

# *A Slip of a Girl*

PATRICIA REILLY GIFF

HOLIDAY HOUSE  NEW YORK

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*For my Longford great-grandmothers:*

*Elizabeth McClellan Reilly*

*of Clonbroney,*

*who survived the Hunger,*

*and*

*Anna Rogers Mollaghan,*

*and for her father, Thomas,*

*of Drumlish,*

*who lived through the Land War,*

*with deepest admiration,*

*and for*

*their grandson,*

*William Reilly,*

*my dad,*

*with love*



🌿 Home 🌿

# Sounds

IN the back field,  
I'm bent double, hidden,  
pulling up chickweed  
for our tea.

Since the Ryans were tossed out,  
this field belongs to the English earl,  
and his sheep,  
who huddle near the stone wall.

Nearby, screams begin.  
They come from a mud house  
that shelters a family of girls:  
Bridey, Mair, Kate,  
and Mag,  
I forgot the new baby's name,  
Cassie?

I stand tiptoed,  
trying to see.

The crash comes  
over their screams.  
The bashing in!  
Dust rises up:  
the house of five girls  
and a mam is gone.  
They're forced out on the road,  
maybe to starve.

I clutch my fist to my chest.  
I'm afraid for the five girls  
and the mam.  
I'm afraid for us,  
Mam and Da,  
Willie and John,  
Jane and Nuala,  
and even more afraid  
for me, Anna.

But didn't Da say  
we're all right?



*Mathias Magrath's house, Moyasta, Co. Clare after destruction by the Battering Ram, Robert French, ca. 1886–1890 (This image is reproduced courtesy of the National Library of Ireland L\_CAB\_04918.)*



# *The Hill*

**A**FTER supper that night,  
I climb my hill.  
It's steep and rocky,  
but my bare feet know the way.

I sing one of Da's old songs.  
I won't think about those poor things  
on the road.

From behind the hedgerow,  
my brother Will says,  
"She has a mouth on her,  
that Anna."  
And John: "With a voice like a frog."

I make a frog sound,  
laughing,  
and go on.  
I carry an old potato,  
green with mold.

If one of the little people  
comes up from the earth,  
I'll throw it to him,  
and dash away while he eats.

From here, I can see the world,  
my world anyway:  
the bogs that cover the earth  
like blankets,  
and the snipes that fly high.  
There's the top of Liam's roof,  
the thatch tan with weeds.  
Beyond that, the schoolhouse.  
I close my eyes.  
I've never been inside.  
I'm needed at home.

The corn mill rises up below,  
its great wheel creaking  
as it grinds the grain.

The English earl's house spreads out  
like a castle.  
He's a man to be feared.

He could put us out to starve,  
if he wished.

A sudden wind loosens a stone.  
It rolls and moves another.  
Something is underneath.  
I catch my breath.  
A book!  
I've never seen one before,  
except in church.

One cover is missing.  
The other is the color  
of a January field.  
It has a picture of a horse,  
its mane flying.

I clutch the book to myself,  
wondering at those silky pages.  
Imagine knowing what the writing says!

I fly down the hill,  
to tell my best friend, Liam.  
I pass my house  
and circle around the Donnellys'.

The oldest, Mae, raises her hand  
to wave.

She looks tired.

She has more to do than any of us,  
with her da gone,  
and five children in  
steps and stairs  
behind her.

Liam meets me  
at the crumbling stone wall.

I don't say a word,  
but hold the book in front of me.

"Oh, Anna," he says.

He reaches out,  
almost touching it,  
and then my hand.

"If only I could read," I say.

He nods.

# *A Word*

THAT night while everyone sleeps,  
I sit on the rush chair  
at the hearth.  
The room is cozy.  
The banked glow of peat  
gives enough light  
to see my treasure,  
the book!

I stare at the cover,  
and picture the horse  
pawing the ground,  
as I climb on his back.  
We soar across the field  
and jump over the wall.

I lean closer to the fire light.  
The circles and lines  
under the picture must say  
*Horse!*

A joy like listening  
to Da's stories,  
or swinging along the boreen  
with Liam,  
fills my chest  
and spills into my throat.

I go to Mam's bed.  
She never sleeps.  
How thin she looks!  
Her eyes are sunken,  
her cheeks flushed.  
*Please, let her just be tired.*

I put my hand on her shoulder.  
"I can read a word."  
She touches my cheek.  
"Alannah, my Anna,"  
she whispers.

# Liam

WE sit on the stone wall,  
our heads close,  
and search through the book  
to see *Horse*.

It's printed on almost  
every page.

We know dozens of words,  
all *Horse*.

But still . . .

"Anna?" Liam begins.

I glance at his blue-gray eyes,  
the color of a windy sky.

"We haven't paid the rent,"  
he says.

"Not this quarter,  
not the last two."

"This year may be different,"  
I say desperately.

grasping his arm.

“It’s almost time to plant.”

“If the weather holds,  
we’ll have vegetables  
to sell,  
and lumper potatoes to fill us  
next winter.”

