

chapter 01

Last year was bad, and this year, 1846, was even worse, because we hadn't been able to store any food. I lived in the countryside on a small farm, where we grew potatoes and kept a cow and a couple of pigs. The potato crop failed in 1845, and we were hungry, but at least we had some food stored from the previous year. In 1846, however, there was no more food. We'd killed the animals and didn't have any way of making a living.

Our small farmhouse was owned by an English gentleman who lived in England. The man who managed his property was responsible for collecting the rent, and he didn't seem to care about our problems. When we couldn't pay the rent, he threw us off the farm. We were only able to take a few small things with us, and had to set off to find the only people who could help us, our relatives in Dublin.

We certainly weren't alone in our suffering. Nearly two million people died during the Irish Potato Famine. About the same number left the country, and I was soon to become one of them.

It took us a week to walk to Dublin, taking it in turns to carry the baby, Siobhan. My two brothers, Sean and Seamus, kept our spirits up by telling us stories about America. They told me I should have brought a shovel with me because there was gold in the American streets and that, in America, if you wished for something to eat, it would simply fall from the sky into your hands.

We slept out in the open if we couldn't find any other shelter, but there were farms like ours which had been boarded up, and abandoned. Sometimes we found people still living on farms, and they fed us what they could spare. The Irish are kind people, who look after each other when they can. Sometimes we slept in barns with the cows and donkeys. Anywhere was better than sleeping outside.



chapter 1

By the time we got to Dublin, my mother and the baby were sick. Poor Siobhan died that evening, and my mother followed her the next day. Now there were my two brothers, my father (we called him Da) and myself, Maire. Somehow, we had to get to America; there was no honest work to be found in Dublin.

My aunt and uncle lived a good life in the city, and helped us by paying our passage on a boat that was sailing to New York. My father was grieving over the loss of his wife, and just sat by the fire, apparently unable to move, so my uncle had to make all the travel arrangements. Sean and Seamus, however, were in high spirits, despite the deaths in the family.

chapter

01

They tried to keep me cheerful, although I was terrified at the thought of a sea voyage. We were country people, not sailors.

Eventually the day arrived when we were to sail. My aunt had given us all a change of clothing and in my bundle she put some Irish lace – for my wedding, she said, something to remember the Old Country by. I was fourteen and had no thoughts of getting married any time soon!

I cried when we left, and so did Da and my aunt. My brothers were excited and raced around, whooping and throwing their caps into the air. The seagulls were whirling and screeching over our heads, and I could feel the movement of the ship under my feet. It was a strange sensation, and one that wasn't very pleasant. Sean picked me up and swung me round in his enthusiasm. I screamed to be put down, but then, when I was on my feet again, I wished he'd kept his arms around me, to keep me safe.

The sailors busied themselves lifting the anchor. Everyone crowded to the ship's rail, waving to their friends and relatives who had come to see them off. The air was filled with excitement and anticipation, and for a while even Da and I were swept along with it. The gangplank was raised and there was no turning back. I

suddenly felt alone and desperately sad. I was leaving not just my home, but my homeland, and going to a country where the people spoke an alien language – English. My family spoke only Gaelic.

How would we manage? Would we survive the journey? What would become of us?

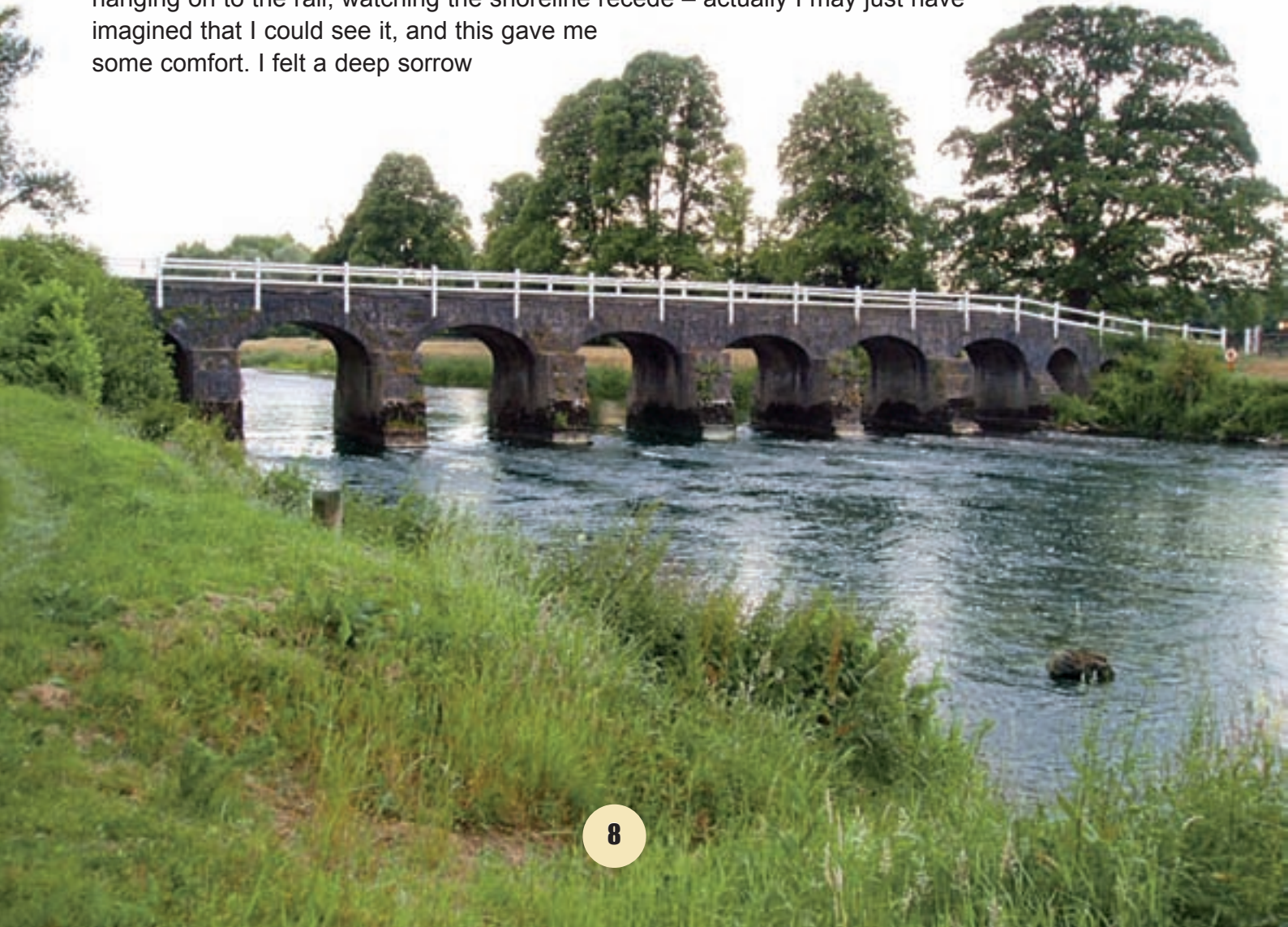


chapter

2

On the ship, the men had quarters in one part of the ship, and the women and children in another. I was horrified when I realised that I would be separated from Da and my brothers. We had the cheapest type of ticket, so we were travelling in steerage. That meant that we had to sleep at the bottom of the ship. It was dark, airless and overcrowded. We had bunk beds, three to a bunk, with mothers sharing mattresses with at least one child. Children were crying, the little ones not knowing where they were or why. None of us had been in such a situation before. Some mothers were singing Gaelic lullabies to their babies, and the other women joined in. I did too, glad to feel that I was part of a group and not totally isolated.

All too soon we were out at sea, and the ship moved up and down in the waves. Women and children began to feel sick, then vomited – and the stench was unbearable. I staggered over people and up the ladder, desperate to get some fresh air. It was a fine day, and the first- and second-class passengers were strolling around the deck. These were the people who had the money to pay for more expensive tickets and who, that night, would eat in the ship's dining room with the captain. They mainly spoke English, although occasionally I would hear Gaelic. I stood hanging on to the rail, watching the shoreline recede – actually I may just have imagined that I could see it, and this gave me some comfort. I felt a deep sorrow



because I thought I would never see my homeland again. Tears fell onto my hands as I thought about the Irish countryside, my poor mother and little Siobhan. Maybe they were better off than I was – at least they were still in Ireland.

Someone grabbed my waist. It was Sean. He saw my tears and hugged me, stroked my hair and patiently waited until I stopped crying. He asked what the women's quarters were like and, when I described them, he laughed, saying that the men's were just as awful. He took my arm and we walked around the deck, looking at the other passengers and the sailors, busy with the sails and hurrying about their business. Some stewards were taking tea and sandwiches to the passengers' cabins – a luxury we couldn't afford.

