**‘The Year 1912’**

**translated by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc**

**from ‘An Bhliain 1912’**

**by Máirtín Ó Cadhain**

—The trunk.

She said the word offhand yet there was a touch of stubbornness in her tone. She hadn’t agreed to go to Brightcity with her daughter a week ago last Saturday to buy the trunk, and it irked her like a white frost the way it had been perched up on the ledge of the kitchen dresser, adored like an idol. The children having great play with it, opening it, closing it, looking it all over. She hadn’t the heart to vex her daughter this final week, otherwise she would have cleared it off into the room under the bed. But tonight, though the daughter might be of a different mind and anxious to show off that expensive article to the company that had gathered, the mother had followed her own inclination at nightfall and moved the trunk into the room – it might, she said, get damaged or scratched where it was.

It was like a burnt spot or a smallpox scar on the face of life, tonight especially since she seldom had a hearty gathering under her roof. It was useful and wellmade, but that was only a chimaera, a ghost from the Otherworld come to snatch away the first conception of her womb and the spring of her daily life, just when the drinking, the high spirits, the music and merrymaking were in full spate. Seven weeks ago, before the passage-money came, she had been as much on edge awaiting it as Mairin was. That her daughter should be off to America was no surprise to her, no more than the eight sisters of her own whose going was a bitter memory still. She had been schooled by the iron necessities of life to keep a grip on her feelings and throttle her motherlove – as Eve ought to have throttled the serpent of Knowledge. It was the passage-money that had set the heather ablaze again. Flickers of affection, flashes of insight from shut-away feelings, were setting her sense and reason aglow with the knowledge that this going into exile was…

But it was destiny, must be attended to. The day was agreed. Patch Thomais was gone for the sidecar. Back in the crowded kitchen the merriment had risen to a frenzy; remnants of the wreck of a people, doomed to extinction at daybreak, bringing their ritual vigil to a hurried night’s-end climax of wild debauch…

A halfpenny candle stood on a small press by the wall in the bedroom, smeared by a breeze coming by the edge of the paper on a broken windowpane. Depth, magic, mystery of unfathomable seas, reflected by the guttering candleflame in the trunk’s brass knobs. It was of pale yellow timber, the mother couldn’t at once remember where she had seen that colour before – the face of a corpse after a long wake in sultry weather. And a certain distaste kept her from looking into the trunk, that same tabu which had kept her, though she had often tried, from looking at a corpse in a coffin.

—Have you everything? she asked the daughter keeping her eyes off the dimlit thing. There were all kinds of things in it – a sod of turf, a chip off the hearthstone, tresses of hair, a bunch of shamrock though it was autumn, stockings of homespun, a handful of dulse, items of clothing, papers connected with the voyage across. The daughter took her shoes, coat, hat and dress out of the trunk and laid them on the little press to put on her. During the week she had often laid them out like that but the mother had never encouraged her, and early in the night she had implored her not to put them on till morning.

The mother shut the trunk, threw the bedquilt over it.

—To keep it clean. She had long feared that the daughter once she was in the American clothes would be estranged from her, alien as the trunk. Mairin was in her stocking feet and naked except for a long white shift which she had been at great pains to fix about herself that evening and which she had no intention of taking off until she had reached the house of a relative on the other side. Seeing her like that was to see a vision, the only one which had remained clearskinned and beautiful in her memory. A vision that gave bodily shape to the dear lost Tree of Life, while it made real the delicate and deceitful skin of the Knowledge-Apple – a mother's first conception, first fruit. She had so many things on the tip of her tongue to say to her, the intimacies, the affectionate things saved up in motherlove, her life-stuff, from the moment she feels the quick seed in her womb until the flush of eternity puts out the twilight of the world.

