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Ellis Island

Written by Kate Kerrigan

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Ellis Island



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Prologue

It was snowing on the Jersey Shore. My mistress had wrapped herself in fur. A grey mink coat trailed behind her on the ground like a wedding train, her snug cloche hat forcing her glossy bobbed hair into neat curls under her cheekbones. Standing in the grand entrance of her country home, Isobel Adams snapped open her purse and quickly applied a slice of scarlet lipstick, puckering her perfect lips together a few times to secure the stain. ‘How do I look, Ellie?’ She seemed nervous.

‘Very well, Ma’am.’

Isobel was beautiful, like a photograph. She shrugged with delight, plunged her hands into a mink muff and called, ‘Wish me luck ...’ as she ran out the door.

Alone in the house, I walked up the grand sweeping staircase that divided and curved out on either side towards the bedrooms. Bedrooms that would soon be filled with strangers with whom I would be obliged to share the intimacy of my servitude as I prepared hot bed-jars, emptied chamber-pots, washed out socks and undergarments. Chores that had once been acts of love for my husband had become a job for which I was being paid.

Once, picking up some socialite guest’s clothes from the floor, I had noticed a lost button, and a hemline torn by a sharp heel

– snagged whilst dancing the Charleston, no doubt. When I pointed out the flaw to the lady and offered to repair it, she said, ‘You’re a darling!’ and gave me a dollar tip just for offering, and another dollar later when the job was done. I was delighted, but then that night as I slid the bills into an envelope to send home to John, I felt cheapened. I was being paid to perform these small acts of domestic love for strangers while my husband set his own fires and cooked his own dinners. John needed the dollars, but he needed me home more.

I lit a fire in the mistress’s bedroom and picked out an outfit for her to change into when she came back from her walk. A black satin robe embroidered with brightly coloured peonies, a red silk nightdress, fresh stockings and her favourite pointed slippers, which earlier I had packed in tissue paper. I laid them across the bed, wiping a layer of dust from the black lacquered bed-end with the hem of my apron, then went to the window and stood for a moment to look at the day. The crisp, sunny morning had turned grey and watery. Snow fell in heavy, sloppy clumps from the trees. The white blanket that had descended in the night and made the world glistening and magical was slowly disintegrating. There was a car outside, crystals of snow still sitting on its roof. There was no driver, but as I looked further down the empty street, I saw my mistress walking with a man. He was much taller than her, and her head leaned into his shoulder, her arms tucked under one of his, clutching him as if she were cold – despite all the fur. Their backs were to me and they were walking towards the promenade. Knowing she would be gone a while, I decided I had time for a cigarette. Turning away from the window, I put my hand into my apron pocket and it fell upon John’s last letter. In the mere touching of the envelope a wave of sadness pushed me down onto the bed.

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Would I ever again walk with him on a cold day, feel the breeze of his breath on my face or look into his tender eyes?

I always had more life in me than I knew what to do with – but it was John who had taught me how to love.

PART ONE



IRELAND

1908-20

Chapter One

The first time I fell in love with John, I was eight and he was ten.

One day, Maidy Hogan called down to the house with a basket of duck eggs and asked my mother if I could play with her nephew. His parents had both died of TB and he was sad and lonely, she said. But for his aunt coming to ask for me in the way she did, my mother would never have let me out to play with him. My mother didn't approve of boys, or playing, or of very much at all outside of cleaning the house and protecting our privacy. 'We like to keep ourselves to ourselves,' was what she always said. She didn't like us to mix with the neighbours, and yet she was concerned that our house was always spotless for their benefit. Perhaps the fact that she made an exception for John Hogan made him special to me from the first.

John called for me later that day. He was tall for his age, with bright blue eyes and hair that curled around his ears. He didn't look lonely to me. He seemed confident and looked me square in the eye, smiling. We went off together, walking and not talking at all, until we reached the oak tree behind Mutty Munnelly's field. Before I could get the words out to challenge him, John was a quarter of the way up the oak, sitting astride its thick, outstretched arm. I was impressed, but angry that he had left

me standing there. I was about to turn and walk off when he called, 'Wait – look.' He ducked suddenly as a fat blue-tit swooped past his face, then took a white cotton handkerchief out of his trouser pocket and inserted his hand into a small hole in the trunk. He carried the fledgling down to me, descending the tree awkwardly with his one free hand. 'It's hungry,' he said, carefully parting the white cotton to reveal the frantic baby blue-tit. 'We could feed it a louse – there should be some under that stone.'

