

MOTHER TONGUE

PATRICIA FORDE



Little Island

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*With thanks to all the team at
The Tyrone Guthrie Centre at Annaghmakerrig.*

*In memory of the Tuam babies
and for children without a voice everywhere.*

She saw a long and narrow room. Each wall was lined with small white cots. A woman dressed in white was standing over one cot with her back to the window. Another woman pushed a trolley on which sat rows and rows of bottles. The first woman bent down and picked up a baby. Slowly, she turned with the infant in her arms and Letta's heart almost stopped beating. The woman's mouth was taped shut with heavy grey duct tape but Letta recognised her immediately.

She was looking at a dead woman.

CHAPTER 1



THE INK was dark and slightly sticky. Crimson. It reminded her of blood. It was made from berries harvested in autumn, the precious juice extracted when the first leaves began to fall. Letta dipped her nib in carefully, trying to avoid any splashes. The cards were lined up before her. One word on each card. Words from the mother tongue that they had all but lost. This batch described wild flowers.

Buttercup. Daisy. Primrose. Cowslip.

Each letter was written in her own cursive script, red ink on white card. She pressed the nib to the card, heard the gentle scratch, smelt the scent of berries and vinegar waft around her head.

'Ready?' Marlo asked, pulling on his jacket.

'Yes,' she said. 'I just need to pack my bag.'

He waited as she put the cards into their boxes, then handed her the old leather satchel, his strong hands touching hers for a second as lightly as a butterfly touches a flower. She slipped the boxes into the satchel alongside a slim volume of stories.

She fastened the straps, enjoying the feel of the old leather and its rich, spicy smell. It smelt of home. This had been Benjamin's satchel. Benjamin, her beloved mentor, who had raised her after her parents went away.

'All set?' Marlo smiled at her.

She followed him across the floor of the old pump house, up the ladder and through the trapdoor. They walked across the high dusty hallway that smelt of bats and mould and damp. Marlo nodded to the young man who stood guard, and he in turn looked through the peephole. Letta waited. The boy pushed against the great doors and they swung open, complaining loudly on their rusty hinges. The boy checked that the way was clear outside, then stood back to let Letta and Marlo pass.

Letta breathed in the cold air. All about her the trees whispered in the wind, leaves shivering as the fat plops of raindrops hit them.

Thirty minutes later they were walking through the rough grass of open fields. A world of ruts and stinging nettles, of water-logged sods and winds laden with the smell of damp, earthy moss. The landscape had the pallor of a dying afternoon in winter with everything and everyone locked in its cold embrace. An east wind had moved in overnight, bringing with it a slate sky and constant showers of wintry rain. Now Letta and Marlo climbed, hand in icy hand, as the land stretched upwards, a slope that was bald and bare from the heavy rainfall. At the summit, they paused to catch their breath. Below them, Letta saw the dell, with its thicket of small trees and bushes that would hide them from prying eyes. When they reached it, she settled herself, sitting with her back pressed against an old pine tree, the dampness permeating her thin clothes. They had chosen this place because the land had been left fallow.

There were no workers to worry about, no reason for anyone to be there. Marlo moved away to stand on a knoll from where he had a good view of the surrounding countryside. Then they waited.

Letta heard them before she saw them. Her raggle-taggle band of scholars. Ten children ranging in age from seven to almost twelve. It worried her that they had come together, that they were making noise. She would have to speak to them again about how important it was that they be careful. These children came from the bravest people in Ark, people who were prepared to risk and lose everything so their children could learn to speak. Soon the youngsters were sitting in front of her, eyes wide, waiting to hear what she had to say. She cleared her throat and began. 'I'm so happy you could all come this afternoon.'

The wind rushed in across the fields and she struggled to be heard over its eerie whine. It was the raw end of the second month, when the earth is still cold. Thaddeus, one of Letta's youngest students, looked at her with wide blue eyes and put his hand up. In his other hand he held a daisy, its head squashed in his warm palm.

'Letta, what call this f- flower?'

He stumbled over the last word, a non-List word that Letta had only recently taught him. She had a sudden intense memory of picking daisies with Benjamin when she wasn't much older than Thaddeus.

'Daisies symbolise new beginnings,' he'd said. She hoped it was true.

'It's a daisy,' Letta said.

Daisies in February. The Melting had left the climate in chaos and nature was still acting strangely. 'Can you tell me the names of any other flowers that we learnt?'

The small boy's forehead creased as he struggled to remember. 'Primrose, daff-o-dil, buttercup ...'

‘Excellent, Thaddeus,’ she said.

