The Woman's Daughter

Dermot Bolger

Dermot Bolger
The Woman's Daughter

Аннотация

A classic Bolger novel, following the lives of three women.Set in the grimy backstreets and suburbs of Dublin. Bolger has often used a woman's voice to tell his story, and this novel is no exception; we follow the lives of three women – a Victorian maid, a young woman brought up in the 1960s (the product of a violent family) and that young woman's daughter, the child of an incestuous relationship, hidden away from sight.

Содержание

Contents 5
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента. 63

DERMOT BOLGER

The Woman's Daughter

Flamingo
An Imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*

In Memoriam

'Although *finn* strictly means a colour, it is used to designate water that is clear or transparent. In this way is formed the name Finglas from *glais,* a little stream: *Finn-glais* (so written in many old authorities), Crystal Rivulet.'

– Joyce, P. W. (The Origin and History of Irish Place Names, Vol. II, 1883)

'But you'll have to ask that same four that named them is always snugging in your barsalooner, saying they're the best relicts of Conal O'Daniel and writing *Finglas Since the Flood.* That'll be some kingly work in progress.'

– Joyce, James (Finnegans Wake)

Contents

Cover
Title Page
PART ONE: The Woman's Daughter
PART TWO: Victoriana
PART THREE: The Crystal Rivulet
About the Author
From the reviews for *The Woman's Daughter:*
By the same author
Copyright
About the Publisher
PART ONE *The Woman's Daughter*

There is a city of the dead standing sentinel across from her window. Through the gully between them a swollen rivulet is frothing over smooth rocks brimming with the effervescent waste of factories. Within its boundaries grey slabs of granite are flecked with shards of mud as sheets of rain churn up the black pools that nestle in the webbed tyre tracks. Above its crumbling lanes and avenues stooped ivy-covered trees shiver over the homes where no soul moves.

There is a city of the dead that edges down the grass bank towards her window. To the brink of the rivulet that sprays out from an underground pipe. The gnarled fingers of its railing slot shadows over tombstones from the illuminated carriageway. The

holes on the pitch-and-putt course breathe easy without their spears. The alarm on the pub wall waits, broken glass in the car-park dreams of tyres. The last lorry lurches down the steep hill and onward towards the countryside. The bored attendant in the all-night garage cradles his head beside the ranks of switches and dials. The cables and monitors hum in his glass vault, the night's takings snug in the floor safe. He seems to be the only living thing as he lifts his head to gaze across the gleaming forecourt to the railings outlined in the yellow light. Yet even there life stirs invisibly downward. Below the plain stones and pillared crypts that end united in the soil, there comes the inaudible creak of life bursting through. The sigh that is clay capsizing, the bustle of blind creatures being eternally renewed.

There is a city of the dead whose gates all fear to enter. Every morning the woman observes it when she leaves her home. Each evening it stands there, patiently awaiting her return. In the hours between she sits beside the conveyor belt picking the indented cans from the incessant silver stream. At night, when the curtain moves in the room, the moon sketches out the grey stones and rushing water like a sole universe. In daylight the curtain never moves, the room staying in darkness which we have never known.

Would we find a figure there stretched in the blackness? Could it live or breathe? Since the sword of light retreated beneath the door it has lain stationary. What could it dream of, knowing no world beyond these walls, the nightlit river and stones? Food? Light? A Saviour? A trickle of blood? The

woman's stories constantly retold?

If our eyes grew accustomed to such darkness we might discern the shape of a nightdress, the outline of a girl and long folds of lank hair. Our ears, still unattuned, hear nothing, yet her head twists towards the door and one elbow lifts her from the bed. Just when we're certain she's been mistaken the key burrows into the stiff lock, the glass panels shiver as the front door slams and the footsteps commence on the stairs. One step, two step, the bogeyman is coming. Three step, four step, your mother is home. The girl's head swings upwards and one bare foot reaches slowly out for the cold lino. The beam of light swarming through the keyhole would catch the white bend of her knee and then be blocked by the key blinking in the lock and the flood of electric light saturating her eyes with a searing whiteness through which the woman came home exhausted from her work.

But it is night now, they should be sleeping according to the ritual played out in that house day after day. The woman returned to her parents' bed, the child silent in her own. Soon it will be time for the woman to rise, a second before the clock would shatter the stillness if not smothered by her hand. She should stand cooking breakfast in the winter dark, two cracked bowls of thick steaming porridge carried up the stairs. Her mind returning to the worry of leaving the house for work, the exhortations for silence, the fable of the man who guards the stairs, the double checking of each lock.

Except that one of them is squatting in a heap beneath the

window with the curtain torn down. The single bed is empty, the blankets forming mountain ridges across the floor. She hugs herself as her eyes, terrified, never leave the woman sitting on the chair beside the door that should not be open, above the hallway where the shards of hammered glass glint in the streetlight coming through the broken frame. The night air like an intruder sneaks in, carrying off the stale smell of sweat and urine and polish. The woman lifts her head.

I should never never have let that plumber in. It was him started it all. The first person since those busybodies inside the house for eighteen years. I wouldn't have let him in at all only the Corporation sent him and he refused to go away. The typical sneaky sort he was, asking all sorts of questions.

'I suppose you're lonely here all alone?'

All alone, I ask you! You needn't think that he fooled me for a moment. He was sent by them down the street, always prying around and trying to poke their noses in. Do you remember the trouble I had trying to mend that tank the time the ballcock broke? Balanced up on the ladder stuck in the bathtub in my nightdress with both hands plunged deep into the icy tank trying to do something that would fix it. And the water pouring out into the yard from the overflow pipe up beside the gutter for three days in a thundering fountain that formed a black pool swirling down the drain. A good skirt I wasted trying to block the hole where the water kept rushing into the tank.

And then I came down here and sat beside your bed with

my hands all red-raw and numb from the freezing water, and I thought you were asleep until you sat up in the darkness to reach out and begin to blow warm air on my palms and rub them till they started to thaw. There was just the two of us like always, but you were nursing me for a change, and though from the side of the house we could hear the torrent of water splashing down into the yard, we were cut adrift all high and dry like Noah sailing off in his Ark.

I was so happy that night with my hands in yours as if it made up for everything. Because I could have been all sorts of things, you know. I had talent when I was young. In school I used to be in plays in the classroom, and once Kitty Murphy and myself did a sketch for the Christmas show at the Parochial Hall. We were dressed up as cleaning ladies with mops and buckets and curlers in our hair and the whole place roared with laughter. But you know, I wouldn't swap that night for the whole world, with the two of us up here and you leaning forward to blow warm air all over my hands.

But still they'd no right to call in the Corporation. What business was it of theirs if there was water coming down. In the end, I would have found a way to fix it like I always do, or turn the water off from the street with that big metal key that Daddy used to keep in the shed.

He battered at the door like a policeman and I ducked down behind the glass, but he must have seen me for he banged and banged till I ran upstairs and warned you to lie still as I locked

your room. Then he was all smiles when I opened the front door.

'Sorry to bother you, Miss O'Connor, but we believe you might have a bit of trouble with your water tank.'

A great big slob he was in his dirty blue overalls with a cigarette perpetually hung between two rows of brown teeth. I let him up into the attic all right, but he was getting no information out of me. I just stared dumb at him the whole time and then watched him from behind the curtains till he drove off in his van.

All alone! This is my house, and my parents' before me, and they'd better learn to respect it. I chased them off with a bread knife the last time they came calling. The tenants' association, the community week, join this, pay that. I know what they were after. You should have seen them run that night when I grabbed the knife, shoving each other out of the gate like their tails were on fire.

The child had to be fed. That was why she had always shrugged her way to the front of the crowd gathered around the clock. That was why each evening she had to be the first to squeeze her card down into the machine and wait for the click. The child had to be fed. The responsibility blotted every other thought out as she hurried down the passageway without time to join the cluster of women chatting as they put on their coats and smoked in the cloakroom. Out through the cars and bikes and noisy groups walking towards the gates and down the long carriageway where the old woods used to be.

All that was left was the secret snake of the rivulet that glinted

to her here and there down in the steep gully that ran beside the dairy. A few trees remained with their roots exposed on the steep bank and often from one of these the children would tie a thick rope to one of the high protruding branches and out they would swing, three and four girls and boys at a time, clutching each other as they hung on to the rim of the old tyre suspended from the end of the cord. They screeched as they lurched out through the blue air above the swirling water and when they were carried back it seemed as if they would never reach the crumbling ledge of earth again. Then one of the boys would catch his foot on the exposed root and they would all fall backwards in a tumbling heap of jeans and skirts as fresh pairs of hands grabbed the tyre before it swung out into orbit again.

