

Bill and Nell

Two chapters from a novel-in-progress

October, 1845

You're reading, of course you are. Hand poised over tiny marching words, row by row. Oftimes you pause...marking the place with a finger, you ponder what you just took in. Candlelight bobs and wavers with each blast of wind outside, whistling through the black trees of the village. That west wind carries the chill of the ocean just beyond. As the light shifts, you squint to keep your reading moving apace.

It's a quiet night in the Brown household. You're the youngest of nine; only three of you remain. You are the seventh Brown son, as your father and his father were before you, a fact never lost on your townsfolk in Mayo. You cannot recall a time in your life when people didn't mention that happenstance of birth in hushed, excitable terms. You inhabit it now, serving as a veterinarian's apprentice and learning the ways of healing. But you will not give those townspeople the satisfaction of acknowledging that you do feel anointed...special...endowed. *Let them prattle*, you think. After all, you yourself are still coming to terms with what it means to offer treatment, to give comfort. You could say you've become obsessed with it; that would not be an exaggeration.

And here you are reading an anatomy text, quite old—loaned to you by the veterinarian, Dr. Noone, from his long-ago days at university—yet still useful to your learning. You're marveling at the bravery of writers and artists who have laid bare the body and endeavored to explain its contents.

You genuinely startle when a neighbor heaves open the cottage's thick wooden door, rushing into the house before anyone has a chance to get up and see who it is. "Mrs. Garrity—the labor—she's failing—"

You leap to your feet, thudding aside the book and crazing the candlelight.

Mother, at the sideboard, begins to ask, "Where are y—"

That's all you'll hear of Mother's voice. You're already over the threshold and into the night.

Your face pushed upon by a moist, gusting wind, you follow your neighbor, Maeve Curran, as she guides the way to the Garritys' with a dim lantern. Your feet unsure of the path under them, you nearly stumble a couple of times on rocky terrain. But Maeve is so bent on reaching Mrs. Garrity that she might as well be floating, so surely does she surge ahead. Finally, the lantern outlines the crude doorway. In a far, dark corner, against the stone walls, you note five sets of Garrity children's eyes peering out. To the right, on a disheveled

bed illuminated in lamplight, is their mother. Her cries of anguish are keening with the wind outside.

The midwife, Mrs. Walsh, holds her hand, which jerks side to side with Mary Garrity's pains. Annie Walsh studies you as you approach, and then looks at Maeve, agog. "Him??" she says. "Why?"

"Annie, he's Dr. Noone's apprentice, surely..."

Annie begins to speak, but you've commenced rinsing your hands in the basin, an act of intent. You head for Mary, rolling up your sleeves. Annie regards you with disbelief. "She's not a cow," Annie states. Mary moans, high-pitched, almost as if in assent.

"Nor am I, Mrs. Walsh," you say. Your blue eyes are kindly and calm, but the pit of your stomach roils as you regard Mary's predicament. You feel her pulse, assess her temperature—high, feverish—and immediately turn to Maeve Curran, gesturing. "Take the children to your home." Where is this vocal authority coming from? You do not know its source, but you've no doubt of its urgency.

Footsteps shuffle, a few meek protests and calls for "Mam" are heard, but the children and Mrs. Curran soon depart.

The night is barely held at bay by this shoddy hump of a thatched dwelling, lending a clammy aspect about the room. "Stoke the fire, please," you order Annie. She turns away, her sharp gaze averted, and it is now that you commence to examining Mary Garrity's readiness to deliver. Despite the fact that you have never seen a woman's private parts before, you overcome a moment's hesitation and begin to probe her. Your hands find the baby partly crowned, but evidently not making progress in the birth canal. Annie Walsh is suddenly at your side, saying it's been nearly half a day of such struggling. You try to compute in your head what might have gone wrong in that time for either mother or child, then decide that information is useless now.

"Mary," you ask in a loud voice, "have you the urge to push?"

Mary's gaze back at you is unknowing. After five children (and who knows how many stillbirths), she ought to be able to supply a response. Now it is clear to you that she is not going to be an active participant. In hindsight, you realize, this should have been obvious when Mary allowed you to examine her so intimately without protest.

"Do you think the babe is live?" you ask Annie, quietly as you can.

"I'm not believing so," she says equally quietly.

You hear yourself sigh. The midwives have an instrument, an iron hook that crushes an infant's skull to allow delivery. This is the last resort when all involved agree that the baby will not survive, and a medical man is the only one allowed to wield it. The perforator, Dr.