He was such a clever boy. He should be in a proper school, she thought, remembering her own days in Mrs Truckle’s classroom, where they had learnt John Noa’s words, the list of seven hundred words allowed in Ark. They didn’t know at the time that they would be the last children in Ark to be offered seven hundred words. After Letta graduated, children were given only five hundred words. And now that school had closed.

Letta and the Creators did their best to teach those who wanted to learn, though it meant teaching them in the open air, in desolate spots where they wouldn’t be discovered. People had taken to calling them ‘hedge schools’, since they often took shelter under bushes and trees, and more parents were trying to send their children, even though discovery would mean death. She glanced behind her to where Marlo stood guard, scanning the countryside.

The wind squeezed through the copse, its breath frigid, and Letta blew on her hands to warm them before opening her little book of stories. It was one of the few things she had managed to take from Benjamin’s library before going on the run. The blue cover had once been stiff and inflexible, but now it lay limp in Letta’s hands, the pages crinkled and yellow-stained with water. It was older than the Melting, from another time, a time that was almost impossible for her to imagine. A time when books were everywhere, when people churned out stories and everyone was free to read them. A long time ago, before the water levels rose and drowned most of the planet. She opened the book carefully.

‘I’m going to read you a story,’ she said and felt the ripple of anticipation that shimmied through the group. ‘It is about a mouse who saved a lion.’

‘I had mouse once, but I put him in box and him die,’ Thaddeus said. ‘Mama think him not have enough air.’ The corners of his

mouth turned down at the thought, and his brother Aaron hushed him.

'Listen story, Thaddeus,' he said.

Letta smiled. She turned to the book again. She was about to start reading when she saw something shoot out from behind a grassy mound to her right. She jumped. It was an animal. Its fur was brown and russet, but Letta saw a flash of white on its belly. It had long ears with white tips and strong back legs.

'Look!' Thaddeus cried. 'Rabbit!'

'Not a rabbit,' Letta said gently. 'A hare.' She picked up the book and began to read. 'Once upon a time –'

'Letta!' Marlo's voice cut across her words like a whip.

She looked back at him.

'Gavvers!' Marlo shouted.

Her heart stammered.

'On horseback. Go quickly!'

They had rehearsed this. They knew what to do, yet now the children stood frozen.

'Go!' Letta shouted.

The children recovered quickly. They started to move to the far side of the copse, where the shrubbery was dense. Letta and Marlo shepherded the little ones. Letta held Thaddeus's hand. She could feel the daisy squashed between their palms. When they reached the stone wall at the northern end of the small enclosure, they lay on the ground. All about them, the shrubbery formed a screen. The rough ground was cold and stony but no-one moved. In the distance, the inexorable beat of hooves came closer. Men on horseback. This was a new intervention from Amelia, the leader of Ark. Before this, horses and all other animals had roamed freely, as John Noa had dictated. But Amelia had captured and tamed them and now they made the gavvers far more efficient.

Beside her, Letta heard Marlo breathe in sharply. The horses were getting nearer. Thaddeus squeezed her hand. She caught Marlo's eye and saw her own anxiety reflected. He held up a finger in warning. *Don't move.* They lay totally still as the horses came to within a few strides of them. Letta heard the animals snorting, smelt their sweat. And then the hare they had seen earlier broke cover and flew out in front of the huge galloping figures. Thaddeus went to stand up, to stop the little creature. Letta hauled him down, clamping her hand over his mouth.

A shot rang out and the hare crumpled. Through a gap in the undergrowth Letta saw him fall to the ground. Brown fur on green grass with a halo of crimson. Under her hand, Thaddeus shivered, his warm tears splashing on her fingers. The horses stopped. For a second there was total silence. Letta could hear Thaddeus breathing, her own heart hammering.

'Rabbit!' The gavver's voice was rough and hoarse. 'Take! Give Central Kitchen.'

Letta heard a mutter of agreement, then the horses took off, the thunder of their hooves receding, as Letta pressed her ear to the cold ground.

Werber walked slowly along the beach. The wind whipping in from the sea was cold and punishing. His eyes watered. Above him the seabirds screamed as they ducked and dived above the boiling waves. He had come to the sea to get away from the tyranny of the big house. Since Noa's death, Amelia had taken him as her apprentice. She had insisted he learn to speak the old tongue properly, though he felt uncomfortable about it. Noa had always said that language was the enemy, the reason they had destroyed the planet. But Amelia explained it to him. Language, she said, was a necessary evil for rulers, though unnecessary for ordinary people. A society needed only one set of ideas, one way of looking at the world. Leaders were charged with outlining what those ideas were. To do that, they had to be able to express themselves fully. Others were not tasked with that responsibility. They only needed to obey.

