A Brief History of the Heart

John Kay

Lying in a puddle in the rain.
People walked around it not
knowing whether to take it seriously.
It thumped, making little splashes.
A man held his umbrella over it
for a few minutes before moving on.
A pigeon landed and pecked at it
a few times before flying off.

Then, as an ambulance arrived,
a shiny, black rat snatched the heart
and vanished up a dark alley.
The children cheered and clapped.

Katie Ireland

Hunter Liguore

They said God was punishing Ireland with the blight, like He did to
Pharaoh when He sent locusts into Egypt. Outsiders saw us as an island
of sinners. The devil and his minions had taken refuge on our island, far
from the righteous do-gooders of the world, and poisoned our food. But
I knew in my heart this wasn’t true.

When I looked into the sweet face of my baby sister, Ellen, before
she was taken by fever, her eyes had a tender peace. Eyes that were aimed
heavenward, as if she knew such a place existed, and she was going to it.
Certainly, she didn’t go to hell. Still an infant, she didn’t know what sin
was. And so, those people saying God wasn’t on our side didn’t know the
whole story.

When Ellen died she was just one of thirty-six others who happened to
be called the same day. Some died of starvation, others of consumption,
and most from fever. Mother and Father were still alive then, nearly a
year ago now. We didn’t have money enough for a proper burial, and so
we buried her in a big hole with all the rest. Mother was partially consoled
because she believed Ellen wouldn’t see God alone. Mrs. Smith, our
former neighbor, died of fever too. Mother prayed especially for Mrs.
Smith’s soul to keep watch over Ellen as they made their way to heaven.
She had loved Ellen and often looked after her when circumstance
occasioned it.

Father had asked the men digging the hole if they would place a
small, wooden cross on the coffin, which he had finished whittling, but I
don’t know if they complied with his wishes, and since he hadn’t money,
they weren’t obligated.

When the dead were covered with silt, and the shovels stopped, it
started to rain. The women wept, their tears mixing with the rain, cleaning
the dirt from their faces. I tried not to cry, believing Ellen had gone to
a better place. As those that gathered started to leave, Mother told us to
say our peace, then led us back to our home. Back when we had a home.

I tried not to think about Mother and Father after they died. An
abbot once told me their souls would be afflicted if I thought of them,
and any hope of finding peace in the afterlife would be futile. I kept my mind free of them, though it was very difficult since they were my only comfort in trying times. One of my last remembrances came the first time I met the man.

It’s hard to look back at the way Fate’s path winds and bends towards us, forcing us into predicaments born of someone else’s making. I remember the sky the most, the day I met the man. He was on top of me, my head tilted to the side, allowing me to see land and heaven. I couldn’t bear the pain anymore, down below, when the man was moving in and out of me. My bones creaked together, worn and frail from not eating, like Father’s old till, which nearly broke to pieces whenever he kicked it.

On my back, I could see how pale the sky looked, unaffected by the blight. It only seemed real to me when I blinked. A black bird flew by, perhaps going to America where indigo corn grew plentifully. Mother and Father’s faces took shape in the white void, and I closed my eyes, not wanting them to see how I was getting on.

I had met the man in town one morn, while my siblings waited in line for soup given out by the Quaker folk that had come over from the mainland. He made a bargain with me, to get a loaf of bread and square of cheese. I saw in his bags dried herring and something bound up in a jar. Since Mother and Father had passed on, and my two older brothers were missing or dead, I was the oldest and the one responsible for the needs of my family.

Patty was holding onto the tattered shirt of Eric, the youngest, nearly six, while looking over Maggie’s shoulder at the man, who was offering more food than we had known in nearly a year’s time. Maggie was always the rolly one in the family, always thick around the middle. Nearly one and twenty, she was hardly the same girl I remembered growing up with. Now a pale bluish skin hid beneath the dirt, making her blue eyes gray; lost forever were her once rose-colored cheeks.

Maggie didn’t know what the man offered had come with a high price. The man turned so only I could hear him, and with his proper English accent, said he’d give the bread and cheese if I did the thing for him. The words rolled off his tongue like a serpent’s. He told me to meet him in the forest, not far from the village, near to where Ellen had been buried.

I hadn’t meant to meet the man, but waiting in line for the remainder of the afternoon behind three hundred other starving souls didn’t amount to our share. When it was nearly our turn, Eric ran away. I sent Patty to fetch him. The two were gone so long that they missed their turns in the line. Maggie and I had managed to come out each with a bowl of soup and hunk of bread. The Quaker women wouldn’t let us take more, no matter how we supplicated.

