

CHRISTINA MCKENNA

THE
GODFORSAKEN
DAUGHTER

From the bestselling
author of
The Misremembered Man



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THE
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DAUGHTER

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My Mother Wore a Yellow Dress (memoir)

The Dark Sacrament (nonfiction)

Ireland's Haunted Women (nonfiction)

The Misremembered Man (fiction)

The Disenchanted Widow (fiction)

CHRISTINA McKENNA

THE
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LAKE UNION
PUBLISHING

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Published by Lake Union Publishing, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781477827451
ISBN-10: 1477827455

Cover design by David M. Kiely
Cover photograph by Michael McKenna

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014952404

For my sisters:

Marie

Ann

Sarah

Rosaleen

And brothers:

William

John

Michael

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God is a concept by which we measure our pain.

—John Lennon

Chapter one

Ruby Clare sat in a velour recliner in the kitchen of Oaktree Farmhouse, knitting a tea cozy. cupcake tea cozy.

Knitting steadied her. It was her therapy. Her meditation. Although Ruby didn't know those labels, she knew the feeling. And she needed to hang onto that feeling more than ever these days; the grief-stricken days with her dear father gone. At his eternal rest these seven months, under a plastic angel and globe of plastic tulips in St. Timothy's churchyard on the outskirts of Tailorstown. A mere twenty-minute walk from where his daughter sat.

His now fatherless daughter, Ruby Vivian Clare—thirty-three years of hope and dreams and fear and woe packed into a size 16 frock, sunk deep in the old chair—was only vaguely aware of the June sun steady at the window, open just a crack. Of the alder leaves kissing the glass, of the hen clucking, a cow mooing, and birds twittering in the big ash.

Ruby had knitted more tea cozies than were teapots to cover in these past months of mourning. But no matter; she'd a lot of time on her hands and needed to use it fruitfully. For, like milk left standing too long, idle moments could surely mass together, curdle, and grow sour. Stagnation could haul you down depression's road, with only indolence and self-pity for company along the way. And such a situation must be avoided at all costs. No, moping and feeling sorry for yourself were to be kept well at bay in Mrs. Clare's home. Emotions were dangerous. They pointed to a sensitive nature, or "weakness" in mother-speak. Weeping could only mean you were "bad with your nerves."

The knitting, filling the hours and filling the house, stood as testimony to Ruby's stoppered grief; tears of purl-one-plain-one for her departed father, stitched out in tea cozies, cushion covers, throws, and chair backs, were safer than displays of dramatic despair.

She glanced at her watch. Two minutes past two. Maybe she'd have the tea cozy complete before her mother awoke from her nap with the chiming of the big grandfather clock in the hallway.

That was about an hour away—a whole hour of calm.

So she sat there, the tea cozy taking shape as her fingers flew, enjoying the quiet of that lazy afternoon. An afternoon as yet unsullied by the mother's demands.

She'd been driven indoors by her father's death. Those hands, so toughened from years of labor—milking cows, hauling buckets, shaking fodder free from bales, pulling calves from grateful wombs—were now softening against their natural bent, under a frivolity of household chores her mother deemed necessary to keep her from a breakdown.

"I don't want you getting bad with your nerves 'cos your father's not here no more. You'll stay in the house and keep yourself occupied. There's plenty for you to do. Knitting and baking got m

through my mother's death. Got me through many a death, truth be told. And it'll get you through, too. And if you don't stop that blubbering you'll have to go to Derry . . . like . . . like your uncle Cecil and your aunt Marjorie and . . ."

Mention of "Derry" had struck fear into the hearts of all three Clare children when they were growing up. For they knew that by "Derry" the mother didn't mean a shopping trip under the bright lights of that metropolis. No, for Mrs. Clare the name was code for a formidable mental institution: St. Ita's, on the outskirts of the city. And, no, Ruby had no wish to pass through its somber doors like Uncle Cecil, Aunt Marjorie, or the succession of relatives on her mother's side who, whether for good or ill, had all done stretches there.

Ruby's childhood was pockmarked by visiting hours within its soulless, sick-green walls. She carried memories of a hollow-eyed Marjorie sitting wordless in a tub chair, staring forlornly at the floor. And the alcoholic Cecil shaking and chain-smoking his way through the trauma of yet another bout of post-Christmas blues, which, with relentless regularity, would bring each year of his to a close.

