The Secret Scripture

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Extract

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

Roseanne's Testimony of Herself

(*Patient, Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital,* 1957–)

The world begins anew with every birth, my father used to say. He forgot to say, with every death it ends. Or did not think he needed to. Because for a goodly part of his life he worked in a graveyard.

That place where I was born was a cold town. Even the mountains stood away. They were not sure, no more than me, of that dark spot, those same mountains.

There was a black river that flowed through the town, and if it had no grace for mortal beings, it did for swans, and many swans resorted there, and even rode the river like some kind of plunging animals, in floods.

The river also took the rubbish down to the sea, and bits of things that were once owned by people and pulled from the banks, and bodies too, if rarely, oh and poor babies, that were embarrassments, the odd time. The speed and depth of the river would have been a great friend to secrecy.

That is Sligo town I mean.

Sligo made me and Sligo undid me, but then I should have given up much sooner than I did being made or undone by human towns, and looked to myself alone. The terror and hurt in my story happened because when I was young I thought others were the authors of my fortune or misfortune; I did not know that a person could hold up a wall made of imaginary

bricks and mortar against the horrors and cruel, dark tricks of time that assail us, and be the author therefore of themselves.

I am not there now, now I am in Roscommon. It is an old place that was one time a mansion but it is all cream paint and iron beds now, and locks on the doors. It is all Dr Grene's kingdom. Dr Grene is a man I don't understand but I am not afraid of him. What religion he is I don't know, but he looks very like to St Thomas, with his beard and balding crown.

I am completely alone, there is no one in the world that knows me now outside of this place, all my own people, the few farthings of them that once were, my little wren of a mother I suppose in chief, they are all gone now. And my persecutors are gone in the main I believe, and the reason for all this is that I am an old, old woman now, I may be as much as a hundred, though I do not know, and no one knows. I am only a thing left over, a remnant woman, and I do not even look like a human being no more, but a scraggy stretch of skin and bone in a bleak skirt and blouse, and a canvas jacket, and I sit here in my niche like a songless robin – no, like a mouse that died under the hearthstone where it was warm, and lies now like a mummy in the pyramids.

No one even knows I have a story. Next year, next week, tomorrow, I will no doubt be gone, and it will be a smallsize coffin they will need for me, and a narrow hole. There will never be a stone at my head, and no matter.

But small and narrow are all human things maybe.

It is silence all about. My hand is good and I have a beautiful biro full of blue ink, given me by my friend the doctor, because I said I liked its colour – who is not a bad man in truth, maybe even a philosopher – and I have a bundle of paper that I found in a store cupboard among other unwanted things, and I have a floorboard loosened where I hide these treasures. I write out my life on unwanted paper – surplus to requirements. I start with a clean sheet – with many clean

sheets. For dearly I would love now to leave an account, some kind of brittle and honest-minded history of myself, and if God gives me the strength, I will tell this story, and imprison it under the floor-board, and then with joy enough I will go to my own rest under the Roscommon sod.

My father was the cleanest man in all the Christian world, all Sligo anyhow. He seemed to me all strapped about in his uniform – not in any manner haphazard, but regular as an account book. He was the superintendent of the graveyard, and for this work he had been given quite a resplendent uniform, or so it seemed to me as a child.

He had a barrel in the yard that gathered the rain and with that he rinsed himself every day of the year. He would turn the faces of my mother and myself to the wall of the kitchen, and stood without fear of being seen among the mosses and the lichens of the yard, stripped entirely, and laved himself mercilessly in all kinds of weather, in the deeps of winter groaning like a bull.

Carbolic soap, that would have cleaned a greasy floor, he agitated into a suit of suds, that fitted him well, and he scraped at his self with a piece of grey stone, that he stuck into the wall in a particular niche when he was done – from where it poked out like a nose. All this I saw by glimpses and quick turns of the head, because I was a dishonest daughter in that way, and couldn't obey.

No circus act could have pleased me in the same way.

