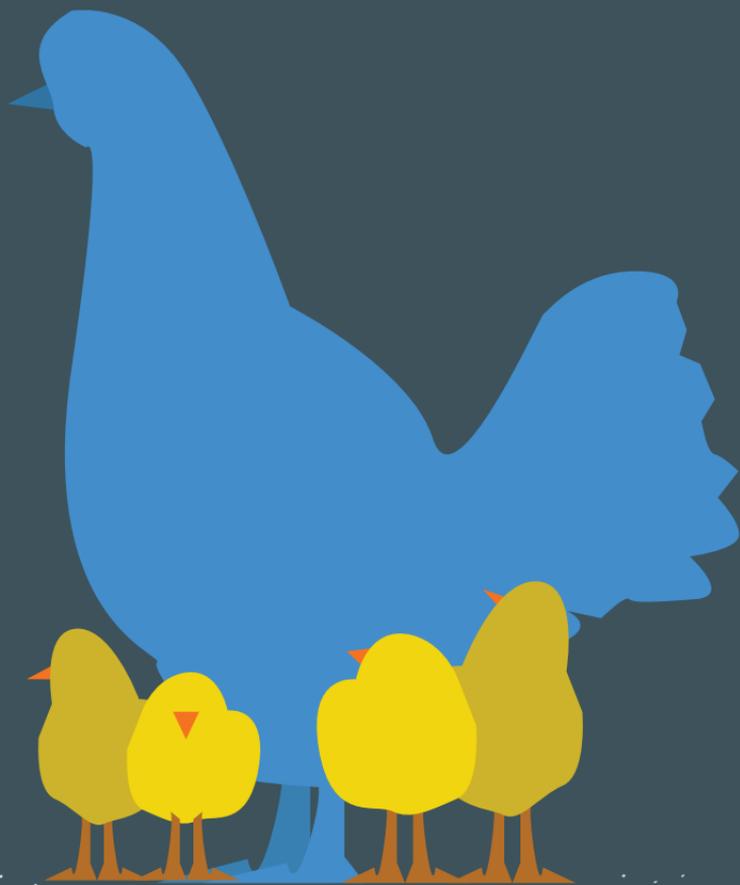
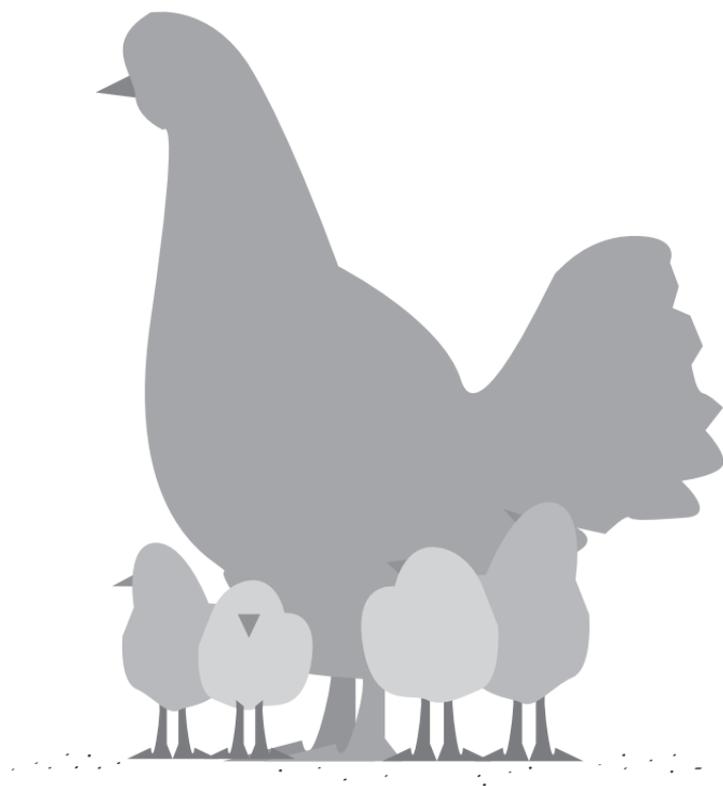


A NOVEL
BY NANCY-GAIL BURNS



Chickens & Hens

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To my granny,
Melina Ladouceur,
and my ma,
Leona Burns.

I'm forever grateful for the lessons taught
with love, strength and fairness.

Prologue

The day blows in with a force that strips me of the foolishness we all wear. My mission hurries me out the door. The station swarms with people. Ticket in hand, I hope I'm going the right way. I've never had a sense of direction, but of all days, this is the day to find one.

