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Opening extract from

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Written by

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CHAPTER ONE

It's a funny thing about the potato. It came to Ireland from the Americas in the first place, and yet it's also the very thing that made us leave home and head to the New World. You wouldn't think something so ordinary as a potato, something I used to eat every day of my life, could have had such an effect – but, well, it did. The potato once grew in the ground right by our front door, but because of it, me and my family left home and travelled six thousand miles to find a new life. This is the story of that journey – and I've quite a tale to tell, so you'd better make yourself comfortable. Some of it is unbelievable, but it's the truth, sure as my name is Slim Hannigan.

Ah, well, I should stop right there. Everyone calls

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me 'Slim' but my real name is Rosalind. Rosalind? I ask you. What kind of a name is that for a girl who can ride a horse and fire a gun? For a girl who once wrestled an Indian boy with a feather in his hair and won? For a girl who started her own newspaper and sold it on the streets of New York aged twelve? But I'm getting ahead of myself. My father chose Rosalind from some play called *As You Like It*. Well, I *don't* like it, so 'Slim' I'll be, thank you very much.

I was always making my own mind up about things and I don't think I was an easy child. The story my family always told was about my hair. I was about ten. It was Christmas and we were going to have a small party. Ma had told me a hundred times, 'You tidy your hair, Rosalind Hannigan, or I will cut it off with your father's knife.'

Da's knife always lay ready to use by the fire. It says something about me that I didn't like to have tidy hair – I didn't like having long hair at all. I just found it annoying. I wasn't anything like my big

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sister, Beatrice, who loved nothing better than to try different styles. I just thought long hair got in the way. Refusing to brush, I simply took Da's knife and cut it off myself to save Ma the time. When she saw me with my new haircut she nearly dropped the pail of milk she was carrying. She stood completely still and I thought she was going to be cross.

'It was you who suggested it,' I said, quietly waiting for her anger to burst out, but instead she was silent before she suddenly began to laugh.

'Oh, Slim, whatever shall we do with you?' she wondered through peals of laughter. I loved her laugh. It brightened our little house every day.

Anyway, Da – that's my father, Patrick Hannigan – always said that a story has to start some place, so I need to take you for a little while to the great green fields of Ireland. We're not stopping for long as I don't live there any more. Despite that, and everything I've been through, there's still something about even the thought of Ireland that makes my heart

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pound. The symbol of Ireland is a little tiny green clover with three leaves called the shamrock. I can't even picture the shamrock growing by the lane alongside my old home without a tear coming to my eye. I don't approve of being too soppy, but my big brother, Henry, says it's all right, it just proves I'm still Irish in my heart.

Henry. He's the one who started a lot of the trouble. Not that I blame him. If I had been a bit older I might have caused some trouble too.

I was born in 1834 in a small place called Ballysmaragaid, which I'm sure you won't have heard of. It's about two days' walk from Dublin, which is the biggest city in Ireland and which I suppose you might know. *Ballysmaragaid.* What a lot of letters! It means 'Place of Emerald', and sure enough it was so green that St Patrick himself was once said to have been struck almost blind with the beauty of it. I don't know why a saint would have come to our village at all.

The last time I remember when everything was

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completely normal was a day off from school. Maybe it was a Sunday, I don't know. Ballysmaragaid was so small, we didn't even have a church so we didn't go. I think Ma believed in God but she didn't make a fuss about it. That day I was wandering through the woods. I used to spend hours amongst the trees by myself but I never got lost.

'Look for the moss,' Da taught me. 'It's a natural navigator. Find a bit of tree not too near the ground. If there is moss growing, it will be on the north side of the trunk. Moss needs moisture and it will grow there because that is in the shade in the middle part of the day when the sun is doing most of its drying.'

It was 3 July 1845. The day before my birthday. I was ten, nearly eleven, when my story begins. I was probably wearing a pair of my brother's old trousers, and certainly no shoes. In fact I never had a pair of shoes at all until much later. We were poor but it didn't feel like it. With my short hair and trousers I must have looked like a boy.

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I was happy in the woods. The woodland went on for miles – great oak trees made a canopy of green but there were also crab apple trees, wild privet, and little Irish whitebeams covered in a fine mist of white flowers in the spring and small red berries in the autumn. I loved the place. Ma was good with nature too. She taught me about the delicious mushrooms you could eat for free and how to look carefully at everything that was growing.

'Look closely and you will see great wonders. See this?' She picked up a green plant with rounded leaves and little pink flowers. 'They call it Enchanter's Nightshade. Isn't that a beautiful name? Now, most people will tell you it's a sort of weed but even if it is, I think it's lovely. If you look carefully you can see it has delicate little downy hairs all over the stems.'

