

WHISPERS ON THE WIND

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GLENGARIFF 1884

Kate O'Reilly opened her eyes and quickly shut them. Awakened by the chill of morning, she snuggled deeper into the warm bed. Scattered thoughts of the

day ahead soon interrupted her stolen slumber. She held the inevitable at bay, then braced herself and pulled back the blanket. Kate lingered for a moment longer, taking in the familiar surroundings through sleepy green eyes; then willed her long legs to the cold floor. Emerging from behind the curtain that separated her sleeping area from the rest of the cottage, Kate made her way quietly to the hearth. She looked down on the smoldering turf fire while running a hand through her long red hair. Glancing to the side of the hearth at the wicker basket where the peat was stored, Kate saw that it was empty. "Best get this filled," Kate thought to herself as she took hold of a basket handle. With basket in hand, Kate stepped away from the hearth, stopping only to lift a knit shawl of unbleached wool from a wooden peg on the wall. Kate pulled it tightly around herself, picked up the basket and pushed open the cottage door.

Barefoot, Kate stepped out onto the Glengariff morning. As always, the wind carried with it the scent of the sea. Somehow it tasted softer and sweeter this May morning, Kate decided, as she inhaled deeply. The perfumed fragrance of heather intermingled with the salty sea air, producing an invigorating tonic. Kate shook off the last remnants of sleep and looked towards the mountain ridge. Cascades of mist floated gently down the slopes of green. Spring blooming wildflowers dotted the lush vegetation and seemed to dance with the wind. Turning away from the verdant beauty of the Caha Mountains, Kate let her gaze fall upon a yellow-breasted stonechat caught up in its morning song. Kate listened to the tiny bird, as she started down a worn footpath, intent on gathering the much-needed fuel. With strong strides she covered the short distance and found herself back where the earth-scented peat was stored. Kate made quick work of filling the basket with hardened, brick-shaped sods of turf, and was soon on her way back to the cottage.

Kate hurried up the path and slipped quietly inside. She laid the peat on glowing embers, casting the basket aside and began to hum softly, while hooking a kettle over the fire. Moving smoothly to the next task at hand, Kate entered the tiny kitchen and opened a chest where the oatmeal was stored. She stirred the creamy white flakes before scooping out a portion into a heavy pot. Kate started to carry the uncooked oatmeal to the hearth, but stopped abruptly, distracted by the hushed tones of her parents speaking in Gaelic.

Kate lowered herself onto a stool near the hearth, setting the pot aside. She leaned forward squinting as she tried to make sense of the conversation coming through the wall. Suddenly, the discussion in the other room stopped. Kate looked down at the forgotten oatmeal and in her haste to lift the pot, she almost dumped the contents into the fire.

“Good morning, Kate,” her mother called out.

Kate looked towards the direction of her mother’s voice and replied, “Good Morning, Ma.”

Mary O’Reilly reached the hearth and looked into the eyes of her 17-year-old daughter. “Kate, you’ve been busy I see,” Mary said, as she tied a scarf around her shoulder length, brown hair. “Pour ‘yer father some tea and let me take over the porridge.”

Kate busied herself filling a mug with tea, as her father approached the hearth. Wordlessly, Kate handed him the steamy mug.

“Thanks Kate, you’re a good lass,” her father said, giving Kate a wink.

Kate looked into her father’s face, still wondering about the words he shared with her mother. Her parents reserved their use of Gaelic for issues of a more serious nature. Kate knew bits and pieces of the Irish language, but her limited knowledge proved no help earlier that morning.

“I couldn’t help hearing the two of ‘ye,” Kate began feeling a bit ashamed at her confession of listening in. “I trust all is well,” Kate added looking directly at her parents.

Francis O’Reilly looked over at his wife, drank a bit of tea and replied, “actually Kate, there is something we need to discuss with ‘ye.”

Mary O’Reilly motioned Kate to take a seat by the hearth and filled two mugs with tea, handing one to Kate.

“‘Yer mother and I have decided to emigrate to America.”

Kate looked stunned, not quite believing what she had heard.

“I know it seems sudden,” Mary chimed in, “but we’ve been thinking about it for some time now.”

“Why did ‘ye never mention it to me before now?” Kate asked.

