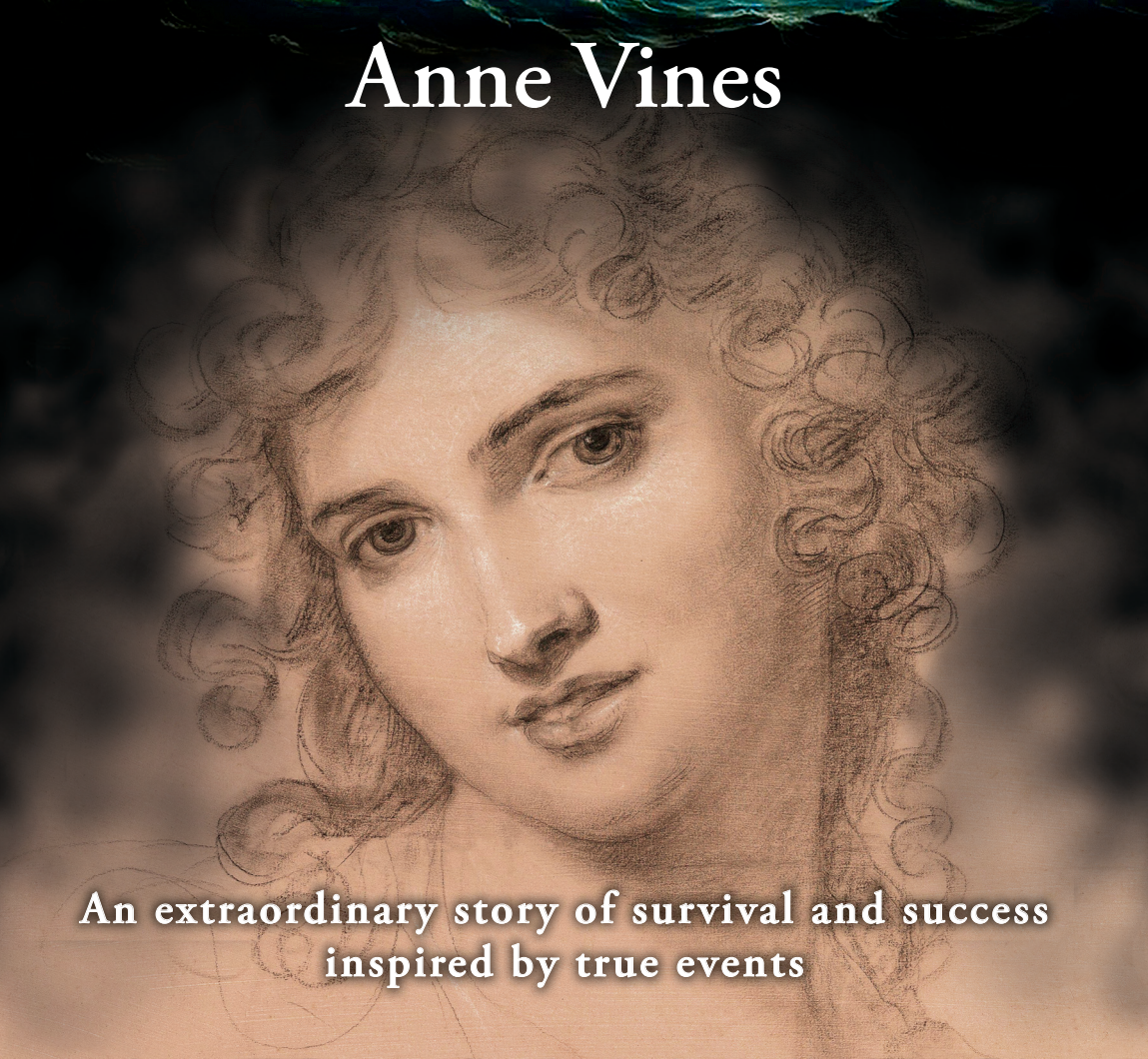




The Ship Wife

Anne Vines



An extraordinary story of survival and success
inspired by true events

Anne Vines won the Boroondara Prize in 2014 and the Keith Carroll Award in 2020 for short stories.

