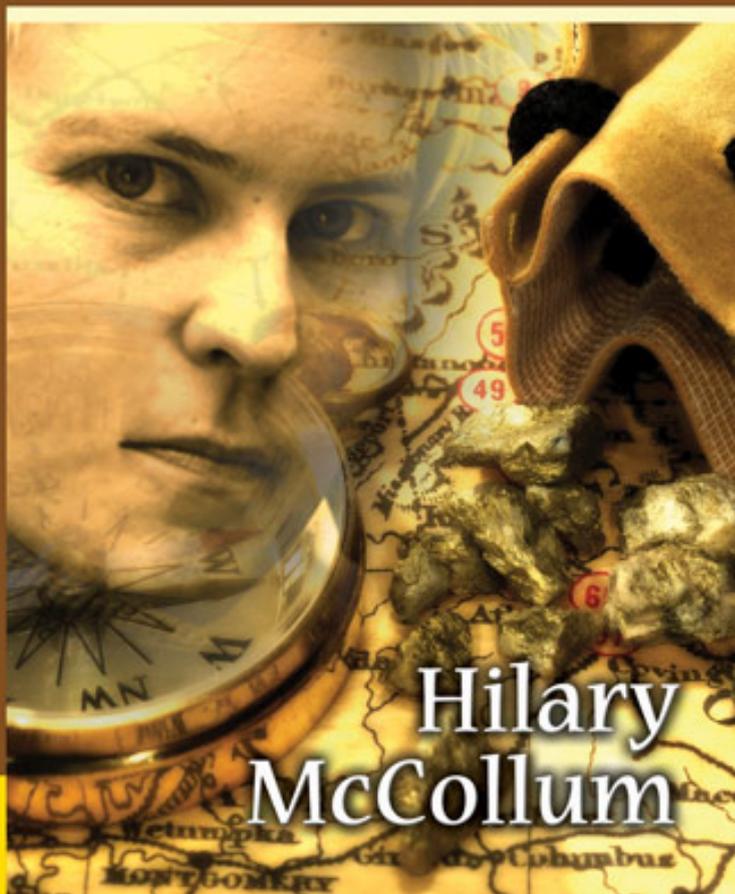


GOLDDIGGER

Hilary McCollum



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CHAPTER ONE

New York, August 1848

I woke this morning suddenly, as usual. Sleep is black and white for me. When I was growing up, I shared a bed with four sisters. They would moan and groan their way awake. Not me. Eyelids springing open, I'd leap out of bed ready for the new day.

Except for the nights I spent with Kitty. Then waking was a gentle stroll along a country lane, slowly becoming aware of her lying close to me, my breath on her skin, her foot on my calf, my eyes slowly opening to see hers looking at me. I couldn't help but smile. She'd kiss the edge of my upturned mouth. "Morning, Frankie," she'd say.

Now I spend my nights alone in a room in a boarding house in New York City. Sweat has pooled under my breasts as I have slept. New York is hot. I pour water from the jug on the dresser into the basin. My arms have tanned over the summer, up as far as the elbows, skin golden, splashed with brown freckles. But the upper half is pale, a creamy white. My arms are firm and strong. I like them.

I douse my face with water. It too is tanned, down to the collarbone. I catch my reflection in the mirror, eyes a bright blue, hair brown-black. I dip my flannel into the water, wring it out, then wipe my neck, beneath my breasts, under both arms, between my legs. Standing on one foot, I wash the other. I dry off with a rough towel. It is time to

dress. I take a long piece of white cloth, tuck one end under my left armpit, and begin to wind it round and round my body, binding my breasts flat and tight.

I slip into my white shirt and the dark trousers that have hung overnight on a hook on my door. I bought them eighteen months ago in a pawnshop on the Lower East Side, the day after I'd arrived in New York on a coffin ship from Cobh. The trousers needed taking up and in, but I was good with a needle; my mother had taught me well. I borrowed shears from the landlady, then went back to my room and cut my hair short, peering into a spotted mirror. It was strange, not myself, but not entirely someone different—the son my mother never had.

I left the guesthouse and went in search of somewhere to live. It brought me here, to Mott Street. My room is tiny, space only for a narrow bed and the broken dresser I lugged up the stairs. I look again in the mirror above the dresser, adjusting my cap. It's time to set off.

I stop at the post office on my way to work, expecting a letter from home. My mother writes to me twice a year. At last it's arrived. My heart starts to beat faster—praying for good news. I read as I walk along.