I hated insects, but I wanted to feed the blue-tit, and I wanted to impress him. So I kicked back the rock, picked up a wood-louse between my thumb and forefinger and carefully placed it into the bird's open, hungry beak. As it swallowed back, I touched the top of its little head with my finger and felt how small and soft and precious it was. I looked at John and my heart flooded through. It was the first time I remember sharing love with somebody.

'I'll put her home,' he said, and climbed back up the tree.

My parents were never loving – that is, not towards me.

My mother was from a shopkeeper's family who were largely deceased. Her grandparents had survived the famine years through holding on to what they had while their neighbours starved. They were hated in the locality, and her father had lost the business because of his own father's sins. My mother bore the scars of her family history in her acute privacy and unwillingness to mix with anybody, not even her own child.

My father at least loved the Church. He had failed the priesthood and been sent home from Maynooth College. Nobody ever knew why, but it was certainly not that he had disgraced himself in any particular way. It seemed he was just not considered devout enough. He had made the mistake of thinking that God

had been calling him, when in fact He hadn't. My father was fond of saying that it was his decision. That he had chosen a life in the civil service over life as a priest, yet he went to Mass every day – twice on holy days of obligation – and took as many meals in Father Mac's house discussing parish business as he did in his own. Whenever he was asked, my father would say that it had been a difficult decision to make, but that marriage and children were his vocation. Yet he and my mother slept separately and had only one child. My father's room was as austere as a monk's, with a huge crucifix over the bed. My mother and I shared a bed in another room, and yet I could never say that I felt close to my mother or knew her especially well. We slept with dignified respect for each other's privacy, arranging ourselves back to back, silently, never touching.

Maidy and Paud Hogan were in their late sixties when John came to live with them. They had never had any children of their own and treated this young orphan as if he were their son. Maidy was a generously built and warm-hearted woman, well known in our townland as she had delivered half of the children in the area. Even though she wasn't trained, Doctor Bourke recognized her as a midwife and nurse and consulted her on matters of childbirth and nutrition. Paud Hogan was a quiet man, a hard-working small farmer. He was not schooled, but he knew by its Latin name every plant and flower you could point out – facts learned from the *Encyclopaedia of Nature*, which he kept high on the mantel over the fireplace. John's father had been Paud's beloved younger brother Andrew. When Andrew died and his wife, Niamh, was tragically taken six months later, Paud closed up his brother's house and took John in straight away.

John knew how to do everything. The Hogans were old, and

they wanted to be certain he would be able to fend for himself after they were gone. So they taught their charge how to grow vegetables, cook a decent meal, and one end of a cow from the other. John was an easy child to love. Andrew and Niamh Hogan had showered their only son with affection, before turning him serious and dutiful with their early, tragic deaths. I knew John's story before I met him. Everyone knew everything about everyone in our townland. Aughnamallagh numbered less than one hundred people scattered in houses across miles and miles of identical fields bordered with scrappy hedgerows. The monotony of our flat landscape was broken in places by shallow hills and lakes, which were little more than large puddles.

My parents' house was on the edge of the village, just three miles from the town of Kilmoy. My father was an important man, a civil servant working for the British government. And we should have been living in a grand stone house in the town itself, where he would not have to walk for an hour each way in the mornings and my mother could get turf delivered directly to the back door, and not have to muddy her boots walking to the stack herself. However, the house they had given us was outside the town, and as my father was apt to say on the rare occasions my mother questioned him, 'Who are we to argue with the Great British Government? It is our duty as citizens to be governed by them as we are by God.' Even though my parents kept us deliberately apart from our neighbours, news of each other was unavoidable. It carried across the church grounds in hushed tones and sideways glances after Mass, across the still air of the grocery shop, in the sucking of teeth and clicking of tongues when someone's name was mentioned. My mother's ear was sharply attuned to second-hand scandal, for the very reason that she was too distant from our neighbours to receive it first hand. So I had heard my parents talk about John as a pitiful

orphan – although, as I got to know him, John’s life seemed anything but pitiful to me.