She was shortlisted for the Alan Marshall Short Story Award 1987, The Age Short Story Award 2009, the Henry Handel Richardson Short Story Award 2011, and the international Wasafiri New Writing Prize, 2014. She was commended in the Varuna Harper-Collins Award in 2007 for her novel's "compelling, very exciting voice" and "character-driven unusual twists" which "build up a head of steam". Her novel, *A Good Killer*, entered in the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript in 2008, was commended by the judges for its "fast-paced storytelling".

Anne's short fiction was published in *Word U Up* 2014, *Award Winning Australian Writing* 2015, *Wasafiri Magazine Online* 2016, *Ring of Words* 2018 and *Boroondara Literary Awards Anthology* 2020.

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The Ship Wife

A novel based on a true story

Anne Vines



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The moral right of Anne Vines to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

This book was written on the traditional land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation. The author acknowledges and pays her respects to their elders, past and present and emerging.

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*for Richard, Andrew, Laura, and in memory
of my grandmother, Catherine O'Shannassy Vines*

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1 Evanton Estate, Wicklow Hills

County Wicklow, 1792

Just after daybreak, sitting in the cart behind two men and a woman and wedged between portmanteaux and boxes, Elizabeth gazed intently at her street, which was all she knew of the world. She waved at her parents, grandmother, sisters, cousins and neighbours. It was hard to believe she would not see them for years.

The cart clattered into the wider street that she hardly knew and then along to the high street, past the green and the big cathedral. Soon they were driving out along the road to the country. Dublin Town took so little time to ride through and leave behind. Here, there were fields and scarcely a house or shed for miles. Cows she saw, but not people. She must get used to the countryside. In her new life as a housemaid, she would have country fields and hills all around. She unwrapped her small portion of bread and took a bite. It was cold in the wind; even in her shawl and bonnet she shivered. She must not eat too much at first or she would be hungry and too cold as night drew near. After a time, her head drooped, and she dozed. The wobbling of the cart had a rhythm that soothed her.

When she woke, the cart was stopped in a crowded village street. The driver told her to walk about.

Granny had told her this, too. "If a body stays on the cart the whole journey, the bones and all will be stiff for days."

"But don't go wandering out of sight," Da had warned. "Don't trust anyone in the villages, especially young men lounging about."

She pressed her nose to the window of the shop next to the inn and looked over the bonnets and ribbons. There was a statue of some nobleman in the middle of the street with steps around it. She sat on one of the steps for a few moments and looked to see if there was water anywhere. Her mother had worried about her not getting anything to drink. Granny had suggested asking for a cup of water at the inn, but Elizabeth feared she would be sent packing, like in Dublin Town.

She stood up and walked back and forth, trying and failing to ignore the jostling boys rushing past. Then she saw them grabbing something off a tree near the corner and running away. No one came after them to scold or whip them. She followed their path and saw a big pear tree overhanging the street. It grew behind a high stone wall. On the ground near her were two pears, one half smashed and one whole. She looked about her, stooped quickly, scooped them up into her shawl and scurried back to the coach. Though she could not eat them till she was safely away, they felt so soft and plump in her hand under her shawl that it was all she could do not to grin in triumph.

The pears made up for the cold wind. As the cart trundled off, she ate the soft smashed one – so sweet and running with juice – a taste she had not known, for it was only old apples that they ate at home. She pulled her shawl close about her and pressed her back against the wooden rails as the cart rocked back and forth. No one else was travelling on with her so she sang softly to herself and imagined her future life in the Big House. Granny had described the outside of the house, but not the grand rooms or the ladies' clothes, for she had lived in the outer region of the estate on her small farm and did not know the ways of the household.

They drove past so many streams that Elizabeth lost count. Twice she spied a castle and once they drove close to its gates. Who would believe such great high buildings, half-ruined but still so grand. Way off were such hills – no, mountains – they took her breath away, they were so beautiful. To think that she would have never seen them if she had stayed in Dublin Town.

She saw men and boys bringing in the cows. There were farms a way off from the road and when she saw the smoke wafting from their chimneys, she shed quiet tears at the thought of the little fireplace at home. How she wished Granny could have come with her, or Ma.

They stopped two more times. It was tiring to climb down but she had to find a spot behind the bushes to lift her skirts. When she climbed back the second time, the driver threw her a rug to snuggle under. When the gloaming came on, she loved her view of the sky and the rising moon and then the flicker of stars behind wisps of cloud.

She did not know she had fallen asleep until she heard the driver's voice. "Wake up, girl, the estate starts on this hill."

