

The Kissing Post

I am bone-achingly old, too old to be outside today, but winter is a familiar adversary and so my scarf is tied tightly, my hat pulled low and my sheepskin mittens are providing the warmth needed against the bitter, mean wind. In spite of the temperature a Sunday flea market cannot be ignored. I will probably have the place to myself, only the brave or foolish would venture out.

And it is deserted, no-one has chosen to be outdoors on this spiteful day so I move from stall to stall, searching. I look about and realise that I appear to be the only living soul in the entire, abandoned place. The wares of the stall-holders are set up but there are no vendors to barter with. I am not a thief, nor do I intend to become one, I will merely leave the money on the table for any item that intrigues me. It doesn't occur to me to question why I am alone, I just continue on, a solitary visitor.

I buy two curios, both will make me a profit and will bring those that seek them to me. I find another, I remove a mitten and touch it gently. The item is important, I feel it, though I don't know why. It is an old oak post or rather, a small section of a much larger pillar. Measuring the length of my arm, it is flaking into splintered shards at its base but the top has been rubbed smooth from the oil of a thousand fingers. A blast of biting wind coaxes me and I place a twenty on the table.

Walking home, the empty streets are a vacuum. It is almost dark, perhaps people are forsaking this day for warm fires - yet it begins to worry me. As I walk, I reflect - the market, the streets, devoid of people. I am without family, without friends, the contact I get from the markets reminds me that I am not entirely alone. Why then, did its emptiness not concern me at the time? It was as though I was entranced.

I am glad to finally reach my shop where I hurry inside, bolt the door and place the post on the counter.

My shop of curiosities has a certain, gothic clientele. There is dark enchantment within, I know it, and the people who come know it. There is always a story to the pieces I sell and I am used to those things that others may find disconcerting and that is why I am unsettled.

I switch on a lamp, ignite the gas heater and take a closer look.

'I will see you sooner than you can say the Rosary,' Carrick says gently as he hugs his wife, his love. 'I will send your passage to the priest.'

Bronagh embraces him. Their life is bleak, without him it will be worse. He is unlike any of the village men, her seven brothers are not like him, her own da, whom she adored, did not care for her mammy the way he cares for her, loves her.

'When?'

'As soon as I earn the money for your ticket.' He kisses her. She takes his hand and despite the newness of their marriage, leads him to their small bed. Afterwards, they lie, their limbs woven, pale skin, transparent as mantilla lace.

Carrick twists her auburn hair. 'I can earn more money in a week there than ten here.'

Bronagh takes in his green eyes, his freckles. Their children will look like sprites, she thinks.

He dresses again, puts on the woollen coat the priest has given him. He has four pennies in his pocket and the ticket for the boat journey to New York.

'It will do you no good to come to the port. Remember, no hungry bellies in our new life. I love you, Bronagh,' he says. As he goes through the door he stops, 'I'll meet you at the kissing post.' And he is gone in a blast of raw September wind.

Bronagh stays in their bed. The hunger which began with the potato blight fifty years ago maintains its legacy, it killed her mammy when Bronagh was wee and it took her da six years ago. Her brothers left for a life elsewhere. Patrick, the eldest, sailed to America. Carrick decided that it would be better there for them too. So he worked on the Romilly estate, labouring on the hard, spoilt soil, every day for a year to earn the ticket money. It's why she will be strong.

Time passes slowly. She waits.

Late summer is wet. The priest is running along the muddy path outside her tiny cottage. He bursts in and Bronagh jumps, sending the woollen stockings she is mending into the air.

'Bronagh, it's here!' The priest calls. Bronagh goes to him, bare feet on a freezing, flagstone floor.

Her ticket. And a letter. Father Andrew taught her to read, when he is gone she reads the letter, touches the paper where Carrick's hand has been.

The journey is long.

Four weeks of motion. The sea rolls, Bronagh rolls with it. The boat is noisy, cramped with people. She feels claustrophobic, nauseous. She keeps to herself. And then there is an outbreak of coughing, of fever. A child dies, then another and soon more than eighty men, women and children are dead. Their bodies are dropped into the ocean with only the words of a priest, blown away by the wind.

When she cannot stay incarcerated any longer, word comes that they are almost there. Steerage are allowed onto the top decks. Outside she inhales deeply, tastes the salt - can almost taste New York.

Bronagh feels as tattered as her old dress, she is dirty, unkempt. Her spare dress is wrapped in brown paper. Going below deck, she searches for the second class cabins. She finds one empty with a sink, wash cloths and a towel. She strips and washes, closes her eyes at the niceness. Wearing her better dress she hurries onto the deck and for the first time in eleven months she smiles.

