

## Chapter 1

My mother said she was a nun. That might have been a lie. Her story made her famous, but it was always hard for me to tell how much of it was true. She was also a whore, and she might have been a thief. I learned more about my mother's history from strangers than I ever learned from her. I was often ashamed of her, but I always loved her.

Even when I was a little girl, I loved the freedom of city streets, even though the streets of New York City could be dangerous for a girl. We lived on Goerck Street until 1846, when I was ten. Pigs ran free in the streets; little girls did not—except for me and my little sister Lizzie. Many mothers kept their daughters close. Our mother only came looking for us if she wanted us to read to her or take a bucket to fetch her beer. The streets were filled with people who came from everywhere, it seemed, except New York. More black folk lived there in those days and plenty of Germans, along with some Jews and ever-increasing numbers of Irish. Entertainment was everywhere: dog fights, street vendors crying their wares, drovers bringing cattle through for slaughter, pigs everywhere. The streets themselves were pitted, dank, and filthy with the contents of refuse pails and chamber pots. We did have privies, but they were usually full, and they always stank. Children assigned to empty the chamber pots took the easy course of dumping the contents in the street. So did adults, when they thought nobody was looking.

Lizzie and I often went to glean bits of wood or coal from the docks, where the steamboats spewed cinders that could still be burned. The great sailing ships were exciting to watch, and the sailors were often jolly with children, telling us stories and making us laugh.

I always loved to dance, and by the time I was ten, I was fast-footed and light. I could earn a few pennies dancing for the sailors or outside one of the saloons, especially if I were dancing with someone else and most especially if I were dancing with one of the black boys. I'd start by clogging as the Irish do, rapping my feet on stone or brick and leaping very high. The black children would dance low to the ground, with snaky, sinuous movements I would imitate. Then they'd imitate me. Even when there was no fiddler about and we had to make our own mouth music, we'd be entertained and so would passersby. If all other entertainments failed, we always had the pigs.

Pigs were everywhere in those days, and I understand it's as true now as it was then, and it's been nearly twenty years. Some of the more provident women of the neighborhood would catch and mark the pigs as their own by cutting notches in their ears. The pigs disapproved of this idea and would squeal mightily and try to run, sometimes dragging the women along the ground and almost always giving some spectacular gushes of blood. Those of us who saw would laugh and applaud.

Disputed ownership could provide even better entertainment. The Irish women didn't always honor the German women's marks, and vice versa, and a female punch-up often brought the men out of the saloon to watch. Still, the women would feed their pigs and maybe find some country boy to slaughter them in the alley or the street when the time came. Meat was scarce for poor folk, especially fresh meat.

Salt pork could be had from the barrel at the grocer's or at the saloon. That is, it was *sold* as salt pork, but people claimed if you listened closely enough, you could hear it whinny or bray or bark or meow—or maybe say the Lord's Prayer.

My friend Ziprah hardly ever got to eat meat at all. She and her family were Jews from Portugal, and Mrs. Carvalho said they didn't eat pork, even when they were sure that's what it was. She certainly wasn't going to feed her family anything that came to Goerck Street in a dirty barrel. They lived closer to the saloon than anyone else, except the Chayevskis. Mrs. Chayevski thought all red-headed people were evil and unlucky. Unfortunately for her, she lived next to the saloon in an Irish neighborhood. Every time Mrs. Chayevski saw someone with red hair, she would cross herself three times and spit. She seemed to spend all her time crossing herself and scowling, and she looked like giving out all that spit had dried her right up. It might not have been the spit alone. Maybe having eight children had something to do with her shriveled face.

All the McGonagles had red hair: mister, missus, and all six children. Mrs. Chayevski might have been happier if she'd decided to get along with Mrs. McGonagle, a big, strong, capable woman who had marked several pigs—and scared off any possible poachers.

I was dancing in front of the saloon one late-summer day when I saw Mrs. McGonagle spread out some potato peelings and rotted vegetables. Her biggest pig trotted up, and her six children quietly surrounded it as a big Negro stood by with a butchering knife. One of the children moved too quickly, and the pig bolted, knocking her down. Her oldest boy Tommy tried to run after it, but he slipped on some chamber pot filth and fell. I stopped dancing to watch, and the crowd by the saloon door laughed and shouted. Two of the younger children trapped the pig by a wagon wheel, and Mrs. McGonagle strode up to tie three of its legs together. She must have been rattled by her fall, because she didn't tie the legs properly, and when the Negro stuck the big knife into the pig's neck, it thrashed free, spurting blood into the Negro's face, and running toward the front of the saloon, heading straight for the horse and wagon standing in front of it.

All seven McGonagles tore after the pig, with the Negro roaring after them, a bellowing, bloody apparition. The frightened horse started plunging away from them with the wagon, bringing the driver out of the saloon, shouting and cursing. That frightened the pig, which doubled back, knocking down three of the children and running straight into Mrs. McGonagle, who grabbed it up and started to tie it again, right in front of the Carvalhos. The bellowing Negro began hacking at the pig in a blind fury, with Mrs. Carvalho starting to shriek as the unclean blood and entrails of the pig gushed over her family's doorstep.

