University of Reading

The Letters: A Novel

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Department of English Literature
School of Literature and Languages

Laura Healy

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Abstract

This work is in two parts: a historical fiction novel, *The Letters*, and a supporting essay, *Fictionalising History*. The novel tells the story of Sister Patricia, an Irish nun and missionary, as she arrives back in Ireland. Upon her return, Sister Patricia is confronted by a box of letters and through them she must face her past, in particular the events of November 1920, when her brothers, Patrick and Harry Loughnane, were murdered during the Irish War of Independence. *The Letters* explores memory, religion, storytelling and the supernatural, thinking about how our past shapes the people we become and how we process trauma. It is a novel about the aftermath of war, from a female perspective, and it is based on real life events. The essay is divided into four chapters: Research, Writing, Editing and Final Thoughts. It assesses the problems and benefits of too much information and considers what is more important, fact or fiction? To do this it analyses the process of research and writing, establishing setting and voice, as well as creating narrative tension. It explores the themes of the novel and looks at the way we tell stories and how reliable they are when told from memory and how that affects the retelling of history. In summary, it dissects the creative process of writing a historical novel and discusses how historical accuracy sometimes has to change for the sake of fiction. Throughout the essay, ideas are supported by the work of authors, writing about Ireland or Ghana, or in the historical fiction genre, namely, Sebastian Barry, Anne Enright, Toni Morrisson, Emer Martin and Seamus Deane.

Declaration of original authorship

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

LAURA HEALY

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The Letters

Part One

Co. Mayo, 1969

Chapter One

The box is similar in size to a shoe box, but on the top is a name I have spent a lifetime putting to rest. If I dare to open it, will she once again rise up and torment me? I had hoped all that was behind me, burnt in the heat of Ghana. I fear now I was wrong. Has she followed me here too? I tried to leave her behind in Africa, along with Patrick and Harry, but she would not stay and now, in this quiet, old house of dying, has she found a way into the corner of my room, into the last years of my life?

If she is here, how can I stay? But running away seems like an odd place to start, even though I still can't help but wonder if running would have saved them, back in that winter of 1920. Patrick was always fast. Taller than all the other boys in the village, he could reach the fence in the bottom field quicker than anyone. Harry, almost as tall, but nowhere near as quick, was always behind him. I can still see them.

'Run, Harry, run,' we called. He tried so hard; his white stick legs trotting and his poor afflicted lungs gasping for air. He was always the sickly one, but for Patrick, he would do anything. We used to play for hours in the fields around the farm with the neighbours, Michael and Willie Glynn, and John Hession, chasing around the way children do in the sodden, west of Ireland weather. Hugo, the eldest, was already working and so it was always the same: Patrick first, then Willie, then John, competing to reach the bottom fence first. Us girls – me and Kate - followed with dancing steps and tripped on our skirts and grass-stained petticoats, while at the back, Harry stumbled like a new-born foal, his face intent and focused, but his legs foolish and aching to fold beneath him. He was always more comfortable in Daddy's beaten-up armchair by the fire, absorbed in the pages of a book. Then, one day, he fell. At first, we laughed.

'Get up, you stupid lump,' shouted Kate. But Harry lay there with his leg twisted at a weird angle. He wriggled with a little moan of pain on the oily grass and rain drizzled down his face like a baptism. Patrick was beside him in an instant, of course. Barely out of breath, his arms, strong as ancient tree branches, scooped up his brother and marched him home to our farmhouse. Harry's whimpers carried back to us in the wind and we cowered low on the damp ground, wondering who to blame. Mammy always told us to look after Harry. 'He can't run like you others,' she said, 'go mbeannaí Dia dó.'

She was right, as always. Harry couldn't run and so, years after Mammy blamed us all for the bone that tore through his skin, when it really mattered, when their very lives depended on it, Harry stayed still and so did Patrick. When the Auxiliaries rounded them up, pushed them against the whitewashed wall of the pig shed, prodded them with the barrels of their guns, Patrick and Harry stood their ground. I was told, at some point in the mess of the months after their disappearance, that Patrick, tall, strong, proud, Patrick, turned to Harry, put his hand on his arm and said, ‘let them.’ The end of our story would be different if they had chanced running, if they had made it to the fence in the bottom field. Perhaps. But they didn’t even take a step and ever since I have been running for them and away from them. Until now.

Now, I have returned to Ireland. In my head, though my memories are grainy like yellowed photographs, their faces have not faded, for they are still young and I am too. I may be an old woman, with an ugly mass of experiences to sort through, and perhaps I am confused or clinging to a past I could never let go, but in my foolish old head, we are still at home in Galway and playing in the rain and there has never been blood or tears, other than the trivial tears of every day hurt like a grazed knee, a sibling row, a dead calf, or even the small catastrophe of a broken leg. Patrick and Harry will always be in those green fields behind the cottage, playing or working on the slicked back grass, and that is where I must leave them. It is where we were once all happy.

Ireland is still beautiful, even though she has been cut up and built on and her green tinged with the grey of civilisation, deep wounds carved into the flesh of her soil, the jagged edges of houses that stand in rows. An occupying army of brick and cement, transparent glass revealing empty spaces inside, outstretched to the sky in cold, grey prayers. But in coming back there is, surprisingly, the sense of coming home. I didn’t expect that, but then neither did I expect to enjoy the crossing. However, the journey on the ferry was comfortable; they served tea in plain white china with stains dribbled down the side, and ham sandwiches which were curling slightly as the corner of the bread dried. It wasn’t fancy by any stretch, but enjoyable nonetheless. There is much to be recognised in the simple pleasures. The ferry was calm, riding the waves with little impact to us passengers, and there were padded chairs to rest on, fixed firmly to the floor around freshly wiped Formica tables.

When I ran away years ago and boarded a different boat, it was all hard wood and the swirling seas flung me, and all the passengers, around with little regard for our seasick bodies. Bound up in all journeying is trepidation, and that crossing to Africa is as vivid now as it was then, a living torment for days as the sun got hotter and the air thicker. We crossed the Atlantic Ocean, the same only in name from the ocean I knew in the West Coast of Ireland. It was a cruel, angry ocean and, lying down to prevent falling, I was pinned to the deck, face against the splintered boards, trying desperately to lift the anchor tethering me to Ireland’s shores but that boat, creaking its way across the merciless Atlantic, raked up the seabed all the way with my troubles. I disembarked in Ghana, crawling down the gang blank, sickened and sweaty and the heat, like no heat Ireland will ever know, bore into me. It was the start of a new life, but, as I took my first trembling steps on African soil, the hopes I had packaged up before I left, fled as I checked over my shoulder, already uneasy, troubled by the feeling of my past stalking me.

Once again, I am scared. True, it is a relief to find Ireland doesn't seem to change all that much from year to year. Yes, there are more cars, more roads and more houses. And yet, the ground is a sponge and the skies broil with rain and clouds and now and then a spark of sun, just as I remember it. People still tip their hats, pause for a story, smile, wave, bow their heads. Especially to me. They fear God, and so me, just as they always did. Now, though, I only wish to bring kindness to her shores. I am not here to judge. Here, in this old house, I want to complete my own quiet journey back home to God. There have been too many years of questions, anger and, perhaps, regret. Although, regret is a funny thing and eventually we all follow the path God set for us. I pray I have served Him well.

The order bought this house - Castlemacgarrett - a few years ago and turned it into a care home, a place to rest, a place to tend the old. For a place of rest, I find that it is all corners and angles, the corridors wind around, like snakes, tightening, crawling back on themselves. I walk quickly as I navigate, for there is still a sense of something following. The corridors need more light, the paper is a dingy peach, fringed with cobwebs, and I find myself needlessly rushing, sometimes even breathless. Despite this, it is set in abundant grounds and there are flowerbeds, which in summer will bloom I am sure, bordering lawns like those I saw in books when I was young, short and emerald with little moss. I have not ventured too far yet. I am not here to rest with the residents, although some seem to be more spritely, less wrinkled, than me. I am not so old that I cannot work and I have been sent here as the new bursar. It is here, though, where my journey will end. And what a relief that will be after the distance I have travelled through the years: Cork, France, Ghana, Co. Down, Lancashire, and now Mayo. County Mayo, a rugged, expansive county and one I rarely visited as a child. Not that far from Galway, where it all began. Just hours to the south of me stands the cottage in Shanaglish, lived in by another family. And a little way from that, along the windy road lined with rough stone walls, is the cemetery, still guarded by the tall conifers.

It is true that your past haunts you, and no matter how hard I have tried to leave mine in the rainy fields of Galway, or in the scorching sun of Ghana, it is my dark, faithful shadow. I thought here, in these dull corridors and stuffy rooms, it would leave me. I prayed for rest. But then the box was there in the corner. Tatty with dogeared corners and yellowing tape. And the name. It is no wonder I wanted to run. Once I had, with difficulty, composed myself, I asked Mother Superior where it had come from. She would not say anything, even though, against my character, I pressed her on it. Someone had left it, she told me.

‘They just thought you should have it. I can say no more.’

I wanted to drop to her feet and beg, but instead I nodded and thanked her.

Back in my room on that first evening, after prayers, I sat on the floor with it within arm’s reach. I could hear her whispers welcoming me home and I shook my head, in disbelief, at what I had returned to. The ghosts of my family are everywhere. That night, I dreamt of the memorial cross on the road to Ardraghan, and that I was standing before it, wiping the wind from my face and feeling my feet sink into the mossy ground. And then it turned to Ghana and Patrick and Harry were there too, I was writing letters into the darkness, writing them always hoping for a reply, or was I? Perhaps I was writing them for myself all along.

Will I ever be able to forgive myself for leaving Mammy alone in the place that used to throb with family, with laughter and squabbles, petty worries and celebrations? I left her there in silent grief to follow my own journey and to look for my own peace. We never spoke again. There was so much we didn’t say, or so much I should have said about our suffering during that awful winter, or the months after when the two of us, Mammy and I, hung around the farmhouse like restless spirits, unable to talk to each other apart from discussing who should feed the pigs, or the chickens, both picking up the same broom to give our hands work, or offering tea when neither of us wanted it. And now, only three nights after returning, I am restless again, sitting here in my warm room, looking at that box and wondering what it holds, wondering if Mammy finally replied. The writing on the top is unfamiliar, but the name is not. *Nora*.

Chapter Two

'Settle in here,' I tell myself, over and again, as a distraction, but in truth, I have hardly anything to unpack: a small trunk with mainly books and clean clothes and two pairs of shoes, pretty much identical, each with an inch heel, except that one pair, the newer pair, rub the sides of my little toe slightly, and my heel. It is not such a discomfort that I can't bear it but, the other pair, the trusty older pair, mould my feet like slippers, despite the seams which are starting to pull away and let the damp in when I walk outside.

I have not yet spent much time outside, the cold weather is starting to bite, and while the rooms and hallways here are stuffy, the windows permanently shut, at least they are warm. A slow ache, barely noticeable, really, has started to stretch through each of my fingers when they are cold. I hold one hand in the other, then swap, to keep them warm, but outside, without gloves, which I don't possess, I worry the ache will grow. Small niggles, hints towards old age, like the envelope-brown patches that have appeared on my skin. I hold my hands up in front of me, the roads of my veins blue and my skin thin, fragile like paper that has been folded and unfolded too often. Perhaps I will ask for some gloves, and with my hands tucked in my sleeves, I could brave the oncoming winter. As I said, the grounds look pleasant and ample for a walk. I see, from my small window, which like all the windows in Castlemacgarrett, is smeared with the memory of rain drops and more broken cobwebs, residents, being pushed or guided through the gardens. They are all tucked so tight in wheelchairs, or gripping the arm of a sister as they take a short walk around the terrace. Rarely do they venture on the grass and often, they pause on the many benches. Do they speak I wonder? From here, on the third floor, I see their faces as paintings, unmoving, interpretations of the real thing. Sometimes we just want quiet though, don't we?

Nowadays, in the order, we talk to each other; there is not so much secrecy and denial of oneself. It is odd, though, to be sitting at lunch with other sisters and chatting about our days as though what we have done is news-worthy, or something which needs to be shared. My new colleagues think I am aloof or unfriendly for I have forgotten how to talk about who I am, or was, to others; I have spent a lifetime hiding. That is what we were taught and it is what I wanted. In the early days, when I took my novitiate in Lyons, then my mission to Ghana, we were told to leave our thoughts, our families and our former selves behind in the places we came from. Sisters sometimes prayed together, and in Ghana offered advice about how to deal with the heat, the bugs, spot the signs of the fever, but never about our daily troubles or our pasts. I, as all sisters did then, came to the order a blank person with no history and no story, like the covers of a book with its pages burned out. I wanted that; I thought it saved me. Yet, nowadays, they talk about home and family, even how they feel, and I simply cannot join in. My mouth stiffens and the words dry up, I stutter and, scared of blushing, drop my head down and whisper a prayer.

'Bealtaine Dia na síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo.
Bealtaine Mac na Síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo.
Bealtaine Spiorad na síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo,
an oíche seo agus gach oíche'

Besides, the lunch room is too bright and the tables are set up, like a frame, around the edges and then in large groups in the centre. It is all too social. The first time I went in there, I was unsure of where to sit, or what to do. Of course, in Leigh Convent it was the same, and Rostrevor too, but I was never just a bursar before and it has left me unsure of myself. I needn't have worried really. Sister Moira came to my rescue and gently cupped her hand around my elbow and guided me to a central table. She smiled at me and nodded when I waited behind one of the metal chairs. We stood shoulder to shoulder and prayed quietly. Quite suddenly, with prayers over, there was a thunderous scraping on the tiled floor and we were all seated in a violent clash of metal.

'We sit anywhere,' Sister Moira smiled. 'Welcome.'

I nodded at her and managed the trace of a smile.

It did not surprise me when we were served chicken and vegetables; from the moment I entered the smell of boiled cabbage was unmistakeable. As I said, things are not that different from Leigh after all. I ate a scoop of turnip and a scoop of mashed potato, cabbage and one slice of chicken and stuffing all covered in gravy. It tasted like all the meals I have ever eaten in Ireland: Mammy's gravy and stews, her soups and roasted chicken, or a rabbit if Daddy had been lucky with the snares. We were a fortunate family in that respect, we had a lot compared to others. But still, lunch in Castlemacgarrett is a strange time. That first lunchtime, with Sister Moira, I struggled.

'Where were you before, Sister?'

‘Leigh, Lancashire,’ I said keeping my eyes down.

‘And how was it?’

‘I did my work as God asked me.’

‘What’s Lancashire like?’ Sister Moira persisted. ‘I’m so pleased you’re here, we’ve all heard of you.’

I chewed slowly as I was taught and swallowed before speaking. ‘Our work kept us busy. As no doubt it will do here too.’

I did not fail to notice Sister Moira give a look to the sister opposite her, then turn to me, but before speaking again, she thought better of it and joined the conversation with the sister sitting on the other side of her and, unbelievably, throughout lunch she chatted and smiled and got involved in various conversations about family and weddings and the arrival, in August, of British troops in Derry. A warm welcome they said, a limited operation, the papers reported. I didn’t want to know. Beannaigh an Tiarna dúinn agus sábhálann linn.

The way they kept glancing at me, like some relic from another time. Isn’t it strange to think of oneself like that? Until I look in a mirror, not that there are many of those around, they are hardly needed in here, I forget I am old. I imagine my face as it always was, unwrinkled, sometimes weather-reddened skin, a plumpness in my cheeks. The old lady with a sharp chin and skin like that of a softening apple, is always a surprise. But not to them. That is the only me they know. I suppose in our world, in the order, I am the voice of experience, though I don’t really believe it. I had hoped, before arriving in Castlemacgarrett, that my role as bursar would hide me from my previous reputation, as Mother Superior in both Ardfoyle and Rostrevor. We are a small order though. It shouldn’t be a surprise that people have heard of me. I don’t mind that so much, but it is unsettling when sisters bow their heads as they pass me, or nudge one another’s shoulders behind my back, their footsteps quickening when I approach. I am only a bursar I want to shout.

I had no appetite for the stewed pear pudding we were given, as Sister Moira gleefully told me that she too had done her time in Africa and Ardfoyle, but never Lancashire or Rostrevor. She is young enough to be one of the new nuns, one who never learnt to lock her thoughts away. She talks faster than is comfortable and jumps from subject to subject without pause. I want to say, ‘hush’, and will her to reflect on her words, as they fall, already forgotten, from her mouth. I suppose it is just another adjustment to make. The world, even our quiet world that has been my safe haven for so many years, is changing, and I wonder how much longer I can belong. I could never leave; I took a vow. I cannot change either. Instead, I must quietly slow down and eventually, one day, go home to God.

And so, I find myself, for the first time in years, with free time, quite frequently. I don't want to be alone in my room with that box and so, instead, I sit in the day room and read a book. Reading has always been a comfort, perhaps because I mainly read in Irish. There is something in seeing the words take shape on the page, the flow of soft language through my mind and the memories it stirs of my brothers, who both loved to speak Gaeilge. But lately, since being here, I have become distracted. My eyes wander from the page, I notice people walking, or talking, changes in the light. I look up from the page and lose my place. It is so unlike me. I let my eyes wander and notice the residents scattered in chairs, some snoring, some knitting, some, unlike me, reading. The room is tired and I notice the carpets need a good clean. It should be mentioned to Mother Superior. The other sisters busy themselves caring for the needs of residents. It is a lovely thing to witness. There is a feeling of contentment in being amongst those who need help, rather than paperwork, and I let my book fall to my lap so I can watch.

I start to do this every afternoon and, surprisingly, I begin to look forward to my time in the day room, even though it is a little on the warm side because of the number of gas heaters dotted around. It is a homely room with mismatched furniture, all different patterns and colours, and small tables with lacework cloths. There are pot plants and artificial flowers and the pervading smell of vegetables, sometimes talcum powder, floral scents too sweet to be from real flowers and under it all, sadly, a musty smell, like old clothes which have been folded away for years. And yet, although I only plan on observing, I find myself sometimes stooping from my seat to pick up fluff or threads from the floor, scuffing my toe over dried mud to disperse it, or, when just sitting is too much, I put my book to one side and ask residents if I can fetch them anything. Often, they want tea, and I always add a sprinkle of sugar to sweeten it for them, remembering that was Mammy's weakness too. It makes me feel I can still do some good, provide company to those who need it. I miss looking after people and my mornings amongst the order's paperwork, which is in a terrible state of disarray, with files in the wrong place, numbers incorrect, faded words and a half-hearted attempt at organisation, are less than satisfactory. Even though I know it is all God's work, during my morning in the office, I fidget more than normal and words or numbers jump before my eyes, swap places, and I look to the corners of the room and notice creeping damp, cracked paint and the peeping blue wallpaper showing beneath the peeling peach top layer. I can't help but wonder if the blue had been more refreshing, or at least would have helped me stay awake.

One day I decide to take a seat next to a lady bundled up in a crocheted blanket. She is always in the same place, and I have never seen her talk to anyone. I don't speak to begin with, I simply sit beside her. At first, she doesn't acknowledge me, just stares forward; her head has a slight tremble as though she is driving over an uneven surface, but she is not, she is curled into the chair.

'Hello, I'm Sister Patricia.' I touch her arm. 'Is there anything you need?'

She turns her head and I see watery eyes, not tears, just age, and she shakes her head slightly. 'I'm fine,' she says.

I stay beside her, our arms almost touching, and I look to where she is looking, at the wall opposite, across the heads of the other, mainly sleeping, residents and we stay like that. There is a picture on the wall of a teapot filled with flowers. It has faded in the sun.

I am not used to pictures on the wall. There were never any in the early days of the order, in Ardfoyle and definitely not in Ghana. But even before that, in my other life, our home never had pictures. Arriving in Ardfoyle, I compared it to the chaotic kitchen I'd left behind, the socks drying above the range and shelves packed with bowls and utensils and food and various pans and sewing kits and books. No pictures, apart from one family photo propped on a shelf. But the walls, those rough stone walls of the farm house, were not bare. They were a mass of scrapes and dents and chipped paint caused by the rush of family life; those chips held the lingering moan of my mother when Patrick whacked a sliotar against the wall, after she'd already told him not to practice inside, or when Daddy tried his best to swat the flies with a saucepan, causing more damage than good, or Harry (and Mammy never gave out to him for it, or for anything come to think it), curled up reading, who absentmindedly dug his nails into the cracks of the paint and pulled off little bits that fell like snowflakes around him. Mammy was so house-proud, she always asked Daddy, then Patrick: 'would you ever paint those walls for me?' but they rarely got done with a busy farm to run and they became a picture themselves: stew splattered like paint, flicks of mud, greasy fingerprints but never dust or cobwebs. No, Mammy kept her side of the bargain and the house was always immaculate.

'What's your name?' I eventually ask.

'Hmm?' The lady next to me stirs and then turns to me. 'Agnes Kelly.'

'Are you sure there's nothing I can get you, Agnes?' I have spent a life caring and teaching and now to end it surrounded by paperwork seems unnatural, I want to help. 'Let me get you a drop of tea, perhaps?'

‘I’m okay, Sister.’ She looks at her trembling hands. ‘Thank you, though.’

‘Have you been here long?’

‘Five years. After Fergus died I hung on at home for a while before I got stuck in here.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘It was a long time ago. Sure, we all have our sadness.’

‘Tell me,’ I say. A life, lived like mine, in silence, makes you hear the smallest noise. And as Agnes starts to speak, I see she is glad of the company, as she tells me of her marriage to Fergus and their son, Eoin. She tells me of her garden and the hydrangeas she battled to keep alive and how Fergus was forever hopeful of a Mayo win in the All Ireland. ‘But they won in 1950,’ she says, ‘so he never saw it.’

I place my hand over hers.

‘Do you like the football?’ she asks, startling me with excitement.

I shake my head quickly, thinking it outrageous that a nun should watch football. And here he is: Patrick. He stands in the corner of my vision, as he often does, this time holding his hurley and dressed in the maroon of Galway. A full back, he was the biggest hurler in Galway. And even though he has gone, and it has been years since I laid my hand on a hurley, the honest truth is that when the chance arises, I do cast my eye at how Galway are doing and know, when they are doing well, that Patrick is smiling too.

‘Are you from Mayo?’ Agnes asks.

‘No, Galway. So not too far.’

‘A blustery county is Galway. We holidayed in Salthill on occasion when Eoin was small.’

‘So did we, when I was a child.’

‘It was always cold.’

‘It was.’ I don’t want to think of Salthill or those holidays when we were all together and there was no IRA and troubles and the green of Ireland and grey, biting waves, seemed like they would always be ours.

‘Have you family nearby?’ Agnes turns to me. ‘My son never visits like he promised.’

‘I don’t,’ I say. ‘Well, sure, Agnes, I must be getting on. You rest now and I’ll come and see you tomorrow.’

I stand up too quickly and she looks surprised. She barely has time to say, ‘yes, I would like that,’ before I leave her. I pause in the doorway and look back, guilty. Agnes is staring forward again, the faded painting unflinching on the wall. Nora starts taunting me. Tell her, she says, tell her. I shake my head. I don’t know how.

Chapter Three

‘Agnes, how are you this afternoon?’

‘Sister.’ She smiles at me with a slight turn of the head.

‘It’s a beautiful day, are you okay in here?’

She tells me she has been outside today already, but when I look at her clean slippers and flimsy day dress I doubt she has moved much further than from her bedroom. She is still tucked under the same crochet blanket as before and her hair, wispy and thin though it is, could do with a brush. I ask her if there is anything she needs.

‘No, thank you, Sister, I’m quite comfortable.’

And she does look it, although she adds it is always nice to have company. And so we sit and we are quiet. For a moment, I think she is nodding off as her head tips forward and her eyelids sink, but she stretches her legs and with a yawn brightens.

‘Do you like football?’ she asks.

‘Yes, on occasion.’

‘My Fergus never got to see the Mayo win of 1950, you know. He waited years too.’

‘You miss him?’

‘I’m used to life without him. We had a good life, Sister. I used to grow hydrangeas.’

I listen again to her life story, of her son who doesn’t visit and how she and Fergus lived in a small village in Mayo and about her garden and their holiday. She tells me, without regret that she never left Ireland.

‘It sounds like you had no need to.’

‘True. Have you travelled, Sister?’

‘I have.’

Agnes, impatient with my short answer, asks where I went. I tell her to Ghana, with the order. She raises her eyebrows and says that was a long way from home. It was, I tell her, a very long way.

‘And are you from Mayo?’

‘No. Galway.’

She tells me again about holidays in Salthill and mentions Strandhill in Sligo too. I smile at the memory of the places. When I was young, I tell her, Ireland, the west coast, was my entire world and I admit, for the first time, that I never wanted to leave until the war.

‘The war?’

‘The War of Independence.’

Agnes nods a long, slow nod and says it was a terrible time. She lost an uncle and some cousins, she says, matter of fact, but still crosses herself at their mention and prays for their souls.

‘Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha,’ I say, then tell her I joined the order after the war.

‘Did you lose someone too?’

I cannot find a way to answer and so I stay quiet and look out at the room beyond, at the sisters and the residents, just as they are every day, making tea, reading papers, sleeping, murmuring conversations, two gentlemen residents are even playing cards.

‘Sure, tell me about it another day,’ she pats my hand with a smile. How was Ghana?’

‘Hot!’

She laughs and the constant tears in her eyes spill over her cheeks. She doesn’t wipe them, or even notice them. I ask her if she would like tea.

‘Sure, I wouldn’t mind a cup if you’ll have one yourself.’

I stand up, smooth my skirt and feel, as if for the first time, the roughness of the fibres, the heaviness of the skirt I have worn, without noticing, for years. In the kitchen I press my hands to my face and massage my temples with my cold index fingers. They rest against my skin like sudden, chilled steel. I drag them down to my cheeks, still cold, like the blade Patrick and Harry shaved with every morning. The small dots of hairs they left in the sink, sometimes the odd drop of blood, that I was often ordered to clean. I used to moan, but now, now, it would be a privilege. My poor brothers. I turn, the feeling of being watched, but there is just the doorway and beyond that the day room and the residents. My brothers have gone, they are not here. But still, there is a sense of something, a niggling need, painful, like an insistent cough which dredges the chest. I want to tell her everything. I can imagine the weight of my past falling, like stepping out of rain-soaked skirts, if I could share my story. To have someone who will listen to me, after years of listening to others, seems too much of a luxury for someone like me. Even at the thought, my mouth clogs up with words and my hand goes to my throat. Patrick places his hand on my shoulder. I can feel the weight of it and the slight squeeze of his fingers against my bones. Tell her, he whispers, tell her about us.

The kettle screams, and I start to pour the tea and stir in a spoonful of sugar to Agnes' cup. I know it won't help her constant trembles but it won't do any harm. I roll my shoulders backwards then forwards a few times before picking up the cups and walking back.

'Here you go,' I place the cup on the side table beside her chair. 'Bain taitneamh as.'

'Go raibh maith agat, Deirfiúr'

'Do you think there's any truth in dreams, Agnes?'

'We're honest when we sleep,' she smiles then continues saying, with a snort, that most can't manage it when they are awake. She has a son in Dublin, she says, all flash car and suits and she is quick to point out that that was not how she raised him.

I tell her I don't imagine it is, but that people change, they grow, and they can't always be the way we want them to.

'Ireland's got too big for her boots.'

I nod and say perhaps, but I can't agree entirely. She is still ours. I ask Agnes if she, Ireland, was worth fighting for in 1920. She is quick to answer with, of course, and then we both pause. I can't help but look for Patrick to see what he thinks of our country now, of the people he died for.

'Do you wish your son hadn't moved to Dublin?'

'Maybe, but he wasn't going to stay in Mayo when there was money to be made in the city. I'd say your family were proud of you devoting your life to God?'

'I hope so. I left my mother at a difficult time. Dia beannaigh a anam.'

'You were serving God.'

I smile, it hangs on my face but I can't feel it. I was running away, I want to say, but I don't, I sit there with the silly smile, a mask for my regret.

'I hope Mammy was proud.'

Agnes is looking to me like there is something more. Perhaps I am biting my bottom lip in the same way Mammy did on the day I told her I was leaving. Part of me expected her to grab the wooden spoon, just as she did when we were bold as children, and whack it against the back of my knees. She knew I was running away. Agnes is still looking at me, a question, unspoken, hooked between us and so, somehow, like breaking the news all over again, I say it. I tell her.

‘My brothers were lost in the war.’

‘So many were lost.’

‘They were taken from us while threshing.’

‘The bastards,’ Agnes curses and a jolt of surprise shoots through me. She goes on, angry, saying the soldiers took too many. The poor men, she says, all they were doing was making a living and claiming what was theirs in the first place. She asks if that was the reason I left.

It is not that simple and so I distract her by telling her I was a teacher before the war but I couldn’t return to it.

‘And so you went to Ghana?’

‘To Cork first, then Ghana.’

‘I can’t even imagine it.’ She turns to me, her eyes still wet with age but bright, excited. ‘Tell me about it, please.’

I describe to her the heat and the yellow light, how the sand on the beach got so hot it burnt your bare feet. I tell her about the bustle of markets and the shouting, jostling and pushing in the cities. I tell her about the greenery, how lush it was, how the rain was warm. Of the monkeys and the lizards and the snakes. I describe how the people dressed in clothes of all colours and how the food was peppery and strong. She listens and smiles and says how she wishes she’d seen it. I leave out the bugs and the illness, the poverty, the lack of education, all the death and dying. I leave out the darkness I carried over there with me. She listens to me talk as the sun gets lower and I watch as her head falls forward and she sleeps. It is when she is asleep that I find myself whispering, half to myself – surprising myself – half to her. Words. Feelings. I don’t listen to what I say as the minutes pass, my voice a hum, a mosquito’s drone, and the sun creeps across the flaking windowsill, playing with shadows that twist and shrink from the room, then across the faded picture bringing its colours back to life. I start to tell her, in such quietly whispered words, my real story.

I check her face to see if she has opened her eyes, or if there is any change in expression.

I cannot risk her hearing me, but Nora is impatient for the story to be told. Since I have come here, the stories, that for so long have been just mine, are brimming to the surface and I can't contain them. I feel hounded in the corridors, where I walk close to the wall and the edge of the fraying carpet as if to avoid her

It is her. Nora. I know it is.

She is always nearby these days.

I look again at Agnes, her mouth drooping open slightly and I feel safe.

'God bless and thank you,' I whisper before I take a deep breath and begin, pausing like Nora did before she journeyed away from home, and remembering my mother's selfless encouragement.

''Go, Nora, please,' Mammy said. 'Téigh'

Nora stood there with poker straight arms. The door of the bus was open and the driver waiting.

She nodded, 'I will. 'Beidh mé.'

Her mother stood, about two feet away, twiddling a thread on her cardigan between her fingers. She didn't look at Nora, but over her shoulder to the bus and the boggy countryside beyond that. 'Make sure to write,' she added.

Nora was aware of her feet doing a strange back and forth shuffle, a funny dance step that didn't close the gap between them at all. 'Can you believe the sun's out on the day I leave?' she laughed and her smile was too wide.

'It's a blessing, Nora.' One of her mother's hands moved from the thread and flapped towards the bus, a gesture again telling her to go. Nora turned then, though all of her wanted to move towards her mother. She wanted arms and warmth and pressure and she wanted to be told it was the right thing, that her leaving was okay. Instead, she picked up her small case and waved gently before boarding the bus. Sitting rigid in her seat, not slumped like the man next her, Nora watched the sun disappear and the rain start to fall. Aireoidh mé tú, she mouthed.

When she arrived in Cork, as far from home as she'd ever been, Sister Eithne was waiting and they climbed aboard a carriage to continue the journey to Ardfoyle Convent. Nora sat in the carriage and looked at the rainy Cork countryside and remembered Mammy standing on the side of the road as the bus pulled away. She hoped the rain had let her get home, but it probably hadn't, so she imagined her at home trying to dry her stockings and skirts, her cardigan with the twisted thread, and her shoes, by the fire in Shanaglish, alone.

She worried, again, if she should have left her. After that November when she went back to live with her, after getting leave from her job as an assistant teacher in Curandulla, Nora had started to doubt if she would ever belong anywhere else, but as the end of that time approached she knew she couldn't leave her. Mammy had lost too much to lose her as well, especially with Kate planning her move to America and Hugo already in England. And then there was Patrick and Harry. And so, Nora stayed with her and they ticked along, side by side, in the hostile countryside, praying each night they would survive and not wake to flames and burning and death. So, in the back of that carriage with Sister Eithne beside her, Nora thought about everything she held dear, and how it was time to let it all go. Her mother said everyone in Shanaglish was delighted she was to join an order. Nora sat there, guiltily relieved to escape, and struggled to forget the look in her mother's eyes when she boarded the bus, the same look from the kitchen the day she told her Patrick and Harry were never coming home.'

Agnes groans in her sleep and I jump, probably visibly, lifting my hand and then, when I am sure she is only stirring and not waking, I rest my hand on hers again.

'You made me jump, Agnes,' I say. The truth is, I cannot tell my story to her if she wakes, it is impossible. Even as I check again her eyes are closed and her breath has settled into a deep rise and fall rhythm, I pick up my story cautiously, the words barely more than breaths.

'Ardfoyle Convent was not the impressive building Nora had imagined during sleepless nights in Galway. It was smaller, less sprawling, much like the Big Houses left in ruins across the countryside. A porch jutted out from the centre and ivy gripped onto the grey stone, smothering it from the ground up. To the left, she could see a chapel with six long narrow windows, pointed at the top like exposed teeth. It was actually the lawn which struck her; it was so green and smooth, a world away from the boggy, tangled grass of Galway.

'Come along,' said Sister Eithne with a shake of her head, before she quickly walked up the gravel driveway with her skirts flapping around her ankles. Nora marvelled at the crunch of gravel beneath her feet. And the rain, no longer a nuisance, washed clean her face.

Inside, the peace struck her immediately, like a sudden blast of hail when the sun is still shining, and yet her footsteps cracked against the stone. Sister Eithne walked briskly - her rubber soled shoes squeaked on the tiles - through to a room with a long table down the centre. There were no soft seats, which wasn't all that different from home, where there was just one armchair, which they all fought over after their Daddy died. Everything in the room was hard. Nora liked it. Sister Eithne gestured towards a chair at the table and obediently Nora sat down.

She didn't know where to rest her hands and, at first, she placed them in her lap, but that felt like hiding, and so she put them on the table in front of her. The wood was polished and cold. There wasn't a scratch on it and it made her think back to the rough oak of the table in Shanaglish. In that kitchen, there was always noise and heat and the furniture was a mismatch of convenience rather than style. The table, which did not seat ten comfortably, but was forced to nonetheless, was engraved with their lives. There were knife marks from chopping and arguments, there were stains from blood (a poorly lamb) and various stews that had spilled, scorch marks from the heavy metal pots and splinters which snagged on clothes and burrowed into skin. There were dents and irregularities in the wood, even an oil stain from when Patrick fixed a motor inside to get out of the rain, and always the lingering tang of chopped onion. They wiped it daily with a wet cloth, but it was impossible to clean up a family history just like that.

And, there were the memories of the days around that table during the search, before they knew for sure the brothers would never return. The silence that weighed down like an unspoken sin and the way Nora and her mother jumped at every noise, every creak, every footstep. Hoping. Hoping it might be them.'

'Sister, is Mrs. Kelly okay?' I am startled momentarily. I look at Agnes, still sleeping, and place my hand on the blanket around her.

'Yes, Sister, we were talking, but she fell asleep. I'll sit with her a while longer if that's okay. I think she likes the company.'

'That's fine, Sister.' And then the nun, whose name I am unsure of, walks away to check on another resident. I look again at Agnes and think perhaps I should stop my story, but I was lost in the telling of it and somehow, it soothed me.

'Agnes,' I say gently, 'may I continue?'

She doesn't answer and I think back to Nora arriving in the convent, sitting there alone in the dim light and noticing how plain it all was: no pictures, no plants, no china, no drying socks. She expected to hear whispering in the rooms or corridors outside, but there was nothing apart from that heavy peace. Weren't the other sisters wondering about the new recruit? She imagined them peeking through a gap in the door to get a look at her and sat up straight just in case. It just shows how little she knew. Of course, they wouldn't be interested in her. To become a nun, one must let their former self die. To kill herself, is that what she wanted? It was impossible to get rid of an identity, your identity, just by swearing an oath to God, surely?

It felt like she was left at that table for hours until Sister Eithne came to fetch her.

'Mother Provincial would like to see you now.'

Nora nodded and hastily got to her feet, eager to please.

'No,' Sister Eithne said, with her eyes cast down, 'Mother Provincial will come to you.'

Nora sat back down. Looking around the room again, she took in the sights of her new home; there wasn't much to see apart from a wooden carving of Jesus on the cross and a small font of holy water by the doorway. What else did she need?

Mother Provincial's shoes also squeaked and she too didn't look at Nora when she spoke. She kept her head bowed and stood at the end of the table with her hands clasped in front of her.

'Nora Loughnane?'

'Yes, that's me.' How foolish an answer with no one else in the room. Mother Provincial told her to gather her things. Clumsily, all muddled arms and quick breaths, Nora stood up with her small overnight case in her hand.

'I'll take you to your cell.'

My cell? Nora thought, and then again how quickly she fell back in time wondering about them - Patrick and Harry - and thinking that they too must have once heard those words, *your cell*. She shook her head to try and clear away the thoughts and slowly followed Mother Provincial, whose shoes squeaked again as she walked, while Nora's tapped behind, and so away they went, like a funny kind of percussion, to a new life. Nora's memories of home and family trailed behind her, stubborn like a sulky child.

Her cell was also plain, her bed was hard and the air was cool. Of course, it was far better than most people could dream of. Some had so much less on the farms and in the cities of injured Ireland. Only nights before, Nora was in the same bed she had been in as a little girl, as a young woman and, holding the blankets, warm with the smell of familiarity, up around her face, she had trembled at the slightest noise, even a mouse scurrying in the pantry after dark, or the scratching of branches against the whitewashed walls outside. There was no hope from footsteps, a knock on the door, or the rumble of an engine. All those things meant only trouble. The Black and Tans stalked the countryside at night, lighting fires, dragging people from their homes and driving them away to unimaginable fates. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.

She knew that Mammy was trembling the same, on the other side of the wall, and that if they were chosen, their house, their farm, their bodies, then they were powerless to stop them. Across Galway, the whole of Ireland, families, just like her own, were tucked up, if they were lucky, or praying in the depths of the dark nights, falling to their knees on cold stone floors, clasping their hands, to ask the Lord, with a ferociousness only felt to protect loved ones, that they would survive the night. So, her cell, bare and cold, colourless, as it was, gave her enough; Nora at least had walls and security, at last, buíochas le Dia.

'You'll want to freshen up. Use the water in the bucket. Dinner is at five. You'll eat alone tonight because the other postulants don't arrive until tomorrow. Someone will collect you.' Then Mother Provincial went and Nora stood alone in the room, the cell, which was hers.'

I stop as Agnes' breaths deepen to rumbling snores and I worry they will draw attention to us. Besides, I have said enough for today.

Chapter Four

I stare at the box in the corner of the room, scared even to blink, in case something escapes it. I don't know what, or who, but I fix my eyes on it until they burn and I imagine the rims of them red. I am not ready to open it. Still Mother Superior will not tell me who left it. I keep asking her. I can't even give her names or suggestions so she can nod slightly or shake her head. I have no idea. Every time I ask her she looks at me, very serious, but with a sadness too, as I used to with students who disappointed me, and her lips are stuck so tightly together I can barely see the pink of them. Once, without thinking, I even reached for her hand, taking it between the cold bone of my fingers. Her eyes widened and I dropped it immediately. She hurried from me, the sway of her skirts more frantic than usual. I do understand she cannot break a confidence, but what about me?

Of course, I should not matter. I haven't mattered for so many years. But Nora is awake. After years of quiet she is fussing again. Whispers. Pleading. In the night when I try to sleep, I think it is the breeze, or the tap of rain. But it is her. Pestering. My dreams are no longer restful or safe, as they have been for years, as Patrick and Harry have ensured they are. There are shadows, memories, faces blurred as though staring through water. I wake, struggling for breath, as though someone is tightening their hands around me. My room is empty, of course.

But in the corner, always, is the box.

I step away from it now and press my back against the wall. Will opening it make Nora quiet? Or will it free her completely? I squint my eyes, as children do, to make it disappear until I can only see through two crescent moon slits. Still, it is there and quickly, in a sudden panic, I open my eyes wide, staring again in case I have missed something. I watch for movement. Tense, braced to run. It is stupid, I know, but I can't bear it. Please God, help me. I bend too quickly for my old back and feel muscles stretch with a sharpness that catches my breath and I grab my shoes, forcing my feet, with their ridges of blue veins and misshapen toes, into them and hurry from my room.

Outside, with my head down, I plough straight across the lawns and towards a row of trees. Their leaves have started to fall, a myriad of browns against the green grass, I like the crunch beneath my steps, the way if I swing my feet forward, like a pendulum, they swirl up in front of me only to fall down again. The ground is damp even though it is the afternoon, and despite bright sunlight, an unusual sight, there is a distinct chill. I continue walking, kicking up leaves, and leaving a trail of brokenness in my wake. What was once curled and dying, but whole, is now torn on the floor, and the dead leaves pattern the ground like used confetti. I stop and look behind me, realising how far I have walked from the house. I am beyond the carefully placed benches and cut lawns, beyond the neatly turned flower beds and trimmed hedgerows. Here, the grass is longer and the naked trees have moss on their trunks and spider webs hang limp between shivering branches. It is beautiful; more reminiscent of Galway and the countryside I left behind. Our farm didn’t have straight edges or perfectly pruned hedges, it was rough and jagged and our boots clogged with mud daily as our feet slipped over soggy ground.

I look back at the house. Castlemacgarrett, as pretty as it is, with pots of livid red geraniums and creeping ivy on its walls, leaves nothing for any of us to do but reflect. For we are all, well myself and the residents, like forgotten, once treasured, trophies lying dusty in the attic, here to live out our final days, surely, gura móide teaghlach Dé a anam. I veer to the left and weave through the trees to the edge of the estate where metal gates keep us in. You cannot see the gates from the house but resting my hands against them they feel very real. The black iron is cold, solid, and they do not wobble or even shudder when I wrap both hands around them and try to shake them. Only raindrops fall to the ground. I press my face between two railings and feel the iron run down each cheek. I curl my fingers tighter, twisting my palms back and forth, creating heat. What a funny place it is really, and how strange to think that when our families get too much for us, too old, like novels whose pages have been turned and read and ripped, we package them away in a place with bars, as though the act of growing old is a crime.

My family did not grow old. They disappeared one by one before they were meant to, picked like flowers in the middle of bloom, and for that, perhaps considering what I see now, I should be thankful.

I walk the entire perimeter with my hand occasionally touching the gate or curled with the other one in front of me. The ground at the edges of the grand house is not always even, and twice, I trip and turn my ankle, but I don’t think I cause any damage, I am used to aches and pains anyway. We used to prowl for days, traversing pot holes and sinking ground, iced puddles and exposed rock. The time we could spend, all crouched down around a rabbit hole, waiting for action, poking droppings with sticks or our fingers, seems impossible now. We could waste hours, observing the slow movement of a snail in the aftermath of the rain, only to move it back to where it started to watch it again. It seemed to us, as it probably does to all children, that our home and the fields surrounding it, were endless. Mammy always shouted when we trailed mud into the house, which we did daily, but she smiled when we brought her buttercups and daisies tied in bundles with long bits of grass. Those bundles were shrivelled and dead by the evening but we never cared. Sometimes, with everything that happened, I forget I had a happy childhood.

I stumble back to the front door. There is a stinging wetness on my heel and my feet are soaked through. I bend down and snap two heads from the red geraniums. Agnes will like them, even though they are not hydrangeas. Inside, I begin to shiver and worry that I have missed the bell for tea, but people are still busy and it is not as late as it feels. I have let myself get too cold. Every step along the corridor causes more pain in my heel, and I know I must go and look at it before prayers, but I also want more time with Agnes.

A few people are in the day room and nuns are slowly encouraging residents to retire to their rooms. Agnes has not moved from where she was yesterday and the day before that. She is still tucked under her blanket facing the picture on the wall. There is dust on the glass of the frame.

I sit down beside her but she is asleep. A gentle whistle goes in and out as she breathes. Her trembling has stopped and she looks peaceful. I lay the geranium heads on her lap, they already look a bit wilted, but no doubt she will soon be taken to her room and so she will catch some of their beauty. I sit with her for a minute, breathing. The sun is sinking lower and the light is fading.

‘I hope you had some company this afternoon, Agnes.’ I rest my hand gently on hers but the touch does not disturb her. ‘I’ll stay just a minute. Níl mo scéal críochnaithe go fóill.

Nora was lonely when she first arrived in the convent. Those first few days were friendless and bleak. But that was what she wanted after all, and the constant prayer, the cold which after the first night was unshakeable and the determined gnaw of fear in her stomach were a pleasurable distraction from everything before. For weeks, she felt like she was playing fancy dress, and imagined Kate, or Harry would appear around a corner, in a different costume, one of Mammy’s old dresses, a glittering broach, or the shoes with a slight heel she kept for dances and for when Father Nagle did a station in their home. But no one appeared, except for other postulants, and they were all dressed the same. Their shoes flat and the only embellishment was a swinging cross around their necks. They prayed as individuals not a group. They walked side by side but didn’t speak or smile or stare. They barely knew what each other looked like. Then one evening, about four weeks after Nora arrived, one of the postulants – I think she became Sister Colombiere – turned to Nora in the kitchen and asked where she was from.

Without thinking, Nora looked at her, eye contact, and water dripped from the postulant’s hands as she passed Nora the china bowl she had just washed. Nora took it and moved the cloth around it.

‘Is it nearby?’ the postulant asked again.

Nora looked down at the dry bowl and continued to rub it.

‘I’m from Sligo.’

She heard the postulant’s smile when she spoke of her homeplace, but then she touched Nora and her hands were flames on Nora’s skin after weeks of no contact.

‘It’s Nora, isn’t it?’

Nora looked at the bowl to avoid any further eye contact. It was against the rules. They were not to be friends; they had been told several times.

‘Nora?’

She put the bowl down still wrapped in the cloth.

‘Are you finding it hard too?’

Finally, Nora raised her head and looked. The girl had pale skin and beneath her eyes were pools of shadow. Nora nodded, even though she wasn’t sure it was the truth. Was it hard? She didn’t know. Since that November nothing had been easy and this was just another type of hardship.

‘I want to talk and laugh some days,’ said the girl who had ginger hair, which was so fine and frizzy it poked out the sides of the hoods they wore daily. Nora made an effort every day to conceal her hair and so the girl saw just her dry, pale skin, cracked, sore lips and pinkish eyes - back in her cell, with the sun gone for the day, her tears were as regular as her prayers.

‘I didn’t know it would be like this, well, I did but-’ she paused and removed her hand from Nora’s arm. ‘Did you?’

‘I didn’t think about what it would be like.’ Nora finally spoke and her voice felt strange and echoed in her head. She tested it again. ‘I just knew it was the right thing. Toil Dé.’

‘I didn’t want to get married,’ laughed the girl. ‘This was the only thing to do that made Mammy happier than a wedding.’

Nora didn’t dare laugh. Besides, there was nothing inside her, not then, that would let her.

‘Where’re you from?’ the girl asked again.

‘Galway.’ Nora liked the way it sounded, ‘Contae na Gaillimhe.’

‘The bus passed through when I came down here.’

Nora thought of the countryside she would have seen: the carefully stacked walls and undulating fields with their spongey grass and prickly hedgerows. Across the landscape, always the bushy silhouettes of sheep and the angular shape of cattle. And the persistent fog of rain and the thickness of fear that still clung to the people. Tall grave stones stood lonely in overpopulated cemeteries and church spires amongst clouds and the slow Sunday procession of the faithful. That was Galway. She imagined no place would ever be so beautiful.

‘It’s Nora, isn’t it?’ the girl repeated.

This time Nora nodded and let the corner of her lip lift. Then she remembered. ‘We shouldn’t talk. The sisters said it will slow the process.’

The postulant dunked her hands back in the lukewarm water to wash the swimming cutlery. ‘My name’s Aoife by the way.’

Nora didn’t reply; she had never been a rule breaker. There were times she wished she had. Perhaps if she had pushed harder she would have found them in time, despite the closed doors and rumours. She never believed it was too late, until it really was, and she was standing in the family kitchen bearing her mother’s entire weight as she screamed out for them.’

I stand up suddenly. ‘I’m sorry, Agnes, so sorry,’ and I wince as the refreshed pressure of standing pinches the blister on my heel. ‘Codáil go sámh.’

On the way back to my room I am rounded up for tea and prayers. It is not a surprise; the same things happen at the same time every day, but now I am uncomfortable because my clothes are damp, making me shiver, and my heel is smarting just enough that I cannot forget it. Guiltily, I go through the motions, anxious to get away from everyone and, for once, back to my room. Again, there is too much talk over tea and I hunch over my fruit cake to avoid conversation.

Then I hear it. A slight hum, ever so quiet, of *Amhrán na bhFiann,* to my right. I look over and see one of the nuns, she is younger than most, humming it as she tucks into her pudding. The pitch of her voice rises and falls but the tune is clear and I can’t help but feel tears gather in my eyes, with the same sting as my injured heel. There is the knot of all my suffering. Patrick is back. He is standing against the far wall with his hand on his heart, head held high. Harry is by his side. Their faces are covered in mud and they wear dark coloured tweeds. They look like soldiers and they were, they are. Why is she is humming it? I want to stop her, I need to. She carries on and each note of it reverberates through me. Patrick is stretching his body up; he is so tall and his shoulders broad. Harry does the same. I battle to push more fruit cake into my mouth. It is dry like baked earth and I move it around and around until I feel I might choke. I cannot listen to it anymore, proud as I am of all it represents, I have never been able to listen to it without such sadness. There is a sudden crescendo of scraping forks and small talk. It is all so loud. I lean forward and a tear falls to my plate amongst the crumbs.

The sister stops. She laughs at something said by another sister at the table and is swept up in conversation. As quickly as it started it is over. I am shivering, visibly shaking and one of the sisters on my table asks me if I’m okay.

‘I’m fine,’ I snap. Then quietly, regretfully, ‘I spent too long walking outside in the cool evening, Sister.’

She nods and says I should get to bed perhaps.

‘Thank you, I will.’ I bow my head, trying to control the shivering inside me that seems to cut right to the marrow of my bones, and lay my fork silently down on the side of my plate. I rise from the table, ‘excuse me,’ I say, ‘go mbeannaí Dia duit,’ and hobble away as Patrick and Harry salute.

In the safety of my room, I slip off my shoes and peel away my stocking to see the weeping, red blister on my heel. I shouldn’t have worn the newer shoes for such a long walk. But it is not that which bothers me. The box is on the floor and I can’t ignore it anymore. I get up, and with a limp, get across my room and bend down to it. *Amhrán na bhFiann* is still playing in my mind, my family are gathering round and the wind is blowing in from Galway. There is string tied around the box and with trembling hands I start to unknot it.

Chapter Five

Patrick disappears as I wipe sleep from my eyes. He was standing guard as he has done most nights since I left Ghana. When I sleep, I see him, sometimes Harry too, and they tell me, in the same voices I knew throughout childhood: Patrick's a chime, higher than expected, and slow, Harry's deeper, a cat's purr, and quiet, that I have done well all these years. Last night, Patrick said nothing, he was just beside me. The room is warm, but I feel a chill and pull my cardigan tighter. The box is on the floor, lying upturned. It is open, the string discarded beside it. I remember untying the string. I remember how, with shaking hands, I lifted the lid. The smell seeped into my room, unfamiliar, sharp, with a tang of something animal. And mustiness, the dry, dusty smell of years. I remember how I placed the palm of my hand on the pile of unopened letters inside. I remember how tears fell. How I lost my nerve. How I closed my eyes. More tears. I curled up on my bed. The box fell. I dreamed. And now it is morning.

My heel rubs against the woollen blanket of my bed and I feel the sting of my blister and enjoy the raw pain of it, so I do it again. The sharp catch of exposed flesh takes my breath but it is easier to face than what is on the floor.

The box. Opened.

It is full of letters. Letters I sent home, still sealed. My stories. But why? Why are they here? Why were they never read? I look at the top one and the hopeful loops of my writing. What was I telling her? I had survived? I don't know if I did. Nora did. They are her letters. I put my hands to my head and want to drag my fingers through my hair, pull it, feel the slight tear from my scalp. I am still wearing my wimple. I push my fingers through the wrinkles of my forehead, as if through mud, dragging my nails back down and leaving, I imagine, red lines across my face. Everything I ever said to Mammy was unread. My life, my stories, unheard.

