

Angela's Ashes

A MEMOIR

WINNER
OF THE
PULITZER
PRIZE

Frank
McCourt



Frank McCourt (*right front*) in the playground of Leamy's School
in Limerick, Ireland, circa 1938.



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ASHES

A Memoir



FRANK McCourt

S C R I B N E R



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*This book is dedicated to my brothers,
Malachy, Michael, Alphonsus.
I learn from you, I admire you and I love you.*

Acknowledgments

This is a small hymn to an exaltation of women.

R'lene Dahlberg fanned the embers.

Lisa Schwarzbaum read early pages and encouraged me.

Mary Breasted Smyth, elegant novelist herself, read the first
third and passed it on to

Molly Friedrich, who became my agent and thought that
Nan Graham, Editor-in-Chief at Scribner, would be just the
right person to put the book on the road.

And Molly was right.

My daughter, Maggie, has shown me how life can be
a grand adventure, while exquisite moments with
my granddaughter, Chiara, have helped me recall
a small child's wonder.

My wife, Ellen, listened while I read and cheered me
to the final page.

I am blessed among men.

ANGELA'S
ASHES

I

My father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains,

lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore; to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest.

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church—our refuge, our strength, our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.

My father, Malachy McCourt, was born on a farm in Toome, County Antrim. Like his father before, he grew up wild, in trouble with the English, or the Irish, or both. He fought with the Old IRA and for some desperate act he wound up a fugitive with a price on his head.

When I was a child I would look at my father, the thinning hair, the collapsing teeth, and wonder why anyone would give money for a head like that. When I was thirteen my father's mother told me a secret: as a wee lad your poor father was dropped on his head. It was an accident, he was never the same after, and you must remember that people dropped on their heads can be a bit peculiar.

Because of the price on the head he had been dropped on, he had to be spirited out of Ireland via cargo ship from Galway. In New York, with Prohibition in full swing, he thought he had died and gone to hell for his sins. Then he discovered speakeasies and he rejoiced.

After wandering and drinking in America and England he yearned for peace in his declining years. He returned to Belfast, which erupted all around him. He said, A pox on all their houses, and chatted with the ladies of Andersontown. They tempted him with delicacies but he waved them away and drank his tea. He no longer smoked or touched

alcohol, so what was the use? It was time to go and he died in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

My mother, the former Angela Sheehan, grew up in a Limerick slum with her mother, two brothers, Thomas and Patrick, and a sister, Agnes. She never saw her father, who had run off to Australia weeks before her birth.

After a night of drinking porter in the pubs of Limerick he staggers down the lane singing his favorite song,

*Who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?
Nobody spoke so he said it all the louder
It's a dirty Irish trick and I can lick the Mick
Who threw the overalls in Murphy's chowder.*

He's in great form altogether and he thinks he'll play a while with little Patrick, one year old. Lovely little fella. Loves his daddy. Laughs when Daddy throws him up in the air. Upsy daisy, little Paddy, upsy daisy, up in the air in the dark, so dark, oh, Jasus, you miss the child on the way down and poor little Patrick lands on his head, gurgles a bit, whimpers, goes quiet. Grandma heaves herself from the bed, heavy with the child in her belly, my mother. She's barely able to lift little Patrick from the floor. She moans a long moan over the child and turns on Grandpa. Get out of it. Out. If you stay here a minute longer I'll take the hatchet to you, you drunken lunatic. By Jesus, I'll swing at the end of a rope for you. Get out.

Grandpa stands his ground like a man. I have a right, he says, to stay in me own house.

She runs at him and he melts before this whirling dervish with a damaged child in her arms and a healthy one stirring inside. He stumbles from the house, up the lane, and doesn't stop till he reaches Melbourne in Australia.

Little Pat, my uncle, was never the same after. He grew up soft in the head with a left leg that went one way, his body the other. He never learned to read or write but God blessed him in another way. When he started to sell newspapers at the age of eight he could count money better than the Chancellor of the Exchequer himself. No one knew why he was called Ab Sheehan, The Abbot, but all Limerick loved him.

My mother's troubles began the night she was born. There is my

grandmother in the bed heaving and gasping with the labor pains, praying to St. Gerard Majella, patron saint of expectant mothers. There is Nurse O'Halloran, the midwife, all dressed up in her finery. It's New Year's Eve and Mrs. O'Halloran is anxious for this child to be born so that she can rush off to the parties and celebrations. She tells my grandmother: Will you push, will you, push. Jesus, Mary and holy St. Joseph, if you don't hurry with this child it won't be born till the New Year and what good is that to me with me new dress? Never mind St. Gerard Majella. What can a man do for a woman at a time like this even if he is a saint? St. Gerard Majella my arse.

My grandmother switches her prayers to St. Ann, patron saint of difficult labor. But the child won't come. Nurse O'Halloran tells my grandmother, Pray to St. Jude, patron saint of desperate cases.

