

2021

Irish

Russell Thayer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://corescholar.libraries.wright.edu/mrr>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thayer, R. (2021). Irish, *Mad River Review*, 5 (1).

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by CORE Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mad River Review by an authorized editor of CORE Scholar. For more information, please contact library-corescholar@wright.edu.

Russell Thayer

Irish

The little girl listened to men approach on the stairs as she worked a sodden scrub brush along a dirty tread near the landing. Three men, by her guess. One of the pairs of feet belonged to the building super. She could tell him by his heavy, plodding gait, which probably made the other men impatient. She didn't like the super at all. He reeked of cigars and sweat, bossed her around, and called her a "dumb mick" to her face. He gave her a nickel an hour to scrub the stairs and tile hallways, and she hated herself almost as much as she hated him because she liked the money and worked for him all day in the summer when she'd rather read *True Detective* under a tree in Waterworks Park. The super's whiskers were like the stiff bristles of her brush, and she sometimes pretended it was his face in her fist, moving like a rasp across the wood.

She moved the bucket of brown water aside when the super threatened to kick it over as he passed with his worn cuffs and greasy trouser-legs, followed by the shiny black shoes of two cops. The girl didn't like cops, either. She'd learned plenty about their crooked nature from the stories in *Black Mask*.

The men stopped in front of 3D, Mrs. Molnar's door. The girl had not seen Mrs. Molnar for two days. What had she done to warrant the presence of coppers? Surely nothing. It was Mrs. Molnar, after all. She never left her apartment.

The men whispered together for a moment; then the super raised his voice.

"Her father's a dumb mick," he said, apparently for her enlightenment. "A drunk. Hey, Irish, get over here."

The girl pushed her brush around some more, pretending to be deaf.

"Now!" shouted the super. "She's slow upstairs," he said to the cops, tapping at the side of his skull.

Irish stood stiffly and stepped onto the landing, her blue eyes moving from the wall to the police officers, then back to the wall as she pushed her frame along as though it hurt like hell to walk. Her mother was Irish, but her father came from English stock. He *was* a drunk, and he'd abandoned them for the last time a year ago. She had red hair, cut to her shoulders. A round face. Pale skin. No freckles. She was ten, but small, and the super told everybody she was six. *He* was the slow one, she thought.

"Hey, Irish," said the super. "How'd you like to make a dime?"

"What are ya talkin' about, Mac?" asked one of the cops.

"Hell, I don't want ya to bust that door down. Cost me ten bucks to get a new one set if you split the frame. And what if I gotta get the trim replaced? Or the deadbolt? The landlord's not gonna wanna pay for that. He'll take it outta my hide. Just walk the little shit downstairs. Run her up in the dumbwaiter. She can open the door from the inside. No damage done. Jesus. It ain't that hard."

"Are you shittin' me, Mac?" said one of the cops. "I ain't gonna run a little kid up in a

dumbwaiter and make her walk through a flat with a dead woman spread out like a plate of cold baloney. What's wrong with you? Use your passkey, fer Christ's sake."

Irish looked at the cop. They'd forgotten about her if they were cursing. And Mrs. Molnar? Dead?

"I don't have a passkey," said the super. "I can't find it. Okay? Can ya do a guy a favor?"

The super didn't have a passkey because Irish had his passkey. He'd left it in the lock of 2A, the apartment of a poor young woman downstairs who was having trouble paying rent for herself and her small baby. There was no husband, so she and the super had come to some kind of unsavory agreement, Irish reckoned. She'd read about big apes like him getting things from women behind closed doors. Honor was often stolen or lost. *Black Mask* was full of stories like that. Usually the men died, and it was always satisfying. To give herself a tingle of pleasure, she'd pulled the forgotten key out of the lock while the super was inside eagerly settling accounts. Irish had recently detected the remains of his cigar stink inside 3C, her own place, but she was pretty sure her mother wouldn't have any of that. She was young, but not pretty, and she had a good job demonstrating vacuum cleaners at Sears, Roebuck & Company in Flatbush, so didn't need any "help" from a big ape like him. Her mother could stand on her own two feet.

"You must have a backup set of keys," said the older cop.

"Nope," said the super with a sigh. "Not at the moment."

The backup keys were in a pearl-colored silk change purse under Irish's bed. She'd gone into the super's apartment one day after watching him get on a bus and disappear to his regular job. The super lived alone, and Irish used the passkey to get into his apartment, where she discovered the backup keys in a bowl on a desk pushed up under the front window. She could have taken only the key to her own apartment, just to be safe, but she knew that most of the other tenants didn't like the super barging in the way he did. His apartment smelled so bad and was so dusty that she sneezed a dozen times as she crept around. Eventually her upper lip began to drip, so she took a folded handkerchief from a pile on the top of his dresser, wiped her nose, then stuffed the handkerchief into the pocket of her dress.