Here they all are, sealed for years, in the envelopes I sent from Ghana, the address of the farm written by my own hand, time and again. My mother never read them. Of course, she never read them. All those years I waited for a reply, all the excuses I made for the poor postal system, a bad season on the farm, illness. It was simple. They were never opened. The post in Ghana was infrequent and unreliable. Sometimes, sack loads of post would arrive and other times just a few letters, tattered and smudged. Regardless, I would wait for a knock on my hut, or for an envelope to be pushed, like a secret, under my door. Or I would sit with the others, tracing shapes in the dirt of the compound floor instead of talking to one another, for a letter to be handed to me. I waited once, my back against the door of my hut, and watched the sun fall and the world grow dark. I felt the tickle of bugs against my skin, the low buzz of their night flight attracted to my warmth, my blood. I didn't move. I closed my eyes. I tried to imagine what she would write, but the paper was always blank. Why did she never read them?

Perhaps she never received them.

My breath stalls, a hook in a fish's throat, at the thought she was forever waiting for me to write. But then where did they go? Where have they been? I kick the box. Who took my stories?

I blink away the burn of tears and look to my window where the sun is already shining, and although the air will be cool, I think the crispness of autumn will be delightful for the residents because it makes the skin taut, revives youth momentarily, helps us breathe just a little bit deeper. For some, it clears their minds. For me, it reminds me of Galway and of that harsh November in 1920. The cold, any cold, always takes me back there, to the grip of fear we endured searching, hopelessly, in the frozen countryside. So much was left unanswered and it still is, but now there are yet more questions without answers.

I knead the hollows of my cheeks trying to think, to remember faces, to piece it all together. Did Mammy hide my letters? But who brought them here? I look again at the window and the twinkle of a first frost lacing outside. No, I was right. Of course, she never received them. My letters were intercepted. They had to be. Even after the murders, the discovery of their bodies, the truth was hidden. It is the only answer there can be. My stories - even though they were stories of a faraway place - were stolen. Perhaps the IRA were worried I would give away too many names? Or the British wanted to hurt us further. There was that officer, Nichols, I can still see his wide grin, teeth with tea stains like the beginnings of rust. He knew so much about us all. Too much. I can still hear my mother's name on his breath, the malty bluster carrying it across to me. He wanted to hurt us. Even after their deaths, he didn't leave us, interrupting the funeral mass, denying all knowledge at the inquest. Of course he would have taken my letters, a spiteful bully, he would have hidden them, not to read, but to ensure Mammy couldn't. Another punishment. Nora caused such a scene in the aftermath of their deaths, it wasn't enough she had gone away, he wanted her completely silent. But I was already trying to silence her. Is that why she is back now? She wants me to finally reveal her truth.

Back then, Galway was awash with rumours. Everyone had their own story about my brothers. There was Martin Coen, who owned the shop on the road to Gort, saying a gang of soldiers bought rope and a bottle of whiskey on the day Patrick and Harry were taken. They didn't pay, he said, just pointed guns at him and so he let them away. Or, Mr. MacGill, who claimed he spent three days in bed because of what he saw as he made his way home from church. A tumbled wall, and behind it, Patrick and Harry, ropes around their necks. Then Mr. Kinsella added that he was told the soldiers made them run in front of the lorries carrying heavy stones. And all the while there was talk of shots being fired and of them being dragged behind lorries or running at bayonet point and of escape, freedom and the chance of them coming home. But, of course, they never did. Only Patrick and Harry know what they suffered. My letters didn't tell those stories, but the British, Officer Nichols, didn't know that. He was a coward, telling lies, afraid I would cement the rumours of his brutality in history by writing them down. But they were not mine, or Nora's, to tell, though she tried.

Nora did find a voice in my letters, a place to talk, when the day-to-day silence of Ghana grew too much. I would sit in my hut, sweat dribbling between my shoulder blades, and write home. My words, too often, turned to Nora's. She had so much to tell Mammy, and I wrote it down on the scraps of paper I was given, reluctantly, by the mission. Some said it was better to forget home entirely. Don't write, they said, it's easier. But I did, she did, and now here are our words, still sealed shut in the envelopes I glued with my own spit. On the floor. Unheard. I cannot hear Nora whisper now as she has been since I arrived here. She too, like me, is shocked. Part of me wants to reach out to her, take her soft hair, which was always twisted into a tight bun, and stroke it, say sorry for shutting her away, whilst the other part of me trembles at the thought of her, jumps at shadows in the corner, bites my nails, fidgets, runs down corridors. She should have stayed in Ghana. But I want to tell her story, our story. I must.

I reach for my new shoes then think again and instead pull my old shoes from under my bed. I should let my foot heal. It smarts as I push my heel against the leather and it will sting, like a deep splinter, with every step when I walk. I stand up and turn my back on the box on the floor. For now, Nora can rest. I have a life to get on with and I am hungry and looking forward to a bowl of porridge with a crunchy sprinkle of brown sugar. We are allowed some luxuries nowadays. I open my door and start walking before the bell even rings for breakfast.

Chapter Six

I go straight to Agnes after breakfast but before sitting beside her, I straighten the edges of her crochet blanket and ask how she is. I want to look busy, helpful, so as not to draw attention to us.

‘Sister.’ Agnes smiles as I tuck her blanket over her hands and she tells me not to take her outside in the chilly weather.

I laugh, telling her it is good for her but that I will leave her inside for now and take my opportunity to sit down.

‘Do you like football?’ she asks.

I nod, ‘yes, on occasion.’

‘The boys played in terrible weather some years. You know, my Fergus never got to see the Mayo win of 1950. Shame, because he supported them all his life.’

‘You told me. Fergus sounds like a good husband. You were happy.’

‘We were.’ Agnes smiles at the thought and I worry that will be the end of our conversation for the day. ‘I found some withered geraniums in my room this morning. I never liked geraniums.’

I tell her I am sorry and make a note not to bring them to her again. Besides, what would others think? I need to be careful.

‘I grew hydrangeas.’

‘You said.’

She looks like she is staring at the faded teapot but her eyes are not focused, they have a marble shine to them, she barely blinks as she remembers how they smelled of spring. New starts, she tells me, with an affirmative nod.

She never seemed to me like someone who needed a new start and I ask her again if she was happy.

‘We all make mistakes, Sister.’

‘And yours?’

She waves her hand free from under the blanket and says plenty, then trying to laugh adds she must have made lots to end up in here. She doesn’t look at me, her eyes still forward, somewhere else, and I want her focus. Thinking of what is in my room, I need her today. I reassure her she hasn't done anything and touch her hand to get her attention. She turns to me.

'Do you remember I told you about Nora?'

'Yes. The nun. In Cork.'

I straighten, slightly taken aback by her memory. Of how sure she is. I don't know where I am with her, like the bogs of Galway, you chance a step, and then the next step sees you slip under, panic, leap for solid ground. Agnes. I don't know what she knows, what she holds. I hesitate, can I continue?

Around me the room is quiet with many of the residents wheeled outside for the fresh air. Those still here are dozing and sisters occasionally flit between them, then disappear. I want to tell Agnes more, it is welling up inside me, like heartburn.

'What about that nun in Cork?'

I look around again and there are no sisters and so I lean in closer. 'Nora wasn't always going to be a nun, Agnes. She was a teacher, a contented teacher in Galway, until the troubles. Then everything changed.'

'The troubles upset a lot of people.'

'Nora was disappointed in herself. She should have done more, broken more rules.' My voice rises and I pause, take a breath, and whisper that she should have pushed harder to find them.

'Who?'

'Her brothers.'

Agnes shakes her head and says she is sure Nora did all she could. 'Tell me about her rule breaking. I love a story.' She smiles and sinks a little in her chair.

I can't help but smile too. 'It's not that exciting, really.'

'Lean ar aghaidh.'

'Her brothers were taken, rounded up by the Auxiliaries, and Nora's mother asked her to search for them. But where? Galway at that time was dangerous and people were scared to talk. First, she tried Eglington Street Barracks but they closed the door in her face, slammed it like an unsatisfactory book, and the same happened at Galway Gaol. In Shop Street, people were busy getting on with their days, heads down, while soldiers leaned on Crossley Tenders and bullet-pitted walls. Nora, too brazenly, walked into the first shop she came across - Ryan's Haberdashery - and straight up to the lady behind the counter who recoiled at the mention of Patrick and Harry. It was the same everywhere, a hardware store, a green grocer's, a dress shop. They all shied away from her as though the mention of her dear brothers would bring harm. Galway clammed up and a city, usually so full of stories, fell silent. But how could Nora give up?'

'We should never stay silent, Sister. Words are our gift, Ár arm.'

I look across the day room at the elderly people, tucked up in chairs, daydreaming with cups of tea, digestive biscuits and their memories. How sad we all become.

'Did you fight for them, Sister?'

'Nora tried, Agnes. But people were frightened and didn't want to be the next victim picked off by the soldiers. Silence was protection.'

'She didn't give up so easily, surely?'

'As she reached the end of Shop Street, and she supposed her search, to her right was the burgundy front of Murphy's Bar. Two men stood outside talking: one about to go in, one leaving, both balanced against canes. They paused momentarily in their conversation to look at her. A public bar! Whatever would Mammy think? Beannaigh an Tiarna dúinn agus sábhálann linn. One of them swayed slightly. He had drunk too much and Nora thought, perhaps naively, that people with liquor slurring their tongues, shrouded in dimmed lights, would be more likely to talk. Mammy used to say, 'don't listen to that fool, that's drink talking,' when Daddy got home from Whelan's Bar. He always sat in the comfortable chair by the fire, untying his laces with clumsy fingers, cheeks reddened.

'I tell you, one day, Kathleen, we'll have a farm twice the size of this one.' He would pause to see to a knot. 'And horses and even a car, I'm telling you, we'll have it all. We're going good.'

'Get away with ye,' Mammy would say, half smiling. 'It's only nonsense, we're fine as we are.'

But Daddy would go on with his big ideas while Mammy smiled and said again and again that it was only the drink talking and not to listen to him and to concentrate on schooling because there would be no Loughnane empire any time soon. Nora always liked listening to him, she liked his dreams of expanding the farm and she never believed it was just drink talking. Besides, her Daddy was never a big drinker, none of the Loughnane men were, so it was worth a listen when he did have a few. Loose tongues. But there is truth in nonsense.'

'Indeed, there is, Sister.'

'And so, Murphy's Bar seemed like her last chance, surely. She excused herself as she pushed between the two men, still standing outside, and walked through the doors, into a fog of smoke, with the confident stride of the young.'

'Good for her.'

'The light was poor, almost brown in colour, like the drink in all the glasses, and she squinted her eyes, then widened them, to adjust her sight. There were a lot of men, some standing, some sitting, most with drinks in their hands, and cigarettes hanging from their mouths, like boys in the fields chewing grass. There was laughter and words tossed around the thick air, but all were lost. She stood in the doorway trying to hear anything, but everything merged into one deep hum, like a swarm of bees, even the whack of the doors closing behind her didn't disturb it. A crowd slouched around the fireplace where orange flames worked away at the turf in the grate even though the bar was already uncomfortably warm. She touched her hand to her face, feeling the beginnings of sweat on her brow, then brushed past the crowds to get to the bar. There was a smell of silage and tobacco, and the sourness of perspiring bodies as her cheek got pressed against a man's woollen jumper, and she stepped back to find space, only to feel the lump of someone's foot beneath her own. It was then they started to notice her, some of the men turned to stare and she apologised with her eyes down. Finally, as the crowds parted to let her through, she made it to the bar and placed her hands on the well-worn wood. Her little finger got wet in a puddle of liquid and she moved it quickly, wiping it on her skirt. There were two empty glasses to her right, the yellowish white remnants of beer crusting the inside of each glass, and to her left, a man sitting forward looking into his whiskey.

'Can I help, Miss?' The barman, middle-aged in a shirt with ugly brown stains on the chest, stood before her on the other side of the bar.

'I hope so, I'm looking for my brothers - Patrick and Harry Loughnane.' Nora shifted her weight and as she did her shoes stuck slightly to the floor making a tearing sound like when her mother ripped fabric at the kitchen table. 'An gcabhróidh tú liom?'

'They're not here.'

Nora’s body tightened. She looked around, aware that some men were creeping closer, listening. Her fingertips pressed harder into the bar, and she leaned forward to explain her brothers were taken on Friday. While she spoke, the barman shook his head, slowly, left to right. A tuft of his hair was pushed up with sweat and it irritated her, his untidiness, and yet his sureness. She clenched her fingers into fists as he said no one had heard that name. His eyes were down and she narrowed her own at his chest. Look at me, she wanted to say, you coward, look at me. Instead, whispering now, as she felt a draft of alcoholic breath on her exposed neck, she said perhaps there might be someone in the bar who had information. On tiptoes with the edge of the counter digging into her stomach, she said she just wanted to ask around.

The breath on her neck retreated.

‘You won’t be bothering anyone in here with your questions. Now, it’s best you get yourself home.’ The barman scolded her like an angry father repeating his warning, and she could feel the heat from the fire reddening her left cheek, but she stood firm, her body tense. Shadows stretched out on the walls as drinkers shifted position and resettled. Space had opened up around her again. She took a step backwards, looking towards the corners, through archways into darkened snugs. There was a shadow, solid as a tree trunk, tall but with a slope of the shoulders too familiar to ignore.

‘Patrick?’ She said, turning slightly. The barman shook his head, and as he did she saw the man, who was probably not even as tall as Patrick, lean forwards, crumpling a rounded belly and with a scatter of dark hairs on his face. Patrick was strong but trim, his face always clean shaven. The barman looked at her pitifully, wiping moisture from his top lip with his arm. She wondered if she was the first desperate woman to fall upon his bar looking for information. Doubtless there had been women before her, searching for drunk husbands or brothers or sons. But her brothers were not drunkards. Nora steadied herself on the bar, suppressing a cough, as she gasped in the air, which hung about her face like spiderwebs.’

‘You know, I’ve never set foot in a bar. My Fergus liked them well enough though.’

‘It was the first and last time Nora went into a bar, Agnes, but she had so few choices. You remember the fear of those days?’

‘I do, Sister. Uafáis na cogaíochta.’

‘The barman walked away to serve a customer. She stayed still. There was a trickle of liquid as a drink was poured, like the times she heard Patrick, rarely Harry, relieve himself behind the shed from where he was taken. The bar was littered with puddles, empty glasses, cigarette ends and half-full bottles of whiskey. There was an earthy smell to the room, mingled with the sweat and choking smoke. A smell not unfamiliar in the kitchen at home, but this was thicker, like a net. It caught at the back of her throat and she kept pushing back the need to cough. Her eyes were sore from blinking in the half-light. Cold liquid splashed at the back of her legs, as a glass was dropped, shattering with a deadened song, on the floor. Alone at the bar, stinging bites of glass scratching her legs through her stockings, she put her hand to her warm left cheek and looked around. The bar was big, much bigger than it looked from outside and there were small areas to the left packed with men, their bodies crammed together like wood lice under a rock. Bursts of laughter fired into the main area, whispers, deep growls. Nora strained and on two occasions took steps towards the crowds, hearing 'Loughnane.' The names Harry and Patrick seemed on the end of everyone's tongue, thrown around, and Nora jumped, turned her head, felt even her heart pause, but it was talk of Barry, or discussions of how to carry hay without a cart, or the fantastic hurling score, or the panic when a bull escaped into the road. Rope, capture, men. She turned, breathless, exhausted. Behind her, with her back pressed to the bar, were more men, more conversations. A group in the corner by the curtained window, the fabric a swirl of yellowing stains, were huddled together, heads down and she watched them, waiting for any clue, while other men sloshed drink from their glasses, cursed, straightened their caps.

'You'd best be on your way.' The man next to Nora spoke quietly, in Irish. 'There's no good to be done with you in here.' She turned to face him but he wasn't looking at her.

'Do you know anything, Sir? Le do thoil.'

'As your man there said,' he nodded towards the barman, 'none of us do.'

The sound of the door slamming shook the pub like a slap and more men entered, smartly dressed in suits, folding up long spikes of umbrellas, as the rain dripped onto the sticky floor. The old man shuffled further down to make space for them. She wanted to reach out to him, tell him to wait, but the men had already placed their forearms on the bar and leaned over.

'Two pints there, Padraig, when you're ready,' said the taller of the two.

'How are you there, Miss?' said one of them. 'Chasing that husband of yours home are you. Sure, doesn't a man deserve a break?' Then they turned, with a laugh, and started their own conversation without giving Nora a second to answer.

Her head throbbed and she wanted to grab them, scream at them, her skin itched as it did the time they all caught lice. Mammy had roughly pulled at their hair, tugged it from their scalp, dragging a comb through it. Tufts of hair littered the floor afterwards and it sizzled when it was thrown into the fire. She put her hand to her head and scratched, but her entire body was itching. She dug her nails into the palms of her hands.

Life was continuing as before, just without her brothers. She struggled to ever imagine them in a place like this, laughing like these men, not caring, making fun of her. She kicked the bottom of the bar with her pointed heel but the noise around her was so loud it made no sound. There was no hope in that pub, it was like peering into a well to retrieve something precious. There was no bottom. There were no answers amongst the spilt drinks and hanging smoke and as the distinctive patter of rain grew louder, like an applause, the men throughout the bar clung tighter to their drinks, hands looped through handles and cradling glasses, like mothers with babies to their chest. She stepped away from the bar counter, unpeeling her shoes from the floor, and shoved through the crowd with her shoulder. Men looked at her again, as though they had forgotten she was there, and stepped out of her way. She put her head down and pushed forward, past booths and hard splintered chairs. A man sat, in the corner by the door, his face in a book with a pint balanced on his knee.

‘Harry?’

He looked at her, puzzled, then back to the pages of his book. I’m sorry, she said, taking a handkerchief from her pocket to wipe her hot face, and realising he was at least twenty years older than Harry, grey and with thick work-hardened fingers. I’m sorry, she whispered to herself, dropping her handkerchief to the filthy floor. She went to pick it up but feet trampled the white cloth before she could get to it. She let out a cry, the bleat of a frightened lamb, and rushed out into the rain, gulping down the fresh air.

Shop Street was much quieter since the rain started, and those that were still out were hurrying with bowed heads. She waited in the doorway, unsure of where to go. How could she return to Mammy with no answers? Go bhfóire Dia orainn.

A hand grabbed her arm and twisted her round, pinching her skin painfully. It was the old man. He stood before Nora with a whiskery face and eyes slightly unfocused.

‘Go home, will you,’ he said with spat out whispers. ‘You’re doing no good here as I said, now just go. Don’t be coming back tomorrow either.’

‘I’m going, I just don’t know where. Cuidigh liom.’

‘Abhaile. Go home to your family, Miss Loughnane. Asking about your brothers, it’ll do no good. Jesus, I shouldn’t even be talking to you now.’ He looked around and pulled her a little closer. She could smell alcohol on his breath, a warm gust against her face.

‘Do you know something, Mr-’

‘It’s none of your business who I am. Yes, there are rumours all over, doubtless you’ve heard them, and everyone in that pub, this city, even, knows them. But they won’t talk so there’s no good asking.’

‘Tell me what you know?’

‘Bad things, like always, but there’s no good you hearing them.’

‘I can’t just leave them.’

‘Miss, locals, y’know the local men that fights with them, are searching. You leave it there and get yourself back home safe.’

‘But-’

‘No one will speak. Now good evening to you and go mbeannaí Dia duit.’

He turned with a stamp, releasing her arm, and pushed back through the door of the bar. Nora stood for a moment and looked at the reflections flickering in the panel of the door. She placed her palm against the cool glass and rested her forehead on the back of her hand. They were all warm in there, the fire a staggering amber glow, and the men pressed together with pints and secrets. Nora cursed them all for their cowardice then quickly took it back and looked to God, up into the rainy sky, for help.’

Agnes claps her hands. ‘And did the good Lord help?’

She says it with a laugh, but I don’t mind because God didn’t help Nora then and I tell her no, sadly, there were no revelations.

Agnes’ face grows more serious and she says at least Nora was doing something, that she was out there searching. That is more than some would have dared.

I agree but tell her to imagine how it felt to return home to her mother with no more information than she had that morning.

‘Ara the poor craythur. Those bastards.’

‘Agnes!’

‘Ah well, you’re thinking it too.’

I try to remember the last time a smile came so easily and I thank Agnes for listening.

‘As I said, I love a story.’

‘It might not have a happy ending.’

‘They never do.’

I take her hand and ask if it is ever possible to be happy. She looks at me, her smile gone and says she is as happy as she can be when she has nothing left. Her head shakes from side to side, waving away the thoughts she hasn’t told me, and she asks me to tell her more. Then looking to the window, she says again it is too cold to go out. I know she rarely goes out, despite what she thinks, but I have no desire to walk the grounds or return to my room either and telling her is easier than I thought. I check the room again, worried people will talk if I stay too long, but it is still quiet.

‘Was her mother angry? I am sure she understood.’ Agnes encourages me to continue.

‘When Nora returned to the farm, her mother was slouched on a wooden chair in a boneless way she wouldn’t normally. She didn’t sit up straight away, just stayed there like a child’s discarded doll. Nora wanted her to jump up, eager with questions. But she didn’t. Nora sat down and placed her hand on her mother’s shoulder. She shook her head, telling her she asked everywhere, even in Murphy’s.

‘Murphy’s Bar?’

Her mother’s body tensed, Nora felt the muscles of her shoulders, strong from churning, flex beneath her hand. She nodded.

‘A bar? Nora, go mbeannaí Dia orainn.’

‘I thought someone might know something and you know what you always said about Daddy and drink.’

‘Nora,’ Mammy sat forward. ‘Nora, how could you? How could you go there? To those men, I, I-’ her voice grew to a shout and Nora felt the scorch of her mother’s hand across her right cheek before she heard the slap of it. ‘As if your brothers would be in that place,’ her mother spat, flopping backwards.

Nora sat still, her hand had fallen from her mother's shoulder and was dangling, limp between the two chairs. She didn't touch her face, although she could imagine the rash of red spreading across her cheek and she promised her mother she would look again the next day and the day after that. 'I won't stop asking questions,' she said.

Her mother smiled and said, 'you're a good girleen,' then she started to cry. Silently. Tears chased each other one by one over the wrinkles of her face and Nora stayed beside her for a while as the room darkened around them and the soup her mother had prepared for dinner cooled and congealed in the bowls.

When all the light had gone, and Nora could no longer tell if her mother was crying or not, awake or asleep, the room quiet and still apart from their deepening breaths, Nora told her mother to go to bed.

'I will not. I must wait up for them.'

'But Mammy-'

'You get some sleep, Nora. There's a good girl. Make sure you're ready to continue the search tomorrow, le cúnamh Dé.'

Nora pressed her weight on Mammy's shoulder as she stood up and leaned forward to kiss her on the head and wished her goodnight. There was no reply as her mother continued to stare at the door and begin her nightly vigil.

Chapter Seven

Before light, Nora crept past her mother who was asleep where she'd left her the night before. Patrick had done the same on many evenings, avoiding the sharp ear of Mammy where she slept on guard. Nora smiled to imagine him tiptoeing across the kitchen flagstones - corpse cold where the fire had burnt out - and holding his breath as he pushed up the black iron latch on the farmhouse door. Then out into the night with the other men.

Her bicycle bumped over the rough lanes. And as she travelled over each stone and pothole, Nora thought of her brothers in the back of that truck, not knowing where they were going and only guessing at what was ahead of them. Everyone knew what the Auxies did to prisoners. Nora wondered if Patrick put an arm around Harry or if, as usual, he remained upright and told him to be brave. 'Ar son shaoirse na hEireann,' she heard him saying and Harry would nod and wipe his eyes when Patrick was not looking.

As she cycled, the sky didn't break, there was no orange crack or golden glow, instead just a persistent dark shrouding the countryside. And where was she heading? She didn't know. There was purpose in simply cycling towards the city and feeling, however futile, that she was doing something. But then, and it was almost a shock to herself, she found herself taking the route towards Salthill and as her mind was made up she cycled harder, foolish or not.'

'What was in Salthill?' Agnes asks, smiling again at the memory of it as a place for family holidays. She shivers though and wraps her arms around her, laughing at how they were always damp and cold as they waited on the beach for a glimpse of sun. Then she loosens her arms, letting her hands slide down her rippling flesh and says, it was time together and with a sudden brightness, turns to me, saying some days they even had ice cream. Nora's journey to Salthill is forgotten for a short while as Agnes recalls how she liked to show Eoin the small barnacles on the rocks. She mimics his small hello and childish wave as he greeted them. We are quiet then, Agnes' head bobbing slightly, sorting through memories until she lifts her hands to her mouth, shaking her head. I worry she is crying as she speaks to herself, not me, mourning how full her heart was then, how Eoin was everything to her. Then, she looks at me, and I was wrong, there are no tears, but no smile either, and she is serious. He had a fierce imagination back then, she tells me.

I smile. I would like to hear more about it, I tell her. But she is waving her hand at me now, muttering it is all best forgotten and she asks again why Nora was cycling to Salthill.

‘It wasn’t to Salthill she was going, only in that direction. She didn’t get as far as the coast. No. Nora, and looking back it was stupid, was going to face the soldiers at their headquarters. Lenaboy Castle.’

Agnes doesn’t say anything but she doesn’t smile or clap either. Even now, with the Auxiliaries tucked safely in history, the thought of knocking right on their door is a frightening one. Agnes’ face, like that of a child who has dropped the best delph on the stone floor, looks as I imagine Mammy’s would have if she’d known Nora’s plan.

‘Lenaboy Castle squatted grandly on Taylor’s Hill on the outskirts of the city. It was never a place that belonged to Ireland, it sat against the boggy landscape: a diamond on a farmer’s hand. Nora had passed it many a time for errands to the city, both before and after it was taken. The Auxiliaries claimed it as their own - sure why wouldn’t they with it being the finest house in Galway? - and once commandeered it became a place of terror. Of course, it wasn’t true that you could hear the screams of those inside through the sparkling grey stone of the walls. Neither could you hear gunshots in the clipped gardens surrounding it, but that was what some said. It was there, they say, that Father Griffin was taken and, some say, he was tortured before they shot him in the head and sunk him in the bog. A priest! Imagine!

She reached the castle as day was breaking. The sun, though by no means glorious, reached out to the turrets in the central tower. She stopped a little way off. The building was dove-grey with walls smooth as the weathered pebbles on Salthill beach, and the trees stood dark around it, gatekeepers, stretching out their bare branches like snatching fingers. The grass was too green, thought Nora, and too short. She parked her bicycle at the end of the long, gravel drive and took a step forward, the sound like small bones breaking beneath her feet. She braced, briefly, her muscles tight knots, for a bullet, imagining the thud of it driving into her, the sharp sting of torn flesh, but none came. With each step, Nora held her breath beneath the watch of the curtained windows. Cowards, in hiding. She took a deep breath and smelled cordite and smoke, the metallic iron of blood, but with another breath there was only the saltiness of the sea, and the familiar smell of stubborn frost. It was too late to turn back for they would be watching, she was sure.

The door was solid, a large arch, painted crimson and sunk into the pale stone. She knocked quickly before she had time to change her mind and run. No answer. She held her breath, counted to three, then five, then nine, before she felt the pressure of panic well inside of her, pushing against her chest bones and opening her mouth with a gasp. Footsteps, like the tick of a clock, sounded within. She stepped back, one heel slipping from the stone step and back onto the gravel with a crack that startled her. Then nothing. Nora lifted her hand to knock again but before she did there was the heavy clank of keys and the turning of a lock.

‘Morning, Sir,’ Nora said even before the door was fully opened.

‘Morning.’

Before her was a young man, with red-tinged hair and bluish skin beneath his eyes. He was small, his narrow shoulders dwarfed in the yawning door frame. The green fabric of his RIC tunic hung on his body like clothes on a line, not filled, or with any shape, as though he was lost within it. The soldier stared at her, rubbing delicate hands across his face with a sigh. Then, lazily, he leant on the door frame, not straight and tall as soldiers should be. There were worn patches on the knees of his khaki trousers. He rubbed his face again, blinking his eyes quickly like a lizard, and he grunted slightly as he tried to clear his throat. The fingers of his other hand coiled around his leather belt, lifting and falling.

Nora tried to stand taller and held up her chin. ‘My brothers were taken from our family farm on Friday and I’m trying to uncover their whereabouts.’

‘What’s your name?’ The sharpness of his English accent, rounded, high, unfamiliar, made her look down briefly, then back up towards him and his raised eyebrows.

‘Nora Loughnane, and my brothers are Patrick and Harry.’

‘We haven’t time to look for missing Irishmen.’

Nora recognised the familiar reflex in his arm to shut the door and she held up her hands in surrender. ‘Please, Sir,’ she said and lowered her hands as a bird bravely chirped out a song in the shrubbery. ‘Surely, there must be someone who can tell me something. They can’t have just disappeared.’

He opened the door wider. ‘Have you tried Eglington Street barracks, or the gaol?’

‘I have.’

There was something in him softening, a slight falling forward of his shoulders, perhaps even the tiniest nod of his head, before he stepped back and invited her in.

She should have hesitated. Instead, she stepped straight over the threshold. Finally, someone was listening.

Inside, there was a woven rug on the floor, a shock of reds and dark blue, which should have seemed out of place but didn't, for there was also a scarlet carpet runner on the stairs to the left, pristine with no hint of dust or mud, or the imprint of heavy boots, and to the right, a side table was pushed against the wall, covered with a white cloth which might even have been lace and on top of it an open book. It looked like some kind of register, but she was too far from it to make out any words. She clasped her hands together in front of her, feeling the warmth return to them, for the hallway was well heated and her body began to thaw from being outside in the frost. There was a smell she could not place, it was certainly not cordite or blood, or even the homely smell of turf burning, this smelt chemical, yet fragrant, like flowers in the evening releasing their scent, or the water in the vase just starting to turn sour. She tried not to inhale, but her mouth was dry and her throat was constricting.

The soldier closed the door. A sudden jolt. Nora stifled a cough and smoothed her skirt to calm herself. The soldier in front of her was only an inch, perhaps two, taller than herself. She was used to tall men, like her brothers, who filled a space rather than decorated it. He stepped towards her slowly and she saw the high shine to his long boots, watched as his hand fell to his hip, to the open holster and the pistol.

She was a *feckin' fool,* Patrick would say, because of the risk she was taking. He would grumble that she should have left them, that they knew what they were doing. But then in a change of heart (so typical of Patrick) he would say she was brave and he was proud, cróga agus bródúil as. He wouldn't thank her though, Harry would do that. He would come up and squeeze her hand, and with that limp smile of his, and perhaps a frustrated cough, say, 'you shouldn't have, but go raibh maith agat.'

'Can you tell me, Sir, where they are?' She looked towards the book on the table, hoping there was something in there he could share.

'I don't know who is here.' He looked no older than a school boy really and spoke with a shrug of his over-dressed shoulders.

'Is there anyone who might be able to help?'

The soldier looked around, as though for the first time, and Nora followed his gaze. The walls were painted white and hung with pictures of landscapes with neat hedgerows and flat, square fields. Nora had imagined bare stone and chains. Perhaps weapons slung from the walls and ceilings, but it wasn't like that at all. There was a china teacup, with a gold rim and peachy floral bouquets, a small tea plate with fluted edging and a delicate scattering of crumbs, on a silver tray by the stairs.

The soldier smiled. ‘Our Commanding Officer might be able to help, I’ll get him.’

‘Thank you. Sir.’

The soldier turned and walked up the carpeted stairs with a barely audible tread.

Nora stood alone, looking again at the book on the table, but too afraid to move, her feet welded to the spot. She heard the Commanding Officer before she saw him, as he hummed a jovial tune and walked down the stairs with steps that thumped out a beat on the scarlet runner. The toes of his boots shone like wet stones and he emerged in front of her, not dressed in an RIC tunic like his comrade, but in full, khaki, military dress. A set of medals, with multicoloured ribbons, dangled above his heart. He held out his hand to her, still humming and smiling like an old friend.

Nora pulled her feet forward and took his hand. His fingers were smooth and warm compared to her clammy ones and they shook hands with gentle force. He was no taller than the young boy but he was fatter, older, and poking out from beneath his perfectly positioned Tom O’ Shanter cap, was a sweep of thin grey hair.

He made a moist clicking sound with his tongue before he spoke and told her, with an accent not nearly as pure as his comrade, thick and rough like rustling straw, that he hadn’t got all day but he would do what he could. Then he gestured, like a school teacher with a snap of his fingers, for her to follow, which she did without speaking. Over her shoulder, she left Patrick shaking his head sadly.

They went into a room which must once have been a family dining room. It had long windows with heavy brocade curtains, hanging ajar, so only a small slice of sunlight could cut through, and the carpet was patterned with sweeps of golden leaves. There were more pictures on the wall, a still life of fruit, a bridge across a river and a woman, dressed in Victorian finery, walking along a paved street, alone, holding a white umbrella high above her head. Instead of plates and cutlery there was an array of paperwork, piles of varying heights, leather bound notebooks, more trays with tea cups, scattered beer bottles, the odd discarded pencil and a couple of pistols resting amongst the administration. Music rumbled away in the background. The officer removed his cap putting it down among the mess of the table.

‘Commanding Officer Nichols,’ he said and sat down.

Nora remained standing as she offered her name.

‘I know who you are.’

‘You do?’

‘We do.’

Nora didn’t want to look at his face, where the corner of his lips turned up in a suppressed smirk, or so it seemed to her, and so she directed her gaze behind him, to the wall where a picture hung of a hunting party, red coats and sturdy horses, leaping in unison over the hedges of the English countryside. He was leaning back on the hard dining chair with his right leg crossed over his left.

‘Do you know anything about the whereabouts of my brothers?’

‘Please, sit down.’ He gestured to the mahogany chair opposite him.

Nora pulled it slowly out from under the table and sat down, arranging her skirt, then placing her hands in her lap. She did not remove her hat.

‘Sir, my brothers-’ Nora was interrupted by the music, something classical, which she did not know, suddenly gaining pace and volume, a galloping melody, racing through the room, with twists and loops of sound, string and wind instruments roaring into life. The officer raised his arms, like a conductor, and bobbed his head slightly out of time.

Nora waited, pressing her hands together, curling her toes inside her boots. She watched as he smiled at the music, a sheet of paper flapping up into the air and spiralling down, then as it faded, becoming a whisper in the background, or the whine of a midnight cat fight, he looked at her, straight on with a bird of prey glare.

‘Your brothers?’

‘Yes.’ Nora straightened.

‘What about them?’

Nora looked down at her hands, unable to bear his stare and told him they were taken from the farm on Friday.

He was still smiling when he asked who took them.

It was then Nora looked up, remembering how she heard her brothers didn't run, or slouch, but stood tall as they were taken. 'Your men, Sir.'

'And you think we have them?'

Nora nodded feeling the music, louder again, swell around her and the heat of her cheeks beginning to burn red. There was never music in the cottage, none of them played an instrument, and they had no means with which to listen to music. The officer's gramophone sat in the corner, almost lost under crumpled paper, surrounded by empty brown bottles, smeared plates as though someone had licked them clean. Still, it rose above it all, curved like the neck of a Claddagh swan, not tarnished, but shiny brass. Nora wondered if she placed her hands on it would she feel small vibrations, like fluttering breaths, beneath her palms, or would it be cold, like steel, unyielding. Its pompous glint would never have fitted in their cottage and the music itself was odd, it was disconcerting, to feel it rise in her ears, tumble about her thoughts, blocking the words she needed to say, as it flapped around the room with too much haste, less swan's grace, more crow's abrasive caw.

'Tell me, why would we want your brothers?'

Nora opened her mouth but there were no words. She left it open, sat there like one of her students searching for an answer. She couldn't tell him they were IRA members. Instead, looking down again, she mumbled that she just wanted to know where they were.

The sun wavered as winter clouds slunk past and the room became dark, casting Nora and the officer as just shadows at the table. All of a sudden there was a shrill scream, Nora looked up to see the officer tucking a whistle back into his top pocket, the small bit of light catching the metal gleam of it. It rang in her ears like a searing wound.

The door to the room opened and the same soldier from before came in with two bottles of beer. He placed both in front of the officer, who immediately picked one up around the neck, in the same way Nora remembered her father doing with chickens before he slaughtered them, and took a long swig.

'And you think I might know where they are?' He put the bottle down with a thud on a pile of paper.

Nora, touching her fingers to her hot cheeks, asked him again to tell her anything. There was a crack in her voice when she mentioned her mother, adding she was old and at home, worried.

He laughed. ‘Yes, poor Kathleen Loughnane. Your mother, is that right?’

Nora nodded, acid burnt her mouth, rushing up from inside her, gagging her. He knew so much.

Officer Nichols leaned forward. ‘You’re right.’ He took another swig of beer and froth bubbled up from the bottle when he put it back down. Nora smelt the yeasty waft of it. ‘It’s cold out there to be on the run.’

‘They’re running?’

He shook his head and raised his hands in exaggerated exasperation saying he didn’t know.

‘Sir,’ Nora leant towards him, feeling her gut twist, ‘with respect, there are plenty of witnesses who saw your men take my brothers by gunpoint so how can they be on the run?’

He drank again, smiling, commenting on the uncertainty of these times.

Nora looked at him, at his clean-shaven face, plump cheeks, that queer smile, and hated him entirely. She wanted to - and it was the first time in her life she had felt such an urge, go maithe Dia dom é - stand up, place her hands around his throat and shake the truth from him. She would be shot if she did.

Officer Nichols looked back at her, thoughtful, then drummed the fingers of his left hand on the table. ‘So, do you have any information about the whereabouts of your brothers, Miss Loughnane?’

The music in the background rose up again, anxious strings. The officer picked up his beer but did not drink. His hands wrapped around it.

Nora stuttered, put her hand to her throat, tried to take a deep breath but could find none.

‘Well?’ He sipped from the bottle and beer dribbled down his chin leaving dark spots, on the khaki of his uniform.

Nora stayed quiet. Every muscle tensed.

‘The Irish have ways of vanishing into the countryside, or so we’re learning, they scatter like hare and slink like fox. Perhaps they don’t want to be found, Miss. Thank you for alerting us to them though.’ He smiled, that same old friend smile, but this time his teeth, one chipped at the front, showed through.

Nora moistened her lips with her tongue and tasted the residue of salt from the sea air on her skin. A taste of family, of happy times. ‘Sir. I really should be getting back to my mother.’

He finished the beer and tossed the bottle beneath the table. Nora heard the chime of glass hitting glass. He laughed, loud and coarse, as he told her to go but to keep them informed.

Nora stood up, her legs quivering and weak beneath her. She pressed her fingertips into the table to steady herself. ‘Keep you informed, Sir?’

‘About the whereabouts of your brothers?’

‘But I don’t know.’

He picked up the second beer and then made a show of trying to think, his chubby finger pressed into his temple, his eyes up turned. ‘Now, where might they run to? Home? A friend? A muddy bog hole with their comrades?’

Nora shook her head, close to tears, she said again she didn’t know.

The officer stood up and brushed down his trousers, he told her again, he wanted to be kept informed. This time there was no laugh, more a snarl. The sun returned and cut through the room, leaving half his face in shadow.

Nora dug her nails into the back of her hand. ‘I’m sorry, Sir. I must go.’ She heard Patrick whisper *get out*, in the dying chords of the music, *imigh leat amach as seo anois.*

‘They’re wanted men, remember. Those I-R-A.’ He drew out each letter with a hiss as the music fizzled out.

He walked up to her, closer than before, close enough for his breath, liquor warm, to brush her face, dislodge a hair across her cheek, and he kept his hand low, in line with his hips as he held it out to her.

Nora shook his hand and gritted her teeth. He ushered her through into the hallway. Nothing had changed, there were no other soldiers around, the tea tray was still on the floor by the stairs, but it was quiet, no music. He opened the door. Cold gusted in and she lifted her face to it, she needed to breathe again and sucked greedily at the air, feeling tears run down her face as the door was closed gently behind her. She hadn’t the strength to walk and fell backwards against the blood-red wood. She brought her hands to her face, wiping them over and over from her forehead to her chin.

‘Where are you?’ She called out into the bitter air. There was nothing but quiet, even the brave little bird had been silenced.

‘Oh, the poor love, droch-ghrá. What cruel treatment. There were not many would have taken the risk.’ Agnes sits forward despite the effort it takes. She looks up at me, sad, her eyelids drooping, her eyes more red than usual. She says she never took any risks and I can tell in the tremble of her voice, her quick little breaths, that it hurts her to admit it. I lean towards her and put an arm across her shoulders. She whispers that she never fought for Eoin, that she let him walk away, or, and she can barely speak the words, frightened him away.

‘Frightened? Of his mother?’

‘He thought I was crazy, an embarrassment. Away with the fairies, he always said.’

I tell her it is nonsense.

She nods and says perhaps and perhaps not. But it is true that Eoin has never visited her and I don’t know why. I see she is not ready to say, because she changes the subject and asks if the soldier was right, were my brothers really running? She wants to know what Nora told her mother.

‘Nora needed time before returning home, and so she detoured to Salthill after leaving Lenaboy Castle. She sat hunched on the beach, her bones frozen but the sea wind had at least stripped her of the stench of that place, of his breath on her cheek, the soft clasp of his hand. It was impossible to move and so she stayed there, staring out to sea, watching the metal grey waves crash, one after another, up the shore, waiting, or hoping, for them to reach her. Eventually, as the tide came in, she cycled home, but even then, she couldn’t go in.

It was late and the ground was already frosty again. The air was fresh and blade sharp. She took a deep breath and felt it cut right down inside her. One of their dogs was outside the front door; she could see its lithe silhouette stretched out in the moonlight. As she got closer she knew it would start to bark, and then on seeing her it would come running with its tail wagging and nuzzle her ankles with its wet nose. She took a step, listening to the creak of her old bike as the wheels turned. The farmhouse was perfect as always: even in the evening light she could see the whitewashed walls. Mammy used to make Patrick (not Harry, with his lungs, go mbeannaí Dia dó) go out and scrub them with a broom.

‘Our home must shine,’ she said. But it always did. It was always a place so full of happiness and love. At last, she slowly walked forward.

Inside, Nora stood aghast at the mess. The pots and pans upturned and dented on the ground, Daddy's chair, always at the head of the table, on its side on the floor with one leg snapped, clay bowls in smithereens and the picture of the family with cracked glass. Potatoes rolling around the floor.

'There were muddy footprints everywhere, Nora. But I scrubbed them and swept out the dirt. They pulled all Harry's books from the shelves as well, some of the pages got ripped, he won't like that at all. And they slashed the armchair!'

'Who, Mammy?'

'The soldiers. They came here searching while you were out.'

'Soldiers?'

'Yes, the ones who took Patrick and Harry. They came back, pulled the house apart searching.'

'For what?'

'They said Patrick and Harry have escaped. They were looking for them.'

'Escaped?' Nora remembered the officer's smirk.

'Do you think it's true, Nora?' Then before Nora had chance to answer, her mother snapped, asking where she had been and why was she out after dark.

Nora, knowing she would be scolded, told her mother where she had been, but instead of shouts or screaming, perhaps even a slap, her mother cried, 'you stupid, brave girl. I can't lose you too.'

Nora walked over to her and put her arms around her. Over her mother's shoulder she saw on the table, amongst the chaos, a pile of neatly folded clothes.

'What are those?' She stepped back from her mother, who quickly wiped away her tears and told Nora that Mrs. Naughton returned them. Then she continued to say she had sent Mrs. Naughton to Gort RIC with clean underclothes for the boys. All folded and freshly washed they were, she added proudly. But when she got there, Mrs Naughton was told there were no Loughnanes being held and she was sent away, so she brought them back.

‘She was as shocked at the state of this place as you are now. Sure, I’ll leave them there a while longer. They’ll need them.’

Outside the little dog started to bark and her mother turned immediately, hands gripping each other, knuckles white. Nora willed God to let them walk through the door. Seol siad abhaile le do thóil. It was possible, if they had really escaped, that the dog had spotted them. After all, escape meant freedom, and while that little dog yapped, Nora saw Mammy opening the door to Patrick and Harry, bedraggled, starving, hurt, but free. She saw Mammy helping each of them to the rickety chairs around the table, stripping them of their wet clothes, wrapping blankets around them, giving them soup, or sandwiches, or both. They would have tea too. And there would be quiet, the crackle of the fire, the steady tap of rain, but no questions. Mammy would let them sit, take deep breaths and they would be relieved. Nora prayed for it to be true, le cúnadh Dé, to hear footsteps, for an open door, for it to be them. But the dog was just over anxious, barking at nothing at all.

Chapter Eight

The following day I hurry to the kitchen and ask for two small servings of ice cream. The cook gives me a strange look, but goes about scooping some overly frozen vanilla into stainless steel bowls and handing me two spoons. I hurry down the corridor and into the day room.

Agnes is not in her chair.

I look around, a thump of panic in my chest.

Why is she not in her usual chair?

‘Is Mrs Kelly okay today?’ I enquire as another sister walks by.

She looks at me, and fortunately there is no sign of concern. Agnes is taking a spot of air.

I thank her and rush out to the hallway and through the door, a bowl in each hand, making the opening of doors rather tricky. The terrace, as they call it, is not as grand as it sounds. It probably once was, like all of us here, but now it is cracked and mossy and weeds push up in tangled sweeps. It is charming in its way though. In the winter sun, various residents are dotted around in wheelchairs, tucked under eiderdowns and blankets. I see Agnes at the end towards the gorse bush with its yellow flashes of stubborn flowers. There is a stone bench not too far from her.

‘Agnes, how are you today?’ I squint in the sun as I approach.

She turns her head slightly and greets me with a hello.

‘Can I move you near that bench?’ I ask. ‘I can’t stand too long myself these days.’

She nods, complaining it was getting too bright for her eyes anyway, and so I push her wheelchair gently and turn her so her back is to the sun. I go to sit and notice a splatter of bird droppings encrusted onto the stone. I brush them away as best I can with one hand.

‘I like it out here in summer,’ she says.

‘You’re not too cold, though?’

‘It’s winter now, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, it’s approaching.’

She smiles, a quivery, limp smile and observes, more to herself than me, that there are no leaves on the trees.

‘You said you used to have ice cream in Salthill so I brought you some.’

She looks at me through watery eyes, reddened round the edges from squinting too long in the sun. ‘Ice cream? In winter?’

I laugh, I suppose it is an odd thing to bring but then, I say to Agnes, when was the weather ever nice in Galway? I hand her the ice cream, which is now pooling in the bottom of the bowl, and say that despite the rain, the holidays, family time, must still have been special.

She looks into the distance, far down the manicured lawn of Castlemacgarrett, across to another time, and we are quiet for a while.

It is me, surprisingly, who breaks the silence, remembering to Agnes my own family days at the seaside and how, before Daddy died, we used to go to Salthill if the weather promised good. Agnes looks at me then and asks if my father died in the war.

I tell her no, he had a heart attack. ‘Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam. I was just a child.’ I make the sign of the cross as I speak.

‘I’m sorry.’ She stirs her spoon around, a sharp tinkle of sound as it drags against the bowl.

‘It was my brothers we spoke about, remember?’

She looks up, questioning, but I worry that everything I told her has seeped away, the way faces of loved ones do after their passing, no matter how hard you try to remember.

‘They were captured,’ I continue. ‘Nora went to Lenaboy Castle to look for them.’

Agnes shivers. There is not much heat in the sun and again I check she is okay. She says she is, adding that it is not often she receives treats, and I can’t help but smile thinking of the nightly stewed fruit, of custard, cake, and rice pudding. She seems far off today but, perhaps being outside, away from her familiar painting and worn chair, is distracting. But then again, I wonder if she even remembers anything at all? Are all my stories unheard, lost? Still, she asks if my brothers were found and regardless of whether she will remember I find myself continuing my story, the words welling up into her vacant presence.

‘The day after Lenaboy Castle Nora woke up slowly, listened for the clink of breakfast bowls, or the heavy footsteps of her brothers. All was quiet, as it had been for days, the cottage just as it was before she had slept, and yet she had to hope for news. What else was there?

After mass with her mother she went to feed the pigs. It was just a short walk across the field, even so, she couldn't stop herself looking about for the shape of them as she slipped over the rutted earth with a bucket full of vegetable scraps. The day was bright with a cold that tingled against the skin, resonating through her like a lingering high-pitched note. She stopped and stared above, le cúnadh Dé, she prayed, please help us God.

The pigs, with their stinking pungency and snuffling chaos, pushed and squabbled, grunted and snorted. She watched them, how the coarse hair on their backs was covered in dried mud and was repelled by their total disrespect for each other as they panicked to be the closest to the fence and the promise of food. She emptied the bucket above their heads and they guzzled and fought so loudly that Nora didn't hear footsteps behind her, until someone cleared their throat and said her name, so softly, she believed it to be Patrick. She turned around holding her breath.

It was only John. She said hello and apologised for not hearing him approach. Then slowly released her breath like a tensed muscle. Aching that it was only him, their friend and farm hand.

John told her to sit down and gestured to a hay bale, dark with patches of rot. She obliged, despite feeling the cold through her skirts. Then he said her name again, softly like before, and knelt down like a man about to ask for her hand, but bowed his head and did not speak.

Nora tried to say something through the clutch of fear at her throat, and her voice spluttered, croaked, asking if her brothers had been found.

John nodded, clasping his cap too tightly.

Agnes stops eating her ice cream, there is a smear of it above her top lip, and asks what happened to them.

'That's what Nora wanted to know too. But John couldn't bring himself to tell her. He shook his head when she asked. She said again, 'tell me,' but he couldn't. He sat beside her on the mouldy hay and pinched too hard at his eyes with his thumb and forefinger. Instead of what happened, he told her how they were found.'

'Did that matter?'

'Agnes, you won't believe me if I tell you.'

She laughs, almost a cackle, and says there is not much she doesn't believe and so I tell her they were found because of a dream, and as I speak the words, I think again how impossible it seems, even now.

'A dream?' Agnes scrapes the last of the ice cream into her mouth.

'All these years and it still doesn't make sense, but tá orainn muinín a chur í nDia. We must not question Him. A friend of John's, Tally, dreamt their bodies were in a pond in Umbriste.'

'Sister,' Agnes' hand rests on mine, and the flesh is softer than it looks, moist, like the folds of a damp towel, though I flinch at her cold touch. 'Sister, are you okay?'

'Yes, tá brón orm.' I rub my eyes. 'I'm sorry. You see that gorse next to you?'

Agnes nods.

'After John told me the news, I remember stumbling into one on the farm and I reached out my hands, but instead of recoiling, I pressed harder, squeezed the thorns, until-'

'Those bushes are lethal. The curse of the Irish countryside, sure haven't we all suffered pierced skin after a fall too near them.' Agnes smiles and rubs the back of my hand, my skin moving in ripples over the bone, as though she can mend an ancient wound.

'Thank you, Agnes. Níl aon deireadh le do chineáltas.'

'For what? It's you who needs thanking, Sister, for the ice cream. It was quite the treat.'

PART TWO

Co. Mayo, 1969

Chapter Nine

The box is still upside down. It is still open. I kneel beside it and lift one corner, as I do, an envelope slips out, then another. I pick one up and start to tear at the corner. The glue is yellow and pulls apart easily. I pick up another and do the same. Then another. Until, in what seems like seconds, by my knees is a messy array of letters. Years of words. I pick up the first one and start to read.

April, 1922

Dear Mammy,

I have arrived in Africa. First, I must apologise for how long it has taken me to write to you. I hope you were not too worried about me, but sure, you know I am safe in God's care. It was a long journey, longer than I ever imagined, and it took a lot out of me and so, please accept that poor excuse as reason for my silence.

How are you? And the farm? It is winter for you and I know too well the rain and cold you are living with. I told you over and over not to worry about me - this is the right thing - but I know you will, so let me tell you where I am staying and what it is like. I know Mrs. Naughton and Mrs. Kilmartin will be eager to hear. Do they still call into you every day? I pray they do, le cúnadh Dé.

By morning, I have read them all and I am back there. Still sitting by the window, just as I wrote to Mammy about.

My window looks out to other buildings and beyond that the forest and coast, it is all a little shabby to be honest. The buildings are shaky, fragile, like a hollowed-out hay bale, and the wind rushes through them, so I am thankful it is at least warm, like moist breath. I think in Ireland we would call them sheds, in fact, our shed, although I can hardly bear to think about it, was more permanent than the shacks which line the lagoons and coast here. There are dark, inky swamps inland from the coast, swathes of thin-trunked trees, the thrumming buzz of insects, a constant pulse of threat, but then suddenly, like a burst of sun during Spring rain, there are lighter lagoons, the water still, like swirls of blue and green stained glass. I suppose I should think it beautiful, if it wasn't so different.

