



FISH ON A FARM

The rain had been falling heavily for weeks. The rivers could hold no more water; they flooded farms and towns and houses all across the lush, green island called Ireland. And the Reidy home was no exception. Several inches of water had gathered on the floor of the cottage on the day Maurice, the fifth child of Fergal and Brigid Reidy, was born. Years later, when Fergal learned that his son had chosen a life at sea, he would think of those floods. He would wonder if the boy felt at home on the open ocean because he'd entered into this world surrounded by water.

The floods stopped eventually, and Maurice grew up in a dry and increasingly crowded home. Patrick was the oldest child, followed by Michael, Mary, and Conor, then Maurice, Roisin, Kathleen, Patricia, and, finally, the youngest, Maureen. The Reidys were farmers, and the boys were expected to help Fergal in the fields, but from an early age it became clear that Maurice wasn't much good at the work. His brothers were twice as fast, far more thorough, and only too happy to remind him of his deficiencies, often when their father was within range. They enjoyed torturing him in other ways, too, but he had a friend and ally in Roisin. If Michael or Conor snuck a worm into his shoe, dropped a pebble in his soup, or dribbled some mud into his milk, she'd be the one to warn

him. And whenever Queen Mary, as they called the oldest sister, gave Roisin one too many orders, Maurice would help her with the extra chore.

As for his nickname, Fish — he earned it on a warm autumn morning. The Reidy boys had just finished marching across three farms and through a wood to a clear and cold lake. They called it Outhouse Lake because Michael would always relieve himself along the shore just moments after they'd arrived. They would walk there once a week to bathe, always remaining in the shallows since none of them knew how to swim.

As usual, his brothers started fighting the moment they stepped into the water, and, as usual, Fish considered trying to stop them. He did not like it when people fought, but he also knew there was such a thing as harmless roughhousing. Michael and Patrick were the chief troublemakers, but their battles were waged in good fun. Conor, on the other hand, was short-tempered and quick to transform an innocent scrap into a bruising brawl.

On that particularly warm morning, they were wading out into the water when Michael pushed Conor from behind. Conor fell but returned to his feet quickly, only to find Michael and Patrick laughing. Immediately he burst into a rage. He grabbed a stone from the bottom of the lake and prepared to swing at Michael's head. Fish threw himself at Conor, grasping for the arm with the stone. Conor, angrier than ever, picked up his younger brother and hurled him out toward the middle of the lake.

Fish didn't fly far, but it proved to be far enough, past an unseen ledge where the shallow water ended and the deep part of the lake began. He tried to plant his feet on the bottom, thinking they'd land in the silt of the lake, but they found only water. He began to sink.

He heard Michael, Patrick, and Conor all shouting. And then, as he slipped below the surface, he stopped hearing anything at all. He closed his mouth, sank further, and, when he thought the lake was going to swallow him for good, he learned how to swim.

Unexpectedly, he felt comfortable below the surface, enveloped by the lake. He started to relax, felt his palms pushing the water. When he moved his palms down, he moved up. When he moved them to the right, he spun to the left. He reached high above his head, pulled his hands down as hard as he could, past his waist, and his body shot upward. The sunlight shone through the surface of the lake; he kept pulling. Finally, just as it felt like his chest was closing in, he broke through the surface and sucked in an enormous gulp of air.

At this point, the average child probably would have headed directly back to shore, into the shallows, and run straight home for his mother. Maurice? He smiled, laughed, cheered, and stroked right out into the middle of the lake.

From then on, whenever they returned to Outhouse Lake, Maurice would swim and splash and dive for as long as his parents would allow. His father came with them on occasion and thought it strange the way his son was so comfortable

out in the depths. But he had no comment on his behavior; he merely grunted. His mother, on the other hand, found it downright unacceptable. “I’m trying to raise a man,” she’d yell, “not a fish!”

That is how he acquired his name. Of course, the name had little to do with his appearance: He had no gills and no fins. He was a skinny kid, with short, straight, brown hair, hazel eyes shielded by long lashes, slightly oversized front teeth, and a small nose dotted with faded brown freckles. In his looks, therefore, he was very much a boy, yet his brothers and sisters began calling him Fish, not Maurice, and it felt natural. He was at home in the water, not on the farm.

