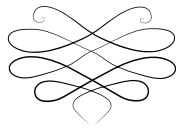


# THE WORLD'S FAIR

*A Picaresque Novel*



by  
Joan Ferry

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*to my mother and father*



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## CHAPTER 1

# *Prologue*

EMER WATCHES THEM THROUGH the car window as they run up the church steps. The baby sleeps beside her on the back seat. Her mother returns to the car as if she's forgotten something.

Emer rolls down the window and looks at her questioninglly. Her mother whispers, "We're getting married. We won't be long. Just look after Zack." Emer rolls the window up quickly. The air is a little cool in Ottawa for May. She studies the date over the portals of the United Church. "1937." It's a brand new church, she thinks. "Wow!" I'm six years older than this church.

Later that night she remembers standing at the foot of her father's bed. Her feet were cold. Her father was shouting and coughing. She saw his chest heaving. His feverish body contorted as he struggled to control the wracking cough. His black curly hair glistened with sweat. His body was drenched. He shouts as his fists thud against the mattress. "No! No! No!"

Her mother sits up in the bed. "Michael, what is it? Wake up!" She looks worried. "Is it because we got married?"

He slowly sits up and spits into a handkerchief. "Nothing to do with that."

"Not the same dream Michael? Not the same dream?"

Zack starts to cry from the next room.

Michael slumps back, too exhausted to tell her. "That tasted like blood, Bella. Where's the sputum cup?"

Bella hands it to him.

"Can I get you a glass of water, Dad?" Emer asks.

Together they go to the kitchen.

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Emer wraps her toes around the spindle legs of the chair and watches him as he pours them both a glass of water. He is tall and thin with dark brown hair, brown eyes and a straight nose. They look alike. What she loves best about him is his kind-hearted eyes. To her they are regal. They radiate the warmth of a king. That and the variety of ways he finds to express himself.

“What happened Dad?”

“I just had a bad dream, that’s all.” His cough subsides.

Emer sees him trying to shrug it off.

He changes the subject, “You know that tomorrow I am going into the hospital. The sanatorium. I have tuberculosis.” He enunciates every word clearly.

Emer feels the urgency in his voice and whispers, “What’s that?”

How could he explain to his six year old? “It’s a disease of the lungs.” He repeated, “a disease of the lungs,” to reassure himself that he had actually said it.

“Will you get better?”

He pulled himself together. “Yes, of course I will.”

The Doctor said that even with plenty of rest, cod liver oil and sunshine, ‘getting better’ would still be in the lap of the gods. But he was determined that he would beat this thing if for no other reason than to confront his mother and grandmother. One of them had to tell him the truth. He had to get to the bottom of these damnable recurring dreams. He knew that the TB diagnosis had something to do with unresolved issues. He felt sure of it. It wasn’t only his lifestyle that had brought it on.

As he looks at her querying eyes, he knows that he also must secure a future for his family.

“There’s nothing to worry about, really. Your life will continue here with your mother and Zack, much the same as always.”

“But without you?”



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“Yes, for the present.”

“Is that what made you shout in your sleep?” she asks.

“Not exactly.” He looks away. “I don’t know. I just know that I had a nightmare. It keeps coming back.” He lowers his voice as if he were talking to himself. “Has for years now.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a dream I have of me as a baby, sitting on the floor. Two women are fighting over me.”

“Who, Dad?”

“Your grandmother Silvy and your great grandmother Alma.”

“Why are they fighting?”

“They’re saying bad things, Emer. I don’t quite hear what they say but I hear that they are bad things.”

“What, Dad?”

Michael bites his lips knowing he couldn’t tell his young daughter the dream. It is too shocking for even him to absorb.

He shudders. Their voices still rang in his ears.

Alma repeatedly screamed to his mother, “You don’t even know who the father is.” She pointed to the baby sitting on the floor. Him. Michael.

And then Silvy’s recurring chant of “I couldn’t help it! I couldn’t help it! I couldn’t help it!”

“The hell you couldn’t. He’s a bastard!” Alma shouted.

And then in the midst of his wails his Aunt Maura scooped him up off the floor and ran away with him to her house.

To Emer, he says, “I don’t really know who my father is.”

Her young voice cracks. “Is that important Dad?”

“Yes Emer. Very.”

The reason why he’d married Bella the day before, he thought.

His children at least, would know who their father was. Even if he did die.

Emer sips her water. "But it's grandfather Maguire, Aunt Maura's brother."

"That is no longer clear to me."

Emer folds both legs up on the chair and hunches her shoulders over them in deep thought. She loves her father. He always speaks his deepest truth, no matter what. It hurt to see him in such pain. In her heart she resolves to watch her family closely. She was determined to get to the bottom of it.



LIFE WAS NOT THE same after her father left. In her view, her eighth birthday came and went almost unnoticed. Almost two years had passed and the excitement of his presence had vanished. Her mother was totally wrapped up in three-year-old Zack.

Emer felt as though she no longer existed.

She dipped her fingers into Bella's emollients, unguents and face creams in the hope that by rubbing it on her skin her mother would smell it on her, and grow to love her too. She even painted her toenails imitating her mother, though she herself, didn't favour the look of it. Still, nothing happened.

One night she woke up screaming. Bella came rushing in.

"What is it?"

"There's a rat crawling up my arm."

Her mother felt her forehead. She was feverish and sweating.

The next day they went to see Doctor Carmichael at the Sanatorium. All three of them had X-rays, including Zack.

Emer was admitted to the San a week later with a shadow on her lung. She was delighted. She didn't feel sick. She felt perfectly fine. She could see her father once a week!

In the beginning he was in the Pearly Building, but with her arrival he moved to the Grey Building to be closer to her. This gave

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everyone reason to hope that he would make it. Entrance to the Grey indicated that the disease was beginning to go into remission.

On Saturdays, they walked together hand in hand in the deep snow along the boulevard lined with ghostly maple trees shorn of leaves, their branches draped in snow and icicles. The maple was a sacred tree in his view, “because in spring it gives us its sap, which when boiled turns into a beautiful syrup. It’s relatively more nutritious than straight sugar, you know.” They walked all the way to the frozen creek and back through the middle of a pine forest covered in pancake-sized clumps of snow.

