

Early on a Sunday, after first Mass in Clonegal, my father, instead of taking me home, drives deep into Wexford toward the coast, where my mother's people came from. It is a hot August day, bright, with patches of shade and greenish sudden light along the road. We pass through the village of Shillelagh, where my father lost our red shorthorn in a game of forty-five, and on past the mart in Carnew, where the man who won her sold her not long afterward. My father throws his hat on the passenger seat, winds down the window, and smokes. I shake the plaits out of my hair and lie flat on the back seat, looking up through the rear window. I wonder what it will be like, this place belonging to the Kinsellas. I see a tall woman standing over me, making me drink milk still hot from the cow. I see another, less likely version of her, in an apron, pouring pancake batter into a frying pan, asking would I like another, the way my mother sometimes does when she is in good humor. The man will be her size. He will take me to town on the tractor and buy me red lemonade and crisps. Or he'll make me clean out sheds and pick stones and pull ragweed and docks out of the fields. I wonder if they live in an old farmhouse or a new bungalow, whether they will have an outhouse or an indoor bathroom, with a toilet and running water.

An age, it seems, passes before the car slows and turns in to a tarred, narrow lane, then slams over the metal bars of a cattle grid. On either side, thick hedges are trimmed square. At the end of the lane, there's a white house with trees whose limbs are trailing the ground.

"Da," I say. "The trees."

"What about them?"

"They're sick," I say.

"They're weeping willows," he says, and clears his throat.

On the housefront, tall, shiny windowpanes reflect our coming. I see myself looking out from the back seat, as wild as a tinker's child, with my hair all undone, but my father, at the wheel, looks just like my father. A big, loose hound lets out a few rough, halfhearted barks, then sits on the step and looks back at the doorway, where the man has come out to stand. He has a square body like the men my sisters sometimes draw, but his eyebrows are white, to match his hair. He looks nothing like my mother's people, who are all tall, with long arms, and I wonder if we have not come to the wrong house.

"Dan," he says, and tightens himself. "What way are you?"

"John," Da says.

They stand looking out over the yard for a moment and then they are talking rain: how little rain there is, how the priest in Kilmuckridge prayed for rain this very morning, how a summer like this was never before known. There is a pause, during which my father spits, and then the conversation turns to the price of cattle, the E.E.C., butter mountains, the cost of lime and sheep-dip. I am used to it, this way men have of not talking: they like to kick a divot out of the grass with a boot heel, to slap the roof of a car before it takes off, to sit with their legs wide apart, as though they do not care.

When the woman comes out, she pays no heed to the men. She is even taller than my mother, with the same black hair, but hers is cut tight like a helmet. She's wearing a printed blouse and brown, flared trousers. The car door is opened and I am taken out, and kissed.

"The last time I saw you, you were in the pram," she says, and stands back, expecting an answer.

"The pram's broken."

"What happened at all?"

"My brother used it for a wheelbarrow and the wheel fell off."

She laughs and licks her thumb and wipes something off my face. I can feel her thumb, softer than my mother's, wiping whatever it is away. When she looks at my clothes, I see my thin cotton dress, my dusty sandals through her eyes. Neither one of us knows what to say. A queer, ripe breeze is crossing the yard.

"Come on in, *a leanbh*."

She leads me into the house. There's a moment of darkness in the hallway; when I hesitate, she hesitates with me. We walk through into the heat of the kitchen, where I am told to sit down, to make myself at home. Under the smell of baking, there's some disinfectant, some bleach. She lifts a rhubarb tart out of the oven and puts it on the bench. Pale-yellow roses are as still as the jar of water they are standing in.

"So how is your mammy keeping?"

"She won a tenner on the prize bonds."

"She did not."

"She did," I say. "We all had jelly and ice cream and she bought a new tube for the bicycle."

I feel, again, the steel teeth of the comb against my scalp earlier that morning, the strength of my mother's hands as she wove my plaits tight, her belly at my back, hard with the next baby. I think of the clean pants she packed in the suitcase, the letter, and what she must have written. Words had passed between my mother and my father:

*"How long should they keep her?"*

*"Can't they keep her as long as they like?"*

*"Is that what I'll say?"*

*“Say what you like. Isn’t it what you always do.”*

Now the woman fills an enamel jug with milk.

“Your mother must be busy.”

“She’s waiting for them to come and cut the hay.”

“Have ye not the hay cut?” she says. “Aren’t ye late?”

As the men come in from the yard, it grows momentarily dark, then brightens once again when they sit down.

“Well, Missus,” Da says, pulling out a chair.

“Dan,” she says, in a different voice.

“There’s a scorcher of a day.”

“ ’Tis hot, surely.” She turns her back to watch the kettle, waiting.

“Wasn’t it a great year for the hay all the same. Never saw the like of it,” Da says. “The loft is full to capacity. I nearly split my head on the rafters pitching it in.”

I wonder why my father lies about the hay. He is given to lying about things that would be nice, if they were true. Somewhere farther off, someone has started up a chainsaw and it drones on like a big, stinging wasp for a while. I wish I was out there, working. I am unused to sitting still and do not know what to do with my hands. Part of me wants my father to leave me here while another wants him to take me back, to what I know. I am in a spot where I can neither be what I always am nor turn into what I could be.

The kettle rumbles up to the boiling point, its steel lid clapping. Kinsella gets a stack of plates from the cupboard, opens a drawer and takes out knives and forks, teaspoons. He opens a jar of beetroot and puts it on a saucer with a little serving fork, leaves out sandwich spread and salad cream. Already there’s a bowl of tomatoes and onions, chopped fine, a fresh loaf, ham, a block of red cheddar.

“And what way is Mary?” the woman says.

“Mary? She’s coming near her time.”

“I suppose the last babby is getting hardy?”

“Aye,” Da says. “He’s crawling. It’s feeding them that’s the trouble. There’s no appetite like a child’s and, believe you me, this one is no different.”