Dear Frances

I hope this letter finds you in good health bad times are still with us and people are dying all bunched together Mary Quinn and her mother dead last week

The Quinns were neighbours, rather than friends. I stop, crossing myself, sending a prayer for their souls, thanking God it wasn't my family.

There is no sign of anything but hardship and poverty it has rained for months and your da is sure the potatoes will rot again thank God for our oats and the money you send Burnham has sent the wreckers in to destroy the cabins of them as cannot pay the rent but we have enough

That bastard Burnham. I turn and spit, as always when I think of him. Hounding people for the rent when he knows they have nothing to pay it with.

We found Dolly dead in the field some poor starving wretch had bled her she was such a good milker I hope it saved whoever done it

*I am sorry I have no better news to tell you but pray God things will have improved by the next time I write
Everyone sends their kind love to you I remain until death
your loving mother*

Twenty minutes later I arrive at Harvey's grocery store. It sells all sorts—flour, sugar, tea and coffee, brushes and shovels, boots, tobacco and medicines. Gerry, my only friend in New York, works here. He's thin and wiry with jet-black hair, soft brown eyes and a lopsided smile. "Morning Frank," he says.

I nod.

"Don't you be wearing your tongue out," he says.

"What?" I say. "Oh, sorry. It's only..." I hesitate. Gerry is from Skibbreen. We've never talked about The Hunger.

"It's only what?" he says.

"I got a letter from home this morning."

It's his turn to nod. "Jaysus, I dread those letters. Me stomach clenches when I see one waiting for me."

We are silent for a moment.

I bang my fist down on the counter. "What am I supposed to do?" It takes me by surprise. Gerry too.

"Easy now there, Frank," he says. "I'm sure you're doing what you can."

"What? What am I doing?"

"You're making a new life for yourself here, you're sending money. Sure that's all you can do."

I don't answer. There is no answer. He's right, but it's not enough.

"Try and put the letter from your mind," he says.

I sigh, shaking my head.

"Listen," Gerry says, "why don't we go out later? We could have just the one drink. Sure, it'll lift your spirits."

I manage a smile. "I better get started if I'm to have money for a beer. I'll go and get my things."

I retrieve my chair and box from the back of the storeroom where Gerry lets me leave them overnight. Soon I'm on the sidewalk, placing the chair near the wall a few blocks down from Harvey's. There are shops here, a couple of restaurants, a theatre on the corner. It's a good spot. I get my brushes, cloths and polish out of the box, then turn it upside down in front of the chair. It's time to look for some trade.

I start off today with a pair of men's front-lacing shoes, made from the finest black leather. He's an older gentleman, with an eyeglass,

gold pocket watch and bushy grey moustache. I set to with my black polish and brushes. I'm at the final cloth polish, bringing up a silky shine, when he leans forward.

"You've done a good job. I appreciate a young man who does a good job." He lowers his voice. "I bet you're good at all sorts of jobs, with hands like that. Perhaps I can interest you in a special job for me."

I pretend not to understand. "Have you some other shoes you want polishing?"

"Well, it is a polishing job," he says, coy, "a private polishing job, if you follow my meaning."

"Is it some boots, sir?"

He gives up. "No, no, not today at least."

Despite my refusal, he tips well then sets off down the street. I wonder about men like him. Is it just shoeshine boys? What about delivery boys? Messenger boys? Do they ever get a yes? I suppose they must.

I have four more customers in the next hour—men's black leather boots, ladies' soft grey leather side-fastening boots, ladies' ankle boots in red and burgundy and men's black shoes. A couple comes out of a shop twenty yards away, arm in arm. I'm hopeful—they look like a courting couple and men always tip more in front of their sweethearts than their wives. I watch them walk towardss me, ready to catch the woman's eye. But before she's got the length of me she trips and starts to fall. She's teetering, but he has her arm and manages to pull her back.

"Are you hurt?"

She shakes her head. "Thank goodness you caught me. Oh, but look at my shoes."

I step forward where they might see me but I don't say "Shoeshine." I'm not a hawker.

"My lady has scuffed her shoes," he says to me. "Can you restore them?"

I nod for her to take a seat. Her shoes are unusual, dark green leather, with a high heel and two pearly buttons on the outside of the ankle. Her trip has done no lasting damage and soon I have them polished to a high shine.

