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The Good People

Written by Hannah Kent

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The
Good
People

Hannah Kent

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For my sister, Briony.

There was an old woman and she lived in the woods,
weile weile waile.

There was an old woman and she lived in the woods
down by the river Saile.

She had a baby three months old,
weile weile waile.

She had a baby three months old
down by the river Saile.

She had a penknife, long and sharp,
weile weile waile.

She had a penknife long and sharp
down by the river Saile.

She stuck the penknife in the baby's heart,
weile weile waile.

She stuck the penknife in the baby's heart
down by the river Saile.

Three hard knocks came knocking on the door,
weile weile waile.

Three hard knocks came knocking on the door
down by the river Saile.

‘Are you the woman that killed the child?’
weile weile waile.

‘Are you the woman that killed the child
down by the river Saile?’

The rope was pulled and she got hung,
weile weile waile.

The rope was pulled and she got hung
down by the river Saile.

And that was the end of the woman in the woods,
weile weile waile.

And that was the end of the woman in the woods
down by the river Saile.

When all is said and done, how do we not know but that our
own unreason may be better than another's truth?
for it has been warmed on our hearths and in our souls,
and is ready for the wild bees of truth to hive in it, and make
their sweet honey. Come into the world again,
wild bees, wild bees!

W.B. Yeats, *The Celtic Twilight*



PART ONE

Death is the Physician of the Poor
Liagh gach boicht bas

1825

CHAPTER
ONE

Coltsfoot

Nóra's first thought when they brought her the body was that it could not be her husband's. For one long moment she stared at the men bearing Martin's weight on their sweating shoulders, standing in the gasping cold, and believed that the body was nothing but a cruel imitation; a changeling, brutal in its likeness. Martin's mouth and eyes were open, but his head slumped on his chest and there was no quick in him. The blacksmith and the ploughman had brought her a lifeless stock. It could not be her husband. It was not him at all.

Martin had been digging ditches beside the fields that sloped the valley, Peter O'Connor said. He had seen him stop, place a hand on his chest like a man taking an oath, and fall to the gentle ground. He had not given a shout of pain. He had gone without farewell or fear.

Peter's chapped lips trembled, eyes red-rimmed in their sockets. 'I'm sorry for your trouble,' he whispered.

Nóra's legs collapsed beneath her then and in the fall to the dirt and straw of the yard, she felt her heart seize with terrible understanding.

John O'Donoghue, his thick forearms scar-speckled from iron-work, heaved Martin over his shoulder so that Peter was able to lift Nóra out of the mud. Both men were dark-eyed with grief and when Nóra opened her mouth to scream and found that she had choked on it, they bowed their heads as though they heard her anyway.

Peter wrested the chicken feed from Nóra's clenched fists and kicked the clucking hens from the doorstep. Placing her arm around his shoulders, he led her back inside the cabin to sit by the hearth where her grandchild, Micheál, was sleeping in the unfolded settle bed. The little boy, his cheeks flushed from the heat of the turf fire, stirred as they entered, and Nóra noticed Peter's eyes flicker to him in curiosity.

John followed them inside, his jaw clenched with the weight of Martin's body and his boots tracking mud over the packed clay floor. Grunting with the effort, he laid Martin on the bed in the small sleeping quarter off the main room. Dust from the disturbed straw mattress rose into the air. The blacksmith crossed himself with deliberate precision and, stooping under the lintel, murmured that his wife, Áine, would be there soon, and that the new priest had been fetched.

Nóra felt her throat close over. She rose to go to Martin's body in the bedroom, but Peter held her wrist.

'Let him be washed,' he said gently.

John cast a troubled look at the boy and left without saying another word, shutting the half-door behind him.

The dark rose.

'You saw him fall, did you? Saw him yourself?' Nóra's voice sounded strange and small. She gripped Peter's hand so tightly her fingers ached.

'I did,' he murmured, looking at Micheál. 'I saw him in the fields and raised my hand, and I saw him fall down.'

'There was a need for those ditches. He told me yesterday there was a need for them to be dug, so the rain . . .' Nóra felt her husband's

death creep over her, until she began to shake with it. Peter draped a greatcoat over her shoulders, and she could tell from the familiar smell of burnt coltsfoot that it was Martin's own. They must have brought it back with his body.

'Someone else will have to finish those ditches,' she gasped, rubbing her cheek against the rough frieze.

