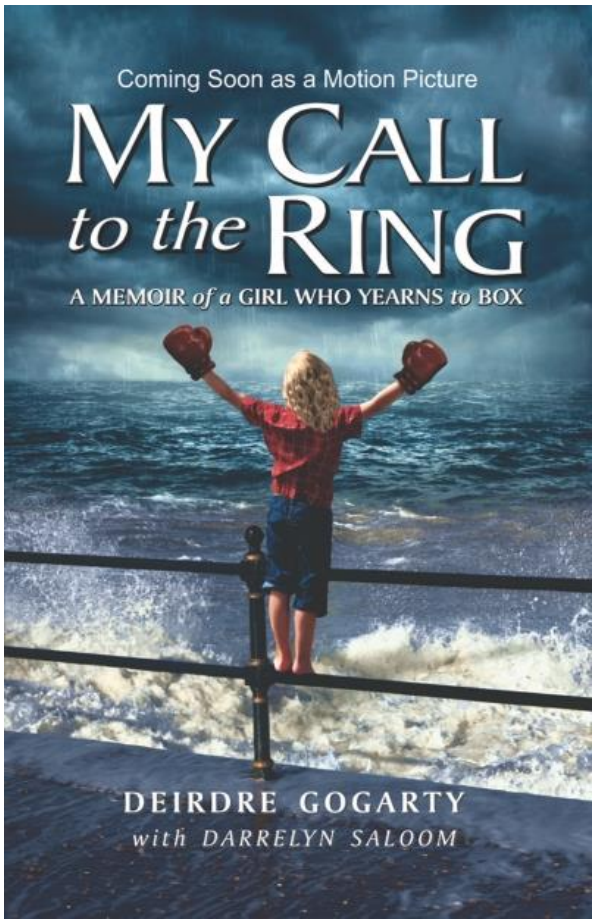

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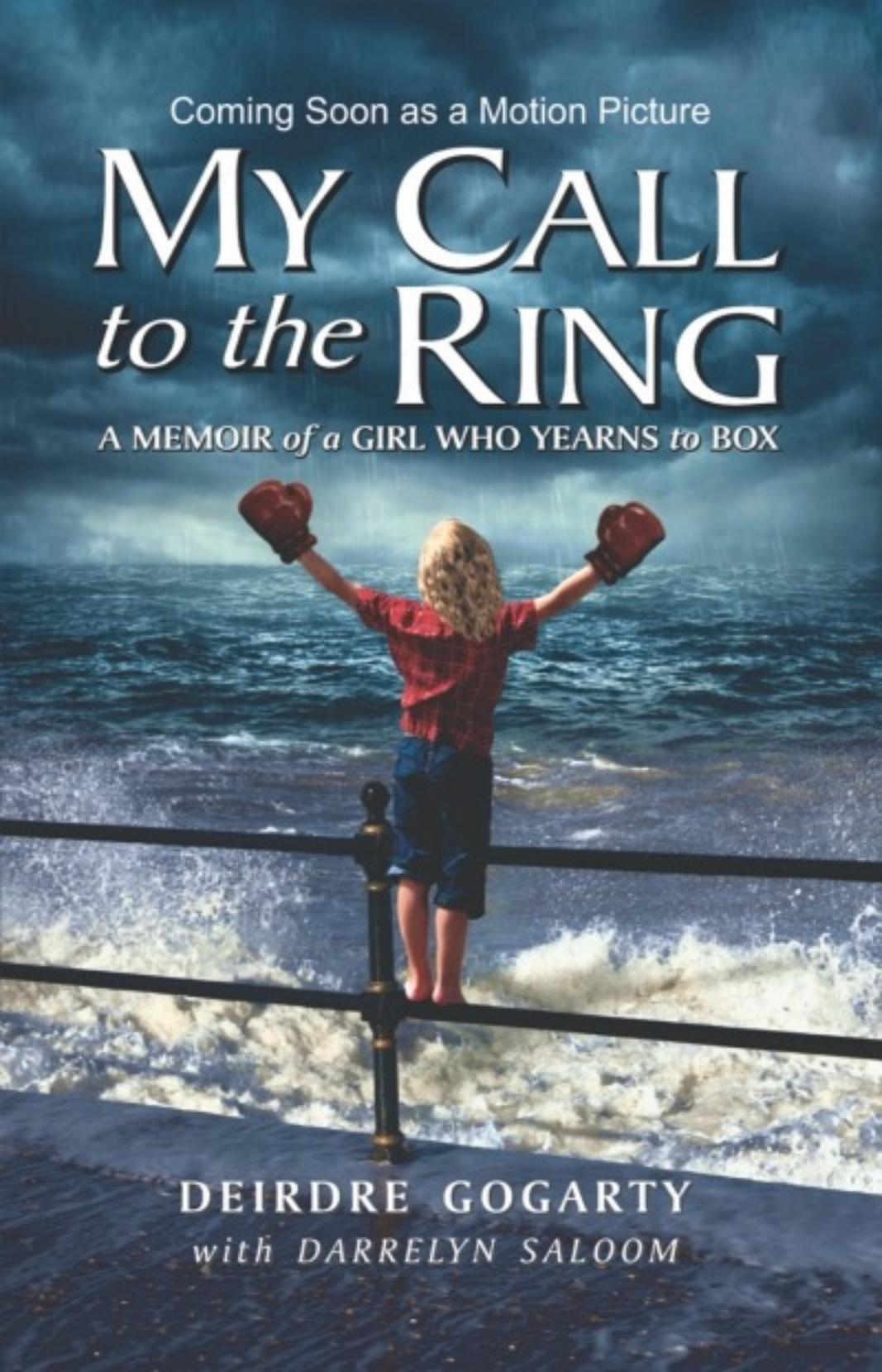

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with DARRELYN SALOOM

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A note from Deirdre Gogarty:

This memoir is a recollection of a period in my life spanning twenty-five years. I have described the people and circumstances included, to the best of my memory, from a first-person/present-tense point-of-view. This true story is written from my own experience and personal opinion. This is not an attempt to portray any individuals' full physical appearance, personality traits, or moral character.

Prologue

Sisters of No Mercy

Her eyes meet mine from where she hangs on the peeling grey wall, and I wonder if it's scorn or pity I see in the Virgin Mary's stare. Crucifixes hang like X-marks showing me the way to my classroom inside the Loreto Convent in Balbriggan, Ireland. I'm quiet at my school desk where I listen to children's shoes slap shiny floors and echo down the long halls. In the dim light my classroom is colorless and smells like floor wax, chalk, and musty old books. Every surface is cold and hard, especially under my bottom. Smoked glass windows eclipse the slightest glimpse of birds or trees.

A vivid painting of Jesus hangs above the blackboard. He's impaled on a cross with a wound weeping down his chest, his skin blue, his head hanging from murder. The nuns say he died for us and we're all sinners, and I think that must be the reason the sisters seem always annoyed with me. But I'm only three, so I don't tell them I didn't mean for Jesus to die.

Mother Imelda scrawls on the blackboard with chalk as stiff and white as her fingers. I have no choice but to endure long, mind-numbing hours while she drones on and on. So I daydream until the lunch bell rings. Herded to the canteen

room, I slurp oxtail cubes in warm water.

The clear brown soup does nothing to fill my tummy but inflates my bladder beyond capacity. Back in the classroom I'm afraid to raise my hand to be excused. Mother Imelda is still writing on the blackboard and will be bothered if I interrupt her. I hold and hold. It can't be much longer until the bell. Suddenly, despite resisting with all my might, my seat grows warm and my face burns hot.

Seconds later, the bell rings. I sit in my pool of urine and wait for everyone to leave. But one of the girls spots the dark stain around my skirt. A gaggle of classmates points and snickers at my humiliating predicament. The nun marches over to investigate and plucks me off the molded plastic chair. My puddle of pee swims in the concave seat, a bubble floats on top, and the girls burst into laughter. The nun hisses at them and they scurry away like rats.

"Lord blesses! Look at the state of you, acting like butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. An animal has better manners," she snarls. "Follow me. You're going to take those clothes off at once."

Half naked, I watch Mother Imelda grab a kitchen cloth, swoosh my urine off the chair, and then hurl it into a sink. When she hands me a sour towel to dry myself, I thank the Lord above I wore bottle-green underwear as per uniform code.