“Ah, don’t we all eat in spurts, the same as we grow,” the woman says, as though this is something he should know.

“She’ll ate but you can work her.”

Kinsella looks up at his wife. “There’ll be no need for any of that,” he says. “The child will have no more to do than help Edna around the house.”

“We’ll keep the child gladly,” the woman echoes. “She’s welcome here.”

When we sit in at the table, Da tastes the ham and reaches for the beetroot. He doesn’t use the serving fork but pitches it onto the plate with his own. It stains the pink ham, bleeds. Tea is poured. There’s a patchy silence as we eat, our knives and forks breaking up what’s on our plates. After some little scraps of speech, the tart is cut. Cream falls over the hot pastry, into warm pools.

Now that my father has delivered me and eaten his fill, he is anxious to light his fag and get away. Always, it’s the same: he never stays in any place long after he’s eaten, not like my mother, who would talk until it grew dark and light again. This, at least, is what my father says. I have never known it to happen. With my mother it is all work: us, the butter-making, the dinners, the washing up and getting up and getting ready for Mass and school, weaning calves, and hiring men to plow and harrow the fields, stretching the money and setting the alarm for a time before the sun rises. But this is a different type of house. Here there is room to think. There may even be money to spare.

“I’d better hit the road,” Da says.

“What hurry is on you?” Kinsella says.

“The daylight is burning, and I’ve yet the spuds to spray.”

“There’s no fear of blight these evenings,” the woman says, but she gets up anyway, and goes out the back door with a sharp knife. A silence climbs between the men while she is gone.

“Give this to Mary,” she says, coming in. “I’m snowed under with rhubarb, whatever kind of year it is.”

My father takes the rhubarb from her, but it is as awkward as the baby in his arms. A stalk falls to the floor and then another. He waits for her to pick them up, to hand them to him. She waits for him to do it himself. In the end, it’s Kinsella who stoops. “There now,” he says.

Out in the yard, my father throws the rhubarb onto the back seat, gets in behind the wheel, and starts the engine. “Good luck to ye,” he says. “I hope this girl will give no trouble.” He turns to me. “Try not to fall into the fire, you.”

I watch him reverse, turn in to the lane, and drive away. Why did he leave without so much as a goodbye or ever mentioning when he would come back for me?

“What’s ailing you, child?” the woman says.

I look at my feet, dirty in my sandals.

Kinsella stands in close. “Whatever it is, tell us. We won’t mind.”

“Lord God Almighty, didn’t he go and forget all about your wee bits and bobs!” the woman says. “No wonder you’re in a state. Well, hasn’t he a head like a sieve, the same man.”

“Not a word about it,” Kinsella says. “We’ll have you togged out in no time.”

When I follow the woman back inside, I want her to say something, to put me at ease. Instead, she clears the table, picks up the sharp knife, and stands at the window, washing the blade under the running tap. She stares at me as she wipes it clean and puts it away.

“Now, girleen,” she says. “I think it’s nearly time you had a bath.”

She takes me upstairs to a bathroom, plugs the drain, and turns the taps on full. “Hands up,” she says, and pulls my dress off.

She tests the water and I step in, trusting her, but the water is too hot, and I step back out.

“Get in,” she says.

“It’s too hot.”

“You’ll get used to it.”

I put one foot through the steam and feel, again, the same rough scald. I keep my foot in the water, and then, when I think I can’t stand it any longer, my thinking changes, and I can. The water is deeper than any I have ever bathed in. Our mother bathes us in what little she can, and makes us share. After a while, I lie back and through the steam watch the woman as she scrubs my feet. The dirt under my nails she scrapes out with tweezers. She squeezes shampoo from a plastic bottle, lathers my hair, and rinses the lather off. Then she makes me stand and soaps me all over with a cloth. Her hands are like my mother’s hands but there is something else

in them, too, something I have never felt before and have no name for. This is a new place, and new words are needed.

“Now your clothes,” she says.

“I don’t have any clothes.”

“Of course you don’t.” She pauses. “Would some of our old things do you for now?”

“I don’t mind.”

“Good girl.”

She takes me to a bedroom, at the other side of the stairs, and looks through a chest of drawers.

“Maybe these will fit you.”

She is holding a pair of old-fashioned trousers and a new plaid shirt. The sleeves and legs are a bit too long but the waist tightens with a canvas belt, to fit me.

“There now,” she says.

“Mammy says I have to change my pants every day.”

“And what else does your mammy say?”

“She says you can keep me for as long as you like.”

She laughs at this and brushes the knots out of my hair, and turns quiet. The windows are open and I see a stretch of lawn, a vegetable garden, edible things growing in rows, spiky yellow dahlias, a crow with something in his beak which he slowly breaks in two and eats.

“Come down to the well with me,” she says.

“Now?”

“Does now not suit you?”

Something about the way she says this makes me wonder if it’s something that we are not supposed to do.

“Is this a secret?”

“What?”

“I mean, am I not supposed to tell?”

She turns me around, to face her. I have not really looked into her eyes until now. Her eyes are dark blue, pebbled with other blues. In this light she has a mustache.

“There are no secrets in this house, do you hear?”

I don't want to answer back but feel she wants an answer.

“Do you hear me?”

“Yeah.”

“It's not 'yeah.' It's 'yes.' What is it?”

“It's yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, there are no secrets in this house.”

“Where there's a secret,” she says, “there's shame, and shame is something we can do without.”

“O.K.” I take big breaths so I won't cry.

She puts her arm around me. “You're just too young to understand.”

As she says this, I realize that she is just like everyone else, and I wish I was back at home so that the things that I do not understand could be the same as they always are.

