**CHAPTER TWO**

Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat. The Creation Hymn.

The news of the day: The Theatre Royal will present Italian Operas sung by Mr. Harris and Mr. William Beale. ₤ 100 Reward by the Constabulary

Whereas on the night of the 6th, a man cut the farm gates and thus broke into the barn of Miss Georgina Byrne in County Dublin. The thieves stole apples and set fire to the barn. Irish Missions to the Roman Catholics:

Roman Catholic friends: Come to a discussion at Coombe class in Skinner’s Alley on Thursday evening of March 15th at half-past Seven O’clock. Subject—“Are Adoration of Relics and bowing down to images lawful for Christians?”

Roman Catholics are earnestly and affectionately invited to attend. Total Abstinence Question

This evening will be the first meeting at the Metropolitan Hall. Speakers will be the Rev. G.W. Dalton and Geoffrey Pope, esq. After the meeting, members will be enrolled. Tickets 3s. Tickets are transferable. The Irish Times, front page for March 15, 1860 SEÁN O’Neil was sitting on the stairs of the tenement in the city of Cork. The dark wood smelled dank with mold and was combined with the wafting acrid urine smell from the common toilet down the hallway. The small man with jet-black hair and pale skin was slumped over and holding his head in his hands. Then he tried to scratch his temple, but the nail on his index finger was broken from the accident at work. The nail cut into the skin of his face. He started to curse, but didn’t have the energy. He was exhausted. Translated by Wendy O’Flaherty, The Rig Veda (New York: Penguin, 1981). Mary had gone into labor six hours ago. That’s when he left for the midwife. She was a woman in the building who had had thirteen children of her own and knew exactly what she thought of everything. She generally looked on the fair side of things. Was it those years in the convent? Rose came almost immediately, even though it was midnight when Seán knocked on her door. “Whatcha be wanting me for?” said Rose through the door. Rose was a short, stout woman whose husband worked at the same factory that Seán did. “It’s Seán O’Neil, Rose. It’s about Mary. Her water’s burst out everywhere.”

“Why didn’t you say so? I’ll be right there.”

And she was. That was six hours ago. Seán was dozing on the stairs. Every so often he’d awaken by the cry of a child or woman who was being slapped around by her husband. Seán would be alert for a moment and then return to his trance.

In another hour, Seán would have to leave for work to be there by 7:30. He was hungry and tired. It would be a very bad day. The church bell chimed fifteen minutes after the hour. The door behind him opened up and little Tommy, just turned two, toddled toward his father. “Da, Da, Da!”

The little boy in his short pants and dirty shirt came forward. As he walked, his bare feet squeaked over the hard-aged carpet whose pile had long ago been beaten down to a flat plane by mud and filth and vomit.

Tommy walked forward with his broad oval face that exuded unrestrained joy. “Da! It’s a boy! I’m a brother!”

Seán smiled a half-smile, grabbed the handrail and pulled himself up. He lifted little Tommy in his arms and walked back to their flat. The door was open and he walked into the room where his wife, Mary, lay. Rose blocked the view of his wife. She was holding the bawling red baby boy. He looked up at Rose. “Is everything all right?”

The midwife nodded her head and held the boy forward for the father to see, then she turned around and went back to the exhausted wife who was lying on the straw tick, and put the child to her breast.

Seán knelt on the floor next to the straw tick. The sight of his new son gave him a sense of energy. He kissed Mary. The church bells chimed. It was seven o’clock. He had to leave for work. \*\*\* It was lunchtime. Seán had wrapped four biscuits in his handkerchief and had just purchased a ha’penny cup of tea to wash them down. He sat next to his mate, Patrick. The long wooden benches in the lunchroom were partially empty due to the recent lay-offs. “My missus just had my son this morning.”

Patrick nodded his head and gnawed at a thick piece of black bread. His brother worked in a bakery and got him day-old bread for a song. “Have you thought of a name yet for the little stranger?” “We’ve several we’ve been tossing around, actually. You know, boy names and girl names. If we can’t make up our minds, we’ll ask Father McGinnis before the christening. He has an opinion about everything.” Seán put the last biscuit in his mouth and then picked up the lukewarm, weak tea.