'Don't be thinking of that now, Nóra.'

'And there will be the thatch, come spring. It needs thatching.'

'We'll all be taking care of that, don't you worry now.'

'And Micheál. The boy . . .' Alarm ran through her and she looked down at the child, his hair copper in the firelight. She was grateful that he slept. The boy's difference did not show so much when he was asleep. The keel of his limbs slackened, and there was no telling the dumb tongue in his head. Martin had always said Micheál looked most like their daughter when asleep. 'You can almost think him well,' he had said once. 'You can see how he will be when the sickness has passed. When we have him cured of it.'

'Is there someone I can fetch for you, Nóra?' Peter asked, his face splintered with concern.

'Micheál. I don't want him here.' Her voice was hoarse. 'Take Micheál to Peg O'Shea's.'

Peter looked uneasy. 'Would you not have him with you?'

'Take him away from here.'

'I don't like to leave you alone, Nóra. Not before Áine is with you.'

'I'll not have Micheál here to be gaped at.' Nóra reached down and grabbed the sleeping boy under his armpits, hauling him into the air in front of Peter. The boy frowned, eyes blinking, gummed with sleep.

'Take him. Take him to Peg's. Before a soul is here.'

Micheál began to squall and struggle as he hung from Nóra's grip. His legs tremored, rashed and dry-looking against the bone.

Peter grimaced. ‘Your daughter’s, isn’t he? God rest her soul.’

‘Take him, Peter. Please.’

He gave her a long, sorrowful look. ‘Folk won’t mind him at a time like this, Nóra. They’ll be thinking of you.’

‘They’ll be gawping and gossiping over him, is what.’

Micheál’s head slumped backwards and he began to cry, his hands drawing into fists.

‘What ails him?’

‘For the love of God, Peter, take him.’ Her voice broke. ‘Take him away!’

Peter nodded and lifted Micheál onto his lap. The boy was clothed in a girl’s woollen dress, too long for him, and Peter awkwardly wrapped the worn cloth around the child’s legs, taking care to cover his toes. ‘Tis cold out,’ he explained. ‘Do you not have a shawl for him?’

Nóra, hands shaking, took off her own and gave it to Peter.

He stood up, bundling the bleating boy against his chest. ‘I’m sorry, Nóra, so I am.’

The cabin door swung wide after him.

Nóra waited until the sound of Micheál’s crying faded and she knew Peter had reached the lane. Then she rose from her low stool and walked into the bedroom, clutching Martin’s coat around her shoulders.

‘Sweet, sore-wounded Christ.’

Her husband lay on their marriage bed, his arms tucked close to his sides, grass and mud clinging to his calloused hands. His eyes were half closed. Their pearly whites glimmered in the light from the open door.

Martin’s stillness in that quiet room sent sorrow peeling through her chest. Easing herself down onto the bed, Nóra touched her forehead against Martin’s cheekbone and felt the cold of his stubbled skin.

Pulling his coat over the both of them, she closed her eyes and her lungs emptied of air. Pain descended with the weight of water and she felt that she was drowning. Her chest shuddered, and she was crying into her husband's collarbone, into his clothes reeking of the earth and cow shit and the soft sweet smell of the valley air and all the turf smoke it carried on an autumn evening. She cried like a pining dog, with the strained, strung whimper of abandonment.

Only that morning they had lain in bed together, both awake in the dark of early dawn, the warmth of Martin's hand resting on her stomach.

'I think it will rain today,' he had said, and Nóra had let him pull her close against the broad barrel of his ribs, had matched the rise and fall of her breathing with his own.

'There was a wind in the night.'

'It woke you?'

'The boy woke me. He was crying in fear of it.'

Martin had listened intently. 'There's no sound from him now.'

'Are you digging potatoes today?'

'Ditches.'

'And will you have a word with the new priest about Micheál on your way home?'

'I will.'

Nóra stretched herself out against her husband's dead body and thought of the nights they had slept in company together, the touch of his foot on hers in the unthinking custom of their marriage, and sobbed until she thought she would be sick.

It was only the thought that her cries might wake devils lying in wait for his soul that made her stop. She stuffed her mouth with the sleeve of Martin's coat and shook, silently.

How dare you leave me behind, she thought.

*

‘Nóra?’

She had fallen asleep. Through the swelling of her eyes she saw the slender outline of the blacksmith’s wife standing in the doorway.