I asked Sean what we would eat. He laughed, and said that we'd be given tea and probably a biscuit for breakfast, and after that thin soup or maybe some tough, stringy meat. I hoped that he was wrong, but he was, of course, right in his predictions.

We soon saw Seamus and Da walking towards us. It was reassuring to be in their company. There were so many people on the ship that I had thought it might be difficult to find them. I'd imagined that we might only see each other again when the ship docked in New York. I confessed my fears, and Seamus laughed and said we were family and stuck together – we would always find each other, no matter where we went. I hoped he was right and, from then on, whenever I felt alone, his words gave me courage and reassurance.

By this time, Sean had begun talking to one of the sailors, asking if there was anything he could do. Sean was full of energy and hated being idle. The sailor suggested taking him into the galley (the ship's kitchen) where he could help the cook prepare the passengers' meals. Sean went off, and Da leaned against the rail, looking at the sea. By then, there was no land in sight. Seamus tried to keep me cheerful, but then he saw a pretty young girl, and went trailing after her. I made sure that Da was okay and decided to do a bit of exploring myself.

Chapter

2

At first, I found it difficult to walk without hanging on to the rail, but after going around the deck once, I felt brave enough to walk unaided. Other women from steerage were also now emerging from below deck, and there was a mixture of Gaelic and English being spoken. I realised that it would be difficult for me in America, because I knew no English at all.

As I was thinking about the language problem, I bumped into a girl of my own age, who was walking with her mother. I apologised, but she seemed not to understand, and looked quite cross. Once again, I said that I was sorry, but it was her mother who said I shouldn't worry. Her daughter only spoke English, she explained. The woman was kind and asked me where my own mother was. I told her that she had died in Dublin. The woman translated our conversation for her daughter into the strange English language. Her expression became softer and she took my hand in hers. Her mother suggested we continue around the deck together. We talked and the mother translated.

I was glad to have found some female company, because I missed my mother a lot. The woman must have felt sorry for me and I was, for the first time in my life, happy to be pitied.

Then a bell rang – a sign for the passengers that lunch was about to be served. Before they left, the woman, Mrs O'Connor, and her daughter, Margaret, suggested meeting again in a few hours, and showed me where to wait for them.

I went down to steerage to see what we were going to get to eat. We had some watery soup with a few vegetables floating in it, and a chunk of bread. It was better than I'd have had if I'd still been at home, so I was grateful for that, at least.



chapter

03

During the days that followed, I spent a lot of time with Mrs O'Connor and Margaret, and they taught me a few words of English. Sean picked up some English from the cook and his assistants in the galley, and we shared our knowledge with Da and Seamus. Sean also managed to bring us extra food and, one day, he gave me a banana. It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen, but Sean showed me how to peel it, and it tasted really good. So did the oranges he sometimes stuffed his pockets with.



chapter

03

I don't really like to think of that voyage. I was one of the lucky ones who didn't suffer from seasickness, but many people never got used to the movement of the sea and had a miserable Atlantic crossing. Luckily for us, we didn't hit any storms and we weren't in any danger, except from diseases such as typhus. Some people died on the voyage and, after a brief religious service, were thrown overboard into a watery grave.

My brothers never lost their enthusiasm for our American adventure, but my father seemed to be getting sadder. I hoped he wouldn't die, and told him so. Perhaps it was that which saved him. He told me that he would try to remember the living from that time on, and he did try to be cheerful, at least when he and I were together. He began to tell stories about what he had done as a boy, how he had met my mother and other things about our family history which I would never have learned about otherwise.

Mrs O'Connor asked me what plans we had for our new lives. I told her that we hadn't thought too much about it – after all, the streets were paved with gold, weren't they? Mrs O'Connor told me as gently as possible that such ideas were nonsense. People had to work hard to make money in America. Yet another of my dreams was shattered. It was a good thing I hadn't brought a shovel after all, I thought childishly.

Mrs O'Connor must have noticed my disappointment, because she asked if she could speak with my father. I had not previously introduced them, as I liked to keep my family for myself. I liked being with Margaret and her mother, but I wanted my family to be only mine. However, I made the introductions and went off to play with Margaret.



Later, Da told me that Mrs O'Connor was a wealthy lady who lived in New York City, in a big house. She had said that she could employ me as a maid, and have me live with her, her husband and Margaret. Da had said he would ask me, and pointed out that this would be a really good thing for me.

I was horrified! I couldn't imagine being separated from Da and my brothers, even though I liked Mrs O'Connor and Margaret. I burst into tears and, as I began sobbing, Sean and Seamus appeared, demanding to know who had upset me. When Da explained the situation, they were confused. We didn't want to split up the family. However, we knew we needed to earn some money, and if I had to work, then Mrs O'Connor would be a good choice of employer. I didn't really want to live with her though, so Da said he'd discuss it with her again.

By the time the ship got to New York, my future had been more or less decided. I was to work for the O'Connors, and live with them for a short time until my father and brothers had found work and an apartment to rent (apparently these were cheaper than houses). None of us really had any idea of what an apartment was. We had come from a stone farmhouse in rural Ireland, after all!

Then, one day, the ship's bell warned us that we were approaching New York, and there was a buzz of excitement in the air. Mrs O'Connor and Margaret would be leaving us, as we had to go through immigration. I had no idea what this meant, but I was about to find out. Mrs O'Connor had given my father her address, directions to get there, and some money.



chapter

4

The number of people going through immigration was frightening. There were other ships offloading their passengers, and we were all going to the same place. There was a babel of voices: mostly eastern European and Scandinavian, but also Greek and Italian. The Italians were shouting to each other in their sing-song dialects. I'd seen some Italian sailors in Dublin and liked the sound of their language and their laughter, and their dark good looks.

Just in front of us was an Italian family – an elderly couple, a middle-aged couple and their children, one about the same age as Seamus, and others, two even younger than me. They were laughing, probably glad to be on dry land again, and they seemed to be much happier than the people who had come from our boat.

I wondered why the Italians had come to America. They didn't have a potato famine too, did they? They didn't look thin and hungry like the Irish. Later, I learnt that people were coming to start a new life in the New World for all sorts of reasons. They were escaping poverty, famine, disease, war and discrimination. Others just hoped for a better life for themselves and their families.

It was difficult to understand what was happening in the immigration building. There were some interpreters, but we couldn't find one that spoke Gaelic. The officers were using long words I hadn't heard before, so I had little idea of what was happening. Some doctors examined us very closely.

I felt extremely uncomfortable and distressed by the whole process.

chapter

4

Finally, it was over. We found each other again and, as it happened, the lively Italian family, too. Surprisingly, we still had our sad-looking bundles with us, mine with the lace my aunt had so kindly given me. I wondered if I'd ever see my aunt and uncle again, but I was soon jostled out of my thoughts by Seamus, who was intent on getting us into the city centre.

Everything looked much bigger than it did in Ireland. The buildings were taller, for one thing. Several families lived in them, not just one. So that's how we'll be living, I thought. But I didn't have time to dwell on it, as Seamus was herding us along with the Italian family.

Sean and Seamus started a conversation with the two older boys and, much to my surprise, they all seemed to more or less understand each other. They made gestures and looked at each other's face to help catch the meaning. It seemed that the Italians knew where they were going – an uncle who had been in New York for five years, had helped them with their fares, and had found them somewhere to live. The boys suggested that my brothers and father go with them. They also thought that I should stay with 'Mama' and their sisters. Of course, I was going to Mrs O'Connor's, but my brothers eagerly accepted the invitation to meet the uncle who, the

Italian boys said, had his own restaurant. They gave my brothers the address and a hand-drawn map.



