
Opening Extract from...

Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan

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For Debbie, where it all began
and
For Alex, until the end.

There are those of us who haven't yet told our stories, or refuse to tell them, and so we become them: we hide away inside the memory until we can no longer stand the shell or the shock – perhaps that's me, or perhaps I must tell it before it's forgotten or becomes, like everything else, something else.

—Colum McCann, *Zoli*

Prologue

In the bloodless light of the foyer she feels herself nothing but a stranger.

The all-smiles nurse leads her through. Visitors' Book. Autograph please. A set of coded doors and then a waft of luncheon smells, almost solid on the air. Cream of mushroom soup.

The first room is laid out with tables and chairs, the aftermath of last night's Festive Bingo. Old games for old folks, two little ducks. She surveys, clutching her parcel to her chest; spots a leftover scorecard that has fallen to the floor. But she admits there is a polish to the place she hadn't been expecting, a vase of lilies on the sideboard and the surfaces wiped so clean you could almost see your face in them, even if after three days without sleep she would probably just prefer to look away.

In the next room, a parliament of armchairs curves around a television – a *Father Ted* rerun – the volume turned all the way down to mute. Only, she can just make out a hum of classical music playing somewhere near, which turns the priests into a sort of silent film, a farce of dog collars and fags and mouths mouthing *go on, Father, you will you will you will*.

The television's audience, though, won't resist the distraction;

a ripple of heads for the arrival; wrinkled necks strained tight, young again. And eyes that cannot seem to place her – is she somebody's granddaughter? A niece? Whose turn is it for a visitor anyway? Usually Sammy Harris is the safest bet, more relatives than marbles left in him these days. Or even Betty O'Meara – an age since she has had one – not after her brood decided to emigrate to Canada, something to do with these 'recessionary times', a second chance buried underneath the snow.

The imposter herself only has eyes for the floor. Still she hugs her parcel as she follows the nurse out towards the conservatory where another scatter of them sit, framed in the frail light.

Until, tucked up in the corner, they find him.

He wears a tatty shirt. A tie. A little hat, poised atop his head. It is a Jewish hat, apparently, though the symbolism is overshadowed by the other men's jealousy – covers his bald patch nicely, so it does. He sits unmoving, staring out at the back garden where a cluster of pigeons takes lumps out of the mangy ground.

Two little ducks, lucky for some.

But the onlookers now are too curious for the birds, because this here is a revelation – the first visitor the old man has ever received – in here for years, like, and not a single one! Of course, they all have their theories about him, half-baked stuff whispered round. Even the staff, sneaking into the Records Room for a go of his file to see what family, if any, he has left; what his story could possibly be. The folder, though, doesn't say a word. Totally empty. The most vigilant Home for the Elderly in all of Dublin, yet somehow he has slipped through the cracks.

The nurse leaves the unlikely pair to it, still-lifed in silence. The classical music changes track. The girl looks exhausted. After a

while the old man stands and leads her off down the corridor, much to the others' annoyance – just when things were getting interesting – before they reach his room and step inside and finally, it is her turn to stare.

The entire bedroom has been covered. All four walls, from carpet to ceiling, bristle with layer upon layer of paper. Foolscap. Narrow-lined. Printer plain. Not a hint of wall left peeking. Each page is covered too in line after line of the old man's handwriting – he transcribes another sheet every day, then pins it up with all the rest, stabbed deep with the rusty tacks he keeps in a drawer beside his bed. It is the strangest of rituals, the other folks think; odder, even, than most. Wonder sometimes if he kept going forever would the walls just close right in? Crushed to death by his own words and how about that for a way to go, eh?

The staff, meanwhile, try to have a read when they can – any excuse to nip into his room. To change his bed linen. To drop off his laundry. Tricky at first to find your way with the scrawl, but the words themselves, ah, now we're talking. Melt your bloody heart:

> *What about a man and a woman who court via pigeon mail, until the woman falls in love with the pigeon instead?*
>
> *It all started on Clanbrassil Street in 1941, an unlikely place for love.*

'And do you suppose they are his memories?' they speculate then, back in the staffroom over builder's tea and biscuits that have been touched by too many fingers. 'Events like, from his past?'