As a teenager, Ruby herself had come close to being incarcerated.

Barely out of high school, with two C passes in Religious Knowledge and Cookery, career choices narrowed to the convent or the kitchen, and Mrs. Clare had promptly packed her off to a waitressing job in Donegal to "take her out of herself."

The convent could wait. She needed "to mix more." First time away from home, and sharing a dorm with six young women—slim, quick girls, flitting about like finches in brightly colored clothes and dainty shoes—had made Ruby all too painfully aware of her shortcomings. Ruby, the country bumpkin, in her bulky gray pinafore, self-made using a *Woman's Realm* pattern, feet jammed into a pair of low-heeled castoffs from a maiden aunt. An outfit certainly appropriate for that first, pietist career choice, if the grounding in hospitality didn't work out.

She was a figure of fun to those giddy roommates. She knew that. Could sense it in the smirking faces, the eyes that slid away guiltily from her hopeful smiles when she tried to connect. Slow Ruby, last at everything: in the classroom, on the sports field, on the dancehall floor. Not that her roommates ever gave her the chance to accompany them to dances . . .

They'd stay out late and alight in the small hours, perching on the edge of their bunk beds giggling behind painted fingernails and discussing boys till dawn broke.

Sleep-deprived Ruby, out of her depth completely, stumbling into work, forgetting orders, dropping plates, tripping over a toddler and going headlong into the dessert trolley. And the last straw scalding a woman's bosom when handing over a cup of tea. "I'll have you up for this, you clumsy lump!" The woman jumping up, screeching at the sight of her crimson cleavage and saturated top.

She lasted a week. Mr. Ryan, the manager, calling her mother. Ruby in tears in his office. "Come here, Mrs. Clare, and take yer daughtur home. She's a bloody liability, so she is."

Mr. Ryan.

Ruby's grip tightened on the needles. The frantic *click-clacking* slowed. Mr. Ryan's red face. Fist flexed for combat. She shut her eyes tight. When she opened them again, she was riding home on her father's Hillman Imp. The memory of that journey: painful, but safer. Yes, a whole lot safer than Mr. Ryan's office.

Her mother's berating voice reaching down the years: "What are you *like*? Couldn't stick at a good job for a week. Mr. Ryan moved mountains to get you into The Talk of the Town. So many young ones queuing up for that job, but he was doing me a favor, being a third cousin of your father's half brother, Jamesy, on his daddy's side. Now look what you've done. What am I going to tell the neighbors? I told everybody you were going away for the summer."

Her daddy's big hands gripping the steering wheel. Capless, in his Sunday suit and it not even Sunday. Hair Brylcreemed into a shiny skullcap. Fixing it a bother to him on a weekday, but needing

to look respectable for this unexpected trip. Having to leave the hayfield in midafternoon to make the two-hour journey to Donegal. Oh, the trouble she'd caused! But he never blamed Ruby for that.

"Och, leave Ruby alone," he protested. "She doesn't need to be goin' out tae a job. She can help me on the farm. She's good with the animals, so she is. Aren't you, daughtur?"

Ruby nodding through her tears, affirming his kindly look in the rearview mirror.

What would she have done without him? What would she do *now* without him?

"I'd try her in the convent, but she's too fat." The mother, not listening, rattling on like a Gatling gun. Never listening. No thought ever left unspoken. No insult ever left unaided. Her wrath filling the car like mustard gas. "Gluttony, the second deadly sin. Father Cardy said as much. Nun lead lives of fasting and abstinence. That's why they're so thin. They live on Christ's wafer and the Holy Ghost." She turned back to the sobbing Ruby. Powdered face rigid with scorn. Discount earrings shivering in the coppery light. "So, if you want Father Cardy to consider you for the Oblate Mission of Mary, you'll have to go on a diet first."

Now the fatherless Ruby, sitting in the old chair in Oaktree Farmhouse, allowed tears to blur the last few rows of the tea cozy.

She left off knitting and fumbled a tissue from her apron pocket. Dabbed her eyes. Checked the clock. A quarter to three. She got up quickly and went into the pantry. The mirror above the sink threw back a comely reflection, even though the eyes were puffy. She splashed some water on her face, released the band that held her ponytail in place, letting her amber hair—her best feature—fall loose about her shoulders; all the better to hide behind.