That first summer, my mother was taken up nursing an elderly aunt in the village and so it suited her for me to spend my days with the Hogans and their nephew. My mother told me I had to be kind to John because the Lord had taken both his parents from him. She saw that she was doing the Hogans a favour by allowing me to keep their orphan nephew company.

John called for me each morning and we went exploring. Through his eyes, the ordinary fields between our houses became a wild, exciting playground. John turned grass into Arabian Desert sand, and ordinary muddy ditches into raging rivers we had to conquer.

‘Slip at your peril,’ he would say, as my small feet walked comfortably across a narrow fallen tree. ‘These waters are infested with sharks!’

He knew every animal, noticed their presence in shaking leaves. ‘Rabbit!’ he called on our second or third day out together, and I chased after him into the boundary bushes. John foraged around and pulled aside clumps of leaves to reveal the smooth, dark burrow entrance. I sat firmly down on a large stone and insisted that we wait there for a fluffy ball to come out. ‘It won’t come. It’s afraid of us,’ said John, peering down into the tunnel. ‘There are probably hundreds, *thousands* of them down there – but they won’t come out.’

I imagined the ground beneath us alive with busy, burrowing rabbits, frantically hopping over each other, panicking about John and me. The idea of the two of us sitting quietly in the still day with all this mad activity going on underground made me laugh. It was as if there were two worlds – their world and ours – and I liked that. ‘If it came out now, I’d only want to kiss and cuddle it,’ I said.

John looked embarrassed; he picked up a stick and sliced the air with it. ‘I’d chop its head off and skin it and cook it into a stew.’ I started to cry. Once I started, I couldn’t stop – not because of the rabbit any more, but because I was embarrassed to be crying in front of John and I was afraid that he wouldn’t like me; that I would ruin everything. ‘I’m joking,’ he said, ‘I wouldn’t ever do that to a rabbit, Ellie, sure I wouldn’t, stop crying now, Ellie, don’t cry.’ I did stop, but I remember thinking how boys were different from us, and that I should be more careful how I carried on if I wanted us to stay friends.

When the sun was directly above us in the sky, we ran over to his house, where Maily had our dinner waiting for us.

I loved eating in that house. My own mother was frugal with food, not for lack of money, but because she had no fondness for it. My father ate in the presbytery in town in the middle of the day and she felt there was no need to go to trouble for me alone. Her meals were meagre, modest portions organized in shallow piles that never touched one another and made the plates look huge. In contrast, Maily Hogan shovelled piping hot, sloppy stews onto our plates until thick, brown gravy spilled over the edges of them onto the table. There was never any room left for the potatoes, so they went straight onto the scrubbed wooden tabletop where we piled them with butter, often still watery with milk from the churn, then tore them apart and ate them with our hands. Afterwards we’d have apple tart, or soda cake with butter and honey.

Maily was as round as her cooking was good, and Paud was wiry and still strong at sixty. He worked hard to provide food for her, and she made sure that the meal she prepared with it was worth the work. I ate like a savage at that long, wooden table. I ate until I thought I would burst inside out, until I could barely move and would have to sit teasing ants with a stick on

the front step, waiting for my stomach to settle. The first time I ate with them, Maidy asked, 'Does your mother not feed you at all?' I stopped eating, blushing at my greed, my spoon still poised. She patted my head as apology, encouraged me to continue and never said anything again.

John always cleared the table and cleaned up after dinner; that was his job, wiping the grease and crumbs from the table and sweeping the floor beneath it, then washing the four plates in a bucket of water warmed on the fire and polishing them dry before placing them carefully back in the cupboard. I was never allowed to help. The Hogans made me a part of their family, yet they treated me like a treasured guest always. They loved me like a daughter, but they never overstepped the mark and made me into one. They had a talent for knowing the right way to be with people.

Late in the afternoon, John would bring me back to my own house. Although I was still full of Maidy's food, I ate a silent meal with my parents. In the grey twilight then we would kneel and say the rosary. The coldness of my father's praying voice settled on me as a vague fear. An ache for life burned in my stomach.

Chapter Two

In September, John and I started back at school and I was afraid I was going to lose him.

