

Preface

I fell in love with Kitty's people that time the two of us sat in her kitchen, when she told me how her sister died.

And when my mother told me about the wicked stepmother and the cast iron frying pan.

And that afternoon on the picnic bench when Ewald told me about the gangsters.

I fell in love with Kitty's people when I saw the Edwardsville article about her papa's job.

And the first time I saw a 1910s newspaper ad for Barrett's Market.

And whenever my mother told the story of that deep scar along her arm and ribs.

Kitty Flanagan was my grandmother, known famously to the world of her grandchildren as *Kitty Mom*. Kitty's people and their tales of faithfulness and fortitude grabbed our hearts.

My mother Kathleen adored her Irish-American family and took great pride in her mother's *joie de vivre* in the face of hardship. She researched and organized the first set of information, then passed her work on to me.

What a gift.

Family history research became my meditation, its revelations strongest when my mind was quiet. And when the revelations came, I could feel the loving presence of Kitty and her people.

In 2020, my mother died just before her ninety-fifth birthday and just before the pandemic plunged us into isolation, leaving me to grieve with my folders full of notes and photos.

One evening, as I sifted through family documents for the umpteenth time, I stopped at a great-uncle's death certificate—cause of death: *delirium tremens*. I'd seen it before—the sad consequence of chronic alcoholism. But times being slow, I meditated on every line of the death

certificate and consulted all my family timelines. What chain of events led him to despair and landed him in City Hospital, dying an agonizing death, with no family by his side? Suddenly, I knew. Suddenly, I felt a heartbreaking moment of communion with him. I hadn't known him before, but now I loved him.

Then came the question: Who can I tell? Who will share my insight and shed a tear with me? The timelines and fact-filled blog posts I'd uploaded over the years felt too bland for what my heart knew.

But I needed to share, not a single moment in time, not a single insight, not a single sorrowful profile, but the whole saga—all the moments, all the epiphanies, all the intertwined fates of Kitty and her people.

So many facts will be forever unknowable, but could I write the *legend*? Could I say, given what we *do* know, here's how the life and times of Kitty and her people *probably* looked and sounded?

Think of tapestry restoration.

Real people and actual events are the fragments of an ancient tapestry, excavated over time from the vast dig of old archives, and gently laid out on plain linen, waiting for the wise application of storytelling methods to complete the picture. The images and their stories are gradually reconstructed with the sturdy yarns of logic; background, filled in with the shape and movement of history; its figures, made vibrant again with the newly spun fibers of scenes and dialogue.

Was I up to this epic task?

Then, I had a dream. I sat at the dining room table with my mother and she took my hand in hers, a gesture of love and confidence. I knew she'd stick with me on this project.

For months, I wrote. For months, I checked my research and hunted for more insights. Mapped every address. Checked every weather report. Scanned old newspapers for popular clothing styles, from corsets to fur coats. I was surprised at how often I dug up another original patch of weaving for my tapestry, something that fit in and connected one ragged fragment of the legend with another.

Whether my "restorations" came from a mystical connection to my ancestors or from deep in my own unconscious, I don't know. Part of me wants to think the experience of my forebears is encoded deep in my DNA, slowly revealed by walking with them through fifty years of history.

Although the restoration storytelling is clearly mine, I tried to push aside any preconceived themes or messages about women, the Irish, the Catholics, big families, or small businesses. In letting Kitty's people become characters who tell their own stories, some mystery remains, some holes in the saga that neither the data nor the logic can fill in, mysteries that will continue to disturb and raise questions.

But here is the legend. And like many legends, it begins with a chance encounter.

BOOK I. MAGGIE & MOSES

Part I. Chicago Love Story, 1885-1891

:: 1 ::

Monday, November 2, 1885. On the corner of Cottage Grove at Thirty-Ninth Street, Maggie Keville huddles with a small crowd waiting for the Jackson Park trolley. The man next to her has a coughing fit, hawking up phlegm and spitting it into the darkness. She backs away from him, her ankles wobbling on the frozen mud.

The wind picks up. She tightens the scarf holding her bonnet in place, then curls her hand to make sure the nickel is still inside her glove.

Her old job was walking distance from her room—a basement crowded with immigrant girls making cloaks. Through the grapevine of Irish seamstresses, Maggie snagged a better job as a dressmaker's assistant up on State Street. She thanked Our Lady for the blessing, till she realized the work meant jumping onto a trolley every day before dawn, just as winter and its coal-dust fog were settling over Chicago.

Here it comes.

She checks her nickel again.

The trio of cable cars slows down and car number one pauses in front of her. The conductor stands ready to collect the fares, his brass buttons

gleaming in the lantern light.

Maggie lunges forward to catch the narrow step. One foot up, her arms flail. The conductor reaches a gloved hand out to her, but she misses it, grabbing his coat sleeve instead.

His hand cups her elbow and floats her aboard.

Mother of God, it's a miracle she didn't fall to her death. Her heart is pounding.

"Easy there, Miss. Hang on. Here." He guides her hand to a pole, then turns to collect coins from other passengers, ringing the bell with each fare, his movement smooth as a juggler's. "Mrs. Keenoy. Miss Hennessey. The gout better, is it, Mr. Sweeney?" His greetings are lyrical, a litany sung by a priest to his congregation, the riders mumbling back their response, communicants in a workers' ritual.

"Morning."

"G'morning, sir."

"Could be worse."

Trembling, Maggie fumbles the nickel out of her glove and hands it over. With a clang of the bell, the car picks up speed.

She's on her way.

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In the lantern light, Moses recognizes the young woman. From the neighborhood, yes, with that strong jaw, those sharp eyes, and that dark hair cut to a fringe across her brow. Glad that he took the time to wax his mustache this morning, he smiles at her.

"Moses McCarty Flanagan," he says with a tip of his conductor's cap, "welcome aboard, Miss—?"

The woman takes a beat before answering. "Keville," she says, then louder, "Keville."

