

A Thousand Tears

A Novel

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Chapter One

The woman had been following him ever since he left the village, always staying a safe distance behind him on the road. She never got close, but she never fell too far back, either. He was too weak to outpace her.

Rain had fallen heavily throughout the day, but now only a damp wind swept across the darkening hills. Evening shadows were quickly filling the valley. He was chilled from the dampness but had no coat or hat; he had sold them to buy bread. A thin, ragged shirt and ragged pants covered his arms and legs. His shoes looked too big on his bony feet.

The bread was tucked tightly under his arm. He would fight the woman if he had to. Although he was weak, he had been a mountain of a man before the hunger, and he was determined.

She was waiting for him to weaken, following him as if he were prey, waiting for him to fail and fall into the muddy ditch beside the road. But he wasn't going to allow it. He whispered through clenched teeth, "This bread is for my children and my wife."

For a long time he didn't look back, but he knew she was there. He gave his attention to the distance before him. How far to the cottage? It had been an easy walk in normal times.

He forced his legs forward. He imagined the look on his children's faces when he entered the cottage. He knew there wouldn't be great excitement or cries of joy, only ghostlike figures crawling out of the corners with begging hands. He would break the bread into three pieces for the children and his wife. She was still alive when he had left that morning, sleeping in the straw near the peat fire. She had been that way for days—so frail that he thought she would break if he tried to move her. Now, in his clouded mind, he pictured her taking the bread from his hand and smiling at him.

He stumbled and almost fell to his knees, but he recovered quickly. The bread stayed safe under his arm. He looked back—a quick look. The woman had found a heavy stick. She was swinging it in the air to warn him. He walked on, looking back more often. “For my children and my wife!” he shouted to her.

He stumbled in his haste, this time falling to his knees. It took him a few moments to get up. He had lost precious ground to the woman; she was closer.

“No!” he shouted at her.

She waved the stick. “Drop it!”

“No! No!” He was walking backwards now, retreating from her. He tripped and went down again. She rushed forward.

“For my children!” he cried out. “My wife!” He lay on the road. His body was shaking.

The woman grabbed at the bread. “Let go!” she pleaded.

The man hung on defiantly, but he could feel the muscles in his hands and arms failing. “No,” he shouted helplessly,

but suddenly the bread was gone. His arms were empty. The woman was hurrying away.

He hadn't the strength to get up. It started to rain again. He laid in the road where he had fallen and closed his eyes. He thought of his children. His wife. He did not get up.

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The woman hurried down the road, tucking the bread under her shawl to protect it from the rain. She looked back only once at the man. He was lying in the same place she had left him. She tossed the stick away guiltily. "He should have given me the bread," she complained to herself. "There was dying in his eyes. What do the dying need of bread?"

She hurried on. The rain was blowing against her from the ocean, which was to the right of the road. She stayed on the road until she came to where the *curraghs*, the small, lightweight fishing boats, were pulled far up on the rocky beach. In good weather and in better times, the fishermen would have had them far out on the ocean, but in this fifth year of famine, few men were still strong enough to handle them. The storms pounding the coast had been unforgiving. Many a starving fisherman had died smashed against the rocks, too weak to fight the great Atlantic.

A path near the beach led from the road up into a green field that climbed a low hill. The woman took the path, hiding the bread carefully under her shawl as she neared a collection of cottages. They were not cottages of quality but sad-looking things, abused by the elements and in need of care, all small in size and built the same. Smoke lifted

from the thatched roofs of some of them, but most showed no signs of life. The woman knew, however, that life was struggling to survive in the shadows behind the doors. She would be risking her own life if the bread were discovered.

The path led through the middle of the settlement. She quickened her pace as she neared her cottage. When she reached the door, she hurried in, closed it tight, and leaned her body against it.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust, but in the dim light of the peat fire, she saw something stirring in the corner. “Paddy? Father?”

A soft voice replied, “It’s Fanny.” The woman focused her eyes on her daughter. Close to the girl was a younger child, who was sleeping on a bed of straw. And close to the boy was an old man whose white hair and beard looked silver-orange in the light of the burning peat. All three looked ghostly thin and ragged and pale.

“Your da has not returned?” she asked the girl.

