



Oonagh Mary Tilberg

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MARY TILBERG



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For Tasha

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

L'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers.

Man was born free and everywhere he is in chains.

— JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *DU CONTRAT SOCIAL*

PREVIEW NOT FOR RESALE

One

NEWCASTLE DISTRICT, UPPER CANADA, 1833

For a long time afterward I carried him within me. I felt the contours of his smile on my face, as if he were smiling out of my own features. I lay warm beneath quilts in the little room below the roof in my sister Mairi's house. Life went on. I heard her young daughter wail and our brother Michael's children clatter in and out of the rooms below me, their voices like sparrows. I heard Mairi pacing in the next room as she spun wool; some days she worked the loom, the beater thumping like my own heart. Chauncey's heart in me. I listened and felt no guilt Mairi was doing my job. Nothing was to keep him from surfacing in my mind. I smiled to think of his laugh that could bounce around the village, echoing against the wall of forest to the west and north against the hills. I listened for the sound of his voice.

For hours I lay on my back staring as the bright day slipped around the room, as light faded into darkness. Once, the rain ceased for a while in the night. The moon rose and peered right in at me with its big face. Then it too was gone, and slowly, slowly, the birds began to twitter in the maple outside the window. Day crept in again like a thief. I turned my face away from that rogue and slept.

I kept my belly warm with both palms spread. A broody hen. No one could budge me from my nest. No one tried. It seems to me now that for much of the time it rained, sometimes a soft patter on the shingles, sometimes a thundering deluge. I thought of our brother

John, how it had rained then too, raining all over Connemara for John and young Adam Keane, hanged at the crossroads. I would fall asleep and awake in tears. "Our Johnny," I'd cry. Mairi would come and sit silently in the darkness by my side, holding my hand, her palm cool on my forehead.

"Only a few more months," I said to her once, patting my belly. In the pale light of the dawn she turned away from me. My hands were hot on my skin. Look, I wanted to tell her. My breasts have swelled. My belly is rising like new dough. I am carrying Chauncey in me. The child will have her father's dimples, the deep centre of a pansy on each cheek. But Mairi rose and went away into the day. I turned my face to the wall. I reached under the pillow for Mam's stone carving and held it in my hand until it seemed to pulse with warmth like a live thing.

Sleep closed over me like a lough. I swam in it, a fish breathing underwater. Chauncey often swam with me, his face laughing with those dimples I loved to kiss. Through the sunlit water I marvelled at his tightly curled eyelashes, at the dappled light reflecting in his black eyes. His hair sparkled. When I reached out to touch his slender ribs, to stroke the muscles of his stomach, he laughed and darted away through the water like a seal. How marvellous this ability of his. I swam like this for hours, days, until some slight noise of the world above brought me to the surface. Usually it was Daniel, Michael's boy, standing at the doorway, peering in. He was so serious, half-afraid I think now, that perhaps I had drowned in my sleep. He came to empty the chamber pot. I never left the room; I hardly left the bed. He was so sweet and uncomplaining, my brother's young son. I treasured his presence, because the moment he peeked in at the door it was as if Chauncey were sure to follow. Daniel had brought me so many messages, and each time I'd given him a hug to pass on to Chauncey. Then once again Daniel was gone, carefully clumping down the stairs with the heavy chamber pot. I drifted off.

Once I awakened to see Daniel standing by my bed, smiling shyly. With a surge of joy I asked, "A message for me?" He turned and fled.

I froze. For a suffocating instant, out of a darkness spitting snow, leering demons thrust torches at me. I shrieked and clapped my hands over my eyes. Silence. My room again, sunlight flickering in through the window. What an absurd mind to conjure such a scene. Mairi entered with Daniel close behind her. Had I shrieked aloud? I held out my hands to them both, my eyes brimming. *Look at the sunlight on the walls!* My fingers made a leaping hare on the wall. *Look, Daniel.* I laughed at their long faces and held out my arms. But Daniel hung back by the door. "He has to go home now," Mairi said. "It'll be dark soon."

Then one day, abruptly, heat suffused the room. Mairi opened the window and the scents of lilacs blew in. Lilacs! Was it spring? I looked at Mairi as she turned from the window and saw how big she was with child. I had forgotten. She sat on the bed behind me and began brushing out the wild grapevines of my hair. "Is it spring?" I asked her.

"Indeed," she sighed.

I stared at my hands, slack on my flat belly. Empty breasts. Hollow. And then I understood. I was suddenly a cave full of howling wind. No day, only darkness, only a winter wind whirling in me, a cold sea dragging me down. Mairi held me against her breast. She held my head up above the water. She breathed her own breath into my nostrils. She cursed me. She blessed me. "Damn you!" she cried. "Hold on to me."

