

EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF

It's not every woman who can say she's remodeled the front end of the local supermarket with her Buick. My my, what a solid car. Drove it for nearly fifteen years before they took it away. Glass and steel and plastic crashing all about like a fussy budget. All I got was a little bump. A headache that hasn't gone away since. Funny, though. Have you ever driven into your neighbor's living room while they were having a big party? Well, of course you haven't, but that's what destroying the supermarket was like. When all the debris settled, I could see my good friend, Sarah Schwartz, standing in the checkout line, and at her feet was a shattered jug of red wine. She had her hands over each breast like I was driving in to take them off, poor dear. And the nice handsome checker standing next to her who always helps me when I'm in the store, what's his name? He came running over like Prince Charming in his supermarket uniform to see if I was all right. "Are you hurt, Mrs. Frees?" Well of course I was scared silly, but I didn't want people to trouble over me so. I wasn't hyperventilating like Majie Reynolds, who, incidentally, is the only person I've met in Golden Valley so far who is also originally from Massachusetts. And there was poor Mr. Deeds, the man with all that beautiful white hair and the two dead wives, the man whom all the ladies in Golden Valley are pining after. He was sitting on the checkered floor in the aisle between the wall I drove through and the end of the checkout counter. His bottle-thick bifocals had fallen off and he was beating his wood cane angrily on the ground.

That was when I came here, out of my apartment and to the nursing home. I'll be going back to my apartment before long; my son, Colin, keeps an eye on it for me. The doctors said I had a cracked hip, a broken foot and nose, and my eyesight was worse than I'd let on, but I tell you, I've just had this damnable headache. Just bring on those pills and it will go away, I know it will. Codeine, Demerol, Arsenic, what-

ever. Bring on the pills. The pills, James. My kingdom for a pill! These bedsores are getting worse. More drugs. Somebody tell that woman in the hallway to stop yelling for her parents, for Christ's sake.

That reminds me of my first date with Seamus. When I was a senior in college at Mt. Holyoke . . . let's see, it would have been 1925 . . . when you were expecting a gentleman caller, you would wait in your room, and when your date came, he would have the door monitor call up to your room to announce that he was there. And one night, when I was waiting for Seamus to come for me, I got a call that my date had arrived. I was very excited. Seamus and I were going to a speakeasy in Springfield and I had on a lovely fringed blue dress that I'd been waiting to wear for weeks and weeks. Seamus told me later that it brought out the blue in my eyes. I checked myself once more in the mirror (I was so slim!) and rushed out to the stairwell, before descending slowly and nonchalantly as if I had so many things on my red-headed mind. You see, at that point, Seamus and I were just on our first date, and I didn't want to appear unseemly and out of sorts. So I came down the stairs, and there was the door monitor looking at me rather awkwardly like someone who was choking and didn't know the proper signal to show it. Then I see the man who was to be my date.

He was the most handsome colored man I'd ever seen. He was covered head-to-toe in a raccoon coat, and even though I could tell he had on a fine suit, mostly all I could see was the broad-rimmed brown hat on his head and his natty, polished wing tips. We took one look at each other, he said, "For Christ's sake," and then we burst out laughing. He was quite delightful, this man. When I looked at the door monitor, an elderly woman (like me now, I suppose) who was new on the job, she was flushed redder than a boiled lobster. That made me laugh harder, and when the colored fellow saw me laughing at the door monitor, he started guffawing even more and wiping at tears around his eyes, each one a beautiful and deep cocoa brown. You see, there was a colored girl living in my dormitory by the name of Mary Maroney. She was one of only two colored girls in our entire class. So when this lovely colored man came in and asked for Miss Maroney, the door monitor

obviously misheard and thought he had said my maiden name, "Miss Moloney." Oh my, we laughed. And then Seamus eventually did come, and we went on to the speakeasy and saw Jimmy Durante smash a piano.

Smashing pianos. You see, they did all that long before this rock and roll business. But we knew how to have a good time in a civilized manner. When you smashed a piano, you made it count.

"Time for your pills, Mrs. Frees."

Right, pills. Drugs . . . the pain. God it's awful. My side aches, my head aches, my toe nail aches . . . sounds great. Pills, yes. Thank God.