chapter 4

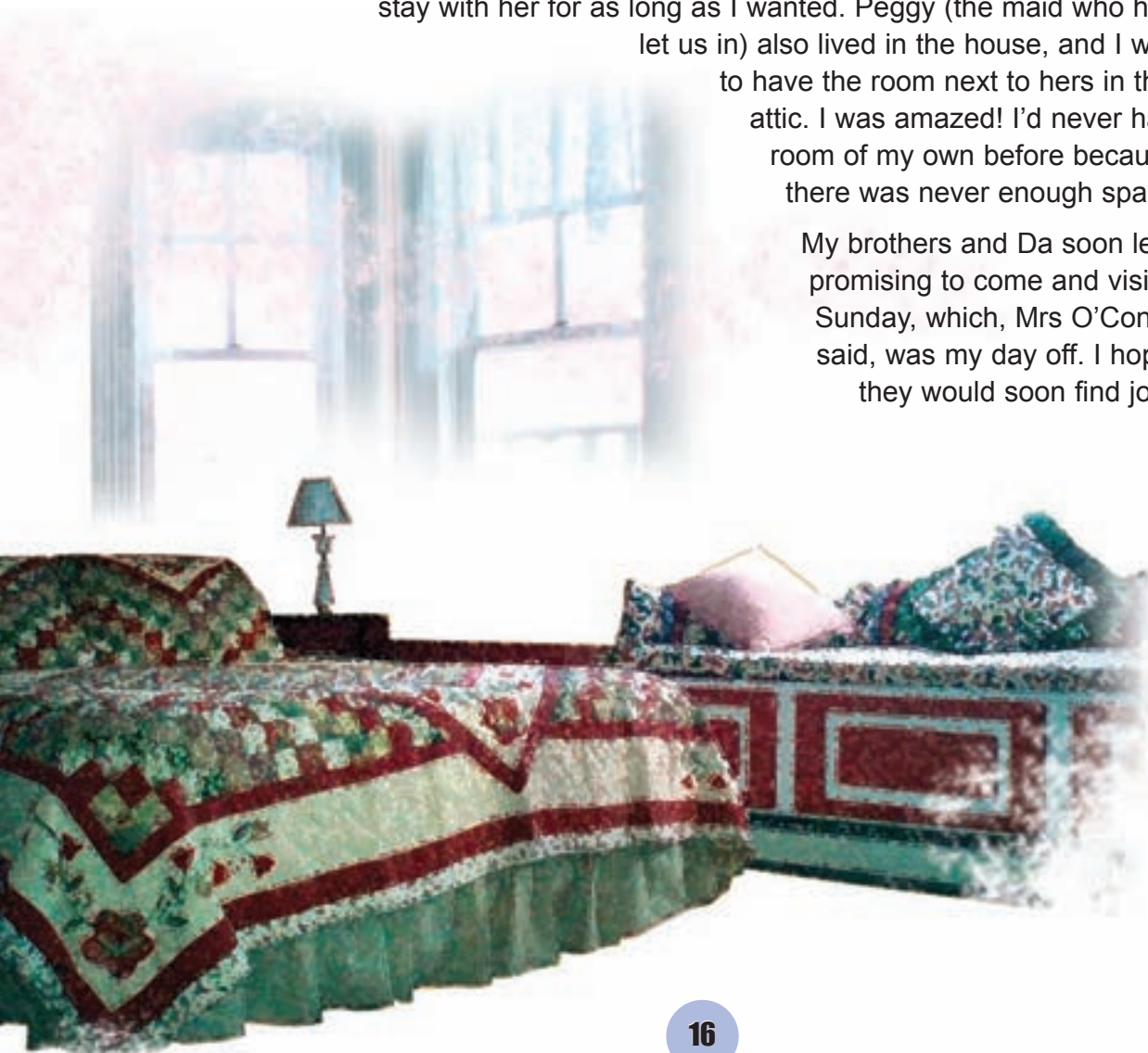
We left the harbour and walked to Mrs O'Connor's. It was a long walk, but we didn't talk much. We were all too busy taking in the sights, sounds and smells of our new home.

When we arrived at Mrs O'Connor's, Sean pulled a bell rope. I wouldn't have known what it was for, but Sean had learned a lot from his time in the ship's galley. I found out later that he'd been paid for his work too.

It wasn't Mrs O'Connor or Margaret who answered the door, but a pretty young maid in a uniform. She knew who we were, and invited us in, speaking in Gaelic. She said she came from Galway and still missed the Old Country. She asked us to sit in the parlour, and brought us tea. Then Mrs O'Connor came in with Margaret. I was to stay with them until my father found accommodation, although she said that I was welcome to stay with her for as long as I wanted. Peggy (the maid who had

let us in) also lived in the house, and I was to have the room next to hers in the attic. I was amazed! I'd never had a room of my own before because there was never enough space.

My brothers and Da soon left, promising to come and visit on Sunday, which, Mrs O'Connor said, was my day off. I hoped they would soon find jobs



chapter

4

and a place to live. I was worried about them. Where would they sleep? What was going to happen to us in this new country? Standing in the open doorway, I waved goodbye to them and, when they were out of sight, Peggy took my hand and led me up the stairs to the top of the house, and my new bedroom.

Peggy looked at my bundle, and suggested I take a bath and change into my maid's uniform, which was lying on my bed (a proper bed – not just a mattress on the floor!) and then she'd take me to the mistress (Mrs O'Connor), so that I could find out what my duties were.

'A bath?' I thought, and remembered washing in a tub in front of the fire in winter, and in the back yard in spring and summer. Peggy saw my confusion and helped me find the bathroom. One of the wonders of America!

Scrubbed clean, hair braided, I presented myself to Mrs O'Connor. I was to help Peggy, she said, and do as she asked. When Peggy didn't need me, I was to sit with Margaret, who would teach me to read and write English. I could count at least, having learned how to do that from my brothers.



chapter

5

I realised that I was very lucky to have met Mrs O'Connor. The O'Connors treated the people who worked for them very well, much better than some employers I heard about. They really seemed to want me to feel at home, and in return I did my best to perform all my duties as well as I could. The days flew by, and suddenly it was Sunday. I was so excited I could hardly eat anything. I got up really early and paced my bedroom floor, listening for the bell, or a knock on the door. When no one had come for me by eight o'clock, I began to worry. I went to find Peggy, and she explained that maybe my brothers had found work and had been working late the previous night. That cheered me up a little, and I went to sit with Margaret. I was learning English quite quickly, and was proud of the fact that I could already read and write a little.

A 10 o'clock, there was a ring, and I ran to the door, following Peggy, who got there first. It was Seamus, but he was by himself. I must have looked as disappointed as I felt, because he picked me up and swung me around the way he always did when he wanted to cheer me up.

He told me that he'd come to take me to where he, Da and Sean were living, and that I should get my coat. I left him with Peggy and went to tell Margaret where I was going.

Seamus took my hand and we walked a few blocks, then took a left and a right and carried on until I had lost all sense of direction. We walked for a very long time, with

Seamus telling me what had happened since they had left me. I kept

interrupting, telling him about what I had been doing. Neither of us was paying much attention to what the other was saying.



Then I began to notice that, in this neighbourhood, the houses looked different. They were closer together, washing was strung outside windows, and there were different cooking smells wafting through the air. People were leaning out of windows shouting to each other and yelling at the scruffy, dirty children playing in the streets. There weren't many horses, I realised, and hardly any horse-drawn carriages. No one was speaking English either. I held Seamus' hand tighter. He asked what was wrong, and I asked what language these people were speaking.

He just laughed and said, 'They're speaking Italian, German, Polish, Russian, Dutch, Norwegian and more. This is an immigrant neighbourhood. It's fine – there's nothing to worry about. We're all the same here. We're all newcomers.'

I realised he was right. Whatever language we spoke and whatever country we'd come from, we were all the same, strangers in a strange land. Then Seamus stopped and looked up, pointing, and there were Da and Sean, yelling and waving. I waved back and followed Seamus, through the doorway and up three flights of stairs to find Da standing in the doorway of their rented apartment. Across the hall, the door opened and there was the Italian 'Mama' from the immigration centre, smiling and welcoming me.

After my excitement had died down, I begged to hear their story all over again. The Italian boys' uncle did own a restaurant and, although he didn't need any staff, he knew people who did. Da, Seamus and Sean had all found jobs, and there was a vacant apartment opposite the one the Italian family had been taken to. The Italian uncle had soon arranged for Da to rent it, but it wasn't very big. Not big enough, said Da, for me to live there too. When I heard that, I felt strange. In the beginning, I'd thought that I'd hate

not being with my family, but I had a good life with the O'Connors. I had my own room, I was learning English, I was eating well and my work wasn't hard. I was beginning to feel guilty, because I realised that I wouldn't want to live in this small apartment, even if I could.



chapter

5

Seamus always seemed to know what I was thinking, and he laughed. He told me not to worry, that as they all had jobs, they'd soon be able to move into a bigger place – one where I could have my own room. Then there was a knock on the door, and I was introduced to Giorgio and Mario, the neighbours. Their mother had made pasta, they said, and we were all invited to lunch. I don't know how Sean and Seamus had understood the invitation, but 'Mama' was waiting for us, with huge pots of spaghetti which she had made herself, and a wonderful meat sauce.