Two

TORONTO, 1851

For nearly twenty years I cast about the way forward into the telling of this tale. Many hours I strained my eyes in dim candlelight, writing paragraph upon paragraph, which all too cruelly by morning proved insubstantial to the memory I carry. The writing sagged, the edifice sadly unable to bear the weight. And so the years slipped away. Lately, though, I've come to understand that what was once a personal story has in time become part of the fabric of history. I can no longer shirk my responsibility to record for future generations the truth of our experiences. My niece, Samantha Corcoran, awoke me to this necessity when she inquired after the manuscript she has seen me labour over many nights of her childhood. On the evening of the great Frederick Douglass's speech in Toronto a few months ago, Samantha asked me when I thought to publish my book. "After all," she said solemnly, "you aren't getting any younger. Who will write it if you die?"

SO I BEGIN WITH Connemara and the house where I was born the fourth of eight children. Ours was a poor district, but we managed year by year. It was my mother's deft hand at spinning and weaving that brought us through many a difficult period, and she passed on these talents and skills to my sister Mairi and me. Our father and elder brothers worked our small plot and worked for the landlord,

tending his sheep and cattle. Our father had built the cottage himself when he first moved here from the Claddagh. The land was rough, good only for grazing. To enrich the potato plots we went down to the sea each year and hauled home baskets of seaweed. We had a cow once and a donkey when times were good.

ONE DAY IN THE spring of 1831, I spent the afternoon sitting in my usual spot by the shore. Below, the sea sucked and slapped into the narrow inlet where we collected seaweed. I was wrapped up in the grey shawl, my back against the massive, triangular end stone of a wall. Who'd placed such a large stone as that? How did they move it? Da, he'd only grunted when I pointed it out to him the last time we came down for seaweed.

"Before me time," he muttered. Meaning before he arrived forty years earlier. He was a silent man, hard to know what he thought about anything. Each time I visited this place I made sure to replace any smaller stones fallen from around the large one. *Spalds suit walls as well as big ones*. So the saying goes. There was true satisfaction in fitting the most suitable spald in snugly. It's the smaller stones, the spalds, tucked in to prop up and wedge the large stones, that lend the greater beauty, the patterns and colours, to the wall. Still, it was the immense solidity of the end stone that drew the eye. Perhaps Nature itself had placed it here and men in a distant age had used it to guide their building of the wall to the sea. I pressed my back against its cold smoothness and gazed at the restless water, and the island, brilliant green now in the setting sun.

A narrow spine of a stone wall climbed up from the sea and over the summit, dividing the island almost in half. One side of the island was barren, grey-green boulder-strewn, overgrazed by the landlord's cattle, while on the other side the brilliant green grass grew tall among clumps of trees, pine and hazel scrub, awaiting the livestock. No creatures at all this afternoon.

As a child I'd watched smoke rise and drift from the chimneys of eight stone houses on the island, where Da's aunt Margaret and

three cousins lived. On Sundays I'd wait for them to row over for tea. There was Robby, the smallest cousin, his hair a flaming red, waving from the boat his da was rowing. Where was Robby now? He'd disappeared with his family; Da had no idea. If Robby were alive, he'd be about Liam's age.

Not a single house on the island was left whole, thatch roofs yanked off and burned. The people dispersed. Aunt Margaret died in Athenry, we'd heard that much. Then nothing more. John, seventeen, thinking he could do something to stop the constables from evicting the people. All that trouble. He, little Michael Leary, and Adam Keane arrested for their agitation. Accused of being Ribbonmen. They didn't deny it at all. The look on Da's face and Mam collapsing in the court. The Leary boy, not twelve, they'd shipped off to slave in Jamaica. But Johnny and sweet Adam Keane. No, even now I can't think of them without this rushing into my chest all the storms off the Atlantic.

The branch in the hedge lives long after the hand that planted it. So many things outlast human life. Stone walls. Gravestones. The sea, constantly washing the shore. John left no artifact that we can hold and marvel at. He left no child with his brown eyes and bright hair. On a hillside overlooking the sea, a rough gravestone marks his resting place, his name, John Corcoran, the dates, 1804–1821, chipped into the stone by Michael just before he left for Upper Canada. The rainy winds from the sea will wear them away. The words don't tell the story.

THAT TERRIBLE MORNING, MAM sent me into the hills with a basket to collect tansy. She'd intended to dye some fine wool yellow to make a baby garment. I was up in the hills overlooking the village and the sea and the island just off shore, keeping a watchful eye on the dark clouds surging over the ocean, when all at once heavy smoke billowed from the houses on the island. I stared, uncomprehending for a moment, then bolted down the rocky hills, yelling until my breath came out in sobs. By the time I'd run all the way into the village to warn of the fire, soldiers were already yanking Johnny, Adam Keane, and little Michael Leary through the crowds in the village street, ropes

around their necks, young rams for the slaughter. Mam, heavily pregnant, ran alongside shrieking, trying to free John's ropes. A mounted officer struck her down.

