Praise for

ANGELA'S ASHES

"This memoir is an instant classic of the genre . . . good enough to be the capstone of a distinguished writing career; let's hope it's only the beginning of Frank McCourt's."

—Nina King, *The Washington Post Book World*

"Frank McCourt's lyrical Irish voice will draw comparisons to Joyce. It's that seductive, that hilarious."

—Mary Karr

"*Angela's Ashes* is a chronicle of grown-ups at the mercy of life and children at the mercy of grown-ups, and it is such a marriage of pathos and humor that you never know whether to weep or roar—and find yourself doing both at once. Fear not: it ends happily; but all along, through each fresh horror of the narrative, you will be made happy by some of the most truly marvelous writing you will ever encounter. McCourt deserves whatever glittering prizes are lying around. Give the man a Prix de Rome, a Croix de Guerre, a Pulitzer, a Nobel, a Templeton—and while you're at it pull him another Guinness!"

—Thomas Cahill

"Frank McCourt has examined his ferocious childhood, walked around it, relived it, and with skill and care and generosity of heart, has transformed it into a triumphant work of art. This book will be read when all of us are gone."
—Pete Hamill, *Irish America* magazine

"The power of this memoir is that it makes you believe the claim: that despite the rags and hunger and pain, love and strength do come out of misery—as well as a page-turner of a book. And though the experience it tells of was individual, the point—and the story—is universal."
—Vanessa V. Friedman, *Entertainment Weekly*

"I was moved and dazzled by the somber and lively beauty of this book; it is a story of survival and growth beyond all odds, a chronicle of surprising triumphs, written in a language that is always itself triumphant."
—Mary Gordon

"It is only the best storyteller who can so beguile his readers that he leaves them wanting more when he's done. With *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt proves himself one of the very best."
—Malcolm Jones, Jr., *Newsweek*

"McCourt weaves tales with the bewitching charm of Ireland's fabled storytellers."
—Robert Sullivan, *The New York Times Magazine*

"Frank McCourt is a writer whose unflinching eye for family tragedy is matched only by his capacious heart in forgiving it. Having waited a half-century to tell his tale, McCourt uses his ripened talent to reincarnate the desperate Ireland of his boyhood, a boyhood shaped by the hunger for both material and intellectual sustenance. Any

reader with an immigrant in his past cannot help but find his own forebears in *Angela's Ashes*."

—Samuel Freedman

"His prose is so clear a reader can smell the raindrops."

—Patricia O'Haire, *Daily News*

"McCourt's writing resembles the sweet purity of a boys' choir. A voice clear, bright and innocent. Frank McCourt has seen hell, but found angels in his heart. This is a work which will bring satisfying tears to your eyes and critics to their feet."

—Heddy-Dale Matthias, *The Clarion-Ledger*

"What is it that transforms a childhood blighted by poverty, death and disease into a story that shines with love and leaps off the page in language of rare energy, music and humor? In the case of *Angela's Ashes*, I think it must be Frank McCourt's soul. This memoir is the best I've read in years, and I'm putting it on the small shelf in the company of the few books I don't lend—lest they're gone when I want them again."

—Kathryn Harrison

"A pen picture of a lost generation—lost to early death and emigration."

—Mary Morrissey, *Los Angeles Times*

"*Angela's Ashes* is a joy to read."

—Alix Madrigal, *San Francisco Chronicle Book Review*

"*Angela's Ashes* contains some of the loveliest language I've ever read. It is both hilarious and utterly heartbreaking. . . . McCourt has an astonishing gift for remembering the details of his childhood. And for writing."

—Deirdre Donahue, *USA Today*

"Frank McCourt's book is deeply moving, for his searing story is true. No one has ever written about poverty or childhood like this. That Frank McCourt lived to tell the tale is amazing. That he could create out of such squalor and misery a flawless masterpiece is nothing short of miraculous."

—Mary Breasted

"A story so immediate—so gripping in its daily despairs, stolen smokes and blessed humor—that you want to thank God young Frankie McCourt survived it in part so he could write the book."

—Gail Caldwell, *The Sunday Boston Globe*

Also by Frank McCourt

'Tis

Teacher Man

Frank McCourt *(right front)* in the playground of
Leamy's School in Limerick, Ireland, circa 1938.

ANGELA'S ASHES

A Memoir

Frank McCourt

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This book is dedicated to my brothers,
Malachy, Michael, Alphonsus.
I learn from you, I admire you and I love you.

Acknowledgments

This is a small hymn to an exaltation of women.

R'lene Dahlberg fanned the embers.
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And Molly was right.

My daughter, Maggie, has shown me how life can be a grand adventure, while exquisite moments with my granddaughter, Chiara, have helped me recall a small child's wonder.
My wife, Ellen, listened while I read and cheered me to the final page.

I am blessed among men.

ANGELA'S ASHES

INTRODUCTION

BY JEANNETTE WALLS

"Ah, a fellow sufferer," Frank McCourt said when we first met. "Let us share our epics of woe." We were appearing together on a panel and I had been so nervous about meeting him—the great Frank McCourt, the legendary storyteller, the author of the Pulitzer Prize–winning bestseller *Angela's Ashes*—that I had barely slept. He noticed how flustered I was and it seemed to amuse him. "It is true that I am a great man," he said, winking at me. "I know this because people ask my opinion on all manner of subjects of which I know nothing."

I don't remember what I said on the panel. Little, I hope. If you were lucky enough to meet Frank McCourt, the smart thing to do was to shut up and listen. Listen to the music. To the magic. Because Frank McCourt's spoken words were, incredibly, every bit as exquisite as the words he wrote. And it was all the more extraordinary because, for the most part, Frank McCourt complained. He complained about everything, about drunken Irishmen and pompous priests and pious nuns, about bullying schoolmasters and long-legged Episcopalians, about the way New Yorkers said "stoopid," about euphemisms and platitudes, about the fungus that grew inside his soggy childhood house in Limerick, about such ironies of fame as growing up hungry and then being invited to write for *Gourmet* magazine. "Have ya read *Angela's Ashes*?" he asked the editor. "As a child, I thought a balanced diet was bread and tea, a solid and a liquid."

When most folks complain, it comes across as bellyaching. Or grousing, or kvetching, or bemoaning, or whining. But when Frank McCourt shared his woes, it was lyrical. A lyrical lament. A hilarious, heartbreaking, wry, lyrical lament—and I say that even though Frank McCourt rolled his eyes anytime his work was described as "lyrical."

