

Contemporary Irish Life Writing – How Fictional Is The Truth?

Aoife Mannix

Goldsmiths, University of London

PhD thesis submission

I hereby declare that the work submitted in this thesis is my own

Signed: Aoife Mannix

Abstract

This thesis comprises a memoir entitled 'Is It Yourself?' and a critical commentary. The memoir tells the story of three generations of Irish women, the author, her mother and her grandmother. It describes the impact of family secrets and lies on their sense of identity. The commentary examines the process of writing the memoir within the context of contemporary Irish life writing. It looks at the difficult relationship between truth and fiction in autobiographical writing. It consists of an introduction that gives an overview of how issues of truth telling are particularly complex in an Irish literary context. The first chapter then looks at the connections between memory and place with reference to the work of J. M. Synge. The second chapter examines the use of language in life writing, particularly the influence of the Irish language on the memoir writer Hugo Hamilton. The third chapter looks at the role of the self as narrator, specifically in relation to Irish women writers and sexuality with reference to the work of Nuala O'Faolain and Nell McCafferty. The conclusion considers the idea of truth as multiple and permeated by fiction by looking at the writing of Brendan Behan and John McGahern as well as the influence of the short story and other forms of fiction on Irish life writing. Throughout, there is a connection made between the principal theme of the memoir, the difficulty of telling the truth in real life, and the difficulties of writing the truth on paper.

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Is It Yourself?

A Memoir

The Wedding

London, 2009

This is the most frightening day of my life. I'm looking at my face in the mirror of a hotel bathroom. My eyes are bright blue and enormous. It's the effect of the make-up. I've never had my make-up done professionally before. Everyone has been telling me what a good job the make-up artist did, how I look amazing, how I should wear more make-up more often. It's not that I disagree; it's just that it's disconcerting how I don't really look like me anymore.

'Is it yourself?' my mother used to ask me years ago as she let me in from school through our back door. Perhaps even then my mother suspected I was not all I was supposed to be. But in those days, it wasn't a question that required an answer. It was just my mother's jokey way of speaking like a *culchie* - that is a person from the countryside as opposed to Dublin.

Though I've barely ten Gaelic words to rub together, I do know that strictly speaking there isn't a term for yes or no in the Irish language. In Ireland, the truth is something to be evaded. We'd much rather live in the soft shadows of maybe. Unfortunately, 'will you marry me?' is a question that requires a 'yes' or a 'no' answer. And vows require an 'I do', there's not much room for an 'I might'. This is where sleeping with the enemy has led me, thrust into the harsh public glare of Anglo Saxon certainties.

I take my wedding dress off the back of the bathroom door. It's not a white dress; it's a dress I've found difficult to describe. I started out saying it was black but people seemed to think that was morbid. So I changed to, 'It's not black, well it is black, but it's also sort of silver, more silver than black.'

For months now, the question I've been asked most often is 'and what are you wearing?' Not a single person has asked me why I'm getting married.

My mother told me nobody asked her why she was getting married either. They all just assumed she was pregnant. She said the whole of Stillorgan turned out to see if they could spot a bump. My Gran picked my mother's wedding dress. It was cream and made out of wool as protection against the January cold. It was also so tight my mother could hardly breathe. My Gran was determined that people not get the wrong impression. As a result, my mother said, she nearly fainted at the altar from asphyxiation.

Even though my Gran had her doubts, it turned out that on her wedding day my mother really wasn't pregnant. Apparently, this was far more a matter of luck than caution. I was born in Stockholm in a snowstorm on the stroke of midnight just over eleven months after my parents' wedding in Dublin the previous January. As my mother put it, I wasn't so much planned as expected. Meaning that it never occurred to either of my parents to use contraception. To get condoms in Ireland you had to go to your GP and he was unlikely to prescribe them unless you already had ten children and another one might finish you off completely. My mother suspected it wasn't the same story in Sweden but she was too embarrassed to ask. Besides having a baby after getting married was just what you did. She considered it a minor miracle she'd done this in the right order even if she had cut it rather fine. She strongly suspected my Gran hadn't managed this. It seemed the only logical explanation for why she'd married my grandfather.

I'm also getting married in January and my dress is very tight. Nobody thinks I'm pregnant though. I've only my own vanity to blame and the fact the

woman in the shop insisted this was the right size. Now I'm scared I've put on weight over Christmas and won't be able to fit into it. I come out of the bathroom in my underwear and ask my friend Deirdre to help me get the dress on. I'm terrified if I try to do it by myself, I'll rip it.

I've known Deirdre since I was eight years old. My mother always said how alike she and Deirdre were, both being barely five foot with flaming red hair and tempers to match. I used to love to joke that I was surrounded by ginger dwarves. I'm tall with dark brown hair and have never borne any resemblance to my mother. Once she told me I should be glad I was pale and interesting looking. To which I replied that I'd much rather be blonde, gorgeous and tanned. 'Wouldn't we all,' my mother laughed.

The only feature my mother and I have in common is our noses, which both end in a little sharp turn. I hate my nose, thanks partly to my brother Stephen tormenting me by pointing out that the tip of it moves when I talk. This is the same brother I've asked to be my best man.

Deirdre carefully lowers the dress over my head. It's delicate and yet heavy from the hundreds of tiny silver sequins. It's the fanciest dress I've ever worn. As a kid, I used to loathe wearing dresses. It was one of the many things my mother hoped I'd grow out of. Even at thirty-six, I'm not entirely sure that I have.

My mother was only twenty when she got married. My Gran had done her best to persuade her to wait till she was older. But my mother ignored her until the wedding day itself when the moment came for putting the dress on. Then my mother said, 'I'm not sure I can go through with this. I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing.'

To which my Gran replied, 'Well it's too late now,' and pulled the dress over her head with a sharp tug.

As my wedding dress catches on my shoulder and Deirdre struggles to untangle it, I wonder what my mother would say to me if she was here. Would she be happy for me or would she think I was making a terrible mistake? A needle stab of missing her passes through me.

What on earth am I doing in this hotel room in south London? Wouldn't it have been so much easier to just elope to Canada or Sweden or somewhere like that? Two witnesses, quiet, simple, no fuss. What possessed me to agree to a guest list of over a hundred people? Maybe I thought when we sent the invites that half of them wouldn't come. That crossing the Irish Sea would at least put my relatives off. But no, they've turned out en masse. Brothers, cousins, my Uncle Tadhg and Auntie Helena, my father and my stepmother all the way from Turkey. Nobody seems to disapprove as much as I feared. Even my prospective in-laws have had a last minute change of heart and are driving up from Portsmouth to come to the ceremony. Of course I'm happy about this but at the same time I feel a bit sick. I don't even like birthday parties. My own birthday, that is; other people's where I'm not the centre of attention I enjoy perfectly well.

I'm starting to sweat. I wonder if this is how my mother felt? But then again my story is not my mother's story. It is certainly not the story she would ever have imagined for me. Though I suppose my mother's story is not what my Gran had in mind for her.

Chapter 1

Strawberry Blonde

Dublin, 1970

My parents met on a blind date. Or rather my father was on a blind date. He fancied a friend of his but she wasn't interested. Instead she offered to fix him up with her sister. Ever the optimist, my father hoped that the sister might be a chip off the same block. He agreed to meet her in a pub near UCD where he'd recently graduated with a first class honours degree in French and German. It was 1970. The tail end of the swinging sixties had finally managed to spin Ireland around. My father had ripped off the hair shirt of his ultra-Catholic conservative upbringing. To the horror of his mother, he'd taken up the twin evils of socialism and atheism. He was part of the revolution that was going to change the world beyond recognition. He was all set for sexual liberation.

The date was a disaster. He'd hoped to charm Cinderella and ended up with the ugly sister. Worse she wouldn't even talk to him, wouldn't even take off her coat. Discouraged, my father decided to cut his losses and go dancing in town.

My mother and her best friend Mary had also decided to check out the same new disco. They were sorely disappointed. The place was a dump and the talent sadly lacking. My mother was nineteen and had recently returned from a year in Switzerland as an au pair. She'd wanted to go to Paris but my Gran thought it too dangerous. She couldn't understand why my mother, if she had to leave home, didn't want to go to England like everyone else. Even if it was

a God forsaken country that oppressed us for nine hundred years, at least there were plenty of other decent Irish folk living there. She wasn't impressed when my mother told her that escaping the Irish was the whole point. They'd eventually agreed on Geneva as a safe compromise though it didn't quite work out that way. My mother became engaged to a Swiss Italian but then realised she didn't want to get married; she was just a bit homesick. The Swiss Italian hadn't taken this so well. When she ditched him, he attempted to run her over in his car. According to my mother, Italians are passionate like that.

Now she was back in Dublin, she couldn't for the life of her remember what she'd ever missed about the place. She'd found a job working in the office of a small factory that made designer dresses. She didn't mind the work as such but it was dull. She'd started dating three different blokes, all of whom bored her to tears. She hadn't told my Gran but she had plans to escape the claustrophobia of her mother's house once more as soon as possible. She didn't think of 'Aherlow', the semi-detached she'd been born and raised in, as her father's house because he was dead. My mother had been largely raised by her grandmother as her own mother struggled to make enough money to support four small children. My Gran worked hard and she prayed hard. Nobody could say her house wasn't respectable. Just because they were poor didn't mean they weren't middle-class. They had standards, they spoke properly and they went to mass with the backs of their ears scrubbed free of vegetable patches.

But my mother was bored rigid with all this keeping up appearances, she wanted to have fun. A German friend she'd met in Geneva was trying to

arrange for them both to go and study in Berlin. The studying part didn't particularly interest her but Berlin conjured up images of Marlene Dietrich and drinking whiskey in late night bars. Not that she'd actually ever drunk whiskey in her life but the idea appealed. Berlin might be divided by a great wall but at least, unlike Dublin, it wasn't walled in.

'Let's get out of this kip,' she said to Mary, meaning not just the disco but the whole damn country. Just at that moment a rather serious-looking young man wearing glasses very politely asked her to dance.

My father had also been just about to leave. Still he'd paid to get in and it seemed a shame to leave without even one dance. He cast his eyes around the room. Wall-to-wall ugly sisters. Then at the bar he saw a flash of long red hair. It wasn't orange-coloured, but it wasn't auburn either. He'd never seen a shade like it before. (Strawberry blonde my mother was later to insist was the correct term.) Before he lost his nerve, my father strode across the floor.

'Would you care to dance with me?' he asked the back of my mother's head. He hadn't actually seen her face so when she turned around, he got a nasty shock. It wasn't that he thought she was ugly, it was that she looked about fifteen.

My mother handed her drink to Mary and replied, 'Sure why not.'

Shite, my father thought as they took to the floor, she's just a kid. Worse the song that was playing was 'Je t'aime moi non plus.'

As Serge Gainsbourg and Jane Birkin sang their way closer and closer to orgasm, my father felt increasingly uncomfortable. Especially as my mother appeared to know all the words and was mouthing along quite happily.

'Je vais et je viens, entre tes tiens ... Do you speak French?' she asked him.

My father spoke French and German fluently - as he explained at length. After a year of looking after five French-speaking children in Geneva, my mother's French wasn't at all bad and she was happy to have the chance to speak it again. But she thought my father arrogant and overly intellectual. Not her type at all. When he asked her for her phone number, she told him it was in the phone book.

'But what's your name?' my father asked as my mother and Mary jumped into a taxi.

'Joan,' my mother said.

'Joan what?'

My mother hesitated. 'Joan O'Connell.' She slammed the door shut and the taxi sped off into the night.

Mary thought this rather harsh. 'You looked like you really liked him,' she informed my mother on their way home.

'No,' my mother insisted. 'I just like French. I'm through with Irish men. They're full of themselves and pig ignorant and tied to their Mammy's apron strings.'

So she was surprised when the next day she got a phone call. 'How did you get my number?' she asked. O'Connell is a very common Irish name and my mother hadn't said where in Dublin she lived.

'I looked you up in the phone book like you said,' was my father's reply.

She refrained from asking how many O'Connells he'd rung before he got to her but agreed to let him take her for a drive the following Saturday. It was the first inkling she had that my father was not a man to take a hint.

After agreeing to that first date, my mother completely forgot the conversation the moment she hung up the phone. A week later, she was upstairs ironing her hair when there was a knock on the front door. She thought whoever it was must have gone away when there was a slightly louder knock. She shouted at her younger brother Cormac to get off his lazy arse and answer the bloody door.

He returned a moment later grinning from ear to ear. 'It's for you.'

'Who is it? If it's the Vincent de Paul tell them to go feck themselves, we've nothing for them.'

'It's not. It's a young fella says his name's Tony and he's here to take you out. He's got flowers.'

'Shit,' my mother said. She was only home at all because the night before she'd broken it off with the journalist she was seeing. He'd been getting too jealous about the other two lads she was sort of doing a line with. Her date with my father had completely slipped her mind.

'I'm not ready,' she informed Cormac. 'Take him into the front room while I get changed.'

'What am I supposed to do with him in there?' The front room was where my Gran served tea to guests who weren't family. As there were very few of these, in reality it was only ever used on special occasions like Christmas. It was kept spotless all the same.

'Make polite conversation like a normal person,' my mother instructed her brother.

Cormac blushed. At sixteen he was painfully shy. 'I'll get Tadhg,' he

said. Tadhg was my mother's other brother. He was seventeen and could talk to anyone. My mother said he could make a corpse chuckle if he put his mind to it.

As Cormac turned to go, my mother asked, 'What does he look like?' In her panic, she was having great difficulty recalling my father's features. Mary had said he was good-looking but Mary had seriously dubious taste in men.

Cormac grinned. 'Great big mop of curly hair, silly glasses and loads of spots.'

Curls and glasses my mother remembered but she mustn't have noticed the spots because that hole of a dance hall was so badly lit. She wished to God she'd never agreed to see him again. Why hadn't she just told him she didn't want to give him her number? She didn't hurry herself getting ready. Maybe the spotty boy would get bored and just go away.

By the time she eventually emerged, my father had been well and truly interrogated by her brothers. He looked a bit pale as a result but did not have an acne condition. Cormac had been taking the piss. My mother was so relieved by this she hardly noticed that the car my father was helping her into was an old banger with the paint chipped off and a dent in the side. They were half way up the Dublin Wicklow mountains before she realised she could see the road passing beneath them through the holes in the floor. This made her laugh. My father had no idea what was so funny but he was glad she seemed to be enjoying herself. Since he'd established she was actually only four years younger than him, he'd allowed himself to think she was beautiful.

As he would proudly tell his children years later, 'When I met your mother she had three other fellas as well. I had to work my way up from number four to number one.'

How he achieved this was never very clear to me. Certainly when he drunkenly took out his framed first class degree certificate and every other certificate he'd ever received to impress her, my mother thought it was hilarious. They had few interests in common and my father's attempts to disguise this were ill advised. She told him she loved the Romantic poets and he told her he did too. The first present he bought her was a hardback second hand collection of Keats. Unfortunately, he failed to look inside the cover so didn't realise the pages were scribbled with annotations. My mother was furious because she assumed he'd written the notes himself. She thought he was so arrogant he was telling her what the poems meant.

Besides, she was headed for Berlin. She had her place on her course, she'd worked hard to save her money, and her German friend had found them a perfect little flat just near Checkpoint Charlie. For my mother, being young and being free were the only things that mattered. She had her future planned and it did not include my father or indeed me.

She bought her flight to Berlin a week before she was due to go. Her German friend asked her if she was going to find it hard to leave her new boyfriend behind. She assured her that she'd only been dating him for a few months and it was never intended to be a long-term thing. My father took that week off from work saying he wanted them to enjoy the few days they had left together. But this was not his intention at all. As he drove my mother round in his clapped-out car, he conducted an intense campaign to convince her not to

go. His argument ran along the lines of she might never meet anyone like him again. This didn't get him very far. My mother pointed out that Berlin would be full of intellectual young men who spoke far better German than he did and probably devoured Keats in translation.

Then the day before she was due to leave, they sat in his car and he held her hand. He told her that he loved her, that they were destined to be together, and that 'freedom meant making a choice.' To her surprise, my mother found herself wavering. She liked the way my father blushed when she told him he had gorgeous blue eyes. She liked the dimple in his chin. She liked how he was even more desperate to escape his upbringing than she was. What if she really didn't meet anybody she liked this much again?

She rang her German friend and asked if there was any way she could delay her flight. The friend was horrified and outraged. Their course was about to begin, she'd paid the deposit on their flat. She was counting on my mother to share the rent. She didn't know anyone in Berlin and would be completely on her own if my mother let her down. How could she throw away the adventure of a lifetime for some boy she hardly knew? Hadn't she said she wanted to be free to travel the world in all its fun and excitement? What about Marlene Dietrich? What about the Berlin Wall?

My mother told her that freedom meant making a choice and her choice was to stay in Dublin. Her German friend never spoke to her again and, as my mother said, who could blame her?

I owe my entire existence to my father's powers of persuasion. It's a disturbing thought. I wonder if it was only on her wedding day that my mother

asked herself if she'd made the right decision. Even after giving up Berlin, she maintained that marriage was the last thing on her mind. She enjoyed my father's company but she ignored his talk of love and destiny as so much romantic nonsense. She just wanted to have a good time. Hadn't he heard of existentialism? All that bourgeois saving your pennies for a rainy day belonged to the fifties. Matrimony and monogamy were boring and so passé. They read Camus and Sartre and Hermann Hesse together and thanked the God they knew wasn't there that they had escaped the repression of their parents' generation.

My Gran believed that God writes all our stories. My mother defiantly believed she was writing her own story. I guess I believed I was writing mine too up until the day I discovered I had no control over the plot whatsoever. Even now, just because I'm writing about the past, doesn't mean I'm not writing in the dark.

My father also liked to think he was master of his own destiny. His first job involved working for the Department of Health. But this was only a stepping-stone. He didn't intend to rot away in some safe civil servant post until his heart gave out. He planned to join the Department of Foreign Affairs and become a diplomat. This way he could travel the globe, represent his country, transform the world into a better place and contribute to the revolution. He could also make his mother happy while at the same time escaping her clutches.

My father's mother had hoped her only child would become a priest but she was prepared to settle for a respectable job where she could visit him in

exotic locations. Even if my father hadn't received a calling from God as such, as far as my Nana was concerned there was still no reason for him to have any woman in his life apart from her. When my father first introduced my mother to his parents, my Nana looked her up and down from head to toe. Then without saying a word, she turned on her heel and strode from the room. My mother joked that her relationship with her mother-in-law was to go downhill from there.

My father, at the age of twenty-three, still lived at home with his parents in Terenure. It was bad enough that he wouldn't cut his hair and he wouldn't go to mass but when he started staying out till all hours with my mother, my Nana felt something needed to be done. If my father had to date girls, there were plenty of respectable young ladies to be found at the tennis club my grandparents belonged to. My Nana had introduced my father to several charming daughters of her friends and he'd shown no interest. These were girls whose fathers were doctors or lawyers or politicians, girls whose family connections could help my father in his career. Why would he turn them down so he could run around with some hussy who had no father and whose mother, horror of horrors, worked in television? On learning that my Gran had once been an actress, my Nana came to the conclusion that my mother and my Gran were out to ensnare my father. He was her only child, her most precious possession, and she wasn't about to let them take advantage of his innocence and naivety.

Her husband, my Granddad, tried to point out that after all my Nana had married him against the wishes of her own father. And that the reason my Nana's father had objected was because my Granddad came from a solid

Dublin working class background. But my Nana hated to be reminded of this, she refused to have anything to do with my Granddad's family because she considered them so far beneath her. She was the daughter of the chemist in Terenure. Even though people had looked down on her when she got married, she'd had the last laugh because my Granddad was now a successful accountant and had put his awful family behind him. Her son, as she was always pointing out to anyone who would listen, was brilliantly clever and destined to go places. She was not going to let him waste himself on some floozy from God knows where.

My Granddad eventually caved in to the pressure and one night, after a few whiskies, he agreed to ring my Gran. It was quite late and given the long hours she worked, my Gran was in the habit of going to bed early. She didn't appreciate being woken up by some strange man informing her that my mother with her 'European ways' was leading his only son astray. By this, my Granddad meant that her year in Switzerland had turned my mother into a brazen slut. He went on to accuse my Gran of running some kind of house of ill repute and of plotting with her daughter to trap my father into marriage. My Gran very politely informed him that his son seemed like a perfectly respectable young man who wouldn't dream of taking advantage of an innocent girl like my mother. Then she hung up on him.

The first time my Gran had met my father, he'd been so nervous he got plastered and ended up joining in a singsong. My mother's family were all extremely musical and given to bursting into song. My father, unfortunately, didn't have a note in his head and he sang to the tune of The Red Flag, 'the working class can kiss my ass, I've got the foreman's job at last, the working

man on the dole can stick the red flag up his hole.' Hardly my Gran's idea of respectable. But then she wasn't under too many illusions about my mother's innocence either. After the infamous phone call, she warned her daughter she was headed for trouble. My mother told her to mind her own business.

Of course it turned out my Gran was right. A few months later, my father was offered his first diplomatic posting to Sweden. He took my mother out to dinner to propose to her. He'd thought his speech through carefully. He began, 'I'd love you to come to Sweden with me...'

Unfortunately, my mother cut him off. She began a long rant about how she didn't think she'd be able to get a visa, she didn't speak Swedish so how would she get a job, she'd have to lie to her mother about them living together, flights were very expensive but maybe she could come on a holiday...

'I meant will you marry me,' my father snapped.

My mother stared at him. Realising he'd lost his opportunity to deliver the whole middle section of his speech, he made a belated attempt to get on his knees. My mother told him to stop embarrassing her. She said she'd think about it just to get him back into his chair.

And she did think about it for several days. My father was puzzled by this delay. He'd grown up without any sisters and been educated by the Jesuits in an all-boys school so how could he be expected to understand the mysterious ways of women? All the Jesuits had to say on the subject was to instruct them not to speak to factory girls, who were evil and likely to lead you into temptation. Although there were very few women there when he got to

university, the ones my father met were a revelation. The Jesuits hadn't warned him there were girls nearly as clever as him. And they certainly hadn't warned him there were women like my mother.

So he had to admit to a certain relief when she eventually said yes. He rushed off to tell his boss that he couldn't go to Sweden straight away because he had to get married first. His boss congratulated him but said in that case it might be better to wait till another posting came along. My father was deeply disappointed. He explained to my mother that it might be a couple of years before he was offered anything else. She told him maybe he should go without her. He wouldn't hear of such a thing.

'Oh good,' my mother said, 'then we can just go back to the way we were before and forget about all this marriage nonsense.'

My father was horrified. No he hadn't just asked her to marry him so she could get a visa, he wanted her to be his wife. He thought she was perfect in every way. When he said this, my mother felt a deep chill. Because where was there to go from absolute perfection but down? She knew she wasn't perfect by any means and my father's idealism scared the bejusus out of her.

My father went back to his boss and said his girlfriend didn't want to marry him unless he was going to Sweden. His boss sympathised. Women, hey, only interested in what they could get out of you. My father didn't trouble him with the finer details. What was important was that Sweden was back on, the marriage was back on. It just had to be organised as quickly as possible so my father could start his new job.

My Gran was unimpressed by the unseemly rush. She liked my father well enough but having herself married a man considerably older than her with whom she had nothing in common, she felt she knew the risks of incompatibility. When the first flush of romance passed, wouldn't my mother be bored and move on to someone else? My mother felt my Gran was in no position to advise her on marriage and as my mother's father was not a subject they ever discussed, my Gran went and booked the church across the road from their house instead.

My Nana was delighted that her son had not only been accepted into the diplomatic service but offered a posting in Sweden. She was less thrilled when he told her he was going to marry my mother so that she could come with him. Just before their wedding ceremony began, obviously struggling for something positive to say, she told my mother, 'Well at least you're not black.' Not being able to breathe in her skin-tight dress, my mother claimed, was the only thing that stopped her from telling my Nana to fuck off.

Between the resentment of her mother-in-law and her own mother's paranoia about pregnancy, my mother didn't particularly enjoy her wedding day. Neither did my father. For him, the best part of it was going through customs at the airport as they headed off to Tunisia on their honeymoon. He turned to wave goodbye to his parents and his new in-laws and it was as if a huge weight was being lifted. Just a few more weeks and they'd be setting up their new flat in Stockholm. Despite everyone's objections, he felt he'd succeeded in marrying the most beautiful woman in the world. His career was just taking off. Compared to the backwardness of Ireland, Sweden was going to be like stepping ten years into the future. He was twenty-four and he

couldn't wait for his real life to begin.

In my mind's eye, I see him there in his thick black-rimmed glasses waving goodbye to the past. My mother is beside him smiling in her sheepskin coat with her strawberry blonde hair so long she could sit on it. I feel strangely protective of them both. Hope is a dangerous thing.

Chapter 2

Little Buggers

London, 1995

I can't breathe. I put my hand in my coat pocket for my inhaler. It's not there. I start to cough. The coughing doesn't help because air seems to be coming out of me but not going in. My lungs hurt, particularly the right one. It's as if there's a little creature in there with a sharp pointed pencil.

Don't panic. The inhaler must be here somewhere. In my bag maybe. I stop in the middle of the train station. People rush past me but no one gives me a second glance. I unzip my bag and start to rifle through all my things. I check all the inner pockets. Nothing.

I take everything out of my bag, the novel I'm reading, notebook, diary, pens. There is now a small mountain beside me. I go through all my pockets again. The inhaler is most definitely not there. An image of it sitting blue and steel by the kitchen sink floats into my mind.

I need to get home quickly. I should never have gone to the party in the first place. I knew I wasn't well enough and I only lasted half an hour before my cough got the better of me and I had to leave. That was just coughing though, now I can't seem to breathe at all and I feel much worse.

I look up at the announcements board. The writing is blurry. Apart from one little square in the right hand top corner of my vision. That is startlingly clear. I must focus. I blink rapidly. The letters swim and refuse to give up their meaning. Luckily, there is an announcement. A train for Brockley is leaving in two minutes.

I throw everything back into my bag. I rush towards the platform. I must get this train. My lungs protest. The little creature is now digging his claws into the inner lining of my right lung. I ignore him. Which platform did they say?

I turn a corner and head towards a large yellow train. I've never noticed how yellow trains are before. Or perhaps it's because it's dark in here. Or the edges of my vision are dark. I concentrate on the yellow. But the doors don't want to open. That's because there's no one else on the train, silly. This can't be my train; it's not in service. I turn around. There's not another soul on the platform. This part of the station is completely deserted.

The little creature is laughing at me. How stupid to forget my inhaler when I know I'm not well. When I've not been well for weeks. Chronic bronchitis, the doctor said, you need to rest. But I have been resting. I've been curled up in the duvet watching the seconds fall slower than rain. It's worst at night when I'm utterly exhausted but I can't sleep.

How I used to take oxygen for granted before I got ill. How I used to take heating for granted before our boiler broke. Our landlord says it's our responsibility to pay to get it fixed but my boyfriend says it's up to the landlord. Besides, we can't afford to be shelling out that kind of money. I feel like asking Colman how come we have money for him to go out every night with his friends? I feel like asking him has he any idea how cold it is in our flat when he's not there and I can't breathe? But I don't. I've lived in this city for over a year and I haven't the strength for any more questions.

I only agreed to go to the party because Colman insisted. He said it would be good for me to get out of the flat, see people, have some fun.

Apparently, I've been no fun since I got sick. And the party was fun to begin with. At least they had heating so I defrosted a little. But I'd hardly arrived when I started coughing. Not a subtle, polite cough. Rather a deep, hacking one like the lining of my lungs was being ripped off. People asked if I was all right. I insisted that I was. I thought if I just ignored the problem it would go away.

But Colman said I should go home and rest. He seemed a bit embarrassed. He didn't offer to go with me. Which is why I am on my own. I walk back down the platform. Each step takes great concentration. The train is a silent hulk beside me. I can see the lights from the main hall dancing in the distance. I wish my mother was here. She'd know what to do. I just want to go home. Not Brockley, not to our freezing cold flat, but my real home. Dublin. I'd have to get on an aeroplane for that. I'm 23; I know I shouldn't be having such childish thoughts.

But everything seems so far away like the sounds and the colours have been turned right down. It's as if there's only me and this empty train in the whole universe. The little creature lets out a sigh. All of sudden the panic leaves me. Breathing doesn't seem so important any more. Maybe I could just lie down right here on the platform. I'm so tired and my body feels like it belongs to someone else. I've lost all sensation in my fingers.

A man in a bright orange jacket is walking towards me. 'You alright, love?'

I put my hand out against the train to get my balance. 'I just want to go home,' I whisper.

'Sunday, sweetheart, this part of the station's closed on Sunday.
Where you trying to get to?'

I take a deep breath. The little creature relents and allows some oxygen in. There's a pleasant tingling sensation in my arms and legs. I suck in air through my mouth as if I'm whistling silently. I gasp as my lungs expand like I've just broken through the surface after holding my breath for far too long. I'm so relieved I feel like telling the man in the orange jacket all about how I've no idea where I'm going.

When I eventually manage to get on a train, I start to cough again. The bloke next to me edges away. The carriage is nearly full but I have a seat by the window. I try to repress the cough by pressing my face against the glass whilst breathing slowly and deeply. This works for a little bit but then I'm once more doubled over coughing and gasping for air. Being London, everyone ignores this until at last an elderly woman at the far end of the carriage asks if I'd like a cough drop. I try to thank her but this is my stop so I stumble off the train.

We're only a five-minute walk from the station yet it seems to take an eternity to drag myself to our flat. We live above a chicken and chip shop and getting up the stairs is like climbing a mountain. When I finally get in, I grab my inhaler and take several puffs in quick succession. Within minutes, my heart is beating too quickly but my hands and feet no longer feel like they belong to someone else. As my breath returns, I notice the red light is flashing on our answering machine and I press Play.

My mother's voice begins, 'I've got them; I've finally bugged the little buggers. Ring me when you get this. Have you been back to the doctor? Eat something decent, how can you get better if you don't eat properly? Ring me.'

I'm torn between curiosity as to what she's on about and lack of strength to deal with a lecture on my food habits. My mother believes that all illness is caused by a shortage of nutritious, home cooked meals. As I've lived mainly on a diet of pasta and tomato sauce for the past few years, there's always the slim possibility that she has a point. I make a cup of tea to fortify myself and then dial my parents' number in Tehran.

There is the familiar whooshing sound like I'm connecting to another planet at the bottom of a dark well. Then the phone rings a couple of times and my mother says 'hello?'

There is a click and we are cut off. It was too good to be true that I'd get through on the first attempt. Despite the unreliability of the service, a few months ago the Iranian government decided to double the cost of international phone calls so now it costs a pound a minute.

My mother has taken this as a personal insult. 'They do it just to annoy me you know... But I said to your Dad I don't care if it costs the earth, they will not stop me speaking to my children.'

My mother thinks the entire Islamic Revolution was undertaken for the express purpose of getting on her nerves. But she is fighting back with schemes of her own.

The second time I dial, she answers even before it starts ringing. Given the cost of the call, she loses no time in getting to the point. 'I've got

them on the answering machine, I hope they're listening to this because I've got them at last.'

'Got who, Mammy?'

'The buggers. I can't wait till your Dad gets home. Telling me I'm paranoid, but now I've got absolute proof. Bahram left a message but something went funny because after he hangs up, you've got the sounds of papers shuffling, people speaking in Farsi, like an office. A spy office. I've managed to listen in on the ones who listen to us.'

I don't quite get why my mother is so triumphant. It's widely accepted that the Iranian government taps the phone calls of foreign diplomats. Personally, I've always felt a bit sorry for whoever has to sit there listening to my mother's long diatribes on the importance of eating properly. The only annoying thing about it is that we have to censor our conversation.

Thus my mother is forced to express her frustrations at living in the Islamic Republic of Iran in half cut off sentences. 'You won't believe what those baa... well I'll tell you at Christmas' is a common refrain. And I'm meant to avoid any reference to alcohol or living in sin. Sad to say, this cuts down my topics of conversation by at least 50%.

It's not as if my mother can ring up the religious police to arrest Iranian government spies. It may be illegal for a man and a woman who aren't related to walk down the street together but harassing evil Westerners is perfectly acceptable.

'That's not the point, kiddo,' my mother explains. 'The point is that I've caught them in the act. And next time I'm at some function with all those men

in beards telling your Dad how much they love the Irish while pretending I don't exist, I'll be able to think but I know what you're really up to...'

When my parents moved from Belgium to Iran over a year ago, my mother told me how she was greeted when she got off the aeroplane. There was this big official reception for my father as the new Irish ambassador, which was attended exclusively by men. They stood in a row to shake my father's hand. When my mother put out her hand, they recoiled in horror. Not only is it considered disrespectful to touch or speak to another's man wife, it's the height of rudeness to even look them in the eye. So my mother was treated as if she were completely invisible. Invisible was not a situation my mother had ever experienced before.

'They go on about respect but where's the respect when they won't acknowledge your existence in public but they listen in on your private phone calls? Explain that one to me.' The tone of accusation in my mother's voice suggests she half expects one of the buggers to interrupt us with a full-scale apology.

The truth is the eavesdropping doesn't bother her as much as the being ignored. It's not just that under normal circumstances my mother can talk to anyone, which she can, but she has this strange gift. Sometimes she says it's more like a curse but people seem compelled to tell her their life story within five minutes of meeting her. I've never understood it because it isn't as if she's even particularly sympathetic.

'People don't need your pity,' she claims, 'they just need you to listen to them.' She decided years ago to put her peculiar talent to use by volunteering for the Samaritans. She spent hours and hours listening to the severely

depressed and suicidal and it never seemed to get her down. In Iran, however, she not only has to wear a scarf and cover her body from her wrists to her feet, she's enveloped in a culture of silence.

'You'd think they could put their listening skills to better use,' my mother continues to lecture her invisible audience through me. 'That's why I joined the Samaritans 'cause I felt I'd been very lucky in my life and I wanted to give something back. But there'd be no point setting up a helpline over here. You'd be cut off every thirty seconds and they'd rather stone you to death than hear your problems. Which is a shame because the ordinary Iranian people, I mean the ones that don't work as spies, are lovely.'

My mother's own personal jihad is only directed towards the government of the Islamic revolution and 'those bloody mullahs'. 'I like Iranians,' she insists. 'They're very like the Irish when you get to know them.'

And she has gone out of her way to know them. I suspect if my mother hadn't befriended quite so many Iranian women artists and musicians and enemies of the state, her phone calls mightn't get cut off quite so often.

I make the mistake of interrupting her triumphant mood by coughing. 'You sound terrible,' she accuses. 'What did the doctor say?'

'She gave me some more antibiotics, told me to rest.'

'You were never sick when you lived with me.' This is completely untrue. But, oblivious to the contradiction of her words, she goes on, 'What you need to do is get a bowl of hot steaming water, put a few drops of menthol in it, stick a towel over your head. Do you remember how I used to get you to do that? Works a treat.'

Sometimes I think I spent half my childhood with my towelled head over a bowl breathing steam. Without my mother to make me, I've no intention of inflicting this on myself. 'Yeah, Mammy, I'll give that a try.'

'Make sure you do. I was talking to your Gran earlier. I told her you weren't well so she's praying for you. I said it's not prayers you need, it's fruit and vegetables and someone to look after you. Is What's His Face looking after you?'

'Colman, Mammy, his name is Colman. We've been together five years, you know his name.'

'I know, I know,' she says, 'after the mustard. I still reckon What's His Face suits him better.'

I decide to change the subject. 'I suppose Gran's prayers won't do me any harm. It's nice of her.'

My mother snorts. 'Prayers do plenty of harm. Look at this bloody country...' My mother pauses, but her recent victory over our eavesdroppers has made her reckless, 'I told your Gran about that nun as well. She didn't want to believe me but I said it's the gospel truth.'

Up until recently, the Irish embassy in Tehran had been sending sensitive information in Irish rather than English. Not that Ireland had much in the way of secrets of interest but there was stuff about what the EU and the Americans were up to. They felt confident that Gaelic was so obscure a language to the Iranians that it was safer than any code. But then they started to notice that the officials they met were asking questions they couldn't possibly have known to ask without reading this information. It transpired that a former Irish nun, who'd converted to Islam and married a mullah, was

employed by the Islamic Republic to translate documents from Irish into Farsi. She was possibly the only person in the world who spoke both languages fluently.

My mother finds this story hilarious. 'Your Dad says he can't understand how an Irish nun could end up in Iran. But it doesn't surprise me at all. Those nasty old penguins that taught me in school would be right at home here.'

It's a bitter irony that my mother married my father partly to escape the Catholic fundamentalism of her childhood, only to end up as she puts it, 'in a place that'd make 1950s Ireland look like a decadent orgy.'

One of the many things that infuriates my mother is going to official dinners with Western diplomats who attempt to defend Iran by saying, 'Well, you have to understand that it's their culture.'

'Freck their culture,' my mother rails. 'It was Irish culture for hundreds of years to treat women like shite and we're only now starting to get over it. Cultures need to change. Oppression is oppression whatever religion you use to justify it.'

I start to cough again and this inspires my mother to switch from damning the church to delivering her own sermon on how I don't look after myself properly. She's warming to her theme when the phone begins to crackle and I lose whole parts of her sentences. Perhaps this is God showing me some mercy.

After I've shouted, 'What? What?' several times, my mother declares, 'Oh this is hopeless, I best go.'

'Bye,' I say. This is followed by some distorted response I can't catch.
'Sorry? I can't hear you.'

Suddenly my mother's voice tunes in loud and clear. 'I said I love you. I'm worried about you, take care of yourself. Please.'

It's after midnight when Colman gets back from the party. I'm already in bed but he persuades me to get up and drink cheap red wine with him at our kitchen table. Of course, I shouldn't be drinking when I'm on antibiotics but the alcohol is making me feel much better than any medication has.

When I tell Colman about my mother's views on how the Islamic Republic of Iran treats women, he says he agrees with her absolutely because he's a feminist himself. The old models of how relationships between men and women work need to be completely scrapped. Love shouldn't be turned into some kind of prison. As Simone de Beauvoir says, monogamy transforms women into objectified possessions. What's needed is freedom and openness and trust. Sex is a celebration of life whereas jealousy is a poison that makes us weak. He wants to help me get strong enough not to be threatened by his friendships with other women.

I'm not really listening because I've heard variations on this speech many times before. Somewhere at the back of my mind, I know that my mother would not be impressed by Colman's existentialist theories on how casual sex can liberate women from their submissive position. But he's been chipping away on this subject for so long, I can't remember what my own objections are any more.

'I just wish you could be more like Tonya,' he says. This catches my attention and I sit up straighter in my chair. Tonya is a woman he works with who he's recently taken to dropping into every conversation we have. 'She's just so strong and confident in her sexuality. I've told her a lot about you, she's really keen to meet you. She was very disappointed she arrived at the party after you'd left. I explained you're a bit of an early bird. She thought that must be tough on me but I told her that we lead very independent lives.'

I refrain from asking what else he's said about me or admitting that I'd rather eat my own vomit than meet Tonya. 'Maybe I'll meet her when I'm better,' I say.

'You're always sick,' he says. 'It's so boring.'

God knows I want to be exciting and sexy and confident like Tonya. But I hardly recognise myself these days. It's not just that my lungs have packed up. I feel so heavy and tired. I don't want to do anything. Colman's right, I am boring. There's a strange panicky feeling in my stomach all the time.

My mother says, 'The trouble with people treating you like you're invisible is that you start to believe it.' I'm not in Tehran, I'm in London, one of the freest cities in the world. Yet I do feel covered up and I don't really know why.

Colman pours us both another glass of wine. 'So I've got tickets for Friday. You'll love it. It's one of my favourite pieces of music.'

'What?' I haven't been listening again and sense a whole part of the conversation has passed me by.

'Friday night, the concert. Tonya's going to be there so you two can meet at last.'

For a second, I consider throwing my wine in Colman's face. But that's the kind of immature, emotional behaviour he can't stand. Since I moved to London to live with him and we're not students any more, I'm meant to have got my bursts of temper under control. I'm supposed to be a grown-up now. I tighten my grip on the stem of the glass till it's in danger of snapping. I start to cough and Colman rolls his eyes.

Chapter 3

Tiny Monsters

Dublin, 1975

I'm excited at the prospect of meeting God. I wonder what he looks like. Gran has told me God has a long white beard but surely that's Santa Claus? Perhaps they're brothers? My mother tells me to take what Gran says with a pinch of salt. But I don't like salt, I like sugar.

It's a cold winter's afternoon and the wind threatens to bite me with its teeth. I hold my mother's hand as we mount the steps. Gran dips her fingers in a bowl of water that is embedded in the wall. She makes a sign like she's pointing out different parts of herself. My mother doesn't do this; she just pushes open the large wooden door. It creaks on its hinges and then shuts behind us with a sigh.

Inside is dark and spooky. There are rows of wooden benches. The roof is very high above us and there are pictures painted in the windows so that you can't see out.

'So where is he?' I demand loudly. My voice echoes strangely.

'Who?' Gran whispers back. I don't know why she's whispering.

'God,' I say. 'Isn't this his house?'

I've never been in a church before. I'd no idea they were so big. Or so cold. I shiver even though I'm wearing my coat. God needs to turn the heating on.

'Yes, yes it is God's house, but he's not here.' My mother is whispering too. She pulls me closer to her. I can tell she doesn't want me to ask any more questions but I can't help myself.

'If this is God's house, why isn't he home?' I lower my voice. It seems whispers are contagious.

Gran is glaring at my mother. 'God is here, you just can't see Him.'

'Can you see him, Gran?' I ask.

Sean, the boy who lives across the road from me, has an invisible friend that only he can see.

Gran hisses at my mother, 'Do you teach the child nothing?' and walks off in a huff. She kneels in front of a large cross with a man pinned to it. The man looks very sad like he's been crying.

My mother squeezes my hand so tightly she hurts my fingers. 'Ow,' I shout. I feel like crying myself.

'Just try to keep quiet.' My mother lets go of my hand and rubs her stomach. Her stomach is very big because there's a little brother or a little sister inside. I wonder if the baby knows we're in a church. Is the baby able to see out of my mother's stomach, perhaps through her belly button, or is it just dark in there? I wouldn't like to be inside someone's tummy. I think I'd be scared. My mother says I was inside her once, I just can't remember it.

'I wanted to meet God,' I say. It's not my fault my mother hasn't taught me what she was supposed to.

'God's just a story,' my mother says. 'He's not real.'

'Then why does he have a house?' I ask.

My mother sighs. 'Maybe we'll meet him next time we come.'

I'm disappointed. I think it's rude of God not to be here when we've come all the way across the road from Gran's house to visit. I wish we'd stayed at home.

Gran is still on her knees. She's mumbling to herself. I walk over to her before my mother can stop me. 'What are you doing?'

'I'm praying.'

'What's praying?'

Gran sighs. 'When you pray God hears your wishes and He answers them.'

'How does it work?' I don't understand how God can answer when Gran has been speaking very quietly and isn't on the telephone. 'How can he hear you?'

'God hears everything. He sees everything too. He can read your mind.'

'I'm learning to read, amn't I, Mammy?' My mother has come up behind me and is standing over me and Gran. She's teaching me to read with the Humpty Dumpty club. You have to match the right words with the right picture and if you get it right, you get a Humpty Dumpty sticker. Maybe God is in the Humpty Dumpty Club too.

'I'm praying to God to save your mother's soul and return her to the true faith,' Gran says.

My mother sucks her teeth with annoyance. 'Don't wear yourself out on my account,' she says.

'Can I pray?' I ask. My mother gives me a look that makes me wish I hadn't asked this.

'Of course you can,' Gran smiles at me. 'All you have to do is wish for God to enter your heart.'

'Do you need a coin? Like for the well in the shopping centre,' I say.

My mother laughs. I love when she laughs but Gran doesn't look happy. Sometimes it's hard to get people to laugh at the same time.

On the way home, my mother tells me a story about a little Irish girl who was born in Sweden where it's very cold and there's a lot of snow. Finding a priest in Sweden is like finding a needle in a haystack. So when the little girl was born, her parents didn't bother to have her baptised (that's when the priest gives you a name by pouring a jug of water over your head.) The little girl's parents didn't think a bit of water made much difference anyhow. But the little girl's Gran cried and cried every night for six whole months and couldn't sleep for worrying. Every night the little girl's Gran rang the little girl's mother, even though it was an expensive long-distance phone call from Dublin to Stockholm. And every night she told the little girl's mother she couldn't sleep because she kept thinking of the little girl burning in hell for all eternity.

Eventually the little girl's mother got tired of this so she searched high and low to find a priest. She wrapped up the little girl in a big white shawl to keep her warm and then she walked through a dark forest until she came to the priest's house. There were wolves howling all around and the snow fell thick and fast but the little girl wasn't scared. The priest was quite kind for a priest and he took the little girl and her mother into his church. It was a very small church because there aren't too many Catholics in a Swedish forest. He poured water over the little girl's head and even though she was only a small baby and the water was icy cold, the little girl didn't cry.

He christened her Aoife because that's what her mother wanted even though it wasn't a name you could find in the Bible or that he'd ever heard of

before. The little girl's mother had to say her daughter's name lots of times until the priest got the hang of it. Before he wrote it into his book of names, he asked the little girl's mother to spell it. The priest looked confused so the little girl's mother spelt it again. When he asked her to spell it for the third time, the little girl's mother took the pen out of his hand and wrote it in the book herself. She had nicer handwriting than the priest anyway. And that is how the little girl got her name and lived happily ever after.

'So you see, you have been to a church before,' my mother informs me.

Gran says God is everywhere. He's always watching out for sinners. Sinners are bad people who commit sins and end up in the fires of hell. Gran explains to me that stealing is a sin. Even if you think nobody sees you doing it, God sees you. But if God is in his house, how can he really know what I'm doing in the butcher's? Unless of course he has spies.

There is the smell of sawdust mixed with blood. I'm wearing my new Clark shoes and my winter coat and my mittens. In my left hand, I'm holding a packet of chalk. I keep my hand with the chalk hidden under my coat. This is because I have just stolen the chalk from the supermarket next door. My mother is ordering a pound of round steak mince for our dinner. My hands are sweating inside my mittens but I can't take them off because then my mother will see the packet of chalk.

I turn away from my mother to look through the glass pane of the counter. There is a pig's head on a plate. His mouth is slightly open and he is staring straight at me. I'm so startled by this, I lose my grip on the packet of

chalk. It clatters loudly to the floor. My mother, the butcher, and all the other customers turn to stare. The pig's head is staring too. He knows I'm in big trouble.

My mother leans down and picks up the packet of chalk. 'Where did you get this?' she asks.

'I found it,' I reply. My tongue is dry in my mouth.

The pig's head knows I'm lying and so does my mother. 'We didn't pay for these,' she says.

'I wanted them for my drawing,' I explain.

'Why didn't you just ask me to buy them for you?' My mother sounds disappointed.

I say nothing. I don't know why I didn't ask; I don't know why I stole the chalk. I wish I hadn't. The smell of pig's blood is making me feel sick. I wish everyone would stop looking. I wish I could just disappear. Now I know how the pig's head feels being put on display like that in all his ugliness.

After the pig's head catches me with the chalk, I promise never to steal again. But then Damien Snake says I can't play if I don't get them biscuits. He's a horrible boy that lives at the end of our road. My father says he is the child of Satan. This is because Damien Snake stole my toy dump truck and destroyed it. My father looked out the bedroom window and saw him kicking it down the road so he ran down the stairs to stop him. He slipped on the way and twisted his ankle so now he's on crutches. Thanks to Damien Snake, my father may never be able to run again.

I get the wooden stool and drag it over to the counter. It's heavy. I

balance one hand on the counter and the other on the stool. With a kind of jump, I manage to haul myself up so one knee is on the counter and one knee is on the stool. The stool rocks a little and there is a strange dropping feeling in my stomach.

I reach up and manage to grasp the wooden knob on the press door. I grab hold of it so I can stand up on the stool. Once standing, I very carefully pull open the door. Now I can see the tin of biscuits. It's a bright orange and it's on the second shelf, up in the far corner. I reach up on tippy toes but the end of my fingers can only just about touch the metal bottom of the tin. I manage to push the tin a little bit closer to me. Just a little bit more and I can grab hold of it properly.

But suddenly the tin slips from my grasp and comes tumbling down. It opens on the way and biscuits rain out everywhere. Some are chocolate, some are wrapped, but most are plain and broken. Biscuit dust and sugar cover me.

Because I'm no good at stealing biscuits, my friends don't want to play with me. Apart from Sean who always wants to play. He has a red sports car that he pedals over to my house so that he can give me a ride. It's quite squished with the two of us in his car and he never lets me have a go at pedalling. Still I like the way he can make different engine noises, especially the one for when he pedals very fast.

Sean's father was my mother's first boyfriend. If she'd stayed with him, Sean would be my brother. It's a pity 'cause even though Sean doesn't let me drive, he's much more fun to play with than my real brother.

My real brother is called Stephen. He's so small he lives in a cot. When I first met him, he lived in a basket. It was really disappointing because my father told me I was getting a brother or sister to play with. I thought that meant he would be my size. You can't play with my brother. All he does is cry and eat. He's very boring. The only good thing about him is that he doesn't like his desserts. He gets this special baby banana dessert that comes in a jar. My mother tries to make him eat it but he just screams. When she gets tired of him screaming, she gives up and lets me eat the dessert. Obviously I'm not a baby so I can eat it by myself with a small spoon. It tastes delicious. I'm only allowed to eat it though if I ask first. My mother says I have to be patient, which is annoying.

My mother also says when I grow up I should marry a man who has a real sports car. But I don't want to wait till I grow up. I want my own car with my own pedals now. My mother says I can't have one but Santa might bring me a bike if I behave myself. If I'm bold I'll get nothing but a sack of soot. That's why I have to be nice to my brother even if I don't feel like it.

My brother has a cough just like the one I had, only his won't go away. I ask my father why Stephen keeps coughing more than I did. He tells me that when you're sick, there are two armies inside of you. A black army and a white army. The black army are the evil germs that invade you and are trying to kill you. The white army are your own army that defend you from the evil black army germs. But they need help to fight the germs and that's why I had to take my cough medicine even though it tasted horrible. Sometimes some of the black army germs escape. They jump out of you and into someone

else. They're like tiny monsters so small you can't see them.

Stephen has the evil black army germs inside him but because he's just a baby he can't fight them the way I did. So now they've got really strong and turned into something called pneumonia. I practice saying pneumonia to myself. It's a hard word to remember. It doesn't seem to want to stay still but jumps around like the germs do and makes my head hurt. I think about how my germs jumped from me into my brother. Maybe it happened when I was eating his food. They ran out along the spoon and into his mouth.

My brother turns bright red when he coughs but it doesn't stop him screaming. Before he used to eat everything apart from his banana desserts but now he won't eat anything. He just drinks milk that comes from my mother. The only time he's not coughing and screaming is when he's drinking.

At first I'm happy because I get to eat all his food for him. Then the doctor tells my mother that it's lucky he's being breast-fed or he might not get better. My father says of course my brother's getting better but he doesn't sound so sure. I ask Gran what happens if people don't eat and she says that if you don't eat for a long time, you die. Dying is when God takes you back up to heaven. Heaven is the most beautiful place where everyone is happy forever.

I ask my mother if Stephen is going to die. She starts to cry. I don't ever remember her crying before. I guess being taken back up to heaven is not such a good thing. I look at my brother in his cot. He's sleeping but then his face creases up like something's hurting him. He begins to make a funny noise like our next-door neighbour's cat when she's been left outside. Then

he starts to cough and cough and my mother comes running and picks him up. I know if he dies, it's going to be my fault. I try praying like Gran told me to. Dear God just because I don't like my baby brother doesn't mean I want you to take him back up to heaven. I would like you to leave him alone. Please.

My brother keeps coughing, though, he coughs all night. I go into my parents' room and ask if he's going to be okay. My mother tells me to go back to bed. I say I can't sleep with the noise of the coughing. My father shouts that I'm to get back to bed whether I can sleep or not.

I tell Gran I don't like God very much. She says I must never say such an awful thing ever again because if I do I will be smote down. Smote is when a bolt of lightning comes out of the sky and turns you into ashes. Gran makes me apologise for what I said because I've hurt God's feelings and made him angry. I know God will steal my brother if he's angry so I tell him I'm very sorry. Then I promise that if he makes my brother better, I will never be bold ever again.

I go and sit by Stephen's cot. For once, his eyes are open but he's not crying, he's just breathing. He makes a funny snuffling noise when he breathes. His eyes are bright blue, even bluer than mine. I put my hand on his forehead like I've seen my mother do. It's very hot. This is because he has a fever. My father says the fever is because the white army and the black germs are fighting like crazy. I imagine the big battle that is happening inside my brother. I wish I could kill the black germs and make them go away.

I put my hand inside the cot and my brother catches hold of my finger. He holds on very tight, he's stronger than I thought.

Chapter 4

The End of The World

London, 1995

'I think we should have a threesome,' Tonya announces. She's holding my hand tightly.

We're standing by the bar and I've been talking to her for all of five minutes. It's the interval of the concert Colman got tickets for so that I could meet the wonderful Tonya. Behind us, he's discussing how the second violin was out of tune. But I've the feeling he's listening to our every word. I don't know what I expected but Tonya isn't it. She's very drunk and loud and her eyes have a bulging fish like quality. There's something alarming about the determined way her jaw protrudes.

As soon as he gets me on my own, Colman asks what I think about the threesome idea. 'No,' I say.

'But you said you wanted to sleep with a woman.' He seems peeved by how unreasonable I'm being.

I recall a drunken conversation in which I did say this. Did I mean it? I'm not sure, I just know I don't want to get any closer to Tonya than I absolutely have to.

Colman continues in a gentle voice, 'We're supposed to be having an open relationship. I'm disappointed you might be jealous of Tonya. It makes me feel I've just talked you into this...'

'I'm not jealous, of course I'm not.' I'm so green, I could quite happily gouge Tonya's eyes out. But I'm not going to admit this, even to myself, or the fact that Colman may be having an open relationship but I'm certainly not.

'You know I love you,' Colman says and kisses me on the cheek.

Tonya pops up behind him and puts her arms around us both. 'You two are so sweet together,' she gushes.

I take a large swig of my pint and nearly choke.

Although classical music isn't my thing and it took an enormous effort not to cough, I did enjoy the concert itself. But by Monday morning, I feel worse again. I make myself go to work though because my boss is an evil bitch who despite me regularly working twelve hour days as her assistant, acts as if bronchitis is another word for laziness. Though she's white and constantly late for meetings herself, she likes to talk about 'coloured people's time' and make jokes about the Irish being drunks who can't get up in the morning.

It turns out, thank God, that she's actually away on one of her many trips. As I sit down at my desk, the marketing co-ordinator stops whistling 'Coca Cabana' and says, 'Darling, you look absolutely fucking terrible. Go home.'

I decide to take his advice. Shortly after I get back to the flat, the phone rings. I think only my mother would be ringing me at home in the afternoon, using her sixth sense that tells her where I am at all times. But a man's voice booms, 'Congratulations. We'd like you to come and work for us.'

I did the interview over two weeks ago and had heard nothing so I'd assumed I didn't get it. I'm so surprised I don't know what to say and there's an awkward pause.

'You do still want the job?'

'Yes, yes of course I do, I'm delighted.'

I hang up the phone and do a little dance around the sitting room. A proper job with a proper theatre. No more data entry, no more photocopying, no more being my boss's personal slave. Administrator of the Royal Court Young People's Theatre. I practice saying the title to myself. Maybe things are starting to pick up at last.

Colman also has a new job at the Chelsea Centre Theatre. He even gets a flat rent free thrown in with it. We're moving to the World's End estate on the King's Road. I'm so happy to be escaping Brockley. Colman's really excited about his new job. I'm excited he's not going to be working with Tonya any more. I think this could be a fresh start for us and we can put all that open relationship nonsense behind us.

I finally seem to have stopped coughing. With the return of oxygen, I realise just how depressed I've been. No wonder Colman hasn't wanted to spend much time with me. I decide I need to change my attitude to London. I can't keep dreaming about moving back to Dublin. I've got to stop being this homesick immigrant. As Colman's always saying, London is an exciting city bursting with opportunity whereas Dublin is small-minded and boring. Besides there's no jobs there. I need to open myself up to the reality of my situation. London is where I live, I just have to try to make it my home. I resolve to go out more, have fun, be this confident, sociable person Colman wants.

On the day of our move, I'm happily wrapping our few fragile possessions in newspaper and placing them in a cardboard box. Apart from books and CDs, we haven't acquired much since we moved to this country.

The new flat is unfurnished so we'll have the opportunity to buy stuff and make it our own. I never thought the prospect of owning furniture could make me so cheerful. I must be getting old.

Colman comes in whistling, closely followed by Tonya. I freeze at the sight of her. Catching me staring, Colman says, 'I told you Tonya's going to drive the van for us. She's such an angel.' Colman kisses Tonya on the cheek and she smirks.

'No, you didn't mention it,' I say. Anger rushes through me. But not the usual hot flush that makes me want to shout or burst into tears. This is cold and steely. A line has been crossed that there's no going back from.

The pub is near Liverpool Street. It's Irish themed and nothing like any pub I would ever set foot in in Dublin. A vast barn like place with fishermen's nets screwed on to the walls, it has all the atmosphere of an indoor car park. Over the bar there are dancing leprechauns painted in bright green and a banner that reads *cead mile failte*. Irish for a hundred thousand welcomes yet I've never felt less welcome as all around me, drunken men in suits jostle each other for warm Guinness.

I try to repress my disdain as the barman slops white foam into the glass. I order a pint of lager for myself. I never drink Guinness in this country, the way they pour it hurts me too much.

Hearing my accent, the bloke beside me says, 'I love the way you people talk. Are you a terrorist?' He winks at me and slurs 'chucky ar la' while patting me on the arse.

I wish I was a terrorist. The mood I'm in I wish I could knee cap him right here and now. I step on his toes instead, while spinning round with the pints.

'Stupid bitch,' he yelps and I beat a hasty retreat.

When I get back to our table, my friend Michael says, 'So are you coming dancing?'

'No, I'm knackered, I really just want to go home.'

I've already had far too much to drink and despite all my resolutions to enjoy myself, this pub is depressing the shit out of me.

'Ah go on, it'll be a laugh.' Michael grabs my arm and whispers into my ear, 'Please come, I'm begging you. Craigy's in a right mood with me and if you don't come as protection there's going to be a terrible row.' Craigy is Michael's boyfriend, his name is also Michael but we call him by his last name to differentiate.

Without ever actually having said yes, I find myself in a long queue for this club called Popstarz. It's freezing cold and I wonder what I'm doing here with Michael, Craigy and Colman's friend Judy.

Suddenly this guy appears in the doorway and starts shouting at the crowd. 'This is a gay club. If you're queer, come to the front, but if you're straight you'll have to wait.'

A rush of pretty boys with no doubts about their sexuality skip ahead of us.

Judy says, 'Well that's just discrimination.'

Michael tries to persuade me and Judy to pretend to be a lesbian couple so we can all go to the front of the queue. Judy hesitates, 'I suppose I am bisexual.'

This might be true but she's also engaged to a banker, a bloke she's been seeing on and off since she was sixteen. I decide to take the moral high ground. 'I'm not going to lie just so we can get in quicker.'

Craigy rolls his eyes. This is me being uptight and no fun. Lucky Colman's working late so he's not here to witness it. I must make more of an effort.

When we eventually do get inside, we queue for the cloakroom, then we queue to get into the 80s trash room, then we queue for the bar. By the time I finally get my double vodka and Red Bull, I'm determined to dance. In a far corner, I can see Michael and Craigy snogging each other. I guess they're not fighting any more.

The music is very loud and the dance floor is packed. Judy is going on about her hot new job in advertising, something about cream crackers and this new range of condoms in her portfolio. I try to dance further away from her but she continues to yell in my ear. This is turning into the longest night. I wonder if I grabbed my coat now, how long it would take to get a night bus? Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a very beautiful girl dancing near me. When I look at her, she looks away but when I turn back to Judy, I can sense she is still looking at me.

'Pity Colman couldn't make it tonight,' Judy says.

'Yeah he loves this place.' I know Judy would much rather be talking to Colman than to me.

Judy mutters something else that I don't catch. 'What?' I mouth.

She shouts in my ear, 'I hate this song. Let's go find the Michaels.'
She turns her back to me and starts walking away.

I follow Judy past the beautiful girl, who is definitely staring at me. I get half way across the floor. I can see Michael and Craigy by the bar. I look at Judy's back and I make a decision. I turn around and return the way I've come.

For a moment, I think the girl has gone but then I see her and I go over and start dancing with her. She's tall and thin with long dark hair. I feel I should say something but I've absolutely no idea what. It's been a very long time since I chatted someone up. And I've never flirted with a woman before. I'm not sure what I'm trying to prove.

I'm so drunk I find myself saying what's on my mind, 'It doesn't get any easier, does it?'

'Sorry?' she shouts.

'This. I mean it's still as hard as being stood up against the wall at the school disco.'

She stares at me like I'm nuts. 'You learnt to dance at school?'

Already we misunderstand each other. I'm about to give up when she says, 'Why not sit on the stairs where we can hear each other no?'

The staircase curls high above the dance floor and we sit on the top step. Her name is Monique and she's from Saint-Tropez. I tell her I've been there on holidays and she's surprised.

She asks me if I speak any French. *'Tu es belle,'* I say.

I must be really drunk. She looks embarrassed but not horrified. As we talk, I'm surprised to discover I'm enjoying myself for the first time in ages and ages. Monique tells me how much she loves London, how she finds it incredibly exciting and there's such a great sense of freedom. I wish I knew the London she's talking about. I tell her I find London quite lonely.

'You just have to meet the right people. Everything is possible here if you give it a chance,' she insists. It's strange, I already feel as if I've known her a very long time.

I need to go to the toilet and there's a queue that takes ages. When I get back Monique says, 'I thought I'd lost you. I was about to go home.'

I sit down beside her and kiss her. Her lips are soft and her mouth tastes of mint. We're not kissing for long when I hear Michael's voice shouting my name. I look down and he's coming up the stairs towards us.

'What are you doing?' he asks.

I start to laugh. Michael seems annoyed. 'I've been looking for you everywhere, we want to go home but I didn't want to leave without you.'

I tell Michael I'll be five minutes. He looks from me to Monique and hesitates before leaving.

'I better go,' I say. 'But can I get your number?'

'Why don't you give me yours?' she asks.

Neither of us has a pen so we go back downstairs. I push my way to the front of the bar and ask the bar man. He hands me a biro saying, 'Fallen in love, have we?'

I laugh and thank him. I feel strangely light and giddy. I spot Monique standing near the cloakroom waiting for me. She has the saddest look on her face. I suddenly feel an incredible sense of responsibility for her happiness. Like I would do anything to make her smile.

Colman's asleep when I get in but he wakes up as I slip into bed beside him.

'You're late,' he says with a yawn. 'Did you have a good time?'

'Yeah,' I hesitate.

'What is it? You alright?'

'I met someone. I mean I kissed someone. A girl.'

'Wow, I wasn't expecting that.' Colman sits up in the bed. Despite all his protests that he wants me to see other people, I'm anxious he's going to be jealous or upset.

'Neither was I. I think I'd a bit too much too drink.'

'Are you going to see her again?' he asks.

'No, of course not.' I'm starting to sober up and I feel uncomfortable and guilty.

'Well I reckon you should. It might be fun. What's her name?' Colman suddenly seems wide-awake and he wants to know all about my evening. But I tell him I'm tired and I really need to sleep.

The next day I jump every time the phone rings. 'Please God don't let it be her,' I think. And then feel a strange sense of anti-climax when it's not.

We go out to the theatre and to a party in a late-night drinking club. Judy's there and we are sat with her and the Michaels and a few other friends at a large table. Judy starts to tell this hilarious story about me snogging a girl

the night before. Everyone's laughing like this is the funniest thing in the world apart from Michael. He leans over to me and asks quietly, 'Why did you do it?'

I do not have an answer to this question.

The next morning I wake to the phone ringing. I crawl into the hall to answer it as my thumping hangover kicks in. I know only my mother would ring me this early on a Sunday morning. 'Hello?' I croak.

'Allo. Could I please speak to Aoife?'

'This is Aoife,' I reply as my stomach lurches.

'Really? You sound like a man,' Monique says and laughs.

I explain I was out till four in the morning and drank too much. It's a lovely sunny day and she wants to know if I'd like to go for a walk with her in the park. I tell her I can't because it's St Patrick's Day and I'm going to the pub. There is a silence.

Then she asks, 'This is like a special Irish day, no?'

'Yeah,' I tell her. 'When I was a kid we used to go to the parade but now we just drink.'

'I have heard the Irish like to drink,' she says.

I dislike this kind of stereotyping but realise I'm doing very little to disprove it. I've a strange urge to explain that I'm not really this alcoholic party animal, that in fact everything about my life is only pretend. There's another person inside of me who would love to go out for a walk in the park and never come back.

Colman's face appears around the side of the door. He's blurry eyed without his glasses and his black curls are wild and fuzzy from sleep. 'Is it

her?' he whispers loudly. I nod yes and he gives me a big thumbs up. My stomach turns over and I decide to get off the phone as quickly as possible.

'Maybe we could have a drink during the week?' I ask. The question seems to pop out of my mouth involuntarily.

I arrange to meet Monique in a bar called Freud's in Soho on Wednesday evening. I hang up wondering how much of the fragility I'm feeling is just my hangover.

'Did she want to see you again?' Colman's face is flushed with excitement. 'That's brilliant. I thought when she didn't ring yesterday she mustn't like you that much. I mean a drunken snog is one thing but now you might do other stuff... I wish I could come with you.'

A wave of hatred passes through me. At that moment, I hate Colman almost as much as I hate myself.

Chapter 5

Sawdust

Dublin, 1976

My mother says dreams only happen when you're sleeping but this isn't true. Sometimes I dream that I'm walking through a fruit market. There are great big piles of oranges and bananas and apples. I'm looking for my parents when suddenly I know that they've been turned into pieces of fruit. How will I ever find them when there are mountains of fruit all around me?

If I'm asleep this dream wakes me up and I feel shaky and sick. But sometimes I have the dream when I'm already awake. I try not to think about all the oranges but I can see them in front of me and I get really scared. My mother says what am I talking about, there are no oranges, oranges aren't scary, I'm being silly. She's right I suppose but what if it really happened and I never managed to find her or my father ever again?

My mother doesn't understand about the angry man that talks to me either. She thinks I mean like when I talk to my teddies but it's not like that at all. My teddies are friendly and they only talk to me when I want them to. The angry man lives inside my head and he talks to me even when I tell him to stop. I can't understand what he says. It's like the words are fuzzy but he always sounds angry with me and a bit disappointed. I think the angry man knows I'm the one that made my brother sick. I hate when he talks to me but I can't make him go away especially if I'm tired. He stops me sleeping even when I want to. I wonder if the angry man is God's spy like the pig's head was.

Since I promised God I'd never be bold ever again, my brother has stopped coughing. He still screams but not as much as he used to. The doctor tells my mother that he's gaining weight and this is a very good sign. I'm happy about this but it's not as easy to keep my promise as I thought it would be.

The blood comes as a surprise. It's a deep red and, for a moment, it sits in a perfect droplet on the end of my thumb. I stare at it and then at the thin piece of metal in my hand. Don't panic, I think, it's only blood. I reach over and pull a square of tissue paper off the toilet roll. I use it to smudge the drop of blood but another one instantly appears to replace it.

I reach up and put the sliver of shiny metal back on the shelf above Gran's sink. Only then do I remember my mother telling me that things in the bathroom are not toys. I also remember her telling me not to touch things that aren't mine, especially not Gran's things. I look down to discover there is now a small pool of blood on the black and white tiles of Gran's bathroom. I grab more toilet paper, a whole swathe of it, and wrap it round my thumb. But instantly the green tissue paper turns dark. I can't get the blood to stop.

I pick up the yellow sponge behind the tap and use it to wipe away the stain on the floor. Then I hear my mother's voice, 'Kiddo, it's time to go home.'

I can't tell her I played with the shiny metal. I can't tell her about the blood. I'm going to be in so much trouble. 'Aoife,' she calls again more loudly.

I hunch down under the sink. The floor feels cold underneath me. Please God make it stop, I think. I can feel my throat begin to close over. I blink rapidly to stop the water in my eyes. Crying is not going to help, crying

is going to make things worse.

There are footsteps on the stairs. Then a gentle rapping on the door. 'You all right in there?' It's Gran's voice.

Next thing I'm sitting in Gran's kitchen drinking very sweet tea. My mother thinks I'm too young to be drinking tea, but Gran doesn't see any harm in it. It's tricky holding the cup though because my thumb has a large plaster on it.

'Does it hurt?' Gran asks.

'No, Gran,' I lie. It didn't hurt at first but now it's throbbing. When he gets back from abroad, I'll ask my father to use his special magic blowing powers to take the pain away. He'll hold my thumb very carefully and ask me to count to three and then he'll blow really hard. After that, the pain will disappear. It's good having a father who has super powers.

My mother asks again, 'But how did you do it?'

Gran looks at me. Neither of us is going to mention the shiny metal, it's our secret. 'Let the child be, Joanie,' Gran says.

'Don't worry,' I say. 'My Daddy will fix it. You know, Gran, my Daddy isn't really a prince. He just looks like one.'

This makes Gran laugh so much that two tears roll down her face. My mother smiles at me and shakes her head. I'm not in trouble any more.

It's my brother's first birthday and he's got a brand new teddy bear called John. John looks like my teddy only he's bigger and fluffier and a brighter yellow. Stephen isn't that interested in John. Since he started eating again, he just eats and eats and doesn't care about anything else. I think John must

be upset by this and I give him a hug. But my father tells me that hugging John has made my own teddy jealous.

Using his magic powers, my father helps my teddy to climb up the sitting room door. I watch my teddy slowly inching up and up the white door. I ask where he's going and my father tells me he's going back to heaven because he thinks I don't love him anymore. But I do love my teddy, I don't want him to die. I start screaming. My teddy gets such a fright, he falls back to earth. I run and pick him up. I dash upstairs to give him some medicine to fix him after his fall. I never hug John again.

Just like my brother, I got my teddy bear on my first birthday. As well as Sean, he's my best friend. This is why my teddy needs a name. And not a boring name like John that anybody could have. I discuss this with Granddad. I explain that it's hard to think of the right name because some days my teddy is a boy and some days my teddy is a girl. Granddad tells me that I should go for a double barrel name. I don't know what double barrel means but it sounds good. I practice saying it double barrel, double barrel. I think maybe it has something to do with shooting people but actually it just means two names. Granddad suggests I should call my teddy Elgin Rose. That way teddy can be Elgin when he's a boy and Rose when he's a girl. I think Elgin Rose is perfect, I think it's the most beautiful name I've heard.

My mother is always washing. She doesn't like me being dirty and she doesn't like Elgin Rose being dirty. One day she says he's filthy and he needs a wash. She says he looks worn out. I tell her he's not worn out, he's just over loved. This makes her laugh but it doesn't stop her grabbing him from

my arms.

She puts him in the washing machine. She tells me it'll be an exciting adventure for him. I sit on the floor and watch Elgin Rose being spun around. It's hard to see if he's smiling or not 'cause he's just a blur of yellow fur.

After the washing machine, I walk out into our garden. We have a washing line shaped like a triangle. I see that Elgin Rose is hanging from the washing line. Each of his ears is clipped with a wooden peg. I start screaming.

My mother comes running. She thinks I've hurt myself. I'm so upset I can't speak, I just point at Elgin Rose. She rushes and takes him down from the line. He's definitely not smiling now, he looks really sad. My mother says that being pinned up on the washing line didn't hurt Elgin Rose. But I know she's lying.

I'm sure my cousin Sarah is lying too. We're in Gran's house sitting on her stairs playing. Sarah is three years older than me. I like her but I don't like her Barbie doll. I think dolls are stupid and so does Elgin Rose.

I tell her that Elgin Rose says her Barbie is ugly and she says, 'You do know he's only sawdust?'

'What?'

'Inside he's only got sawdust. He hasn't got any blood so he's not real.' She's just saying this because Elgin Rose was mean about her Barbie. I wish he hadn't been now because it gives me a dropping feeling in my stomach to think about the sawdust.

I go into the kitchen to ask Gran if Elgin Rose is only sawdust. I'm not

really allowed into the kitchen because it's for adults to drink their tea in. Us kids are meant to stay outside and play on the stairs. But Gran can see I'm upset and she lets me sit down.

She says, 'It doesn't matter whether he's got sawdust or blood. What matters is that he's got a soul and God loves him.'

My mother laughs. 'So now teddy bears have souls?'

Gran glares at my mother.

'What's a soul?' I ask.

'Your soul is what's inside of you, it's the part of you that lives forever.'

I look at Elgin Rose to see if I can see his soul but I can't. I wonder if it's like the orange light that surrounds you when you eat Ready Brek. In the ad, you can see the little boy's Ready Brek glow quite clearly but I've never managed to see mine. My mother says it's just a question of looking from the right angle, and if I was able to look over my shoulder properly, I'd be able to see it.

'Can you see Elgin Rose's soul?' I ask Gran.

'No,' she says. 'But God can.'

I turn Elgin Rose around just in case I can find the right angle. He looks a bit cheered up by the idea he's got a soul. He didn't like to think he was just sawdust.