‘Áine,’ Nóra croaked.

The woman entered, crossing herself at the sight of the body. ‘May the Lord have mercy on his soul. I’m sorry for your trouble. Martin, he . . .’ She paused and knelt by Nóra’s side. ‘He was a great man. A rare man.’

Nóra sat up on the bed and wiped her eyes on her apron, embarrassed.

‘The sorrow is on you, Nóra. I can see it. And we’d do right to give him a proper wake. Would you be willing for me to wash and lay him out? Father Healy has been sent for. He’s on his way.’

Áine put her hand on Nóra’s knee and squeezed it. Her face, hanging from wide cheekbones, seemed spectral in the gloom. Nóra stared at her in horror.

‘There now. Here are your beads. He’s with God now, Nóra. Remember that.’ She glanced around the room. ‘Are you alone? Did you not have a child . . .?’

Nóra closed her fingers over the rosary. ‘I am alone.’

Áine washed Martin as tenderly as if he had been her own husband. At first Nóra watched, clutching the prayer beads so tightly that the wood bled her skin into welts. She could not believe that it was her husband naked before them, his belly painful-white. It was shameful for another woman to see the pale secrets of his body. When she stood up and held her hand out for the cloth, Áine passed it to her without a word. She washed him then, and with every movement of her hand she farewelled the boned curve of his chest, the sweep of his limbs.

How well I know you, she thought, and when she felt her throat noose tighter, she swallowed hard and forced her eye to the neat cobwebbing of veins across his thighs, the familiar whorl of his hair. She did not understand how Martin's body could seem so small. In life he had been a bear of a man, had carried her on the night of their wedding as though she was nothing more than sunlight.

The dark fur of his chest slicked damp against his skin.

'I think he is clean now, Nóra,' Áine said.

'A little longer.' She ran her palm down his sternum as though waiting for it to lift in breath.

Áine eased the grey cloth from her fingers' grip.

The afternoon darkened and a bitter wind began to blow outside. Nóra sat beside Martin's body and let Áine stir the fire and fix the rushlights. Both of them jumped at a sudden knocking on the door, and Nóra's heart gave a scalding leap at the thought it might be Martin, returned to her by the evening.

'Blessings on this house.'

A young man entered the cabin, his clerical garb flapping in the doorway. The new priest, Nóra realised. He was dark-haired and ruddy-cheeked, with long limbs that seemed at odds with his soft, child's face and pouting mouth. Nóra noticed a conspicuous gap between his front teeth. Father Healy's hat dripped with rain, and when Peter and John followed him inside, their shoulders were wet through. She had not realised that the weather had changed.

'Good evening to you, Father.' Áine took the damp coat he held out to her and carefully arranged it over the rafter to dry by the heat of the fire.

The priest looked around the cabin before noticing Nóra sitting in the bedroom. He walked towards her, ducking under the low doorframe. His eyes were solemn. 'God be with you, Mrs Leahy.

I'm sorry for your trouble.' Taking her hand in his own, he pressed the flesh of her palm. 'It must be a great shock to you.'

Nóra nodded, her mouth dry.

'It happens to us all, but 'tis always sad when those we love go to God.' He released her hand and turned to Martin, placing two slender fingers against her husband's throat. The priest gave a slight nod. 'He has passed. I cannot give the last rites.'

'He had no warning of his death, Father.' It was Peter who spoke. 'Would you not give him the rites anyway? His soul may yet be in his body.'

Father Healy wiped his forehead on his sleeve and grimaced in apology. 'The sacraments are for the living and cannot avail the dead.'

Nóra gripped her rosary until her knuckles paled. 'Pray for him, will you, Father?'

The priest looked from the two men in the doorway to Nóra.

She lifted her chin. 'He was a good man, Father. Say the prayers over him.'

Father Healy sighed, nodded and reached into his bag, taking out a small, used candle and a glass bottle of oil. He lit the candle by the fire in the main room and placed the waxy stub awkwardly in Martin's hand, beginning the prayers and anointing the man's head with a firm touch.

Nóra sank down onto the hard floor beside the bed and let her fingers slide across the beads in blank habit. But the prayers felt empty and cold in her mouth and she soon stopped whispering and sat there, mute.

I am not ready to be alone, she thought.

Father Healy cleared his throat and stood up, brushing his knees of dirt and reaching for his coat and the coin offered by John.