"Did that suppository help, Mrs. Frees? Did you have a bowel movement today?"

C'mon pills. Work, damn you.

"Mrs. Frees? DID YOU HAVE A BOWEL MOVEMENT?"

Like a machine gun.

"Mrs. FREES?"

There's a bird in the zoo called a pelican. And his beak holds more than his belly can. And I don't see how the hell he can.

"DID YOU HEAR ME?"

Yes.

Yes. Yes! That's what I told Seamus when he asked me to marry him in Boston, right in the middle of the Common. 1926. We used to love to watch the ducks. The ducks were hobbling around when Seamus sat me down on that bench and opened up a box with the small diamond inside resting on a thin band of gold. He picked the perfect cool night. I knew it was coming, but still. "Colleen, what d'ya say?" That's the way he asked me. He never said, "I love you," but when he used my first name, I knew his heart.

He was always calling me by my maiden name, even after we got married. Get a move on, Moloney . . . what do ya think, Moloney? That sort of thing. So when he said "Colleen," I knew he was as serious as he was capable of being. But that was Seamus's way. One time,

just after we were married, we were on a walk to the west of Boston, when he left me in the middle of a pasture after he saw a black and white heifer start to chug towards us. Seamus was deathly afraid of cows. He sprinted so fast for the fence, holding his hat to his head. I didn't know he could move so quickly. In fact, I don't know that I'd ever seen him run until that moment. The cow seemed to lose interest in us when Seamus started running, and, eventually, it stopped and started to chew its cud. I stood there and shouted after Seamus how gallant he was being, was he going to leave his damsel in the middle of a field to be mauled by a cow? He said, "Every man for himself, Moloney," just as he made the railing and hauled himself over.

Seamus used to like to call me "Red," too. When I was a little girl, my hair was on fire. Redder than brick and iodine, bled through by beet juice. Red heads are stupid, shot with arrows by Cupid. I loathed my hair. All the women on the TV have red hair now. Dyed into the strawberry color they've always wanted. At least this week. But they wouldn't have wanted it in my Boston of 1911. Oh, God no. It was awful. My mother would pull some of it up and fix it with hairpins to the top of my head, to keep it out of my eyes, sometimes with a bow. But I had so much that it rolled along my back, easy pickings for the boys and girls at school to grab.

Randall White was one of those boys. Mean little boy with his eyes set too close. I think that's what made him mean. A disfigurement, my mother said, can often cause a person to have a sour disposition. My red hair was my disfigurement, and it made me feel ugly. It drew ugliness to me.

Randall White in his starched white collar and little wool breeches. You wanted to crush the boy sometimes, and I felt my red-headed ugliness surging up at times to beat him. But I kept it in check. Yah, Yah, Ya Derty Irish, your ma keeps pigs in the parlor, he'd squawk at me.

I wouldn't let the children at school see me, but I often went home crying. When my Grandmother Moloney saw me one day, she asked me what was wrong. And when I told her, she said, "Oh, that's

nothing that. Yer descended from Irish royalty, don't you know? Moloney isn't some regular Irish name. Go on, now. Stop yer crying."

This was a revelation! The heavens had parted and grandmother had delivered me from evil. My red hair was no bane, it was the blood red of Irish kings and queens and chieftains. And so the next time I saw Randall White, I made sure he knew exactly where we stood. We crossed paths not too long after my grandmother's proclamation, and Randall said it again, dancing with his legs flipping in the air like he was doing a jig: "Yah, Yah, Ya Derty Irish, your ma keeps pigs in the parlor." I'd been waiting for him to try something, and it felt so good when he said it, I thought I was going to burst out laughing.

"Call me what you like, commoner," I said. "I'm descended from Irish royalty." And I spun and walked away, my red hair a crown of shimmering rubies on my head.

