

Chapter One

1841–1845

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Mullinclavin, Ireland
February 14, 1841

Dear Da,

As the dirt slid off my shovel onto your coffin, Uncle Bryan pressed a parcel into my hand. The cameo pendant of Erca, the first princess of Scotland, lay nestled in the brown paper. My heart stopped to see our family heirloom, handed down to me through generations of ancestor mothers.

When our family gathered the next day to witness your testament, we now four orphans briefly clasped hands. To my right, the firm grasp of Torlough, our redoubtable “Tor,” confirmed his new role as the family patriarch. To my left, Frank’s warm bear paw reminded me he was our heart. Young Johnny, only twelve years old, was straggling behind, as usual. You will never read this, yet I know you hear me.

Your loving daughter,
Cath

Letter from Da, in Gaelic

Mullinclavin, Ireland
February 12, 1841

My dearest children,

The tales of our ancestors are timeworn, but indulge me in one last recitation. One day, you will bequeath our traditions to your children.

Our ancient lineage may be as much myth as historical fact. Still, we believe we were descendants of Murtagh MacEirc, the High King of Ireland, in the sixth century. Our troubles began when the English confiscated our land during the Nine Years’ War. That act hastened the Tudor Conquest of Ireland in 1605. The purloined parish still bears our name, Termonmaguirk, meaning McGuirk’s Sanctuary. It was there we became the “Keepers of the Bell,” a relic bequeathed to us from Colmcille, the patron saint of Ireland, along with Saint Patrick. The bell was sworn on to settle disputes and drank from to heal the sick. May it always protect you.

To escape the scourge of serfdom, you must flee our farm and the stifling lack of a future in Mullinclavin. My dying wish is for your small inheritances to provide you with a better life in America. I ask that Johnny stay behind for a time with your uncle Bryan. As a schoolmaster, he will provide the only

chance for him to finish his education. Always remember this vow: "In times of trial, remember the Duty and Honor of the Bell."

Your loving,
Da

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

38 Mulberry Street
New York City
July 7, 1841

Dear Johnny,

This letter is from an Irish boarding house we heard about on the ship. The voyage was long, miserable, and nothing I wish to repeat or remember. We were surrounded by English people on board who were not friendly. I thought I was brave and ready, but our circumstances already intimidated me. The term "sea legs" became familiar. When the first foul weather strikes, you become helplessly sick to your stomach, where standing is impossible. The moment the misery becomes unendurable, the winds wane, and you can magically stand again. At that moment, your sea legs have arrived to see you through the rest of the voyage.

No amount of cleaning could remove the nasty stench in steerage. Sleeping next to strangers and lacking proper privacy was a continuing trial that took all my worldly resolve to rise above. The ever-present vermin and monotonous, unsavory food did not help. The chill wind and damp cabin were my constant companions, as was an incessant hacking cough. At least one sympathetic acquaintance on board helped ease the burden. Having a friend to converse with made me forget where I was sometimes.

I am sorry to complain, as we were fortunate to depart of our own will. We are blessed to be young, healthy, and strong, with some money to get us started. I hope I have not discouraged you for your turn.

I am sorry I did not cry when I said goodbye to you. As the Queen Victoria pulled away from the slip toward the infinite ocean, my brave facade melted. My yearning for the motherland I would never see again almost strangled me. Missing loved ones and places is new, but it feels indistinguishable from grief. I only hope that the missing return, even if only in our hearts.

Your loving sister,
Cath

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

38 Mulberry Street

New York City
October 14, 1841
Dear Susie,

When we met at the townland well to say goodbye, I professed no regrets about leaving. I lied to you, as I desperately miss you and our home. New York is intense and unrelenting. Even Liverpool, where we embarked, is a backwater compared to this human chaos. As jarring as it is, I am strangely drawn to it, as though it were familiar. Of course, that is utterly impossible.

When I saw the skyline of New York City, I felt like Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*. Perhaps fate had more in store for me than I imagined. At last, I am free of being shackled to a tiny plot of land, watching my life waste away. This is my chance to become a different person, and I do not intend to waste it.

Please, Susie, never let me forget I said this. I declare here and now: "I vow to become a governess in America or die trying." I found a fleeting friend on the ship to whom I also confided my secret ambition. He was the first person I have told besides you and my brothers. Maybe here, a girl can decide for herself what kind of life she wants.