'May God comfort you,' he said to Nóra, shaking the rain from

his hat and setting it on his head. He took her hand again and she flinched at the feel of the bones in his fingers.

‘May God protect you. Seek His love and forgiveness and keep your faith, Mrs Leahy. I will keep you in my prayers.’

‘Thank you, Father.’

They watched the priest mount his donkey in the yard, squinting against the steady rain. He raised a hand to them in farewell, then whipped the animal’s flank with a sally rod until the weather closed around him and the valley below absorbed his black, fleeing form.

By nightfall the cabin was filled with neighbours who had heard that Martin had died by the crossroads next to the blacksmith’s, falling to the ground on the strike of hammer on anvil as though the ringing of iron had killed him. They gathered around the hearth, taking consolation from their pipes and murmuring condolences to Nóra. Outside, the rain blew against the thatch.

Confronted with a sudden crowd, Nóra concentrated on collecting preparations for the wake with Áine. There was no time to weep while they had *poitín*, clay pipes, tobacco and chairs to find. Nóra knew that death made people long to smoke and drink and eat, as though by tending to their lungs and stomachs they were assuring themselves of their own good health, of the certainty of their continued existence.

When she felt the weight of her grief threaten to press her to the floor, Nóra retreated to the cabin walls and pushed her palms against the cool limewash to steady herself. She took deep breaths and stared at the people in the room. Most of them were from the valley, tied to one another by blood and labour and a shared understanding of the traditions stamped into the soil by those who had come before them. They were quiet, close folk, those who lived on the shadowed side of Crohane, in the fertile crucible formed by the rising rock and hill

of Foiladuane, Derreenacullig and Clonkeen. And they were familiar with death. In her small house Nóra could see that her neighbours were making room for sorrow in the way they knew to be best. They piled turf on the fire and built the flames high, filled the air with smoke, and told each other stories. There would be a time to cry, but it was not yet.

Thunder rolled outside, and the guests shivered and drew closer to the fire. As Nóra moved around the room, setting out drinking water, she heard the people whisper stories of divination. The men commented on the weather and the movements of jacksnipes and magpies, seeing in them signs of Martin's death. Much was made of his collapse at the crossroads where they buried suicides. Some spoke of the sudden change in the sky that afternoon, of the great blackening of clouds in the west and how they had surely heralded Martin's passing. Of the storm that was closing in upon them.

Unaware that Nóra was listening, Peter O'Connor was telling the men that, just before he had seen Martin clutch his heart, he had noticed four magpies sitting together in a field.

'There I was, walking the lane, and did those birds move? They did not. They let me pass within arm's reach of them and not once did they startle. "That's mighty strange," I thought to myself, and – I tell you, lads – a shiver went through me for it seemed they stood in conference. "Someone has died," I thought. Then sure, I make my way down the boreen until I reached the crossroads and, soon enough, there is Martin Leahy, lying with the sky in his eyes and the clouds darkening beyond the mountains.'

There was a slap of thunder and they jumped.

'So, 'twas you that found him then, lying there?' asked Nóra's nephew, Daniel, drawing on his pipe.

'Twas. And a sorrow 'twas to me too. I saw that great man topple like a tree. He had not yet the cold upon him, God rest his soul.'

Peter's voice softened to a hush. 'And that's not all of it. When John and I were bringing the body here, dragging him up the slope from the crossroads – and you know the heft of Martin, 'twas slow going – well, we stopped a while to catch our breath, and we looked down the valley, out towards the woods, and there we saw *lights*.'

There was a murmur of intrigue.

'That's right. Lights. Coming from where the *fairies* do be, down by the Piper's Grave,' Peter continued. 'Now, I might not have the full of my eyes, but I swear I saw a glowing by that whitethorn. You mark my words, there'll be another death in this family before long.' His voice dropped to a whisper. 'First the daughter passes, and now the husband. I tell you, death likes three in company. And if the Good People have a hand in it . . . well.'

Nóra's throat tightened and she turned away to seek out Áine. She found her taking chalk pipes and a lump of uncut tobacco from a straw *ciseán*.

'Do you hear that storming?' Áine whispered. She gestured to the basket. 'Your nephew Daniel's woman, the young wife, she's brought some preparations.'

Nóra picked up a small cloth parcel and untied its string with shaking fingers. Salt, damp from the rain. 'Where is she?'

