Zinna was already in the doorway.

“Come here.”

Erin folded her hands over her stomach hoping Sister Zinna wouldn’t notice the bulge around her midsection. Sister Zinna stepped back into the room beckoning Erin closer. As she entered she noticed Donelle standing close by, her hands behind her. Sister Zinna waved her hand at the reader who immediately ceased reading. The women in the room were busy at their stations and paid no notice to her, Donelle, or Sister Zinna. Erin noticed there was a new girl she hadn’t seen before working beside Cairra. She wondered how long she had been upstairs. It couldn’t have been that long. Hiss.

“I’ve watched you at the press, and you’re not fooling me any,” Sister Zinna said.

Donelle smiled without parting her lips as if she were just savoring an anticipated pleasure for later.

“You pretend to be giving us your best effort when I know you can do much better,” Sister Zinna continued.

Donelle took a step away from Sister Zinna and brought her hands out front showing Erin her stick. Erin figured it was so she wouldn’t catch Sister Zinna’s tunic when she swung. Erin tightened her legs and pushed her teeth together.

“Let’s see if we can give you something more fitting,” Sister Zinna said in a lower voice. “Something more suitable to your urchin upbringing. Follow me.”

Donelle's smile receded. Sister Zinna left the press room and turned toward the wash room. As they passed the laundry carts, Erin tried again to loosen her midsection. No use. Sister Zinna was moving too fast. There was no telling when she would stop and look back, and Erin would not give Donelle the satisfaction. She felt Kaylee's sweat dripping down her hips.

The dank air in the washroom was stifling and reeked of dirty linens and clothes, but it was clear without the steam from the presses. The washroom was much deeper than the press room and the walls were lined with immense, steel washers except for the few intermittent spots where there was a thin window. The aisles were also wider to accompany two laundry carts at a time, those coming in and those going out. Of course, there was a woman standing on a wooden box, reading scripture. She looked to be as old as Erin's mother and then a few years. Most of the women here were older than her. None of them looked at Erin. They just kept moving. As soon as one machine was loaded, they unpacked another and loaded it into a dryer. The load from the dryer was loaded into a cart and the older women pushed the carts from the room.

Sister Zinna led Erin to a set of washing machines adjacent to a window. "This will be your station," she said. "Watch the others, and we'll see if you have any assemblance of a God-given brain at all. You will come to know Sister Astore very well. She is stricter than me and will not let you dawdle as I have let you do."

Erin glanced down the row of washers. No one looked back. Sister Zinna had already made her exit, and Sister Astore was glaring at Erin over her book. A young girl that could have been no older than ten or eleven, maybe younger, had already pushed a cart of laundry to her machine and made a hasty retreat. Erin stuffed the laundry into the first of three machines at her station.

"Not so fast," the girl tending the washing machine next to her whispered without turning

her head. “You’ll pass out in this heat by the second load. Only a half a cup of detergent or the sister will send for Donelle. Don’t mind the dial. Leave it at gentle cycle and push the run button.”

Sister Astore had gone back to her reading. Erin slowed her pace. She couldn’t bear the thought of Donelle hovering over her like a turkey vulture.

Erin loaded the entire contents of the cart into the washer and followed through as the girl at the next set of washers had instructed and did the same with the other washers at her own station. She unloaded a washer that had finished its load and packed the load into the first dryer. Brown, cotton dresses and denim shirts with the words “Mountjoy Prison” were loaded in together. Erin pressed the cycle button and watched as the two colors spun inside the window, until she couldn’t tell which was which.

Two of the dryers remained empty with their doors open. They were holes with only darkness churning on the other side. Erin recalled a teacher when she was younger, reading about Alice falling down the rabbit hole and trying to get out. What Erin wouldn’t give to be able to climb into one of those dryers and have tea with the Mad Hatter. Alice was a bloody fool. Erin would have never wanted to come back. She could have an unbirthday. An unbirthday. Her birthday had been a while ago, but she had forgotten it. She had turned another year in this place. She glanced at the hole and envied the laundry. But even those would have to come out.

Sister Astore hadn’t looked up from her book.

“Keep your face to your work,” the girl at the next station said, “ even if there’s not a thing to do.”

Erin positioned herself at the end washer near the window and stood perfectly still the way she had learned at church. Only here, the window was not stained with the dark reds of

Roscommon church. It was dingy from the dust of the Dublin street outside, but she could see the world beyond it. People moved about, going places. A short distance away, skyscrapers reflected the sun rising far away behind the convent. They didn't fit in with the squatty buildings across the street. Even the sunlight took its time getting here. Yet the people still moved back and forth as Erin supposed they had done all their lives, dressed in denim jeans and work shirts. Some were carrying lunch cases and probably on their way to work. She would see them on their way home.

“Watch yourself,” the girl at the next station said.

A sound smack to her head sent Erin into the washing machine. She righted herself and faced Sister Astore.

“Where is your mind, child?” Sister Astore demanded.

