

ALSO BY EMMA DONOGHUE

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THE WONDER

EMMA DONOGHUE

PICADOR

The journey was no worse than she expected. A train from London to Liverpool; the steam packet overnight to Dublin; a slow Sunday train west to a town called Athlone.

A driver was waiting. "Mrs. Wright?"

Lib had known many Irishmen, soldiers. But that was some years ago, so her ear strained now to make out the driver's words.

He carried her trunk to what he called the jaunting car. An Irish misnomer; nothing jaunty about this bare cart. Lib settled herself on the single bench down the middle, her boots hanging closer to the right-hand wheel than she liked. She put up her steel-frame umbrella against the drizzle. This was better than the stuffy train, at least.

On the other side of the bench, slouching so his back almost touched hers, the driver flicked his whip. "Go on, now!"

The shaggy pony stirred.

The few people on the macadamised road out of Athlone seemed wan, which Lib attributed to the infamous diet of potatoes and little else. Perhaps that was responsible for the driver's missing teeth too.

He made some remark about the dead.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The dead centre, ma'am."

Lib waited, braced against the juddering of the cart.

He pointed down. "We're in the exact middle of the country here."

Flat fields striped with dark foliage. Sheets of reddish-brown peat; wasn't bogland known to harbour disease? The occasional grey remains of a cottage, almost greened over. Nothing that struck Lib as picturesque. Clearly the Irish Midlands were a depression where wet pooled, the little circle in a saucer.

The jaunting car turned off the road onto a narrower gravel way. The pattering on her umbrella's canvas became a continuous thrum. Windowless cabins; Lib imagined a family with its animals in each, huddling in out of the rain.

At intervals a lane led off towards a jumble of roofs that probably constituted a village. But never the right village, evidently. Lib should have asked the driver how long the journey was likely to take. She didn't put the question to him now in case the answer was *Still a long time yet*.

All Matron at the hospital had said was that an experienced nurse was required for two weeks, in a private capacity. The costs of keep and travel to and from Ireland to be furnished, as well as a daily consideration. Lib knew nothing about the O'Donnells except that they had to be a family of means if they were cosmopolitan enough to send all the way to England for a better class of nurse. It occurred to her only now to wonder how they could know that the patient would need her services for no more nor

less than a fortnight. Perhaps Lib was a temporary replacement for another nurse.

In any case, she'd be quite well paid for her trouble, and the novelty of the thing held some interest. At the hospital, Lib's training was resented as much as it was appreciated, and only the more basic of her skills were required: feeding, changing dressings, bed-making.

She resisted the impulse to reach under her cloak and pull out her watch; it wouldn't make the time go any faster, and the rain might get into the mechanism.

Another roofless cabin now, turned away from the road, its gabled walls accusing the sky. Weeds had had no success at covering up this ruin yet. Lib glimpsed a mess of black through the door-shaped hole; a recent conflagration, then. (But how did anything manage to catch fire in this waterlogged country?) Nobody had taken the trouble to clear away the charred rafters, let alone frame and thatch a new roof. Was it true that the Irish were impervious to improvement?

A woman in a filthy frilled cap was stationed on the verge, a knot of children in the hedge behind her. The rattle of the cart brought them forward with hands cupped high as if to catch the rain. Lib looked away, awkward.

"The hungry season," muttered the driver.

But this was high summer. How could food be scarce now, of all times?

Her boots were speckled with mud and gravel spat up by the wheel. Several times the jaunting car lurched into a dun puddle deep enough that she had to cling to the bench so as not to be flung out.

More cabins, some with three or four windows. Barns,

sheds. A two-storey farmhouse, then another. Two men turned from loading a wagon, and one said something to the other. Lib looked down at herself: Was there something odd about her travelling costume? Perhaps the locals were so shiftless, they'd break off work to goggle at any stranger.

Up ahead, whitewash glared from a building with a pointed roof and a cross on top, which meant a Roman Catholic chapel. Only when the driver reined in did Lib realize that they'd arrived at the village, although by English standards it was no more than a sorry-looking cluster of buildings.

She checked her watch now: almost nine, and the sun hadn't set yet. The pony dropped its head and chewed a tuft. This appeared to be the sole street.