The woman loved to pause and watch them from the path alongside the carriageway but the child had to be fed and so she hurried on, past the spot where the old woman once sold wafers of ice-cream from her cottage shop on Sunday mornings, and up the steep hill towards the estate. She walked quickly here, with her head to one side, always gazing down as she imagined the gauntlet of eyes behind windows. Often she found herself suppressing the childhood habit of alternating her steps to avoid the cracks in the pavement and she almost ran the final steps to the sanctuary of the doorway. Sunlight ran briefly down the lino her father had laid in the hall and then was caught and flung back as the door closed. She leaned against the glass for a moment in the musty hallway and listened for the first creak of the mattress

above her.

Don't stare at me like that, you frighten me with those eyes. They've gone now, I tell you, they'll never harm you. I've always looked after you, you know I always will. Don't move away from me again, come back daughter, come here like you used to, do you remember? Take down your dress and rock in my arms the way you loved to when you were small. And I'll tell you a story; I'll tell you how we came here, me and Johnny and Mammy and Daddy.

We were all up on top of a huge open lorry and Daddy was cursing because he couldn't get the rope to fit around it. There was a crowd of neighbours from Rutland Street gathered around the lorry and he'd bought a bag of Lemon's boiled sweets for all my friends even though it wasn't Saturday. They kept jumping up and waving at me until I felt like a film star, and then Daddy climbed in beside the driver and with a big black puff of smoke we moved off with the children running behind and old Mrs O'Byrne from the same landing leaning out of her window and calling to my mother who was sitting on one of the new chairs.

We drove away up the North Circular Road with Johnny and myself clasping our hands under the chairs to keep from falling off, past Doyle's Corner until we came over Cross Guns Bridge and saw the big flashing lock of the canal at the flour mill where that woman was murdered, and then out past the orphanage where all the boys in short trousers with their hair cropped like convicts raced over to the tall railings to stare at us and shout at

Johnny, and then along by the grey stone wall with the towers till we reached the railings of the cemetery. That scared me when I saw it first, with those carved out tombs of priests and bishops just within the walls covering the bones of figures stretched out in stone, and the big crowd of sombre mourners waiting for some hearse. And then we reached the countryside with the big houses set in their own grounds across from the graveyard and the road sweeping down towards the stone bridge with a pub where the wood began.

We swung left there and up that hill where there was a little row of small cottages and a country lane leading down to the back of the dairy. It felt like we were out in Meath or Wicklow. And then the truck swung left again into an uneven road and we had to grip the chairs tight to cling on. And as I swung my head round to see this street with muck and stones from the builders all over the road and every second house still empty, I got so excited I almost cried out with so much space everywhere.

Another crowd gathered when the lorry pulled up, but this time nobody waved to us. Instead the children stared silently from the doorways or called backwards to their parents inside. My father got out and I could see he was angry. He stood looking up at the furniture as if he wanted to bundle it all up under his coat and run inside.

'We should have waited for darkness,' he said, 'to get the stuff into the house.' He carefully avoided the watching eyes as he hauled at the ropes, only intent on trying to save his pride.

My mother was different. She climbed down from the truck and stood there brushing her hands as if every detail of the street was to be savoured like a prize. A neighbouring woman approached her and with a careless wave of her hair she was gone off to drink tea in a kitchen. Some of the children came closer and craned their necks to gaze up.

'Oi, headtheball, where'd ya get the sister?' one boy shouted and they all laughed. Johnny sat with his feet swinging over the edge of the lorry talking to them. He jumped down to join the crowd as they moved off and called to me over his shoulder. But even though I wanted to follow, I stayed there expecting him to turn again or stop and call for me, but he never bothered and they all just ran on with their feet scrambling for a kick at a small plastic ball.

My father and the driver were working without ever exchanging a word, shifting piece after piece of furniture in through the hall door. After a while, the driver stopped as if asserting his independence and offered Daddy a cigarette. They stood in the doorway silently smoking. The winter twilight was coming in, dragging a cold mist down with it.

I walked past them into the hall and climbed the bare stairs to the top step. *This is my step,* I thought, *this is my house.* I said it over and over again as if I couldn't believe that other floors weren't built on top of it and people would not keep tramping up and down to them. And as I sat up there on that floorboard in the darkness, gazing down with a strange sense of pride at the bare

circle of light in the hall, it seemed as if a child's bony fingers reached out to pinch my back from the empty landing behind me. I never turned my head, I sat perfectly still, watching the backs of the two men as they bent beneath their loads, and listening to the echo of their boots retreating down the concrete path.

Every morning the same; the monotonous meals prepared and carried upstairs, the silence when they sat, the manic cheerfulness of the woman's voice as she unveiled the small tokens of gossip and snatches of conversation she spends her day inventing to carry home like worms in her beak. And then the irretrievable silence settling like dust in the room when the train of lies slows to a halt and there is nothing left to make of the day. Then sometimes, like now, the story will begin, narrated over and over, part by part, as if some key that had been mislaid in all the other tellings might suddenly glint in the light of this one. Again and again the faces, the actions, the voices of this house, as if the recounting could somehow exorcize them. Always she begins it for the girl whose mute eyes show no recognition. Always she finishes it for herself as if only the chain of memories sustained her.

The sitting-room was always cold, no matter if you lit a fire. You could put a glass of ice beside the heater and it wouldn't melt. At first Johnny would never go upstairs by himself. I'd find him alone in the hall and he'd take my hand even though I was smaller. We'd ascend, step by step, always expecting to find white eyes staring at us through the banisters. And then we'd stand at the top

feeling foolish, confronted only by three white doors. At night we often heard the sitting-room door slam, even after Daddy had carefully locked it.

The priest came at dusk in a long black cloak and my arms ached from helping Mammy to scrub the lino clean. We knelt in a circle with beads in our hands while he blessed the house in Latin. He took out a framed picture of the Pope and wrote our details in the slots below it, and we hung it across the room from the Sacred Heart lamp. The sitting-room door never banged any more. It was always kept locked and only used for visitors. Even now, I'm frightened before I open that door, as if Mammy and Daddy are still kneeling there, the beads in their hands criss-crossed by cobwebs.

This is the spot where the archers' horses paused first by the stream. They shook their manes that were caked with mud and lowered their noses towards the water. The King rode past with his lieutenants and stopped to examine the ancient trees which the saint had planted there. Sunlight quivered through the thick foliage and sparkled upon the axes the foreigners carried by their sides. Here where two streams met, a mile from the village, they made their camp in the woods. The axes bit into the trunks, the sap ran over the blade. They fell with a loud crackling of limbs. The beech trees and the yew were sliced and shaped into arrows, the ash was bent into long bows. Campfires flickered through the dense forest where peasants watched from the shelter of bushes. Scouts rode back and forth from the walls of the Pale, rabbits

bolted into burrows between the roots of trees.

An archer shivers and cries in his sleep, the friends who bury him catch his inheritance. Plague runs swiftly through the ranks, delirious strangers shiver among brambles and day lilies as they await death. On the hillside above the rivulet, Henry surveys the trench being dug. Clad in mail the bodies tumble down, some of them still breathing. The horsemen ride towards the coast, the peasants come out to stand in the clearing. They run the white shavings of ash and yew between their fingers. A summer breeze blows down from the north, the limbs of the sacred trees bow their heads secretively.

Below the window we could see the stream, but not set in a park like it is now. There were big tangles of bushes and old trees down there, and you could watch it disappear into the meadow that was walled in by the convent. Sometimes after dinner on Sundays, Mammy would cajole Daddy to walk with us down Washerwoman's Hill to the Botanic Gardens. There'd be rows of black bicycles parked outside and crowds walking along the bright avenues of flowers. And the first place we'd always visit would be the huge glasshouses, all dripping wet in the steeping heat with tropical plants reaching up to the sky and water lilies in bloom on the walled pond. But I'd grow impatient and I'd tug at her hand, and drag her out past the sign beside the door forbidding perambulators.

They'd laugh at my haste as I pulled them along, through the old trees and grasses where nobody else went until I came to the

wall with the convent. There we could see it again, brown now and sluggish, flowing out of that silent valley where nuns walked. Johnny and I would drop petals in it and walk along, following their progress till it came to a turn where the water banked steeply with a wild spray of foam down a waterfall and sped away. We'd race across the bridge, trying to keep up as the petals bobbed and spun in a white tide, but we could never catch them as they spun away, past the rose garden to escape down through Drumcondra. And every night when Johnny and I lay together in bed, we'd invent all sorts of plans for the future.

Do you know the one dream we always both had? What we both said we'd do when we were big enough? One morning we would set out off up the country and find where the stream first rose from the earth, and then we'd walk every step of its path, down Watery Lane and across the North Road, through the village and down the steep valley through the woods, then past our house and we'd wade into the convent grounds, through the Botanic Gardens and go on down by the parks and the factories, and on and on until we finally came to where it entered the sea. And there we'd stand together like those explorers in that film in the Casino who'd discovered the source of the Nile.