I peer through the netting, like through the mist on the boat on the way here, and hear the hiss of insects, loud like the release of steam from a cooking pot, and the squat huts, haphazard and scattered, some leaning, some straight, most swaying, are silhouetted in the dark, edged with a white from the glowing scythe of the moon. The air barely cools, even at night, and it carries with it the sighs of eventual rest, whispers, coughs, sometimes I think I hear the scratch of other pens writing away the day. The smells are milder, there is still sweat and spice but there is also the salt of the sea, and the perfume of flowers, fragrant and sweet on the tongue if you breathe deeply. Everyone settles early ready for a bright start, much like home.

Before the sky darkened, I sat in the doorway of my room with my bare feet resting in the sandy dirt outside. I was there for perhaps five minutes, if that, but it felt like a lifetime of rest. I paused and felt my muscles loosen and the bones of my body felt heavy and I sat limp, leaning, in quite an unmannerly pose, but one which I felt helpless to escape.

There in front of me scampered a lizard, so tiny it was not much bigger than a chicken bone, but it ran out in the open then stopped. Its body tensed just as mine relaxed. We looked at one another; his eyes were shiny and black like a pearl of blood and mine, or so I imagine, were tired and dull with dark circles slung beneath them. He turned his little head to one side and his bulbous toes spread out in the sand. His breaths were quick and his tail stretched out behind him like string. What a funny little creature, I thought. We both paused for a moment in time. Then when I moved my foot, flexing it in the sand, and feeling the gentle heat massage the padding beneath my toes, he ran off, startled. And soon after I stood up and washed, ready for dinner. I know you probably think I am making it up because you have never seen such a creature in all your life, but it was real.

I can just imagine you now, my letter in your hand over at the next farm, telling Mrs. Naughton about all the funny things in Ghana. 'Africa,' I can hear you saying, 'can you believe it? What a place it must be.' And outside there will be rain and fog and no funny little lizards or snakes or monkeys. That is assuming people ask after me. It strikes me now as I write that none of us, you especially, ever rest enough, is mó an trua. I pray you have at least found some peace. I think of you all every day.

My eyes prickle, like they did when the air lacked moisture and whipped up the sand in a frenzy during the dry season. I stand by my door. They are just letters; they can be tidied away. Surely, everything can be swept into a corner, isn't that what happened to the truth about my brothers?

And yet, I cannot bend back down to them. I imagine how my knees will creak, and how once I am kneeling over them, I won't be able to shuffle them away into the dark, and I will want to stand again immediately, or instead lay on the floor beside the tattered paper and absorb the dusty smell of my words. Or stare out of my window, eyes fixed on the mighty oak tree, the pale birch or the willow, draping itself forward as though seeking forgiveness.

Closer to the school compound, the trees grow stronger: African walnuts with low sweeping branches, thick clusters of green leaves, and tall, wide, mahogany trees, their trunks stained a burnt red, like drying claw marks in skin. They are more like the trees which surround you on the farm, the oaks and birch we ran around, or failed miserably to climb. And the grass here is not dead and brown, as I imagined it would be, but lush and green, like Ireland. And the rain! Every afternoon the sky opens and it pours in a way that would make Ireland jealous.

I wrote home, even in that first letter, with too much contrast. Boasting even? But no, I did not write of happiness. My words spread fear. Perhaps it is better they were unread.

And so back to my window, which is covered with grubby netting, but no glass. I am lucky to have any covering at all, it has been tacked on, but it is too loose, so when the wind picks up it strains and ripples, rustling against the fraying bamboo. Still at least it is there, because it holds hundreds of flies - mosquitoes, they call them - tiny would-be intruders which have got stuck trying to enter my room. From a distance, it looks dusty, you would not like it, and it is only close up, like now, that I can see their trapped corpses, go mbeannaí Dia dóibh. They spread disease and on occasion, or so I am told, death.

I cannot bear to look at them, at the words seeming to rise from the paper, wrap around me like tangled yarn, pull me back to those times. I must leave the room and so I lean around the doorframe, cowardly, and pick up a cardigan from the end of my bed - it is not like me to be so untidy - the bobbled wool is rough against my skin but it is my warmest and the day is cold despite the heating, and I leave them, hurriedly.

What can I do now until Sunday mass? Who knew time could stretch out when once I never seemed to have enough? These days things move faster but it feels like here, in this place, we are all getting left behind. The residents, and perhaps myself, have been packed away like old newspapers, full of stories, and we sit unread, not heard, gathering dust. I wander the corridors occasionally licking my thumb and rubbing at a mark or scuff on the wall. Then finally, during mass, I try to sit quietly. I pray. Side by side with my sisters. Maith dúinn ar bhfiacha. But it is not enough and my feet fidget beneath the pew, my fingers entwine and flatten, entwine and flatten. I cannot sit still. I read my letters over and again, they are loud thoughts in the sanctimonious quiet of chapel.

I am lucky to be here. Most people smile at us as we pass, they bless themselves and welcome us, singing out ‘*akwaaba.*’ *It has been too long since the same happened in Ireland. To think how we turned on each other, beannaigh an Tiarna dúinn agus sábhálann linn. And afterwards, there were just holes, gaping dropped stitches, where loved ones used to be. You know how I struggled to live on that farm full of ghosts, I hope they have left you in peace now. Sometimes I wonder if I haven't brought them with me. Perhaps that is why the fetish priests scare me, can they see what I cannot?*

When at last it is over, I hurry from mass into the day room, excusing myself as I bump into two sisters, fleeing my own thoughts, yet my words trail me. Again, Agnes isn't here.

I find her in her room. She has a cold and so she is resting, tucked under a sharp white sheet, with a floral bedspread on top. Of course, she doesn't recognise me, so we go through our introductions again and I get her a cup of tea, pale with milk, just as she likes it. I hear about Mayo football, hydrangeas and her Fergus. She smiles a lot when she remembers him.

‘Do you remember, last week, what we were saying about dreams, Agnes?’

She nods, although I am not sure.

‘You said you like to think we're honest when we sleep.’

‘I hope we are,’ Agnes closes her eyes and whispers that dreams are a type of magic within us.

‘Do you remember my brothers?’

Agnes turns to me and I can see, because she is smiling, that she does not.

‘They were killed during the War of Independence. They were found through a comrade’s dream, remember?’

She holds my gaze and tells me she used to dream all the time. Sometimes they were so real she would wake up and believe them. She would imagine that her son visited her, that Fergus was still alive, but none of it is true, more’s the pity. She shakes her head, slowly, complaining that no one has time for each other these days, her Eoin is too busy to worry about her. Look at us all, Agnes scans the room, we are all alone in here, she says. There’s not a single visitor. Perhaps dreams are a blessing, she says, and she looks back to me, her eyes brighter than usual, catching the light, they give us what everyday life cannot. They tell us both truths and untruths, and both are needed.

I break free from her stare and look at my hands, curled in my lap and agree, perhaps. But do I want that to be true? I tell her Nora had a dream about her brothers too. I pause, unsure of whether to continue, but she looks so frail and small in her bed, tucked tight, I don’t see there can be harm in telling her, andso I continue saying I have never told anyone. Go maithe Dia dom é. Everyone knew they were members of the IRA and that they were in constant danger, but Nora dreamt of their capture just a week before it happened, she saw them beaten and bloodied but she didn’t say anything. She thought she was just being over anxious. They were taking so many risks and Nora worried about them, but then the dream-

‘You blame yourself, don’t you?’

‘Nora blamed herself for not speaking up.’

‘And you, now?’

I pause, what can I say?

‘You didn’t make them fight, Sister. So many were lost in that war, a Dhia dean trócaire ar a n-anamacha. Irish fighting British, Irish fighting Irish, none of it made any sense. My Fergus stayed out of it, thank God. But my Eoin thinks the whole thing was an embarrassment, to my shame. The younger generation will never appreciate what was sacrificed to win them their country. And look now, it’s still a mess up north. Sure, this country will never see peace.’

‘Will any of us?’

‘When we’re dead, le cúnamh Dé.’

I know she is right. She is a crumpled old woman, folded into forgetfulness, but she is honest. I am not sure I can say the same. The letters, the mess of them on my floor, unfolded, finally read. I built a world full of excuses and stories. The paper is torn now and my guilt peeps through, creeping between the spaces in my words, the tiptoes of a guilty child avoiding being caught. When we were naughty, Mammy would twist our ears between her finger and thumb. I can feel the pain now, as though she is here, the sharp ache of her pinching fingers. She would have read my letters, if she received them, I know it. So, who took them and who brought them back? If I knew, I would force the truth from them like Mammy did to us.

Chapter Ten

Agnes nudges me from my thoughts, asking if I am okay. I whisper that I was thinking of my family, hoping they are at peace.

‘You looked tense,’ she says.

I shake out my hands, realising my thumb and finger have clamped together, my veins raised like tree roots.

‘They’re all together now,’ I say. ‘Together in Shanaglish cemetery.’ I think of their bones softening side by side, reunited. ‘I will never join them.’

‘It’s just their bodies.’

I nod, it is true, but I think perhaps Nora wants to be there too. Is that why she is so angry? I have denied her peace, denied her the chance to rest with her family in the heavy Galway ground. We will be forever alone, in God’s love, and when it is my turn, my flesh will melt into the soil at Ardfoyle, amongst sisters, not family. It is no more than I deserve, I chose to leave. I bow my head wishing, out loud, that I hadn’t left my mother all alone.

Agnes snorts through her blocked nose and, seemingly amused, says that I would have been married off if I’d stayed and then she would have been alone anyway. Then she pauses and her smile slides away as she tells me I was as well to join the missions. It is odd, I thought she was happy with Fergus, so I ask her if she enjoyed being married.

At the mention of his name her smile reappears. ‘I was lucky with my Fergus, ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam, but plenty aren’t. Besides, despite all the love we had, I still ended up in here. Our stories are not so different. It’s how we got here, not where we finish that matters. Your mother would’ve been proud of you doing God’s work, you can be sure.’

‘Mammy asked why it had to be a missionary order.’

‘And?’

‘I never answered.’

Agnes draws the bedspread up to her chin and rumples the white sheet. We sit there in the quiet of her room. Everything is so still. Then she tells me it is not a parent’s job to understand their children. ‘I don’t understand my son. I love him though. Very much.’

I take her curled old hand, it is cold in mine, and tell her I am sorry.

‘Sure, it’s too late now. Besides, we misunderstood each other.’

‘How so?’

Agnes starts to mumble and I think perhaps we all have something to hide. I lean closer as she whispers that Eoin didn’t understand her ways. I am unsure what she means and so I ask her.

‘Oh, you know, the things people believe, what we see. I’m not crazy like he said, Sister.’

‘No one thinks you are.’

‘Eoin does. He never opened his mind to it. But then, he was always too easily embarrassed. Perhaps your mother just didn’t understand you, Sister.’

‘I think she did. Or perhaps she would have if she received my letters.’

Agnes asks how I know she didn’t read them and I tell her they are here, that they were unopened. She seems unmoved even though there is a catch in my throat as I tell her that I don’t know where they have been. She asks what they say? I don’t know where to start and so I tell her, and it is not really another lie entirely, that they simply detail day to day life. But she doesn’t leave it there and she looks excited as she asks me to tell her more, adding that she would like to hear about some far-off place. I take a deep breath and she closes her eyes. I warn her that there is not much to tell but she waves her free hand at me as a gesture to continue and so I do.

‘Nora wrote to Mammy when she first arrived.’ I pause, seeing my words on the page, remembering my doubtless faith that she would reply. All the boring details, so far from life in Ireland. And yet, I thought she wanted to know. Perhaps she did. It is too late now.

On our first night, though I was still feeling quite queasy from that long boat ride, we were invited out from the school compound to join the other sisters and some local nurses. They brought food, not at all like your stew or soup, and the fire on my tongue at the first spoonful was shocking. I coughed, and felt my throat constrict while my lips seemed to swell, the skin immediately tender and burnt. The other sisters laughed and said it was the powdered red pepper seasoning. Beannaigh an Tiarna dúinn agus sábhálann linn.

‘Get used to it,’ they said, ‘it’s in everything. But it kills the germs.’ I smiled and wiped my eyes, smearing tears and sweat across my cheeks. Oh, Mammy, you would hate it. It still makes my eyes water and nose run, as though I’m suddenly sickening for a cold. There were

also balls of something floating in my soup. They were chewy and gelatinous and took a mighty effort to swallow, like those cheap cuts of lamb, full of gristle, we sometimes got given from John's father at Christmas. I almost gave up, but they absorbed a bit of the soup's heat and that made them worth it.

A local nurse, scooping at her food with her fingers - you would shake your head at their lack of cutlery and how we all sit on the floor to eat, not around the table - smiled and said: 'You are enjoying the fufu, yes?' I nodded, struggling to understand her and with no idea of what fufu was. It's a terrible thing to feel ignorant, Mammy, but it will soon pass, please God. Needless to say, all that new food did nothing to ease my queasiness and my first night was spent uncomfortably, with a fretful stomach. But don't worry, I feel much more settled now, buíochas le Dia. I should write more about the school before the light fades; once the light goes here there is total darkness, just like at home. Candles are few and far between and we don't have oil lamps. I like the darkness though, and just think that you and I, however far apart, are both blanketed every night under the same dark sky with the same God watching over us. See, rest assured I'm safe, God willing.

Mammy, it was the right thing to come here. I hope you understand. I will write again soon. You are all in my prayers, every day.

I tell Agnes that Nora expected a quick reply but in its absence she wrote again.

I hope you received my letter, le cúnadh Dé, and now know that I arrived safely in Africa. You must be so busy with the farm; I do not expect you have the time to write. At least you have the lighter evenings now and, I pray, warmer weather, which makes life on the farm more bearable. Do you still have help from John? I don't doubt you do, please God. He wouldn't let you down, I'm sure.

It's been a busy few months for me too, I should have written sooner, but there is so much to do here and I barely have the time, maith diom e seo. I have so much to tell you of this strange but beautiful place. Don't worry, I won't overload you; I know how your eyes smart when you read for too long.

There is satisfaction in teaching again and I also have the company of another sister, Sister Acquiline, the Principal of OLA college. Although college is too grand a term for the *dusty collection of rooms we work in. Of course, it is infuriating that the girls will not sit exams or get formal qualifications, like the men, but they will gain the skills to teach others, le cúnadh Dé. That should be enough, but how wrong that seems, don't you think? Do you still have all our certificates pinned to the wall of your room? Their corners must be curling by now, the letters faded. Perhaps Ireland allowed us more freedom than we ever realised, certainly more than the women get here.*

Daily, I see them bent under the weight of babies tied to their backs, as they crouch to prepare food, or trudge the dusty path to the market and back, often carrying goods on their heads, and their feet bare, trundling like donkeys, their bodies strong but their eyes cast down, picking their way over potholes and rocks. It's a sight to see, Mammy. They look at me, in my flowing white habit, while they are tied up with heavy, coloured fabric, sometimes baring their breasts, go ndéana Dia trocaire oraibh, and their eyes, bright in their dark skin, look to me, and I can't help but pity them, and all their burdens. They work the land too, some with rounded bellies ready to drop, others thin as saplings, too young to no longer be children.

Imagine that, Mammy? Daddy never liked you doing outside work, did he? It wasn't proper, he said, ushering you inside, where women should be, and yet still, when your hands brushed our skin while pulling up our socks, or wiping mud from our faces, it was callused and rough like splintered wood, the tips of your fingers sprinkled with the miniature scars from a darning needle and a lacework of cracks across your dry knuckles. Even here in my clammy palms I can remember the feel of your hands. Mine are still soft, for now, but I imagine, soon, they will become like yours.

Anyway, the girls I teach have already spent their childhood working and I pray education will help them, offer them a different path. Like you did for us. Mammy, I can only thank you for letting us learn, for forcing us (often against our better judgement) out of the door and to college. At the time your words were often sharp as the teeth on a rake, but you were never wrong and I will be forever grateful for the days you pushed me out into the cold, dark mornings, go raibh maith agat. I must now do the same for these young women, and ensure they grasp every opportunity.

In all her letters, Nora talked about home and often compared things in Africa with Galway. In particular, she described the building of a cathedral that had started on the edge of the compound. Every day Nora saw it, she felt like she was back in Galway trying to find them.

Mammy, she wrote, *this must happen for you much more often because you didn't leave like me*. In fact, the building site wasn't even on Nora's way home, she had to take a detour to see it but she did nonetheless. It was a way to remember them, or home. There was a grassy mound opposite the site and although the ground was hard, the grass (which was surprisingly alive) provided an adequate cushion for a few minutes and she used to sit quietly with her knees tucked to her chest. Often there were ants (and when they bit it hurt) but mostly they were busy getting on with their day, carrying bits and pieces to and fro and negotiating Nora's bulk which had blocked their way. Of course, we have ants in Ireland but not like these ants, no, these ants were the length of a fingernail and you could see their armour and the sheen on their backs. In fact, they were quite beautiful, taisce Dé. And on the building site, it was just as amazing to watch the men, as intent as the ants, work on the cathedral.

Nora had never paid attention to construction in Ireland. There was nothing magical about damp, dark holes in the ground beneath grey skies, or about men straining their bodies to build one storey houses or repair barns. They wore jumpers with frayed sleeves and moth holes in the chest. Their caps were always wet and the wool glistened with dew and rain and although their cheeks were red it was not from the sun but from the chill and the exertion of physical labour. They stopped often to smoke and to chat and their feet rested on rocks and left behind clods of mud that had been ripped from the ground. It was different watching the cathedral being built. When Nora first started watching, it was small; they had dug the foundations and started to build a layer of blocks about a foot high. The men worked in loose trousers of various colours and they were often shirtless by the time she passed by. Their skin was shiny and the colour of peat. At first, she was embarrassed to look and see so much exposed flesh, but it was not anything to be ashamed of, not when they worked in such temperatures. Can you imagine if the same happened in Ireland? There would be outrage! Go mbeannaí Dia orainn.

So, Nora used to sit on the mound for no longer than ten minutes and in that time the men worked fast and quietly. They did not chat or smoke. The sun was relentless. Even as they heaved the large blocks up from the ground it burned down on them and she found herself wiping sweat from her face even just sitting there. At first, she told Mammy that the cathedral would be nothing like the gaol it reminded her of. Instead, she wrote, *it will bring joy to our compound and Cape Coast. It will be somewhere for us to come together and worship as a community*. When Nora first arrived in Ghana there was just a wooden building with a cross on top, it used to get so cramped that people had to stand outside to pray. It was hard to stand in the heat; Nora's skin burnt too easily there. She joked in one of her letters, *I already have a* *reddened nose which is peeling and sore. Small complaints, I know. But imagine sun burn in Ireland?*

Nora remembered how it happened once or twice on those rare summer days when they played in the fields as children and occasionally Patrick would come in with the sun caught on his face. And didn't he moan about it too. He could get whacked with a hurley and finish the game without complaint but a bit of sunburn and the whole of Ireland heard him give out!'

I pause, smiling at the memory.

'It's nice to talk about my family, Agnes. Cronaím uaim go mór iad. When I was in Ghana, I didn't talk about them at all, I only mentioned them in my letters to Mammy, but sometimes, on sticky evenings, after work, I longed to tell Sister Acquiline about them and the farm. Back then, nuns were not supposed to talk of their former lives and so I never spoke a word and instead kept my family tucked up safe like the best china, ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha.'

Agnes nods with a smile, but my happy memories are tarnished, they have been ever since that day in November. Ghana was an attempt to heal but perhaps, looking back, Nora was only trying to convince herself, because she could never let her sadness go. The letters are crowded with painful reminders.

The stone of the cathedral is the same grey as that of Galway Gaol, that awful place, go ndéana Dia trocaire orm. It's not a nice comparison, maith diom e seo. But I must tell you, because when I pass it and see the stones, I am taken back to another time. I am back, outside the gaol, desperate, fighting back the tears with the Corrib rushing beneath my feet.

Only the other day, as I passed, I struggled for breath, a sudden constriction of my throat, like eating pepper soup, and thick, stubborn tears came as I remembered those days. It caught me by surprise, a lungful of dust, and perhaps it was just that. The air is dry here lately. Still though, it makes me think of you and feel sad that we do not mourn together. I am healing here, although there is always the temptation to pick at the scab of my grief.

Chapter Eleven

For three days, I am lost. Agnes is unwell. The cold that was bothering her went to her chest and so she has been put to bed, with only family allowed to visit, which of course means she is alone. I don't know enough about Eoin, and who am I to judge, but it saddens me that he can leave his mother for others to care for, as though her life is no longer his responsibility. There is too much money these days, it is too easy to hand it over and get a job done without dirtying your hands. But Agnes isn't a job.

One of the elderly gentlemen, I do not know his name, had a visitor yesterday. I was flittering about, killing time, and I sat briefly, too near them. He is older than Agnes, I am sure, but he looks stronger. He walks with a frame instead of being pushed in a chair. His hair is combed tidily to the side and he makes an effort to wear a shirt. The lady who visited sat by his side and every so often they chatted: about the weather, a boy called Liam who did well in his leaving cert, and the dog who recently died. There was a lot of quiet time, fidgeting, staring into the distance. She didn't touch him, though his hands held the scratched wooden arms of the chair, she kept hers clasped in her lap. I did not see their goodbye but I imagine a shake of the hand, perhaps just a nodded take care, not an embrace or kiss. But still it is more than Eoin has done, more than I did for my mother. She deserved more. Agnes deserves more. I want to sit by her sick bed and read to her, or tell her more stories, but I am no longer a member of the order who cares for people and besides, it is him she wants, not me. I pray to God: go sábhála mac Dé sinn, A Íosa Críost na bhflaitheas.

I shuffle paperwork in the name of rest, but really it is just frustration. I am alone, then. For three days. My words hound me and through them I remember. The same impatience. Waiting. Waiting for Mammy. Waiting for Agnes.

Dear Mammy,

Please write to tell me how you are. I worry I've not heard from you since I arrived. Perhaps your letters get lost on the journey – it is a long way. I think of you all the time and like to imagine you sat by the range, tummy full of broth, the lingering meatiness of its smell, and tea on to boil, your feet warm by the fire, reading my letter, le cúnadh Dé. It will be cold again now in Ireland, with wind and rain battering the cottage walls daily. I hope the farm is not getting you down and you have help. I'm sure John is there as always, he is just like Patrick was and loves the coming of winter, the turning from green to brown, the grip of cold and all the hard work it *brings. And the threshing season will be upon you in no time and I know the sadness that will bring, go bhfóire Dia ort. I feel it too, even here. Somehow, Nora, inside me, struggles to rest. I shouldn't say that, but I know I can be honest with you, can't I?*

I walk the hallways and the gardens but quite often I end up pacing the long corridor outside Agnes' room. Her door is shut and I daren't open it and so, instead, I walk. My words, tattered on the pages in my room, sing in my ears, wailing like a banshee.

I miss you and perhaps I'm not supposed to. How could it be any other way though? Go bhfóire Dia orainn. And still, I think often of what you asked me.

'Why a missionary order?' you said.

'It's God's calling,' I replied.

I do believe, truly, it is. But how could I stay in a place so full of emptiness? How do you?

I still see you on the day I told you I'd joined OLA, your back to me at the sink, the sound of splashing water as you scrubbed the potatoes, faster and faster, whilst telling me how proud you would be, that the neighbours would think it marvellous to have a sister in the community. But Africa, you said. Africa. Go maithe Dia dom é, Mammy, you have suffered enough.

I hope you write back soon, Mammy, le cúnadh Dé. It would comfort me to know you have read my letters, that you know I am here and safe. It would be nice to hear about the farm and any news from home. Tell me, who is helping with the threshing this year? And how is Father Nagle? He showed us such comfort, I do hope he's back to himself, or as much as any of us are. And although I know he is, it would be good to be sure that John Hession is still helping you. He is a nice lad and he always liked to be around the farm, doing odd jobs, especially helping Patrick when Daddy was gone. I imagine he is a blessing for you now. Mammy, please write, just because I am here it does not mean I have forgotten you all. You are forever in my prayers.

I distract myself with the carpets, which are burgundy, with navy and cream floral swirls. They are thinning at the edges where they meet the walls. The walls themselves need painting. Some are cream, or peach, like a sickly dessert, but now they all look grubby, uncertain of what colour they should be, and when you look closely, as I have these past few days, you see tea splatters, water stains, crumbs, mud scrapes, cobwebs. I am sure we used to take more care in my day, but I must remember that it is no longer my job to worry about such matters. I am worried about Agnes though.

The younger sisters smile at me, as though my existence is some sort of myth. I am the longest serving member of OLA here now. Sometimes, in the way they whisper, it makes me feel I may not be real. I pinch my thin skin, digging in my nails.

Just yesterday, as I walked the day room, then the reading room which leads down towards the archives, a Sister Florence stopped me. She must be new, I have not seen her at breakfast, lunch, dinner, or prayers. Her face is quite unwrinkled and she wrings her hands as she speaks, in the way young people do, lacking confidence.

‘Sister,’ she touched my arm. I stepped back quickly without thinking and panicking she removed her fingers, ‘sorry, Sister,’ she started again, ‘perhaps, one day soon we could talk about Africa. I’m to go to Ghana, to OLA college.’

I looked at her: her hands clasped, her petite teeth biting her bottom lip and part of me wanted to take her hand, like I used to, and tell her she will settle, that convent life is not bad, it just takes time. That Ghana will be an adventure. Beidh Dia ag tabhairt aire di. Years ago, when I was Mother Superior in Ardfoyle, I would welcome all the postulants, I have seen so many over the years, held their hands, guided them, reprimanded, soothed, reassured. At first, each time I opened the door to a new face, tears would well in my eyes. I don’t know why that was. Perhaps, it was the look of sadness in their parents’ eyes as they said goodbye. Perhaps, it took me back to the day I got on a bus and went away, left my own mother standing in the threat of rain, and watched Galway turn to Clare, then to Cork, saw the rain fall. Perhaps, it was because I was once lost in the corridors, stumbling into convent life, running from the past. B'fhéidir go bhfuil Dia trócaire.

Even as Mother Superior, ferocious as I supposedly was, my past caught up with me on occasion. I remember a young nun, Sister Etna, was dropped to the door of Ardfoyle by her father. The usual tears were in my eyes, but recognition too. For I saw him, not at the blustery door of our convent, but standing by my brothers’ coffins, in the bitter Galway winter of 1920. I saw his face, older but not so much through years, but through anguish and fear, deep trenches crossed his skin from sleepless nights, and life on the run, nightmares, or regret, and I was back there. He saw my face, perhaps even saw the tremble in my lips, and I believe he was back there too, even as I guided his timid daughter through the convent door, both him and I were young again, in Galway, standing beside the open coffins, next to the dark, twisted bodies of my brothers, mourning them once again, lost in the troubles of that time. I am forever mourning. That father, my brothers' comrade, saw the sadness in my eyes as a reflection of those times played out again and again with every blinked back tear, and I saw it in his too; he was losing a daughter, I had lost my brothers. I think it must be impossible to escape the past. Go dtuga grá Dé treoir dúinn.

'Sister, are you okay?'

'Yes, I'm fine,' I was brought back from my memory by Sister Florence.

'So, could we talk about Ghana?'

'What would you like to know?'

She hesitated, 'well, maybe, we could take tea in the day room, and you could tell me about it.'

'I do not need tea, thank you, Sister. I'm quite fine standing here. Is there anything particular you'd like to know?'

'Well no.' She wriggled awkwardly on the spot, like a child who needs the toilet, and asked if I was there when they set up OLA College.

'I was.'

And Ghana, what's it like? I've only ever travelled as far as Lyons.'

'It's hot. Wear a hat so as not to get burnt or worse, sun stroke.'

'I see, thank you.'

I saw the disappointment on her face, I can still see it now, her sinking eyes and the scarlet imprint of her teeth in her lips. I did nothing to ease the slithering nerves inside her and I don't know why. In my letters, I wrote of my own doubts, looking for my own reassurance.

The cathedral I wrote to you about is climbing up before us, although it will be a while before it's finished. I shared the grassy mound with Sister Acquiline the other day and we sat together to watch the men work.

'How long do you think it will take them?' I asked

'The cathedral?'

'Yes. Do you think we'll see it?'

'They're working hard. These things fly up, surely.'

'I suppose.'

And then I asked her, and I know it was wrong of me to pry, go maithe Dia dom é, how long she planned to stay in Africa. She was quiet and I worried I had offended her - we really shouldn't ask personal questions, which for me brings relief - but then, without looking at me, she simply said, 'until God no longer needs me.' Her faith is unshakeable, Mammy. I didn't ask anything else because, of course, that was the only answer there could be, and so it should be for all of us here. Sister Acquiline scrambled to her feet, then held her hand out to me, and pulled me to mine.

'You will adjust, Sister. We all do eventually.' She smiled as she brushed sand from my habit.

It was a funny thing to say, don't you think? I feel have adjusted as well as one can in a place so different from home. A place where the heat rains down on you, crushes you daily, where even the food burns you, but also a place so beautiful, so bright, it seems to glow. A place of dark and light.

Instead of sharing my own doubts or hardships, I told her she would be fine, adding, 'it's been so long since I was there, I really struggle to remember. I'm sure it's very different now anyway.'

'Sorry to bother you, Sister.'

I nodded and we passed in the corridor. Of course, I remember it all, it haunts me, but I can hardly share it. The letters that tell the story are still in my room. I have read them over and over. I see them, each tear, each crease, each stain, my looping words nooses on the page. I keep reading them, a desperate rosary through my fingers, in the same way, I keep walking past Agnes' door, chanting them. I want the safety of our conversations.

Chapter Twelve

On the fifth day, her bedroom door is open. She is weak, I can see that as soon as I enter. She smiles, ‘Sister,’ and her voice is throatier than normal, quiet.

‘Agnes, how are you feeling?’

‘Have you come to take me out?’

‘It’s miserable out there.’

‘It’s miserable in here. I keep asking them to take me out. I thought that’s why they’d sent you, Sister.’

‘They didn’t send me, I came to see you.’

‘Oh.’

‘To see how you are.’

‘Good, thank you.’

I stand quietly in her room, at the end of her bed.

‘Won’t you sit, if you’re visiting? There’s no point hovering like a lost spirit.’

I take a seat on the only chair in the room, reach for her hand and ask her how she is feeling. She draws her hand back, unfamiliar, moaning that all the fussing over a cough is no good for her. I tell her I think it was more than a cough and she dismisses the idea with a tut. I wonder if she even remembers me, if the illness has taken away any recollection of our time together. She fidgets in her bed, agitated, unable to get comfortable, like the nights in Ghana I tossed and turned, under a blanket of heat I could not throw off, but more because of everything that came back to me when I closed my eyes.

‘Would you like me to read to you?’

‘I wouldn’t like that.’

I nod, unsure of what more I can say today, and Agnes continues telling me she used to read poetry to her husband Fergus when he was ill. He was in the bed for weeks at the end, neighbours rallied round too. She would open the door every morning - to let the bad spirits out - and there would be bottles of milk, butter wrapped in last week’s news, fresh bread, sometimes still warm, baskets of eggs, vegetables still scattered with dark dirt. She stayed inside, she sponged his skin, dribbled thin soup into his mouth, then just water. The poetry was more for her, she couldn't leave the house, leave him. He never understood it, she says, but still, perhaps it was a comfort. 'I haven't read a line since.'

'Who did you read?'

'Yeats.'

'I see.'

'*Come away, O human child! To the waters and the wild* -'

'I'm not too familiar with Yeats, if I'm honest.'

'He always talked sense to me.'

I ask her to tell me more about her family, but she sighs, saying again her son never visits. He is too busy, she speaks with cross, over enunciated words, her teeth clashing slightly. There is so much of importance in the city, money to be made, women, she supposes. He never married, of course. She has never visited his home there, has never been invited, but she expects it is small and empty, perhaps high up like the buildings she has heard about in Dublin but never seen, towers reaching into the clouds, but with no garden. She shakes her head, softening, saying he never tells her anything about how he lives, although he did say once he has a lady clean for him. Imagine! I squeeze her hand to say I am sorry but she waves me away. I think of my trip to Accra and how I wrote home about it. As if my mother would ever go, or have use of imagining it.

Accra's streets seem straighter, and I fade into them in a way I cannot do here. Here, in Cape Coast, when I leave the compound, people follow me, bend to me, children peer at me from their mothers' backs as though I am an apparition. I seem to blend into Accra, whereas here I am stark white, fabric and skin, against a community of colour and a landscape scorched and bloated by the raining heat. Of course, Accra is busy, there is no order, and the cacophony of shouting and wailing from crowds in the marketplaces and in the streets is unsettling, or it should be, but I like it. It's so different to the empty wilds of home, or the wind torn shores of Cape Coast. There are so many buildings, huddled together, falling, disjointed. It is a mess.

I often wonder about Dublin, and if it's the same, albeit colder, of course. In Dublin, is there the same panic to face the day? The same mass of buildings, layers of dirt and people, like *insects, crawling, begging, grabbing? Perhaps we are a more civilised people? Yet here they are so alive; the city is alive because of them. We never got to go to Dublin, did we? Galway is surely no comparison. But it is enough for you, if you ever venture there now. I hope you do.*

You would not like Accra, I'm sure of it, I know I shouldn't either, but somehow it's refreshing.

It was selfish of me to write of my experiences when my mother was reliving the same daily routine, over and over, but alone.

Agnes looks back at me.

'Every family has their struggles, Agnes. When I was in Africa, there were three students who wanted to join the order.'

'You were in Africa?'

'Yes, Ghana.'

'It must have been hot.'

'It was.'

'Tell me about Ghana, Sister, I like to hear stories, my eyes are no good these days for reading. Besides, stories are meant for telling.'

'Ghana was, well, it was difficult. The people had so little and the weather was merciless in its heat but I liked it for a time. I taught girls to become teachers there, now it's called OLA college, but back in the twenties it was only small. You know, I had three students who came to me one day and asked to join the order, I thought it wonderful, but nothing is ever simple is it? Tá orainn muinín a chur í nDia.'

'I'm not sure I can trust God entirely. Fergus did, he thought life was simple. Nothing bothered him, not even as our Eoin changed and disappeared before our eyes. Or that's how it seemed, but sure everything changed. Fergus was lucky he died the old way.'

'You should tell me about him, Eoin I mean, some day.'

'I don't want to be troubling you with all that, Sister. It was just the way it was. I used to joke to Fergus that Eoin had been replaced by fairies. He never disagreed, just chuckled at my funny ideas.' She laughs now but I don't.

‘It’s very hard for families to always agree. People should be free to make their own decisions and they are now, more than before. I suppose that is good. There is more distance.’ I think of the residents and the empty hallways, the sisters who care for them as family, and the often empty chairs dotted besides beds, or in the day room.

‘Yes, freedom is good, but someone will always be left behind. So, when Nora was in Ghana, there was a knock on the door of her hut. I tell you this because it is strange, Agnes. Unlike in Ireland people didn’t call unannounced and people did not visit. But there was a definite knock, so hesitantly, she opened the door. Three students, Margaret, Helena and Esther, who, as I said, attended the college and finished the teaching course, were standing on Nora’s doorstep.

‘Good morning, Sister,’ they said. ‘We hoped to speak with you before classes begin.’

The three students came in timidly with bowed heads and awkwardly stood in the small space. The tallest of the three, Esther, shuffled her weight on to the other foot. ‘Sister, Father Brennan told us to speak to you because you’re running the school now.’ Nora could hear the nervous breathlessness in her voice, like children plotting their excuses before they return home with dirtied clothes or grazed knees.

‘We want to help you. We want to be nuns, Sister, and teach with you. The school it gave us a future and we want to repay.’

Nora wiped the ever present sweat from her brow. It was the most generous of offers. What was she to say, or do? It wasn’t something that had happened before. Helena stepped forward then, ‘we want to do God’s work as you do.’

Her face was young and the dark skin flawless, shining even in the dim light of her little hut. They hadn’t even received qualifications in return for their studies, and yet they wanted to dedicate their entire lives to OLA’s work. Their faces, all looking at her, were eager, biting back smiles as their stomachs rumbled with nerves, like the front row of children on the first day back in class. Did Nora ever look so hopeful? Was there a time, amidst the terrible search, when she looked to farm hands or comrades, her own mother even, with the bright eyes of someone who believed in hope? Like sheep on the farm, trusting, following, eating from her very hand, until the day of their slaughter, the sheen of their eye only dulling with each steady drip of blood. Or worse. Her mother’s smile on the day she left. Nora could still feel the ache in her forehead as she furrowed her brow to appear serious. And her mother’s smile was too wide, too forced. The face of a china doll, not moving, but still showing the threat of cracks in the surface of a porcelain complexion.

‘Are you sure?’ Nora asked them, ‘it will change your entire lives. You’ll have to leave your families.’

The girls nodded and assured her they were certain.

Later that day, after school, Nora went to see Father Brennan. He was a long-time survivor of Africa and, although he had suffered with malaria, it never sent him back to Ireland, or worse, go raibh maith agat an Tiarna. He escaped yellow fever and despite administering last rites to so many sisters and priests he always smiled and noted what a beautiful day it was. He told Nora to speak with the families to get their blessing, to be courteous more than anything.

‘We don’t like to upset the locals,’ he grinned.

It all sounded easy. And mostly, it was. Nora visited the families of Margaret and Helena and easily got their blessings. In both cases, the family gathered around her with smiles and all gripped her hands to thank her for giving their daughter such opportunity. She was given kelewele as a welcome and they repeated ‘thank you’ over and over again. Unfortunately, things were not straightforward at Esther’s. The family did not gather around and instead Esther’s father, a large solid man, sat before Nora in the centre of the hut. She remained standing with her head dipped.

‘Sir, your daughter has come to see me to request permission to join the order and teach at the college. I’ve come to seek your blessing.’

‘My daughter? A nun?’ His voice was a rich, low growl, warm and thick like bubbling tar. Even though the room was poorly lit Nora could see beads of sweat on his forehead. She too was sweating for the room was stuffy and a pungent smell of spice hung in the air, picking at the back of her throat. ‘She’s my only daughter. I have three sons. I planned for her to marry.’

‘She would be doing God’s work.’

‘This I know. But what of her family?’

His words caught Nora, she wanted to say that the religious life would be a family for her, that she would have God’s love and protection. Instead, a stifled cough burst forth and she spluttered a weak, ‘God is family’ which disintegrated to nothing in the heavy air.

‘Do you believe that, Sister?’

'I do.'

'Nonsense. God's not family. Family is the weight of an embrace, belly laughter, comforting arms, spitting disagreements, it is real people, surely?'

'Perhaps it is, but it is also God.' Nora made the sign of the cross and as she did, there was a flicker, like someone walking past a window, tall and straight. Nora looked for Patrick but the window was untouched, dusty, and the only people in the room were herself and Esther's father. It was a stupid thought. She had given her family up for God, just as Esther wanted to do. She tried to steady her gaze, stand strong in her conviction that God was enough. But there was a definite shadow stretching across the room, in the quick blink of her eyes, the sting of her sweat, and it seemed to wrap around her, a suffocating truth that she ran from her family into God's arms.

Agnes makes a choking sound, almost a laugh, and says God is all well and good but he won't give you a hug when you need it or laugh at your bad jokes, nurse you when you are sick, or close your eyes and bathe your body when you pass. She pauses and then, more serious, says her Eoin will have none of that. He ran to money and success, all so cold, so hard. She remembers he laughed, it was distant down a crackling phone line, when she told him he would be lonely one day.

She screws up her face, her nose wrinkling, her lips small and tight, as she tries to remember if it was months or years ago. He said again I was away with the fairies, always have been, she laughs. A crazy mother doesn't go well with fine pressed suits and shiny cars. I tell her I am sorry and try to picture the face of a man who can discard his mother so easily, the face of a man who wants to be alone. Instead, I see my own face, as I turned to the kitchen door, felt the cold metal catch as I lifted it after I'd told my mother I was leaving. Agnes has stopped laughing and says, God is not enough. Maith diom e seo. And then she presses my hand, gently, and asks what happened to Esther?

'Nora continued to stand in front of her father, while he sat, straight-backed, on the ground, the trunks of his huge legs crossed in front of him. There was a sound at the door, a scratching, and then it opened. A small woman. Beautiful but stooped with the weight of a small child curled on her back, she entered the hut. Despite the brief opening of the door, the hut seemed to get hotter, the spice thicker and the sweat trickled like tears down Nora's cheeks. The woman looked from Nora to Esther's father, her eyes wide, the whites gleaming like opals. Then a rapid exchange of words in Twi between Esther's father and the woman, guttural, low, breathless. Both turned to Nora.

'This is my wife, Esther's mother.'

The small child slid down her spine landing quietly on the floor and Esther's mother straightened, brushed her hands down the yellow of her skirts, the hem, dragging on the ground, tearing the fabric, patterning it like lace.

'Sister.'

Nora nodded.

The mother's words were whispered at first, 'not my Esther.' Then, she flung herself forward and grabbed Nora's hands. Nora stepped back, the touch of skin against her own, shocking, unfamiliar.

'You won't have her,' the small woman, her eyes even wider than before, wailed, 'you won't, you won't,' and wrung Nora's hands between her own, shaking them like a cat startling its prey.

Nora tried to step back further, Esther's mother had a strong grip, her face was close, her breath warm, and sweat and tears impersonated each other. Nora stumbled and there was a cry. The small child, a leggy little boy, the one who just moments before had clung to his mother's back, got under her feet and the rubber sole of her shoe pressed two of his twig-like fingers into the dusty floor.

He cried, sticking his injured fingers into his mouth. Nora crouched down, her hand outstretched to him. She was good at comforting, much better than her own mother had ever been. When they were hurt, unless it was Harry, they were told not to make a fuss. Blood that beaded on their skin was wiped away with dishcloths, like spilt tea, and bruises were never kissed, thorns were pulled from fingers like feathers plucked from a chicken and they were sent away. Go and play, they were scolded, as the door was opened and they were bustled, even with an exaggerated limp, back out into the cold.

Esther's mother swooped to her son and threw her arms around him, the yellow sleeves of her dress billowed like wings and then settled on his small body and she pulled him close, whispering, her lips against his hair leaving it wet and stuck to his forehead. He cried into her breast and she took his little fingers in her own mouth, softly, cushioned by the flesh of her dark lips and she kissed away his pain. Nora stood up. Esther's father, hawk-eyed, watched on. Still crossed-legged, he stared at Nora and there was quiet, the little boy soothed apart from the occasional sniff or whine, and Nora recognised it as the same silence that filled the Shanaglish kitchen on the day she told her mother she was leaving.

Nora could still hear the squeak of the wet potato skins as her mother cleaned them. Could see her back, sloped shoulders, and sunken head. Like Esther's mother, now curled around her child, Nora's mother had leaned closer to the sink. Nora had said she was leaving, that she had joined an order of nuns. She would travel to Cork. There was a pause. A silence like the one in the hut. It was a missionary order, she finally said. She would go to Africa. Her mother sighed. The potatoes squeaked. Nora had waited for her mother to turn around. She waited for Esther's father to speak.

He waved his hand at the door.

'I would be proud to see her married and a mother.' He chewed at the side of his mouth and tutted. 'I knew this education would be bad. You cannot have our Esther.'

Nora looked down at the mother and child by her feet, gently rocking, the mother crying, the boy, his eyes closed, relaxed. Her own mother had never cried for her. She had told her, without turning from the sink, that the neighbours would be pleased. 'They'll think it grand to have a sister in the community,' she said. Nora stood there, as she did in that hut, with her arms dangling by her sides.

'Please leave.'

'Sir-' But he had turned his face to the ground and was muttering in Twi to himself. Nora looked down to Esther's mother but she had nestled her face in the hair of her son and Nora no longer knew if she was crying. She wanted to bend down to her, apologise, but reassure her it was a good life Esther had chosen. But she didn't bend, she half turned, remembering the heat of Esther's mother's hands against her own, the pressure, the feeling, not of pain, but of desperation in her grip and she wondered what her own mother's hands would have felt like. Imagined the cold water on them, the slippery stick of starch, and the polite looseness of her grasp. Then she left, just as she did from the Shanaglish kitchen, without another word.

Chapter Thirteen

Outside, she had forgotten it was still a bright day and blinked quickly in the light, remembering the grey clouds of her own departure. She walked to the mound by the cathedral. The men were starting to construct flimsy scaffolding around the base to enable them to build higher and further. She prayed then, for Esther and for her family and then, for her mother, wondering if she was alone on a farm in Ireland, blaming herself because she never told her daughter to stay.'

'Mother's do not own their children,' Agnes interrupts.

'Do you wish you'd stopped Eoin leaving?'

'Nothing would've stopped him.'

'I know nothing would have stopped me either, not once I'd decided.' I still feel the asphyxiating sadness of Nora as she stood in that hut, sad that Esther was trapped, but was there envy too? A weight in her chest, like lungs filling with sand. She believed it was guilt, but she was envious, because Esther's family fought for her, made her stay.

'Do you know what happened to her?'

'Well, her father was rooted to his decision and so she didn't join OLA.' I look down at my hands, now cold and bony, not clammy and swollen as Nora's were on that day. There are lines on them now but my nails are longer, not broken by work, or the nibbling of worry as they were then. I run a thumb over the ridge of a blue vein. It is soft and disappears under my touch. The same hands held Esther's when Nora broke the news to her that she could not travel to Lyons with Margaret and Helena for her novitiate. Esther did not cry, she accepted her parents' decision, but her grip on Nora's hand was strong, her fingers coiled into her palm, nails biting. Nora wanted to put an arm around her but she couldn't think how to, where to place it across her shoulders, or how close she should pull her. They sat side by side and prayed.

Agnes shakes her head and says it is a shame she never got to follow her dreams.

'It was just the way in Africa. Daughters' had no control over their lives. Esther's father taught me that and I witnessed it time and again. There was a woman, Esi, who used to live by the roadside, she wasn't Christian, but she often looked at me, as though perhaps it wasn't too late for her, although it was, and we even spoke a couple of times.' I tell her I wrote home about her to my mother, because it troubled me that I couldn't help everyone, and knew my mother, a woman, for who education was so important, would understand.

January 1925

Dear Mammy,

Apologies again for not writing sooner. I don't know where the time goes these days. I'm getting along grand, although I do worry that I have never heard from you, still I trust in God that you receive my letters, le cúnadh Dé, and they provide comfort.

OLA College is still keeping me busy, buíochas le Dia, and I have been campaigning for female teachers to be awarded qualifications. I even went to Accra to meet the Director of Education. I know you would be proud of me. You always believed in our education and so I want to keep campaigning for you. I have to say, that, despite your doubts about me coming here, you were wrong. Africa is good for me. I'm working so hard, I barely have time to think, or remember. I pray to God that he'll let me continue here for as long as I can. I am confident he will. A local woman, Esi, told me I look strong compared to other whites.

'Yoo,' she called to me the first time, her voice so much thicker and richer than our Irish squawk. 'Yoo,' she repeated.

I stopped and went across the road to her, careful of crumbling holes and rocks. She was sat crossed legged with a bowl in front of her, the white flesh of yam, half pounded. I knelt to her level, and bowed my head, 'good day.' Behind her were strings of pointed chillies, coconut husks, dry and rough in the sun, and yellowing fish. She waved her arms, nodded enthusiastically. She is often there, I have seen her before when visiting local houses in the evenings after school, always sitting by the road, her children beside her. I worry that she sleeps there too, in the small shack behind her, barely big enough for two let alone a family and which Daddy would have said you couldn't keep an animal in. It's just a collection of bamboo and blankets tied and draped together, many with rips and frayed fabric, shivering in the warm breeze, unstable as the legs of a newly born lamb, so near collapse.

'Wait,' she said. 'Please.' She reached behind her and pulled a plantain from another loosely weaved basket, as she moved the stench of turning fish, pungent and salty, gripped me, like two fingers stuck down my throat, I nearly gagged. In the dirt to her left, two children were collecting small rocks from the sandy path and curled to her breast, a tiny baby, its skin shiny and new, black like cut turf. The woman's face was lined, wrinkled with hard work and the sun, her fingers were calloused, like yours, and mine now, but the tips pink. Around her neck a string of red raffia brushed against her dark skin as she reached out to me, pressing the plantain, cool

and smooth, into my palm. I held her hands for a moment, felt their heat, then pulled back, and slipped a one-tenth penny between her fingers.

'Thank you,' she nodded.

I didn't take the plantain, instead I offered her a blessing, drawing my thumb in the air by her forehead, to the stations of the cross, and I noticed how she looked about her and dipped her eyes, afraid. Then I continued on my way.

I wave to her now when I see her, often the baby, who is hardly growing, suckles from her, sometimes it is asleep, tied to her, withering, with her goods, in the sun. Only a week or so ago, she stopped me again and told me her name is Esi.

'Born on a Sunday,' she added.

I smiled, 'a holy day.'

She laughed, 'meda wo ase,' then she added, her English broken, words like pecking hens, that I will do well, I look strong and so I thanked her too.

There are too many women like Esi, who have no education. It maddens me, a hot rage, ungodly, almost choking, rises in me, but I cannot help the likes of her with her queer beliefs. There are many I can help though; those who have joined our school and our congregation deserve my help. I will travel again to Accra in the next few months to continue my mission to get them qualifications. In fact, they have asked me to be a member of a committee at the educational office.

But then I smile, softening my voice, as I tell Agnes it wasn't all hopeless and, at least, with Esther, there was an unusual compromise because she eventually joined the Eucharistic Heart Sisters in Nigeria, with a sort of blessing from her father.

'What a relief. Sure, otherwise, she would only have ended up married with a scatter of children.'

'Is that so bad?'

Agnes shrugs her bird bone shoulders and asks me what I think, is that what I would have wanted.

I tell Agnes I don’t know, saying that I often wonder the same. Perhaps for women who do not wish to marry a religious life is the only answer. Or was. She doesn’t reply and so I continue, saying of my mother that her family made her so happy and then so sad. It is an easier path I have chosen, le treoir Dé.’

‘You are wrong. My family doesn’t make me sad, Sister. I had good years with Fergus and they are with me always. People, like Eoin, will find it harder later on, what will they have when they are sitting in a chair, every day, like I am now? I need only think of my family to smile and Eoin, well, he’ll always be my little boy and perhaps I only need his childhood years to remember, not him now, for he is his own person now. I’ve done my job. Táim bródúil as.’

‘Family isn’t a job.’

‘Is it not?’

I shake my head and say, quietly so I am unsure if she hears, that it shouldn’t be.

‘Life’s hard work, Sister. Cuireann Dia Fulaingt orainn.’

‘Tá ghrá ag Dhia dúinn.’

I worry I have upset her. Her lip is trembling as though she is about to speak but there are no words. She was already weakened from her illness and perhaps I have made it worse. I touch her shoulder, there is no flesh, just thin cotton against thinner skin. I stand and say I should let her rest.

‘I’d like to see Eoin again before I go, Sister.’

‘Go?’

‘To the next world.’

I nod. ‘Of course, ar ndóigh.’

She thanks me and closes her eyes. I sit back down and take her hand.

‘Tell me about him, Agnes.’

At first, I don’t think she will speak, but she does, her words quiet as her breath as she tells me they struggled to have Eoin, that they had started to believe children were not meant for them and then when he arrived, finally, he seemed a little different. I lean closer so I can smell the mixture of talcum powder and stale breath as she speaks.

‘Sometimes, I wonder who sent him to us, because he was never really ours. And such a pretty little boy too. He had such blonde, actually, almost white hair, and the palest skin, no freckles, not even in summer, and glassy eyes of light blue. People in Claremorris would often comment that he was beautiful. And he hated mess!’

I laugh remembering Patrick and his forever muddy clothes. My mother’s exasperation when there was another hole to darn, or a stain to remove. Agnes, smiling now, remembers, and it is more to herself than me, that Eoin liked to be inside, he played games, read books, often he sat and made up stories surrounded by teddies and a wooden car. Her grip on my hand tightens. He liked to be alone, she adds.

‘The complete opposite of my brother Patrick, so. He was ridiculously competitive. But, Harry, my younger brother, he was more like your Eoin.’

‘I doubt it, Sister. Eoin was like no child I’ve ever known.’

I think of Harry - quiet, gentle, Harry. Whenever I picture him, he is sitting on a chair in our kitchen. It didn’t matter what family chaos was around him, he could block it all out and he found comfort on any seat, hard or soft, even the cold flagstones on occasion. He was interested in GAA but the scores, not playing it, and Mammy never really let him help out on the farm, ‘his lungs,’ she always said, ‘the boy needs rest, go mbeannaí Dia dó.’

I look about me, searching for him, but he is not here. The room, Agnes’ room, is bare. There are no pictures, or cards, no flowers. The walls are a greying white and there is dust all along the skirting. The floral quilt she is under is all pinks and greens, whereas the curtains are a faded blue check and the carpet is flattened orange. I wonder if she lays here and wishes for more.