What made Frank McCourt so amazing was that, whether he was chatting backstage, regaling a crowd, or putting words on paper, he had that same irresistible voice. "When I look back on my childhood, I wonder how I survived at all," he wrote at the beginning of *Angela's Ashes*, and reading those words, you hear Frank McCourt talking. "It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while."

Frank McCourt was born in Brooklyn in 1930, but his father, Malachy, was unable to find work, and four years later, in the midst of the Depression, brought the family back to his native Ireland, where the McCourts existed on the brink of starvation, mooching off relatives, scrounging on the roadside for pieces of fallen coal, longing for luxuries such as a boiled egg. When Malachy did land the odd job, he drank up what little money he made, then eventually deserted the family altogether, forcing Angela, the mother of his children, to beg, and thirteen-year-old Frank to forgo further schooling to become the man of the household.

A childhood like that can destroy you, break you, turn you into a bitter, angry mess, and no matter how successful you become, it will always haunt you. You can never escape a childhood like that—but you can put it to work for you. As a gifted storyteller, Frank McCourt knew, however, that a straightforward account of his bleak upbringing would have been a room clearer. To turn his childhood into the transcendent story that is *Angela's Ashes*, he also had to share the secret of his survival, to use the gift that allowed him not only to survive, but to turn his life into a story that shimmered.

That gift came, ironically, from the very man who also

made young Frank's life miserable. Malachy, his shiftless, booze-soaked scoundrel of a father, was also a truly marvelous storyteller, a man who understood the power of words—spoken, sung, and written words. When Malachy McCourt came stumbling home drunk, he'd sing ballads about Ireland's eight hundred years of oppression under the boot of the hateful English, he'd regale his children with tales of the Irish hero Cuchulain, he'd tell them all about the angel who lived on the seventh step of the family's staircase, the one who made babies appear and also took them away when they died. Once when young Frank was haunted with guilt, convinced he'd committed an unforgivable sin by listening to a naughty story, his father advised him to tell his troubles to the Angel on the Seventh Step. Frank took his father's advice and heard a voice telling him, "Fear not."

It was that kind of storytelling that gave young Frank hope. It transformed a world that was grim and often horrific into a place that was not just tolerable, but sometimes full of wonder, and when Malachy disappeared altogether, Frank started telling his younger brothers stories, just the way his dad had.

Frank McCourt's father wasn't his only inspiration. Storytelling is a national pastime in Ireland, where storytellers are said to have "the gift," where statues honor poets and playwrights as national heroes, where cab drivers recite Yeats and doormen quote Joyce. At a hospital where Frank recovered from the typhoid fever that nearly killed him, an illiterate janitor entertained him with poems he had memorized. And later, a headmaster urged Frank to read, saying, "You might be poor, your shoes might be broken, but your mind is a palace."

While Frank McCourt had "the gift," it took him decades to figure out how to truly put it to work to write the book that was inside him. When he returned to New York at age nineteen, all he wanted was to fit in, to be American, to look and act like the Americans around him, with their golden tans and big white teeth. He took several jobs, including one cleaning the lobby of the Biltmore

Hotel and another as a meat packer, and it never occurred to him in those early years that his childhood was material for a book. "I didn't know you could write about yourself. I didn't know," he once said. "Nobody told us in school. The masters always made us write about noble topics like the Battle of Kinsale or the Siege of Limerick or that dirty rotten bastard Cromwell and the terrible things he did to the children of Drogheda, and so on. Nobody ever said to us, 'Write about yourself, about your family.' No, we didn't know. We were worthless. Our concerns were irrelevant to the world. So I didn't know. Besides, I would've been ashamed to write about the way I grew up."

After a stint in the army during the Korean War, Frank earned a college degree through the GI Bill and began teaching at vocational and technical schools because, with his thick Irish brogue, the better schools had no interest in hiring him. Even his students, kids from rough neighborhoods, were struck by his accent.

Yo, teach! You talk funny! Where you from?

At first, Frank McCourt was afraid those students would look down on him if he told them the truth about his childhood in Ireland—the hunger, the drunken father, the shabby clothes, the fleas in the bed, the rats in the kitchen. But his students knew all about poverty, broken families, and alcoholic parents, and when Frank McCourt finally began to reveal himself, they were captivated.

Frank McCourt knew, of course, that his students would talk about anything to avoid the lesson of the day, but something else came into play, as well. When these kids with their urban slang or English-as-a-second-language accents started hearing the tales told by this educated and eloquent man with a lilting voice, they realized that maybe he wasn't so strange after all, that maybe despite all the differences, they had more in common with him than they had thought, and a bond started to form, the bond that is created when we share our stories.

After a few years at vocational and technical schools, Frank was hired to teach at Stuyvesant, an academically elite high school in lower Manhattan. Instead of studying to become beauticians and plumbers, his new students were competing for Ivy League scholarships, but the Stuyvesant kids also loved hearing about life in Limerick. "You got the coolest stories, Mr. McCourt," they told him. "You ought to write a book."

For years, Frank McCourt had "noodled around," as he put it, with writing that book, trying to find his voice, looking for the way into his story and the courage to tell it. He hung out with "real writers" like journalists Pete Hamill and Jimmy Breslin at the Lion's Head, a Greenwich Village bar, and he and his brother, Malachy Jr., cracked jokes about their past in a comedy act. Frank McCourt also had a duffel bag full of notebooks in which he'd jotted down peculiar turns of speech he remembered from Limerick, lists of street names, songs, and wisecracks, and he had a hundred and fifty pages of a manuscript he'd never been able to finish.

He kept finding excuses. He was too busy teaching. His mother, who had moved to New York, would be ashamed. But even after she died in 1981 he held back. Then, after nearly thirty years teaching, he retired in 1987 and a few years later he met Ellen Frey, the woman who would become his third wife. She had a sparkling laugh, adored his stories, and encouraged him to finally write the book. It was as if she was his Angel on the Seventh Step, saying, "Fear not." "Frank used to have a very gloomy outlook on life until he met Ellen," his brother Malachy said when the two were married in 1994. "Now he's a changed man. Every one of us has a wellspring of laughter, and all we need is to be drilled or uncorked. That's what she did. She found the cork and released it and he's bubbling."