Noone calls it. As soon as you recall that stark device, you know you'll not be calling for it. *You will deliver this baby*, you tell yourself, again in that authoritative voice. As you've been apprenticing, thoughts such as this—serene, knowledgeable— have come to you with clarity, and you always act on them.

At that same moment, you hear a clanking sound, breaking your train of thought. Annie is fiddling with a folded leather pouch. *Her instruments*.

“No,” you command.

Annie reels. “What?” Your voices are loud again, to ride over the dreadful sounds coming from the distressed mother. “We—”

“Assist me,” you say. “Stay at Mary's side. We will need moist cloths.”

Annie stares open-mouthed, undoubtedly seeing the boy she remembers just a few years ago playing about his parents' dooryard.

“Hurry!” you bark.

Annie dampens cloths in the basin, disapproval shading her eyes.

You look away from Annie and her disbelief, and lower your face closer to Mary's. “I am going to help you give birth,” you intone. “We will do this.”

“AAAAAAAH!” Mary responds, in the same tone she's had all along. “Dennis!!”

This is not the first time she's called for her husband in her hysteria. You know Dennis must be at his brother's home down the lane, probably by now soused and insensible. His anguish and worry have driven him to it. You can only hope that he hasn't heard the children passing by on their way to the Currans', which certainly would have made Dennis fear the worst.

Annie settles herself close to Mary's head. She wipes off her face and croons to her in motherly tones. Annie is your partner in this, suddenly, and it bolsters you. At the end of the bed, you reach out with both hands and touch Mary's skin, inside her thighs. You're steadying yourself, truly, but at the same time, you suddenly feel a warmth that is not her fever—it is of you, and then Mary; some kind of connection that suffuses and tingles. You're jolted, but you do not pull away; instead, you move Mary's legs apart with a surety that you do not understand. With one hand—a smooth hand, untested by the plough or the axe—you feel Mary's cervix, the lined hair of her offspring crested over its small skull. Your other hand braced, without hesitating you begin to dilate Mary's cervix.

Her shouted moans become shrill. Annie holds her shoulders to the bed, making eye contact with her, but then looking over her shoulder in wonderment at you.

You lose track of time as you endeavor to free the Garrity baby from his mother's womb. You've a keen alertness, as if the entire Garrity cottage has narrowed into the space between you and Mary. You are oblivious to fluids and blood spreading everywhere, staining the bed, floor, and your clothing.

Your hands grasp slightly more of the infant's head. You glance at Mary's rounded white stomach, its undulations, and press on. The baby feels warm and viable within the glowing sensation of your hands. You feel the edge of one ear, like a miracle, then two. Your concentration is absolute. Mary keens and wails at a higher pitch than previously, and Annie weeps in silence.

Suddenly... motion. A familiar sensation from the farm animal births you've conducted; you experience the same jolt of joy. The baby's head takes fuller form in your palms. Mary's legs tense; her demeanor changes. It's as though she's been freed of something, and she's ready to take part in the birthing.

"Yes!" Annie shouts. "Mary! Work with him! Yes!"

Your hands move downward. The baby's head is out. You quickly feel for shoulders and bring forth the baby, and within moments the infant is emerging.

Alive.

"Oh, glory! a baby!" cries Annie. "Mary, it's your baby!"

Your hands slide on the child's body and gently grasp it; the umbilical cord snakes back into Mary. It pulses... an astonishing sight.

At this, Annie snaps back to her role. "We'll cut the cord." Stroking Mary's soaking wet hair, she says, "I must fetch the clippers."

Mary thus tended to, you give attention to the Garrity's newborn son. He is not as lively as one would hope, but you note with relief that his skin is only mildly blue-tinged. Your finger enters the baby's airway, his spongy tongue, all warm; you lay a hand on his back while you peer into the tiny, pinched face. The infant commences squirming, opens his eyes—which are dark and wondering—and then yelps into a crying sound. Meanwhile, Annie cuts the cord, then gathers up the baby from your hands, in one motion swaddling him in his father's shirt. "Deliver the placenta," she orders you.

Mary's voice rises again from the bed, and it's almost normal in tone, though hoarsened. "My baby...I..."

"Yes," you say, kneading carefully on Mary's stomach to ease along the placenta. "You have a son, thanks be to God." Soon, the maroon organ slithers out, and you grasp it quickly to ascertain that it is intact. You're still feeling that odd glow of your hands...the sense of guidance and purpose all around you. And the placenta looks fine.

“Great God in heaven,” Annie says from the other side of the room. “You saved her life. And his!”

“No, Mrs. Walsh, we did,” you correct her. “All of us.”

Including that voice, you muse as you rinse your hands. Whoever it may be.