We waited for Patty to return with Eric. A woman with six babies to feed had been begging in the street nearby. The woman stopped us and pleaded for us to give her our food. I told her fairly, no. As it was, we hadn’t eaten since the morning prior. The woman begged on, her voice soaring over the footsteps of those passing by, until finally, she ripped at my arm sleeve, knocking the bowl from my hands. The soup bubbled up on the dry dirt, as her children fled to it, licking it with their tongues and scraping it with their hands. Then the dogs came competing for it. The woman commanded her children to eat up. She was unnatural with rage, and knocked me over, stealing the bread from my hands. Maggie pulled me to my feet and then dragged me through the crowd, carefully guarding the one bowl of soup.

When Patty and Eric returned, the kitchen had closed its doors. They had fallen short of soup, a regular occurrence, and everyone was told to come back tomorrow. We decided to head off the main road into the forest, away from the crowds, which often turned riotous after the food was gone.

We took refuge on a bare hillside, and passed the soup bowl around, each drinking a mouthful. With four mouths, it didn’t quell the pain in our stomachs. Eric started to cry and so I gave him my portion of the bread to calm him.

Our days revolved around the soup kitchen. When it was closed we begged in the streets, or near the hotel where rich travelers often stayed. But we weren’t the only ones and so it did not always pay to do so.

It was toward the late afternoon, when the sun was cooler, and the sky turned pale, that I saw the man again. He was riding horseback—he in his clean brown coat, with his thick legs straddling the beast. I was not conscious that I had risen and gone towards him, like Lazarus to Christ, but I had, and before I could reverse my course, he turned to see me. Smiling he was, like a fat bull.

I told Maggie to take Patty and Eric, and follow the clouds, like Mother used to tell us to do when she wanted us out of the house. But
there weren’t any clouds in the sky that afternoon for them to follow. “Go on,” I said, pointing to the next hilltop. “And don’t come back ’til I come for you.”

A lawyer or traveler, I guessed. The man’s fingernails were the cleanest I’d ever seen. He smelled of dried soap, as he sweated on top of me. The man grunted and groaned, causing me to wonder if it pained him as much as it did me, and then I pondered why he would want to do it at all. A strand of my hair had fallen into my eyes. Normally blond, it had darkened, and its oily nature made it look like one of the yellow grasses we picked from the bog to sleep upon.

My mind slipped back to Mother and Father. Like in a dream, their faces smiled at me. My thoughts went back to happier days when we lived on our land, before it had been taken. Sheep and chickens roamed the fields, and a mound of potatoes was always stored away in the rafters of the old barn my father had built. Then came the fated day, when Father was telling Mother we hadn’t any potato left, and the few he could find in the ground were rotten and marked with the blight.

I remember it had later rained for days. One night Father didn’t come home for supper. I asked mother where he’d gone. She told me he went to find food for us. It was dark before he came home, and he was smiling, like nothing was wrong, handing mother six pheasant eggs he collected in the forest. The next morning we were woken by the sheriff, who had come to arrest both Father and Mother for stealing. The landlord made an example out of them, making sure all his tenants knew that everything in the forest was his property, including the eggs his pheasants laid. He said he wouldn’t tolerate stealing, and so hanged Mother and Father before noon the very next day.

Mother and Father, like Ellen, didn’t receive a proper burial. We couldn’t afford one coffin, and certainly not two. The minister had taken leave, so there was no one qualified to absolve their sins. I took it upon myself to ask God for His forgiveness, and to consider the fact my parents had been taken wrongfully. I believe with all my heart they have gone to heaven. When the abbot visited our village a few months later, he said he would pray to God to let them into heaven, granted I stopped thinking on them so much, and to let their souls be.

Mother and Father were buried a month before harvest time. I had just turned seven and twenty. Father had arranged for me to be married to John McIntire, a farmer twenty years my senior. After Father died and the land had been taken away, Mr. McIntire came around less, until one day I heard he had been knifed to death in the village south of ours. Rumor had it he was seeing a woman with riches and a jealous husband.

When the man was done with it, he wiped himself clean, and started packing up his belongings, preparing to leave before he gave me my due. My voice sounding like a hoarse bird, I reminded him. The man looked me square in the eye and said, “I don’t owe you a thing.”

Just then, Maggie called from the bog not too far away. “Katie, come quickly, Mr. O’Brien’s passing by over the next hill. Come quick, yeah? Before he’s too far gone to catch up to.” She waved me on, as Eric ran to her side and clutched her dress, repeating my name over and again.

