

Land Beyond the Wave

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To Karen, Louise, Rebecca and Andrew

The Wearing of the Green

March 17, 1922

The little girl was dancing up and down on the spot like she needed to go to the bathroom.

‘Stand at peace, Kathleen,’ her mother said, clutching a hairbrush and sweeping it through her daughter’s brown hair, smoothing it against her back. Kathleen sighed impatiently. She could hear voices out in the hallway, laughing and shouting and cursing, and she was desperate to join them. Every time she turned her head, even a fraction, towards the noise, her mother pushed it back so that she was staring at the small picture of Our Lady which hung on the plain wall. Our Lady had brown hair too, most of it hidden behind a white veil, and Kathleen wondered if she had to stand while her mother brushed her hair. The little girl joined her hands together like she did at Mass every Sunday, imitating Our Lady’s pose.

‘What are you doing?’ her mother asked.

‘Nothing,’ she said, letting her arms hang at her side again.

Her mother took the green ribbon which was draped across her knee and tied it round the brown tresses of hair she’d gathered in her hands, singing the words of a song that Kathleen had heard many times before.

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‘The wearing of the green. Oh, the wearing of the green. They’re hanging men and women for the wearing of the green . . .’

Kathleen started humming the tune too as her mother turned her round so they faced each other.

‘Let me see you,’ her mother said. She leant forward and kissed her daughter gently on her forehead. ‘A beautiful little Irish girl for Saint Patrick’s Day,’ she said, smiling, and Kathleen beamed.

‘Now can I go?’ she said, starting to move away before a firm hand gripped her shoulder.

‘Just one more thing,’ her mother said. She moistened a handful of her cardigan sleeve in her mouth before rubbing it roughly across Kathleen’s face.

‘Mommy!’ the little girl cried, trying to move away from the improvised cloth.

‘A nice clean face,’ her mother said, with a final nod of approval. ‘Now you’re a princess. My Irish princess.’

She hugged her daughter tightly, even as the little girl tried to squirm out of her grasp, desperate to join the other children she knew were waiting impatiently outside the apartment. Kathleen didn’t want the rest of them to leave without her. She knew if they weren’t there, her mother wouldn’t let her go to the parade. It had taken a lot of pleading and pouting the previous night before her mother had relented. She’d heard the other children talking about the Saint Patrick’s Day parade and she wanted to join them.

‘You’re too young, darling,’ her mother had said when Kathleen told her where she was going. She hadn’t even thought to ask permission.

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'But everyone's going,' she said, throwing herself down on the chair and folding her arms.

'Don't be pulling faces like that, little lady,' her mother said. 'You're five, not fifteen.'

'But it's Patrick's day parade.'

'Saint Patrick,' her mother corrected.

'There's music and marching and fireworks too. And Mary Maguire says you can buy the biggest ice-cream in the whole of New York. It's this big,' she said, stretching her arms as wide apart as they could go.

Her mother laughed. 'That's a big ice-cream.'

'So can I go?'

'No.'

'Please!'

'When you're older.'

'But everyone's going.'

'I don't care if the whole of the city will be there. You're not going.'

'You could take me.'

'Kathleen, darling. I couldn't stand on my feet for that long. Besides, it's too far away for me to walk.'

Kathleen sat and sulked, throwing occasional sullen glances at her mother which were either ignored or laughed at. In the end, her mother relented. There were lots of other children going to the parade, just about everyone in the building for starters, and plenty of adults too, more than enough to keep a watchful eye out for her. Kathleen rhymed off all the names she could think of who would be there, some now in the hallway waiting impatiently for her.

'She'll be fine, Theresa,' her father had said, peering through the cloud of smoke hovering above the chair where

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he sat. His boots were sitting by the fire, wet socks draped over them, and his bare feet rested on another chair he'd brought from the kitchen. A saucer was balanced precariously on his stomach, filled with ash and cigarette ends. Her mother shrugged, defeated by superior numbers. Kathleen smiled gratefully at her father, though he'd closed his eyes. She knew he wasn't sleeping.

He hadn't always lived with them – he hadn't always been her father – but even though it had only been since she was four, Kathleen found it hard to imagine him not living here in the apartment. There was also going to be a new baby in the family soon and it would be a brother or sister for her. When her mother told her, she also suggested it was a good idea to call him 'Daddy', since that's what the new baby would call him. She nodded because it was a good idea, and when he had smiled the first time she'd said it, she guessed he thought it was a good idea too. He had left for work early that morning, long before Kathleen had woken up excitedly, but she was sure he would want to hear all about the parade when he came home.

When her mother opened the door, everyone in the hall turned round. Some of them cheered, while others took it as a cue to race noisily down the stairs, their shoes and boots clattering on the wooden floor until they reached the bottom and burst out of the building into the March morning, which offered a chilly welcome none of them noticed.

A handful of the children remained on the landing, and Kathleen's mother eyed them all, looking for the most suitable candidate to keep a watchful eye on her daughter. The task fell to Joseph Tierney. He stayed directly above

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them. He was older – Kathleen thought he was about eleven – and her mother gave him his final instructions as she stood at the doorway, reluctant to let go of her daughter's hand.

