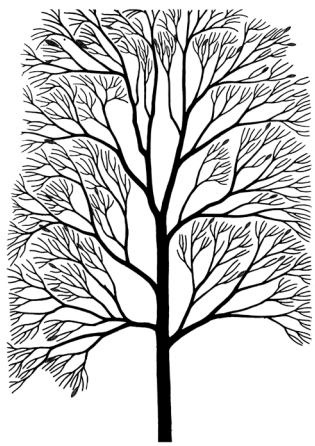
I Couldn't Love You More



Prologue

Summer 1991

My daughter is suspicious. She sits beside me in the taxi, squinting at the mist of rain as we wind our way through the straggled outskirts of Cork City. 'Who are we visiting?' she asks again, but my heart is beating, leaping – I'm surprised not to see it bucking through my shirt – and my voice is caught up in my throat. The driver answers for me by turning in beside a sign: CONVENT OF THE SACRED HEART.

'Not far now.' He starts along the humped slope of the drive and I stare out through the window at hedgerows, saplings overshot, cows, legs folded, fields green with wet. Fence posts flash past white; there's a curve, a mesh of wire, and there it is: the home. 'Here we are, right enough.' The man gets out, and he lifts our bag from the boot.

I wait until the car has turned before ringing the bell. It shrills, and we can hear it, startling on the other side. When no one comes I ring again, longer, louder, and even before the drill of it has died I seize the handle, and I twist. 'Hello?' There is no hint of give, and so I bang a fist against the wood. 'Hello!' I shout, and would have gone on shouting if Freya hadn't tugged at my coat.

I spin round for the car. It's gone: there's nothing but the plume of its exhaust, and desperate for what else there is to do, I see a gate in the fence and rush us both towards it.

'Was no one there?' Freya has to run.

I look back and, on the second floor, I catch the dim glow of a lamp.

The latched gate opens easily, and we find ourselves in a shaded glade of trees, a mulched path leading between pine and rhododendron, and, in the distance, the low hum of the road. At the far end is a rectangle of lawn; beyond it, the ruins of a tower.

'A castle!'

'Wait!' Around the edges of the lawn are black encircled crosses. I bend to one, my breath caught high, but the graves are inscribed with the names of nuns. Sister Augustine. Mother Euphrasia. The most recent, Sister Gerarda, buried two years before. I speak the names, and wonder what it was that brought them to their vows. Poverty, chastity, obedience.

I saw a face, I'm sure of it, peering out beside the lamp.

On the castle wall there is a plaque:

IN REMEMBRANCE OF ALL BABIES WHO DIED HERE BEFORE OR SHORTLY AFTER BIRTH. I GATHER YOU IN YOUR FRESHNESS BEFORE A SINGLE BREEZE HAS DAMAGED YOUR PURITY.

'Freya!' But Freya has stepped inside and is standing with her hood up in a leak of rain.

We wait until the sky has cleared and walk back the way we came. A pale sun has broken through the cloud and the house sits huge and solid in the light.

'Excuse me!' There is someone striding out. 'Can I help?' The nun is tall, white hair wisping on her upper lip. 'It's private property you're on.'

I swallow and my heart skips, painful. 'I was hoping for some information. I'd like to speak to someone who might know … my mother, she was here …'

Her eyes widen, and I see her flash a look across the knuckles of my hand. 'Shame on you, dragging the child along.'

'I've come from England to talk to—'

'This is no talk for innocent ears. Now off with you.' She ushers us, with unholy strength, past the front of the house, round to the side, and points us down the drive to the main road.

'She was here.'

The nun stands squarely. 'You'll find you have it all mixed up.'

My blood rises and I'm swirled round in a sea of red. 'And so was I.' I'm flailing, falling, holding out my arms, and when I'm steady, and my vision's cleared, the nun has turned her back, and we are left alone.

Aoife

1939

I met you at a dance in Ilford. I saw you as soon as you walked in. Black hair, the curls oiled down, the flash of your green eyes. I was there with Clifford Bray, but as soon as he released me to step outside and smoke, there you were at my side. 'Cashel Kelly. ' You put out your hand, and I took it as the music started. '"Begin the Beguine",' the bandmaster announced. Our own version of Cole Porter. And so we began.

