



'A hauntingly beautiful piece
of work. Bolger combines the
subtlety of a poet with the
artistry of a master
storyteller'

JOSEPH O'CONNOR

the family on paradise pier

DERMOT BOLGER

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE . . .

Dermot Bolger

The Family on Paradise Pier

Аннотация

A stunning historical saga set in the early decades of the twentieth century which follows the lives and loves of one extraordinary family. We first meet the Goold Verschoyle children in 1915. Though there is a war going on in the world outside, they seem hardly touched by it – midnight swims, flower fairies and regatta parties form the backdrop to their enchanted childhood. But as they grow older, changes within Ireland and the wider world encroach upon the family's private paradise. Turbulent times – the Irish war of independence, the Spanish Civil War, and World War II – are woven into the tapestry upon which this magical story is spun. Events in Spain, Russia and London draw the children in different directions: one travels to Moscow to witness Communism at first hand; another runs away to England to take part in the General Strike and then heads off to the Civil War in Spain; another follows the more conventional route of marriage and family. Based upon the extraordinary lives of a real-life Anglo-Irish family, Bolger's novel superbly recreates a family in flux, driven by idealism, wracked by argument and united by love and the vivid memories of childhood. 'The Family on Paradise Pier' shows Bolger at the height of his powers as a master storyteller. A spellbinding and magnificent achievement.

Содержание

The Family on Paradise Pier	5
Table of Contents	6
Prologue 1941	9
ONE The Picnic	32
TWO The News	61
THREE Four Thousand Lamps	70
FOUR The Motor	80
FIVE The Boat	96
SIX The Docks	121
SEVEN The Exiles	134
EIGHT The Studio	146
NINE Not a Penny off the Pay	158
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	160

The Family on Paradise Pier



Dermot Bolger

The Family on Paradise Pier

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Harper
Press

For Donnacha and Diarmuid

Table of Contents

Cover Page

Title Page

Prologue 1941

PART ONE 1915–1935

ONE The Picnic

TWO The News

THREE Four Thousand Lamps

FOUR The Motor

FIVE The Boat

SIX The Docks

SEVEN The Exiles

EIGHT The Studio

NINE Not a Penny off the Pay

TEN The Turf Cutters

ELEVEN The Two Fredericks

TWELVE Eccles Street

THIRTEEN Deep in the Woods

FOURTEEN Chelsea

FIFTEEN The Visit

SIXTEEN The Letter

SEVENTEEN A Jaunt Abroad

EIGHTEEN The Night Call

PART TWO 1936

[NINETEEN Hunting and Shooting](#)

[PART THREE 1937–1946](#)

[TWENTY The Volunteer](#)

[TWENTY-ONE Night](#)

[TWENTY-TWO The Bailiffs](#)

[TWENTY-THREE The Crumlin Kremlin](#)

[TWENTY-FOUR The Journey](#)

[TWENTY-FIVE The Camp](#)

[TWENTY-SIX The Man from Spain](#)

[TWENTY-SEVEN In the Hold](#)

[TWENTY-EIGHT An Encounter](#)

[TWENTY-NINE The Great Betrayal](#)

[THIRTY The Plane](#)

[THIRTY-ONE The Knock](#)

[THIRTY-TWO The Grave](#)

[THIRTY-THREE A Tutor Comes](#)

[THIRTY-FOUR Make Room](#)

[THIRTY-FIVE Home](#)

[THIRTY-SIX The Former People](#)

[THIRTY-SEVEN The Flag](#)

[THIRTY-EIGHT A Darkened Room in Oxfordshire](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Praise](#)

[By the Same Author](#)

[Copyright](#)

About the Publisher

Prologue 1941

A parched twilight began to close in around the unlit prisoner train. For over a week the *zeks* in Brendan Goold Verschoyle's wagon had jolted across a landscape they rarely glimpsed, crushed together in putrid darkness. Only those crammed against the wooden slats ever saw the small worms of daylight flicker in through the slight cracks. Little sound penetrated into the wagon either, just the ceaseless rumble of the tracks and very occasionally a more confined echo as they passed at speed through an empty station. Sometimes the long train stopped and prisoners shifted eagerly, yearning for the noise of hammers as guards untangled barbed wire coiled around each carriage and eventually opened the doors. In the stampede to relieve themselves on the dry earth outside, dignity would be forgotten as men and women squatted together under the gaze of the guards and their dogs. But more often these stops occurred for no obvious reason. There would be no sound outside after the wheels came to a rusty halt, no footsteps, no safety catches unleashed, no orders screamed for *zeks* to get down on their knees and be counted. Instead the train would remain motionless for an indeterminable period during which the *zeks* inwardly clung to dreams of water and dry bread and fresh air to replace the rancid stink within the sealed wagons.

Eventually when the wheels slowly jolted forward again

nobody would speak, even the children no longer able to make the effort to cry. Yet each *zek* felt a stir of relief amidst their disappointment. Because despite the demand for railway carriages no decision had been made to liquidate them. Fresh instructions must have been issued to change direction and transport them to a different gulag or some patch of barren earth where their first task would be to erect barbed-wire fences around themselves.

Hours later when the train finally stopped for them to receive a small mug of water and several ounces of bread, there would often be another corpse to be lifted off, stiffened in an upright position from having sat cradled between the legs of the chained man behind him.

Half the *zeks* in this carriage had no idea why they had been arrested. The Polish surname of the man behind Brendan was sufficient to implicate him in a counter-revolutionary Trotskyite conspiracy. The man who died yesterday was among workers sent by Stalin to help build a railway in China, all arrested on their return as members of a Japanese spy ring. Some had endured appalling torture while others knew only cursory interrogation by overworked *troikas* who took just a few seconds to concoct random treason charges before sentencing them to fifteen years.

Brendan's position as a foreign political had become perilous in the weeks since a voice on the Tannoy in his last camp had abruptly announced Germany's treacherous attack on the Soviet Union, with guards and *zeks* equally stunned that anyone

– even Hitler – could dare to defy Stalin. Since then all prisoners with German names had been killed. This train contained *zeks* who were foreigners or had been contaminated by contact with foreigners and were therefore now classified as enemy soldiers. Still, Brendan had known worse transports. The carriage might lack the luxury of those cattle wagons where *zeks* could squat over a small toilet hole in the floor, but this heat was better than the cold. Today was bearable. He had managed to fully evacuate his bowels at the last stop, had savoured his mug of water and eaten most of his bread while keeping a small chunk concealed on his person. He was hungry now but would wait until the apex of this starvation before starting to slowly chew the last hunk of black bread. To be able to control when he briefly relieved his hunger gave him a sense of power.

Only two men sat between him and the wall so that when he leaned backwards there was some support. Nobody had yet soiled themselves so that no stream of urine seeped into him and there was no stink of shit. Nobody had died as yet in this wagon today or if they did they had done so without attracting attention. Nobody had tried to steal another *zek's* bread, with prisoners lashing out until the thief was dead. Any other theft was acceptable but even here there were taboos one could not break. No woman had been gang-raped, mainly because the carriage consisted of politicals, and true violence only occurred when the common criminals seized control of a wagon, dominating it with their brutality. This wagon was so quiet that for a few seconds

Brendan blacked out into sleep and dreamed of Donegal.

The four Goold Verschoyle children were home from boarding school for Easter, reunited with their sister Eva who was considered too delicate to send away. They were bathing at Bruckless Pier in Donegal Bay. At sixteen, Brendan's eldest brother Art raced hand in hand with seventeen-year-old Eva along the stones to step off the private stone jetty and tumble laughingly into the waves. Nineteen-year-old Maud swam near the shore, while Thomas, aged fourteen, stood balanced in a long-oared punt like a sentry. And Brendan saw himself, nine years of age and sleek as a silvery fish, flitting through the green water, while Mother sat sketching on the rocks and Father looked up from his Walt Whitman book to wave. Eva surfaced and shook out her wet hair before joining Mother to take up her sketchbook as well. Art plunged deeper into the water and surfaced beside Brendan. Reaching out to ruffle his hair, he asked if Brendan liked the kite he had made for him that morning. Brendan nodded his gratitude and plunged his head into the water to glide behind his beloved big brother. Opening his eyes he watched Art power through the waves and longed for the day when he would be that strong. His lungs hurt and he needed to surface for breath while Art's feet pushed inexhaustibly on.

The unexpected jolt of the train woke him as he crested the waves. Some *zeks* came out of their torpor and began to talk, wondering if they would be allowed into the air. Others shouted for quiet so they could listen for the click of rifles and the panting

of dogs. Brendan discreetly checked that his bread was still there. He longed to still be asleep, yearned for the salty tang of seawater at Bruckless Pier and wanted his family to know that he was still alive. No *zek* spoke now but he sensed their terror. Because there was no sound of guards' voices, just the leisurely drone of an aeroplane approaching.

Nettles were in flower on the fringe of the small Mayo wood, with a peculiar beauty that people rarely looked beyond their poisonous leaves to see. Eva watched a Red Admiral alight on the tip of a leaf and the butterfly's colouring reminded her of the dying glow of the turf last night when she had paused, after blowing out the wick, to gaze back at the fire which moments before had seemed dead in the candlelight. Yet in the dark it had been possible to glimpse the turf embers still faintly beating like two red wings.

Eva was noticing such details now that she had the freedom to see things. Freedom seemed a peculiar word in times of war, but this was how Mayo felt to her soul after escaping from England. The freezing winter was now just a memory. In January her husband had written from barracks to describe the Thames frozen over for the first time in fifty years. Every tiny Mayo lake had been the same, with local children tramping across the ice to pull home whatever firewood they could scavenge. When the *Irish Times* carried a picture of Finns attempting to hack away the corpses of invading Russian soldiers frozen to the ground, the icy backdrop could have been any white-capped Mayo hillside.

For much of January Eva had been snowed into Glanmire Wood with her two children. Playing and squabbling, drawing pictures on the walls of abandoned rooms and singing hymns at dusk, Francis and Hazel had longed to hear another voice. One night all three heard an unearthly cry from the woods and gathered at the front door to gaze out at the snow, the unnerving wail reminding them of the banshee. Convinced that Freddie's Territorial regiment had been dispatched to join the desperate battle abroad, at that moment Eva felt sure that her husband was dead. As ever, eleven-year-old Hazel proved the level-headed one.

'It's a dog,' the girl had cried. 'Trapped out there.'

Hazel had not waited to get properly dressed, but ran into the snow with Francis following and Eva trying to keep up – more concerned for their safety in the snowdrifts than for the dog. It had taken ten minutes to locate the collie's cries and dig her out. The children carried her back to the house, refusing to change their drenched clothes until they found a blanket to wrap the starved creature in. The dog's ribs were so exposed that it seemed she would never recover. She survived though and so did they, despite the February storms that shook all of Europe as if God was moved to fury by mankind's rush to slaughter.

They had safely come through two winters to be happily becalmed in the warmth of this summer's afternoon with no wind to disturb the trees encircling their crumbling home. The Red Admiral fluttered out onto the uncut lawn where Francis

lay bare-chested, intoxicated by the high-pitched warble of two goldcrests in the wood. Returning to Ireland had restored his confidence. He was king of his castle here, venturing in his canoe down the Castlebar river or tramping the bogs where his father loved to shoot, but armed only with binoculars to watch for snipe among the reeds. Eva tried to keep his education going, but he only became excited about Latin when a neighbour loaned him a study of Irish trees. Now on walks through Glanmire Wood he eagerly displayed his knowledge. The hazel, with its coppery-brown bark and dangling yellow catkins, was called *Corylus avellana*. The birch with its sticky long winter buds and winged nutlets was *Betula alba*. He even told her Latin names for absent species that he intended to plant one day. *Arbutus unedo*, called the strawberry tree because its clustered fruit was covered with tiny warts and resembled strawberries. If Francis had his way Eva doubted if he would ever leave this wood again, because here he was Adam in all his innocence, reminding her of her youngest brother, Brendan, on those long childhood afternoons when they used to bathe at Bruckless Pier.

Eva watched the collie rouse herself from the front steps and pad across the lawn to collapse beside Francis. The boy lazily stretched out his hand and the dog rolled over to expose the freckled stomach she wanted rubbed.

Eva had a list of urgent tasks to jot down, but despite having taken pencil and paper outside she was too caught up in this miraculous heat to focus on responsibilities. Hazel emerged from

the stables where she had been brushing down her pony and went to fill a bucket with water as the pump handle creaked in rusty protest.

‘I’m going to the kitchen,’ she announced. ‘I’m going to make bubbles.’ But the girl paused to stare past the branches of the sweet chestnut framing the avenue. Hazel had sharp hearing but soon Eva also heard the jingle of a bicycle circumventing the deep ruts on the overgrown path. She could not prevent herself being seized by a familiar fear, a residue from her childhood in the Great War when silence would envelop Dunkineely village whenever the postmaster left his office with a telegram. Was it news of Brendan or her parents? Surely Freddie, with his club foot, would not be sent into battle, no matter how desperate the war effort. But perhaps age and disability meant nothing, with Mussolini conscripting boys at fourteen, barely older than Francis. Eva lowered her pencil and tried to pray for all those she loved whom she knew to be in danger.

Full-length drapes across the window gave the Oxford bedroom an appearance of twilight, though it was only mid-afternoon when Mrs Gould Verschoyle woke. For most of the night she had fretted about her husband’s safety as he patrolled the blacked-out streets as an air raid warden. So far, Oxford had escaped the fate of Coventry and Southampton, but some nights the fires in London were so great that their glow was said to be glimpsed even at this remove. Only after hearing Tim

return safely at dawn had she allowed herself to fall asleep. But there was no sign of him having come up to bed. She lay on for a moment, recalling her dream about Donegal. She could still see Mr and Mrs Ffrench crossing their lawn from Bruckless House down to the stone pier with trays of homemade lemonade for the visiting swimmers. Brendan had loved their lemonade, often prolonging his thirst so as to savour the taste. Brendan, her youngest, had been like a fish in her dream.

A constant struggle with arthritis had left Mrs Goold Verschoyle's face severely lined. Her disability was so acute that holding a pen was torture: still she refused to stop writing to British and Soviet officials. Each line represented physical agony, but she was motivated by a need to quench the greater anguish in her heart. Today she determined not to upset herself by sifting through the replies piled in the bedside drawer – curt responses expressing regret at being unable to supply any information about her missing son. Today she would make herself look well for Tim. Painfully she brushed her hair, still soft and fine like a child's. Through the open wardrobe door she glimpsed the mothballed dresses she had once worn at parties in Donegal. She put down the hairbrush on the dressing table beside a copy of *The Great Outlaw* – her favourite book about Christ – and opened a drawer to examine the small bottles of perfume she was carefully nursing there.

Selecting her husband's favourite, she rose. Tim would be pleased to see that she was not too frail to leave her bed today. He

was probably sleeping downstairs so as not to wake her. But when she reached the drawing room he was not lying on the sofa. His body was slumped forward in an armchair, with a book of poems still balanced on his knee. Mrs Goold Verschoyle watched, too scared to move. It would be typical of Tim for his death – like his entire life – to be so understated that the book had not even fallen from his lap.

Show some mercy, Lord, she prayed. Don't take him away from me also.

The book toppled over, striking the carpet with a dull thud. Mr Goold Verschoyle stirred slightly, looking down at the book and stooped to pick it up. He became aware of her.

‘How is my darling?’ he asked quietly.

Mrs Goold Verschoyle made no reply, but walked over to place her hand on his shoulder.

‘I know,’ he said. ‘I can feel how precious this time is too.’

Tragedy declined to penetrate the Mayo wood today because it wasn't a telegram boy who emerged beneath the chestnut branches onto the lawn where Eva and her children watched. Instead it was Maureen, their former maid but now their friend and lodger. She freewheeled up to the steps, delighted with her weekly half day off from the shop in Castlebar where she worked. Her wicker basket was full of provisions ordered by Eva, with every item paid for. It was bliss to owe no money and have no fear of creditors.

Glanmire House had undoubtedly gone to seed. Cracked windowpanes had not been replaced, loose tiles let rainwater into disused rooms with walls covered in a seaweed-like vegetation. But the kitchen was dry and warm and the few habitable rooms were adequate for their needs. Just now those needs were simple.

The horror of war was ever present by its absence. This woodland silence seemed artificial, as if punctured by distant cries so high-pitched that only the dog could cock her head to stare off puzzled into the distance.

Ireland was not yet directly consumed by the conflagration, but few doubted an imminent invasion from one side or the other. While the countryside held its breath people learnt to live in limbo. For Protestant neighbours the fact that Freddie had joined the British army was sufficient to reinstate respectability after the debacle of their bankruptcy. With Freddie too engrossed in army life to press her about maintaining appearances, Eva could discreetly go native with the children, talking and thinking as they liked in the privacy of this wood. Without Freddie, Glanmire House reminded her of the freedom of her childhood in Donegal.

Hazel waved to Maureen, then picked up the bucket of water and went to the kitchen. Francis waved and rolled onto his stomach to let the sun warm his back. Maureen laid her bicycle against the steps and strolled over to Eva.

‘That heat’s a terror.’ She flopped down. ‘The chain came off my bike near Turlough and I thought my hands would be

destroyed with oil.'

'Any news from the village?' Eva asked.

'Divil the bit, Mrs Fitzgerald. The Stagg boys are off to England for work, though you'd swear half of Mayo had the same idea if you saw the crowds in Castlebar Station and the train already packed from Westport. They'll be sitting on the roof in Claremorris if it gets that far with the wet turf they're burning. They say English factory owners are crying out for workers.'

Maureen kicked off her shoes and lay back to let the sun brown her legs. Eva wondered if the girl was hinting at being tempted to go. The young woman reached into her bag to produce a letter.

'I met Jim the Post and said I'd save him the cycle,' she said. 'He looked killed with curiosity wondering what might be in it.'

Both laughed before Maureen picked up her shoes and went to join Hazel in the kitchen. Eva opened Freddie's letter with trepidation because it was true that his weekly registered one, containing her allowance, had only arrived on Monday. As always his tone was candid, yet circumspect. The mantra that careless talk cost lives was instilled in him, though Eva doubted if his letters were being steamed open by German sympathisers in an Irish sorting office. The Irish preferred to receive news of the tightening Nazi noose by listening to Lord Haw-Haw's bragging tones on German radio. Even then she suspected that most locals only listened because Haw-Haw was a fellow Connaught man and they took pride to see a local do well for himself in any walk

of life.

Typically the first page enquired after the children before Freddie imparted his news. Eva's fears of him being dispatched to join the fighting were groundless – for now at least. With two million young men called up, the army needed experienced men to provide military training, and Freddie wrote that his time spent shooting on the Mayo bogs might not have been wasted after all. He kept his tone self-deprecating, as if baffled at having to relay the news of being commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Educational Corps. But Eva knew he would have impressed his superiors by being the best shot in his reserve artillery company. Such promotion was a dream realised, especially with his disability. Eva knew that he would show each conscript the care he would have taken with Francis had his son betrayed the slightest interest in guns.

Freddie had knuckled down to army life. The routine suited him. He would be popular once he controlled his drinking – his Irishness being a bonus for showing that he had deliberately chosen to be involved in the war. His tales about shooting on the bogs would be embellished for comic effect. He wrote about missing them but at heart Eva knew that he relished the freedom to succumb to a last drink with new acquaintances and ease himself into each day by waking up alone. Eva knew that he would feel guilty for enjoying this sense of freedom because she experienced the same guilt here in Mayo. Neither said it, but war was providing the camouflage for them to commence separate

lives. Her brother Art had been right to proclaim that they should never have married.

In the wooden dormitory hut of the Curragh Internment Camp for subversives, Art Goold rose after polishing his boots. The discipline of camp life suited him. It was the sole advantage gleaned from having attended Marlborough College. Last week yet another IRA boy had been rounded up and interned for the duration of the conflict in Europe – which de Valera and his puppet imperialist government euphemistically termed ‘The Emergency’. Listening to the boy cry when he thought the other internees were asleep, Art had remembered dormitories of boys abducted at an early age to be brainwashed and brutalised into managing an empire.

The difference of course was that in this camp, guarded by the Irish army, every internee was equal. There were no prefects or fags, no casual bullying or ritualised beatings. At Marlborough you were force-fed lies, but here a chance existed for genuine discourse. Not that all IRA men had open minds: some made a hurried sign of the cross when spying him. Art was used to such superstition, but most internees had grown relaxed with him, especially as he knelt alongside them at night while they recited their rosary. They knew that Art did not pray, but he considered it essential to camp morale to show respect for their beliefs. It made them curious about his beliefs too. His description of Moscow streets socialising and how agricultural production was

transformed by the visionary genius of Stalin fascinated men who had never previously travelled more than thirty miles from their birthplace. At heart they were *kulaks* who would need to be prised from their few boggy acres when the time came. But what could one expect when they were terrorised by priests with the spectre of eternal punishment. Besides, having emanated from the *Byvshie Liudi*, Art could look down on no one. Stalin had coined that term well: *the former people* – remnants of the despised tsarist class who refused to play their part in the revolution. Soviet re-education camps were full of them, with soft hands learning to handle a shovel and be given a chance to redeem themselves. The triumph of the White Sea Canal, carved from rock with primitive tools and honest sweat, proved how re-education worked. Art had been sent back to Ireland to spread the gospel and, if de Valera insisted in interning him as a communist, then this camp was an ideal environment to do that.

The IRA and the communists were not natural allies but the persuasiveness of his argument was starting to gain converts. Art had previously agreed with the IRA leadership that Ireland stay neutral. However – since Hitler's attack on Russia – Art had no option but to call on Ireland to join the fight against German fascism now that Comrade Stalin had strategically aligned himself with the imperialists. Blinded by misguided nationalist shibboleths and petty hatred of Britain, the camp leadership had grown scared of his speeches in recent weeks. But it was not about collaboration with Britain, it was about using the

Allies as a vehicle to crush fascism before uniting behind Stalin to create a new world order. That was a greater prize than the steeples of Fermanagh.