I'd never eaten spaghetti before, and found it difficult to wrap it around my fork. Da, Seamus and Sean had obviously had it several times, as they were almost tidy about eating it. Mario, Giorgio, and Mama were experts, of course, and I didn't mind when they laughed at me, as I tried to slurp strands of spaghetti into my mouth. I learned later that Mama cooked for Da and my brothers, and they gave her some money to buy the ingredients. By pooling their resources, both families ate better than they might have done otherwise. The uncle helped too, sending Parmesan cheese from the restaurant.

We'd left the doors of our apartments open, and a raggedy child came in. Mama scooped him into her lap, and put a plate of food out for him too.

He ate, smiled, and said 'Danke'.



chapter

5

'What language is that?' I asked.

Seamus said, 'German. His name's Klaus. His father works with Da.'

So, there were members of three immigrant families from different parts of the world, sitting and eating together as though it were the most natural thing to do.

I thought back to my old life in Ireland. Such an event would never have happened there! In fact, such a lot had happened since we'd left the farm, I almost felt that I was a different person from that Irish girl who had only spoken Gaelic and had only been to Dublin once. It all seemed so long ago. I looked around the faces at the table and wondered if these people felt the same. I told Seamus what I'd been thinking, and he said that he was feeling like that too. Then he and Mario seemed to be discussing the same subject, and I guessed that Mario felt much the same as we did, as he was smiling and nodding, and occasionally shaking his head, as if he couldn't believe that he was the same person who had left Calabria in southern Italy such a short time ago.

Klaus had escaped from Mama's lap, and she was piling more food onto a plate for him to take to his mother downstairs. She was ill, we understood, so

Mama looked after her
and fed her only
child while her
husband was at
work.



chapter

06

My life continued in much the same way for a long time. I worked at the O'Connors' and, on Sundays, I went to see what was now my extended family. Klaus's mother was now also present at Mama's table. Mama, as I now called her too, had taught me how to make pasta and various sauces. I loved the flavours of basil and oregano – things I'd never tasted in Ireland, as they weren't suited to our harsh climate.

Sometimes Giorgio would come to collect me from the O'Connors', explaining that my father and brothers were working, or very tired, although they were usually all at home when I arrived, and didn't yawn at all until they'd eaten well. After we'd had been in America for a year, Seamus told me that he was going to marry Maria, Mama's oldest daughter. He showed me the engagement ring and said that, as Maria and her father had agreed to the marriage, they would soon be having an engagement party. Now they just had to organise a priest to perform the wedding ceremony, because no one saw any point in waiting too long after the engagement. Seamus was also busy looking for an apartment to rent.

I immediately thought that perhaps I should move in with Da and Sean when Seamus left but, in the end, we all agreed I was better off staying with the O'Connors. I asked Seamus what I should buy him and Maria as a wedding present. I was paid every week, but spent very little of my wages. I didn't have to buy any food, and Margaret had given me some of her old dresses to wear when I wasn't working.

Peggy was good with a needle, and altered them so that they fitted me as though they had been made for me. I had quite a lot of money saved, as Da and my brothers would never accept financial help from me. I suppose they didn't need it.

We had all learned how to communicate with each other – more by instinct and intuition than in English, I sometimes felt. Klaus was learning English at school, I was learning from Margaret, and everyone else around Mama's table was picking it up from wherever they could. We also peppered our conversation with words and phrases from the languages of the others, although I couldn't say for sure that the Italians and Germans ever spoke any Gaelic.

Time went on. Maria and Seamus got married, and it seemed as though everyone from the whole block was there to celebrate with them. They moved into a small apartment not too far from the O'Connors, so I could visit them some evenings when I didn't have any work.

Sometimes the O'Connors would have guests for dinner, and I would have to serve at the table with Peggy. We always got to eat whatever was left over, although the cook would often let us eat before we started serving; she said that we worked better when our stomachs were full. These evenings were interesting because Mr O'Connor was involved in politics and I learned a lot from listening to the dinner-table conversations. I began to realise that America was huge, and didn't begin and end in New York.



chapter

06

There was the south, where rich white people had black slaves, the colder north, and the land still being explored to the west. Obviously this was a land of contrasts, and slowly I realised that I'd like to see more of it. In Ireland, we would never keep slaves, and I wondered how people could 'own' other people. The idea was barbaric. How could slave owners justify what they did? One day, I was bold enough to ask Mr O'Connor about this, and he said that, in all honesty, he didn't understand it either. Little did we know then that there would be a bloody civil war fought to free slaves from plantation owners less than twenty years later.

One evening when I was free, I walked to where Maria and Seamus lived on Mulberry Street. Giorgio and Mario were there too, and the men were arguing. I found Maria in the kitchen, cooking and crying. I had no idea what was going on, because the men, including Seamus, were speaking Italian. Maria explained, in between sobs, what they were arguing about. Mario had somehow become involved with some criminals, and Seamus had discovered this quite by accident. There had been a robbery at a restaurant near their home, and Seamus had seen Mario running away from the scene. Seamus and Giorgio were trying to persuade Mario to leave New York and start a new life in another city.

I'd lived a fairly sheltered life with the O'Connors, and didn't know much about New York's underworld. Maria said that Mario needed to leave before the police found him or he got into even more serious trouble with New York's criminal gangs. She started crying again.



I tried to comfort her, but she and Mario were very close, and she would miss her brother terribly. We heard a door slam, and I rushed into the other room. Mario had gone, and none of us would ever see or hear from him again. He left with only what he was wearing that evening. It was Giorgio who would have to explain his absence to his mama and the rest of the family. Seamus and Giorgio looked at me, but said nothing. They sat in silence while Maria and I laid the table and then served dinner. None of us felt like eating, but Maria had spent a lot of time preparing the meal, so we dutifully ate. Giorgio even made a few jokes, and we all laughed, although our thoughts were with Mario.

Later, Giorgio offered to walk back to the O'Connors' with me, and I saw Seamus frown, but he didn't say anything. As we were walking, Giorgio surprised me by telling me that he loved me and wanted to marry me. Then he kissed me, and I had no idea what to do or say. Giorgio was like a brother, I had thought, and I felt very confused.

When we got to the O'Connors' we said goodnight and I fumbled with the lock, and couldn't open the door. Peggy let me in. She asked what was wrong and I told her about Giorgio, although not about the Mario situation.

Peggy was delighted for me. She told me how handsome Giorgio was, and what a good man he was. What more did I want? Being young (I'd just turned sixteen), I didn't know the answer to that. I did know that I didn't want to marry Giorgio, although I had no reason that I could give to Peggy.



chapter

07

The next evening, Mr O'Connor summoned me to his study. That was the first time he had ever done that, so I guessed it was going to be important. He asked me to sit down, and explained that Margaret was going to visit her aunt and uncle in a place called New Orleans, in the south. He said that he and Mrs O'Connor had seen how close Margaret and I had become, so they would like me to go with her. He himself would escort us on our journey. We were going by boat.

'What an adventure!' I thought, but that was quickly followed by 'Not a boat!' Mr O'Connor seemed to read my mind, and explained that all of us, including me, would be travelling in first class, and that the journey would be a comfortable one.

I was very excited by the idea and I asked when we would be leaving. It was to be soon – the following week. I flew out of the room and bumped into Margaret, who was as excited as I was.

'When will you tell your family?' she asked.

I hadn't thought about them in my excitement. Margaret suggested sending them a note there and then, but I thought I should tell Da myself, on Sunday. Mr O'Connor came out of his study then, and said that he had spoken with my father before he had said anything to me, and Da had given his permission for me to go on the trip. What a relief!

Margaret dragged me to see her mother, who was looking at dress patterns. She told me that the three of us would go shopping for dress material the next day, and that we'd have clothes made for the trip. We'd buy accessories too: gloves, bonnets and parasols, as it was hot in New Orleans.

