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Irish Lessons

For my brother and me, 1981 was a year without adults. All the adults, those who mattered, checked themselves into hospitals or seedy motels, or disappeared into bars and deeper into their own problems until they were oblivious to ours; some of them starved themselves to death. No one called us off the streets after dark. No one paid attention to us at all, except the nuns who tormented us at school, and Pat Sullivan, the man who introduced me to the Irish language and tinned snuff. That year, televised images of Bobby Sands and nine other men dying in a prison near Belfast flooded the living rooms of everyone we knew. I turned twelve, and my brother turned fourteen. It was the year of our hunger strike.

Someone recently asked me where my mom was that year, and I couldn't think of what to say except "gone." My brother and I weren't allowed to visit her, and when I picture shuffling electro-shocked forms and locked steel doors, I know I'm just remembering movies I've seen. My dad lived in a motel off I-55. He must have been sober some of the time, at least enough to drive. He's the one who dropped my brother and me off at my aunt's house in Bridgeport, where we were going for "just a few weeks," while he and my mom got things sorted.

I hear you can get Ethiopian food in Bridgeport now, but it was all white then, and people fought to keep it that way, even if you could still smell Chicago's vanished stockyards on a windy day. It was a neighborhood of tiny backyards protected by chain-link fences. Bars where you could drink with people who could pass for your Irish cousins and might just be related. Living rooms hung with photos of the Pope and JFK, and Irish flags hanging over front stoops. Old women arranging plastic flowers around lawn statues of the Virgin Mary. Teenage girls smacking gum to get the attention of guys with shamrock tattoos. Never-ending gossip. The kind of place where people talked about crime and "the coloreds" over Christmas dinner. Most people who lived there deny it now, but there was a price for stepping out of line. There might have been an even worse price for belonging.

My brother and I arrived in Bridgeport on January 4, 1981. When we pulled up to the curb, my aunt came out onto her porch, smoking a cigarette and gripping the folds of her sweater. She looked ashen in the afternoon light, as she muttered about the shame of having to take in her sister's kids, and we struggled up her icy steps, lugging small bags packed for what we thought would be a short trip.

Our first night in Bridgeport, my aunt stayed home with us. We ate boiled

hotdogs, and she had two cans of beer. The volume of a television on the kitchen counter prevented any conversation, not that our aunt had any interest in hearing about our problems. She had too many of her own. After that, she disappeared every afternoon, after a quick stop at home to change out of her nurses' uniform and into tight jeans. She always left money on the kitchen table, and in that sense, she was a mother to us. She slept at the house most nights, and we never worried about going hungry. My brother took charge of the money every afternoon, handing me a few bills before I walked to the corner store, where I bought canned spaghetti under the watchful eye of a shopkeeper with three missing fingers and a thick Irish accent.

Every afternoon I walked a gauntlet, past teenage guys clinging to the bumpers of old cars and sliding down the street on makeshift sleds of flattened cardboard boxes, middle-aged men flushed from years of drinking and the strain of breaking icicles from eaves, and worn-out mothers sweeping snow off porches. The mothers were so-called "lace-curtain Irish" who maintained appearances by collecting empty beer cans from their alleyways and every stray cigarette butt left on the curbs—the sort who kept their stoops clean no matter what was going on inside their houses. I'm not sure if they felt sorry for us or angry at the two ill-kempt kids bringing down the neighborhood just a little bit more. There were only two porches in the neighborhood that never got swept. My aunt's was one. Pat Sullivan's was the other.

The first time I saw Pat Sullivan, he was standing on his porch, reading a piece of mail and muttering to himself with a cigarette pressed between his lips.

"Come here and read something for me, lass." He held up a card that had been left on his door. "I haven't got my glasses. Be a good girl and tell me when the postman is bringing my package."

I paused, less out of fear than fascination. He had massive hands covered in thick scars, watery blue eyes tinged with jaundice, and a sharply lined face. He looked tired and a little sick, so I pushed through the drifts blocking his walkway and stepped onto his porch, clutching a grocery bag to my chest.

"What does it say there?" he asked.

I squinted at the card pinched between his fingers. "Before noon tomorrow."

He studied my face, covered in frozen snot, and my coat, a hand-me-down from my brother. "You're staying with the lady next door."

"My aunt." I looked at my feet and said something vague about my mom being sick.