My mother tells me we're moving house but not to worry because Elgin Rose and all my other teddies will be packed up by the moving men so they can come with us. My brother is also coming. But Sean isn't because he has to stay with his own family.

On the day that we move there's a big van with all our furniture and toys inside. Our house seems much louder without anything inside of it. It doesn't look like the same place. Sean comes over in his red car to say goodbye to me. He says not to worry because he'll drive over to see me in my new house. But I know he won't. His car isn't real, it's just got pedals and it doesn't go as fast as he pretends it does. Our new house is on the other side of the city so he'll never be able to find it even if he could pedal that far.

I tell my mother I don't want to move house. She says I'll make new friends at the new house. But I like the friends I have. My father says I should be glad to see the back of Damien Snake. It's true I won't miss him the way I'll miss Sean but, even though he's evil, I will miss him all the same.

Chapter 6

A Message

London, 1996

I step out of Sloane Square tube station with my mother. She's wearing a sleeveless t-shirt with a skirt and high-heeled sandals. The skirt is long but it does reveal her ankles, which would be enough to get her arrested back in Tehran. She's put henna in her hair to celebrate not having to wear a scarf and it glows red with defiance in the sunlight.

We wait to cross the road and she grabs hold of my arm as the light changes. I know she'd take my hand if she thought I'd let her get away with it.

'It's got nothing to do with Colman,' I say. 'I just don't want to get married. I've never wanted to get married. You know that.'

My mother is on her second favourite campaign topic. She's visiting me for a week and, having stuffed me with so much good food I feel like I'm about to explode, she's now focussed on marrying me off.

'You'll change your mind,' she says. 'Everyone wants to get married. Even gay people, they're fighting for the right to get married for God's sakes.'

My stomach lurches. I've been seeing Monique for nearly four months. This doesn't make me gay, though. Of course it doesn't.

'Just don't go marrying a Muslim,' my mother says.

'Don't be so racist, Mammy.' I can't tell her me falling for a Muslim is not what she needs to be worrying about.

'I'm not saying he wouldn't be lovely but you'd have to deal with the relatives. Look at poor Eileen. Nazro's mother claimed she was dying and so

they'd to move back to Iran. Woman made a miraculous recovery and now Eileen's barely allowed out the door in case she brings shame on the family. They told Nazro he'd to stop letting his wife go to the market on her own or his sister would never get a husband.'

'Not all Muslims are like that.'

'Maybe. But all mother in laws are. Look at the hell your Nana's put me through. Take my advice, marry an orphan.'

'I'm not marrying anyone,' I proclaim as we're whirled through the doors of Peter Jones.

My mother sighs happily. This is Mecca as far as she's concerned. In Tehran, a typical window display consists of a bottle of shampoo proudly displayed alongside a couple of tubes of toothpaste. My mother has missed shopping the way prisoners serving life sentences miss their wives.

'Of course you have to find the right person,' she tells me as she enthusiastically rifles through a mountain of reduced price t-shirts. 'How are things with What's His Face, I mean Colman?'

'They're fine.'

Ironically, things are better than they have been for a long time. At first Colman tried to ask about Monique but, as I've refused to tell him anything, he's given up. I try to limit the amount of time I spend with her because I'm worried he's going to get jealous and object. But he seems perfectly happy with the whole arrangement. He's finally got the freedom and independence he wanted and I'm no longer giving him a hard time about how unhappy I am. The fact I'm sleeping with a woman makes me exciting and interesting again. If I'd done it on purpose to get his attention, I couldn't have come up with a

better plan.

The only snag is that I've gone and fallen in love with Monique. This is the part I'm not telling anyone, especially not my mother. I couldn't begin to imagine her reaction, God knows I don't want to.

My mother decides to abandon the bargain t-shirts. 'What's the use? No matter how good value they are, I won't be able to wear them outside the house. Just in case, Allah forbid, some bloody mullah should catch a glimpse up my coat sleeve.'

She steers me over towards the lingerie department as she continues to dole out relationship advice. 'It's not easy being with someone long term, you have to work at it, especially when you find yourself in a foreign country. Your Dad's always given me plenty of space, which I need, but when you're in a strange place and you know nobody, you're too much reliant on each other.'

'Colman's very independent,' I say.

'With all the evenings he works, you must hardly see each other. I worry that you're lonely.'

'I've made some good friends.' I find myself blushing but my mother is too busy pulling out bras and reading the labels to notice.

'Well she did seem very nice. Yer one you're working with, Hannah. Full of energy and enthusiasm. I liked her a lot. Is she married?'

'No, she's not,' I hesitate. 'Actually she's a lesbian.'

'Really?' my mother says. 'You know, funnily enough I've never met a woman like that before.'

Apart from the one you gave birth to, I think with a small shudder. My mother has told me that she feels very sorry for homosexuals because they

can't help it. Bisexuals she's no time for because they could choose to be normal if they wanted. Can I help it? Am I bisexual or am I schizophrenic? I seem to have somehow divided myself into two completely different people.

'Remember I tried reading that novel about it once,' my mother continues. 'Was a bit boring really and all that perverted sex, I just couldn't get into it.'

As we head for the escalators, I notice my mother is short of breath and seize the opportunity to change the subject. 'Did you go back to the doctor about your asthma?'

'Oh I hate doctors,' she replies. 'Patronising cow just said I was probably stressed. I live in Iran, so of course I'm stressed. Did I tell you what they did to the Swedish Ambassador's wife?'

'No. Do you want to use my inhaler?'

'I'm fine,' my mother says, waving my offer away. 'The thing is the Swedes have been taking in Kurds as political refugees. Needless to say this has gone down like a lead balloon with the mullahs. So one night the doorbell goes and the Ambassador's wife answers it. There's a strange man standing there looking absolutely terrified. She's about to ask what he wants when another man appears with a gun. Shoots the first man in the head right there in front of her.'

'Jesus Christ.'

'I know. They claim the guy they shot was a Kurdish dissident on the run who was looking for asylum. But I reckon they set the whole thing up to scare the living daylights out of the poor woman. Executed him in front of her to send a message.'

‘That’s terrible, she must have got an awful shock.’

‘Shock isn’t the word. There was blood and brains everywhere. She’s gone home to Stockholm and she’s not coming back and who can blame her. And they still don’t know who killed those Hungarian diplomats. Beaten to death in their beds they were.’

I don’t like it when my mother talks like this, it makes me worry something terrible might happen to them over there.

‘Dad says Iran is one of the safest countries in the world,’ I say.

‘Well that’s the plus side of chopping people’s hands off, they’re less likely to mug you in the street,’ my mother laughs. ‘Mind you they got those feckin’ eejits from Aer Lingus that were over. This fella came up to them outside their hotel and flashed a badge saying he was police checking for drugs.’

‘And they fell for it?’ I don’t know why I sound surprised when I’m discovering for myself just how easy it is to pretend to be something you’re not.

‘They were intimidated out of their lives. Iran does that to people. They emptied their pockets and quick as a flash were relieved of their dollars. One of them lost \$300 and the other \$500. We invited them to dinner that night, they stayed until 3am and got jarred out of their minds. I was the only woman present and they told us so much scandal about Irish political life my hair stood on end.’

Normally, I enjoy listening to my mother’s scandalous stories. She considers politicians, especially Irish ones, to be corrupt and degenerate but endlessly entertaining. It’s just that right now I’m feeling less in a position to

pass judgment on the secrets of others.

To my surprise, as we step off the escalator, my mother says, 'Maybe I will just have a little go of your thingy bop.'

'You mean my inhaler?' I ask, handing it over. It has always irritated me the way my mother can't be bothered to call objects by their proper names. Though of late I've become reluctant to use labels myself.

I watch my mother puff too quickly. 'You're not doing that properly,' I tell her.

She hands me back my inhaler with a shrug. 'I never had asthma before I went to that God infested country. It's all the pollution. Tehran's one of the filthiest cities in the world they say. So much for cleanliness is next to Godliness.'

'Maybe we should go home if your breathing's not so good,' I offer.

'Are you kidding?' my mother winks at me. 'I've barely begun to get my shopping fix. Western decadence here I come.'

With that, my mother charges off into women's fashion and I hurry to keep up with her.

Several hours later, we finally make it back to the flat. We're laden down with shopping bags and my mind has been numbed by all that overheated dreadful musak. I feel utterly exhausted and deeply bored.

My mother, however, is chirpier than ever. 'You know what I miss most,' she says as I put my key in the door. 'Colour. It's not just that Iranian women only wear black, it's that the buildings are grey and the streets are a

washed out sandy shade of nothing. The men mainly wear grey trousers and white shirts. You never see a splash of blue or yellow or heaven forbid red.'

My mother's flight back to Tehran is in two days' time. I suddenly feel guilty for how little I've enjoyed our shopping trip. The truth is I've spent the entire time wondering if we'll get back before Colman returns from work so I can ring Monique. It's not so much that I'm hiding these phone calls from him. Most of the time, I tell him that we've spoken and let him know when I'm meeting her.

'As long as both people tell each other the truth then an open relationship is much healthier than a closed one,' he's fond of saying.

Technically, I suppose I'm not lying to him. But I know I'm not being honest either. At first, I rang Monique when Colman wasn't around because it annoyed me how much he enjoyed eavesdropping. Now though, it's more because I'm afraid if he hears the tone of my voice, he'll realise how much these phone calls mean to me. That I plan my days around them. Part of me resents how oblivious he seems to how deeply I'm in over my head and part of me is petrified that he'll find out. I know we can't go on much longer like this but I also have no idea what to do. It's like I'm caught in a trap that I've made myself.

As we struggle to get all our shopping bags through the door, Colman bounds forward to greet us. 'Did you have a good time on your girlie shopping trip?'

My mother stiffens as Colman takes the shopping bags off her. 'I thought you'd still be at work,' she says. She much prefers talking to me about my boyfriend than actually having to talk to him.

'No, no. I managed to get off a bit early,' Colman answers brightly before turning to me. 'Monique rang for you by the way.'

It's my turn to tense up. 'Did you speak to her?'

'Oh yes we'd a nice little chat.' He grins at me.

I know he's doing this on purpose to make me uncomfortable but I'm not sure why. I feel a bit sick. When we went for that first drink, I confessed to Monique I had a boyfriend. I thought she might be offended or angry at me for wasting her time. But she'd taken it well. She said she found it oddly reassuring because she'd only recently split up with her boyfriend of five years.

'You see we have more in common than you might think,' she joked.

Recently though, she's started to find it less funny. 'I hardly ever see you. I've never met any of these friends you talk about so much. What's the point?'

I don't really want there to be a point. That would involve thinking about the future and what the hell I'm doing with my life.

'Actually I didn't speak to her,' Colman says with a laugh. 'She just left a message on the answering machine. She sounded very French. She asked you to ring her as soon as you can. It seemed urgent.'

'Who's Monique?' my mother asks.

'Just a friend from work,' I mumble.

Monique has never left me a message before. Usually if I don't answer, she hangs up. I have a bad feeling about this new development. I suspect she's had enough of my excuses and this whole life I have with my boyfriend that she's not part of. I want to tell her that she's not missing much.

That it's only when I'm with her that I feel alive. The rest of the time has no colour at all.

My mother is looking from me to Colman and pursing her lips. I know she doesn't believe that things are fine between us.

'I'll make us a cup of tea,' I announce and head off towards the kitchen with my mother close on my heels.

As I put the kettle on, my mother says, 'I hope I haven't been complaining about Iran too much.'

'Course not, Mammy. The place is a hellhole. You need to let off a bit of steam about it.'

'It's not always so bad. Your Dad does try you know. It's not his fault they're lunatics. We went through a bad patch there when we first arrived. But sure we're closer than ever now. That's what marriage is like, ups and downs.'

'I know. He has to go where the job takes him.' I take some cups out of the press thinking how much I don't want to get back on to the subject of marriage.

My mother rubs my arm affectionately. 'It's so nice to have a grown up daughter I can talk to about my problems. I'm very proud of you, you know.'

'I don't see what's to be proud of.' My voice has a catch in it.

'Well look at you with your pad in London and your exciting new job. All those lovely people you work with. It was so strange seeing your office, made me realise you're not a little girl any more.' My mother pauses. 'I hope you know you can talk to me about stuff. Like with What's his... Colman or anything that's worrying you.'

Sometimes I have the eerie feeling my mother is psychic. Or maybe she just knows me better than I know myself.

‘Don’t worry, Mammy, everything’s grand.’

‘Are you su...’ my mother’s question is interrupted by a sudden burst of coughing.

‘Do you want my inhaler again?’ I ask with concern.

She nods and I take it out of my pocket. ‘You really need to go back to the doctor,’ I tell her. ‘It’s all very well lecturing me...’

In between puffs, my mother says, ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. Sure I’ve never been ill a day in my life. It’s just a bit of asthma.’

‘Well asthma’s not nothing you know,’ I say, irritated. Then I have an idea. ‘Let’s check your peak flow.’

‘My what?’

‘It’s easy. You just blow into a tube. It tells you how your breathing is doing.’

‘Oh don’t be silly, kiddo.’ I ignore her protests and rush off to the bathroom to get the peak flow reader.

‘Aren’t you going to ring Monique back?’ Colman asks as I pass. ‘Tell her I’d really like to meet her sometime.’

I ignore this. ‘I’m getting something for my mother,’ I say.

The peak flow reader is in the bathroom cabinet next to a box of condoms and the contraceptive pills I’m on. I had hidden these away before my mother arrived but Colman has put them back. Probably to demonstrate that we’re adults now. Though if his ultra-Catholic mother was visiting, he’d have banished any evidence of sin.

When I get back to the kitchen, my mother has made the tea. 'I'm grand now, there's no need to fuss,' she tells me.

'Blow into this as hard as you can.' I present her with the reader.

My mother makes a face but does as I ask. 'No, no,' I tell her. 'Not like that. Take a deep breath first and then blow really hard.'

'You mean like the wolf in the Three Little Piggies. I'll huff and I'll puff... You used to love that story.'

'Just do it.'

My mother sucks in her breath and blows into the tube.

'Try again,' I instruct. She does but the reading is the same as last time.

'Mammy, your peak flow is half of what mine is and God knows mine isn't very good.'

'Well what does that mean?' My mother sounds defensive.

'It means you have to go back to the doctor. Promise me.'

'Did I tell you about the two doctors fighting over Karen when she broke her leg skiing? She was lying there in the snow waiting for them to put her in the ambulance. And the two of them started beating the bejasus out of each other, an actual punch up to see who'd get her as a patient. Just 'cause they know they can charge top notch to a Westerner.' My mother laughs at her story.

'You did tell me, Mammy. You still need to go no matter if they rip you off.'

'Oh I will, of course I will. I'll just hold on to your thingy bop in the meantime in case I get a bit breathless. I suppose you've got loads of them?'

‘Yes I do but I’m not meant to give them away.’

‘Surely you can spare one for your mother.’ She holds my inhaler up and shakes it before slipping it into her skirt pocket. ‘I’m getting the hang of using it. Now no more nonsense. Let’s have a cup of tea. I’m parched from all that shopping.’

I remember nothing else about my mother’s visit that summer. Not if I went with her to the airport, not what I said to her if I put her on the plane, not if she asked me any more questions about Colman or Monique. Just that moment when she breathed into the peak flow reader and it told me a terrible truth that I was too stupid to understand.

Chapter 7

The Land of Eternal Youth

Dublin, 1976

We're going away on holidays to a magic island called Inis Oirr. It's very far away so the only teddy I'm allowed bring is Elgin Rose. To get there we have to drive for a whole day to the west of Ireland and then get a ferry. Then we have to climb down into a smaller boat from the ferry because it's too big to get into the harbour. The small boat is long and black and it's called a currack. A huge sailor man with hairy arms reaches up to grab me as my father hands me over. Even Elgin Rose finds this scary as the boat rocks and we think we're going to be dropped in the water.

If you fall into the water and you don't know how to swim, you drown. The old lady who owns the cottage we're staying in tells us about a little girl who put her face into the sea. People thought she was holding her breath and waving at the same time. But she wasn't, she was trying to ask for help. They didn't realise till it was too late and she drowned.

This story scares me but most of the time on the island, I can't understand what people are saying because they speak Irish. Even though I'm Irish, I speak English. I ask my mother why that is and she says that her father spoke Irish as his mother tongue but that the Irish language got stolen from us by the English. I didn't know you could steal words. I ask her if it's because his words were stolen that her father died. She says no, that wasn't it, he died of a heart attack when she was a little girl. I ask if this made her very sad but she says she doesn't really remember.

I ask my father what a heart attack is. He says that inside my chest is

a special pump that pushes all the blood around and that's my heart. Sometimes the pump breaks down though all of a sudden and then you die. On the island, they don't have taps like at home so we have to go every day to a green pump to get water. My father lets me pull down on the lever to make the water come out. I ask him if my heart looks like the green pump. He says sort of. Then I ask him if he's going to have a heart attack. He says he hopes not, he's barely thirty and it usually doesn't happen until you're old. I'm still worried though, he seems pretty old to me.

My father reads me a story every night before I go to sleep. One night on the island, he reads me 'The Children of Lir.' It's about four brothers and a sister called Fionnuala whose mother dies. Their father remarries an evil stepmother whose name is Aoife. I'm not at all happy that the evil stepmother has the same name as me. Especially when she goes to a magician and gets a spell to turn Fionnuala and her brothers into swans. This is because she's jealous of how much their father loves them. At first, the swans are able to stay in the lake and their father can come and feed them. But after that they have to spend four hundred years being tossed about in the ocean. Eventually they hear the sound of a Christian bell and get to turn back into people. I think they're going to see their father again but they don't because as humans they're very, very old and they die shortly afterwards. The end of the story is the priest burying them.

This is the saddest story I have ever heard. I cry myself to sleep thinking about Fionnuala and her brothers as swans lost in the storm. It seems so unfair to be turned into something you're not and never get to see

your father again.

Another story my father reads me is 'Oisín and Niamh in Tír na nÓg.' This story is sad too but I love it because the magic white horse in it lives on our island and I get to feed him carrots. My father says the magic white horse is here because he's retired now but once upon a time he belonged to Niamh, a magical princess from Tír na nÓg. Tír na nÓg means the land of eternal youth. Niamh came to Ireland on her white horse and she fell in love with the hero Oisín and took him back home with her. Tír na nÓg looks a bit like heaven and Oisín should have been happy but he misses Ireland. He wants to go back and visit so Niamh eventually lets him go on her white horse. She makes him promise though that he won't get off the horse. When he gets to Ireland, Oisín is upset because he hadn't realised hundreds of years have passed and Ireland isn't a land of heroes any more. He sees some old men trying to push a boulder up a hill and he leans down from his white horse to help them. Unfortunately, he slips and falls off the horse. The moment he touches the ground, he's transformed into an old man himself. The white horse gallops off without him and he never gets to see Niamh again. I guess it's his own fault but I'm sorry for him all the same.

When I'm feeding the white horse in his field, I wonder if he feels bad about leaving Oisín behind like that. I like the way his lips tickle my hand when he eats up the pieces of carrot. My father says he would never bite me because he's magic and very gentle.

I love being on the island because of the horses and the donkeys that go along the beach with their carts and all the stories I get to hear. But then

one day I'm playing outside the cottage. It's a game I've invented myself where I'm throwing my rubber ball against the thick window ledge and seeing how quickly I can catch it when it bounces. I'm very good at it until I misjudge and bounce my own head into the wall really hard. I start crying and my mother comes out to see what's the matter. When I explain what happened she asks me how I could be so stupid? I don't know how, I think maybe that's what Oisín thought when he fell off the horse.

That night I wake up and my head is still really hurting. My tummy feels funny too. My mother asks me how my stomach can hurt when it's my head I banged. She thinks I just don't want to go to sleep and puts me back in bed. Then I puke up all over the covers. My mother isn't angry about this. She's very nice to me as she changes the sheets. She says she didn't mean to say I was stupid and I must have hit my head harder than she realised. My father wants to get a doctor but there isn't one on the island. My parents stay up with me all night and read me stories. They keep asking me if I'm okay. I tell them I am. It's fun really but I wish my head would stop hurting.

We're back in Dublin and I'm sitting on the sofa watching the news with my parents. Usually it's very boring but tonight there's a photo of a boy who looks a bit like Sean. It's not Sean though because it turns out this boy is older and he's also dead. He got shot in the head with a rubber bullet.

I ask my mother, 'what's a rubber bullet?'

She tells me it's time for me to go to bed but I know it's not. I don't have to go to bed till after the news is over. And I don't like it when she doesn't answer my questions.

'Is a rubber bullet like a rubber ball?'

Wouldn't it just bounce off him? Maybe there's been a mistake and the little boy isn't really dead, surely he's too young to be dead? Isn't that something that happens to old people?

My father says, 'it's those British bastards trying to pretend they're in a cartoon not a war.'

My mother glares at him to shut up. On the TV, there are lots of soldiers with big guns and very serious faces.

'Are we in the war?' I ask.

'No, no,' my mother says. 'That's Northern Ireland.'

I'm confused by this. 'But don't we live in Ireland?'

'Yeah but not the bit where there's fighting. We're perfectly safe here in Dublin.' My mother kisses me on the top of my head before getting up and changing to another station.

My father complains, 'I was watching that.'

My mother says, 'Well I've seen more than enough. Do you want the child to have nightmares?'

My father looks at me. 'You're not scared, Ferret, are you? It's just TV, it's not real.' Ferret is my father's nickname for me.

I tell my father I'm not afraid. But it looked real to me. And I can't help thinking if the boy on the TV is Irish and I'm Irish and if he's dead then I could be dead.

Granddad takes me butterfly hunting. My father has taught me to call them flutterbys and to watch out for stampeding hordes but Granddad says all the

different types have different names. He says the ones that live in his lane are not dangerous. He shows me a little book he has with a leather cover. It has pictures of the different butterflies and the markings that let you know which kind you've caught.

We catch them using nets on the end of a stick. It's better to be quiet and sneak up on them like Granddad does. But sometimes I get too excited and run around waving the net and shouting. Granddad's dogs love when I do this. They run with me and bark loudly and the butterflies get away but it's fun. Granddad has a springer spaniel called Tina and a red setter called Sherry. He says they're his best friends. Even though Sherry isn't what you'd call bright, he loves her because she's very loyal.

The dogs are his favourites but Granddad is friends with other animals too. He has a magic whistle and when he blows on it, it doesn't make any noise but a robin redbreast comes and lands on the palm of his hand. He feeds the robin birdseed and I have to be quiet so as not to scare him off. I love the way Granddad's robin has a red coat and he puts his head from side to side when he's talking to you. Granddad can understand what he says.

Gran has taught me a very sad song about a robin that gets murdered. *'Who saw him die? I saw him die, says the fly, I saw him die with my beady eye.'* Sometimes I practice singing this song to myself and I wonder if Granddad's robin knew the robin in the song.

One day, after we feed his robin, Granddad shows me the case where he keeps all the butterflies that we've caught. He puts pins in their wings to hold them in place and little labels underneath to say what type they are. As I'm looking into the case, I realise that one of the butterflies is still moving.

He's shaking his wings but he can't get away because of the pins. I'm horrified; I'd no idea that was what happened to the butterflies. I want Granddad to let him go.

He agrees that he will, even though it's a shame because the trapped butterfly is quite a rare type. He pulls the pins out of his wings. For a second, the butterfly doesn't move. I think maybe it's too late to save him. But then he rises up out of the case. He does a kind of crazy zigzag like he's a bit confused before flying high into the air and disappearing. I think maybe butterfly hunting is not a game I want to play anymore.

I'm sitting at our kitchen table playing with my glass tiles. These are one of my favourite toys because they come in reds and blues and greens. When you look through them, it makes the whole world change into that colour. Also you can slot them together into all kinds of different shapes.

My father asks me what I'm making and I tell him I'm building a joke. He says, 'No, you're not. Jokes are meant to be funny. They need a punch line.'

I don't want to punch anyone and I don't see what's wrong with the joke I've made from my glass tiles. I ask my father why my joke isn't funny but he's not listening to me. He's talking to my mother about something serious. I pretend to keep playing with my tiles but really I'm listening hard to understand what they're saying.

It's not easy to follow but what I gather is that we're moving house again. Only this time to a foreign place on the other side of the ocean.

My father says, 'Canada is the second largest country on earth after the Soviet Union.'

I've never heard of Canada before. I picture a jungle with monkeys climbing high up into the trees. I like the idea of monkeys but I don't like the idea of moving.

Then my mother says, 'There's bound to be lots of snow.'

So I wipe away the picture of jungle monkeys and see Eskimos in their igloos instead. I wonder if there's going to be polar bears.

In school my teacher, Mrs O'Connell, tells us that now we're in senior infants we each get our own coat peg with our own name above it. We're all very excited about this. Mrs O'Connell leads us out into the corridor and tells us to find our peg and hang up our coat neatly. The pegs are golden coloured and directly over them, each child's name is neatly printed in large, black capital letters.

I search the row of pegs but I can't see my name. I walk along the row again reading each name carefully. I'm sure it must be here and I don't want Mrs O'Connell to think I'm stupid and can't read my own name.

Everyone else has hung up their coat and is ready to go back into class. Mrs O'Connell tells me to hurry and get in line. I don't want to admit I can't find my name but I haven't got a choice.

'Where's my name?' I ask.

Mrs O'Connell peers down at me. 'Oh yeah, that's right,' she says. 'You're leaving us so soon it didn't seem worth putting it up there so I didn't bother.'

I stare at her in shock. We're not moving to Canada till after Christmas and that's ages and ages away. I suddenly feel as if somehow I've already left. That because I'm moving to another country, I don't exist. All my classmates will carry on without me and because I have no name to mark my place, I don't count for anything. Mrs O'Connell turns away.

Me and Granddad are in the garage playing indoor fishing. What we do is we get two deckchairs and place them one behind the other to make the boat. Then Granddad sets up the fishing rods. He explains that there's different rods and hooks that you use for catching different fish. I'm not allowed touch the hooks because I might cut myself. Normally you put live worms on the end of the hooks because that's what fish like to eat. We don't have to do this though because we're only fishing inside and not by a river. I'm glad about this because I like worms and sticking them on hooks reminds me a bit of the pins in the butterfly wings.

Granddad sits in the front deckchair because he's the captain of the ship. He gives me my rod, then he lights his pipe before picking up his own. Our ship is a huge ocean liner and we're sailing around the world visiting all the foreign countries. I ask if we can go to Canada but Granddad says I'll be going there soon enough. He says this is the last time we'll get to play indoor fishing in the garage. I tell him we'll play when I get back from Canada. He says I'll be older then and I might not want to play in the garage any more.

This isn't true though. Granddad's garage is one of my favourite places. It's kind of dark but it's not scary, even though Granddad has real shotguns that he uses to shoot birds. He's shown them to me but I'm not

allowed touch them. As well as the butterfly case, he also has lots of cases of birds' eggs. And he has a huge picnic basket full of knives and forks and champagne glasses and a red and blue chequered rug so we can sit on the ground and play indoor picnic after our adventures at sea.

Today though I decide that our ship is in trouble. An enormous storm has blown up and giant waves are crashing over the sides. I wave my rod around wildly because we're being tossed up and down in the wind and rain.

I shout, 'Granddad, what are we going to do? There's a huge storm.'

Granddad puffs on his pipe before taking it out of his mouth. Then he smiles at me and says, 'There may be in a storm in your part of the boat but in mine, it is the most peaceful, sunny day.'

When we go back into the house, Nana lets me comb her hair with her orange comb. I like doing this because it makes her look beautiful and she gives me lots of biscuits to say thank you. This time though when I hold up the mirror for her to have a look at how pretty she is, she doesn't tell me what an amazing job I've done.

She asks, 'Dear God but how did I ever get so old?'

I don't understand. I thought she was always old. She tells me her hair used to be red, even redder than my mother's.

'But it's still red,' I point out.

'No, that's just dye. It's not the same thing at all.' Nana sounds sad about this.

I don't know what dye is but it makes me think of something. I say, 'I hope you and Granddad don't die by the time I get back from Canada.'

As soon as I say it, there is a sudden silence like all the air has been sucked out of the room. My mother gives me that look that means I've said something I really shouldn't have.

After a horrible eternity of stillness, Nana sighs, 'Well I'll certainly pray for that.'

Granddad takes his pipe out of his mouth. He carefully puts more tobacco in it and relights it. He says nothing. Watching him do this, I think how much I love the smell of his pipe. I don't want to go to Canada. I wish I hadn't said that about them dying, what if it makes it come true?

Granddad winks at me. Suddenly I realise that I don't actually know what death is.

Chapter 8

A Metal Box

London, 1996

I'm sitting in a small pub theatre watching a play called 'The Yellow Wallpaper.' I don't know anything about the play apart from it's an adaptation of a short story that was written a long time ago. Our friend Conor's English girlfriend is directing it so that's why we've all come along to show our support.

By we, I mean me and Colman and the large bubble of friends we hang around with. All of us are Irish. Most of us went to college together and emigrated to London around the same time. Apart that is from Conor's new girlfriend who is a bit older and exotic in that she comes from this country. The jury is still out on her but there is a great deal of unspoken suspicion. Is she a bit too confident, too stuck up, too distant, or is she just English?

Colman is holding my hand. I don't know why he's doing this, he never used to. Once when we were walking through Stephen's Green in Dublin, he told me holding hands is for saps. Laughing, I'd tried to take his arm instead. But he'd pulled away almost violently saying linking arms makes you look like an elderly couple. Now he's holding my hand tightly in the darkened theatre when I really don't want him to.

The play seems well acted but I'm having trouble following the plot. I'm very tired. I've hardly slept for months. And I'm thinking of Monique. I don't ever seem to think about anything else these days. Hundreds of times I've run through scenarios in my head where I've told her I can't see her any more or we should really just be friends. I get to the point where I've made this

crystal clear both to her and to myself and then find I'm dialling her number so that I can arrange to see her again as soon as possible.

When we first met, she told me she planned to move to Australia at the end of the summer. I found this reassuring because it meant there was a definite cut off point to a romance I'd never intended to happen. But somehow everything has snowballed and Monique has stopped talking about Australia. And I've stopped asking. If I asked, I might have to admit that I don't want her to go.

After my mother left, I eventually managed to ring Monique back. Her voice was ice on the phone. She said she needed to meet me to tell me something important. I'm pretty sure I'm about to be dumped. In all my attempts to convince myself I should stop seeing Monique, I haven't really considered before that she might come to the same conclusion.

Monique's never once asked me if I'd leave Colman. All she's done is talk repeatedly about how much she'd like to take me to Saint-Tropez to see where she comes from and meet her family. Not for long, just for a holiday. But how can I go away with her when I'm supposed to be going on holidays with my boyfriend? Colman has been making noises about a group of us going to Greece. He says he doesn't want to go with just me because that would be boring.

When I tell Monique this, her face becomes very still. 'Why do you want to go with him when I would be so happy just to have you for a weekend for myself?'

The truth is I don't want to go with him. I don't want to be sitting in this theatre holding his hand. On stage, the main character is ill in bed and talking

to her husband about how there are creatures moving in the wallpaper. It reminds me of when I was a child and my mother used to let me sleep in my parents' room when my father was away with work. The wallpaper was orange and bumpy and I loved to trace the outlines of animals I thought I could see in it. I had a tiger and a lion but my favourite was a camel with a large hump. My mother would have the radio on and we'd listen to the shipping news and a late night jazz programme. I loved the way the man who presented the programme would say 'and this next one comes all the way from New Orleans' in this slow, deep voice as though he was taking us there in a dream. I wish I could talk to my mother about how my whole life has turned into the strangest dream. I keep pinching myself and expecting to wake up.

But she'd never understand. I suspect she'd be very angry and worse, disappointed. 'What about marriage? What about children? What about what your friends will think? What about Colman, he's not the worst surely? What about all those words that exist out there in reality? Dyke, carpet muncher, lezzar, homosexual, pervert...'

These are not my mother's questions. They are mine. But I hear them in my head in her voice and I feel like I'm standing on the edge of a cliff where I have an irrational compulsion to jump.

The sick woman on stage with the wallpaper has a husband who is a doctor. He's telling her that she just needs to stay calm, to rest, to not write anything and to trust him. Something in the doctor's kind, patronising tone reminds of Colman. I remove my hand from his. He shifts in his seat but he doesn't look at me.

The sick woman is now convinced there is another woman trapped behind the bars of the wallpaper. A woman who crawls around and around the room like an animal. As she tells the audience about this, it becomes clear that she's lost her mind. I wonder if that's what's happening to me. The stage feels very far away and the blackness of the small auditorium is pressing down on my face. I've never understood properly before what claustrophobia is. I feel like if I don't get out of this theatre, I'm going to start screaming.

The crazy woman's husband is telling her not to be hysterical. I dig my nails into the back of my hand in an effort to stay calm. Suddenly a voice inside my head that I've never heard before says, 'I'm going to leave him.'

This thought has such absolute clarity that it's as if it's imprinted in black capital letters across my mind. Even though I must have been building up to this moment over the past six months, it's as if it had never occurred to me before, as if the idea had come from nowhere. But now that I've thought the impossible, I know this is what I will do.

After the play, we go for a drink downstairs in the pub. Everyone seems to think 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was weird and didn't make much sense. Anita tells a story about how the other week, me and her had our bags searched as we went into a theatre in the West End. It's true that the guy on the door waved everyone else through but stopped us when he heard our accents. All the people in the queue stared as he carefully took everything out of our bags, including some loose tampons I had at the bottom of mine. I blushed at the small pile of my belongings as he informed the queue, 'You can't be too

careful.’ As the strangers behind us nodded their heads in agreement, I felt like I should be offering some kind of apology.

Colman says, ‘You can hardly blame them being suspicious of Irish people when the IRA has just blown up Manchester.’

‘Well I didn’t blow anyone up,’ Anita replies. ‘When my Mam was here in the seventies, she went into her local shop after some bomb went off and the shopkeeper spat in her face.’

‘It won’t get as bad as that,’ Colman insists.

Just then Conor’s English girlfriend appears and the subject of Irish terrorism is instantly dropped. We all tell her how much we enjoyed her play and thank her for inviting us.

Colman proposes that we all go out clubbing but I say I’ve a headache and I want to go home. He tells me I should head back to Chelsea and he’ll see me later on. He promises he won’t be late. I don’t feel guilty about being boring because he seems nearly as glad to be rid of me as I am to get away from him. I don’t really have a headache as such but there is a strange ringing sound in my head that’s making polite conversation pretty unbearable.

Outside the pub, I wave goodbye to everyone. ‘Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,’ Michael calls out to me. As I turn away to head for the tube, I have a strange sensation that I won’t ever see them again.

It’s a clear evening but the air has a chill in it for the first time. A reminder that summer is ending and September is nearly upon us. Our flat is on the third floor of one of the towers of World End’s council estate. We’ve only been living here since January but I’ve come to hate the place. It’s not just the Nazi

graffiti and the smell of piss in the lifts, it's a certain sour resentment that hangs in the air. The people who live here have very little yet just down the road is the supremely unfriendly poshness of Sloane Square. They are surrounded by chic boutiques and expensive restaurants and fancy bars that they would never dream of setting foot in. This is definitely the wrong end of the King's Road. Still the flat has two bedrooms with a view of the river and we don't have to pay rent. It belongs to Colman because of his job. If I leave him, I'm going to have to figure out somewhere else to live.

'It's the end of the world as we know it,' I hum to myself as I cross the courtyard and look up at the dozens of lit squares of windows in the flats above me.

Only when I've climbed the three flights of stairs and arrived at our front door do I remember that I don't have my keys. Colman left his in work by mistake so I've lent him mine. Even though this now comes back to me with horrible clarity, I still go through my whole bag in the hope the keys will somehow miraculously appear. Then I check my wallet. I only have a few coins in it. I don't know what time it is but it's definitely past the last tube. And a taxi back into town will cost a fortune. Plus I'm not even sure what club Colman was going to. They were still debating it when I left. Colman had wanted to go to Popstarz but the others weren't so sure.

This is in the days before mobile phones, or at least before anyone I know has a mobile phone, so I'm forced to head back out to the King's Road to find a phone box. I can hardly ring my parents in Tehran to tell them I'm locked out of my flat. I could ring my brother Stephen in Dublin but he'd just laugh at me. I realise the only other number I know off by heart, apart from

my own, is Monique's. I dial it praying she'll be in. Maybe I can get a night bus over to her place in Brixton. Even if she is about to ditch me, she'll hardly leave me to sleep on her doorstep.

The phone rings for ages and I'm about to give up when a man's voice answers. I ask for Monique and he shouts at me, 'She's not in'. Then he slams down the phone before I have a chance to leave a message. I'm taken aback by his rudeness but then realise it must be nearly one in the morning and I've probably woken him up. I wonder where Monique is. I've told her Colman was talking about going to Popstarz after the play but she hasn't said what her plans for this Saturday night are. Do I really know her at all? I shiver in the phone booth. I'm wearing my thin dark brown leather jacket and I'm freezing.

I head back to the estate thinking there are some benches near the playground and perhaps I can lie down on them and try to sleep. I really am incredibly tired. I remember Colman saying he wouldn't be late. With depressing certainty, I realise that means four or possibly five am. The benches are red and plastic. As I attempt to get comfortable, I discover they have bumps in them that make lying down impossible. I curse this incredibly stupid design. Then it dawns on me that it's not stupid, it's done on purpose to prevent those with no homes to go to from getting any kip. Bastards, I think, with a genuine rage about the plight of the homeless that I'm ashamed to say I've never felt when I was tucked up in the warmth of my own bed.

The cold seems to have seeped into the very marrow of my being and my teeth are chattering. Maybe it will be warmer inside the lifts. I head back over to our tower. There's not another living soul around. Of course I

wouldn't really want to bump into anybody who'd be wandering around our estate at this time of night. But I'm starting to have the apocalyptic sensation that the world really has ended and I'm the sole survivor of some kind of nuclear holocaust.

There are two lifts, though at least one of them is generally broken. This evening, to my relief, when I press the button, both of them ding open. I step into the one on the left. I am in what is essentially a large silver metal box, rather like an oversized aluminium coffin. It has that flickering strip lighting I'm sure they use to torture people. The stench of urine makes my stomach flip over and I put my hand over my mouth. It's not a desire for exercise but my dislike of this smell that means unless burdened with shopping, I always use the stairs. But tonight the lift is marginally warmer than being outside and for that I am extraordinarily grateful. I rub my arms in an attempt to get my blood flowing again. Then I press the button for the top floor.

I step out onto the roof. I've only ever been up here once before on the day we moved in. Funny how that seems like several life times ago.

I remember standing here looking out and Colman exclaiming, 'What a great view, we'll have to come up here all the time.'

And of course we haven't. I suddenly feel very sad for all the things we haven't done. Whose fault has that been? Shouldn't I have made more of an effort? I realise that this is the first time in ages that I wish Colman was with me. And this is mainly because he has my keys. But it's not entirely just that.

My parents met and they fell in love and they got married. Simple. Well I guess it wasn't that simple but still by the time she was my age, my mother was married with two children. Why am I making everything so complicated for myself?

I look out over the river. It's a dark shadow moving far beneath me but there are also the cheery lights of barges passing slowly up and down. Suddenly I realise I'm shaking. There's a sharp breeze up here on the roof and it's cutting right through me.

I get back into the lift with its horrible fluorescent twitching and overpowering smell of piss. Though I don't press any button, after a while the doors close by themselves. The lift doesn't move but the light goes off. The sudden darkness makes me panic and I fumble to press every button I can find. The light comes back on and the lift starts moving with a slow whirr like a mouse being killed very, very slowly. I realise I'm going to have to keep the lift moving if I don't want the light to go out automatically. I've never actually noticed the whirring noise the lift makes before but now it seems to be getting louder and louder.

Suddenly though I realise I can also hear voices. There are people in the other lift. I can hear a man and a woman talking. Maybe if I could catch up with them, I could ask them for help? A couple returning from a night out seem less likely to be axe murderers or rapists. I hit a button at random. I know it's hopeless. In a moment or two, they'll have disappeared into the warmth and safety of their home while I'll still be stuck taking shelter in this bloody lift.

Strangely though I can still hear them. I listen intently and realise they're having some kind of argument. I can't make out the words but the man's voice is low and angry. The woman is quiet for a moment but then she begins roaring at him hysterically. All I can make out is, 'You bastard, you total bastard.'

Then she starts sobbing loudly. For a second, I'm worried the man is going to hit her. But when he speaks, his voice is very calm. He's obviously trying to comfort her. She's having none of it though. She starts screaming at him in a high-pitched animal shriek. I don't know if she's even using words any more but the pain and fury in her rage is unbearable to listen to. I hit a button to get away from them.

As her screams recede, I wonder if she's in danger and I should somehow be trying to rescue her. But if anything it sounds as if she's about to kill him, not the other way round. After a few moments, I hear another mouse being tortured and realise the other lift is moving. The woman's cries are getting louder again. The man's pleading with her but I can tell he's wasting his breath. She's way beyond listening to anything he's saying. I tell myself this is just a silly drunken row, like couples have all the time. Like I've had myself on occasion. But the woman's screaming and sobbing with renewed intensity and it all sounds so raw and utterly desperate.

As I hit the button again to move away from them, I realise they must be doing what I'm doing. Keeping the lift moving so that the light doesn't go off. It's like a ridiculous game of cat and mouse as I try to figure out how to get furthest away from the sound of what has surely got to be the end of their relationship. Is it possible that people could get this upset with each other and

then just carry on the next day as if nothing had happened? Why are they having this total meltdown in a lift of all places? Probably because they've no idea I'm here and think they have a privacy they wouldn't have at home.

I have no idea what age they are or what they look like, they're just disembodied voices, one male and one female. Are they married? Have they got children? I find myself fervently hoping they don't have children as her sobbing turns to a high pitched keening. Maybe somebody has died on her. Maybe she's losing the love of her life.

'Please stop,' I whisper. 'Please God make it stop.' Not that I think God actually exists. Though not as atheist as my father, I still reckon it's highly unlikely. My mother claims this makes me an agnostic like her. But right now agnostic strikes me as just a fancy word for not having a clue what you believe.

As my Gran says, 'Just because you don't believe in God doesn't mean He doesn't believe in you. He sees you even though you can't see Him.' If God's watching me now, I bet he's laughing.

I feel as if I've been trapped in this lift forever. Like that play I saw once where one of the characters observes, 'Hell is other people.' Meaning an eternity of being stuck with those you don't like repeating the same arguments over and over. But let's face it, I don't want to be on my own either. I want to be normal, I want to belong. Most of all, I want to go home. I just don't happen to know where that is.

The last time I saw Monique I said to her, 'I'm not gay you know.'

'So what does that make me?' she asked quietly. 'A total idiot?'

Of course she's not the idiot, I am. All my life I've been scared that there's something deeply wrong with me and that one day everyone is going to find out. Now I feel I'm going to be caught at last and judged. Being stuck in this lift is punishment for how I'm letting everybody down.

I realise I'd rather die of hypothermia than listen to this couple argue for a moment longer. I get out at our floor and as I turn the corner, I spot Colman about to let himself into our flat. I've never been so glad to see him in my entire life.

'Keys,' I shout. 'You have my keys.'

'Shit,' he says, turning to stare at me. 'I'm really sorry. Are you alright?'

'I'm fine,' I mumble. 'It was a bit cold. I'm fine. I went on the roof. There was this couple in the other lift...'

And then I stop trying to explain. I don't know how to begin to tell him what a nightmare this evening has been. I don't know how to begin to tell him that I want to leave him.

Chapter Nine

World War Three

Ottawa, 1978

I'm looking through the window of an aeroplane. Far below me I can see lots of toy cars in different colours like the ones Stephen likes to play with. I point this out to my father and he says, 'They're not toys, Ferret Face. They're real, they just look like toys because they're so far away.'

I shake my head at this. I'm learning not to believe everything my father tells me.

It turns out there are no Eskimos or polar bears in Canada. Or at least not in Ottawa, the city we live in. There is snow though, lots of snow. At first, we live in a hotel because we haven't found a house to rent yet. My parents discover we won't be able to get a house until the snow melts because nobody moves when there's so much snow and it's so cold.

'Ridiculous to post us to this God forsaken country in January,' my mother says.

Because we're in a hotel, I can't go to school so my mother decides to teach me herself. She's amazed at how little I know.

'Didn't you learn anything?' she asks when she discovers I can't remember what the days of the week are. I never liked it when Mrs O'Connell used to shout at us but my mother shouts even more.

'Jesus but I'd never have the patience to be a teacher,' she says. I think she's right. I hope we find a house so I can go back to school soon and escape my mother's teaching.

'Let's go play in the snow,' my mother says, slamming my sums book shut. She hates being stuck in the hotel because we only have two small rooms and Canadian telly is a load of rubbish.

My mother puts us into our snowsuits. Mine is green with a fur lined hood and Stephen's is blue. He doesn't like being put into the padded trousers or having the coat zipped up or wearing his boots and he's always losing his mittens. It takes forever for my mother to get us ready and Stephen starts crying because he wants to go outside. But once we get outside, he starts to cry because it's so cold. I like making my breath smoke like a dragon. But after a few minutes, even though we're all wrapped up, my toes and my ears start to hurt. I never have to cry though because Stephen does that for me. My mother tells him not to be such a baby but that just makes him scream. The screaming is annoying but it gets us back inside which I'm quite happy about.

At the weekend we go to the canal, which is completely frozen, and there are loads of people skating. My father says he'll teach me how. It's a lot harder than it looks. Even though my father holds my hands, my skates keep slipping sideways and I lose my balance. My father tells me I need to stand straighter and slide one skate forward and then the other. I try this but I fall over. I can tell my father is getting annoyed at how stupid I'm being.

'Why don't you take a break?' he says. 'Just sit down here for a moment and rest. I'll be right back.'

I sit in the snow and watch my father disappear into the crowd of skaters. He can move really fast. I decide I'll practice by myself while he's

gone. It's hard getting to my feet without him and I'm scared I'll fall again. I move very slowly. One foot and then the other. I wobble and nearly topple over but then suddenly it seems to work. I'm gliding slowly over the ice and I even pick up a bit of speed. All around me people race past in a swirl of coats and scarves. Their breath is steaming and they're smiling and laughing. The ice is a kind of blue white. It's easier to look at than the banks of snow which glitter and burn in the sunshine. The sky is vast and deep blue over my head. I feel a bit like I'm flying. Wait till my father sees, I think, he's going to be really happy I'm not so stupid after all.

A man in a big puffy jacket whips by me, nearly knocking me over. I come to a stop to regain my balance. I don't fall though. I can do this now. I look around for my father so I can show him that I've become a skater. I can't see him anywhere. There are lots of children and grownups rushing past in little groups. I'm the only one that's on my own. I decide to head back to where I was sitting.

I turn around very carefully. But there's only a vast whiteness. There's no way to tell where's the spot where I'd been told me to sit and wait. It all looks the same. The canal stretches frozen into the distance full of strangers who are not my father. I'm lost. I feel a rush of heat and my stomach flips over.

I slowly head back the way I've come. I'm not flying now, I'm searching. The glare of the whiteness hurts my eyes and my feet feel like they've turned to stone. I wonder if I should ask for help but I'm not supposed to speak to strangers. So I just keep going. I'm very tired and I know I've

gone too far but I don't know what to do. What if my father never finds me and I'm trapped on the ice forever?

Then I hear a voice calling my name. I turn around and it's my father skating towards me. 'There you are,' he says. 'I told you not to move. I've been looking for you everywhere.'

I'm so glad to see him I don't even mind that he's angry. 'I can skate all by myself, Daddy,' I tell him.

It takes three months for the snow to melt. My mother says to my father, 'We're going mad locked up in this bloody hotel. You've got to get us out of here.'

My father promises that if me and Stephen are good then as soon as we get a house, he will buy us a soft toy of whatever Sesame Street character we want. I'm excited about this but I don't think Stephen or my mother care that much.

One day Stephen picks up the large glass ashtray that's on the table. It's got ash in it from my father's cigarettes.

'Don't touch that,' my mother says.

Stephen looks at her. Then he hurls the ashtray against the wall as hard as he can. Which even though he's only two and three quarters is still pretty hard. The ashtray shatters into a thousand pieces. There is glass and ash everywhere.

My brother has really done it now. My mother looks as if she's going to kill him. 'Get the wooden spoon,' she says to me.

She's so angry she's forgotten the wooden spoon is still in storage with my bike and my teddies and all our other stuff. There is however a small dust pan and broom so I grab this instead. I start trying to sweep the broken glass. I think if I can clear up the mess quickly, my mother might calm down.

'Stop that,' she roars at me. 'You'll cut yourself.' She grabs the brush from my hands and pushes me out of the way. She gets down on her knees and starts picking up the larger pieces of glass carefully.

Stephen is watching her. He starts to cry. He does it silently at first but then in little gulps of sobs that make it hard for him to breathe properly.

'Oh for Christ's sakes,' my mother says. She goes over and picks him up in her arms. 'It's okay, it's okay,' she tells him quietly while wiping the tears off his face. 'Sometimes I feel like smashing things too.'

We eventually rent a wooden house in Manor Park, a suburb of Ottawa. The day after we move in, a boy my age with white blond hair rings our doorbell. He looks like an angel dressed in combat trousers and a Superman t-shirt. It's a Saturday afternoon and my father answers with me hidden behind him.

'My name's Blare,' the boy announces. 'I live across the street. Do you have a little boy I could play with?'

'No,' my father replies. 'But I have a little girl. Would that do?'

My father shoves me forward and Blare regards me with disappointment. 'We need another soldier to make the teams even. Girls aren't soldiers.'

'I could be a soldier,' I whisper. It feels like an eternity since I've had anyone my own age to play with. I could be anything he wants.

Sensing my desperation, my father announces cheerfully, 'Of course girls can be soldiers. Anyone with a gun can be a soldier. My daughter has a rifle that was used to fight in the Spanish Civil War. Wouldn't that be good for your army? An army needs decent weapons after all.'

I watch Blare's curiosity overcome his doubts about girls in the military. Like the magician he is, my father produces a pop gun that Granddad bought for him in Spain when my father was a little boy. He demonstrates how it can fire wooden corks with considerable accuracy.

'Cool,' Blare declares and I know I've been recruited.

I love playing soldiers with my new best friend Blare and all the other boys. Because I'm the only girl, I have to hand my father's rifle over to Blare's evil older brother Philip. Philip tells me he hates girls but I can have a water pistol to fight with as long as I don't start crying or being a baby. Blare explains that we're not fighting the British like they do in Ireland, we're fighting the Nazis who are German. If the Nazis catch you, they will turn you into a piece of soap. That's why it's important to kill as many of them as possible.

I ask my father if he fought in any wars. He says he was very lucky not to have to. I think it's a bit disappointing though. I ask him if Granddad did and he says no, he didn't have to either. But that when Granddad was a little boy, he saw a soldier shot dead right in front of him. Granddad was waiting to cross the road with his father. There was a British soldier sitting on his horse and the next thing he was on the ground with a bullet in his head. There was blood everywhere and the horse went crazy, rearing up and pawing at the air and neighing like he was the one that got shot. The soldier didn't make any

noise at all and Granddad could tell there was no hope for him. He'd been killed instantly. Nobody knew where the shot had come from but it was probably a sniper hiding in a window. It all happened so fast, the soldier was dead before he even knew what hit him. Even though he was the enemy, Granddad felt a bit sorry for the dead soldier.

I ask my mother if her father was ever in the army. She says she doesn't think so. Certainly he wouldn't have been a British soldier. Not like my father's family who were a bunch of Castle Catholics and Nana had an uncle in the British army. Being in the British army makes you a traitor because you should have been fighting to get Ireland free instead. Like Kevin Barry in the song.

My mother teaches me this song that her Gran taught to her when she was my age. *'In Mountjoy Jail one Monday morning, high upon the gallows tree, Kevin Barry gave his young life for the cause of liberty. Just a lad of eighteen summers, yet no one can deny, as he walked to death that morning he proudly held his head on high.'*

The gallows tree means the British put a rope around his neck and hung Kevin Barry till he wasn't breathing any more. This was because he wouldn't betray his friends and say who had helped him attack the British. That's what being a hero is, attacking the British and staying true to your friends.

I ask my father what a Castle Catholic is. He doesn't answer me though. Instead he tells me and Stephen about how hundreds of years ago when he was young, he used to go out hunting dinosaurs. He was in an army led by a guy called Hannibal and they used to ride into battles on elephants.

They went to a place called Xanadu that was full of jewels and rivers made of chocolate.

‘You said you were never a soldier,’ I point out.

My father sucks on his Marlboro and says no, he was never a regular soldier. But he was a warrior with Kubla Khan in outer Mongolia. After that, he went to the Wild West to be a cowboy and then he was in Moscow spying on the Russian spies. I’m not sure my father really did do all this. Still I love when he talks about his many careers. Plus he has been to a lot of places. He shows me his passport, which is covered in all kinds of strange stamps from all the countries he’s been to. It’s like a book of adventures. Some of the countries he’s visited are behind a curtain made out of iron and not many people get to go there. Also the people who live there can never leave because they’re stuck behind the curtain.

There’s even a city called Berlin that is divided in two by a huge wall. My mother had a friend from there and she could never visit her own grandfather because he lived on the East side of the wall and her friend’s family lived on the West side. At least there’s only an ocean between me and Granddad and my mother says him and Nana are definitely coming to visit. She says Nana is afraid of flying but unfortunately not scared enough not to get on the aeroplane. I wonder if I ask Nana what a Castle Catholic is, will she tell me? I think it’d be great to live in a castle but the way my mother says it, I can guess it’s something to be ashamed of.

My mother tells me regardless of his family, I should be proud of my father because he’s something much better than a soldier. He’s somebody who makes peace instead of war. This is very important because since they

invented nuclear weapons, we are on the edge of World War Three. And if World War Three happens then the whole planet will be blown to smithereens. My father says on one side there's a Russian man with his finger on a big red button and on the other side there's an American man with his finger on the same kind of blow up the world button. He tells me to imagine two men who have a gun to each other's heads. One man has five bullets and the other man has only one bullet. But if they both pull the trigger at the same time, it won't make any difference who has more bullets because they'll both be dead. This is why it's stupid of the Russians and the Americans to have a race to see who can build the most nuclear bombs. You only need a couple of nuclear bombs to kill every single person on planet Earth.

My father is trying to explain to the men with the buttons that they should be getting rid of their bombs, not building more. So far though, they're not listening to him so they could push the buttons at any second and we'd all be dead before we even knew what hit us. When I'm playing soldiers, I think about the men with the World War Three buttons and it makes my heart beat very fast.

At my new school, there are two languages. English and French. To see which language to put me in, they make me do a strange test that involves lots of small drawings and picking which square goes where. On the basis of this, it's decided I should be immersed in French even though I can't speak it like the other kids. My mother claims it's a kind of compliment because otherwise I'd have to go into a class with English speaking nine year olds. I don't want to be in a class with bigger children because I know they won't

want to play with me and they'll probably hit me for being only six. I think it'll be okay because in my old school there were two languages also. English and Irish. Most things were said in English but you had to say 'an seo' every morning to let the teacher know you were there and there was a fun Irish song about a teddy bear that runs too fast and falls over.

But it's not like my old school. Immersed means that there is no English allowed. 'C'est interdit de parler anglais dans la classe' the other children shout at me every time I try to speak to them. They think I'm stupid because I don't understand what they're saying. I have to sit outside the door and an older boy shows me numbers on cards and I'm meant to say the numbers in French. I'm not very good at remembering the words for the numbers and the older boy yawns like I'm the dumbest person he's ever met.

The only good thing is that my teacher is called Mademoiselle Putvez and she's very nice. She has lots of blonde hair all swept up around her face and I think she's really beautiful. She never shouts when I use the wrong words as long as I'm trying. One day I sit listening to Mademoiselle Putvez read a story en Francais with the whole class perched on cushions round her feet. I know it's a good story because there's that special magic hush. I can make out some of it but not enough to understand what's happening to the prince in the forest. I try to listen harder so I can go ooh and ahh like everybody else but it's useless. I'm not even sure if the stupid prince is even in the stupid forest any more.

I'm gripped by a sudden urge to leap up and rip the book from Mademoiselle Putvez's hands. I'd like to tear the pages into thousands of pieces and mush them under my feet. The idea is so clear in my head that,

for a moment, I'm frightened I'm actually going to do this. I think it must be the devil talking in my ear and telling me to do what I know is very wrong. I start to sweat and I feel a bit sick in my stomach. I bite my lip to put the bad thoughts out of my mind.

Afterwards I sit at my desk pretending to read a book that has pictures with French words in it. I put my face very close to the book because I don't want anyone to see that I'm trying not to cry. Mademoiselle Putvez sees everything though. She asks me what's wrong. I don't know how to tell her in English about the devil in my head, never mind in French. So I say nothing. She asks me what I'm reading. Then she says to pick any picture I like and she'll give me that word in French. It'll be my special word that I can keep always. I choose a picture of a strawberry and she says 'une fraise'. I think it sounds beautiful and I practice saying it to myself. Une Fraise. A strawberry. I feel much better now that Mademoiselle Putvez has made me a present of a word. After that, I collect lots of French words very quickly and then whole sentences start to be mine and I can understand most of what's going on around me.

Every morning we do an exercise dance to a song called 'Raindrops keep falling on my head.' It's about a boy who feels sad but then learns to be happy. It's in English so it's easy to learn. We also sing the anthem 'au Canada' in French. This is a special song for Canada. Canada's symbol is a big red leaf that comes from the maple tree which gives a delicious syrup that you can put all over your pancakes. My mother tells me that Ireland has a special song too and our symbol is a beautiful harp and also a pint of

Guinness. Guinness is even more delicious than maple syrup but it's only for adults to drink.

I tell Mademoiselle Putvez about the Irish anthem and the Guinness symbol and how it's because of my father's job that we're in Canada and not Ireland. She asks me what my father does and I say he's a diplomat. I explain that this means his job is to bring peace to the world and to stop the war in Northern Ireland. Mademoiselle Putvez thinks this is so cute, she wants me to say it again to another teacher. But I'm shy and I don't want to say it to another teacher that I don't know. Besides it's not cute, it's true.

If we hadn't got sent to Ottawa, my father might have been posted to Belfast. We wouldn't have been able to go with him because it would be too dangerous. He'd have to live in a special bunker under the ground with helicopters flying overhead to look out for terrorists. Otherwise he might get kidnapped or shot or blown up by a bomb. Sometimes I think about my father having to be put in the bunker and I feel a bit sick. If the war doesn't stop, they might send him there in the future. I don't know how to say all this in French to Mademoiselle Putvez so I say nothing.

I wonder if Mademoiselle Putvez knows about the two men with the buttons. My mother says everyone knows about that but they don't think about it so much and neither should I. But my father thinks about it all the time and talks about it all the time because it's his job. I ask him if everyone in the whole world will be killed in World War Three or if there could be any survivors? He tells me that the best possible place to have a chance of surviving is the west coast of Ireland. This is because of the way the wind blows so you'd get the least amount of radiation.

Radiation is a kind of sickness that means you might wish you'd died in the initial blast. When a nuclear bomb goes off, it looks like a giant mushroom that grows very, very quickly up into the sky. It's so hot that everybody for a hundred miles is incinerated instantly. Incinerated means your clothes burn into your skin and you turn into ash just like what falls off my father's cigarettes. But if you didn't get incinerated, then you'd get the radiation sickness, which also makes your skin fall off, but more slowly and painfully.

The only chance of escaping the radiation sickness would be to go into a special bunker. A bit like the one my father might have had to go into in Northern Ireland but bigger and much deeper and with more supplies. Because it wouldn't be safe to come out for at least a year because the air wouldn't be clear yet. And when you did eventually come out, the whole world would be in a winter that never ended. The trees would all be grey and there would be nothing growing anywhere. My father says in a nuclear winter, everything is covered in ash rather than snow.

My mother asks me what I want to be when I grow up. At first I wanted to be an astronaut but then I noticed how on Star Trek they never do seem to find their way home. I'd love to visit other planets but I wouldn't want to be lost in space forever. So I had decided I'd be a scientist on the ground, maybe one with a giant telescope for looking at stars. But now I tell my mother that I don't think I'll get a chance to grow up because of the men with buttons and the mushroom in the sky and the nuclear winter. My mother says not to worry because my father won't let World War Three happen any time soon. I hope she's right.

Chapter Ten

A Gift of Flowers

London, 1996

The morning after I get locked out of our flat, we're lying in bed and I ask Colman, 'Do you think you'll ever want children?'

He yawns, 'Oh God not this again. I told you I hate kids.'

'Yeah but my mother always says she'd no interest in babies till she had her own. Even then she found other people's really dull and couldn't understand why they insisted on talking about them all the time.'

'Well exactly. Who needs to know the details of a creature that just eats, shits, and screams all day and all night.'

'I'm being serious. Do you really think you'll never want to have a child in your whole life?'

'I'm sure of it. I honestly can't see the point of them. I've got ambitions, things I want to do. They'd get in the way. There's too many brats in the world as it is.'

Colman rolls away from me to indicate that the conversation is over. I lie there thinking but I do want kids, I've always wanted kids for as long as I can remember.

Or at least since my brother Eamonn was born when I was eleven. Unlike with Stephen, by then I was old enough to appreciate my baby brother's cuteness. Despite how it used to irritate the life out of me when people would say to my mother, 'Oh wasn't that clever to raise the babysitter first,' I actually loved looking after Eamonn when he was small. And even though he's now on the edge of turning into a teenager, we're still very close.

Every summer my mother lets him come visit me for a few days as a special treat. He's due to arrive tomorrow. I can hardly ring my mother and ask her to cancel this promised trip because I'm planning on leaving Colman for a woman. Somehow I'm going to have to keep it together till after Eamonn's gone.

Colman stretches. 'Shit it's nearly twelve, I'm meant to be meeting Michael for a pint. Hair of the dog and all that.' He heaves himself out of bed and heads for the bathroom.

I lie there wondering if he even remembers that I'm spending the afternoon with Monique. Though it could be a very short afternoon if she plans on ditching me as I suspect. If she says it's over between us, I can just go back to my normal life. Get married, have a family, all the things I've always assumed that I want. I can carry on as if nothing had ever happened. The thought of this should make me feel relieved. But it doesn't, it makes me feel as if someone were slowly pressing a pillow down on my face.

As soon as Colman leaves, I rush over to Monique's place in Brixton. Somehow even though I'm dreading hearing what she has to say, I'm still longing to see her. She lives in a large Victorian house that she shares with five other people. Her room is at the top so you can hear the pigeons cooing to each other in the rooftops.

I sit on the edge of Monique's bed. She's standing on the far side of the room regarding me coldly. 'I've got something to tell you,' she says.

'Wait,' I insist. 'I've something to tell you first.'

'I just need to say this quickly or I won't manage to say it at all.'

With horrible certainty, I know she's going to announce it's over between us. So I cut in with, 'I'm leaving Colman.'

There's a moment's silence and then she asks, 'For real? Are you sure?'

'Completely sure.' Then, for some inexplicable reason, I burst into tears.

Monique sits down on the bed and puts her arm around me. 'Why are you crying when this is the best news I've ever heard?'

I tell her then about the play and getting locked out and the couple arguing in the lift. She starts to laugh.

'It wasn't funny,' I say, though her laughter is contagious and I find myself smiling.

'No, I know,' she explains. 'It's just when you rang me, I was at Popstarz.'

'What?'

'You said you might be going there with Colman. So I went to see if I could find you both.'

'What were you going to do if you saw us?'

'Nothing. I thought if I saw you with your boyfriend, actually saw you, it would give me the courage to tell you goodbye. Sort of like shock therapy.'

'I'm sorry,' I say.

'Well it was a wasted evening. I couldn't see you obviously and all I know about Colman is he has black curly hair. It was amazing how many ugly boys with black hair I managed to find.'

I kiss her then and she says, 'Promise me you're not going to change your mind.'

'I promise.'

On the bus on the way home, I decide I'm going to tell Colman as soon as I get in the door of our flat. If I don't do it now, I never will. I'll let him know I plan to move out once Eamonn's visit is over. Monique has said I can move in with her but I don't think that's such a good idea. Tanya and Jason have a tiny box room that I'm sure I can stay in for a while. Also Lucy and Conor are looking for a new flat to rent and might let me move with them. The only tricky part about these friends is that of course they are Colman's friends too.

As I let myself into our flat, Colman comes rushing forward to give me a kiss and present me with a bunch of flowers. He never buys me flowers.

'What's going on?' I ask.

'Nothing, I just thought you'd like them.'

I look down at the flowers. There was a time I'd be thrilled out of my mind to get flowers from him. 'They're lovely,' I say, unconvincingly.

'I'd a really good chat with Michael,' Colman tells me as I go into the kitchen to search for a vase. It's dawning on me that this is not going to be at all easy.

'About what?' My stomach lurches. I have to remind myself I shouldn't care if Michael has pointed out to Colman that he should be worried about me seeing someone else. I'm leaving him so what Colman thinks about me and Monique doesn't matter anymore. Except, somehow, it does.

'Children,' Colman replies.

This isn't what I was expecting. Our conversation that morning already seems light years ago.

'What about them?' I ask cautiously.

'I told Michael you'd asked if I ever wanted any. It turns out he'd love to be a father. Funny, I'd never thought about gay people wanting children before.'

I feel like telling Colman there's a lot of things he hasn't thought about.

'Well I'm sure Michael would make a very good father,' I mumble. I open up the presses to search for the vase, even though I'm not even sure we have one.

'Not likely to happen though is it. He said I should appreciate how lucky I am...'

'Listen,' I attempt to interrupt. 'I need to talk to you.'

But Colman continues oblivious. 'I guess I've been a bit busy lately, kind of distracted, with work and everything but you do know...'

I stand up and put the flowers down beside the sink before turning to face him. 'I can't do this anymore.'

Colman blinks hard. He looks as if I've slapped him. 'I was going to say you do know that I love you.'

'I love you too but I don't want to be with you anymore.' Oddly this is actually true.

'Because I don't want children?'

'No, that's just part of it, it's because of everything. Everything about us I mean. About me.'

'I don't understand.' Colman's face has gone white. 'I thought you were happier recently.'

Is it actually possible that he hasn't noticed I've been happier since I've found someone else?

'You must know...' I start to say.

'I don't know you at all,' Colman replies quietly, before turning and walking out of the kitchen.

Eamonn arrives full of his usual incredible enthusiasm and excitement at being in London. I take him to Sonic World, seven floors of screaming, blaring video games that would push anyone over the edge. Never mind someone who's just ended a five year relationship with her boyfriend because it's finally dawning on her that she might be a lesbian.

My brother thinks he's in paradise. I try suggesting we go to the Science Museum or something vaguely cultural or educational that he can report back to our mother but all he says is, 'No way, Eef, that's really bent, I don't want to do that.'

Everything that is uncool or stupid or laughable he refers to as bent or queer. Anyone who's annoying is a faggot. I know my brother probably isn't a raging homophobe, he's just a normal twelve year old boy and they all speak like this. Still it's even more wearing on my nerves than the bloody video games.

When we get back to the flat, Eamonn happily rushes to the telly to try the new PlayStation game I've bought him. Colman and I set the table in silence.

Suddenly Colman asks, 'Are you sure about this? I mean do you know what you're doing?'

I attempt to smile at him. 'I haven't a clue what I'm doing but I'm pretty sure about it.'

Colman places a knife down so loudly, my brother turns round for a moment. I glare at my soon-to-be-ex. Colman's promised he won't let on to Eamonn that there's anything wrong. So far he's managed to be so cheery and friendly, even I've nearly forgotten we're no longer together.

Now he asks in a near whisper, 'I guess you're going to move back to Dublin?'

'What?' I'm so surprised by the question I forget to keep my voice down. But Eamonn is on to the next round of ripping heads off and pays no attention.

Colman continues, 'You've always said you hated London. That the only reason you were here was because of me. So I presume you're going back?'

'I don't hate London,' I manage to mumble as Eamonn lets out a cry of agony as his character dies in a swirl of smoke and fire.

It hits me that I've more or less forgotten how badly I wanted to leave London. It just isn't the same place to me anymore. Or maybe I'm just not the same person.

The evening after my brother leaves, my mother rings me. I'm anxious that Eamonn might have said something about a strange atmosphere, but apparently he had the time of his life.

‘He keeps going on about this Moronic World place,’ my mother sighs. ‘I hope you didn’t let him play video games the whole time.’

‘Ah Mammy you know he needs his fix of Western decadence as much as you do.’

‘I suppose so. He’s an even bigger freak here than I am. Do you know the other day I took him to the Iranian national museum and he insisted on wearing his sunglasses indoors. When I asked him why, he said it was so he could stare back at all the people staring at him.’

‘Poor Eamonn. You know when I was there, I watched him run down the street in front of me and every single person turned around to look. One man nearly fell off his bike.’

My mother laughs. ‘They don’t mean to be rude, it’s just ‘cause there’s so few Westerners they get a shock when they see blue eyes.’

‘Yeah and I guess people feel they can stare at kids more easily than adults.’

‘It’s so much better now he’s learnt French and has some really good friends. He was even lonelier than me at the beginning. But I think we’ve both become oddly attached to this loonie bin of a country.’

My mother sounds in a better mood than she has done for ages. I don’t want to tell her about splitting up with Colman because I know she’ll worry. I’m certainly not going to tell her the reasons why in case she has an absolute fit. I can’t tell her about Monique over the phone anyway as it’s probably bugged and they stone homosexuals to death in Iran. Not that the secret police are likely to track me down in London. And let’s face it, I’m far

more afraid of my mother than I am of Iranian military intelligence. But I need to tell her that I'm moving out in case she rings and speaks to Colman.

As I struggle to figure out how to put it, my mother goes on to explain the reason for her chirpiness. 'Believe it or not, I've got a job,' she announces.

'Really? Doing what? Teaching English?'

'No, working for the UNDP. They want me to help UNHCR with this crisis that's happening with Kurdish refugees on the Iranian border. I've to go to a meeting tomorrow. I mean maybe nothing much will come of it but I'm quite excited. I can't tell you how nice it is to know more about what's going on than your Dad does.'

'That's brilliant news, Mammy. I'm really pleased for you.'

'Oh it's not a big deal but you know at least it'll give me something other than bridge to think about for a while.'

Though she's trying to play it down, I know this job is a very big deal. Even when they lived in Belgium, my mother complained that people looked down on her for just being a housewife. That's why she started giving private English lessons. In Iran, this hasn't been possible and my mother has felt even more dismissed than before.

'People don't take you seriously if you don't earn your own money. They treat you like you're a moron. You know I believe in feminism more than anyone but it's had the unfortunate side effect of making being a wife and mother occupations to be ashamed of.'

It hurts my mother that people think so little of what she's made her life's work. When she was growing up, my Gran's job involved such long

hours that my mother hardly saw her. A large part of the cooking, housework, and rearing of her two younger brothers fell on my mother's shoulders. She vowed that when she grew up, her children would never come home to an empty house. They would have all the things she missed out on, including a father. Thinking of my mother's traditional views on family life makes me decide maybe I'll tell her I'm leaving Colman another time.

But then she asks, 'So what about you? I've been going on and on about myself. How's things in London?'

'Oh they're fine.' The moment I say it, my mother knows there's something up.

'What's wrong? What's happened?'

I know there's no getting out of it. 'Me and Colman have split up. I mean I've decided to leave him.'

There's a slight pause and then she asks, 'You've definitely made up your mind?'

'Yeah, it's really over. But I'm okay, I'm going to stay with friends for a while and then get a place with Lucy and Conor.'

I'm expecting a barrage of anxious questions but instead my mother just says, 'Well sometimes things don't work out and it's much better to leave than to stay if you're not happy.'

I'm a bit taken aback by this as my mother's always banging on about how you need to work at a relationship and see it as a long term investment, which is another way of her saying get married as soon as possible. But then she continues, 'You know I never told you this before because I didn't want you to think I was interfering but... the truth is I've never really liked Colman.'

I nearly burst out laughing at my mother's confiding tone. It's been perfectly obvious to me from the moment she first met him that my mother couldn't stand my boyfriend. You don't carry on calling somebody 'what's his face' for over five years if you're fond of them. Still I'm touched that she believes she's been hiding this from me.

'Well I definitely think it's for the best,' I tell her, hoping she won't ask me if I've found a replacement yet. It also occurs to me that if my mother couldn't hide her disapproval of Colman even when she was trying to, what on earth is her reaction to Monique going to be?

Chapter 11

Running Away

Ottawa, 1978

I'm hiding crouched behind a parked car with my water pistol in my hand. I'm planning my next move against the Nazis.

Suddenly I hear my brother's voice shouting. He sounds really angry. He says, 'Put down Oscar or I'll get my big sister to kill you.'

Then I hear laughter. I recognise that laughter. It's Blare's evil older brother, Philip. He says, 'Oh yeah, now I'm really scared.'

Carefully, I stand up so I can see through the car window. On the other side of the road, I can make out a group of boys with their backs to me. Philip is holding my father's rifle in one hand and Oscar The Grouch in the other. Stephen tries to grab Oscar back but he can't reach because he's only three and Philip is much bigger than him. Philip then pushes Stephen in the stomach so that he falls over.

Philip raises his fist to punch my brother as he's lying on the ground. That's when I step out from behind the car and run across the road. 'Don't hit him,' I say. 'He's just a baby.'

Stephen yells, 'That's my big sister and you're dead meat now.'

This is not helpful. My brother is too dumb to realise that while I'm bigger than him, I'm still a lot smaller than Philip.