“You should get on to them, Katie,” the man said, fixing his sweaty, brown hair with his hands, the sound of my name making me stand straighter.

“Please, sir, what we agreed upon, for the young ones then?” I pleaded, touching his jacket slightly, to stop him from saddling his horse. “We had a deal, didn’t we?”

“Well,” he sighed, squinting to block the sun splitting through the gray sky. “I won’t be having Katie Ireland saying I didn’t keep my side of a bargain.”

My mouth salivated when he pulled out his sack of food. If I had murder in my heart, I would’ve killed him right there for it. I saw figs, bread, cheese, herring, jams, and carrots. The smell of the bread made my stomach grumble loudly. The man broke the bread in half and handed it to me.

“And the cheese, sir. Don’t forget the cheese.”

“A greedy one, aren’t you. Don’t push your luck,” he said. “There’ll be more for you in the future if you mind your manners.” The man swiped at his hair once more, and closed the bag. He mounted the horse. His cheeks were red with warmth, and his white collar was soaked from sweat.

I stood clutching the bread like the Holy Book. “Please, sir, it was but my first.” Tears had formed in my eyes, and rolled down my cheeks, as if I had planned for it, just as he looked down upon me.

“You hardly expect me to believe this rubbish?”

My mouth opened, but my words had no wings to escape. The man rode away.

Maggie broke my statue-like stance by pulling my arm. I nearly dropped the bread.

“What a kind man,” she said, taking the bread from me, “to give us such a large piece.” She placed a small piece into my shaking hand, and
ran off to Patty and Eric, placing bits of crumbling bread in their hands as well.

As we savored the bread, upon the hillside overlooking the meadow, the sun came out of hiding for good. We ate every crumb that fell and forgot all about the world at large, and Mr. O’Brien’s visit. Although we had been turned out by Mr. O’Brien, he was still the landlord, and so we looked to him as a source of benefit, even if he hadn’t willingly bestowed anything upon us lately. Once, before summer arrived, he had given us indigo corn from America. We didn’t know how to cook it, and ate it raw from the cob, which only made Patty and Eric sick.

Later that evening, we gathered with neighbors near the bogs. Bonfires were lit. We listened to tales about Mr. O’Brien who apparently wanted us off his land for good, if we could not pay. This was believed to be the real reason he had come back. Patrick Tanner, a cousin of Mrs. Smith’s, had told me O’Brien was shipping Irish off to America since it was cheaper than feeding us. Some of the older men talked about murdering him, while the women said we should go to speak to him directly, claiming he’d not do such a barbarous thing to his own people.

Patrick had a friend who worked at the manor and told him an English lawyer had arrived to draw up the legal papers allowing O’Brien to ship us away. Said too, that it was happening all over Ireland where the blight had taken a heavy toll. A wave of discordance spread among the people gathered. Eric started to cry. His head was hot with fever. I took him in my arms and rocked him, then carried him off to where we had laid out the dried grasses to sleep upon. I kissed his forehead and told him to sleep. I left him there and went to the spring for water.

The water was cold and murky, but enough to clean with. I could smell the man on my clothes and skin. Maggie joined me, fixing my hair behind my ear. She had managed to find a handful of wild onions, and popped one into my mouth and hugged me. Happy she was, humming one of Mother’s songs. Dogs circled the hills, waiting for one of us to die.

In three nights Eric died of fever. He stopped eating on the second, and when he talked about seeing Grand-pa-pa, we knew his time was short. I had gone to town on the second night to arrange for someone to bury him. I had hoped to find the resident abbot or minister, but both had been called elsewhere.

The hotel pub was the only place still open. Inside, music played by dim candlelight. The smell of roasted meat permeated the air. Two men, dressed in rich suits, stumbled from the bar and tried to seize me. Having my senses about me, I pulled free, and dodged around the back of the building.

From a window I could see the man, the lawyer from England, inside drinking beer at a table. I tapped on the glass until he saw me. He motioned for me to let him alone, but I persisted. Eventually, he came out to me, reeking of beer and stale food, a mug of the ale still in hand, which he spilled on my bare foot. Before I could say a word his hand was upon my breast, squeezing it like uncooked dough.

“My baby brother lays sick. I fear he will die through the night. I’ve no means to provide for a burial.”

“So, what’s it to me?”

“Please, will you help me?” My hands fell upon his clean, soft shirt, trying at best to keep him from leaving.

