

## The Irishwoman

by Melissa Woods

The thatched cottage sits at an awkward angle, like a sinking frigate, and chunks of plaster peel from its stone walls. Rain pats against the straw roof like a broom sweeping a clay floor. Alice lights an oil lamp for the lad. “Get back under the covers, Gael. Don’t go into Papa’s room.” She tousles his dark curls and kisses him on the forehead.

He is her last living child.

She says a prayer and watches him pad to the bed, his dressing gown slipping off his emaciated shoulder. Alice traces the curve of his neck and his head, which settles like a globe onto his body. He gazes at the ground, as if the weight of his head is too much, or perhaps it is the thickness of sorrow in the air. His skin stretches over bone. A sort of vulnerability lives in his bumpy spine and it moves her, fills her with tenderness.

He is lovely and too big and too small all at once.

Just months before, she had a different life. Three healthy children and a husband. A thriving potato field. The thud of Friedrich’s heavy boots had announced her husband’s arrival and brought steadiness to her day. She had piled dry firewood in the hearth and served

nourishing stew. Friedrich thought it was delicious. All Alice knows now is that it filled her children's bellies. She remembers three children prancing about, always loud, too loud, Friedrich said. Oh, she would give anything for the cadence of their voices, the rhythm of their feet as they ran circles around the tiny cottage.

Now, Friedrich lay feverish in the sick room. She tucks cool linen blankets around his body. They've gone gray and pilled. The drinking water must be boiled over the wood stove and cooled. She runs it through a sieve to strain out the sediment, and the water is murky. Maybe it's a little safer. Lime-green lichen grows on the stone walls, so thick it weeps like monsters from the deep. Gael is seven, but he still wears the dressing gown at all times to ward off faeries. Alice always scoffed at the idea of evil faeries stealing her children in the night, but now, who knows? She cannot afford to take risks.

"Friedrich," she says, and sits beside him on the bed, "how do you feel?" He has the cholera. and his body is withering; his sallow skin stretches over bone. She touches his milky blue hand. Veins scatter, lifeless under his skin. She presses her lips to his scalding forehead. "Oh, my Friedrich." Her voice is hoarse. Alice dips a rag into a basin of water. Her chest shudders.

"No," he whispers.

No crying.

Alice straightens her posture. No, she thinks. Enough of this nonsense.

She squeezes out the rag and places it on his forehead. "Mary has fetched the doctor," she says, "Soon, my love."

#

Her family is starving, along with the rest of Ireland. Her children's hungry whimpers

flood her mind at night. Anna and Katherine are buried beside the cottage, close enough that they won't be afraid of the dark. Close enough that she can splay her hand against the cold wall and reassure them.

*We will be together someday.*

It started with a disease that swept the potatoes and infected harvest after harvest. Her homeland is filled with impoverished souls.

The British refuse to help.

She imagines her hands curled around the neck of a Brit and squeezing till his face turns a beet color. Or any color of the crops that would grow quite well in their farmland, yet they cannot plant. Because of the fucking Brits. It's murder, she thinks. This is nothing short of murder.

She will try the field again.

Alice trudges out the half-door to the open field. It is wild and green, but this is a poisonous beauty. It is so insidious she can almost hear it chant as she enters. But maybe today will be different. She needs to believe that today will be different.

She pulls her heavy wool skirt up to her knees. It is the last she owns, caked with patches of dried mud and half-eaten by moths. Her boots sink into the rotted earth. The scent is putrid, drowning. She squeezes her eyes shut and yanks the thick green plant from the ground. The potato is shriveled and black. Wet rot fills the pasture.

This is the daily routine.

Her body is sinking with Ireland, under the ground where her children are buried. There is nothing left. She's sold the last cow. Wild berries grow deep in the thicket of wood, miles away. The last time she made the walk, thorny brambles sliced her flesh, all for a handful of

berries. The potato famine began earlier that year, in 1842, and Friedrich said they'd weather it out. Though they lived in rural Dublin and subsided mostly from their own potatoes and milk from their livestock, they sold enough to buy some grains and tinned food for emergencies.

That terrible morning, Friedrich and the boys had gone out to the fields as usual. Alice's favorite pair of sheep came to her, unbidden to be sheared. The briny sea rolled against the cliffside, intermingling with the scent of wet grass. Beads of dew suspended in the marine layer like diamonds. This is so clear in her memory because it was like any other day. The sheep whined, they spoke in casual banter, and she had a good stack of wool for skirts and stockings and knickers.

The sweetness of the day died with the potatoes. Friedrich thought there might be a mild blight, though they appeared normal upon initial inspection. However, within hours the potatoes turned slimy, black and smelled of disease.