If only I could have run faster, been closer to keep Mam from falling, to keep her from the soldier's whip. So many times since, I've imagined wrenching that whip away and slashing that bastard across his face. But it's the other, the crossroads where they hanged our John that is impossible to conjure, although I'd been there with everyone else in that cold rain.

I pictured Johnny as he rowed us in the currach across to the island on a Sunday, remembered him laughing as he chased me around the boulders above the house. The powerful strength of his shoulders as he hoisted me up for a ride down to the sea, how proud I was for the whole village to see me perched on his shoulders. I remember one afternoon when he and our oldest brother, Michael, competed cutting turf, their bared backs shining with sweat, and how finally Johnny thrust in his spade, stepped back laughing, his arms flung wide, and conceded to Michael. "I'll beat you yet!" I can see that high sunny field with its rows of drying peat blocks, people standing about, men clapping Michael on his back, our da sitting on a boulder quietly smoking his pipe, nodding as people complimented him on his sons. Yes, easy to remember these, but it's the other I resist.

We lost Johnny and Mam the year before the great hunger that came upon us in 1822. Mairi said then she was glad after all Mam didn't have to go through the famine. "God works in mysterious ways," she said. I lay close to her on the pallet in those dark hungry days and heard her say the words "mysterious ways," and a great revulsion overcame me. Just who was this God, anyway? If He could spare Mam the starvation by taking her in childbirth, and that tiny eighth baby too, if He was so powerful, why did He let us starve? Why didn't God help? Why had He let Johnny be hanged? Anger choked me as I lay beside Mairi in the dark. I hated God. I was only nine but knew to keep my fearsome thoughts to myself.

"IT'S IN GOD'S HANDS NOW," Mrs. Keane said. Mam was still alive. I was kneeling by the bed, and Mam opened her eyes and stared right into mine. She didn't stop staring, but the light in her eyes seemed to fade. The hair prickled on my neck. I rose without a sound and ran out and up into the hills for help. "God," I called. "It's in your hands. You see the sparrow fall. There's my Mam. Down there, in that house." I pointed, just in case He was watching.

I sat high up in the grass. The sun glittered on the sea in the distance and on the low pink clouds, casting shadows across the far bare mountains they called the Twelve Bens. Purple heather and the bright yellow of cowslips enhanced every stony cliff and outcropping. God's handiwork. He was everywhere. Surely He could hear me. What did I expect? A voice out of the wilderness to boom down: *Go home, your mam is well.* I nibbled and sucked at a stalk of grass. Wait. Patience. Who could rush God? With my chin cradled in my hands I watched the smoke from the chimney below curl in small wisps that the wind blew away in gusts. Whitecaps on the sea. Then a cry, then several voices at once. Da rushed out of the house and away down to the village. Mairi came out and looked up to me. She was shading her eyes from the bolt of sunlight that came piercing over the summit of the hills. *Oonagh*, she cried, *oh no, Oonagh.* She was twelve, four years older than I, as tall as Mam. She started for the path, but I leaped up and scrambled even higher into the boulders so that no one would find me. And no one did for the rest of the day, until Colum O'Leary jumped down upon me from behind. "You have to come home," he said. "They're waiting on you."

THE WIND PICKED UP with a nasty bite to it. I drew the grey shawl even closer. It had been Mam's and Mairi had said I could have it. It wasn't summer yet. I shivered. Da and Liam were sure to be home soon, tired after working on the roads all day, wanting their tea. Though Heaven knew, Mona at fifteen was quite capable and had likely already added potatoes to the stew.

Still I lingered, leaning against the stone. A seal popped its dark head out of the water and gazed at me before silently slipping under again. The sun lowered into the ocean, flooding the waves with its blood red light. I wouldn't fear to stay here all night until the moon rose. When we were children Colum used to tease that I was a witch or a Druid. Maybe in ancient times I would've been. *Last night you were in my dream. By the sea dancing. I saw you!* I shoved him away, pretending to be mightily offended, but thrilled. He'd been spying again. *And anyway, stupid,* I shouted as he ran away laughing. *Druids don't dance by the sea!*

But I did. It was obvious at his words that he'd seen me whirling in this spot. This sacred place. I smiled to remember his dark head peeping up over boulders or in the green grass on the hills. Ah, Colum. He was off to sea these days, travelling the world.

I felt backwards with both hands for the rough edges of the stone, closed my eyes to better absorb the rhythmic shush of water on the rocks below, wind along the grass, the rasping of a donkey grazing on the near slope. *Oh, Mam. Let me draw in the spirit of the stone at my back, let me be stern and silent, a wise woman, not to be drawn into petty squabbles. Help me.*

RATHER THAN CLIMB BACK up to the track that ran along the coast, I scrambled along the rocky beach on the jumble of round sea-smoothed boulders. Easy to get a foot caught, to step on a rock suddenly upending. Vast tables of stone closer to the sea's edge made the going easier, but too close to the water and the stone was dangerously slick. Still, by walking here I avoided being seen by the gossips in the few houses along the road. Just where the rocks gave way to a little sandy cove, I'd catch the road as it wound through the last houses of the village and back out into the hills where our house was.