'Or just ideas from his imagination? Maybe he was a writer in his previous life?'

'Jaysus, and I wonder what was I in mine?'

Under the weight of confusion the girl sits – a wooden chair at the foot of the bed – still holding her strange bundle to her chest. Whereas the old man seems to have grown lively, skipping about, running his fingers along the overlaps of paper like the feathers of a swan that might take flight.

She bites her nail; flicks a white half-moon to the floor.

When the burden becomes too much she holds it up, an offering.

He pauses; takes it from her.

Unwrapped, it is a book, a hefty thing with a black leather cover and gold letters indented so deep they catch the bit of sunlight finding its way in through the window to watch.

The tome looks so heavy in the old man's lap – a paperweight as if he might blow away.

Slowly, the girl begins to talk, presumably to explain about the gift. That it is a great read? A family heirloom? No one is sure. Only that the more she speaks the further he seems to sink, lower and lower back into himself like he has just been told the most Godawful news. While she sprouts the other way, quicker now, reasserting the natural order, higher and higher until she is standing, smiling, a real beauty as it turns out, despite the cut of her; despite how she suddenly has to go, just like that, slamming the door behind her with an end-of-the-world bang.

The draught makes the pages on the walls flutter, a whisper that only the old man can hear. Though for the entire visit, he hasn't uttered a word.

Two days later, the walls have shed their plumage. A large envelope sits stuffed on the chair, sealed with the single bit of spit he

managed to get going in the mirror that morning. The pins are clustered on the bedside table like a set of teeth, bared.

He waits until after lunch to take the nurse aside. The address on the envelope is in the same, stuttering hand they know so well – the last words, it turns out, he will ever write – and above it, the name is the same as the one from the Visitors' Book the other day; the one that exited so quickly she didn't even have time to sign herself out again so now it reads as if, really, she never left.

The residents have finished their soup and squabble over the Penguin bars brought out for dessert. They go calm again as they trade the feeble jokes hidden under the wrappers' seams:

'Why do seagulls always fly over the sea?'

'Because if they flew over bays they would be bay-gulls, and they're made out of bread.'

A drizzle of half-laughs. A lash of glances in his direction. But the old man is too distracted to notice, only nods a 'thank you' to the nurse then shambles back to the naked room, empty save for that single book – the black leather wedge with the gold indents; the gaffer tape stuck crooked down the spine to hold the wonk of a thing in place.

He picks it up. He stares at the title, still struggling to believe. And then he reads, knowing he might not stop, not tomorrow or even the tomorrow after that when the pigeons have flown off somewhere better again, resisting the urge to come home. Because in the end, it is the only story to have survived.

part one | In the beginning…

1901

'What if, in the beginning, they arrived by sea and then, in the end, they left by sea too, each in their own way?

'*North.*

'*South.*

'*East.*

'*West.*

'Never once looking back?

'Because maybe that's all a compass can really show – the different ways a family falls apart. The pull of magnets, and the push of other dreams.'

Ruth heard the sound of bone before she felt it. The crack was clean, just below the shrivel of her knuckle; her body lurched forward from where it sat on the bed to land on that single, snappable point.

'Tateh!' she cried out for her father next to her in the darkness. 'TatehIthinkIhavebrokenmy—' the panic colliding all her words into one.

But the ship's moan was so loud it drowned her out, its very own version of pain.

The prow buckled beneath the force of the crash, the impact

rippling along the hull. The waves leapt acrobatic. The propeller paused mid-propel. While above, the Atlantic stars spelled out a Morse code of dots.

