

He had us in a line in his parlour. 'Twas the room he used ta entertain his fancy friends. Musta killed him ta have the likes of us all in there at once. Was six of us. I been workin' in this house for a cuppla years. I seen him make his way through the younger girls, fuck'n them when he saw fit. Can't 'magine how his wife don't know what he's upta.

He's lookin' for his gold watch an' a silver pair of buckles. Says he knows one of us lowlife Dublin misfits took 'em. Old Franny took 'em. I seen her do it. She's been workin' for him for more'n ten years in this house, and she's still poor. She sold 'em to buy medicine for her sick ma. Franny's ma must be old, cos we think Franny is ancient.

He strides along the line of us girls. I'm not scared of him. I hate him. I hate his kind. Flauntin' their wealth at the Irish. His kind don't think we are good enough. I didn't take his stuff, but I wish I had. He stops in front of me, standin' so close to me face I can smell his rancid breath. Smells like the rotten meat that the cook sometimes uses to make the stew for the "lord". I wanna laugh in his face and tell him he smells like a corpse, but I don't wanna get the cook in trouble. I stand straight and stare back at him. He doesn't like it.

'You stole them,' he roars. The spittle from his rotten mouth sprays onto me face. I lift me hand and wipe it off. This makes him real mad. He yanks hold of me arm and pulls me outta the line. I catch a glimpse of Old Franny. Her eyes are pleading with me notta say it's her that's guilty. Don't know what she expects me to do. Take the blame meself?

'You took them, didn't you?' the "lord" yells at me again. This time he's closer to me face. Wants ta prove a point, I guess. I wipe me face with the other hand. He moves his arm behind hissself, brings it forward quick as, and slaps me face so hard I fall on the floor. Old Franny screams. The other girls put their hands o'er their mouths and gasp. I stay on the floor on me hands and knees. Me head is spinnin'. He grabs me hair and drags me up to me feet. I don't make a sound. Not givin' him the satisfaction.

'Lock her in the cellar,' he bellows at the bloke who's s'posed to dress him and clean up afta him. 'I'll send someone for the constable.'

'Elizabeth Barclay, or Bartley, or Bartlett, whatever you call yourself,' the judge says to me. 'You are hereby found guilty of larceny at large, for the theft of a gold watch and a silver pair of buckles out of the house of James Dogherty. You will be

transported for seven years.’¹

The cell is freezin’. There’s no heating, and it being February tis mighty cold. I didn’t get a chance to take anything from my room when the constable dragged me from the cellar, along the streets and into the gaol at Kilmainham. Now I’m back in the cells waitin’ to be transported to God only knows where. The other women in the cell are sitting close to each tother to keep warm. One o’ them uses her finger to signal I should join them. Not much choice. I either sit near ‘em or freeze to death. Maybe I should freeze to death. Might be easier in the long run.

Old Franny sent her Ma to the prison with me stuff. I’m surprised her Ma didn’t run off wit it. Old Franny must be feelin’ bad right ‘bout now. Me takin’ the blame for her stealin’ the watch and the buckles. Old Franny’s Ma hands over me woollen overcoat that I’s had since I left home ta work in big houses when I were twelve. The coat is too small, but I’ll be able to put me arms in and cover meself with it. She gives me a pair of boots I haven’t seen before. Says they are Franny’s and she wants me to have them. She’s hidden some bread and dried beef in me old cap. I’ll have to hide it from the other women or they’ll fight me for it and I’ll get none.

I’ve been in this cell, in this gaol for months. We can hear the birds singin’ outside, so I figure it must be getting nearer spring time. No one has been to see me since Old Franny’s ma. Me own Ma hasn’t come, neither has Franny. They have their own troubles and don’t want to be burdened with mine. A few of the women have died. One of them was left in the cell for three days before they took her body away. We took it in turns at night to keep the rats from eatin’ her. She looked real young, younger than me. I think I’m about twenty. She looked about fourteen.

It’s called the *Marquis Cornwallis*, the ship they are puttin’ us on. They’ve made us take a bath in a barrel, they’ve cut our hair back to nuttin and put us in clothes that don’t fit. At least the clothes are clean, and I don’t stink anymore. The whispers around the ship are that we’s goin’ to New South Wales. I never heard of it. They say it’s goin’ to take months to get there.

The guards feel us up while they’re pushin’ us into our cells. The women who complain are cracked over the head with a cudgel. I don’t complain. I’m used to it.

¹ A Desperate Set of Villains: “The Convicts of the *Marquis Cornwallis*. Ireland to Botany Bay 1796.” By Barbara Hall.

All the houses I worked in in Dublin the “lords” of the house did the same to us girls who did the housekeepin’. Same as slaves we are.

The cell on this ship is better than the prison cell in Kilmainham. At least we have a bunk each, so we are off the floor. Rats can climb, but it’ll be easier to whack them off. We’ve been told we get three meals a day, but we have ta work for it. We gotta keep the cells clean, we gotta keep ourselves clean, and we gotta do some learnin’ while we are on our way across the seas. We are warned not to jump into bed with any sailors or guards. Lookin’ around at them while they gawk at us, I don’t see meself rushing into their arms.