This was the moment for all revolutionaries to unite and, while the IRA might find it hard to adjust, Art had shown how radical change was possible. It had not been easy. Christ only endured forty nights in the desert, but Art had spent two decades working on the docks, kipping in tenements and police cells. He had been his own judge, serving every day of his sentence with hard labour and was strong and cleansed of his former class now. But the confusing thing was that last night he dreamt about his family bathing off Ffrench's private pier and had felt no guilt in re-experiencing that life of idle privilege. Instead he had known a sense of belonging, a dangerous wave of love all the more disturbing for emanating from those he was forced to repudiate.

Art left the hut, anxious to be on time for the few internees not intimidated away from his Russian language class. But soon he realised that two men were walking alongside him. He glanced at them as they pinned his arms. They belonged to the primitive Catholic element of Republican. He was strong enough to take them on but as they turned into a space between the huts he saw a deputation awaiting him. Taking a long knife from his pocket the camp IRA commander held it to Art's throat.

'You've been court-martialled, Goold, and sentenced *in absentia*.'

'You can't court-martial me. I'm not a member of any

Republican organisation.'

'You're a Protestant crackpot.'

'I'm an atheist.'

'Either way you go to hell. You're just going there sooner than expected. I've had enough. We told the governor that unless you were gone by today you'd be found with a hundred knife wounds tomorrow morning. You're his responsibility now.'

The men pinning back Art's arms shoved him forward and he started walking. Then for some unknown reason, he remembered his brother Brendan in that dream last night, swimming alongside him, trying to keep up. Art stopped, not through fear but after being overcome by *déjà vu* and an inescapable guilt. He lifted his head, almost as if willing for retribution to finally come through a bullet or a knife.

Mrs Ffrench crossed the lawn from Bruckless House, and reached the gravel path that led to the small pier. Years ago on a picnic there when the Goold Verschoyle family argued about whether they should call it Bruckless Pier or Mr Ffrench's Pier, Eva had insisted that it should really be christened Paradise Pier because that was what it was. But with the Goold Verschoyles gone, nobody called it Paradise Pier any more. Indeed no one ever came here, though locals knew that she never objected to people swimming there. But superstition was strong, despite everyone in Bruckless and Dunkineely being kind to her in her grief. Perhaps nothing summed up her husband's failure more than their affection for him. He had seen himself as a

radical orator, a progressive torch of truth amidst their fog of ignorance. But she realised that locals had just considered him a colourful eccentric – not even regarding him as Irish. Local priests had frequently railed against the Red Menace without bothering to mention her husband, despite his years of standing up on the running board of his Rolls-Royce at public meetings to heckle the speakers and beseech people to read the communist pamphlets that she had patiently held out.

Locally their crusade had been considered so laughable that it counted for nothing. The only converts they ever made came from their own class – those marvellous Goold Verschoyle boys. Not that class would count for anything after the revolution, but it still counted for something now. This was evident from the respectful way that people had carried her husband's body home last month after he collapsed while bicycling to Killybegs to heckle de Valera at a political rally. She had warned him it was too far to cycle but petrol was impossible to obtain. Mrs Ffrench had laid him out in the study, with his maps and books and his tame birds that flew about, soiling everywhere, disturbed by all the visitors. For three days the most unlikely people came to pay their respects, farm labourers who had never previously set foot in the house. Any trouble he had caused with Art Goold Verschoyle was forgotten. But all the neighbourhood could whisper about was his funeral arrangements.

No one attended the interment but she had sensed eyes watching from across the inlet as four workmen laid her

husband's body in this sheltered corner of the garden beside the pier. In Donegal only unbaptised babies and suicides were buried on unconsecrated ground. But this had been Mrs Ffrench's wish and where she would lie when her time came. There had been no prayers or speeches; just *L' Internationale* played on the wind-up gramophone. Mrs Ffrench reached the headstone and knelt to lay wild flowers. The local stonemason had gone to his priest for advice before chiselling the stark inscription her husband chose as his epitaph: *Thomas Roderick Ffrench: The Immortality of the Dead Exists Only in the Minds of the Living.*

The silence outside the prison train was broken by indistinct sounds: the barking of released dogs, guards shouting in panic, a scramble of boots across the ground.

'The bastards,' an old *zek* muttered behind Brendan. 'They're more concerned with saving the dogs than saving us. Come back, you cowards, unlock these doors.'

The entire wagon was on its feet now, banging at the roof and wooden walls. Bursts of machine-gun fire came from above, interspersed with cries.

'Aim well, Germans,' a woman said. 'Kill every guard.'

'That's who they want,' a young man added. 'I mean, why would the Germans want to destroy us?'

'They don't,' replied the old *zek*. 'We count for nothing. They want to destroy the carriages, this rolling stock.'

Noise of frantic hammering came from inside every wagon. Brendan heard the crush of timber and knew that one set of

prisoners had broken free. Their shouts turned to screams amid a burst of gunfire, but he could not tell if the bullets came from the plane or if the guards might have set up their machine guns in the undergrowth. Two men beside him hammered at the roof, being lifted up by other prisoners. They broke away a wooden slat, yielding a dazzling glimpse of blue sky. Everyone was screaming now. But Brendan was utterly still, mesmerised by the blueness above him. It was the blue of an Irish summer and crossing that patch of light was a small aircraft, departing or wheeling around for another assault. It resembled a child's plaything, a sparkling gleam in the bright air that made him catch his breath as it turned in a slow loop. Others saw it too and began to scream louder. But Brendan said nothing because he had become a boy again, standing on Bruckless Pier to draw in the bright kite that his eldest brother had made for him.

Eva looked up from her husband's letter as Hazel waltzed out from the kitchen onto the lawn in her bare feet. The girl stirred a mixture in the jug she carried, then tossed back her hair to blow the first bubble skyward, laughing as it rose and burst. Francis briefly watched, then lay back with the dog beside him.

Eva laid down Freddie's letter and, feeling a sliver of guilt at her idleness, purposefully picked up her pencil to start making the list of tasks planned for this afternoon. But Hazel's laugh made her glance up at the extraordinary way the child twisted her supple body to keep the bubbles aloft. The girl was totally

immersed in this game, enjoying her triumph whenever a bubble stayed intact, laughing at the silent plop of its extinction, then starting anew with a fresh bubble stream. Nothing else existed for Hazel at this moment: no war, no bombers circling Europe's skies, no threat of invasion or nerve gas, no future complicated by adult decisions. Just these weightless globes to be savoured for the brief totality of their existence.

Eva stared down at the jotting pad, the list of tasks banished from her thoughts. It was years since she last held a pencil for any reason except to scribble down lists. Her childhood instinct to draw – dormant for so long – had unconsciously taken over. She discovered a swirling sketch of her daughter already half finished. Eva examined it with a quickening of the heart. She could draw again if she didn't think about it. Let the pen do the thinking. A second image shaped itself on the page. Of Hazel stationary this time, back arched and head held back to blow a bubble upward. Eva could see her own reflection within the girl, as if she was the same age, experiencing the same joy. The second sketch was barely finished before her fingers commenced a third. If the girl looked over, the magic would be ruined. Hazel would demand to see what Eva was doing, minutely examining each sketch. But these drawings felt as light as bubbles. At the slightest pressure her ability would burst asunder. It was like a sixth sense returning to her fingers, with the tension of adulthood banished.

Francis spied Maureen's bicycle beside the front steps.

He mounted it and freewheeled deftly across the lawn. Two quarrelling birds chased each other among the trees. There was so much that Eva could add to her sketch: their crumbling house, cattle in the fields below, the crooked stable door. But there was no need to include these because Eva merely wanted to draw happiness. As Hazel spun in giddy circles she seemed like an axis, a fulcrum, a whirlpool of happiness, drawing the whole world into her on invisible threads.

The dog barked, chasing the weaving bicycle. Maureen came from the kitchen to say that tea was ready. But nobody moved as if nobody could hear. Hazel scooped into the jar to unleash a final stream of bubbles. They soared above her, rainbow-coloured in the light. This was how her family had been in Donegal, Eva realised, diving into the waters at Bruckless Pier, beautiful, impractical, living in the moment with no awareness of how short-lived that paradise would be. Hazel danced beneath the last bubble, throwing her head so far back that it seemed impossible she would not fall. Borne by her breath, the bubble rose so high that Eva had trouble following it. Maureen stopped calling and even Francis halted the bicycle to watch. The bubble balanced in midair and Hazel balanced on the grass, equally poised and beautiful until, without warning, it burst and there was nothing left. Hazel toppled backwards, rolled over to gaze at her mother and laughed.

PART ONE 1915–1935

ONE The Picnic

August 1915

Eva thought it was glorious to wake up with this sense of expectation. The entire day would be spent outdoors, with her family chattering away on the back of Mr Ffrench's aeroplane cart as Eva dangled her legs over the swaying side and held down her wide-brimmed hat with one hand in the breeze. Surely no other bliss to equal this.

Her older sister Maud was asleep in the other bed in the room. Dust particles glistened in the early sunlight, creeping through a slat in the wooden shutters, the thin beam making the white washbowl beside the water jug even whiter.

It was barely six o'clock but thirteen-year-old Eva could not stay in bed a moment longer. Nobody else was yet awake in Dunkineely. Soon the endless clank of the village pump would commence, but until then Eva had paradise to herself. If she rose quietly she could go walking and be home again before the Goold Verschoyle household rose to prepare for today's picnic.

Dressing on tiptoes so as not to wake Maud, Eva slipped downstairs. An old white cat beside the kitchen range lifted his head to regard Eva with a secretive look as she lifted the latch and escaped into the garden. The clarity of light enraptured her, with spider webs sketched by dew. Eva followed a trail of fox pawmarks along the curving path leading to the deserted main

street, then took the lane that meandered down to the rocky Bunlacky shore. The sea breeze coming off St John's Point swept away her breath, filling Eva with a desire to shout in praise. She closed her eyes and formal hymns took flight in her mind like a flock of startled crows, with new words like white birds swooping down to replace them. The prayers that meant most were the ones which came unbidden at such moments:

'O Lord whom I cannot hope to understand or see, maker of song thrush and skylark and linnet. Do with my life what you will. Bring me whatever love or torment will unleash my heart. Just let me be the person I could become if my soul was stretched to its limits.'

Eva opened her eyes, half-expecting white birds to populate the empty sky. Instead a few bushes bowed to the wind's majesty.

As son of a Church of Ireland bishop, Father took his task seriously of instructing the boys in religion but Mother claimed that secretly he only went to church to sing. It was Mother's responsibility to instruct the girls. Yet even without Mother's Rosicrucian beliefs and indifference to organised religion, Eva knew that she would have outgrown their local church in Killaghtee, where sermons were more concerned with elocution than any love of Christ. She needed a ceremony which encompassed her joy at being alive. But if Eva did not belong with her family in the reserved top pew in Killaghtee church, where did she belong? Neither in the Roman Catholic chapel which Cook and Nurse attended nor with the Methodists in their

meeting hall next door to her home. Right now this lane felt like a true church, filled with the hymn of the wind. Freedom existed in this blasphemous thought, a closeness to God that might have heralded the sin of vanity had it also not made her feel tiny and lost. Eva closed her eyes and slowly started to spin around, feeling as if she were at the axis of a torrent of colour. Behind her eyelids the earth split into every shade of green and brown that God ever created. The sky was streaked in indigo and azure, sapphire and turquoise. Prisms of colour mesmerised her like phrases in the psalms: jade and olive and beryl, rust and vermilion. At any moment she might take off and whirl through the air like a chestnut sepal. Her breath came faster, her head dizzy.

‘Can you see your child, Lord, dancing her way back to you?’

A sound broke through her reverie, a suppressed laugh. Eva opened her eyes but the earth declined to stop spinning. A young barefoot girl grasped her hand with a firm grip, steadying her. The girl looked alarmed.

‘I’m sent for the cows, miss,’ she said. ‘Are you okay?’

‘Yes.’ The world still swayed dangerously but Eva let go her hand, able to stand unaided.

‘Was it a fit? My sister has fits. She’s epil...’ The girl struggled with the word. ‘Epileptic. They took her to the madhouse in Donegal Town. Are you mad too?’

‘No. I’m just happy.’

The girl mused on the word suspiciously.

‘Your father defended my Uncle Shamie in court for fighting

a peeler, miss. They say you're a fierce dreamer, and your father is for the birds. Why don't you go to boarding school like your sister?'

'Mother says I am not strong enough.'

'They say your mother is a right dreamer too, miss.'

'What's your name?'

Deciding that she had already revealed too much to one of the gentry, the girl veered past Eva and moved on, viciously whipping the heads off nettles with a hazel switch. Eva felt embarrassed at being seen.

Where the lane bent to the left the sea came into view. A small sailing ship was firmly anchored in the bay, never changing position despite the buffeting it received from the waves. It was time to go home but Eva could not stop watching the boat. More than anything she wished to be like it, firmly anchored despite the wild seas of emotion she constantly found herself in.

A queue was forming at the village pump by the time Eva returned up the main street. People greeted her respectfully and she talked to everyone. Possibly because she had never gone away to school for long, the whole village had adopted her.

Eva's miserable few months in boarding school last year had convinced Mother that she was not strong enough for sports or other girls. But sometimes Eva wondered if she was kept at home to afford Mother company during the winter when Mother was affected by illnesses that Dr O'Donnell seemed unable to pinpoint. The front door of the Manor House was open and her

five-year-old brother, Brendan, ran out half-dressed to chase the ducks splashing in pools along the deeply rutted street. Eva swept him up in her arms and handed him back to Nurse. The clang of the pump followed her as she walked around by the side of the house. Visitors sometimes asked how the family tolerated this constant clank, but Eva only really noticed the pump when it stopped. For her it represented the creaking heart of Dunkineely.

Her family would be up, chattering away over breakfast, but Eva's first responsibility was to feed her rabbit in the hutch near the tennis court. Crickets communicated with each other along the grassy bank in an indecipherable bush code as Eva cradled the rabbit to her breast, savouring the special shade of pink within the white of his ears. Sitting on the grass beside the rabbit as he ate, she spied Father through the drawing-room window. His few briefs as a barrister were mainly the unpaid defence of locals in trouble. His real passion was music and Father had left the breakfast table early to work. A black cat – whom he christened 'Guaranteed to Purr in Any Position' – sat motionless on his piano as he composed. The cat loved Father, not with a dog's adoring servitude but as an equal with whom she condescended to share her space. She would sit for hours when he played – her head cocked like a discerning, slightly quizzical, music critic.

All the house cats belonged to Father. Mother's pleasure arose from holding any baby in her arms. Eva was the only baby she ever rejected, just for a brief moment after Eva was born. *Take her away*, she had ordered Nurse because – having already borne

one daughter – she was convinced that she had been carrying that all-important son and heir. Mother herself had told Eva this story and though Eva never sensed any trace of rejection within Mother's unequivocal love since then, it still caused unease. Returning the rabbit to the hutch, Eva plucked some daisies from the grass bank and held them to her nostrils. The scent always conjured her earliest memory of sitting on this slope at toddling age, picking a bunch of daisies to breathe in their smell that swamped her with happiness. In her memory, Nurse sat knitting nearby, her white apron hiding a plump, inviting lap. Eva could remember longing to be on Nurse's lap and suddenly it had felt like she was already there, as if Nurse's essence – her warm skin and laughing breath – was reaching Eva through the ecstasy of inhaling the fragrance of daisies. Even now she could still recall racing towards Nurse's arms, holding out the bunch of daisies to be savoured.

‘Eva, quit dreaming and come and have some breakfast! The Ffrenches are calling for us at eight o'clock.’

Maud's voice had an exasperated big sister tone as she summoned Eva from the doorway. Eva waved and went to join her family in the breakfast room. In Father's absence, Art sat in the top chair. Sixteen months younger than Eva, he was the heir whom Mother had longed for, being groomed already to take over the Goold Verschoyle lineage. Thomas sat beside him, a year younger and two inches smaller, focusing on eating his egg with the exact concentration that he brought to every

task. Being the middle brother made him weigh the value of everything. Brendan was too small to care about such matters. As the youngest he took it as his right to be spoiled by everyone. Maud was organising the hamper with the cook, having baked the cakes herself last night. The servants looked to fifteen-year-old Maud for instructions, finding Mother frequently too unwell to oversee the running of the house. But this was one of Mother's good weeks and, spurred by the presence of her Cousin George, she would accompany them on today's picnic.

Everyone at the table talked about their plans for the day. All were good swimmers, though Art was by far the strongest – being nearly as fast as Oliver Hawkins who was seventeen. The Hawkins family from Herefordshire had spent all this summer at Bruckless House, two miles away. Last year a young couple, the Ffrenches, bought this isolated mansion, built by two local brothers on the proceeds of selling guns to Napoleon and pickled herring to Wellington's army. Mrs Hawkins was related to Mr Ffrench who after being commissioned into the Royal Navy had been away since January. But Mr Ffrench had returned home two weeks ago, claiming that he had insisted on his naval shore leave coinciding with Eva's end-of-summer birthday party.

Eva had laughed along with everyone else when he said this, but secretly she believed him. This final week of summer was always the most exciting, culminating in Chinese lanterns being hung in the garden for her birthday party, with charades and fancy dress costumes and singers gathering around Father at

the piano. After Eva's birthday the farewells would start at the train station, with the Hawkins family returning to England, Art, Thomas and Maud going away to school and Mr Ffrench rejoining his frigate currently moored in Killybegs Harbour. But Eva refused to let this thought sour her mood as the maid ran in to announce that Mr Ffrench's cart had arrived and, within seconds, the breakfast room was full of laughing voices.

Mother entered the room with Cousin George to greet the new arrivals. Cousin George was a wise chameleon, secretly in tune with Mother when discussing the occult and yet indistinguishable from any other Church of Ireland curate when a guest preacher in the pulpit at Killaghtee church before their neighbours. His sermons were the only ones that Eva still enjoyed, although the Ffrenches never attended church to hear them – being of a religious persuasion, the Baha'is – that not even Mother had heard of. No locals minded the Ffrenches' eccentricity because nobody understood it. Grandpappy, now on his annual summer visit, declared that no such religion existed except among a handful of demented Arabs driven from Iran, and the Ffrenches would forget such nonsense once they began to procreate like decent Christians. But since Father invited them along to a picnic last autumn, the Ffrenches had become part of the family, opening up their house and shoreline garden to the Goold Verschoye children.

The ceaseless chatter made Eva fear that today's picnic might never start. But Maud coaxed everyone out onto the street where

people started to lift picnic baskets up onto Mr Ffrench's open-backed float, christened the Aeroplane Cart. Maud sat at the back with the Hawkins twins, who were the same age as her, dangling their legs and bending their heads together to gossip beneath wide-brimmed hats. Somehow twelve-year-old Beatrice Hawkins managed to perch between Art and Eva, unable to address either of them. Until ten days ago Eva and Beatrice had been the closest chums, left to fend for themselves when Maud and the twins disappeared to whisper about grown-up secrets. They had searched for nests without disturbing the eggs, taken turns to push Brendan on his scooter along the street with anxious ducks scattering or had gone walking along the shore with Art minding them. But recently Eva could not explain the friction between them, as if Beatrice was jealous of Eva having a brother so wonderful as Art and wanted to push in and play at being his sister also.

Beatrice's brother, Oliver, held the reins as the cart left Dunkineely behind. Eva saw Maud watching him furtively and knew that she had fallen in love. When they reached Bruckless village, Oliver gave Thomas the reins and went to sit among the grown-ups. Cousin George had Brendan on his knee, teaching him to shout the responses to a music hall rhyme:

'Who goes there?'

'A grenadier.'

'What do you want?'

'A pint of beer.'

‘Where’s your money?’

‘In my pocket.’

‘Where’s your pocket?’

‘I forgot it.’

The adults laughed, demanding an encore as the horse jangled along the Killybegs road. The Donegal hills rose to the right, arrayed in purple, with the sea to their left and beyond it Ben Bulbin screening the distant Mayo mountains. Sunlight lit the gorse, with foxgloves peeping from hedgerows. Father was maintaining that idle moments like this brought us closer to the truths of the universe, while Mr Hawkins countered that the Irish were sufficiently lazy without being given a philosophy to excuse their idleness.

Eva was relieved to hear the adults not discussing the war because today was too perfect for outside intrusions. The morning passed in a babble of voices that died away as they neared the sea, leaving just the jangle of the harness and the noise of hooves on the dusty road.

The view from the rocks beside the beach was so striking that Mother had to sketch it at once. Eva climbed up with a sketchpad to keep her company. Both looked out to sea, drawing quietly. Behind them, rugs were spread out on the sand and Maud arranged plates from the hamper as the Hawkins twins poured homemade lemonade. Father sat talking to Art while Beatrice Hawkins lay beside Art in the very spot where Eva wanted to lie when the sketching was finished. Brendan kept pestering

Art by presenting seashells to the big brother he worshipped and, although Beatrice Hawkins was normally too quiet to merit notice, Eva saw that she also kept bothering Art by shyly brushing sand with her bare foot over his.

They had forgotten to bring drinking water, but Mr French climbed up towards the caves with a copper kettle to collect water from the streamlet trickling down over the glistening rocks. Father went to assist him and suddenly Beatrice Hawkins found the courage to lob a handful of sand over Art's hair. She shrieked as Art rolled over to trap her in a wrestling hold, gathering up sand that he playfully threatened to make her swallow. Then just as quickly Art rolled off the girl and picked up Father's book, pretending to ignore her.

'Oh,' Mother said quietly, distracting Eva. Her pencil went still as she stared across the waves. Thirty seconds passed before she looked at Eva with an air of casual curiosity. 'How strange. I've just seen something interesting.'

'What?' Eva asked.

'I don't know,' Mother replied matter-of-factly. 'A stone statue rose slowly from the sea to block the horizon.'

'What did it do?'

'Why nothing, dear, obviously. It was just a statue. It rose as far as its navel, then sank slowly without a sound.' Mother resumed sketching, her seascape bereft of any figure. 'It looked rather like Neptune,' she added as an afterthought. 'Or Manannán Mac Lir, the Celtic God of the Sea, the way that AE draws him

in visions. Not that AE is a good draughtsman, of course. How is your sketch coming on?