“I'm sorry, Mother,” Erin answered.

“I was informed about you,” Sister Astore said. “Quite the tart weren't we? And you'll have me believe you weren't staring out the window at some young lad and getting your mind up to mischief.” Sister Astore paused a second to look out the window. “Ah yes,” she said. “A fair lot of them out there. I shouldn't ask which one you've set your wicked eyes upon. Knowing what I do, you no doubt fancy the whole lot of them.” She raised her hand again.

Erin tensed and waited.

“No, I'm not sure this will do any good for the likes of you.” Sister Astore's voice had calmed. “I have a better idea. Come with me child.” Erin followed her to the front of the room. Sister Astore ordered the girl reading the bible on the box back to her station and pushed Erin into her place. As the girl passed, Sister Astore grabbed the bible from her and shoved it into Erin's hands.

“I’m surprised it doesn’t burn those eager hands,” Sister Astore said. “Start with Galatians six, verses seven to nine. Repeat them again and over again, and do not stop until I tell you to do so. Don’t look at me, child. Put your face in the book, and see if you can understand any part of it.”

Erin turned to Galatians. “Do not be deceived. God is not mocked, for whatever he sows that he will also reap.” Erin couldn’t help think about McDonough’s barley fields and how quiet it was. Had God been there? Had he been watching? Why did he leave? “For he who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption.” She remembered the sweet scent of the fresh cut fields. Was God there? She remembered Mr. McDonough sitting on the edge of the loft looking over the Harvest Dance floor. Was God there? She remembered Doyle’s face over her and feeling the cart planks digging into her back. Where was God then? “But he who sows from the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life.” Is God at the convent? Here in the laundry rooms? Is this her eternal life? “And let us not grow weary in well doing, for in well season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart.” She thought of her father and fought back the tears she felt coming.

“Again,” Sister Astore snapped.

Over the next couple of weeks, Erin continued to sneak food to Kaylee, but each time she ate less than she had the night before. Sister Zinna instructed Theresa to bring Kaylee her meals in bed, but Erin suspected most of that food was going down Theresa’s throat. Either way, it made little difference. It was as if Kaylee welcomed the sickness that was eating away at her.

Erin woke early one morning to check on Kaylee. The window in the gable was frosted over. She could see her breathing shallow through her blanket. She was finally sleeping sound, which she hadn’t done in a long time. Erin decided to leave her be. Kaylee hadn’t touched the

bread and fruit Erin had tucked under her pillow. She would be good until supper. Later that afternoon, through her laundry room window, Erin spotted Father Teague and two other men entering the rear courtyard door to the convent. It was the same two men Father Teague had move the washers and other furniture as each wore out its usefulness. Erin watched the men until they were within the walls and out of sight. An older woman Erin had seen pass by on the street paused to stare at the convent door for a moment before moving on. The woman had a satchel no larger than one of the workman's lunch pails heaped over her shoulder, but she carried it as if trying to make light work of a heavy burden.

She saw the woman again in the dormitory that night, sitting on the edge of Kaylee's cot. The satchel lay open near her feet. A roll of coarse twine of a thickness Erin had used to bind the cut barley, was on top of it, and a single strand was threaded through a large needle with a gaping eye. Kaylee's bed sheet had been wrapped about her, and the woman was stitching it closed. Erin put her hands into her pockets and closed her fists until she could feel the blood rush from them, and they felt like two slabs of lifeless meat. Then she noticed Kaylee's face was not lined or strained as she had so often seen it. She didn't feel any pity for Kaylee. Erin felt a calmness that she hadn't felt since she arrived. She felt no guilt, no anger. Kaylee wasn't taking the pain with her.

Sister Zinna ordered the women into the bathroom, instructed them to wash themselves and put on a clean frock. Erin waited until she couldn't see Kaylee's face anymore. A hand gripped her shoulder tightly, but Erin didn't budge.

"She was your friend?" Sister Zinna inquired.

"Yes, Mother," Erin said without pausing or lowering her face. She braced herself for a retightening of Sister Zinna's grip, but it didn't come.

“That doesn’t surprise me. Sin begets sin.” Sister Zinna relaxed her grip. “I’m sure you had a lot of stories to keep the two of you amused. I pray that in time God may forgive you. It is too late for God to forgive her. Go wash.”

Erin glared at her. Sister Zinna narrowed her eyes. Erin hoped for more, some recognition that a life was gone, some sense of pity for Kaylee, but there was none, and Erin retreated to the bathroom.

By the time the women were filing out of the bathroom, Father Teague had arrived with the two men Erin had seen earlier. They carried a stretcher which they laid beside Kaylee’s bed. The woman finished her job and left. The men heaped Kaylee’s body on to the stretcher and carried it down the stairs. Erin fell into line with the women and followed Father Teague and the Sisters.