“We’re having a good run at life in the country aren’t we?” he said. They may be in there to die but they were going to have a good time doing it.

“The snow stays so much whiter, longer,” she whispered, enchanted with the silence of this new sparkling world, away from the city and apartment living.

The San had given her a winter snowsuit of tomato red woollen leggings with a matching sweater, toque and mittens. The snow suit was a size five but it was still a little big for her. At eight she was small for her age.

He held her hand tightly. That she should know the details of family folklore was important to him, however inglorious they might be.

“You see Emer, it goes this way,” he began. “Silvy, my mother ran away to the circus when I was three months old.”

“Wow! What a wonderful thing to do!”

“Yes, but I was very young and I needed her.” His knowledge of basic psychology told him the nurturing mother was a necessity to the infant child. Where else would he learn love except at his mother’s side?

She caught his serious tone, that it wasn’t the right thing for Granny to have done. “Did you love her, Dad?”

He smiled sadly, “at three months old? I suppose so, I don’t know. I needed her, let’s put it that way. She was too young I suppose to have known any better,” he said in a forgiving tone.

“So then what happened?”

Aunt Maura, John Maguire’s sister had raised him.

Michael suddenly whirled his daughter around, threw her up in the air with gales of laughter and caught her shouting, “I lived with Aunt Maura and we all lived happily ever after, so there!” He was forever grateful to the woman who had taken on the responsibility of mothering him when she herself at sixteen barely had enough to live on. Maura the only woman that knew how to translate spiritual values into pragmatic action with detachment.

Emer loved her father’s spontaneity. She wasn’t sure what motivated his excitement, but if it was like hers, it came from a passionate love of life.

He continued to talk about himself.

She watched his words form vapour puffs disappearing into the blue-white air. The new snow scrunched underfoot. Emer watched thick scatterings of snowflake words forming intricate lacework connections in mid-air.

“You see, because I majored in Mathematics at Ottawa University when I was sixteen, I obtained tenure at the university by the time I was twenty-one.”

She thought about this for a moment. “What’s tenure Dad?”

“Tenure is a position that is bestowed upon you for life.”

“Bestowed?”

He straightened her toque. “Well, yes. It’s given to you for as long as you live.”

She clapped her mittens together. “A gift forever? Do you have it even now?”

He cleared his throat and looked away. There were some complications here, however, if and when he got better he would clear up the mess with Father Bruneau, the dean of studies. The pink-cheeked priest had no room in his heart for non-conformists. To

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Emer he said, "We will only know that when I get out." He hoped that was going to be the case. He intended to realize this goal, if he lived.

He talked about his student days at Ottawa University and how he'd met her mother while he'd been playing violin in the orchestra at the Standish Hall in Hull.

"Where is that?"

"On the other side of the provincial bridge."

"That's in Quebec, huh?"

"Yes, that's where your mother is from, Gatineau Point, Quebec."

Emer felt as if she was a grown woman. She didn't understand a lot of what he said but she absorbed all of his words much as a flower absorbs the sun and the rain.

Sometimes the walks were spent catching up on her school-work. He made a game out of every subject he taught her. She knew from his laughter that he loved to teach.

Under cold, crisp, blue sunlit skies he drew triangles in the glittering snow, to explain the *Pythagorean theorem*. On other days it would be *Hamlet* or Plato's *Republic* or a one-sided discussion on the *theory of relativity*. One Saturday she watched as his leather-gloved hand meticulously wrote Fermat's last theorem into the crusty snow.

"One day," he said standing back to study the equation, "I will resolve this problem, make some money, and then we will move to Peru where the sun shines the year round. Where there's pounding surf, palm trees and warmth in the very air we breathe. And that's a promise!" He squeezed her hand tight. She never forgot this. On still other days, it was meditative walks and quiet talks about their future lives in Peru. "Oh Daddy, imagine that. Just imagine it!" She could barely breathe with the thought of it.

"Imagination is reality, so yes, let's just work on that." She followed the word-puffs as they travelled, merging into the ice blue sky.

Her mother comes to visit her every Sunday. She comes with Grand-maman or Memère, as Emer calls her. They drape themselves around the white wrought iron knobs at the foot of her bed.

Memère's gold ciborium-shaped pendants dangled into the prickly wire fur of her brown muskrat. Her mother wore a brown tweed coat, her golden brown curls piled high in the manner of a movie actress. Was it Barbara Stanwyck or Irene Dunne? Hard to tell, the upswept hairdo looks stunning with her sea-green eyes.

Emer lay flat on her back in a homemade tent the nurses have made for her because she has bronchitis. They have placed a little steamer inside the tent so that she could breathe easier. As she lay there in the euphoric haze of Friar's Balsam, she could see their anxious faces through the mist.

"Penses-tu qu'a va mourir?" Memère said. Do you think she'll die?

Emer's attention rivets on her mother's response.

Bella merely shrugged, appearing indifferent.

Emer's heart stopped for a second. She felt nothing coming from her mother. Absolutely nothing. Silence.

Bella died for Emer, then and there, standing right at the foot of her bed.

Both of them dissolved into puddles under their coats like the bad witch in *The Wizard of Oz*. She rages inside screaming soundlessly. You fools. Insensitive fools. I'm going to live. I will live.

They were too lost in their own 'mellow-drama' to hear her. That much she knew.

Emer's 'shut-down' towards her mother and Memère was complete by age eight. From that moment on she became her own best support. No bitterness. No rancour.

The day her father walked through the grey-stone Sanatorium gates both thumbs up, would live in her memory forever. He knew

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how to turn darkness into light. He let her see that he was unafraid to experience his own darkness from within himself and move forward from that point.

“We have the ability to transform ourselves, Emer. Life is a gift. We are here to experience it fully. Good, bad or indifferent. We have the power within ourselves to change our so-called negative emotions by experiencing them fully. The trick is to catch myself ignoring them. From that point I can then move forward into a healthy body. All is energy, including thoughts and feelings. They are neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad.’ All of life’s experience is power at our disposal to use consciously.”

At the time all Emer understood was, that he may be going into the hospital to die but that he chose to go down like the *Titanic* with “all his lights on.”

“No defeats,” he’d said. “Only powerful lessons to learn.”

