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First 50 pages

Prologue

It is 1845, the first year of the Great Famine in Ireland, when fourteen-year-old Cornelius Collins faces a harrowing seven-year struggle for survival. At twenty, he escapes to Liverpool, England, securing a one-way third-class passage aboard a “coffin ship” bound for America.

Against all odds, he survives the forty-one-day Atlantic crossing on the packet ship *Clara Wheeler*, landing in Boston, Massachusetts. There, he is processed and released into the streets alone to face the “land-sharks” eager to take what little he possesses, including his life.

Fate intervenes, and an Irish American welfare society helps him find work in Milford, Massachusetts—the boot-making capital of America employing thousands of cordwainers who produce one million pairs of boots and shoes annually. Determined, Cornelius vows to save every penny and send it back to Ireland to support his family.

Milford is also the source of a world-famous pink granite, which adorns some of the most iconic buildings of the time. The “granite rush” attracts highly skilled stonecutters from around the world, including Giuseppe Ambrosini, a master stonecutter from Lombardy, Italy, a place renowned for its craftsmen.

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As the decades pass, Cornelius, his youngest son Michael, and Giuseppe, who are contemporaries, find themselves caught between America's promise of prosperity and the violent cultural prejudice against them during a period of unprecedented technological change—perhaps more transformative to the people of the time than space travel and the internet were to later generations.

Factories and machines reproduce the handmade work of artisans cheaper and faster. Gas and electric lighting illuminate cities and towns, ending centuries of reliance on candles and whale oil. Self-propelled vehicles connect cities, towns, and the nation, transporting people and goods in hours instead of days or weeks by horse and wagon.

Trains and automobiles replaced horse-drawn carriages for land travel, steam-powered ships replaced sailing vessels, and airplanes took over from air balloons. The telegraph and telephone connected everyone, everywhere, transmitting news and information in real time, rendering the mail carrier packet ship and overland stagecoach obsolete.

The phonograph, photographic camera, and motion picture camera preserve human voices and images for the first time in history, creating a true record of individuals' lives and civilizations.

They live and raise their families through the disastrous effects of the American Civil War, widespread labor upheavals, a total collapse of the American economy, and the Irish Rebellion, as they are hurled headlong into the twentieth century and “the war to end all wars.”

These events profoundly impact them and the next generation of their American-born children, who will unite their families in marriage at the height of the Roaring Twenties and the threshold of the Great Depression.

There will be no great fortunes or inheritance, no monumental works of art or science left for future generations. Instead, there will be profound life lessons learned from a lifetime of cutting and shaping leather and stone in Milford's workshops and quarries.

Theirs is the common fate of common people: living their lives without fanfare, known only to those who worked with them and those who loved them, then forgotten by time—until one day, when they are remembered, and their names are spoken again by the living.

Forgotten by Time, Until Rediscovered by Fate

“A century after her birth, Jessie (Ambrosini) Collins is laid to rest in October 2001, beside her husband, Joseph Cornelius Collins, in St. Mary's Cemetery in Milford, Massachusetts. Weeks later, while settling her estate, her children and grandchildren discover an old hope chest filled with artifacts and memories from her life.

Among the curiosities and treasures is a tied bundle containing three handwritten journals, previously unknown to the family. In time, they would come to realize that what they held in their hands was the family legacy—pictures of life passed down by those who lived before—*The Remembering* of how it was with them in their time.”

Introduction

June 1, 1899

Days after my father's funeral, my sister Ellen asked me to come to her house. She wanted me to see if there was anything I wanted from our father's personal items. Among his things were his tools and a leather portfolio, hand-stitched at the spine with intricate leather crosspieces.

The portfolio had a leather strap on the front, fastened to a button sewn on the back panel, securing inches of handwritten pages inside. The precise finish of the portfolio made it clear that my father had crafted it himself.

As a child, I had often watched him work in his modest workshop, his hands steady and sure as he shaped leather into functional and beautiful boots and shoes. Sometimes, he shared stories—tales of his journey to America, filled with both hope and hardship.

I asked Ellen what was in the papers. She said she didn't know because she hadn't read them, thinking they were just our father's workshop notes. Our father was not a man of many words, preferring to express himself through his craft. And it wasn't unusual for him to jot down ideas and sketches for his projects, and we had long grown accustomed to his reserved nature.

Weeks later, I saw Ellen and her husband, Tom, at their house for Sunday dinner. I brought the portfolio with me. “I’ve been reading and organizing the pages,” I told them. “They’re not his workshop notes. It’s a journal—the story of his life and our mother’s. We’re all in it.”

Ellen broke down completely, sobbing into Tom’s arms. It was too much for her to take, so soon after our father’s passing. The journal’s contents were a window into a world we only knew fragments of— a world that shaped who we had become.

Over the following months, I pieced together the order of the journal as best as I could. Some of the writing was easy to identify by dates and significant events. Other pages contained random entries of thoughts and pasted newspaper clippings of events that seemed to belong where I found them.

It took months, perhaps a year, to finish arranging the pages. The more I read, the deeper I felt the connection to my parents, understanding their struggles and triumphs in a way I never had before.

At family gatherings, we read the stories and discuss the things our parents kept secret. Some stories were hard to read and hear. Our father’s early years in his native Ireland, the arduous journey to America, and the sacrifices they made to build a life here—these were the foundations of our family’s legacy.

Everyone agreed that, since I was the youngest and would probably live the longest, I would keep the journal to preserve the family story of how we started in America. I will keep it close—for all of us—to remember how it was with them.

--Michael James Collins

FORCES OF NATURE

“By what grace did we
escape to this place,
where our children grow
without the curse of hunger
and the political causes of it?”

Life can be such hell in one place
and such a blessing in another.”

—Cornelius Collins

A TALE OF TWO LIVES

I have lived in America for 38 of the 58 years of my life—as it is. My dearest wife, Johanna, is gone, and all of our children have grown and have families of their own to look after.

I am the only one not born in America left to tell the story of our two lives—hers and mine—one old and one new, one in Ireland, one in America.

When I am gone, there will be few left who knew us—then, we will be forgotten.

It is the common fate of common people.

Cornelius Collins

August 14, 1890

THE ODYSSEY OF CORNELIUS COLLINS

Of all the things I can remember in my life, memories of my childhood before *An Gorta Mór*—the Great Hunger—are not among them. Almost everything from before the Hunger is gone or nearly erased.

I was a boy of fourteen when the potato blight came to Ireland in 1845, ravaging the countryside with relentless death and suffering for seven long years until I turned twenty. My life before that is a collection of vague memories: working in fields we didn't own and never ate from, seeing my mother and father exhausted from laboring from dawn till dusk to keep us fed and a roof over our heads. It was more than most people had.

We were no strangers to hunger. Most days, we had little to eat, and some days there was nothing at all, not even potatoes. But *An Gorta Mór* was the worst famine anyone in Ireland who survived it could remember.

The potato, which most people depended on for basic food, became infected with disease, leaving the fertile landscape a mixture of decay and healthy crops. Even the air smelled rotten, a constant reminder of our unbearable situation.

The Black '47

Death by starvation is a slow, merciless fate. Worse than the sight of it is the smell, which can make you retch whatever little you have in you. After that, you can't eat anything, no matter how hungry you are. The sight and smell linger in your senses, taking over your mind with no escape. The year 1847 was the worst of it. Hunger, fever, sickness of all sorts, and human filth were everywhere. The unburied dead and dying covered the land like uprooted trees after a storm, strewn across roadsides and in open fields where starving dogs finished them off.