“You’ll get me dirty, won’t you?” He snatched my hands away, and then pushed me back against the wall of the building. I heard his mug drop to the ground as he kissed my neck, wetting it as a dog would.

“Please sir, a small price it would be for you, that I may pay a respectable man to dig a grave for him.”

He hiked my dress up to my waist and bore his hard rod into me. This time I was ready for it, and tightened my legs and muscles, and moved with him, instead of against. His breath stopped at one point, and I thought he might have died, but it came back, and his entire form reanimated.

The lawyer moved away from me, stumbling, drunk as he was, and barked, “You made me drop my ale.” He fell to one knee and scooped the mug up, then stood, and placed two coins in my hand, while calling me a damned whore.

With the lawyer’s allowance, I was able to pay a digger to bury Eric. He was laid to rest without a minister’s blessing on a hillside near to Ellen’s grave. We prayed she was there for him, to guide him to heaven’s door, since he was alone. We even went so far as to ask Christ to take him upon his knee, when he might arrive, as Eric went without sin.

Nearly five months have passed that I’ve made it a regular occurrence to visit the lawyer secretly, without Maggie or Patty knowing what I was on about. The man spent most of his time at the O’Brien manor, negotiating contracts and selling lands. He told me he found O’Brien’s manor stuffy, and stayed as often as he could at the hotel pub. It was
during these moments that I took myself to him, and he in return kept us three alive in the way of bread and cheese, once with herring and a crock of beer, and once when he was feeling good about himself, a hunk of cooked meat.

I had learned the man came from a respectable family in North Wales where he was schooled like his father-in-law. He had been promised to marry a girl, a girl much like me, when he returned after his business was finished with Mr. O’Brien.

Often, I thought there might have been a gentle side to the lawyer. (I had never asked his name.) I saw the young boy in him when he asked me to sleep by his side until morning, forfeiting a lonely bed for my company. It was these rare moments, when I was able to bargain for more of an allowance for myself and my sisters—real money I’d later use to buy food, allowing us a respite from the soup-line, sometimes for an entire day.

I presumed my sisters never asked about the gifts, how I came by them, since they had known about the lawyer on some level. Once, Patty in her naivety asked if the lawyer was planning to marry me. It was Maggie who reprimanded her with a slap on the arm. She never spoke again of it.

I could tell the lawyer’s work was nearing completion. My mind often looked for ways to keep him, though I hated the sight of him. The last night I lay with him, I kept awake hoping to rise to courage in order to murder him in his sleep, knowing full well that his leather chest contained enough money for me to take my sisters away and live happily for a long time.

When he awoke, I cried quietly, knowing I had lost my one chance of saving us. His arm curled around my naked waist, and he pulled me against his warm body. In many ways he was like a husband to me. We had shared in all the mysteries a husband and wife conceal together, and in my womb had grown a child born of him.

The morning sun bore its way through the cheap curtains, as he took me a last and final time. I lost myself in the noisy squeal of the bed, the barking dog in the street below, and the meadows where I ran freely as a child.

As he dressed, he looked me over without shame. “Have you worms?” he asked plainly, insensitively, and pointed to my bulging stomach. “I should say I shouldn’t want to catch such a thing.”

“No,” I said, biting my tongue, betraying myself with more tears.

“Is it mine?” I looked away.

“It’ll die before it’ll see the age of two.” He was dressed, his bags ready to depart. “I’ll be back to England in a day or two.” He dropped some money on the rumpled sheet beside my leg. “Right.” He paused. “I’m off then.”

I laid there until the matron kicked me out; forcing me to pay her for the extra time I had stayed.

I borrowed thread and needle from one of the Quakers at the kitchen and sewed the money the man left me up in my dress, to save for when the child came. Maggie and Patty were indifferent, knowing full well my soul was damned to hell, since I was not married. Most women chose to live unmarried and celibate, living their lives for God, but now my sin shone on me like the blight.

The next day, word traveled from the O’Brien manor that names were being drawn across the estate for those who would be forced to board one of the coffin ships bound for America. They were called such since most of the ships gone across the Atlantic didn’t make it to shore without losing more than half their passengers. The list of names would be known the next day, and all O’Brien’s tenants, former or present, were told to go to the manor.

I thought nothing of the day. It was neither cold nor hot, nor sunny or gray. A slight wind rolled through occasionally. We traveled by foot through the forest, along a path that ran parallel to a running stream. Patty noticed it first, the gathering of men and women around a bend, next to a fallen tree. “Look, something has happened.” She pointed, looking back at me. As we neared, I heard a man say a horse lost its footing on the dead log, causing the rider to be thrown.