Fearing the convent, and to thwart her mother, the teenage Ruby had remained plump. Father kept his promise and Ruby joined him on the farm. For fourteen years she'd worked the land, but his sudden death had changed everything. The dairy farm with her beloved herd of Friesians had died along with him. Mother was having none of it. No amount of pleading would turn her.

"I'll carry it on, Mammy. It's what Daddy would of wanted. Please, Mammy. I know nothing else but the farm. I know nothing else but milking the cows and feeding them and helping with the calving. Please, Mammy."

"No, you will *not*. It's my farm now and I'll do what I want. And no daughter of mine's going to stand on a Fair Day in Tailorstown, haggling over the price of a heifer. That's men's work. You'll be a laughing stock."

"But, Mammy, *please* . . ." Ruby in tears. "I'll—I'll—"

"I said *no*. The herd's going and let that be the end of it. There's plenty for you to do around the house. I need peace in my life, now that your father's gone. God knows how long I've left myself. My heart's not good. Dr. Brewster said so. Even going up them stairs has me puffed. What if I'd dropped dead like your father? What then?"

So the herd was sold off, the land rented out, Ruby's muddy Wellington boots retired behind the pantry door. Ruby the housemaid still dragged herself from the old divan at 7:00 a.m., though. But now, in place of a boiler suit and boots, she pulled on a shapeless dress, stuck her feet into size 10 slippers, before galumphing down the stairs.

Apron on, fire on, kettle on. All in that order. Her mother's needs always coming first. Everybody else's needs always coming first.

Ruby returned to the old chair, calmer now, and took up the knitting once more.

But, within seconds, she was stuffing the unfinished tea cozy into her sewing bag. The pearl button decorations would keep for next time. A stirring overhead meant that Mother was already on her way. A whole five minutes before the chiming of the clock at 3:00 p.m.

Ruby got up hurriedly and shoved the kettle back on the stove.

Time to make the tea.

Time to set her troubled thoughts aside and set the table instead.

Chapter two

Henry Shevlin was cursed with a listener's face. It was the reason he'd gravitated toward the mental health branch of medicine. Psychiatry sat well with the silent, attentive Henry. He was the perfect fit. The key in the lock that could unbolt so many secrets, and have them freely tumble from the darkest recesses of the closeted self. The many fractured souls who sat before him, day in and day out, trusted him completely.

He heard as much as the cleric in the confessional. And who knows, perhaps at one stage he could have donned the collar and strode purposely through life like a ministering angel. His mother had wished it for him.

But not Henry. Strong-willed as he was, with an inquiring mind, religion was not for him. Like his father, he was a pragmatist—a leader not a follower. With his kindly eyes and detached manner, he'd been special from the start.

Little girls in the school playground ran weeping to him when they fell over or got teased. Teachers circled him like planets, wary of his aloofness. Bullyboys wilted when he stared them down. Those eyes, warm and watchful as a feted saint's one minute, could turn as cold as storm-washed pebbles when angry. In childhood, he rarely threw a tantrum; that look of displeasure when he didn't get his way was enough to have others caving in. His needs met without having uttered a word, expending an ounce of energy.

Histrionics were not his way. He'd witnessed firsthand how they destroyed his mother, a quick-tempered woman who'd lived largely at the mercy of her feelings. She externalized everything. Blamed everyone else for her unhappiness.

His father—the magistrate, stoical, reflective—could not afford to get involved in what he termed “those fearful displays.” A clear head was needed for his judgments on the bench. His career, a much-needed escape route from an unhappy marriage, meant more to him than his wife.

Where Ava Shevlin saw coldness and detachment in the husband she once loved, the young Henry saw patience and forbearance. Admirable qualities, which served him well as a doctor. The great gusts of pique and wrath he often observed in his patients—“those fearful displays”—were the result of having ceded control to that most invidious of emotions: fear. “Fear, Henry, is what makes the world a terrible place. Your mother isn't upset with you and me; she's merely afraid of life.”

Having become a therapist, Henry understood all too well what his father meant. He couldn't take away the fears that each of his patients presented, but he could stand with them at the cliff edge on the riverbank, the lip of a high-rise building, and gently pull them back from the metaphoric brink. He offered hope and medication, and he listened to them with a finely tuned ear and a brotherly

heart.