‘Fine,’ Eva replied, accustomed to Mother’s psychic visions. They sketched away with nothing further to say. The stone figure would be their secret. It had no place in the boisterous picnic taking shape on the sands where Mr Ffrench clambered down to applause, jumping the last few feet without spilling a drop from the kettle. Eva was anxious to help Art deal with the pest which Beatrice Hawkins had become for him and, once the kettle was boiled over a fire of twigs, Mother was also happy to join the main picnic.

The meal was gloriously protracted, with interruptions as shapes in the changing clouds diverted people’s attention or when they paused to hear each other’s favourite quotations. Father, for once, chose not Whitman but Longfellow to share with the gathering:

*‘And evermore beside him on his way
The unseen Christ shall move,
That he may lean upon his arm and say
“Dost thou, dear Lord, approve?”’*

Cousin George was a master diplomat, encompassing the Ffrench’s strange beliefs by reciting:

*‘So many gods, so many creeds;
So many paths that wind and wind,
While just the art of being kind
Is all the sad world needs.’*

Eva saw how this gesture impressed Mr Hawkins, who knew that Grandpappy – who avoided today's picnic by rising early to go into Killybegs – had little time for divergent beliefs, including those of his own daughter-in-law. Mr Hawkins's good mood was tempered however by Maud's hot-headed contribution to the quotations:

*'Ireland was Ireland when England was a pup
And Ireland will still be Ireland when England is done up.'*

Home Rule was anathema to Mr Hawkins and Eva sensed how the picnic could be soured by politics. Nobody disputed the absolute rightness of the war in Europe, but people held differing opinions as to what should happen in its aftermath. Father believed strongly that what was good enough for Belgium should be good enough for Ireland and so, in fighting to free that small nation, the Irish boys were fighting for their own right to self-determination. Mr Ffrench appeared less sure. Since his rapid promotion within the Royal Navy he seemed to lean more towards Mr Hawkins who called Father's attitude treasonous for a Briton. Father laughed off this comment, saying that the Verschoyles lacked one drop of English blood. They were Dutch nobles who came over with William of Orange and later married into ancient Irish clans whose ancestry he had personally traced back to Niall of the Nine Hostages.

Leaving politics to the grown-ups, Eva joined the other children bathing in the sea, with Maud delighted when Oliver Hawkins joined them. Oliver said little about the war and Eva

suspected he felt differently from his father. As Art and Oliver raced each other out to the rocks, Eva lay in the waves and watched Maud secretly cheer on Oliver against her brother and Beatrice Hawkins secretly do the same for Art. At last the time came to pack away the hampers and load the cart, with Beatrice again interloping between Eva and Art. People said less on the return journey, content to relax in the evening sun.

When they reached Killybegs Harbour a coach was parked along the quay where a travelling showman was demonstrating a wireless set. Mr Hawkins gave them all money to sit among a row of people with earphones over their heads, listening to a crackle of faint voices breaking in from outside. Maud seemed indifferent amid the general gasps of wonder, but these bodiless voices disturbed Eva, breaking into her closeted world with other lives and languages. She couldn't wait to dismount from the coach but the showman had to shake Art and Thomas before her brothers removed their headphones. Art seemed distracted as they returned to the cart, questioning Mr Hawkins about every aspect of radio.

Waiting for them there was Grandpappy, a tall white-bearded old man dressed in knickerbockers appropriate to his ecclesiastical station. Two soldiers arranging their posters more prominently outside a recruiting booth respectfully nodded to Mr Ffrench, instinctively recognising his military bearing. Young women leaving the carpet weaving factory studied a poster outside the Royal Bank of Ireland advertising sailings to New

York for three pounds and sixteen shillings. Grandpappy wanted to know who would ride in his pony and trap. Eva scrambled up into the trap, with Art behind her. People joked about them being inseparable during the holidays and she hated to think of him returning to Marlborough College. Eva fretted when Mrs Hawkins asked Grandpappy to wait, complaining that her old bones couldn't take the bumpy aeroplane cart, but although Beatrice longed to join them she was too shy to follow. The old man took Art on his knee, allowing him the reins.

Eva might be Grandpappy's favourite but in time Art would be his heir after Father, with the Manor House perpetually indentured by law to be passed in trust to the eldest son of the eldest son.

On a bend with fields falling away towards the sea, a flock of sheep halted them, crowding through a crude gateway from the lands of Mr Henderson, a local farmer. Frightened of the pony, they shied into the ditch. A sandy-haired boy of Art's age darted after the sheep, fiercely waving a stick. Welts formed a mottled pattern down his thighs. His bare feet were brown with dust and his face had a pinched hungry look.

'Gee-up!' Grandpappy encouraged Art to take control and urge the pony forward. The boy lowered his stick to stare at Art. For a moment Eva saw them observe one another, each boy intensely sizing up the other. Then Grandpappy flicked the whip and the pony jogged past, scattering the sheep.

'Why does he have no shoes?' Art asked, as if their staring

contest had only now brought home this everyday disparity.

‘What would he need shoes for?’ Grandpappy laughed. ‘His feet are as hard as the hob.’

‘He wasn’t born with hard feet.’

‘He was born poor. He looks a strong lad who’ll do well for himself if he works hard. He won’t be left standing at the Strabane hiring fair when his time comes. Tyrone farmers know the measure of everything from horseflesh to boys. He’ll find a good master.’

‘Better a farm than the Glasgow mills,’ Mrs Hawkins said.

She and Pappy fell silent, but something troubled Art. The reins went loose, the pony slackening as if sensing a lessening of authority. Eva looked behind to spy the aeroplane cart encountering the sheep.

‘What if he doesn’t want to stand at a fair like an animal?’ Art asked.

‘That’s how life is ordained.’ Mrs Hawkins broke into a verse of *All Things Bright and Beautiful*:

‘The rich man in his castle,

The poor man at his gate,

He made them high or lowly

And ordered their estate.’

‘Stop the cart,’ Art said with sudden fierceness. ‘He’s my size. I want to give him these shoes. It’s stupid that I own five pairs and he has none.’

Pappy laughed, wrapping Art in a bear-hug till the boy ceased

to struggle.

‘You’re a good boy, but you must harden yourself or be fooled by every beggar and three-card-trick-man on the street. He’ll have shoes when he earns them. It’s how the world works. You’ll have men under you one day. Firm but fair is how to win respect, not by throwing away your possessions.’

Distant laughter rose behind them as Father joked with the boy who managed to harry the sheep into an enclosure. Brendan was asleep, being rocked on Mother’s lap. Eva envied Art his place on Grandpappy’s knee, like she envied him the status she would have enjoyed if born a boy. Art was her special friend, but since Beatrice Hawkins started talking too much or going silent in his company, Eva had been disturbed by a recurring dream. In it Art was bound in a dungeon with Eva advancing on him, holding the terrible steel contraption she once saw a farm boy carry. When Eva had asked what it was the boy snapped it shut and smirked, ‘To castrate young bulls, miss, and put a halt to their jollies.’ Eva did not know what castration meant until Maud, who knew everything, said it was ‘to cut off the slip of a thing men make such a fuss about’. This dream mortified her because she could never hurt Art. Shivering, Eva reached guiltily across to ruffle Art’s hair. He loosened Grandpappy’s bear-grip enough to smile back, although she saw how he was still upset.

Dunkineely village was deserted when the pony cantered past MacShane’s public house. Mr MacShane emerged and said that a shoal of mackerel had swum into the inlet at the Bunlacky jetty.

Grandpappy whipped the pony so as not to miss the excitement. The lane was crammed, with people lining the rocks beside the tiny jetty as the trap came to a halt. Youths had only to cast fishing rods in the waves to instantly haul out more silvery bodies. Women waded into the water using turf creels to capture the fish battering senselessly against each other. Barefoot children outdid one another in savage bravado as they killed the gasping fish with stones. Grandpappy laughed with approval, urging Art to dismount. Eva watched her brother join in the orgy of slaughter, blood and fragments of gut staining his shirt. The air was festive, pierced by warlike shouts of *Take that, you Hun*. Finally the aeroplane cart arrived and Beatrice Hawkins watched Art spatter a mackerel's brains with as much admiration as if he were harpooning a whale. Father noticed Eva sitting very still beside Mrs Hawkins. 'Run along home,' he said quietly, 'and tell Cook we're having mackerel for supper. I'm sure the Hawkinses can be prevailed upon to stay. Aye, and tell her we'll be having mackerel for breakfast, lunch and dinner all next week too.'

Eva had seen Art fish with Father and even helped them to kill sea trout out on their small boat. Sea fishing had felt noble but now she couldn't bear to look back in case she saw Art hold up the dead mackerel amid the slaughter for Beatrice to admire. Eva ran home to give Cook the message, then went to her room. Her perfect day in paradise felt ruined. Pressing her face against the cool sheet on her bed, Eva closed her eyes but kept visualising a floundering shoal of mackerel. They refused to die, wriggling

furiously with their battered heads. Fish eyes stared up, having got separated from scaly bodies. They became the eyes of dead soldiers in the war that Eva hated people discussing. She had always loved the taste of mackerel but knew that she could never bear to bite into their oily flesh again.

Maud entered the room, kicked off her shoes and threw her hat on her bed. She flopped down. 'Come on, Eva,' she said. 'The Hawkins girls are staying and Mother says we can play musical bumps. Surely there's some way to persuade Oliver to join in. My word, it has been such a day.' She stopped and looked across. 'What's wrong, Eva?'

'Nothing.'

'You look like you've been crying.'

'Haven't.'

'Cook says we'll have a feast.'

'What is she making?'

'Fish, you goose. Get changed. It will be such fun. Father says we can use the gramophone.' She sat up to observe Eva closely. 'Shall I call Mother?'

'I'm all right.'

'I think I will.'

Maud went out, leaving the door open. Rising, Eva poured water into the white basin to wipe the smudge of tears from her eyes, then walked towards the window overlooking the street. The carpet ended a few feet from the window, the floorboards cool on her soles. The windowpane soothed her forehead. She felt

so small suddenly in that long room, imagining the lonely winter months of solitary lessons ahead. Sketching for hours by the Bunlacky shore, reading to Brendan or sitting with Mother while she read books of sermons sent from London. Each Tuesday Mother would engage in planchette with her psychic friend, Mrs O'Hare – both women calmly attempting to decipher spirit messages, with the table moving beneath their outspread hands. But despite such loneliness it was better than the horrors of the bustling school dormitories to which the others would return.

A sound betrayed Mother's presence.

'What's wrong, Eva?'

'Nothing.'

'That's not true. Normally you would be the first downstairs on such an evening. We don't have secrets, you and I.'

'It's too terrible.'

'Nothing is terrible if you share it.'

Eva meant to describe the mackerel, but the streaks of blood on Art's shirt on the jetty became confused with his tortured body in her dream. 'I keep having nightmares where I hurt Art terribly. I must be the worst sister in the world.'

Mother stood behind Eva who was unable to turn and face her. The woman did not place a hand on her shoulder but Eva sensed the comfort of her presence.

'You're a Virgo,' Mother said calmly. 'All Virgos have a touch of that. I'm to blame for telling you I wanted a boy before you were born. But your dream might not be about Art. It could be

the memory of unfinished business from another life or a vision of something to come. And even if it is about Art we're not to blame for our dreams or for being complex. You want life to be black and white, but we all have two sides. Just because we each hide one side from strangers doesn't mean we should hide it from ourselves. Everyone is jealous. Look at me, crippled with arthritis. Some days I'm jealous of you dancing around, unaware of the wonder of being able to move without pain. You're allowed to feel jealous, Eva. You're allowed to be anything that's part of you once it doesn't take over. Now is your secret so terrible?

'Don't tell Father.'

Mother laughed. 'Us women need a few secrets, because God knows men keep enough. I'm jealous of your hair too. Let me comb it, then away downstairs. You need to be out more with other children. Maybe I've been wrong to keep you away from school. But you've always been so delicate that I was worried you might not cope.'

'I don't want to go to school,' Eva said. 'I love life here.'

'You're lonely in winter,' Mother replied. 'Still, it's too lovely an evening for worries.'

She brushed Eva's hair in comforting strokes, tilting her head slightly and smiling at Eva until her daughter smiled back. Eva looked around to spy Art in the doorway, concerned at her absence.

'The fun is starting,' he said, 'but it's not the same until you come down.'

Taking Eva's hand, he drew her from the room. On the stairs they passed Nurse carrying Brendan who had woken up. The small boy put out his hand to Art, delighted when his big brother squeezed it. Eva looked back at Mother who smiled as she watched them descend towards the excited voices in the drawing room. Grandpappy had gone to rest but the other men were emerging from a pre-dinner drink in Father's study. Eva noticed that Oliver had been allowed to join them.

'Your AE is a menace with his anti-recruitment talk,' Mr Hawkins was complaining. 'It was bad enough him siding with Larkin's union during the Dublin lockout two years ago. He would do better sticking to painting fairies than meddling in politics.'

'AE is entitled to his opinion,' Father replied. 'Not that the King or Kaiser will pay him any more heed than the Dublin employers did. They were determined to break the workers and had the Roman church behind them.'

'Your church too,' Mr Hawkins pointed out. 'Larkin is a communist. What support could AE gather for such a blackguard?'

Remembering Mother's reference to AE, Eva imagined an army of stone figures rising from Dublin Bay, summoned by the bearded mystic whom Mother regarded as a friend.

'What is a communist, Father?' Art asked, alerting the men to their presence on the stairs.

'A thief,' Mr Hawkins retorted, 'who would murder you in

your bed and divide your possessions among every passing peasant.'

'Somebody who thinks differently from us,' Father interjected quietly.

'True,' Mr Ffrench agreed. 'Perhaps Christ was a communist.'

'Really, Ffrench!' Mr Hawkins was aghast.

'I don't think he was,' Father said. 'Christ asked us to live selfless lives for love of our fellow man and the promise of our reward in the next life. The communist offers no such reward. His world will not work because we are the flawed children of Adam. The communist may proffer an earth without God, but he cannot create an earth without sin. Our chief sin is greed and that is the worm which would devour the communist's clockwork world.'

'Larkin would devour your world too,' Mr Hawkins argued. 'Hand in hand with the Germans, he would murder every Irishman of property, with your cousin acting as his scullery maid.'

'Countess Markievicz knows her own mind,' Father replied mildly.

'She's a traitor to her class,' Mr Hawkins declared, 'consorting with dockers and slum revolutionaries? Is this the mob you would put in power if we gave you Home Rule?'

'Mr Larkin wishes to murder nobody,' Father argued. 'He simply wants children not to sleep nine in a bed.'

'And I agree with him,' Mr Ffrench interjected. 'Is it so wrong

to want children to have bread?’

‘And shoes?’ Art asked.

‘Yes, shoes too,’ Mr Ffrench agreed.

Mr Hawkins bristled. ‘You’re too free with the talk you allow in this house.’ He pointed into the study. ‘I never thought to hear such comments allowed by someone with that portrait over his desk.’

Eva glanced in at the dark portrait of Martin Luther whose stern eyes followed her whenever she entered Father’s study.

‘Any man who pinned a thesis of ninety-five points on a church door invited discourse,’ Father replied, unflappably. ‘Come, Hawkins, let’s not quarrel.’ He smiled at Art and Eva. ‘You children run along before you forfeit your forfeits.’

Maud fretted in the drawing room, impatient at their dallying and upset because Oliver had been commissioned into the ranks of the men. Beatrice Hawkins was anxiously awaiting their presence too. The carpet was rolled back and six cushions placed on the waxed floor. Gas jets hissed as Nurse came down from Brendan’s room, having been coerced into playing records on the gramophone. Dance music began as the children waltzed around the cushions, never straying far lest they lose the game. Nurse lifted the needle and the music stopped. Maud and Thomas were first to sit down, each laughingly bagging a cushion. The three Hawkins girls fell in unison so that Art and Eva were left battling for the last cushion. But Eva spied Art’s almost indecipherable feign as he slipped, ensuring that she got to the cushion first.

‘Forfeit!’ the others shouted gleefully.

‘What is it?’ Art asked.

Maud glanced towards the door, ensuring that the adults were beyond earshot. She sneaked a look at Nurse. ‘You must kiss the person you like best,’ Maud commanded – her favourite forfeit, the one she longed to play on Oliver. Eva blushed as Art glanced at her, certain of being chosen, yet dreading the public spectacle. Then, to her astonishment, he strode towards Beatrice Hawkins to surprise the girl with a kiss. Beatrice stared at Art as if nobody else was present and Eva suddenly sensed that she was losing her brother. Then the others laughed as Beatrice blushed in embarrassed delight. Art turned to Nurse, smiling.

‘More music,’ he commanded. ‘Let’s dance. Let’s all dance.’

They danced on in the August twilight. Art was now being so attentive to Eva that she made herself forget the way he had kissed Beatrice. It grew so dark outside that their reflections became visible in the windowpanes. There was something comforting about seeing her world there, exactly as it should be, with bodies whirling about. Still she was glad when Cook knocked on the door to announce that supper was ready because it hastened the time when the Hawkins family would be leaving and she would have Art to herself.

Mother sensed that something was wrong as soon as the cooked mackerel was placed before Eva. Gently she suggested that Cook might find something else for her. People at the table were too busy trying to be heard to pay much attention. Father

had yielded his normal seat to Grandpappy who seemed to agree with Mr Hawkins on most issues concerning politics. Oliver Hawkins spoke little but Eva saw how he often glanced at Maud. Art finished eating and asked to be excused. Eva waited a few moments then followed him out to the old coach house where he and Thomas had constructed a den. He was busy at a table with bits of tube and wires.

‘Are you feeling okay?’ she asked. ‘Would you like to do something?’

Art looked up. ‘I will later. I just want to see if I can make a wireless.’

Brendan appeared in the doorway, having sneaked out of bed in hopes of being with his oldest brother. He was fascinated by anything Art did and pleaded to be allowed to help with the complex arrangements of wire. Eva left them there, knowing that soon Thomas would join them to question each decision with his impeccable logic, becoming even more determined than Art to construct this contraption. She knew that she would not see Art for the rest of the night, with the boys locked away, fixated by crackling siren voices as they attempted to construct their wireless set.

Returning to the house she found that the adults and the girls had moved into the drawing room. The front door was open and several local people had wandered in, attracted by the sound of the piano. Eva liked how people always spilled into the Manor House. There was old Dr O'Donnell from Killaghtee House,

waylaid on his way home from a sick call, and two soldiers home on leave who clapped loudly when Maud finished her party piece. Eva took a window seat in the crowded room as Father sang the tone poem for violin and orchestra in his still unperformed *Tir na n-Og* symphony:

*'Far, far away, across the sea
There lies an island divinely fair
Where spirits blest forever dwell
And breathe its radiant enchanted air.'*

Everyone applauded, taking pride in this local composition. A hush came as Mr Ffrench took Father's place at the piano. This striking young officer was still a novelty in Dunkineely and few people had previously heard him sing. Mr Ffrench announced that while travelling with the Royal Navy he had encountered strange men, but none as unusual as the hero of Mr Percy French's song, *Abdullah Bulbul Amir*. He commenced the opening bars, then stopped to stare at Eva.

'What are you sketching, Eva?'

'You.'

Mr Ffrench beckoned Eva forward. She felt embarrassed, unused to anyone except Mother paying attention to her sketching. Heads craned forward to await the officer's opinion. He considered her drawing in a silence that seemed to last for ever.

'Well, Eva, do you know what this officer thinks?'

'No, sir.'

‘That you will be a true artist when you grow up. Let no one steer you from that path. Can I keep this?’

Eva nodded, too overcome to speak, and returned to her seat, watching as Mr Ffrench began to play, with no sheet music in front of him, but an unfinished sketch balanced on the holder instead. She longed to get back the drawing, to sketch in Mother and Father and all the other faces in the crowded drawing room as Mr Ffrench smiled at her, then began to sing in a wondrous voice. People demanded an encore and it was midnight before all the party pieces were performed, with the visitors departing into the night, calling their farewells as the cart moved off along the dark street.

Eva and Maud had hot milk and bread in the kitchen before being sent to bed. Eva was glad to go, but Maud felt that she should be allowed to stay up with the adults who would talk late into the night. The wooden shutters blocked out any moonlight. Both sisters lay quietly, awaiting Mother’s final visit. Eva gazed up at the picture of a young girl kneeling beside a bed in prayer. She could not remember a time when this picture had not hung on her wall. She listened for Mother’s shoes on the creaky step near the bend of the stairs. The door was ajar, gaslight filtering in from the corridor. Mother ascended the stairs and Eva heard her soft voice in Art’s room before she pushed their door fully open. Framed in the light she looked beautiful in her dark grey hostess gown. She sat for a time on each bed. There was no hugging. She never took them on her knee for cuddles. Instead they sensed the

aura of her love as she quietly asked each daughter if they had enjoyed their day. Mother's fingers played with Eva's hair while they talked, braiding imaginary plaits as a faint fragrance filled the air. It emanated from the hand lotion Mother always rubbed into her palms after gardening. She wore no makeup or perfume, just this scent as her fingers stroked Eva's hair for a final few seconds before she said goodnight and the door closed.

Maud turned over, quickly falling asleep. Eva lay awake for a while, still able to smell Mother's hand lotion. It had been a perfect day after all and there was still her birthday to come. The story about being rejected at birth for being a girl seemed less scary now. She fell asleep, filled with warm milk and bread and knowing that she was truly loved.

TWO The News

Easter 1916

Last night the maid had gone out walking and saw the lights of a German submarine rising from the dark sea at St John's Point. She ran back to the house, hysterical for her country and her virginity, calling out for Mr Tim. Mr Timothy Goold Verschoye had cycled out along the Bruckless road to watch the lights approach, stopping Dr O'Donnell on his way home from a sick call to tell him how he'd been mistaken for the vanguard of an invading force. On the deserted road the two men had laughed but tension lurked behind their good humour because for once the maid's hysterics might have contained an edge of truth. The declaration of martial law in Dublin City and environs did not extend to Donegal, where life appeared normal. But amidst the constant bushfire of rumours about an armed insurrection in that city there was so little confirmed news that nobody was certain what to believe any more.