And so, he had learnt the old tongue and became a warrior. A Green Warrior. One of the elite champions of the environment who had been with John Noa from the very beginning. He lived now to serve Amelia and Ark. Together they had come up with new ideas to control language. Amelia was almost totally blind but never missed anything. She had an amazing brain. Werber was trusted with even the most sensitive secrets now. He was part of a family.

But sometimes at night he lay awake worrying. What if Amelia discovered what had really happened in the water tower? He was so ashamed of his action. He had helped a murderer to escape. Not just any murderer. The person who had killed John Noa. Letta.

He hated Letta. Didn't he?

He stopped to look out at the sea.

He hated her.

The force of his emotion shocked him. He bit down hard on his lip, tasting blood in his mouth. She had made him forget who he really was.

He couldn't forgive her for that.

Carver had told him that she was alive and involved with the Desecrators. She was a traitor, working to destroy all that Noa had worked so hard to create.

She had made a fool of him. He had believed that she was young and innocent. Pure. A person he could spend his life with.

But Carver said that she was rotten to the core. He had to accept that. Overhead, a gull screeched, an eerie, otherworldly sound. Werber shivered, then turned and walked away.

CHAPTER 2



IT WAS a year since the battle at the water tower and life in Ark had changed utterly. John Noa, founder of Ark, had died that day. He had ruled Ark with an unrelenting harshness and not many had been sad to see his departure. Almost immediately, Amelia, Noa's partner, had taken power and proved herself to be every bit as formidable as John Noa and even more vicious, despite her failing health. Rumours painted her as feeble and almost totally blind, but that didn't seem to deter her from her mission.

To let the people know that she was now running Ark, she had embarked on a reign of terror. Tin Town, which lay on the outskirts of Ark and was populated by the poorest of the poor, refugees who hadn't made it into Ark after the Melting, had been razed to the ground, its inhabitants taken as slaves or thrown into the forest to be eaten by wild animals. The Creators (or Desecrators as they were still called by the authorities) had gone back into hiding, only venturing into the town in heavy disguise. Letta, in particular, was a wanted woman with a large bounty on her head.

But there were positive signs too. The Creators organised meetings in hidden places and talked to the people about freedom.

Their following was increasing all the time. People were concerned about their children, who were growing up unable to express themselves. They were the first generation without any knowledge of the old tongue. All they knew were the five hundred words they had been given by Amelia. Until now, their parents had been too afraid to share the language they stored in their heads with their innocent offspring.

The revolution that day in the water tower had shown some people that there was still hope. Some people, but not many. Most people were too terrified of Amelia and her gavvers to see that freedom was even possible. Letta had come to realise that you can't have real hope until you leave fear behind.

Letta had been anxious to play her part. She came up with the idea of the hedge schools, and even though Finn, the leader of the Creators, had been wary of letting her risk her life again, she had insisted. In the end he had agreed. She loved the children, and their thirst for words was insatiable. But it was an uneasy situation. Letta was constantly afraid that the children would give themselves away by using the words she taught them, or that the gavvers would discover the school and hurt the young scholars. Amelia had shown little compassion since Noa had died. Letta had been consumed with dread and guilt about Amelia being her aunt, a blood relative. But Marlo reminded her that Leyla had also been her aunt and she was the sweetest person to ever draw breath. And so Letta went on living in the pump house, taking each day as it came.

The pump house was an old lichen-spattered stone building from the time before the Melting. A relic of another time. It had no place in John Noa's world. Its roof was caved in, a home to raucous jackdaws, and its windows were boarded up, leaving it blind to the outside world. It was deep in the forest, miles from Ark, an island of sanity in a world gone mad. Nothing on the

outside gave a clue to what lay below ground level. Beneath the building was where Letta and the Creators lived, in a maze of basement rooms of all shapes and sizes.

Life was tense in the pump house now. Security was tight. Finn led this small, hunted community with quiet confidence, but for those who had known him before his beloved Leyla had been murdered, he was a changed man. Letta watched him as he went about his daily chores – listening to reports from scouts, discussing what they might eat with the cook, monitoring their supplies of water. She could sense an absence in him, a feeling that he wasn't fully there, that some part of him was still with Leyla. Here, inside the walls of the pump house, where there was music and art and laughter and words, it was easy to feel her spirit. Letta hoped she had found peace, somewhere.