"The boy. He's your brother?"

I nodded, and he asked me our names.

"Bridget," he repeated. "I'll call you Bridie. That's the Irish. We'll leave your brother as Brendan. Be a good girl, now, and take care of yourself." With that, he opened his screen door and started fumbling with his keys, and I scampered from his porch.

Two days later, he appeared on his porch in a thin shirt just as I was leaving my aunt's house. He summoned me, this time to hand me a five-dollar bill.

"Be a good sheila, Bridie, and get two Cadbury bars down at the shop. One for me, and one for yourself," he said. "Be sure the man gives you proper change."

I ran down the sidewalk, slipping on ice and imagining, for the first time in a long time, that I wasn't a burden. When I got back to Pat's, I heard a kettle whining inside. I held out his chocolate bar and change and, again, looked at my feet.

"*Go raibh maith agat*," Pat said. "*Ar mhaith leat cupán tae*? You haven't a clue what I just said, do you?"

I forced myself to look up.

"I said thank you. Asked if you'd like a spot of tea. You haven't any Irish, then."

I shook my head.

"Come inside and warm yourself."

It seemed more of a command than a request, and so I followed Pat into his clapboard house, into a living room cluttered with Irish newspapers, empty beer bottles and dirty saucers stuck with dried tea leaves. That afternoon, I drank a cup of sugared Irish tea, the kind that stains your teeth the color of peat, shared a bar of chocolate and recited strange words, vestiges of something from Pat's childhood. That's how they began, my Irish lessons.

For three weeks, Pat was my only friend in Bridgeport. The kids on the street ignored me and my brother, and the adults pitied us, that is, if they weren't gossiping about "two more fucking Connellys," as I overhead one neighbor call us. We didn't attempt to explore the neighborhood. As far as we knew, we'd be leaving Bridgeport and going home in a few weeks. But then someone from St. Mary's left an anonymous gift on the porch, a bag of second-hand school uniforms. A sweater and tie for my brother, and a plaid skirt with worn pleats—a skirt I wore, along with twenty safety pins, almost every day for the next two years. We knew, then, that we'd be finishing sixth and eighth grade with strangers. So, we adapted to changing circumstances. We tried to fit in.

For one thing, I can thank the nuns. In the first week of school, the ones old enough to remember our parents harangued, and in two cases, beat us just for being Connellys, usually while remarking on the deep roots and far-reaching branches of sin. It might have been for the best, because we gained some cred among kids who might have beaten us more viciously than the nuns did. As our last name got around, we traded on collective memories and lingering reputations, on stories about our dad and stolen liquor and street-corner brawls. For the first and last time, our family name counted for something. Our aunt was never home, and so our house became the place everyone hung out. At least the guys. I was the only girl on the street, and so I lived in a world of boys becoming men.

My brother quickly dominated our small pack. He was big for his age and desperate enough to be daring. By the end of February, we'd fallen into a routine—predictable, if you don't count being chased down alleys by irate shopkeepers. My brother and his friends would walk home from school, cutting across empty lots to collect bottles, stop at a grocery store for deposits and then hit the Polish shop

to steal candy bars and cans of soda. My brother told everyone what to steal. One time, my brother even got Sean Conlon to nick a fifth of Southern Comfort from behind the register at Doolen's and then beat Sean when he tried to claim the bottle as his own.

I can't completely blame him. His dignity, though, came at my expense. When we got out of school, I'd trail behind my brother, unacknowledged until he handed me grocery money, having taken a cut to buy cigarettes from the machine just inside the entrance of McCafferty's bar, that is, if he wasn't chased out by someone's half-crocked dad. I went along with everything. I was terrified of my brother, and I couldn't conceive of defying him. I was also infatuated with Brian Kelly, and by March, with Bobby Sands. The latter, at least, gave me something in common with the guys on the street.

In mid-February, news that Bobby Sands had announced a hunger strike to protest conditions in Long Kesh Prison began to circulate in neighborhood bars, where half the old guys remembered the days of partition and kept up on the "Northern Six Counties" by reading *An Phoblacht* and other Irish republican newspapers mailed from Boston. The hunger strikes became the talk of old women in bakeries, young guys on street corners, and all of our classmates.