There is a legend of the dead, unboxed and unaccounted for: the story of a hunger spreading across a land. Small cabins caving in and skeletons in rags crawling through the woodland to beg alms from horsemen galloping towards the walled houses beyond Shallon. The year they stripped the carvings from the walls

of the ancient reformed church, where the stench of the dead in the crypts beneath the flagstones had begun to sicken their descendants kneeling at prayer. Past the unmarked plot where the cross lay buried since Cromwell, by the gates of Dr Harty's asylum at Farnham where twenty-two opulent incurables ranted, and through the small lane at the rear of the tavern, the chiselled marble carried in procession towards a newly consecrated home.

There are stories with nobody left to remember: of smallpox and cholera secreted in the breath of children panting from mud-hut to famished hovel, and of the headland where two streams met at the forest edge where each evening they laid them hastily, unnumbered and still warm in the open pit outside the forked railings of the cemetery.

There are legends of lights leading to nowhere, of hungers in isolated places that could waste a person. There are spikes and concrete foundations, cables twisting through the vaults beneath floorboards. There are skulls of children smiling upward.

At a quarter to nine every morning, Kitty Murphy would call for me and we would walk together to school. There was a steep bank beside the school wall and a bush that we loved to climb through. Then we'd walk primly up the steps where Sister Carmel was watching in the yard. We were in the middle one of the three classrooms lit by high, narrow windows that could only be opened by pulling long cords. There was a stove in the corner to keep us warm and two quivering tubs of ink in each desk. You'll never know what I saved you from by never letting them get at you.

Each morning I would be hauled up and Sister Carmel would ask me my name. I'd stand in that space in front of the desks where the floorboards glistened with polish and swallow once or twice before I'd say, 'Sandra, Sister.' She'd grab my hand screaming, 'What sort of a mother have you at all!' and I'd feel the pain shoot up my arm like an electric shock. Twice the thin cane would flash and she'd shout, 'What class of a mother gave you a pagan name?' as my other wrist was clenched by her fingers. My hand would not open and the cane cracked against the white knuckles.

'Your name is Brigid, after our saint. Now what is your name?' And all I could think of was that woman waiting for me at home, of how I could hug her in the hall when I escaped from here, and I could never utter the foreign name they wanted. I'd stand silently with the palms of my hands buried under my armpits and the tears streaking down my face as I watched that old, puckered face in the habit staring down at me.

'We'll make you a Christian yet, no girl here will have a pagan name!' Then the cane would dart across my bare legs as I jumped back against the wooden desk and she'd prompt the class to take up the steadily rising chant, 'Brigid, Brigid, your name is Brigid!' All the smug Claires and Marys and Teresas, thankful for the diversion and glad that it wasn't them. And when I finally said, 'Brigid, my name is Brigid,' I knew it was a betrayal of the woman I loved.

At three o'clock the bell would ring and we'd burst out

screaming through the gates. The girls would gang up, chanting 'Frigid Brigid! Frigid Brigid!' and follow me and Kitty Murphy to the end of our street. I'd bang on the knocker and throw my arms around her waist, crying with my face buried in her dress, and she'd hug me and cup my face in her hands, smiling as she said, 'What's wrong, Sandra? Were you bad at spelling? Were you bad at sums?'

But what could I say to her? How could I tell her the name she gave me was wrong? So I'd just climb into her lap and clutch her and cry until finally she would grow cross. 'We never had any secrets before,' she'd say, lifting me down from her lap.

I'd set the tea things out on the oilcloth on the kitchen table and my father would come in and wash up after work. They called him *The Doctor* there because he arrived into the factory each morning in a suit with his lunch in a leather bag and changed into his overalls in the toilets. Johnny always seemed to have a fresh cut or bruise that he'd picked up after school, fighting in the Cabra Wars. Then, still clutching a bit of bread and butter and banana in our hands, the pair of us would rush out into the street and run screeching between the lamp-posts to play Statues or Relievio or Hide-and-Seek.

I'd stand on the wall with my face pressed against the telegraph pole and count up to thirty before spinning around to scan the dark gardens with their big rucks of hedges and walls to make out the shapes of the hidden figures.

And with my skin tingling with excitement and my breath

clouding with the cold I'd forget everything except those friends dodging in and out of the shadows till morning came again and Kitty Murphy knocked to accompany me on another slow journey of fear. What would they have done to you? How could they have understood? Whatever else I've taken from you, daughter, at least I've spared you that.

Climb over the gate below the row of old labourers' cottages on the slope of the hill. Drop down on to the grass where the horse's hooves have left their mark. See the mare snort and quiver as she watches you approach. Two girls advancing hand in hand towards the nervous animal who turns as they dart forward with sunlight minting silver from her hooves and gallops towards the laneway that runs above the dairy where the old man is watching.

In the glade below the other children call as they run down towards the sparkling water. Johnny smiles as he stands with his net, barefoot in the stream, and she is surprised by how small he looks surrounded by the gangs of boys. A fish is sighted and they stumble clumsily towards it, their feet churning up muck through which it vanishes. Midges throb in the blue air, a parent shouts from the road, an older girl lifts up her dress and splashes across an overhung pool.

Summer pours through the twisting branches, the greens and browns mirrored in the stream, and she wishes they were all gone and there was just Johnny and her climbing down across the stones in the direction of the sea. They are all her servants inside her dream world. She lies like a princess on the bank as

handmaidens splash around her, and in the evening she will bathe alone in the cool water while two maids wait with the silken cloak they shall drape about her shoulders. Johnny smiles and climbs up beside her. They hold hands, with their bare feet distorted in the water.

Do you know what I hate? I cannot stand to see you lying near the edge of the bed. If you stay in the centre you cannot fall. That's sensible, and sense costs nothing. When I was young I was taught that you always left a space beside you for your guardian angel to rest. She was with you through the day and watched over you at night. I'd sleep with Johnny curled up beside me in a ball and our angels hovered on both sides never needing to rest. We were not supposed to talk but we did, often for hours about anything. Away from the crowd he always seemed bigger with all the wisdom of those two extra years. Often to tease me he'd put his feet up against my stomach and begin to roll me over towards the edge of the bed.

'I'll tell on you, I'll tell, you'll crush my guardian angel,' I'd whisper urgently, and he'd giggle and roll me back to him with his feet. One night when he pushed me, I just seemed to keep rolling like the bed was being pulled down towards the floor. I remember the panic, with his hands trying to grab me and then falling into the black space with no angel there.

It was daylight when I woke in the depths of my parents' bed and when I put my hand up to my head, it throbbed as if the bandage there had been strapped on too tight. It felt like a giant

hand that was trying to crush my skull down through the mattress and I kept on screaming until my mother came. She had to lie in beside me to make me stop, just the pair of us in that double bed. And I curled up against her warmth and slept like I have never slept again, in that bed I used to crawl into after waking at night in our old flat. It was like being in the womb again, all black and safe, all loved and warm.

I was alone when I woke next and I could hear noises in the kitchens and backyards all down the row. The sound of people at tea and dogs barking across gardens so that I felt scared and forgotten, alone in the darkness. I wanted her back in there beside me, I screamed and screamed to make her come. And then I heard the creaking footsteps, one, two, three, four, the bogeyman climbing the stairs, only it was my father who opened the door to shout for me to stay quiet and not be disturbing the neighbours. I lay by myself feeling cut off, like Mrs Colgan's retarded son up the street who was kept in the house all day and who I only saw once being chased by his mother when he escaped.

I must have slept again because it was the door opening that woke me and old Mrs Whelan, the nurse from around the corner, came into the room. On the landing I could hear my mother whispering as she sent Johnny out to the shops for biscuits. Mrs Whelan called me a brave little girl and held one hand on my shoulder as she pulled the plaster on the edge of the bandage off with one long tear. After she had bathed and rebandaged the cut and was gone, Johnny was sent up with the rest of the

biscuits. He sat on the edge of the bed, apologetic and grateful that I hadn't told on him. But I would never have betrayed him no matter what he did to me. Indeed, the more he would have done, the prouder I would have been to be able to forgive him and prove myself worthy to be his companion. I gave him two of the chocolate biscuits with a kiss and ate the rest in the darkness beneath the blankets. The next morning I woke up in my old bed still clutching the plastic wrapper.

In dreams the bed always seems to slope, the darkness waiting to claim her. Walls observe her climbing the stairs, coat-hangers sway behind stationary doors. Her father brings home a builder who tries to explain the changing temperatures in different rooms. Late one night they are awoken by her mother's cry. Her father runs to the doctor in the next street. He drives the few hundred yards in his car to assert his social position.

She makes her First Communion in a net of white, orange candles weep heavenwards like tears defying gravity, the scrubbed knees of segregated boys gleam from the right-hand pews. She races down the steps towards the *Dublin Evening Mail* photographer, then watches her Saviour being crucified in the darkness of the State cinema, gently rattling the accumulated coins in her small white purse.

After school, Kitty and herself walk stiffly between the Stations of the Cross, with two lace handkerchiefs covering their heads. Kneeling at the grotto in the car-park they swap stories. The man who had raved that there was no God and ran up

the aisle of the church without genuflecting, clutching a loaded revolver. And when he fired straight at the tabernacle, the bullet hit it and bounced back right through his heart.