The air was thick with the odor of decay, mingling with the foul stench of human waste and the bitter smell of sickness. Flies covered everything—from rotting potato plants to piles of human waste in front of mud huts to the dead and dying inside. The constant drone of their buzzing made every day feel like another rock had been piled on the mound of hopelessness we were buried under.

In the spring of that year, news arrived that a ship from America had brought food and supplies. The newsreaders' voices were desperately sad as we listened in dread silence to what the Americans and others with them saw in Cork City.

“On Monday of this month (April 1847), Captain Robert Bennet Forbes, commander of the *USS Jamestown*, arrived in Cork Harbour from Boston with some eight hundred tonnes of relief provisions for distribution. He visited the city in the company of Father Theobald Mathew and was shocked by the scenes he saw in the side streets and back lanes. Captain Forbes was heard to say, ‘I saw enough in five minutes to horrify me.hovels crowded with the sick and dying, without floors, without furniture,

and with patches of dirty straw covered with still dirtier shreds of humanity. Some called to Father Mathew for water, and others for a dying blessing.”

For seven endless years, people lived in fear of being found dead in the fields or alone on the hills, without a priest or family to bless them and comfort them in the last moments of a wretched life. Every week, entire families were found dead inside their one-room mud huts, the doors nailed shut from the inside to prevent anyone from entering and seeing them still clinging to life in their miserable state.

The poorest people, unable to pay the landlord’s rent, were sent to workhouses where three people lived in spaces made for one. Disease killed hundreds weekly, and the inmates were put to work digging great pits in the surrounding fields to bury the dead by torchlight until well after dark.

The sight of so much death made you numb. Lifeless bodies became objects no different from rocks or tree stumps. But the invisible, horrible stench in the air could not be escaped. The wind pushed it up your nostrils and down your throat, making you gag with every breath.

Death by Avoidable Causes

At the heart of the troubles was the fact that almost all the farmland in Ireland belonged to a small group of English and a few Irish landowners. The rest of us rented huts as tenants on the land we worked for the landowners. Everything was under their control, including the small patch of dirt near our hut just big enough to grow the potatoes we needed to feed ourselves.

Earning the lowest of wages, we planted the landowners’ fields with oats, rye, and other grains that we harvested for sale in English markets. The dirt unfit for the landowners’ crops or grazing their animals was given to us to grow “lumpers,” the ugly pale brown potatoes covered

in lumps that a working man would eat a stone weight—about thirteen to fourteen pounds—a day. Most days, we only ate half a stone weight so everyone had something.

The boiled yellow mush tasted like paste unless you were lucky and had milk, butter, or sometimes scallions to chop and mix in. Eating it every day was work, shoveling it down your throat, swallowing hard, and drinking water to fill your empty stomach. If you didn't force yourself to eat it, the hunger cramps felt like someone twisting your guts with a stick, much worse than eating lumpers.

We always lived in danger of famine. That was the truth of it. The old people remembered the potato crop failing dozens of times before 1845, causing hunger until a new crop came in. But this time, the crop failed for almost seven years, causing greater misery and death than anyone had seen before.

The newsreaders, who kept us aware of government and landowner developments, said that spokespeople for Ireland argued with the English Parliament to stop exporting grain and other crops grown in Ireland when the potato crop first failed. These crops should have been sold in Irish markets.

But the English and Irish landowners, with their influence over Parliament, claimed the crops were their property. Parliament had no right to interfere with the free market, and the crops grown in Ireland were needed just as desperately to feed English laborers. If Parliament stopped the export of Irish crops, they said, England would suffer the famine instead of Ireland.

The English Parliament did not interfere with the free market, and the landowners continued exporting crops. Eventually, they changed the law to allow direct aid from outside sources like America, bypassing the English review authorities who always took large fees before sending us what was left.

With the law changed, Irishmen who served in the Queen's troops in India and Irish American organizations in Boston and New York sent aid directly. The Quakers' Society of Friends, who always provided aid, formed the Central Relief Committee in Dublin at the beginning of the troubles to set up soup kitchens and distribute food around the country, saving many from starvation, including my family.

When "The Black '47" came, the Quakers gave out turnip seeds to plant, helping thousands survive. Fishermen, too weak to work, had to pawn their boats and tackle for money to buy food. The Quakers lent them the money to buy back their equipment and start new fishing stations, keeping the trade going.

There is a gratitude you cannot truly express when you are among the invisible of the world, teetering at the edge of existence. An outstretched hand makes the difference between clinging to life, as miserable as it is, or letting go forever to be with the forgotten.

Irish Lace

Women like my mother didn't like depending on government aid during the famine and looked for ways to support their families. In our community, certain women sponsored lace schools to teach others how to make lace and find buyers for the finished work. Before then, lace making was done in workshops in the north of Ireland and mostly in convents where we lived in Cork.

At the community lace school my mother attended, the teacher learned to weave by undoing an expensive piece of lace stitch by stitch to see how it was made, then putting it back together again. That's how my mother, Julia Kilty Collins, learned to weave lace—stitch by stitch. The lace was intricate, each thread pulled tight with delicate precision, creating patterns as beautiful as spider webs.

I remember a story she told about some children at the lace school whose parents were sent to a workhouse. The children stayed with a relative who sent them to the lace school where they learned to weave so well, that they earned enough money selling their lace to pay the workhouse debt and free their parents. Then they taught their parents the lace trade, so the whole family could earn an income.

“The ability to earn a productive living,” my mother said, “inspires people with hope and dignity that handouts, though much needed and appreciated, can sometimes destroy.”

It is a lesson I have never forgotten.

THE DEPARTURE

I was twenty years old in 1852 when the blight finally ended, and the potato crop returned in some places. For seven long years, we didn't laugh or look long into each other's faces, fearing we'd see the spark of life had gone out.

There was nothing beautiful left in the world. The breeze that once smelled sweet with flowers and fresh-cut fields now reeked of death and decay. The rain was cold and miserable, and the sun, that once lit the golden fields and emerald-green hills with a mellow glow, now cast dark shadows on barren patches of dirt where potatoes once grew. Only the landlord's grain fields flourished, while we went hungry, toiling to harvest them.

After *An Gorta Mór*, it would be business as usual: working for low wages and paying higher rents for the same damp, smoke-filled hut with its leaking roof. There would be no miracle to save us from it. As far as I knew, no one else had been saved, and I didn't imagine we would be lucky enough to escape either. If there was to be a miracle, we would have to create it with our own two hands.

We heard stories of family members who had gone to America and found work, sending money home for food or passage tickets for the next family member to join them. But for those

who left and were never heard from again, there were countless explanations—none of them good.

Some sought to forget the sorrowful life they had in Ireland and left everything behind. Others, they said, perished in Ireland or Liverpool, falling prey to robbers and other misfortunes, never setting foot on a ship.

For many, death aboard a “coffin ship” and burial at sea were well-known, common fates. Those who made it to America and sent a hopeful letter home often never wrote a second letter. Only God knows why.

Any of these fates could await me if I went, but it seemed no worse than the fate awaiting me and my family if I stayed and did nothing. If I didn’t step up, we might all be lost to oblivion. At twenty, I believed I had the best chance of finding work in America.

There was no other choice; it was decided I would go. But it would take every penny we had and every penny we could beg, borrow, or steal to make this desperate journey.

To Dublin and Liverpool

In the days before my departure, for the first time in a long while, I saw a hopeful smile on my parents’ faces, replacing the mask of despair they usually wore. That alone gave me the courage to go, no matter what the consequences. With all the money we could scrape together, including the secret savings from my mother’s lace weaving, it was time for me to leave.