My father was a singer that could not be silenced, he sang all the songs of the operettas of those days. And he loved to read the sermons of preachers long gone, because, he said, he could imagine the sermons fresh for some vanished Sunday, and the words new in the mouths of the preachers. His own father had

been a preacher. My father was a passionate, I might almost say celestial-minded Presbyterian man, which was not a particularly fashionable quality in Sligo. The *Sermons* of John Donne he prized above all, but his veritable gospel was *Religio Medici* by Sir Thomas Browne, a book I still possess in all the flotsam and ruckus of my life, in a little battered volume. I have it here before me on my bed, with his name in black ink inside, Joe Clear, and the date 1888, and the town Southampton, for in his extreme youth he had been a sailor, sailing into every port of Christendom before he was seventeen.

In Southampton occurred one of the kingly or main events of his life, in that he met my mother Cissy, who was a chamber maid in the sailors' boarding house he favoured.

He used to tell a curious story about Southampton, and as a child I received it as the gospel truth. It may have been true for all that.

One season coming into port he could find no bed in his favourite house and was obliged to go further along the windy wastes of terraces and signs, and found a lonely house with a vacant sign stuck out to fish in customers.

In he went and was met by a greyfaced woman in her middle years, who gave him a bed in the basement of her house.

In the middle of the night he woke, thinking he heard someone breathing in the room. Startled, and with that extreme awakeness that attends such panic, he heard a groan, and someone lay on the bed beside him in the dark.

He lit his candle from the tinderbox. There was no one to be seen. But he saw the bedclothes and mattress depressed where a heavy person lay. He leapt from the bed and called out but there was no reply. It was then he noticed also in his very entrails a terrible sense of hunger such as had not afflicted an Irishman since the dark famine. He rushed to the door but to his amazement it was locked against him. Now he was greatly outraged. 'Let me out, let me out!' he called, both terrified and

affronted. How dare that old hag lock him in! He banged and banged, and finally the landlady came and calmly unlocked it. She apologised and said she must have unwittingly turned the key against thieves. He told her about the disturbance but she only smiled at him and said nothing, and then went up to her own quarters. He thought he caught from her a strange smell of leaves, of underfloor and undergrowth, like she had been crawling through woodland. Then there was calm, and he snuffed out his candle and tried to sleep.

The same thing happened a little while later. He leapt up again and lit his candle and went to the door. It was locked again! Again that deep gnawing hunger in his belly. For some reason, maybe because of her extreme strangeness, he couldn't bear to call the landlady, and sweating and discommoded he spent the night in a chair.

When morning broke he awoke, and dressed, and when he went to the door it was open. He took his bags and went upstairs. It was then he noticed the decrepitude of the place, which had not been so obvious in the kinder darkness of the night. He could not raise the landlady, and with his ship due to sail, was forced to leave the house without seeing her, throwing the few shillings on the hallstand as he went out.

Outside in the street when he looked back he was greatly perturbed to see many of the windowpanes of the house were broken, and there were slates missing from the sagging roof.

He went into the shop on the corner to compose himself by talking to another human person, and asked the shopkeeper about the house. The house, said the shopkeeper, had been closed up some years ago and was uninhabited. Ideally it would be demolished except it was part of the terrace. He could not have spent the night there, said the shopkeeper. No one lived there and no one would dream of buying it, for the reason that a woman had killed her husband there, locking him in a basement room and starving him to death. The

woman herself had been tried and hanged for murder.

My father told me and my mother this story with the passion of a person reliving it as he spoke. The gloomy house, the grey woman, the groaning ghost swam behind his eyes.

'It's as well there was room with us the next time you were in port, then, Joe,' said my mother, in her most neutral tones.

'By God, by God, yes,' said my father.

A little human story, a sailor's story, that somehow had still bound up in it my mother's contrasting beauty, and the enormous lure she had for him then and always.

For her beauty was that darkhaired, darkskinned Spanish sort of beauty, with green eyes like American emeralds, that no man can protect himself against.

And he married her and brought her back to Sligo and there she lived her life henceforth, not bred in that darkness, but like a lost shilling on a floor of mud, glistening in some despair. A more beautiful girl Sligo never saw, she had skin as soft as feathers, and a warm, generous breast all new-baked bread and delight.