“It’s too late,” Liam says,  
his hand on mine.

“We’ll be out on the road,  
Mam and me.”

I can’t see the earl’s house  
from here.

Still I look toward it.

Rage rise up in my throat.

I swallow,

try to speak over it.

“Our land,” is all I can manage.

“Someday,” Liam says,  
touching the curl of my hair.



# Spring

**M**ARCH is here,  
time to plant.

With knives in our hands,  
we cut the eyes  
from seed potatoes.

We'll tuck them in the earth,  
where they'll send up green shoots  
and purple blossoms.

Then underneath,  
lumpers!

My sister Jane is old enough  
to help.

But her mind is far away,  
on a ship to America.

She slices her finger  
as well as the potato.

Ah, Jane.

Mam and I rub her arms,

while Willie pats her head,  
and John finds a cobweb  
to stop the bleeding.  
Da croons, “Don’t cry, *astore*.”

We set the cuts in the field.  
Mam bends,  
trying to catch her breath,  
her fine hair blowing in the breeze.  
She pats the soil  
the way she pats us.  
“Our mother, the earth,”  
she says.

Nuala grabs my skirt,  
wanting a bit of potato,  
not to plant, but to eat.  
Her smiling face looks  
almost like Mam’s.  
I gather her up,  
twirl her around.  
“Someday,” I say.

If only the days are clear,  
and the lumpers can grow.

“Listen, sky,” I yell,  
my fist raised.  
“Hold back the rain  
for us,  
and for Liam and his mam.”

## Leaving

AFTER the potatoes, the oats,  
and the summer cabbage  
begin to grow,  
Will and John go down the road,  
arms slung around each other's  
shoulders.

They've worked hard in town,  
mucking out the hotel barn,  
washing windows,  
and sweeping the street.

They have enough coins now,  
just,  
to pay for passage.  
Their ship will sail from Cork,  
to Brooklyn, America.

Da stands in the field,  
one hand raised in blessing.  
Mam's face is set

so they won't see her tears.  
I look hard after my brothers.  
I'll never see them again.

"Take me," Jane cries,  
until the road turns  
and they're gone forever:  
Willie who carried me on his shoulder  
when I was Nuala's age,  
and John so tough  
he could walk through nettles,  
but was soft for Jane.

I pick up a clod of damp earth  
and hold it tight in my fist.  
America is not for me.  
That faraway place is for my brothers,  
and maybe for Jane.  
But I belong to this country.  
If only it belonged to me.

# Mam

IT'S early, still dark.  
Mam is at the hearth.  
I go to help with the cooking.

She stands, stirring,  
one hand  
against the stones,  
balancing herself.

The wooden spoon falls  
to the floor,  
spattering hot soup.  
She sinks down for it,  
her hand sliding,  
and kneels there.

I stare at her.  
She's bone thin,  
her hair was red  
like mine

but streaked white now.  
Are we going to lose her?

She turns.  
I can't hide my fear.  
"I'm all right, child."  
She raises her shoulder  
a bit.

I go toward her,  
stumbling.  
"I can't do without you,"  
I say fiercely.  
I bury my head  
in her chest.  
All right, I tell myself.  
She's all right.

# Hens

A clap of thunder,  
and sudden downpour.  
I open the half door,  
worried about the crop.

The hens, wings flapping,  
flutter along the boren.  
What's happened?

I throw my shawl  
over my shoulders.  
Head bent against the rain,  
I run to turn them back.

But ahead of me,  
arms out, reaching,  
a man chases after them.  
Our hens!

I'm desperate to catch them,  
but I trip,



turning my ankle,  
losing moments.

I scramble up.  
One hen is under his arm.  
He reaches for the neck  
of another.  
I yell,  
Can anyone hear me?

But then,  
Mae Donnelly stands  
in front of him,  
arm raised,  
pitchfork over her head.

The man drops the hen,  
and runs away  
across the Donnellys' field.

Mae stabs the earth  
with the pitchfork,  
and reaches for me,  
“Are you all right, Anna?”

“The hens,” I say.  
“How can I thank you?”

She helps me  
turn them toward home,  
then waves.  
“We have to take care  
of each other,”  
she calls after me.

## *Last Day*

EVERY day,

Mam weakens.

Then, one morning,

I kneel at the side of her bed.

“Keep Nuala safe,”

she whispers.

“The house and the land.”

For a moment,

Da rests his head against hers.

“Anna’s only a slip of a girl,”

he says.

“Ah no,” Mam whispers.

“She’s more than that.

Much more.”

Da tries to smile.

“True,” he says.

“She has a lot to say.”

Mam takes a breath,

struggles for another.

“Nuala will always need help,”

she says.

I see Nuala’s beautiful face,

her light hair,

her uneven teeth.

My little sister is slow to speak,

slow to understand.

“I count on you, Anna.”

Mam tries to grip my hand.

“Read,” she says.

“I’m sorry there was no time for school.”

Hours later,

she’s gone.

There’s only the sound of crying

in our house.