

Extract from Golddigger by Hilary McCollum

Dunquin, September 1845

“I surely am sick to death of oats,” my da says to me, as we sit at the table eating stirabout. “Thank the Lord we start the harvest today, I woke up dreaming of a decent feed of potatoes.”

Since last year’s potatoes ran out eight weeks ago, we’ve been managing on oatmeal, buttermilk, eggs and whatever else can be fashioned into a meal. I love September and the return of the potato. It’s the time I was born. Maybe that’s why autumn’s always been my favourite season. If I’d sprung out in March, would I feel differently about the leaves changing colour, the crisp sharp mornings? Mister O’Connor, who taught me as a child, told us about countries where there are no seasons. I wouldn’t like that, same weather, day in, day out, same sunrise, sunset.

“Shall I get the girls up?” I say.

“Leave them sleeping. Your ma’ll send them up in an hour or so.”

I am glad we’ll be starting without them. I like working up in the fields with my da. “It’s probably just as well,” I say. “You know how bad-tempered Lizzie can be if you rise her too early.”

“She takes after your mother. Come on, let’s be off.”

It’s a clear enough day as we make our way up the hill, following the path to the high field. It’s our smallest field but the furthest from the house. We always start up here. I begin this morning with digging a storage pit in the bottom left-hand corner of the field while my da does the same in the top right. I don’t make it too deep, just enough to keep the light and frost out, not so deep as to break your back finding them again.

“How are you getting on?” my da calls from his end of the field.

“Nearly finished,” I say, leaving my shovel standing in the earth next to the pit.

The furrows have stayed neat, our lines of potato carefully weeded over the spring and summer. The white flowers are long gone, leaving a foot of yellowing leaves above the surface. These are our lumpers, large knobbly potatoes with pale yellow skins. We grow two acres of them for ourselves, four more of Queens for sale. My da precedes me down the first furrow, digging in with his spade along the side of the ridge to avoid damaging the potatoes. I follow him, half crouching, half crawling, extracting the potatoes where they lie exposed amid the broken earth. Dark soil clings to them, especially around the bumps and knobs and deep eyes. I rub it off, then place each potato on the ground to dry out. In a few hours, once the sun has hardened their skins, they will be ready to store.

Gathering potatoes is hard, slow work and my da has more than half the field opened up before I have finished even the first row. Tomorrow my thighs will burn, my back ache, from the crawling, crouching, reaching, gathering. But for now I’m fine. My mind drifts as I find my rhythm. It lands at Kitty’s doorstep. We went to a dance yesterday outside the shebeen where the old man died in May. I smile, shutting my eyes for a moment, remembering that first night with her. How shy I was, how nervous. I have learnt a lot since then about the giving and getting of pleasure, though I only spend the night with her every few weeks. We mustn’t raise suspicions. She tells her mother she’ll be staying over with me, I tell mine I’ll be staying over with her. Instead we meet at our scalp. Not that we spend all our time there out of clothes. We sing, we dance, tell each other stories, talk of our future, sometimes just sit.

“Morning.”

I look up to see Lizzie and Peig coming through the gate towards me. “Good afternoon,” I say, smiling.

“Ah Frances, we’ve not done badly. Ma says you only set off an hour ago,” Peig says.

The girls mutter and grumble to each other as they start on the next two furrows, but soon they too are in a rhythm. My da has finished uncovering the furrows. I join him at the far end of the field, working our way back towards the middle. When there’s only one row left, my da stands up and stretches.

“Would you go and fetch the sand, Frances?” he says. “Then you can catch us up in the west field.”

It is good to be upright after more than four hours on my knees. I shake out my arms and legs as I walk back down the hill to the outhouse, breathing in deeply, looking out to sea, glad to be alive.

Bramble walks over to the wall, snorting a welcome as she sees me approach. “Good girl,” I say, scratching the back of her ears. She’s a lovely donkey, soft grey with a strong dark line across her shoulders and down her back, patient and hardworking. She smiles when she sees you and never kicks or bites. Not like Samson, the first donkey we had. He liked nobody but my da. Anyone else went near him, he would kick and bang and create a commotion. You never met a noisier donkey, braying and hee-hawing at all times of the day and night. Before we had the house we used to share the old cabin with the animals. I don’t know how we ever got any sleep. The least thing would set him off and my da would have to sing to him to put him back over.

Bramble waits patiently as I hitch the cart behind her and start loading it with sacks of sand brought up from the beach. The sand protects the potatoes in the pits. There’s not enough room for all the potatoes in the cabin, half full as it is already with oats. It’s the oats that pay the rent. My ma hoards any profit. “I’ll take that for a rainy

day,” she says, ferreting the coins away in every nook and cranny round about the house. Even my da doesn’t know how much she’s saved and where half of it’s hidden.

The top field is empty when I return, just rows and rows of harvested potatoes, the odd bird looking for worms among the dirt. I shake a layer of sand from my sack into each pit, then make my way down to the west field, where my da has started uncovering the furrows.

“Ah, there you are,” he says. “Would you line the pits, then take Peig with you and start in the east field.”

Peig sits on the little cart as we bump along the track to the east field perhaps sixty yards away.

“My back’s aching already,” she says.

“You’ll forget about it tonight when you’ve got a decent meal in your belly,” I say. “I’ll make—”

The putrid stench of rotting flesh hits me, forcing my mouth shut. I turn my head away, my face screwed up, gripping the side of the cart to stop from retching.

“What’s that smell?” Peig says.

I put my hand to my nose and speak round it as best as I can. “Some animal must have died somewhere near. We’ll have to move the body.”

Peig slips off the cart. “There’s no sign of a body here. It must be in the field,” she says, opening the gate. “Eucchhh. It’s even worse in here.”

The air is rank with the bodies of a herd of rotting cows. I look around but there isn’t a single corpse.

“What is it?” Peig says. “Where’s it coming from?”

I scan the field, looking for a body. And suddenly I see what’s out of place. There are no green stalks here. The plants are grey black slime.

“It’s the potatoes,” I say, leaning down to get a closer look. My stomach rises in my throat as the smell takes me over. I turn away, vomiting onto the ground.

It catches the edge of Peig’s dress. She doesn’t notice. “Look at the potatoes,” she says. “What’s happened to the potatoes?”

“I don’t know,” I say, fighting down the panic. I put my hand over my face, trying to shut out the stink. “Maybe it’s just above ground. Perhaps the potatoes themselves will be fine.”

The spade is still lying on the back of the cart. I fetch it. It goes in easily along the side of the furrow. I squeeze my eyes shut. “May the potatoes be safe. May the Lord bless us with a good crop.”

My left hand slips down the shaft. There’s a sucking sound as I open up the ground. I stagger back from the sight and smell. There are no solid potatoes, just an oozing sludge of stinking grey rot.

“Oh Jesus,” Peig says. “Oh Jesus.” She turns away, running from the field.

“Da,” she screams. “Da, Da.”