'Only cowards hit babies,' I argue. 'A real soldier never would.' I'm not shouting; I'm being a diplomat like my father. I'm making peace not war.

Philip drops the rifle and Oscar the Grouch. He walks over to my brother who's trying to get back to his feet. 'What happens if I just kick him?'

Before I can answer, Philip kicks Stephen's legs so that he falls over again. The other boys laugh at this. My brother starts to cry because Philip has really hurt him this time.

'What you going to do now?' Philip asks. His face is all twisted up with ugliness because he's bigger than me and Stephen and he believes we can't do anything to stop him.

Without thinking about it, I pick up the rifle and use the point of it to stab Philip in the face. There's a sharp little bit of metal at the end where the bullets come out and Philip lets out a yell of pain.

Then I grasp my brother by the arm and pull him to his feet. Quick as a flash, Stephen grabs Oscar the Grouch and the three of us run away down the street as fast as we can.

If there's one thing my brother is good at, it's running away. The moment my mother has her back turned, he's off like a shot. If she's on the phone for more than two minutes, he's unlocked the door and escaped up the road. No matter what my mother does to keep him contained, he always finds a way out. He runs away so often, the neighbours give him a special nickname. Houdini. This was the name of the most famous escape artist in the world. The neighbours think it's very funny to call my brother Houdini. The whole street finds it hilarious.

Apart from me. I just think it's really embarrassing. This is mainly because I'm the one that's given the job of finding Stephen. He always runs away to his friends' houses and so I have to knock on all their doors to ask if he's there. I hate having to do this because it means talking to lots of

grownups. They all like to laugh and say silly things such as 'Ah Houdini strikes again' before patting me on the head and telling me to try the next house.

One day I knock on a lady's door and she says, 'Oh no honey, Houdini's not here. My little boy is having his nap and I haven't seen your brother at all.'

I'm about to walk away when I hear giggling. It's not very loud and I think I might be imagining it. The lady says she can't hear anything. I ask her if it would be okay just to check. She leads me up her stairs and opens the door to her son's bedroom. She lets out a shout of surprise when she sees what's inside. I look under her arm and for a moment I think it's snowing inside her little boy's cot.

Then I see my brother. He's completely naked and his fists are full of feathers that's he throwing in the air. He seems to be doing a kind of dance. The other little boy is sitting and looking up at Stephen with total awe and adoration.

When he sees me staring at him, my brother shouts, 'Sorry, sorry.' He's pulled all of the feathers out of his friend's mattress and completely destroyed it. But the lady isn't even angry. She just asks Stephen to put on his clothes and go home with his sister. She even gives him a cookie and a kiss when he's leaving.

I'm the only one that knows that my brother isn't sorry at all. My mother says this is because Stephen looks like a little angel when he's actually a little devil. I don't tell my mother about the naked dancing and the destroyed mattress because that's the kind of thing that brings out the wooden spoon.

I'm sitting reading a book outside our house. The sun's shining and we're meant to be going shopping but my parents are taking forever getting ready. It always takes them ages. Especially my mother to find her keys, her glasses, her handbag.

My mother comes out and shouts at me, 'Are you ready?'

I feel like I've been ready for hours but I don't say this, I just say 'Yeah' without looking up.

'Where's Stephen?'

'I don't know.'

Actually I do know, he's gone across the street to play with his friend. He was meant to wait with me but he got bored because I was reading and wouldn't talk to him.

'Play with me, play with me,' he kept shouting in my ear but I just ignored him. Sometimes I do play with him but today I wanted to read.

My mother says, 'You were supposed to be watching your brother. You know he disappears if you take your eye off him.'

'I'll go get him,' I reply, running across the road and knocking on Stephen's friend's door. There's no answer so I knock again. Still nothing. That's weird.

I wander round the back into their yard calling, 'Stephen, Stephen, where are you, we're waiting, you're going to be in trouble.'

I tell myself he's hiding to annoy me, but the garden is strangely silent. Somehow I know he's not there but I keep shouting his name, 'Stephen, stop messing, Mammy's getting really angry.'

I've got a funny feeling in my stomach. I run back to tell my mother Stephen's not where I thought he was. She tells me to try all his friends' houses on the street. I knock on everyone's door but there's no sign of my brother anywhere.

My mother asks some of the neighbours to help us search for my brother. We check our house and we check our garden and the neighbours check all their houses and their gardens. This time my brother's completely disappeared. My mother decides to call the police.

She asks me for the hundredth time, 'Which way did you see him go?'

I just swallow hard and point. It hits me that if we never find my brother again, it'll all be my fault.

A policeman arrives and my mother explains that she thinks Stephen may have got through a gap in the hedge at the back of his friend's garden. From there, it's only a very short walk to the river where he could have fallen in and drowned. The policeman says they've put out a report and there are squad cars going up and down the streets near ours. My father and all the other fathers on our street are out looking as well.

But it's been nearly four hours and there's still no sign of my brother. If only I'd just played with Stephen like he asked. I'm the one that was supposed to be looking after him. I wonder if the policeman knows I was reading my book instead. I overhear him on his walkie talkie saying something about dredging the river. I'm not sure what this means but it sounds terrible. I think I'm going to be sick. It's like a nightmare that I can't wake up from.

Then suddenly I see a man on a bicycle coming slowly down our street. My brother is sitting in the carrier on the back. For a moment, I think I'm imagining this. But no it really is him and he's waving at me.

The man had found Stephen walking along the river. When he asked him where he lived, my brother didn't know the name of the street but he said it wasn't far and he'd know it if he saw it. So the man decided to cycle him up and down all the streets till they found his home.

My father tells Stephen he has no idea how lucky he is or how worried we were. But I don't think my brother even hears this because my mother is so busy thanking the man and covering Stephen's face in kisses at the same time.

I look at my brother and I think never again will I be so careless as to let him run away like that. Because that's what happened to the real Houdini in the end. A trick went wrong and he drowned. Though some say it was being punched in the stomach killed him. Either way, my brother is the kind of brother you need to keep a very close eye on. And that, after all, is what big sisters are for.

I have a new friend called Elizabeth. Her mother and my mother are best friends and her family lives at the top of our street. My mother wants me to be best friends with Elizabeth but I'm not so sure Elizabeth wants to be best friends with me. At first we have fun playing spies by writing down all the numbers of the cars in a special notebook. It's not as much fun as playing soldiers but Elizabeth doesn't want to play soldiers because it's a boy's game and boys are horrible. She wants to play Mommies and Daddies with her

dolls. This is a boring game but I say okay because I know it wouldn't be fair to just play spies all the time.

Elizabeth has a little brother called Robbie who's best friends with Stephen. I tell her how annoying it is that Stephen's always running away and I'm the one that has to find him. She says her little brother bites people all the time and that's worse. I ask my mother about this and she says Elizabeth's right, to be a biter is the worst thing possible. Hitting people is okay if they've hit you first, or hit your brother, but you should never ever bite them. Because that's what animals do and it's disgusting for a human to do it. My mother says Stephen may be very bold sometimes, but at least he never tries to hurt anyone. He only ends up hurting himself. Like when he found where she'd hidden the Halloween candy and he ate all the bags of jellies and was sick as a dog.

One day I arrive home from school and my mother tells me I can't come into our house. She says I'm to take Stephen up to Elizabeth and Robbie's and stay there till Elizabeth's mother says it's okay to go home. I don't want to do this because Elizabeth has told me she doesn't want to play with me today because she's got friends from her class visiting. Elizabeth is in second grade when I'm only in first grade. She doesn't want anyone to know that she's friends with a first grader.

I tell my mother I can't go to Elizabeth's house but my mother says she doesn't want to hear about it. I'm to go there right now because we've got a gas leak and we're being slowly poisoned. This is why Stephen's been so sleepy and my mother has had a headache. It's not safe to be in our house till the leak is fixed.

'Do you want to be poisoned?' my mother shouts at me. So I have no choice but to go.

Elizabeth's friends are a pair of identical twins. This means they look exactly the same. They even wear the same clothes. It's as if one little girl has been turned into two. I find it a bit creepy, especially the way they have exactly the same laugh. Elizabeth and the twins don't want to play with me but Elizabeth's Mom tells them they have to. We decide to go into the kitchen and make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. I pick up a knife that has some peanut butter on it. Without thinking about it, I lick the peanut butter off the knife.

'Ugh,' Elizabeth shouts. 'That's so gross. I can't believe you did that.'

'Gross, gross,' the twins start chanting. It's like two people with the one voice.

Then one of them asks me, 'Is it because you're from Ireland that you're so disgusting?'

'No,' I say. I didn't know licking peanut butter off a knife was such a big deal.

'Yes it is,' Elizabeth says. 'And we don't want to be near someone who has no manners.'

With that, her and the twins march out of the kitchen giggling.

Elizabeth's Mom comes in and asks me what I'm doing in the kitchen by myself. I don't tell her about the peanut butter and the knife in case she thinks it's really gross too. I just say the other girls don't want to play with me. She says to pay no attention to them and we can play cutting out dough together instead. This is a fun game because you can make your own stars

with a special cutter and then bake them into cookies. Elizabeth's Mom is very kind but I still feel embarrassed that she has to play with me because nobody else wants to. I don't tell anyone about the peanut butter and the knife but every time I think of it, I feel myself turning red. I never ate peanut butter before we moved to Canada. I don't even like it that much. I wonder if I didn't know about not licking knives because I come from Ireland or just because I'm stupid.

Elizabeth forgives me for licking the peanut butter off the knife. But then I do something even worse. My mother tells me that Elizabeth has forgotten her music sheets and that I should go drop them off at her house. She needs them for her piano lesson. I'm walking up the street when I meet Blare and he asks me if I want to play soldiers. Even though I know I shouldn't in case it makes me late, I think I'll just play soldiers for a few minutes. I pretend the music sheets are secret documents that I've stolen from the Nazis. In fact, pretty soon, I've completely forgotten that they're really music sheets and that Elizabeth's waiting for them.

The Nazis have invaded Blare's sandpit. We creep up on them slowly. I explain to Blare that we need to get closer by running across the lawn and hiding behind the hedge. I make a dash for it and motion for Blare to follow. He tries to, but unfortunately, he trips over his own shoelace and lands with a cry of pain. The Nazis are instantly upon us, waving their guns and shouting victory as they take us prisoner.

Philip is their leader. He throws my father's rifle on the ground and kicks it. 'That piece of shit doesn't work anymore,' he tells me.

I can see the wood's splintered and he's broken the catch right off. My father's going to kill me because I've promised to take special care of the rifle because it's old and was a gift from Granddad. I'm not meant to have lent it to anyone else but it was the only way Philip would let me play.

I don't think Philip has forgiven me for stabbing him in the face. He tells me and Blare that he's going to have us executed as spies. This means putting us up against a wall and shooting us. He grabs my water pistol and tries to squirt water directly into our eyes. He's not a very good shot and it doesn't hurt but Blare starts to cry because he doesn't like the sound of being executed.

'God you're such a sissie,' Philip tells him. 'That's what happens when you play with girls. You turn into a big sissie like them.'

The other Nazis start shouting, 'Execute the sissies,' which only makes Blare cry harder. I think even if they do execute me, I'm not going to cry. No way would I give them the satisfaction.

'I'm not scared of you,' I tell Philip.

Philip smiles at me, an evil Nazi smile, like this is a game he knows he's going to win. Suddenly he says to Blare, 'Tell her, go on tell her you're not a sissy and you don't want to play with sissy girls.'

I turn to stare at Blare. But he's not looking at me, he's looking at his sneakers. And then he says it. 'I don't want to play with you anymore.'

I know it's not my best friend's fault I'm a girl. I know it's his evil older brother is making him say this but now I really do feel like crying.

I run to Elizabeth's house and she's very angry that I'm so late. I try to tell her about getting captured by the Nazis but she just says why do I want to

play with horrible boys anyway? She grabs the music sheets off me and slams the door in my face.

I tell my mother that Elizabeth doesn't want to play with me anymore because I'm a soldier and Blare doesn't want to play with me anymore because I'm a girl. My mother says real friends like you for who you are. If they don't, they're not worth bothering about. And that she'll always be my friend no matter what happens.

It's break time and I rush out to play in the snow. I've made myself a dog just like the one on Battlestar Galactica except mine is carved from ice. Unfortunately he's started to melt so he's a little harder to find today. And I get distracted by a bunch of boys hanging round the frozen pond. A couple of them are playing sliding across the ice and I watch in fascination as it's so thin you can see the water moving just underneath.

An older boy, who looks a bit like Philip, breathes in my ear, 'I dare you to walk on it.'

I ignore him.

'Are you scared? Are you scared to do it just 'cause you're a stupid girl?'

Even though I know it's not a good idea, I put one foot gingerly on the edge of the ice. It's surprisingly firm. Steeling myself, I take another step and another and am now standing on the pond itself. I turn to wave at the older boy in triumph.

At that moment, one of the boys near me pushes another one and they both fall over. There is a noise before the noise of ice splitting. Rather like a

sigh that whispers through the freezing water. I watch in slow motion as the plate under me fragments into millions of tiny pathways through which dark brown liquid is seeping.

Somebody screams and I dive towards the shore which suddenly seems a million miles away. My arms are grabbed, but my legs are sinking into a cold deeper than anything I've ever known. I can feel my lungs ice over as I'm hauled on to the blessed certainty of dry land.

Back in the classroom, I sit on a desk shivering in a puddle of my own making. Mademoiselle Putvez is pulling off my boots. 'Mon Dieu,' she keeps saying over and over.

The door of the classroom is open and a boy calls in that the principal is looking for anyone who was playing on the frozen pond. Behind him, I can see a group of captive boys who look wet and scared. My heart sinks. I'm going to be in so much trouble.

Mademoiselle Putvez winks at me. 'We've no one here silly enough to think they can walk on water,' she tells the boy.

He looks at me a bit suspiciously but then shrugs and leaves, closing the door behind him. I breathe a huge sigh of relief that my teacher hasn't betrayed me.

But it turns out I haven't got away with falling through the ice. I start coughing and coughing and I've a very high temperature. The doctor comes and my mother explains that I've always had trouble with my lungs but this is much worse than usual. I tell the doctor it feels like there are pieces of ice stuck inside my chest but I don't say where they've come from. My mother is

always telling me and Stephen to put our coats on or we'll catch our death of cold. I guess that the reason I'm so sick is because it was freezing cold in the pond water. But I don't tell the doctor or my mother this.

Because she doesn't know it's my own fault I'm sick, my mother is being very kind to me. She sets up these toy red telephones that have a white cord that runs from my bedroom down into the kitchen. Any time I want anything, all I've to do is pick up the red phone and dial once. Tea, cookies, more steam, I just have to reach for the receiver. I like having a phone that connects only to my mother.

It's even better when my father comes back from his work trip. He tells me and Stephen all about how a magic lady in New York stole his tickles and that's why when we try to tickle him, it doesn't work anymore. He's brought me a special present of magic stickers because I'm ill. These stickers are all the characters in Peter Pan and the great thing about them is that you can peel and unpeel them as many times as you like. I can stick them to my red phone and to my yellow lamp and I spend hours making the crocodile chase Captain Hook with the ticking clock. Peter Pan looks a bit like Blare so I play that we're friends again.

I also have a small record player with Mickey Mouse's face on the cover and I can listen to stories on it. My favourite is a record of Peter and the Wolf because of the music for the birds and also because Peter made a few mistakes himself.

Better than the recorded stories though are the ones my mother tells me. Sometimes she reads to me from a green hard backed book of Irish myths and fairy tales. This book is incredibly old and it doesn't have many

pictures but the ones it has are really creepy. I can only look at these pictures if my mother lets me snuggle in very close under her arm.

My mother tells me I'm being really brave about being sick, just like the Irish hero Cu Cuchlann. When Cu Cuchlann was dying, he strapped himself to a rock so his enemies would think he was standing there with his sword raised ready to kill them. His enemies were so afraid of his strength that they didn't dare go near enough to be able to see that he had in fact already died. In this way, Cu Cuchlann was able to hold back their invasion for several days. It was only when three ravens, who were really witches, landed on him and pecked out his eyes, did the enemies realise that Cu Cuchlann had played a trick on them even in death and they rushed forward to attack.

I love this story until one afternoon I see the three witch ravens flying around my room. I don't feel at all brave and I'm about to start screaming when I remember the red phone. I dial and my mother comes running but she says there aren't any birds in my room. It's just because I'm ill and I have a fever. She says the same thing happened to her when she was sick many years ago and she saw spiders crawling all over the walls. She promises to stay with me though in case the ravens come back.

Even better than the stories in the green book are the stories my mother tells me about when she was my age. She says she can sort of understand why Stephen runs away all the time. When she was a child, she was so bored she would move her pillow each night to a different end of the bed just to create some variety. She only ran away once though and that was because she was really angry with her family. She says she can't remember

why exactly but she packed her bag and ran off with her little dog Canto. Just like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz but without the tornado.

She left a note on the kitchen table explaining that they had broken her heart and she was never coming back. Then she spent all day wandering around the fields near where she lived. As the hours passed, she realised that she didn't actually have anywhere to run away to and hunger brought her back just before teatime. My mother had imagined a search party would be out looking for her and everyone would be very worried and feeling sorry they'd upset her. But when she eventually got home, her note was still on the table where she'd left it. No one had even noticed she was gone. My mother crumpled up the note and threw it in the bin and she never told anyone that she'd tried to run away.

'But I never did it again you see,' she says and laughs, 'because it's not that much fun if no one looks for you.'

My mother tells me this like it's a funny story but I'm not so sure that it is. I say to her that if ever she was to try to run away again, me and Stephen and Dad would go looking for her. This makes her laugh even more.

Chapter Twelve

Crack

London, 1996

I'm sitting in a black cab surrounded by boxes. 'Where to, love?' asks the driver cheerfully.

I give him my new address and he says, 'Moving house are we?'

My head is thumping from far too much to drink the night before. Unlike at home where they never shut up, taxi drivers in this country rarely say a word. How unlucky to get one that's in the mood for conversation.

'Yeah, I'm just renting a flat in Brixton with a few friends,' I answer politely.

'Chelsea to Brixton eh,' the driver chuckles. 'Bit of a come down. What have you done to deserve that?'

I decide to ignore the question and stare out the window instead. I feel like even total strangers are trying to tell me I'm making a terrible mistake.

The taxi lets me off just outside my new home. An unimpressive bunch of squat, ugly flats set around a concrete yard. There is no lift so I haul the boxes up two flights of stairs. There is the familiar smell of piss and I wonder in disgust why people have to urinate in a stairwell.

Once inside though, I cheer up a bit. The flat is a lot less grim than its outer appearance. The walls are white and the kitchen, though small, has a large window that lets in plenty of light. I put the kettle on the hob of my new cooker and pour myself a glass of water. Lucy will be here any minute and I need to gather some strength before I start unpacking. I sit at the table

knocking back four Anadin. Nothing wrong with me that painkillers and a cup of tea won't cure.

My back is to the cooker. Suddenly there is a huge bang, like a bomb going off in my ear. I turn around and the kitchen floor is covered in tiny shards of glass. For a moment, I think the window has been blown in. But then I realise the window is intact. In fact it's not a bomb. What's happened is that I've exploded the glass cover off our cooker. I was meant to raise the sheet and put the kettle directly on the metal but this never occurred to me. If I'd been facing the cooker when the glass shattered, I'd probably have had my eye taken out. It doesn't feel like a very good omen.

I'm still sweeping up glass and thinking what a total idiot I am when Lucy arrives. I have to confess to her that I've nearly blown up our new home before she's had the chance to unpack. She takes it quite well saying we'll just tell the landlord it was broken when we got here. I haven't actually wrecked the cooker, just destroyed the cover so we sit down to have a cup of tea together.

Lucy asks me how I've been finding staying at Tanya and Jason's.

Then she says, 'Tanya told me you were out most nights.' Her tone is accusing.

I have to resist the urge to snap that Tanya's not my mother. I sip my tea instead. I'm going to have to tell Lucy sooner or later if we're going to be living together. It might as well be now.

'I've met someone else,' I say.

Lucy raises her eyebrows. 'That was quick. Who is he?'

'Her name's Monique.'

There is a silence. 'Dominic?'

'No, Monique. She's French.'

'She's a girl?' Lucy is staring at me like I've just sprouted an extra head.

'Yes. We met at Popstarz.'

'Have you really thought this through?' Lucy asks. 'I mean what does it say about your sexuality? Are you sure this is the lifestyle you want? I just wouldn't want you to do anything that you'll regret.'

The way she says it makes me feel she has every intention of making me regret it.

It is the strangest feeling to realise that everyone is talking about you but no one is talking to you. I have become a social pariah overnight. Rooms fall silent when I enter them. Whispers follow me when I leave.

'I want to see these people you talk about so much,' Monique says. 'I'm sure they will realise how much better off you are with me than with this feckin' eejit Colman.'

Feckin' eejit is an expression Monique has learnt from me. It sounds strangely endearing in a French accent. I only wish I shared her confidence.

Lucy is organising Christmas drinks and asks me, 'Why not bring your French friend?'

I refrain from pointing out that Monique is not my friend.

We meet in a trendy pub in Soho. The place is splattered with Xmas decorations with a drunken looking tree keeling over in one corner.

'Gay as Christmas,' Conor declares, giving me a big wink. 'She's good looking, I'll give you that. Very feminine, you'd never think in a million years...'

'Shut up, Conor,' Lucy hisses.

'I'm only saying. If you ever need anyone to watch...'

'Watch what?' Monique asks as she sits down.

'Football,' Conor smiles at her. 'Do you watch football?' He asks loudly and very slowly. I feel like pointing out that my girlfriend's French, not deaf.

'No, I hate all sport,' Monique declares.

'Ah shame,' Conor says. 'Sure suppose you can't have everything.'

'What's he talking about?' Monique asks.

'Your English is very good,' Judy tells her as patronisingly as possible.

'This is Judy,' I say. 'And you've met Lucy and Conor...' I attempt to introduce the rest of the table but everyone pointedly turns away.

'I remember you,' Monique tells Judy. 'From Popstarz. I thought you were Aoife's girlfriend.'

'What?' Judy looks appalled at the thought.

'Because you were dancing together,' Monique laughs. 'I know now it's not true.'

'Girls can dance together without there being anything queer going on,' Judy informs her stiffly.

'More's the pity,' Conor murmurs into his pint.

Then Justine stumbles in more than a little tipsy. She sits down and starts chatting away about the party she's just come from.

Monique politely asks, 'It sounds like you had a good time no?'

'Ah it was great craic,' Justine replies.

'Crack,' Monique smiles at her. 'Aoife's explained to me this word has nothing to do with drugs.'

Justine blinks hard before announcing loudly, 'Oh God, I've just realised who you are.'

Everyone turns to stare and there are several moments of silence as tumble weed rolls across the table. Monique whispers to me, 'Can we go soon?'

On the way home on the tube, I try to apologise for my friends' rudeness and for putting her through such a hellish evening. But Monique just winks at me and says, 'As long as I have you, what do I care about anything else.'

Chapter 13

Sun Worship

Ottawa, 1979

Even though I can now understand a lot, I don't generally talk much in class because it's hard to think of the French words quick enough. I'm not always silent though. One day I'm walking out of school when I see these two black squirrels chasing each other around a maple tree. They're moving so quickly they look like a black flame swirling up and down. It's hard to tell if they're playing a game or trying to kill each other.

'Look how fast they're going,' I shout in surprise, pointing at the squirrels. It's okay to speak English because I'm not in class any more.

Caroline hears what I've said and walks over. She's a pretty girl with pink ribbons in her hair who I like to think of as a friend of mine. I assume she's coming over to look at the squirrels but she stares at me and says, 'Wow, Aoife, that's the first time I've ever heard you talk.'

With some puzzlement, I realise we probably can't be friends if we've never had a conversation. I'm upset by this idea so I ask my mother about it. She tells me I should try to speak up for myself more. She says it's not a good idea to be too much of a behind the door person or people won't know I'm there. She knows it's hard to speak a foreign language. When she went to Switzerland as an au pair, every time she opened her mouth people would laugh. Even though she was speaking French, they thought she was speaking Irish or some strange made up language of her own. This was because the nun that taught my mother in school didn't bother with the accent

part. She just taught them to speak French with her own Dublin accent. So they learnt to say 'mercy buckets' instead of 'merci beaucoup' and 'bun jewer' instead of 'bonjour.' That's how come the Swiss couldn't understand a word when my mother tried to speak the little French she'd managed to learn in school. But how she got past this was by not caring about people laughing and being really friendly and getting to know all sorts from many different places.

My father says my mother learnt French by finding lots of boyfriends. My mother can say 'I love you' in at least ten different languages. My father says he learnt German by falling in love with a German girl when he went to Dusseldorf on holidays when he was a student. My parents agree that falling in love is the best way to learn a language. That's why they spoke French to each other when they first met.

'Proper French, not the gobbledygook they're teaching you,' my father says.

He doesn't like the French I'm learning at school because it's Canadian and he can't understand half of it with the weird accent and the wrong words for the numbers. I think of all the time I spent sitting with the older boy yawning with the numbers on cards and I'm not pleased to hear I've learnt the wrong words.

But my mother tells me it doesn't matter about the accent or the numbers as long as people can understand me and I learn to talk up for myself.

Just when my French is finally catching up with my classmates, my father gets promoted and we have to move back to Ireland. Our own house is still being rented so we need to find somewhere to live until the people in it move out. My parents rent half a house in Dun Laoighaire, which is by the sea. I love the sound of the waves crashing against the pier but I'm not sure I like being back home.

At the local school, there's no room for me in second class so they put me into senior infants. My mother says I'm lucky they let me in at all, seeing as it's the middle of the year and we only plan to stay six months. But I don't like having to be back in the baby class. When we're doing our sums, I tell the teacher I've learnt all this already. She says it won't do me any harm to learn it again. Plus my English spelling is terrible because I've been going to school in French and I write my letters backwards because I'm left handed. Worst of all, I hardly remember a word of Irish. This makes me think maybe it wasn't that the class was full, maybe they think I'm only good enough to be in senior infants.

On the first day at my new school, I ask if I can go to the toilet. The teacher glares at me and barks, 'An bhfuil cad agam dul amach go dtí an leathrois mars e thoile e.'

She says it really quickly and it reminds me a bit of Mary Poppins on my Mickey Mouse record player singing 'supercallafashalisticexpialladocious.' Unfortunately, my teacher isn't magic like Mary Poppins and the girl beside me explains that this isn't a special long word for singing, it means, 'Can I go outside to the toilet please?'

This is what I need to say if I want to be allowed to go to the bathroom. I raise my hand and give it a try. It comes out all wrong though and the other children laugh.

My teacher doesn't laugh. She just says, 'You're not going anywhere till you learn to say it properly.'

The trouble is I really do need to go to the toilet. I cross my legs under my desk and try to ignore the pain in my tummy. If I wet myself, everyone is going to think I am a baby. A stupid baby that deserves to be kept back in senior infants.

I ask the girl beside me how to say the question in Irish again but she ignores me. Luckily somebody else raises their hand and this time I listen very carefully. Like with French, it makes no sense if you try to take the whole thing at once. You have to break it down into little bits.

I go up to the teacher's desk and attempt to half whisper the words to her. I'm hoping if I say them quietly and quickly, the mistakes won't be so obvious.

The teacher interrupts me with a glare, 'You're not allowed out of your seat without raising your hand.'

I miss Mademoiselle Putvez. She would never speak to me like this. I used to get stickers to put on my squirrel picture as a reward for how fast I was learning French. Once, I even got a prize and they took my photo in front of a maple tree and Mademoiselle Putvez took me to McDonalds with her boyfriend as a special treat.

I look at my new teacher and shout, 'Annwillcadogum dullamockgojianlayrus marshahalla.' Desperation has made me brave. If she doesn't let me go now, I'm going to pee on her floor.

'Be quick,' she replies, which is totally unnecessary as I've already dashed to the door and am half way down the corridor.

The only class I have with children my own age is religion. This is because I'm seven and it's time for me to make my first holy communion. One day the teacher asks us to raise our hand and tell her where we go to mass. After several children have named various saints, I raise my hand and say, 'We don't have a church.'

The teacher peers at me. 'Where did you go to mass in Canada?' she asks.

'We never go to mass,' I reply.

The whole class is now staring at me. There is a long silence before the teacher pronounces, 'It's a sin not to go to mass.'

When I get home from school, I'm in trouble with my mother. 'Why did you have to raise your hand?' she demands.

'We were asked,' I mumble. 'The teacher asked us.' I don't know why I raised my hand. I think I just wanted to answer the question, I didn't know not having a church was such a big deal.

'It's a Catholic school. I told them we were Catholics. They wouldn't let you in otherwise.'

'Are we not Catholics?' I ask.

My mother sighs. 'You were baptised a Catholic. I didn't lie to them, I just didn't go into details like not believing in God. Why couldn't you just have kept your mouth shut? I'm never going to hear the end of this.'

'Am I going to be expelled from school?' I ask in horror. This is something I know only happens to very bad children who grow up to be criminals.

'No, no, I'll just have to crawl on my hands and knees to those bloody nuns to get them to keep you. You can forget about making your communion though, they've kicked you out of that stupid religion class.'

I'm upset about being banned from my first holy communion. I wanted to wear the white dress and collect lots of money.

We've moved back into our old house and I'm back at my old school. Only it feels like a new school because it's been so long since I've been here. My teacher's name is Mrs Dilworth and I'm terrified of her. If you're not paying attention, she taps you on the head with her ruler and shouts in your ear to wake up. One day she asks me a question. I answer her but I'm scared so it comes out very quietly. She screams at me that if I don't speak up, she's going to put me outside the door and make me shout from there until she can hear me. She doesn't mean the door into the corridor. She means the other one that leads outside into the yard. It's raining and cold out there and I think I'll never be able to shout loud enough to be let back inside. So I repeat my answer.

'Louder,' Mrs Dilworth shouts, waving her ruler.

I stare up at her and think how she looks a bit like the wicked stepmother in Snow White. I answer again as loudly as I can.

'That's better,' she says. 'I don't know what's wrong with you children.'

I find myself wondering what's wrong with Mrs Dilworth. I hardly utter a word in class so most of the time she leaves me alone. The boy who sits beside me is not so lucky. His name is Anthony, which is the same as my father, and he's very polite to me. He's dyslexic and Mrs Dilworth is always telling him how stupid he is because he can't read. But my mother says dyslexia has nothing to do with being stupid.

One day, Anthony raises his hand and asks to go to the toilet. He says it in perfect Irish so he should be allowed go. But Mrs Dilworth tells him to wait. When he tries to ask again, she roars at him to be quiet. Needless to say this leads to the inevitable.

Mrs Dilworth hauls Anthony in front of the class. The front of his trousers are wet. She tells him he's a disgusting, filthy creature who should be ashamed of himself. All of the rest of the class are pointing at him and laughing. I don't though. I remember how it nearly happened to me when I didn't know Irish. I think it's very wrong of Mrs Dilworth to make a show of Anthony like this when it was all her own fault for not letting him go when he asked.

Another time Mrs Dilworth is reading to us from a maths book and she suddenly bursts into tears. She runs from the room and for a moment, all us children look at each other in confusion. I've never seen a teacher cry before. Then chaos breaks out as some boys start hurling crayons around the room. Girls retaliate by throwing books back and chasing boys around the desks

with rulers. There is an atmosphere of total hysteria and I don't like it. Only me and Anthony stay sitting at our desks, not saying a word.

Eventually the headmistress comes in and everyone shuts up instantly. The room is destroyed though and I think we're all going to be in a lot of trouble. Instead the headmistress just tells us that Mrs Dilworth isn't very well and is going on a holiday. We should understand that she's been having a really hard time and try to be good children for her.

When I tell my mother about all of this, she says, 'Jesus Christ, that poor woman.'

Then she explains to me what's wrong with Mrs Dilworth. My teacher had a baby but it died at three months of a cot death. A cot death means that the baby just suddenly stops breathing and nobody knows why. You put them to bed at night and in the morning, they're gone.

'I don't know how you'd get over the shock of that,' my mother says. Then she explains to me that a lot of the time when people are nasty or cruel, it's because of some terrible unhappiness inside of themselves. After that, I feel very sorry for Mrs Dilworth but I'm still afraid of her.

A good thing though about being back at my old school is that I've been let back into religion class. This time I know better than to say anything about not going to mass. I tell my mother I want to make my first holy communion like my best friend Grainne and all the other girls in my class.

My mother sighs and says, 'If you insist, I suppose there's no harm in it.' She tells me how when she was in school she won a prize for biblical

studies. This was because even though the nun didn't like her, she'd got all the answers right in the exam.

When she went up to collect her prize, the nun hissed at her, 'Just because you know the answers, it doesn't make you a good Catholic.'

My mother laughs. 'How right she turned out to be.'

My father is less pleased about the idea of me making my communion. He explains to me that there is no such thing as God or the Garden of Eden or fairies or Never Never Land. It's all just stories that aren't worth getting out of bed early on a Sunday for.

My religion teacher doesn't seem to think they're just stories though. She explains to us about how Saint Patrick came to Ireland and he drove out all the snakes and saved everybody's souls by turning them into Christians. He did this by using the shamrock to explain the holy trinity. Each leaf represents the father, the son and the holy ghost. The stem represents that they all exist as part of the same being.

I'm fascinated by this idea but I don't understand it. My curiosity gets the better of my experience that asking questions leads to trouble.

I raise my hand. 'How does it work?'

The teacher looks at me hard. 'I've already told you, it's a miracle.'

'Yeah but how do they actually do it? Three in one? How's it possible?'

The teacher grabs me by the arm and pulls me up to the blackboard. 'Don't you be so cheeky, young lady,' she says. 'You may think you're being very clever but the miraculous workings of our Lord are not for you to question.'

She makes me stand with my face against the blackboard for the rest of the class. I wonder if I could travel back in time and ask Saint Patrick if he'd be able to tell me. I bet he'd understand that I'm not trying to be cheeky, I genuinely want to know.

I'm playing fairies with my friends but even though she's my best friend, Grainne won't let me be the fairy I want to be. So I tell her, 'My Daddy says there's no such thing as fairies. He says they're not real.'

Grainne's eyes fill up with tears. She tells me that every time someone says fairies aren't real, one of them dies.

I'm a bit worried about being a fairy murderer. 'That's not true, it's just a story. Like Jesus is just a story.'

Grainne stares at me in horror. Then she runs off home. She lives directly across the street from my house.

She's also in my class at school. The next day I tell her I'm sorry about saying fairies aren't real. But she refuses to speak to me. I think she's just a bit angry I killed one of the fairies but she'll get over it. However, days pass and she still won't say a word to me. If I speak to her, she pretends she hasn't heard me. She stops coming over to my house to play after school.

I'm very upset about this and I say to her, 'Look, the fairy is fine. I clapped my hands afterwards and that brings them back to life. It says so in Peter Pan.'

Grainne gives me a look of infinite scorn. 'It's not about the fairies,' she tells me.

'Then what is it?'

'My Daddy says I'm not to speak to you or play with you anymore.'

'Why?'

'Because my Daddy says you and your brother are the devil's children because you don't go to mass.'

I feel like I've been slapped across the face. So what if we don't go to mass? I can find my own religion instead. I decide to take up sun worship like the Incas. The Incas were Indians and they had cities made out of gold. They used to sacrifice children to the sun god by taking them up mountains and leaving them to die. I don't think I'll bother with that part of it though. Instead I practice seeing how long I can stare at the sun without blinking.

My mother catches me doing this and tells me to stop being so stupid, I'll hurt my eyes. Do I want to end up blind? I think if I was blind, Grainne would feel sorry for me and might want to play with me again. Plus I'd get a guide dog and I'd love more than anything to have a pet dog. I don't tell my mother the reason I'm looking at the sun is because I've decided to become a sun worshipper and hope to go blind. I know she wouldn't understand.

Chapter 14

Bottom of the List

Dublin, 1997

Christmas comes and goes and I say nothing to my family about having a girlfriend. Once my parents and Eamonn are safely back in Tehran, I decide to take Monique to Dublin for our first anniversary. The tricky part is that we'll have to stay with Stephen. He'd think it odd if we didn't. My brother is now in college and rents out rooms in our family house to other students.

Monique tells me she'll be just as happy if my brother doesn't know anything about us being together. That way she can get to know him a bit before he goes making judgements. I don't actually think Stephen is going to mind that much. He does occasionally crack jokes about faggots and puffs but then again he makes jokes about everybody. It's an odd kind of tolerance he has where he thinks nobody is above having the piss taken out of them.

The night we arrive in Dublin we go straight to the pub. Everything seems to be going quite well although Monique isn't saying much. She tells me she's having trouble understanding some of my friends' accents, including my brother's. I'm surprised because I think I have the same accent as Stephen even though he likes to tell me I've gone all posh since moving to London.

On the way home, Stephen and Monique end up walking together. Me and my friend Jenny are just behind them. I'm pleased to see that Stephen is chatting away with great animation to Monique. I really want them to get

along because though I'd never admit it, my brother's opinion matters a lot to me.

Suddenly Jenny laughs and says, 'Oh shite, this could be awkward.'

I've no idea what she means but then I start to tune in to what Stephen is saying. 'I don't speak much French myself. But I've always loved the French accent. I think it's very sexy. Very sexy indeed.'

My heart sinks. I wonder why this possibility hadn't occurred to me before. After all, my brother has gone to bed with a startling number of my friends. In a way, I'm quite proud of the fact Stephen is considered so handsome and charming. But I do not want him chatting up my girlfriend.

'Relax,' Monique whispers to me once we're inside. 'I'm not about to go running off with your brother.' She seems to find the whole situation highly amusing.

Stephen pours glasses of vodka and rolls an enormous joint. 'Now,' he says, passing it to Monique. 'Get your gorgeous French lips around that.'

I give my brother a filthy look but he just winks at me. In fairness, I've never objected to him chatting up any of my friends before so why would he guess Monique is any different?

Monique complains that we've been in Dublin for four days and all she's seen is the inside of a pub. 'Pubs are what Dublin is famous for,' I tell her.

'There must be something more to your culture than black beer that tastes disgusting no?' she asks.

'Tomorrow is St Patrick's Day. We can go to the parade. You'll love it.'

Monique looks doubtful and is even less impressed that we have to get up so early to get there. We stand on O'Connell Street behind several layers of screaming children. Many of them are waving the Irish flag and have shamrocks painted in glitter on their cheeks.

'Ge'yershamrog, fifypencedeshamrog,' bawls an old woman. I buy Monique a small bunch to pin to her shirt.

'What is it? It just looks like weeds.'

I attempt to explain about St Patrick and the snakes and the holy trinity. 'Is this some kind of religious thing you've taken me to?'

'No, well, it's more nationalistic. He's the patron saint but it's our national day.'

'It's very noisy,' Monique remarks as the first of the marching bands comes proudly past.

I try to tell her about how my mother would take us every year when we were kids to see the parade. We'd watch it on one of the back streets and there would be teenage boys up on all the roofs and hanging off the lampposts. The whole crowd would sing 'A Nation Once Again.' My mother taught me the words. I used to absolutely love the feeling that we were all Irish together and that we'd won our freedom through courage and sacrifice.

Monique looks at me. 'I'd no idea you were such a little Republican,' she teases. But she's smiling at last. It's hard not to get caught up in the atmosphere of excitement.

Massive cardboard swans float past on waves of crepe paper. 'That's the Children of Lir,' I say.

'Children of who?' I try to tell Monique the story but she can't really hear me with all the shouting and music.

There are men walking on giant stilts and acrobatic clowns and fluorescent green jugglers. What impresses Monique most is a group of scantily clad Brazilian dancers with drums. I realise the whole thing has become much more sophisticated than when I was a kid. It's a proper international spectacle. I'm glad that Monique finally seems to be enjoying herself. I don't admit that I'm a little bit sorry that nobody sings 'A Nation Once Again'. Or that I don't feel as much a part of it as I did when I was small enough to be flag waving at the front.

It's a Sunday morning and I'm lying in bed with Monique when the phone rings. I ignore it thinking they'll have to give up eventually.

But Lucy knocks loudly on my bedroom door. 'It's your Mum,' she shouts reproachfully. 'What should I tell her?'

I don't want Lucy telling my mother anything so I leap out of bed and grab the phone off her. 'Hi, Mammy, how's things?'

Monique rolls her eyes. I still haven't mentioned anything about replacing Colman but luckily my mother is not in a mood to be asking questions. She's got too many stories of her own to tell. She's just got back from her trip to Ardebil. As part of her new job, she went with an UNHCR convoy bringing supplies to villages hit by a devastating earthquake.

'Honestly, kiddo, I've never seen anything like it. You can't begin to imagine what those people have been through.'

My mother explains how she was the only woman on the mission. Some of the other diplomats' wives were meant to come too but they chickened out at the last moment. At first the Iranian translator seemed to resent my mother tagging along and made digs about it not being a place for tourists. But once they got there, it became clear that the village women would only talk about what had happened and what they needed to another woman.

'It was funny, I'd ask questions and he'd translate them. Then they'd answer to me as if he hadn't spoken and he'd have to interpret into my ear. And sure once he realised having me there wasn't a total waste of space, we got on like a house on fire.'

In some villages, over half the population had been killed and the buildings were completely uninhabitable. People had been reduced to living in tents beside their old homes. 'What they really needed was boots to get around in all the mud and snow. You'd see people hobbling along in no more than slippers. A lot of them lost everything. Their homes, their families...'

'It sounds awful. Did you not find it kind of depressing?'

'Well you know I was feeling a bit overwhelmed. Like how would you even know where to begin. But then I saw this young woman, about your age, washing this red carpet and I asked her what on earth she was doing? Cos really what's the point of a clean carpet if you haven't got a floor? And she explained how she was preparing it for the New Year celebrations like she does every year.' My mother pauses. 'I just thought that took some guts to keep up your traditions when all around you there's nothing but destruction.'

'Jesus I don't think I'd be able to be so positive,' I say.

'Me neither. People in the West think they have hard lives, but they don't know what it is to really struggle to survive. When I watched that young woman I suddenly realised with a bit of help all of this can be rebuilt. It gave me a real sense of hope and purpose.'

'Well it was very brave of you to go.'

My mother dismisses this. 'Don't be silly. Your Dad was worried but it was completely safe and it felt a lot more useful than playing bridge. I wrote this report, not long or anything, but they told me it's helped raise quite a bit of money.'

'That's brilliant, Mammy.'

'Sure I didn't do much. It was great to see the Red Crescent in action and how hard the Iranian volunteers were working to help people. You know there are times I'm almost fond of this crazy country.'

After I hang up, I tell Monique about my mother's adventures. She says she thinks it must be wonderful to have the chance to see parts of the world most Westerners don't.

'Yeah I guess,' I reply. 'But you know it's not very easy for her over there. I can't help thinking she'd be happier in Dublin.'

'That's just because you have this ridiculous nostalgia about your home. It would be boring. Even London has become boring.' Monique rolls over away from me.

I'm stung by this. There seems to be a strong implication that it's not so much the city she finds dull as me.

I come into work and my horrible fat boss says to me with a smile, 'Have you seen the newspaper? There's terrible trouble in Iran.'

I grab the paper and scan the front page. The headline reads, 'Riots in Tehran. Diplomats Recalled.'

Before I've fully grasped what on earth is going on, I dial my parents' number. My mother answers immediately. She says to me very calmly and cautiously, 'It's fine. We're all fine. Bahram is driving us to the airport and we're getting on the next flight home.'

Bahram is the embassy driver. My mother hated him at first because he insisted on following her everywhere, even when she went shopping in the market. 'Like having a bloody babysitter,' she used to grumble. But gradually she's accepted he's only doing his job. She's been teaching him English and he's teaching her Farsi. They seem to have struck up an unlikely, but close, friendship.

'Don't you worry,' my mother now says. 'Bahram will get us through the checkpoints. He'll make sure we get on that plane.'

I sense that my mother can't say more because the line is bugged so I hang up reluctantly. I finish reading the newspaper which explains that the riots are due to the Germans convicting some Iranians of blowing up a group of Kurdish asylum seekers in Berlin. Not only did the German court find the Iranians guilty but they also proved that they had carried out the assassination whilst in the employ of the Iranian state. The riots are to protest against evil Western imperialists imprisoning Iranian national heroes. The most frightening aspect of them is not so much that all the windows of the German embassy have been smashed as that the rioters have government support.

Far from keeping the masses under control, the religious police seem to be inciting them to attack Westerners, particularly diplomats.

My boss finds all this very exciting and interesting and insists on asking me lots of questions. I feel like screaming at him that this is not a piece of diverting drama, this is my family we're talking about and until I know they've safely left Iran, I feel sick.

I get a call that evening from my mother to tell me that they've arrived in Dublin. I've never been so glad to hear her voice. She says they're all okay and Eamonn is dying to talk to me.

I ask him if he was scared and he jokes, 'Ah you know it's not so bad being refugees when you get to flee first class. I ate loads of chocolate on the plane, I could have as many as I wanted and even Mammy didn't try to stop me.'

'I'm surprised you weren't sick,' I tell him.

'Nope. Nerves of steel me. I wasn't a bit worried. Just got a bit of a shock to see Bahram at my classroom door. I told him he was way too early but he just said, get in the car, we're going to the airport. I thought he'd gone bezerk or something.'

'Good thing you did as you were told.'

'Bahram was in the army you know,' Eamonn informs me. 'He was on the front line for two years fighting Iraq. He has a way of telling you to do things where you don't ask questions.'

'Well I'm very relieved you're home safe and sound.'

'I never said goodbye to any of my friends. They're going to wonder what's happened to me disappearing like that. Wait till I tell them all about my adventure.'

My mother takes the phone again. She explains that the whole thing is bound to blow over in a couple of weeks and they'll be heading back.

'Storm in a teacup your Dad says. Though he nearly had a fit when it was suggested just the diplomats leave as a sign of protest but the families remain to show it's only temporary. He told them no bloody way were his wife and son being left hostage to a bunch of mad mullahs.' My mother chuckles. 'My hero.'

'Well he was damn right. What an insane suggestion.'

'Ah sure it was the Italian's idea. Reckon he fancied a few weeks with the mistress and the wife left behind in safe keeping.'

'Are you sure it'll be over so quick? It all sounds pretty serious.'

'Who knows. Anything could happen in that nut house. In the meantime, I intend to enjoy myself. Any chance you'd be able to come over and visit us? It'd be so good to see you. Sometimes I think with being far away, I've no idea what's going on in your life. I'd really like to catch up properly.'

I hang up greatly relieved they got out safely but guilty for making my mother feel the distance between us. She's coped with earthquakes and riots and fleeing Islamic fundamentalism, surely she can deal with my love life. Isn't it unfair to assume she's going to have a deeply negative reaction?

I say to Monique that I'm going to Dublin for a few days and that I've decided to tell my mother that we're together.

'Don't you think having just had to flee the country that's the last thing she needs to hear?' Monique asks.

'Look,' I explain. 'You don't tell your family if you don't want to. But I feel very strange lying to mine. I've never kept anything like this hidden from my mother before. And she's going to want to know. The longer I don't tell her, the more annoyed she's going to be.'

'Okay,' Monique says. 'Do what you think is best. Just don't say I didn't warn you.'

I spend a lot of time running through my speech in my head. Like if I can just find the right words, come at it from the right angle, it'll make all the difference. Unfortunately it's not a Hollywood jury I'm facing, it's my mother.

The night before I'm due to fly, the phone rings and it's my father. I tell him that I'm all packed and ready to go. Then I ask if they've got the date yet for when they can return to Tehran?

'Well yeah, yeah we have.' His voice sounds a bit odd.

'When is it?'

'Next week, just after you go back.'

'Well that's good news, you were right about it all blowing over very quick.'

'I suppose I was.' My father hesitates. I think maybe there's been some kind of row because my mother was hoping she'd get a few more weeks at home.

'Best for Eamonn not to have missed too much school,' I offer to make my father feel better.

'Actually I'm not sure... I'm ringing you about Mammy,' he says. This time there is a definite quiver in his voice.

'Is everything okay?'

'She hasn't been feeling so great. You know her asthma has been playing up...'

'I told her to go to the doctor.'

'Well she did. And they're a bit concerned.' My father pauses. When he speaks again, I realise the quiver in his voice is fear. I have never heard my father sound afraid before.

He says, 'They want her to go to the hospital tomorrow for tests. I mean they say it's probably absolutely nothing to worry about. But I thought you should know.'

'What kind of tests?'

There is a silence so I repeat, 'Dad, what kind of tests?'

'I'll put you on to Mammy now.'

My father passes the phone on as I try to absorb his lack of an answer. My mother's voice sounds subdued but otherwise normal. 'So annoying really, we found out the other day we've got the all clear to go back to Tehran. Your Dad's sorted the flights and everything. I was hoping we'd be able to do some last minute shopping when you arrived...'

'Mammy, what kind of tests are they doing?'

My mother sighs. 'They found fluid in my lungs. They're not sure what it is. They think it might be TB.'

'TB? Do people still get TB?'

'I said to your Dad sure in that God infested country you could easily pick up tuberculosis,' my mother hesitates. 'Of course it could be something else.'

'Like what?'

'Well they're saying bottom of the list is cancer.'

Chapter Fifteen

Witches

Dublin, 1979

My Granddad is in the hospital so we go to visit him. His skin is a funny yellow colour and his eyes aren't as blue as they used to be. Still when he sees me, he gives me a big wink and asks me if I'd like some of his grapes. I sit on the edge of his bed happily eating grapes while the grownups are talking.

Granddad asks me if I think the little robin in his garden misses him. He tells me not to worry, he's still got the magic whistle that makes the robin come and land on his hand. When he's better, I can come visit him and we'll feed the robin together.

'How long do you have to stay in hospital, Granddad?' I ask.

Before he can answer, Nana says, 'I can't believe you've finished off the whole bunch of grapes, you greedy child.'

I look down and it's true that all the grapes are gone. Then Nana tells me a story about a sick deer in the forest. When all the other animals came to visit him, they ate every single one of the deer's grapes and so the poor, sick deer starved to death.

I tell Granddad, 'I'm sorry I ate all your grapes, I didn't mean to.'

He smiles at me and says, 'It's okay, I wasn't going to eat them anyway.'

It's a beautiful sunny evening and my mother is calling me to come in. I don't want to as all the other kids are still playing but she's using her voice that means it's not a good idea to pretend not to hear her.

When I run up to our front door, my mother is standing in it and she says to me, 'Granddad has died.'

I laugh because I'm sure this must be a joke. 'No, he hasn't,' I say.

'He was very sick, he had cancer. They couldn't make him better.' My mother isn't laughing or even smiling so I realise she's not trying to be funny.

I run back out into the street to tell all my friends that my Granddad's dead. I do this because it's what the woman in Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves does when she thinks Ali Baba is dead. She runs wailing from house to house knocking on all the neighbours' doors and telling them the terrible news. Of course it turns out Ali Baba isn't dead really. He's hiding in a cave that's full of magical jewels. I wonder if Granddad is in a cave somewhere with rubies and sapphires and maybe a lamp with a genie in it. He'd love that.

I wish I hadn't eaten all his grapes.

We go to visit Nana in Nana and Granddad's house. It's strange to be there without Granddad.

Nana tells me, 'Your Granddad is with the angels in heaven.'

'Daddy says there's no such thing as heaven,' I reply.

I look to my father for confirmation of this but he just mumbles, 'Why don't you go outside and say hello to the dogs.'

Tina and Sherry are in the back garden. They haven't seen me for a long time and they're really excited. They jump up on me, barking madly, and

I can't get them to sit down. I know if Granddad was here, he'd whistle and they'd sit down instantly. I also know that Tina and Sherry would never hurt me because they're Granddad's best friends but I don't like them jumping on me. I think about how they must miss Granddad and suddenly I don't want to be in the garden with them anymore. I run to the door and knock to be let back in.

My father asks me why I'm crying. 'Did the dogs do something?'

I hadn't realised I was crying. 'No,' I tell him. 'They're just overexcited.'

This makes my father smile because it's what my mother is always telling me and Stephen. 'Don't get over excited.'

We're sitting at dinner at home and Nana is there. She's having a row with my parents.

My father says, 'Are you accusing me of being a thief?' He sounds really angry.

Then he turns to me and asks, 'Can you remember what was in Granddad's garage?'

I tell them all about the fishing rods and the deckchairs and the picnic basket for playing indoor picnics. But I sense they're not really listening to me.

'Was there anything valuable?' my mother asks.

I don't know what she means. Granddad's garage is a magic place full of valuable, fun things. Luckily they're arguing again so I don't have to answer. I sink down further into my chair. I don't like shouting and neither did Granddad.

He used to say to me, 'We'll just slip off to the garage where it's quiet.'
Maybe there isn't a heaven or a magic cave but I think if Granddad just has his garage, he'll be happy.

My mother tells me that Nana is an evil, old witch who's making our lives hell. Nana thinks my father has taken things that belonged to Granddad without asking her. Also she's angry because my mother won't invite her to live with us.

'People say why not let her move in, she's old and she won't be around for much longer,' my mother informs me. 'But that old battle axe will probably out live me.'

I tell my mother that I don't like her saying Nana is a witch, it's not true.

'Double, Double, toil and trouble, fire burn and cauldron bubble...' My mother is quoting her favourite play, Macbeth. 'How do you know she's not a witch?'

'Cause she's my Nana and she loves me more than you do,' I say defiantly.

My mother looks at me strangely. 'You know the way she told you those dogs had gone to new homes.'

'Yeah,' I say.

'Well that's not what happened at all. She had them put down because she couldn't be bothered looking after them. And she left your Granddad in that hospital to die when all he wanted to do was come home. He knew he was dying but she insisted on pretending he was getting better. She wouldn't let any of us talk to him about how ill he was...'

'Tina and Sherry are dead?' I interrupt.

My mother looks at me. 'Well put to sleep, you know it wouldn't have hurt them.'

I burst into tears and rush from the table. If only I'd stayed with the dogs when they jumped up on me, if only I hadn't eaten Granddad's grapes. I don't blame Nana for what happened like my mother does, I blame myself.

We go on holidays to Switzerland. Well it's a holiday for me and Stephen and my mother. My father is there to work at a conference to save the world. Every day we go to the beach on Lake Geneva. It's very hot so I spend a lot of time in the water. I'm supposed to stay down one end near where my mother is sunbathing and reading her book. But I'm playing a game of seeing how far I can jump through the water. It's a lot of fun and I haven't noticed that I'm not at my mother's end of the beach any more. I take a particularly impressive leap forward and to my surprise, my feet don't touch the sand on the bottom. They don't touch anything. But the water closes up over my head. I'm out of my depth and I don't know how to swim. With a certainty that strips away every other thought I've ever had, I realise that I'm drowning.

My toes brush against stones. There is a pressure in my lungs. With all my strength, I push against the bottom of the lake and succeed in catapulting myself to the surface. There is a flash of blue and dazzling sunshine as I break through and a glimpse of the pier that is not that far away if only I could swim.

But I barely have time to suck in oxygen before I'm once again sinking down into the lake. This time when my feet touch the bottom, I jump forward

with all my strength. When I reach the surface, the pier is a little bit closer.

There is a small boy standing there watching me.

'Help,' I shout before going under once more. I realise my best bet is to keep trying to jump forward so I can reach the pier. I take another leap upwards and forwards. The little boy is still there and he's pointing at me. Pointing and laughing.

His laughter makes me feel oddly detached and calm. Nobody is going to save me if I don't save myself. I push and jump and propel myself forward till eventually my hand reaches up and grabs hold of metal. There is a ladder leading from the pier into the water.

Gasping and spluttering, I haul myself on to the blessed certainty of the concrete. The little boy is still laughing. For a second, I consider tossing him into the water so he can experience how funny drowning is. But of course I would never do this. He's even more of a baby than my brother. He doesn't know that what to him was very entertaining, for me was terrifying.

I start to tremble violently as I head back over to my mother. She looks up from her book. 'Are you cold?' she asks.

'No, I nearly drowned,' I say.

'What are you talking about?'

Then I remember I wasn't supposed to be at that end of the beach. There's actually a huge sign on the pier in French that says to be careful because of the dip in the lake. I only bothered to translate this sign after I hauled myself out of the water.

'Just kidding,' I say to my mother.

'You have a very strange sense of humour,' my mother says before turning back to her book.

We're moving house again. This time to Dolphin's Barn which is south inner city Dublin. My mother says she's sick to death of the suburbs and they've managed to buy a house very cheaply on the South Circular Road. My father says we're going to love the new house. He tells us it's a bit like the TARDIS in Doctor Who because it's much bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

This makes me hope the new house is going to be like some kind of spaceship but it's not. It's incredibly old and has to be completely rewired to make the lights work. When we visit it, me and Stephen are told to go and play in the garden. There are weeds that are higher than our heads.

Stephen is delighted by this and shouts, 'We've moved to the jungle,' while attacking the weeds with his toy light sabre.

It's going to take a long time to fix the place up so we have to live in the dining room. An architect called Michael is working on the house. He's a friend of my mother's friend Mary. He takes us to see a modern art exhibition.

I've never seen modern art before but I'm not very impressed. I say to Michael, 'Sure I could draw that and I'm not even any good at drawing.'

Michael tells me that his favourite picture is a huge blank canvas with just one brush stroke in the far right hand corner. I decide that Michael is mad and that when I grow up, I'm never going to buy an old house in which nothing works no matter how cheap it is.

We're helping my father work in the jungle garden. Suddenly he shouts that he's found something. It turns out to be a path that runs all the way from one end of the garden to the other. I start to think maybe our new old house isn't so bad once I discover it's full of buried treasure. Me and Stephen spend hours digging up coins and bits of china and glass. I keep all these precious objects in a special wooden box my mother gives me.

Also we have new neighbours who I think are probably even more ancient than our house. On the one side are the Flemings, three very old ladies who are sisters and keep chickens in their garden. Because we help them collect all the chicken eggs, they invite me and Stephen over for cake and orange squash. The cake has bright pink icing and doesn't taste quite right. Also it's a bit creepy in their front room because they don't have any electricity. There are just a couple of candles that make strange shadows that could be ghosts. In the corners of the room there are piles of old newspaper and there's a weird smell.

I'm not so sure it was a good idea to come but then Sara, the eldest sister who's in a wheelchair, shows us the huge cage in the front window where she keeps her budgies. There are lots of them flying around madly in streaks of yellow and green. Sara says we can feed them birdseed if we like. I tell her about my Granddad's robin. She says her birds come all the way from Africa and that they miss the sun. She tells us about the adventures they had when they were in the jungle and how one of them was nearly eaten by a lion. Stephen is very impressed by this.

The Flemings promise us that one day they're going to invite us to a proper tea party, just like they have in Alice in Wonderland. They say there's

going to be magic teapots that can talk and a cat that never stops smiling. The Mad Hatter will be there and the Flemings will wear their ball gowns that they keep hanging in the wardrobe upstairs. The budgies will put on tuxedos especially for the occasion. Stephen asks if he can wear his cowboy suit and they tell him that would be perfect.

When we leave, my brother whispers to me, 'Do you think they really are witches?'

I consider this for a moment before informing him, 'It's hard to tell, we'll have to wait till we get the invite.'

Stephen says he thinks Miss Kenny, the old lady who lives on the other side of us, is definitely a witch. This is because she has twenty two cats and she shouts at Stephen whenever he climbs into her garden to get his ball back. Her favourite cat is a huge tom called Boggy and she has another one called Tishy. Tishy is short for Taoiseach which is Irish for prime minister. She named him that because he's the only cat that ever stole from her and you can't trust politicians. Or small boys like my brother who enjoy pulling cats' tails and spilling their milk. Miss Kenny is always nice to me though. She tells my mother that she overheard me and Stephen playing and she thinks I'm a saint for not murdering my brother. I couldn't agree more.

Miss Kenny asks us if she can come into our house to watch television. This is because she has no TV of her own. She would never normally ask but this is a very special occasion. Lady Diana is getting married to Prince Charles. My mother tells Miss Kenny of course she's more than welcome to watch the wedding on our telly in the front room.

My mother says to me that I can watch the wedding too and keep Miss Kenny company. She won't be watching it because she's not a Protestant like Miss Kenny and she doesn't approve of royalty, especially not British royalty. When I ask her why, she says that while a million Irish people starved to death during the famine, the royal family were stuffing their faces in Buckingham Palace and doing nothing to help. In fact, the British continued to ship food out of Ireland and they passed laws to evict starving people out of their homes and into the workhouse. My mother says the French had the right idea when they chopped the heads off of their royal family.

But even though they did terrible things, I still think the royal wedding is really exciting and wonderful. I practice doing the special walk the flower girls have and imagine what it would be like to be one of them.

When Diana comes down the aisle, Miss Kenny asks me, 'Isn't she just the most beautiful princess you could ever hope for? Isn't her dress only gorgeous?'

When Charles and Diana say their vows, Miss Kenny has to take out her white handkerchief from her handbag to wipe the tears from her eyes. I look round to realise that my mother is hovering in the doorway.

When I ask her to come sit down, she says, 'No, no sure I'm just having a quick peek to see what all the fuss is about.'

She watches the whole rest of the wedding standing in the doorway pretending she's not interested.

Chapter Sixteen

The Chinese Dressing Gown

Dublin, 1997

On the plane on the way over, I keep thinking it's not cancer, of course it's not cancer. My mother's only forty six and apart from the asthma that started when she moved to Iran, she's always been in good health. It's probably just TB. And TB is completely curable. These days it is any way even if it takes a while. It occurs to me that I never thought I'd be hoping my mother has tuberculosis.

My Nana had ovarian TB. She caught it from nursing her sister. My Nana adored her younger sister and insisted on looking after her all through her long illness. She was heartbroken when her sister died at just eighteen. My mother has told me she knows this because it's what my Granddad told her shortly after my parents were married.

My Granddad also told her that my Nana's mother was a violent alcoholic. When my Nana was being put into the ambulance to be taken to the hospital, her mother screamed at her, 'I hope you never have children.'

Even though my Nana survived her TB, the doctors told her in all likelihood her ovaries were damaged. To defeat my great grandmother's curse, my Nana prayed to Saint Anthony, the patron saint of lost things, every night to give her a child. Eventually Saint Anthony took pity on her and my father was born. That's why he was called Anthony although everyone apart from my Nana calls him Tony. My mother reckons my Granddad told her all this to help her understand why my Nana can be so hostile and difficult sometimes. But what my mother understood from it was that my Nana was

never going to forgive my mother for stealing her only child away from her by marrying him.

As the air hostess serves me another beer, I find myself thinking about how my father was diagnosed with skin cancer a few years ago when they were living in Belgium. It was my mother who'd rung me to tell me. She'd made it sound like he'd just caught a bad flu. It was only later when he was recovering that she admitted how worried she'd been. She explained how she'd noticed a mole on my father's back that had grown. She kept going on and on at him to get it looked at. But hating doctors, my father ignored her until he happened to read a book in which one of the characters died of skin cancer. This inspired my father to have a check up.

It turned out it wasn't even the mole that had grown that was cancerous. It was another smaller one that you'd hardly notice. The doctor told my father that if he'd come to him in six months, he'd have been able to do nothing for him. As it happened, my father didn't even have to have chemo. They just took a skin graft from his leg and cut an enormous hole out of his back. I say just but of course he was in agony after the operation and very ill for weeks. Still he survived it. They caught it in time.

In time, that sinister phrase. As the pilot switches on the seatbelt sign for landing, I allow myself to consider for a moment the possibility that it's not TB my mother has. I remember urging her to go to the doctor with her asthma. When was that? Last summer, nearly a year ago.

A flash of my Granddad lying yellow in a hospital bed comes unbidden into my mind. What kind of cancer did he have? Liver I think. It suddenly horrifies me that I don't know. And what about the grandfather I can't

remember, my mother's father? Didn't he die of cancer too? Or was it a heart attack? Why don't I know these things? Why am I so deeply ignorant and stupid?

My parents have rented a small flat in Christchurch. The walls are white and anonymous. It's a short term let generally used by business people. When I arrive only Eamonn is there. It's nearly lunch time but he's still in his pyjamas. They make him look even younger than he is.

'Dad said they wouldn't be long but it's been hours,' he complains.

'What's going on with Mammy anyway?'

'I don't know,' I tell him. 'I'm going to head down to the hospital now.'

'Can I come?' he asks.

'No, you better stay here.'

'There's nothing on telly,' he sighs. 'I'm starting to wish I was back in school.'

'Well you will be soon.'

'Yeah I know we're flying on Wednesday. I've bought loads of cool comics to give to my friends, they're gonna be well impressed.'

'You know, Eamonn,' I hesitate. 'Mammy might not be well enough to fly.'

My brother looks startled. 'She's not ill, is she? She's just having tests for her asthma.'

'It might be a bit more than that.'

Eamonn's face goes white. 'She's going to be fine,' he says defiantly and walks out of the room.

I repeat his words like a mantra as I head to the hospital. 'She's going to be fine, she's going to be fine, she's going to be fine.' I keep saying them as a bright, efficient nurse points me in the direction of my mother's ward. I head down a long corridor trying not to look at anybody else. As if as long as I don't meet the eye of any ill people, I can stay in the safe, smug world of the healthy.

But the moment I walk into the room, I know it's not fine. My mother is sitting on the edge of the bed. My father is beside her holding her hand. Stephen is standing awkwardly by a large armchair.

As I come in, my mother gets up to hug me. 'Oh you're here,' she says. 'Thank God you're here. Are you okay?'

As if I was the one that was sick. 'I'm fine. What have the doctors said?'

My mother is wearing her black silk dressing gown with the huge Chinese dragon on the back. She reties the cord and tells me, 'I got your Dad to bring this in for me. I wasn't going to be hanging round for hours in one of those yokes where everyone can see your naked bum.'

'Have they done the tests yet?' I ask.

My father says, 'They have to do more. They don't know for sure yet...'
His voice trails away.

My mother puts her hands on my shoulders and pats them lightly. 'It is cancer,' she says. 'Stage Four apparently. They need to do more tests to find out what kind of cancer. If they can figure that out then they say they might be able to offer me treatment.'

I blink hard. I want to scream what do you mean if they can figure out what kind of cancer? Don't they know? Instead I ask, 'What does stage four mean?'

I didn't know cancer came in stages, like there's different levels of qualification. My mother steps away from me and replies, 'Well, kiddo, it means I'm not going to live to be a hundred.'

I stare at her in disbelief. This cannot be really happening. Stephen starts to cry. Tears are coursing down his cheeks and he makes no effort to wipe them away. I wish I could cry. It seems the only right and proper thing to do. But somehow I can't.

My Dad says, 'You know they've all sorts of chemical treatments now, medical advances, you'd be amazed what modern technology... If anyone can fight this thing, your mother can.'

'Of course I can,' my mother tells him. Standing there in her flowing Chinese dressing gown, she speaks with such quiet conviction that we all believe her.

As my father drives me back to the flat, I think of all the time and preparation I've put into my great coming out speech. Like it ever mattered a damn.

'What are we going to tell Eamonn?' my father asks.

'The truth I guess,' I say.

'But we don't know yet what that is... They're keeping her overnight because they want to run a lot more tests. Your mother always used to boast about how she's never been sick a day in her life.'

I realise my father is hoping the doctors are going to come back and apologise for some kind of mix up. That actually they've done the tests again and there's not a thing wrong with my mother, of course there isn't. It's all been a very silly mistake.

My father opens the door to the flat and Eamonn jumps up off the sofa to greet us. He takes one look and I realise it's obvious from our faces that there's been no mistake. 'What's wrong?' he asks.

I turn off the TV and sit down to tell my thirteen year old brother that his mother has cancer. 'Mammy's not well,' I begin.

'She has cancer, you know like I had cancer, but now I'm better,' my father interrupts. 'She'll get better too.'

'Well obviously,' Eamonn says. He looks from me to my father suspiciously. 'How long will she be in hospital for?'

'They're not sure yet,' my father tells him.

'Will we have to delay our flight back to Tehran?'

My father looks at his hands. 'We won't be going back.'

'What?' Eamonn sits up straighter. 'Not ever?'

'No, we'll stay in Dublin. I've spoken to the department. They'll send somebody else to replace me.'

I look at my brother. 'Eamonn, Mammy's treatment could take months. She'll get much better care here.' I don't mention that they haven't even decided if they can give her treatment yet.

'But, but... I never even said goodbye.' I watch my brother's growing comprehension that his childhood has just ended.

We're in a different hospital room. My mother is lying on the bed and I'm sitting on a plastic chair on one side of her, my father on the other. We're waiting for her to be taken into theatre to do a special test to determine if she has cancer of the stomach.

'He said to me this morning, the doctor, young fella, very handsome, can't remember his name. I thought to myself surely you're far too good looking to be a doctor.' My mother chuckles.

'Too young you mean,' I correct her.

'Oh that too. Barely out of nappies. Like a sort of early Kevin Costner.'

'You mean when he was still a porn star?' My mother has always fancied Kevin Costner for reasons that are completely beyond me.

'No like in that scene where he rescues Whitney...'

My father has had enough. 'What did the doctor actually say to you?'

My mother sighs. 'Well a great deal that was largely incomprehensible. They seem to speak their own bloody language half the time. But what it appears to boil down to is that by process of elimination they think I have ovarian cancer. Which is not great but better than having stomach cancer. This morning's little adventure is to rule out stomach cancer.'

'Why's ovarian better than stomach?' I ask.

My mother takes my hand. 'Cos if it's in my stomach then there's no hope at all.'

For a second I think I might throw up. I can taste sick in my mouth but I swallow it back down.

'Anyhow for God's sakes let's talk about something else,' my mother sounds irritated. 'How's work?'

It takes me a second to remember that I have a job. The world outside of these hospital walls seems to have retreated to a distant memory. London feels several lifetimes ago. 'Work's okay,' I mumble.

My mother gives me a look that means I'm not being very helpful. I make an effort to engage in normal conversation. 'My horrible fat boss is finally leaving,' I announce.

'Well that is good news,' my mother says. 'You never seemed to like him much.'

'No, he's an awful prick. Ola's going to go for his job. I really hope he gets it, he'd make a much nicer boss.'

'Ola's the coloured fellow?' my father asks.

'Black, Dad, he's black.'

'I met him and his wife when I was over in London. Such nice people,' my mother says. 'And their lovely little boy, what was his name again?'

'Eshay. And actually they're not married.'

'Oh but I thought you'd said they were together for years?' my mother asks.

'Well not everybody wants to get married. They're happy just being partners,' I explain.

'Partners,' my mother nods. 'Well sure why not. But you don't have much rights as a father if you're not married. Legally I mean.'

'You don't have much rights as a father in any case,' I point out.

Then my father says, 'Well it's all very well but you know people can take this partner thing too far. There was this woman at the embassy who kept inviting her female 'partner' to events till the ambassador had to tell her to

stop. I mean after all you're there to represent your country, not shock, upset and disgust people.'

My father has told me before that he thinks homosexuality is unnatural. Once in Belgium when I attempted to argue with him about it, he told me he wasn't homophobic, it was just that the thought of it made his stomach turn. So what he's said shouldn't come as such a surprise. But somehow it hurts me more than anything I've ever heard before in my life.

There is a moment's silence before I stammer, 'I completely disagree with you.'

My mother looks between the two of us as if she can see the chasm that has just opened up. She says, 'If it is ovarian cancer, I'm going to have to have surgery you know.'

I feel terrible that my mother has had to resort to talking about her illness to dispel the tension in the room. The only thing that really matters is getting her through this. Yet somehow I can't seem to stop my father's words from bouncing off the inside of my skull.

Chapter Seventeen

Dracula's Bride

Dublin, 1980

Even though I agree with Miss Kenny about how beautiful Diana's wedding dress is, it doesn't change the fact that I hate wearing dresses. Except for the one Gran makes me for a fancy dress party. She takes an old summer dress that my mother lets her have because I've ripped it. Then she cuts up lots of different coloured crepe paper. Not pink because I hate pink but blue and red which are my two favourite colours. She sews the crepe paper on to the dress in lots of different layers so that it's all fluffed out. She doesn't really do it by magic like the fairy godmother in Cinderella but it's so beautiful, you'd think she had.

I'm sad when the party's over and it's time to take the dress off. My mother tells me I look so pretty in it I should wear dresses all the time. But I don't want to do that. I only like dresses that make you look like you belong in a story. Real dresses just make you look silly like a baby or a doll. That's why most of the time I won't wear them. The only exceptions are birthday parties and Christmas Day when my mother insists. And of course my first holy communion because you have to wear a white dress for that.

Gran comes to stay with us and asks me if I'd like to go to mass with her. When we get to the Catholic church, Gran asks me what the name of the priest is. I tell her I don't know, this is the first time I've ever been here.

On the way back from mass, we walk past my school and St Catherine's church next door. All my classmates are coming out of church and they shout hello to me. Canon Sinnamon and his daughter Sarah, who's

my friend, come over and I introduce them to Gran.

Gran's not very friendly to them though. She doesn't like that I know everybody at the Protestant church but didn't know anyone at the Catholic one. When we get home, she tells my mother it's a disgrace that I know nothing about my own religion, my own culture, and am being educated by Protestants who are barely Irish. This makes my mother very angry and there's a big row.

I hate arguments so I retreat upstairs. I climb into the second hand wardrobe in the spare room, leaving the door open just the tiniest crack so there's enough light to read.