She will meet him at the kissing post.

A frantic hammering on the door startles me. I try to peer through the glass but can see only my ancient and decrepit reflection.

'Let me in, I beg you...!'

I hesitate but I cannot ignore the plea. I feel vulnerable, yet for the second time today I am entranced. I open the door and from the night a man appears, he steps inside, looks at me, looks through me.

'You have it,' he states, nodding towards the counter. Then he considers me and I recognise anguish in his face.

'Would it be alright if I stay?' he asks. His brogue is strong.

'Yes,' I say, though I am uncertain why.

I collect a stool for him from the back room. I sit behind the counter and we appear as two players across a chess board.

'Where did you find it?'

'In the market, today.'

'I don't know,' I say.

And then he smiles at something behind me and his sorrow lifts and his green eyes, the freckles across his face, become apparent. He is a beautiful, young man.

Ice seeps into my bloodstream and there is a woman standing at my shoulder, I am so shocked that I get up and stumble backwards. She glances at me but moves swiftly around the counter and is embraced, kissed by the man so intensely that I am embarrassed to watch such intimacy.

I scurry into the back room, frightened to my core. I know of the mysteries within my shop but I have never been unnerved by anything, until now. The door is thrown open and I quake like a mouse. Darkness. I step back into my shop, anxious and afraid. The man and woman are watching me. Though the space is unlit, my eyesight poor, I can see them clearly. The woman holds out her hand.

'Come now, it is time.'

I shake my head. 'You can leave. Take the item, it's yours.' I want them to go.

'But we came for you,' the man says and my fear holds me rigid, roots me to the ground.

'You do not know us?' her question has sadness in its tone and I shake my head again because I cannot speak.

'Then I will tell you,' she says.

Processing immigrants takes time. Steerage passengers go to Ellis Island, thousands arriving daily, from Ireland, Italy, Poland, from every country. They are exhausted and drained by the life they have left behind.

If there has been an epidemic on board the ships, the coffin ships, those that have survived are quarantined for days, weeks, compounding their misery, until they are clear of contamination.

Carrick waits for four, five, six days. He stands at the place where family re-unions are taking place around him, where he will meet Bronagh - the kissing post.

On day seven he seeks help at the barge office.

'Bronagh Daley,' he says to the man.

The man searches a thick ledger. 'Not here,' he says with a broad Brooklyn accent.

'She took passage on the Wilmington,' Carrick says, hearing his own desperation.

The man looks up sharply. 'The Wilmington?'

Carrick nods, holds onto his breath.

The man selects another ledger.

'Bronagh Daley.'

Carrick breathes out.

'...died on board. Typhus. Tenth of September. Buried at sea, two days before arrival. I'm sorry.'

And Carrick's world ends. Bronagh, he came here only for her. She is dead because of him. How will he live without her?

For a time he does. He stumbles about the city, a man without a light in a dark alley, and though he finds some comfort from his countrymen, from those who came on earlier ships, he soon realises that people despise him and his thick mick accent, his religion. No Irish Need Apply.

Bronagh's brother, Patrick, moves to Canada but Carrick stays in case the man at Ellis Island had been wrong. His guilt grows and spores like mould in a damp room, it holds him under and he drowns in a city that does not want him. One glacial morning in January he is found dead in his bed by the priest at the mission, an empty bottle in his hand, perhaps a broken heart in his chest.

I am immobile.

The woman whispers. 'I boarded the Wilmington with a new bairn hidden beneath my dress.'

'What happened to you?' the man asks me.

I answer, stammering, 'I...I don't...know.... the orphanage, no-one knew, I...was left there....A bastard...I...was abandoned.'

'No. Not abandoned – lost,' they say together.

'I don't understand.'

'You were a secret, you had no ticket. Someone must have found you when I fell ill, took you to the orphanage. I'm sorry I didn't take better care of you,' she says. I would run if I could. Yet, everything that has happened today, was it leading me to this? And in spite of my dread I am surprised to feel – relief.

'Come with us, it will be better,' she says. She reaches out, her touch is cold. I feel a sting, like a bite from a nasty insect. I look down at my wrinkled hands, my creased, craggy skin, at the worn-out frame that has carried me for ninety five years and then I realise that it is no longer mine - that body is on the floor, wisps of white hair, green eyes open but unseeing.

I should be terrified but I am not because instead I am liberated but more surprisingly, I am happy. I am a child of five again and I marvel at my ease of movement.

'You look like a sprite,' my mother says holding my face in her hands.

We leave, my father, mother and me. I turn to look - the kissing post is gone.

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