After disembarking, Tor, Frank, and I forged through the teeming crowds to an Irish boarding house on Mulberry Street. Luckily, it is a distance from the riraf of the Five Points neighborhood, the worst in New York. The idea of gentility can be an antiquated notion here. Women pass us on the street and shout to my brothers, "Come join me, sir." Men openly stare at me, but with two brawny brothers flanking me, they say nothing.

We have been repeatedly warned about gangs of criminals roaming the streets. Sad to say, they are Irish, and we have been admonished to be vigilant to avoid pickpockets. Some gangs, like the Forty Thieves and the Daybreak Boys, do worse than that. However, they say their worst crimes are reserved for each other. Between the rearing horses and the forward people, I feel unsafe on the streets without my brothers.

It has only been a few weeks, but our goal of settling in Manhattan is beginning to seem insurmountable. With all the rejection and nasty insults, it feels like a tall gate surrounds the island, keeping us locked out. The only employment available, a mudlark selling scraps or a ratcatcher, is worse than what we had in Ireland. We were naïve, not knowing that the proverbial streets of gold were filled with horse manure and trash. We resolve to keep trying. Wish us luck, dear Susie.

Your oldest friend,
Cath

Letter from Patrick Lynch

452 Greenwich Street
New York City
November 29, 1841

Dear Catherine,

You may be surprised to receive this letter. We did not formally declare our intentions to continue our acquaintance when we parted. However, I better understand now your reasons for spurning my marriage proposal on our last night at sea. The predicted rejection of me by your brothers is one obstacle.

We have not known each other very long or well. I declared myself to you for fear of never seeing you again. I realize I may not be the prize some young ladies dream of. If you could look beyond my spectacles and slight stoutness, my sincerity is true blue.

You are different from other young ladies I have met. You have ideas of your own, and perhaps marriage could come between you and pursuing long-held ambitions, as you suggest. This is not a predicament I ever expected. I never had a sister, and I lost my mother at a young age. The ways of ladies are mysterious to me.

Competing with a young woman's aspirations is not a situation I imagined before. You are the first young lady I have ever met who has declared such plans. However, I have always loved challenges, and your determination intrigues me. Embarking on a new life in a new country is indeed matchless.

While adjusting to the fact that we will not become husband and wife, I have another proposition. Unless you object, I cannot think why we may not proceed as correspondents. Your company, thoughts, and perceptions have been a pleasure to share. Without the intrusion of your hovering brethren, we might continue our meeting of the minds on paper. Our letters do not have to be kept secret. Still, it would be a relief to speak our minds to one another without interference.

A single young lady and man corresponding with each other may not be proper. Still, I will forgo propriety for the pleasure of your company on paper if you agree. Sharing our struggles and a sympathetic ear in this godforsaken city may ease our paths forward. If each of us collects the mail at the post office ourselves, keeping our missives private may be possible. Please consider my idea. I am still disappointed that I will not be taking a beautiful wife. Still, we could both benefit from having a friend in this municipal wilderness.

Your possible penfriend,
Patrick Lynch

Letter from Catherine

38 Mulberry Street
New York City
December 20, 1841

Dear Patrick,

I am sorry that I was compelled to refuse your flattering proposal. Your friendship aboard the Queen Victoria was my rock. Our shared walks around the deck in the rain were worth risking my reputation and health. Conversing freely with you meant so much that I looked forward to the frequent squalls. Your kindness and perspective gave me the stamina to tolerate the daily trials of life at sea. If I led you to a wrong conclusion, I apologize. I am unfamiliar with the ways of courtship and did not quite realize we were engaged in one.

My hesitation is that I have never had a life of my own, and I hope for that chance. My dream is to fulfill my ambition of teaching while I am still young. By refusing your hand, I will probably suffer bitter regret someday. Please understand that you did nothing wrong and much right. Just as I will someday lament refusing your proposal, you will no doubt be relieved one day that I refused you.

If we correspond, we can learn the outcome of these dilemmas. Therefore, I will be honored to exchange letters with you. Your suggestion of keeping our posts to ourselves is sound. Not that we have anything to hide, but others may misinterpret two adults of different sexes developing a friendship. It is for the same reason that neither of us dares take the hour walk through the muddy streets separating us. It would arouse too many inquiries to visit each other. As you suggested, we both need a friend to rely on in this jungle called New York City.