I don't remember the first time I saw the famous photograph of Bobby Sands—a striking young man with flowing hair and a brilliant smile—that started appearing on television, but it now seems part of my own store of memories, something taken from my personal life. So many of us, simply because our grandparents and great-grandparents had come from Ireland, felt like we were part of what was happening in Belfast's Long Kesh Prison. As though the hunger strikes had something to do with us. Inspired by televised reports of rioting and slow death in Belfast, we felt angry on behalf of all Irish people and spiteful towards "the Brits." Wanting to feel part of something beyond our own narrow streets, we slipped into naïve fantasies and cast ourselves as long-suffering martyrs and masked gunmen. I'd feel worse saying that if I hadn't been so young, then, and so desperate to belong. And so lonely, as Pat began withdrawing into his own thoughts and brooding over the latest news in *An Phoblacht*, and on the small television in his front room.

Two days after Bobby Sands began his hunger strike, I crossed a patch of ice to Pat's front door. With Lent approaching, I figured Pat would want to splurge on snuff or cigarettes, which I could usually buy with a signed note. When he let me in, he tossed a newspaper on his coffee table and sat down in his worn upholstered chair.

"*Ní gá dom aon rud.*"

I struggled, as usual, to understand him.

"Did you not get that, Bridie? I don't need anything." He coughed into his fist. "So Bobby Sands will be the first, with nine more to follow."

I sat down in a wooden chair. "Why are they doing this?"

"They want the status of political prisoners, Bridie."

He leaned forward and tossed a small package of foil onto my lap. Inside, I found a bit of chocolate he'd saved.

"Go on," he said. "Finish it."

I used my fingernail to shave tiny curls of chocolate from the bar, eating slowly to extend what little pleasure I had. Pat smoked three cigarettes in a row, and each time he lit one, I noticed a shaking in his hands. At some point, he drew a tin of snuff from his shirt pocket.

"I should give the lungs a break." He pinched a bit of powder between his thumb and forefinger.

"You don't want anything from the shop? Lent starts tomorrow, and you'll be fasting."

He considered me, then, with a haunted look. "*Ocras.* That's the word for hunger. *Is iad na laethanta an ocrais anseo.* The lean days are here. The days of waiting, Bridie."

"*Tá ocras orm,*" I said. It was the simplest thing to say. It was what I knew. That I was hungry.

"I know, Bridie." He placed a fold of bills on the coffee table. "Take that and get yourself some bread and cheese. *Aran agus cais.* Get us some dinner, as well. Hunger is going to be on everyone's lips soon enough."

The following day, Ash Wednesday, we—all the kids on our street—wore crosses on our foreheads, marks of a newfound faith, and imagined for the first time that we understood the meaning of Christ's redemptive sacrifice. It suddenly mattered, in a way it never had before, that we were Catholic. Irish-Catholic. That didn't seem to matter to Pat, who kept to himself, and from what I could tell, never left his house to take communion. When I knocked on his door, he didn't even get up from his chair. He simply called me inside and pulled several bills from his tattered bathrobe.

"*Toitíní, aran agus ispíní fola.*" He looked up from a newspaper splayed across his lap and considered my expression. "Cigarettes, bread and black sausage. You need to pay attention."

"It's Ash Wednesday." My voice fell to a near whisper. "The sausage. We can't eat meat." I waited for a moment and then left his house, clutching two crumpled bills and feeling as though I'd disappointed him.

I hurried to the shop, and on a shortcut back to Pat's house, passed the empty lot at the end of our street. There, I found my brother, Sean Conlon and John Lynch leaning against a chain-link fence. Brian Kelly was standing at a short distance, with his arms folded across his chest.

"We just kicked the shit out of that Jewish kid," my brother said. "If he doesn't have to go to mass with the rest of us, he shouldn't be at our school. They have their own."

"Everybody but Brian. He didn't want to get dirty." Sean Conlon threw a stick, and Brian lifted his arm to protect his face. "Maybe he's a Jew, too. Where'd you say your ma's from, Brian?"

"We rubbed his face in the mud," my brother said. "Put ash on his fucking forehead."

"He's in my class." I looked at my shoes. "He's alright."

My brother pushed me to the ground, and for a moment, I sat beside a puddle ridged with ice, staring at the change that had spilled from my pocket. When I stood up, Brian Kelly was touching my shoulder, and my left knee was bleeding beneath the hem of my plaid skirt.

