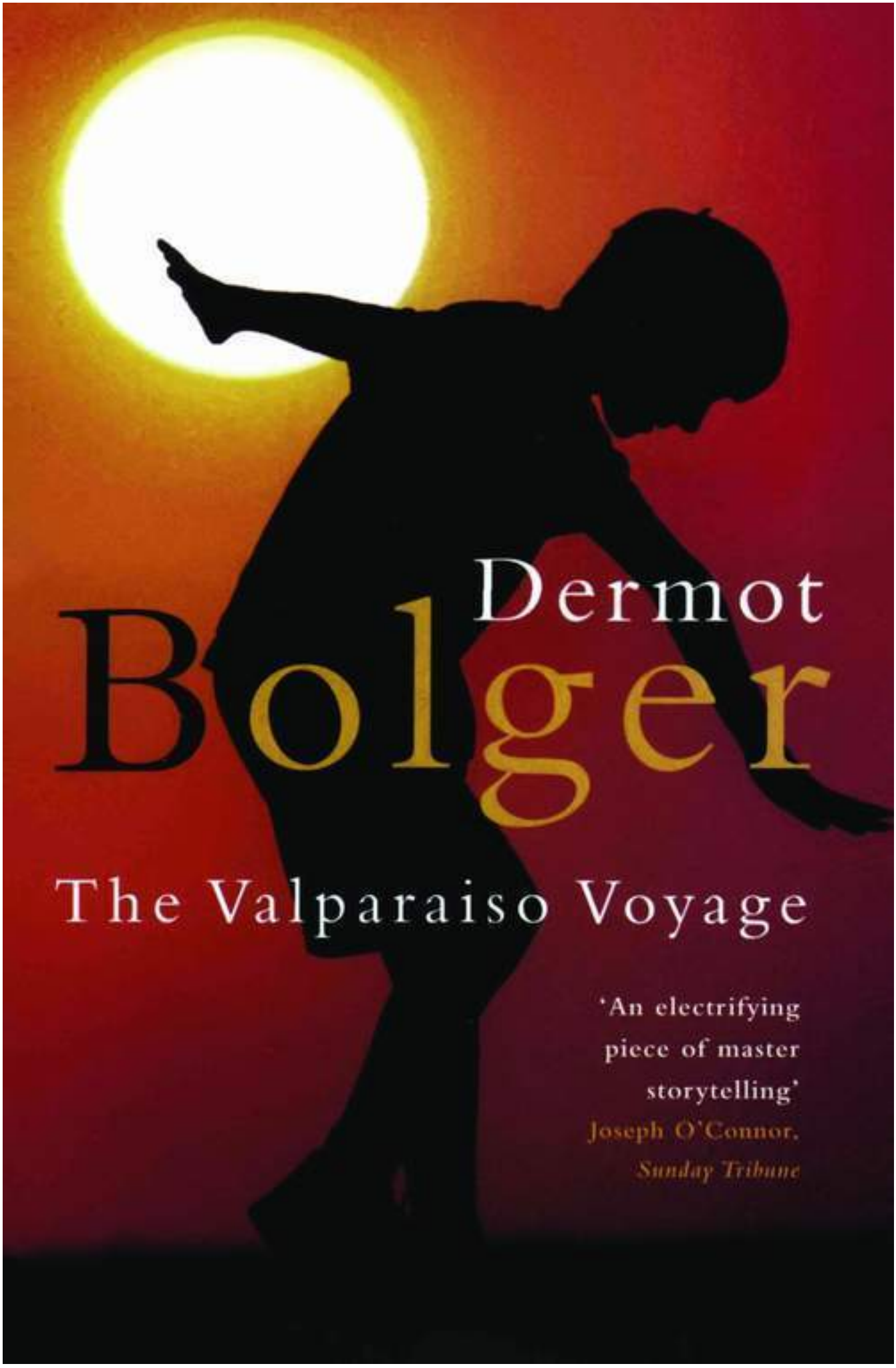
Dermot
Bolger
The Valparaiso Voyage
'An electrifying piece of master storytelling'
Joseph O'Connor, Sunday Tribune

Dermot Bolger

The Valparaiso Voyage

«HarperCollins»

Bolger D.