“He was dead instantly,” another said.

Peering between the legs of those that gathered, I could see a bloody rock and a body lying still beside it.

“His head hit the rock.”

“Who is he?”

“Not one of us.”

“A foreigner,” a woman speculated. “Look at his fancy clothes.”

“The lawyer responsible for sending us to our doom!” a man shouted.

My heart throbbed when I heard this, and I gasped, clinging to Maggie’s arm.

“Look here!”
I knew by his elation he’d stumbled upon my lawyer’s chest of money. A fiery battle for it ensued; bodies shuffled and fought and pilfered all his possessions. Maggie and Patty disappeared from my vision. I moved away from the riot, and took refuge against the tree on the opposite side of the trail. The sounds of fists beating flesh, and men and women screaming at one another overtook me with fear, until it was done.

I didn’t move until the others were gone and Patty kneeled at my side. She clutched a small hand-sewn poppet in her hand; stitched on its blue garment was the name Christopher. She put the thing into my hands and said, “Maybe it was for your lil’ one.” I didn’t know what to think. Was it one of his possessions? Did fate wish to tempt me into thinking he was riding this trail to find me, to marry me, make an honest woman of me, so my soul would not be condemned to the fiery depths of hell? Was he coming with a token of affection for my child, our child, or was this merely a deception, a trick, a slap once more to my face, that said he had a child of his own waiting for him elsewhere, maybe in Wales, maybe in another village in Ireland?

I knelt at his body, now picked over like a carcass left for the dogs and vultures alike. I could hear his voice in my head saying, “Oh Katie Ireland, Katie Ireland, what would you do without me? Tell me, Katie Ireland.” I should’ve killed him when I had the chance. Would God have faulted me since he was predestined to die regardless?

The boat for New York was filled tightly with Irish, and set sail on All Saints’ Day. My sisters and I held hands as we said goodbye to Ireland, to the blight, to the land our father and mother died for, and to the lawyer. Some women sang a somber song, as the coast bore away in my memory. “Oh, Ireland, we shall not forget thee,” an old man shouted. He would not make the full journey, nor would my sister Patty, whom we buried overboard with prayers into the cold, cruel sea.

With the money saved and sewn into my dress, Maggie and I were able to buy us rent in a boarding house, where we shared a room with at least a hundred other girls like ourselves. As the weeks passed, Maggie took a job in a washing room, while I worked cleaning house for a wealthy family. The Benjamins were good to me, paid me well, that is, compared to what Maggie made working twice as hard and long. But we pooled our money together and tried to get by.

A week before Christmas the child came early. I had finished work for the day and left by way of the side door, not noticing the ice on the steps. I fell, ramming my back against the brick stairs. I couldn’t move, for the stinging pain paralyzed my back momentarily, and then my water broke. I didn’t call for help. I tried to get up, feeling I had faced harder, when a man with a fancy suit scooped me up in his arm. I passed out then, right as I looked into his handsome eyes.

Maggie was sent for and arrived just as little Christopher let out his first cry late that night. The lady I worked for, Mrs. Benjamin, had called a proper midwife, and so my baby was brought forth in a real bed with clean linens, and wealth all about it. I was allowed three days respite from work. In that time, I held and loved my baby every moment, staving off sleep as best I could, or until Maggie came home and took Christopher from my arms, forcing me to rest, lest I would never regain my strength.

The gentleman who had rescued me was fittingly a lawyer, a friend of the Benjamins, who was late for an informal dinner that evening. While I was still recuperating, he asked Mrs. Benjamin to disclose my whereabouts and surprisingly he paid me a visit.

His name was Mr. Manross, Mr. Elijah Manross. He inquired about my health and questioned me for the whereabouts of the child’s father. It was Maggie to tell the lie of it, of how we were set to marry, but how the baby’s father was killed during the blight, making only small provisions for us to come to America, hoping to save his baby from a terrible life. I was made Mr. Manross’s wife the first of the new year.

They say God punished Ireland with the blight, that Ireland was a land rotting away with sinners. Those doing all the talking didn’t know the whole story. Surely, there were those who’d sinned knowingly, as if drinking from the same cup as the devil, but then there were others, the innocent, who’d spent a whole day upon starvation, wondering when the sky would part, enough to let the sun in just a wee bit to blot out some of the gray. I haven’t decided yet, which am I, an innocent or a sinner.