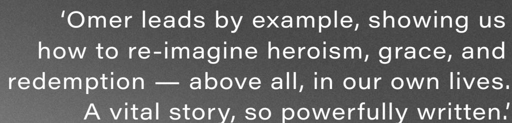

'Omer leads by example, showing us how to re-imagine heroism, grace, and redemption — above all, in our own lives. A vital story, so powerfully written.'

SARAH KRASNOSTEIN, author of *The Trauma Cleaner*

HOLY WOMAN

a divine adventure

LOUISE OMER

SCRIBE

Australia

I yanked open the screen door. Nag-champa incense, chatter in the kitchen.

'Hello-o?' Auntie Liz called out, her tone both welcome and rebuke. I was late for my date with a nun.

Framed in the light of the doorway, my dark curly hair was splayed in Medusa-tangles, my mascara smeared, my heeled sandals clutched in a weak, shaking fist. I hoped there was no spew on my mouth from when I'd asked last night's one-night stand — my first ever, at twenty-eight — to pull over on the drive across town.

I sat at the wooden kitchen table, apologising, breathless. Gurrumul's songs played soft in the lounge room. Auntie Liz's goddess drawings hung on the fridge.

'Hi, Margie.' I smiled apologetically at the nun I'd invited to brunch. My auntie had worked with the Sisters of Mercy in the nineties. Auntie Liz thought her old colleague Sister Margie Abbott might direct me to some answers.

Everyone else's plates were maple syrup–smeared. Uncle Sal picked up a spatula to serve me ricotta-orange hot cakes. For the last three months, our Sunday pancake ritual had tempered the loss of my thirteen-year-old churchgoing routine. But today I shook my head in panic.

'Not hungry, are you?' His eyes glittered beneath wavy silver hair.

Auntie Liz poured me coffee with a smirk, and said, 'We were just talking about Margie's trip to Ireland, Louise.'

Lively coils of wiry white hair sprang from Margie's head. No habit, no black gown; just cargo pants and a bright-blue Patagonia jacket. She emitted a stoic, pragmatic sensibility, like a straight-backed rural farmer, but held her body with light, natural ease. The author of several books, her latest was *Cosmic Sparks*, which suggested rituals to unite hearts with the earth. I'd summoned no ordinary nun.

Margie grinned at Auntie Liz. 'Two years ago, I went on a goddess pilgrimage for my seventieth birthday. It was a wonderful tour through the sacred places of Ireland and the British Isles: Iona, bike riding around Newgrange, and then off to Glendalough. I had a friend to stay with in County Kerry.'

I slow-breathed through my nose, trying to calm my nausea, as she described stories embedded in the Irish landscape. Méabh, Queen of Connacht. Éire, the mother goddess for whom Ireland is named. And Brigit, of course, an ancient Celtic goddess; when Christianity came to Ireland, she became an abbess and a saint.

'If you get a chance, do go to Kildare and meet the two Brigidines who tend St Brigid's flame.'

'Louise, did you know Nan's grandmother was born in Ireland?' said Auntie Liz. 'We've got our own Irish heritage.'

'Yes, I remember.' I looked at Margie across the table. Tried to sit tall and say why I'd asked her here. 'I just … It hurts. All that praying, all that singing. To who, you know? A guy.' I'd always prayed to God the Father, Jesus the Son. We even called the Holy Spirit 'Him'. But lately, it felt wrong. I trailed my finger along my mug handle. 'Where am I? Where are the women?'

According to Pew Research Center, there were 2.3 billion Christians in the world. In my religion, women outnumbered men, making up approximately 60 per cent of believers. Which made

1.38 billion Christian women in the world. Not to mention the roughly one billion Muslim and six million Jewish women in the other two world religions that prayed to a monotheistic, male God. Surely, I wasn't the only one with questions — could someone, somewhere, tell me if women can belong in a patriarchal religion?

Margie pressed her lips together. 'A lot of women have these questions. Some of them find answers exploring the goddess tradition. I think St Brigid could have what you're looking for.'

Soon, my nun-guide left for a long drive home. Auntie Liz and Uncle Sal walked her to the driveway, but after an urgent wave at the door, I dashed to the bathroom, where I retched until tears fell.

'Idiot, idiot,' I muttered, gripping cool white porcelain, punishing myself with the memory of last night's mattress on the floor, the smell of an ugly stranger's skin.