Your new penfriend,
Catherine

Letter from Patrick

452 Greenwich Street
New York City
January 14, 1842

Dear Catherine,

I am delighted that we are to be penfriends. This is the only positive event I have encountered since landing on these shores. So far, I am having little luck securing a position. While I have not reached the stage of discouragement, I am skirting the edge. When I return each night, I sit alone in my room, contemplating my reasons for coming here. While I do not question that I made the right decision, I never realized how difficult the challenges would be.

Perhaps coming here alone is the problem, as my boarding housemates are hard to talk to. When I probe for advice or seek companionship, I am usually disappointed. Although if I had a mate aboard the ship, I might have been distracted from pursuing your friendship. I treasure our correspondence, and it more than makes up for my current state of loneliness. May we have a long and fruitful exchange of letters.

Your penfriend,
Patrick

Letter from Catherine

38 Mulberry Street
New York City
February 27, 1842

Dear Patrick,

Forgive my slow start to our correspondence, as the long days navigating these streets have left little time. I have some unsettling news. Unfortunately, my brothers and I are admitting defeat and leaving Manhattan. Sadly, this is goodbye, but not farewell.

After failing to secure employment, the boys heard about labor on a railroad being built on the eastern end of Long Island. I am not sorry to leave here and will not miss New York City. We can resume our confidential correspondence when I am settled in the village of Greenport, wherever that is.

Your penfriend,
Catherine

Letter from Patrick Lynch

Merchants Hotel
39 Cortland Street
New York City
April 30, 1842

Dear Catherine,

I am sorry we will not be in proximity and for your current travails. It must be daunting to move on again, though I am glad you will not be alone. My solitariness continues to weigh on me, and I am thankful you will continue our exchange.

The good news is my run of bad luck is improving. An acquaintance I encountered from Cork helped me secure a job at the Merchants Hotel as a hall man. I patrol the floors for safety and security, removing intruders who do not belong there. Assisting with the guests' requests is my other responsibility. So far, the labor is tolerable, as the strangers obey me because I am large. The patrons order me about because I have an accent. Please speak up if I am usurping your time from duties and responsibilities with our correspondence. As much as I anticipate it, I do not wish it to become an obligation on your part.

Your penfriend,
Patrick Lynch

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Third Street
Greenport, New York
June 19, 1842

Dear Johnny,

Now that you are in your teen years, I can be frank about our challenges here. Some of them may be your own in time. The boys heard about labor on the railroad in Greenport, a village about a hundred miles east of Manhattan. Leaving the big city was a simple decision. Whatever Greenport was, it had to be an improvement over those horrid streets. With much trepidation, as there was no railroad occupation firmly in hand, we took the chance of boarding another vessel. We hoped it would lead to a new life in a place called the North Fork of Long Island.

Now that we live in Greenport, whose citizens are descendants of the Puritans, we are tolerated but not much accepted. There is little opportunity for us to socialize or make friends. Many inhabitants work in the whaling industry, which entails long voyages to faraway places. I am grateful our brothers chose local labor, as I would hate to be left alone. Yet they find the railroad trade punishing. The other Irishmen they work with are downtrodden from the back-breaking toil of laying ties.

I am keeping house in our small rental cottage, trying to keep my spirits up for the boys' sake. The women buying provisions at the market nod but do not respond to my overtures of conversation. We are there shopping for our families, granted from different backgrounds, but it still galls me they consider me alien. I am so removed from a friendly face that I banter with a cat outside our front door. How long I can keep up a stoic demeanor is in question. Perhaps better days are in the offing, dear brother.

Your loving sister
Cath

Letter from Catherine

Third Street
Greenport, New York
July 18, 1842

Dear Patrick,

Of course, you are not interfering with any responsibilities I face in this new life. Picking up your letter at the Greenport post office today was a pleasure. It was a balm to my spirits, trampled here too frequently. Cultivating an epistolary friend is a habit I treasure.

I am pleased that you can show your abilities, and sincerely hope that your position develops into a lasting occupation. Securing professional labor is difficult for any female, but seems especially remote for a foreigner like me in a new village. As I told you at sea, they prepared me to be a teacher at the school I attended. Unfortunately, my dream may be foregone for a long time.