"I'll give you a hockey skirt to wear home. You'll have to pay for it, and your mother will be very vexed with you," she says, shaking her bony finger at me. She then hands me a plastic bag containing my wet underwear and skirt.

"Thank you, Sister. Sorry, Sister," I mumble as I slink out the door and dash for the bus home, where no one takes pity on me. And I decide that neither does the Virgin Mary.

All through school the numbers and letters dance in my head, so my homework is never complete. Mother Imelda marks red Xs through my conjured answers, makes certain

other pupils know about my failings, and scolds me for not listening. Her efforts do not reach me, for my mind wanders beyond the banks of the River Boyne, far away from nuns and books and the eyes of the Virgin Mary. The only lesson that settles on me is that I don't belong here. What I yearn for won't be delivered with sympathy or pity—I'll have to fight for it.

Chapter 1

Jack the Giant Killer

At night, lights from fishing trawlers and cargo ships glide across my bedroom walls. Sounds of foghorns float in from the Irish Sea as I climb into the bunk bed above my brother Brian, who is home for the weekend from an institution for the mentally handicapped. I ask him if he ever feels lonely like the ships far out to sea, but he does not answer. Mum says Brian could talk when he was four. But then he stopped. He has not spoken since. Not for twelve years. And during the decade I've shared a room with him, my own need to communicate has grown until it must be true that my desire for conversation is as strong as Brian's silence.

With no one to answer me back, I stop talking and listen to distant chattering, laughing, and the clinking of wine glasses. A loud whoop of laughter means Dad's telling one of his jokes. He always has a crowd around him. Mum and Dad are great entertainers and have lots of wine-drinking friends. Cigar smoke swirls its way to my room, and I breathe in the scent as I drift off to sleep.

Weeks pass with no parties, and something's wrong with my mother.

I find Dad in his workshop, but he won't leave his

hammer and saws and drills. He says Mum will be fine. But I'm eleven— and I am terrified by her blankness. I tell him she's screeching and acting insane. He says again that she will be fine. But I don't think so. For days she has seemed an empty shell, a ghost. I feel I could pass my hand right through her body. Earlier today, as she drove me home from the train station on my last day of school at the Loreto Convent, she forced my friend Peter Harmon into a ditch on his bike. Now she's collapsed on the kitchen floor and wailing that my dad never loved her.

She's inconsolable. So I brown thick slices of bread and slather on her favorite marmalade. I place the snack on a dish and set it on the floor beside her. I cannot think of a word to say, so I also feed my dog Shoobee and escape to my bedroom.

Shoobee follows and studies me as I munch toast and stare at her long, black-and-white coat. Black fur circles her eyes and down her long ears. Her white muzzle makes her moist black nose stand out like a dollop of chocolate on top of vanilla ice cream. She is my constant companion and the best friend I've ever had. I look at Shoobee and I've got Mum to thank. She fought for me to have a dog because Dad doesn't like pets. I feel guilty for not sympathizing with Mum more now that she's down and needs a hand, but her dramatics just make it so hard.

A loud crash brings me running to the kitchen. The dish I offered Mum is shattered across the floor, and the sticky marmalade has glued the toast to the wall. My mother jerks open the dishwasher, pulls out a ceramic bowl, and throws it through the kitchen window. I scream at her to stop as shards of glass crash into the sink. She picks up another bowl—"Stop that bloody nonsense!" Dad yells as he bursts through the doorway.

She hurls the bowl through another window as Dad grabs her arms. Moaning and sobbing, Mum wrestles with

him. As if his touch has sapped her strength, she buckles and drops back to the floor. I am unable to bear her hysterics, and I run to my room.

Even as the commotion fades, through the wall I can hear my mother muttering obscenities and Dad sweeping the avalanche of broken glass and ceramics. As tears soak my pillow, I begin to understand why my brothers, David and Shane, and my sisters, Katherine, Sheena, and Adrienne, have all moved away.

Noise from Dad's workshop jars me awake in the morning and I head to the kitchen. My parents' bedroom door is closed. The absence of light underneath tells me Mum's still in bed. I creep past to find boarded-up windows darkening the kitchen— confirmation last night's drama was not a bad dream.

Inspecting the dustbin, I notice the kitchenware my mother chose to destroy were the chipped mixing bowls, long worn and faded. The good dishes at the front of the dishwasher remain untouched. Mum had her wits about her all right, and I'm angry she put us through such a nightmare.

Frustrated, I search for my father and find him in his workshop. Unlike the heavy stillness of the house, my father's workshop is abuzz with activity. The stench of resin forces me to breathe through my mouth as I watch Dad and his eight employees labor on his latest project to build a forty-five foot yacht. The massive fiberglass hull is already constructed and sits upside down in the boatyard. Fishermen nicknamed the hull "Titanic," and I don't know if that's good or bad.

Two of the boat builders whisper to each other. One removes his cap and scratches his forehead as he stares at the yacht's blueprints. But Dad seems to know exactly what needs to be done as he explains the next steps to them. He cheers the men with descriptions of beams and bulkheads, and then he cranks up his wood saw. Baffled by my father's

enthusiasm after last night's drama, I return to the house.

Mum's still sleeping as I make a bowl of Ready Brek and turn on the television, keeping the volume on low. Switching through our four stations, I hear a name that grabs my attention: *Dempsey*. A man with cropped, black hair punches a heavy bag in a black-and-white film clip. The bag swings with ease after each strike of his leather-mitted fists. His sinewy muscles flex across his chest and ripple down his arms. He turns to the crowd of onlookers and flashes a warm grin. Men and women in old- fashioned hats and clothes smile and applaud. This handsome yet rugged man the narrator describes as an "American icon" captivates me.

The commentator claims Jack Dempsey has changed boxing from a stiff, defensive competition to a wild almost sensual assault. I'm not even sure what the word "sensual" means, but it's the most exciting description of a person I've ever heard. The announcer goes on to say that in 1919 Dempsey challenged "The Pottawatomie Giant," Jess Willard, for the World Heavyweight Championship. Willard towered over Dempsey by six inches and outweighed him by sixty pounds, but Dempsey floored Willard seven times in the first round. The battered "Pottawatomie Giant" failed to answer the fourth-round bell, and Dempsey was christened "Jack the Giant Killer." The clip ends and I'm hungry to see more of the man who fights giants.

I finish my cereal and return to the workshop, where Dad asks if Mum has stirred. I tell him no while looking around the shop. I ask my father if he has an old bag I can have.

"I'm sure I do. What kind of bag?"

"The kind you hit." I show him, throwing a punch.

"Young ladies don't *hit* things."

I don't know if it's my pleading expression that moves my dad, or if it's the circumstances with Mum that he wants to atone for, but after a few minutes he concedes.

"All right, I'll see what I can find."

Delighted, I skip back to my room and write a letter to my best school friend, Jill Dempsey. I wonder if she knows she might be related to the former heavyweight champion of the world!

Mum's fourth day in bed, I bring her a hot cup of tea and warm toast. I take away the previous tea and toast, stone cold and untouched. I look back at her underneath the sheets. From the dim light falling across the floor from the corridor, her frame appears more skeletal than yesterday. My mother is wasting away, yet our lives continue around her. Her friends keep ringing, so I tell them she has the flu. How can I explain that she accuses Dad for making her ill?

My mother's fifth day in bed, I can hear Dad talking to her. I have a feeling he's the only one who can make her better, maybe convince her that life is worth living. My feeling proves right when she slowly follows him out of her room. A day in the garden helps her emerge from a cocoon of despair, and at supper I'm happy to see Mum eating again.

On the weekend my siblings trickle home from college for the summer, and I'm delighted by the life and sanity they breathe into the house. I tell my brothers and sisters that Mum broke dishes and windows. But they change the subject as though I hadn't said anything, and, no matter how I try they won't talk to me about our mother's problems. I suppose it's because they are older and I'm just a kid. They do step in to give Mum some company, and I am relieved of the burden of caring for her. I begin to believe that I can salvage my sacred summer.

Adrienne has invited a fair-haired boy to come over and play. I'm rolling on the ground with Shoobee when he cycles to the front door. Ignoring him, I continue to wrestle my dog on the sweet-scented lawn.

My sister steps outside to introduce us.

"This is Jonathan," she tells me. "He lives down the road

at the Grammar School. His father's the headmaster. Now you'll already know somebody before you start secondary school."