She saw gates and long meadows and then, hazy in the dim light, gardens that went on and on. In the distance, tiny farmhouses – one

that was once Granny's.

Then the Big House. A lantern lit up the main entrance. The walls and roof were etched against the violet sky. Their lines were so straight and grand. The dark windows gleamed in the moonlight.

The cart rattled around to the back. She was shaking in anticipation and could hardly take in the courtyard and the smaller buildings. The driver helped her down, led her to a door and knocked.

An old, dried-up looking man nodded at the driver and then looked her up and down. He ushered them both along a corridor into a large room with a fire. She wanted to rush to it but did not dare. The driver sank down on a long bench by the fire. The old man handed him a jar and uncorked it. Then the old man handed Elizabeth a cup of something warm. She gulped it. He waved towards the table, and she saw a plate of bread and a little cheese. He nodded towards a chair, so she sat and ate. The driver stretched out on the bench. When she had eaten, the old man beckoned her and led her out to a passage at the end of which was a narrow staircase.

"Be quiet, child, as we go up to the room. The other maids are asleep. Your place is on the bed near the door. Do you require the water closet?"

She stared.

"Do you need to make water, child, to relieve yourself? There is a place here for the maids."

She nodded. He took her bundle, then led her to a small door and opened it. She walked inside and shut the door. She looked at the wooden bench and the hole. So well-scrubbed, a bowl inside to empty, and hardly a smell at all.

He led her up to her room and pointed to a bed, the closest of the three. The other girl on it was facing towards them but did not wake. Elizabeth took off her boots and her shawl and slowly slid under the quilt on the other side of the bed. She feared she might wake the other occupant with tossing and turning, but she slept at once.

A few hours later, the sun streamed in the windows and the girls were talking.

Maire, the tallest girl, had a wide smile, kind eyes, a broad face, and a noticeable bosom. Her hair was bundled up under her cap.

When Elizabeth sat up, Maire said, "Show us your boots – no, the soles," and the girls all laughed. "Brush them off." She handed Elizabeth a hard brush. "Over there in the corner where we won't

walk in your dirt. You can't go bringing outside mud or dirt inside the house, see? Downstairs there is a boot-scraper and a brush for when you come in from the laundry or the garden. You will get your clothes from Mrs Ryan once we have the fires going and the breakfast ready."

Aine was smaller, not much bigger than Elizabeth, and her eyes were mischievous but a little sad too. "Come down with me," she said, and they ran down the stairs so fast that Elizabeth was laughing and panting to keep up.

She watched Aine and the others lighting fires, opening curtains, dusting and carrying in platters of fruit and bread that smelled better than anything Elizabeth had tasted before.

In the kitchen, she met Mary Hogan, the cook, who was calling out orders and who sat Elizabeth down on the end of a bench. The other girls rushed into an adjoining small room and brought back bowls of steaming gruel. One was banged down in front of her. She was so hungry she would have eaten it were it sour or bitter, but it was pleasing – and filling. Oats and other grains it was, with milk and hot water. Maire brought in a tray covered with slices of bread; was it the wonderful kind that she had smelt? Perhaps not, more like yesterday's bread, but thankfully not too hard or dry.

Maire said to her, "Don't expect butter or jam, except on Christmas Day."

Aine said softly, "Sometimes there are leftovers at lunch time."

When Mrs Ryan appeared, she was dressed like a fine lady, with no apron.

"You are neat enough, I am pleased to see," she said. "Keep that straight back, girl. Good posture is what we like at Evanton. Maire, fetch her uniform. Now, Elizabeth, go to the scullery, take off your things and wash your face, neck and hands. Wash the soap off thoroughly or you may get a rash."

In the scullery, she found a basin of cold water and a bar of soap on the bench under the window. She took off her upper garments but kept on her petticoat – surely that was what Mrs Ryan meant. She swished her hands around in the basin and splashed her face and neck. Mrs Ryan came into the room holding out a cloth.

"Dry yourself, now. And leave those clothes in the basket at the door."

She had scarcely put her clothes in the basket when Mrs Ryan was behind her again. The housekeeper lifted Elizabeth's arms and hair to

examine her for lice, but her family hardly ever had those. Inspection completed, Mrs Ryan swept a cloak over Elizabeth's shoulders and pulled her out into the kitchen. Elizabeth's garments were on the long seat. She found the dress fastenings were beyond her.

