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ANGELA'S ASHES

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There is a row of small houses on each side of the lane and Grandma lives in one of the small houses. Her kitchen has a shiny polished black iron range with a fire glowing in the grate. There is a table along the wall under the window and a press opposite with cups and saucers and vases. This press is always locked and she keeps the key in her purse because you're not supposed to use anything in there unless someone dies or returns from foreign parts or there's a visit by a priest.

There is a picture on the wall by the range of a man with long brown hair and sad eyes. He is pointing to his chest where there is a big heart with flames coming out of it. Mam tells us, That's the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and I want to know why the man's heart is on fire and why doesn't He throw water on it? Grandma says, Don't these children know anything about their religion? and Mam tells her it's different in America. Grandma says the Sacred Heart is everywhere and there's no excuse for that kind of ignorance.

Under the picture of the man with the burning heart there is a shelf with a red glass holding a flickering candle and next to it a small statue. Mam tells us, That's the Baby Jesus, the Infant of Prague, and if ye ever need anything pray to Him.

Malachy says, Mam, could I tell Him I'm hungry, and Mam puts her finger to her lips.

Grandma grumbles around the kitchen making tea and telling Mam to cut the loaf of bread and don't make the cuts too thick. Mam sits by the table with her breath coming hard and says she'll cut the bread in a minute. Dad takes the knife and starts slicing the bread and you can see Grandma doesn't like that. She frowns at him but says nothing even though he makes thick slices.

There aren't enough chairs for everyone so I sit on the stairs with my brothers to have bread and tea. Dad and Mam sit at the table and Grandma sits under the Sacred Heart with her mug of tea. She says, I don't know under God what I'm goin' to do with ye. There is no room in this house. There isn't room for even one of ye.

Malachy says, Ye, ye, and starts to giggle and I say, Ye, ye, and the twins say, Ye, ye, and we're laughing so hard we can hardly eat our bread.

Grandma glares at us. What are ye laughin' at? There's nothin' to laugh at in this house. Ye better behave yeerselves before I go over to ye.

She won't stop saying Ye, and now Malachy is helpless with laughter, spewing out his bread and tea, his face turning red.

Dad says, Malachy and the rest of you, stop it. But Malachy can't, he goes on laughing till Dad says, Come over here. He rolls up Malachy's sleeve and raises his hand to slap his arm.

Are you going to behave yourself?

Malachy's eyes fill with tears and he nods, I will, because Dad never raised his hand like that before. Dad says, Be a good boy and go sit with your brothers, and he pulls down the sleeve and pats Malachy on the head.

That night Mam's sister, Aunt Aggie, came home from her job in the clothing factory. She was big like the MacNamara sisters, and she had flaming red hair. She wheeled a large bicycle into the little room behind the kitchen and came out to her supper. She was living in Grandma's because she had a fight with her husband, Pa Keating, who told her, when he had drink taken, You're a great fat cow, go home to your mother. That's what Grandma told Mam and that's why there was no room for us in Grandma's house. She had herself, Aunt Aggie, and her son Pat, who was my uncle and who was out selling newspapers.

Aunt Aggie complained when Grandma told her Mam would have to sleep with her that night. Grandma said, Oh, will you shut your gob. 'Tis only for one night an' that won't kill you an' if you don't like it you can go back to your husband where you belong anyway instead of runnin' home to me. Jesus, Mary an' Holy St. Joseph, look at this house—you an' Pat an' Angela and her clatter of Americans. Will I have any peace in the latter end of my life?

She spread coats and rags on the floor of the little back room and we slept there with the bicycle. Dad stayed on a chair in the kitchen, took us to the lavatory in the backyard when we needed it, and in the night hushed the twins when they cried from the cold.

In the morning, Aunt Aggie came for her bicycle telling us, Will ye mind yeerselves, will ye? Will ye get out of my way?

When she left, Malachy kept saying, Will ye mind yeerselves, will ye? Will ye get out of the way, will ye? and I

could hear Dad laughing out in the kitchen till Grandma came down the stairs and he had to tell Malachy be quiet.

That day Grandma and Mam went out and found a furnished room on Windmill Street where Aunt Aggie had a flat with her husband, Pa Keating. Grandma paid the rent, ten shillings for two weeks. She gave Mam money for food, loaned us a kettle, a pot, a frying pan, knives and spoons, jam jars to be used for mugs, a blanket and a pillow. She said that was all she could afford anymore, that Dad would have to get up off his arse, get a job, go on the dole, go for the charity at the St. Vincent de Paul Society or go on the relief.