As my breathing slowed, Margie's words knitted together. This straight-backed, alternative nun seemed to believe I was at the beginning of a quest. Ireland was the place where goddess traditions and Christianity intersected, and the country held another pull: my mother's family line. Margie's pilgrimage laid out a path for my own.

A cheery beep, the screen door slammed. Someone put the kettle on and still I panted over the toilet bowl, wishing there was a way to divine the future in swirling specks of orange vomit.

I peeled off sweaty clothes and fell into bed, kicking back sheets as fresh air whispered through the window. Auntie Liz had left a jug of lemon water. I poured a tall, luscious glass, then closed my eyes, let noises come as if through a long tunnel. The rainbow lorikeets' vibrant chirps, the back door's *squeak-creak-slam* as Uncle Sal went to tend the veggie patch. My mind separated from my body, and I drifted.

Leave home.

I think St Brigid could have what you're looking for.

Who could resist the direction of a nun? Who could deny a call upon their heart? I'd survived my marriage breakdown, and wanted to be alone and free, wanted to leave safety and follow my questions. I would be a nomad with a red suitcase and a borrowed coat, unlacing Doc Martens at airport security, flying across the world in search of answers.

I would go to Ireland — from there, I would decide my next move.

Six months after I left my marriage, I left the country.

Ireland

Twenty-six hours, four airports; I fled the sun across the earth in one long night. The sky was grey-bright when I exited Dublin Airport in early afternoon, the wind rude and cold. I tugged my suitcase past the taxi rank, climbed aboard a double-decker bus, and contemplated long-haul travel's quiet brutality. My body felt as if it'd been spun by centrifugal force — spleen thrown against spine, stomach against ribs — and spat out.

On Camden St, I pushed open a butcher's back door. An Airbnb host with a salt-and-pepper beard led me three storeys up a thin, creaking flight of stairs ('Geez, whaddya have in this suitcase, bricks?') to my attic room. Clasping a cup of strong black tea, I sat cross-legged on my first of many temporary beds. East of the window, boiler-pipe steam rose into a dark ash sky, though it wasn't yet 5.00 pm. Enormous seagulls circled the city's chimneys.

Among the heavy books in my suitcase was an A5-sized King James Version Bible with a black leather cover and elegant, slim pages edged with gold. But instead of the word of God, I opened

John Bunyan's seventeenth-century novel *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where a man leaves his family to answer God's call. The first person he meets asks, 'Do you see yonder shining light?' The light calls the pilgrim forth and guides him where he's meant to go.

Like Bunyan's protagonist, I'd left community and security behind, convinced God had called me to this divinely designed path. I didn't know how long I'd be away from home. Three months? Six? A year? I only had three nights' accommodation booked, $200 of savings, and the $300 that Grandad had slipped into my hand when I last visited. A few freelance writing projects were lined up, but I'd have to pitch articles on the road. I planned to live on as little money as possible, and depend on providence.

I tucked my feet beneath me, and wrote in my journal:

Rules of pilgrimage

1. *Forsake comfort.*
2. *Seek yonder shining light. At the next stop, you will receive instruction.*
3. *Never steal, even if you have no money.*

Where I travelled would be decided by my quest: if I felt drawn to a concept that addressed women in Christianity, and perhaps Judaism and Islam, then I'd go there. And talk to people. This first stop, to meet St Brigid, was guided by a nun's holy wisdom; I'd received God's instruction and obeyed. I already had a few potential countries on a 'maybe' list. Soon, he would direct me where to go next.

At this point, I still trusted God.

—

'You're new here.'

It wasn't a question. My cheeks burnt at the pony-tailed librarian's patronising smile. I hated looking like I didn't know what I was doing.

'If you could just tell me where the Ussher Library is?'

He pointed to a grey flight of stairs. Heavy coat slung over one arm, I climbed four storeys to the religion section, and was disappointed when I pushed open the door to find undecorated rows of shelves. I'd hoped the research library would look like the Long Room, the famous library where Trinity College keeps the Book of Kells, the famous ninth-century illuminated biblical manuscript. But that was in a different building. Which cost €14 entry.

Piling my arms with books, I found a free desk between students' laptops and energy drinks, and started taking notes. St Brigid was one of three of Ireland's patron saints — the other two were St Patrick, who 'brought Christianity to Ireland' in AD 432, and St Colmcille, alleged to have invented monasticism. Like her saintly companions, St Brigid still had schools and churches named after her in almost every county. Born in Faughart, County Louth, in 450, her hagiographies (saints' biographies) claim she wanted to join a convent to dedicate her life to caring for the sick and poor. But her father, the pagan chieftain of Leinster, had promised her hand in marriage, so she prayed God would make her ugly. When her suitor glimpsed her transfigured face, he refused to marry her. After she took her vows, her beauty returned, more radiant than before. When she asked her father for land in Kildare, he said he'd only give her as much ground as her cloak covered. She unfurled her cloak and threw it across the green: it supernaturally stretched for acres. Thanks to this miracle of God, she built her monastery, where the town of Kildare now stands.