The drinkers began pointing and guffawing. "Sure, and she should have had a sober man do the butcherin' of it."

"Sober? Any sober man here?"

Laughter.

The laughter made Mrs. Carvalho shriek louder, and Mrs. McGonagle began shouting in her thick Kerry accent at the Negro, who was still hacking at the pig's carcass. "I won't be payin' for this, ye spalpeen. This is no proper butcherin' job."

The Negro turned and threatened Mrs. McGonagle with the butchering knife. The drinkers began taking bets, about half of them on Mrs. McGonagle even though she faced an armed and angry man who was already covered with blood.

Behind Mrs. McGonagle's back, Mrs. Chayevski tiptoed through the mess to grab a large piece of meat.

"Ma!" yelled Tommy. "Thief, thief!"

Mrs. McGonagle whirled around and fetched Mrs. Chayevski a cuff on the ear, knocking her down and bringing a cheer from the saloon audience. She stood there a moment, breathing hard but making it clear she'd fight the whole neighborhood for the remains of her pig. She paid the Negro, who dragged the carcass into the street, silently cut it into pieces, gave one nod, and got up and shouldered his way into the saloon, still covered with blood. Some of the drinkers followed him in, knowing the show was over and hoping perhaps he would stand them a treat.

Mrs. McGonagle and her children gathered up the large pieces and the guts, leaving some of the entrails in the street. Those of us in the street were laughing and joking when suddenly I heard everyone go silent and saw people start to move away.

I knew without looking that my mother had come out of our house. I knew she'd been drinking already, and I didn't have to look at her to know her boots were untidily laced, her dress disheveled, her hair askew. She had a large, empty bottle in her hand. "Vera," she called to me. "Dearest child, come here."

She wanted me to take the bottle and get more beer. I wished I were invisible.

Maeve McGonagle stopped in front of me, carrying bloody hunks of flesh. She was my age but half a head taller and mean as a fighting rat. She narrowed her eyes and stuck her face in mine. "Your ma's a drunk." I looked away, but that didn't stop her. "My mother says she's an evil woman and you're going to be just like her."

Ziprah came to my rescue. "What will your ma say when she sees you talking to the likes of us when you're supposed to be helping her?"

"She'll strip the hide from your backside," I jeered. Ziprah and I started to chant, "She'll strip the hide from your backside! She'll strip the hide from your backside!"

Maeve gave us a sneer and walked off.

My mother stood glassy-eyed, swaying slightly, still holding the bottle in her hand. The remaining saloon drinkers looked at her, muttered to each other, and went back indoors. Stray dogs and pigs moved forward to make a meal of the entrails in the street. I went to my mother.

"Sweet child." She put a hand on my head. "Please take the bottle and get me a drink."

"I won't, Mother. You know I won't." I waited a minute and said, "Let's go inside. I'll read to you."

She liked having me read to her: the Bible, newspapers, anything we had. I hoped if I read to her, she would fall asleep, and we wouldn't get slapped.

It hadn't always been like this. There was a time when she would read to me, or I to her, and we would sit contented in each other's arms until we fell asleep.

I didn't know why our neighbors treated our mother the way they did. I had once tried to ask her, and she had slapped me and burst into tears, so I didn't ask her again.

I remembered visits from well-dressed, dignified men who would talk to her kindly and listen to me read. Sometimes they would give Lizzie and me money, or even leave another book in the house. I know now they were Protestant clergymen, maybe even the ones who made my mother famous, or infamous. One of those men might even have been my real father, but none of them had visited for a long time.

We'd also had paintings in the house, but they were gone by then. The paintings were bright and beautiful, dramatic scenes from the Bible, usually involving virtuous women in danger or difficulty. My favorite was Susannah's trial, with Susannah's pale, noble face glowing in a beam of light, while dark, bearded men stared menacingly from the shadows. Susannah looked different from the women on Goerck Street. She was clean, her hair shining and her hands soft-looking and white. Even Ruth, gleaning in the fields, knelt in the soil in what looked like perfectly clean garments, with the same lovely light upon her face. I know now my mother sold them to buy her drink.

When the neighbors talked about her, they didn't call her "Mrs. St. John" or even "Maria," but "Maria Monk." Both names. They stopped talking whenever they realized I was nearby, listening.

They made me feel ashamed, outcast, unclean, without really knowing why. I wondered what my mother had done, and I thought, as children do, that I must somehow be responsible. I loved her, for children often love even the most unworthy of parents, and I knew she loved me.

I have been fortunate, I suppose, to have survived at all. If I had stayed in Goerck Street, I could easily have died as a child or been crushed under the wheels of a cart or forced to whoring.

I didn't know what my surname should have been, who my real father was. The name I had came to me from the man I knew as my mother's husband, who was as good to me as any father can be to a child.

My name was Vera St. John.