Emer chose to make the family incident at the foot of her bed serve her. Death’s door was death’s door.



AUNT MAURA SITS IN a chair by his bed. He watches her snow-white head bent attentively over the makeshift bookcase on the window ledge.

She smiles. “Still reading all your books, Michael?”

He whispers, “Got it from you, I guess.”

“I see your interests are more varied than ever,” she says reading the titles. “*Magic Tricks, Chess, Theatre*. What’s the file of music?”

“Brought the violin with me for brush-ups.”

“That was a good added income wasn’t it? Best to keep it up.”

“Yup. Never know what’s around the old corner.” Friends that helped him through the day.

“You’ve got several Mathematic books.”

"Was thinking I'd work on Fermat's theorem while I'm here. This episode kind of cut me off at the starting post."

"It will happen. It will and you know that!"

"I want to crack that one day."

"Is that a vow?"

"Actually, yes."

"Then it will happen," she says matter-of-factly.

He was thankful for her light touch.

She looks at him quizzically. "What's this one?"

"It's a book on yoga. The exercises. How to breathe."

"Yes, well breathing is of the essence, isn't it?"

Michael laughed. He feels her gentle comfort as if they were back home in Clarkstown. "A chap in this wing happens to be a yoga instructor. He's teaching me about breathing. Pranayama, he calls it."

"What does the doctor say to this?"

"The more oxygen I get into this the better, he says."

"Good, you're on the right track then, aren't you?" There was a moment of silence between them.

"Conscious breathing is it then?"

"Yes." Her knowledge always surprised him. "How do you know?"

"Toussaint," she says. And then, as if to remind herself to be quiet, she put a finger to her lips.

His name startles Michael. He scans Maura's face trying to detect her intention behind mentioning him. "Could I have the glass of milk on the cabinet there?"

"Certainly," she says.

He drinks the cool liquid down and sinks back into the pillow. Some mistakes you never forget, he thinks.

He remembers his mother's brother, Uncle Toussaint, making a slingshot for him. From the moment he got it, he was a natural shot. Could knock any milk bottle clear off its pedestal by the age of six.



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Ping! The bottles resounded and echoed into the back woods. The kids had thought he was a marvel. He'd thought so too! Such satisfaction in being able to make a thing vanish. Magical feeling. He loved his old slingshot.

Uncle Toussaint though was another matter. Michael had not liked the brusque way he treated his mother. He was mean to her.

He was called Toussaint because he'd been born November first, All Saints Day. "A holy day of obligation," he would say leeringly. A masher with the women, he brought a few home every Saturday night to Alma's house from the Byward Market. His taxi service was especially busy on weekends. Whether the girls paid him or not, they got free lodgings and food. Toussaint's excuse to his mother was always the same. "They have no place to sleep on the weekend, Ma." The less fortunate in Alma's and Choe's house had always been given a big welcome on Murray Street. The recollection of the girls sitting around his grandmother's kitchen table on a Sunday afternoon, eating thick, homemade soup and bread made Michael smile in spite of himself. It had been an exciting place for a boy of nine, despite the admonitions from Aunt Maura and her sister Meg. "The St.Pierre's!" they exclaimed almost in unison with Meg always adding, "Toussaint, indeed!"

One summer day when Michael was eight, Maura's radio antenna fell over after a bad thunder storm. It needed repairs.

The Maguire house, a duplex in Clarkstown, was minutes away from Eastview where Toussaint lived and ran his business. He was known locally to be the only man in the neighbourhood that did that kind of work.

Toussaint arrived on the Maguire doorstep, all French charm and grace. Michael saw that Aunt Maura was hypnotized by his uncle's reverence for her.

The house had a peaked roof. Toussaint reached it through an attic trap door and walked up its steep, wet slope. Michael was in the backyard

watching him work. Maura was in the back summer kitchen baking some pies for Toussaint, as payment. Every now and again her face appeared at the screen door. To Michael she looked overly concerned. She even came out on the back porch, shading her eyes against the sun to make sure of his uncle's safety for God's sakes! The practical joker, the prankster in him ran into the wet bushes, took out his slingshot, the one Toussaint had made for him, and delicately 'pinged' the antenna. Toussaint's head turned abruptly to see where the sound had come from, and in so doing, rolled down the roof to the ground where his body fell in a crumpled heap. Maura ran screaming for help. Michael hid, terrified in the bushes crying, "I didn't mean it! I didn't mean it! Please God, let him be okay. It was just a joke," over and over again as he writhed in anguish in the bushes.

The ambulance came, but it was too late. Toussaint's neck was broken. He was already dead.

Michael had cried in the bushes for hours while Maura ran for help. He never knew whether she had seen him do it. She never mentioned it. Life in her home continued as if nothing had ever happened. If anything, her love and support for him increased until he graduated out of Ottawa University with a four-year Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Mathematics, when he was in his mid-teens. She had helped initially with his violin fees by working at St. Brigid's Orphanage. Later on she even paid for his tuition at university when his father refused.

He looks at Maura long and hard, feeling the pain once again of what he had done as a child. Tears roll down his face.

"There now," she says taking his hand and squeezing it hard, "everything has a reason. We don't always see the larger canvas."

Michael didn't know if she was talking about Toussaint. If she had in fact seen him do it, or if she was talking about the tuberculosis that had taken a turn for the worse. He was too tired to ask.

She sat beside his bed, well past visiting hours, her legs crossed at thin ankles, hands clasped together in her lap.

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She had always been present for him in all of his growing crises and she was present now. He wondered where she got the strength.

Michael fell asleep in a state of exhaustion.

The leaves of the poplar outside his window started their rustling sound, throwing dappled shadows interspersed with glimmers of light across the white counterpane on his bed.

Maura gazed on his beloved face. She rose and gently wiped his forehead with a cool face cloth. He resembled him so much that she thought her heart would break with the pain.

Remembering her promise to the only man she had ever loved, she gathered herself up staunchly and tiptoed out of the room.

As she walked back through the tree-lined boulevard to the stone gate, the coolness of the October breeze forces her to gather her cardigan tightly around her hunched shoulders.