As the monastery's abbess, St Brigid lived a life of justice and evangelism. Most famously, she wove reeds into a cross while sitting at the deathbed of a pagan chieftain and teaching him the story of Christ. The chieftain supposedly asked to be baptised into Christianity before he died. Every January, schoolchildren weave these crosses in preparation for St Brigid's Day, February 1.

But before she was a saint, Brigit was a goddess. (I use 'Brigit' when referring to her as a goddess.) She has had many names, like Bríd or Bríg, and her legends are often contradictory. According to pre-Christian Celtic mythology, Brigit was a triple goddess, incarnated in three characters; stories associate her with poetry, healing, and blacksmithing. Her multiplicity meant stories depicted her as maiden, mother, and crone.

(A note here on the rich history of Celtic tradition. Neolithic archaeological sites like burial mounds and ring forts are found across Ireland. Newgrange is the island's most well-known monument; built around 3200 BC, it's older than Stonehenge and the Egyptian Pyramids. Due to the earth's angle, sunlight enters the ancient structure at dawn during the winter solstice — and no other time of year. Pre-Christian Ireland was an oral culture, so Newgrange's full meaning is guesswork. But it proves the Celts operated with a sophisticated level of astronomy, ceremony, and design. Celtic mythology, and therefore Brigit's stories, connect us to something ancient and powerful.)

All three of Brigit's mythic incarnations have associations with fire: the spark of creativity ignites the song of poetry, a medicine woman uses heat to prepare herbs and brews, and smith-work requires an open flame. Legend says a perpetual fire burnt for the goddess for hundreds of years. In a fire temple attended by priestesses, a taboo against male intruders caused transgressors' limbs to

fall off, or doomed the men to madness. Sister Margie Abbott had mentioned that the Brigidine nuns nurtured a perpetual flame of their own.

The flame wasn't the only tradition carried from Neolithic times to today. St Brigid's Day coincides with Imbolc, the ancient pagan festival celebrating the beginning of spring. In a legend that persists today, St Brigid journeyed across the land on the dawn of February 1, bringing the season's expanding light with her.

The Serpent and the Goddess, by Trinity College researcher Mary Condren, traces Brigit's transformation from goddess to saint. As monasteries proliferated in the fifth century, Christian scribes recorded ancient myths, aligning them with monotheistic dogma. Brigit was transfigured into sainthood, Condren wrote, and her supernatural power was ascribed to God.

I chewed a soggy cheese sandwich on a damp wooden bench under a maple tree, my breath visible in the air, and watched tourists queue for the Book of Kells. Sister Margie said St Brigid and the goddess tradition could have what I was looking for. But this implied transforming my spiritual practice to worship female deities from old religions. This was a near-impossible, gargantuan psychological leap. What was God to me? A Supreme Being, an omniscient, invisible presence, an ultimate power who created the world and controlled all things. A divine Father, who created universal laws and was the source of eternal wisdom. With whom I was in an intimate relationship. Thirteen years of faith had cultivated a continual conversation that occurred deep in my consciousness. So how to direct my attention, instead, to a feminine pantheon? How to believe in fairytale characters?

Wind shook wet leaves. And God was love, above all. He loved me: this underlaid my actions, and brought meaning and purpose to each day. And again, I came to that familiar frustration: God was father, man, other. Opposite to me, my body, my history.* I rolled crumb-filled cling wrap into a ball and tucked it in my pocket, fingers pink with cold.

By recommending this goddess tradition, Sister Margie encouraged me to search for a feminine divine: a mystic god-power personified as a woman. Maybe venerating goddesses — even if they were just pictures in storybooks — was a way to remedy the psychological imbalance of a male God.

The next morning, I knelt on the floorboards. Mist drifted beyond the window.

'Please light the way, Lord.'

Unease as I walked into the city centre, last night's dream seeping into waking hours. I had been the protagonist of a play. The audience was waiting, the lights were bright. But when I stepped onstage, I forgot my lines.