I've been set up. But I know Adrienne means well. She wants me to have a friend in my new school.

"Wanna play Frisbee?" Jonathan asks, not missing a beat.

He flings the disc at me, and I scramble to catch it while trying to look cool. Jonathan is tall with bigger muscles than most boys his age. He is outgoing and talkative, and he makes me nervous. I'm glad when Peter shows up to relieve the pressure I'm feeling. Our friends, Joanna and her brother James, follow Peter. I introduce Jonathan to the gang and invite him to cycle with us to the beach.

We hop on our bikes and Jonathan talks about tits, pricks, and farts. He makes us laugh until our faces hurt, especially James, who nearly crashes every time the new boy tells a dirty joke. When we get to the beach, Jonathan leans way back on his bike's seat to pop wheelies on the dunes. He is funny and fearless. And I think I like him.

Homeward bound we stop at Moran's pub to buy sweets. We gorge ourselves while chatting with Agnes, one of the shop's owners. On the way out Jonathan tosses a stink bomb over his shoulder. To my horror it discharges in a splattering of liquid, so we jump on our bikes and take off. The headmaster's son is the only one laughing. I won't be able to come back to the pub, and I'm aghast that he has sabotaged my chance to shop for sweets at Moran's.

We ride in silence. Except for Jonathan, of course, who brags about forcing the drunks to sprint from the pub as they coughed, spit, and threw up their pints. When we split up to go home, the jokester is the only one to offer a goodbye.

"See you tomorrow," he shouts.

Jonathan becomes a regular visitor, and Mum acts more and more suspicious of him. When we go outside, she always

tends nearby flowerbeds. But her spying only makes my new friend seem more dangerous and fascinating.

While playing in the boatyard, Jonathan tells me he wants to show me something. I know he's not talking about his mickey because he pees outside and doesn't mind if I watch. So I follow him to my father's Titanic, and we climb onto the crossbeams of her upside-down hull.

The sun tries to penetrate the enormous fiberglass shell but is muted into an orangey glow. Jonathan reaches under his shirt, pulls out a pack of cigarettes, and then lights one with a match. The aroma of tobacco smoke is much more pleasant than the hull's stink of industrial solvents. My hand shakes as he shows me how to hold the cigarette to my mouth and light it. I pretend to inhale as he watches with approval. Smoking a cigarette feels sensationally wrong.

We crawl out from under my father's boat and walk Shoobee through the golden wheat field behind my house. Ripe kernels of grain slap against our thighs. I nibble the tasty, moist seeds and believe I could live off the land and never return to school.

Jonathan suddenly grabs my hand and pulls me to the ground. The wheat stalks crackle and crunch, but my landing is soft. He drops beside me and chuckles at my startled expression. We lie still for a moment and my breathing slows to normal. Jonathan's chest heaves. I'm wondering why he is gasping so hard when his wet lips press onto mine. Did he just kiss me? He flashes a proud grin and I don't know what to do. Does this mean I'm pregnant? What will I tell Mum?

I can hear Shoobee hopping like a jackrabbit as she searches for me through the tall stalks. She crashes into our crop circle and wags her tail. I'm relieved when my good dog steals Jonathan's attention, so I can wipe off his wet kiss with the back of my hand. We then stretch our legs and amble toward home as though nothing happened.

Jonathan saunters away in the direction of the school where he lives, and I wonder what it's like to live in a school where your dad is headmaster. I've heard his father is a terrible man, a dictator, always yelling and walloping the backs of students' heads. Maybe that's why Jonathan does bold things when he gets away. I don't know if I should be annoyed with him or flattered. But one thing I do know—I've been given my first kiss. And I liked it.

When I arrive home, Dad hands me a dark blue bag.

"It's a sailor's kit. You can stuff it with rags and hang it with the drawstring."

"It's perfect!" I shriek.

I'm so delighted Dad remembered, I regret misbehaving behind his back. Ashamed of smoking a cigarette and kissing a boy, I swear to never smoke again. But I can't make the same promise about kissing.

Scavenging the house and workshop for rags to fill the sailor's bag, I take every scrap of cloth, foam, old clothes, and knickers—anything soft for stuffing, and I hope no one will miss what I've taken. With nothing left to rummage, I decide newspaper is what I need to finish filling the duffel.

I want to have the bag just right before I ask Dad to hang it, and I collect the *Irish Times* for two weeks, until I'm one fat *Sunday Tribune* away from a full punch bag. I hover as each family member finishes the paper, passed from Shane to Katherine to Sheena, ending up in the hands of Sheena's twenty- one-year-old boyfriend Liam. He torments me by reading every word as slowly as possible. It's not until Dad walks in that he hands over the armful of papers, and I run away with my treasure to finish filling my punching bag. It's heavier than I imagined, but my father lends me a hand to hang it from a pipe under the eaves of the house.

I stand before my makeshift bag and my breathing speeds up. I think of Jonathan and know better how excited he must have been with me in the wheat field with all his

huffing and puffing. My heart races, too, as images of "Jack the Giant Killer" appear vivid in my mind. I cut a quick look at Dad. Then I thrust my bony fist into the center of my homemade punching bag. But even hanging in the air the bag is still heavy and doesn't swing when I smack it—it barely moves. I punch harder. And then harder. Finally, the bag starts to sway.

"My goodness! Is that my little girl with such ferocious punches?" Dad's voice is clearly full of surprise.

The canvas cover is sandpaper rough and stiff from salty sailing journeys. My knuckles redden and tingle when I hit the cloudy rings of sea-salt stains. But I love the feel and excitement of my fists crashing against the bag. Dad watches and again says, "My goodness!" And then he shakes his head and strides to his workshop to sculpt and fire pottery in his kiln.

"Look at the little boy." A brash voice startles me, taunting. "You couldn't punch your way out of a wet paper bag."

It's Liam, who no doubt lay in wait for Dad to leave. "Do you piss standing up as well?"

"I'm not a boy."

He comes close and taps the side of my face.

"C'mon little boy," he says. "Show me how tough you are."

Liam always waits until no one is about to tease me. I look toward Dad's shop and hear a potter's wheel kick on. It's just me and Liam and I hate him and wish I were big enough to drop him where he stands. He uses his open hand and taps my face harder. I reach up and throw a wild swing, but he leans back and my fist misses his big nose. He grins and exposes his inward-slanting teeth, but I can tell he is shocked that I tried to hit him. He then slaps my face in retaliation, which jars my head and burns my cheek. I want to cry but he shoves me down on the grass. He says, "Little bitch, wait till I tell your parents you tried to hit me." Then

he stomps back to the house in a blur of tousled dark hair.

I run to the top of a hill in the field behind our bungalow and burst into tears. I am humiliated and angry with myself for wanting a heavy bag. I should have known someone would see me, someone other than my dad, and it would spark ridicule. And now I'm certain I'm in trouble. Liam is a guest and I took a swing at him. I know he will say I did it for no reason, and I believe his word will be taken over mine. Sheena's in love with him and will rally Mum to launch into me with one of her torturous lectures. I stop crying and start home but stop and sit in the weeds. I won't go home as long as Liam is there.

As I sit, I become a bit sleepy and a memory almost like a dream surrounds me. Children at the public bus stop stare down at me on the cold concrete. Their faces spin in a blur.

"Are you all right?" an older girl asked me.

"Yeah, grand," I told her. Struggling up on rickety legs, I used my sleeve to wipe the spit out of my eye. My shin throbbed. But mostly, I was in shock. A dirty-faced boy had been watching me. He darted closer and spit in my eye. A swift kick to my shin bent me over, and a roundhouse swing of his schoolbag bowled me to the pavement.

Then he just laughed and strutted away.

When the local CIÉ bus finally arrived that afternoon, I found refuge in one of the seats where old ladies sat and clutched their shopping bags. None of the women seemed to notice the bluish knot on my shin.

The reverie swimming before my eyes is the memory of my first horrible day at the Loreto Convent in Balbriggan. The nuns were as bad as the ruffian at the bus stop because I could not put up a fight with them. They were the bosses of everything and everyone. And now the crushing helplessness I felt that day has returned to me. I hated it then and I still hate it.

I am pulled back from my dreamy spell by the sound of

bats hunting insects above me as Liam's van pulls out of the driveway at dusk. I imagine if I go home, even with Liam gone, it will be a good scolding for me. No one will believe that he slapped my face. So I'm determined to stay in hiding, until everyone is panic-stricken, and the guards arrive flashing their torches in my direction.

