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# Bridey



Liverpool

April 1908

No one without a ticket was allowed past a certain point and Bridey watched people standing inside tight circles of luggage, trying to stretch out the few moments they had with loved ones who were boarding the ship and whom they might not see again for years, or forever.

Women stroked the cheeks of boys; men patted the hair of young girls; babies in arms were squeezed between mothers and fathers when the mothers leaned in for a kiss. A white-haired woman in a flouncy cloth bonnet shrugged off her shawl and wrapped it around the thin shoulders of a girl who looked to be no more than nine. Apparently, no age limits applied to those who could book passage, now that steamer companies had relaxed rules, seeking to fill new, larger ships.

The woman ahead of Bridey in the line was a few years older than her, perhaps twenty. Her hair fell in dark waves on her velvet coat collar. The man she was kissing, his eyes became wet, and his tears must have displeased her because her gloved hand gently pushed at his shoulder. "Go on with ye, now. Go on, get on."

## The Latecomers

Bridey thought she saw the coat of her father and worried that he'd come after them. But the man in her father's mac wasn't her father, and Bridey was glad to be spared the sight of anyone she knew.

Thom was right for insisting she come with him, she saw that now. She'd resisted for months. They'd entertained other plans. For a time, it seemed to make sense for him to go over first and send for her later. But in the end, it was clear that if they were to be together, they'd have to leave together, and, though their escape hadn't worked out exactly as planned, they were together now, which both agreed was the most important thing.

She couldn't have stood being separated from him as some girls were separated from their sweethearts who'd left, who were gone sometimes for years and sometimes forever. She didn't want to be writing him letters; she needed Thom to be near her. Her desire for him was in her, inside her blood. She'd met him last year at a solidarity dance. As soon as he came into the hall, with his neat red hair and smart tweed coat, walking sure, which meant he was not on the drink, lots of lasses were on him, wanting him to ask them to dance. She'd thought him too handsome to dance with herself. But after he'd gone a set with each of the forward Flaherty twins and then a girl she didn't know, he had walked toward her while she was standing at the punch bowl with Liadan O'Callaghan. She'd thought he might be coming for Liadan, who was the prettier one, taller, and her hair was flaxen instead of dull broom straw. But another boy had in that moment intercepted Liadan and was leading her away, which made Bridey think the new boy might turn on his heel, but there he was before her, asking if she was free for a spin. She'd turned to the bowl to ask its permission—she didn't know what possessed her to do that—and he'd laughed with his eyes. She couldn't tell their color in the light, but his lashes were long. The teeth in his smile were straight and strong. The two of them danced that set and then another, and there'd not passed a day in a year when they'd not been

Helen Klein Ross

together at least for a few minutes and wouldn't her parents be surprised to know that.

In the cart from Kilconly to Tuam, the bus to Galway, the long train ride to Dublin, both of them sat alert on the hard wooden seats, taking turns keeping an eye on their luggage. Her black oil-skin grip and his suitcase secured with a leather strap contained everything they needed to start their new lives. On the overnight ferry from Dublin to Liverpool, they'd tied their bags with twine to the shelf rails above them and again took turns keeping watch. They couldn't sleep anyway, so excited were they about their future. Her insides roiled with the prospect of what lay ahead, the thrill of doing what so many wanted to do but couldn't, which was go to America.

What gnawed at her, cutting into her happiness, was that the thing that most people *were* able to do, they had not been able to manage.

Father McGrory had not been in the rectory yesterday, though they'd knocked on his door before six in the morning. They'd wanted Father to marry them before they left. Their knocking had roused his cantankerous housekeeper, who had come to the door, blanket pulled around her, yawning under her sleeping cap. She'd told them that the priest wasn't there; he'd received a call in the night from a midwife. It hadn't occurred to them that the priest wouldn't be there. They'd not mentioned their coming to him, afraid if he knew beforehand, he might think himself duty-bound to betray them to her parents. She and Thom were old enough now; he couldn't refuse them. It was days after her sixteenth birthday. They no longer needed the consent of a parent. But Mrs. Taggart had closed the door against them.

Bridey dreaded going home, which she'd assumed they would do. How could they travel together unwed? But Thom put a hand on her back and said, "We've got to go, Bridey, the tickets will

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expire if we don't use them." His brother had sent tickets from a place called Poughkeepsie. Pink slips of paper so valuable, they seemed to glow in his pocket. They cost two months of what Thom earned working as an apprentice to Mr. Dollard the carpenter. But in twenty-four hours—if they turned back—the tickets would turn into worthless pieces of paper.

A strange weight settled in Bridey's chest, which she tried to ignore as she followed Thom down the stone steps of the rectory house. The mist was so thick it obscured the fields. It was spring, when the rains came. They could see the lane only a few paces ahead, but that was all right. They'd grown up on these lanes. They could walk them blind. They were headed to the calling place where Mr. McGallahey's cart brought people to the station in town. They were surprised to hear the three-minute bells. Thom was carrying both of their bags and he shifted hers sideways onto his head, balancing it with one hand, and seeing this made her laugh because he looked like drawings in books written by missionaries of heathen-born women toting water from wells. But with the weight shifted, he could walk faster. The bells rang again. They had to hurry. The cart was known to leave early if one of the passengers slipped McGallahey a coin. No one wanted to be late for work, not day-laboring men or women employed in houses as maids and cooks and laundresses. Ten minutes late, and an hour was docked from the pay.

*I'll soon be one of them,* Bridey thought with excitement. But she wouldn't be working in a house in Listowel, where household staff came and went with the day. She'd be working in the grand city of New York in one of the big houses on a street called Fifth Avenue.

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