

Also by Maggie O'Farrell

Fiction

After You'd Gone

My Lover's Lover

The Distance Between Us

The Vanishing Act of Esme Lennox

The Hand That First Held Mine

Instructions for a Heatwave

This Must Be the Place

Hamnet

The Marriage Portrait

Nonfiction

I Am, I Am, I Am

seanchaí, m. (gs. ~, pl. aithe).

1. **Lit**: Custodian of tradition, historian.

2. Reciter of ancient lore; traditional story-teller.

Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla/Irish-English Dictionary

Niall Ó Dónaill, 1977

For my family – past, present and future

PART ONE

A peninsula, stretching out into the Atlantic

His father was ever a man of few words. Even when Liam is on the other side of the world, with a new name and unfamiliar clothes, facing a committee of robed men who have come to sit in judgement of him, he will be able to recall the astonishing day that turned his father garrulous.

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The morning had been a long one, Liam and his father out since dawn. A north-westerly breeze has been at them for hours, scrupulous in its self-appointed work of lifting the caps from their heads, in hurling a scree of water over them. Liam stands on what he would call a hillock and his father a drumlin or *tulach*, holding the end of the chain and the surveying pole in hands that are scarlet with cold. He is scrawny, in short trousers and a handed-down jacket that has been mended and re-mended by his mother. Her patches, with their fretted edges, have to Liam the fascinating appearance of postage stamps. He likes to rub at the stitches, those marks of maternal patience and devotion, with the side of his thumb. He imagines, at night, when he catches sight of the jacket hanging on a peg, that it might take off through the darkness on a journey across oceans and mountains, borne along by his mother's faceless, stateless stamps. Not that he would tell anyone this: at ten years old, he has lately attained the awareness that such flights of fancy should not be divulged.

The year is 1865, the place a narrow promontory of land lapped on either side by cold blue inlets: a peninsula, stretching out into the Atlantic like an imploring hand, the westernmost scrap of Europe before it surrenders to icy cross-currents of a vast ocean. As Liam waits there, on his hillock, buffeted nearly off his feet by saline gusts, he brings up his

hand to worry at the corner of his elbow patch – a minuscule snarl resides there, a place where his mother has been obliged to knot and retie her darning thread, something he knows she is loath to do.

He is startled by a sudden noise. His father, at the other end of the measuring chain, perhaps twenty or thirty yards away, reduced by distance to nothing more than a little peg man like the ones his sisters make with fabric scraps, is yelling something at him – what Liam’s schoolmaster would term an imperative – but the greedy breeze snatches away the word. Liam stands more upright, wishing to signal that he is paying attention. His father is gesturing, brandishing his arm. Could he be instructing him to straighten the chain or to move the pole? It is what he most often shouts at Liam.

The boy adjusts the stick with one hand, tugs at the heavy links with the other. His father is still yelling from his matching hilltop, still motioning, waving his tripod. Liam waits, anxiety trickling through his chest. He sees his father throw down his instruments and stride towards him. He licks the salt from his lips and tries not to shiver. His father doesn’t like to see him affected by weather: a sign of weakness in a man, he calls it.

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What does Tomás see as he walks from the pinnacle of one drumlin to the next (counting his strides, as is his habit)? The bedraggled figure of his only son, faithfully holding the surveying pole, a child dear to his heart, who he will perhaps take back to their lodgings soon because this is no weather to stay out in, a person too young for the job he has been given?

If only it were so.

Tomás, as he feels the slope of the first drumlin level out under his boots and then the incline of the second start to lift him up, sees only this: a gradient of perhaps 1:3, topological

features caused by glacial activity, depositional in nature, a valley scraped and forced to submit to a u-shape by the slow force of ice, to his left the rearing structure of a high rocky outcrop of likely volcanic origin, a smoothness of murrain. And in the middle of this abundance of cartographic detail is an irregular greyish mark that does not belong there – a human, a small one, with bare knees, a cap, under which is some hair the colour of copper coins, and a surveying-pole tilted at an ineffectual angle.

His gaze, passing over the landscape, is arrested by a curious fissure in the southernmost slope. Filled with a dense copse, from which flows a reasonable sized stream, it is a feature not shown on the existing map sheet, making it Tomás's responsibility to measure and survey it for the necessary revision.

Tomás sighs. He removes his own cap and uses it to wipe the moisture from his forehead. He doesn't feel the cold, doesn't mind the rain. I am waterproof, he likes to say to the scarlet-jacketed soldiers who employ him for their great mapping project. The redcoats, who come from over the water, bare their teeth in a smile and roll up the charts and sketches he creates. Tomás is useful to them, he knows, not so much for his surveying and draughtsman skills – there are plenty to be found over the water who can do such things – but harder to find someone who has these abilities and can also speak to the locals in their own language. Tomás may be classified in their accounts and ledgers as a 'labourer' but the soldier-men cannot do without him. He is the only one of their division who can measure and calculate, draw detailed draft-maps in ink for the engravers to copy, and also converse with the people about where the boundaries lie, who owns which field, what this valley or that bluff is called and why, where might the ruins of this building be. He alone is able to parse a polysyllabic-string comprehensible to only those who have lived here for generations: he makes '*the-crossroads-under-the-bluff-where-once-a-hailstorm-killed-a-cockerel*' read