You sleep heavily, and late. Awake to the confusion of too-high sunlight. The bed—usually shared with your brother—offers too much space for your legs to stretch in. Last night’s events have faded to a dreamlike oddness.

Your mother looms alongside the bed with no warning. “What have you done,” she says in a low voice.

Not even a question—an accusation. You blink up at her. “Wha...I...”

“Mary Garrity,” your mother goes on, still keeping her voice tightly constrained. “A married woman. A Catholic. What. Have. You. Done!”

You bolt up, now. *You’d think I’d impregnated her myself*, says your conscious mind, but you would never utter it. Instead, you state simply, “I believe I saved her life.”

“Dennis Garrity believes you defiled her. Yes, that’s the word he shouted at your father. *Defiled her.*”

“Her baby was caught—”

“They’ve instruments for that, foolish boy. Midwives and doctors do. Vet’s apprentices do not.”

You fall silent. She would not understand last night’s transaction—you yourself are still grasping through it. Then you loose your tongue, spirited by her anger: “Dennis Garrity is burdened by a fearsome headache, I would imagine.”

She shakes her head. “You have no idea, do you.” She strides away without further enlightening you. “Out of that bed,” she orders as she moves through the doorway.

As your feet reach the floor, they brush against last night’s clothing piled there, a sodden heap. *Mother won’t be washing these*, you tell yourself ruefully. *Must bring them to the stream later on.*

You will not wash those clothes; they will stay behind, your last vestige in this home you are destined to leave, in haste.

March, 1851

I'm standing against the rail of the barque *Eglantine*, my hands clutching. I'm looking out at a city, grey and confusing, beyond which is my quiet home town, miles from here. I'm leaning heavily because I've both dreaded and wanted this moment for weeks now.

Weeks of scheming with Da to make sure my brother and I had proper funds for the trip. Weeks of clothing sifted through my hands, some deemed too threadbare for voyaging, and other pieces essential to my life beyond now. Weeks of trying to see everything around me with eyes more open, while at the same time, oh it hurt to look. And everywhere I see Ma...even though she's long gone from us, and too soon at that.

Now I will be leaving all of this. Today.

The air about me smells of greenish sea mist, morning scent of this Cobh quayside, with clattery wooden piers that I trod across; the shipboard, teeming with people and a breeze sweeping over us all; my clothing, dampened already. I'm wearing too much, you know, because our trunk was full to bursting. And Da said we mustn't overburden ourselves on a journey such as this...

There, that's made me cry a little again. In this pocket is a handkerchief that Ma tatted the edges of, it still smells of her, and now I take it to my cheek, willing the wetness there to blot into it and stop. *Grow up, Ellen Finn*, I say inside me. And just as I do, the ship blasts a horn that makes me shudder where I stand.

"Frightened, are ye, Ellen?"

My older brother Tommy has loomed up next to me. Off exploring the deck, I imagine. I cannot fathom that smile on his face. The eagerness.

"Not frightened!" I snap.

"Not frightened," he echoes. His face rearranges to something kindly.

He looks like Da and Ma blended, and I relax a little because it's familiar and I believe he will keep me safe.

Another blast of that horrid horn, shouts and calls all around us, and a jerking motion as the *Eglantine* begins, in phases, to move away. I'm staring at all the people and carts on the quay. I wish Da were in that throng, but he wouldn't have been able to travel into this crowded city then turn around and go back home, alone now as he is. Still, I try to place him in front of me on the pier—not waving at us, because he would never do that. Da is a calm man, farewells conveyed by his clear eyes and his stance.

"We're going!" Tommy says over the din of the ship. That smile is back, and his eyes are alight: America is on his mind. Éire is on mine.

At least, we have both sides covered.

Dear Father, Bridget's letter had read, If you decide to send Thomas and Ellen along to America, John and I will do everything we can to help them. We already have our house built, and there's plenty more land about. John can help Thomas clear space to build on—for the forest is thick around us, and you must carve out the lot before you can build your home. For their passage, you must find a ship that will bring them in through Canada: the best ports being on the Chaleur Bay. This voyage will cost much less and bring them much closer to the Aroostook territory than New York or Boston. We will appoint a guide named William Brown to meet them and complete the journey to Fort Kent...

The forest is thick, she said. Is that like the groves of bright green trees that gather around Mallow, on hillsides, between farmlands? Or is it dark trees colluding everywhere you look, the sun fairly blocked by them? I've only heard tell of such forests, in legends and stories. *A-roo-stook*. I keep hearing that word in my head, pronounced haltingly in its "oo, oo" strangeness, and it sounds false, unfamiliar as it is.