Mrs Ryan called Maire, who was stacking bowls into a dresser, to come to Elizabeth's aid.

"Tomorrow, you will fasten your clothes yourself," said Mrs Ryan. "You will need to change your clothes if they become soiled, but we try to keep the one dress for the week, so remember to use the apron at all times. Your payment will be kept for you till the end of the trial period and then all your payments will be kept by me to avoid you losing them. You may apply to me if you need ready cash. Most of our girls do not, not till the summer fair. You may attend Mass with the other girls on Sunday when I can spare you, and you are lucky that your master allows it."

Elizabeth nodded. "Thank you, Mrs Ryan."

"You will work with Maire today and all this week." Mrs Ryan dismissed her with a quick nod and walked swiftly from the room.

Maire was watching in the large silver-framed mirror she was cleaning. She winked at Elizabeth. "All of us are so tired by the time we get to Sunday, but we must trudge out to the field for the Mass and listen to the priest talking his foreign lingo, or who knows what might happen to us. The devil is always watching, isn't he? It is a comfort when the priest gives us the blessing to keep us safe from curses and the devil's tricks. Come here. I'll show you how to dust this cabinet."

"How do I know what my work will be next week if I'm not with you?" Elizabeth asked Maire.

The girl laughed. "Old Ryan will make sure you know, don't you worry."

Elizabeth wondered when she would meet Milady.

"Did you start here when you were my age?"

"What age are you? Twelve? Yes, that's the age that my lady wants her maids to be." Her voice changed to an old, slow, English one. "I need them young enough to be moulded and old enough not to miss their mothers."

Without warning, Elizabeth burst into tears. She hid her face in her apron and wished she could be anywhere else. How scornful big Maire must be.

An arm slid around her shoulder. “Never you mind, we all cry. Almighty God in Heaven, why wouldn’t we? Here...”

Elizabeth found a piece of biscuit in front of her face. She gulped down her sobs, accepted the gift and stammered her thanks.

“We cry so much,” Maire said, “that if the master or mistress ever came within earshot of the attic, they would hear a choir to harrow their hearts – if they had hearts.” She sniffed. “They only hear the cries of their own daughter. Rarely, too, for that girl only cries when she is not off enjoying herself. Come on, you’ll learn to like some things here. At least we eat, and the rooms are warmer than most, and though the work goes on too long, it doesn’t maim us – so we’re the lucky ones, aren’t we?”

When her voice was back, Elizabeth said, “Do we ever see the grand rooms or the garden?”

“Sure, you can look out at the garden today. Do you like gardens?”

“I’ve never seen one. There are always high walls and gates to stop you seeing.”

“Aye. This work lets you see how the gentry live, for what it’s worth to the likes of us.” She laughed and bent down to push Elizabeth’s hair back inside her cap. “Keep that bright hair out of sight. They don’t want to see it. As Mrs Ryan says, ‘A maid must not draw attention to her appearance.’” She laughed again. “You can take it down at the fair one day and dazzle some poor fellow.”

The second night, Elizabeth felt content and a little excited when she went to bed. She thought she would sleep at once, like the night before, but while the other girls’ breathing became deep and even, she found her tears welling up. The night wore on; she heard Aine sob and peered anxiously at her. Then Elizabeth heard herself give a wail and Aine’s arms were around her.

For the first week, this happened every night. Once, another girl woke and joined their crying. Maire got up and stroked their backs and told them to hush and never mind.

At the start of her second week, Elizabeth found that she could make herself stop thinking of home. In her bed at night, she thought of the future instead, of how she would grow big and strong, and how she might become more than a downstairs maid. As Maire said, here they had a warm bed, good food and work that would not steal their health and turn them twisted and old before their time. A position where, if they behaved well, no one beat them. Back home, there was

not enough to eat some weeks, there were no positions for girls like her, nor any work at all most of the time; she might have been on the streets – begging, scavenging or, like some girls, stealing. She was a fortunate one.

Yet the lord of the estate owned her now, more than her father did. Her life depended on pleasing her master and mistress. One false step and out with her, back to Dublin Town to be a burden on Ma and Da.

One day that summer, she served Milady. In the garden courtyard, she carried plates of bread and fish and meat to the big, smooth stone table. She did not dare look at Milady except for a second.

Not till she was clearing away did Milady say, “And who is this swift little person?”

The butler, Mr Creggan, said her name and Elizabeth stood still.

