

I LOST MY OWN FATHER AT 12 YR. of age and know what it is to be raised on lies and silences my dear daughter you are presently too young to understand a word I write but this history is for you and will contain no single lie may I burn in Hell if I speak false.

God willing I shall live to see you read these words to witness your astonishment and see your dark eyes widen and your jaw drop when you finally comprehend the injustice we poor Irish suffered in this present age. How queer and foreign it must seem to you and all the coarse words and cruelty which I now relate are far away in ancient time.

Your grandfather were a quiet and secret man he had been ripped from his home in Tipperary and transported to the prisons of Van Diemen's Land I do not know what was done to him he never spoke of it. When they had finished with their tortures they set him free and he crossed the sea to the colony of Victoria. He were by this time 30 yr. of age red headed and freckled with his eyes always slitted against the sun. My da had sworn an oath to evermore avoid the attentions of the law so when he saw the streets of Melbourne was crawling with policemen worse than flies he walked 28 mi. to the township of Donnybrook and then or soon thereafter he seen my mother. Ellen Quinn were 18 yr. old she were dark haired and slender the prettiest figure on a horse he ever saw but your grandma was like a snare laid out by God for Red Kelly. She were a Quinn and the police would never leave the Quinns alone.

My 1st memory is of Mother breaking eggs into a bowl and crying that Jimmy Quinn my 15 yr. old uncle were arrested by the traps. I don't know

where my daddy were that day nor my older sister Annie. I were 3 yr. old. While my mother cried I scraped the sweet yellow batter onto a spoon and ate it the roof were leaking above the camp oven each drop hissing as it hit.

My mother tipped the cake onto the muslin cloth and knotted it. Your Aunt Maggie were a baby so my mother wrapped her also then she carried both cake and baby out into the rain. I had no choice but follow up the hill how could I forget them puddles the colour of mustard the rain like needles in my eyes.

We arrived at the Beveridge Police Camp drenched to the bone and doubtless stank of poverty a strong odour about us like wet dogs and for this or other reasons we was excluded from the Sergeant's room. I remember sitting with my chilblained hands wedged beneath the door I could feel the lovely warmth of the fire on my fingertips. Yet when we was finally permitted entry all my attention were taken not by the blazing fire but by a huge red jowled creature the Englishman who sat behind the desk. I knew not his name only that he were the most powerful man I ever saw and he might destroy my mother if he so desired.

Approach says he as if he was an altar.

My mother approached and I hurried beside her. She told the Englishman she had baked a cake for his prisoner Quinn and would be most obliged to deliver it because her husband were absent and she had butter to churn and pigs to feed.

No cake shall go to the prisoner said the trap I could smell his foreign spicy smell he had a handlebar moustache and his scalp were shining through his hair.

Said he No cake shall go to the prisoner without me inspecting it 1st and he waved his big soft white hand thus indicating my mother should place her basket on his desk. He untied the muslin his fingernails so clean they looked like they was washed in lye and to this day I can see them livid instruments as they broke my mother's cake apart.

*Tis not poverty I hate the most
nor the eternal grovelling
but the insults which grow on it
which not even leeches can cure*

I will lay a quid that you have already been told the story of how your grandma won her case in court against Bill Frost and then led wild gallops up and down the main street of Benalla. You will know she were never a coward but on this occasion she understood she must hold her tongue and so she wrapped the warm crumbs in the cloth and walked out into the rain. I cried out to her but she did not hear so I followed her skirts across the muddy yard. At 1st I thought it an outhouse on whose door I found her hammering it come as a shock to realise my young uncle were locked inside. For the great offence of duffing a bullock with cancer of the eye he were interred in this earth floored slab hut which could not have measured more than 6 ft. × 6 ft. and here my mother were forced to kneel in the mud and push the broken cake under the door the gap v. narrow perhaps 2 in. not sufficient for the purpose.

She cried God help us Jimmy what did we ever do to them that they should torture us like this?

My mother never wept but weep she did and I rushed and clung to her and kissed her but still she could not feel that I were there. Tears poured down her handsome face as she forced the muddy mess of cake and muslin underneath the door.

