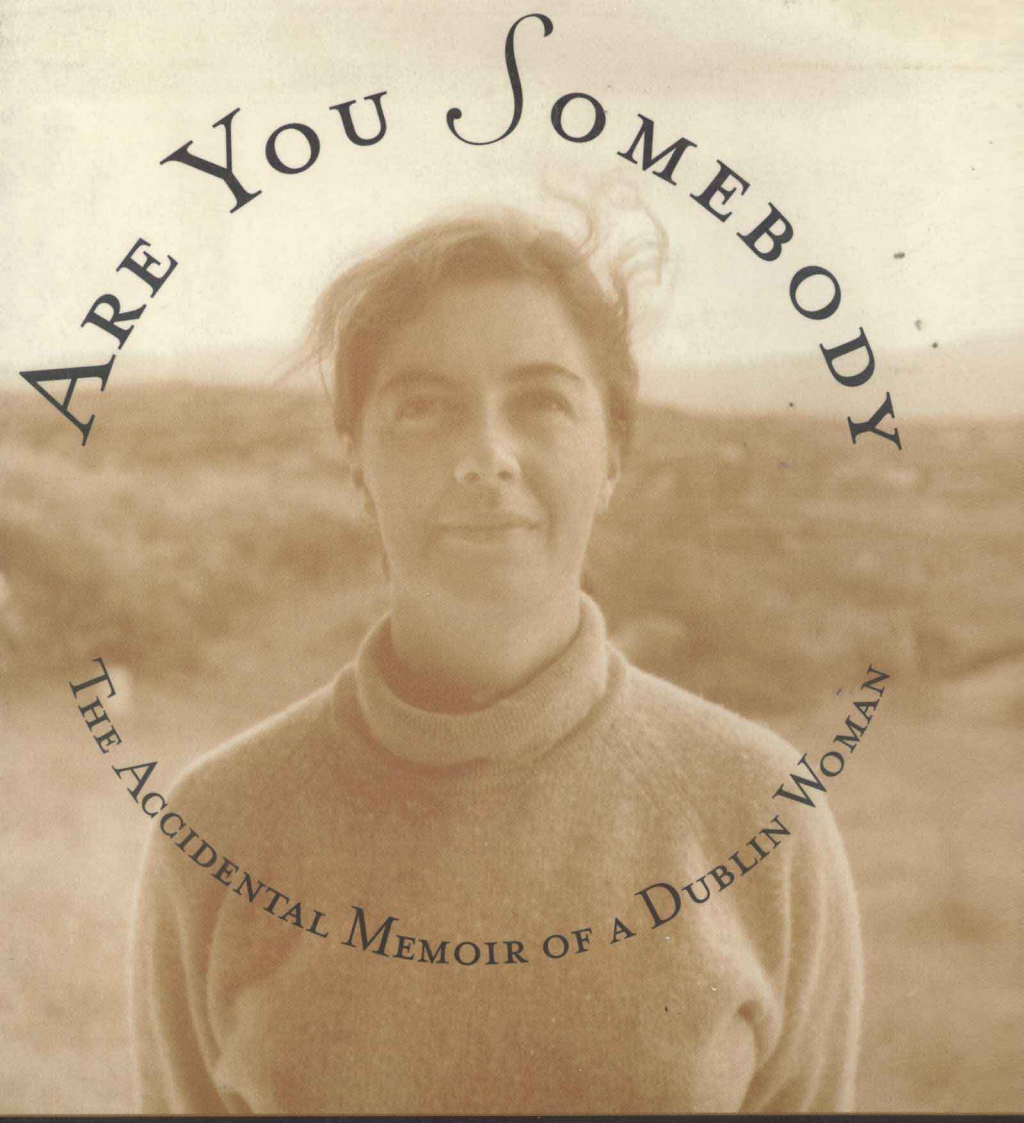
Are You Somebody

The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman



"You don't want the book to end: it glows with compassion and you want more, more because you know this is a fine wine of a life, richer as it ages."
—Frank McCourt, author of *Angela's Ashes*

NUALA O'FAOLAIN

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ARE YOU SOMEBODY

INTRODUCTION

I was born in a Dublin that was much more like something from an earlier century than like the present day. I was one of nine children, when nine was not even thought of as a big family, among the teeming, penniless, anonymous Irish of the day. I was typical: a nobody, who came of an unrecorded line of nobodies. In a conservative Catholic country, which feared sexuality and forbade me even information about my body, I could expect difficulty in getting through my life as a girl and a woman. But at least—it would have been assumed—I wouldn't have the burden of having to earn a good wage. Eventually some man would marry me and keep me.