I don't know how long I've been gone or what time it is, but it's been dark for hours and my thin T-shirt is no match for the cold and damp air that followed the setting sun. I'm shivering and hungry, but it will be worth it when my family arrives in a frantic search party. They'll be so delighted I'm all right, they won't care that I tried to hit Liam. In relief they will listen and believe how cruel he was to me.

I wait and watch. And wait and watch some more. From my high vantage point, the only stirring I see outside is Shane leaving with Brian, followed by Katherine and Sheena driving off to Dublin.

Still, I wait.

It must be really late now. I'm guessing eleven o'clock. I decide the minute anyone starts looking for me, I'll reveal my whereabouts. But when Adrienne departs, I lose hope. I've been a runaway for what must be nearly seven or eight hours and can't bear the cold, hunger, and boredom any longer. I surrender and make for home. Surely, I'll receive a joyful welcome from Mum and Dad after my long absence.

"There you are," Mum says, crocheting by the fire.

Dad looks up from his *National Geographic*. "You should run along to bed, Deedums," he says. "It's very late."

Did no one notice how *long* I was gone? Suppose robbers had taken me!

I look at my parents who are not looking back at me. Not even a glance, and I ache to be comforted for my hours of misery while hiding in shame. But my parents are oblivious to my torment and my shivering. So I dash off to bed and climb under the covers already warmed by Shoobee. I can tell by the

way her warm eyes stare at me that she, at least, is glad to see me and wonders where I have been and why I am crying.

But how can I explain to Shoobee my crushing realization. Unlike Jack Dempsey, the giant has beaten me.

Chapter 2

Bad Grammar

My new school offers a choice: day pupil or boarder? No need to flip a coin on that one. I choose day pupil so I won't suffer a second longer in school than absolutely necessary. As it is, classes are in session six days a week with a half-day on Thursdays and Saturdays. I'm glad for the short day during the week, but don't like at all going to school on Saturday.

Even worse, the school is walking distance from my house on the Mornington Road. I worry about teachers spying on me as I tackle oak trees and sycamores instead of homework. Or perhaps they will send someone to bang on my window if I sleep too late.

As I amble up the wooded driveway to Drogheda Grammar School on my first day, a graceful regency house emerges with a fist-shaped brass knocker jutting from its enormous black door. Bordered by landscaped paving and modern dormitories, the twenty-two acre grounds sport an outdoor swimming pool, grass rugby fields, an all-weather hockey pitch, and a gymnasium that puts the Loreto in the dark ages.

A puny male teacher with hands like a porcelain doll directs us to line up for morning assembly. My class stretches

across the front row, so I have to look up at the mock stage constructed of lunchroom tables shoved together. Jonathan's father, Headmaster Siberry, thunders across the platform followed by a flock of teachers. They open their hymnals while the headmaster seizes command of the students with a resounding "BE QUIET!" The foreboding headmaster recites a passage from the Bible, and I wonder if this will really be better than the Loreto. What would the moralizing headmaster do if he knew his son and I have kissed?

Unlike the Loreto, Drogheda Grammar School is open to boys and girls of all faiths. Walking to my first-year classroom, I try to find differences between Catholics and Protestants but there appear to be none, though I notice plenty of differences between boys and girls. I'm eleven, so the girls are a year or two older. They're not interested in climbing trees or kicking a ball. On breaks, they share nail-polish tips and rave about Adam Ant and Duran Duran.

I sit close to the gossiping girls and trying to decipher the secret code to break into their group. But the harder I try, the more they resist me. I do manage to acquire bullies, however, both boys and girls. They call me "Lion Head" because of my unruly straw mane and "Rust Face" on account of an undiagnosed rash on my cheeks and chin. Even my runners with the Incredible Hulk pictured on them arouse locker-room teasing. I can only imagine what they'd say if they knew I followed newspaper articles about another hulk—the British heavyweight prospect, Frank Bruno.

After several weeks, as I fail to discover my scholastic prowess, I realize Sister Imelda at the Loreto was right when she'd ridicule and nag: *Gogarty will dream her life away. Gogarty is away with the fairies again*. It seems I am bound to daydream my life away. But they'd be surprised to know it's Jack Dempsey I dream of. And the punch bag now tossed into a corner of Dad's workshop after Liam sent me hiding in

disgrace. I decide to hang the bag in a secret place, too ashamed to ask Dad to help me. At least this time Liam won't be able to snoop about and humiliate me.

A specialist comes to school to test my IQ. She reports I just need to apply myself to studies, that I'm highly intelligent. She says I'm pleasant and approachable. She also claims I have excellent mechanical reasoning and dimensional skills. I'm delighted the teachers will now realize I'm not stupid. But they're not impressed.

At least the boarding school girls have warmed to me since they discovered I live down the road. I've been informed that after Sunday mass my house will be their welcome escape for tea and biscuits. I'm glad for their interest and hopeful they will befriend me. But Brian is home on weekends, and I'm worried he'll embarrass me with his bizarre behavior.

The first Sunday I shuffle the girls straight into the sitting room and manage to keep my brother away. Brian is in a sullen mood and shying from the strangers. I ply the girls with pots of tea and coffee and Kimberly Mikado biscuits. We have a laugh and I begin to feel I'm making some good friends. Boarders generally don't hang around with day pupils, so I will tally some "cool points" at school.

The next Sunday, though, I'm nervous. Brian is active and in a boisterous mood. Mum says it's because he's sixteen and his hormones are raging. He's been listening to Shakin' Stevens all morning and bounding through the house. The beat spurs his unique dance, a sort of frenzied Nazi march. He has already kicked two huge dents in the freezer with his big swinging feet—not out of willful destruction, but the way a puppy knocks over a toddler with clumsy enthusiasm. Brian has also refused to change out of his pajama bottoms. His large manhood makes frequent alarming appearances through the hopelessly ineffectual front fly. Dad, who is normally the one to convince Brian to change his attire, is

passed out at the dinner table from too much wine.

Three girls arrive. Before they even sit down, Brain springs into the sitting room and slaps his hands against the back wall then leaps out again. The girls look at each other in disbelief and burst into laughter.

"That's my brother Brian," I explain. "He's autistic."

"Artistic? You mean, he's weird?" one girl asks and the others chuckle.

"No, *aw*-tistic—he's handicapped."

"You mean like he's mental?" the same girl asks and the others elbow her while trying to smother another fit of giggles.

Escaping to the kitchen to make tea, I can hear Brian marching in and out of the sitting room and the girls' growing titter. I place a pot of tea and cups on a tray along with the last of Mum's favorite almond slices. My mother will be furious, but I need all the points I can score today.

I try to steady my return to the sitting room with a tray full of rattling cups and hot tea. Brian swipes an almond slice off the tray.

"Brian, stop!" I snap as he crams the slice into his mouth.

The girls laugh and Brian starts to jump up and down, rubbing his hands between his legs. I shuffle faster to put down the tray. But it's too late. Brian pulls down the front of his pajamas and exposes his huge penis to the girls and they run screaming to the door.

I would have tossed the scalding tea at him, but Brian is off and running. Slamming down the tray, I tear after him. I corner him in my parents' bedroom and draw back my fist to crack his arm. But he throws up his hands in defense and shoves me backwards. I crash against the footboard of the bed, and my breath vanishes as Brian bolts from the room.

Mum and Dad have spent years teaching my brother good manners, yet he remains barely manageable. In public, he takes whatever he wants out of shops and snatches food off

strangers' plates in restaurants. Anything new we bring into the house he randomly throws in the fire. The slightest change in his routine provokes blood-curdling tantrums. My parents have been working to raise money to build a school for autistic children. In the meantime Brian remains at a school for the mentally handicapped that is more like a sitting service. The workers there have little knowledge of how to teach someone like my brother.

I stomp about seething over the ridicule I'm bound to receive at school. I want to kick or hit something, to rail with the freedom that Brian claims. Suddenly I think of my punch bag. I run to Dad's workshop and exhume it from a drift of sawdust. I cannot hang it up, but I stand the bag and flood it with punches of anger and frustration. Tiny bits of wood fly into my mouth and stick to the tears on my cheeks. My knuckles break open and splinters of sawdust work into the cuts. But I don't care. I'm beyond the world where the sting of pain can find me.