I tell myself to make the best of the journey, obligatory and unplanned as it is. The train's whistle shrieks as rows of railway cars line up. The engine's roar asserts that this big fellow waits for no one. I join the throng of people, leap aboard clumsily, bang my knee solidly, and pretend I didn't. I cart my grimace to my seat, lifting it high until it resembles a smile. Minutes later, the rhythmic click-clack of wheels on joints, like kneading hands, drive the day's stress away.

Simple pleasures . . . ah.

I tuck a pillow behind my head and peer out of the rectangular window, but the thick edging steals much of the view.

Pavement turns to gravel, and I welcome the countryside as one would a rare treat. Cornfields and pungent smells whisper that I'm nearing my destination. Wrinkled noses reveal that I'm the only one who appreciates the undercurrent of cow dung.

A mood of formality permeates the train as fine suits and elegant dresses surround me. Flinty stares accost my casual attire, and conformity thrusts excuses into my brain—if I'd foreseen the journey, I'd have done better, but I didn't, so there.

Judgments are despicable, and unfavorable ones carry a particularly rank odor. Oddly enough, the cloud of stink doesn't bother

me. After spending years blending into the milieu, always afraid to stand apart, I'm done hiding who I am. My thirties have delivered some wisdom. I'm Marnie O'Sullivan, and if you don't like what you see, walk away—I won't stop you.

Passing miles transport memories closer. Glasses clink as a steel pushcart lumbers down the aisle, and the sound brings back memories of my mother. Full glasses and rainbows were important to her.

My childhood was a happy one. Ma refused to let me see it as anything but. I swear she could take the most sullen child on Earth and force them to be happy, for her suggestions had a way of becoming the God's-honest truth, and who can ignore the God's-honest truth? She fed me hearty food and euphemisms, and when I grew, she shoved me from my safe haven and forced me take chances.

Her labour yielded rewards, but I repaid her by voicing complaints and hoarding compliments. It's now too late to rectify the situation. Death ends discussions. It doesn't give a darn about unspoken words. It barges in, not giving one time to prepare.

Our final exchange lodges in my brain. I could probably recite the conversation verbatim. My memory is a gift akin to the knick-knacks that clutter a house: trivial conversations reside in every crevice, leaving little room for matters of consequence. When final words are important solely because of their timing, it's never a good thing. They would have been meaningless had we spoken again, but we didn't, so heigh-ho, the derry-o, the cheese stands alone, and believe me, it's one piece of stinky cheese.

Why did I say such things? It could be because I enjoy being difficult. The rattle of a cage excites me. I take pride in my ability to exasperate anyone. Worthless traits, but they're mine, and I grasp them tight.

Dissatisfaction pokes at me. I foolishly waited for the ideal moment to divulge my feelings. Refusing to consider expiration dates, I never saw the logic of seizing a given moment and declaring it ideal. Death kills while birthing regrets. The guilt magnifies until I feel wretched and small, yet to suffer without results is senseless. Ma taught me that much.

"Where are you headed?" the woman beside me asks.

“Farley Falls,” I reply, expecting the bewildered look that follows. Although Farley Falls is a dot on any map, I see it as immense, for it encompasses everything dear in my life. Its smallness no longer embarrasses me. Everyone’s world is small, regardless of what they think. I turn away from the woman before she can ask where Furley, Fooley, or Falley Falls is. Her eager eyes tell me she’s the gabby sort. Today is not about idle chatter. It’s the day I must right a wrong.

Does death slam the window on life, or does it close it slowly, allowing words to drift into the parting consciousness? I want to believe it falls unhurriedly, and I’m going to. Why set myself up for failure?

Memories flash before my eyes. I take hold and wring every drop of life from them.

Chapter One

There are no drum rolls, no dark premonitions. The start of the day is ordinary.

“Breakfast!” Ma yells.

Daddy’s boots pound the back steps. “We’re going to have a lot of roses this year,” he says as he makes his way to the sink. “I tried to count the buds, but I had to give up. There’s too many to count.” Water splatters as he scrubs his hands. Ma comes up behind him. She wraps her arms around his waist and squeezes. “Bad boy, how many times have I told you not to wash your dirty hands where I do the dishes?”

“Can’t help it, Ell. Your food smells too good. It’ll take me forever to go upstairs and come back down.” He turns around and pulls her close. “Will you forgive me if I cover you with roses?” They smooch, and I look away.