"Leave her alone, Brendan."

My brother took a step towards Brian. "Got a thing for my sister?"

I started walking, then, oblivious to the pain in my leg, to the cold, to everything but the memory of Brian's hand on my shoulder.

"*Cá bhfuil an t-airgead*?" Pat asked, when I limped into his house. "The change."

"I don't have it."

Pat's face darkened. "*Cén fáth*?"

"I lost it on the way home."

"Somewhere, or to someone?" He took the bag from my hand, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and looked at a half-smoked cigarette in his overflowing ashtray. "Rationing," he said, relighting the extinguished cigarette. "I ought to thrash the lad that did that. Put a second crack in his ass. But I see you're not one to give names."

I looked at a bottle of holy water standing on his mantle. He watched me and waited.

"Didn't you go to church today?" I asked.

He stood up, and I flinched. But then he disappeared into his kitchen and came back carrying a wet towel. I thought it was for my knee until he placed a hand on top of my head and dragged the towel across my face.

"This ash business. It's for sinners." He dropped the towel on the coffee table. "We've already had enough degradation. Enough suffering."

I picked up the stained cloth and dabbed my knee, just for the feel of water on my torn skin. I no longer cared about infections, and Pat made no move to stop me.

"Where's that aunt of yours?"

"I don't know," I said, watching dark water trail down my leg.

"So she's fit to watch over you and your brother. Is that it? She's an improvement on your own mother?" Pat looked through his dusty window, at my aunt's house, and then turned back to me. "Let's begin, Bridie. *Tá brón orm.* Do you know that?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry. *Agus ta afela orm.* I regret what I just said. I have sorrow and regret on me. *An dtuigeann tú*? Do you understand?"

"*Tuigim*," I said. I well understood regret and sorrow.

The next six weeks unfolded slowly, over a gradual thaw, through classes that bled into one another and exams that my brother willfully failed and I barely passed, Irish lessons and the slow release of news from Belfast: stories of Margaret Thatch-

er's refusal to compromise with terrorists, of armored trucks and unrest in Catholic housing projects. Of slow starvation. By mid-April, most cars in our neighborhood had "26+6=1" bumper stickers, and Sinn Fein posters had begun to appear in the windows of houses, bars and shops. We could only imagine what Bobby Sands looked like by that point, for we had only the famous photograph. We never saw his protruding ribs or sunken cheeks, or the tortured expression of someone maddened by suffering. We never imagined a brain slowly deteriorating or muscles wasting away, sores erupting on atrophied legs, or hair overrunning a haggard face and then falling out in clumps. We just saw that smile and fell in love.

"My dad said they were collecting money for NORAID at the bar last night," Brian said one afternoon, while we were all sitting on my aunt's porch, dividing cigarettes and stolen candy.

"What's NORAID?" Sean Conlon asked.

"You're so stupid," my brother said. "They help the IRA."

"Did your dad give anything?"

"Yeah," Brian said. "What do you think? We're one hundred percent Irish."

"I'm three-fifths," Sean said.

"You can't be three-fifths," my brother said. "Fucking idiot."

"Then I'm half."

"We're a hundred percent, too," I said, looking at Brian Kelly. For the first time in weeks, my brother didn't counter me.

During Easter week, Bobby Sands replaced every martyr in our dusty hagiographies. None of us could understand chaste Roman women offering up their severed breasts to the greater glory of God, or St. Anthony slung with arrows, or anyone being drowned in boiling lead for their beliefs. Those were the kinds of saints venerated by our parish priest, the same man who condemned Bobby Sands as a mortal sinner for choosing suicide. At our school's Passion Play, we listened to stories of Christ's suffering on the cross, and all we could think of was Long Kesh Prison, where Bobby Sands was, by all accounts, nearing death. On Easter, when we heard about Christ rising, we imagined Bobby Sands being released, finally, from the torments of the flesh; we imagined black facemasks and machine guns and slowly dying while the whole world watched with bated breath.

By the end of April, the hunger strikes were the leading news story on every network. Every day, we gathered in my aunt's house for the five o'clock news, hoping to catch some new detail about Bobby Sands' physical condition. We cursed Margaret Thatcher when she disavowed responsibility for the impending deaths at Long Kesh, and we applauded Bobby Sands when he said that God would understand what he was doing and forgive him. When Bobby Sands' mother described her visits to the hospital prison, we imagined the love of a parent and the salving touch of a soft hand. Bobby Sands seemed to be standing up to things that haunted all of us—violence and neglect, helplessness and never-ending misery. That's why it began, I suppose. Our hunger strike.