“No, Ma.”

The woman moved into the single room of the cottage, removed her shawl, and laid the bread on the table. Crossing over to the boy, she knelt beside him and felt his hands and face. Both were warm—almost hot, just as she feared. She asked the girl, “Has your brother been awake?”

“He was talking, but I think dreaming.”

The woman moved away uneasily and turned her attention to the old man. She didn’t touch him, only listened to his breathing, which was labored. He was still alive. “He’ll live forever,” she muttered under her breath.

She moved away, and to the girl she whispered, “We’ll eat and not wait for your da. We’ll save a share for him.”

“I don’t want the soup!” the girl replied. “It makes me sick in my stomach.”

“I have bread.”

“Bread?”

“Quiet, now! Don’t wake your grandfather.” The woman took a pot on a rack near the fire and swung it over the heat. “Ya can wake your brother quietly when the soup is hot.”

“I don’t want the soup,” Fanny said again.

“Dip the bread in it. That won’t be so bad.”

Soon the soup started to boil, and as bubbles appeared, a sickly odor filled the small cottage. It was a thin soup made of grass, rotting black potatoes, and turnip peelings. The potatoes had been salvaged from the family’s acre of ground around the cottage. The turnip had come out of a neighbor’s field in the middle of the night. It had been a pleasant and unexpected find, as the field had been picked over so many times. The family had consumed the turnip with great care, saving the peels for last.

While the soup was heating, the woman sliced the bread. She cut four pieces: one for Fanny, one for the boy, one for herself, and one for her husband. She cut none for the old man—her own father—because she believed that he would soon die. *And what do the dying need of bread?* she asked herself again. She cut her husband’s slice larger than the others. He needed his strength more than they did, for he worked to earn the little money that came in.

Turning to Fanny, she whispered, “Wake your brother. Wake him gently.”

The girl turned on the straw bed to lay her hand on her brother’s shoulder. “Johnny. Wake now.” The boy stretched and settled again. “Johnny.” She shook him gently. “Come now.” After a moment he sat up, rubbing his eyes.

The woman was dishing the soup carefully into bowls when the door opened, exposing the damp darkness outside. The wind and a spray of rain followed her husband into the cottage. He closed the door, took off his cap, and hung it on a hook. Rubbing his hands, he went directly to the fire. “God!” he said. “In this land the rain follows a man to his door, and the damp never leaves his bones!”

“Don’t say *God*, Paddy, unless you’re thanking him,” the woman said.

Patrick held his palms to the heat and looked down at the boy, who was still waking up. “And how are ya, Johnny?”

The boy didn’t reply.

Turning to his wife, Patrick asked softly, “How has he been?”

“His fever is high. I was in Temple Bay. Fanny stayed with him.”

“Temple Bay?”

“They were selling bread and meal today.”

“But we have no money. I’ll see no money on the work gang for another ten days. They say it could be even longer if nothing comes in from Dublin.”

“I got bread.”

Patrick said nothing at first, but as he moved from the fire to the table, he asked, “But how?”

“With the kindness of a stranger.”

“Kindness?” Patrick looked doubtfully at the bread. It was a thick, crusted loaf, now in slices.

“Eat and be grateful,” she said sharply as she passed him a bowl of soup. He took the bowl and his portion of bread and sat by the fire. In better times he would have asked more questions.

Looking at the old man as he ate, he asked, “And is he any better?”

“No.”

“I should wake him.”

“Let him sleep. He’ll sleep all night.”

The woman took some soup and bread to the boy and then gave Fanny her portion. When she got her own, she said, “We should thank God.” But the others were already so far into the meal that they paid no attention.

They ate in silence while the old man slept.

That same night Fanny woke to screaming out in the darkness. She lay in the stillness of the cottage, listening. It lasted only a moment and then stopped.

She looked about anxiously and saw her grandfather looking back at her, his ageless blue eyes shining in the thin glow of the fire, his weathered face gaunt. “A banshee,” he whispered.

Fanny laid in the straw bed and stared at the window. Her brother had not moved. She had almost drifted off when

the screaming started again. This time it lasted for several long minutes.