When my punches become weak and exhaustion takes hold, I flop against the bag. Satisfaction replaces anger as my lungs gasp for breath. Blood runs through my arteries and bubbles on my knuckles like raspberry jam and I feel like no prayer has ever made me feel — like not one minute of the absurd tea parties. I feel as good as I do leaving school, kissing a boy, better and more relieved than I can remember. I don't need a nun's blessing because I know my salvation is buried in a punch bag stuffed with newspapers and rags.

Chapter 3

The Fishmeal Factory

Fire! Ring the fire brigade! Dad yells and then disappears. Mum leaps to the phone. I fly to the window and see flames shoot from Dad's workshop and stretch across the roof of my bedroom. And then I see Dad's silhouette dash into the inferno. I watch horrified as he rolls out four giant cylinders of butane gas, one by one. Burning embers cascade upon him. Mum and I rush to the fishpond to fill buckets with water.

The fire brigade arrives in a rush of reflective armor and it seems to take forever to extinguish the blaze. Afterwards, the charred firemen slog inside for refreshments. I scramble to brew tea and serve snacks while the tall, smoky heroes explain the fire was caused by Dad's pottery kiln's butane flames. They boast that Dad has saved the house and probably our lives by removing the explosive fuel. I'm so proud of my father. But Mum doesn't seem to share my pride as she stares into her tea. And Dad appears lost in blame, for he designed and built the kiln. My father escorts the firemen outside while Mum drops her face into her hands and sobs.

The next morning I stare into the black skeleton of Dad's workshop, and the smell of smoky ruin stings my

nostrils as I push through cold, damp mush and pieces of busted pottery. One of the slippers Dad wore while retrieving the gas cylinders lies twisted and burnt in a pile of ashes. For me, it's a heart- stopping reminder that my father could have been killed.

Towards the back of the workshop I search for the punch bag that has now ministered me through nearly three years of teasing and failed exams at Drogheda Grammar School. But it's buried under a mass of debris and huge chunks of collapsed roof. I've been told girls aren't supposed to hit things, but the bag's possible loss freezes me mid-step.

I search but cannot find my bag, and I have to wait until Dad clears the ashy corpse of his workshop. When he finally uncovers my punch bag, it's in surprisingly good shape. Even after a day in the sun and fresh newspaper stuffing, the duffel still carries a smoky scent when I hang it from the clothes bar in my walk-in bedroom closet. Now I can pummel the bag as often as I want without anyone knowing how obsessed I am with my punching.

After rearranging my cupboard, I stroll back to the workshop to lend Dad a hand. Mum arrives from Dublin with a surprise: a brand new electric kiln for my father. He humphs and plods off with a handcart to unload the gift in a back room filled with salvaged bits of pottery. Mum says, "He may not bloody well like the new kiln, but at least he can't blow us all to smithereens."

When my father returns, he goes straight to work erecting a cinder-block wall. "So, Des," my mother says, "where's the electric kiln going in your new workshop?"

"This isn't a workshop," he says, lifting another block into place. "This is my new dental practice."

After my father cleans the mortar from his trowel, he relocates his practice and our lives begin to change. I try to settle into a routine during my fourth year at Drogheda Grammar School, but our driveway is cluttered with

awkwardly parked cars, and patient's children run loose in the garden. Dad's patients knock on our door all hours of the night. But it's worth losing privacy and sleep to have my father nearby. And it's especially nice that Dad's young nurse works here full time.

Jean was friendly from the first day I met her. After my first day at the Loreto Convent, just three years old, I rode the bus home and then walked to Dad's surgery beside the twin towers of Saint Laurence Gate. Unable to reach the bell, I rapped on the thick, royal blue door though my knock barely made a sound. When the door finally opened and someone stepped out, I slipped inside.

The wide hallway smelled like minty mouth rinse. Dental drills shrieked from the corridors. A young lady in a white coat sat at a desk in a small reception room. I thought she was pretty and looked like my oldest sister Katherine with brown eyes and dark hair worn in a shoulder-length flip. She turned—got a fright when she noticed me—and then looked puzzled.

"Bejanie! I didn't see you there with the size of you. Are you looking for your mammy?" she asked.

"No, my daddy. He works here."

"Oh! You must be Deirdre. My name's Jean. Would you like some crisps?"

"No, thank you," I said though I was hungry and wanted to eat the snack.

Another lady in a white coat stepped into the reception room. She was shorter than Jean and not as pretty. The women lit cigarettes and chatted about me as if I couldn't hear them.

"Who's yer one?" the shorter lady asked.

"That's Deirdre, Doctor Gogarty's daughter," said Jean. "She's a dote, isn't she? Today was her first day at the Loreto, poor thing."

"Ah, God love her, she's very small. Them nuns will eat

the arse off her. Load of cows. What age is she?"

"I don't know. She must be only four or five. What age are you, love?"

I awkwardly clasped my thumb over my little finger and raised my hand.

"Golly, she's only three. And it's such a long walk from the bus stop for her, tut-tut."

The women stubbed out their cigarettes and vanished into the rooms with eerie noises. I sat a long time and listened to the screams of dental drills. People left holding their swollen cheeks. Bloodied cotton jutted from their mouths, and I wondered why they came here in the first place. Across from me a towering grandfather clock ticked loudly. Its long gold pendulum swung so slowly I thought it must have been counting minutes instead of seconds.

Daylight spilled through the letterbox and faded to black when the women returned. They peeled off their white coats, slipped on their anoraks, and snapped up their handbags.

"Your father has one more patient. Will you be all right waiting?" Jean asked.

"Yes, fine thanks," I replied and gulped down my tears of frustration.

I've never forgotten Jean's kindness that first day I met her and I am thrilled to have her nearby. She listens to my accumulated fourteen years of heartache and loves to share a laugh with me now and again after classes.

How I wish to communicate with my brother Brian the way I do with Jean, but those prayers remain unanswered. My parents' dream, however, to have their youngest son housed in a facility for autistics has finally come true. Their tireless efforts with the Irish Society for Autistic Children have helped raise enough money to build a special housing community in Dunfirth, County Kildare. Brian no longer shares a dorm room and gets full-time attention and endless

cups of tea. He smiles often and with ease.

Even with Brian doing well, Mum seems still rattled and uneasy. She continues to terrify me with her death-wish driving. At dark, after dropping off Brian in Dunfirth, she often hugs blind bends on the wrong side of the road and refuses to turn on her headlights. If I don't show fear, she pretends to fall asleep by slouching over and jerking the steering wheel, which forces me to take control to keep us from crashing. Her fights with Dad, too, have increased and are much more disturbing.

As usual, my father seems unaffected by Mum's hysteria. The forty-five-foot yacht he'd been building has been abandoned and sits in his boatyard with a thick carpet of green algae. But the avid yachtsman nonetheless keeps to his sailing and has purchased a dazzling thirty-five-foot replacement. And he keeps to his bottle. Dad drinks every day.

After a particularly heavy night of spirits, he crashes his car. The next morning Mum begs him to stop drinking. Unsuccessful, she turns to me.

"Go and tell your father he must stop drinking."

But I can't confront my father.

"He could've been killed last night," she pleads. "He'll listen if you tell him to stop."

"No, Mum," I say, refusing to let her pull me into this and tarnish my relationship with Dad.

"If you don't tell your father to stop drinking," she says, "you'll ruin Christmas for everyone. You hear me? Christmas will be ruined, and it will be your fault."

Guilt-ridden, I relent. I walk away from Mum, ease down the hall, and tap lightly on Dad's bathroom door. I whisper for him to stop drinking.

"What did you say?" he asks.

"Mummy wants you to stop drinking," I mutter a bit louder.

Dad roars with laughter and I rush off to school. The drama at home makes me late. Again. And, as usual, the

headmaster publicly humiliates me in assembly.

And, again I am reminded how much I hate school and long to practice my punches or spend time with my two best friends, Peter and James. But even in the company of boys, when I'm most at ease, I'm afraid to voice that my favorite pastime is practicing jabs, rights, and hooks on my hidden punch bag.

During Easter break, when we cycle to the abandoned fishmeal factory at the end of Crook Road, James and Peter talk about movies like *Rambo* and *Rocky*, but I still don't take the opportunity to mention my pugilistic fantasies.