It was Tuesday afternoon, me and my brother, Brian, Sean, Jimmy McCarthy, John Lynch and Peter Devlin were sitting on my aunt's stoop, talking about a shoplifting spree, when my brother raised the subject of starvation.

"I wonder what it feels like," he said. "Starving."

"Like shit." Sean lit the end of a twig with a stolen lighter and started writing with its charred tip on my aunt's porch.

"What do you mean?" Brian asked.

"I mean, does the pain go away? Or are you hungry the whole time?"

"Only one way to find out."

"We should do it. Stop eating."

Brian picked at a callus on the side of his thumb. "What's the point?"

"Just to know. We could start tomorrow. Water and nothing else."

Sean spoke first. "I can't do it. My ma would find out."

"I can skip lunch," Brian said. "And supper when my mom's at work."

"I'll do it," I said, pulling my skirt down over my knees. "All of it."

"Our aunt's never home, and she's a drunk, anyway," my brother said. "We'll start tomorrow."

That afternoon, I found Pat reading the paper and chain-smoking, and knowing he was already agitated, annoyed him with all sorts of questions.

"Why are you smoking so much?"

"It steadies my hands, Bridie. Gives me something to focus on."

"Why do your hands shake?"

"They shake when I'm tense, Bridie."

"Are you tense?"

"A bit, Bridie. And very sad. *Tá brón orm.*"

"*Cén fáth?*"

"This business in Belfast," he said. "It's where I'm from. Did you know that, Bridie?"

I shook my head, amazed to be sitting so close to someone who'd walked the same streets as Bobby Sands. "Why did you leave?"

"You read the papers, Bridie. You've seen the news."

"Did you have family there?"

He stared at me for a long moment. "I did, Bridie. I do. They're still there."

"Were you in the IRA?" All I knew of Belfast were bombs, makeshift barricades and masked men carrying rifles.

He lowered his paper and narrowed his eyes.

"You were in the IRA," I said.

"I knew some of these lads, Bridie." He pointed to the front-page photographs of ten young men starving in Long Kesh Prison. "I knew their mothers. Their fathers."

"Were they your neighbors?"

"You could say I spent some time with them, Bridie." I started to speak, and he

lifted his finger. "That's enough, Bridie. Enough."

He rose from his chair and disappeared into his kitchen. When he returned, he placed a cup of tea on the coffee table and a bottle of whiskey on the floor beside his chair. Then, he returned to the kitchen to fetch a glass for himself. While Pat rinsed a glass, I slid his tin of snuff from the coffee table, unscrewed its cap and lowered my nose into a tiny drift of brown powder. I might just well have drawn ground glass into my nostrils. I started coughing and crying, and within seconds, felt so dizzy and sick that I was afraid to stand up.

"You're acting the fool," Pat said, when he came into the room. He snatched the tin from my hand. "It's a rotten habit. Nothing for eleven-year-old girls."

"I'm twelve, and you said it was better than smoking."

He slipped the tin into his pocket. "I missed your birthday, then."

"It's okay," I said between coughing fits. "Everyone forgot."

I must have been a miserable sight, crying for all sorts of reasons and wiping my nose with the same towel used a month earlier to wipe ash from my forehead and blood from my knee. When I calmed down, Pat drew a half-eaten Cadbury's bar from the mantle.

"*Seacláid*," he said, placing it before me. "That you should know. Break off a square, and after our lesson, you can run down to the shop for a cake. Now pay attention."

For the next hour, I repeated Irish words and thought of birthday cake. Our lesson that day focused on the names of spring flowers.

I don't remember seeing any of those flowers, and I wonder if they actually bloomed on our street that season. Everything turned gray over the next six days, once my brother and I began our hunger strike. On the second night, I lay awake in bed, rubbing my temples to lessen the throbbing in my head and ease the pain that, if nothing else, made me feel connected to my brother through the thin wall separating our rooms. By Friday, my legs were shaking, and I couldn't control my bladder. I went to school wearing tight shorts beneath my skirt and toilet paper folded into my underwear. I shivered and drifted in and out of awareness during classes that bled into one another and slipped from my memory as soon as they ended.