I splurged on an americano and croissant, and strolled through St Stephen's Green, a park at the top of Grafton St. Families and friends sat on benches beneath great sycamore trees, watching ducks and swans drift on a green-tinged lake. A laughing woman took photos of her partner extending his hands like a man crucified as grey-brown pigeons lined his arms. I breathed in as I passed, as

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* For the purpose of using my cisgendered experience as knowledge, I define my womanhood through socialised gender *and* through my body. Transwomen are women. This is true *as well as* the fact that women's experience throughout history has been, in part, defined by our biology.

if I could inhale their happiness.

I caught a coach to Dundalk, County Louth, to meet Celtic-spirituality teacher Dolores Whelan, who for the last decade had organised an annual St Brigid festival on her feast day. She was also involved in the revival of a July pilgrimage honouring the saint. Every year, hundreds of people made the walk from St Brigid's holy well in Faughart to the cathedral in Kildare.

Hundreds of wells are named after saints across Ireland, some decorated with pictures, candles, and ornaments. They might be ringed by brick, or simply be a hollow in long grass, and often mark a place of mythic significance. Before Christianity, the Celts saw wells as a connection to elemental power embedded in the earth. Saints supposedly used them to baptise new converts, and now people visited them for contemplation or healing. Pagan sites became Christian holy places.

At Dundalk bus station, a woman with dyed-crimson hair and a fuchsia coat waved at me from her car. I hopped in and we drove to a garden cafe. Across the table, Dolores had large round eyes and a deep and husky voice, and was about ten years older than my mother. She enunciated words with deliberate care when she wanted to drive a point home, a habit from when she lectured: she taught biochemistry before studying a master's in spirituality under radical Dominican priest Matthew Fox in 1983. Dolores had taught healing and creative spirituality for thirty-five years, and in the last four censuses marked her religion as 'Celtic Christian'.

'Growing up in Ireland,' she told me over soup and soda bread, 'there was an incredible religiosity. It was like everything was governed by the church. It was a really closed society. On Good Friday — there was always a sermon at three o'clock. And because there was communion, ye couldn't eat anything for three hours

before. Mam would say to us, *don't be hanging around the house*. And I used to go down to the forest. Now, when I think of Good Friday, that's what I remember: the primroses coming out. A part of my child soul knew that I could find God there. On Good Friday now, I never go to a church, but I spend the day out in nature.' She quoted a line from Patrick Kavanagh's poem 'Canal Bank Walk': 'But this soul needs a new dress woven of blue and green things and arguments that cannot be proven.'

Dolores encountered a sense of the divine in nature. She saw herself as continuing an ancient practice that sought connection with earth, water, and fire. But it wasn't only eco-spirituality that drew her to Celtic practices. Irish Catholicism was authoritarian, she felt, full of commands and directives and punishment. What's more, worshipping a male God felt incomplete. One of the reasons why she ran the festival was because St Brigid was important to women: she was a feminine face of God.

Catholic Ireland, Dolores said, had a strong relationship with the powerful maternal figure. The Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, was prominent in Catholicism as an intercessor; like her, Brigid embodied divine feminine qualities: compassion, nurture, generosity, trust.

'People often ask me, is what you teach Christian or pagan? What I'm teaching, what I'm doing, is both. Sometimes, I think Christianity imagines it fell out of the sky. But it integrates with the indigenous people in every country.'

A teenage waitress cleared our plates.

'Thanks a mill.,' Dolores mumbled. We left and climbed into her car. 'Oh! I forgot!' She dashed back to the cafe, and returned with a jar begged off the staff. 'For the holy water,' she said, before tucking it beneath the handbrake, turning on the ignition, and

driving up a windy road. She parked at a peak and directed me to look out towards Dundalk Bay and further, the Irish Sea: an apricot light glowed between the horizon and the clouds. I breathed air so cold it hurt my nostrils. Wind rustled through beech trees.

I followed Dolores' skinny legs under a copper arch spelling 'St Brigid's Shrine'. Across uneven mounds of wet grass, we passed odd-angled gravestones rubbed clean by decades of rain. We were right at the Hill of Faughart's peak, believed in Celtic mysticism to be a 'thin place'. Where elements meet — land and sky, land and sea — the veil between the physical world and the 'Otherworld' becomes thin. I tried to feel something, searched for tingles up my spine, which had always been the physical manifestation of the Holy Spirit. I was used to reaching up, for a God on high. But what if, like the Celtic Christians thought, power buzzed beneath my feet?