You weren't tall, I could look you in the eye in my new heels, but you were strong, and you could dance. We swooped away to the lilt of the trombone, the clarinet smooth, talking, pleading, as we floated around the room. I'll never end, it told us, peeping high and low, two voices, mine and yours, and then the trumpets blasted and the notes slid into a swing and we were roaring, laughing, our fingertips on fire. Next was that dreadful song by Eddy Duchin about not waiting till Christmas to be good, and we were arranging ourselves, ready to start again, when I felt a hand on my arm. My eyes must have closed because I remember the surprise as they snapped open and there was Clifford.

I'll take over now, thank you. Cliff was always the gentleman, always polite, I think I only agreed to marry him because he asked so nicely, but politeness, that was never your style. Your face darkened and your grip tightened, but I looked at you, and I gave you a sign. What was it? I'm not sure I know, but you understood, and you released your hold.

Who's your new friend? Clifford held me, stiff and disapproving, as we clinked round the room.

Just someone … How could I explain? Someone I know. We left early. Cliff was working the next morning and he wanted to drop me home; I had a room with Mrs O'Shea on the Broadway, and he had to get to Epping where he lived with his mother.

I didn't see you again till the New Year. I'd been home. Spent a week on the farm at Kilcrea, and when I got back – I'd warned Clifford I'd be tired from the ferry, sitting up all night on a wooden seat – and I was tired, but then when Eileen asked, did I want to come to the dance, I'd be lying if I didn't wonder … maybe … what if you were there? I hardly dared look up as I stepped in. I was wearing a red dress. If you've two eyes in your head you'll see me, that's for sure, but you didn't come over, not at first. We waited out the first dance. Eileen was hoping to set up with a fella she'd met, a lad from Dun Laoghaire, not that that ever worked out. They were playing 'At Long Last Love', and we were mouthing the words, *Is it an earthquake, or simply a shock? Is it the good turtle soup or merely the mock?*

And there you were. Your eyes bright as ever. I don't think I waited for Eileen to find her man, I was away with you, sweeping round the room, and no one this time to tell us to break it up. Eva, you murmured into my ear, and I didn't have the heart to set you straight: Aoife – the name is pronounced

Eefa. Hadn't I said it a hundred times since arriving in England? But I didn't want my voice to come out sharp.

I wrote a note to Clifford the next day to say the crossing was desperate rough, I was the colour of the sea still, but needed nothing – I didn't want him knocking with powders – only a rest and some weak tea which Mrs O'Shea was kind enough to supply. I'll be well enough, GW, I told him, to start back at work Monday. Do you remember I used to dress the window at that department store in Kensington? Pontings. Closed down now. Then I took myself to Confession and was given three Hail Marys for my lies.

You wanted to be married that first summer, in June. It was the talk of war that was hurrying people up, but Mavis announced that she'd be marrying in June, although she and Bob had been courting five years and could have tied the knot at any time. But Mavis was the boss. We set a new date, September 9th, and didn't Chamberlain announce that very week we were now at war with Germany? This time you wouldn't cancel. Your sister could interrupt your plans, you said, but not Hitler. So the service went ahead, and lovely it was too, with Joan and Doris in palest pink. They wanted to wear those awful buttercup affairs they'd worn for Mavis, with the sash bows at the back, but I wasn't having that. I bought a roll of crêpe de Chine and we started again. Hundreds of tiny buttons. Spain was out. Too dangerous to travel, so instead we treated ourselves to two nights at the Strand Hotel. Squeeze my hand if you remember. What a two nights they were. The first morning you wouldn't let me out of your arms. What about breakfast, isn't it included? I thought someone might come and thump on our door, and you laughed and said that if I cared so much what people thought, we'd go and have our

tea and toast and then get back into bed. There was raspberry jam, and strawberry jam, and the butter was moulded into shells, and in the years that followed, when there was hardly a raisin to sweeten a scone, I'd think of that breakfast and wish I'd eaten more.

I'd been engaged before, twice as it happens, and you weren't going to let me forget it. What stopped you marrying that Dennis fellow, then, or Clifford Bray? You didn't miss a chance to remind me. But the truth was that I'd never really known them. Maybe that would have come later. Or maybe not. But either way the Good Lord had other plans.

That first month after the wedding we lived with your family. We were glad then to have had those two nights at the Strand because I was put in to sleep with Isabelle – your mother – while you were in the box room. I would have crept in beside you if I'd not been so afraid of Mavis, all settled in with her new husband, in the big room at the front. I was still working for Pontings, that was a lovely job, and you had work as an engineer. Trained for it, to step into your father's shoes. Cashel Kelly. You were named for him. Dead before you were born. But it wasn't until we had Rosaleen that I thought of Isabelle, a stranger in this country, four little ones, and not a bit of help.