“I like the name Patrick, I do,” said Patrick as he took another bite of bread. Even though it was a couple days old, the grains in the bread gave off an odor that made Seán’s mouth water.

“Patrick’s a fine name, it is. Too bad they wasted it on you!” said Seán as he lifted his forearm and gave his mate a jab. Patrick smiled and jabbed back.

Then there was the work whistle. Seán downed his tea and Patrick stuffed the rest of the bread into his mouth. \*\*\* Seán came right home after work. No stopping at the Green Dragon tonight. He opened the door and smelled the aroma of boiled cabbage. Tommy was playing with some small sticks that Seán had roughly carved so that they resembled people. Each one had a recognizable head, body, and legs. The biggest drawback to the toys was that they had no arms. That’s what the imagination is for. “Whatcha playing, Tommy?”

“Red Branch.”

“Which one is Cuchulain?” Tommy lifted up the tallest stick figure. His father clapped his hands. Then Seán walked a few steps past his son to his wife who was holding her baby close to her and under the stained, blue cotton blankets that had been made in the factory that Seán worked in. Mary’s usual ruddy complexion was redder than normal. The tenement was drafty and, this being the middle of March, it was a damp-cold. Seán took off his coat and put it over his wife and baby. “How was work?” asked Mary.

Seán shrugged his shoulders and knelt next to the pair. “He’s a beautiful lad. Have you thought of a name yet?” “He has your eyes. Blue eyes. What kind of Irishman has blue eyes?”

“The damned handsomest one on his shift.” Seán inhaled and stuck out his chest. Then he exhaled and shook his head, “But what about a name?”

“Well, both of our fathers were named ‘James.’” The infant popped off the breast he was feeding on.

“But I hated my father,” said Seán, turning away and addressing the wall.

“Well, you had good reason to. But this little stranger would never hurt anyone.”

Seán rubbed a small scar next to his left eye. He stared at a roach that was emerging from a crack in the plaster.

“Let’s ask Father Mac about it,” put Mary as she used her free hand to brush her light brown hair out of her eyes.

Seán turned back to his wife, smiled, and gave a kiss to Mary and their child before walking over to the stove to ladle out what was left of the boiled cabbage. The fire had long since gone out. Tommy was engaged in a battle of the Red Branch—including sound effects.

“So there’s nothing new at work, then?”

“Nope, just the same. Another couple guys made redundant.”

“More firing?

“Yeah. The place is contracting, that it is.” Seán walked back to his wife and lowered himself to the floor. “Some of the guys are getting shorted, too. A dozen hours work and they only pay you for ten. It’s not like we are lace Irish and don’t give a damn: bloody awful place to work. But what choice does a lad have? We know it. They know it. And they use that knowledge to keep us down. Bloody English way of commerce.”

“And how safe are you?” asked Mary as she transferred the baby to her other breast.

“Don’t know. But there was another bloke at the plant today to round up workers for America.”

“Free passage?”

“Yeah, but you have to work three years at their factory or pay the full price of the passage for the family.”

Mary smiled and reached out her hand to her husband. “Don’t worry, Seán. I’ve always said you were my protector. I mean it, honey, until the day I die.” Seán leaned forward and took Mary’s hand.

“Bam!” yelled Tommy, as Cuchulain killed ten English soldiers who were trying to invade Belfast.