—He was forty-two and starting an unexpected new phase in his life. The city of Belfast, where he'd spent his career, could no longer keep him bound. He'd requested a transfer from the Mater Infirmorum Hospital, his employer of fifteen years. Had spotted an ad for a temporary consultant at an outpatient clinic in the town of Killoran. The clinic was run by the community health center, and referred its serious cases to St. Ita's mental institution in the city of Derry.

Henry secured the position with ease. Killoran, with its catchment area of a few thousand souls as opposed to Belfast's half a million, seemed the ideal place. Fewer patients meant a less hectic schedule, a narrower focus, and fewer demands. Just what he needed.

This dramatic shift in circumstances was not of his making. Sadly, the decision had been forced upon him. Constance, his wife of nine years, had vanished. Weeks of feverish searching had proved futile. The weeks had ripened into months, to become a year of waiting. He'd finally faced up to reality: Constance wasn't coming back. It was time to draw a line under the tragedy, to move on.

He could no longer remain in the home they'd shared for so long. Because it was no longer a home. Her absence had regressed it to the mere house it had once been. There were too many memories. Too many lonely nights of waiting for the phone to ring. Too many days of waiting for her to come through the front door. Yes, it was time to move on.

The memory of the evening she went missing would never let him go. He'd gone over it and analyzed it so many times. He'd found a note on the kitchen table when he'd arrived home from work at his usual time of 5:30. It was May 25, 1983.

"Going for a walk, darling. Love you. Always." That was what the note said.

He'd thought nothing of it . . . to begin with. Had grown used to such notes, especially at this time of year. Constance, a born walker, had always looked forward to the finer weather. May was her favorite month. The pre-summer days meant saying good-bye to heavy clothing, and dispensing with the gloves she loathed, yet was forced to wear against her Raynaud's syndrome.

But with darkness falling and still no sign, Henry poured himself a brandy—an uncustomary indulgence. He wasn't much of a drinker and prided himself on his imperturbable nature. Psychological crutches were for his patients. She's dropped in with Betty, he told himself, after finishing the drink in two gulps. Yes, that's it. She's chatting with her sister over a coffee and has simply lost track of time. Betty would be back from her weekend with the mother-in-law in Bangor. There would be much to discuss.

He had to remain calm. This unexpected warp in his routine was a challenge in ways he couldn't have anticipated. He subscribed to the psychotherapeutic model of Émile Coué. Had been using it very successfully in his practice for years. Émile Coué, the man who coined the famous maxim, "Every day, in every way, I'm getting better and better."

Now Henry Shevlin called on the great master's precepts to steady himself. The conscious will was what you focused on. To feed and strengthen your conscious will, it was imperative to bring the unconscious will—the imagination—under control, by feeding it only positive thoughts and images. What you think about exclusively turns into reality. Therefore Henry immediately began picturing the best possible outcome, his eidetic memory coming to his aid when he most needed it to. The pictures were coming. Clear and detailed pictures.

He was picturing Connie in Betty's pristine parlor, chatting over coffee. What was she wearing? He went further back: to the breakfast table. Yes, her white dress with the forget-me-not pattern. How extraordinary! Forget-me-not. Over the dress: a white cardigan, the final two buttons done up at the waist. Shoes? He hadn't noticed those, but it was a fair assumption they were the beige slip-ons she favored for walking.

He saw her check her watch. Betty halting in midflow, scowling at the interruption.

“God, is that the time? Really must be going. Henry’s long home and I didn’t mention I’d be dropping in with you.”

Call Betty! Wouldn’t that be the most sensible thing to do? Henry’s eyes locked on the phone. No, he decided. Calling Betty would mean giving voice to his anxieties. Endorsing his doubt. No. Connie would come through the door any minute. Plant a kiss on his cheek. Apologize. Settle opposite him in the armchair with a glass of her favorite Sancerre, and ask him about his day. That’s the way it had always been. And that’s how it would be now.

However, sitting there in the armchair made him feel unproductive. Action! He needed to take action.

Her handbag. Maybe she decided to do some late shopping after the walk. The city-center shops were open late on a Thursday. He looked in all the usual places for the handbag and was relieved when he couldn’t find it. She *had* gone shopping then.

And so the minutes ticked away. The clock striking down the hours till the shops shut at 9:00 p.m. A taxi back home would take twenty minutes at most.