Downstairs, she fetches a zinc bucket from the scullery. At first I feel uneasy in the strange clothes, but, walking along, I forget. Kinsella's fields are broad and level, divided with electric fences that she says I must not touch, unless I want a shock. When the wind blows, sections of the longer grass bend over, turning silver. On one strip of land, bony Friesian cows stand all around us, grazing. They have huge bags of milk and long teats. I can hear them pulling the grass up from the roots. Neither one of us talks, the way people sometimes don't, when they

are happy. As soon as I have this thought, I realize that its opposite is also true. We climb over a stile and follow a dry path through the grass to a small iron gate, where stone steps run down to a well. The woman leaves the bucket on the grass and comes down with me.

“Look,” she says. “There’s not a finer well in the parish. Who’d ever know there wasn’t so much as a shower since the first of the month?”

I go down steps until I reach the water.

“Taste it,” she says.

Hanging above us is a big ladle, a shadow cupped in the steel. I reach up and take it from the nail. She holds the belt of my trousers so I won’t fall in.

“It’s deep,” she says. “Be careful.”

I dip the ladle and bring it to my lips. This water is as cool and clean as anything I have ever tasted. I dip it again and lift it level with the sunlight. I drink six measures of water and wish, for now, that this place without shame or secrets could be my home. She takes me back up the steps, then goes down alone. I hear the bucket floating on its side for a moment before it sinks and swallows, making a grateful sound, a glug, before it’s pulled out and lifted.

That night, I expect her to make me kneel down but instead she tucks me in and tells me that I can say a few little prayers in my bed, if that is what I ordinarily do. The light of the day is still bright and strong. She is just about to hang a blanket over the curtain rail, to block it out, when she pauses. “Would you rather I left it?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Yes.”

“Are you afraid of the dark?”

I want to say that I am afraid but am too afraid to say so.

“Never mind,” she says. “It doesn’t matter. You can use the toilet past our room but there’s a chamber pot here, too, if you’d prefer.”

“I’ll be all right,” I say.

“Is your mammy all right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Your mammy. Is she all right?”

“She used to get sick in the mornings but now she doesn’t.”

“Why isn’t the hay in?”

“She hasn’t enough to pay the man. She only just paid him for last year.”

“God help her.” She smooths the sheet across me, sighs. “Do you think she’d be offended if I sent her a few bob?”

“What’s ‘offended?’ ”

“Would she mind?”

I think about this for a while. “She wouldn’t, but Da would.”

“Ah, yes,” she says. “Your father.”

She kisses me, a plain kiss, then says good night. I sit up when she is gone and look around the room. Trains of every color race across the wallpaper. There are no tracks for these trains, but, here and there, a small boy stands off in the distance, waving. He looks happy, but some part of me feels sorry for every version of him. I roll onto my side and, though I know that she wants neither, wonder if my mother will have a girl or a boy this time. I think of my sisters, who will not yet be in bed. I stay awake for as long as I can, then make myself get up and use the chamber pot, but only a dribble comes out. I go back to bed, more than half afraid, and fall asleep. At some point later in the night—it feels much later—the woman comes in. I grow still and breathe as though I have not wakened. I feel the mattress sinking, the weight of her on the bed. Quietly, she leans over me. “God help you, child. If you were mine, I’d never leave you alone with strangers.”

All through the day, I help the woman around the house. She shows me the big white machine that plugs in, a freezer, where what she calls “perishables” can be stored for months without rotting. We make ice cubes, go over every inch of the floors with a Hoovering machine, dig new potatoes, make coleslaw and two loaves, and then she takes the clothes in off the line while they are still damp and sets up a board and starts ironing. She does it all without rushing but she never really stops. Kinsella comes in and makes tea for us out of the well water and drinks it standing up, with a handful of Kimberley biscuits, then goes back out. Later, he comes in again, looking for me. “Is the wee girl there?” he calls.

I go to the door.

“Can you run?”

“What?”

“Are you fast on your feet?” he says.

“Sometimes,” I say.

“Well, run down there to the end of the lane, as far as the box, and run back.”

“The box?” I say.

“The postbox. You’ll see it there. Be as fast as you can.”

I take off, racing, to the end of the lane and find the box and get the letters and race back. Kinsella is looking at his watch. “Not bad,” he says, “for your first time.”

He takes the letters from me. “Do you think there’s money in any of these?”

“I don’t know.”

“Ah, you’d know if there was, surely. The women can smell money. Do you think there’s news?”

“I wouldn’t know,” I say.

“Do you think there’s a wedding invitation?”

I want to laugh.

“It wouldn’t be yours anyhow,” he says. “You’re too young to be getting married. Do you think you’ll get married?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “Mammy says I shouldn’t take a present off a man.”

Kinsella laughs. “She could be right there. Still and all, there’s no two men the same. And it’d be a swift man that would catch you, Long Legs. We’ll try you again tomorrow and see if we can’t improve your time.”

“I’ve to go faster?”

“Oh, aye,” he says. “By the time you’re ready for home you’re to be as fast as a reindeer, so there’ll not be a man in the parish will catch you without a long-handled net and a racing bike.”

After supper and the nine-o'clock news, when Kinsella is reading his newspaper in the parlor, the woman sits me on her lap and idly strokes my bare feet.

"You have nice long toes," she says. "Nice feet."

She makes me lie down with my head on her lap and, with a hair clip, cleans the wax out of my ears.

"You could have planted a geranium in what was there," she says.

When she takes out the hairbrush, I can hear her counting under her breath to a hundred before she stops and plaits it loosely.

And so the days pass. I keep waiting for something to happen, for the ease I feel to end, but each day follows on much like the one before. We wake early with the sun coming in and have eggs of one kind or another with porridge and toast for breakfast. Kinsella puts on his cap and goes out to the yard to milk the cows, and myself and the woman make a list out loud of the jobs that need to be done: we pull rhubarb, make tarts, paint the skirting boards, take all the bedclothes out of the hot-press, Hoover out the spiderwebs, and put all the clothes back in again, make scones, scrub the bathtub, sweep the staircase, polish the furniture, boil onions for onion sauce and put it in containers in the freezer, weed the flower beds, and, when the sun goes down, water things. Then it's a matter of supper and the walk across the fields to the well. Every evening, the television is turned on for the nine-o'clock news and then, after the forecast, I am told that it is time for bed.