The Valparaiso Voyage / D. Bolger — «HarperCollins»,

A literary thriller with a heart. ‘The Valparaiso Voyage’ blows the lid off the Celtic Tiger and looks at the corruption that spawned today’s Ireland.Dermot Bolger is one of the leading figures on the Irish literary scene: very influential, amazingly energetic and prolific, popular and well respected. This is his eighth novel (and his third for Flamingo).Bolger’s previous novel, ‘Temptation’, was a departure for this author. It was a story of family life, told from a woman’s perspective. ‘The Valparaiso Voyage’ is, as you might say, Bolger returning to familiar territory – back to chronicling the darker side of contemporary Dublin life.It is the story of Brendan Brogan, who grew up in the small town of Navan on the outskirts of Dublin. An unhappy childhood, spent searching for love and affection, leads to an unhappy adulthood spent gambling and trying to hold a difficult marriage together. When circumstances offer Brogan a chance to fake his own death, he seizes the chance and runs – far away to Portugal where a new life beckons.But no one can escape the past entirely, and when his father is found murdered, Brogan returns to Dublin. Here he finds a new Ireland, wracked with corruption, everyone – politicians, bankers, businessmen, councillors – caught up in it, including his own father. Tormented by memories and old resentments, Brogan nevertheless feels he must solve the riddle of his father’s death. And he finds himself not in the least surprised to discover that the rot set in many years ago, back in the Navan of his childhood.A cracking, fast-paced literary thriller.

Содержание

The Valparaiso Voyage
Dermot Bolger

Bernadette
Tháinig long ó Valparaiso,
Scaoileadh téad a seol sa chuan;
Chuir a hainm dom i gcuimhne
Ríocht na greine, tír na mbua
'Gluais,' ar sí, 'ar thuras fada
Liom ó scamall is ó cheo;
Tá fé shleasaibh gorm-Andes
Cathair scáfar, glé mar sheod…'
A ship came in from Valparaiso,
Let go her anchor in the bay,
Her name flashed bright, it brought to mind
A land of plenty, of sun and fame.
'Come,' she said, 'on a long journey
Away from this land of cloud and mist;
Under the Andes' blue-grey slopes
There's a jewel city, by the sun kissed…'
From An Long (The Ship) by Pádraig de Brún, 1899—1960, translated from the Irish by Theo Dorgan.

Table of Contents

Introductions

What was the Scottish train driver thinking about at that moment? Or the first-class passengers who glanced up from laptops and papers to see the gathering mesh of rail tracks converging at that junction on the outskirts of Glasgow? A labyrinth of points, signals and sidings, graffiti disfiguring the crumbling railway sheds and steep oil-stained concrete walls. Indistinguishable birds circling in the high grey light of the sky.

As a child, watching the Christmas toy display in Alcock's shop window off Market Square in Navan, I used to imagine that trains drove themselves. A perfect clockwork world of engines bobbing beneath bridges and emerging from hillside tunnels where plastic sheep grazed placidly.

Occasionally something might go amiss but all you had to do was bang on the window until a shop assistant picked up the engine whose wheels kept whirling uselessly around. Set back on the track, it glided past again, while toy workmen looked impassively on, as if nothing could ever disturb their pristine universe.

Within seconds of that head-on collision between the 7 a.m. train from Perth and a local commuter service, the top carriages of each train had become a fireball, six times hotter than the furnaces used for cremation. Back along the track voices sang out from a concertina of derailed carriages. 'Help me!' 'Save me!' 'Sweet Jesus!' Shards of broken glass everywhere, even littering the upturned windows that refused to break. Passengers hammering on them with their shoes and briefcases and fists. Doors opening upward to the sky, as people reached down to pull other survivors out.

A man, who nobody knew was alive or dead, lay beside his severed leg. A young woman in a white skirt clutched one shoe as she sat on the embankment shivering. A helicopter's drone blended with a growing symphony of sirens. A child's watch stopped dead at seven-fifty-four. Stubble further darkened a thickset chin, which an undertaker would have to shave twice. A mother held her nine-year-old son who cried because his homework was destroyed.