“We wanted to wait until we were certain,” Mary answered.

“So what do ‘ye think?” Francis asked Kate, as he ran his hand over a thick shock of red hair.

“I don’t know ‘Da, I don’t know,” Kate responded with her voice trailing off.

“By and by, you’ll become accustomed to the idea,” Mary said, “now go fetch me some bowls for the porridge.” Kate got up from her seat by the hearth to do her mother’s bidding. As Kate walked off, still overcome by the news, Mary looked over at her husband. Francis read the concern on his wife’s face and gestured with his hands that all would be fine. Kate opened the cupboard and reached up for the bowls. She felt a wave of passion course through her body that left her shaking. She turned, facing her parents and without thinking, cried, “I don’t want to leave!”

Following Kate’s outburst, silence filled the small cottage. Kate remained standing in front of the cupboard, violently gripping the worn pieces of crockery she held in her hands. Mary looked into the fire before breaking the growing silence.

“I expected as much,” she began, “and so I’ve already arranged for ‘ye to spend a few days at ‘yer Grandmother’s cottage. You’re always so happy there. Take a few days and make peace with this Kate, Mary continued, it has not been without consideration for ‘yer future that we came to this decision.”

Kate closed her eyes and pictured her Grandmother’s face. Immediately, she felt her body respond to the peaceful thought and relaxed the grip she had on the bowls. Opening her eyes, Kate looked into the worried faces of Francis and Mary O’Reilly.

“Are ‘ye recovered from the shock of it all, Kate,” Francis asked, looking at his daughter with concern.

“Not entirely, ‘Da,” Kate replied.

“Come over here and drink your tea,” Mary gently commanded.

Kate walked over and handed her mother the bowls before taking her seat by the hearth. Picking up the mug of tea, Kate brought it to her lips and drank. The tea felt warm and soothing. Mary looked at Kate, thinking to herself how very young her daughter looked just now.

“‘Me darlin’ Kate,” Mary said softly, “‘tis a hard life trying to bring forth anything from this rock laden piece of land we live upon. How many times have I shushed ‘yer own harsh words, as ‘ye watched ‘yer father take leave to give over the very fruit of his labor when the rent came due? Life is too dear to be spent killing ‘yerself for another man’s gain. With ‘yer Uncle Jamie taking over ‘yer Grandfather’s land and ourselves not wanting this land we’re working, America provides some hope of a better life to ‘yer father and me.”

Kate looked into her mother’s face, sensing the conviction with which Mary spoke.

“Are ‘ye beginning to understand, Lass,” Francis asked.

“I understand ‘Da, but I still can’t believe we’ll be leaving Ireland behind us. I’ve watched others leave, but I always thought, not me, I’ll never leave.”

“Ireland will always be here,” Francis broke in.

“Aye, you’re right ‘Da,” Kate continued, “but I’ve heard once ‘ye leave, ‘ye never come back.”

Mary sensed the direction the conversation was taking, and deciding that now was not the time, she acted quickly to bring about its end.

“Well, I can see we won’t be solving anything this morning,” Mary announced, trying to lighten the mood; “so, eat ‘yer porridge before it grows cold,” Mary said, as she handed a bowl of the warm, creamy mixture to both

Kate and Francis. “Ye needn’t worry about helping me wash up the dishes,” Mary addressed Kate, “pull a few of ‘yer things together and be on ‘yer way, Gran will be watching out for ‘ye.”

“Aye, Ma.”

“There now,” Mary continued, “we’ll say a prayer and have our breakfast.”

Once more, silence fell upon the O’Reilly household. Kate looked up from her simple breakfast and sensed something different about the familiar home. Change arrived unexpectedly this morning and she knew that life would never be the same. While Mary O’Reilly busied herself with the task of cleaning up the remnants of breakfast, Kate walked over to her sleeping area and pulled aside the curtain. From underneath her bed, Kate withdrew a small, wooden box. She then settled herself upon the bed and opened it, looking down on the few treasures it contained. A black beaded Rosary lay in the corner, next to a book of Catholic prayers. Kate pushed aside a precious tablet of paper, some pencils and a comb for her hair, for underneath this lay several packets of carefully labeled seeds. She had gathered these seeds with Gran at the end of last summer. Kate picked up a single packet and thought of the plans she and Gran had to put in a flower garden. Kate wondered if that too would change. She dropped the seeds into the box and closed the lid. Locating a nightgown stored under her pillow, Kate quickly folded the cotton sheath and tucked it under her arm. She then picked up the small wooden box and emerged from behind the curtain. Mary O’Reilly’s blue eyes locked onto the nightgown, loosely tucked under her daughter’s arm.