Or the man in the house who'd renounced Christ and found that all the doors were locked. The calendar on the wall had a picture of Christ and that very date marked with a red circle. He tore it off and the next month had the same picture and date marked in red, and the next and the next. They found him dead on the floor with twelve different scenic views of Ireland lying torn from the calendar at his feet.

The wooden hatch slides shut and the mesh of light is gone. She leaves the darkness of the confession box and says her penance kneeling on the stone step of the side altar decked with candles for people's intentions. *Should I die now, my soul would fly straight to Heaven. My guardian angel appear in silver and gold to guide me home.*

I have the scar still under my hair. If I shaved my head you could see it. Somehow, life seemed different afterwards. I began to stammer when asked questions in school. The words stuck like bits of hot coal in my throat. But Johnny was always there to protect me, to shout back at the girls chanting my nickname, to watch me through the wire dividing the two playgrounds. When break was over, the bell would ring and each class would stand to attention in line. The gulls would go mad clawing for bread as we lifted our arms up and down to each command barked in Irish.

Four years ago this Christmas, Kitty Murphy, or Katherine as

she calls herself now, came home from England. She called to the door and we both stood there. I couldn't let her in with you upstairs, even though I desperately wanted to trust her. It was hard to believe who she was, thirty-three then like myself, but so sophisticated looking. She has three children now and a husband, a civil servant in Leeds. After a few minutes I just wanted her to go, I became suspicious like I always do. I muttered and stared down at my feet until I drove her off and closed the door. Then I stood in the hall and realized what I had wanted to say, *you're the only friend I have, don't leave me, help me to get out of here.*

I went up to my parents' room and stared in the wardrobe mirror, the same style of clothes I've worn for seventeen years, the hair combed down the same way, that face that had forgotten the feel of make-up, my short podgy figure. I could be any age up to fifty, a curio to be stared at in the street, and behind me I could see Kitty's form in the mirror like a whole life which I had lost out on. I hurt you that night although I didn't mean to, it was just a rage that I could not control. And even afterwards when I had to wash the blood off, never once did you cry out.

Like her, Mr Farrell next door collected boxes. Mrs Smith in the corner shop would hand her down three or four cardboard ones from the high counter and she built a home from them in the back garden, ignoring the jeers of the other girls. Her neighbour's boxes were made of wood and were ranked with wire mesh on the roof of the shed. She stopped inventing her secret world to watch him stand there, his eyes gazing up into the soft blueness

of the evening as if awaiting a revelation. She craned her neck heavenwards as the man climbed with quick, aggravated steps on to the shed, and then a speck emerged like a tiny chariot from beneath the single white cloud.

Mr Noonan came out and called, 'You'll win it yet, John,' and she turned to watch him stride down through the cackling hens in his garden. They scuttled in alarm over the brown earth pecked clean, past the apple trees and into the felt-covered hut smeared with white stains on its sides. Finally, one ran too close and he grabbed it by the neck and twisted as Sandra stood in terror. The hen flapped frantically in the air and then swung limp in the man's arm as he hung her from a steel hook on a branch and began to pluck the drifting brown snow of feathers.

The bird seemed to shudder as if not fully dead and he gave her another sharp blow across the neck. The other birds pressed themselves against the fence and cackled, trying to fly into her garden with useless wings.

She turned and ran towards her mother who was holding her side and wincing in the kitchen. She dreamt it for the first time that night, the plucked beheaded body of the bird strutting in the garden where the long worms, red like sticks of rock, slithered out from the hedges to catch her. When she tried to run, her feet would not move and then the child's hand, hard and bony, began to push her forward towards them. She struggled and lost her grip, and down, down she fell until her body jerked awake bathed in sweat against the mattress.

That would always be the sight of death for her, the white pimpled flesh of a headless bird scrambling across the garden.

When I came home from school, the hallway was crammed with neighbours. They went silent as I came in and turned to watch me. I ran quickly through them and found a woman from down the road standing in the kitchen where my mother should have been. 'You poor child,' was all she said, 'you poor child.' One of them tried to put her arms around me and I screamed and broke free, remembering the times my mother had threatened to give me to the gypsies when I was bold. I ran into the backyard thinking that they must have driven her from the house but she wasn't there.

Where was she, I kept wondering, why has she left me alone? Then through the open door I saw Johnny come down the stairs and I ran to him. Daddy was walking behind with his face all red and crumpled, like there was no air left in his cheeks. He shook his head slowly and Mrs Moore and Mrs McCormack began to cry. I could feel tears from Johnny's eyes running on to my face as he held me as though he had fallen and hurt himself. Then Daddy came and put his hands around us both and he was crying too.

A silence seemed to fall in the house and I could only hear hushed voices on the path outside. I started sobbing too because they were all crying and I needed to find my Mammy and ask her what was wrong and why nobody would tell me. Then I realized she must be upstairs, so I broke away from them and ran up the steps two at a time even though somebody tried to stop me.

I opened the door of her room and stopped. Mrs Whelan was sitting beside the bed where a man in a black coat was bent over my mother with his hands on her eyes. 'Leave my Mammy alone, you!' I shouted at him, and when he turned I recognized one of the priests from the village. They both looked at me and I grew afraid to approach the bed.

'Mammy,' I called, and when her head didn't turn I called again louder to wake her. I heard Johnny climb the stairs as I ran over to the bed to shake her. Her eyes were wide open but still she didn't look at me. I felt Mrs Whelan pull me back and say in a low voice, 'Leave her, Sandra, your mother has gone to God.'

I didn't cry then because I knew she was wrong. My mother would never leave me like that without saying goodbye. The person in the bed must be someone else, her sister maybe or a neighbour pretending. I knew my mother would come in the door that evening or tomorrow or the day after, all apologies for being away and that everything would be the same as it ever was because how could life go on without her.

You must understand I was only eight years of age, I knew nothing of death or life. Johnny put his arms around me, and I watched my father give Mrs Whelan two bright, shiny pennies to place over her eyes.

That night, her sister came from England with her two brothers and they gave me money and sweets and called me a brave little girl. It was like a party having them there, with tea and cakes and whiskey, and as I lay in the little camp-bed in the

dining-room reading my book, I heard a voice singing from the sitting-room. Later on, I woke up when Johnny climbed into the narrow bunk beside me, because the relations had our bed, and without warning he began to cry again and just went on and on though I tried to tell him that Mammy wasn't really dead, she was just pretending. But he wouldn't stop and turned his back on me so I could feel his shoulders shaking in the darkness until finally I fell asleep with my head pressed against the back of his neck and my fingers pressed in his hand that had reached out to find mine.

'… it was on our fourth visit to the house that we finally succeeded in gaining access. Miss O'Connor, who struck us as being very nervous throughout the interview and seemed to be of a somewhat neurotic temperament, opened the door after we had been knocking for fifteen minutes. We had great difficulty in persuading her to allow us into the house.

Finally, having taken our identification cards and examined them for several minutes with the door closed, she opened it again to let us in.

The majority of the furniture and fittings therein seemed to date from the mid sixties and were very worn in appearance although in a clean condition. Miss O'Connor stated that she had lived alone since the death of her father sixteen years previously, and that she had one brother, two years older than her, whose present whereabouts were unknown but whom she believed to be working somewhere in England.

When we explained that the purpose of our visit was to

investigate reports from several neighbours who suspected that a second person (whom admittedly, they had never seen) might also be living in the house and could possibly be in need of medical attention, Miss O'Connor again replied that she lived alone. She seemed to indicate, in her own mind at least, that there was some kind of conspiracy against her in the street, and cited some not very coherent examples of this which dated back to the death of her mother in childhood.

At our behest, Miss O'Connor showed us around the house which consisted of two rooms and a kitchen downstairs, and a small bathroom and two bedrooms upstairs. One of the latter was locked, because, as she explained, she had ceased using it several years previously. She tried a number of keys in the lock without success, and then insisted that we return to the kitchen, where a search of various presses yielded up a number of old keys. She asked to be excused while she tried them. A few moments later she returned to inform us that one of these fitted.

The room had thick curtains, was lit by a single naked light bulb and was permeated by a somewhat unpleasant and overpowering smell. It was bare except for a carefully made bed and a single straight-backed chair. There were no personal possessions or items of clothing therein to suggest that it was occupied, although the absence of dust would appear to indicate that Miss O'Connor had spent some time in it recently.

The room, and indeed the whole house, had a rather oppressive atmosphere, and while we found no evidence there of anyone

other than Miss O'Connor, we do feel that she is under grave emotional pressure of some sort, possibly rooted in loneliness and/or schizophrenia. Thus, we would recommend some back-up from the Social Services. However, this is outside our jurisdiction and we would suggest that her case be passed on to the relevant section within the department …'

My mother was a good woman but she left me in a house of men. When I grew I grew inward in ignorance and fear. The nuns in school were kinder now, but how could you ask them advice or questions? We got a lay teacher the year after that who would take us out on walks.