At 10:00 p.m. he was forced to phone Betty.

“No, she never came here. Is something wrong?”

“She went for a walk this afternoon and didn’t come home.”

“Oh my God! Have you called the police?”

No, he hadn’t called the police. Betty was a catastrophist. A black-and-white thinker with few wanderings into that much more yielding zone of gray.

He waited until midnight. Half an hour later, he found himself at his local Royal Ulster Constabulary station, filling out a missing-person’s report.

A bulky constable, yawning his way through a list of questions.

“Five foot four, you say?”

“Yes.”

“Hair?”

Henry reached into his pocket and took out his wallet. “Here, I have a snapshot.”

The RUC constable studied the portrait.

“Blonde,” he said aloud, while scribbling the word down. “Recent pitcher, this?”

“Yes, a couple of months back. It was taken for a gallery brochure.”

The constable looked up. “Right.”

“And how does she wear it?”

“Wear what?”

“Her hair, sir. Always tied back like that?”

“Yes, usually . . . in a ponytail.” Henry made an explanatory gesture at the back of his head. “Worn . . . worn high.”

The constable studied the shot again. “Eyes . . . blue?”

“Blue, yes.”

“Any distinguishing features?”

“No . . .”

“What was she—?”

“Sorry, sorry, yes, she has . . .”

“Has what?”

“A distinguishing feature.” He pulled back the cuff of his shirt. Pointed to a spot just above the wrist on his right arm. “A small tattoo, *here*. A butterfly . . . blue. A blue one.”

“Right. Wouldn’t be seen by anyone, unless she’d be in the short sleeves,” the constable said, stating the obvious. “And clothes. What had she got on, sir?”

“A white dress with a blue pattern . . . small flowers. Forget-me-nots, I think. Knee-length and . . . and a cardigan . . . white as well.”

“Just plain white?”

“Yes . . . no, no. At the back it has a sunflower . . . embroidered into it. She . . . she did herself.”

“What color? This sunflower?”

“Eh . . .” Henry thought it an odd question. “Yellow. Yellow, of course . . . yes, yellow with brown center.”

“How big?”

“Size twelve.”

“No, sir, not the cardigan, the flower. Did it cover the whole back or—”

“Yes, yes, of course . . . sorry, Constable. Yes, it covered the entire back.”

“That’s good.”

“Sorry, why’s it good? I don’t follow.”

“The cardigan’s distinctive. You say she embroidered it herself, therefore there wouldn’t be another one like it.”

Henry shook his head. “I never thought of that.”

“Shoes?”

“Sorry, can’t remember. But she did have her handbag. Brown leather . . . a shoulder bag. I know that for sure, because it’s not in the house.”

“You’re positive?”

“Yes.”

“And you say she usually walked in Lady Dickson Park?” The constable sat back in his chair and relaxed his viselike grip on the pen. “Would she usually take her handbag on a walk, sir?”

“No, not usually. But if she intended to do some shopping afterwards, she might.”

“There are no shops in Lady Dixon Park.”

“I’m quite aware of that, Constable. But there’s late-night shopping on a Thursday.”

“This is Wednesday.”

Damn! How could he have mistaken the date? A calendar on the police officer’s desk was showing *Wednesday, May 25*.

“Marital problems?”

“No. Why are you asking that?”

“Procedure, sir. Could she have been seeing someone else?”

“No.” Henry looked the man straight in the eye. He dropped his gaze to the form again. “If you’re looking for a chief complaint, Constable, I can assure you that you won’t find it in that area.”

“Chief complaint? I don’t think I follow . . .”

“I’m sorry. That’s professional jargon. I doubt if it’s relevant here.” How remiss! What would a simple policeman know about psychiatry and diagnostic procedure?

“A suitcase missing?” the officer pressed on.

“I didn’t check. Why would I check such a thing? I love my wife. She loves me. I’ve absolute no reason to doubt her. I’m missing her already and you’re painting her as some kind of harlot.”

“We need a full pitcher, if we’re to find her. These questions might be hard, but we must have facts, and you must *face* facts.”