As I neared the cove in the twilight, I heard voices and came upon a couple of small boys crouched among the boulders. They hadn't seen me yet and chattered on about Natty: *Did ye see how he bawled*

like a babby? They snorted with laughter. What had they done? Something made them look up. They gasped, guilty-faced. I leaped down beside them as they scrambled to their feet.

“Well now, O’Rourke’s. What did you do to poor Natty?” I put my hands on my hips and glared at them. Inside I was laughing.

They shrugged and looked away and giggled when they looked back at each other.

“Come now, spit it out.”

The older boy, Tom, a scrawny boy of nine, lifted his head and snarled, “We don’t have to tell you nothing.”

“Well, I’m asking. What about Natty? It’s not his fault how he is.”

They both shrugged.

“Your wee cousin. You should love him. Be kind to him.”

“We don’t have to listen to you,” said Tom.

“You’re not our Mam!” piped up the younger O’Rourke, a smaller replica of his scrawny brother. They scowled at me through straggly fringes of dark hair.

“Thank God I’m not!” I laughed.

“You don’t believe in God. Or Mother Mary!” said Tom.

I was that shocked to hear him I put my hand to my throat.

“Where’d you hear that?”

“You love the Devil. You are the Devil!” Both boys then leaped away from me as if they expected me to attack them.

Then I got angry, if amused. “If I don’t believe in God Himself, why would I believe in the Devil? You can’t have one without the other!” I grinned at the sudden uncertainty in their eyes.

“You can’t?” said the older.

“No, of course not.”

They gaped like fish flung on the shore.

A woman’s shrill voice called. The boys ducked down, their eyes pleading with me not to give them away. On tiptoe I looked over the bank up to where Mrs. O’Rourke stood at her half door. When she saw me she scowled just like her boys and crossed her arms.

“Good evening to you, Mrs. O’Rourke!” I called cheerily.

The boys were begging me not to betray their hiding place. Mrs. O'Rourke just stared grimly, then without a word she closed the door.

"Too bad for you," I muttered.

The boys giggled. "Is she gone?"

"She's a big old crab, isn't she, your mam?"

The boys giggled louder, still crouching.

I continued on my way. A moment later a pebble struck me between the shoulder blades. Then another. One hit the back of my head. If I'd turned to see, I'd have rushed back and throttled them. Instead I took a deep breath, then another, and moved on. No more stones. I stepped calmly down onto the sand of the cove.

The tide was out. Several currachs were hauled up high above the tide line, looking like beached seals. I wove around them, digging my toes into the cold sand, relishing its hard smoothness after the uncertain rocky beach.

Mr. Dickie Clooney sat on the seawall that sheltered the road from the storm waves. A gnarled old man, he often sat there in the evening, smoking his pipe. I reached the steps in the wall next to him and started up.

"Evening, Mr. Clooney."

"Aye, 'tis that," he grunted.

I swept by him up the stairs.

"They needs a good trashing, them lads," he said, pointing his pipe at the O'Rourkes, who were just visible squatting back down in the rocks.

I smiled, mindful of my words. "They're only silly boys."

"A good trashing, I say." He took another puff and I continued up the stairs. I'd gained the top stair when he said rather loudly, "I hear yis got a letter today."

My heart lurched. "A letter?"

"Colum O'Leary brought it. He's come from America again."

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Clooney!"

Colum home, and with a letter! Must be from Michael. Please God in whom I do not believe, let Colum still be there; please make

him stay for supper. But as I hurried up the stony path my prayer changed. Let him come tomorrow instead. Oh please, don't let him see me all windblown and dishevelled.

The girls must have been watching from the window. While I was still at a distance, Lizzie, our youngest, came tearing down the path, followed closely by Mona.

"Let me, let me!" shrieked Lizzie, flinging back her hands to stop Mona from passing her.

Mona passed her and yelled, "A letter's come!"

Lizzie's small face crumbled in disappointment. She halted and folded her arms tightly across her chest. Her mouth was all a tremble, but I didn't indulge her in her pout.

"Is Da already home?"

"No, no!" the girls cried.

I continued up the path with a girl on either side.

"Colum O'Leary brought it!" said Mona.

"I hope you asked him to stay for tea."

"Yes, but he had to go," Mona sighed. "He's got a heavy beard now."

"Does he? Well, he's a grown man after all, Mona!"

"It's a thick packet," said Lizzie, pulling on my hand in her excitement. I smiled down at her. "From Michael," Lizzie continued. "That's what Colum said."