I looked at the fine soft covering on its stem.

'Look for beauty, Slim, and you will find it,' she advised.

No matter what the season, the woods seemed to

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be alive with colour – the richness of the early purple orchid, the tiny shaft of sun from the yellow pimpernel and the red of the wild strawberry.

'Who needs great museums and galleries of art when we have this?' Da would say as he picked bluebells to take home for Ma.

Anyway, this last normal day I was in one of Da's old shirts with the sleeves rolled up. I had been fishing in the stream. I wasn't supposed to. Beatrice said it wasn't right for a girl of my age to still enjoy 'such nonsense'. She wanted me home, in the house but I could never settle to sewing or cooking like my big sister, Beatrice. I liked outdoor things. I had caught a little brown trout and was feeling very pleased with myself. Ma might well be cross about me going fishing but she would appreciate the fish. We never had a great deal to eat and a trout would be welcome. I walked along carrying my fish on the end of the long stick I had been using as my fishing pole and no doubt whistling, which I was not supposed to do either. I had played in these woods all my life so

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I think I was surprised to come across a turning through the trees that I didn't recall taking before.

I had only walked for a few moments when the woodland seemed to give up and I came out into a clearing. I looked up and saw the grandest house you could ever imagine. It was a great grey square place, the size of a castle. It stood on a small hill with lawns the size of fields rolling up in waves towards it. The late-afternoon sun was shining on the windows. I had never seen so much glass. We didn't have any windows at all in our little stone house. To my young eyes this magnificent place seemed to have hundreds. The light glinted back at me, bouncing off the shiny surfaces as if the place were on fire. It was beautiful. Three long sets of stone stairs swept up towards the front door, with fancy marble columns set on either side. I had never walked this far before, but I knew what it was.

This was Cardswell Manor, a grand house that belonged to a lord so English that he didn't even stay there. Ma said they had linen on the beds and a

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fireplace with a chimney in every room. A child living in such a place had a room all to herself just for sleeping and was never cold in the winter. There was even a library of books which the people in the house could read whenever they liked. How Da would love such a thing!

I was mesmerized by the house and stepped forward onto the lawn. I could see roses growing over a small wooden house to my right. They were red and yellow, pink and white. I had never seen such lovely flowers, so I headed towards them, thinking I could perhaps take just one for Ma. As I got closer the scent was enough to knock you over. It was wonderful. I couldn't resist putting my head down to a particularly large flower and had just plunged my nose into the soft petals when I heard a gentle voice say, 'Well, hello there.'

I looked up into the face of a woman. She was beautiful – about the same age as Ma but dressed completely differently. She had a long silk gown in an emerald green with white lace at the shoulders.

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Her hair was dark, with lovely curls that peeked out from a matching green bonnet, also trimmed with lace. I had never seen a woman like her. She smiled at me and I thought she seemed nice.

I was about to say something when I heard a man behind me shout angrily, 'You, boy, what do you think you're doing?'

I spun round, and in my haste my fish swung out from the stick on my shoulder and slapped straight into the woman. She gave a gasp of surprise and I turned back in horror. The trout had fallen from the line onto her chest, and she stood there for a second with the fish hanging from her gown. I didn't know what to do.

'I'm so sorry,' I began.

'You little beggar!' yelled the man, moving towards me. He was old but he looked quite fit, so I'm afraid I ran. I wanted my fish, but didn't feel this was the moment to try and get it back. Instead I ran as fast as I could across the lawn. I thought for a moment that someone was calling my name but I

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didn't stop. I carried on racing through the woods and all the way back home. I ran past the stream, past the giant oak where Ma liked to picnic, and on past Uncle Aedan's small blacksmith's shop. I could tell he was there because smoke rose from the chimney where he worked the forge. As I sped past the open door I could see him raining blow after blow, down with a giant hammer on to hot metal as easy as I might lift a spoon to my mouth. He was the strongest man I'd ever seen. Under his buckskin apron the muscles on his arms and legs bulged like something that might hold up a small bridge . . . But I didn't stop. I ran past the other little *teachs* or houses that made up our small *clachan* or village. There was no proper road, just a dirt path worn down by our feet, but I knew every step. Our two chickens, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, nearly tripped me up as they flapped about at my arrival. I sprinted towards our small house; it was built of such rough stone that from a distance it almost looked like part of the ground. I dashed inside and

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slammed the door behind me. It was just one room, with no windows to let the light in. The only light came from the fire. It was dark and smoky, and I thought it would be easy to hide.

