This is the opening chapter of **Sovereign Ground**.
Thank you for beginning here.

Figs O’Sullivan

Chapter 1
The World That Raised Me Had No Steady Ground

I grew up in a world where the ground never felt steady. Not in my home. Not in my school. Not in the adults around me. Ireland in the seventies was a place of shame, silence, instability, and fear. Adults carried unspoken wounds inside them. Children learned to adapt before they learned to talk. Economic chaos, class hierarchy, religious dominance, corruption, and unprocessed trauma shaped everyone. The world was raising us before our parents ever got a chance.

One of my earliest memories is sitting in the back of a daycare with my sister as the room went dark. All the other children had been picked up hours earlier. We were the last two left. Forgotten. The woman who ran the daycare had gone into the next room to have dinner with her husband and children. I remember hearing the forks hitting the plates, smelling their food, and feeling my stomach twist. My sister and I sat there quietly, not wanting to cause any trouble. We waited in the dark while another family ate in the light.

Even now, I feel that shame in my chest. The cruelty of indifference. The invisibility. The way two children were left sitting in the shadows while adults pretended we were not there. My body knew it was wrong long before my mind had language for any of it. That is how instability works. It gets into you early.

And here is something even deeper. It was not the cruelty toward me that hurt the most. I could bury my own shame. I could make myself small and pretend I did not need anything. But watching my sister sit beside me with the light fading from her face was too much. I felt ashamed for her. I wanted to protect her, even though I was only a child myself.

And who was I supposed to blame. I knew even then my mother was doing everything she possibly could. She worked all day. She rushed across Dublin to collect us. She carried the weight of two parents on one exhausted back. I could never be angry with her. So the anger had nowhere to go. It landed in me. By eight or nine years old I had stopped going to daycares altogether. I started cooking for myself, finding my own way home from school, doing whatever I could to not be a burden. My independence came from love, not rebellion.

At home, I lived between two enormous forces. My mother carried The Bull. The Bull never stops. The Bull finishes the job even if a child is lying in the dirt. My grandfather once ran over my uncle with the trailer of a tractor full of water barrels. When he realized what he had done, he climbed down, checked that the lad would live for a few more minutes, and said, “Wait there. I have to bring the cows to the field.” Then he finished the work before bringing him to the hospital. That is The Bull. Duty before tenderness. Work before fear.

My father carried The Collapse. The Irish Collapse. Addiction, drink, mental hospitals, disappearance and return. He was not cruel. He was drowning in wounds he could never speak about. He could not face himself. He could not face us. He collapsed into drink because he could not carry the weight of his own shame.

So I was raised between The Bull and The Collapse. Between endurance and helplessness. Between over-functioning and disappearing. Between a woman who never stopped and a man who could not stay.

My father’s Collapse wounded me with rejection. I was not enough to be seen. Not enough to matter. I shrank inside that wound. My mother’s wound touched me differently. She had been abandoned. And I believed I could heal her. If I were funny enough, entertaining enough, special enough, I could stop her from feeling alone. That is the grandiosity of the wounded child. I thought I could fix her broken heart.

School was no safer. I was punched in the face by my teacher at five years old for daydreaming while singing “The Yellow Rose of Texas.” I was punched so hard in the arm at seven or eight by another teacher that I could not move it for weeks. No apology. No comfort. No explanation. This was punishment in Ireland. This was normal.

And here is another contradiction. I felt poor growing up. I felt ashamed of how little we had. But my parents were civil servants. My father worked for the Electricity Supply Board of Ireland. My mother was a junior civil servant. In a country drowning in unemployment, this was one of the most stable incomes a family could have. We may not have had emotional ground, but materially we had more than many. I could not recognize it because the emotional ground was always shaking.

The wider world was unstable too. I remember the oil embargoes of the seventies. Long lines for petrol. Adults panicking. Relatives arriving with canisters of petrol as if carrying treasure. A small country tossed around by global forces. Economic uncertainty entered my body before arithmetic.

And then there was Charles Haughey, our Taoiseach (Prime Minister). Crony capitalism at its finest. Everyone knew it. Corruption was the air. The closer someone was to the exchequer, the wealthier they became. Merit had nothing to do with it. Honesty had nothing to do with it. My nervous system knew the system was crooked long before I understood politics.

And all of it happened against the backdrop of the Troubles in Northern Ireland.

I remember the black flags.
I remember the hunger strikers dying in the H-Blocks.
I remember signing books of condolences as a nine-year-old.
I remember feeling proud of those men.

Their suffering felt noble to me.
Their sacrifice mirrored something inside me.
The belief that pain made you worthy.

Later in life I took a DNA test. I was almost disappointed to see how Irish I am. Parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. All Irish. Hundreds of years of lineage on both sides. And still The Shame whispered I was not Irish enough. I did not suffer enough. I was not legitimate enough to belong. That is how Shame works. It separates you from belonging even when you are indigenous to the land itself.

By seven or eight I looked at the community college where boys learned woodwork and metalwork and knew I had to get out. When I entered private school, I knew I had to get out of Ireland. When I finished my degree at Trinity, I was on a flight to San Francisco the next day. I admire the people who stayed. I could not. My body knew I had to run.

In my twenties I thought I was a catch. A stockbroker by day, bartender by night, drinking club rat every other hour. Looking back now, I cannot believe anyone took me seriously. I was anxious, lost, and performing worth. I drank to escape myself, exactly like the men I swore I would never become.

I would not find any real internal stability until I quit my job at thirty-three and lived at Esalen for a year and a half. Esalen was not just a retreat center. It was a place where people went to take off the masks their families and cultures placed on them. A place for people escaping Shame. A place for people trying to become more themselves.

I arrived there with no idea how much of my life had been shaped by instability. I only knew I needed

something honest.

And if you are reading this thinking, “My childhood was not as bad as this,” that is exactly how Shame hides. Believing everything was grand is how we avoid noticing the instability we were raised in. You do not need my life to have wounds of your own. You grew up in this world too. A world that taught you how to hide. How to shrink. How to perform. How to survive the emotional weather you were born into.

I am not telling you all this so you can watch me.

I am telling you so you can begin to see yourself.

That is where we begin.