

A Real Legend by Victoria McNulty



God only knows how he goat here. 1920s. Irish. Cid be anywan's guess. A heard he wis wae the rebels. A heard he wis runnin fae them. He'd racked up some kind ae debt. Serious dangur! Ma Daddy awways said he travelled here oan fit. Walked rollin green hills, slept by campfires in the durt. He said everywan in Ireland wis starvin, bent double and oot ae work after the Famine. When he wis a youngstur aw his pals were startin anew lifes in America, New York City! The Big Apple! And he went tae England. England!? Anyway, he said he goat the boat oan the River Foyle. A heard he wanted tae train as a priest. Went tae Liverpool, fell in love wae a pregnant Welsh wumman, ma Mammy. He wis shunned fae the church. They ran away tae Glaesga. He wis a real legend ma Daddy. Awways tellin tales. We nivur knew the truth, only wit nosey neighbours thought, and wit the auld chancer wanted tae tell us.

Legends ur only hauf true. Ma Daddy wis so handsome. Smilin blue eyes, blond hair and a razor jaw. He worked hard. Labourin stuff. Liftin and cartin mainly. He awways hud durt undur his nails and muck oan his neck. Aw the wummen in oor close loved him. He drove a motor bike wae a side car and thought he wis a ticket. Ma Daddy wis a bully. He chased me roon the kitchen table, a fell and knocked oot ma two front teeth. Wance he shiriked ma wee brar so much he'd wet the bed wae aw ae us in it. He carried somehin horrible, ma Daddy. Bit oan his gid nights we'd sit roon the table playin cairds. He'd cheat, obviously. And tell us about the watur lappin oan white sand where he wis fae. The horses, the dugs. Aw, ma Daddy loved dugs! Ye see, legends dinnae need tae be perfect, we jist remember the gid bits.

We wur durt poor tae, but oor hoose wis ayeways spotless. We aw hid tae work tae chip in. A worked weekends in a shoe shoap on tap ae ma school, ma aulder sistur married young. Ma younger sistur Moira helped ma

Mammy. Brushin the flair, pressin the claes. My wee brar John wis an apprentice weldur. He wis the apple ae ma Mammy's eye. Ma Daddy awways said he'd grow up saft. But ma Mammy jist loved him so. She'd lost a couple ae weans. It wisnae uncommon in they days. She missed her country and her heart wis sore and ma brar gave her somethin tae doat about.

The hing aboot immigrants is they say wit they want tae say. They in reinvent themsel in every city. Bit aebidy aboot us wis Irish apart fae ma Mammy. Aw the adults fae Mayo and Donegal, so we wurnae any different. Still, in they days bein Irish wisnae safe. There wis a deadly sense ae shame. Shoap windaes hid signs 'NO IRISH NEED APPLY.' We cid only work in certain trades. So, ma Daddy kept hissel tae hissel and told the myths he wanted tae tell, while leavin oot the true bits. Ma Daddy wis in the Air Force, left cause he didnae like it. Ma Daddy wis the caretaker in the Chapel in the Garngad, goat in a fight wae the priest, told him were tae shove his joab. Ma Daddy never boat that collie dug aff a guy in his work, it jist follaed him hame. Ma Daddy won the Grand National twice, cidnae find the bettin slips. At work he wis Mick, at hame Michèal, and fur aw he talked, we didnae know him at all. Until ma Granny came tae stay.

A came hame fae school wan day and she wis at the scullery table, wrapped in a crochet shawl. Her wee sparra hauns toastin away at the fire, jitterin ae cup a tea tae her mooth whenever she felt able. Ma brar said she must hiv come oan the boat. She sat there in her woolly jumper and big thick skirt, her mooth a tight slit, and her wee heid tremorin so slightly that it awmost felt as if it wisnae movin at aw. She looked merr like she'd travelt by time machine than boat! There wis somehin ancient aboot Granny. No jist her age! Somehin we'd forgotten aboot. She hid wild blue eyes, wae wee crow feet. And a swear, if ye looked closer ye could see the sea swirlin and smashin in her iris. She didnae speak like us either, she talked in tongues tae ma Daddy. She'd croak in this warrior tongue, and he wid awways answer in oor language the way he ayeways did. Curt, firm and cauld.