"You're to put up at the spirit grocery."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Ryan's." The driver nodded left to a building with no sign.

This couldn't be right. Stiff after the journey, Lib let the man hand her down. She shook her umbrella at arm's length, rolled the waxy canvas, and buttoned it tight. She dried her hand on the inside of her cloak before she stepped into the low-beamed shop.

The reek of burning peat hit her. Apart from the fire smouldering under a massive chimney, only a couple of lamps lit the room, where a girl was nudging a canister into its row on a high shelf.

"Good evening," said Lib. "I believe I may have been brought to the wrong place."

"You'll be the Englishwoman," said the girl slightly

too loudly, as if Lib were deaf. "Would you care to step into the back for a bit of supper?"

Lib held her temper. If there was no proper inn, and if the O'Donnell family couldn't or wouldn't accommodate the nurse they'd hired, then complaining would be no use.

She went through the door beside the chimney and found herself in a small, windowless room with two tables. One was occupied by a nun whose face was almost invisible behind the starched layers of her headress. If Lib flinched a little, it was because she hadn't seen the like for years; in England religious sisters didn't go about in such garb for fear of provoking anti-Romish sentiment. "Good evening," she said civilly.

The nun answered with a deep bow. Perhaps members of her order were discouraged from speaking to those not of their creed, or vowed to silence, even?

Lib sat at the other table, facing away from the nun, and waited. Her stomach growled — she hoped not loudly enough to be heard. There was a faint clicking that had to be coming from under the woman's black folds: the famous rosary beads.

When at last the girl brought in the tray, the nun bent her head and whispered, saying grace before the meal. She was in her forties or fifties, Lib guessed, with slightly prominent eyes, and the meaty hands of a peasant.

An odd assortment of dishes: oat bread, cabbage, some kind of fish. "I was rather expecting potatoes," Lib told the girl.

"'Tis another month you'll be waiting for them."

Ah, now Lib understood why this was Ireland's hungry season — potatoes weren't harvested until the autumn.

Everything tasted of peat, but she set about clearing her plate. Since Scutari, where the nurses' rations had been as short as the men's, Lib had found herself incapable of wasting a bite.

Noise out in the grocery, and then a party of four squeezed into the dining room. "God save all here," said the first man.

Not knowing the appropriate response, Lib nodded.

"And ye too." It was the nun who murmured that, making the sign of the cross by touching her forehead, chest, left and right shoulders. Then she left the room — whether because she'd had all she wanted of her meagre portion or to surrender the second table to the newcomers, Lib couldn't tell.

They were a raucous lot, these farmers and their wives. Had they already been drinking elsewhere all Sunday afternoon? *Spirit grocery*; now she understood the driver's phrase. Not a haunted grocery, but one that served liquor.

From their chatter, which touched on some *extraordinary wonder* they could hardly believe although they'd seen it with their own eyes, Lib decided they must have been to a fair.

"'Tis the other crowd are behind it, I'd say," said a bearded man. His wife elbowed him, but he persisted. "Waiting on her hand and foot!"

"Mrs. Wright?"

She turned her head.

The stranger in the doorway tapped his waistcoat. "Dr. McBrearty."

That was the name of the O'Donnells' physician, Lib remembered. She stood to shake his hand. Straggly white

side-whiskers, very little hair above. A shabby jacket, shoulders flecked with dandruff, and a knob-headed walking stick. Seventy, perhaps?

The farmers and their wives were eyeing them with interest.

"Good of you to travel all this way," the doctor remarked, as if Lib were paying a visit rather than taking up employment. "Was the crossing awful? If you've quite finished?" he went on, without giving her a chance to answer.

She followed him out into the shop. The girl, lifting a lamp, beckoned them up the narrow staircase.

The bedroom was poky. Lib's trunk took up much of the floor. Was she expected to have a tête-à-tête with Dr. McBrearty here? Had the premises no other room free, or was the girl too uncouth to arrange things more politely?

"Very good, Maggie," he told the girl. "How's your father's cough?"

"Better, nearly."