'You two stay together,' she said. 'There will be loads of people there, thousands, so it would be easy to get lost. Kathleen, you make sure you hold Joseph's hand all the time.'

Kathleen nodded, even though she didn't imagine Joseph would want to do that once they'd reached the next block and were out of sight of her mother's anxious gaze. She was sure she could see the older boy rolling his eyes, though her mother didn't appear to notice.

'And once the parade's passed by and all the marchers have left, come straight back home.'

'Yes, missus,' Joseph said, nodding solemnly.

There was one final hug and kiss for Kathleen before, reluctantly, her mother let go of her and, holding Joseph's hand, she ran down the stairs with the rest of the children, just as excited and thrilled as they were to be heading towards the parade.



Joseph held on to the little girl's hand, even as they weaved their way through the crowds. Many of the people were no doubt heading to the same destination as they were. The Saint Patrick's Day Parade which was marching all the way up Fifth Avenue until it stopped at the Cathedral. Joseph had figured that would be the busiest place, so he'd suggested standing further down the route, a few blocks from the Cathedral. The others had agreed, so they were all heading for the corner where West and East 28th Street met, hoping

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to get a good vantage point to see everyone marching by. After that, they could make their way up Fifth or, if that was too busy, cut down on to Sixth and head towards Central Park, where there would be stalls and shows and rides and ice-cream sellers and countless other places to spend the few cents jangling in their pockets. They would be able to stay there a while before having to head home. He'd make sure it wasn't so long that the adults would start worrying.

He didn't let go of Kathleen's hand. He saw the look in her mother's eyes when she'd instructed them to stick together, and realised it was more than his life's worth to let the little girl run along the streets herself and risk losing her in the throng of people. He wasn't bothered anyway. He just pretended she was his little sister, and no-one else had teased or tormented him either.

She didn't stop talking. That was his one complaint. She had a thousand questions and spotted a million different things on the way. The smell of a hot dog vendor; the rumble of a passing motor car; the pretty dresses some of the women wore; the blue sky; buildings that reached up towards it and towered over them. They'd walked down Tenth Avenue and then headed along West 42nd Street. It seemed like everyone had the same idea so Frank Devlin suggested cutting down Ninth Avenue, claiming it was quicker, and quieter. No-one disagreed, so they all began traipsing along the street, with Joseph and Kathleen lagging behind slightly. The little girl's pace had slowed. She was puffed out.

'Stop a minute,' Joseph said, halting and going down on one knee to tie one of his bootlaces. It hadn't been loose,

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but he figured if he suggested they stop because she was tired, Kathleen would have refused. She stood watching him as he slowly finished with one boot and then, swapping on to his other knee he loosened the lace of his left boot and began re-tying it.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Kathleen asked. The rest of the children were lingering at the end of the block, having belatedly noticed that Joseph and Kathleen had stopped. It wouldn’t have bothered Joseph if they’d gone on ahead. He knew where they were heading and he would find them eventually.

‘It won’t be long,’ he said to Kathleen, standing up. ‘Just another few blocks.’

The little girl nodded, automatically slipping her hand in to his as they started walking again. The other children, seeing them on the move, resumed their journey, and they disappeared round the corner at West 34th out of sight. There was no point speeding up, Joseph thought, and he stopped again, this time outside a convenience store.

‘Are you thirsty?’ he asked Kathleen, who nodded. ‘Come on,’ he said, tugging her hand and they walked into the store, which was dark and misty, a million tiny specs of dust floating in the air obscuring their vision. Joseph felt like waving his hand through it all to get a better view.

‘Do you want a soda?’ he asked. Kathleen nodded again.

They walked over to the counter, where an old woman sat on a chair. Her blue eyes watched the children approach while her mouth continued chewing. Joseph would catch an occasional glimpse of something dark, and he wondered if it was tobacco? His grandfather had the same habit.

‘Two bottles of soda, please?’ he asked the woman, who

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slowly pushed herself up off her chair and shuffled down the counter to where all the drinks were kept.

‘This do you?’ she said, holding up two bottles containing a dark liquid. Coca Cola.

‘Thanks,’ he said with a nod, while Kathleen’s face broke out in a beaming smile. He handed over the four nickels to the woman, who slipped them into the pocket of her faded cardigan rather than in the money box that sat on a shelf behind the chair where she’d been sitting. Joseph could hear the coins rattling with others in the pocket as the woman shuffled back to her seat.

Standing on the sidewalk, they stood and drank quickly until the bottles were just about clear again. They swapped burps, and Kathleen giggled guiltily.

‘Wait here,’ he said, taking the bottle off her and running back into the shop, reappearing quickly enough to stop the sudden alarmed look on the little girl’s face become a permanent one. He wasn’t giving up the two nickels he’d paid as a deposit for the bottles. Joseph burped again and Kathleen laughed. She was skipping along the road now, almost dragging him along in her wake as he held her hand loosely and quickened his pace to keep up with her. Still the questions continued.

‘Will there be lots of people at Patrick’s parade?’

‘Loads.’

‘How many?’

‘Thousands . . . millions maybe.’

‘Is everyone Irish?’