“You may look up, child,” Milady said.

Elizabeth had enjoyed her voice all afternoon. It was low, and sometimes sounded like singing. She looked up and took in the lady’s curled, garlanded hair, her jewels and the soft sheen of her gown. Milady’s dress was prettier than the Virgin’s on the statue in St. Anthony’s back home. Elizabeth felt a flush of shame for a moment, but it was true and why shouldn’t she admire pretty things? When she was dismissed the next minute, she had taken in all of Milady as if she were a painting.

But the soft beauty of Milady was not a picture of her heart. Maire had said it: they had no hearts. When the next winter was ending, Elizabeth’s cousin, Joe, came to tell her that Granny had just died. He asked to take her to Dublin Town in his cart, to the burial and the wake. Mr Creggan told Milady of the request and she refused. She did not look at Elizabeth after that, and Elizabeth felt a fury that did not abate. Never to see Granny again, the sorrow of it so much harder when she could not share it with her parents and sisters. Did Milady not know that the whole family must gather and pray and mourn together, and that Elizabeth would always remember that she, the eldest daughter, the one meant to support her mother the most, the one who had known Granny the most, had not been there at the wake, and that all the family would remember too? Would Granny’s spirit be uneasy or be angry at Elizabeth’s absence? Would something bad befall Elizabeth now? These rich folks must think she had no

feelings. They must see their servants as no better than their horses, dumb beasts to do their bidding.

*

It had been easier not to draw attention to herself when she first went to Evanton Manor as a child with no bosom.

Two years later, her bosom had appeared. She was the youngest of the girls and so it pleased her to look more like them. Mrs Ryan trained her for the good rooms, for the upstairs parlour and even once for the young lady, the master's daughter, who was over from London. Elizabeth liked to listen to Mrs Ryan and to watch her preparing the washstand and the dressing table. Even more, she liked learning what to say and how to say it. Not that Mrs Ryan sounded English like Milady, but she sounded like gentry – soft, low and pleasant. Elizabeth could hardly bear hearing Mary the cook after the smooth tones of Mrs Ryan.

One day, Elizabeth had a moment to stop in the side passage upstairs and see her profile in the glass. It took her breath away – she thought it was someone else for a minute. The shelf her bosoms made jutted out so far and her waist was so little that she looked grown up, like a lady in one of those black drawings on white cards that she had seen on the library wall.

But she felt less glad of her new bosom when the master and the young master noticed, and the footmen too. The young master she could dodge and shake her head at, for he was still a child, but if the master spoke or touched, she must stand stock still and await his pleasure – no, really, surely, he would not, but she felt his eyes on her that day when she was helping the young lady.

Six months later, he was home for the hunting, and he looked at her again. She had shot up a half a head. He came upon her in the upstairs passage when she was dusting the paintings near the small parlour. He grabbed and pushed her into the doorway, his face against hers, his tongue in her mouth, his breath hot. She tried to stand still but his weight nearly pushed her over. It was well that they were in the smaller parlour and could back into the harpsichord, which was closed, thank God, and silent. It proved surprisingly sturdy. She hoped the master's buttons and rings were not scratching the pretty painted flowers on the wood. He cupped one bosom and squeezed

her waist but if he left her alone below, she thought she wouldn't mind too much. Suddenly he laughed and left.

She realised she had not made a sound. How could she? He had taken over her mouth. And she was afraid. It was like she was struck dumb and unable to move. A mournful sadness swept over her, like a huge dark bird hovering above her, closing its wings over her head.

Wasn't it just as well she had not made a sound, just as well she had not resisted? What good would it have done? The mistress might have heard, or Mrs Ryan, and wouldn't they dismiss her? She would be blamed, surely. The master would not admit any wrongdoing. She had heard tales from Maire and the others of how they had been used so. "Even Eilish, with her holy face and pretty manners," Mary Hogan had muttered, but when someone mentioned that Eilish was Elizabeth's kin, Mary said, "Take no notice, Elizabeth. It was only the talk of the footmen, and you can't believe a word they say."

She stood up straight. She still felt the hard imprint of the harpsichord lid on her back. She tried to get her breath. It was not till the blood stopped racing at her temple and her throat that she could focus on the painting she was facing, of a beautiful, serene lady in a shining pale blue gown, bright pearls in her hair and at her throat. Did such things happen to ladies like that? Wouldn't they be treated to charming poems and promises, not grabbed and pushed like hens in the yard?

