

# THE ICE CHORUS





C H A P T E R   O N E

*Sea Iris, brittle flower,  
one petal like a shell  
is broken,  
and you print a shadow  
like a thin twig.*

H.D.

**A**n ocean-hued piece of silk rests over her hand like a landed butterfly. As she moves through the unheated rooms her footfalls disturb air thick with odors of previous dwellers, an old woman's perfume and the acid tinge of cat. Her eyes water and the stripes of silk blur, seaweed bleeding over the slate of swells, blue slate smudging the white-green of sea glass. The cloth is cut from a dress she no longer wears but once cherished, a vivid scrap of her past.

Along the hallway her suitcases and crates are stacked under dust-white rays from the one grimy window set deep in the plaster wall. Trying the door, and finding it warped snugly into its frame, she pushes against it, backs up, then pushes again. One determined shoulder frees it, and the door gives too quickly, caught by an Atlantic gust, so she is

pulled suddenly over the threshold and into the late winter day.

She blinks in the brightness and takes several strides down the path before turning back to better view the isolated cottage.

The outer walls are pocked by years of sea spray and in need of whitewashing. Loose mortar dulls the grass and ragged hedges shivering along the foundation. Paint is battered from the window sashes, so only a few flakes of red curl from weathered wood. The entire building seems to lean away from the sea, even its chimneys. In spite of the neglect — or perhaps because of it — the place draws her. That the cottage still stands after three hundred years is an assurance. The place has survived generations; it can endure the history of one more woman.

She looks down at the cloth, now wrapped around her finger like a wedding band, and thinks of dim rooms within, imagining the walls painted in these soft hues, so that walking through the cottage will be like moving through moods of the sea, like wading through one of Charlie's paintings.

Yes, she thinks. *I could live here.*

So much is old in this new place. In the driveway of crushed shells, her 1960 Morris Minor sits like a forgotten toy. Her second day in Ireland she'd found it parked outside the café where she'd been having tea, *For Sale* lettered neatly over its windscreen. Circling the car in the cobbled lane, she'd noted that its robin's-egg finish still shone, the fenders had only a few shallow dents, and the upholstery had been mended but was clean.

Touching the paneled door, she'd inhaled the odor of wood wax — a smell of the past. The gloss at her fingertips was the same sheen as the walnut of her father's desk.

How often she'd crawled into the shelter of its kneehole,

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to read or daydream, sometimes falling asleep. Her father's dark serge knees would eventually invade her nook, jostling the book in her hand or nudging her awake. Her father never seemed surprised to find her there, would only whisper, "Out you come, Roo," and press his legs aside.

Roo. One of the many nicknames he'd given her — there was Mitten, of course, and Gertrude, which she hated, but he'd only called her that when she was being awful. Most names are lost to her now, but one comes in a whisper. As first drops of rain splatter down the windscreen of the little car, she remembers weeping over some silly thing, and her father blotting tears with the heel of his palm, tempting her into his lap with "C'mon, Drizzle."

A lorry sped past. She peeled her hand from the car as rain began in earnest. Crossing the street to a phone booth, she squinted through the glass and dialed the number on the Morris's windscreen.

She chooses to believe driving a car her own age is providence. As she walks toward the car, the keys jangle a tune from her fingers. The drive is little more than two ruts carved in sea grass. As the Morris bumps up the rough incline, the house and sheep barn are reflected in the rearview, solid grey blocks behind the cartons stacked on the backseat, the household goods she's purchased: cleaning solutions, lightbulbs, towels, a broom, an electric kettle. Things to start with. She'll buy paint in the village.

Puddles in the ruts are lidded with ice — long mirrors of Irish sky that shatter under the weight of the tires. The glint of ice and the sound of cracking echo a game she'd often played on her solitary walks to school. Finding a frozen puddle, she would count the number of jumps, knees pumping and book bag pounding at her back, until the ice broke and the sudden squelch of dirty water would darken the

leather of her loafers. These deeper memories slip more easily into frame now that she's so far from them. Since coming to Ireland she has wondered whether it isn't the silvery coastal light — surely a stop or two brighter — that has endowed these days with a clearer view to the past. Or perhaps she's simply ready to remember.