But there are no typical people. And places don't stay the same. The world changed around Ireland, and even Ireland changed, and I was to be both an agent of change and a beneficiary of it. I didn't see that, until I wrote out my story. I was immured in the experience of my own life. Most of the time I just went blindly from day to day, and though what I was doing must have looked ordinary enough—growing up in the countryside, getting through school, falling in love, discovering lust, learning, working, travelling, moving in and out of health and happiness—to myself I was usually barely hanging on. I never stood back and looked at myself and what I was doing. I didn't value myself enough—take

myself seriously enough—to reflect even privately on whether my existence had any pattern, any meaning. I took it for granted that like most of the billions of people who are born and die on this planet I was just an accident. There was no reason for me.

Yet my life burned inside me. Even such as it was, it was the only record of me, and it was my only creation, and something in me would not accept that it was insignificant. Something in me must have been waiting to stand up and demand to be counted. Because eventually, when I was presented with an opportunity to talk about myself, I grasped at it. I'm on my own anyway, I thought. What have I to lose? But I needed to speak, too. I needed to howl.

What happened was that in my forties, back in the Dublin of my birth, I began working for the most respected newspaper in the country—*The Irish Times*—as an opinion columnist. This was a wonderful job to have, and a quite unexpected one. The very idea of an Irishwoman opinion columnist would have been unthinkable for most of my life. The columns were usually about politics or social questions or moments in popular culture—they weren't personal at all. They used a confident, public voice. My readers probably thought I was as confident as that all the time, but I knew the truth. My private life was solitary. My private voice was apologetic. In terms of national influence I mattered, in Ireland. But I possessed nothing of what has traditionally mattered to women and what had mattered to me during most of my life. I had no lover, no child. It seemed to me that I had nothing to look back on but failure.

But when I'd been writing my columns for ten years or so, a publisher came to me and asked whether he could put some of them together in book form. I said that was fine. No one would track my work through the back numbers of the newspaper, but a book gets around. It might be the only thing to read in a trekker's hut in Nepal. It would be catalogued in the National Library. It would be there for my grandniece, who is only a baby now. But I wasn't interested in the old columns. I was interested in what I would say in the personal introduction I'd promised to write.

What would I say about myself, the person who *wrote* the columns? Now that I had the opportunity, how would I introduce myself?

I'm fairly well known in Ireland. I've been on television a lot, and there's a photo of me in the paper, at the top of my column. But I'm no star. People have to look at me twice or three times to put a name on me. Sometimes when I'm drinking in a lounge bar, a group of women, say, across the room, may look at me and send one of their number over to me, or when I'm in the grocery store someone who has just passed me by turns back and comes right up to me and scrutinises my face. "Are you somebody?" they ask. Well—am I somebody? I'm not anybody in terms of the world, but then, who decides what a somebody is? How is a somebody made? I've never done anything remarkable; neither have most people. Yet most people, like me, feel remarkable. That self-importance welled up inside me. I had the desire to give an account of my life. I was finished with furtiveness. I sat down to write the introduction, and I summoned my pride. I turned it into a memoir.

I imagined the hostile response I'd get in my little Irish world. "Who does she think she is?" I could hear the reviewers saying. But it turned out not to be like that at all. The world my story went out to turned out to be much, much bigger than I'd ever thought. And it turned out to be full of people who knew me, who were sisters and brothers although we had never met, who were there to welcome me coming out of the shadows, and who wanted to throw off the shadows that obscured their own lives, too. My small voice was answered by a rich chorus of voices: my voice, which had once been mute! Of all the places where my story might start, even, it started itself at a point in my life when I could not speak at all. . . .