Fanny had heard screaming like that before. Once, when she was very young, she had gone to the window to see where the howling came from. Out in the darkness she could see a frail old woman in white rags. Her long hair reached to the ground, and the light of the moon wrapped about her like a shroud. Fear grabbed Fanny, and she raced back to bed. She never again went to the window when she heard the screaming.

The screaming stopped, and Fanny lay back in the straw. After a time she slept again. She heard nothing more that night.

The banshee had wailed at the death of a woman in a nearby cottage. It was one more death to mark a long list from the village through the years of famine.

Fanny was nine years old in 1845 when the Great Hunger first struck Ireland. She had known nothing but its horror for the past four years of her young life. Death had become as common to her as the coming of night and the first light of dawn. Her mother spoke of angels and the hand of God. Her grandfather spoke of banshees and mysterious ways. Fanny grew up believing both of them.

Her grandfather didn't die that night as her mother had thought he might. When the thin light of morning fell through the cottage window, he was awake and alert. The woman woke to see him sitting up in his bed. Feeling guilty for not offering him bread the night before, she got up and stoked the fire. She added peat and said, "There's a bit more soup in the pot. Would ya like a cup?"

“Is it still soup?” the old man asked. “Or is it but water?”

The woman swung the pot over the heat. “It’s broth. Thin, perhaps, but broth.”

“I’ll take a cup,” he replied.

While the soup was warming, the woman went to the boy. She didn’t wake him but again gently felt his body. He was still warm. As she was doing this, Fanny woke and sat up on the straw. With the fire only just beginning to burn, there was a chill in the cottage. Fanny rubbed her arms and legs under her shabby frock. Suddenly she remembered the cry of the banshee, and she looked around, quickly taking a family count. Everyone was there.

Patrick awoke and sat upright. Arching his back and rotating his shoulders, he worked the sleep from his body. Then, looking across at his wife, he asked, “Is the lad still with us, Meg?”

“By the goodness of God,” the woman replied.

Patrick nodded and sighed thankfully. Then he looked at the old man. “Amazing,” he said quietly to himself. “And himself still with us as well?”

Meg turned to her husband. “There’s enough in the pot for each. A hot cup to—”

“I’d not keep it on my stomach this morning,” Patrick interrupted.

Meg didn’t insist. She knew that the men were given some kind of lunch on the road crew. It was not enough to compensate for the low wages, but everyone knew that the work really had been created only to feed the starving—and that it would end soon.

Patrick put on his cap and turned to the door. "I'll be going." He had more than an hour's walk to the place where he worked. He opened the door, and the damp morning air rushed in around him. He wouldn't be back before darkness fell.

Meg spooned out a small bowl of soup for her father. The old man cupped it in both hands and sipped at it slowly.

The boy was waking. Meg went to him and helped him sit up. He was pale, his face gaunt, his eyes set deep and dark. He had been sick for many weeks. He hadn't gotten worse, but he also hadn't gotten better, and Meg didn't know what to do to help him.

Soon Fanny was up and moving. The bread and the broth from the night before would hold her through the morning. She ate so infrequently that it had become habit to have little or nothing at most mealtimes. The feeling of hunger was always with her.

She took a tattered cardigan from a hook near the door. She had no shoes, but her feet had adjusted to the Irish earth just as her stomach had to the land's hunger. Slipping into the cardigan, she looked across the room to her grandfather. The old man was just finishing the broth and looked back at her over the rim of the bowl. He nodded. "As I promised, lass."

Meg, still fussing with the boy, turned to her father. "And what was it you promised?"

"To go with Fanny this morning."

"You're too weak," she protested.

Defiantly, the old man set the bowl aside and worked himself up on frail legs. He was shaky for a moment, but he studied himself.

“And where are you going?” Meg asked.

“O’Malley’s lazy beds, Ma,” Fanny replied.

Meg looked at her daughter and then her father. “You’ll get yourselves in trouble, you will. And there’s nothing there for ya.”

“There might be,” Fanny insisted.

The old man added, “We’ll know when we get there.”

A well-worn cardigan hung on a hook by the door, and Fanny took it to her grandfather, holding it as the old man slipped his arms into the sleeves. His shirt and pants were soiled and ragged. He had shoes, though no socks. He went to the door as Fanny opened it. Before going out, he turned to his daughter. “Did ya hear the cry’n in the night?”