Next day, she had to dust in the upstairs corridors just the same, and the master pounced again to clutch and push. She thought, *thank God, the business below isn't happening*, but it was a trick because he pressed her against the wall of the corridor and it was all she could do not to scream. So fast, she was astonished, though cousin Meg in Dublin Town had told her that men were in and out and off they ran. The pain inside was stinging. She felt hot smarting liquid spill out of her. She sped up the three flights to the maids' room and grabbed a rag. There was blood. She tied the rag ends onto her petticoat waist and hurried back to work.

Her legs and arms felt heavy as she waxed the wooden floor in the library. She kept hearing the words, purity, virtue, virginity – now they could never be said of her. She was pure no longer, a virgin never again. She remembered her mother and her aunts whispering about a girl in the street who had lost her virginity. With mournful, disapproving faces, they said "lost" over and over, and their tone was

scornful; the girl was lost – from God, Heaven and the Church, and from the respect of men and the friendship of women. A bad girl. Fallen. Elizabeth put down her work cloth and put her head in her hands. Should she pray? Would God or Christ or St Brigid help her – or the Virgin Mary?

Why had it happened? Why had the Holy Ones let it happen to her? What had she done wrong? She thought of Mass last Sunday – she had fallen asleep and not even heard the blessing. She had not said “Amen”. Or was it because she had not properly mourned and sung for Granny? Or had she smiled too much at the master?

He found her again on the morrow and it hurt again, though she shed not a drop of blood. She felt pain there for days. Would the footmen and Milady smell something? The footmen did, or else they knew from her face or her demeanour or the master’s, for they smirked at her. But they would not touch her now. For a week, she worried till her monthly bleeding started around the usual day. She tried to warn off the master when next he found her at the height of the bleeding, for she thought it would stop him, but he took no notice, though he let her be for the next few days. Soon after, he went away to his town house in Dublin and then over to London. So she was safe for now.

He might take his pleasure when he willed, but she could keep her heart free. Maire told tales of girls who lost theirs to gentlemen or even footmen. But then Michael, the boy in the stables, started giving her the eye when she went outside to the laundry and to the kitchen garden. And truth be told, he had already caught her eye – such shoulders on him, and legs. A tall country lad, the like you never saw in the smoky streets of Dublin Town. The way he stared at her was lovely compared to the master who looked her over like she was a horse or a cow. The way Michael waited, and then only wanted to talk, was lovely, too.

So was the way he walked out with her twice before he even tried a thing. When he did, it was a kiss so sweet and light, no slobbering at all. Michael didn’t know what had gone on with the master. He didn’t know the indoors people. He didn’t mention them at all. She wanted to tell him, but it was hard to find the right moment, and the words. If she told him, she would not feel this heavy dread, and she would not be treating him falsely. Soon she would know when and how to tell him.

That summer, she turned fifteen. The master and the family went to their English house, so life on the estate became easier. When she had an evening off, she could stay out till late. Michael could, too, when his stable duties finished early. One clear evening, he took her to a place he had talked of often, in the nearby hills. She was longing to see it, for it was the place her grandmother had spoken of with such love.

They walked along the valley and up the hill to where you could look down over the glen. It was as beautiful as Granny had said.

Swathed in mist, the greens of the glen were rich and varied. Streaks of flushed sunlight were thinning; the world grew dimmer and softer. In the distance, she could see the green hills turning blue-grey. She watched the trees become blurs of brown then black, while the birds whirled and sang their hearts out before they vanished, and the white moon hid behind soft cloud.

He was surprised at how thrilled she was. "What a town girl you are," he teased.

All that evening her heart was light and full of love for this long-limbed, carefree boy whose eyes were hot and joyful. No greed or cruelty dwelt in him. The other feeling she knew that day was one she could barely name. Freedom was not a word her people threw about. It had a strange, foreign sound. Her uncles who had fought over the sea might say it, but not her parents or cousins or the girls she worked with now. Yet much of the happiness she felt that day was the absence of fear.

For though his mind was made up, like any man's, she could say things to him, ask, and tell even. So when they rolled in the grass, he only caressed her and he was so gentle it was no hurt, but just what cousin Meg said, the best of anything in the world.