‘Eoin, was my only child and I loved him, tá grá agam dó, but even if we had been able to have more, which never happened for us, I doubt Eoin would have accepted them.’

I go to ask why, but hesitate. Eoin, from what I am learning, is a solitary man. He seems to roam the country, prowling, taking, never making a connection, severing, with a selfish swipe, anyone who tries to love him. Of course, I don’t know him, but I see him, not as a lion, part of a pack, but as a tiger, camouflaged in the sharp grey lines of his suit, amongst the cold angles of the city, alone. I am alone now, but through choice? ‘I loved my brothers and sister,’ I say, a slight tear of panic cutting into my voice.

Agnes doesn’t reply. She is staring at the ceiling and her grip has loosened again. The air feels chilly despite the burning radiator. Agnes sighs. He used to tell me I was a witch, who had locked him up in the house, when I asked why he didn’t want to run around outside with the other children, she says, and slowly shakes her head, rolling it side to side on the pillow, leaving crinkles in the white fabric. Our door was always open, she continues. Always, she says again and tells me she loved being in the garden, in all weather, so whatever he thought was all in his head. His imagination was boundless.

I squeeze her hand but her fingers remain limp in mine. It is like she is no longer in the room. She is back in her garden with Eoin inside, taunting her. Her face creases up, her eyes closed tight, so for once they are dry as she goes on, telling me how he was good at school, never struggled. She hoped he would write poetry or stories, or paint, but he became an architect. I tell her it is a good profession but she doesn’t hear me. Our words collide above the bed, letters tangled, lost, barely heard. But I hear her say he was special, not from this world.

‘We were blessed with him,’ she adds, her voice rising slightly, then she begins to hum until the reverberations of her throat become quiet words and she sings.

‘Sleep, sleep, grah mo chree,

Here on your mamma’s knee.’

I let go of her hand and touch her arm. She continues:

‘The birdeens sing a fluting song

They sing to thee the whole day long

Wee fairies dance o’er hill and dale

For the very love of thee.’

I stand up. Agnes is still singing but I can no longer make out the words.

‘Eoin,’ she says as I leave, ‘remember the song I would sing you?’

Chapter Fourteen

I sit on my bed and it sinks beneath me, the green flannel bedspread crumples and then I lie back. It is unusual, I am normally so upright unless I am sleeping, but I cannot help or resist the feeling of falling, spreading myself flat, my feet still touching the floor.

I see the shadows of them first, both broad, not stooped with age as they perhaps would be now. They are young, unchanged from 1920.

‘Hello,’ I say. Patrick nods and Harry, leaning slightly against my wall, tips his hat. They are dressed in their everyday farm clothes. Patrick has dried mud on the cuffs of his sleeves and his knees. Harry looks spotless. My room seems lighter now they are here. I take a deep breath, and smell home: the sharp onions, silage, earthy vegetables, damp, rain, the heavy smell of burning turf. I would like them to sit beside me, to talk about the years that have gone, to embrace like Agnes said families do, but they won’t.

‘I hope you’re proud of me, Patrick? Le cúnadh Dé, I’ve done my best.’

He doesn’t speak but he smiles and I know, of course, he is.

‘And you too, Harry?’ He nods at me. In the corner, on my small writing desk is the box containing my Ghana letters.

‘I read them, finally,’ I say. ‘I’m sorry for Mammy. Tá brón orm.’

Patrick strides across the room, Harry not far behind him. He bends to sit by my right side, hand outstretched. I reach out for him and our fingers almost brush as he disappears. I look over to Harry but he has already gone.

‘I said I’m sorry.’ I raise my voice in the empty room, it sounds weak, the mew of a bagged cat, hoping they’ll return. I need them to come back. The box of letters is as still as a predator, hunkered down, between the pen pots on my desk. I no longer need to lift the lid to see them because I know every word, I can smell the old paper, feel their fragility, like dried leaves, without even touching them. They would burn well. The corners would curl, the edges blackening then crumbling to ash and I could pretend they were never here. The smell of smoke lingers though, like mistakes, it gets into clothes, between the folds of curtains, into your thoughts. You smell it even when strolling in fresh air, like memories, bad memories, flash into your mind without invitation. Did Mammy relive my leaving like I do? Sitting in the farm, believing I never wrote to her, did she see me as a bad memory? I shouldn’t have left her, not then. But I wrote to her. If only I could tell her I didn’t forget her, that she was with me every day, the thought of her, and our home, a tarnished locket around my neck I could never unclasp. I reached for it so many times. But still, if only she knew.

I sit at my desk, my eyes are stinging and I tell myself it is the late hour, not tears. I thumb through the letters, then pull one out at random.

February 1927

Dear Mammy,

I know now, after all these years in Africa, that you will not write back to me. Why is that, Mammy? I admit I have not been good at correspondence. The life of a missionary is a busy one, or so it seems, and my letters to you have grown too far apart, maith diom e seo. Plus, it's hard writing into darkness. I hear the scratch of my pen at night, and think now it must be like the scratch of an insistent insect, or the scuttle of rats in our barn. A nuisance. I hope my letters do not cause you sorrow, or annoyance. But I must continue to write, however sporadic, for me and for you.

There is a lot to tell but I won't bore you with the details. I was successful in my campaign and girls are now receiving certificates, buíochas le Dia. I am delighted for all my students, who dedicate so much to their studies; their determination to be more than they would have been, is astounding. It warms me with pride and I thank the Lord that finally their efforts will be recognised.

As you can imagine, I returned from Accra feeling jubilant, excited to speak to more local families about their daughters joining our school, especially to tell them that they would achieve a recognised qualification, so I increased my evening home visits. After a day teaching at the college, my habit already weighed down with sweat and dust, it is hard to find the energy to plod along the road, more dust, more heat, the squeal of children on the roadside and chickens, with necks thinner than my fingers, getting under my feet, as I pass, but for each knock on the door, there's a chance I'll be invited in, that I can talk about our work. There might be a daughter, sitting in the corner, her eyes brightening at the prospect of learning, which she would miss if I didn't visit. For that, it's worth it, and still, I think of your efforts to make us learn, and so I keep going.

On my way, one of these evenings, I passed by Esi - remember the woman who lives by the road? - and she looked at me, waved. It had been a while since she had called to me, you see her husband comes and goes depending on where there is work, picking yams, fishing, building, anywhere he is needed. I know when he is back because she keeps her head down, doesn't wave to me, busies herself calling out to sell her goods, only not to me. The fetish priests are here. Other sisters have seen their shrines, simple mud huts, surrounded by fences, on the outskirts of Cape Coast. One of the local nurses told me the families along the roadside, the ones who have come from rural parts, still follow the old ways. I've seen it in Esi's eyes. My blessing that day I first spoke to her was a curse, she's afraid of Our Lord. They are best left alone, the nurse warned, frightened, despite herself finding Christianity, of the supposed powers the fetish priests threaten to possess. It is strange stuff and surely nothing to be believed.

Anyway, Esi pointed at her eldest daughter and then pointed away, telling me she will soon be gone. I looked behind Esi to where her daughter was scrambling around in the dirt with her siblings, always collecting stones, or threading raffia, and her limbs were too long to crawl like the younger children, she seemed almost in a tangle.

'Marriage?' I asked joining my hands together as I spoke.

She nodded, 'yiw, yiw,' then her big, ochre tinged eyes looked at me and she gestured to herself and shook her head, it was not what she wanted. I looked at her daughter with her bowed legs, the flawless skin of a child, her body, wrapped in cloth, was still straight, no hint of womanhood. I held Esi's hands and muttered a prayer which she didn't understand, asking the Lord to protect them, to bring them safety and nourishment. She held my hands tighter, squeezed them, 'meda wo ase,' she repeated, 'meda wo ase.' Thank you, thank you.

I smiled. Go maithe Dia dom é. And you too, Mammy, forgive me. Her daughter can only be twelve or thirteen. I would love to help, to enrol her in our school, to give her a future outside of marriage, as you gave me, but how can I? Without her father's consent, I am helpless. Africa teaches me that we cannot save everyone, but I knew that already, didn't I? Ireland, our loss, taught me that, this has just reinforced it. Sometimes, even God cannot overpower evil.

I should tell you also, I have suffered recently with fever and been sent to bed on a few occasions, much to my frustration. Perhaps it is penance. It's not like the yellow fever, so please don't worry, and we all here in Africa suffer from time to time. I suppose it is like a head cold in Ireland, ha!

I hope the farm is doing well and you're not working too hard, although I know you will be. I am actually taking a holiday to Elmina, a fishing port along the coast, next month, and so, hopefully, I will have time to write again in more detail, le cúnamh Dé.

You'll be pleased to know that the cathedral is almost finished: the roof is on and now they are putting down the floors. I no longer have such sad thoughts when I look at it, plus the sun has bleached the stones permanently and they are no longer grey. It's been a constant for me and I will rather miss watching it grow every week.

I do hope you receive this letter, le cúnadh Dé.

As ever, you are in my prayers.

Go mbeannaí Dia duit

Love always,

Sister Patricia

I never really appreciated what it meant to be alone, not alone in a place that was once a family home. My letters are filled with trivial things, about food and work and weather. There was so much more that needed to be said. I apologised, a lot, *I am sorry that my letters are not more regular* or *I am sorry it has taken me so long to write* but never for the thing that mattered the most. I updated her about the cathedral, I told her about conversations with Sister Acquiline, with Esi. I told her I missed her. But not enough. Agnes nursed Fergus, I should have nursed Mammy. I think back to the letter I received telling me of her passing. I read it again and again. Relieved. Unburdened. John was with her, said Hugo, who didn't make the journey back from Manchester in time. John, who helped on the farm, held my mother's hand in his roughened ones, perhaps pushed back her hair, mopped her brow. No. I can tell myself that, but the truth is, he found her, in bed, not breathing, with the morning dust dancing in a shaft of light as he opened her curtains and he stood there watching it settle on the mound of her cold body. Hugo said she died peacefully at home. He never said alone. But she was. And I sat on my bed and read the letter and was relieved. Peace for her at last, I told myself, peace at last. A mantra. An apology. I should have been there. I should have apologised for all the things my letters, Nora's letters, never said. The letters she never read.

And none of it matters anyway because my letters were taken, and someone kept them, all these years. Officer Nichols, I just know it. He should have burnt them, instead he kept them like trophies, he didn't even read them. All at once, I hear the swell of jumpy notes, a voluminous music score, bounding and laughing, and the glint of a brass gramophone, his smirk. He took them, but why return them now? He wants me to know, still hunts victory. After everything, Mammy was even denied an apology, or if not quite that, an explanation. I have spent years mourning her silence, and she must have done the same over me. I tighten my grip on the letter in my hand and begin to scrunch it. The crackle of it bending and folding, like a fire taking hold, is comforting. I twist it and hear the paper tear. The words of my letter disintegrating. Nora breaking. Going. Go bhfóire Dia orainn.

The letter falls to the floor, broken, like the corpse of a bird. Nora was forever clawing at me, even when, as Sister Patricia, I could stand tall again, she was always there, nagging to go home. On my return from Ghana, after my recovery, I stayed away from Galway, as though if I returned my feet would sink into the bog, suck me down, kill Sister Patricia and release Nora. Did Mammy ever call me Sister Patricia? She only ever wanted Nora. I was so angry at her when she was alive for ignoring me, for ignoring who I had become, the anger knotted inside of me, sometimes a pain in my head, or sudden breathlessness that dragged me from sleep, because I blamed my mother for the myriad silence. The injustice of it all!

Sleep, sleep, grah mo chree, Agnes' lullaby fills the quiet of my room. It is not too late for them, Agnes doesn't have to be alone, like Mammy. They could be reunited. I take a clean sheet of paper and begin to write:

Dear Eoin

My name is Sister Patricia and I live and work at Castlemacgarrett. Lately, I have spent time with your mother, Agnes, and she talks about you so fondly. I know you have not had opportunity to visit for some time, but perhaps, and I ask as your mother's friend, not her carer, it would be good to see her soon. She misses you.

I stop writing. I have spent a lifetime trying to heal people, teach people, guide people but I ran from all my own problems and so how can I possibly know what to say? By the time I was invalided back to Ireland, what words would it have taken to make me forgive the silence? God is forgiveness. He wasn't enough. I don't know what to say. My mind is awash with sentences, but each breaks, the paper a foaming white crest when I put my pen to it, my words washed away. Tomorrow, Agnes won't even remember who I am, she won't remember that she asked for Eoin. One day, she may forget him completely. Or so she would have me believe. I am a silly old fool trying to mend other families, maith diom e seo. I look up to God and instead of writing, I pray that he will send Eoin to Agnes. *Le toil Dé.*

I wake up the next morning with a pulsing headache. On my writing desk is a blank sheet of paper with my pen placed to the right.

I touch the nib to the paper and with a reluctant scratch the ink flows.

Dear Mr Kelly,

Your mother would like to see you.

Go mbeannaí Dia duit,

Sister Patricia

Bursar

Castlemacgarett Nursing Home

I pick up my copy of the Bible, the brown leather cover is faded and worn where I have often held it too long, too close, and I place the letter between the pages.

Chapter Fifteen

'Don't worry about Sister Assumpta,' I say, as we bump over the paving stones. 'She's just being cautious because of your bad chest. We won't be out long. Besides, you said yesterday that you always liked being outside.'

'I did?'

'When I visited you yesterday, in your room, remember?'

Agnes reaches her hand to her face and shakes her head saying she forgets. Then, looking around her at the plants she tells me she liked her garden. There is no colour in the grounds now, save the vivid red geraniums, the leaves of the plants have faded to browns and scarlets, golden yellows and they are beginning to fall leaving the exposed spines of bushes and trees. Agnes remembers colour. She smiles when she tells me that she planted flowers: hydrangeas and primroses, daffodils in spring and foxgloves. And she laughs, even, saying she often cut them and stood them in empty jars around the house to brighten it. I think again of her mismatched room, the faded tones of peach and blue, dirty white and the grey bundles of dust that have gathered under her bed and, I say out loud, although I don't think I mean to, that she must find this place very plain.

Agnes shakes her head and says she doesn't really notice, although she goes on to say how it is nice there are pictures on the wall and that the gardens are pretty in summer. Again, she remembers her hydrangeas. 'They were so bright,' she adds.

'You said.'

'I did?'

I nod. 'I never paid much attention to flowers growing up on a farm, then in Ghana, it was green because of the rain, but I don't recall many flowers. I'm sure there were many though.' I don't tell her that even flowers made me sad, it was hard to find beauty, following loss.

Every so often there is a shock of pink flowers, bright like a gaping mouth in pale skin, loud like sinful words. But here I can try to put sin right, whereas at home, we were all drowning in the sorrow of it.

Agnes says she would have loved to see Ghana. She tries to turn around to me but cannot quite make it and slumps back down into her chair. I reassure her that really it was too hot and the work was hard. Not to be deterred, Agnes says she imagines it was very beautiful.

I wonder if it was. I try to think back to those years, to feel the humid mist on my skin, like a veil, or the burn of the sand on my feet, the hot, moist crunch of it, compared to the muddy slide of Irish fields. I nod again, even though Agnes cannot see, and say that, yes, perhaps, it was beautiful.

Agnes starts to cough. It is deep and rasping. I panic, pushing harder with my right hand to turn her chair and head back to the house, telling her we should go in, checking she is okay. I have heard coughs like that before, from within, raking up everything inside. They do not give up.

‘No, I like it out here. I wish it would rain.’

‘Really?’

Agnes throws her hands to the sky. Her arms are too thin, veins twist around them like creeping vines. They are bone white as though her skin has already gone. The sleeves of her dressing gown, a pale pink crimplene, have rumpled all the way to her elbows with no flesh to grip to. I lean forward, over the chair, like a mother tending her baby and push Agnes’ hands to her lap, pulling her sleeves back over her arms. She laughs at my fuss saying she used to sit in the garden when it rained, until she was soaked through. Eoin told her she was crazy. He was embarrassed, she thinks, in case people saw her. But then what didn’t embarrass him? Even our own language was shameful. Agnes laughs remembering how she would talk to Eoin in Irish, sometimes, and she knew it would annoy him, but it did him good to remember who he was. The world he occupies now has no feeling, no roots. I ask her about Fergus, and she says he never cared what she did, he would never be ashamed of her, but he wasn’t one for outside. I say she must have got so cold, in the rain.

‘Not a bit, a drop of rain can’t hurt you.’

‘It caused a lot of trouble in Ghana.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘It did.’

I didn’t need to read my letter to remember the pain the rain brought, the death and dying it poured upon us. My words fall then, and I hear them, feel the panic rise once more.

Dear Mammy

We’re in the midst of an emergency, go ndéana Dia trocaire orainn. It seemed like nothing at first, just a few headaches and complaints of aching backs and legs. Some sisters went off the pepper soup completely (I don’t blame them) and others couldn’t keep it down. It was not the same as the other fever which strikes so ferociously around here. Some people made a recovery and it seemed they had suffered with just flu. But it wasn’t, it isn’t, flu. They call it yellow fever, and now the tales of the Gold Coast being the white man’s grave are sadly becoming truth, as it seems is the way with all stories in time.

We stop walking, and I stand by the side of her chair at the border of the lawn. The grass is cut close and level to the paving. Dew still clings to each blade. I remember the smell of the rain before it arrived, like the damp undergrowth of jungle, how the dust rose and coated our throats in a panic. Then the noise of it, as I wrote home, I described it as an *ensemble piece.* I tell Agnes how the rain caused diseases to spread because it made the insects active. There was an epidemic, I say. She asks of what and I remember the man, summoned by the local priest. He walked through our compound shaking his head. His clothes were wrapped around him, like loosening swaddles, and his skin wrinkled like a new puppy, though he was very old. He had seen it all before. Many times. The curse of the yellow mosquito, he said, shaking his head with more vigour. I tell Agnes it was called yellow fever. She has never heard of it.

I carry on, taking a huge lungful of the fresh air, cold and biting, not like the warmth of Ghana, as thick as breathing steam. I remember how delighted we were by the rain, at first. After months of dryness and the constant irritating itch of dust, it was such a relief to feel the build-up, a curtain of heat which fell across the compound. Heavy, weighty heat which you could almost part with your arms and then the rain fell, like no rain imaginable, with startling claps of thunder.

‘They were God’s warning but we did not heed them. Maith dúinn ar bhfiacha.’

‘Nonsense.’

I put my hand on the arm of her wheelchair to steady my weight, lifting my left foot from the ground and stretching it with a click. There are no flies or wasps or bees now, and although there will be in summer, they will be a nuisance, nothing more. Their buzz will not linger, for they travel alone, not like the clouds of mosquitoes which swept upon us from the river, biting without thought. I can still see them now.

They say, the locals, that the mosquitoes have come up from the lagoon because of the rain and it's a feeding frenzy, as their small, almost invisible bodies twist and turn in the downpour. You don't feel them bite, you barely see them at all, but they are carried with the raindrops and they are indeed biting and with that we are dying.

The rain couldn't wash them away, they landed like dandelion seed and stuck. I remember writing to tell my mother and begging her not to fret. *Déanfaidh Dia sinn a chosaint*, I wrote, *please don't worry*.

Agnes looks up at me, her eyes are sad and she asks if many died. I nod, then add it was God's will. Agnes shakes her head with a snort and tells me again that is nonsense.

I ask her what else could we believe? And I say that is what I told my mother when I wrote to tell her what was happening. Agnes gasps, it is a grainy breath, crackling at the end, like a fading fire, and I step away from her chair, surprised. She asks, her voice stronger, why I would tell my mother such a thing when she was so far away and helpless.

I don't know what to say and so I stand there, looking down at the ground, watching fallen leaves being dragged across the lawn by the playful breeze.

Agnes is quiet too. She rubs her hands together, the tips of her fingers yellow from the cold, and slowly I watch a red tinge return to her skin.

'She never got my letter anyway,' I say, sounding like a petulant child.

'It was for the best.' Agnes does not look at me. Perhaps she is right. Mammy would have wanted to know though, I am sure of it. There was a time we shared everything. How could we not? The cottage was spacious compared to some but we were still a large family and the rooms did not stretch as we grew. We lived in the noise of each other, the grunts and snorts, the way Harry slurped soup from the spoon, or Patrick cracked chicken bones between his teeth, the laughter, the shouting, the rows - Mammy and Daddy could rock the house - soaked in the scent of sweat and soap, the sickly stink of wet dog and the warmth of cooking food. Sure, there was a time you couldn’t have a conversation without everyone hearing, the walls could not contain our voices. We knew everything: when someone was sick, or angry, when money was tight, or plentiful. That cottage, bundled up with our sprawling limbs and clothes, and books and shoes and utensils, never held any secrets. Every evening, in our rooms, Mammy and Daddy, Patrick and Harry, Kate and I, all fell to our knees and prayed, prayers that mingled in the after-dinner smell of vegetables and meat fat, the sweetness of baking soda bread. Even Hugo, so long in England, probably knew when to bend his knees, clasp his hands. And so, Mammy would have prayed, she would have wanted to, as I did, our prayers uniting us, saving us.

I still remember the feel of the damp ground beneath my knees as I prayed outside the half-built cathedral. It’s structure, bare, exposed, rose out of the earth, but no one touched it and I tell Agnes how I crouched before it daily, despite the work on it being halted, and prayed for my fellow sisters and also for my mother.

‘What cathedral?’

‘I told you before about the cathedral being built?’

‘It’s hard to remember everything, and why talk about bricks when we can talk about nature and the magic of a foreign place.’

I sigh and look down to where Agnes has tucked her hands under her blanket, bringing it up to her neck. I remind her that the cathedral was important to Nora, it reminded her of home. It was mentioned in all my letters, even in the midst of an epidemic.

This whole business has halted the building of the cathedral much to the protest of the men who need daily wages, go mbeannaí Dia dóibh. There is a swinging helplessness in their limbs as they walk aimlessly, lost without work, resorting to digging graves, instead of foundations. It’s sad to see and I long to help them but we are confined to our rooms most of the time because the school has been temporarily closed. Every day, I watch the mosquitoes land on the netting and try to get to me, but they cannot. Please don’t worry about me, I am fine, le cúnadh Dé. Sure, didn’t we survive worse?

‘Didn’t you go away to forget home?’

I don’t take my eyes from her. Despite her frailty, and her confusion, she remembers more sometimes than I expect, more than I think she has heard. Often, I think of my stories to her like my letters, unopened, but now, I don’t know. I shiver. I cannot answer her question. Instead, I admit my fear to her. I thought I would die in Africa, I say. Perhaps I wanted to.

Some days, stuck in this hut, I want to crawl out of the door and lay in the sand and let them take me, rather than worry anymore. But shadows in my room hold me back, whisper in the pattering of rain. That I am loved. That I am needed. Mammy, I thought I would be braver than this, but I am not. I am scared. You would be so much braver than me. You already are.

Away from my family, alone, perhaps I did want to die. There seemed no end to the death and illness. Local doctors, we would call them witch doctors these days, came onto the compound chanting spells and treating people with herbs that had no effect. The priests chased them away.

‘A shame. There might have been hope in their magic.’

‘They were just old stories.’

‘We all tell stories, Sister.’

I straighten.

‘And do they ever bring peace?’

‘Perhaps.’

‘I don’t know, Agnes. They never have happy endings, or so it seems.’

‘Does yours?’

I shake my head and look to the treeline in the distance, the slight shiver of the branches, and the falling leaves, one by one, silently, spinning to the ground. Then I tell Agnes about Sister Mary and how Nora watched her die. I tell Agnes about her bloody tears. About how she hunched up with stomach pain. How Nora laid her back down and took her hand. I tell her how Sister Mary closed her eyes, opened them, tried to speak and asked Nora to pray with her. Nora did as she asked, of course, and there they sat with their hands together, praying silently. Or that is how it looked.

‘And here now is my confession, Agnes. Maith diom e seo.’

Agnes turns slightly in her wheelchair, her body is stiff, but her eyes are bright.

‘I couldn’t pray.’

‘That’s it?’

I hang my head, picking at a spike of skin by my thumb. It has already dried but beneath it when I pull, blood rises. Instead of praying, as Mary died alone without family, Nora thought of her brothers and all that was lost long ago during that brutal November. Everything jumbled up in the emergency, she couldn’t straighten her thoughts, like skeins of yarn they tangled together, knotted, became inseparable. Nora dreamed often of being back in Ireland and the war was still raging, when there was still hope and her brothers were still alive. Yet somehow, in those dreams there were mosquitoes caught up in the rainfall of Galway and then Patrick and Harry were there on the compound floor, bleeding, their faces streaked as they used to be after a wet day in the fields but with bloody tears, not mud. I used to wake at night screaming in the humid dark. The sound of my voice suffocated under the weight of the heat, the clasp of Nora’s hands tight around my throat. My eyes itched from tiredness like they did in the dry season with the dust. I found myself more and more on my knees by the cathedral until one day, I asked my mother to call them home, take back her family’s ghosts. Glaoigh orthu teacht abhaile duit.

Until that epidemic, I was doing well. I was becoming Sister Patricia. Nora was dying. But with the mosquitoes buzzing at the mesh, the dark closed in and I wanted to scream at Nora to go away, that I was Sister Patricia, Sister Patricia. I wrote home*: I am Sister Patricia and I must carry on, in Patrick’s name, and for you. Tá orm lean ar aghaidh.* I waited and waited, but there was just silence.

Agnes is focused on the spindly branches of a tree. She reaches out her hand in front of her.

‘I wish I could feel the rough bark, or the sharp gorse thorns.’

‘Agnes?’

‘Some say burning chases away changelings.’

‘Changelings?’

‘You talk of becoming someone else, but why? All our experience is bundled up in the people we are and we are many.’ She rests her hands on her knees. Some days, she says, when Eoin was particularly cruel to her, she would sit in the garden by her rose bush - it had yellow flowers with a tinge of red on the petals - and she would hold the stem and squeeze with all her might. Somehow, the names Eoin threw at her, *witch, fairy, crazy*, or some sort like that, would bleed away into the soil.

‘Why did he call you those names?’

Typical of Agnes, she shrugs away my question. He never liked her stories about the forts nearby, or when neighbours visited looking for cures. She chuckles but it only skims the surface, it is not a true laugh and tells me his imagination was too wild.

‘Cures?’

‘Just a bit of milk and garden herbs, it does the world of good.’ She says it as though it is nothing. I look around, check for other sisters nearby. I move closer to her, tighten my fingers around the handle of her wheel chair, remembering my own scepticism, Mammy’s warnings.

I am not frightened of getting ill, Mammy. There is so much good to be done here, not just teaching, but spreading the word of the Lord. In the towns, like Cape Coast, where our compound is, the locals are pleased to see us, they want to attend our school and have already given their hearts to Our Lord. Not all though. Some, and it seems to be those who travel in from rural areas, frighten me with their painted faces, often naked to the waist, chanting words I cannot, and do not want, to understand. They speak of evil, Mammy. Hissing, like snakes, they glare at us, not blinking, and mix up potions and pastes to cure the spirit. I turn my face, ashamed not only of their flesh, but of their minds, twisted as they are, like the sticks they carry, away from our God. I should not be afraid, I know, for they are no different to the old women at home who believe in the good people and curing illness with nothing but a few flowers and whispered words. You always told us not to heed them. We are in God’s care, you told us, and that is how it is now, for me. I remember your words, and hold them dear.

Agnes’ voice gets louder as she continues saying Eoin thought it was poison. *Ride away on a white horse*, he would shout, *but I won’t come looking for you*. Then, with a sigh, she admits some days she wished she could. ‘I even prayed they would come for me, le cúnadh Dé.’

‘Agnes, I-’

She has brought her hand level with her chest now and squeezes it into a fist. Her knuckles whiten and the skin stretches, becomes youthful. Fergus used to come into the garden and take her hand off the rose, she says, turning her fist around and looking at it. He's just an angry young man, he would say, don't hurt yourself over him. When she opens her hand, a row of red arcs has imprinted her skin, like scales, and she rubs her palm gently, saying that Fergus would take the time to wipe away the blood and wrap her hand in gauze to stem the bleeding, but how she needed more than that to truly heal.

I look across the garden at the roses, now spindly sharp and bare in winter. I press the tips of my fingers one by one and feel, again, the prick of gorse as I stood in the farm, just before walking into the cottage to tell Mammy they were gone.

'Shall we go in, Agnes? That wind is really starting to bite.'

'No, I like it. Tell me, what happened to Nora after the epidemic?'

'I think she went away with it, but then-'

'She's here now though, isn't she?'

'No, she's gone.' I speak firmly but do I believe my own words?

'She survived the epidemic though.'

I dig my own nails into my palm, like Agnes did, but I am not brave enough to press as hard and there are no imprints on my hand. After the dying stopped, Nora went away, or perhaps, I hoped, she perished with it. So many were lost, amongst them Sister Acquiline and, with her passing, the responsibility of the school was entirely mine and I, Sister Patricia, became Principal of OLA College. Nora had no place there. I became strong as Sister Patricia. I wrote to Mammy and told her, I added, *I hope that makes you proud.*

'She would've been proud, Sister.' Agnes looks up at me. Her eyes are watering, the edges red as always like the gentle fade of colour in wilting petals. She tells me all mothers are proud. They have to be. Even she is proud of all Eoin has achieved with his building, although she doesn't agree with it, adding, as water spills down her cheek, that she is sad for what he lost along the way. He is so empty, she says, working in a place that won't care for him when he is finished, in a city with people who cannot possibly really know him. They don't remember when he was six and pinned a butterfly to the ground with sharpened twigs, his fingers covered by the powder from its wings. Or how, when he was two there wasn't a thing he wouldn't eat, his hungry little mouth eager to try food from my plate, or his father's, how on the muddy pathways, even the soft squelch of fallen berries beneath his feet were a possible snack. No, they don't know, as he sits in one restaurant or another, in the clink of silver cutlery and crystal glasses, that he used to tear the thick crust from the bread with his teeth, when he was four, pretending to be a lion. And there was a time, although I am sure he doesn't remember, that his little fingers, worked beside mine in the garden, pulling weeds, and flowers, and enjoying the mud which wedged under his nails, darkened his knees. Agnes looks at me, in tears, as she says, she is proud of all those things, and she holds them for him so they are not lost forever. Your mother would have done the same for you, Sister, she says, and she would always have been proud.

I thank her but I don't know. Perhaps Mammy did cling to Nora, swaddling thoughts of the baby, the child, the young woman, forever in the warm embrace of memory. I remember writing to my mother, weeks after becoming principal and telling her I was happy. *I have settled in Africa, I wrote.* It was true, I was settled. I used to see new arrivals and smile as I told them that the hot red pepper kills the germs, that licking your lips makes the burn worse. I stopped jumping when monkeys leaped by the water's edge, and I was no longer startled when a lizard darted in the shadows. It was true, I was happy. Bhí mé sásta. But I was still caught unaware by my memories, by the days when suddenly my mother would appear, in Ghana, as vivid as on the day I left, still fiddling with the thread on her cardigan, or I would see Patrick laughing and teasing in the sun scorched fields, or Harry curled with a book beneath a Ghanian mango tree. I wrote to Mammy and said: *You are all with me always*. I gcónaí. And they were.

Without warning, rain begins to fall in fast, heavy drops, I move quickly behind Agnes' chair and grab the handles to push her inside.

'No, Sister. Don't.'

I stop.

'Let me stay.'

'It's pouring, Agnes. We'll be soaked.'

'I know.'

'This is madness. You'll catch your death.'

The rain pelts us, it is freezing and I shiver beneath my quickly sopping skirts. It runs down my face, blurring my sight, and dripping from the end of my nose. Agnes leans back, her face to the sky, I hunch forward. The rain falls steadily, dancing swathes of cold water, we sit in silence for what seems like a lifetime.

‘But O that I were young again,’ all of a sudden, Agnes raises her voice above the clatter of rainfall and laughs, saying how she used to love quoting Yeats to Fergus, then thanks me and says we should go in before we miss afternoon tea. I quickly agree, relieved, and begin to manoeuvre her wheelchair back across the terrace towards the house, commenting that it looks like the rain is settling in for the afternoon.

‘Let’s hope so,’ Agnes says quietly. ‘I like the comfort of it against my window at night, like my Fergus’ snores.’

As I reach the house, my shoes squelching and irritating the healing skin where it blistered, my habit hangs limp about me. I glance around. We are the only ones out in it. People will talk. I bump Agnes up the step into the thick warmth of the hallway.

‘Whatever will Sister Assumpta say, Agnes.’ I look at the water dripping from the spokes of her chair, leaving dark patches on the carpet, and the imprint of my footprints gives us away. ‘She’ll be raging with me. Go mbeannaí Dia orainn.’

‘Ara, don’t bother yourself worrying, Sister. We’re too old for all that.’

Chapter Sixteen

Outside there is a frost, the paving stones glisten and I am glad I took Agnes out yesterday, despite the rain, because today it would be too cold.

‘How are you today?’ I ask her.

She is in her usual chair tucked under the brightly coloured crochet blanket.

‘Sister,’ she nods formally. ‘I wouldn’t mind a slice of toast with marmalade if you’d be so kind?’

She eats the toast slowly, her hands are shaky and I resist the urge to hold them in my own. I notice a hot water bottle poking out beneath the blanket and ask her if she is cold. She fidgets a little, saying she can’t seem to get warm but then, with a laugh, she holds up the toast and says it will help, adding whiskey would do a better job though and tilting the toast to me says, ‘sláinte.’ I have to laugh and agree that it probably would. Despite her cheery mood, she looks pale and I am worried she caught a chill in yesterday’s rain. I ask her how she is feeling again.

‘What about yesterday?’

‘In the rain.’

Her face brightens, the skin folding back into soft creases, like whipped cream, and a small hint of colour blooming in her cheeks, as she tells me that she loves the rain and used to sit in it when she was younger.

‘You said.’

She looks at me, eyes wide, hopeful and asks if we can go out again but I shake my head, it is too cold today. The ground is icy. Agnes looks at the worn carpet, her feet shuffling under the blanket. She tells me, whilst picking at bobbling wool, that the frost used to kill her early flowers. She speaks quietly, as though remembering the death of a loved one, describing how she begged them to wait but they were determined and defiantly poked their heads above the earth. The frost killed them instantly. She looks to me with her familiar watery eyes, although today, they look yellow, dull, and she says she hated watching them die. I pat her hand and reassure her I will bring some flowers to her room.

She shakes her head, her hair barely moving as I notice it is bunched in a matted mess at the back of her head, and says I needn’t bother, that Eoin will bring flowers when he visits.

‘Have you heard from him?’

She doesn’t answer, instead she continues to play with the blanket, poking her fingers between the gaps. Dia, Éist liom, I pray silently.

‘It’ll be his birthday soon.’ She says, her voice suddenly loud. I look around to see who else is in the room. But it is quiet today. Agnes continues telling me he was born in winter but she can’t recall the exact date. I suggest she sends him a card but she shrugs my idea away saying he doesn’t have time to read cards, besides, he will visit. I look around again and see the white porcelain vase on the windowsill filled with dusty flowers, faded by the sun, forever dying. There is the odd empty tea cup, some discarded books, and I count two cards. I have never taken the time to read them, it is true. One stands wonky, the front corner bending and the other, with a hand-tied bouquet on the front, has already fallen. Later, I think, I will straighten them, perhaps read them. I look again, but there are no more. When did we stop writing to each other? Agnes, with a wide smile, the look of a child receiving a longed-for gift, turns to me and says he visited the other day.

‘Eoin?’

‘Yes. I saw him just the other week.’

I tell her that is lovely, nodding along as she describes the visit. They sat in this room, him in the exact seat I am sitting in now. She puts both hands under the blanket and raises it higher up her chest. There was cake she says, lemon cake, and he got crumbs on his suit. It was a black suit with sharp pressed lines down the legs, straight as train tracks, she laughs. I laugh too. His hair is beginning to thin, she tells me, he has it swept to one side, with a little hint of grey amongst the blonde, but there were glimpses of scalp, like bare soil appearing in winter. He won’t like that, she shakes her head, saying, my poor Eoin, to herself.

He sat in the chair, she tells me again, gesturing to my seat with a nod of her head and he held my hand. I wish he’d brought flowers but he brought cake. Lemon cake. It was too sharp, cake should be sweet, it should melt on the tongue, not make you wince. The crumbs got everywhere, she says again. His poor suit. And so expensive he said. I lean forward and rest my hand on her knee. It is bouncing up and down, just slightly, under the blanket. I indulge her stories, for what else does she have?

It’s a shame, she says, the football was not on for him to watch while he was here. He used to like going to games with his Daddy. Fergus loved Mayo. He was so happy when they won the Sam Maguire. ‘What year was that now?’

‘I don’t know. My brothers would’ve told you in an instant. Did you go to the matches with Fergus and Eoin?’

She seems uncomfortable, shifting her weight about her chair, moving her legs, unable to rest her hands. She says, of course they all watched it together, and asks me if I did too. I nod, and say, but not now. Agnes lowers her head and says it is a shame. We sit for a while and Agnes picks up the cold, half-eaten toast from the side table and finishes it. She chews loudly and often with her mouth open, blackened crumbs gather at the corner of her lips. I check if she would like some more but she quickly says no, she will spoil her tea. I notice she is trembling more than usual, her lips quivering and her hands more than a little unsteady. Again, I ask her if she is okay and she waves away my concern saying she is grand. I place my hand on her forehead and push back her wiry hair.

‘You’re warm, Agnes.’

‘Ara, get away with you.’

I feel her clammy skin beneath my fingers and press a little harder. Agnes, I tell her, you have a fever. She tuts and tells me not to fuss, pushing my hand away from her head with more force than I expected. I take her hand from her lap and tell her I am worried. She laughs, but it is not a friendly laugh, it is bitter, like an irritating tickle, and she says she is too old to be worried about. I look around the room, this time hoping to see sisters amongst the few sleeping residents. Agnes, I make my voice school teacher serious, and tell her the sisters need to check her.

She protests and I see the blanket at the base of her chair rise as she kicks her feet telling me to leave her alone. She doesn’t want to be dragged back to her room again and forced to lay in bed all day.

I hold her hand a little tighter. ‘Tell me if you don’t feel well, please. Táim buartha.’

She smiles. I think back to yesterday’s rain and remember our soaking skin, the cold grip of wet clothes, the brisk wind, the winding rainfall wrapping itself around us. Agnes shivering. I look to the ceiling and beyond it and send a quick prayer: Dear God, please let her be okay. Maith diom e seo. I’m sorry. Amen.

Agnes is humming softly, a tune I recognise, *Too-Ra-Loo-Ra-Loo-Ra*. Our hands move slightly, as she sways them. ‘Sometimes Fergus would waltz me in the garden. He hummed this or that tune, sure it didn’t matter, I liked to feel him close.’

She begins to hum again, her cheeks are flushed. I see my parents, not long before Daddy's heart gave up, ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam, in the kitchen. Daddy taking Mammy's hand and twirling her under his arm. She laughed and pushed him away with a flat hand on his chest. He laughed too and tried to pull her close. 'Stop it,' she said, 'I'm busy.' Harry in the corner raised his eyebrows at me. I sniggered. Patrick told them to cop on and grow up, from where he stood, tying his laces, in the doorway. Oh, we were happy, gabhaim buíochas le Dia dóibh, we were still a family, together, and my heart thuds a sudden sadness. A plummeting dip of loss in my chest. Agnes' hums quieten to gentle snores and I let go of her hand.

'Sister,' I catch the eye of one of the young nuns tending to the residents in the day room. 'Sister, I think that Mrs Kelly is coming down with something. She feels warm.'

The nun, whose name I don't know, bends over Agnes' shrunken body and touches her forehead. 'She's roasting, I'll get her to bed.'

I nod and whisper, 'Tá brón orm,' to sleeping Agnes. Behind her, the sisters are getting a wheelchair and one is on the phone to the doctor. I stand up slowly, aches in my knees, and walk back to my room with Patrick trailing behind me, a comforting hand on my shoulder.

Chapter Seventeen

July 1923

Dear Mammy,

I'm sorry for my last letter. I'm sorry for the fear it must have caused you, maith diom e seo. And for delay of this letter, which must have also alarmed you. Forgive me and please, rest assured, I am well. I promise. I survived. Buíochas le Dia.

In total we lost seven sisters, ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha. They have all been buried near to the cathedral, where building, just yesterday, resumed. The school has reopened too, but I have been teaching alone. There was loss everywhere, not just our religious community, but even amongst the locals. Sadly, Sister Acquiline did not survive, Dia scíth a hanam; she was the last to die and she did it in the way I knew she would, whispering, in gurgling breaths, 'we'll meet again in heaven.' Her faith did not falter.

After she had passed, I went to the mound where we once sat and stared at the skeleton cathedral. Around it, palm trees leaned like staggering survivors, their leaves the frayed tarpaulin on the farm at home after a storm. They are funny trees, with long thin trunks, like scaffolding, and only a burst of greenery at the top and a collection of brown fruit nestled in the centre, rock hard, until you break it and sweet milky water trickles out, cold despite the heat. You would like them, I am sure, although it takes a mighty effort to crack them. Patrick would have whacked them with his hurley. I picture him, throwing the coconut in the air, opening his broad chest, his shoulder blades like rolling hills, and then a thwack, as he hits it and fragments fall at his feet. It is so real Mammy. Too real.

There has been too much death and it has got to me, I fear. I find myself worrying if I would have been the same as Sister Acquiline? I can't help but question if I could be as rigid in my belief? What a terrible admission, but if I can't be honest with you, there is no one. You see, sometimes, and as I write this, it feels like my thoughts are whispering for fear of being heard, I get an urge to turn around and expect Patrick and Harry to be there, grinning like they did. I see them often. They are at peace, I know that, but the sense of them beside me, some days, is palpable. Do you feel it too? Are they with you on the farm too?

It's silly talk and I am sorry, maith diom e seo. Forget my pathetic doubts, let's think instead, as Sister Acquiline did, of heaven, where I know Patrick and Harry are waiting for us, and the day we are all reunited. I will pray for that.

For now, I must focus on my new role. Things have changed in Africa since the epidemic. I survived. I am now Principal of OLA College. Sister Patricia, Principal and Missionary. I hope that makes you proud, le cúnadh Dé. Nora must rest now, with the departed back home and here.

I'm sorry this note is so short, but I'm busy as I am sure you understand. I just wanted to let you know I'm well. I promise to write more soon.

Go mbeannaí Dia duit,

Love Always,

Sister Patricia

Chapter Eighteen

I survived. I am now Principal of OLA College. Sister Patricia, Principal and Missionary. I say the words over and over, chewing to the rhythm of them at dinner, praying alongside them, holding them close as I hurry to Agnes' room.

A lamp is on in the corner and Agnes is lying with her eyes closed. I sit beside her, instinctively putting my hand to her forehead. She is still warm. I have brought a book of poetry with me and in the dim light I recite the words slowly, shaping my mouth deliberately, thoughtfully, around the dipping and rising vowels and consonants:

Cumhthach labhras an lonsa,

an t-olc do fhuair d'fheadarsa

cidh bé do théalaigh a theagh

is fá éanaibh do hairgeadh

I pause. Agnes's breathing has quickened and she stirs in her sleep, groans slightly and turns her head to the side. I continue, '*your little heart, O blackbird*.' Agnes calls out in her sleep, a long high cry. She must be dreaming, she is restless. I move closer to her.

'your nest without birds, without eggs

Sgéal is beag ar an mbuachail.'

'Sister?' Agnes' voice is a jagged croak, she feels for me with shaky hands, eyes closed. 'Sister, I don't feel well.'

'I know, Agnes, I know. Tá am codlata ann.'

'Tell Eoin to come.'

I nod, reassuring her I will tell Eoin, and say she must rest. She turns onto her side, tucking her legs up like a child. She is so small beneath the blankets. I can see the shape of her. I let go of her hand as she pulls it away and places it under her cheek.

'I like the poem about the blackbird, Sister.'

'You heard it?'

She moves her head, a tiny movement, the sound of her hair scratching against the pillow. I tell her it is one of my favourites. She takes a breath, a gurgling, strained breath and says it has been a long time since anyone read Irish to her. She read it to Eoin as a boy but he always refused to speak it, it was his worst subject in school, despite great grades in most others. I can feel the shape of the words in my mouth, solid as boiled sweets, satisfying too. The chant of small voices, the classes Nora taught back in Galway, rise up repeating phrases after me. The words, soft and rounded, became weapons, banned but we spoke them nonetheless, hiding them like lies yet treasuring them like secrets. I say to Agnes it is a shame no one speaks it to her anymore. Again, she moves her head slowly in agreement, hair tangling.

'We are forgetting who we are, Agnes. After all our battles. Go ndéana Dia trocaire orainn.'

She doesn't turn to me and her words are frail as she tells me she doesn't think so. That every breath of Irish life, our myths, our beliefs, our heroes, our failures, it is all bound up in our stories. They will be told forever. I hope she is right. But who will tell them? I think of Eoin and everything Agnes has told me about him, but cannot picture him, sitting with other men in sharp suits, telling stories of old Ireland, of their parents. I hear them laugh, making fun of the women who raised them, scoffing at the language which was once theirs. What will their stories tell? Who will Ireland become? Then, Agnes asks if my mother told me stories.

I think of Mammy and her broad shoulders, her thick arms. Her tongue, always ready to scold, was weapon-sharp mostly but could soften to soothe tears. She was strong and busy, ruddy cheeks and solid bones. Proud to her core.

'There was no time for storytelling in her world, until-' It is not the right time to remember. Dia scíth a hanam.

Agnes lifts her head slightly. 'Until?'

'I told the worse story of all.'

The room is quiet. Agnes is barely moving save for the occasional twitch of muscle, and the small rise and fall motion of her chest. Her breaths are louder than her words, each one a victory. But her eyes are open; she is waiting.

'Nora had searched everywhere for her brothers, stories thronged the countryside, the city, spilling from shops and pubs, echoing on rippling water, creaking out of old stone walls. There were so many stories about what happened to Patrick and Harry. They were on the run. They were in Lenaboy Castle. They were dead. They were in Galway Gaol. Stories of torture and heroism, of escape and absolute desperation. And there was hope, like a flickering candle withstanding a battering wind. But it only took the prickle of cold when John told Nora, told me, about my brothers, to extinguish it. I remember looking at the pig house and the frozen mud, the stray strings of hay and across to the fields and the walls where we all played as children. The wind still carried our happy cries on days when it whipped a frenzy across the countryside and shook gulls from the sky. I heard us running and playing and shouting, already the cries of ghosts.

I remember every moment before I told Mammy. The light seemed too bright and I blinked and held up my hand to obscure the sun, framing our cottage across the field. Smoke tumbled from the chimney in a woolly stream. Our dog had followed John to his van and he was feeding it scraps of something. I walked across the field, the ground was hard beneath my feet, jarring my knees, until I reached the softening mud by the side of the farmhouse. The walls, in the bright light, seemed whiter than usual and I noticed that the window frames were quite newly painted; Patrick must have done it since the last time I visited from school. I wanted to stand there forever, but sure I was only stalling, giving Mammy one last moment of happiness before my own words made everything forever cold.

I can see her now, as she was when I opened the cottage door, on her knees before the fire, stacking turf. She turned to me. Instantly, she knew, of course. She said my name. It was a question, a pleading. I told her, forcing the words through lips which would not open. She stumbled forward and I clasped her around the waist and pulled her close. She let out a long, high moan, which softened into tears. Her sobs were gentle and restrained and, in my arms, her body, despite being well built, trembled and relaxed, fragile as a child. I held her tight, felt her bones crack, her heart break and when she slumped down, I carried her full weight.

I can't remember how long we stood in the middle of the room with her tears soaking my shoulder and the faint sound of bubbling stew in the background. Behind us, the kindling started to crackle and hiss.

I stroke Agnes' hair, as I did my mother's. It is thin and coarse, her body is all angles and sharpness, she is so small, so thin. I remember the roundness of Mammy in my arms. How she couldn't stand, couldn't speak, how when I sat her on a chair, she fell forward and cried. The priest, Father Nagle, came to us, he said nothing, he held her hand. The quiet of loss filled our kitchen, drowning out the memories of family laughter, of squabbles, of conversations, of family life. I stood up, leaving Mammy with the priest and left. I knew I had to go to them.

'What happened to them, Sister?'

‘I couldn’t say, Agnes. I could never speak of what they suffered.’ Without thought, I make the sign of the cross again. ‘Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha,’ I whisper.

‘Tell me what happened, Sister?’

‘They were murdered. I can say no more. It was a time of lies and fear and dreams.’

Agnes shakes her head, a tiny motion. ‘Tá a bhealach rúndiamhair féin ag an Tiarna.’

I disagree, saying God shouldn’t be mysterious. We should trust Him. I remind her how He showed me their resting place through the dream of their comrade’s. Agnes opens her eyes, blinking quickly despite the dim light.

‘I remember something like that. Tell me more.’

‘After Tally told others about his dream, and we had all been searching for days, some of the men from the village went to the pond. My brothers’ bodies were there. They were exactly as he saw them.’

‘They were calling to you.’ Agnes’ words are slow but certain.

‘It was God guiding us.’

Agnes doesn’t reply. She closes her eyes, the light too much for them. ‘They were calling to you, Sister. They showed you the way. My Fergus does the same for me now. I see him, just there.’

A smile spreads across her face. I look around, of course, the room is empty.

‘He wants to waltz, Sister, but tell him I’m older than him now.’ Her words have a sing-song rhythm to them, they are so quiet, just wisps of breath.

‘Agnes-’ I stop. Who am I to speak? Let her believe.

‘Sister. It’s late. Mrs Kelly needs her rest.’ I turn quickly and see Mother Superior at the door. I apologise, feeling a rush of heat in my cheeks, as I say I was just keeping her company. Mother Superior, her face half brightened from the light in the hallway says she understands but the doctor said Mrs. Kelly really needs to rest. I stand up and momentarily hover over Agnes, the brief idea of kissing her crosses my mind, but I hurry instead to the door. ‘God bless,’ I say as I walk past Mother Superior, quietly, ‘go raibh maith agat.’

‘Sister Patricia,’ she calls to me, ‘get yourself to bed.’

I stand in the corridor and look at her. She is younger than me and transfers her weight from left to right foot. Then, quieter, she says, ‘you look tired. It will do you good.’

I link arms with Harry, who was leaning against the wall outside, and we walk like that to my room where Patrick is waiting.

Chapter Nineteen

I have never done anything like this before, go bhfóire Dia orainn. I am creeping yet breathless. The corridors are dark and too warm. Claustrophobic. I feel my way using my hands, running my fingers along the peeling wallpaper that catches at my skin. I trip several times, pitch forward, recover, take a deep breath, pause, look around.

Castlemacgarrett is sleeping. There is a collective rise and fall in the corridors as the night has taken hold and granted rest. I couldn't sleep. I kept thinking I should have leant over Agnes, kissed her, held her, stayed with her, as I wish someone did for Mammy. Her breathing was starting to rattle, just slightly, at the end of each intake. I have seen it before. I know I have to be with her. A Dhia, cuidigh liom.

Eventually, I arrive outside her door. I stand there for a while and wish I had brought flowers or something, my hands seem too empty. I am weighed down with stories I can no longer carry. I want to give them to Agnes but it is not fair, not now. Perhaps they will be forever unfinished. I put my hand on the door handle and turn it slowly. Her room is not dark as I thought it would be, the lamp by her bed is still on. She is very still and I worry I am too late. I go to her side and sit down. There is the rattle, so quiet, but her breaths are strong despite it. Perhaps I am wrong.

'Agnes,' I rest my hands on the bed beside her. She does not speak. 'I wanted to be with you.'

I look around the room. It is so plain. Outside even the geraniums are starting to brown. The tips of their flaming petals are curling inwards, turning the maroon of Galway. If I touched them, they would feel crisp like the edges of burnt newspaper, then disintegrate with a rustle. I try to imagine flowers for Agnes. I picture a glass vase, half-filled with water, the stems gathered at the bottom like a standing crowd. And above, blooms of red and pink, yellow, the glossy shine of green leaves. The flowers' faces turned to the winter sun through the window and I can feel a breeze which ruffles them, filling the room with a sweet scent, like toffee apples at a fun fair, the sugary rush of candy floss. Her window is closed and the air is thick, a smell of sweat, like sour milk with an edge of antiseptic, which is too sharp and scratches at my throat. In the dim light of the lamp, I see a layer of dust, like velvet, on the side board where there should be the flowers and I wipe my hand along it, leaving trails like tyre marks in snow. The dust is soft and briefly clings, but my hands are cold and dry and it falls, like ash onto the carpet.