"You didn't open it, did you?" I asked sternly, squeezing her hand.

"We didn't touch it," said both girls at once. I knew from their faces how each had run a finger secretively over the bulky letter when the other wasn't looking.

I ducked through the doorway of the house and paused to adjust to the gloom within. The girls crowded up behind me. Faint light from the window gleamed on the oilcloth-wrapped package on the table, the fattest letter I'd ever seen, tied up securely with twine. The girls watched me. Would I open it? they wondered. I grinned at them and clapped my hands.

"Well, let's get busy. Mm, smells good, Mona. You put the potatoes in? They'll be here soon."

DA AND MY YOUNGER brother Liam had been working on the roads since February. This was the only way to qualify for financial assistance. Things had been poorly lately, with bad harvests and little employment. With the mills in Ulster taking much of the business, fewer and fewer people brought Mairi and me their flaxen or woollen yarn to weave up on the loom. Things were not the same as they'd been when Mam was alive, weaving good cloth and knitting. How could we compete with the mills? Troubles had erupted again in many places as people refused to pay the tithes to the Church of Ireland.

People who brought me their business could not afford to pay much. Mairi lived out now, in the home of the Protestant Pastor Spring, working in his kitchen. Da and Liam worked all day for a pittance. Our family was better off than many who hadn't a shelter to sleep in. So far at least, we still had the house and garden, a bin half-full of oatmeal, some potatoes. We had the bed and table Mam brought with her when she married Da, and her loom and spinning wheel.

Voices from down the path. The men were coming. Liam was still my baby brother, for all that he was fourteen, doing a man's job. He had his eye on the daughter of the shebeen owner in the village. I teased him that he thought only of the pub and not the girl, and he didn't deny it. She was a pretty enough girl, older by two years. Liam was big for his age, joining the rest of our brothers who tended to six feet, taking after Mam's side of the family who came from Ulster. He was already taller than Da, who declared that Liam wouldn't stop growing until he was taller than Michael. *Giants, all of you*, Da pretended to grumble. *Comes from all that milk he used to swill before we had to sell the cow.*

Yes, Liam enjoyed attention for his sudden gangly height. Now if only we had enough food to fill in the spaces between his ribs.

The men clumped into the house and made straight for the wash basin. Liam stood aside as Da washed up. They seemed sunken in weariness tonight, silent as stones.

"A letter's come," piped up Lizzie.

"Yeah," said Liam, flashing a bit of a grin at her. Da settled himself in his chair at the table.

Da reached across the table and lightly touched the packet. "It's a fair size, now, wouldn't you say?" He poked it as if it were a puppy about to nip.

"Colum called out about it as we passed his place," Liam's voice muffled in the towel.

"Yes, the girls said he brought it," I said.

Liam lowered the towel from his eyes and raised an eyebrow at me. "Oh? And where were you when he came?"

I stuck my tongue out so that Da could not see.

"Out walking by the sea again, I suppose?" Liam continued, grinning. He was hoping Da would chastise me for neglecting my work. I glanced at Da.

"I finished Mrs. Kelly's cloth by noon. So?" I grimaced at Liam, who grinned back, shaking his head at me.

"We'll eat first," Da growled, ignoring us.

Mona handed me the plates one by one, and I filled them from the pot on the hearth. Mona poured hot salted milk in the large bowl in the middle of the table so all could reach it, and beside it I plunked the kish with a few steaming potatoes. Da raised his eyebrows but he didn't say what I knew he was thinking, that we'd cooked too much. Then we were eating, all eyes shifting helplessly to the brown packet that sat at Da's elbow. Da nudged it with his arm.

"Michael, I'd be guessing."

"From Canada," said Lizzie, beaming. The firelight burnished her hair to a bright copper. How wonderfully strange that in one family the hair colour ranged from blackest black, like mine and Mona's, to that of Mairi's gold. In between were the copper of Lizzie and the bronze of Liam. Michael's was also copper, turned darker with age. Johnny's had been bright like Lizzie's. Mam's a soft gold tinged with red, and Da's, before it turned grey, black like mine. Half of us,

including me, had Mam's dark blue eyes, and the rest took after Da, like Mairi, whose eyes were a lovely soft brown.

As if my thoughts had summoned her, Mairi burst in the door with Josie, her betrothed. He was Joseph, like Da, but everyone called him Josie. The teasing when they were first courting, *Mary and Joseph ... Just be careful about that first-born, won't you?*

"A letter's come!" Mairi called out.

"They let you go, did they?" grunted Da at her.

"They don't know I've left!" laughed Mairi. She loved to tease Da, who worried that she was too lighthearted toward her employment. "But Bertha said I might go." Her eyes were on the letter. "Will you look at that," she breathed. "How thick it is."

"It's from Michael, from Canada," said Lizzie.