Henry relented. He knew he’d get nowhere by being awkward. “I’m sorry,” he said, letting his gaze fall on the constable’s pen, poised again over the report form. Bitten nails. A slight tremor in the left hand shielding his note taking from view. Conscious of his spelling, despite the uniform. *My patient, Henry*—he heard his father’s voice—*everybody is afraid of something; everybody has lo*

someone. "You have to do your job. It's just that . . . well, it's just that I never expected to be sitting here at this hour of the night answering questions about . . ."

Out in the corridor a pair of duty boots marched past: heavy, assertive. In their wake a scuffling sound. A slurred voice raised in song. "And I'm off tae join the IRA and I'm off tae-morrer morn—"

"Aye, you wouldn't be much bloody good to the IRA in your state. Get in there!"

A door slamming. Keys jangling.

Silence.

"It's good that she took the handbag," the constable said into the pause. "More for us to go on. We can check for bank withdrawals."

"I see."

He slid the statement across the desk for a signature. "Go home, sir. Try to get some sleep, but not in the marital bed."

Henry was nonplussed. "Why not?"

"We'll need to see the bedroom. Look at her effects. It's important you don't tidy anything up. Stay by the phone. Keep it free, in case she calls."

The constable got up. "We'll check phone records, of course." He opened the door. "Don't worry, Doctor. Ninety percent of people show up within forty-eight hours. Perhaps she just wanted to be on her own for a bit. Women are hard to fathom at times." He smiled. "But you don't need me to tell you that—you being a psychiatrist and all."

Henry managed to reciprocate the smile, grateful for the man's reassurance. But he knew, as he walked away, that in the troubled city of Belfast, with its relentless succession of shootings and bombings, a woman missing for a few hours would figure low on the RUC's list of priorities.

He returned home in the early hours, finding the house eerily quiet without her. All the warmth and comfort he'd taken so much for granted: gone like a puff of breath in winter. He went immediately up to the attic to check on the suitcases.

No, they were still there, gathering dust from the last vacation. Relief swept over him like a blessing. So she hadn't left him.

He sat down on a beanbag and stared at the cases. Connie's: the biggest of the set. She loved clothes, and always insisted on taking most of her wardrobe with her. So many happy holidays had been packed into that blue Samsonite. Their most recent, on the island of Crete the previous August.

He saw them on the terrace of Hotel Hyperion, sipping Metaxa as the sun sank over the Mediterranean. Connie's blonde hair burnished bronze in the evening light; her easy smile, eyes bright with happiness. Her pale fingers clasping the glass, savoring each tiny sip of the Greek brandy. Her butterfly. She loved butterflies. Loved seeing them in summer. That delight in them mirrored so keenly in her own life. So hungry for adventure. Trying out new things: jobs, hobbies, hairstyle. Flitting from one experience to another, eager to soak up the thrill of it all.

"Why don't we move here, darling? Wouldn't it be heaven?"

Henry, the realist. Always the realist: "Yes, it would be lovely, but not practical, as you—"

"Oh, stop spoiling the moment. Just say 'yes' and let me dream. I'm tired of Belfast. The shootings, the bombing. We've no ties, really. We're as free as birds. We could live anywhere in this big, bright, beautiful, scintillating world."

"Hmmm . . . You see the world as bright and beautiful because you're on holiday. Unfortunately, I'm under contract. My patients need me."

"You're not indispensable! I expect there are mentally ill people in every country. You always find work." She'd taken a larger sip of the brandy. "Only trees stay in the one place all their lives. And we're not trees."

"I'm sorry."

“Why can’t I try on different lives, like dresses, to see which one fits me and is more becoming?”

“Oh, stop quoting that morose poet! Now look who’s spoiling the moment.”

“Sylvia Plath was *not* morose. She was a realist, trapped by others’ expectations. A bit like me.”

She’d gotten up then and slammed down the glass.

“Connie, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“I’m going for a stroll.”

“On your own.”

“Yes, on my own. I’m not a toddler. And I wish you’d stop treating me like one.”

Is that why she’d done this? Just to show him? Had he been too restricting?

The doctor put his head in his hands. *Maybe I should have listened more. Maybe I should have given her the same ear I give my patients.*

He got up and went downstairs. Clear, almost palpable in his mind, the image of her rising from that table at Hotel Hyperion and stalking off.

He went immediately to the writing bureau. Opened the locked drawer and dug down through their shared collection of personal papers: birth, marriage, graduation certificates, bank statements until he found the object of his search.