We'd have stopped in Ilford for the duration of the war if there'd been a bedroom for us, and then didn't my brother Joe write to say he'd taken on the lease of the Bull and Gate in Islington, and there he was when we dropped round, Elsie all togged up and leaning on the bar. You saw a future for us then. How hard could it be to run a pub? The beauty of it – we'd never have to be apart. Men were being called up – boys, at least – and within a week you'd volunteered for the fire service, and that was it. You'd stay at home.

It didn't take long to find our pub. The couple who ran it were keen to get away. Off to Devon, they were. Her nerves were shot from the first war, and she wasn't going through it again. We signed the papers then and there, and afterwards we stayed and had a drink. Met the locals. Brixton. The shopping capital of the south. Lovely big houses out along the main road, and down by the station the first street in London to be lit by electric light. We stayed till after closing and even then we were too excited to go home, couldn't sit still long enough to board a bus, and so we walked, our arms linked, listening, waiting for what was to come.

If I close my eyes even now, Cash, I can feel it, your first kiss. We were outside the dance hall and you had hold of my hand, and as we said our goodbyes you pressed your lips against my hair. A heat went through me, over in a flicker, but the imprint of it stayed. Bye then, I said all breezy, and as I walked away I put a hand up to my temple and felt the burn of it right there. It woke me, I didn't know I'd been asleep, travelled through my skin and down into the pit of me. I could blush to say it, a fire raged so fierce I was hardly able to keep still. What's with you, you dope? That's what they said to me at Pontings, because I was away with you, wondering how it might feel, whatever came next. Give me a sign, Cash, if you remember our night in the Strand Hotel. There was me, sitting up in bed. No wonder God declared this to be a sin, or we'd all be at it, day and night.

It's not always like this, that's what you said, it can be a sordid business, if it's not right. I thought of Clifford Bray, and his politeness, and I wriggled down and lay against your chest. It was only later did I think: how do you know? But it wasn't expected that the men resist, it was only the girls that had to wait. Cash? I'll whisper it to you – that night in the

cellar with the sirens wailing, the place to ourselves for once with Margaret away visiting her sister, that's when I gave up being careful. What was the use when none of us might get through to the morning? One in the eye for Hitler. I didn't buy into that. But I knew straight away, when silence fell, and we wandered out into the sulphur and the smoke and there was one star glinting high above us in the dark. We clung together and gave our thanks and for all that I'd determined I'd not bring a child into this world, not till the war was over, I knew we'd made a start on our future.

★

Rosaleen was quiet as they boarded the train. She sat by the window and looked out. No, she shook her head at the offer of a sandwich, again no to a drink. It was a long slow journey from Harrogate to London. By Leeds the girl had still not said a word. 'I spy with my little eye,' Cashel leant forward in his seat, 'something beginning with …'

'She's too small,' Aoife whispered, although of course Rosaleen could hear. 'She won't know her letters, she's only just turned four.' She moved closer to the girl. 'Something the *colour* of …' She glanced around and her eyes lit on the leather bag Elspeth Stead had packed for her. It was the same bag Aoife had handed over when Rosaleen was three months old, and inside were the clothes she'd sent up to her over the years. There was the winceyette nightdress with the pink sprigged flowers and the ribbon bows, and a cardigan she'd paid Mrs Winstanley next door to run up for her in double-knit wool to keep her warm through that last freezing winter. She'd knitted her a doll too, for today, with embroidered eyes and mouth which she'd handed her when she arrived. 'Will you

keep her with you for the journey home?' Aoife had asked, but that too was met with a shake of the head. No.

'I'll give you a clue,' Aoife tried. 'It's inside the carriage.'

Rosaleen kept her eyes on the passing fields.

When they reached Leicester Aoife and Cashel ate the sandwiches they'd brought with them, although they kept one back, with a glug of tea, in case the child woke. Aoife's fingers itched to draw her down across her lap, lay a palm on her forehead, admire the shell of her ear. Instead she unwound the scarf she had around her neck, and folding it into a square she slid it between the window and her daughter's cheek. A wave of satisfaction threatened to engulf her, and when she met Cash's eye and he nodded his approval she had to stop herself from turning to her neighbour, to everyone in the carriage, and telling them: I'm her mother, do you know? This is my girl, Rosaleen Mary. But the man beside her had only one leg, his crutch sticking out into the aisle, and two young women, thin and pale, shared the seat opposite. They looked over at her, sour, and Aoife glanced away. Of course they must be thinking why didn't she lift the girl on to her lap, make room for someone deserving, but the child had a fierceness about her, and she couldn't risk it.

