

1959, Galway Races

Our house was packed with holidaymakers and racegoers headed for the afternoon's horse racing at Ballybrit about three miles outside town. The only rooms not occupied were my parents', my great aunt Bridget's, and my grandfather's. I was sleeping on a couch in the living room next to the kitchen, my brother John next door at our Uncle Bill's and Liam, the youngest, down the street at his friend Sean Cahill's.

"Where are we going to put Birdie?" my mother said.

"We'll have to put her in Bridgie's room," my father said, referring to his eighty-something-year-old aunt, Bridget Feerick, who lived upstairs.

My mother put the pan she'd been scrubbing on the draining board and looked at my father. "You don't mean. . .?"

"I do."

"She won't like that . . . and you'll have to be the one to tell her . . . because I'm not."

While my father was upstairs talking to Bridgie, my mother said to me, "Birdie is only staying a few days, and I can't see herself and Bridgie fitting in the one bed . . . and Birdie with such a big bottom."

Birdie and my mother had grown up together at the Weir, the fishing village at the east end of Galway Bay, where my grandfather had farmed, raised cattle, and owned oyster beds before he sold everything and came to live with us. She was a dressmaker, a second cousin of my mother's, and managed to scrape out a living doing alterations, sewing and trimming, and mending women's clothes. Unmarried, Birdie rented a small cottage at the end of Athenry Village, twenty miles from Galway, and had just called from a phone box on the street, saying she was catching the Dublin-to-Galway train that stopped in Athenry and would see us shortly.

"Ah, don't worry," I said to my mother. "Herself and Bridgie will probably get along fine."

Bridgie's room was at the west gable of our house. One window looked out on St. Mary's field and the other on our backyard. There was a crucifix on the wall, a statue of the Sacred Heart on the mantelpiece, a framed photograph of Pope Pius XII above her bed, a rocking chair by the fireplace, and several mousetraps lying on the floor. She kept to herself and never ate meals with us. I had to be careful when I brought food up to her on a tray from the kitchen and

not step on a mousetrap.

She might be sitting in the rocker, lying in bed reading her prayer book, or prodding the fire with a poker when I entered. Bridgie was a small woman with a heavily wrinkled face, dark angry eyes, and straight black hair, dyed. She always wore plain gray or black clothing, with a woolen shawl sometimes wrapped round her shoulders.

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Later that morning I bought the *Irish Press* at Cahill's grocery down on the corner and brought it up to my grandfather's room. He sat in a chair by the window, and after he spent a few minutes looking at the racing page he turned to me and said, "I fancy Highfield Lad in the Plate. Johnny Lehane's over from England to ride. Will you put a half-crown each way on it for me?"

He was shrewd at picking horses, and after he handed me the five shillings I told him that Birdie was due to arrive at any moment, and that she and Bridgie would be sharing a bed.

He threw back his head and laughed. "Oh," he said, "There'll be *rira agus ruaille buaille* in this house tonight."

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Birdie arrived just before eleven. I was mowing our lawn and saw her coming up the front steps. Soon as she spotted me, Birdie dropped her bag on the top step and headed toward me across the grass, a big jolly-looking woman with a roly-poly figure and apple-blossom cheeks. She was wearing a long, loose-fitting frock that swayed and shifted with the movement of her expansive hips.

"How are yeh, a *Mac-een*?" She embraced me, her eyes full of warmth and mischief. "I thought you'd be out in the cats farting cabin looking after those poor *crate-ures*."

Birdie and my mother were mad about cats. My whole family was—barring Bridgie, who mistreated them if she got the chance. My father preferred dogs. Every stray cat that came by we fed leftovers to in a shed out back—or, as Birdie called it, *the cats farting cabin*. Some became part of our family and wandered about the house, slept on our beds and on cushions and pillows, and often dislodged our dog, Caliban, a boxer who liked to sleep on a cushion in a corner of the kitchen next to the warm stove.

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My father and I cycled the back road out to Ballybrit Races and avoided all the cars and buses along the main road. At Castlegar, we propped our bicycles against the back of the parish church and

walked across green fields crisscrossed by gray stone walls that led up to the rear of the grandstand. The grass was flattened and trampled by all the other racegoers who had chosen this route. At one of the turnstile entrances to the racecourse, a white-coated attendant allowed us to pass without paying because years before my father had gotten him the job while he was still secretary of the Race Committee.

I used to wonder about my father. Any man who had gambled racetrack money and lost a good job and brought ruin on his family would never have come near Ballybrit. Didn't faze my father, though. He acted like he was still the secretary, didn't hesitate to enter the Stewards Room or Owners and Trainers Bar or to step inside the Parade Ring as the horses circled and jockeys prepared to mount.