"Of course it is." Mairi leaned down and planted a kiss on Lizzie's head.

Josie settled down by the fire. Mairi turned to fill him a plate and I rose, embarrassed that I hadn't offered right away. Mairi waved me away with a laugh, but I fetched him potatoes from the kish steaming on the table and gave him a cup with hot salted milk. He smiled his thanks.

"Josie hasn't eaten yet, but I have." Mairi served him the plate of stew and he laughed at all the food thrust upon him from both sides. He ate quickly. Josie looked like he never had enough to eat, and that was entirely possible, coming from a large family of boys, all short and skinny. Josie was determined to take himself and Mairi off to Canada where Michael and Josie's own two oldest brothers lived in the same village. Every time a letter arrived, Josie eyed it with great anticipation. Perhaps it carried the passage money his brothers had promised for the last five years. He and Mairi had been betrothed for two long years, waiting to marry. If they could only get to Canada. He wolfed down the food, dipping the potatoes into the milk and practically eating them whole. Pity panged in me. Mairi adored him; she hung on every word he said, even while she teased him.

“What did you eat tonight, Mairi?” asked Lizzie. This was always her question, for the Springs were known to eat quite exotic food at times, especially when they had guests come from Galway or Athlone or Dublin.

Mairi told her about the bowl of custard with cream and apricot preserves that she had served the Springs, and how Bertha had allowed her to finish the leftovers. Lizzie’s eyes widened with pleasure. But before she ate the custard, Mairi assured her, she had eaten a large bowlful of lamb stew. I glanced at Da, for he hated when Mairi spoke like this. We hadn’t had lamb in a long time. Mairi glanced at me and ducked her eyes away. She dug into her apron pockets and pulled out something wrapped in a white napkin.

“Well, what do I have here?” She spoke in feigned surprise.

Lizzie sat silent, her big brown eyes fixed on what Mairi was unwrapping in front of her. A number of small golden oatcakes studded with raisins. Lizzie didn’t move an inch, her eyes smiling up at Mairi.

“Did they give them to you?” asked Da sternly.

“Of course. Bertha said to take some to you.”

He harrumphed as if he didn’t believe her story.

“Really, Da,” laughed Mairi. “I made these myself.”

She divided them up among us. I ate half my portion then put the rest in my pocket for later. I savoured the sweetness of the raisins stuck in my teeth long after the rest had slipped down my throat.

Da didn’t hesitate to eat his share.

SOMETIMES I WONDERED IF the Springs’ God wasn’t the true one. He certainly seemed to provide better for them. I’d said as much to Da once and he’d clipped me hard on the head with his knuckles.

“They get our tithe money!” he’d growled.

Da growled when he spoke. He was like a gruff shaggy dog, beard tattered and strewn with grey, eyes overhung with enormous grey eyebrows that he had me snip just so they wouldn’t get into his eyes.

He was a good father. He hardly ever drank. If there'd been a regular priest in the area, he'd have had us to church every day. As it was, we said the rosary before going to sleep.

Da had no idea that what I said to please him I couldn't say with belief. For a long time I thought that to believe in God was childish. Like believing in fairies. But I kept quiet, feeling alone in this. I'd just turned thirteen when I came to my conclusions. Five years had passed since Johnny had been hanged and Mam died. Michael had emigrated with Josie's brothers to Upper Canada. I lay one night on the straw bed with my sisters and Liam. He was still sharing the straw with us, before he was moved to the little loft overhead. Everyone was asleep. Across the room, in the bed, Da snored heavily.

I'd been thinking intensely on the events of that day. Father Christopher had come all the way from Loughrea and everyone had turned out for the celebration of the Mass up in the hills, in a special place sheltered from the winds within the tumbled walls of an old castle. Mostly sheep grazed there now, but when the priest came every month or so, Mass was held in those ruins.

On this day, in a strange mood, I'd felt detached from everyone, as if seeing them for the first time and from a great height. The priest's beautiful, deep voice rang against the hills and the crowd echoed in its unison. Da, kneeling beside me, bowed his grey head. Two O'Rourke boys a few feet in front kept poking each other in the ribs, barely suppressing giggles. Their mother rapped them sharply on their heads. I thought of Mam, how she'd never hit us children. How she'd died without God's help. How Michael, now in Canada, had been excommunicated from the Church because he'd spoken of rebellion just like Johnny. The words sprang into my head: *I hate You.*

Why did the Springs have all that lovely food and us hardly any? Why did the Robertson children, whose father was a sodden drunk, but Protestant, always have good clothes to wear? And a school? Liam had only a hedge school to attend whenever Master Neill came about, the good school in the village barred to him. I'd never learn

to read. I couldn't accept this as Mairi had, as Joanna Leary did, or Bridie Luby, who said women didn't need reading or writing. When Bridie had said that the other day, I'd flown into such a rage Bridie'd run home after denouncing me for being a Ribbonman.