"Oh, they're as good as new. Why don't you get yours done too?" she urges him. He makes a show of reluctance, then sits down. He is wearing a well-made but dull pair of brogans. I give them my attention. He pays well, then departs with his beloved clamped tight to his side.

It is quiet now. Some days are like that. Usually I sit on my chair, waiting for trade to pick up again. But I'm restless today. I pace back

and forth along the sidewalk, looking for a distraction. The newspaper stand down the street catches my eye. I fish two cents from my pocket for a copy of the *New York Herald*. Slowly I walk back to my chair, sitting down to read the first article, "Affairs in Our New Territory," the story of a New Yorker's journey to California. I settle down, taking my time, glad of the diversion. Until I get halfway down the second column. I sit up straight, sprinting through the words. Then I spring out of my chair and walk quickly down to Harvey's. I need to see Gerry right now.

But he's out on a delivery. I kick a stone in frustration as I walk back to my shoeshine stall. I try again later but he's still not there.

My hands are busy all afternoon with boots and shoes, but the *Herald* is flitting round my mind. "Gold mine discovered...abundant...a Peruvian harvest...as soon as a sufficiency of miners can be obtained." I am full of gold and what I might do with it.

At six o'clock I'm in the bar, waiting. "Over here," I say, beckoning to Gerry as he comes in. "I got you a drink."

"You're in a better mood."

"I am indeed. I found out something today that's going to change our lives. Gerry, they've struck gold in California. We are going to be rich."

"Will you talk sense. California. It's clean over the other side of the country. That's thousands of miles, as far as Ireland. How are we going to get there?"

"We'll find a way. I don't know how yet. But Gerry, we have to go. This is our big chance."

He is suddenly savage. "*We're going to get rich*," he parrots. "*This is our big chance*. Would you ever listen to yourself? I've already had me big chance, Frank. It took me out of Skibbereen and got me to New York alive. It gave me a job when I got here. That's more of a chance than the rest of me family have had. Four brothers and me father all dead in Skibbereen. Me sister, Mary, dead in me arms on the boat to America. Me mother and last brother waiting for me to have the money to bring them over. And here you want me throwing it all away for some half-arsed plan."

I have never seen him like this. I have known him for almost a year and this is the first time he's been angry. He's usually funny stories, a smile dancing beneath his lips. Now they are tight, his face hard angles, eyes hot anger.

"Ah Gerry," I say. I go to touch him, but he flinches away. "Come on, don't take on so. I didn't mean to upset you. Listen, let's not talk about it now."

“And when would be a better time? When you’ve taken yourself off halfway round the world on a dream that will never come true?”

“Why shouldn’t it come true? There’s gold there for the taking, the paper says so. I’m as entitled to it as any man.”

“As any *man*?” Gerry says.

“Yes, as any man,” I say, but I can’t look him in the eye. “Or lad, at least. As entitled as any lad.”

His voice goes soft. “I know.”

“Know what?” I say, wishing my face wouldn’t redden. But it does. I can feel it burning up to my ears, hot round my throat.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-two,” I say, wondering where he is going. “Twenty-three next month.”

“Yet still no sign of whiskers. Look at my face,” he says, “after a day at work.” Dark stubble shadows his cheeks and jaw. “And look at you, smooth as a baby’s arse. Frank, I know.”

I say nothing for several long minutes. I’ve been so careful, learning to stride like a man, sit with my legs apart, grunt answers to questions. “How?” I whisper at last.

He shrugs. “You’d me fooled for months. But one day...I just got a feeling.”

I stare at my glass of beer, not knowing what to say.

“Anyhow, you will understand why I can’t be letting you tear off across to California. You are but a girl. You may be man enough to shine shoes, but you’ve never the strength for gold digging.”

“You’re wrong. I’m as strong as many a man. I’ve been used to hard work since I was a child. I helped my father digging out the peat and preparing the fields.”

“You were *helping* a man. A full-grown adult man. You were not doing it by yourself. Please, see sense. You will never manage on your own. And I can’t be coming with you. I have steady money coming in. It’s keeping me ma and brother alive. Promise me there’ll be no more talk of California.”

“I will promise no such thing.” It is half shout, half sob. I’m on my feet now, bursting out of the bar, pushing away everyone and everything in my path, needing to get away from him.

You are but a girl! I can swing an axe all day, have a leg made for digging. I stride down the street, break into a run. I pound along, arms pumping, legs stretching. See how strong?