The Morris's shock absorbers are loose with age, and with the next jarring break through ice she bites her tongue. The car is quaint with faults; the heater fan labors and the indicator lights barely wink. It is too sluggish to drive safely on the N5 when it's busy. But the car has one modern feature — the new CD player she'd had installed down in Galway. Turning onto the main road, she slips in a favorite disk and begins her terrible singing.

It is a song she's heard dozens of times, but since her affair with Charlie the lyrics can affect her breath. *You are in my blood like holy wine*. When she first began to think of it as “their song,” she'd blanched at the sentimentality of pairing songs to lovers. It was more interesting, really, to consider the idea from the songwriter's perspective — how wonderful it would be to witness the dramas, the dances and heartbreaks your own lyrics might serenade. Syncopated voyeurism — lovers tangled in hotel sheets, leaning close in smoky bars, murmurs and cries a muted beat behind the tune. *You taste so bitter and so sweet*.

Charlie had asked once which songs she wanted played at her funeral. It was just after they'd both nearly drowned. They'd been lovers only a few days then but already knew they would like to grow old together, die together.

“Which songs?”

“That's easy.” Her answer was half-serious. “Samuel Barber's *Agnus Dei* sung by a full choir, and ‘Muskrat Love.’”

If asked now, she would add this old Joni Mitchell tune. As she sings, an ache for Charlie catches under her ribs and

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she can imagine herself becoming ill again. During the hand-wringing weeks after they'd parted, Charlie had written his most melodramatic letters, claiming what they'd had together was no mirage, had compared their separation to being lost in a desert, overcome by thirst.

*I could drink a case of you . . .*

But now, after all this time?

*. . . and I would still be on my feet.*

Dark exhaust trails the car and she makes a note to check the oil. She's taken her eyes from the road too long and must swerve to avoid a cat. The tires rock into the chippings of the ditch, the rasp of it startling her just as Joni Mitchell's cigarette voice gives out, singing, *I'd still be on my feet.*

Usually she enjoys driving, but here, on the wrong side of everything, she must concentrate, and finds being left-handed is no help at all. The roads are narrow, making the smallness of her odd car an advantage, but even so, the fenders swipe the gorse with each oncoming vehicle. In Ontario the roads barge through the countryside, but here they only meander as the land allows. The coast road is a brown shelf dividing hillside and beach. It's an effort not to be distracted by the scenery. Far up the checkered hillside, sheep graze like slow chess pieces, and to her right the surf chimes. She makes another note to order film stock from Dublin and to drive this route again with her eight-millimeter camera, when the light is the same, wide and benevolent.

She feels blindly for her sunglasses, not daring to take her gaze from the road again.

The village lies at the narrow end of a V-shaped bay. There are two sleepy streets and a few lanes of row houses slanting toward a pier. Scum-bottomed boats tilt, and three boys she imagines should be in school are draped over the seawall, fishing and punching one another. They stop long

enough to aim ice chunks at a gull pecking near their bait bucket. Obscene shouts trail the bird until it lands precisely out of range on a leaning mast.

A sexual smell from the sea mingles with diesel fumes and smoke rising from a trash barrel. Parking near the town centre, she need only turn a half circle to take in the entire main street. Strung between two churches are a post office, a petrol station, six pubs, a laundry, a grocery, a combined fishmonger-butcher, an ugly modern community centre, and a dozen houses with tiny gardens. The once graceful façade of the Arches Hotel has been covered over in pebble dash, with a modern glass door as added insult. Litter swirls in eddies at either side of the hotel's broad stoop.

This is not postcard Ireland, just a small town at low tide.

It's easy enough to find the hardware store, Conner's, its door flanked by two rabbit hutches carpeted with scattered droppings and candy wrappers stuffed through the mesh. Several lop-eared whites cower in far corners. On a card atop of the hutches, £5 has been crossed out and *Free* scrawled over it. Inside, the shop is dark and crowded. A man in coveralls ruminates over a row of hammers. A housewife brushes past her with a shopping bag sprouting a duster and sponges.