That afternoon, the pain subsided long enough for my Irish lessons. I sho my head when Pat placed a package of digestives on the coffee table.

"Have a biscuit, Bridie."

I shook my head again.

Pat studied my face. "You're not slimming like all the young girls. Starving themselves for the lads, as if any one of them was worth a shag. I know that's nothing you haven't heard already next door."

"I'm not," I said, knowing he must have heard my stomach growling.

"There was a time when going hungry was the fear. When you wouldn't turn down a chance to fatten up." Pat lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. "How's that brother of yours? I haven't seen him for a bit. Or you."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just be a good girl and run down to the shop." He handed me money, and unable to argue, I started down the street with a trickle of urine running down my leg.

Our aunt noticed nothing unusual about our behavior. She slept through her long hangovers every morning, and as always, we spent evenings on our own. Every afternoon, my brother collected the money she'd left for our dinner and stashed it in a box beneath his bed. I could hardly have argued, even if I'd been one to stand up to him. By Saturday, I'd started seeing black spots, and my stomach was roiling with nausea when I showed up at Pat's. I turned down a bar of Cadbury's, but afraid I might pass out, asked for a glass of water.

"What's this, now?"

"I went to confession at school. The priest told me to give up sweets."

"What had you to confess?" Pat lit a cigarette. "You're twelve years old."

"I was having bad thoughts," I said. "About my mother."

He nodded towards my aunt's house. "I'd say you've done your penance."

I don't remember anything of our Irish lessons that day, except that I left feeling as though Pat's eyes were following me all the way home.

At home, I found my brother curled up in a nest of blankets on the kitchen floor, watching the evening news. Bobby Sands had just gone into a coma. I lay down beside my brother and watched interviews with politicians, thinking only of Bobby Sands' smile and the end of all suffering. Around ten o'clock, our aunt came home. She stood in the kitchen doorway, smoking and looking at us as though we were strangers. She seemed an apparition at that point, as distant and unfocused in my vision as I must have been in hers. She mumbled something about lying on dirty floors and then passed out in her room.

That night, I went to bed in terror. I saw lights in the corners of my eyes, and the Virgin Mary and Bobby Sands and all the saints became mixed up in my mind. I heard blood rushing in my ears and my heart pounding and church bells ringing and my mother's voice. It's hard to say where night ended and the morning began. The following day, I remained in bed, thinking of Irish words that suddenly seemed so clear in my mind. They all had to do with food.

The news broke on Tuesday morning. Bobby Sands was dead, I repeated to myself, standing in my aunt's kitchen and staring at images of Catholics in Belfast holding street vigils and then throwing petrol bombs at armored trucks. To the sound of glass shattering in Belfast, my brother pulled a box of Cheerios from a cabinet and began eating handfuls of cereal. Then he drank a can of Coke and started spooning peanut butter straight from a jar. He was eating too quickly and, as I realized, too easily. I knew, then, that he'd been eating every day of our hunger strike. I didn't say anything. I was beyond speaking.

That afternoon, I went to Pat's, while my brother and his friends threw rocks and empty beer bottles and battled each other with sticks and trash can lids to mimic

the skirmishes in Belfast. When I showed up, Pat was already drunk, slumped in his chair and staring at televised footage of mourners gathered on the street in front of Bobby Sands' house. He had the sound off, and in my disoriented state, I couldn't bear the seeming disconnect between images of Bobby Sands' face and British soldiers, armored trucks and old women carrying candles. I turned from the television's sickly glow and studied the wet streaks on Pat's cheeks. A cigarette was dangling from Pat's fingertips, and I became fixated on the column of ash about to fall on the carpet. Pat must have been talking to me for some time before I heard him, because he looked angry when I met his eyes.

"So you were part of that foolishness with your brother. I heard the lads yesterday, sitting on the porch and talking about some sort of hunger strike."

"It was just my brother and me that stopped eating."

Pat leaned forward, and I thought he might fall out of his chair. "Only you stopped eating." He nodded at his window, and I realized he could see straight into my aunt's kitchen. "How many days has it been?"

I didn't answer. The floor had begun to list, and in my delirium, I couldn't have counted as high as six. I closed my eyes and listened to Pat rising from his chair. When his refrigerator opened, I started to shake.

