

Five: Curtains

Ellen: It's nice to sit and talk like this, isn't it, Father? I mean, I know you have to listen to me, but I can pretend, can't I? Pretend that we're having a real conversation. Pretend that you really want to know all this. It's quiet. Peaceful. Nobody asking anything of us. Nobody sticking their nose in.

And I want you to hear it all. I want you to understand. Why I did what I did. Even if you can't offer me absolution, just the telling makes things feel a little better. It's all hard right now, and it feels pretty dangerous and, I don't know the word, "bleak," I s'pose. But it's going to turn out all right in the end. She's on her way back already, I'd bet, and when she gets here it's all going to be okay. For me, anyway. I think we can both agree it's too late for you. But I do appreciate you letting me use the church like this.

St. Patrick's, the church by the shop, is one of my favorite places. I went every Sunday, even though Ma told me it was wasted time and Aidan and Samuel made fun of me for it. Jack would go with me, and Father Froud always had a kind word. He never judged me for my clothes or my manner or my upbringing.

I felt bad for doing something that Ma disapproved of, believe it or not. I loved Ma. We didn't always see eye to eye, but she was my Ma, you know. We had a connection that them other ones couldn't have, because she was really my ma. I always felt like it was sad, them others being cast-offs. Sinead, Emma, Sean. Roisin. To think your own ma and pa would throw you out, that someone would be so unfeeling as to not want their own child. Ma is a lot of things, but I always knew she had kept me. No matter how bad things got, I always had that to hold on to--at least I hadn't been thrown away. I had an anchor. I had my Ma.

We're all just made of the things that came before us, if you see what I mean. Every time I speak, I hear the city--a little bit of Ma's Ireland, a little bit of all the other talking I picked up wandering the streets my whole life. Any walk through the city will give you German and Irish and Dutch and all kinds of others I don't know. And altogether they're a new thing, which I s'pose is American. That's what America is, if you see what I mean. Layers on layers making a new thing, like Saoirse's painting.

And I think maybe religion is like that? You might disagree, Father, but it feels like that to me. That the old beliefs, like Ma's faerie stories, are just past religions showing through. Maybe that's why the old stories said the faeries were devils? Or why a cross stops Mr. Clutch from crossing a doorway?

Or why being with Saoirse feels like being in church?

See what I mean? It's nice to sit and talk. I can be philosophical and try to make sense of it all. I can forget for a minute or two what's happening right outside those doors. Because there's bad things happening in the city, Father. Be glad you're not able to see. It's a war between worlds. All the layers are being peeled back. And it's dark underneath.

I know I shouldn't have done it. I loved this city. It's all bad right now.

But I know. She'll be back for me any minute now. I know we're going to be okay.

I believe.

[Theme music; opening credits]

Just like your stories, Father, Ma's faerie tales were only half-truths. Saoirse told me some of the truth of it, though. Like the rest of us, the faeries crossed the ocean, following the same

impulses and desires of people like Ma, hiding out in ships, maybe? Or maybe things like distance are different for them. Saoirse is vague about that, like a lot of things. But what I got really clear from her, that night by the pond, is that the fae came here like everybody else. Not as many, maybe. But all the same, here they were. And just like in the old country, they kept to the shadows, hiding in lonely byways, doing whatever it is they do, out of sight. But there are men who hunt the fae, Saoirse told me. Men who look for signs and watch for chances. And these men know how to ensnare the little folk, and they know the right charms to keep them once they've got them. Some faeries, Saoirse told me, became incautious, careless. Arrogant, I suppose. Fearless. And so, one by one, Dr. DeQuincey took them.

"He holds us here by talisman and by lock," she said. "He found us by sneaking and lying, ferreting us out like a hunting dog on a blood trail. And then he stole us."

Saoirse said that the charms were real--the iron nails in the threshold, the herbs in the scapulars. She said the crosses and such didn't do anything to her, but for some of the others it was like a freezing cold, like burning. And she said if someone moved the charms, or destroyed them, the denizens could just...walk away.