Although the sky was overcast, the summer air felt warm. The women were herded on to an old bus that was parked in the rear courtyard. Erin watched the buildings move outside the windows. She hadn’t been outside the convent since she arrived. She tried to remember how many summers had passed since she had come to the convent. How many flowered tablecloths had she washed? How many loads of long sleeved and short sleeved prison shirts? Sundays. She knew Sundays because it was the only day they didn’t work. They spent their mornings in the chapel listening to Father Teague preach about another sin. But too many of them had passed. Erin had only been in the washroom for a short time, and the season was just beginning to change outside. She had once asked Caira if anyone ever left the convent. Caira asked her if it really mattered. They would be here until a family member or their parish priest came to get them. Erin thought about her father.

The bus turned into a dry stone walled yard with an iron trellis that read Glasnevin

Cemetery. The graveyard was broad enough to allow a hill to begin and end its slopes upward and downward within its walls, but there were no trees. Round stones no bigger than a half a milk pail were positioned in uniform rows across the grass. At the far end, a grave had been dug near one of the stones. The men placed Kaylee into it and stepped away. Father Teague stepped forward nodding to the men. He scanned the women with an expression as lifeless as Kaylee's. Caira poked Erin, and she noticed the women had bowed their heads.

Father Teague quickly recited The Lord's Prayer and paused long enough for the women's heads to come up. Erin looked out over the rows of stones. They were all the same, no one any bigger or shaped differently than another. Father Teague mumbled something about fate and just punishment while the sisters looked on obediently.

Erin silently counted the rows across and then down. She couldn't see all of them, at least not those that were on the other side of the hill, but she figured there had to be at least a hundred and a half of them. There was no writing on them, nothing more than rocks in a field soiled by the soot from the city's chimneys. Erin wondered if those under them were burning or sleeping peacefully. She pictured Kaylee's face with no pain of fire, only the reassuring smell of turned up earth. She imagined Kaylee turning on her side and fluffing a mound of soil for a pillow as it was thrown in on her. Erin resisted the temptation to laugh out loud in front of Father Teague, in front of the sisters, in front of the women. It's a sad joke on them, she thought.

Whatever Father Teague had been saying passed into the breeze, and the sisters moved the women back on the bus. Erin took in a deep breath and carried the outside air in with her. She held on to it as long as she could, letting it out in tiny allotments before she was forced to breath in the stale air the bus carried with it from the convent.

In the dormitory, Sister Zinna instructed them to say five Acts of Contrition for Kaylee

adding it probably wouldn't do much good coming from such blackened souls as theirs. They should make an attempt anyway.

Before she left, Sister Zinna whispered something to Theresa who promptly went over and began to strip Kaylee's blankets and pillow. She turned over the mattress and tossed the blanket and pillow into the hall with the indifference of a farmer pitching dry hay from a loft. Sister Zinna unlocked the closet where newly laundered bed linens were stored and stood by while Theresa extracted a new set. She promptly relocked it afterwards, clipped the key to the rosary that hung about her waist, and trod off down the stairs. Erin watched as Theresa carried the linens past Kaylee's cot, sneaking a glance back at the hall, and replaced the used linens from her own cot with the fresh linens. She took hers to Kaylee's cot. The women changed into their nightgowns. They kept their backs to Theresa.

Erin pushed her teeth together. There was no trace that Kaylee had ever slept there. Erin remembered the nights she lay in her own cot when she first arrived, the nights she buried her face in the pillow not wanting the other women to hear her. She tried to remember how long Kaylee had been here and how many nights she cried into her pillow before learning to cover her pain with that smile of hers. Kaylee's pillow would be stripped clean of her tears the same as her bed had been stripped of her memory. Theresa had seen to that, and now her cot would reek of Theresa. Erin had been forced to lose one of the few friends she had there. She wouldn't lose her memory without fighting back. Not to that bitch.

Erin flew across the aisle and grabbed Theresa by the back of her dress, forcing her front first on to her cot. The back of Theresa's head became a blur with the mattress. Erin felt herself tear Theresa from the cot. Theresa flailed about and tried to run away. Erin became aware of the women shouting and knew it would attract the attention of the sisters downstairs, but she wasn't

ready to bury Kaylee even if the sisters did. Erin pulled the sheets from Theresa's cot, grabbed the pillow and took them to Kaylee's cot. She had barely laid the pillow on the bed when she felt her hair yanked from behind. Theresa's screech reminded her of the owl she heard in the woods the night of the Harvest Dance. But she wouldn't take it this time. Erin whirled and dug her fingers into Theresa's face. Theresa fell backwards. The women howled. Theresa's body blurred as Erin's closed fists came down and pounded her. Erin didn't care where they hit as long as they hurt. She clawed at Theresa until she heard Theresa scream and kept at her. There was a savage satisfaction in the feeling that came with each strike. Erin lost track of everything about her, the shouts, Theresa's cries, herself. There was only the feeling that made her want more of it. She didn't know how long it had been when she felt herself being pulled from Theresa. She refused to let go until the hard slap across the side of her face brought Theresa's curled up sobbing figure into focus. The room was quiet. Erin stood up and faced Sister Zinna. Erin's rage had not subsided, and she lifted her face toward the sister. Sister Zinna responded with a violent slap across her face. Erin held her posture.