"Now, Mrs. Wright," he said as soon as the girl was gone, and he gestured for her to take the single rush chair. Lib would have given a great deal for ten minutes alone first to use the chamber pot and the washstand. The Irish were notorious for neglecting the niceties.

The doctor leaned on his cane. "You're of what age, if I may ask?"

So she had to submit to an interview on the spot, although she'd been given to understand that the job was already hers. "Not yet thirty, Doctor."

"A widow, yes? You took up nursing when you found yourself, ah, thrown on your own resources?"

Was McBrearty checking Matron's account of her? She nodded. "Less than a year after I was married."

She'd happened on an article about the thousands of soldiers suffering from gunshot wounds or cholera, and no one to tend them. The *Times* had announced that seven thousand pounds had been raised to send a party of Englishwomen to the Crimea as nurses. *That*, Lib had thought, with dread but also a sense of daring, *I believe I could do that*. She'd lost so much already, she was reckless.

All she told the doctor now was "I was twenty-five."

"A Nightingale!" he marvelled.

Ah, so Matron had told him that much. Lib was always shy of introducing the great lady's name into conversation and loathed the whimsical title that had come to be attached to all those Miss N. had trained, as if they were dolls cast in her heroic mould. "Yes, I had the honour of serving under her at Scutari."

"Noble labour."

It seemed perverse to answer no, arrogant to say yes. It struck Lib now that the name of Nightingale was why the O'Donnell family had taken the trouble to bring a nurse all the way across the Irish Sea. She could tell the old Irishman would like to hear more about her teacher's beauty, sternness, righteous indignation. "I was a lady nurse," she said instead.

"A volunteer?"

She'd meant to clarify, but he'd taken her up wrong, and her face heated. Really, though, why feel the least embarrassment? Miss N. always reminded them that the fact of being paid didn't lessen their altruism. "No, I mean that I was one of the educated nursing sisters rather than

the ordinary nurses. My father was a gentleman," she added, a little foolishly. Not a wealthy one, but still.

"Ah, very good. How long have you been at the hospital?"

"Three years come September." Remarkable in itself, as most of the nurses stayed no more than a matter of months; irresponsible scrubbers, Mrs. Gamps in the old mould, whining for their rations of porter. Not that Lib was particularly appreciated there. She'd heard Matron describe veterans of Miss N.'s Crimean campaign as *uprish*. "After Scutari I worked in several families," she added, "and saw my own parents through their final illnesses."

"Have you ever nursed a child, Mrs. Wright?"

Lib was thrown, but only for a moment. "I would expect the principles to be the same. Is my patient a child?"

"Mm, Anna O'Donnell."

"I've not been told her complaint."

He sighed.

Something fatal, then, Lib deduced. But slow enough that it hadn't killed the child yet. Consumption, most likely, in this wet climate.

"She's not exactly ill. Your only duty will be to watch her."

A curious verb. That awful nurse in *Jane Eyre*, charged with keeping the lunatic hidden away in the attic. "I've been brought here to . . . stand guard?"

"No, no, simply to observe."

But observation was only the first piece of the puzzle. Miss N. had taught her nurses to watch carefully in order to understand what the ill required and provide it. Not medicine — that was the doctors' domain — but the things

she argued were equally crucial to recovery: light, air, warmth, cleanliness, rest, comfort, nourishment, and conversation. "If I understand you —"

"I doubt you do yet, and the fault's mine." McBrearty leaned on the edge of the washstand as if his strength were failing.

Lib would have liked to offer the old man the chair if she could have done it without insult.

"I don't want to prejudice you in any way," he went on, "but what I may say is that it's a most unusual case. Anna O'Donnell claims — or, rather, her parents claim — that she hasn't taken food since her eleventh birthday."

Lib frowned. "She must be ill, then."

"Not with any known disease. Known to me, that is," said McBrearty, correcting himself. "She simply doesn't eat."

"You mean, no solids?" Lib had heard of that affection of refined modern misses, to live off boiled arrowroot or beef tea for days on end.

"No sustenance of any kind," the doctor corrected her. "She can't take a thing but clear water."

Can't means won't, as the nursery saying went. Unless . . . "Has the poor child some gastric obstruction?"