The creased sea fills in around the ship and we move further and further away. The coast is arranging itself into an orderly line and looks quite pretty for that. People are no longer visible on the shore; the only voices are aboardship. Truthfully, there aren't many voices to be heard among those of us here on the deck. Passengers up and down the railing stare out blankly. Even Tommy has fallen silent.

"There she goes," says a man off to my right, his voice strangely flat.

He means Ireland, but I let myself think he means me. And I nod.

Days, weeks, months, who knows what. The ship rolls and pitches along an ocean that offers no relief from its stone blue, choppy surface. The sky either lowers with gray or gleams clear; it matters not. We're trapped on this ship, grasping rails for dear life or collapsed against a wall, sitting, or lying in the wooden prison of a bunk. Passengers united in misery—from day to day, I'm not sure I'm remembering names or even faces. Everything I eat seems sharp and crispy, leaving my mouth dry. Everything I drink brings queasiness. Water's been set aside in ample amounts for all of us, thank God; tea occasionally proffered and gratefully taken, its shocking heat clearing my mouth out. Tommy brings me rum and whiskey sometimes, too, and you best believe I am drinking it greedily down. The rum clear and fast in its sweetness; the whiskey like a jolt of home, like Da poking the fire, night falling. I need the dizziness that follows the drink, the dreams and visions. Mother alongside me, smoothing my hair, crooning a song, her lips near my ear.

The water is wide, I cannot get o'er

Neither have I wings to fly

*Give me a boat that can carry two
And both shall row, my love and I
A ship there is and she sails the sea
She's loaded deep as deep can be
But not so deep as the love I'm in
I know not if I sink or swim...*

Och, Ma's voice—I cry and cry, turned face to the wall in my bunk, sodding the mattress under my head. Perhaps I too am singing, as I lie here. And again I sleep, not sure if it is day or night as blackness descends.

Time passed thusly, a blur and a void, nothing worthy to recall. And this morning, after we've eaten some hardtack soaked in tea, a man's voice rings out with an unmistakable excitement and I know at once: we've completed the crossing. Throngs of us stamp onto decks; on either side of the ship after land's blessed sighting is the slightest tinge of new greenery onshore. There are shouts, cheers, mothers weeping with babes held close, and more than one bottle being passed around among jubilant men.

The crowd elbows, jostles, and sways; I stay tight to my brother's side and gawk at the landscape. A few houses dot each coast, wooden, gray. Smoke curls from their chimneys, and sometimes a farmer and his horse are pinpoints working the land. There are occasional cliffs like home, jutting down, waves pushing up at them.

Tommy clutches me, almost to hurting. "We're here," he shouts.

"Really?" say I, not teasing, just not believing.

"Ellen!" he barks. "Look about you!"

"America...?"

"No, 'tis New Brunswick. We're meant to travel yet to America, to Aroostook, remember?"

I do not remember...and then I do. Not another ship, but some other conveyance from this land across to Maine, where Bridget waits for us. Maternal Bridget, rounded even as a young girl, fussy caretaker when Ma was busy or tired. I push down crying by staring ahead at the narrowing shore, and let the rushing air on my face force tears instead.

There is elaborate docking of the ship, and passengers thundering to and fro to gather their things and make their way to the gangplank. What seems like hours later, finally free, we reach the quayside, Tommy straying from my side to suss out what we must do next.

Weathered planks creak thoughtfully under me as I slow-walk in circles, keeping close watch on our trunk...my life therein contained. This is as far away from me as Tommy's been since the voyage began. Campbellton's misty, ocean-smelling harbor is bracing and more than a little frightening, with thick forested hills looming off across the bay and behind the town, as well. Hemmed in by landmarks we do not know. Far smaller than Cobh, this place is. Seems sparse. I wish Tommy were nearer me.

The wharf's boards begin creaking distantly, deliberately, and it's not me, not Tommy. All of the other passengers and crewmen have cleared off to some other section of the harborside. I squint through the midday mist and see a solitary figure.

Could this be the man Bridget spoke of in her letters?

A face takes form as the man draws closer. Young; hair wavy and wind-pressed. After all we have been through, this happy face bewilders me. Strides right past me to Tommy, and I eavesdrop on the first words exchanged.

"William Brown." Just that, a statement: and I know it is you, the man sent to lead us to Aroostook. "Are you Thomas Finn?"

"Yes," my brother says, relief buoying his voice. "Has Bridget sent you, then?" Such a lilt to Tommy's words.

"Indeed she has," you answer. "Welcome to America!"