Once inside, I raced up the ladder which rose up to a platform where we kept the potatoes. Sometimes I slept up there and it was the place where I felt safest. My chest was heaving as I lay on the wooden boards looking at the door. I tried to calm myself. I looked at the great wooden beam above the door where Da, long before any of us children had come along, had once carved his name with Ma's. *Pat & Peg*, it said, with the shape of a heart neatly marked around it to keep them together. Peg was Ma's nickname. I liked looking at that. When I saw their two names joined together, it made me feel safe and happy; as though everything was all right. Slowly I started to get my breath back.

The first person back was my little brother, Toby, and our pig, Hamlet. I could hear Toby coming before the door even opened.

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'We won! Me and Hamlet won!' he was shouting. You always knew where Toby was for he had the loudest voice you ever heard in your life. As soon as he could talk, out came this booming sound, like a grown man in a tiny boy. It was hilarious and used to make us all laugh. He was eight then and he had the roundest, happiest face. Toby loved nothing better in the world than eating and laughing – usually at the same time. He was slightly out of breath but still managing to chew on a piece of bread while Hamlet grunted behind him, hoping for a scrap. Da had named him for some other Shakespeare play, even though Ma said he 'shouldn't be giving a name to a poor creature we would some day have to sell at market'. We weren't supposed to be fond of Hamlet, but he was a funny little fellow, more like a dog than a pig. He was the palest pink you ever saw, with small, slightly darker pink nose and ears. His eyes seemed huge in his head and his hair lay smooth across his body. He loved to play with a ball and he followed my little brother around like a small shadow.

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Toby must have been racing the rest of the family home as they were a way behind him. My big sister Beatrice was next in. She was sixteen and a miniature of Ma, with the same curly red hair. She was carrying great bricks of peat bog and looked hot and bothered. She dumped the lumps of soil down by the fire. I realized with a sinking feeling that I would be in trouble; that I should have been with the family digging out the peat instead of fishing and wandering in the woods. The land was soft in the summer and it was easy to dig, so we gathered in enough to last the winter. Usually we worked together, digging and collecting the 'bricks' which Ma and Da would then leave to dry. Once it was all dried it would burn better than wood on the fire. We used it to cook with and to keep us warm. It was important work and I should have been helping.

I watched Beatrice push her hair back from her hot face and try to smooth out her dress. Even though she was my sister I could see that she was a beauty. We were so different. She always worried about her

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appearance in a way that never crossed my mind.

My father was not far behind. Da, with his scruffy beard and dark hair sticking out at all angles from under his old round hat with the battered brim. He had heavy boots and trousers to the knee. He was carrying a great load of peat, but I knew he would rather be reading the books that stuck out from both pockets of his jacket.

'Where the devil is our Slim?' he asked, looking around as he dropped the peat onto the pile Beatrice had started.

I moved to hide further back on the platform, but Toby looked up and saw me. 'She's up there.' He pointed with a grin, giving me away with pleasure.

I sat up, expecting the worst, but just then Ma came in, and as usual everything became calm. She was the most beautiful woman I ever saw, with curly hair that was so bright it was almost like the pretend hair I once saw on a doll. She wore it pulled up in a bun with a single white clasp that Da said had been made from the tusk of an elephant. Imagine such a

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thing! She had so many freckles on her face that she never seemed anything except full of colour, but even so there was something so elegant about Ma. She didn't speak like the rest of us, all in a hurry and a jumble, but chose each word with care.

'Where have you been, Slim?' she asked gently. Her accent was soft and she sounded nothing like Da. As she spoke she carried on working, taking down the wooden bucket we used to fetch water which hung on a nail on the wall.

I swung my legs round to the top rung of the ladder. 'I went fishing.'

'Where's the fish?' asked Da.

'I . . .'

Ma shook her head and raised her right eyebrow at Da the way she did when a subject was not to be discussed any further. Ma always found something good in everything.

'Well, I'm glad you didn't come with us, Slim,' she said brightly. 'That'll mean you're not too tired to help me sort the supper.'

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I nodded and slowly climbed down the ladder just as my older brother, Henry, brought in the last of the peat. He was carrying too much but wouldn't let Da help him. Henry was fourteen but he was a big lad. It wouldn't be long before he was as tall as Da, but right now he was somewhere between a boy and a man. He banged into me, and I'm sure it was on purpose.