"None that I've been able to find."

Lib was at a loss. "Severe nausea?" She'd known pregnant women too sick to stomach food.

The doctor shook his head.

"Is she melancholic?"

"I wouldn't say that. A quiet, pious girl."

Ah, so this was a religious enthusiasm, perhaps, not a medical matter at all. "Roman Catholic?"

The flick of his hand seemed to say *What else?*

She supposed they were virtually all Catholics, this far from Dublin. The doctor might well be one himself. "I'm sure you've impressed on her the dangers of fasting," said Lib.

"I have, of course. So did her parents, at the start. But Anna's immovable."

Had Lib been dragged across the sea for this, a child's whim? The O'Donnells must have panicked the first day their daughter turned up her nose at her breakfast and shot off a telegram to London demanding not just any nurse, but one of the new, irreproachable kind: *Send a Nightingale!*

"How long has it been since her birthday?" she asked. McBrearty plucked at his whiskers. "April, this was. Four months ago today!"

Lib would have laughed aloud if it weren't for her training. "Doctor, the child would be dead by now." She waited for some sign that they agreed on the absurdity: a knowing wink, a tap of the nose.

He only nodded. "It's a great mystery."

That wasn't the word Lib would have chosen. "Is she . . . bedridden, at least?"

He shook his head. "Anna walks around like any other girl."

"Emaciated?"

"She's always been a mite of a thing, but no, she seems hardly to have altered since April."

He spoke sincerely, but this was ludicrous. Were they half blind, his rheumy eyes?

"And she's in full possession of all her faculties," added

McBrearty. "In fact, the vital force burns so strong in Anna that the O'Donnells have become convinced she can live without food."

"Incredible." The word came out too caustic.

"I'm not surprised you're sceptical, Mrs. Wright. I was too."

Was? "Are you telling me, in all seriousness, that—"

He interrupted, his papery hands shooting up. "The obvious interpretation is that it's a hoax."

"Yes," said Lib in relief.

"But this child . . . she's not like other children."

She waited for more.

"I can tell you nothing, Mrs. Wright. I have only questions. For the past four months I've been burning with curiosity, as I'm sure you are now."

No, what Lib burnt with was a desire to end this interview and get the man out of her room. "Doctor, science tells us that to live without food is impossible."

"But haven't most new discoveries in the history of civilization seemed uncanny at first, almost magical?" His voice shook a little with excitement. "From Archimedes to Newton, all the greats have achieved their breakthroughs by examining the evidence of their senses without prejudice. So all I ask is for you to keep an open mind when you meet Anna O'Donnell tomorrow."

Lib lowered her eyes, mortified for McBrearty. How could a physician let himself be snared in a little girl's game and fancy himself among the *greats* as a consequence? "May I ask, is the child under your sole care?" She phrased it politely, but what she meant was, had no better authority been called in?

"She is," said McBrearty reassuringly. "In fact, it was I who took a notion to work up an account of the case and send it to the *Irish Times*."

Lib had never heard of it. "A national paper?"

"Mm, the most lately established one, so I hoped its proprietors might be somewhat less blinded by sectarian prejudice," he added, wistful. "More open to the new and the extraordinary, wherever it may arise. I thought to share the facts with a broader public, don't you know, in the hope that someone could explain them."

"And has anyone done so?"

A stifled sigh. "There've been several fervent letters proclaiming Anna's case to be an out-and-out miracle. Also a few intriguing suggestions that she might be drawing on some as-yet-undiscovered nutritive qualities of, say, magnetism, or scent."

Scent? Lib sucked in her cheeks so as not to smile.

"One bold correspondent proposed that she might be converting sunlight into energy, as vegetation does. Or living on air, even, as certain plants do," he added, his wrinkled face brightening. "Remember that crew of shipwrecked sailors said to have subsisted for several months on tobacco?"

Lib looked down so he wouldn't read the scorn in her eyes.

McBrearty found his thread again. "But the vast majority of the replies have consisted of personal abuse."

"Of the child?"

"The child, the family, and myself. Comments not just in the *Irish Times* but in various British publications that

seem to have taken up the case for the sole purpose of satire."