We’ve been sailin’ for about four weeks. Some o’ the girls are slinkin’ away at night and slinkin’ back before dawn. They have a better colour to their face and their clothes fit better. I grabbed Shirley by the arm one night while she tiptoed past me bunk. She didn’t yell out, but bit me hand. I didn’t let go. ‘What do ye want?’ she snarled at me in her Cockney irritating English accent. ‘Where you goin’,’ I want to know. She says she’s not tellin’ me. She says that where’s she’s goin’, they don’t want no Irish trash. I twist me hand on her arm so that her skin burns. She is quite chatty after that. Seems she and some of the other girls are givin’ the sailors their attention, and in return their gettin’ better quality food and nice clothes. I jump down off me bunk and tell her I’m goin’ with her. My stomach has been grumblin’ for months. At least in that James Dogherty’s house we got well fed.

He was alright, the sailor. His name was William and he was kind to me. Said his Ma was from Dublin and he missed her voice. Liked to listen to me talkin’. Liked the sound of my accent. I don’t know why. I think my accent is quite normal, it’s his and his kind that have a different accent. He isn’t rough in the bed like the “lords” of the houses always were. And after he always takes me back to the cell, so I don’t get bothered by one of the disgustin’ guards. He said he’s made it clear to them that I belong to him. I’m not happy about belongin’ to him. But I belong to the King and he’s sending me to the other side of the world, so I figure it don’t matter much.

When I tell William I’m with child he shrugs his shoulders and says there’s nothin’ he can do about it. He says he’ll keep takin’ me to his bed so I get proper food to eat while the baby grows inside me, but when we land in New South Wales, if I say he’s the father, he’ll deny it and I’ll be flogged.

Another disaster in my life that I have to deal with alone.

My belly is swellin’ and when we are herded off the *Marquis Cornwallis* at Sydney

Cove I try me best to keep me dress in place to hide the growin' infant. William catches me eye, looks for a moment, then turns away. I know I'm not the only one with child to a sailor or a guard. We all try to hide what desperation for a good feed has done to us.

It's so damned hot I can hardly breathe. I've never felt heat like it. It's like the sun has sucked all the air out of the world and filled it with its burning rage. The sweat runs down our faces, there's nothin' that's goin' to stop it.

There's fourteen of us Irish girls on the *Marquis Cornwallis* and we are all stood before the commandant, or whatever high and mighty title he gives himself. He tells us that we will be in Sydney Cove a couple of days and then he's shippin' us off to another God forsaken place called Norfolk Island. That might as well be the moon as far as we know. Where the hell is Norfolk Island? He's sending us there cos we are Irish, and we'll know how to spin the flax into fabric to make sails. We turn and look at each other. I don't think any of us knows how to use a spinning wheel. I don't. But I'm not sayin' anythin'. I'm a slave, I have no rights, and I don't wanna be flogged. Everyone stays quiet.

I've never seen anything so beautiful in me life. My baby is goin' to be born in paradise. This Norfolk Island is magical. I expect to see leprechauns or elves or faeries jumpin' around under those magnificent trees. The soldiers here don't push us around, they let us take our time. Me and two other girls put our heads back and take in the sky. It's bluer than I've ever seen. Bluer than the sky over the ocean on our journey. There's no clouds. The air is crisp, clean, fresh, and tastes like coddled cream. I didn't ever think before that air could have a taste, but this air does.

We are put in cabins. Not cells. There's four of us to a cabin. It's hot, but not suffocating like Sydney. There's a breeze comin' through the windows. We each have our own bed, and there's a fire and a table with four chairs. There's some food on the table, and we've been told to cook it and look after ourselves. We'll be told what's goin' on the next day. We share the cookin' and sit down, the four of us, to eat like civilised women. At a table. We even have forks and spoons.

'They haven't given us knives,' I laugh. 'Wonder why they don't trust us with knives?' We have a chuckle about that and tell each other our names and the stories of how we ended up on Norfolk Island.

After the best night's sleep I've had in years, a banging on the door and a bellowing voice tells us to get up and report to the middle of the settlement. We take

a bit longer than we should. We take time for a wash and to eat the rest of the bread, salted pork, and carrots. Carrots. Been a long time since I'd had a fresh carrot. The next bangin' on the door sees it open and a red-faced English soldier straddling the opening ordering us to get to the meetin'.

Turns out they only need six of us to weave the flax and the rest of us, me included in that lot, are to be assigned to settlers. This is the first time since I took the blame for Old Franny, that I've been scared. I'm with child. I've got no idea what it means to be assigned to a settler. Does it mean I'll be the property of some codger who'll have his way with me and treat me as bad as the "lords" of the houses in Dublin? I'll jump off one of them cliffs that runs along the edge of this Norfolk Island before I'll do that again.

