

Irish girls can weave

Dublin, Ireland. February, 1795

He had us in a line in his parlour, the master. It's the room he uses to entertain his fancy friends. Must be killing him to have the likes of us all in there at once. There's six of us. I've been working in this house for a couple of years. I've seen him make his way through the younger girls, grabbing them when he saw fit. Can't imagine how his wife doesn't know what he's up to.

He's looking for his gold watch and a silver pair of buckles. Says he knows one of us lowlife Dublin misfits took them. Franny took them. I watched her do it. She's been working for him for more than ten years in this house, and she's still poor. She sold them to buy medicine for her sick mammy. Franny's mammy must be ancient, cos we think Franny is really old.

He strides along the line of us girls, glaring. I'm not scared of him. I didn't take his stuff, but I wish I had. He stops in front of me, standing so close to my face I can smell his rancid breath. Smells like the rotten meat the cook sometimes uses to make the stew for him. I stand straight and stare back at him. He doesn't like it.

'You stole them.'

The spittle from his rotten mouth sprays onto my face. I lift my hand and wipe it off. This makes him real mad. He yanks hold of my arm and pulls me out of the line. I catch a glimpse of Franny. Her eyes are pleading with me not to say it's her that's guilty.

'You took them, didn't you?' he yells.

This time he's closer to my face. Wants to prove a point, I guess. I wipe my face with the other hand. He moves his arm behind himself, brings it forward quick as, and slaps my face so hard I fall on the floor. Franny screams. I stay on the floor on my hands and knees. My head is spinning. He grabs my hair and drags me up to my feet. I don't make a sound. Not giving him the satisfaction.

'Lock her in the cellar,' he bellows at the bloke who dresses him and cleans up after him. 'I'll send someone for the constable.'

'Elizabeth Bartlett,' the judge says to me. 'You are hereby found guilty of the theft of a gold watch and a silver pair of buckles out of the house of James Dogherty. You will be transported for seven years.'

The cell is freezing. I think it's warmer on the Dublin streets than in here. The other women in the cell are sitting close to each other to keep warm. One of them

uses her finger to signal I should join them. Not much choice. I either sit near them, or freeze to death. Maybe I should freeze to death. Might be easier in the long run.

Franny sent her mam to the prison with me stuff. I'm surprised her mam didn't run off with it. Seems she got better with the medicine. Franny's mam hands over my woollen overcoat. I've had it since I was twelve, when I left home to work in big houses. The coat is too small but I'll be able to put my arms in and cover myself with it. She gives me a pair of boots I haven't seen before. Says they are Franny's and Franny wants me to have them.

I've been in this cell, in this Kilmainham Gaol, for months. We can hear the birds singing outside, so I figure it must be getting nearer springtime. No one has been to see me since Franny's mam. My own mam hasn't come, neither has Franny. They have their own troubles and don't want to be burdened with mine. Some girls have died. One of them was left in the cell for three days before they took her body away. We took it in turns at night to keep the rats from eating her. She looked real young, much younger than me.

It's called the *Marquis Cornwallis*, the ship they are putting us on. They've made us take a bath in a barrel, they've cut our hair back to nothing and put us in clothes that don't fit. But the clothes are clean, and I don't stink anymore. The whispers around the ship are that we're going to New South Wales. I never heard of it. They say it's going to take months to get there.

The guards feel us up while they're pushing us into our cells. The women who complain get a fist to the back of the head. I don't complain. I'm used to it. In the places I worked at in Dublin the masters of the house did the same to us girls. Same as slaves we were.

The cell on this ship is better than the prison cell in Kilmainham. At least we have a bunk each, so we are off the floor. Rats can climb, but it'll be easier to whack them off.

They tell us not to jump into bed with any sailors or guards, or members of the New South Wales Corp. Looking around at them while they gawk at us, I don't see myself rushing into their arms.

We've been sailing for about ten days, and some of the girls start slinking away at night and sneaking back before the sun comes up. I grabbed Shirley by the arm one night when she tiptoed past my bunk. She didn't yell out but bit my hand. I didn't let go.

‘What do ye want?’ she snarled at me.

‘Where you going?’