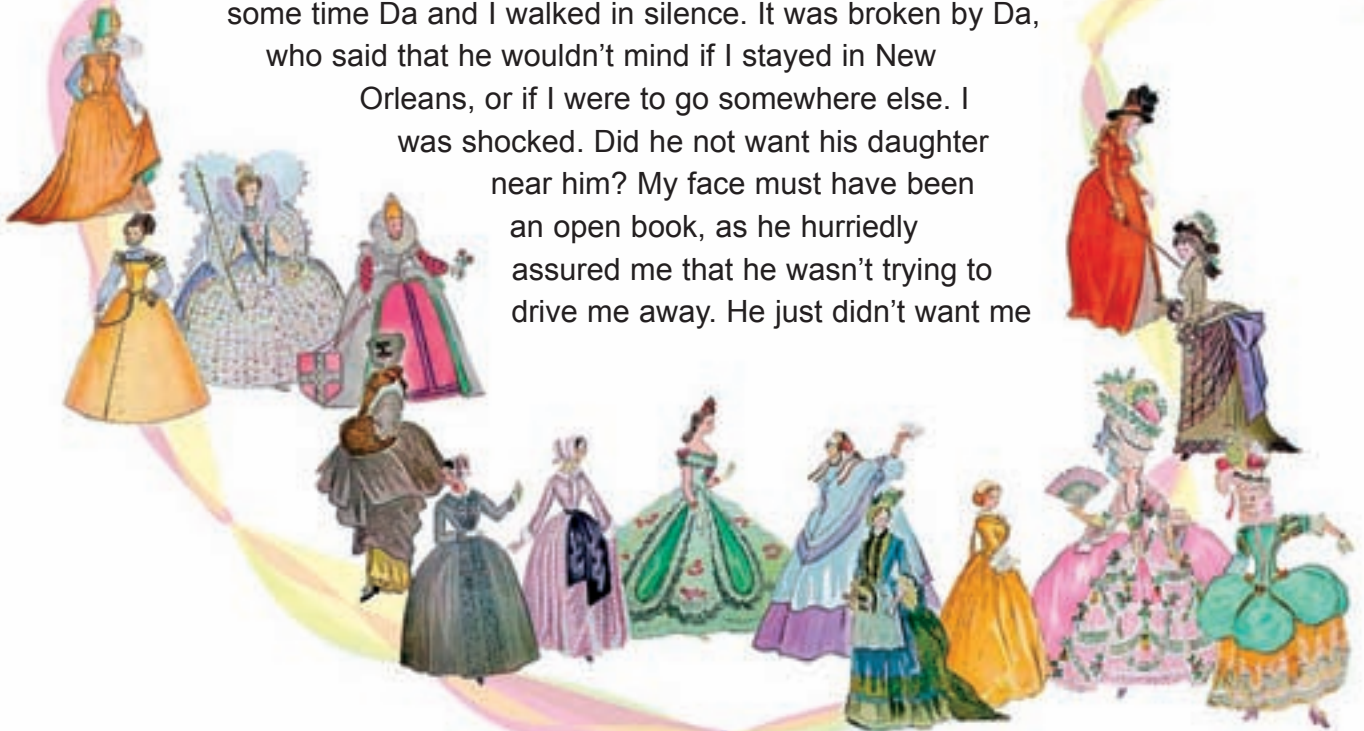


The shopping expedition was a real thrill for me. I finally got to spend some of the money I'd been saving and, by the time we sailed, I had some wonderful new clothes. Normally I wore my maid's uniform or Margaret's unwanted dresses when I wasn't working.

That Sunday I was nervous, hoping that Seamus or Sean would come to collect me. I didn't want to have to walk with Giorgio because I didn't know what I would say to him. I needn't have worried, as it was Da himself who came to the house. He was shown into Mr O'Connor's study by Peggy, and they both came out smiling. Da told me that he had given Mr O'Connor some money which he would give me in New Orleans, so that I would feel more 'independent' he said, but this word was said in Gaelic. As we walked to his home, Da explained that he wasn't really happy about me being a servant, and having money would mean that if, at any time, I wanted to return to New York, I could. I didn't have to stay with Margaret for ever.

His words made me stop and think. I had only really been thinking of myself in relation to the O'Connors. Because I lived with them and they treated me so well, it felt as though I was one of the family. The work I did for them was only the kind of work I would have done in our small house in Ireland. I cleaned, fetched and carried, and served food. In return I had been educated by Margaret and Mrs O'Connor. Peggy had helped teach me English too, and I was happy with the O'Connors. Now I began to question my relationship with them and with my own family. I felt uncomfortable, and for some time Da and I walked in silence. It was broken by Da, who said that he wouldn't mind if I stayed in New

Orleans, or if I were to go somewhere else. I was shocked. Did he not want his daughter near him? My face must have been an open book, as he hurriedly assured me that he wasn't trying to drive me away. He just didn't want me

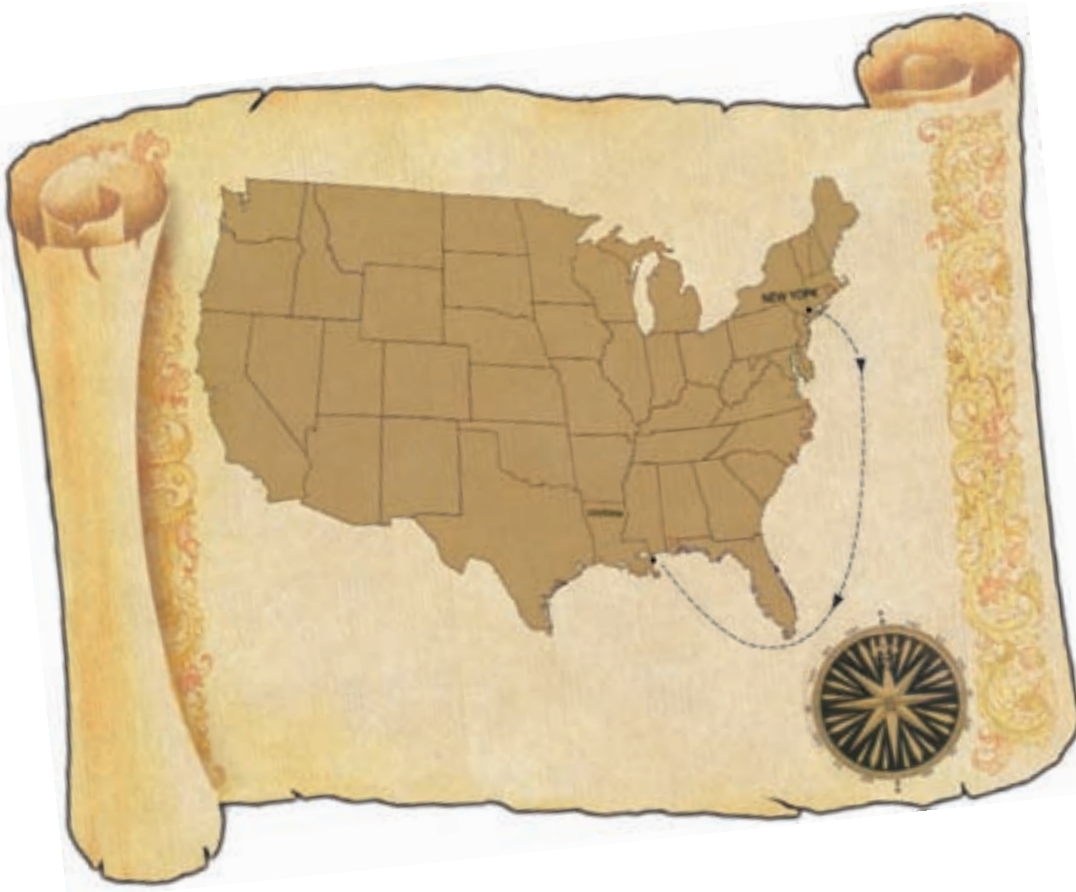


chapter

07

to marry Giorgio, or anyone else for that matter. He thought I was still too young to be a married woman. I hadn't expected to hear this and, without thinking, I stopped in the middle of the street and gave Da a big hug. It was his turn to be surprised, as he had thought that I wanted to marry the kind, good-looking Italian. I now felt much better about going to Da's, knowing that I had his full support.