I drove my Buick (or was it a Cadillac?) into the Safeway wall. What a sturdy car. I bought it with money I got from my insurance settlement after Seamus died. After Seamus was gone, my son wanted me to be near him, so he brought me and my car out West to the Golden Valley Retirement Community, just adjacent to Diablo Valley, where he lives with his lovely wife and son. Fifteen years I had that car. I was angled funny coming out of the parking spot. That darned station wagon was parked so close, I had to move extra slowly to avoid hitting it. I just couldn't quite get my head right. You know, I think I had the beginning of my headache right before I actually hit that wall. I pressed the accelerator, and I swore I was in reverse, but instead I went forward and right through that wall like it was cardboard. The steel folded and the glass bent and it all sort of went POP! before it shattered and clattered onto the hood of the car. But the car didn't have a scratch. And there, inside the store, with my sturdy car's engine booming in her face, was my good friend and neighbor, Sarah Schwartz, standing in line with her hands on her breasts like I'd come in specifically to snatch them off her chest. Red wine and green glass all about her feet. And Majie Reynolds, a dear Protestant friend, was huffing and puffing with her hand leaning on my car for support. She's originally from Newton,

Massachusetts, and it appeared that Newton and a lot of other scenes passed before her eyes. I believe I shocked her most of all. That nice young boy at the checkout counter asked me did I hurt at all, put the back of his hand to my forehead as though he was checking for a fever. And Mr. Deeds was wearing checked black and white pants that matched the color of the tiled floor he was sitting on, and he banged his old cane on the ground saying, "Good goddamn, woman. Good goddamn to hell." A few years ago, another of the Golden Valley ladies, Barbara Harris, brought Mr. Deeds a fruit pie once a week for one month after his second wife had passed, and Barbara nearly killed him, too. Turns out he has diabetes. Can't blame her for trying. There aren't many eligible men our age left. All the women of Golden Valley would have given money to be there to help Mr. Deeds up when I knocked him on his rear in the supermarket. I never saw who finally did.

They said my nose was broken, a leg, some ribs and maybe a skull fracture, but I don't know, I've just got this headache. Maybe that's the skull fracture. Once my skull fracture has healed, my son Colin will get me out of this damnable nursing home and back to my apartment. I bet it's not even a skull fracture. God, give me something for this headache! I can't stand the pain. It's awful. I could have a herd of cattle lugging over my head and it would feel more pleasant. How about some horse pills? Can't we speed up the damn pills for this skull fracture?

Skull fracture.

"Mrs. Frees, do you want to eat?"

Pills.

"MRS. FREES?"

Pills for the pain.

"TIME TO EAT."

Cream of Wheat is so good to eat that it makes us shout, hooray!

"CAN YOU HEAR ME? IT'S BREAKFAST TIME."

Perhaps some pills? How long till the pills?

•

From my apartment in Golden Valley you can see down to the golf course, and just beyond that, along the hill that runs up from the fairways, is the brown line of a dirt horse trail where you can see riders from time to time. Seamus rode a horse just once.

When Seamus's mother got wind of me having a job as a librarian, that was the end of that. No daughter-in-law of Patricia Frees was going to have any job as long as she was alive. Seamus was a lawyer, and doing all right for himself. And Patricia Frees was a lovely woman, she really was. Very sensitive about keeping up appearances. Doing charity and church work, perhaps, but otherwise staying focused on life in the home. It was hard giving up my job, as I eventually did, particularly when there were still a few signs left around Boston reading, "No Irish Need Apply." But the Frees women were proud and refused to believe that they needed jobs outside the house, let alone ones not available to them. Try convincing Patricia Frees otherwise. She was something, God bless her.

So when his mother said that she didn't want her daughter-in-law having a job, Seamus borrowed a horse from one of his cousins and paraded through Boston, down Beacon Street to the library where I worked, and up the short flight of stairs in front of the building. One of the girls came in yelling, Colleen, Colleen! Your husband is out in front of the building on a horse! Now normally, everyone would have been shushing each other, but when they heard that a man had come for me on a horse, they all decided that this would be better than whatever it was they were reading. So a few dozen curious types came outside with me, and there was Seamus, sitting astride a beautiful brown roan. He had on a fine gray suit and his best tie. He tipped his hat to me while the horse tittered a bit from all the commotion he was causing, standing fifteen feet above street level, directly in front of the library doors. Seamus looked like he might have had a hint of whiskey in his glassy eyes. Then he said, "It's quitting time, Moloney," and gestured for me to get on behind him, which I did. We wobbled down the stairs, and on down the street towards home. It was terribly romantic, but I did miss my job for a while. How a man scared to stand before a cow in an open field can ride up library stairs on a horse in the city is beyond me.

