

## Extract from untitled novel - Emma Rhind-Tutt

### Georgia 1921

Whenever Martha sucks her thumb, she presses Sai to her face, running the worn frayed edges between her forefinger and nose. Sai then breathes Martha's own self back at her, conjuring all manner of things – warmth, sleep, sweet milk, the dizzying, wavy carving on the frame of her crib, and the damp, jumbled smell of flowers that might float in the air around a lady. Sometimes Martha can just about pick out, mingling among all these riches, the faintest note of one particular feminine scent. Sai, she was told longer ago than she can recall, used to be the blanket she was wrapped in as a baby.

'Does that chil' ever let go a that raggedy thing?' people often remark to Granmaw, when she and Martha go get groceries along Main Street.

'Her start in life, she gotta have something to hold on to,' Granmaw tells them perkily. 'She's a name for it, too, and you don't name a thing 'less you got a good use for it.' With a nod that says there's no disagreeing with her, Granmaw then smiles a wider, flatter smile than joy itself would induce - and sometimes people realise this is a signal they have stuck their noses in too far, and sometimes they blunder on, 'Make her teeth crooked, having her thumb in her mouth all day.'

At which Granmaw might scoff: 'Stops *her* spouting nonsense, leastways,' and then she will squeeze Martha's hand a little tighter – which Martha knows, though Granmaw has never said so, is her way of backing Martha up. They walk on with a brief 'Good day to you!' and Martha will keep on the listen-out for automobiles – not long ago she saw two in one day - Granmaw cursing each one of them for their noise and oily odours.

It has been quite a while since she and Granmaw did groceries together.

Martha presses Sai to her nose, crossing her eyes so that she can see the material and nothing else.

Mrs O'Connor tuts loudly for some reason, and snatches Martha's empty breakfast bowl off the table. She has been giving Martha her meals for some time now, helping her mornings and bedtimes too, and every day the lines on her forehead grow deeper and her lips fix in a tighter, narrower line. Through the hiss of the faucet as Mrs O'Connor fills the sink, Martha hears a knock at the door – three sharp raps.

'Mercy, she's here already,' Mrs O'Connor cries, wiping red hands on her apron, and lifting Martha off her high chair and on to her hip. 'You must be good for the kind lady,' she scolds, looking ahead to the hallway. As they approach the front door, Martha's toes bob lightly against the wall keeping time with Mrs O'Connor's brisk steps.

On the porch stands a thin person dressed in a plain dark coat, buttons the size of figs running down the front of it. She steps inside the house with a quiet hello and when she removes her bonnet Martha sees a stark white line dividing the dull hair scraped back off her face.

'Well, now, come sit down a spell while I get her things.' Mrs O'Connor wears a harried expression as she slips Martha from her hip, then bustles back down the passage. Martha, right behind her, turns and glances up at the person: her small pale eyes stare straight out of a sallow face and the ribbon of her bonnet is printed in the soft flesh under her chin.

Lifting her hand from her apron, Mrs O'Connor waves the person into the parlor. 'Would you care for some lemonade after your long journey?' she offers in her politest voice, the one she uses on the priest.

'Yes,' the person murmurs, her attention seized by Granmaw's Jesus collection on the long parlor wall, 'please.'

Martha follows Mrs O'Connor back to the kitchen. Martha is not allowed in the parlor without Granmaw and anyway the room bothers her – the floral pattern on the wallpaper is frantic and her eyes struggle to work it out. Furthermore, a strip of the paper gapes behind the sofa. The bare wall beneath is tacky pink and gray like the skin under a scab, and Martha suspects some large creepy-crawly may have set up home there and will come sidling out of the curl of paper to taunt her. She pities the Jesuses suspended above it who cannot escape.

'Who is the person in the parlor?' Martha asks, trotting along the hall to keep up with Mrs O'Connor.

'Why, this kind lady is taking you to Saint Mary's home, dear,' Mrs O'Connor answers in her priest voice, that now has a little waver in it.