"Mother Zinna." Cairra was the first to speak up. "Theresa was ..."

"Did I ask you what happened?" Sister Zinna said sharply.

"No, Mother," Cairra replied.

"I have no interest in you or what happened," she said. "I have my own eyes." Sister Zinna turned to Erin. "You will accompany me to Father Teague's office, child, and I will not tolerate any trouble from you."

"You," Sister Zinna said to Theresa, "get up and clean yourself. I will return to deal with you presently."

Theresa curled herself tighter on the floor.

* * *

Erin had only been sitting on the bench outside of Father Teague's office for a few minutes before Sister Zinna and Father Teague emerged from his office. In the past, Erin distracted herself by letting her eyes move along the bench's ornate scrolls. This evening she stared at the opposite wall. She had come to learn there was a type of serenity in nothingness. Thinking about nothing prepared one for anything.

Sister Zinna did not look at her and marched off down the hall. Father Teague stepped to one side indicating Erin should come into his office. He didn't have the demure smile he usually had. Erin moved toward the chair she normally sat in when Father Teague summoned her, but Father Teague instructed her to remain standing at the front of his desk. She had a feeling there would be no lectures about the blessed relationship between man and woman in the Garden of Eden and the sinfulness of that relationship after woman had learned from the snake to tempt man and cause their fall.

"It's not in my nature to believe Christ would abandon a soul," he said, "or how woman, by God's will, will spend her life atoning for Eve's sin. I have come to believe there are those to whom he turns a blind eye for one reason or another. It's not in my power to question his judgment. I'm sure you realize it is not in yours either." Father Teague meandered behind his desk and sat down. "But then, he didn't abandon Mary Magdalene either, and she atoned through service to Christ."

Father Teague stared at her, but he didn't seem to see her. It was as if she were one of the statues at Roscommon Church. Erin remained still. She didn't know how long the silence lasted, but it pushed her back and she felt herself shrinking until the room was kilometers away from her.

“There is a story that Mary Magdalene had a child by Christ, a girl I believe, named Sarah. If that’s true, he must have had a reason. He also must have had a reason for choosing the wickedest of women to be the mother.”

Erin heard his chair creak and noticed his shadow moving along the floor. She saw the bottom of his cassock and his feet step lightly past her.

“I’m sure you also had your reasons for your actions in the dormitory.”

His voice was moving away from her. Erin shifted her head to see where he was. She only saw the carpet.

“You understand, Maura, I cannot excuse your actions, yet I believe there was a bit of God’s grace in your intentions. Theresa and I have had many talks such as this since she has been here. In the office she was very repentant and receptive to the church’s ideas. I am disappointed in her.”

Erin heard him pacing behind her.

“And since I am the church here at Our Lady of Charity, Theresa gained my favor. But, it seems she has used that favor for her own means. Such an unfortunate circumstance. But God understands I am human and make mistakes, so I am confident he will forgive me for making a poor choice.”

Erin felt Father Teague’s hands rest lightly on her shoulders.

“You’ve been here almost three years here now, haven’t you, Maura? You’ve made a few friends here. Until this past year, you have been an obedient girl. I would like to see you become that again. I would like to see the church bestow its favor on you. I’m sure you would not take advantage of it as Theresa has done. Would you, Maura?”

“No, Father,” Erin said.

“No, I don’t believe you would. You want the church’s favor, don’t you?”

“Yes, Father.” Erin felt Father Teague take his hands from her shoulders and slip one hand under her arm. Father Teague moved in front of her and took her gently by the shoulders. She noticed the lower part of his cassock was unbuttoned.

Sister Zinna was waiting outside the office. Erin closed the door and forced herself to look at her. There was something different in her expression. Her mouth was still tightly drawn, but she didn’t have that “I am God’s chosen” look. Something had been taken from her while Erin was in the office. Erin had noticed it before whenever Sister Zinna returned Theresa to the dormitory. But this time, it made Erin stop hating Sister Zinna. Even when Sister Zinna turned her back to have Erin follow her, the heaviness also followed.

At the end of the hall, Erin noticed the front doors of the convent were open. In the waning sunlight, a priest she had not seen before was standing with two men and a woman, all dressed in finely pressed suits. The priest nodded to Sister Zinna and stopped talking to the men as she and Erin passed. Erin hoped they were relatives of one of the women and would take her home.

At the top of the stairs, Erin heard someone crying. It was coming from the closet. In the dormitory, the women were in bed asleep or pretending to be asleep. All the girls were in their cots ... except Theresa. She no longer had the church’s favor.

Erin waited until she was sure the Sisters were asleep downstairs before she went to the bathroom. She stripped off her nightgown, turned on the shower, and scrubbed herself until the pain was replaced by numbness. She couldn’t feel her hips or her legs, only anger, but, she rinsed it away with the wisps of blood that washed down the drain.