She still missed Benjamin. She thought about him every day and whispered his name in her sleep. Only the previous night she had dreamt of him. The dream brought her back to a time in her childhood when Benjamin had taken her to the beach and shown her how the water was giving back what it had taken: every year the sea receded a little. It was an old memory, tattered about the edges, but in her dream it was as vivid as if it had just happened.

When her grief threatened to overwhelm her, there was always Marlo, who held her and whispered comforting words. It helped. But she missed her old life. She missed Ark. It hadn't been perfect but it had been predictable. She ached to be back at her own desk, knowing that Benjamin was upstairs pottering about, knowing that she had a job to do. She missed Mrs Truckle, even though the old woman had sided against her and taken John Noa's part. She missed watching her neighbours come and go, full of the hustle of life. She even missed going over to Central Kitchen every day to collect her food.

And she missed her parents. They had left Ark when she was a small child, gone to search for places and people that might have survived the Melting. They had never come back. In all her short life she had never felt their loss as much as she did now. She missed them with an aching loneliness that she found hard to describe. She wanted to walk to the edge of the sea and look out, scanning the horizon for a boat with silver sails, but she knew she couldn't turn the clock back. She knew she couldn't live a normal life now. She was a rebel, an outcast and a fugitive. She knew all of that, but it didn't help. And she was beginning to feel claustrophobic.

Finn and Marlo meant well and only wanted to protect her, but some days she wondered if they had forgotten it was she who had engineered Noa's demise. They treated her like a delicate flower, while inside she felt like a bear – an angry bear. The energy that had driven her to stop Noa still burned inside her. She wanted freedom, for herself and for the people of Ark. She wanted justice. She wanted something approaching normality, something like people had had before the Melting.

'Are you on dinner duty?' The small dark girl who had asked the question was frowning down at her.

'No,' Letta said. 'I don't think so.'

The girl shrugged. 'Must be me then,' she said and sauntered away.

Letta stared after her. She didn't like Carmina. She couldn't put her finger on why, but she just didn't. Carmina was an artist. She was responsible for the row of portraits that hung on the south wall of the pump house. Letta's gaze found them now. These were the martyrs, the Creators who had been killed by Noa's regime. At the end of the line, she could see Leyla and Benjamin. Their faces had a light to them that made them look

alive again. Letta often stood and examined Benjamin's portrait, and each time she was even more impressed at Carmina's skill. But it didn't make her like her any better.

Carmina was a soldier as well as an artist. When Letta had moved into the pump house twelve months earlier, Carmina had been living in Ark, undercover, a spy for the Creators. She had only come back to the forest two weeks ago and had been hailed as a hero. Letta had felt that Carmina was not happy to see her there, and since then they had settled into an uneasy truce.

Letta turned back to her work. Finn had managed to get her some card and she ran her hand over it, its smoothness reassuring her. There were so many words to record. Some days she felt a wave of panic when she thought about all the words she stored in her head. She had to write them down, pass them on. Today, she would start with this room. She looked around.

Window: A framework of wood or metal that holds a pane of glass.

Soon, she had thirty words written on her white cards. Once again, the words sang in her head and shot around the room just as they had when she'd been a little girl. When she stopped to rest, she found she had an audience. Twelve or so children and teenagers were standing around her table. A young boy clapped his hands and smiled. 'You know many words. So many.'

Letta shrugged. 'You are welcome to these if you want them.'

The boy smiled. 'We will ... I'm sorry ...' He hesitated. 'We will sh- share them,' he said. 'Thank you.'

A girl standing next to him pushed forward. 'Do you have word for this?'

Letta looked and saw that the girl had wool and needles in her hand. The needles were whittled sticks and the wool had been

gathered from the fields and the sheep who lived there. For a second, Letta feared that she didn't know the word, couldn't remember it, even though it was circling in the air just beyond her grasp.

'Knitting!' she said. 'It's called knitting.'

Knit: To tie or link together, especially yarn or wool.

Letta's heart leapt at the look of gratitude on the girl's face. 'Nitt-ing,' she said. 'I used to know that word. My mother give it me. I forgot. I know I should not have. I know it was a special thing but I forgot.'

Letta touched the girl's arm. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'You have it now, and I will write it down for you so you will never forget it again.'

For the rest of the afternoon, Letta wrote words for anyone who wanted them. She had realised a long time ago that there was a huge discrepancy in language amongst her new friends. Some, like Finn and Marlo, spoke quite beautifully; others, like the girl with the knitting, had everyday language and nothing else; others had few words and made themselves understood through a mixture of mime and facial expressions.