Frank McCourt had beautiful handwriting—a "fine fist" as they said in the old country—and he wrote *Angela's Ashes* in longhand. The famous first pages, the musings about that miserable childhood and how his parents should

have stayed in America, came out almost exactly as they appeared in print—and he never rewrote or polished them. After that initial outburst, he did cast around for the narrator's voice, at first trying to tell the story from the point of view of an adult looking back, but he felt that it lacked intimacy and immediacy, the way a child actually thinks and feels. It was when he was babysitting his granddaughter, Chiara, who was four, listening to her speak in the present tense, in language that was simple and honest and direct and urgent, that he realized that he could use a child's voice to transport readers back to his own childhood.

The voice changes as Frank gets older, struggling to understand the perplexing world he's growing up in, the father who both inspires and fails him, the teachers who forbid him from asking questions, the Catholic priests who both condemn and absolve him, the confusing mix of shame and exhilaration as he discovers his own desires and starts planning his escape from Limerick. But throughout, the voice remains a boy's voice, the vocabulary for the most part simple, even while the psychology is richly layered, capturing the contradictions and paradoxes of his childhood. "I was a madman when I was writing," he once said, "weeping and laughing." Frank McCourt often noted that once he found his voice, it took him less than two years to write *Angela's Ashes*—two years and his entire life.

Angela's Ashes was published in 1996, and it was greeted not just with acclaim, but with astonishment. Plenty of books had been written about poverty, but never before with such incandescent beauty, lopsided humor, piercing horror, and, throughout it all, an unexpected, joyous vitality. Some people felt the story was tragic and deeply upsetting, others found it hilarious, even oddly uplifting. Many thought it was all of those things, and that was what made *Angela's Ashes* so breathtaking.

As Gail Caldwell wrote in the *Boston Globe, Angela's Ashes* was "a story so immediate—so gripping in its daily

despairs, stolen smokes and blessed humor—that you want to thank God young Frankie McCourt survived it in part so he could write the book." Frank McCourt's first book won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. "*Angela's Ashes*," the Pulitzer committee declared, "imbued on every page with Frank McCourt's astounding humor and compassion, is a glorious book that bears all the marks of a classic."

At age sixty-six, this retired schoolteacher, this Irish immigrant who had grown up so hungry he once licked grease off newspapers that had wrapped someone else's fish and chips, was suddenly rich. And famous. He appeared on *60 Minutes*, he was profiled by *TIME* magazine, gave college commencement speeches, joined the National Arts Club, and received the Award of Excellence from the International Center in New York. Through it all, Frank McCourt remained remarkably, even shockingly, humble, expressing bewilderment at his success, insisting that *Angela's Ashes* was "a modest book, modestly written."

Modesty aside, Frank McCourt was incredibly grateful that so many people embraced his story. "I learned," he said, "the significance of my own insignificant life." And he never forgot how far he'd come, or how lucky he was to have made that journey. He never stopped being thankful for electric lights, for a boiled egg in the morning, for a warm shower and a dry towel. And he refused to be impressed by his fame, treating it with the same clear-eyed humor, the same sense of the absurd, the same droll irony, as he had his miserable childhood. He became, as he liked to say, the mick of the moment, a dancing clown, a geriatric novelty with an Irish accent.

Frank McCourt was unfailingly gracious to readers, especially those who, tears running down their cheeks, wanted to share with him shameful details of their own childhoods. He told them that with luck, they'd learn to laugh about it all, just as he had. And when some people

in Limerick complained that *Angela's Ashes* stretched the truth and insulted the city, he laughed that off as well. "I was denounced from hill, pulpit, and barstool," he said. "Certain citizens claimed I had disgraced the fair name of the city of Limerick, that I had attacked the church, that I had despoiled my mother's name, and that if I returned to Limerick, I would surely be found hanging from a lamppost."

There was something gentle and joyful about Frank McCourt when we talked that day before the panel. With his white hair and his fair Irish skin, he seemed to glow. He smiled easily and often. His eyes—forgive the stereotype, but it's true—his eyes twinkled. "If I'm happy now, it's because I wrote that book and it's successful and I'm embraced all over the place," he said at the time. "If I hadn't written it, I'd probably be sitting around thinking about going back to teaching. I'd feel unfulfilled, as they say. And I'd die howling."

When death did come in 2009, a few months before his seventy-ninth birthday, Frank McCourt was widely mourned—but many of his friends felt it was an opportunity to celebrate his phenomenal life. "We have an attitude about death in Ireland," his brother Malachy said after the funeral. "It's not, as I often say, fatal. We keep people alive in song and story." Death certainly wasn't fatal for Frank McCourt. More than ten million copies of *Angela's Ashes* have been published worldwide. It has been translated into twenty-five languages and made into a movie. There is a Frank McCourt High School of Writing, Journalism, and Literature in Manhattan and even the Frank McCourt Museum in Limerick, where, after all those complaints about the book, locals now provide *Angela's Ashes* tours.

But Frank McCourt's most powerful legacy is his own words, his life as told in *Angela's Ashes* and its two sister books, *'Tis* and *Teacher Man*. He gave us his stories, his laments, his humor and insight and compassion, and he gave us the simple, nine-word lesson it had taken him sixty-six years to learn: "Sing your song. Dance your dance. Tell your tale."

I

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains, lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore; to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest.

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church—our refuge, our strength, our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.

My father, Malachy McCourt, was born on a farm in Toome, County Antrim. Like his father before, he grew up wild, in trouble with the English, or the Irish, or both. He fought with the Old IRA and for some desperate act he wound up a fugitive with a price on his head.

When I was a child I would look at my father, the thinning hair, the collapsing teeth, and wonder why anyone would give money for a head like that. When I was thirteen my father's mother told me a secret: as a wee lad your poor father was dropped on his head. It was an accident, he was never the same after, and you must remember that people dropped on their heads can be a bit peculiar.

Because of the price on the head he had been dropped on, he had to be spirited out of Ireland via cargo ship from Galway. In New York, with Prohibition in full swing, he thought he had died and gone to hell for his sins. Then he discovered speakeasies and he rejoiced.

After wandering and drinking in America and England

he yearned for peace in his declining years. He returned to Belfast, which erupted all around him. He said, A pox on all their houses, and chatted with the ladies of Andersontown. They tempted him with delicacies but he waved them away and drank his tea. He no longer smoked or touched alcohol, so what was the use? It was time to go and he died in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

My mother, the former Angela Sheehan, grew up in a Limerick slum with her mother, two brothers, Thomas and Patrick, and a sister, Agnes. She never saw her father, who had run off to Australia weeks before her birth.