For a month now she had said many things to the daughter, scraps scattered at long intervals... that she couldn't care if all in the house were to go so long as Mairin stayed... that the whole house would miss her, herself especially... that of all her children she was the one who had given her the least trouble... that she was fine about a house. But none of all that said what she wanted to say. She felt like a servingwoman, the necklace she was putting about the young queen’s neck had broken, its precious stones scattered here and there in danger of being crushed and broken. She felt as if some hostile force were filtering her speech, hindering her from letting loose the flow of talk that would ease the tight grip on her heart. She was aware she could never hope to express the things in her mind in a letter which she would have to depend on someone else to write, and in a language whose make and meaning were as unhomely to her as the make and meaning of the Ghost from the Fairymound. And a letter was a poor substitute for the living contact of speech, eyes, features. Her flowing imagination, floodtide of her love, would run thin and freeze in a niggardly writing.

She was hardly likely to see her daughter again for a very long time. Mairin would have to repay her passage, then earn the passage of one or two more of the family, as well as send a share home. It could happen that the child in her womb would set eyes on her before she did. That American coat, the graveclothes – how tell one from the other? The ‘God speed her’ that would be said from now on had for its undermeaning ‘God have mercy on her soul’. Children often got those two expressions mixed up. And when the time came that in actual fact would change the ‘God speed' into ‘God have mercy’, it would come without a decent laying-out and a bier to be carried, and with no passionate keen. Even the graveclothes, no mother would have them awhile to shake out the folds of them from time to time as a relief to her anguish, and there would be neither name nor surname on a rough bit of board in the churchyard by the Fiord for generations to come. The voyage – that immensity, cold and sterile – would erase the name from the genealogy of the race. She would go as the wildgeese go.

But while such ideas were as a sour curd in the mother's mind, she wouldn't give in to the thought that she would never see the daughter again. Her sense and reason said no, her love, hope, determination, said yes. And it was these she listened to. Yet even if she were to see her again she knew she'd be utterly unlike the simple country girl, now nineteen years old, with a look pure as morningsun on a hillside in the Promised Land. Her lips would have been embittered by the berries from the Tree of Good and Evil. That dark weasel envy in her heart. Experience, that slimy serpent, writhing in her mind. Temper of cold steel in her countenance. The tone of her voice transformed by the spell of a harsh stepmother. Such were all returned Americans. She must reveal herself to her now, as the mother of the warriors in the cave used to reveal herself to her children when every sallying out in search of food was a matter of life and death. Reveal herself to her while her age and ignorance were still unmocked at, while there was yet no wall of disbelief between her daughter’s mind and hers...

The money, she thought, was the best way to begin. She took a cloth purse from her bosom, took out what small change the daughter might need in Brightcity, and gave her the purse with the rest. The daughter hung it about her neck and settled it carefully in her breast under her holy scapular.

—Look now child you take good care of it. It's likely you won’t need it at all, but if you fail to find work soon it would be too much to be depending on Aunt Nora who has her own children to look after. Keep the rug tucked well round you on the vessel. Make free with no one unless it happens to be someone you know. You'll be safe as soon as you reach Nora's house. Even if you have to take small pay, don't overstrain yourself working... You will make a visit home after five years. Well, at least after ten years… It can’t be but you'll have a few pence put by by then. My...

She had kept her spirits nicely up to that. But as soon as she thought to break the crust of speech she couldn’t find a word to say but stood stockstill staring at her daughter. Hands fiddling with the folds of her apron. Blushing, tears and smiles painfully together in her cheek. Humps and wrinkles of distress coming in her forehead like keys struggling with a lock. The daughter was almost dressed by now and asked where was the small change she’d need in Brightcity? The mother had been so eager to talk that she had forgotten to get a little purse to put it in. Turning to get it she fell into such confusion she forgot the money in her fist until it fell and scattered about the floor. Her idea had been to wait till her tongue could contrive a proper speech, then to hand over the small change to the daughter as a sacred offering, embrace and kiss her... Instead, the sacrifice had been ripped from her hand.