This discovery turned out to be an important one, given the fact that two years later, thanks to a dead horse, a mildly mysterious uncle, and a crafty thief, he would find himself on a pirate ship, leaving solid ground behind him for good.



THE PIRATE THIEF

Early one fall evening, when Fish was eleven years old, Fergal slumped into the cottage and announced, “Shamrock is dead.”

Shamrock was the family horse and arguably its most valuable member, after Fergal and Brigid. Without Shamrock, they’d barely be able to grow enough to feed themselves. One of the children, Fergal declared, would have to work in the city to send money home and help the family. Patrick volunteered — he was the oldest — but he was too good of a farmhand to lose. There was really no question of who would have to go, given the fact that he was miserable at farming, often needing half a day to finish a task that any of his brothers could complete in an hour. Fergal decided it would have to be Fish.

His heart raced when his father told him. His mother placed her hand on his shoulder; he wasn’t sure whether to cry or cheer. For the next few days, as he prepared to leave, his emotions rose and fell like the ocean waves he’d soon come to love. He’d miss his brothers and sisters, his gruff, hard father and practical mother, his swims in the lake. But the prospect of actually helping his family made him feel a good six inches taller.

On the day he left, the good-byes were short and consisted mostly of affectionate punches and brief hugs. Conor’s

punch was not entirely affectionate; he left a painful memento on Fish's shoulder in the form of a purple and blue bruise. His mother held him in her arms longer than she ever had before and his sister Roisin, who could carve just about anything from a hunk of wood, handed him a newly whittled fish. He could just close his fist around it. "For my brother the swimmer," she said. Then she whispered, "Who is going to help me survive under Queen Mary's rule?"

"And who will warn me of worms and muddied milk?" he asked.

"I hope you won't have to worry about either."

For the better part of two days, Fish walked with his father along a puddle-filled road traveled by men on horseback and the occasional carriage. They lodged one night in a large stable, taunted by the sights, sounds, and smells of healthy horses, reminding them of poor Shamrock. They arrived in the city early in the afternoon, and the new world was both exciting and frightening. Fish had never seen more than three buildings in one place, but here there were hundreds, all stacked together and standing three times as tall as the cottage on the farm. Yet the color had been drained from everything; the familiar green fields and trees were gone, replaced with varying shades of brown. The entire city looked like it needed a bath.

Smoke billowed from chimneys and doorways and burned his nostrils. The heavenly scents of freshly baked breads and roasted meats mingled evenly with the foul stench of out-

houses and trash-filled alleys. One moment he wanted to savor the air, the next he felt like wrapping a cloth around his mouth and nose to block it out.

He stayed close to his father as they walked through the dry and dusty streets. They met his father's brother Gerry in a public house called the Burren. The place was dark and miserable, a wooden cave that blocked out all sunlight, and they sat in a tight booth near the door. Uncle Gerry, a large man with large hands who, like Fergal, was prone to grunting, ordered two ales for himself and his brother. Fish was next to his father, pressed between him and the wall.

Strange people filled the place: women with bright purple makeup on their faces and round, ugly men with blotchy red skin. But his father was uninterested in the scene. He and Uncle Gerry grunted and grumbled back and forth. It sounded like they each had food stuck in their throats, but Fish eventually realized that they were, in their own way, conducting a very real conversation.

Finally, Fish heard his father say, "So it's decided, then."

He turned to his father. What was decided?

"Frgggghhhh," Uncle Gerry responded.

"Gruffff," his father answered back.

Fergal stepped out of the booth. Fish slid toward the end, ready to follow, but Uncle Gerry reached across and placed one of his large hands on his shoulder, stopping him. Fish looked up at his father.

"You'll stay here now."

Fergal picked up his glass from the wooden table and

drank the last of the brown ale inside. He placed his hand on Fish's head. "Be careful," he said.