After a night of drinking porter in the pubs of Limerick he staggers down the lane singing his favorite song,

Who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?
Nobody spoke so he said it all the louder
It's a dirty Irish trick and I can lick the Mick
Who threw the overalls in Murphy's chowder.

He's in great form altogether and he thinks he'll play a while with little Patrick, one year old. Lovely little fella. Loves his daddy. Laughs when Daddy throws him up in the air. Upsy daisy, little Paddy, upsy daisy, up in the air in the dark, so dark, oh, Jasus, you miss the child on the way down and poor little Patrick lands on his head, gurgles a bit, whimpers, goes quiet. Grandma heaves herself from the bed, heavy with the child in her belly, my mother. She's barely able to lift little Patrick from the floor. She moans a long moan over the child and turns on Grandpa. Get out of it. Out. If you stay here a minute longer I'll take the hatchet to you, you drunken lunatic. By Jesus, I'll swing at the end of a rope for you. Get out.

Grandpa stands his ground like a man. I have a right, he says, to stay in me own house.

She runs at him and he melts before this whirling dervish with a damaged child in her arms and a healthy

one stirring inside. He stumbles from the house, up the lane, and doesn't stop till he reaches Melbourne in Australia.

Little Pat, my uncle, was never the same after. He grew up soft in the head with a left leg that went one way, his body the other. He never learned to read or write but God blessed him in another way. When he started to sell newspapers at the age of eight he could count money better than the Chancellor of the Exchequer himself. No one knew why he was called Ab Sheehan, The Abbot, but all Limerick loved him.

My mother's troubles began the night she was born. There is my grandmother in the bed heaving and gasping with the labor pains, praying to St. Gerard Majella, patron saint of expectant mothers. There is Nurse O'Halloran, the midwife, all dressed up in her finery. It's New Year's Eve and Mrs. O'Halloran is anxious for this child to be born so that she can rush off to the parties and celebrations. She tells my grandmother: Will you push, will you, push. Jesus, Mary and holy St. Joseph, if you don't hurry with this child it won't be born till the New Year and what good is that to me with me new dress? Never mind St. Gerard Majella. What can a man do for a woman at a time like this even if he is a saint? St. Gerard Majella my arse.

My grandmother switches her prayers to St. Ann, patron saint of difficult labor. But the child won't come. Nurse O'Halloran tells my grandmother, Pray to St. Jude, patron saint of desperate cases.

St. Jude, patron of desperate cases, help me. I'm desperate. She grunts and pushes and the infant's head appears, only the head, my mother, and it's the stroke of midnight, the New Year. Limerick City erupts with whistles, horns, sirens, brass bands, people calling and singing, Happy New Year. Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and church bells all over ring out the Angelus and Nurse O'Halloran

weeps for the waste of a dress, that child still in there and me in me finery. Will you come out, child, will you? Grandma gives a great push and the child is in the world, a lovely girl with black curly hair and sad blue eyes.

Ah, Lord above, says Nurse O'Halloran, this child is a time straddler, born with her head in the New Year and her arse in the Old or was it her head in the Old Year and her arse in the New. You'll have to write to the Pope, missus, to find out what year this child was born in and I'll save this dress for next year.

And the child was named Angela for the Angelus which rang the midnight hour, the New Year, the minute of her coming and because she was a little angel anyway.

Love her as in childhood
Though feeble, old and grey.
For you'll never miss a mother's love
Till she's buried beneath the clay.

At the St. Vincent de Paul School, Angela learned to read, write, and calculate and by her ninth year her schooling was done. She tried her hand at being a charwoman, a skivvy, a maid with a little white hat opening doors, but she could not manage the little curtsy that is required and her mother said, You don't have the knack of it. You're pure useless. Why don't you go to America where there's room for all sorts of uselessness? I'll give you the fare.

She arrived in New York just in time for the first Thanksgiving Day of the Great Depression. She met Malachy at a party given by Dan MacAdorey and his wife, Minnie, on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn. Malachy liked Angela and she liked him. He had a hangdog look, which came from the three months he had just spent in jail for hijacking a truck. He and his friend John McErlaine believed what they were told in the speakeasy, that the

truck was packed to the roof with cases of canned pork and beans. Neither knew how to drive and when the police saw the truck lurch and jerk along Myrtle Avenue they pulled it over. The police searched the truck and wondered why anyone would hijack a truck containing, not pork and beans, but cases of buttons.

With Angela drawn to the hangdog look and Malachy lonely after three months in jail, there was bound to be a knee-trembler.

A knee-trembler is the act itself done up against a wall, man and woman up on their toes, straining so hard their knees tremble with the excitement that's in it.

That knee-trembler put Angela in an interesting condition and, of course, there was talk. Angela had cousins, the MacNamara sisters, Delia and Philomena, married, respectively, to Jimmy Fortune of County Mayo, and Tommy Flynn, of Brooklyn itself.

Delia and Philomena were large women, great-breasted and fierce. When they sailed along the sidewalks of Brooklyn lesser creatures stepped aside, respect was shown. The sisters knew what was right and they knew what was wrong and any doubts could be resolved by the One, Holy, Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church. They knew that Angela, unmarried, had no right to be in an interesting condition and they would take steps.

Steps they took. With Jimmy and Tommy in tow they marched to the speakeasy on Atlantic Avenue where Malachy could be found on Friday, payday when he had a job. The man in the speak, Joey Cacciamani, did not want to admit the sisters but Philomena told him that if he wanted to keep the nose on his face and that door on its hinges he'd better open up for they were there on God's business. Joey said, Awright, awright, you Irish. Jeezoz! Trouble, trouble.

Malachy, at the far end of the bar, turned pale, gave the

great-breasted ones a sickly smile, offered them a drink. They resisted the smile and spurned the offer. Delia said, We don't know what class of a tribe you come from in the North of Ireland.

Philomena said, There is a suspicion you might have Presbyterians in your family, which would explain what you did to our cousin.

Jimmy said, Ah, now, ah, now. 'Tisn't his fault if there's Presbyterians in his family.

Delia said, You shuddup.

Tommy had to join in. What you did to that poor unfortunate girl is a disgrace to the Irish race and you should be ashamed of yourself.

