

Impetuous as always, I, Katie Shaughnessy, fifteen years old, bare of foot and bag in hand, was the first to scramble up the rope ladder to the deck of the Brig St. John, my sister, Anna, close behind. Steep steps led down to darkness. A press of bodies. Eyes struggling to adjust. Berths rose in tiers, one atop the other.

“Quick,” I said, “grab two next each other.”

“On top, young ladies,” a woman’s voice cried. “Let them that’s young enough to scamper, scamper.” We scampered. Lifesavers for pillows. No shelves or presses. I pulled two plates, cups, forks, spoons from the leather bag, shoved them into a corner.

A man hoisted himself into the berth next to Anna. “Get down, you bowsie,” the same voice shouted. “Park yourself aside the other men.”

A shaft of sunlight lit up the figure of a well-muscled woman wearing the sort of red cloak I hankered for—good strong broadcloth bought in the shops.

“Thank you, missis,” I said.

“No carrying-on on my watch. Women with women. Remember.”

“Yes, ma’am. A lovely cloak you’re having there.”

“And will keep having.” She folded back the hood to show a sewn-in label, thrust it in my face. “Bridie Coyle. That’s my name, this my cloak.”

“Who wants your old—”

“Katie.” Anna’s hand was gentle on my arm. “Come help with the blankets.” Her voice grew softer. “Best we stay peaceful with everyone. It’s a long trip.”

“Thinks I’m after her cloak, the old hag.” But I succumbed, helped Anna unfurl the wool blankets we were told to bring. The selkie book, Miss Edgeworth’s gift, was in the bag under our clothes. Malachy’s gift was under my waistband. A shawl pulled over

my loose dress was enough to keep it hidden, though a woman on the quay did look at me askance, then away, out of kindness or more likely a wish not to get involved.

We returned to the deck, eager to see what was to be seen. The brig lay at anchor, becalmed in Galway Harbor. A misty day, the scent of brine strong in the air. Nothing to see but gray sky blurring into gray sea. We navigated over coils of rope to the taffrail. Passengers' family and friends huddled on the quay waiting to wave goodbye.

The first mate stuck his head down the hatch and summoned everyone on deck. A raggedy crowd of over a hundred, mostly women, assembled. Mothers held babies. Small children clutched their mothers' skirts. The mate ordered us to line up in front of Captain Oliver, count off, and give our names, which he wrote on a piece of paper.

A long boring process. Children broke from their mothers to run and play. The baby in my belly kicked. For sure the little thing wished it could run too. I clasped my belly to soothe it. A hand touched my shoulder. Twas Bridie Coyle in her red cloak. She cast her eyes on my belly. "Is someone in Boston waiting for you, lass?"

Prying, was she? "Me mam is there."

"Ara. That's good." A companionable squeeze to my shoulder. "You'll need a strong hand to help you through the troubles to come."

"My troubles are behind me." And true it was. They slipped away as I spoke—scornful neighbors, harsh Auntie Garity, Father McCourt's punishing plans. All behind me. A month to cross the Atlantic to Mam in America, the land, twas said, of the free.

Captain Oliver waved to the first mate. "That's enough."

The first mate walked away, shouting "Go back to your berths" to the crowd.

"He didn't count us or write our names," Anna said.

“Tis likely they took on more passengers than is legal or safe,” Bridie said. She shook her head. “So the owner makes more money. Tis the way of greed.”

A sudden gust of wind lashed my hair and set Bridie’s cloak flapping. A cry rang out. “All hands! Up anchor, ahoy!” Sailors clambered up the rigging to loosen sails and brace yards. Sails rose and billowed as they caught the wind. The creaking windlass hoisted the anchor. Passengers crowded the stern, weeping and waving to family and friends. Family and friends wept and waved back. With none to weep or wave to, I ran to the bow and pressed against the prow, gripping the bulwark. I held back my flyaway hair with my hand and let sea spray splash my face. Troubles behind, adventure ahead for Katie Shaughnessy, hero of every book I’d ever read, a hero now for true.

The sailing was better than expected. We stopped at Lettermullen up the coast to pick up passengers, whose names were no more written down than ours were. The fall weather was mild, then chilly. Sunny on deck, dark below. Unwashed bodies, vomit buckets, overcooked food. Weans crying and running about. Men smoking and grumbling. Women shouting and smacking the weans. Bridie—more bluster than bite—took a shine to Anna and me, shared extra food with us.

I found a sheltered spot on deck where I could curl up and watch the sailors in their flaring, hip-hugging, white duck pants climb the rigging, quick and busy as a flock of sparrows. I envied them all, especially the tar with a spyglass who climbed into the crow’s nest to survey the sea. On warm evenings, sailors gathered on deck to play pipes and fiddles and sing. I lay among the coiled ropes, one hand on my belly, and listened as I gazed at the stars. Moonlight cast shadows through the rigging’s knotted ropes. An

inexplicable tangle, like the tangle of memories, thoughts, dreams, wishes, regrets inside my mind. Like the rigging, a puzzle impossible to sort. The sailors saw the pattern. As I lay staring up into the knotted ropes, I tried to see it too.