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That afternoon I backed Highfield Lad in the Galway Plate for my grandfather and myself at 12-to-1 odds. Heading downhill into the dip—the *Moneen*—Highfield Lad raced alongside the leading group, outjumped them over the last two fences, drew clear in the straight, and won easily. Afterward, I collected our winnings from turf accountant Malachy Skelly at his stand in the betting ring and joined my father in the Owners and Trainers Bar beneath the grandstand.

“How did you manage that?” he asked me, and when I told him my grandfather had picked Highfield Lad he said, “Ah, that auld bastard is as cute as twenty dogs' mickeys when it comes to picking winners.”

Then, with plenty of whiskey in him, he asked me to lend him ten shillings. “I'll have it back for yeh,” he said quietly, leaning into my ear, “after the next race.”

That was the last I saw of it.

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My mother didn't laugh much, but with Birdie at our house the air rippled with gaiety and high spirits. I remember that evening they were listening to the radio when I got home. Laughing and singing along to the song playing: *She wears red feathers and a hooly-hooly skirt. . . . A rose in her hair, a gleam in her eyes, and love in her heart for me.*

Later, they sat at the kitchen table drinking cups of tea and telling stories about growing up together at the Weir and the boarding school, Mercy Convent, Tuam, where they'd been boarders together in the late 1920s. My father was in Cooke's pub at the corner, and my grandfather had retired for the night.

“Maureen, I've something important to tell you,” Birdie said

to my mother after a lull in the conversation.

“Oh, do you, Birdie?”

“I do indeed.” She looked at my mother and sighed deeply. I saw she was deadly serious and quite different from the person she had been all evening, happy and laughing.

“I’ve met a man. A farmer from Skehana near Peterswell, Pat Crehan. The parish priest arranged it, and we’re going to be married this day fortnight.”

My mother took a minute to answer. “Oh, Birdie,” she said, her voice filled with surprise, “I don’t know what to say, except that I’m happy for you . . . if it’s what you really want.”

Birdie stroked the cat sitting on her lap. “Well, I’ve always wanted a home of my own, and he’s a kind man, a widower with an elderly father . . . just the two them . . . and they need a woman around the house.”

After she said that, my mother turned toward me and said it was time to take the dog out. The clock on the wall showed it was getting close to eleven. I clicked my tongue. Caliban jumped up, I reached for his leash, and we headed out the hall door and down the front steps. We walked up to St. Mary’s gate. Inside, I unleashed him, and he raced off through the nighttime grass, happy as a dog could be.

My thoughts were of Birdie. I understood how lonely her life must be, her livelihood as a dressmaker always uncertain, what little money she made dependent on women’s whims and changes in fashion. Only natural that she wanted a home of her own, security, and, if all worked out well, maybe love, too.

Our house was quiet when Caliban and I returned just before midnight. Everybody had gone to bed. The only sounds I heard were the ticking of the pendulum clock in the kitchen and the murmur of coal burning in the Rayburn stove. I went into the living room and pulled the curtains, turned off the light, lay back on the couch, and fell asleep.

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Hours later something stirred me awake. A loud shriek. The tormented cry of someone in pain. I lay there, unsure. Maybe I had imagined it? I burrowed my head into the pillow and drifted off into the fog of sleep again. Then, suddenly, raised voices jolted me from dreaming. Caliban was barking in the kitchen. I sat up. There was a commotion coming from upstairs.

When I reached the top landing outside Bridgie’s room, the light was on and I saw my mother and father standing there trying to

console Birdie. She looked pale and frightened. Wild-eyed. Tears streaming down her face. One hand clutched her bottom through the long white flannel nightdress that reached to her ankles. Between her spread-out fingers, I saw splotches of bright red blood had soaked through the nightdress.

“Tell us what happened, a *Stor-een*?” My mother drew a handkerchief from her dressing-gown pocket and wiped Birdie’s tears, then stood looking into her eyes.

“She stabbed me,” Birdie said. Her face trembled, and more tears sprang out. “Bridgie stabbed me in the bottom while I was asleep.”

By now a few guests had opened doors of their rooms and were listening and watching. Bridgie’s door remained closed.

There was no sign of her.

“Oh, Lord God Almighty,” my mother exclaimed, incredulous, and let go of her handkerchief. “You don’t mean to say. . . Jesus, Mary, and Joseph . . . how could she?”

My father took a step towards Bridgie’s door and reached for the knob. “I’m going to talk to her,” he said and looked back at Birdie. “Find out what sort of a fit of savagery came over her.”