Och, I am, said Malachy. I am.

Nobody asked you to talk, said Philomena. You done enough damage with your blather, so shut your yap.

And while your yap is shut, said Delia, we're here to see you do the right thing by our poor cousin, Angela Sheehan.

Malachy said, Och, indeed, indeed. The right thing is the right thing and I'd be glad to buy you all a drink while we have this little talk.

Take the drink, said Tommy, and shove it up your ass.

Philomena said, Our little cousin no sooner gets off the boat than you are at her. We have morals in Limerick, you know, morals. We're not like jackrabbits from Antrim, a place crawling with Presbyterians.

Jimmy said, He don't look like a Presbyterian.

You shuddup, said Delia.

Another thing we noticed, said Philomena. You have a very odd manner.

Malachy smiled. I do?

You do, says Delia. I think 'tis one of the first things we noticed about you, that odd manner, and it gives us a very uneasy feeling.

'Tis that sneaky little Presbyterian smile, said Philomena.

Och, said Malachy, it's just the trouble I have with my teeth.

Teeth or no teeth, odd manner or no odd manner, you're gonna marry that girl, said Tommy. Up the middle aisle you're going.

Och, said Malachy, I wasn't planning to get married, you know. There's no work and I wouldn't be able to support . . .

Married is what you're going to be, said Delia.

Up the middle aisle, said Jimmy.

You shuddup, said Delia.

Malachy watched them leave. I'm in a desperate pickle, he told Joey Cacciamani.

Bet your ass, said Joey. I see them babes comin' at me I jump inna Hudson River.

Malachy considered the pickle he was in. He had a few dollars in his pocket from the last job and he had an uncle in San Francisco or one of the other California Sans. Wouldn't he be better off in California, far from the great-breasted MacNamara sisters and their grim husbands? He would, indeed, and he'd have a drop of the Irish to celebrate his decision and departure. Joey poured and the drink nearly took the lining off Malachy's gullet. Irish, indeed! He told Joey it was a Prohibition concoction from the devil's own still. Joey shrugged. I don't know nothing. I only pour. Still, it was better than nothing and Malachy would have another and one for yourself, Joey, and ask them two decent Italians what they'd like and what are you talking about, of course, I have the money to pay for it.

He awoke on a bench in the Long Island Railroad Station, a cop rapping on his boots with a nightstick, his

escape money gone, the MacNamara sisters ready to eat him alive in Brooklyn.

On the feast of St. Joseph, a bitter day in March, four months after the knee-trembler, Malachy married Angela and in August the child was born. In November Malachy got drunk and decided it was time to register the child's birth. He thought he might name the child Malachy, after himself, but his North of Ireland accent and the alcoholic mumble confused the clerk so much he simply entered the name Male on the certificate.

Not until late December did they take Male to St. Paul's Church to be baptized and named Francis after his father's father and the lovely saint of Assisi. Angela wanted to give him a middle name, Munchin, after the patron saint of Limerick but Malachy said over his dead body. No son of his would have a Limerick name. It's hard enough going through life with one name. Sticking on middle names was an atrocious American habit and there was no need for a second name when you're christened after the man from Assisi.

There was a delay the day of the baptism when the chosen godfather, John McErlaine, got drunk at the speakeasy and forgot his responsibilities. Philomena told her husband, Tommy, he'd have to be godfather. Child's soul is in danger, she said. Tommy put his head down and grumbled. All right. I'll be godfather but I'm not goin' to be responsible if he grows up like his father causin' trouble and goin' through life with the odd manner for if he does he can go to John McErlaine at the speakeasy. The priest said, True for you, Tom, decent man that you are, fine man that never set foot inside a speakeasy. Malachy, fresh from the speakeasy himself, felt insulted and wanted to argue with the priest, one sacrilege on top of another.

Take off that collar and we'll see who's the man. He had to be held back by the great-breasted ones and their husbands grim. Angela, new mother, agitated, forgot she was holding the child and let him slip into the baptismal font, a total immersion of the Protestant type. The altar boy assisting the priest plucked the infant from the font and restored him to Angela, who sobbed and clutched him, dripping, to her bosom. The priest laughed, said he had never seen the likes, that the child was a regular little Baptist now and hardly needed a priest. This maddened Malachy again and he wanted to jump at the priest for calling the child some class of a Protestant. The priest said, Quiet, man, you're in God's house, and when Malachy said, God's house, my arse, he was thrown out on Court Street because you can't say arse in God's house.

After baptism Philomena said she had tea and ham and cakes in her house around the corner. Malachy said, Tea? and she said, Yes, tea, or is it whiskey you want? He said tea was grand but first he'd have to go and deal with John McErlaine, who didn't have the decency to carry out his duties as godfather. Angela said, You're only looking for an excuse to run to the speakeasy, and he said, As God is my witness, the drink is the last thing on my mind. Angela started to cry. Your son's christening day and you have to go drinking. Delia told him he was a disgusting specimen but what could you expect from the North of Ireland.

Malachy looked from one to the other, shifted on his feet, pulled his cap down over his eyes, shoved his hands deep in his trouser pockets, said, Och, aye, the way they do in the far reaches of County Antrim, turned, hurried up Court Street to the speakeasy on Atlantic Avenue where he was sure they'd ply him with free drink in honor of his son's baptism.

At Philomena's house the sisters and their husbands ate and drank while Angela sat in a corner nursing the

baby and crying. Philomena stuffed her mouth with bread and ham and rumbled at Angela, That's what you get for being such a fool. Hardly off the boat and you fall for that lunatic. You shoulda stayed single, put the child up for adoption, and you'd be a free woman today. Angela cried harder and Delia took up the attack, Oh, stop it, Angela, stop it. You have nobody to blame but yourself for gettin' into trouble with a drunkard from the North, a man that doesn't even look like a Catholic, him with his odd manner. I'd say that . . . that . . . Malachy has a streak of the Presbyterian in him right enough. You shuddup, Jimmy.

If I was you, said Philomena, I'd make sure there's no more children. He don't have a job, so he don't, an' never will the way he drinks. So . . . no more children, Angela. Are you listenin' to me?

I am, Philomena.

A year later another child was born. Angela called him Malachy after his father and gave him a middle name, Gerard, after his father's brother.

The MacNamara sisters said Angela was nothing but a rabbit and they wanted nothing to do with her till she came to her senses.

Their husbands agreed.