I don't mind admitting the idea scared me. I didn't understand it all, and I was afraid of Dr. DeQuincey, and of the other denizens. Saoirse was one thing, but the idea of Mr. Clutch or O'Donald walking the city, free and unfettered? I didn't know if I could do it. But eventually it was time to go back inside, and when she turned to go, Saoirse put her hand against my cheek. I had been kneeling by the water, listening to her, and she just reached out and cupped my face in her palm. My whole body thrilled, and I knew I would help her.

And if I still had any doubts, they disappeared a couple of nights later when I watched through the curtains during Saoirse's show.

Saoirse had been very firm that I was to stay in the little dollhouse room while she performed. I would sit and wait, occasionally interrupted by the old hag who shouted up at the window. I only had a dim understanding of what Saoirse's performance involved. I had a sense that she simply...held court? That customers came in and talked with her. I had heard voices through the curtain, once or twice, always men, and sometimes I could hear Saoirse's voice answering. But it was always quiet, civilized sounding talking, a low mumbling I couldn't make out. This night, I heard the same thing, male voices speaking in a quiet rumble, Saoirse occasionally responding. And then, something made me listen closer. A voice not, raised, necessarily, but with a different tone to it. Something that reminded me of the way men on the street sometimes spoke to me. I still couldn't make out what they were saying, but it had that feel--like there was a dirty joke you weren't in on, and that maybe you were the joke.

I walked on my knees over to the curtained doorway, and I parted the silk just enough to press my eye to the slit.

I was looking at the room from the side. Saoirse sat in profile to me on her little chair, against the wall facing the main door. There were three men sitting in the room, two on the sofa and one on the chair to her right. They were all fine-looking gentlemen, black ties and jackets, hair oiled down and waxed moustaches. One of them had a walking stick with a gold lion's head, his hands crossed over the top like he was watching the races. All three of them were wearing charms, the black-edged scapulars that Dr. DeQuincey sells to customers.

When I first peeked, they were all looking expectantly at Saoirse, like someone had just asked a question and they were waiting for her answer. Saoirse looked strangely uncomfortable, like I hadn't seen her look before. After a moment she looked up toward the back of the room,

and I realized someone else was standing there, just inside the door. It was Dr. DeQuincey, watching the whole show.

"Now gentlemen," said the doctor, "I must insist on propriety. This young woman is faerie royalty, after all."

There was laughter from the men at this, and I realized they were all the worse for drink. One of them reached up and smoothed the moustaches on either side of his mouth. "But how are we to believe you, Doctor?" this man said, turning to look at DeQuincey. "I maintain that there must be a physical anomaly. How can we simply take your word?"

"You *must* take my word," said the doctor.

"She talks like a normal girl," said another of the men, "but she is clearly some kind of freak. All we can see is her head and hands. I want to know if she is anatomically sound."

"Yes, for *science*," said the third man, and he dissolved into ugly laughter.

Saoirse was watching the doctor, something like fear on her face. The doctor did not speak.

The third man said, "I say either she shows us there is no freakishness, or else we are allowed to verify for ourselves." He leered at Saoirse.

"No one is allowed to touch or handle the denizens," said DeQuincey, but he said it without force, as if he were just repeating the rules to a forgetful customer.

The first man, who seemed to have had less to drink than his companions, stood and approached Dr. DeQuincey. As he did so, he pulled a handful of paper bills from his pocket. "Surely you can see your way to giving us a private audience," he said, and he thrust the bills toward Dr. DeQuincey.

The doctor looked at the outstretched hand for a long moment. Saoirse stood up at her chair and looked wildly around, for a way out, I suppose. She looked directly at me in the curtains,

saw me watching her. Beyond her I saw Dr. DeQuincey reach out to take the offered money. Saoirse said my name...

Two weeks before, I had looked through a similar set of curtains. They weren't silk, the ones between the front of the shop and the back room, but they were there to keep me from seeing what went on in the other room. Like Saoirse, Ma had told me not to look--to go to my room once work was over and leave them to it.