Daddy sits down, and Ma brings him his plate. He immediately grabs a piece of bacon and stuffs it into his mouth. “Delicious as always, Ell.”

Ma pats his shoulder. They always touch each other. I pretend not to notice. Ma puts a plate in front of me. She returns to the stove and makes two more eggs. Daddy loves eggs, and she spoils him every weekend.

As soon as she sits down, Ma turns to me. “We should go shopping. I need material, and you can use a new pair of shoes.”

“Can I pick them myself?”

“Only if you choose wisely.” The screen door whines. She gets up and returns with the newspaper. She gives it to Daddy. He opens the paper and says, “You two run off.”

Ma’s eyes dart around the room. “I should tidy up first.”

“I’ll attend to the dirty dishes, just go. Don’t spend too much of my money,” he teases.

Ma kisses him goodbye. “I’ll only spend a few million.”

“All right then, have fun.”

We leave him sitting at the table, reading the paper.

We roam for two hours as we hunt for bargains. When we get home, Ma opens our front door. “Paddy!” she calls. She clutches a bag of humbugs, Daddy’s favorite treat. “Paddy!”

Daddy doesn’t answer. “Bet he’s back in the yard,” Ma says. I nod in agreement. He’s always in the yard, coaxing azaleas to bloom or forcing trumpet vines to exist in a cold climate. He doesn’t see the hours of labour spent in his garden as work. “That man has no concept of time,” Ma mutters.

We make our way to the back of the house. “I love this blue gingham. It’s crisp. I’m going to make new curtains for the kitchen and maybe even a tablecloth.” Ma touches the stiff fabric with satisfaction. “It’ll hang properly.”

I’m jumping around. “I can’t wait to show Daddy my new shoes.” I yank them from the box. They are so shiny, you can see your reflection in their black lustre. I stick my tongue out and gawk at the glossy tongue staring back at me.

“Don’t lick your shoe,” Mom says.

As if I would do something so stupid. I make another face, not aimed at the shoe. Oblivious of my annoyance, Ma chatters about her curtains.

“They will need a lace trim,” she says. “Do you think I should . . .”

“Should what?” I hate it when people don’t finish sentences. I look up.

Ma looks different. Her small features have collapsed like a rotten apple. The bag of sweets falls from her hand. I track her glance. It lands on my father. Sprawled on the kitchen floor, a horrible grimace twists his face to make it barely recognizable. His hands clutch his chest.

At that moment, I would give anything to transport him into his garden, where he can happily tend plants whose names I cannot pronounce.

“Ma, what’s wrong with Daddy?” I ask, already knowing the answer. My eyes dart to the dish rack. Plates line its rungs. The counters gleam without smears of butter or the crumbs that toast dumps. The clean kitchen mocks the last moments of my daddy’s life. I despise its neatness.

My words shatter Ma’s stupor. Reality springs forth. Her small hands push me from the room. “Go outside,” she orders, making no mention of my father’s crumpled body. Her arms hold no strength, but I leave the room nonetheless. I do not want to see my father’s dead body. I do not want to witness my mother’s pain.

I run up a flight of stairs and sit on the top step. Ma’s moans follow me. I cover my ears with my hands. She sounds like an animal caught in a trap. Moments later, the sounds of sirens mix with her baying until I can no longer tell them apart.

Neighbours venture over. I sit in solitude, but their voices carry. Emotions grow until there is barely enough room for me, never mind others. I have to be alone. I don’t want to hear pity-filled words, barren of solutions. I do not want to feel warm embraces as my father’s body turns cold. I run to the third floor to sit on the unlit steps. Once there, I look up. “I hate you,” I whisper to God. “I will hate you forever,” I promise as I call Him every foul name I’ve ever heard.

My mother abhors swear words. She sees them as pointless. I like them, because I recognize their purpose. They are filthy, ignorant, and worthless. Isn’t that exactly how the world sometimes appears?

I curse until my chest constricts and I can only wheeze. My hands tighten on my new patent-leather shoes as I struggle to breathe. They were so important, only minutes before. My hands open.

They fall and I relish the hollow sound they make as they plunge to the bottom.

This day is no longer about shiny new shoes. It is the day the Lord stole my daddy. I curse Him until I am confident I will never enter His kingdom.

A police car, a fire truck, and an ambulance pull up in front of our home. They've come for Daddy's body. Why does it take so many men to haul away an empty shell?