But in the back of my mind the fear nibbles, then gnaws. *You will never manage on your own.* I slow to a walk. Ahead I glimpse the East

River. At home there was an old rock on the cliff at Dunmore Head. I would sit there looking out across the sea to the Great Blasket, my mind drifting and turning till it found whatever answer I was searching. On that rock I decided that I needed to have me the loving of Kitty Gorman. There too that I first talked to her about leaving Ireland.

I sit down near the river. Boats are ferrying people across to Brooklyn, the tall ships delivering their cargoes at the South Street Seaport. This is where I arrived eighteen months ago. I had a little money, sewn into a secret pocket in my skirt, but no address to go to. I was washed along by the tide of people milling around the harbour. And then I felt a strong hand on my arm and I was propelled down a side alley, away from the crowd. He stank of sweat and dirt and something huge and animal. Forcing one filthy hand across my mouth, he pushed me hard against the wall.

“Shut up, whore,” he said as I yelped in pain.

With his free hand he was fiddling with his trousers. But he couldn't get the buttons undone. Cursing he removed his hand from my mouth. It was my one chance. I clawed my fingers sharp down his left cheek.

“Bitch,” he roared as he drew back his fist and swung for me. I dodged and he struck the wall. My knee came up hard and fast, catching him full in the groin. And then I ran and ran and ran. I couldn't tell if he was following, didn't dare look behind. Finally I stopped in a busy street, light and sound all around me. I leaned against a wall, my lungs burning. Slowly my breathing returned to normal. I looked up. There was a sign on the opposite side of the street. Guesthouse. I crossed over. They had a room free. I took it.

I lay awake most of the night. I'd heard stories of women molested, rumours whispered behind hands of girls disgraced and outcast. I knew these things happened, but they'd never happened to me, not until then. That's when I decided to become a boy.

Tears slip out. I have clawed a life out here—a room, a job, a friend. It is not enough.

You will never manage on your own. I came here on my own. I walked from Knockreagh to Cobh on my own. I sailed across the ocean on my own. The journey ahead is no farther than that behind. I am going to California.

CHAPTER TWO

Dunquin, March 1845

I have left my da finishing up in the fields and come home to prepare the evening meal. We have been planting potatoes all day, stopping only for boiled eggs and oatcake, washed down with water. It is hard on the back and on the knees—digging out the trough, laying in the seaweed, turning over the sods, planting the sprouters, covering them back up. Then on to the next trough. And the next.

Still, it is satisfying. Potatoes are great growers. And from the high field you can see right across the land, the patchwork of fields, the hedges of bright gorse, the road out to Slea Head, the sea.

We have a goodly sized farm, bigger than all our neighbours, fourteen acres rented from Lord Burnham. The house sits at the bottom of the farm, on a flattish bit of land, staring straight out to sea. My parents have worked hard for it—two rooms, three if you count the loft above the kitchen where my parents sleep.

The house is quiet. My mother is in Limerick helping my eldest sister, Marie, with the birth of her first child. Janet has been gone this year past, to Manchester after her marriage. And Peig and Lizzie are not yet back from market.

I start with the fire, breathing the embers back to life, adding sticks, letting them catch, then laying on sods of turf. I pull up my mother's

rocking chair, sitting for a while by the fire, stretching out my legs, wriggling the twinges out of my back.

I am peaceful, but I can't sit here all day. This morning I boiled up a field of potatoes ready for making potato cakes tonight. It is hard to beat a potato cake hot from the pot. The praties are cold now and I skin them easily. I am mashing them in the big cream bowl when Peig dashes in.

"The dance master's back," she says, excited. "He's holding a cake dance on Sunday."

It's a while since I've been to a cake dance. I found myself with an unwanted suitor the last time. Mickey O'Connor was his name. Handsome enough but he thought too much of himself for my liking. He came calling the day after the dance. My ma made him welcome, setting a stool by the fire for him. He up and told her he was after marrying me.

My da laughed out loud. "Oh, you are now, are you?" he said. "Frances, what have you to say on this?"

I had been staring through the window at the donkey in the field, wishing I was out there with her. But I turned to my da. "I wish Mickey good fortune and happiness, but he'll not be finding it with me."

"Now don't be playing hard to get," Mickey said. "You are the woman I am after marrying, and you'll not find yourself a better offer than me. I have ten acres and four cows."