She says she’s not telling me. She says that where’s she’s going, they don’t want no thieves. I twist my hand on her arm so that her skin burns. She’s quite chatty after that. Seems she and some of the other girls are giving the privates of the New South Wales Corp their attention, and in return they’re getting better and more food. I jump down off my bunk and tell her I’m going with her. My stomach’s been grumbling for months.

He is all right, the private. His name is William; he is kind to me. Says his mam was from Dublin and he misses her voice. Liked to listen to me talking. He’s not rough in the bed like the masters of the houses always were. And after, he always takes me back to the cell, so I won’t get bothered by one of the disgusting guards. He says he’s made it clear to them that I belong to him. I’m not happy about belonging to him. But I belong to the King and he’s sending me to the other side of the world, so I figure it don’t matter much.

When I tell William I’m with child he shrugs his shoulders and says there’s nothing he can do about it. He says he’ll keep taking me to his bed, so I get proper food to eat while the baby grows inside me, but when we land in New South Wales, if I say he’s the father, he’ll deny it and I’ll be flogged.

My belly is swelling and when we are herded off the *Marquis Cornwallis* at Sydney Cove I try my best to keep my dress in place to hide the growing infant. William catches my eye, looks for a moment, then turns away. I know I’m not the only one with child, to a member of the New South Wales Corp. We all try to hide what desperation for a good feed has done to us.

There’s seventy Irish girls on the *Marquis Cornwallis*, and we stand before the commandant, or whatever high and mighty title he gives himself, cooking in the sun like a pot of soup on the fire. A corporal from the New South Wales Corp wanders around looking us up and down. I’m one of the eight he tells to move to the side. My legs have trouble taking me where he says I have to go; they’re expecting the ground to move like the sea.

Herding us like sheep away from the others, he tells us we’ll be in Sydney Cove a couple of days and then we’re being shipped off to Norfolk Island. That might as well be the moon as far as we know. He tells us cos we’re Irish, we’ll know how to weave the flax that grows on the Island, into cloth to make sails. We look at

each other and raise our eyebrows. I don't know how to weave, and I'm pretty sure the girls standing near me don't either. But I'm not saying anything. I'm a slave, I have no rights. We all stay quiet.

Norfolk Island 1796

I've not seen anything this beautiful in my life. My baby will be born in paradise. I expect to see leprechauns or elves or faeries peeking from behind those magnificent trees. Me and two other girls put our heads back and take in the sky. It's bluer than I've ever seen. Bluer than the sky over the ocean on our journey. There are no clouds. The air is fresh, and tastes like the quince jam the cook used to let us have in the master's kitchen. I never thought air could have a taste, but this air does.

The men in the New South Wales Corp on this island don't push us, they wait while we walk behind, taking in the beauty. We're put in cabins. Not cells. There's four of us to a cabin. It's hot, but not suffocating like Sydney. There's a breeze coming through the windows. We each have our own bed, and there's a fire and a table with four chairs. There's some food on the table, and they tell us to cook it and look after ourselves. We share the cooking and sit down, the four of us, to eat like civilised women. At a table. We even have forks and spoons.

'They haven't given us knives,' I laugh. 'Wonder why they don't trust us with knives?'

We have a chuckle about that and tell each other our names and the stories of how we ended up on Norfolk Island.

After the best night's sleep I've had in years, there's a banging on the door and a bellowing voice tells us to get up and report to the middle of the settlement. We take longer than we should. We take time for a wash and to eat the rest of the bread, salted pork, and carrots. Carrots. Been a long time since I'd had a fresh carrot. The next banging on the door sees it swing wide and a red-faced English soldier straddles the opening and orders us to get to the meeting.

They're assigning us to settlers. This is the first time since I took the blame for Franny, that something has scared me. I'm with child and I've got no idea what it means to be assigned to a settler. Does it mean I'll be the property of some old man who'll have his way with me and treat me as bad as the masters of the houses in Dublin? I'll jump off one of them cliffs that runs along the edge of this Norfolk Island before I'll do that again.