Before sunrise on the day I left my family, I walked through the doorway of our hut with my duffel bag on my shoulder. I carried some bread, a spoon, a fork, a knife, a tin plate, a drinking cup, a spare shirt, a blanket, and the clothes on my back. I said goodbye with hugs and tears, then faced the road to make my way north to Dublin City—160 miles away—by foot and in friendly wagons, sleeping hidden off the road to avoid any trouble.

After three days of travel past endless walled fields and little else, I arrived in Dublin and went to the ferry office to buy my ticket to cross the Irish Sea to Liverpool, where I planned to purchase a third-class ticket on the packet ships that sailed weekly to America and Canada.

Liverpool Docks

The ferry from Dublin to Liverpool took more than ten hours. We landed at Bootle, where the Mersey River and the packet ships sailing to America empty into the Irish Sea. It was my first ocean trip, and I spent the whole time wondering if the voyage to America would be as crowded and dull.

From Bootle, I had to make my way south, about four miles to get to the docks at Liverpool Port. There were ferry wagons for hire that would take you there if you didn't want to walk, but every penny saved was a penny earned for me. I took to the coastal road along the Mersey on foot, joining the crowd and a caravan of ferry wagons loaded with people and their baggage.

An hour later, and half a mile from the docks at Liverpool, the smell of rotting garbage overpowered everything else. When we reached the crowded docks, the stink turned to horse dung and urine from people relieving themselves where they stood in queue to buy a ticket to sail to New York, Boston, and Philadelphia in America, or to Quebec and Nova Scotia in Canada.

Passage to Canada was cheaper than to America, but the stories about the Canada crossing were so horrible that people avoided it at all costs. A few years ago, I heard a newsreader read a letter printed in *The Cork Examiner* from a man who made the Canada crossing.

"The letter," the newsreader said, "is from the barque *Bridgetown*, lying off Grosse Island, at Quebec, which, it appears, was converted to a vast burial place.

“We arrived here on the 22nd from Liverpool. We buried six yesterday on shore. The carpenter and joiner are occupied making coffins. There are six more dead after the night. I cannot say when we can go to Quebec, as we cannot land the rest of the sick at present, there being no room in the hospitals for them, though the front of the island is covered with sheds and tents.

“The accounts from the shore are awful, and our condition on board you can form no idea of: helpless children without parents or relatives, the father buried in the deep last week, and the mother the week before, their six children under similar unfortunate circumstances, and so on. I trust God will carry me through this trying ordeal.”

Sometimes it took days to get a passage ticket. When you couldn't, you had to find a place to stay for the night, which was as dangerous as it was terrible. I slept on the floor of a boarding house for a few nights, covered only by my thin blanket and my duffel bag for a pillow.

You never really slept, always watching for someone who would steal whatever you had. I saw women badly abused, and young children sold by desperate parents or kidnapped to work as street beggars or sold for sex in the alleys and brothels.

In the morning, before first light, they woke us and fed us almost-cooked oatmeal and water to drink before sending us out into the early morning damp. As I stepped outside the boarding house, a line of shivering gray shadows pushed through the doorway to take my place on the floor, if only for a few hours, before the next shivering mob pushed in to take their place.

Always circling about, the land-sharks preyed on us at every turn, selling rags for clothing, fake boarding tickets, and secret hiding places to stow away on a ship only they knew—or so they claimed—if you paid for the information. I heard endless stories of people who lost all their money to Liverpool barkeepers, rag sellers, and boarding house operators, then died penniless never leaving Liverpool.

Even more heartbreaking was the fate of entire families who, with the last of their money spent, crawled into the dark cellars of abandoned buildings, and died undiscovered until weeks later when someone reported the stench of decaying bodies. Some committed suicide, some performed mercy killings of their own family members, others starved or went insane. Typhus, among other deadly diseases, claimed the rest.

October was the wettest month of the year in Liverpool. The sky was always gray and misty, and the sun hardly ever broke through the blanket of clouds. After days of waiting, I finally bought a steerage ticket that cost £4.15 shillings—nearly half of all the money I had—on the American packet ship *Clara Wheeler*, sailing for Boston, 3,000 miles away and 40 days at sea. The passage price included a full day's ration of food and shelter below decks. That was more than I ever got in wretched Liverpool, and I couldn't wait to sail away from there.

Packet ships like the *Clara Wheeler* were originally built to carry mail and cargo in the lower decks and a small number of cabin passengers on the upper deck. But the demand for passage from Liverpool to America was so high and profitable that when a mail ship arrived from America, the lower level was refitted with bunk boards to accommodate up to four hundred forty third-class passengers for the voyage back across the Atlantic to Boston.

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On departure day, long before sunrise, I stood with hundreds of exhausted, sick, and anxious people queued up to board the *Clara Wheeler*. She was a new ship, built in 1849 at Medford, Massachusetts.

I remember the morning sunlight breaking through the clouds for a moment and bouncing off her shiny black lacquered finish. Up near the deck railing, her sides were trimmed by a white band that ran from the front to the back of the ship, outlining the portholes bringing air into the lower decks.

Three great masts, tangled with crisscrossing lines to hold ten sails or more, rose into the sky. At her stern was the American flag flying westward in the wind toward her country of origin and an unknown future awaiting me.

My legs ached and my feet were swollen tight in my shoes after standing and waiting for hours while the porters loaded cargo below and the baggage trunks of the cabin passengers traveling in the top deck cabins.

Those of us on the lower decks finally got the call to move up the gangway ramp to the ship's top deck, then down steep, narrow steps while balancing our baggage in one arm and holding the stair railing with the other to avoid falling headfirst into the bottom of the ship.

As we stepped off the stairs onto the lower deck, the acid stink of vomit invaded our noses and throats, and the urine vapors in the air made our eyes sting. We were told there had been no passengers on the crossing from Boston and that the ship had been thoroughly cleaned. If that was true, the wooden planks in the floors of the ship were permanently corrupted with the poison.

Single men were sent to the front of the ship, families were grouped in the middle, and single women were sent to the rear. In the men's quarters, there was some pushing and scuffling to be the first to place belongings on a top bunk.

The bottom bunks were the last place anyone wanted to be when someone on top got seasick and vomited on those below. The strongest men usually won the top bunks, while the rest of us crowded two or three deep in bottom bunks or crouched on the floor in the corners and along the sidewalls for the entire forty-day voyage—if we survived. That's why they call them “coffin ships.”

AWAY AT SEA

The *Clara Wheeler* sailed on the afternoon tide, leaving the Mersey River, and headed into the open sea. I set my mind to stay away from the misery on the lower deck as much as possible. Instead, I made my way up to the top deck, which was crowded with people watching Liverpool fade behind us in the distance.

Late in the afternoon on that first day, the ship's crew called us to queue up for our food rations. Passage on an American ship required each adult to receive three quarts of water a day and a weekly allowance of:

- six pounds of meal
- two and a half pounds of navy bread
- one pound of wheat flour
- one pound of salt pork free from bone
- two ounces of tea
- eight ounces of sugar
- eight ounces of molasses
- vinegar

The cheaper ships to Canada did not supply food or, if they did, not very much. That's why there were so many stories about people so desperate to escape starvation that they boarded a ship knowing they did not have enough food for the crossing, hoping for a miracle. In the end, they died of starvation and were buried at sea.

According to American laws, convicts being transported on the ship had to receive meat four days a week. Additionally, for every one hundred convicts, there had to be four seamen assigned to service them. We who paid for our passage received no fresh meat and were assigned only three seamen for every hundred steerage passengers. There were hundreds of steerage passengers onboard the *Clara Wheeler*, but we never saw more than two seamen servicing our quarters the entire voyage.

