

# Gooseen

Nuala O'Connor

We walk along by the Liffey as far as Ringsend. The river smells like a pisspot spilling its muck into the sea. We stop by a wall, Jim in his sailor's cap, looking like a Swede. Me in my wide-brim straw, trying to throw the provinces off me.

'Out there are the Muglin Rocks,' Jim says. 'They have the shape of a woman lying on her back.'

His look to me is sly, to see if I've taken his meaning. I have, and our two mouths crash together and it's all swollen tongues and drippy spit and our fronts press hard and there's a tight-bunched feeling between my legs. His hands travel over my bodice and squeeze, making me gasp.

'Oh Jim,' is all I can manage to say.

'You have no natural shame,' he says, coming at me now with his thing in his hand, that one-eyed maneen he's no doubt very fond of. It looks, I think, like a plum dressed in a snug coat.

'No natural shame?' I say. 'Don't be annoying me. Do you think because I'm a woman that I should feel nothing, want nothing, know nothing?' But I dip my nose to his neck for a second, the better to breathe his stale-porter, lemon-soap smell. Span new to me.

Jim squints and smiles. I kneel on the ground before him, my face before his tender maneen, glance up at him; Jim pushes the roundy glasses up his nose, the better to see my mouth close over it. The taste is of salt and heat, the feeling thick and animal. I suck, but only for a spell, then I draw back and peck the length of it with my lips. I stand.

'There,' I say, 'there's a kiss as shameful as Judas's and don't tell me it's not exactly what you wanted, Jim Joyce.'

A groan. He wants that bit more, of course, but that might be enough for today, our first time walking out together. We kiss again and he lingers in my mouth, wanting to enjoy the taste of himself on my tongue. His paws travel over me, front and back. Oh but he is relentless. So I put my hand into his drawers and wrap cool fingers around his heat. A gasp. I work him slow, slow, fast until he is pleased, until my fist is warm and wet from him.

'You've made a man of me today, Nora,' Jim says, a coddled whisper, and I smile. It's rare to have a fellow say such a thing and I feel a small bit of power rise up through me, a small bit of joy.

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A horse called Throwaway won the Gold Cup at Ascot. So I'm told by a man whose hotel room I'm cleaning. The man shouldn't be in the room while I'm here. Or I shouldn't be in the room while he's here. One of the two. But I'm so shocked by his attire that my brain can't decide which it is. The man is wearing only a long undershirt and he appears to have no drawers on and he's talking to me as if he's in a three-piece suit crowned with a hat. I stand like an óinseach with a rag in one hand and a jar of beeswax in the other, trying not to gawp.

‘Throwaway!’ the man says. ‘Can you believe it?’

The man doesn’t sound Irish. He may be English. Or perhaps even American. His arms are white beneath a fur of black hair. He has a gloomy expression, a father-of-sorrows way about him. His bare legs are bandy and fat, like a baby’s. I feel my face scald hot so I turn my back to him and look for somewhere to put down my rag and polish.

‘A twenty-to-fucking-one outsider,’ he roars, and I jump. ‘And all my money thrown away on that damned nag Sceptre.’

He starts to laugh, a mirthless cascade of sound. Then he goes quiet and I hear a click; I turn my head to see the man start to hack at his wrists with a razor.

‘Sir!’ I shout.

But he keeps slicing at his arm until he draws red; I run to him. There’s not enough blood to fill a fairy thimble in truth, but he holds up the dripping wrist and cries and shivers as if he might die. I take hold of him and sit him on the bed and I run to fetch the porter for he will know what to do.

As I hammer down the back stairs of Finn’s Hotel a voice trails behind, calling, ‘Throwaway runaway! Throwaway runaway!’ on a long string of cackles.

I open the back door and in apron, cap and all I run and run until I can go not another step. At the River Liffey wall, my stomach lurches and I empty my breakfast into the water and watch it float off to the sea.

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To Jim I am Ireland.

