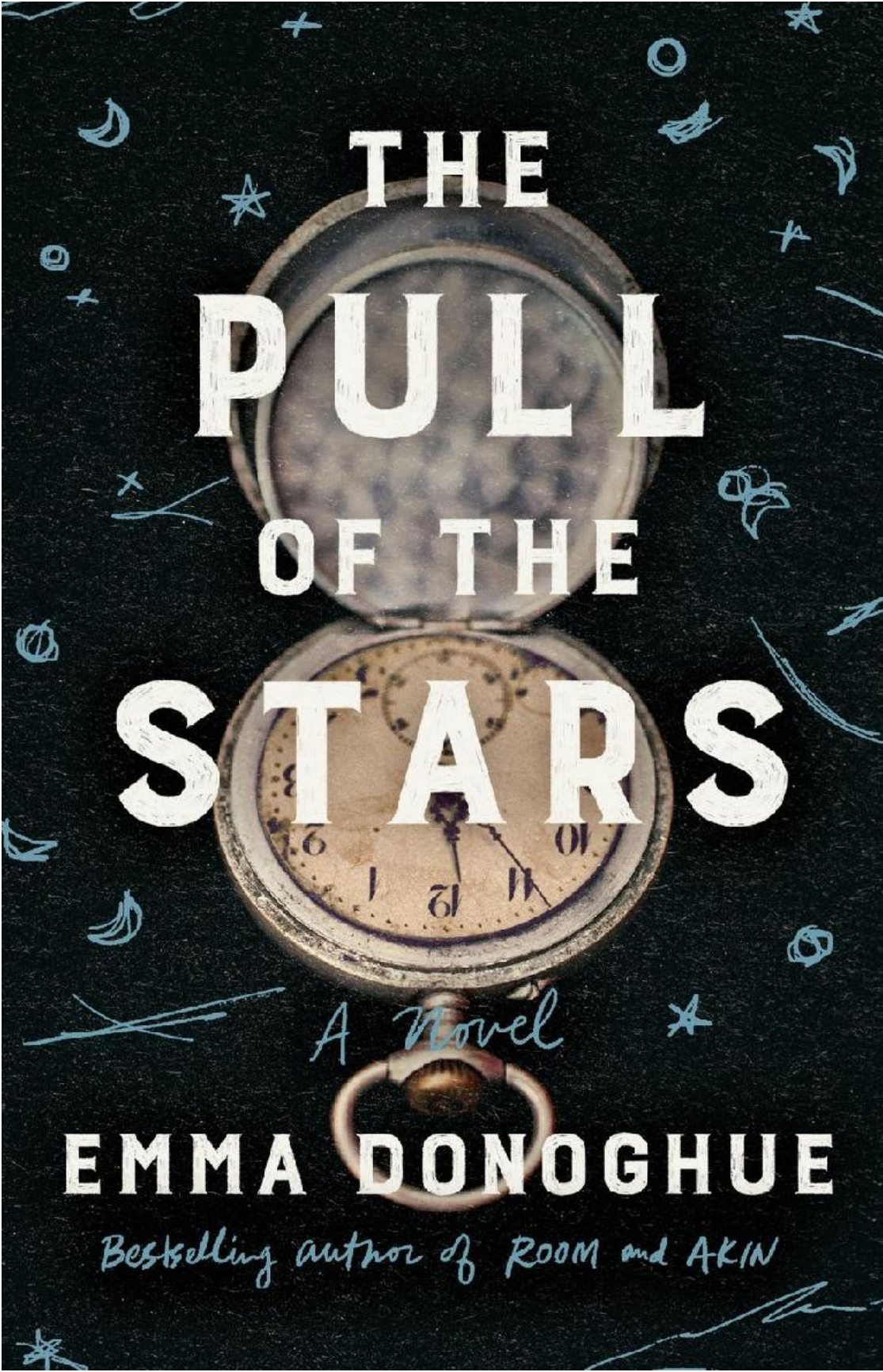


THE PULL OF THE STARS

A Novel

EMMA DONOGHUE

Bestselling author of ROOM and AKIN



THE PULL OF THE STARS

A Novel

EMMA DONOGHUE

Bestselling author of ROOM and AKIN

THE
PULL
OF THE
STARS

A Novel

EMMA DONOGHUE



Little, Brown and Company
New York Boston London

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of

the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2020 by Emma Donoghue

Cover design by Sara Wood

Cover photographs: watchcase © Reilika Landen/plainpicture, watch face © Hanka

Steidle/plainpicture

Author photograph by Mark Raynes Roberts

Cover © 2020 Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The

purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich

our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the

author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other

than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support

of the author's rights.

Little, Brown and Company

Hachette Book Group

1290 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10104

littlebrown.com

facebook.com/littlebrownandcompany

twitter.com/littlebrown

First Edition: July 2020

Little, Brown and Company is a division of Hachette Book Group, Inc. The Little, Brown name

and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the

publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for speaking events. To find out

more, go to hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

ISBN 978-0-316-49904-0

LCCN 2020935462

E3-20200604-DA-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[I: Red](#)

[II: Brown](#)

[III: Blue](#)

[IV: Black](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Discover More Emma Donoghue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Emma Donoghue](#)



Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)

[I](#)

[Red](#)

STILL HOURS OF DARK to go when I left the house that morning. I
cycled

through reeking Dublin streets that were slick with rain. My short green
cape kept off the worst, but my coat sleeves were soon wet through. A waft
of dung and blood as I passed a lane where livestock were waiting. A boy in

a man's coat shouted something rude at me. I pedalled faster, past a motor car creeping along to eke out its petrol.