Martha glances up at Mrs O'Connor. 'Who is Sint Mary?'

Mrs O'Connor just sniffs loudly and swivels her back to Martha, cussing at the breakfast dishes while she prepares a jug of lemonade.

Martha inhales a fistful of Sai. Adults often act like they haven't heard her, and make her repeat herself endlessly, and sometimes they don't manage to catch her meaning at all. Mrs O'Connor was especially wanting in this regard after supper yesterday when she took Martha into Granmaw's room to say goodnight.

'Why has Granmaw been in her room so long?' Martha asked all the way up the stairs.

The room looked darker than usual from the doorway; the drapes were closed although there was still some light outside. She had never seen Granmaw lying down before – indeed, that Granmaw might actually put herself to bed at some point after hefting Martha into her crib and blessing her goodnight was a striking revelation. It was quite against the natural order of things to witness her face lower than Martha's own. Martha just stood heavy-footed by the side of the bed and peered, breath held fast. Granmaw's head was deep in the pillow, her features so slack and flattened, so *un*-Granmaw, that Martha had not wanted to kiss her, despite Mrs O'Connor's insistence that she should. Granmaw's cheek was cool and faintly sticky.

'Why is Granmaw asleep so early?'

'I think it's time we put *you* to bed.'

'Will Granmaw put me to bed?'

'I'll fetch you some nice warm milk.'

And Mrs O'Connor went on like this, giving answers, but not to the questions Martha put to her.

Martha opens her mouth to her thumb and strokes Sai while Mrs O'Connor's elbows flap at the sink. Letting out a long sigh, Mrs O'Connor wipes a smear off a glass with a damp cloth and tips the lip of the jug into it. The cloudy green drink gives a flamboyant twirl round the glass, then settles. She carries the glass poised mid air ahead of her as if it were somehow leading the way, and marches through to the parlor, appearing to have forgotten Martha. Martha follows slowly, hoping that Mrs O'Connor will come out of the parlor, but the two adults murmur quietly in there for some moments and Martha eventually edges her way in to join them. The person, spying Martha straight away despite her attempts to stand behind Mrs O'Connor, straightens up from her perch on the sofa, then bends from the waist and tells Martha – in a

breathy, hushed voice like she is announcing a big treat – that she will be going on a train. She smiles as she speaks, but her flecked grey eyes glint strangely, hinting at something much riskier than a train ride (excited as Martha is about it), and Martha does not feel easy with her.

If Granmaw was around, Martha might cling to her at this point, but she never hugs Mrs O'Connor and anyway her hands are busy with her apron. When Martha looks up at her face, Mrs O'Connor is staring hard at the person, and her lips are pushed forwards and moving slowly, like the simpleton's who sometimes sits on the steps of the grocery store veranda.

The person nods briefly at Mrs O'Connor, then sends a short smile down to Martha. Mrs O'Connor turns suddenly and Martha wants to go after her, but the person reaches down for her hand – her thumb-hand – and holds her back.

'Well, now,' she says, as if she is about to tell Martha something, but then she just gives a short sigh.

The wallpaper flowers nod encouragingly.

'Is Granmaw coming with us?'

'What, my child?'

'Is Granmaw coming with us?'

'Excuse me, my dear.' The person releases Martha's hand and rushes from the room, her cheeks splashed with pink and her skirt snapping as it checks the reach of her steps.

Martha shoves her liberated thumb into her mouth, pulling Sai across her nostrils, and then risks a glance at the walls. The wallpaper flowers begin to turn - their petals forming spokes that become gramophone records just like the wheels of automobiles picking up speed - slow and distinctive at first, then blurring, then solid discs, shimmering. Martha drops her eyes and watches Sai's peaceful, even weave.

