

FIRST THINGS

I.

**I SAW YOU FIRST
IN MISS MCDONAGH'S DANCING CLASS
WHERE ONCE A WEEK OUR MOTHERS BROUGHT US
TO LEARN THE STEPS, AND IN THAT WAY
MAINTAIN (THEY PRAYED) SOME CONNECTION
TO THE SPIRIT OF THAT ISLAND
WE CHILDREN HEARD SO MUCH OF, AND FEARED IN SECRET
AS A PLACE THEY HAD BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE.
A NOBLE AIM, FELT HEART-DEEP
BUT UNSPOKEN, LIKE SO MANY OTHER THINGS ...
AND TRUTH TO TELL, I DON'T THINK WE WERE READY
(SPEAKING AT LEAST FOR THE BOYS IN THE CLASS)
TO ASSUME SUCH RESPONSIBILITY.
MISS MCDONAGH'S MISSING TOOTH, AND HER OUT-OF-TUNE PIANO,
AND THE SAGGING SECOND FLOOR OF THE HIBERNIAN HALL
AND HORNPIPE SHOES THAT PINCHED:
THESE WERE IMPORTANT TO US THEN.**

**WHEN THE BOLDER OF US, PERHAPS RENDERED TEMPORARILY INSANE
BY THE SIGHT OF BATS AND GLOVES AND PALS
HEADING TOWARDS THE PARK THESE SATURDAY MORNINGS
RISKED ASKING FOR THAT INFAMOUS "ONE GOOD REASON"
WE HEARD OUR MOTHERS' REPLIES: WHETHER SHARP OR GENTLE,
WE DID NOT OFTEN UNDERSTAND, AND SO
(EXCEPT AS ALWAYS IN DESPERATE SPRING)
WE DID NOT ASK.**

II.

**I HAD BEEN IN MISS MCDONAGH'S TWO YEARS
WHEN YOU FIRST CAME, A STRANGER
FROM THREE PARISHES AND ONE BUS TRANSFER AWAY
(THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD, ALMOST.)
YOUR FAMILY HAD ARRIVED FROM IRELAND NOT LONG BEFORE:
YOU SPOKE IN ACCENTS OF CLARE
(SO MY MOTHER SAID) AND NOT THE BRONX.
YOU HAD LONG RED HAIR AND GREEN EYES
A SHY SWEET SMILE, AND, INEVITABLY, FRECKLES
AND (SO OUR MOTHERS SAID, AND MISS MCDONAGH SAID)
YOU HAD A REAL GIFT FOR THE DANCING.
IN TIME, NOT EVEN THE OUT-OF-TUNE PIANO
OR THOUGHTS OF MISSED BASEBALL GAMES
COULD DIMINISH WHAT I SOON KNEW TO BE
YOUR EASY GRACE.**

FIRST THINGS

I WAS NINE THEN, AND YOU WERE EIGHT,
AND OF COURSE I FELL IN LOVE WITH YOU.
AT LEAST I THOUGHT IT WAS LOVE
BUT THE IRISH POPULATION OF THE BRONX
HAD NOT MUCH TIME IN THOSE DAYS FOR ROMANCE
AND SO I WASN'T SURE WHO I COULD ASK IT
DIDN'T SEEM TO BE THE KIND OF QUESTION
YOU COULD JUST ASK ANYBODY. I TRIED THE LIBRARY
BUT DIDN'T HAVE MUCH LUCK ON MY OWN
AND I COULDN'T BRING MYSELF TO ASK THE LIBRARIAN
(USUALLY FIERCE MRS. MOSKOWITZ, INQUISITRESS-GENERAL
IN CHARGE OF OVERDUE BOOKS; AT THAT POINT IN MY LIFE
I HAD MORE OF THEM THAN MORTAL SINS).

