

## Hills and Valleys

8 April 1912

Blood oozed from the cut on Benjamin Lynch's lip. He couldn't stop running long enough to stanch the flow. His brother-in-law was on his heels, spoiling for a fight.

Benjamin rounded the corner at the Pig Whistle Pub. The sidewalk along the quay was crowded with pedestrians: women in elaborate wide-brimmed hats, men smoking cigars, children carelessly licking ice cream cones.

The street was empty. With no hesitation, Benjamin ran into the road. He noticed the pile of horse manure in time to jump over it. The brute chasing him wasn't so fortunate.

Benjamin spared a backward glance when he reached the other side of the road. What he saw made him smile, causing him to wince in pain. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, pressed it to his throbbing lip and hurried away from the man sitting in shit in the middle of the road.

Relieved to be rid of the overgrown oaf, Benjamin slowed his pace after two blocks. He wasn't afraid to fight; however, striking his wife's brother was out of the question. Her family despised him enough with no violence in the equation. He reached home unaccompanied.

Theodosia was ironing a dress in the kitchen. She took one look at her injured grandson, with blood blotched on his shirt, and rushed to his side. "What happened to you?"

"Rachel's brother threw a rock at me." The old woman steered him to the bench at the kitchen table.

“Keep your voice down. Rachel’s resting,” she said before moving to the cupboard. She retrieved a cloth, poured water on it, and handed it to him.

“Something’s burning,” he said.

“Oh, bollocks.”

His grandmother scurried back to the steaming, flat, black iron she’d left on the sleeve of the dress. She moved the heavy iron to the cooker before examining the damage. Holding the fabric up, she frowned at the copy of the iron burned into the sleeve. “I guess I’ll have to turn this into a short-sleeve dress.”

“I’m sorry,” Benjamin said.

Joining him on the bench, she rested her arm on his. “The dress is the least of my concerns.” She unconsciously patted his ink-stained hand. “I thought Rachel asked you to stay away from her family.”

“She did, but I had to try to reason with her father one more time.” He looked down at the paper-thin skin on her hand, the hills and valleys of veins as pronounced as the image of the iron on the dress.

“You two are my family now,” said Rachel, “and this little one.”

Benjamin and Theodosia turned at the sound of Rachel’s voice. The young woman stood in the doorway, hands resting on her pregnant belly. The sadness she saw in her husband’s eyes equaled her own. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It looks worse than it is.”

“Tell me what happened,” she said, approaching the table.

“I wanted to talk to your father, but your brother wouldn’t let me inside the gate.”

“Which brother?”

“The big one,” he said.

“They’re all big,” she replied.

“I think it was Aaron. I told him he’d be an uncle soon.”

“What did he say?”

Benjamin couldn’t make himself repeat the ugly words he’d heard. The last thing he wanted was to heap more hurt on her. “He didn’t say anything. He just picked up a rock and threw it at me.”

Rachel sat across from her husband. She studied the pattern on the tablecloth. The room was so quiet the ticking of the clock was abnormally loud.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

She sighed heavily and looked at her husband. “How can I still care so much about people who care so little?”

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Unable to answer her question, Benjamin grasped her hand and squeezed. The despair on her face was too much to bear. He turned his gaze to his grandmother.

“I have an idea,” Theodosia said, desperate to ease the tension. “Come on. We’re going to the inn for high tea.”

The next morning, Benjamin woke before Rachel. She was nestled behind him, snoring softly. He felt two soft thumps on his lower back. Rolling over, he spread his left hand on her stomach. His child kicked him again.

He could hear his grandmother preparing breakfast. Reluctantly, he rose dressed for work, and entered the kitchen. “Good morning,” he said. “Did you sleep well?”

Theodosia stopped slicing bread and looked at him. “I didn’t sleep at all and you know why.”

“Gran, I’m not changing my mind. If I get the job, I’m leaving tomorrow.”

“But what about Rachel and the baby?”

“They are why I need to do this,” he said. “Once I get established and save more money, I’ll send for them . . . and you.”

“You can’t even imagine how much I’ll miss you.” She reached to adjust the newsboy cap on his head.

He smiled at her and said, “I’ll miss you too, but I have to make a better life for Rachel and little Ben.”

“I’m not convinced she’s carrying a boy,” Theodosia said.

“Well, I am,” he said, reaching for a slice of bread.

She swatted his arm. “Put that back. I’m making toast.”

“I don’t have time for toast. I’ve got newspapers to sell.” He kissed her on the cheek.

“Ouch, my lip still hurts.”

The silly look on his face reminded her of his younger years when he'd play with the neighbor, Ernest Corben, who always had at least one loose tooth, freckles, and a ferocious appetite. Ernest was the youngest of nine children and always hungry. Even if Theodosia didn't get quite enough to eat, she always made sure to save some food to share with Ernest. Both boys started hawking newspapers at nine-years-old in order to survive.

Benjamin's mother died giving birth to him. His father dealt with that fact by drinking himself to death. Theodosia was Benjamin's only living kin. She was a widow who made ends meet as a dressmaker. They had each other and little else when he was growing up.