After all these months, Gael and Friedrich need food. She clenches her jaw and holds an index finger below her eye. There is no time for tears. Alice needs a plan.

"Mary!" she calls.

Her sister-in-law limps to the doorway. Mary's sapphire-colored eyes sink deep in their sockets and her skirt hangs from her hips. Her cheekbones are sharp and chiseled. Beneath her ghastly skin is only a skull. Alice averts her gaze. "We're going for a walk, okay? Tell Gael to stay indoors."

Mary looks wholly unconvinced that Alice's plan can do them any good. "Your hare-brained schemes haven't worked yet." Her words slip into the wind, lost into the clouds, but she follows.

Alice slurps through the pasture, her boots making a sucking noise as she lifts each one

out of the acrid mud. “You know the Wilsons have food.”

“You’ve changed your mind about that?” Mary narrows her eyebrows.

“I know what you’re thinking. I’ve always refused it. But, they’re a nice Quaker family. They’ve got extra. I’ll pay ‘em back.” Alice holds her head in her palms. A deep and layered shame wells in her gut. She hates to take from others. “I have a plan, like I said.”

Mary sighs. “I don’t know if I’m strong enough to make the ten mile walk.”

Alice isn’t sure why, but she cannot see her own spindly legs and bony hips. That must be how she appears, now, to others. She imagines herself as thick-hipped, with muscled calves and large arms capable of churning vats of butter. Her breasts are full and she is the wet-nurse of many children.

“I can see why my brother loves you so. I don’t understand either of of ya.” says Mary. She shivers and wraps her arms around herself. “Both so stubborn. I hope he’s okay. Lord, I do. So much loss lately. I can’t do this, Alice.” Her voice shakes.

If Alice could make it through the white-hot pain of Gael’s complicated birth, she can survive anything. Even begging the Quakers for food. They walk through mud and decay in silence. The vapor from their breath hangs in the cold air. “Mary,” she says, gripping the girl’s elbow, “All you’ve got to do is convince your body to acquiesce at the will of the mind. This is how you do it,” she pants. “This is the only way we’ll make it.”

Each mile or so, Alice stops and leans onto her skirt with her palms. The twist in her gut intensifies with each step in the sludge. She encourages Mary, pushes away her doubts, but at any moment she might drop. And Mary is worse for the wear. A sort of bell goes off in Alice’s head. She stops. What on earth could she have been thinking? Thunder growls ahead and a shiver of lightning clicks against the charcoal sky. The lemon-sized moon is silhouetted by the clouds,

and its light is a pale, gray-tinged shade of yellow. A slice of wind cuts through the pasture and blows toward them. The last bit of kerosene is consumed by the heady night. A deer moans in the distance; Alice can hear the sound of death pulsing from its throat. She shudders. The thud as its diseased body hits the ground is a relief. Anything to stop its cries. Neither Alice or Mary comment. It is not suitable for food.

Alice puts her face in her hands and sobs. “We can’t do this. You were right.” She waves her arm toward the distant cottage. The squall flaps through her cheeks as she speaks, a shiver in her voice. Her fingers feel like frozen sausages. She opens and closes her hands to get the blood flowing, but they are so stiff she can hear her skin crack.

Mary places her hand on Alice’s shoulder. “Too late now. We gotta keep going. The other choice is to die out here.” Her words drop to a whisper. “You know, Friedrich fancied you, right from the start. Of course, he’s my biggest brother. Did the silliest things as a kid. Did you know that once he dared me to stick my fingers in a windmill?”

Alice knows this, because Mary has told the story a thousand times. “That’s my Friedrich. Mischievous. Like Gael.”

“Listen.” Mary puts her finger to her lips and stops short. “What’s that sound?”

“It’s a storm, I tell you,” replies Alice. “We’re gonna drown in it.”

“No. Look ahead.” Mary points toward the Wilson farm.

Alice blinks a few times before she hears the clip of horse’s hooves hitting the ground. Someone approaches in a jaunting car. The wheels crunch over limestone scattered soil and splatter mud in all directions.

“Halt!” A man clips the horse’s sides. It obeys and stops beside them with a voracious neigh. The man has a heavy beard and wears a bonnet. He is sinewy and vibrant. “I was heading

into town, and thought I saw a couple of figures this way. Like ghosts. Why are you walking through this dredge all alone?"

"We're headed your way," says Alice.

"That's right sir," says Mary, "We live in the cottage back yonder."

"Potato rot, am I right? My father sent for your man weeks back."