"Why so fearful of my luxurious coach?" He has cultivated a stage actor's voice to cut through the whine of the wheels and roar of the wind.

"I'm no fool," she says with a brogue from the west of Ireland. "This monstrosity could kill me in the blink of an eye."

Moses throws his head back in laughter. "Oh my, that would be a pity. But did you know that the Jackson Park trolley is one of the great feats of American ingenuity? Did you know that these lovely cars are pulled along by miles of underground cable? That they are operated from a labyrinth

of gears and clutches at the Fifty-Fifth Street power plant? What kind of imagination dreams up projects so monumental? What kind of engineering brings those dreams to life, every belt and cotter pin in its place?"

"But you hear stories every day," she retorts. "Trains and trolleys crushing people out of the blue."

"So much blather, Miss Keville. Not fashionable anymore to talk about the number of folks trampled by horses every day."

Mr. McManus, hunched next to Miss Keville, grunts and says, "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away. Praise be."

"Indeed," says Moses. "And we men roll on toward the twentieth century in our magnificent contraptions."

Finally, Miss Keville gives him half a smile. "You men indeed—always thinking you can invent a machine that outruns the reach of the Lord."

The trolley rolling into its next stop, Moses again performs his fare-taking, bell-ringing, passenger-greeting acrobatics, perfected after months on the job, repeated constantly ten hours a day, six days a week, with variations at any given moment to guide a drunk to his seat, lift a child onto the car, or catch packages slipping from an old woman's arms.

The work is demanding and poorly paid—by no means his life's calling. He arrived in Chicago a craftsman, but for years the only jobs available to him were pounding nails into planks, slapping together tenement housing with the cheapest materials possible to accommodate the tidal wave of immigrants. Last year, he leapt at the chance to work for Chicago City Railway, to be part of their grand mission to replace the filthy horse-drawn trolleys with modern cable cars. He admires the taut engineering of the system, but mostly he loves his trolley riders, loves coaxing smiles from faces too often clenched with worry, eyes focused on the sick child at home or the back-breaking job ahead.

And on this fine day, he meets Miss Keville.

:: 3 ::

By the end of the week, Miss Keville is hopping onto his car like a cat, always taking the seat next to his post, appearing to enjoy his patter between stops.

"I was living on Cottage Grove when the cable car started running in '82," he announces one morning. "The street was tore up something awful, but what a marvel watching them construct the cable-conduit, stone by

stone. Like watching the pyramids of Egypt go up.”

“I only arrived in ’84, from Mayo, God help us,” she says.

“Mayo, *God help us*. What is it about Mayo, Miss Keville, that everyone who mentions it implores the Lord’s assistance?”

She looks away. “We are so very poor, Mr. Flanagan.” Her voice is strong, like a teacher’s. “God-forsaken, you might say. Those who survived the famine and the fevers are now forced to send their daughters to America. It wasn’t my idea to leave a job I loved for the privilege of filling my lungs with coal dust and the stink of stockyards.”

As the brakeman slows the trio of cars to pick up more riders, Moses performs his fare-collection duty, then turns back to Miss Keville.

“So you were the chosen one?”

Her eyes harden. “I got put on the boat because I could read and write, most qualified to find work or a wage-earning husband, to send home a wee bit of change every month. Boys are needed on the farm. Girls have strong arms to carry water from the pump, but are more valuable in Boston or Chicago.”

She tightens the woolen shawl around her neck and tucks a blowing lock of hair under her bonnet. “Then, wouldn’t you know, the minute I arrive, my papa is struck dead with typhus. Typhus! Mam was left running the farm with six sons and two unmarried daughters. She wrote, informing me that my sister Delia was on her way here because they needed another remittance. So here we are,” she says, her sad eyes catching the lantern glow. “In *El Dorado*.”

As the car rolls into the next stop, Moses helps Mr. McManus to his feet. The old man has a wheezy coughing fit and Moses gives him a thump on the back. *El Dorado, indeed.*

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During Moses’s ten years in Chicago, his Saturday night entertainment has usually revolved around the corner saloon, where he can listen to music and sing, and, with a little luck, pay for his drinks by winning at darts in the side room or horseshoes in the alley.

But he is beginning to long for a wife.

So, he gives up his rowdy, smoke-filled saloon for the church-sponsored hooleys designed to help immigrant girls find husbands. The dancing is strictly supervised, in lines or circles, lively enough to blow

off steam but without the occasion of sin. Moses has been well-taught: intimacy is a frightening thing. Giving in to lustful temptation not only puts a man's immortal soul at risk of damnation but also carries with it the risk of uncomfortable infections, not to mention the inconvenient timing of children. Moses is a careful man.

He meets many women at these soirees, some bashful and backward, some plucky and bold, all anxious to find their men, to liberate themselves from domestic service or the shirtwaist factory, and to start their families. None hold his attention.

Now, here is this Miss Keville, keen-eyed and well-spoken, with an edge of darkness, not at all sure Chicago is where she wants to be.

Being a cable-car conductor as winter closes in on Chicago is no way to get to know her. He can raise his voice in the few minutes between each stop and his riders can shout back, but real conversation is impossible. After weeks of greeting Miss Keville at Thirty-Ninth Street, he gets an idea.

An early riser, Moses usually goes to the 5 a.m. Mass at Holy Angels, a succinct service geared to the servants who need to run back to their jobs before their employers wake up. But on the Sunday after Christmas, Moses sits in the back row through every crowded service till, finally, he catches sight of the woman whose pale eyes haunt him, heading toward the exit at the end of the eight o'clock Mass.

Trotting up to her outside, he removes his derby hat and takes a dramatic bow. "Miss Keville! It's me, Moses Flanagan, your humble cable-car conductor!"

After a surprised look, she smiles. "Well, hello! Let me introduce you to my sister Delia and her beau John Walsh."

Walsh doffs his hat and Delia curtsies. "Ah, Maggie has told me about her entertaining conductor," Delia says

So, her name is *Maggie*. And she has spoken of him.