On Monday some bizarre class of Republic had been proclaimed in the capital by a handful of desperadoes. In some accounts the insurgents were utterly isolated, but in other reports they were holding Dublin until German reinforcements arrived. Whatever was happening, Mr Tim knew that his cousin, Countess Markievicz, would be at the centre of it, in James Connolly's Citizen Army. Last year in the *Irish Times* there

had been a photograph of her in a fantastical military uniform, marching at the head of a group of young men who resembled boy scouts more than volunteer soldiers. Mr Tim had supported the Irish Volunteers who were founded to demand Home Rule from Britain, especially as that force threatened no offensive action but existed merely as a counterweight to the unionist militant Ulster Volunteers who were pledged to resist at any cost Westminster's plans to grant Home Rule. When the Great War started, the Irish Volunteers leadership had declared it to be the duty of young men to fight against Germany to show how Ireland valued freedom and would deserve the reward of self-government within the Empire when peace came. Republican zealots like the Countess had broken away from the Irish Volunteers to form a small splinter force, but it possessed so little support that nobody took them seriously. Indeed her conversion to Catholicism had caused more scandal in the family than what, until this week, had been seen as amateur theatrics of militaristic posing.

Mr Tim did not know how many others had joined the Countess in this shocking fiasco in Dublin. He was just glad that all his family would soon be safely gathered in the Manor House. Maud was the last to arrive, having gone to spend three days with a schoolfriend in Londonderry before the trouble broke out. Thankfully the trains were running and she would now be in Dunkineely, being escorted home by Art. Art had decided to meet the train alone and tell Maud the news. Mr Tim regarded his

eldest son's offer to do this as a sign that he was adjusting to the role and duties of an heir. With the sudden death of Grandpappy in January, Art was now just one heartbeat – Mr Tim's heartbeat – away from inheriting the family home. Art was growing up. Mr Tim could see a difference when he travelled home at the end of each term from Marlborough College. This Easter he had brought back two school chums who had not previously set foot in Ireland and were alarmed by the startling events in Dublin. Still they were decent chaps, familiar with the rituals of bad news. They had played tennis with Eva and Thomas this afternoon, then slipped off for a swim at Bruckless Pier to let the family be alone when Maud reached home. Having changed trains at Strabane before boarding the narrow-gauge service that chugged along the coast from Donegal town to Killybegs, Maud would be expecting her siblings to crowd the tiny platform at Dunkineely in welcome. The sight of Art standing alone would disconcert her because she had the quickest brain in the family.

Mr Tim kept watch at his window, wanting to be the first to greet her. He saw them approach along the main street in silence, Art carrying Maud's case. Leaving his study, Mr Tim opened the front door. The street was utterly quiet, like it always went after the postmaster left his office holding a telegram. This had nothing to do with their news, but ongoing events in Dublin had created a strange atmosphere, with people saying little and little way of knowing if they meant what they said. Maud's eyes were puffy but she had not cried as yet.

‘I’m all right, Father,’ she announced before he could utter a word. ‘It’s not as if I knew Oliver Hawkins well. We only met for the first time last summer.’

‘You were fond of him all the same,’ Mr Tim replied.

‘He was a boy that any girl would be fond of. When did you hear the news?’

‘Last week. Mrs Ffrench told us he was reported missing in action. I didn’t want to write to you at school. I thought it best to wait until you were here.’

‘I don’t see why...’ Maud looked away, anxious lest she betray her emotions. ‘Oliver sent me the odd letter from the army, but only I think so he would have some girl to write to, like other boys in his outfit. Nothing was ever...’ Maud looked at her father. ‘Still you were right not to write. So many girls get news about their brothers and cousins. You see them cry for days, with other girls crying as well, caught up in hysteria. Last summer Oliver’s parents thought he was going back to school from Donegal but he had other plans. He told me he was going to enlist on his last night here. I wanted to talk him out of it, but it seemed so gallant.’

‘There’s nothing gallant in war.’ Mr Tim glanced at Art, anxious to make his son understand. At thirteen he was tall and broad enough to pass for sixteen. Last month a fifteen-year-old boy, who lied about his age to enlist, was executed for cowardice in France. Art possessed a rebellious streak but, with his accent, no recruiting sergeant would dare sign him up as trench fodder.

‘Nothing gallant even in Dublin?’ Maud asked. ‘Outnumbered

a hundred to one? The family I was staying with kept talking about the pro-German traitors fighting in Dublin. I wanted to say they were pro-Irish and I was related to one of them. But you know what Ulster Protestants are like. Have the rebels a chance, Father?’

‘A chance of what?’ Mr Tim asked. ‘It would be laughable if people were not being shot dead. Every second Dublin family has a son in France. The only people who rose with them were the slum hordes looting shops.’

‘I should visit Mrs Ffrench,’ Maud said. ‘She must be upset about Oliver.’

‘The poor woman has lost both brothers in this war already,’ Mr Tim replied. ‘She has aged so much worrying about Ffrench, who is seeing plenty of naval action. He’s quite the rising star but she just wants him safely home.’

‘How is Eva?’ Maud asked.

Mr Tim smiled. ‘Eva is Eva. Yesterday she decided to aid the Dublin rebels by climbing into a tree and writing a poem for them.’

The front door opened and Maud’s mother stood waiting to comfort her daughter. Father and son watched them embrace and disappear indoors. Glancing down the empty street Mr Tim felt a disconcerting sensation of being watched. He went inside where his son followed him into the study.

‘Are your two chums back yet?’

‘Last night one wanted to know where we kept the guns. He

couldn't believe that we don't have a single one in the house.'

'I've always hated shooting. However if they want to go hunting birds I'm sure we can arrange it with a neighbour.'

'He meant guns for protection.'

'Protection?' Mr Tim smiled. 'What does he expect, our neighbours to rush the house? Still I shouldn't laugh. This trouble in Dublin is disconcerting. Such madness, with Irishmen already dying every day in France.'

'Maybe that's the problem. They're dying in the wrong land.'

'The problem, Art, is that they are dying at all. War solves nothing and cleanses nothing. It just leaves more bitterness waiting to spill over again.'

'The fighting in Dublin is different,' Art argued.

'In what way?'

'No one is forcing them to fight. There is no officer to shoot anyone who turns back. That's one of the tasks they prepare the older boys for in school. That and being first out from the trench with a drawn sword to spur on your men to follow.'

'You like your school, don't you?' Mr Tim probed. 'I mean you're popular, you have good chums.'

'Some times I feel totally at home there. Other times I think I don't fit.'

'Being Irish can make you feel that.'

'It's not being Irish.'

'What is it then?'

'I don't know.' Art struggled for the words. 'One to one I

like most chaps there. Even the teachers are good eggs when not being jingoistic. But...sometimes when they are all gathered together...I find myself hating them. I hate their superiority, the sense of their absolute right to rule.'

'The English have that,' Mr Tim agreed. 'Even our friend Mr Hawkins – poor man – is unshakeable in his self-belief. But they cannot be blamed for being what they are, any more than a fox can be blamed for being a fox.' His father paused. 'Maybe there's something else you hate?'

'What?'

'Maybe you see the same qualities buried inside you. I mean no offence, but when asked to describe what we least like in people we often end up inadvertently describing ourselves.'

'I'm not like my fellow students,' Art stated angrily.

'I know. But maybe deep within yourself you see a seed which, if not careful, might one day make you become like them. They will all find jobs ruling the Empire when this war ends. If that is what you want then doors will also open for you. Ffrench went to a poor school, yet see how well he is forging ahead. Imagine what you could do with your contacts.'

'Is that why you sent me to Marlborough? What you want?'

'I wanted to give you the best education I could afford. After that I merely wish you to be happy. I disappointed my father, our cousins too. They wanted me to achieve things. One said that I was a lotus-eater, lacking ambition, hiding away in my own little paradise here. But my ambitions were different from

theirs. Perhaps I am inventing excuses and I have been a failure, but only on their terms. Because I never accepted their right to put their ambitions on my shoulders, I have no right to place my ambitions on yours. I'm merely saying that you may be afraid of being contaminated by the outside world. My days in Oxford were the loneliest time in my life. Young men boorishly drinking in societies. Grandpappy claimed that I ran away and I needed to toughen up to survive in the world. But I didn't want to toughen up because something inside me would have died. You're different. You have steel. Find your own path and stick to it.'

'What if you don't like my path?'

Mr Tim stared at the brooding portrait of Martin Luther. 'The one thing I wish to give all of you is a conscience. If you trust to your heart you will not go wrong, no matter how others may judge you. Go and see if your chums are back. I want to finish something before I dress for dinner.'

Art left Mr Timothy Goold Verschoye alone. Upstairs Maud would be crying, comforted by her sister and mother. Thomas would be glad all his siblings were home because he seemed happiest when they were all together. Brendan was probably reading in his den in the coach house. Of all his children Brendan was the one Mr Tim knew least about. He spent many evenings walking with the boy, but it was never fully clear what Brendan felt. Being so young, he made the others seem grown-up. Opening a drawer, Mr Tim took out new lyrics for the

latest song cycle he was composing. The villagers thought his music remarkable. Neighbours often said how much they enjoyed hearing the sound of his piano filtering out onto the street. But no orchestra had yet played a single composition. Music companies returned his compositions with polite notes of refusal. But still he pressed on, motivated by a desire to bring beauty into this world or, maybe at a subconscious level, to feel some vindication in succeeding to prove his cousins wrong.

In Dublin now rebels were fighting behind barricades, with buildings shelled and slum dwellers looting amid the corpses of horses and soldiers. Boys trapped on barbed wire in no-man's-land in France were screaming for comrades to end their agony with a bullet. Rats grew fat on corpses. Young Oliver Hawkins's body might never be found. Mr Tim remembered how handsome Oliver had looked last summer. What must it be like to lose a son? He prayed that this war would end before his boys were old enough to be drawn in and that the Dublin madness would end without too many deaths. Scrutinising the lyrics he wrote this morning, they seemed a feeble pastiche of his favourite poets. At heart he knew this cycle would fare no better than the others, but still he worked on, knowing that these imperfect songs were the only poultice he could offer the world.

THREE Four Thousand Lamps

December 1917

Local Catholics had such long memories that Mrs Ffrench was careful not to betray any hint of proselytism about her activities. Older people still cursed the visiting Protestant clergymen who had tried to steal souls during the famine by offering soup to any starving wretch lured into attending their church services. Last year a Dublin Protestant was sacked after his Catholic employers discovered how he served tea each Sunday at the *Free Breakfasts for the Poor* Protestant Missionary Charity. Mrs Ffrench thought that it was easy for her fellow Baha'is in America to advocate Baha'i children's parties as vehicles by which children of different social classes might learn to intermingle and be gently taught the truth, but in this remote part of Donegal any form of preaching was dangerous. Her husband might not think so, because Commodore Ffrench feared nothing. But, with the Bolshevik unrest in Russia, his leave was cancelled and, without him, their house felt empty and the winter hills desolate.

Still, with a war on it was unpatriotic to look glum. There was much that a woman could do. Last week Mrs Goold Verschoyle had hosted a Red Cross musical evening, attended by many young officers from the warships anchored in Killybegs Harbour. Mrs Ffrench had invited several to dine in Bruckless House,

impressing them by her knowledge of Northern Russian ports. Not that Commodore Ffrench ever divulged naval secrets, but his last letter had been filled with a boyish excitement about his latest mission. The northern route into Russia was always important as a line for supplies to be ferried into the ice-free port of Murmansk and sent on by rail to St Petersburg. However it had been an unglamorous naval backwater until the recent revolution in Russia, when it now became vital to prevent Murmansk and Archangel falling into the hands of the dangerous Bolsheviks who had seized power. This was the moment of destiny which her husband had been waiting for. Over dinner the officers had agreed that if he could help to fight off the Bolsheviks and hold these ports he would return a hero.

When the Tsar abdicated in February nobody suspected that the Bolsheviks would seize power – indeed few people, including Mrs Ffrench, knew much about them. But the world was out of kilter in these days of incessant bloodshed, with nothing predictable. The Dublin rebels – booed off the streets last Easter, with James Connolly and the other leaders executed – had recently been welcomed home from internment camps like returning heroes instead of hooligans who had levelled their own city. Mrs Ffrench was glad to have a Baha'i spiritual master like Abdul-Baha to make sense of these changes. His instruction was to spread light and human fellowship through every class and creed she came in contact with.

This was her intention behind today's party. Every child

from Bruckless and Dunkineely was invited. The attendance – smaller than she hoped for – was a curious mix, with prosperous Protestant children who were used to enjoying her gardens mingling uneasily with a few local poor Catholics. The better-off Catholic tradesmen had kept their children away. They liked the notion of their offspring taking refreshment with the gentry on her lawn, but not if they had to mix with their own lower social classes.

At first there was little mixing, as Protestant children formed one clique and the Catholics another, too ill at ease to enjoy themselves. She suspected that some Catholics had never attended any type of party, let alone an afternoon one. For a terrible moment she even envisaged a fight breaking out, a miniature re-enactment of the riots in Moscow. The servants were thinking this too, from the way they whispered to each other, but then the arrival of Eva Goold Verschoyle put everyone at ease because children from all creeds were comfortable with her.

Although Mrs Ffrench told people that every child was always welcome at Bruckless House, few ever called. Yet she never visited the Goold Verschoyle household without seeing village urchins wandering freely about the tennis court or sitting with Eva in the old coach house, taking turns to use her paints and brushes, laughing with their hands streaked in watercolours. Eva quickly became the centre of the party now, not even conscious of how she drew the children into the games she suggested.

Perhaps it was her size, with many children towering over her. Or maybe it was her aura. At fifteen, Eva was older than her years in some respects, yet far younger in others.

Soon Mrs Ffrench found herself peripheral to her own party, a bystander who would love to swing a four-year-old girl around like Eva did or have toddlers cluster about her skirt while she told stories. She kept trying to mingle and talk to each guest but a glass wall existed with the village children that she could not break down.

Still, she loved the sounds of laughter and was delighted at having risked holding the party outdoors during the few hours of winter sunlight. There was real Baha'i happiness by the end as children relaxed with each other. Village children waved as they walked away in clusters, with the Protestants being collected in ponies and traps. Finally only she and Eva were left, excitedly discussing the party on a sofa in the library while, outside, serving girls cleared away the mess on the lawn.

She offered to have her man drive Eva home, but Eva insisted that she loved the two-mile walk in twilight. Mrs Ffrench knew that she would be safe because something about the child's innocence suggested that Eva could not be hurt so long as she never left Donegal. Eva sympathised at how lonely Christmas would be in Bruckless House with Mr Ffrench away and asked would the Hawkins family ever come back to visit.

'I suspect not, dear. Bruckless holds too many memories. These days a lot of ghosts sit on empty chairs at dinner. It

would be hard for them not to keep seeing Oliver in their minds swimming down at our pier.'

Mrs Ffrench stopped, surprised by her tears. Grief was a sly thief always waiting in ambush. She had thought she was over the worst of the anguish at losing her two brothers, but last month's news that her sister's husband had also been killed had brought back her dreams of blood. When she woke some nights now she was afraid to touch the sheets, having dreamt that they were saturated in blood. She hated the three-card-trickery of these insidious dreams. In them she could be back with her brothers in their nursery, watching them play with boxes of tin soldiers. Next moment they would be wading through barbed wire and foxholes where dying men screamed, still only boys holding their tin soldiers, oblivious to danger. Then they would become her own unborn sons walking towards the German guns, not hearing her screaming to warn them until they were shot and fell. She always woke with a start from such dreams, her hand instinctively reaching down between her legs where she bled every month whether her husband was home on leave or not. Five years of marriage, stained by unwelcome blood. The Commodore had devised a code so that she could send him news after each visit home. They had names chosen if it was a boy or a girl and a locked room set aside to be a nursery. At thirty-one she was still young enough. When his victory at Murmansk was achieved, he would come home for them to try again, as often and with as much passion as it took. To compensate for all the deaths, her

first child would be a boy.

Mrs Ffrench became aware of tears also in Eva's eyes.

'Don't mind me being silly, dear.' She put her hand on the young girl's arm.

'Sometimes I blame myself for Oliver dying,' the girl said. 'You see, Mrs Ffrench, I didn't want his family to come back because of Beatrice. I wanted to keep Art to myself. It's just too terrible how I got my wish.'

'You can't blame yourself, child. Thousands of boys are slaughtered every week. Men will have to answer to God for this one day, but you have nothing to answer for.'

Something about the wide-eyed fifteen-year-old reminded Mrs Ffrench of herself at that age. Eva would also be a seeker after truth. Mrs Ffrench remembered how isolated she had felt as a girl until she stumbled by seeming chance upon a reference to Abdul-Baha and his beliefs. Now she knew that The Master had been guiding her life on a quest to find a man sufficiently open to embrace her beliefs. Her conversion of the Commodore meant that there were now four Baha'is in Ireland. She wanted to thrust copies of *World Fellowship* and other Baha'i publications into Eva's hands but each seeker needed to find their own path. Instead she decided to let the girl share The Master's work in a different way.

'Will you help me light my lamps?' she asked, knowing that Eva loved this task.

'Yes, please,' the girl replied.

Dusk had set in already. The lamps could not be seen from the road where they would attract attention but any walker by the pier would see them shine in eleven windows. This was a vital task and some nights Mrs Ffrench woke, fearful that one might have burnt out while she slept.

The greatest moment of her life was travelling to London this spring to meet Abdul-Baha in person. She could still see the Master's piercing eyes as he announced that she could cause the illumination of all Ireland if she lit four thousand lamps in one year. Mrs Ffrench had broken this down to mean eleven lamps to be lit on three hundred and sixty days and just eight lamps on the last five nights. Initially she felt foolish, knowing that the servants considered her behaviour odd, but recently they seemed to understand because they smiled when passing her each evening, as if silent conspirators. She took it as a sign that the Master was right. If the lamps were having this effect in her home, then perhaps they were spreading harmony in other houses across Ireland without her knowledge. The maids knew to fill each lamp full of oil but never to light them. That was her strangely comforting task. But tonight she let Eva help, walking from room to room through the empty house.

Finally the task was finished and Mrs Ffrench saw her guest to the door, knowing that Eva would pause on the lawn to count each lamp that beckoned to her and to Ireland and across the seas to where her husband knew that they were being lit. Eva said good night and Mrs Ffrench had to resist a impulse to

embrace her. The thought of all the marvellous Goold Verschoyle children being home for Christmas filled her with hope. She would carefully choose presents for each one, making sure that they knew her door was always open. Sometimes she imagined a fantasy where young Brendan was trapped here by a snowfall and she was able to mind him for some days until the road cleared.

Mrs Ffrench stood in her doorway until Eva was out of sight and there was nothing for it but to close the door. Lizzy, the parlourmaid, was descending the stairs. Mrs Ffrench smiled to put her at ease.

‘That was a good day, Lizzy.’

‘It was indeed, mam.’

‘The party went well.’

‘Yes, mam. Will there be anything else, mam?’

‘No.’

The girl hesitated. Mrs Ffrench suspected that some servants, including Lizzy, might feel happier in a house where the mistress never addressed them except with an order.

‘Have you the lamps lit, mam?’

‘Yes, Lizzy.’

‘We do the same for you, mam.’

‘What do you mean?’ Mrs Ffrench was puzzled.

‘If we’re passing the church, the other maids and me always light a candle for you. That’s what us Catholics do for special intentions. All of us are praying that when the Commodore comes home things will go well for you and it will be a boy.’

Mrs Ffrench was momentarily too shocked to speak.

Suddenly aware that she had been too forward, the maid went to apologise, then realised that this could only make matters worse.

‘I light my lamps for a different reason,’ Mrs Ffrench replied icily.

‘Yes, mam. I wouldn’t know, mam.’

‘Your Master and I...’ Mrs Ffrench stopped in time, shocked that she was explaining herself in front of a servant. ‘That will be all, Lizzy.’

‘Yes, mam.’

The girl curtsied and scurried away. Mrs Ffrench entered the library that was in darkness except for the lamp in the window. They would be whispering about her in the kitchen like they always whispered. She had tried to create a household where servants were not in dread of their mistress, but she had never envisaged that they would feel pity for her. She hoped that no maid would come in to stoke the fire. She wanted to be alone. She had never felt so utterly alone. Mrs Ffrench took a deep breath. This war would pass. Her husband would return from Murmansk as a hero, having fought off the menace of Bolshevism. Her bed linen would be stained with blood, only this time good cleansing blood from her labours in childbirth. She would welcome every wave of pain, every push that it took. She would be made whole then, she would illuminate Ireland and her child would illuminate her life. The Master had ordained this ordeal to test her faith,

but she would be strong and learn to be patient. Rocking herself softly back and forth, Mrs French waited for her true life to begin.

FOUR The Motor

Donegal, August 1919

Maud was surprised at the ease with which she discovered the location of the remote cottage being used as a temporary headquarters by the local IRA commander. A mark of how the villagers trusted the family was that it only took Art five minutes to emerge from the smoky gloom of MacShane's public house with directions and a respectful warning that he might be found with a bullet in his head if he did not keep his mouth shut. But it had not gone unnoticed how the family had so far declined to contact the constabulary about last night's incident, which had begun when Brendan announced at dinner that he could see men moving about in the coach house. They had all watched from the window as four armed strangers pushed the family's battered Ford across the yard to the gate, then cranked up the starting handle, climbed in and drove off.

Father had placed a hand on Maud's shoulder when sensing her about to intervene. Last year his cousin the Countess became the first woman ever elected to the British House of Commons. She refused to take her seat however, setting up an illegal assembly in Dublin with other Sinn Fein MPs instead, which proclaimed the right of its volunteers to use arms. Donegal had seen little of this new lawlessness, but remote police barracks were being attacked, and there had been raids on Big Houses by

masked men seeking weapons.

Locals knew that Father didn't hold a gun licence, so last night's raid was confined to the outbuildings. But Maud was determined to recover the motor. Father had no idea about this expedition but Father rarely bothered to use the motor, whereas, since finishing school, Maud had become at eighteen the first female in Donegal to drive. Learning was not easy, because Father, himself an infrequent driver, had been nervous about teaching her. But after Art was given permission to drive the motor, there had been no way in which Maud was going to be forbidden. Now, having fought for that right, she was simply not going to simply see their motor stolen. She did not wish to bring Art, but after divulging the address he had refused to let her cycle up into the hills alone.