In the open air on the upper deck, a brick firebox laid over with metal grates was the place to cook your food if there were no rough seas. I rarely cooked anything there, but I boiled water most days for something warm to drink, even when I didn't have any tea to soak in it. People like me, who didn't carry any food with them, had to make do with the rations they gave us.

The bread, called navy bread, was so hard you couldn't eat it unless you soaked it in hot water, and it was so sour it made you sick to your bowels. When you could make hot water and had some dry meal stashed in your coat pocket, you could make a poor porridge and add some molasses or salt pork, which they rarely gave us, for flavor.

The wheat flour made poor bread if you tried it, and it took too long to cook, so there were constant arguments to give up your place at the fire. Some people cooked in the middle of the night on deck in the pitch black, then traded what they cooked for other food.

Hot water with tea and sugar, or just sugar alone if you had no tea, was one of the few things that didn't take any time to make and didn't make you feel sick. Tea, in particular, was in great demand by the men who smoked it in place of tobacco, so it came in handy to trade for food if you needed it. I drank as much boiled water as I could, but it didn't stay with me long and ran right through me, or I retched it into the sea.

Above & Below the Waterline

The wind on the upper deck came whipping cold and hard against my face, mixed with ocean spray and vomit from people doubled over, retching, and trying desperately to hang on to the deck railing to avoid being thrown backward against the ship's structures.

A sick woman an arm's length from me was holding onto two children with one arm while grasping the deck railing with the other, retching through the rail down the side of the ship and onto the open deck, nearly collapsing and losing her grip on her babies.

There was nothing I could do to help her or the children because if I let go of my hold, it would be me going into the ocean with the next wave. It took a while before she regained her footing, then she pressed her children into her skirts, gripping them like a vice with her legs. We both stayed on deck, hanging on to the railing rather than face the alternative of being seasick in the lower deck.

In the men's area below deck, the air was a suffocating haze so thick from smoking tea leaves that stank worse than bad tobacco. The bad air forced the older men to lower their faces close to the floor, gasping for breath while pressing their palms against the sides of the water casks for balance. The stench of vomit was so strong it pierced through the haze, forcing you to bury your face in your coat, only to smell your own unwashed body.

Staying clean was impossible. If you got sick and couldn't get to the top deck in time, the only place to retch was into your shirt, on your bunk, or onto the floor. To wash ourselves, they gave us a water bucket and lye soap to disinfect our bodies and our clothes.

On the top deck, the air and sea spray were so numbing cold you shivered uncontrollably when you tried to rub soap on yourself or your shirt while the waves tossed the ship, and you, overboard if you didn't hang onto something.

I tried to avoid getting too close to people who never washed themselves and wore the same filthy clothes the entire crossing. Not only because they stank, but they were full of lice and scratched at their open sores.

The latrines for hundreds of people below deck were made of wooden boards with holes cut in them, fastened above the bilge-water channel that ran under the floorboards, carrying a horrific concoction of waste and runoff from the upper-deck cabins.

Whenever the ship rolled to one side, the rotten sludge squirted up through cracks in the caulking between the floorboards. The urine vapors stung your eyes and burned your nostrils, and the stench made you gag.

There was never any paper to clean yourself with, because people took it to start cooking fires on deck. Instead, rag strips hung on a hook above a bucket filled with sour-smelling vinegar and sea water to wet the rags to clean with then throw into the black pit under you.

Life, Birth, and Death

Death and sickness on the Clara Wheeler were as common as they were in the houses, on the roads, and in the fields of Ireland. If someone died in the night on the ship, by morning you could smell the rotting body above the usual stench.

The ship's crew, being afraid of catching the dead's sickness, would not touch the body, so we passengers had to carry the limp, stinking corpse up the steep stairs to the top deck and out of view of the cabin passengers, then drop the body into the ocean without ceremony.

I cannot describe the sufferings pregnant women and those with children endured, which I saw with my own eyes. One day, when a heavy gale storm was upon us, some of the ship's crew fetched a few of us from the men's quarters to help with a sick woman who couldn't be carried to the medical area because the ship was too unsteady from the storm.

When we reached the section of the ship where the woman was, I saw she was already dead and had given birth to a stillborn child. When the ship's crew ordered us to bury her at sea, the other women looked at us with grim faces, while those with small children wrapped them in their skirts to keep them from looking on the scene. Others sobbed or said prayers.

Two of the crew members stood beside the body and unfolded a white canvas sheet with yellow stains on it, laying it lengthwise on the deck beside the dead woman and her child. Then they told two of the men among us to lift her and place her on the canvas while I was handed a smaller piece of cloth and told to wrap the infant's body in it.

When I had finished, they told me to place the bundle close to the dead woman's side, then step back while they ordered one of us to place the bottom of the canvas shroud up over the dead woman's feet. The two men who placed her on the canvas folded the two sides lengthwise, joining them in the middle over her.

When they had finished, a crewman handed the man closest to him a large, hooked needle that looked like a large fishing hook threaded with coarse, waxy thread and said, "Close her up."

We all watched as the two men on either side of the shroud passed the needle through one side of the canvas to the hands of the other, back and forth up the entire length until they reached the woman's face. Then the ship's crewman said, "Find her nose with your fingers and pass the needle through it to be sure she's dead."

Feeling around the canvas covering her face and pinching his fingers, he stopped, placed the needle on the spot, and began to push with some force but then stopped. He said the canvas and the nose were too hard for the needle to pass through, and he couldn't get leverage because the ship was rolling too much from the storm. Then the crewman told the man sewing opposite to help push it through from his side.

Placing his hands on the other man's hands holding the needle, both men grunted and pushed hard when we heard a sharp crack as it passed through and out the other side. "All right," the crewman said, "finish it up; we've got to bury her quick and be done with it."

The crewmen then moved everyone to one side, clearing the way to a stairway that led up to a hatch door in the upper deck. "You two bring her along," they ordered the men who had sewn her shroud.

With one man carrying her shoulders and the other her feet, they wobbled the distance to the stairs, then began to push and pull the shrouded corpses upward to the deck as the ship rolled, tossing them, and making them lose their grip, dropping the bodies on the stairs with a thud that forced some to gasp in horror and others in disbelief. The rest turned away from the scene, hiding their eyes with their hands and sobbing.

As the men disappeared up through the deck hatch, a rush of ocean air and rain flowed into the space, clearing it, if only for a moment, of the images and the memories that might

otherwise linger long in the stillness and in the shadows of the lower deck. In short order, the men returned down the stairs while the last crewman closed and secured the hatch.

“All right then, men,” he said, “follow me—we’re all done here now.” As we made our way back to the men’s quarters, there was no speaking of it. We all knew it had to be done, and that was the end of it. But I could not help thinking, *what if the child had been born alive? Would its fate have been the same?*

There Are No Days, Only Time

The hours felt like days, and days stretched into weeks when there was no counting what never changed. Boredom and discomfort were the only pastimes when you were not sick or asleep, which didn’t happen often.

When the ocean or the winds were not raging, I found a space on the top deck, wedged myself tight with my duffel bag, and stayed fixed for as long as I could to avoid being tossed around the deck and having to return below.

Almost three weeks had passed since we left Liverpool, and I saw nothing in the sky or the ocean that was any different from the way it always looked in sunlight or in darkness. Only a line on the horizon separated one color of blue from another unless there was a storm.