With that, Bridgie’s door opened slowly. She shuffled out onto the landing, her head bowed. She had on a frayed woolen nightgown. The fingers of her left hand clutched rosary beads, and she kept her right hand behind her back.

My father spoke, gently. “Auntie Bridgie, what did you do atall to poor Birdie?”

Bridgie raised her face and looked at my father. I could see defiance in her eyes, not a trace of remorse. Finally, she spoke. “I didn’t get a wink of sleep all night with her in the bed snoring and croaking like a bullfrog.”

“Ah, now, Auntie,” my father said, “that’s a poor excuse for the awful thing you did.”

Bridgie drew a breath, shook her head. “That big bottom of hers pushed me out of me own bed and knocked me onto the floor. . . nearly killed me . . . and me an old woman more than eighty years of age. . . I had to do something to protect meself or else you’d be taking me down to the hospital . . . or the morgue . . . true as I’m standing here.”

My father paused. I could see he was momentarily at a loss for words, stumped.

“What else could I do?” Bridgie said, shaking her rosary

against the side of her nightgown. “Sure, I feared for my life.”

“What’s that behind your back?” my father asked. He reached around Bridgie and caught her hand, and as he pulled it into sight something dropped onto the floor. It lay there bright under the landing light—a big hatpin with a square silver stud on the end.

I heard a gasp. My mother put her hand to her mouth. Then my father reached down and picked up the hatpin. He held it in his palm and stared at it, speechless.

Birdie pulled herself together for a moment. “Bridgie,” she cried out, “what did I ever do to you? That you’d get into bed armed with a weapon like that and stab me in my sleep. . . . I never wanted to be in your bed . . . not for one minute . . . but there was no place else for me . . .” She stopped then, unable to say any more, and broke down and sobbed, leaning her head against my mother’s chest.

I expected my father to say something, but he remained silent, and my mother, her arm around Birdie’s shoulders, began to lead her toward the stairs.

I watched the two of them descend the staircase slowly. The big grandfather clock in the hallway below chimed four.

“Faith, you’re a terrible *caoin-leanbh*.” Bridgie threw a baleful look after Birdie. “Tis you that’s lucky and only got a tiny prod in the arse that wouldn’t damage a fly.” Then she turned, went back inside her bedroom, and shut the door.

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Birdie slept the remainder of that night in the same bed with my mother. My father slept on chair cushions he placed on the living-room floor next to where I slept on the couch. Lying there, I saw the first rays of gray morning light shine through a chink in the curtains and make patterns on the wallpaper over my head. I closed my eyes and waited for sleep to come, but none did for a while.

I was thinking about Bridgie and my father. He was her favorite of the three small boys she had been nanny to long years before in Clonbur, the small village where my father and his two brothers were born—my father first in 1904, and later his brothers, Bill and Michael.

Their father, William Gavin, my grandfather, had been the schoolmaster in Clonbur, and his wife, Julia, my grandmother—also a teacher—left the village every Sunday after twelve o’clock mass in a pony and trap bound for Finny across the border in County Mayo, where she was schoolmistress in a one-room schoolhouse.

Julia would be gone all week—she lodged in a nearby

farmhouse—until Friday evening, when she returned to Clonbur. My father, the baby, needed minding, so Bridgie, Julia's sister, twenty-five and unwed, came to live in the Clonbur house and became the children's nanny. She doted on my father, spoiled him, according to my mother. And this I knew to be true because my father, now a man in his fifties, still could do no wrong. Not in his Aunt Bridget's eyes.

In the 1920s, the family moved up to Galway because my grandfather and grandmother, then retired, wanted my father and his two brothers to attend university. Bridgie, too, came along. She had never married or found a job of her own, spending her youth taking care of her three nephews, and after they were grown she lived a spinster's life, with only her sister and brother-in-law to keep her company. A lonely, friendless life. A life that made her bitter.

Lying on the couch, unable to sleep, I thought then of the story my mother had once told me about her and Bridgie. After my father lost his job at Ballybrit and his mother died, and there was no money coming in, she and my father moved in with Bridgie. I asked how she had gotten along with Bridgie, "Not well," my mother told me. "She tolerated me, but she was happy to have your father living again in the same house with her. I never met your grandfather. He'd died some years before, in the 1930s, before we were married."

Sometimes stray cats appeared in the backyard looking for food. Bridgie always chased them away. My mother, loving cats as she did, used to feed them.

One day my mother was outside in the backyard hanging washing on the clothesline. A stray cat, not much bigger than a kitten, came up to her. She reached down to pet it, and just then Bridgie came by the gable of the house. She stood in the yard, silent, watching my mother stroke the cat. After a minute or so, she stepped closer. Held her arms out.