Putting away the little purse the daughter felt an envelope in her pocket. —A tress of your hair, mama, she said. 1 thought I had put it in the trunk alongwith – the rest. She held the black tress between her and the candle, her blue eyes softened, became childlike. She felt an urge to say something to her mother, she didn’t quite know what. Her thoughts went fumbling here and there as a stranger might among the blind holes of a bog on a dark night. The pair of them would have to be in one bed, the light out, and a wand of moonlight through the small window to charm and set free the tongue. She looker her mother in the eyes to see if she might find encouragement there, but she remained unconscious of her mother’s seething emotions, locked within, quite unable to crack the fixed and rigid mask of her features.

She put on the light and gaudy coat, then the wide-brimmed hat. Part of the preparations for her attack on life, she supposed, was to spend a long time fixing and refixing the set of the hat, though she had no idea which particular slant she wanted. She didn’t realise that the size and the undulations of the hatbrim added nothing to her good looks, nor that the yellow shoes, black hat and red coat made a devil’s own trinity in conflict with her fresh and delicate features. But she was ready: hat, coat, low shoes on and lady-gloves – not to be taken off again. She felt strange, surprised as a butterfly that feels for the first time that it has shed its cramped caterpillar limbs and has the endless airy spaces unimpeded to sail through on easy wings. She felt too some of the lightheaded pride of the butterfly…

The mother forgot until the trunk had been locked that she had forgotten to put a bit of hendirt in it, or somewhere among the daughter’s clothing. But she wouldn’t for the world unlock it again. She couldn’t bear the daughter to make fun of her, this morning especially, accuse her оf pishrogues and superstition. She shook a tint of holy water on her, and while she was putting the feather back in the bottle the daughter was off out to the kitchen floor to show off her American ensemble.

The sidecar hadn't come yet. There was a swirl оf dancing. Tom Neile with his back to the closed door was singing The Three Sons in a drunken voice drowning the music –

There’s many a fine spa-a-rk young and hea-a-rty

Went over the wa-a-ter and ne-e-e-r return’d.

—Tone yourself down, said the mother to Tom, but she’d have given a deal just then to have a tune like he had in order to release the load of her love in a spilling song. The girls had gathered again about the daughter, scrutinising her rigout, although they had been a week looking at it. They gave the mother no chance of keeping her company. They thought nothing, it seemed to her, of driving a wedge into nature, one almost as inhuman as that driven in by the immense cold sterile sea. The young women were chirruping of America. Chirruping of the life they’d have together soon in South Boston. Typical of a race whose guardian angel was the American trunk, whose guiding star was the exile ship, whose Red Sea was the Atlantic. Bidin Johnny reminded her to ask her cousin to hurry with the passage-money. Judeen Sheain told her on her life not to forget to tell Liam Pheige about the fun there was at the wake of old Cait Thaidhg.

—Take care you don’t forget to tell our Sean that we have the Mountain Garth under potatoes again this year, said Sorcha Phaidin. He said when he was going that after him no one would ever again be born to the race that would attempt to sow it, it was such a hardship.

—Tell my boy, Mairin, that it won’t be long till I’ll be over to him, Nora Phadraig Mhurcha said in a whisper that all the girls heard.

—By cripes it won’t be long till I’m knocking sparks out of the paving stones of South Boston myself, said a redhead youth whose tongue had been loosed by the drink.

—God help those that have to stay at home, said old Seamas O Currain.

The whiskey was circling again. —Here now, you ought to take a taste of it, said Peaitsin Shiubhaine who was measuring it out, heeling the glass towards Mairin with a trembling hand. He splashed some of it on her coat. —A mouthful of it will do you no harm. Devil the drop of poteen you’re likely to see for the rest of your life. There was an undertone to his voice, he was remembering the five daughters of his own who were ‘beyond’ – one of them thirty five years gone – and he had no hope of ever seeing them again... —I’ll drink it myself then. Your health, Mairin, and God bring you safe to journey’s end.

Neither Peaitsin nor anyone else in the gathering thought to add —God send you safe home again. Such ignorance of the proper thing to say sparked off the mother’s repressed anger. —Five years from today you’ll see her back home again, she said tartly.

—God grant it, said Peaitsin and Seainin Thomais Choilm together.

—And she’ll marry a monied man and stay here with us for good, laughed Citin, Mairin’s aunt.

—I’ll have little or nothing to show after five years, said Mairin. But maybe you’d marry me yourself, Seainin, without a sixpence?

But by this time Seainin had huddled himself back against the door and was talking like a tornado to let the mockery of the young girls pass over him.

—At all costs don’t pick up an accent, said a young lad, one of her cousins, —and don’t be ‘guessing’ all round you like Micilin Eamoinn who spent only two months beyond and came home across the fields with nothing to show for his voyage but half a guinea and a new waistcoat.

—Nor asking ‘what’s that, mamma?’ when you see the pig.

—Anyhow, you’ll send me my passage, said Mairead the next daughter to Mairin, eyes sparkling.

—And mine too, said Norin the next sister.

The mother felt a bleak touch of her own death hearing the greedy begging voices of the pair. Years of delay were being heaped on her daughter’s return, as shovelfuls of earth are heaped on a coffin. And the grace of that homecoming was receding from her – as far as Judgement Day. At that moment the children she had given birth to were her greatest enemies.

She set Mairin to drink tea again though she had just stood up from it. But she wanted to come close to her again. She must break bread, make a farewell communion, weave the intimate bond of a farewell supper with her daughter. She would tell her plain and straight that she didn’t believe this parting meal to be a funeral meal as far as home was concerned: there would be an Easter to come before the Judgement. But they weren’t left to themselves! Her sister Citin with her family of daughters and some of the other girls pushed up to the table by the wall and in no time had Mairin engulfed among them.

The daughter had no wish for food. Her face burned: desire, panic, wonder, an anguish of mind, all showed in her cheek. Brightcity was the farthest from home she had ever been, but she had been nurtured on American lore from infancy. South Boston, Norwood, Butte, Montana, Minnesota, California, plucked chords in her imagination more distinctly than did Dublin, Belfast, Wexford, or even places only a few miles out on the Plain beyond Brightcity. Life and her ideas of it had been shaped and defined by the fame of America, the wealth of America, the amusements of America, the agonised longing to go to America… And though she was lonesome now at leaving home it was a lonesomeness shot through and through with hope, delight, wonder. At last she was on the threshold of the Fairy Palace… Tremendous seas, masts and yardarms, blazing lights, silvertoned streets, dark people whose skin gleamed like beetles, distorting for her already the outlines of garth, mountain, rock, fiord. Her mind tonight was nothing but a ragbag to keep the castoff shreds of memory in until she might shed them as flotsam as she sailed. She was so unguarded now that she let herself be led out to dance on the stone floor, dressed as she was for America, in any case she couldn't have found it in her heart to refuse Padraigin Phaidin.

It irked her conscience that she had so long neglected him. She began to dance in a lackadaisical way, but the pulse of the music – that music to which they were beholden even in the fairyplace – excited an impulse in herself, and soon in her dappled outfit she was like a young alien deer, fullblooded, with the common young animals of the herd prancing about her, inciting her to show what she was made of, what she could do, while the elders sat around in sage contemplation. The mother was thinking that if she was ever to see her again the hard experience of life would then be a dead weight on that lust for dancing. In place of that passion of young and eager blood that wedded her limbs to the graceful movement of the stars, the thin and watery stuff of greying age would be keeping her tired bones fixed on earth.

Nevertheless the mother was closely watching, not the daughter, but Padraigin Phaidin who was dancing with her. There and then she guessed the whole story. Easy to see. Very likely the pair had never said a word of love to each other. Very likely they hadn’t said a word tonight. And they were likely never to say a word in their lives. But she realised they would be married in South Boston in a year’s time, in five years, ten years even… She was vexed. That’s what lay behind Padraigin’s wild dancing fit. What she had failed to say in words he was saying in dance. Body and limbs he was enacting a perfect poem, with growing zest, abandon, vigour and precision, until a lash of his nailed boot caned a spark out of the hearthstone in time with the final beat of the music. Some might put it down to intoxication, but the mother knew better. That spark was in fact a finishing touch, a final fling of the spirit in full victory. Then hardly waiting to be asked while still breathless from the dance he began with easy power to sing. And the mother forgot the daughter listening to him:

The garden’s a desert, dear heart, and lonesome I be.

No fruit on the bough, no flower on the thorn, no leaf,

No harping is heard and no bird sings in the tree

Since the love of my heart, white branch, went to Cashel O’Neill.

A young spirit trying to crack the shell of a universe that shut it in, so fierce was his song. By now the mother had come to hate him. An evil being, fingering her own proper treasure…

Horse’s hooves and the clatter of a sidecar were heard from the cart-track outside. Music and merriment ceased suddenly. Only Seainin Tolan stretched drunk against the shut door still moaning –

Ora, wora, wora,

It’s on the southern side of New York quay

That I myself will land –

the only snatch of a song Seainin ever raised.

—Indeed you’d be a nice gift to America! Devil drown and extinguish you, it’s a pity it isn’t on some quay you are, a useless hulk, instead of here, cried a youth who could stand him no longer.

The trunk was taken from the room and set like a golden calf on the table.

—Take out that and tie it up on the sidecar, said the mother.

—It might get broken, said Mairin. Leave it alone until I'm ready to go out along with it. That trunk was her licence and authority to wear an elegant hat on her head and an ostentatious coat on her back instead of a shawl. Without the trunk her lady-outfit would be an insult to God. If she let it out of her sight for as much as a second as like as not those tricksome and showy garments would wither into rags and ashes about her body.

She turned now to say goodbye to those who hadn't the strength to accompany her as far as the king’s highway. Crippled oldtimers who could barely manage to shuffle across the street; for most of them this was likely the last time they’d leave their own firesides for a social occasion. This was the first link of the chain to be jerked apart, it made her feel for the first time how hard the parting was, how merciless. Whatever about the rest of the people, she would never set eyes on these again. In spite of her distress and hurry she looked closely at each one of them so as to store up in her memory their shape and features. She kept a grip on her emotion and broke down only when she came to her grandmother at the hearth. She had as much affection for her grandmother as she had for her mother, and made more free with her. And was loved in return. Never a week went by but the old woman had laid aside a bit of her pension to give her, whatever else might be behindhand. The old creature was as speechless as if already turned to clay. In fact she almost was, for the best part of her was in the grip of ‘the One with the thin hard foot’, and the rest waiting on busy death to prepare her dwelling-place. Her mouth was as dry as the timber of a new-shut coffin, and except for a faint blinking of the eyelids that brought her far-off look a little closer to the here and now, Mairin would have thought that she hadn't the least notion what was going on.

—I’ll never see you again, mammo, she said, her voice breaking at last in tears.

—God is good, said the mother, a shade stubborn.

Then to kiss the small children and the infant in the cradle. She felt it as a warm substantial summer after the midwinter chill. Charming her senses against the threat of the graveclothes.

The mother brought her off to the room once more. But they weren’t long there till Citin and Mairead came in on them to get their shawls so as to accompany Mairin to Brightcity. The mother could have melted them. How officious they were – without them, she thought, the lump of sorrow in her throat wouldn’t have hardened again. All she could say to Mairin was that she’d have good earnings; that she hoped they’d have good weather at sea; and for the life of her not to forget to have her picture taken beyond and send it home.

—My own darling girl, she said picking a speck of fluff from the shoulder of the coat and giving a hurried quirk to the hatbrim, though the daughter at once reset it her own way. And having glanced quickly round the house she was ready to go.

The sidecar went lurching down the rugged village track followed by a dense crowd, men, women and children. They had all the appearance of a sacrificial procession: the sidecar like a funeral pyre ahead, puffs of the men’s tobacco-smoke hanging in the early morning air, and Mairin walking in her barbaric costume as the officiating druid.

The mother walked alongside the daughter and offered to carry her rug but Brid Sheamais snatched it and carried it herself. She had determined to have Mairin under her own wing on this last walk, but Citin and her own Mairead thwarted her once more. Then all the young girls closed round her, some chattering and laughing, some so lonesome at her going that they hadn't the heart to say much and others sorry that they weren't in her place or going along with her. By this time the mother had hardly any feelings of regret left so angry was she with the rabble that wished to deprive her of her daughter before she was even out of sight. She took a spleen against the sidecar too. It was moving as fast as if it was giving a corpse ‘the quick trot to the graveyard’. It seemed to her that it was the trunk perked up on the box of the car, its timber blond as an ear of corn in the rays of the virgin sun – that was pricking the horse to death's own scything speed. She hadn’t a word left to say...

There was a mild red light from the sun just up. Field walls and piles of stone grinned bleakly. In the little pokes of fields slanting and rugged the tramped stubble was like the head of some Samson having suffered the shears of Delilah. A small sailingboat just out from harbour with a fair wind scratched a bright wake down the Fiord. Mairin looked back from the rise at Hollycliff, from then on her own house and the village houses strung around would be out of sight. Last year's new thatch joined the old black and withered roof at the ridge-strip – line of contact between the past and the time to come. And the village seemed asleep again after its brief second of action, slight as a spit in the ocean that the sailingboat might obliterate.

The sidecar halted at the end of the track. The people formed a close group in the mouth of the highway so that the mother was cut off from the daughter. Just another stray stone in the cairn, that’s all she was. The same as if she was neither kith nor kin. More than ever she begrudged Citin and Mairead their going to Brightcity with Mairin. When the kissing began the women were like a gaggle of scavengers about a prey. They pushed their way rudely up to her daughter, squeezed her hand, snatched kisses one after the other like а flосk of starlings on a trash-heap. The men shook hands with her, shy, laconic, seeming to say it was all one, and if it had to be done then it were best done as quickly as might be. Padraigin Phaidin did likewise, but unlike the rest of the men he gave the slightest lift to his head and the mother caught the eyes of the couple interlocked for the nick of a second.

At last it was her turn. She hadn’t kissed her daughter since she was a child. But she failed to put much yearning and anguish into the kiss, though her lips hungered for her. Hadn't she kissed all and everyone? Hadn't all and everyone got ahead of herself in the kissing and hugging? The daughter’s kiss was cold and insipid, the good skimmed from it by all that had been pecking at her. Her body was cold too, cold and insubstantial as a changeling from the Liss.

But what quite spoiled the kiss for her was the sight of the trunk, she was unable to keep her eyes off it and it was all but whispering in her ear –

No mortal kiss will break the spell of the changeling, seduced by pleasure to wander and forget, whose dwelling is the golden web which young desires weave from the sunlight on green hills far off from the here and now.

Mairin was now on the sidecar. Mairead sitting beside her, Citin next to the driver on the other side, Padraigin Phaidin fixing the trunk firmly between them up on the box. Damned spirits, they appeared to the mother – the accursed trunk, Mairead greedy to get her passage-money, and Padraigin Phaidin on edge to get to America and marry her daughter – three damned spirits torturing her first-born and best-beloved.

Padraigin had finished and the people were moving aside to make way for the horse. The women started in to sob, and the sobbing lifted into a loud wail of words, expressing no real anguish the mother thought, beyond voice and tears. They wouldn’t leave her even the comfort of keening alone. And she shed no tear…

She stammered uncertainly, —I’ll see you before five years are out. And couldn’t raise her eyes to meet the eyes of her daughter, not if the sky fell.

The car was now moving. Sobbing the daughter whimpered, —You will. But now the mother’s heart as well as her commonsense knew that she would not. Padraigin Phaidin would see her sooner and the girls of the village and her own children, even the infant then in her womb. The mother realised she was but the first of the nestlings in flight to the land of summer and joy: the wildgoose that would never again come back to its native ledge.