I left my cycle in the usual alley and clipped the combination lock onto the back wheel. (German manufacture, of course. How would I replace it when its mechanism rusted up?) I let down the side tapes of my skirt and took my rain-soaked bag out of the basket. I'd have preferred to cycle all the way to the hospital, and it would have brought me there in half the time the tram took, but Matron wouldn't hear of her nurses turning up in a sweat. Emerging onto the street, I nearly walked into a disinfection cart. Its sweet, tarry tang marked the air. I ducked away from the masked men who were spraying the gutters and feeding their hose through the grating of gully after gully.

I passed an improvised war shrine—a wooden triptych draped with the Union Jack. There was a chipped azure Virgin Mary for good measure and a shelf below overflowing with decaying flowers. The names painted on were just a few dozen Irishmen out of the tens of thousands lost so far, out of hundreds of thousands who'd enlisted. I thought of my brother, whom I'd left at home finishing a piece of toast.

At the tram stop, the pool of electric light was becoming watery as dawn approached. The lamppost was pasted with advertisements: DEPLETED AND

DEBILITATED FROM LIVING TOO QUICKLY? FEELING OLD BEFORE ONE'S TIME?

Tomorrow I'd be thirty.

But I refused to flinch at the number. Thirty meant maturity, a certain stature and force, no? And the suffrage, even, now they were extending it to women over thirty who met the property qualifications. Though the prospect of voting felt unreal to me, since the United Kingdom hadn't had a general election in eight years and wouldn't till the war was over, and God alone knew what state the world would be in by then.

The first two trams whizzed by, crammed to bursting; more routes must have been cut this week. When the third came, I made myself push onto it. The steps were slippery with carbolic, and my rubber soles could get no purchase. I clung to the stair rail as the tram swayed through the fading darkness and hauled myself upwards. The riders on the balcony section looked soaked through, so I ducked in under the roof, where a long sticker said COVER UP EACH COUGH OR SNEEZE...FOOLS AND TRAITORS SPREAD DISEASE.

I was cooling fast after my bike ride, starting to shiver. Two men on the knifeboard bench moved a little apart so I could wedge myself between them, bag on my lap. Drizzle slanted in on us all.

The tram accelerated with a rising whine, passing a line of waiting cabs,

but their blinkered horses took no notice. I saw a couple arm in arm below us hurry through a puddle of lamplight, their bluntly pointed masks like the beaks of unfamiliar birds.

The conductor inched along the crowded top deck now. His torch—a flat one, like a whiskey flask—spilled a wavering radiance over knees and shoes. I gouged the sweaty penny out of my glove and dropped it into his sloshing tin, wondering whether the inch of carbolic would really wash the germs off.

He warned me, That'll only bring you to the Pillar.

So the penny fare's gone up?

Not at all, there'd be ructions. But it doesn't take you as far now.

In the old days I would have smiled at the paradox. So to get to the hospital...

A halfpenny more on top of your penny, said the conductor.

I dug my purse out of my bag and found him the coin.

Children carrying suitcases were filing into the train station as we swung past, being sent down the country in hopes they'd be safe. But from what I could gather, the plague was general all over Ireland. The spectre had a dozen names: the great flu, khaki flu, blue flu, black flu, the grippe, or the grip...(That word always made me think of a heavy hand landing on one's

shoulder and gripping it hard.) *The malady*, some called it euphemistically. Or *the war sickness*, on the assumption that it must somehow be a side effect of four years of slaughter, a poison brewed in the trenches or spread by all this hurly-burly and milling about across the globe.

I counted myself lucky; I was one of those who'd come through practically unscathed. At the start of September I'd taken to my bed hurting all over, knowing enough about this brutal flu to be rather in a funk, but I'd found myself back on my feet in a matter of days. Colours appeared a bit silvery to me for a few weeks, as if I were looking through smoked glass. Apart from that, I was only a little lowered in spirits, nothing worth making a fuss about.

A delivery boy—matchstick legs in shorts—whizzed past us, raising a peacock's fan of oily water. How slowly this tram was trundling through the sparse traffic—to save electricity, I supposed, or in line with some new bylaw. I'd have been at the hospital already if Matron let us cycle all the way there.

Not that she'd know if I broke her rule; for the past three days she'd been propped up on pillows in a Women's Fever ward, coughing too hard to speak. But it seemed sneaky to do it behind her back.

South of Nelson's Pillar, the brakes ground and squealed, and we came

to a halt. I looked back at the charred carapace of the post office, one of half a dozen spots where the rebels had holed up for their six-day Rising. A pointless and perverse exercise. Hadn't Westminster been on the brink of granting home rule for Ireland before the outbreak of world war had postponed the matter? I'd no particular objection to being governed from Dublin rather than London if it could come about by peaceful means. But gunfire in these streets in '16 hadn't brought home rule an inch closer, had it? Only given most of us reason to hate those few who'd shed blood in our names.