It wasn't until they pulled into King's Cross that Rosaleen's eyes flew open. She looked round, wild, as if she might run, but it was dark outside, shadows reflected in the windows, porters with cases, soldiers in uniform, groups of children herded along.

'Almost home now.' Aoife put a hand on her arm.

There was talk of a taxi, but the crowds in the station, the queue out by the rank, lost them their courage. We'll get the bus, they decided, and without warning Cash took hold of the girl, hoisted her up into his arms and ran with her across the street.

'Wait for me, you two!' Aoife was exultant.

'Would you like to sit upstairs?' Cash asked as they clambered aboard and, gentle as anything, he set her down.

'I would not.' Rosaleen stuck her chin out. It was the first time they'd heard her speak since she left Yorkshire, since she'd said goodbye to Elspeth Stead.

'So we'll sit downstairs.' Aoife could see two seats near the back and, taking courage from Cashel's example, she lifted the girl on to her knee.

'I'll sit over there.' Rosaleen wriggled down. There was an empty seat over the way beside a foreign man, a hat like Cash's tipped back on his head.

Cash grabbed her wrist. 'No, young lady,' he said. 'You'll sit where you're told.'

'This is your daddy,' Aoife tried. Maybe the girl was muddled.

'He's not my daddy.' For a four-year-old she was full of scorn, and she pulled away. 'He's my daddy.' She pointed, and before they could stop her she was away over the floor of the moving bus and had climbed up on to the seat beside the stranger.

Cash's fury threatened to derail him. 'Leave her,' Aoife held his arm, 'she doesn't know what she's saying.'

There were twenty-seven stops before they reached Brixton. Aoife had counted them that morning, in the long-ago time when it was her and Cash. A swirl of nausea caught hold of her, and she closed her eyes, and to distract herself from the creep of sickness, she pictured the delight in Rosaleen's face when they told her that before too long she'd have a brother or a sister. There was a new bed too, in a room all of her own, and Mrs Winstanley had run up curtains. In Harrogate she'd not had her own room. She'd slept in with Mrs Stead, not that Aoife went upstairs, just once when the girl had mumps, and

there she was, swollen and lost among the pillows, with Mrs Stead's stockings – had she forgotten she was coming? – hanging over the side of the chair. Mostly they sat in the parlour that didn't look as if it was used from one year's visit to the next, and she spent the hours attempting to coax her daughter on to her knee. She'd taken ribbons for her hair, long and thickly waving even by the age of three, yellow ribbons to plait into the ends, but the girl would not stay still. She wanted to be out, racing away across the country with the cowman's son, his neck and ears grubby as the earth. Aoife took a breath and remembered herself, sweeping the yard, washing down the doorstep, forking straw from the chicken coop, all so she'd be free to tear across the fields with her brothers where they'd make their own fun over at the creek, or climb into the hay barn and lie in hollows of warm hay, shrieking as they pushed each other off a precipice of bales. She could smell the hot, dry smell of the twine, feel the itch of it in her nose, but hadn't she got away from all of that? Put herself into college. Walking across those same fields to catch the train from Killumney into Cork, studying, taking jobs, anything that would fit around her classes, saving up her fare to London, avoiding marrying the first one who asked, waiting, waiting, for a man who might rise up in the world with her, make a better future, work hard for their children – not a filthy horde running wild, like this one – but who would get everything that was for the best, good food, smart clothes, an education, a job that meant she'd not be stuck at home, cutting peat from the bog, swabbing floors, old at thirty-five – her mother – with nine children, and those the ones that had survived.

The bus rattled to a stop and, shaken, Aoife twisted around expecting to find Rosaleen vanished, but there she was,

although the man – where had he even come from? – was gone. She eased her hand from her husband's. 'Is there room on that seat for your mummy?' she asked, and the girl looked up, her eyes flecked with fear, and, with the smallest quiver of her lip, she nodded.

They sat side by side, not speaking. Four years was too long. Aoife cursed the war, the greed of it, crossing herself as she did so, and thanking God in his wisdom to see fit that they'd survived.

'Are you getting off, then?' It was Cashel. 'Or will you wait and travel back to King's Cross?' Aoife looked into his face and smiled, and before the child had time to protest they had hold of a hand each and they were swooping her down the step and out on to the street.