

Saturday , April 29th 1916

15 Moore Street.

Jesus. Sacred heart of Jesus. My heart. It's in my mouth. Watching her there, with her handkerchief poking out the door. Scrubbed and starched and stacked. One on hand for any emergency. 'You can't go far wrong with that', we always say. One flag out the window like a toe in the deep end, testing. Tip tip... So far so good. And them opening the door with its reluctant creak and their 'Go on Lizzie. Go on now. Good girl'. Like she's a horse. Look at her. I can't. Oh Jesus, Liz and Holy Saint Anthony. Yes. Saint Anthony, I'm talking to you. Now. Right now. Please don't let her be lost don't let her be lost...not that. Are you listening? Not now, not now. Not when I wouldn't let her say. Shushed her. Of all things, Julia. A shush for Christ sakes! So alone out there. One foot in front of the other. Laced up tight and everything pinned on the hankie, so small it could be blown away any second. Oh Jesus Saint Anthony don't let that get lost either.

I tried to do my bit: two red crosses – one for arm and apron - willing them to be brighter and bigger. And the flag. A good constrictor knot, that one. The starched white handkerchief double tied for all it's worth. Strangling to death the bit of a stick it is on. Damned hands nearly letting me down, betraying me with the shakes. 'Steady as she goes', said Liz with a wink. Could have been on the stage too. Ladies and Gentlemen we'd like to present the one and only Miss Elizabeth O'Farrell, coming all the way from Holles Street Maternity Hospital for one night only. One fine wink and a toss of her high head and they'd have been eating out of the palm of her hand. Me shaking the blush away as best I can. Always gets me that. She'd have given the best of them a run for their money.

Ten years ago already, that night when we were running through these very same lane-ways from the G.P.O.¹ One side of the thoroughfare crowded with the swing of Highlanders' kilts and Redcoats as they were then and the girls up from the country dazzled by the fit of them, by the young men with their English accents inside. Dazzled into their own disaster, when no respectable person would dream of walking on that side of the street after nightfall. We'd seen some of these self-same soldiers before, undoing their buckles to belt anyone who looked crooked at them. Had the measure of them alright. Our printed hand-bills hidden for the moment inside handbags and muffs. *Irish Girls! Remember you are walking with your country's enemies! You endanger your purity and honour! We, Inghinidhi na hEireann, daughters of Ireland...* One of the soldiers loud and abusive as he catches on, it spreading quicker than the diseases we're trying to warn them about. *Remember the Boers! Women and children starving in the camps!* This last inserted at Madame Maud Gonne's insistence, she being the president of our society. Always found it a bit confusing myself. One thing a time I'd say, but things being as they are. 'Your wish, as always Madame Gonne, is our command'.

A couple of policemen, they making their way towards us through the crowd. 'You there! Missy!' And us taking to our heels, light on our feet and fast and gleeful with the last of a cloud of hand-bills flying up into the air, a printed flurry in our wake. Running running light and agile and they cumbersome and bulky and finally puffing and dragged to a standstill by the weight of their own overcoats. Liz giggling and Helena Molony it was with us too, panting and laughing when we finally got clear, ducking in behind the market walls to catch our breaths. Helena straightening her bonnet and skirts. She a friend of the great and the good, never mind her brush with the law. Stone-throwing. Or rather, one stone thrown. On the occasion of a royal visit. A portrait of King George and Queen Mary,

its clear-sighted target. Glass broken. A case of high jinks. The magistrate remarking that he ‘would not brook any Simon Tappertit, be they male or female’². And no, our Dear Miss Molony would not countenance paying a penny. Indeed she would rather be locked away. However, upon the anonymous payment of said fine, our eponymous heroine was released unscathed from the hospitality of Mountjoy prison. Due at the National Players Society later on that particular evening³. ‘Sigh!’ More theatrics. ‘Although of a more refined variety you understand!’ Full of Yeats and Caitlín ní hUalacán and wouldn’t a journal for women be a fine thing? ‘Just imagine! Our own voices: blood and thunder, high thinking and home-made bread’. Her carefully cultivated accent in keeping with the slightly raised eyebrow. ‘Why of course Miss Molony, of course!’ We watching, amused, as she steps out onto the corner of Capel Street. ‘Always a pleasure!’ Setting off with a wave and a walk she’s been rehearsing these past few weeks.