They clung together in the beauty and the cooling air and when they could stay no longer, they walked quickly back to the edge of the estate. Michael ran to the stables to tell some tale to the head groom about his wanderings. She walked swiftly to the house, into the kitchen for a cup of water before bed. She never told where she went on her few afternoons off; planting a story about visiting her mother's cousins, Joe and Nora, in the nearby countryside had been enough lying. It brought her close to blushing, thankful that no one

knew her family. Maire guessed, she knew, and probably others, but no one said a thing.

The next time they walked out, she was determined to tell him about the master. Once he knew, wouldn't he see that they should make their courting known to the head groom and to Mrs Ryan and Mr Creggan, and wouldn't everyone think that they should marry soon? Then wouldn't the master move from her to someone else?

It was late and night had fallen. They did not go further than the meadow beyond the Big House. Across the foothills, the high dark outline of the Great Sugarloaf Mountain overshadowed them, blocking out the moonlight. They sat down, and she could hardly see Michael's face. How could she begin? What words should she use? Although she had thought of this moment for nights and nights waiting to go to sleep, she had not found an easy way to tell such a story.

"Michael, you know that the master has everything his own way in the house with all of us, and there is nothing we can do, whatever he decides?"

His eyes met hers. "What is he going to do to you, Bessie? He's not about to send you to the house in Dublin Town?"

"No, not that." She waited. How she wished he would guess. When he started to speak, her heart lifted.

"Does he order someone to beat you?" His eyes were kind and concerned.

She stroked his cheek. "No."

Was it something in her eyes that gave him a sense of horror? He stared with a look almost of fear, a look of dread.

She could bear the tension no longer. Her voice came out in a sob. "Oh, Michael, you know he does own the bodies of us, of us girls. He has used us all most shamefully..."

She stopped, halted by the tension in his look and the sudden hardness of his grip on her arm. His face turned into someone else's. A sneer twisted his mouth. Hatred darkened his eyes. "Those who flounce about like Maire or Eilish, to be sure he grabs them. But why did you catch his eye?"

"All of us upstairs, he looks us over—"

"You could have dodged him; you could have told the housekeeper."

Her tears were streaming now. "How could I? There is nothing she can do."

"How do you know? If she told the mistress—"

“I would be dismissed.”

“Would not that be better?”

“How could it be? I would have to go home. I would have no wages, no reference, no chance of another position.”

“Your family would help you.”

“They could not find me work like here – probably no work at all.”

“But to just let him, how could you? Did you tell him no, did you bid him to stop, did you struggle?”

She wept and gazed at him, unable to say a word. Could he not see how it was with the master? What did he think had happened? What did he imagine the master would do if she protested?

He pushed her away onto the grass. She fell onto her back, looking up at him. He leaned over her. “You just let him, didn’t you? How many times?”

He sounded like the priest.

She shook her head and sobbed. Then a hot feeling came over her; she sat up and said, “But he hasn’t had me, Michael. That’s not what I’m saying. I am afraid of what he *might* do, I worry about how to dodge him. I’ve managed it so far. I told the other girl, Aine, to come in when I give a loud sneeze. She knows to race along the passage and into the room, so he stops touching my cheek or sliding his hand around my waist.”

She watched his red colour fading and his eyes calming down. What if someone told him tales later? They would never tell the details, and he would believe her still.

“Aine and I have protected each other so far and we will continue, but there’s only the other girls to talk to and I wanted so much to tell you and for you to understand.”

She stood up and there was but a wisp of air between them. She smiled and tried to make him see, to make him keep loving her. She started to shake; it was so risky. What if he shouted, struck her and spurned her? But the shaking she felt was pleasurable too, as if she had run down a hillside in the summer night breeze. How easy it was to change his thoughts and his mood and his face. Why should she lose him because of the master? When she and Michael were married, then she might tell him, but probably not for the idea riled him so much. Thank God, she had the gift of the gab a little, like Da. She understood now why Da’s eyes sparkled when he buttonholed someone and talked at them.

Michael said, his tone still aggrieved and hot, "Can't you work downstairs again so he doesn't keep looming up at you?"

She put on a look as hopeless as his idea.

He was breathing fast again. "When we are a little older, I can wed you. Then you would work elsewhere in the house."

"Oh yes, Michael, I hoped you would say that. I am longing to marry you. I am hoping to be a ladies' maid. Mrs Ryan says I have the makings, the face and hands and voice too."