There were fifty or so children with ages ranging from six to thirteen, and we were crammed into two small rooms with two teachers. We sat in lines of four at long, wooden desks. Our uniforms divided us. Along with about one-third of the girls in our school, I wore a long navy wool shift – ordered up from Galway by Moran’s, the outfitters in Kilmoy – and a long white cotton pinafore, laundered and starched twice-weekly by my mother. I had boots that I wore every day and, when they wore out or pinched too hard, my parents replaced them. Other girls wore slips of dresses, torn cardigans and no shoes. Their lack of status was further announced by the dirt on their faces and under their nails, and by their matted, untidy hair. Although we mixed in the yard during break, in the classroom the teachers saw to it that the clean girls sat together near the fire, while the dirtier ones sat nearer the door, to minimize the stench of poverty. The boys seemed more similar to each other, as they all wore shorts and even those who could afford shoes chose not to wear them, apart from on the coldest days. As the boys got older, their legs crammed awkwardly flesh to flesh under the shallow desks, naked to

the thigh in outgrown shorts, scabby blood-stained knees quivering with the cold, making the metal legs of the desks rattle against the stone floor until the teacher would come over and bring their fist down on a desktop. Some of us lived near the school – John and I included – but many had to walk up to five miles every morning to get there, and five miles home again.

When we got back from our summer holiday that year, many of the boys were missing. Their fathers had noticed strength in their sons during the summer and put them to work farming full time. That was what John would have liked, I feared. He never listened to the muinteoir Mrs Grealy, but was always looking out of the window – not dreaming, like some of us, but studying the apple tree outside the school gates, as its colours changed with the season.

‘There’s nothing happening out there, John,’ I said one day as we left to make our way home. ‘It’s just a tree.’

He smiled. ‘There’s more happened in that tree today, Ellie, than will happen in this classroom in a lifetime.’

I raised my eyes to heaven, imitating Maidy, and he laughed. I loved making John laugh. When he laughed, I felt like he belonged to me.

As we passed the gate, he reached up casually into the tree and picked off an apple, handing it to me and saying, ‘See?’ As if he had grown it himself for my benefit, just by looking out during lessons.

It was tiny and hard and as bitter as Satan’s tears. ‘Yuk!’ I said, spitting and making him laugh again. ‘You’re a stupid eejit,’ I said, and he chased me home.

When winter came the school became bitterly cold. We all moved into the same classroom for warmth, and each child was asked to bring in a piece of fuel with them to put in the small,

open fireplace. However, many of the children were from families too poor to keep their own fires burning, or were too stunted and weak to carry even a sod of turf five miles or more. By lunchtime we could barely see the pages we were writing on beneath the fog of our own breath, or hear the teachers above the clatter of chattering teeth. John complained to Paud Hogan about this one afternoon. 'It's school business,' Paud said, but John insisted, 'There's enough turf in the county, Pa, to warm a small school, surely.' We were sitting on the edge of his fireplace, roasting ourselves, and Maily had to poke us out of the way to get to her cooking. John pushed and pushed until Paud agreed. The two of them loaded the cart with their own bail of turf, then called on every farmer in the area for contributions until they had the cart piled with enough fuel to keep the school cosy all through the winter.

Everyone loved John, and I felt honoured that he was my friend. Even though ten-year-old boys didn't like to be seen playing with eight-year-old girls, John was happy to walk me home from school, openly waiting at the gates for me if I dawdled. But at break-time, John played with boys his age and I was stuck standing with Kathleen Condon, who had thick glasses and was as disliked by me as much as by the other girls. I didn't know why I got stuck with her. I wasn't ugly or annoying like Kathleen – in fact, I was smaller and prettier than many of the popular girls. I decided that was probably why the others hated me: they were jealous of my looks, and the fact that my family was better off than theirs. It hurt, not being invited to play with the others, but I pretended not to mind. In any case, I didn't like the way they carried on, bragging about their devotion to the Blessed Virgin and gossiping about the neighbours like old women. My mother didn't gossip, so I never had any news. And I had always been taught that it was unseemly to talk

about one's private prayers and devotions. I had voiced this opinion once and imagined that was another reason for their rejection of me.

