

One Final Night

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Róisín Campbell was born on an Irish farm early on a misty morning in March of 1852. From the moment of her first breath her fate was sealed. And now, just over eighteen years later, she quite naturally was anxious about the impending destruction of her prior life. It was her final night in Hospital, the farming town on the eastern edge of County Limerick. It was where she was born and where her family had its dairy farm. In recent years, two of her sisters and one of her brothers had been forced to cross the Irish Sea to Liverpool, where they established some sort of lives for themselves. It was the accepted reality throughout the island.

For reasons she did not fully understand, Róisín's fate would differ in one significant respect from those others. She'd be going to America. Where a cousin said she might find a job as a housemaid in one of the fancy mansions that lined the streets of New York. For a sweet, attractive Irish girl such as Róisín, with a bit of training to know how to care for the person and things of a society woman combined with the basic skills of sewing and polishing all Irish girls had, she'd find a secure place. After a time, she could send some of her slight earnings—she had little to spend it on herself—home so a sibling or a cousin could follow her.

Aye, it was the Irish way. A life of service. Unless she misbehaved or especially was misbehaved by one of the randy sons or, God forbid, the master of the house, she'd never need worry about being fed or having a warm place to sleep, at least for several decades.

This is what Róisín and all the other Irish farmgirls knew.

For her, it had all been arranged, it had. The steamship on which she would cross the Atlantic was identified and a spot aboard had been obtained from a ships' broker in Limerick City two months back. All that remained was Róisín travelling by train to Queenstown. It was where she'd first see the ocean and would

last set foot on Irish soil, for her and the hordes of others who'd embark on the City of Paris for the journey to New York.

This one last night and early in the morning Róisín and her daddy would travel the six miles to catch the first of a series of trains that would take her, and her alone, to Cork and Queenstown. For the last time she would see her mother and the siblings who were still in Ireland, at least for now.

She woke in the night. She did not know what time it was when she shot up from what had been a deep sleep. All was quiet except for the rhythmic breathing of her sleeping sister, Sophie. It was dark, too dark to see anything, and thus her hearing seemed heightened. And she understood that she would never again hear what she heard at that moment. Her sister would never be dreaming beside her. The slight Limerick wind she'd sometimes wake to in the night would never whistle through her room and across her bed.

It was that realization, the concept of never again, that finally chilled her. She long knew the day would come. It was a Wednesday in June of 1870. Her eyes were open, but it made no difference in the pitch black. Still, it gave her the illusion that she was seeing something, and the something she imagined she was seeing was burning into her memory. From the ceiling to the bedroom to the farmhouse itself. Moving from room to room, imagining she was running her fingers along the walls and the windowsills and the tops of the old, dark furniture she'd long taken for granted. The kitchen with its pots dangling. The outhouse discreetly in the rear corner of the yard, sometimes too far and sometimes not far enough from the back door.

Soon—she could not know how soon—her daddy and her brothers Liam and Aidan would be heading into the fields with the dog to drive the cows to the barn for milking. Her mamma would start making a small breakfast while she and Sophie tried to stay in bed as long as they could. The night before, her mamma gave Róisín the letters written to her by those who'd left for England. Each told of how there was a good, or good enough, life away from the farm. That she should not be afraid though she was going far, far away.

Her mamma handed her the letter from her sister's son Jimmy, too. He worked on the New York docks. In it, Jimmy said he would see to Róisín when she arrived and that he hoped he could help her get placed at the home of an admirable Irish-American family once she was properly trained.

Hours after reading those letters, she was looking at the dark ceiling and trying to memorize every part of the house that was her home since she was born over eighteen years before, and she could not control her sobs. She refused to cry before about this. She knew that she would have to leave. She was strong till that moment. The farm could only support one boy. The rest had to leave. So Liam would stay and he would marry the eldest daughter of a nearby farm—much as Ciara married Gerry Owens—and Aidan and Sophie would follow her or their other siblings to England or America when they, too, turned eighteen. Róisín fell back asleep, and it took several shakes from Sophie to awaken her.

"Get up, you fool. Today's no day to sleep in." Sophie was a troubling sort and far too unsettled in Róisín's mind, even for a fifteen-year-old. Still, Róisín would miss her.

Things were somber when she reached the kitchen, and her mamma insisted that Róisín do nothing but be waited upon. She told her mamma when she saw the others finished with their milking, and Mrs. Campbell got the tea ready. Everyone was quiet as they had their eggs and toast and tea, and they were somber as they went about doing chores. For those in the house, the ticking of the clock above the mantel in the front room seemed to get louder with each minute, approaching the moment when Róisín would have to leave to be in Knocklong to catch a train that would begin her destined journey to New York.