I know that hiding in the wardrobe isn't very courageous of me. My father says he wants me to be brave and that what's he gave me a brave name. He tells me Aoife is the name of a battleship in the Irish navy as well as an Irish princess whose father was a traitor who married her off to a Viking called Strongbow. Aoife and Strongbow had a huge wedding celebration while the Vikings burnt down the town and murdered all the men, women and children inside. There's a painting of this in the National Gallery. Gran takes me to see it. I think it's going to look like Charles and Diana's wedding but it doesn't.

'Did Aoife want to marry Strongbow?' I ask.

'I don't suppose she'd much choice in the matter. In those days girls married who they were told.'

Gran stares up at the painting. It's huge and I feel very small standing under it. Aoife is wearing a white dress. It's hard to tell if she's having a good time or not. Just behind her there are red flames and corpses hanging from

the walls. I don't think I'd like that for my wedding.

'If she didn't like him, could she leave him or would she have to wait till he was dead?' I feel a bit sorry for Aoife. I wouldn't want to be stuck with a Viking.

Gran sighs, 'You're supposed to wait till they're dead.'

This seems silly to me. I ask my mother about it. She says in other countries, like America, you can get divorced. This isn't allowed in Ireland because the church doesn't like it.

'Gran says you're supposed to stay together till death do you part. That's the promise you make to God and each other.'

'Sometimes that's easier said than done.' My mother looks irritated. Then she tells me, 'You know your Gran wanted to leave your Granddad. Actually she did for a while.'

'What do you mean?'

'After your Auntie Ellen was born, she left him and went back to live with her mother, my Gran. But then a priest persuaded her to go back to her husband.'

'Why did she want to leave him in the first place?'

'I'm not sure, she doesn't ever talk about it. Ellen told me he was very jealous. That he used to go down to the theatre where she worked and start shouting and insisting that she came home. I think it was something to do with that.'

'Well I guess if she hadn't gone back you and Uncle Tadhg and Uncle Cormac would never have been born.'

'Yeah, I reckon it must have been a bit of a shock for your Auntie Ellen.'

Eight years the only one and then the three of us coming along one after the other so quickly.'

I think of when Stephen was born and feel a bit sorry for my Auntie Ellen.

My mother decides to send me to speech and drama classes on a Saturday morning because she thinks I'm too much of a behind the door person and she wants me to learn to speak up for myself. I'm not all that bothered about the classes. I just sit at the back and hope not to be asked to do anything.

What I do love though is that after the class, my mother takes me into Harvey's cafe next door. She has a cup of coffee and I always have a coke and an apple turnover. What's great about this is that I can talk to my mother without her being distracted by all the stuff she's always doing around the house. It makes me feel very grown up to tell her stories about what goes on in the speech and drama class over coffee.

Needless to say I don't mention that I never volunteer because I don't actually like acting or reading aloud. Instead I explain how the girl who was going to play the bride in Dracula can't do it now because she's broken her arm.

'Poor child. How did she break her arm?' my mother asks.

'She fell down the stairs that leads up to the class.'

'I suppose those stairs are very steep. You could break your neck on them if you weren't careful. I hope you're always careful.'

'Oh I am,' I reassure my mother. 'But I don't think she slipped or anything.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well I heard her friends talking about how one of the other girls pushed her on purpose.'

My mother looks horrified. 'Why on earth would anyone do that?'

'I don't know,' I shrug. 'But now the girl that pushed her is playing Dracula's bride.'

I think maybe my mother is going to be disappointed that I'm just one of the villagers in Dracula and I don't have any words. Also all I get to wear is a black bin liner instead of a white dress like the bride. But her and Gran come to see the show and tell me they're very proud of me.

My mother says, 'Even if you are a bit behind the door at least I know you'd never dream of pushing anyone down the stairs.'

Gran tells me how she used to be an actress in the Gate theatre. She went on tours all around the country. In one show she was in there was a coffin that usually had no corpse in it. But the last night of the tour, they hid Gran in the coffin and when the lead actor opened it, she was smiling up at him. The poor man nearly jumped out of his skin. He probably would have screamed only he was too much of a professional and the show must go on no matter what. Gran has lots of funny stories like this about when she was in the theatre.

I ask her if my Granddad was in the theatre too but she doesn't answer me. Afterwards my mother tells me never to ask questions like that because her father is dead a long time and Gran doesn't like to be reminded of him.

'What age were you when he died?' I ask.

'A bit younger than you.'

'How much younger?'

'I was six I think,' my mother says. 'About six.'

'How did he die?'

'He had cancer.'

'I thought you said it was a heart attack?'

'Maybe it was. I can't remember, it was a long time ago.'

I guess my mother doesn't like to be reminded either but it's odd she doesn't seem sure what her father died of.

Chapter Eighteen

Something There

London, 1997

On the flight back to London, I fall asleep. I dream that I'm lying on a hospital trolley with lots of doctors and nurses running around me. When I try to move I discover I can't because I'm attached to all these different tubes. I open my mouth to explain that it's not me that's sick, it's my mother. That's when I discover I can't speak.

A man in a white coat wearing a mask leans over me with a giant needle in his hand. 'This won't hurt a bit,' he says.

I know he's lying and wake up with a jolt. I'm covered in cold sweat and press my forehead against the coolness of the window. The aeroplane is passing over the Thames. I can just make out World's End towers where I used to live with Colman. I start to wish the plane would never land. That I could just stay suspended up in the sky and not ever have to deal with what awaits me on the ground.

That evening I go for a drink with Monique. She's shocked and sympathetic. She says, 'Your mother is going to be okay you know. I'm absolutely sure of it.'

I tell her that I've decided to delay coming out to my family for the moment. 'You're right,' she tells me. 'You can't put all that on your mother now she's sick. She doesn't need anything more to worry about.'

When I get back to the flat in Brixton, Lucy has some news for me. Her and her boyfriend Rory have bought a house together. She's asked her friend Annabelle to move in with them. Annabelle has been living with us since

Conor moved out a few months previously.

'What about me?' I ask.

Lucy looks uncomfortable. 'Well I just... I think it'd be better if we didn't live together any more. I mean we hardly ever see each other anyway.'

'Is this because of Monique?'

'No, no, well I mean it hasn't been easy. She doesn't really fit with us. And you two never come out with the rest of the girls. You just do your own thing all the time.'

I can't believe I'm hearing this. 'So when are you moving?'

'I've given notice to the landlord. He wants us all out by the end of the month.'

'All of us?'

'Well yeah, he says it's a chance to do the place up and he can charge more for it.'

'So basically I've just found out my mother has cancer and you're making me homeless?'

Lucy's face closes up. 'I really think it's for the best,' she says.

I'm absolutely furious. I realise Lucy must have been planning this for months. She could have told me about it when she knew Monique was moving. Then we could have considered whether we wanted to move in together. Now Monique has just signed a year's lease and she won't want to move again so soon. Plus my mother's surgery is in a couple of days and I plan to be back in Dublin by the weekend to see how she's doing. When on earth am I going to have time to find another place?

It's the morning of my mother's surgery and I'm walking up Portobello Road on my way to work. I pass the parrots that live in an outdoor basement cage on the corner opposite the pub. I always cross the road in time to make sure I can look in at them. I don't know how much they like the English climate but they usually seem cheerful enough. This morning though the bright green one is staring aggressively at his reflection in a round mirror above his perch. He puts his head from side to side as if he's deeply puzzled. I used to think it was stupid how they don't recognise themselves. These days I feel more sympathetic.

As a rule I like to get into work early before everyone else. The only one who's usually there when I arrive is the cleaner Linda. We've gotten into the habit of having a cup of tea together before she leaves. Linda is a retired nurse from Jamaica. This morning I tell her that right at this moment my mother is lying cut open on an operating table.

She pats my hand and says, 'I will pray for your Mum. The Lord will look after her.'

'Thank you,' I say. I don't tell her that I'm not at all convinced that prayers work.

She tells me, 'You look very worried. You're a good daughter. My daughters worry about me because of the diabetes. I tell them what good does all this worrying do me? I need to enjoy life the best I can while I still can.'

Then she tells me a story about how years ago her daughter was in a hit and run accident. 'This rich lady in her big car just knock over my child and not even stop. Can you imagine that? There's things in this world that just

don't make no sense. I tell you I prayed and prayed. I said to the Lord to take me and just leave my little girl. And it worked, she's okay now. But I never forget that feeling when I realise I could lose her.'

I realise that Linda is staying longer than usual because she feels sorry for me. It's a small kindness that I feel very grateful for.

The phone rings and it's my father. He tells me, 'Mammy made it through the operation. The surgeon says the tumour was quite big, definitely ovarian, but she thinks it went as well as it possibly could have done.'

'Thank God,' I say as Linda smiles at me.

But the following evening there is a complication. My mother has developed an infection and the doctors are very concerned.

My father's voice sounds strangled on the phone. He rings me from the hospital. 'They're pumping her with antibiotics. They say this sometimes happens with such a major operation. She's not really conscious but I should get back, I'll ring you in the morning.'

That night I dream I'm a small child again. My mother is having some kind of dinner party with her friends. She tells me to go and get her something from the other room. As I step into this white room, I realise I can't remember what she said she wanted. As I turn to ask her, the walls of the room come rushing in at me. I try to hold on to the floor but the ceiling is crushing me. Just when I think I'm going to be flattened, I wake up. The physical sensation of terror lingers though and I can't get back to sleep.

I sit at the kitchen table in my pyjamas drinking tea. The flat is completely quiet apart from the hum of the fridge. Eventually the phone rings.

It's my mother. Her voice sounds so far away and weak that for a moment I wonder if I'm still dreaming.

'Kiddo, is that you?'

'Yeah, it's me. Are you okay, Mammy?'

'I'm all right. I think I had them worried there for a bit.'

'You certainly had me worried.'

'I got an infection. To be honest, I kind of scared myself. I really thought I was dying.'

'Oh Mammy don't say that.'

'I'm not just saying it. I'm pretty sure I was. I felt like I was.' My mother pauses. 'But you know it was the strangest thing. When I asked for help, I suddenly felt there was something there for me.'

'How do you mean?'

'I was repeating this prayer to myself that I knew when I was a kid. I thought I'd forgotten how to pray but it just came back to me. And then I said please help me. Not out loud, just in my head. But it was as if there was this shift.' My mother laughs quietly. 'Not like white lights or a tunnel or anything. Just something. Not even someone necessarily. Just something. It's hard to explain.'

It's night time and I'm in my mother's room in St James's hospital. She's lying in bed looking very pale. She's hooked up to a million different drips and wires. There's a machine with lights that makes a weird whooshing noise.

'R2D2 I call him,' my mother informs me.

'Who?' I ask.

'That silly machine. I'm trying to convince myself he's on my side. Not one of the androids from the evil empire.'

I smile at her. 'How are you feeling?'

'Like I just got hit by a truck.' My mother sighs. 'But I'm still here at least.'

'Of course you're still here.'

'It was touch and go there for a bit you know.'

'Eamonn wants to come in to see you.'

'He's too young for all this. Don't bring him in yet. I don't want him getting a fright seeing me in this state. Wait till I'm a little stronger.'

'You don't look so bad,' I mumble.

'Kiddo, I look like shite and I know it. Don't you start with the oh you're looking so much better bollocks. I don't want to be bullshitted. I just want to be told the truth.'

'I know, Mammy, but you have got a bit more colour than yesterday.'

'I said to what's his face, Doctor Daley, that I didn't want him pussy footing around. That I'm a grown up and I want to be told what's going on no matter how grim it is.'

'What did he say to that?'

My mother laughs. 'He said I was a remarkably brave woman.'

'Well you are.'

'I told him I bet he says that to all the girls. I think the poor man actually blushed.' My mother shifts uncomfortably in the bed. 'Oh I shouldn't laugh, it hurts too much.'

'Did he say how you're doing?'

'Well apparently they drained two pints of fluid from my lungs.' As my mother tells me this, a nurse comes in.

'Two pints, that's impressive,' the nurse says brightly. She hands my mother a bright blue pill with a small paper cup of water.

'What's this?' my mother asks.

'Just something for the pain,' the nurse answers as she bustles back out the door.

'God only knows what drugs they have me on. They tell you nothing.' My mother knocks back the pill and grimaces. 'And they talk to you like you're in nursery school.'

'I suppose they mean well,' I say.

'Oh I know they do. And they work bloody hard, you want to see them running round this place. And it's not like they get paid properly. You'd want to be a saint to be a nurse honestly. I could never do it.'

'I'm glad they're looking after you properly.' I want to ask what exactly they cut out of my mother during her surgery but I haven't the nerve.

As if she can read my mind, my mother says, 'Well they whipped out my ovaries, my womb, my appendix, and part of the lining of my stomach. I said to Daly did you leave me anything?'

'Do they think they got out all of the cancer?'

'Oh I asked him that too. And that's the point he's not so clear on. He just started a load of mumbo jumbo about chemotherapy and hormone levels.'

Another nurse comes in and stands at the end of my mother's bed. Sensing I might be in the way, I ask, 'Would you like me to step out for a bit?'

My mother groans. 'Not more injections surely.'

'No, no, it's not that.' This nurse is a bit younger than me and has lots of freckles. 'It's to do with our conversation earlier.' She glances at me uncertainly.

'Oh did you get me the book?' my mother asks with sudden enthusiasm.

'Well yes.' The nurse hands my mother a book in a brown paper bag before scuttling from the room.

'What was all that about?'

'I think I embarrassed her but I don't care. It's important. Your Auntie Joan said to me surely that's the last thing you'd be worried about. Which I have to say I don't think reflects terribly well on your Uncle Cormac.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Well I couldn't very well go asking Daley, the man's scared of me as it is. So I asked that nurse what impact all this would have on my sex life.'

'You asked her what?' My jaw drops open.

'Don't look at me like that. Daley told me that though I hadn't hit menopause yet, I've had a full hysterectomy so my hormones will go crazy as if I had.'

'Oh you wanted to know about the menopause.'

'No, kiddo, I wanted to know if I'd ever be able to enjoy sex again. I mean obviously not straight away...'

I can't quite believe I'm having this conversation with my mother. But I force myself to ask, 'And what did the nurse say?'

My mother chuckles. 'She told me it might be a little uncomfortable at first, then she got all awkward and said she'd get me a book. I don't know

why she found it so hard to talk about, I think it's a perfectly reasonable question.'

'Of course it is, of course,' I stammer.

My mother looks at me. 'Have you met anyone since Colman?'

'That's not important right now,' I say.

My mother narrows her eyes suspiciously but decides to let it go. 'I'll tell you one thing about all of this. It's given me a hell of a jolt about what actually matters in life. I used to think I had problems, I didn't know I was born.'

'Well none of us saw this coming.' I squeeze my mother's hand. 'But you fought off that infection.'

'Don't tell your Gran, or your Dad for that matter, but I keep thinking about that night I nearly...'

'How do you mean?'

'Oh I don't know. I've been thinking about a lot of things.' My mother sighs and smiles at me sadly. 'There's nothing like lying in a hospital bed for hours on end to spur you on to reflection. But I'm a bit tired to get into it now. You must be knackered yourself. Go home and I'll see you tomorrow. When do you have to go back to London?'

'Wednesday.'

'I barely know what day of the week it is. You lose track of time in this place. Do they not mind you missing all this work?'

'It's grand, Mammy. They understand.'

I close the door to my mother's room gently. As I head back down the long corridor, I pause at the sound of voices. A woman in one of the wards

calls out, 'Night now, Mary.'

Another voice replies, 'Night Lizzie, God bless, hope you get some sleep.'

'Sweet dreams, Pat. Don't be letting the bed bugs bite.' This is met with general low laughter.

'G'night, Paula, see you in the morning.'

'You better believe it, Noreen.'

More laughter and an echo of 'Night, night, God bless,' that reaches out into the empty corridor.

I stand there listening to these women wish each other good night like some kind of Dublin based all-female version of the Waltons. This is a cancer ward so every single one of them is facing some version of my mother's battle. Their voices are full of kindness and defiance. It is I think the most moving thing I've ever heard.

Chapter Nineteen

The Last Time

Dublin, 1980

Me and my best friend Deirdre are playing hopscotch before school but she's not speaking to me. 'What's up with you?' I ask.

There's no answer. I rack my brains for what I could have said to upset her. 'Have I done something?'

Deirdre shakes her head. Then she tells me that her father was crossing the road and a car hit him. Now he's in hospital with a broken neck.

'The driver didn't even stop. He just kept on going,' she explains.

'Why on earth did he do that?'

'It's called a hit and run. The driver probably didn't have any insurance and didn't want to have to pay for my Dad to be in the hospital. So he just left him there.'

'How long is your Dad going to be in hospital?'

Deirdre stares off into the distance. 'I don't know. After it happened, he was about to try to get to his feet. But a nurse was walking by and she told him not to move. Only for that, he'd be dead or at the very least not able to walk again.'

I want to say something to make Deirdre feel better but I can't think of anything. I can't imagine what I'd do if someone ran my father over and didn't even bother to stop. I think I'd find it hard to stop crying. But Deirdre doesn't cry. She just looks a bit paler so that her freckles stand out more.

One day on our way home from school, Deirdre tells me that something

terrible has happened to her mother. She doesn't have to stay in the hospital for long but she's very upset because she's had a miscarriage. My mother explains to me that this means she lost her baby. The same thing happened to my mother after I was born and before she had Stephen. She was pregnant with another little baby who would have been our brother or sister.

But one night she started bleeding so my father called the doctor. The doctor arrived and he was drunk. They could smell the whiskey on his breath. He told my mother she was going to be fine and he left. She wasn't fine though. The bleeding got worse and worse till my father had to take her to the hospital. Not only had my mother lost the baby but she was haemorrhaging badly and could have died.

My mother says, 'I was so depressed afterwards I could hardly get out of bed. Only that I had you to look after, I don't think I'd have managed it.'

After she tells me this, my mother asks me a strange question. 'How would you feel if we were to adopt?'

I consider this for a moment. 'I think that'd be brilliant.'

'Really? 'Cause your Dad's a bit worried he mightn't feel the same about an adopted child as he does about his own.'

'I'd just like another brother or sister. I wouldn't care if they were adopted.'

I tell Deirdre about this odd conversation. She says, 'It must mean your parents are trying to have another baby the same way my Mam and Alan are.' Alan is Deirdre's mother's boyfriend who lives with them. Her parents split up when she was six but they're not divorced because that isn't allowed in Ireland.

I'm playing with Deirdre in the lane at the back of my house which is completely overgrown with weeds. On the other side of the lane is the canal and we like to watch the swans flying up and down it. Deirdre plucks two dandelion clocks and presents me with one of them.

'If you blow on it and you manage to get every single seed off in the one go, your wish comes true. Just like with birthday candles,' she tells me solemnly. 'Let's wish that our Mammies get pregnant and have the babies they want.'

'Okay,' I say a little doubtfully because I'm not sure I believe in magic any more. All the same I take a huge breath and blow as hard as I can.

So does Deirdre and suddenly the air is full of dandelion seeds. They float around us like tiny little parachutes glittering white in the sun. Not a single one is left on either stem.

'We did it.' Deirdre gives me a big hug in delight.

To my surprise, this actually works. A few months later, both our mothers are expecting babies.

I'm sitting outside in the school yard with Sandra Nolan, a girl who's a couple of years older than me, and I tell her my Mammy is about to have a baby. We're watching Sarah Webb twirling around as fast as she can. She does this so that everyone can see her knickers. Sarah Webb is in the special class. Sandra tells me that the reason Sarah Webb likes to show her knickers is because when she was born the oxygen got cut off to her brain.

I ask my mother if this could be true and she tells me it happens

sometimes but she'd rather not think about it. Then she says, 'What you have to understand, kiddo, is that every child is a gift. And whether our new baby is a boy or a girl or they have black hair or red hair or they're disabled or not, we will love them just the same.'

This is a bit like what Mr Barnet tells us about the special class. He says everyone is to be treated the same and there is to be no bullying or teasing people because they might be a little different. Sandra tells him that if she catches anyone picking on anyone in the special class, she's going to burst their heads open. Mr Barnet reminds her about the talk they had about violence and how it's not always the best way to handle a situation.

Deirdre comes into school a bit late and she tells me that a terrible thing has happened in Palestine. Israeli soldiers have gone into a refugee camp and massacred all the people who live there, even the women and children.

'But why would they do that?' I ask.

Jeffrey Green is listening to our conversation. He starts laughing and doing an impression of people in Palestine having their throats cut.

Deirdre threatens to hit him with her ruler. 'It's not funny at all,' she tells him.

I ask, 'How would you feel if soldiers murdered all your family?'

But Jeffrey Green just laughs harder. 'Don't be thick,' he says. 'That would never happen.'

'It might,' I say. 'How do you know? You could have been born in Palestine just as easily as here.'

'No, I wouldn't,' Jeffrey Green looks at me with scorn. 'I'd never have

been born black.'

I'm so shocked by this way of thinking that I don't know what to say. But Deirdre takes her ruler and hits Jeffrey Green across the face with it as hard as she can. She does it really fast so that Mr Barnet doesn't see.

The next day me and Deirdre are walking home from school when we're confronted by Jeffrey Green's mother. She's a huge fat woman with red cheeks and a chin that wobbles. She asks Deirdre if she was the one who hit her son with a ruler.

'So what if I did?' Deirdre asks, staring up defiantly at the giant ogress towering over her.

'You cheeky little brat,' Mrs Green bellows. 'Don't you hit my Jeffrey, don't you dare hit my Jeffrey.'

'Your Jeffrey,' Deirdre tells her, 'is a baby and a coward.'

Before Mrs Green can react to this, we've hurried away. I tell Deirdre I'm amazed she could stand up to Jeffrey Green's Ma like that, I'd have been terrified.

'It'd take more than that oul' bitch to frighten me,' Deirdre says and I believe her.

The baby is late and my mother is bored with being pregnant so she gets my father to take us all to a film. We go to see 'Return of the Jedi.' In the queue, there is an old man in a suit with a bowler hat who plays the fiddle. My father gives me a fifty pence piece for the fiddler. The old man does a funny bow and makes his hat roll down his arm into his hand so I can drop the coin in. Then he winks at me just as the doors to the cinema open.

I sit in the dark stuffing popcorn into my mouth and thinking about space travel and the baby swimming inside my mother's tummy that's going to come out any day now.

On the way back to the car, we pass the Rotunda hospital and my father jokes, 'Are you sure it's worth going home?'

Stephen was born in the Rotunda but I wasn't. I was born in a Swedish hospital where the nurse couldn't pronounce my name so she christened me Fifi. My mother didn't like this because Fifi is a poodle's name but other than that she thought the Swedish nurses were great. She tells me how she got an awful shock when I was born because she was only twenty one and nobody had explained to her that babies arrive all covered in blood and guck. When they handed me to her, she thought she'd given birth to some kind of alien. But actually I was quite normal, whereas the new baby we're waiting for is huge. My mother says she can't remember the last time she was able to see her feet.

The morning after Return of the Jedi, I wake up and there is a strange stillness in the house. I go into my parents' room to discover they're not there. Excited, I wake Stephen up and tell him that our mother must be at the hospital having the new baby.

Stephen is even more excited than I am. He's wearing Superman pyjamas and he runs up and down the stairs shouting, 'Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a baby.'

Eventually the phone rings. It's my father and he tells me that I have a new baby brother. He's going to be called Eamonn Sean. I'm not so keen on the name Eamonn because in my old school, there was an Eamonn in my

class who drew a bare naked lady in my copy book. But my father says the baby's being called Eamonn Sean after my grandfather. Granddad's name was Edward John and Eamonn Sean is the Irish for that. I think Granddad would like that we've called the new baby after him so I'm pleased.

My father says my mother is doing fine even though Eamonn weighed over nine pounds. He says he's going to come home and take us in to visit them both.

When we get to the hospital, my mother is lying in bed looking very tired. The new baby is in a kind of glass cot beside her. When I look inside, my brother is fast asleep. For all the talk of him being huge, he looks pretty small to me.

'Isn't he perfect?' my mother asks.

I'm about to say yes when I notice that the bottom of Eamonn's feet are bright blue. I wonder if anyone else has noticed. Are a baby's feet meant to be bright blue? I decide it's probably best not to say anything. I'll just keep an eye on him in case it means there's something seriously wrong.

My mother needs a holiday to recover from giving birth to the baby so we go to the west of Ireland like we do every year. Usually we go to Kerry or the Aran Islands but this year my parents decide to try Mayo. We stay in a little cottage that belongs to the farmhouse across the road. I make friends with the farmer's daughter whose name is Colette.

We're coming back from the beach and my mother comes out to greet us. She has baby Eamonn in her arms and she hands him to me. I've become very good at holding him and changing his nappy and washing him. I

think he's the most gorgeous baby that was ever born. Plus his feet are now a normal colour so he seems to be doing fine.

My mother says to me, 'I've got some good news for you. We're moving to New York. Your Dad's been posted to the UN.'

Colette's eyes widen. 'New York, that's only brilliant. I'd love to go to New York.'

Colette tells me that she's never even been outside of County Mayo in her whole life and she'd give her right arm just to get to Dublin, never mind New York. I know I should be excited about going to America but I'm not. I don't really want to move house again.

'Mayo's not so bad,' I inform Colette.

It's my last day at school before we move. Mr Barnet tells me that I'm going to be missed but he knows I'll do us proud over there with the Yanks. I think how much I'm going to miss my teacher who's always so kind to us and even though he can be strict, he hardly ever shouts and is always up for a laugh.

The boys love to tease him for supporting Manchester City when they all support Man United. But Mr Barnet just says, 'I'm a fan of the underdog. It's easy to support a team that wins but to support a team that loses requires strength of character.'

Oliver Honan explains to me that they don't play football in the States. They play something called American football, which is more like rugby. Football they call soccer but it's not very popular. I don't like the sound of this. No football. What am I going to do in break times?

I'm walking down the street by St Catherine's church with Deirdre like

we do every day after school. When we get to the corner, we're going to have to say goodbye. She can't come play at my house today because we need to finish packing. We're spending tonight in a B&B and we're flying tomorrow. Deirdre makes me promise that I'll write to her. She has tears in her eyes which is strange because Deirdre never cries.

I say to her, 'It's funny I never thought we'd walk home from school and it'd be the last time. I guess I figured we'd just keep on doing it every day the same way forever.'

Chapter Twenty

The Wrong Place

Dublin, 1997

I'm on the phone to the hospital. I'm trying to find out if my mother might be released tomorrow.

The nurse says 'Well if she leaves for the weekend, we can't guarantee the bed will still be there.'

I have an image of a burglar making off with the mattress the moment our backs are turned. I know what the nurse really means is the bed will go to another patient. Still it's ridiculous that my mother can't come home between chemo sessions in case there's no room for her when she needs to return. I also know she won't want to stay five minutes more in hospital than she absolutely needs to.

'I think we'll have to risk it,' I say.

'Up to you,' is the reply. I hang up thinking how none of this is up to me, how totally useless and powerless I feel.

I dial yet another ad for a short term let. My parents' own house is still rented out to strangers and time's up on the Christchurch flat we're staying in. If I don't find something, my mother won't have a bed either in or out of hospital. A woman answers to tell me that she's just this minute rented her apartment to someone else. Never before have I understood the despair of the biblical no room at the inn.

My Dad is sitting beside me smoking a cigarette. 'We'll find somewhere,' I tell him.

He nods and says, 'I just want to get her out of that bloody hospital.'

I try the last place on my list. These are luxury flats in Donnybrook. They're expensive and they can only offer us a few weeks. The man is surprised when I say we'll take it without even seeing it.

I make dinner. Spaghetti Bolognese because it's what my mother often cooks and my Dad likes it. I force myself to taste the mince to see if it's done, as I don't want them poisoned because of my vegetarianism. The trouble is I haven't eaten meat in so long, I'm not so sure any more what it's supposed to taste like.

As I put the plate down, my hand slips and some sauce splashes over the table. Eamonn says, 'God but you're no good as a substitute mother.' He's joking but I can't help thinking how absolutely true this is.

The next morning we go to the hospital to collect my mother. The nurse offers her a wheelchair but she insists on walking. She takes my arm as we slowly make our way down the corridor. We turn a corner and are in the main reception area, which has a huge glass revolving door.

My mother says, 'I was worried I'd never walk out of here again. I can't tell you how beautiful the idea of the outside world is.'

'Well this is like a war,' I tell her. 'And getting out of this hospital today is a battle won.'

'That's true. Even if I'm back here Monday, today I'm a free woman.' My mother squeezes my arm.

Once I get back to London, I have to move myself. I've managed to get a room downstairs in a house in Stoke Newington where Ant, the guitarist in Monique's band lives. This at least means I'm once again on the same side of

the city as Monique who now lives in Holloway. There are six of us in the house and everyone else is a musician apart from me. There's a guy called Shag who likes to play his bass late into the night but is otherwise perfectly pleasant. Besides the noise doesn't bother me that much as most of the time I'm at Monique's or I'm in Dublin. The vast majority of my worldly belongings are now in storage under Lucy's stairs. I guess I should be grateful to her for looking after my things but I'm not, I'm still angry.

I arrive into work and my boss tells me, 'Linda died.'

'What?'

'Some complications with her diabetes I think. The funeral's tomorrow, I suppose we should go.'

I knew Linda had diabetes but I didn't think it was going to kill her. The world seems a much more fragile place than I ever realised.

It's a huge funeral. In the church, one of Linda's daughters puts her arms over the coffin and starts sobbing. I wonder if this is the daughter who was in the hit and run. I wonder if I'm also going to know this kind of pain.

A few days later my boss asks me to drop Linda's last pay packet round to her husband. I ring a doorbell in a tower block and walk up several flights of stairs. Linda's flat is utterly spotless. Her husband is sitting on the sofa watching cricket and drinking a glass of wine.

He says to me, 'Very good of you to come over. I should have picked it up myself but I'm finding it hard to go out.'

'No problem at all. I'm so sorry for your loss,' I mumble.

'Would you like a glass of wine?'

'Thanks but I have to get back to work.'

‘Of course you do. Of course you do. It’s just you know so very quiet now she’s not here. I never knew quiet like this before.’

For a moment, I think he might start crying but he doesn’t. He just shakes my hand and thanks me again for bringing over the money. He reminds me of my father.

I leave thinking it wouldn’t have killed me to sit down with that poor man and have a glass of wine and listen to his pain. It’s what my mother would have done. I am not my mother. How will we cope if we lose her?

From the airport, I get a taxi to my parents’ rented flat in Donnybrook. It’s late in the evening. I haven’t been sleeping and am absolutely exhausted. I drop off in the cab and wake up abruptly when we arrive. Only after the driver has deposited my suitcase on the pavement and sped off into the night do I realise that I’m in completely the wrong place. My parents and Eamonn moved to a different flat on the other side of town a couple of weeks ago. I’ve been there myself but somehow I gave their old address instead of the new one. I can’t quite believe I’ve done this. It’s beyond stupid.

I try to hail another taxi. But there are hardly any cars on the road. Even if I knew the way, it’s miles into town and I have my suitcase. I decide to go into the pub across the road to ask if I can use their phone to ring a taxi.

The bar is completely empty apart from a balding man piling up stools. ‘Jasus, love, you’ve missed last orders by a good hour,’ he informs me.

I explain about needing a taxi. He peers at me and asks, ‘Are you lost or something?’

Lost is exactly what I am so I just nod my head.

'I tell you what, I'll give you a lift.'

The next thing I'm squeezed into a tiny car with the bald man, who it turns out owns the pub, and three of his bar men. I wonder if it's entirely wise to be in a car with total strangers but don't feel I've much choice. They're all very chatty and want to know if I've been away on holidays anywhere nice. I tell them I live in London but am home to visit my mother who's not very well.

'What's wrong with her?' asks the pub owner.

'Cancer,' I say.

'I'm terrible sorry to hear that,' he says. The other three nod their heads in sympathy.

They insist on dropping me right outside the door even though it's clearly not on their way. All of them wave at me as I ring the doorbell. They wait till I'm safely inside before heading off into the night. I feel like I've been rescued by my very own knights in shining armour. In all likelihood they won't remember this small detour, but I know I'll never forget their kindness. I tell no one about my idiotic mistake.

I'm sitting at the kitchen table with my mother and she asks, 'Don't you think this wig makes me look Ronald McDonald?'

'Not at all, it's stylish. And you've always been a red head so it makes sense to stick with the same colour,' I try to sound as reassuring as possible. The wig actually suits her but it's upsetting that underneath all that remains is soft, downy wisps like you'd find on a baby. My mother's hair has always been her pride and joy.

My mother sighs, 'That's what your Auntie Helena said. She tried to

convince me I was suddenly a dead ringer for Julia Roberts. My legs are a bit short and my mouth is a bit small for that.'

'Oh I don't know... maybe Julia after she got shrunk in the washing machine.'

'Let's face it, I haven't shrunk that much. Isn't it desperate how even cancer hasn't made me lose weight?'

'Mammy, you shouldn't be worrying about that. Especially now.'

'Why not? Why shouldn't I worry just like before? I've not got any thinner.'

I don't know how to answer this so I pour us both another cup of tea instead. 'The thing is, kiddo,' my mother continues. 'When you think about it, everybody's dying, I just happen to be more aware of it.'

My hand shakes ever so slightly and tea splashes on the table. I never used to be this clumsy except maybe when I was a kid. As a child, I seemed to be forever knocking glasses over. My mother would yell, 'What did you do that for? You know I hate spills.' Like I'd done it on purpose to annoy her.

Now though she ignores the small puddle. I don't know if it's her sudden tolerance or her philosophical attitude to death but I feel the sharp sting of tears in my eyes.

My mother says, "Helena's been very kind. You'd think having had breast cancer herself she wouldn't want to be reminded what it's like. But she insisted on helping me get the wig.'

Helena is married to my mother's brother Tadhg. My mother has always been a little bit jealous of losing her fun loving younger brother to a wife. Now she says, 'I think I've underestimated Helena, I've never given her

enough credit. But you know the trouble with my family is that they're always comparing. Your Gran was going on and on about how much worse the chemo Helena had to have was than mine. For God's sakes, pain is not a bloody competition.'

'Gran probably just wanted to make you feel better, that it wasn't that bad.'

My mother sighs, 'You know that's one of the things they say to you in the Samaritans. To ask yourself every time you tell someone it'll be alright if you're saying that for their sake or for yours. Because it can just be a way to shut people up from talking about what you don't want to hear.'

'I'm sure Gran didn't mean it like that.'

'We were never allowed talk about anything in my family. The C word is just another subject they'd prefer not to mention. I was on the phone to her yesterday telling her how exhausted I am, how I have to lie down in the afternoons. Do you know what she said to me?'

'What?'

'Sure wasn't I lucky that I had a bed I could lie in. I was furious. Even though I guess I am lucky compared to some women. Daley told me he's got patients whose husbands still hit them even though they're getting chemo.'

'Seriously? That's terrible.'

'And at the support group, one of the women was saying that when her cancer came back, her husband couldn't cope at all and he went off with someone else. I don't think your Dad would do that.'

'Of course he wouldn't.'

My mother stares off into the distance. 'You know growing up I always

had so much admiration for my mother, for how hard she worked and how she never complained no matter how bad things were. But I just don't feel like playing the martyr, I really don't.'

'Why should you?'

'It's like bloody Ellen telling me she couldn't face seeing me in the hospital and she'd just have to put this whole situation out of her mind. How selfish can you get?'

My mother has never felt especially close to her older sister. When they were younger, they shared a bedroom despite the eight years between them. On the dresser was a small statue of the Virgin Mary. One night my mother woke up and she saw the statue moving. Mary was swaying slightly from side to side. My mother got such a fright, she started screaming. My Gran came running and told her it must have been a dream. Even with the light from the street lamp outside falling through the curtain, it still wasn't bright enough to be able to see anything properly. But Ellen believed my mother had been visited by the Mother of God. Which was most unfair because Ellen said her prayers every night without fail when half the time my mother didn't bother.

My mother sighs, 'I know Ellen has her own problems. She says her back is bad again. Sure she ruined her health years ago having all those children like steps of stairs. She wouldn't hear of using contraception till the doctor said to her that if she risked a sixth, she'd most likely be leaving those poor kids orphans.'

At this point in the conversation, Stephen comes bustling into the kitchen. 'Hiya, how you feeling?' He puts his arm around his mother and

gives her a kiss on the cheek.

She replies, 'I hope you always use condoms.'

'Oh Jesus, don't start on this again,' my brother mumbles.

'Well one of the women in the support group made the point to me that mothers are always warning their daughters about not getting pregnant as if their sons had nothing to do with it. She said boys need educating too and I think she's right.'

My brother rolls his eyes as I shift uncomfortably. My mother has never exactly been one to mince her words but since she got cancer, she sees no reason not to talk about anything she likes. 'I'm just saying you can't be too careful. In the heat of the moment it's easy to get carried away...'

Stephen says, 'I'm out of here, I just came in to get a glass of water...'

'You're alright, sit down, I'm off to have a rest in a minute.' My mother continues, 'You don't know how lucky you are to be able to get condoms. When I was in school, the nuns used to say to us if you sat on a boy's knee, you should put a telephone book in between so that you were sitting on paper rather than flesh. That way he wouldn't be getting over excited and have impure thoughts that could lead to occasions of sin. They told us contraception was the devil's invention and only Protestants used it because it didn't matter to them because they were damned anyway.'

'Don't worry,' Stephen laughs. 'None of the girls I know rely on telephone books. Janice certainly doesn't.'

Janice is my brother's girlfriend, who despite the fact she's so tough she pierced her own nipple, my mother approves of. Maybe because no one could accuse Janice of being naïve.

I say in a desperate attempt to finish the conversation, 'You do look tired, Mammy, maybe you should get some rest.'

My mother is of the opinion that now we're all adults, there's no reason not to talk about our sex lives. It's her own personal rebellion against the sexual repression of her youth. Of course I agree in principle but in reality I don't want to know and also I'm very keen to keep up the illusion of my own celibacy.

'I suppose you're right.' My mother stands up to leave. 'But I'm telling you, it's certainly different from when I was young. Not that we didn't have fun. I can tell you we took chances you wouldn't believe.'

'I thought you were trying to tell us to be careful,' I point out.

As if to punish me for my boring conservatism, my mother's parting words as she heads out the door are, 'Well I've always believed in a bit of adventure. And I won't tell you where you were conceived but it certainly wasn't in a bed.'

This is far more information than I ever wanted to know.

Chapter Twenty One

The Notebook

New York, 1983

We're in the taxi driving from JFK airport. It's night time and I'm peering out the window at all the thousands of lights.

'I want to see a skyscraper,' I say excitedly.

The taxi driver cracks his gum loudly and tells me, 'Don't you worry, kid, no shortage of skyscrapers in the Big Apple.'

At first we have to stay in a hotel until my parents find us a house to rent. We have an au pair called Ann who takes us to different playgrounds every day. She's come with us from Dublin and she's never been to New York before. I'm a bit old for playgrounds and find them kind of boring. I like feeding nuts to the squirrels in Central Park though. I try feeding one of them a piece of hubba bubba bubble gum. The gum is bright pink raspberry flavoured. The squirrel turns it round and round in his paws sniffing it carefully. Then he drops it in disgust and looks at me as if to say just 'cause I'm a New York squirrel doesn't mean I can blow gum, you asshole.

I also love the old carousel in Central Park. I always go on the same black horse and pretend we're winning the Grand National. My mother says she can't understand why I don't get fed up with how slowly the painted horses move. She doesn't realise that in my head, the hooves are thundering past at astonishing speed.

We're in a playground and there's a woman called Maureen who's organising a game of chasing. When she finds out I'm Irish, she's very

excited because her family came from Ireland hundreds of years ago. It turns out Maureen isn't the mother of any of the children in the playground. She's an actress but she also does community work taking orphans out for the day.

She tells Ann that she lives in a really fancy apartment building on the upper West side. It's nearly Halloween and if we like, we can come to her building to go trick or treating with her. She loves trick or treating but she needs some children to do it with.

I dress up as a skeleton and Stephen dresses up as the devil. Back home, we used to get some apples and nuts and maybe a few tuppences when we knocked on our neighbours' doors. My mother tells me I'm not to eat any apples that I get from New Yorkers because a few years ago there was some psycho that put razor blades into the apples he gave to children for Halloween. But I can eat anything that's properly wrapped.

I cannot believe the amount of sweets the people in Maureen's apartment building give us. Every time we shout 'Happy Halloween, trick or treat?' they tell us we have the cutest accents and give us tons of goodies we've never seen before. There are Reeses pieces and M&Ms and Hershey's kisses and gigantic lollipops. When we get back to our hotel, me and Stephen empty our plastic bags on the floor and admire the mountain of candy we've acquired.

My father says this is what is known as the American dream. My mother says not to eat it all at once or we'll be sick.

We move into a large white house in Harrison, a suburb of New York, even though the estate agent has annoyed my father by telling him this is a lily-

white neighbourhood. My father says he doesn't care about things like that but the estate agent just shrugs and says that most people do.

I find the new house very strange. The hall and the stairs have a bright red carpet with this silver wallpaper that you can half see your reflection in. Upstairs the bedrooms are covered in purple and green swirls. My mother says the landlady has the most hideous taste but then what can you expect from Americans?

On my first day at my new school, I'm introduced to a girl called Alexis Fortgang and told that she's in charge of showing me around. I've been given the same schedule as her so she'll be able to take me from class to class. I'm glad about this because in St Catherine's, we spent all day in the same room and the whole school only had three classrooms any way. I'm worried I might get lost. The vice principal, Mr Donovan, explains to me that at Louis M Klein Middle School, there are over a hundred students just in my grade. He's shocked when I tell him that in sixth class in Dublin, we were only seven.

As soon as Mr Donovan leaves, Alexis Fortgang turns to me and hisses, 'Don't go thinking we're gonna be friends. I'm not friends with people like you and I don't want anyone thinking I am. When we change class, you can walk behind me.'

With that, she swishes out of the room and I have to hurry to catch up with her. The first class isn't really a proper class at all. It's called homeroom and it's for listening to messages over the intercom.

I'm sitting at my desk when suddenly everyone gets to their feet and turns to face the American flag. They're chanting, 'I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, one nation under God, indivisible with

liberty and justice for all.' It reminds me of black and white footage I've seen of Nazi rallies.

In the next class, which is called Reading, I've a teacher known as Mr C. He shouts at me, 'Hey Whiffy, give me five.'

When I stare at him blankly, he takes my hand and holds it out flat before him. Then he slaps my hand with his. I'm shocked because even though Mr C. hasn't slapped me hard, Mr Barnet would never hit us. Plus he's smiling at me so I've no idea what I've done wrong.

A girl called Ellen Kim explains to me that Mr C. wasn't hitting me. 'Give me five' is just an American way of saying hello. She tells me that her parents are from Korea and they found it really weird at first too. Her Dad nearly punched someone because he thought they were insulting him. Ellen Kim tells me that I can eat lunch at her table if I want.

'Thanks,' I say. 'But I think I'm meant to stay following Alexis.'

Ellen looks a bit embarrassed. Then she explains to me that actually it's Alexis who's told Ellen to invite me to eat at her table. All the kids who eat at Alexis's table are Jewish so I wouldn't be welcome there. The Italian kids probably wouldn't want to eat with me either but at Ellen's table, they're a mix of those that other people don't want so they don't care that I'm Irish.

I find all of this really confusing. In my old school, everyone was Irish and we didn't have a cafeteria with tables. We just ate our sandwiches in the yard. I quickly come to hate my new school. None of the teachers can pronounce my name. No matter how many times I correct him, Mr C. carries on calling me Whiffy. The other kids think this is hilarious and they love imitating my accent too. 'Potato,' they shout in my ear with great emphasis on

the t's.

I'm in English class and Mrs Bisignano has set us a spelling test. She asks me how to spell the word horror. I say H O R R O R.

'What?' she bawls at me. 'I can't understand what you're saying. Say it again.'

So I repeat myself. 'Does anyone else understand her?' Mrs Bisignano asks. The rest of the class has started to snigger. 'Say it again,' she instructs me.

By the time I've spelt horror three times, the whole class is in fits of laughter. I have no idea what I'm doing wrong. I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

'It's spelt,' Mrs Bisignano speaks to me very slowly like I'm a retard. 'HORROR.' She pronounces the R's like ares instead of ores the way I do. 'I know it's hard for you, honey, trying to learn English but you gotta say the letters right or you ain't gonna get nowhere in this world.'

My attempts to convince Mrs Bisignano that English is my mother tongue fall on deaf ears. She puts me in the back of the class with the Japanese kids and refuses to read any of the stories I write. She asks me if I've ever been to school before and when I tell her of course I have, she looks doubtful. On another spelling test, I spell colour with a u instead of color the way the Americans do. We're supposed to write out any mistakes a hundred times. I attempt to explain to Mrs Bisignano that technically I've not spelt the word wrong, just the way they do in my country.

This irritates her greatly and she yells at me, 'Well, honey, you're in the United States of America now, the greatest country on earth, and you're just

gonna have to learn to spell English properly.' She then informs me that to make sure I get the message I'm to write out COLOR a thousand times before I can go home.

Mrs Bisignano seems to hate my guts. But then one day I come into class and it's like an evil spell has been lifted. She's all smiles and tells me, 'No, honey, I think you should move to one of the desks up front. But come sit beside me here for a moment, I wanna talk to you about something.'

With great trepidation, I lower myself into the chair Mrs Bisignano has pulled up for me. To my surprise, I see that on her desk is a photocopy of a story I'd written for Mr C's class. It's about an alien who comes to planet Earth but nobody can understand what he's saying because of his accent. Mrs Bisignano explains to me that Mr C loved my story so much he showed it to Mr Donovan, the vice principal. Mr Donovan was so impressed that he came to talk to Mrs Bisignano about her Irish student.

'I told him how well you're doing and what a great little writer I think you are,' Mrs Bisignano smiles at me.

I frown back in puzzlement. I know for a fact that Mrs Bisignano just puts my stories in a file without reading them. She doesn't think I'm good at writing, she doesn't even believe I can speak English. Suddenly a word I've heard my father use pops into my head. Hypocrite. I've never understood its meaning before.

From that day on, Mrs Bisignano is nothing but sweet to me. But I know that she's only changed her tune because the vice principal took an interest in me. Mrs Bisignano is the first grown up person that I have absolutely no respect for.

I really miss Deirdre and my old life in Dublin. I've nobody to play with after school any more so I spend a lot of time in the giant walk-in wardrobe making a fantasy land from cards my father bought me in Chinatown. The cards have Chinese symbols on them and I like to imagine what they say. I also like pulling both the wardrobe doors closed behind me. The doors have mirrors on them and in the middle of the wardrobe is a kind of box made of mirrors. With the doors pulled towards me, if I look in the mirror box, I can see my reflection repeated hundreds of times into infinity. It's weird that there can be all these versions of me going further and further into the distance. It makes me feel I don't recognise myself any more since I moved to America. Like I'm made up of all these strangers.

I try to write a letter to Deirdre. There's so much to say that I don't know where to begin. I want to explain that when I'm saying the pledge of allegiance in the mornings, my stomach gets tied up in knots and I feel sick because I don't want to face another day of humiliation for being the weird Irish kid. I want to explain to her about the strange feeling the mirror box gives me and ask if she's ever felt like that? But I don't know how.

In frustration, I give up on the letter and write something else instead. It's about a frog that everyone thinks is ugly. My mother asks me what I'm writing and as I'm not too sure what it is, I hand it over for her to look at.

'Oh,' she says in surprise. 'It's a poem. A really lovely poem.'

I'm not too sure about this as it doesn't rhyme and it's not funny like the Hilaire Belloc poems I used to love to learn off by heart. *'Matilda told such dreadful lies, it made one gasp and stretch one's eyes.'*

Still as my mother seems to like the thing about the frog, I try writing a few more. My mother takes me into Manhattan to Barnes & Noble book store. I've never been in a bookshop this big. My mother tells me that she wants to get me a proper notebook so that I can put my poems into it. The stationary section of Barnes & Noble is vast and there are several shelves of different notebooks. I pick them up in wonder and fascination. I love the feel of the untouched pages and the beautiful covers.

My mother says I can have whatever one I want. Eventually I settle on a notebook that is hard back but also has a soft reddish purple covering. The pages are cream and I can already imagine filling them with poems. I'm worried though that my mother's going to think the notebook is far too expensive. But to my surprise, she doesn't even look at the price.

She just hands it to the man behind the counter and says, 'It's for my daughter. For her writing.'

Chapter Twenty Two

The Flood

Dublin, 1997

As my mother's so tired, I insist that cooking Christmas dinner is my responsibility. My mother agrees reluctantly. I can tell that having to let me prepare the turkey is a huge strain on her nerves. She keeps giving instructions until I insist she sit down at the table. She only accepts this because the apartment is small enough for her to easily carry on telling me what I'm doing wrong from her seat.

When I was a child, we used to cook dinner together every night but my role was restricted to minor tasks such as stirring gravy, whipping cream and listening to my mother's stories about her family. She particularly liked to talk about her grandmother who when she was eighty developed breast cancer. The doctor told her that at her age it probably wasn't worth going through the pain of surgery. My great grandmother informed him that she had four fatherless grandchildren to look after and she'd risk it. She lived for another six years until my mother was ten. On her deathbed she called in each member of her family, one by one, to say goodbye to them.

'That's how I'd want to die,' my mother would tell me. 'At home, on my own terms. Not like your poor Granddad in that awful hospital with your Nana insisting he was getting better. Sure he knew he wasn't getting better. People don't die without noticing. All that lying does is mean they can't talk about it.'

Now she has cancer herself, my mother's views haven't changed. 'I keep saying to Daley I want the truth, I want to know what's actually going on.

I told him that when my father died, it was an enormous relief to my mother. I think he thought I was mad but I was just trying to get him to see that I'm not afraid to talk about death. I don't want him pussyfooting around me.'

Dr Daley has told my mother the chemo has been highly successful and she's in remission. 'Remission is a bit like limbo,' she informs me. 'Nobody really knows how long it lasts or where it is or if it's just made up to make us feel better about the lost souls of African babies. But it's better than hell that's for sure.'

'Dad says it's great news. That you can be in remission for years and years. That it might never come back at all,' I reply, while carefully placing streaks of bacon over the turkey.

My mother smiles at me. I get the uneasy feeling that she's not convinced. 'I just hope Daley's telling me the full story. That he's not lying to me. It's the one thing I can't stand, people not being honest. 'Cause you know, kiddo, that's all I had growing up. Lies and secrets and not being able to talk about anything. You can't imagine what that's like.'

'No, I guess I can't,' I reply, thinking all I do these days is seem to tell one lie after another.

'I'm sure your Dad's right but Daley gives me the creeps. And it makes it hard for you to trust people when you grow up in an atmosphere of don't mention the elephant in the corner,' my mother sighs. 'Which is what my father was let's face it. This huge absence we were never to speak of.'

In all the dinners we cooked together and all the stories my mother told me when I was growing up, she always maintained that her father had died when she was six. Admittedly I'd thought it a bit odd that sometimes she said

he died of cancer and other times it was a heart attack. Or that she didn't seem to have any stories about him. All she ever explained was that the reason there was an eight year gap between her and my Auntie Ellen was that my grandparents had been separated during that time. Then a priest persuaded my Gran to go back to her husband and they had three more children in quick succession. Shortly after that, my mother always said, my grandfather had died. I'd had the vague feeling that perhaps my Gran didn't think the priest had given her the best advice. But I'd no reason to ever suspect my grandfather's death was considerably more complicated than my mother ever let on.

Then when I was twenty one, my mother took me out for a drink. We sat in a quiet corner of a pub and she revealed that her father hadn't died when she was five as her family had always claimed. Instead he'd moved to England, which they'd pretended was the same thing. He'd actually been alive until I was about five. In fact she'd taken me to meet him when I was little but I couldn't remember it. I found it very strange to discover I'd met someone I'd always believed had died long before I was born.

Now my mother instructs me not to over-boil the Brussels sprouts before saying, 'You know my father was just a complete taboo. We never ever mentioned his name. When your Gran first left him, he used to come visit sometimes. I was only small but I remember it was very awkward. Then he went to England and it was as if he'd never existed.'

'Did Gran ever talk about why she left him?'

'No, never. The only time she ever even acknowledged the situation was when we went to his funeral. I remember I said to her "Well a

respectable widow at last” and she smiled at me. You see the lie we’d been telling all those years was finally true.’

‘That’s just weird,’ I say as I drain the Brussels sprouts. They do look a bit soggy and overdone.

Luckily my mother is lost in her story. ‘Standing at the grave, I had this line from Macbeth that kept going round and round in my head... “Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it.”’

Macbeth is my mother’s favourite play and she knows whole passages of it off by heart. Still this strikes me as a strange quote to use about your own father.

‘The only person I could ever talk to about it was your Auntie Ellen. And she said your Gran left because our father was very jealous and we were better off forgetting about him. She made me feel that if I asked what had happened, I’d just be upsetting everyone. That it was better to leave well enough alone. And you know I didn’t think about it that much for years. But recently I can’t seem to stop asking myself all these questions.’

‘Did I only meet him the once?’ I enquire as I struggle to fit the enormous bird in the flat’s tiny oven.

‘Yes, I’m afraid he wasn’t very interested in you. He just kept going on and on about your Gran being a slut and a whore. He was so bitter, he hadn’t let any of it go. I couldn’t be listening to that so I never went back.’

‘Well that’s understandable,’ I say, feeling disappointed that I’d failed to capture my grandfather’s imagination the way he’s captured mine. I wonder what he did in England all those years when his family was busy telling

everyone he was dead. I wonder if his secret life was as complicated as mine.

‘I understand why your Gran lied, I do. It just wasn’t acceptable to leave your husband back then,’ my mother continues. ‘But I wish she would have talked to me about it. You know in the support group we had to do this thing where you wrote a letter to someone about something you’d never been able to tell them. Once we’d written them, we set them on fire and burnt them. I wrote to my father.’

‘What did you say?’ I ask. The air is thick and moist with steam from the oven as I set the timer. I’ve never used this oven before and I’m not entirely sure how the little clocks for setting the temperature and the alarm work. If I burn the turkey and ruin Christmas dinner, my mother will kill me.

‘I just asked him why he’d disappeared from our lives for so long. Even if it didn’t work out with him and your Gran, why did he have to cut me out too? Because you know all these years I’ve always thought I was so angry with him about that. But when I burnt the letter, I didn’t feel anger at all. I just felt terribly sad. And I realised I’d really missed my father when I was a child and no one had ever allowed me to admit that.’

‘That’s terrible, Mammy.’

‘Well you know it was good in a way to realise it at last. I never thought of having counselling till I got cancer. I can’t help feeling I should have gone and talked to somebody twenty years ago.’

My mother suddenly looks very small and vulnerable. No wonder she doesn’t like secrets. If she knew how much I was lying to her, she’d hate it.

‘At least we talk about things, don’t we?’ she asks.

'Of course we do,' I say.

'Seems an awful shame you finally learning how to cook a turkey and you won't even get to taste it. Are you sure you've set the temperature right?'

To my enormous relief, Christmas dinner turns out to be surprisingly edible. Everyone compliments my efforts but I can't help noticing that my mother barely touches her food. She just cuts the bits of turkey up very small and moves them around in her vegetables the way I used to do when I was a child.

A week later I head back to London. When I get to the house in Stoke Newington, I put my key in the door and as I open it, I'm greeted by a wave of water rolling down the stairs. For a moment I think I'm in danger of being swept away. Instead the water laps around my feet in a rapidly expanding puddle. I stand there in shock before shouting 'Hello, hello?' There's no answer because none of my housemates are back yet from their Christmas holidays.

I'm exhausted from the journey and the pressure of trying to make Christmas feel like Christmas when my mother's so ill. This is not the homecoming I need. Suddenly all the strain of pretending to be full of holiday cheer is too much and I burst into tears. It's as if I've been flooded along with the house.

Then realising I'm only contributing to the problem, I splash through the hallway and into the sitting room to ring the landlord. His tone is accusing even after I've explained that I haven't been here for weeks so whatever's

happened cannot possibly be my fault. He instructs me to get a plumber that's not expensive.

It's a Sunday and I ring a long list of emergency plumbers in the yellow pages before I find one prepared to lower himself to make the trip. It turns out the bottom of our boiler has collapsed, flooding first upstairs and then gradually the rest of the house. The boiler will need replacing and probably most of the carpets.

'This is not going to be cheap,' the plumber informs me with cheerful honesty. 'Just as well you're only the tenant.'

The house reeks of damp. I attempt to mop up some of the water with towels that I ring into a bucket. After the plumber's left and I've soaked up as much of the water as I can, I sit in the empty house listening to a clock ticking. No boiler means no heating so it's freezing cold. The milk in the fridge has gone off and I'm too tired to go to the shop. I don't think I've ever felt quite so alone. Monique is still in France with her family. I miss her. Sometimes I think she's the one beautiful and good thing in this whole mess. I'd really like my mother to meet her. If only I knew what my mother's reaction would be. Then I'd know whether to risk telling her or not. I wish I had a double of my mother that I could try the truth out on.

Thinking this, I decide to ring the Samaritans. Because my mother worked for them for so long, it seems the closest I can get to telling her without hurting her. The woman on the other end of the phone asks me if I've thought about killing myself. It's strange because my mother has explained to me that they're trained to ask this of everyone just in case they are suicidal.

'No, I haven't considered that,' I say, suddenly feeling like I'm wasting their time. That my problems are tiny and insignificant compared to what so many people must suffer. People like my mother who are utterly blameless for what's happening to them. Not like me, who has brought all this on myself even though I'm not really sure how.

I explain to the Samaritan woman that I imagine she must be somebody like my mother, kind and honest and wanting to help people. She asks me if I think maybe my mother guesses I'm a lesbian. I tell her I don't think so, that the idea would just be completely alien.

The Samaritan woman says, 'But working for us, your Mum must have listened to quite a few gay people.'

'Yeah I suppose she has,' I say. 'But I think maybe it's just made her feel that gay people aren't very happy.'

The Samaritan woman goes back to asking questions because she's not meant to give me her opinion. She's just supposed to listen. I respect that but I can't help wanting to know if she thinks I'm a terrible daughter or an awful person or just a complete fuck up?

When I eventually finish the call, I start crying again and I can't seem to stop. Even though I tell myself that if I keep on like this, it's going to have been a waste of time mopping up. I seem to be in danger of creating my own flood like Alice in Wonderland. It's as if everything around me is the wrong shape or I'm the wrong size. I wish I could shrink so small I could disappear. I wish I could talk to my mother.

Chapter Twenty Three

The Soul Of A Butterfly

New York, 1984

We're in science class hooking up batteries to make circuits that cause small bulbs to light up. Mr Curran is explaining about voltage and how electricity works. He asks me if I understand what a flashlight is?

'Yes,' I tell him. 'It's the same thing as a torch.' I've learnt lots of American words by now so I say trash instead of bin and cookie instead of biscuit to avoid being laughed at.

Mr Curran's laughing now though and I've no idea why.

I'm walking down the corridor when Alexis and two of her friends come up to me. All three are wearing matching red jackets and chewing bubble gum. The other kids call Alexis and her friends JAPs. My new friend Kate has explained to me this has nothing to do with the Japanese, it stands for Jewish American Princess. Kate is half Jewish herself but she's not a JAP. It's all quite confusing but at least since I've learnt my way around, I no longer have to walk behind Alexis and I try to avoid her as much as possible.

Alexis cracks her gum and asks, 'Is it true what Mr Curran's been telling everyone?'

'What?'

'That it was so cute you called a flashlight a torch 'cause like in Ireland you've no electricity, you just have like burning bits of wood.'

'Of course we have electricity.'

Another girl called Kim sneers, 'That's not what Mr Curran says. He says in the old country there's like no lights or running water and like you have

to go to the bathroom outside.'

'That's nonsense.'

Alexis leans in and cracks her gum right in my face. The smell of synthetic raspberry makes me feel a bit sick. 'Why don't you just go back to the little hole in the ground you crawled out of?' she asks.

For the rest of the day, I'm confronted by students who Mr Curran has told there's no such thing as electricity in Ireland. He's found my use of the word torch so amusing he's repeated the story to every single one of his classes.

I'm in social studies and Mrs Castelnau is pointing with a long ruler at different states on a large map of America. She's asking if people can identify which state she's pointing at. We get bonus points if we can name the capital too. Needless to say I don't raise my hand because though I could list the 26 counties of Ireland, I know nothing about the 50 states of the US.

Suddenly Mrs Castelnau points her ruler at me. 'Tell me what state this is?' she asks, slapping the point of her ruler back at the map.

'I don't know,' I say.

'Have a guess.'

'I really don't know.'

Someone else tells her it's Maryland but I'm not off the hook. 'Let's try an easy one,' Mrs Castelnau is peering at me through her glasses. She slaps the left hand edge of the map.

'I've no idea,' I say.

The class starts to giggle.

‘How can you be so ignorant? That’s California. Everyone knows where California is.’ Mrs Castelnau shakes her head in despair. ‘Tomorrow we’re having a test. So you better learn where all fifty of the states are or God help me I’m going to stand you up here in front of everyone until you do.’

That evening I go home and I pull out my father’s atlas. My father loves testing us on the world’s capitals. It’s a game we play sometimes at dinner that I like because I’m much better than Stephen. Never once though has he asked me the capital of a US state. I’m fast learning that most of the knowledge I have inside my head is of absolutely no use in this country. They don’t care about the land of saints and scholars or the terrible things the British did over nine hundred years. They only care about their own history and their own geography. I pace up and down my bedroom repeating Washington, Oregon, California, North Dakota, South Dakota... I do this for hours and by morning I know all fifty of the US states and their capitals.

I get a 100% on the test but it doesn’t make me feel good. It just makes me feel angry.

We have to take a class called Health for one term. Mainly it seems to consist of telling us that while drugs may make us feel good, they will destroy our brains, rot our insides and kill us. Though my friend Kate hates the gross pictures of blackened lungs and passes out cold when she’s forced to watch a video of open heart surgery, I find it all quite interesting.

There’s one part of it though that I really hate. This is called The Magic Circle. We have to sit round a table and the counsellor asks each of us in turn questions like ‘Where do we go when we’re angry?’

Two of the kids in my group are very shy so when it's their turn, they're not able to answer. The counsellor says he'll come back to them again at the end. And he does. We all sit there while they blush and stutter and eventually manage to mumble something. It's excruciating as Alexis and the other bullies nudge each other and snigger. I desperately search my brain for an answer that will come across as American and normal. I know I can't possibly say what I'm thinking, which is why on earth should I be forced to share my inner most emotions with people who I don't like and who I know will laugh about me afterwards?

'When I'm angry,' I say quickly when it gets to me, 'Sometimes I go sit by myself in my garden.'

'That's where she goes to the bathroom too,' Alexis whispers loudly.

The counsellor ignores this. He warbles on about the importance of not being isolated and talking to others about your feelings as I imagine pouring petrol over them all and striking a match. I know I would never actually do this but I suspect it's not considered normal to think it. It bothers me that while I wouldn't personally kill Alexis, I wouldn't feel terribly sorry if she were to be run over by a bus. I realise I've never hated anyone before.

Mr C shows us a documentary about the holocaust. There is a man walking by a barbed wire fence speaking French. I've forgotten most of my French but there are subtitles. The man is saying that such hatred is beyond human comprehension. Then there is black and white footage of huge piles of suitcases and then shoes and then bodies. The subtitles explain about making lamps out of human skin and how gas chambers work. Walking

skeletons in striped pyjamas stare into the lens.

When the film finishes and Mr C turns the lights back on, everyone starts chatting away quite normally. But I don't want to talk to anyone. I feel stunned. For the rest of the week, I can't get the image of the stick thin people burying naked bodies in ditches out of my mind.

I ask my mother why the Germans hated the Jews so much? She says, 'It's not just the Germans. Sometimes I think there's some fundamental flaw in the human race. Something that's gone terribly wrong that means we can do such awful things to each other. You don't catch any other animal behaving like that.'

'I just don't get it,' I reply.

My mother peers at me. 'You know you really think about things too much. I don't why they had to show you that film, you're far too young.'

Usually I hate my mother treating me like a baby but this time I can't help thinking she might be right.

My mother has tickets for a poetry reading in Manhattan. She's very excited because it's someone called Seamus Heaney and she's read all his books. It sounds like a grown up thing to me but she insists that I come with her.

'It's important. Besides I can't take your Dad, he has no interest in poetry, and I don't know anyone else well enough.'

It occurs to me that my mother misses her friends and Ireland too. She thinks Americans are rude and aggressive and obsessed with money. She went to a PTA meeting and was shocked that the women all wore fur coats and boasted about how much their husbands earned. They kept asking her

what country club she was in and when she said she wasn't, they stopped talking to her. My new friend Nicole has told me that only JAP moms go to PTA meetings so my mother shouldn't bother. Nicole's parents are a mix of Italian and Polish American. Her father's a cop so they haven't got the money to join a country club. My mother says they're ridiculously expensive and she still doesn't understand what the point of them is. I used to believe my parents knew everything but since we moved to America, I've realised there's lots of things they don't understand at all. Thinking of all this, I agree to go to the poetry reading.

The room is crowded. There is no one there my age or even anywhere close to my age. I forget about this though once Seamus Heaney starts reading. I don't understand everything he says but it doesn't really matter. The words dance around inside my ears and suddenly I don't care that the kids laugh at me at school and the teachers think I'm stupid and can't speak English. I wish he would read forever.

Afterwards me and my mother queue up to get our copy of *North* signed. I'm mortified when my mother informs Seamus Heaney, 'My daughter writes poems too.' But then when I see that he's written inside the cover – 'For Aoife, write on!' I'm secretly pleased that my mother told him.

I'm over at my friend Nicole's house. She writes poems too so I show her my signed copy of *North*. She's never heard of Seamus Heaney though so she's not that impressed. She says she has something much more interesting to show me but it's private and secret. I have to swear not to tell anyone. This sounds exciting so I instantly agree.

Nicole gets a stool and climbs up on it to reach to the top of her parents' wardrobe. She pulls down a whole pile of magazines that she tells me belong to her father. When she opens them up, they are full of pictures of naked women. It's not just that they have no clothes on. They are also holding their legs open so you can see their private parts up close. The women are smiling even though some of them are handcuffed or being whipped. I think they look really ugly.

Nicole starts giggling, 'Look how hairy her fanny is,' she says.

'What is all this?' I ask.

'It's porn. Don't you have porn in Ireland?'

'I don't think so,' I tell her.

A few days later, I'm in my parents' bedroom and there's a copy of Playboy on the table. I ask my mother, 'Why have you got this?'

'Oh it's nothing,' she says, looking embarrassed. 'Your Dad just picked it up 'cause we're thinking about buying a new car. '

'A new car?'

'Yes and well I was curious. You know it's banned in Ireland. I don't know why, it's very mild.'

I don't care how mild it is. I don't mind that Nicole's father has magazines of naked women but I don't like at all the idea that my father would ever look at anything like that.

My mother sees the look of distaste on my face. 'You'll understand about these things better when you're older,' she says.

I'm not sure I'm ever going to understand grownups and their weird ideas.

Mr Donovan, the vice principal, has asked to read my notebook of poems. He calls me into his office to discuss them. I sit awkwardly in a large swivel chair as he tells me he particularly likes the one I've written about the war in Northern Ireland. I explain it's not about the North, it's about Vietnam. He looks a bit thrown by this but carries on.

'How old are you, honey?'

'I'm twelve.'

'Well your writing has a maturity way beyond your years.'

I'm pleased to hear this but then he spoils it by informing me. 'Your poems are beautiful. I really think you have the soul of a butterfly.'

I don't want to have the soul of a butterfly. I don't want to write about flowers and ballet and pretty things like Mrs Bisignano is always telling me to since she's accepted I can speak English. I want to write about war and death and the holocaust and pornography and how much I hate America. I don't tell Mr Donovan this of course. I know he's only trying to encourage me.

Chapter Twenty Four

This Is The Life

London, 1997

I'm in bed with Monique. I'm trying to explain why my house flooding has made me realise I really need to live somewhere that feels more like a home. 'Why don't we get a place together?' I ask.

'Okay,' she says. 'But in the meantime, you can just stay with me. I mean you're here all the time anyway. What's the point in paying rent on somewhere you're hardly ever in?'

'Alright, as long as it's just while we're looking for a place. And on two conditions. One, you let me pay half your rent. And two, you tell the people you live with that I've moved in.'

'I don't see why they need to know.'

'Because they'll notice me using the kitchen and the bathroom. I don't want to have to be sneaking in and out of your room. It's only polite and you can explain it's not for long.'

'I guess. I'll just say you're staying for a bit.'

She kisses me and I think as long as I have her maybe that's all the home I need.

The next day I give a month's notice on my room in Stoke Newington. My housemates tell me they're delighted I'm moving out because the guitarist in Shag's band has just been evicted and is desperately looking for a place. I've been there so little they barely know me so I guess it's not personal. Still I find their enthusiasm to be rid of me a bit depressing.

Me and Monique go dancing in Club V, upstairs at the Garage. Huge graffiti on the walls declares 'The Queerest of the Queer.'

I'm at the bar ordering drinks and Monique is chatting to this boy. As I join them, she says, 'I've just been explaining that you're my girlfriend.'

The boy looks me up and down. 'Well you're both welcome to come back to mine,' he informs me.

'No thanks,' I reply.

'I thought this was meant to be a mixed night. Gays and straights together. My mate told me I'd meet lots of lesbians who were well up for it.'

'It's a gay club.' I point helpfully to the declaration on the wall.

'Well I don't know how you expect to be accepted if you go hiding in your little ghettos.'

'I just want to dance with my girlfriend in peace,' I tell him. In truth, I wish I could hide away and never have to face the straight world ever again.

Monique can see I'm upset. 'You really shouldn't let some stupid boy bother you. You know you're the only person in the world I'm interested in.'

'It's not that,' I say. 'It's just when I'm here I feel a million miles from Dublin and when I'm in Dublin I feel a million miles from here. And at the same time, I feel like I'm nowhere.'

'We need a change of scene. Australia's going to be incredible, you'll see. The sun will shine every day and we won't care what anyone thinks because we'll have each other.'

We've both applied for one year Australian visas and have been accepted. Monique's delighted and wants to leave as soon as possible. Going to Australia has always been her dream.

‘Dance with me,’ she says, pulling me out onto the floor. ‘Just you wait and see, like that silly song says, things can only get better.’ I really hope she’s right.

The next morning, my mother rings me to tell me my parents have bought a cottage in the countryside. It’s in Tipperary near where my Gran’s family come from.

‘I’d rather be by the sea,’ my mother explains. ‘But this is a short enough drive from Dublin that we can pop down at the weekends.’

‘It sounds lovely, Mammy.’

‘Well it’s what we always dreamt of doing when we retired. I told your Dad best not to wait. If there’s one thing I’ve learned from all this, it’s to live 90% of your life in the present tense. 10% is more than enough for future plans; you got to make the most of right now.’

‘I totally agree with you.’

‘Brilliant so you’ll come with us next weekend. I’m dying to show you the place. We’ve a field out the back. Your Dad saw a fox...’

I listen to my mother’s enthusiastic descriptions thinking I wish I knew how to be in two places at once. Or rather two different people at the same time. I feel like I’m a rubber band being stretched in different directions and at any moment I might snap.

We’re sitting in a crowded Chinese restaurant. It’s my father’s birthday. Though my mother looks tired and pale, she’s determined we’re going to have a nice evening. So far it’s been going quite well. But then, just as my father is

ordering the bill, we somehow manage to get on to the subject of Senator David Norris running for Lord Mayor of Dublin.

My father says, 'I'm not saying I don't respect the man, obviously he's very clever being a professor and knowing so much about James Joyce, it's just the idea is ridiculous.'

My mother nods her agreement, 'You're right, you couldn't possibly have a gay Lord Mayor, I mean what would people say? Sad really.'

'I've nothing against homosexuals myself, even though I don't think it's natural, but Ireland isn't ready for that kind of thing,' my father continues.

I stab at a prawn and press my lips together. I wish I could somehow disappear from this conversation.

Stephen laughs, 'You wouldn't catch me taking it up the arse.'

While my father shudders at the thought, my mother says, 'Don't be so vulgar. Often they're very nice people or one of them is. In relationships like that there's often one that's abusive.'

I can't take any more. 'I'm going to have to go in a minute. Jack's waiting for me. I'm meeting him in the Freedom Lounge.' Jack is an old friend of mine from college.

Stephen stares at me. 'Are you gay?' he asks.

I'm so surprised I drop my fork. 'No,' I nearly choke.

'It's just that's a gay bar,' my brother elaborates.

This is news to me. 'I've never been there,' I explain. 'Jack picked it.'

'Maybe Jack's gay,' my mother exclaims. 'Poor boy. Such a shame. And to think I always thought he had a crush on you.'

Stephen sticks his tongue out at me. 'He always seemed a bit of a faggot to me.'

My mother sighs, 'It's his mother I feel sorry for. She must be so worried.'

My father shakes his head. 'I'd be devastated if Eamonn turned out to be gay. I mean what kind of life would he have?'

Rising out of my chair, I grab my jacket and shout at them, 'Jack's not gay.'

A moment's silence greets this uncharacteristic outburst. I watch a shadow of a doubt cross my mother's face.

'Of course not,' she says. 'You know I like Jack. I didn't mean to insult him. I think you two would be very good together.'

I'm sitting in the hospital waiting room with my mother. It's dark and dingy with curls of paint peeling off the walls.

'You'd think someone would put up a few pictures or something,' my mother says.