Maura thought of Emerald and silently prayed that she would make it. Her one and only god-child, whom she herself had named. The brilliant little chess player with the big brown all-seeing eyes. She was sure Emerald had a tremendous future ahead of her. She glanced up at the second storey of the Children's building. The ghostly dimness of the night lights in the main corridor cast long shadows. Shadows of nurses on the walls as they moved in and out of rooms, tucking the children in. It reminded her of the nights when she was on duty at St. Brigid's Orphanage caring for the youngsters in the Babies' Wing. Unwanted babies. The babies of young unwed mothers and fathers who didn't have the means of supporting their child.

He'd come to visit his daughter, three-month-old Jesse. The smiling baby that welcomed you at any time of the day or night. She handed him her favourite baby.

The picture of this strong, dark curly-headed man gazing into his infant's face touched her deeply.

He had allowed Maura to see his vulnerability. In that moment she fell in love with him. They were both twenty-one years old.

The month previously, Sister Walter Marie had scanned her application form. "Your experience with children fully qualifies you for a job caring for the babies at our orphanage."

As she stood up, her headdress made her look three feet taller. She extended her hand warmly. "Welcome to the staff!"

By then Michael was six and had been living with her since she was fifteen. Her brother John had brought him to her at three months old.

That had been her "qualification" as the nun put it.

Then came laughing Jesse. Then Jesse's father. Her face was wet with tears. She wondered if she would ever forget him. A tinkling melody of some old jazz tune wafted to her from somewhere. Everywhere. Nowhere. A melody they had danced to. God knows.

Leaving Michael behind her, after a visit, always left her limp.



MICHAEL WAS PACKING HIS books when Dr. Carmichael entered the room. He hitched his long white smock under him and sat down on the end of Michael's bed. "Well, it's been a long time coming hasn't it?" he said drily.

Michael threw some books into the box. "Feels like three years," he said sardonically, not entirely able to hide the bitterness in his words. He could hardly forget the date. 1937 the year he'd married Bella and also the date he admitted himself into the care of the Sanatorium.

The old man knew Michael's story. He puffed on his glasses and polished them on his handkerchief. "Congratulations, anyway" he said to his glasses with an air of restraint.

Michael caught his acerbic tone but knew that it wasn't directed at him. His doctor hid behind an expressionless tone like some people

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hide behind an expressionless mask. It was his protection against the experience of so many lives lost Michael thought. "Lots of water under the bridge," he said thinking of the thirty-one others in his ward who hadn't made it.

The doctor shrugged, "Yup! One in thirty-one. Not great odds. You win some. You lose a lot."

Michael saw his shoulders slump under the oversized smock and knew that he took the losses personally.

Carmichael looked up, peering at him intently over his glasses. "But maybe you'll do all the living you can for them."

Michael paused to breathe into the pain of the loss, many of them friends. "Sure, will give it a good try."

"You can drop in for X-rays every once in a while. Just to make sure there's no recurrence." He cleared his throat. "Emer too of course. That and the sputum cups for testing." He dropped them into the suitcase.

Michael mimicked a military salute. "Yes, Sir!"

"You can tell Bella," he added, "that there's to be no sharing of towels, utensils or linens. Just in case." He got up to go and turned at the doorway. "And as usual, as I mentioned when you and Emer came in here, no hugs, no kisses. No physical contact. Remember, she had a shadow, you had definite scarring."

"I know," Michael laughed, "germs, germs, germs."

"This is serious Michael. I'm talking about lives now. I don't want to see either one of you in here again. Take care of yourself and your family. That is my pleasure."

"I will Doctor."

As he turned to leave he said, "I cleared Emer a month ago as you know."

Michael nods.

There was a silence then, "No heavy work of any kind and definitely no cigarettes. He fondles the stethoscope at his neck. "Also, I want

you to examine the possibilities of another job. One that takes you away from the classroom. Preferably a job that is done in the fresh air.”

Michael looked up from his suitcase in shock. “But teaching Math is what I’m trained for. How am I supposed to find a job in the fresh air?”

“Well look at it Michael. The world has changed since you arrived here.”

“Not that much. Only a few years ago.”

“When you arrived in May of ‘37, Hitler’s strategists were testing new weapons out on the Spanish Civil War and Franco in consequence won.” Dr. Carmichael looks out the window. “Unlike the Spaniards we got through that war here in Canada unscathed but I’d say that at this very moment the war machine is in full production with Krupp at the helm producing guns for the Germans to aim at the rest of Europe. We might just have to get involved. The depression here has gotten worse. I have a feeling that we’ll either go to hell in a wheelbarrow or it will explode.”

Doctor Carmichael looked around the room avoiding Michael’s gaze. Normally a very conservative man, he cleared his throat embarrassed that he’d said so much.

Michael was astonished at this sudden display of verbiage. He snapped his suitcase shut. “I think you’re being too pessimistic. After all the World’s Fair just opened in New York a few weeks ago; the exhibits in all of those pavilions are from all over the globe, Czechoslovakia, USSR, Britain to name a few. In my world the Fair makes a very positive statement for optimism and the progress of the future. The Trylon, Perisphere and the Helicline, the combination of those images, the sphere and the tower with the bridge connecting them spells futuristic to me. Reason for hope about the development of the ingenuity we on the American continent display through our creative inventions. War spells gloom and doom.”

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“Well, anyway congratulations.” The interview was over. “And . . . good luck to you!” he called back. He sped out of the room. His starched smock flapped loudly at his legs.

“Maybe we’ll go to hell in a wheelbarrow and explode!” Michael said to the four walls as he threw the last of his books into the box.

His attention shifted to Bella and the children as he placed their photograph on top of the books.

With suitcase in one hand and a box in the other, Michael walked out the front door to the waiting cab. “We stumble towards success,” he thundered into the curtain of rain.

His strength restored he relaxed into the back seat. Staring into the May downpour, he readied himself to face the challenge of his new world.



## CHAPTER 2

# *Prospect Street*

THE FAINT IRONY OF its name hung over all the flattened, tumbledown, clapboard houses of Prospect Street. It served as a great leveler to the families who moved there, the Maguires among them, all on the same day, in the summer of 1939.

