

FROM NEW YORK TO LIMERICK AND BACK – Part Two

Bearbetning: Richard Hogan och Claes Nordenskiöld
efter en BBC-produktion av Frank McCourts roman “Angela's Ashes”
Producent: Claes Nordenskiöld

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Music: Sinéad O'Connor – “Mna Na H Eireann” (Women of Ireland)

FRANK: Dad frightens me with his wailing, and Mam frightens me with her small bird sounds and I don't know what to do though I wonder if anyone will light the fire in the grate so that we can have tea and bread. Hungry? Hungry?! Och, Francis, your wee brother Oliver is dead. Your wee sister is dead and your wee brother is dead.

NARRATION: Social apartheid was an established feature of Irish life. The rich and wealthy lived side by side with the poor but didn't mix. It was commonly accepted that the poor had no one to blame for their poverty but their own laziness.

Poverty was rampant in Ireland in the 1920s and 30s. In order to relieve some of this misery, charitable organizations such as the Catholic St. Vincent de Paul Society was founded. They provided food, clothing, furniture, and education to the needy and in return the Catholic church maintained a tight grip on the poor and ensured their adherence to Catholic moral teachings, practices and beliefs.

Frank's schooling is sketchy at best. Often scorned by teachers and bullied by peers, he longs for a job to help his mother feed the starving family. He wants to become a man at the age of eight. But starvation, poor living conditions and lack of medical help soon results in the death of two more McCourt children as they are forced to move once again.

FRANK: Mam says she can't spend another minute in that room. She sees Eugene morning, noon and night. We move to Roden Lane on top of a place called Barrack Hill. Next to our door is a small shed, a lavatory, and next to that a stable.

Mam goes to the St. Vincent de Paul Society to see if there's any chance of getting furniture. The man says he'll give us a docket for a table, two chairs, and two beds. He says we'll have to go to a second-hand furniture shop down in the Irishtown and haul the furniture home ourselves. She wipes her eyes on her sleeves and asks the man if the beds we're getting are second-hand. The man says, I'm very sorry, but beggars can't be choosers.

It takes us all day to haul the furniture on the pram from one end of Limerick to the other. We're happy with the house. We can walk from room to room and up and down the stairs. You feel very rich when you can go up and down the stairs all day as much as you please. Dad lights the fire and Mam makes the tea. He sits at the table on one chair, she sits on the other and Malachy and I sit on the trunk we brought from America.

While we're drinking our tea an old man passes our door with a bucket in his hand. He empties the bucket into the lavatory and flushes and there's a powerful stink in our kitchen. Mam goes to the door and says, Why are you emptying your bucket in our lavatory? He raises his cap to her. Your lavatory, missus? Ah, no. You're making a bit of a mistake there. This is not your lavatory. Sure, isn't this the lavatory for the whole lane.

Mam says, But wait a minute, sir. Could you tell me who cleans this lavatory? Cleans? Ah Jasus, that's a good one. Cleans. Is it joking you are? These house were built in the time of Queen Victoria herself and if this lavatory was ever cleaned it must have been done by someone in the middle of the night when no one was lookin'. And he shuffles up the lane laughing away to himself.

Music: The Pogues "If I Should Fall From Grace With God"

NARRATION: Unemployment was high in Ireland in the late 1930s. The outbreak of World War II provides opportunities for thousands of Irishmen and women in the munitions factories in England. And like countless others, Malachy McCourt follows suit.

The money these immigrants sent home to their families boosted the Irish economy and delayed the need for the Irish government to tackle the ever-growing unemployment and poverty problems.

FRANK: Mam says, Alphie, the new baby, is enough. I'm worn out. That's the end of it. No more children. Dad says, The good Catholic woman must perform her wifely duties and submit to her husband or face eternal damnation. Mam says, As long as there are no more children eternal damnation sounds attractive enough to me.

What is Dad to do? There's a war on. English agents are recruiting Irishmen to work in their munitions factories, the pay is good, there are no jobs in Ireland, and if the wife turns her back to you there's no shortage of women in England where the able men are off fighting Hitler and Mussolini and you can do anything you like as long as you remember you're Irish and lower class and don't try to rise above your station.

The families with fathers in England are able to lord it over the families that don't. At dinnertime and teatime the new rich mothers stand at their doors and call to their children, Mikey, Kathleen, Paddy, come in for yeer dinner. Come in for the lovely leg o'lamb and the gorgeous green peas and the floury white potatoes.

Dad says all that food comes from English money and no luck will come to those who took it but what could you expect from Limerick anyway, people who profit from

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Hitler's war, people who will work and fight for the English. He says he'll never go over there and help England win a war. Mam says, No, you'll stay here where there's no work and hardly a lump of coal to boil water for the tea. God above.

Dad sighs, Och, aye, och, aye. All right. He'll go to England after Christmas because America is in the war now and the cause must be just. He'd never go if the Americans hadn't gone in. He tells me I'll have to be the man of the house, and he signs up with an agent to work in a factory in Coventry which, everyone says is the most bombed city in England. The agent says, There's plenty of work for willing men.

Music: Chieftains "O'Sullivan's March"

NARRATION: Malachy is off in England, and Angela's days are marked by the the ringing and reciting of the Angelus. The Angelus is a prayer devout Catholics recite three times daily – in the morning, at noon, and at sunset, to honour the Incarnation, Mary's conception of Jesus.

The McCourts life is now spent waiting and hoping for the telegram boy to bring them a telegram with money from England.