S-O-S

Save our souls

Sinking our ship

Below deck, the bunk beds were nearly wrenched free from their fixings, the wood already gnarled with splinters that seemed sharp enough to prick the darkness and bleed it out, like a bullock drained the kosher way. As it happened, the ship itself had been for cattle once, herds of beasts sailing off towards the foreign slaughterhouses, the white-pink sinews of their shoulders knotted tightly together, hooves ankle-deep in the muck-splattered straw.

But now the stench of it was back again – the cold, meaty waft of fear.

Because the boat had crashed. An almighty thud. Ruth wondered if it was an iceberg they had hit. Or maybe a whale – she could still remember that story from Cheder; still see the gulp of the Rabbi's throat as he acted out the moment poor Jonah was swallowed. Whole. But of course, she knew that this here was a different story; a different tale with a full cast of characters – two passengers per bed and sixty beds in total sailing from Riga to America on a promise of could-bes, suddenly thrown forward with hands out to stop the fall and bones that snapped in two like pencils.

'Tateh—'

'All right, Bubbeleh. All right, I am here.'

For a moment, Ruth forgot about the throb.

It was the first time her father had spoken in hours. In fact, he had been practically silent for days now, leaving her lonely there on

the top bunk, nothing to play with and nothing to listen to except for other people's prayers; other people's vomit as it backwashed on the floor below – ten whole days of seasickness worth. Unless, of course, homesickness spews just the same.

Her finger seared again. Eight years without breaking a bone, and now this.

And it had been strangest of all, her father's silence next to her, because at the beginning of the journey he had barely drawn breath, filling the below-deck shadows with the usual stream of his latest ideas:

'What about a famous mural painter who is tortured by being forced to watch his creations get covered with layer after layer of white paint?'

'Or a man and a woman who court via pigeon mail, until the woman falls in love with the pigeon instead?'

'Or—'

Until his wife had had enough – a lash of impatience from the bunk below. 'Moshe!' she cried. 'Won't you give us any peace?'

Even in the blackness Ruth could sense her father's blush. 'It's all right, Tateh,' she tried. 'It is just too dark for stories. We…we cannot picture a thing.'

She had always wondered what her father did with his unused ideas – stones in his pockets, weighing him down, heavier even than the mounds of baggage they had managed to lug through the snow, across the Latvian border, up to Riga, down the port, along the gangplank to this – an entire existence condensed into a schleppable load. There were the stockings and the pans; the Kiddush candelabras; a compass wedged hard against a little leg making a *NorthSouthEastWest* bruise. And then of course there were Uncle

Dovid's letters sent back from America, nearly as sacred to the family now as the Torah scrolls themselves. In fact, probably even more so. Because the ancient words could only tell them their past.

In the beginning…

Whereas these letters told the story of their future.

'Tell it again, Tateh,' Esther had asked when they first set sail. 'I want to hear it again.' Ruth's beautiful sister Esther commanding their father's voice to repeat his brother's words.

So he had done as he was told; had adjusted his window-thick glasses and filled the bloated belly of the boat with tales of all the things that awaited them across the Atlantic. He told them about Manhattan with its buildings that scraped the sky; about the flag lined with stripes and a fistful of stars; about the giant lady with a crown and a torch who welcomed the weary ships in.

And it was only a few more days until their own ship would arrive – two weeks at sea, they had been told. Despite her nausea, Ruth had been counting. And she had even used her compass to try to plot a map in her head, a bit like the one Tateh had had pinned to his attic wall, back where they had come from. It was a yellowed thing, with crosshatch lines for the ocean and a red dot for 'New York'. *Can you see it, Bubbeleh, can you?* Only, the dot had been pointed to so many times that eventually it had disappeared, rubbed away by the poke of desperate fingertips, as if the place never existed at all.

And now her finger was broken.

She turned to ask her Tateh for a kiss; to feel the bush of his beard up against her. But suddenly he seemed busy with other things, the bash of the boat bringing him back to life. He clambered his way down from the bunk and reached up for Ruth to follow. Confused, she let herself be lifted, her hand stashed tight into her

chest, before he took her other hand and led her on through the blackness, a wobble in her legs from the waves underneath. And soon there were other legs too, other hands and other wobbles as the rest of the passengers began to follow behind, the pied piper and the rats.

