The Discovery of Finnegan Wilde

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALAN CRANNY

THE HEART OF DUBLIN, 1913

Finnegan Wilde ducked into the shadowy doorway, pulse thudding in her ears. Tentatively, she leaned out and glanced down the busy street. She'd lost them. *For now.* She leaned against the brick wall and took a few deep breaths of cold air to calm her pounding heart. It seemed like she'd lived a thousand lifetimes hiding in darkened doorways. But she was thankful for the shelter they provided. From the wind. From the police. From Dooley and his gang.

Finn knew she didn't have long before some grumbling shopkeeper would usher her on with his broom, as though she were just a bit of rubbish on the stoop. But she didn't plan on staying long. She'd gotten what she'd come for, and her spirit lifted somewhat at the weight of her prize in her pocket. Finn longed to see what the wallet actually held but she couldn't open it here. The workday was done and already the streets were growing more crowded, businessmen in their bowler hats rushing for the tram, washerwomen

bearing baskets on their hips, hawkers wheeling their emptied wagons home as newsboys called on corners to peddle the last of their papers. A job she was meant to be doing. A job she may never have to do again, if luck was truly on her side with this score.

Finn blew in her cupped hands, warming her numb fingertips against the damp chill. She needed gloves. A proper sweater. Even a ratty scarf would do. Old man winter was early this year and folk were already wearing their woolies. For Finn, that meant nicking warmer clothes—nicking anything really—would be all the more difficult. Finn needed a win. She knew that. She slipped her hand into her coat pocket and gripped the fat leather wallet.

This is the one, she thought, as if somehow this particular prize and all it promised would change her life.

The keening wind scuttled around where she stood, stirring up the crumbled leaves at her feet. Its cold finger circled the nape of Finn's exposed neck. Her blue cap and short hair did little to keep her warm, and the oversized coat did even less. Too big, it was, and the buttons, too few. Even with her belt of rope, it never stayed closed. Finn shivered. Bracing herself, she stepped down from the doorway and into the evening rush along the cobbled streets.

Folk were eager to get home for their tea, to sit—feet up before the fire—in their townhouses or tenements after a day's hard work. But Finn was in the business of surviving—

and that work never ended. Sometimes it meant sitting at the bridge, hand out, begging for a few coins, if people would bother themselves. But more often than not, she'd save them both the trouble and time and simply take what she needed. It was so easy. A bun from a basket. A purse from a pocket. A watch from a waistcoat. For all of it was there, ripe for the picking, and Finn knew all the tricks of the trade.

She would go on about her sickly siblings back home, her beloved mother's last breath, her father's accident down on the docks that left him broken in body and spirit. Lies, the lot of it. But lying was Finn's mother tongue. Playing with their minds. Telling tall tales. Be it a gift or a curse, it came so easy to her. Nobody knew her truth, likely because Finn didn't know it herself. Surely she once had a family, parents—if not a home—before she was left on the steps of Woodhall Workhouse. But she'd no memory of it or them. All she knew, all she could remember, was that dreadful workhouse, from which she'd recently escaped. And this life of surviving on the streets.

Finn focused on the moment. The rest didn't matter. She would be in and out of people's pockets and purses before they knew it. Some might call her a liar and a thief, but Finn was a storyteller, a right magician she was, so skilled that she could make herself disappear and all. A handy trick, especially when it came to Dooley.

"There she is!" The shout echoed from behind Finn as she moved with the crowd. She didn't have to turn to know whose it was. Even in the noise of the trams and trolleys, the rumble of cars, Dooley's voice rang loud and clear.

Finn took off, darting like a minnow in the sea of people. Her toes ached from the pinch of her stolen boots that were surely two sizes too small, but there was no time to bother with that now. She cut across the current and slipped down a side street.

"Over there!" Dooley shouted, catching sight of her again. "Get her!"

Finn knew they were getting closer. She could just picture him, red-faced, riled, and swinging that stick of his overhead. Dooley never was seen without it—his so-called hurley. Not that he played hurling. Sure, he bragged that he was a natural, said that hurling was in his blood, as though he himself was descended from the mythological gods of old. But Dooley's hurley was nothing but a bit of driftwood. And he was no hero, for as far as Finn could tell, anger was the only thing in Dooley's veins.

"I'll kill you, Finnegan!" he yelled.

Ooh, he was riled, so he was. Not surprising, though, for she'd bested him once again. They'd all seen the easy target—the man outside the museum, dithering with his briefcase, his papers blowing in the wind and that fat wallet bulging in his side pocket, just asking to be taken. But it was

Finn who'd snagged the wallet before Dooley did. Dooley had rushed at the man and—with a swing of his stick—sent the fellow stumbling to the ground. A hooligan move. Typical Dooley. But by then, the wallet was already lost inside Finn's coat and Finn herself lost in the crowd.

Finn knew the streets of Dublin City better than anyone else. Even Officer Cullen. He'd made it his mission to rid his beat of the so-called street rats who preyed on respectable citizens. But Finn was fast. And smart. She knew every side lane, back street, and dark alley. More often than not, when Officer Cullen was on her tail, eager to drag her back to Woodhall Workhouse, she'd lead him to some dead end as she slipped behind a loose board in a fence, hunkered in a barrel, or squeezed her tiny frame into the nearest hen coop. She'd no trouble losing Cullen—but losing Dooley? Well now, that was another story.

Finn glanced back. Sure enough, Dooley was gaining on her. For a moment, Finn wondered if she'd made a mistake. What made her goad him so? Maybe she should have let Dooley have the wallet.

Don't look back, she told herself. It would only make her fearful. Anxious. It made her doubt her strength.

Don't look back. That was her mantra. Her courage in any challenge. Her conviction in any lie. Commit. Act. And don't look back.

It's mine, Finn told herself. *I stole it. I deserve it.*

PHOTOGRAPHER: ANGELA FLEMMING PHOTOGRAPHY

Irish-Canadian author and educator Caroline Pignat is the recipient of two Governor General's Awards for Children's Literature (*Greener Grass*, 2009; *The Gospel Truth*, 2015). She explores complex themes through her character-driven stories and her work is hailed by the Canadian Children's Book Centre as "historical fiction at its best!" Pignat immerses her readers in rich and varied historical settings, drawing them close to characters who embody resiliency, empathy, and hope. She lives in Ottawa, Ontario.