The greatest joy of my young life was issuing forth with my mother into the streets of Sligo at dusk, because she liked to meet my father on his way home from his work at the cemetery. It was only many years later when I was more grown myself that I realised, looking back, that there was a certain anxiety in that going forth, as if she did not trust time and the ordinary way of things to bring him home. For I do believe my mother suffered strangely under her halo of beauty.

He was the superintendent there, as I said to you, and wore a blue uniform and a cap with a peak as black as a blackbird's coat.

This was at a time when there was the Great War and the town was full of soldiers, as if Sligo itself were a battlefield, but of course it was not. It was but men on their furlough we saw there. But they had a great look of my own father, what with

the uniforms – so that he seemed to pop up everywhere in those streets, as my mother and me were walking, myself looking out as fiercely as she for him. My joy was only completed when at last it turned out to be him, coming home from the cemetery in the dark evenings of winter, as might be, skittering along. And when he spied me he would be playing with me then, larking about like a child. And many a glance he got, and maybe such action didn't go with his dignity as superintendent of the Sligo dead. But he had that rare ability to let things ease in himself in the company of a child, and be stupid and gay in the parched light.

He was the keeper of the graves, but he was also himself, and in his peaked cap and blue uniform could guide a person to whatever plot held relative or friend with solemn dignity enough, but alone in his graveyard house, which was a little temple made of concrete, he would be heard singing wonderfully 'I Dreamt that I Dwelt in Marble Halls' from *The Bohemian Girl*, one of his favourite operettas.

And on free days he went out on his Matchless motorcycle to race along on the devious roads of Ireland. If the winning of my mother constituted a kingly event, the fact that he in one great year of fortune, around the time of my birth, raced the short course on the Isle of Man, on his lovely bike, coming in respectably in the middle of the field, and not killing himself, was the source of constant memory and joy, and I am sure consoled him in his concrete temple in the dreary stretches of an Irish winter, surrounded as he was by those sleeping souls.

My father's other 'famous' story, that is, famous in our tiny household, happened during his single days, when he was more able to get himself to the few motorcycle meetings of those times. It happened in Tullamore, and was a singularly peculiar tale.

He was going along himself at a great rate, and in front of

him was a long wide hill, leading down to a sharp turn where the road met a domain wall, one of those high, thick stone walls built during the Irish famine indeed, as a sort of useless labour to keep labourers alive. At any rate, the racer in front of him, tearing down the hill and picking up an enormous head of speed, instead of braking seemed even to accelerate at the opposing wall, and finally, in a horrible clutter of smoke, metal and a noise as of cannons, struck it mercilessly. My father, peering out through his dirty goggles, nearly lost his grip on his own machine, such was his horror; but then saw a sight he could not and could never explain, which was the rider rising as if on wings, and crossing the huge wall in a swift and gentle movement, like the smooth glide of a seagull in an upwind. For a moment, for a moment he thought indeed he saw a flash of wings, and never could read in his prayerbook again about angels without thinking of that extraordinary instance.

Please do not think my father was dissembling, because he was quite incapable of that. It is true that in country districts – even in the towns – people like to tell you they have seen wonders, such as my husband Tom and the two-headed dog on the road to Enniscrone. It is true also that such stories are only effective if the teller feigns absolute belief – or indeed saw such wonders truly. But my father was no magician of lies and stories.

My father managed to slow his motor-bicycle and stop, and running along the domain wall, found one of those fanciful little gates, and pushing the rusty iron, hurried in through nettles and docks to find his miraculous friend. There on the other side of the wall he lay, quite unconscious, but also, and my father swore to the truth of it, quite unharmed. Eventually the man, who happened to be an Indian gentleman who sold scarves and other items out of his suitcase all over the western seaboard, awoke, and smiled at my father. They both mar-

velled at this inexplicable escape, which not unnaturally was the talk of Tullamore for years after. If you ever hear that story, the teller might give it the title of 'The Indian Angel'.