The depression had ceased to be merely a low ebb in the flow of economic history. For these people, it had become a state of mind endured to desperation, accepted past enduring, and finally resigned to. It was the body-blow of poverty without prospect. It had crushed even the strongest optimism. It was here now and to stay. It was true that they had come separately and at different times of the day, having decided independently of one another to move from their self-contained and heated flats in Ottawa's uppertown, to this dead end of a street at a dead end in time. But as one truck after another pulled up before the empty drab-faced houses, and blank-faced people stood on the sidewalks surrounded by their knocked-about furniture, they seemed by their very presence to confront the world and one another with a statement of fact.

A generation had become adults in the shadow of the Depression. They had survived without money, married without money, and now would raise their children without money. They would live and die broke but not broken, secure against nothing, but grimly holding out for holding's sake. They would let a smile be their umbrella and laugh the devil away.

The demanding urgency of life, yes, had to be satisfied somehow and if it meant only a few beers at the end of the week, a pack of cigarettes and a Carol Lombard movie, or a gamble with chance at the penny



## PROSPECT STREET

arcades, then that was it, and you couldn't have everything. Who could? The state of mind went unaltered and while politicians argued the vicious problem of the slump, the unemployed fingered their monthly relief cheques and thought yes, of life and not of politics.

Prospect Street, in the city of Ottawa, parliamentless for the summer of 1939.

All this was before the holocaust that no one suspected was imminent, that no one suspected would bring an end to the permanent state of mind and introduce another even less funny. All this is before that, and by comparison with that, it could have been much worse.



A MOVING TRUCK CAME to a lurching stop before 268 Prospect Street. Emer Maguire, jumped off the back and nibbles her lips with the tense excitement of a young rabbit.

There are five other trucks along the street erupting furniture. Back from the street were houses of a snugness she had not expected. The trees along the street came as a vast surprise, but most of all the people scudding up and down the broken wooden walkways. She had not expected people. Families passed boxes of pots and pans through windows and back doors. Children raced along the sun-burned trodden grass with bundles of clothes; overalled men trotted up with overstuffed furniture; harassed men gave directions from their porches on where to set it down; women hung curtains, running around themselves with children following, as they searched for brooms and mops and all the other aids to quick and ordered domestic entrenchment.

Emer stood transfixed to the spot where the lurch had thrown her. She remembered the rooming house they had just left. A crumbling red brick building, squeezed between a penitentiary on one side and a convent on the other, on Waller Street, a street without people.

Her mother nudged her and her brother's pudgy little hand slipped into hers. Both are propelled up the wooden path to the porch of 268, where they assembled while Michael Maguire fitted a key into the rusted Yale lock and threw open the front door. He stood aside and the children scuttled past him into the empty, dusty, dank-with-darkness hallway. Bella set foot on the step and peered in. The head of the family retraced his steps down the path, jingling the keys, and directed the moving men to bring the cardboard boxes first and stack them on the porch.

The movers grinned, then got on with it.

Michael tried to impose some kind of order from the beginning, but after a while the furniture is dropped with dull unconcerned thuds all over the available floor space.

The men had been through this before, and nod sympathetically while they drop the things wherever they can. Bella watched dejectedly from her collapsed position in an armchair in the hall and bit her nails.

Finally Michael moved her into the kitchen where he had set up the table and they sat together over a bottle of beer waiting until the job was over. "I wonder where the kids have gone?" he said.

"There's a yard in the back – that's nice. I guess they went to have a look around." She relaxed a little. "I'm glad they've got a yard anyway."

"We'll be alright," he said. "It's no palace, but it's better than the place you had on Waller Street."

I couldn't find a place by myself," she said. "I was alone to look." She smiled palely.

"I know, dear. All that's over with now. That part of it anyhow. So long as I look after myself and we can all stay together. That's the important thing." He heard the stern voice of Dr. Carmichael warning him: no strenuous work of any kind for at least a year. He

looked at the chaos of heavy furniture and wondered how he was going to organize it. If he couldn't get help, he'd have to get the stuff upstairs by himself, and that was life and how could it be avoided? With a family.

"It's been hard on you," he said. "Don't think I don't understand that. But it's been tough for me too, wasting three years. Not knowing whether I'd come out of it or not. And knowing Emer was in the same shape. I kept blaming myself for that, but it was nobody's fault. I know that now. We've got to be thankful I'm better, and that with Emer it wasn't anything more than a shadow. We've got a lot to be thankful for, haven't we? Really."

She thought a moment. "Yes, I think we have."

"Sure we have. And if we can live down what's past we can make a good future, too. A good future for the kids." He made rings on the table with the wet beer glass, waiting for her to say something, then remembering that she was a woman who had little to say when the subject was not basic, or concrete, or founded on everyday realities. Theorizing was foreign to her. He recalled that every visiting day she had filled the time talking about the real and useful things, had avoided any speculation about the future. Their communication skills at that point had been basically good but after the years away from her he was back with a woman, a new wife, he did not fully know. The illness and the lifestyle that had precipitated the illness became a gulf between them. The experience was something he wasn't able to verbally share with her. Or so he felt. But with Emer he had shared part of it and that would always be something between them.

"We must be very careful with Emer," he said. "She hasn't as much resistance as I have. A child never has."

She nodded and seemed to think deeply about it.

He gets up quickly. "I'll help you get organized, Bella. Tell me where you want things and I'll get started."

She rose to this suggestion and he felt on safer ground. It was up to him to make his own assumptions and examine them and make them work in terms of their lives, and he must not merely talk about what he planned to do. His voice rose.

"We have to put the house in order. It's better to start with the kitchen, too." He moved a small table and two chairs to the window. "You know, there are no mistakes in the universe, I see this as an opportunity for you and I to start over again. Fresh. From the beginning. We'll entrench solidly this time. Once we get our bearings."

"Will you help me unpack the boxes?"

"Better than that! I'll do it myself!"

He would help to get things settled around the house over the weekend, maybe rest a little on Sunday, and then look up Bert Buckingham at the university to sound out his prospects for getting his job back.

"Maybe Monday I'll arrange to see the dean about working into the summer program somewhere."

Bella proudly imitated Bruneau's voice. "Something can always be arranged for a man with an academic background."

Michael laughed remembering the Jesuit's propensity for dictum.

"There's no need for us to accept relief money anymore," he said. "I'll go into mental and physical training during the summer so that when the academic year begins in September I'll be ready to make up for lost time." Michael felt a surge of energy at his second chance to make a successful "go of family life."