Dolores pointed to hundreds of coloured ribbons flapping from a hazelwood tree. On the craggy branches were lengths of blue cotton and yellow silk, some clearly ripped from old clothes, wavering in the wind.

'The legend is that Brigid passes through the country on the eve of Imbolc, the 31st of January. And if everybody leaves out their cloths, she absorbs the dew that settles on it at night. So if you had a sore eye, you would touch your eye with a cloth and tie it to a branch. And you receive healing.'

Tucked in to the side of the hill, was an enclave covered in moss; inside, the stone ring of a well.

'In the Irish tradition and all primal traditions,' Dolores said, 'the well is the gateway to the Otherworld.' Close beside her, I leant in. Was God down there, too? The water seemed immeasurably deep. Fear thrilled from my hips to my shoulders.

'Would you like a blessing?'

I nodded, and she grabbed a long rusted ladle from a metal hook, before reaching into the well.

'We're lucky it's not frozen,' she said. She pulled up her arm, poured water from the ladle to the jar, and dipped two fingers in. Hands resting on my jacket, I closed my eyes.

'So, Lou, we bless you with this water of Brigid's well.' Her voice slow and deep. 'May Brigid guide your spirit's steps, may you know the deep truth of her being and the wonders of her teaching. May your eyes open to see that inner vision.' With each invocation, she anointed the part of my body with holy water. 'Your ears to hear that inner vision, your nose to sense it, your mouth to speak it, your throat to speak it, your heart to absorb it, your solar plexus to give you the strength, your sexual creative energy to allow you to be creative, your knees to help you go forward, and your feet to keep you firmly grounded on the earth. And may Brigid wrap her mantle of protection around you as you continue this important journey in this sacred land.'

She screwed on the lid, and I slipped the jar into my jacket pocket. We walked down the hill in new, awkward intimacy, and she insisted on taking a photo of me at the roots of an oak.

On the ride back to Dublin, the gloaming hour lowered like a velvet curtain. Country homes' yellow windows flashed in deep twilight blue, and I fingered the jam-jar lid. Where did the goddess end and the saint begin? What was superstition, and what was faith? The bus left a trail of my questions across County Meath. When did water become sacred? When it came from the sky, when it clung to my jacket, when I cycled through fog? How did the ordinary become holy?

—

Kildare's cathedral spire stretched into bright blue sky. The town's name came from the Irish *Cill Dara,* Church of the Oak, and St Brigid's cathedral stood where her monastery is recorded as being in the fifth century (though this is disputed by some historians). After Viking attacks and many rebuilds, the church of turrets and gargoyles towering before me was 150 years old.

Heartbeat thick in my chest, I entered the gate and wandered around thick grass, worn old gravestones, and Celtic crosses. I found a reconstructed fire temple. Catholic sources believed that St Brigid adopted the pagan fire and that through her it became the light of Christ. But it had been extinguished by invading English forces in the seventeenth century. Now, the temple was a knee-high stone wall that encircled ten square metres, with stairs leading three steps down to lower ground. In its centre was a pile of blackened ash.

I loved outdoor fires. They meant camping holidays, winter parties, or sometimes a personal ceremony. Before I left for Ireland, I had invited my two closest friends, Gemma and Gul, to Auntie Liz's house. Gul's phone played songs by Selda Bağcan, a Turkish singer and freedom fighter, and Gemma balanced logs atop kindling, scrunched newspaper, and struck a long match. When the flames burnt hot and orange, we pulled up chairs and tore strips from my wedding dress, ripping purple mesh and crimson chiffon. We fed my costume into the fire.

Tucking my hands into leopard-print pockets, I exited the churchyard. The Brigidine nuns, too, had their flame. A global network of Roman Catholic nuns founded by the Bishop of Kildare in 1807, the Brigidines were inspired by St Brigid's role as Carer of the Earth and Healing Woman. Their website claimed she was a model for Christian womanhood and 'the feminine face of God'.

The Solas Bhride Centre's gravel car park hosted a row of metal bike racks by a vegetable garden. In the garden's centre was a copper statue of St Brigid, and at the back were the self-contained hermitages where Sister Margie had stayed. I pushed open a glass door — in an instant, a strong cup of tea and plate of fruitcake were in my hands. Guided by God, I'd happened upon a morning tea.

At a round table, I met some women who'd gathered for reflection and prayer. Brenda, who wrote her postgraduate thesis on St Brigid, led me into a room where natural light spilled through a tall window. The design was circular, echoing the feminist theory of erasing hierarchy to ensure equality of voices. Red-cushioned chairs were arranged in curves.