One afternoon, while we are topping and tailing gooseberries for jam, Kinsella comes in from the yard and washes and dries his hands and looks at me in a way he has never looked before.

"I think it's past time we got you toggled out, girl."

I am wearing a pair of navy-blue trousers and a blue shirt that the woman pulled out of the chest of drawers.

"What's wrong with her?" the woman says.

"Tomorrow's Sunday, and she'll need something more than that for Mass," he says. "I'll not have her going as she went last week."

"Sure, isn't she clean and tidy?"

"You know what I'm talking about, Edna." He sighs. "Why don't you go up and change and I'll run us into Gorey."

The woman keeps on picking the gooseberries from the colander, stretching her hand out, but a little more slowly each time, for the next one. At one point I think she will stop, but she keeps on until she is finished and

then she gets up and places the colander on the sink and lets out a sound I've never heard anyone make, and slowly goes upstairs.

Kinsella looks at me and smiles a hard kind of a smile. His eyes are not quite still in his head. It's as though there is a big piece of trouble stretching itself out in the back of his mind. He toes the leg of a chair and looks over at me. "You should wash your hands and face before you go to town," he says. "Didn't your father even bother to teach you that much?"

I freeze in the chair, waiting for something much worse to happen, but Kinsella just stands there, locked in the wash of his own speech. As soon as he turns, I race for the stairs, but when I reach the bathroom the door won't open.

"It's all right," the woman says after a while from inside, and then, shortly afterward, opens it. "Sorry for keeping you." She has been crying but she isn't ashamed. "It'll be nice for you to have some clothes of your own," she says then, wiping her eyes. "And Gorey is a nice town. I don't know why I didn't think of taking you there before now."

Town is a crowded place with a wide main street. Outside the shops, many different things are hanging in the sun. There are plastic nets full of beach balls, blow-up toys, and beds that float. A see-through dolphin looks as though he is shivering in a cold breeze. There are plastic spades and matching buckets, molds for sandcastles, grown men digging ice cream out of tubs with little plastic spoons, a van with a man calling, "Fresh fish!"

Kinsella reaches into his pocket and hands me something. "You'll get a choc-ice out of that."

I open my hand and stare at the pound note.

"Couldn't she buy half a dozen choc-ices out of that," the woman says.

"Ah, what is she for, only for spoiling?" Kinsella says.

"What do you say?" the woman says.

"Thanks," I say. "Thank you."

"Well, stretch it out and spend it well," Kinsella says, laughing.

The woman takes me to the draper's and picks out five cotton dresses and some pants and trousers and a few tops. We go behind a curtain so that I can try them on.

"Isn't she tall?" the assistant says.

“We’re all tall,” the woman says.

“She’s the spit and image of her mammy. I can see it now,” the assistant says, and then decides that the lilac dress is the best fit and the most flattering. Mrs. Kinsella agrees. She buys me a printed blouse, too, with short sleeves, blue trousers, and a pair of black leather shoes with a little strap and a buckle, some pants, and white ankle socks. The assistant hands her the docket, and she takes out her purse and pays for it all.

“Well may you wear,” the assistant says. “Isn’t your mammy good to you?”

I don’t know how to answer.

Out in the street, the sun feels strong again, blinding. We meet people the woman knows. Some of them stare at me and ask who I am. One has a new baby in a pushchair. The woman bends down and coos, and he slobbers a little and starts to cry.

“He’s making strange,” the mother says. “Don’t you mind.”

We meet a woman with eyes like picks, who asks whose child I am. When she is told, she says, “Ah, isn’t she company for you all the same, God help you.”

Mrs. Kinsella stiffens, then says, “You must excuse me but this man of mine is waiting, and you know what these men are like.”

“Like fecking bulls, they are,” the woman says. “Haven’t an ounce of patience.”

“God forgive me but if I ever run into that woman again it will be too soon,” Mrs. Kinsella says, when we have rounded the corner.

Before we go back to the car she leaves me loose in a sweetshop. I take my time choosing what I want.

“You got a right load there,” she says, when I come out.

Kinsella has parked in the shade and is sitting with the windows open, reading the newspaper. “Well?” he says. “Did ye get sorted?”

“Aye,” she says.

“Grand,” he says.

I give him the choc-ice and her the Flake and lie on the back seat eating the wine gums, careful not to choke as we cross over bumps in the road. I listen to all the change rattling around in my pocket, the wind rushing through the car, and the little pieces of speech, scraps of gossip, being shared between them in the front.

When we turn in to the yard, another car is parked outside the door. A woman is on the front step, pacing, with her arms crossed.

“Isn’t that Harry Redmond’s girl?”

“I don’t like the look of this,” Kinsella says.

“Oh, John,” she says, rushing over. “I’m sorry to trouble you but didn’t our Michael pass away and there’s not a soul at home. They’re all out on the combines and won’t be back till God knows what hour, and I’ve no way of getting word to them. We’re rightly stuck. Would you ever come down and give us a hand digging the grave?”

“I don’t know that this’ll be any place for you but I can’t leave you here,” the woman says, later the same day. “So get ready and we’ll go, in the name of God.”

I go upstairs and change into my new dress and my ankle socks and shoes.

“Don’t you look nice,” she says, when I come down. “John’s not always easy but he’s hardly ever wrong.”

Walking down the road, we pass houses with their doors and windows wide open, long, flapping clotheslines, gravelled entrances to other lanes. Outside a cottage, a black dog with curls all down his back comes out and barks at us, hotly, through the bars of a gate. At the first crossroads, we meet a heifer, who panics and races past us, lost. All through the walk, the wind blows hard and soft and hard again, through the tall, flowering hedges, the high trees. In the fields, the combines are out cutting the wheat, the barley, and the oats, saving the corn, leaving behind long rows of straw. Farther along, we meet two bare-chested men, their eyes so white in faces that are tanned and dusty. The woman stops to greet them and tells them where we are going.