'Praying over Martin.'

The bedroom was crowded, the air blue with the pipe smoke that the older men and women blew over her husband. Nóra noticed that they had turned Martin's body so that his head was at the foot of the bed, so as to avert further misfortune. His mouth had fallen open and his skin had already taken on the waxiness of the dead, his forehead greasy with the priest's oils. The candle stub, unlit, lolled amongst the bedclothes. A young woman knelt beside him, reciting Hail Mary with her eyes closed.

Nóra tapped her on the shoulder. 'Brigid.'

The girl looked up. ‘Oh, Nóra,’ she whispered, heaving herself to her feet. Her pregnant belly swelled, lifting the front of her skirts and apron so that her bare ankles were visible. ‘I’m sorry for your trouble. Martin was a mighty man. How are you keeping?’

Nóra opened her mouth to speak but thought better of it.

‘Himself and I brought what you might need.’ She nodded to where Daniel sat smoking with Peter. ‘I set a basket on the table.’

‘I know, Áine showed me. ’Tis kind of you both. I’ll pay you for it.’

‘A bad year for you.’

Nóra took a breath. ‘Do you know who might have the drink?’

‘Seán has brought *poitín*.’ Brigid pointed through to the main room where Seán Lynch, Daniel’s uncle, was setting two clay jars of spirits on the floor. His wife, Kate, was with him, a woman with crowded teeth and a hunched, hounded look. She stood in the doorway, peering around the room in agitation. They had clearly just arrived; their clothes were dark with rain and the smell of cold was on them.

‘Nóra, Brigid.’ Kate nodded as the two women made their way back into the room. ‘’Tis a sad evening. Has the priest been? Do we need to hide the drink?’

‘Been and gone.’

Seán’s face was grim, his eyes and lips set in hard, leathered lines. He pushed tobacco into the bowl of his clay pipe with a calloused thumb. ‘Sorry for your trouble,’ he told Nóra.

‘God save you kindly, Seán.’

‘You’ve a visitor lurking out there,’ he said, gesturing towards the door. Taking the offer of an ember from one of the men by the fire, he lit his pipe with the tongs and muttered, ‘May God have mercy on the souls of the dead.’ Smoke escaped from between his teeth. ‘The herb hag. She’s out by your dung heap, waiting.’

Nóra paused. 'Nance Roche?'

'Aye, the interfering biddy herself.' He spat on the floor.

'How did she know to come?'

Seán frowned. 'I wouldn't talk to her if she was the last woman alive.'

Kate watched him anxiously.

'Nance Roche? I thought she was the handy woman?' Brigid asked.

'I wonder what she wants,' Nóra muttered. 'Tis a long way for an old woman on a night of tipping rain. I wouldn't put my enemy's dog out tonight.'

'Looking for pipe smoke and drink, it is,' Kate remarked sourly, nostrils flaring. 'Don't go out to her, Nóra. Not that hag, that swindler *cailleach*.'

Night had fallen and the downpour had grown heavier. Nóra pushed out the wooden door of the cabin and peered into the yard, her head hunched under the low awning of thatch. Water poured off the straw ends. At first she couldn't see anything through the rain, only a thin rim of iron grey on the horizon where the dark had not yet suffocated the light. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw a small figure moving towards her from the gabled end of the house where the muck of the smallholding lay heaped against the stone wall. Nóra stepped down into the yard, shutting the door behind her to keep out the cold. The mud rose over her toes.

'Who's that there?' she called, her words drowned out by thunder. 'Is that you, Nance Roche?'

The visitor walked to the door and bent her head under the thatch, pulling the cloak from her head.

'So 'tis, Nóra Leahy.'

Lightning flared and Nóra saw the old woman before her,

drenched to the bone, her white hair slick against her skull. Nance blinked away the rain that slid down her forehead and sniffed. She was small, shrunken, with a face as wrinkled as a forgotten russet. Her eyes, fogged with age, looked up at Nóra from beneath heavy eyelids. ‘I’m sorry for your trouble.’

‘Thank you, Nance.’

‘Tis the end of Martin’s worry in this life.’

‘So ’tis.’

‘Your man is on the way of truth now.’ Nance’s lips parted, revealing the few stray teeth that remained in her gums. ‘I’ve come to see if you will have me keen. Your Martin was a good man.’