Liam carried Róisín's satchel to the parlor. She'd packed it the night before with her mamma, and it contained the clothes they bought two weeks earlier in Limerick City supplemented by family mementos, her siblings' and Cousin Jimmy's letters, and three of her beloved books. Her daddy made a point of buying one for her when he went to the city. She was a good, bright student, and she read alone when she could in quiet times and appreciated

that her parents did all they could to encourage it, hoping it would give her an advantage in her new life.

Finally, Róisín's mamma went to her room and she sat on the bed with her child, holding her hands, and Róisín put her head on her mamma's shoulder as the others had done before her, and her mamma said everything would be grand. Not long after that, Liam rushed in.

"Daddy says...you must get going," and he hurried down the stairs, followed a long minute later by the two women, who went to the drive at the front of the house as Liam put Róisín's satchel in the back of the single-horse trap her daddy had brought around. Mamma handed her a large package containing food to have until she reached Queenstown. Aidan and Sophie were joined by Ciara, holding her baby and beside her husband, as well as some of Róisín's friends. One by one they hugged and kissed her—except for little Meghan Owens, who received Róisín's lips on her forehead—until she reached her mamma, and that dear woman clutched her tightly and made her daughter promise to be a source of the family's pride.

Finally, Róisín joined her daddy in the trap for the journey south to Knocklong. There she would catch a train that would ultimately take her through Cork City and to the port of Queenstown where she would spend the night in a hotel. It was a pleasant day, and Róisín sought to imprint it on her memory as she looked back one final time just as the trap started a turn that would forever leave the farm behind. With a wave, it was gone.

Her daddy was his usual taciturn self for the early portion of the ride, and Róisín's head leaned against his shoulder. Neighbors on farms along the way stood at their stone walls to wave their own goodbyes and shout their own encouragements as had become a ritual, and they stopped at the church, where the teacher, Mr. Sullivan, reached up to her to hug her goodbye and the parish priest, Father Crowe, handed her the book, a Bible in Gaelic, he gave each who left. After the Campbells received his blessing, they continued south, and Róisín took her last look at the town and could just see the church's steeple until it, too, was all gone.

As they neared Knocklong, her daddy spoke in a way he never had before.

"Your mamma and I will miss you, that's for sure. You understand why it must be?"

"Yes, daddy."

"From Jimmy, we hear good things about New York. And some bad things, too. You are a good girl. I know you will do good."

"I will, daddy."

"Lots of people who are not like us, though. Some very poor. They are God's creatures and do not forget that. You will also see people who think themselves superior to you. Like the English do. Remember you are a good, Irish girl."

"I will, daddy."

"And be sure to write to your mamma regular. Some of the ones in Liverpool are not so good. But you are in America. Write when you can."

"Yes, daddy."

They arrived at the station shortly after nine. Róisín's daddy handed her a bag with money. This was for the train and the boat and the hotel in Queenstown plus enough, according to Jimmy, to tide her over until she could cash the modest bank draft her daddy got for her in Limerick City, which was safely stowed in her satchel.

Father and daughter found a place for the trap, and after Róisín bought her ticket, they went to the platform. When the train pulled in some ten minutes later, the two hugged. She put her head out the window and waved as she looked upon her daddy, waving back, for the last time.

As the train neared Cork some hours later, Róisín was amazed at how crowded and congested everything seemed. She was in Limerick City a few times. It was nothing compared to this. But she was in Cork only briefly as she switched to the train to Queenstown. She had the name of a small hotel near the quay. At the desk, she was asked what boat she was on and when it was departing. Róisín shared a room with another girl, from County Sligo. She'd arrived at the hotel the day before, and the two went to the dining room. It was full of girls and boys near Róisín's age

and some older men and women and some families with wee ones. All were waiting to go to America, and Róisín was at a table with seven others.

"You think Cork is big, lasses?" It was addressed to the table by an older man. "I hear tell that 'tis tiny compared to New York." He slurped his soup, and his wife said, "And the hurrying. Our son be there, and he says they never stop. But he says it'd be a good life for us." They looked to be from a farm, and Róisín could not place their accent, and she missed some of their words.

After the meal, Róisín went out with her roommate and several others for the air of their last night. They were mostly quiet, paired arm-in-arm till dusk appeared. Róisín had never seen the water before, though some of the girls from the west had. The group strolled to the quay, where they saw the City of Paris on which they would all sail to America, and they watched the darkness cover it and the sea. They returned to the travelers' hotel, going to their rooms to sleep at home one last time.