Then the line separated the gray-black wall that rose above us from the green-black field that moved below us. On a cloudy night without stars, there was no dividing line at all—just a shapeless blackness that wrapped around your face and suffocated you like a tight woolen scarf.

I had stopped counting the changes of day from light to dark because it made me feel desperate to think there were still so many days left in this miserable journey, sliding, and colliding across a sheet of liquid broken glass in the middle of nowhere.

I noticed fewer people coming up from the lower deck lately to retch up whatever little was in them into the sea. As soon as they were finished and fearful of someone stealing what little they brought with them, they quickly returned to the world below to guard the valuables they did not possess.

Daily food rations doled out by the crew and health checks by the doctors were the only activities on the ship when I was awake. It was always the same dull dream as it was the time before. Like an old dog, unaware of time passing in its sleep, I escaped to that place if I could, hoping that when I returned to consciousness, I would be unaware of the passage of time and awaken in the tomorrow I hoped for.

I gave up trying to clean my body with soap and water every day. It was impossible to wash except on those days when the ocean was calm, and the ship was not rolling. I had taken to removing my overcoat and shirt when no one was around, then pulling myself along the railing to mid-ship, where the waves crashed up and over the deck when the ship rose and slammed down into the water, throwing a soaking spray up and over me.

Seeing my wet body, I was disgusted by my poor condition. I had been unable to eat even half of what they gave me, as it was indigestible or just rotten to begin with. Lice bites and rashes I could see in some places, although nothing like what most people had who stayed below deck on this ship.

So, I washed as best I could and told myself I was not as bad as the rest. I reminded myself over and over again that there was an end to this present that I could not see yet, but that I must believe I would live to see.

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

Monday, November 22, 1852

We were woken up before sunrise by members of the ship's crew, telling us that Boston was in sight and to make ready. After forty-one days at sea, everyone, including myself, couldn't believe we were actually hearing those words. No one could wait to get off that ship, and we moved quickly to gather our belongings.

Those of us with few possessions made our way up the stairs to the top deck to catch our first glimpse of Boston. All you could see in the distance at first was a wavy line of small hills against the cold, clear blue November sky.

As the *Clara Wheeler* moved into the harbor channel and the morning sun rose behind us, the shapes of buildings on the shore became clearer, their brick-red and grayish-black colors standing out. Then the ship's crew jumped when the captain commanded to drop anchor where we sat.

"Why are we stopping here?" people asked some crew members near us.

"Waiting for the tide to rise," they said. "Need to lift the ship above the rocks on the uneven channel bottom if we're going to get her to the dock in one piece."

In Liverpool, there was no talk about dangerous rocks in the Mersey River. But Boston was a different story. If we didn't move carefully to avoid the shallows, a strike against a rock could break right through the ship's hull planks, flood the lower deck, drowning everyone there, and sink the ship within minutes, all within sight of Boston.

All morning, I sat on deck with everyone else, staring at the buildings on the shore and imagining a new life just out of reach. Finally, the tide rose high enough for the harbor pilots to board our ship and steer us between the islands dotting the harbor.

As we got alongside the dock, the ship bumped it with a jolt, throwing some belongings sideways and sending passengers screaming, thinking we had hit the rocks. When the ship steadied and people quieted down, we could hear the men on the dock below shouting up to our crew as they pulled the rope lines together to secure the *Clara Wheeler*.

When we came to a dead stop, even the deathly ill cheered as loudly as they could. It was like nothing I had ever heard before. At that moment, I saw a feeling of shared compassion among everyone who had survived that dreadful journey. Tears of thanks, and perhaps tears for loved ones who had not made it, flowed freely.

Constitution Wharf, Boston City, America

Everyone was terribly anxious as the cabin passengers and their luggage were offloaded. Those still below decks, waiting to climb up, began shouting and pushing to open the stair hatch doors to reach the top deck.

It became very tense when the people queued at the top of the stairs began screaming to be let out. Those at the bottom were pushing them up against the closed hatch door, crushing them.

The crew finally acted to prevent people from being crushed. They opened the hatch door, causing a pile of people to spill out onto the deck like a net full of wriggling fish released onto a fishing boat deck, slipping, and sliding everywhere.

The rest followed behind, balancing their belongings while clutching their money purses and papers close. All the sick and those unable to move were told to wait until everyone else had cleared out. Then, the ship's crew would carry them out.

As we walked down the gangway away from the *Clara Wheeler*, I saw the dock below was just as chaotic as Waterloo Dock in Liverpool. The man just ahead of me turned and pointed to a sign on the building in front of us and said, "It's Constitution Wharf, lad. We're in America!"

At the bottom of the gangway, officials in uniforms formed a corridor on either side, moving us along to a line of desks with more officials to process our papers, just as they did in Liverpool.

One by one, we presented our papers and passage tickets. If everything was in order, they were stamped, and we were sent to the medical examiner's desk. People whose papers didn't get stamped were taken to the buildings made of big gray stone blocks at the end of the wharf.

At the medical examiner's desk, they checked us for sickness. Many older passengers were sick and sent to quarantine. Sometimes entire families were quarantined because one family member was sick with something contagious. I heard the doctors say the contagious ones were sent to an island in Boston Harbor for treatment or confinement.

After the medical exam, I was sent to one of the gray stone buildings at the end of the docks. It was late in the day and cold, and I could see they were still unloading the sick from the

Clara Wheeler. Some were on stretchers covered in canvas, having died on the *Clara Wheeler* while waiting in the harbor.

Later, I heard the dead were taken to one of the harbor islands and buried. *They would stay in America forever but never live in it*, I thought. I didn't know how many people died on the crossing, but rumors were it was dozens, including women and children like the ones I saw, buried at sea and forgotten forever.

* * *

Inside the big stone building, I saw rows of cots with blankets and pillows filling the room. Before entering the hall, we had to empty everything from our pockets into a small canvas bag they gave us and place it with our baggage against the wall under one of the numbers painted on it.

I looked at one of the men in uniform standing guard over our belongings and said I couldn't read. He pointed to an empty place at the wall and replied, "You're number 327—put your things there."

We stood in a queue along the wall, then the guards moved us through a doorway into a room with empty wooden crates lined up in the middle of the floor. The guards split us into two lines on either side of the crates and told us to take off all our clothes and throw them into the crates to be burned.

Naked, they motioned us through another doorway at the end of the room to wash ourselves and receive clean new clothes. It was getting dark outside and cold as we walked into the dimly lit washing room. Men in uniforms gave us a small bucket and a bar of gritty lye soap, telling us to scrub our skin and hair clean.

In the center of the room was a large watering trough with clean water to fill our buckets. It was the first time in more than a month that any of us saw the terrible condition our bodies were in. My arms and legs were spotted with red bumps from lice bites, and my ribs and hip bones stuck out of my skin even worse than when I left Ireland.

As we washed, we tried not to stare at each other's poor condition, but it was impossible not to notice. Some men were in a terrible way, with open sores and rashes around their privates from the urine and filth in the clothes they hadn't changed the whole voyage.

Even the wash water running down the drain holes in the floor was thick with lice and body filth, mixed with red swirls of blood from scrubbing the lice bites and open sores with the gritty soap.

Shivering and still naked, we were checked again by the uniformed guards for signs of lice and sickness before being allowed to leave the washing room. Some men with bad cases of head lice were sent back to have their heads and beards shaved off, then wash again.

After they were shaved, the guards gave them a rag wet with kerosene to wipe their heads and bodies to kill any remaining lice. When the kerosene rag touched a bite or an open sore, the men screamed as if they were being burned by fire.