Although she thought she knew the area, Maud would have been lost by now except that Art had a mental map of every sheep track for miles around. The sixteen-year-old rarely paused for bearings, but cycled up the negotiable parts of the steep track and carried his bicycle over stretches potholed beyond repair. By now they were probably being watched. The IRA lookout would think them picnickers at first, only growing alarmed as their destination became clear. Maud knew that she was taking a huge risk and their informant in the village might be in danger too. Yet all she could think about was the damage surely inflicted on the motor when it was driven up this rough boreen. Branches on both sides must have destroyed the paintwork.

Art stopped to scan the hilltop where, beneath a clump of trees, there was the entrance to a cottage.

‘Do you think they’re really there?’ he asked.

‘They will have seen us coming for miles.’ Maud looked back down the steep hill. Having left Dunkineely fuelled by righteousness, she was now apprehensive, sensing that the respect she was accustomed to might be absent in this new world of desperadoes. Would they be locals whose faces she knew, or strangers? Which would be the most dangerous? It was whispered that flying columns rarely stayed under one roof for more than a few nights. Their chief weapon against the army was inconspicuousness, the ability to blend back into the local populace. So few motors existed in Donegal that using one would be a death warrant for such a column, making their movements easy to track. But perhaps it had been stolen for use in a one-off attack.

‘You stay here,’ Art said. ‘This is men’s work.’

His remark banished uncertainty from Maud’s mind.

‘You stay,’ she retorted. ‘This is for grown-ups.’ In the end they raced each other up to the farmyard. Only when they swung through the gate did the two armed men stand up. It was hard to see their faces beneath the caps. Maud knew they would not shoot her, but Art might be a different matter. She tried to control her fear and dismounted, speaking authoritatively.

‘I want to speak to whoever is in charge.’

‘What are you doing here?’ a man snapped back.

‘I will speak only to whoever is in charge.’

‘He’s off about his business,’ the older man replied.

‘I’ll wait.’

‘Aye, you’d better do that.’

They lowered their guns, reluctant to aim at a young woman and a boy. Maud was relieved that Art stayed silent, because Marlborough College had eroded any trace of an Irish accent. He nudged her elbow, nodding to a hastily constructed turf rick beside the cottage, which could not conceal the car parked behind it. The men glanced at each other, uncertain of what to do.

‘Would you be Miss Goold Verschoyle?’ the first one asked.

‘I am,’ Maud replied.

‘Step inside the cottage like a good woman and bring the young master with you. Who told you where to find us?’

‘We followed a trail of broken branches. It would be easy enough for the military to do likewise.’

‘What have you told the military?’ the man demanded.

‘We told them nothing.’ Art spoke for the first time. ‘We’re all Irishmen together.’

The men said nothing, looking amused.

‘We don’t need to tell them,’ Maud added quickly. ‘A motor car is a big object. It will be as hard for us to hide the fact of not having one as it is for you to hide the fact that you do.’

‘That’s what I told him,’ the first man hissed to his comrade. ‘The damn yoke is a stone around our necks.’

‘That’s enough.’ The second man nodded towards the cottage

door. 'Step indoors and if there's any sign of the military you'd best run for it like us because they only start questioning when they're finished shooting.'

A small fire provided some light in the gloom of the cottage. The thatch was discoloured, the whitewash long faded. An elderly couple stood up as they entered and silently beckoned for them to take the two chairs, ignoring their protestations. The old man went outside and Maud heard low voices through the doorway before the youngest volunteer mounted Art's bicycle and set off down the rutted lane. The old woman was making strong tea for them, tasting of peat. She paused to take a bottle of clear liquid from the mantelpiece and added a sup of illicit whiskey to Art's cup. Then she disappeared, leaving brother and sister alone.

Being close did not prevent Art and Maud from frequently quarrelling. They were both so strong-willed that conflict was inevitable – especially if Eva was not present as peacemaker. Now however they were united by unease, each wishing they had come alone to prevent the other being exposed to danger. But neither had been willing to be left behind and allow the other to act as *de facto* head of the family.

It would be some hours before the others realised they were missing. Mr Ffrench was expected back from naval service at any time. Mother would think that they had cycled over to Mrs Ffrench who found the strain of awaiting her husband's final homecoming very difficult. Father would be in his study,

preoccupied with deciding what to do. Last month a respected police sergeant had been shot dead in front of his children in Donegal town. Father was among the small attendance at his burial, with local mourners warned off. Perhaps this had attracted the IRA's attention. Maud didn't know who had ordered the theft of their motor, just that worse trouble might ensue if Father felt obliged to report it.

Eventually they heard the bicycle's return. Maud thought that the volunteer had gone to notify his superior, but she was mistaken because, as if watching out for the bicycle, the old man re-appeared in the doorway with a wind-up gramophone which he placed on the stone flags near the fire. The volunteer entered, breathless, carrying a bag over his shoulder.

'You'll be a while waiting yet,' he panted. 'We thought these might pass the time for you.'

Maud had no idea where he had found the records but they included several very scratched Protestant hymns. The old man put one on and smiled at Maud, with his wife momentarily appearing to claim her share in this gesture of hospitality.

'That's lovely,' Maud said. 'I could listen to it all day.'

'You might have to,' the volunteer replied grimly. 'I'll be outside, mam, if there's anything you'd be needing.'

The hymns sounded strange in this dark, smoky cottage. Perhaps some Protestant family in the hills had left them behind when they packed up and left, grieving the loss of a son in France. The second time Maud played them Art joined in the

singing, his clear voice soaring over the crackling record as she began to sing too. Each record was played five times before she heard voices outside. The new arrival had a strong Cork accent. Maud felt suddenly petrified. The Donegal men's hospitality could have been a ruse to keep them here so that they could be held as hostages to secure the release of Republican prisoners. Art rose, ready to face whoever entered, but Maud remained seated, reciting a quiet prayer. The stranger was a tall stocky man, possessing a confident authority. He laughed and kicked the gramophone lightly, knocking the needle to the end of the record.

'Hymns?' he said. 'You'd swear we were at a funeral. Now, what's this about a motor car?'

'It belongs to my family.' Maud stood up. 'What possible use could you have for it?'

'Sure, if I told you that I'd have to shoot you.'

'Please. I need it for my mother. She has terrible arthritis. She can only get around if I drive her.'

'You?' The man laughed louder. 'Don't tell me they let a wee slip of a thing like you behind a steering wheel?'

'They let a slip of a thing into the House of Commons, only my father's cousin wouldn't take her seat.'

The man nodded, as if Maud had scored a point. 'But they also say you have an uncle an Orangeman who would burn every Catholic out of Belfast.'

'My father is a Home Ruler, on the same side as you.'

‘To hell with Home Rule,’ the man said. ‘Home Rule was a bone thrown from the English table to keep the Irish dogs gnawing away quietly. This struggle is about freedom...a Republic.’

‘Hear, hear.’ Art spoke for the first time.

The man eyed up Art. ‘Did you say something, sonny?’

‘I’ve argued this same point with my father who’s a pacifist. But for me it’s full independence or nothing.’

‘Glad you think so.’

‘I do more than think. I offer you a fair trade. Give my sister back her motor car and you can have me. I wish to volunteer my services for the Irish Republic.’ Art ignored Maud tugging at his sleeve, anxious to shut him up. ‘I have received comprehensive training in how to use a rifle at boarding school.’

‘Bully for you.’ The Corkman sat down, amused. ‘What exactly would the Irish Republic do with your services?’

‘Are you insinuating that I’m a coward?’

‘I’m suggesting that you stay out of what doesn’t concern you.’

‘Of course it concerns me. I want what you want.’

‘What exactly is that?’

‘Freedom for us all.’

Maud could no longer contain herself. ‘Sit down for God’s sake, Art, and stop being an ass.’

Art turned, annoyed. ‘Stay out of this. I’m sick of other people mapping out my life for me.’

‘Listen to your big sister, sonny,’ the Corkman said. ‘Run off

and join a circus if you want, but you're misinformed about our fight. It's not about freedom *for* you, it's about freedom *from* you. The best way you could help Ireland's freedom is to pack up and return to where you came from.'

'Where exactly is that?' Art was so furious that the two volunteers appeared in the doorway with their rifles.

'England.'

'More Irish blood runs through my veins than through yours. My father can trace our family back to Niall of the Nine Hostages. Can your father do that?'

'My father was too busy trying to earn an honest wage. That's more than you parasites have ever done.'

Maud was no longer interested in the motor. She simply wanted to get Art safely out of this cottage. Of late he frequently took notions, but rarely as dangerous as this. Was it his way to rebel against Father who was shocked by each bullet fired on either side in this Irish conflict? She wanted to speak, but any interruption would only further inflame her brother.

'So what constitutes an Irishman now?' Art demanded.

'An Irishman is someone with Irish blood in his veins and in his father's and grandfather's before that.'

'Where does that leave the half-breed Patrick Pearse?' Art retorted. 'His father was indisputably an Englishman. At least my distant ancestors had the decency to be Dutch.'

The Corkman rose and took a pistol from his holster. 'Don't ever take Pearse's name in vain,' he hissed. 'I fought with him in

Easter Week. He was a true Irishman.'

'I am not saying he wasn't.' Art was calm, exuding an unconscious superiority in the face of the man's anger. 'It's your definition that excludes him, not mine.'

The commander turned to the volunteers. 'Give them their blasted car and shoot them both if they turn back.' He looked at Maud. 'Take this child away and put him somewhere safe, miss. Let this be a lesson. Property required by the Irish Republican Army will be requisitioned in the name of the Republic. Any collaboration with the army of occupation will be seen as an act of treason. You understand?'

'Yes.'

'How can it be an act of treason if we're not even Irish?' Art queried. 'I suppose you call my father's cousin a foreigner too.'

The commander replaced his gun, calmer now. 'You're sharp, sonny. If debating points were bullets you'd have killed me long ago. But the Countess gave up everything. Could you do likewise? Revolution is not a half-way house. Your accent would be a liability to any flying column. You'd stick out, like a motor car. Stay in your own world. We leave this cottage tonight and won't be back. If you reveal where you found this car the roof will be burnt over the old couple's heads. Such a thing would not be forgotten. The peelers have just abandoned the barracks that I had planned to attack with your car tonight. They probably got a tip-off. Go home and keep your mouth shut. And tell them to do likewise in the pubs of Dunkineely.'

‘Nobody said a word to us,’ Art said quickly.

The commander escorted them out to the yard where the old couple silently stood. ‘If I had to shoot every loose-tongued Irish fool, I’d have no bullets left for the British.’

The car started at the second attempt. Art loaded their bicycles into the boot while the volunteers stood back as if expecting Maud to crash into the gate. Only after she drove into the lane did her hands start shaking.

It was dark as they descended the rough track and she steered cautiously, knowing how easy it would be to snap an axle. Father would be angry when he discovered the risk they had taken, but Maud could now convince him not to contact the police. Art stared ahead in silence.

‘Did you really want to volunteer?’ she asked.

‘No,’ he replied, though Maud knew he was lying. ‘I was merely winding up the blither. Can’t say I’d fancy the type of country he would build.’

‘I’m not sure he will get the chance,’ Maud said. ‘The Prime Minister can flood Ireland with troops.’

‘True. There’s no way these fools can win. I’m just not sure they can be beaten either. Don’t mention my offer to Father.’

They drove on in silence because the dark world beyond the windscreen felt different now. Maud wondered if the Corkman’s story about the barracks was a ruse. Perhaps some poor man had been driven in this motor to a remote spot last night, shot and his body dumped? She would spend hours scrubbing the

upholstery, yet the motor would never feel like it fully belonged to her again. At the bend beside Bruckless House a Crossley Tender was parked, with a party of British soldiers blocking the road. A local man was being searched, his hands raised as a soldier roughly kicked his feet apart. The man looked up, relieved that there were witnesses to his search. A sergeant stopped the car and put his head in the window.

‘And where would you two lovebirds be heading?’

‘This is my brother,’ Maud replied, tersely.

‘Is it necessary to search the man like that?’ Art asked.

‘I assure you it is.’ The sergeant relaxed upon hearing Art’s accent. ‘The Shinnars would shoot loyal citizens like you in your bed.’ He called back. ‘That will do. Let him go.’ Watching the local man cycle quickly away, he turned back to the car. ‘Can’t say I like this posting. At least in France you knew who the enemy was. It must be hard for you, barely able to trust your own servants.’

‘I trust everyone in my village,’ Maud replied.

‘What village is that?’

‘Dunkineely.’

The sergeant whispered softly, ‘We’ve heard rumours of a car stolen in Dunkineely.’

‘Was it reported stolen?’

‘We get reports in many ways.’ His manner was brisker. ‘Where have you just come from?’

‘We were out taking the air.’

‘What if I don’t believe you?’

‘Are you calling my sister a liar?’ Art demanded.

‘I want to know your exact movements. I’m keen to encounter a certain party of men. I have a little silver present for each of them.’

‘We met nobody today,’ Maud said.

‘For God’s sake, miss, whose side are you on? If they take your car today it will be your house and lands tomorrow. The savages won’t leave you with a roof over your heads.’

‘Please move your lorry,’ Maud replied. ‘I want to go home.’

‘And I want to know where you’ve been.’

‘What is the problem here, sergeant?’ Two figures emerged from the driveway of Bruckless House. The soldiers raised their rifles, then lowered them, sensing Mr Ffrench’s military bearing as he stood beside Dr O’Donnell. The sergeant saluted.

‘Just carrying out our duties, sir. Keeping the peace.’

‘Go and keep it somewhere else so. And don’t salute me, I’m a civilian.’

‘Sorry, sir. It’s just obvious you were in the services.’

‘We all make mistakes.’

‘The Commodore has returned from service off Murmansk this evening,’ Dr O’Donnell said mildly. ‘We can vouch for these young people. Kindly let them pass.’

‘Damned hard luck about the withdrawal of the expeditionary force from Russia, sir,’ the sergeant addressed Mr Ffrench. ‘I hear the Bolsheviks are savages.’

‘On the contrary,’ Mr Ffrench replied, ‘the Bolsheviki are men of principle, which is more than can be said for the White Russians we were shoring up, for whom I could not give a horse artillery hoot. Our retreat was bliss for me.’

The sergeant searched Mr Ffrench’s face as if this was a black joke that he was missing. His tone stiffened.

‘I lost a cousin there, at the battle on the Ussuri River.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ Mr Ffrench replied. ‘Good men died needlessly. I made it my business to write to their widows.’

‘He was just twenty-two,’ the sergeant said. ‘He fought bravely. His kids will be proud of him. What did you do?’

‘I fought my best to ensure that as few of my men as possible died. I don’t have children yet to be proud of me. If I had I might have been truly brave for their sake and joined the Bolsheviki to fight for the liberty of all men.’

The sergeant looked at his men who were all watching this encounter, then, very deliberately, he spat and gave the order to board the truck. He climbed in without speaking. Headlights lit up the dark road as it pulled away. The darkness was more intense after it was gone.

Mr Ffrench approached the car.

‘My word, you pair have got so big. Come down tomorrow and we’ll have a picnic on the pier like old times. Maybe you’ll give the doctor a lift as far as Killaghtee church.’

Mr Ffrench sounded relaxed and jovial, but Maud wondered if when she woke tomorrow she would suspect that his conversation

with the sergeant had formed part of a bizarre dream. Mr Ffrench shook their hands, then strolled back up his avenue. The doctor got into the back seat and Maud drove on.

‘Is Mr Ffrench feeling all right, Doctor?’ Maud asked.

‘I’m afraid that diagnosis is out of my league,’ the doctor replied. ‘Our neighbour appears to have embraced a new faith. He has spent the evening preaching the benefits of communism for all mankind. I have not heard such ardour since travelling medicine men used to pontificate on the virtues of their elixirs at fair days, curing everything from croup to baldness. In Mr Ffrench’s favour he makes no claim that communism will cure either. A few weeks’ rest should sort him out. Ffrench always took up hobbies with enthusiasm. Reading between the lines, it seems that he was relieved of the command of an assault on Archangel. It was given to a well-connected young English officer whom the Admiralty were keen to blood. I put Ffrench’s zeal down to pique, but we old doctors are a cynical breed. Here will do fine, Maud. I’m glad you recovered your motor.’

Maud stopped to let him out.

‘How did you know it was missing?’

The doctor laughed. ‘Who doesn’t know? Good night.’

Brother and sister drove on and entered the village. Two men leaned on the low windowsill at MacShane’s pub to watch the car go by. One gestured a silent greeting. Only after they passed however did Maud wonder if it was actually a greeting or had his fingers been cupped in the shape of an imaginary revolver.

She didn't know. Indeed, as she turned into the lane to the coach house Maud realised that there was little she was truly sure of any more.

FIVE The Boat

Donegal, August 1920

Nobody else called this the Fairyland Road, but in her mind Eva never referred to it by any other name. It was a rough track over bogs and rocks that cut the trip to Killybegs by two miles. Sometimes at dawn she loved to sketch here, knowing there would be no traffic and rarely another person to disturb her. But it was barely passable to cycle on as she had discovered with Jack this morning, going to the Killybegs Regatta when they struggled to lift their bicycles over exposed rocks where the track had vanished. Still, she was happier to travel independently rather than be squashed between her boisterous brothers in the battered motor with the roof tied down with rope.

This morning, Mother had seemed perturbed at allowing the recently demobbed twenty-two-year-old New Zealand officer to accompany her alone down this isolated track. But – as if to encourage Eva’s growing friendship with Jack – her brothers and, more reluctantly, Maud, had all expressed a fierce determination to travel by motor.

Jack looked slightly comic now, as his long legs struggled to cope with Maud’s small bicycle, but the family was lucky to have two bicycles left. Eva dismounted as they reached another outcrop of rock. Her wicker basket was crammed with eggs purchased from an old woman who resembled an amiable witch

and kept eggs for sale in a chamber pot under her box-bed in a tiny cottage near the road. Cook would be glad of them for tonight's regatta party. Jack also dismounted to offer Eva a hand, but she blushed and said that she would manage. Twice already she had taken his hand at awkward parts of the track and twice he seemed hesitant to let it go.

They discussed the afternoon regatta in Killybegs where crowds had lined the harbour walls. Eva explained how British submarines based there during the war had created great local excitement. She was careful when mentioning the war, having never ascertained how Jack received his injuries which required such a lengthy recuperation. Two months ago Father had acceded to a request from an army friend that the family might take in Jack for some rest before he undertook his long return voyage to New Zealand. Luckily Cousin George had been leaving after a summer visit, so it was agreed to offer the young officer his room. When asked to inscribe the visitors' book on his last day Cousin George had listed an entire alphabet, with his Q & R causing particular hilarity. *Q is for all the impossible QUESTIONS discussed at dinner. R is for the RESULT: indescribable babble.*

The New Zealand officer was initially bewildered by the Goold Verschoyles's indescribable babble on the night he arrived. Mother – engaged in 'table turning' with her psychic friends in the drawing room – had suggested that Father play a march on the piano to see what the spirits did. As Eva had answered the front door and led Jack into the room, the table started to

move by itself in time to the jaunty music while Mother's friends with outstretched hands linked across it, needed to stand up to keep pace with its swaying. Father was impressed, although her brothers' disbelief remained unaltered. But that night Eva and Maud had been more preoccupied with their new arrival than with any occult manifestation.

The sisters had expected a pale invalid, perhaps mildly deranged like several local ex-soldiers who had been exposed to nerve gas and were prone to fits. But apart from a slight limp, Jack seemed in perfect health. Eva did glimpse a scar down his leg on the first occasion when Jack accompanied Art and her to the pier beside Mr Ffrench's house. The tide had been in, with high waves washing over the stones as they splashed down the pier to jump feet first into the sea. The water was deep and exhilarating, so intensely cold that for several seconds after each jump Eva feared that she would never surface again. But excitement kept her warm as she repeatedly clambered out to do it again, suddenly conscious of how tightly the bathing suit clung to her eighteen-year-old body.

She had never imagined that anyone could jump higher than Art, but after several timid attempts, Jack suddenly charged through the spray to launch himself forward with a roar that scared Eva because she instinctively knew this was how he had been trained to bayonet German soldiers. Jack never uttered such a yell again as if his leap off the pier had exorcised some terrible vision trapped in his heart. But afterwards Eva never used her

nickname for the pier again as if the sight of his muscular body had altered her innocent vision of paradise.

Indeed, Eva never really thought of him as a British soldier until the night, soon after his arrival, when loud knocking disturbed the house. Father was away. Eva and Maud had looked down to see armed men outside. The IRA guerrilla campaign was ongoing, with hardened British auxiliaries ransacking villages and shooting bystanders in reprisals. Little of this had filtered into Dunkineely since their motor was stolen, but Maud understood the danger and had whispered for Eva to wake Jack and smuggle him out the back door. Eva had often visited the spare room when Cousin George slept there, but to enter it with a stranger in the bed felt different. Jack's shoulders had been bare and for a terrible moment Eva feared that he was naked. Jack woke once she touched his arm. His hand covered her fingers as he gazed up in a cryptic way she could not understand. He seemed unsurprised at her presence.

'Armed men are here,' Eva had whispered. 'They may have come for you.'

'Turn your back.' Eva heard him slip into his trousers.

He went to his window to look down at the coach house and she touched his sheets that retained a warm scent of sleep and dangerous masculinity. Jack had reached back for her hand, his touch exciting and excusable in the context of leading her onto the dark landing. She had wanted him to hurry down the back stairs but he leaned over the banisters to watch Maud open the

door and Mother exclaim: ‘Oh, do put those guns down, I can’t stand guns.’

‘Sorry, mam,’ Eva had heard a man reply. ‘Lower the guns, lads. We’re after bicycles. We need two.’

‘Then only two of you come through,’ Maud had said with such authority that only two men entered the hallway and were led by Maud down towards the kitchen. Jack drew Eva back into his room to watch the men remove bicycles from the coach house and mount up with rifles on their backs before cycling beyond a ring of light cast by the paraffin lamp which Maud held aloft. Eva had detached her hand from Jack’s grasp as her sister re-entered the house.