The warehouse sits empty, strewn with broken glass from smashed windows. The smell of rotten fish permeates the salty air, and their dehydrated carcasses stick to the floor. Behind a cobweb-encrusted crate, James finds a rat's nest. As he and Peter scramble to gather ammo to pelt the babies, I wander outside to where fishing trawlers once unloaded their catch. I drop a broken piece of cinder block into the murky depths and watch it disappear. Sitting among dry-rotting ropes and rusty chains, utter despair pours over me.

Sitting at the edge of the pier, I imagine two cinder blocks chained around my ankles. If I shoved them over the edge, I'd plummet into the frigid depths to inescapable darkness. Even if I panicked and gasped for life, it would be too late. No one would ever know what happened. I'd simply vanish.

My plan has left me flooded by an unfamiliar inner peace. I know that if my despair becomes too much for me—I have a way out.

Chapter 4

The Clones Cyclone

Tea is served in Beatrice Potter cups at Aunt Claire and Aunt Catherine's childhood home in an upper-class suburb across the street from Carysfort College in Blackrock, County Dublin. Mum grew up in this three-story Georgian with her five sisters. Their only brother died of tuberculosis at the age of six. Nothing masculine resides here.

A gold-framed, convex mirror captures the room in a distorted snapshot. A chandelier sparkles in the mirror's reflection and nestles in plasterwork of Prince of Wales feathers. Shimmering Waterford crystals cast a gentle glow on the white, Indian rug. Dresden and Meissen porcelain adorn the marble mantelpiece. To the right of the hearth, a white, enameled bell pull gleams though it's been a generation since it signaled the maid.

My skirt is stiff and uncomfortable. I'm nervous about spilling the tiniest spot of tea on the pale Chintz-upholstered chair. My back is sore from sitting up straight, trying to look like a lady. Mum and Aunt Catherine watch ballet on the television. The choreographed prancing bores me, provokes me to consider survival in the wild—an undomesticated life, free of society's expectations.

"She's not a bit interested in the ballet," Aunt Catherine whispers to Mum. My aunt crosses her slim legs and adjusts her tailored skirt to drape over her knees. She then pats the back of her short, tight, ash-blonde curls that look fresh from styling. She smells of hairspray and Chanel No. 5 perfume. I pretend not to have heard her soft voice and turn to stare at the purple Dublin Mountains through eight panels of rippled glass.

"I can't make heads nor tails of what Deirdre likes," Mum replies as if I've already set forth to discover my wilderness sanctuary.

"Deirdre love, would you not have a look at the ballet?" Mum urges. "You should take it up. It's great for your posture."

At the age of fifteen my underdeveloped body and unfeminine interests are under the microscope. My elders feel the urgency to sculpt me into a marriage-worthy lady before it's too late. But I don't think I'll ever fit their criteria—my hands are too dry and rough for a gentleman to hold.

Aunt Claire arrives from University College Dublin where she teaches social science and is the university's first female dean. She is brilliant and practical with a sharp mind for business. I love her because she always makes me feel at ease and unafraid to be myself. Unlike Aunt Catherine, whose countenance is regal, Aunt Claire's face is soft and a bit droopy. She would be as tall as her sisters, but her shoulders are narrow and slightly hunched due to a curve in her spine. Wearing slacks and a wool top, she waltzes into the room and announces, "Let's put it on BBC. The Irish fellow, Barry McGuigan, is boxing for the world title!"

As soon as the channel switches, a burst of mayhem replaces the gentle tweeting of ballet. The fever-pitch boxing crowd swamps the Irishman as he tussles his way towards the ring. The red-and-white-striped ring canopy serves as his only beacon in a sea of blinding fans. I'm surprised at

McGuigan's tiny size because I've imagined all boxers to be hulking bricks of men like Jack Dempsey. Only McGuigan's bobbing head is visible as he trots to his destination.

"Such a big fuss over a slip of a thing," says Mum. But I'm fascinated by the adoration poured on him, especially since the fight is in London. I never thought with "The Troubles" I'd ever witness Englishmen cheering an Irishman.

A blue flag with a gold dove is jostled over the heads of McGuigan's team. The commentator explains that the flag represents peace between the North and the South of Ireland. McGuigan, a Catholic, is married to a Protestant and always wears neutral colors with the *dove of peace* on his trunks. He grew up in the South, in a small town close to the border of Northern Ireland called Clones (pronounced clone-us) so his nickname is "The Clones Cyclone."

The crowd lets out a mighty roar as McGuigan climbs through the ropes. I've only seen snippets of boxing since the Jack Dempsey clip four years ago that inspired me to hang up a punch bag and study everything I could find on the sport. I'm delighted with Aunt Claire's viewing choice and settle in to watch my first boxing match. The Irishman's task sounds daunting. The champion, Eusebio Pedrosa from Panama, has been king of his division for seven years with nineteen— nineteen!—successful title defenses.

The atmosphere sizzles as the fight begins. The champion is described as a legend. He is tall, dark, and graceful. The Irishman is short, pale, and solid. And McGuigan appears to be fearless as he pushes forward and attacks the larger man. Mum asks me if I want to change the station back to ballet, but I don't have to answer because Aunt Claire says, "Ah, sure don't bother her, Edie. She's practically leaning into the television. Let her enjoy the match."

As I watch the fight, it occurs to me the human body is designed to box. Fingers curl into fists that are perfect punching weapons, a pair of lethal hammers projected by

arms that can also shield the warrior. There is a defense and counter to every move and strike. But even the best of men are vulnerable—their guard can be penetrated. An assault can be terminated in the blink of a counter knockout punch. I detect only one design flaw: our brains are located in a primary target area.

In the seventh round Pedrosa is not able to circle the ring as quickly and is forced to stand and fight McGuigan. My bum lifts off the chair when suddenly, *Bam!* McGuigan's right hand drops the Panamanian. The excitement of the crowd pours from the screen. Pedrosa rises and wobbles, but he boxes his way back into the fight. Relentlessly, the Irishman moves forward. He bobs and weaves to slip inside Pedrosa's longer reach. Once inside, McGuigan punishes his opponent with left hooks to the body. Pedrosa's hurt again in the thirteenth round as he teeters about on wobbly legs but defies his body's wish to crumple.

The gallant Panamanian survives the fifteen rounds. But our man Barry McGuigan, "The Clones Cyclone," is crowned the new WBA Featherweight Champion of the World. Bursting with pride I clap and cheer along with Aunt Claire. Mum and Aunt Catherine are aghast at my joy. But I don't care, for tonight I've witnessed the dance of magicians.

Back home, knuckles wrapped in bed-sheet strips, I pummel my homemade punch bag in the secrecy of my cupboard. One minute I am McGuigan throwing a barrage, the next I am Pedrosa, rising from the floor to battle back. It's long after midnight when I notice my hand cloths are soaked with blood.

As weeks pass, the McGuigan fight persists in my head. I try to simulate the movements in front of my bedroom mirror and invent my own battles. To enhance the scene in my mirror, I pop an orange peel into my mouth for the feel of a gum shield. But it just looks silly. Instead, I melt and roll white candle wax, scorch my palms, then mold the hot wax

around my teeth. It tastes awful and breaks easily, but I'm pleased with its realism. I huff and puff about the room while I swing fists left and right. My head snaps back when my imaginary opponent fires damaging blows. I get dropped—but climb off the floor to win by knockout. My dog Shoobee sits on the bed and looks worried I've gone mad.

Two months later I'm standing a few feet from Ireland's sporting hero. Barry McGuigan dines above Weavers pub in Drogheda before a scheduled appearance at a local festival. When the champion rises from his table, my heart kicks my breastbone. A cold sweat dampens my light-blue pantsuit. As we pose for a photo, I am speechless. He seems to perceive my nervousness and firmly wraps his arm around me. His lower back feels tiny yet solid as I slip my trembling arm around his waist. Beaming into the camera I can't believe the famous Barry McGuigan is holding me. The camera flashes and I skip away. Meeting him has been the most thrilling moment of my life.

My friend Jonathan sneers at the photo of Barry and me. "You look like you could be going together if you didn't have that big goofy smile on your face," he says. We sit in the garage behind an apartment Dad built onto the backside of our house. I chalk on the side of the garage: *Barry rules OK* and *McGuigan is the Greatest!* This prompts more teasing and an abrupt change of subject.