The room is crowded but no one else is talking. One woman is flicking through a magazine she's clearly not reading, she's not even looking at the photos. There is an air of tension as if we're all on a ship that's slowly sinking and there are very few lifeboats. I have the strangest feeling, like a combination of *deja vue* and that time has come to a complete standstill. It seems like a hundred years before my mother's name is finally called.

When she comes out, she's subdued. 'I'll have to have a bit more chemo,' she says.

'But what about the remission?'

My mother looks at me and says, 'You know you were talking about going to Australia.'

'Yeah.'

'I'm asking you not to go.'

'Of course I won't go.' I put my arms around my mother and give her a hug.

I arrive back in London expecting to pack to move to Monique's house in Holloway. When I open the door of my room, I get a surreal shock. It's a completely different place. There are posters all over the walls of rock bands and a guitar lying on an unmade bed with sheets I've never seen before. There's a clothes rail with boys' t-shirts and checked shirts hung up and a pair of boxers on the floor. All my things have disappeared. For a dizzying moment, I feel as if somehow I've disappeared.

It turns out Shag's mate was so keen to move in straight away that they've boxed up all my stuff and put it in the sitting room. 'Thanks,' I say uncertainly, not at all pleased that they've been through my things. Or that they found it so easy to make all trace of me vanish.

'It didn't take long,' Shag informs me. 'It's not like you've got much.'

This is true and most of what I do still have I add to my collection of boxes under Lucy's stairs. I arrive at Monique's with just a small bag of clothes. She offers me one drawer to keep it all in.

'I feel like some kind of refugee,' I tell her.

‘You’re better off travelling light,’ she says. ‘You don’t need stuff. It just weighs you down. When I came to London I hardly brought anything with me. I was so happy to be making a new start. I didn’t want to be reminded of the past.’

Monique hasn’t told her housemates I’ve moved in because it didn’t seem worth it when we’re going to Australia soon. ‘I’ve bought us a travel book to read,’ she says. ‘It’s such a beautiful country. I’m sure you’re going to love it.’

‘I can’t go,’ I tell her. ‘Not when my mother’s having more chemo.’

Monique turns away from me. ‘Well,’ she says. ‘We’ll just have to wait till your Mum’s better. The visas are valid for a year.’

‘I’m not sure she is going to get better.’

Monique takes my hand. ‘Don’t say that. I know you’re scared but she’s going to be okay. I know she is.’

I’m sitting out the back of my parent’s cottage in Tipperary with my mother. It’s a beautiful sunny afternoon and we’re at a small table eating strawberries. ‘Ah yes,’ my mother says. ‘This is the life.’

I smile at her. ‘It’s really gorgeous here.’

The cottage is very old with a staircase so low you have to crouch down so as not to hit your head when you’re climbing it. There are open fireplaces in all the rooms and though freshly painted, everything looks pretty much the same as it must have done a hundred years ago. It used to be the home of an impoverished tenant farmer and his large family.

‘Hard to believe some poor woman raised ten children in those tiny rooms,’ my mother says. ‘It must have been hell. But God knows it’s heaven to me. It’s our little bolt hole. Sometimes when I’m here I can nearly feel like I’m not sick. It’s just so peaceful. You know before I got cancer I was always running around thinking I had to do this, that and the other. Now I don’t do anything unless I really feel like it. I feel strangely free.’

‘Good for you,’ I reply as I watch a bumblebee climb inside a purple foxglove. I feel calmer than I have done for ages.

‘Your Dad and I are so happy when we’re here I can’t tell you. You know it’s like we’ve fallen in love with each other all over again. I mean we always knew we loved each other but then you have kids and you get so busy and you kind of forget. It’s like we’ve gone back to when we first met.’

‘Sounds very romantic.’

My mother laughs. ‘The first weekend we came here, we did it in every single room...’

‘Mammy...’

‘Ah God you’re far too easily shocked.’

My mother pours more cream over her strawberries and winks at me.

Chapter Twenty Five

Early Success

New York, 1985

I tell my mother that I need more clothes. I claim that I've outgrown all my old ones. I haven't really but I've realised that I need to start looking more American if I ever want to be left in peace. Even my favourite outfit that my mother let me pick to wear to my brother Eamonn's christening is ridiculed by my classmates.

I also tell my mother that I need a bra.

She says, 'Don't be silly. How can you possibly need one when there's nothing there?'

Mortifyingly this is true but it's also beside the point. 'All the other girls wear bras.'

'But, kiddo, isn't that because they have breasts?'

This is also true. But when we were changing for swimming, Jamie Ponce noticed my lack of a bra and pointed it out to everyone else saying, 'I guess they're like too poor in Ireland to buy underwear.' This was greeted by hoots of laughter.

'I really have to have one,' I insist.

'Okay,' my mother sighs. 'Don't get your knickers in a twist.'

She takes me and Eamonn to Caldor, a huge department store in White Plains. The girls' clothing section is a vast ocean of pinks and purples. These are the two colours I find most distasteful. Everything is covered in Care Bears or My Little Ponies. I feel like I'm drowning in rainbows, love hearts, unicorns and princesses.

I tell my mother to search for anything that's not smothered in this revolting slush. She comes back with a fluorescent pink sweater with I Love You sprayed across it in glitter. 'I wouldn't be seen dead in that,' I tell her.

'You said you wanted to look more American. This is what American girls wear.'

Eamonn from his buggy, or rather stroller as it's known over here, shouts, 'I wanna Carebear, I wanna Carebear.' Even my two year old brother has been corrupted.

By the time we finally escape with the least offensive clothes I could find plus some triple A bras, night has fallen. A huge full moon bathes the car park. I release Eamonn from his stroller in order to put him in the car. Delighted to be free, he makes a run for it. I rush after him, terrified he's going to be run over by an enormous station wagon that's backing out. But he stops suddenly and points at the sky. He starts laughing with sheer joy and excitement.

'What is it? What's funny?' I ask him.

'The moon,' he replies, still pointing. 'It's the moon.'

Why he finds this so hilarious I have no idea but I find myself looking up and laughing too. I'm standing in a car park laughing at the moon with a two year old. I must be going stark raving mad. Still as I pick Eamonn up and he wraps his chubby arms around my neck, I feel that he's the one bright patch in this dark night.

In the car on the way home, my mother tells me my cousin Susan has had a baby. I find this hard to imagine as she's only five years older than me.

'I didn't know she was pregnant,' I say.

'Nor did anyone,' my mother sighs. 'Poor girl didn't tell a soul. Not even the father. She planned to give the baby up for adoption and no one would ever have known. But she couldn't go through with it. She told your Gran she'd something to tell her but she had to promise not to tell Ellen.'

Susan is one of my Auntie Ellen's five children. She's been living with my Gran in Dublin while studying for her exams. 'What did Gran say?'

'Oh she got an awful shock. She thought Susan had put on a bit of weight but nothing that would make you think she was about to give birth. Apparently Susan was wearing a lot of baggy jumpers.'

'What's happened to the baby?' I ask, glancing back at Eamonn who has fallen asleep with the Carebear I bought him still clenched in his fist.

'Your Gran got it back. A little girl. She made Susan tell Ellen as well. Terrible to think she didn't feel she could confide in her own mother. I mean you'd tell me if you were pregnant, wouldn't you?'

'No way,' I reply. 'You'd kill me.'

My mother looks at me. 'I wouldn't you know. I'm not saying I'd be happy but I wouldn't kill you.'

I'm sitting in homeroom with my friend Kate. I tell her that I don't see why I should have to stand for the pledge of allegiance when I'm not American and I don't believe in God.

She says, 'You don't have to stand up, you could just stay in your seat. It's a free country.'

'Okay why don't we put it to the test? Tomorrow we both won't stand up.'

'Fine,' says Kate.

The next morning in homeroom after the familiar bing bong bing of the intercom followed by the scraping of chairs, we stay seated.

Mr Leaf, our homeroom teacher, barks at us, 'What's up with you two?'

We both leap to our feet and start chanting the pledge. I've proved my point but I don't feel particularly good about it as I haven't been any more courageous than Kate.

Mr Leaf is also my social studies teacher. He's small and full of an explosive energy and passion that means his classes are never dull. The other kids think he's really cool but I find his lack of irony annoying. He likes to give long lectures about how wrong it is to use abusive terms for people of different colours or different religions. Yet he constantly refers to Muslims as Towelheads. One afternoon he's close to tears when he tells us about terrorists murdering an American man in a wheelchair by pushing him off a boat. But shortly afterwards when a Russian diplomat is murdered, he informs us 'Better dead than red.' He rants that if Europe doesn't support the US in fighting Libyan terrorism then maybe we should drop a nuclear bomb on Europe too. He claims the United Nations is a shocking waste of taxpayer's money and they should move it to Beirut so it can be blown to kingdom come along with the rest of the Towelheads.

I sit there seething as I consider that my father is a European working for the UN who's spent much of his career fighting for nuclear disarmament. If he knew that a large part of my history class consists of being taught that the solution to the world's problems is to nuke Muslims and anyone else who disagrees with the US, he'd be furious. He'd probably complain to the school.

Then I'd be a snitch as well as a weird foreign kid and people would hate me even more. Resistance is futile because Mr Leaf is cool and I am not.

Then one day Mr Leaf starts in on Northern Ireland. 'The Catholic majority are fighting for freedom against oppression from the Protestant minority,' he pontificates.

I brave raising my hand to object because this is not a question of opinion, this is just factually wrong. 'Protestants are in the majority in Northern Ireland,' I say.

Mr Leaf glares at me. 'You don't know what you're talking about, honey.'

To my great surprise, one of the boys comes to my defence. 'Well, Mr L, it is like her country so I guess she would know.'

Mr Leaf gives this patronising chuckle. 'Okay well I tell you what, I'll look it up tonight when I go home and I'll bring you in the book tomorrow and show you.'

Of course he never does this. He never mentions Northern Ireland again. He just carries on making jokes about Towelheads and explaining why the United States of America is the greatest country on earth.

The only teacher I don't despise is my new English teacher, Mrs McCann. Not only does she believe I can read and write English, she seems genuinely enthusiastic about my poems. She tells me I should write about the things that interest me and she never mentions flowers or butterflies. She gives me books to read and wants to enter my poems for this nationwide competition.

To my amazement, I'm selected as a finalist which means I have to

represent my school at the awards ceremony and I might win one hundred dollars. One hundred dollars is more money than I have ever had in my entire life. Mrs McCann says I can invite my parents to the ceremony if I like. My father has to work and doesn't care much about poetry anyway but my mother's delighted.

'Maybe an American education isn't as bad as I thought,' she says.

I'm pleased to hear this as my mother is always going on about how shocked she is by how little I seem to be learning. She thinks all I do is answer multiple choice questions that are bound to leave me illiterate. 'Don't you write any essays at all?' she's constantly asking.

I explain to her that Mrs McCann loves getting us to write essays. Plus she's read loads of the books my mother has. I'm sure they're going to get on like a house on fire.

'Well it'll be nice to meet an American that's interested in something other than shopping and telly,' my mother says.

The awards ceremony itself is quite intimidating. We have to sit at these round tables with nameplates to mark where we're meant to be. When my name is called to say I've won first prize, they mispronounce it so badly that it takes me a moment to realise it's me they're talking about. Mrs McCann gives my mother a big hug as I walk up to collect the cheque.

On the way home, I sit in the back seat of our car. Mrs McCann is in the front because my mother is giving her a lift.

'The whole school is so proud of you,' Mrs McCann informs me. I have my doubts about this but I don't care. I only need Mrs McCann and my mother to be proud of me. The rest of them can go to hell.

My mother says, 'Don't let it go to your head too much. You know what they say, early success spoils a talent.'

'Oh I don't think that's true,' Mrs McCann remarks. 'I think it's really important to recognise achievement. Kids need to believe in themselves.'

'As long as it doesn't make her arrogant.'

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. My mother thinks all Americans are shockingly arrogant and rude.

'What are you going to spend your prize money on?' Mrs McCann asks.

'A camera,' I reply instantly. I've already given the matter a lot of thought.

'Her Dad loves taking photos,' my mother explains. 'I'm not a fan of photography myself. I prefer to remember things as they were. Not how they looked through a lens.'

'But it'll be great that she'll have a record of her time in America,' Mrs McCann turns round and smiles at me. 'It's such a shame you can't stay here till you finish school at least. You deserve to have some real opportunities.'

My mother stiffens. 'She'll get a perfectly good education in Ireland.'

I look out the window. I have a bad feeling about the turn the conversation has just taken and wish I could find a way to talk about something else.

'I hope so.' Mrs McCann sighs. 'It's just I heard in Ireland girls don't get to go to school much. And if they do, they're separated from boys.'

'They may go to an all girls' school but they certainly do go to school.'

My mother grips the steering wheel tighter.

‘Well I think this separation of men and women is terrible. You know Irish women serving men their meals and then having to retreat to another room. Not even being allowed to sit down with them.’

‘That doesn’t happen in Ireland,’ my mother snaps.

‘Oh I think you’ll find that it does,’ Mrs McCann replies.

It’s as if a dark fog has descended inside the car. I listen to my mother and Mrs McCann argue and I wish I could curl up into a tiny ball and disappear.

After we drop Mrs McCann off at her house, my mother says, ‘I can’t believe the nerve of that ignorant cow.’

Over dinner, my mother tells my father all about the offensive ideas my English teacher has about life in Ireland. My father shakes his head. ‘These people, I don’t know what’s wrong with them, how can they be so ridiculous?’

Nobody mentions me winning the prize or the hundred dollars or the camera I want to buy.

Chapter Twenty Six

A Promise

London, 1998

Monique never does get round to telling her housemates who I am or that I live with them. I overhear one of them, a huge bloke called Greg, say to her, 'Your friend who has a key is upstairs I think.'

I try to shower very early in the morning before anyone else is up and if Monique's not there, I eat my meals perched on her mattress on the floor of her room. The room is often freezing cold but I don't know how to put the heating on. My insomnia gets worse as I wake up in the middle of the night and can't get back to sleep. I listen to the wind rattling the windowpane and think about how my mother might die and of all the things I haven't told her.

I'm back in Dublin most weekends so there's not much opportunity to look for our own place. Even when I try to talk to Monique about it, she insists we need to find somewhere with two bedrooms so if her brother comes to visit, he won't know we're together.

'But your brother's gay,' I point out.

'I don't care. He might want to tell my mother. And I'm not doing that so I don't want him to know.'

'But we can't afford somewhere with two bedrooms.'

'What's wrong with here?' she asks.

'It's absolutely filthy for a start.'

She shrugs, 'Feel free to clean it up.'

'I can't do that because I'm not supposed to be living here.'

These rows go round and round in circles that wear me out even more than the not sleeping.

My father is driving me and my mother to the cottage in Tipperary. Normally as soon as we're on the road, my mother starts making jokes and laughing. The further we get from Dublin, the further we seem to leave her cancer behind us. But today, she's strangely subdued.

As my father parks the car, my mother searches in her handbag for the keys to the front door. But as we approach it, I realise that it's already wide open. Inside the place is a mess. All the drawers have been pulled out and emptied on the floor. My mother's books of poetry have been swept off the shelves and lie scattered everywhere. They've taken my father's camera and some coins that were in a jar by the window. Other than that, there wasn't really anything worth stealing.

My father rings the guards as my mother opens up a bottle of red wine. She pours us both a large glass and says, 'I thought we'd be safe here.'

'It's going to be okay, Mammy,' I tell her. 'There's no real damage done. Once the guards have gone, we'll be able to clear it all up in no time.'

She looks at me and takes a large sip. 'I went to see Daley for a check-up.'

'What did he say?'

'He said I was doing great, that this round of chemo had been very successful, that I'm back in complete remission. He said I should go away for the weekend and relax and not worry about a thing.'

‘That’s good news surely?’ I sense from my mother’s tone that somehow it’s not.

‘When I got home after seeing Daley,’ my mother pauses to take another drink. ‘I was packing up to come here and I felt this lump in my neck. Quite a large lump. I showed it to your Dad and he said it might be nothing. But I knew it wasn’t nothing. So I rang Daley.’

‘What did he think it was?’

‘He said it was nothing. That I shouldn’t worry.’

‘Well maybe it is nothing.’

My mother ignores my interruption. ‘So I asked him to explain to me how is it that if I’m in remission I have this lump in my neck? Then he got really annoyed. He just seemed to lose his temper completely. He started shouting and told me that the chemo hasn’t worked at all, that the cancer has come back and it’s spread all over my body. He said he only told me I was fine because he didn’t want to ruin my weekend away.’

I try to take a sip from my wine glass but I can’t because my teeth have started chattering violently. It’s as if I’m freezing cold even though the room is warm.

‘Imagine telling me that over the phone,’ my mother says. ‘Imagine if I’d been on my own. It was lucky your poor Dad was there. I got such a shock. I mean to go from telling me I was doing really well to telling me...’

There is a knock on the door. It’s two guards, a tall one with grey hair and a skinny one so young he looks like he doesn’t need to shave.

‘So I hear you’ve had a bit of bother,’ the older guard remarks.

‘That’s one way of putting it,’ my mother replies grimly.

The older guard examines the front door carefully. He points out to me the vague mark where the door has been kicked. 'I would say now,' he pronounces with great certainty, 'that this has all the hallmarks of the Travelling community.'

I feel like asking him if Travellers have a special way of kicking in doors that's instantly recognisable from settled people? But I don't because no doubt the depths of his racism is such that he probably thinks they do.

It doesn't take the guards long to look around the tiny cottage and make a few notes before leaving. 'We'll let you know if there do be any developments,' the older guard informs us on his way out.

'Sorry for all this,' the younger guard mumbles. It's the first time he's spoken.

When they're gone, my mother says, 'I just feel like I can't trust anyone anymore. Nobody's honest. Being burgled doesn't bother me as much as being lied to. All I've ever asked Daley for is the truth. What's so hard about that?'

I look at my mother and I suddenly grasp that this is what is meant by being brave. It's not about running into battle or martyr-like suffering. It's about facing up to the reality of your situation. It's a form of courage I'm not sure I have. For I realise now how much I want the lie to be true. That somehow all along I've believed that by some miracle, my mother will beat the statistics. That she'll be the one that makes it. The truth feels like a stranger that's broken into our home and turned everything upside down. I just want to go back to the way it was before.

I'm waiting for Monique by Hampstead tube. We plan to go for a swim in the women's pond on the heath. She's late as usual so I buy a paper to pass the time. A bomb has gone off in Omagh killing dozens of people. I read about how the terrorists gave a misleading warning that led the police to move people towards the bomb rather than away from it. There is a picture of each of the victims with a short paragraph about their lives. One woman was nearly nine months pregnant with twins. Tears fill my eyes as I read. Both Protestants and Catholics have died. How can people have so much hatred in their hearts that they're prepared to slaughter those who've never done them any harm?

When she eventually arrives, I try to show Monique the paper. She says, 'It's very sad but there's nothing you can do. There's no point getting upset about it. These things happen all the time.'

'No they don't. Not in my country anyway.'

'I don't see why you should be more upset than if it happened somewhere in Africa or Asia. It's still people.'

'I know that but I guess I just feel more of a connection because it's closer to home.'

'Your home is London. If you feel such a connection to Ireland why don't you move back there?'

'Well maybe I will,' I say.

'Do what you like,' Monique replies. 'You're there most of the time anyway. I don't care what you do.'

It's strange how I used to feel Monique was the closest person in the world to me, that life without her wouldn't be worth living. Now we seem to be

getting further and further apart. I can't decide if this is the strain of my mother being sick or if Monique isn't the person I thought she was.

I'm walking down Grafton Street with my mother. It's a beautiful day and she feels well enough to go shopping. Shopping with my mother is something I have been doing since I was a small child. She is the world's slowest shopper trying on everything a million times before finally deciding. Shopping with her used to bore me terribly. But now she's dying, it's suddenly the most wonderful thing we could be doing.

'Let's go for a pint,' she says. At three o'clock in the afternoon. My mother never used to drink in the afternoon. She hardly used to drink at all.

'You know you're turning into one of them wild student types, Mammy,' I tease her.

'I've been thinking about trying ecstasy.'

'What?' I gasp.

'Well a woman in the support group said it's quite good fun. I guess we all feel we might as well experience things while we still have the chance.'

I don't want to dwell on this. 'I'll take you to a rave if you like,' I offer as I take her arm affectionately. We pause to have a look in the windows of Brown Thomas.

'No, that's okay. Stephen played me some of his techno stuff. Nearly took my head off.'

'He listens to awful shite. It's much better when you're dancing to it.'

'I must say I preferred it to that M&Ms rap Eamonn likes. He tried to tell me it was modern poetry.'

‘Well I suppose it is. It’s just a pity there’s so much in it about hating women and gays.’

My mother points at an elegant full length wedding dress in the window. ‘You’d look gorgeous in that,’ she tells me. ‘At the support group, they tell you to try to imagine something you’d want to be at in the future. I like to imagine myself at Eamonn’s wedding. I know I most likely won’t be but maybe in some way or other...’ my mother’s voice trails off.

‘Let’s get that drink,’ I say.

‘I tell you what I would like you to take me to,’ my mother continues as we carry on.

‘What’s that?’

‘Mass.’

For a moment, I think she’s joking but my mother continues, ‘The choir is meant to be doing a lovely concert up in St Patrick’s cathedral. I know it’s not trendy...’

‘No, Mammy, of course I’d love to go with you.’

‘I’ve taken to going to mass again of late. I haven’t been for years and years. It hasn’t changed much though.’

‘I don’t suppose it has.’

As we cross the road, my mother says, ‘it’s not that I’ve changed my mind about the Catholic Church. To be honest if I thought I had time I’d find myself a new religion. But I suppose it’s just easier to stick with what’s familiar.’

‘That makes sense,’ I tell her.

‘I haven’t told your Gran. I don’t think I could bear to give her the

satisfaction of thinking I'm saved at last. And maybe I feel bad that I'm only now refinding my faith when I need it.'

'Isn't that what God's supposed to be for? Helping people in need.'

'I suppose so. I used to think God was this huge lie told to keep us all in our place. Now I suspect it's not God who lies, it's people.'

'Maybe so,' I mumble.

My mother frowns. 'You know I just can't understand why Daley told me I'm in remission when I'm not.'

'I guess he wanted to make you feel better.'

'I'd much have preferred if he'd just been honest.' As we reach the curb, my mother says, 'You're honest with me, aren't you?'

My throat tightens. 'Of course I am.'

'Just sometimes I think of your cousin Susan.'

'What about her?'

'When she had the baby without telling anyone.'

'What's that got to do with anything?'

'At the time... at the time you were about thirteen and you said you wouldn't have told me if you were pregnant.'

'Don't be silly, Mammy, of course I would have told you.'

We've reached the pub. My mother pulls open the door. 'Just sometimes I feel there are things you don't tell me.'

'There's not,' I stammer.

We step inside and my mother says, 'Promise me, promise me there's nothing you're not telling me just because I'm sick.'

'I promise,' I reply.

I go to the bar and order a pint of Guinness for myself and a glass for my mother. I think about how I'm lying to her and how this is a betrayal of everything she believes in.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Tenacity

New York, 1986

My Gran has come to visit us. She's made me this beautiful doll in a fabulous pink satin ball dress. Normally I dislike dolls and I dislike pink. But this doll isn't plastic. My Gran explains that she's stuffed her with goose feathers. Her dress is incredibly elegant and completely hand stitched.

My mother tells me that in the sixties when she was a teenager, everyone thought she dressed like a model. This wasn't because they had money for expensive clothes. It was because whenever my mother saw something she liked in a magazine, she'd just show it to my Gran and she'd run it up for her in no time. Other mothers disapproved of things like miniskirts but my Gran loved fashion so my mother always looked like she'd stepped off a catwalk.

I tell my Gran that I don't like American clothes very much. She says, 'You just need to find your own style. Give yourself time to figure out what that is. It's not about trying to look like everyone else.'

I'm sure she's right but at the same time I'd give my right arm to just be like everyone else. I'm so tired of being foreign and different. Sometimes I wonder if there isn't something deeply wrong with me that I can't put my finger on.

I love listening to my Gran's tales of when she was head of the costume department in RTE and when she was in the theatre. I tell her that I've decided when I grow up I want to be a writer. She says that's what my mother wanted to be and she had some really excellent poems published in

the newspaper when she was my age. My Gran says she's still got the clippings and she'll send me a copy. She gets me to give her copies of my poems so she can add them to her scrapbook.

She says, 'Then I can take them out sometimes and read them and think of you.'

She tells me that Eamonn is very lucky to have an older sister like me to look after him. 'I had a sister who was much older than me. There were eight of us so she was the eldest and I was the baby. Sadly I don't really remember her, I was too young. She died very suddenly when she was eighteen.'

'What did she die of?'

'Flu. Influenza. I don't think my parents ever got over it.'

I'm pushing Eamonn on the swings in our garden. It's a very hot summer's day and I'm sweating. He keeps telling me to push him higher in between singing Tears For Fears 'Shout, shout, let it all out, these are the things we can do without.' For a three year old, he has an incredible memory for the lyrics of songs. As he spends most of his afternoons playing in my bedroom while I'm doing my homework, he's learnt the words to much of my music collection. His favourites include the Rolling Stones 'Paint It Black' and Eric Clapton's 'Cocaine.' Neither of these have lyrics that are very suitable for a small child.

'Higher,' he shouts again. 'I want to go higher.'

'I can't push you any higher,' I tell him. "You might fall.'

'You won't let me fall,' he replies with supreme confidence.

I look at his smiling face, so full of happiness and innocence, and I promise myself that I'll never let anything bad happen to him.

In music class, Mrs T always asks me to read out loud because she finds my brogue so cute. She seems to be deaf to the other kids sniggering and repeating my words in dreadful imitations. They think I'm Mrs T's pet because she's always getting me to read. I try to explain to Sandy, who sits beside me, that this isn't fair because I never volunteer and I actually hate reading out loud.

Sandy chews her gum and says, 'Me too. But that's 'cause I can't read too good. I think the way you talk is neat. You sound like that leprechaun on the Frosty Lucky Charms advert.'

'I do not,' I exclaim.

Sandy examines her brightly polished nails before asking, 'Do you like believe in leprechauns?'

'Yeah of course I do,' I reply with deep sarcasm. 'Sure my father's one. He doesn't bother going to the bank, he keeps all his money at the end of a rainbow.'

Sandy's eyes widen. 'I think that's really cool,' she says.

I realise there's no point explaining that I'm joking. Besides Mrs T yells at us to stop yakking. She wants us all to bring in tomorrow a piece of our favourite music. My heart sinks. I'm sure whatever I pick will lead to humiliation and ridicule.

The next day a girl called Christina is asked to play the song she's brought in. She hands Mrs T a cassette of Cyndi Lauper. I really like Cyndi

Lauper myself and had very nearly chosen 'Time After Time' as my piece of music. I thank God that I didn't as the boys start laughing, saying it's no surprise Christina picked Cyndi 'cause she's an ugly freak just like her.

Mrs T picks me next. My stomach ties itself in knots as she puts my choice on. It's U2's 'Pride In The Name Of Love'. To my great surprise, the class actually listens to the song. When Mrs T asks me why I chose it, I manage to mumble, 'Well it's about Martin Luther King and U2 are from Ireland which is where I'm from...'

One of the boys shouts, 'I didn't know U2 were like Irish.' I wait for the usual jokes about pigs in kitchens and wearing green but he just says, 'They're really cool.'

A huge wave of relief sweeps through me. I think I will love U2 forever for making it okay to be Irish.

My junior high graduation is only a couple of weeks away. The top three students have to make a speech and I've come third. My mother says she's very proud of me but when I tell my father, he laughs and says, 'Why didn't you come first? It's not like it's hard to beat those moronic Americans.'

My mother tells him, 'You know third out of over a hundred is very good and making this speech is a big deal.'

'Don't be scared,' my father winks at me. 'I make speeches all the time, it's not difficult.'

Nothing I do ever seems to impress my father. I feel like telling him how in my first year in America, I'd been put in all the bottom classes because nobody believed I'd been to school before. How I've worked my guts out to

prove that I can speak English and read and write and use electricity. Now I'm at the top of all my classes apart from math which I'm hopeless at. It's taken me three long hard years to get any kind of acceptance and I'm terrified about having to make this speech to people who've only recently started to forget that they hate me.

But I don't get a chance to say any of this because my parents have already moved on to talking about how we're moving house again. This time to another town called Eastchester.

'You're going to love the place. It's only down the road from here. Hardly a move at all,' my father tells me.

'But I'll still have to go to a new school where I don't know anyone,' I point out.

'You'll make new friends,' my father assures me.

'You're always saying you don't like your school anyhow,' my mother chips in.

That may be true but as my mother's fond of saying, better the devil you know than the devil you don't. Isn't it bad enough that we have to start our lives all over again by moving country every few years without moving when we don't have to? They're just doing this because the landlady has increased our rent.

'And your room used to belong to a teenage girl about your age so it's all done up the way you like,' my father continues.

'How do you mean?' I ask.

'Well there's a green carpet and bright purple walls and a walk in cupboard that's painted hot pink.'

'That sounds absolutely gross. I hate pink,' I tell him.

'All girls like pink,' my father replies wearily.

There's no point in arguing so I storm off instead. I try not to think about the move but concentrate on writing my speech. It has to be on the future of our class. Given that I dislike quite a lot of my classmates, I'm finding it hard to muster up much enthusiasm for what they might do with their lives. Still our first rehearsal is tomorrow so I have to come up with something.

Mrs T, my music teacher, is at the rehearsal because she's helping a girl called Chris to practice our graduation song. Chris has an amazing voice but unfortunately the song that's been chosen is Whitney Houston's 'The Greatest Love Of All'. I hate Whitney Houston and I think this song is stomach turning. After an hour of listening to poor Chris trying to hit the high notes, I have a splitting headache. Eventually it's my turn to get up to the podium. I'm nervous but I steel myself and launch into my speech.

Before I've finished, Mrs T yells at me to stop. 'Honey,' she shouts. 'If you go that fast and with your accent, no one is going to understand a word you say.'

Then she turns to Mrs McGee, my hockey coach, who's sitting next to her. Mrs T says quietly but still loud enough for me to hear, 'I don't understand why they didn't give it to someone who speaks proper English. I mean she's not from here, she's not even gonna be in the country very long.'

I feel myself turn bright red and for a moment I'm scared I'm going to start crying. I stumble through the rest of the speech at an even faster pace because all I want now is to get off the stage as quickly as possible.

Mrs McGee comes up to me afterwards. She's a small, round woman who inspires incredible loyalty from her hockey team. She says to me, 'Listen, kid, I've always said about you that you score the most goals on the team because what you lack in talent you make up for in tenacity. Don't let these folk beat you. You earned your right to be on that stage. You go home and you practice that speech in front of a mirror. Practice, that's all you need.'

When I do get home I ask my mother what tenacity means. She says, 'It's kind of like stubborn aggression, you know not letting go. Like a dog with a bone. Why do you ask?'

I don't tell her why though because then I'd have to explain what Mrs T said and my mother already hates Americans enough. I just go to my room and start practicing in front of the mirror. First I put the speech on note cards. Then I learn it off by heart by breaking it down into little phrases and putting in lots of pauses.

On the day of my graduation, we have to wear these horrible maroon robes. Maroon and white are the school colours. People are so moved by Chris's rendition of the 'Greatest Love Of All' that they cry. As I walk up to the podium, I feel like I'm about to throw up. I look out over a sea of faces.

Mrs McGee is sitting in the front row and she gives me a thumbs up. Suddenly I know I can do this. I take a deep breath and begin. I pronounce every word as slow and clear as a bell. Nobody giggles or yells or throws things at me. They just clap politely at the end. I may not have achieved the emotional impact of Whitney Houston but at least they didn't think I couldn't speak English.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Smoking

London, 1998

'I'm going to tell my mother about us,' I inform Monique. I'm trying to squeeze a jumper into a small holdall bag for my weekend in Ireland. I seem to spend my life packing and unpacking this bag.

'You're out of your mind,' she says.

'She doesn't want people lying to her. She keeps saying that.'

'She doesn't want her doctor lying to her. It's not the same thing.'

'But the reason Daley lying to her upsets her so much is because it reminds her of all the lies she grew up with.'

'I think you're being very selfish,' Monique replies before walking out of the room.

As soon as I arrive in Dublin, my parents bundle me into the car to head down to the cottage. They go there every weekend now. My mother says it's the only place where she feels like a human being. 'That's the trouble with hospitals,' she explains. 'They don't mean to but they treat you like a piece of meat. You're just another body to them. One that isn't behaving as it should.'

We go to an Italian restaurant in the village that's owned by a Turkish man. My parents chat away to him about the on-going disaster that is Middle Eastern politics. They come here every Saturday night so they've got to know him well. I'm distracted thinking about how I can get my mother on her own and what on earth I'm going to say.

The next morning my father announces he's going to take the dog for a walk. This could be my one opportunity to have a private conversation with my mother. The dog is called Bran. He's a German Shepherd my parents got as a tiny puppy in Tehran. Eamonn adores him so my father had promised he would get Bran back from Iran. It seemed the least he could do after all my brother has been through. But it turned out to be a deeply complicated rescue operation that involved an enormous amount of paper work and finding someone who'd agree to fly on the same plane as Bran. Though why he had to be accompanied when he was flying in the hold was never clear. The Iranians regard dogs much the same way as we regard rats so perhaps found our Western sentimentality difficult to understand.

Then Bran had to spend six months in quarantine in Ireland to make sure he didn't have rabies. He has only recently been restored to us. 'Poor creature, he's so ecstatic to be free and back with his family, he keeps coming up to me and licking me as if to check I'm really here and not a dream he's having.' My mother pats the dog affectionately. Then she says, 'You go with your Dad if you like. I'm feeling a bit tired for walking.'

'No,' I reply. 'I'll stay with you. There's something I want to talk to you about.'

Despite my best efforts to sound normal, my mother is instantly alarmed. 'What is it? Has something happened? Are you alright?'

'I'm fine. I'd just rather talk to you on your own.'

The trouble is that my father treats even a walk round the block as if he's going on a Himalayan expedition. He has to put on his walking shoes and his special walking jacket. Then he can't find his keys. Then he can't find

the dog's lead. Then he can't find his walking stick.

'You don't need the bloody stick,' my mother snaps at him.

Oblivious to the mounting tension in the room as my mother and I become increasingly desperate for him to leave, my father replies, 'I know I don't need it for walking. But you never know when you might need it for protection. Remember that time those wild dogs set on Bran up in the Iranian mountains? If I hadn't had the stick to beat them off, they'd have ripped him to pieces.'

'There's no wild dogs in Tipperary,' my mother points out.

Given the enormous shock of my mother's illness, I don't blame my father for feeling a bit paranoid. But at the same time, if he doesn't leave in the next five minutes there's a danger I'm going to start screaming. It's like I'm standing on the brink of an unbelievably high precipice and given that there's no way back from the edge, I'd rather just jump before I pass out from dizziness.

'Maybe I'll have a quick cup of coffee before I go,' my father says.

This is too much for both me and my mother. 'Just go,' we yell at him.

My father looks startled and a bit hurt. 'C'mon Bran,' he says softly.

'Let's get out of here. We can tell when we're not wanted.'

At last we're on our own. A strange silence descends. I help myself to one of my father's cigarettes.

'I didn't know you smoked,' my mother observes.

Indeed this may not be the best moment to start smoking in front of my mother but compared to all the other stuff she doesn't know about me, it seems quite trivial. I doubt if telling her that I only smoke when drunk or under

extreme stress is going to reassure her.

'Your Dad's been smoking a lot recently. I thought he'd finally managed to give up when we were in Tehran.' My mother lights up a cigarette herself. 'I don't say anything anymore though. He's under a lot of strain. He says the smoking helps him relax.'

'Since when do you smoke?' I ask.

'Oh I don't even inhale properly,' my mother says. 'But I figured if I couldn't stop him, I might as well join him. Just the last few weeks we've gotten into the habit of smoking a cigarette together after dinner. It's silly I know but it feels kind of teenage and defiant. Like we're telling the cancer to go fuck itself.'

'It's not fair this is happening to you when you never used to smoke or hardly drink or do anything unhealthy.'

'A man in the support group said he smoked sixty a day so he supposed he deserved it. I told him nobody deserves this. Cancer's unfair on everyone.' My mother peers at me. 'What was it you wanted to talk to me about?'

I take a deep drag on my cigarette. I have no idea where to begin.

'Are you pregnant?' my mother asks.

This makes me cough. 'No, no, I'm not pregnant.'

'Then what is it?'

'I'm in love with Monique.'

There is a pause. 'Who's Monique?' my mother asks. Of course there's no reason why she'd remember her name. I go out of my way to avoid mentioning it.

'She's my girlfriend,' I reply.

'Oh,' my mother says. There is an even longer pause. 'It... well it crossed my mind... I mean I knew there was something you weren't telling me... I thought maybe a married man or...'

I light another cigarette not giving a damn that I'm chain smoking. My mother is staring off into the distance. I can nearly hear the wheels in her brain whirring.

'But I don't understand,' she says. 'You always had lots of boyfriends. I thought you liked men.'

'I do like them. It's got nothing to do with not liking men.'

'I know what's his face didn't treat you very well...'

'It's nothing to do with Colman.'

'It's just you know a lot of women in the seventies, I guess they were disillusioned or something, so they decided to give up men, set up these communes...'

'I haven't joined a commune. I'm not trying to make some kind of feminist statement.'

'Then why? Is it something I've done?'

'Of course it's not. I don't... I don't know why.'

'What about children? You always said you wanted children.'

'I do still want children. I think I could still have children.'

My mother raises her eyebrow at me. 'I think that's going to be a little tricky.'

'I think me and Monique have as much of a chance of making a go of it as anyone else.'

'How long have you...?'

'We've been together for two years.'

'Two years,' my mother repeats. 'And you never said anything?'

'I was going to tell you but then you got sick and I didn't want to upset you.'

'Well I can't say I'm thrilled.' My mother notices that her cigarette has turned into a finger of ash and she carefully stubs it out.

'I didn't know what to do. I rang the Samaritans and talked to them about it.'

My mother stares at me. 'What did they say?'

'That you probably talked to a lot of gay people when you were on the helpline.'

'I suppose I did. God what are we going to tell your Dad?'

'Do you think I should tell him?'

'I don't think I could keep something like that from him. You know we tell each other everything these days. I guess I could tell him for you if you want but I think it'd be better coming from you.'

'It's okay,' I say. 'I'll tell him myself. I just wanted to tell you first.'

'I don't suppose it's just a bit of a phase you're going through?' my mother asks.

'I really don't think so.'

'No, no I guess not.' My mother lights another cigarette. 'Well you best tell your Dad when he gets back from his walk. I'll say I need to go to bed for a rest. I don't know how he's going to take it. But it'll be okay. He's a good man, your father, a very good man.'

'I know he is.'

My mother reaches over and pats my shoulder gently. 'It'll be okay,' she says again.

I'm sitting across from my father. We're both smoking. He's looking at me as if I've just sprouted an extra head.

After a silence that seems to last several eternities, I say, 'Mammy said it had crossed her mind.'

My father stares at me. 'Well,' he says slowly, 'It never crossed mine.'

He doesn't shout or yell or tell me what an awful, disgusting person he thinks I am. He says nothing at all.

My mother comes slowly down the stairs. She looks around her as if checking all the furniture is still in place.

'Did you manage to sleep?' my father asks.

'Oh I dozed a bit,' my mother replies.

I think with a pang of guilt how unlikely that is.

As soon as my father goes to the loo, my mother whispers, 'Did you tell him?'

'Yeah, I did. He didn't say much.'

'So much has happened that he never expected, I don't think he knows what to think these days. Neither of us do.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you.'

'Oh I was already upset,' my mother says with a sigh. 'I don't understand anything anymore.'

When we get back to Dublin, I go to the pub with Stephen. 'I've something to tell you,' I say to my brother.

I figure while I'm at it, I might as well get the whole family out of the way. Apart from Eamonn who already has far more on his plate than anyone should have to deal with at his age. Besides at fifteen I think he's probably too young to understand. Or maybe it's not that I think my little brother is too young. Maybe it's that I know how much he looks up to me and I can't bear to disappoint him.

The pub is very loud and crowded. 'What did you say?' Stephen shouts at me.

'I said I've something to tell you,' I repeat.

'Oh, right, yeah well just let me get the drinks in first. Be right back.'

He dives into the sea of people at the bar. I stand there surrounded by laughter and the clink of glasses.

'Aoife, how are you? It's been forever.'

I turn around to be greeted by an old school friend I haven't seen since I moved to London. 'How's life been treating you?' she asks.

Life has been punching me repeatedly in the side of the head but I'm not sure how to explain this. 'I heard you left Colman,' she says and gives me a long look. Of course she's heard the gossip.

Stephen takes years to get back from the bar. 'Sorry that took so long,' he says as he hands me a pint. 'Owen started yakking on to me about some bloke. You know what he's like.'

Owen is my brother's friend who's gay. I draw some courage from this. 'I wanted to tell you that Monique's my girlfriend.'

'The French one? Sure I know she is, I met her.'

'I mean I'm going out with her.'

'Oh that kind of girlfriend,' my brother takes a deep gulp from his pint.

'Jesus Christ, what are Mam and Dad going to say?'

'I've just told them. When we were in the cottage. They weren't very happy.'

Stephen stares at me. Then he starts to laugh. 'Fuck me but that puts everything I've ever done in the shade.'

This is true. I've always been the responsible one who was good at school and obeyed the rules. He's always been the messer who got into trouble. It's a strange kind of role reversal.

My brother puts his arm around me. "I mean c'mon you have to laugh even if it isn't funny.'

And I do start to laugh. Suddenly the two of us are in fits of laughter.

Chapter Twenty Nine

First Love

New York, 1987

We've moved to a town called Eastchester though we're still in Westchester County. Things in our new home get off to a bit of a dodgy start when the lady next door brings round an apple pie. My mother is at first delighted that someone has actually done this. She thought it only happened in films. But her mood quickly sours when our neighbour starts talking about plumbing and how nice it must be for us to have bathrooms now we're no longer in the old country. When my mother tells me about this, I think Jesus Christ what is it with Americans thinking they're the only people in the world who have indoor toilets?

At least my new school isn't as terrifying as I feared. It helps that I now have an American accent and American clothes. Also I make sure to sit at the back of every class ignoring the teacher so no one thinks I'm clever or weird.

I'm perched on some bleachers above the school football pitch with a girl who's also a freshman like me. Her name is Melanie and she has blond hair and blue eyes. She's surprised when I tell her I'm Irish, as in actually from Ireland Irish, as opposed to Irish American. 'You don't really have the accent at all. You sound completely normal,' she informs me.

Then she explains that her background is also not what people expect. She's Jewish and her grandmother survived Auschwitz. 'So even though I'm naturally blonde, I'm not like historically blonde if you see what I mean.'

I do see what she means. It's good to talk to someone who also feels different inside than they do on the outside. But I become shy and nervous again when she asks, 'So do you have like a boyfriend?'

I'm fourteen and not only do I not have a boyfriend, I've never even kissed a boy. This is mortifying because when I was back in Dublin over the summer, Deirdre told me she'd snogged eleven boys and gone out with four.

I consider lying to Melanie but decide to risk the truth. 'I haven't even kissed anyone,' I confide.

'Really?' she says. 'Me neither. I really want to though.'

This confession of lack of experience bonds us and we discuss in depth which of the guys in our year we have a crush on. I tell her I quite like a very tall boy called Taro Ietaka.

'Oh my God,' Melanie cries. 'So do I. I think he's just so cute. You know his Mom is American but his Dad is Japanese. Isn't that cool?'

Our common interest in Taro seems like another thing to draw us closer until Melanie decides to confide our mutual admiration to her friend Rob. 'Why don't I just tell him that you both have a thing for him and find out what he thinks?' Rob suggests.

'No, don't do that,' I respond with horror.

'Why not?' Melanie asks. 'I think it's a great idea. I mean how else are we going to find out who he likes?'

I can barely bring myself to speak to Taro. It's never occurred to me to try to figure out if he fancies me.

The next day Rob comes strolling over to our table in the cafeteria and says, 'Well do you want to know or not?'

'Of course we want to know,' Melanie replies.

I concentrate very hard on a charred bit of soggy pizza that represents our school lunch. It's really quite disgusting how they manage to burn the edges but leave the centre cold. 'It's you,' Rob says. 'I mean he likes you both but he said he's been really into Aoife for ages. He's been trying to work up the nerve to speak to her.'

I have no idea what I'm supposed to do with this information but Melanie is full of ideas. Adapting to the role of matchmaker with considerable grace, she suggests, 'We should all go see a movie and make sure you two sit together.' It's a relief to me that Taro's answer hasn't damaged our friendship.

This is how I find myself like a proper American teenager in a movie theatre with huge tubs of popcorn watching *Nightmare On Elm Street*. Melanie figured a horror movie to be the best option as it gives you the opportunity to jump into each other's arms by pretending to be scared. But as Freddie Cougar slashes the screen into a blood bath, I can't help feeling it's not the most romantic moment.

Rob whispers loudly to Taro, 'You should hold her hand.'

I can almost feel the heat from Taro's embarrassment even though I can't see his face in the dark. After a few moments though, he does indeed take my hand. My stomach does a strange flip that I'm not sure is love or fear.

That night I have an incredibly vivid nightmare that I'm walking through the school halls and they're crowded with other students. I know that my mother

has cancer but I'm not allowed to tell anyone or Freddie Cougar will kill us both. I wake up drenched in sweat. For a moment, I'm worried that I'm still in a dream world because in Nightmare on Elm Street, the unfortunate victims keep thinking they've woken up only to discover they're still in the nightmare.

I do not tell Taro that the film gave me bad dreams. He likes me apparently because I'm not soppy and silly like most girls. I go over to his house to watch horror videos after school. In fairness, I'm not really bothered by the blood and guts. I'm far more anxious about how we're going to get round to kissing. One major obstacle is his younger brother Jiro who, every time Taro even manages to put his arm around me, pops up from behind the sofa making loud sucking noises.

After three afternoons of this, Taro resorts to a mixture of death threats and a small monetary bribe to get his brother to leave the house. Unfortunately just as the movie ends, his Mom comes home unexpectedly early from work because she's been given two kittens. She's very friendly and invites me to stay for dinner. I try to decline as I can sense this is the last thing Taro wants but she's persistent and I quickly cave in.

The food is not like anything I've eaten before but it's delicious. The only problem is that they all use chopsticks. With my cheeks burning, I explain that I've only ever used a knife and fork.

'That's no problem, sweetie,' his Mom tells me. 'It's really very easy. We can teach you how.'

With great patience and good humour, Taro's father demonstrates how to hold the sticks. I'm not a quick learner and my embarrassment makes me

even more clumsy than usual. Still I eventually manage to get most of the food into my mouth.

‘Your parents are really nice,’ I tell Taro afterwards.

He rolls his eyes. ‘I guess they’re alright but they’re just so incredibly boring.’

‘Well it’s interesting that your Dad’s Japanese.’

Taro stares at me. ‘It’s not interesting to me. It’s just a reason to punch people who call me Chinky or Jap or Slitty Eyes.’

‘I mean at least they gave you an interesting name.’

Taro sighs. ‘You have an interesting name. Believe me I don’t. Do you what Taro and Jiro mean? First son and second son. Could you get more boring than that?’

This makes me laugh. Even though I really did like his parents, I assure Taro that my parents are very dull too and Aoife is not an interesting name in Ireland, it’s fairly common. ‘My Dad told me he called me Aoife after the battleship in the Irish navy. I mean that’s just weird,’ I explain.

My mother is shocked that I’ve had dinner with Taro’s parents. ‘Jesus Christ you don’t usually meet the parents till you’re about to get married.’

‘I’m not about to get married.’

‘Well of course not,’ my mother peers at me. ‘You are careful though?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t know. All that going over to his house after school. You do know you’re far too young to have sex.’

How do I answer this when we haven't even managed to kiss yet?

'Don't worry, Mammy,' I say, turning bright red.

'I trust you to be sensible, I do. It's just with Americans... I don't know everything is just different. If we were at home I'd know what was normal and what was not.'

'I am normal. Taro's normal.'

'I didn't mean you. I just mean the way they do things. Like how you said your friend's parents drove her and her boyfriend to the cinema. Who brings their parents on a date?'

'They didn't go to the movie with them, they just gave them a ride.'

My mother laughs. 'You mean a lift. Giving them a ride would be very odd indeed.'

I know from Deirdre that in Dublin 'a ride' means a gorgeous guy and 'riding' means sex. I wish I'd never told my mother I'd started seeing someone.

I arrive over at Taro's house and his brother's nowhere to be seen. 'Where's Jiro?' I ask.

'I paid him to do my paper route for me.'

I hope this is true and Taro hasn't cut his brother up into tiny pieces and buried him in the garden. Maybe the horror movies are getting to me. But Taro doesn't even suggest putting on a video. Instead we sit on his sofa and play with the kittens. One is black and one is ginger. They're like balls of fur with claws. They're so cute I completely forget my anxiety about kissing. Thus I'm taken entirely by surprise when Taro leans over. After a second or

two of panic, I discover Deirdre's right. There really is nothing to it. In fact, it feels really good. So good that I don't notice that one of the kittens has climbed up on to my shoulder. It makes a misstep and manages to tumble down between us. Taro draws back and we both burst out laughing.

Chapter Thirty

Eggs

Dublin, 1998

I'm in the kitchen with my father. My parents have finally managed to move back into their own house. I'm trying to teach him how to scramble eggs. Scrambled eggs on toast is one of the very few things my mother can still eat.

'How much milk?' my father asks.

'Just a splash.'

'But shouldn't you measure it?' His face has a look of the most intense concentration.

I grit my teeth and mutter, 'It's not rocket science.'

'How many eggs did you say?'

'Just a couple, it depends how much you want to make.'

'Hang on, let me get a pen, I need to write this down.'

Jamie Oliver my father is not. I bring the tray up to my mother in bed.

'Did you really make this with your Dad?' she asks.

'Well tried to. He's useless.'

My mother takes my hand. 'You have to understand, if he learnt how to do it, it'd be like admitting he's going to be on his own.'

I think about how my mother has cooked my father's dinner for over a quarter of a century. What the hell do I know about love or rocket science?

My mother manages a few forkfuls before pushing the tray away from her. 'Would you mind giving me a bit more of a massage?'

We've discovered that if I rub the side of my mother's stomach, it helps

to ease the pain. Her stomach is swollen and hard. I try not to think about what this means.

‘Your Dad said he had a dream that I was pregnant,’ my mother says. ‘If only it was a baby I was growing inside me...’

‘Is that helping?’ I ask, pressing as much as I dare.

‘Yeah, it really does. You can push harder, you’re not hurting me. It just seems to shift things a bit.’

At least I’ve managed to find one small thing that makes a difference. I know my irritation with my father’s helplessness is only because it echoes my own.

The doctor has come to visit my mother in bed. Since the second chemo seemed to have even less impact than the first, my mother is doubtful about having a third round. Even my father can’t work up much enthusiasm at talk of experimental drugs being trialled in America. I’ve looked up their long strange names on the internet and read statistics that I decide to keep to myself. Statistics are the enemy of miracles and we’re well into miracle territory by now.

The phone rings and I rush to answer it. ‘Could I speak to Mrs Mannix?’ a woman’s voice asks. She sounds extremely angry.

I’m so surprised by her tone that I say, ‘She’s with the doctor at the moment. This is her daughter Aoife. Can I help?’

The woman explains that she is the mother of a boy my brother goes to school with. Eamonn and his cousin apparently spent the evening before chucking eggs at her windows and she’s furious. When I explain how ill my

mother is, it takes the wind out of her sails. 'I had no idea,' she says. 'I'm really sorry.'

Eamonn turns white as a sheet when I confront him with his egg throwing escapade. 'What am I going to do?' he asks.

'You're going to ring that woman back and apologise to her. Then we're going to forget this ever happened.'

'Are you angry with me?'

'No,' I tell him. 'I'm not angry with you at all.' And I'm not. It's life itself I feel like choking.

My mother is on the phone to my Gran. She's shouting. Is it possible they're having an argument?

As soon as there's silence, I rush into my mother's bedroom. She's sitting up in bed with the phone in her lap. She's crying.

'Mammy, what's going on?'

My Gran has rung to say she hasn't got time to drop over the Christmas cake she's made us till after Christmas. As usual, she's spending Christmas down the country with my Auntie Ellen. 'She's always put Ellen first,' my mother says. 'Even now...'

This is an incredibly stupid row, which like most incredibly stupid rows, has deep, painful roots. I decide to ring my Gran back. She starts trying to explain to me about the cake.

'I don't care about the cake,' I interrupt her. 'I don't care about the details. You can't fight with Mammy when she's this sick. You just can't.'

'I know the drugs she's on means she's get easily upset...'

I take a deep breath. 'It's not because of that, it's because she's dying.'

There is a long silence. Then my Gran says, 'What are you talking about? Of course she's not dying.'

I feel as if I've just hit my grandmother over the head with a sledge hammer. 'Yes, she is. Neither round of chemo has worked. The tumour's got a lot bigger and the doctor thinks she can try these new chemo drugs but at best they might give her a few more months.'

'I... I didn't realise,' my Gran's voice sounds tiny. 'I don't know what to do.'

'You should ring her back and tell her that you love her. And that you don't want to be having stupid fights.'

'Okay, I'll do that.'

I hang up the phone wondering if it's me or the truth that is so heartlessly cruel.

It's Christmas Eve. I'm in the sitting room with my mother. I'm trying to hang a string of red stars along one of the walls. 'We got these in New York, I think,' I say.

'Did we?' my mother asks.

'Do they look straight to you?'

My mother doesn't answer. 'Mammy, are you okay?'

'How many do you think it would take?' she asks.

'What?'

'How many pills do you think I'd need?'

'I don't understand...'

'I don't think I can do this anymore...'

I drop the red stars and go and put my arms around my mother. I can feel her shoulder bones. She's lost all that weight she used to worry about.

The next morning we go to my Uncle Tadhg's and Auntie Helena's. We always go there on Christmas mornings but this year they've invited us to stay for dinner as well. My uncle makes the most delicious Irish coffees that are strong enough to knock out a horse. My mother accepts a glass of champagne but she doesn't drink it. She doesn't eat any turkey either or Christmas pudding. When my uncle pours whiskey over it and sets the pudding alight, nobody makes the traditional comments about how long the blue light burns telling you how long you've got to live.

'Isn't that beautiful?' my mother says to me. 'You always loved lighting the pudding when you were little. You used to say it was your favourite part of Christmas.'

'It still is,' I tell her.

'Yes, it's good how some things don't change.' My mother turns to my Auntie Helena. 'Thanks for inviting us. This has been the best Christmas I've had for years.'

Helena looks like she's about to burst into tears.

'No, really, it is. Everything is just so lovely.'

When we get home, my mother is tired so she goes to bed. Me and my Dad and my brothers sit at the kitchen table playing poker. We don't argue or pay much attention to who's winning. We're just kind to each other.

Chapter Thirty One

The Cutest Boy

New York, 1987

For six months, me and Taro are completely inseparable. We walk together between classes. He sits at my table in the cafeteria at lunch. I go over to his house most days after school. Everyone tells me how gorgeous he is and what a great couple we are.

I'm in White Plains mall waiting for Taro when I bump into some girls from my old school. I'm instantly on my guard because one of them is Jamie Ponce, a girl with blond curls I used to be afraid of, who's always chewing gum.

Once in the locker rooms, I came across Jamie and some other girls surrounding a newly arrived Japanese student. Jamie Ponce was poking the Japanese girl in the chest and saying, 'Go on, speak some English, we all know you're only pretending you can't, you stupid Chink.'

'I don't understand,' the terrified Japanese girl mumbled in response. She looked like she was about to start crying.

'She's not been here long, I think she only speaks Japanese,' I ventured to say.

Jamie Ponce cracked her gum at me. 'Yeah well you'd know seeing as how you can hardly speak English yourself.'

I'm ashamed to remember that these words sent me rushing round the corner to my own locker. Abandoning the unfortunate Japanese student to more taunts of 'Dumb slitty eyes, we heard you, you can talk proper when you want to.'

Now Jamie Ponce stares me up and down. 'You look different,' she says.

Just at that moment, Taro grabs me from behind and kisses me.

'Is that your boyfriend?' Jamie asks in clear shock that someone like me could have a boyfriend.

'Really good to meet you,' Taro says and shakes her hand.

To my surprise, Jamie blushes. 'Wow, you sure changed,' she says without a hint of sarcasm. 'You're like a totally different person.'

Only I know that I'm not. Inside I'm still the weird foreign kid with the funny accent and the funny name. Even though on the outside I've suddenly become cool and popular. I have no idea how this has happened. It seems entirely arbitrary and therefore meaningless.

Gradually though me and Taro seem to have less and less to say to each other. I don't know what's changed. He's always been pretty quiet but this is different. I try listening to his heavy metal music and reading the fantasy books he likes but it doesn't seem to work. I get the feeling he doesn't like my friends. He offends me by saying Melanie sometimes sounds like an air headed bimbo.

I try talking to my mother about it. She says, 'Have you asked him what's wrong?'

'Yeah,' I tell her. 'He just says nothing and then won't talk at all.'

'Men are like that,' my mother says. 'I told your father when we were first married that he was emotionally retarded bordering on autistic.'

'How did Dad take that?'

'Well what could he say? It's true. Kind of true. Actually I came to realise he takes things much more to heart than I thought. When we first got to Sweden, we had this huge row and I told him I regretted that I'd ever married him.'

'That was a bit harsh.'

'Well I was angry. Then six months later he asked me in all seriousness if I still regretted marrying him. I didn't know what he was talking about, I'd completely forgotten even saying it. That's when I understood that just 'cause he doesn't express what he feels, doesn't mean he isn't burying it all somewhere and getting hurt for no reason. He's just not good at talking, I blame your Nana...'

My mother thinks the vast majority of my father's personality flaws come from his mother. Maybe she's right but it's not much help to me with Taro.

I ring up my boyfriend and say, 'This doesn't really seem to be working. Maybe we should take a break?'

'Yeah, I think you're right,' is the reply.

I'm a bit sad that Taro hasn't made any objections but I can't claim that I'm heart broken. A few other girls tell me I'm crazy to have split up with him when he's one of the cutest boys in the whole school.

But my mother says, 'Looks aren't everything. Besides you're very young to be so serious. When I was your age I never dated a boy for more than a few weeks. I got bored. I remember I once broke it off with this fella 'cause he wore these socks I didn't like.'

'And then you got married at twenty,' I point out.

‘Oh yes, your Gran thought I was mad. But sometimes you just know when someone is the right person for you.’

‘How do you know though?’

‘You just do. You’ll see.’

I don’t think this is a very satisfactory answer.

My father comes home and tells me the Irish Embassy has been given tickets for some concert for some band called U2. ‘I love U2,’ I exclaim.

‘Well we could go together,’ my father suggests.

Everyone at school is deeply impressed that I have tickets to U2’s sold out gig in Madison Square Garden. I don’t mention that I’m going with my Dad.

The day of the concert, I’m at after-school football practice. Only this being America, it’s called girls’ soccer, not football. I’m the only freshman and the youngest on the team.

Our coach is an incredibly passionate and excitable Italian known as Mr G. ‘It’s all about commitment,’ he likes to tell us. ‘Commitment and pain.’

Practice is five days a week. No excuses are acceptable. Mr G makes us run for three miles and do millions of sit ups before we’re even allowed kick a ball.

‘Faster, girls, faster, shift those lazy legs,’ he screams at us as we run round and round the track. We are all terrified of him and adore him at the same time.

Suddenly I spot a boy called Andy waving at me. Andy is Melanie’s best friend and he eats lunch with us most days. Unlike Taro, he’s very chatty

and is always making jokes. I've told Melanie that I think I might have a crush on him but I'm not sure I really want another boyfriend so soon after Taro.

I've no idea what Andy is doing at my soccer practice but I know he's in danger of Mr G killing him. Mr G strongly disapproves of distractions like boys.

I run over in a panic, 'What's wrong?'

'It's your Dad,' Andy says. 'He's outside in his car. He says you're late.'

'Shit, I told him I wouldn't be ready till five. Does he seem really angry?'

Mr G approaches us. 'What is this?' he asks threateningly.

Andy wilts slightly under Mr G's harsh glare. 'I have to go,' I tell Mr G. 'My Dad's waiting for me.'

Mr G frowns. Boys he has no time for, fathers are a different matter. 'Well go then,' he says. 'But be on time tomorrow...'

I rush through the school corridors barely listening to what Andy is saying. My father must have misunderstood what I said about the time. I don't want him to be pissed off or he might change his mind about taking me to the concert.

'Wait up,' Andy hurries to catch up with me. 'Your Dad's not there. I made it up...'

'What? I don't understand...'

'I lied. I just said that so I could get you on your own. It's very hard to get you on your own. Without other people listening in. I wanted to ask you if you'd go out with me. I mean like be my girlfriend.'

I'm so relieved I start laughing. 'Oh thank God for that. I really believed you. I thought my Dad was going to kill me.'

'Sorry,' Andy says, though he's start laughing himself. Soon the two of us are in hysterics.

All through the U2 concert, I keep thinking of Andy and smiling. I'm seated between my father and some of his work colleagues. Within seconds of the band starting to play, the entire stadium is on its feet apart from my father and the other fuddy duddies from the Embassy. It's embarrassing but I stand up determined to enjoy myself and ignore them. I know the words to most of the songs. The atmosphere is incredible and I have a fantastic time.

When we leave, I tell my father, 'Thanks, Dad, that was really awesome.'

My father looks at me. 'You sound so American these days. Still I'm glad you enjoyed it.'

'Didn't you?'

'Yeah, I mean, it was very loud but it was fun I guess.'

I think what a terrible thing it must be to be old.

The next day in school I tell Melanie all about the concert and that Andy has asked me out. 'Yeah,' she says. 'Well I told him that he should. I spent ages convincing him to grow some balls and just go for it.'

She sounds pissed off with me for some reason.

'Well, thanks, I'm really pleased,' I tell her.

She looks at me and laughs. 'So you do want to go out with him?'

'Of course I do.'

'It's just he says that you didn't actually say yes. That you just kept going on about being so pleased your Dad wasn't there.'

I realise this is true. In the excitement of my relief, I never actually answered Andy's question. 'Oh shit, yeah, tell him we could do something this weekend.'

Melanie shakes her head at me. 'I don't know what you'd do if you didn't have me to sort out your love life for you.'

Me and Andy go to see 'Full Metal Jacket'. Afterwards we have ice cream at Friendly's diner. The diner is designed to look just like it would have done in the 1950s. They serve the most delicious sundaes and there is a jukebox that plays really slushy songs. I love this place; it makes me feel like a proper American teenager. I don't tell Andy that though. Instead we talk about the Vietnam War.

'Such a waste of people's lives. I hate all that patriotic macho bullshit,' Andy tells me. 'My brother wants to join the army. God knows why, he's like this complete stoner. I used to really look up to him but it's like now he just wants to take drugs and kill people.'

'You're different than how you are at school,' I tell him.

'How do you mean?'

'Like you're not making jokes all the time.'

'Oh sorry,' he says.

'No, no, I like it. I mean it's great that you're funny but it's nice to have a proper conversation.'

'Yeah it's a bad habit being class clown. But I figured out when I was

little that people like you when you make them laugh and then they don't ask you too many questions. It's a kind of protection. I never have to hit anyone, I just make a joke. Teachers think I'm an idiot though.'

'You're not an idiot at all.'

'I'm not in the A classes like you are. I'm always getting myself into trouble. It's stupid, I know, it is. But teachers are such assholes. I wrote this story about a dream I had about suicide. So they decided I had to go to the school shrink every week. It pissed me off 'cause I put a lot of effort into the story, I was kind of proud of it, but all they wanted to know about was like my parents' divorce and my stepdad and all that shit.'

'What did you tell the shrink?'

'Nothing, I went in every week and just laughed in his face every time he asked me a question. So then they told my mom I was hostile and uncooperative and needed medication.'

'Shit, they can't make you take stuff, can they?'

'Of course they can. They can have you locked up if they want to. My mom told me I needed to change my attitude. So I did. The next time I saw the shrink I was incredibly polite and answered all his questions very nicely. Only thing was I had deliberately put all my clothes on back the front. When he asked me why, I just acted really surprised like I hadn't noticed.'

This makes me laugh. Andy grins at me, 'After that they kind of decided to leave me alone. I hope you don't think I'm just weird.'

'I quite like weird,' I tell him and lean over to kiss him.

Chapter Thirty Two

Anne's Garden

Dublin, 1999

I'm on the phone to Stephen. I've just arrived back in work after Christmas.

My brother tells me, 'Mum was throwing up all night.'

'Is she okay?'

There is a pause. 'To be honest I was looking at her and it came into my head that this is what someone looks like when they're dying.'

'Oh God, what are we going to do?'

'Yesterday I just started crying and I couldn't seem to stop. I felt so fucking useless.'

'I know what you mean, I feel the same way. Can I speak to her?'

'Yeah she's in bed, I'll bring the phone up.'

My mother sounds very calm. 'I asked your Dad to get in touch with the hospice. He didn't want to but I said to him I can't stay at home being sick like this. The cancer nurse says they'll be able to make me much more comfortable.'

'Are you sure?'

'It's the best thing to do. I know it is. I'm very lucky that they've got a place available. Your Dad's taking me in this afternoon.'

I tell my boss Ola that my mother is going into a hospice. He says, 'You go and be with her. Don't worry about work. You take all the time you need.'

I wonder how much time that will be?

I'm back in Dublin unpacking my small bag when Eamonn comes into the room. 'Can I ask you something?' he says.

'Of course you can.'

My fifteen-year-old brother takes a deep breath. 'What's a hospice?'

I stare at him. I can't believe nobody's told him. But then how do you answer such a terrible question? I think if I don't tell him the truth, he'll just ask someone at school and that'll be much worse.

'A hospice is... well it's a place where... where people go when they're very, very sick and they're not going to get better.'

'But Mum's going to get better?'

'No, Eamonn, I don't think she is.'

My brother glares at me. He looks angry.

'It's okay to cry you know. Stephen was crying yesterday.'

At these words, Eamonn bursts into tears. It's as if he needed to be given the permission of hearing that his older brother had done this. It's not easy being a teenage boy. I hold him as he sobs thinking he's way too young for this, maybe we all are.

My mother has her own room in the hospice with her own bathroom. There are large glass windows looking out over neatly cut grass. 'It's like some kind of hotel,' my mother says.

I don't contradict her. But it doesn't feel like a hotel to me. Not when the other guests I glimpse in the corridors look so frightened.

The nurse brings in an extra mattress and puts it on the floor near my

mother's bed. She says, 'If you need anything, anything at all, or you just want someone else here, ring the bell. Don't hesitate for a second.'

My mother replies, 'I've got my daughter with me. She's not leaving, are you?'

'No, Mammy, I'm staying all night. I'm going to be sleeping right here beside you.'

I've agreed with my father that I will do the night shifts and he will come relieve me in the mornings. I want to spare him seeing my mother so sick. At least spare him the nights, it somehow seems slightly more bearable during the day.

Because even though I speak of sleeping, I know it won't be possible. My mother has been given two blue bowls. She throws up roughly every fifteen minutes. How this is possible when she hasn't eaten anything I don't understand. The nurse tells me it's bile. All through the night, I walk back and forth to the bathroom alternating the blue bowls. I empty them in the sink, rinse them thoroughly, and bring back more tissues. I am not disgusted by their black green contents. After the first dozen times, it doesn't bother me at all. What I can't get used to is my mother retching. I hold the bowl up to her mouth and in the gaps between her whole body shuddering, wipe her mouth gently.

'It's okay, I'm here,' I say to her over and over again.

'God but it's revolting,' she says. 'Don't you find it revolting?'

'No, Mammy, I don't,' I tell her.

'You're so patient,' she tells me. 'I don't know how you can be so patient.'

I smile at her. We both know patience was never one of my mother's virtues.

It seems that the night will never end, that time has come to a complete standstill. But eventually a thin shadow of grey creeps under the curtain. Another nurse comes in. 'We just want to give your mother a wash. Is that okay with you, Joan?'

'I'm not sure I can get up,' my mother says.

'That's okay, we'll just do it while you're in bed.'

'I'll be right outside, Mammy.'

My mother's room is one of several along the same corridor. Opposite these rooms are enormous windows looking out on a courtyard. The windows are so deep-set that you can sit comfortably on their low ledges. I sit in the window just across from my mother's room. I'm exhausted but not remotely sleepy.

I notice that on the wall beside her door is a painting. It's called 'Anne's Garden.' It's been donated to the hospice by the family of someone who died here. I find myself wondering who Anne was and if she loved gardening the way my mother does. The way my mother did. I walk into the swirling flowers of the picture as if they are the only thing that can save me from this collapse of the present tense.

It's morning. My mother's room is filled with flowers. 'Look at those colours,' she says. 'Isn't that peach just amazing?'

I know it's partly the morphine my mother's being given but it's as if I can see the colours blazing too. As if blue has become more blue. Red has

become more red. The tiniest shoot of green is the most precious, extraordinary proof of life. I've been six nights without sleep. Or maybe seven. I've lost all sense of time. Or rather I've gained an appreciation of time I never had before. Each minute seems incredibly vivid. And long. I look at my watch. It's gone nine so I decide to ring my father. I feel bad for waking him up but I suddenly can't take any more.

'What is it? What's wrong?' he asks in panic.

'Nothing,' I say, which is ridiculous when everything is wrong. 'I just need you to come in. I have to lie down.'

I've always heard that lack of sleep is a form of torture. I've never properly understood why before. When I get home, Eamonn grabs me by the wrist and drags me into the bathroom. 'Look at the state of you,' he says.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. There are huge dark rings under my eyes. My face looks drawn and thin. I have the oddest sensation that it's not me I'm looking at. It's a complete stranger.

I get into bed in my clothes and instantly fall asleep. I'm woken by the phone ringing. For a moment, I've no idea where I am. Then I think it must be my father and something terrible has happened. I rush down the stairs at top speed. On the second to last step, I lose my balance and skid into the side of the door. Pain shoots up through my foot. I grab the phone. 'Hello?' I shout in agony.

The voice on the other end says very politely, 'I don't suppose Aoife Mannix is there?'

'Speaking,' I mutter through gritted teeth.

'Oh I didn't think it would be so easy. This is Kitty Richards. We went

to school together. Do you remember me?’

I have a flash of a very pretty girl who sat in the row in front of me in biology. I always thought she looked like a china doll. I was fascinated by how incredibly tiny her wrists were. Kitty missed the school debs because she was in hospital being treated for anorexia. Now she’s ringing me to invite me to our ten year class reunion.

For a moment, I consider telling her that I’m only at home in Dublin because my mother is dying of cancer. That at this very moment, she is lying in a hospice starving to death because her stomach can’t even keep down water. But I don’t. I just say, ‘It’s good to hear from you. I’ll try to come if I can.’

The last part of this is a lie. I know I won’t go to my school reunion. But strangely I am pleased to hear from Kitty and to know that she’s still alive. I have to resist an urge to tell her that I really hope she’s eating properly these days. I think how much I sound like my mother even in my own mind.

I hang up the phone and carefully remove my sock. One of my toes is at a strange angle and is already turning purple. I’ve clearly broken it. The sheer stupidity of having such a ridiculous injury when my mother is dying makes me laugh. The physical pain of it is like a thin rope that’s letting me hold on to my sanity.

I’m shuffling around my mother’s room. My father has lent me a pair of his soft shoes. Of course they’re far too big for me but I can’t get my own ones on because my toe has swollen up. My Dad says, ‘Maybe we should get your foot checked out?’

‘Don’t be silly, I’m fine. It’s only a stupid toe.’

Only I’m not fine. The numerous trips to the bathroom with the blue bowls are now quite painful as I’ve difficulty walking. I curse myself for having been such an idiot.

Another night passes. My mother’s sickness has not eased. If anything, she’s throwing up more often. The anti-nausea drugs they’re giving her seem to be having no effect. Even the nurses, who have a calmness that I imagine comes from having seen death do its worst, look slightly anxious.

One of them says to me, ‘The doctor would like you all to come to a family meeting in the relatives room.’

‘My brothers as well?’

‘Yes, we think it’d be best if the whole family was there.’

The relatives room is quite large and there is a long low table with a big box of tissues on it. I have a bad feeling about the tissues. I’m sitting beside my mother who’s carefully propped up in an armchair. I’m holding her hand. My Dad is on her other side and Eamonn and Stephen are next to him. A doctor and a nurse sit across from us.

‘What we’d like to do,’ the doctor is saying, ‘is put a tube through your nose and down your throat. This would allow us to manually empty the contents of your stomach. It should mean a near total reduction in the amount of nausea you’re experiencing.’

My father leans forward. ‘Well that sounds great, let’s do that.’

The doctor continues to look at my mother. ‘It would mean, however, that you’d no longer have the possibility of eating for yourself. Though you might be able to manage small amounts of liquid.’

My mother sighs. 'It's not like I'm eating anyway.'

'What I want you to understand, and as I've said to you before, we believe in being completely honest with our patients,' the doctor hesitates ever so slightly.

'I really appreciate that. I don't want any more stories,' my mother tells him.

'This procedure means that you will need to stay with us here in the hospice. It's not a cure, it's a purely palliative measure.'

My mother grips my hand tightly. 'You mean I won't ever be going home?' she asks.

