

The Marriage Bed



REGINA MCBRIDE

A TOUCHSTONE BOOK

PUBLISHED BY SIMON & SCHUSTER

NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY

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TOUCHSTONE
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ALSO BY REGINA MCBRIDE

Fiction

The Land of Women

The Nature of Water and Air

Poetry

Yarrow Field

for my parents

I love you

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My childhood bends beside me,
secrets weary of their tyranny.

—*James Joyce*

PART ONE



In Ancestral Sleep

*The created world began with a separation of opposites.
The sun became distinct from the moon. A single vapor
divided into four elements.*

—MEDIEVAL ALCHEMICAL TEXT

ONE

1910

Merrion Square Dublin

My husband's mother had decorated the little room at the back of the house with me in mind. It was a room meant for solitude, for revery and prayer, because the face I had presented then, fifteen years before, had suggested a contemplative girl, a girl given to intercourse with the saints. To her I was an unassuming girl, a kind of empty vessel like the Virgin Mary, who would carry holiness in her womb. They were an ecclesiastical family; she wanted her son to father a priest.

A fortnight or two after we were married, and before Manus and

I left Kenmare in the west, Mrs. O'Brien came to Dublin on her own and furnished this old Georgian house for us. It was then that in a surge of generosity toward me she had the walls of this little room painted sea green and scallop shells impressed into fresh plasterwork. She said that she'd been concerned that I would miss the Atlantic. In fact, after having been cloistered at *Enfant de Marie*, so far inland, I had grown to find the smell and sound of the waves diminishing.

But I never expressed such truths to Mrs. O'Brien. As I never expressed them to Manus.

I was up at dawn this January morning, though it was a Sunday, attempting to draw a blue vase that I'd brought in with me from the dining room.

The night before, Manus and our two daughters, Maighread, fourteen, and Caitlin, thirteen, were speaking in low voices at the dining room table. I'd come in and they'd gone quiet. When I asked them what they'd been speaking about, Manus evaded the question and began describing a horse he'd seen earlier that day on Grafton Street, decked out in ribbons and bells. There was a winter fair in Phoenix Park, and the city had been adrift with gypsies.

I struggled now to draw the likeness of the vase, but my mind was not on it. I'd had it before me for over an hour, yet I had only drawn a few faint lines. I was fixed, instead, on the static representations of water along the wainscoting.

Mrs. O'Brien saw decorative potential in all representations of the sea. Here they were, trimming the very room in controlled waves.

In spite of the plasterwork, the room she had bequeathed me was stark. The barest in the house, furnished with only a dresser and a draftsman's table more suitable for a child than an adult. The table faced the dresser upon which I placed the objects of my still lifes: flowers, fruit, bottles, and jars. When I'd finish drawing them I always cleared away the objects and replaced them with those that Mrs. O'Brien kept there: a marble statue of praying hands, and to either side of it, two separate pairs of gloves, lying palm up. They were the white novice gloves that I had been wearing the day I'd come

to marry Manus in the house in Kenmare-by-the-Sea and the nuns' black gloves I would have worn if I'd taken my vows as I had been close to doing before Manus's proposal. But this morning a rebellious humor flickered in me, and I toyed with the idea of rearranging everything, and relegating the gloves and praying hands to some dim cabinet.

In the center of one bare wall hung a painting of the Annunciation in a heavy frame with fading gold leaf. There was nothing grand about this particular Annunciation. No lilies or terra-cotta floors. No sunlit cypress trees out the window. In this representation, only an empty, boggy field and an Irish sky with clouds inclined to thunder.

The angel, human looking, wore gray, one muscular knee and calf apparent as he knelt. He was earthbound, without a trace of divinity about him, except perhaps for his wings, which, in the tension of the moment, appeared slightly flexed, and, though his upper body did not lean toward the Virgin in the manner of a Botticelli angel or di Paolo's, he appeared attentive of her.

Over the years I had thought of asking Mrs. O'Brien about the painting, but in her presence my natural impulse was to be silent.

As she had selected everything else in this house, she had also selected me. I was only seventeen when she saw Manus staring in my direction at Mass at *Enfant de Marie*. I was a novice then, as she had been a novice when her own husband had proposed marriage to her. My quiet, careful demeanor appealed to her. I had come from a wild, windswept place, the Great Blasket Island. She'd liked the idea that I was an islander and probably thought, as many did, that islanders were more backward even than tinkers. I would be out of my element in her family, dependent, compliant.

The face I wore then suggested stillness and grace. Before my wedding night, Mrs. O'Brien had given me tea in a room with a sea view, filled with statues of female martyrs. Agnes, Lucy, Cecilia. I was at the height of my saintly persona, managing it so well that I had felt myself radiating light. Mrs. O'Brien could not take her eyes off me. For a

while there was gratification in being this girl, but the young are in love with the moment, and disappointment had been inevitable. Even I knew that it would come.