"We stumble towards success," he whispered as a reminder that there was nothing wrong in stumbling.



EMER SAT WITH HER brother on the step of the red corrugated garage and let a trickle of sunflower seeds pour into his cupped hands. They chewed contentedly awhile, spitting the shucks onto the hot

earth and explored with their eyes the infinite possibilities of the yard. They had already investigated both sides of Prospect Street, counted the trees and observed the neighbours. A neighbour on the other side of the duplex had given them a crumpled paper bag with a handful of speckled seeds in it. They returned to the yard to munch them, having seen as much as they could of what was going on in the other houses, what kind of furniture was coming out of the trucks, and who the children were. While they sat, something flashed through a broken slat in the fence. Emer sprang to her feet, took Zack by the wrist and pulled him into the garage.

He crammed his mouth with the rest of the seeds and whispered in the dark. "What's a matter Emer?"

She pinched his arm and waited. They strained to see through a knot in the wood.

He caught sight of the white mass of feathers and the brilliant red comb. Suddenly he was out the door and off after the chicken. "Woof, woof!" He zigzagged after the distraught bird and made a violent grab for its tail.

"Leave him alone! Leave him!" Emer cried, running ahead and jumping around to avoid the spiteful-looking beak.

A girl shouted from over the fence, "Hermione, viens ici!"

But the chicken strutted and squawked around, half trying to fly.

Emer shouted, "Come and get him before he pecks us to death!"

The girl squeezed through the broken slat in the fence, crept up on the bird and grabbed it, very expertly Emer thought, by a leg. She swung the chicken over her shoulder and disappeared through the opening.

The children stood in the middle of the yard guarding their squinted eyes against the shimmering sun, hoping the French girl would come back. The bells in the Parliament Tower tolled the hour of six as they stared at one another.

Inside the house, Michael and Bella watched from the window. Eventually the Baillargeon Brothers truck pulled out. They were left alone in the tiny kitchen to rest over their glass of beer. It was suddenly quiet; they could look at one another again. The house had the heavy smell of soot, mothballs and stuffiness, yet they sat there well past six o'clock, toasting their new home, happy to be together again. Because the house was strange to them and they felt the awesomeness of being together again, they spoke in whispers, about the children, the six-room duplex, and about Michael's chances of teaching. Their voices hummed on, one into the other in contentment, punctuated by the distant chiming of bells.

In the yard, Emer asked, "What's all that ringing for?"

"The Gubmint bells," Zack said.

She smiled. He talked as if he had a mouthful of marbles sometimes. The consonants seemed to obstruct the vowel sounds. "Who told you it was Government?"

"Mommy told me when you were far, far away," he indicated grandly with his hand, then ran to the loose slat in the fence and shouted after the girl. "Hey, I'm not afraid of a ol' chicken!"

"Shut up!" Emer climbed up and sat on the fence.

"Hey, why don't you come back?" she hollered.

The thin girl disappeared into her back shed. The girl's black dress melded into the darkness. Her pasty face suddenly reappeared through the crack in the doorway peering out. Sweat trickled down her temple and found a resting place in her clavicle. The chicken heat of the shed must be suffocating her. She opened the door a crack. "What- you-want?"

It sounded as if she was chewing with her front teeth. She probably felt very stupid. She puckered and forced her lips to stretch over her teeth in ways foreign to her, angling her jaw unusually forward. Emer hesitated on the fence top, not knowing what to say. Close by, a

phone started to ring. The urgency of the ringing made Emer wish she could say something to the girl to drown it out. But instead she stared down at the blue-green print of her dress til it subsided. Looking up, she found the girl in the doorway fanning herself with a yellowed front page of 'Allô Police,' the gossip tabloid of the time.

She cleared her throat behind the newspaper and shrugged, "Bye. I go."

"I'll bet you can't climb up this fence." Emer shouted.

"Quoi?" She looked back.

"Oh, never mind." She looked down at her brother to discover that he was crossing his eyes and sticking his tongue out at the girl. She swung her foot down and gave his behind a swift kick that almost set her off balance. "How ignorant can you be?"

His head went flying between the slats. He struggled to free himself and wailed, "Fix you! Fix you, Emer."

Emer had already transferred her interest to a red truck sitting up on blocks in the middle of scattered white chicken feathers. She pointed, "Is that yours?"

Hesitantly the French girl came toward them and inspected Zack's predicament.

Perched up high, Emer gets a good look at her – a thin angular frame and long flaxen hair curlicued limply hugging the nape of her damp neck. The black cotton dress is too big for her.

"My name's Emer, and we've just moved in," she barely whispered, nodding her head towards the house.

"Tu es anglaise?" her black eyes flashed.

"Well," Emer hesitated, "my mother is French but my father speaks English."

"Oh," the pale face nods. "Ma mère pis mon père sont français."

"My mother speaks French." Emer frowns as if in deep thought. "I think she must be French."

“Pis ton Père?”

“My father’s Irish, I think.” With all the ‘Begorra’s’ and ‘Top `o the morning to yez’ that came out of her Great Aunt Maura, Emer surmises he must be Irish. Plus of course her name, Emerald. She’d been named for the old Emerald Isle. Not that she’d ever been to Ireland, nor had she ever seen a real green emerald. Only a fake one that Gran Silvy showed her when she accompanied her father on one of his visiting jaunts. Finally she said, “but he speaks French too, so I’m not really sure.” She bit her lower lip, pensively.

“O,” The flaxen head nodded.

“Understand? Capiche?”

The girl throws her palms skyward in a question mark and walks towards the remains of an old barn on her side of the fence. Her bare feet come down hard on the sharp stones. At the foot of the ladder which leads to the loft, she lifts her chin and gazes directly at Emer. “You want see more chickens?”

Emer shifts uncomfortably on the sharp wooden edge of the fence; her face tilts upwards, listening to the irritated squawks up top. “Why don’t we drive your truck instead?” She points.

The barefeet tense their toes in the hot sand, clutching the gravel, releasing and waiting. She isn’t sure she understands the request, but she understands the gesture. “Non,” she said. “My father no like.”

Zack started to wail that his head was stuck. Emer, glad of an excuse to avoid the pecking chickens, shinnies down the fence and pretends annoyance. “Tiresome. That’s what you are. Serves you right for making faces.”