Alice sighs. "We thought we had a handle on it. But my husband is sick. We lost another girl to cholera, and my last boy is starving." She takes a slow, deep breath. "I hate to ask. I hate it so. But my boy—"

"Hop in." He dismounts his horse and lifts both women into the carriage. "We have plenty." He flashes a wry grin. "My name's Oliver."

Oliver Wilson isn't much more than a boy, Alice thinks. He lifts her and places her in the cart, and then Mary. "Oh, my. Sweet Lord. You're shriveled into nothing, the both of you." He shakes his head. "We farm lots of crops. The blight only affects potatoes. We've got livestock. All of that." He wrinkles his brow. "You didn't know? I've got supplies. From the farm, plus I was at the market for my mum and father."

The back of the carriage slumps from the weight of the food—bags of rice, a bushel of spring wheat, big jugs of milk, and a dozen eggs nearly spill over the side.

Alice shakes her head and slumps in her seat. "The doctor is on his way to my husband, but my Gael is alone. Thank you, sir, but we cannot take all that. We can't afford to pay you back till the blight is sorted."

"You can't afford not to." Oliver passes a canteen of water to the women, and chunks of bread.

Alice finds Mary's delicate little bites of bread and sweet smile irritating and kicks

her. She has no time for the girl to be flirting with the handsome Quaker. He winks back. The boy must be the youngest child, Alice thinks. “So, you work your father’s farm?”

“Indeed, ma’am. He’s a good man. Quite stern, but he’s humble and good-hearted. Strong-willed. You know the type.”

Alice takes a huge bite of bread and mumbles. “Yes, I do.” She thinks of Friedrich. Strong-willed is one word for it.

“But, as a lad, I had a bit of pride in me. Like you, ma’am. I think we’re a lot alike.” He nods to himself. “Anyway, my old man made a point of it. Which, as you know, when you make a point of a thing, children test you more.”

Alice nods. This is true.

“My mother canned jams. Lots of kinds. You know the berries over there? Well, she makes a delicious berry jam. I suppose I shouldn’t go on about food—but the rule was, we were not to get into her canning things.”

“Let me guess. You did just that.” Of course, Oliver’s mother is right, and normally Alice would have said this, however, she has more pressing matters than his anecdote. She closes her eyes and passes the water to Mary.

“I thought I’d can some beets—again, sorry for the food reference—here, eat this.” He tosses her a head of cabbage, which she scarfs indelicately.

“And?”

“And I burnt the cottage down! Father was rushing in with buckets of water to douse the place with. Except half of it had to be rebuilt and I have a burn over most of my chest—”

“What is the point of this?” she asks dryly, “That one should honor thy mother and father?”



“Oh, no, of course not.” He chortles. “I’m only trying to keep you alive till we get you home. It’s called conversation.”

“Ah, I see.” Alice can hardly see a thing at all, except that she is beholden to an inchoate little boy who addresses her by her first name and disrespects his elders. Maybe God personalizes hell and this is hers. First, there was famine and death and then dependence. Alice’s life in one sentence. She leans back and closes her eyes, listening to the wooden wheels thwack thwack thwack over the uneven earth. The smell of food is intoxicating, almost surreal, and the little chunk of bread has awakened her senses enough to let her guard down. Her muscles unclench, one at a time, and she inhales the spicy wind as she falls asleep. She cannot remember the last time she slept...

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She wakes on the straw bed in the little cottage with a weight on her chest. Her eyes are bleary, but the scent of warm rose water fills her nose. Alice feels her little girl’s head, damp with sweat, against her chest. She strokes her daughter’s hair, runs her fingers through the wispy strands and exhales scalding grief. Anna lifts her head and sits, cross-legged and mute, smiling. Her eyes are pools of green and she has one dimple that Alice longs to touch. “I had this awful dream you died,” says Alice.

Anna smiles, but does not speak.

“Anna?”

She sits like that, palms on her knees, with her lips curled into the mischievous smile Alice knows so well. Her skin is dotted with the same four freckles. The edges of her visage are soft, almost translucent. Alice reaches to touch her, but all she can catch is a wisp of her child’s essence. Music. This is the feeling she associates with Anna.

Once, Friedrich brought home a stringed instrument from a customer, a Christmas gift. Anna had learned to pluck the strings into melancholy songs that made something tender rise from the pit of your stomach, deep and true. As her Anna slips away, Alice feels her music fade, too.

Alice jolts up in bed. Her breath catches in her throat. Gael is cuddled against her, and Friedrich is beside him. She pulls her nightgown tight against her body and steps on the cold stone floor. Her vision sharpens as she takes in her surroundings, still confused.

“Water?” says a voice.

What on earth is going on? She has gone insane. It would be lovely if she had descended into madness. That would be a relief.