“Well, it must be a relief to the man, to be out of his misery.”

“Sure, didn’t he reach his three score and ten?” the other says. “What more can any of us hope for?”

We keep on walking, standing in tight to the hedges, the ditches, letting things pass.

“Have you been to a wake before?” the woman asks.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, I might as well tell you. There will be a dead man in a coffin and lots of people and some of them might have a little too much taken.”

“What will they be taking?”

“Drink,” she says.

When we come to the house, several men are leaning against a low wall, smoking. There’s a black ribbon on the door, but, when we go in, the kitchen is bright and packed with people who are talking. The woman who asked Kinsella to dig the grave is there, making sandwiches. There are bottles of red and white lemonade and stout, and, in the middle of all this, a big wooden box with a dead old man lying inside it. His hands are joined, as though he had died praying, a string of rosary beads around his fingers. Some of the men are sitting around the coffin, using the part that’s closed as a counter on which to rest their glasses. One of these is Kinsella.

“There she is,” he says. “Long Legs. Come over here.”

He pulls me onto his lap, and gives me a sip from his glass. “Do you like the taste of that?”

“No.”

He laughs. “Good girl. Don’t ever get a taste for it. If you start, you might never stop, and then you’d wind up like the rest of us.”

He pours red lemonade into a cup for me. I sit on his lap, drinking it and eating queen cakes out of the biscuit tin and looking at the dead man, hoping that his eyes will open.

The people drift in and out, shaking hands, drinking and eating and looking at the dead man, saying what a lovely corpse he is, and doesn’t he look happy now that his agony is over, and who was it who laid him out? They talk of the forecast and the moisture content of corn, of milk quotas and the next general election. I feel myself getting heavy on Kinsella’s lap. “Am I getting heavy?”

“Heavy?” he says. “You’re like a feather, child. Stay where you are.”

I put my head against him but I’m bored and wish there were things to do, other girls who would play.

“She’s getting uneasy,” I hear the woman say.

“What’s ailing her?” another says.

“Ah, it’s no place for the child, really,” she says. “It’s just I didn’t like not to come, and I wouldn’t leave her behind.”

“Sure, I’ll take her home with me, Edna. I’m going now. Can’t you call in and collect her on your way?”

“Oh,” she says. “I don’t know should I.”

“Mine’d be a bit of company for her. Can’t they play away out the back? And that man there won’t budge as long as he has her on his knee.”

Mrs. Kinsella laughs. I have never really heard her laugh till now.

“Sure, maybe, if you don’t mind, Mildred,” she says. “What harm is in it? And we’ll not be long after you.”

“Not a bother,” Mildred says.

When we are out on the road, and the goodbyes are said, Mildred strides on into a pace I can just about keep, and as soon as she rounds the bend the questions start. Hardly is one answered before the next is fired: “Which room did they put you into? Did Kinsella give you money? How much? Does she drink at night? Does he? Are they playing cards up there much? Do ye say the Rosary? Does she put butter or margarine in her pastry? Where does the old dog sleep? Is the freezer packed solid? Does she skimp on things or is she allowed to spend? Are the child’s clothes still hanging in the wardrobe?”

I answer them all easily, until the last. “The child’s clothes?”

“Aye,” she says. “If you’re sleeping in his room you must surely know. Did you not look?”

“Well, she had clothes I wore for all the time I was here, but we went to Gorey this morning and bought new things.”

“This rig-out you’re wearing now? God Almighty,” she says. “Anybody would think you were going on for a hundred.”

“I like it,” I say. “They told me it was flattering.”

“Flattering, is it? Well. Well,” she says. “I suppose it is, after living in the dead’s clothes all this time.”

“What?”

“The Kinsellas’ young lad, you dope. Did you not know?”

I don’t know what to say.

“That must have been some stone they rolled back to find you. Sure, didn’t he follow that auld hound of theirs into the slurry tank and drown? That’s what they say happened anyhow,” she says.

I keep on walking and try not to think about what she has said, even though I can think of little else. The time for the sun to go down is hours from now but the day feels like it is ending. I look at the sky and see the sun, still high, and, far away, a round moon coming out.

“They say John got the gun and took the hound down the field but he hadn’t the heart to shoot him, the softhearted fool.”

We walk on between the bristling hedges, in which small things seem to rustle and move. Chamomile grows along these ditches, wood sage and mint, plants whose names my mother somehow found the time to teach me. Farther along, the same heifer is still lost, in a different part of the road. Soon we come to the place where the black dog is barking through the gate. “Shut up and get in, you,” she says to him.

It’s a cottage she lives in, with uneven slabs of concrete outside the front door, overgrown shrubs and red-hot poker growing tall. Here I must watch my head, my step. When we go in, the place is cluttered and an older woman is smoking at the cooker. There’s a baby in a high chair. He lets out a cry when he sees the woman and drops a handful of marrowfat peas over the edge. “Look at you,” she says. “The state of you.”

I’m not sure if it’s the woman or the child she is talking to. She takes off her cardigan and sits down and starts talking about the wake: who was there, the type of sandwiches that were made, the queen cakes, the corpse who was lying up crooked in the coffin and hadn’t even been shaved properly, how they had plastic rosary beads for him, the poor fucker.

I don’t know whether to sit or stand, to listen or leave, but just as I’m deciding what to do the dog barks and the gate opens and Kinsella comes in, stooping under the doorframe. “Good evening all,” he says.

“Ah, John,” the woman says. “You weren’t long. We’re only in the door. Aren’t we only in the door, child?”

“Yes.”

Kinsella hasn’t taken his eyes off me. “Thanks, Mildred. It was good of you to take her home.”

“It was nothing,” the woman says. “She’s a quiet young one, this.”

“She says what she has to say, and no more. May there be many like her,” he says. “Are you ready to come home, Petal?”