'Yes, that's exactly what I mean,' the doctor replies.

My father stares at the floor. I glance over at my brothers. The devastation on their faces reflects my own.

'How long do you think I have?' my mother asks.

'That's quite difficult to say with any great accuracy...' the doctor shifts uncomfortably.

'But we will be here for you,' the nurse speaks for the first time. She pushes the box of tissues closer in our direction although none of us is crying.

I realise then that I thought I'd accepted that my mother is dying. But there are levels of knowing. To hear that she won't be coming home ever again is a whole new level of truth. My feeling that time has been suspended is an illusion. Time is marching relentlessly on. It's only my heart that is hung in this frozen, sleepless nowhere land between life and death.

Chapter Thirty Three

Fight

New York, 1987

My mother has agreed to come to one of my soccer matches. 'I preferred it when you played hockey,' she tells me.

'Well it's not a choice,' I explain. 'Eastchester High doesn't do hockey. They just have soccer and basketball for girls. And I'm useless at basketball. Actually you know I'm much better at football than I ever was at hockey.'

'It just doesn't seem very lady-like,' my mother sighs.

'Everyone on the team is really nice,' I tell her.

But when my mother arrives for the match, she's not reassured.

'They're so big, these American girls,' she whispers to me. 'You look tiny compared to them, I'm worried you're going to get squashed.'

'Don't be ridiculous. It's not American football, it's just soccer.'

The game starts off well and even my mother looks excited when we manage to score a goal. Then disaster strikes. The other team's goalie is claiming that our centre forward Gaby committed handball and the goal should be disallowed. They start to argue and the next thing the goalie has grabbed Gaby by her long ponytail. She swings her round violently so that Gaby is brought to her knees. Our left forward leaps on the goalie's back to drag her off. Everyone on the pitch rushes towards them and piles into the fight.

Mr G is screaming, 'Stop it, girls, stop it now.'

I'm running forward myself when I catch a glimpse of my mother watching in horror. This is going to do nothing for her appreciation of soccer

or American girls.

Afterwards she tells me, 'Well I have to admit it certainly wasn't dull. I thought they were going to kill each other.'

Needless to say my mother doesn't come to any more of my matches. However the fight is the talk of the school and from now on, we have a huge turnout of support.

'Hey look at this way,' Andy tells me. 'Even if they're only there in the hope there'll be another bust up, at least you got fans. Nobody thinks girls' soccer is girlie any more.'

Mr G tells me he's proud of how well I'm coming along. 'I mean you're only a freshman, but I think by next year you'll really be a force to reckon with. This team is going from strength to strength. We're gonna make people see that girls' soccer is just as serious as anything the guys are doing.'

I hesitate, unsure how to break the bad news to my coach.

'What's wrong?' he asks. 'Don't tell me you've suddenly decided you want to be a cheerleader.'

'No, no of course not,' I say. 'It's just... well I won't be here next year. My family is moving back to Ireland.'

'Why the hell would they want to do that? This is America, you can do anything here.'

'There isn't a choice, it's my Dad's job. It's been four years and so now they're sending him back.'

'Well that really sucks,' Mr G looks utterly crestfallen. 'I had big plans for you.'

I want to tell Mr G how sorry I am for letting him down. That I really

don't want to go back to Ireland, that for all its faults I've come to love the United States of America. But I'm afraid I'm going to start crying.

'Ah don't worry, kid, I know it's not your fault. We'll miss you that's all.' Mr G shakes my hand. 'Best of luck back in the old country.'

We have to move out of our house and rent an apartment on Roosevelt Island for a month before we fly back to Dublin. My father can't seem to understand why I'm not over the moon to be going home.

'You said you missed Dublin terribly,' he tells me.

'Yeah, I did when I first arrived here. That was ages ago.' It does feel like several life times have passed since then. I'm not the same person at fifteen as I was at eleven.

'Well,' my father says, 'we always knew it was only temporary.'

The movers pack up everything into boxes and shove them along with our furniture into a large van. Me and my mother do a last walk through the house to make sure that nothing has been left behind. The rooms look barren and desolate, stripped of their personality.

My mother says, 'It's as if we were never here.'

This makes me shiver. I don't like how easy it is to completely dismantle my life.

My friends throw me a surprise leaving party and present me with a soccer ball that everyone has signed. I'm incredibly touched. It feels unfair that I have to leave just when I've finally learned how to be an American.

To get to Roosevelt Island you have to take a cable car that hangs high above the river. The night before my flight, Andy insists on getting the tram

back with me. 'I don't want to say goodbye till the last possible moment,' he tells me.

I look out admiring the view over Manhattan's skyline. All those skyscrapers with their windows glistening in the sun. 'Will you write to me?' I ask.

Andy doesn't answer so I turn to stare at him. His eyes are full of tears that he wipes away angrily. 'You probably think I'm a real faggot now,' he says.

'No, of course I don't,' I tell him.

'God but it's so unfair,' he smiles at me. 'I finally fall in love with the most gorgeous girl in the world and she moves to the other side of the fucking planet.'

'We'll keep in touch,' I say, even though I know we probably won't.

Chapter Thirty Four

In The Piggy Boat

Dublin, 1999

I'm watching television with my mother. Every now and again I get up to check on her machine. It isn't really much of a machine. It's just a bag with tubes. The nurse has shown me how by slowly pulling back on the syringe, I can draw out the contents of my mother's stomach up through the tube in her nose and into the bag. If this is done very carefully and gently, every fifteen minutes or so, it means that my mother no longer has to vomit. The machine is our friend and I'm very pleased to be able to use it.

My mother is much better since she stopped being sick all the time. Of course I know this isn't true. I know she is slowly, almost imperceptibly, floating away from us. But at the same time she can sit in an armchair and I can hold her hand and we can watch *Casualty* together.

An Asian man is forced to come out to his parents because he has to tell them he has HIV and can't make the kidney donation his elderly father needs. This is followed by a drama in which a young woman refuses to allow her recently deceased father to be buried where he wanted in the same plot as the gay partner he's been with for years. Why is suddenly everything on the telly about the tragedy of homosexuality?

As if she can read my thoughts, my mother says, 'Such a shame really. After all when you think about it, and I've been thinking about it quite a bit, does it matter so much? At the end of the day, love is love. That's the only thing that counts.'

She squeezes my hand as I blink back tears. 'Just make sure you

enjoy your life,' she says to me.

I think it might be time for me to start following my mother's advice.

'I know it sounds strange given what's happened but I do feel very lucky you know,' my mother continues. 'I've had so much love in my life. Your Dad's a very good man. Try to look after him for me, will you?'

'Of course I will.'

'I worry about him. I really do. You see I promised him that I'd never leave him. And I think, in spite of everything, he still thinks that I won't. But I haven't got a choice, have I?'

'It's not your fault, Mammy. None of this is your fault,' I tell her.

'Oh I know that really. I just didn't think it would be so hard to say goodbye.' My mother pauses. 'I want your Dad to meet someone else you know.'

'Don't talk like that.'

'No, I mean it. He's not the kind of person who should be on his own. I was always rather jealous, even though he never gave me any reason to be. But this is different. I want you to know that I'd like him to find somebody to be happy with.'

'He's happy with you.'

'I know he is.'

There is a knock on the door and a nun peers her head around. 'Am I disturbing you?'

I'm about to tell her yes but my mother says very politely, 'Of course you're not. We're only watching telly.'

The nun comes bustling into the room. She exudes a cheery positivity

that can only be described as irritating. 'And this is your daughter?' she asks as if she were addressing a pair of five year olds.

'Yes, my daughter Aoife. She's here with me most of the time. She stays overnight.'

'Well every other night,' I say. Since they managed to put the tube in, my Dad has persuaded me that we should split the night shifts so we take turns sleeping on the mattress beside my mother.

'Well isn't that just wonderful,' the nun smiles at me. 'Though I mean after all that's what daughters are for. It's the least you'd expect. But I have to say what impresses me is those sons of yours. The way they come in every afternoon. So polite and caring. Such charming young men. And it can't be at all easy for them.'

My brothers are wonderful and they love my mother very much and would do anything for her. However I resent that their care is somehow being deemed more impressive than mine. That as a girl I'm merely doing my duty while as boys their love is truly special.

The nun carries on her inane chatter for a few more minutes and finally leaves.

'God I thought she'd never go,' my mother says. 'Bloody nuns, I've never liked them. So full of advice on things they know nothing about. Returned unopened is what we used to say.'

This makes us both giggle like naughty schoolchildren.

'I'm damned if I'm going to talk to her about my problems,' my mother says. 'I would like to go to the chapel though. Do you think you'd be able to take me?'

‘Of course, Mammy. It’s only down the hall.’ I have peered into this strange room at the top of my mother’s corridor but never dared to enter.

The next morning, I tell the nurse my mother would like to visit the chapel. ‘Of course, that’s no problem,’ she replies. ‘You know where it is?’

I nod, realising I’d been expecting the nurse to advise against this journey outside the safety of my mother’s room. Instead she just asks, ‘Do you think you’ll want a wheelchair, Joan?’

‘No, no,’ my mother says. ‘I want to walk. But first I want a bath. And not in the bed either, a proper bath. Never take a bath in a bed if you can possibly avoid it is my advice.’

This makes the nurse smile. ‘Do you think you’d be able to give your mother a bath?’ she asks me.

‘Of course,’ I answer uncertainly. I suddenly feel a lot less confident in my new found nursing skills.

There is a special bathroom just round the corner from my mother’s room. The tub has a side that comes down so that you don’t have to be lifted in or out. All the same it is a very slow process to get my mother into the bath. She is so incredibly fragile that I’m terrified she’s going to fall and hurt herself.

But once she’s in, she gives a huge sigh of happiness. ‘God but this is heaven,’ she says as the warm water laps around her. ‘I don’t suppose you remember that Winnie the Pooh yolk I had years ago for keeping the shampoo out of your eyes?’

A sudden flash of this long forgotten contraption comes into my mind. ‘Was it a bit like a shower cap only with a wide rim?’

'I think so. It was when we were in Canada...'

'Yeah, that's right,' I peer back into the fog of memory. 'Winnie and Tigger were holding hands and dancing along the rim. I loved it. And the bottle of shampoo was shaped like a sailor and me and Stephen used to fight over who had the most bubbles.'

'Ah your brother was a little devil. He'd scream going into the bath and then he'd scream when you took him out. But he loved it when he was in there.'

'Do you remember how he always running away and I'd to go chasing after him?'

My mother laughs. 'Houdini, that's what the neighbours used to call him. The minute my back was turned he'd be off like a shot. He's a free spirit, your brother, always was, always will be.'

'Like his Mammy,' I say as I soap my mother's back.

'We were always very alike. Too much alike, that was half the trouble. We had a lot of silly fights but I hope he knows I always thought he was wonderful. Wild but wonderful.' My mother sighs. 'Do you think you could wash my hair?'

'Of course I can.' I pour a tiny amount of shampoo into the palm of my hand. My mother's hair has grown back into wispy curls rather like a baby's.

I'm walking along the hospice corridor with my mother. Though I'm not sure walking is quite the word for it. She has her drip with the bag on one side as she leans on me. We take a small step and then stop for several moments.

My mother seems unperturbed by this snail's pace. She looks around

her brightly. 'Isn't that great the way they have all those lovely paintings on the walls?' she asks.

'Yeah,' I reply. 'The one outside your room is called Anne's Garden.' I instantly regret saying this in case she wants to look at it and sees that it's dedicated to a patient who has died.

But my mother is focused on getting to the chapel. She takes another tiny step forward. 'That's what I always thought was wrong with the hospital,' she explains. 'They were so busy with medicine, they didn't think about pictures or light or flowers. But medicine runs out for everybody in the end and then what are you left with?'

We've finally reached the door of the chapel. Inside are simple wooden pews arranged in a semi-circle. I carefully help my mother to take a seat. We look up at Jesus on the cross. Behind him is a stained glass window of blue and red.

My mother says, 'Funny, isn't it? He doesn't look to me any more like he's in pain. He just looks kind. I thought I'd forgotten how to pray but it's come back to me.'

We sit in silence then. I think my mother is praying and I try to do the same. 'Please God,' I repeat to myself over and over again. I don't know what it is I'm asking for. I don't know what it is I believe any more.

It's night time and my mother is sleeping. Or I think she's sleeping when suddenly she opens her eyes. Her eyes are an extraordinary shade of deep sea green.

Just before he left us for the evening, my father asked me, 'Have you

noticed how she's getting younger?'

This is bizarrely true. It's as if my mother's not so much dying as passing backwards through time. Her skin is loose over the bone and incredibly soft. It has a translucent quality and her eyes are glowing.

'You alright, Mammy?' I ask, leaning in closer. 'Would you like a drink or anything?'

'God I'd love a cup of tea,' she says.

'I'll go make you one,' I reply. 'I won't be a moment.' There is a small kitchen at the other end of the corridor that relatives are allowed use.

'Take your time,' my mother smiles. 'I'm not going anywhere.'

I can't help thinking how that isn't really true.

I look at my watch. It's just gone four am. The corridor is dimly lit and completely silent. When I reach the kitchen, the door is opened by a woman about my mother's age.

'I've just put the kettle on,' she says as if she's been expecting me.

Together we take out several white cups and saucers from the press above our heads. The kitchen is tiny so we're forced to stand right beside each other.

'I brought my own teapot,' the woman explains with a hint of defiance.

'I don't think it tastes the same out of those metal yolks. Do you?'

I nod, thinking how much my mother would agree.

'Who are you in for?' the woman asks.

'My mother,' I say.

'My sister,' the woman replies.

I watch as she pours a drop of water into a blue teapot with white daises on it, swirls, empties it, pops in two teabags and fills it to the brim with infinite care. She smiles at me. 'It's gotten awful cold. I think it might snow you know.'

'They said it would on the radio,' I tell her.

'Yes, I heard that too. Me and my sister loved snow when we were children.'

I think how close I suddenly feel to this complete stranger. Maybe this is what people felt in the air raid shelters during the Second World War.

'You take care now,' the woman says as she carefully balances her tray on her way out. 'God Bless.'

When I get back to the room, I think my mother has drifted back to sleep. But when I put the tray down, her eyes flash open.

'Where are we?' she asks.

I'm tempted to reply that we're on a space station light years from planet Earth or even better, at home in our own kitchen. But my mother doesn't like fairy tales.

'We're in the hospice, Mammy,' I say.

'Ah,' she laughs. 'I thought for a moment there we were in the piggy boat.'

It does feel a bit like we're in a giant ship drifting through the North Atlantic. There's a terrible wind that's making the windows rattle.

'A woman in the kitchen said it's going to snow,' I tell my mother.

'It snowed the night you were born,' my mother replies. 'There was a

storm...'

I want to ask my mother what the piggy boat is but her eyes are closed again. She doesn't seem to sleep so much as that her dreams have joined up with her being awake. I pour the tea and add five sugar cubes to my mother's cup. She used to warn me about tooth decay when I took just one spoon but now she can't get hers sweet enough. Of course technically she's not really drinking tea, it comes straight back up again through the tube. But I like to think that some of the sugar is being absorbed somehow.

My mother shifts and opens her eyes again. 'I poured your tea, Mammy,' I tell her.

But she's not looking at me. She says, 'Hush, whisper who dares, Christopher Robin is saying his prayers.'

'What?' I ask.

'If I open my eyes just a little bit more, I can see Nana's dressing gown on the door. It's a beautiful blue but it hasn't a hood. Mine has a hood...'

I suddenly remember my mother telling this to me when I was a child. Now she works her way through the verses in a clear voice that is quiet but full of inflection. 'God Bless Mammy, oh wasn't it fun in the bath tonight? With the hot so hot and the cold so cold, God Bless Daddy I almost forgot.'

'I used to love that one,' I tell her.

But she doesn't answer me. Instead she begins to recite her favourite poem, Oscar Wilde's 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'. 'Oh his step was light and gay but I never saw a man who looked so wistfully at the day...'

When my mother gets to the last verse, she barely pauses before launching into, 'Then I saw the Congo creeping through the black, snaking

through the jungle like a golden track...'

I recognise this as a poem my mother learned for a recital competition. She was on a team with other girls and they practiced it with their teacher after school every day for weeks. Then the day before the competition, the head nun came to listen to a rehearsal. She decided the poem was not suitable for young Catholic ladies. Apparently she objected to the line 'Fat black bucks in a wine barrel room.' As a result, they had to learn a new poem overnight and needless to say didn't win. Now nearly thirty years later, my mother gives it the performance of a lifetime. She remembers every word and it's a long poem. By the end, I'm struggling not to cry.

My mother has always been fond of quotations. She knows an astonishing amount of poetry off by heart and is quite capable of slipping a short passage from Shakespeare into every day conversation. But this is different. This is not her reciting a poem or two. This, I realise, is her working her way through everything she has ever learned. It's as if I'm not there at all but there is an audience I can't see just beyond the edge of the bed.

Next come a number of poems by Emily Dickinson, followed by a few nursery rhymes, and then a prayer I've never heard before. I have the eerie feeling this is something my mother knew when she was a child and had forgotten but now remembers. She goes silent for a moment and closes her eyes. I think maybe it's over but she suddenly turns and stares at me.

'Is this a dagger which I see before me? The handle toward my hand. Come, let me clutch thee. I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.'

Of course, it's Macbeth, her favourite play. 'Please, Mammy,' I whisper. 'Please stop.'

I don't think I can bear for her to go on. And yet I know I should be paying more attention. This is undoubtedly my last chance to learn the words to all the things my mother tried to teach me.

After the witches' speech, which I have always found creepy, but never more so than on this interminable night, 'bubble, bubble toil and trouble, in the cauldron boil and bubble', she starts to sing, 'On Raglan Road.'

'Oh I loved too much and by such by such is happiness thrown away.'

My mother has a soft, lovely voice and I sit back in the armchair to listen. Tears stream down my face. Thick snowflakes have begun to fall against the window.

Chapter Thirty Five

Native

Dublin, 1988

My new school is called 'The High School'. I think how confusing this will be to explain to my friends back in America where all secondary schools are called high schools.

My mother tells me, 'It's a good school. Protestant so they won't mind you don't know anything about religion. And they'll help you catch up after four years of learning next to nothing.'

I find my mother's complete dismissal of the American education system a little harsh. But the fact remains that what I've been learning is not much use to me now. My knowledge of the American Civil War has little relevance to the Irish struggle for independence. The capitals of the fifty states won't help me recall the major towns of the twenty six counties. I've only two years to prepare for my Leaving Certificate, the dreaded state examination that will determine if I can go to university.

My mother insists I take all honours subject including maths. I was never any good at math even in New York and I'm totally unfamiliar with what my new classes cover.

'Seriously, Mammy, I don't understand any of it. He might as well be teaching in double Greek for all that I'm able to follow,' I protest.

'I'm sure if you give it some time,' my mother says. 'When I was in school, they didn't even offer honours maths, only pass because we were just girls. There was one friend of mine wanted to be a doctor and she had to take extra maths classes outside of school. The nuns thought she was mad to

aspire to anything more than a nurse. There was this bloody priest who used to tell us not to come across as too intelligent or we'd never get a husband.'

'But it's got nothing to do with me being a girl, I'm just useless at it.'

My mother sighs, 'I don't want you missing out on opportunities the way I did. You're just as clever as any boy. Cleverer in fact.'

I realise rational argument is pointless in the face of my mother's feminism. I'm going to have to suffer the opportunity of failing maths whether I like it or not.

I draw the line at learning Irish though. 'I can barely remember a word of it, I'll never catch up in time for the exams.'

'But your grandfather was a native speaker. If he could hear you, he'd turn over in his grave. Besides it's compulsory,' my mother objects.

'Not for me it isn't. You only have to take it if you were born in Ireland and I wasn't.'

'But it's your own language, it's important.'

'English is my language. That's what I want to study at college and if I fail Irish and maths, there's no way I'll get in.'

'Well it might come back to you easier than you think.' I can tell my mother is torn between her nationalism and her fierce determination to get me into university.

Luckily my new headmaster is more open to reason. After several weeks of sitting in a class bored out of my mind because I understand nothing, he calls me to his office. 'I'm thinking you could go to the library during Irish class and use the time to study. That's what our other American student Rebecca does.'

I decide I won't tell my mother that the headmaster referred to me as a Yank, she'd have a fit. Just that he agrees with me that it's a waste of time spending nearly an hour a day in complete incomprehension.

Because of my meeting with the headmaster, I'm late for class. I attempt to explain this to my Irish teacher, Mrs Cummings, but she cuts me off with a long rant osc Gailge. Of course I don't understand anything other than the tone of her voice which is clearly pissed off.

Seeing the blank look on my face, she snaps, 'Just sit down and get out your Irish book.'

I do as I'm told but though I open the book, I don't look at it. It's called Peig and I've been told by my classmates that it's the most incredibly dull story of this old woman who lives on a rock off the West Coast of Ireland.

'She just keeps going on and on about her feckin' cows,' a boy called Peter has informed me. 'Cows and drowning and the glory of Ireland. You're lucky you can't understand it. It's got nothing to do with anything that happens nowadays.'

So instead of struggling with this incomprehensible gibberish, I stare out the window thinking about how much I miss Andy. I'm remembering the fourth of July and how he held my hand while we watched the most incredible firework display.

Suddenly Mrs Cummings is yelling in my face, 'Read it, read the next passage.' She's stabbing at the book.

'I can't,' I tell her. 'I don't know any Irish.'

'Just do it.' Mrs Cummings has the beginnings of a moustache and a thin bead of perspiration clings to it. She really is angry.

I shrug and start reading very slowly and clearly in an exaggerated country accent that mimics Mrs Cummings' own. I know I'm pronouncing all the words wrong and I couldn't care less. After my early experiences in America, I've become immune to teachers' attempts at humiliation. I've developed what Andy used to call 'a healthy attitude problem' which involves sitting in the back of all my classes and not listening to a word my teachers are saying.

Mrs Cummings has turned bright red with fury. 'If you're not even going to try,' she spits at me. 'Then there's no point in being in my class.'

'Fine by me,' I tell her. I gather up all my books and saunter out slamming the door behind me. Doubtless my maternal grandfather is spinning in his grave but it's not my fault my parents have dragged me round the world so that I've forgotten this difficult, obscure language that's supposed to be mine even though no one I know speaks it.

People in my new school keep asking me what religion I am. When I tell them I'm not religious, they ask, 'Well what religion are your parents?'

'They're not religious either, in fact they're quite anti-religion.'

'What about your grandparents?'

'Catholic, they were all Catholic.'

This seems to satisfy them. I can see the box marked Catholic being ticked in their mind and realise that these questions have nothing to do with my own personal beliefs. They are purely about which side I come from.

A girl called Muriel tells me her parents are furious because her sister has a Catholic boyfriend. 'What'll they do if she marries him?' I ask.

Muriel recoils in horror. 'Oh she won't do that. I mean after failing her Leaving and then to go marrying a Catholic, they'd never speak to her again.' She then blushes slightly as she remembers I'm not Protestant. 'Not that we've anything against Catholics of course.'

'I'm not a Catholic,' I tell her even though I can see that to her I am.

I'm in complete darkness. I realise I'm waiting for my eyes to adjust and for it to become a shade lighter. But this doesn't happen; the blackness remains thick and impenetrable.

'Pretty freaky hey,' Cocky says. He's my geography teacher and his real name is Mr Wright but everyone calls him Cocky. He switches back on his gas light on his metal hat. 'Let's keep moving.'

We're in a cave in Yorkshire. Clambering over a rock in an underground stream, I slip and bash my leg. It hurts and I'm pretty sure I'm bleeding but it's too cold to worry about it. Eventually we can see light up ahead. We emerge out into a thick mist. Scrawny twisted trees appear and disappear like ghosts as we make our way back to the van. My teeth are chattering and I'm frozen.

'Isn't this the most beautiful place on Earth?' Cocky asks.

And it is. It's like being in Wuthering Heights which we're reading in English class and I'm obsessed with. My mother keeps asking me what exactly I enjoy about crawling around in the dark and the cold. It's hard to explain the incredible thrill that comes from emerging back into the light after being in a completely different world.

In the van, we all eat Kendal mint cake and sing rude songs. Cocky

stops off at a tiny shop to buy beer and the papers. 'No mention of this to the old Brook,' he says as he hands round the cans to a dozen delighted teenagers. Brook is our headmaster and we're all a bit scared of him.

We crack open the beers and feel like proper grown up cavers. Everyone is laughing and shouting cheers.

Then my friend Tara says, 'Oh God.' She has the paper open in front of her. The headlines are all about two RUC officers who accidentally drove into a Republican funeral. There are graphic photos of them being ripped from their cars by an angry mob. It's not clear if they were beaten to death or if they were finished off by being shot but they're both dead.

An uneasy silence settles in the van. Then Duncan says, 'Can you imagine how scared they must have been?'

'It's all getting way out of hand. Why do they hate us so much?' Tara asks.

It hits me that I am not part of 'us' because I'm not Protestant. That is the reality regardless of what I might believe about God or Northern Ireland. Nobody feels like singing any more and we just drink our beers and look out the window. It's as if the grown up world has seeped into our happy teenage bubble and it's not as fun and exciting as we'd expected. We felt safer when we were stumbling along together underground. At least that was a darkness we understood the reason for.

The cut I got on my leg doesn't heal very well and I'm left with a small scar on my shin that never completely fades away. A scar I'm a little bit proud of but also always brings back a strange feeling of uneasiness whenever I examine it.

Chapter Thirty Six

No

Dublin, 1999

I'm on the phone to the florists. The woman on the end of the line is trying to explain to me the wonderful variety of bouquets they do. I'm so tired I can't really follow what she's saying.

'What's the biggest one you have?'

I barely let her finish her answer before saying, 'I'll take that.'

'I have to warn you it's quite expensive,' the woman tells me.

'It doesn't matter as long as it can be delivered tomorrow.'

'No problem. What would you like the card to say?'

I pause. How could the card begin to say all that I need it to say?

'Hello... are you still there?' the florist asks.

'Yeah, yeah, just put To Mammy and Dad, All my love on your anniversary, from Aoife.'

'What's the delivery address?'

'Our Lady's Hospice, Harold's Cross...'

There is a silence and then the florist asks, 'Are you sure you wouldn't like them delivered today?'

Her tone has changed completely. I have the feeling if I asked her to run over there now with every flower in the shop she'd do it.

I'm in my mother's room and she's getting me to move vases of flowers around. 'Just put that one there a bit further to the left and then move the cards along so you can squeeze in those roses...'

‘Like that?’ Flowers have been arriving all morning but I’m starting to get anxious that there’s no sign of the ones I ordered.

My mother is sitting up in bed. She says, ‘You haven’t got those cards right, put them at more of an angle so you can see all the pictures.’

There is a knock on the door and Eamonn peers his face round. ‘Can I talk to you for a second?’ he asks me.

‘Don’t be long,’ my mother says. ‘I want everything where it should be for when your Dad gets here.’

It makes me smile that my mother may be dying but she’s still as bossy as ever. But when I step outside the room, I can see that Eamonn is very upset. ‘What is it? What’s wrong?’

‘I haven’t got the clown. My teacher says it’s not ready yet.’

My brother has been making a ceramic clown in school. He planned to give it to my mother for my parents’ anniversary. ‘It hasn’t come out of the kiln...’

‘Did you say you needed it for today?’

My brother flushes bright red. ‘I tried to... but I just couldn’t get the words, I couldn’t...’

I put an arm around him. ‘It’s okay, you can give it to her tomorrow.’

Eamonn looks at me with huge, frightened eyes. ‘Are you sure? Are you sure it won’t be too late?’

Of course I’m not at all sure about this.

Me and my brothers are in my mother’s room. Stephen is moving yet another vase. ‘How about there?’ he asks.

‘That’s it, that’s perfect,’ my mother says. ‘Aren’t they just lovely? But where’s your Dad? He should be here by now. He’s always late.’

‘Twenty eight years,’ I say. ‘That’s an impressively long time to be married.’

‘Yes,’ my mother says. ‘Hard to believe really. And yet sometimes it feels like it was only yesterday we were on our honeymoon.’

My father comes rushing in brandishing a bottle of champagne. ‘Happy anniversary,’ he says to my mother kissing her on the cheek.

My mother is looking at the label. ‘No, no,’ she says. ‘This isn’t the one we like.’

‘The traffic was bad, I just grabbed the first bottle I saw, I didn’t want to be late...’ My father looks stricken.

‘It’s our anniversary. I don’t want cheap plonk, I want the best they have. I want a proper celebration.’

‘Why don’t you just pop back to the shop and ask for another one?’ I suggest. ‘I’m sure they’ll let you change it.’

‘Good idea,’ my mother says as she hands the bottle back to him.

‘Okay,’ my father says. ‘I won’t be long.’ He scurries out of the room.

My mother smiles. ‘Poor man, I suppose I shouldn’t be hassling him. But you know if something’s worth doing, it’s worth doing properly.’

A nurse pokes her head round the door. ‘Another delivery for you, Joan,’ she says. ‘I’m going to need a hand with this one.’

‘I’ll help you,’ I say, leaping up in the hope my flowers have finally arrived.

As we stride along the corridor, the nurse says to me, ‘I’m telling you

I've seen some flowers come in here but these are just magnificent.'

'I think they're from me,' I say, praying that this is true. 'They're for my parents' anniversary.'

'Oh I know,' the nurse says. 'Your mother was telling me yesterday about how she met your Dad when she was nineteen and they moved to Sweden, was it?'

'That's right. I was born there...'

The bouquet is lying on a counter in the kitchen. It's enormous and I'm delighted to see my name on the card. The nurse says, 'This is the biggest vase we have, I think it should do the trick.'

She helps me squeeze in the flowers with some difficulty. 'Sorry about this,' I say. 'I'm sure you're really busy.'

'I don't mind at all,' she says. 'That's what this place is all about. Love.'

The nurse opens the door for me as I carefully carry in the vase. My mother gives a little gasp. 'Oh,' she says. 'Those are the most beautiful flowers I've ever seen.'

My father arrives with a new bottle of champagne. 'The man in the shop said this is the best vintage...' The cork pops loudly.

My mother laughs. 'Isn't that one of the best sounds in the world? Put a bit of sugar in mine, will you?'

I stir five sugars into my mother's glass of the finest champagne.

My mother raises her glass. Her hand is shaking ever so slightly. 'To my family,' she says before taking a tiny sip. 'Absolutely delicious,' she

pronounces to my father's obvious relief.

I take a long gulp from my own glass. It really is very nice champagne.

'Right, let's take some photos,' my mother announces. 'I want a picture of me with each of you.'

'But you don't like...'

My father is about to point out that my mother hates having her photograph taken when I interrupt him. 'Here you go, Dad, I've got the camera right here.'

I shove the camera into his arms. I don't want to dwell on why my mother for the first time in her life wants her photo taken. I know these pictures aren't for her. She's unlikely to ever see them. She wants them for us so that we never forget how we were all together like this and how, in spite of everything, we were celebrating and somehow happy.

The next day my mother stops talking. I'd like to think that she's sleeping but in fact her eyes are only about three quarters of the way closed. Occasionally she mumbles something and I lean in as close as I can to try to catch what she's saying.

The nurse tells me, 'She can still hear you, you know. Hearing is the last thing to go. You could try reading something to her.'

It's comforting to think my mother might catch snatches of what I'm saying and I think maybe reading will take away the disturbing feeling that I'm talking to myself. I open the drawer in my mother's bedside cabinet to try and find a book. Inside there is a small grey volume entitled 'Now Is The Time' by Sister Stanislaus Kennedy.

I know my mother has been carrying this around with her for the last few months. She's told me, 'I never thought I'd get into something written by a nun but she makes some very valid points.'

I turn to the chapter called 'A Time To Love' and begin to read out loud. 'I want to do with you what the spring does with the cherry trees.' This is a quote from Pablo Neruda that I think my mother would like. It hits me that since I was a small child, most of the books I've read have been ones my mother recommended to me. What on earth am I going to read from now on?

I'm lying on the mattress beside my mother's bed. It's dark out and the room is silent except for the strange rattle that is coming from my mother's throat. It's a sound I've never heard before and yet I know I will recognise it instantly for the rest of my life. It's the sound of someone dying.

The nurse comes in. I ask her, 'Do you think I need to ring my Dad yet? It's very important that he's here.'

'Don't worry,' the nurse says. 'I'll be sure to let you know. I think we can wait till morning.'

I lie back down. There is no chance of sleeping. There is nothing but this terrible noise. Hours go by. I'm torn between longing for morning and a deep dread of what it will bring.

At last, the nurse returns. She touches my mother's face very gently. 'I think you should ring your father now.'

I'm sitting outside my mother's room in the window box across from the painting of 'Anne's Garden'. My Auntie Helena is sitting beside me holding my

hand.

‘Do you want to go in?’ she asks me.

‘No,’ I tell her. ‘I think my Dad wants to be alone with her.’

We sit in silence. Eventually the door opens and my father gestures for me to come in.

The room is completely quiet. My mother is still lying in the bed. Only I know instantly that she’s not really. She’s no longer there.

My father tells me, ‘I just kept saying I love you over and over again. I wanted to be sure those were the last words she ever heard.’

The nurse comes in. She says, ‘You know she’s not in pain any more.’

I nod, thinking that is the one positive thing that can be said in this moment. ‘Thank you,’ I tell her. And I mean it. Not just for the care that my mother has received but for the fact that she died in a place that respected her last wish for honesty and truth.

I’m in the car driving back from the hospice with my father. He says, ‘I know it’s going to hit me later but right now I can’t seem to feel anything for myself. I just keep thinking how much she’s lost, all those years that have been taken from her before they should have been.’

I’m struck by how selfless this is. My own sense of loss is threatening to shatter me into thousands of pieces.

When we get into the house, Eamonn is standing by the stairs just outside the kitchen. He looks up at us in surprise. ‘What are you both doing here?’ he asks.

I walk over to my brother and put my arms round him. ‘She’s gone.’

'What?'

'Mammy's gone. She died.'

'No,' he says. 'No, she didn't.'

'I'm sorry, I'm really, really sorry.' This I realise is the hardest thing I've ever had to tell anyone.

My brother collapses into me. He just keeps whispering 'No' over and over again.

Chapter Thirty Seven

A Pint of Guinness

The Aran Islands, 1988

My Dad is away for work so my mother decides to take me and my brothers to the Aran Islands with her friend Mary. I'm not thrilled at the idea of a family holiday but I cheer up when my mother says I can bring Deirdre with me. I had thought after my four years in America, Deirdre might not be that interested in being friends any more. But actually at sixteen we're as close as we were at eight.

'I've always been very fond of Deirdre,' my mother says. 'She reminds me of myself when I was a teenager.'

'Cause she's a ginger dwarf like you,' I tease.

'No, it's because she's had far too much responsibility too young just like I did. The way she looks after her sisters the way I had to with your uncles. She told me she's scared this pregnancy is going to kill her mother.'

Deirdre's mother is expecting twins and has very high blood pressure. My mother tells me, 'I was always worried about your Gran. How hard she worked at RTE and then I had to make dinner in the evenings because she was doing more sewing at home. She never seemed to draw breath. When Ellen came back from Aden on holidays, she told me that Mammy had gotten very thin and that I mustn't be looking after her properly. I never really forgave her for saying that 'cause I was only a kid and I was doing my best.'

My Auntie Ellen moved to Aden shortly after getting married because my uncle Phil was in the RAF and there was a war on. 'Though looking back I realise Ellen was probably very homesick. She hated it over there with the

heat and having to stay in the enclosure and the threat of attack. But she didn't need to take it out on me.'

When we get to Inis Oirr, the smallest of the Aran Islands, Eamonn looks around him expectantly. 'Where are the palm trees?' he asks. I realise that at four years of age, he thought going to an island meant like being shipwrecked in his Robinson Crusoe book.

As an old man helps us load our luggage into a cart pulled by a donkey, Eamonn whispers to me, 'Have we gone back in time?' It's an entirely serious question. I haven't been to the Aran Islands since I was four myself yet everything is oddly familiar so it does indeed feel a bit like time travel.

As we settle into our little cottage, there's a knock on the door. Deirdre rushes to answer it. There's a boy of about seventeen with a bucket in his arms. He says something in Irish that neither myself nor Deirdre understand so we just stare at him. He turns bright red and mumbles barely audibly in English, 'I've brought you some spuds.' Then he drops the bucket and turns on his heels and runs.

'Stupid bogger,' Deirdre says as she picks up the bucket. She stands in the doorway staring after him. 'Kind of cute though.'

Unfortunately my mother overhears this. 'Always good to be friendly with the natives and a little summer romance is just what we all need.'

Mary laughs. 'I'm not sure your husband would approve of you running off with a fisherman.'

'No, I suppose not. I shall just have to live vicariously through you lot.'

'We're here five minutes and your Mam's already plotting to marry me off,' Mary tells us.

‘Peadar is an absolutely lovely bloke. I have a good feeling about the two of you.’

‘I really can’t see myself marrying some hillbilly and moving to live on a rock off the west of Ireland.’

‘You’d be surprised what you end up doing for love,’ my mother observes.

That evening myself and Deirdre head off to the Gaeltacht summer camp for the ceilidh dancing. Inis Oirr may be the middle of nowhere but young people are sent here from the towns to learn Irish. We arrive to a hall packed with teenagers and the dance floor is heaving. Nobody seems to know the steps very well so there’s a lot of falling over and laughing.

Suddenly the door opens and a group of slightly older blokes come in looking very nervous and out of place. I nudge Deirdre. ‘Spud boy’s here,’ I tell her. She looks over to see the young man who delivered the potatoes approaching.

‘Would you like to dance?’ he mumbles. He’s standing there like a sack of potatoes himself. But once he has Deirdre out on the floor, it’s a completely different story. Unlike the city kids, he actually knows how to do Irish dancing. He catches Deirdre under the elbow and spins her round so fast that her feet lift off the floor.

By the time the dance is over, she’s completely out of breath. ‘God but he’s gorgeous,’ she informs me.

Unfortunately once the music stops, the island lads disappear back into the night. Deirdre’s not too heartbroken though ‘cause she gets chatting to a bloke from Limerick who’s not a Gaeltacht student either but is visiting with his

cousin from Liverpool. He asks if we'd like to go for a walk with them. There are no lights on the island apart from the odd window glow from a cottage in the distance so it's lucky my mother insisted I bring a torch. We carefully make our way down to the beach. The Limerick lad has cans of beer with him which we're happy to accept. He's full of jokes and he already has his arm round Deirdre.

His cousin is much quieter and when he does talk, he has such a funny English accent, it's hard to understand. He seems nice enough though. He asks me what Limerick is like as he hasn't actually been. This is his first trip to Ireland and though his cousin has told him it's not all rocks and sheep, he hasn't seen any cities yet.

I remember how every year when we went on summer holidays my father would always seem to take a wrong turn somewhere around Limerick and my mother would say 'Well here we are again, lost in the arsehole of Ireland.' I don't want to be rude though so I say that I think Limerick is a lovely place.

He smiles at me. 'Really? I heard it was called Stab City. To be honest with you, I quite like it here with the rocks and the sheep.'

Then he kisses me. He's not a bad kisser and I can hear the waves hitting the beach. Also he doesn't spoil things by trying to get his hands up my top.

Deirdre is still chatting to the Limerick cousin who offers us more beer. Suddenly it occurs to me to wonder what time it is. My mother had said not to be late. That means be back before half past eleven which is her strict curfew. My watch reveals that it's 2am. Oh my God she's going to kill me.

'We've got to go,' I say. Deirdre hears the panic in my voice. Unlike her own mother who doesn't mind what time she gets in, Deirdre knows how much trouble I'm going to be in.

We quickly say goodbye and stumble along the rocky path back to the cottage as fast as we can. 'At least you got a snog,' Deirdre teases. 'That Limerick fella was so busy gabbing on about his life story, I'd have had to sit there till dawn to get a kiss.'

This makes me laugh and we're in fits of giggles as we approach the cottage. 'Shh,' I say. 'We've got to seem sober.'

Though I realise with a lurch in my stomach that my mother is going to take one look at me and know I've been necking cans of beer. She strongly disapproves of underage drinking.

'There's an awful lot of alcoholics in your father's family,' she likes to tell me. 'So you stick to lemonade till your eighteen and then you could try having a shandy or something. Girls especially shouldn't drink too much, you'll only get into trouble. By which I mean pregnant.'

We attempt to open the cottage door as quietly as possible but it's old and creaks loudly. We step into a kitchen flooded with light. My mother and Mary are sitting at the table. I brace myself for an onslaught of where the hell have you been.

But to my great surprise, my mother asks with a smile, 'Ah you're back, did you meet anyone nice?'

This question always means a boy. She asks it when I go to school parties even though I've explained I know them all already from school.

I think the best thing would be to slip off to bed before my mother

remembers the time and starts lecturing me but Deirdre proceeds to tell her all about the two cousins.

Mary says, 'Your Mam and I once did a double date with two brothers, d'ye remember?'

'Oh yeah,' my mother replies. 'One of them said to me you know you'd be very pretty if you wore a bit more make up. Little gobshite was no oil painting himself.'

'God but fellas used to say the most stupid chat up lines during the slow sets. Do you remember when that moron asked you do you come here often?'

'I was so bored of hearing that question I told him no, the floor's just sticky.'

My mother and Mary collapse into a fit of helpless laughter. Suddenly I realise there is an open bottle of whisky on the table. Mary pours them both another glass and my mother knocks hers back. My mother never drinks whisky. Is it possible she's drunk? I've never seen my mother even tipsy before.

'Did you have a good evening?' I ask tentatively.

'Oh yes,' my mother has a glint in her eye. 'We went to the pub and bumped into Peadar.'

'We didn't bump into him, you had arranged to meet him and you dragged me over the minute we got there,' Mary exclaims.

'Well I thought the two of you got on like a house on fire. I know about these things and you're in love with him even if you haven't admitted it to yourself yet.' My mother winks at me. 'Just like I was with your Dad though I

kept saying I wasn't at the beginning. I didn't want to get myself tied down.'

'I knew you were going to marry Tony that very first night you met,' says Mary. 'You always wanted to get married really.'

'Did I? I fancied myself as footloose and fancy free. But then he said freedom is making a choice and I thought that was very true. God knows he drives me mad sometimes but I can't say I've ever regretted it.'

The next evening Mary suggests we go to the pub. 'Hair of the dog,' she says cheerfully.

'What time did you get in last night?' my mother asks me as we settle into a quiet corner.

'Not that late,' I reply nervously.

'I lost all track of the time myself,' my mother says. 'Mary's a terrible influence. We stayed up till dawn yakking, I can't remember the last time I've done that.'

'What would you girls like to drink?' Mary asks.

I look at my mother and reply, 'A coke would be lovely.'

'Ah c'mon you'll have something stronger than that,' Mary exclaims.

I can feel my mother tense but then she says, 'Have whatever you like.'

'Maybe a glass of Guinness?' I venture.

'Have a pint,' Mary replies.

As she heads off to the bar, I ask my mother. 'You're sure you don't mind?'

'Of course not. We're on holidays. Besides I know you're not a baby any more. It was strange when you and Deirdre came stumbling in last night,

it was like looking into a mirror to the past. You so much reminded me and Mary of when we were teenagers. It hit me that I was going to have to let you grow up and be your own person. One day when you've kids of your own you'll understand that's not such an easy thing to do.'

Mary returns with the drinks and we all clink slainte. Suddenly the pub falls silent. An old man is standing at the bar and two younger men are holding each of his hands. He starts to sing as the younger men move his hands around in small circles as if they're winding him up. He's singing in Irish so I don't understand the words but it's so beautiful and sad that I find my eyes are filled with tears.

My mother puts her arm around me affectionately. She whispers in my ear, 'Of course you know, kiddo, whatever happens, you'll always be my little girl really.'

Chapter Thirty Eight

Thicker Than Water

Dublin, 1999

I'm in a shoe shop with Deirdre. 'What about these ones?' she asks.

'I don't know, I suppose it doesn't really matter,' I tell her.

Deirdre looks at me sadly. 'That's not what your Mam would say.'

This is true. I need to focus on getting a decent pair of black shoes for my mother's funeral. The kind of shoes my mother would approve of and that I never normally wear.

'So me and Jenny and Susan will be over first thing in the morning to help you cut the sandwiches,' Deirdre tells me.

'Thanks,' I say thinking how lost I'd be without my friends.

When I rang Monique to tell her my mother had died, she didn't offer to fly over for the funeral. I guess it would have been awkward. At the same time I'm not sure I'll ever forgive her for not even considering it.

This evening is the removal. I explain to Eamonn that our mother's body will be taken from the hospice to the church to stay over night for the funeral in the morning.

My brother stares at me. 'Do we stay with her?' he asks.

'No, there'll just be a service in the church and then we'll go home. They'll send a car to pick us up in the morning.'

'I thought maybe we'd stay with her,' Eamonn mumbles and turns away from me.

There is also a service in the hospice chapel. My mother lies in an open

coffin and people queue up to say goodbye. When it's my turn, I lean over and kiss her cheek. It's cold and papery. I realise she isn't there anymore; her body is just an empty shell.

We follow the hearse to the church in Stillorgan across the road from my Gran's house. This is the same church my mother got married in. It's packed with people. They queue to shake my hand and tell me how sorry they are for my trouble. Some of my mother's friends from when she lived in Belgium have flown over specially. There are people she knew in Iran. There is an endless stream of cousins who tell me the last time they saw me I was only a child. I feel guilty that I don't remember who they are.

A woman grips my hand tightly and speaks so softly I can't hear her. 'Sorry I didn't catch your name,' I tell her as I lean forward across the pew.

'It doesn't matter,' she says. 'I'm just another person your mother was very good to.'

This touches me more than anything the priest says. I remember my mother telling me in the hospice, 'The most important thing is to try to be kind. I'm not saying I didn't make mistakes but it's a big relief to me that I've no real regrets, nothing that's weighing on my conscience. Because you know it's true that it all catches up with you at the end.'

It was only last week she said this but it already feels like a lifetime ago. It's as if time had stopped and now it's speeded up again.

The next day is the funeral. My father makes a speech in the church that my mother would have loved. He, of course, doesn't believe that she can hear it but I find myself hoping that somehow she can. I have a moment of blind

panic when I become convinced the priest has forgotten about my reading but of course he hasn't. I've chosen Emily Dickinson's *if I can stop one heart from breaking I shall not live in vain*. It's a very short poem but I'm still pleased I manage to get through it without crying.

I've asked Eamonn if he'd like something of his to be included in the presentation of the gifts during the mass. He's chosen a silver letter E my mother gave him. He's upset when after the ceremony the priest gives it back to him. 'I thought it was going to go with her,' he says.

My mother has asked to be cremated. As the white curtains close on her coffin, I realise there is a bit of me that is turning to ash and can never be given back. I start to cry and my Gran gently passes me a tissue. She looks much older than she did when she came to visit my mother in the hospice just a few days ago. Maybe I do too.

Afterwards everyone comes back to our house. Deirdre and Jenny serve the millions of sandwiches they've helped make.

Several people say to me, 'Well at least she didn't suffer, thank God.'

This drives me mad. Mainly because it is totally untrue. My mother most certainly did suffer, both physically and emotionally. And somehow pretending that she didn't seems disrespectful to the enormous courage and strength she showed during her illness.

I can nearly hear her saying, 'What a load of shite. Why do people tell themselves these lies? They're not making you feel better, they're just making sure you can't talk about what actually happened.'

Stephen comes over to me. 'You look upset,' he says. 'Do you want a

drink?’

He pours me a beer but just as I’m about to accept it, my Auntie Ellen grabs hold of my hand. She says, ‘We have to stick together you know, now your mother’s gone. It’s very important that we keep in touch, that you understand that we’re here for you.’

‘Okay,’ I reply without conviction. Where has Ellen been all these months?

‘I realise it’s been tough but we’re here to help. You looked after your mother so well, I know Sarah would do the same for me.’

Ellen has five children; I wonder why my cousin Sarah is already the chosen nurse? ‘I did what I could,’ I say.

‘Of course you did. We all did. And it’s great that your friends are helping out but what you have to remember is that blood is thicker than water. What really counts is family.’

I stare at my aunt in disbelief. Has she really got the nerve to say this to me after she barely visited my mother the whole time she was sick? My mother died thinking her only sister didn’t give a shit about her. Ellen had made her feel she had no right to be ill, that she wasn’t allowed to cause the family any stress or anxiety. I don’t think I’ll ever forgive her for it.

Stephen grabs hold of my elbow. ‘I just need to talk to Aoife about something for a second,’ he says to Ellen as he steers me out of the room.

I sit down on the stairs and he hands me the glass of beer. ‘Drink it,’ he instructs. ‘Drink it and pay no mind to her. There’s no point being angry or bitter. Life’s too short. Ellen’s only saying all that ‘cause she feels guilty. Mammy would want you to forgive her.’

I look up at my brother in his dark suit. I wonder when he got so grown up and wise. 'Thanks, I know you're right,' I tell him.

And of course he is right but, at the same time, I'm still filled with rage at my aunt's abandoning of my mother when she needed her most. I don't feel at all forgiving, I feel like smashing something.

Returning to London is the hardest part. Even at the funeral, at least I had a sense of purpose, that I was doing something for my mother. Now everything feels empty. I just can't seem to relate to all the anxiety at work about the next show, the next meeting, the next appointment. It's not that people aren't kind. They tell me how sorry they are and ask me how I am before turning back to their conversation about who's pissed off about this, that and the other. I don't blame them, it's just that where once I could join in with enthusiasm, I now find it all utterly pointless.

Then the playwright Sarah Kane kills herself. I only knew her to say hello to but lots of people at work were good friends of hers. The whole theatre goes into mourning. All anyone talks about is death and grief and suicide. I find that this is actually worse and wish they'd go back to the inanity of before. The truth is I don't want to talk about losing my mother and yet I don't want to talk about anything else.

I don't go to Sarah Kane's memorial service because my Nana dies. I think it must be awful for my father to lose his mother just two months after his wife. But he says, 'Well in some ways it'd be worse if it was a bigger gap 'cause it'd be a blow just when I was starting to pick myself up.'

I think I know what he means. I'm still in so much shock that it's only

half way through my Nana's funeral that it hits me that I'm going to really miss her. Even though she was old and difficult and my mother couldn't stand her.

It strikes me as a sad irony that I remember my mother once telling me, 'You know people said after your Granddad died that I should let your Nana move in 'cause she probably wouldn't live long. I just thought that old battle axe will probably out live me.'

Outside the church, my Gran gives me a hug and tells me, 'Your Nana wasn't the easiest but she loved you. I think you were one of the few people she actually liked.'

As my father's an only child, we feel obliged to invite people back to ours after the mass. The whole funeral is like some bizarre replay of my mother's.

Stephen whispers to me, 'Feels like our family's dropping like flies.'

I realise I'm developing a sense that everyone I care about is in danger of disappearing.

Once back in London, I try to ring my father as often as possible. He seems to be drinking an awful lot of whisky.

'Not that you can blame him under the circumstances,' Stephen tells me on the phone. 'But it's not easy to watch. Specially for Eamonn.'

Eamonn rings me to tell me he took the afternoon off school. 'You won't tell, Dad.'

'Of course not,' I say.

'I just went for a walk by the river. I couldn't see any point in going back in.'

This is so exactly how I feel myself that it's hard to know what to say. 'Don't worry about it,' I tell him. 'Just don't go making a habit of it. Mammy wouldn't have liked you to be missing school.'

'She wouldn't like Dad drinking so much either,' Eamonn replies with a catch in his voice.

I'm starting seriously to think I should just move back to Dublin and try to look after them all. I decide to take my father away on holidays to the west of Ireland. I realise we've never been away together, just the two of us. Without my mother to translate, I don't know what we'll say to each other.

We stay in a brand new swanky hotel. When my father asks for two single rooms, the hotel receptionist gives me a huge wink. Surely she doesn't think we're a couple? But it becomes clear that she does and so does everyone else. In the restaurant, my father is asked if he wants to buy me a rose and in the pub, a French woman wants to know how we met. When my father explains that I'm his daughter, she stares at us as if to say do we think she was born yesterday?

Even the old man playing the spoons with the band in the corner looks us up and down. It's all so unsubtle that I find myself blushing.

I'm terrified my father's going to be really offended. But he just says, 'I don't think people believe I'm old enough to be your Dad.'

'No, they're stupid like that,' I mumble.

He shrugs, 'Well it's the first time in months anyone's looked at me with envy rather than pity. It makes a nice change.'

The band are actually very good and the pub is swinging. To my huge relief, my father seems to be enjoying himself.

When we get back to the hotel, we decide to have a nightcap in the bar. 'How are you really?' I ask him.

Neither of us is very sober. My father picks up his whiskey glass and looks at me through it. 'It's all my fault,' he says. 'I'm the one that killed her.'

Having blamed my father for so many years for things that really weren't his doing, I now can't bear to watch him drowning in his own regrets. 'No, you didn't Dad, you did everything you possibly could and she knew that.'

'But if we hadn't moved to Iran, if she'd gone to a doctor sooner...'

My father starts to cry. For possibly the first time since I was a small child, I take his hand. 'Dad, she loved you and she loved the life you had together. She would hate for you to torture yourself like this.'

My father smiles at me, 'You're very like her you know. I hope you'll find someone, doesn't really matter who they are, someone that appreciates how kind you are.'

It hits me how much I've always needed his blessing.

Chapter 39

Roses

London, 2001

Eamonn has come to visit me in our new flat in Shepherd's Bush. Monique chats away to him in French. I can only half follow the conversation. It strikes me as ironic that my little brother can understand my girlfriend better than I can. Except of course he's not so little any more, he's suddenly considerably taller than me and there is stubble on his chin.

Monique is working a night shift so once she's left, I pour my brother a beer. I've been putting off this moment for far too long. 'There's something I've been meaning to tell you,' I say.

'What's up?' he asks.

'I'm gay. Monique's my girlfriend.'

'You're joking, right?'

'No, no I'm not.'

Eamonn stares at me. 'Why didn't you tell me before?'

'I thought you were too young, that it might upset you and you had enough to deal...'

'Does Stephen know?'

'Yeah, I told Stephen and Mammy and Dad when Mammy was sick...'

'So you told everyone apart from me?' My brother sounds really hurt. 'I'm not a kid you know.'

'I know you're not. You're seventeen. But you were only fourteen when I told them and to be honest I was scared it might change how you felt...'

'Felt about what?'

'About me.' I take a long drink from my beer. 'I didn't want to disappoint you.'

My brother shakes his head. 'That's ridiculous. Nothing will ever change how I feel about you. You should have told me.'

I want to hug him but he's gotten so grown up I'm not sure how to any more.

There's a message on my answering machine. 'Aoife, it's your Gran here. Me and Sarah are coming to your launch.'

The launch of my first poetry collection is that evening in the Poetry Café in Covent Garden. I know my brothers are coming but I didn't expect any other members of my family. I ring my Gran back wondering if, at the age of eighty six, she's had a sudden attack of senility. But no, she's completely sane and staying with my cousin Sarah in a hotel in Liverpool Street.

'I told Sarah I'd really like to go and she said she'd book us the flights,' my Gran says. 'We wanted to surprise you.'

I am surprised and also delighted. It's a strange irony that since my mother died, I've discovered my Gran is not at all the ultra-Catholic conservative her daughter lived in fear of disappointing. In fact, she gave up going to mass shortly after my mother's death.

Though this wasn't a loss of faith exactly. She's told me, 'I still believe in God of course but when I think of what those priests were doing to children for all those years and then they had the nerve to pass judgement...'

So now she reads up on Buddhist meditation and practices her Reiki

healing. When I told her about Monique a few years after my mother died, my Gran just said, 'Well I knew a lot of gay people in the theatre, you know I've nothing against them.'

It hadn't actually occurred to me that my Gran's years as an actress and costume designer would make her the least homophobic member of my family. Only once have I attempted to ask her about my grandfather. I did so with great trepidation knowing I was breaking the promise I'd made my mother never to bring up the subject.

But I got nowhere. My Gran just answered quietly, 'That's a part of my life I don't like to talk about.'

I realised I'd just have to respect that as really it was none of my business no matter how curious I was to know the truth.

At the launch, my Gran utterly charms everybody by asking them all about their lives. Afterwards she says, 'I had such a lovely time, all those interesting people, it was just like being back working in the theatre.'

'Your grandmother is one very cool lady,' Monique tells me. 'I hope I'm like that when I'm old.'

I hope I am too. My Gran seems to me the epitome of what it is to grow old gracefully.

The day after my cousin and my Gran fly back to Dublin, terrorist bombs rock London. My Gran rings me to see if I'm okay. 'Liverpool Street,' she says. 'I couldn't believe it, to think we were just there and it seemed so peaceful. At least it wasn't the Irish this time. And on your Mammy's birthday too...'

My mother was born on July 7th 1950. Now, in 2005, it's become 7/7, a

day that will forever be remembered for carnage and horror.

‘Sometimes I find it very hard to make sense of the world,’ my Gran says. ‘But I’m still glad I went to your launch, I felt so proud of you. And I know your Mammy does too.’

I hang up the phone wishing I knew for sure that was true.

Me and Monique have moved to Geneva. Or rather Monique has moved to Geneva but I’m still travelling back to London a lot for work. Stephen tells me it sounds very glamorous dividing my time between London and Switzerland. I try to explain that there are few things less glamorous than standing at six in the morning at a bus stop with the smallest suitcase I could find because I don’t want to pay Easyjet to check in my luggage.

We live in a small flat above a baker’s. The smell of bread baking is delicious but Monique says she can’t sleep with the noise of the ovens that start at 4am. We’ve moved here because of Monique’s job but she refuses to admit this. She says I can go back to London any time I like. Which is of course true. I’m not quite sure what I’m doing here when most of the time I feel like a rather unwelcome guest.

The phone rings and it’s Stephen. ‘How was Barcelona?’ I ask. He’d gone there for a romantic weekend with his girlfriend Emer.

‘Well I did it, I actually did it.’ My brother sounds delighted with himself.

‘Did what?’

‘I had this brilliant notion I’d do it at the top of Gaudi’s cathedral but I completely forgot Emer’s terrified of heights. She got half way up and refused to go any further. I could have killed her. So I’d to wait till the next day on the

balcony of the apartment.'

'To do what?'

'Pop the question of course.'

'And did she say yes?'

'Well yeah, we're going to have the wedding in Dubrovnik. You have to come.'

'Of course I'll come, I'm delighted. That's absolutely brilliant news.'

And it is brilliant news. Emer is wonderful and she's clearly madly in love with my brother. Nearly as madly in love with him as he is with her. Yet as I hang up the phone I feel like crying. I should just be focussing on being happy for my brother. But I can't help thinking how, just a few weeks ago, me and Monique were in Barcelona for our tenth anniversary. We went to see these amazing Spanish dancers and for dinner afterwards. I'd felt so happy but the moment we sat down to our meal, Monique started in on how she was thinking of getting a job in Senegal.

'Be a bit hard for me to commute to London from there,' I joke.

'Well you can come with me if you want but you'll have to get some kind of work because I can't just give you money.'

I point out that the chances of me finding employment in a French speaking Muslim country are really rather small. This leads into an argument in which Monique tells me that she has absolutely no intention of getting married or having children or any of those boring things that straight couples do. I can't help thinking that we've been together for a decade and yet Monique doesn't really want a partner. What she wants is an invisible friend that she can make appear and disappear at will.

Seeing my expression as I put the phone down to my brother, Monique asks, 'What's wrong?'

'Stephen proposed in Barcelona.'

'So? Is that not good?' Monique asks. 'I thought you liked Emer?'

'I do,' I say. 'I like her a lot. I'm really happy they're getting married.'

'You don't look happy.'

'I'm just upset because we had such a terrible row when we were in Barcelona.'

'Not this again,' Monique stands up. 'If you're so desperate to get married, find yourself a man.'

'They have civil partnership here. If we got married, I could at least get a visa and be in this country legally.'

'Yes, yes well I told you I'd get you registered at some point.'

'We've been here nearly a year. And you make me sound like I'm some kind of pet.'

'Pets are less work,' Monique says as she strides out of the room.

I know in that moment that it's over between us. I can nearly hear my mother saying, 'I told you you'd change your mind about marriage.' And she's right. I realise I do want commitment, I want a proper home, and, most of all, I desperately want kids. And time is running out.

I'm in a gay club in London called Ducky's. Sarah, a friend of mine from work, has invited me to come because there's a cabaret part of the evening that features poets. There are some women but the crowd is mainly gay men in tight t-shirts clutching pints. It seems to me they've come here to dance

rather than listen to poetry so I'm a bit nervous for Beyonder, a poet I know because we've worked together in the past. But he does brilliantly and soon has most of them eating out of his hand.

After Beyonder, the emcee announces that there will be a company of older people performing contemporary dance. I cannot think of anything less likely to go down well in a gay club in Vauxhall. As a group of men and women, all at least in their seventies, come on stage dressed only in white towels, the bloke next to me groans and heads for the bar. But then they start to dance and a hush settles over the crowd. They may be old but they are also somehow very elegant and funny and totally charming. I think how impressed my Gran would be.

'God I usually can't stand contemporary dance,' Sarah tells me. 'But they were fucking amazing.'

I agree and thank her for inviting me. Then I realise I can't find my bag. I think I might have left it backstage when I went to say hello to Beyonder before his set. I head back there feeling panicked as my passport, my wallet, and my notebook are all in it.

The dance group are getting changed. A white haired old lady is pulling on a purple jumper. 'You were fantastic,' I tell her as I search under her chair.

'Did you really think so? It seemed to go well, I mean they seemed to like us. It was such fun, I'd do it again tomorrow.' She laughs and I think how young she sounds.

I tell her I've lost my bag and she gets all her fellow dancers to help me look for it. But it's nowhere to be found. I suddenly feel very old and tired. I

go back to the dance floor wondering how I'm going to get home without my wallet.

Sarah comes over saying, 'I found your bag. It was behind the bar. Someone must have handed it in.'

I'm amazed to discover that everything is still in it, even the cash in my wallet. Sarah says, 'Maybe your luck is changing.'

I celebrate by getting really drunk. When Ducky closes and chucks the last remaining clubbers out into a warm summer's night, Sarah offers to walk me to the taxi rank. We wait ages for a taxi but none appears. She says, 'I'm staying at a friend of mine's round the corner. He won't mind if you want to stay too.'

I follow her down a series of winding streets realising I have no idea where I'm going. But I don't really care. Sarah's friend's spare room has nothing in it but two mattresses and a large canvas leaning against the wall. The painting seems to be some kind of surrealist modern depiction of Christ on the cross. Jesus appears to be smiling up at me or am I just imagining that?

Me and Sarah talk for hours while looking out of the window and just as it starts to get light, I kiss her.

She says, 'I was wondering if you were ever going to do that.'

It's a beautiful morning and now we can properly see the garden below us, I realise it's full of yellow roses. I have the beginnings of a thumping hangover and I haven't slept at all but I feel lighter and happier than I have done for a very long time.

A week later, I fly back to Geneva. Monique tells me that she's found a new flat and is moving next weekend.

'Don't you think you should have talked to me about it? After all I live there too,' I point out.

'I tried to ring you. You'll like this place, it's very nice.'

For a moment I'm furious how little say I have in where we live but then I remember that it doesn't matter any more. I tell Monique that I think we should split up. She seems utterly shocked.

'Is there someone else?' she asks.

'Yes, maybe, I'm not sure. That's not the reason. I just can't do this any more.'

I had thought that Monique was largely indifferent to whether I was there or not. But now she says she can't live without me, that she's going to kill herself if I go back to London. She takes my passport out of my bag and slams out of the flat.

When she comes back several hours later, she tells me that she's locked my passport in the safe at work. 'I won't let you just walk out of here,' she says. 'Not till you tell me why.'

The next few days are a horrible dissection of everything that is wrong with our relationship. I ring Deirdre who says, 'Just get on a plane out of there. You've been telling her what the problems are for years and it's changed nothing. It's just emotional blackmail.'

I explain that Monique's taken my passport. 'So you mean you've been kidnapped?' Deirdre asks.

This makes me laugh though I realise it's sort of true. I decide to ring

Sarah and tell her what's been happening. I stand in a phone box in the blistering heat wondering how everything has turned into such a mess.

Sarah says, 'I feel like I'm listening to a story that has nothing to do with me.'

'I hope it's got something to do with you,' I tell her. Even though it's true I'm not leaving Monique because of Sarah, she's still the glimpse of possible happiness that is steeling my resolve.

That evening I tell Monique that if she doesn't give me my passport back, I'm going to report it missing to the police and get another one issued.

Monique takes the passport out of her bag and hands it over. She says, 'You're a liar. I bet you've been lying to me for months.'

'I haven't,' I reply, thinking that I've been lying to myself for years.

The next morning I walk out of the flat with the one bag I can carry. All the rest of my things I'll just have to leave behind. I know I won't ever be back.

Chapter 40

Photographs

London, 2008

My Auntie Ellen has cancer. It started out in her throat. My Gran tells me how they thought, after months of agonising chemo which left Ellen unable to speak, that they'd beaten it. But it turns out the throat cancer was only secondary. The tumour actually began in her fallopian tubes and now cancerous cells have spread everywhere.

I haven't spoken to my aunt in years because I was so upset how she treated my mother when she was sick. But after listening to my Gran, who is now facing losing another daughter to cancer, I decide to ring my Auntie Ellen. She sounds delighted to hear from me. Neither of us mention that it's been such a long time and that our last conversation was at my mother's funeral. We start to email each other and to my surprise, Ellen starts writing to me about my grandfather. She tells me that a psychiatrist informed my Gran that her husband could have been a genius but he had a 'kink' in his personality. I wonder what on earth this means?

I've moved in with Sarah and when I tell her about Ellen, she says, 'It sounds to me like you need to go see your aunt. Like there's an awful lot of unfinished business there.' I know she's right but at the same time I'm anxious about opening up old wounds.

I ring my Auntie Ellen and tell her I'm coming to Ireland for a few days. 'I would so love to see you,' she says.

My Uncle Tadgh gives me and my Gran a lift as my aunt lives in Trim, about an hour out of Dublin. I know the moment Ellen opens the door that

she's dying. She has the same weirdly youthful glow that my mother had. We sit in her sitting room drinking tea and eating sponge cake. I haven't been to my aunt's house since I was a kid and it's eerie how little it has changed. The cabinets are still full of the trophies my uncle won when he did boxing in the RAF. I used to spend hours looking at them when I was a kid and imagining my uncle's feats in the ring.

Ellen hands me an envelope. 'Don't open it now,' she whispers with a sidelong glance at my Gran. 'Open it later. It's pictures of your Mam and your grandfather. I thought you might like to have them.'

I want to ask her about my grandfather but I know she won't talk about it in front of my Gran. My aunt closes her eyes and I can see how tired she is.

Then suddenly she opens them and says, 'That's what I always regretted, that I never spoke to your Mam properly at the end, that we never spoke...'

It hits me that for all this time Ellen has missed my mother and that she wishes things had ended differently between them. It's suddenly impossible to be angry any more. I find that in forgiving Ellen, I come a little bit closer to forgiving myself.

When I get home and open up the envelope, I am particularly struck by a photo of my mother, aged about two, on a beach. My grandfather is squatting behind her with his arms around her waist. He's wearing a dark suit and he's smiling up at the camera. My mother's face is partly obscured by a sun hat so her expression is impossible to read but my Granddad looks happy and proud. I wonder what he's thinking in that moment and if he has any idea

what's going to happen.

A few weeks later, my Auntie Ellen dies. I go to her funeral and I see my cousins' pain, particularly my cousin Sarah who looked after Ellen at the end, just as my aunt predicted she would years ago when my mother was ill.

I decide to take my cousin for a drink. We sit in this trendy sports bar and I think how terribly sad it is that we have in common this experience of nursing our mothers through their final days. I tell her about Ellen giving me the envelope of photographs and how much my mother had thought about her father when she was dying.

My cousin says to me, 'He was mad you know. Not at all well in his mind...'

I am shocked by this and ask her what she means. She explains that Ellen told her my grandfather used to hear voices. At one point, he blocked up the chimney and the front door because he thought people were trying to get in to kill him. When my Gran was away on tour, sometimes he didn't feed his children because he thought their food was poisoned.

I tell my cousin how in the months before my mother died, she'd started having very vivid memories about things that happened when she was a child. Almost like nightmares except that she was awake and fairly sure these were real events that she'd blocked out for years. In particular she spoke about being pinned into a blanket and a feeling of absolute terror.

My cousin goes quiet and then says, 'That must have been when Gran left him for good.'

She explains that one day my grandfather started trying to restrain my mother who was only a toddler. He thought he was protecting her by pinning

her as tightly as possible into a blanket but my mother started having trouble breathing. Ellen was ten and she could see that my Granddad was in serious danger of really hurting my mother. She ran to the next door neighbours to get help but they weren't in so she went to the police. The guards arrived shortly followed by my Gran.

When my Gran heard what had happened she put all four of her children into the car and never went back. She also never mentioned the incident again. Ellen was given no explanation as to why they were suddenly back living with her grandmother. She only knew she was afraid of her father and thought her mother blamed her for the collapse of their marriage. They never spoke of my grandfather again even when Ellen was dying.

I can't help thinking what a shame it is that my aunt never explained any of this to my mother. No wonder Ellen had feelings of resentment that were never dealt with. No wonder my mother was left with such disturbing memories and an uneasy feeling that there were things she was never told.

'Why didn't they just talk to each other?' I ask my cousin.

'I guess it was all just too painful. I think Gran really thought she was doing the best thing by never discussing why she left,' my cousin replies. 'I think she believed she was protecting them by just pretending none of it ever happened. You know leaving your husband, mental illness, they were just such huge taboos in those days...'

I feel as if I've suddenly found the missing piece to a jigsaw puzzle my mother was trying to solve for most of her life. I wish I was able to give it to her. If she'd known the truth about her father, it would have helped her to make sense of things. I think my mother felt suffocated not just by the

memories that came back to her when she was dying but by the silences she felt pressing down on her family. Secrets have a way of sucking all the oxygen out of a room. Yet I also understand why my Gran felt unable to speak. When the whole weight of the world tells you there is only one way to live, it's hard to find the words to explain that sometimes it's not possible to conform to what's expected. There simply isn't the space to say my life has been different without feeling crushed by other people's judgements. My Gran did her best under terrible circumstances and my mother, of all people, would have understood that. It's just a pity they never managed to find a way to talk about it. Even if it is too late to tell my mother, I hope that I can make some sense of the mystery of my grandfather's death and breathe a little bit easier for knowing that at least my mother didn't die not knowing my secrets.

A Thin Circle

London, 2009

It's my wedding day and I'm in the bathroom of Deirdre's hotel room struggling to get into my dress. Deirdre gives one last hard pull and the dress falls over my shoulders and into place. 'There you go,' she says. 'Fits perfectly.'

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. I feel terrified. There is a loud banging on the door. 'C'mon girls,' Stephen shouts. 'Time to get this show on the road.' He's taken his role as best man very seriously and has been bossing me around all morning. Sometimes I think he gets more like our mother with every passing day.

Me and Stephen and Deirdre take the lift down to the lobby. Sarah is already standing outside the room where the service will take place with her goddaughter Evie and the registrar.

'I love your dress,' I say. 'You look gorgeous.'

'So do you,' Sarah replies.

Evie, who's six, beams up at us. 'I told her you'd like it. I told her she looked like a princess. You both do.'

We've asked Evie to be our bridesmaid. The registrar quickly runs through again what's going to happen. I stare at him blankly. Even though he's explained it all carefully before, it's as if he's now speaking a foreign language. Sarah also looks dumbstruck.

Luckily, Evie is on top of the situation. 'So once they do the talkie bit, that's when I hand over the rings. Will I have to stand?' she asks.

'For about half an hour,' the registrar says.

'You could sit down for some of it if you like,' I tell her.

'Will there be photos?' Evie asks.

'I think there probably will be but don't worry,' I reply, imagining that Evie's nervous. But Evie is not the shy, retiring child that I was.

'Oh good,' she says. 'If there's photos, I'll stand. I want to be in them.'

Evie's enthusiasm is infectious and sweeps us smiling up the aisle in a hail of camera flashes. Eamonn is sat with his girlfriend Siobhan and he gives me a big thumbs up as we pass. My Uncle Tadhg is already passing my Auntie Helena a tissue as she wells up. My friend Heather sings, 'You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To' with Sarah's friend Andy accompanying her on guitar. She has a beautiful voice and as I look around at all our friends and family, I can't help feeling that I have indeed come home at last. I feel like crying but I manage to hold it together until we've said our vows.

Only when Sarah slips the thin circle of gold onto my finger do I find I need to wipe the tears away. Doubtless I'm destroying all the careful work of the makeup artist but it doesn't really seem to matter any more. Married at last, well civil partnership technically, but that's not a term I have any interest in using. It just seems to me something made up to keep homophobic Christian fundamentalists happy. As far as I'm concerned, this is a marriage just like anyone else's.

I'm at the bar ordering a much needed drink. The bar man says to me, 'Was that your father gave that speech? It was really quite lovely.'

I smile at him. My father is very good at speeches and though the subject of nuclear disarmament might be more his comfort zone than his only daughter marrying a woman, he has delivered a corker.

I take a large sip of wine and nearly choke as Stephen puts his arms round me and swings me on to the dance floor to the theme tune of Wonder Woman. 'I chose this one,' he tells me proudly. Then he spins me round so fast I nearly lose my footing but land safely in Sarah's arms. 'Dance with your wife,' my brother instructs me and winks.