SO, UNABLE TO EAT OR SLEEP
AND FINDING MYSELF READY TO CRY FOR NO REASON
AND WANDERING AROUND ACTING GOOFY MOST OF THE TIME
(AND NEARLY GETTING WHACKED BY SISTER FOR MY INATTENTION)
I CONCLUDED I MUST BE IN LOVE.
I WASN'T SURE I LIKED THE FEELING;
IT WAS A LOT LIKE THE FLU, ONLY WITHOUT THE SNEEZING.

MY MOTHER TOLD ME LONG AFTERWARDS
THAT SHE HAD SOON NOTICED THE CHANGES, INCLUDING
MY NEW ENTHUSIASM FOR MISS MCDONAGH'S CLASSES.
AND INSTANTLY AND MATERNALLY SHE HAD ARRIVED
AT A FEW CONCLUSIONS.
WHEN SHE CASUALLY DROPPED YOUR NAME
INTO OUR DINNER-TABLE CONVERSATION ONE EVENING
AND I BLUSHED BEET-RED
AND NEARLY CHOKED ON A FISH STICK
SHE KNEW FOR SURE WHAT WAS GOING ON.

FOR TWO YEARS I ADORED YOU
NOT ONLY FROM AFAR (AS IN SOME OF THE NOVELS
I HAD BEGUN TO CONSULT IN THE LIBRARY,
MOSTLY ON MRS. MOSKOWITZ' DAY OFF)
BUT FROM RIGHT NEXT TO YOU AT MISS MCDONAGH'S.
WHEN WE DID THOSE STEPS
IN WHICH I GOT TO HOLD YOUR HAND
AND PUT MY ARM AROUND YOUR WAIST
I SAID QUICK SILENT PRAYERS OF THANKS
TO THAT NAMELESS BUT POWERFUL FORCE
THAT LAY BEHIND OUR MOTHERS' DESIRE
TO HAVE US CHILDREN LEARN THE DANCING.

FIRST THINGS

I SUSPECT NOW COLLUSION BETWEEN MY MOTHER
AND MISS MCDONAGH: I WAS YOUR PARTNER MORE AND MORE
NOT UNGRACEFUL, IF I DO SAY SO MYSELF
BUT WELL CONTENT TO LET YOU BE
THE BRIGHT PARTICULAR STAR.
FROM THE PRACTICAL SIDE, OUR RESPECTIVE FATHERS
PLAYED FOOTBALL TOGETHER ON THE SAME SIDE
EVERY SECOND SUNDAY AT GAELIC PARK.
IN A FEW YEARS' TIME
A SPIT ON THE PALM AND A HANDSHAKE WOULD SUFFICE
TO SEAL OUR FATES
THE ENGAGEMENT RING, AND SEVENTY YEARS OF WEDDED BLISS,
COULD COME LATER.

III.

ALL THIS I THOUGHT, BUT NEVER SPOKE
NEVER SURE OF THE RIGHT WORDS
OR EVEN IF THERE WERE RIGHT WORDS.

THEN ONE DAY THE PHONE RANG
AND MY MOTHER ANSWERED. IT WAS YOUR MOTHER
TELLING US THAT YOU WERE SOON MOVING TO BOSTON
IT WAS UNEXPECTED: SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR FATHER'S JOB
AND RELATIVES AND BABIES AND NEW HOUSES...

- *WE'RE HAPPY FOR YOU, MY MOTHER SAID AT LAST.*
- *BUT WE'LL MISS YOU. MAKE SURE YOU GIVE US A CALL*
WHEN YOU GET SETTLED.

SHE HUNG THE PHONE UP GENTLY.
AND WHEN SHE LOOKED AT ME AT LAST
THERE WERE TEARS IN HER EYES
TO MATCH THE TEARS IN HER POOR LOVE-STRUCK MIDDLE SON'S.

