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The Rabbit Girl

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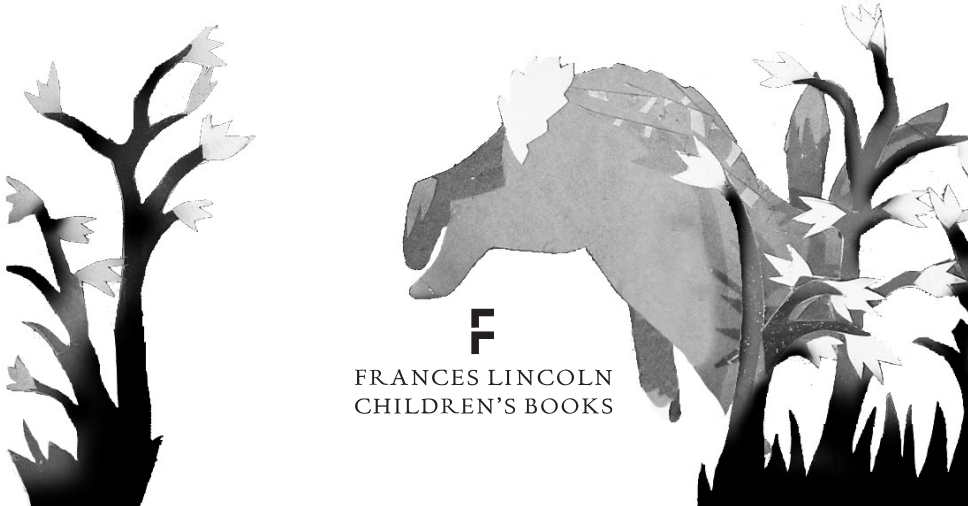
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The RABBIT Girl

Mary Arrigan



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Chapter One

Ireland, 1934

'That's not my mam!' protested the five-year-old boy, shrinking behind the elderly woman's ample skirt.

She drew him out firmly by the arm. 'It *is* your mam, Tony. Now, you come over here and kiss her goodbye, there's a good lad.'

Tony clung to Mrs Mooney's skirt, turning his head away from the figure lying on the bed. That yellow face did not belong to his mam. His mam had rosy cheeks, and eyes that laughed when she was telling him stories about people with strange names who lived in faraway lands filled with caves,

castles, ogres and animals that could talk. It was that memory which Tony clung to in this bedroom, transformed from its warm cosiness into a place that smelled of medicine and starchy bed linen folded in mothballs. Candles around the bed sputtered in the breeze blowing up the stairs from the open front door. All Mam's comforting clutter had been hidden away. Even the picture of rabbits in a field was covered with a white cloth.

'We'll go there,' Mam used to say. 'You and me, Tony, we'll go there and play with those rabbits.'

Maybe that's where Mam is, thought the little boy. *Maybe she's gone to play with the rabbits and is waiting for me*. He tried to pull away from Mrs Mooney's grasp. She dragged him over to the bed, but all the while he kept his head averted, eyes focused on the borrowed crucifix standing on the bedside table.

'Jesus will help her,' his dad had said when he put the cross there. 'Jesus will make your mam better.'

'Now,' Mrs Mooney said, lifting Tony up. 'You kiss your mam goodbye.'

She thrust his face against the stone-cold cheek of the figure on the bed. Tony struggled, but Mrs Mooney held him there.

The figure's lips were pressed tightly together, its eyes shut. Its head was covered in a white cloth, making it look like a wax nun. This was not his mam.

But when he saw the bloodless fingers entwined in his mother's blue rosary beads, he knew. His hopeless wail echoed around the walls of the small house, and the gathered neighbours crossed themselves. Tony turned his face away, and was again confronted by the crucifix.

'Jesus didn't make Mam better,' he sobbed, lashing out at it. Mrs Mooney caught his wrist before he could sweep the cross off the table.

'You little rascal,' she whispered, still holding the boy's wrist. 'But, sure, you're not thinking right, you poor little mite.'