We have the same challenge of Americans being bothered by our accents, and facing the same obstacle makes me feel less alone. I am trying to learn patience on this side of the sea. I hope your work continues well. When my brothers and I boarded the vessel from New York to begin another new life, my head was bent with fatigue and discouragement, Patrick.

On this forlorn voyage, I clutched the pendant hanging around my neck with all my strength. The ivory carving is of Princess Erca, the daughter of the first king of northern Scotland and Ireland in the fifth century. I did not care if the pendant's derivation was a fanciful embellishment by an imaginative ancestor. The faded, carved silhouette against the weathered wooden background was still beautiful. It linked me to the princess born, in fact or fable, over a thousand years ago in Scotland. It felt like the last link to everything I had ever known in my eighteen years on earth.

Your penfriend,
Catherine

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Third Street
Greenport, New York
August 30, 1842

Dear Susie,

I am glad that we are far from the crude streets of New York, but we are still struggling. The village of Greenport is not a respite, but another challenge. I fear my brothers will become as browbeaten as the other Irishmen laboring on the railroad. I have urged Tor to implement his original plan of buying a small farm. Frank applied for the shipbuilding trade, but with no other Irishmen in the yard they refused him.

Tor traveled across the Shelter Island Sound off Greenport to Bridgehampton to inspect a property. It is about forty-five miles by land but only ten nautical miles to the nearby port of Sag Harbor. Tor made the journey alone, hoping to send for us if he secured the farm. I would be grateful if you could visit young Johnny for me.

Your oldest friend,
Cath

Letter from Johnny McGuirk, in Gaelic

Kingscourt, Ireland
November 17, 1842

Dear Cath,

I am sorry that adjusting to America is so hard, and I hope things are improving for the three of you. Living and learning with Uncle Bryan and little Jack is better than expected. He is an excellent schoolmaster but exacting of his students. Though I am separated from you and the boys, I still feel like I am in a family.

Without a mam to care for him, Jack is constantly by my side. What a terrible fate to lose your mother in childbirth. I have never had someone who needs me before, and I am no longer the baby of the family. Now, I am a big brother whose help is required to raise one. I do not want to let him or Uncle down.

Your younger brother,
Johnny

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Tomasina Farm
Scuttle Hole Road
Bridgehampton, New York
April 17, 1843

Dear Susie,

Frank and I joined Tor on a farm he bought near a village called Bridgehampton. We live in a small house on the land. Tor has christened his purchase Tomasina Farm, which is the combination of our parents' names in Gaelic. When I hear the lilt of the word "Tomasina" spoken aloud, they still seem to be with us.

The Bridgehampton countryside is picturesque, though so different from Mullinclavin. The soil here is sandy and rocky instead of moist and dark. While Tor is engaged in his new occupation, farming

reminds Frank and me of why we left home. The monotony and tedium of plowing, hoeing, feeding chickens, and milking cows are the same.

While we live with Tor, I help with farm chores. Frank has been walking back and forth to the nearby village of Sag Harbor, searching for labor. It is another whaling port only four miles from the farm, but it seems farther over the pitted, sandy path that serves as a road.

Frank took a temporary room in a hotel in the village to bolster his chances of employment. He promises to send for me when he secures a trade. Though this is another unsettled interlude, our prospects seem promising, considering Tor's successful land purchase. I, too, look forward to finding a home where I belong.

Your oldest friend,
Cath

Letter from Frank

Nassau Hotel
Sag Harbor, New York
July 26, 1843

Dear Cath,

Sag Harbor is a place of good luck for a lad from Ireland. My English is well understood, especially after all that drilling in grammar our entire childhood. People from all over the world stroll the wharf here. A fellow I talked to about hauling cargo from the vessels told me, "Irish accents are easy compared to those of the people from distant lands who wander the streets."

Down at the wharf, I noticed something else unusual. There is one place where folks of different sorts seem to get along—aboard these whaling vessels. A hand on the dock told me,

"We have fellows who are white, free Black, members of the Shinnecock and Montaukett tribes, and from the Azores and Pacific Islands. They all live together in close quarters for years on the voyages." That is remarkable. We were subject to snide remarks and closed doors in the short time we spent in New York City. Maybe our luck is changing, finding our way to this place called Sag Harbor. They will tell me tomorrow whether I have secured labor hauling goods on the wharf. Send me good wishes, Cath, my girl.

