FRANK McCOURT

'Tis

A MEMOIR

By the
Pulitzer Prize–Winning
Author of
the #1 *New York Times*
Bestseller
Angela's Ashes

Frank McCourt

'TIS

A Memoir

A Touchstone Book

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This book is dedicated to
my daughter, Maggie, for her warm, searching heart,
and to
my wife, Ellen, for joining her side to mine.

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My thanks, my love.

'TIS

Prologue

That's your dream out now.

That's what my mother would say when we were children in Ireland and a dream we had came true. The one I had over and over was where I sailed into New York Harbor awed by the skyscrapers before me. I'd tell my brothers and they'd envy me for having spent a night in America till they began to claim they'd had that dream, too. They knew it was a sure way to get attention even though I'd argue with them, tell them I was the oldest, that it was my dream and they'd better stay out of it or there would be trouble. They told me I had no right to that dream for myself, that anyone could dream about America in the far reaches of the night and there was nothing I could do about it. I told them I could stop them. I'd keep them awake all night and they'd have no dreams at all. Michael was only six and here he was laughing at the picture of me going from one of them to the other trying to stop their dreams of the New York skyscrapers. Malachy said I could do nothing about his dreams because he was born in Brooklyn and could dream about America all night and well into the day if he liked. I appealed to my mother. I told her it wasn't fair the way the whole family was invading my dreams and she said, Arrah, for the love o' God,

drink your tea and go to school and stop tormenting us with your dreams. My brother Alphie was only two and learning words and he banged a spoon on the table and chanted, Tomentin' dreams, tomentin' dreams, till everyone laughed and I knew I could share my dreams with him anytime, so why not with Michael, why not Malachy?

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When the MS *Irish Oak* sailed from Cork in October 1949, we expected to be in New York City in a week. Instead, after two days at sea, we were told we were going to Montreal in Canada. I told the first officer all I had was forty dollars and would Irish Shipping pay my train fare from Montreal to New York. He said, No, the company wasn't responsible. He said freighters are the whores of the high seas, they'll do anything for anyone. You could say a freighter is like Murphy's oul' dog, he'll go part of the road with any wanderer.

Two days later Irish Shipping changed its mind and gave us the happy news, Sail for New York City, but two days after that the captain was told, Sail for Albany.

The first officer told me Albany was a city far up the Hudson River, capital of New York State. He said Albany had all the charm of Limerick, ha ha ha, a great place to die but not a place where you'd want to get married or rear children. He was from Dublin and knew I was from Limerick and when he sneered at Limerick I didn't know what to do. I'd like to destroy him with a smart remark but then I'd look at myself in the mirror, pimply face, sore eyes, and bad teeth and know I could never stand up to anyone, especially a first officer with a uniform and a promising future as master of his own ship. Then I'd say to myself, Why should I care what anyone says about Limerick anyway? All I had there was misery.

Then the peculiar thing would happen. I'd sit on a deck

chair in the lovely October sun with the gorgeous blue Atlantic all around me and try to imagine what New York would be like. I'd try to see Fifth Avenue or Central Park or Greenwich Village where everyone looked like movie stars, powerful tans, gleaming white teeth. But Limerick would push me into the past. Instead of me sauntering up Fifth Avenue with the tan, the teeth, I'd be back in the lanes of Limerick, women standing at doors chatting away and pulling their shawls around their shoulders, children with faces dirty from bread and jam, playing and laughing and crying to their mothers. I'd see people at Mass on Sunday morning where a whisper would run through the church when someone with a hunger weakness would collapse in the pew and have to be carried outside by men from the back of the church who'd tell everyone, Stand back, stand back, for the lovea Jaysus, can't you see she's gasping for the air, and I wanted to be a man like that telling people stand back because that gave you the right to stay outside till the Mass was over and you could go off to the pub which is why you were standing in the back with all the other men in the first place. Men who didn't drink always knelt right up there by the altar to show how good they were and how they didn't care if the pubs stayed closed till Doomsday. They knew the responses to the Mass better than anyone and they'd be blessing themselves and standing and kneeling and sighing over their prayers as if they felt the pain of Our Lord more than the rest of the congregation. Some had given up the pint entirely and they were the worst, always preaching the evil of the pint and looking down on the ones still in the grip as if they were on the right track to heaven. They acted as if God Himself would turn His back on a man drinking the pint when everyone knew you'd rarely hear a priest up in the pulpit denounce the pint or the men who drank it. Men with the thirst stayed in the back ready to streak out the

door the minute the priest said, Ite, missa est, Go, you are dismissed. They stayed in the back because their mouths were dry and they felt too humble to be up there with the sober ones. I stayed near the door so that I could hear the men whispering about the slow Mass. They went to Mass because it's a mortal sin if you don't though you'd wonder if it wasn't a worse sin to be joking to the man next to you that if this priest didn't hurry up you'd expire of the thirst on the spot. If Father White came out to give the sermon they'd shuffle and groan over his sermons, the slowest in the world, with him rolling his eyes to heaven and declaring we were all doomed unless we mended our ways and devoted ourselves to the Virgin Mary entirely. My Uncle Pa Keating would have the men laughing behind their hands with his, I would devote myself to the Virgin Mary if she handed me a lovely creamy black pint of porter. I wanted to be there with my Uncle Pa Keating all grown up with long trousers and stand with the men in the back with the great thirst and laugh behind my hand.

I'd sit on that deck chair and look into my head to see myself cycling around Limerick City and out into the country delivering telegrams. I'd see myself early in the morning riding along country roads with the mist rising in the fields and cows giving me the odd moo and dogs coming at me till I drove them away with rocks. I'd hear babies in farmhouses crying for their mothers and farmers whacking cows back to the fields after the milking.

And I'd start crying to myself on that deck chair with the gorgeous Atlantic all around me, New York ahead, city of my dreams where I'd have the golden tan, the dazzling white teeth. I'd wonder what in God's name was wrong with me that I should be missing Limerick already, city of gray miseries, the place where I dreamed of escape to New York. I'd hear my mother's warning, The devil you know is better than the devil you don't know.

There were to be fourteen passengers on the ship but one canceled and we had to sail with an unlucky number. The first night out the captain stood up at dinner and welcomed us. He laughed and said he wasn't superstitious over the number of passengers but since there was a priest among us wouldn't it be lovely if His Reverence would say a prayer to come between us and all harm. The priest was a plump little man, born in Ireland, but so long in his Los Angeles parish he had no trace of an Irish accent. When he got up to say a prayer and blessed himself four passengers kept their hands in their laps and that told me they were Protestants. My mother used to say you could spot Protestants a mile away by their reserved manner. The priest asked Our Lord to look down on us with pity and love, that whatever happened on these stormy seas we were ready to be enfolded forever in His Divine Bosom. An old Protestant reached for his wife's hand. She smiled and shook her head back at him and he smiled, too, as if to say, Don't worry.

The priest sat next to me at the dinner table. He whispered that those two old Protestants were very rich from raising Thoroughbred racehorses in Kentucky and if I had any sense I'd be nice to them, you never know.

I wanted to ask what was the proper way to be nice to rich Protestants who raise racehorses but I couldn't for fear the priest might think I was a fool. I heard the Protestants say the Irish people were so charming and their children so adorable you hardly noticed how poor they were. I knew that if I ever talked to the rich Protestants I'd have to smile and show my destroyed teeth and that would be the end of it. The minute I made some money in America I'd have to rush to a dentist to have my smile mended. You could see from the magazines and the films how the smile opened doors and brought girls running and if I didn't have the smile I might as well go back to Limerick and get a job