Jonathan says we need to have sex before my period starts so I won't get pregnant. (I'm almost sixteen but I've not yet menstruated. Boobs still haven't sprouted either. Apparently, I'm behind other girls in everything.) Reluctantly, I listen to his gory details of periods, tampons, intercourse, and ejaculation. His matter-of-fact approach signals to me our childhoods have slipped away. Still, I'm not sold and though I'm curious about sex, I'm too scared to try more than kissing. Mercifully, Jonathan lets it go.

As we walk along the side of the garage apartment, Jonathan cups his hands against the window and peers in.

"Who lives in there?" he asks, his voice muffled by glass.

"Nobody," I reply. "I guess Dad's planning to rent it out or something."

"No, somebody's living in there. Look."

I cup my eyes against the glass and my heart sinks. Dad's clothes are in piles on the bed. A sundry of his day-to-day belongings are placed about the room. The mystery of Dad building an apartment attached to the house is solved with a sickening sensation in my stomach. All this time he was building a way out of our lives.

Sure enough, Dad starts sleeping in the apartment every night. Mum and I are left behind. Adjusting to my father living in separate quarters wears hard on my mother. She fixes herself up after crying. She slaves over ambitious new recipes. By the time my father arrives for dinner, she has transformed into a stage actress desperately trying to resurrect a doomed play. But the curtain always closes, and Dad never even spends the night.

Mum's irritable mood switches to upbeat and friendly. But the small talk between my parents quickly runs dry. The tension mounts and leaves me screaming inside for escape. I'd give anything for my brothers and sisters to be home. Dad seems unaffected by Mum's efforts and retires to his apartment. My mother retreats to bed to recharge for tomorrow's sad encore.

This evening Mum springs from the dinner table to fetch a special sauce she's spent hours perfecting. While her back is turned, Dad pushes his tongue out and thrusts his middle finger at her. Pure hatred is in his eyes. I'm shocked. Not only has my father left my mother's bed—he loathes her.

I jump at an invitation to a Christmas party by a fifth-year classmate. Anything to skip even one night's performance. At the party I'm once again dressed in my

light-blue pantsuit and try to act cool. I manage to chitchat with friends but think it's going to be a long night. Then things look up when a good- looking guy introduces himself as Nick, the party-giver's cousin.

Nick is well groomed in dark jeans and a navy sweater. He's taller than the other guys and is slender but not skinny. His dark brown hair and eyes compliment his flawless complexion and a face so handsome I wonder why he's talking to me. The pretty and promiscuous Tara circles him like a wild dog. I don't stand a chance against her. As Tara moves in on her prey, I disappear into the crowd.

Sampling the self-serve buffet, I meander from room to room. If only I hadn't come to this party. I'm bored and uncomfortable. "There you are," Nick says. "I was looking everywhere for you." *Why?* I wonder. He continues to talk and I begin to relax. We dance together, first a few fast numbers and then a slow dance. His arms feel strong around me as I rest my cheek against his chest. I like the smell of laundry detergent in his sweater and the hint of aftershave. May as well enjoy the moment, I decide — however briefly it may last.

Nick takes my hand and leads me to a quiet spot at the bottom of the staircase. He circles his arms around me and pulls me into a kiss. His lips pressed against mine feel nice, but then his tongue breaks through and touches mine. The sensation is a shock. Jonathan and I kissed but never like this.

The kissing goes on too long, and my neck begins to cramp. I don't know when we're supposed to stop. Is he waiting for me to stop first? I hear constant shuffling and excited whispers lurking round the corner. I am relieved to know it's the parent in charge of driving me home who has arrived. Nick scratches down my phone number and then gives me another kiss goodbye. I don't expect to hear from him.

But he calls the next day.

Throughout Christmas break Nick sends messages

through his cousin that he'd like to take me to a nightclub. He also phones often and becomes my first official boyfriend. But dating him makes me uncomfortable; that if I'm to keep him, I've got to show him I'm his girl. He's too good looking. Some prettier girl who is willing to have sex will steal him away. And it doesn't help that everyone says what a "catch" he is. It only makes me nervous. When the rash on my face flares up again, I stop returning his calls without explanation.

Chapter 5

Pilgrimage to Barry Town

My sulking over the loss of Nick hangs on until spring when I become more worried about Mum. Her mental state continues to deteriorate. Fighting a losing battle for her husband has left her despondent. She's given up the gourmet meals and rarely even bothers to cook. She dresses and leaves for work so lost in thought she forgets to wear lipstick. Even her normally well- groomed hair is askew and flat in the back.

On Easter weekend Mum surprises me with a bit more spring in her step. She asks if I'd like to visit Barry McGuigan's hometown. Normally, she escapes our lonely house by dressing up, putting a fashionable face on her sad state, and going out to visit the great homes and gardens of Ireland. So her offer to visit the working-class town of Clones is an unlikely choice. She's doing this just for me.

She seems happier driving away from the house. Her voice is livelier. But her eyes are hidden behind large, brown-tinted sunglasses with lenses that fade to clear toward the bottom. Her eyes, if I could see them, would tell me truly. We travel with the windows down, breathing in the day's warmer temperature. I watch hedgerows and farmyards zip by and wonder if my hero will be in town. McGuigan has made two

successful world title defenses and is so popular it seems all of Ireland has united in admiration.

We arrive in the center of Clones called "The Diamond." The town is ablaze with banners claiming their famous son. Our first stop is to the McGuigan's family grocery shop. Mum chats up the cashier, who is Barry's mother. She tells us her son is away in London. But I'm undeterred by this news. In fact, I'm thrilled to be in "Barry Town" and to meet his mother.

We stroll across "The Diamond" to the champ's father-in- law's hotel for lunch. Mum giggles when the owner pronounces á la carte.

"He said *car-tee*," she explains. But the humor escapes me. Everything about Clones and its people seems to amuse her.

"I can't believe we're here," I say.

"Neither can *I*," my mother says and giggles again.

While Mum waits for lunch, I stroll past the hotel's bar and find a McGuigan fight on TV. I slip inside to watch, and a group of curious, pint-drinking men strike up a conversation.

"You like boxing, young one?" a shiny-nosed man asks.

"Yes, I love boxing. I came all the way from Drogheda just to see Barry's hometown."

"Really?" another man chimes in. "Well then, can you name the heavyweight champions of history?"

I've been studying the history of boxing. If this were on a test at school, I'd get top marks. My memory is fresh as the names pour out: "John L. Sullivan, James J. Corbett, Bob Fitzsimmons, James J. Jeffries, Marvin Hart . . ."

The men sit in stunned silence.

I am answering a Joe Louis question when Mum finds me.

"There you are, love. You were gone so long, I was getting worried."

The men explain I've been answering boxing trivia questions without a single mistake.

"I'm amazed," Mum declares on the drive home. She looks stylish in her pantsuit and sunglasses, the wind whipping her light-brown hair. "You're usually so shy I don't know what to do with you. And there you were, answering boxing questions in front of all those strange men. You certainly are full of surprises."

Then a big surprise comes to me when on June 23rd, 1986, Barry McGuigan loses his title in the desert heat of Las Vegas to Stevie Cruz. Ireland is stunned. But I am devastated and cannot bear to read newspapers that headline his defeat. On the verge of tears I refuse to believe my hero is no longer world champion. I feel depressed and irritable as I reluctantly push the shopping trolley behind Mum in Quinnsworth market. She is also in a bitter mood. When I dare to inspect a pineapple, she screeches, "Too expensive!" And then she scolds me about money in front of strangers, but I know it's about Dad and not about money.

In the checkout line my mother tells me to stop moping. I'm angry that she thinks she is alone in her right to disappointment. Though I agree I'm taking the McGuigan loss a bit too hard, I can't seem to swallow the sadness lodged in my throat. I have to fight the urge to burst out crying but finally give in to the tears on the drive home. Mum's not seen me cry since I was a child, and the shock sends her into her own fit of tears. "I'm sorry, Mum. It's okay," I say, "I don't know what's wrong with me."

But the next day my answer arrives in a bloody mess. I've been lucky to reach my sixteenth year without tampons and pads and embarrassing accidents. The blood on my bed sheets could arouse suspicion of a murder scene. I'm not used to bleeding without injury so I'm alarmed. But then I look through Mum's 'feminine products' and fumble through the procedure to stop the mess. I use Mum's bulky maxi pads, and I'm no longer able to walk normally, so I shuffle

and fear someone will, heaven forbid, spot the bulge in my jeans.