I'm in a playground on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn with my brother, Malachy. He's two, I'm three. We're on the seesaw.

Up, down, up, down.

Malachy goes up.

I get off.

Malachy goes down. Seesaw hits the ground. He screams. His hand is on his mouth and there's blood.

Oh, God. Blood is bad. My mother will kill me.

And here she is, trying to run across the playground. Her big belly slows her.

She says, What did you do? What did you do to the child?

I don't know what to say. I don't know what I did.

She pulls my ear. Go home. Go to bed.

Bed? In the middle of the day?

She pushes me toward the playground gate. Go.

She picks up Malachy and waddles off.

My father's friend, Mr. MacAdorey, is outside our building. He's standing at the edge of the sidewalk with his wife, Minnie, looking at a dog lying in the gutter. There is blood all around the dog's head. It's the color of the blood from Malachy's mouth.

Malachy has dog blood and the dog has Malachy blood.

I pull Mr. MacAdorey's hand. I tell him Malachy has blood like the dog.

Oh, he does, indeed, Francis. Cats have it, too. And Eskimos. All the same blood.

Minnie says, Stop that, Dan. Stop confusing the wee fellow. She tells me the poor wee dog was hit by a car and he crawled all the way from the middle of the street before he died. Wanted to come home, the poor wee creature.

Mr. MacAdorey says, You'd better go home, Francis. I don't know what you did to your wee brother, but your mother took him off to the hospital. Go home, child.

Will Malachy die like the dog, Mr. MacAdorey?

Minnie says, He bit his tongue. He won't die.

Why did the dog die?

It was his time, Francis.

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The apartment is empty and I wander between the two rooms, the bedroom and the kitchen. My father is out looking for a job and my mother is at the hospital with Malachy. I wish I had something to eat but there's nothing in the icebox but cabbage leaves floating in the melted ice. My father said never eat anything floating in water for the rot that might be in it. I fall asleep on my parents' bed and when my mother shakes me it's nearly dark. Your little brother is going to sleep a while. Nearly bit his tongue off. Stitches galore. Go into the other room.

My father is in the kitchen sipping black tea from his big white enamel mug. He lifts me to his lap.

Dad, will you tell me the story about Coo Coo?

Cuchulain. Say it after me, Coo-hoo-lin. I'll tell you the story when you say the name right. Coo-hoo-lin.

I say it right and he tells me the story of Cuchulain, who had a different name when he was a boy, Setanta. He grew up in Ireland where Dad lived when he was a boy in County Antrim. Setanta had a stick and ball and one day he hit the ball and it went into the mouth of a big dog that belonged to Culain and choked him. Oh, Culain was angry and he said, What am I to do now without my big dog to guard my house and my wife and my ten small children as well as numerous pigs, hens, sheep?

Setanta said, I'm sorry. I'll guard your house with my stick and ball and I'll change my name to Cuchulain, the Hound of Culain. He did. He guarded the house and regions beyond and became a great hero, the Hound of Ulster itself. Dad said he was a greater hero than Hercules or Achilles that the Greeks were always bragging about and he could take on King Arthur and all his knights in a fair fight which, of course, you could never get with an Englishman anyway.

That's my story. Dad can't tell that story to Malachy or any other children down the hall.

He finishes the story and lets me sip his tea. It's bitter, but I'm happy there on his lap.

For days Malachy's tongue is swollen and he can hardly make a sound never mind talk. But even if he could no one is paying any attention to him because we have two new babies who were brought by an angel in the middle of the night. The neighbors say, Ooh, Ah, they're lovely boys, look at those big eyes.

Malachy stands in the middle of the room, looking up at everyone, pointing to his tongue and saying, Uck, uck. When the neighbors say, Can't you see we're looking at your little brothers? he cries, till Dad pats him on the head. Put in your tongue, son, and go out and play with Frankie. Go on.

In the playground I tell Malachy about the dog who died in the street because someone drove a ball into his mouth. Malachy shakes his head. No uck ball. Car uck kill dog. He cries because his tongue hurts and he can hardly talk and it's terrible when you can't talk. He won't let me push him on the swing. He says, You uck kill me uck on seesaw. He gets Freddie Leibowitz to push him and he's happy, laughing when he swings to the sky. Freddie is big, he's seven, and I ask him to push me. He says, No, you tried to kill your brother.

I try to get the swing going myself but all I can do is move it back and forth and I'm angry because Freddie and Malachy are laughing at the way I can't swing. They're great pals now, Freddie, seven, Malachy, two. They laugh every day and Malachy's tongue gets better with all the laughing.

When he laughs you can see how white and small and pretty his teeth are and you can see his eyes shine. He has blue eyes like my mother. He has golden hair and pink cheeks. I have brown eyes like Dad. I have black hair and

my cheeks are white in the mirror. My mother tells Mrs. Leibowitz down the hall that Malachy is the happiest child in the world. She tells Mrs. Leibowitz down the hall, Frankie has the odd manner like his father. I wonder what the odd manner is but I can't ask because I'm not supposed to be listening.

I wish I could swing up into the sky, up into the clouds. I might be able to fly around the whole world and not hear my brothers, Oliver and Eugene, cry in the middle of the night anymore. My mother says they're always hungry. She cries in the middle of the night, too. She says she's worn out nursing and feeding and changing and four boys is too much for her. She wishes she had one little girl all for herself. She'd give anything for one little girl.

I'm in the playground with Malachy. I'm four, he's three. He lets me push him on the swing because he's no good at swinging himself and Freddie Leibowitz is in school. We have to stay in the playground because the twins are sleeping and my mother says she's worn out. Go out and play, she says, and give me some rest. Dad is out looking for a job again and sometimes he comes home with the smell of whiskey, singing all the songs about suffering Ireland. Mam gets angry and says Ireland can kiss her arse. He says that's nice language to be using in front of the children and she says never mind the language, food on the table is what she wants, not suffering Ireland. She says it was a sad day Prohibition ended because Dad gets the drink going around to saloons offering to sweep out the bars and lift barrels for a whiskey or a beer. Sometimes he brings home bits of the free lunch, rye bread, corned beef, pickles. He puts the food on the table and drinks tea himself. He says food is a shock to the system and he doesn't know where we get our appetites. Mam says, They get their appetites because they're starving half the time.

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When Dad gets a job Mam is cheerful and she sings,

Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss,
It had to be and the reason is this
Could it be true, someone like you
Could love me, love me?