"Aren't we lucky to see the sun this chilly morning," Moses says. "Perhaps you're going my way? May I walk with you?"

In a split second, Moses senses Maggie taking stock of him and he stands a little taller, knowing that his coat is brushed and his boots are polished.

With a twinkle in her eye, she says, "Of course you may."

Maggie isn't sure what to think when Moses Flanagan invites her to join him at one of the Catholic social clubs.

She hates the idea of merriment on a Saturday evening. After a week of sitting at a noisy sewing machine, easing sleeves into armholes and gathering skirts onto waistbands, she enjoys embroidering or painting china in the room she shares with her sister. Despite her growing collection of embellished linens and decorated teacups, she is not ready to be courted. Courting leads to marriage and marriage means children. How could she bring a child into such a dangerous city? What she sees of America is worse than Mayo, God help us. Babies catch diphtheria, men are trampled in stockyards, and women are casually molested by cigar-smoking employers.

Completely opposite is Delia—her “Irish twin,” born nine months after Maggie and soon to be celebrating her twenty-first birthday—outgoing and fun-loving, comfortable in the crowded city and firmly attached to John Walsh. But what boon to mankind is John Walsh? A night watchman at the yards, reporting for duty at midnight. What kind of future does he have?

Maggie certainly didn't come all this way to raise babies in a tenement, with a night-shift husband shouting at everyone to let him sleep.

But she doesn't want to be a nun either. Reluctantly, she agrees to go out with Moses.

In their first conversation away from the dark clangor of the morning trolley, Maggie wants to know more about her new friend.

“Limerick-born and Dublin-bred. I'm the son of a sea cook.” He chuckles to himself at the turn of phrase. “I can only guess my father Tim Flanagan was a drunk and a wife-beater. I can only guess that Mam's family, the McCartys, wouldn't hear of her moving back home with six boys. I was told she meant to get us all to America but only made it as far as Dublin.”

“Good Lord, that must have been terrible!” Maggie says. Breaking up a family in Ireland, no matter what the conditions, is unheard of.

“I hardly remember. She claimed to be a widow, I think, and got herself a job as a cook on one of those paddle steamers that ferry wealthy passengers along the coast. And she turned us younger boys over to the

Christian Brothers to be educated.”

“So you can read and write, then,” Maggie says.

“I’m a wizard at math too. Being the best in my class saved me from many a paddling at the hands of the Brothers. Anyway, you have to know fractions and basic geometry to get anywhere in the carpentry trade.”

“Carpentry?” Maggie is surprised. “I thought you were dedicated to entertaining trolley riders.”

“Ha! I don’t fancy being poor for too many more years in this land of opportunity. I went from primary school into an apprenticeship with a cabinet-maker. I was on my way to being a master joiner when Mam decided it was time for me to make my fortune in America. I was eighteen.”

“But the trolley—?” she asks.

“A stepping stone. They were hiring conductors who needed to be both physically strong and quick-witted, but my real goal was to get a foothold in the railway shop where they hire only skilled craftsmen.”

“And have you?”

“I have! A couple of nights a week, I work at replacing the wooden slats on trolley car seats. They take a beating. The other nights, I work with a carpenter there, learning to operate an industrial lathe and a couple of other big machines. Nothing like finding yourself an apprentice again when you’re near thirty years of age.”

Maggie is impressed with her new friend’s ambition and his eagerness to learn.

She also likes the fact that he has a clean neck, starched white shirt collars, and trimmed fingernails. The soles of his polished boots have received the attention of a cobbler. And the patches on his old wool coat are nearly invisible, so skillfully darned.

Very soon, stepping out with Moses on Saturday nights becomes the highlight of her week.

Her pastimes change. Instead of embroidering dainty flowers on the corners of tea towels, she turns her attention to enhancing her silhouette and making herself feel pretty from the inside out. With a supply of scraps from her day job, she adds lace inserts to her store-bought shifts and corset covers. Strips of linen are gathered into ruffles to add volume to her petticoats.

She stuffs muslin padding into the voids around the top of her corset to round out her shape. Working-class women don’t have the luxury of

wearing bustles, but a bum pad worn at the back of her corset balances the look of her full bosom and helps support the weight of her wool skirt.

And her hair! She's never satisfied. She tries various styles that might look good with or without a hat. She takes special care of her hairpiece, which gives her bangs to hide the premature old-lady creases on her forehead.

As she dares dream of having a husband, it is Moses's face she sees. Delia can have her burly John Walsh and his night shifts. Moses will lead her to the promised land—not this America of crowded rooms and foul air, but one where she's the lady of the house, with a brood of fat happy children, and a garden—a garden not for cabbages and potatoes, but a garden for cut flowers, full of roses.

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Maggie loves strolling through the neighborhood with Moses. The community anchor is Holy Angels Church, founded to serve Irish families exiled from home by the famine and mass evictions of the 1850s. They are the stable base of the parish. But nowadays, the Irish come as singles, sister by sister, brother by brother, cousin by cousin.

Unlike the Germans and Italians, who arrive as families and don't miss a beat organizing their domestic lives, the new Irish are wildlings, young people on their own, putting off marriage and children for as long as possible. They work and play without parents, free to be whoever they want—as long as they work their six ten-hour days a week, participate in the Holy Sacraments, and save a few pennies to support the farm at home or to pay for a sister's passage. They are free to enjoy Saturday nights, free to stay out late, free to sip whiskey till they reel along the sidewalk back to their shabby rooms—as long as they begin their fast at midnight so they can take Communion at Sunday Mass.

A young woman like herself is free to pair up with the future father of her children—as long as she is careful to avoid sin, but, if sinning, careful to know the difference between mortal and venial sin, mortal sin being a fast trolley to hell if she dies before saying her Act of Contrition at Confession.