* * *

The window in the laundry room gave Erin a sense of calm continuity. She watched the rest of the summer come to a close, the fall come and go, and the winter melt into spring. She watched the people go by wrapped in woolen coats and watched them shed their coats in the spring. She could tell how warm or cold it was by how they dressed. She watched a dilapidated house across the street get pushed aside by a bulldozer operated by a young man in a yellow plastic hat. He was handsome and had strong arms. She hated him for that. A three-story steel and glass building took its place. A bus stop was placed in front of it, but the bus didn't come by for almost a month. When it did, Erin made sure she loaded the last washing machine on the row so she could see the people file off. First off was a large woman in high-heels and stretch slacks that were filled to their capacity. The man behind her had a ridiculous looking mustache that could have been wrapped about his ears.

Several people had gotten off when Erin saw her father. She caught her breath and moved to the window for a better look. The new bus line must have brought him this way, or maybe he came this way for a reason. That was it. Caira said sometimes a relative comes to take someone out. Maybe her father has come for her. He looked older and slouched forward like his shoulders were too heavy for his frame, but his face looked the same as it did when he walked her home from McDonough's farm. Did her mother or these past few years change his mind? Erin watched as he walked to the corner and disappeared. He didn't look her way. Maybe he didn't know she was just across the street. But he would be back. If he came on the bus, he would be back. Somebody out there would tell him this was the convent, and he would come to the front doors. Sister Astore would escort her to Father Teague's office. She would open the door and feel her father's arms wrap around her. He would tell her he missed her and her mother was waiting for her at home. They would walk out the front door and get on that bus and go back to Fuerty, her

room, her bed, her home.

Five o'clock passed into six and then to six-thirty. A few minutes after, her father rounded the corner. He looked tired. Maybe he couldn't find the convent. He must have spent the day trying to find her. Maybe he couldn't find anyone to help him, and he didn't know he was this close to her. She only had this chance to help him. Sister Astore was engrossed in her book and a new girl was reading a passage aloud.

Erin moved stealthy to the window and tapped against it. Her father didn't look up. A gleam caught her eye. The bus was coming up the street. She tapped harder. He still didn't look up. The world outside seemed to pull away from her like a beautiful dream she was waking from. She laid her hand against the window almost as if she could will it away and climb through. Now she knew how Alice felt. The laundry soap bottles were plastic, and there was nothing hard to tap against the window. The bus stopped further up Sean Mac Dermott Street to let on passengers. Erin grabbed a tin soap cup and slammed it against the window. The hollow bang resounded against the glass. She banged it again and again. She heard Sister Astore's chair slide out from under her. Erin didn't care. She shouted and banged. A few people on the street looked up. Erin banged harder.

Her father finally looked up. "Dad," she yelled and banged again against the window.

He stared at her.

"DAD," she screamed, "I'm here, I'm here." She slammed the cup against the glass praying she could break it. He knew where she was now. He would come for her. She would tell him how sorry she was. She would push this place back down the rabbit hole where it would only be a dim nightmare to be erased by the warmth of her own bed sheets, the smell of the cut barley

fields. She struck the glass again. Help me, please God, she thought. She would get on the bus with her father and go home, back to Fuerty, back to her mother.

Her father stood there, apart from the other people waiting at the stop.

All Erin could hear was the tin against the glass. All she could see was her father's face.

And his face changed. He clamped his lips tight, narrowed his eyes, and became the man that sent her away. He shook his head and turned to the bus stop.

The bus brakes let out a screech and a hiss as it arrived at the stop. Erin screamed as she felt Sister Astore's hands pull her backward. The street outside narrowed in the window frame. Erin lashed out at Sister Astore and ran for the doorway, but before she could get there, Sister Zinna and Donelle blocked the way. Erin charged at them. Donelle caught her about the legs, and Erin stumbled to the floor. She tried to right herself, but Donelle climbed on top of her. She felt the stick across her shoulders and tried to grab it. Erin felt Donelle being pulled from her. A pair of strong hands dragged Erin into the hall. They turned her over and pushed at her until she was sitting against the wall. Erin stared into Sister Zinna's face.

"Your father isn't coming for you," she said in a low, stern voice.

"He was there, at the bus stop." Erin's eyes began to blur. She hadn't cried for a long time. She thought she had no tears left.

Sister Astore and Donelle were standing in the hallway near the washroom door. Sister Zinna turned to them.

"I can manage this on my own," she said. They didn't move. "Your work is in the other room."

Sister Astore frowned and went back into the washroom. Donelle headed off to the press room in a huff.

Sister Zinna waited until the hall was clear before turning back to Erin. "It was by your father's request you were sent here."

"He got on the bus. He left me here." She felt the first tear make its way down her face.

Sister Zinna took a piece of linen from her robe and wiped Erin's face with it. "Your mother wrote a letter here a little more than two years ago. I responded to it to let her know you were doing fine. The letter was returned informing us they had moved. We have not heard anything since. Do you understand me, child?"