In their centre was the flame.

Considering its historical and symbolic value, I expected an Olympic cauldron. At least a fireplace. But I squatted and leant my cheek almost to the floor to see a diminutive light in a glass dome. This thing was tiny.

One of the three nuns who lived at the hermitage, Rita, led me to a room heated by the sun. A sweet Irishwoman in her seventies, she repeated the last word of my sentence as I said it, making me feel as if she were finishing the sentence for me, and knew exactly what I meant.

'Yes, naturally you are surprised. Everybody is. Because they are expecting something big, a ball of flame.'

They relit it in 1993. In 2006, the flame was moved to the Market Square in the middle of Kildare. The president of Ireland, Mary McAleese, attended the lighting ceremony. But Irish weather got the better of the gas, and whenever the flame blew out, fumes went up into the sky. This went against the nuns' environmental policy.

'So we have the little naked flame.'

The act of tending was without grandeur. A tall seven-day candle sat in a glass chamber, and when it neared its end, another nun, Mary, would light a new wick with the dying flame. Rita witnessed, and together they thought about all the people who had visited that week, or anyone asking for prayers, or whatever was happening in Ireland or the world.

Born in County Tipperary, Rita took her vows at twenty-one, disappointing her parents, who had hoped she would take over their pub.

'You either became a sister, or you went into the bank, or you became a nurse; college wasn't an option at that time, even in Ireland.' The Brigidine order was established with an emphasis on education. Rita's story echoed the historical appeal of convents: for many women, it was the only pathway to education.

I asked her about the link between pagan and Christian beliefs.

'Our tradition holds that the hill of Kildare — at the site of St Brigid's monastery, on which stands the thirteenth-century cathedral today — would have been a sacred place.' Her croaky voice high-pitched but authoritative. 'Y'know, frequented by priests and priestesses petitioning to gods and goddesses, to protect their herds and to provide a fruitful harvest. A lot of these were sacred places prior to the coming of Christianity.

'We know that Rome advocated a strategy that pagan sanctuaries were not to be destroyed, but they were to be used to preach the new religion. The Celts were a religious people, they believed in another world, and a lot of the same kind of beliefs about life as the Christian message.

'There wasn't a war to bring in Christianity,' she said, her eyebrows furrowing theatrically with the word 'war', as if she were

reading a children's book out loud. 'There's an interweaving of the myths and the stories of the gods with the Christian story.'

The train back to Dublin was empty. Green fields flashed, and heaviness seeped through my limbs. Outside Heuston station, the almost-sour fragrance of roasting hops floated from the Guinness factory. I plodded along the Liffey, watching a lone swan drift. Gleaming Clydesdales pulled lavish carriages holding tourists with blankets over their knees among taxis and buses. The sky deepened from indigo to obsidian. On aching legs, I walked to Grafton St, where golden lights spelt *Nollaig Shona Duit* — 'Merry Christmas' in Irish. Shoppers with red noses rushed, clutching Brown Thomas bags in gloved fists. I passed Bewley's glowing tearoom, its curling brass lamps and packed tables; outside, buskers sang acoustic covers, their breath unfurling. A child in lavender mittens and a beanie tugged on her father's hand, looking up at him with an obstinate frown.

I wandered, carried by the crowd's flow. History books, Dolores Whelan, and the Brigidine nuns told me that monks stole pagan beliefs and adapted them. Christianity wasn't just a male God but a system of thought. Colonisation conformed existing beliefs to the imposed doctrine; the old and the new were consolidated. In Irish mythology, female figures accessed independent power, but now they could only request it from Big Daddy. In this way, the goddess was dethroned.

What was with all these women being *under* God? Why was independent female power incompatible with Christianity? For a mad moment, I imagined visiting a department store Father Christmas, sitting on his lap, and saying, 'Help.'

Frozen fingertips throbbed. At Butlers Chocolate Café, a line of shoppers snaked from its golden lights, and I imagined the luxury of a hot chocolate to warm my hands, maybe a marshmallow or two — no. I needed the coins in my pocket for tomorrow's airport bus.

The next day, I examined myself in the bathroom: my knitted jumper made me look bulky. As I stuffed it in my full backpack, my fist knocked something solid: the jam jar! Even in Ireland, they wouldn't let holy water through airport security. I unscrewed it, dipped my fingers in, and dabbed water on my eyelids. Maybe it was time to try praying to someone new.

'Brigit,' I whispered. 'Show me the way.'

I emptied the water down the sink.