Farther down the road, where firms such as the bookshop where I used to buy Tim's comics had been razed by British shellfire during that brief rebellion, there was no sign of any rebuilding yet. Some side streets remained barricaded with felled trees and barbed wire. I supposed concrete, tar, asphalt, and wood were all unaffordable as long as the war lasted.

Delia Garrett, I thought. Ita Noonan.

Don't.

Eileen Devine, the barrow woman. Her flu had turned to pneumonia—all yesterday she'd coughed up greenish-red, and her temperature was a kite jerking up and down.

Stop it, Julia.

I tried not to dwell on my patients between shifts since it wasn't as if I could do a thing for them until I was back on the ward.

On a fence, specifics of a variety concert with CANCELLED stamped diagonally across them; an advertisement for the All-Ireland Hurling Finals, POSTPONED FOR THE DURATION pasted on it. So many shops shuttered now

due to staff being laid low by the grippe, and offices with blinds drawn down or regretful notices nailed up. Many of the firms that were still open looked deserted to me, on the verge of failing for lack of custom. Dublin was a great mouth holed with missing teeth.

A waft of eucalyptus. The man to my left on the tram bench was pressing a soaked handkerchief over his nose and mouth. Some wore it on their scarves or coats these days. I used to like the woody fragrance before it came to mean fear. Not that I had any reason to shrink from a stranger's sneeze, being immune now to this season's awful strain of flu; there was a certain relief to having had my dose already.

A man's explosive cough on the bench behind me. Then another. Hack, hack, a tree being axed with too small a blade. The mass of bodies leaned away. That ambiguous sound could be the start of the flu or a convalescent's lingering symptom; it could signify the harmless common cold or be a nervous tic, caught like a yawn just by thinking about it. But at

the moment this whole city was inclined to assume the worst, and no wonder.

Three hearses in a row outside an undertaker's, the horses already in harness for the morning's first burials. Two aproned men shouldered a load of pale planks down the lane to the back—for building more coffins, I realised.

The streetlamps were dimming now as day came. The tram rattled past an overloaded motor launch that looked tilted, askew; I saw two men kick at the rear axle. A dozen passengers in mourning wear still sat pressed together on its benches, as if stubbornness might get them to the funeral mass on time. But the driver, despairing, let her forehead rest on the steering wheel.

The man sitting jammed against my right elbow trained a little torch on his newspaper. I never had a paper in the house anymore for fear of upsetting Tim. Some mornings I brought a book to read, but last week the library had recalled them all for quarantine.

The date at the top reminded me that it was Halloween. The front page was offering hot lemonade, I noticed, and life insurance, and *Cinna-Mint*, *the Germicidal Throat Tablet*. So many ex-votos sprinkled among the small ads: *Sincere thanks to the Sacred Heart and the Holy Souls for our family's*

recovery. The man turned the page, but his newspaper was blank inside, a great rectangle of dirty white. He let out a grunt of irritation.

A man's voice from the other side of him: Power shortages—they must have had to leave off printing halfway.

A woman behind us said, Sure aren't the gasmen doing their best to keep the works up and running, half staffed?

My neighbour flipped to the back page instead. I tried not to register the headlines in the veer of his shaky beam: *Naval Mutiny Against the Kaiser. Diplomatic Negotiations at the Highest Level*. People thought the Central Powers couldn't possibly hold out much longer against the Allies. But then, they'd been saying as much for years.

Half this news was made up, I reminded myself. Or slanted to boost morale, or at least censored to keep it from falling any further. For instance, our papers had stopped including the Roll of Honor—soldiers lost in the various theatres of war. Irishmen who'd signed up for the sake of king and empire, or the just cause of defending small nations, or for want of a job, or for a taste of adventure, or—like my brother—because a mate was going. I'd studied the roll daily for any mention of Tim during the almost three years he'd been posted abroad. (Gallipoli, Salonika, Palestine—the place-names still made me shudder.) Every week the columns had crawled

another inch across the newspaper under headings with the ring of categories in a macabre parlor game: *Missing; Prisoner in Enemy Hands; Wounded; Wounded—Shell Shock; Died of Wounds; and Killed in Action*. Photographs, sometimes. Identifying details; appeals for information. But last year, casualties had grown too many and paper too scarce, so it had been decided that the list should from that point on be made public only for those who could pay for it as a threepenny weekly.

I noticed just one headline about the flu today, low down on the right: *Increase in Reports of Influenza*. A masterpiece of understatement, as if it were only the *reporting* that had increased, or perhaps the pandemic was a figment of the collective imagination. I wondered whether it was the newspaper publisher's decision to play down the danger or if he'd received orders from above.

The grand, old-fashioned silhouette of the hospital reared up ahead against the pallid sky. My stomach coiled. Excitement or nerves; hard to tell them apart these days. I struggled to the stairs and let gravity help me down. On the lower deck, a man hawked and spat on the floor. People twitched and drew back shoes and hems.

A female voice wailed, Sure you might as well spray us with bullets! Stepping off the tram, I saw the latest official notice in huge letters,

pasted up every few feet.

A NEW FOE IS IN OUR MIDST: PANIC.