Early shift workers from local factories swarmed towards the rear of the train, desperate to help, prising open doors to scramble into carriages and search under rubble. Others simply stood beside the red signal, which the express driver had missed in slanting winter sunlight, staring at the spot where the two engines met. Inside that inferno the bodies of both drivers, plus a lottery of first-class passengers, were being consumed by such scorching sheets of flame that not even blackened sets of teeth would survive among the ashes to testify to their number.

The frosty air was heavy with smoke, billowing upwards and out, like the sail of a tall ship that had left a West of Ireland quayside and steered out into the wind, setting forth across the ocean for the dreaming white streets of Valparaiso.

I SATURDAY

Navan, Co. Meath. Thriving hometown of carpets and wooden furniture. Warehouses and showrooms, neat factories dotting its outskirts. Strong farmers' wives who would arrive in during my childhood to search for bargains, while their husbands belched and, with top buttons undone, slept off enormous lunches in broad armchairs in the hotel lounge.

Navan. With narrow streets as tight as a nun's arse, falling downwards to where the Boyne and Blackwater meet. The fulcrum of Market Square where a kindly barber had clipped hair for half a century, discussing painting and amateur drama, rarely mentioning his nights on the run in an Old IRA flying column. An unlovely trinity of streets spreading out from it: Ludlow, Watergate and Trimgate.

Their medieval gates are long felled, their town walls disappeared. An ugly motorway scars the landscape now, necklaced by new estates with Mickey Mouse names. Dublin commuters forced into exile here by rising house prices, resenting their daily drive thirty miles back into the capital and suspicious of locals who are more suspicious of them. Outsiders and blow-ins circling each other around the closed fist of my native town.

'Navan itself has little to detain you,' *The Rough Guide to Ireland* says. A pity that one unfortunate black sailor at the start of the nineteenth century didn't heed this advice. Hiring a rig of horses when his ship docked in Dublin after a voyage from some exotic foreign port, he took off through the morning rain to explore this land. It was noon when his black horses trotted into Market Square in Navan. He climbed down, his black boots and cloak startling the gaping locals. He found the local tavern and ordered. The innkeeper served him with true Irish hospitality, then withdrew to join the throng on the street, none of whom had ever seen a black man before.

They decided that there was only one person he could be. Old Nick, Lucifer himself come to tempt them. A rope was fetched, a horse chestnut tree selected in the field where my street was later built. It was the final lynching in the Royal County of Meath. This story doesn't make *The Rough Guide,* nor any of the historical brochures welcoming visitors in the tourist office on Railway Street. Perhaps it was just a myth invented by Pete Clancy to frighten me as a boy. It certainly succeeded, hearing the creak of a tree at night beyond the outhouse where I slept, expecting to see a dark body still twitching in mid-air if I peeped out through the chicken wire.

Who ordains which stories are remembered and what tales discreetly forgotten in any town? Were there many in Navan who recalled mine, with my family gone? Few would wish to be reminded, in this new traffic-choked prosperity they live in. Yet nobody can control the ghosts that haunt these streets. Lost foreign sailors; starved serving girls who shivered, waiting for their muscles to be felt at hiring fairs; barefoot messenger boys who contracted gangrene by running with open sores through worm-infested horse dung on the cobbles; our local poet, Ledwidge, killed by a stray shell at Ypres and appearing to a friend that same night outside the *Meath Chronicle* printing works. I just knew that such ghosts existed, because, walking up Flower Hill, I was taking my first step amongst them.

Opening her garden gate everything looked the same, even the way the estate agent watched me from the doorway. Lisa Hanlon's father had stood in that spot once, an old man who avoided my eye, wary of finally admitting me onto the premises.

I took the estate agent's brochure and gave a false name and phone number. Not that anyone was likely to recognize me, but I still felt nervous pushing open the sitting-room door. The electric heater set into the old fireplace remained in place, as did the nest of small tables, the thickset re-upholstered armchairs and the long sofa with its lace frills. This room was always too choked with reminders of Lisa's childhood and mine.

It had felt strange making love to her here, when we were both twenty-two, while her younger self looked down from a gold-framed communion photo. That mouth, which looked so devout after receiving its first wafer of Christ, surprising me by its sudden wantonness.