The first few weeks were difficult. Fish missed his brothers and sisters, those rare moments around the table when nobody was fighting and everyone was full of food and cheer. But he did not miss digging into the soil, cleaning the filthy pigpens, or having to deal with the farm's ornery, stubborn sheep. The city — a chaotic mass of people small and large, of sailors and merchants speaking French, Portuguese, and Italian — kept his mind away from home. Winding streets and narrow alleyways fed off wide thoroughfares lined with people selling vegetables, wool, and various trinkets out of wooden carts. Women wore bright dresses and large hats, and the men swilled from bottles in the middle of the day. The city, in a way, was like a book. No, it didn't have pages and paragraphs, but it was filled with life and variety, sounds and smells. The city was a living, breathing, endlessly interesting book.

There were young people, too, like him, but he never saw them playing or having fun. They were running errands, working in the inns and offices, selling baubles, and they rarely offered him more than a nod. As for his own work, well, Fish didn't exactly understand what sort of business his uncle Gerry conducted. All he knew was that he was charged with running packages of various shapes and sizes from one part of the city to another, and that his uncle had enough

clients to keep him moving from morning until night, when Fish would collapse, exhausted, onto his bed.

Despite his fatigue, Fish never complained. He worked ever harder and faster, straight through the rest of fall, winter, and spring. He asked Uncle Gerry when he might have a break, even just for two days, so he could visit the farm, but his uncle only grunted a few times before responding, “Soon, soon, but I can’t afford to lose you now.” Fish wrote several times, and sent money on a regular basis, but he rarely heard back, and the few replies were short. Uncle Gerry would see the brief notes and grunt, “My brother’s not much with a pen.”

Often Fish wondered if anyone at home actually missed him. And he had so many questions, too. Had the girls gotten much bigger? Were his brothers fighting more now that he was gone? Had Roisin led a revolution against the domineering Queen Mary? He kept the fish she gave him in his pocket and rubbed it when he longed for his family, as if this action might magically bring him home.

But he was too busy to wonder for long. Fish ran letters to the crowded and frightful prison, delivered packages to the brewery, and whisked notes from the grand houses on the city’s edges to boats down at the docks. These last jobs were his favorites, for they brought him near the water. He loved to race down, close his eyes, and breathe in the sea air. He’d get close to the boats, inspect their hulls, decks, and sails for signs of distant adventures. He thought he could smell hints of the open ocean stuck to their sails.

Therefore, it was entirely understandable that Fish smiled so brightly that summer morning when Uncle Gerry handed him a leather purse and informed him that he was to take it to the docks. Yet Fish's smile did not please his uncle.

Uncle Gerry glared, one hand still holding the top of the purse. "This is important."

"Yes, of course."

"No," Uncle Gerry said, pausing. "This is *very* important."

"I understand," Fish said.

"You will deliver this to the *Mary*, a passenger ship docked in the harbor, bound for America. You will deliver it, specifically, to a certain Reginald Swift, who will be sailing on that ship."

"Yes."

"He is an uncommonly small man with uncommonly large eyeglasses. Aged about thirty years, a good few less than your father and myself. He is expecting you."

Fish waited with one hand on the bottom of the purse while Uncle Gerry still gripped the top. He'd done hundreds of deliveries already. This sounded no more challenging than the rest. Why, then, was his uncle so concerned?

Uncle Gerry grunted, glowered, grunted again, then pulled his hand away. The purse itself was altogether unimpressive, yet it felt like it was filled with coins. "Are these —"

"The contents are not your concern." Fish turned to leave, but his uncle stopped him. "Fish?"

"Yes?" he asked.

“I realize that I stress the importance of all your assignments, but this one is especially critical. These particular clients . . . they do not tolerate mistakes. You must not fail.”

Fish replied with a solemn nod, then sped out the door, down the street, and through the alleys he'd come to know so well. Within minutes, Fish had reached the harbor and found the *Mary*, which was twice as large as any other ship tied to the docks, and twice as grand, too. Sailors and dockworkers were rolling aboard huge wooden barrels filled with water, beer, salted pork and beef, biscuits and butter. He'd heard that these ships could carry as many as two hundred people for a journey that lasted more than a month.