I loved when she'd bring us through the church grounds and down the main street of the village to the foot of the road into the west. It was like a frontier leading up to new estates named after patriots where gangs of youths were said to roam. Once I was carried up there by the bus and ran down as if caught behind the iron curtain. Miss O'Flynn knocked to get the keys of the graveyard at one of the two old cottages there, and we watched the three Alsatians in the compound beside the steps snarling as they flung themselves against the wire with their teeth bared.

Inside the gates it was overgrown, unlike the cemetery outside our window, with the slabs over old crypts broken in two and faded tombstones lying smothered in weeds. Within the ruins of the ancient church the new shops in the village were framed through the ivy-covered slats where windows used to be. When Miss O'Flynn rang her little bell we all ran through the graveyard

towards her, and she'd gather us into a circle around the cross and tell us the story again.

In my mind's eye I could see it as she began to talk, the cross standing, a thousand years ago, at the top of Watery Lane, marking the boundary of the village and the monastery. And remaining there through centuries of nights and days until the curse of Cromwell blighted the land. Whorls of cloud are veiling the moon as the villagers carefully uproot it in the night. The stonemason slowly cuts it in two and the cart covered in straw creaks down the village street in the darkness. A man with a lantern keeps watch from the graveyard steps. I'd imagine myself as a small girl concealed at the back of the silent cluster of watchers as the two gravediggers wait beside the black mound of freshly dug earth. Reverently, as if burying the soul of their village, they lower the twin pieces of stone down into the grave.

Then the conspiracy of silence settles over the village to save the cross from desecration. It is never mentioned again in public as though its name had been erased from their vocabulary. Decades crumble into centuries and nothing is said. In the earth the cloth rots away, worms nose the final threads, the stone returns naked to its first love-bed. It no longer exists, except as a secret in the mind of the oldest man in the village, who received it in a whisper on his father's deathbed.

Then I'd imagine myself again as a small girl just before the turn of the century. I'm laying flowers on a grave in the spring sunshine when the old man walking on two sticks enters with

the rector. Matthew, Miss O'Flynn said his name was. He never hesitates for a moment. Slowly but steadily he shuffles over to a sward of grass in one corner, indistinguishable from any other, and bangs his stick down on the spot. Finally the words kept unuttered for centuries are spoken. Like a man yielding up his life's purpose Matthew stares at the rector's face and proclaims, 'The Neather Cross is buried here.'

The rector doesn't know whether the old man is doting or if he should believe him. Still he is afraid to move from the spot. He commands the verger, whom the old man has insisted must remain outside the gate, to fetch some men with shovels from the fields. I'm hidden behind an old tombstone watching the pair of them who never speak as they wait for the men. The rector rubs his hands nervously together while the old man rests on his sticks, confident and yet seeming to tire as though the life force was draining from him. His face is dark, strong-boned, his features the same as the man I always imagine two centuries before holding the lantern for the two gravediggers in the dark, the same as old Turlough down in Watery Lane whose cottage is the only one left standing in the hollow now.

A man called McEvoy brings a spade from the cottages nearby and another man joins him from the fields beside the wood. There is no sound in the graveyard except the soft incision of spades into the soil, until after half an hour the clank of steel striking stone rings out, sharp as a cry fresh from the womb. Carefully they scrape the clay from the top of the stone until the

worn ancient carvings are revealed once more in the light. The rector and the two men examine them excitedly, only I notice old Matthew walking slowly away.

These days when I cross the huge metal bridge above the carriageway that roars down through where the wood used to be, I pause above the ruins to examine the cross. It's forgotten now of course, nobody here is interested in those things. On Sundays I climb those steps and stare in through the railings, but when I gaze at it I never imagine I'm that little girl any more, watching the swinging lantern or the shovels glinting in the sunlight. I think that the pair of us are that cross buried somewhere in the earth and maybe only still alive in somebody's mind. We're waiting here in the darkness for him to find us, like a splintered stone that needs to be set together again.

The street riddled with porches and extensions. Hedges are gone now, front gardens cemented for cars. The top windows overlook the cemetery and the rivulet joining the Tolka beneath a new bridge. One house is grown derelict. Two women wait inside it in the hours before dawn, one huddled on the cold lino beneath the torn curtain, the other leaning forward on the single chair, her fingers constantly intertwining. One speaks in a low voice, urgent but indistinct, one stares back as if not listening and living only in her own thoughts.

Everyone was talking about him in school then. How he stayed there for three days buried alive in his coffin. There was a tube leading down into the earth through which he was able to breathe,

and he had taken along books like *Dracula* to read. I couldn't understand anyone wanting to stay down there. For three nights the pair of us stood at that window, thinking of him breathing out there alone among those ranks of crosses, surrounded by decomposing bodies. His picture was in the paper when he broke the world record, clutching a bottle of champagne with the cemetery railings behind him. But I could not get him out of my mind.

To frighten me one night Johnny told me stories, corpses dug up with splinters of wood crushed beneath their fingernails, and shattered teeth smeared with blood where they had tried to bite into the lid. I had a new dream now at night, the coffin is being screwed down and I am unable to move my head or cry out to them. I keep beseeching them to notice the terror in my eyes, but they talk on sorrowfully among themselves as they box me in.

I'd scream and scream awake and Daddy would come in. He'd put his arms around me and say, 'Mammy is with the angels now.' But my fear was so embedded that I was afraid to tell him, as if even to speak those words would make them come true.

At the end of the long gardens the hedgerows began, huge rucks of branches and leaves that one could crawl underneath, and there in a nest of dried leaves it was like a submerged cavern. Three or four bodies could climb inside and play their games in the secretive hedgelight. One boy always lay with his head outside, watching the row of kitchen doors for danger. Johnny would vanish there now and refuse to bring her. She'd watch him

wiggle inside from an upstairs window. He'd grow silent when she questioned him, in the darkness of their room.

One summer morning she followed him down, creeping through a neighbour's garden so as not to be seen. She lay on the far side of the hedge, stealthily pushing aside branches to peer through. Three boys squatted naked by the light of a small candle, their hairless bodies shockingly white in the light. Johnny's face was turned towards her, his body excited as he watched his two companions begin to rub their buttocks together. The twigs snapped beneath her fingers, the naked boys anxiously grabbed their short trousers. As she turned to flee the look-out raced round the hedge to catch her and push her struggling down the leafy tunnel.

'Spy,' one of the boys shouted, 'you were spying on us!' Johnny dressed himself, white faced and ashamed. 'What will we do with her?' one of the others asked, and the boy paused and replied, 'If she saw us, she must take her clothes off and take the oath to become part of our club.'

She started crying as she squatted here, surrounded by them, and it was Johnny who took her hand and said, 'Leave her alone, we're going home now.' He led her out into the fresh air, beyond the gardens, and they walked down silently to where the rivulet glinted between trees. 'What were you doing?' she finally asked, and he threw a stone into the water and said, 'It was a game.'

He sat on the bank beside her and went on: 'It was a club. We swore loyalty to each other. We'd each make up tests of courage

and have no secrets between us.'

The pair of them climb upstream over the rocks. By the green light of an overhung pool they kneel down and swear secret faith and loyalty to the *Joh-dras.* He carefully plucks the leaf of a wild nettle and they solemnly give each other a single sting on the white exposed skin of their buttocks, the badge of courage, of blood brother and sister against the world.

Daddy wore his mourning quietly, as if his grief was a stigma that could never be revealed in public. I always seemed to be sitting in the living-room with my homework, listening to his slow desperate pacing of the floor above. We more or less had the run of the house and he would never say a word, but his presence and his grief was always there as though accusing us. Everything I did was done to please him as if I carried guilt around on my shoulders. It seemed like he was balanced on an invisible window-ledge and one mistake or wrong word would push him off.

Three times a week he caught two buses to the scorched earth of Mount Jerome cemetery and every other evening went walking by himself. After tea he worked in rubber boots in the garden, manicuring the lawn as if he could only speak through its ordered shape. It was only when we went out that he'd grow stern, checking our clothes and nails to show the road that he could cope. Often when I played on the street I'd sense him watching from behind the curtains to make sure that I wouldn't let him down, and afterwards, at supper, he'd quiz me slyly about things

neighbours might have said to their children.

He never went back to the street where he was born, to the two rooms we had lived on in after his mother's death until we moved here. The friends I remember calling to see him in the flat were never mentioned. His life before this place seemed something sordid to be locked away.

There was an election called then, and when I walked to school men were clambering up ladders to stick posters on every pole. Cars toured the street with loudspeakers. It was the first time I saw Daddy bring people into the house that used to be full when my mother was here. A poster was stuck in every window, and each night two men called for him with bundles of printed leaflets. He'd be cross if he found Johnny and me playing with them, he'd hoard them to his chest like money.