God saw all, knew all, did all He did for a reason, the priests said, but even at fifteen, I had doubts. Was it God or nature gave Malachy McCormack, coachman's lad at the Big House, bewitching blue eyes rimmed in lashes black as coal? God or my own frail nature that spurred me to mount to the stable loft for afternoons so sun-drenched and glorious I never felt the raw scrape of hay on my bare backside until I'd started home? Surely nature not God planted the seed in my belly that I'd tried so to ignore.

And was it God or nature that rotted the potatoes in the ground? Not that it was the Hunger that pressed Mam to quit Ireland. As cook at the Big House, she ferried enough food to her own kitchen to keep us fed. It was my stepfather, urged by God or his own roving nature, who scooped the household money from the tea canister and took himself off. He promised to send for us once he was settled in America. When he didn't, Mam dug out her savings from behind a brick, tucked her latest baby in her shawl and, leaving Anna and me in Auntie Garity's charge, set off to find him. If Mam cared more for her rascalion husband than her daughters, why shouldn't I run off to the stables with Malachy whenever I got the chance?

No more schooling once Mam left, Auntie saw to that. The narrow schoolhouse gates were locked to me. I'd been six when they first opened, just the right age. Two big rooms—one up, one down. Mam gladly paid a penny a day to have Miss Honora Edgeworth teach me to read. Two pennies when I reached the higher levels. Too much

for Auntie Garity, although Mam left money for our school fees. “What do you need with schooling?” she said. “You’re old enough to work.”

So I became a skivvy in Edgeworth House, dusting, mopping, washing dishes, emptying slops, arriving early each morning to clear ashes from fireplaces and relight fires. Arriving earlier than required, early enough to spend hours in the library, a treasure house of books, reading to my heart’s content. That was the glory of it.

I see her now, that girl who was myself, cross-legged on the floor among the shelves, a book spread across my lap. Dustpan, brush, polishing cloth discarded on the hearth. Skirt carelessly hitched up, revealing a scab across a freckled knee, dirty bare feet. Light from a banked fire glints off an unruly mane of red-gold hair badly in need of a wash. I hold it back from my face with one hand, raggedy fingernails bitten to the quick, absorbed in a book. Reading as though my life depended on it, as indeed it did.

On our last night, land was spotted. Captain Oliver threw a party. Fiddles played. Candles twinkled from the masts. Singing. Dancing. Me begging the sailors for sips of grog. No one heeded the clouds gathering near the horizon. Nor did I heed the growing strength of twinges I’d been feeling all week. Not until a giant hand gripped low on my back and squeezed. I leaned against a hatch, breathing hard. Within minutes, it came again, stronger. Since God, or nature, chose that moment for the clouds to burst, drenching the deck, no one noticed the water gushing from between my legs.

I ran below deck with the others. Anna helped me into the berth, shook her head.

“You drank too much grog.”

“It’s not the grog,” Bridie said. “Her time has come.”

Torrential rain fell all night. Winds howled like banshees. I thrashed and moaned. While other women huddled over rosaries, Bridie mopped my face. Anna held my hand. Around daylight—what daylight there was—the ship struck a rock and split open.

I split open too—or felt like I did. A baby girl slid into Bridie's hands. Bridie cut and tied the cord, wrapped the baby in the shawl, saw to the afterbirth. The baby gazed wide-eyed, as though startled to find herself squeezed from a cozy womb into such a perilous world. "A red mark's above her eye," I said.

"Kissed by an angel," Bridie said. "Will fade as she grows."

"Tis good luck, then?"

"For sure."

Water rushed into the cabin. "The ship's breaking up," Bridie shouted.

Screaming women grabbed their children and battled their way through the flood to the steps. Bridie handed the baby to Anna and pulled me up, draping the red cloak around my shoulders. "Not me," I said. "Cover the baby."

Bridie wrapped the baby in the cloak like a draper's parcel, handed her to Anna, said, "Stay close." One arm around me, elbowing women out of the way with the other, Bridie barreled toward the stairs, shouting, "Make room! We're coming through." Anna, face pinched with cold, followed with the leather bag.

Startled, those not yet drowning stepped away long enough for Bridie to hurtle me to the steps. Water rushing about our feet, we sloshed their way up, Anna right behind. Legs unsteady, we straddled the queasily plunging deck.

Timbers creaked. The ship was breaking up. Rain slammed down on frantic passengers crowding to the rail. Captain and crew lowered the jolly boat and climbed in.

Other men and a few women jumped in too. The boat wavered and rocked. “Room for one more,” the captain called, rain slashing his cheeks. “That’s it.”

“Quick,” Bridie shouted, holding off the hysterical women behind her.

Anna dumped clothes from the bag, put the baby inside, snapped the clasp, thrust the bag at me. “Take her. Jump.”

“I’m too weak,” I said. “You go. Save her.”

Anna looked helplessly from me to Bridie.

“Jump, darling,” Bridie said.

Clutching the precious bag, Anna jumped. Her feet hit the side of the boat. Two men pulled her and the bag in. Hands clasped, Bridie and I watched as the little boat wobbled, steadied, started to pull away. A man brushed past, grabbed the rail, vaulted over. The impact as he landed capsized the boat. Bodies tumbled out. The bag, torn from Anna’s grip, floated off on the next wave. Before I could cry out, the deck crumpled and I went down, clutching the bowsprit.