"Not America," I hear myself say with considerable daring as my feet approach you. "'Tis Canada!"

"'Tis," you reply. "But America lies not far from here, and I shall take you there."

"Over those hills?!" I say, pointing past the quay.

"Tstch!" Tommy hisses at me.

And you smile, directly at me, truly. Which makes me drop back and hunch my shoulders, because how bold have I been, and how equally did you rise to it?

In the pause before you speak, I have looked into your eyes, a shade of blue dark as the Atlantic itself. Staring, I am. I try to look away.

"Not over the hills," you say. Your face is kind. "Through them."

My mouth is suddenly dry. I cough a little. "I'm—hnh—Ellen Finn," I manage.

"Yes," you say. "Miss Ellen Finn. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

I bow a little, my hands brushing my skirt. It feels so damp and worn, and there's the heat of a blush on my cheeks.

But even so, I meet your gaze again. Because I must. You are still smiling. I attempt the same.

“Ellen!” Tommy snaps. “Giddy girl,” he says to you in a manly tone. “What must we do next?”

“We’re to stop at the customs office there,” you gesture. “Should be brief. After that, we’ll get a proper meal into you both. And then I suggest we depart.”

“Wha—? How long is the trip? Where shall we sleep?” I cannot stop my rudeness.

I fear Tommy will burst with anger. You rub your face with a gentle hand and answer me. “We’ll make camp tonight, not long into the journey.”

Camp...? Journey? “How far is this A-roo-stook??”

You pause and laugh lightly. “We say A-roo-*stuck*, hereabouts. We’ve some days still to get there.”

Tommy snatches at my sleeve. “Now that is quite enough! You do what this man tells us, and leave off asking questions!”

“Yes, Tommy,” I say into my collar.

“Are these your things?” you ask, standing alongside the battered trunk.

“Yes,” Tommy says quickly, making certain I do not speak up.

You stoop a little, then haul the big trunk onto your shoulders in one go. I know that Tommy is too weary to do that. And your shoulders, Mr. Brown: ample for the task, so broad and sure. You are clearly a working man, despite your good waistcoat.

I study the wood planks beneath my feet and follow you both to the customs house. *What do I look like to you?* I wonder. Red hair all about my head like a crazed halo—I reach up and pat it as I walk. Look down again at my sorry, creased skirt, threads worn on my jacket. I can’t have a lick of color to my face: I can just hear the way Da would call me “taibhse”—ghost—after a winter of indoors-dwelling. And och, my hands! ruddy as a washer-woman’s.

“Keep up!!” Tommy hisses.

And William Brown, you hear him; and despite the burden of our trunk, you slow your gait for me.

After a customs officer checks our names off on a list and writes down where we’re headed, you lead us to a nearby public house, up an incline from the docks. The warm aroma of food, bread and drink at the doorway nearly makes me faint.

“Easy now,” you say as we come across the portal. “You’ll not want to eat too heavily. Your stomachs...the voyage—”

“Yes,” Tommy says. “And how shall we pay?”

“You mustn’t worry. All is taken care of.” You nod at Tommy as you set down our trunk.

With a sigh, I sit at a round wooden table, its varnished surface pitted and streaked. The busy tavern is aswirl with clamorous voices, making little sense. Numerous passengers from the *Eglantine* have made their way here, and crew members from the many masts I’d seen along the quay.

A tin plate appears in front of me. Potatoes, green peas—*green!* it’s been so long!—and actual cubes of beef in gravy, with a biscuit. Your hand has set the plate down, and I look up along your arm, up to your face. I smile because you are smiling, and I feel the deepest rush of gratitude I ever can remember. “Thank you,” I murmur.

“You’re welcome,” you say.

How do we hear each other in the clatter of this place? It must be that we have leaned a little too close. I know I am feeling wavery after so much time at sea, unsure of where I’m leaning. And now I realize, I am leaning on you, because my arm and shoulder are suddenly warmed and relaxed. Tommy has noticed none of this. Across the table, despite your warnings, he is devouring the meal and slurps from a beer mug with foam tracing down it.

“Eat, Miss Finn,” you say, easing away and sitting down.

The best meal I have eaten in many a year, this. Cooked by another, good-tasting, and oh, the little bursts of green peas after this long and sad winter. And meat—unlike my brother, who has already requested a second mug of beer, swiping a sleeve across this mouth, I am savoring every taste.

“Beef,” I say to you—louder, of course, because you’re no longer at my side. “Is there beef here, everywhere?”

You, too, are not long away from Ireland, as our sister has told it. So you nod right away, and you know why I have asked. *I wish Da could be eating this food*, I am thinking.
