

ONE

I had seen plenty of dead people before. Grandma died last spring. She was old, so the famine killed her first. The baby of cousin Alannah died, too, in the winter. He was too little and wouldn't grow. Mostly, they just looked like they were sleeping. Never had I seen a dead person look so dead.

Ma's face was green. Her belly and her legs were so bloated that I could see her bright-blue veins popping out. Sometimes, when the waves receded back to the sea, the sand looked like that: like a map. Ma's hands and feet were a dark shade of purple, and stringy hairs stuck to her forehead. I didn't know how she could have been sweating. She had not moved in nearly a week. I knew I had to bury her, or else the dogs would get to her. I had seen them pacing down the road for the last few days. They could smell the death on her, just like I could.

I looked around our home. There was no furniture. No clothing. We'd sold or burned it all. There was only a knife and a pot left. They sat next to where the fire ought to have been. Where we'd cooked and where we'd cut up cow meat months ago. There was a stain there still from the cow's blood. I had used the pot yesterday to boil some nettle with our last cow bone. A few sticks sat where the logs should have. The chimney above it was black. In fact, everything was black from the dirt and soot. I looked at my feet: almost entirely black.

Ma lay on her hard bed. I tried to pick her up, but she was so heavy I could not. So I grabbed her hands and dragged her. She thumped off the bed, and as I pulled her across the floor and out the

door, I was thankful that her hair had been tied back and wasn't now being ripped from her head. I'd always loved Ma's hair. She let me brush it at night before bed. Those were the only times I saw her at ease.

My hair was nothing like Ma's. Hers used to be ash blond but had turned silver as she got older, particularly near the end. Da's hair was the color of an acorn, and among them, I stuck out like a sheepdog in a herd of sheep with my long, coarse black hair. Ma said her grandma had hair like mine. In every other way, though, I was my da's child. My eyes were Da's, and Da's alone. Green like the land, he would say. Even though we both loved the sea.

The air outside was heavy with fog, like it had been every day that summer. The stench of my mother clung to the mist and mixed with the smell of the rot. My stomach lurched. I turned my head away from her and retched. My face was wet, whether with sweat or mist, I could not say. I kept dragging her in the direction of the Celtic Sea until I couldn't anymore. I laid her near the pear tree. It had been her favorite.

The hoe was at the back of the house, near the old pigpen, but I could not find the shovel. I decided to dig a shallow grave and pray that the dogs would let her be. I picked some purple flowers that grew along the wall to the west. They were weeds, but Ma always thought they were beautiful. I laid them on the ground, where her head was buried.

"May her soul rest in peace," I whispered, crossing my chest.

I gazed ahead at the sea, wishing this wasn't how I would forever remember my home. I tried not to breathe in the foul air. I tried to remember the smell of the uncontaminated salt, the sound of my father, stomping his muddy fishing boots on the rug after a long workday. I tried to remember Ma humming, and the great number of healthy cows and sheep and chickens on the neighboring farms to the left and right as far as the eye could see. Not their rotting, picked-apart carcasses dotting the seashore, their last effort to find bits of seaweed splashing to the shore.

I knew what I had to do. What Ma and I had talked about the week before last, when she could still open her eyes, still speak. I would try to find her family in Cork. She didn't know if they were still alive. Her mother, father, brother, and sister. But I would look.

Her advice had been to go to town and wait. But I was scared now. We had not been in town for some time. I had not seen our neighbors, my school friends, Father Connolly, the shopkeeper Miss Claire in many months. I had been trying to take care of Ma and find us food to eat. I had nothing to offer anyone in return for a ride to Cork.

I knew the landowner would be back soon, too. He had come once every week for the last month, looking for money. He knew we had nothing. We had sold him some cows in the beginning. Before Ma was sick. She had thought that would keep him away for a long time, but it didn't. Not long enough. I was angry thinking of those cows. How much longer could Ma have lived if we'd kept them?

I remembered the face of the man who'd come to speak for the landowner. It was shrunken, all of his features crowded in the middle of his face.

“We’re being quite lenient with you,” he said. “All of this is ours. The land, this sad-looking house, those pathetic cows. We were gracious to let you grow the potatoes. It is no fault of ours that they failed.”

The anger built in my stomach, then, but I willed myself to submit. “Sir, my ma is very sick,” I said. “We will get you the money when we are able.”

He snorted. “I will be back with an eviction notice,” he said.

That was last week. I hated him and hoped that he would come to occupy the land again so that Ma’s ghost could haunt him. She would never be at peace, anyway.

I started to shake, from fear or shock or the wind or all of these things.

The sun was setting. I had one last night in my home. As I settled into Ma’s bed and pulled the tattered blanket to my chin, I cried and listened to the hungry dogs howling.

My walk into town the next day was quiet. I thought about how, like almost everything in my life, the noise could be separated by before Da died and after. Before Da died, Ma and I had been loud and happy and fun. Even if Da was away on a fishing trip for a few days, Ma and I would dance around as we got ready to welcome him home. And when he was home, the boom of his voice in the stories that he told and the echo of his laugh filled our little home day and night.

After Da died, my life became quiet and sad. Ma no longer wanted to have fun. She stopped dancing and laughing. She worked in the field and slept and got fits of headache. And now, even our short, soft conversations were gone. I didn't even have the sound of her steady breath.

But the silence was slowly fading, broken up by the sound of hooves shuffling on the dirt, wagon carts groaning, and shop doors squealing open and shut. Even so, town was oddly quiet. I was surprised to find Miss Claire sitting outside her shop, petting a very skinny and tired-looking cat. Normally, Miss Claire was busy. Never had I seen her so still. She did not lift her head when I approached.

"Miss Claire?" I asked, my voice squeakier than I had expected.

She looked up, squinting. At first, her face was blank, as if she had just woken from a dream.

Slowly, something like a smile formed on her face, a show of recognition.

"Rosaleen," she said. "Does your ma need more horse's blood? He died last week, and his blood is gone now with him."

“No, ma’am,” I said. “Ma died, too.”

She looked directly into my eyes but did not betray any emotion.

“I’m sorry,” she said, flatly.

I did not know what to say back. We were both quiet for a moment. I felt the breeze hit my face, and with it, the stench of the rot, though not nearly as strong as at home.

“What can I help you with, then?” she asked.

She did not have anything to offer me. I could tell by her empty shop behind her, her gaunt face, her stoical eyes. I was glad, then, that I did not come searching for anything tangible. I could not have asked.

“A way to get to Cork. Ma’s family is there. Is anyone . . .” I trailed off. What was my question? Still alive? I looked at my feet and decided to stay quiet.

“Paul the baker,” she said. “He goes to Cork to sell his oats. He’ll leave in the morn’.”

I thanked her and headed west to the bakery. I felt lucky and hopeful and tried not to think of the fear of leaving my home and doing so alone.

Paul the baker was loading sacks with oats. I was surprised to see so many oats. I didn't know anyone was allowed to have them. I thought they were like the wheat, taken by the British as soon as they popped out of the ground. But here he was, with bags of oats.

I told Paul I needed a ride to Cork but I couldn't offer anything in return. And suddenly, I realized that he probably couldn't help me. He had one horse and one small cart and enough to put onto them without the burden of a fourteen-year-old girl. Even one who was much smaller than she ought to have been.

I told Paul as much and turned to leave before he stopped me.

"Of course I have room, Rosaleen," he said. "You know your ma and I went to school the same years. She was always a good friend to me."

His tired smile was the first I had seen in months. I did not really know Paul, but I was comforted. I slept in his kitchen that night, and it was quite warm.