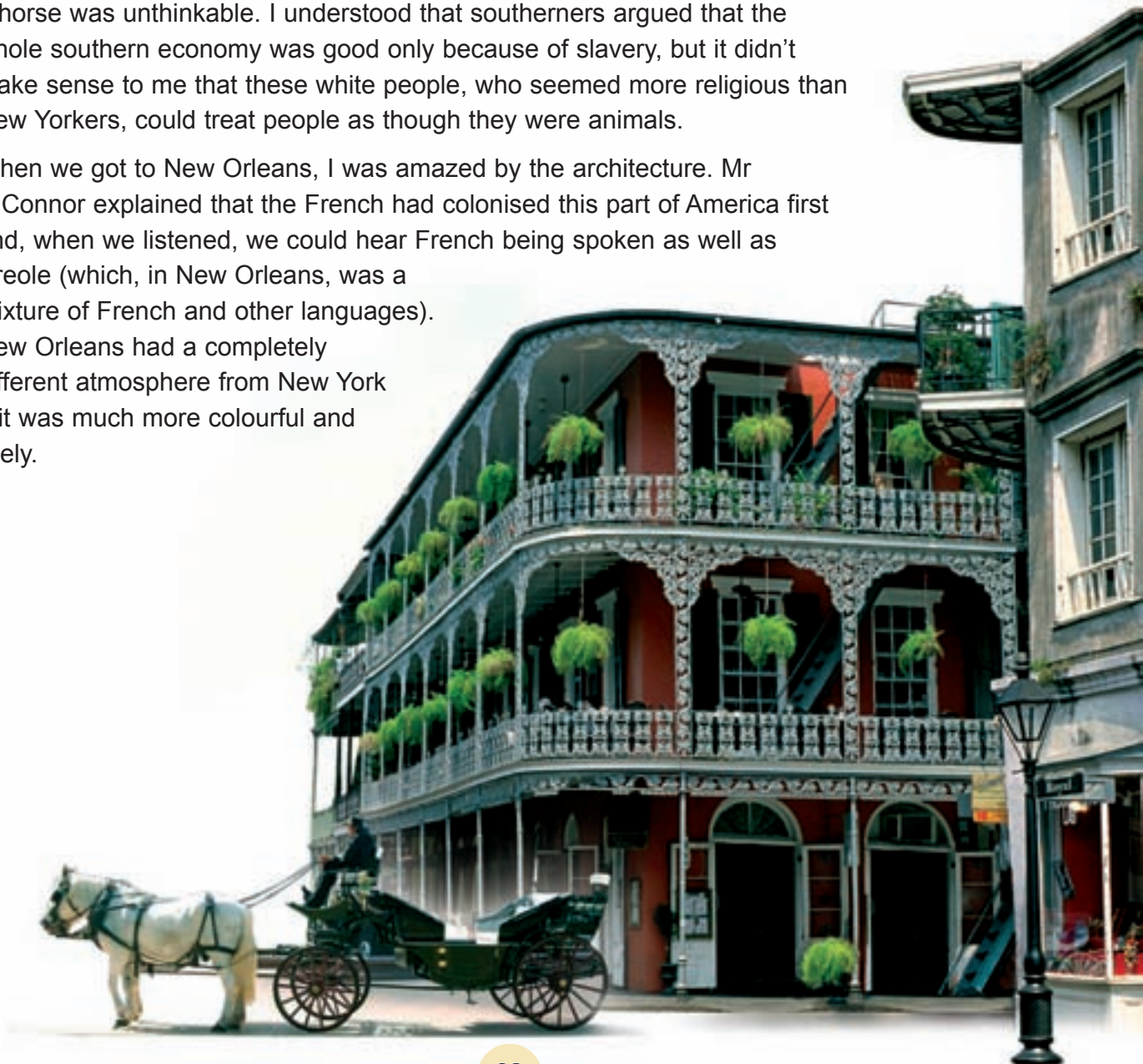
I told everyone about my trip to New Orleans while we were eating at Mama's. Sean and Seamus were delighted but concerned, until Da told them that Mr O'Connor would be travelling with us and, afterwards, I would be under the protection of Margaret's uncle. Poor Giorgio didn't know what to say; he just looked sad throughout the rest of the meal. Later, he tried to talk to me privately, but my father and brothers always seemed to be around. When the time came for me to leave, Da took me back, rather than allow Giorgio or Sean to take me. So I left New York without saying anything to Giorgio about his marriage proposal. I hoped that, by the time I returned, he would have found somebody else.



Margaret and I shared a beautiful cabin on the boat; the conditions were so different from the ones on the ship that had brought me to America. There was entertainment on board: a piano player accompanying a female singer, and card games for the men. The trip had a holiday atmosphere, and the whole voyage was full of new experiences for me. It was the first time I'd seen such entertainment, the first time I'd seen men in white suits and the first time I saw a black slave. He didn't look any different from black people I'd seen in New York, and I couldn't understand how keeping slaves could be justified. That you could buy and sell a person as you would a horse was unthinkable. I understood that southerners argued that the whole southern economy was good only because of slavery, but it didn't make sense to me that these white people, who seemed more religious than New Yorkers, could treat people as though they were animals.

When we got to New Orleans, I was amazed by the architecture. Mr O'Connor explained that the French had colonised this part of America first and, when we listened, we could hear French being spoken as well as Creole (which, in New Orleans, was a mixture of French and other languages).

New Orleans had a completely different atmosphere from New York – it was much more colourful and lively.



chapter

08

Margaret's aunt and uncle lived just outside the town in a huge house. They had servants, both white and black, but, as they pointed out, they weren't slaves. Margaret and I were shown to our rooms; mine was next to Margaret's so that I could help her dress and do her hair. She did the same for me, in fact, although we didn't tell anyone else about this. We were more like sisters than mistress and servant.

Mr O'Connor stayed for a few days, then returned to New York, having given me the money from my father. I had no idea what it was really worth, as I hadn't really bought much, except when we went shopping before this trip. Mrs O'Connor or the cook sent me to buy food occasionally, but this was paid for on a monthly basis, so I never actually paid for anything, or understood how much things cost. Margaret didn't have any money because her aunt and uncle would cover her expenses.

Margaret's aunt was born in New Orleans and had met her husband, Frank Doyle, on a trip to New York. He was, of course, Irish, being Mrs O'Connor's brother. He was a charming man and had been very lucky in his business dealings. He had made more than enough money and had retired by the age of 35. They were a wonderful couple, and their only regret was that they couldn't have children. That was where Margaret came in. Mrs Doyle wanted to do things for Margaret, and the first thing she did was to host a ball. This was the

first time Margaret had ever been to a ball, and she insisted that I accompany her. Margaret had to teach me how to dance, because the only dances I knew were traditional Irish ones, and these were not suitable for the occasion. By the evening of the ball I could dance well enough not to embarrass myself – at least I hoped so.



Mrs Doyle had employed extra servants for the ball, and the house was full of activity all day. People came to arrange flowers, the kitchen was in use from the early morning, and delicious smells wafted through open doorways. Margaret and I were so excited that we rushed about getting in everyone's way, until Mrs Doyle suggested that we go for a ride in her carriage. We jumped at the chance, and the horses and carriage were brought to the front of the house by Davey Byrne, one of the grooms. He was to drive the carriage and Nancy, one of the older maids, was going to come with us.

We drove into the countryside at a leisurely pace, happy just to look at the scenery and the wildlife. Nancy and Davey weren't talkative either. It was very peaceful and relaxing, until we suddenly heard a gunshot. In Ireland, it would have meant that someone was shooting rabbits, or perhaps a fox, so I ignored the noise, but Davey quickened the horses' pace and Nancy seemed very tense. I looked around, but couldn't see anything unusual. Then a black man ran across the track, scaring the horses. Instead of just running though, the man stopped and calmed the animals. Davey was impressed, I could tell, and for some reason he told the man to lie on the shaft that separated the two horses. The man did so and no other words were exchanged. Davey turned the horses and carriage and headed for home with our extra passenger.