On her precious Saturday nights, that winter of '86, Maggie Keville lets Moses hold her hand as they walk through snow and ice to their gatherings, where the lads share hip flasks of whiskey with colleens.

Maggie meets Moses's younger brothers Denis and Jeremiah, who followed him from Dublin and who live together on Halstead. Denis works his railroad job on most Saturday nights, but Jerry becomes an annoying fixture. He's a big lug who works in the stockyards and smells of sweat and cow dung. His girl is the chatty Miss Bridget Meehan, who shows too much petticoat when she dances and allows her hair to fall loose when she drinks too much—which is every Saturday night.

And every Saturday night, she drapes herself over Jerry or fakes a stumble near Moses to force him to help her up, despite the warning of chaperones.

One evening as Moses walks her home, Maggie can't help voicing her disapproval. "I don't get why such a beautiful girl would make such a vulgar display of herself."

"Oh, my darling," Moses says. "I've known Biddy since Dublin. When she was orphaned, the nuns took her in. Jerry tells me they sent her to a cousin in Chicago, but the cousin never showed up, so the nuns stuck her into the Industrial School on Van Buren. She learned too much from the wayward girls there, I'm afraid. But she's good at heart, lucky to have run into Jerry. She'll settle down."

Maggie walks faster when she hears the affection in Moses's voice, but he catches up with her. He lays his hands on her shoulders, pulling her close and bowing his head till his mustache tickles her ear and his breath warms her neck. "By now, you must know that my heart has room for no one but Margaret Keville."

She touches her gloved hands to his. "I love you near me," she murmurs.

Winter gives way to spring. Maggie finds she enjoys the effects of whiskey. Walking home with Moses becomes the favorite part of her week as they slip into darkened doorways to kiss and cuddle. Slowly, they come to an understanding: they will eventually marry but they have much to accomplish beforehand to avoid starting a family in poverty.

Maggie encourages Moses to quit his conductor job and devote himself wholeheartedly to carpentry and the booming building trades.

"You're thirty years old. Time to show the world who you are," she tells him.

He agrees. And, with his experience in the City Railway shop, he's

able to get a job at a planing mill, operating a lathe.

For extra money, she brings home mending and alteration jobs to sew by hand at night. On Sundays, they attend Mass and have a quick breakfast together, but spend the rest of the day on their jobs.

Their precious Saturday hours together become more intimate.

While they kiss in the darkened doorways, they press together, hands roaming. As the months pass, swooning under the influence of her whiskey, Maggie becomes more generous about lifting her skirt and petticoats, allowing Moses's fingers to find the open seam in her bloomers. He leaves her shivering with pleasure and always wanting more.

"Soon," he whispers, "soon."

Each Monday before she catches her trolley, she stops at Holy Angels to confess her sins to Father Tighe or Father Callaghan, veiling her ecstasy in the bland language of impure thought and touch. Her contrition is sincere and she prays that her guardian angel will keep her safe from temptation. But when Saturday rolls around, as soon as she sees Moses's smile, her guardian angel is relieved from duty. There can be no sin with this man, this gift from God.

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In the autumn of 1887, when Moses picks up Maggie for their Saturday night, he has an announcement.

"The planing mill promoted me to supervisor, with a big raise. Let's start planning our wedding!"

Throwing her arms around him, Maggie squeals, "Yes! Wonderful! I know just the style of dress I want to wear."

"We'll do it up properly," he says, holding on to her. "With what family we have here and with all the friends we've made, I want a bit of fanfare to signal our prosperity, not a rinky-dink tea party like the Walshes put on."

"I agree," she says. Delia and John Walsh got married last June and only served tea and cookies afterward. They claimed to be saving their pennies for a house, but it felt too humble for her exuberant sister.

"We can even wait till spring," Maggie says, "like the rich families do, so we can have fresh flowers and an open carriage."

They celebrate their decision that evening by dancing faster and drinking harder than any Saturday before.

On the walk home up Cottage Grove, buffeted by a harsh wind off

the lake, the two dash into their favorite dark doorway, giddy with joy, desperately hungry for each other, scrambling to raise her skirts. In a new move, he guides her hand to that place between his legs that she's been so curious about. For the first time, he doesn't pull away, doesn't caution her that it's too dangerous. She tugs open the buttons on his trousers.

They do an awkward dance as they close the gap between them. Then Maggie gasps.

Moses pauses to whisper, "I don't want to hurt you."

"Don't stop! I want this!" She is surprised by the breathlessness in her voice and then by her sudden weeping when they must separate and rearrange their clothing as the sound of voices grows near.

Moses holds her close till the voices fade.

"You're all right?" he asks.

"I'm in heaven," she answers.

But by morning, her anxiety sets in. When Moses picks her up for Mass, she grabs his arm and looks him in the eye.

"We committed a mortal sin last night, Moses Flanagan. We can't take Communion today." They begin walking. As if it were as trivial as breaking their fast after midnight, they will keep their fingers pressed to their lips when the priest reaches them at the communion rail, a discreet signal to pass them by. But this is the least of Maggie's worries.

"What if I'm with child? Then what?"

"Oh, my darling!" He stops walking to look at her. "How can that be?" His gaze shifts to the horse-drawn carriages crowding the street, then brightly back to her. "We were standing up. You can't... you can't make a baby standing up."

"Where did you hear that bit of science?" she asks, praying that it is true.

But it isn't.

:: 8 ::

Windy November gives way to frozen December. On Christmas eve, with most of the rooming house residents out celebrating with cousins, Maggie and Moses snuggle together on a threadbare loveseat in the parlor. Maggie gives Moses a package wrapped in brown paper and scavenged string. He grins with pleasure when he sees the worn copy of

Moby Dick.

"I hear it's very popular," she tells him. "I found it in the used bookstore near work. Since we have both traveled the high seas..."

He laughs. "And we both chase the white whale of prosperity."