1

When I was in my early thirties and entering a bad period of my life, I was living in London on my own, working as a television producer with the BBC. The man who had absorbed me for ten years, and whom I had once been going to marry, had finally left. I came home one day to the flat in Islington, and there was a note on the table saying *Back Tuesday*. I knew he wouldn't come back, and he didn't. I didn't really want him to. We were exhausted. But still, I didn't know what to do. I used to sit in my chair every night and read and drink a lot of cheap white wine. I'd say "hello" to the fridge when its motor turned itself on. One New Year's Eve I wished the announcer on Radio Three "A Happy New Year to you, too." I was very depressed. I asked the doctor to send me to a psychiatrist.

The psychiatrist was in an office in a hospital. "Well, now, let's get your name right to begin with," he said cheerfully. "What is your name?" "My name is . . . my name is . . ." I could not say my name. I cried, as from an ocean of tears, for the rest of the hour. My self was too sorrowful to speak. And I was in the wrong place, in England. My name was a burden to me.

Not that the psychiatrist saw it like that. I only went to him once more, but I did manage to get out a bit about my background and about

the way I was living. Eventually he said something that lifted a corner of the fog of unconsciousness. "You are going to great trouble," he said, "and flying in the face of the facts of your life, to re-create your mother's life." Once he said this, I could see it was true. Mammy sat in her chair in a flat in Dublin and read and drank. Before she sat in the chair she was in bed. She might venture shakily down to the pub. Then she would totter home and sit in her chair. Then she went to bed. She had had to work the treadmill of feeding and clothing and cleaning child after child for decades. Now all but one of the nine had gone. My father had moved himself and her and that last one to a flat, and she sat there. She had the money he gave her (never enough to slake her anxieties). She had nothing to do, and there was nothing she wanted to do, except drink and read.

And there was I—half her age, not dependent on anyone, not tired or trapped, with an interesting, well-paid job, with freedom and health and occasional good looks. Yet I was loyally re-creating her wasteland around myself.

One of the stories of my life has been the working out in it of her powerful and damaging example—in everything. Nothing matters except passion, she indicated. It was what had mattered to her, and she more or less sustained a myth of passionate happiness for the first ten years of her marriage. She didn't value any other kind of relationship. She wasn't interested in friendship. If she had thoughts or ideas, she never mentioned them. She was more like a shy animal on the outskirts of the human settlement than a person within it. She read all the time, not to feed reflection but as part of her utter determination to avoid reflection.

What made her? Her father—my grandad—wrote his memoirs, a few pages in pencil, in a lined copybook. He was one of fourteen children on a smallholding, and perhaps because, like his brothers and sisters, he had had to emigrate when he was a boy and there was never a family again, he remembered his childhood home with an abundance of

sentiment. "I will try and give you a typical family scene as I saw it in the beginning of the 1890s," he wrote:

> Father would enter the kitchen after dark and would start making and mending—a chair, a basket, or some harness. He would always sing at his work, he having a great variety of songs in both English and Irish. The babies would be asleep and the next elders would have their feet washed in a wooden vessel, then follow. After the rosary was said the next elders would retire. Mother would be putting the last thread in her needle. An oil lamp hung before the window and a turf fire in the hearth would be supplemented by a piece of bog deal which cast a light on the dresser so that the jugs and other ware would gleam as if alight. Sometimes, when not engaged in work, Father would pull down the weekly paper and read aloud, mostly the political news—stopping now and then to put his own interpretation on it. Mother, near at hand, would be an eager listener.

My mother, the granddaughter of this ideal pair, was anything but an eager listener. I don't know what happened, down the generations. I don't suppose that history explains it—that the individual person comes out of a vessel into which two jugs called Heredity and Environment have been poured. But perhaps emigration did something to the relationship between women and children. Children were toughened early, sent out into the world with their cardboard suitcases—one minute warm in the tribe, the next minute walking down the steps of some distant railway station into a world they must handle on their own. Under the surface competence, they must have been infantile. Somewhere in the years that fed down into my mother, there were too many children and too few resources. She was the most motherless of women, herself.