Approaching the counter, she suddenly feels silly about her request. She haltingly explains the piece of coloured cloth, and the young clerk raises her freshly pierced eyebrow and takes the scrap by a corner. After a beat the girl loudly calls for someone named Remy, and while they wait, the clerk stares at her until a clomping on the boards grows near and an elderly man with a high lift in his shoe appears. The girl hands him the cloth and shrugs.

"She wants paint."

He squints at the cloth and sniffs the air near the girl's ear. "I can smell the fags on you, Siobhan."

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The girl rolls her eyes, shutting the register drawer with one hip.

He turns away. “C’mon then.” With his neck craned the old man limps ahead, leading her through the shop and out a low door to a small courtyard — a sunlit chaos of metal shelves and bins of brown nails. Glass is stacked in jagged piles, and three chrome kitchen chairs surround a cable spool turned on its side to fashion a table. The man raises his head, blocking her sun. In the eclipse, she notices his profile makes a familiar shape, the sloping brow and protruding upper lip reminding her of a tortoise. He holds the silk high in the air, and when he squints, his eyes nearly disappear in pools of wrinkled flesh. Sun on his chin catches a spot missed by the razor, a shimmer of silver and gold stubble. There is enough curl left in his hair to suggest he once had a ginger-coloured mop of it.

He grunts and hands back the cloth. “I’ve no such colours in my formulas.”

Sighing, she opens her purse to put the cloth away, but suddenly the old man plucks it back with a grin.

“Ah, now, that doesn’t mean I cannot do it. It’ll take a bit though, so sit yourself, missus. I’ll get her started.”

He hitches away, favoring his right leg. Had he meant for her to wait here? As she turns, her elbow catches a shelf of discarded hardware and buckets of scrap metal. She pulls her arms close, trying to recall the date of her last tetanus shot.

After brushing soot from one of the chairs, she sits, and one of the chrome legs immediately buckles. Cursing, she catches herself and shifts into the next seat. The old man pops his head out, warning, “Watch that bandy-legged one, missus. It’s as steady as I am.” He stomps his special shoe on the threshold.

He’s been watching her. She wonders for how long. Of course she is a curiosity here — surely there will be specula-

tion. She idly muses over what the people of this tiny place will think, or, more likely, what they will surmise.

After a few minutes the girl with the raw eyebrow appears, scowling against the sun and balancing a metal teapot and yellow teacups on a tray.

“For me?”

“It’s only tea.” The girl jerks her head toward the door. “*He’s* eaten the biscuits.”

“Thank you . . . Siobhan, right?”

“Uh, yah.”

When she offers her own name, the girl shrugs. “That’s pretty, but what do people call you?”

“You mean like a nickname? Well, my friends call me Lise.”

“*Leez-eh?* Weird.” The line of the girl’s mouth softens a fraction and she brushes aside her bangs, revealing green eyes fringed in black lashes. Her skin is flawless eggshell, save the yellow swell around the piercing. Siobhan catches Lise’s glance and nods. “It feekin’ aches, yeah, but nothing like when I had my nipple done. Jesus, that.”

They both laugh, Lise rather nervously, and as the paint shaker shifts into full rattle she wonders if Siobhan’s revelation was meant to shock her. Why would the girl pierce herself in such painful manners — why would anyone? Had she altered her body for a boyfriend, or in a simple fit of vanity? *What women suffer for love*. She begins to ask, “How could you . . .,” but flounders, rephrasing to finish weakly, “I mean, how could *I* find the library here?”

Under Lise’s inquisitive gaze, the girl’s face is open; there is no malice on her. How old could she be? Anywhere between seventeen and twenty-seven. The girl looks younger when she smiles.