She cried I would kill the b-----ds if I were a man God help me. She used many rough expressions I will not write them here. It were eff this and ess that and she would blow their adjectival brains out.

These was frightening sentiments for a boy to hear his mamma speak but I did not know how set she were until 2 nights later when my father returned home and she said the exact same things again to him.

You don't know what you're talking about said he.

You are a coward she cried. I blocked my ears and buried my face into my floursack pillow but she would not give up and neither would my father turn against the law. I wish I had known my parents when they truly loved each other.

You will see in time your grandfather were a man of secrets and what he said and done was different things though for now it is enough to know my mother had one idea about my father and the police the opposite. She thought him Michael Meek. They knew him as a graduate of Van Diemen's Land and a criminal by birth and trade and marriage they was constantly examining the brands on our stock or sifting through our

flour for signs of larceny but they never found nothing except mouse manure they must have had a mighty craving for the taste.

Nor was your grandmother as unfriendly towards the police as you would expect if solely instructed by her testimony she might of wished to murder them but would not mind a little drink and joke before she done the deed. There was one Sergeant his name O'Neil my mother seemed to like him better than the rest. I am talking now of a later time I must have been 9 yr. of age for our sister Kate had just been born. Our father were away contracting and our small hut were more crowded than ever now there was 6 children all sleeping between the maze of patchwork curtains Mother hung to make up for the lack of walls. It were like living in a cupboard full of dresses.

Into this shadowy world Sgt O'Neil did come with queer white hair which he were always combing like a girl before a dance he were v. friendly to us children and on the night in question he bring me the gift of a pencil. At school we used the slates but I never touched a pencil and was most excited to smell the sweet pine and graphite as the Sergeant sharpened his gift he were very fatherly towards me and set me at one end of the table with a sheet of paper. My sister Annie were 1 yr. older she got nothing from O'Neil but thats another story.

I set to work to cover my paper with the letters of the alphabet. My mother sat at the other end of the table with the Sgt and when he produced his silver flask I paid no more attention than I did to Annie & Jem & Maggie & Dan. After I made each letter as a capial I set to do the smaller ones such were my concentration that when my mother spoke her voice seemed very far away.

Get out of my house.

I looked up to discover Sergeant O'Neil with his hand to his cheek I suppose she must of slapped him for his countenance were turned v. red. Get out my mother shrieked she had the Irish temper we was accustomd to it.

Ellen you calm yourself you know I never meant nothing in the least improper.

Eff off my mother cried.

The policeman's voice took a sterner character. Ellen said he you must not use such language to a police officer.

That were a red rag to my mother she uncoiled herself from her seat.

You effing mongrel she cried her voice louder again. You wouldnt say that if my husband were not gone contracting.

I will issue one more warning Mrs Kelly.

At this my mother snatched up the Sergeant's teacup and threw the contents onto the earthen floor. Arrest me she cried arrest me you coward.

Baby Kate woke crying then. Jem were 4 yr. old sitting on the floor playing knuckles but when the brandy splashed beside him he let the bones lie quiet. Of a different disposition I begun to move towards my mother.

Did you hear your mother call me a coward old chap?

I would not betray her I walked round the table and stood next to her. Said he You was busy writing Ned?

I took my mother's hand and she put her arm around my shoulder.

You are a scholar aint it he asked me.

I said I were.

Then you must know about the history of cowards. I were confused I shook my head.

Next O'Neil was bouncing to his feet and showing the full hard stretch of his policeman's boots said he Let me educate you young man. No said my mother her manner now completely changed. Please no.

A moment earlier O'Neil had a stiff and worried air but now there was a dainty sort of prance about him. O yes said he all children should know their history indeed it is quite essential.

My mother wrenched her hand from mine and reached out but the Ulsterman ducked behind the 1st set of curtains and emerged to prowl in and out and around our family he even patted little Dan upon his silky head. My mother were afraid her face was pale and frozen. Please Kevin.

But O'Neil was telling us his story we had to quiet to listen to him he had the gift. It were a story of a man from Tipperary named only A Certain Man or This Person Who I Will Not Name. He said A Certain Man had a grudge against a farmer for lawfully evicting his tenant and This Person etc. conspired with his mates to kill the farmer.