Outside the washroom, we dried ourselves with a small, clean cloth that came in a folded bundle with a clean woolen shirt, pants with a tie string, a pair of woolen socks, a tin pocket comb, and a plain gray woolen coat and cap. The guards told us to thank the Sisters of Charity for their gifts.

Once we were dressed, the uniforms moved us to a line on the floor to size up our feet for a pair of leather ankle boots, if our feet weren't too big or too small. If your feet were too small,

you could stuff the toes with newspaper. But if your feet were too big, you had to cut the toes of the boots open or go without shoes.

So, you took what you could get without complaints. Fortunately, mine fit just fine, but they were stiff and rubbed against my ankles. I knew they would give me blisters, but having new shoes was a fair exchange in my book.

At the other end of the great room, there were tables with long benches where the Sisters of Charity served stew, fresh bread, and clean drinking water. Except for a few people sobbing, there was complete silence as we ate. Some cried from grief, and others wept from pure happiness, I reckon, because they had survived the crossing. Only hours ago, we had all been at sea on the “coffin ship” *Clara Wheeler*.

As much as I wanted to, I had a hard time eating. The food was so heavy and rich after eating almost nothing for a month. I used the bread to soak up some of the stew gravy, slowly drank some water, and that was enough.

After eating, the guards told us to fetch our belongings and take a sleeping cot for the night. Tomorrow, first thing, we would be processed for release to Boston. For those like me who didn't have anyone waiting to meet us, the guards said, “Look for the Sisters of Charity. They're always there, ready and waiting to help.”

I didn't sleep that night, and I don't think anyone else did either. Partly because my stomach was full of gas and cramps from the rich food. Mostly, though, because I couldn't stop the dizziness, like I felt on the *Clara Wheeler* rolling back and forth at sea.

Tuesday, November 23, 1852

The guards woke us in the morning and told us to get some hot porridge and coffee and be ready for final processing. The hot oatmeal porridge was easier to eat than the stew from the night before, restoring me just enough to keep me going.

We gathered our belongings and queued up at the clerks' desks to be processed and either enter America or be detained for some reason.

When they motioned me forward, I walked up to the clerk at the desk, who was writing in his ledger. I waited for him to speak. Without looking up, he said, "Embarkation papers," opening his left hand while still writing in his ledger with the other. I handed him my ticket and paperwork from Liverpool.

He studied them for a moment and, still without looking up, he said,

"State your name for the record."

"Cornelius Collins," I replied.

"Date of birth?" he continued.

"December 1831," I said.

"What date in December?" he asked.

"I don't know for certain, sir," I answered.

"Place of birth?" he inquired.

"Cork, Ireland, sir," I replied.

"Where in Cork?" This time, he looked up and studied my face.

"County Cork, sir. That's all I know," I said.

"All right then," he said, sounding like he had heard the same answer many times before.

Looking back at his ledger, he asked,

“Father’s name?”

“Peter Collins,” I replied.

“Where was he born?” the clerk asked.

“In Cork too,” I said.

“Is he still living? When was he born, or how old is he?” he asked.

“He’s still living, sir. I don’t know when he was born as I don’t remember ever celebrating his birthday. But I think he’s about 45 or 46 years old, maybe older, sir.”

“Is your mother living?” he asked, looking up at me again.

“Yes,” I replied.

He continued, “Go on then, give me her particulars like your father’s.”

“Well, sir,” I said, “her name is Julia Kilty by her father’s family name. She is from Cork, but she talked about Limerick too. I really don’t know where, though. I don’t know when she was born, but she is about 45 or 46 years old, same as my *Da*.”

“All right, son, and how much money do you have with you?” he asked.

I opened the little cloth pouch I had received yesterday when I arrived and shook out the coins into my open hand, showing them to the clerk. He looked them over and made a count, then looked down at his ledger and spoke out loud while he wrote, “Five pounds sterling, four pence, and one St. Christopher’s medal.”

Without asking another question, he reached over to a small stack of cards on his desk, took one, wrote on it, and stamped it. Then, sliding it on the desk over to me, he said, “Sign your name or make your mark here. This is your immigration card to stay and work in America. Do not lose it. You’ll need it for finding work, to prove you are here legally, and you will need to present it if and when you become a citizen of this country.”

When I made my mark, he pointed over his shoulder to the uniformed men standing at the doors behind him. Then, he folded his hands on his desk without saying a word and waited for me to leave.

I must have been stunned because I don't remember picking up my duffel bag and walking toward the uniforms at the back of the hall. But I do remember the steel doors opening and stepping through them, like a hallway through time itself, and onto the streets of Boston.

The Great American City

Fast-moving steel-rimmed wagon wheels made a hell of a racket on the stone streets, full of people shouting, while the smell of smoke and horse dung filled the air. The "land-sharks," just like the predators in Liverpool, were quick out of the crowd, circling around you, speaking in English and Irish like they were old friends from home. Placing a friendly hand on your shoulder, they slipped the other hand into your pockets if you weren't quick or smart enough to beat them to it.

Across the street from the immigration hall, groups of angry people holding signs I couldn't read shouted and waved their fists at me. I'd seen this type of unwelcoming bunch before, and their intentions were all too clear. *"Only the English back in Ireland and Liverpool didn't like us,"* I thought, *"but they're hostile in America too and don't want us here either. Why then did so many ships with food and aid come to us from Boston?"*

Before I could think any more about it, I moved out of reach of the land-sharks and the mob. I hid the small canvas bag with the little money I had left, the tin hair comb, and the St. Christopher's medal my mother gave me for protection on the journey, safely inside my coat.

A woman in a plain dress with a pin on her collar approached me and smiled. Speaking in Irish, she asked, “Are you under contract? Do you need work? Do you have someone to stay with?”

I knew she meant was I indentured to an employer in America who had paid my sea passage, to work for him for three or more years without a salary, to pay him back for the cost before my contract was fulfilled.

I told her I wasn’t indentured, had no work, and there was no one in Boston waiting for me. I would work for anyone to avoid ending up on the streets alone and penniless. “There now,” she said. “Not to worry. My name is Shannon, and I work for the Charitable Irish Society of Boston. Have you heard of our work back in Ireland?”

I told her I had heard newsreaders talk about the many friendly societies in Boston and New York that sent ships with food and aid to Ireland throughout the famine years. But I did not know her society by name. “We’ve been helping the Irish community in Boston for over a century,” she said. “The society has a place nearby where you can stay briefly, and we will help you find work if we can. Come and wait over here with the others for just a moment, then we’ll leave.”

I was cautious but very happy to meet someone so quickly and grateful that she reached her hand out to me, a complete stranger. I knew the dark fate that could befall you after just a few days on the streets, like what I saw in Liverpool. Then I realized it was people like Shannon and the Irish friendly societies that sent the food ships to Ireland, in spite of the sign wavers.

After joining the others waiting, Shannon returned, and we set out walking. “We’ll be keeping close to the waterfront,” she said, “to avoid the troubles and to get some fresh sea air.” I’d had my fill of fresh sea air, but I was grateful, nonetheless.

I was still dizzy and wobbly in my legs after rolling on the sea for forty days, so I walked a little unsure of myself, paying attention to keeping my balance. Then I heard Shannon's voice saying, "Alright, we're here," and we stopped in front of a red brick warehouse. "Follow me inside and stay together," she said, "and we'll get you settled."

* * *

We followed her through a big iron and wood door into a large room that smelled like seaweed on the beach at low tide, and the air felt damp on our faces. Shannon pointed out the gathering areas for men, women, and families, just like on the *Clara Wheeler*.