Seamus would never have liked to live in Golden Valley. When we lived in Boston, and our son Colin would bring his family to visit us, Seamus loved it. But when we went out West to visit Colin, Seamus could never quite get used to the California “types,” as he called them. He’d get antsy after a few days and start to make comments about us leaving early. “Too damn many people here that aren’t even from here,” he used to say. If people were in Boston, he said, you knew they were from Boston. He seemed to forget that plenty of us in Boston weren’t too far off the boat. But still he felt that in California, it was different. This person from North Dakota, that person from Texas, this one from Shanghai. No one was ever born here, he said. My friend Sarah Schwartz said her husband, Saul, used to be the same way about leaving Brooklyn to visit their daughter in San Francisco before they finally picked up and moved to California. When I told Seamus that I thought we might want to think about moving to California to escape the winters and to be closer to Colin, his wife, Candace, and our grandson, Foster, it was as though I’d grabbed him by the trunk and pulled his roots out of the peaty soil in which he had been happy enough growing. He died not long after from a massive heart attack.

Seamus had a strong heart when I first met him. We danced all night on our first date, and Seamus was filthy sweaty, but I was so in love with his red, smooth face that his sweat glistened like fresh rain. I swear to God he didn’t smell a whit. He moved so lightly, with just the right amount of swish. We were in a little speakeasy in Springfield that night and Jimmy Durante played so hard that he smashed a piano. Or his piano bench. His piano just sort of fell over after he finished his last number, but Seamus and I liked to say that he pushed it over for effect. But that wasn’t even the best part about our first date. The best part was before the date even got started.

I was waiting for Seamus in my room. When he arrived, the hall monitor would call up to me on the phone and announce his presence. That was the way it was done in those days. Some of the girls who were a little risqué would sneak men up to their rooms, but not me. Oh my. I had on a light blue flapper dress with fringes, and I kept looking at

myself in the mirror. Too much powder on my face? Too little? Red hair all a fussy mess. Smoothing the dress over my hips. Oh, give me back that body. The call finally came and so startled me, my heart began pounding. I smoothed the dress one more time and then walked into the hall and down the stairs like Cleopatra going to meet her Marc Antony.

And, instead, imagine my surprise when there before me was the most gorgeous colored man I had ever seen, in his finest suit, hat and wing tips, and a raccoon coat to boot! Picture that scene: a short, pale-as-day redhead coming down for a date with this strapping, nattily dressed Negro. We gave each other the once over, he said, "Christ Almighty," and then we started laughing like our lives depended on it. It was hard to stop; we just kept on like two old friends sharing a joke from childhood.

"Not Miss Maroney, I presume," he said, once he'd gotten hold of himself. I still remember that voice. Voice of a crackling, friendly campfire.

I paused in my laughter for a moment to look mock serious. I turned my nose to the ceiling and said, in my most refined English accent, "And you're not Seamus." And we both giggled and stamped our feet some more.

You see, he was looking for Mary Maroney. And the door monitor, this old dear who looked ready to die of embarrassment and chagrin, she heard "Miss Moloney." So her mistake turned into one of the funniest moments of our respective lives. Oooo, we laughed.

The door monitor eventually got her wits about her and called up for Mary Maroney. And Seamus walked in just as Mary came down the stairs, while Mary's date and I made pleasant conversation. I remarked that the poor door monitor probably never realized that it would be part of her job description to be mortified, and the beautiful, strange man replied, "Every one needs *some* vocation, after all." We both had a last laugh together at this until we noticed our dates weren't joining us in our humor. It was all very awkward for a moment while Mary looked at me as though I had designs on her fellow, and Seamus (who didn't know me very well then, after all) just said hello and waited

for me to disengage. So short and sweet, he was like a little boy waiting for his mother to direct him. Mary nodded to me very curtly and walked out the door with her date, who turned and raised his hat to me. Such a ~~pretty~~ but reticent woman, that Mary. She later worked with the NAACP. Got to be friends with the Kennedys in the 1960s. Now *there* is a tragic family, God bless them.

"Bathroom, Mrs. Frees?"