Siobhan tells her where to find the library, such as it is, next to the community centre, which doubles as the theatre

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on weekend nights. She lists the two outdated American films currently playing. “*My Best Friend’s Wedding* and *Erin Brockovich*, as if Julia Roberts is the only thing on legs,” she groans. “Why not something with Clive Owen or Colin Farrell? Even fat old Russell Crowe, but *no*, it’s a man who runs the place and orders the films, so there you are.” As she frowns, the ring through her eyebrow glints. “Last week it was *Notting Hill*. Could you puke?”

“You like films? My son is — ” Lise is interrupted when the man shopping for a hammer pokes his head out the door. He stares at them a full measure before holding up his choice like a baton.

Siobhan mumbles through a clenched grin. “Needs more than a hammer, that one.” She takes her time meandering back into the shop, running a finger along one of the outdoor shelves, looking back once at Lise and feigning shock at the grime.

The girl’s easy charm reminds her of Adam, though these days it’s difficult to remember her son being easy. She thinks of the last silent weeks in Toronto and his terse farewell. As she presses a sudden sting from her eye, there is nowhere to look except her lap.

“Too bright?”

She straightens to see Mr. Conner has appeared and is shifting toward her. He shores the broken chair with a crate and sits heavily. Once settled, he commences cleaning his stained nails with a match end, stealing the odd glance. “Are you not cold?” He thrusts his chin at her unbuttoned coat.

“Not at all.”

While the tea cools she feels compelled to tell the old man things he already seems to know: that she has rented old Mrs. Kleege’s place and has come from Canada. She fumbles for adjectives to describe how beautiful she finds the coast. When she can think of nothing else, they sit in silence.

He pours tea, apologizing for the absence of biscuits. Scowling mildly toward the shop, he says, “The girl’s eaten them all.”

Lise smiles and cradles the cup of tea, which is too hot to drink. Mr. Conner gulps his and makes a trip inside to check the paint, reemerging with small rectangles of glass dipped in colour. These are lined up on an overturned barrel, their shades deepening as they dry.

“Have you relations here?”

She shakes her head.

Mr. Conner’s brow arcs. “You’ve rented that trap of a house, so you must be staying on with us for a while?”

She shrugs. “I guess.”

It’s obvious he’s after her reasons for choosing his village, or perhaps why she’s chosen to arrive in the unlikely month of February. But he won’t ask directly, she realizes. She can play his game just as well.

He blows over a wedge of glass in his palm. “You’ve come for the excitement and high drama then?”

“Like watching paint dry?”

He nearly laughs, at least smiles enough to show the wide gap between his front teeth. As he places the bit of glass with the others, a cloud passes overhead. “Surely you’ve not come for the weather?”

“And why not? It’s never dull.” Her real reason simply sounds too ridiculous: *I saw this coast in a painting*. She doesn’t want to be considered mad before she’s even unpacked. “It’s the loveliest bit of the country, isn’t it?” she adds.

His eyes slit as if he knows all she’s really seen of Ireland is the back end of a lorry while driving the N<sub>4</sub> from Dublin. “So” — he sighs — “you’ve come for the ocean, for there’s nothing else.”

He’s right, in a way. She brightens, remembering the view

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on the old coast road. “Yes, I may even gather some footage — there’s an amazing place out past the caravan park.”

“Footage?”

“*Film* footage.”

Mr. Conner slaps the table. “Right, so! Kevin from the FedEx said he’d brought some of those metal equipment cases out your way.” He grins broadly, pleased to have solved her mystery. “So you’re here to make a film, then?” He pronounces the word “fil-um.”

“Oh, no, I hadn’t planned, I only might.”

“What’ll it be then, a love story, a crime caper?”

“Nothing like that. I only make documentaries.”

The phone jangles near the back door, and the old man scowls before tilting from his chair. She’s been saved further explanation, but while he’s inside, Lise realizes she needn’t really explain herself. She can let Mr. Conner and the other villagers assume what they want. The old hardware man might simply assume she’s an eccentric visitor with a movie camera, and that she is choosy about her paint to the point of weirdness. Or perhaps he’ll imagine something more dramatic — that she carries a shameful secret, or has escaped a difficult life. That she’s come to the sea to grieve.