‘That was a spot of excitement, what?’ Jack had said quietly. ‘Was your bicycle taken?’

‘No.’

‘If it ever is I’ll happily carry you around on my shoulders. Good night, Eva.’

For one moment they had stood so close in the moonlit bedroom that Eva half-feared and half-hoped Jack would kiss her. He might have done so had she not turned to run barefoot back to the safety of her childhood bedroom.

No such sanctuary was now available on this rock-strewn track however as Eva remounted her bicycle, checking that none of the eggs wrapped in newspaper was broken. Jack was behind her, so close that her back was colonised by goosepimples. Eva was intently aware of his breath and could almost feel his fingers

though his hand was inches away. She knew that he was about to touch her shoulder and couldn't decide if she wished him to. She was used to school pals of Art who played tennis in white flannels and brought her for bicycle rides. But their prime focus had always been Maud who was prettier and more mature, well versed in accepting and deflecting their attentions with a confidence Eva felt that she could never master. At twenty, Maud had fully supplanted Mother as head of the household. She trained the maids and issued instructions, while Mother gardened and attended to her bees in an enormous black-veiled straw hat. Eva would understand Jack being besotted with Maud, but he seemed to have chosen her instead, to Maud's thinly concealed surprise. Eva turned to face him, suddenly bold.

'Slowcoach,' she laughed. 'I'll race you to the crest of the hill and beat you too.'

Eva began to pedal furiously, knowing that with his limp he might have trouble catching her at first but would soon gain ground. She glanced behind and slowed down, for the sake of the eggs. Jack was laughing, straining in the effort to catch her and Eva realised with a shock that she loved him. Yet she loved him most at moments like this, when she could feel Jack's love without him being able to reach her, when his love made her feel grown-up without forcing her to fully become an adult. Eva waited till their wheels nearly touched, then pedalled faster, loving the wind in her hair, the scent of heather and distant view of Donegal Bay. Mother had insisted that Art wait for them

where the track rejoined the Killybegs road, but just now Art seemed as far away as New Zealand. Everything felt distant in the exhilaration of this chase – the regatta they had left, this evening's house party, the unrest in Ireland and the aftermath of war that brought Jack into her life.

Since the night the bicycles were taken, the IRA never returned and even die-hard Republican villagers accepted that Jack had nothing in common with the Black and Tans in Crossley Tenders who often invaded the main street. Indeed Jack had even allowed himself to be lined up and roughly frisked by drunken British soldiers without revealing his former military rank. His only contact with any ex-officer was with Mr Ffrench, who steadfastly refused to answer to his naval title when dealing with British squaddies, though he seemed to enjoy it when local people affectionately addressed him as 'Commodore'.

War had changed the Ffrenches. Mr Ffrench's favourite topic at dinner now concerned how the White Russians were a decadent dictatorial class and his pride at having done everything short of being court-martialled to aid the revolutionary Bolshevik victory. But such dinner parties were infrequent, because relations between Father and Mr Ffrench seemed strained compared to the days when they wandered for miles on his aeroplane cart. The Verschoyle children still enjoyed the run of Bruckless House and pier, often helping Mr Ffrench in his new passion for making handcrafted wooden cabinets. But Father argued with seventeen-year-old Art over all the time he spent

in Ffrench's study, lined with maps of Russia and where a tame jackdaw flew freely about since having his wing mended by Mrs Ffrench. Father never criticised the communist tracts that Art and Thomas often brought home from Bruckless because he believed in open discussion. But Eva sensed his difficulty in dealing with some of the assertions Art had started raising.

Not that Eva paid attention to their political arguments, because lately all her attention was focused on Jack and most of his attention on her. As they cycled now she knew that she would not be able to keep ahead of Jack for much longer. This chase that she had initiated worried her because it had to lead somewhere. Jack was riding abreast suddenly, both bicycles wobbling dangerously on the narrow track. He reached across to grasp her handlebars and she had to brake, slipping slightly in the dust. She halted, suspecting that several eggs had cracked. He was beside her, his hand gripping her bicycle. Eva wondered what acts that hand had committed during the war and what it might do alone with her now.

'You caught me,' she said.

'Have I?'

Eva knew suddenly that he was not going to kiss her. Jack's eyes were serious. She wanted to kiss him, purely to stop him saying whatever he meant to say because Eva sensed that it was about to change everything.

'I'm going away,' he announced soberly.

'Where?'

‘New Zealand obviously. At least I have written to my doctor to say that I’m ready for the voyage...if I wish to go...if there’s nothing to keep me in Ireland. That is what I need to know. Is there?’

‘Of course,’ Eva replied blindly. ‘We all love having you.’

‘Do you?’

Eva blushed, not wanting to admit what she felt, even to herself, because it meant having to leave so much behind. ‘Yes. I only ever had younger brothers before.’

She knew that the words were wrong, not what Jack wished to hear or she wanted to say in her heart. Maud would know the right words.

‘I’m not – I don’t want to be – your brother,’ Jack said firmly. ‘Is that all you’re seeking? A big brother?’

‘It’s more than that,’ Eva insisted. ‘I like us being together. I love when we lie in hayricks and you read me poems like Father, only different.’

‘I’m not your father either. Look at me.’ His voice was quiet, his hand steadying her bicycle. ‘Is there anything you might like us to do that does not involve your precious family?’

‘I liked the midnight picnic last week when we all sailed out to the Green Island,’ Eva admitted shyly. ‘I liked it when I decided to swim alongside the boat and you dived in and swam beside me. Just us two in the water.’

She wanted to add how she had liked touching his bare shoulder on the night the IRA came. She liked how he shook his

wet hair when climbing from the water at Bruckless Pier. She liked the accidental glimpse she had caught of him drying his naked body by the shore, unaware that she could see through the trees.

‘I liked us being in the water too,’ Jack said. ‘Just a few inches between us and nobody able to see in the moonlight. That sort of moment might make a man not wish to return to New Zealand or make him bring somebody with him. You’d love New Zealand, Eva. It’s bigger and more beautiful than here. And there’s no trouble, no armed gangs, just people getting on with life. Childhood doesn’t last for ever. What do you want?’

‘I don’t know,’ Eva replied, scared. Mother frequently scolded her for spending too long in her studio, dreaming about the future instead of actually planning it. Jack sighed.

‘None of your family know what they want. Look at Art.’

‘What about him?’

‘This place is like the Garden of Eden and he will inherit it all, but instead you’d swear he was in the Garden of Gethsemane. Especially with that renegade Ffrench filling his head with nonsense.’

‘Mr Ffrench is nice,’ Eva protested.

‘It’s easy for Ffrench to entertain notions without children to pass his wealth on to. I want children and want to work hard for them. Do you want children, Eva? I don’t mean this year or next, with you being so young and having seen so little. I mean in time.’

‘Yes,’ she replied, because he had qualified the question so it

did not threaten her. But she hated Mr Ffrench being criticised, like she hated the arguments always simmering now at family gatherings.

‘I’m glad you said that.’ Jack’s hand moved from the handlebar to grip her fingers alarmingly. ‘Give me hope and I’ll stay. I’ll have the slowest recuperation in medical history. Even at the risk of an IRA bullet I’d walk barechested across Donegal if I stood a chance with you. Do I?’

‘I’ve said I like you,’ Eva replied.

‘What does that mean?’ Jack pressed.

‘Art will be wondering what’s keeping us.’

‘He knows damn well. He may be an apprentice saint, but he’s no fool.’

‘What do you want from me?’ Eva was desperate to escape, yet made no effort to free her hand.

Jack took a deep breath, trying to be patient. ‘Nothing you don’t want to give. Your mother says you’re not ready and I know it would be better if we met in a few years’ time, but we haven’t got that luxury. I don’t know where I’ll be then and you don’t know what type of country you’ll be living in if the house isn’t burnt over your heads.’

‘They wouldn’t burn our house,’ Eva protested. ‘They know us.’

‘You don’t know them.’ He paused. ‘Listen, we can’t talk with a chaperone waiting over the hill. You loved swimming out to the island, didn’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then do it again tonight. I’ll borrow Ffrench’s boat. He doesn’t believe in private property any more anyway. Meet me on the Bunlacky shore at midnight and we’ll have our own picnic on the island.’

‘That sounds magical,’ Eva said. ‘Can I bring Art?’

‘For God’s sake, Eva.’ Jack put his hand to her cheek and made her stare into his face. ‘Stop playing at being a child. I want us to visit the island alone as man and woman, if you want that too. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’ But Eva didn’t want to understand. She wanted to remain poised on the cusp of this new world without having to leave the safety of her old one.

‘Not that I’d do anything improper,’ he added. ‘You know I’m a gentleman. I just need us to talk alone with none of your family having seances or political debates or playing polkas or simply being so damned cheerful. I need a sign that you understand and return my feelings. I’m willing to wait if there is hope but I’ll not be played as a fool.’

A shout disturbed them. Art had grown impatient and come to check on them. Jack quickly released her hand. His fingers had not been rough but Eva still felt their touch and knew that she was blushing. She waved to Art, with a gaiety she didn’t feel.

‘Are you okay?’ Jack asked quietly.

‘I’m fine,’ she whispered.

‘So, should I steal Ffrench’s boat or not?’

‘I’ll bring my bathing costume. You can sail and I’ll swim the last stretch.’

Eva mounted her bicycle to pedal up the slope towards the safety of her brother. Jack followed more slowly. Both dismounted when they reached Art so that they could unhurriedly walk home together with Eva in the middle, between the two men she liked most in the world after Father. Jack was less frightening in company. He was in wonderful form as they sang and swapped snatches of poetry. If Eva had a choice she would have continued walking like this for ever, but that was a child’s wish and, glancing at Jack, she knew that she was a woman.

The house was packed when they reached home and the drawing room carpet had been taken up for dancing. Mr Barnes, manager of the Royal Bank in Donegal town, had transported the Goold Verschoyle family silver from his vault despite his misgivings about taking such a risk in these times. His three sons were here and the eldest boy was playing tennis against Maud in the garden. Through the window Eva watched Maud gracefully return a volley with one hand holding down her straw hat. Thomas talked to Mr Barnes in the grown-up way which came naturally to him, while ten-year-old Brendan raced in and out of the open front door pursued by a clutch of village children in a game that Eva couldn’t fathom but would have loved to join in. Male voices came from Father’s study and Art joined the men there like poor Oliver Hawkins had been allowed to do the

summer before he died. Mr Ffrench was also in there with the rector whose son always attended their musical evenings and sang *I Love Thee, Come Forth Tonight*.

The kitchen would be dangerous territory, with the flustered cook complaining that in any other house the mistress would have some notion about how many were likely to arrive for dinner. Mother would be trying to soothe her, with Mrs Trench, the gardener's wife, also there to help. Maud sometimes whispered that Art was sweet on Mrs Trench's only daughter, but Mr Trench – a man of few words – had once announced that he would twist the neck off any boy seen near her. Art's social position would not save him from Mr Trench's temper if he were over-familiar with the girl. Thinking of this made Eva wonder where Beatrice Hawkins was now. The Great War had changed everything. Tonight's gaiety would be tinged by absences. Eva and Maud often lay awake discussing the dozen young men from nearby Protestant families butchered in France and Belgium, with Mother despairing that so few eligible locals remained for her daughters to consider marrying. Eva wondered how long a boat took to reach New Zealand and what it would feel like to be a bride. The possibility would have been exciting were it not suddenly tangible.

She went to answer the front door where two local women wearing shawls stood with a donkey cart loaded with whiting, herrings and sprats, looking to sell them at two pennies a plateful. Eva explained that tonight was a special dinner. As the women

moved off, she checked the basket on her bicycle and found that only two eggs were broken. Carefully she removed them while Brendan ran through a flock of geese to offer to ride her bicycle around to the coach house.

Eva braved the chaos of the kitchen to give Cook the eggs. The babble there was too much for her, so she slipped out to her studio where she could think.

It was seven o'clock, five hours until midnight. It would be impossible to talk to Mother all evening and, even if she could, Eva wouldn't know what to ask. She longed to knock at Father's study and ask to speak to him alone because Father understood her, but Eva was too shy to seek advice from anyone about anything so personal.

Eva's parents were used to her wandering off for walks at night to sketch in the moonlight or simply sing with joy where she could not be overheard. With so many people arriving tonight nobody would miss her or Jack. She imagined cold water soaking into her bathing costume, the sway of dark waves, the white splash of oars. She would need to change back into her clothes when they reached the island, having to render herself naked under a bathing robe before slipping every item of apparel back on. Jack would be kindling a fire with his back to her, aware that she was briefly naked and knowing that when she sat next to him a tang of salt would still linger on her lips if he kissed her. He would definitely kiss her on the island with no one else there. If she allowed him, he would touch her through her clothes in

places where Eva had never been touched. Surely it would be the most fleeting of touches because he was a gentleman who wished to marry her and would do nothing that might lessen his respect. Perhaps he would just want to talk or read her poetry.

The coach house was deserted. The family had divided the building into separate dens. Being fascinated by science, Art and Thomas had constructed a laboratory in the part furthest from the kitchen, from which explosions were occasionally heard. Nearby Maud had set up a weaving shed, after visiting local weavers to master the loom. Maud's den was also the editorial address of *The Dunkineely News*, the family newspaper established by Maud to record the advent of summer visitors. A flight of rickety steps led to the small loft that Eva used as a studio for painting. Brendan generally flitted between dens, anxious to be with his brothers but knowing he would be teased less by his sisters. He considered the back seat of the motor as his private den. This was parked in the main coach house, and Art and Thomas were summoned to discuss engine problems whenever it refused to start.

Eva climbed the stairs to her studio where she could be alone, except for the mouse behind the skirting board whom Eva had trained to come out and accept food from her hands. Jack was the only visitor to her studio with the patience to sit still long enough for the mouse to emerge. Jack seemed content to sit for hours and watch her paint. At first Eva was too self-conscious in his presence, but she had grown so accustomed to him being

there that she found it hard to paint without Jack at her shoulder.

She picked up a paintbrush but put it back, wishing she had socks to darn because she found darning a soothing occupation. Footsteps ascended the wooden stairs and she prayed it was not Jack. It was Brendan, wearing the comical oversized hat that he loved.

‘What are you doing?’ he asked.

‘Just dreaming.’

‘I bet you’ll be a famous artist when you grow up.’

Eva laughed. ‘I doubt it.’

‘I’ll stand by the door in tails and top hat greeting the crowds pouring into your first exhibition.’

‘I prefer you wearing that hat. What will *you* be?’

‘A world famous traveller. Foreign correspondent for *The Dunkineely News*, sending dispatches from Killybegs and Kilimanjaro. I’ll recruit a tribe of pygmies to land at Bruckless Pier and march on Dunkineely to put Art and Thomas in the stocks with people ordered to empty chamber pots over their heads.’

Eva smiled. ‘What have they done now?’

‘Thomas won’t let me into the attics to dress up.’

‘For what?’

‘The dancing, silly. Maud has decided we should wear fancy dress tonight. She says you must go as Becky from *Vanity Fair* and she is dressing as a damsel from a harem, whatever that is. Will you help me to find a costume and stop the others from

teasing?’

Eva took his hand, which felt so small after Jack’s, and left the studio. She envied Brendan being the magic age of ten, just like he envied Eva her grown-up status. At ten she had seemed old compared to her brothers, but, as the youngest, Brendan would always seem young. They crossed the yard, swinging their arms and singing. She knew that the others had not really barred him from the attics, especially Art with his deep sense of justice, but Brendan was sensitive to every slight, convinced that his brothers patronised him no matter what he did. Normally Eva loved to dress up but this evening she found it hard to focus on anything except the slow approach of midnight. Maud had opened a trunk of clothes belonging to Grandpappy’s late wife who had been locked away in an asylum for the incurably insane. Grandpappy had never encouraged visitors, claiming that she recognised nobody, but Eva used to hate imagining the old woman stranded in a ward of strangers.

Maud was dressed in bright silks, set off by a rich Persian cummerbund. She had found a pageboy outfit that Brendan only agreed to wear on condition that he could keep on his favourite hat. For Eva, Maud had a high-waisted, full-skirted pale green satin dress, which had probably not been worn for decades. Normally Eva liked to make her own choice but this evening she didn’t argue, even allowing Maud to put up her hair with a ring of silk rosebuds after they returned to their room.

‘You’re quiet,’ Maud observed, finishing Eva’s hair. ‘Did

anything happen on the cycle back from Killybegs?’

‘Like what?’

‘You tell me.’ Maud looked down. ‘You’re blushing.’

‘Am I?’

‘Jack is daft about you. I heard him tell Father and Mother.’

‘What did they say?’

‘That you couldn’t be rushed, you didn’t really understand such things yet. But you do, don’t you? You must do what you alone want in your heart. But a man cannot be put off for ever either. You could lose him.’

Eva knew this. But there was so much else she could lose. She felt safe in Donegal where she understood this peaceful world and it understood her. Jack didn’t just bring the horror of war into their lives by occasionally shouting in his sleep, making Eva long to comfort him, he also brought home the encroachment of adulthood. There was no doubt but they made a wonderful couple, matched in everything except experience. He loved nature like she did and would happily lie out in the fields while Eva recited Tennyson or Whitman. But change was everywhere. This autumn Art would enter the University of London. A suitor could snatch away Maud at any moment. Watching Father check the windows at night Eva knew in her heart that they could wake to find the house in flames. That was why she loved to stop time in paintings. But life refused to work like that.

The maid’s voice called from the landing that Maud was

urgently needed to sort out seating arrangements. Left alone, Eva examined herself in the mirror. The Victorian dress made her seem older, the piled up hair emphasising her slender neck. She closed her eyes to imagine Jack's hand caressing it. Then the dinner gong broke her reverie. At Maud's chest of drawers she put rouge on her face, then walked downstairs to greet people, sensing Jack watching her every step.

By a miracle they all fitted at the table. Some neighbours disapproved of such mayhem but Eva loved the informality where Cook was applauded and people struggled to make themselves heard. Across the table Jack caught her eye and Eva knew that he thought she looked beautiful. Normally she would have brought down her autograph book to ensure that everyone inscribed a clever remark or fragment of poetry. At last year's regatta party Mr Barnes's eldest son had inscribed a poem:

If the wicked old world was swept away
Like dust from your studio floor,
And only those parts of it made again
That were good and fair and pure;
And if the re-making was given to me,
I'd begin with Donegal,
And your studio out in the stables
Would be the first of all.

But the treasured autograph book belonged to her old life and she would have felt childish bringing it to the table now.

As befitted dangerous times, there was no talk of politics, with

even Mr Ffrench and Art respecting Father's wish. Afterwards people crowded into the drawing room, where the rector's son produced a fiddle to accompany Father on the piano. They launched into old-time waltzes, English folk dances like *Sir Roger de Coverley* and then, when the room was warmed up, riotous Irish set dances like *The Walls of Limerick*, with people eager to teach Jack the steps. Eva noticed that he never danced with her, anxious not to spoil the moment when they would finally be alone in the boat. At eleven o'clock, the dancing halted to let people deliver their party pieces. Maud was first, singing the *Skye Boat Song*. Eva saw Jack slip away and knew that he was about to cycle to Bruckless House to untie the small boat by the pier.

Maud's song finished and old Dr O'Donnell sang *Eileen Alannah*, with eyes only for his smiling arthritic wife. The minute hand on the mantelpiece clock picked up speed as more songs followed. Father played a piece by Liszt and Mother who was tone-deaf said, 'That's lovely, Tim,' as she always did whether he played Beethoven or *Pop Goes the Weasel*. Mr Barnes insisted that Father play a composition of his own and the room was still as he began to sing:

*'Far, far away, across the sea
There lies an island divinely fair
Where spirits blest forever dwell
And breathe its radiant enchanted air.'*

The familiar words followed Eva as she slipped unnoticed upstairs. Her room was moonlit, her bathing costume in the

drawer. She chose a robe and long white towel, took the band of silk rosebuds from her hair which tumbled down, and then, as an afterthought, washed the rouge from her face. The kitchen was empty when she desperately wanted someone to find her. But nobody came to stop her lifting the latch and slipping into the yard, past her dark studio and around onto the main street. She stopped across the road to look at the open drawing room window where family and neighbours were gathered. The dancing would soon recommence. The noise of a Crossley Tender's engine in the distance suggested troops were about. The street was deserted, with locals cautious of venturing out. Jack would be waiting at the Bunlacky shore. It was dangerous to leave him alone, in case patrolling auxiliaries mistook him for a rebel. Yet she couldn't bring herself to move from the scene in the window. Footsteps came down the lane she had just left. Eva recognised the hat before hearing Brendan's lilt: *'Who goes there? A grenadier. What do you want? A pint of beer...'*

He spied her and stopped. 'Where are you going?'

'Swimming.'

'It's midnight.'

'I know. Do you want to come?'

'I've no costume.'

'You can stay in the boat and explore the island?'

'What boat?'

'It will be an adventure, our secret.'

Even as she held out her hand Eva knew that she was making a

terrible mistake. But she couldn't stop herself. All the way down the Bunlacky road she kept intending to send Brendan back at the next bend, but she swung his arm and let him sing, until on the final bend she hushed him.

‘What’s wrong?’ the boy whispered, sensing her tension.

Eva didn’t reply, but walked on, clutching her bathing costume to her breast, feeling so small in the moonlight as she struggled to decide what she wanted. She reached the rocks and spied the boat below, with Jack smoking as he waited. He stood up, tossed the cigarette into the waves and held out a hand which halted in midair as the boy appeared behind her.

‘Hello, Jack,’ Brendan called. ‘Are we going on an adventure?’

Jack didn’t reply. He looked across the dark waves and Eva knew that he simply wanted to row away. But the boy had already run down the crude stone steps and Jack swung the boat around so that he could clamber on board. The young officer put a hand out to help Eva get in, then immediately released his grip. He seemed taut like a coiled spring, saying nothing. Yet Eva knew that he was not angry, merely disappointed and more annoyed with himself than with her. Without Brendan she would never have come this far. She would have hesitated on a bend on the Bunlacky road, lacking the courage to continue. Yet now she was here Eva wished that the boy was gone. She wanted them to sail alone to the island, with Jack’s back turned as she stripped out of this ridiculous Victorian dress to don her bathing suit. She wanted all this when it was safely out of reach, because Eva knew

that they could not simply let the child off. Jack had set her a test which she failed. Brendan's clear voice filled the air: '*... Where's your money? In my pocket. Where's your pocket? I forgot it.*'

The child lay back, trailing his hand in the water. 'This is more fun than the party. Can we do it again tomorrow, Jack?'