Zack tries to wriggle around to punch her but his arms flail the fence instead.

The girl climbs up to the middle of the ladder to get a better look. The dead dress flutters limply about her knees. She snickers.



“Stay still a minute, will ya?” How can I get you out if you keep acting like a wet hen?”

“Yur hurting me, yur hurting me!”

She stifled his screams and looked towards the house.

The French girl laughs as she comes down the ladder.

“Why do you not stop to pull?” She ambles gracefully towards the fence.

Puffing and straining, Emer gritted her teeth and hated the girl for laughing.

Her pale face leans close to Zack’s, by now, purple one.

She turned her head to one side. “Tourne-la de côté.”

Emer releases her brother’s shoulders and without any more fuss he pulls his head through. He rubbed his scratched face, forgetting he was mad at Emer.

She climbs back to her perch.

Taking his anger out on the loose boards, he kicks as hard as he can with his high-laced boots. “Mean ol’ fence!”

The girl giggled on the other side, joining in and banging the rotted wood with her back in response to his banging.

The fence shakes so hard with the two of them pounding that Emer jumps off and peers at the girl through the opening. The girl caught Emer staring and stopped.

The sun was beginning to go down and already birds were chattering for limbs for the night. “I hate it when the sun goes down. Birds are going to bed. It means I have to go in. The old seven o’clock curfew,” Emer grumbled into the silence.

From the kitchen window Bella watches the orange sunset. “Better call the children in. It’s getting late.” She drank the last of her beer. “Shall we unpack tonight?”

“No, let’s just unpack the dishes and put up the beds for now. The rest can wait til tomorrow.”

“Call them in. I’ll heat something up.”

Outside at the fence, the silence lengthens.

Emer murmurs, “What’s your name?”

The girl fingered the ends of her straight hair.

“Roberta,” and added, “mais tout le monde m’appelle Poupoune.”

“Poopoon, Poopoon,” the boy purred delightedly, plunking down on the ground closer to see her face.

“‘Poupée’ means doll, right?” Emer says thoughtfully. “But you are Poupoune. Pretty close, isn’t it?”

The girl seemed satisfied. She smiled and sat on the ground as close to the opening as she could, smoothing the faded material delicately over her bony knees, her legs extend in front of her. Zack’s pumpkin face reflects the orange of the setting sun. He picks at the slivers in the wood. Emer sits crouched with her knees under her chin and hums a tune she heard on the nickelodeon in the Queen’s Hotel. A hotel that her mother’s cousin owned in Gatineau Point.

“C’est ‘Mexicali Rose’. Je l’ai déjà entendu à la radio.”

Poupoune had heard it on radio.

Somewhere nearby a fire truck reeled by. Emer stopped humming. Their hearts beat faster but no one moved. Poupoune crossed herself. The shrill sound dies in the distance.

“Gee, I thought they were coming here for a minute an’ we’ve just moved in,” Emer said to no one in particular.

The girl grabs a handful of gravel and nervously shifts it from one hand to the other. “You have radio?” She holds her breath for an answer.

Emer shrugged and brushed the sand from her cotton dress. She counters with another question. “Do you want to play chess?” She’d learned the game from her father while she was in the San and played with everybody who’d play with her.

Poupoune scrutinized her thumb. “Non, Maman say to me, stay in yard.”

Emer casts a glance at Poupoune’s thumb to see what is so interesting. “What are those white specks on your nail?”

Poupoune clenched her fists, hiding her nails. “Maman, she say they are white lie marks because I tell lie. But that is not true.”

Emer examines her own nails for lie specks but was disappointed. “That’s funny, I tell a lotta lies and I don’t have any specks.” The three heads came closer together to check each other out.

“Maybe you have on your toes.”

Emer frowned, thinking of the red polish on her toes and that she would have to take it off to have a good look. “Hmmm, maybe.” Three heads nod reflectively.

Back inside the house, Bella says, “The children must be getting hungry for their supper.”

Michael nodded distractedly. He stared into the amber liquid trying to piece the fragments of his life into a formal pattern.

Order it. I must order it. There had been a pattern before the San. As vague as it was, studying for his Masters degree had held him in a pattern. He hadn’t been able to finish it because of the illness. But now that he was cured, he would get back to work on it, first chance he got. Order. I must order my existence.

Bella finds a can opener in one of the cardboard boxes. “A tin of soup will have to do. I don’t have any bread.”

Outside, in the vanishing light, three pairs of eyes strain to see one another. The crows make their peculiar double sounding cawing as they swoop down for their prey. No one made a move. The kitchen light in Poupoune’s house was flickered on throwing a buttery yellow reflection on the garbage cans underneath the window. Suddenly a vicious yank was given to the shade rolling it to the bottom. Poupoune giggled nervously. Just as swiftly, the blind rolled to the top again

with a resounding bang as if the spring had broken. There were loud screams and shouts as pandemonium broke loose in the kitchen. The children freeze. Unconsciously they huddle closer together.

Poupoune spat on the ground. "Là, elle est fâché."

"She's mad," Zack whispers. "Come over this side."

"Are you scared of her?" Emer asks.

"Nah. My mother, she has big voice. Always she sound mad."

"Come see my chessmen ." Emer was proud of the hand-carved pieces the San had given her before she left. Sounds of crashing cutlery and crying babies made them move.

"Hokay." Poupoune threw her long legs over the fence and was over in a second. She stood on her spindly legs, legs as round as the legs of a kitchen chair, only wavering uncertainly. "O," She took in the clumps of tufted grass and the one tree at the back. "C'est différent ici." And added, "C'est nette."

"Clean?" Hmmm. Never thought of it that way.

Poupoune grimaced as if she had a sour lump in her mouth.

"Let's go in. Go in, Emer," Zack says, waddling ahead of them.

"I have to get my chessboard, anyways." She disappeared into the house.

Poupoune doesn't move but scans the whole yard with her eyes.

She's been in it before. It's better kept than her own. Even has a vegetable garden. Avec des fleurs aussi! She feasts her eyes on the flowers. Her heels firmly dig two small holes in the earth. The house would be better than her own too. She did not care to see that. Her pride tells her it's best to wait in the yard.