"But in Milady's or the young lady's rooms, you would be near the master."

"Yes, but Milady might see. I don't think he tries it with the ladies' maids, only with the housemaids."

He looked unsure. She wasn't sure herself, but it was the best she could think up on the spot.

There was anger in his eyes. "The master does what he likes with all of us. Don't you know that he throws families out to starve, raises the rent, or pays less for the crop if he has a mind to? My brother is afraid we will lose our farm. But there are some folk who have ideas about how to help us." He stopped and stared at her.

She gave him a smile and he flushed. She leaned on his chest, and he put his arm around her, but it was not quite a caress. There came a booming noise from a way off and a sound of shouts.

"Come on," he said. "I have less taste for kisses right now. Let's see what the row is."

He strode off. She struggled to catch up to him but he walked too fast on those long legs of his.

She could almost have rejoiced at the sight of the huge cloud of smoke rising from the Big House because it made him stop in his tracks when they came over the hill. He did not look surprised or worried. He did not run to assist Mr Creggan and the group of men carrying water to douse the fire. He stopped on the side of the hill and watched, so she stood beside him. She wished he would hold her hand, for no one would have seen. She wondered how she stood in his eyes now. Had she kept him? Surely she had, but she would have to take pains to keep his feelings waxing hot and his doubts cooling. It had taken half the joy from their courting. Yet she felt less at his mercy now that she knew she could talk him round.

The stables were alight. The head groom drove the carriage out of the coach house along the path to the other side of the house.

Michael counted the horses that followed, herded by the other groom. "They're all out, thank the Lord."

She saw Maire and Aine run out of the house, and behind them Mrs Ryan and Mary Hogan. What of the scullery girl? Had she run away or burned to death?

A crowd of men and women, strangers, came running out of the side door, laden with candlesticks, silver and cloth. They began to run up the hill, chased by a small group of farmers from the estate. Were they thieves, tinkers, or a gang from the town, or folk from the hills? Mr Creggan sometimes spoke of rebel gangs in the hills, but she had never seen any.

When horses' hoofs rumbled a way off from the road behind, she did not fear, even when they thudded closer. But Michael turned, stared behind and shouted, "It's the militia. Flee, flee!"

He took her hand, and they ran along the hill path after the thieving folk. She had no breath to ask him why. Soon they were amidst the panting, cursing, shouting crowd of thieves. Then horsemen wheeled in front of them, blocking their way. Folk tumbled over each other. A shot rang out. A boy fell. A volley of shouts erupted from the crowd. A horseman with shiny things on his shoulders hollered orders to them all. A soldier seized Michael and dragged him away. She held fast to him and felt her feet leave the ground. When Michael struck the soldier, she pushed the man too. He batted her off. She was ripped away from Michael and watched the soldier take him into the gloom.

Strong arms from behind pinioned her arms, crushing her chest. Large hands reached down over her arms, grabbed her between her legs, held her hard. Her feet were in the air. Some man's legs beneath her were running her forward. To her death? To ruin? To prison? Who had her?

She opened her mouth. No sound came out. How could it have helped?

The man turned her around. He was a soldier, young, breathing fast. His eyes were on her hair. She tossed it back. When he hoisted her up as if she were a child, his buttons grazed her breast. He threw her into a cart. She struggled to find her footing. More women were thrown in.

Where was Michael?

She strained and twisted about.

The wagon of screeching, cursing women lurched off. Where was Michael? She saw a line of men marched under guard. As her wagon passed, she spied him. She called, but the air was full of women wailing. He did not look up. She passed him and kept her eyes on him till she was too far ahead.

The side of the wagon kept bumping her. She could see little in the gloom. The Big House and the estate were long gone. She stared at the Great Sugarloaf Mountain until its dark bulk was too dim to see. The path became a road of bumps and holes that made the women curse and cry out.

There was little talk on the wagon. She knew no one. None of them was from the estate. All from the hills, she guessed. The butler always sneered about such folk and the other maids said they were wild and half of them rebels, so she wasn't ready to give much away to any of them.

For wouldn't she be sent back to the estate, to Milady – or would she be arrested? Was she arrested already?

If only they had gone home early. If only she had joined the other maids. If only Michael had been with the groom and the horses, hurrying from the smoke and the noise.

She couldn't wait to see him, run to him, feel his warm arms around her. Now he would forget what she had said. Because what she had told him didn't matter anymore.

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