Seán smiled, shook his head, and ate his cabbage. \*\*\* Two years later, the O’Neils were riding steerage on their way to New York and then to Philadelphia. The American Civil War had depleted much of the working-class population for the army. A clothes company wanted to replace the lost skilled workers who knew the cotton and wool business from the ground floor and could deliver cheap cloth to the female work force that were fettered to their sewing machines (a good portion of which was going to the war effort). The pay was half of what was promised but an apartment was included that had its own toilet and bath. Even though the ceiling leaked and there were roaches, the O’Neils thought they had died and gone to heaven. Their parish was mostly Irish, German, and a few Italians. Tommy was a year away from attending public school and James was just a toddler. The family made some friends in the apartment building that was populated mainly with people from the clothing factory (as the building was owned by the same man). They were paid daily in cash and they were never shorted. It seemed that life was beautiful. \*\*\* One night Seán woke up coughing. The factory in Philadelphia was smaller than the one in Cork. There were fewer windows and there were more cotton fibers in the air. Sometimes it became hard for Seán to breathe. He had to get outside for a few minutes. However, if you left the work floor (even to go to the bathroom) you were docked a half-hour. But better a few bob short than to fall over dead. \*\*\* Seán walked over to the faucet near the oven. He picked up a ceramic mug and filled it with water. Then he had another coughing fit. When it had subsided, he took a few sips of water, walked over to the window and opened it up. It was November and getting cold, but the air felt good even though it prompted another coughing fit. He wished he had enough money to buy tobacco. A good smoke would soothe his lungs. He was sure of it. Then Seán went back to bed. The straw tick seemed to poke him like needles as he drifted into a dream about Tommy and James. They were all members of the Red Branch and were on their way to report to Cuchulain, who was protecting Dublin against an attack of the British. Tommy carried a long sword and James had a dagger (he fought on the sly and caught you when you were unprepared). Seán was the attendant. He led a donkey that carried what they needed for battle. Suddenly, they were lost. How had it happened? It was Seán’s job to lead them to their destiny, but somehow he had lost his way and the family honor would be forsaken forever. Seán awoke in a sweat and began to cough.

It was the beginning of March in the middle of Lent when Seán went to find a midwife. They did things different in America. In Cork, people just helped each other out in the tenements. There was no talk of compensation because people simply helped each other out when they needed it. But here he had to take the midwife and her children into their apartment for meals until the child was born. This arrangement made everyone a bit uncomfortable. Tempers were a bit frayed when Mrs. Bernadette Coughlin and her brood of five came for lunch and supper each day. Seán often came home a little late so that he might avoid the cacophonic circus.

Bernadette’s husband was in the army, and she hadn’t received a letter from him in over a year. The last she’d heard was that he was fighting in the army of General Sherman.

Mary made the fire in the oven with the scant coal from the factory allowance that was augmented by scraps that Tommy picked up around the neighborhood. The food was mostly vegetable-based soup with bread washed down by tap water.

Mrs. Coughlin was a short, stout woman with black hair and dark brown eyes. The features on her face seemed to have been pushed to the middle by her puffy, rosy cheeks. Bernadette’s teeth were not good. She’d lost two in her smile plus a molar. Her children (two boys and three girls, aged six to twelve) were terribly thin and had to use the toilet a lot.

On Thursday, the thirty-first of March, when Seán came home from work at eight o’clock, he found the house in disarray. Mrs. Coughlin’s children were bouncing off the walls and occasionally knocking James over, who was sitting by himself toward their outside window. Tommy ran to his father. “Mommy’s having her baby!”

Seán looked over to the side of the room where the bedding lay. There was a bucket of water and some rags hanging over the side. James could smell the coal fire in the oven. Both of their lamps were burning at high wick.

The blue-eyed, pale skinned, black haired little giant of a man strode toward his wife without thinking. When he had taken three steps, Bernadette Coughlin twisted her head around and screamed at him, “Get everyone out of here! I need some decent space about me now.”

The remark puzzled Seán, but he instantly obeyed. He picked up James and rounded the other children out into the hall and deputized Martha, the oldest Coughlin child, to control the group. The hallway was wide—ten feet or so. There was a carpet that covered the seven feet in the middle. The plaster walls were in good condition thanks to the occupants having painted them last summer. (Free paint from the factory owner. They provided the labor.) The only light they had was from the gaslights outside. The dim corridor smelled of dank and dried vomit. At the end of the hall was the staircase. Martha posted herself there to prevent any children from venturing that way.

