

Mammy wakes me, saying I have to take the babby and go into the woods. She says, Wait out there til I call ye. She says it's time she's saying her prayers with Father Magan.

My nose leaks snot from the cold. I pull her old woolen wrap around me tighter. I stick my fist through the tear in the tarp near my head and mizzling wet slicks it even though Father Magan set the cart for the night under a big tree, saying it would keep us dry. My belly twists with hunger but I know he won't give us anything to eat until morning, so's there's no sense asking.

Hurry now, she hisses. Himself won't be kept waiting.

I tell her I know all my prayers and why can't I stay here and say them with Father Magan, too? She tells me they're special prayers. She says, Off with ye now. And don't go too far.

The babby fusses when I'm climbing with him out the back of the cart and Mammy tells me to take the wrap for him. A short way into the woods, I hold him against my chest as I squat and piss under a tree. I put Mammy's wrap over my head but it's threadbare in places so the spitting rain still gets in. At least the babby is warm. I hold him close though he fidgets and makes a rumbling noise when he coughs, and I can smell the stink coming off his nappy that droops like a feed sack. He starts the crying, so I put him down and hold onto his wrist while he dodders on his thin, birdy legs in the mud. He's only just started the walking. Last time we were in Kilnamona village back home, there was Missis Ó Ríordáin tutting to Mammy and saying,

Late for the wee one not to be walking. God love it's not the rickets, and him a cripple and burden to ye, a woman all on her own now.

The babby leans down and grabs at bits of moss. I have to stop him putting them in his mouth, which makes him fuss again. I tell him to whisht. I'm trying to listen so's I can learn these special prayers and not be woken up and sent off to be miserable anymore.

When Mammy was saying her prayers the night before with Father Magan, I left the babby asleep near Father Magan's mule in the cowshed with no roof we'd laid up by on the side of the road. I crept to the cart in the dark and listened, but I never heard any prayers coming from under the tarp, only sounds from Father Magan like he was disappointed by how bad Mammy was at the praying and her making this whine like a gammy dog over being the source of such disappointment. And I thought, if she can't be saying the prayers right, then shouldn't I be the one to be saying them and not put outside in the cold and the wet with the babby? I felt the temper on me then, what Da says I get from Mammy's Da, sent away to Van Diemen's Land for busting a landlord agent's nose, and was ready to start giving out The Lord's Prayer, singing it right up to them from beneath the cart, when the babby woke and set off a wail and I had to run back to the cowshed. When I got there, he'd fallen and had blood down one side of his face. I tried to make him quiet but he wouldn't stop the wailing. Then I heard Father Magan yelling something fierce about the noise and how he hadn't taken the trouble to rescue a woman on the side of the road so ungrateful and with two filthy children only to be subjected to such keening.

After Himself went off into the cowshed to pray alone, hurrying past me with that funny walk he has, all pained like someone's pinned his bollocks to his arse and his neck all sunk into his shoulders, the hunched old crow, Mammy gave me a beating with the mule's stick.

Have I not told you how far it is from Kilnamona to the army camp in Kildare? Are you wanting us to walk all that way? she said.

That made me right tick because it was sure Father Magan was more angry about her not saying the prayers right than the babby crying, and if he wouldn't take us the rest of the way to the army camp to collect the widow's pay, the fault wasn't on me. But I didn't give out because she started to cry. She climbed into the cart and curled herself up in the back, legs all folded beneath her like a sick calf as she suckled the babby. I sat beside her and patted her head, running my fingers down her hair that was stuck into separate hanks like strings of seaweed and thinned out since having this last babby.

I hear a cracking of twigs and then Father Magan is alongside me, pissing against the tree. I stand up to avoid the wet he's making. The babby's reaching a grasping hand up to him, so's I pull him aside. Mammy's calling me, but I don't move because Himself is holding his mickey and shaking it before he stuffs it back inside his trousers. I've seen mickeys on babbies and the one time on Séamus Mac Conmara when he waggled it at me and the Ó Hehir girls behind the schoolroom hedges, but this is the first one I've seen on a grown-up man. It's an ugly thing, pale and squirmy in a dark nest like some sick bird that's lost all its feathers.

Father Magan asks what age I am now.

Eleven, I says, though I know I won't be that until two months' time in June.

He asks am I a good girl.

I am, I says, and Himself says he'll be the judge of that.

He asks if I know where my Da is.

I says, He's in heaven.

He says, Your Da is far from heaven, girl. No Irishman who killed for The Famine Queen goes to heaven.

Parts of me go warm and cold and it's like there's a wad of nettle stuck in my throat and I don't dare swallow because I'm afraid I'll set off choking. Then I'm hearing Da in that place where I keep the thoughts of him, and him telling me to never take the lip from anyone and how the whole world wants to tell us we're not worth the dirt under our feet but to not believe it, and what is Father Magan doing but giving out lip to Da and saying he's not good enough for heaven. Then I'm thinking would I step on one of Father Magan's feet or would I kick him in the shin. I'm thinking which one would Jesus be more like to forgive? If I trounce his foot and he can't be making rounds to the sick and dying, that'd surely be an awful sin. But if it's his shin that gets swole up and he can't stand and deliver the Mass, then wouldn't that be the bigger sin? Before I can make up my mind which gets it—foot or shin—Mammy's hurrying toward me, pulling the front of her dress closed that has the wet on it from her teats needing the babby, and she says, Áine, come to me now and be done bothering the blessed Father.

When Mammy and me lie down together underneath the tarp in the cart and the babby breaks away from her teat and spits up milk when he coughs, I ask her if God won't let Da into heaven because he killed men in The Famine Queen's war.

She says, God won't let Da into heaven because he died and left us in hell.

Then she's pushing the babby and herself up against me, and my back's all stuck against the cart's side wall and I'm feeling like I can barely breathe, all because Himself's climbed in alongside her and is giving out about how there's barely enough room left for a mouse let alone a charitable man of God. But soon enough he's doing the snoring, and then I hear Mammy doing

her quiet crying. So's I reach for her hand, and she's gripping mine tight, like she'll fall away to somewhere if I don't keep hold of her.