I follow him out to the car, where the woman is waiting. “Were you all right in there?” she says.

I say I was.

“Did she ask you anything?”

“A few things, nothing much.”

“What did she ask you?”

“She asked me if you used butter or margarine in your pastry.”

“Did she ask you anything else?”

“She asked me was the freezer packed tight.”

“There you are,” Kinsella says.

“Did she tell you anything?” the woman asks.

I don't know what to say.

“What did she tell you?”

“She told me you had a little boy who followed the dog into the slurry tank and died, and that I wore his clothes to Mass last Sunday.”

When we get home, the hound comes out to the car to greet us, and I realize that I've not yet heard either one of them call him by his name. Kinsella sighs and goes off, stumbling a little, to milk. When he comes inside, he says he's not ready for bed. He puts what I realize is the boy's jacket on me.

“What are you doing now?” the woman says.

“I'm taking her as far as the strand.”

“You'll be careful with that girl, John Kinsella,” she says. “And don't you go without the lamp.”

“What need is there for a lamp on a night like tonight?” he says, but he takes it anyhow, as it's handed to him.

There's a big moon shining on the yard, chalking our way onto the lane and along the road. Kinsella takes my hand in his. As he does it, I realize that my father has never once held my hand, and some part of me wants Kinsella to let me go, so that I won't have to think about this. It's a hard feeling but, as we walk along, I settle and let the difference between my life at home and the one I have here be.

When we reach the crossroads, we turn right, down a steep hill. The wind is high and hoarse in the trees, tearing fretfully, making the dry boughs rise and swing. It's sweet to feel the open road falling away under us, knowing that we will, at its end, come to the sea. Kinsella says a few meaningless things along the way, then falls quiet, and time passes without seeming to pass, and then we are in a sandy, open space where people must park their cars. It is full of tire marks and potholes, a rubbish bin that seems not to have been emptied in a long time.

“We're almost there now, Petal.”

He leads me up a hill, where tall rushes bend and shake. Then we are standing on the crest of a dark place where the land ends and there is a long strand and water, which I know is deep and stretches all the way to England. Far out, in the darkness, two bright lights are blinking.

Kinsella lets me go and I race down the dune to the place where the black sea hisses up into loud, frothy waves. I run toward them as they back away, and run back, shrieking, when they crash in. Kinsella catches up and takes my shoes off, then his own. We walk along the edge of the sea as it claws at the sand under our bare feet. At one point, he holds me on his shoulders and we go in until the water is up to his knees. Then he walks me back to the tide line, where the dunes begin. Many things have washed up here: plastic bottles, sticks and floats, and, farther on, a stable door whose bolt is broken.

“Some man's horse is loose tonight,” Kinsella says. “You know the fishermen sometimes find horses out at sea. A man I know towed a colt in once and the horse lay down for a long time and then got up. And he was perfect.

“Strange things happen,” he says. “A strange thing happened to you tonight, but Edna meant no harm. It's too good, she is. She wants to believe in the good in others, and sometimes her way of finding out is to trust them, hoping she'll not be disappointed, but she sometimes is.”

I don't know how to answer.

“You don't ever have to say anything,” he says. “Always remember that. Many's the man lost much just because he missed a perfect opportunity to say nothing.”

He laughs then, a queer, sad laugh.

Everything about the night feels strange: to walk to a sea that's always been there, to see it and feel it and fear it in the half-dark, to listen to this man telling me things—about horses being towed in from the deep, about his wife trusting others so she'll learn whom not to trust—things that I don't fully understand, things that may not even be intended for me.

As we turn to head back along the beach, the moon disappears behind a cloud and we cannot see where we are going. At this point, Kinsella lets out a sigh, stops, and lights the lamp.

“Ah, the women are nearly always right, all the same,” he says. “Do you know what the women have a gift for?”

“What?”

“Eventualities. A good woman can look far down the line and smell what’s coming before a man even gets a sniff of it.”

He shines the light along the strand to find our footprints and follow them back, but the only prints he can find are mine. “You must have carried me there,” he says.

I laugh at the thought of my carrying him, at the impossibility, then realize that it was a joke, and I got it.

When the moon comes out again, he turns the lamp off and we easily find the path we took through the dunes. We stop at the top and he puts my shoes back on and then his own and knots the laces. We turn and look at the water.

“See, there’s three lights there now, where there was only two before.”

I look out across the sea. There, the two lights are still blinking, but with another, steady light, shining in between.

“Can you see it?” he says.

“I can,” I say. “It’s there.”

And that is when he puts his arms around me and gathers me into them as though I were his.

After a week of rain, on a Thursday, the letter comes. It is not so much a surprise as a shock. Already I have seen the signs: the shampoo for head lice in the chemist’s shop, the fine-tooth combs. In the gift gallery there are copybooks stacked high, Biro’s, rulers, mechanical-drawing sets. In the hardware, the lunchboxes and satchels and hurling sticks are left out front, where the women can see them.

We come home and take soup, dipping our bread, breaking it, slurping a little, now that we know one another. Afterward, I go with Kinsella out to the hay shed, where he makes me promise not to look while he is welding. I am following him around, I realize, but I cannot help it. It is past the time for the post to come but he does not suggest that I fetch it until evening, after the cows are milked and the milking parlor is swept and scrubbed. “I think it’s time,” he says, washing his boots with the hose.

I get into position, using the front step as a starting block. Kinsella looks at the watch and pulls down his handkerchief as if it was a flag. I race down the yard to the lane, make a tight corner, open the box, get the letters, and race back to the step, knowing that my time was not as fast as yesterday’s.

“Nineteen seconds faster than your first run,” Kinsella says. “And a two-second improvement on yesterday, despite the heavy ground. It’s like the wind, you are.” He takes the letters and goes through them, but today, instead of making jokes about what’s inside of each, he pauses.

“Is that from Mammy?”

“You know,” he says, “I think it could be.”

“Do I have to go home?”