The room had a fireplace where we could boil water for our tea or an egg in case we ever came into money. We had a table and three chairs and a bed, which Mam said was the biggest she had ever seen. We were glad of the bed that night, worn out after nights on floors in Dublin and in Grandma's. It didn't matter that there were six of us in the bed, we were together, away from grandmothers and guards, Malachy could say ye ye ye and we could laugh as much as we liked.

Dad and Mam lay at the head of the bed, Malachy and I at the bottom, the twins wherever they could find comfort. Malachy made us laugh again. Ye, ye, ye, he said, and oy oy oy, and then fell asleep. Mam made the little hink hink snore sound that told us she was sleeping. In the moonlight I could look up the length of the bed and see Dad still awake and when Oliver cried in his sleep Dad reached for him and held him. Whisht, he said. Whisht.



Then Eugene sat up, screaming, tearing at himself. Ah, ah, Mommy, Mommy. Dad sat up. What? What's up, son? Eugene went on crying and when Dad leaped from the bed and turned on the gaslight we saw the fleas, leaping, jumping, fastened to our flesh. We slapped at them and slapped but they hopped from body to body, hopping, biting. We tore at the bites till they bled. We jumped from the bed, the twins crying, Mam moaning, Oh, Jesus, will we have no rest! Dad poured water and salt into a jam jar and dabbed at our bites. The salt burned but he said we'd feel better soon.

Mam sat by the fireplace with the twins on her lap. Dad pulled on his trousers and dragged the mattress off the bed and out to the street. He filled the kettle and the pot with water, stood the mattress against the wall, pounded it with a shoe, told me to keep pouring water on the ground to drown the fleas dropping there. The Limerick moon was so bright I could see bits of it shimmering in the water and I wanted to scoop up moon bits but how could I with the fleas leaping on my legs. Dad kept pounding with the shoe and I had to run back through the house to the backyard tap for more water in the kettle and the pot. Mam said, Look at you. Your shoes are drenched and you'll catch your death and your father will surely get the pneumonia without a shoe to his foot.

A man on a bicycle stopped and wanted to know why Dad was beating that mattress. Mother o' God, he said, I never heard such a cure for fleas. Do you know that if a man could jump like a flea one lep would take him halfway to the moon? The thing to do is this, when you go back inside with that mattress stick it on the bed upside down and that will confuse the little buggers. They won't know where they are and they'll be biting the mattress or each other, which is the best cure of all. After they bite the human being they have the frenzy, you know, for there are other fleas around them that also bit the human being and the smell of the blood is too much for them and they go out of their minds. They're a right bloody torment an' I should know for didn't I grow up in Limerick, down in the Irishtown, an' the fleas there were so plentiful an' forward they'd sit on the toe of your boot an' discuss Ireland's woeful history with you. It is said there were no fleas in ancient Ireland, that they were brought in be the English to drive us out of our wits entirely, an' I wouldn't put it past the English. An' isn't it a very curious thing that St. Patrick drove the snakes out of Ireland

an' the English brought in the fleas. For centuries Ireland was a lovely peaceful place, snakes gone, not a flea to be found. You could stroll the four green fields of Ireland without fear of snakes an' have a good night's sleep with no fleas to bother you. Them snakes were doin' no harm, they wouldn't bother you unless you cornered them an' they lived off other creatures that move under bushes an' such places, whereas the flea sucks the blood from you mornin' noon an' night for that's his nature an' he can't help himself. I hear for a fact that places that have snakes galore have no fleas. Arizona, for instance. You're forever hearing about the snakes of Arizona but when did you ever hear of fleas in Arizona? Good luck to you. I have to be careful standin' here for if one of them gets on my clothes I might as well invite his whole family home. They multiply faster than Hindus.

Dad said, You wouldn't by any chance have a cigarette,

A cigarette? Oh, sure, of course. Here you are. Aren't I nearly destroyed from the fags myself. The oul' hacking cough, you know. So powerful it nearly knocks me off the bicycle. I can feel that cough stirring in me solar plexus an' workin' its way up through me entrails till the next thing it takes off the top o' me head.