Lib saw it now. She'd travelled a long way to hire herself out as a nursemaid-cum-gaoler, all because of a provincial doctor's injured pride. Why hadn't she pressed Matron for more details before she accepted the job?

"Most correspondents presume that the O'Donnells are cheats, conspiring to feed their daughter secretly and make fools of the world," McBreaty's voice was shrill. "The name of our village has become a byword for credulous backwardness. Several of the important men hereabouts feel that the honour of the county — possibly of the whole Irish nation — is at stake."

Had the doctor's gullibility spread like a fever among these *important men*?

"So a committee's been formed and a decision taken to mount a watch."

Ah, then it wasn't the O'Donnells who'd sent for Lib at all. "With a view to proving that the child subsists by some extraordinary means?" She tried to keep even a hint of the sardonic out of her voice.

"No, no," McBreaty assured her, "simply to bring the truth to light, whatever the truth may be. Two scrupulous attendants will stay by Anna turn and turnabout, night and day, for a fortnight."

So it wasn't Lib's experience of surgical or infectious cases that was called for here, only the rigour of her training. Clearly the committee hoped, by importing one of the scrupulous new breed of nurses, to give some credence to the O'Donnells' mad story. To make this primitive backwater a wonder to the world. Anger throbbed in Lib's jaw.

Fellow feeling, too, for the other woman lured into this morass. "The second nurse, I don't suppose I know her?"

The doctor frowned. "Didn't you make Sister Michael's acquaintance at supper?"

The almost speechless nun; Lib should have guessed. Strange how they took the names of male saints, as if giving up womanhood itself. But why hadn't the nun introduced herself properly? Was that what that deep bow had been supposed to signify — that she and the Englishwoman were in this mess together? "Was she trained in the Crimea too?"

"No, no, I've just had her sent up from the House of Mercy in Tullamore," said McBreaty.

One of the *walking nuns*. Lib had served alongside others of that order in Scutari. They were reliable workers, at least, she told herself.

"The parents requested that at least one of you be of their own, ah . . ."

So the O'Donnells had asked for a Roman Catholic.

"Denomination."

"And nationality," he added, as if to soften it.

"I'm quite aware that there's no love for the English in this country," said Lib, summoning a tight smile.

McBreaty demurred: "You put it too strongly."

What about the faces that had turned towards the jaunting car as Lib was driven down the village street? But those men had spoken about her because she was expected, she realized now. She wasn't just any Englishwoman; she was the one being shipped in to watch over their squire's pet.

"Sister Michael will provide a certain sense of familiarity for the child, that's all," said McBrearty.

The very idea that *familiarity* was a necessary or even helpful qualification for a watcher! But for the other nurse, he'd picked one of Miss N.'s own famous brigade, she thought, to make this watch look sufficiently *scrupulous*, especially in the eyes of the British press.

Lib thought of saying, in a very cool voice, *Doctor, I see that I've been brought here in hopes that my association with a very great lady might cast a veneer of respectability over an outrageous fraud. I'll have no part in it.* If she set off in the morning, she could be back at the hospital in two days.

The prospect filled her with gloom. She imagined herself trying to explain that the Irish job had proved objectionable on moral grounds. How Matron would snort.

So Lib suppressed her feelings, for now, and concentrated on the practicalities. *Simply to observe*, McBrearty had said. "If at any point our charge were to express the slightest wish, even in veiled terms, for something to eat—" she began.

"Then bring it to her." The doctor sounded shocked.

"We're not in the business of starving children."

She nodded. "We nurses are to report to you, then, in two weeks?"

He shook his head. "As Anna's physician — and having been dragged into this unpleasantness in the papers — I could be considered an interested party. So it's to the assembled committee that you're to testify on oath." Lib looked forward to it.

"Yourself and Sister Michael separately," he added, holding up one knobby finger, "without any conferring. We wish to hear to what view each of you comes, quite independently of the other."

"Very good. May I ask, why is this watch not being conducted in the local hospital?" Unless there was none in this all too *dead centre* of the island.

"Oh, the O'Donnells balked at the very idea of their little one being taken off to the county infirmary."