For seven hours they waited. One by one the Coughlin children went to sleep. Even Tommy went to sleep holding his brother, James’s, hand. Only James and Seán remained awake. The trio was positioned together when the door to their apartment opened and Mrs. Coughlin emerged holding something.

Seán pulled himself up, lifting little James and nudging Tommy awake with his left foot. Coughlin moved her head in an impatient way. The O’Neil clan proceeded on cue.

“This is your new baby sister,” said Mrs. Coughlin. The baby was red and bawling: this resonated in Seán’s consciousness as a memory confirmed. He smiled and took the baby in his arms. “Smile at your father, Lucy,” intoned Mrs. Coughlin.

Then Tommy blurted out, “Lucy?”

Even Seán was confused. Something was amiss.

Bernadette sensed the confusion and took the baby back and with a flip of her hand dismissed Tommy and James. Then she lifted her free hand and motioned Seán to follow her. It was only then that Seán noticed that Bernadette’s hand was dripping blood. Unconsciously, he followed Mrs. Coughlin to the doorway where his eyes were captivated by the form of his wife lying in a bloody mess. Seán rushed to Mary. “What’s the matter? What has happened?” Seán’s voice was squeaky high. His hands were shaking as tried to wake her up. He kneeled down and lifted the unconscious body into his arms.

“Wake up, Mary. It’s Seán, your protector.”

But Mary didn’t move. Her body was still warm. \*\*\* Tommy O’Neil finished his schooling at sixteen to take a job in the factory with his dad. Tommy had been a passable student, but he didn’t really see the point of learning math and English grammar— to say nothing about the Greeks and Romans! Tommy was a very practical fellow and he didn’t like to go into abstractions such as are taught in high school. James was fourteen and liked Latin in particular. He was partial to Virgil’s Aeneid. “I sing of arms and men!” What could be finer? One day when Tommy had come home from work with his father, James was strutting about the room reciting lines on the death of Dido. “What do we have here?” queried Seán as he entered the room and began coughing.

James and Tommy helped their father to his armchair for rest. The great protector needed a little protecting himself. When he had stopped coughing, the patriarch renewed his query. “What is this prancing all about, James?”

James slunk back and hid his book behind his back.

Tommy put his hand on his father’s shoulder. “That’s all right, Da. Jamie was just role-playing from Virgil. He’s a great Latin poet.”

“Damnation boy, don’t you think I’ve never heard of Virgil? Just because I never went to school doesn’t mean that I don’t know a thing or two.”

Tommy smiled and went over to the sink to draw his father a glass of water. It was dark outside and there was only one kerosene lamp lit. Seán’s vision range did not extend to the sink, so to him Tommy disappeared and then re-appeared with the cool elixir. The father took a long drink and then set the glass on the floor. James furtively slid closer to his father. He wanted to touch his father as Tommy had, but he was afraid.

As Seán’s youngest boy stepped forward into his lamp-lit field of vision, the father reached out his arm. James eagerly bounded forward and grasped his father’s hand. “Since I don’t know the Latin tongue like your learned brother and you (though I did learn a spot of Gaelic in my youth), please tell me the scene that you were going through when we came home.” Seán looked up with a smile.

James grimaced. “It’s not a really good scene, Da. It’s just a lot of military stuff. You know it’s a book about war.”

Then Seán frowned. “When I ask you a simple question, young man, I expect a simple answer and not a lot of shenanigans. Now tell me, what was the scene about that prompted your prancing and dancing?”

James looked to Tommy, who lifted his hand to his brother and answered for him. “James was reading a very sad part of the story in which a woman in love with the hero of the story, young Aeneas, becomes despondent when her love deserts her for his exploits.”

“Why did he do a damned-fool thing like that for?” inquired Seán.

“Well, the short story was that he had a mission to accomplish that required him turning away from the personal. His duty as a king was bigger than his private life.”

“And who was this fair lass who he treated so wrongly?”

“Her name was Dido,” put James (emboldened by his brother’s largesse).