But at twenty-two I wasn't that interested in Lisa, to be honest; the attraction behind our brief affair was more about gaining access to this sitting-room. Listening to her parents ascending the staircase, enjoying the sense of danger that they might come back down. I remember Lisa's astonishment at my ability to grow erect again so quickly after I came. She was quiet and plain. Possibly no man had ever been this passionate in her presence before. But I couldn't explain how it wasn't her tiny breasts, still pert as a schoolgirl's, which excited me. It was being able to fondle the furniture – the uncomfortable cushions on the sofa, the patterned carpet faintly reeking of mothballs, the never-to-be-touched china plates in the sideboard, the ornaments from the parish's first Diocesan Pilgrimage to Lourdes. The cloying scent of small-town respectability that I was always excluded from.

If Lisa had left me alone on those nights I might have simply carried on making love to the furniture. Here on the lit side of Hanlon's sitting-room window at last. Not crouched outside in the cold, like on the evenings when I had risked climbing from our outhouse roof down into Casey's garden next door. Creeping from there into Hanlon's garden to peep through apple branches at Lisa's mother drying her only daughter's hair, reading her bedtime stories, bringing in hot milk and biscuits while they watched television together in winter.

She would switch the light off so that the sitting-room was lit by a glowing coal fire, with images from the unseen television literally transposed across their faces. At least that was how I saw it from outside, at the age of ten and eleven, living out those television programmes at second hand by mimicking the expressions on their faces. I laughed when they laughed and ducked down if they glanced towards the window, even though I knew they could not see me crouched against the hedge.

I could always tap against Casey's kitchen window and Mr Casey would chance taking me in for an hour to get warm. Some nights I was hungry enough to swallow my pride and risk doing that, though twice I was discovered and beaten for it, with my father shouting at our next-door neighbour across the hedge to mind his own business. But the fact that sanctuary was obtainable in his kitchen made me view Mr Casey as inferior. Hanlon's house was impenetrable, with its warmth as unimaginable as sex. Hunger didn't lure me to spy on Lisa's window. It was to live out a fantasy where I imagined myself allowed to add coal to the fire with the brass tongs and have someone brush my hair instead of yanking at it with a steel comb.

The estate agent coughed in the doorway behind me now. I had forgotten about his presence. Other viewers moved noisily around upstairs, testing the floorboards, checking walls for dry rot, envisaging attic conversions and PVC windows.

'Why is it for auction?' I asked.

'An executor's sale. The old woman who lived here died. Her daughter lives in England.'

'Is she home now?'

'Why do you ask?' The estate agent was careful of his profit margin. Too many tales of under-the-table bribes to owners, desperate illegal bids from desperate people trapped by the housing shortage in this new booming economy.

'I'd just feel self-conscious looking around a house if I felt the owner could be watching.'

'We encourage people to stay away while their homes are being shown,' the man replied. 'It's better for everyone. She's coming home on Thursday morning for the auction in the Ard Boyne Hotel that afternoon.' He scrutinized me carefully. 'At three thirty. You're leaving it late if you want to bid. Most people have already had it surveyed and are just taking a last look.'

'I've been abroad. I only saw it in the paper today.'

They were the first true words I had spoken. The ad was in the property section of a discarded *Irish Independent,* which I pocketed at Dublin airport this morning when passing through the first-class section of an Aer Lingus flight from Lisbon. Maybe it was cold feet at actually being back in Dublin, but after the airport coach reached Busaris I'd sat on a bench, too terrified to venture out.

When a bus to Navan was announced I had left my bags in a locker and boarded it, thinking that Navan seemed as good a place as any to start my homecoming.

The estate agent walked back out into the hallway to hand a brochure to a young couple, launching into his patter about the south-facing garden and how, with the motorway, it was less than an hour's drive from Dublin.

Why had I asked him about Lisa? The dead cannot intrude on the living, even to apologize. She was one of the few people to have ever loved me. In return I had abandoned her, lacking the self-confidence to believe that anyone could truly care for me. Before meeting Miriam I had been afraid to let people get close, feeling they would only be disgusted when they uncovered the lice-ridden Hen Boy beneath the thin veneer of normality I'd gained in Dublin. At twenty-two I had been acting out a role every Thursday evening for seven weeks when I had washed and shaved and took the provincial bus back out here from the capital to visit Lisa. One of many roles I'd taught myself to hide behind, whereas Lisa was simply always just herself. Would she have understood if I had broken down and tried to explain the insidious stench of dirt and disgrace I carried inside? How could I, when I didn't fully understand it myself back then? Instead – after enduring two hours of Country'n'Irish music down the town while we waited for Lisa's parents to retire to bed – I would make love to her in this sitting-room, never slackening off in my terror that some tenderness might develop if we lay motionless for too long.