And indeed you might walk me home Miss O’Farrell, indeed you might lend me your arm what with these uneven cobblestones and indeed one could see no harm in that at all.

Oh Jesus slow down now Liz, that’s right. Don’t run or they’ll have ye. Steady as she goes. And the hankie’s looking smaller and smaller, bobbing and waving in the air above her head.

Saturday , April 29th 1916

15 Moore Street.

The cease-fire holds like bated breath. Eerie, the sound of a piano jangling somewhere nearby. Hauled out through a broken window and off with it.

British barricades up the top and bottom of the street. We trapped like rats in between. Now Moore Street has managed to become *No Man's Land*. Oh Jesus. Liz in that empty desolate place. Halfway out across it, disappearing with the angles getting more and more acute from this broken slit of a window. Dirty bit of lace curtain flapping in my face. They're shouting at the top of the street from behind their bags of sand. How they love their bags of sand. Snuggling up against them like kids in Dollymount. Should have brought them all a few buckets and spades to go with it. What are they shouting? Can't make it out. It's that young Tommy with the moustache. I'm sure it's him. All talk about his Irish mother. He couldn't take a currant bun from Liz and give her a hug all friendly-like yesterday morning and shoot her dead on the spot today could he?

Mind you, he probably would alright if he'd realized what we'd had under our aprons. Myself and Liz accompanied by little May McLoughlin, she just back from a scouting trip with the rest of the Clan na Gael girls⁴. Some of the younger ones only ten or eleven years old starting to cry in fright when they saw what was afoot. Word sent out: Children need to be picked up by their mothers. Not May. She plucky as they come. Gave her brother Sean the deaf ear when he spotted her in the GPO, having been sent to collect food and ammunition. Told her to get on home with herself, that she was too young and anyhow her dinner was ready. It'd be done to a crisp. Locked into her bedroom by her mother when she did finally show up there. Climbed out the back window and off again. Gun still safely

tucked away in her skirts. Turning like a homing pigeon at the G.P.O. Upstairs a couple of Tommies are merrily washing pots in the kitchen alongside some of our Cumann na mBan girls.⁵ Keeping themselves busy. Whistling as they work. Proclaiming themselves very well-kept prisoners of war indeed. Wouldn't dream of escaping, thanks very much. A bunch of officers also quite contented, quietly playing bridge and sipping cups of tea despite the mayhem. Downstairs in the G.P.O., May is handed another dispatch and six ten pound notes to deliver to the Commandant Michael Mallin in Stephen's Green. Inserts the message in between the coils of her hair. A hat firmly pinned on top. Now there she goes, already slipping on through ahead of us, while myself and Liz are given the full treatment. 'Ladies, are you quite sure you want to be going up that end of town? And why would that be?' And no getting rid of him until Liz produced the bun from one of her plentiful pockets and then with smiles all round we were sent on our way, with a 'Well if you're both sure then. Mind how you go. Watch your step'. Across the barricades. 'There you are. I shall of course. No bother at all' Finally managing to unburden ourselves of both message and ammunition when we got as far as Commandant Mallin's outpost in Stephen's Green.

No Man's Land. The thought of it ferreting into our souls. Heard some of our lads have been there too, digging up the grass around the Green and burrowing themselves down into it, like they'd been doing it all their lives. Trenches in Flanders, full of rats and freezing cold, with all sorts of diseases running rampant. *Safer than the slums of Dublin*, or so goes the claim on the British recruiting poster, asking our young men to fight for the same King and class that has them living in such squalor. Not a trace of irony or shame.

And that oul'fella not wanting to give up his cart. Sure who could blame him and it all that stands between himself and the workhouse. The cart lodged in between other bits of recently commandeered furniture and him trying to break down their barricades to retrieve it.