THE GENERAL WEAKENING OF NERVE POWER

KNOWN AS WAR-WEARINESS

HAS OPENED A DOOR TO CONTAGION.

DEFEATISTS ARE THE ALLIES OF DISEASE.

I supposed the authorities were trying to buck us up in their shrill way, but it seemed unfair to blame the sick for *defeatism*.

Written across the top of the hospital gates, in gilded wrought iron that caught the last of the streetlight: *Vita gloriosa vita*. Life, glorious life.

On my first day, when I'd been just twenty-one, the motto had made me tingle from scalp to toe. My father had stumped up the fees for the full three-year course at the Technical School for Nurses, and I'd been sent here for ward work three afternoons a week; it was in this hulking, four-storey building—handsome in a bleak, Victorian way—that I'd learnt everything of substance.

Vita gloriosa vita. The serifs were tipped with soot, I noticed now.

I crossed the courtyard behind a pair of white-coiffed nuns and followed them in. Religious sisters were said to make the most devoted, self-abnegating nurses; I wasn't sure about that, but I'd certainly been made to

feel second best by a few nuns over my years here. Like most of the hospitals, schools, and orphanages in Ireland, this place couldn't have run without the expertise and labour of the various orders of the sisters. Most of the staff were Roman Catholics, but the hospital was open to any residents of the capital who needed care (though Protestants usually went to their own hospitals or hired private nurses).

I should have been down the country. I'd been due a whole three days off, so I'd arranged to go to Dadda's farm for a little rest and fresh air but then had to send him a telegram at the last minute explaining that my leave was cancelled. I couldn't be spared, since so many nurses—including Matron herself—had come down with the grippe.

Dadda and his wife's farm, technically. Tim and I were perfectly civil to our stepmother and vice versa. Even though she'd never had children of her own, she'd always kept us at a slight remove, and I supposed we'd done the same. At least she had no reason to resent us now we were grown and supporting ourselves in Dublin. Nurses were notoriously underpaid, but my brother and I managed to rent a small house, mostly thanks to Tim's military pension.

Urgency girdled me now. Eileen Devine, Ita Noonan, Delia Garrett; how were my patients getting on without me?

It felt colder inside the hospital than out these days; lamps were kept turned down and coal fires meagrely fed. Every week, more grippe cases were carried into our wards, more cots jammed in. The hospital's atmosphere of scrupulous order—which had survived four years of wartime disruption and shortages and even the Rising's six days of gunfire and chaos—was finally crumbling under this burden. Staff who fell sick disappeared like pawns from a chessboard. The rest of us made do, worked harder, faster, pulled more than our weight—but it wasn't enough. This flu was clogging the whole works of the hospital.

Not just the hospital, I reminded myself—the whole of Dublin. The whole country. As far as I could tell, the whole world was a machine grinding to a halt. Across the globe, in hundreds of languages, signs were going up urging people to cover their coughs. We had it no worse here than anywhere else; self-pity was as useless as panic.

No sign of our porter this morning; I hoped he wasn't off sick too. Only a charwoman sluicing the marble with carbolic around the base of the blue-robed Virgin.

As I hurried past Admitting towards the stairs to Maternity/Fever, I recognised a junior nurse behind her mask; she was red-spattered from bib to hem like something out of an abattoir. Standards were really slipping.

Nurse Cavanagh, are you just out of surgery?

She shook her head and answered hoarsely: Just now, on my way here, Nurse Power—a woman insisted I come see to a man who'd fallen in the street. Quite black in the face, he was, clawing at his collar.

I put my hand on the junior's wrist to calm her.

She went on in gulps. I was trying to sit him up on the cobblestones and undo his collar studs to help him breathe—

Very good.

—but he let out one great cough and...Nurse Cavanagh gestured at the blood all over her with widespread, tacky fingers.

I could smell it, harsh and metallic. Oh, my dear. Has he been triaged yet?

But when I followed her eyes to the draped stretcher on the floor behind her, I guessed he was past that point, beyond our reach. Whoever had brought a stretcher into the road and helped Nurse Cavanagh carry him into the hospital must have abandoned the two of them here.

I crouched now to put my hand under the sheet and check the man's neck for a pulse. Nothing.

This weird malady. It took months for the flu to defeat some patients, sneaking up on them by way of pneumoniatic complications, battling for

every inch of territory. Others succumbed to it in a matter of hours. Had this poor fellow been a stoic who'd denied his aches, fever, and cough until he'd found all at once, out in the street, that he couldn't walk, couldn't speak, could only whoop out his lifeblood all over Nurse Cavanagh? Or had he felt all right this morning even as the storm had been gathering inside him?

The other day an ambulance driver told me an awful story: He and his team had motored off in response to a phone call from a young woman (in perfect health herself, she said, but one of her fellow lodgers seemed very ill and the other two not well), and when the ambulance arrived, they found four bodies.

I realised that Nurse Cavanagh hadn't felt able to leave this passage outside Admitting even to fetch help in case someone tripped over the corpse. I remembered being a junior, the paralysing fear that by following one rule, you'd break another.

I'll find some orderlies to carry him down to the mortuary, I promised her. Go and get yourself a cup of tea.

Nurse Cavanagh managed to nod. She asked, Shouldn't you have a mask on?

I went down with flu last month.