Daddy is gone, and now I will never have a father. Daddies are for little girls. Fathers are for teenagers and adults. Daddy's life is over. His skin will not wrinkle. His back will not bow. Our relationship ends in my childhood as his toe barely touches middle age.

The parade of vehicles leaves with sharp turns and squealing tires. Neighbours wander back to their homes. "Marnie!" Ma yells. I move toward her without conscious thought. Detached from my familiar surroundings, I am at the bottom of the stairs even though I don't remember taking a step. My new shoes lie on the floor. I pick them up. I don't look at them, because I no longer want to see my reflection.

Ma holds out her arms. "Marnie . . ."

I look at her, but I don't take a step toward her. I can only squeeze out one word. "No."

Her arms drop to her sides. "Do you know what happened?"

"Yes."

She makes her way to my bedroom to rifle through my closet. "We must find the appropriate clothes to wear," she declares. Her eyes fix on the shoes dangling from my hand. Bewildered lines tangle and then branch across her face. "They're barely out of the box. How can they be so beaten up?"

She grabs hold of them to examine the scratches. I swallow the smile threatening to reveal itself. I like the shoes. Scuffed and marred, they're just like me.

Time blurs. People mill about like ants. Everyone brings casseroles. As if you can eat.

Chapter Two

Late Saturday afternoon, Ma sets the bag on the small entrance table.

“What’s that?” I ask

“I bought Paddy a tie.”

“What colour?”

“Blue.”

She hurries to her bedroom and returns with Daddy’s only suit. A thin layer of dust coats the plastic cover. She wipes it with her hand. Particles fly in every direction. “I’ll be back within the hour.”

I don’t ask her where she’s going. I know where my father is.

Dust flits in the air and then settles.

The front door unlocks with a stiff click forty-five minutes later. She darts past me without saying a word. Drawers open and close, and cupboards bang in quick succession.

“What are you looking for?” I ask as I enter her bedroom. Every light is on, and she’s darting about seemingly without reason.

“Paddy’s beads.”

“Beads, what sort of beads?”

“His rosary beads,” she cries without turning around. Her back bends and her fists clench. “He must have his beads.” She checks her watch and moans. “It’s six o’clock—the stores are closed. They

won't be open tomorrow." She spins around. "What are we going to do?" Deep lines scrunch her face, but her voice booms.

Suddenly the lines disappear. She seizes Daddy's top drawer and places it on the bed. Carefully folded handkerchiefs fan out, cuff links clink, and papers rustle.

The lines return to her face. "Where can they be? I was sure they were here." The crease between her eyes deepens as she searches nooks and yanks contents out of her way. Tears course down her face when she bends to rustle through a basket.

I leave the room and return a moment later. "Here, Ma," I say as I hand her my crystal beads.

"But they're yours."

"I want Daddy to have them."

"But we gave them to you for your First Communion. They're special."

"That's why I want him to have them."

Ma takes the beads from my hand and our grip lingers. "Thank you. I'm sure he'll appreciate them."

The beads are my final gift to him.

That night, before we go to bed, Ma calls to me. "Come join me on the porch. I poured each of us a glass of lemonade." I sit on the chair as she rocks back and forth on the wooden swing.

Her hand plays with the hem of her blouse. Whenever words leave her slowly, they are weighty. She looks off in the distance, and I wonder what she's hoping to see. "We can't control what life gives us, Marnie. If you could, we'd all be happy. Paddy's death was a shock, but we mustn't stand still and let our sorrow crush us. We have to move on."

The rocking stops as she plants her feet. Her eyes bore into my own. "Find strength in your grief. Move beyond your pain." She smiles, but it's a thin smile lacking gladness. "At least we have each other." The anemic smile returns. "See the glass as half full, not half empty."

I can't trust myself to speak, so I nod.

"Promise," she says.

Daddy's death and my reaction to it are cut from the same grim cloth. There are no choices. There is only one way to see it. I stand up. "I'm tired. I'm heading off to bed."

"Good night, sleep tight."

By sheer habit, I finish the silly saying for her. "Don't let the bedbugs bite."

The next day I enter the funeral home to visit my father. Wax-like, his stiff fingers clutch my beads. Light reflects off the crystals, and I'm glad he has them to hold and admire.

Ma's fingers brush the red roses resting at the foot of the coffin. "Paddy was right. Old-fashioned roses are the best." She inhales deeply to capture the heady, spicy scent. The roses are from Ma and me. Flowers in every color and design surround the coffin like sentinels. I hope that they will be with him always. He would like that.