"I do not care if you have ten thousand acres and four herds of cows. You are not the man for me. And if you carry on talking such nonsense, you'll be doing it out of a broken mouth."

I haven't been to a cake dance since then.

"Oh, Frances," Peig says, "can we go? Please say yes."

I love all my sisters but Peig has always been special to me. After I was born, my mother had two children that died—Michael, who was stillborn, and Sally, who died at six weeks. Then along came Peig. You never saw a more beautiful child—dark curls, blue eyes, little button nose. And she never cried, just gurgled away to herself. She has always been easy and, being easy, perhaps a little indulged.

I smile at her. "We can go."

* * *

On Sunday morning we celebrate Mass at Saint Gobnait's Church. As I'm leaving the churchyard after the service, I hear Mary Garvey calling my name. I've known Mary since childhood, though she was a Begley then.

“Good day, Frances,” she says, catching up with me.

“It looks like any day now,” I say, pointing to her swollen belly.

“I think it will be four or five weeks yet.”

“That’ll be some size of a baby. Maybe it’s twins.”

“So my mother thinks,” she says. “She was a twin.”

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

“Well, I was wondering if you could take Ellen here with you to the cake dance today. You’ve seen the size of me, I can’t be making that trip.”

“Ah Mary, sure that’s no favour at all.” I smile at Ellen, Mary’s younger sister. “Why don’t you come and eat with us first?”

I left the praties cooking in the embers of the fire while we were at church. When we get home I chop cabbage and scallions and put them on to simmer in milk. My father smiles as he sits by the fire listening to the girls laughing and joking in the bedroom next door.

“Are you coming with us, Da?” I say.

“Not this time. I’ll be just as happy at home, so I will. I might try and fix your ma’s spinning wheel, get it working properly before she comes home.”

A new round of shrieks greets us from the next room.

“Is there time for a dance before we eat?” my da says.

“There’s always time to hear you play.”

He stores his pipes in a wooden box on the far side of the room away from the fire. As I call the girls he gets them out, then settles himself on his chair and begins to play a jig. I watch the girls for a minute, then turn back to preparing the meal. The potatoes are cooked and I extract them from the fire, scooping the hot, creamy flesh into the pot with the cabbage, onions and milk. I start to mash it all together as my da begins the “Queen of the May” reel. The girls are wild, trying to out-leap each other. And my da is utterly alive, face glowing, foot tapping, right arm giving life to the pipes, hands flying up and down the chanter, making the tune. This was how my ma first saw him, piping at a dance. It is no wonder she fell for him.

I could listen to my da playing all day but potatoes are best served hot. I clap as the reel comes to an end. “Well, that was some performance,” I say. “But now it’s time to eat.”

We are quiet at first, enjoying the food, but slowly the talk emerges.

“Have you been to a cake dance before?” my da asks Ellen.

She blushes as she nods, pausing from eating for a moment. “Mary and Peter took me to Ventry last year. I saw you dancing for the cake,” she says to me. “You were great.”

It's my turn to blush.

"You might win today," Ellen says.

"Indeed you might," Da says. "You're a fine dancer."

"I don't know about that." Except I do know. There's no chance I'll be winning as I've no intention of competing, not after the performance with Mickey O'Connor last year. "I should go and get myself ready," I say, escaping to the bedroom. I take my time changing my plain petticoat for my fancy red-and-blue-striped one, then brush my hair vigorously and tie it back with a red ribbon.

As we set off, the church clock is chiming one. It's a brisk uphill walk to start but as we get the rhythm and the track flattens out, we start to sing. I love this route, high above the sea, on one side the waves rushing in, on the other the land swelling up towards the mountains. We pause at Clogher, the beach below us, seagulls floating above, searching for fish. Then we head inland. In two hours we reach the Ballyferriter crossroads.

The field next to the crossroads is packed—men and women sitting around talking and drinking, boys wrestling and chasing, girls practising their steps. It looks like half the countryside has turned out. I nod here and there to familiar faces, glad that none of them belongs to Mickey O'Connor.

As we make our way through the crowds, my attention is captured by the sight of three men parading towards us down the road from Ventry. The first plays a fiddle while the second holds a ten-foot pike, supporting a board, on which is balanced a cake. Bringing up the rear is the dance master, a tall, spare man in a top hat, swallowtail coat and black shoes with shiny silver buckles.