“Dido? What kind of name is that? County Donegal?”

“It isn’t an Irish name, Da,” said Tommy, caressing his father’s shoulders. “It’s from the Mediterranean area, in a city called Carthage.”

“So what does this woman do?”

“She’s a princess, Da. She’s very important. She loves Aeneas, another royal soul, and when he leaves her she throws herself off a cliff.”

Seán began coughing very hard. Blood came up and the boys tried to lay him onto the floor. They both alternately caressed him and gave him a few sharp jabs to the back. Soon he stopped hacking. The fifty-one-year-old factory worker seemed to go to sleep.

The boys retreated a few steps when Seán awoke and said, “I don’t want this talk about death around here: especially selfinflicted death. Don’t you know that you go to hell when you kill yourself?” Then he seemed to breathe in a very labored way. The boys started forward again but he resumed speaking. “That’s what keeps the likes of me going. And don’t you forget it. It’s not enough that your blessed mother, Mary, and your dear sister, Lucy, are no longer with us, but do you have to read stories about—” and then Seán fell immediately into a deep sleep.

The boys checked their father’s breathing and then went and covered him up with a thick wool blanket that his factory had produced and had been given to him last Christmas. Tommy walked over and picked up the book James had been reading and handed it to his brother. “Now, once again, read me the passage and put your soul into it.” \*\*\* Seán’s health was getting worse. Tommy found that he hated factory work. It was too repetitive. He was forced to work with a team of five in a very small space for long periods of time. This wasn’t pleasing to him and he wanted to get out. The trouble was James. He was a delicate soul who couldn’t stand very much conflict. James liked to be by himself. James didn’t play with the other boys, but preferred studying for school. He got high marks, but the family couldn’t eat his high marks. If Tommy left, then James would have to go to work because they couldn’t live on the contracted hours that their father could still perform. He was only working a six-hour half-shift, and that for only five days a week. If Tommy quit, his brother and father would founder. It was the beginning of Advent in 1876. Tommy tossed the fish and potatoes he’d purchased for dinner on top of the black cast iron oven. The temperature was cold and the humidity was high. The combination was particularly uncomfortable to Tommy. He washed his hands and unwrapped the fish from its newspaper covering. It was then that he saw a large font advertisement for policemen in New York City: Wanted: Young Men Strong and True to be Policemen in New York City. High Wages, Job Security, Career Opportunities—Especially Interested in Immigrants: Irish, German, Polish. Contact Padreig Conley . . . . The advertisement set Tommy’s mind on fire. It was like an omen from God telling him where he should go. The only drawback was getting James a job so that he could help support their father. That would not be an easy task. James was not cut out for the harsh indignities of the factory floor. In America, a man in a factory had to be prepared to fight at the drop of an insult. Tommy had protected his father. But then even the young punks weren’t really out to get a man with one foot in the grave. But James was too delicate for all of that. He needed a different sort of job. After Easter, Tommy took a hike to central Philadelphia. His first idea was retail sales. There were a myriad of little shops with so many people who wanted work that the task daunted him. It was important to get to a part of town where people with some money shopped. If he stayed in south Philly where the O’Neils lived, any job Tommy got for his brother might be gone the next day. So Tommy headed to the area of town that had streetlights, just a few blocks from the waterfront in the beginning of the old capital area. An unusual sign of a top hat with a white handled cane arrested his eyes. Tommy stopped and took in the haberdashery. It was not too fancy, but not working class either. The merchandise in the window was respectable but not ostentatious. At the far end of the window was a little placard that said, “Help Wanted.” He took off his own Irish tam and proceeded inside. The interior was dark wood, probably walnut. It was the afternoon so the lamps inside were not lit, but the atmosphere was very dim. Tommy had been inside no longer than a half a minute when a scrawny man wearing a gray waistcoat and broad tie approached him. The man was very old—sixty or more! He carried his hands in front of him and was constantly rubbing them as if he were washing. “Excuse me, can I help you?” said the high crackling voice. It was a question that was phrased like a veiled threat. Tommy cleared his throat. “Yes sir, you can. You see I was walking down the street here and I saw your help wanted sign in the window.” The scrawny man stopped rubbing his fingers. His eyes took on a focus and then he raised his right arm and pointed his index finger right at Tommy’s face. “You Irish trash. Why don’t you stay where you belong? Do you think I’d dirty my shop with your filth? Why, I wouldn’t even sell you a hat unless you paid me in gold.” As he spoke, the scrawny man jabbed his finger closer and closer to Tommy’s face. Tommy knew that he could take out this little bigot in thirty seconds or less, but he also knew what it would cost him. So he pursed his lips, pivoted, and exited the shop. When he was outside, Tommy gave in to his urges and spat on the outside wall of the shop under the plate glass windows. He continued on his journey. After a dozen or so attempts, Tommy called it a day. He was sick and tired of all the anti-Irish sentiment in the English part of town. For a moment he began to question his interest in becoming a copper in New York City. Maybe they would treat his kind in the same way. At least at the clothes factory they didn’t hold his blood against him. But that was probably because the owner was Irish and most of the workers were, too. Tommy began to think about how he might take some short cuts on the four-mile walk home when he stopped in his tracks. A gray-haired man dressed in a black frock and white shirt was in the process of locking up his store when a horse that was pulling a cab knocked down a young boy, who had been crossing the street. The black-clad man rushed to the boy. Tommy didn’t think twice: he also rushed to the boy. The lad was probably around eleven—just a few years younger than James. The gray-haired man was in complete command. He saw Tommy’s approach and directed him to lift the legs while he took the torso. They walked him over to the shop the black-clad man had exited. “Set him flat,” directed the elder man. The sidewalk was brick and was reasonably even. When the boy was down the man took out some keys from his coat and opened the door to the shop. Tommy kneeled near the boy’s head. He stroked the boy’s face and the child opened his eyes. Tommy smiled. “Tell me where it hurts.”

