OTHER HARBORS

A Novel by

John J. McKeon

"How many lies did it require to make
the portly truth you now present us with?"

-- Robert Browning

"In this chapel are ancestors: You cannot deny that. With the estate, I bought the chapel and its contents. I don't know whose ancestors they *were*, but I know whose ancestors they *are.*"

-- Major General Stanley, in *The Pirates of Penzance*

PART ONE

Speak only of the streets, then, if you must.
If silence can't content you or relieve
The need to speak at all of things so old.

The streets that reach the river are the best.
You walk with open collar, hatless, wet,
Slick with heat from sun-baked brick and stone.
What breeze there is comes whispering,
Touches the brow, the throat, and brings along
The smell of far-off, fish-crammed ocean, other shores,
Other harbors, horizon times horizon in the past.
But not in winter.
In winter the air breaks against your face
And you dream of rough wool blankets.

Do you dream as well of that lost, remembered pier?
The time when one horizon vanished and the next
Had not yet shaped itself in thought or even wish?

-- Kathleen Lynch

Chapter One

In December 1924, in fact not long before Christmas, a four-year-old girl named Genevieve Lynch died of unrecorded causes in her family's third floor apartment in Brooklyn. Two days later she was buried in earth that had barely closed over her mother Blanche, laid to rest the previous June. The grave was one of the first in the new St. Michael's section of Holy Cross Cemetery, within sight of the front porches on Schenectady Avenue. In addition to

Blanche it already held three tiny bodies: James Lynch, who died in 1915 aged two days; Blanche Lynch, died 1917 aged five days, and "Baby" Lynch, aged six hours, baptized in haste and dead on August 22, 1922.

Now, again, the cemetery. A cloudless, dismal day with the rumor of snow. The four Lynch girls who still lived – Kathleen, called Kitty, Josephine, Margaret and Maureen – stood in a row by the grave, flanked by their father John and his brother Patrick. To John's left, his wife's sister Ann kept her distance. John was bare-headed and wrung his tweed cap in his hands as he glanced over the mound of earth, the small casket, the sparse flowers. Seedling trees rustled in the breeze. The hearse behind them shielded them from the neighbors who gathered along the fence despite the cold. The girls clutched their thin coats across their chests. They wore brown shoes buttoned to mid-calf, exposing black stockings. Their heads bore only black lace mantillas. Kitty coughed, tried not to, coughed again.

Each little sound jabbed at John and brought his mind back from wherever it had wandered, dragging him again through the last sleepless nights with Blanche, the futile efforts to clear her lungs, the whistling of her breathing that grew fainter until it stopped. He looked at his oldest daughter as she pulled a yellowed handkerchief from her sleeve, blew her nose, and sniffled. The only weeping came from Mrs. McManus, the parish secretary, who Uncle Pat said would never miss a funeral. "An angel," she murmured to the rosary beads she worked in her pink, frozen fingers. "A sweet innocent soul." John Lynch glanced at her over his shoulder.

Father Dillon had come with them from the church and now he held his breviary open with both hands, the pages flapping in the wind. He was a young man, recently arrived, perhaps fresh from the seminary in County Wicklow. He had white hands with finely trimmed fingernails

but yellow and crooked teeth, and his accent was all Wicklow, the very sound of lace and roses and hot tea in the drawing room.

The readings were familiar to John: We brought nothing into this world and it is certain we carry nothing out.

The priest concluded and the gravediggers lowered the casket. A plain box, not heavy, the job easily and quickly done. John bent to scoop a handful of soil and toss it into the grave. He rubbed the remaining dirt between his fingers as each of his daughters repeated the graveside gesture. The girls stood alongside the hearse awaiting direction. John looked into the grave and thought he could see Blanche below Genevieve. It was not true; only dirt showed beneath the new vault. A few paces off was the second plot John had bought when he needed to bury his father. At that burial the field was truly bare, not even the trees planted yet, no grass to speak of, swirls of dirt eddying across the surface and dusting the tops of the mourners' shoes. A hot, hot day, and the breeze no relief. He had been wise to buy both plots while he could, John thought.

Father Dillon was talking to the girls. The two gravediggers stood to the side, waiting, because it would never do to begin filling the grave with the family still there; the sound of the spades and the dirt hitting the wood was always a jolt. Also, they had reached the point when a small consideration was expected from the next of kin. John had a two dollar bill in his pocket for each and he crossed to them now, extending his hand, hiding the transaction with his back. Here you go, fellows. Doubtless you know a place where you can warm up. He recognized the men from a previous funeral. Italians, he thought, without two words of English between them, but they understood cash and their thirst translated easily enough.

Father Dillon came to him and put a black-gloved hand on his forearm. “Mrs. Collins of Children's Aid will come to see you,” he said. “You should listen to what she has to say. She can help.”

John nodded but said, “I expect we will be all right.”

The priest tightened his lips and glanced at the girls. “How will you, John?” he said. “How will you be all right?”

“We will find a way.”

“You need to think about them, you know. And how they will eat, and go to school, and be taken care of.”

John held up his hand. He heard the accusation. That when Jenny first sickened John had been at work, then making his rounds and taking his orders, and he had not noticed anything amiss until he came home and found Kitty dabbing the baby's forehead with rubbing alcohol.

The priest let go of his arm. “Just hear her out, John,” he said. He looked again at the four girls, gathered in a silent circle around Ann, waiting to go home. “Something must be done, John,” Father Dillon said, and John Lynch nodded.

“Something must be done,” he whispered. It was somehow terribly important not to cry in front of the girls, so he turned his back and gazed across the half-formed cemetery landscape, the struggling shrubbery and the bright new stone markers that dotted the terrain, and he stared until the cold wind dried his tears.