He drew out the passport and leafed through its pages, hopeful. But, alas, it was his own face that stared back at him.

He reached back into the drawer, a feeling of dread taking hold. His fingers made contact with bare board. He pulled the drawer out as far as it would go, and hunkered down to get a closer look.

But the back of the drawer was empty. Connie’s passport: gone.

Chapter three

In the time it took Martha Clare to rise and dress, Ruby had the tea made, the table laid, the mother's favored cup and saucer in position, and her chair cushion plumped, ready to receive her. On the table: a cream sponge Ruby had made that morning, perfectly risen and finger-lick springy, due to the care she'd taken in beating sufficient air into the mixture. Baking came as natural to her as breathing. As a child she'd watched her mother, and as a girl had helped her aunt Rita, who used to own a cake shop. The farm work had taken her away from all those domestic pursuits, but now she was rediscovering, as with her knitting, the joy of those long-neglected skills. And it pleased her that her foray into farming hadn't diminished her talent in the kitchen.

Martha Clare, a brittle-boned sexagenarian, frail as a festive meringue, sharp as a hacksaw when her blood was up, sighed her way down the stairs and proceeded unsteadily to the table.

She waited for her daughter to pull out the chair—“*Might put my elbow out. Them chairs are too heavy for me these days. Have to watch my bones. Dr. Brewster said so.*” Ruby knew the mantle well and was on guard like a lady's maid, obeying a set of unspoken commands just to keep the peace. Being indoors with the mother day after day was a fresh trial to be gotten through, a burden to be borne.

Martha gathered her cardigan about her and settled herself. The garment seemed much too big for her, but Mrs. Clare, always on the slight side, had lost even more weight following her husband's death. Vincent Clare had taken care of everything outside the home. The farm business was his world; the domestic sphere hers. But with his passing, Martha was forced out of her comfort zone and into a world of lawyers and paperwork pertaining to his affairs and their sixty-plus acres of land. The stress of it all had taken its toll, robbing her of sleep and the desire to eat.

Lately, however, all that grief and despair had turned to anger—anger at the injustice of it all. She was angry with Vincent—barely a month into his sixty-eighth year and rarely ill in his life—for causing her such grief by exiting so early. She was angry at Ruby, for she'd been his favorite. She knew that Vincent would have wanted Ruby to carry on the farm. He'd said it often enough. But his death was a betrayal too far.

So she took her revenge on both, by selling off the dairy herd and renting out the land. Not only dishonoring her dead husband's wishes but depriving the daughter of the only world she knew.

“Did you have a good sleep, Mammy?” asked Ruby, pouring the tea, stewed to the color of oxblood, just the way her mother liked it.

“Enough sleep? I never get enough sleep. Why d'you think I have to lie down during the day?” Martha, her usual cantankerous self, held out her plate for the slice of cake. “That looks like one

your auntie Rita's?"

—“No, Mammy, I baked it this morning.”

“Is that so? Looks very like one of Rita's to me . . . always great at the sponges, Rita. She learned it from me, of course. Not that she'd ever give *me* any credit. She wouldn't have had the bakery business if it wasn't for me.”

Ruby said nothing. She was getting tired of defending herself. A lull was better than a row.

Mrs. Clare sliced the cake into tiny pieces, as was her way. “Well, what have you been doing with yourself?”

“Finishing off the tea cozy. The cupcake one I started on Monday. It's very nice. But I won't show it to you till it's ready.”

“You're still at that, then?”

“Mammy, there's something I want to ask you.”

“What's that?”

“You know the way when Daddy was alive he always . . . he always give me twenty pound a week for me work on the farm.”

Ruby waited for the mother to fill in the blanks so she wouldn't have to spell it out, but Martha just sat there, staring into the middle distance.

“Well, you haven't give me any since . . .”

“You're not working on the farm no more, so why would I give you money? Besides, don't you get my pension money every Monday?”

“But that's for groceries. I've nothing left over for meself. For things . . .”

“And what things would you need, Ruby? You don't go out. You've no responsibilities. You've got your bed and board here—which is more than a lot of people have.”

“Did Daddy leave me anything in his will?”

The mother looked askance. “What kind of question's that? Your poor father hardly cold in his grave and all you're concerned about is how much money he left behind him.”