'Not with me, sonny. I'm New Zealand bound. I'll swing this boat around now and leave you both on dry land.'

'But it's great fun having you here,' the boy protested. 'Must you really leave?'

'I'm afraid so.' Jack altered course effortlessly to steer them towards the shore. He was a superb sailor. Eva imagined the pair of them sailing across a New Zealand lake. Only in this fantasy she was older and wiser and he had built a cabin with high windows to allow her to paint by the lakeside. She closed her eyes and tried to keep imagining these things, because she knew that when she opened them he would be regarding her with quiet disappointment. 'I'm off in the morning,' Jack added. 'I was never one for long farewells.'

Eva opened her eyes and stared at him. She wanted to say so many things that she didn't possess words for. She wanted to explain that she was just not ready. She wanted to be someone older than herself, yet she longed to be ten years of age again.

With a thud the boat bumped against the jetty. Eva wanted the comforting touch of a hand. She reached out in the moonlight and held one tight, never wanting to let go. Brendan glanced at his sister and whispered, 'You're hurting my fingers.'

With great courtesy, Jack held the boat steady while she got out.

‘I’m sorry,’ she told him.

‘Don’t be. The fault is mine.’

Eva longed to say more but the young officer had already set his back to her and began to row away along the dark shoreline towards Bruckless Pier.

SIX The Docks

London, August 1922

All night Art had been arguing with university friends about Italian politics in Fletcher's rooms near Blackfriars. Fletcher was not of like mind to the others: he saw nothing wrong in truckloads of Il Duce's fascists storming into Milan to end the communist-led strike there with the black-shirted thugs tearing down the Bolshevik flags hanging from the town hall. Fletcher could not understand why Art took such matters so seriously. To him, Mussolini was a clown who would never achieve power, just as Lenin would not hold onto it for long with famine in Russia. Fletcher would have been happier discussing Johnny Weissmuller's new world swimming record or playing *I Wish I Could Shimmy Like My Sister Kate* on his gramophone, because, to him, university was merely a lark. Tragedy had set Fletcher's future in stone, no matter what he studied. With the death of his eldest brother on the Somme, he was set to inherit the family estate. University was a chance to escape from home and discreetly make hay in this unburdened limbo before he came into his inheritance.

Watching him, Art wondered would Thomas possess this same air of haunted gaiety if he had died in battle. So many chaps at the University of London carried a guilty look at having come into their inheritance not by birth but by an elder brother's death,

that Art had learnt to recognise them. The peculiar thing was that they often mistook him for one of their number as if he too was cursed with the stain of underserved wealth. Yet the more he studied politics the more he realised that he was like them. All that distinguished him from his siblings was a fluke of birth, a throw of the dice yielding him absolute access to wealth while the others were left to scramble for minor bequests. Past generations had ensured that this was a chalice he could not refuse. Short of dying, Art had no means of breaking that cycle of indenture.

Yet Art argued now with his college chums that surely to God – if there was a God – the Great War's slaughter had overturned all previous rules and conventions. Crippled beggars on the London streets were daily reminders that any pretence of innocence was gone. For the Great War to mean anything it had to herald the advent of a new era. Freedom was not about one Kaiser defeating another, it was about granting people the liberty to be truly themselves.

Before the Bolshevik revolution the bulk of humanity had sleepwalked through life, unaware that they could possess total power if they merely looked up from their chains. Every day the imperialist press repeated lies about millions starving in Russia because they were afraid to report what was really occurring there. But once ordinary British workers understood this truth, they would emerge like risen Christs from the tomb, liberated from the inbred fear of their alleged betters. Last year the miners had suffered on strike without the country rising to back them

and today it was the engineers' turn to be locked out. But once the Communist Party was fully organised across Britain a day of reckoning would come.

Fletcher laughed at Art's intensity and rang the bell for his manservant to fetch more stout. The others agreed with Art's assertion that the Labour Party had become lured away from its revolutionary roots and was now merely a cloak and dagger ally of imperialist expansion. But Art sensed the hollowness of their convictions. They were flirting with radicalism, like their fathers on Grand Tours of Europe once flirted with exotic dancers. Typically short-sighted, they regarded Lenin's revolution as too foreign to impinge upon their world. These student discussions were not about genuine revolution, but simply a chance for the privileged idle to enjoy a brief *frisson* of danger by pretending to be different from their parents. After college they would drop such notions and take up golf and banking, fattening out into premature middle age. Art lost patience with their play-acting and was about to leave, when the manservant returned and sought him out with a sympathetic look.

'Begging your pardon, Mr Goold Verschoyle, but I thought you should know the news from Ireland. I'm afraid your Michael Collins has been shot dead in an ambush.'

The room went quiet, the others studying his face. They had no interest in the civil war raging in Ireland since the peace treaty was narrowly accepted and British troops had withdrawn. The treaty had divided the country, with the majority of people sick

of war and anxious to accept the partitioned Free State which the treaty offered. But Art could not imagine any compromise on a full Republic being accepted by such men as the IRA commander who had once returned the family motor to Maud in the Donegal hills. In the ensuing split he surely sided with the diehards like de Valera and the Countess who were now fighting against Michael Collins and his fellow treaty negotiators whom they accused of betraying the dream of a Republic. Art had initially been excited by this civil war, seeing parallels with the power vacuum in Russia in which Lenin seized authority. But de Valera was no true revolutionary. Art still hoped that both factions might weaken each other sufficiently for a communist takeover, but – with the union leader Jim Larkin sidelined in an American jail – there was nobody of sufficient stature to lead such a coup d'état. Art's enthusiasm for the IRA had never recovered from his encounter with that Cork commander. It left him feeling occluded from all sides in recent years, as the conflict grew increasingly bloody. The Troubles had taken a toll around Dunkineely, not just in occasional killings and reprisals, but in the way that people came to be judged purely as being on one side or the other. At times in Donegal he was made to feel a foreigner, whereas in London he was viewed as a totally Irish outsider.

Having delivered his news, the manservant slavishly waited for a morsel of acknowledgement.

'That is shocking,' Art said. 'Thank you for letting me know.'
'They shot him like a dog, sir. Mr Collins claimed that when

he signed the peace treaty he was signing his own death warrant and he was right.'

'Thank you, Jenkins,' Fletcher interrupted. 'That will do.'

'Yes, sir.'

The man placed four bottles of Imperial Russian stout on the table and left. Fletcher leaned over to refill Art's glass. 'Damned bad news,' he said. 'I liked Collins. He was a murderer but one you could do business with. My sister developed quite an attraction to his picture in the papers when he came to London for the peace talks. The whiff of danger I suppose. You know romantic girls. These must be worrying times.'

'Yes.' Art sipped his stout, surprised at how moved he was by this news. Dunkineely would be shocked, even those who felt that Collins had sold out the Republic. He longed to be among people who understood this contradiction. His sister Eva had recently enrolled at the Slade Art School, but she was sleeping in a London girls' hostel where he would not be welcome at this late hour. Besides, though he loved Eva more than anyone in his family, she was too vague to fully understand what was happening.

He finished his stout and rose to leave, glad to descend into the night air. Collins had been a strong man, a Catholic reactionary, yes, but still a man of both action and thought and he was to be admired. Crossing Queen Victoria Street, Art found himself humming *The Soldier's Song*, the illicit anthem sung by rebels during the Easter Rising. The tune attracted a policeman's

attention. He approached Art, then took one look at his expensive clothes and passed by with a surprised nod.

Art knew that if he had been poorly dressed it might have been a different story. He cut down sidestreets, being well-versed in long night walks from Donegal, heading towards Wapping where there were early morning pubs for dockers. Other Irish people might be there, fellow countrymen with whom he could discuss the news. The first pub door he tried was locked, although lights were on inside. He knocked but the drinkers ignored him. It was the same at the next one but when he reached the Thames he fell into step with two young Mayo men, Liam and Tomas, near Tower Bridge Wharf. When he offered to buy them a drink they laughed, claiming that he must be desperate for a cure. Still they knew exactly where to go.

The pub shutters were down to keep out the night. Casual dockers inside were having a pint to steady their nerves before commencing the struggle to find work. More afflicted drinkers sat among them, crippled by alcohol, hands shaking so badly that they could barely lift a glass to their lips. Art bought drinks and then a second round as the three Irishmen discussed Collins's death and the grip that his new Free State army was gradually gaining over the country. Neither Liam nor Tomas was educated, yet Art felt happier in their company than with the students in Fletcher's room. Here there was a sense of real life being lived. More Irishmen joined them, distraught at the news, glad of Art's company and opinions. He bought a final round of drinks,

including a whiskey for an elderly English carpenter who initially refused Art's offer because he had not eaten a meal for several days. The man was seventy-four and told Art he had always found work until his health recently began to fade. Some older stevedores still took him on, knowing that he was a good worker, but most were scared of having a dead weight on their hands. He was a veteran of the 1889 Dockers' Tanner strike and had been among the first crew two years ago who refused to load coal onto the *Jolly George* when that ship was due to sail with arms against the Bolsheviks in Russia.

The group drank up, hurrying out from the pub now onto the dark quayside where the casual hiring was about to commence in a large iron-barred shed. Dockers permanently employed by the big firms brushed past them, knowing that they were guaranteed work. But for the men around Art it was a case of hoping that smaller ships had docked in the night and needed casual workers to unload them. Men emerged from other pubs and nearby streets, a swarm pressing into the shed where stevedores selected workers from the crowd. Art stood beside Liam and Tomas who didn't know the stevedores and so found it hard to get noticed. This was capitalism at its most ruthless – men reduced to units of labour, hired for the shortest time then discarded when they grew old. Repeatedly the old carpenter pleaded with the stevedores who shook their heads. Art was impressed at how the other hungry men, while focused on their own plight, sympathised with him. This was a world Art knew little about, but he might learn

more here than from a day in university.

He began to raise his hand amongst the clamouring throng as things started to look desperate for the remaining men. Liam and Tomas were amused at first, then hissed at him to stop messing. He ignored them, fighting his way forward to eventually attract the attention of a burly stevedore.

‘What the hell do you want?’

‘A day’s work. You’re hiring, aren’t you?’

‘I’m hiring men. This isn’t some sort of student lark.’

‘I’m as strong as any man you’re taking on.’

‘You’re big all right but your hands are as soft as a baby’s arse. Now piss off.’

The other men regarded Art with none of the measured sympathy they felt for the old carpenter. They stared at him coldly, like he was trying to mock them. Was it solely his accent and clothes or was there another difference that he was unaware of? Perhaps the proletariat was harder to join than the bourgeoisie. From an early age the proletariat was trained to ape their so-called betters, whereas the rich were trained to largely ignore the existence of workmen and servants. He could not recall the names of all the maids who worked in the Manor House when he was a boy but all of them would remember him.

The stevedore glanced at a shabbily dressed young man with huge shoulders standing behind Art.

‘Ready to burst a gut?’

The young man mutely nodded and the stevedore nodded

too. Art noticed how their interaction was entirely based on appearances. Only five words had been exchanged. Men behind Art pushed aggressively forward and he moved back to where he was less intrusive but could still observe these rituals. The stevedore chose his crew and there was an anguished murmur, although someone amongst those left claimed that there was another ship yet to be unloaded. Art went to join Liam and Tomas at the entrance to the shed, though he sensed that their camaraderie had cooled since leaving the pub.

‘Swap shirts,’ he said to Liam.

‘Are you daft?’ The Mayoman laughed.

‘It seems a fair exchange.’

‘You won’t be saying that, being eaten alive by his fleas all night,’ Tomas joked. ‘Talk sense, man.’

Art ignored Tomas. ‘Do you want this shirt or not?’

Liam licked his lip nervously. ‘What’s the catch?’

‘None. I’ll swap you my shoes, trousers and all.’

‘Jaysus, is it to be standing in the nip you both want?’ Tomas asked. ‘I’m not staying around to be a laughing stock.’

But Tomas didn’t move and Art recognised the greed in his eyes. He was jealous that Liam had been asked. Liam sensed this too and he agreed to the swap as much to gain an advantage over his companion as to get the clothes.

Both of them went down a narrow dank alley smelling of piss between two warehouses. They undressed, first exchanging shirts and then trousers, anxious that no garment touched the filthy

ground. Liam's boots were too tight for Art, and Liam would slide about in his shoes but the Mayoman did not complain. Liam craned his neck, trying to inspect himself in his new outfit.

'Well? Do I look like a gentleman?'

'Yes,' Art lied, though the way in which Liam held his body resembled an awkward servant in fancy dress. 'Do I look like a docker?'

'No.' Liam was suddenly aggressive, feeling that he had been made a fool of. 'You look like the gobshite you are. Now piss off and stop following us.'

The Mayoman stalked off to rejoin his companion and Art watched them leave, knowing that there was a new friction between those two friends. Collins's death had been quickly forgotten in the acquisition of a good shirt. This was the corrupting influence of possessions. It was easy for Art's college friends to discuss Marxist theory but the Ffrenches had shown that it was possible to live out your convictions. As yet he was not in a position to follow them to Russia but this morning was a first step. He wondered if Mr Ffrench dressed like this in the Moscow furniture factory where he and his wife had now been working for the past three months. They were sharing a large room there with three other couples, in a big house seized from a bourgeois family. Ffrench had described in his last letter how quickly you grew accustomed to restricted space. He did not know how he ever put up with the waste of rooms in Bruckless House which lay empty for the IRA to burn for all he cared.

True life for the Ffrenches had only started since their move to Moscow. Fellow workers welcomed them and Mrs Ffrench loved how children from all the different families ran about the room, climbing onto her knee as easily as onto their mothers' laps. Ffrench urged Art to ignore imperialist propaganda. Life under Lenin was the greatest adventure in history and the Ffrenches, like other foreigners flocking there, were privileged to be allowed to play a small role within it.

Art had sworn to join them one day. He could visualise arriving in Moscow, with Mr Ffrench embracing him at the station like a true father because – although this was awful to say – Father, who supported the new Free State, felt like a stranger.

Art walked back out to join the men at the dockyard gates and thought about Collins's body lying in its blood-soaked uniform. The deputation that Collins led to Downing Street to negotiate the treaty had looked more like civil servants than revolutionaries. Nothing would change in Ireland, no matter which faction gained final power. The priests would rule, urging the new government to grind the poor with the same iron grasp. A degree in murder was no substitute for a degree in political theory. The new government would look like Liam, aping their former masters in clothes that didn't fit them. The only true revolutionary was the Countess who was still enduring prison and hunger strikes, having given up everything to live in the slums with Dublin's poor. True freedom was not freedom to acquire colonies or possessions but the freedom to be liberated from such

burdens.

Art re-entered the shed where a stevedore was scanning the remaining crowd.

‘I need twenty strong men. No layabouts. Stand still so I can bloody well see you.’

Art noticed the elderly carpenter and walked towards him. The other men let him slip through their ranks, not seeing him or paying any heed but Art felt that he was being seen properly for the first time. Not as a Goold Verschoyle or public schoolboy or university student but as flesh and blood on a par with all humanity. The carpenter did not recognise him and only looked up, baffled, when Art began to speak.

‘Do you know this stevedore?’

‘For years.’

‘Say I’m your son and I’ll work beside you all day. I’ve strength enough for us both if you show me what work needs to be done.’

‘I don’t understand what you’re at, sir?’

‘Don’t call me “sir”. I’m after a day’s work like you. Help me get in and I promise to fetch and carry for you all day.’

Ten men had already been chosen. The carpenter nodded, weak with hunger. As he pushed forward, Art followed, bending down to pick up some mud and smear it through his hair. He kept his soft hands in his pockets where they could not be seen. The stevedore looked down at the carpenter and shook his head.

‘If I could do you a favour, Andy, I would. But I need muscle for this job.’

‘My son is with me,’ the carpenter called back. ‘He’s a mute but built like an ox. Look at him. We’re a team. We’ll do the work of three men between us.’

The stevedore stared at Art. The appraisal was brutal and honest, like a gaze at a horse or a boy at an Irish hiring fair. ‘Lost his tongue, eh? Could be worse, he might have lost his prick.’ The stevedore nodded curtly. ‘Let’s hope he’s half the man his father once was.’

The old carpenter pushed eagerly in through the gates at the end of the shed and Art followed into a new world, a university of toil where he had so much to learn.

SEVEN The Exiles

Donegal, Easter 1924

There were no lamps in the windows of Bruckless House when the horse and cart bumped over the small stone bridge leading onto their property. Since arriving back in Ireland yesterday Mrs Ffrench had grappled with the wild hope that somebody – the Goold Verschoyle girls or one of the servants who had been laid off a year ago – might have placed eleven lamps in eleven windows to welcome them. But there was no such illumination, merely the damp rain that so frequently settled around this isolated house which she had been longing to see for weeks – or months if she was truly honest.

She could not tell when her husband's zeal had begun to weaken. Perhaps only in the cramped Moscow hospital where they realised there was little likelihood of him receiving proper medical attention for the terrible arm wound received in a factory accident. Poor medical conditions were not the fault of the Soviet authorities but of the belligerent European capitalist powers still trying to blockade the revolution into submission. The Moscow doctors were heroic in the loaves and fishes miracles they performed with such limited supplies – not that the medical orderly who took her husband's details would have appreciated this metaphor from a discredited religion. Every comrade citizen had been heroic even when they did not appear

to be so and violent squabbles broke out between families trying to commandeer every inch of space in the room where they all ate and slept. Even the children's heroism was undiminished by their inability to stop crying with hunger. Heroism existed in the very air on the streets, in revolutionary banners and endless workplace meetings, in the orchestra which entertained her fellow workers in the furniture factory by playing a new style of music, composed collectively instead of being imposed by the tyrannical will of a single conductor.

If heroism alone could have healed the gash in her husband's arm that threatened to turn septic they would still be in Moscow, walking through crowded streets at dawn to commence long factory shifts, whispering in English at night so that people sleeping nearby could not understand their intimate endearments. Their Russian was poor, but had slowly improved. They did not understand what the medical orderly had said to them until he made the shape of a saw through the air and they realised he was warning them that Mr Ffrench's arm might be amputated. That was the first time she cried in Moscow, although she had wished to cry on many nights when the noise and cold and hard floor kept her awake, when she was forced to overhear strangers break wind or furtively make love despite having too many children already huddled like rats beneath piles of rags. When she had watched a husband beat his wife while other families ate supper as if this monstrous behaviour was unworthy of comment or intervention. When the Secret Police came to take one father away for reasons

that nobody knew and were careful not to speculate about. When she woke some nights longing to be back in her old bed in Ireland with clean sheets and the other decadent bourgeois trappings they had rejected. Yet throughout all this she had been strong and supported her husband in his enthusiasm to embrace this new order.

But it had been too much to contemplate the notion of a half-qualified foreigner sawing through her husband's arm with a dirty implement and the pair of them returning to that crowded room where she would need to physically fight for the space to nurse him and make bandages by tearing up whatever small amount of her clothes had not mysteriously vanished. Mrs Ffrench had cried that day on a dirty bench in the hospital and nothing Mr Ffrench could say had been able to penetrate the terrible grief that opened up inside her. Perhaps she had been a bad wife to show her feelings like that and was weak in not supporting her husband and the revolution. But behind the tears was the terrible fear that he would die during the operation, leaving her alone in that city which stank of hunger and terror, with nobody to protect her except the God whom she could no longer even mention.

Lenin had died in January but her god was not dead. She could not have uttered such blasphemy in Moscow, but she knew it was true because here at last was Bruckless House and her husband still had both arms intact – even if his left hand would never regain full power. God had steered them safely back home. It was God's voice she had heard in the hospital when her husband

announced quietly over her tears that his wound was a job for his old naval surgeon friend, Geoffrey. When she reminded him that Geoffrey would hardly leave his Harley Street practice for Moscow, Mr Ffrench had patted her arm with his one good hand and said that if Harley Street refused to come to them, they would simply have to go to Harley Street.

The driver stopped the cart at the front door of Bruckless House. Two figures stood there whom Mrs Ffrench had despaired of ever seeing again. Art Goold Verschoyle stepped forward with Eva. Mr Ffrench shouted a greeting and suddenly there was laughter and welcoming smiles and the driver was helping her down onto the overgrown lawn and she did not mind the rain or cold but longed to kneel and kiss the damp earth. She hugged Eva. How could she ever have found Donegal dull? How could she have been so eager to pack up and start again in Russia with nothing but the unuttered hope that a fresh start might make her body finally yield to her husband's seed?

The cases unloaded by the driver contained nothing from Moscow but new clothes purchased by her in London while the Harley Street doctor treated her husband. Not that Geoffrey had done more than merely examine the job done by a doctor in a private Helsinki hospital after they managed to get themselves onto a train to Petrograd and cross into Finland. Mr Ffrench had kept assuring her that, having freely entered Russia, they were equally free to leave for a short time. She had tried to believe him and not seem scared by the constant inspection of their

papers and how soldiers patrolling the railway system shouted at them. But her husband's arm had oozed pus and he was in such distress that the patrols had let them proceed – less for humanitarian reasons, she suspected, than because they didn't want to be responsible for an invalid.

In Helsinki they wired their bank in London and contacted the British attaché. Soon Mr Ffrench was in hospital and a new fear replaced Mrs Ffrench's previous concerns. She had started to dread her husband's recovery. Helsinki felt strange but it had no slogans on walls or agents of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage seeking out class enemies. On her first night alone in her hotel bedroom she realised that she had been constantly terrified during the previous six months. Now that she had escaped from Russia she did not know if she would have the courage to ever go back.