“I won’t have ‘ye walking about, flashing ‘yer bed clothes for all to see, Kate. Take up the sack by the door ‘yer wee box should fit as well.”

Kate glared at the homely sack lying in a heap next to the door. “Ma, I have no need of it,” Kate pleaded, “I could just as easily wrap it in ‘me shawl.”

“And what are ‘ye to do if ‘ye have need of ‘yer shawl?” Mary countered.

“Do as ‘yer mother asks of ‘ye.” Francis commanded, looking up from his tea and straight at his daughter.

Kate sighed, as she knew she wouldn't be able to leave the cottage without it, and, so, she resigned herself to the homely sack and hastily stuffed her nightgown and box inside. Mary O'Reilly leaned against her broom and smiled approvingly at the sack now in Kate's hand.

"Well now, that's better."

"You're quite certain, 'ye won't be needing me here?"

Kate asked, still mildly annoyed about the undesirable sack she now held in her hand.

"Quite certain."

Mary set the broom aside and walked with Kate to the door of the cottage.

"Will 'ye be stopping by the Maloy's to see Colleen?" Mary asked, while opening the door.

"I am and don't worry yourself Ma, I won't talk half the day away," Kate said, now anxious to be leaving and on her way to see Colleen.

"All right then, off 'ye go," Mary said, and gave Kate a hug.

As Kate stepped out into the yard, Mary closed only the bottom part of the half-door, as she wasn't quite ready to let Kate out of her sight. Francis O'Reilly got up from the well-scrubbed table to join Mary and the two of them looked out at their departing daughter.

"See 'ye in a few days then, Kate." Francis called out. "Aye 'Da, in a few days."

"Give our best to Gran, won't 'ye," Mary added.

"I'll do that Ma," Kate called out as she waved a

goodbye to her parents and started down the road to the Maloy cottage.

Francis slipped his arms around Mary, pulling her close. "Everything's going to be fine, love," he murmured into her hair.

"Aye, with the help of God and His Blessed Mother." Mary relaxed into her husband's embrace and together they watched Kate until she was out of sight.

The village of Glengariff was not far from the Beara Peninsula where Kate's Grandmother lived. Bathed in the warm Gulf Stream, the climate was mild and the greenery seemed almost tropical in this part of Ireland. Kate couldn't help but smile, as she walked along; not even the burdensome thoughts that hovered at the edge of her mind could taint the beauty all around her. Each spring, her natural wonder renewed itself, surrounded as she was by these marvels of nature. Kate stopped at the side of the road, set down her sack and cupped a fuchsia flower in both hands. As she held the elegant blossom, she took true delight from the hues of lavender and rose that colored it. "So graceful," Kate thought further, and tenderly released it.

Embarking once again on her short journey, Kate came to a point in the road that offered a magnificent view. It was as if a notch had been cut into the distant mountains just to reveal the shimmering blue of the long reaching Atlantic.

"Soon, I'll be on it," Kate thought, as she focused on the ocean itself, "heading to America." She heaved a heavy sigh and continued down the road.

The thatched cottage of the Maloy family finally came into view. Built into the hillside, it appeared almost a natural part of the landscape. A bubbling brook provided the only sound in the otherwise quiet scene. When Kate was just halfway up the road that led to the cottage, Colleen appeared at the half-door. She waved a greeting to Kate and emerged from behind the door, running to meet her. Colleen Maloy wondered what had brought Kate O'Reilly to her door, but didn't question it for long. She was happy enough just to be able to break away from her morning duties. Colleen hurried along the gap of road between them, enjoying her sudden freedom and the cool, fresh, morning breeze. As Colleen reached Kate's side, her eyes fell upon the half-hidden sack.