Still, he couldn't have been the sharpest knife in the drawer. Our Volunteers already starting to hide in behind it, shouting, 'You'll get it back when we're done. Go on out of that with yerself'. Him unrelenting, tugging and agitating. A growl. 'You've been warned. I won't tell you again'. Now there he is, lying like a spilt bucket in the dirt, with the cart fine thanks very much, not a bother on it, and him with no use for it any more.

Reports of the Countess striding up and down around Stephens Green, looking for all the world as if she was having the time of her life, practically unaware of the bullets whistling past and the British already lining up on the rooftops overhead. Those trenches finally doing noone any favours when the bullets start showering down on top of them from the machine gun mounted on the roof of the Shelbourne Hotel. Sitting ducks. Commandant Michael Mallin gives the order: 'Into the College of Surgeons. Tell the women. Retreat in twos and trees. Move! Now!' The open-air canteen and first-aid centre are suddenly abandoned. Nora O'Daly, losing her hat in the scramble, arrives flushed, breathless, irked by the notion that she might be misconstrued as one who gallivants around town bareheaded. A lady's social standing almost as easily lost and besmirched as her hat.

Miss Margaret Skinnider, skilled in gauging wind, light, velocity and distance. Pedalling against the odds on a borrowed bicycle. Dropping off messages and ammunition, mostly unnoticed in the chaos. Up on the roof of the Royal College of Surgeons, Miss Skinnider looks down her sights across the treetops of Stephen's Green, steps back down the stairs as a man in khaki far below keels over. A schoolteacher of mathematics in Glasgow over in Dublin on her Easter holidays. A frequent visitor in the hills around Dublin testing detonators and the like. Training the Countess' Fianna. Inner-city boy scouts schooled in the art of marksmanship and explosive devices. No girls, no. The

Countess professing herself confused by 'those dreadful girls'. They taunting her Fianna boys, leaving them tongue-tied and excited and slightly bewildered. A girls scout group must be and is set up under other auspices. Margaret Skinnider, on the other hand finally arrives at the Countess' side. The unexpected thrill of a custom-made uniform laid out awaiting her arrival. Her presence unofficial but not unplanned. Moleskin. A beautiful material. To fight alongside the Countess. The soft chilling embrace of it. Miss Margaret Skinnider and Countess Markiweicz. Well designed handmade britches, belt and puttees for women. A most excellent markswoman, having learnt to shoot at a rifle club in defence of the British realm.

The .303 Lee-Enfield rifle: a heavy weapon with a strong recoil. Margaret Skinnider. Bits and pieces for detonators hidden in a bonnet. Wires in her skirts. News and urgent secrets on her tongue. Skidding around a corner as something hits and tears through metal and spokes and rubber. A hail of bullets rain down yet again from the roof of the Shelbourne. Maggie Skinnider. Dragged inside, writhing in agony. Moleskin and leatherwork ripped and shot through three times, the blood spilling out darkly, staining the material cruelly. Her hand held tightly in Madam's as Miss Madeline French Mullen hunts and gouges for the bullets. Revenge, she is told at some point through the next feverish hours or days, lies in the form of an unarmed policeman the Countess personally shot dead, and she passes out of consciousness again with the cold comfort of this death hanging around her neck.

Outside the College of Surgeons, one of our Volunteers still sits on a park bench in the Green. Riddled with bullets. His arms spread out across the back of the bench looking as if he's taking the sun. Head leant back. Face crimson. Can't make out who he is for sure. Unable to move. So much blood. Collecting in a seeping puddle on the

bench. Leaking, dripping from his finger-tips, these twitching for an eternity. Faintly, hopelessly, noiselessly calling for help or respite. We none of us able to get to him.

Friday April 28th 1916.

Abbey Street.

Sniper fire ricochets.

Ankle and shinbone shattered.

A gun falls onto the road.

James Connolly dragged back inside.

Flesh lacerated.

Ether.

G.P.O.

Ammunition. Explosives.

Fire raging out of control, moving fast through the building.

Machine gun fire sweeping the streets outside.

Nurse Aoife de Burca on watch.

Connolly wakes.

Sean McLoughlin, twenty years of age sir.