'What's happening?' they whispered, half-terror half-delight. 'Did somebody say…*arrived*?'

Ruth climbed the ladder to the deck as best she could, though she was clumsy in Esther's old shoes, the buckles chafing stockings chafing goosepimple flesh. Once across the gangplank she felt the scuff of dry land beneath her; a breeze that was surprisingly warm. But a fresh batch of whispers had already started to spread, a new confusion doing the rounds.

'Arrived? But—'

'Nu, America is early.'

Ruth checked the sky as if the answer to their questions might be there, but it was just as lightless out here as it was under the deck – the middle of the American night. She half-remembered how Tateh had mentioned something about 'time differences', not that anyone had really bothered to hear – they had just assumed it was another of his silly ideas – a story all about clocks. Ruth wanted to ask him about it now, to get him to explain, only he and Mame were babbling something else in a language she didn't know. Russian? Lithuanian? She could never tell – used to think they were just special phrases only grown-ups were allowed to say until Esther had explained it was called 'different tongues'. So now the world had time differences and tongue differences and how did they know they weren't just different worlds altogether? And why was no one sure if this was even the right one for America?

As soon as she saw her, though, Ruth's head went mute.

The people around her stopped. Dead. Sea leg sways gone still. Their breaths stopped too, the whole cloud of them held tight in anticipation. But also in concentration. Because what if this was it – the moment they had been sailing for? The one they would have to remember now for the rest of their lives, to translate into words again and again for generations to come?

Arrived.

America.

The beginning?

Ruth tried to force some words of her own to stop her head from spinning away. She started with the ones she had been practising. 'New York' and 'Subway tunnel'. 'Centre Park' where they would go to play and learn the names of different trees. And of course there was 'Liberty' too – wasn't that the woman's name? The one who stood now down the end of the port, a floppy crown on her head and an eager smile dimly lit by the yellow torch she held in her hand, guiding them in just like Uncle Dovid had said.

In a way, she looked smaller than Ruth had expected. In fact, totally different to the image in her head. But despite her father's genes she had always struggled with her imagination, so really, what would she know? She just hoped that that side of her would grow up when the rest of her did, to make them all proud at last.

Still nobody around her spoke, unready to believe. Ruth looked at her Tateh, waiting for him to confirm. Or maybe even to call out a greeting – he was the only one amongst them who could speak any American yet, a whole library of borrowed dictionaries piled on the attic floor, building blocks for little girls to make forts. And Ruth wondered now if an idea stayed the same no matter how many

times you translated it? And what about a family, she wondered? Or even, a love?

But despite these questions, her father gave no answers. Nothing. The only time Ruth had, or ever would, see him lost for words. So she knew then that yes, they must have made it – that this here must be it.

Arrived.

America.

The beginning.

The right world at last, too perfect even to be said aloud.

While behind them Cork City lay slouched in sleep, snoring off last night's dregs, dreaming of anything other than the unexpected arrival of a Russian slaughterhouse ship.

There is always a beginning before the beginning, and this one had started with a plague of rats.

He had been an aspiring young playwright in a village called Akmian, which meant 'a river full of stones'. He sometimes went swimming to check if the rumours were true. He had a younger brother and a brand new wife and a skull that was full itself – an endless stutter of ideas like a tick or a twitch until one about a plague just stuck.

He felt the scurry of it, running through his dreams.

He wrote for five years; five years on one wooden, time-knotted desk, high away in an attic room where pillars of notes and ideas towered on every side – one sneeze and the pages would fly. While out in the shtetl, the locals all thought him crazy – calls his wife the Princess of the Bees and writes a play about rats?

'Nu, inside his head must be a zoo.'

'Noah's Ark, two by two!'