Now I pulled out the electric fire to examine the grate behind it. On the first night she brought me home I had been intensely disappointed to discover this two-bar monstrosity blocking the fireplace where flames used to light her face. We'd only met by fluke when snow prevented racing at Newton Abbot and I was forced to return to Navan dog track for the first time in a decade because it was the only place where I could place a bet on a freezing January evening.

'This heats the room in no time,' Lisa had said, plugging in the fire, tipsy from the champagne I'd splashed out on after sharing the tote jackpot with six other punters. 'Don't worry, I've warned my parents never to come down here when I'm with someone.'

But the fire's dry heat didn't feel right that night, nor her white skin or deep French kisses. Being real and available, they could never hope to match my gnawing hunger, any more than the gesture of buying champagne could change who I knew I was inside.

'I used to wonder about you,' Lisa had whispered afterwards. 'The way people avoided mentioning you. What did you do to deserve all that?'

As a child I didn't exactly know what I had done, just that I deserved such punishment and more. Wicked, dirty and dumb. 'The Hen Boy,' as Barney Clancy's son, Pete, christened me at primary school. 'Chuck, chuck, chuck, chuck – here comes the Hen Boy. Get up the yard and lay an egg, Hen Boy, there's a smell of shite off you here!' His taunting voice, two years older, four inches taller, and a dozen social castes above me. The son of my father's Lord and Master. Children don't talk in whispers. They understand small-town distinctions and lack adult inhibition about openly shouting them out.

The estate agent returned to hover behind me, concerned lest I damage the electric fire. He probably had a sixth sense to distinguish between potential bidders and nuisance viewers.

'The house needs work, of course,' he said, steering me from the sitting-room. 'But just think what you could do with a little imagination.'

I had no interest in seeing the other rooms, but felt that it would look suspicious to depart. Old people leave something behind them in a house. Not a physical smell or even miasma, but the aftertaste of lonely hours spent waiting for a phone to ring. Everything about the kitchen looked sad – a yellowing calendar from the Holy Ghost Fathers, an ancient kettle, a Formica table that belonged in some museum. Its creeping shabbiness stung me, like a tainting of paradise. One should never go back, especially to Navan – a town so inward-looking it spelt its own name backwards.

Wallpaper had started to droop on the landing, with faint specks of mildew caused by a lack of heat in winter. Finally I was going to see upstairs. Lisa's voice returned from nineteen years before: 'Wait till they go on the pilgrimage to Fatima this summer. You can stay over, sleep in my bed. We can really do fun things then.'

A Dublin family clogged the stairwell as I squeezed past, sandwich-board people togged out in an array of expensive logos, trailing an aura of casual affluence behind them. Lisa's room was empty. I knew it was her room. I had watched her here often enough as a child when she seemed unaware that if she closed the blinds by slanting them down instead of up her outline remained visible. Lisa who spent ten minutes each night brushing her long straight hair; who often stared into space, half-undressed, like her mind was switched off. Lisa aged eleven, twelve and thirteen, when her breasts made that single surge outward so that her body had looked the same silhouetted in this window as when I first saw her properly naked. Some nights she had remained at the window for so long that I feared she suspected me of spying on her. Eventually I had realized that she, in turn, was peeping through her blinds at the outhouse where she presumed that I was sleeping. Perhaps she had been as fascinated by my life back then as I was by hers.

I switched off the bedroom light which the estate agent had left on and raised the blind fully. Hanlon's garden was now a wilderness with one apple tree cut down and the other besieged by sour cooking apples rotting in the unkempt grass. There was no way that I was going back out there. I had never quite banished their sour taste and the nausea that replaced my night-time hunger if I stole them.