'Prop me up lad, prop me up'.

'Yessir'.

'Got to get out of here lad. Get us into Moore Street'.

'Yessir'.

Now Commandant McLoughlin, later told as the 'boy commandant'.

Crowbars. Pickaxes.

Through the walls.

Friday April 28th 1916

O'Connell Street.

The British cordon steadily tightens around the G.P.O and its surrounding streets. We arrive back to witness a hesitant runnel of misery, from the tenements of Moore Street and around, straggling under the doubtful cover of a lop-sided white flag. A dismal procession of women and children exposed and fearful, stumbling like moles over the rubble, out onto the blinding expanse of O'Connell street. The hope of a way out. If only they can find it. A young girl. Straggling behind. Terrified. Drops to the ground at the slightest provocation. A stray horse - one of the many released or escaped from a stables nearby during the night - skitters dangerously close to her head. Urged up to her feet and on again by a couple of the younger Tommies, shouting encouragement to her from across the barricades: 'Nowhere to go sweetheart, but you'd best not stay there'.

Inside the G.P.O.

‘Women and girls!

All out!

Prisoners too!

Yes! All of you!

Go!’

All finally making a headlong dash for it.

Feet first. Falling through the walls of the G.P.O. Into the musty blind embrace of the Coliseum. Nurses. Red Cross workers. Cumann na mBan. A few Tommies switching sides tumbling through after them. Wounded men passed through last. Caught. Make-shift stretchers. Bombarded, the building shudders and groans. Everyone flat on the floor. Heads and heels. Huddled together in this blacked out theatre. Trying to prepare for death in the pitch black as bullets and bombs hammer the walls.

'A Lieutenant by the name of King reporting back sir, having escaped from the rebels' Headquarters at the G.P.O: Padraic Pearse badly wounded. A fractured thigh. James Connolly is dead. The Countess Markeivicz coming and going. A German Professor makes bombs for them. Rebels adopt civilian clothes. They slip undetected into the crowds'.

Everyone tarred with the same brush.

In the lull that follows, a trail of women are sighted, awkward and determined, moving under a Red Cross flag. Heading for Jervis Street hospital, carrying the wounded in sheets, one at each corner.

Accompanied by a priest. A Father Flanagan. Scrambling over one British Barricade and then another, they being respectful of the Red Cross, grateful for them on the battlefields of Flanders. Straggling on down the quays. Nearing the hospital, one fresh-faced trooper roars 'Halt, or I fire'. Obdurate. Brooking no argument.

The wounded laid on the footpath. Buildings in flames around them. Thick hot air pressing in on all sides. Then another soldier. An officer this one. Father Flanagan negotiates. Six British soldiers will guard them, escort them, suffer some nurses to remove the wounded, bring a pot of tea and after a night lying on the hard floor of a hospital waiting room, release them exhausted and hungry into the chill grey morning.

Friday April 28th 1916

8pm

Inside the G.P.O.

Winnifred Carney.

Secretary for James Connolly.

'Trust Miss Kearney as you would trust myself'.

'Yessir'.

Entered the G.P.O with Commandant Connolly on Easter Monday,
taking her trusty Typewriter and Webley along with her.

'I'll be leaving the same way'.

'Just leave the gun Winnie. Go on now'.

'I'll be coming with you Sir'.

'I won't argue with you Winnie'.

'I'll be coming with you Sir'.

'Come on so, if you're coming'.

Smoke, shattered glass, explosions.

Every solid thing blown to pieces, crumbling in the furnace.

Friday, April 28th 1916

Moore Street.

A street of small holdings and tenements.

More chance of dying here than in the trenches.

No. 9 Mrs. Mulvany, Victuallers.