Again my father's curious happiness was most clearly evident in the retelling of this story. It was as if such an event were a reward to him for being alive, a little gift of narrative that pleased him so much it conferred on himself, in dreams and waking, a sense of privilege, as if such little scraps of stories and events composed for him a ragged gospel. And if ever there were to be written an evangelical gospel of my father's life – and why should there not, as every person's life is said to be precious to God – I suppose those wings merely glimpsed on his friend the Indian's back would become more substantial, and things merely hinted at by him would become in the new telling by a second hand solid, unprovable, but raised up even higher into the realms of miracle. So that all and sundry might take comfort from it.

My father's happiness. It was a precious gift in itself, as perhaps my mother's anxiety was a perpetual spanner thrown into her works. For my mother never made miniature legends of her life, and was singularly without stories, though I am sure there were things there to tell as good as my father's.

It is funny, but it strikes me that a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them. Of course this is the fate of most souls, reducing entire lives, no matter how vivid and wonderful, to those sad black names on withering family trees, with half a date dangling after and a question mark.

My father's happiness not only redeemed him, but drove him to stories, and keeps him even now alive in me, like a second more patient and more pleasing soul within my poor soul.

Perhaps his happiness was curiously unfounded. But cannot a man make himself as happy as he can in the strange long

reaches of a life? I think it is legitimate. After all the world is indeed beautiful and if we were any other creature than man we might be continuously happy in it.

The principal room in our little house, while already of narrow dimensions, we shared with two large objects, viz. the aforementioned motorbike which had to be kept out of the rain. It lived in our living room a quiet life as one might say, my father being able from his chair idly to run a chamois leather over the chrome when he wished. The other object which I want to mention is the little cottage upright piano, which had been bequeathed him by a grateful widower, as my father had dug a hole for this man's wife at no charge, because the circumstances of the bereaved family had been straitened. So one summer night, soon after the burial, the piano had arrived on a donkey and cart, and was carried in with smiles and embarrassed happiness by the widower and his two sons, and placed in our tiny room. The piano had possibly never been worth a great sum, but it had a most beautiful tone for all that, and had never been played before it reached us, in as much as one could surmise that history from the state of the keys, which were pristine. There were scenes painted on the side panels, of places which were not Sligo as such, most likely being scenes of an imaginary Italy or the like, but might have been all the same, being of mountains and rivers, with shepherds and shepherdesses standing about with their patient sheep. My father, having grown up in his own father's ministry, was able to play this lovely instrument, and his delight as I have said was in the old operettas of the previous century. He considered Balfe a genius. As there was room for me beside him on the stool I soon by grace of my love for him and my own great joy in his ability began to pick up the rudiments of playing, and

slowly progressed to some real accomplishment, without in any way feeling it was an effort or a trial.

Then I could play for him as he stood out in the centre of the floor, such as it was, with his hand idly perchance on the seat of his motorbike, the other hand in his jacket like an Irish Napoleon, and sing with utmost perfection, or so it seemed to me, 'Marble Halls', or the other gems of his repertoire – and, for that matter, those little songs called Neapolitan, which of course were not as I thought in memory of Napoleon, but songs invented in the streets of Naples – songs now in exile in Sligo! His voice entered my head as a sort of honey, that lingered there potently, buzzingly, banishing all the fears of childhood. As the voice rose up, so did all of him, arms, whiskers, one foot swinging a little over the old carpet with its pattern of repeating dogs, his eyes brimming with a strange merriment. Even Napoleon might not have scorned him as a man of elevated qualities. At such moments he exhibited a most beautiful timbre in the quieter passages of songs that to this day I have never heard outmatched. Many fine singers made their way to Sligo when I was a young woman and sang in the halls under the rain, and for a few of the more popular sort I even played piano accompaniment, chopping out the notes and chords for them, more of a hindrance than a help to them perhaps. But none seemed to me to equal the strange privacy of my father's voice.

And a man who can make himself merry in the face of those coming disasters that assailed him, as disasters do so many, without grace or favour, is a true hero.