But once finished, something about the play caught on. First in the shtetl's tiny shed theatre, the local ramshackle treat; then in the town of Vilnius; then eventually it caught on in Moscow. And every night in the Empire's biggest city, beneath the ceilings dripping gold, the audience would gaze at the swarms of rodents; at the valiant hero who did not slaughter them, but rather rhymed the rats to death with his poetry and wit. Though the biggest joke of all was that no one could ever know the name of the man who had created this magic. *Anonymous* said the theatre programme. *Anobody*. A genius with a pockmarked face and a pair of bottle-thick specs forbidden to catch even a glimpse of his own work.

Since 1882 it had been illegal for Jews to move to Moscow. So said the May Laws. The no-you-May-not Laws. After the assassination of the Tsar the conspiracy theories had rippled out from St Petersburg, all eyes burning on the underdogs. Until eventually, the truth came out – that yes, there had been a Jewish man involved. Just one. And not even in the killing – not in the hurling of the bomb or the years of conspiracy, just in the hiding, to give the rest of them a place to disappear under the cracks of his floorboards because his people had had a history of being refused such a luxury, so now, who was he to do the same?

In the end, he was a hanged man.

From that moment onwards, it was his people who were forced to hide. Banished from the big cities; forbidden to own land or to take up certain jobs.

To see their masterpieces on stage.

Until one of them begged and an exception was made – a one-night exception for the Ratman.

It took him an entire day to get there – a bus from Akmian then a local train to Moscow, the carriages filled with prostitutes heading to work. Each clutched a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bright yellow permit in the other, both needed to appease the guards. Yet, at the sight of the patchwork of fishnets the playwright didn't so much as flinch. 'Sorry to disturb, ladies, but is this seat taken?' He buried himself amongst them with a smile as their cleavages rickeeted along in time with the tracks. The scent of musk lightened heads. The snow chucked fistfuls of itself at the windows. And the more they gossiped the more he began to listen, enthralled, flattering them with a kind of attention they had never known in all their lonely lives, so that soon he felt the slick of their ruby lips upon his earlobes, whispering, begging for more. Either down the back of the train or in the icy Moscow alleyways where they made their dens. 'Come on,' they pleaded. 'We don't even charge you…' Just one chance to steam up the glasses of the Akmian genius who spoke to them nicer than any boychik ever had.

But 'no', he eventually managed. 'No thank you.' He had his Princess of the Bees waiting back home. And besides, the Commandments decreed – Mitzvah 69 to be precise – that there should be no intercourse with a woman outside of marriage.

The ladies cackled at that; the ladies who made a living out of those who flouted Mitzvah 69.

Eventually they waved him goodbye as he made his way towards the theatre's back door. He smuggled up to the cheapest seats in the house and looked down at the gilded faces looking up to his rats in awe.

By the time he returned to the shtetl it was the following afternoon, yet he knew his Princess wouldn't have slept a breath.

'So?' she asked. 'How was it?' Her black eyes had turned grey in the winter light.

'Exquisite.' He pulled her to him. Still his ears rang with the douse of the applause. 'Austėja, I have been…I think…' The same sound as torrential rain. 'I think it is time for us to leave.'

She gazed out the window beyond his shoulder. The snowflakes landed soft thuds on the ledge. 'Moshe,' she said, suddenly. 'You have something on your ear.'

He grabbed the stain between his fingers, ruby red. 'I must have cut it,' he replied. 'Shaving.' Even though he had been growing his beard since the day they were married, a hive for the honeybees.

It took them ten whole years to save; ten years and two daughters and one brother Dovid gone on ahead to work. A long wait. And then a crumpled letter arrived with some extra money for four tickets on an orange-rusted cattle ship – yet another beast to add to the zoo.

To America.

As well as packing his bags before he left, the playwright had learned his pillars of notes by heart, then built a giant bonfire in the middle of the Market Square. The whole shtetl gathered round to watch the flames feasting on years and years of work, their eyes streaming from the smoke almost as if they were upset; almost as if it were the man himself being burned.