“Well, it’s addressed to Edna, so why don’t we give it in to her and let her read it.”

We go into the parlor, where she is sitting with her feet up, looking through a book of knitting patterns. Kinsella slides the letter onto her lap. She opens it and reads it. It’s one small sheet with writing on both sides. She puts it down, then picks it up and reads it again.

“Well,” she says, “you have a new brother. Nine pounds two ounces. And school starts on Monday. Your mother has asked us to leave you up at the weekend so she can get you togged out and all.”

“I have to go back, then?”

“Aye,” she says. “But sure didn’t you know that?”

I nod.

“You couldn’t stay here forever with us two old forgeries.”

I stand there and stare at the fire, trying not to cry. I don’t so much hear as feel Kinsella leaving the room.

“Don’t upset yourself,” the woman says. “Come over here.”

She shows me pages with knitted jumpers and asks me which pattern I like best, but all the patterns seem to blur together and I just point to one, a blue one, that looks like it might be easy.

“Well, you would pick the hardest one in the book,” she says. “I’d better get started on that this week or you’ll be too big for it by the time it’s knitted.”

Now that I know I must go home, I almost want to go. I wake earlier than usual and look out at the wet fields, the dripping trees, the hills, which seem greener than they did when I came. Kinsella hangs around all day, doing things but not really finishing anything. He says that he has no disks for his angle grinder, no welding

rods, and he cannot find the vise grip. He says that he got so many jobs done in the long stretch of fine weather that there's little left to do.

We are out looking at the calves, who have been fed. With warm water, Kinsella has made up their milk replacement, which they suck from long rubber teats. They look content lying there in a fresh bed of straw.

“Could ye leave me back this evening?”

“This evening?” Kinsella says.

I nod.

“Any evening suits me,” he says. “I’ll take you whenever you want, Petal.”

I look at the day. It is like any other, with a flat gray sky hanging over the yard and the wet hound on watch outside the front door.

“Well, I had better milk early, so,” he says. “Right.” And goes on down the yard past me as though I am already gone.

The woman gives me a brown leather bag. “You can keep this old thing,” she says. “I never have a use for it.”

We fold my clothes and place them inside, along with the Ladybird books we found on the stand at Webb’s in Gorey: “The Three Billy Goats Gruff,” “The Ugly Duckling,” “Snow-White and Rose-Red.” I can remember how the lines go, can match my memory of the words with the words that are written there. She gives me a bar of yellow soap and my facecloth, and the hairbrush she bought for me. As we gather all these things together, I remember where we got them, what was said, the days we spent, and how the sun, for most of the time, was shining.

Just then a car pulls into the yard. I am afraid to look, afraid it is my father, but it’s a neighboring man. “Edna,” he says, in a panic. “Is John about?”

“He’s out at the milking,” she says. “He should be finishing up now.”

He runs across the yard, heavy in his Wellington boots, and minutes later Kinsella sticks his head around the door. “Joe Fortune needs a hand pulling a calf,” he says. “Would you ever run out and finish the parlor off? I have the herd out.”

“I will, surely,” she says.

“I’ll be back just as soon as I can.”

“Don’t I know you will.”

She puts on her anorak and I watch her go down the yard. I wonder if I should go out to help but I come to the conclusion that I’d only be in the way. I sit in the armchair and look out to where a watery light is shining off the zinc bucket in the scullery. I could go to the well for water for her tea. It could be the last thing I do.

I put on the boy’s jacket, take up the bucket, and walk down the fields. I know the way, could find the well with my eyes closed. When I cross the stile, the path does not look like the same path we followed on that first evening here. The way is muddy now and slippery in places. I trudge on along toward the little iron gate and down the steps. The water is much higher these days. I was on the fifth step that first evening here, but now I stand on the first and see the surface of the water reaching up and just about sucking the edge of the step that’s one down from me. I bend with the bucket, letting it float then sink, as the woman does, but when I reach out to lift it another hand just like mine seems to come out of the water and pull me in.

It is not that evening or the following one but the evening after, on the Sunday, that I am taken home. When I come back from the well, soaked to the skin, the woman takes one look at me and turns very still before she gathers me up and takes me inside and makes up my bed again.

The following morning, I do not feel hot, but she keeps me upstairs, bringing me warm drinks with lemon and cloves and honey, aspirin.

“ ’Tis nothing but a chill, she has,” I hear Kinsella say.

“When I think of what could have happened.”

“If you’ve said that once, you’ve said it a hundred times.”

“But—”

“Nothing happened, and the girl is grand. And that’s the end of it.”

I lie there with the hot-water bottle, listening to the rain and looking through my books, making up something slightly different to happen at the end of each, each time.

On Sunday, I am allowed to get up, and we pack everything again, as before. Toward evening, we have supper, and wash and change into our good clothes. The sun has come out, is lingering in long, cool slants, and the yard is dry in places. Sooner than I would like, we are ready and in the car, turning down the lane, going up through Gorey and on, along the narrow roads through Carnew and Shillelagh.

“That’s where Da lost the red heifer playing cards,” I say.

“Wasn’t that some wager?” the woman says.

“It was some loss for him,” Kinsella says.

When we get to our lane, the gates are closed and Kinsella gets out to open them, then closes them behind us, and drives on very slowly to the house. I feel, now, that the woman is trying to make up her mind whether she should say something to me, but I don’t really have any idea what it is, and she gives me no clue. The car stops in front of the house, the dogs bark, and my sisters race out. I see my mother through the window, with what is now the second youngest in her arms.

Inside, the house feels damp and cold. The lino is tracked over with dirty footprints. Mammy stands there with my little brother, and looks at me. “You’ve grown,” she says.

“Yes,” I say.

“ ‘Yes,’ is it?” she says, and raises her eyebrows.

She bids the Kinsellas good evening and tells them to sit down—if they can find a place to sit—and fills the kettle from the bucket under the kitchen table. We move playthings off the car seat under the window, and sit down. Mugs are taken off the dresser, a loaf of bread is sliced, butter and jam left out.