Yours forever,
Frank

Letter from Catherine

Tomasina Farm
Scuttle Hole Road
Bridgehampton, New York
August 14, 1843

Dear Frank,

Congratulations on joining the trade at the wharf. I am happy for you and know you are making a fine start. Our rightful life in America will truly begin when I join you in the house you rented for us. We tried mightily to save wages to book a passage, unaware of the trials awaiting us. We thought escaping Ireland was challenging, but that was only the beginning.

All this itinerant wandering since leaving home, from one temporary residence to the next, will finally seem worthy. I strived so much to rise above each situation that it felt like I was constantly floating. It will be a pleasure to finally plant my feet on terra firma. I forget what a true home is like, but our new house will become one, dear brother.

Yours forever,
Cath

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
January 8, 1844

Dear Susie,

We have settled in our new home in Sag Harbor. It is another whaling port near Tor's farm, and our fortunes are improving. On my first day there, I gaped at the activity, which was a carnival of excitement and novelty. Even as an outsider, I had a perception of the purpose and industry coursing through the village. Everyone had an occupation and was thoroughly engaged in performing their duties.

At the wharf, I took in the shops serving the whaling industry: sailmakers, coopers, and those selling riggings and iron goods. Susie, my delight was barely concealed upon finding the lending library. The streets were lined with modern services for such a small village. There is a grocery and liquor store, a general store, taverns, a bakery, a tin shop, a butcher, a jewelry store, a hat shop, a tailor, a shoemaker, a cabinetmaker, a clockmaker, a stationery shop, a drugstore, a blacksmith, a doctor, a post office, and a newspaper office. There is also a Customs House to accommodate Sag Harbor's status as a port of entry for the entire United States.

The narrow sidewalks are perfect for meandering under a canopy of trees that line the small, inviting houses. The din of horses and nasty drivers yelling and cursing, like there was in Manhattan, is forgotten. The lone carriage driver I encountered crossing the street tipped his cap to me. Far from being

splattered with mud by the traffic, I emerged from the street without a blemish. My old habit of pressing a handkerchief to my face to ward off the stench was unnecessary. The air smelled sweet and fresh, with a hint of salt from the sea. Unlike in Greenport, the shopkeepers greeted me in a friendly fashion, which warmed my heart. I am already beginning to forget our detour to New York and the neighboring port.

A thoroughfare called Division Street runs down the middle of the village. It casts one side of Sag Harbor in the Town of East Hampton and the other in the Town of Southampton. Frank and I live on the East Hampton side, on the edge of Eastville. It is a community of whalemens, free Black people, and folks from the Shinnecock and Montaukett tribes.

I am encouraged that we are in a neighborhood with a variety of people. It might provide a better chance to fit in. That would mean much after being excluded as foreigners in Greenport and New York City. For the first time since Mullinclarin disappeared from the back of a wagon, we are somewhere we might belong. Susie, you will like this place if you ever come here.

Your oldest friend,
Cath

Letter from Catherine

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
February 11, 1844

Dear Patrick,

Our time in Greenport was a detour, not a destination. From observing my brothers' grueling toil, I admonish you to avoid railroad employment. When Tor purchased a farm nearby, Frank and I moved to a small house in Sag Harbor, another whaling port.

It fills me with joy to have a proper home. I inquired around the village, "Do you know any families who might want to employ a governess?" None of the people I spoke to could name one. It turns out Sag Harbor is made up of tradespeople, not the landed gentry.

My newfangled optimism was still not deterred. I naively believed they would not think me too foreign to at least serve in a role at the local school. The assumption remains that schoolmasters are men, so I did not place my hopes in that position. However, it seemed reasonable that I could become an assistant in some capacity. I told the headmaster, "I achieved a rare Level Five of the Core Five Reading Books back in Ireland." He looked at me as though I was speaking gibberish.

Unfortunately, it seemed no one wanted an Irish immigrant with an accent teaching their American children English literature. Furthermore, the local school did not offer French, which is my favorite subject. It was humiliating to be treated as though I had made an outlandish request when I was more than qualified to teach. I gathered my dignity as best I could despite the nasty sneer on the arrogant face of the headmaster.