It begins to dawn on Martha from the general bustle in the narrow hallway that preparations are being made for her to go out. Indeed the person returns shortly, smiling brightly at the space directly in front of her. With a nimble side step, she pegs up the shoulders of Martha's coat behind her, and automatically Martha puts out her arms one at a time, snatching Sai from one hand to the other so her arms can slide easily through each sleeve. The person then hunkers down before her and hooks up the coat as Granmaw would do, but unlike Granmaw she frowns at the hooks, and plucks at Martha's wrist to pull her thumb from her mouth and Sai away from her nose while her knotted fingers struggle with the top hook - all without looking Martha in the eye.

She stands easily and takes Martha's hand – the not-thumb hand this time, luckily.

'Come,' the person says.

Down the passage, Mrs O'Connor stands at the bottom of the staircase, to make room for opening the front door with all three of them standing there. She is holding a small black valise that Martha has never seen before. As they cross the porch she hands it to the person without looking at Martha, her face tinged and sour as a bowl of turned milk.

The person walks fast – Martha has to do at least two steps for every one of hers. Once they reach Main Street the wind hurls dust into their faces, and Martha cranes her head round, partly to keep out the dust, and partly to keep her view on the things she recognises: the regular-spaced wood houses with their plain, short front yards, and the Coca-Cola sign fixed to the timbers above the veranda of the ever shrinking grocery store.

The railroad station, farther down Main than Martha has ever been with Granmaw, is smaller than she imagined, with a wide entrance door but no windows on to the street.

Inside is just one empty, silent room. Along its only uninterrupted wall runs a narrow bench and opposite that is a counter, behind which Martha can just about see a bald man in dark clothing. The person puts down the valise, and asks the bald man something, then pays him some money from a wallet that must have been tucked in her clothing some place. Martha looks towards the platform, easily visible through a wide arch: its surface is dusted with sand and a wood roof hangs above it, whose fancy edge is like a long row of filed teeth. In the distance she can see a bare gray tree, its twigs fidgeting in the gusts.

‘Come, child,’ says the person, and taking the valise in one hand and Martha’s wrist in the other, she leads the way under the arch. Martha is curious to see the railroad tracks – she’s heard adults talk about getting the train, her own journeys to date consisting in short walks to the grocery store, visits to Mrs O’Connor’s a few doors away, and an occasional Sunday outing to Purrysburg, where they take a ride in a buggy along the Savannah river to watch the ruffles of brown water for fish circles.

When she looks around now all she can see are the dark skirts of the couple of women on the platform; she fixes on the short, narrow tubes of their stockinged ankles and black boots, then she shuffles towards the platform edge, until she is gently tugged back by the shoulder.

Forced to give up her exploration of the platform, Martha brings Sai up to her nose again and focuses on its threads: waves on one side, a warm and even sea (her favourite side); rows on the other, of paired bird wings, stacked together and frozen in flight .

She hears the person murmuring with one of the other women standing nearby and Martha senses their uneasy stares.

‘You going to Savannah, the big city?’ one lady croons.

Martha peers up at a lined ashen face hunched down into wide lapels. Was Martha supposed to know where they were going? Why didn’t Granmaw say goodbye, is the sum of what Martha can reckon with at the moment. A sharpness stirs her belly and she has to work harder at breathing.

‘Is Sint Mary’s home in heaven?’ it occurs to Martha to ask the person.

The person looks down at her wide-eyed, tuts once, then cries out: ‘Now *where* is that train?’

As if to hunt it down, they now move nearer the platform edge and Martha leans forward towards the drop to get a closer look. The tracks gleam greasily in the weak sunlight and the sleepers and coals are floured with black. She feels the lively wind jostling her, watches it flicking the person’s skirt round her ankles with little whipping noises, like flags flapping.

‘Careful now,’ says the person, ‘the train is coming.’

Martha steps back in surprise – what train? Her chest leaps and she squeezes her fingers round Sai, and brings it to her nose, breathes it in, and her chest relaxes some. She looks up at the person whose eyes dip fleetingly.