At the long dining tables set to one side of the room, everyone sat together and ate side by side. It wasn't crowded like on the ship, so people ate their food quietly and alone for a change.

Near the back wall of the hall, Shannon pointed out a line of tables with clerks that managed work listings you could apply for. I was still feeling the motion of the ship and not too hungry, so I queued up with the other men and waited my turn to see what work I might be able to get.

When it was my turn, I approached the desk, and the clerk asked me my name and age, and if I was "skilled" or "labor." Men who said they were skilled in a trade like blacksmithing, building, or stone working had to prove they had the training and experience to do the work, or they would be sent packing.

People like me, who didn't have a trade, were sent to work all kinds of jobs like canal cutters, trench diggers for water and sewer pipes, rail line layers, textile mill workers, stevedores loading and unloading cargo ships, stable workers, and many other jobs. These were the hardest

jobs with the lowest wages. It was back-breaking work, and only the fittest men were sent to employers to be looked over for hire.

So, it was the desk clerk who decided what job you were suited for, or if you were suited for no job at all. No job offer meant you were returned to the streets, on your own, with no prospects. In Liverpool, I saw what being on the streets with no prospects can do to a man, and I was determined to do anything not to become that man.

When I stepped up to the desk, I told the clerk my name, that I was 20 years old, and that I was labor. He looked up at me for a moment, then he said, "Open your shirt, please." I didn't hesitate and did as he asked, standing there in silence while he saw how terribly thin I was. When he looked away and back at the papers on his desk, I buttoned up my shirt and waited for him to say something.

After writing in his ledger, he took a ticket from a stack on his desk, stamped it, handed it to me, and said, "Cordwainer." Then, motioning to the man behind me to come forward, he nodded his head to one side for me to move along.

I stepped away from the table thinking, "*What does 'cordwainer' mean? What kind of work is this?*" Standing there holding my ticket and wondering what to do or who to ask, I saw another man nearby holding the same ticket as mine. I walked over to him, holding the ticket in my hand so he could see it, and asked him in Irish if he knew what kind of work this was. "*Tá,*" (yes), he replied. "It means bootmaker. We are going to make boots and shoes. We leave in the morning for Milford-town, the boot-making center of America."

My hands went numb, and my stomach churned, on top of being lightheaded and weak in the legs, as I listened to what he said and tried to make sense of it in my tired mind.

Yesterday, I was near death at sea aboard the *Clara Wheeler*. Today, I am standing in Boston city in search of a place to stay and a chance to work. Now I hear that tomorrow, I will be leaving Boston city for a place I have never heard of, to work a job I don't know the first thing about. I remembered a shoe cobbler in Cork who made his rounds in the county. Then we never saw him again, and we heard he died in the Hunger.

I wasn't sure what awaited me in my new place and my new work. But I thanked God and those who gave me a helping hand that I had been saved from living on the city streets and the dark fate of those left to face them alone.

Wednesday, November 24, 1852

At sunrise the next day, we were woken up and told to get dressed quickly if we wanted to get some coffee, bread, and oatmeal before leaving. There wouldn't be anything to eat again until the end of the day.

Outside the building, we queued up in the cold to board the open bench wagons waiting to take us to Milford-town. The man standing at the back of the wagon nearest to me was waving a ticket like mine and shouting, "Cordwainers over here."

When I handed him my ticket, he looked at it, handed it back, and motioned me to get aboard. "Keep your tickets," he said to the group of us. "You'll need to show them when we arrive." Each man boarded the wagon and took a place to sit on the long planks running down either side of the open wagon bed. When it was full, the wagon loader whistled for the drivers to get underway.

As the horses pulled, the wagon jerked, and we moved away from the waterfront. Boston city faded behind us, much like Liverpool had from the deck of the *Clara Wheeler*. I was on my way again, this time to a place I never knew existed.

Clutching my St. Christopher's medal, I buried my hands deep in my coat pockets and stared down at my new ankle boots and my future—one that I never imagined.

Four wagons, carrying twelve men each, crossed Boston city. Their metal-rimmed wheels slipping and grinding against the stone streets, out of time with the steady rhythm of the horseshoes.

After a long while, the creaking and grinding of the wagons and the sharp clacking of horseshoes on the city streets began to muffle. Then the ride smoothed out as the hard stone streets turned into the soft dirt roads of the countryside.

Across Massachusetts

For hours, the wagons moved past thick oak trees almost bare of leaves, lining the roadway like pillars in the hallway of a grand government house. Fields marked out by hand-stacked stones were cut and turned, looking like the harvested fields of Ireland I passed for days on my way to Dublin a lifetime ago.

Just after noon, thin clouds turned the sky light gray, and the wind whipped up swarms of dry leaves around us. I lowered my wool cap in front of my face to shield it from the numbing cold and wind that stung like the wet sea spray on the upper deck of the *Clara Wheeler*.

Every few hours, the wagons stopped to water and feed the horses, letting everyone get down to relieve themselves and shake the numbness out of our legs and arses from bouncing on the hard wagon benches. We took turns drawing water from the pump, and I ate a piece of bread I had saved from the morning breakfast, wrapped up in my pocket.

Near sunset, the wagon drivers lit the kerosene coach lamps up front where they sat, and we continued in the dark. As a light snow began to fall, the coach lamps on the wagons behind us had a fuzzy glow through the snow that looked like fireflies following us in the night.

Traveling in the dark seems much longer than traveling in daylight when fields and trees are clear to see and mark your coming and going. In the dark, there is no sense of time or distance. Only the sense of motion, the sound of turning wagon wheels, the thump of horses' hooves, and the cold—a cold that went right through my clothes and skin, and into my muscles—what little I had left.

Milford-town

The smell of wood smoke came on the air as the horses slowed and turned off the road into the carriage yard in front of a building where men with lanterns stood watching us arrive. As the men came forward and called us to come down with all our belongings and queue up in two lines, a bell in the distance rang out the six o'clock hour.

Walking past us, holding their lanterns to eye level, they asked to see our stamped tickets before moving us along into the building. When they finished inspecting us, they ordered everyone to follow them inside through the barn-sized doors.

Like the Charitable Irish Society waterfront building in Boston, there were cots to sleep on and food being served by two women standing over large steaming pots. We were hungry, having had nothing to eat all day.

We queued up for a bowl of stew, then sat at the long tables and ate in silence. Everyone was too tired and hungry to talk, and there wasn't much to say anyway. I still couldn't eat the heavy parts of the stew, so I soaked my bread in the gravy and ate some soft potatoes and carrots.

I thought, *if they serve oatmeal in the morning, I'll do better with that.* But I knew I would have to get used to heavy food soon, or I'd never build my body strong enough to do my work and succeed. Having a job and staying off the streets, away from the grip of the land-sharks, is strong enough medicine to bring any man back to health.

After the meal, they pointed each of us to a cot, so there was no pushing or fighting to get a bed like on the *Clara Wheeler*. “Get a good night’s sleep, lads,” one of the men said. “First bell is at six o’clock, work begins at seven sharp.”

I laid my duffel bag down, then myself on the cot, fully clothed, holding the St. Christopher’s medal my mother gave me in my hand. That’s the last thing I remember.

Thursday, November 25, 1852

The sound of the morning bell startled me, and I panicked, thinking it was the ship’s bell on the *Clara Wheeler*. Then I noticed a sharp pain in my right hand. When I opened my clenched fist, I saw the image of the St. Christopher’s medal impressed on my palm and realized I had fallen asleep with it in my hand all night.

