

IRISH EYES

by Kathleen Norris

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"And you mean to say, Peter—" Sheila began bewildered, and stopped. Peter, at twenty-one, was only a little boy after all, a little boy who would be delighted to stop his difficult law studies and be off to a strange city and a new job. She laughed suddenly, mirthlessly.

"This seems very funny to me!" she said.

"Sheila, dear," Mrs. Mc Cann said, in remonstrance and distress, "you mustn't think we're trying to corner you, dear, or to trap you! Judge Mc Cann and I talked this over all day yesterday, almost all night last night. We want to do what's fair to you. This seemed to us the fairest thing, the thing you'd want to do! Surely—surely if you and Peter are fond enough of each other to have remembered each other all these months, to have made an engagement with each other only a few days before he was to have been married, surely then it was natural that we should think that this plan would please you both."

"And admit that we were lying!" Sheila exclaimed, angrily.

"Aw, Sheila, pull yourself together!" Joe said, unsympathetically.

"Dear child, we were only thinking of you," Mrs. Mc Cann protested, in a hurt voice.

"I thank you all!" Sheila said, in a loud, hard voice. "But it isn't necessary to—to sacrifice your son on my account!"

Suddenly she was shaking with rage such as she had not known since very small, schoolgirl days. She walked out of the room, with her head up, and out of the house. No one attempted to stop her; or, if anyone did, she was too blind, too deaf, to know it.

Down the brownstone steps, that were being gently powdered with snow, she went quickly. The cool, pure air of the silent holiday noontime smote her hot cheeks refreshingly. Timid little flakes fell all about her, her footsteps were softened in the thin covering of the snow.

At the corner she turned back, looked at the street. She was not being followed, there was not a human being in sight.

Instinctively she had turned toward the subway, and home. But on the way she passed, on Lexington Avenue, a shabby, sign-cluttered doorway. Almost every obscure activity known to the business world was housed in this old building; a passport photographer, a stuffer of dead animals, a dressmaker whose ambitious sign of "Modes" had been crossed by a humbler notice, "Children's school uniforms at cost." A dancing teacher had the top floor; a mender of broken china was somewhere upstairs. The second floor was given over to "Mrs. O'Connor's Famous Employment Bureau."

And against her particular sign Mrs. O'Connor had tacked cards. "Four box-workers wanted. Girls, good money!" and "Child's nurse wanted, lovely family right near city."

Sheila stood reading these cards, her breast smoldering. They were all against her, the Mc Canns, and Joe, and Ma. Everyone. Even Frank had smiled as he handed her over to Peter—to Peter, who had departed from Sheila's dreams forever, who was less to her now than that casual clerk "fr'm the office," who had been waiting for "Misther Frank," in the Mc Canns' hallway. "It wouldn't be open on a holiday," Sheila reflected, looking up the dank, uninviting stairway that lurched toward "Mrs. O'Connor's Famous Employment Bureau."

"Here's what'll decide it," she

said aloud. "If it's open, I'll try it! And if I don't want to do it, I can back out. And anyway, I'd have to go home for my clothes, and probably Ma and Joe'd be home, and they'd not let me go. But if I get away this time, it's for good!"

She mounted the crazy stairway and laid her hand on the knob of the glass-paneled doorway that indicated O'Connor's. The knob turned, the door opened, and Sheila found herself alone in a shabby, spacious office, with a kindly looking woman of fifty, whose face instantly told her that if this was not Mrs. O'Connor, at least it might be.

"I want a job!" Sheila said, going in.

Mrs. O'Connor proved to be an affectionate and encouraging person.

"Now, I'll tell you, dear," she said to Sheila. "What did you say your name was?"

"Mary Moore."

"I'll tell you, Mary. I don't often keep open on holidays, but I've a rush order I couldn't do nothing with yesterday, and I've had to put it into today. There's a federation of business clubs meeting at Atlantic City this week, and every place down there is full. You've got a reference, dearie, from someone that knows you, your teacher, or the parish priest?"

"I can get it."

"Well, Mary, take the four-o'clock to Atlantic City—you'll get your fare and your lunch money back. Go to the Pendergast Inn. It's not on the boardwalk, it's a block back, but it's finer than many of the waterfront places. Go there and ask for Mrs. Kearney; she's the housekeeper. She's a lovely woman. I've sent her help these twenty years."