The boy didn’t reply. “You took a nasty fall there. A horse ran into you and sent you sprawling backwards. I need to know where you hurt so we can help you.” The boy’s gaze was now clearly focused upon Tommy’s face. It had an imploring air of helplessness.

Then the man in black returned with a dark brown glass bottle and a spoon. He unscrewed the cap and poured out a teaspoon full. “Open your mouth, son. This is medicine that will help you.” The boy turned his gaze to Tommy. Tommy nodded his head in accord and the boy opened his mouth and accepted the proffering.

The man in black then turned his gaze to Tommy. “Can you stay with him an hour? I have to go to a meeting and will be back to get this lad on his feet.”

“Sure,” replied Tommy as he sat down next to the sleeping child. It was forty-five minutes after the hour when the man left and twice fifteen minutes after the hour when he returned. Tommy was very tired. It was his day off, but the combination of everything took all that he had. He passed the time by making note of the way various people made their way around him on the sidewalk. No one offered any assistance or asked him what had happened. It was just as if a pile of sand had been dumped on the sidewalk and everyone had to negotiate around it.

“Ha! There you are,” said the man. “I told them so at the meeting.”

Tommy tilted his head quizzically.

“The meeting,” he said with more volume, as if that would solve the problem. “Sister Catherine and Brother Mark were certain that I had been wrong to leave you with the boy and that you’d be gone when I returned. I told them that I was an uncommonly good judge of human nature. But I didn’t convince them.”

Tommy looked down at the sleeping boy.

“Has he been calm?” asked the man in black.

Tommy nodded, his eyes half-closed.

“Well, then let’s get him inside my shop to have a good look at him.”

Tommy reacted almost mechanically to the command. He instinctively took the feet as they carried their charge inside through the main shopping area to the back room where there were several tall wooden tables. They set the boy down and the man in black undressed the boy and examined the body. Even with all three lamps lit, there were many shadows. Shadows frightened Tommy. He felt that no good came from them.

The man in black turned to his young assistant and said, “There are no broken bones. The boy has some severe bruising that can be eased by this herbal extract that is rubbed on the affected area. What I want to do now is to wake the boy and have you take him home with the salve.”