I itch all of a sudden. And you know what Grandmother Moloney used to say about itching. It's a low threshold of pain, isn't it? She said her point was proved by the legend that Great Grandfather O'Neill back in County Galway got himself a huge rash—this horrible red itch all over his body—just before the potato blight came in 1846 and cut the last of his land out from under him.

"Do you need to go to the bathroom, Mrs. Frees?"

Great Grandfather O'Neill, itched with a rash, crossed to America, drank the sour mash.

"BATHROOM, MRS. FREES? DO YOU NEED TO GO POTTY?"

Cross over the threshold into my house of pain and at first all you will feel is an itch.

"ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY SOMETHING, HONEY?"

No.

"I BET YOU'RE TELLING ME THAT YOU DON'T WANT TO GO TO THE BATHROOM. YOU'LL BE READY TO GO TO THE BATHROOM WHEN YOU'RE READY TO GO, WON'T YOU? I'LL CHECK BACK, OK?"

More pills please. I itch and I know I'm going to be sore before long. Because that's the way itches work. The pain comes later.

Poor Randall White. He was a mean little boy from my grammar school; my mother said he was mean because he was born with his eyes so close he looked like a lemur or some other nocturnal beast, and a disfigurement, my mother used to say, often resulted in a person hav-

ing a sour disposition. Randall had this way of getting my goat something awful, when he'd dance around me at school in a little jig and sing, Yah, Yah, Ya Derty Irish, your ma keeps pigs in the parlor.

I tried to stay above it all and ignore him, but he was awful and mean. He'd snarl "Paddy" and "Mick" at me, and even though those were the names of two of my uncles, it was horrible the way he would say them, like a cornered, nasty animal. He'd tug at my red hair, tell me how ugly it was. I drew some comfort from the fact that the Protestant girls in class didn't like him either.

Then Grandmother Moloney told me that I was descended from Irish royalty, sure enough, and that was all I needed to hear. Any time Randall would tell me that my mother kept pigs in the parlor, I'd tell him I was Irish royalty. This only briefly confused him, so he kept on with the teasing, until one day I turned on him. I drew myself up to my full height (which was probably all of four feet), I got on my tippy toes, and thrust my hands out at him, my fingers twitching inches from his face.

"The curse of the High Celtic Pagans is upon you, Randall White." I made sure my blue eyes blazed at him with the same intensity as my red hair. I wanted him to think me a Catholic witch, which he'd also called me on occasion. "Connacht, Leinster, Ulster, Munster!" I said, the names of the four Irish provinces ringing like death knells in his ears. And then a booming "*amadán!*" His eyes got wider at this last strange word, so much so that he really did begin to look like a lemur, his eyes sucking in what light they could for all eternity before the curse of the High Celtic Pagans shut them forever. *Amadán* was one of the few Irish words I knew. The way I said it, it sounded like hellfire. But it really just means idiot.

He left me alone after that. He stayed out of my way for years. And I'd keep him guessing about the curse by giving him the evil eye once in a while. You can imagine how I felt when in college I found out that he'd been sent to an insane asylum. Every now and then, thoughts of him return like a little pinch of guilt, and I wonder how much I had to do with his misfortune.

•

Golden Valley really is a pleasant place. A different pleasant than Boston. I miss the change of seasons, but not the cold. Oh no. My eighty-one-year old bones can do without that, thank you. I'll take the dry, seventy-degree heat round the clock, and the shade of oak trees, magnolia and pine. I like to sit on my porch in the Golden Valley Retirement Community and look out over the golf course where deer graze in the early morning and up to the ridge where the horse path runs. Then just over that ridge is Diablo Valley, where my son Colin lives with his wife and my grandson. The horses prance along the trail with their heads bobbing. Beautiful spotted browns and grays and blacks. Horses like the one that Seamus rode up to the library to take me away.

As Seamus used to say, no one is from Diablo Valley. You grow up here perhaps, but then you move away. Or you grow up somewhere else and come here to raise children, and then move away again. Go somewhere else to die. Or you come here in the first place to die, in the location they've appointed for that. Golden Valley. Which is hardly a valley at all. More of a little dent in a long hill, really.

"How's the pain, Mrs. Frees? Is it doing all right?"