After adjusting my expectations, I began knocking on doors around the village, searching for any labor I could find. Following your lead, I secured employment at the Nassau Hotel, admittedly a detour from my lofty ambitions. I assist at the front desk and substitute in the tavern or kitchen when necessary. Many of the customers come off the whale vessels that arrive regularly. We do not get the riggers and boatsteerers, as they stay at the boarding houses on the wharf. Our patrons are the first mates, officers, and the occasional captain. After a few pints in the tavern, they can still imitate their subordinate brethren. Despite the vagaries of the trade, I am grateful to earn wages for the first time in my life.

My most intriguing customer at the Nassau Hotel has been a former whaleman named Herman Melville. He was a brooding, handsome man with an air of vague menace about him. Mr. Melville confided, "I have just finished a book about my time in the South Pacific, and I am looking for a publisher."

I shook his hand and said, "Congratulations are in order." From the intense look on his face, I presumed some trial had been visited upon him there. Summoning my courage, I asked, "If you do not mind, Mr. Melville, would you describe the South Seas?"

"Tahiti is like a paradise," he said, though his tone made the compliment sound ominous. He became almost transported speaking of it. "The natives' perceptions of time, labor, and love have no equivalent in our way of life. We measure, compete, strive, and classify through the years. They attend, cooperate, defer, and accept whatever happens among them."

I kept nodding, not at all sure what he was talking about. Then he offered me a quote from Typee, the title of his book: "However ignorant man may be, he still feels within him his immortal spirit yearning after the unknown future." For this recent immigrant who harbors aspirations beyond my current station, his sentiment spoke volumes.

Mr. Melville told me he had taught school for several years. I confided, "My dearest wish is to teach, but my overtures in the village were soundly rejected."

"Never give up, young lady," he said, which I will not forget. Sag Harbor is undoubtedly a more fascinating place than what we left behind in Ireland. I hope our recent lull in letter writing portends well for your new occupation.

Your penfriend,
Catherine

Letter from Patrick Lynch

Merchants Hotel
39 Cortland Street
New York City
April 19, 1844

Dear Catherine,

How pleased I am that we are laboring in the same profession. What a fascinating acquaintance you have made in Mr. Melville. Despite my pleasure in our shared occupation, I hope you remember the dream of teaching, as Mr. Melville said.

The hotel trade is also providing me with fascinating new associates. I met a gentleman named Cornelius Vanderbilt, who frequents the tavern. Some would argue that he is not one, given his crude and aggressive ways.

Unlike anyone I have ever met, Mr. Vanderbilt fills each room he enters with his bearing. All those present seem to absorb his every word. His hand is in so many businesses that he relies on accountants to calculate his worth. He owns much real estate besides the ferry, steamboat, and railroad companies, all under his purview.

We have struck up a friendship. He told me, "A bright young man like you might have a place in a venture I will launch soon, especially if you do not mind traveling." I assured him, "Mr. Vanderbilt, I would do anything you asked."

"The next time I am in town, we will speak again," he replied. I am eagerly awaiting his return. He lives across the river in New Jersey. While doing business in New York, Mr. Vanderbilt always stays at the hotel. I have tried to study him during each visit and learn from his vast knowledge and business talent. What an honor that he has taken an interest in me, and I will jump at any opportunity to be employed in his firm. Wish me luck upon his return.

Your penfriend,
Patrick

Letter from Catherine

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
July 8, 1844

Dear Patrick,

My last letter to you was returned from the hotel with a note on the envelope: "In Panama." I can only assume that you have indeed become employed by Mr. Vanderbilt. Congratulations! How fascinating to be so far away and in such an exotic place. I envy your adventurous opportunity and look forward to hearing about it upon your return.

Perhaps your loneliness will be in the past with this additional responsibility. My work at the hotel continues to occupy me, and I still enjoy living in Sag Harbor. I will patiently wait for your reply whenever you return home.

Your penfriend,
Catherine

Letter from Catherine, in Gaelic

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
December 7, 1844

Dear Susie,

How exciting that you and your brother are preparing to emigrate here. To have my best friend with me again will make my homesickness disappear for good. I have never needed a friend to confide in more than now. Susie, please prepare for a big surprise, as I have a new beau. This is how we met.