So did I, but...

Well, then. (I tried to sound kind rather than irritated.) One can't catch it twice.

Nurse Cavanagh only blinked uncertainly, a rabbit frozen on a railway line.

I went down the corridor and put my head into the orderlies' room.

A knot of smokers in crumpled round caps and in white to the knees, like butchers. The waft made me long for a Woodbine. (Matron broke all her nurses of the filthy habit, but once in a while I relapsed.)

Excuse me, there's a dead man at Admitting.

The one with the metal half-face snorted wetly. Come to the wrong place, then, hasn't he?

Nichols, that's who the orderly was—Noseless Nichols. (A ghastly phrase, but such tricks helped me remember names.) The copper mask that covered what had been his nose and left cheek was thin, enamelled, unnervingly lifelike, with the bluish tint of a shaved jaw and a real moustache soldered on.

The man beside him, the one with the trembling hands, was O'Shea—Shaky O'Shea.

The third man, Groyne, sighed. Another soul gone to his account!

These three had all been stretcher-bearers. They'd enlisted together, the

story went, but only O'Shea and Nichols had been sent up the line.

Equipment shortages at the front were so awful that when bearers ran out of stretchers, they had to drag the wounded along on coats or even webs of wire. Groyne had been lucky enough to be posted to a military hospital and was never sent within earshot of the cannon; he'd come back quite unmarked, a letter returned to sender. They were all mates still, but Groyne was the one of the threesome I couldn't help but dislike.

Anonymous at Admitting, we'll call him, Groyne intoned. Gone beyond the veil. Off to join the great majority.

The orderly had a bottomless supply of clever euphemisms for the great leveller. *Turned up her toes*, Groyne might say when a patient died, or *hopped the twig*, or *counting worms*.

Something else I held against him was that he fancied himself a singer.

Goodbye-ee, he crooned lugubriously now, *goodbye-ee...*

Nichols's nasal, echoey voice joined in on the second line: *Wipe the tear, baby dear, from your eye-ee*.

I set my teeth. Despite the fact that we nurses had years of training—a theory diploma from the technical school as well as a practical one from the hospital and a third in an area of specialty—the orderlies liked to talk down to us, as if feminine weakness made us need their help. But it always paid to

be civil, so I asked, Could two of you possibly bring Anonymous below when you have a moment?

O'Shea told me, Anything for you, Nurse Power.

Groyne reached towards the overflowing brass ashtray, stubbed out his fag, and put it in his breast pocket for later, singing on.

Don't cry-ee, don't sigh-ee,

There's a silver lining in the sky-ee.

Bonsoir, old thing, cheerio, chin chin,

Napoo, toodle-oo, goodbye-ee.

I said, Thanks ever so, gentlemen.

Heading for the stairs, I found I was a little dizzy; I hadn't eaten anything yet today.

Down into the basement, then, not right towards the mortuary but left to the temporary canteen that had been set up off the kitchen. Our ground-floor dining rooms had been commandeered as flu wards, so now staff meals were dished up in a windowless square that smelled of furniture polish, porridge, anxiety.

Even with doctors and nurses having to muddle in together in this ad hoc canteen, there were so few of us still on our feet and reporting for duty that the breakfast queue was short. People leaned against the walls, wolfing

down something egg-coloured with an obscure kind of sausage. Roughly half were wearing masks, I noticed, the ones who hadn't had the grippe yet or (like Nurse Cavanagh) who were too rattled to do without the sense of protection offered by that fragile layer of gauze.

Twenty hours' work on four hours' sleep!

That from a girlish voice behind me. I recognised her as one of this year's crop of probies; being new to full-time ward work, probationers lacked our stamina.

They're bedding patients down on the floor now, a doctor grumbled. I call that unhygienic.

His friend said, Better than turning them away, I suppose.

I glanced around, and it struck me that we were a botched lot. Several of these doctors were distinctly elderly, but the hospital needed them to stay on till the end of the war, filling in for younger ones who'd enlisted. I saw doctors and nurses who'd been sent home from the front with some harm done but not enough for a full service pension, so here they were again despite their limps and scars, asthma, migraines, colitis, malarial episodes, or TB; one nurse from Children's Surgical struggled with a chronic conviction that insects were crawling all over her.

I was two from the head of the line now. My stomach rumbled.

Julia!

I smiled at Gladys Horgan, squeezing towards me through the knot of bodies at the food table. We'd been great pals during training almost a decade ago, though we'd seen less of each other once I went into midwifery and she into eye and ear. Some of our class had ended up working in private hospitals or nursing homes; between those who'd left to marry or who'd quit due to painful feet or nerve strain, there weren't many of us still around. Gladys lived in at the hospital with a gang of other nurses, and I lodged with Tim, which was another thing that had divided us, I suppose; when I went off shift, my first thought was always for my brother.

Gladys scolded: Shouldn't you be on leave?

Nixed at the eleventh hour.

Ah, of course it would be. Well, soldier on.

You too, Gladys.

Must rush, she said. Oh, there's instant coffee.

I made a face.

Have you tried it?

Once, for the novelty, but it's nasty stuff.

Whatever keeps me going...Gladys drained her cup, smacked her lips, and left the mug on the dirty-dishes table.