Emer calls back, "Aren't you coming?"

"Non. I wait here."

Zack opened the inner screen door, "C'mon!"

"C'mon!" Emer said. "Then I'll go to your place."

Poupoune stands rigidly in the two holes she made for her feet

## PROSPECT STREET

and shakes her head violently that she won't and that she certainly won't let the English girl come into her house.

"But why?" Emer strains to see her in the dusk.

Zack slams the screen door.

Poupoune stares at her shoeless feet. When she becomes aware of the length of her black dress with its uneven hemline, she raises her head and, mustering all of her pride together, haughtily walks down the Maguire laneway towards the street.

Emer ran and tried to grab her long bony arm. She hadn't made any friends since she had come out of the San; she wasn't going to let this prospect get away so fast. They struggled quietly on the sidewalk.

Poupoune, her lips sucked tensely inside her mouth, tried to unglue the tentacle-like hold on her arm. Defiantly, the words clipped out of her mouth. "You want see *my* house?" The street lights had not come on yet.

Emer nodded yes. Her eyes fell to Poupoune's shoeless feet on the hot cement.

Poupoune ran straight past her house, to the corner of Prospect and King Edward.

Emer runs after her. She again tried to grab hold of her arm, but Poupoune would not be touched.

At the edge of the sidewalk she points to the corner store, "C'est l'épicier." She is waiting for darkness to enshroud her house.

Emer reads it out loud. The sign says, "Routhier's Groceries."

"C'est ça." They cross the street at the corner, with Poupoune giving her the grand tour. Biding her time, she points to a two-story brown house. They were all out on the front porch sitting on some old trunks.

Emer sees that the father had a long beard and a black beanie on his head. She was wide-eyed.

"I don't understand what they're saying." She thought everyone in the world spoke English.

Poupoune nodded in agreement. "Moi non plus. Ce sont des Polonais."

Next door to them is a duplex. On the front lawn sits a howling baby. His eyes seem glued shut with green stuff. His mother ran in and out with heavy boxes.

"I think the baby's sick." Emer clutched her stomach and let her tongue hang out. "Yuck!"

Poupoune shrugged. She had lived on the street all her life. She had seen it all. New people moving in, old people moving out. Pointing to the duplex next to it and the man in the rocker, she said, "C'est Monsieur Chapelle. Saturday nights they have big fight. Him and Madame. Police come. Lots of fun."

Emer swallowed hard. Grown-ups fighting? Police coming? Wow!

Her attention is drawn to some furniture in a moving truck parked next to the Chapelle's house. "Gee, look at this polished table you can see your face in it," she says distracting herself from the rawness.

Michael came out on the porch. He beckoned her in for supper.

"They move into apartment house. They are rich people. Only rich people, they go there. They have big radio too. Sometimes they play loud. I hear." The girl looks wistful. "But they very quiet. Not so much fun as Chapelle's house."

"My father's calling. I have to go home." She quickly scans the gold plaque on the stone gate. "Truro Apartments."

Poupoune continues, "I am glad I am not you."

"Why?"

"Because you live next door to crazy woman."

"Oh?" She imagined a witch with stringy long black hair and laughed. But as she faces her house from the opposite side of the street,

she sees a woman sitting on the other side of their duplex, sitting in a nursing rocker, bolt upright.

Poupoune whispers confidentially, "Monsieur Larocque's wife she stare all the time," and added, like a little old lady, "Monsieur Larocque, he is very nice though. He has no job and he give me candy."

Emer remembered the thin man who had given them the sunflower seeds. "Yes I know."

The two girls tiptoe closer to the rocker. "Why does she stare?"

Poupoune giggled behind cupped hands. "Because she crazy."

Emer was puzzled. Craziness and staring just didn't seem to fit and she's ramrod straight too. How strange.

Flushing with embarrassment she points, "Me, I live there..." Indicating the only free-standing shack on Prospect Street. It was a brick house to the right of the Larocque's. At that moment the street lights came on.

Emer has difficulty taking her eyes away from the painful sight of the old lady, to the painful state of Poupoune's house. The front door hangs at a crooked slant. A greasy windowpane glimmers dully in the fading light. Loose bricks are scattered all over the alleyway at the side of the house, leaving patches of emptiness where she can see straight through to the plaster of the inner walls. The parlour window was cracked. A piece of cardboard kept the draft out. Emer looks up and down the street at the houses on either side. She sees the street now as if for the first time.

It had seemed a pretty street when they first moved in, with its people and tall trees. But looking closely at all the funny crooked houses jammed one on the other, it looked sad somehow. The people in rockers on their porches seemed lonely and forgotten. Emer's heart throbbed in her head at her new found sight. It was a sorry street. Where there was no future. Waller Street would have been better to live on. At least there were no sorry sights to see. She wondered why her father had moved them here. People seemed so poor. She stared

at the smashed parlour window. It wasn't the poorness she minded so much as the shame that went with it. Poupoune was ashamed to be poor; Emer knew that much and that she minded. Suddenly the door of Poupoune's house opened. It fell back against the wall with such force that the few remaining pieces in the front windowpane fell out and shattered into the hallway. A fat woman with pitch black hair appeared in the doorway.

"Where is that bitch?" she shouted, and slapped her fat thigh with a switch. Her eyes fell upon Emer. "Hey you, you seen my girl?"

A heavy smell of grease and urine drift out the open door. Emer nods and whispers in fright that Poupoune was in the back.

"Hah." The woman snorted a heavy phlegm back into her throat and hurled it with a curled tongue onto the damp earth. "She is never around when I want her, that one."

A streak of lightning illuminated the woman's body with grotesque clarity. Involuntarily Emer steps back. She can hear the squalling of babies in the back kitchen but her eyes were glued in fascination on the woman's swollen belly.

Madame Sarrazin was used to being stared at in that way. "How old you?"

"Thirteen," she lied in fright.

"You speak English. You must be Protest-ant."

That was final.

Somewhere a phone starts ringing. Emer didn't hear. She stares at the woman's middle part, wondering what it is she was protesting about.

"Mais mon Dieu, what is the matter?" The stomach swung around.

"The cat, she has your tongue?"

The door slams shut. The bricks dance.

Emer stood still in the silence.