I tried a piece of bread and some butter first. *Aran agus im*, I thought crazily, and got sick on cheese, and sicker, still, when I swallowed a sip of weak tea. With perspiration trickling down my forehead, I fell to my knees and regurgitated everything I'd just eaten. Then I passed out.

When I awoke, Pat was wiping bile from his carpet with the towel. On the coffee table, a banana and a bottle of 7-Up were resting in the folds of a plastic bag. Without asking, I unpeeled the banana and took a small bite.

"What you did was foolish," Pat said.

I forced myself to swallow. "We wanted to find out. What it was like."

"There was no 'we,' Bridie."

"I wanted to do something for Bobby Sands."

Pat tossed the rag into a corner. "Well, Bridie, he's in a coffin, now. And he'll be in the ground tomorrow."

Pat came over to the couch and felt my forehead with the back of his hand. He had the hands of someone who'd scaled fences topped with razor wire and thrown petrol bombs and built barricades out of scrap metal. The hands of someone who might have taken the life of another human being.

"Did you know him?" I asked.

Pat sat down and poured himself a glass of whiskey. "When he was coming up."

"What was he like?"

"He was young. And now he's dead." Pat took a long drink. "Go on, now. Get yourself cleaned up and go home, Bridie."

I sat up and looked around his room, and my legs started to shake. My shirt was damp with sweat, and I'd urinated on Pat's couch. I might have explained myself,

my incomprehension and paralysis, but I couldn't find the words to tell Pat I didn't have a home. Pat's hands shook and a bit of whiskey spilled onto his pants. He lit a cigarette, then.

"You know why I smoke so much, Bridie? I'm addicted. *Andúil uafásach.*"

I started to apologize for his carpet, for his couch, for the three months I'd taken his money to buy our dinners, but he interrupted me.

"That wasn't always the reason. At first, I was just trying to steady my hands. So I wouldn't cross the wires in the timing devices. Making bombs."

"You don't need to tell me," I whispered.

"One thing leads to another, Bridie. Now, I drink to forget. The dead. Everyone left behind. I'd say your father did a fair job. Leaving his hungry child on my doorstep and shagging off."

He didn't say anything when I staggered from his house with urine cooling on my legs and bile drying in my hair.

I didn't go back to Pat's again until May 9th, two days after 100,000 people lined the streets of Belfast for Bobby Sands' funeral, and two days before Francis Hughes died in the prison hospital at Long Kesh. Neither one of us spoke until we heard my brother, Brian Kelly and Sean Conlon coming back from the empty lot, where they'd been throwing rocks at one another.

"This neighborhood's changing. That lot where your brother and his friends are fighting their imaginary battles," he said. "There will be people living on that spot someday. Spics. Niggers. Slants. Whatever people around here want to call them. They'll be here." Pat poured me a cup of tea and pushed a plate of digestives in my direction. "Don't look so shocked. I was a nigger in Belfast. That's not what they called me. But that's what I was. That's why you won't hear me saying 'there goes the neighborhood' and all that shit."

"My brother's not so bad," I said, looking at a faint stain on the carpeting.

"He's young. It's the older ones. The armchair nationalists who don't understand a thing. Talking about injustice and calling the next man a nigger. The old man Kelly paying for bullets and pretending he doesn't see the gun." Pat drew a tin of snuff from his shirt pocket. "They got my temper up, Bridie. I'm sorry."

"*Ta bron orm, freisin,*" I said. "I'm sorry, too."

As Pat uncapped his tin, I looked at the scars on his hands, at his swollen joints and the incongruous angles of broken fingers badly healed.

"It's better than smoking." He extended the tin. "You're twelve now. A regular grown-up. Raising a child on your own. Yourself."

I gathered a pinch of snuff between my fingertips and drew it into my nostril. The initial sting quickly faded.

"I think I got the hang of it," I said, wiping my nose.

"*Tiocfaidh ar la.* Do you understand, Bridie?"

I nodded. Our day would come. Whatever Pat thought, I'd been paying attention over the course of three long months. I'd survived the winter to see the thaw, to

see all the broken bricks and bottles strewn across the empty lot—the wreckage and rot so long hidden by the snow covering my brother's imaginary battleground—and patches of weeds in early bloom. In that moment, I understood and believed him.

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