I didn't want to stay without anyone to talk to, so I collected some watery cocoa and a slice of war bread, which was always dark but varied in its adulterations—barley, oats, and rye, certainly, but one might find soya in there too, beans, sago, even the odd chip of wood.

To make up some of the time I'd lost finding orderlies to bring Anonymous down to the mortuary, I ate and drank as I climbed the stairs. Matron (currently in Women's Fever) would have been appalled by the lapse in manners. As Tim would have said—if he were able to say anything these days—everything was entirely arsewise.

Full day had broken without my noticing; the late October light stabbed in the east-facing windows.

I put the last of the bread in my mouth as I went through the door that bore a handwritten label: *Maternity/Fever*. Not a proper ward, just a supply room converted last month when it became clear to our superiors that not only were expectant women catching this grippe in alarmingly high numbers, but it was particularly hazardous to them and their babies.

The ward sister was a lay nurse like myself. Sister Finnigan had overseen my diploma in midwifery, and I'd been flattered last week when she'd chosen me to staff this tiny room with her. Patients admitted with the flu who were well on in pregnancy got sent here, and Maternity, up on the

second floor, transferred down any women who had fevers, body aches, or a cough.

We'd had no actual deliveries yet, which Sister Finnigan said was a sign of divine mercy, given that our facilities were so primitive. There was a line from our training manual that always stuck in my head: *For a woman with child, the surroundings should be such as will promote serenity*. Well, this makeshift ward was more conducive to irritation; it was cramped, with battery-powered lamps on each bedside cupboard instead of electric night-lights. At least we had a sink and a window for air, but there was no fireplace, so we had to keep our patients warm by bundling them up.

We'd had only two metal cots at first, but we'd crammed in a third so we wouldn't have to turn away Eileen Devine. My eyes went straight to her bed, in the middle, between Ita Noonan, who was snoring, and Delia Garrett, who (in a dressing jacket, a wrap, and a scarf) was reading. But the middle cot was empty, with fresh bedding pulled tight.

The crust of bread turned to a pebble in my throat. The barrow woman was too ill to have been discharged, surely?

From over her magazine, Delia Garrett gave me an angry stare.

The night nurse heaved herself off the chair. Nurse Power, she said.

Sister Luke.

The Church considered it immodest for nuns to serve in lying-in wards, but given the shortage of midwives, Matron—who happened to be from the same religious order as Sister Luke—had managed to persuade their higher-ups to lend this experienced general nurse to Maternity/Fever. *For the duration*, as everyone said.

I found I couldn't control my voice enough to ask about Eileen Devine. I drained the cocoa that now tasted like bile and rinsed the cup at the sink. Is Sister Finnigan not in yet?

The nun pointed one finger at the ceiling and said, Called to Maternity.

It had the ring of one of Groyne's playful synonyms for death.

Sister Luke adjusted the elastic band of her eye patch, a puppet pulling its own strings. Like quite a few nuns, she'd volunteered at the front, and shrapnel had sent her home with one eye gone. Between her veil and her white mask, the only skin showing was the hinterland around the other eye.

She came over to me now and nodded at the stripped cot. Poor Mrs.

Devine slipped into a coma around two a.m. and expired at half past five, *requiescat in pace*.

She sketched a cross on the stiff, snow-white guimpe that covered her broad chest.

My heart squeezed for Eileen Devine. The bone man was making fools

of us all. That was what we kids called death in my part of the country—the bone man, that skeletal rider who kept his grinning skull tucked under one arm as he rode from one victim’s house to the next.

I hung up my cape and coat without a word and swapped my rain-soaked straw hat for a white cap. I unfolded an apron from my bag and bound it on over my green uniform.

Words burst out of Delia Garrett: I woke up to see men toting her away with a sheet over her head!

I walked over to her. How upsetting, Mrs. Garrett. I promise you, we did our utmost for Mrs. Devine, but the grippe had lodged in her lungs, and in the end it stopped her heart.

Delia Garrett sniffed shakily and pushed back a smooth curl. I shouldn’t be in hospital at all—my doctor said this is only a mild dose.

That had been her constant refrain since arriving yesterday from her gracious Protestant nursing home where the two midwives on staff had been knocked out by the flu. Delia Garrett had walked in here wearing a ribboned hat and gloves rather than the old shawl typical of our patients; she was twenty years old, with a genteel South Dublin accent and that sleek air of prosperity.

Sister Luke tugged off her mackintosh sleeves and took her voluminous

black cape from the peg. Mrs. Garrett's passed a comfortable night, she told me.

Comfortable! The word made Delia Garrett cough into the back of her hand. In this poky cubby on a backbreaking camp bed with people *dying* left and right?

Sister only means your flu symptoms are no worse.

I tucked a thermometer as well as my silver watch, attached by its fob chain, into the bib of my apron. I checked my belt, my buttons. Everything had to fasten at the side so as not to scratch a patient.

Delia Garrett said: So send me home today, why won't you?

The nun warned me that her pulse force—an indication of blood pressure—was still bounding.

Sister Finnigan and I hadn't been able to decide if Delia Garrett's flu was to blame for this hypertension; we often found the pulse force surged after the fifth month of pregnancy. Whatever the cause, there was no treatment but rest and calm.