"NEVER" IS A HARD WORD FOR ANYONE TO GRASP:
FOR A BOY OF ELEVEN IT'S NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE.
MISS MCDONAGH'S DANCE CLASSES
WERE FILLED WITH NEW FACES, NONE OF THEM YOURS.
I SUPPOSE I GRIEVED;
EVEN MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS LEFT ME ALONE.
I TRIED TO WRITE YOU, AND ACTUALLY FINISHED ONE LETTER;
THEN WE WAITED FOR YOUR MOTHER TO CALL

FIRST THINGS

**AND GIVE US YOUR NEW ADDRESS. SHE NEVER DID.
I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED TO THE LETTER.**

**AT SUNDAY MASS I PRAYED YOU WOULD BE HAPPY
BUT LACKING COURAGE, WOULD NOT RISK MY FAITH
BY PRAYING THAT YOU WOULD RETURN.
I COULD NOT BRING MYSELF TO PRETEND
THAT IT WAS ANYTHING BUT AN ENDING,
OR THAT THERE WOULD BE EASY HEALING
FOR WHAT I WAS CERTAIN WAS A BROKEN HEART.**

IV.

**WEEKS PASSED, THEN MORE TRAGEDY:
OUR CAT JESS DISAPPEARED ONE NIGHT.
WE SEARCHED HALF THE BRONX AND NEVER FOUND HER
UNTIL THE SUNDAY MORNING MY LITTLE BROTHER KEVIN
HEARD SOFT CAT NOISES UNDER THE BACK PORCH STEPS.
THERE WAS JESS, NOW A PROUD NEW MOTHER
OF THREE MYSTERIOUS TOM-KITTENS
PRESUMABLY RELATED TO ONE ANOTHER
BUT EACH APPARENTLY WITH HIS OWN IDEA
OF PROPER FELINE COLORATION.**

**THE LITTLE FAMILY HAD BEEN TOGETHER A WHILE:
THE KITTENS' EYES WERE OPEN,
ALL THE STRANGE NO-COLOR OF VERY YOUNG EYES.
MY FATHER, A LOVER OF CATS AND THE MUSIC,
SUGGESTED THAT WE NAME THEM MICK, PAT, AND JIM
AFTER HIS THREE FAVORITE FIDDLERS COLEMAN, KILLORAN, AND MORRISON.
WE ALL APPROVED, AND THERE WAS A GREAT HOOLEY AT THE HOUSE
FOR THE NAMING (AS MUCH, I SEE NOW, FOR MY BENEFIT
AS FOR THE KITTENS', WHO SLEPT THROUGH MOST OF IT ANYWAY.)**

**AND SOMEHOW THE ARRIVAL OF THOSE KITTENS
- MEANING NO DISRESPECT -
RESTORED TO ME A PART THAT YOU HAD TAKEN
AND BROUGHT A BROKEN HEART TO FASTER HEALING
THAN TIME LEFT TO ITSELF COULD HAVE ACCOMPLISHED.**

**I REMEMBER MY FATHER, ALWAYS KIND BUT MOSTLY SERIOUS
MAKING US KIDS AND MY MOTHER AND AUNTS LAUGH
ANY TIME HE'D PICK UP ONE OF THE KITTENS
IN HIS ROUGH LABORER'S HAND
AND CROON TO IT IN WHAT HE THOUGHT WAS IRISH**

FIRST THINGS

**CONSIDERING HIMSELF WELL REWARDED FOR HIS CULTURAL EFFORTS
WITH A SINGLE PLAINTIVE MEOW.**

V.