They managed to wake the child and get a sense of where he lived (about two miles away). Tommy would assist his walking and see to it that the boy got home. As the trio exited the shop, the man in black reached out his hand to Tommy. “Young man, you are a person of character. If there is ever a boon that I can bestow upon you that is within my power, please let me know. I am Charles Quincy, trained chemist.”

Tommy shook the man’s hand and started home with Johnny, the waif they had rescued. Tommy couldn’t see it but Charles Quincy tipped his hat to the pair when they were but fifty yards into their journey.

When James graduated on June 15, 1876 on a Saturday, the sixteen-year-old was taken to the park. They sat on a bench and chatted about the future.

“Well, James, my boy, you seem to have followed the course of your brother and graduated from high school. You are a scholar and a gentleman.” The now gray-haired blue-eyed little giant teared a bit when he talked. He had recently gone down to a third-shift (the lowest shift allowable).

“Yes, Da.” James shared many of the same physical characteristics of his father while Tommy was a mix of their mother and father.

Tommy put his arm around his brother that was followed by his father. The scene was set: James sat in the middle of his brother and father. As they sat there frozen for a minute in time, there was a gaggle of geese that had been walking about in some non-descript pattern that suddenly decided to fly up in the air, flapping their wings and emitting a cacophony of loud squawking sounds.

The cascade of sounds revived the frozen pair to the moment at hand.

“So, what do you have to say to the future?” asked Seán.

“Future?”

Tommy cuffed his brother on the head. “Don’t be daft, Jamie boy. You understand English.”

“Of course I understand English. What do you mean by that?” “Your Da asked you a question.”

It was June. The black-capped chickadees in the park were swirling about. It was a partly cloudy day. There were insects abuzzing and in the center of the park a band was setting up in the circular white bandstand to begin a concert.

“I don’t know,” replied James. He didn’t look at either his father or his brother.

“YOU DON’T KNOW!” screamed Seán. “Don’t you know that only losers talk like that? Life doesn’t just come after you like we’ve always given you. You got to have the balls to go after it in order to survive. There’s no room in the world for ‘I don’t know.’ You’ve got to know or you will go under.” The patriarch lurched forward, but the exertion was too much. He retreated in a paroxysm of coughing that caused him to fall off the bench onto the turf.

Tommy quickly moved to retrieve his fallen father. James was frozen and didn’t know what to do. When they had placed the patriarch back into position on the park bench, James began to talk.

“Listen, Da, it’s not like I don’t think about these things. I think about quite a bit, actually. It’s just that—I mean that I’m not sure how much good it does.”

Seán looked at his younger boy and listened.

“You know there is so much out of our control.”

“What are you talking about, James?” asked the father.

James fidgeted a bit. He was now sitting on his hands and moving his shoulders up and down. “Well, for one I’m talking about moving from home.”

Seán nodded.

“And for two, there was Ma. I don’t know why she had to die giving birth to Lucy. I mean why did that have to happen? We never talked about it much. It was like an unspoken sin—except it wasn’t any of our faults.”

Seán’s hands began to shake. Tommy tried to calm his father, but the elder man brushed him away.

“And then all that for a sister who goes and dies of the measles three years later. I mean. What was the point of Ma dying? She brought something into life that quickly made her exit.”

“Lucy didn’t make an exit,” said Seán. “She was given the hook. She would have stayed if the good Lord would have let her. But it wasn’t in His plan.”

“Damny the plan, Da. I want my mother and sister!”

The older brother and father froze again. Then their attention went to a thin, young mother walking with her little daughter in front of them on the bench. The father and older brother patted James on the shoulder before standing up.

Seán turned and said to James as the trio exited the park, “You shouldn’t say ‘damny’ son. It makes you sound like Irish scum.”

They had walked a few blocks aimlessly when Seán directed the group toward South Street. Seán and Tommy had decided to take young James to a show at the new Ravioli Theater. It was a gay time watching comics tell bawdy jokes, singers present popular tunes, and dancing numbers here and there.