Some of the passengers were out on the broad deck, others standing below on the overcrowded dock. What had Uncle Gerry said? Uncommonly small, with uncommonly large eyeglasses. Fish wondered just how small someone had to be to qualify as uncommonly so. Walking onto the dock, he studied the faces and stopped as a short, bald man stepped toward him. No, that wouldn't be Reginald Swift. He was only a little shorter than Fish and he didn't have glasses, either.

A quartet of ladies in very large yellow dresses briefly blocked his way, but Fish squeezed between them and spotted a man leaning against one of the pier's tall, worn wooden columns. It had to be him. Short? Very much so. A sailor walked in front of Swift, and he looked like a child next to the man. The glasses, too, matched Uncle Gerry's description. Big and black-rimmed, they took up nearly half his face.

And these glasses were effective, for Reginald Swift obviously spotted the purse from a distance: His eyes widened. A wave of relief washed through Fish. Uncle Gerry had entrusted him with an important task and he was about to complete it successfully. Perhaps Uncle Gerry would even tell his father. Fish imagined his father clapping him proudly on the back, the way he'd congratulate Patrick, Michael, and Conor after a hard day's work in the —

Fish crashed to the ground, his shoulder driven hard into the wooden dock. He blinked, breathed, felt the purse in his fingers. What had happened? Was that Swift hurrying his way? Before he could determine for certain, someone knocked the diminutive man to the dock.

Fish tried to sit up, but someone yanked him up to his feet by his collar before he had the chance. Still confused, he found himself standing eye to eye with a boy about his age.

“Release the purse, and I will release you,” the boy snarled.

This boy was strong — even stronger than his brothers — but Fish wasn't about to hand over that purse. He would not fail his uncle Gerry. Not after all the hard work he'd done in the last few months.

He gripped the purse tighter and tried to pull away, but the boy struck him in the jaw with the back of his free hand. Pain shot through his head. Holding tight to the purse as the boy tried to yank it away, Fish cried, “Can't we . . . discuss this . . . in a more civilized way?”

The boy drove his fist into Fish's stomach. He crumpled

to the dock, his arms wrapped around his midsection. Apparently the answer was no.

The purse! Placing a fist on the ground, Fish steadied himself and stood up. He saw the boy hurrying away through the crowd.

Ignoring the sickening pain in his stomach, Fish ran after him and leaped at the boy's legs. They wrestled toward the edge of the dock, and then the boy smiled, saying: "Good-bye, pest!" He pushed Fish over the side, sending him splashing down into the cool water below.

Immediately Fish pulled back to the surface. Treading water, he scoured the docks. The boy was out of sight. No one seemed to have noticed the theft; passengers, sailors, and dockworkers were carrying on as before.

A thick rope splashed down in front of him. Reginald Swift was up on the dock, urging him to hurry. He looked frightened. Fish pulled himself out of the water. "The boy and another man . . . they went that way!" he said, his eyes wild as he pointed down the dock. "And if you don't catch them, my mother will be furious!"

"Your mother?" Fish asked. Why was this grown man talking about his mother?

"Just hurry! If you lose that purse, it could mean both our lives!"

Fish studied the crowd in both directions. There! The boy, and another man with him. He could see them turning down a dock a few hundred feet away. Dripping wet, his stomach and neck now dull to the pain, Fish sprinted ahead to the

dock. Not a single boat was tied up, yet he was certain he'd seen them turn this way. A man who looked like a farmer was leaning against a pylon, smoking a pipe. Behind him, three sailors were standing against the wall outside an ale-house, their faces turned up to the sun. A thin, bald, wrinkled gentleman in official dress walked quickly by, passing a mother and her young children. But that ruffian boy and his friend were nowhere in sight.

His heart was pounding. Failure. Reginald Swift said their lives were at stake, but all Fish could think about was the terrible prospect of disappointing Uncle Gerry and his father and mother. And what would his brothers say?

He had no choice but to find the thieves before they slipped away for good. He was about to run back in the other direction and scour the town square when he saw two heads, then a rowboat moving swiftly away from the dock. They were heading toward the far side of the harbor. There, anchored near the shore, floated a thoroughly menacing boat.