Whoever now owned Casey's house had built on a Victorian-style conservatory and a patio. A barbecue unit stood against the pebble-dashed wall replacing the hedge which once screened off my old garden next door. My father's crude outhouse had been knocked down. A pristine building stood in its place, with a slated roof and arched windows strategically angled for light. A trail of granite stepping-stones twisted through a sea of white pebbles up to the newly extended kitchen. A Zen-like calmness pervaded the whole garden. I found my fingernails scraping against the glass.

Two elderly women entered the bedroom behind me, their Meath accents achingly familiar. I knew their names but didn't turn around in case they recognized something about my face. As a weekend pastime, house viewing seemed like solitary sex – it was cheap and you didn't need to dress up for it. With no intention of bidding, they gossiped about how much Hanlon's house would fetch and what their own modernized homes were worth in comparison – immeasurable fortunes, leaving them weak-kneed at the very thought of auctions. I could imagine Cormac mimicking their accents: *'I don't know how you held out until it reached the reserve, Mrs Mulready, I'd already had my first orgasm just after the guiding price.'*

'God help any young couple starting out,' one of them remarked, moving to stand beside me at the window. 'Didn't that American computer programmer make a lovely office for himself out in the Brogans' garden?'

'Poor Mr Brogan.' Her companion blessed herself. 'There was a lovely crowd at his funeral. A terrible way to meet your death. The guttersnipes they have in Dublin now, out of their heads on drugs!'

'Maybe with all these scandals it's just as well that he's gone,' the first woman said. 'Mr Brogan was from the old school, not some *"me féiner".'*

Her companion tut-tutted dismissively. 'Sure the Dublin papers would make a scandal out of a paper bag these days. You get sick of reading them. They can say what they like about Barney Clancy now that he's dead, but they've never proved a single thing. That man did a lot for Navan and the more they snipe at his memory the more people here will vote for his son.'

'Don't I know it.' The first woman turned to go, sneaking a quick glance in my direction before dismissing me as another Dublin blow-in. 'Still you'd feel sorry for Mrs Brogan, no matter what two ends of a stuck-up Jackeen bitch she could be in her day. The papers say she's not long for this world with cancer.'

They moved on to the front bedroom, talking over my head like I didn't exist.

I was almost fourteen when I left Navan. By seventeen I'd cultivated a poor excuse for a beard to conceal the onslaught of acne. It was never shaved off until the age of thirty-one. Clean-shaven and bespectacled now (even if the frames only contained plain glass), my dyed hair had receded so much that my forehead resembled my father's. But I found that I had still sweated in their presence – perhaps half-hoping to be recognized. I touched Lisa's single bed, kept made up for her during all the years she was away in England. I had never lain between its sheets, as she wanted. Nineteen years ago, on the final night when we returned here from the pub, her mother intruded upon the spell, overcome by curiosity or guilt as she blundered into the sitting-room with a tray of tea and biscuits that I knew Lisa didn't want.

'How are you keeping since the family moved to Dublin, Brendan?'

'I'm keeping well, Mrs Hanlon.'

Her pause, then in a quiet voice: 'I knew your mother. We went to Lourdes together. The first ever pilgrimage from this parish.'

Mrs Hanlon didn't say any more. She didn't need to, the pity in her eyes destroying everything. Their sly plea for forgiveness at having never lifted a finger to help. Suddenly I had ceased to belong in that room. I was an object of sympathy dragged in from outside; the boy raised by his stepmother in an outhouse. Indifference would have made me her equal. Hatred or distrust might have given me strength to screw her precious daughter so hard that Lisa's cries would summon her mother back down to gape at us among the communion photographs and smashed china and knick-knacks from Lourdes. But her pity had rendered me impotent. Lisa's parents might have been horrified by what my father did, but – like the rest of this town – they never stood out against him. Only Mr Casey ever did, and he got no thanks from anyone back then in their turn-a-blind-eye world.

After her mother left the room, I knew that Lisa was too nervous to make love. I hadn't wanted to either. I'd simply longed to vanish back to the anonymity of flatland Dublin where no one knew or cared about me, except that I was Cormac's slow-witted gambler of a brother, always in the bookies. It hurt me now to recall Lisa's face as I left that night, aware that something beyond her comprehension was wrong as she urged me to phone and probably continued waving even when I was out of sight. And how I walked out along the blackness of the Dublin road after missing the last bus, although I knew how hard it was to hitch a lift after leaving the streetlights behind.