FRANK: Everyone knows the telegram boys stop coming when the Angelus rings at six and darkness brings desperation to the women and children. Telegram boy, will you look in your pouch again? Please. Aw God. I did. I have nothing for ye. Aw God, please look. Our name is Meagher. Will you look?

Mr Meehan at the top of the lane went to England with Dad and when the telegram boy stops at Meehan's we know we'll be next. Malachy calls, Telegram boy, do you have something for McCourt? Ours is coming today. The telegram boy shakes his head and rides away.

Mam puffs on her Woodbine. Well, we have all day though I'd like to do a bit of shopping early before the best hams are gone at Barry the butcher. She can't leave the fire and we can't leave the lane for fear the telegram boy might come and find no one at home. Mam says don't be too worried between noon and two because so many telegram boys go for their dinner and there will surely be a big rush between two and the Angelus. We don't have a thing to worry about till six. We stop every telegram boy. We tell them our name is McCourt, that this is our first telegram. One boy tells us he'll inquire at the post office. He says he knows what 'tis like to wait for the telegram because his own father is a drunken oul' git over in England that never sent a penny. Mam hears him inside and tells us you should never talk about your father like that. The same telegram boy comes back just before the Angelus at six and tells us he asked at the post office and they didn't. Mam turns toward the dead ashes in the fire, and sucks at the last bit of goodness in her Woodbine.

Music: Enya "Book of Days"

NARRATION: Frank's health has been poor for a long time. Once, near death from typhoid fever, he spends several months in quarantine in the hospital where he has

steady meals, clean sheets, and best of all, books. Luxuries he really doesn't want to leave. On top of this, his crusty, infected eyes continue to be a nuisance.

FRANK: Now, woman, what's your name?

Angela McCourt, sir.

And what's up with you?

'Tis my son, sir. He has two bad eyes.

Oh, by God, he does, woman. They're desperate-looking eyes altogether.

'Tis some class of infection, sir. He had the typhoid last year.

All right, all right, we don't need the life story. Here's your docket to Dr Troy.

Dr Troy looks at my eyes. Into the hospital with this boy at once. Here's the docket to get him in. What does he have, Doctor? The worst case of conjunctivitis I've ever seen in my life and something else in there I can't make out. He needs the eye man.

I'm a month in the hospital and the doctor says I can go home even if there's still a bit of infection but if I keep the eyes clean with soap and clean towels and build up my health with nourishing food plenty of beef and eggs I'll have a pair of sparkling eyes in no time ha ha.

Music: The Pogues "If I Should Fall From Grace With God"

NARRATION: Frank's been making small bits of money for some time when he gets the chance to ride with Mr Hannon. Mr Hannon delivers coal through the streets of Limerick and needs help because of his bad knees. Frank gives the money he makes to his mother – like a good, faithful responsible husband would.

FRANK: I'm dying to go around with Mr Hannon like a real workingman. If I'm good at it they might let me stay at home from school forever but Mam says, He can do it as long as it doesn't interfere with school and he can start on a Saturday morning.

First we get the horse ready, give him a bit of a rub. Mr Hannon shows me how to put on the harness. He says, Jaysus, Frankie, you have the knack of it. That makes me so happy I want to jump up and down and drive a cart the rest of my life.

When the rain starts we cover ourselves with old coal bags and Mr Hannon turns his pipe upside down in his mouth to keep the tobacco dry. He says that the rain makes everything heavier but what's the use of complaining. You might as well complain about the sun in Africa.

We cross the Sarsfield Bridge for deliveries to the Ennis Road. Rich people, says Mr Hannon, and very slow to put their hands in their pockets for a tip.

The bags are delivered and the sun is out. It's lovely to sit on the cart looking along the length of the horse from his tail to his head. Mr Hannon says the man who delivered sixteen hundredweights of coal and turf deserves a pint and the boy who helped him deserves a lemonade. He tells me I should go to school and not be like him working away with the two legs rotting under him. Go to school, Frankie, and get out of Limerick and Ireland itself, before your legs rot and your mind collapses entirely.

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Music: Chieftains "O'Sullivan's March"

NARRATION: Many people saw emigration as their only chance for survival and success, and as soon as Frank saves up enough money from an assortment of jobs, he is off to America, leaving Ireland behind to face a brighter future.

FRANK: I'm seventeen, eighteen, going on nineteen, working away at Easons. I'll be nineteen in a month. All I need is a few pounds to make up the fare and a few pounds in my pocket when I land in America.

The man at O' Riordan's Travel Agency says he can't get me to America by air unless I travel to London first, which could cost a fortune. He can put me on a ship called the Irish Oak, which will be leaving Cork in a few weeks. He says, Nine days at sea, September October, best time of the year, your own cabin, thirteen passengers, best of food, bit of a holiday for yourself and that will cost fifty-five pounds, do you have it? I do.

I tell Mam I'm going in a few weeks and she cries. Alphie says, Will we all go some day? We will.

Mam says we'll have to have a bit of party the night before I go. They used to have parties in the old days when anyone would go to America, which was so far away the parties were called American wakes because the family never expected to see the departing one again in this life. She says 'tis a great pity Malachy can't come back from England but we'll be together in America someday with the help of God and His Blessed Mother.

We all join in the chorus of her sad song.

A mother's love is a blessing

No matter where you roam.

Keep her while you have her,

You'll miss her when she's gone.

FRANK: It's late in the day when the Irish Oak sails from Cork, past Kinsale and Cape Clear, and dark when lights twinkle on Mizen Head, the last of Ireland I'll see for God knows how long.

Music: Chieftains with Sting "Mo Ghile Mear" (Our Hero)