I’m island-shaped, he says, large as the land itself, small as the Muglin Rocks, a woman on her back, splayed and hungry, waiting for her lover. I’m limestone and grass, heather and granite. I am rising paps and cleft of valley. I’m the raindrops that soak and the sea that rims the coast.

Jim says I am harp and shamrock, tribe and queen. I am high cross and crowned heart, held between two hands. I’m turf, he says, and bog cotton. I am the sun pulling the moon on a rope to smile over the Maamturk Mountains.

Jim styles me his sleepy-eyed Nora. His squirrel girl from the pages of Ibsen. I am pirate queen and cattle raider. I’m his blessed little blackguard. I am, he says, his auburn marauder. I’m his honourable barnacle goose.

‘Nora,’ Jim says, ‘you are syllable, word, sentence, phrase, paragraph and page. You’re fat vowels and shushing sibilants.’

‘Nora,’ Jim says, ‘you are story.’

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I am born in the Union Workhouse in Galway.

Mammy is a spinster when Daddy lures her into matrimony, promising their life will bloom and rise like the bread he bakes for a living. But the only thing that blooms is Mammy’s belly and all that rises is Daddy’s hand to his gob with the next drink and the next. When I am three, and my twin sisters are born, Mammy sends me to live with her own mother, Granny

Healy, in her quiet house in Whitehall.

‘It can’t be helped that you’re a Barnacle,’ Granny says, ‘but always be proud of your Healy and Mortimer sides.’

But still, as I grow, she likes to spin tales for me.

‘You’re a seabird, Nora Barnacle. Born from a shell.’ She eyes me over the golden rim of her teacup.

‘Not born from an egg, Granny, like other birds?’

‘No, not from an egg at all, loveen. A shell. For the barnacle is a rare and magical goose.’

‘I like magic.’ I try to sip my tea from the china the way Granny does, heartily but with grace. ‘Where does the shell come from?’ I ask.

Granny leans closer, breaks a piece of currant cake in half and puts it into my mouth. The rest she chews herself and she looks over my head, out the window into Whitehall, as if she has forgotten me.

‘The shell, Granny?’

‘Well, girleen, that’s the most peculiar thing of all. That shell you came from grew like a fruit on the branch of a noble tree that stood by the Galway Bay shoreline. The shell-fruit got heavier and heavier until it dropped into the sea. There it bathed in the salty water until it bobbed ashore at Salthill.’

‘Do you mean *our* Salthill, where we walk the prom?’

‘The very place.’

I sit before Granny and imagine a pearlescent shell lying on the shore, nobbled like the conch Uncle Tommy gave me.

‘Go on, Granny. Tell me more.’

‘This beautiful shell burst open on the shingle at Salthill and inside there was a dark-haired baby, serene and curious. The baby smiled and smiled, and she had one droopy eye that gave her a wise and holy look.’ Granny leans forward and puts her cool finger to my eyelid.

‘Me.’

‘Yes, my lovely Nora, it was you.’ Granny sets down her cup. ‘Your mother was walking the Salthill prom that day, and when she saw that fine shell she tripped down to the beach. She clapped her hands when she found a baby inside, smiling up at her. She was so happy. Your mother picked you up and brought you home, her little barnacle goosen.’

I settle back against the rungs of my chair. Lift the china cup to my mouth and let the tea scald my tongue.

‘All that trouble I took to be born,’ I say. ‘All that falling from a tree and bouncing on waves and landing onshore and bursting from a shell to be scooped up by Mammy.’

Only to be sold off like a goose at a fair, I think. Might it not have been better if I had come more naturally, I ask myself, to have entered the family with some portion of stealth? If I had managed that, maybe Mammy would not have given me away to Granny. If I had managed that, maybe Mammy would still love her goosen.

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Monday and I lie abed, thinking of Jim, when I should be up and getting into apron and cap.

But divil up I'll get until I have let my imaginings play out. My hands wander under my nightgown, I slip a finger into my crevice and press; I knead my breasts and let my palms slide over my nipples, while keeping Jim's sweet face fixed in my mind. He is all I need in my head.