Nobody liked Kathleen because her glasses made her eyeballs swim around her face like big, frightening fish, but she was just the same as them – always trying to get in with the others – talking non-stop about this one and that one, telling me that if the communion wafer touched your teeth, you'd be sucked down into the ground by Satan when you were sleeping. One day, when I refused to act out a tableau where she was the Blessed Virgin and I was a Sinning Advocate prostrate at her feet, she finally told me the real reason nobody liked me. 'Your grandpa killed baby children when their mas came looking for food and he wouldn't give them any, and your father loves the bastard British.'

I didn't cry. I just told her she looked a fright – which she knew anyway – and pretended she hadn't said anything, but my stomach was turned inside out on itself all afternoon.

I was quiet on the way home and John asked if there was something wrong. 'You don't have to tell me if you don't want to,' he said.

'Kathleen Condon was awful to me because I wouldn't play her stupid game.' I didn't tell him what she had said. I didn't want him despising me as well because of my family. 'I hate her and I'm never going to play with her again.'

John stopped to break off a long stalk of blackberries, pulling his sleeves over his hands and freeing the bramble from the mangled hysteria of the hedgerow with a ferocious twist. He served me the ripe berries as we walked on, passing them to me in soppy handfuls, his stained palm a platter. 'Don't do that, Ellie,' he said. 'Poor Kathleen has nobody, only you.'

*

My mother's aunt was still ailing in the spring. By now, I had a comfortable routine: John always walked me home after school, but, three days out of the five, I would carry on with him to the Hogans' and spend the afternoon there. They would feed me, then allow me to follow John around the farm as he did his chores. I was scant help to him. Mesmerized the first, second, third time I saw him milk a cow, after that it was my mission to distract him. I'd call and challenge him from some hiding place, clamber up a tree and squeal for his help; one time, I lay down under his favourite cow and urged him to squirt the milk directly into my open mouth. He failed and I got soaked in milk and muck. It wasn't hard for me to untether John from his duties. It seemed that all that mattered was our happiness. I discovered freedom and joy, and I grabbed it with both my small hands and didn't let it go until I got back to my parents' house.

For all the freedom she gave us, Maidy was a tidy woman and hated to send me home to my mother with muck on my uniform.

'Pssht, child. Your mother will think I have no respect for her if I send you home in that state!'

Tired of nagging and scrubbing stains off my skirt, one day she put me into a pair of John's working trousers – the ones he changed into after school to keep his shorts clean and his legs protected from all the cow muck and dirt on the farm. They looked comical on me, but Maidy insisted on rolling them up to my knees and leaving on only my woollen vest, which she then covered with one of her aprons, binding me up in its voluminous, flowery print until I looked like a package.

I ran and ran that afternoon. With my legs protected, I fled down a hill of nettles and climbed up the spindly silver birch tree by the road before John reached me, panting comically as

if he couldn't keep up. He was afraid of that tree because the branches were too small to hold him. I was light enough that I knew they would hold my weight. I had always wanted to climb that tree, but John had never let me up it on my own, in case I fell.

'Come down, Ellie – the branch will break and you'll fall.'

'You're just jealous because I can see the world from here and you're stuck there on the ground.'

'It's dangerous, Ellie – I mean it, come down.'

I was a little anxious, because I realized John knew better than me. Yet at the same time I felt in charge of the world, protected by my distance from the ground. I could say and do anything I pleased; nobody could reach me. In any case, his fear made me more defiant. 'Won't never come down, John Hogan – won't never, ever ... You'll have to come up and get me!' I felt dizzy from the running and my high position.

Miss Kennedy, the priest's housekeeper, came down the road on her bicycle. She was quite pretty and younger than my mother, but I didn't like her. She sat near the front in Mass and acted very holy. But once, when I was bored, I studied her face after communion and saw her watch every person coming back up the aisle as if she were measuring them for a coffin. She was creepy and I was a little scared of her. But from my vantage point in the sky, she looked like a small beetle.

'Hey – Miss Kennedy!' I shouted.

She pretended she didn't hear me, so I shouted again.

'Hey – Kennedy!'

John looked up at me, daggers. I knew I was in trouble, but I didn't care. 'Good afternoon, Miss Kennedy,' he said like an altar boy, touching a non-existent cap as she passed the tree.

Kate Kerrigan

Then: ‘You’ve done it now – come down from that tree at once, Ellie Flaherty, or I’ll whip you!’

I was laughing so hard he had to come up and get me in the end. The tree bent, but it stayed with us and didn’t break.