Thanks to the triumvirate of desperation, talent, and perseverance, Theo and Benjamin managed within a decade to attain a certain level of comfort. Benjamin wanted more. A lot more. His ambition motivated him to work hard. But his country's class system stifled him. And his in-laws infuriated him. They'd disowned their only daughter for falling in love with a Catholic of limited means.

Benjamin carried an armful of newspapers to the corner he'd thought of as his own for ten years. Ernest was waiting for him, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

"I have brilliant news," Ernest said.

"I got the job?"

"You got the job." Ernest extended his arm for a handshake. Benjamin dropped the bundle of newspapers and hugged him instead.

"I'm gobsmacked. How can I thank you for the recommendation?"

“No need to thank me,” Ernest said. “I need the help, and you’re the perfect man for the job.”

“I can’t believe we’re going to America,” Benjamin said.

“I can’t believe it either. I’m really going to miss Theresa and Ernie.”

“I haven’t seen them in so long,” Benjamin said. Ernie must be walking by now.”

“Yes, he is. He turned one last week.”

“Please bring your family to the house tonight. Gran would love that.”

“On one condition,” Ernest said. “She has to make her famous shepherd’s pie for me.” He looked at his pocket watch. “We’re leaving in a little over twenty-four hours.”

“Say, that’s a dandy. Where did you get that pocket watch?”

“Theresa gave it to me for our anniversary.” He held it out to show Benjamin the elaborate E and T on the back of it. “She had it engraved with our initials.”

Benjamin held the watch in his palm, admiring the scrollwork. “That’s impressive,” he said.

“So is your fat lip,” Ernest said, pointing at Benjamin’s face. “What happened?”

“I tried to talk to Rachel’s dad yesterday.”

“Did he hit you?”

“Of course not,” Benjamin said. “He’s a rabbi. He punches with his words not his fists.”

“Who hit you?”

Benjamin stared at the watch in his hand. He didn't want to answer the question. He didn't want to relive the hurt and humiliation he'd felt. He didn't want to try to explain the unending compulsion he had to make things right with Rachel's family.

"I really don't want to talk about it." He handed the watch back to Ernest. "I've got to get busy. I have a lot of newspapers to sell."

"There's no time for that. You need to meet with Abraham. He's waiting for you in the lobby at the Criterion on Oxford Street."

"I have to sell these newspapers first."

"I'll do it for you," Ernest said. "I was always better at this than you anyway. Don't keep him waiting too long."

"I don't deserve your friendship," Benjamin said.

"Don't be a wanker." Ernest clapped him on the back. "Get going."

"Seriously, thank you for giving my family a future." Benjamin barely got the words out around the lump in his throat. He walked away from his mate, headed in the direction of Oxford Street.

Ernest picked up a newspaper and held it up. "Extra! Extra! Read all about it. *Titanic* sets sail tomorrow!"

Benjamin turned and looked at Ernest. They smiled at each other.

Entering the Criterion, Benjamin didn't recognize Abraham Mishellany right away. They'd only met once in the print shop that employed Abraham and Ernest. "Thank you so much for this opportunity," Benjamin said. He stuck his hand out to shake the hand of his new boss. It

didn't escape his attention that the man's hand was as discolored as his own as a result of years of contact with ink.

"Ernest speaks very highly of you," Abraham said. "Have you ever sailed on a ship?"

"No, I've never been out of Southampton," Benjamin replied.

"Let's hope you get your sea legs quickly." He chuckled and gestured for Benjamin to sit. "You'll be assisting Ernest with typesetting. We'll be printing the Atlantic Daily Bulletin for the passengers." He lit a cigarette and continued, "We'll print other things too, mainly daily menus for the dining rooms. Do you have any questions?"

"Only about a hundred," Benjamin said.

Abraham smiled. "I'll try to answer all your questions, but first I'll need you to fill out this paperwork." He gestured to the papers on the table bearing the logo of the White Star Line.

An hour later, Benjamin returned to an empty house. He couldn't wait to share his big news, but he couldn't find his wife or grandmother. He found a note propped up against the iron sitting in the middle of the kitchen table. He read it and ran out of the house.

"Sir, please keep your voice down," said the woman behind the desk.

"I'm sorry," Benjamin replied, "but I've been all over this hospital and I can't find my wife."

"There you are," said Theodosia, rushing to him from the hallway.

"Is Rachel . . . is she . . ."

"She's alive, but she's lost a lot of blood. She's in surgery now," Theodosia said.



“What about the baby?”

“The baby is breech. The doctor is performing a procedure he called a cesarean.”

“What’s that? Is Rachel going to be okay?”

“Ben, I don’t have any answers.” She put her arm around her grandson. “Let’s go to the waiting room.”

He paced and checked the clock on the wall every few seconds. He would’ve sworn time had slowed to a crawl. He was staring out the window, looking but not really seeing the flowers on the lawn when the doctor entered the waiting room. Benjamin turned to see an exhausted man approaching him.

“Are you Mr. Lynch?”

“Yes,” Benjamin said.