'You called to me, Agnes, I couldn't sleep.'

‘Eoin?’

I thought she was asleep, beyond hearing, beyond speech.

‘Eoin, you came.’

I take her hand as she wrests it free from the blankets. Her eyes are closed, there is a clamminess to her fingers I have not felt before. A sheen to her face that is new.

‘Eoin, I dreamed of you just now. I saw you on your way in a fancy car, I saw you in your suit, and you came and held my hand, like now. I sang for you like when you were little. I still feel your tiny limbs curled up against me in bed like when you were young enough for nightmares, your small fingers clawing at me to get closer, to make the bad people go away. You asked me to cast spells so often. You made me a good witch. I am pleased you’re here now.’ She takes a gasping breath. ‘Your father’s here too.’

I squeeze her fingers beneath mine.

‘Tell me one last story, Eoin, before I go.’

I take a deep breath. I have to finish. It has been too long since Nora confessed and she won’t rest, she is trapped like a fly at a window, hopeless, the sound of her is a constant buzz to be freed. I need quiet. We both do.

‘My letters to Mammy grew shorter, they started with lines like, *just a quick note* and skimmed over the details of my life. I have no doubt that Mammy would have noticed the change in them and perhaps, tucked away in the cold of our Galway farm, she would have accepted I was gone as well, go maithe Dia dom é. Mammy taught me to trust in God. Tabharfaidh sé treoiraíocht duit, she always said. And I always did. He is good, she reassured me.

I took pride in telling Mammy about all the work and campaigning I was doing. I liked to imagine her reading my letters, picturing me fighting for women’s futures, just as long ago she fought for ours. I told her time and again that Africa was good for me. Oh Agnes, forgive me, my letters were full of everything and nothing. All Mammy really wanted was for me to go home.’

Agnes murmurs a barely audible response. Eoin, she says, take me home, and her lips stick slightly as she speaks. Let’s go back to our cottage and walk among the flowers. She remembers how he used to stick his little fingers in the foxgloves, and she warned him, then she apologises, her voice dropping further, breathless, that she frightened him with the tales of the bees which lurked inside.

I stroke the back of her hand with my finger. ‘I’m listening, Agnes. I’m here. Just as you’re here for me, to hear my sins. Eventually, I wrote to Mammy and simply told her I had accepted, after so long, that she would never write back. But I hadn’t. Her silence was a dull ache in my stomach, a lack of hunger which I blamed on the heat. Of course, I continued to update her with news from Africa and even told her I had been sent to bed with fever on occasion. Even my illness didn’t provoke a response and my letters remained much like that, boring, short, and unanswered. Croíbhriste.’

Agnes lets go of a long moan, a whine that fades into the night. Her grip briefly tightens around my fingers, then loosens. Her voice is a crack in the quiet, like sunshine breaking through cloud, as she remembers Eoin, how he was never a sickly child. I think she tries to smile, although her lips are barely parted, as she whispers about a time when he was so ill with a bad throat. He was fourteen and let her spoon feed him chicken broth. Her tongue pushes out between her teeth, moistening her lips, as though she can still taste the saltiness of it. She is definitely trying to smile as she recalls the goose grease Eoin let her rub on the skin of his neck, how she felt the soft down of hair starting to grow on his chin, and the few drops of whiskey he enjoyed in his warm milk. She is hardly breathing, her words taking all her breath, as she remembers sitting with him, how his hand, no longer tiny, was still chubby in hers, fingers curling round like fat worms, and how his hair was wet as she pushed it back from his face. ‘You were scared, Eoin,’ she says, ‘do you remember?’

‘I’ve always been scared, i gcónaí, but you’ve made it better these last weeks, Agnes.’

She takes a trembling breath and then there is quiet, a too long pause, before she releases it. I think back to lying on what could have been my death bed in Ghana, a sweaty mess of shivers, sickness and my body aching like it had been crushed. Nuns visited me and told me OLA college was grand and that I would be on my feet in no time. In the corner of the room, or when they thought I was sleeping, they said prayers or the rosary over me. I didn’t write a letter then, in answer to Mammy’s silence I gave my own. I prayed to God, déan trócaire orm.

Agnes tries to speak again but coughs slice through her words. Determined, she tries again, remembering how the next time Eoin was sick he didn’t want her. Did you? she questions, managing to fire the words out before another cough assaults her body.

I shake my head and whisper, ‘I always wanted you.’

Agnes, raises her hand to her face and wipes it across her mouth. It falls heavy onto the bed, the movement too much. She whines, a small sound like the echoing chime of a bell, and continues telling Eoin that he told her to stay away with her fairy magic, that he betrayed her and went to the doctor for *real* medicine as he called it. Her teeth are clenched together and she forces out the words. Your father took you, she says. She didn't even know what the problem was, he never told her. She pauses, dragging a breath from her throat. 'I can't remember holding your small body again.'

'I remember holding you, Mammy.'

Agnes' head flops to the side. Her eyes close and she says she roamed the garden for weeks. Fergus brought her inside when it got dark, sometimes she crept out again. Other nights, she sat up watching the fire and its dancing shadows, pushing her toes too close to the embers to feel the burning sting of relief. Eoin slept in his room and told her never to enter. Sometime, soon after that, he went away. The sheen on her face has broken into beads of sweat. I wipe her forehead with my sleeve. 'Tell me you're back to stay now, Eoin?'

'It was like I never left. I was invalided back to Ardfoyle Convent, not Galway. Sister Angela wrote home to my mother. She said kind things. As I recovered from my sickness in Cork, the very place I first ran away too, Mammy visited me, I think, and held my hand as God walked me through to health, absolving me of sin and His love became enough, Shábháil sé mise. But it wasn't Nora who returned, as Mammy believed, it was me, Sister Patricia. I left Nora behind, until now. Agnes, forgive me, for I have sinned.'

Agnes reaches out her long, spindly arm but not to me. 'I see you, Eoin, I feel your arms around my neck, the weight of you pushing down my hip, thin legs slung around my waist. The feel of your breath against my cheek, the warm pecks of kisses your lips gave so freely. Then nothing, Eoin. I am cold now, I have always been cold since you turned from me,' she gasps, her chest rattles, her breaths are shallow.

I lean forward. 'I'm here,' I say, 'go in peace,' and I wrap my arms around her, press my cheek against hers. She weighs nothing as my arm slips under her, her breath is apple-sweet, lessening, her body cooling. I press my cheek harder against hers, tighten my grip on her, like her fingers around the rose, my hand in the gorse, toes pressed up to a fire, I hold her until her story ends, or starts anew.

Chapter Twenty

Throughout the long morning, I am alert to all whispers, to the hurried footsteps of sisters, to the sad eyes of residents. I wait for a commotion, for an announcement. There is nothing. Do people know now? When someone passed in Shanaglish, or throughout the dotted villages and towns of Galway, there would be queues of people snaking the streets, waiting at the door of the deceased to place a kiss on their forehead, shake the hands of the bereaved, to share the moment and split the burden of loss. The corridors of Castlemacgarrett are mostly empty. After my duties, I flit from place to place, unable to rest, pacing, meandering, hiding. The door of Agnes' room is shut, as I expected it to be. I walk in the garden and through the overgrown rose bushes. The sky is beautifully clear, freezing, stinging, and the sun appears white. At dinner, I sit, as usual in silence and no one speaks to me. The slimy smell of chicken fat is choking. I hear them mention her name, they say it is a shame. God rest her soul, they say. She is in a better place, they say. The sign of the cross is formed over boiled vegetables. At last, they know she has gone. I remember the warmth of her cheek against mine, then her cooling skin when I kissed her, how I felt her chest rise and fall, rise and fall, and then nothing between my arms. 'Go gcoinní Dia I mbos A láimhe thú, Agnes,' I whisper.

The sister next to me says, 'she was a dear old lady. I'll miss her.'

'That she was,' says the nun opposite, as she slurps custard from her spoon. 'Her son telephoned this morning. He'll be here now I imagine, or soon.'

I look up from my bowl of untouched custard. 'Excuse me, is Mrs Kelly's son here?' The other sisters look at me, startled, scared.

'He's on his way. Mrs Kelly passed away in the night, we rang him this morning.'

'Thank you, Sister,' I nod, then push my spoon through the thick gloop in my bowl, 'excuse me,' I say and I stand up and leave. The corridors are empty because everyone is eating and I quickly hurry to the day room. From there, I can see the hallway. I sit and wait in the chair that was always Agnes'. The teapot picture hangs just the same, still at a tilt. Patrick sits down beside me. He smiles. I smile back. We both look towards the door, I hear rain start to fall on the roof, then against the windows. 'That is surprising when the sky was so clear earlier,' I say to Patrick.

The doorbell rings. Patrick disappears.

I stand up. Sisters hurry past on their way to evening prayers. I fall in behind them, slower, halting. There is a man at the door. I see him through the glass panels, his face is blurred. I change direction to go to the door, but Mother Superior is there first. She lets him in. I sit down in the nearest chair, a hard wooden dining chair, and pretend to inspect the heel of my foot. Peering up, I see he is wearing a black suit, and has blonde hair cut fashionably with a side parting. I cannot see the beginnings of grey, or a peeking scalp. I watch as Mother Superior shakes his hand and raindrops fall to the ground.

‘The rain started just as I got out of the car,’ he moans, ‘I didn’t have a brolly.’ His accent is all Dublin smooth. I look at his hands; he didn’t bring flowers. Agnes told me he would. I close my eyes and imagine the feel of his hand in mine. It would be wet, perhaps slide against my skin. He would notice my bitten down nails compared to his perfectly trimmed ones. I would lead him to the seat where Agnes sat for all those endless days, looking at the tilted picture. I would sit next to him. What would we say? I can hear his voice, velvet soft, and charming, the twinkle of a bright star in his eyes. He would smile and so would I but when I open my mouth to speak the words will be Irish.

‘Go raibh maith agat as teacht,’ I would say and take his hand again, blessing him, still in Irish, ignoring the grin on his face, or how, when he thinks I am not looking, he checks his leather strapped wrist watch. I would ask him if he received my letter, if that is why he has come. Then, I remember the letter I received from John telling me Mammy had passed, telling me she was at peace. I folded it six times, over and again, until the paper was a small square in my palm, the words crossed out with creases. I put it in my pocket and left it there, the weight of it like stones. I only responded when Hugo’s letter arrived, my brother, her son, telling me the news. We should have been there. I would say the same to Eoin, you should have been there.

‘Ba chóir duit a bheith ann,’ but he cannot understand my Irish and would simply thank me again. I would tell him about Agnes, hand him the bundle of her memories to keep, tell him to treasure them. She loved you, I would say, like no one else. But no, how could I? They are not mine to give. I was never given my mother’s memories. Who took care of them? It should have been me.

I feel my hands press together in my lap, the skin on my fingers warm, for once, and moist, as I sit up. Eoin is still standing at the door with Mother Superior. I watch them. He stands very straight, smiles, nods his head. Their words are whispered, Mother Superior’s head hangs low, while Eoin stands tall.

‘Agnes, he came back for you. Buíochas le dhia,’ I whisper. Sisters are still hurrying past me and I stand to join them, smoothing my skirts, taking a step in the direction of the chapel for evening prayers. As we pass the door, where Eoin is being ushered in the opposite direction to the relative’s room, I smell the chemical scent of aftershave, sharp, clinical, like a menthol burn. I hear the whack of his polished shoes on the tiled floor of the hallway. And then we have passed. I slip my hand into my pocket and feel the letter I wrote to him still tucked between the pages of my Bible, signed, *Go mbeannaí Dia duit, Sister Patricia.* He came back for her at least, and I know, that I too must do the same, for my mother.

Just a week later, I wait by the door of the convent, where even the red geraniums have shrivelled completely, their petals just embers, for leave to go on a trip to Galway. I am to be accompanied to the bus station. It is ridiculous, as if I am too old and frail, too unsure, to navigate the peculiarities of Irish roads, the potholes, the loose stones and the soupy puddles, as if I have never walked alone before. A sister approaches me with caution, bowing her head, so I can see the dust which has settled on the black fabric of her wimple. She is one of the new ones and her face is black too, but without the sweat sheen of the African sun. I have never seen black skin dulled by the Irish weather before. For us, the cold brings out roses in our cheeks, but for her, it blackens her skin further, stops it shining, like unpolished shoes. It saddens me to see her face so out of place.

‘Sister,’ she says, her voice deep, like they all were back in Ghana, a lion’s growl. ‘Sister,’ she says again and she tells me, with a meek smile, that she is to accompany me to the bus stop. Ridiculous I tell her. But her face, though dulled, is not wrinkled like mine and her shoulders are square where mine are stooping. I pull them back and thank her. She takes my small leather bag, curling her fingers around the worn handle.

‘Shall we go?’ she says, her smile strengthening, teeth white. I don’t much care for conversation, and she walks slightly behind me down the long driveway out of Castlemacgarrett. Despite this, our separation, she insists, and her deep voice follows like an echo.

‘A trip to Galway will be nice. There’s so much of Ireland I’d like to see but walking with you to the bus is as far as I’ve travelled in this country.’

‘You travelled from Ghana, Sister, that’s a far greater distance.’

‘But now I’m here,’ her voice is feathered at the edges as she takes larger strides to walk beside me. As she reaches my side, the mist of her breath forges ahead. ‘I want to see more.’

‘Not yet, Sister.’ I can’t imagine her face in the bus window, a shadow weaving through the green of the country. Of course, people would stare. There would be an empty seat beside her no doubt.

I first saw her the day after Agnes passed, standing at the edge of the lunch room, her head bowed in prayer. I recognised within her my own distance, because, like myself, when I eat, despite the chatter filling the room, noisy like a flock of birds, she was quiet. She glanced around, eyes wide, large. A face like those I was once so used to seeing, so many of them staring at me from behind desks, at markets, on dusty streets, but not here, in the greying winter of Ireland.

‘I’m sorry about that lady, Agnes, was it? I heard you were friendly with her?’

‘No more friendly than I am with all the residents. It’s our job to tend to them. God has welcomed her home.’

‘I take them their tea, so many turn away, or look right through me, like I’m a shadow or something to be feared.’

I stop walking, we are on the road into Claremorris town now, and I turn to her. The wind is swiping at us, pulling tears from our eyes, and they glisten on her cheeks, like how I remember the beads of sweat in Ghana.

‘Give it time, Sister. We all need to adapt.’ I remember Sister Acquiline saying something similar to me when I first arrived in Ghana. All those years ago, and now Ghana has come to me. She shivers, pulling her shawl tighter.

‘Why did you come here, Sister?’

She shakes her head. ‘It’s where the order wanted me, after Lyons, and I was in no rush to return to Ghana. Independence brought so much uncertainty and then the coup, well, I wanted to get away.’

I nod. ‘Ireland has her own struggles, Sister. But it will get easier.’ I resist an urge to reach out to her and start walking again, saying the wind will be the death of us if we don’t keep moving. She follows on, unnecessary. Old as I am, I do not need help to get to the bus station. Ireland has changed and the danger of so many years before has gone, evaporated like an early morning fog.

As we walk, the Ghanaian sister puffs beside me, the cold cutting her lungs with every breath and her feet pounding the hard road. I imagine Agnes laughing at the two of us, laughing that they think I need help to walk, and probably asking all sorts of questions about the ‘black nun.’ But Agnes has gone and Ireland is moving on without her, and perhaps, so can I.

Chapter Twenty-one

April 1931

Dear Mammy,

It is the start of the wet season once again, and every year, when the rains fall, I am taken back to our farm in Ireland. There is something about the damp ground softening beneath my feet, like bog, and the feel of rain (even though it is warm here!) on my face reminds me of how your fingers stroked my hair when I was small. And do you know that all lands smell the same in rain, here and home, the scent of soil and grass lifting into the air, nature's perfume.

I never did write to tell you of my trip to Elmina, maith diom e seo, and now it seems so far away that I do not know what to say. Still, I will try to tell you something of it. The port is very exciting, not at all like Galway with its groaning ships on steely grey waves. In Elmina, the coast gives way to a lagoon which is packed with long, wooden fishing boats that weave in and out all day and night, some cast nets and simply float from the coast, while others are dragged out of the water onto the sand, fish squirming in their bowels. The boats are thin and rough and across the inside of each are planks of wood for seats. They bustle together in the lagoon, like sheep crowding to get out of a pen. I can't imagine how they fare out at sea. It can be as rough here as at home, the waves, their backs hunched in anger, rise high above the sand, before slamming down, again and again, with a slapping sound, like how Patrick smacked his hand repeatedly against the table, anxious and agitated, on the nights before he went out with his comrades.

Elmina is not big and the streets are lined with market sellers, women like Esi, and men, and even children, calling out, holding up fruit, vegetables, jewellery, sometimes there are crowds of goats and chickens and men squabbling over prices, the animals shouting out their own protests, kicking up the red dirt of the street, scratching holes. It's chaotic and beautiful. They do not queue like the polite people of Galway, or share the day's news. To go to market here is a battle; to survive you must do well.

Then there is the castle, or fort. It watches over the village, high above, white, bright, unforgettable, rather like us nuns. And yet, no one talks of it, the locals, existing in the dust and dirt of the streets, or the salty sting of the coast, do not look up to it. I wandered there alone, thinking as I did of the cathedral, the gaol, of you, and I walked the dark corridors, encrusted with moss, crumbling stone, dark and dank, with, sour, bitter air, and I wanted to turn back.

It was crowded with bad memories, of things which were unspoken, and although it was empty, I felt jostled along that corridor, pushed along, like the flat palm of the past was pressing into my back. The walls were too close and I closed my eyes, but instead I thought of the cells where my brothers waited, wondering what would happen, feeling the air grow staler, craning for light, resting on hard floors, that same smell of mildew, and felt them shivering beside me, shoulder to shoulder. I opened my eyes as I bumped into the wall and through a narrow slit in the stone, I could see the beach, pigs were rifling through the sand, men were wrapping up nets, boats were being carved, and I imagined the noise, the calling, the snorting, the scraping, the whip of the wind, but for me, in the fort, it was silent. As though, like for so many here before me, life was muted.

To my left was a door in the wall, blue splintered wood, black rot, it is called the door of no return. The locals avoid it, saying they can hear the crying of slaves, who, after months lingering in cells, were pushed through that door and loaded onto ships, taken across oceans, from both their homes and their freedom. I held my breath and listened for their cries, but there were none. I placed my hand on the white painted wall, chipped in places unlike our cottage, but like our shed, and I pressed until the tips of my fingers began to ache, until I no longer felt the damp cold, and instead of the screams of slaves, my head was filled with my brothers, and I saw them again lined against the cold wall, heard the crunch of the lorry tyres as it drove away with them, and I wondered about the last door they travelled through?

Mammy, where ever I go, will I always find memories of them? Is there a place on earth that doesn't hold their suffering somehow? I thought it would be contained in Ireland, perhaps I was wrong. Go bhfóire Dia orainn. And once again I have taken you back there too, forgive me.

Despite the fort, Elmina is a peaceful place, and the locals are simple folk who do not ask for much. I think we used to be like that. They welcomed me and I had a lovely few days. In fact, it reminded me of our family days in Salthill, but without the caustic wind and grey clouds. Oh, remember how Harry would moan about the cold as we huddled on the clacking pebbles and Patrick used his hurley to fling them out to sea. We had fun though, didn't we, away from the farm, so perhaps it's something you could consider, le cúnadh Dé. Maybe visit Hugo in Manchester? I fear that Ghana is too far, more's the pity. Besides, one day I will come home to you.

More importantly, tell me how you are, I long to hear from you.

What other news is there? Oh yes, how could I forget? The cathedral is finished. Mammy it is beautiful, I wish you could see it.

Part Three

Co. Galway, 1969

Chapter Twenty-two

I am on a bus again. The seats are softer than before, with a slight padding beneath navy velour covers. When I travelled from Galway to Cork, the seats were hard leather which caused you to slide if the bus hit a pothole, so that you had to tense your muscles, like gritted teeth, for fear of ending up on the floor. It smells the same, strangely. A mix of shoe polish and silage. Dust has settled on the metal window frame, but the glass is clear, with just small greasy smears from the heads that have rested here before mine. There are less people on this bus, in fact, just six of us, and on the roads, overtaking like eager teenagers on bikes, are cars. The roads used to be emptier. I jump when a car, its engine grumbling, accelerator straining, comes up beside us, a flash of grey or black, then is gone, leaving no trace around the bends, just a memory and a doubt it was ever there.

This time, instead of heading away from Galway, I am travelling towards it. Like years before, I rest my head against the window and watch the countryside go by, merging into greys and greens and browns, then the stark brightness of a cottage, a row of houses, brightly coloured doorways, the glinting cars, the bark of dogs chasing the wheels of our bus. I watch it, remembering the quiet of my journey so many years ago. Remembering the bog and the gorse and the rain. It is not raining today, but it is not warm either. It is bitter like the month they were killed, ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha. The spikey cold that bore into us throughout those searching days is back, it never went, it is me who is returning.

Agnes would be pleased, go mbeannaí Dia í, that I am going home. Her funeral, or what I heard of the arrangements, was too lavish. One of the sisters who attended to represent Castlemacgarrett, said huge white lilies filled the church, their petals long and thin as seagulls' beaks, spilling tiny, golden grains of pollen along the aisle, like sand. And afterwards, there were silver platters of sandwiches with fancy fillings like prawn mayonnaise or salt beef, plates of devilled eggs and tiny sausages on sticks. Whatever is wrong with plain ham or cheese? Waitresses poured tea into bone china white cups with fluted rims, and men and women alike sipped on wine. I asked if there were other flowers, ones with bright petals, reds, yellows, pinks, but there were just the lilies. It was in a local hotel in Claremorris and the sister laughed miserably, as she told us over lunch, how the room was too big, too grand with a winking chandelier in the centre and polished floors. There was just a handful of guests, who stood lost, voices echoing in the space. She didn't mention Eoin, but as she clinked her knife and fork together across her plate, she said it was a sad day, you know, with so few there. The other sisters around the table nodded in agreement but said at least she was spoiled at the end. I bit at the skin on the inside of my mouth, releasing a metallic tang amongst the half-chewed sinews of cabbage, and thought how it was probably everything Agnes didn't want. I am glad I didn't attend, I could have, but I said my goodbyes in that bare little room. I felt her cheek go from warm to cold, her chest slowly, slowly, fall still. I held her hand, I whispered stories. It was enough.

'Agnes,' I said, before I left this morning, pausing outside what used to be her room and pressing my hand to the door, 'they've given me leave to see you. But, I know you'll understand why I'm going to Galway instead.' I waited for an answer, a sign to tell me she was listening. How silly! I scolded myself, it wasn't my belief, but my hope.

The bus jolts over a pothole and I lunge forward, putting my hand out to stop me hitting the seat in front. Go mbeannaí Dia orainn. The lady next to me smiles as we right ourselves, but she doesn't speak. I am rarely spoken to. Before, when I was training in Ardfoyle, people approached nuns, they took our hands, blessed themselves before us. Now I fear we are becoming invisible, just as we tried to make ourselves, we are disappearing and the most I get, when out and about (which is rare in itself these days), is a, 'Good morning, Sister,' and a tip of the head. The lady next to me is young in comparison to my years, perhaps forty, it's hard to say, and I am useless with ages, but she is not entirely grey and her skin is only starting to wrinkle at the eyes. She smiles nicely, showing her teeth, and when we are still and not thrown around the bus, she fiddles with a hole in the finger tip of her woollen gloves. I would like her to stop, for she is making me nervous, it is that kind of movement, but I cannot speak to her, besides, she may be worried about something herself.

We arrive too soon. I fear I am not ready; I sit in my seat and watch the other passengers, although most disembarked in the city, walk down the aisle, climb down the steps, and shiver in the shock of cold. The driver looks down the bus, he nods at me, 'are you alright, Sister?'

I assure him I am, and so I am forced to rise, to put one foot in front of the other, to walk down that narrow aisle, to hesitantly climb down the steps. I turn around and take my case from the driver.

'Thank you,' I say.

He smiles and sits back down behind the wheel to light a cigarette.

Beneath my feet the ground is forgiving. I turn a half circle and take a deep breath, comforted by the soft land, the wild grass, the rough stone walls, the smell of peat smoke and the salt of the Atlantic wind as I stand on the edge of the village. I shift my weight from leg to leg to prevent sinking into the muck of the grass verge at the side of the road. Shanaglish is quiet but for the squelching of my feet. I look forward. There is still just one shop and Whelan's bar. The streets are as uneven as they ever were, and mud litters the ground from farmers' boots. I thought there would have been more building but it is like it always was, a pastiche of greens and greys and browns. The wind forever strong and the sky laden with clouds. Behind me, out of sight, on the road out of town, is our farm. I glance once more at the small village with the haphazard paths and lopsided walls, at two men walking into the bar and a woman with a pram going into the Marty Coen's shop, if it is still his. Then I turn away from it, stepping carefully from the grass verge, and onto the road to start the walk home.

The road winds through fields, and beyond them there are rows of conifers, standing tall, on guard. When we were young we would follow that treeline home and then, lazy in youth, we never took the road, as Mammy did, no, we cut across the fields, trampling the tall grass and digging our heels into the soft mud, gathering stray seeds or leaves on our clothes, bringing home the scent of the outside: sludge and broken grass, thick and clean. The grass is tall, the pathways we traipsed along, outgrown and tangled once again. We never walked quietly, one of us would be shouting, another singing or humming, quarrelling, our screams and disagreements, laughs, like the screech of birds or buzz of insects. Now it is quiet. Years ago, as children, Mammy constantly warned us to keep the noise down before she shoved us out the door, only I doubt it was ever peaceful, there were always children running from house to field or house to shop, or the clip-clop of horses' hooves, the clanking grind of machinery, the odd engine. Mammy would heave herself after us, jurassic in her size, the effort reddening her face. If we didn't move fast enough, she rapped the back of our calves, sometimes the wooden spoon was still wet with stew, or batter, and made a slapping sound, like wellies flapping down in puddles, against our skin, and away we would go, across the fields, laughing, or crying, with her stinging warning, burning red on our legs. We screamed into the wind. We ran along the trees and through the fields, not minding the effort the soft ground caused or the mud that splattered higher than our knees.

I imagine us now, as adults, if we were all here, and in my mind we walk quietly, a parade of ghosts, and I want more than anything for us to be young again. But, as I look at the trees, which gently sway, I see only Patrick and Harry, walking like heroes, their feet stamping out alternate paces, arms swinging with no joint rhythm. I stumble on the gravelly road and reach out to the wall that separates it from the fields. The rocks are damp and rough like sandpaper. I stop and gather myself, leaning slightly. There was a time we laughed when one of us tripped, inevitably it was Harry.

‘Don’t laugh at your poor brother,’ Mammy always scolded. ‘He isn’t for the outside like you all, go mbeannaí Dia dó.’

Patrick was always by his side, pulling him up, brushing down his knees, banging his back to see off a coughing fit, or carrying him home. They are together now, I can feel them following me, their hands brushing against each other as they walk. I catch a flicker of light from the tall conifers. It is just the silver glare of the winter sun but it looks like someone running amongst them. Nora. I take a step back, afraid. The familiar fear. She is still in Africa. *She is still in Africa*, I tell myself again, to be sure.

‘You are Sister Patricia,’ I say out loud. Then again, ‘Sister Patricia.’ I take a step forward, scolding myself for even thinking of her.

The road begins to curve and at the end, I know, I will see the whitewashed walls on one side and on the other, the grey, jaunty structure of Shanaglish Church. Despite walking on the road, the grass from the verge is long and heavy with dew, so the hem of my skirt is sodden, my shoes clogged with mud and I’m slightly breathless. Nettles have caught my ankles and I want to bend down and scratch, the itch a furious sting. I am searching for excuses to remain where I am, on this side of the bend. A car, sudden as a camera flash, catches my eye in the sun from the lane on the other side of the field, I jump, and cower down. Then, as I slowly rise, feeling foolish, I begin to laugh. It is a small laugh at first, a slight tickle in my throat, but then it grows and I put my hand to my chest, and I lean forward slightly, laughing loudly, in a way I haven’t done for years, until it begins to hurt the bottom of my lungs, a dull ache, a slight compression like a closing fist. They are out of practice. I cannot catch my breath and I splutter, tears in my eyes, as I feel the weight of a hand on my shoulder. I straighten. Patrick nods to me. Like stifled giggles in Sunday mass, this is not the time. He marches ahead.

‘Wait for me. Please God, fan liom,’ I try to run after him, lifting my feet, one in front of the other, like pulling them from syrup, the ground is absorbing me. I want to stop, but I can’t let him go, and then I see it. The white shape of home protrudes from the bend in the road and Patrick disappears.

It needs painting, the white is chipped and dried mud is dusty on the walls, Mammy would never have allowed it to become so tired looking, God rest her soul. Outside the front door is a strange pair of boots. They are too shiny, and the laces haven't frayed. They are black, not long polished, and the soles look too thick, not worn down. Despite the soft ground, there is no mud on them. They are not the boots of my father, or Patrick or Harry, ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha. They are boots that have not fed the pigs in the early morning, or put the cows out to pasture. They have not taken part in the threshing season, or marched the bogs of Ireland in her defence. Harry's boots were often worn in, before he ever put them on, moulded to the shape of Patrick's feet, not his. Patrick got new boots; he was too big for hand me downs. Sometimes, I wore Daddy's old boots. Mammy kept them by the door after he had gone, and at times, we all liked to slip our feet into them, walk the fields, follow the snaking walls, or march up and down the yard with our feet comforted by the shape of our father's. Mammy did too. I would often watch her hang out sheets, when it was a good day for drying, and look down to see her feet in Daddy's boots, many sizes too big, so that when she walked back to the cottage she had to take larger steps and lift her knees slightly too high, go mbeannaí Dia í. The boots I see now, are smaller, cleaner. They were never ours.

Without realising what I am doing, I rest my hand on the gorse bush by the gate. I brush my fingers against the leaves but I haven't the courage Nora had to press down on the thorns.

'God have mercy,' I whisper. That name won't leave me.

I turn away from the door, scared it will open and reveal her, and by accident my eyes rest on the shed. Instantly, I am back in the place I tried to run from. Its walls are still white but the doors are painted black, not red. In 1920, there was straw scattered on the ground from the threshing, frozen into the dirt, fallen like the disjointed handwriting in the letter that told me they'd been taken. I take a deep breath. It is cold and damp, and I cough. The bitterness has gone, the slicing cold, blunt. I wish it would return. I walk closer, I can't stop myself as I mutter, go bhfóire Dia orainn, again and again, and remember how their boots left imprints in the ground, small trenches that filled with rain, froze, melted, re-filled. Then were gone. But not really, for I still see them. The shape of them pressed into the mud, and I look up.

A tree at the roadside, now without leaves, casts a shadow on the shed wall and I think of how it must have been. Go mbeannaí Dia orainn. I place my hand in the murk of the shadow and run it along the rough stone. It is cold, wet, and leaves a layer of dirt on my fingertips. I bring them to my mouth, bunch them up against my lips, inhale them. The smell of our farm. Of pigs and chicken feed, damp mould and hard work. Of home. The place they were taken from. I turn and look out across the field, then shuffle backwards until my heels hit the wall. I flatten my shoulder blades out, enjoying the winter damp of my clothes pressing into my skin. I look up, for Patrick would not have hung his head, and I spread out my arms. Feet together, arms out, a strange crucifixion. Go ndéana Dia trocaire orm. I am pinned to the wall, a cursing wind points at me. I stare into it and feel the firmness of the stone, the weight of my feet in the mud, and I understand that they could never have run. I am stuck, unable to peel myself away, as though their bodies left indents in the walls, and I have slipped into them. In front of me, in the fields, I see a distant slither of darkness. It is familiar as it slips through the waving grass. I want to look away. I cannot. I smell the musty rot of hay, turf fires, the earthy richness of wet mud. Patrick and Harry are nowhere to be seen now. The shadow stalks closer. My breaths quicken.

'Nora,' I fire the name into the curling wind. But it can't be her. She left years ago; she never came back. The fields are empty, not even the bark of a dog, or cry of a gull. Is she hiding? I look to the church across the road, with its jagged footpath and stumpy spire. A second home to us all when we were growing up.

I can still hear Mammy warning, 'now don't be bothering Father Nagle, either,' as she banished us from the house. But there was something in that winding, misshapen path, or about hiding amongst the well-kept shrubs, so different from the unkempt plants of our farm, and Father Nagle kept malted milks in a dented tin in the tabernacle.

I look to that church now and remember, not the games of hide and seek, or trying to listen in on confessions, but of the night, alone, that Nora spent, first standing, then sitting, and finally lying on the church floor besides the coffins of her brothers. My brothers. And with my cheek against the shed wall, just as my brothers' backs were pressed there, I feel Nora creep closer.

A claw of cold clasps my cheek, nails cutting, digging, deep into my skin. I want to move from the shed but I am restrained by an unmoveable weight. Pressed hard against the wall, I can't even struggle. I blink, shaking my head, trying to feel warmth in my face again, avoiding the bitter slap of the wind.

'Nora?'

The edges of my vision tear with a painful burn as I squint towards the church path. I see her feet first, walking slowly, unsteady. Pin pricks of light cloud my view, the tap of steps on stone throbs in my ears. My head whirls. Nora. It is Nora.

I can see her now. She is emerging, as she did then, tired, dishevelled, picking her way carefully along the path. She volunteered to sit with them during the night before their funeral mass because Mammy didn’t want them alone. Now, she is here again, in her gabardine coat, skin pale white despite years of the Ghanaian heat. The pin pricks of light distort my vision and Nora glows, all at once, then there is darkness.

Chapter Twenty-three

Inside the church, the two coffins were side by side at the altar. Over each was draped the Sinn Fein flag, and its colours, gold, green and white, were sunset bright. Nora walked up the aisle, one foot in front of the other, heel to toe, head bowed. She dipped to one knee upon reaching the front pew and made the sign of the cross, *in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit*. Father Nagle handed her the key to the church. It was heavy and made her skin smell metallic. He leaned forward and kissed Nora's forehead, placed his cold palm on her cheek, then left, walking, as slowly as she had come, up the aisle and out of the church door.

'It's going to be okay, boys,' she whispered. Then she got to her feet and moved from one candle to the next, extinguishing them with short, sharp breaths. Once smothered by the dark, Nora walked the same heel to toe walk as before, to the altar and placed her hands on the smooth wood of their coffins.

She had identified their bodies the day before, but she didn't want to think of that, of what they were beneath those nailed down lids, go ndéana Dia trocaire oraibh. She touched the flag on Harry's coffin and the fabric rippled beneath her hand like water. It was cool too. She did the same to Patrick's and then straightened them both.

'I'm proud of you,' Nora whispered, moving her face closer into the gap between the coffins. 'You were stupid, but I'm proud. I understand why you didn't run. I just wish you had.'

She heard Patrick's ever positive voice say, 'they would've shot us in the back then,' and without meaning to, she laughed, quietly. 'True.'

'Besides,' Patrick spoke again, 'Harry would never have kept up.'

Nora imagined Harry's protests, 'I try,' he would say and somewhere in the quiet church, he was there and he was telling them to leave him alone. 'Not tonight,' he was saying.

'Right so, boys. Tonight, we'll all be kind.' Nora sat then on the floor, cross-legged, between them. 'Harry you're right, this is not a night for cruelty, even kind cruelty.'

She kissed the coffins, small sparks, first Harry's, then Patrick's.

'I did try to find you, I just didn't know where to look.'

Patrick was shaking his head, waving his hand to tell her to stop. She couldn't bear to think of what they endured during the ten days they were missing. Their bodies told a grim story.

She rested her head on Patrick's coffin and it was hard, in the same way his chest muscles were. Nora brought her arms up then and placed them around it, and she hugged him.

'Get off would ya,' he would say, pulling away her arms. And so, she moved and did the same to Harry, who she always knew didn't mind her attention. Except in front of Patrick, when he would do the same. 'Get off, you sappy thing,' he would say.

She laughed. 'I miss you.'

'Ah stop,' they said in unison.

'Go ndéana Dia trócaire orainn.'

'Now then, don't get serious on us,' Patrick said. 'Remember the wakes we've been to, always great craic to be had.'

Nora nodded, and smiled. Mammy was a great one for a wake. There wasn't a corpse in Galway she hadn't visited before their mass. It had to be said there was something about the room when you entered, the coffin central, normally open, rosary beads entwined in the deceased's hands, and the relatives all in a line, and you, the guest, telling them, 'sorry for your troubles,' shaking their hands, kissing their cheeks. Then there would be drink, but not much, and plates of sandwiches, the offering of cigarettes and always a gaggle of children at the back of the room.

'We were that gaggle so many times, weren't we?' Nora touched her hand to the corner of Patrick's coffin. They always ended up feeling sick on egg or ham sandwiches, she remembered, and they would be there for hours, past dark. She fidgeted between the two coffins as the stone floor troubled her knees.

'I wish it wasn't like this.'

'Sure, it can't be helped,' said Patrick, while Harry nodded in agreement.

The dark had started to feel too close, suffocating, so she laid down in the space between them. As she did, she heard an engine and quickly sat up, desperately trying to ignore the quick beat of her heart as it thumped out her panic. Go bhfóire Dia orainn. She waited. She expected shots to break through the dark, perhaps shouting, and the thud of boots. She thought perhaps they wouldn't break down the door, and instead would simply set alight to the church. It wouldn't be the first to fall to fire. Go bhfóire Dia orainn. She waited. There was nothing. She laid back down and rested her head on the stone floor between her brothers.

Chapter Twenty-four

‘Nora.’

I put my hand to my head. There is a sharp pain across my temple. I try to open my eyes but a slash of white cuts across them.

‘Nora.’

That name. And a banging sound. A gentle knocking.

‘Father?’ I say.

The knocking stops.

‘Father Nagle, is that you?’ But then I feel beneath me with my hands and it is not the cold church floor as I imagined. It is soft, there is cotton and the weight above me is not the cold dark air of the church, it is an eiderdown. A musty smell like the inside of old cupboards. I force open my eyes. The pain strikes quickly, bright, furious. I shut them, then open them. I blink. It is not dark. There is a white ceiling above me. I turn and see white walls too. I look then at the door, at the shape of the room. It is completely different but it is the same. My hands clench the flannel bedspread, and I twist it up to my chin.

How did I get here? There, where the wall is now bare, there used to be a shelf with all my books. It bowed slightly because the wood was too thin and the books too heavy. And across from the bed, was a chest of drawers with my clothes, Nora’s clothes, always so neatly folded. Floral dresses I can no longer wear and buttoned blouses. How did I get here?

I gather the blankets further around me. My vision struggles to keep up and for a second there is darkness. Then, fully illuminated, my old room. The weight of my body in a bed, not the one I once slept in, a new one, but in the same place my old one once was. I bite back vomit. There is another knock at the door.

I remember then.

I saw Nora on the church path. And after that? I don’t know.

‘Can I come in?’

The voice is female. It is not Father Nagle. I was never in the church. That was Nora, years before. Never me.

The door opens and a sturdy, middle-aged woman stands in the doorway.

‘Sister,’ she smiles and takes a step towards where I am perched on the edge of the bed. ‘Nora.’

I shake my head. Not her. I am not her.

‘I found you, outside by the shed. You must have fainted. You hit your head as you fell. Is it sore?’

I put my hand to my temple where the pain is most piercing and feel moist flesh, the ragged edges of ripped skin.

‘It’s just a graze, I’m sure.’

She stands there. I look at her. The room feels smaller than it ever did before. The air is too warm.

‘You were calling for Father Nagle,’ says the woman. ‘Asking him to let you out.’

‘Out?’

‘He was the priest here, wasn’t he? During that time?’

I think back to Nora in the church with their bodies, all those years ago. How she, I, woke to Father Nagle banging at the door.

I nod.

‘Poor man. He died not long after all the troubles, or so I’ve been told. Never quite got over it.’

‘I’m in my old house?’

‘You were lying in the mud outside. I had to get Máirtín, my husband, to lift you in here. You were unconscious.’

‘I’m sorry for the bother.’ My face flushes.

‘Should I call the doctor? Your head-’

‘No! No, thank you. I’m fine.’ I need to get out of this room, this house. The blankets smell too sweet, and the windows are closed. There is no air.

‘Sure, have a cup of tea, won’t you. I can’t let you go like that.’ She gestures again to my injury. ‘Come through to the kitchen when you’re ready.’

Once she has gone, I get to my feet, and wobbly at first, I clutch the bed post. Smooth like the wood of their coffins. I want to shut my eyes and feel my way out of the room without ever seeing it again. But I can't, the fall has left me feeling peculiar. I tell myself that the world outside, the craggy landscape of our childhoods, the constant cold, the rain, the white-washed cottage, the snuffling pigs, Mammy breaking her heart by the range, the socks still drying above it for days, I pretend none of it ever existed, that I am not in the cottage where it all began, and I hurry out, eyes down to a pink carpet that wasn't here years before.

I open the door to the kitchen. My feet don't want to move, stuck like they were before, by the shed. The lady is smiling, then she apologises. 'Look at me. No manners at all. I'm Áine.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. And I step in. My muscles ache with the effort. It's not real, I tell myself over and over.

'Nonsense. There was talk you were in Ireland again, Sister, but I didn't expect to find you laying in my field.' Áine, busy pouring boiling water into a brown ceramic teapot, laughs.

'Don't be going to any trouble for me,' I say.

'It's no trouble at all. Sure, I wouldn't mind one myself. Besides, himself, will be in before long, he's seeing to the pigs, then he'll be looking for something warm.' She gestures her head to the door.

I take another step into the kitchen. The air is stifling.

'We thought you'd be back for the memorial.'

'We?'

'Oh, you know, people in town. Your family are missed.'

'You still have a memorial for them?'

'Of course, nothing fancy. Just a few words, perhaps a poem.'

I feel lightheaded and unexpectedly stumble. My hand grabs at the back of a kitchen chair.

Áine has her back to me, she is solid, her body filling the space that was always Mammy's, and is busy laying out cups, each with a teaspoon in it, fussing just as my mother did for guests. I watch her reach up to a press and take out a loaf of bread wrapped in brown paper and carve off thick slices. I turn away. Mammy always made sandwiches when people called round, or ladled them a bowl of soup or stew or whatever she had simmering on the range. There was always something. And that is what is missing, I suddenly realise, in the thick air, there is no warm smell of boiled carrots, turnips, the sharp sweetness of recently sliced onions, or the saltiness of boiled ham. There is peat smoke - there was always that, but then there is in every Irish home, Castlemacgarett included - and there is that smell, so hard to pinpoint, of winter, of the cold and frost that permeates clothes and corners and fills entire spaces when the door opens. I can smell the damp of dog, although there is no dog to be seen, and when Áine moves there is a burst of something floral, or sweet. Mammy never wore perfume.

I rest my other hand on the back of the chair and blink, trying to clear my head. On the floor, I see the same flagstones we all ran upon for years. There was a time Mammy tripped over the dog - it wasn't supposed to be inside but it had followed Harry in for the heat of the fire. I heard the awful crack of her fall from the bedroom, and I ran to her. So did Harry. She was laid out on the floor, vegetable peelings from the bowl she had been carrying, all around her, slithers of shining skin, and she cried out for Daddy. I ran to find him in the fields, while Harry stayed cradling her head in his lap, but I found Patrick instead and he came back with me. Harry said he was sure she would die from the sound of her head on those flagstones, but it was only a bit of bruising in the end. I look at them now and hear the crack again, the sound of ceramic smashing on the floor, the dog's claws scratching against them when he sneaked inside, of all the water splashed, the soup, the crumbs, the mud. And Mammy, always sweeping them clean, or on all fours, scrubbing. They are not as clean now. I see bits of food around the edges, small ribbons of carrot peelings, the tissue skin of an onion, the shine of splattered meat fat and the glisten of tiny sugar crystals, like frost, in the corners. Mammy would tut, she kept a proud home.

Áine turns towards me carrying a tray. It is full with wedges of cake and those thick sandwiches I saw her cutting. I can smell the whiff of overboiled egg and picture the greying yolk before I see it. Tea slops from the delicate cups onto the tray and when she places it down on the table, I notice the pink rosebuds on my teacup clash with the yellow primroses on the saucer. Again, I hear Mammy tut.

'Sit down there,' Áine pulls out a chair and an old cushion falls to floor. She stoops down to get it. 'One day, or so Máirtín promises, we'll get those fancy chairs with upholstered centres. Wouldn't that be nice?'

Before I can reply, she hurries over to the sideboard and picks up a stainless-steel sugar bowl and proffers a heaped spoon in my direction.

I shake my head. A sharp whip of pain. There is a radio playing in the background, very faint, but a nagging sound that was never here before. The music is cheery and bounces up and down as a male voice sings. I catch Áine's eye and she bobs her head. 'Do you like Joe Dolan, Sister?'

'Who?'

'The singer.'

'I don't know him.'

'He's alright. My Máirtín doesn't mind it either, but he really just wants the football or hurling scores. You can't get near the thing on a Sunday when Galway's playing.'

'Patrick and Harry would've been the same.' Their names don't seem to leave the air between us after I speak, like breath on a cold day that makes itself seen. I turn around to look behind me, expecting to see them standing by the window. But there is nothing except a slight condensation on the glass.

'It was a tragedy what happened to them boys,' Áine shakes her head. 'And the Brits never even admitted it, did they?'

'I'm sorry?'

'They say you went to the inquest and all?'

I look out of the window and across to the familiar fields.

'Are you okay, Sister? That was a nasty fall.'

I lean forward and flatten my palms against the wood of the table. It is smooth, polished. Each knot and blemish has been sanded down and so now the surface of the table is more like a painting than something that was once alive.

'Sister, we never forget them round here.'

I look at the wood, at the way its colours are intensified by the sheen on it, how the swirls of it are shades of mustard and sienna, walnut and sepia.

'Nora, are you okay?'

That name. My breath catches. 'I'm sorry. I have to go.'

I run to the door, lift the clasp and it clangs behind me as I rush out into the cold. My feet jolt against the stone then sink, as I try to run, dragging each foot from the claggy mud. I limp across the field, hearing the gulls shriek while my heart thuds a volley of gunshots and my head, fragile as eggshell, throbs with a crushing pain. I wish it would rain. I don’t want it to be so clear, the edges of everything outside are too sharp. My home village. The grass is still tangled, the bogs still sodden, the handful of houses still packed full, spilling out with babies and toddlers. There are still grazing sheep and cows, chickens underfoot, the deep bark of dogs, the clanking of machinery. It is all still here and the imprint of their backs will always be on the shed wall, their footprints in the frozen earth, my mother at the door calling to them. Nora prowling. I wish it would rain and wash it all away, wash me away.

Chapter Twenty-five

'Patrick,' I whisper, and look around, 'Harry?' I didn't expect to get off the bus in Galway city but the pulsing pain in my head beat out her name, *Nora. Nora* with every bump and hole in the road. I had to escape. Then I saw my brothers in the crowds at the bus station.

We link arms and walk through the rushing streets. I don't think about where they are taking me until I see it. We stop and look across the bridge. In front of us, in the same grey stone from years before, is Galway Cathedral, Galway Gaol. I feel pressure on my hands, Patrick and Harry gripping tighter, and yet, I start to walk again, leaving them behind, as I cross the bridge.

The cathedral casts the street in shadow. I drag my feet once again to its wooden doors. I can still see the soldier's arm as he used the door as a shield to keep me out, keep Nora out. What do I expect now? And this place. This place disguised as a home of God that was once full of terror. Why am I here? The stone must hold the screams of so many men, the brickwork the lies of a generation, or their untold truths. Go ndéana Dia trócaire orainn. And yet, I am helpless to stop myself, as though Nora, like an unbreakable habit, is forcing me as I walk through the doors.

Inside, I kneel at the first pew and bless myself: In ainm an Athar agus an Mhic agus an Spioraid Naoimh. Amen. Thankfully, there are a couple of people dotted sporadically, heads down, praying. I strain to hear the whispers of their prayers because I do not know how to begin my own. Everything about this cathedral feels unholy. The coloured lights from the stained-glass windows do not bring beauty, they are fresh wounds in the stone, all reds and oranges. Burning. The grey stone is as I remembered in Ghana, just as I wrote home about so many times, the same stone I told Sister Acquiline about, but now, with the bronze dome overhead there is a green hue, the beginning of mildew, over everything. I shiver. A gentleman stands and walks up the aisle. His steps are small and quiet. Like Nora's. I lower my head but there is nothing. Help me, I mouth. Help me.

An incredible clatter of sound reverberates throughout, a round of shots, slamming doors. Violence.

The candles at the altar flicker. I look around. Is she here?

The man, with reddened cheeks, stoops to reclaim his dropped umbrella. His clumsiness struck me like the shock of a sudden fall. I am breathless, shaking. I glance around, quickly, jittery, like the accused. Like the men who were once locked inside here.

Now there is just myself at the back and an elderly woman stooped by the altar. Then footsteps. They stop behind me.

She has followed me.

‘Forgive me Father, for I have sinned,’ I panic. I only want peace.

‘Nora,’ says a gravelled voice.

I whip around, too quickly, and muscles stretch with a sharp twinge in my back. There is a man standing slightly behind my pew. He smiles. I stare at him, at the something familiar in the hook of his nose.

‘Nora,’ he speaks softly and yet, at that name, I move away, slide, just a few centimetres further.

‘John?’ I turn a bit further to face him, twisting my body around, knotting it, but I do not stand up. My legs won’t allow it. ‘John Hession?’

He nods, then gestures to the space next to me and says, ‘may I?’

I don’t speak but he sits anyway.

‘Nora-’

‘Sister Patricia.’

‘Of course.’

‘Sorry, it’s just-’

‘I understand.’

We sit then, looking forward towards the altar. I am trying to recall him and how he was all those years ago, but all I remember is when we sat on the rotten hay and he told me they were never coming home. He apologises now for interrupting my prayers and says Áine told him I was in Shanaglish. She sent word to Whelan’s that I had returned, that I was hurt. There was no one else she could think of who knew my family so well. His voice is the same. A gentle plodding of words. I breathe deeply, relieved it is him. He smells of whiskey. He continues saying he was coming to find me at Áine’s house, but, by the time he got there I had gone. I want to ask why it matters, why did he want to see me? But he stutters on, saying, you ran from her house, then pauses, adding, your house. The farm. He lowers his voice and says my head looks sore.

I can’t piece it together. How is he here? Who is he talking about?

‘Áine?’I question out loud. A name not familiar to my story.

He reminds me of the woman who lives in my house now. The lady who stood by the sink that was my mother’s and cut sandwiches just as Mammy did. And then I remember the sickliness of her perfume infusing the thick, warm air of the kitchen. I don’t want to think of her, or that place, and I ask John how he found me here.

‘I saw you board the bus. I followed.’

‘Why?’

‘Áine said you seemed confused. She was worried. Your head.’

He keeps talking about her and I snap that I am fine.

I hear John swallow, a moist, sticky gulp. I pick at a hardened piece of skin around my thumb.

‘You were confessing?’

I put my hand to my rosary, inhale, and say it is a beautiful cathedral.

John, as ordinary as he ever was, laughs and says it is but that the church in Shanglish, the spikey stone building with uneven paths, does the job just the same.

I don’t look at John as I tell him I thought of this place when I was in Ghana. I tell him about the cathedral they were building and how it reminded me of home, of here when it was a gaol. I turn to look about me, avoiding this shabby man, waiting for the familiar silhouettes of my brothers. I check the lightest places, the pews, the baptistry, but they are nowhere. Even as I do I ask myself why. They are not here, they can’t be. But I look again and peer into the darkest corners, half closing my eyes in case Nora is waiting again too, aware, perhaps, that we are no longer separate. I feel the chill in the air, so familiar in churches, but this one is crueller, more determined. It cannot be ignored. Go bhfóire Dia orainn.

The cathedral in Ghana was always so stuffy, the air wet with heat and when mass was said, despite its grand size, it was brimming with bodies, with singing prayers, the sweetness of sweat, the lingering taste of spice from combined breaths. I always thought it so welcoming. The interior was painted white and it was so bright you had to close your eyes for fear of blindness. I remember how I smiled and prayed, how I embraced Sister Patricia and left Nora to wither outside on the steps. But somehow, she survived. I can feel her breath, her cathedral chill, on my neck.

‘Ghana must be quite the place.’

‘It was hard, John.’

‘It was harder here, I’m sure.’

‘I know.’

‘Do you?’

‘Of course.’ I grip the rosary tighter and turn my face away from him, then I thank him, in tiny whispers, for all he did for my mother, because I never told him at her funeral.

‘You didn’t stay.’

I move my finger from one bead to the next. ‘I couldn’t bear it, John.’

‘People were pleased to see you.’