Then he gives her a necklace—a fashionable gold-plated book-chain with a small square cameo and two dangles. "From an estate in Evanston," he tells her. "That jeweler down the street—Cohen—he fixed the clasp and got it all polished up for me. For you. It will have to do till someday I can afford a diamond ring."

"It's too beautiful. You shouldn't have—" Her voice cracks as Moses drapes it around her neck and closes the clasp, his fingers brushing against her neck. She looks down at the floor. "There's something I need to tell you. Something—my monthly hasn't come. I need a tonic of some sort to bring it on. I can't have a scandal. I'll lose my job, my room. I'll be forced into one of those homes where girls in trouble are sent."

He puts his arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. Since that one time, they have been chaste, not only out of fear and caution, but also to purify themselves for the sacrament of Matrimony come May. He is quiet.

"Say something," she says.

"You've lost weight," he suggests. "You've had a cough since the weather turned cold. I wonder if we should be more worried about consumption—"

"Stop!" she says, her voice sharp as she twists around, pushing his arm away. "Is that supposed to comfort me? Don't you know my sister Mary died from TB? I was seven and she was nine. She wasted away, fairy-stricken, for two years at the center of our household before the angels took her. It was horrible. Don't talk to me about consumption."

The memory of those harsh years fills Maggie's eyes with tears.

"I'm so sorry. How terrible." Moses pulls her close again and dabs her eyes with his handkerchief. "But, Maggie, listen to me. You're not *in trouble*, no matter what. You have *me*. Forget harsh tonics. We'll get married tomorrow. If we have a baby, it will be a couple of weeks early, that's all. Not an eyebrow will be raised."

She pulls back to look into his eyes. "Seriously? What about the big wedding?"

"To hell with trying to impress everyone. All I need in this world is

you by my side.”

She sniffs and lays her head on his shoulder. “We’ll find a little house,” she says, “with a rose garden.”

“And I will never again make you weep. Only tears of joy from now on.”

After Christmas Mass, Maggie and Moses follow Fr. Tighe to the rectory.

In his parlor, Maggie asks, “Can you marry us today?”

He glances pointedly at her belly. “The rush?”

“Since her sister got married,” Moses says, “Miss Keville can’t afford her room. The two of us can live cheaply together and start our family, God willing.”

Maggie glows at Moses’s fine words, but resists the urge to grab his hand.

Fr. Tighe opens his 1888 Matrimony calendar, already crowded with names. “You need three weeks to post the banns. I can add you to today’s list. How about Thursday, January 12, in the Blessed Mother’s side chapel? You’ll have to bring me your license from the County Clerk in the meantime.”

That afternoon, Maggie pulls Delia aside to tell her about the change of plans.

Delia’s eyes widen. “You’re knocked up!”

Maggie rears back. “I swear to St. Anne and the Blessed Virgin I am not!”

She hates the look of mockery in Delia’s eyes. She’ll tolerate no whiff of scandal. “We’re saving our money is all.”

Delia grabs her hand. “You know I’m happy for you, no matter what. Flanagan is a brilliant man. So well read. Learn something new every time we talk. And he adores you, Maggie, that’s what counts.”

On January 12, the blustering west wind and four-degree air temperature do not keep Maggie and Moses from celebrating. Wearing a borrowed, ivory silk dress and fashioning a yard of lace into a veil, Maggie proudly takes her vows with Moses.

At the age of twenty-two, Maggie Keville becomes Mrs. Moses Flanagan. And because of the fine print in the immigration law, she also becomes an American.

Moses is disappointed that the only living space he can find for them is a one-room cold-water flat at 4446 Cottage Grove. He's used to living in buildings with a shared toilet and washroom down the hall, but wanted more for Maggie.

Maggie is a good sport. "I don't see a rose garden, but, look, a big stove and a full bucket of coal." She lifts the thin mattress to check for bedbugs before she sits down and bounces on the uneven, squeaky bed-springs. "Oh my, our first chore will be to retie these springs!"

They are both surprised when the announcement of their marriage results in Maggie's losing her job. The reason is curt: "Girls on their own need the work and can put in long hours. Married women are a pain in the arse."

Delia scolds her. "You were a fool to tell them! I still go by Keville at the shirtwaist factory and they're none the wiser."

But Moses is secretly pleased. It's a point of pride with him to accept the responsibilities of a husband, just as he has taken on the obligations of citizenship by registering to vote. And, no denying it, he is tickled to come home to a wife who cooks him dinner, darns his socks, and heats kettles of water for his baths. He is growing roots in America and loves the tender burden of family life.

After three missed cycles, Maggie invests a dollar on a maternity corset, with lacing up the sides to fit a changing figure.

"God willing, this garment will keep my back healthy through many childbearing years," she says to Moses.

When Maggie begins to hand-sew gores and gussets into her clothing, Moses barter a Sunday of woodwork installation for a second-hand, treadle-operated sewing machine, which he oils and polishes for her.

"I'll find you the softest white cotton for our baby's clothes," he promises, enthralled by the romance of fatherhood. "Or linen—that's cooler. It'll be the hottest part of summer when our babe arrives, about August fifteenth, I figure."

Maggie's eyes harden above her smile. "No, no, my dear. The due date is September 12, nine months from our wedding night. The Blessed Virgin and St. Anne blessed us with new life on the first day of our marriage, don't you remember?"

Moses understands and sweeps Maggie into his arms.

On August 22, 1888, a sweltering Wednesday afternoon, Maggie gives birth to a healthy daughter “just a few weeks early.” She is baptized at Holy Angels on September 2, with the Christian name *Ellen*, after Moses’s mother. They call her *Nellie*.

:: 10 ::

As the Flanagan’s ring in 1889, they celebrate a year of marriage, their precocious little girl, and a better apartment down the street—one with hot water and a private toilet. They are both exhausted, but remind each other that prosperity is just around the corner.

But their optimism wears thin. With the never-ending demands of cooking, laundry, and childcare, Maggie begins to resent Moses’s long working hours, sometimes topping eighty a week. She tunes into the hall-way gossip that unions will soon force companies to adopt a forty-hour workweek. She’s all for it.