I said, I do sympathise, Mrs. Garrett, but it's best if we keep an eye on you till you're quite well.

I scrubbed my hands at the sink now, almost relishing the sting of the carbolic soap; if it didn't hurt a little, I wouldn't trust it.

I looked over at the sleeper in the cot on the left. And how's Mrs.

Noonan been, Sister?

Much the same.

The nun meant Ita Noonan was still away with the fairies. Since yesterday, the woman had been so dazed, she wouldn't have noticed if the pope had come from Rome to pay her a visit. The only mercy was that her delirium was of the low type, not the high kind that could make sufferers chase, whack, or spit at us.

The night nurse added, I poulticed her just before she dropped off, so that'll need changing by eleven.

I made myself nod. The messy rigmarole of preparing hot, moist linseed and plastering it on the chests of congested patients was the bane of my life. The older nurses swore by poulticing, but I couldn't see that it achieved any more than a hot-water bottle.

I asked, When will Sister Finnigan be in?

Oh, I'm afraid you're on your own, Nurse Power. She pointed at the ceiling. Sister Finnigan's in charge of Maternity today—four deliveries on the go at once up there, and only Dr. Prendergast left.

Physicians were as rare as four-leaf clovers. Five of ours had enlisted and were serving in Belgium or France; one (caught up in the rebel cause)

was in a Belfast prison; six were off sick.

Dry-mouthed, I asked: So I'm acting ward sister?

A shrug from Sister Luke. At a moment like this, *ours not to reason why*.

Our superiors might be making unwise decisions, did the nun mean? Or was she just saying that I shouldn't baulk at any new burden laid on my shoulders?

She added, Nurse Geoghan's missing in action too.

I sighed. Marie-Louise Geoghan would have been a great help. She was skilled at patient care, even if she still knew little of midwifery; in the current crisis, she'd been allowed to get her nursing certificate early. I said, I presume I'll be sent a junior, or a probie as a runner?

I'd presume nothing, Nurse Power.

The nun straightened her wimple and hooked her black cape at the throat, ready to depart.

A volunteer, at the very least? Another pair of hands?

I'll have a word with Staff on my way out, see what I can do for you.

I forced myself to thank Sister Luke.

As the door closed behind her, I was already rolling my sleeves up past my elbows despite the chill in the room. I buttoned on a pair of long starched cuffs. *In sole charge*, I told myself. *Needs must. No time for*

whining.

More light, first. I went over to the small, high window and tilted the green slats towards me. I spotted a blimp hovering high over Dublin Port, watching for German submarines.

I'd been taught that each patient should have one thousand cubic feet, which meant a ten-by-ten-foot space per bed. In this improvised ward, it was more like ten by three. I wound the handle and angled the window half open at the top to let more air in.

Delia Garrett complained: As if there weren't already a draught.

Ventilation's crucial to recovery, Mrs. Garrett. Shall I get you another blanket?

Oh, don't fuss.

She went back to her magazine.

The tight-sheeted cot between her and Ita Noonan was a reproach, a tomb blocking my path. I called up Eileen Devine's drooping face; she'd kept her dentures in a glass by her bed. (Every baby seemed to cost these inner-city women a handful of teeth.) How she'd loved the hot bath I'd drawn her two days ago—the first she'd ever had, she'd told me in a whisper. *Luxury!*

I wished I could wheel Eileen Devine's empty cot out onto the landing to

make a bit of room, but people would only bump into it. Also, I had no doubt we'd be getting another pregnant grippe case to fill it soon.

Eileen Devine's chart from the wall behind the bed was gone already, presumably tucked into the corner cabinet under *October 31*. (We filed by date of discharge, which sometimes meant death.) If I'd been the one to write the concluding line in the regulation tiny lettering that filled both sides of her sheet, I'd have been tempted to put *Worn down to the bone*.

Mother of five by the age of twenty-four, an underfed daughter of underfed generations, white as paper, red-rimmed eyes, flat bosom, fallen arches, twig limbs with veins that were tangles of blue twine. Eileen Devine had walked along a cliff edge all her adult life, and this flu had only tipped her over.

Always on their feet, these Dublin mothers, scrimping and dishing up for their *misters* and *chisellers*, living off the scraps left on plates and gallons of weak black tea. The slums in which they somehow managed to stay alive were as pertinent as pulse or respiratory rate, it seemed to me, but only medical observations were permitted on a chart. So instead of *poverty*, I'd write *malnourishment* or *debility*. As code for *too many pregnancies*, I might put *anaemia*, *heart strain*, *bad back*, *brittle bones*, *varicose veins*, *low spirits*, *incontinence*, *fistula*, *torn cervix*, or *uterine prolapse*. There was

a saying I'd heard from several patients that struck a chill into my bones:

She doesn't love him unless she gives him twelve. In other countries, women might take discreet measures to avoid this, but in Ireland, such things were not only illegal but unmentionable.

Concentrate, Julia. I said the phrase in my head to scare myself: *Acting ward sister.*

Let Eileen Devine go; I had to bend all my efforts to the living now.

One always checked the sickest patient first, so I went around the skeletal frame of Eileen Devine's empty cot and took down the chart on the left. Good morning, Mrs. Noonan.