If I was a boy, I would be! I yelled at her back.

A Ribbonman, as they'd accused Johnny. His neck broken by the rope. *No. Don't think. God, please. God, who knows when even the smallest sparrow falls.*

Father Christopher said God tests our devotion like He tested Job's. What kind of Father tests His children in such horrible ways? Whatever had poor Mam or Johnny done to offend Him? Father James said Mam was such a saint God wanted her home with him. But we'd needed her ourselves.

The voices around me rose and fell in unison. My mouth clamped shut. I looked up to the hills green and scattered with boulders, the people kneeling on the grass among the ruins of the ancient castle. That castle had been here before Christ came to Ireland. The people living then had had Druid priests. They hadn't believed in Jesus. That much I knew. Maybe not even in God. *There is no God.* For a moment I couldn't breathe. *Look around. No God to hate.*

I stood up and swayed. Da looked at me through watery eyes. He dropped his head again. *Go, now,* I said to myself and walked past Mairi's inquiring eyes and up into the hills. From a boulder high above, I watched the service, Father Christopher's voice clear even from that height. Then slowly people began to leave. The service was over. I was empty as the sky. I didn't have to hate God anymore because there was no God. People lived on earth, as did the animals. They birthed babies like the animals, needed food, water, and sleep like the animals, and died too, like any other living thing on this earth. No God sent His angels to stretch invisible wings over them in protection.

All this I mulled over as I lay beside my sleeping sisters. Although I was quite frightened at what I'd conjured up — for what if I were to die that very night and God really did exist — a wild exhilaration

took hold of me. Had anyone else ever dared to think such thoughts? I couldn't imagine Da saying God didn't exist. Had Johnny? Had he died with that broken neck and gone straight to God?

MAIRI WAVED HER HAND in front of me. "Oonagh, my goodness, where are you? Come back to us!"

The whole family stared at me.

"You're such a dreamer," chided Mairi.

"Aw, she's dreaming of a certain someone who's come from America," crowed Liam.

The dishes had been cleared away and Da's steaming punch placed before him. Da reached for the packet and carefully untied the knots.

Wrapped inside in an extra sheet of waxed paper was another packet sealed and tied in string. Da worked at these knots.

"Just cut it," suggested Liam.

We all sucked in breath. Money and passage tickets. Da carefully set it all aside and took up the stiff pages of the letter itself. He handed it over to Liam, the only good reader among us. Reading was hard work and the letter trembled in Liam's hand as he bent toward the firelight. He cleared his throat.

"Dear Father and Family," he read hesitantly. "I trust this letter will find you all in good health. We are not a little worried here at the report of things in Ireland. We are all keeping well. Jane sends you her love. We are expecting our third child in September, God willing." This revelation was greeted with wild cheers. Da puffed on his pipe, eyes glittering under bushy brows. He gestured for Liam to continue.

"Please find enclosed the passage tickets for Mairi and Josie. The money is for the provisions they will need for the voyage. A list is enclosed. As well, I have sent Oonagh her passage. She will be good company for Mairi on the voyage as well as after. They will have no trouble obtaining work here, as maids are in constant demand by the wealthier farmers and townspeople. Truly this is a rich country if one is willing to work hard. I only wish I could send for everyone now!"

Liam looked at Da; Da smoked with no expression. I was seized with apprehension. Emigrate with Mairi? Mairi, on the other hand, could hardly restrain her joy. She clasped her hands to her breast. I began shaking, although the room wasn't cold. To leave this place? To leave Da and my sisters and Liam?

Liam had stopped reading and was staring down at the paper in his hands. He suddenly looked up and across at me, his eyes stricken. It was as if he'd flung a spear.

"Go on then, son. Can you not see to read? Get closer to the fire. Is that all he says?" Da's voice rumbled.

"No, there's more." Liam's voice trembled. Tears started up in my eyes. Liam had expected the passage money for Mairi; we'd all been awaiting that. But *Oonagh*? I could see that question in his face.

He continued, "In this new land a man is respected for what he can accomplish. We are all doing very well and unafraid to voice our opinions. Josie's brothers have built a gristmill in the village, near a wonderful source of water power, and are after building a sawmill this summer. They are only waiting for Josie."

Mairi leaped from her stool and flung her arms around Josie's neck. He flushed in the firelight. Da glanced at them from under his lowered brows.

Liam continued, "I hope the winter was not difficult. I will send you money as I can. We are all waiting to seeing Josie and Mairi soon, God willing, and little Oonagh too." Liam grinned at me. "Little Oonagh!" Everyone laughed.

I shrugged. In the five years since Michael had left I'd grown a head taller than Mairi. But I hadn't Mairi's robust body. Liam liked to tell me I'd make a good broomstick.