Nóra looked at Nance dripping in front of her. Her clothes, heavy with water, hung off narrow shoulder blades, but for all her layers of sopping wool she had a certain presence. There was a sharp, bitter smell coming off her. Like bruised nettles, thought Nóra. Or rotting leaves. The smell of someone who lived close to the forest floor.

‘How did you know to come?’ asked Nóra.

‘I saw that new priest on his ass, beating the dust out of the animal. Only the Devil or a dying man would drive a priest into a wet and dirty night.’

‘Father Healy.’

‘I had the knowledge then that it was your man, Martin. God rest his soul,’ she added.

An icy thread ran the length of Nóra’s spine. Thunder sounded.

‘The knowledge?’

Nance nodded and reached for Nóra. Her fingers were cold and surprisingly smooth.

Healer’s palms, thought Nóra. ‘And so you’ve walked all the way in the wet and wind.’

‘No one becomes a worse person for rain on her head. I would do a great deal more for your man.’

Nóra opened the door and flicked the mud off her feet. ‘Well, come in so. Seeing as you’re here.’

‘I will.’

The conversation inside the crowded cabin halted as Nóra led Nance into the room. All eyes looked to the older woman, who stopped inside the doorway and gazed about her, chin raised.

‘God save all here,’ she said. Her voice was thin, husked with smoke and age.

The men nodded to her in respect. A few of the women looked Nance up and down, noting the thick clag of mud that clung to the hem of her skirt, her weathered face, her soaked shawl. Seán Lynch glared before turning his face to the fire.

John O’Donoghue rose, his blacksmith’s bulk suddenly filling the room. ‘And you, Nance Roche. God save you.’ He moved forward to lead her to the fire, and the other men immediately made room by the hearth. Peter, pipe in mouth, fetched a crepie stool and placed it firmly down by the coals, and Áine brought water for her dirty feet. Daniel offered Nance a small nip of *poitín*, and when she shook her head, the young man mumbled, ‘Tis not a drop big enough to fit a wren’s bill,’ and pressed it into her hand.

Those who had fallen silent resumed their talk once they saw Nance was welcome. Only Seán and Kate Lynch retreated to the shadows where they slouched, watching.

Nance extended her bare toes to the embers, sipping her spirits. Nóra sat beside her, dread unspooling in her stomach as she watched the steam rise from the old woman’s shoulders. How had she known Martin had died?

The old woman took a deep breath and raised a hand towards the bedroom. ‘He’s in there?’

‘He is,’ Nóra answered, heart fluttering.

Nance cradled her cup. 'When was his hour?'

'John and Peter brought him to me when it was still light. Before evening.' Nóra looked at the ground. The close air of the cabin after the clean night outdoors was making her feel sick. There was too much pipe smoke. Too much noise. She wished she could go outside and lie on the soft slick of mud, breathe in the smell of rain and be alone. Let the lightning strike her.

Nóra felt Nance's hands close around her fingers. The tenderness in her touch was alarming. She fought the urge to push the woman away.

'Nóra Leahy. You listen to me,' Nance whispered. 'For all the death in the world, each woman's grief is her own. It takes a different shape with all of us. But the sad truth is that people will not want your grief a year after you bury your husband. 'Tis the way of it. They'll go back to thinking of themselves. They'll go back to their own lives. So let us mourn Martin now, while they will listen. While they have the patience for it.'

Nóra nodded. She felt like she would throw up.

'And, Nóra, tell me. What's all this muttering about him passing at the crossroads? Is that true?'

'Tis.' It was Brigid who had spoken. She was cutting tobacco at the table behind them. 'Peter O'Connor found him there. A dreadful sorrow.'

Nance turned her head, squinting. 'And who are you?'

'Brigid Lynch.'

'My nephew Daniel's wife,' Nóra explained.

Nance frowned. 'You are carrying. Young Brigid, you ought not to be in a corpse house.'

Brigid stopped cutting the plugs of tobacco and stared.

'You have a right to leave. Before you breathe the death in and infect your child with it.'

‘Is that true?’ Brigid dropped the knife on the table. ‘I knew to stay out of the churchyard, but . . .’

‘Churchyard, corpse house, grave mound.’ Nance spat on the fire.

Brigid turned to Nóra. ‘I don’t want to leave Daniel,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t like to go out when ’tis dark. And ’tis storming. I don’t want to go alone.’

‘No.’ Nance shook her head. ‘Don’t you go alone. ’Tis an uneasy night.’