Last night, when we walked to Ringsend, he told me he was called 'farouche' by a moneyed lady he knows.

'Farouche, Jim?'

'Wild. Savage.'

He seemed hurt by the word. 'Sure isn't your savagery one of the best parts of you?' I said. 'Isn't it what makes you the man you are?'

And he pushed me against a wall and whispered my name into my ear over and over and called me by his names for me: Gooseen, Sleepy-eye, Blackguard. He said, 'I will make you my little fuckbird,' and my reason slithered to pulp when I heard that and I kissed him with all the fierce light of my body.

Jim has me write letters to him but my thoughts are stiff on the page – I'm not fond of writing; words don't slide off my pen the way they do for him. He wants to know what I think of when we are apart, to bind us closer, but it seems to me all I think of is him and does he want to read letters that are all about himself? Perhaps he does.

I slip from the bed, gather my paper and write a few lines:

*Darling Jim,*

*At night my soul flies from Leinster Street to Shelbourne Road, to entwine with yours, Jim, I can't bear to be apart from you and my mind conjures and caresses you every minute of every hour that I do my work, as if my heart will dry up without the balm of you to oil it. This is love, Jim, it is constant and wracking and true and I will see you, my precious darling, tonight and we will hold hands and rejoice that we found each other of all the people in Ireland, I am lonely without you, believe me to be ever yours,*

*Nora*

I scramble into my uniform and run to catch the post for I want Jim to read my words this morning. He's right about the letters, they do make us closer, they bring him to me. They are heart-balm.

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I have the night off work and Jim's friend Vincent Cosgrave comes to Finn's Hotel to walk me to the concert rooms in Brunswick Street.

*'I will go on ahead of you, my little pouting Nora,'* Jim wrote to me last night, *'dire performance nervousness will not permit me to see you before I sing.'*

Outside Finn's, Cosgrave offers me his arm and I hesitate, but then I take it. He saunters like a man following a hearse, so after a minute I withdraw my hand and increase my pace.

'Where are you off to so fast, Miss Barnacle?' says he. 'You're like yon stallion Throwaway, belting out ahead of me.'

I laugh. 'That horse, Mr Cosgrave, seems to be the only horse I know.'

He smiles. 'Why's that? Go on.'

'Well, I'll relate to you how I first heard of Throwaway,' I say. I slow down until Cosgrave falls in beside me and I tell him all about the man in the hotel with the razor and his

distress over that very horse winning Ascot. Cosgrave laughs and I laugh too, though it was alarming at the time. ‘Throwaway!’ I bellow, just like the man.

‘And did you tell Jim that the fella was in nothing but his undershirt, Miss Barnacle?’ Cosgrave asks, reaching for my arm; there is a wicked pull to his mouth when he says it, a class of leer. I pull away from him. ‘Oh, you didn’t reveal that to darling Jim? Naughty Nora.’ He waggles his finger under my nose, then grabs my hand and tries to kiss it. I snap it back.

‘Mr Cosgrave! Jim Joyce wouldn’t be happy with these antics, after asking you to escort me.’

‘Jim Joyce, Jim Joyce,’ he mocks. ‘I have it up to my neck with the same Jim Joyce. And you, Nora Barnacle, know little about him. The same fella may tell you he adores you, but it’ll never last. Mark me. Joyce is mad for one thing – who wouldn’t be, that had to live with *his* father? Mr John Stanislaus Joyce, the disappointed, drunken snob.’ Cosgrave leans his head in close to mine. ‘And your Jim, you should know, is a man of particular urges and very fond of his trips to the particular houses of Tyrone Street. But the biggest thing is that Joyce is stone mad. Remember I said that.’

Cosgrave pulls back and stalks on ahead of me. I follow behind him to the concert rooms and he doesn’t let another pip out of him, for which I’m very glad; it suits me better to watch his angry back stride ahead rather than listen to his bitter, slobbery talk. I will have to ask one of the girls in Finn’s what goes on in Tyrone Street, though I fear I already know.