The room holds my father's lifeless body and holds me captive, too. It teems with tears and condolences, repeated so often they become meaningless. The fourth day brings our final goodbye. The double doors swing open.

Suddenly, sitting with his dead body is not so bad. It's better than having nothing of him at all. Wants are of no consequence.

The sun shines through the windows. The open doors carry the heat inside. Ma grabs my hand. "Be strong, Marnie. Make your daddy proud. Walk straight and tall."

I can only nod. I don't know if I can be strong.

We follow the hearse as it heads to the church. The walk is a mere fifty yards. It feels like miles. Ma and I are dressed in black. Black dresses are not appropriate for little girls, so mine is homemade. Bags bunch under Ma's eyes. They testify that it took all night to sew the simple frock.

Ma stumbles as she walks on the uneven road. She holds my hand tight and pulls me along with her. She rights herself before she hits the pavement, righting me along with her.

We arrive at the church. Wide cement steps seem endless. Why is it so difficult to enter a church? The doors are large and inviting,

but only until you feel the weight of them. They shut on you if you don't push with all your might.

The cathedral is one of the oldest in town. Ceilings soar, plunging you into irrelevancy. Subdued lighting casts shadows on the holy paintings. They appear secretive and sinister. A priest I don't know clears his throat and begins the ceremony. I sit like the statues before me and hear droning but no words. Body heat circles, but I feel cold and alone.

We leave the church to drive to the cemetery. The full sun consumes the glow of headlights. Nonetheless, cars stop to let all of us pass. The procession must not be broken. When the limousine stops, Ma and I step out. She grabs my hand.

Green grass and mature oaks grace the land. Bird songs fill the air. "Paddy was born minutes from here," Ma says. "He always wanted to return to the country."

I'm sure he didn't want to return in a box, but I don't say it.

We gather around the coffin. A steel apparatus holds it above the hole. The priest prays. Someone thrusts a clump of soil into my hand. The coffin lowers. It bounces as it hits the ground. Handfuls of dirt pelt the coffin. As the earth leaves my fingers, I wonder why we are obliged to do such a dreadful thing.

The glass empties. I am not a big enough person not to envy children who have both parents. I resent having a loved one yanked away before I'm ready to let go.

I'm ten, my mother forty-one, when my father's massive coronary strikes. We've been a traditional family, so Daddy has been the sole breadwinner. Ma's theories on attitude can't change facts. Daddy's death has broken our hearts and our pocketbook. I see us as doomed—emptied—and I expect Ma feels the same.

Chapter Three

Monday arrives. I go to school. Eyes follow me as I enter the schoolyard. No one says a word. I'm now different—separate from the rest of them. Marjorie Burton explains why.

Marjorie has bristly carrot-red hair and freckles so irregularly shaped, it appears she was looking through a screen entry when a bucketful of poop pelted the door. Freckles drip from her face down her neck, chest, arms, torso, and legs. Furthermore, when a knife scrapes across a plate, it hits the same pitch as her voice. There's not much to like about Marjorie, and like her I don't.

"Marnie O'Sullivan is a bastard," she announces to the children who surround me yet don't acknowledge my presence.

My resistance is swift, even though I don't really know what I'm defending. "I am not," I declare with as much force as I can muster.

Marjorie takes a few steps and stands before me. Her piggy eyes look gleeful as she declares, "You are so, O'Sullivan. You're just too stupid to know it."

"I'm not stupid, and I'm not a bastard." I want my voice to ring strong and clear. Its trembling disappoints.

Her piggy snout smells weakness. A filthy laugh rings out. "You probably don't even know what a bastard is, you stupid mick."

She hurls the term as if it carries no weight. Normally, I wouldn't feel its power. I'd return the insult and think nothing of it. This day is different, though only because of what took place the day before.

Time consistently advances, but on certain days, it hops, pushes, grabs, stomps, and demands notice.

Eeny, meeny, miny, mo . . . I grew up in a time when you didn't catch a tiger by the toe. Yep, it was the n-word.

We weren't ashamed, because we didn't know any better. Everyone followed suit, and none of us looked at ourselves in a mirror. If we had, we would have seen the wrongness of certain words. The wrongness in us, actually. I was as blind as the rest of them until a day seized my attention and revealed that it is only tigers that are caught by their toe.

