

**FIONA'S LACE**  
by Patricia Polacco

*For Mick and Annie Hughes and to brave firefighters everywhere.*

Many years ago my father's family lived in a small, poor village a few miles from Limerick in Ireland. Everyone in the village depended on the textile mill that was soon to close. Most of the villagers were unsure of their futures. But Glen Kerry was their home and all that any of them had ever known.

My father's great-grandmother Fiona told him later that she and her younger sister, Ailish, used to wait by their front gate almost every day to greet their father as he came home from the mill.

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Their mother, Annie, was known far and wide for her hearty soups and lovely bread. Supper in the Hughes household was a celebration of good food! But the best part of supper for Fiona and Ailish was to hear their father, Mick, tell grand stories.

"Da, tell us about how you got Muther to marry you," Fiona whispered.

"Oh yes, Da. Tell us!" Ailish chirped.

Their father's eyes blazed as he began. "Now ye can believe this, or ye can believe it not," he started. The girls and their mother leaned in.

"Back when your muther and I worked at the textile mill in Limerick, I used to walk by the lace parlor on me way to lunch." He paused. Fiona smiled broadly at Ailish. They knew this story by heart.

"That is when I saw the most beautiful little lass I ever laid eyes on."

"Such talk, Mick.... You've been kissin' the Blarney." Their mother blushed.

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"So I asked all of the other girls in her parlor where she lived so's I could come a-callin' and spark her. But not one of them would tell me. One day as I left the mill I noticed a lovely little bunch of lace tied to a bush just down the lane. I could see other little bits of lace tied to trees, bushes, front stoops, and lampposts further on. I recognized her lace, so I followed it down the paths and lanes until they stopped just in front of a darlin' little cottage. I looked further on and saw no more of 'em ... so I knew this was your muther's house"

Fiona and Ailish giggled.

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“Twasn’t more than a fortnight that I started courtin’ your mum. We were married right here at St. Timothy’s and I brought me bride home to this very house. Carried her over that threshold just there,” he said with a sweeping gesture.

“Both you girls were born right here next to the hearth,” their mother added.

“To think a trail of lace brought you to our mum,” Fiona said dreamily.

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Then, just as she did every evening, Fiona ran to get her day’s handiwork to show her father. Her mother was teaching her to be a fine lace maker. “Mum showed me her secret runnin’ stitch today,” Fiona said proudly as she held a small pillow covered with lace in front of her father’s face.

“Aye, Fiona, your mother was one of the finest makers of lace in all of Limerick,” Father said wistfully as he smiled at her mother.

“Sure the arthritis stopped all that, Mick,” Annie said quietly. She tried to smile, but it was heartbreaking to them all that Annie’s fingers were swollen from the pain.

“Fiona will be grander than I ever hoped to be. And as soon as she is old enough, we’ll take her to the parlor in Limerick and she’ll be their best!” Annie crowed proudly as she inspected her daughter’s lace.

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Times were already hard in all of Ireland, but harder still in Glen Kerry. The mill closed as rumored. It broke many a man and forced families to leave all they knew and seek work elsewhere.

“Where will we go, Mick?” Annie said one day. Her heart was deeply troubled.

One day their neighbor Mrs. O’Flarity spoke to Annie over their back fence.

“My Jocko and I have signed a contract. That’s all we had to do to get passage to America!” she said as she hung up her wash.

“A contract to do what?” Annie asked.

“To serve a wealthy family in America. We are going to be in domestic service for them.”

“You mean you’ll be their maid?” Annie asked.

“Of course, and Jocko will help on the grounds. The wealthy family will pay our way there on a ship. All we have to do is promise to work for them until the passage us paid off!” Mrs. O’Flarity answered.

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When Annie told Mick that evening, they stayed up into the wee hours of the night talking about it. Within a week they too went to an agency and signed a contract to work for a family in Chicago, America!

For the next weeks, it was hard for all of them. They had to decide what to take with them and what to leave behind.

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The last night they were home Fiona and Ailish put out a bowl of milk for the leprechauns and the wee people, the fairies, as they had done all their lives.

“Fiona, in America servants have servants of their own. The streets are paved with gold and we shall live in a fancy house. If only we could take the wee people to America with us. Do you think we could?” Ailish asked her sister.

“No, Ailish. I think the only place that the wee ones can be happy is here where the woodbine twineth, near the forest ... here in Glen Kerry,” Fiona whispered.

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The next morning Fiona’s mother and father bade tearful farewells to lifelong friends. After old Mr. Fitzgerald helped them load the last bundle on the wagon, the family climbed aboard.

As they left their homestead and village they all looked back as long as they could. When they crested the hill, their beloved village disappeared behind a grove of trees. Ailish and Fiona cried for miles. So did their mother. Their father just stared off into the distance.

They traveled most of that night and part of the next day. When they arrived in Belfast, they made their way directly to the shipyard to board the steamer that was bound for America.

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As the ship pulled away from the docks they took one last longing look at their beloved Ireland. Crossing the Atlantic was long and hard. Almost everyone aboard was seasick and miserable. To pass the time, Fiona made lace - yards and yards of lace.

Finally they neared the harbor in New York. They could hardly wait to set foot on dry land.

When they did, they barely had time to be processed and then make their way directly to the train station to catch the train to Chicago.

On the train there were no bunks or cots to sleep in. They had to take turns sleeping on the hard seats of the coach car.

“At least on the ship we had bunks to sleep in,” Annie said wearily.

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Days passed. Fiona busied herself making more and more lace. The journey was bumpy, hot, and dusty. They stopped at many towns and cities. Every so many stops they bought bread and cheese.

Finally, one day, the conductor announced that they were approaching Chicago!

“We’re here! We’re here!” Ailish crowed happily.

The train pulled through what seemed like miles and miles of stockyards full of cattle. They could see a big city, tall buildings off in the distance.

“I’m guessin’ the cattle are waitin’ to be slaughtered. The Americans eat well. I’ll be bound - there must be a joint of beef on every table!” their father sang out.

“Look, Muther, the sea is right next to Chicago. I wonder why the ship didn’t bring us right here?” Fiona said.

“That there is Lake Michigan, folks. And it sure does look big enough to be the ocean, don’t it?” the conductor said.

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At the depot in Chicago there were drivers for hire with wagons to take travelers home. Fiona’s father had the address of the rooming house that their employers had arranged.

As they drove through the city Fiona couldn’t believe her eyes. Every building was grander than the last - row upon row of them. Elegant people were strolling with arms full of packages.

“Look at those lovely frocks,” Annie sighed.

“Made with fine Irish lace, I’ll wager,” Father added.

“Is this where we are going to be living”? Ailish chirped excitedly.

“Our flat is on Dekonen Street. Is that near here?” their father asked the driver.

The driver smiled. “No, sir, we have quite a ways to go,” he answered.

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