One afternoon, I struggled up the hotel stairs with some heavy bags. A young man passed, coming down the opposite way. He bent down and slid the bags out of my hands. Susie, I gazed up into the most ravishing blue eyes I have ever seen. He set the bags at the top of the stairs. I was already becoming smitten with this handsome whaleman, Michael Heffernan. Later, I served him a pint of ale in the tavern. He told me, "I just returned from a two-year-long whaling voyage to the Sandwich Islands and Polynesia."

After the crew unloaded the vessel each day, Michael would stop by the tavern to see me. We talked for hours, about what I could not say. I adored listening to his voice and catching the faraway look in his eyes. After completing the unloading of the vessel, Michael left for Greenport to be reunited with his sister. The minute he was out of my sight, I missed him terribly.

As much as I like Michael, there is something about him I cannot quite fathom. Frank snatched a glance at him on the wharf. He said, "You have a schoolgirl romance based on good looks, not character. Do you know anything about this man?" From Frank's description, Tor said, "He could be a ne'er-do-well."

Michael says little about himself, though solicitous of me. Besides being Irish, I am not sure if we have much in common. We do like to stare into each other's eyes. The chambermaids at the hotel encouraged me to heed the warnings about sailors. They said, "A whaleman will break your heart because they are already married to the sea. They have a girl in every port." Still, as much as the caveats give me pause, I cannot attribute those qualities to Michael. Even though I am almost twenty years old, I have hardly had a caller before, so I need your advice. I will try to wait until you get here before I decide to become Michael's sweetheart.

Your oldest friend,
Cath

Letter from Patrick Lynch

Merchants Hotel

39 Cortland Street
New York City
January 14, 1845

Dear Catherine,

You did indeed guess correctly. I was in Panama and Nicaragua working for Mr. Vanderbilt. I left rather suddenly, and my destinations were so remote that sending letters was unmanageable. We were scouting overland routes through a jungle. Our locations were too far from a port where I could ask a passing ship to take a letter. Regrettably, regarding our continuing correspondence, I am returning to Central America shortly. I am only here long enough for the errands and paperwork required to maintain a residence in New York.

If only you could accompany me on my next trip. I know you have your occupation, but the country's culture and customs would fascinate you. They are so rich and varied that it would take me many letters to describe them.

Let me know if you ever want to change your life in any substantial way. I am always at your disposal to help make that wish a reality. My feelings have not changed, though I understand it would entail your sentiments altering considerably. Of course, we can proceed as usual and let my musings remain in the realm of imagination. I am going to return to Central America soon. Unfortunately, because of the remoteness of the locale, we may experience another rupture in our correspondence.

Your penfriend,
Patrick

Letter from Catherine

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
March 11, 1845

Dear Michael,

I have done what you asked and committed the story of my childhood to paper. I hope you will do the same in return, as I long to know more about you.

Our little townland, Mullinclavin, sat near the intersection of four counties. Cavan, Louth, and Meath bordered Monaghan, where we lived, on three sides. I first learned to disbelieve authority at the Irish Society School in Kingscourt, across the county line in Cavan. We were the only family in Mullinclavin to attend there. The state ordered the school to convert us from Catholic to Protestant, which is why few Catholics attended.

The lure my parents could not resist was a superior education in literature, history, French, Latin, mathematics, and science. The subjects were taught in English, not Gaelic, like the local hedge school

where my uncle taught. Unlike his school, mine charged no tuition, an added benefit to my beleaguered da.

He trusted that my brothers and I would have the strength to ignore everything the schoolmasters said about religion. My da said, "It will not be easy to question your teachings. Then again, our Irish nature is stubborn, and we doubt authority." Though it took constant vigilance, it was good practice. I also learned to disbelieve the rules I was taught about girls' proper behavior.

Still, being one of the few Catholics in my school was lonely and vexing. The other girls were cruel and teased me, so I played with boys instead. However, believing in the value of an excellent education took no converting at all. I just had to devise a use for it. The occupations reserved for girls—spinning yarn, weaving flax into linen, or sewing lace—were not for me. French was my favorite subject, and I loved to imagine myself in the land of my hero, Joan of Arc.