One winter evening after another 10 p.m. dinner, she mentions the rumor to Moses.

“Do you want to put us in the poor house, Margaret?” he growls. “If my hours are cut in half, who’s going to double my wages?”

“The unions will demand better wages. It’s not like the owners aren’t making more money than they know what to do with.”

“I’m too weary to discuss it.”

She sighs, longing for the days when he would jot bits of poetry on the pages of her autograph book; when he would tell her stories about growing up around the docks in Dublin; when he would help her make dinner, boil pots of water to wash their whites, and take in the laundry from the fire escape; and when he would rock their fussy Nellie while Maggie stole a nap.

Now, sweet times are reduced to Sunday mornings, when the Flanagan’s bundle up and promenade to Mass, where they catch up on family news.

In February, Moses’s brother Denis hails them with the news that his wife Katie gave birth to a their first child, Timothy. The baptism will be after Mass in two weeks.

Delia tells her that she and John are sponsoring their brother Pat’s passage to America. “He’s done with farming,” she says, “and wants to

join us here in El Dorado. Passage booked for April. Now that we have the house, he'll live with us, help with the mortgage."

As they mingle after Mass, Moses seems to know everyone, greeting them with questions about their mothers and children, whose names he all remembers. No matter how tired and frustrated she is, Maggie beams with pride at her genius of a husband.

:: 11 ::

For his part, Moses worries that Maggie is too withdrawn, that she is losing her edge. Her world has shrunk to little Nell and brief exchanges with other mothers as she dashes around the neighborhood, through wind and rain, getting her errands done. He wonders if America really is better than the Old Country. In rural Ireland, Maggie would be surrounded by family, including a mother who raised ten children. They might subsist on potatoes and oatmeal, but he would be home at night. He would have time to learn the fiddle and time to teach Nellie the flute.

But there is no going back. His obligations are here. *This is who I am*, he tells himself, *a poor immigrant fellow, figuring out this damn new world on my own*. He is terrified that the two of them will grow distant and silent, like too many couples.

He gets an idea. On Saturday afternoon, when the mill finally closes for the week, he stops at the public library on the way home. A new ritual is born. He brings Maggie books they can talk about. *Tom Sawyer*. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. *Little Women*. Stories and poems by Edgar Allen Poe. *Ben-Hur*.

At first, Maggie protests that she is too tired, too busy to read. Then one night, he comes home to find her absorbed in *Tom Sawyer*.

"When I taught school, the government gave us readers with excerpts from Mark Twain," she says.

"You taught school?" he asks.

"Didn't I tell you?"

Moses shakes his head. "Talking about home always seemed to make you sad."

"It does. I hated leaving that job—a tiny primary school I could walk to from Moyne. They told me I could be a teacher in America but, surprise, I had nowhere near the qualifications to teach here. I learned to read from a tattered copy of *Jane Eyre*, which I read and reread, but it was missing

the final chapter, so I made up different endings.” She runs her fingers along the firm binding of *Tom Sawyer* and murmurs. “Mayo, God help us.”



Maggie loves the library books but finds herself envying the characters, such as those in *Little Women*. She loves Louisa May Alcott’s March sisters for their energy and ambition. Even when they squabble, their love shines through. Maggie had three sisters as well, but look at them. Her sister Bridget, who can’t even write enough to compose a letter, lives a world away on the farm in Mayo, while her poor sister Mary is long dead. Delia still works at the factory, impatient for Walsh to give her a baby, yet prospering—buying a house on Union, sponsoring Pat Keville’s passage. Their fresh-off-the-boat brother now has a steady job carrying bricks for city construction projects. Maggie envies them, too, for their roomy home and three paychecks.

So much for sisters. But what she wouldn’t give for a Marmee or an Aunt March to teach her how to be a good wife and mother.

She envies Mark Twain’s characters too. She wishes they lived in Hannibal, Missouri, with its whitewashed fences and boyish adventures. The more she is cooped up in this apartment, with its clanking radiator and sewage odors, the more she envies Huck Finn floating on his raft down the wide Mississippi.

:: 12 ::

When Christmas comes around in 1889, Moses surprises her with the news that he’s found another, even better apartment for them. It’s still on Cottage Grove but faces the lake, a corner flat with windows on two sides for cross-ventilation.

Maggie smiles, even though it means that once again she’ll be surrounded by strangers. Her news for Moses is that she thinks another baby is on the way.

“We can do this,” he says as he hugs her close.

On the first Sunday in January, 1890, after they miss Mass because of Maggie’s morning sickness, Moses hires a wagon to move their few belongings three blocks down the street.

Maggie is frazzled. The flat is filthy. A dish and one of her hand-painted teacups are broken.

“I surely see no lake view,” she says, standing at the east-facing window with her fists on her hips.

Moses steps beside her. Against the backdrop of heavy fog, they gaze out on the arse-end of another row of apartment buildings and a cobblestone alley dotted with ash pits and garbage pails.


“It was a clear day when...,” he starts to say but lets the sentence trail off. She hears his sigh and feels his pang of regret. She knows how he loves sitting with his morning newspaper at a streetside window, watching the hustle and bustle along Cottage Grove Avenue. She knows he has sacrificed that so she can have a cross-breeze, a larger icebox, and gas lights.

He puts an arm around her, but as she starts to lean against him, Nellie lets out a holler, screaming for the ragdoll that went missing during the move. When the sixteen-month-old pitches herself on the floor in a fit of tears, Moses sweeps her into his arms.

“I’ll take her to meet the neighbors and let you have some time to...” He looks around at the mess. “Some time.”

As he exits with the crying child, Maggie shouts after him. “Bring back ice. We have no ice!”