For the first few days she did nuthin at aw. She slept in her chair, a hink, cause she wis awake at bedtime, awake in the morn. A candle by night, kettle boilin fur her tea at sunrise. She didnae read, didnae move, just stared oot the windae, as if it wis the wee porthole ae the ship she'd came here in.

One day, a wis horsin aboot, poachin fur some food, daein a wee nosey fur a sweetie or a penny that somebody hid misplaced someplace. A heard a croak fae the table. 'Bring ye here, now,' it said. A looked up and ma wee Granny was smilin at me, wrappin her wee thick fingernails aff the wood beside her. 'Bring yourself a chair, now. And we can talk while them uns are out,' a wee laugh-cough snuck oot, 'and bring me my bag too, I might have something for you.' As a settled doon beside her, she rummaged pennies and papers, her knobbed fingurs pulled oot a giant toffee wrapped in a waxy papur. Jist wit a wis lookin fur! And that's how we sat on oor secret days. Warmed by the fire, a sweet tea fur her and a toffee fur me.

Some Wednesday night, a wis tellin her aboot oor John and she sipped her tea and looked at me, started fumblin fur her bag. 'Go raibh maith agat,' she cracked as I lifted it ontae her lap. 'Now,' she said, very official. 'I'm not going to be here forever, so. It's time we talked about home.' She pulled oot a picture ae hersel as a young woman, blonde hair like ma Daddy. She was skin and bone, staunin beside an iron fence oan a patch ae trampled grass. Tae her side wis a wee hoose wae a thatched roof, a waw ae thick black stone. Beyond her ye could see hills and merr hills and then the ocean. She told me she wis born twinty years aftur the Famine and her home wis still a ghost toon. They cawd it 'The Bad Life.' Her family buried so many friends. Everywan was skint and landlords were clearin oot hooses, so young uns rushed the boats tae America and Canada. Some would leave fur Dublin or Belfast tae work in the factories, loads wound up in Glaesga. Or worse, the workhoose. She hid five weans, only ma Daddy and his sister survived. 'That's terrible he left ye on yer ain,' a says, wellin up fur her heartache. 'No, no,' she said. It wasn't like that at all.' She told me how ma Daddy's sistur wis a belle ae the ball. She worked hard, ayeways helpin others oan toap ae that. She wis so smart. Cid uv been a teacher. Then wan night, her nose started tae bleed. A red waterfall. It

widnae stoap. Aw the wummen in the village pitched in tae help. Bloody rags mountin on the scullery flerr, as folk began tae panic, she goat weakur by the hour. The nearest doctur wis a town away. Ma Daddy took his savins, travelled by night tae git him, and when he arrived in the mornin, his sistur wis gone. Aftur she died, he packed his bags and left fur Liverpool. Never went hame. There were nae rebels, nae excommunications, nae debts. Nae tall tales. Just grief, and ma Daddy couldnae take any merr.

Soon grief came tae oor door tae. Ma wee Granny wasted away in the box bed in the scullery. Her chest gettin wheezy and skin goan greyer by the day. At her funeral, ma Daddy didnae cry. We held a wake in the backroom ae the pub. He jist smoked and sighed. The last shadow ae that cloud that follaed him for years hid liftit. My brar and I stood at either side ae his airmchair. Drunk neighbours sang their tunes. My wee fingurs gently combin the back ae his hair. 'Bring ye here now,' he said, lookin fae wan ae us tae the other. His cigarette rested between fingurs as he patted the lap ae his gid troosers. A rare invitation so we scuttled roon. He squeezed us tight thegither, slid his face against oors. 'You've been so good today,' he whispered, 'I'm glad that we are all here together now.'