But I had needed to escape from Navan that night, just like I had to flee from Lisa's house now. I descended the stairs, left the estate agent's brochure in the hall, closed the gate and refused to glance towards the house, two doors down, into which my parents had once driven me home with such pride from the Maternity Hospital in Drogheda.

Athlumney graveyard on the Duleek Road out of Navan. Twice a year my father came here – on Christmas Eve and 12 November, my mother's anniversary. He always arranged for 7 a.m. mass to be said for her on that day, calling me from sleep in the outhouse with an awkwardness that verged on being tender. He'd have rashers and sausages cooked for us to share in silence before anyone else was awake, watching the clock to ensure that we still managed to fast for an hour before communion. We drove, in our private club of two, to the freezing cathedral where the scattering of old women who knelt there glanced up at us. Afterwards in the doorway people might whisper to him, with supplications for Barney Clancy, our local minister in Government, to be passed on through his trusted lieutenant. An old woman sometimes touched my arm in a muted token of sympathy, as I shivered in the uneasy role of being a rightful son again. On our return from visiting the grave, my stepmother Phyllis would be up with the radio on and the spell dissipated for another year.

Standing now beside the ruined castle in this closed graveside I wondered what had possessed him to be buried with his first wife? Was it an act of atonement or another example of miserliness? My father, careful with his pence, even in death. In recent days the doctored version of his life had

been freshly carved in gold letters on the polished black marble: *Also, her loving husband, Eamonn, died in Dublin…*

The wreaths from his funeral were not long withered, the earth still subsiding slightly so that the marble surround had yet to be put back in place. I hadn't anticipated his body being laid here, where only the old Navan families retained rights, nor that I would feel a surge of anger at him for seizing the last possession that my mother owned.

I should remember something about her, a blur of skirts or just a memory of being hugged. It's not that I haven't tried to recall her, but I was either too young or have blocked them out. My first memory is here in Athlumney. Her coffin must have been carried three times around the outer boundaries, as was the tradition then, before being lowered into the earth. But all I recall is adult feet shuffling back from the graveside as someone let go my hand. I stand alone, a giddy sensation. A green awning covers the opened grave but through a gap I can see down – shiny wood and a brass plaque. When I scuff the earth with my shoe, pebbles shower down. I do this repeatedly until a neighbour touches my shoulder. I am three years and eight months of age.

It is night-time in the memory which occurs next. I wake up crying, with the street quiet outside and my room in darkness. Yellow light spills onto a wallpaper pattern of roses as my door opens. My father enters and bends over my bed, wrenched away perhaps from his own grief. He climbs in, rough stubble against my neck as his arms soothe me. How secure it feels as we lie together. I want to stay awake. A truck's headlights start to slide across the ceiling, with cattle being ferried out along the Nobber Road. I love having this strong man beside me in the dark. I don't remember waking to find if he was still there in the morning.

The polished floorboards in the outhouse come to mind next. I am playing with discarded sheets of transparent paper, crammed with lines and angular patterns which he allows me to colour in with crayons. Lying on my tummy to breathe in the scent of Player's and Major cigarettes. His only visitors are men with yellow-stained fingers who laugh knowingly and wink at me as they talk. The extension bell on his phone frightens me, ringing so loudly down in the shed that it can be heard by half the street who are waiting the seven or eight years of wrangling, lobbying and political pull that it takes to have a phone line installed back then.

This was before my father was headhunted by Meath County Council as a planning official. He was simply a quantity surveyor, running his own business from a converted shed, which had been constructed in our garden by a previous owner as a hen-house. Here he received courtiers in a black leather swivel chair, men who tossed my hair, slipped me coins and excitedly discussed rumours of a seam of mineable zinc being located outside the town.

Some had business there, like Slab McGuirk and Mossy Egan – apprentice builders knocking up lean-to extensions and milking parlours for the bogmen of Athboy and Ballivor. Others, like old Joey Kerwin, with a hundred and forty acres under pasture near Tara, simply sauntered up the lane in search of an audience for their stories, like the mock announcement of a neighbour's death to the handful of men present. 'All his life JohnJo wanted an outdoor toilet, but sure wasn't he too fecking lazy to dig it himself. He waited till the mining engineers sunk a borehole on his land, then built a bloody hut over it, with a big plank inside and a hole cut into it to fit the queer shape of his arse. The poor fecker would be alive still if he hadn't got into the habit of holding his breath until he heard the fecking plop!'