My weepy emotional state does not mix well with Mum's mood swings. She snaps at me for eating too many groceries, for wearing nothing but dirty T-shirts and jeans. But when I do the laundry, she screams that it's too expensive to run the washing machine. Just when I'm about to crack, my cousin John offers me the perfect summer job. He is supervisor at a plant nursery and mushroom farm in Kimmage, a working-class section of Dublin. He hires me to tend greenhouses at the nursery. I'll have to move to Dublin, an hour's drive from my family home in Mornington. It is exactly what I need.

I stay at my sister Katherine's house in Goatstown and cycle four miles to and from work five days a week. I leave for the nursery in darkness at five in the morning. The deserted streets give me a satisfying sense of being the first person to witness each day. A genesis of sorts seems to have come my way, and I wonder if maybe I'm just growing up.

Working in the warm compost and damp greenhouses suits me, and I find Mother Nature in her silence is nurturing and soothing and wise. Supervision is infrequent and casual, but I work hard anyway as though my future depends on every drop of sweat that seeps into the soil.

My blue-collar coworkers have a dry quick wit, a Dublin sense of humor that is well known. The men are macho and attractive. They are loud, gregarious, and uninhibited. I admire their lack of self-consciousness and willingness to have fun. They read tabloids in the lunchroom and wink at me. They even nudge a friendly young man to approach me. With an audience he asks me for a date. So as not to embarrass him, I agree to go out with him.

"Me name's Colin," he says sheepishly. "Colin Brown. I hate me surname. It's brutal."

He takes me to see *Cobra* starring Sylvester Stallone.

Every few minutes a woman is viciously murdered. I can't imagine a worse first-date choice, for the movie reminds me I'll soon be out on the shadowy streets of Dublin with a guy I hardly know.

Colin gets up to go to the bathroom. "Watch me jacket," he warns. "It's got bleedin' legs. Me brudders are always nickin' it."

I study his grey blazer in the flickering light of gunfire. It looks cheap, outdated, and grubby.

For dinner we eat greasy fish and chips and watch a brawl across the street. My date apologizes for the behavior of his Dublin neighbors. I pretend to be unfazed by the raw display of violence, and in fact I use the opportunity to ask Colin if he's ever boxed.

"Yeah, once," he tells me. "Got bleedin' murdered. When I got home, me mudder asked if I had any luck at me fight. Yeah, I says to her—bad luck."

We laugh and I begin to feel at ease.

The film and the meal must have emptied Colin's pockets, for the next night we just stroll along the River Liffey. We follow the cobblestone alleys of Temple Bar and kiss under the blue light of a lamppost. He holds my hand and proudly greets his friends on Eustace Street. Colin makes me feel special and wanted, and I'm glad I'm out of my house and away from all the drama.

My summer job and romance ends but I've earned enough money to enter the sports shop on West Street and buy the boxing gloves I've admired for so long. The dusty brown leather resembles the gloves Jack Dempsey wore to knock out his opponents.

The second-hand gloves leave a bright silhouette on the dingy display board. They smell musty and their frayed laces don't match, but something magical happens as my fingers slide into the cushiony hollows. My thumbs seem to

know just where to go as they veer into each sheath, and my fingers curl into perfect punch conformity, the gloves a chrysalis for my fists, now defined as weapons and equipped to see me into battle.

Back home, gloved and confident, I'm uninhibited without fear of sprained wrists or bleeding knuckles. The punch bag slams violently into the cupboard walls; the clothes rail rips out of its sockets and plummets to the floor. So I haul my apparatus to the hallway of Dad's empty dental offices now that he has moved his practice from his former workshop. I create a way to hang the bag by removing the attic access panel and hoisting a thick iron bar into the loft. I place it across the opening. The bag hangs high and the hall is narrow, but my punching range is greatly improved. I have to be careful though—when the iron bar shifts too far, it crashes down and threatens to give me my first knockout.

My heavy bag and Shoobee are my only companions since Dad is never here anymore. I can't talk to Mum and I miss chatting with my father's dental nurse, Jean. So I visit his new surgery, a few doors down from a magnificent shopping center on Wellington Quay in Drogheda. The center is bright and cheery. Gone are the dreary, old malls, and a new car park accommodates enthusiastic shoppers.

The only structure that remains of the old docklands stands defiant at the edge of the car park—a dilapidated, graffiti- riddled, three-story building on Dyer Street. The faded wooden sign reads: DROGHEDA AMATEUR BOXING CLUB; FOUNDED 1936. A sapling grows from a clogged gutter on the roof to seemingly flaunt the building's timeline of neglect. I am transported into a fantasy. For many, the building might be an ugly leftover, but for me it holds a magical fascination of what could lie within its walls.

I study the building for weeks from Dad's waiting room window. In the evenings tough-looking, young men work out on the top floor. Below, the heavy wood doors remain

closed. I wonder how to make an initial approach. I've never talked to boxers before. I imagine a dentist's daughter would not be welcomed into their world. I want to knock on the enormous dark-blue door, but I think they'll never hear me over the din upstairs.

Besides, I'm a girl.

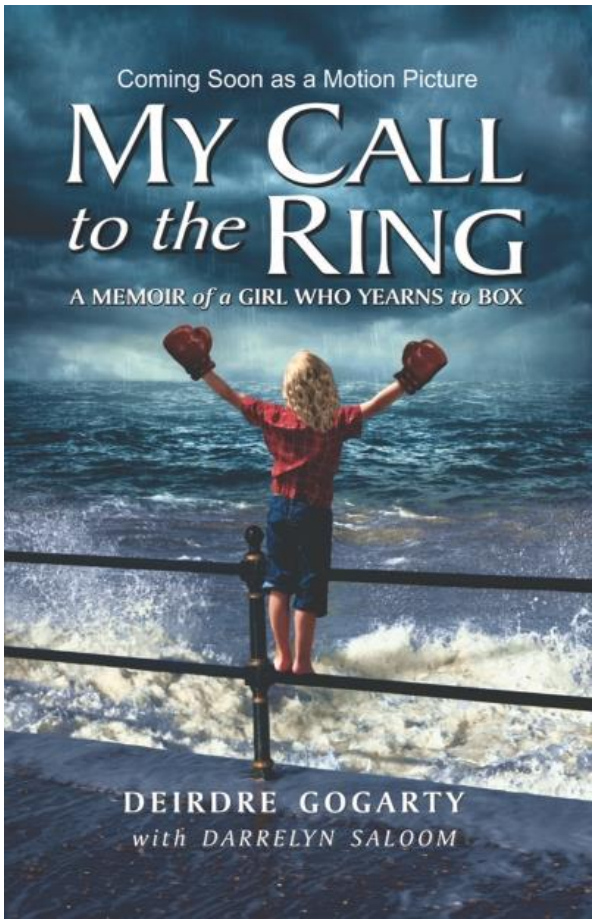
Girls don't belong at such a rough establishment, and truthfully I'm scared even as I think about asking to be let inside.

I try to accept the reality that women don't box. But I cannot take my eyes off the building. Two older men regularly sit at a mesh-covered window during the day. As they watch the passersby, I imagine conversations of boxing legends and classic fights. I want so badly to join them my hands clinch into fists as I pace in front of the window.

At home I search for a boxing match on television. And on Sunday there's a bout on delayed broadcast from America. The boxers are Marvelous Marvin Hagler and Sugar Ray Leonard. Leonard is thin but muscular with small ears and a cute face. Hagler is an ebony-skinned tank of a man. His back is a rippling V of perfect fitness, his wide shoulders and thick neck topped off by a clean-shaven head.

Leonard looks in danger of serious bodily injury as the brooding Hagler viciously hunts him down. But each time Hagler has him snared, Leonard throws a blinding flash of fists and slips away. And then Leonard pours out a dazzling flurry, and my heart soars with the beauty of boxing.

For nearly two years "The Clones Cyclone" has inspired me to throw and duck a million punches, to rise from the floor countless times in victory in the confines of my bedroom. By the time Leonard's hand is raised in victory, another decision has been made. I vow to defeat my fear. I will enter the boxing club on Dyer Street. I will see what happens when a girl tells the men she wants to fight.



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