‘It was too much, John.’ Even now, in the cool of the cathedral, I can feel the heat of that day, even the touch of the priest’s blessing on my forehead felt like the sudden burn of a spitting fire. Hugo and I were the only family there, we barely spoke, outnumbered by people not related to us, but people, nonetheless, we grew up beside. I held so many hands, some limp in my fingers, some vigorous in their shaking. *Sorry for your loss,* echoed through the room like a ghostly chant, whispered, shouted, quiet, loud. Everyone was crowded into our cottage, which was normally so ordered, and stories and words, laughter, tears, every terrible thing that ever happened, was all crammed in too, amongst the smell of egg and onion, salted ham, porter and whiskey. There were not enough chairs but people stood, leaned and perched around that heavy kitchen table, with no regard for the plates of sandwiches and pots of tea plonked upon it. My back was to the fire and its heat travelled up my spine and across my shoulders. And Mammy’s body was turning colder and colder in the middle of it all. I shiver.

‘She was barely buried and you were gone.’

‘I said goodbye, it was enough.’

‘Everyone was asking after you.’

‘John, you don’t need to tell me I ran away. Do you think I don’t know?’ I grit my teeth as I speak and John slumps back, away from me, along the pew. ‘I’m sorry. It’s not your fault.’

‘I don’t blame you, Sister.’

‘I was running long before she died.’

‘Because of Patrick and Harry?’

‘Is everything always because of them?’

‘Is that why you went away, Nora?’

‘Sister Patricia. Nora’s gone.’ Even as I say it, and amidst John’s grumbling apology, I can see the darkness edge down the aisle, creeping shadows, from the corners. John, with an annoying flatness in his voice, like a calm, lapping sea, reminds me my mother never stopped calling me Nora.

I stand up, startling myself, leaning over John and my voice snaps the silence of the cathedral, like a stamping foot breaking a twig, as I say that is why I never came back. I edge along the pew and into the aisle. I blink at the darkness gathering in my eyes, wrapping me in a blanket, moth-eaten with the holes of memories. I turn, regathering my composure, creeping forward to face him again.

‘I did come back, John. To Ireland. I was invalided back home from Ghana to Cork.’

‘I know, Sister.’ He doesn’t look at me. I step closer.

‘Mammy came to see me in the Mother House. She rested her hand on my brow, just as she used to do when I was sick as a child, and I was pleased she was there.’ I pause wrapping my arms about me, pulling the blanket of my past tighter to me. Her touch was the first touch I remembered in so long, after years alone. It seemed so natural, despite my illness, to take her hand, or her wrist, the boniness of it a shock, and squeeze it with what little strength I had.

‘I was pleased she was there,’ I say again to John.

Somehow though, in the pain of remembering, the blanket slips and, like when I was ill, I start to shiver and my memories begin to churn and warp and like they always do, they begin to reshape and I can’t be sure of anything. I was too sick back then to truly remember. When she came, I was too weak to speak and perhaps I didn’t reach out for her at all. The warmth I recall, was that the warmth of my fever? Perhaps she didn’t reach out for me. I turn my back to John, hunch over, try to block it all, but somewhere reaching through the cold I can feel her fingers gently brushing against my forehead, constant as the waves against my boat home, and I can still hear her as she started talking, quietly, in a voice that was never meant to be heard, words lost, almost, to her breath, but I heard them as she said *at least you're back now, Nora*

It is suddenly all too clear. Like the ringing bells of reluctant surrender. *Nora. Nora.*

'She wasn't visiting me, Sister Patricia, she was visiting a ghost.'

I hear the pew creak as John stands and tells me she was only pleased I was away from Africa, completely oblivious to the pain, the wound, her use of that name, a sharpened knife, caused me.

Then I turn to face him and we stand in the aisle. 'John,' I speak slowly, letting my rage creep with the words, 'John, after all the years she still couldn't let Nora go.'

He shakes his head, 'Nora was her daughter, how could she?'

He has a silly half smile on his face. I want to shake him, scream in his face, and the icy anger reaches a boiling point inside me. That name. I left her in Africa. I never wanted her back in Ireland. Nora died in Africa.

'After everything, John. How could she?'

'What do you mean?'

'After everything we went through back then, she should have understood. She must have wanted to escape it all herself and yet she clung to me, to Nora, when I needed to be free.'

The memory of her warm touch on my forehead has gone and the pounding ache of my injury has returned. I lean forward over the pew in front of me, a swirl of nausea rising, and I scratch at the papery skin on the back of my hands to distract me.

'What do you want, John? Why are you here?'

He doesn't speak and I wait, the nausea rising to my throat, drying my mouth, until sweat beads on my forehead and I am back there, in Cork, on my sick bed but there is no one beside me.

'By the time I was well enough to sit up, to talk, to get out of bed, she was gone, John. She never came back.'

'You never came back to Galway once you were well.'

'I was busy with the order.'

‘Ara now, too busy for one visit?’

I nod, conceding.

John clears his throat to speak, opens his mouth like the dying searching for a last breath, but instead shakes his head. I brush down my habit, the hem still anchored with damp, standing tall again and move closer to him, shaking my head. ‘The next time I saw her was to kiss her cold cheek as she lay in her coffin, Dia scíth a hanam. She looked peaceful, blameless. John, I was wrong to stay away for so long.’ He is staring straight at me and his eyes are still blue, as they always were, but the red threads of drink are creeping across the white.

‘Do you see, John? Do you understand now? I’m sorry.’

He nods. ‘And that’s your confession, Sister?’

We are close. I could reach out and touch him, feel the roughened skin of his farm-worn hands against mine. But he looks angry. His height, just about two inches taller than me, feels immense, and my confession, if that is what he wants to call it, doesn’t feel like enough. I know it is not. I should have gone back, he is right.

‘John, I wrote to her while I was away but she never read my letters.’

He looks at me, his eyes widening.

‘Maybe if I’d known she hadn’t read them, well, it would’ve made more sense. I would’ve been kinder. But I couldn’t understand why, after all I’d told her when writing home, why she still called me Nora.’

John straightens, pushing his curling shoulders back. ‘Your letters?’

‘Yes, I wrote to her but she never read them.’

He moves his hand up to his face, rubs his fingertips in circles across the vein patterned skin and asks how I know.

‘They were returned to me at Castlemacgarrett. Unopened.’

His hand is still on his face, moving up to his eyes, like a fattened spider, crawling, and he asks who returned them. As his hand moves it seems to wipe away the red tinge in his skin and in the shadowy light of the cathedral, he whitens. My voice catches, crystallising in my throat, like hoarfrost around thorns, as I say, with effort, that whoever left them, told Mother Superior they wanted to remain anonymous.

‘Sit back down, Sister.’

I shake my head and walk away, slow step, after slow step, down the aisle. The woman at the altar has gone and we are the only ones left in the cathedral now. The light outside must have faded, rain clouds gathering into the evening, as the fresh wound of stained glass darkens to a scab. John is following me.

‘I can’t bear the weight of it all, John.’

‘The weight of what?’

‘My family.’

‘I never knew a better family, Sister.’

I tense my muscles, feeling them strengthen one by one, knots lacing tighter down my spine. There are cold breaths again and I turn but no one is there, only John. He asks if I am okay.

‘It’s cold in here.’

‘Sister,’ he pauses, swallowing a lump I see bob up then down in his throat. He makes the sign of the cross and asks for my forgiveness, reaching out a hand, his nails thick with the grime of home. I don’t take it. I wait, quietly, as his arm wobbles, outstretched, then drops to his side. His eyes, still reddened, are tearful and then he opens his mouth to speak, his voice shrinking, cautious, like tentative first steps on ice.

‘I left the letters in Castlemacgarrett for you.’

I stand, still. My body pulses, a soft, thud, thud, thud. I close my eyes, open them. It is like an Atlantic fog, sudden and thick, and I cannot see. I step backwards down the aisle. John steps forwards after me. And then I hear my voice, trembling, low, angry, asking where he got them.

‘I just thought you should have them.’

We are all whispers now and I ask again where he found them. We are close together, eyes level. He shakes his head, warming the air with the smell of home, of the fields, of whiskey and smoke.

‘Tell me, John.’

‘Sister-’

I can feel Nora gathering strength in the shadows, my fingers tighten and my nails cut into the palms of my hands.

John is too close, and I can feel the soft swish of air against my cheek as he moves his bloated face side to side. His words feel sticky, clinging to my skin as he tells me my letters would have been too painful for my mother.

My head is splitting with a sharp, angry pain. There is pressure in my chest like someone - it is her, I just know it - is pushing me with kneading fists, as though she always knew. I step towards John, so close our noses almost brush. ‘Did you take my letters?’

‘Sister, forgive me.’

Now I am certain Nora is beside me. The girl who ran around Galway, unafraid, asking too many questions, is back. John has the answers and he is talking, words firing into the space, echoing around the walls which were once cells, that held so many lies. He is telling me, muttering, that they – my letters! – would have been too much for my mother. He keeps saying it. That my words would have hurt her.

‘Why?’ I scream the word so loud it scratches my throat, like a hook, it bursts through flesh and hangs in the air.

He can’t look at me, his fat, grubby hand is once more all over his face, obscuring his words, but they get out through the gaps in his fingers, like whispers through a privacy screen. He won’t stop. He is saying she was the only one of us left, lingering in her family remains. Then he reaches out, with that hand, dripping with his words, to touch my forehead.

‘You’re bleeding again, Sister. Here let me.’ He dabs his handkerchief against the wound on my temple.

Nora pushes aside his hand before I even think to and we turn and walk down the aisle away from him. Nora stalks close to me, the cold air like a vice. I don’t know where to go. We are trapped in this cathedral and now I can hear the wailing of the missing and the condemned in the rush of wind around its walls. In front of me, is Christ on the cross. The figure is ornate, coloured, his palms bloody red in crucifixion.

‘I still have the handkerchief with their blood on it, between my shirts, in my drawer,’ John says coming to stand beside me. He is calmer now, tears stream down his face, like the blood trickling down mine. I look up to Jesus for strength, Nora wants to look away, down at the ground and I see the haphazard stones, there are slight cracks, and a dull covering of dirt from the faithful's shoes.

'They were martyrs, John.' Nora spits, then I add, 'but, I'll never understand how they were still bleeding after ten days.'

'Those were strange times, Sister.'

I break free from Nora's grip, tugging my head up to Christ, to witness his suffering before us, but we are no longer in the cathedral. We are back in Hynes' barn, identifying their poor, broken bodies, and we can see the men dipping their handkerchiefs in their blood. I can still feel it, viscous against my skin, and remember the stiff starch of my own handkerchief softening. And how Mammy's fingers were clutching that bloodied handkerchief, stained with her sons' blood, even in death, even as they nailed her coffin shut. How after everything, all that, did I never go home to her?

'John,' I say quietly, once more aware of Christ's watchful gaze, ashamed for my earlier outburst, 'why did you take my letters? Mammy needed them. I was her family.'

'She had me.'

'You?'

He nods and tells me that after we had all gone, and the farm, was still, while my mother bled tears daily, he was there, by her side. He kept her going, brought the farm back to life. She didn't need to remember anymore.'

'She didn't need to remember her family?' Nora is winding up the rosary, tighter and tighter, between my fingers. 'And have you forgotten, John? Do you remember that day, the day they were taken?'

He doesn't speak and looks down at the ground, tracing a circle with his heavy boot.

'You ran, John, remember? While they stood still, at gunpoint, you ran away.'

Still there is silence, except for the raspy in and out of his breath, visible in the cold air.

'You left them.'

He moistens his lips with his tongue. 'I should've stayed by their side, Sister, I loved you all. You were like family.'

'And because you loved us, you hid my letters from my mother?'

'She was angry with you for leaving. Proud, of course, but angry. She didn't think of my running, my betrayal, when she was so focused on your silence.'

There it is. At last. His confession.

John sinks to his knees and they crack on the cold stone floor, his head falls forward and he grips the heavy hem of my habit.

We stand over him and remember, in the swell of his rounded shoulder blades, the fraying fabric of his woollen jacket, the still thick hair, albeit white, on his head, how he was as a boy. How he always sat beside us during mass, and how our mothers slapped our cold knees, exposed in our Sunday finery, when we giggled, or whispered. How he was always on the pitch with Patrick, never quite as good, failing, often, to finish a point, or keep a pass. How he never read with Harry, that wasn't his thing, but how, when Patrick wasn't around, he didn't run as fast, stayed by Harry's side. How he helped on the farm. How he sat round our table after a day in the fields for stingingly salted soup. How we never noticed how important he was to our family. How he was our best friend.

Now he is an old man, shivering in the religious cold. A candle flickers and goes out. Beside me, Nora's anger is a barbed edge. I lean towards her, then, push, each rosary bead through my fingers, force them one by one. *In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.*

'God grant you peace, John.'

There is a gasp from Nora, I tug the hem of my habit from John's hand and I walk away leaving her shadow cutting back into the darkness.

Outside, the evening has closed in on Galway and the light is dim. I do not need to squint like I did every time I left the cathedral in Ghana. I look around at the roads and the cars, the trees which lean low into the river, bent like injured soldiers, and the path back towards the courthouses and the city. I peer over the side of the bridge, like I did years before. The river below is not beautiful, or clear, like the Gulf of Guinea, no, the Corrib flows with force, dragging mud from the banks, dirtying its water. In some places, there are rocks and holes beneath the surface, and they appear like black ink spills never to be erased. It flows with such speed, I feel dizzy, and straighten to take a breath. The river continues on, flowing through the city and out to Galway Bay, to the Atlantic and further to America, even Africa. I turn my back on the cathedral, its shadow still casting darkness on the street, and I smooth my skirts - the way Mammy did whenever she turned away from the range - as I walk back over the bridge, where

Patrick and Harry were once waiting. They have gone now and I am alone. I walk on, and the piercing memories of the words I wrote home start softening, like wet paper, disintegrating in the familiar comfort of Irish rain.

Fictionalising History

Exploring the process of writing *The Letters,* with consideration for the relationship between fact and fiction, incorporating research and balancing historical accuracy and narrative.

In 2005, whilst studying for a Masters in Writing at The National University of Ireland, Galway, I stumbled across a story about two brothers, Patrick and Harry Loughnane. It was to become a story which would not leave me alone. Like the character of Sister Patricia in my novel, *The Letters***,** I too, could not let the Loughnanes rest and so it was that years later, I decided to tell their story. But what was it that caught my attention, even troubled me, so much?

Two brothers, both in their twenties, who were tortured and murdered without trial or remorse by British Forces, in a war Britain would rather forget. I remember being so upset, shocked, embarrassed, and as I delved further into the facts of that conflict, I wondered why so little fiction had been written about it, in comparison to other conflicts. Therefore, I decided I wanted to write my own fictional account of their story.

Initially, I didn't know what angle I would approach the story from and my first thoughts were about physical conflict and male perspectives. War literature has always been a genre I enjoy reading and I was interested in the authenticity of literary combat when written from research. With the Loughnanes, I thought I might have the opportunity to explore this and also write about the underrepresented Irish War of Independence. I imagined a novel much less reflective than the one I have written, but war isn't just about the fighting and the more I read, the more I became interested in Patrick and Harry's sister, Nora Loughane. It felt more comfortable to write a female perspective and led me to think about how genders experience war differently. Nora, a quiet, strong woman, who risked her own life to discover the truth about her brothers' deaths, witnessed the country she loved savaged by war, and experienced personal tragedy, which shaped her entire life. She seemed to personify the greater loss suffered throughout Ireland. Choosing Nora's story to fictionalise the murders, created a different viewpoint of events and moved the story in a different direction, but through her, it allowed for exploration of themes including storytelling, religion, memory and the supernatural. Instead of a novel full of action, I wrote a quiet novel, detailing the cost of war on a very personal level, looking not at the event, but how a life moves forward in the aftermath. How do we process trauma; do we hide it or reveal it? Instead of writing about authenticity of war writing, it seemed more relevant to focus on fact versus fiction. How do you tell someone else's story and still make it your own? There were two levels: as a character, how accurately does Nora tell or remember her own story and as a writer how do I fictionalise history?

Chapter One: Research

Initially, it was important to start with research. Therefore, before writing, I started to gather the facts and find out as much as possible about Nora Loughnane. In 1922, only two years after her brothers' murders, Nora joined a missionary order of nuns, The Order of Our Lady of Apostles, OLA.[1] This decision was influenced by their deaths and as testament to this, her religious name, in honour of her brother, Patrick, was Sister Patricia. Following her novitiate period and time at the Mother House in Lyons, France, Nora travelled to Ghana in 1927 to establish a training college for teachers, however, by 1931 she was invalided back to Ireland with 'fever.'[2] Despite this, she went on to have an illustrious religious life in OLA, in roles such as, Provincial of the Order, Provincial Secretary and Mother Superior in various locations such as Ardfoyle, Co. Cork, Leigh, Lancashire and Rostrevor, Co. Down. In 1969, she returned to the west coast of Ireland and was bursar at a nursing home, Castlemacgarrett, in Co. Mayo, where she stayed until her death on 26th June 1981, having only retired from active duty in 1979. But these are all facts, and though they forge a path through her life, they do not create a character. Research is not that simple. Hilary Mantel writes: 'if a reader asks the writer, "Have you evidence to back your story?" the answer should be yes: but you hope the reader will be wise to the many kinds of evidence there are, and how they can be used.'[3]

Historical fiction needs to authentically recreate a time period or event in history, but it also needs to represent the people, real or imagined, living at that time, to capture their thoughts and feelings, beliefs and culture and so my research had to be varied. I needed the facts and figures, names of places and events, but also the details of who Sister Patricia was aside from where she worked or travelled to. To do that it was important to hear from those she worked with, to discover her motivations, and so, in April 2015, I went to Ireland.

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[1] A relatively new order, OLA was established in Lyons, France, in 1876. It was primarily to reach out to non-Christian people, particularly in Africa, and with a focus on women. On their website (www.OLAireland.ie) it states they strive to be 'examples of women in communion.'

[2] Malaria was often referred to as simply 'fever' in many written anecdotes from nuns, and also when the sisters of Ardfoyle were discussing it with me during my visit.

[3] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

As part of my trip, I visited Ardfoyle Convent, where Nora first travelled to upon joining the order, where she returned to after Ghana and also where she is buried. Upon arrival, the convent sat flat against the landscape up a hill across the river from Cork city. It was grey and had a long driveway lined by grass. A nun stood in the garden, small and curled in her environment. It was a dull day and the clouds gathered overhead. There had been some sunshine but soon it would rain. At the door, a lady, who introduced herself as Audrey, and who looked after the sisters, invited me in and showed me through to a living room with mismatched chairs, high ceilings and a grand fireplace in front of which was a small gas fire with fake plastic logs. From another room, through an archway, appeared Sister Columbia, wearing a navy skirt and cardigan with a pretty white shirt. Her hair was roughly cut, with greying tufts of different lengths, and it was very short. I supposed normally it was covered, and couldn't help but wonder if Sister Patricia's hair had been the same. She took my hand to shake it, but instead held it and looked at me, before another nun, Sister Etna, entered the room, and also took my hand and they linked me through to the lunch room. All our shoes squeaked on the white tiled floor. Even then, at the start of my journey, I felt Sister Patricia was with me, and her voice began to develop.

The lunch room was very light with tables snaking around the edges and clustered in the centre. There was the scrape of chairs and the smell of boiled vegetables. We stood before our seats and each nun said grace in her own private way then they waited for me to sit. As soon as I was seated, a bowl of vegetable soup was placed in front of me. I waited for the nuns to receive theirs, but they never did, and I realised I was the only one to get a starter. Not bothered at all, they looked at me, pleased to have company and eager to share their stories. Sister Columbia - once Provincial at Ardfoyle - told me Patricia had, 'steady steps,' and she was always serious and very competent. Another sister, to my right, told me she worked with Sister Patricia in Rostrevor. It was during her novitiate and on first meeting, Sister Patricia would come across stern and cold, but she was always incredibly kind; she cared for the sick and tended the old. She never liked to see others upset. She also described Sister Patricia's tread, remembering how you knew it was her by the sound of her footsteps: she wore shoes with an inch heel and they clipped out a regular beat on the floors as she walked. Sister Columbia agreed and said, 'that's right she never missed a beat.' The other nun continued, saying, it was lucky, because if they were doing something they were not supposed to, it gave them chance to stop. However, Sister Patricia always knew - she didn't miss a thing and although she was kind, she was very strict and disciplined. They remembered Sister Patricia with fondness, talking about her in the way someone remembers a really good teacher, not a friend. She stood apart, they said, she was often alone and very dedicated, but that didn't stop her caring or sharing a joke.

The next course was brought out and this time the nuns also received food (although they had to go up to get theirs) and it was a scoop of turnip, two scoops of mashed potato, broccoli and three thick slices of chicken and stuffing all covered in gravy. They continued their stories about Sister Patricia. There were so many anecdotes, descriptions, even just nods of approval. And with their words, the Sister Patricia I had already imagined, the one I carried in my head, began to grow. The same words cropped up again and again: 'competent, disciplined, caring, strict, stern.' One sister told me she wore a serious face and people were scared of her, but really, she was soft inside. [4] She suffered a lot. And that was when talk turned to her brothers.

The nuns did not know of the atrocities that Patrick and Harry suffered (they did not want to) but they knew they were murdered. They said, unanimously, that Sister Patricia never got over the deaths of her brothers and while she didn't talk about it, she carried them with her forever. Perhaps this was the moment I considered trauma, or a woman's war? Like soldiers who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after combat, do women carry a constant grief? Do they ever recover? Here was where I might find Sister Patricia's motivation for telling her story.

A sister told me that Sister Patricia was in the order when people didn't share their feelings or their past and so she wouldn't have thought it right to talk about what she and her family had suffered. Back then you joined and you did your job and you didn't think about your past. I tried to imagine how it would feel to bundle up so much hurt, so many stories and never let them go. I could almost feel the gnawing pain they would cause inside, and I wondered if it was really possible to suppress them? Don't we all have to share in the end? Is that the reason people read historical fiction? To share, or understand trauma, or to relive stories from the past. The nuns were excited to tell their stories, to me, an outsider. The same sister, then told me her uncle (a member of the IRA) was shot and her father never talked about it even though she asked him many times. When things were over that was it, or that was how it was supposed to be.

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[4] Photograph (POL4/2/29) courtesy of Kieran Hoare, Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections Reading Room at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and copied from POL4 'Papers Relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.'

However, they all agreed, just because you were silenced, it didn't mean the stories, or memories, went away, you just learnt to live with them and that is what Sister Patricia did. So, what if my character didn't? What if she finally, after years of carrying sadness, couldn't carry them anymore? What had to happen to cause that? I needed a catalyst.

The nuns said Sister Patricia had a strong sense of nationalism and was very proud of Ireland and her brothers. They described how when she heard nationalistic songs, tears appeared in her eyes, and whenever she saw the Irish flag, the Tricolour, or as it is known in Irish, Bratach na hÉireann,[5] it always upset her. Later, in the archives with Sister Columbia, she confided that 'Sister Patricia would have died for Ireland she believed in it so much. She would have died. She was a brave and selfless lady.' Indeed, even at the time of her own death, in a typed account from the archives referring to her dying, it says that Sister Patricia 'confided to more than one that she didn't want to give any trouble or keep anyone up at night.'[6] But back at lunch they talked about how she dealt with what she suffered and how she bore her secret grief until the day she died in 1981.

Sister Patricia liked stability and so, like me, they puzzled over why she joined a missionary order, especially because in the 1920s it would have been little known and very small. Her time in Ghana was an achievement in itself because many nuns didn't even survive six months in Africa. All the nuns had served various times: some just a couple of years, one twenty-five years and another fifty years. One sister said Sister Patricia was an excellent judge of character and knew, instinctively, who could survive Africa and where they were best placed. She continued by saying she joined to be a missionary and was eager for adventure in Africa, but Sister Patricia placed her in the National School next door to Ardfoyle convent because she considered her too fragile. She smiled, eventually she did go to Africa, but Sister Patricia was right and she didn't last long.

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[5] The Tricolour is made up of green, white and orange. The green represents the Catholic religion, the orange represents the Protestant religion and the white sits between them symbolising lasting peace. It was first raised over the GPO in 1916, but wasn't officially the national flag until 1937.

[6] Typed notes written by Kathleen O' Regan and copied for me from the archives at Ardfoyle Convent.

We finished lunch and the nuns thanked me for coming, even though I really should have been thanking them, and then they dispersed, quietly, into the corridors of the convent. Sister Columbia stayed with me and took me to the archives - a smallish room with portable shelves full of photo albums, publications and files documenting OLA and the sisters. She had already photocopied information, including photographs of Ghana. One showed Sister Patricia standing on a small veranda surrounded by six students, the building was small and the landscape dusty. That became OLA Training College. Sister Patricia never smiled, always, in all the photos, she had the same stern expression. Even a photo of her in old age, with softened skin and dimples, shows straight lips and eyes which stare right out and through.[7]

I tried to picture her walking the hallways and rooms of the convent. It was warm and the furniture was a mixture of hard chairs and armchairs, all different patterns. I imagined how she would perch, not slouch, always upright, ready to move on. Throughout the day room, there were small tables with cloths dotted around and there were a lot of gas heaters. In my mind, I thought Sister Patricia might think them unnecessary, feeling slightly uncomfortable in the stuffy heat. There were pot plants and artificial flowers, again an extravagance she might 'tut' at. It was hospital clean and echoey, but not cold, and this felt more in keeping with my character. The sisters described 'party' nights when people came in to teach them. The previous night they had learnt about the big bang to present day using candles and they excitedly showed me leaflets. I tried to imagine Sister Patricia at one of these events, but struggled. It seemed, especially after hearing so many accounts of her, that she would slope off to be alone, or separate herself from a gathering. Then, with the clink of china from delicate cups and saucers, tea arrived on a trolley, and Sister Colombia and Sister Etna settled beside me with more stories, and this, I felt, was a part of convent life Sister Patricia approved.

Sister Etna said she was eighteen when she joined the order and, on the day her father dropped her to the doors, he was very upset. He didn't tell her at the time, but later, he admitted he knew she would be okay because he saw Sister Patricia open the door and recognised her as Nora - he had attended her brothers' funeral and had himself been a member of the IRA - so he knew she would look after his daughter, plus he noticed tears in Sister Patricia's eyes when she closed the door. This was a constant reference - tears in her eyes. My imagined character was sad too, but the idea of tears in her eyes, welling up but not letting them fall, was tragic. It was a physical act of containing grief. Not only did Sister Patricia not want to tell her stories, she wanted to hide her suffering as well. I had to question if sacrifice was part of the draw to life as a nun?

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[7] Photo from 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981), p. 5.

Sister Etna herself said she was desperate to be a missionary but not so bothered by the religious life, yet at eighty-four she had spent fifty years between Ghana and Nigeria, with five years in Rome studying theology. She wanted to die in Africa, but they sent her back to Ardfoyle to retire and she didn't seem pleased, but that's the call, she said, with a slight shrug of the shoulders at what seemed to be a life changing sacrifice. Is that what Sister Patricia wanted too? To sacrifice? Not just Nora, her former self, but happiness too?

When it was time to leave, the sisters stood and both placed their cheeks against mine. They held my hands. They thanked me. They were so kind and gentle and they said Sister Patricia was happy in her new life, back home with God. And perhaps that was what she was waiting for all along.

My preconceived ideas of nuns as aloof, judgemental and frightening were misplaced, and the sisters were delighted at my interest in them and enthusiastically shared their stories. They were very human, but then surely the act of telling our memories, our stories, is part of the human experience, of being alive, especially in Ireland, the tradition of storytelling is Ireland's gift, generation to generation. I knew my fictional Sister Patricia had stories to tell too, therefore, I had to find a way to help her unlock them, a reason for her to open up. Sister Patricia was fearless, frightening, stern, strict, disciplined, sad and kind. She was extremely well educated and taught both English and Irish. She was brave. She was something different to all of them and she was very well remembered. During my time in the convent, I imagined her in the different places, wondered what she would think of our conversations and I got to know her a little bit more. I was building a character, but I still needed motivation. What was it that Sister Patricia was hiding? What would make her speak? And who was Nora? Her name was barely mentioned, as though she was still wandering the bogs and fields of Galway, as though she never went to Ghana and became Sister Patricia. To fictionalise the Loughnane's story, I needed to understand both Sister Patricia and Nora. And so, I went to Galway, to the heart of my story, to find out what made her flee.

Galway is very different now from the city Nora knew. It is a place of music and art, colourful buildings, bright-fronted pubs, bustling tourists and melodic buskers. People walk through the cobbled streets care free, and there are no shadows of soldiers patrolling, no fear. In

1920, when Nora trawled the streets in search of her missing brothers, there was a pervading terror, the threat of violence, and death. Soldiers were ever present, men were on the run, women smuggled secrets, rumours haunted the alleyways and corners. I walked the streets trying to imagine how it felt then, always watched, always cautious. It was almost impossible; Galway has to be one of the most welcoming cities. It is hard to take more than a few steps without a friendly nod of the head, a smile, or a stranger saying, 'how's things?' And yet, upon passing Galway Cathedral, built on the site of Galway Gaol, I got a sense of history and whispers of the past. The cathedral straddles the River Corrib, an imposing structure, even now, visible from most points of the city, with its huge bronze dome towering high, and its grey walls seemingly untouched by the harsh Atlantic weather, it could be said to be striking, or ominous in the shadows it casts. It made me pause. It made me look over the bridge at the black rushing river, then up, and wonder what it was like when a gaol stood there, watching over the city, threatening, secretive? How did Nora feel when she first saw it? The site of a former prison now a house of God.[8]

Beyond the cathedral is The National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) which holds the Loughnane archive. To understand the impact of Patrick and Harry's deaths, first I needed to understand the family, to be able to imagine where and how Nora grew up and therefore understand what they all lost in 1920. The Loughnanes owned a 'snug farm'[9] in the village of Shanaglish in South County Galway. In 1920, both Harry and Patrick were at home on the farm, and another brother, Hugo, was away in Manchester, UK. There were two sisters, Kate and Nora, both were teachers in North County Galway, with Nora working as assistant teacher in a National School in Curandulla and Kate as Principal at Corofin National School, Tuam. Their mother, Kathleen, was still alive and working at home and on the farm, but their father was dead, it seems having died quite a few years earlier, and so Patrick was the man of the house.

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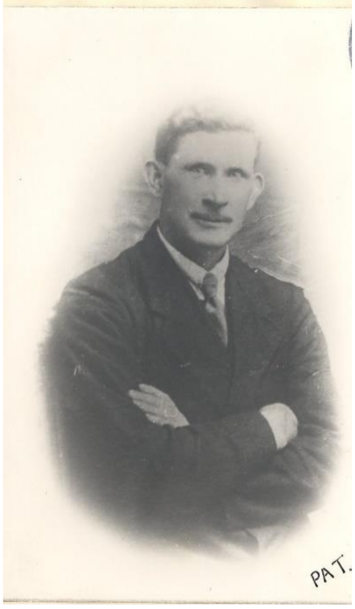
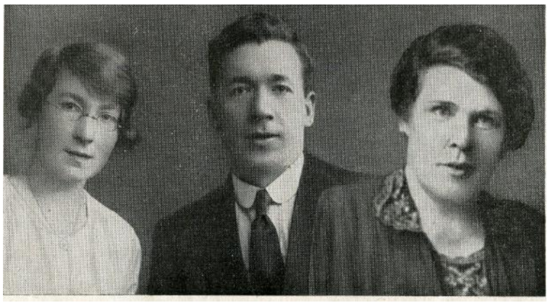
[8] Galway Cathedral, known as The Cathedral of Our Lady Assumed into Heaven and St. Nicholas, is situated on the site of the old Galway Gaol. Construction work began in 1958 and was completed in 1965. It was consecrated on 15th August 1965. Made of limestone and with a huge bronze dome, it is the youngest great stone cathedral in Europe and the last Roman Catholic cathedral constructed in Ireland.
Picture of cathedral from Julius Szabo, 'Places to visit in Ireland – 16 most beautiful cities and towns' at *traveltipy.com/places-to-visit-in-Ireland-cities-towns/* (2015) [accessed: 26th November 2020]

[9] Brian Greaney, 'Days of Terror in South Galway' in *Maynooth Layman's Annual 1954 – 55* (Vexilla Regis, 1954), p. 88.

In the archives, there were a few photos of the family[10]. Both Patrick and Harry were of imposing build, but Harry had a childlike look to his face with thick hair, a lean neck and dark eyes. Patrick, in contrast, was broad shouldered, wearing a heavy overcoat, clean white shirt with a perfect tie and relaxed, folded arms. In Kate, there was a resemblance to Harry. Nora, however, was similar to Patrick. She was round-cheeked with small, almost pinched lips and she was wearing a white shirt. Their mother was a combination of them all, with her hair parted in the middle and swept neatly back, she wore wire framed glasses which rested on a large nose. Her shoulders, while broad for a woman, were sloping. In the archives, she was described as 'a gentle Irish Mother [who] inspired children with a combination of simple, unwavering faith and a burning love of country.'[11]





And what a privilege it was to sit, surrounded by their stories, looking into their faces, decades later. It was possible to imagine them alive, as characters, and gather, from their appearance, what kind of people they were. Harry was described often with words such as 'gentle', 'quiet', 'retiring', 'studious.' He was very religious and helped at home in the kitchen. There was reference to his weak lungs, although this was not expanded, but it seemed he was not as active on the farm as Patrick. During his leisure time he liked reading.

Patrick, on the other hand, was described as, 'tall, handsome and powerfully built,'[12] and very active in the community, often being selected as leader of Parish activities and a very respected hurler. Most vital to their story, Patrick was heavily involved with the IRA and regretted not being part of the 1916 Rising, saying, 'it grieves me to think that we stood by whilst others suffered, but if I only got the least inkling of the Rising, and what Sinn Fein stood for, I too would do my part.'[13] Patrick was later to become President of the local Sinn Fein organisation, with Harry the secretary, making them both targets for the British forces.

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[10] Photographs of Patrick, Nora, Hugo and Kate (POL4/1/03 and POL4/1/07) courtesy of Kieran Hoare, Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections Reading Room at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and copied from POL4 'Papers Relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.'

[11] Brian Greaney, 'Days of Terror in South Galway' in *Maynooth Layman's Annual 1954 – 55* (Vexilla Regis, 1954), p. 97.

[12] Brian Greaney, 'Days of Terror in South Galway' in *Maynooth Layman's Annual 1954 – 55* (Vexilla Regis, 1954), p. 88.

It was on 26th November, 1920, as the community gathered at the Loughnane Farm to help with the threshing that the brothers were taken. Shortly after three o'clock, a lorry of Auxiliaries arrived and rounded up the brothers. They didn't run, even though other members of the threshing party did. Robert Glynn, a neighbour who did run to safety, said, 'all had a chance of escaping, but I am sure Pat Loughnane would have stood his ground, for he had refused often before to leave home at night and go 'on the run''[14] This question of whether they should have run surely tormented Nora. The possibility of escape. It opened up a way into Nora's story. Why didn't they save themselves? Others did. Imagine how Nora, their sister, felt, knowing they could have survived, that others survived. However, their capture was not a surprise, as she wrote in her own account, 'I knew that both he and my younger brother were in danger, as both were in the Sinn Fein movement and Pat had been an active member of the Land League.'[15] Adding that, 'Pat had been advised not to sleep at home,' whilst also acknowledging that 'both could not go and leave their mother alone.'[16] It seems Nora was right and her brothers were targeted, both for IRA involvement and because Patrick was also involved in the Castledaly Ambush.[17] As evidence, Pete Glynn testifies that the Auxiliaries 'lined us up against a wall and a policeman went round us with the auxies and picked out Pat and Harry Loughnane.'[18]

What happened to them after that is pieced together through stories and rumours but what is certain is that they never returned home and it fell to Nora to try and find out the truth. Determined to find her brothers, Nora took many risks and her behaviour, especially in 1920s rural Ireland, was unusual for a woman. There was an organisation of women, Cumann na mBan[19], active during the fight for Irish Independence, who were gun runners, carried messages or ran safe houses, but Nora didn't have the support of any group and she acted alone. Hers was not a national fight, it was a personal one, and it carried just as much risk as the women in Cumann na mBan faced. Alone, she tried to stand up to the British Forces, because above all, even when there was no hope, she wanted the truth. Her unexpected behaviour made for interesting reading and for fiction, it added layers. Did she know how dangerous her behaviour was? Did she care? What did her need for the truth say about her as a character? And above all, her dedication to the search demonstrated her loyalty to family.

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[13] Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 1. [accessed: 26th May 2015]

[14] Marie McNamara and Maura Madden (ed.), *Beagh: A History and Heritage* (Beagh Integrated Rural Development Association, 1995), p. 120.

[15] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981) p. 5.

[16] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981) p. 5.

[17] The Castledaly Ambush took place on 30th October 1920. A group of approximately twenty-five IRA, under the command of Thomas McInerney, and including Patrick Loughnane, ambushed a patrol of five RIC men. Constable Horan was shot dead and others were seriously wounded. Guns were also stolen during the ambush.

[18] Chief Supt. Henry O'Mara 'Witness Statement', document no. W.S.1652 in *The Bureau of Military History*, *1913 – 21 (2003):* www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 5. [accessed: 26th May 2015]

[19] Cumann na mBan translates as 'The women's council' and they were a paramilitary group formed in 1914, however, after the signing of the Anglo-Irish treaty in 1922, the organisation was banned in 1923 and any women suspected of being members were detained in Kilmainham Jail, Dublin.

St. Anne's,
Lenaboy Castle, Galway

Despite her efforts, the authorities would not talk to her and there were plenty of rumours winging across the county, but people were scared to talk for fear of being taken, tortured or killed. It left Nora with little choice and as she says in her own words: 'In desperation, I went to Lenaboy House,[20] Headquarters of the Black and Tans, and asked to see the officer in charge.'[21] It was this fact which made Nora stand out because she quite literally knocked on the enemy's door.

At Lenaboy Castle, she was lied to and told her brothers had been taken, but had since escaped, and that the Auxiliaries were also searching for them. In a war, where truth was one of the primary casualties, this was hardly surprising. Alongside this, locals whispered of their deaths. Here it was possible to draw a comparison between fact and fiction. In fictionalising history, as a writer, I constantly battled with what was more important: fact or fiction? However, so too did Nora during her search. There were numerous stories about her brothers, but who to believe? There was talk of Patrick and Harry being made to run in front of the lorry while carrying boulders and at bayonet point. Another local, Pat Linnane, said he saw the brothers tied to the back of the lorry, covered in blood and being dragged along the road. Shots were heard from Moy O' Hynes Wood and moaning was also heard to be coming from the same place. There were stories about them being seen behind a wall, choked, and another prisoner in Gort (where the brothers were briefly taken), Michael Carroll, said a young RIC Constable told Patrick and Harry they would be murdered. Perhaps as testament to the family's strength, Carroll described Patrick's response: 'Patrick thanked them and turning to Harry, said, "We'll say our rosary. Let them."'[22] The rumours were endless, horrifying and yet Nora continued her search.

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[20] Lenaboy Castle, originally owned by Colonel James O'Hara, was requisitioned by the Black and Tans in 1920 to use as their headquarters. British Forces kept the house until 1925, when it was taken over by the Sisters of Mercy and renamed St. Anne's Orphanage. It remained an orphanage until 2017 when the order donated it to Galway City Council to be a creative hub for children. Photograph courtesy of Eamon Healy, 'The Fight For Freedom in Beagh - Part Three: 26 November 1920 – Murder of the Loughnane Brothers of Shanaglish' at *http://beaghrootsgalway.weebly.com/blog/26-november-1920-murder-of-the-loughnane-brothers-of-shanaglish* (2017) [accessed: 16th May 2021]

[21] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981) p. 5.

Nora was not only selfless with regards to her own safety, but also protecting her mother from further suffering. In an article published by the *Connacht Tribune* after Sister Patricia's death in 1981, she is quoted saying, 'Mother was still hopeful and rumours of their death had not reached her.'[23] It seems Nora felt responsible for shouldering the emotional turmoil and shielded her mother from what was being said. Further to this, and evidence of her protective nature, when Jack Halloran, a family friend, arrived on the farm with news, it was Nora who faced him and tried to make the job of breaking the news of their deaths easier. She said of that moment, 'I went out and to make it easy for him I asked him if the bodies had been found. He was relieved as he did not know how to tell us the awful truth.'[24] And yet, after the brothers' murders were revealed, she left and went to Ghana, leaving her family behind. It is puzzling and it was here that the real questions about character, indeed the motivation to write a novel, emerged. Why did she leave at a time when her mother needed her most? Joining a missionary order felt like running away. Throughout my research, I never uncovered a reason why she needed to travel abroad, neither did I speak to anyone who could shed any light. Perhaps, it was the one act of selfishness she needed to survive. And therefore, I had to consider if her decision to leave would have haunted her all her life. It was clear from speaking to the sisters who worked and lived with her in the convent that she carried a lot of sadness, perhaps too, regret? Perhaps, nearing the end of her life, this was the motivation for the telling of her story.

Nora's was not an easy voice to capture. She was a woman of many extremes: educated, caring, fearless, stern, foolish, loyal. In fact, at one point during the search she was described as a 'pathetic figure,'[25] which seemed at odds to all other accounts of her. Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, in his account of the Loughnane murders in the Bureau of Military History, described how Nora, 'trembled from hand to foot,' upon seeing her brothers' bodies but then 'by a superhuman effort she braced herself together,' and that just, 'for a moment the fearful sight almost unnerved her.'[26] Words like 'superhuman' and 'braced' seem far better suited than 'pathetic.'

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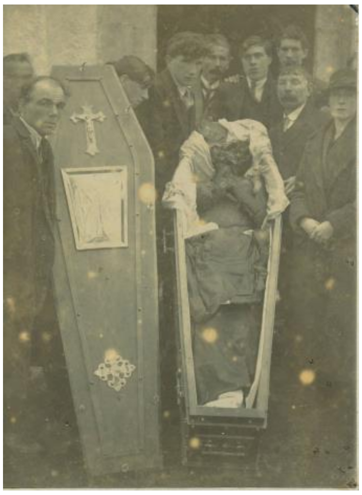
[22] Marie McNamara and Maura Madden (ed.), *Beagh: A History and Heritage* (Beagh Integrated Rural Development Association, 1995) p. 122.

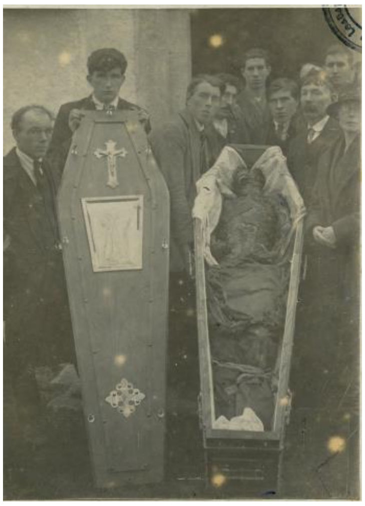
[23] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981) p. 5.

[24] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981) p. 5.

[25] Brian Greaney, 'Days of Terror in South Galway' in *Maynooth Layman's Annual 1954 – 55* (Vexilla Regis, 1954), p. 95.

[26] Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 1. [accessed: 26th May 2015]





In the archives there were photos of the funeral congregation gathered around the open coffins.[27] In them, Nora, the only woman, stares straight at the camera, emotionless, not looking at her brothers. She had identified their bodies and perhaps that was enough. Interestingly, Nora never described their ordeal, saying only that what happened to them was 'told elsewhere.'[28] It was a reality too awful for her to bear and she trusted their story would be told by others.

Facts are powerful and the details of her brothers' torture and death make for gruesome reading. They were found on December 5th 1920 in a pond in Umbriste. Lying in a few feet of water, dirty oil covering the surface, their burnt remains told the story of their suffering. Both were naked, apart from one of Harry's boots. Two of Harry's fingers had been chopped off, the rest broken. His right arm was so severely broken it practically hung off at the shoulder. Of his face nothing remained except his chin and lips; his skull had been shattered. Patrick's body was not as burnt, except on his limbs where the bone was exposed. Both his wrists were broken and again his right arm, though not to the same extent as Harry's. Almost nothing remained of his face, and his skull was fractured. *IV*, presumably representing *Irish Volunteer*, was carved into the flesh of both torsos. At the inquest, it was revealed hand grenades had been exploded in their mouths to shatter their heads. Upon seeing them, Nora was reported to have said, 'Oh poor, Harry,' [29] and was only able to identify Patrick because she recognised his broad shoulders. After identifying their bodies, Nora was quoted as saying: 'Their souls are in heaven, of that I am confident; and they died for Ireland, so it really doesn't matter how their bodies look. They were ready to make this sacrifice for their country's sake and, because I have the same idea of nationality that they had, I, too, can bear this ordeal.'[30] And yet, despite her love for family and Ireland, she went away, to Africa, leaving her home and family behind.

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[27] Photographs of Patrick and Harry in their coffins, with Nora (Pol4/2/12 and Pol4/2/13) courtesy of Kieran Hoare, Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections Reading Room at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and copied from POL 4 'Papers Relating to the deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.'

[28] 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror' in *The Connacht Tribune* (1981), p. 5.

[29] Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 6. [accessed: 26th May 2015]

During my research trip, I visited Shanaglish[31] where the Loughnanes lived, to get a sense of the place where Nora grew up and lived for the early part of her adult life. It was October and winter was already beginning to tighten its grip; the wind was cruel, colours already faded and the rain relentless. What a contrast Ghana, with its heat and colour, must have been for Nora. Whilst in Shanaglish, it seemed that it hardly got light, with a constant dusk shrouding the daylight hours. The ground was spongey and the air damp, almost thick to breathe in, with clouds overhead, like dark, grey stones, similar to those in the myriad snaking drystone walls. The pathways and roads were uneven, poorly maintained and littered with puddles and across the fields were a multitude of coloured cows: brown and tufty, black and white, rough cream, all splattered with mud.

I went from the tiny village centre out along the road, around a bend to where the Loughnanes lived. Opposite the cottage was Shanaglish Church, where Nora spent the night with her brothers before their funeral mass. It was small and boxy with long, thin, stained-glass windows. Upright trees were dotted among the graves. Surrounding the church was a combination of brick and stone walls, old and new. The large arched door was painted white with black fixings and above it was a circular window. The gate to the church was locked to prevent entry from the road.

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[30] Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 6. [accessed: 26th May 2015]
[31] Shanaglish is a small village in the south of county Galway in the west of Ireland.

It was this church that the Loughnanes frequented for daily mass, for weddings and funerals, and it was a church they looked upon every day from the windows of their home; a church central to their lives. Across the road, although no longer owned by the Loughnanes, was the cottage. The road outside was muddy with tangled grass, stones and puddles. The cottage had been modernised but the shed, where the brothers were lined up, was still there. The cottage was still painted white and well maintained, as it was in the photo from the archives,[32] and it looked to be a comfortable home. It was easy to imagine a content childhood there. They were not a poor family and with farm land stretching behind and the church in front, the cottage - the Loughnane's home - was a happy place, for a while.

I visited the cemetery and stood before their grave.[33] Beneath the ground, the family were reunited except for Kate, who moved to America, and Sister Patricia, who was buried in Ardfoyle. Was it strange for Nora to know she would not rest with her family, that in her decision to join the religious life, she was separating herself from them forever? Another sacrifice. Did it make her lonely? Community was important in 1920, and it still is today, but through her decision to leave, Nora cut herself off from that support network. Perhaps that was what she wanted, to be forgotten? The story of the Loughnanes still resonates locally and nationally. In County Galway, there are several memorials, including a Celtic cross and a hall, the Loughane and Quinn Memorial Hall, as well as two poems, one written by Padraig O Fahy and one, entitled, *Patrick and Harry Loughnane,* by Fr Maurice Slattery, in their memory. But what of Nora, has she been remembered? In researching the story, she is a key element; her determination to find the truth, despite there being no hope, makes her unforgettable and she is remembered in all accounts. Her behaviour, as Nora, was unusual and brave. Less is written about Sister Patricia. Is that what she wanted? For my character, too, perhaps she wanted to be written out of history? Yet, her story needed to be told: it is part of the Loughnane's story and

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[32] Photograph (POL4/2/30) courtesy of Kieran Hoare, Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections Reading Room at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and copied from POL4 'Papers Relating to the deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.'

[33] Photograph of the Loughnanes' grave in Shanaglish cemetery copied from Brian Greaney, 'Days of Terror in South Galway' in *Maynooth Layman's Annual 1954 – 55* (Vexilla Regis, 1954), p. 97.

also the wider history of the war in Galway, the repercussions of that war and also life as an Irish missionary. To write historical fiction, I had to explore everything, create a broad picture of the time, the people, and most importantly, find the forgotten stories, the ones which history might overlook, like Sister Patricia, trying to slip into the shadows of her family's story. But I couldn't allow her to.

I returned to the UK with a sense of the place where Nora grew up, of her family life and of her sorrows and so, a better understanding of her character. However, what about Ghana? The transition from Nora to Sister Patricia seemed to be in Ghana, and so I turned my research towards Africa and exploring what life as a missionary was like. I did have some material to help me with this already, from the sisters in the convent, who kindly showed me photos, and gave me a copy of the order's magazine, *Tidings,*[34] as well as information about Nora's time in Ghana, and a typed document detailing the development of OLA Training College. I was also able to use the OLA website as a source of information. However, to support this, especially in contrast to the wealth of material I had from Ireland, I needed to research Ghana in more detail, to really feel it. Obviously, the best solution would have been to visit Ghana and OLA College, as I did in Ireland, but as much as I wanted to, at the time of writing, it was not possible due to family circumstances and so I had to experience Ghana using secondary research.

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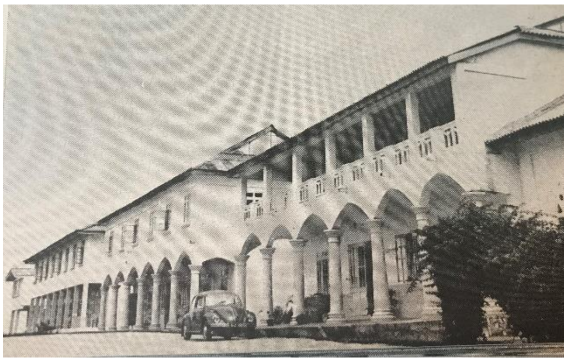
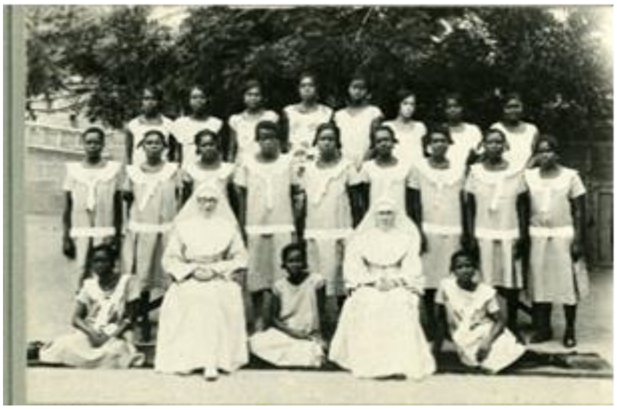
[34] *Tidings* is a magazine published by OLA. The sisters gave me a copy of their centenary edition printed in 1976. The photograph is from the centenary edition and shows a nun helping to clear ground in Ghana ready for building, an example of the work the sisters did, alongside teaching. (Sr. Colombiere O'Driscoll (ed.), *Tidings Vol.29, Nos. 2 and 3* (OLA Ireland, 1976) p. 29.)

Initially, using travel books and the internet to get a sense of what Ghana is like, the climate, topography, language etc, I tried to immerse myself in place, to create a feeling of experiencing it. For sisters who travelled to Ghana and Nigeria with OLA, the constant impression was one of shock, at the heat, the environment and the food. Often it was described as a cruel place for the sisters to survive with references to 'malarial swamps' and a 'haphazard collection of bamboo huts.'[35] The OLA website describes how 'West Africa's harsh climate allied to yellow fever and malaria would mean very few Europeans could expect to live for any more than five or ten years.'[36] It was also important to visualise St. Mary's compound where the training college was built. Sister Patricia's own account said it was 'small certainly, but all beginnings are small.'[37] She had vision and in *Tidings,* a picture of OLA Training College in the 1970s[38], shows she was right to believe it would become a grand place. However, it was hard to picture my character there, it was not the building she knew, or the Ghana she experienced. In the archives at The National University of Ireland, Galway, there was a picture of Sister Patricia, in Ghana, surrounded by her students, describing them as the first group of trained Catholic teachers, dated 1931.[39] However, being a formal photograph not much emotion is given away, and there is no real sense of place, other than the white of their habits and a lush tree behind them.