Erin stared at her. She had to be lying. Why would they have left? Their friends were there. They had been brought up in Fuerty. But she saw her father's face as he got on the bus. It was older, but it hadn't softened. Erin realized he wouldn't soften either. They moved away and left her life in Fuerty to be plowed under with the next season's crop. There was no family for her, no home in Fuerty, and no God.

Sister Zinna helped her up. "Follow me," she said.

Erin turned toward Father Teague's office, but Sister Zinna walked to the laundry room doorway. Erin followed. Once inside, Sister Zinna turned to Sister Astore who was sitting on her perch with her book closed on her lap.

"There will be no talk of this incident," Sister Zinna told Sister Astore. "I will inform Donelle of the same, and if she does otherwise, she will do pence with God."

Sister Astore nodded and opened her book.

"I trust you can find your way back to your station," Sister Zinna said to Erin. "Will we need to put a shade on the window?"

"No, Mother," Erin replied, not in a demure tone, but with a resolve that came from somewhere deep down the rabbit hole. She remembered the ground behind the market in Fuerty,

how it took her tears. How it absorbed them and still looked dry. Erin felt the roughness of her hands. They hadn't been softened by the laundry. She had grown calluses and despite all the wet laundry that passed through them, they stayed dry. Erin went back to her station and loaded the machines. She didn't look out the window. The bus was gone, and she would have to find her own way out of the rabbit hole. Happy unbirthday.

Erin saw her father get on and off the bus many times after that, but he never looked across the street. After a while Erin stopped watching. She stopped caring. Cairra was right when she told her they were just ghosts here. And ghosts don't care about anything because they were already dead.

Erin also no longer needed the window to tell her the seasons. The linens from the Dublin restaurants that Erin fed to the washing machines were lined in gold and crimson colors. The prisoner's shirts from Mountjoy Prison were long sleeved. Summer had passed and it was autumn in Dublin. Now and again, when she was escorted to Father Teague's office to receive the church's blessing, she sometimes saw the two men and the woman in the pressed business suits coming in when she was leaving. They were wearing long overcoats and shook the fall debris from the air outside. For a moment, Erin smelled the sweet scent of decaying leaves.

Late one night, well after one o'clock, Cairra slipped over to Erin's cot.

"I heard Sister Zinna talking to Father Teague this afternoon," Cairra whispered. "Bloody hell. They're selling the blasted convent to some company."

"You didn't hear right," Erin said. "They're making their own money. I saw the cash box in Father Teague's office. He had to stuff it in just to close the lid."

“What are you saying?” Cairra grabbed her arm. “Can you grab some? I mean when his back’s to ya?”

“What for? Where do you think you’re going to spend it here? Like there’s a nice little shop just down the way, right?”

“You ain’t been keeping your ear to the floor. Aye! They’re selling the bleeding place.”

“And what about us?” Erin asked and turned her face away.

“They’re opening the bleeding doors,” Cairra said in an excited tone. “We’re all going home. They’re bloody sending us home.”

Erin hadn’t thought about Fuerty anymore. She closed her eyes and could feel the breeze coming over the fields along the road to Roscommon, the scent of fresh cut barley, the cool summer nights when she sat on the dry stone wall near the road and watched the moon light up the open fields. Those memories were so distant. She also remembered seeing her lunch case rooted about by the hogs, the stench of Doyle’s breath, and her father’s face. Him sitting on the couch next to Father Jessup. His face at the bus stop turning away from her. She wouldn’t go back there.

“What an eejit you are,” Erin said. “Do you think they’re going to just open the doors and say there you are. You can go home now?”

Cairra looked hurt for a moment but composed herself quickly. “Maybe,” she said. “But who cares how they do it as long as we get to leave this blasted place.”

A month or so later, after Cairra’s enthusiasm had since dissipated, Father Teague came into the meal hall during supper. Cairra’s face reignited as he informed the women of the Convent’s closing. Letters had been written to the girls’ relatives and in some cases, telephone calls had

been made. Erin looked around the hall. Many of the women had been here long before she came and were considerably older. Erin wondered who would be outside for them. She wondered who would be outside for her. She didn't exist anymore. Who comes for someone who isn't there?

The next morning, the sisters roused the women from their cots, not with their usual commands accompanied with smacks across the shoulders but with firm nudges. Erin stripped off her nightgown, put on her frock, and waited by her cot. At the bottom of the stairs she realized she didn't hear the steam presses warming up. No one read scripture at breakfast, although the grit was the same. The sisters didn't eat at their usual table at the head of the hall. Father Teague, who had not been there before, stood quietly looking over the hall, letting his eyes pause on a girl here and there. Erin wondered how many over the years had received the Church's blessings.

Breakfast was also longer than usual. No wash carts were being pushed down the hall. Nothing to be pressed. Yet Donelle and a few of the older women roused the others into the hallway and down the flight of stairs to the first floor. On one side of the hallway, black suitcases were stacked against the walls. Brown paper tags were stapled around the handle of each. Plain gray coats lay folded on the floor in front of the suitcases.