One day I found a torn Labour poster like a fallen leaf on the pavement. I loved its design of stars and red colour. When I brought it home he almost struck me, as if I had carried an ikon of the Antichrist into a cathedral. When the election was over the men never called, the energy of those few weeks seemed to drain from him. On Saturday when he took us shopping into town, he stood reverently aside to let the former schoolteacher, now a Dáil deputy, stride by without returning his respectful salute.

Every year it never seemed it would come until it was suddenly there. The buses throbbing outside the gates as the girls march up the steps in their Sunday clothes. At Tara or Clonmacnois they are lectured on the historical sites, and then the nun claps her

hands for them to scamper down the gravel path towards the tiny shop where crisps and toffees and chocolate are drowned in a sea of hands. On the way home they travel, exhausted, through the alien green landscape. There is a fight for window seats and the girl beside her leans over to be sick. Spilt milk is souring in the heat. They sing in the queasy smell of the summer evening.

The morning before fifth class breaks up, with Miss O'Flynn at their head, they parade through the empty streets towards the countryside. The dark-skinned old man watches from his cottage wall beneath the roadway as they pass the red barn and start to move through the fields. Loose gravel sprays beneath their rubber soles, they point out the farms where there is work in the autumn. Some of the girls hold hands and sing, *Now she won't buy me – A rubber dolly!* At Pass-If-You-Can they turn up the hill where the flooded quarry glistens blue in the light. A girl winks at friends and turns to Sandra.

'My brother was swimming in there once and he saw two sharks.'

Her wide eyes gaze out at the water and back to their straight faces.

'And there's a hidden tunnel since the Penal Days from the castle to the old graveyard in the village.'

Girls whisper behind them, 'Listen, they're winding mad Brigid up.' Cows graze in the castle grounds as they climb the curving stairs to the battlements. Her throat is parched from the walk, the blouse stuck to her with sweat. She stares out

at the countryside divided up into squares of colour, the blue tar glinting between trees, the outskirts of the city three miles distant. The breeze is fresh against her face as her head starts to spin at that height like a hermit in the desert being tempted by a vision of the world.

I always promised myself afterwards that it would be the last time. I was so resolute that it seemed nothing he could do in the future would break my grip. I remember how the moonlight would slant into the room and I'd lie here occasionally hearing footsteps. I'd think anyone out at that time of night must be embarked on some sort of adventure. Johnny would be curled up back in his pyjamas beside me with his body so hot it was like a furnace to touch. He always fell asleep immediately afterwards, mumbling a few words as he untangled himself and turned to the wall. It wasn't long after my eleventh birthday, and I'd think of our two guardian angels hovering, wounded and disappointed, on both sides of the bed.

Daddy thought nothing of us sharing the one bed, especially after the nightmares I used to have. It was as a badge of courage that I'd first undressed, like as in all the other games of dares. Johnny'd saved up his pocket money to buy a packet of birthday candles. He'd light one on the dressing-table to make it exciting. In the half light it was just like those old games of marriage. I'd imagine him as my husband coming home tired from work. In the darkness it was more sinister, his actions more frightening, more like a stranger. One step, two step, the bogeyman is coming, his

hands pushing mine downwards towards that hard and slippery thing. I'd enjoy the excitement then, his breath coming fast against my ear, his hands never still.

It was afterwards that I'd lie awake, knowing that what I was doing was wrong, and terrified that there might be some way for people to guess my sin. I'd think of my father in the next room, how his face would crumble in if he ever knew. I knew that I had let him down, and grew more guarded now and withdrawn in school.

The single candle is stuck with wax on to the top of the chipped dresser. Its small flame lengthens and draws in the shadows along the walls of the room. They lie curled together against the cool sheet below and the rough warmth of blankets above, her feet drawn up into his stomach as she allows him to peel each nail of her toes, just the scratch of nail cutting through nail filling the silence. Then the light clicks in their father's room and they pause for a few moments before they tentatively begin.

The blankets are tossed down below their knees, her nightdress slipped up above her head. His hand stroking across her thigh, he suppresses her giggles with his lips. Both close their eyes, retreat into their separate illicit fantasies – *her husband coming home to her from work* – he draws her hand down to the rigid penis – *his own girl in a doorway down the dark side entrance of the Casino* – where the first light hairs cluster around its base. Stiff with the thrill of fear and excitement they lie, afraid to creak the bed springs, until he grimaces in his cramped

position, his mouth pushed into her hair to stifle the panting as his limbs overspill with pleasure.

She watches the white stains settle over her naked stomach, feels his body relax as he turns and drifts towards sleep. The cloth is tucked beneath the mattress, she shivers as she wipes herself, the husband's knock, his bicycle ticking down towards the shed, the first kiss on her lips in the sparkling kitchen, all gone, all gone.

We were in a classroom in the cellars of the church, down a granite flight of steps. The windows had thick hammered panes of glass and so the light had to be left on all day. Every morning I was sent up to the big school with another girl to fetch the crate of Government milk. We'd feel so important that last year to be let out alone, walking through the scraps of bread after break in the concrete yard where the seagulls swooped and clawed at each other. In winter the milk would often freeze, and when you raised the half pint to your lips you'd suddenly swallow raw chunks of ice.

Miss O'Flynn frequently switched into Irish and the whole class would keep our heads down because we couldn't understand what was being said. The times I loved best were the singing lessons, when she would unzip the small fur-lined bag and produce her green-and-cream Melodica with keys like a miniature piano. She'd blow the dust from it with a single shrill note and arrange us in rows against the back wall to accompany us through every hymn in our song book, *Mother of Christ, Star*

of the sea, Pray for the wanderer, Pray for me. Those lovely and lonely words sung over and over to her methodic accompaniment till we had them perfect. I felt such joy and safety in being part of a group, a unified voice wafting up into the church where I imagined the women who had come to pray were listening to our singing coming faintly through the floor.

At three o'clock when the bell rang the class would burst out into the tiny passageway, fighting to be the first to crest the stone steps before scattering off in every direction. I would delay until I thought nobody was watching and then slip through the ornate wooden doors of the church. In the porch a stone staircase twisted upward like in a castle to the high balcony where the choir sat. Beside it a wire rack displayed small pamphlets on the lives of the saints and the dangers of marriage outside the fold. Just inside the inner doors there were two small altars with statues and a twisting metal candlestand. Old women always knelt there, whispering loud indistinguishable prayers.

I'd genuflect with my head covered and walk to the top of the church where the two side aisles were always empty. The left one would be drowned in deep shadows and the right transfixed by afternoon light igniting the coloured squares of stained glass.

All alone in that mesh of light I'd pray, trying to recapture the holiness and union with God that I once used to feel. But though I tried to prevent them, my eyes would always stray up towards those white marble limbs of the crucified Saviour on his cross that would remind me of Johnny's ivory white body against mine

in those sessions I had failed to end, and the shame and guilt would rush in.

Those blood-stained eyes stared mournfully down at me from beneath the crown of thorns as I knelt, tiny and insignificant, in the third row from the end, and I knew that unless I confessed my soul was damned. Yet every fortnight when I entered that black box with rows of impatient classmates waiting outside and Miss O'Flynn overseeing it all, how could I begin to tell the bored voice on the lit side of the grille the sins of touch from the night-time and the blasphemy of sight on those despairing afternoons? I'd emerge doubly condemned for the sin of false confession, cast out by fear from my second family until Johnny's was the only company I could still fit within.

johnny johnny hung on the church wall. johnny johnny had a great fall. all the king's horses turned bright red, when mammy loved johnny johnny in bed. always the same, story the same, school and job, and death and pain. we know every word by heart, but when she leaves our fun will start. frightened by that open door, let in the bogeyman from the stair. must stay quiet, must not speak, till mammy mammy is down the street.

I suppose Johnny was always just weak, although I never recognized it then. A few years later on I remember catching a glimpse of him one night in the National Ballroom in town. We had gone off to see the Clipper Carlton Showband but couldn't get in, so we'd wound up there without him knowing it. I was standing up near the stage to gaze at the Mighty Avons when I

saw him hovering in front of a girl with a stiff beehive, trying to work up the courage to ask her to dance.

He was so slow and obviously nervous that her friends began to giggle in the chairs beside her and she became embarrassed. Then he asked her in a rush and seemed almost relieved when she snubbed him and he could merge back into the crowd as if it had been the high point of his night.

But back when I was eleven or twelve he was a hero because, even though he was bigger, he never looked down on me and I felt important and wanted in his company. Besides, I was at an age to want to know and there was nobody else to tell me things. Poor Johnny, always laughing and joking when we were alone, and then quiet in company like you'd think he was in bad humour till you realized he lacked a single shred of confidence. Always tucked up in the centre of a crowd of lads as if living off their collective bravado. For all his air of knowledge I suppose he knew as little as I did in those days.