:: 13 ::

 **1890** is full of unrest. Moses gets embroiled in union politics as the atmosphere heats up over working hours. As strikes sweep the country, many of his union brothers join the Socialist Labor Party. A Jewish neighbor takes him to one of the meetings, a lecture on the right of workers to share in the profits of their bosses. After the talk, Moses browses a table of free books and picks out a dog-eared copy of *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* by Edward Bellamy.

The story is a utopian fantasy about Julian West, who wakes up after a hundred-year sleep in the year 2000, to find the world has become a worker’s paradise. Instead of inspiring Moses, the book depresses the hell out of him. Wouldn’t a tired working man just love to fall asleep like Rip Van Winkle and wake up in a fine community with all his problems solved?

He leaves it on the table next to the rocker, where Maggie is reading to Nellie *Around the World in Eighty Days*, a fantasy adventure by Jules Verne.

“Here’s another fairy tale for you, dear,” he says.



Maggie reads *Looking Backward* through to the end, even though she too is disturbed by it. Her discontent with Chicago is growing as fast as the baby in her womb. Newly arrived Germans and Italians crowd several families to a flat in their neighborhood. Parents let their children play in the alley, where garbage piles up, stinking to high heavens and drawing rats. Every child she sees has a runny nose and a cough.

Too often, she hears the keening of a mother whose babe has died of some horrifying ailment. Last September, Moses's brother Denis and his wife Kate lost their dear little Timmy, only seven months old. The wail of heartbreak is everywhere.

Moses makes a decent wage, but he's stuck. He talks about finding a job with profit-sharing but has no time to look. Maggie starts reading his *Chicago Tribune*, hunting for an answer, a path forward. She collects names of companies with profit-sharing plans, companies that could benefit from a clever carpenter and shop supervisor like Moses.

Spring arrives. Moses takes up smoking and re-introduces whiskey into their Saturday night routine. He doesn't want to hear about her unhappiness or her ideas. He wants drink, smoke, and the warmth of his woman.

Then, on the first hot Saturday of summer, Moses's brother Jerry shows up with his boisterous girl Biddy Meehan and a bottle of cheap rye. Although it's understood they are bound for marriage, there is tension between them.

"Tell your brother it's time to quit living with Denis and Kate, for christsake," she says to Moses. "It's time to start our own family. I'm fed up with being a maid."

Jerry turns to Moses. "How can I start my own family after watching Timmy be taken by the strangling angel, choking to death in his mother's arms while another child was growing inside her. Since little Helen was born last month, Kate is back to weeping again every day and Denis himself is doing poorly, missing work."

Maggie jumps up from the table to chip ice for their drinks. Just hearing the story makes her feel cursed by it. How in the world will she protect her own children?

She turns to see Moses force the worry off his own face with a smile,

as he sloshes the rye into glasses. “You’re a big-hearted man, Jerry, being faithful to your brother in his time of need. Don’t worry, Biddy, Denny and Kate will spring back. It’s what people do, carry on. You’ll get your own babies before long.”

:: 14 ::

August of 1890 comes around with the hottest weather Chicago has seen in decades. People and animals are dropping dead in the streets, broiled in the hundred-degree heat. Outbreaks of diphtheria add the element of terror, as heat-exhausted parents watch their children succumb to the “strangling angel.”

On the twelfth, with the help of a midwife, Maggie gives birth. Catherine Margaret announces herself with a healthy wail. The Flanagans decide to mark their good fortune with a combined christening party for “Kitty” and second birthday party for Nellie.

After the Baptism on the twenty-third, the family gathers in the Flanagan’s small apartment. On the Keville side, Delia and John—Kitty’s godparents—are joined by their brother Pat, now twenty-three and full of muscle from hauling bricks sixty hours a week. He lifts Nellie onto his shoulders, making her squeal with delight. On the Flanagan side, Jerry and Biddy arrive with Denis and Kate, who bring their four-month-old Helen. It is nearing the one-year anniversary of Timmy’s death. Although Denis and Kate avoid the topic and join the laughter, Maggie still sees the darkness behind their eyes.

With two daughters to protect from lurking dangers, Maggie is reinvigorated. Even with her workload doubled, she is more determined than ever to find her family’s way out of grimy Chicago to their promised land. Moses will get them there, even if he doesn’t know it yet.

Autumn brings relief from the heat and rampant disease. But the days still fly by with no discussion of improving their lot. A few family gatherings at Delia’s brighten the holidays—women in the kitchen preparing food and playing with babies, while the men smoke and drink too much in the parlor.

Maggie is looking forward to a quiet New Year’s Eve, where she might introduce the idea of change using Moses’s own imagery of progress and the wondrous world of the twentieth century.

But Jerry and Bidy show up.

As the liquor flows, their guests get louder and louder. Moses laughs at their uproarious stories of life around the stockyards. Long before midnight, bored with the silliness, Maggie retreats to the bedroom to check on Nellie and nurse Catherine. She falls asleep.

When she awakes, the family chatter has gone quiet. Maggie lies there for a few minutes, sorting through the noises of her neighborhood—a saxophone wailing from across the alley, a fiddle playing a jig down the hall, an accordion squeezing out a polka downstairs, all these sounds against a bassline of laughter, shouted arguments, tipsy singing, and children crying.

Buttoning her shirt, she leaves the bedroom. The flat is dark. She turns up the gas on the sconces by the bedroom door, then a lamp.

Jerry is slumped over the kitchen table, passed out. Slowly, her mind sorts out the puzzling vision on the settee. Moses is there, a stunned look on his face. And Bidy. Bidy is sitting on his lap, her hair loose from its bun, her shirtwaist open to show her frilly white corset cover. She is clutching Moses's hand to her bosom.

Maggie stares.

Moses mumbles, "Margaret. This isn't..."

Bidy giggles. "Mar-gar-et. This isn't *anything*." She tries to get off Moses's lap and winds up rolling onto the floor. "I'm drunk, Mar-gar-et, can't you see?" She puts a hand on Moses's knee and raises herself up. "Moze was just... I don't know..."