Later, Tony stood with his father at the bottom of the stairs near the front door, as men in black eased the coffin down the narrow stairs.

Bump, thud, grunt, thud. Not nice noises. There should not be noises like that when they were carrying Mam. She wouldn't like it. Tony buried his face in his father's new overcoat and tried to think of Mam in a field with rabbits, and not in that bumpy box.

Every Sunday after that, Tony and his father took flowers to Mam's grave. Then his father had

to go away. Lots of men on the street went away. Mrs Mooney said it was because the shoe factory had closed down and they had to look for work somewhere else. Tony didn't like staying in Mrs Mooney's house. He wanted his father to come and take him away. Every day he stood at the front door, scanning the street for the familiar figure to appear.

'Best get away from that door, lad,' Mrs Mooney said. 'He'll come for you when he finds work. The two of you will live in a grand house and you can have a hutch for those rabbits you're always going on about.'

Tony flinched. Rabbits were a sore point between himself and Mrs Mooney.

It had begun the day Joe Dolan from the cottages knocked at the door. He was carrying a long stick from which five dead rabbits were hanging. Mrs Mooney had been pleased to see him and gave him a shilling for two of the rabbits.

'Rabbit stew,' she smiled at Tony, as she plonked the limp creatures on the kitchen table.

'They're dead,' he said, shocked. 'The rabbits are dead.'

'Of course they're dead, child,' Mrs Mooney laughed. 'How else could we eat them? Joe here is

an expert rabbit-trapper. Keeps me in cheap meat. I can't afford beef or bacon. Isn't that right, Joe?'

Joe nodded, giving the boy a meaningful scowl.

'Sure, you've been eating my rabbit stew ever since you came here,' went on Mrs Mooney.

'No,' wailed Tony. 'I didn't. I couldn't.'

'Ah, but you did, and you could,' laughed Mrs Mooney. 'And we'll be having it again this evening with carrots and potatoes.'

'Not me,' said Tony, backing away. 'Not ever.'

And he didn't. He stubbornly refused rabbit under any guise or name. Mrs Mooney tried calling her rabbit stew 'Brown Broth', 'Mooney Mash' and 'Carrot Surprise', but Tony always detected the rabbit meat and kept his lips tightly closed.

'Ye little upstart,' Mrs Mooney said. 'Ye can just starve, for all I care.'

But she did care enough to buy eggs for her awkward charge. 'And nothing died for this meal,' she told him, as she served him his daily fried egg and potato.

But word of Tony's problem with rabbits reached the school yard, and he suffered teasing and bullying that left him lying awake at nights. At first he tried to explain to his tormentors that his mam had gone

to a field of rabbits and was going to take him there too. But they only laughed.

Sissy, they called him. *Bunny baby. Whingey Mollie.* And, worst of all, *Snotty-face.* The tough Dolan brothers often lay in wait for him on his way home from school and beat him up – with promises of instant death if he told on them.

Mrs Mooney was sometimes annoyed at the state of the boy's clothes. But Tony kept his silence and took the blame for his torn jumper and bloody nose.

'I fell,' he'd say.

If Mrs Mooney suspected any rough stuff, she simply tut-tutted. Her own sons had grown up fighting their corner. It was something boys had to learn to cope with. Good for them. Made them tough.

So Tony learned how to play truant, disappearing into the streets after setting out for school and coming back at three o'clock.

When two letters arrived together one morning, Mrs Mooney opened the one with the English stamp first.

'Thank God,' she said. 'Your father is coming to collect you.' She looked at Tony over her reading

glasses. 'I don't know who's more pleased,' she chuckled, 'me or you.'

'Will we go back to our own house now?' the child asked. Mrs Mooney drew him to her. 'Not really, lad,' she said gently. 'England. Your daddy is taking you to live in England.'

So the second letter, which was from the headmaster complaining about Tony's absences, somehow didn't matter any more.