Lovely, I'm lovely.

"THE PAIN. IS IT BAD?"

God, it's awful.

"YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE IN PAIN, SO I'M GOING TO GIVE YOU THESE PILLS. THEY'RE A LITTLE STRONGER THAN YOU'RE USED TO, BUT I THINK THEY'LL HELP."

Yes, pills. Stronger. That's good.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?"

Pills, pills, thank God for the pills!

THEN WE'LL HAVE CAKE TONIGHT FOR YOUR FOURTH ANNIVERSARY WITH US!

Pills is good for what ails us.

"OK? YOU BUZZ IF YOU NEED ANYTHING."

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz.

"MRS. FREES?"

I drove into the Safeway with my big car. I just wanted to go shopping. You got a problem with that, handsome checkout boy? Such a sweet boy, but don't mess with me or *amadán!* and you're finished. Glass and steel like water. I'm driving underwater in my Buick. We hit a coral reef and jerk to a halt. A shaky halt, I'm a boat underwater, so it's not a halt at all. More of a jiggle. Like a brain floating in its synovial fluid. Yes, yes, young man, I'm fine, you're a sweet boy, but I've got this damnable headache, and my . . . why it's Randall White! Randall, I'm so sorry, it really just means idiot. That's all it means. It's nothing. Meaningless. Don't be angry. Ask my friend Sarah Schwartz. She's right there, the one holding her breasts. Yes, she's Jewish. She *is* pretty isn't she? Sarah, tell him. It doesn't mean anything. That's a lovely little wine sculpture you've got there. How did you make that, it's quite beautiful and so red, the way the wine splays out it's like hair. Hair. You've painted my hair. What a wonderful gesture. You *are* a true friend, Sarah. Do you miss Saul? I miss Seamus. It has been so long for both of us, hasn't it?

Now Majie, you stop breathing so hard or you're going to drown yourself. We're underwater and the idea is to save your breath, not use it all up. Just float to the surface. Use that fluffy swathe of a bouffant you've got there. That's what I'm waiting for my big car submarine Buick to do. Just catch a drift and float. I'd swim myself but I can't and besides, I've got this damnable headache.

Good goddamn. Good goddamn. You sound like a skipping old phonograph, Rawley Deeds, and if there were five more men in Golden Valley, you wouldn't be all that much of a catch, especially since you can't properly enjoy an apple pie. Now, Sarah, he can help himself up. Let him use his cane. He's sneaky. Don't touch his cane! Look out, Mr. Deeds! Your cane is a snake! Look out! Push it away! It's on your pants, for goodness sake! Sarah help him! I can't see it because it's black and white like his pants like the floor like the snake like the heifer. My God, Seamus, are you going to leave me here underwater in this Buick in a field with deadly black and white snakes and cows shift-

ing around on top of Mr. Deeds' pants like gnats? Are you going to leave your damsel? Come out from behind that fence and help me out of here. I've got an awful headache. Get off that horse, this instant!

Every man for himself, Moloney.

Did you see the black and white snake? The cow? Seamus was there and he ran away. Rode away on a horse. He can't ride away like that. He knows I'm royalty. You wouldn't ever leave me, would you? Your beautiful hand, a royal hand as well, I've often imagined. A hand of a deep brown I remembered every time I took a sip of coffee, a hand reaching out to mine. We held hands and we laughed and we mortified that poor woman behind the desk. She hadn't seen a white girl and a colored boy so much as brush sleeves, let alone hold hands warmly in a lobby in full view of anyone who cared to see it. And I didn't care. I don't care now. Christ Almighty, you said. For Christ's sake, Jesus in heaven, it felt good. We laughed and there were no snakes or cows or red-haired children or Buicks. Only us and the door monitor to see it. But Seamus knew. He knew the energy I felt that night was created by you, from the moment he stepped in and said hello, he knew it. When Jimmy Durante smashed the piano and I cackled in high pitch, Seamus had to know from whence I drew my joy and strength. I grew to love Seamus deeply, but even so, he had to know. I can only imagine that your Mary knew the same of your feeling. Did you feel the same? It was only a moment that we were together, do you remember? We held hands and we laughed and we mortified that old woman behind the desk.