Brigid pressed both hands against the round of her stomach.

Nance waved at Áine, who was handing out filled pipes to the men. ‘Áine O’Donoghue, will you take this girl to a neighbour’s? Take her husband too, so he might come back with you. ’Tis no night for a soul to be alone on the road.’

‘Take her to Peg O’Shea’s,’ Nóra muttered. ‘She’s closest.’

Áine looked between the women. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘’Tis for the good of the young one’s child.’ Nance reached out and placed her wrinkled hand on Brigid’s belly. ‘Make haste, girl. Put some salt in your pocket and leave. This storm is brewing.’

By midnight Nóra’s cabin was oppressive with the smell of wet wool and the sourness of too many people in a crowded room. The eyelids of Martin Leahy were bright with two pennies, placed there by a neighbour, and there was a crusted saucer of salt balanced on his chest. A plate of tobacco and coltsfoot sat on the dead man’s stomach. The air was unbearably close, smoke-rich, as the men nudged their lips with clay pipes, borrowing Nóra’s knitting needles to tap out the ashes and wiping them on their trousers.

At the approach of midnight John O’Donoghue recited a rosary for the dead, and the company knelt and mumbled their responses. Then the men retreated to the walls of the cabin and watched the women keen the body by the poor light of the rush

tapers, stinking of fat and burning too quickly from their brass pinch.

Nance Roche led the wailing against the muted cracking of thunder. Her forehead was grey with ashes, her hands blackened from where she had smeared cold cinders on the foreheads of the other women. Nóra Leahy felt each powdered cheek split with the hot, wet path of her tears. She knelt on the ground and looked up at the circle of familiar faces, furrowed in solemnity.

This is a nightmare, she thought.

Nance closed her eyes, let her mouth slip open, and began a low lament that vanquished the small conversation of the men like an airless room snuffs a flame. She crouched on the clay floor and rocked back and forth, her hair loosened and thin over her shoulders. She cried without pause, without words. Her keen was hollow, fear-filled. It reminded Nóra of the *bean sídhe*, of the silent, scrabbling death-yawns of drowning men

As Nance keened, the other women muttered prayers for the dead, asking God to accept Martin Leahy's departed soul. Nóra noticed Kate Lynch, brown hair dull in the gloom, next to her kneeling daughter, Sorcha, dimpled and whispering, and Éilís O'Hare, the schoolmaster's wife, crossing herself in a latticework of prayer, one eye open to Nance as she clawed the firelight. Her neighbours and their daughters. The glut of valley women, all wringing their hands. Nóra shut her eyes. None of them knew how she felt. None of them.

It was frightening, to be unbridled from language and led into anguish by the *bean feasa*. Nóra opened her mouth and did not recognise her own voice. She moaned and the sound of her grief scared her.

Many in the room were moved to tears by the *caoineadh* of the women. They bent their damp heads and praised Martin Leahy with tongues loosened by *poitín*, naming the qualities that recommended

him to God and man. The fine father of a daughter, gone to God only months before. A decent husband. A man who had the gift for bone-setting, and whose wide hands could always calm horses in a hackle of panic.

Nance's moan dropped to a low ragged breathing. Sweeping up a sudden fistful of ash, she threw her body towards the yard door of the cabin, flinging the cinders towards it. Ashes to banish Those that would restrain a soul's flight into the other world. Ashes to sanctify the grieving of kith and kin and mark it as holy.

Amidst the prayers, Nance slowly dropped her head to her knees, wiped the ash from her face with her skirts, and rose from the floor. The keening had finished. She waited until the words and cries of those in the room subsided into respectful silence, and then, nodding at Nóra, retired to a dark corner. She knotted her white hair at the nape of her neck and accepted a clay pipe, and spent the rest of the night smoking thoughtfully, watching the womenfolk and mourners circle Nóra like birds above a new-shorn field.

The night ground down the hours. Many of the people, dulled and comforted by the heady fumes of burning coltsfoot, lay down to sleep on the floor, plumping beds out of heather and rushes and slurring prayers. Rain escaped down the chimney and fell hissing on the fire. A few kept their eyes open with stories and gossip, taking turns to bless the body and finding omens in the thunderstorm that thrashed the valley outside. Only Nóra saw the old woman rise from her corner, slip her hood back over her head and retreat into the darkness and the howling world.