I suspect that growing up in Mullinclavin was the same road to futility as being raised in Limerick. We toiled on our small farm, growing potatoes and raising livestock. Yet we could never get ahead because of the high rents the absentee English landlord extorted from us. Learning so much about the world in school only made our plight seem worse. Year by year, our lives were shrinking before our eyes. Despite our loving family, nothing could change the inevitable misery the immediate and lasting future held for us.

When our land would be subdivided again for my brothers, there would not be enough to attempt farming. Girls were not a part of the calculation. The so-called prize of making a good marriage was in vain. All the young men faced the same fate as my brothers. Even without Da's parting wish for us to go to America, the only path forward was escape. We reaped one more harvest at Cabra Castle, next to our school, to earn extra wages for the voyage to America. Then we were gone. I look forward to learning about your childhood.

Your sweetheart,
Cathy

Letter from Susie Fee, in Gaelic

Fee Farm
Scuttle Hole Road
Bridgehampton, New York
June 17, 1845

Dear Cath,

I am so happy to have arrived at the farm of my brother Junior in Bridgehampton. I felt ready for the journey from the tale of your passage, which was sadly true. In my lack of bearing here, I did not realize Junior's farm was next to your brother Tor's. "I am so happy to see you!" he greeted me, followed by a hug. It was out of character for your proper big brother.

America seems to agree with the Irish folk here. Seeing family makes me feel at home. I have already visited with some cousins, with more arriving soon.

I will walk over to Sag Harbor the first chance I get. We can have a long talk about your young man. I am so excited that one of us, at least, has a sweetheart.

Your oldest friend,
Susie

Letter from Catherine

Division Street
Sag Harbor, New York
July 22, 1845

Dear Michael,

I was afraid that I would be the only one confiding my life story. Your remote air and distant eyes may have deterred other girls, but they will not deter me. The more you withhold, the more I will ask you about your childhood and what capturing a whale is like. This time, I will not be discouraged by that cloud passing over your face or your downcast eyes. I am still seeking descriptions of the exotic places you have visited, especially Tahiti. Herman Melville raved about it, but you are reluctant to broach the subject.

Events at sea may have marked you beyond your ken. No matter how much I learn about you, Michael, some doors may remain shut. I will keep trying to pry them open so we can become closer, as a couple should be. You are not making it easy, but you are a kind gentleman despite being aloof. I will wait for you to return my gesture and write your history if you dare.

Your sweetheart,
Cathy

Letter from Michael

Fourth Street
Greenport, New York
September 3, 1845

Dear Cathy,

My parents are also gone. I was far away when they passed, something I will always regret. Of course, my mam and da loved me, but the endless grind of having nothing wore them down. Though I

dreaded never seeing them again, I was as eager to leave Ireland as you were. I went to a hedge school in Cashel, this one under a roof. By then, the Protestants had deigned to legalize Catholic schools, so we no longer hid behind hedgerows outside to learn. The masters taught us to read and write in Greek and Latin, but not the enemy's language. Once here, with a foundation in the classics, I quickly grasped written English.

My brother William and I landed in New York in 1843. We also found our way to the end of Long Island to labor on the railroad. To escape that drudgery, we became seamen, which separated us. We became the proverbial two ships passing, as we were rarely in port at the same time. It was a lonely life.

My fortunes improved when my younger sister arrived. Her name is Elizabeth, nicknamed Ellen. You are not the only poor girl who has endured living with three brothers her entire childhood. One time, when we were young, the four of us took the wagon to church. Afterward, Ellen was still inside chatting with the neighbors. My brothers and I were hurrying home and forgot about her. Little did we notice her absence until we were hungry. "Where is supper, and why is Ellen not here?" When we went to fetch her, she presided over dinner with our parish priest. "Go home. Get your supper yourselves. I am not ready to leave yet," was her retort to our belated rescue.

Being the only girl in a trio of brothers is not the only thing you two have in common. As Ellen says, "I can run, throw, and wield a hoe with the best of you." We share a house in Greenport, and I will introduce you soon. Now that you have read about my raising, you know I keep my promises. Here is one more. I promise to stay true to you as I embark on my next whaling voyage in a few weeks. Will you promise to wait for me?

Your sweetheart,
Michael