They tell four of us to get up on the back of a cart with our stuff. None of us has much in the way of stuff, so it doesn't take long for us to settle. There's a bullock pulling, and a horse tied to the back of the cart: it's walking with its head down,

staring at the ground its feet are treading on. Turning to the girl next to me, Mary, I say the horse looks broken and sad, like the way I'm feeling.

The driver hears me and turns to look at us. 'That horse is going to a settler who'll look after her. A settler who's earned his freedom. If you work hard you can earn your freedom too and have a good life. A couple of you look like you'll be convicts for a long while.'

Facing the front, he flicks the reins on the bullock's back.

The baby kicks me with a force that takes my breath away. 'I don't think the babe likes his mammy being a convict,' I say to Mary. 'I don't much like it either.'

Mary's the third one to get offloaded from the cart. I could see her hands shaking as she crumpled her dress to climb down with some dignity. A man and woman came out of a house that had solid walls, a roof, two chimneys and a front verandah. The man waves, the cart driver waves back, then gets down to greet the couple. I wanted to reach out and grab Mary and drag her back onto the cart, so we could huddle and be miserable together.

'Greetin's ta ye Thomas,' the man says to the driver. 'Ye've brought fer us a hard workin' lass 'ave ye?'

Mary moves her head to look at me, grinning. The man has a Dublin accent. He introduces himself to Mary as Patrick Connell. She curtsies like a good servant and tells him her name.

'Tis me wife, Elizabeth,' he says, 'she'll take ye and get ye sorted.'

Mary waves to me. Thomas flicks the reins on the bullock's back, and we trundle down the track to my place of servitude.

'It's your turn now,' the driver Thomas says as he pulls the bullock to a stop. 'You got lucky. You got Mr Cullen.'

I don't know how a person can think someone like me is lucky. I'm with child, I'm a slave on an island no one else in the world knows anything about, and I'm about to be handed over to a new master. For seven years.

A tall, strong looking older man marches out of a handsome house and makes his way to the cart. He shakes Thomas's hand and calls to a man working in the stable to untie the old horse and look after her. Then as if an afterthought, he turns to me. Taking off his hat, he gives a little bow and says his name is James Bryan Cullen and I'm welcome on his farm in Queenborough Path, Norfolk Island. I tell him my name's Elizabeth Bartlett and I'm pleased to meet him. I don't think he believes me. I don't believe me either.

‘Go on into the house, Miss Bartlett. Have a wash and change your clothes if you want. There are women’s clothes in a cupboard in the bedroom at the end of the hall. That’s your room. You should find something that fits.’

My feet won’t move. My brain is telling them to go, one in front of the other, but they’re not listening. This man’s being nice, talking to me like I’m a person. There’s got to be a catch.

‘Is everything all right?’ he asks.

I nod that it is, but my feet still won’t move. I start shaking. Can’t stop. Any minute he’s going to slap me across the back of my head.

‘It’s all right, Miss Bartlett,’ he says to me so quiet I can hardly hear him. ‘I’m not going to hurt you. You do a good day’s work, and we’ll get along just fine. We’ll talk about your duties when you’re cleaned up, fed and had a good night’s sleep. Off you go.’ He walks off, leaving me to make my feet move.

Taking a deep breath I got my feet to obey my brain and walk towards the house. The door was open. I stepped inside and wrapped my arms around myself, it felt like the house was giving me a hug. It smelled like old leather and pine needles. For the first time since Franny’s eyes begged me to take the blame for her stealing, the tears run down my face. I don’t wipe them away.

The house has a kitchen and a parlour and two bedrooms. Not as grand as the house I worked at in Dublin, but it’s big, well made, and comfortable. I find the room Mr Cullen said would be mine. It has a sideboard with a wash bowl, a new piece of soap and a jug of fresh water. There’s a towel folded real nice like and put over the side of the wash bowl. One wall has a cupboard and a window that looks over the greenest grass that reminds me of the farms around Dublin. A big, soft looking bed is against the wall on the other side. The bed has two pillows, and a quilt that looks like the sunrise and sunset have been trapped in its fabric. I use the new bar of soap to wash my face, hands and arms in the water and dry myself with the clean towel.

Patting my belly, I tell the infant inside that I feel pretty sure we are finally home.