"It's only fourteen dollars," Mrs. O'Connor continued hardily. "What of it? It's something, these times, isn't it, with everything found. Everything found. Everything found, think of it. Now you owe me six dollars . . . pay me when you like. Some of the girls pay half this week and half the next. There's another convention going down soon. She told me there was a month in it, surely. And then it'll be almost May, what do you know about that? You could easy stay on, right into the season. The season's getting earlier every year."

She was making entries with a fat soft hand, in a big book. Sheila said she would pay half.

"That's entirely satisfactory to me," Mrs. O'Connor told her, amiably. "They want nice, quiet-looking girls, and they'll like you. I suppose you haven't a sister or a cousin who'd like to go with you? It's quite a lark, the girls say."

"No, I haven't," Sheila said. And to herself she added, when she was in the quiet, snowy street again, "I very likely won't go myself!"

She went home, and found the three dreary rooms of the Bronx apartment empty and dark. Angela had gone away with Neely and Lizzie. The sight of the place reminded Sheila of the day's desolating adventures, of Ma's unkindness, of Joe's doubts, of the Mc Cann family, who were so ready to believe that she would run away with their precious son and be married by a justice of the peace!

Joe had an old imitation leather suitcase. Sheila dragged it out from under the big bed and began to pack it, crying hard as she did so. She prayed that they would come in and find her at it; they would be a long time persuading her not to go!

To be sure, she had given Mrs. O'Connor three dollars, but then what were three dollars in a crisis like this? The thought of the money reminded Sheila of her precious fifty dollars, and she took it out of the drawer of the kitchen table, to look at it lovingly. She put two bills back again, crying harder than ever. Ma should have them, Ma hadn't had forty dollars very often in her life.

Less than an hour later, turning into their street, and supporting his emotionally exhausted mother with a firm arm, Joe Carscadden said suddenly:

"Did you see that girl across the street, Ma?"

"I saw nobody."

"I guess I'm seeing Sheila everywhere!" Joe said. "It looked like her."

"Now I tell you," said his mother, "they have that child all wrong, them Mc Canns."

Joe all but stopped short in his slow pacing, to give his mother an astounded glance.

"But, Ma, you didn't take her

part then!"

"I blame meself that I didn't, then," Mrs. Carscadden said, walking on.

"You have to hand it to her for this," Joe said. "His having money didn't matter two cents to her! She didn't want him, and that was all there was to it."

"It spakes well for her, it does so," said her mother.

"I thought it did!"

"There's few ger'ls wouldn't jump at a lad that has all he has."

"I'll tell the world there are!"

"But you'd not get Sheila to in-thrigue for 'um, just because he was a rich man's son."

"I'll swear I felt sorry for her!" Joe said suddenly, as they entered the dark, odorous doorway of home.

"She seemed so alone, poor kid, there in that big room, with every one of us riding her."

"They had me so twisted about, Joe," Mrs. Carscadden said confidentially, arresting him on the long stairs, "I didn't know what they were after. Did they want her to marry 'um, or didn't they?"

"I think they thought Peter had got her into something, and the only decent thing for him to do was stand by her."

"But you don't think so, Joe?" his mother asked seriously.

"No." He hesitated. "Of course, at first I thought she and Peter were just stringing us," he confessed, "and then all of a sudden while we were there it came over me that she was telling the truth."

"I hope she's not mad at us," Mrs. Carscadden murmured fearfully at the door.

"Sheila? Oh, she never stays mad," he said comfortably.

"I'll make her a batch of muffins for supper; she likes them!" the woman decided. "It scalds me that she told me yesterda', Joe," she added, "that she'd been cookin' a pot-roast, an' I never said anything to her about it!"

"You certainly rode her!" Joe said, stooping to grope for the door-knob in the dark.

"Not anny more than the rest of you," the mother protested uncomfortably. "Look how Lizzie done!"

"Yes, but Sheila only minded it from you, Ma."

"Oh, Joe," Mrs. Carscadden said, pathetically, "don't say that, dear!"

"Why, you know darned well how Sheila feels when she thinks you're off her, Ma. It's locked; she's not home!" Joe said blankly, of the door.

"Joe, she must be home!"

"She's not. She couldn't lock herself in, could she?" Joe asked, producing the key from its usual hiding-place on the top of the door jamb.

"Oh, God forgive us, Joe, where would she be!"

"Maybe she went to Marg'ret's."

"She'd not do that, Joe. She was droppin' with the fatigue that was on her!"

"She'll be back," Joe said, anxiously.

His mother made no answer. Joe heard her whispering prayers as they went into the dark, empty rooms together.

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