

Devotion

'Go on Mammy, you have it!'

'Mammy. Sure, it's yours!'

'You're looking famished. Take it, Maw!'

Clodagh looked first at the three girls, then at the single potato, faint wisps of steam rising from the dish, tempting her, telling her to resist. Her mind drifted back to earlier that day...

...The table had been set for twelve: Lord Fitzgerald himself, and her Ladyship, naturally at the top, and five of his Lordship's shooting party and their wives. Clodagh stood quietly at the edge of the room, her hands held primly crossed over her apron, her eyes averted.

'Clodagh! For heaven's sake, girl! Wake up! Can you not see that there are plates ready to be taken away? Honestly,' the man of the house shook his head and rolled his eyes, 'these local Kerry girls. They're simply *feckless*!'

To a background of murmured agreement and tuts Clodagh came to and hurriedly cleared up the offending chinaware and cutlery, focusing hard, making sure not to give her employer another reason to humiliate her. Sean, the butler, gave her an imperceptible, reassuring smile.

'And be sure *not* to drop anything. We *don't* want a repeat of *yesterday*...' It was his wife's turn to speak. A sweeter voice, perhaps, but the barbs still hurt.

Clodagh reached the kitchen where cook was busy putting the finishing touches to the main course, one of the nine or ten the assembled company would be enjoying that lunchtime. Cook looked over her shoulder and nodded. 'Come on girl, put them plates down and get crackin' with the mains! We haven't got all day. You know what his Lordship is like.' Being careful not to burn herself, Clodagh picked up the heavy silver dish and started walking towards the door. 'It's pheasant, in case anyone asks, girl. Served up with potatoes, parsnips, and a range of seasonal vegetables,' the cook informed her before she had left the kitchen.

The smell of the food filled the long corridor separating the kitchen from the dining room. As she walked, almost staggering under the weight of the dish, Clodagh imagined the rich taste of game on her tongue, the cloying sweetness of the carrots and parsnips, and the velvet thickness of the gravy. Reaching the door, she held her chin up and entered, handing the dish over to Sean who gestured to her to return to her station, next to the wall. So, return she did, watching as the party worked their way through first the pheasant and all the trimmings, then several subsequent dishes.

Not once was she acknowledged; much less thanked.

As the sun disappeared behind the mass of Mount Brandon, she trudged homewards, to the simple turf-roofed cottage she shared with the three girls...

... Clodagh shook her head, dispelling the smells and tastes of the manor dining room, trying to disregard the hunger gnawing now at her stomach. She looked again at the three pairs of imploring eyes, picked up her knife, and cut the potato into three.

500 words