**I STARTED IN HIGH SCHOOL THAT SEPTEMBER
AT CARDINAL HAYES, IN ANOTHER PART OF THE BRONX,
NOT CLOSE TO WHERE WE LIVED.**

**I DID NOT GO AGAIN TO MISS MCDONAGH'S.
THE HEALING HAD BEGUN; MY PARENTS KNEW
IT MADE NO SENSE TO RISK
THE TEARING OPEN OF THE CLOSING WOUNDS.**

**BUT LESSON MONEY HAD BEEN PAID, HARD-EARNED,
AND TOO MUCH PRIDE TO ASK MISS MCDONAGH FOR A REFUND.**

**A DILEMMA, THEN MIRACLE OF MIRACLES:
MY YOUNGER BROTHER KEVIN TOLD MY MOTHER
THAT HE'D GO TO LEARN THE STEPS AS I HAD DONE BEFORE HIM.
MY MOTHER AND MY FATHER WERE BOTH DELIGHTED.
AND I KNEW ALL TOO WELL HOW MUCH I OWED HIM.
(IT WASN'T UNTIL YEARS LATER I FOUND OUT
THAT KEVIN ALSO HAD HIS EYE
ON ONE OF MISS MCDONAGH'S RED-HEADS.
... I WAS BEST MAN AT THE WEDDING.)**

**DAYS, WEEKS, MONTHS, YEARS
PASSED MOSTLY UNNOTICED, CROSSED SQUARES
ON THE PARISH CALENDAR THAT HELPED MY MOTHER
TO KEEP WHOLE DECADES OF UNRULY LIVES IN LINE
(AND WHICH SOLEMNLY MARKED, FOR REASONS STILL UNCLEAR,
THE PHASES OF THE SCARCELY-SEEN BRONX MOON.)
I WAS NEARLY FINISHED HIGH SCHOOL, READY FOR COLLEGE
AND DECIDING BETWEEN FORDHAM OR IONA
OR MANHATTAN, WHERE MY FATHER KNEW ONE OF THE BROTHERS.
HE'LL TAKE CARE OF YOU, MY FATHER SAID,
AND I COULD NOT SAY I DID NOT NEED TAKING CARE OF
BECAUSE I KNEW MY FATHER'S CONCERN:
I WOULD BE THE FIRST IN THE FAMILY TO GO SO FAR.
YOU CAN NEVER BE TOO CAREFUL, HE SAID MANY TIMES.
HE WOULD NOT HAVE KNOWN HOW TO SAY:
I FEAR FOR YOU.**

**MY OLDEST SISTER JANET MARRIED A FIREMAN
AND MOVED TO MASSAPEQUA (A NAME MY FATHER
NEVER LEARNED TO PRONOUNCE - ALWAYS TO HIM**

FIRST THINGS

IT WAS "SOME TOWN ON LONG ISLAND").
MY OLDER BROTHER WENT OFF TO JOIN THE MARINES
HE WAS SENT TO KOREA - WE HAD TO GO THE LIBRARY
TO FIND OUT EXACTLY WHERE IT WAS.
IN THE BEGINNING, HE WROTE HOME A LOT.
MICK, PAT, AND JIM, FORMER KITTENS,
HAD LONG AGO FOUND NEW HOMES
AND DOUBTLESS STARTED FAMILIES OF THEIR OWN.

THEN MY FATHER FELL AND HURT HIMSELF ONE DAY AT WORK
AND MY MOTHER CONVINCED THE GAS COMPANY TO RETIRE HIM.
HE PASSED AWAY SUDDENLY SIX MONTHS LATER.
KILLORAN PLAYED AT THE MASS; THE PRIEST
WAS MISS MCDONAGH'S NEPHEW. WHEN HE SAID THE CREED IN IRISH
WE THOUGHT OF DAD'S CONVERSATIONS WITH KITTENS.
AND NEARLY LAUGHED ALOUD IN SPIRE OF TEARS...

VI.

I REMEMBER HEARING OR READING
THAT LIFE IS A RIVER. WELL IT MAY BE, FIERCE, SWIFT
WHAT KEEPS US FROM DROWNING
ARE THE BRIGHT BOBBING FIRST THINGS
LOVE, KITTENS, SORROWS EVEN
ALWAYS WITHIN OUR HEART'S GRASP.

I DID NOT OFTEN THINK OF YOU AGAIN;
I KNOW THAT I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU.

- MAY 1997