"'Tis a lovely bag 'ye have there Kate," Colleen said, as a wry smile crept to her lips.

"Ah, this, they forced it on me."

Colleen studied Kate's face, detecting the sadness that lay just below the surface, as she tossed her long, black, braided hair behind her.

“Off to ‘yer Gran’s this morning, are ‘ye?” Colleen asked.

Kate nodded her head in reply, when suddenly her eyes filled with tears. She dropped the sack and brought her hands to her face.

“Kate, what’s this?”

“I might as well come straight out with it,” Kate began, as she wiped away the tears running down her cheeks, “we’re going to America.”

“America!” Colleen gasped, “when?”

“I’m not quite certain, soon, I suspect.” Kate said, looking into Colleen’s widened blue eyes. Colleen’s expression was one of shock, as she turned away from Kate and looked down the road.

“Oh Kate,” she said, “wasn’t I just wondering why ‘ye were here, but never would I have guessed this.”

Moments passed while nothing more was said. The two young women looked at one another, both unsure of what to say. Rays of spring sunshine had not yet begun to dissipate the gentle morning mist, allowing a soothing coolness to flow over them. The shock of Kate’s news slowly subsided as the girls were refreshed by the delicate spray. Finally, Colleen leaned over to pick up Kate’s sack.

“This isn’t so bad,” she said, handing it to Kate.

“Wouldn’t that be true, if it were lying on the bottom of a locked trunk.”

Infectious laughter burst out onto the quiet morning, easing the tension between them.

“When was it that ‘ye learned of all this?”

“Just this morning,” Kate replied, “they’re quite set on leaving Ireland.”

“Isn’t this why you’re off to ‘yer Gran’s?”

“Aye, I’m meant to take a few days and make peace with the whole mess.”

“Either that or figure a way out of it,” Colleen broke in. “Couldn’t ‘ye get yourself married off in the nick of time?”

“Well now, there’s an idea.”

“What lucky lad did ‘ye have in mind?” Kate asked. “You could be a Saint and take on one of ‘me

brothers, or there’s always old Colin McNulty.”

“Marrying one of ‘yer brothers ‘twas not the path to Sainthood I had imagined for ‘meself,” Kate began, smiling back at Colleen; “and wouldn’t we have a time of it, getting the jar of ale out of Colin’s hand long enough to complete the marriage ceremony?”

“’Tis true,” Colleen said. “The Priest would just have to conduct the ceremony right there in the Public House.” Laughter filled the air again between the two friends, as it did often and easily whenever they were together. Kate paused for a moment, as a more somber expression came across her young features.

“Haven’t I made a mess out of our grand plans to find jobs in lovely shops?” Colleen contemplated their long discussed dream of finding work in Cork City or Dublin.

“Well now, about that, haven’t the odds been against us from the very beginning? As it is, I can’t even breathe a word about it at home,” Colleen continued as she waved a hand towards the Maloy cottage, “without the lot of them thinking I’ve lost ‘me mind.” “It’s all talk they say, a simple lass off the farm has no hope in life aside from a half-way decent marriage. And with marriage being the last thing I’d want for ‘meself right now, imagine settling for a half-way decent match?”

“Aye, that would be the final blow to these plans of ours,” Kate replied.

“The only difference I can see,” Colleen continued, “is that we’ll be going after it alone instead of together.”

“You’re right about that, Colleen.” “It’s just hard for me to see past today; everything has changed so much. I can’t hardly bring ‘meself to believe that

I'll be leaving," Kate said, as she looked in the direction of the open ocean and closed her eyes. "It's the leaving that scares me. There's this great sadness that I can't reason away. All my hopes and dreams lie here, on Irish soil." Once more tears welled up in Kate's eyes but she fought them back. "Well now, perhaps I'll make peace with all this as I'm meant to."

"Won't we be writing each other, exchanging gossip across the Atlantic?" Colleen queried.

"We'll always be friends," Kate agreed. "I should be off to Gran's before she thinks I've been kidnapped."

"Aye, be on 'yer way," Colleen replied, "and be certain to let me know when you'll be leaving. Everything's going to turn out just grand for 'ye, Kate."

"Ah Colleen, I hope you're right."

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