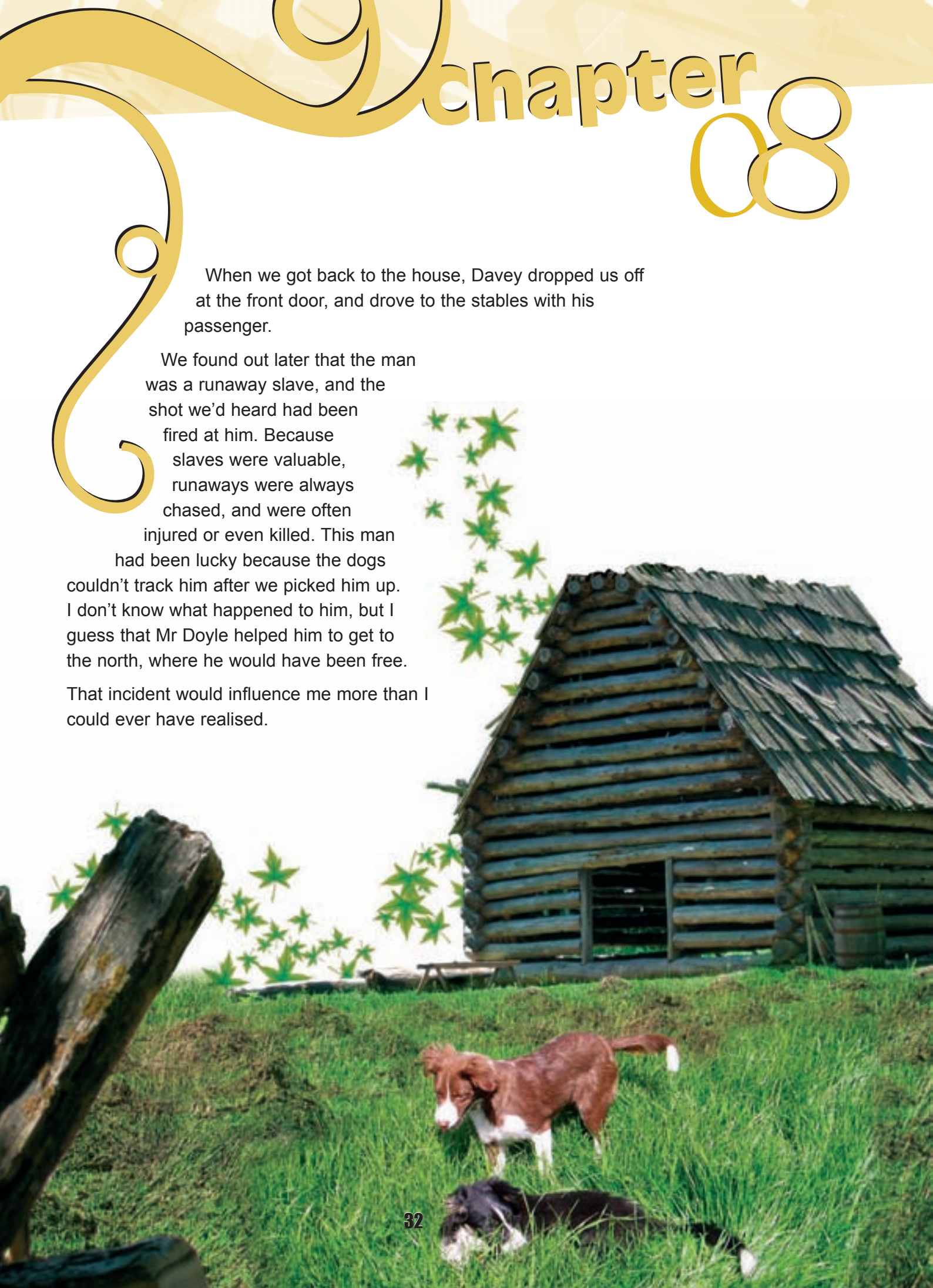
Margaret and I exchanged glances, but didn't ask any questions. It didn't seem appropriate.



chapter 08

When we got back to the house, Davey dropped us off at the front door, and drove to the stables with his passenger.

We found out later that the man was a runaway slave, and the shot we'd heard had been fired at him. Because slaves were valuable, runaways were always chased, and were often injured or even killed. This man had been lucky because the dogs couldn't track him after we picked him up. I don't know what happened to him, but I guess that Mr Doyle helped him to get to the north, where he would have been free. That incident would influence me more than I could ever have realised.



The ball that night was wonderful, and I could hardly believe that I was a part of it. I temporarily forgot the events of the day, and was lucky enough to have a partner for every dance. Margaret was too, although she danced a lot with one man in particular. It was towards the end of the ball that I realised why we had come to New Orleans – for Margaret to find a wealthy husband.

Later, after the ball, Margaret told me that she'd danced with a Mr Townsend, who lived near her aunt and uncle. We were all invited to visit him for dinner the following day. It turned out to be a whirlwind romance, and the two were married at the Doyles' house, three months later. Mr O'Connor was there, but Mrs O'Connor was too ill to travel.

Now that Margaret was married, I realised that my life would be totally changed too. More and more often I found myself thinking about what Da had said before I left New York. I was in a dilemma. I didn't want to continue to be Margaret's maid, I didn't want to go back to New York with Mr O'Connor, and I didn't want to work for the Doyles. I knew, at least, what I didn't want to do, but unfortunately I didn't have a clue what I did want to do. I still had the money Da had given me, so maybe it was time to be more independent, just as he had wanted.

I'd heard that there was good farmland to be had in the west, and I decided to ask Mr Doyle for advice. He said that with the money I had I could buy a small plot of land, but he also pointed out that it might be dangerous for a 'young lady' to move out there alone. I asked Mr Doyle what he personally thought I should do, and he actually gave the matter a lot of thought, which surprised me. Most men would have advised me to get married. Finally, he suggested that I go to Baltimore, where he thought I might open a small café or restaurant.

'Why Baltimore?' I asked, and it was the answer to this question that changed my life.



chapter

09

Mr Doyle had, for some years, been helping slaves to escape to freedom in the north. They headed for New York, but it was a lot easier if they had a 'resting point', and Baltimore would be a good location. Baltimore is in the state of Maryland, and in that state and in neighbouring Virginia there were still large numbers of slaves, so one or two extra black people would not be noticed. There was also a harbour, and runaways could escape by sea, as well as overland. This convinced me. My time in New Orleans had reinforced in me the belief that people should not be bought and sold. The black man on the road that day, and the way Davey had helped him, remained in my memory.

It was arranged that Davey and Nancy would take me to Baltimore, and our passage was booked. Margaret and I could still see each other occasionally, as ships were fairly frequent, and Da and my brothers could also visit by sea. It was sad saying goodbye to Margaret, but I was excited and my excitement grew as soon as I got on the ship. On this voyage, Davey showed me how to play poker, although I wasn't allowed to gamble with the men. Davey played a few hands and showed me his winnings. Nancy disapproved, but I thought it was a good way of getting extra cash. It's probably a good thing that I wasn't allowed to play, or I might have lost all my money. I can be reckless when I'm excited.

We did dance though, and Davey was a good dancer.



Nancy once again disapproved, but I didn't see anything to disapprove of – I only danced with Davey, not with men I didn't know.

When we got to Baltimore, Davey took charge. He got Nancy and me settled in a guest house and went to a cheap hotel. He soon managed to find me a property – a restaurant/diner with a kitchen and living quarters upstairs. When I had dealt with all the paperwork, Nancy and I moved in, and set about getting ready for a grand opening. I hired a chef and people to serve at the tables. I wrote a letter to Da too, telling him about everything I was doing.

Nancy soon decided to go back to New Orleans; she missed it, and didn't like Baltimore at all. It wasn't as colourful, and it wasn't her home. Davey said he'd stay a while longer – just to help out when the restaurant opened. He did, however, arrange for Nancy to travel back as a companion to an elderly lady on the voyage.

Davey disappeared on the day of the opening, but turned up with Da and Sean, just before I opened the doors to customers for the first time. They'd got my letter, and come to congratulate me. Seamus and Maria had had twins (a boy and a girl) so they couldn't travel, but they wished me well. So I was an aunt and hadn't known it! I never did find out how Davey had known that Da was arriving on that day. I realised, years later, that Davey could just pick up news seemingly from the air. One of his most often-repeated phrases was 'A little bird told me.' Sometimes I half believed him.



chapter 10

On that first evening, we were rushed off our feet; the restaurant was a success from day one. Da and Sean stayed for a week, to make certain I didn't want to change my mind and go back to New York with them. I wished they could have stayed longer, but I knew they couldn't afford to miss any more work. I felt nostalgic when they left, and hoped that Davey wasn't thinking of leaving too.

After we closed the restaurant that night, Davey said 'I'm not going anywhere, not unless you want me to.'

So he stayed, and we worked hard to build up the business and to help runaway slaves on their flight to freedom. After the civil war, we didn't have to do that any more. Instead, we opened a hotel with an even bigger restaurant.

The hotel was a success too, and we could soon afford to take some time off. We decided to go back to visit Ireland together, travelling first class this time.





Postscript

Looking at my great-great-great-grandmother's story again made me realise how relevant it is today. New immigrants in America in the nineteenth century had to find ways of communicating and interacting with each other. Although they spoke different languages and came from different cultures, they all wanted to become American citizens.

Today, there are millions of refugees around the world who have been forced to leave their homes because of wars, poverty, famine, disease, environmental disasters and persecution. Just like those early immigrants in the United States, these people have to start new lives in very difficult circumstances.

I hope that my work with the UNHCR will help refugees live in harmony with the rest of the people in their new countries.

My ancestors made a better life for themselves in a new home, and I hope I can help other people to do the same.

Tasks

Chapter 1

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 Why didn't Maire and her family have any way of making a living?
- 2 Why did the family have to leave their farmhouse?
- 3 How did Maire's brothers keep the family's spirits up while they were walking to Dublin?
- 4 In what ways did other people help them before they reached Dublin?
- 5 What tragedies took place after the family reached Dublin?
- 6 Why did the family decide to continue their journey and go to America?
- 7 Can you explain why Maire's uncle made the travel arrangements?
- 8 How did the different members of the family feel on the day they were leaving Dublin? Why?
- 9 What was Maire thinking about as the ship left Dublin?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are a journalist who has been sent to write a report on what is happening on the farms in Ireland. Describe the situation that you find.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates about the differences between Maire and her brothers. What do you suppose Maire thinks of the things her brothers do and say?