It was a high school graduation that James would never forget.

A few weeks later when Tommy took in the mail after work, he found a fat brown envelope addressed to him from the New York City Police Department. The letter offered him a probationary job in the force. If he showed his stuff in the first six months, his job would be permanent. There was also a brochure that set out all the particulars. Tommy took the letter outside to read. The evening was warm and the sun lingered on the horizon.

The following Saturday, Tommy took off from work at noon and walked back to central Philly to the chemist shop of Charles Quincy. Tommy opened the door and took off his tam. The store was very simply arranged. Over the door was a small window that could be opened with a pole that had a hook on the end. To either side of the door were large-paned glass windows that provided light for the interior. When one walked inside, he would see a shop with light red mahogany walls, the two flanking walls each sporting a large picture.

On the wall to the left was a picture of the staff and snake of Asclepiad, the symbol of the medical profession. To the right was a painting of William Penn. In front of Tommy at the center was a red cherry counter with an opening on the left side, and behind the counter was an entry to the back room, where he could see countless stoppered bottles sitting on little shelves that rose to the ceiling and a ladder that moved on a metal track for access.

When Tommy had opened the door, it hit a little bell on a string that signaled the entrance of a visitor. The noise prompted a scurry in the back room and the appearance of Charles Quincy without his black coat.

The elderly man appeared a bit flustered. His face was flushed and his sleeves were rolled up. “Can I help you?” said the man, adjusting his spectacles.

Tommy walked forward. “Excuse me, Mr. Quincy. I made your acquaintance quite by accident a couple of months ago. Do you remember? There was this little boy who was violently knocked down by horse pulling a cab—“

“Oh,” began Quincy, pulling out his shirttail to clean his spectacles. “Yes, indeed I do.” The chemist reached over the counter and shook Tommy’s hand. “You know the mother came by on the Monday after and thanked me. She wanted to thank you too—especially for taking her boy such a long ways home. But unfortunately, I knew neither your name nor where you lived.”

Tommy grimaced. “I’m sorry sir. That was very stupid of me. You see I’m just a simple lad who works in a clothes factory. I’ve not a lot of experience in the manners of this part of the city.”

“You’re an Irish immigrant, aren’t you?”

Tommy grimaced again, and looked down at the cherry counter. He prepared himself for the worst. “Yes, sir.”

“C’mon, boy. It’s nothing to be ashamed of. We’re all immigrants here. This country is full of immigrants—everyone except the Indians, you know. That’s the beauty of America. You know, I’m a Quaker. We weren’t wanted in England. They thought we were stupid simpletons because we weren’t part of the Anglican Church. So we got up and left and lots of us landed here after our patriarch procured a land grant from the Crown.” Quincy gestured with his left hand to the painting on the wall. “Now, why don’t you come in the work room with me and I’ll fix you up a cup of tea. I’ve invented a device that can make a quick contained fire under a special pewter pot that I also designed. I can get us hot water in fifteen minutes. Have some tea with me, and tell me your story.” And so they went into the back room. It was there that Charles Quincy did all the hard work of curing and preparing his herbs and salves for medicine based upon the tried and true recipes of his forefathers and mothers. Everywhere were little gadgets that Quincy had invented himself to make the job more efficient. In his modest way, he pointed out most of these to Tommy.

Before Tommy could make his request, Charles Quincy offered him a job in his shop. “You see, this is too much for one man. I used to have a nephew who helped me out, but he got big ideas and went to St. Louis. Why anyone would want to go to St. Louis is more than I can fathom. Anyway, I’m not getting any younger and I need an assistant. Do you want the job? I’ll match your pay at the factory and the work is lighter and uses your brain more.”

“Oh, dear Mr. Quincy. What you are saying moves me deeply. But let me give you some facts about my family, first.”

And so, two cups of tea later, Tommy O’Neil had procured a job for his brother, James. The way was now clear for New York City and an exciting career as a cop!