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My face almost bursts from smiling, I’m so proud of Jim. There is not a man who can talk like him and now, it’s clear, not a one who can sing like him either. Even when the pianist bursts out crying like a baby and runs from the stage with nerves, and Jim has to provide his own piano accompaniment, he doesn’t falter. Down he sits and plays like an angel. Out of his mouth come the sweet words about the Sally Gardens and taking love easy. I know that he is thinking of me as he lets the notes roll and rise and my own heart rolls and rises with him. I would go to the side of the earth with Jim Joyce. And I’d drop off into black, starry space in his arms if it came to it.

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Jim has goose-blue eyes, clear as saltwater, eyes electric from the jumps of his fierce mind. My eyes are mud in comparison, but Jim says they are like mountain pools. He says I have the eyes of a saint, a virgin, a pleasing plaster Mary.

‘Go on out of that,’ I say, ‘who’d want to look like a blessed statue?’

‘Your eyes are quiet like the Madonna’s,’ he says. ‘Even when your hand tickles me to pleasure, your eyes stay molten and melancholic.’

This is the way Jim talks. He got good schooling, away in Clongowes Wood in Kildare and then in Belvedere College and the university here in Dublin. Places for boys from moneyed families. He even went to Paris to study doctoring, but came home when his mother passed away. His Pappie had colossal hopes for Jim but the same man drank those hopes away. Money is all in fine schools and colleges, and when it’s gone you’re out on your ear, no matter how grand a sentence you can spin.

Our heads are puddled together in the marram grass, mine and Jim's, and the Irish Sea is a nearby shush. We have different heads. Jim's is full of song and story, questions and schemes, perturbances and dissatisfactions. Mine is full only of memories and, most importantly now, feelings. I am happy to lie in his arms and kiss, feel the soft heat of lips, his hands roaming into my drawers, mine into his. But Jim loves to talk and muse and go on about everything; he's always bothering himself.

'Do you think John McCormack can hold a tune as well as I can?' he says.

'No.'

'Did that bowsy Cosgrave try to hold your hand when he chaperoned you to the concert rooms to hear me sing? Be frank with me now, Nora.'

'He did not.'

'Did you think Stannie was looking at you queerly that time you met him?'

'Ah Jim. Your own brother?'

'Do the other girls who work at Finn's Hotel have boyfriends?'

'They have.'

'Are they free with them?'

'I don't know.'

'But don't girls talk about everything, Nora?'

'They do, I suppose.'

'So are you lying to me?'

'Ah shut up Jim, for the love of the Lord, and kiss me again.'

He leans in and I take his tongue between my teeth and press it until he laughs. He pins the two wrists over my head and bores his own tongue deep into my mouth, poking at every tooth and lapping all around until I am liquid with the madness of it. Our breath comes fast like horses after a race and we roll in the marram and the sea gives her siren call and the air is keen and fresh. We finish kissing, mouths bruise-soft, and lie on our backs to watch the cloud shapes roll above us in the blue: here a cottony ship's masthead, there a stippled mackerel. I take his hand in mine and squeeze it.

All my loneliness for Galway is gone. Since I took up with Jim, Dublin has opened her arms to me, taken me to her breast. My Jackeen Jim. He's cut from Dublin as sure as Nelson's Pillar was. But still he talks of getting away, of leaving all behind; he sees a lit-up future away from this country. I'm hoping he will invite me.

I roll on my side to look at him: the wrinkled linen jacket, the dirty plimsolls, the clever eyes, stilled now under sleepy lids. He looks serene and innocent yet he's the same man who stole one of my gloves and brought it to bed with him and told me that it lay beside him all night 'unbuttoned', as if I could believe that. I gaze at Jim and wonder what Mammy would make of me lying on the seashore with a glove-caressing jackeen's fingers roaming into my garters and beyond. What would she say to my hands powering over his maneen, snug inside his trousers? She'd be skittery with rage, to be sure. And Uncle Tommy? Well, he'd beat the thunder out of me and no mistake, like he did over Willie Mulvagh. He took out his stick and left me purple and raw and running for the first train out of Galway. Yes, Mammy and Tom would be galled to their bladders if they could see Jim and me now, carefree as birds, love wrapped snug around us like a shawl. And do I care about their imagined ire, I ask myself? I find I do not.