I gazed at the face of the Virgin in the painting, expressionless except for the little squeezed mouth and the trace of mistrust in the eyes at the intrusion of the angel.

In retrospect, I marvel that Mrs. O'Brien had once believed so fully in me. Over the years I had found that seeing Mrs. O'Brien in the flesh, her real presence, was easier than feeling the darker spirit of her that made dim susurrations in the walls of this house.

I picked up my pencil and, with a series of quick, curved lines, struggled a last time to draw the dark blue vase. But when I heard the girls' footsteps above, my heart began to throb and I stopped drawing again.

As I ascended the stairs, I heard them talking softly. They startled as I appeared in the doorway. Sitting close together on Caitlin's bed, they were looking at a pamphlet of some kind.

"What is it you have?" I asked them softly.

They exchanged a wary look. Then, gathering her resolve, Maighread stood. "We're going to boarding school in September," she said.

"You're not," I said. "You're both registered for another year at St. Alban's."

Caitlin looked down at her lap, having thrown the pamphlet off to the side. She rubbed her fingers together nervously.

A few months back we had talked about boarding school, one in particular where a number of their friends were going—St. Lucretia's in Wicklow. Pressured by Maighread's appeals, I had almost given in, only because it was a short train ride from Dublin, and because I had had little to support me in my fight against it. It was simply what girls of their age and social class did.

But in the end I'd said no. I had tried to hide the desperation I'd felt at the idea of their going from me, and I'd believed that if they had known how hard leaving home would be, they would not have wanted it. It had, I told them, only been the novelty of it they'd been bucking for.

"I'll not send you unmoored into the world," I had said as my final word.

"It's you who would be unmoored in the world," Maighread had spat back. I'd been stunned at how clearly she could see me.

Now, standing defiant before me, she said, "We're going to Kilorglin in the west. To *Enfant de Marie!*"

I let out a little, incredulous laugh. "You don't want to go to that nightmare of a place," I said.

"We're going," Maighread said defiantly.

"First of all, it's a terrible place! Girls die there of consumption!"

"That was ages ago, Mammy. Things are different now!"

"It's on the other side of Ireland! Do you think I'd let you go that far away?"

"Nanny's already registered us. We're going," Maighread said. Caitlin shifted uncomfortably on the bed. Maighread watched my face carefully as she always did when she confronted me.

"No one's consulted me about this," I said.

"We all knew what you would say."

I paused. "I'm sure Caitlin doesn't want to go that far away," I said, waiting for her to meet my eyes. "Do you, lamb?"

"She does!" Maighread said coming closer to me, almost as tall as I was, her chest high in a glory of forthrightness.

"Let her tell me herself," I said.

I felt Caitlin softening as she stared at her hands on her lap.

"Mammy," she said tenderly, and Maighread let go an infuriated sigh.

Caitlin shot her a confused look and then said quickly, "We'll not be far from Nanny! You shouldn't worry over us."

I brushed past Maighread to Caitlin. I touched her shoulder. "I don't want you to go," I said.

She breathed hard and set her mouth. "I want to go!"

The room swayed around me. She watched me now like Maighread did, her eyes softer but resolved.

"You never let us do the things the other girls are able to do. You're always afraid about everything."

I sat on the edge of the bed. "The wind there in the west is fierce," I uttered, reaching now for anything.

“What are you on about the wind for?” Maighread asked, holding my eyes.

Manus was at the door then. I was uncertain when he’d come.

“Let them out from under you, Deirdre,” he said.

The three of them looked at me, and an expression of pity came into Caitlin’s face. She averted her eyes.

“Your mother registered them at *Enfant de Marie*?” I asked him, rising to my feet.

“Yes. All the arrangements have been made,” Manus said. “And September is still far off. You’ve plenty of time to get used to the idea.”

“But I’ve registered them for school here in Dublin for September. I’ve paid the installments.”

“I notified them. I got the money back.”

I stood a few moments without moving, then took a deep breath and walked vacantly downstairs to my little room at the back of the house.

I was fourteen years old, Maighread’s age, when I first crossed the bay to Ventry Harbour. Until then I’d resisted the sea, afraid of its moods, its lack of pity, the black boil of it at night. My grandmother and I were leaving Great Blasket Island for good, moving to her sister’s house near Ballyferriter, the place she had originally come from before she’d married into island people and the place where she would remain until her death.

I remember the pattern around the rim of a cracked teacup, dark green curlicues snaking this way and that, small, fierce-looking male heads in profile woven into the design. My great-aunt’s cold, rough hands grasped the cup as she told me that such designs were called “Celtic knotwork.” She spoke an unsettling combination of Irish and English, a disagreeable warble to her voice. The memory brings a heartsore feeling, my parents newly dead, my fate undecided as it was, the alien language deepening in me an uncertainty of the world.

The waves slapped inconsolably at the rocks below my great-aunt’s house, throwing white sparks into the air. My grandmother was too old, she said, to care for me properly. My own mother had been born to her when she was fifty. “An old cow’s calf,” my grandmother had