“I’m Dr. Ford. Your wife survived the surgery. We’re trying to get her vital signs stabilized. She’s in critical condition.”

“What about the baby?” Theodosia said.

“She’s very healthy,” the doctor said, “and she’s got quite the set of lungs. I’m surprised you can’t hear her in here. A nurse will let you know when you can see them both.”

Theodosia looked at her grandson. Tears streamed down his face.

The moon was up by the time Benjamin got to see his wife. He sat in a chair next to her bed. “She’s so beautiful, Rachel. I wish you could see her.” He picked up his wife’s limp hand.

She didn't open her eyes. "Please wake up. I love you so much." He kissed her hand. "I can't do this without you. Please wake up."

A nurse woke him in the middle of the night. He'd fallen asleep in the chair. He asked, "How's she doing?"

"About the same," the nurse replied.

At sunrise, Theodosia walked through the door with a basket in her hand. Benjamin was talking softly to Rachel and stroking her hair. He looked at his grandmother with sorrowful eyes. "She won't wake up."

Theodosia set the basket down. "You listen to me, young man. Rachel is going to be fine." She hugged her grandson. "I brought you some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry."

"That's nonsense. You need to eat." She got busy unpacking the basket. "I just saw little Theo. She's the most gorgeous girl in the world."

"So, you've named her after you?"

"Of course, she looks just like me," Theodosia said.

Benjamin attempted a smile. "I forgot to tell you. I got the job." She gave him an incredulous look.

"I'm not going. Of course, I'm not going. Everyone I love, everything I need is here," he said.

Her face flooded with relief. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along.” She handed Benjamin an English muffin. “I’ve got to run an errand. I won’t be gone long.”

Theodosia approached the imposing house with trepidation. Rachel had talked about her family home, but Theodosia never imagined it to be so grand. She stooped by the flower bed lined with pebbles and picked up a large one. It was hefty in her hand. She put it in her pocket and knocked on the door.

A large boy opened the door. “Hello. I need to speak with your father,” she said.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“I’m Theodosia Lynch, your sister’s mother-in-law.”

The boy smirked at her before shutting the door in her face. She took a deep breath and reached for the pebble in her pocket. She pictured Rachel clinging to life and pounded on the door.

The same boy opened it and stepped onto the porch, towering over her. “Lady, you need to leave.”

She took a step back before tossing the pebble a few inches in the air and catching it with the same hand. The boy stared and she did it again. It almost grazed his chin the second time. She caught it and said, “I need to speak with your father right now.”

The boy turned and went inside, closing the door behind him. She hummed the tune to “It’s a Long, Long Way to Tipperary” and slipped the pebble back into her pocket. She’d hum and wait all day if that’s what it took to speak her mind. Halfway through the second chorus, Rachel’s father appeared.

“Your daughter has a daughter,” Theodosia said. The man opened his mouth to speak. She shook her head. “No. You’re going to listen for a change. Rachel almost died in labor. We’re still not sure she’s going to make it. She needs her family, all her family.”

Benjamin was giving his daughter a bottle for the first time when the *Titanic* departed Southampton. The evening the ship struck the iceberg, Rachel emerged from her coma. She was surrounded by Benjamin, Theodosia, little Theo, her parents, and her seven brothers, including Aaron.

12 June 1932

Benjamin held his arm out for his daughter. Theo looped her arm through his, and they slowly headed down the aisle. As she passed all her uncles and aunts, her grandparents, her mother, and her soon to be mother-in-law, she smiled. She was marrying her best friend, Ernie Corben.

Dressed in a gown of her own design, she was almost as talented a dressmaker as her namesake had been. Her parents gave her the locket around her neck. It was engraved with elaborate scrollwork and the initials E and T. Inside the locket was a picture of the two important and cherished people not in attendance: Ernest Corben and Theodosia Lynch.

1 September 1985

Theo was talking to her daughter on the phone. “Darling, I’ve got to hang up. It’s time for the news and you know I never miss it.”

“Okay, bye Mom. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

Theo set the phone down next to the antique iron she used as a paperweight. The same iron her namesake had used in the same kitchen. She moved slowly into the living room. The dreary, wet weather bothered her bursitis. She settled herself on the couch and clicked on the TV.

The screen filled with an image of the ocean. The announcer said, “Dr. Robert Ballard made history today. He discovered the wreckage of the *Titanic* utilizing the *Argo*, an unmanned submersible equipped with powerful lights and cameras to aid in the search.”

Theo couldn’t believe it. Her entire life, seventy-three years, the *Titanic* had loomed large in family lore. She turned up the volume. The news announcer said, “The *Argo* captured video from a portion of the debris field.”

Theo watched as the *Argo* circled a boiler, from the *Titanic*’s engine room, embedded in the sandy surface of the ocean floor. Then it floated up a small hill. Near the top of the hill, it passed elegant plates, teacups, and a beaded purse.

Dipping down into the valley between two hills it glided by a pair of leather boots and hovered over what appeared to be a pocket watch. Theo stared as the camera focused and zoomed in on the initials E and T.