Would my mother allow her to pet the cat, too? My mother was puzzled. She knew how much Bridgie disliked cats. But being a young, naive woman and wanting to be liked by Bridgie, my mother picked up the cat and handed it to her.

I pictured the two of them in the backyard. My mother: early twenties, slim, shy, eager to please. Bridgie: late sixties, short, dark-featured, eyes cunning, malevolent.

Why did Bridgie want the cat?

There was a basin full of water standing beneath the tap in the yard. Before it dawned on my mother what Bridgie had in mind, she submerged the cat, and held it under until it drowned.

Why didn't my mother stop her?

"Oh, nobody could stop Bridgie," my mother told me. "Not when her mind was dead set. She was a fierce dangerous woman, and I was afraid of her. Besides, she owned the house, and I feared she might put us out on the street."

Afterward, Bridgie grasped the dead cat by the tail and carried it over to my mother.

"Look at this dirty auld yoke now, Maureen, that you're so fond of," Bridgie said, and held the dead cat up in front of her. My mother stepped back, dropped the clothes pegs, and uttered a cry, unable to speak.

That said, Bridgie heaved the cat over the ivy-clad wall of the backyard into St. Mary's field. Later, my mother found its body lying in a briar patch. She buried the cat in a corner of our front lawn beside the rockery.

"Why," I asked my mother, "did she do that? What did she have against you?"

My mother stared at the fire burning in the hearth. "Bridgie wanted to hurt me," she said, her voice calm, resigned. "She was jealous and angry with me for taking your father away from her."

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Birdie's wedding. We all drove out to the parish church in Athenry for the ceremony. It was a lovely mid-August day, haycocks in the fields, cows grazing peacefully, and corn shimmering in the breeze, ripening under a warm sun. A few men and women had gathered outside the church. Birdie's relatives and friends from the Weir dressed in their best. She looked splendid in a dark blue dress and matching hat and gloves. The groom was on his way and would arrive any minute. My mother and father had yet to meet him and wondered what he was like. A car pulled up. Those of us gathered on the church steps looked over.

The driver's side door opened. A man in a dark gray suit and leather brogues emerged.

"That's Pat-eeen Crehan now," I heard somebody say.

The man appeared to be a cripple. He struggled to walk. His upper body stooped, bent nearly to his knees, head bowed, arms hanging slack.

"Oh, Janey Mac," I heard a woman's voice exclaim. "Don't tell me that's him that's getting married?"

After a few steps, the man grabbed hold of the church railings with both hands. Slowly, hand over fist, he managed to pull himself up,

until he stood half erect.

“Ah, Pat was a great hurler and dancer in his day,” a man wearing a brown trilby said to the woman. “Sure, he’d dance the buckles off all the lassies’ shoes at the *Ceilidhs*.”

“Is that so?” the woman asked. “I’d never have thought it . . . looking at the state he’s in now.”

The man turned to my mother and father. “Ah, sure, the poor divil’s crippled with lumbago. But I hear they’re spending the honeymoon in Knock . . . and maybe a miracle will happen while they’re there.”

“I’ll pray for a miracle,” my mother said.

By now, Birdie had gone down and joined her soon-to-be-husband.

Ever so slowly, arm round his waist, she helped him climb the steps up to the church door. Then we all stood aside and followed them in.

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In the bottom dresser drawer of my mother and father’s bedroom lay an old chocolate box with a faded brown ribbon. Inside were photographs of my father. On the beach at Atlantic City in an old-style bathing suit, swigging bootleg whiskey with two other young fellows; sitting at a picnic table, his arm around a girl wearing a long beaded necklace and cloche hat; standing by a hot rod, fedora atop his head, a lopsided grin on his face.

“Twas America that ruined your father,” my mother used say to me. “Prohibition and speakeasies and all that whiskey.”

At the age of twenty-one back in 1925, years before he met my mother—at the height of Prohibition and the Roaring Twenties—my father had sailed from Cobh to New York and met up with his Uncle Joe and first cousins in Philadelphia. He lived there for eight years and often told me stories about life in America.

The cars he drove; the cops, all Irish, who never gave him a speeding ticket; the Atlantic City Boardwalk; casinos, speakeasies, and dancehalls; the Charleston; flappers with bobbed hair; the 1926 World Heavyweight Jack Dempsey–Gene Tunney fight in Philadelphia—all that and more.

“It was a great time to be alive,” he said. “Atlantic City was just over fifty miles from Philadelphia. My cousins and I used to drive there nearly every weekend during the long hot summers.”

“Dad,” I said, “I’m going to America when I grow up.”