Stillness reigns when the key is turned in the lock. The woman's footsteps turn to descend the stairs, pausing every morning to listen for sounds before the glass rattles in the panel of the front door as it is slammed shut. The noise reverberates through the floorboards up into the dark room where the girl lies, and all the glass there seems to take up the echo and quiver until the very air is vibrating with sound. She never moves from the mattress, but beneath her closed eyelids she can feel the roof descend. Walls advance and begin to spin as the bed springs

undulate like a rippling tide. Breathless with excitement, she waits for her friend to visit her.

He calls her name through clanging coat-hangers, there is no danger – she can answer him. He is both older and younger than her. He has no age. He has lived forever. He tears apart all the colours that form black; dissolving reds and blues spin in glowing bands around the room. Nothing there is stationary any longer, he breathes his life into the woodwormed furniture. And nobody can reach her inside that cocoon, she is deaf to the shouts of children playing outside. She never has to warn him when to leave, johnny johnny knows when his time is done. He knows that he can never be forgiven, he knows he must remain her secret lover. Slowly he gathers himself up, softly the bed springs are reined in. Only darkness remains in the room when the girl's eyes flicker open and the woman's footsteps come.

After tea one evening I began to get cramps as I was washing up. It was like a dull sharp pain that would never end. I climbed up to this room and lay on the bed frightened to call for help. When I ran my hand gingerly up along the inside of my dress my fingers were smeared with blood. I was sure it was the consequence of the deeds I had committed with Johnny, our secret finally being made public.

The blood seeped out until I thought I was about to die. Johnny came into the room looking for something and stood staring at the stains of blood where my hand touched the coverlet. I wouldn't let him touch me or tell him what was wrong, so he

shouted down to my father who fidgeted awkwardly at the foot of the bed. Embarrassed, he pushed Johnny out of the room, told me to lie still and left me alone.

For ten minutes I waited, listening to the stillness of the house and then Mrs Whelan arrived, still in her nurse's uniform, and took my hand. She cleaned me up and dried my tears, and sat beside my bed for two hours talking and teaching me the names of things.

'I'm only around the corner from you, Sandra,' she said, 'you know if you are ever worried you can come to me.' For a moment I almost told her everything and then I stopped, afraid to lose her esteem.

'I'll be okay, thank you,' was all I said, and she smiled back as she left the room. Johnny came up when she was gone and began to take spare blankets from inside the wardrobe. He said Daddy had told him to sleep on the sitting-room sofa until he had time to buy a single bed for downstairs. He paused as he told me and stood at the door with the pile of bedclothes in his arms. I know he wanted to say something but for the first time in our lives there seemed nothing more to say. I turned on my side away from him and heard him click out the light and reluctantly close the door of this room on himself.

Without him the bed was empty and huge. Alone for the first time in its depths I listened to the footsteps on the pavement outside and this time I knew where they were all going as if the innocence of my childhood had been washed away now that I

was a grown-up woman of thirteen.

Stately as an ancient courtier, the retarded man with the stick bids her enter the peeling gates. Every Sunday afternoon since she was a child he has stood sentry at the entrance to the lane between the church and the school. This is where she comes to be alone on the Sabbath when all the shops in the village are closed. Nobody lives on the main street any more, the car-park of the vast, guarded shopping centre covers the site of the last few cottages and the post office. Graffiti on the high walls of the lane proclaim Bob Marley's immortality, lovers pledge themselves with aerospray cans and illicit armies canvass support. She turns to watch him run his stick against the bars of the gate and behind him sees the figure of Turlough approaching.

The gaunt old man stares at her like the guardian of her childhood. She feels safe when he watches her as if somehow Turlough knew every secret of her life and yet did not condemn. The weekends are the worst for loneliness, the deserted main street, the empty playground beyond the wall, all reinforce her isolation. Only the lonely, withered figure of Turlough, who never speaks, seems to recognize her, seems to tell her that she is not alone in her story, that she is part of something greater, that there are others as abandoned as her.

For some reason his eyes always bring her solace as they stare at each other, while the shambling retarded figure between them smiles as he twirls his stick against the bars, lost inside his private nightmare.

Won't you even move a little closer to me? Rise up from the floor and get back into bed? I could make you cosy if you only tried. Remember I'm your mother, I want to look after you. Will I tell you the first joke I ever heard?

'Will I tell you a joke – a bar of soap! Will I tell you another – a pound of sugar!'

I suppose they're silly, but we used to laugh at them when we were small. Do you know what I'll tell you? I'll tell you my first job, you'll like that.

We were the biggest class in school and that summer we had to sit our primary exam. We never raced around the playground like the smaller girls now, we huddled together in the open shed laughing at jokes we were afraid to show we didn't understand. One girl kept watch to see who the boys, pressing themselves against the wire and wolf-whistling, were staring at, while the rest of us pretended to ignore them.

The McCormack twins always smelt offish because they were already helping their mother who worked an evening shift at the processing plant. We'd tell each other the jobs we all wanted to get and sympathize with the two girls whose parents had the money to put them into secondary school.

On the last day the Head Nun came down the steps into the cellar to make a speech. She called us a credit to the school and hoped that what we had learnt would always stand us in good stead. There was a wide world beyond this classroom and though we would not notice the years flying till we had children of our

own, whether here or in England, we'd still always be her little girls.

We gave three cheers for the nun and three cheers for Miss O'Flynn, and presented her with a box of milk chocolates that she shared out amongst us. The nun led us in a final prayer and reminded us that faith was the most precious gift we would ever receive before opening the door for us to file out into the summer light.

For the last time I walked up those steps with Kitty Murphy, our arms entwined, and we imagined ourselves in just a few years standing at the gates of this very school, leading our own children down to enrol, and how we'd laugh about old times with the familiar figures smiling in their black hoods. We paused at the corner to embrace and moved off like blood sisters with the wetness of her tears mingling into my own as they rolled slowly down my cheeks.

The smell of lacquer always clung to her clothes and hands even though she scrubbed them for hours each night. In the hot stifled atmosphere of the salon she brushes up the piles of shorn hair from the floor to be packed into boxes and sold to wig manufacturers. She trains her hand to be steady as she pours the cheap lotions into expensive jars for resale, and her feet ache as she runs from chair to chair, setting out clean towels and combs while the customers gaze at magazines from beneath the whirling dryers.

Autumn sunlight flashes against the windows of the buses in

the street below the cramped rooms where meekly she obeys the commands of every member of the staff who, on her one half-hour break in the day, introduce her to the alien taste of coffee and allow her to marvel at the colour pictures in the pile of English women's magazines.

Of course, I gave my wages every week to Daddy and from it he'd give me pocket money. In the evenings after work I could go walking in the street because I was free from homework. The films in the Casino were now becoming over-sixteens and I loved to watch the couples queuing there for the evening show.

It was only a matter of time before a boy would come along and at first, I'd be coy but finally I'd agree. He'd pay us into the 2/6d seats where I would let him take my hand, and afterwards he'd offer to walk me home and we'd take the dark side of the main road, over beside the stream and the trees on the bank, and he'd hold me against a trunk to press his lips on to mine.

After a few minutes I'd protest and he would stand back to apologize. I would give him my hand as we'd step again on to the path and when he left me at the gate, I would rush into the dark sitting-room to watch him standing across the street maintaining a lonely vigil beneath the lamp-post.

I'd go to bed, and all those memories of Johnny would be banished as I'd fall asleep dreaming of that young man out there waiting for me. But no boy ever asked and I'd never have been allowed to be seen on the street in such company. The door would be locked on me at nine o'clock and no amount of pleading would

get me back in.

Acne and bristles and cigarettes. Johnny rarely stays at home now. Each evening he merges into a gang of mates, shouting from the open platforms of dark green buses. In the Astor, they wolf-whistle Brigitte Bardot in *A Very Private Affair*. In the Bohemian, *Rock Around the Clock* is being revived. They spend hours sharpening the tips of steel combs to rip out the seats during the theme song.

In the twisting streets around Stonybatter, small pubs welcome the scrum of under-age boys. At weekends they spend most of their wages there and queue in the greasy fish and chip shops of Phibsborough before strutting the two miles out by the cemetery with catcalls at the couples walking home from dances. They piss in front gardens, ring doorbells and empty dustbins along the main road. She hears him come in at two o'clock in the morning and waits for the light switch to click off in her father's room.

On Friday nights, voices are raised in the kitchen as he demands Johnny's wage packet, and when Johnny has stormed out, slamming the front door, her father comes in to her with his face white in the first shock of defeat. They sit in the chairs on both sides of the fire with only the flames and the red lamp in the corner to light the room, and listen to the voices on Radio Eireann, the farming reports, and whine of accordions and asthmatic tin whistles in strict and monotonous three-four time filling up the silent room.

They let me go in the hairdressing salon after the six months

when they had promised to make me permanent. I stayed at home for two days while Daddy made enquiries. On the third night, he told me to report the next morning to the drapery shop in the village.