She had dreaded Mr Ffrench announcing his intention to return to Moscow and reclaim their corner of that pigsty room. However he had kept postponing this decision because it was vital to be able to fully contribute to the new order and he feared being a dead weight who would drag down production targets for their comrades in the furniture factory. Besides he had affairs in Britain to put in order and people should be told at first hand about how exhilarating life was in the new Bolshevik state. Mrs Ffrench had agreed with everything her husband said, unable to decode what was going on in his head. All she could do was trust

that, unbeknownst to him, her spiritual master, Abdul-Baha, was guiding her husband's hand. She had decided it prudent not to force him into confronting any decision. Such careful passivity on her part got them to London and now to Donegal where the mayhem of the Irish Civil War seemed halted and tonight at least everything seemed like it had always been.

Eva Goold Verschoyle shyly released her hand from Mrs Ffrench's grip as Art eagerly questioned her husband in the doorway.

'How was Moscow? You have to tell me everything!'

Mr Ffrench gripped the boy's shoulder joyously. 'My dear boy, it is everything we dreamt of, the most just society on this earth. Mankind hasn't known a fresh start since the Garden of Eden. But in Russia the old rules are gone and the people, not their masters, are shaping the new order. Come inside and I'll tell you everything. Is there nobody about? I wired for your father to reinstate some servants.'

'You did?' Art sounded surprised. 'I fought with Father, saying that he must have misunderstood the telegram. I mean, what would you want servants for?'

Mr Ffrench laughed. 'What would I want them for? Dear boy, do you know the size of Bruckless House? It would be an injustice to only have two people living here. The important thing is to fill the house with life. Obviously *servants* is a reactionary term, but you can imagine what Papist clergy would say if I advertised for worker comrades to share my home.'

‘You mean you’re looking for local people to live here with you.’

‘Obviously. They will have the full run of their quarters and we shall have the run of ours.’

Mrs Ffrench watched the boy consider this. In truth he was a boy no longer. Eva’s tiny figure still lent her a girlish look, but Art’s shoulders had broadened out, making him look tough and strikingly good-looking. He reminded her of her brothers lost in the war. Once on a Moscow street she was convinced that she had seen her two brothers side by side ahead of her in the jostling crowd. For a moment she had let herself believe that they had not gone missing in action but simply wandered off from the terrible trenches to find their way to this new land. The hope was ludicrous, but she had been unable to stop herself pushing through the crowd, elbowing strangers and being cursed at until she touched one of their shoulders. Both men turned, neither remotely resembling her brothers now she could see their faces and she had felt their eyes undress her, taking in her manic look and the fact that she was foreign. They had looked hungry, as everyone did in Moscow, but strong and when they addressed her she knew immediately that their remarks were lewd, suggesting that they would be willing to share her body. She had run away and never told her husband what happened.

Mrs Ffrench entered the hallway of Bruckless House and almost cried to see a wood fire burning in the grate. Art and Eva had been busy, with another fire burning in the study. Returning

home as a girl from her first term in boarding school, she could remember how small the rooms in her childhood home seemed, but after Moscow the opposite was true of here. Previously she had paid little attention to the size of this study, but now she realised that it was bigger than the awful room where she had been forced to sleep with the squabbling families. Sitting down on the sofa she surveyed its fantastic dimensions. She almost wished for the Goold Verschoyle children and even her husband to be gone so that she could explore each room and luxuriate in the extraordinary space. This physical greed shocked her. She was never greedy before, dutifully sublimating her needs and dreams to those of her husband. But just now she experienced an almost sexual thrill at the thought of cradling the brass doorknob of each bedroom, at pressing her palms against the huge uncracked windowpanes and placing her cheek to the cold mahogany of her dressing table.

Eva's questions about Moscow were discreet enquiries compared to Art's frenzied interrogation of her husband. The boy had studied Moscow street maps and knew more about the city's layout than Mrs Ffrench had learnt in seven months of living there. He wanted to know every detail of the crowds at Lenin's funeral and quizzed her husband about Comrades Zinoviev and Stalin and Trotsky and Kamenev as if Mr Ffrench had spent his days at internal party congresses instead of manufacturing poor-quality tables and chairs.

'The failure of the communist revolt in Germany was a blow

to Trotsky's prestige,' Mr Ffrench was saying. 'It shows that the spread of the revolution will be slower than expected because Germany is ripe for change and yet the reactionary forces dug in. If our German comrades had won the day all of Europe would rise with us but there is talk of Russia needing to stand alone for a while longer.'

'But surely Moscow won't abandon the rest of us?' Art argued. 'What is the point in mankind taking one step forward and then simply stopping?'

'Who mentioned stopping?' Mr Ffrench replied. 'Moscow cannot be a wet nurse to everyone. It is up to us who live here to fan the flames of revolution.'

Art went quiet and even Eva ceased to prattle on about the scraps of local gossip that Mrs Ffrench had been enjoying. There was a subtext in her husband's remark, a Rubicon quietly crossed, a declaration she had not dared to seek from him. Hope surged inside her in direct opposition to Art's baffled disbelief.

'What do you mean by *us*?' he enquired. 'Surely once you recuperate you will return to Russia. I understand your desire to come back here and recover your strength, but...'

'Desire did not enter into it,' Mr Ffrench interjected. 'It was necessity. Because I could seek medical treatment elsewhere it would therefore have been a selfish, counter-revolutionary act to deny a comrade treatment by clogging up a Moscow hospital. Medical supplies are crucial, as are able-bodied workers. My arm will never fully recover. The revolution is no rest home for

cripples. Do you think I wish to be a parasite in Moscow, living off the sweat of my fellow workers? Mrs Ffrench and I had no desire to ever return to Donegal. Crossing into Finland was the hardest chore we ever did. I curse my disability for dragging Janet away from an environment where I saw her blossom with such happiness and purpose. But personal feelings cannot be allowed to rule. What is vital is that we each contribute to the maximum of our potential. I was shocked in London to read appalling propaganda in the capitalist newspapers. Janet and I have decided that for now our place in the revolution is here where we can counter lies and bear testament to the amazing society that we were privileged to witness and to which one day we will hopefully return. Here we can serve a purpose which you can help with too. The Irish peasants imagine that they have undergone a revolution, but they've just swapped one master on horseback for another. We can show them the truth – and do you know the great thing? They will listen to us because even in my short time back I see that the old respect remains for people who speak with authority. They don't look up to this new Johnny-Come-Lately Free State government trying to lord it over them. Oh, no doubt there will be fireworks with their priests waving sticks and shouting threats from the far side of the bridge leading onto my property but they can't stop us telling the truth to those who will listen.'

Mrs Ffrench saw Art trying to shape a question, but no words came because the boy needed to believe in her husband. What did she believe? She watched her husband grow so animated that

soon Art was caught up in his enthusiasm and asking questions again about the factory and the workers' debates. Both she and Eva stopped talking so that they could listen too, because his version of Moscow was so wonderful that it felt like a poultice on her mental scars. It was simpler not to argue or even contradict him in her mind because maybe he was telling the truth and she had been too preoccupied with her own petty concerns to appreciate the wonder of revolution.

The children had brought food and it felt like a picnic to share it out by the fire in the study. The mantelpiece clock had long stopped and she had no idea what time it was when the young Goold Verschoyles left. But it was too late to do anything except retire to the main bedroom where the sheets felt damp. Her husband was asleep within minutes and she knew that he would not wake. She slipped from bed and walked from room to room, trying to reclaim all this space and make it feel that it belonged to her. But she felt uneasy, as if hordes of strangers might arrive at any moment to stake a claim to the kitchen or the locked room overlooking Donegal Bay that had been once intended as a nursery. She longed to immerse herself in a bath but knew that she could never scrub herself clean. Closing her eyes she could still smell in her pores the stink of foul breath and unwashed clothes in that Moscow room. So why was it that she could not hear the voices of the children who had clambered onto her knee to stare at her like a curio? She could not feel their fingers that had gripped hers, hoping that she might produce a morsel to

feed them. Why was it that the single experience she treasured seemed to be erased from her mind, so that all she could hear was silence as she wandered from room to room, barefoot in her thin nightgown?

EIGHT The Studio

Donegal, August 1924

The more that Eva drew, alone in her studio, the less she could hear of the raised voices from the house. Her fingers shook, giving the elfin figures a slightly blurred outline. She had intended painting in oils today but once the shouting started she reverted to using this sketchpad on her knee, hunching over it to make herself as small as possible. She longed to escape and sketch wild flowers in the hedgerows, but was reluctant to leave her studio and cross the courtyard where the angry clash of voices would be impossible to ignore. Eva hated these arguments and the terse silence that followed them. During the fragile suspension of hostilities her brothers and Cousin George would individually visit the studio, ostensibly to comfort her, but each would start to justify their case, anxious to convert her into an ally.

Eva had no wish to take sides in the quarrels that had raged all summer. The Free State's civil war was over, with de Valera's Diehard Irregulars defeated. But just as an uneasy normality settled over the new nation they found themselves in, a civil war had commenced in the heart of her family. Friends and relations who visited earlier in the summer had helped to paper over the fault lines by dragging them back into a childhood world of tennis and picnics on the strand. These visitors inscribed amusing notes

of thanks in the visitors' book and carefully avoided politics like an unmentionable family illness. So perhaps Father was foolish to invite Cousin George to stay for Eva's birthday party because Cousin George knew Art and Thomas too well to allow for any pretence. As a true Verschoyle he was as headstrong as they were. To him the family's reputation was being indelibly eroded by Art's wilful madness in embracing communism, which he considered to be a cancer gradually infecting them all. Such lunacy might be all right for pagans like the Ffrenches, but his uncle was always too soft in allowing inflammatory discussions at the table.

If Eva was forced to listen to George she knew that she would be swayed by the power of his argument but Art's impassioned defence would equally convince her in turn. Her beliefs were more obscure and less dogmatic than either point of view. Although influenced by Mother, Eva found it hard to believe in the occult world as passionately as she did. Seances – with desperate women holding photographs of slain sons – seemed a form of voyeurism, making her as uncomfortable as these political arguments. This was why she locked herself away in her studio when the quarrelling started – not to avoid venturing an opinion, but to avoid favouring one family member over another. Ironically her silence seemed to lend weight to her opinions, with the others frequently appealing to her as if she were a judge who, when she finally spoke, could attest to the rights and wrongs of their dispute.

The voices grew louder as Eva crouched over her sketchpad, focusing all her attention on the tiny figures she was conjuring. They had wings and asexual bodies, flitting like bees around blooming foxgloves growing in a ditch. Her fingers were steadier now and she sketched the ditch with intense concentration. After some time Eva ceased to hear the arguing voices and initially thought that this was because she had managed to block them out. Then she realised that hostilities had paused. Soon the first petitioner would arrive to solicit support – George or Thomas, who generally sided with Art while maintaining his own slant on things, or Father, weary of trying to see both sides. By now Mother would have retreated to her bedsitting room to read the few books from the Rosicrucian Order in London which made it past the censorial new Irish post office, or some volume sent to her by Madame Despard – the elderly English suffragette who had settled among the Dublin poor and shared Mother's interest in theosophy. Eva closed her eyes, allowing the sketch to become saturated with colour. She could visualise the ditch she had drawn from memory, with a tumbled-down, dry-stone wall. But, try as she might, she could not believe in the fairy figures. That childhood belief had died in London along with any belief in her ability as an artist. Art school had stripped her of illusions.

It did not seem like eighteen months ago since she had spent an autumn and winter sleeping in the tiny cubicle of a London hostel for shopgirls, with a sprig of Donegal heather beneath her pillow. Mother had considered London as the ideal tonic to lure Eva

down from the ivory tower of this studio where she had locked herself up to secretly mourn the loss of her young New Zealand officer. It was only after Jack left that Eva fully understood her feelings. By then it was too late because no girl could write and ask for such a proposal again: Eva had constantly painted and destroyed portraits of him, grieving alone in this studio. Her obvious distress more than her talent made Mother enrol her in the Slade Art School. Eva had felt like a princess in a fairy tale, forced to plait her hair into a rope and descend into those bustling crowds to try and start a new life.

Her brief time in London was good in every respect except for painting. What slender spark of talent she possessed was quickly extinguished under the glare of her tutors at the Slade. The more they tried to teach her the less she found that she could paint. She discovered that she had more in common with the shopgirls in the hostel than her chic fellow students. Their cosmopolitan sense of surface gloss and parroting of the tutors' techniques to create deliberately grotesque compositions made her retreat into herself. By comparison her paintings seemed naive, the childish work of an Irish country simpleton.

But back then Eva was certain that there had to be a purpose behind her stay in London, beyond avoiding the increasing vicious conflict in Ireland. When Art had visited her in the hostel between university lectures, Eva used to show him her poems urging the rebels to *fight, fight, fight for what is right, right, right!* But, in truth, at the age of nineteen in London her patriotic bursts

were outweighed by her preoccupation with a different search for independence, the struggle to find a religion to which she might truly belong.

Converting to Catholicism like the Countess did after the Easter Rising was never an option. Instead the Christian Scientists had been Eva's first port of call. While shopgirls gossiped about boys outside her cubicle she had studied the Christian Scientist bible, absorbing their mantra that no life, truth or intelligence existed in matter alone. Next she spent long afternoons in a High Church where women wore blue robes and their elaborate rituals, though beautiful to watch, made her wary. She needed something simpler and more direct. She tried a Jewish synagogue and, after that, sampled every religion in London for pleasure and interest. Yet no matter how comfortable she felt, an intuitive inner voice warned: 'Move on, don't mistake this stepping stone for a summit.' In the end she felt herself to simply be a child of the universe, blown about like a sycamore sepal at the creator's will. That wind had carried her back to Donegal as the civil war spluttered to a smouldering halt soon after Michael Collins's death.

Eva glanced up from her sketchpad now, having become so absorbed in drawing that she had been unaware of a presence in her doorway. It was Brendan but Eva felt she had stepped back in time because he wore the comical hat that he used to love. At fourteen-and-a-half, it made his face seem younger. His serious expression recalled the days when he would visit

her, upset because his brothers kept excluding him from their schemes.

Eva smiled. 'Where did you find that hat?'

'In the attic. Mother must have put it away.'

'She was always threatening to burn it,' Eva said. 'But I like it on you.'

'I'll take it with me so.'

'It would give the boys in school a laugh, but I doubt if you'll be allowed to wear it.'

'From now on I wear what I like.' There was no rebellion in Brendan's voice, just the quiet resoluteness that was in his character. He was not prone to Art's passionate oratory or a stickler for logic like Thomas. Indeed, he rarely ventured opinions aloud but once he made up his own mind about something nobody could alter his beliefs.

'What do you mean?'

Brendan's tone was apologetic, anxious not to offend. 'I'm rather tired of all these rows, aren't you? The fact is I won't be returning to school. I have decided to make my own way in life. I just announced the fact and, you know, for the first time I saw both Cousin George and Art lost for words. I can't see why they are so surprised. Plenty of chaps my age have been earning their keep for years. Art and Thomas talk the good fight, but still cling to the privilege of a university education. Well, wild horses wouldn't drag me back to Marlborough. Not one chap there knows a thing about life or could manage without ten

servants. What's the point in being educated for a world which, as Mr Ffrench rightly says, will soon be swept away?"

"Does Mother know?" Eva asked.

"You understand, don't you?" Brendan's voice faltered, anxious for approval.

"Does Mother know?"

"Well, I didn't rightly know myself until it came to me as I listened to them argue. I want a proper job making something, not pen-pushing in some corner of the Empire. I want to become an engineer. Marlborough doesn't teach you anything useful like that."

"Will you go to Dublin?"

"Don't be silly." Brendan smiled to show that he meant no offence. "In Dublin I'd still be the youngest Verschoyle brother. I want to be known only for myself. I hardly know a soul in London, so that's where I'll go. One cannot wait for life to come to you like a gentleman caller. You must go out and confront it."

They both turned as Thomas entered the doorway.

"This is entirely Art's fault," he announced.

Brendan shook his head. "You're obsessed by Art, Thomas. Maybe it comes from being next in line. Being the last born means that I can simply be my own man."

"You're the one obsessed by him," Thomas retorted. "Idolising him since you were a baby and you're hardly more than a baby now. A pet hamster has more chance of surviving in the wild than you have of finding a job in London at your age."

‘I’m old enough.’

‘I’ll give you a fortnight before Father has to pull strings to get you re-admitted to your warm school dormitory. Don’t be stupid, Brendan. You don’t need to renounce wealth because you and I won’t inherit anything to give up anyway.’

Thomas went silent as footsteps ascended the rough steps. Father had to duck his head to enter.

‘Is this a meeting of the Verschoye Party Congress?’ His mild humour disguised his obvious distress.

‘It will break Mother’s heart if Brendan doesn’t return to school,’ Thomas said bitterly. ‘Though, even then, she won’t bring herself to criticise her golden boy Art.’

‘I’ve never heard her criticise any of her children,’ Father replied. ‘No matter how hard you all hurt her. Cousin George is about to leave. He says he won’t stay to be insulted by the names Art has called him.’

‘Art means no harm,’ Eva pleaded.

‘That doesn’t mean he won’t cause it.’ Father looked around. ‘I heard what you said about inheritance, Thomas. I will try to leave you all something. But it cannot be this house which I only hold in trust for Art and which is legally entailed to his son after him.’

‘You know that weeds will grow through broken windows here before Art will accept it,’ Thomas replied sharply.

‘I know he is young. I know that you see life differently at twenty-two and thirty-two.’

‘Art will never change.’

‘Why should he?’ Brendan asked. ‘I don’t want inherited wealth either. I want to establish my own worth.’

‘You will return to Marlborough and stay there until your sixteenth birthday.’ Father’s voice was quiet but firm. ‘After that you’ll be a child no longer. Hopefully you will finish your education and make something of yourself. That will be your decision. All I request is that you obey me for the next eighteen months.’

‘Why should I?’ Brendan’s voice was not aggressive. It contained an innocent openness that Father also possessed.

‘Because you are a gentleman, it will please your mother and because I will never ask anything of you again. I shall never walk away from any of my children, no matter what you do. Should you choose to walk away from me I will not stop you. But take something with you while I’m alive and you still can. Take jewellery or the family silver if you wish before Art gives it away to a beggar.’

‘I won’t steal from my brother,’ Thomas replied.

‘Art doesn’t own this house yet. Steal from me.’

Thomas looked down awkwardly. ‘I’ll see George,’ he said ‘Maybe I can twist his arm and persuade him to stay for Eva’s party.’

He walked out. Brendan fingered the hat he had removed when Father entered. ‘I give you my word to return to Marlborough until my sixteenth birthday,’ he said. ‘I make no promises beyond that, but you know it is not in my character to

break my word.'

'Define *character*,' Father asked.

Brendan pondered. 'Character is what you are, what you do every day.' He blushed slightly. 'I'd better see Cousin George too in case he leaves.'

Father watched his youngest son descend the steps and shook his head in wonder. '*Character is what you are, what you do every day*. If only dictionaries were as clear and noble. He's a noble boy, you are all noble, but I worry about whether I've prepared any of you for life out there.'

'We'll be fine,' Eva assured him. 'I just hate seeing you look so frightfully upset.'

'Do I? Maybe I don't understand what's happening any more. I've never harmed anybody in my life. I've given my services freely to defend neighbours in court and gave them land behind our house to hold a market every Tuesday. I address every man equally – Catholic, Protestant or dissenter – yet my eldest son thinks I should feel guilty for simply existing.' He looked at Eva. 'What terrible crime does Art feel I've committed? I've only ever wanted to mind your mother and for you all to be happy. We were happy once, weren't we?'

'We still are,' Eva insisted. 'Let's go on a picnic tomorrow, all day. It would be lovely.'

'It would. But then unfortunately we'd have to come home again.'

Down in the yard Maud's voice called up to them both.

‘Dinner shall be in half an hour,’ she announced, ‘and we shall be sitting down together in peace.’

‘Has George left?’ Eva asked, going to the doorway.

‘I confiscated his bag in the hall and ordered him to give up his nonsense,’ Maud said. ‘I raided the wine cellar and shall have Art and George playing chess peaceably before the evening is out.’

‘You’re a marvel,’ Eva said. ‘Is there any chance of a picnic tomorrow?’

‘We’ll sail out to the island where I shall personally drown every annoying male in the family.’

Father laughed as Maud marched back to the kitchens. ‘Your sister is a marvel,’ he said quietly, ‘but you are one too.’

‘I’m not.’

‘You’re a marvellous shape still emerging with slow wingbeats into the light. Too far away for me to judge the outline of what you will become, but I know it will be truly wondrous.’ His hand strayed into his pocket where a small edition of Walt Whitman was kept. ‘We’ve half an hour before being summoned to the next congress on world affairs. What about a walk?’

Eva smiled and closed the studio door behind them. ‘Just you and me.’ She took his hand and squeezed it.

‘A quick bid for freedom.’

Eva released his hand as they entered the lane. Demonstrative shows of affection were not in their character. Passing the village pump, they took the lane to the Bunlacky shore, saying little because little needed to be said between such soul mates and

friends.

NINE Not a Penny off the Pay

London, 1926

Brendan intended being utterly true to his word. Mother would be upset but Father would respect how he honoured his vow. In recent months he had been careful to make no reference to his decision when talking with the other chaps. Eighteen months ago he was vocal about his plans and was ragged because of them. Now he had not even mentioned that his sixteenth birthday occurred this week. Naturally, his two best schoolchums knew his intentions and envied him, but both had too much to lose to follow his example. Being eldest sons, they needed to think about more than just themselves.

Brendan knew that his family loved him, but if he had not been born, little would be different in their world. The last born was always counted as a blessing, but generally counted as little else.

Still Brendan would not wish to swap places with Art or Thomas. Older teachers at Marlborough still paused in the corridors to ask about Art and shake their heads, almost as if sympathising with a bereavement. They recalled Art with affection, even if he had constantly queried every issue with them but they also spoke as if he had perpetually borne a heavy weight on his back. Brendan was not as clever as Art but he sensed their relief at Brendan's cheerful spirit. He had actually enjoyed his time at Marlborough, making friends and being generally

respected as a good sort. Therefore this morning when he made an excuse before assembly and requested permission to see the nurse in sickbay, he felt no resentment towards any person in the school. They were simply misguided, unaware that they belonged to a world shortly about to be eclipsed.

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