There *was* truth, however small, in each possibility. People prefer intrigue to loss, she knows.

When Mr. Conner comes back, he asks before even sitting, “Documentaries — like those how-to films?” He settles down as if he has all day, making her wonder if the pierced girl, Siobhan, is running the shop.

“More like stories. *People’s* stories.”

“What kinds of people?”

“All kinds.” Cocking her head at Mr. Conner, she decides to turn his curiosity back on him. She’s already noticed the worn gold band on his finger and leans in, daring to be personal. “Are you married then, Mr. Conner?”

“I am, about a hundred years now.”

“And how did you meet your bride?”

His eyes narrow, as if she’s being cheeky — the same look he’d given Siobhan earlier. “Now why would you want that rag of history?” He tops off her cup with steaming tea and peers at her.

“Well, I suppose I’m just curious.” She grins. “Like you.”

“I see you are. You’ll fit in here just fine then.” He begins in a very matter-of-fact monotone, “Well, it’s a plain enough story. Her name is Margaret, and she was a gorgeous girl — still is, mind you. But back then . . . well.” He shakes his head and offers empty palms, as if there aren’t words to describe his wife. “Our Siobhan’s nearly the spit image of her, so you can imagine.”

Lise nods toward the shop. “*Your* Siobhan?”

“Our granddaughter.” He sets down his tea. “When Margaret was Siobhan’s age she took no notice of *me*, a course. But then she wasn’t cruel like some, either.” He pushes his lame foot forward. “I went to every healing well between here and the North, hoping to get cured so that I might catch her eye. Girl like her, what other chance’d I have, save a miracle?” Mr. Conner shakes his head. “But in the end, only after I’d given up, the charm happened, but not the way I’d thought.”

“What was the charm?”

“Just a song. I only just sang her a song once — to cheer her, while she was ailing.” His smile seems weighted. “She took notice of me after that.”

“That must’ve been some song. Would I know it?”

“Maybe.” Without the slightest hesitation he stands, clears his throat, and breaks into a ballad with words so thickly accented she can barely make them out. Mr. Conner’s voice rings pleasantly in the courtyard, and after a few bars, a calm spreads over his features, as if singing is his nat-

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ural voice. And in singing, the melody transforms him to near handsomeness; his face opens and he stands straighter, less anchored by his leg. His tune recalls the Cape Breton sea ballads that Lise had learned in school — tragic stories of lovers wrenched apart by the ocean’s appetite for sailors, or by the dangerous sirens who entice men into icy depths. But this song, at least what she can make of it, suggests the beloved might make it ashore, might claim his girl after all.

As soon as he finishes, Mr. Conner sits quickly, a flush blooming over his already pink cheeks. “Ah, you’re thinking, *These Irish, they’ll sing to a mad dog if he has one ear.*”

“Not at all. I’m thinking it’s no wonder Margaret took to you. That was marvelous.” She leans in, feeling bolder. “You must have had quite a courtship.”

He looks at her with straight suspicion. “’Twas well enough. Certainly brief, so. We knew what we were meant to do.” His focus founders before landing on the teapot. “Here, another cup, before it’s stone cold.” After pouring, he leans back, bands his stocky arms around his chest, and clamps his mouth shut.

After a few dumb moments she nearly gets up to sing herself. That might break the ice, she thinks, for surely Mr. Conner’s never heard a voice like hers. Instead she taps a nail over the glass wedges of dried paint. After a dozen counted breaths, the silence becomes unbearable to Lise, so she breaks it with a blurted apology. “I’m sorry, Mr. Conner, I didn’t mean to pry.”

He considers her briefly before shaking his head. “Jays, don’t be calling me Mr. Conner. I’m only Remy.” He presses a broad thumb over his chin. “Now, where were we? Margaret, right, so. As I said — she liked my singing well enough and later even got used to my face. Course those days there weren’t many lads to choose from, so many left to fight the war, and later even more gone off to London