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Though Jim is jealous of any other man whose mouth has met mine, he makes me talk of the two dead Michaels, Feeney and Bodkin, and poor Protestant Willie whom Uncle Tommy objected to so strongly. Jim loves details and takes meaning from everything: dates, songs, tiny occurrences, objects. He lifts my wrist to his nose to examine the enamel bracelet Michael Bodkin – Sonny – gave me, as if searching for clues. Mostly Jim wears me out with his investigations into my life, but I play along anyway, to please him.

‘Tell me again about Feeney,’ Jim says.

Jim and I are once more walking by the sea, this time at Sandycove where his friend Oliver St John Gogarty lives in a squat tower. I let the breeze lap over my face and remember Michael.

‘He was never a robust young fellow, there was something of the lamb about him.’

‘Lamb?’

‘What I mean is Michael was pale-faced, sunken. Always a little sick. But he was gentle and he could sing well.’

‘Feeney sang for you often, I suppose.’

‘He would sing “The Lass of Aughrim” and linger over the saddest parts.’

‘Your love was thwarted, Nora, a bit like those in the song. Go on.’

I sit on the sea wall. ‘Ah, Jim, you have me repeating myself like some doting crone. Haven’t I told you all this before?’

He sits by me and takes my hand. ‘Tell me again about the night of the rain.’

I spurt air between my lips to help me keep my patience. ‘I was in bed one wet night, the wind howling, when I heard stones hit my window. I looked out and there was Michael Feeney, under the tree, shaking with the cold. “Go home, you’ll catch your death,” I said. “I don’t want to live if I can’t see you, Nora,” he said. I ran to Michael and embraced him and went back inside. A week later he was dead. It was terrible. Only a gossoon of seventeen.’

‘You loved him, Nora, I think.’

My heart babbles in my chest. ‘He shouldn’t have been out on such a squally night. He was ailing.’ I drop my head. ‘And then when Sonny Bodkin was taken too. Well.’

Jim puts his arm around me and squeezes; his look is impish. ‘Nora, my little man killer.’

I shrug him off. ‘It isn’t funny, Jim. Dying is not one bit funny.’

‘It’s not, Nora. Death descends so lightly but it’s the hardest thing of all.’

Long gone Granny Healy floats across my vision like a blot in my eye but, as she does in my dreams, she merely smiles. Jim’s face slackens and I know he is remembering his dear mother just as I think of the only woman who was mother to me.

We sit together on the sea wall, letting the jounce of the waves, their grey-green light, soothe and calm us as we conjure the dead.

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‘I’m a wanderer, Nora,’ Jim said to me when I knew him first, and this has proven to be true. He skitters from lodging to lodging, now with this friend in Shelburne Road, now with that one

in Sandymount. He doesn't want to live with his Pappie and the family for they pull on him like leeches, he says. The way it is, Jim finds it hard to settle and he finds oddity hard to deal with.

'I've enough foibles of my own without having to figure out other people's,' he told me once.

'People are strange right, it's true for you,' I answered, but I thought about it for days, the business of him not getting along with others.

At the moment Jim is staying with his friend Gogarty in that old tower by the sea in Sandycove. It's a lovely surprise to find him outside Finn's when I step out for a minute of air.

'Nora, I summoned you and you came!' He grabs my hands and his look is feverish.

'Jim, what is the matter?' His eyes are bloodshot and the lids swollen. 'Have you been weeping? Has something happened?'

He pulls me along by the wall, away from the hotel door. 'Nora, I want to get out of Dublin. Life is waiting for me if I choose to enter it. Will you come?'

I take my hand from his. 'Jim, something has you rattled. Are you going to tell me what?'

'I walked from Scotsman's Bay, through the night, Nora, to ask you if you'll leave this place with me.'