The mother of seven didn't stir. Ita Noonan had been wheeled in six days ago without the grippe's characteristic cough, but feverish; head, back, and joints as sore as if she'd been knocked down by a bus, she'd said. That was when she could still speak coherently.

She'd told us all about her job at the shell-filling factory, where her fingers had been yellowed by handling the TNT. She'd return to it as soon as she was over this flu, despite what she referred to lightly as her gammy leg. (The right was swollen to twice the width of the left since her last birth; it was hard and chill, the skin chalky and nonpitting. Ita Noonan was supposed to stay off it—keep it elevated, in fact—but sure how could she

do that during the working day?) Once she was delivered in January, she'd return to the shell factory again for the grand wages and the cheap meals too; she'd have her eldest girl bring the baby in for feeds, she assured us. Mr. Noonan had been jobless ever since the lockout, when the bosses had broken the workers' union; he'd tried to join the British army but was turned away for having a hernia (even though his pal with a withered arm had kept his jacket on and been accepted), so he went around with a barrel organ now. Ita Noonan chafed to know how her kids were getting on; visitors weren't allowed in because of the influenza, and her husband wasn't one for writing. Oh, she was full of chat and jokes and strong views too; she went off on a rant about the Rising in '16, how her Canary Girl crew—all loyal to His Majesty—hadn't missed a day and had filled eight hundred shells that week.

But yesterday her breathing had turned noisier and her temperature had swooped up, jumbling her mind. Despite Sister Luke giving her high doses of aspirin, she'd spiked a fever twice last night, I read, hitting 103.7 and then 104.9.

I tried to slip the thermometer under Ita Noonan's tongue without waking her, but she roused, so I yanked it out before her remaining teeth could clamp together. Every nurse made that mistake once, had a patient

spitting glass and mercury.

The woman blinked her pale blue eyes as if she'd never seen this room before, and writhed against the tapes binding the hot poultice to her chest. The shawl slid off her head; her thin hair cropped inches from the scalp stood up, the prickles of a hedgehog.

It's Nurse Power, Mrs. Noonan. I see you've had a haircut.

Delia Garrett muttered, Sister Luke put it in a paper bag.

Some of the older nurses maintained that cutting a fever patient's hair had a cooling effect and that if you cut it, it would grow back after, whereas if it fell out on its own, as often happened with this flu, it'd never return.

Superstition, but I didn't think it worth a quarrel with the night nurse.

Delia Garrett touched her fingertips to her own elegant head and said, If it never comes back and the poor creature's left as bald as an egg, I suppose she can have a hairpiece made of it.

Let me just take your temperature, Mrs. Noonan.

I loosened the collar of the woman's nightdress. A thermometer under the arm needed two minutes rather than one and gave a reading one degree lower, but at least there was no risk of the patient biting the glass. On a chain Ita Noonan wore a tin crucifix, I noticed, no bigger than the top joint of my finger. People were all for holy things these days—talismans against

terror. I tucked the thermometer into her humid armpit. There we go.

A little breathless, Ita Noonan answered randomly: Rashers!

That's right.

I knew never to dispute a point with a delirious patient.

Could she be hungry for her breakfast? Unlikely, in her state; patients with serious flu cases had no appetite. Haggard at thirty-three years old, pale but for those flame-red cheeks, her belly a hard hill. *Eleven previous deliveries*, it said on Ita Noonan's chart, *seven children still living*, and this twelfth birth not expected for another two and a half months. (Since Mrs. Noonan had been able to tell us nothing about when she might have conceived or when she'd felt the quickening, Sister Finnigan had had to make a stab at the due date based on the height of the uterus.)

My job wasn't to cure all Ita Noonan's ills but to bring her safe through this particular calamity, I reminded myself, to push her little boat back into the current of what I imagined to be her barely bearable life.

I placed my first two fingers on the skin between tendon and bone on the thumb side of her wrist. With my left hand, I pulled out the heavy disk of my watch. I counted twenty-three beats in fifteen seconds and multiplied by four. *Pulse rate 95*, at the upper end of normal; I jotted it down in minute letters. (Wartime policy, to save paper.) The rhythm was *Regularly*

irregular, I noted, which was typical during a fever. *Pulse force normal*, a small mercy.

I drew out the thermometer from under Ita Noonan's arm; its glass dragged at her tired skin. The mercury stood at 101, the equivalent of 102 taken orally, which was not too alarming, but temperatures were generally at their lowest in the early morning, and hers would climb again. I penciled the point on the graph. Many an illness had a characteristic line of exposure, incubation, invasion, defervescence, convalescence—the silhouette of a familiar mountain range.

Ita Noonan turned confiding now. She wheezed, said in her thick inner-city accent: In the wardrobe, with the cardinal!

Mm. Just lie quiet, we'll take care of everything.

We? I remembered I was on my own today.

Ita Noonan's chest strained to rise and fall, her breasts two windfalls rotting on dropped branches. Six breaths in fifteen seconds. I multiplied and wrote down *Respirations 24*. That was still rather high. *Mild nasal flaring*.

She beckoned me closer with her gaudy stained fingers. I leaned in and got a whiff of linseed from her poultice and something else...a bad tooth?

Ita Noonan whispered: There's a baby.

I wasn't sure how old her youngest was; some of these women were