Artifacts

Item: Form B-114, City of New York, Department of Public Welfare, Bureau of Investigations.

Permit for Admission of Destitute Child to an Institution as a City Charge.

To the managers of (here a blank is filled in): St. Agatha's Home.

You are hereby authorized to receive into your Institution as a City Charge, until further notice (blank) Kathleen Lynch, a (fe)male child of (12 years 4 months) of age, pursuant to the provisions of Section 664 of the Greater New York Charter, as amended by Chapter 187 of the Laws of 1905 and Chapter 46, Laws of 1909 and laws amendatory thereof.

Signed this 29th day of January, 1925, Charles W. Posthauer, Second Deputy Commissioner of Public Welfare.

Item: Abstract of Investigator's Report.

Death of Mother. Father unable to care for children. No relatives able or willing to assist. Miss Tanner of Roman Catholic Orphan Asylum requested commitment.

Siblings: Josephine, eleven, Maureen, six, and here an error occurs, for the form lists Kathleen as a sibling of Kathleen, rather than eight-and-a-half-year-old Margaret. The typewriting is dirty with clogged o's and e's and many letters are x'd out, so perhaps the error is natural, four girls to be processed at once, with two, three or four carbon copies so the secretary has to pound. Everyone in a hurry and the formidable Miss Tanner no doubt tapping her foot.

Chapter Two

January 1925

On the ferry ride to Hoboken the girls were allowed out of the coach to stretch their legs, but it was so cold that all but Maureen soon climbed back inside. The driver leaned on the front fender and smoked grumpily, cupping the cigarette in his palm. Mrs. Osteen, their chaperone, stood alongside the car and watched Mo walk to the back of the ferry and lean on the rail.

Mo shivered, pulled her hat down and her big coat tight around her. Chunks of gray ice, shouldered aside by the ferry's prow, crashed back together in its wake, spinning, sinking, rising again. Mo saw blocks the size of dogs or even horses bobbing here and there across the width of the crowded, busy river, jostled in the crisscrossing wakes of dozens of boats. She gripped the rail as the ferry lurched in each successive wave.

Above the turmoil rose Manhattan, and she had never seen it entire like this, all slabs of gray and red, ramparts high and low, clouds of steam and smoke scattering in the air. Indeed, she had only seen the city skyline once before, from the Brooklyn Heights, and the ride across Manhattan from the bridge to the ferry had been her first time over the water. Right now, she thought, I am the farthest from home I have ever been.

Her father talked about Manhattan as "the city," a dirty place full of coal dust and rogues and not a safe place at all for a young woman, least of all a little girl. "They don't even clean the streets," Da said. "The horse droppings sit for days."

And it was so; she had seen it from the coach window. She sat in the middle, between Jo and Peg and behind the eldest sister, Kitty, who sat next to Mrs. Osteen. The chaperone forbade the driver to smoke in the coach, which made him testy; they had quarreled and Mrs. Osteen had fallen silent. Jo insisted on rubbing her hands together and blowing on them the whole trip, so Mo had to lean forward to see anything at all. But what she saw bore out her father's warnings: Men gathered around fires in steel drums, garbage piled against the buildings, windows with curtains drawn and shades pulled down as if to seal every gap. They passed a small Catholic church, too, its rectory windows encased in steel bars.

Mo could not imagine Nanuet, though Daddy called it a charming little town, a village really, a place of moo-cows and chickens and fresh air. She had rejected the word moo-cow, telling him, "I'm not a baby anymore."

"You'll be able to see stars at night," he replied, smiling. "You'll be well there."

He had told this to all of them as they sat on the floor of the parlor on State Street, with Uncle Pat drinking tea at the tin-topped table in the kitchen. Daddy had just come from work and still wore his coarse melton pants and tweed coat, but had unbuttoned the coat as he guided his girls into a semicircle around the divan. He clasped his hands together, the knuckles large and the nails roughly cut; he clenched his interwoven fingers so tightly the flesh went white and he told them they would be going to live in the country for a while, just until he could get a better grasp on things.

"I simply can't," Da said, letting his hands fall between his knees and his gaze drop to the floor. "Without your mother I simply can't. The nuns will take good care of you until you can come home."

None of the girls spoke. After a moment, Da said softly, “I didn’t expect this. I didn’t…”

Mo stole a glance at Uncle Pat, but he was gazing out the kitchen window to the fire escape across the alley, smoke curling from a cigarette on the saucer.

And then the next morning Mo stood with her sisters in the tiny vestibule of their building, between her knees a canvas sack containing her wool stockings, a couple of frocks and blouses, a few books and a papier maché figurine of the Blessed Mother. The figurine was a Christmas gift. The girls had no other gifts and wouldn't have had these if Uncle Pat hadn't given them. So as not to seem festive, he bought each of them something religious: A rosary, a Nativity set...a figurine of the Virgin. Maureen treasured it and had wrapped it carefully in her underwear, the softest garments she owned.

She climbed into the coach and smelled the engine exhaust coming up through the floorboards and craned her neck to see her father in the front window watching them leave, and in a moment they were at the corner and he was gone and nobody spoke the whole way through Brooklyn and over the bridge, then across Manhattan to the ferry pier.

The ferry’s horn sounded as the boat pulled out into the waterway, and Mo flinched. Almost immediately the ferry slowed again, and through the coach windows Mo caught sight of an enormous black form moving across their path; moments later they lurched as the ferry breasted the huge ship’s wake. Now, from the rail, she saw the ship again, black smoke curling from three stacks, nearing the tip of the island and ready to turn for the open sea, to Ireland perhaps, or Italy, place names Mo heard every day.