I was six months there behind a counter piled with patterns and balls of wool, when a letter came in my name calling me for interview to the new shirt factory below the village. He had never told me he had even applied. I was taken on with a hundred and twenty others.

The plant was brand new, everything so spick and span, and there were loads of girls just turned fifteen like myself. They let us play the radio all day as we sat at the machines and the older women came round with baskets to collect the finished garments. The Beatles were coming to Dublin and there was such excitement in work you couldn't imagine. Two of the girls had tickets and walked around like queens, while the rest of us arranged to meet up and stand outside the Adelphi to try and catch a glimpse of them.

There were thousands there, pushing and milling, and then as the first show came out, the fighting began. The girls behind me started pulling my hair to get up nearer and the police charged down Abbey Street after the gangs of boys. I fell in the crush and cut my knee open. A policeman pushed the people back and lifted me out as I put my arms around his neck and clung to him in terror. They brought me home in a squad car, crammed with other girls who'd been hurt.

All the way home I prayed Daddy would be out, but he came to the door when the car pulled up. He looked so slight and feeble there with shame in his eyes as if the world was slipping away from him. He grabbed me by the hair in the garden and pulled me inside until he was pressed right up against me in the hallway. I could feel his breath as he raised his hand and I cowered, waiting for the slap to come down across my face. Instead, he just lowered it again and shook his head.

'I'll lock you in that room upstairs,' he said, 'till you learn not to disgrace me.' And he grabbed hold of my coat and pushed me ahead of him up the stairs. I was sobbing and tried to put my arms round him but he just shoved me on to the bed in this room and unscrewed the light bulb. He locked the door and left me sitting in the darkness. It was a Friday evening. From the window I could see the young people coming home from the pictures in groups, singing and enjoying the last drags of cigarettes before they reached their houses. And later on, the couples from the dances, on scooters or on foot, quiet now and anxious to avoid notice, standing against the dark leaves of the bushes fronting Mrs Finnegan's house with their arms around each other and only their mouths moving.

Johnny came in and I waited, hearing him ask where I was. I could hear their voices raised in argument, followed by the sitting-room door slamming. Then my father's feet came, one step, two step, like the old bogeyman. Was he coming to forgive me? Was he coming with his belt to beat me? The steps went

into his bedroom and I heard the door close. There was complete silence in the house, yet I knew none of us were asleep. All night I kept waiting for Johnny to come. I'd say to myself, he's waiting for Daddy to cool down, in another ten minutes he'll climb the stairs. Or he's searching in the kitchen for the spare key, any minute now he'll come for me.

The darkness in the room was unbearable because I could not control it. I kept on imagining all kinds of things; my mother was sitting by the door in a chair, the furniture was swaying in the dark around me, floorboards were creaking on the landing. But nothing happened and nobody came, until finally towards dawn I fell asleep from exhaustion.

'I'll dream of them tonight,' said the small, fat fifteen-year-old girl whose eyes were shining and forehead damp as she tottered out into O'Connell Street like somebody possessed.

There was a tiny man with a red nose and spectacles standing on a wooden box outside the Evening Press offices preaching about salvation. But he was talking to himself. Outside the cinema, a row of stout policemen with their arms linked were heaving strenuously against a frantic sea of young people. Girls were screaming inside. They screamed at the pictures in the programmes or if somebody shouted 'Beatles!' The atmosphere was hot and sharp: full of power and perfume and a frightening excitement.

But when the curtain finally rose on THEM, the house erupted into one mad, thunderous noise, that continued right until the cries for more were drowned by the National Anthem.

This morning it was 'B'-Day plus one as the city began to clean up the debris from the Beatles invasion. Motorists made their way through the shambles of Abbey Street, while workers replaced the plate glass windows which fell victim to teenage hysteria.

Trouble began after the first of the two shows when more than two thousand people leaving the cinema 'mingled' with those going in. Members of the St John Ambulance Brigade attended to injured people on the spot while crowds ran riot around them.

Said a Garda sergeant whose cap was knocked off by a flying object, 'I have seen everything now. This is really mad. What can have got into them? You would imagine the country was in the middle of a revolution instead of welcoming four fugitives from a barber's shop.'

On the Saturday morning I knocked, but Johnny had gone away to town. I could hear Daddy in the room below silently pacing. I kept crying out for food and water until he finally appeared. He left the tea and sandwiches on the dresser and never once spoke. I wished to God he would scream at me or beat me black and blue, but he punished me instead with his silence.

I had had to pee in an old vase of my mother's that I was afraid to show him. By seven o'clock every muscle of my body was tense, my nails were bitten through, my head was drumming. I felt like the man in the paper who had been buried alive. I began to shriek like an animal and hurl myself against the door and that is where Johnny discovered me.

This is the bit the girl knows by heart. *Where Johnny*

discovered me. These are the words she will say to herself in the long afternoons when the woman is working. Sitting in the chair watching over the bed where her nightdress is stretched on top of the sheets. She leans her head forward every time the story reaches here and gazes at the woman's lips.

Johnny came home at nine o'clock and when my father wouldn't give him the key, he went upstairs and kicked the door in. He found me lying in a pool of urine with blood crusted on my forehead. He carried me into the bathroom and locked the door, then filled the tub and sponged me down. I remember that his hands moved with a gentleness I had not thought him capable of. It was the first time he'd touched me in over two years.

He pulled a clean nightdress over my head and laid me back gently in my bed. Though I was groggy and only half-aware, I could feel a tremor in his hands as he drew the blankets over me and whispered, 'Don't worry, sis, I'll look after you. I'll never leave you alone with him again.'

Then he closed the door and marched down to confront my father standing defeated in the kitchen.

The girl lies back against the wall, her limbs stretched out, her breath coming quicker. But the woman stares at the floor as if by now only talking to herself.

That night he came again to my room, but more hesitant and shy than when we were young. He drew the blankets back slowly and waited to see if I would complain. His body was stronger than before, so that in the darkness he felt like a grown man.

And I clung to him and allowed his hands to wander wherever they wanted to over me. His fingers found me and I sucked in my breath as he rubbed them back and forth.

I was nervous now and frightened but yet I didn't want him to stop even though I knew that it was wrong. My hands performed all the old tricks that he had taught me when I was ten. But I was fifteen now and knew there were no guardian angels to be excluded or wronged. He panted beside me so loudly I had to cover his mouth and then he lay flat like a dead weight against my side. And all he said was 'I'm sorry, sis,' over and over again.

The Casino cinema was taken over by the new supermarket and there was nothing left in the evening except the bus to town. Shoppers queuing at the meat counter could gaze up to the old balcony at trainee managers stacking cardboard boxes where suspicious ushers had once trained their torches.

Workmen began to fell the wood to build a dual carriageway that would slice the village in half. She watched the trees fall, every one of which seemed to contain a memory. A picnic of children sharing gur-cake and water, autumn afternoons with Johnny searching for conkers, the trunk her lover would have held her against. Blue tar was spilt and rolled into shape and, like a token replacement, tiny shoots of trees planted that the local youths smashed in disgust. Only the rivulet survived, swirling unnoticed through its narrow gorge.

The children of the estate were growing up and finding jobs or waiting at bus stops with two cases for the boat train. All

the way to London, the train's wheels chanting *you'll never go back, you'll never go back.* New estates were springing up in the fields where she used to walk. Lorries loaded down with furniture moved along the finished side of the carriageway.

Two weeks after the Beatles came I arrived home to find Daddy in tears. There was no light on in the dining-room where he sat alone and I know that he had been there for hours, staring down at the wedding photograph in his hand as the features were gradually obliterated by the darkness. He turned to me in bafflement, and said, 'President Kennedy has been shot. Has the whole world gone crazy or what?'

I wanted to put my hand out to him as he passed but I was no longer able to. He leaned heavily on the banisters when he went slowly to his room. After that, he rarely spoke to us, as if all his pride and hope was gone.

We had the house to ourselves and could do what we liked. Johnny and I bought a record-player between us and his friends called now to the sitting-room to play cards and listen to music. I'd come in with big pots of tea and toast for them and fall in love with each in turn, and they'd always shout down to me in the kitchen on their way out where I read romance magazines alone.

I had new friends in the shirt factory and we laughed and chatted to each other among the clattering machines. At lunch-time we'd sit out on the steps and wave back at the lads unloading the vans. Every Friday night, we'd gather at the bus stop to go to the pictures or dancing. I'd soak for half an hour in the bath and

use the Lady Manhattan talc I'd splashed out five bob for.

The Friday evening bus to town. They occupy the back seat on top: eight of them squashed against the blue leather, five with beehive hairstyles, one looking like Priscilla Lane. Frames of evening sunlight flicker between the houses. One girl is laughing hysterically, inhaling noisy gulps of air as though she were choking. Whenever she falters, another begins and then another, each setting the other off, with the original joke long forgotten. The boys in the top seats cast slick glances back at them and shout down the aisle.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.