The women stood silently against the opposite wall stretched the length of the hall. Many of the faces Erin had only seen passing in the hallway. Father Teague called a name from a roster he held. No one stepped forward. He called the name again. A woman about fifty years or more, stepped out from the line with her head bowed toward the floor. Erin felt sorry for her although she didn't know why.

Sister Zinna looked through the tagged suitcases and picked up one with a coat draped over it halfway down the row. She handed it to the woman and instructed her to return to her

place. One at a time each of the women received a suitcase and coat.

Donelle's name was called. She looked surprised. Erin wondered if she expected to stay, if anyone would be staying. Erin wondered where the sisters would go if they left but dismissed the thought as quickly as she had learned to tolerate Donelle's lashings.

No one said anything other than Father Teague until the last suitcase and coat had been distributed. Father Teague handed the roster to Sister Zinna and went into his office. The hall was quiet. He emerged with his hat and paused only to nod to the sisters before going out the front door. He left the door open and the morning sun was a glaring light, too bright to look into. Erin squinted but wouldn't turn her face away.

Sister Zinna instructed the women to put on their coats because it was cold outside. Erin couldn't help thinking how cold it was in here. Sister Zinna also told the women many of their family members were waiting outside on Sean Mac Dermott Street. She hoped they had been moved by God's grace in the time they had been here. Erin stifled the urge to laugh.

Then Erin noticed something odd. Sister Zinna's expression was not as stoic as usual. She was smiling. She was *actually* smiling. What did she have to smile about, Erin thought. She would have to do her own laundry from now on.

"Go with God," Sister Zinna said in a voice Erin didn't recognize and led the girls out the front doors of the convent. The shadow of the convent was instantly dissipated by the morning light outside the convent.

As they had through the laundry room window, the buildings farther into the city reflected the morning sun, but the light brought a chill with it. No God here, Erin thought. She glared at the faraway windows refusing to look away until her eyes needed the shade of a nearby doorway. She turned when she heard the convent door slam shut behind her. The last of the women were

on the street, and the sisters had retreated inside. The women stood around like a herd of sheep waiting for a shepherd to lead them.

A woman Erin heard called by the name Fainche turned and knocked on the convent door. She put her suitcase down and knocked again. No response. A few of the other women dropped their suitcases at the roadside and watched her. Fainche tried to pull the door open, but it was locked. When she turned, Erin saw the confusion on her face and wondered how long she had been in the convent. When no one answered, the woman left the suitcase at the door and wandered down the street.

Some of the women were greeted and led off by relatives or friends. Some hugged, and some merely took the women by their arms and led them off.

Others strained to get a look at their faces. A woman in a long skirt walked through them peering into one face and then another. She stopped and took hold of an older woman who had pushed the carts in the washroom.

“Are you Aileen?” she asked.

The other woman didn’t say anything.

“Aileen O’Donnell?”

The woman who had pushed the carts in the laundry room backed up a step and clutched her suitcase to her chest. “I’m Sarah,” she said.

The woman in the long skirt looked confused and took out a picture from her purse. It was yellow and brown around the edges. She showed the picture to the woman with the suitcase who glanced at it for a moment before looking down.

“I’m Sarah,” she repeated and turned toward the convent.

The woman in the long skirt studied the picture and grabbed her. "I'm your sister Katy," she said. "Don't you know me? Mom said you died. Then we got the letter."

Erin had seen the woman bringing in carts and taking them out. She never spoke a word to anyone except the sisters, and only when she was asked a question. Erin remembered Sister Astore pointing to the woman as a good, repentant soul whose example the rest of them should follow. She worked when she was told to work, ate when she was told to do so, and she slept. Their mother was right. She was dead.

A man from the crowd of people also moved anxiously among the woman. Like the woman in the long skirt, he seemed to study face after face. Some he looked at twice before moving on. Finally he gave up and went back to the bus stop where he put his face in his hands. Erin remembered the field with the unmarked stones.

Erin looked around. About this time she would be at her station, and the bus carrying her father would be along at any time. What would she say to him? She couldn't think of anything she wanted to say. She didn't care. She was not going to forgive him. Let the old bastard rot in Hell.

"Bloody hell," Cairra's voice came from behind Erin.

Cairra hugged her as soon as she turned around. When she let go, the two stood there, silent. "Where you going?" she asked.

"I don't know," Erin said looking over the crowd.

"Heard from one of the laundry man they was going to hire some of us where he works," Cairra said.

"I ain't ever washing anything again," Erin said."

"What the hell else you going to do?"

"I ain't going there," Erin said.

"Yeah, like I'll be believing you," Cairra said and walked away toward the city. "I'll be seeing you there."

Erin suddenly felt more alone than she had in the convent. *What the hell else you going to do?* Something inside her told her to follow her friend, but in her head she would always see the sisters when she heard the banging of clothes buttons against the insides of the washer. She would hear the monotone voices reading scripture in the hisses of the presses. She would miss Cairra but anything would be better than another laundry.