Maggie presses her lips into a hard line. She watches Bidy stumble to her feet. Watches her teeter over to Jerry and give him a shove.

"Come on, Jer."

Jerry grunts. "Is it midnight?" he slurs, stumbling to his feet.

"Nah, we wore out our welcome here," Bidy says, grabbing their coats and pushing Jerry out the door.

Moses weaves across the room, his arms outstretched to Maggie. "I nodded off. I nodded off and there she was—"

Spinning away, Maggie slams the bedroom door in his face.

:: 15 ::

As the new year is greeted outdoors with shouts and pops of gun powder, Moses slips into the bedroom, reeking of whiskey and cigar

smoke. In the darkness, Maggie hears the rustling of his suit and shirt dropping to the floor and feels his weight against her as he crawls under the covers. In a minute, he is snoring.

Catherine begins to cry, a hungry baby, always wanting more.

For the rest of the night, Maggie sits propped against the pillows, cuddling her little sweetheart, sometimes dozing, sometimes staring into the darkness, listening to the sounds of Chicago fade, then begin again as Friday morning deliveries commence and the last party of drunkards passes through their alley singing tuneless rounds of *row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream; merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily, life is but a dream.*

January 1 is the feast of the circumcision of Christ, a holy day of obligation. Mass is required. Maggie rises, lights a lamp, and gets herself and her girls dressed. Then, she gives Moses a poke.

“Time for church,” she says. “We’re going to early Mass.”

When he starts to speak, she can only say, “I don’t want to hear a word from you.”



Moses was not so loaded last night that he can’t remember what happened. He is horrified at how fast he caved in to Bidddy’s seduction. The booze—he swears to go on the wagon, at least till Maggie forgives him. Still, it amounted to nothing—a brush with Bidddy’s bosom, a few seconds of excitement. He was about to push her off him when Maggie turned up the light.

They walk to church in silence. Too much silence. Maggie finally gives him the elbow and mutters, “You’ll talk to the neighbors like you always do, hear me? And you’ll take Communion with me.”

Moses musters a smile and tips his hat at the next passerby.

Back home, Maggie clatters the plates as she puts breakfast on the table. When they sit down to their ham and cheese sandwiches, she finally speaks.

“Here it is, Moses Flanagan. We are leaving Chicago. We’ll pack up our belongings this weekend. Monday, you’re quitting your job and we’ll take the evening train to St. Louis.”

He is dumbfounded. “Maggie, I’m so sorry—it isn’t necessary—I’ll cut Jerry off—we don’t—”

She holds up a hand. “It’s time. Last night was only the final straw.

We have to get out of this place, out of this city. We need a fresh start.”

“I can’t start over just like that. I have to plan, to line up a new job. We have no people in St. Louis.”

She reaches through the side slit in her skirt, into the tie-on pocket beneath, where she keeps her rosary, a small scissors, a magnifier, her key, a small notepad, a hankie, and the gold necklace he gave her, among other necessities and valuables. Pulling out a small embroidered pouch, she slides it across the table to him. “We’ll be the first. Pioneers. Isn’t that what America is all about?”

He opens the pouch to find a thick wad of cash.

“I’ve been saving our money,” she says. “Every spare penny since our wedding. We have train fare and enough to rent a room till you find a job, which I’m sure will be very soon.” She retrieves a scrap of paper from her pocket and smooths it out on the table. “This company, Nelson Manufacturing, is located in St. Louis. They are hiring and they have profit-sharing.”

Moses takes the paper. He’s heard of Nelson a couple of times at the union hall—run by a rich fellow with progressive ideas. He knew of men who packed up their families for St. Louis. But was it really any better than Chicago?

“I don’t know, Margaret. I can’t promise you’ll find rose gardens in another coal-fired city.”

She reaches across and presses her fingers to his lips. “I don’t need promises, Moses. I need hope.”

Moses is surprised to feel tears well up in his eyes. He expected Maggie to punish him, to chain him to the doghouse. But instead, she has liberated him to dream again. He was once thrilled to accept the obligations of a family man, but no matter how sweet the burden, it is heavy. Suddenly, Maggie is not the dependent he vowed to care for, a passenger sitting in the back of his wagon, but a beautiful and clever partner, sitting beside him, holding the map, pointing out the road ahead.

Moses takes her hand. “Then we’ll go.”

Moses retrieves shipping crates from the alley behind the greengrocer’s shop. He repairs and reinforces them while Maggie decides which of their scant possessions will make the trip. She pads her precious pieces of painted china with clothing as Moses dismantles and crates the sewing machine.

On Monday, Moses heads to the planing mill, still only half believing he's giving up his wages for a future unknown. But he does it.

That afternoon, as a gentle snow falls, they hire a wagon and two boys to haul them and their belongings to Union Station. At 6 p.m., with Maggie holding Catherine and Moses holding Nellie, they board the train for a new life in St. Louis.

Part 2. Workers' Utopia in LeClaire, 1894-1897

:: 16 ::

Spring, 1894. Kitty runs through the new house, loving the rhythm of her leather soles slapping the bare wood floors. The rooms smell of wallpaper paste and linseed oil. She stops to peek through the holes of the coal-burning stove and burns the tips of two fingers on the grate.

Her papa yells, "Get away from there, Catherine, you'll hurt yourself!"

"No, I won't," she shouts back, as she curls the fingers against her dress and runs off to the kitchen.

She is three and a half years old.

Mama is holding Tommy in her lap while she snaps string beans into a bowl. "Pull up a chair, Catherine, and help with these beans."

Kneeling on a chair, Kitty breaks a couple of beans in half, but her burned fingers sting. "I want to go outside and play."

"Well, go find your sister." Mama calls out, "Nellie!"

A faint voice answers from upstairs, "What?"

"You're supposed to be watching Catherine!"

"Where is she?"

"I'm not a baby," Kitty says as she runs out of the kitchen and clambers up the stairs. She counts as she climbs—*one-two-three*—but keeps catch-