'You alright?' Sarah asks me.

'I'm very happy,' I tell her. And I am. It hits me that even though it's such a cliché, this really is the happiest day of my life. After all the stress and worry and last minute panic, everything has worked out perfectly.

It's just a pity my mother isn't here to see me embrace marriage at last. I think she would have laughed to see me dancing in such a fancy dress that I can barely breathe in. I wonder whatever happened the tight woollen wedding dress her own mother made her wear.

When I was a child, my mother used to let me dress up in her wedding dress sometimes. 'Your Gran barely squeezed me into it on the only day I wore it,' she'd say, 'it's certainly never going to fit me again.' It would have fit her though at the very end.

My Gran isn't here either but that's only because at eighty-eight she's not really up to flying any more. When I invited her, she said, 'You know I would absolutely love to come but I'm afraid my poor old bones just won't let me. I'll be there in spirit though. I'm so very, very happy for you.'

Then she asked me what I'd like as a wedding present. I said I would love one of her paintings. 'Are you sure?' she replied. 'They're not very good. Wouldn't you rather something useful?'

My Gran took up painting when she retired and I think her pictures are

wonderful. There's one in particular that shows waves crashing against wild rocks that I particularly like. She tells me I'm more than welcome to it.

Now as the music changes, I walk off the dance floor and over to my cousin Sarah and ask her how she's doing. It's only been a few months since my Auntie Ellen died.

'Oh it's good to laugh again,' my cousin tells me. 'It feels like I haven't laughed in a long time.'

'Thanks for coming. I really appreciate you being here.'

'I wouldn't have missed your wedding for the world. You look beautiful in that dress. I'll have to get a photo to show Gran.'

'Gran still has a great sense of style, doesn't she?'

'Always had and always will.' My cousin holds up her glass to mine. 'To our grandmother and our mothers and all the strong women in our family who survived so much.'

'To telling the truth,' I say and clink my glass against hers.

My cousin asks, 'What do you mean?'

'No more secrets. Like with our granddad and all that.'

My cousin says, 'I don't suppose we'll ever know what was really going on in his mind. Gran's never going to talk about it. I don't think after all this time she's even able to. I think maybe some things just hurt so much we lock them up in a place we can never reach.'

I find myself wondering if my mother was such a good listener because she understood what it was to grow up surrounded by silences. That her gift was to make others feel there was nothing they couldn't tell her. With her years of work with the Samaritans, she was there for all those strangers on

the telephone pouring out their life secrets.

Yet Stephen has told me that my mother asked him shortly after I confessed about Monique, 'Why did she have to tell me?'

My brother answered, 'Because she wanted you to know who she is.'

My mother replied, 'I suppose that's true. But I thought I knew her so well and now it turns out she's somebody else.'

'She's the same person, she's just gay,' my brother insisted.

When Stephen told me about this conversation about a year after my mother died, I found myself wishing that he hadn't. It just opened up a wound about whether I'd done the right thing in not keeping my sexuality to myself. But now on my wedding day, I realise the truth comes at a price and that price is the pain caused to others and myself. I also feel deep down that if I'd carried on lying and my mother had died without knowing this fundamental thing about me, I would never have been able to know myself properly. That I would have carried on being a kind of shadow of a person who would never have had the nerve to stand in a room full of the people I care about most and say 'I do.' The best thing about getting married is discovering how happy most people are for me, that love is the opposite of fear and silence. It's a kind of freedom to be who you really are.

Coda: Brand New

Banbury, 2012

It's the 22nd of November 2012. It's Thanksgiving but I've forgotten this. I'm in hospital and I'm in terrible pain. The nurse had said nothing would happen until the morning and that it would be fine for Sarah to go home. Luckily she's still here because if this is nothing I'm very worried what on earth it's going to feel like when things really get going.

Outside I can hear the wind howling as if the world is about to end.

Even the hospital windows are rattling. Suddenly I say, 'I'm going to be sick.'

Sarah manages to grab a cardboard bowl just in time. All of my efforts to eat the hospital's revolting shepherd's pie go into it. I look at the chunks of semi-digested meat and wonder if giving up being a vegetarian was such a good idea.

Another nurse comes in because there's been a shift change. 'Hi there,' she says enthusiastically. 'Now all you guys need to do is just chill out here for a bit. Maybe spray a bit of relaxing spritzer...'

Me and Sarah stare at her as if she's mad. I let out a cry of pain and try to swallow it back in.

The midwife continues oblivious, 'And when your contractions are five minutes apart, we can start thinking about taking you down to the delivery suite.'

'Her contractions are less than a minute apart,' Sarah tells her.

'Oh, I see,' the midwife seems startled by this. 'Well looks like things are going a bit quicker than expected. Do you think you can walk?'

I nod, moving is actually a little easier than staying still, but as we head

down the corridor I have to stop and lean my forehead against the wall. I make it to the lift and we are led into a room I've seen before on the hospital tour. It has a birthing pool that I had imagined myself using along with giant rubber balls and other paraphernalia. We are delivered into the care of a midwife called Kirsty.

Sarah is making a desperate attempt to remember the positions they talked about in the NCT class. 'Do you want to get on your knees? Into the water?'

I don't even answer her. All I want to do is lean with my face against the wall. I suck on the gas and air like I've been addicted to it all my life.

Then I make a very strange noise and Kirsty says, 'I think we need to get you to lie down.'

She has none of the annoying chirpiness of the earlier midwife. She seems calm and understanding and I remember Deirdre's advice to put all my faith in my midwife. There isn't really a lot of choice. After thirteen days of being overdue, in which I was starting to think I'd be pregnant forever, this baby is suddenly in a huge hurry to be born.

Kirsty tells us, 'I've got a bet on with next door. Her one's a second child and with it being your first and an induction, she reckons she's got a safe win. But something tells me we've got a little Usain Bolt on our hands.'

Despite the pain, this makes me smile. I've spent most of the summer watching the London Olympics and joking that I want our baby to grow up and win a gold medal to make his Mums proud. Now I think I couldn't care less about the medal, I just want him to be born healthy and to grow up to be happy and his own person. Nothing else really matters.

I'm lying on the bed with my legs in the air. Sarah is holding my hand. I say to her, 'I'm so glad you're here.'

'You can do this,' she tells me.

But the pain is suddenly unbearable. 'No, no I can't,' I insist.

Two minutes later our son is born screaming. The midwife hands him to me straight away. I remember my mother telling me that when I was born she got the most awful shock because no one had warned her babies arrive all covered in blood and goo. She thought she'd given birth to an alien.

But the blood doesn't bother me. I look down at this tiny baby with his mop of dark hair plastered to his skull and I think he is the most perfect wonderful creature I have ever seen in my life. I think this even though he appears to have my ski jump nose which was also my mother's nose. He latches on the moment this little nose touches my breast and there is a sudden quiet.

As I hold him close against me, I feel the enormity of his trust. I promise myself that I will always be honest with him. I want him to grow up without secrets and without shame. I want to always be able to tell him the truth.

A doctor is called for because I'm going to need stitches.

'I'm afraid he got his hand up at the last moment. He came into the world like Superman,' the midwife explains as she attempts to put a tiny blue hat on the baby. 'And he has the most enormous head,' she laughs as she gives up.

'That'll be all his brains,' Sarah says.

The midwife tries a slightly larger hat but it still doesn't fit. 'I've only got this pink one that's huge,' she says as she pulls it over his little ears. 'We can't have him in a pink hat. I'll go find another one.'

Before we can tell her it really doesn't matter, she's bustled out of the room.

'I guess we can't have you starting off in the wrong hat, can we, little man?' Sarah jokes.

Our son gives a small cry as if he agrees then buries his face back in my breast. 'Isn't he gorgeous?' I ask.

'He's beautiful, just perfect,' Sarah replies.

'I love you,' I tell her.

'I love you too. Do you want me to ring your Dad? I've been keeping him updated with texts.' Sarah dials and hands me her mobile.

'Hello?' My father answers the phone instantly even though it's nearly midnight.

'It's me, Dad, it's Aoife.'

'What's happened? Are you okay?' my father sounds terrified.

'Everything's fine. You're a grandfather. Your grandson weighs 7'11" and has all his fingers and toes.'

'That is the best news I have ever heard,' my father's voice is full of relief. 'I can't tell you how happy I am for you and Sarah. Not to mention for myself. My first grandchild, I can hardly believe it.'

I can't help thinking that it's been a long time since my father had much in the way of good news. And that it's sad my mother isn't there to share his joy.

The midwife comes back in brandishing a blue hat and closely followed by a doctor. The doctor tells me, 'I think we can deal with this. It may hurt quite a bit though. I'll go as quickly as I can.'

'That's fine, you take your time,' I tell her. It occurs to me that this is not a job I'd like her to rush. I'd worried beforehand that I'd feel embarrassed lying semi naked in front of strangers but it hasn't even occurred to me.

'Did you win your bet?' I ask the midwife as she puts our son into Sarah's arms.

'Yes, I certainly did,' she grins at us. 'An hour and a half active labour. That takes some beating.'

'Once he'd decided to make his move, he didn't hang about,' Sarah says as she peers down at his tiny face. 'Did you, little man?'

He suddenly opens his eyes and they are a shocking piercing blue. He stares at us as if he already knows far more than we could ever teach him.

'What are you going to call him?' the midwife asks.

Sarah replies, 'He's strong so he needs a strong name. Maybe Dylan.'

'It means warrior from the sea,' I explain.

Our little fighter who beat all the odds of IVF to get here. I wonder what his story will be? I am excited and at the same time scared for him.

Hope is a wonderful thing.

I'm on such a high that the stitching doesn't even hurt. Once it's done, the midwife asks me if I'd like to take a shower. The birthing room has an en suite bathroom. I get a bit dizzy easing myself out of the bed and taking the few short steps across the room. But once I'm under the hot water, I feel like this is the most incredible wash I've ever had in my life. As if all the blood and the pain and the anxiety are just flowing away.

As I wrap myself in a clean white towel, I have a flash of how my mother used to put fresh sheets on my bed when I was small. She'd put the under sheet on first and then let me lie down on it. Then she'd shake out the top sheet over me so that it billowed like a giant sail before coming to rest. I loved the smell of the fresh linen and the crisp lines of the ironed sheets. My mother would then fold down the sheet and tuck it in so tightly I could hardly move. This didn't make me feel trapped though, it made me feel safe. Finally she'd put the duvet over me and tell me to have sweet dreams. This memory now comes back to me as such a vivid physical sensation that for a moment it's as if my mother is in the room with me.

'Are you okay in there?' the midwife calls through the door.

'Yes, yes, I'm fine,' I reply.

And I am. Of course I wish my mother really was here but I also feel as if there's a thin thread connecting this windy night with the night of a snowstorm in Stockholm when my mother gave birth to me. As if I am more myself than I have ever been. Yet at the same time, I am also all my mothers and my grandmothers and my great grandmothers before me and I am all those who will come after.

THE END

Contemporary Irish Life Writing – How Fictional Is The Truth?

Critical commentary

INTRODUCTION

The Trouble with Truth: Irish Life Writing in Context

My memoir *Is It Yourself?* has as its central theme the difficulties of telling the truth. This raises questions that are not only fundamental to my understanding of my own life story but to the very idea of telling life stories. This commentary aims to give an account of how the search for truth has influenced my creative process within the context of contemporary Irish life writing. I am specifically interested in examining my work in terms of an Irish perspective because I am Irish and this has greatly influenced what I write as well as how I write it. Though the creative part of this thesis is based on the facts of my own life as I understand them, the decision on which memories to include and how to shape them has been influenced by my analysis of how other Irish writers have chosen to tackle similar issues. In this way, the analytical and creative aspects of my thesis are deeply connected.

My original reasons for wanting to write a memoir came from a desire to understand why telling the truth has proved so problematic in my own family. Rather than look at my experience in isolation, I wanted to write about three generations of Irish women, namely my grandmother, my mother and myself. Though in many ways our life experiences have been very different, a denial of the truth as a way of coping with social and cultural pressures is a common thread that links us. As I discuss in my memoir, it doesn't however necessarily mean that we understand each other:

As my wedding dress catches on my shoulder and Deirdre struggles to untangle it, I wonder what my mother would say to me if she was here. Would she be happy for me or would she think I was making a terrible mistake? A needle stab of missing her passes through me [...]

I'm starting to sweat. I wonder if this is how my mother felt? But then again my story is not my mother's story. It is certainly not the story she would ever have imagined for me. Though I suppose my mother's story is not what my Gran had in mind for her.¹

¹ Aoife Mannix, *Is It Yourself?* (unpublished PhD thesis submission, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014) p. 9.

This commentary focuses on the challenges of life writing, particularly in relation to memoir where the narrator's relationship to their environment and to other people is of prime importance. Memoir typically deals not with an entire life but with particular periods of time within it or certain aspects connected with the writer's experiences. Autobiography, on the other hand, is generally considered to be less concerned with the writer's inner emotional landscape and more focused on a chronological telling of their life story. However the two forms have become so blurred that they are often hard to distinguish. For the purposes of this commentary, I am looking at memoir as a subgenre existing, along with autobiography and other forms of life narrative, under the larger umbrella of life writing.

One of the biggest questions in writing a memoir is how to turn parts of your own life into a narrative that makes some kind of sense. Arguably we all do this every day inside our own heads. Yet to put down on the page a coherent selection from the jumble of thousands of memories, reflections, and emotions that make up a life is not an easy process. With fiction, there is the pressure to come up with imaginative, original ideas that will engage the reader by creating whole worlds that don't necessarily exist. With life writing, the pressure is to not make it up but to try to be faithful to some kind of actual lived experience. To tell it how it really was. Yet memory is a notoriously unreliable source. Even members of the same family don't remember the same events or if they do, they remember them in different ways. Also people lie. They often have very good reasons for lying. My own family history is so deeply shrouded in secrets and lies that I've come to realise I will most likely never get to the bottom of it all.

I discuss the challenges of using memory in writing memoir in Chapter One 'A Place To Remember.' I build from the idea that memories only exist as a result of the process of remembering, a kind of on-going translation from the past into the present, to looking at the relationship of language to experience in Chapter Two 'The Foreignness of Words'. This is of particular relevance to Irish literature because of its difficult historical relationship with the English language and connects with my own sense of being a foreigner both in Ireland and England. In Chapter Three 'The Self As Unreliable Narrator', I examine the complex role of the life writer as a character in a story

that is meant to be true. Finally my conclusion, 'Truth as Different Narratives' draws together these discussions of memory, language and identity to look at how, in my own memoir, I've used a dual narrative structure to create a dialogue across time.

In each chapter, I start by looking at challenges implicit in the form, as well as the theoretical questions these challenges raise, and then relating them to the work of particular Irish writers and connecting their work with my own efforts to address these technical and thematic issues. While I make reference to critical theory as it relates to the practice of Irish life writing, I am primarily focusing on the writers themselves that have informed my own writing process. As my memoir covers three generations of Irish women, I have decided to focus on the time period that reflects this. That is roughly from the turn of the 20th century up to the present day. Rather than attempt an exhaustive study, I have chosen to concentrate on particular writers who illustrate their complex and contradictory relationship with the truth within the context of contemporary Irish life writing. This introduction aims to give a general overview of the relationship between memory, language, identity and truth in Irish life writing. I then go on in the individual chapters to examine these issues in greater detail with regards to particular writers and my own practice.

So why does life writing have such a difficult and complex relationship with the truth? To address this question, first of all it's necessary to look at what is meant by the term life writing. Though in this commentary I use the term primarily to describe memoir, it also includes other forms such as autobiographies, confessionals, diaries, journals, letters, oral histories, and many more. Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson have identified fifty-two genres of life narrative in *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*.² Arguably one of the most significant examples of Irish life writing is James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.³ This book is written largely in the third person and is most often described as a novel rather than a memoir or autobiography. Yet it is largely accepted to be based

² Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Appendix A.

³ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Penguin Classics; 6th edition, 1993).

on the author's own life and therefore serves to demonstrate how even the labels given to life writing are often not entirely true. As Harold Rosen argues in *Speaking From Memory*, life writing's 'protean nature ensures that it both invades and is invaded by other texts.'⁴ Throughout this commentary, I discuss this blurring between boundaries as inherent in life writing as a form and look at how I've used elements of the novel, myth, fairy story, theatre, poetry, biography, history, journalism, and the short story in writing my own memoir.

It is the very ambiguity that lies at the heart of the form that drew me to life writing. Through my memoir, I wanted to ask how fictional is the truth? By which I mean how much of what we understand about ourselves is based on objective reality and how much is an imagined construction? On the one hand, life writing can appear to be the most honest and transparent kind of narrative. Yet life writing, with its many different forms, has become notoriously difficult to define. As Claire Lynch points out in *Irish Autobiography: Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation*:

Autobiography is arguably the most underhand of all literary genres, consistently avoiding the definitions fashioned for it and eluding the genre boundaries expected of it.⁵

This difficulty in agreeing on a definition exists despite the fact that the term autobiography itself seems straightforward enough. It comes from the Greek where auto means self, bio means life, and graph means to write. Therefore a person writing about their own life. Philippe Lejeune defined autobiography as 'Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality.'⁶ He went on famously to talk about the 'autobiographical pact'⁷ between writer and reader whereby in putting their name on the front cover of

⁴ Harold Rosen, *Speaking From Memory: The Study of Autobiographical Discourse* (London: Trentham Books, 1998), p. 7.

⁵ Claire Lynch, *Irish Autobiography, Stories of Self in the Narrative of a Nation* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, 2009), p. 1.

⁶ Philippe Lejeune. *On Autobiography*, trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

an autobiography or memoir, the writer is promising that what he or she has written is a truthful account of events that actually happened to them.

This is where the problem begins. For you cannot possibly record every moment of your life in full factual detail even if you wanted to. Firstly, you don't remember everything. Secondly, you would bore your readers to death. The life writer has to select and shape the material they choose to use. Even presuming they want to tell the truth, it will always be an edited truth told from their perspective. Smith and Watson argue that rather than a dichotomy between true and false, the writer/reader pact in life writing is 'an intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader aimed at producing a shared understanding of the meaning of a life.'⁸ However this shared understanding is still based to a large extent on the reader believing they are not being lied to. The difficulty then becomes what constitutes the truth in a constructed narrative. As Smith and Watson ask:

What is it that we expect life narrators to tell the truth about? Are we expecting fidelity to the facts of their biographies, to experience, to themselves, to the historical moment, to social community, to prevailing beliefs about diverse identities, to the norms of autobiography as a literary genre itself? And truth for whom and for what? Other readers, the life narrator, or ourselves?⁹

In his *Poetics*¹⁰, Aristotle argued that the value of art lay in its ability to imitate the truth of the real world in such a way that catharsis is achieved through the release of certain emotions. Aristotle defined truth as 'to say that (either) that which is is *not* or that which is not *is*, is a falsehood; and to say that that which is is and that which is not is not, is true.'¹¹ This has come to form the basis of the correspondence theory of truth where something is held to be true based on how closely it corresponds to an objective reality.

Western European life writing, however, has its roots in the idea that only God knows the ultimate truth with religious works such as St. Augustine's *Confessions*¹² and St. Teresa's *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself*¹³.

⁸ Smith & Watson, p. 13.

⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. by Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin Classics, 1997).

¹¹ *Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 900.

¹² St. Augustine, *Confessions* (London: Penguin Classics, 1988).

Yet as these were more concerned with spiritual journeys than the life of the individual who wrote them, they are often considered preludes to the first modern memoir, Rousseau's *Confessions*¹⁴, first published in 1782. Though the title has echoes of religion, the work is primarily as Rosen puts it 'about a rogue looking back at his more or less villainous life.'¹⁵ This focus on the exploits of the individual fitted with the emergence of Romanticism's emphasis on the artist as a separate entity from society who had access to the higher truth of art.

Though even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the artist's relationship with the truth was considered problematic. In 1819, the Romantic poet John Keats wrote in his 'Ode On A Grecian Urn' that 'beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'¹⁶ This famous quote has given rise to much debate. Not least because it's not clear whether the lines are intended to be understood from the perspective of the urn or the perspective of the poet. Is Keats saying that art is beautiful and true because it captures a moment frozen in time that will last forever? Or is he saying that there is a cold falseness to art because it cannot tell the whole story of what happened before or what happened next?

To complicate matters further, the development of post modernist deconstructionist theories has meant that 'the truth' and indeed 'the self' that is able to perceive that truth have become even more profoundly problematic. As Laura Marcus points out in *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*:

The perceived instability and hybridity of 'autobiography' are inextricably linked to the problematics of selfhood and identity, with the boundaries between 'inner' and 'outer', 'private' and 'public' becoming the sites of concern.¹⁷

¹³ St. Teresa, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself* (London: Penguin Classics, 1988).

¹⁴ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*, ed. by Patrick Coleman, trans. by Angela Scholar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Rosen, p. 21.

¹⁶ John Keats, 'Ode On A Grecian Urn', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 191.

¹⁷ Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), p. 15.

This issue of boundaries is particularly relevant to Ireland, divided as it has been between North and South, Protestant and Catholic, English and Irish, urban and rural. Irish life writing may share Western religious influences, particularly Catholic beliefs in the importance of the confessional. However its roots most likely predate Christianity as Seanachai storytellers and Sean Nos singers used a mixture of poetry, folk tales, and ballads based on real lives to create a strong oral Celtic tradition.

This emphasis on the communal as opposed to the single voice of the individual continued in Irish life writing through the 19th century, particularly evident in writing by women. The prolific novelist and poet Katharine Tynan wrote five autobiographical works. She describes how her decision to join the Ladies' Land League, which was founded in 1880 by Fanny and Anna Parnell, allowed her to engage in politics and artistic expression. 'For one thing, I found there my first real touch with literature.'¹⁸ Her awakened political sensibility leads her to attend the trials of some of those who'd fallen foul of British justice in Ireland:

I remember those Irish-speaking prisoners who stood in the dock, their arms outstretched in the form of a cross, while the sentence was passed in a tongue of which they did not understand a word, after a trial in the same strange speech.¹⁹

This sense of silence and incomprehension as the roots of powerlessness is particularly strong in Irish nationalist life writing. It reflects a society where language itself is a battleground between English, the language of the colonisers, and Irish, the language of the colonised.

W. B. Yeats in his *Autobiographies*²⁰ draws parallels between his relationship with Irish nationalism and the evolution of his poetry. In the six volumes of his *Autobiographies*²¹, Sean O'Casey also connects political activism and a sense of communal identity with his development as a playwright. Similarly, Lady Augusta Gregory in *Seventy Years: Being the*

¹⁸ Katharine Tynan, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. 3*, ed. by Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), pp. 417-423 (p. 418).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

²⁰ W. B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955).

²¹ Sean O'Casey, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

*Autobiography of Lady Gregory*²² charts the connections between her changing political sensibility and the Irish Literary Revival she was a key player in.

Though less motivated by nationalism, James Joyce also explores his relationship as an artist to his society in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. First published in 1916, the year of the Easter Rising, the book begins:

Once upon a time and a very good time it was there was a moocow coming down along the road and this moocow that was coming down along the road met a nicens little boy named baby tuckoo... His father told him that story; his father looked at him through a glass: he had a hairy face. He was baby tuckoo.²³

The childish language captures the internal world of a very young child whose identity has been given to him by his father. Yet as Seamus Deane argues, the book is a story of individual rebellion against all the identities pinned on Joyce at birth:

In *A Portrait*, Stephen, at first overwhelmed by the political, literary and religious views and vocabularies of his elders, rebels and resists to the point at which his voice finally takes over the narration of the story.²⁴

A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man explores the plight of the oppressed artist at odds with the society he grows up in and how it drives him into spiritual exile. In contrast is Patrick MacGill's *Children of the Dead End*.²⁵ First published in 1914, the book uses the author's experiences of working as a navy to highlight issues of racism and poverty amongst the Irish in Britain. MacGill is speaking of the plight of an entire community not just his own alienation. Though this is exile driven by economic necessity, MacGill's inventive use of memory speaks to Joyce's reinvention of language to recreate memories that illustrate society's oppression. MacGill also uses a third person narrator and as Liam Harte points out 'while his novelistic

²² Augusta Gregory, *Seventy Years: Being the Autobiography of Lady Gregory* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1974).

²³ Deane, p. 4.

²⁴ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 1.

²⁵ Patrick MacGill, *Children of the Dead End* (London: Caliban Books, 1985).

imagination aestheticises experience throughout, the fictive elements of the narrative never undermine the text's claim to historical authenticity.²⁶ MacGill as a working class socialist has a different relationship to memory than the more individualistic, anarchic Joyce. Yet both use memory to construct a relationship with their communities and with language, even if that relationship is fraught with controversy. The Catholic Church in Ireland considered *Portrait of the Artist* to be blasphemous while MacGill's criticism of the exploitation of the poor drew fury from Irish priests, landlords and the merchant classes.

This conflict between the writer and society runs deep in Irish life writing with many writers experiencing censorship and condemnation for describing what they perceived to be the truth. Writers who did not fit with Irish nationalists' narrow view of what being Irish meant were often banned or denied. As Maud Ellmann explains in *The Shadow Across The Page*²⁷, Elizabeth Bowen considered herself to be Irish yet the Aubane Historical Society's North Cork anthology lists her name only to cross it out as it considered her 'an English writer illegitimately lodged in County Cork.'²⁸ This in spite of the fact that Bowen was born in Ireland and her family had lived there for generations. For Anglo Irish writers even describing themselves as Irish has proved controversial.

In her memoir *Seven Winters*²⁹, Bowen describes her childhood memories at the beginning of the 20th century from the internal point of view of a child who has little understanding of the wider social and political world into which she was born. Despite the lack of explicit politics, however, *Seven Winters* hints at the decline of the whole Anglo Irish way of life. 'Perhaps a child smells history without hearing it – I did not know I looked at the tomb of fashion.'³⁰ This is made more explicit in *Bowen's Court*³¹, a memoir that traces the history of Bowen's family home and which makes a strong connection between memory and sense of place. Bowen is speaking on behalf of her

²⁶ Liam Harte, *The Literature of the Irish in Britain – Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 140.

²⁷ Maud Ellman, *The Shadow Across The Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

²⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Seven Winters* (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1943).

³⁰ Deane, p. 453.

³¹ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court* (London: Vintage, 1999).

Anglo Irish community over several centuries although this doesn't make her uncritical. As Hermione Lee argues:

Bowen's Court is not a self-indulgent retrospective, but a rational account of Irish politics from a localised Anglo-Irish viewpoint. Some of her ancestors may be a little romanticised, but no excuses are made for certain Anglo-Irish forms of behaviour, and nothing is blurred.³²

This sense of speaking not just as an individual but in relation to a whole community is also reflected in J. M. Synge's *The Aran Islands*³³ published in 1907. In Chapter One 'A Place To Remember' I look at the stylistic and thematic choices involved in using personal memory in relation to location, politics and history. I examine the influence of myth on my own use of memory in an Irish context.

Community storytelling with a cultural agenda is also particularly evident in *Peig*³⁴, the Irish language memoir of Peig Sayers, which formed an important part of the Irish revivalist movement that followed independence. Irish language memoirs of the 1930s and 40s had an expressly political and linguistic purpose not necessarily appreciated by all Irish writers. Flann O'Brien wrote his satire *An Béal Bocht*³⁵, translated into English as *The Poor Mouth*, as a deliberate send up of Irish language memoirs. He possibly had Synge in mind when he describes with great humour and sarcasm how a gentleman records the grunting of a pig dressed in human clothes believing him to be speaking Irish. 'He understood that good Gaelic is difficult but that the best Gaelic of all is well-nigh unintelligible.'³⁶

Originally written in Irish, *The Poor Mouth* takes great pleasure in satirising the turns of phrase so beloved by Irish language revivalists. The expression 'our likes will never be there again'³⁷ is used in the first paragraph of this spoof memoir and repeated continuously in different variations to mock sentimental nationalist notions about the loss of the Irish peasant. In its

³² Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 20.

³³ J. M. Synge, *The Aran Islands*, ed. by Tim Robinson (London: Penguin, 1992).

³⁴ Peig Sayers, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*, trans. by Bryan MacMahon and Catriona O'Connor (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1974).

³⁵ Flann O'Brien, *The Poor Mouth (An Béal Bocht): A Bad Story About the Hard Life* (London: Hart-Davis MacGibbon, 1973).

³⁶ O'Brien, p. 44.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

surreal absurdity, the book continuously pokes fun at the ability of the Irish to wallow in self-pity and to romanticise poverty. Published in 1941, *An Béal Bocht* pours scorn on the inward-looking conservatism of an Ireland that wishes to remain cut off from the rest of the world. The stories it tells are clearly not intended to be taken as literally true. They are, instead, extreme exaggerations that highlight the nostalgic falseness of some forms of Irish nationalism. Behind all the humour and playfulness of language, O'Brien is hitting home some harsh truths about how Ireland has used Irish language life writing to promote a deeply conservative, isolationist nationalist agenda.

Hugo Hamilton describes in *The Speckled People*³⁸ and *The Sailor in The Wardrobe*³⁹, his memoirs of his childhood growing up after World War II, how his father's fanaticism about the Irish language meant he forbade his children to speak English. This censorship of language is connected with a denial of history as the family is ashamed of his grandfather having served in the British Royal Navy. Hamilton uses these tensions between the Irish and English language to create a narrative that charts his attempts to discover the truth about his family, his country and his complex identity. I examine this relationship between language and truth by examining how Hamilton's writing has influenced my own in Chapter Two 'The Foreignness of Words'. I also look at how I've used the language of humour, irony and naturalistic dialogue in my memoir as well as drawing on letters and diaries to try to recreate conversations that ring true.

This struggle between English and Irish language traditions in Irish life writing has given rise to hybrid forms of English that go beyond mere accent and turn of phrase. Frank McCourt in *Angela's Ashes*⁴⁰ uses colloquial language as a humorous weapon to capture the poverty of his childhood in Limerick in the 30s and 40s. At the beginning of *Angela's Ashes*, McCourt writes:

It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the

³⁸ Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, (London: Fourth Estate, 2003).

³⁹ Hugo Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2006).

⁴⁰ Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes* (London: Harper Collins, 1996).

miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood.⁴¹

This is a tongue in cheek acknowledgement that the very things that may make being Irish difficult may also make for interesting and appealing writing. Writing in an Irish form of English, McCourt manages to combine the sincerity of suffering of Peig Sayers's Irish language memoir with the ironic detachment of Flann O'Brien.

Language and identity are also explored in Blake Morrison's *Things My Mother Never Told Me*.⁴² Here Morrison extensively quotes from his parents' war time correspondence to uncover a love affair that led to his mother largely denying her Irish identity and her Catholic religion. The use of both his father's and his mother's letters creates a very personal dialogue through which the narrator attempts to uncover the truth. This is an extension of the themes of his hugely successful first memoir, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* which concludes:

Now I know I'll never know the truth about him and Beatty. Even if I did, it couldn't matter. My father's affair is his affair. His story is not my story. And Beatty doesn't have the missing piece. There is no missing piece, only grief.⁴³

Yet despite this admission that Morrison cannot ever fully know the truth about his father or his relationships, he went on to write a memoir that focuses largely on his parents' relationship before he was even born. It raises the question as to whether memoir writers are motivated by a desire to tell the truth or a desire to bring the dead back to life, particularly parents or lost loved ones. Is life writing driven by the search to find out what really happened or the need to create an identity from the confusions and contradictions of the past?

In *From Harvey River*, poet Lorna Goodison explains in the preface how after her mother's death she began to dream she was asking her mother

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1.

⁴² Blake Morrison, *Things My Mother Never Told Me* (London: Vintage, 2003).

⁴³ Blake Morrison, *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* (London: Granta, 1993), p. 213.

questions she had about her family history. In one of these dreams, her mother says:

She could not tell me more as she did not want me to stay with her too long, because the living should not mix-up too much with the dead. But as I was leaving the celestial work-room, she handed me a book. This is that book.⁴⁴

This cleverly sets up a memoir that is largely composed of family stories that happened before Goodison was born. In tracing her family roots in Jamaica, Goodison tells the story of her Irish great grandfather George O'Brian Wilson and the racist contradictions of a colonial inheritance:

His daughter tells him “If me a neega, you a neega too, for you is my father, you a white neega.” And that was true. He was much more in tune with the ways of the poor black Jamaican people than he was with the imitation English manners of the Creole class into which he had married[...] As the head of his new family, he was expected to behave like a member of the colonial ruling class, having to sit at table at night with the local gentry of Lucea, who talked about the “lazy, dirty Negroes” in much the same way that they spoke about the “lazy, dirty Irish” in England.⁴⁵

In Irish life writing, personal family stories often connect with colonial power structures that are not confined to Ireland but are part of the global Irish diaspora. As Richard C. Allen and Stephen Regan explain in their introduction to *Irelands of the Mind*:

The imagining of Ireland, including the mythologizing of the West, has often been prompted by the condition of exile. Some of the most intense and powerful recollections of Ireland have been fashioned at considerable geographical distance from it.⁴⁶

In his unfinished autobiography, *The Strings Are False*, Northern Irish poet Louis MacNiece describes how strong a grip the idea of the West of Ireland had on his childish imagination:

⁴⁴ Lorna Goodison, *From Harvey River – A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island* (London: Atlantic 2007), p. 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁶ Richard C. Allen and Stephen Regan, *Irelands of the Mind – Memory and Identity in Modern Irish Culture* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), p. 3.

[a] country of windswept open spaces and mountains blazing with whins and seas that were never quiet, with drowned palaces beneath, and seals and eagles and turf-smoke and cottagers who were always smiling[...] But I was not to visit Achill or Connemara until I had left school. So for many years I lived on a nostalgia for somewhere I had never been.⁴⁷

This longing for a landscape he didn't know mirrored MacNiece's longing for his mother to return. She was hospitalised with mental health problems when MacNiece was five and died in 1914 when he was only seven. Her loss echoes through his poem *Autobiography* with its haunting repetition of the last line 'Come back early or never come.'⁴⁸

MacNiece's sister Elizabeth argues in a footnote in *The Strings Are False* that her brother's grief at the loss of their mother has distorted his recollections of their childhood, particularly the harsh portrait he draws of their nurse Miss Craig:

I think that the shock of seeing the sudden change in the mother whom he loved so much, followed by the uncertainty of her return, may have been the chief factor which caused Louis's memories of childhood to be so sad and sometimes bitter. He was too young to have any real understanding of what had happened.⁴⁹

As the memoir was published after Louis MacNiece's death, it's impossible to know if he would have agreed with his sister's interpretation. Yet his descriptions of the cruelty and religious fanaticism of Miss Craig are remarkably vivid despite his sister's view that 'I am doubtful about the authenticity of the 'hell-fire' remarks attributed to her; I think that Louis may have heard or read these elsewhere and unconsciously projected them on to his memory of her.'⁵⁰ Elizabeth MacNiece is not accusing her brother of lying but she is suggesting that his childhood memories are somehow false. She implies that her brother's need to construct an identity for himself out of the

⁴⁷ Louis MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. 6-7.

⁴⁸ Louis MacNeice, *Plant and Phantom: Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), p. 70.

⁴⁹ MacNeice, *The Strings Are False*, p. 43.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

enormous confusion and grief at the loss of their mother has led him to re-imagine their childhood.

Indeed it was not common practice in Ireland at the time to attempt to explain to children difficult issues such as depression, disease or death. Louis MacNiece was never told why his mother died when he was a child and thus was forced to piece together the causes of her death for himself. His sister's doubts don't of course mean that MacNiece's descriptions aren't true but rather serve to illustrate how members of the same family may offer different recollections of the same events or persons, particularly in contexts where certain subjects were treated as taboo.

Much contemporary Irish life writing seems to be driven by a need to understand family histories that were never properly explained. In *Rory & Ita*⁵¹, Booker prize-winning novelist Roddy Doyle uses his parents' words to tell the story of their marriage and his mother's loss of her own mother at the age of three. This is memoir as oral history and Doyle himself barely features but the working class Dublin where he has set many of his novels is vividly evoked through the pattern of his parents' speech. Doyle's parents were still alive when the book was published and arguably his desire to stay true to their words means that while an endearing portrait, it lacks the emotional insights of his Booker prize-winning novel *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha*.⁵² This is a novel that uses many of the language techniques of memoir as the reader is put inside the head of a ten-year-old boy and we see the world entirely from his perspective. Part of the strength of the book is that this reads as neither sentimental nor patronising. Instead it feels utterly authentic and reminds the reader not just what a child sees but how a child's mind works as they attempt to make sense of an adult world that is often violent and confusing. The child's sense of their identity, of who they are, is riddled with holes as much of what happens around them remains unexplained or distorted.

In another memoir described as a novel, Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*⁵³ is also told from the perspective of a young boy struggling to understand truths adults wish to keep hidden. It explores how language is

⁵¹ Roddy Doyle, *Rory & Ita* (London: Vintage, 2003).

⁵² Roddy Doyle, *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha* (London: Penguin, 1995).

⁵³ Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark* (London: Vintage, 1997).

used as a means of evading family secrets and the shame of history connected with Northern Ireland's violent past. Published in 1995 and short-listed for the Booker Prize, the narrator remains nameless throughout but through the use of internal monologue we are brought into Deane's childhood memories. Known for his poetry, Deane also draws heavily on the language of superstition, local folklore and ghost stories to create an atmosphere of uncertainty and mistrust. He uses this language to express how difficult it is to create a solid sense of identity in a culture where the past remains shrouded in secrecy and perceptions of what constitutes reality are constantly shifting.

Another Northern Irish writer who examines how the language of sectarianism and hatred impinged on his childhood is Brian Keenan in *I'll Tell Me Ma*.⁵⁴ Keenan is most famous for his first memoir *An Evil Cradling*⁵⁵ about his experiences as a hostage for over four years in Beirut. This book won the Irish Times Irish Literature Prize For Non-Fiction in 1992. Both Keenan's memoirs explore the relationship between language and sense of self under violent conditions. Language is a means of survival and also a way of building deep friendships. Keenan describes how locked up together for long periods of time, he and Englishman John McCarthy hurled insults at each other about their accents and backgrounds:

Both of us were now in hysterics. The rich elaborations that we slung at one another with childish competitiveness intoxicated us. It was heady, monstrous and foul. But it was gloriously imaginative and unfettered. We hurled this abuse with such pretended vehemence and at other times such calm perverse eloquence that the force of it and the laughter pushed back the crushing agony of the tiny space.⁵⁶

This is a wonderful inversion of the language of hatred that allows both men to hold on to their identity, and indeed their sanity, in circumstances designed to strip them of all sense of self. Yet Irish memoirs often reveal the deep divisions that labelling and different understandings of identity have led to. This raises questions about whether writers of memoirs are inherently unreliable narrators. Published in the same year as *Angela's Ashes* and also

⁵⁴ Brian Keenan, *I'll Tell Me Ma – A Childhood Memoir* (London: Vintage 2010).

⁵⁵ Brian Keenan, *An Evil Cradling* (London: Vintage 1993).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

enjoying enormous popular success in America, Nuala O'Faolain's *Are You Somebody?*⁵⁷ similarly deals with Irish poverty and alcoholism, albeit from a female perspective. It describes O'Faolain's fifteen year relationship with journalist and political activist Nell McCafferty, although avoids discussion of their sexuality. Nell McCafferty was deeply offended by what she saw as a dismissal of both the relationship and her identity. She wrote her own autobiography *Nell*⁵⁸ partly as a response. Perhaps because these memoirs tell the story of the breakdown of the same relationship, O'Faolain and McCafferty offer a fascinating example of how memoir writers understanding of themselves influences how they narrate 'the truth'. They demonstrate how labels influence a sense of self and are a powerful form of language that permeates how life writers understand reality. They also raise questions about early feminist critical theorists' assumptions that women are united in their communal struggle against patriarchy. In Chapter Three 'The Self As Unreliable Narrator', I look at the memoirs of O'Faolain and McCafferty as well as feminist interpretations of Irish life writing and how my own experience of being a lesbian has influenced my sense of identity.

This struggle with different narratives is true for both male and female Irish life writers. The poet Patrick Kavanagh was particularly harsh about how he felt he was pressurised into being an unreliable narrator and constructing a narrative he later no longer believed:

When, under the evil aegis of the so-called Irish literary movement, I wrote a dreadful stage-Irish, so-called autobiography called *The Green Fool*, the common people of this country gobbled up this stage-Irish lie.⁵⁹

Kavanagh felt that his poetry came far closer to revealing the truth about his Irish rural identity. In *The Great Hunger*⁶⁰ a connection is made between sexual frustration and rural poverty. Seen as being critical of the Catholic Church's sexual conservatism, the poem was banned. Unlike the members of the Irish literary movement he despised, Kavanagh felt an outsider to a

⁵⁷ Nuala O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody?* (Dublin: New Island, 1996).

⁵⁸ Nell McCafferty, *Nell* (Dublin: Penguin, 2004).

⁵⁹ Deane, *Field Day Anthology*, p. 484.

⁶⁰ Patrick Kavanagh, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005).

constructed Irish identity he found pretentious. He wrote 'Irishness is a form of anti-art. A way of posing as a poet without actually being one.'⁶¹ Kavanagh attempted to create an alternative truth that challenged the presumptions of the dominant Irish nationalist narrative.

In *My Left Foot*⁶², Christy Brown's relationship with language and sense of self is made particularly challenging by his cerebral palsy. Because as a child his neighbours couldn't understand what he was saying, they labelled him as mentally deficient. Writing his memoir allowed him to establish a sense of self in the real world, though it can be argued that his novel *Down All The Days*⁶³ is actually more autobiographical because in it he is more open about his difficult relationship with his father. The novel was written after his father died and discusses issues of domestic abuse and alcoholism that Brown may have felt unable to print while his father was still alive. It is not so much that the earlier memoir is untrue as that the truths it chooses to tell are different from those in the novel.

Irish life writing has been greatly influenced by a conservative, sexually repressive society where uncomfortable truths have until recently been hidden away. Colm O'Gorman gives a disturbing and frank account of this culture of abuse and secrecy in his memoir *Beyond Belief*⁶⁴ published in 2010. The title is a reference to how hard Irish people have found it to face up to the reality of widespread child sex abuse within the Catholic Church and the painful consequences of denying it. It is also the story of O'Gorman's quest to prove the truth of what happened to him by going to court. For O'Gorman, being believed is essential not only to winning back his sense of self but as a means of getting justice for all the other victims of a culture and a religion that tolerated such perversion of the truth. His memoir argues for the right of those who have been sexually abused to claim their own narrative after so many years of being silenced. As a gay man, he describes how homophobia and sexual repression contributed to a culture in which homosexuality and

⁶¹ Deane, p. 485.

⁶² Christy Brown, *My Left Foot* (London: Minerva, 1990).

⁶³ Christy Brown, *Down All The Days* (London: Mandarin, 1983).

⁶⁴ Colm O'Gorman, *Beyond Belief: Abused by His Priest. Betrayed by His Church. The Story of the Boy Who Sued the Pope* (London: Hodder, 2010).

consensual sex outside marriage were condemned yet rape of children was tolerated.

Issues of sexuality and identity are also key to Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*.⁶⁵ Written at a time when homosexuality was still illegal in Ireland and Britain, Behan, a former member of the IRA, hints at his relationship with an English sailor. Another Irish writer who struggled with telling complex truths in the face of censorship and judgement is John McGahern. He describes an abusive and difficult relationship with his father in *Memoir*.⁶⁶ In my conclusion 'Truth As Different Narratives', I look at the writing of Behan and McGahern as well as other contemporary Irish writers to examine the idea that the truth exists as different narratives and that what it is possible to say changes over time. I discuss how fictional forms of narrative, such as the novel and the short story, have deeply influenced my own memoir writing.

Smith and Watson define life writing not as a genre but as a 'historically situated practice of self-representation'. In such texts, narrators selectively engage their lived experience through personal storytelling. Located in specific times and places, they are at the same time in dialogue with the personal processes and archives of memory.⁶⁷ It is with an exploration of the challenges of remembering that chapter one of this commentary begins.

⁶⁵ Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Arrow Books, 1958).

⁶⁶ John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

⁶⁷ Smith & Watson, p. 14.

CHAPTER ONE

A Place To Remember: Memory in J. M. Synge

My memoir *Is It Yourself?* is based not only on my own memories but on my memory of events that members of my family, particularly my mother, told me about. Much of the first chapter is set before I was born as it recounts how my parents met and got married. Whenever they felt nostalgic, my parents enjoyed telling their children the story of their romance. When they did this together, they would often correct each other on minor details. On her own, my mother would tell the story in a way that included aspects she left out when my father was present. Such as the fact she'd forgotten their first date:

She shouted at her younger brother Cormac to get off his lazy arse and answer the bloody door.

He returned a moment later grinning from ear to ear. 'It's for you.'

'Who is it? If it's the Vincent de Paul tell them to go feck themselves, we've nothing for them.'

'It's not. It's a young fella says his name's Tony and he's here to take you out. He's got flowers.'

'Shit,' my mother said. She was only home at all because the night before she'd broken it off with the journalist she was seeing. He'd been getting too jealous about the other two lads she was sort of doing a line with. Her date with my father had completely slipped her mind.

'I'm not ready,' she informed Cormac.⁶⁸

Even as a child hearing this story, I doubted if my mother had really completely forgotten. Maybe at the time she'd pretended to herself that she didn't remember because she didn't want to admit she'd like to see my father again? Maybe afterwards she told herself she'd forgotten to play down the importance of their meeting? It didn't seem to matter very much. The point of the story was that she didn't treat their first date as a big deal and yet she married this strange boy less than a year later. That was the emotional truth of it, even if the details were embellished for comic and ironic effect.

⁶⁸ Mannix, p. 14.

It was a story I was told many times, yet it was not always exactly the same. Nor is my memory of it entirely accurate. I have tried to recreate the tone my mother used. I have tried to remember the way she spoke, to hear her voice in my head as I've written the dialogue. Of course I don't claim these are the exact words she used. Did she really tell me my uncle said my father had brought flowers? Or is this a detail I've added because in my head I've always had an image of my father standing there forlornly with a bunch of flowers waiting for my mother, the love of his life, to appear?

If my mother hadn't died of cancer at the age of forty eight, would I remember this story with so much fondness? My understanding of my parents' relationship has been hugely affected by seeing my father's grief. Memories of sitting at the kitchen table with my parents talking about how they met or my mother laughing about my father's early romantic intentions have been changed by the filter of what happened many years later. Yet it is also deeply important to me that I have remembered the story as accurately as I possibly can. All I have left of my mother is the memory of the stories she told me. Even if not all of them turned out to be true or there are gaps that I am still trying to fill in.

I've always been fascinated by amnesia, that is the idea of waking up in a hospital bed and not knowing who you are. If you can't remember anything about yourself then surely the whole sense of self disintegrates? Yet, as Max Deutscher points out in the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*,⁶⁹ amnesiacs haven't forgotten everything. 'Amnesia illustrates dramatically the difference between memory as retention of language and skills, and memory as the power to recollect and to recognise specific things.'⁷⁰ For instance a person with amnesia may remember that what they have around their wrist is called a watch, even if they can't recall that it is their watch. Someone not suffering from amnesia may be able to recognise their own watch but they may not remember where they bought it or how long they've been wearing it for. None of us remembers everything, yet what we do remember arguably is what allows us to have a sense of self.

In *Speaking from Memory*, Rosen claims that:

⁶⁹ Max Deutscher, 'Memory' in *Concise Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, pp. 562-563.

⁷⁰Ibid, p. 562.

We may find it difficult to answer, 'Who was I? What am I? How many I am I?' Yet again and again we confront those questions knowing that all is not chaos. It is memory which repeatedly rescues us and makes it possible to speak with a comprehensible voice.⁷¹

Life writing as a genre is to a certain extent based on the assumption that the narrator has enough of a coherent sense of self to write down memories that he or she can remember from their own life. This is the fundamental distinction from fiction where the writer is making it up and may use many different imaginary character voices. Although just as fiction writers often use their own memories or other people's memories to help create make-believe worlds, life writers can use fictional devices to bring memories alive. These may include the adding or subtracting of detail or the recreation of dialogue or the structuring of events to create a more satisfying story arc. They often involve choosing particular memories or prioritising certain aspects of a memory to serve a particular agenda, which may be personal and/or political. At what point do these techniques for writing down memories cross the line into lying? How important is it to remember what actually happened in memoir writing? How can we define the life writer's relationship to the past?

The word memoir comes from the Latin *memoria* meaning memory. The term *memorie* was first used in the mid 1500s by the French to mean something written down to be remembered, as in a memorandum. Thus the roots of memoir lie in writing memories. How could you begin to write the story of your life if you didn't remember it? In *Theoretical Aspects of Memory*⁷², Peter Morris argues that 'without memory, intelligent behaviour becomes impossible. We use the knowledge of the past that we have retrieved to make sense of what is happening to us currently. Without that knowledge, the world becomes a terrifying and dangerous place.'⁷³ Life writers attempt to use their memories as the basis for creating some kind of coherent narrative about their lives. Yet what is memory? How does it actually work? How accurate or truthful can it really be?

⁷¹ Rosen, p. 17.

⁷² Peter E. Morris and Michael Gruneberg, *Theoretical Aspects of Memory* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

The *Oxford Dictionary*⁷⁴ firstly defines memory as the faculty by which the mind stores and remembers information: and secondly as something remembered from the past. These seemingly straightforward definitions cut to the heart of the problem as discussed by Aristotle in *On Memory and Reminiscence*⁷⁵ in 350 BC. Is memory the means by which we recall what happened or is memory what happened at the time? Aristotle defines memory as "neither Perception nor Conception, but a state or affection of one of these, conditioned by lapse of time."⁷⁶ He makes the point that it's not possible to remember the present or the future (unless you believe in divination) and thus:

The object of memory is the past. All memory, therefore, implies a time elapsed; consequently only those animals which perceive time remember, and the organ whereby they perceive time is also that whereby they remember.⁷⁷

For Aristotle, memory is like an imprint in wax. The quality of the imprint is affected by the quality of the brain, which is why the very young and the very old have trouble remembering. Aristotle asks 'when one remembers, is it this impressed affection that he remembers, or is it the objective thing from which this was derived?'⁷⁸ He goes on to argue that when we look at a portrait that is a likeness of a real person, we see not only the picture but the subject it was based on. If we know the person in a context outside of the portrait, it will add to our understanding of the portrait. Yet the two things are not exactly the same, one is an interpretation of the other. Similarly, a memory is an interpretation of the past and it does not exist in isolation from other memories. This is an understanding of memory as a conscious process using associations. Aristotle argues 'whenever one exercises the faculty of

⁷⁴ 'Memory' in *Oxford Dictionaries* <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/memory>> [accessed 13 January 2014]

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *On Memory and Reminiscence*, trans. by J I Beare, *The Internet Classics Archive* <<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/memory.html>> [accessed November 20 2013]

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

remembering, he must say within himself, 'I formerly heard (or otherwise perceived) this,' or 'I formerly had this thought'.⁷⁹

Yet many life writers have argued that memory goes beyond the exercise of our voluntary will. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine reflects on how memory is both part of, and yet something beyond, our conscious mind:

The power of memory is great, very great, my God. It is a vast and infinite profundity. Who has plumbed its bottom? This power is that of my mind and is a natural endowment, but I myself cannot grasp the totality of what I am.⁸⁰

This sense of memory as being both in the mind, and yet more than the conscious mind can fully comprehend, is based on Plato's idea that all learning is in fact the soul remembering what it knew before it took human form on Earth. God, on the other hand, represents Eternal Truth and remembers everything. In trying to remember, human beings can get closer to the ideal of knowing God. In *When Memory Speaks*⁸¹, Jill Ker Conway argues that St. Augustine is adapting Greek classical ideas of the Western conquering hero to Christianity by 'moving the odyssey from the external world to the inner consciousness of the narrator.'⁸²

St. Augustine's memoir is about the struggle of one man to move closer to God, to remember what he once knew in Plato's ideal world. Yet Western memoir is primarily concerned not so much with man's attempt to know God, but man's attempt to know himself. Rousseau writes in his *Confessions*, 'I do not know what is before my eyes, I can see clearly only in retrospect, it is only in my memories that my mind can work.'⁸³ Memory is for him a process by which he can reveal his true self. He doesn't appear concerned that memories fade or may be inaccurate. Rousseau believes that in telling the truth about what he remembers of his life, by leaving nothing out, he is justifying himself not only to God but to the many enemies who have sought to portray him in a false light:

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ St. Augustine, Book 10.8.15.

⁸¹ Jill Ker Conway, *When Memory Speaks: Exploring The Art of Autobiography* (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁸² Ibid., p. 131.

⁸³ Rousseau, p. 116.

Let the trumpet of the day of judgment sound when it will, I shall appear with this book in my hand before the Sovereign Judge, and cry with a loud voice, This is my work, these were my thoughts, and thus was I. I have freely told both the good and the bad, have hid nothing wicked, added nothing good.⁸⁴

Yet this idea of memory as a conscious organising force for revealing truth is very different from later psychological theories of how memory works. As Conway and Rubin point out in 'The Structure of Autobiographical Memory', 'the basic aim of Freudian therapy was to bring to consciousness memories of events and fantasies from childhood, which because of their affective qualities were not directly accessible to consciousness.'⁸⁵ Freud considered 'childhood amnesia', the difficulty adults have in recalling early childhood, to be largely the result of repressing disturbing or traumatic memories. Memory was no longer simply about what we consciously recalled from the past but also about what we have forgotten and the reasons for that forgetting.

As D.L. Nelson argues in 'Implicit Memory' the idea that 'just as we might look for a book in the library, we look inside our minds for information with our success depending upon whether the information is known, or, analogously, by whether the book is in the library'⁸⁶ had become far too simplistic. The French philosopher Henri Bergson in *Matter and Memory*⁸⁷ made a distinction between different kinds of memory. Habit-memory is where we choose a particular memory to enable us to react to a particular situation and is therefore connected with motor sensory functions. Pure memory, on the other hand, is as personal and unconscious as Freud suggests. It is not, however, just a psychological question of tapping into what has been repressed. Rather it is more of a snowball effect where each new memory an individual has adds to the experience of all their other memories that have gone before. Memory is not simply a question of consciously or unconsciously recalling the past. Instead it is a creative act that brings the past into the present in order

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 225.

⁸⁵ Martin A. Conway and David C. Rubin 'The Structure of Autobiographical Memory' in *Theories of Memory*, ed. by Alan F. Collins, Martin A. Conway, and Peter E. Morris (Hove: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993) pp. 110-116 (p. 112).

⁸⁶ D L Nelson, 'Implicit Memory', in Morris and Gruneberg, *Theoretical Aspects of Memory*, pp. 128 – 135 (p. 130).

⁸⁷ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (London: Dover Philosophical Classics, 2004).

to create a new future. As Jean Hyppolite points out in 'Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson'⁸⁸ this is a radical view of memory as not a process that reproduces the past but one that creatively engages with the past to invent meaning.

Bergson doesn't prioritise either reality over perception or spirit over matter, he sees this as a false dichotomy. Instead he develops a concept of image that lies between realism and idealism. Leonard Lawlor argues in *The Challenge of Bergsonism* that for Bergson 'things that are external have an order that does not depend on our perceptions'⁸⁹, so the past has existed independent of our interpretation of it. Yet at the same time, our memories are not mere copies of that past. 'With the concept of the image, Bergson is dispelling the false belief that matter is a thing that possesses a hidden power able to produce representations in us.'⁹⁰

Bergson refused to separate the thing itself from our memory of it. The human brain exists as both a physical part of the world and as a means of creating representations of that world through memory, dreams and art. The past is not some frozen reality that is hidden from us, it is part of the forward motion that leads up to the present and into the future. Therefore we can know the past through intuition, a process that is not conscious but artistic.

Bergson's ideas are thought to have influenced his cousin-in-law, Marcel Proust, when he came to write *Remembrance of Things Past*⁹¹, also known as *In Search of Lost Time*, where the idea of involuntary memory is a central theme. Gerald Gillespie points out that 'the rise of a postromantic, antirealistic reappraisal of the role of memory, intuition, and the psychological relativity of time in relation to perception and knowledge is corroborated through innumerable references'⁹² to Bergson in writers such as Proust and Joyce.

Proust famously wrote about how biting into a madeleine cake transported him back to his childhood in a completely visceral way:

⁸⁸ Jean Hyppolite, 'Various Aspects of Memory in Bergson', trans. Athena V. Colman, in Leonard Lawlor, *The Challenge of Bergsonism*, (London: Continuum Press, 2003). pp.112-28.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

⁹¹ Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 2006).

⁹² Gerald Gillespie, *Proust, Mann, Joyce in the Modernist Context* (Washington: the Catholic University of America Press, 2003) p. 52.

And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it.⁹³

Written in seven volumes between 1909 and 1922, it's difficult to say how much *Remembrance of Things Past* should be read as autobiography and how much as fiction. As Marcus points out it is a classic example of early 20th century experimental novels 'exploring what might have been seen to be the province of autobiography – for example states of consciousness and subjective time.'⁹⁴ Proust believed that in remembering the past, the artist is able to fight back against the ravages of time. This fits with the modernist ambition of understanding the self as a work of art. Christopher Prendergast in 'The Self As A Work of Art: Proust's Scepticism'⁹⁵ suggests it implies a separation of the self from the world as well as the artist from society. It is the power of memory which allows the artist to experience the emotional truth of past experience and turn this into art.

Yet is memory a form of purely individual unconscious time travel? Marcus argues that philosophers such as Maurice Halbwachs developed the idea of collective memory which pushed for an 'understanding of the individual's reflection on his past as irreducibly social.'⁹⁶ Smith and Watson argue that 'we learn early in childhood what people around us and, by extension, our culture expect us to remember.'⁹⁷ From St Patrick's Day to Christmas, there are religious and nationalist holidays that construct communal ways of remembering. Public monuments and museums remind us what history considers worth remembering. Often historical memory and personal memory are intertwined. As Tadhg O'Keeffe points out in 'Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology' he can remember Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979 in terms of emotions

⁹³ Proust, p. 63.

⁹⁴ Marcus, p. 69.

⁹⁵ Christopher Prendergast, 'The Self As A Work of Art: Proust's Scepticism' in *Stories and Portraits of the Self*, ed. by Helena Carvalho Buescu and Joao Ferreira Duarte (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007) pp. 19-28 (p. 25).

⁹⁶ Marcus, p. 146.

⁹⁷ Smith and Watson, p. 16.

and sensations from his personal experience but more vividly through mediation of the event through other means such as television:

These are the memories of mine that I regard as commonly possessed, as elements of a collective memory. In fact, they are not really memories of the event but memories of its mediation. I do not actually remember a congregation of more than one million people because I saw no more than several thousand, so my memory of the vast gathering of people is a memory of its image.⁹⁸

For Irish nationalist life writers at the beginning of the 20th century, what was remembered was not just the unconscious recall of memories evoked by random stimuli. Rather it was a conscious decision to rediscover what had been forgotten. Nor was this forgetting of the past considered to be due to chance and the passage of time, it was seen as a deliberate erasing of the native Celtic collective memory by the British colonial masters.

J. M. Synge had been urged to write about the people of Aran by W. B. Yeats as part of the nationalist agenda of the Irish literary revival. Irish nationalists had become obsessed by the Aran Islands because they believed that they were the last bastion of the pure simplicity of the Celtic way of life and the Irish language. They were one of the few places where memories of how Ireland used to be before the corruptions of colonialism could still be recalled. Yeats instructed, 'Go to the Aran Islands. Live there as if you were one of the people themselves; express a life that has never found expression.'⁹⁹

Yet Synge's memoir, *The Aran Islands*, is very much the recollections of an outsider and he has been accused of romanticising the traditional lives of the islanders through his re-creation of their folk memories. As Tim Robinson explains 'Synge has been criticized by the anthropologist John C. Messenger not only for 'primitivism' and 'nativism' but for projecting a tragic world vision on island life.'¹⁰⁰ Messenger argued that Synge greatly exaggerated the risk of fishermen drowning by making so much of the

⁹⁸ Tadhg O'Keeffe, 'Landscape and Memory: Historiography, Theory, Methodology' in *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity: New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, ed. by Niamh Moore and Yvonne Whelan (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 2007) pp. 5-6.

⁹⁹ Robinson, *The Aran Islands*, p. xxi.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xlvii-xlviii.

islanders' memories of loss. However Robinson points out that the fear of dying at sea that Synge captures may have been far more real to the islanders. 'Which is the more adequate response, the anthropologist's statistics or Synge's prose, as resonant as the keening of the grief-stricken relatives?'¹⁰¹ It could also be argued that as Synge was suffering from the incurable Hodgkin's lymphoma, the threat of death was particularly real for him.

This is an interesting example of how in life writing emotional truths can often carry more weight than factual realities. Arguably it's because his writing contains so much of Synge's own psychological suffering, explorations of sexuality and doubts about the existence of God that Synge later drew such fury from nationalists. Audiences famously rioted at the first production of *The Playboy of the Western World*¹⁰² in 1907, the same year *The Aran Islands* was published, at the mention of women wearing only their 'shift'. Though Synge shared their dream of a free Ireland, his version of Irish truth was not one they wanted to see. They particularly didn't want Irish women to be portrayed as free agents who pursued their own sexual desires. Susan Cannon Harris argues in 'Synge and Gender' that nationalists such as Arthur Griffith's insistence on folk memories of Irish women as chaste and home loving was as much about Griffith's plans for a future Ireland as his interpretation of the past. Women were supposed to produce Irish-speaking children who were only taught to remember an innocent Ireland free from the corruptions of British colonialism. 'Her sexual purity was conflated with the cultural purity of the domestic space from which it was her job to exclude foreign products and foreign culture.'¹⁰³

Though Synge may have had a more progressive attitude towards the role of women, he has also been accused of distorting his memories of island life to articulate his own version of Irish nationalism. Mary C. King describes *The Aran Islands* as 'fictionalised confessional autobiography'.¹⁰⁴ However Synge claims that he didn't fictionalise his experiences. 'I have given a direct

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. xlviii.

¹⁰² Synge, *The Playboy of the Western World*, (London: Penguin Classics 1997).

¹⁰³ Susan Cannon Harris, 'Synge and Gender' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, ed. by P.J. Mathews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) pp. 104-116 (p. 107).

¹⁰⁴ Robinson, p. xxxix.

account of my life on the islands, and of what I met among them, inventing nothing, and changing nothing that is essential.¹⁰⁵

Despite this, Synge's lack of realism can be rather disturbing in its naivety when he complains about how much the men talk about 'the price of kelp in Connemara'¹⁰⁶ and observes 'for men who live in the open air they eat strangely little.'¹⁰⁷ Though later when he describes the cruelty of evictions for not being able to pay the rent, he seems to have grasped that the islanders' obsession with economics and how little they eat may come from extreme poverty.

Coming himself from the class of privileged Anglo Irish landowners, Synge is both rebelling against his own ancestry and reinforcing it. He writes about the islanders that:

Their way of life has never been acted on by anything much more artificial than the nests and burrows of the creatures that live round them, and they seem, in a certain sense, to approach more nearly to the finer types of our aristocracies – who are bred artificially to a natural ideal – than to the labourer or citizen, as the wild horse resembles the thoroughbred rather than the hack or cart-horse.¹⁰⁸

All this talk of pure breeding has decidedly fascist undertones and may connect with Yeats's belief in eugenics. P. J. Mathews argues that because of Synge's own poor health, 'he anxiously internalised Darwinian notions of the survival of the fittest: 'I am unhealthy,' he wrote in his autobiography, 'and if I marry I will have unhealthy children. But I will never create beings to suffer as I am suffering.'¹⁰⁹ Cannon Harris points out that Synge describes reading Darwin as a teenager 'in apocalyptic terms'¹¹⁰ as it leads to his loss of faith in Christianity and the burgeoning of his own sexuality. This is an example of how Synge's memory of his own past has shaped his understanding of how the islanders remember theirs.

In some senses, Synge is like the modern Western tourist who enjoys observing the natives because of a perceived spiritual purity, a kind of longing

¹⁰⁵ Synge, *The Aran Islands*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

¹⁰⁹ P. J. Mathews 'Rethinking Synge' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, pp. 3-14 (p. 11).

¹¹⁰ Cannon Harris, p. 111.

for the innocence of childhood memories. This perception may say more about the nostalgia of the observer than it does about the observed. As when Synge describes listening to an older islander:

Then he sat down in the middle of the floor and began to recite old Irish poetry, with an exquisite purity of intonation that brought tears to my eyes though I understood but little the meaning.¹¹¹

In fairness Synge did go to considerable trouble to learn the Irish language so that he could understand what was being said. The strength of his writing lies in being able to capture in English much of the rhythm and patterns of speech of the original Irish. Like the sound of the sea itself, the particular sounds of Gaelic are fundamental to the environment he is trying to portray. As Robinson explains:

There is no word for 'yes' in Irish; instead one repeats the verb of the question: 'Is it Bartley that is there?' 'It is.' Both these features involve repetition, and thus the possibility of rhythm, when imitated in English.¹¹²

What Synge is attempting to be true to is the language itself, not just a translation of its literal meaning. He tries to remember not only what people have told him but the exact syntax of how they've chosen to tell their memories. As Elaine Sisson points out:

Within the bardic tradition of Irish-language literature lies the concept of *dinnseanchas*: a recognition of the importance of place. Sometimes literally translated as topography, *dinnseanchas* is more than the knowledge of local geography but is learning invested with the meaning and significance of nature, genealogy and memory.¹¹³

Part of what Synge finds so fascinating and charming about the people he meets on the islands is their gift for storytelling as well as their belief in myths and fairy tales that predate a Western rational view of the world. Whether the islanders are telling the truth about the many supernatural

¹¹¹ Synge, p. 10.

¹¹² Robinson, p .xxix.

¹¹³ Elaine Sisson, 'The Aran Islands and the Travel Essays' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, pp. 52-63 (p. 62).

phenomena they claim to remember, such as ghosts, faery people, and ships that disappeared as they approached them, is rather beside the point in a culture where the existence of other worlds is taken for granted. The mysticism of the islanders chimed with the mysticism of the new Irish nationalism. As Robinson points out, 'Aran, that forlorn outcrop of want, was to become one of the chief shrines of this Ireland of the mind.'¹¹⁴

In *The Aran Islands*, Synge tells the reader practically nothing about himself apart from the occasional reference to Paris. He doesn't offer any explanation of what he does in between his visits to the islands or make any reference to his own childhood memories or background. Even when he describes some of the islanders having met an ancestor of his, he doesn't explicitly state that his ancestor comes from the Protestant landowning class. In some ways, the Aran Islands are his escape from a cultural heritage he wants to disown. He doesn't want to remember his own colonial past. Instead he wants to go back to folk memories that can form the basis of his vision of what a free Ireland should be in the future.

Synge is busy preserving the poems, songs and stories of the islands' oral tradition not as an anthropological exercise but as a means of breathing new life into an ancient language. This is memory as myth-making with a political agenda. Synge manages to evoke a profound personal nostalgia for life experiences that are not his own. His memoir allows him to create an identity for himself that is based to a large extent on the memories of others.

P. J. Mathews argues that Synge didn't share Yeats's 'conservative, antiquarian approach to the past'¹¹⁵ but 'embodies the spirit of progressive Revivalism'¹¹⁶ by taking a more critical and realistic approach. C. L. Innes in 'Postcolonial Synge' points out that Synge wrote a series of journalist articles for the Manchester Guardian on life in the West of Ireland that 'make Synge's socialist and anti-colonialist politics unmistakable.'¹¹⁷ Yeats unsuccessfully attempted to have these articles left out of Synge's collected works as he wanted Synge to be remembered as a writer unconcerned by politics.

¹¹⁴ Robinson, p. xv.

¹¹⁵ Mathews, p. 8.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹¹⁷ C. L. Innes, 'Postcolonial Synge' in *The Cambridge Companion to J. M. Synge*, pp.117-131 (p. 117).

Unlike Yeats, Synge wasn't interested in the great mythic battles of heroes such as Cu Cuchlann but rather the power struggles of ordinary peasants. In a postcolonial context, Synge's life writing is a challenge to the male Western life writer's reliance on personal memory to validate the self as conquering hero. Synge doesn't portray the past as a series of challenges that have been overcome which validates the current power structure. Instead he argues that history can be remembered differently from a different cultural and linguistic perspective. Memory is not only communal; it is a force for change. This more radical side to Synge's work brought him into conflict with conservative nationalists who saw Irish peasants, particularly women, as shining examples of Celtic purity with no sexual desires or memories that contradicted the patriarchal narrative.

Synge's complex relationship to memory and place means that *The Aran Islands* cannot be reduced to a personal travel memoir or a piece of nationalist propaganda. The Aran Islands is a real place that Synge actually went to and where he recorded the memories of real people. Yet both Synge's own memories of his time there and the life stories of those he met are deeply permeated by the Aran Islands as a symbol of resistance to the colonial narrative.

Proust famously wrote about how, on waking from sleep, the memories of places he had been allowed him to remember who he was and thus establish a sense of self:

The memory, not yet of the place in which I was, but of various other places where I had lived, and might now very possibly be, would come like a rope let down from heaven to draw me up out of the abyss of not-being, from which I could never have escaped by myself.¹¹⁸

Yet for Synge, memory and place are not just unconscious images from dreams that allow the artist a sense of individuality. He was interested in examining who is throwing the rope; that is, what are the political and historical power structures that permit a place to be remembered in a particular way? For Synge, memories do not exist independently of how they are expressed; they are fundamentally constructed through language itself.

¹¹⁸ Proust, p. 27.

My memoir describes going to the Aran Islands on a summer holiday, something my family did every year from when I was aged two to five. I describe actual events that I remember from my early childhood such as my father reading me 'The Children of Lir' and telling me the white horse in the field came from the mythical land of 'Tir na nOg.' My reasons for telling both these myths however are not purely for nostalgia. They connect with my earliest understanding of what it is to be Irish as well as to key themes in my memoir of exile and dislocation. They are linked to later memories that I explore in the alternate chapters when I describe my sense of loneliness and alienation on emigrating to London in my early twenties. These memories are not just personal to me but are also a feature of much Irish experience in the 20th century and indeed for hundreds of years before that.

For example, I describe my reaction as a three year old to hearing about Lir's children being transformed into swans by their evil stepmother:

This is the saddest story I have ever heard. I cry myself to sleep thinking about Fionnuala and her brothers as swans lost in the storm. It seems so unfair to be turned into something you're not and never get to see your father again.¹¹⁹

This memory haunts me later on when I worry that coming out to my family and friends is a kind of transformation that will mean I'm cut off from them forever. In the next chapter when I decide I will leave my boyfriend for a woman, I write:

Outside the pub, I wave goodbye to everyone. 'Don't do anything I wouldn't do,' Michael calls out to me. As I turn away to head for the tube, I have a strange sensation that I won't ever see them again.¹²⁰

Reading Synge's *The Aran Islands* helped me to remember and understand the significance of the Aran Islands as a place where some of my earliest memories are rooted. But perhaps more importantly, it gave me a way of thinking about memory that is not just personal but also collective and symbolic. For instance, I make a connection between an accident I had while

¹¹⁹ Mannix, p. 79.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 93.

on the Aran Islands and shortly afterwards watching a TV report about a young boy being killed by a rubber bullet in Northern Ireland. This is a historical event that actually happened but as a child, it was perhaps less believable to me than Oisín's magic white horse in the myth of 'Tír na nÓg'. I am interested in exploring how a child's identity is built from a growing sensibility that in an Irish postcolonial context is both political and mythical.

As someone who feels both intensely Irish as well as an outsider in Ireland, I have considerable sympathy with Synge's desire to find a place that allowed him to remember an Ireland that he wanted to belong to. This is not I would argue from a purely nostalgic or sentimental longing to fit in. It also comes from a deep need to validate an Irish identity in the face of considerable racism and prejudice. C. L. Innes argues that Synge needs to be understood in the context of postcolonial life writing that challenges deeply embedded power structures:

As the Martinican writer Frantz Fanon argues, the colonisation of the mind goes hand in hand with the physical occupation of a country, and it is the role of artists and intellectuals to decolonise the mind and restore a colonised people's belief in the validity of their own culture.¹²¹

It is ironic, however, that I also suffered the success of Synge's and other nationalist life writers' portrayals of Ireland as a mythical land of simple peasants. My memories of moving to America at the age of eleven are full of resentment at being treated as if I couldn't speak English and had never used electricity before. I was not pleased to find myself trapped in myths about Ireland and largely powerless to communicate the truth about what life in Dublin is really like. For example I write in my memoir:

Sandy examines her brightly polished nails before asking, 'Do you like believe in leprechauns?'
'Yeah of course I do,' I reply with deep sarcasm. 'Sure my father's one. He doesn't bother going to the bank, he keeps all his money at the end of a rainbow.'
Sandy's eyes widen. 'I think that's really cool,' she says.¹²²

¹²¹ Innes, p. 118.

¹²² Mannix, p. 273.

Though there is much humour in these misunderstandings, memories like these have inspired me to try to write an account of my past that is as realistic as possible.