I'm sorry said my mother I already apologised.

Sgt O'Neil made a mocking bow continuing his story without relent telling how This Certain Man did 1st write a threatening letter to the landlord. When the landlord ignored the letter and evicted the tenant

This Certain Man called a SELECT MEETING of his allies to a chapel in the dead of night where they drank whisky from the Holy Goblet and swore upon the Holy Book then he said to them Brothers for we are all brothers sworn upon all thats blessed and Holy. Brothers are you ready in the name of God to fulfil your oaths? They said they was they swore it and when they done their blasphemy they descended upon the farmer's house with pikes and faggots burning.

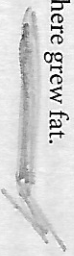
Sergeant O'Neil seemed much affected by his own story his voice grew loud he said the farmer's children screamed for mercy at the windows but the men set their home alight and those who escaped they piked to death there was mothers and babes in arms the Sgt would not spare us either he painted the outrage in every detail we children were all silent open mouthed not only at the horror of the crime but also the arrest of the Guilty Parties and the treachery of This Certain Man who betrayed all he had drawn into his conspiracy. The accomplices was hanged by the neck until dead and the Ulsterman let us imagine how this might be he did not conceal the particulars.

What happened then he asked we could not answer nor speak nor did we wish to hear.

This Certain Man kept his life he were transported to Van Diemen's Land. And with that Sergeant O'Neil strode out our door into the night.

Mother said nothing further she did not move not even when we heard the policeman's mare cantering along the dark road up the hill to Beveridge I asked her what was meant by This Certain Man and she give me such a clip across the ears I never asked again. In time I understood it were my own father that was referred to.

The memory of the policeman's words lay inside me like the egg of a liver fluke and while I went about my growing up this slander wormed deeper and deeper into my heart and there grew fat.



Sergeant O'Neil had filled my boy's imagination with thoughts that would breed like maggots on a summer day you would think his victory complete but he begun to increase his harassment of my father rousing him from bed when he were drunk or fast asleep he also needed and teased me whenever he seen me in the street.

He would mock the way I dressed my lack of shoes and coats. I were

all knees and elbows and shy of any comment I couldnt walk past the Police Camp with my friends without him calling out some insult. I pretended to be amused for I would not give him the satisfaction of seeing blood.

It were during Sgt O'Neil's hateful reign we heard Mr Russell of Foster Downs Station was to sell off a great mob of bullocks and cows in calf also a famous bull he was said to have brought from England for 500 quid. It were a much bigger event than we was accustomed to in Beveridge just a straggly village on a difficult hill reviled by all the bullockies between Melbourne and the Murray River 1/2 way up the hill were a pub and blacksmith and portable lockup then farther west a Catholic school. That hill were too much effort even for the bitter winds which turned around and come howling back towards our hut below. West of the road the water were salt. Our side had good water but it were still known as Pleurisy Plains. No one ever come to Beveridge for their health.

The sale changed all that and suddenly there was squatters and stock agents come to visit even a veterinarian from Melbourne all these strangers set up camp beside the swamp between our place and the hill. There was gaffing & flash talk & grog drinking & galloping up & down the Melbourne road it were good as a circus to us boys to hang about the boggy crossing and see the fancy riding. Day by day Jem and me run the long way to school to see what new tents were set up at the swamp. We was on tenterhooks awaiting the beasts but it were not until dusk on the day before the Auction we heard that particular mournful bellowing on the wind it were a mob of cattle being driven over a track they did not know.

I told Jem I was going to meet them.

Me too.

We wasnt finished tending to the pigs and chooks we did not care our feet was bare the ground were hard and rocky though we was used to it and run right through the Indian corn. Said Jem We'll be whipped.

I don't care.

I don't care neither.

We had just gained the swamp bulrushes when the beasts come into view flooding down the smooth green hill of Beveridge like a breaking wave it were the gleaming wealth of all the nations pouring down towards us and the water. Cor look at them blacks said Jem.