That clinched it for Lib; the squire and his lady wanted to keep their daughter at home so they could carry on slipping food to her. It wouldn't take two weeks of supervision to catch them out.

She chose her words tactfully because the doctor was clearly fond of the young faker. "If, before the fortnight's up, I were to find evidence indicating that Anna has taken nourishment covertly — should I make my report to the committee straightaway?"

His whiskery cheeks crumpled. "I suppose, in that case, it would be a waste of everyone's time and money to carry on any longer."

Lib could be on the ship back to England in a matter of days, then, but with this eccentric episode closed to her satisfaction.

What's more, if newspapers across the kingdom were to give Nurse Elizabeth Wright the credit for exposing the hoax, the whole staff of the hospital would have to sit up and take notice. Who'd call her *upish* then? Perhaps better things might come of it; a position more suited to Lib's talents, more interesting. A less narrow life.

Her hand shot up to cover a sudden yawn.

Lib gave him a repressive look. "Oddly rippled, these fields."

"They'd have been lazy beds," he told her. "The seed potatoes were set in a line, and the peat was folded on top of them."

"But they're grassed over."

He shrugged. "Well, fewer mouths to feed around here since the famine."

She thought of that mass grave in the churchyard. "Wasn't some kind of potato fungus to blame?"

"There was more to it than a fungus," said Byrne, so vehemently that Lib took a step away. "Half the country wouldn't have died if the landlords hadn't kept shipping away the corn, seizing cattle, rack-renting, evicting, torching cabins . . . Or if the government at Westminster hadn't thought it the most prudent course of action to sit on their arses and let the Irish starve." He wiped a sheen off his forehead.

"You didn't starve, though, personally?" she asked, punishing him for his coarseness.

He took it well, with a wry grin. "A shopkeeper's son rarely does."

"You were in Dublin during those years?"

"Until I turned sixteen and got my first job as a special correspondent," he said, pronouncing the term with light irony. "Meaning an editor consented to send me off into the eye of the storm, at my father's expense, to describe the effects of the failure of the potato. I tried to keep my tone neutral and make no accusations. But by my fourth report it seemed to me that to do nothing was the deadliest sin." Lib watched Byrne's taut face.

He was staring far down the narrow road. "So I wrote that God may have sent the blight, but the English made the famine."

She was thrown. "Did the editor print that?"

Byrne put on a funny voice, eyes bulging. "*Sedition!* he cried. That's when I decamped to London."

"To work for those same English villains?"

He mimed a stab to the heart. "What a knack you have for finding the sore spot, Mrs. Wright. Yes, within a month I was devoting my God-given talents to debutantes and horse races."

She dropped the mockery. "You'd done your best."

"Briefly, yes, at sixteen. Then I shut my mouth and took the pieces of silver."

A quiet between the two of them as they walked. Polly paused to nibble a leaf.

"Are you a man of belief still?" asked Lib. A shockingly personal question, but she felt as if they were past trivialities.

Byrne nodded. "Somehow all the miseries I've seen haven't quite shaken that out of me. And you, Elizabeth Wright — quite godless?"

Lib drew herself up. He made it sound as if she were some crazed witch invoking Lucifer on the moors. "What entitles you to assume—"

He interrupted. "You asked the question, ma'am. True believers never ask."

The man had a point. "I believe in what I can see." "Nothing but the evidence of your senses, then?" One ruddy eyebrow tilted.

"Trial and error. Science," she said. "It's all we can rely on."

"Was it being widowed that did that?"

Blood boiled up from her throat to her hairline.

"Who's been giving you information about me? And why must it always be presumed that a woman's views are based on personal considerations?"

"The war, then?"

His intelligence cut to the quick. "At Scutari," said Lib,

"I found myself thinking, *If the Creator can't prevent such abominations, what good is he?*"

"And if he can but won't, he must be a devil."

"I never said that."

"Hume did," said Byrne.

She didn't know the name.

"A long-dead philosopher," he told her. "Finer minds than yours have reached the same impasse. It's a great puzzle."

The only sounds the tread of their boots on the dried mud and the soft clopping of Polly's hooves.

"So what possessed you to go to the Crimea in the first place?"