Ruby wished she hadn't broached the subject. The atmosphere of calm she strove always maintain around her mother was ruffled now.

An uneasy silence fell.

Ruby was seated in the carver chair at the head of the table. The one her father used to occupy. The chair that had forgotten how to hold her father now held his beloved daughter instead. She felt closest to him when she sat in that chair.

It looked out on the field where he died. The field her mother now decreed was cursed. Back in 1926, it had taken the life of Arthur Clare, Ruby's grandfather. Killed in a tractor accident at only forty-two, when Vincent was ten. Ruby had sown a patch of flowers on the spot where her father fell. A memorial to both men.

So, as the mother nibbled on the cake and took tiny sips of tea, sitting in her own isolation Ruby reran the images from that fateful day. As if putting herself through the misery of it time and time again would somehow heal the pain and bring her father back.

She recalled peeling potatoes at a basin on the table. Head bent over the task, stripping the skin from a King Edward with an old knife.

Something had made her look up.

That's when she saw her father, just standing there out in the field, stooped like a question mark, studying the ground, a hank of baler twine in his left hand.

His cap had fallen off. It lay in front of him. A November wind was lifting his hair. *What's he looking at? Why doesn't he pick up his cap?*

Suddenly, he toppled forward. As if pushed by a sharp gust. He didn't use his arms to break his

fall.

Something was wrong.

Ruby dropped the knife. She ran, crashing down on her knees beside him. But in the second between the knife falling and her knees touching the ground, he was gone. His ear pressed against the soil, staring into eternity, peaceful.

She screamed.

“Daddy! Daddy! Wake up!”

She’d heaved him over onto his back. Graspd his shoulders, leaned close. Shook him hard. “Daddy, Daddy, wake up!” The left sleeve of his jacket was caked in mud. The smell of it filled her nostrils. Tears fell from her face onto his. She gripped him more tightly through the rough tweed. But it was useless. He was dead. Father no more. Her protector: gone.

“Oh God! Oh dear God, bring him back! Please bring him back!” The words breaking from her throat got lost on the wind, carried away over the bleak hills and dales of Oaktree Farm.

A raven alighted beside her, transfixed.

But too late. Too late. God had already shut the book on Vincent Clare’s life.

“You’re not crying again, are you?” Her mother’s voice. A knife tearing into the sacredness of Ruby’s memories. “’Cos if you are, I’ll—”

“I wasn’t, Mammy. I think I have a cold coming on.” Ruby brought a hankie to her nose and feigned a sneeze.

“I was going to say: May and June are coming home this weekend. May rang this morning when you were out.”

May and June: the twins. Five years younger than Ruby.

May born one minute to midnight on May 31. Three minutes later, on June 1: her sister. The pair of them away in Belfast, working for Boots department store on Royal Avenue. May in the pharmacy department, doling out drugs. June on the Rimmel counter, doling out cosmetics. Yes, away in the city, but not far enough away for Ruby’s liking. The weekends they came home were torture.

She hated the pair of them, and flinched as she thought of them now. Petite, rail-thin, and snooty in their stretch-stirrup pants and pointy high heels, clapping in off a late bus, clutching vanity cases and buckling the air with their censure.

“I hope our beds are made up fresh, Ruby.” May marching in first and up the stairs.

“Yes, I hope they are, Ruby.” June, echoing behind her, forever in her shadow: indebted to her sister for having braved it out of the birth canal first. “We know the smell of mildew, you know. Heads bent over the twin beds, sniffing pillows. “Mrs. Hipple is very thorough. Changes our bedding twice a week. Doesn’t she, May?”

Mrs. Hipple, their landlady on the Antrim Road, was held up as a paragon of good housekeeping.

“Yes indeed, June. City people know about cleanliness.”

“I washed the sheets this morning.” Ruby, breathless from the stair climb, filling the doorway. “They’ve been drying on the hedge since morning.”

“Hmm . . . if you say so.” May, holding fast to her disappointed face. “God, have you put on even more weight?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Well, she hasn’t got any thinner, that’s for sure.” June chipping in, always siding with her twin, but never with Ruby.

“So you’ll have to change their beds,” Martha was saying now, eyeing her daughter, knowing the request would upset her. “And I’ll have another cup of that tea.”

“I changed them last weekend.” Ruby got up to refill the teapot. “And they only sleep in the

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