That family there. They just couldn't believe it. Left it too late. Lying out there in *No Man's Land* the lot of them. And the size of their flag. The whole bloody bedsheet they'd taken to wave as if they were off for a picnic. Filthy. But it must have been white at some point. There was no telling him. And she tried. And the daughter tried. After they wouldn't let us in. The old man, the granda'. That was bad. Hiding behind the door and them knocking outside and shouting and the other fella screaming in the road in his own blood. What did he think he was playing at? No need to have his eye stuck up against the keyhole to see that coming. And then there was nothing else to do and that was it. We're in and he's still sitting there in his armchair staring at the hole in the door and not seeing anything at all nor any of us coming through it nor the shock on all of our faces as we see him. And the screams still washing over all of us from out in the street. Like watching a man drowning the way we couldn't get to him no matter what, forced back against the walls, watching him go under, until we shut the door and still it follows us into the small parlour and we're all cold with the sound of it seeping into us, making us feel sick and very far from home and the old man's silence doing the same.

They were upstairs, the rest of the family. The father terrified, pulling the sheet off the bed, with the mother flapping and flustering around behind him trying to both help and hinder at the same time. And Liz had given up on him, seeing as how he was the spit of the oul'fella downstairs. The same mad blindness about him. No way of seeing

sense until it hits him in the head. She was talking to the daughter now, slow and calm, the way she does when the waters have already broken and she's telling them to breathe, breathe, breathe and push and breathe and push and push and push and breathe, that's right. The slow floating solidity of it. And they'd cling to her for dear life, cling to her voice in the pain and the mess and the chaos of it all and you can see the girl doing the same. Her eyes are wide with panic and she's licking her lips and listening, concentrating on what Liz is saying. That's the knack of her ladies and gentlemen, the hush she lets fall over things as they become hers. Her own kind of hush that makes you feel everything is alright no matter what. 'There pet, there, that's right'.

But there's no time and this is not the time and Liz is telling her this. 'Do not go out there. Do not let him take you or your Ma out there. This is not the time. Tell your Da. Tell him, pet. Nobody's innocent here. There are no innocent bystanders in this house nor on this street. It doesn't matter anymore who you say you are, not now. They're not listening. We're doing our best to get out of here. And then you might get out too. But right now you can't go out there. Tell your Da. Stay where you are. That's all there is to it.' And the girl. She's probably about fourteen, with more sense than the rest of them put together, and you can see the horror of it taking shape inside her and the panic turning into something heavy and dark and cold as it sinks in and she's saying, 'Right, I'll talk to him I'll ...'

But there's no more time and we have to go and the screams are loud again as someone makes a dash for it and more banging and shouts and silence and then we're out and running and then there's a roar and we're in.

Machine gun fire sweeping the streets.

No going out.

Walls are broken through.

One into the other.

Plaster dust, bricks, rats, dirt.

Holes. Holes.

Bare feet scurrying, trying to get out of the way. A green-black stain creeping and crashing steadily upwards, leaving its trail of destruction. Small narrow houses full of corners, angles, stairs, cupboards, walls and people, people, people. Some of those who couldn't run or were afraid to, frozen to the spot as the walls came crashing in. Scuttling out of the way as best they could. Another door locked.

Mrs Margaret McKane further back in the house, listening to them breaking their way down the street throughout the night. Cooking up a bit of breakfast for them all when they get this far. 'Bridget, they're nearly here. Would you get the door, love?' Bridget McKane. Herself and her father trying to get the lock open. Rummaging, clinking, dropping the key in a panic. 'Open up now or we'll open it for you'. Fifteen she is. The key caught in the floorboards. Trying to work it loose. 'Stand clear in there, will you?' Mrs McKane paying more heed to the potatoes. 'At least these will fill them up'.

Volunteer Joe Good staring into the parlour. 'Oh Christ Almighty!' A piece of Bridget's skull on the ground beside her. 'Clean and white', he says, 'like I'd imagine a baby's'. Picks it up and slips it into his pocket. 'So that no one will discover it'.

No. 11 T.F. Cogan, Confectionary.

Morphia.

No. 13 Mrs Rose Anne Hogan.

Morphia.

None.

No.

Gaping holes and rubble.

No 14. Mrs. Norton, China and Glass-Ware.

Gangrene.

Easing the stretcher on inside and over the top.

Jarring on something half-seen in the dim cramped kitchen.

Crockery crashing to the floor and James Connolly roaring.

No. 15. Hanlon's Fishmongers.