"Maybe the window to the fire escape is unlocked," said the younger cop.

"Nah. Molnar was a fearful old bat. She kept it locked all the time. Besides, the whole frame is comin' loose from the top two floors. I wouldn't go up there if I was you. It's not safe."

Irish watched the two cops exchange glances.

* * *

Soot covered everything in the basement. Trash littered the floor around the garbage cans. It wasn't Irish's first time down to the *dungeon*, as the residents called it. The boiler was warm in winter. Warmer than the apartment. Maybe she could be super someday when she was a little taller. A grimy desk stood against the wall with a little desk light. The quiet chamber would be a cozy place to read, even if the calendar, where a woman posed without her blouse, still thought it was 1946.

The older cop waited upstairs, so it was the younger cop who removed a metal garbage pail from the dumbwaiter, handed it to the super, then put his hands under Irish's arms and lifted her up so she could crouch inside the dirty box. It reeked of rotten potato skins.

"Dime," said Irish, looking at the super.

After fishing in his pocket, the super dropped a dime into Irish's smudged palm.

"Don't let me fall," she said to at the young cop, his blond hair cut short under a black-billed cap.

"I won't," he said with a smile. The brass buttons gleamed on the front of his uniform.

“Why not?” said the super. “Wouldn’t nothin’ happen if she fell on that thick Irish skull.” Irish felt the super’s passkey press her ankle bone inside her sock as she crouched, hating him.

Slowly, with creaks and jolts, the box began to rise as the cop tugged on the frayed rope. Irish pulled the super’s handkerchief from her pocket as the darkness and stench began to swallow her, folded it crosswise, then tied it behind her head, covering her nose and mouth like a bandit’s mask. She could see a frame of light when the dumbwaiter passed the small access door to 1C, the apartment of Mrs. Eylers, a middle-aged secretary who had recently divorced her husband. One day when Irish was seven, Mrs. Eylers took her for ice cream and then for the afternoon to her sister’s fancy apartment, which was on the fourth floor of a building with an elevator and looked out upon a smooth green wedge of Ebbets Field. On the opposite side, 1D housed a crippled gentleman who had once set his apartment on fire while smoking in bed.

As the dumbwaiter lurched past 2C, Irish thought of the young couple who lived there. They were artists, full of smiles, always sitting out on the fire escape on warm evenings, smoking cigarettes, touching hips and shoulders as Irish watched secretly from the shadows above them. They’d let her come into their apartment once, when Irish pretended she had to pee. Drawings of naked men and women hung on all the walls, and Irish remembered how the couple smirked at each other while she looked up at the artwork with a squinty face. Irish didn’t know much about the old couple in 2D. They were Russian and never smiled.

Irish soon arrived at the third floor. She and her mother lived in 3C.

“Stop!” yelled Irish. The dumbwaiter came to a halt. She could feel the lock engage as the box jiggled back and forth.

Mrs. Molnar lived in 3D. When Irish was five, before starting kindergarten, she used to get bad earaches. If her mother had to work, Irish would cry and moan a lot while thrashing alone on the floor. One day Mrs. Molnar knocked, and when Irish reached up to open the door, the old woman burst in to ask what was the matter. After Irish pointed to her ear, the woman took her next door by her hand, heated a towel in the oven, sprinkled it with salt, and then held it over the sore ear while Irish sat on her lap. Soon enough, the pain went away. The trick worked on a number of occasions, and Mrs. Molnar became Irish’s best friend. After starting school, Irish would often visit by pulling up the dumbwaiter, locking it in position, then scooting through it into her neighbor’s apartment. The door was never latched. She could have done that today if the super had remembered she actually lived next door to 3D, but he was slow upstairs, and Irish doubted a scoot would be worth a dime to him.

The heavysset old woman never went outside because she didn’t like what the world had become. On top of that, she had trouble walking, her feet swollen by sugar diabetes. She was already old when she’d escaped Europe before the war, when Jews were being hounded like rabbits. The war had been over for two years, but Mrs. Molnar still thought evil lurked in the streets below. Her son did her shopping for her, but Irish helped her pass the time on lonely afternoons. Often, they would listen to serials on the radio while drinking tea and eating the small, sweet almond cookies Mrs. Molnar made in her tidy Pullman kitchen. When there was nothing on the radio, Irish would read exciting stories to Mrs. Molnar from *Black Mask* or *True Detective*.