“And if I did?”

“The banshee was back.”

“I heard nothing,” she said.

The old man nodded doubtfully.

“Nothing,” she insisted.

The old man followed Fanny out.

The morning was clear and bright, and there was a cool breeze blowing in from the ocean. As they started off, Fanny took her grandfather’s arm, but the old man seemed to need little help. Still, she held onto him as they made their way down the dirt road between the cottages.

A silence shrouded the small village. Before the famine, there would have been activity all around them, with women working in the potato beds and men going down to their boats. There would have been life. But now several of the cottages were empty, the result of so many deaths and the desertion of the village by those fleeing the hunger. It was as if a great sleep had come upon the place.

At the last cottage, they saw a man standing in an open doorway. He was a skeletal figure, his clothes only rags. It was Mr. Duncan, a neighbor they knew well. “The misses died last night,” he called to them.

Fanny and the old man stopped before the cottage. Grandfather took off his cap. Fanny quickly blessed herself.

“It wasn’t the hunger. It was the sickness,” Duncan said.

“I heard the banshee,” the old man told him.

“Aye. It waited for the moment.”

“I’m sorry,” said Fanny.

“She was a good woman,” said Duncan. “Gave me three fine sons. Two gone now with the hunger and the other leaving the island.”

“And what will you do now?” asked Grandfather.

“I’ll wait. The priest is coming.”

“But what will yourself do?” the old man asked again, making the question more direct.

Duncan was quiet for a moment. “I don’t know.” He hesitated and asked, “What does a man do?”

Grandfather said nothing, but Fanny replied, “Ma says prayer will help all things.”

“She prayed,” said Duncan. “The last of it is still on her lips. Would you like to see? It’s like the words are there, forever on her lips.”

Grandfather nudged Fanny forward. “Best we move on.”

Duncan asked again, “Would you like to come in and see her?”

“No,” the old man replied. “Better if the priest comes first. We should show respect.”

Duncan nodded. “When you were a wee lass, she made such a fuss over you, Fanny. Do you recall that?”

“I do.”

“You and she were always laughing.”

“I remember,” Fanny said. Her grandfather nudged her again, and they began to move away. When she looked back, Duncan was stepping back into the cottage. Fanny called out to him, “I’ll pray for her.”

A few moments later they were on the road that ran along the ocean. Grandfather was walking slowly but steadily. Fanny no longer had to help him. It was as though the sunshine and the brisk breeze had brought some of his strength back.

To the left, the ocean was swept with whitecaps. The wind off the water lowered the grass and bent the few trees scattered across the emerald fields. The fields, divided by ancient stone walls, held drifting cloud shadows. In the distance, the town of Temple Bay huddled against the ocean’s edge. Fanny and Grandfather walked on quietly.

Fanny broke the silence. “Shouldn’t we have gone into the cottage and offered a prayer or words of kindness?”

“No.” The old man’s reply was firm.

“Why not?” Fanny protested. “I think it would have been the right thing to do.”

“It was the sickness that took her away, not the hunger,” Grandfather reminded her.

Fanny did not protest further. It had been typhus that had taken Mrs. Duncan. As much as possible, they avoided anyone who had it or who had passed from it. Fanny had seen so many people die that although she still separated the two in her mind—the hunger and the sickness—she no longer did in her heart.

They stayed on the road until they neared Temple Bay. The ocean road ran directly through the old harbor town, but they left that road for a smaller one, though as well-traveled, that bypassed the harbor, shops, pubs, and the church and swung east to O’Malley’s land.

Though it was referred to as O’Malley’s land, the property was owned by Lord Avery. O’Malley was a tenant farmer who rented eighty acres from Lord Avery. In turn, O’Malley rented out small plots, perhaps an acre, to peasant farmers called *cottiers*. Fanny’s father was a cottier. All of the cottages around O’Malley’s were located on small plots rented from him. In normal times, a family could grow enough potatoes on that small plot of ground to survive, but this was the fifth year of the potato blight—these were not normal times.

There were also separate, large portions of land that O’Malley farmed on his own, such as the potato beds in the fields above Temple Bay and the meadows where his sheep