

CHAPTER 1

New York

One day, Malachy and I are playing in the park – jumping on some bits of wood. I jump too hard and Malachy screams. There's blood everywhere. We run back to the flat. Dad's out looking for a job but Mam's there. She takes one look at Malachy and the blood pouring out of his mouth.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' she cries, and she runs to the hospital with him.

Now I'm on my own at home. I walk between the two rooms – the bedroom and the kitchen. There's nothing to eat in the ice box. I fall asleep on my parents' bed. When my mother wakes me up, it's nearly dark.

'Your little brother needs to sleep,' she says. 'He nearly bit his tongue off. Go into the other room.'

My father is in the kitchen, drinking black tea from his big white cup. 'Come and sit here,' he says. He tells me a good Northern Irish story. He gives me some of his black tea. It tastes horrible, but I'm happy sitting there.

For days Malachy can't talk because of his tongue. But no one notices him anyway because we have two new babies.

Malachy and I play in the park because of the babies. Malachy laughs all the time and his tongue gets better. When he laughs you can see his pretty white teeth. He has blue eyes like Mam, and golden hair and pink skin. I have brown eyes, black hair and white skin like Dad. My mother tells our neighbour Mrs Liebowitz that Malachy is the happiest child in the world. She says Frankie has the strange look like his father. I want to know what the strange look is. I can't ask because I shouldn't be listening.

I wish I could fly up into the clouds. Then I wouldn't hear my two brothers, Eugene and Oliver, crying in the night. My mother says they're always hungry. She cries in the night, too. She says four boys is too much for her and she'd like one little girl all for herself.

Dad is out looking for a job again. Sometimes when he comes home, he smells of whisky. He sings songs about poor old Ireland. Mam gets angry and says Ireland can kiss her arse. He says that's nice language to use in front of the children. She says she doesn't care about the language, she wants food on the table and not poor old Ireland.

Prohibition* has ended now. Dad gets jobs in bars. He washes the floor and gets a whisky or a beer. Sometimes he brings bits of food from the bars. He puts the food on the table but drinks tea himself. He never eats. He says food upsets his stomach.

When Dad gets a good job, Mam smiles and sings. When he brings home a week's money on the first Friday of the new job, she can pay the lovely Italian man in the shop on the corner. She cleans the kitchen. She heats water and washes us and Dad dries us. We have tea and bread and potatoes with butter and salt. Dad tells us stories and shows us letters and words in the *Daily News*, or he smokes a cigarette and looks out of the window.

But if Dad's job lasts into the third week, he doesn't bring home the money. We wait for him on Friday night. The darkness comes and the lights go on along Classon Avenue. Other men with jobs are home already and having dinner. You can hear the families talking, you can

*During Prohibition (1920-33), people were not allowed to buy, sell or drink whisky or beer.

smell the eggs frying, you can hear the music on the radios.

Malachy and I play with Eugene and Oliver. Mam doesn't sing. She sits at the kitchen table, smoking a cigarette, drinking tea and crying. I want to tell her I'll be a man soon and get a job and I'll come home every Friday night with the money. Much later, Dad comes up the stairs singing Irish songs.

'Where are my four Irishmen?' he shouts. 'Get up, boys. Stand up and promise to die for Ireland.'

'Leave those boys alone,' says Mam. Her face is wet. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, it's bad enough to come home without any money in your pocket and with whisky in your stomach,' she says to him. 'Go back to bed,' she says to us.

'I want them up,' he shouts. 'They must be ready for the day Ireland is free from Dublin to the sea.' The next week he loses his job.

And then there's a new baby, a little girl, and they call her Margaret. We all love Margaret. She has soft black hair and blue eyes like Mam. Mrs Liebowitz says the world never saw such eyes or such a smile.

Dad walks round the kitchen with her and talks to her. He tells her how lovely she is.

'I'll take you to Ireland and show you the beautiful countryside. I'll get a job soon, I will, and you'll have pretty dresses and shoes.' The more Dad sings to Margaret, the less she cries. Mam says, 'Look at him dancing with that child, him with his two left feet.'

'He's in heaven over that child,' Mam tells Mrs Liebowitz. 'He hasn't had a drink since she was born. I wish I'd had a girl a long time ago.'

It's early in the morning. My mother's whispering. 'What's up with the child?' she says. Dad's by the window with Margaret in his arms. 'Is she sick?' Mam says. 'She's very quiet and a bit cold,' says Dad. 'Go for the doctor, for God's sake,' says Mam.

When Dad comes back with the doctor, he smells of whisky. The doctor looks at the baby. He feels her neck, arms, legs. He shakes his head. 'She's gone,' he says. Mam holds the baby close, turns to the wall.

The doctor says he'll have to take the baby's body to the hospital and Dad signs a paper. Mam has a wild look, her hair is wet, her face is shiny with tears. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' she cries, 'help me!'

Eugene and Oliver are awake. They're crying with hunger. Mam doesn't move or make a sound. Dad's face is white. He hits his legs with his hands. Then he puts his hand on my head. 'Francis,' he says to me, 'I'm going out for cigarettes.'

Malachy and I give our brothers water and sugar. I find some old bread and mix it with milk and we eat it.

Mrs Liebowitz comes to see us. 'Oh, Mrs McCourt, what's the matter? Look at the little ones. No clothes on and dirty bottoms. Is the baby sick?' My mother doesn't answer.

She helps my mother to sit up. She goes to get some soup. Mam holds my hand tight. I'm frightened. I've never seen her like this.

'Your lovely little sister is dead, Frankie. And where is your father? Drinking. He can't get a job but he finds money for the drink.' She screams, 'Where is she? Where is she? Oh, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, I'll go mad.'

Mrs Liebowitz runs back in with the soup. 'What is it? Where's the little girl?'

My mother screams again, 'Dead. Seven weeks in this world, Mrs Liebowitz.'

Mrs Liebowitz holds my mother in her arms. 'It happens, my love. God takes them.'

'What is God going to do with little babies?'

'I don't know, my love. Have some soup. It's good soup. It'll make you strong. Boys, have some soup.'

The soup is lovely and hot. I wonder if Mrs Liebowitz could be my mother. I wish little Margaret could be here for the soup.

I hear Mrs Liebowitz talking to another neighbour. 'Where are Mrs McCourt's cousins?' she asks her. 'The big women with the quiet husbands? I'll find them. I'll tell them the children are wild, with sore arses.'

Two days later, Dad's back from his cigarette search. It's the middle of the night. He smells of whisky and he gets me and Malachy out of bed.

'You'll die for Ireland, won't you, boys?'

'We will, Dad.'

'And we'll meet you're little sister in heaven, won't we, boys?'

'We will, Dad.'

Two big women are at the door. They say their names are Philomena and Delia.

'Who are you?' they ask me.

'I'm Frank.'

'Frank! How old are you?'

'Four.'

'You're not very big for your age, are you?'

They walk past me into the room. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph, this place smells awful. And who are these children?'

Malachy runs up with a big smile. The big women smile back. I wonder why they didn't smile at me.

Mrs Liebowitz comes in and the three women sit at the table. 'These children are a disgrace,' they say. 'We'll write a letter.'



They wrote to Grandma Sheehan, Angela's mother in Limerick. When she got the letter, she sent money to Philomena and Delia. They bought the tickets for Ireland and put us on the ship in Manhattan. They said, 'Goodbye and don't come back.'

The ship set out to sea. Mam said, 'That's the Statue of Liberty and that's Ellis Island,' as we went by. Then she put her head over the side and was sick. The wind blew the sick all over us. 'Jesus, Mary and Joseph,' said the people standing behind us, and they went inside.