We had had a fight. Ma and I were always fighting then, about why I wasn't helping out enough. I told her I wanted to know about the back room business, that if she wanted me to do more, then she should let me know what there was to do. Cause I wasn't about to do what Roisin does. Ma told me I wasn't ready for that, and I said I wasn't no child, and then...well, it was a good strong fight, and I ended up wrapping my hand after it got cut on some broken glass, and Ma yelled for Sinead to sweep up the jagged bits from the floor.

Ma sent me to my room, like I'm some little kid. Like I'm one fo them others, Emma or Sinead. I ain't a kid. I don't have to do what anybody tells me. So after it got quiet I snuck back down the stairs. I was going to go find Jack and see if he'd steal me a mug of beer from Old Dick's. But I heard voices from the back room, behind the curtains. And I walked behind the counter, and I bent down to the curtain, and I peeked.

At first I wasn't sure what I was looking at. Aidan and Ma were standing on one side of a long wooden crate that was laying on the work table, and on the other side stood two youngish looking men in heavy work clothes. There was a taller man, older, and dressed a little finer, who stood off to one side, looking at whatever was in the box. As I peeked through the curtains, he looked up from the box and said to Ma, "Well, it certainly is the freshest specimen I've seen."

Ma smiled, and Aidan laughed, a cruel laugh. Aidan said, "No one gets 'em fresher than me, Dr. Gilligan." And as he spoke I saw his hands. There was fresh blood on them, and I wondered what was in that box.

I didn't have to wonder long. The older man, Dr. Gilligan, gestured to the two workmen and they picked up the box between them. As they shifted it in their arms, I caught a glimpse. I had seen a dead man before, when a runaway horse and buggy had run down a lamplighter on Melmoth, but I wasn't expecting this one. It was a man, maybe thirty years old, hands folded over his chest. He would have looked like he was sleeping if not for the big red gash across his forehead. They were rough as they handled the box, and the man inside slid around a little. He wasn't sleeping.

"My students will be quite pleased," said Dr. Gilligan. "This will keep them busy through their exam. I shouldn't need to bother you again for a couple of weeks." He handed Ma a purse that clinked with coins, and he nodded at Aidan.

As the three men moved away with their burden, Aidan turned his head and looked right at me. Like he knew I was there the whole time. The blood on his hands was dry, but it was clearly blood, rusty red and brown. He grinned at me, a nasty grin full of wickedness. I had frozen, unable to speak or move.

But I didn't freeze when Saoirse said my name. I didn't think or plan at all, I just stood and walked into the room. The third man, who was closest to Saoirse, reached toward her and tried to grab her, pawing at her and laughing. I stepped between them and pushed him back. He looked shocked and then he laughed again, like we were all playing a game. The second man came up behind me and tried to grab me, and the man in front of me leaned around me to grab at Saoirse again. I flailed out at both of them and as I did so, my hand caught in the ribbon that held the

third man's scapular, wrapping it around my wrist. I pulled back to get my hand free, and the ribbon snapped, the charm pulling away and dangling from my hand.

The moment that happened, quick as thinking, Saoirse reached out and pressed her hand flat against the man's forehead.

He sprang back from her as if thunderstruck, his body going rigid as he fell onto his back, half on and half off the sofa. He began to twitch and jerk, his eyes rolling back in his head, spittle foaming at his lips. His skin turned an angry red color and then darkened to purple. It was horrible to see.

The other men leapt to their friend and tried to calm him, but he was thrashing like a fish on a line. I was kneeling, my arms around Saoirse. Across the room, beyond the seizures and chaos, I saw Dr. DeQuincey, watching me and Saoirse. After a moment he stepped forward to help the men.

"Gentlemen, please, everything is fine! Your friend has had a bit too much to drink it appears," he said.

But then Saoirse grabbed my hand and pulled me through the curtains and I didn't hear any more. In the darkness of the dollhouse room, we held each other, and I thought about what I had seen. I had just attacked three customers, and Saoirse has done who knows what to one of them. But Dr. DeQuincey hadn't looked angry or upset. He had looked thoughtful. Calculating. And, Father, that scared me more than anything.