St. Jude, patron of desperate cases, help me. I'm desperate. She grunts and pushes and the infant's head appears, only the head, my mother, and it's the stroke of midnight, the New Year. Limerick City erupts with whistles, horns, sirens, brass bands, people calling and singing, Happy New Year. Should auld acquaintance be forgot, and church bells all over ring out the Angelus and Nurse O'Halloran weeps for the waste of a dress, that child still in there and me in me finery. Will you come out, child, will you? Grandma gives a great push and the child is in the world, a lovely girl with black curly hair and sad blue eyes.

Ah, Lord above, says Nurse O'Halloran, this child is a time straddler, born with her head in the New Year and her arse in the Old or was it her head in the Old Year and her arse in the New. You'll have to write to the Pope, missus, to find out what year this child was born in and I'll save this dress for next year.

And the child was named Angela for the Angelus which rang the midnight hour, the New Year, the minute of her coming and because she was a little angel anyway.

*Love her as in childhood
Though feeble, old and grey.
For you'll never miss a mother's love
Till she's buried beneath the clay.*

At the St. Vincent de Paul School, Angela learned to read, write, and calculate and by her ninth year her schooling was done. She tried

her hand at being a charwoman, a skivvy, a maid with a little white hat opening doors, but she could not manage the little curtsy that is required and her mother said, You don't have the knack of it. You're pure useless. Why don't you go to America where there's room for all sorts of uselessness? I'll give you the fare.

She arrived in New York just in time for the first Thanksgiving Day of the Great Depression. She met Malachy at a party given by Dan MacAdorey and his wife, Minnie, on Classon Avenue in Brooklyn. Malachy liked Angela and she liked him. He had a hangdog look, which came from the three months he had just spent in jail for hijacking a truck. He and his friend John McErlaine believed what they were told in the speakeasy, that the truck was packed to the roof with cases of canned pork and beans. Neither knew how to drive and when the police saw the truck lurch and jerk along Myrtle Avenue they pulled it over. The police searched the truck and wondered why anyone would hijack a truck containing, not pork and beans, but cases of buttons.

With Angela drawn to the hangdog look and Malachy lonely after three months in jail, there was bound to be a knee-trembler.

A knee-trembler is the act itself done up against a wall, man and woman up on their toes, straining so hard their knees tremble with the excitement that's in it.

That knee-trembler put Angela in an interesting condition and, of course, there was talk. Angela had cousins, the MacNamara sisters, Delia and Philomena, married, respectively, to Jimmy Fortune of County Mayo, and Tommy Flynn, of Brooklyn itself.

Delia and Philomena were large women, great-breasted and fierce. When they sailed along the sidewalks of Brooklyn lesser creatures stepped aside, respect was shown. The sisters knew what was right and they knew what was wrong and any doubts could be resolved by the One, Holy, Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church. They knew that Angela, unmarried, had no right to be in an interesting condition and they would take steps.

Steps they took. With Jimmy and Tommy in tow they marched to the speakeasy on Atlantic Avenue where Malachy could be found on Friday, payday when he had a job. The man in the speak, Joey Cacciamani, did not want to admit the sisters but Philomena told him that if he wanted to keep the nose on his face and that door on its hinges he'd better open up for they were there on God's business. Joey said, Awright, awright, you Irish. Jeezoz! Trouble, trouble.

Malachy, at the far end of the bar, turned pale, gave the great-breasted ones a sickly smile, offered them a drink. They resisted the smile and spurned the offer. Delia said, We don't know what class of a tribe you come from in the North of Ireland.

Philomena said, There is a suspicion you might have Presbyterians in your family, which would explain what you did to our cousin.

Jimmy said, Ah, now, ah, now. 'Tisn't his fault if there's Presbyterians in his family.

Delia said, You shuddup.

Tommy had to join in. What you did to that poor unfortunate girl is a disgrace to the Irish race and you should be ashamed of yourself.

Och, I am, said Malachy. I am.

Nobody asked you to talk, said Philomena. You done enough damage with your blather, so shut your yap.

And while your yap is shut, said Delia, we're here to see you do the right thing by our poor cousin, Angela Sheehan.

Malachy said, Och, indeed, indeed. The right thing is the right thing and I'd be glad to buy you all a drink while we have this little talk.

Take the drink, said Tommy, and shove it up your ass.

Philomena said, Our little cousin no sooner gets off the boat than you are at her. We have morals in Limerick, you know, morals. We're not like jackrabbits from Antrim, a place crawling with Presbyterians.

Jimmy said, He don't look like a Presbyterian.

You shuddup, said Delia.

Another thing we noticed, said Philomena. You have a very odd manner.

Malachy smiled. I do?

You do, says Delia. I think 'tis one of the first things we noticed about you, that odd manner, and it gives us a very uneasy feeling.

'Tis that sneaky little Presbyterian smile, said Philomena.

Och, said Malachy, it's just the trouble I have with my teeth.

Teeth or no teeth, odd manner or no odd manner, you're gonna marry that girl, said Tommy. Up the middle aisle you're going.

Och, said Malachy, I wasn't planning to get married, you know. There's no work and I wouldn't be able to support . . .

Married is what you're going to be, said Delia.

Up the middle aisle, said Jimmy.

You shuddup, said Delia.