The stink of dead fish enough to turn the strongest of stomachs.

Silence.

Muffled thumps.

A groan.

No. 16. Mr. Patk. Plunkett. Butchers, poultry, etc.

The stench of death already waiting there to greet them, subtle but insistent, under bleached attempts to subdue it, sluice it from heavy scrubbed wooden chopping blocks. Sacks of woodchip and sodden sawdust slump, spill in a corner.

Saturday, April 29th, 1916

Two things. Decisive things, as it were. One of them a 'Death or Glory Squad'. Sean McLoughlin's idea. Ready to hurtle headlong into their deaths, to cause a distraction big enough so that others can escape. Waiting for Pearse's say so. 'Give me an hour, son'. (Beautiful boy burning with passion). An ardour both awe-inspiring and terrifying. An hour to think it over. Their lives balanced on a knife edge that was in Commandant P.H.Pearse's hands. Deafening thunder of houses, shelled, succumbing, collapsing.

And the other thing. Out the window. When I step out, they're there, right in front of me. It was Sean Mac Dermott who noticed them first. Called Pearse over to the window, pointing. We didn't know how long they'd been there like that, just across the street, nor how we could have missed them. Machine gun fire. Faster than you can say One, Two, Three elderly men. One still clutching the white flag. Slumped stiffly together against the wall. And that broke it. 'Enough'.

'It's our only hope. It'll have to be one of you', they're saying, looking from me to Julia. 'So that'll be me then'. As I couldn't live with myself otherwise. Wouldn't want to. Sean MacDermott sticking a flag out the window to see if it can stem the barrage.

A pause. A silence.

'Don't know if it will hold'.

'Here, take this'.

The tremor in Julia's fingers. Distract her with a wink. Lightly does it.

'Julia ...'

'Shush now, shush!'

And I can't bear to look any longer. Coward that I am in front of those ferocious unblinking eyes, she opening the door of number 15.

Carrying Commandant P.H. Pearse's message, this cargo of cardboard and sadness and surrender. Under such a forlorn flag and crosses. *Believing that the glorious stand...has been sufficient ...* It was Julia who noticed the picture, thought it might do the trick: a cardboard backing in behind the frame. 'Where would we be without art?' Her way of muttering that lets me in and keeps everyone else outside of us. Now look at us, more inside and outside than we ever dreamt of being. But this is not the time. Steady as she goes. I won't look at more than their feet now, sticking out across the cobbles. Six feet pulled from underneath them and my own two crunching loud and heavy across the glass. Slowly slowly does it. Can't afford a slip or it'll rattle the lot of them. *...desirous of preventing further slaughter...* That cockney lad with the Irish mother. A good lad him. If he's in behind there he'll know me for sure.

The O'Rahilly's revolver over there. Sure of course it is and his hat there too, flapping in the gutter beside it. Him forever singing and whistling. You'd know he was on his way up the stairs long before you'd clap eyes on him. A bit hurt when he realized he hadn't been taken into their confidence, not given the nod that it definitely was going to happen, despite him running the guns this past two years. Saddened he was, that some of the girls were in on it before him. Though of course Kitty O'Doherty would have known what was coming, and she the one who organised the gun-room, not to mention carrying messages all over the country. He got over it tho, turning up in the GPO saying sure he'd have to sample his wares. Took thirty or more of our lads out with him. A final charge towards the barricades. Oh Christ almighty! No, not now. Keep going. Look where you're heading. But he must have gotten in somewhere after all. They must have pulled him in after his plan turned into a bloodbath.

They're shouting now, running around up there behind the sandbags.
'Alright lads alright!' Steady on there Liz. That's Julia in there. My
Sheila. As Gaeilge, as she says. Loves the ring of it. Sheila Sheila
Sheila ni Ghrianán.⁶ I'm so sorry love ... *to open negotiations with the
British commander...* One foot and then another. Breathe. Breathe.
That's right: In out in out. Nearly there now. Get them out. Get her out
alive. Let her out or you'll be burying me alive too. 'Yes! Yes, it is!
Nurse Elizabeth O'Farrell'.