Ma and I live in the town's core, where a few blocks change the essence of an area. People move into neighbourhoods that mirror who they are. Districts are French, English, Italian, and Irish—working class, poor, or professional. I live on Elm Street. It's the Irish working-class neighborhood adjacent to the Italian working-class district.

The kids in the Italian neighbourhood eat different foods and speak two languages: English, like the rest of us, and the tongue of their native land, which sounds foreign and loud. Despite these differences, we are the same. We like to have fun. We like to play games, usually outside, since children fill the rafters, and mothers don't want them cluttering the house.

War is my favourite game. It guarantees excitement for lives that don't otherwise have any. We climb trees with bows and arrows made from the new growth of the elms. We chase each other through alleys or plan lines of offence and defence in tight groups. Sometimes it's rather elaborate. Sometimes it's dangerous. It's always energizing. You choose teams with one factor in mind—ethnicity. I don't see anything wrong with that, because that's how it's done. You never question how it's done.

Since the Italians are right beside us, we Irish always fight them. Sometimes we declare war, and sometimes they do. It usually begins

over an injustice suffered by one child. Both sides make sure there are plenty of injustices.

Ma knows nothing of the games I play. I never tell her, because having one child makes her overprotective. Hand-to-hand combat would not sit well with her. Bows and arrows land you in the middle of a discussion on poked-out eyes. Protecting the eyes is a major lecture since most kids have BB guns and firecrackers. Parents buy the artillery but worry about consequences. Blind acceptance rules the day, so some kids do lose eyes. Life holds many dangers, and that reasoning excuses everyone from doing anything about it.

Once the funeral is over, no one calls. "They probably don't know what to say," Ma explains. I nod in agreement but silently call them jerks. Saying something would have been better than saying nothing at all.

I spend Saturday with Ma, but on Sunday, I leave the house, telling her I'm going out to play. I have no intention of playing. I want to be by myself. I'm angry with my friends for not being there when I need them the most. I'm angry with myself for needing them. I'm just plain angry with everyone and everything.

I map out detours in case I run into anyone. I walk the familiar blocks, but something is wrong. Bolo bats don't smack. Hula hoops don't sway as ball bearings clank. It doesn't make sense. Church is out. The streets should swarm with children. But I enjoy the solitude and don't think it through. If I did, I would realize only one thing forces the neighborhood children to relinquish their turf—Kelly, the Saint Bernard, is on the loose!

Kelly O'Shea lives in a row house with a tiny backyard. A five-foot wooden fence surrounds the property, but it's broken in so many places, it no longer serves any purpose. Kelly often escapes. He's an Irish dog, but he doesn't care who he terrorizes: Italian, Irish, French—he has no preferred cuisine. All children are equal culinary dining pleasures.

I'm at the cusp of the two neighbourhoods when muted barks and muffled screams sound behind me. Kelly has taken control of my neighbourhood. Word must have spread, clearing the streets.

Some unfortunates walked into his path. My guess is choirboys. Since they leave church late, they didn't hear the word.

Given it's Sunday and Mr. O'Shea likes to spend Saturday night drinking, it will be some time before the streets are once again safe. I have no choice. I venture into the Italian neighbourhood. My neighbourhood has gone to the dog.

Sunday is a typical war day. I don't relish going into Little Italy, but visions of Kelly's big teeth and slobbering mouth make my decision relatively easy. I proceed into enemy lines, alone and defenceless.

The second my foot crosses the invisible border, Luigi Pucci, their lookout, squeals, "Grab her!" Ten children dash from hiding places. They dart from behind garbage cans, shoot out from under rotten porches, or bound from trees. A circle forms around me. It keeps getting smaller.

"Stupid dumb mick!" they shout.

"You stink!" Maria yells.

"So does your mother," another Maria declares.

"You're ugly," a third Maria says.

Let them say what they want. I'm not dog food, and that supersedes their taunts. "Kelly is on the loose and he's coming this way!" I shriek, trying to overpower their tirade.

"It's a trap," Fat Frank says. "Her friends are hiding, waiting to pounce. Don't fall for it. As soon as we let our guard down, they'll attack."

The other children aren't so sure. Eyes flit as they silently ask one another if I should be trusted.

Fat Frank will have none of it. "She's trying to fool us. She must pay for her treachery." I half listen to his threats as my eyes stare past him.

"She's a dirty rotten liar," he bellows with such force that the three spare tires around his waist bounce. A proficient orator, he requires little effort to convince his friends he speaks the truth.