* D Writing

Briefly summarise the events of chapter 1. Then say whether this first chapter made you want to read the rest of the story. Explain why or why not.

Tasks

Chapter 2

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 Why were mothers singing lullabies to their babies?
- 2 In your opinion, why were so many people feeling sick on the ship?
- 3 What difference did Maire soon notice between passengers like her and most of the people with more expensive tickets?
- 4 Why did Sean laugh when Maire described the women's quarters to him?
- 5 What did Seamus tell Maire to make her feel a bit better?
- 6 Why did Sean speak to one of the sailors?
- 7 Why do you think the girl took hold of Maire's hand?
- 8 What did Maire feel grateful for?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are a passenger from steerage, speaking to a passenger who has a cabin on the ship. Describe what your life on the ship is like.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates what happened when Maire decided to do a bit of exploring on the ship.

* D Writing

You are Maire. Write a letter to your aunt and uncle in Dublin, describing how the members of your family are getting used to life on the ship.

Tasks

Chapter 3

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What did Maire and Sean both do on the ship that would be useful in New York?
- 2 How was Sean able to help his family?
- 3 What was the most serious problem that the passengers on the ship actually faced?
- 4 Why do you think the people who had died were thrown overboard?
- 5 What did Maire's father start to do in order to have a more positive attitude?
- 6 What did Mrs O'Connor tell Maire's father?
- 7 Why did Maire burst into tears?
- 8 How much did Maire and her family know about apartments? Why?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Mrs O'Connor when Maire tells her that the streets are paved with gold. Explain how you feel when you hear this, and what you tell Maire about it.

* C Talk about the story.

Talk to your classmates about the plans that are made for Maire's future. Say how you would feel if you were Maire.

* D Writing

Which of the characters in this chapter would you most like to be? Explain why.

Tasks

Chapter 4

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What did Maire soon notice about the Italian family in front of her?
- 2 What difficulty did Maire's family have in the immigration building?
- 3 Can you guess why the immigrants were being examined by doctors?
- 4 Why do you think Maire uses the word "surprisingly" when she says that they still had their bundles?
- 5 How did Sean and Seamus manage to deal with their language problems when they spoke with the Italian boys?
- 6 Who was Peggy, and why might she be good company for Maire?
- 7 What sort of accommodation was Maire given?
- 8 What two things were special about Sunday?
- 9 In your opinion, why did Mrs O'Connor want Maire to learn English?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Peggy. Describe how you feel when Maire arrives at Mrs O'Connor's house, and say what you think life will be like now that Maire has come to live there.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates as much as you can about what happens between Maire's family leaving the ship and Maire arriving at Mrs O'Connor's house.

* D Writing

Imagine that you are Maire. It's the end of your first day at Mrs O'Connor's, and you are going to write an entry in your diary. Describe your first impressions of life in the O'Connors' house, and say whether you think you're going to be happy there.

Tasks

Chapter 5

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What did Peggy tell Maire to stop her worrying?
- 2 How did Maire know that she looked disappointed when Seamus arrived?
- 3 In what ways was the neighbourhood where Seamus stayed different from Mrs O'Connor's?
- 4 Why did Seamus tell Maire that the people from different countries were all the same?
- 5 Where did Da, Seamus and Sean find jobs?
- 6 Why was Maire feeling guilty?
- 7 What did the two families do in order to have a better life?
- 8 What feelings did Maire find out that she shared with Seamus?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Mama. Write a letter to a relative who is still in Italy, describing the living arrangements you have made with other immigrant families.

* C Talk about the story.

Talk to your classmates about the differences between the new life that Maire has, and the lives that her father and brothers have.

* D Writing

Write a short article with the title 'Strangers in a Strange Land' for your school magazine. Describe the differences between the different immigrants in New York, and also say what they have in common.

Tasks

Chapter 6

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 Who does Maire mean by the expression "my extended family"?
- 2 Who sometimes collected Maire from the O'Connors'? What reason was given for this?
- 3 Why did Maire think again about moving in with her father?
- 4 What reasons does Maire give for not spending much of her money?
- 5 What opinion did Maire share with Mr O'Connor?
- 6 Why were Seamus and Giorgio arguing with Mario?
- 7 What do you think Maire means when she says that she had "lived a fairly sheltered life"?
- 8 What did Giorgio tell Maire, and how did she feel about the news?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that one of your friends has seen a member of your family taking part in a robbery. Write an email to a friend, explaining what you heard and how you feel about it.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates what Maire learns about America at the O'Connors' house, and how she gets to hear about these things.

* D Writing

Imagine that you are Maire. It's the morning after Giorgio asked you to marry him. Once again, Peggy tries to persuade you to say yes. Write the discussion you have with Peggy, in the form of a dialogue.

Tasks

Chapter 7

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 Why did Mr O'Connor explain that Maire would be travelling first class on the boat?
- 2 Where was Mrs O'Connor going to take Margaret and Maire the day after she was told about going to New Orleans? Why?
- 3 How did Maire feel when she saw that her father had come to collect her? Why?
- 4 Why had Da given Mr O'Connor some money, and what did he want Maire to understand?
- 5 Why did Maire hug her father in the street?
- 6 What do you think Giorgio wanted to say to Maire?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Da. Describe how you feel about Maire going to New Orleans, and what you think about Giorgio wanting to marry Maire.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates how Maire has benefited from being with the O'Connors, and what she thinks about her relationship with them and her relationship with her father.

* D Writing

Who is your favourite character so far? Describe this character, and say why she or he is your favourite.

Tasks

Chapter 8

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What excuse did southerners use to justify slavery?
- 2 Why was French spoken in New Orleans quite a lot?
- 3 What did Margaret's uncle and aunt explain about the black people who worked for them? Why?
- 4 Why didn't Maire know what her money was worth?
- 5 What did Margaret's aunt and uncle have regrets about?
- 6 Why did Margaret and Maire go for a ride in a carriage?
- 7 What impressed Davey? Why do you think he was so impressed?
- 8 How did lying on the shaft between the horses help the slave?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Davey Byrne. When you get back to the Doyles' house, you report what happened to Mr Doyle. Describe everything that happened.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your partner about Maire's experiences and feelings at the Doyle's house before she went out in the carriage.

* D Writing

Write a story about what happened to the runaway slave after Davey drove him to the stables. Start with the following sentence: "My heart was still racing when the carriage finally stopped in a dark, gloomy building that smelled of horses."

Tasks

Chapter 9

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What was the real reason for Margaret going to New Orleans?
- 2 Why does Maire use the phrase “whirlwind romance”?
- 3 Why wasn’t Mr Doyle very keen on Maire’s idea of getting a small farm?
- 4 Do you think that Mr Doyle was an honest man? Why?
- 5 What made Mr Doyle suggest that Maire go to Baltimore to open a café or restaurant?
- 6 How would Maire be able to see Margaret or her own family if she was in Baltimore?
- 7 What was the game that Davey showed Maire?
- 8 Why was Maire not unhappy that she didn’t play poker with the men?
- 9 Why do you think Nancy disapproved of Maire dancing with Davey?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Mr Doyle. You are very happy that Maire asked you for advice. Explain to Mrs Doyle what happened, and why you are happy.

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates about the different options that Maire had to choose from after Margaret got married, and why she chose the future that she did.

* D Writing

Imagine that you are Maire. Write a letter to your father, telling him about your plans for the future.

Tasks

Chapter 10

* A Answer each of the following questions.

- 1 What was above the restaurant in the property that Maire bought?
- 2 What did Maire mean by “grand opening”?
- 3 What job did Davey arrange for Nancy to do on her way back to New Orleans?
- 4 How did Davey surprise Maire on the day of the opening?
- 5 Why couldn't Seamus and Maria visit Maire?
- 6 How long did it take for Maire's business to become successful?
- 7 Apart from running a restaurant, what else did Davey and Maire do?
- 8 Did Davey and Maire spend the rest of their lives helping slaves to escape? Why (not)?

* B Imagine ...

Imagine that you are Da. What do you tell Seamus and Maria about Maire's life when you return to New York from Baltimore?

* C Talk about the story.

Tell your classmates about the different things that Maire managed to achieve.

* D Writing

Describe what happens at the end of the story. Did you expect the story to end in this way? Is it a good ending, or do you think that a different ending would have been better? Justify your view.