Liam read on, "I know they will be sorely missed at home, but you will send them knowing they have a good future here. Next year I will arrange for Liam to come."

His voice squeaked, "Me? No! I'll not be leaving you, Da!"

"We know why you'll be staying, and it's not your da will be keeping you home," laughed Josie.

"No, it's a lie!" said Liam.

"What's a lie? What did I say?" Josie said in mock astonishment.

"What you were going to tell," muttered Liam.

"Oh. Now. So you can read minds! That's quite a talent!"

Mona joined in the fun, "We know a girl down at Jem's that has her eye on you, Liam. Could you be sweet on her too?"

"Aw, shut up," he muttered, his head hanging low over the letter.

"Keep reading, son, till it's finished," ordered Da. He reached over and gently tapped his pipe against the hearth stone. "Is that all?" He motioned impatiently at the letter.

Liam shook his head and took up the paper again. "Please kiss the little ones for me and may God keep you all safe until we meet again. Your loving son, Michael."

"So, Da!" Mairi leaped up again and danced over to Da. "A grandfather again. How do you like that?" She hugged him around the neck. He couldn't help smiling at her fervour.

"Well, it does happen."

"Are you not pleased?"

"They're so far away," he said, patting her shoulder. "As you'll be. I'll never see your children, the two of you."

"No, hush. You'll be coming along too."

But Mairi's words were hollow. The truth was Da would probably not come and most people who emigrated never returned. As a sailor Colum could return again and again. But Michael? He'd never be back. In his letter he sounded happy and settled.

Mairi suddenly said, "Oh, Da! If we'd known this was coming we could have been married at Shrove!" She wrung her hands in dismay.

"Never mind," Da muttered. "You'll be married now. Before you sail."

Josie's face went scarlet. Mairi threw her arms around Da's neck, then whirled around the room in a frenzy. Josie reached out and grabbed her as she passed. She collapsed onto the settle in a wild flurry of laughter.

I looked at Da's grey, grizzled head bowed, his gnarled hands resting on the table. He'd stared down while Mairi was dancing in her triumph. I reached out for his hand, my eyes stinging, "I'll never leave you, Da. You'll see all my children to love them."

Liam snorted. "Oh, and who will you be making them babies with? Who is there to marry? Eh? Willy Keane, poor fellow? Or maybe old Dickie Clooney? He's always looking for a wife; I hear he's sweet on ya!" Liam fell on the floor in his laughter.

Da squeezed my hand, saying, hush now, and I stopped the tears. I tried to laugh along with Liam.

He said, "Oh, I know, I know who you'd have. Colum O'Leary! I seen you two last time he was here!"

"Shut up, you!" I wanted to thrash him.

He sat up and stared at me, his mouth hanging open. Why was he being so mean? "Up in the heather. I seen you!"

I launched myself at him to make him stop. He curled into a ball while I pummelled him. I could hardly see for my anger. Then Da roared, "Stop, the pair of yis! Brawling like a pair of silly puppies. You should be ashamed of yourselves. Especially in front of Josie here!"

He stalked to the door and went out. Josie smirked as he hauled Mairi to her feet. "Come, love. Let's leave the little ones to their games."

Liam always managed to do this to me. Mairi touched me lightly on the head as she passed to the door.

"It's getting late," she whispered. "Meet me tomorrow at the stone. After midday."

The door closed and I was left alone with Liam, Mona, and Lizzie all watching me seriously. Liam dusted himself off and reached down a hand. I thrust it away.

"Aw, Oonagh. I was just fooling."

"You didn't have to mention Colum."

"Just teasing you."

His crestfallen face. This was the thing about Liam. He never meant to be mean. He just enjoyed people laughing at the things he said, and if it meant saying things about someone else, he would. He was one for remembering jokes and stories and gossip. He'd make a fine publican. Had he really seen me and Colum?

I reached out and he pulled me up. The firelight played on his face.

"Since when did you get so tall?" I reached up to touch his cheek. Relief shone in his eyes. He reached out and hugged me as if I'd said words of forgiveness.

"I'll miss you when you go," he said.

"I'll not be going!" I said against his shoulder and tried to push him away. But he held me tight and said against the top of my head, "No, you must. It's your only chance."

Lizzie flung her arms around both of us. Mona watched, serious, unsmiling.

"Come," I said, holding out an arm to her. "Let's do the Corcoran crush." Mona smiled and slightly shook her head, as if she were too old for such a habit. But Lizzie grunted with her effort to crush us. Liam groaned aloud, "Oh my good Lord, Lizzie, what a hugger you are!" He picked her up, her long legs dangling. She squealed as he swung her about, complaining that she was getting much too heavy for this. Then he plunked her down and turned to go out the door.

"Liam!"

He paused, looking at me questioningly.

"Did you really see me and Colum?"

He only grinned and smacked a kiss in the air before closing the door after himself.