'You're in the way, Slim,' he muttered, but he saw Da shoot him a warning look and moved away from me. Henry was strong and he liked to solve things with his fists. How he made Da sigh. I hoped no one would mention the fishing – I didn't want my brother to think I had been too stupid to catch anything. I would never hear the end of it. I hated it when he teased me but I didn't want to tell anyone the truth. Henry had no time for me. He thought girls ought to stay home.

Ma went about making supper and giving me jobs to do. I got our only chair to climb on so I could reach up to the single shelf by the fire and

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take down the only two tin plates we owned. As we worked I watched my mother in her long skirt, worn thin with many patches, and her woollen shawl pulled and holed in so many places. It was nothing like the dress I had seen earlier up at the big house but I thought Ma looked the perfect lady.

Later that evening Toby and Hamlet lay curled up on the floor like brothers.

Ma sat in the chair darning a pair of socks. She shook her head at Toby. 'No good will come of it, Patrick,' she sighed. 'There shouldn't be a pig in the house. The boy treats the creature like a dog.'

Hamlet gave a little snore, confident he was not going anywhere. Da wasn't really listening for he was lost in a book. He sat on the floor, frowning as he tried to read by the light of the fire. He was always frowning, which was odd because in all of Ireland there was never a man with a laugh closer to his lips. When I look back now I think maybe he frowned because he needed glasses to see

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properly but we couldn't afford them. Most people's fathers in Ballysmaragaid did something practical to make a living. They built things or planted things. My da told stories, which I thought was best of all. They were all different, his stories, but they all started the same. 'Shall I tell you a tale?' he would begin, and soon you would be lost in his imagining.

I looked around the familiar room. There was nothing in it really. A wooden table against the wall, Ma's chair, the two tin plates and the water bucket. On a nail banged in by the door hung Da's great-coat. We didn't have anything else but I don't remember anyone thinking it wasn't enough.

Beatrice was drawing on a scrap of paper, as usual. She could draw like an angel and she would sit for hours dreaming about a different life. I had no idea how she could sit so still for hours and not fidget. Bea could even sew, a job which made me frown as much as Da.

'Let's see, Beatrice,' urged Ma.

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Beatrice blushed and then shyly held up a drawing of a fancy dress.

Henry laughed when he saw it. 'That's so fancy no one would be able to walk in it.'

'And what do you know about dresses, Henry Hannigan?' Beatrice demanded.

'I think lace would be nice,' I offered. 'On the shoulders.'

Ma looked at me and smiled. 'Do you now, Slim? And what would you know of such things?'

'Nothing,' I muttered, not wanting to explain about the woman I had seen.

Beatrice gave a great dreamy sigh. 'Lace! One day I will dress as fine as I like,' she said. 'I'll go to balls and theatres and have lovely suppers and wine, and I shall have a big bed where I'll lie all day just as long as I please, combing my hair.'

I gave a little laugh because it seemed ridiculous, but Da wasn't having it.

'And why not?' he agreed, looking up from his reading. 'You're a beautiful lass, Beatrice.' He smiled

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at Ma and she smiled back. 'That reminds me,' he continued with a grin. 'I saw the McClusky boy, Colin, hanging about again. Not waiting for you, was he?'

Beatrice's face went bright red. I knew she liked him. Colin was a little older than Henry and had grown a beard, which Beatrice thought was a marvellous thing. She would draw men with beards over and over when she wasn't sketching fancy clothes.

'He wants to take me walking,' she said shyly.

'Does he now?' said Ma.

Beatrice looked embarrassed.

'You're too young,' declared Da.

'She's the age I was when we began walking together, Mr Hannigan,' Ma reminded him.

Da changed the subject. 'Time for a tale,' he announced, clapping his hands. 'Have I told you the story of the great *Comedy of Errors*? It's a marvellous tale of travel and misunderstanding by our old friend Mr Shakespeare.'

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And we sat by the fire as Da spun stories and travelled the world with us in our minds.

'Where do stories come from, Da?' I asked.

He thought for a moment. 'Well, now, they're sort of magic. They're all around but most people don't take the time to let them in. If you open your mind you'll be amazed at the wonder which can appear. It's like reaching out and grabbing a slice of the moon for yourself.'

That night Ma kissed me goodnight. She stroked my head with her right hand and I held onto it. I liked to look at her ring. It was the only jewellery she owned. A Claddagh ring – a band of silver with a pair of hands holding a heart and a crown. She looked at the ring on her worn-down hands and said, 'The heart is for love, the hands for friendship and the crown for loyalty. It's all you need, my lovely Slim.'

She was just perfect. To me she even smelled perfect. I, on the other hand, was not perfect and I wish I had been a better daughter.

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