Mrs. Molnar had been born in Hungary, and Irish thought it a very interesting idea to be from somewhere else. She’d been born a mile away at Samaritan Hospital. Her mother’s family had been in America for two generations, her father’s for longer, but Irish often mostly felt like she was nothing from nowhere, a plate of cold baloney. Except when she was with Mrs. Molnar,

who seemed to love her like the grandmothers she never knew. Mrs. Molnar's son had no children and no wife. Sometimes she would ask Irish to put Jergens lotion on her back and help her wrap her swollen feet in elastic bandages. Irish always glowed with pride when Mrs. Molnar told her she would make a good nurse one day, though Irish thought she might like to be a doctor instead. She was especially happy and proud the day Mrs. Molnar told her she was going to write it into her will that when she died, Irish would inherit the gold necklace she wore every day around her neck. She'd always wanted a smart granddaughter to have it. Her son wouldn't ever marry because it wasn't in his nature, so Irish would have to do. Irish hugged her friend, telling her she hoped she never died, and they smiled at each other as the girl lifted the heavy gold necklace off of Mrs. Molnar's chest to get another look at it. The necklace had been designed to look like a bird with wings that would spread across the collarbone. Many small diamonds were set into the body of the creature, and two purplish red rubies made the bird's eyes. Irish wasn't much for jewelry, and didn't own any, but she knew diamonds were worth something. Gold too. Perhaps she could sell the thing one day to help get far away from the city, for medical school, maybe. She thought Mrs. Molnar would like that.

All these details spun around in Irish's head as she pushed the dumbwaiter door open and peered into Mrs. Molnar's dim apartment, knowing the woman was dead. She hadn't allowed herself to cry in front of the super, but she might cry a little in the apartment, if she had the time. The lights were extinguished, the heavy drapes pulled closed against the night and its prying eyes. Mrs. Molnar was always afraid of people looking in at her from the fire escape at night, so she kept the windows covered and locked. She must have died in her sleep during the last week. Her son had probably asked the super to check on her when she wouldn't answer her telephone. Irish didn't visit as much in the summer. If the weather was clear and the apartments baked with heat and humidity, she liked to wander the streets outside when she wasn't scrubbing stairs.

As she hopped down, Irish heard the older cop tapping on the door.

"Hey, miss," he called out. "Come right to the door, honey. Don't look at her."

Irish had seen dead people before. They didn't scare her. Two years back, while fishing from a rowboat on Sheepshead Bay with one of her mother's erstwhile suitors, she'd hooked a floating corpse with her line. She reeled it in to bump against the side of the boat. The man screamed when he saw it.

* * *

As Irish dragged her bucket across the tile, she listened to the young woman from 2A, the one with no husband, a baby, and no more "arrangements" with the super, talking in the hallway to the female artist from 2C.

"The cops came and hauled him away," said 2A. "He didn't see that comin', the sick bastard."

"How did they catch him?" asked 2C.

"Well, I'll tell ya. That cute young cop took a likin' to me, see. He allowed me all the juicy particulars. I'm meetin' him at Feeney's later for a beer."

"Congratulations," said 2C, looking at her fingernails.

"Thanks. I'll be nice to him. Anyhow, I guess Molnar's son came by to watch 'em haul the body down to the morgue, and he noticed somethin' was crooked."

"Oh, yeah?" said 2C.

"Yeah. Then they found the super's passkey on the floor. And, get this, the super had stuffed his own handkerchief, monogrammed, no less, down the poor woman's throat, chokin' her lights out."

“What a moron.”

“Yeah. No kiddin’,” said 2A. “Then the coppers searched the super’s apartment and found that diamond necklace old Molnar always wore around her neck like she was queen of the world. He was in a high-wheeled huff as they dragged him down the hall in handcuffs, shoutin’ to the high heavens that he’d been framed.”

“She was a nice lady, though,” said 2C.

“Yeah, I guess. Always hangin’ around with the kid, and all.”

The women glanced at Irish, then disappeared into their apartments.

It was as clumsy a frame job as Irish had ever read about in *Black Mask*, but the way she understood it, coppers liked the easy way out, unless the top detective was a genius; then they never rested until they caught up with the real criminal mastermind. They’d never catch up with her.

* * *

Mrs. Eylers won the job of super. That meant she got to move into the roomy first-floor apartment at the front of the building, though Irish guessed it would pain such a tidy woman to have to clean up after such a pig. Irish also thought this would be a good move for Mrs. Eylers, money-wise. She could still keep her secretarial job, since all she had to do in order to have her rent forgiven by the owners of the building was move the garbage cans to the street on pickup day, arrange for needed building maintenance, clear the coal ash out of the boiler room, and collect the rent from her neighbors.

Lounging in the big green chair, a copy of *True Detective* open in her lap, Irish had just been thinking of her magical day with Mrs. Eylers, and how she might like to go to a Dodgers game at Ebbets Field someday, when her mother burst into 3C, waving a letter back and forth above her head.

“Louise!” she said. “You won’t believe this, but the necklace Mr. Platz stole from Mrs. Molnar had been left to you in her will. Her son is probably furious, but it says right here that within sixty days they’ll officially close the case. It was evidence during the trial, but when they’re done with it, I guess it’s ours.”

“Mine,” said Irish.