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[35] Sr. Colombiere O'Driscoll (ed.), *Tidings Vol.29, Nos. 2 and 3* (OLA Ireland, 1976) p. 13.

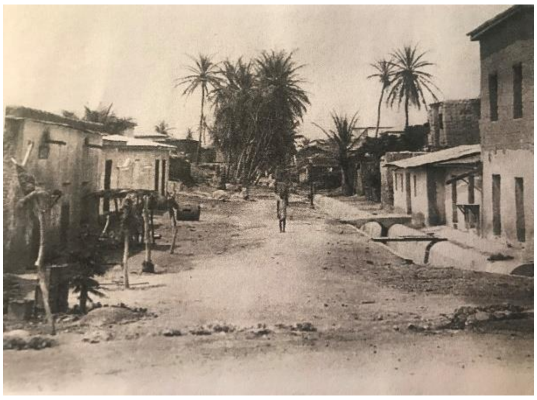
[36] www.olairend.ie/index.php/news-events/news/throwbackthursday-pioneering-female-education-ghana/ [accessed: on 17th October 2020]

[37] Sister Patricia, 'Out of Evil Cometh Good' *in The African Missionary, Volume VII number 1* (The African Mission, Cork, 1929) pp. 14 -15.

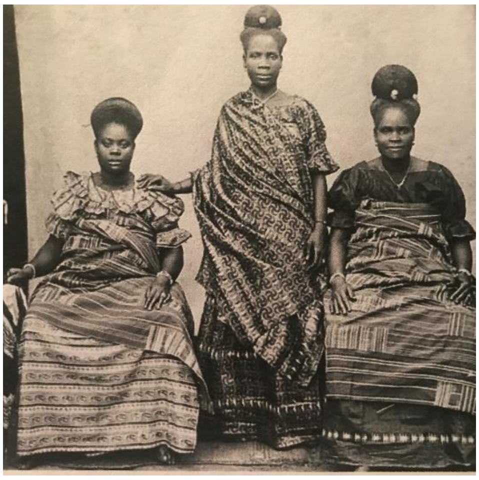
[38] Photograph of OLA Training College from Sr. Colombiere O'Driscoll (ed.), *Tidings Vol.29, Nos. 2 and 3* (OLA Ireland, 1976) p. 31.

[39] Photograph (POL4/1/10) courtesy of Kieran Hoare, Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections Reading Room at the James Hardiman Library, National University of Ireland, Galway and copied from POL4 'Papers Relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.'

Images of Cape Coast from the early 1900s told a different story, a simpler, harder reality.[40] The streets were rough, appearing dusty, and children and livestock scattered the tracks. Trees grew in abundance at the roadside, and the coast and the town seemed to merge, sandy, muddy, windswept. There were descriptions of lagoons and swamps, the ever-present threat of mosquitos, as one sister, Sr. Rosarii O'Sullivan, calls it, 'a paradise for mosquitos,' and later remembers how the 'mosquitos hissed and danced around us.'[41] Another sister, Sr. Callistus, writes that the big problem was 'the lack of running water for personal and clinical needs,' also remembering that 'food was scarce so we were often hungry.'[42]



It was also vital to understand the culture and the people and Jean Bardot in his letter, admittedly from 1679, described how, 'they adorn their necks, arms, legs and even feet with many strings of glass beads, coral and venetian rassade,' and 'anoint their hair with palm oil and decorate it with gold ornaments or red sea shells.'[43] There were many descriptions of kente cloth, a handwoven textile with many colours, which is wrapped around the body[44]. Even the nuns did not wear black and were dressed in white, as evidenced in the photograph of Sister Patricia with her students, and also



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[40] Kwekudee, 'Cape Coast (oguaa) Fante People and their Unique Fetu Afakye (festival)' at *kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/09/cape-coast-oguaa-fante-people-and-their.html* (2013) [accessed: 9th January 2021]

[41] Sr. Rosarii O' Sullivan, 'A Missionary Remembers…' at *www.ola.ie/index.php/about/our-story/* [accessed: 17th October 2020]

[42] Sr. Callistus (Frances Barry), 'A Missionary Remembers…' *at www.ola.ie/index.php/about/our-story/* [accessed: 17th October 2020]

[43] Jean Bardot, 'Letter 17' in *The Ghana Reader _History, Culture, Politics* ed. Konadu, K and Campbell, C. (Duke University Press, 2016) p. 107.

[44] Photograph of Fante Women in 1897. Courtesy of Kwekudee, 'Cape Coast (oguaa) Fante People and their Unique Fetu Afakye (festival)' *at kwekudee-tripdownmemorylane.blogspot.com/2013/09/cape-coast-oguaa-fante-people-and-their.html* (2013) [accessed: 9th January 2021]

Sr. Callistus wrote, ‘what a relief to be able to change into white clothes for our journey along the coast road to OLA Cape Coast.’[45]

To further understand Ghana, I also needed to research what life for a missionary was like there. I knew it was dangerous, selfless, uncomfortable, but I needed more to understand what Sister Patricia experienced during her time in Ghana, and what drew her to the missions. One particular book of interest was *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* edited by Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin. Noleen Foley, from the Sisters of Mercy, was a missionary in Kenya and describes ‘waking to the familiar sound of cocks crowing,’ but then how she stepped cautiously, ‘wary of the lizards, spiders and strange insects sharing my room and maybe my shoes.’[46] In another account, Fr Brian Treacy, also a missionary in Kenya, describes his feelings upon arrival into Mombasa’s Port, questioning, ‘am I crazy to be coming to this place?’ and continuing by saying how he felt ‘so inadequate, despite his theological training.’ He admits, ‘this fear was to stay with me for years.’ [47] This must have been the same for Nora, upon arrival in Ghana, especially considering everything she’d left behind and suffered. Indeed, the ‘culture shock’ was a constant reference throughout the book. Fr Vincent Boyle describes how, ‘the hardest thing was the suddenness of the transition,’ but that, ‘the sense of isolation disappeared after a while and, just like others before me, I became part of the place.’[48] It was this point, this transition of accepting Africa, that triggered thoughts about how Nora became Sister Patricia and how Ghana was a critical turning point in her story.

Nora seemed to find relative peace in Ghana, despite the dangers and uncertainty it posed. But perhaps, the risk was part of the draw? Did she want to suffer? Indeed, Revd Dr Edmund Hogan writes about how the ‘Irish missionary movement was conducted at a price.’ He explains how, ‘during the opening decades of the century, the mortality rate among missionaries in Africa was high, especially those who worked on the west coast in what was then known as the ‘white man’s grave.’ [49]And it was true, from researching Nora’s life, that during her time in Ghana she endured a yellow fever epidemic and eventually was invalided back to Ireland with malaria. It seemed she had left a home of sadness for a place of danger, but did that help her? Maybe she felt guilty that she couldn't save her brothers, or that she didn't stay at home with her mother and so, being in a place under constant threat of illness or death, was some kind of penance? Or perhaps, more simply, despite the ever-present fear of illness, her desperation and determination to escape her life in Ireland was more important than surviving. In *Through the Narrow Gate*, Karen Armstrong details her own journey to becoming a nun and later leaving the religious life and she suggests, postulants had to question if it was God they were seeking, or 'just security or escape from an uncongenial world? [50] This could certainly have been true for Nora.

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[45] Sr. Callistus (Frances Barry), ‘A Missionary Remembers…’ *at* www.ola.ie/index.php/about/our-story/ [accessed: 17th October 2020]

[46] Noreen Foley, ‘From Kerry to Kenya’ in *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* ed. Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin (Four Courts Press, 2011) p. 84.

[47] Fr Brian Treacy, ‘It Was All Swahili to Me’ in *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* ed. Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin (Four Courts Press, 2011) p. 59.

[48] Fr Vincent Boyle, ‘The Work in Nigeria’ in *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* ed. Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin (Four Courts Press, 2011) p. 69.

[49] Revd Dr Edmund Hogan, ‘The Modern Irish Missionary Story’ in *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* ed. Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin (Four Courts Press, 2011) p. 27.

As well as researching Ghana and the missionary experience to create authenticity, my story needed a narrative thread and so I looked for key events based on historical fact. One, mentioned above, was the yellow fever epidemic and another was the building of a cathedral, which Sister Patricia wrote about in a letter to Fr Slattery, published in *The African Missionary* in 1928. Although it was a passing comment in her letter, as she described how 'the cathedral has gone up very quickly,' detailing that the 'roof and ceiling are now finished and the floor is being begun,'[51] I decided to elaborate it to connect the cathedral being built in Ghana and the later building of Galway Cathedral in 1965, on the former site of Galway Gaol. The building of the cathedral becomes a thread through the Ghana section, as a reminder of home for Sister Patricia, because I imagined it is being built of similar stone to the gaol and it is somewhere she can go to reflect upon her family. It also linked the ideas of religion and imprisonment. Was the religious life a means of escaping other forms of incarceration? This was especially relevant when considering that for many women in Ireland at that time, the only way to escape the confines of marriage, was to become a nun. And so, like Nora, and as Armstrong suggests, many women ran from their lives to a missionary or religious life to avoid other alternatives at home, and so, perhaps, all are metaphorical prisons. Revd. Dr Edmund Hogan says, with regards to the Irish missionary movement, that, 'women played a major role from the outset,' and he believes these women upgraded 'the status of their sex in societies where a role of subservience was often the norm.'[52]

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[50] Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 91.

[51] Sister Patricia, 'Out of Evil Cometh Good' *in The African Missionary, Volume VII number 1* (The African Mission, Cork, 1929) pp. 14 -15.

[52] Revd Dr Edmund Hogan, 'The Modern Irish Missionary Story' in *A Road Less Travelled: Tales of Irish Missionaries* ed. Aidan Clerkin and Brendan Clerkin (Four Courts Press, 2011) p. 27.

Nora wasn’t running from her role as a woman, or wife, in Ireland, although perhaps there is an argument to say that, having given up her job as a teacher and returned to the farm, she was afraid she would be trapped there, she was running from grief. Despite this, a woman’s role in society was important to Nora and during her time in Ghana she not only helped to establish OLA College but also campaigned for female students to receive qualifications, further adding to the narrative thread, exploring gender roles in the 1920s, and convincing me that Nora would have wanted more than a husband and life on the farm, even if her brothers had not been murdered. When talking to the sisters at Ardfoyle Convent, none could explain why Nora, such a patriot of Ireland, chose to join a missionary order, but she may have chosen OLA partly because of its mission to pioneer female education. In their mission statement today, OLA states how, ‘the OLA Sisters have always paid special attention to empowerment of women,’ describing how it is an ‘essential part of our identity.’[53] Indeed, Father Augustine Planque, who established OLA in 1876, said, ‘there are missionaries for every mission in the world. There are none as yet, at least no women missionaries for West Africa.’[54] Further to that they describe how sisters ‘support the struggle for women and girls to obtain an education,’ and how they often ‘establish or help administer schools specifically for the education of girls.’[55] This is unchanged from the arrival of the first sisters in 1877 who used their time to set up schools, clinics and visit homes to speak to the local women.

Before joining the order, Nora was a school teacher and herself educated to degree level, and so an order promoting education for women would have appealed to her, upholding her family values. Indeed, during her time in Ghana, her campaign for women to achieve qualifications was successful, and in the fictional letters I wrote from Nora to her mother, this is one of the things she is proud to share.

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[53] www.olaireland.ie/index.php/our-mission/promotion-women/ [accessed: 27th March 2021]
[54] www.olaireland.ie/index.php/our-mission/promotion-women/ [accessed: 27th March 2021]
[55] www.olaireland.ie/index.php/our-mission/promotion-women/ [accessed: 27th March 2021]

To create a complete experience of life in the missions, it was important to show interaction between the locals, and it is historically correct, that three newly qualified teachers, Esther, Margaret and Helena, joined the order, or wanted to. They offered themselves in the wake of the yellow fever epidemic to replace those who had died. Sr. Mary Rita O' Mahony says this was 'new and unusual,' explaining that, 'the people of Cape Coast would have been now used of foreign sisters but not sisters from their own area.'[56] In my novel, they approach Sister Patricia, which is a manipulation of fact, but allowed for Sister Patricia to consider her own leaving, especially the reaction of her mother, because Sister Patricia is confronted by the parents' of Esther, who do not want their daughter to leave Ghana, or become a nun. This also links to the idea of women, in both Ireland and Africa, torn between marriage or the religious life, dictated to and overpowered by their parents, unable to make their own choices about the direction of their lives. They reflect Nora's own decision, caught between loyalty to family and self-care. Looking again at OLA's dedication to the empowerment of women, and Nora's campaign for women's qualifications to be recognised, the introduction of these three students, especially Esther, was not only historically correct, but in keeping with my character's beliefs and attitudes, and as mentioned above, it also provided an opportunity for reflection, to look again at why Nora herself left and the impact of her leaving. It is in direct contrast to the character of Esi, who represents a woman, and her daughter, constrained by gender and marriage and denied an education.

The character of Esi provides more than one contrast, she also allows Sister Patricia to interact with a character not practicing the Catholic religion and instead following local traditions. She is a completely fictional character, but one imagined from descriptions of local people, especially those following the fetish priests,[57] and from the wider rural community. Esi is a character Sister Patricia cannot help, and by introducing her, it widens the scope of Sister Patricia's Ghana experience and, hopefully, makes it more real. Even though she escaped the grief of Ireland to do good elsewhere, it is not possible for Sister Patricia to save everyone and in this case, she cannot contend with local beliefs and educate Esi's, soon to be married, young daughter. Indeed, her meeting with Esi is an education in itself for both Sister Patricia and the reader. It brings the real struggle of Ghana to the fore, the battle between old and new beliefs, and the privilege of education.

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[56] Photograph and quote from www.olaireland.ie/index.php/news-events/news/throwbackthursday-pioneering-female-education-ghana/ [accessed: 17th October 2020]

[57] Fetish priests act as a link between the spiritual world and the living world. They help with physical and spiritual ailments. They follow local traditions and would not agree or adopt the ways of Christianity that missionaries introduced to Africa, viewing it as a threat. With reference to women and marriage, polygamy was still popular amongst those practicing local traditions.

Sister Patricia had to experience Ghana both as a religious sister and as Nora, to take the reader on a journey through Ghana, and so alongside the above interactions and the epidemic, I also included descriptions of her trip to Elmina[58], which Sister Patricia wrote about in *The African Missionary*, as well as her trip to Accra, both of which allowed description of place and to consider the significance of setting. Kojo Laing's novel, *Search Sweet Country*, describes how, 'pillars of houses marched,'[59] to give an impression of the crowded architecture of Accra, and also the blurred lines between nature and the city, as Laing describes further how there are 'smiles of baked mud,' and 'smiles of cement plaster.'[60] To consider where Nora had travelled from, the west of Ireland, or even Cape Coast, Accra must have been a shock, but one, it seemed, she enjoyed and found refreshing, a place where she could momentarily lose herself, but also one where perhaps she could draw similarities. As Jack McNulty describes in *The Temporary Gentleman*, when describing Ghana, 'the people we passed moved slowly in the heat, always turning to view us, sometimes nodding a greeting like an Irish country person.'[61]

The Ghana section, despite dramatic events of its own, was, most importantly, a transition between Nora and Sister Patricia. In detailing day to day life in Ghana, it allows for Nora to draw comparisons to home and think about her family, especially to examine her relationship with her mother. How much correspondence was there between the two of them and what did her mother think of her leaving to go to Africa, especially considering she was alone in the wake of Patrick and Harry's murders and with Kate back in Corofin (and later to America) and Hugo in Manchester? Nora's leaving must have been devastating. In the same letter from *The African Missionary*, Nora wrote, 'as far as I can see, the life of a missionary does not admit of much correspondence. Not that we forget, for sometimes I find myself sitting under the big cedar in Ardfoyle, or wandering through the woods of Cloughballymore, or over the green fields of Shanaglish, or kneeling beside the grave of two brave boys.'[62] This quote provided insight into Sister Patricia and her time in Ghana. She didn't have time to write home, further distancing herself from her family, but she didn't forget them, furthermore, she pictured herself back home. How, after everything, must it have felt to be in Africa, alone, with such memories and sorrow to bear? Indeed, Armstrong, describes writing letters as 'painful,' explaining how she was 'retreating from her family behind a screen of stilted words and phrases,' because they were not allowed to write about 'what happens in the enclosure,' or about 'private or personal feelings to a secular.'[63] Consequently, Sister Patricia feels the same, continually thinking about her family and even more so, thinking about how she left and why. The use of letters in literature, in particular war literature, is often used to create a façade between reality and hope. Men often write from the trenches full of bravado, or at least not telling the truth of the conditions and fear, to protect those at home. Therefore, letters can provide a parallel between truth and reality, fact and fiction. They are a means of protection for both writer and recipient. In her letters from Ghana, Sister Patricia wants to pretend she has healed, but the contrasts are painful, the memories raw, and she finds it too difficult to hide her feelings from her mother.

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[58] Photograph of Elmina Castle (Sr. Colombiere O'Driscoll (ed.), *Tidings Vol.29, Nos. 2 and 3* (OLA Ireland, 1976) p. 20.) Elmina Castle, sometimes called St. George's Castle, is the oldest European building in Ghana. Construction was started by the Portuguese in 1482 and its main use was for trade. However, by the 17th century it was a hub for the slave trade and slaves were both auctioned and held there.
[59] Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country* (Penguin Classics, 2019) p. 289.
[60] Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country* (Penguin Classics, 2019) p. 289.
[61] Sebastian Barry, *The Temporary Gentleman* (Faber and Faber, 2015) p. 300.

As a result, it has to be considered whether Ghana became less about the country and more about internal conflict for Nora? Perhaps it helped her morph into Sister Patricia, but not fully, because as is evidenced, she never forgot home and so, it can be assumed, never let go of Nora. However, for Nora, Ghana provided the cultural contrast she needed to move on from her painful past, or at least helped her keep going, it also provided danger and suffering, and it provided parallels as well, although these came later.

Ghana also struggled for independence from Britain, as Ireland did, and in fact, it was the first African Country to gain freedom from colonial rule, although this was not until 1957, and so it was still under British rule when Nora was there, but it is a fact she must have been aware of later in her life. It is significant to the story, and for fiction and especially plot, another way of introducing memories of the past, therefore the addition of a Ghanaian sister at the end of Part Two makes reference to this. Following the death of Agnes, Sister Patricia, wants to visit Galway, to return to her own ghosts, but instead of running like she did when she left in 1920, she is escorted to the bus station by a sister, a nun newly arrived from Ghana. Again, she is a completely fictional character. There is no factual evidence that nuns were resident in Castlemacgarrett in 1969, however, it is possible. During the 1960s there was an increasing population of African students arriving to Ireland, most often from African countries like Nigeria and Ghana, where there was a strong missionary link. Deirdre Finnerty says that ‘by 1962, at least 1,100 students - or one tenth of Ireland's student population - were African,’[64] and so it is not completely impossible that a nun from Ghana would be posted in Ireland, but more importantly, for the sake of fiction, it was necessary.

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[62] Sister Patricia, 'Out of Evil Cometh Good*' in The African Missionary, Volume VII number 1* (The African Mission, Cork, 1929) pp. 14 -15.
[63] Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 108.

The addition of the Ghanaian nun allows brief exploration of the parallel between Ghana and Ireland and the struggle from the British for independence as Sister Patricia and the Ghanaian nun discuss it while walking to the bus. Parallels between Ireland and freedom from colonialism are made elsewhere in fiction as well. In Ronan Bennett’s *The Catastrophist*, which is set in the midst of the struggle for Congolese independence, following a demonstration where many protestors have been shot, the main character, Gillespie, is asked ‘isn’t that what happened in Ireland after your Easter Rising?’[65] But Gillespie is reluctant, he denies his Irishness, and replies, ‘that wasn’t my rising.’[66] He is different from my character in so much as he denies his identity, but although Sister Patricia is silent about her own, she does not deny it. It is interesting to see parallels in fiction and consider how Sister Patricia felt as she watched Ghana, and other African countries, go through violence and bloodshed to claim independence as Ireland did, especially considering that although Sister Patricia is in Ireland, other sisters from OLA were still in Africa at that time, and this creates layers of history in fiction.

Similarly, in Sebastian Barry’s *The Temporary Gentleman*, the novel transitions between Accra in 1957 and Ireland, pre1957. Like Sister Patricia, the main character, Jack McNulty, is also seeking refuge away from Ireland and he comments at the start, immediately drawing a parallel, on how, ‘it is so strange to be in a freed country, and yet not so strange, since my own home place once was freed.’[67] In fact, Jack McNulty goes further, admitting he should be home in Sligo and is instead, ‘lurking here in Africa like a broken-down missionary, without church or purpose,’[68] but believing, ‘the man who goes back to Ireland will be a better man.’[69] On her return, does Sister Patricia feel she is better? I don’t believe so. She carries her past with her, suffers, but finds no answers, no forgiveness. Her trip to Galway is her final chance and therefore the introduction of the Ghanaian nun is symbolic, perhaps Ghana is finally delivering her to peace. Structurally, it provides a natural linking of her stories.

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[64] Deirdre Finnerty, ‘*The Hidden Story of African-Irish Children*’ at www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-55145873 (2020) [accessed: 6th February 2021]

[65] Ronan Bennett, *The Catastrophist* (Review, 2004) p. 99.

[66] Ronan Bennett, *The Catastrophist* (Review, 2004) p. 99.

[67] Sebastian Barry*, The Temporary Gentleman* (Faber and Faber, 2015) p. 11.

[68] Sebastian Barry*, The Temporary Gentleman* (Faber and Faber, 2015) p. 27.

[69] Sebastian Barry*, The Temporary Gentleman* (Faber and Faber, 2015) p. 27.

Another complication when writing Ghana, aside from setting, was writing about the religious life. Nuns don't talk about themselves, or their feelings, and yet for fiction, Sister Patricia had to. It was through the Ghana section that she really had to open up, to show the transition from Nora to Sister Patricia, but how? Although troublesome, it was also interesting because it helped answer my question as to why Nora chose to follow the religious life, especially as a missionary. Did she want to become someone else? Did she want to leave Nora behind? Kill her even? I couldn't believe that anyone would be capable of such discipline and yet, Armstrong, too, constantly refers to how she struggled letting herself go, saying, 'one of the things that had to die was my mind' and questioning, 'when was I ever going to leave my self behind?'[70] What must this have been like for Nora? The postulants were, in effect, killing their former selves. So, what if Sister Patricia couldn't?

Chapter Two: The Writing

Research is beneficial for informing fiction, but it can also be a burden, and it felt, at the moment of starting to write, that I had too much. Where to begin? It couldn't all be included, but how to decide what was relevant and what was not? And which voice to choose? Could the fiction begin with the sudden, brutal tragedy of the murders with Nora, or with Sister Patricia, slower and reflective? After much experimenting with short fragments, paragraphs, standalone scenes, and considering the idea of storytelling in Irish culture, the voice of an older Sister Patricia, reflecting upon her time in the missions, and the search for her brothers was a more natural starting point. I chose to locate an older Sister Patricia in Lancashire, where, in real life, she served as Superior from 1963 until 1969. How would Sister Patricia feel when she was placed there, and what must it have been like to live in England knowing what she did about the torture and murder of her brothers at British hands?[71] Admittedly, removing her from the present in Ghana, made it easier, because then both of us, writer and character, were distanced from the place we were describing. But it didn't work, my writing was too detached. The combination of a retrospective viewpoint and third person was too removed from the character. It lacked any intensity, her voice was not gripping, there was no hook for the reader. If historical fiction recalls or recreates place and time, the retrospective, third person viewpoint did not, it did not transport the reader.

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[70] Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 144.

[71] Although Sister Patricia knew that the British Forces murdered her brothers, at an inquest into their deaths, held in Gort Barracks on 8th December 1920, it was recorded that the brothers had escaped custody and the British Forces were not responsible. In fact, after their requiem mass, Auxiliary soldiers entered Shanaglish Church and demanded that the coffins were opened to allow them to identify the bodies as their escaped prisoners. They showed no remorse and no one was ever held accountable.

To resolve this, I tried writing Lancashire as a diary, something secret that Sister Patricia kept for herself, which also helped with the issue of a nun not talking about herself, or sharing her past with others. It was a way for her to open up without telling anyone and with this decision, it became easier to write Sister Patricia, plus it felt like she was hiding something, looking for a way to confess. The use of first person in diary form helped me to get closer to her and it started to feel like I was writing a memoir. I started to write in present tense because it felt more natural, especially as she delved into her past as Nora, because it was a way of separating past and present. However, I avoided Ghana, and her transition, instead writing about the search for her brothers in Galway, which seemed most pressing. It was the part of the novel based on fact, with no added fictions, and therefore already had a narrative thread. Plus, the murders were the catalyst for her life in the missions, and so became a catalyst for writing. After I had written approximately five thousand words of Lancashire, I began to struggle to maintain the voice, and needed direction. I also found the voice of Sister Patricia too formal, missing intimacy for a confessional diary, especially when detailing the experiences of Nora. As a narrator, she lacked energy, and as a result, the whole piece lacked momentum, or action. Historical fiction tells stories from the past, but Sister Patricia's voice at this point, didn't make them relevant or interesting. Why did they need to be told?

During my trip to Ireland, I visited the archives of University College Dublin to view the O'Malley notebooks, and while these were hard to decipher because of poor handwriting, they gave me a sense of what it was like to be a member of the IRA during the 1920s. I also accessed first-hand accounts of IRA members through The Bureau of Military History. The trouble with a retrospective viewpoint recalling the events of 1920, especially when that viewpoint was an ageing nun, was that much of this research was lost. It wasn't natural for her to write about the military side of things, the conflict and the troubles, because they weren't her stories to tell. As a nun, even though the war was lifechanging for her, she wouldn't talk about the violence of the period and it was doubtful how much she truly knew of the actions of the IRA, but, at the time, as I set out in my aims at the start, I wanted these to be part of my story. For historical fiction, did I need another voice? A voice to bring all aspects of the past to the story? I was already working with Sister Patricia and Nora, but I had to question whether the brothers needed a voice too? A novel of multiple perspectives would allow for explorations of all areas of the history of the period, and possibly add more direction? But does historical fiction need to cover everything? Or is it sufficient to simply detail one person's experience? If so, then Nora's story was just as important as Sister Patricia's, and so Galway in 1920 needed to be written as a separate section. Plus, although the same character, telling their experience of the same events, a structure separating the voices of Nora and Sister Patricia would allow for distinct voices and a chance to show change and character growth, to show the impact of historical events on one character. I, therefore, began to write a section about the events in Galway during 1920 from Nora's point of view, in first-person, to stay close to the character, but in past tense, whereas the Lancashire section would be written in present reflecting upon the past in the voice of Sister Patricia.

At the start of each scene in the Galway section, I included a fictional quote, using a real person from November 1920, to detail rumours or lies that circulated in the community regarding the brothers. An example of a quote is below:

'I saw them being taken away and I confess, I did not follow. Nora, please forgive me. I will do all I can to help you find them, but come home, your mother needs you. There are rumours everywhere but no truth.'

~ Michael Healy, cousin of the Loughnanes[72]

The purpose was to use real life characters to detail events, as well as Nora. They were dated and showed the progression of the search and subsequent days, creating a factually correct timeline. The section was chronological and accurate, but it was also flat. Historical fiction is still fiction, not a history lesson, and this section demonstrated the dangers of too many facts. There was too much information, too much telling, and somehow the fiction was lost and with it the character of Nora. She became simply a mouthpiece for historical events. Neel Mukherjee, author of *The Lives of Others*, suggests, 'too much research kills the imagination,'[73] explaining that it can be hard to be creative when you already have a story. He believes the construction of stories relies on imagination, saying, ‘research only takes you up to the threshold of the room. You need imagination to enter it. So much of the world in a book feels truthful because the writer imagined it intensely.’[74] It was the perfect explanation for my problem with Galway; it was not creative or imagined and sat bland on the page like a textbook, not a story.

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[72] Although this is a fictional quote, Michael Healy was a real person and he was Nora's cousin. It was Michael Healy who wrote to Nora at the school where she was working in north Galway to inform her of her brothers' disappearance and he also featured in accounts of the search.

[73] Neel Mukherjee, *The Lives of Others* (Vintage, 2015) From 'Author's Interview' at the end of the novel.

In contrast, the character of Sister Patricia in Lancashire, felt more natural, but I was struggling to maintain her voice, with no direction for that section, and lack of plot. All her thoughts and questions were internalised. It was one long internal monologue, with no real historical element and no direction. For it to work, as historical fiction, there had to be a truthful element of the past, not just the fictional ponderings of an elderly nun. And what of Ghana? It had no place in the current novel structure but it needed to be told. Historically, it was vital, because it was the point of change for my character, plus it added layers to the fiction by taking the reader away from Ireland to a different place in the past. It was at this point that I decided the novel needed to be broken into three parts. Galway 1920, Ghana 1927 – 31, and Lancashire 1963. The idea was to write all three sections separately and then weave them together to tell the entire story of Sister Patricia’s and Nora’s experiences. In this way, the story would explore all elements of her life, but also allow for the events of that time period to be detailed, combining both imagination and fact to create a historical fiction novel.

But what of the more violent, brutal details? Could they be left out? If the brothers were given a voice, it would allow for use of military detail and to show how the IRA were operating at that time, hence including more research from my time in Dublin, and so I wrote a letter from Harry to Nora, that I planned for her to find at some point through the novel. The use of a male voice would introduce more discussion about gender, looking at the difference in male and female reactions to conflict, but also, as a female character, there were parts of the war Sister Patricia, or Nora, could not know, whereas a male character, part of the IRA, would be party to those details and thus beneficial to creating authentic fiction.

During the first review of the Galway section, it was agreed that the rumours at the start of each section didn’t work and that, although I thought these would be a way of signposting the story, they were too heavy handed in their introduction of historical characters and needed to be integrated into the narrative. With the Galway section, I wanted to create a sense of distrust to show how rumours travelled and distorted the truth, but in doing so, the section was too plot driven and there was a loss of depth for the character of Nora. The whole piece was too fast and scenes, which were vital to inform about the unfolding of events, were thrown away. In contrast, there were other scenes which were not necessary. For example, I wrote a scene where Nora visits the RIC Barracks looking for her brothers, then I wrote a scene where she visits the gaol and finally, a scene where she visits Lenaboy Castle, Headquarters of the British Forces. It was true that this all happened in real life, but for the sake of fiction, did I need to include them all? In each place she is asking the same questions. To use them all overloaded the prose with facts, it slowed it down, lost tension and felt repetitive. This was a problem throughout the section.

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[74] Neel Mukherjee, *The Lives of Others* (Vintage, 2015) From ‘Author’s Interview’ at the end of the novel.

But how much truth had to be sacrificed for the sake of fiction? I couldn't include every detail because then the story lost pace, but at the same time I wanted to be accurate and factually correct. By clinging onto every real-life event in such detail, the voice of Nora became flawed; she was too simple, too willing to align herself to her brothers' principles and she didn't question anything. She wasn't a character true to herself, rather just a way to relay historical events. What mattered to Nora? If she was sitting opposite me telling the story, what details would be important to her? What would she include? After all, we all edit our own history and can only rely on our memories to tell our version of events. By creating a character true to herself, the fiction would feel more authentic, more believable, more historically accurate for this one character's viewpoint.

To do this, I needed to understand Nora's motivation and indeed Sister Patricia's too. What was at the heart of the novel? Nora ran away to become Sister Patricia, but why? She wanted to repent her sins. This idea took me back to Ghana. I hadn't written much of Ghana, but that which I had in the Lancashire diary was written retrospectively and it needed to be more immediate. A diary form would still work - I liked the idea of secrecy - but it needed to be a diary written whilst in Ghana, not from memory, which would make it more present and grip the reader's attention. For historical fiction, setting is one of the most important elements, therefore, Ghana, with its complete contrast to Ireland, had to be authentic, to transport the reader there. I would still keep Lancashire, instead using it as a framing device to link the Galway and Ghana sections. The collection of viewpoints started to tell a story, to unravel history, however, as a novel, it was very disjointed and extremely introspective.

Following a six-month break for maternity leave, upon rereading the completed Ghana section, I felt that the voice of Sister Patricia was too forced. This was because the act of writing a diary wasn't natural for a nun. The role of historical fiction, as well as exploring past events, is to identify attitudes and beliefs of a particular time, and in the 1920s, those who chose a religious life were not supposed to discuss, or write about their past. Therefore, the diary was wrong for

Sister Patricia. It worked as a way to express her feelings, perhaps even keep Nora alive, but the writing of it would have been against the rules and Sister Patricia, unlike Nora, didn't feel like a rule breaker. I needed to reconsider the form. Looking again to my research, I thought about the issue of correspondence. Sister Patricia was more likely to write to someone else rather than herself. Plus, it was historically more accurate. Sister Patricia herself said it was hard to find time to write letters, but that indicated she wanted to, and Armstrong described it as 'painful,'[75] so what if Sister Patricia did write home, what would she have said?

The Ghana diary described setting and transported the reader to a different place, however, another major theme was that of the relationship between Sister Patricia and her mother, and so it made sense for the section to be a series of letters to her mother instead. The letters are a way for her to justify her reasons for leaving, but Sister Patricia continually apologises because she cannot write frequently, and so the letters themselves are another source of guilt, adding layers to the relationship and more interest for the fiction. If historical fiction explores past events, it also explores the people who lived through them and the impact of events on their relationships. Therefore, it was important, that the mother-daughter relationship was examined because it shapes the person Sister Patricia becomes and this can be seen in the letters because they reflect Sister Patricia's growing unease with Nora and demonstrate how she embraces her transition to Sister Patricia.

The idea of an epistolary novel with letters from Ghana and letters from Harry was appealing as a useful literary device for detailing both events and relationships. The inclusion of newspaper articles, reports, memories, dreams, prayers and confessions to detail the Galway section would also add variation and build a political and personal portrayal of history. But does historical fiction need to do it all? Perhaps it was enough to follow the journey of one character. Her personal history. I was working with fragments and although I had a story and several voices, they were not pulling together, even with Lancashire as a framing device. All stories must follow a plot, but my writing was about a character's journey through a particular series of events, and how they shape her, rather than a detailed account of those events from all viewpoints.

I looked to fiction for inspiration, in particular, *Possession* by A.S. Byatt because she uses letters, poems, diaries and essays to tell the story. It makes for a complicated read and I, personally, felt it prevented the build-up of tension, however, the use of letters works well to help the reader move between narrative voices. At times the letters are too long, or superfluous, but in reading the novel, it allowed me to be braver with transitions. Byatt uses several forms and trusts her readers to follow, which I also needed to do. Therefore, in my work, especially when detailing Ghana, it was okay to have gaps in time, to move between events without explaining the context for them and even to intersperse the letters within the prose. Much like reading letters in real life, Sister Patricia's letters give only the information she feels able to share, in keeping with her restrictions as a nun, and with this knowledge, I felt comfortable with my account of Ghana, and the portrayal of her relationship with her mother, imagined as it was from reality.

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[75] Karen Armstrong, *Through the Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 108.

One ethical concern was that of imagining a fractured relationship between two people, who really existed, but not knowing in reality if their relationship was really so troubled. However, isn't this a problem for all historical fiction? Ultimately, historical fiction does portray real people, but it also imagines them and the characters are only the writer's interpretation. Yes, Kathleen Loughnane and Sister Patricia were real people, but my characters are different, they are inspired by them not factually based on them. Uncomfortable as it may be, manipulating their relationship for my story wasn't ethically impossible and I decided, for fiction, it needed to happen because neither of them are portrayed negatively. I just imagined the possible fallout from decisions, which really did occur, and the impact they may have had on their relationship.

Looking again to Galway, I had to consider Nora's motivation for telling the story? It was Nora's voice but where was her voice coming from and who was listening? It needed to be simplified. Galway and the events there are the catalyst for all other events in the book, they had to be included but they didn't need to dominate. By exploring the life of Sister Patricia, the events from Galway were acknowledged and retained, but Galway as a section on its own didn't make sense, it was too disjointed, and so I restructured the novel again. Instead of having three sections, Galway, Ghana and Lancashire, I divided the novel into two alternating voices, Nora and Sister Patricia, each telling their story, chapter by chapter, which had the effect of further separating the characters. Frustratingly, this did mean that the Ghana letters no longer had a place, but I hoped I would be able to integrate them into Sister Patricia's telling of the story. Another problem the restructure brought to light, was my choice of Lancashire. It wasn't the end of Sister Patricia's journey and to truly reflect upon her life, she needed to be at the end of her travels, especially as her final placement was back where she started life, on the west coast of Ireland. For the fiction, the circular nature of her story had to be acknowledged, and so my character needed to return to Ireland.

In 1969, Sister Patricia returned to Ireland, to a nursing home called Castlemacgarrett in Co. Mayo.[76] It made sense that her return to Ireland would stir her memories and it gave me a reason for her to start telling her story. Surely, returning to somewhere so close to Galway would awaken the past? The scenes in Co. Mayo replaced those in Lancashire, with the unpacking of her things, literally mirroring the unpacking of her life on the page. More importantly, the story had to come together as a novel, rather than separate episodes of a life. History is not remembered that way, rather everything blends together to make a lived experience.

The story still needed an element of tension. All stories do. There has to be a narrative arc which shapes the rising and falling of action in a story. Characters need to want something, to have questions, which creates conflict and the final climax. What did Sister Patricia want? Where was the tension? It was lacking. There had to be a reason for the reader to read on. To create the story hook, which had so far been missing, I introduced the box of letters bearing Nora's name into Sister Patricia's room on her arrival back to Ireland. The box would create questions, thus developing plot. Inside the box, Sister Patricia would find the letters she wrote to her mother from Ghana, hence further dramatizing the story and bringing the past back to Sister Patricia, forcing the reader, and Sister Patricia, to question who put them there.

The Lancashire section was too introspective and there was little to no interaction with other characters, or use of dialogue. While this helped explore character, it slowed the pace and was lacking in direction. Therefore, in Castlemacgarrett, there had to be another character, someone for Sister Patricia to confide in. Why would Sister Patricia suddenly start talking to a stranger after years of silence? Firstly, she knew she had returned to Ireland for her final role and that she would die there. Perhaps, then, she wanted to unburden herself of her stories. Secondly, the shock of seeing her letters in her room. She would want to talk about them, they would raise questions, unbury old hurts. Also, the physical return to Ireland, where she ran from. How would that make her feel? How had Ireland changed? Did she feel she belonged there? Finally, the character she chose to confide in had to be flawed. Agnes started to take shape, a character alone in the home with an estranged son and suffering from dementia, or so Sister Patricia suspects.

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[76] Castlemacgarrett, three and half miles from the town of Claremorris in Co. Mayo, was built by the Browne family, but in 1811, it was destroyed by fire and subsequently rebuilt incorporating several parts of the original building. It stayed with the Brownes until 1965 when it was sold to OLA for use as a nursing home and became known as Castlemacgarrett Nursing Home. The order sold it to developers in 2006, however, it still remains vacant. (Photo taken from Sr. Colombiere O'Driscoll (ed.), *Tidings Vol.29, Nos. 2 and 3* (OLA Ireland, 1976) p. 49.)

In creating Agnes, it raised several ideas regarding memory. Agnes' dementia encourages Sister Patricia to tell her stories because Agnes cannot retain memories. It must also be considered how memory changes experiences. For example, how do Sister Patricia's memories vary from the actual details written in the letters? How reliable is memory? Remembering it all from a different stage of her life possibly alters details, or highlights different issues, or shifts importance for Sister Patricia. With reference to historical fiction, this is critical, because as a genre it is supposed to help retain the past, and yet the story of the past is unreliable, told in retrospect, how much is forgotten? Hilary Mantel suggests, 'any worthwhile history is in a constant state of self-questioning, just as any worthwhile fiction is.'[77] This is certainly true for both, history is unreliable and that unreliability can be reflected in fiction, mirrored in the recreation of history on the page, particularly in characters like Agnes. She is questionable because the extent of her illness and memory is never made clear. How much can she remember? I wanted moments when she surprises Sister Patricia by remembering details she has been told, but other times when she forgets, causing Sister Patricia, and the reader, to question if anything is being remembered, or will the past be forgotten, hence adding an edge of uncertainty to the fiction, as there undoubtedly always is in history.

The idea of memory and reliability is a common theme in fiction. Indeed, the unreliable narrator is a popular tool. In Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, he explores the theme of memory and considers how 'peoples' lives are transformed by history and the power of remembering.'[78] It is set in a lunatic asylum, the main character, Roseanne McNulty, is resident there, so it also ties in with reliability, because, as in my novel, where Agnes is doubted because of her memory, so too can Roseanne because of her sanity. Told in fragments and broken stories, the reader is left to piece together the truth. Roseanne herself says of the truth, 'no one has the monopoly'[79] and in reference to her own story, believes, 'not even myself.'[80] Most interestingly, and similar to my novel, there are two stories at play because Roseanne is writing a secret journal, that she hides under her floor, and so the truth differs from the written, secretive, word, to the spoken word she shares with Dr. Greene. I was able to draw a useful comparison between the conversations of Roseanne and Dr. Greene with those of Sister Patricia and Agnes. In both cases, they are used to delve into the past and uncover painful truths. Sister Patricia shows more honesty, believing, or hoping, that Agnes does not remember, while Roseanne often keeps silent, instead committing the truth to her secret journal. For both characters, Sister Patricia and Roseanne, remembering proves to be cathartic. Tara Harney-Mahajan says, in relation to Sebastian Barry's character of Annie Dunne, from another of his novels, *Annie Dunne*, that 'her only relief comes when she remembers the past.'[81] Perhaps this is the reason for telling stories, and it's why Sister Patricia needs to talk to Agnes. She needs relief. To further this idea, Harney-Mahajan suggests, 'the concepts of memory, forgetting, history (official history versus personal history) and happiness, are intimately coupled with forgiveness.'[82] With this in mind, it started to make sense that in the telling of her past, Sister Patricia is seeking forgiveness, and peace. If the responsibility of historical fiction is to examine the extremes of human behaviour, then here, in the telling of past trauma it is most evident, and most raw. As Hilary Mantel says, the 'chief concern is with the interior drama of my characters' lives.'[83] Through exploring the pain of the past, it takes the reader on a journey with Sister Patricia, as she tries to come to terms with the emotional tragedy of her life.

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[77] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

[78] Quote from Sebastian Barry during an appearance at Cuirt Literary Festival on Thursday 26th April, 2018, in the Town Hall Theatre, Galway, where he was in conversation with Paul Lynch.

[79] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (Faber and Faber, 2009) p. 134.

[80] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (Faber and Faber, 2009) p. 134.

It was enjoyable to write the character of Agnes, partly because she is completely fictional and therefore, I was not balancing fact and fiction in her story, but it was also refreshing to have someone for Sister Patricia to interact with. It is possible to introduce entirely fictional characters into historical fiction, indeed, it is perhaps necessary. They lighten the load of balancing ethical concerns and research with narrative and imagination. Fictional characters allow freedom from the weight of history. They must be appropriate in their thoughts and beliefs, vocabulary and setting for the era they are written in, but there is no danger of mis-representation, as there is with characters inspired by real people. The scenes I wrote between the two of them became like confessions and as Agnes developed, I started to think about the nature of storytelling, in particular its importance in Irish culture and folklore. Within Irish folklore there are so many magical elements with mythical spirits like the 'pooka,' or the 'banshee,' and constant reference to 'the good people,' or fairies.[84] The majority of the myths hail from rural Ireland, told and feared through generations, and with this idea, Agnes, an elderly woman from rural Ireland, has to believe in mythology, putting her in contrast to Sister Patricia and religion. By adding this new layer to my novel, it created conflict for Sister Patricia because Agnes' beliefs, which are so at odds to her own, and to Catholicism, are still so integral to Irish culture. Not only does Sister Patricia doubt her stories will be forgotten, but she is telling them to someone so different from herself.

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[81] Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'Provoking Forgiveness in Sebastian Barry's The Secret Scripture' *in New Hibernia Review* (2012): www.academia.edu/7337206/Provoking_Forgiveness_in_Sebastian_Barry's_The_Secret_Scripture [accessed: 23rd May 2021]

[82] Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'Provoking Forgiveness in Sebastian Barry's The Secret Scripture' in *New Hibernia Review* (2012): www.academia.edu/7337206/Provoking_Forgiveness_in_Sebastian_Barry's_The_Secret_Scripture [accessed: 23rd May 2021]

[83] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

The introduction of the supernatural had to be subtle, with Agnes hinting at her beliefs and Sister Patricia, initially, overlooking them. Therefore, at places in the novel, Agnes quotes Yeats,[85] who wrote extensively about Irish folklore, and, for Sister Patricia, he, perhaps, is a controversial poet, whilst at other points Agnes talks more directly about her beliefs when discussing her relationship with her son, Eoin, and how 'he told her to stay away with her fairy magic.'[86] Fetish priests in Ghana also link with these ideas because, with the introduction of Christianity in Africa, the traditional beliefs were often at odds with the new religion, and even by the time Nora arrived as a missionary, large areas of (typically rural) Ghana rejected Christianity in favour of the beliefs of fetish priests. It is something Agnes and Sister Patricia discuss and Agnes shows faith in the fetish priests, telling Sister Patricia, 'there might have been hope in their magic,' [87] when Sister Patricia describes how Catholic priests chased away the 'witch doctors' during the yellow fever epidemic. It acts as a thread pulling the sections together, examining the complete history of Sister Patricia's experience.

The clash between folklore and religion is also evident in *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* by Angela Bourke, a true story which demonstrates how feared witchcraft was in rural Ireland.

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[84] The Pooka is a mythical creature which can change shape, predominantly using animal forms, and it is believed to only appear at night and causes harm. In Irish it means 'goblin'. Similarly, the banshee is also from Irish mythology and is described as a woman who signals the death of family members by wailing or screaming. Banshee literally means, 'woman of the fairy mound.' Throughout Ireland, particularly rural Ireland, there is fear and belief of fairies and 'fairy mounds' or 'forts' are supposed to dot the countryside and act as an entrance to the fairy world, or as fairies were often referred 'the good people.' In reality, fairy mounds are the remains of ringforts dating from the Iron age, or they could be prehistoric dwellings.

[85] Yeats took Irish folklore and tales of fairies very seriously. He wrote the book F*airy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* in 1888, then followed it in 1892 with another book*, Irish Fairy Tales,* and in 1893 with *The Celtic Twilight.*

[86] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 126.

[87] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 106.

Bridget Cleary was murdered by her husband because he believed the fairies had taken her, in reality she was probably suffering from a breakdown or a diagnosable illness. Priests instigated the fear of fairy magic by condemning those, who were simply ill, as changelings, or using witchcraft. Perhaps, even worse, is the theory in Walter Benjamin's essay, *The Storyteller,* that fairy stories allowed 'face-saving lies to be told,' using the example that women, 'who had obviously been beaten might explain the marks of violence as having been inflicted by fairy abductors.'[88] Bourke believes that 'fairy-legends have been denigrated as superstition, and trivialized in ethnic stereotypes; like any other art form, however, they carry the potential to express profound truths and intense emotions.'[89] Caught up with her illness is the sense, therefore, that Agnes is unreliable, or mad, because of her beliefs, but through them, she tells the truth. Perhaps this is what Sister Patricia wanted, a cover, to tell her story? Although not physically beaten, she is emotionally broken, and so, perhaps, in Agnes, Sister Patricia finds the cover she sought to explore her past.

After conversing with Agnes, Sister Patricia begins to accept and even speak to visions of her dead brothers, which, although, so at odds to her religious life, felt natural, and was a way to introduce Patrick and Harry into the novel without letters or another narrative voice. Indeed, Patrick and Harry as ghosts is an interesting concept, because often ghosts are representative of past trauma, as in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, when the ghost of Beloved, the memory of past trauma, becomes a character in the narrative burdening Sethe. Morrison describes it as 'the idea of past errors taking possession of the present.'[90] In truth, Sister Patricia would have shied away from the supernatural, but not Nora, and the apparitions of Patrick and Harry are a way of Sister Patricia's past returning and with it the resurrection of Nora, adding further layers and conflict to the fiction.

Returning to research, there were definite links with Nora and the supernatural and therefore it wasn't such a stretch for them to extend to Sister Patricia. In Nora's journal, in the NUIG's archives, there were details of a dream Nora had before her brothers went missing in which she dreamt they would be harmed. She saw them bloodied and beaten.[91] In my novel, I did use this dream, but I chose to keep it a secret until close to Agnes' death when Sister Patricia shares it with her. Even for Nora, because it was a dream, and she was from a very religious family, she knew if she told anyone it would be disregarded. But what might have happened if she'd said something, perhaps she even blamed herself for not speaking out? This creates conflict for the character, battling with past decisions, and forcing her to face them.

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[88] Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (Pimlico, 1999) p. 37.

[89] Angela Bourke, *The Burning of Bridget Cleary* (Pimlico, 1999) p. 206.

[90] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage, 1997) p. 256.

[91] Sister Patricia described her dream in the Connacht Tribune article, 'Memories of Nights and Days of Terror', published on 3rd July 1981, and also in her handwritten notebook in the archives at The National University of Ireland, Galway, POL4/1/11: Material relating to Sr. Patricia Loughnane (POL4 'Papers relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane'.)

Another factual element of dreams in the story of the Loughnanes is perhaps the most important. Their bodies were found in a pond in Umbriste by a comrade of theirs, Tally, however, it was not by chance. On the night before the bodies were discovered, Tally had a dream, which showed him where the bodies were and at mass the next morning, he told others involved in the search and when they went to look, they found Patrick and Harry. Nora commented on this in her retelling of events saying her 'heart was full of gratitude to God for showing us where the bodies were,'[92] which showed, even in the facts, the conflict between the supernatural and religion for Nora. A final element of the supernatural, is the documented fact that after the bodies had been retrieved, and with Patrick and Harry believed to have been dead for ten days, they were still bleeding fresh blood and those in attendance at the barn, where they were laid out prior to the funeral, dipped their handkerchiefs in what they called, 'martyr's blood.' [93] Although these unusual events were detailed in the archives, they were unexplained. In her own accounts, Nora said little of them, and yet for the sake of fiction, I needed to include them, especially with the introduction of Agnes and what she represents.

As well as dreams and the supernatural contrasting the piety of Sister Patricia, allowing further exploration of her character, the idea of storytelling changed the shape of the novel again. Irish folklore and stories are passed down through generations, verbally shared, and remembered as Emer Martin's character of Mary, in *The Cruelty Men* says, 'it's the duty of the storyteller to find the next person to keep them going on and on.'[94] But Sister Patricia, in contrast to this idea, chooses someone who will forget. However, we are all remembered in history in some way or another, and as Hilary Mantel says, 'as soon as we die, we enter fiction.'[95] We don't have a choice about how we are represented, or the stories that are told about us, or the varying representations of who we were when we were alive. Mantel says, 'just ask two different family members to tell you about someone recently gone.'[96] No two accounts are the same, and so it would be for Sister Patricia's version of events, whether remembered by Agnes or not, and so too for the act of writing fiction, or even history. Is anything told the same, all stories, real or imagined, change depending on the storyteller.

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[92] POL4/1/11: Material relating to Sr. Patricia Loughnane. A handwritten notebook, detailing the events of November 1920, kept in the archives at The National University of Ireland, Galway (POL4 'Papers relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.')

[93] Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 5. [accessed: 26th May 2015]

[94] Emer Martin, *The Cruelty Men* (The Liliput Press, 2018) p. 64.

[95] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

Traditionally folk tales are told in third person and so to give the impression of Sister Patricia handing down her story, she talks about Nora in the third person and at points, drawing on the supernatural, even hints at the spirit of Nora stalking her, until finally in part three, they are forced together and Nora is no longer a story, held at distance, but a reality. The Ghana letters integrate tales of the missions into the stories Sister Patricia tells Agnes, and initially, not wanting to break up the letters, they appeared in full as a prologue. However, upon further reflection, by starting the novel with the letters, it diminished the narrative tension I had struggled to create. The suspense of part one is derived from the reader not knowing what is in the box, and so by showing the letters at the start, it gives away too much. Instead, although some of the letter content is included as dialogue between Agnes and Sister Patricia, other parts appear in letter form in the prose to show the constant torment Sister Patricia experiences reliving her words and unable to escape them. In two instances, I use complete letters as chapters, which adds texture to the novel but also allows the voice from Ghana to come through in full.[97] The physical presence of the letters in part two, as Sister Patricia tells Agnes about Ghana, shows how her words are a constant torment in her head, and how the telling of them is a relief. In terms of historical fiction, as much as it is a genre to retain the past, it is also a way to relive it, especially the parts that were hard, or would rather be forgotten.