Her own mother, in the little account anyone ever gave of her, was angry and energetic, running a tailoress operation in the front room of

the red-brick terraced house in Clonliffe Road in Dublin, sewing shrouds late at night for the dead of the parish. Tuberculosis makes you feverish, and she was slowly dying of TB. "She threw a red-hot iron at me," was all my mother ever said—sulkily—about her. "She said I always had my head stuck in a book." But then, one child had already died. One grown-up daughter was dying of TB along with the mother. There were seven more being reared for emigration. It was an ordinary respectable Irish household of the time. The woman of the house never went out, never had money, never stopped having children. My own mother held herself at arm's length from this reality. She grew up with no skills. She didn't know how to make small-talk or cook a breakfast or tie up a parcel or name a tree or flower.

When I knew my grandfather he had long been a widower. He dreamt of champion greyhounds and hobbled up Clonliffe Road to a public bench, where he talked slowly with other patriarchs, other countrymen displaced. I didn't know why my mother feared him. He ate bull's-eyes and read *The Saint* thrillers. He would say to me from his frowsty bed, "Hand me over those trousers." He'd fumble in the pocket and give me pennies. He sat on the upright chair to put on his long johns, and his penis was like some purply barnacled mineral thing, found on the seabed. He expected his tea and bread-and-butter brought to his chair. He would certainly have denied that the fact that three of his children were ferocious alcoholics had anything to do with him. No one takes responsibility for the big Irish families that in generation after generation are ravaged by alcoholism.

My mother didn't want anything to do with child-rearing or housework. But she had to do it. Because she fell in love with my father, and they married, she was condemned to spend her life as a mother and a homemaker. She was in the wrong job. Sometimes I meet women who remind me of her when I stay in bed-and-breakfasts around the country. They throw sugar on the fire, to get it to light, and wipe surfaces with an old rag that smells, and they are forever sending children to the shops.

They question me, half censorious, half wistful: "And did you never want to get married yourself?"

The one thing my mother knew definitely existed was her body. She was sent home from convent boarding-school because of dancing too close to the girl she adored. She was baffled by the punishment, never having heard of lesbianism. I remember a Henry Green novel which passed through the house when I was a child, whose cover had a sketch of girls in white dresses waltzing together in the half-dark. Mammy blossomed for a moment, seeing it. "That's exactly what it was like! In the big hall in school! The night I danced with her!" Decades later, not long before my mother died, a bright-eyed middle-aged lady came up to me at a reception. It was in the offices of the then Council for the Status of Women, as it happens. "How is your mother?" she asked. She, it turned out, was the other girl, the love-object. I didn't dare ask her what had really happened. Anyway, by then what mattered was the contrast between this spry woman, obviously someone who knew what status was, and the wreck of my poor innocent and ignorant mother, out in the little flat, making her way through days of shakiness and gagged-on gin, while her husband blandly went about his business and the last of her children—a schoolgirl, then—brought herself up.

This was where grand passion had left her.

Her foremothers knew how the tribe expected women to behave and how it would protect them in return. But when my grandfather came back from exile in London to work in the General Post Office in Dublin around 1910, and the link with Kerry was broken, no one belonged to a tribe. My mother was on her own. But without hope of independence. Nowadays she could have stayed in the civil service, even after she became pregnant. But 1940s Ireland was a living tomb for women.

For men like my father, out and about in Dublin, the opposite was true. Broadcasting and journalism were beginning to open up. He had begun as a teacher, in the 1930s, and if he had stayed in teaching—coming home in the afternoons every day, and free in the summer—his

children would have had a wonderful father. But he had many gifts and ambitions: He was a traveller in Europe in the summers, and a linguist and a sportsman, and a happy, proud patriot. And handsome as anything.

There are photos of himself and my mother on the beach at Ballybunnion, all white teeth and strong limbs. She was blissfully happy with how he made her feel about herself. They were mad about each other from the start. They hiked over Howth Head and Bray Head and up the Dublin mountains and made love in the heather. He bought her a hot port one chilly evening, her first drink ever. They married very early on a January morning because my sister Grainne was a little bump under Mammy's dress. The Second World War started. He joined the Irish Defence Forces in 1939 and loved army life. Not long after my mother was pregnant again; he cycled up from the Curragh Camp to the Rotunda Hospital to greet me. But I spent my infancy in Donegal, because the Army brought my father there. The first few pages of a letter from him to my mother arranging the move survive. She was pregnant again.