The circle tightens until we are a solid mass. I stop thinking about Kelly when I see the rope in Fat Frank's hands. He snaps it to ensure my attention.

Frank is tall, but he's so fat, he looks short. He also has the largest breasts of anyone in school. Frank likes the public pool. When the lifeguard blows the whistle signalling it's open, Frank runs the fastest. As he gains momentum, his ponderous breasts sway back and forth to block his face with massive nipples that grow pinker in the scorching sun.

"Hey, Busty Barducci, quit smacking me with your big boobs," I once said after he pushed me to get into the pool first. The children around us snickered as they pinned the nickname to his weighty chest like a sewn-on badge. He's detested me ever since.

Fat Frank nods to two of his friends. Each grabs me by an arm. My mind conjures up all the tortures one can do with a rope. Fat Frank is dim witted, but when it comes to being vindictive, he's rather clever. He holds the rope in both hands. His lips twist in an odd grimace. His eyes shine black with excitement. The children grow quiet, relishing their anticipation.

His eyes focus on the lowest branch of the elm to our left and then swing back at me. He plans to hang me. Surely, the branch won't hold my weight. It will only trap me in terror for a few seconds. Fat Frank raises the rope over his head as the first growl fills the air.

The circle loosens as children disperse like jawbreakers breaking free from a paper sack. They scatter in every direction until there's only Fat Frank and me. Our glances lock. Before we exchange a word, he drops the rope and runs so fast, it's a wonder his boobs don't knock him out.

I would have laughed if Kelly weren't looking at me with his bloodshot eyes. I take cautious backward steps, praying my big feet won't cause me to stumble.

"Good boy, good boy," I murmur. My mind silently screams, "Get away from me, you rotten beast from hell!" Positive he has eaten the choirboys from Saint Peter's, I decide he'll rip me apart, not devour me. Ma will bury pieces of me rather than dog vomit.

Hard bricks scrape my hand as I inch myself into further trouble. I move to my left. Grasping fingers touch flaking wood. I explore the surface and feel a doorknob. Kelly looks at me stupidly. It's a ploy. I might open the door, but I know I'll never pass

through it. To earn his reputation, you have to be more than just mean. You have to be mean and smart. One sudden move, and he'll spring into action.

I close my eyes and begin to pray. "Our Father who art in heaven . . ." I'm at the part where I'm asking Him to forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us when a hand snatches me and yanks me through the doorway.

Chapter Four

My body hits the warmth of another. I look up. It's Johnny Scarpetta, the most handsome, the most perfect boy in school. He saved my life! I love him more than ever. I'm now sure he loves me, too. I always suspected he did, because whenever we were at war and he caught me, his punches never left bruises.

Emotions plug my throat, making it tight. I slump on the first step of a large stairway. We are in an old rooming house, the type that has twenty-five rooms that people rent and one bathroom that people fight over.

Kelly throws himself against the door. Johnny says, "Listen to his nails rip the wood."

"As long as I'm on this side of the door, I don't care." I kick at the door, and Kelly barks louder. "Thanks," I say a moment later without looking into his soul-grabbing eyes.

"It was nothing," Johnny replies modestly. His bang falls onto his forehead in a careless fashion reminiscent of movie stars.

Kelly jumps some more, growls deep in his throat, and barks angrily, but you can tell he's becoming bored with it. Johnny leaves the door to sit beside me on the step. "I was really sorry to hear about your father," he says as he studies the floor.

"Thanks," I mutter.

"I had an uncle that died," he offers.

I don't say anything. Sometimes there's really nothing to say. Johnny must feel the same, because he changes the subject. "You're

going to have a lot of homework. We started a new lesson in English and in Math.”

“Sister Mary Theresa makes us do too much,” I complain. “She’s so mean.”

“I hate her,” he admits. “She is mean. You’re lucky you’re a girl. She’s meaner to the boys.”

“True, but I still have to see her ugly puss everyday just like you.”

Johnny makes a face that looks a lot like Sister Mary Theresa’s mug. I laugh until I have to pee. I squirm for a few minutes. The pressure forces me to ask, “Can I use the bathroom?”

He hesitates before nodding. “I hope there’s not a line up,” he mutters as he leads me upstairs and then points to a closed door. A toilet flushes, but water doesn’t run. A skinny old man shuffles from the room, and a repulsive odour rushes out to greet me. If I wasn’t so desperate, I would have turned around. I hold my breath and march in.