When Dad brings home the first week's wages Mam is delighted she can pay the lovely Italian man in the grocery shop and she can hold her head up again because there's nothing worse in the world than to owe and be beholden to anyone. She cleans the kitchen, washes the mugs and plates, brushes crumbs and bits of food from the table, cleans out the icebox and orders a fresh block of ice from another Italian. She buys toilet paper that we can take down the hall to the lavatory and that, she says, is better than having the headlines from the *Daily News* blackening your arse. She boils water on the stove and spends a day at a great tin tub washing our shirts and socks, diapers for the twins, our two sheets, our three towels. She hangs everything out on the clotheslines behind the apartment house and we can watch the clothes dance in wind and sun. She says you wouldn't want the neighbors to know what you have in the way of a wash but there's nothing like the sweetness of clothes dried by the sun.

When Dad brings home the first week's wages on a Friday night we know the weekend will be wonderful. On Saturday night Mam will boil water on the stove and wash us in the great tin tub and Dad will dry us. Malachy will turn around and show his behind. Dad will pretend to be shocked and we'll all laugh. Mam will make hot cocoa and we'll be able to stay up while Dad tells us a story out of his head. All we have to do is say a name, Mr. MacAdorey or Mr. Leibowitz down the hall, and Dad will have the two of them rowing up a river in Brazil chased

by Indians with green noses and puce shoulders. On nights like that we can drift off to sleep knowing there will be a breakfast of eggs, fried tomatoes and fried bread, tea with lashings of sugar and milk and, later in the day, a big dinner of mashed potatoes, peas and ham, and a trifle Mam makes, layers of fruit and warm delicious custard on a cake soaked in sherry.

When Dad brings home the first week's wages and the weather is fine Mam takes us to the playground. She sits on a bench and talks to Minnie MacAdorey. She tells Minnie stories about characters in Limerick and Minnie tells her about characters in Belfast and they laugh because there are funny people in Ireland, North and South. Then they teach each other sad songs and Malachy and I leave the swings and seesaws to sit with them on the bench and sing,

A group of young soldiers one night in a camp
Were talking of sweethearts they had.
All seemed so merry except one young lad,
And he was downhearted and sad.
Come and join us, said one of the boys,
Surely there's someone for you.
But Ned shook his head and proudly he said
I am in love with two, Each like a mother to me,
From neither of them shall I part.
For one is my mother, God bless her and love her,
The other is my sweetheart.

Malachy and I sing that song and Mam and Minnie laugh till they cry at the way Malachy takes a deep bow and holds his arms out to Mam at the end. Dan MacAdorey comes along on his way home from work and says Rudy Vallee better start worrying about the competition.

When we go home Mam makes tea and bread and jam or mashed potatoes with butter and salt. Dad drinks the

tea and eats nothing. Mam says, God above, How can you work all day and not eat? He says, The tea is enough. She says, You'll ruin your health, and he tells her again that food is a shock to the system. He drinks his tea and tells us stories and shows us letters and words in the *Daily News* or he smokes a cigarette, stares at the wall, runs his tongue over his lips.

When Dad's job goes into the third week he does not bring home the wages. On Friday night we wait for him and Mam gives us bread and tea. The darkness comes down and the lights come on along Classon Avenue. Other men with jobs are home already and having eggs for dinner because you can't have meat on a Friday. You can hear the families talking upstairs and downstairs and down the hall and Bing Crosby is singing on the radio, Brother, can you spare a dime?

Malachy and I play with the twins. We know Mam won't sing Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss. She sits at the kitchen table talking to herself, What am I going to do? till it's late and Dad rolls up the stairs singing Roddy McCorley. He pushes in the door and calls for us, Where are my troops? Where are my four warriors?

Mam says, Leave those boys alone. They're gone to bed half hungry because you have to fill your belly with whiskey.

He comes to the bedroom door. Up, boys, up. A nickel for everyone who promises to die for Ireland.

Deep in Canadian woods we met
From one bright island flown.
Great is the land we tread, but yet
Our hearts are with our own.

Up, boys, up. Francis, Malachy, Oliver, Eugene. The Red Branch Knights, the Fenian Men, the IRA. Up, up.

Mam is at the kitchen table, shaking, her hair hanging

damp, her face wet. Can't you leave them alone? she says. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, isn't it enough that you come home without a penny in your pocket without making fools of the children on top of it?

She comes to us. Go back to bed, she says.

I want them up, he says. I want them ready for the day Ireland will be free from the center to the sea.

Don't cross me, she says, for if you do it'll be a sorry day in your mother's house.

He pulls his cap down over his face and cries, My poor mother. Poor Ireland. Och, what are we going to do?

Mam says, You're pure stone mad, and she tells us again to go to bed.

On the morning of the fourth Friday of Dad's job Mam asks him if he'll be home tonight with his wages or will he drink everything again? He looks at us and shakes his head at Mam as if to say, Och, you shouldn't talk like that in front of the children.

Mam keeps at him. I'm asking you, Are you coming home so that we can have a bit of supper or will it be midnight with no money in your pocket and you singing Kevin Barry and the rest of the sad songs?

He puts on his cap, shoves his hands into his trouser pockets, sighs and looks up at the ceiling. I told you before I'll be home, he says.

Later in the day Mam dresses us. She puts the twins into the pram and off we go through the long streets of Brooklyn. Sometimes she lets Malachy sit in the pram when he's tired of trotting along beside her. She tells me I'm too big for the pram. I could tell her I have pains in my legs from trying to keep up with her but she's not singing and I know this is not the day to be talking about my pains.

We come to a big gate where there's a man standing in a box with windows all around. Mam talks to the man.

She wants to know if she can go inside to where the men are paid and maybe they'd give her some of Dad's wages so he wouldn't spend it in the bars. The man shakes his head. I'm sorry, lady, but if we did that we'd have half the wives in Brooklyn storming the place. Lotta men have the drinking problem but there's nothing we can do long as they show up sober and do their work.

We wait across the street. Mam lets me sit on the sidewalk with my back against the wall. She gives the twins their bottles of water and sugar but Malachy and I have to wait till she gets money from Dad and we can go to the Italian for tea and bread and eggs.

When the whistle blows at half five men in caps and overalls swarm through the gate, their faces and hands black from the work. Mam tells us watch carefully for Dad because she can hardly see across the street herself, her eyes are that bad. There are dozens of men, then a few, then none. Mam is crying, Why couldn't ye see him? Are ye blind or what?