As the crowd breaks out cheering, the little group proceeds to the centre of the field where a large table has been set up. The dance master leaps upon it and holds up his hand, waiting for silence.

"Thank you, thank you," he says as the crowd quiets. "I am most gratified by your welcome. And I'm sure the cake is too." There is a smattering of applause. "We have before us the finest of fine plum cakes, packed with fruit and nuts, soaked in brandy. And someone here today will be lucky enough to win it. Will it be you?" he says, pointing at a large, oafish man. "Or you?" pointing at a young slip of a girl. "Or perhaps even you?" He points now to a very old man who throws back his toothless head and roars with laughter.

"But before we get to the competition," the dance master continues, "it is my job to show you all how it is done."

The fiddler starts playing “Morrison’s Jig,” and the dance master, still on top of the table, begins to dance. His steps are simple at first—up and back and one, two, three, four, tap one, tap two, tap three, tap four. But as we start to clap along to the music, his feet get fancier, with double shuffles, ground cuts and heel kicks. The music quickens into a reel and the silver buckles on his shoes begin to blur. Shouts of admiration go up from the crowd. As he moves towards the finish, he kicks higher and higher, till with a final flourish he lands with a resounding *thump* square on the table.

Cheers and whistles burst out all around me. Those nearest to the table drum on it with their hands. I clap and whoop along with them. The dance master bows briefly, then smiles. “Now it is your turn. Can all those who want the chance to win this marvellous cake form a wide circle round the table.”

As people jostle their way into position, I’m tempted to dance after all. I have always loved the freedom of letting the music take ahold of me. But there’ll be plenty of time for that later without the attention the dance-off brings.

“Good luck, girls,” I say as I step out of the dancing circle.

I see the surprise on Peig’s face but before she has the chance to say anything the dance master is setting out the rules. “First and foremost,” he says, “my decisions are final. I will judge each dancer’s performance. The best two will dance off to decide the cake. Now can the rest of you move back so that I can get a proper look.”

The fiddler starts to dash out a reel. It is not long before some of the dancers are struggling to keep up. Peig is dancing a bold step with plenty of frills and fancies. Lizzie, too, is holding her own. But my eye keeps slipping to the left, to a red-haired woman I haven’t seen before. She has hitched her black skirt up and her steps are as elaborate as any I’ve ever seen. I am not the only one to notice her; a small crowd has gathered nearby and is clapping her performance.

I force my gaze back to Peig, Lizzie and Ellen. The fiddler keeps on with the same tune, giving the dance master plenty of time to make his assessments. He pauses to watch the red-haired woman before moving on. I see him nod to the fiddler, who draws the dance to a close.

“I have seen enough,” the dance master calls. “For tuppence a lesson I can turn nearly all of you into decent dancers. Three of you are already close to the dance-off standard. You boy, what is your name?”

“Paddy Connor.”

“And you, girl?” He points at Peig.

“Peig Moriarty.”

“And you?”

“Johnny Malone.”

“Well, Paddy and Peig and Johnny, you all dance very well. And I could give you the final polish that you need. But tonight there will be no dance-off. For I have found me a jewel here in Ballyferriter and she will have the cake.” He goes up to the girl I’ve been watching. “So what is your name?”

“Kitty,” she says, her voice strong and clear. “Kitty Gorman.”

Kitty, I repeat in my head, Kitty Gorman. I am still standing watching her when Peig rushes over.

“Oh, Frances, did you hear? Close to dance-off standard.” She throws her arms around me. “Thank you for bringing me.”

I hug her back.

“So did you see this Kitty Gorman dance?” she says. “Was she really that good?”

“Well, I only saw a little. But she was good, very good indeed.”

“I’m away to congratulate her.”

She dashes off in the direction of Kitty Gorman. A couple of minutes later she is back. And she’s brought Kitty with her.

“Kitty, this is my sister Frances. She was in the dance-off at Ventry last year. Frances, this is Kitty.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Frances,” she says and smiles at me.

My attention has been on her feet during the dance but now I look into her face for the first time. Her hair is the copper-gold of autumn leaves, eyes the turquoise-green of sunlit sea. She is beautiful, perhaps the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. But it is the smile that undoes me.

This has never happened to me before. I am flustered and tongue-tied. I struggle for something to say but nothing comes out so I just nod.

“So would you like some cake?” she asks.

“Oh yes please,” says Peig.

“How about you, Frances?”

I know I must speak. “I’d love some.”