Lib half smiled. "A newspaper article, as it happens."

"Russell, in the *Times*?"

"I don't know the individual—"

"Billy Russell's a Dubliner like myself," said Byrne.

"Those dispatches of his from the front changed everything. Made it impossible to turn a blind eye."

"All those men rotting away," said Lib, nodding, "and no one to help."

"What was the worst of it?"

Recalled as Libby

Byrne's bluntness made her flinch. But she answered, "The paperwork."

"How so?"

"To get a soldier a bed, say, one took a coloured slip to the ward officer and then to the purveyor to have it countersigned, whereupon — and only then — the commissariat would issue the bed," Lib told him. "For a liquid or meat diet, or medicine, or even for an urgently required opiate, one had to bring a different-coloured form to a doctor and persuade him to find the time to make requisition of the relevant steward and have it countersigned by two other officers. By which point, the patient would very likely be dead."

"Christ." He didn't apologize for swearing.

Lib couldn't remember the last time anyone had listened to her with such attention. "*Unwarranted items* was the commissariat term for those things that, by definition, couldn't be supplied because the men were supposed to have brought their own in their knapsacks: shirts, forks, and so forth. But in some cases the knapsacks had never been unloaded from the ships."

"Bureaucrats," murmured Byrne. "A phalanx of cold-blooded little Pilates, washing their hands of it all."

"We had three spoons to feed a hundred men." Only on the word *spoons* did her voice wobble. "There were rumours of a hoard in some supply cupboard, but we never did find it. Finally Miss Nightingale thrust her own purse into my hand and sent me to the market to buy a hundred spoons."

The Irishman half laughed.

That day, Lib had been in too much of a hurry to ask

"Toast?"

"The Host, she said," Malachy O'Donnell threw over his shoulder. "The body of Our Lord, ah, under the species of bread."

Lib pictured Anna opening her mouth to receive that tiny baked disc that Roman Catholics believed to be the actual flesh of their God.

Arms crossed, the maid nodded at her master. "Her very first Holy Communion, bless the girl."

"Twas no earthly food she wanted for her last meal, was it, Kitty?" he murmured, eyes on the fire again.

"Twas not."

Her last meal; like a condemned prisoner. So Anna had taken the Host for the first and only time, then shut her mouth. What strange distortion of doctrine could have impelled her? Lib wondered. Had Anna somehow picked up the notion that now she'd been granted divine nourishment, she'd no further need for the earthly kind?

The father's face hung, uneven in the flicker of the flames. Some adult had been keeping Anna alive all these months, Lib reminded herself. Could it have been Malachy? She could hardly credit that.

Of course, there was a grey zone between innocent and guilty. What if the man had discovered the trick — his wife's or their priest's or both — but by then, his little pet's fame had already spread so far, he hadn't been able to bring himself to interfere?

In the bedroom, beside the sleeping girl, Sister Michael was already doing up her cloak. "Dr. McBrarty put his head in this afternoon," she whispered.

to note
Had everything Lib had told him sunk in at last?
"What instructions did he give?"

"None."

"But what did he say?"

"Nothing in particular." The nun's expression was unreadable.

Of all the doctors under whom Lib had served, this affable old man was the most difficult.

The nun left, and Anna slept on.

The night shift was so quiet, Lib had to keep pacing to ward off sleep herself. At one point she picked up the toy from Boston. The songbird was on one side, the cage on the other, yet when Lib twirled its strings as fast as she could, her senses were tricked and two incompatible things became one: a vibrating, humming caged bird.

Past three, Anna blinked awake.

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Lib, leaning over her. "Make you more comfortable?"

"My feet."

"What about them?"

"I don't feel them," whispered Anna.

The tiny toes under the blanket were icy to the touch. Such poor circulation in someone so young. "Here, climb out for a minute to get the blood moving again." The girl did, slowly and stiffly. Lib helped her to cross the room. "Left, right, like a soldier."

Anna managed a clumsy march on the spot. Her eyes were on the open window. "Lots of stars tonight."

"There are always just as many, if only we could see them," Lib told her. She pointed out the Plough, the North Star, Cassiopeia.