‘It’ll be along in just a minute,’ the person insists. ‘Listen.’

Indeed the tracks make strange metallic whoops just as the locomotive comes into view from behind a clump of trees. Martha watches its steamy, shrieking approach. It is enormous, from the rails up easily three times bigger than the person, and wider than Granmaw’s kitchen - surely too big to fit alongside the platform, it will smack against the timbers and they’ll all be crushed! But somehow the engine puffs and moans its way alongside them, and Martha notices that there is in fact quite a gap between the platform and the side of the passenger car.

Around them, several people are jostling now to get aboard, and the person squeezes Martha's hand. 'Come along now, don't go falling down under that train.'

Martha takes one last look, fascinated by the blade-like rim of the wheels, and then the wind flings itself at her. With no warning Sai leaps with it, slipping through the damp pads of her thumb and forefinger. Martha screams as, in one graceful swoop, Sai slides right under the train. Hand wrenched free of the person, she roots herself to the spot, and clamps her arms across her front to try to squeeze out the pain. The flesh between her legs softens in panic. Obviously, someone is going to have to fetch Sai and, her tongue tumbling with urgency, Martha explains that Sai has fallen under the train.

The person turns and frowns down at her, fingers grappling with Martha's locked arms, 'Come *on*, else they'll leave without us.'

Martha speaks up, her voice getting squeakier against the iron groans of the locomotive. And now, she sees with relief, the person smiles quizzically, and drops down on to her haunches so that her face is level with Martha's. Of course, the person needs to know whereabouts Sai fell, must be about to clamber under the train. Briefly Martha wonders will her skirts ruck up as she does so. But instead, the person tucks her arm under Martha's rump, and lifts her swiftly.

Martha gathers all the noise she can muster into her lungs and hurls it out: 'Sai!'. The cry hurts as it leaves her throat, and several heads turn, but the person keeps looking forwards and stepping towards the passenger car door. Everyone around them is climbing aboard, opening compartment doors, acting ordinary – and for a moment Martha stays stock still in the person's thin, unyielding arms, stumped by this uncomprehending world. And then a rush of energy takes hold of her, and she cries out again, long and wordlessly this time. Her body spasms with sobbing: frenzied puppet jerks which being held does nothing to lessen. She punches out wildly and the person hardens her mouth, blinking as if someone is shining too bright a light in her face.

'Here, that's enough, come now, enough.' She stoops and puts Martha back on her feet amid a thick forest of swaying skirts and dangling hands. Still sobbing, Martha throws herself on to all fours, wanting to prise open the grooves in the passenger car floor and slip down to the tracks to look for Sai, but the person hauls her up, and takes her hand again. Martha stares at the floor, willing its scuffed ridges to part. As they make their way to their compartment, her feet flipping beneath rigid legs, helplessly co-operating as the person drags her along, Martha's sobs give way to involuntary, startling sniffs, but a moment or two later her urgency re-gathers and bursts out of her once more: her eyes gush, her nose floods, her cheeks and forehead prickle, even her armpits and her groin are wet. She feels trickles down the inside of her legs and looks up fearfully, remembering Granmaw's wrath, but the person stares blankly at the puddle forming by Martha's feet which begins to run along the grooved floor, like the dishwater in Granmaw's griddle pan.

'Uh oh.' Someone behind them lifts his foot.

'Come on,' the person says, her voice hushed as it had been at Granmaw's house that morning, 'You'll find another rag to suck. I'm sure the sisters will have something.'

Martha stops crying: whose sisters? And, separating her wood-stiff, wet legs to stop them gumming together as she walks, she waddles after the woman in search of their compartment. The passenger car gives a jolt just as they take their seats, and, shifting uncomfortably in her sticky, cold underwear, Martha pictures the train's metal wheels, and her eyes water up again, this time without the sobs. She grips her elbows across her front - hands dizzy with emptiness - and rocks to and fro with the swaying of the train.