When I’m finished, Johnny waits for me outside the door. “Hungry?” he asks before I have a chance to make my way downstairs.

“A bit,” I say, edging him away from the door. I don’t want him to think I stank the place up.

“Let’s ask my mom for something to eat,” he says, and I gladly move down the hallway and up another flight of stairs. When he opens the door to their room, I notice it isn’t one room. A large area serves as a kitchen and a living room. A small alcove leads to a balcony. A washing machine chugs as tins on a wooden shelf rattle. Tops of tomato plants peek over the balcony. Johnny sees my eyes roam. “We also have two bedrooms.”

“It’s nice,” I mutter.

“It’s not, but it’s clean. We had a nicer house in Italy.”

The balcony door opens and clatters shut. Mrs. Scarpetta’s face breaks into a welcoming smile. “You Johnny’s friend?”

“Yes,” I reply without thinking.

“You hungry?”

I nod shyly.

“Sit, sit,” she commands.

Her large frame flies into action. Within minutes, the battered table holds unfamiliar food that smells better than anything I've ever smelled before.

"That's gnocchi," Johnny says when his mother hands me a plate filled with odd-looking dough balls covered with spaghetti sauce. "My mom makes the best food," he mumbles as he covers it with parmesan cheese. He sprinkles some on mine and then attacks the food.

Tentatively, I pick up my fork. I spear one of the balls and chomp down. My taste buds break into song. It's soft and light, and the sauce isn't sweet like the stuff Ma pours onto our spaghetti.

I attack my plate with gusto. Manners assert themselves, and I try to slow down. My mouth falls open when Mrs. Scarpetta pours each of us a small glass of wine. I hesitate.

"Drink. You too pale."

She's a grownup. I can't argue. The wine is cold in the glass but hot in my belly. After a few sips, I like it.

"Kelly almost ate Marnie," Johnny says between mouthfuls.

"That dog no good. Someone should beat it with a stick."

"Someone should blow it up with a stick of dynamite," Johnny says.

False bravado fills the table as we talk about what should be done. It's just talk. Old age will end Kelly's tyranny.

Time passes. I leave the kitchen/living room and disembark to a foreign land as Mrs. Scarpetta tells me stories about Italy. Rows of sunflowers flourish, and ancient earth warms my toes.

I don't just look at her face. I study it. She has a large nose and wide lips, but she's so full of life, you can't take your eyes off her for a second. Her beauty comes from the inside and reworks her harsh features into something of splendour.

"Where are you family from?"

"Ireland."

"Irish, good people," she remarks. She sees my empty plate and laughs so hard, her belly jiggles. "No wonder you like the gnocchi."

I stare at her stupidly.

“Gnocchi is made with the potatoes,” she explains. “And the Irish like the potatoes.”

Surprised, I blurt, “I didn’t know a potato could taste so good.” My hand covers my mouth after the words escape. Thank God my mother isn’t around to hear me. My words would crush her heart.

Johnny’s mother continues to laugh. Her gold tooth catches the sun coming in from the balcony screen door. Her face is awash with kindness and generosity. I never knew you could wear such things on a face, but Mrs. Scarpetta does.

A clock bongs rudely. Disappointment falls on my lap. “I have to leave,” I explain. “My ma will worry.”

“Come back again,” Mrs. Scarpetta says as she rises and gives me a hug. The heat from her body warms me. Johnny walks me downstairs. When we get to the door, his right arm shoots out. “Stay there.”

He opens the door a crack before he goes outside and looks around. “It’s safe, come on,” he says when he returns to me. He grabs my hand and looks into my eyes. Is he going to kiss me? He moves in closer. I can smell the floral scent of his shampoo. His velvety lips brush my cheek. He whispers in my ear. “Run, there’s a war going on. Go through the bushes and you’ll be safe.”

Running with a belly full of gnocchi gives me cramps, but I run all the way home. When Ma asks me what I did all day, I say, “Nothing.”

The smell of beef stew drifts from the kitchen.

“Hungry?” Ma asks.

The stew doesn’t make my taste buds sing. I want more gnocchi. I also want to hear more of Mrs. Scarpetta’s stories. I feel as if I went to Italy. Our dining room looks dreary and small.

An odd sense of guilt forces me to eat heartily. This day holds many things, some I don’t even recognize. It’s one of the best days of my life. I vow never to call an Italian a wop. I never do, but I’m still at war most summer days, for it has nothing to do with prejudice. It’s just sheer fun.

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