Thinking again about the art of storytelling, how it is embedded in Irish culture, Sister Patricia tells her own story in the same way, not chronological, but fragmented, from memory, with emotion, and so the alternating chapters between Nora and Sister Patricia, were replaced with a new structure. The novel was divided into three parts, all set in 1969, but with the first two in Castlemacgarrett and the third in Galway. Parts one and two are written in first person from the point of view of Sister Patricia, in present tense, with Nora's story told by Sister Patricia, to Agnes, in third person, past tense, throughout. I wanted Sister Patricia to refer to Nora as someone else, to talk about her as a separate character, demonstrating she is trying to detach herself from who she once was, that she is telling Nora's story, not her own. The third part, in Galway, details Sister Patricia's return to her home, also told in first person, present tense. In this way, focusing on setting, so critical in historical fiction, it allows the stories to merge and support one another.

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[96] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

[97] Moving letters from a prologue and integrating them into the body of the novel was a decision made post viva.

Memory, therefore, is a central theme of my novel because Sister Patricia is telling Nora's story from memory to someone who may or may not remember. Mary in *The Cruelty Men* describes how they got stories 'from the old people before they disappeared into their graves, and all their knowledge with them,' adding, 'for nothing was written down, all was kept in our heads.'[98] This is similar to Roseanne in *The Secret Scripture*, who says at the beginning, 'no one even knows I have a story', describing herself as 'a thing left over, a remnant woman,'[99] and yet she has a need to write her own history down before it is lost when she dies, detailing how she will 'write out my life on unwanted paper – surplus to requirements' and 'imprison it under the floor-board, and then with joy enough I will go to my own rest under the Roscommon sod.'[100] With Roseanne, the process of writing causes doubt and she does not know if she can trust her own memories, while as readers we question why she is in an asylum and so, perhaps, wonder if we can trust her sanity. Whereas Mary and Roseanne are looking for preservation of stories, Sister Patricia is telling her version, her memory, in the hope it will be forgotten. Throughout my novel, she suppresses rumours and searches for the truth, but ultimately does she want to preserve it?

An important theme in the case of Patrick and Harry's murders, and one I was conscious to represent in my writing, was that of truth versus rumour. In the course of the search for her brothers, Nora was constantly confronted with rumours of what had happened to them from the locals. People didn't know conclusively and it was natural to speculate, so rumours formed, but, also, because of the violence of the time, people were afraid of the truth and the danger it presented. If they spoke the truth, they might be the next victim. In the scene when Nora goes to Lenaboy Castle to ask about the whereabouts of her brothers, she is lied to by the Commanding Officer, as he uses her own search against her. He pretends not to know where her brothers are being held and even says they've escaped and asks her to let him know if she hears anything. He is perpetuating rumours himself and acts as a representation of what was happening across Ireland during the war. The truth was hidden, manipulated and often lost. One role of historical fiction, is to find and explore those lost truths, and to tell the stories of the past, as Sister Patricia tries to do. As Hilary Mantel suggests, ‘facts are not truth,’[101] and facts do not build stories, they simply guide them. There are always gaps to be filled, which fiction attempts to do, by adding detail, thoughts and feelings. Rumours spread in the same way, growing through gaps, built on elaborated facts and therefore the truth of history, as told in fiction, is perhaps all rumour, or an exploration of many truths.

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[98] Emer Martin, *The Cruelty Men* (The Liliput Press, 2018) p. 13.
[99] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 4.
[100] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture*. (Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 5.

Stories, or rumours, became weapons, a war of words, or sometimes the lack of them did. The IRA survived through secrecy, messages were not written down, they were spread by word of mouth and often what happened in the War of Independence was covered up. For example, the case of Eileen Quinn, a young, pregnant mother. In 1920, in Gort, Co. Galway, she was standing outside her front door when a lorry of Black and Tans drove past. They shot her in the stomach and she died eight hours later. Her death was attributed to accidental misfire. Similarly, in the month before the brothers were murdered, Father Griffin was taken from his home and shot in the head, then sunk into a bog. His murder was never admitted by Crown Forces. And finally, Patrick and Harry, Nora’s brothers, whose bodies were found undeniably tortured and the evidence of their murder plain to see. However, at the inquest, which Nora attended, the outcome was inconclusive and no one was held accountable. To make this worse, at their funeral mass, Auxiliaries barged into the church and demanded that the coffins were opened because they wanted to confirm they held the bodies of the Loughnanes, who, as they claimed, had escaped. They denied all knowledge of their deaths. While these are true, horrifying facts, I did not include them in the novel because they are not Nora’s to tell, and not part of the truth she wanted to survive. Tempting as it was to include the brutality - always a way to reel readers in - to be true to character, both historically and imagined, I had to understand her boundaries, and the torture they suffered was not important to Sister Patricia. That they died for their beliefs and for Ireland was what mattered the most, as well as the pain caused by their deaths, but not the manner in which they died.

All of the above stories are retold to this day, memories handed down through generations because at the time they were denied, or covered up. And so, how accurate or reliable can they be when they are being uncovered decades later? As Sebastian Barry writes, ‘everything is always there, still unfolding, still happening. The past, the present, and the future, in the noggin eternally, like brushes, combs and ribbons in a handbag.'[102] If stories are constantly growing and evolving, are ever present, then they are changing and shifting and therefore unreliable. In the same way, by fictionalising history, surely as writers, we are changing the shape of a story, creating our own interpretations of history, and making choices about how events, or people, are represented. Hilary Mantel says of her historical characters, 'from history, I know what they do, but I can't with any certainty know what they think or feel.'[103] As writers, we create the feelings and thoughts for our characters based on research and facts and an understanding of how events may have made them react. They are not reliable, but then no character is truly reliable, just as no retelling of the past can be fully trusted.

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[101] Michael Durrant*, ‘*‘Facts are not truth’: Hilary Mantel goes on the record about historical fiction’ in *The Conversation* (2017): www.theconversation.com/facts-are-not-truth-hilary-mantel-goes-on-the-record-about-historical-fiction-79359# [accessed: 19th January 2022]

Similarly, for Sister Patricia, her story was suppressed for years and when she finally tells it, how much does she remember? The presence of the letters, albeit fragmented in part two, are physical artifacts of the past, and therefore crucial to help the reader believe her. This questioning of memory is interesting in fiction, creating intrigue. Characters, like Sister Patricia, who believe they have acted badly, may be misremembering, or believe their actions to be worse than they were. In Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, there is an element of suspense and mystery throughout due to unspoken secrets and suppressed memories, similar to Nora's story, with locals afraid to talk. Through the narrative, as more information is revealed, it creates a conflict between reality, imagination, truth and trust. In fact, while reading, I was forced to consider if we can ever fully trust our own memories?

At the heart of the novel is a family secret about what happened to Uncle Eddie, but with a fragmented narrative, the secret bobs occasionally to the surface, then sinks, because the story, like memories, doesn't fit together chronologically, and things get jumbled up. Daniel W. Ross says, of *Reading in the Dark*, 'family stories remain as elusive as they are allusive,' also noting that 'the truth can destroy families.'[104] Ross believes that 'the family secret has become a familiar leitmotif in Irish fiction.'[105] The narrator in *Reading in the Dark* is motivated by secrets but at times they are too much, saying, 'so broken was my father's family that it felt to me like a catastrophe you could live with only if you kept it quiet,' and admitting, 'I knew he was going to tell me something terrible someday, and, in sudden fright, didn't want him to.'[106] Similarly, in *Beloved*, it is concluded that, 'it was not a story to pass on.'[107] So, what was Nora's secret? And what did it cost her? Was she, too, frightened of ever hearing it? But there was no revelation at the end. It was a major problem. The rising tension of the previous two parts, following a narrative arc, needed a climax. Therefore, what was the final secret?

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[102] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 210.

[103] Hilary Mantel, 'Why I Became a Historical Novelist' in *The Guardian* (2017): www.guardian.com/books/2017/jun/03/hilary-mantel-why-i-became-a-historical-novelist [accessed: 19th January 2022]

[104] Daniel W. Ross, 'Oedipus in Derry: Seamus Deane's Reading in the Dark' in *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua, vol. 11, no. 1 (2007):* www.jstor.org/stable/20558129 [accessed: 17th June 2015]

[105] Daniel W. Ross, 'Oedipus in Derry: Seamus Deane's Reading in the Dark' in *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua, vol. 11, no. 1 (2007):* www.jstor.org/stable/20558129 [accessed: 17th June 2015]

To answer this question, Sister Patricia had to return to Galway, as she does in part three. It was the only place she would find answers. Structurally it created a circular plot because she ran from Galway in 1920 to the safety of the religious life and at the end she returns. But for answers, or peace, or both? There were a lot of challenges with part three. It wasn't enough for her to travel to Galway and obtain peace. As stated above, the book still lacked a revelation and this had to come from the box of letters. In part two she opens the letters, which she realises, because they are still sealed, her mother never read. This creates questions: why did her mother not read them? Did she receive them? It also explains why, when in Ghana, Sister Patricia never received a letter from her mother. The mystery for her to solve, and for her to obtain peace, is who put the letters in Castlemacgarrett? And why? I didn't know the answer to this question and I came up with several different scenarios as to where they came from and why they were hidden from her mother. Thinking of *Reading in the Dark*, the secret could have stemmed from her family, but they were already lost to her, and so how could they return the letters to Castlemacgarrett?

Was it believable that Nora's mother couldn't bring herself to read the letters and would rather forget about Nora? I didn't think so. As a mother myself, I couldn't imagine anyone would be able to ignore their child's letters, however hurt they were. So, who hid them? I considered that they could have been intercepted by the IRA. This would link with the sense of secrecy and also allow for historical and military context, but why would they do that? And if they did, surely the letters would have been burned? Besides, they would have held secrets about Patrick and Harry, not Nora. Realistically, the IRA would have had no interest in letters from a nun in the missions. As a diversion, Nora believes the letters were taken by Officer Nichols, to further punish her family. She thinks back to their meeting in Lenaboy Castle and thinks how he enjoyed toying with her, believing, 'of course he would have taken my letters, a spiteful bully, he would have hidden them, not to read, but to ensure Mammy couldn't.'[108] Although this was plausible, the revelation had to be more personal, because the novel is ultimately about family and its break up, therefore the letters had to link to someone close to the family.

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[106] Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (Vintage, 1997) p. 46.
[107] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage, 1997) p. 275.
[108] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 35.

In historical accounts, a man called Jack Halloran is mentioned several times. He was a comrade of Patrick and Harry and also the person who broke the news of their discovery to Nora[109], as well as taking her to identify their bodies in O'Hynes' Barn. However, to use him in the novel would portray a real-life person, who historically did nothing bad to any of the Loughnanes, in an unfair light. The letters never existed, in real life they were not there to be taken, so it would be ethically incorrect to implicate a historical character in the fictional taking of them. [110]Therefore, I created John Hession, a fictional character, to take the letters. John, in the same way that Jack did, works on the farm and helps Kathleen Loughnane after Nora's departure, but he also goes further and behaves selfishly by taking the letters to ensure Kathleen's attention is not taken from him. The creation of John allowed me free reign for his actions, however awful, because he is fictional.

What was John's motivation for taking the letters? After Nora's departure he becomes an important figure on the farm and looks after Kathleen Loughnane until her death in 1936, despite her having three living children, the duties of her care fall to him. How would he have felt about Nora? Or Hugo? Or Kate? They all leave their mother alone. Therefore, it seems believable that he might try to keep them away and to look after Kathleen himself. Did he hide Nora's letters to prevent more upset, or because he was worried her return could endanger his position on the farm? It is a combination of both. At first, he hid the letters because he didn't want them upsetting Kathleen, but then, with further thought, he kept them hidden because the reappearance of Nora, even in letter form, could jeopardise his place beside Kathleen. It is ambiguous whether he considered the consequences of his actions and how, by keeping mother and daughter apart, it could sever their relationship. It was an impulsive, selfish decision and one he tries to make amends for by returning the letters to Castlemacgarrett, allowing Sister Patricia to understand her mother's silence, but it is also a cowardly action because he drops them off anonymously to protect himself. In making this decision, it allowed for a confrontation between the two characters, and provided the missing revelation at the end of the novel. It also developed narrative tension because Sister Patricia does not know where the letters have come from, and John is a character from her past, a link to her family, but implicated in the eventual breakdown of the relationship with her mother, and so she is morally challenged. John is not truly villainous, few characters truly are, but he has many sides. He is flawed, yet he means well and loved all the Loughnanes.

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[109] Jack's name appeared several times in Nora's own account of events as she detailed how, 'in the afternoon I saw Jack Halloran of Gilroe come slowly from the church and hesitate about coming in.' She continued saying 'Jack Halloran had told me I was expected in Kinvara to identify the bodies,' and also 'Jack Halloran and John Mullins took me to Kinvara by sidecar.' She later added that the Hallorans of Gilroe helped with the farm work. (POL4/1/11: Material relating to Sr. Patricia Loughnane in archives of The National University of Ireland, Galway, POL4 'Papers relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.')

[110] The decision to change Jack Halloran's name to John Hession, hence creating a fictional character, was done post viva.

Should she forgive him? One aspect of historical fiction, is to consider extremes of human behaviour against historical backdrops, and here, at this point of the novel, the characters are at their most vulnerable and their strongest. Their actions are all the result of historical events and the subsequent behaviour of each character is merely my own exploration of how past events change and shape characters, both real and imagined. Whether Sister Patricia forgives John is not an easy question; so much emotion and history is bound up in the answer. So many lives could have been different if the letters had been read, or Sister Patricia hadn't left in the first place, making history a series of possible alternative futures, and perhaps that makes bad decisions easier to forgive, or at least, understand. We are all, in some ways, victims of history.

Sister Patricia travels to Galway after the death of Agnes and returns to Shanaglish. Initially, she travelled through Galway city and to all the areas of the story: the cottage, the shed, the cemetery, the church. But it was too disjointed; a lesson I should have learned from the Galway section. Instead, it needed to be simpler to focus on the fiction and on character rather than movement from place to place, which allowed for description of setting, but lacked any depth of emotion. To simplify, Sister Patricia only returns to the cottage, and with her, Patrick and Harry, or their ghosts, or at least a sense of them, as Sister Patricia talks with them throughout her journey. However, once back in Galway, it is not only Patrick and Harry who appear to Sister Patricia, Nora is there too. Already, with the opening of the Ghana letters in Castlemacgarrett, Sister Patricia mentions that Nora is creeping closer, she can feel her stirring, but Sister Patricia's arrival back to the family home, resurrects her.

'And with my cheek against the shed wall, just as my brothers' backs were pressed there, I feel Nora creep closer.'[111]

Sister Patricia imagines that Nora is stalking the countryside and whilst standing at the family shed, imagining what Patrick and Harry endured, she sees the shadow of Nora and collapses. In keeping with the factual element of dreams, I created a dream sequence which flashed back to Nora in the church with her brothers' coffins the night before their funeral mass.

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[111] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 141.

This was an idea taken from my research because Nora’s mother did not want the boys to be alone in the church with only IRA comrades on guard outside and, as another testament to her strength of character, Nora volunteered to sit with them throughout the night.

In the novel, when she comes round from her dream, confused and believing she is in the church, she awakes to find she is in her old bedroom, having been found by the new owner of the house, Áine, a fictional character, and put in bed to rest because of a head injury from her fall. Unable to bear the cottage and its myriad memories, Sister Patricia panics and flees to Galway city where she enters the cathedral, built where the gaol once stood. John, informed by Áine of what has happened to Sister Patricia, follows her and it is within the cathedral they confront one another.

Chapter Three: The Editing

While writing, my focus was on establishing the voice of Nora, and then to a greater degree, especially when Nora’s story became embedded in Sister Patricia’s, Sister Patricia’s voice, and plot was secondary, guided by character. In the same way history is told by those who live it, so too was my story. In part, due to this approach, my writing needed to be fleshed out. Each scene had to begin and end at the right point, and had to have action and texture, to add something to the authenticity of the time period, develop a theme or explore a character. Often, they sat bland on the page, not working hard enough. My scenes were too long, beginning before they needed to and ending far too late. A.S. Byatt trusts the reader to follow, avoiding the temptation to over explain and I needed to do the same. In part two, in the scenes between Agnes and Sister Patricia, there was far too much dialogue, too much explanation before the real conversation started, and so I reduced it, using more reported speech and description. This slowed the pace and allowed for more exploration of ideas and also shortened some scenes, allowing the reader to navigate and imagine for themselves.

However, this did make me consider historical context. How much was too much? Could I trust the reader would know enough about The Irish War of Independence to understand my character’s plight? Did it matter? Balancing context in historical fiction is hard to judge. I did not want to have chunks of exposition on the page, they break the story, feel clumsy, and detract from the narrative tension, however, I wanted to ensure the reader understood the context, even if it was not a period in history about which they were highly informed. In finalising the structure of the book, I moved away from the military context, and while significant, this was pushed into the background, moving me away from my original aims outlined at the start of this essay. Without the voices of the brothers, there was no need for information about the IRA missions and, to be true to character, I chose to leave out all details of their brutal murders because they were not something Nora or Sister Patricia would ever want to share or relive. To understand the reason why the brothers were murdered, or the danger of that time, there had to be some explanation. Alongside this, the bulk of the novel was set in 1969 and so progressive Ireland and the changes from 1920, since Nora's departure, had to be taken into account.

Much like research, historical context can be facts and figures, or the creation of a place, person or event from that time, and similar to research, too much can burden the fiction, but not enough leaves it feeling weak, and confused. *Troubles* by J.G Farrell, is an almost a comic representation of the period. The protagonist, Major Brendan Archer, travels to Ireland to stay in an old hotel called, The Majestic. It is representative of the big houses scattered across Ireland and in this particular instance, it is dilapidated and in danger of falling down. As Farrell says, the Major 'is almost unaware of the gathering storm. But this is Ireland in 1919 – and the struggle for independence is about to explode with brutal force.'[112] But it never really does. It feels throughout, that the conflict is very much in the background. The hotel and its gradual collapse seem to mirror the fall of the British in Ireland, and are representative of the political unrest of the setting, while never fully exploring it. The characters and hotel are fictional and the time period is used as a back drop.

Similarly, *The Last September* by Elizabeth Bowen, explores the context of the time in the same way, but really history is very much a back drop to the lives of the characters. The novel is set in 1920, the same year Patrick and Harry were murdered, but it does not venture into their territory. Like The Majestic in *Troubles*, the big house, Danielstown, in *The Last September,* is faded, and like The Majestic, it is a cocoon to the real world outside. The inhabitants hear of atrocities but they rarely come to their door and so we get only a glimpse of history and it is too distant. In contrast, *When Shadows Fall* by Paul Reid, seems to pause the narrative at points to explain the context, much like a history lesson, and far too disruptive. It is not interwoven into the prose, or implicit in the story. We all live history, we create it, but we do not think about it like that while living, therefore, surely, reading historical fiction must feel the same? If, as Hilary Mantel suggests, in response to critics accusing her of defamiliarizing the Tudor period in her portrayal of Thomas Cromwell, 'history is a process, not a locked box with a collection of facts inside,'[113] then it must feel like that in fiction, blended, continuous, questionable, and open to interpretation. This was the idea I was trying to achieve to create an authentic story.

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[112] J.G. Farrell, *Troubles* (Phoenix, 1993) p. back cover.

It was suggested that one way of adding historical context throughout the novel would be to change Sister Patricia's voice from first to third person. The use of third person allows for distance, it allows for the author to come in and explain a scene, it also allows for more movement between characters and for showing events from different viewpoints. An excellent example of this is *The Green Road*, by Anne Enright, which is a family drama and a collection of third person narratives tell the story. Chapter by chapter, it alternates between the different family members and the use of third person allows for Enright to drop nuggets of history naturally into the characters' thoughts, for example, near the end of the novel, when Rosaleen is lost on the mountain and believes she will die, there is mention of the famine, as she crosses the threshold of a famine house and pauses to consider the 'hungry grass,' with Enright making her explain that 'after she crossed the hungry grass then she would be hungry for ever. That was the curse of it.'[114] This information is told through Rosaleen's voice and as a reader I didn't question it, yet in first person it would be more cumbersome, less natural. Interestingly, with reference to the supernatural and trauma, Rosaleen sees her dead husband, Pat Madigan, telling the reader, 'her husband Pat Madigan was a little bit cross with Rosaleen now,' then, 'he wanted Rosaleen to crawl over the hungry grass and get out of the cold.'[115]

In my novel, because the story is only told from Sister Patricia's perspective, the entire book would be in third person, and it could have potentially confused the telling of Nora's stories. Although a common construct, it felt distant in third person and lost the confidential, confessional tone. Also, with the introduction of Patrick and Harry's ghosts, I worried that third person would make them feel less real, although it briefly works in *The Green Road*, a sustained appearance of Pat Madigan could have been confusing, especially when moving between character perspectives. In addition, when Sister Patricia talks to Patrick and Harry in first person, they are her secret, something only she can see. This is not a problem for Rosaleen, it is no secret she is talking to her dead husband, for she is alone on a mountain, nearing death, and it is only for a couple of pages, whereas Sister Patricia converses with her brothers throughout the novel and they appear in rooms and places with other characters present.

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[113] Claire Armistead, 'Hilary Mantel: 'History is a process, not a locked box'' in *The Guardian (2019):* www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/21/hilary-mantel-history-wolf-hall-thomas-cromwell [accessed: 22nd January 2022]

[114] Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (Vintage, 2016) p. 278.

[115] Anne Enright, *The Green Road* (Vintage, 2016) p. 279.

Nevertheless, I did try rewriting a chapter in third person to explore the effect, and while it was true that it was much easier to insert context, as well as physical description, more naturally than in first person, I felt detached from Sister Patricia. It was still possible to be really close in her head but without the 'I', I didn't feel like I was inhabiting her. This was detrimental to my story, which I hoped read almost as a confession, and it changed the style of my prose. It was also ironic because nuns are supposed to cast aside the use of 'I', as Armstrong explains about becoming a nun, that it is only 'when her worldly self has been smashed to pieces can God build up from the rubble a new, Christ-centered individual,' emphasising that they are always focused on the 'stripping and breaking down of her selfhood.'[116] It is something Armstrong found impossible, exclaiming during her novitiate period, 'I just can't get rid of myself,'[117] and it seemed the same was true for my story, because using 'I' was the only way I could tell it.

In what other ways could historical context be embedded into the prose? Conversations and interactions with supporting characters allowed history, at least enough to support Sister Patricia's story, to be told. *Reading in the Dark* looks at the power of the church, family loyalties and courage. Most importantly, rather than lumping historical context into chunks, we learn about it through the main character's telling of the story, of his piecing together of his personal history, and because he is a child narrator, we learn about it as he does, through the unravelling of his innocence as he describes his family and their home city of Derry. In a child's voice, he describes it as a 'city of bonfires,' going on to say 'the Protestants had more than we had,'[118] and listing Protestant celebrations in comparison to a single Catholic one, which he sees as unfair, also adding, 'our celebrations were not official, like the Protestant ones.'[119] In this way, we learn about the world and the society the character inhabits without ever questioning the way in which the information is delivered.

In the same way, in many of the conversations between Sister Patricia and Agnes, they discuss the war and patriotism: 'I ask Agnes if she, Ireland, was worth fighting for in 1920. She is quick to answer with, of course, and then we both pause.'[120] Intertwined with this, Agnes, in particular, considers the younger generation of her son and his lack of nationalism or understanding of the events in the past, saying, ‘my Eoin thinks the whole thing was an embarrassment, to my shame. The younger generation will never appreciate what was sacrificed to win them their country.’[121] It is in this way, through the characters’ thoughts and discussions, that history and the time period are revealed, rather than bulky context. It may be that there is not enough explanation at certain points for those who do have knowledge of the events in Ireland in the 1920s, but I didn’t want to sacrifice the fiction for historical fact.

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[116] Karen Armstrong, *Through The Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 135.
[117] Karen Armstrong, *Through The Narrow Gate* (Flamingo, 1997) p. 142.
[118] Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (Vintage, 1997) p. 33.
[119] Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (Vintage, 1997) p. 33.
[120] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 21.

Herein lies one of the biggest conflicts with historical fiction, how to ensure authenticity and accuracy whilst creating imaginative work? In addition, one of the ideas recurrent in my research, was the idea of cover ups and lies. Perhaps, it could be suggested, that those who lived through that period never truly knew the truth. Sister Patricia can’t be a fountain of knowledge because she is flawed, and perhaps all personal accounts of history are flawed, indeed when researching first person narratives, particularly in historical fiction, the common construct is the unreliable narrator, like the narrator in *Reading in the Dark,* Sister Patricia is building a picture of her past and the reader wants to do this alongside her. Why else do people choose to read historical fiction?

To further research the unreliable narrator, I could have looked to any of the novels I have cited so far. In *Reading in the Dark* there is a child narrator, in *The Secret Scripture* the main character is in an asylum. Indeed, the use of telling any story from a character’s memory surely deems it unreliable. There are always several different versions to everyone’s story. If this story was told from Kathleen Loughnane’s point of view, for example, we would see Nora (and Sister Patricia) differently. The same events would be remembered as more or less important, there would be more emphasis on different elements, a different proportion of blame. Probably, a different conclusion. We only see the character of Kathleen Loughnane, indeed all the characters, through Sister Patricia’s eyes, and so we can never truly know how they feel, but it doesn’t make them any less important.

Supporting characters cannot simply be historical mouthpieces, they need to be well rounded, fully thinking characters, and neither can they just be there to listen to the protagonist. They need their own troubles and conflict, so they too add to the story. In re-reading part two, it slumped in the middle for this very reason. Agnes listened to Sister Patricia, and engaged in conversation, but it all felt very one-sided. She needed to have a stronger voice and story of her own. We live in communities full of many voices, often conflicted, and fiction must represent this. Agnes, although support for Sister Patricia, adds contrast too, but her character was initially just a sketch, with her beliefs in the supernatural and fairies, and it wasn't coming across enough. Also, her illness, the lack of memory, wasn't being used to its full potential. It is because of her dementia that Sister Patricia confides in her, and yet there are moments of clarity, when she remembers. How does this make Sister Patricia feel? Is Agnes hiding behind her illness? Ultimately, Sister Patricia needs to unburden herself - it is a selfish act - but she feels safe with Agnes and so continues the telling of her stories, despite moments of doubt. Agnes is a critical character, and she needed to be able to stand alone in her own right, to create questions.

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[121] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 68.

'Despite her frailty, and her confusion, she remembers more sometimes than I expect, more than I think she has heard. Often, I think of my stories to her like my letters, unopened, but now, I don't know.'[122]

As the scenes with Agnes progress, Agnes opens up more about her own family life and Sister Patricia asks more questions, perhaps not worrying so much what Agnes remembers, instead alert to who is listening around them, reminiscent of how secrets were passed in the war of the 1920s. I included descriptions of Sister Patricia checking the room to see if other sisters are around, or worrying what people will think about the time she spends with Agnes. As in life, friendships grow in strange places, under extreme conditions and against better judgement. Art represents life. To bring Agnes alive, I needed to write more about Eoin, he is her reason for distress and conflict, and also at odds with traditional Ireland. He appears at the end of the novel, after Agnes' death, but too late to see her. Sister Patricia watches him, when he arrives, but doesn't speak. It is the fact he misses his mother's death, that forces Sister Patricia to confront her own lost family. Agnes dies alone without reconciliation, and Sister Patricia, even though her family have already passed, wants to make sure she makes peace. Initially, Eoin was definitely too one-dimensional, for most of the novel only referenced with scant detail, but by fleshing him out, he brings depth to the prose and allows for exploration of another generation, introducing the context of modern or progressive Ireland.

The idea of modern Ireland is one that sits uncomfortably with Sister Patricia, she is at odds with her setting, as is Agnes. The very fact that Agnes is dying, alone, in a nursing home, shows the changes in society, when traditionally she should be nursed at home by her family. If folklore and religion divide them, then changing Ireland unites them. The two characters, Agnes and Sister Patricia, touch on these ideas during their conversations, especially with reference to

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[122] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 106.

Eoin. I decided Eoin should be an architect to represent the rush of building in 1960s Ireland. It is a profession, or lifestyle, that Agnes is sad about:

‘Even she is proud of all Eoin has achieved with his building, although she doesn’t agree with it, adding, as water spills down her cheek, that she is sad for what he lost along the way. He is so empty, she says, working in a place that won’t care for him when he is finished, in a city with people who cannot possibly really know him.’[123]

Similarly, Sister Patricia is sad upon her return to see the changes in Ireland due to building.

‘Ireland is still beautiful, even though she has been cut up and built on and her green tinged with the grey of civilisation, deep wounds carved into the flesh of her soil, the jagged edges of houses that stand in rows.’[124]

Although Ireland is not a character in the novel, the country, and the characters’ love for it, is critical. It is central to the story; it is the place Patrick and Harry died for. As Nora herself said in her account of events, ‘what a martyrdom Ireland has had!’[125] Yet it is also the place she ran from. It is not unusual for Ireland to become personified as a woman in literature, especially as a mother figure. An example of this is in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* by William Butler Yeats. The character of Cathleen Ni Houlihan is mythical and represents Ireland. She encourages the young men to fight for her freedom and in doing so sacrifice themselves,

‘OLD WOMAN. He died for love of me: many a man has died for love of me.’[126]

In the play, Cathleen Ni Houlihan is described as an ‘old woman’[127] and the character of Ireland is often referred to as, ‘Mother Ireland.’[128] Again, while Ireland is not an obvious character in my own novel, it is an interesting concept. If Mother Ireland is a symbol of nationalism, could she also be a symbol of maternal love? Men died for her and mothers lost their sons for her. In Nora’s story, her brothers are sacrificed for their love of country and the desire to free her, and it was not that which upsets Nora, but the lack of truth and the destruction of her family. Nora's sorrow, indeed Sister Patricia's suffering, is caused because she ran away, and more specifically, because she abandoned her mother when she was most in need, in effect, because she abandoned 'Mother Ireland.'[129]

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[123] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 109.

[124] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 9.

[125] POL4/1/11: Material relating to Sr. Patricia Loughnane. A handwritten notebook, detailing the events of November 1920, kept in the archives at The National University of Ireland, Galway (POL4 ‘Papers relating to the Deaths of Patrick and Harry Loughnane.’)

[126] W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902): www.freeditorial.com [accessed: 16th December 2015]

[127] W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902):* www.freeditorial.com [accessed: 16th December 2015]

[128] W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902):* www.freeditorial.com [accessed: 16th December 2015]

As a character who truly believes in Ireland's freedom, how did this make Sister Patricia feel? She left not only her family, but the country she loved, only to return years later, to a changing Ireland. Thinking again about Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture,* Roseanne, represents, as Agnes and Sister Patricia do in my novel, old Ireland, their stories and fates caught up in the unrest of history and the struggles of nationalism. However, in *The Secret Scripture*, the asylum where Roseanne has been resident for many years is closing, and Dr. Greene is tasked with finding out why she was placed there and whether she needs to remain incarcerated. Ireland's identity itself is at question here, as old Ireland is encroached upon by new Ireland, as the old home closes down, and this also links to Eoin and his disregard for the sacrifices of earlier generations, his abandonment of his mother and also the destruction, through building, of Ireland's countryside. Indeed, Cathleen Ni Houlihan in Yeats' play, talks about her 'beautiful green fields,'[130] and, while this is in the context of the invasion by the French, could it not also be applied to the construction of buildings and the idea of progressive Ireland, the very thing that both Agnes and Sister Patricia mourn together?

And so, in this way, the two women come together with their love for Ireland and everything that has been lost, not only in the past, in the war, but in the present, through loss of tradition and perhaps with the breakup of traditional family structures and the economic boom.

The Irish language is reflective of this. The IRA used Irish as a vital weapon of communication. The British didn't understand it, in fact it was banned, and so the IRA used to pass secrets and operational details in Irish. It was central to the community and to Irish identity in 1920 and in Galway, on the west coast, it was the dominant language. Nora mentioned this in the accounts of her life and also taught Irish in the National School when she returned to Ardfoyle. The nuns, during my visit to the convent, also mentioned how passionate she was about the Irish language. It seemed important that Irish was part of Sister Patricia's identity, even despite her travels and absence from Ireland, therefore, I included certain lines and phrases (mostly religious) in Irish throughout the novel, almost like a refrain, predominantly in her conversations with Agnes because their generation are comfortable speaking it. However, I also included lines in the Ghana letters to her mother, strengthening Sister Patricia's love for her home and creating a tone of confidentiality, to replicate how Irish was used in the war in 1920.

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[129] W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902):* www.freeditorial.com [accessed: 16th December 2015]

[130] W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan (1902):* www.freeditorial.com [accessed: 16th December 2015]

It was important to show that she still treasures the language and also that, perhaps, in her conversations with Agnes, they use it as a way to maintain secrecy, or as a comfort and memory of the past. This also provided a contrast to the character of Eoin, being of the new generation, he does not speak Irish (although he would have been taught it at school[131]), it was his choice to forgo it. Agnes and Sister Patricia comment on this, saying, 'we are forgetting who we are, Agnes. After all our battles. Go ndéana Dia trocaire orainn.'[132] In this way, by exploring Agnes and Eoin in more depth, and allowing the contrasts between old and new to naturally develop, the context of the novel developed too.

In the same way as dialogue with Agnes helped me to establish context, the Ghana letters gave me an opportunity to establish the character of Nora's mother. They allowed for discussion of parent-child relationships, especially in the conversations between Agnes and Sister Patricia, with reference to the letters. In contrast to Eoin and Agnes' tumultuous relationship, there was a danger with Kathleen Loughane, that she was too nice. Of course, Sister Patricia remembers her fondly, and with regret, but as a character, to be believable, she had to be flawed. It wasn't a big change but I used memories of their childhood, told to Agnes by Sister Patricia, to show that Kathleen was a normal mother who got angry and frustrated with her children, for example, 'if we didn't move fast enough, she rapped the back of our calves, sometimes the wooden spoon was still wet with stew, or batter, and made a slapping sound, like wellies flapping down in puddles, against our skin.'[133] As mentioned, characters must be believable and in life, we all have flaws, therefore fiction must acknowledge and embrace them.

As previously discussed, John Hession is mentioned in the Ghana letters with reference to help on the farm, but he doesn't physically appear until the last chapter and it is his responsibility to deliver the final revelation. This meant a lot had to happen in the final chapter:

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[131] Irish school children are required to study the Irish language throughout both primary and secondary education, for twelve years, yet it is still not widely spoken at present. Gaeltacht areas were established in 1920, as part of the Irish Free State, and they still exist today in Donegal, Mayo, Galway, Kerry and parts of Cork. They are areas where Irish is recognised as the predominant language.

[132] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 119.

[133] Laura Healy, *The Letters* (unpublished) p. 138.

not only the revelation that John took the letters, but also to ensure he worked in his own right as a credible character. This was the most problematic scene of the entire novel and getting the right amount of movement and energy, as well as building tension and not rushing, proved a difficult balance.

Initially, it was too static, with Sister Patricia talking throughout and hardly any movement. How much should characters interact physically, not just with each other but with the setting, to connect emotionally? We all engage with our surroundings on some level, whether new or familiar. In addition, set in Galway Cathedral, it is a scene packed with symbolism, and essentially the scene is a confession, from both sides. For Sister Patricia, finally in the cathedral, a place of God, she feels the need to confess as to why she left and why, when she returned from Ghana, she did not visit her family home. She believes she is the only one who needs to confess and confides in John, but as they begin to move around the cathedral, John tells her his truth, about the letters. At this point, Sister Patricia is torn between Nora and herself, because Nora has been creeping closer, and the anger Sister Patricia feels - something supposedly alien to a nun - is the manifestation of Nora.

Throughout this scene John changes too, at first, he is angry towards Sister Patricia for abandoning her mother, and yet, at the end, it is his turn to beg for forgiveness. The question then arises of whether Sister Patricia can forgive him? It is the ultimate question: does she find peace through her forgiveness of John, therefore allowing forgiveness of herself? After researching, writing and questioning, it seemed at its heart, my novel is about forgiveness, the ability to forgive others, to forgive oneself and to forgive the mistakes of history. In Morrison's *Beloved*, forgiveness is also key, for 'Sethe pleaded for forgiveness,' and 'Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life.'[134] Similarly, at the end of *The Secret Scripture*, when Dr. Greene confesses Roseanne was wrongly committed years before, it is Roseanne who asks, 'I wonder will you allow me to forgive you?' Dr Greene replies, 'My God, yes,' and Roseanne says, 'well, I do.' [135] Finally, understanding the relevance of forgiveness, my characters' actions made sense: Nora cared more about forgiveness than her own survival, hence her running to the dangers of Africa and living a religious life; forgiveness also linked to the relationship between Agnes and Eoin; and in terms of context, on a wider scale, with the troubles in Ireland and the conflict and civil war of the 1920s, forgiveness seems to be key to peace, not just for Sister Patricia, but for many, if not all, the protagonists in the novels I have cited.

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[134] Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (Vintage, 1997) p. 242.

[135] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (Faber and Faber, 2008) p. 303.

To heighten this in my novel, the use of John and the fact he took the letters, links to Patrick and Harry. He was their comrade and yet he ran, he survived, when they did not. John lives with the guilt of that decision for the rest of his life, and so too, does Sister Patricia. As Nora, she too ran away when she was needed, and in creating the new identity of Sister Patricia, she survived. Therefore, both John and Sister Patricia seek forgiveness as they confess in the cathedral. In this way, the character of John is established and while his appearance is short, it is critical. He is representative of the past coming full circle. And finally, at the end of the novel, the two characters of Sister Patricia and Nora, who have been separate throughout, merge, battling to find peace, and forgiveness, as one.

Chapter Four: Final Thoughts

Fact is an important element to any story, but what is more important? Fact or Fiction? Every story starts with an element of truth and before I wrote any fiction, I visited Ireland, the archives, read historical accounts of the time period and of the events I wanted to fictionalise. In this way, the story was already written for me. But, as explored through the body of this essay, it was not that simple, too much research is problematic, it blocks creativity and imagination.

In my first attempts at writing fiction, the story moved too quickly, was burdened by fact and lacked any kind of hook. It took me a long time, a lot of experimental writing, to understand that not every detail from my research had to be included. The writing of war is not only the action, it is the fall out, the emotional impact, the reverberations that echo through generations, and I discovered this with Sister Patricia’s story. Yes, I was writing about someone who had really existed, but my Sister Patricia was a fictional character and I needed to create her to fit in my story, not, perhaps, how she truly was and, ultimately, her reaction to real life events was mine to create. I was writing a story based on fact, as is all historical fiction, but it is also creative writing therefore I had to write a story, something to entertain and engage, not a history textbook.

This felt like a betrayal at first, especially to the hours of time reading and researching, but also to the sisters who welcomed me in the convent back in 2015. How would they feel if I manipulated Sister Patricia into the person my story needed? Of course, I took elements of her character and the places she visited, and worked, and the tragedy of her life was all based on fact, but things had to change for the sake of fiction. As Hannah Kent, author of *The Good People* and *Burial Rites*, both historical novels, says, she draws heavily on ‘stories and accounts’ but, in the case of her character of Agnes Magnúsdóttir in *Burial Rites*, she hoped to create a 'more ambiguous portrayal' of the real-life woman and that the novel, ultimately, was simply, her 'interpretation.'[136] At the end of my writing process, with all its twists and turns, dead ends and frustrations, I too, can only claim to have interpreted my character, in someone else's hands, the story of Nora and Sister Patricia would have been completely different. Perhaps all historical fiction is an interpretation, simply one person's view about how things were, and while research creates authenticity, adds period details, maybe it is not true that in all circumstances art imitates life, rather it imagines it.

I changed the truth of the past in many ways. Firstly, the timeline had to be altered. In real life Nora went to Ghana in 1927 (seven years after the murder of her brothers). For fiction, this was not immediate enough, it did not create enough tension. I moved it forward and Nora moved to Ghana in 1922 (after a postulancy and novitiate period in Ardfoyle, Cork and Lyons, France), straight after the murder of her brothers. Without this significant change then perhaps, I would not have been able to create such upset with her mother, or write about their fractured relationship. Indeed, in real life, was their relationship really so broken? I can never know for sure. That is my leap of faith. After researching both factual characters, I can only assume that Nora's going away caused Kathleen Loughnane pain. As for the letters, I do not know if they corresponded, there was no evidence of it, but as mentioned earlier on, in the article from *The African Missionary*, Nora said the life of a missionary did not allow for much time writing letters. It is true that she did not return to Galway to live and that her body is buried in Ardfoyle, but whether returning to Galway for visits (if she did) was such a torment as it was for my character, I will never know.

But how much creative licence is allowed? Many of the symbols and events vital to the story are true. The cathedral, symbolic as a sign of both religion and imprisonment, really existed. A cathedral was being built in Ghana, and Galway Cathedral was built on the site of the former gaol. The parallel between the two could not have been missed by Sister Patricia, but I do not know for sure. It is not missed by my character and it provided too good of an opportunity for setting in my novel, it created questions, links to home and challenged the theme of religion, as well as providing an ideal place for the final confrontation. Many of the events in Ghana are true. There was an outbreak of yellow fever and seven sisters did die as a result, I do not know if Sister Acquiline was one of them, but I know she did not remain in Ghana for long, and it is factually correct that Sister Patricia became Principal of OLA College not long after her arrival.

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[136] Hannah Kent, *Burial Rites* (Picador, 2013) p. 333.

Similarly, three former students did wish to become nuns after the outbreak of yellow fever, and one of them, Esther, was not allowed by her father. Sister Patricia wrote about it in her journal in the NUIG archives, however, I imagined the scene with Esther's father, again the parallels between child-parent relationships were too good of an opportunity to miss. It gave Sister Patricia cause to think about how her mother felt when she left. Similarly, I created the character of Esi as a way for Sister Patricia to interact with locals, and to think about local beliefs, and also to demonstrate that in reality the sisters did go out into the community, but that they could not help everyone. The introduction of a Ghanaian nun at Castlemacgarrett in 1969 is a fiction, created to bring Ghana physically back to Sister Patricia, and to show progression in Ireland, and while it is plausible, I do not know if it is true.[137]

Of course, there was never a box of letters and John Hession never existed. Both were a fictional construct to create a revelation at the end of the book and to bring the past back to Sister Patricia, the spark to start her telling her stories. They are the greatest untruths of the novel but at some point fiction had to dominate over fact, and as I have discussed, not all of history is reliable. All novels must follow a story arc and without creative licence my story would be just an account, the characters one dimensional. The real-life events are dramatic, shocking, brutal, but they are not enough. Sister Patricia, my character, had to go on a journey, she had to want something, there had to be conflict and resolution, as there must be for all novels to keep a reader engaged and show the character has developed, or changed, in some way. Historical fiction gives the reader a glimpse into the past, looks at a character's experience of it, but as with memory, it cannot be assumed to be accurate.

The letters are not the only imagined element. Agnes and Eoin are entirely fictional. Again, through talking to the sisters who knew her, I know Sister Patricia missed the more active duties of working with patients and students when she moved to Castlemacgarrett to be a bursar. In a copy of a hand-typed document written by the order, there was a description of Sister Patricia and her time at Castlemacgarrett:

'The residents of Castlemacgarrett miss Sr. Patricia a great deal. When one of them sadly exclaimed on hearing of her death: "I have lost my best friend," she expressed the sentiments of quite a number.' The same document describes how Sister Patricia, 'found time to pay a visit every day to the infirmary. Immediately before lunch and at the same time every day she would visit every ill resident and spend a few minutes encouraging and consoling each one.'[138] It was from statements like this that I had the idea of Agnes and created a character for Sister Patricia to befriend. The fact that Agnes suffers dementia was convenient to my plot. Why else would Sister Patricia suddenly open up? Agnes and her illness felt safe. Eoin was only mentioned briefly at first, but in thinking about different themes and ideas, he grew as a character. He was never a real person but he represents the ideas of a new generation, life in Ireland progressing and moving on, and so, in this way, he was born of research.

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[137] During my visit to Ardfoyle Convent in 2015, there were two Ghanaian sisters, and sadly I did not speak with them, but the sisters I spent time with referred to them in terms of their age, because they were young, and also joked they wore leggings under their skirts because they couldn't adjust to the Irish climate.

Accepting that to fictionalise history there will be conflict between fact and fiction was perhaps my biggest lesson. But it is one experienced by other writers. In September 2019, I attended an event at The Henley Literary Festival which discussed fact and fiction in the context of historical fiction. Lara Prescott, author of *The Secrets We Kept*, whose book is based around real events from The Cold War and the ban, in the USSR, of *Doctor Zhivago*, and the CIA's plot to ensure it was read, discussed this idea. She said, 'fiction is a personal interpretation of history,' and that 'characters are amalgamations of real people.'[139] At the same event, Mary Chamberlain, author of *The Hidden*, which looks at the occupation of Jersey during the Second World War, and also a Professor of History, said, 'imagine you have a deep well of knowledge but you can only pull out a thimbleful for the book…Chronology has to suit the fiction. You can't get constrained by facts because it kills the story. Feel free to invent.'[140] It reassured me to hear from others balancing fact and fiction in their work and reminded me that historical fiction is based on, or inspired by, real events, it is not a dedicated account of that time. The stories of our past inform the fiction but they do not create it, writers do, and as such, we have to be allowed to bend it and manipulate it for the sake of the story. Indeed, personal accounts of history hold some untruths, not necessarily intentional ones, but as discussed, stories of the past are remembered differently, it is an individual activity and we all experience events in our own way, hence the telling of those events cannot be the same. History is based on the accounts of those who lived it, and therefore the memories they choose to share. As a theme in the writing of my book, this allowed me to eventually feel more comfortable with my own manipulation of history.

Despite knowing this, at times it felt impossible to tell the story of one character when there were so many voices shouting out to be heard, they crowded my fiction and left me feeling guilty about the events or people I had to leave behind. But throughout, Sister Patricia spoke to me, and I kept coming back to her. Through many different drafts and experiments, with different narrative voices and techniques, I kept hold of her and, ultimately, it was her story that needed to be told. A story I discovered years before: two brothers brutally murdered by British Forces in a war I didn’t, at that time, understand, but still one which kept whispering to me. The finished novel may not be as close to real life events as I originally planned, or even the story I wanted to tell, and I have created new characters, considered many different ideas as well as been faced with myriad challenges, but, finally, inspired by Sister Patricia’s strength, I hope, I found her voice and told my version of her story with as much truth as fiction allows.

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[138] Written by Sr Kathleen O' Regan, a typed document, detailing the life and death of Sister Patricia. Given to me during my trip to Ardfoyle Convent (2015)

[139] Quote from Lara Prescott during her reading at The Henley Literary Festival on 2nd October 2019

[140] Quote from Mary Chamberlain during her reading at The Henley Literary Festival on 2nd October 2019

Patrick and Harry Loughnane[141]

When shall we know, dear boys
The horrors of that night
You gave your souls to God
For Ireland's right?

Yes, who shall tell the tale
Of that grand victory
You snatched from hellish hosts
To make us free?

Who'll tell what you said
And how you prayed and bore
The awful pangs that pierced
Your sad heart's core?

Did angels weep to see
The bitter cup of woe
Presented to your lips
By Erin's foe?

Did Mary by you stand
That wicked dreadful night
And pour into your souls
Heaven's purest light?

Those queries of our hearts
To God and yours are known
But sure we are you died
To save your own?

Your names to us, dear boys,
Are treasures evermore,
A light, a joy, a flame,
Within our shore.

Rev. Maurice Slattery, S.M.A.

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[141] Poem written by Fr. Maurice Slattery and taken from Pádraig Ó Fathaigh, 'The Fate of the Brothers Loughnane, November 1920', document no. W.S.1517 in *The Bureau of Military History, 1913 – 21* (2003): www.militaryarchives.ie, p. 9. [accessed: 26th May 2015]

Irish Translations

Dia duit - God be with you

Go ndéana Dia trocaire orm/ort/orainn/oraibh - God have mercy on me/you/us/them

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam - May he rest in peace

Maith diom e seo - Forgive me

Go maithe Dia dom é - God forgive me

Is mó an trua - More’s the pity

Ar dheis Dé go raibh a n-anamacha - May they rest in peace

Tá orainn muinín a chur í nDia - We have to trust God

Gura móide teaghlach Dé a anam - God grant him eternal glory

Toil Dé - God’s will

Ár n-arm - Our weapon

A na hEireann - For the freedom of Ireland

Imigh leat amach as seo anois! - Get out of here now!

Droch-ghrá - Poor love

Níl aon deireadh le do chineáltas - Your kindness is unceasing

Maith dúinn ar bhfiacha - Forgive us our sins

A Dhia dean trócaire ar a n-anamacha - God have mercy on their souls

Go sábhála mac Dé sinn, A Íosa Críost na bhflaitheas - Lord give her strength

Go dtuga grá Dé treoir dúinn - May God’s love guide us

Le treoir Dé - With God’s guidance

Déanfaidh Dia sinn a chosaint - God will protect us

Tá orm lean ar aghaidh - I must keep going

Dia scíth a hanam - God rest her soul

Le cúnadh Dé - Please God

Go mbeannaí Dia dóibh - May God bless them

Go gcoinní Dia i mbos A láimhe thú - May God hold you in the palm of his hand

Beannaigh an Tiarna dúinn agus sábhálann linn - The Lord bless us and save us

Buíochas le Dia - Thanks be to God

Go mbeannaí Dia duit - May God bless you

Go raibh maith agat - Thank you

Go bhfóire Dia ort - God give you strength

Go bhfóire Dia orm - God give me strength

Go bhfóire Dia orainn - God give us strength

Go mbeannaí Dia í - God bless her

Go mbeannaí Dia dó – God bless him

Le cúnamh Dé - God willing

Bain taitneamh as - Enjoy

Go raibh maith agat, Deirfiúr - Thank you, Sister

Ár hÉireann - Our Ireland

Téigh - Go

Beidh mé - I will

Aireoidh mé tú - I'll miss you

Níl mo scéal críochnaithe go fóill - My story isn't finished yet

Contae na Gaillimhe - County Galway

Codáil go sámh - Sleep tight

Lean ar aghaidh - Continue

An gcabhróidh tú liom? - Will you help me?

Uafáis na cogaíochta - The terrors of war

Le do thoil - Please

Go bhfóire Dia orainn - God help us

Cuidigh liom - Help me

Abhaile - Home

Go mbeannaí Dia orainn - God bless us and save us

Cróga agus bródúil - Brave and proud

Seol siad abhaile le do thóil - Please send them home

Tá brón orm - I'm sorry

Taisce Dé - God's treasure

Cronaím uaim go mór iad - I miss them dearly

Beidh Dia ag tabhairt aire di - God will take care of her

B'fhéidir go bhfuil Dia trócaire - Thank the Lord for his mercy

An Tiarna a bheith leatsa - The Lord be with you

Táim bródúil - I am proud

Cuireann Dia Fulaingt orainn - God puts suffering on us

Tá ghrá ag Dhia dúinn - God has love for us

Ar ndóigh - Of course

Aá grá agam dó - I love him

Le toil Dé - With God’s permission

Glaoigh orthu teacht abhaile duit - Please call them home to you

I gcónaí - Always

Bhí mé sásta - I was happy

Sláinte - Health

Dia, Éist liom - God hear me

Táim buartha - I’m worried

Gabhaim buíochas le Dia dóibh - I thank God for them

Tá am codlata ann - It’s time to sleep

Tá a bhealach rúndiamhair féin ag an Tiarna - The Lord moves in mysterious ways

A Dhia, Cuidigh liom - God, help me

Go ndéana Dia trócaire orainn - Lord have mercy on us

Tabharfaidh sé treoiraíocht duit - He will give you direction

Croíbhriste - Heart breaking

Déan trocaire orm/ort/air/orainn/oraibh - Have mercy on me/you/him/us/them

Shábháil sé mise - He saved me

Buíochas le dhia - Thanks be to God

In ainm an Athar agus an Mhic agus an Spioraid Naoimh. Amen - In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Go maithe Dia dom é - God forgive me

Fan liom - Wait for me

Bealtaine Dia na síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo.
Bealtaine Mac na Síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo.
Bealtaine Spiorad na síochána
síocháin a thabhairt don teach seo,
an oíche seo agus gach oíche

May the God of peace
bring peace to this house.
May the Son of peace
bring peace to this house.
May the Spirit of peace
bring peace to this house,
this night and all nights

Cumhthach Labhras an Lonsa - It Is Sadly the Blackbird Calls

Cumhthach labhras an lonsa,
an t-olc do fhuair d'fheadarsa
cidh bé do théalaigh a theagh
is fá éanaibh do hairgeadh

It is sadly the blackbird calls,
The wrong that is done him I know.
The cowherd took his house
And killed his little birds

Sgéal is beag ar an mbuachail - The story is little to him

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