'You have the look of being up all night, right enough.'

Jim groans. 'Will you answer what I'm asking you girl?'

I wrap my fingers around his and pull his hands down. 'Of course I will leave Dublin with you. I'd go anywhere with you Jim.'

'Do you understand me Nora?' His eyes are frantic.

'Yes.'

A tiny sob escapes his throat. 'Oh Nora, thank you.' Jim kisses my hand then lights another cigarette with shaking fingers and takes several fast pulls. 'Gogarty shot at me last night.'

'He shot at you?' My astonishment is total. 'With a gun?'

'He had Trench, that awful Hiberno-fiend, staying. Trench dreamt a panther was about to kill him and the damn fool pulled out a revolver and shot a bullet across the room. Not to be out dramatised, Gogarty snatched up the gun and shot at my side of the room, knocking a clatter of pans on top of me where I lay. I knew then I could not stay another night with Gogarty. He's mad.'

I bless myself. 'Dangerous is what he is. It's lucky you're not stone dead Jim. If I see that craythur Gogarty I'll give him a tongue-lash like he's never heard.'

Jim chuckles and grabs me around the waist. 'You look uncommonly beautiful, snapping like a dragon in your white cap and apron. Perhaps when we leave you'll pack that uniform in your little trunk?'

I push him off me. 'Behave yourself, James Joyce.'

Jim jigs, he is shook. He brings his face close to mine. 'Nora, I went to Byrne – the only sensible man of my acquaintance – and asked him if we should go and he said I should not hesitate to ask you and if you said yes to take you as soon as I ever could.'

I dip my head; I don't know Byrne at all but Jim likes him and it pleases me that he spoke for me. 'I have to go back in, Jim. If I'm caught idling out here with you, they'll have my guts.'



He turns me to face the hotel door and pushes me playfully. ‘Go,’ he says. ‘You’ve promised now, it can’t be undone.’

‘It can’t and it won’t.’ I blow him a kiss and run inside.

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The October sky over the north wall is exotic as plum flesh, yellow bleeding to rose. I am in a borrowed coat – Molly Gallagher’s best – for I have none of my own, and I know not if Switzerland is warm or cold. And though Jim has been to Europe before, he cannot say one way or the other. The gold of the wedding band he bought – and shoved onto my finger outside the jeweller’s – winks on my finger, distracting me from looking out for him on the dock below. His Pappie and some of the family will see him off. No one of mine is here to wave to me for I told no one I was leaving.

The air is salt-sweet and cool, the portholes beam light into the dusk. The deck throngs with those aching to stay and those, like myself, aching to go. My legs and my will seem determined to take me further east and further again. Away from Galway, away now from Dublin to the Continent, to Zürich, where Jim has secured a teaching post.

Jim comes aboard at last and embraces me; we stay on deck and watch twilight descend. He is fizzling, giddy, smoking cigarette after cigarette. He tosses the butts to the gulls who keened like mourning women.

‘We’re off now, Nora.’ We stand at the ship’s rail and turn our backs to Ireland. ‘Good riddance to the old sow. No self-respecting man stays here,’ Jim says, and he means it. ‘There is nothing more natural to the Irish than the leaving of Ireland. All the better to weep for her,’ he says.

I start to cry. ‘Oh Nora, Nora, have I alarmed you? Are you so sad to leave, my darling?’

I shake my head. ‘I’m all right, Jim, I’m grand.’

It’s not that I’m pained, it’s more like a wash of relief blasting my heart. Jim and I are alone together at last. Away from Uncle Tommy and Mammy and my sisters. Away from Cosgrave and Gogarty and Jim’s Pappie and brother Stannie and the rest of his large, grasping family. It feels good to leave them all behind. I weep on and the salt of my tears buoys me, as sure as if they were the sea and I a bouncing lump of jetsam. How can I explain that I am happier than I have ever been? Yes, I’m happy. I am as easy and free and content now as a goose on the wing, looking for a soft place to fall.

## Note

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