She goes back to the man in the box. Are you sure there wouldn't be one man left inside?

No, lady, he says. They're out. I don't know how he got past you.

We go back through the long streets of Brooklyn. The twins hold up their bottles and cry for more water and sugar. Malachy says he's hungry and Mam tells him wait a little, we'll get money from Dad and we'll all have a nice supper. We'll go to the Italian and get eggs and make toast with the flames on the stove and we'll have jam on it. Oh, we will, and we'll all be nice and warm.

It's dark on Atlantic Avenue and all the bars around the Long Island Railroad Station are bright and noisy. We go from bar to bar looking for Dad. Mam leaves us outside with the pram while she goes in or she sends me. There are crowds of noisy men and stale smells that remind me

of Dad when he comes home with the smell of the whiskey on him.

The man behind the bar says, Yeah, sonny, whaddya want? You're not supposeta be in here, y'know.

I'm looking for my father. Is my father here?

Naw, sonny, how'd I know dat? Who's your fawdah?

His name is Malachy and he sings Kevin Barry.

Malarkey?

No, Malachy.

Malachy? And he sings Kevin Barry?

He calls out to the men in the bar, Youse guys, youse know guy Malachy what sings Kevin Barry?

Men shake their heads. One says he knew a guy Michael sang Kevin Barry but he died of the drink which he had because of his war wounds.

The barman says, Jeez, Pete, I didn't ax ya to tell me history o' da woild, did I? Naw, kid. We don't let people sing in here. Causes trouble. Specially the Irish. Let 'em sing, next the fists are flying. Besides, I never hoid a name like dat Malachy. Naw, kid, no Malachy here.

The man called Pete holds his glass toward me. Here, kid, have a sip, but the barman says, Whaddya doin', Pete? Tryina get the kid drunk? Do that again, Pete, an' I'll come out an' break y'ass.

Mam tries all the bars around the station before she gives up. She leans against a wall and cries. Jesus, we still have to walk all the way to Classon Avenue and I have four starving children. She sends me back into the bar where Pete offered me the sip to see if the barman would fill the twins' bottles with water and maybe a little sugar in each. The men in the bar think it's very funny that the barman should be filling baby bottles but he's big and he tells them shut their lip. He tells me babies should be drinking milk not water and when I tell him Mam doesn't have the money he empties the baby bottles and fills them

with milk. He says, Tell ya mom they need that for the teeth an' bones. Ya drink water an' sugar an' all ya get is rickets. Tell ya mom.

Mam is happy with the milk. She says she knows all about teeth and bones and rickets but beggars can't be choosers.

When we reach Classon Avenue she goes straight to the Italian grocery shop. She tells the man her husband is late tonight, that he's probably working overtime, and would it be at all possible to get a few things and she'll be sure to see him tomorrow?

The Italian says, Missus, you always pay your bill sooner or later and you can have anything you like in this store.

Oh, she says, I don't want much.

Anything you like, missus, because I know you're an honest woman and you got a bunch o' nice kids there.

We have eggs and toast and jam though we're so weary walking the long streets of Brooklyn we can barely move our jaws to chew. The twins fall asleep after eating and Mam lays them on the bed to change their diapers. She sends me down the hall to rinse the dirty diapers in the lavatory so that they can be hung up to dry and used the next day. Malachy helps her wash the twins' bottoms though he's ready to fall asleep himself.

I crawl into bed with Malachy and the twins. I look out at Mam at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette, drinking tea, and crying. I want to get up and tell her I'll be a man soon and I'll get a job in the place with the big gate and I'll come home every Friday night with money for eggs and toast and jam and she can sing again Anyone can see why I wanted your kiss.

The next week Dad loses the job. He comes home that Friday night, throws his wages on the table and says to Mam, Are you happy now? You hang around the gate

complaining and accusing and they sack me. They were looking for an excuse and you gave it to them.

He takes a few dollars from his wages and goes out. He comes home late roaring and singing. The twins cry and Mam shushes them and cries a long time herself.

We spend hours in the playground when the twins are sleeping, when Mam is tired, and when Dad comes home with the whiskey smell on him, roaring about Kevin Barry getting hanged on a Monday morning or the Roddy McCorley song,

Up the narrow street he stepped
Smiling and proud and young
About the hemp-rope on his neck
The golden ringlets clung,
There's never a tear in the blue eyes
Both glad and bright are they,
As Roddy McCorley goes to die
On the bridge of Toome today.

When he sings he marches around the table, Mam cries and the twins howl with her. She says, Go out, Frankie, go out, Malachy. You shouldn't see your father like this. Stay in the playground.

We don't mind going to the playground. We can play with the leaves piling up on the ground and we can push each other on the swings but then winter comes to Classon Avenue and the swings are frozen and won't even move. Minnie MacAdorey says, God help these poor wee boys. They don't have a glove between them. That makes me laugh because I know Malachy and I have four hands between us and one glove would be silly. Malachy doesn't know what I'm laughing at: He won't know anything till he's four going on five.

Minnie brings us in and gives us tea and porridge with

jam in it. Mr. MacAdorey sits in an armchair with their new baby, Maisie. He holds her bottle and sings,

Clap hands, clap hands,
Till Daddy comes home,
With buns in his pocket
For Maisie alone.
Clap hands, clap hands,
Till Daddy comes home,
For Daddy has money
And Mammy has none.

Malachy tries to sing that song but I tell him stop, it's Maisie's song. He starts to cry and Minnie says, There, there. You can sing the song. That's a song for all the children. Mr. MacAdorey smiles at Malachy and I wonder what kind of world is it where anyone can sing anyone else's song.

Minnie says, Don't frown, Frankie. It makes your face dark and God knows it's dark enough. Some day you'll have a little sister and you can sing that song to her. Och, aye. You'll have a little sister, surely.

Minnie is right and Mam gets her wish. There's a new baby soon, a little girl, and they call her Margaret. We all love Margaret. She has black curly hair and blue eyes like Mam and she waves her little hands and chirps like any little bird in the trees along Classon Avenue. Minnie says there was a holiday in heaven the day this child was made. Mrs. Leibowitz says the world never saw such eyes, such a smile, such happiness. She makes me dance, says Mrs. Leibowitz.

When Dad comes home from looking for a job he holds Margaret and sings to her: