



HEATHER AIMEE O'NEILL

THE Irish Goodbye

A NOVEL

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[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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For my parents, to whom I owe so much

August 1990

Like everyone at the beach club that day, Maggie heard the crash. She jumped up from the sandcastle she was building and spotted her brother, Topher, diving off the bow of his skiff and disappearing into the blue-black water along the lighthouse's rocky promontory. A moment later, he resurfaced holding something she couldn't make out from the shore.

Alice, Maggie's middle sister, scrambled to the top of the rickety lifeguard stand and shouted down to Maggie, "Get Mom!"

Maggie hesitated. She wanted to see what was happening with her brother. Plus, she felt confident about her chances of winning the Port Haven Beach Club sandcastle competition. But when Alice shouted again, Maggie took off down the beach toward her family's house. She liked all the eyes on her as she ran, fists curled and arms pumping. From the dock, someone yelled, "Call 911!"

At the jetty that cut across the shoreline in front of her house, she scrambled over the rocks covered in slippery seaweed, slicing the inside of her ankle against a jagged edge. It stung, but she didn't stop. She hurried up the creaky stairs along the bluff and through the fence gate, calling for her mother. The geese fluttered their wings and scattered, frightened by her screams. She sprinted across the slope of lawn, wet from the sprinklers, and toward the white-and-blue clapboard Victorian, which suddenly seemed massive and terrifyingly empty.

She called out again, and to her relief, her mother appeared from the garden holding a paintbrush in her teeth and wearing her floppy straw sun hat. Her easel was set up by the lavender blooms she'd been painting all week, and splashes of red and blue covered her smock. She tucked her paintbrush behind her ear. "What's this about?" she asked.

"Something happened," Maggie said breathlessly. Her lungs burned from the running.

Her mother lowered herself to inspect the blood on Maggie's ankle. "Did you fall?"

Maggie shook her head and pointed to the bay.

"Is someone hurt?" her mother asked, standing.

Maggie wasn't sure. She'd heard the crash and then seen Topher dive into the water. Her oldest sister, Cait, was supposed to be on her brother's boat, but she hadn't seen her there. "The boat ... Topher jumped in..." She grabbed her mother's hand. "Just come!"

Her mother untied her smock and chucked it in the direction of her easel, then raced past Maggie toward the beach club. At the dock, they found Topher helping Cait and his best friend, Luke, carry someone off his boat. Maggie tried to follow after her mother, but Alice yanked her by her bathing suit strap, and they stood next to the kayak racks with the club's camp counselors.

Waiters in black pants and white polos trickled out from the clubhouse to smoke cigarettes and watch. It seemed that no one knew what was going on.

"Is Topher doing CPR?" Maggie asked Alice.

Alice nodded.

Topher had practiced CPR on Maggie's favorite Cabbage Patch doll while training as a lifeguard, his big hands pumping the doll's puffy chest. She'd gotten annoyed with him then but felt proud watching him now. "On who?" she asked.

Their father rushed past them from the direction of the parking lot. He must have come from work because he was in his suit, but Maggie didn't

know how he'd gotten there so quickly. He didn't acknowledge them as he rushed down the narrow dock.

"On Daniel Larkin," Alice finally answered.

Daniel was Luke's younger brother. He had given Maggie her first "toasted almond," a dunk in the bay and then a roll in the sand, at the Fourth of July barbecue a few weeks ago. Like Alice, he was starting the tenth grade at Saint Mary's that fall.

When the ambulance arrived, the onlookers scurried to the beach. Maggie gnawed at her thumbnail. The summer sky was bright, and she had to squint and hold her hand over her forehead to look out at the bay. For a while, it seemed to her like not much was happening; then, in a flurry, the paramedics loaded Daniel onto a board and rushed him off the dock. Luke leapt into the back of the ambulance and they closed the doors. The sirens blared, and just like that, they were gone.

At the dock house, Topher stood next to their parents, talking to two police officers. It was odd for Maggie to see her mother there in her loose linen shirt, her feet bare. All of Maggie's friends' mothers were younger and wore tennis whites, ate lunch at the clubhouse, and drank cocktails on the adults-only patio for happy hour.

Another police officer took pictures of Topher's boat, which bobbed gently against the dock's edge. There was a dent in the bow, Maggie noticed, and she imagined her brother was upset about that. He'd bought the boat that spring, all with his own money. It had been falling apart, but he'd rebuilt most of it himself.

"Why are the police here?" Alice asked Cait as she walked off the dock.

"I don't know," Cait said in a sharp voice, and turned toward the water. She hugged herself tightly, gripping the silver Saint Jude pendant she'd discovered in their grandfather's junk drawer years ago, anxiously chewing on it.

Maggie scanned the bay to see what her oldest sister was looking for, but all she found were a pair of sailboats scuttling across the horizon and boats anchored around the lighthouse for its annual fundraiser event.

“What’s happening with Topher?” Alice persisted. “Is he in trouble?”

Cait turned back. “I don’t know,” she said again. But then, “Daniel was driving his boat. The steering wheel got jammed or something and they hit a rock by the lighthouse. I guess he flipped overboard.”

Maggie watched her brother and parents on the dock. Her mother held Topher by the arm, and her father gestured toward the boat to one of the officers. Beneath Topher’s aviator sunglasses, his face was shiny and red. She didn’t understand why he’d be in trouble if he wasn’t even the one driving the boat. Maybe Daniel should be in trouble. If he wasn’t too hurt, she guessed. She imagined him returning to the beach club with a bandage around his head and everyone at camp making him a WELCOME BACK poster during craft class like they did when she’d had her appendix removed last summer.

Another police car arrived, and Topher and her parents walked off the dock toward the clubhouse.

“Where are they going?” Maggie asked, but her sisters ignored her.

Alice nudged Cait. “Why was Daniel driving Topher’s boat?”

Cait leaned in closer to Alice. “Will you just shut up?” she hissed. Then she turned to Maggie. “Go find your camp group.”

“Camp’s over,” Maggie said.

“Then go play with your friends.”

Maggie started to protest—why did being the youngest *always* mean being left out?—but all Cait had to do was raise her brow.

Back at the beach, Maggie found she’d been left out of the fun there, too. They’d canceled the sandcastle competition, and all the popsicles were now gone. She sat at the foot of the lifeguard stand and finished reading the last chapter of her most recent *Baby-Sitters Club* book, then followed her friends to the pool for a game of sharks and minnows. As they passed the clubhouse, she tried to spot her family, but the patio was empty, and she worried they’d left without her. Finally, Cait appeared at the pool’s edge and told her to get her stuff.

Maggie walked back home along the pebbled beach with her sisters. They were quiet, and it looked like Cait had been crying.

“Where’s Topher?” she asked. “And Mom and Dad?”

“At the police station,” Cait said.

“Why?”

“We don’t know,” Alice said. “They could be at the hospital.”

That made Maggie feel better. “I’m going to make Daniel a poster,” she said.

Her sisters stopped and exchanged glances. Cait closed her eyes and puffed out her cheeks.

“Just tell her,” Alice said.

“Tell me what?”

Cait opened her eyes again. She held on to the beach towel wrapped around her neck and straightened her back. “Daniel’s dead,” she said.

Maggie looked at her sisters, but they didn’t say anything else, eyes fixed on the path ahead. There was so much Maggie wanted to ask, but she knew Cait would tell her to shut up like she had Alice.

Cait stepped over the broken shell of a horseshoe crab. “Everything’s different now,” she said.

And she kept on walking.

THANKSGIVING

2015

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS LATER

1.

MAGGIE

Maggie and her girlfriend, Isabel, crossed the border into New York. The drive from southern Vermont, where they taught at a boarding school, to Port Haven on the North Fork of Long Island, usually took Maggie about six hours, but it was the day before Thanksgiving and traffic was piling up. Maggie also hadn't accounted for the unexpected snowstorm making its way along the Eastern Seaboard.

Isabel picked through a bag of pistachios. "Prep me on your family," she said, and curled her long legs beneath her on the passenger side of Maggie's twenty-something-year-old Jeep Wagoneer. "Like a game. One word to describe each of them."

"Hmm—"

"No thinking," Isabel said. "What does Kerouac say about getting to the truth?"

"I don't know."

"Sure you do." Isabel snapped her fingers. "'First thought, best thought!'"

"That's Ginsberg."

"I told you you knew."

Maggie laughed, which relieved some of the pressure that had been building inside her. Not only was she bringing a girlfriend home for the first

time, but something had happened that morning that had thrown her. Headmaster Cunningham, in his characteristically formal voice, had told her he'd like to speak with her first thing on Monday when she was back from Thanksgiving. He didn't specify what the meeting was about, but she'd avoided opening the calendar invite his secretary had sent because she worried it would reference something to do with her disastrous trip to Boston last weekend. She'd gone to attend an Anne Carson event at the Museum of Fine Arts and ended up seeing her ex, Sarah. Maggie had tried to put her anxiety aside for the visit home—she had enough to worry about with her mother meeting Isabel—but that proved more difficult than she'd expected. Throughout the drive, her mind drifted to Sarah leaning in to kiss her, and her stomach felt sour and twisty.

A sporty BMW behind them flashed its headlights.

"I think they want you to move over," Isabel said.

As Maggie switched lanes, the BMW zoomed past them, and the passenger stuck his middle finger out the window.

"Jesus," Maggie said.

"I like that you're a slow driver. It reminds me of my dad."

Maggie checked the speedometer, which was indeed hovering just above the speed limit.

When they'd first gotten on the road, she'd decided not to use the GPS on her phone because she didn't want a text from Sarah popping up while she drove.

Isabel relaxed back against the headrest. Her dark hair hung in a low-slung ponytail that made the car smell like coconut every time she adjusted it.

Maggie turned down the radio. "Okay," she said. "I'll play." It was better than stewing in her anxiety. "Let's start with Cait."

"And the word for her is—"

"Fiery."

Other words might have been more precise—*explosive*, for one—but Maggie was trying to keep things positive, even though her oldest sister

hadn't returned any of her calls recently. She hadn't even responded to Maggie's text about bringing Isabel home for the holiday.

"She was also always the prettiest," Maggie said. "Still is."

"I'll see about that." Isabel flashed her that wink Maggie found irresistible.

Maggie actually looked a lot like Cait. Whereas Topher and Alice took after their mother—all strawberry-blond curls and hazel eyes—Maggie and Cait had their father's straight brown hair, blue eyes, and lanky build. But Cait had some quality Maggie didn't, something that wasn't just about her full lips and smooth complexion. It was in the way she carried herself, almost like a warning. While it had gotten Cait attention ever since puberty, it wasn't something Maggie envied.

"Who's next?" Isabel asked.

"Alice," Maggie said. "Middle sister. The word for her is ... *Mom*, I guess."

"Isn't that, I don't know, more like her role? Maybe the word is *maternal*?"

"She's such a mom. You'll see."

"Fine. What about your mom, then?"

Maggie had spent plenty of time that morning thinking about Nora. She knew her mother wouldn't be outright rude to Isabel, but her discomfort with Maggie being gay would make it difficult for her to be warm and welcoming.

"Nora is ... *opaque*. I mean, I told you she was literally raised by nuns in an orphanage in Ireland, so she had it pretty rough." Then she said, "I've never felt like I've known her. Not really. Or that she wanted to be known."

"Doesn't everyone want to be known?"

Maggie held out her palm for pistachios. "I'm not sure if it's even possible to know someone fully." She cracked a shell in her teeth, and the nut popped into her mouth, salty and slightly stale.

"Maybe, but that's different from wanting to be known."

Maggie conceded.

“And your dad?”

“Robert.” Maggie tapped the steering wheel. “For him, I’d say *obliging*.”

Isabel laughed. “In a house full of women, what other choice did he have?”

“Well, it wasn’t always that way, before my brother...”

Isabel shook her head. “Oh God, why did I say that?”

Traffic slowed to a stop and Maggie reached for Isabel’s hand. “It’s okay,” she said.

After a long moment, Isabel said, “It’s just, you never talk about him.”

“Yeah,” Maggie said, shrugging. “I know.”

Isabel placed her hand high on Maggie’s thigh and kissed her neck, sending shivers along Maggie’s body. After what Maggie had done in Boston, she did not feel like she deserved any of Isabel’s affection, and receiving it now was almost hard. Still, when Isabel leaned in closer and pressed her lips against Maggie’s, she kissed her back—not only to avoid making Isabel suspicious but because it was exactly what she wanted to do. Isabel’s breath smelled earthy and sweet: pistachios.

The blare of a car horn behind them broke the moment, and Maggie reluctantly pulled away from Isabel, put the car back in gear, and drove on.



Maggie first spoke to Isabel last winter while conducting phone interviews for the writer-in-residence program at Grove Academy, where she taught English. Isabel was her last call. Maggie had already favored Isabel’s plays over the work of the other top candidate, a language poet who used only words containing the vowels *a* and *o*, but she approached the call cautiously.

Sarah, the mother of one of Maggie’s students, warned her that choosing an openly gay writer might come across as playing favorites. It was a fair point, but since Sarah was also the married woman Maggie had been sleeping with for the past year, the irony of Sarah’s cautioning about moral lines and clear judgment wasn’t lost on her.

After Maggie and Isabel hit it off, chatting far past the half hour they'd scheduled, Maggie submitted her recommendation to the English department.

Coincidence or not, the next day Sarah called to tell Maggie that she'd confessed their affair to her husband, Frank, but that she'd decided not to leave him. Sarah had been the most constant person in Maggie's life for nearly a year, and the breakup was devastating, if not entirely unexpected. Sarah promised to protect Maggie and not tell Frank who the affair was with, but the fact that he was a trustee at Grove made Maggie paranoid about losing her job. Plus, Sarah's son, Oliver, was still in her class, and Maggie had to email teacher evaluations of his work to Sarah and Frank at the end of every quarter.

After a few miserable months of waiting for Sarah to change her mind, while having an unsatisfying, largely drunken fling with a bartender from town, Maggie finally met Isabel at a welcome ceremony the first week of summer school. It was a bluebell Sunday afternoon. Maggie arrived at the library late, dressed in the paint-stained overalls she'd worn to rip out the moldy carpet in the uninhabited cabin she'd recently purchased and was restoring off campus. She leaned against the back wall with her arms crossed and listened as Isabel read from a play in progress about her Venezuelan grandmother, who was a seamstress at the White House during World War II.

Isabel was not the California surfer girl Maggie had imagined. There was something almost somber in her beauty, and her long dark hair and high cheekbones reminded Maggie of the painting of an Indigenous woman that greeted visitors at the school's main entrance. Isabel's voice was raspy but sweet, almost masculine. She wore a white linen button-down tucked into worn Levi's, with a braided leather belt that wrapped around her waist twice. She was funny and charming and entirely self-possessed, and Maggie knew right away that she was in trouble.

After the reading, they all gathered in the garden outside the library. Maggie chatted with a few seniors there for the summer program but

watched Isabel, too, with quick sidelong glances. She waited until they were alone to introduce herself.

Isabel filled a small plate with cheese and grapes, and Maggie handed her a pint of beer from the local brewery catering the event.

“I like your play,” Maggie said. “Did your grandmother really work for Eleanor Roosevelt and read her tarot cards?”

Isabel was about to answer when a few faculty members approached, and the conversation turned to the recent announcement that the current English department chair was retiring. Maggie caught Isabel studying her more closely when someone mentioned talk of Maggie being the possible replacement. Though Maggie waved away the rumors, she hoped they were true.

After the event, Maggie and Isabel walked back from the main campus to the faculty residence hall.

“This is me,” Maggie said when they arrived at her door. “There’s a communal porch out back. I have some extra beers if you want?”

“I start classes tomorrow and haven’t even unpacked, so I should probably—”

“Of course,” Maggie said. “Some other time.”

“Definitely.” Isabel headed toward her door, then turned. “Oh, and my grandmother did claim she read Eleanor Roosevelt’s tarot cards, but she never let the truth get in the way of a good story, so who knows?”

Maggie laughed.

Isabel pointed to Maggie’s sneakers lying on her doormat. “You run?”

“Used to. It’s been a while. There are some great trails around here, though. I have a map you can borrow.”

“Why don’t you show me?” Isabel said. “Maybe tomorrow after class?”

A laugh echoed from somewhere on the other side of the quad. The dining hall bell rang and drowned out the buzz of cicadas in the nearby bushes. The yellow lamps flicked on across campus as they did every evening at five p.m. The world around Maggie was as familiar as ever, and yet before her stood an enchanting woman asking her to go for a run tomorrow.

“I’d love to,” Maggie said.



Maggie hadn’t gone running in well over a year, but the next afternoon she led Isabel to her favorite trail along the back of the campus, exhausting herself by sprinting faster than normal in an effort to make a good impression. At the top of the trail, they sat on the rocky cliffs of a waterfall and chatted with two students who were on field study for their earth science class.

“The kids seem nice here,” Isabel said as they walked back down the mountain. “I’ve never taught high school.”

Maggie loved her students, a quirky and gifted cohort, and felt like a proud parent when she talked about them. Grove was her first teaching job out of graduate school, but she couldn’t imagine ever wanting to leave the historic stone buildings and sprawling green campus. “They’re great,” she said. “Smart. They’ll test you the first week, though, so don’t be afraid to push back.”

“Good to know,” Isabel said, laughing. Then, more seriously, “Are you out to them?”

Well, that didn’t take long. People were more likely to be surprised when Maggie told them she was gay than to figure it out on their own. Then again, most of the women she’d been in relationships with, including Sarah, regarded themselves as straight, so perhaps that played a part. She wondered what Isabel detected that gave it away, and glanced down at her outfit—running shorts and an old Grove T-shirt—as though it might reveal something.

“It’s not what you look like.” Isabel laughed. “It’s ... the way you look at me.”

“How do I—”

Isabel fixed her dark, heavy-lidded eyes on Maggie.

“Oh.” Maggie felt her face redden and tried to hide it by adjusting the brim of her hat.

The sun filtered through the canopy of eastern hemlocks surrounding them on the trail.

“Anyway,” Maggie said. “I am. Out, I mean. I teach a seminar on contemporary queer literature in the upper school.”

“And to think I had you pegged as an Austen or Woolf girl.”

“Well, I dabbled in college.” Maggie laughed. “But, really, don’t worry about it. Everyone’s cool here.”

“I wasn’t worried. Just curious.”

They walked on until, suddenly, Isabel grabbed Maggie’s arm and pulled her to a crouch. “Shh,” she whispered. She placed one hand on Maggie’s sweaty back and, with the other, pointed through the trees and around the bend to a deer and two fawns drinking from the moss-covered edge of a stream. The closeness of Isabel’s breath and the heady scent of her sweat made Maggie feel like she was on the brink of something new, something she wasn’t entirely sure how to name. They watched until a branch beneath Maggie’s foot snapped, and the three creatures sprinted across the water without making a sound.

“They’re like ghosts,” Maggie said.

Isabel stood and reached for her hand, pulling her up.

For the rest of the summer, Maggie and Isabel ran together every morning, shared most meals, and drank whiskey on the communal porch at night, their thighs touching beneath the flannel throw they’d share when the temperature dropped after sunset. Isabel helped Maggie restore the wood-burning stove in the cabin, and Maggie acted out the part of Eleanor Roosevelt, mid-Atlantic accent and all, whenever Isabel staged a reading from her play. They made each other laugh and never seemed to run out of things to talk about.

Still, it felt safer to keep some distance. Maggie’s crushes before had been consumed with urgency and angst. What unfolded with Isabel was different. There was a steadiness that almost confused her. Her first instinct

wasn't to rip off Isabel's clothes, have sex, and then leave—she wanted something more, which scared her. She sensed the attraction was mutual, but her heart felt like an easy target, and she wasn't sure it was a good idea to get involved with another person from the school, especially with the chair position opening.

One rainy morning in August, she and Isabel went for a run to celebrate Maggie's thirty-fourth birthday. After, Maggie was home changing out of her wet clothes when there was a knock at her door. She opened it to find Isabel holding a chocolate cupcake with a candle and reached for the plate.

"Wait, wait." Isabel pulled a lighter from her back pocket and lit the candle. "Make a wish!"

Maggie met Isabel's golden-brown eyes, and thought *You* as she blew out the flame.

Isabel stepped into the apartment and stood close enough that Maggie recognized that something between them had shifted.

"What was your wish?" Isabel asked quietly.

Before Maggie could answer, they were kissing. Isabel's lips tasted like salt from the run. As they stumbled toward the bedroom, Isabel undressed her, kissing her all over, and then Maggie did the same to Isabel, revealing her long body, her hair dark and full. They lay on the bed together, skin on skin, and suddenly Maggie felt like she might cry. They stayed there for a long moment, lips hovering, eyes open, until Isabel took her chin, closed her eyes, and kissed her again—softly, then fully.

They spent that night, and every night after, together. Every night, that is, until last Friday, when Maggie went to Boston. Sarah had heard from a mutual friend that Maggie would be in the city and texted her a last-minute invitation to stop by for a glass of wine before the reading. Maggie hadn't spoken to Sarah in almost a year by then, but she made the decision, which she regretted immediately, to accept. She told herself it was a chance for closure, and she'd meant it.