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# Angela's Ashes



A MEMOIR

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OF THE  
PULITZER  
PRIZE

**Frank**

**McCourt**

Author of *'Tis* and *Teacher Man*



# I

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**M**y father and mother should have stayed in New York where they met and married and where I was born. Instead, they returned to Ireland when I was four, my brother, Malachy, three, the twins, Oliver and Eugene, barely one, and my sister, Margaret, dead and gone.

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: the poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years.

Above all—we were wet.

Out in the Atlantic Ocean great sheets of rain gathered to drift slowly up the River Shannon and settle forever in Limerick. The rain dampened the city from the Feast of the Circumcision to New Year's Eve. It created a cacophony of hacking coughs, bronchial rattles, asthmatic wheezes, consumptive croaks. It turned noses into fountains,

lungs into bacterial sponges. It provoked cures galore; to ease the catarrh you boiled onions in milk blackened with pepper; for the congested passages you made a paste of boiled flour and nettles, wrapped it in a rag, and slapped it, sizzling, on the chest.

From October to April the walls of Limerick glistened with the damp. Clothes never dried: tweed and woolen coats housed living things, sometimes sprouted mysterious vegetations. In pubs, steam rose from damp bodies and garments to be inhaled with cigarette and pipe smoke laced with the stale fumes of spilled stout and whiskey and tinged with the odor of piss wafting in from the outdoor jakes where many a man puked up his week's wages.

The rain drove us into the church—our refuge, our strength, our only dry place. At Mass, Benediction, novenas, we huddled in great damp clumps, dozing through priest drone, while steam rose again from our clothes to mingle with the sweetness of incense, flowers and candles.

Limerick gained a reputation for piety, but we knew it was only the rain.

My father, Malachy McCourt, was born on a farm in Toome, County Antrim. Like his father before, he grew up wild, in trouble with the English, or the Irish, or both. He fought with the Old IRA and for some desperate act he wound up a fugitive with a price on his head.

When I was a child I would look at my father, the thinning hair, the collapsing teeth, and wonder why anyone would give money for a head like that. When I was thirteen my father's mother told me a secret: as a wee lad your poor father was dropped on his head. It was an accident, he was never the same after, and you must remember that people dropped on their heads can be a bit peculiar.

Because of the price on the head he had been dropped on, he had to be spirited out of Ireland via cargo ship from Galway. In New York, with Prohibition in full swing, he thought he had died and gone to hell for his sins. Then he discovered speakeasies and he rejoiced.

After wandering and drinking in America and England he yearned for peace in his declining years. He returned to Belfast, which erupted all around him. He said, A pox on all their houses, and chatted with the ladies of Andersontown. They tempted him with delicacies but he waved them away and drank his tea. He no longer smoked or touched



alcohol, so what was the use? It was time to go and he died in the Royal Victoria Hospital.

My mother, the former Angela Sheehan, grew up in a Limerick slum with her mother, two brothers, Thomas and Patrick, and a sister, Agnes. She never saw her father, who had run off to Australia weeks before her birth.

After a night of drinking porter in the pubs of Limerick he staggers down the lane singing his favorite song,

*Who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy's chowder?  
Nobody spoke so he said it all the louder  
It's a dirty Irish trick and I can lick the Mick  
Who threw the overalls in Murphy's chowder.*

He's in great form altogether and he thinks he'll play a while with little Patrick, one year old. Lovely little fella. Loves his daddy. Laughs when Daddy throws him up in the air. Upsy daisy, little Paddy, upsy daisy, up in the air in the dark, so dark, oh, Jasus, you miss the child on the way down and poor little Patrick lands on his head, gurgles a bit, whimpers, goes quiet. Grandma heaves herself from the bed, heavy with the child in her belly, my mother. She's barely able to lift little Patrick from the floor. She moans a long moan over the child and turns on Grandpa. Get out of it. Out. If you stay here a minute longer I'll take the hatchet to you, you drunken lunatic. By Jesus, I'll swing at the end of a rope for you. Get out.

Grandpa stands his ground like a man. I have a right, he says, to stay in me own house.

She runs at him and he melts before this whirling dervish with a damaged child in her arms and a healthy one stirring inside. He stumbles from the house, up the lane, and doesn't stop till he reaches Melbourne in Australia.

Little Pat, my uncle, was never the same after. He grew up soft in the head with a left leg that went one way, his body the other. He never learned to read or write but God blessed him in another way. When he started to sell newspapers at the age of eight he could count money better than the Chancellor of the Exchequer himself. No one knew why he was called Ab Sheehan, The Abbot, but all Limerick loved him.

My mother's troubles began the night she was born. There is my



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