“Oh, I brought you jam,” the woman says. “Don’t let me forget to give it to you, Mary.”

“I made this out of the rhubarb you sent down,” Ma says. “That’s the last of it.”

“I should have brought more,” the woman says. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“Where’s the new addition?” Kinsella asks.

“Oh, he’s up in the room there. You’ll hear him soon enough.”

“Is he sleeping through the night for you?”

“On and off,” Ma says. “The same child could crow at any hour.”

My sisters look at me as though I am an English cousin, coming over to touch my dress, the buckles on my shoes. They seem different, thinner, and have nothing to say. We sit in to the table and eat the bread and drink the tea. When a cry is heard from upstairs, Ma gives my brother to Mrs. Kinsella, and goes up to fetch the baby. He is pink and crying, his fists tight. He looks bigger than the last, stronger.

“Isn’t there a fine child, God bless him,” Kinsella says.

Ma pours more tea with one hand and sits down and takes her breast out for the baby. Her doing this in front of Kinsella makes me blush. Seeing me blush, Ma gives me a long, deep look.

“No sign of himself?” Kinsella says.

“He went out there earlier, wherever he’s gone,” Ma says.

A little bit of talk starts up then, little balls of speech they seem to kick uneasily back and forth. Soon after, a car is heard outside. Nothing more is said until my father appears, and throws his hat on the dresser.

“Evening, all,” he says.

“Dan,” Kinsella says.

“Ah, there’s the prodigal child,” he says. “You came back to us, did you?”

I say I did.

“Did she give trouble?”

“Trouble?” Kinsella says. “Good as gold, she was, the same girl.”

“Is that so?” Da says, sitting down. “Well, isn’t that a relief.”

“You’ll want to sit in,” Mrs. Kinsella says, “and get your supper.”

“I had a liquid supper,” Da says, “down in Parkbridge.”

I sneeze then, and reach into my pocket for my handkerchief, and blow my nose.

“Have you caught cold?” Ma asks.

“No,” I say, hoarsely.

“You haven’t?”

“Nothing happened.”

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t catch cold,” I say.

“I see,” she says, giving me another deep look.

“The child’s been in bed for the last couple of days,” Kinsella says. “Didn’t she catch herself a wee chill.”

“Aye,” Da says. “You couldn’t mind them. You know yourself.”

“Dan,” Ma says, in a steel voice.

Mrs. Kinsella looks uneasy.

“You know, I think it’s nearly time that we were making tracks,” Kinsella says. “It’s a long road home.”

“Ah, what’s the big hurry?” Ma says.

“No hurry at all, Mary, just the usual. These cows don’t give you any opportunity to have a lie-in.”

He gets up then and takes my little brother from his wife and gives him to my father. My father takes the child and looks across at the baby suckling. I sneeze and blow my nose again.

“That’s a right dose you came home with,” Da says.

“It’s nothing she hasn’t caught before and won’t catch again,” Ma says. “Sure, isn’t it going around?”

“Are you ready for home?” Kinsella asks.

Mrs. Kinsella stands then, and they say their goodbyes. I follow them out to the car with my mother, who still has the baby in her arms. Mrs. Kinsella takes out the cardboard box with the pots of jam. Kinsella lifts a four-stone sack of potatoes out of the boot. “These are floury,” he says. “Queens they are, Mary.”

My mother thanks them, saying it was a lovely thing they did, to keep me.

“The girl was welcome and is welcome again, anytime,” the woman says.

“She’s a credit to you, Mary,” Kinsella says. “You keep your head in the books,” he says to me. “I want to see gold stars on them copybooks next time I come up here.” He gives me a kiss then, and the woman hugs me. I watch them getting into the car and closing the doors and I feel a start when the engine turns and the car begins to move away.

“What happened at all?” Ma says, now that the car is gone.

“Nothing,” I say.

“Tell me.”

“Nothing happened.” This is my mother I am speaking to but I have learned enough, grown enough, to know that what happened is not something I need ever mention. It is my perfect opportunity to say nothing.

I hear the car braking on the gravel in the lane, the door opening, and then I am doing what I do best. It’s nothing I have to think about. I take off from standing and race on down the lane. My heart feels not so much in my chest as in my hands. I am carrying it along swiftly, as though I have become the messenger for what is going on inside me. Several things flash through my mind: the boy on the wallpaper, the gooseberries, that moment when the bucket pulled me under, the lost heifer, the third light on the water. I think of my summer, of now, of a tomorrow that I can’t entirely believe in.

As I am rounding the bend, reaching the point where I daren’t look, I see him there, closing the gate, putting the clamp back on. His eyes are down, and he seems to be looking at his hands, at what he is doing. My feet batter on along the rough gravel, the strip of tatty grass in the middle of our lane. There is only one thing I care about now, and my feet are carrying me there. As soon as he sees me, he grows still. By the time I reach him, the gate is open and I am smack against him and lifted into his arms. For a long stretch, he holds me tight. I feel the thumping of my heart, my breaths coming out, then my heart and my breaths settling differently. At a point, which feels much later, a sudden gust blows through the trees and shakes big, fat raindrops over us. My eyes are closed now and I can feel him, the heat of him coming through his good clothes, can smell the soap on his neck. When I finally open my eyes and look over his shoulder, it is my father I see, coming along strong and steady, his walking stick in his hand. I hold on as though I’ll drown if I let go, and listen to the woman, who seems, in her throat, to be taking it in turns sobbing and crying, as though she is crying not for one but for two now. I daren’t keep my eyes open and yet I do, staring up the lane, past Kinsella’s shoulder, seeing what he can’t. If some part of me wants with all my heart to get down and tell the woman who has minded me so well that I will never, never tell, something deeper keeps me there in Kinsella’s arms, holding on.

“Daddy,” I keep calling him, keep warning him. “Daddy.” ♦