Four of us are told to get up on the back of a cart with our stuff. None of us has much in the way of stuff, so it doesn't take long for us to settle. The cart is pulled by a horse who walks with its head down, staring at the ground its feet are treadin' on. Turning to the girl next to me, Mary, I say the horse looks broken and sad, a bit like the way I'm feelin'. The driver hears me. 'The horses came from England,' he says. We don't know how old any of them are. It's just as long a journey for them as it is for us. This old girl barely had time to put her hooves on the ground in Sydney Cove 'afore she was loaded up again to come to Norfolk Island. She's goin' to stay on the Cullen farm. Mr Cullen wants a horse for company for his younger ones, to settle 'em down. She is goin' to retire.'

I don't ask who Mr Cullen is. I don't wanna know, but Mary asks the driver 'Who is Mr Cullen? Are we sposed to know who he is?'

'No lass, you're not supposed to know. He's a settler here on Norfolk. Was a convict, got sent here in 1790 with a lot of others to look after themselves. He was on the First Fleet that arrived in New South Wales in 1788. Governor Phillip didn't have enough in Sydney to keep everyone fed. There were some here already, and there's been more since. Cullen is a Constable too and has a big land grant. He's been free since a few months after he got to Norfolk Island. Even though you've been given a long sentence, you can get out of it if you behave yourselves.' The driver turned to look at each of us. 'A couple of you look as if you'll be convicts for a while.' Turning back, he flicked the reins on the horse's back. The baby kicked me with a force that took me breath away. 'I don't think the babe likes the idea of his Ma bein' a convict,' I said to Mary sitting next to me. 'I don't much like it either.'

Mary was the third one to get offloaded from the cart. The colour drained from her face as she crumpled her dress to climb down with some dignity. A man

and woman came out of a house that had solid walls, a roof, two chimneys and a front verandah. The man waved, the cart driver waved back, then got down to greet the couple. I wanted to reach out and grab Mary and drag her back onto the cart, so we could huddle and be miserable together. Then the man spoke ‘Greetin’s ta ye Thomas,’ he said to the driver. ‘Ye’ve brought fer us a hard workin’ lass ‘ave ye?’ Mary moved her head to look at me. She smiled. The man had a Dublin accent. He introduced himself to Mary as Patrick Connell. She curtsied like a good servant and told him her name. ‘Tis me wife, Elizabeth,’ he said to Mary ‘She’ll take ye and get ye sorted.’

Mary waved to me while Thomas flicked the reins on the horse’s back. We trundled down the track to my place of servitude.

‘It’s your turn now, Elizabeth Bartlett,’ the driver, Thomas said as he pulled the horse to a stop. ‘You got lucky. You got Mr Cullen.’

I don’t know how a person can think someone like me is lucky. I’m with child, I’m a slave on an island no one else in the world knows anything about, and I’m about to be handed over to a new master. For seven years.

A tall, strong lookin’ older man marches out of a handsome house and makes his way to the cart. He shakes Thomas’s hand and calls to someone who is workin’ in the stable to unharness the old horse and look after her. Then as if an afterthought, he turns to me. Taking off his hat, he gives a little bow and says his name is James Bryan Cullen and I’m welcome on his farm in Queenborough Path. He has that English accent, but Cullen is an Irish name. I decided I’d ask him about it one day, if he were all right. I told him me name was Elizabeth Bartlett and I was pleased to meet him. I don’t think he believed me. I didn’t believe me either.

‘Go on into the house, Elizabeth. Have a wash and change your clothes if you want. There are women’s clothes in a cupboard in the bedroom at the end of the hall. That’s your room. You should find something that fits.’

Me feet wouldn’t move. Me brain was tellin’ them to go, one in front of the other, but they weren’t listenin’. This man was bein’ nice, talkin’ to me like I’m a person. There’s gotta be a catch.

‘Is everything alright?’ he asked. I nodded that it was, but me feet still wouldn’t move. I started shakin’. Couldn’t stop. I thought any minute he was goin’ to slap me across the back of me head.

‘It’s alright, Miss Bartlett,’ he says to me. ‘I’m not going to hurt you. You do a good day’s work, and we’ll get along just fine. We’ll talk about your duties when

you're cleaned up, fed and had a good night's sleep. Off you go.' He followed his stable hand and Thomas to the stable and left me to make me feet work.

Taking a deep breath, one so deep the babe kicked me again, I got me feet to obey me brain and walk towards the house. The front door was open. I stepped inside and wrapped me arms around meself, I felt like the house was givin' me a hug. It smelled like old leather and pine needles. It smelled like me Ma's kitchen in Dublin. For the first time since Old Franny begged me to take the blame for her stealin', the tears run down me face. I don't wipe them away.

The house has a kitchen and a parlour and a dining room and three bedrooms. It weren't as grand as the house I worked in in Dublin, but it's big, well made, and comfortable. I find the room Mr Cullen said would be mine. It has a sideboard with a wash bowl, a piece of soap and a jug of fresh water. There's a towel folded real nice like and put over the side of the wash bowl. One wall has a cupboard, a window on the other wall looks out over the greenest grass that reminds me of the farms around Dublin, and a big, soft lookin' bed on the other wall. The bed has two pillows, and a quilt that looks like the sunrise and sunset have been trapped in its fabric. I wash me face in the water. I use the new bar of soap and dry meself with a clean towel.

Sitting on the edge of the bed lookin' out the window, I'm thinkin' I might try out the pillows and the quilt.