“You passed out on the way here. It's been three whole days. It seems your son and husband are doing a bit better.” Oliver lay on the stone floor with blankets tucked around him. She gazes at her clean gown.

“Why are you— what’s going on?” The boy should not be here, what with her undressed.

“It was quite the drama. Mr. Flaherty was very ill. Very ill.” Oliver’s face pales at the memory. “And my father called the doctor. He’s on the mend, now— well, my mother will return soon. She had to tend to the littles.”

“And my other children?” She waves her hand at Gael. “Are they still— gone?”

“I think that’s how it works,” says Oliver. He averts his gaze. “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

She smooths her gown and stands. “Yes. I suppose it is.” Her throat is so very dry.

“Could you please fetch that water?”

“Of course, ma’am.”

As Oliver heads outdoors, her eyes graze the clean gown. Each pleat is crisp in her fingers. It is so white it gleams. It has real gathered sleeves and lovely buttons sewn down the front. Alice imagines that Oliver's mother is an expert seamstress.

Alice once had sheep. She wove wool on her loom into skirts and stockings and people loved them. Now, she has nothing to give. She feels her cheeks blossom pink. Tears spill from her eyes, and she curls her knees to her chest. Why should she own such beautiful clothes, when her babies died in gowns so thin and gray you could see through them?

Her knees cut into her chest. They are foreign to her, as if they belong to someone else's body. She lifts the layers of the gown, one by one, holding her breath. She gasps at the sight of her legs. They've shriveled like a plucked chicken and her knees are like doorknobs. She runs her fingers over her chest, and can feel each individual rib.

Alice screams and screams until Friedrich wakes and Gael wakes and everyone hovers over her. Oliver rushes back inside, spilling the jug of well water onto the floor.

"What, darling?" Friedrich turns to her. "What?" He sits and kisses her cheek gently.

"Why is my body like...this?"

"Oh." Oliver turns away from her. "You've starved with the rest of your family, ma'am." He shakes his head. "You all do this. Don't see your own body till you get some nourishment. I don't quite understand it." He turns to Friedrich now. "My father believes God does this to protect a starving person's mind. To keep 'em strong. The doctor says it's a scientific thing with the brain, and we'll never know what."

Alice will never understand any of it. This home, so damp and cold, does not belong to her. This quiet, so haunting and unreal, does not belong to her. Few things in life are fair, and she isn't one to expect justice from God.

But Alice's God has failed her children. All of her prayers have been for naught.

Friedrich strokes her hair. "If not for you, love, we wouldn't have made it. We've made it." His eyes wet with tears, and her chest aches with love for this man.

Oliver paces across the little cottage, as if misplaced. "But, you're home. The three of you are gonna make it. That's good, right?"

Her children might be alive if not for all the stupid, stupid choices she made. Her eyes shine with tears. Would her girls be alive if she'd gone to the Wilsons earlier? Friedrich had insisted there was no need, but when was the last time she listened to Friedrich?

"Well, then," she puffs her chest like a mama bird and crosses her arms against herself, "did Mary tell you about my plan?"

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Alice mounds fresh soil over the seedlings and packs it gently with her hands. She whispers to the little plant, figuring it can't hurt to offer it a bit of encouragement. Friedrich cracks the soil with a hand tiller. "These are ready for you, love." He wipes his neck with the back of his arm. His cheeks are flushed and his skin is moist with dewy sweat. She smiles and moves to the next pile of earth. It is early spring and the marine breeze has a bite to it, but she's warm from working.

Oliver jaunts toward them and adjusts his hat. "Ready for a break? Mum has pie."

"I'll come," says Friedrich, whose appetite is incessant since his recovery. "You coming, Alice?"

"Let me finish these." She drops another seedling in a hole.

"Oh, come on Alice." Oliver crouches to her level. "I can't lift that till one more

time.”

“Pfft. I’ve got it.” Her chest fills with a pungent kind of sorrow. “This is a woman’s work.”

“Oh, all right.” Friedrich meets her eyes. “Come on in when you’re ready.” He watches her for a moment, before tapping Oliver’s arm. They start toward the cottage.

They plant, and then they wait.

One morning, the sun cracks open like a fresh egg ready for the fire, and hope spreads deep in her bones. The sky is a wild shade of blue, feathered with rose and tangerine. She goes to the meadow with rows of tilled land and crouches low, holding her breath. Alice spies a tender sprout freshly unfurled in the earth. It smells rich and alive. She runs her finger along the baby, so sweet and new it is nearly white. And beside that one is another and another. In her mind, the precious vegetables root beneath the soil. These roots grow deep and wide, into layers and layers of life, held together by the thinnest, yet strongest of vines.

Like family.

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