As Letta wrote the words, she tried to imagine why this was. Obviously, Finn and Marlo had grown up with educated people who had a great store of words. Others had been separated from their parents at a very young age and forced to fend for themselves.

Many children had arrived at Ark almost feral. An old man who used to visit Benjamin had told her about them. John Noa had taken them in and placed them with families who took care of them. They had recovered in most ways, but their language was destroyed. Most of them had few words and it was difficult for them to take on new ones. She had met many such people in

the wordsmith's shop, people who desperately wanted to speak properly, to be able to express themselves, and Letta's heart had ached for them. And the Creators were no different: they too had their share of people with some words and others who had almost none.

Letta looked up from her work. Finn and Marlo were due back. There had been a demonstration today. Finn had taken a group to the fields to play music for the workers. Letta had longed to go but it had been decided that it was too dangerous for her. They hadn't had a demo like that for a long time. But Finn had got word that there was a training day for the gavvers and that security would be lax. Letta hoped he was right. A week had passed since she'd seen the gavvers shoot the hare. A week in which she was haunted by the sight of them parading around on horseback. Quicker now, and more lethal than ever before.

Carmina had just called people to the table to eat when they heard the trapdoor open.

'Finn!' a child called out and Finn jumped into the room, followed by Marlo and the half-dozen musicians who had gone with them to the fields. Letta smiled. They were safe.

Over dinner Finn was in better humour than Letta had seen him for a long time.

'It went well!' he kept repeating. 'It went very well.'

Letta looked around for Marlo and saw him with Carmina, their heads close together at the far end of the table. She felt a sharp nip of jealousy. And then Eithne, one of the musicians, was beside her. 'We had such a good day. Yes, a good day. No gavvers. We played our music. The workers were astonished, and then – how do you say it? Transformed. Yes, transformed.'

'That's wonderful,' Letta said, wishing she could have seen it.

Finn clapped his hands for silence. 'And now,' he said. 'We celebrate.'

The party went on all night. After eating, Finn retold the story of their adventure, praising Eithne and the other musicians. He held his glass aloft and made a toast: 'To absent friends,' he said. 'To all those who went out and didn't come back. To those who chose to die so that others might be free. What we do today is for them. Our brothers. Our sisters. *Salut!*'

He raised his cup to the line of portraits and everyone drank. Eithne and some of the other musicians started to play. Letta gave herself up to the sweet music and watched the dancers sway in the half-light. Before long, everyone was dancing. Letta hung back, suddenly shy. On the floor, she saw Marlo and Carmina, Carmina moving easily, her body fluid, Marlo following her, as though they were one person. A little while later, the musicians stopped for a break and Marlo and Carmina came to join her.

'Are you having a good time, Letta?' Marlo asked, his eyes soft and full of kindness.

Letta nodded. 'Of course,' she lied.

'You don't dance?' Carmina said.

Letta flushed. 'No,' she said. 'I don't dance.'

She didn't want to explain to Carmina that until a year ago she had never even heard music.

Carmina shrugged and held her hand out to Marlo. 'Come on!' she said. 'They're playing our tune.'

Marlo hesitated. 'You're sure you won't join us, Letta?' he said.

'You go. I'm happy here.'

Inside, she hoped he wouldn't go. She hoped he would stay with her. She chided herself even as that thought came. He didn't

owe her anything. And he and Carmina had been friends for a long time. And yet ... she felt a tingle every time he was near. Marlo shrugged and took Carmina's hand. They walked away from her and the music swelled to a crescendo as all the instruments joined in.

She didn't care, she told herself, but she knew that wasn't true.

CHAPTER 3



AT BREAKFAST the next day, Marlo pulled Letta aside. ‘There’s a meeting tonight in Ark,’ he said. ‘In a safe house. Finn would like you to come.’

Letta was startled. Finn had been adamant that she shouldn’t leave the pump house other than to go to the hedge school.

‘What’s happening?’ she said.

‘You know that Finn has recruited a lot of volunteers in recent months? They’ve been divided into separate cells – that way there’s less chance of informers betraying us. Each cell has its own responsibilities, but they know nothing about what goes on in other cells.’

Letta nodded. She had heard Finn talk about this system before.

‘The cell we’re visiting tonight is in charge of education. We need more schools. This cell wants to recruit more teachers. The more teachers we have, the more children we can reach. Finn thinks you should attend.’

Letta felt her heart lift. She was thrilled that Finn trusted her with such important work. It was a small role but it was something.

‘We need to develop a plan,’ Marlo said. ‘We already know of