‘In the world?’

‘In New York?’

‘Not everyone.’

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'My mommy says that all the best people are Irish.'

'She's right.'

'I hope I get a baby sister. A girl's better than a boy, sure it is?'

'I'm a boy.'

'But you're big . . . You're not a baby. My daddy wants a boy. He tells my mummy the bump is a boy. But I think a girl would be better. She'll be my baby sister.'

They passed lampposts with green bunting tied to them and stretched across the street. Some of it hung too low and was broken by trucks driving by, and there were stray bits lying on the road. Irish flags hung out of windows. The *Tricolour* and the *Green Harp*. There was even one Starry Plough flapping in the breeze. He liked the Tricolour best, its green, white and orange making it stand out. It was so different from the American flag, with its stars and stripes. One of them stood at the front of his classroom, propped against the wall behind the teacher's desk and every morning, before lessons started, they had to say the *Pledge of Allegiance*.

Shop windows were decorated in the appropriate colours. Some of them were closed, with the owners obviously heading out to see the parade as well, but the shrewd ones stayed open, ready to make a few extra dollars on this day.

A few people staggered up and down stairs which led to basements that Joseph knew sold liquor. He could hear blasts of music drifting up from these places whenever a door was opened to welcome in someone or spew out another drunk on to the streets, songs he recognised from when his father would sing them on a Saturday night for the whole family. Joseph's favourite was *Dear Old Skibbereen*.

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When he was younger, he would climb on to his mother's knee and snuggle in, letting her wrap her arms round him so that he could feel himself instantly heat up, and he'd listen to his dad singing.

*My son, I loved my native land with energy and pride . . .
Till a blight came over all my crops and my sheep and
cattle died.
The rents and taxes were to pay and I could not them
redeem . . .
And that's the cruel reason why I left old Skibbereen.*

They had reached the corner of West 34th and Seventh when they heard the first firecracker. Kathleen squealed and began dancing on the spot.

'We're nearly there. We're nearly there,' she said loudly, almost singing the words in her excitement.

Joseph smiled, glad the little girl hadn't noticed him jump when he heard the noise. He'd got a fright but he would be better prepared for the next one. They weren't too far away now. He'd lost sight of the others, but since they'd already agreed on a rendezvous point, he'd be able to meet up with them soon enough. He wondered where the firecrackers were coming from. They were still far from Central Park so the noise couldn't have carried from there. It might just be someone in the street, or perhaps on top of a building, shooting them off into the sky. It might even be someone following the parade, though he couldn't hear the music coming from that yet.

They stood waiting on the edge of the kerb, Kathleen's hand still clutching his tightly, unable to venture across the

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road until there was a break in the traffic. There was another firecracker, and Kathleen squealed again, though this one was quickly followed by the screech of tyres. Joseph glanced at the little girl, who didn't appear to have registered the other noise, and then he looked up and down the street.

A car suddenly appeared round the corner, speeding wildly across the road and slamming into a parked car. There was a bang, like a clap of thunder, and the sound of breaking glass. The car's engine roared angrily as the driver tried to reverse, and then there were more snapping noises, though this time Joseph knew exactly what it was. The car managed to trundle backwards and then, with a loud groan, it shuddered and began moving forward just as another car appeared round the same corner. Now the air was full of noise as gun shots rattled back and forth between the two cars. The first one, with its bashed front, was desperately trying to escape along the street. The driver clutched the steering wheel while another leant out the passenger door and fired a machine gun at the pursuing car, which returned fire.

People were shouting and screaming. Some dived to the ground, hiding behind parked cars or scrambling on their knees towards doorways for shelter, as car windows and shop fronts caved in as stray bullets hit the glass, shattering it instantly. Joseph had been momentarily frozen to the spot. It was happening so quickly, but he found himself beginning to tug Kathleen, pulling her away from the kerb. As he began to move, he saw the chasing car move to the far side of the road, and then screeched back into the middle so that it rammed the slower vehicle, sending it spinning out of control towards another parked

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car. A man leant out and fired his gun, spraying bullets over the crashed car, his body shaking with the venom of the weapon.

Joseph moved again, trying to pull Kathleen with him, but it seemed like she was resisting his efforts to drag her to safety. He couldn't understand why. Surely she must realise the danger too? He tugged again, and now he was struggling to hold on to her hand. It was slipping out of his grasp. He pulled and snatched and tried to hold on to her but it was like trying to clutch a bar of soap. Suddenly her hand had gone and he stumbled forward, no longer struggling to drag a heavy weight.

He looked back and couldn't see her at first. Where had she gone? Then his eyes looked down and she was there, lying face down on the ground, the green ribbon in her head dazzling in the daylight, her brown hair all shiny and smooth.

'Kathleen?' he mumbled, not sure at first if she'd simply stumbled into the road, but sinking to his knees as he heard the screams of a woman behind him. The scream was repetitive, like an alarm, getting louder as more people ventured nearer to see what had happened. Joseph saw the car race away down the street and round a corner, the gunman having disappeared back inside, but his eyes kept returning to the body on the ground as his hand continued snatching at fresh air in the hope that he might be able to grasp on to her tiny hand again.