"*A chroidhe dhil*," he begins. For years I could not read this letter. "Beloved heart," when they ended so badly! He is writing from Fort Dunree, up on the Inishowen peninsula. He has found a little house for the family—he encloses a sketch and continues:

> For Grainne and Nuala there is quiet, air, sun and sea, chickens for Grainne not to mention an occasional *bó*. For you there are these things, plus me, plus an odd weekend trip to Derry and evenings in Buncrana. As regards books, Father Dolan has a pile of great stuff, which I know he will lend to you. There are other things—eggs, milk, potatoes straight from their cradles. And even though coal will play second-fiddle to turf, there will be no pennies in the gas. The reek is about twenty yards of a walk—no trouble to an enthusiastic husband. . . . Today is Wednesday—and I find I will not be paid my 6/2d until tomorrow—but

> I am borrowing money for a stamp. Almost a week now since I saw you last and it feels like a month. I am counting the days till we all get together again in the lovely sunshine. Today the sun shone for twelve hours, and all the day, from 9 a.m. till 6 p.m., I was on duty on a grass-topped cliff, giving a hand to recruits who were engaged in rifle practice.

His letter is overtaken by one from her. He went on:

> Your letters usually make me feel bloody awful, but this one was not too bad! I notice that I have influenced you to the extent that you say "a bit difficult" when you mean "quite desperate." Good Girl.

"Ah so!" I say. "She was already provoking him with her despair." But then—three children in four years! The end of the letter is missing, so the taboo on a parent's intimate life was not breached, if there were intimacies there.

He treats my mother as a partner in this letter. He's doing freelance journalism, and she's helping him. But when I knew them, he went out; she stayed home. Nobody treated her as a partner. When she died, a few years after him, this letter was found in the old tin biscuit box that was her only possession, apart from clothes. She didn't own a single thing in the little flat—not a book, not a record. In the biscuit tin there were the scrawled pages of book reviews she had written, in pencil and ballpoint pen. They had moved house at least a dozen times. She had gone to great trouble, then, to keep this letter and the reviews. A few of her book reviews were published in the paper. That was the only money she ever earned for herself, apart from the children's allowance. That was what she talked about—the money. But it wasn't for the money that she kept the crumpled drafts in the biscuit tin, when she had nothing else. She could have been respected, if things had been different. She could have done something other than be the drudge she was.

. . .

It seems that very early in the marriage she was overwhelmed. She foundered, and either he didn't see it or he saw it but couldn't help. It must have happened quickly. A woman who worked for my parents when they came back from Donegal told me Grainne and I were always identically dressed in pretty clothes. What I remember, from only three or four years later, is the teacher in Miss Ahern's school in Malahide calling me in to her office and fingering my dirty cardigan. "Couldn't your mother find anything better to send you to school in?"

She was to have thirteen pregnancies altogether: nine living children. She never had enough money. She did her best for years. She made crab-apple jam. She gave us jam sandwiches and a milk-of-magnesia bottle full of milk for our picnic. She bought us Wellington boots for the winter. She fine-combed our hair, us kneeling before her, bent into the newspaper on her lap. Think of all the clothes she must have bought, washed, dried, sorted out, put on our backs. . . . We lived in a rented bungalow meant for a farm labourer, on a gentry estate in north County Dublin. The bungalow was surrounded by fields with ditches and hawthorn hedges in what was an isolated landscape, then. The railway line from Dublin passed the other side of a turnip field. Sometimes Daddy jumped from the train and rolled down the embankment as a shortcut home. But he began not to come home. He was a clerk in the Irish Tourist Board after the Army, but then he began to get work in Radio Éireann, and to get jobs—like doing the commentary on the "Radio Train" to Killarney—that took him away. His life became more exciting all the time. He brought his joie de vivre home with him when he came striding across the field to where we were playing—making "houses" and "shops" from stones and mud—around the house. We would hear the bright whistle of "*Beidh Aonach Amárach*" or some other Irish tune, and we'd run to jump up on the fence to see him. "Daddy's home! He's home!"

Her life got harder. The Calor gas cylinder under the two rings she cooked on would run out, and she had no phone or transport. She