The degree of truth in life writing is arguably to a large extent dependent on the accuracy of the writer's memories. Yet as psychologists Lynn and McConkey argue in *Truth in Memory*, memory is not 'a complete, static and accurate record of the past'¹²³ but rather 'a dynamic medium of experience shaped by expectancies, needs, and beliefs, imbued with emotion, and enriched by the inherently human capacity for narrative creation.'¹²⁴ A memory is not simply something that happened in the past. It is a fragment of time that we 're-member' for reasons that may or may not be clear to us. The 're' part is key as it implies words such as 'recreate' or 'reconstruct' where something is brought back into existence through a mental, emotional and/or spiritual process. What actually happened and what we remember happened are not necessarily the same. This is the challenge for life writers who claim to be telling a true story of real events. As Smith and Watson point out:

As memory researchers from fields as diverse as neuroscience, cognitive psychology, and philosophy have argued, remembering involves a reinterpretation of the past into the present. The process is not a passive one of mere retrieval from a memory bank. Rather, the remembering subject actively creates the meaning of the past in the act of remembering. Thus, narrated memory is an interpretation of a past that can never be fully recovered.¹²⁵

In the famous song from the musical *Gigi* 'I remember It Well', Mamita continually corrects Honore's recollection of their romance:

H: You wore a gown of gold
M: I was all in blue
H: Am I getting old?
M: Oh, no, not you
How strong you were How young and gay
A prince of love In every way

¹²³ Steven Jay Lynn and Kevin M. McConkey, *Truth in Memory* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1998) p. ix.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹²⁵ Smith & Watson, p. 16.

H: Ah, yes, I remember it well¹²⁶

The humour lies in the fact that lovers love to think they share precious memories. It helps to build a sense of closeness, of a shared reality. This is true for all human relationships. In Brian Friel's *Philadelphia Here I Come*¹²⁷ the son asks his father if he can remember the time they went fishing together. His father can't and the son takes this as proof his father doesn't love him so leaves for America. Tragically the father then tells the audience another memory of his son's childhood that shows how much he does care. Father and son do remember each other, just not in the same way, and this is why they find it so difficult to communicate. Though collective memory may seem to imply some kind of harmony, as Rosen points out:

For many, collective memory is shot through with conflicts, contradictions, ambiguities and doubts. Wars, battles and skirmishes are fought out in their heads and may emerge into the light of day through their autobiographical acts.¹²⁸

In an Irish historical context of mass emigration, where families often didn't see each other for years or even never again, the power of memory is particularly important. To remember things properly is a way of holding on to all that has been lost. To forget is worse than death itself. Allen and Regan argue that:

Outsiders tend to defend their culture, possibly from a subliminal fear of losing it. They tend to cling to their culture, for if all their material possessions have been lost, creativity may be all they have left. Artists seek to recreate their past visually or to represent that past nostalgically. In an alien environment, they may fear that their memories of home may disappear too.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, 'I Remember It Well' from *Gigi* musical film (1958) <<http://www.lyricsplayground.com/alpha/songs/i/iremberitwell.shtml>> [accessed January 15 2014].

¹²⁷ Brian Friel, 'Philadelphia Here I Come!' in *Plays I* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996).

¹²⁸ Rosen, p. 135.

¹²⁹ Richard C. Allen, 'I've Come Home and Home I'm Gonna Stay: The Quiet Man in Irish-American Cinematic History' in Allen and Regan, pp.112 – 121 (p. 114).

This is an understanding of memory as a means not just of preserving individual identity but an entire culture in the face of exile and loss. Synge writes in *The Aran Islands*:

This grief of the keen is no personal complaint for the death of one woman over eighty years, but seems to contain the whole passionate rage that lurks somewhere in every native of the island. In this cry of pain the inner consciousness of the people seems to lay itself bare for an instant, and to reveal the mood of beings who feel their isolation in the face of a universe that wars on them with winds and seas.¹³⁰

This strikes me as the memory not so much of a writer doggedly promoting a nationalist agenda but of a man with a fatal illness who knew he had a limited amount of time left and thus shared the islanders' savage grief. Synge had suffered an initial attack of Hodgkin's disease shortly before visiting the Aran Islands for the first time and he died two years after it was published at the age of thirty seven.

In my memoir, I have written about my mother having an asthma attack in London:

I remember nothing else about my mother's visit that summer. Not if I went with her to the airport, not what I said to her if I put her on the plane, not if she asked me any more questions about Colman or Monique. Just that moment when she breathed into the peak flow reader and it told me a terrible truth that I was too stupid to understand.¹³¹

I would most likely never have remembered this small instance of realising my mother had breathing problems if a year later fluid hadn't been discovered in her lungs, which led to a diagnosis of ovarian cancer. The cruelty of memory is that much of what happens is only remembered because of its later significance.

In writing down their memories, perhaps life writers hope to remember and thus understand what would otherwise be forgotten. It is largely for this reason that I have struggled to write my memories as accurately as possible

¹³⁰ Synge, p. 31.

¹³¹ Mannix, p. 77.

while at the same time acknowledging that they can never be direct representations of an objective past. Memory in life writing is a creative act of communication and thus hugely dependent on using language to construct past events. As Rosen argues, 'Memory is not a thing but an activity, not so much what we have as what we do.'¹³²

My initial interest in Synge's *The Aran Islands* came from a desire to understand how individual memory is connected to collective memory, both in terms of using the memories of others and how folk memories in the form of myths can create a cultural and political identity. Also my own life writing has been deeply influenced by Synge's techniques for remembering language itself; that is in terms of turns of phrase as well as rhythms of speech and dialogue. This is what I will be exploring in the next chapter 'The Foreignness of Words'. I have found that treating memory as neither entirely objective nor subjective but rather as an on-going creative act of remembering has allowed me to question why I remember the way that I do and thus has deeply informed my approach to my own life writing.

¹³² Rosen, p. 102.

CHAPTER TWO

The Foreignness of Words: Language in Hugo Hamilton

The title of my memoir *Is It Yourself?* comes from a common Irish greeting that is a traditional way of saying hello. I explain my interest in this expression at the beginning of the book:

'Is it yourself?' my mother used to ask me years ago as she let me in from school through our back door. As if on certain occasions, I could be somebody else. Perhaps even then my mother suspected I was not all I was supposed to be. But in those days, it wasn't a question that required an answer. It was just my mother's jokey way of speaking like a *culchie* - that is a person from the countryside as opposed to Dublin.

Though I've barely ten Gaelic words to rub together, I do know that strictly speaking there isn't a term for yes or no in the Irish language. In Ireland, the truth is something to be evaded. We'd much rather live in the soft shadows of maybe.¹³³

An inability to give a straight answer may not be unique to Irish culture but it seems to be deeply rooted in our use of language and our sense of self. My maternal grandfather was a native Irish speaker and teacher. He met my grandmother when she decided to take Irish lessons in order to join the civil service. Proficiency in Irish was a requirement of working for the Irish state. The reason my grandmother didn't know her own language was because her parents had refused to speak it to her. Speaking Irish under the British colonial government meant you were highly unlikely to get a job so my great grandparents had banned their own language in their own home. This is a level of censorship and internal repression that I suspect my grandmother passed from her parents to my mother and my mother then passed on to me. If you don't even have access to your own words, how can you possibly tell the truth about your life?

One of my original inspirations for writing my memoir was to try to understand why my mother lied to me about her parents. Until I was twenty one, she maintained that her father had died when she was a small child. In fact he died many years later, when I was six. Divorce was banned by the Irish constitution until 1996. The subject itself was such a taboo that my

¹³³ Mannix, p. 6.

grandmother told her children to tell everyone that their father was dead, even though, in reality, he was very much alive and living in England. It was only over the course of writing this memoir that I discovered my grandfather suffered from severe mental health problems. Much of his life story, like his mother tongue, had been censored and forgotten. Rather like the Irish language itself under colonial rule, after Ireland gained independence, some words became very difficult to say. These included divorce, sex, madness, unmarried mothers and homosexuality. In my memoir I have struggled to find the language to talk about these subjects and to understand the ways in which control of language has been used in an Irish context to silence truth.

All my life, I've had a vague sense of guilt that my mother tongue is English, not Irish. That I am speaking a foreign language and that the very words I use are somehow false. It has contributed to a sense of dislocation brought about by my nomadic childhood. I wasn't born in Ireland. I was born in Sweden and grew up in Dublin, Ottawa and New York. What I've discovered through writing and researching my memoir is that this feeling of not being properly Irish, of being somehow marginalised and not quite fitting with what's expected, is deeply ingrained in Irish life writing. The pressure to be silent, to conform, to lie in order to be accepted by Irish society has paradoxically led to a significant number of contemporary memoirs that rebel by speaking out on taboo subjects.

I've always been fascinated by how language affects our understanding of reality. As Davy Van Oers argues:

On the one hand, language records and protects life, as without writing there is no trans-lation of life. On the other hand, inevitably, language itself (re)creates life, the translation being only a 'copy' of the real life: it blocks biographical being and identity. Language and writing have a regenerative value: they create a 'textual' life that differs from the biographical one.¹³⁴

Language is often understood as the means by which we describe reality. Yet does reality exist independently of language? How does language affect how

¹³⁴ Davy Van Oers in 'Staining the Past with Ink in Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Memorie* (1830)' in *Stories and Portraits of the Self*, ed. by Helena Carvalhao Buescu and Joao Ferreira Duarte (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 231-237 (p.232).

we experience reality? In a classic psychological study carried out in 1974, Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer showed participants video clips of a car crash. Some participants were asked to estimate how fast the car was going when it hit the other car. Others were asked to estimate the speed when the car smashed into the other car. Those whose question included the word 'smashed' as opposed to 'hit' estimated higher speeds. A week later participants were asked if they had seen broken glass in the clip. Those who had been asked the 'smashed' question were more likely to report that there had been broken glass. In fact there was no broken glass. The study implied that the form of the question itself, that is the use of the word smashed as opposed to the milder term hit, actually caused people to remember the incident differently.¹³⁵ For life writers this opens up the question as to whether we are using language to capture reality or whether language is capturing us?

Ngugi Wa Thiang'o writes:

Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort or clarify the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being.¹³⁶

This idea of language as our only means of accessing reality becomes particularly problematic in postcolonial contexts where language itself has become a kind of battlefield. Patricia Palmer argues that 'a sense of discontinuity, self-estrangement, of living beyond the fault line of a fractured tradition haunts Irish writing.'¹³⁷ In learning Irish, Synge was radically embracing a language that his ancestors had despised and were determined to stamp out. As Palmer points out, although Ireland had been nominally under British rule since the 12th century, it wasn't until the Elizabethans that

¹³⁵ S.A. McLeod, 'Loftus and Palmer' in *Simply Psychology* (2010)

<<http://www.simplypsychology.org/loftus-palmer.html>> [accessed December 9 2013].

¹³⁶ Ngugi Wa Thiang'o in *The Uses of Autobiography* by Julia Swindell, (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) p. 1.

¹³⁷ Patricia Palmer, *Language and Conquest in Early Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 1.

full control was asserted. Up until then, the vast majority of people spoke Irish throughout the country. The Elizabethan colonisers saw themselves as civilising the Irish barbarians and part of this evangelical process involved the repression of their inferior and savage tongue. According to Palmer, this included a deliberate strategy of largely pretending that the Irish language didn't exist: 'When the fact of translation itself is repressed, however, the scope for traducing native meanings and denying the native's alterity is even greater.'¹³⁸ Ignoring the existence of a native language entirely different from English allowed the colonisers to conceive of Ireland as a rebellious province rather than a distinct cultural identity. Thus colonial texts made little or no reference to the need for translation or the challenges of communication across two different languages.

This confusion around language is something that puzzled me as a small child. In my memoir I write about visiting the Aran Islands:

Most of the time on the island, I can't understand what people are saying because they speak Irish. Even though I'm Irish, I speak English. I ask my mother why that is and she says that her father spoke Irish as his mother tongue but that the Irish language got stolen from us by the English. I didn't know you could steal words. I ask her if it's because his words were stolen that her father died. She says no, that wasn't it, he died of a heart attack when she was a little girl. I ask if this made her very sad but she says she doesn't really remember.¹³⁹

This question of language is already connected with a sense of mystery around my maternal grandfather, an early intuition that there is something about his story that is not being translated.

In his memoir *Out of Place*, Edward Said describes the challenge of not only capturing memories from his childhood in Palestine but of finding the language to describe those early experiences:

More interesting for me as author was the sense I had of trying always to translate experiences that I had not only in a remote environment but also in a different language. Everyone lives life in a given language; everyone's experiences therefore are had, absorbed, and recalled in

¹³⁸ Palmer, p. 54.

¹³⁹ ¹³⁹ Mannix, p. 78.

that language. The basic split in my life was the one between Arabic, my native language, and English, the language of my education.¹⁴⁰

This sense of being divided between languages is at the heart of Hugo Hamilton's memoirs about growing up in Ireland after the Second World War. His father was an extreme nationalist who forbade his children to speak English even though that was the language most commonly used outside their front door. Hamilton's father wanted to reverse the history of colonialism by halting the decline of the Irish language. His logic was that the best place to begin this was with his own children as they represented the next generation and the future of the nation. He didn't stop to consider that his children had to live in the postcolonial reality of an Ireland where the vast majority of people spoke English. His insistence on Irish had the ironic effect of making his children foreigners in their own country. In addition, Hamilton was bullied by other children because his mother was German, the language of the Nazis. As Anne Enright explains:

He grew up as an immigrant does, but in his own native country[...] His is the voice of the migrant, the mongrel, of the person who is neither one thing nor the other, of the stranger and the traveller in us all.¹⁴¹

Hamilton's difficult relationship with his father is reflected in his relationship to language and history. His father longed for a nostalgic purity of language stripped of foreign colonial influence. His son is forced to face the impossibility of turning the clock back. Language is not just something he can choose to use or not use; it is physically part of him. Hamilton describes his different languages as parts of his own body, of being the very ingredients that make up his being:

My father has one soft foot and one hard foot, one good ear and one bad ear, and we have one Irish foot and one German foot and a right arm in English. We are the brack children. Brack, homemade Irish bread with German raisins. We are the brack people and we don't have just one language and one history. We sleep in German and we dream in Irish. We laugh in Irish and we cry in German. We are silent in

¹⁴⁰ Edward Said, *Out of Place* (London: Granta Publications, 2000) p. xv.

¹⁴¹ Anne Enright, 'Hand in the Fire by Hugo Hamilton' *Guardian*, 17 April 2010, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/apr/17/hand-fire-hugo-hamilton-review>> [accessed October 11 2013].

German and we speak in English. We are the speckled people.¹⁴²

Language is not an entirely conscious process that Hamilton is in control of; it is also subconscious and emotional. It doesn't tell one story but rather is embedded in the conflicting stories of the great complexity of the 20th century. A century that is now infamous for mass destruction driven by belief in singular over-arching narratives, whether fascist or communist.

As much as Hamilton uses language to tell his story, he recognises that language has written him. His dreams are in Irish and he cannot escape the whole Irish nationalist revivalist agenda because his father has made it such a personal battle in his own home. Hamilton writes in English, the language his father despised. However it's not the Irish language he is rejecting, it is his father's means of enforcing Irish by violently censoring English. His father seems unaware that he is replicating the methods of the British colonial masters who did everything they could to prevent the speaking of Irish by making it as unofficial and invisible as possible.

Hamilton's sense of a plural identity is a rebellion against his father's totalitarian vision of the world. Hamilton embraces the softer attitude of his mother, a woman who escaped from physical and sexual abuse in Fascist Germany. It's ironic that as a child Hamilton gets beaten up and name called because of his mother when she hated the Nazis. It's his father who is revealed to have been a fascist sympathiser. Discovering the anti-Semitic newspaper articles his father wrote forces Hamilton's family to confront some difficult truths. Hamilton writes:

There are things I need to forget, things I don't want to think about any more. I want to have no past behind me, no conscience and no memory. I want to get away from my home and my family and my history.¹⁴³

This is an extraordinary statement from someone who has published two books that are obsessively concerned with the writer's family, past, memories, conscience and sense of history. Yet it is a contradiction that appears again and again in Irish life writing, as if the very impossibility of telling the truth is

¹⁴² Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, p. 67.

¹⁴³ Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, p. 7.

what compels these writers to attempt to put it down on paper. As Hamilton explains:

In many ways it was inevitable that writing would become the only way for me to explain this deep childhood confusion. The prohibition against English made me see that language as a challenge. Even as a child I spoke to the walls in English and secretly rehearsed dialogue I heard outside.¹⁴⁴

The censoring of language leads almost inevitably to a fascination with language. Irish life writers search for a way to say the unsayable, to overcome the silences that have blocked them from speaking the truth.

Hamilton also explores these themes of searching for a true identity and coming to terms with the lies of history in his novel *Disguise*.¹⁴⁵ In this book, the main character believes that his parents have lied to him about where he comes from, that he is not their child at all but a Jewish orphan from the Holocaust:

His father was an obsessive hunter who filled the house to bursting with antlers and stuffed animals. And maybe it was no wonder that Gregor felt a bit like an exhibit in a natural history museum. It was only when he started a new life in Berlin that he could be himself again. He felt a huge weight lifting off his shoulders being able to tell people that he was originally from the East, that he was a Jewish survivor and that he had no relatives left alive.¹⁴⁶

This connects with the powerful sense in Hamilton's memoirs that the only way to find a version of history that allows him to express his true self is to write about the conflicts of his childhood. He uses the language of novels to create memoirs that express who he believes himself to be. Life writing is for him a means of claiming a language of his own rather than the lies and silences that were forced upon him. Hamilton doesn't believe in the blank page that the autobiographical writer fills with the truth and wisdom of their words. Instead he argues that writers are born with languages and histories that they have little control over. They are not masters of their own destiny

¹⁴⁴ Hugo Hamilton, 'Speaking to the Walls in English' Original Essays, Powell's Books, <<http://www.powells.com/fromtheauthor/hamilton.html>> [accessed December 4 2013].

¹⁴⁵ Hugo Hamilton, *Disguise* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009).

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

but neither are they passive victims. In attempting to write the truth about their lives, life writers can start to create a new language that allows them to move forward from the mistakes of the past:

People say you're born innocent, but it's not true. You inherit all kinds of things that you can do nothing about. You inherit your identity, your history, like a birthmark that you can't wash off[...] We are born with our heads turned back, but my mother says we have to face into the future now. You have to earn your own innocence, she says. You have to grow up and become innocent.¹⁴⁷

Hamilton particularly interests me because of my own experiences of language. As my father was a diplomat, we moved back and forth between Ireland and other countries every few years. By the time I was eighteen I had moved home a dozen times. When I was six we moved to Canada and I was sent to school in French. Like Hamilton, I was forbidden to speak English. I was made to feel stupid and alienated because I couldn't communicate:

I think it'll be okay because in my old school there were two languages also. English and Irish. Most things were said in English but you had to say 'an seo' every morning to let the teacher know you were there and there was a fun Irish song about a teddy bear that runs too fast and falls over.

But it's not like my old school. Immersed means that there is no English allowed. 'C'est interdit de parler anglais dans la classe' the other children shout at me every time I try to speak to them. They think I'm stupid because I don't understand what they're saying.¹⁴⁸

On my return to Ireland a year later, I face humiliation for not being able to remember my Irish. My teacher won't let me go to the bathroom unless I can ask in Irish and I nearly wet myself. Then when we move to New York when I'm eleven I have to deal with teachers who refuse to believe I can speak English. My accent and lack of American English leave me open to racist assumptions about how backward Irish people are:

I'm in English class and Mrs Bisignano has set us a spelling test. She asks me how to spell the word horror. I say H O R R O R.

'What?' she bawls at me. 'I can't understand what you're saying. Say it again.'

¹⁴⁷ Hamilton, *The Sailor in the Wardrobe*, p. 103.

¹⁴⁸ Mannix, p. 110.

So I repeat myself. 'Does anyone else understand her?' Mrs Bisignano asks. The rest of the class has started to snigger. 'Say it again,' she instructs me.

By the time I've spelt horror three times, the whole class is in fits of laughter. I have no idea what I'm doing wrong. I wish the ground would open up and swallow me whole.

'It's spelt,' Mrs Bisignano speaks to me very slowly like I'm a retard. 'HORROR.' She pronounces the R's like ares instead of ores the way I do.¹⁴⁹

All of this means that by the time we move back to Dublin in my mid teens, I have developed a hostile attitude to what is supposed to be my native tongue. I have become very angry with being told how I should speak and in what language:

I gather up all my books and saunter out slamming the door behind me. Doubtless my maternal grandfather is spinning in his grave but it's not my fault my parents have dragged me round the world so that I've forgotten this difficult, obscure language that's supposed to be mine even though no one I know speaks it.¹⁵⁰

Reading Hamilton's memoirs has given me an insight into how conflict around language formed such an integral part of my own childhood. It's also helped me to understand that this complex relationship with different languages need not be entirely negative. When language is not taken for granted but is something that must be negotiated and challenged, it becomes of great interest. Not all of my teachers were horrible and I write about my struggle to learn French in Canada:

Mademoiselle Putvez sees everything though. She asks me what's wrong. I don't know how to tell her in English about the devil in my head, never mind in French. So I say nothing. She asks me what I'm reading. Then she says to pick any picture I like and she'll give me that word in French. It'll be my special word that I can keep always. I choose a picture of a strawberry and she says 'une fraise'. I think it sounds beautiful and I practice saying it to myself. Une Fraise. A strawberry. I feel much better now that Mademoiselle Putvez has made me a present of a word. After that, I collect lots of French words

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 335.

very quickly and then whole sentences start to be mine and I can understand most of what's going on around me.¹⁵¹

Language is also a gift and has a special music of its own. When I was very young I remember thinking isn't it strange how Irish people are the only people in the world who don't have an accent? Moving to different countries made me hear my own accent and understand that the Irish have a particular way of putting things. In writing my memoir, I have struggled not only to be truthful to events that happened but also to the language used to describe these events.

Both my grandmother and my mother were wonderful storytellers. Though they never spoke Irish to me, I suspect their knowledge of that language deeply informed the way they spoke English. I have looked at letters my mother wrote to me when she was in Iran and put whole phrases and images from them into my recreation of our conversations. I also have a short diary she kept when she was ill and the report she wrote describing vividly her work with earthquake victims in Iran. These have proved to be useful aids to jogging my memory and for checking facts but perhaps more importantly have allowed me to hear my mother's voice. Her language permeates my own writing so that I do not feel I am the sole author even though I am the one writing down this particular version of events. It's not that I'm speaking for my mother but rather that in some way she is speaking through me. In much the same way that Hamilton feels that his history is speaking through him. Yet this is not a passive process, it is one in which the life writer, by being aware of where their language is coming from, is able to creatively reconstruct their past and their identity. As Hamilton puts it:

Maybe your country is only a place you make up in your own mind. Something you dream about and sing about. Maybe it's not a place on the map at all, but just a story full of people you meet and places you visit, full of books and films you've been to. I'm not afraid of being homesick and having no language to live in. I don't have to be like anyone else. I'm walking on the wall and nobody can stop me.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 111.

¹⁵² Hamilton, *The Speckled People*, p. 272.

Language doesn't just describe reality; it creates the world we live in. The language we use as a child is very different to the language we use as an adult and thus the child's perception of the world is very different. Half of my memoir is written in a child's voice and I found reading Hamilton's memoirs very useful in terms of how to achieve humour and irony by using the language of the child while at the same time avoiding the trap of sentimentality. Hamilton's achievement is to make the apparent simplicity of the child's voice achieve a subtle complexity that draws the reader in to the experience of language itself. As Hermione Lee explains in her review of *The Speckled People*:

It's not a straightforward reminiscence. More like the early pages of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, it's shaped like a fiction, told, as if naively, in the language of a child. It incorporates in passing, but often without much annotation, a complex web of allusions to literature, politics and history[...] Gradually, what the child-narrator sees and hears begins to turn into what he knows and understands - secrets, conflicts, histories, beliefs. It is a bold strategy, because it does so call Joyce to mind, but it pays off handsomely. This story about a battle over language and a defeat in "the language wars" is also a victory for eloquent writing, crafty and cunning in its apparent simplicity.¹⁵³

Reading Hamilton showed me that the child's voice is not some cute trick to charm readers. Rather it is a way to reach an emotional honesty that describing childhood in an adult voice would never achieve. Using the language of the child allows the reader to creatively construct the child's reality as we are able to see the world from their point of view. By engaging with the child's struggle with language, we come to understand the depth of the conflicts in Hamilton's writing. It also allows for humour and irony, powerful weapons for those who have been silenced to fight back. As Lee observes:

As he starts to refuse his father's language lessons, using whatever weapons a child can use - illness, anger, silence, naughtiness - he

¹⁵³ Hermione Lee, 'A Tale of Two Tongues', *Guardian*, 25 January 2003, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jan/25/featuresreviews.guardianreview1> [accessed 30 November 2013].

loses that firm patriarchal sense of direction, but finds that there might be advantages to being lost. He works out his own understanding of a mixed, "speckled", multiple, modern society.¹⁵⁴

Hamilton's father wanted to rewrite history by hiding away the photograph of his own father in a British navy uniform, the *Sailor in the Wardrobe* of his son's second memoir. In denying the English language, Hamilton's father was also denying his own father's history as someone who fought for the hated invaders. Discovering the truth about his grandfather allows Hamilton to construct his own history rather than having to accept his father's censored version of events. For Hamilton, language is ultimately a form of rebellion.

Reading Hamilton's memoirs has helped me to see the connections between a desire for truth and a desire to write. This connection lies in a fascination with language itself. As Campbell and Harbord argue:

Language has the magical power to bring that experience with others and with the object world into being, but reading ourselves in relation to others is always in part mysterious. We cannot have direct access to other people's feelings or thoughts, and yet our own experiences of being are always dependent on the situated world we are in contact with: a world and 'self' that is always shifting between modalities of the real and imaginary. The profane illumination is always framed by such an opacity.¹⁵⁵

In the next chapter, I examine how conflicts with others can lead to conflicts within the self. The life writer tells their story in their own words. However the language they use is not a neutral description, it is, to use Hamilton's expression, 'speckled' with the experiences of others.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵⁵ Jan Campbell and Janet Harbord, *Temporalities, Autobiography and Everyday Life* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 13.

CHAPTER THREE

The Self As Unreliable Narrator: Identity in Nell McCafferty and Nuala O'Faolain

Though readers of autobiography may accept that memories are at best flawed reconstructions and that language can distort reality, they still expect memoirs to be stories told by a narrator who is narrating experiences that happened to them. Smith and Watson point out that 'charges of autobiographical bad faith and occasional hoaxes reveal how complex questions of the authenticity of experience and the integrity of identity can become, how critical they are to the central notion of the relationship between life narrator and reader.'¹⁵⁶ They cite the example of Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood*¹⁵⁷ which caused furious controversy when it was revealed the author had never spent time as a child in a concentration camp. In his novel *Disguise*¹⁵⁸, Hugo Hamilton seems to show some sympathy for those who wish to change their identity by changing their history but the majority of readers are horrified at the idea that a narrator would lay claim to a Holocaust survivor identity that they have no right to.

Yet perhaps identity is not simply a question of what makes up an individual's past. Benjamin Wilkomirski never admitted that he'd lied. 'Even when confronted with documentary proof of his identity as a Swiss citizen adopted by a middle class couple named Doessekker, the author declared, 'I am Benjamin Wilkomirski.'¹⁵⁹ This opens up the question of whether there is a gap between what the outside world thinks is the author's identity and what the author believes internally. If the narrator of a memoir doesn't know who they are then how can readers believe what they say?

I have entitled my memoir *Is It Yourself?* because this traditional Irish greeting points to my Irish identity. Also because it raises the question: what does it mean to be yourself, to say this is who I am? An uncertainty about

¹⁵⁶ Smith & Watson, p. 32.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁵⁸ Hamilton, *Disguise*.

¹⁵⁹ Smith & Watson, p. 32.

whether I really know myself first occurred to me when I moved to New York at the age of eleven:

With the doors pulled towards me, if I look in the mirror box, I can see my reflection repeated hundreds of times into infinity. It's weird that there can be all these versions of me going further and further into the distance. It makes me feel like I don't recognise myself any more since I moved to America. Like I'm made up of all these strangers.¹⁶⁰

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan famously argued in *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*¹⁶¹ that the 'mirror stage' in infants gives them a false sense of coherency and wholeness when they become fascinated by their own reflection in a mirror. Yet I find myself looking in a series of mirrors that reflect many possible versions of who I am. This sense of fragmentation, of not having a unified sense of self, comes from a personal experience of moving to a foreign country. Yet it is also a feature of much Irish life writing where the experience of exile, whether through migration or because of deep social and historical divisions within Ireland, is something many Irish writers have in common. Claire Lynch argues that:

Irish history and Irish culture have contributed to the creation of a distinctive style of autobiography, particularly in the representation of communities where the author is concerned not only with an individual narrative but also multiple selves and others.¹⁶²

In his opening to the section of the *Field Day Anthology* on 'Autobiography and Memoirs', Seamus Deane writes:

Autobiography is not just concerned with the self; it is also concerned with the 'other', the person or persons, events or places, that have helped to give the self definition. Inevitably, in a colonial or neo-colonial country like Ireland, the forms of 'otherness' available are multiple and blatant, so much so that they rarely escape stereotyping. An idea of Ireland has to be fashioned, discovered, recreated over and against that which threatens to disallow it.¹⁶³

¹⁶⁰ Mannix, p. 228.

¹⁶¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis* (Maryland: John Hopkins Press, 1981).

¹⁶² Lynch, p. 2.

¹⁶³ Deane, p. 380.

Deane makes the point that where identity is oppressed by a traditionally more powerful force, there is a tendency to create 'a utopia inverted and perverted'.¹⁶⁴ This is a sort of over-compensation where truth is put aside for the myth of a freedom without complications or contradictions. He means this with regards to Irish national identity emerging from British imperialism. However it could also apply to gender and sexuality in Ireland. Irish nationalism created an ideal of Irish women as having a Celtic purity untainted by colonial corrupting influences that was to prove deeply conservative and restrictive. Taboos around sex and sexuality still linger on as an echo of Irish Catholic stereotyping of women as either virgins or whores. They have made it particularly challenging for Irish women writers to narrate a sense of self that doesn't fall into narrow predefined categories. As Deane puts it 'this is the final, but bitter triumph of oppression. It teaches the oppressed to oppress themselves more effectively than any external agency can do.'¹⁶⁵

In Nuala O'Faolain's biography of *Chicago May*¹⁶⁶, an infamous Irish criminal and prostitute who lived in America in the 1920s, O'Faolain writes 'I knew that, before my own time, there was very little autobiography by Irish women, and almost none by women who were neither saintly nor patriotic nor literary.'¹⁶⁷ The book is essentially O'Faolain's retelling of how Chicago May came to write her autobiography which was published in 1928. In it, O'Faolain examines her own motives for writing her memoirs as well as examining the changing nature of how Irish women have struggled to narrate their life stories. She asks:

Are life stories even tellable? I wrote my own – in fact, I've made two attempts at it, because I wrote two memoirs – but I can feel the unsaid and unsayable pressing from behind all I said, though I never consciously kept anything back. Any single moment of a life is so magnificently various, so rich in material and at the same time so multiple and delicately insubstantial that it is hardly served by being placed in a simple, chronological narrative. The thinness continues into character. You read your own words and they seem displaced from

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 383.

¹⁶⁵ Deane, p. 381.

¹⁶⁶ Nuala O'Faolain, *The Story of Chicago May* (London: Michael Joseph/Penguin, 2005).

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

yourself; a lighter, smarter, more shallow person than you seems to have written them.¹⁶⁸

The idea that the narrator of a memoir can end up feeling as if it had been written by someone else demonstrates how complicated the relationship between the person who has lived the life and the person who has decided to try to capture it on paper can be.

O'Faolain's first memoir is entitled 'Are You Somebody?' This is a question which implies that the author is not at all sure she is even entitled to write about herself. O'Faolain is plagued by feelings of inadequacy and doubts about whether her life story, and indeed her sense of her self as a narrator, are of any value. She writes in her introduction to her memoir:

I never stood back and looked at myself and what I was doing. I didn't value myself enough – take myself seriously enough – to reflect even privately on whether my existence had any pattern, any meaning. I took it for granted that like most of the billions of people who are born and die on this planet, I was just an accident. There was no reason for me.¹⁶⁹

In the American edition of 'Are You Somebody?' O'Faolain has subtitled it *the accidental memoir of a Dublin woman* which suggests not only that her life had no purpose but that she somehow wrote her life story by accident. It further underlines a deep feeling of insecurity that she has no right to tell her life story; that society believes she shouldn't write it and she has done so almost against her better judgement because she couldn't help herself.

This is in contrast to Rousseau's confidence in writing his classic memoir *Confessions* where he makes it clear he's not saying all of the events of his life are of huge historical importance but it's enough that they were important to him:

The sword wears out its sheath, as it is sometimes said. That is my story. My passions have made me live, and my passions have killed me. What passions, it may be asked. Trifles, the most childish things in the world. Yet they affected me as much as if the possessions of Helen, or the throne of the Universe, had been at stake.¹⁷⁰

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 297 .

¹⁶⁹ Nuala O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody?* p. x.

¹⁷⁰ Rousseau, p. 364.

At least Rousseau recognises that the importance of his actions are entirely subjective and dependent on his sense of self. The Western romantic tradition put forward the white male life writer as the voice of authority and this extended into the 20th century where narrators of autobiography were often expected to be famous and powerful men who were shaping the course of history. This worship of the individual was in many ways a worship of universal domination. It suggested that the hero went forth and conquered and described the objective reality of his experiences. The implied message was that the reader was not being given a point of view; they were being given the truth. Therefore there were no other possible interpretations or conflicting accounts. There was no other, the other was rendered completely invisible. This applied not only to women but to all marginalised people who because of ethnicity, sexuality, religion or class did not identify with the dominant power structure of white male supremacy. As Julia Swindell argues in *The Uses of Autobiography*:

In the early 20th century, the overwhelming concern with genius and its auto/biographical expressions are, at least in part, a response to ethnographic research. The autobiographies of 'great men' become the authentic data which shore up cultural certainties and provide the points between which the map of Western civilisation is drawn. They often come to embody the cultural value with which the primitive artefacts of 'savages' are contrasted.¹⁷¹

Bart Moore-Gilbert in *Post Colonial Life-Writing* points out that from the late 19th century up until the Second World War, critical theorists such as Georg Misch didn't believe that colonised people were even capable of writing autobiography because of a lack of 'sophistication of consciousness.'¹⁷² Moore-Gilbert argues that 'canonical autobiography is a conservative form, not least because of its complicity in the marginalisation and 'Othering' of women'.¹⁷³

¹⁷¹ Swindell, p. 15.

¹⁷² Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Life-Writing: Culture, Politics, and Self-Representation* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. xii.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii.

This is not to imply that Western male narrators have not written about their doubts, confusions and splintered sense of self. Indeed the development of postmodern theories in the latter half of the 20th century questioned whether it was even possible to think of a 'self' that is the narrator behind any given text. As Linda Anderson points out:

'The death of the author' which Roland Barthes had announced in 1968, and which signalled his attack on the concept of the author as origin or source of meaning, also had implications for autobiography[...] The pre-existing subject of autobiographical theory and its stabilization within a genre that could, like the self, be identified and recognised was presented as an illusion, unmasked.¹⁷⁴

Yet the fact remains that living men and women write about their lives. The question of the narrator's identity, including their nationality, gender and sexuality, hugely influences how and what they write. So what is the relationship between identity and the life writer's sense of themselves as a narrator? Smith and Watson argue that identity is multiple and forever shifting:

Think, for instance, of how many identities you cycle through in the course of a day, identities linked to gender, national citizenship, work status, sexuality, class location, generational location, ethnicity and family constellation. And notice the potential for conflict between or among these different identities.¹⁷⁵

Yet the challenge for the life writer is to take all of these conflicting identities and attempt to make some kind of coherent narration from them. However rather than memoirs that offer a presentation of the self, I would argue that contemporary Irish women life writers have instead written memoirs that offer a profound questioning of the self, a questioning that is inspired by having been brought up in a country that for so long expected women to be silent and invisible.

Part of my reason for not focussing purely on Irish women life writers in this commentary is because I believe that in the early 21st century, it is more

¹⁷⁴ Linda Anderson, *Autobiography* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) p. 52.

¹⁷⁵ Smith & Watson, p. 33.

useful to consider issues of sexuality and gender as they affect both sexes. This is not to completely reject earlier feminist analysis but rather to build upon it. According to Smith and Watson in their introduction to *Women, Autobiography, Theory*¹⁷⁶, the first wave of feminists reclaimed autobiography as a way to hear the authentic voice of 'Woman', as if women represented some kind of single entity that could all be lumped together. In a way this was just a different version of the male Western romantic hero, the single 'I' that was 'unified, rational, coherent, autonomous, free.'¹⁷⁷ Later feminist critical theory argued that women's autobiographies were more fluid in their sense of self and connected more with their communities. Yet this emphasis on the communal also perhaps neglected the sense of conflict in women's autobiographies: conflicts that existed between women as well as between women and men and conflicts that connected with other forms of disempowerment. As Swindell argues:

Whereas Western European educated man can both speak for his ideological environment and be seen to represent it, women, black people and working-class people, because of their political position, are not placed to conceal the tensions between consciousness and the social world. Speaking from any kind of subordinate position in the culture reveals a contested and often highly embattled relationship between the two.¹⁷⁸

This is a critical approach to autobiography that allows feminist interpretations of memoirs to look at evolving power relationships within a society. The role of women in Ireland has vastly changed since De Valera's 1937 constitution which stated in Article 45.4.2:

That the inadequate strength of women and the tender age of children shall not be abused, and that women or children shall not be forced by economic necessity to enter avocations unsuited to their sex, age or strength.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ Sidonie Smith & Julia Watson, 'Introduction: Situating Subjectivity in Women's Autobiographical Practices', *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, (London: University of Wisconsin, 1998)

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁷⁸ Julia Swindell, *The Uses of Autobiography* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995) p. 4.

¹⁷⁹ Article 45.4.2, *Constitution of Ireland*

This reversed the 1916 Proclamation which had promised women full equality. It was an attitude that led to a marriage bar in the civil service up until 1973 with serious economic consequences for many women, including my own grandmother, struggling to raise four children on her own.

Yet, while there are still deep-seated issues of inequality and patriarchy in Ireland, looking at women's life writing in isolation from memoirs by men is not necessarily the most effective way of challenging this. Volumes IV and V of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish writing*¹⁸⁰ are entirely made up of writing by women. They were published to address the lack of female writers in the first three volumes edited by Seamus Deane. In *Are You Somebody?* Nuala O'Faolain writes that she was deeply hurt that Deane failed to include so many women writers. She describes 'what was almost grief at the absence of women.'¹⁸¹ She explains how she interviewed Deane for a television programme:

Then I brought up the missing women. He said words to the effect that he hadn't really noticed what he was doing. He just hadn't noticed.¹⁸²

Thus the publication of volumes IV and V addressed the huge issue of Irish women writers being either ignored or forgotten in the literary canon. They also opened up the debate on national identity to include issues of gender and sexuality. However it could be argued that in their treatment of autobiographical writing, they also reinforce stereotyping of women as communal and supportive, as somehow intrinsically less selfish than men. This sentimentalising of the role of women can come dangerously close to echoing the patronising attitude of the very patriarchy these feminists hope to reject.

For example in her memoir *Peig*,¹⁸³ written in the 1930s, Peig Sayers describes how her husband was chosen for her while she sat in silence. This Irish language memoir was used by nationalists as a symbol of what Irish women should be and was still the standard text for all students of Irish when I

¹⁸⁰ *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. IV and V, (Cork: Cork University Press 2002)

¹⁸¹ O'Faolain, *Are You Somebody?* p. 119.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁸³ Peig Sayers, *Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*, trans. by Bryan MacMahon and Catriona O'Connor (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1974).

was in school. Patricia Lysaght, as one of the editors of the 'Life Stories' section of Vol. IV, comments on Peig Sayers's description of having her first born inspected by her female neighbours:

The old women's scrutiny and comments on the child mentioned by Peig were not malicious; they served rather to identify him as a member of a particular family and thus to incorporate him into the island community.¹⁸⁴

Yet Lysaght offers no evidence that this is Sayers's own view. What Sayers actually describes is women being highly critical and judgemental:

Each one delivered her own summing-up on the child. According to one, he had this fault and that fault, the nose was a little too big, the eyes were small, the ears weren't exactly perfect and so on. At last the grandfather, Mici, who had been sitting by the fire raised his voice. 'May blindness and short-sightedness overtake ye!' he said. 'Tis hard for anyone to have a flaw unknown to ye.'¹⁸⁵

The grandfather goes on to make a joke, 'God's Paradise won't be any the better of having those women inside its gates for it won't take them twenty-four hours to upset heaven.'¹⁸⁶ This may be funny but it's clear that he considers them interfering troublemakers, not supportive champions of the community. Sayers says nothing to contradict this analysis. At the age of nineteen, she has been married off to a man she's never met before to go and live on a rock where she knows no one. Her own reaction to arriving at the Blasket Island is: 'How lonely I am on this island in the ocean with nothing to be heard forever more but the thunder of the waves hurling themselves on the beach.'¹⁸⁷ Yet at a time when De Valera was putting forward his vision of women as subservient homemakers, Sayers's harsh life experiences were idealised as having a Celtic purity Irish women should aspire to. Just as nationalists used Sayers's stories to romanticise what being Irish should be, is

¹⁸⁴ Patricia Lysaght, *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Vol. IV and V: Irish Women's Writing and Tradition*, ed. by Angela Bourke (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005) p. 1205.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 1205.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 1205.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1202.

Lysaght idealising a communal bonding between women that may have little basis in reality?

In a conservative and sexually repressive society, it is perhaps women who are often harshest on each other. This is a theme explored by Mary Lavin in her autobiographical short stories and other works.¹⁸⁸ Her story 'Sarah' begins with the line 'Sarah had a bit of a bad name'¹⁸⁹ and goes on to describe women in a small town who initially appear fairly tolerant of Sarah having three illegitimate children but who by the end we realise are vicious and cruel in their judgements. We never do find out who the father of Sarah's fourth child is as rumour and lies are enough to ensure she is thrown out of her home and left to die of exposure. As the jealous wife tells her husband with considerable satisfaction, 'At least that's where they found her in the morning, dead as a rat. And the child dead beside her!'¹⁹⁰

This lack of sisterhood is also explored in what is considered one of Lavin's most autobiographical and powerful short stories 'Happiness'¹⁹¹. When the narrator goes to visit her husband in hospital bearing a huge pile of daffodils, a nun stops her on her way in:

I know now that she was waiting for me, knowing that somebody had to bring me to my senses. But the way she did it! Reached out and grabbed the flowers, letting lots of them fall – I remember them getting stood on. "Where are you going with those foolish flowers, you foolish woman?" she said. "Don't you know your husband is dying? Your prayers are all you can give him now!"¹⁹²

In my memoir, I express my frustration at how traditional notions of women as caring martyrs still persisted in Ireland in the late 20th century. I feel these are used to define certain behaviour, such as nursing the dying, as inherently feminine and somehow of less value when undertaken by a woman as opposed to a man. I write about a conversation my mother and I had with a nun about me staying nights in the hospice with my mother:

¹⁸⁸ Mary Lavin, *Selected Stories*, (Middlesex: Penguin, 1984).

¹⁸⁹ Mary Lavin, 'Sarah' in *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, ed. by William Trevor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 392-400 (p. 392).

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

¹⁹¹ Lavin, 'Happiness' *Selected Stories*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 202.

‘Well isn’t that just wonderful,’ the nun smiles at me. ‘Though I mean after all that’s what daughters are for. It’s the least you’d expect. But I have to say what impresses me is those sons of yours. The way they come in every afternoon. So polite and caring. Such charming young men. And it can’t be at all easy for them.’

My brothers are wonderful and they love my mother very much and would do anything for her. However I resent that their care is somehow being deemed more impressive than mine.¹⁹³

Though often domestic in setting, Lavin’s short stories are completely lacking in sentimental ideas about women being naturally kind, maternal or supportive. She seems to have little patience with the idea that female artists are somehow fragile or mad or need to withdraw from the world. Widowed herself at a young age, she not only enjoyed popular success as a writer but raised her three daughters and ran the family farm. She defied many of the stereotypes associated with women writers in both her life and her writing.

Reading Lavin’s short stories has helped me to examine my own uneasiness about writing from a female perspective. In my memoir, I describe how much of the judgement I faced in coming out as a lesbian came from other women. I write about my flatmate:

‘Have you really thought this through?’ Lucy now asks. ‘I mean what does it say about your sexuality? Are you sure this is the lifestyle you want?’

I think it's pretty obvious what it says about my sexuality but Lucy seems so appalled, I just stutter, ‘I love her.’

Lucy purses her lips. She suddenly looks fifty instead of twenty two. ‘I just wouldn't want you to do anything that you'll regret.’

The way she says it makes me feel this is not so much a warning as a threat. I realise she has every intention of making me regret it.¹⁹⁴

This lack of a sense of entitlement, of somehow having to sneak into a club where you’re not welcome, is a feature of many contemporary Irish life writers who write about subjects that were once considered taboo. This includes male memoir writers who have also had to overcome Irish society’s prejudices and preconceived notions about their identity. However what I wish to examine in

¹⁹³ Mannix, p. 322.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 142.

this chapter is the particular ways in which such stereotyping has impacted on women memoir writers. Swindell points out that:

One by one, individual autobiographers are being retrieved from the gaps in literary history and reread from a perspective that insists on the significance of gender in the autobiographical process and product and that challenges the naïve conflation of male subjectivity and human identity[...] From their position of marginality, women have spoken. They have written public autobiography. Nonetheless, when they engage in the autobiographical project, they do so as interlopers.¹⁹⁵

Rather than a reductive theory of autobiography that holds that men are selfish egotists and women are all about multiplicity and sharing, I am interested in the power structures that allow certain kinds of identity to be written about. This I would argue is connected to a fear of censorship and judgment in a repressive society.

Nell McCafferty subtitled her memoir *Nell* 'a disorderly woman' in recognition of the fact that as a Northern Irish lesbian she did not fit into the predefined categories that Irish society had created for who she should be. Her memoir begins with a description of her parents' attempt to deal with her sexuality. 'They turned me over to silence and to God.'¹⁹⁶ This is not because they have rejected her but because they are terrified of what the neighbours will think. McCafferty connects this silence around her own story with that of her mother's brother Brian who was jailed in America for murdering a prostitute and whose name her mother never mentions until she is dying.

McCafferty's fascination with the secrecy and shame around her uncle echoes my own interest in my grandfather whose name was a complete taboo in my mother's family. Irish life writers have a particular interest in discovering the truth about the past perhaps because it allows them to come to terms with the oppressive silences in their own lives. Irish memoirs are often personal acts of rebellion against a society that for so long insisted that if you spoke of certain things, you would be punished. When my grandmother told her children to tell everyone their father was dead as opposed to the truth that she had left him because he was dangerous and mentally ill, I believe she did so not just from a fear of what people would say. At the time she worked for

¹⁹⁵Swindell, p. 5.

¹⁹⁶McCafferty, p. 1.

RTE, the national television company, which made her a civil servant and therefore not entitled to work because of the marriage bar. If she said she was married as opposed to widowed, she would have lost her job and her only means of supporting her four young children.

My grandmother's total silence on the subject of their father was to prove very painful for my mother but it was intended to be protective. Doubtless my grandmother also feared rejection and social isolation as I did for coming out as a lesbian. I write in my memoir:

I wish I could talk to my mother about how my whole life has turned into the strangest dream. I keep pinching myself and expecting to wake up. But she'd never understand. I suspect she'd be very angry and worse, disappointed. 'What about marriage? What about children? What about what your friends will think? What about Colman, he's not the worst surely? What about all those words that exist out there in reality? Dyke, carpet muncher, lezzie, homosexual, pervert...' ¹⁹⁷

To say this is who I am, to lay claim to an identity, requires a certain confidence that this identity is acceptable to the reader. What is acceptable changes over time. As I live in a world where divorce and single parent families have become commonplace, it has been difficult for me to fully grasp what it meant for my grandmother to leave her husband in Ireland in the 1950s. I suspect that, particularly for younger readers, it will be hard to understand why I was so anxious about coming out to my mother as gay. Indeed I hope this is the case but it represents a particular challenge to the life writer who is presenting themselves as a reliable, truthful narrator. Identity is not simply a matter of how the life writer chooses to explain their sense of self; it is bound up in how society and other people label the narrator.

The painful challenges of what constitutes the truth in life writing are vividly illustrated by McCafferty's reaction to O'Faolain's memoirs. McCafferty initially wanted O'Faolain not to write about their lesbian relationship out of fear that it would upset McCafferty's elderly mother. Yet when O'Faolain's memoir was published, McCafferty was deeply offended with how O'Faolain chose to write about their fifteen year relationship. McCafferty explains in her

¹⁹⁷ Mannix, p. 91.

own memoir how she was particularly angry at O’Faolain’s saying in an interview with a magazine:

I never thought of Nell as a woman, and when I woke up with Nell it didn’t seem remarkable to me at all[...] it was much more healthy and life-giving than any relationship with a man. But I would still walk across fifty-nine women to get to one man if I was attracted to him¹⁹⁸

What McCafferty finds hurtful is that O’Faolain never mentions that McCafferty is a writer or considers her lesbian identity to be of any significance. This is rather ironic given O’Faolain’s own horror at Deane’s claim that he didn’t notice the lack of women writers he published. What’s interesting is that it’s not that O’Faolain lies in the literal sense of pretending that she and McCafferty didn’t have a sexual relationship; it’s that she refuses to discuss that having a lesbian relationship was an issue at a time when homosexuality was still very much a taboo in Ireland.

McCafferty argues that by refusing to use the label of lesbian, or to acknowledge McCafferty as a woman or a writer, O’Faolain has distorted the narrative of their relationship so that it reads as if McCafferty were O’Faolain’s lodger rather than her partner. In writing her own memoir, McCafferty deliberately sets out to correct O’Faolain’s narrative by giving a no holds barred account of both their relationship and the homophobic society they lived in. She does so acknowledging that she is taking a huge risk:

This book might take the fear of that word ‘lesbian’ out of me. It might undo my mother. It might undo me. It might undo such social and professional standing as I have, given its demand that I am embraced for all that I am. I will soon know from readers how I am doing with them. I will know how I am doing with myself when I go out to talk about it.¹⁹⁹

Where O’Faolain dealt with the possible homophobia of her readers by avoiding the term lesbian, McCafferty confronts the issue head on. O’Faolain’s memoirs were arguably hugely successful because of their intimate tone and the sense that the narrator was being open and honest

¹⁹⁸ McCafferty, p. 405.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 406

about her own failings and insecurities. In *Almost There*²⁰⁰, the second volume of her memoir, O’Faolain writes:

I think an autobiography is like any other narrative – never better than partial and provisional. But as well as I possibly could, and from the heart, when I managed to start my tale I told the truth.²⁰¹

Yet McCafferty challenges the truthfulness of O’Faolain’s narration by drawing attention to the gaps and silences that O’Faolain leaves because she does not share McCafferty’s sense of a lesbian identity:

I came to the conclusion that Nuala just could not deal with anyone thinking of her as a ‘lesbian’. And if she feared the label ‘lesbian’ – she for whom the lesbian phase was but a fifteen-year moment, and who could still retreat, hand on heart, to the blissful safe, socially sanctioned, God-blessed sanctuary of heterosexuality – then what was it like for me who had no such bolt hole, who could not truthfully say other than that I am lesbian?²⁰²

Reading O’Faolain and McCafferty’s memoirs inspired me to consider the difficult questions around how identity and sense of self influences the perspective of the life writer. Much of my memoir is concerned with the tension between different identities that I struggled to reconcile, particularly being Irish and being a lesbian. I write about living in London and having a phone conversation with my mother inviting me to visit her in my parents’ cottage in the Irish countryside:

I listen to my mother’s enthusiastic descriptions thinking I wish I knew how to be in two places at once. Or rather two different people at the same time. I feel like I’m a rubber band being stretched in different directions and at any moment I might snap.²⁰³

This sense of my identity being torn apart came not just from geographical dislocation. It was a result of discovering that I wasn’t able to be what was expected of me as a woman and led to deep feelings of insecurity, fear, self-

²⁰⁰ Nuala O’Faolain, *Almost There* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2003).

²⁰¹ Nuala O’Faolain, *Are You Somebody?* p. 23.

²⁰² McCafferty, p. 406.

²⁰³ Mannix, p. 248.

loathing and doubt. Reading McCafferty and O'Faolain helped me to realise that I could write from a position of doubt rather than conviction, that I could allow the reader to see that I was struggling to tell truths that were as elusive as my own sense of self. As Edward Said wrote in his memoir *Out of Place*:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance.²⁰⁴

In my conclusion, I argue that this more fluid concept of identity means that the narrator of a memoir is not only a real person but also a number of different characters who exist in particular times and places. The truth of what these characters have to say is not singular; it is plural and shifting and full of contradiction. It is a truth that is deeply permeated by fiction.

²⁰⁴ Said, p. 295.

CONCLUSION

Truth as Different Narratives: True Fiction in Brendan Behan and John McGahern

In my memoir, I explain how my mother makes a connection between her doctor lying to her about her illness and the lies that surrounded her as a child when her mother left her father. I connect this with the guilt I feel about lying to her about my sexuality:

We've reached the pub. My mother pulls open the door. 'Just sometimes I feel there are things you don't tell me.'

'There's not,' I stammer.

We step inside and my mother says, 'Promise me, promise me there's nothing you're not telling me just because I'm sick.'

'I promise,' I reply.

I go to the bar and order a pint of Guinness for myself and a glass for my mother. I think about how I'm lying to her and how this is a betrayal of everything she believes in.²⁰⁵

The need for truth is one of the main themes of my memoir and therefore I have struggled to write my life story as truthfully as possible. Yet in this commentary, I have argued that memory is a creative process, that language constructs experience rather than describes it, and that the narrator of a memoir is inherently unreliable. I have examined how this is particularly true in an Irish postcolonial context where sexual repression has become entwined with national identity. Does this make the whole idea of telling the truth in contemporary Irish life writing a lie? Or is a true story always a mixture of fact and fiction?

The expression 'more Irish than the Irish themselves' has been used to describe countless waves of Irish people from the Norman invaders in the 12th century to second and third generation London Irish in the 21st century. Perhaps this is because there is nothing more Irish than feeling like you're trying to live up to a concept of Irishness that you can't quite grasp. Perhaps because being Irish is as much a myth, a story, as it is a reality. Claire Lynch argues that:

²⁰⁵ Mannix, p. 270.

Autobiography is simultaneously fiction and fact, drawn from both memory and the imagination. This blurring of expectations highlights the intangible nature of autobiography, ostensibly concerned with reality, paradoxically preoccupied with fiction.²⁰⁶

Lynch makes the point that from its beginnings as a nation, for Ireland the myth has always been at least as important, if not more important, than the reality. The 1916 Easter Rising was a military disaster but the British response in executing the rebels turned them into martyrs and paved the way for the war of independence. The stories of their sacrifices came to matter more than the reality of their defeat. Similarly, Irish life writers have sought to mythologize their own experiences for political purposes.

As Liam Harte points out, it is overly simplistic to assume that the accounts of Irish migrants to Britain offer an objective historical account:

To poststructuralist historians and literary critics, however, the practice of reading autobiography referentially in terms of a putatively objective historical reality constitutes an act of gross theoretical naivety. As they see it, narrative is constitutive rather than constative, performative rather than descriptive.²⁰⁷

However Harte argues that lack of objectivity doesn't mean that these accounts are not of considerable social as well as literary importance. Particularly for marginalised people, constructing their own truth in the face of a narrative that either doesn't include them, or dismisses their experiences, is a highly political act. In this sense, Harte believes that Irish life writing is:

[a] form of resistance writing through which culturally disempowered and displaced subjects seek to become known autobiographical agents taking charge of their own representation – a case of the written-off attempting to write themselves back into social and cultural history.²⁰⁸

In this sense, the truth does matter. It is not simply a question of remembering events accurately. Rather like Ireland itself for much of its history, the truth in Irish life writing is highly disputed territory. It is a power

²⁰⁶ Lynch, pp.7-8.

²⁰⁷ Harte, p. xxiii.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. xxii.

struggle that is forever shifting and changing. Life writing is no longer the preserve of 'great men' telling their tales of adventure and mastery over their environment. Swindell argues that 'autobiography is not recognised as one of the important genres of literature'²⁰⁹ but that it 'now has the potential to be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual.'²¹⁰

Many Irish life writers are inspired not so much by a desire to share the facts of their lives but by a need to explore the difficult relationship between the narrative given to them by their society and the narrative they have found themselves living. This sense of questioning has given rise to memoirs that are highly influenced by fiction and which seek to express the Irish life writer's sense of ambiguity about the truth.

In Brendan Behan's *Borstal Boy*, Behan's understanding of himself as an Irish Republican is challenged when, at the age of sixteen, he develops a close relationship with an English sailor in reform school. Published in the late 1950s when homosexuality was still illegal in Ireland and England, it's difficult to say how much of Behan's lack of explicitness about the relationship is internalised and how much is due to external pressure. Though when it's explained to him that Oscar Wilde was not imprisoned for being an Irish rebel but for being gay, Behan refuses to condemn him:

'And you don't know really what he was in for?'

'Well, not exactly,' said I.

'I'll tell you exactly,' said the novelist's nephew, with his grin, and he did tell me exactly. 'What do you think of your Irish rebel now?' said he.

'I think,' said I, 'that every tinker has his own way of dancing, and I think if that shocks you, it's just as well ordinary people didn't hear about it. Because, bejassus, if it shocked you, it'd turn thousands grey.'²¹¹

A large part of *Borstal Boy's* appeal is the lively and believable way in which Behan recreates the dialogue between himself and his fellow inmates. It's interesting to note though that he does not explicitly explain what Wilde's crime was and thus avoids the censorship of the time. The narrator is

²⁰⁹ Swindell, p. 9.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 7.

²¹¹ Behan, p. 245.

expressing an opinion that is taboo and to do so he needs to rely on the reader having information about Wilde that is not present in the text. This is a striking example of how Irish life writers have struggled to express truths that are not allowed to be said.

Borstal Boy reads like a novel because it recreates entire conversations which Behan couldn't possibly remember word for word. Frank McCourt uses similar techniques in *Angela's Ashes*, another memoir about growing up against a background of Irish nationalism, sexual repression and poverty. Despite the book's enormous popular success, *Angela's Ashes* has been attacked for exaggerating the extent of hardship in Ireland. Relatively minor fictionalised details in the book were hauled over the coals as evidence that this was not an accurate portrayal of the city of Limerick. His own brother, Malachy McCourt, later wrote a memoir called *A Monk Swimming*²¹² that arguably offers a less dark recollection of their childhood, though Malachy McCourt doesn't actually contradict his brother's version so much as choose to focus on his own adventures in America as an adult. He uses the language of the witty, drunken Irishman to create a series of hilarious anecdotes for American audiences that serve as a thin cover for his own anger and despair. As he puts it when he describes his reception when he first emigrates to the States:

But the Americans were kind, so I'd tell them I was going to be a doctor an engineer a surgeon a pilot a navigator – anything to bring a smile to the lips of these kindly folks. Truth is, I knew I couldn't do anything at all but tell stories and lies.²¹³

Many contemporary Irish life writers have developed a style of memoir writing that is dependent on engaging storytelling rather than strict adherence to facts. There has arguably been a sense that the truth, like the past, no longer matters because we have moved beyond it. The popularity of memoirs that broke taboos became part of an Ireland that for the Celtic Tiger years seemed so open and honest that readers began to wonder what on earth was left to tell and to feel a certain cynicism about 'misery memoirs'. Fiction writers also

²¹² McCourt, *A Monk Swimming* (New York: Hyperion, 1999).

²¹³ McCourt, p. 6.

found themselves accused of exploiting the mythological status of Irish suffering. For example, Colm Toibin has been criticised for setting his Booker-nominated novel *Brooklyn*²¹⁴ in the dark days of 1950s emigration and repression. Julian Gough argued:

If there is a movement in Ireland, it is backwards. Novel after novel set in the nineteen seventies, sixties, fifties. Reading award-winning Irish literary fiction, you wouldn't know television had been invented. Indeed, they seem apologetic about acknowledging electricity.²¹⁵

Yet since the economic bubble has burst so spectacularly, the old divisions are turning out to perhaps not be so irrelevant after all. Accusations of corruption, lies, cover ups, and betrayals are once again all the rage. In Ireland, Oscar Wilde's observation that 'the truth is rarely pure and never simple'²¹⁶ is now truer than ever. A novel such as Toibin's *Brooklyn* has influenced my own memoir writing because it evokes the sense that the emigrant's life and sense of self will always be profoundly split. They will always be haunted by the other life they could have had if they hadn't left Ireland and thus their sense of reality is deeply permeated by the fiction of what they may have left behind.

Similarly Anne Enright's Booker prize-winning novel *The Gathering*²¹⁷ deals with this theme of memory as uncertain and partly fictional. It is a novel that is written in the style of a memoir in which the main character has forgotten that her brother was sexually abused until the world begins to talk about child abuse. It is unclear if she does remember her brother's abuse or indeed if she was abused herself. The book examines how the impossibility of saying something actually impacts on our ability to remember it.

It will be interesting to see how Irish writers rise to the challenge of making sense of lives led against a cultural background that has shifted so dramatically in such a short space of time. Though the novel has undoubtedly

²¹⁴ Colm Toibin, *Brooklyn* (London: Viking, 2009).

²¹⁵ Alison Flood, 'Julian Gough slams fellow Irish novelists as 'priestly caste' cut off from the culture', *The Guardian*, 11 February 2010. <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/feb/11/julian-gough-irish-novlists-priestly-caste>> [accessed 2 December 2013].

²¹⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays*, ed. by Richard Allen Cave (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).

²¹⁷ Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007).

been enormously influential, the fragmentary, conflictual nature of Irish realities means that it is arguably the short story that has the greatest connection with Irish life writing. In *The Empty Family*²¹⁸, Toibin creates snapshots of people negotiating secrets and lies in their efforts to connect to an Ireland that is not as open or honest as perhaps it likes to imagine. Enright uses the same dark wit in her short stories as she does in her autobiographical *Making Babies*²¹⁹ to show that truths are partial and glimpsed, not over-arching narrative structures. As editor of the *Granta Book of the Irish Short Story*²²⁰, she points out that:

When there is much rubbish talked about a country, when the air is full of large ideas about what we are, or what we are not, then the writer offers truths that are delightful and small. We write against our own foolishness, not anyone else's. In which case the short story is as good a place as any other to keep things real.²²¹

William Trevor is also a master of the small devastating detail that punctures pompous idealism. In his short story 'Death in Jerusalem'²²² he questions the myths surrounding adoring Irish mothers. A priest is on holiday in the Holy Land with his younger brother when he gets a telegram that their mother has died. He delays telling the brother so as not to ruin their holiday. His brother never forgives him and by the end of the story he is judged for being a drunk priest in a holy place. Yet the reader has come to understand that the mother was a cold, harsh, unforgiving woman who has ruined the younger brother's life. The real tragedy is that the younger brother doesn't realise this: he adored his mother. This is a truth that the priest can never get his brother to see. What is striking about this story is that though the priest's lie about the mother's death is at first shocking, the reader comes to understand the lie. Even if they might not have done the same themselves, the reader can see that the priest has good reasons for putting off the literal truth.

²¹⁸ Colm Toibin, *The Empty Family* (London: Viking, 2010).

²¹⁹ Anne Enright, *Making Babies* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004).

²²⁰ Anne Enright, *Granta Book of the Irish Short Story* (London: Granta, 2011).

²²¹ Anne Enright, 'The Irish Short Story', *The Guardian*, 6 November 2010
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/nov/06/anne-enright-irish-short-story>> [accessed 12 December 2013].

²²² William Trevor, 'Death in Jerusalem', *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories*, pp. 455-470.

Reading contemporary Irish short stories has helped me to think of my own memoir in terms of snapshots that are based on real events but are also symbolic of how difficult my grandmother, my mother and myself have found it to tell the truth. I have tried to be honest about the challenge of honesty in life writing:

My Gran believed that God writes all our stories. My mother defiantly believed she was writing her own story. I guess I believed I was writing mine too up until the day I discovered I had no control over the plot whatsoever. Even now, just because I'm writing about the past, doesn't mean I'm not writing in the dark.²²³

I have come to realise that telling the truth is never going to be a straightforward process because there is no such thing as reality and then stories that are an interpretation of that reality. Rather our stories are so deeply embedded in our understanding that they become part of reality even if they are not literally 'true'. Hence the power of fairy tales, myths, family secrets and half-truths retold over generations. To write about your life is not simply to record events as they happened to you, it is to shape and structure these events to create a sense of self or of multiple selves. There is not the world of reality and then descriptions of that reality, just as there is not the self and then descriptions of that self. Describing reality constructs realities just as as describing the self constructs identities. The reality of who you are is deeply enmeshed in the fictions others construct for you and the fictions you construct for yourself. Language is not separate from the self; language makes you who you are.

For example if as a child you are told a lie about where you come from, you might live your whole life on the basis of that lie. Even when you find out it's a lie, this doesn't change all the real decisions/consequences of your having believed that lie and acted on that basis for so many years. If you hadn't believed this lie, you might have constructed a different life for yourself. You might have been somebody else entirely.

²²³ Mannix, p. 18.

These 'lies' are not necessarily deliberate. They are caused as much by the omissions, errors and gaps in the memory of our elders as by purposeful distortion. As most of us do not, in fact, know the whole story of where we come from, but only fragments that are handed down from generation to generation, we all build our identities on a mixture of fact and fiction. We are fictional from the beginning, we pass on these fictions and we make up our own. Yet we don't like to think that our lives are based on lies. There is in most of us a desire to know the truth. To find out what really happened, to know ourselves through knowing the reality of our history.

Yet at the beginning of the 21st century, there is perhaps a tendency to dismiss the truth as somehow no longer relevant to our post-modern lives. This is partly because some critical theorists seem to have moved so far from Aristotle's concept that truth is based on external reality that they no longer accept that any such thing as reality exists. There are only our interpretations of it. Facts are considered passé. However, what actually happened is often of enormous importance to those who have been the victims of abuse. One of Ireland's leading writers of fiction, John McGahern, published his simply titled *Memoir* in 2005, the year before he died. The book in many ways made explicit the dark truths McGahern had explored through his novels and short stories. His novel *The Dark*²²⁴ had been banned in Ireland and he lost his job as a teacher in 1965 because he dared to imply that the main character had been sexually abused by his father. *Memoir* received widespread critical acclaim in Ireland: a sign perhaps of how far the country had moved from the secrecy, censorship and repression of the past.

When asked in an interview whether writing about his own life differed from writing novels, McGahern replied:

In fiction, the most powerful weapon the writer has is suggestion. I think that nearly all good writing is suggestion, and all bad writing is statement. Statement kills off the reader's imagination. With suggestion, the reader takes up from where the writer leaves off. A memoir is tricky because one was itching to alter it so that it conforms to a certain vision, but one is stuck with what happened.²²⁵

²²⁴ John McGahern, *The Dark*, (London: Panther, 1971).

²²⁵ Sean O'Hagan, 'A Family Touched with Madness', *Observer*, 28 August 2005
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/28/fiction.features3>> [accessed 19 December 2013].

Indeed the power of *Memoir* lies in its searing honesty, the unemotional way in which McGahern documents the loss of his mother by giving only the sparse details of a child's view. Reading McGahern was particularly helpful when I came to write the chapters of my own memoir that are set in the hospice where my mother died. It made me realise the power of simply showing what happened rather than attempting to explain or analyse the unfathomable mystery of dying. In writing about grief, it seems to me there is a need to reach an emotional truth both out of respect for the reader and respect for the person who has died. It's a kind of poetry of truth that doesn't pretend to be objective but instead opens a window on to the intense reality of death and the importance of remembering those who are gone.

At the end of *Memoir*, McGahern writes about his mother:

When I reflect on those rare moments when I stumble without warning into that extraordinary sense of security, that deep peace, I know that consciously and unconsciously she has been with me all my life.²²⁶

This very movingly brings together the idea that the past is always with us, that memory is a creative force that keeps the dead alive in our imaginations. In the final pages, McGahern writes about walking with his mother as a child. As Andrew Motion noted in his review for the Guardian, this return to where the narration began gives a sense of wholeness to the story whilst never denying the pain and contradictions of a real life:

But the circular journey of the book proves that McGahern knows he can't ignore - or, imaginatively speaking, do without - the scenes of his childhood. In this sense his book is an act of healing, perhaps even of forgiveness, as well as a probing of deep wounds.²²⁷

L. P. Hartley famously wrote 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there.'²²⁸ This understanding of the passage of time as

²²⁶ John McGahern, *Memoir*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 272.

²²⁷ Andrew Motion, 'Figure in a Landscape', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2005
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/sep/17/featuresreviews.guardianreview5>> [accessed 21 December 2013].

²²⁸ L.P. Hartley, *The Go-Between*, (London: Penguin 1997), p .5.

making my own life somehow alien is an idea that has deeply informed how I've set about structuring my memoir. *Is It Yourself?* is written in the present tense yet most of it is set within two time frames and told by two narrators. The first is myself as a child growing up in the 70s while the second is myself as a young woman in London in the 90s. Then there is a third narrator who is the shadowy figure of the self who's writing the book in the actual present tense that continues to change from moment to moment. It is this narrator who is struggling to grasp at truths that are as elusive as time itself.

I have come to believe that the truth is not an illusion; it is rather an on-going dynamic, often conflicting, dialogue across time and space. This connects with Foucault's rejection of universal truths for an understanding of truth that is the result of power struggles in society:

Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.²²⁹

Stories don't just describe; they create. They are used to enforce not just interpretations of reality but reality itself. We do not have access to direct experience. We only have what we are told about the world, much of which may be inaccurate. This does not mean we should not seek the truth, or as close to the truth as we can possibly get. The struggle to be completely honest is doomed to fail and yet in that very failure lies the power of life writing as a form of literature. This paradox is particularly evident in the popular and critical success of Irish memoirs, which engage with a culture that through its history has become riddled with contradictions, myths, lies, repression and uncertainty. As Seamus Deane puts it in the third volume of his *Field Day Anthology*:

Ireland, the land of betrayers and betrayals, duplicates in its literature the betrayal at the heart of its own condition. Where language is felt to be treacherous, and treachery is native, then language is a betrayal of a betrayal. This makes foreignness important. The only path to

²²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* (London: Penguin Social Sciences, 1991), p. 73.

foreignness is that of exile, and in exile one is forced to take account of a foreign language and of the foreignness of language.²³⁰

It is this sense of alienation and internal division, that language itself is not to be trusted, that makes contemporary Irish life writing particularly relevant both to Irish literature and to life writing as a genre. As McGahern explains:

Ireland has changed more in the last 20 years than it did in the preceding 200 years. From 1800 until 1970, it was a 19th century society. It was only then that the Church started collapsing. I think that it is by focusing on the local that you can best capture that change. If you were to focus on the universal, you'd end up with vagueness. John Donne said love "makes one little room an everywhere." That's what I believe, really, that everything interesting begins with one person and one place.²³¹

This it seems to me is where the real power of life writing as a genre of literature lies. Not in giving the reader the objective facts of a person's life but in drawing us into the world of the writer as they struggle to find the truth of their own experiences. Elizabeth Bowen argued:

One might say that whereas autobiography used to be based on statement, now it derives from query, being tentative rather than positive, no longer didactic but open-minded. It is mobile, exploratory.²³²

I have entitled my memoir *Is It Yourself?* In some ways the whole book is my attempt to answer this question, to say yes, I am myself. I explain in the final chapters how important telling the truth has been in order for me to be able to do this:

But now on my wedding day, I realise the truth comes at a price and that price is the pain caused to others and myself. I also feel deep down that if I'd carried on lying and my mother had died without knowing this fundamental thing about me, I would never have been able to know myself properly. That I would have carried on being a kind of shadow of a person who would never have had the nerve to

²³⁰ Deane, p. 3.

²³¹ Sean O'Hagan, 'A Family Touched with Madness', *Observer*, 28 August 2005
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/aug/28/fiction.features3>> [accessed 22 December 2013]

²³² Elizabeth Bowen, 'Autobiography', in *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (London: Longmans, Green, 1962), p.201.

stand in a room full of the people I care about most and say 'I do.' The best thing about getting married is discovering how happy most people are for me, that love is the opposite of fear and silence. It's a kind of freedom to be who you really are.²³³

I began this critical commentary with the question 'how fictional is the truth?' because I wished to analyse the complex relationship between truth and fiction in contemporary Irish life writing. Traditionally, stories are seen as having a beginning, a middle and an end. The same is true of a person's life but as the life writer is still alive when they write their story, they don't in fact know what the end is nor do they know the beginning as none of us can remember our birth. Rather than a linear narrative, a memoir is more like a Russian doll. Inside the narrator who's writing their story is a slightly different version of themselves at a different point of time. And inside that version is yet another version going back to the earliest memories of a small child. Not only does the narrator contain all these different selves, they also contain the other people they are writing about who are equally as complex and variable. There are stories within stories within stories.

In conclusion, I would argue that what is true in memoirs is deeply permeated by the fictional nature of memory, language, and identity. It is the life writer's search for truth, the questions that are asked rather than the answers that are given, that makes the genre so compelling. Journalists speak of 'digging for the truth' as if it were a buried corpse. But for the life writer, the truth is multi layered and contains seams of reality that are mixed with fictions. It may not be pure but it is rich soil that can yield strange and fascinating fruit.

²³³ Mannix, p. 380.

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