Erin set off down Sean Mac Dermott Street away from the city. She noticed the filth caked on the old walls of the convent. Was there no punishment here? No one to scrub the walls? Along Gardiner Street she saw shops and outdoor cafés that reminded her of the Towne Centre Mall at Roscommon, yet there was a strangeness about it. It was a dream from a long time ago. She wondered if the boutique and the salesgirl was still working there. The salesgirl was nice to her. Maybe, she could find a job there. If not in that shop then another. But what did she know about fashion. She knew how to do laundry. That was it.

A block in on Gardiner, Erin set her case down on a concrete bench near a newspaper box. She noticed the date on the paper pressed up against the glass. October 25, 1996. She wanted to laugh, but she knew it would hurt. Erin opened the suitcase. Two more brown, cotton dresses like the one she was wearing, a flannel nightgown, socks, undergarments, and an envelope. Inside the envelope was fifty Euros. Erin decided it was worth laughing after all. It was a cruel joke. Her wages for four years work. She stuffed the envelope into her pocket.

People on Gardiner Street sat at finely lined tables and ate food off patterned plates. Erin recognized the pink and green flower pattern. How many of those linens had she washed?

From where she sat she could see the domes of the convent on the next block, but none of the people at the cafes noticed them. They sipped their tea among the artificial flowers that hung on the railings. She couldn't see this world from the washroom window, but it had been there just the same. Erin watched the people, go in and out of the cafes, in and out of the stores. A small girl, in a country frock tugged anxiously at her mother's hand urging her into a toy store. Erin was reasonably sure she had enough money to take the bus to Fuerty. But there was nothing for her there.

A salesgirl, in a short dress embellished with blue and red wavy lines, came out of a clothing store rolling a rack of dresses much like the one she, herself, was wearing, and fixed a sale sign to the top of it. When she went back inside, Erin looked through the rack. The sale price was sixty-two Euros. The sales girl reemerged, started to ask if she could help, but stopped mid-speech and went back in the store. Erin hated her. More than that, she hated herself. She hated her cotton frocks, she hated the people in the café. Most of all, she hated Ireland for taking four years away from her and not even giving her enough money to buy a dress.

She felt stuck as much in Dublin as she was in Our Lady of Charity. She wandered Gardiner Street searching the side streets for a refuge away from modern Ireland and away from the sight of the convent's domes. But each was infected by more shops and cafes. She made her way down one busy street and down another until she came to the North Wall Quay. A white ferry with plaque that read *Dublin – Liverpool* was docked at the pier. A stand at the dockside was selling tickets. A one way ticket to Liverpool was sixty Euros. The woman at the ticket window had a grim, stout face that suggested it would not be open to compromise. Erin sat down on a bench that had an advertisement for the Garden of Remembrance and listened to the water beat against the stone walls of the quay.

A young man, sitting at a table at an outdoor café, laughed loudly. His pinstripe suit was sharply creased down the backs of his arms and along his trousers. The girl with him was clad in a snugly fit, black skirt and a blue, shiny blouse, probably satin. Her high-heels clicked along the pavement as the couple left. The girl looked in Erin's direction briefly but didn't seem to see her. They got into a sleek, red car and buzzed off. Erin could smell the food from the café and wondered if they had left any on their table. As she moved closer to the cafe railing, she noticed a pile of bills wedged under one of the glasses. None of the patrons at the café were watching. No one took an interest in a ruddy girl in a cotton frock. Erin slipped the bills out from under the glass and into her pocket in one fluent move as if it was a gravy-soaked piece of bread.

The lady at the ticket window smiled like it was expected of her, sold Erin a one way ticket, and handed her a few coins in change. Erin walked up the gangway wondering how many of the women were still standing in front of the convent. She made her way through the crowd on the deck near the rear railing and felt a nervous calm when the gangway was drawn up and the water behind the boat churned. Erin thought about the dresses in the suitcase and laughed. She didn't care who heard her. Erin waited until there was a considerable stretch of water behind her but she could still see Ireland. She heaved her suitcase to the railing. "Have it and be damned," she yelled back and flung the suitcase into the water. She reached into the pocket of her frock and drew out the change from her fare. She strolled to the front of the ferry jingling the coins and although not yet in sight of the English shore, contemplated how she would turn it into more.

Vita

The author was born in Carle Place, New York. He graduated with a bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice from Indiana State University. After a twenty-four year career as a police officer, the author returned to school to explore a long-time interest in writing and literature, particularly Irish literature. He attended Le Moyne College where he earned a bachelor's degree in English majoring in Creative Writing and Irish Literature. He won the Newhouse Award for fiction and playwriting in 2005, and again in 2007 for playwriting. He also won the Denise Gasiorowski Award for "Passion in Writing" in 2007. He joined the University of New Orleans Master of Fine Arts program in fiction in the Fall of 2008.