I was barely awake and staring at the image in my hand when one of the men in charge told us to make up our bunks, wash, and get breakfast. There was no time to think, just do as ordered. Everyone quick-stepped to clean up and get a serving of porridge, bread, and coffee. The porridge was easier on my stomach, as I thought it would be, than the heavy dinner stews. Just as I finished eating, I heard the next bell.

The bells were the first lesson in my new American life. They marked out the day: when to start the next task, when it was time to eat, and when to quit for the day. *From that day and for years to come, I would live by the bells.*

Everyone quickly gathered their belongings and moved outside to queue up in front of a half-dozen men sitting at long tables, lit with kerosene lamps and ledger books. The wagons we arrived in were pulling out of the yard, heading back the way we came last night to fetch another load of men, I supposed.

Ever since I arrived, I couldn't help thinking *how cold it was here compared to Ireland*. I pulled my new coat around me as tight as I could while I stood in the queue, waiting my turn at the desk. One by one, we stepped up to the clerks and handed over the tickets we received in Boston.

When it was my turn, I handed the clerk my ticket. He said, "State your name and age loudly so I can hear it, and clearly so I can understand it." As loud and clear as I could, I replied as he asked. He must have heard me clearly enough because he wrote in his ledger without a word, while the man sitting beside him paged through another ledger and said, "Collins, accounted for."

Then the clerk raised his arm, waving my ticket in the air, and in a loud, clear voice said, "Collins, labor." Behind him, a few men I hadn't noticed stood looking at me without expression. One of them stepped forward and said, "Collins, aye," and exchanged a ticket he was holding with the clerk for mine.

The clerk marked the exchange in his ledger, then turned the page toward me, handed me the pen, and said, "Sign or make your mark here." After I made my mark, the clerk pointed to the man holding my ticket and said, "You work for him now. Go with him."

I nodded to the clerk and said thank you to the new man holding my ticket, who motioned me to join a group of other men he had chosen, standing off to one side. We all stood silent for a few minutes, waiting until our new boss finished his business with the clerk. Then he joined us, and we followed him away from the carriage yard toward some buildings I had seen in the distance when we arrived last night.

* * *

We walked along the road in silence for some time, making a few turns past some shops and houses until we stopped at a building where men outside were loading and unloading wagons filled with animal hides.

Through the doors inside, it was very loud with the sound of hammering and machines clacking. But the smell of leather coming from rows of wooden crates stacked floor to ceiling, with hundreds of newly made boots inside, stuck in my head and was unforgettable.

This is Milford-town, I thought to myself, the place where they make the boots for America. And by the grace of God, I am here and not in the streets of Boston, alone, where anything could happen to me, and probably would.

THE CORDWAINERS

Our group leader kept us to one side of the doorway and out of the way of men moving materials in and out of the building. Then a man came toward us and stepped up onto one of the wooden crates so we could all see him. He spoke to us in English while another man beside him translated into Irish.

“Men, you are now employed by the Godfrey, Colburn & Company, the finest boot maker in Milford, Massachusetts, and America. You will see to it that you do not cast a black mark upon the reputation of this company that has taken you in. You will learn your jobs quickly and do them well if you are to remain employed here.

Insubordination to your bosses or political agitation of any type will not be tolerated and will be dealt with at once, including dismissal from this company and a black ball in the cordwainers’ trade in this town that will surely follow you. When your name is called, step forward to receive your assignments.”

One by one, they called our names, then assigned us to one of a few men there dressed in leather aprons. “Okay, follow me,” the man I was assigned to said, and we walked behind him

into the building past rows of men at benches and tables hammering, cutting, and stretching leather onto wooden blocks shaped like a foot.

When we stopped, he motioned for us to line up facing a wall piled with leather hides laid on wooden planks off the floor. “I am Conor McNessa, and you are assigned to me. Meet me here every morning for your work assignment and return here when you finish. Whenever you hear the bell, come back here. Today, you will unload the wagons and stack the hides against this wall. Now, follow me.”

We followed McNessa back through the building, out the main doors to a line of wagons parked outside, piled high with leather hides. Our job was to unload the hides one by one, carry them back inside, and stack them where McNessa showed us. At the wagon, I turned my back to face the wagon bed where two men stood on either side of the pile of hides.

Each man grabbed one side of the hide with both hands. Together, they carried it forward and laid it smooth side down across my shoulders like a cape. I reached my arms straight back over my shoulders, grabbed the rough side with my fingers, and drew the edge of the hide into my palms. With my thumbs pressed against the smooth side underneath, I dug my fingers in hard to get a firm grip.

My right palm burned with pain where I had branded it with the St. Christopher’s medal in my sleep. The pain was so sharp, I thought, *Jesus, I’m going to drop this right here and lose my job before it even starts. How am I going to do this all day?*

In less than half a minute, we all received a hide, then followed McNessa back into the building to where we started. He pointed to a pile or an empty spot for us to drop the hide. Together with McNessa, each man picked up his hide, placed it on the pile, and adjusted it to lie flat.

“All right then, lads,” he said, “you know what to do. Bring me those hides.” One trip after another, we walked back and forth between the wagons and the stacking piles, carrying hides weighing about four stone (60 lbs.) each, some heavier. My fingers cramped, my palms swelled, and my forearms ached, but I couldn’t press out the cramps because my hands were too sore.

For hours, we emptied one wagon after another. The scent of tanned leather filled the air, mingling with the sweat and muscle of the workers. Everyone stopped when we heard the bell and headed in different directions. We walked back, as instructed, to where McNessa told us to gather at the bells. Then we followed him out through the back of the building, across a yard, and into another building where a line of women stood behind food tables serving the midday meal.

* * *

When I entered the dining hall, I heard the sound of men talking and laughing in a familiar way. Once, it had been a common sound, but that was far back in my boyhood in Ireland, before the famine years. *Isn't it strange, I thought, how something so common and unexpected can recall a memory from a time when I remember almost nothing?*

I moved along the serving line, got a bowl of stew and bread, and reached the end where a clerk asked my name and made a check mark in his ledger, just like they did at breakfast and everywhere else.

A lot of men took their food from the serving line, but many carried their own bundles of stacked tins with cooked food inside. These men were married or lived in boarding houses in town that provided room and meals. Most of the older men took their food from the company serving line. I supposed it was because they lived alone and had no wives or children to cook for them.

I tried to eat a little more stew, but it was not much better than yesterday. It was still harder to swallow than breakfast porridge and coffee. Just as we finished eating, the work bell rang, and we moved quickly behind McNessa, continuing to unload hides from the wagons until sunset.

All day, I didn't feel good in my gut, likely because of the heavier food and eating more in one sitting than I ever had during the Hunger years. Certainly, more than during the entire forty-day voyage on the *Clara Wheeler*.

When we finished, McNessa picked up a kerosene lamp and led us through the dark workshop, out the back, and across the yard again to the meal hall for supper. Before he let us queue up at the serving line, he sent us to the wash basins to clean our hands and faces with soap and comb our hair.

Tonight, the serving women ladled out stewed mutton, they said, and freshly made bread. When I started eating, it didn't feel as heavy as the other stews, and it tasted good. I was hungry but still felt a little sick, so I ate less than I wanted to, just to be safe.

Thank God, it stayed in me, and I didn't retch it up. I don't think I could manage the sight or smell of vomit again for the rest of my life. When the end-of-supper bell rang, McNessa motioned for us to put our plates and spoons on the board at the end of the food line and follow him.

* * *

Outside the dining hall, it was biting cold as we walked across the yard toward the lamps hanging on the front posts of a long barn. Inside were rows of bunk beds stacked two high and about two feet apart all the way down to the end of the room.