I remember still the roars of male laughter that I didn't understand. New York might have Wall Street but Navan had my father's doorway, with men leaning against it to spit into their palms as they shook hands on deals. Occasionally raised voices were heard as Slab McGuirk and Mossy Egan squabbled about one undercutting the other. It took Barney Clancy to bang their heads together, creating an uneasy shotgun marriage where they submitted joint tenders for local jobs that the big Dublin firms normally had sewn up.

My first memories of Clancy are in that outhouse: the squeak of patent leather shoes that set him apart, the distinctive stench of cigar smoke, deeper and richer like his voice could be. The way the other men's voices were lowered when he arrived and how his own accent could change after they left and himself and my father were alone. Often, after Clancy in turn departed, my father's sudden good humour could be infectious. I would laugh along with him, wanting to feel in on his private joke, while he let me sit on his swivel chair. With my knees tucked in, the makeshift office spun around in a blur of wallcharts, site maps, year-planners and calendars from auctioneers; all the paraphernalia of that adult world of cigarettes and rolled banknotes, winks and knowing grins.

But I remember sudden intense anger from my father there too, how I grew to dread his raised voice. Just turned eight, how could I know which architectural plans were important and which were discarded drafts? A gust of wind must have blown through the opened door that day when my father saw Slab McGuirk out. Half-costed plans slid from his desk onto the floor. I still remember unfathomable shapes on the wafer-thin sheet as I began to colour them in, absorbed in my fantasy world. That was the only time he ever struck me until Phyllis entered our lives. Curses poured forth, like a boil of frustration bursting open. Curled up on the floor, I understood suddenly that everything was my fault. I was the nuisance son he was stranded with, perpetually holding him back.

Then his voice changed, calling me to him. Tentatively I dared to glance up at this man who was my entire world. His arms were held out. Old familiar Dada, beckoning and forgiving. Then the black phone rang. He picked it up. From his tone I knew that it was Barney Clancy. I might not have been there. His swivel chair was empty. I sat in it, with my ear throbbing. But I didn't cry. Instead I spun myself round until the whole world was flying except for me, safe on my magic carpet.

The revolving slows to a halt in my mind. A bell rings, a crowd rising. Zigzagging on a metal track with its fake tail bobbing, I fret for the mechanical hare. The steel traps open, greyhounds pound past. Floodlights make the grass greener, the packed sand on the track sandier, the sky bluer above the immaculate bowl of light that was Navan dog track.

Men jostled around gesticulating bookmakers with their leather bags of cash. A young blonde woman laughed, teasing my father. I couldn't stop staring at her, like somebody who seemed to have stepped through the television screen from an American programme into our humdrum world, except that her Dublin accent was wrong. The woman teased him again for not risking a small bet on each race, as she laughed off her loss of a few bob each time the bell went. But my father would have regarded the reverse forecasts on the tote as a mug's game, when an average dog could be body-checked by some mongrel on the first bend. He would have been holding off to place one large bet on a sure tip handed to him on the back of a Player's cigarette packet.

I was an eight-year-old chaperone on that night of endless crisps and lemonade when I first saw Phyllis. Hair so blonde that I wanted to touch it, her fingers stroked the curved stem of a gin and tonic glass. She didn't smoke back then, her palms were marble-white. Her long red nails gripped my father's arm when one of her dogs finally won, leaving an imprint on his wrist as we sat in silence while she collected her winnings.

I had four winners that night. If a dog broke cleanly from trap six with sufficient speed to avoid the scrum on the first bend it invariably featured in the shake-up at the end. Dogs in trap five generally faded, but trap four always seemed to get pulled along and challenged late if they had closing strength. The knowledge and thrill were instinctive within me, my heart quickening at the bell, my breath held for twenty-nine point five seconds, my ears pounding as time moved differently along the closing straight. Except that all my winners were in my head – they never asked if I wished to place a bet. Indeed, all night I had a sense of being airbrushed out as they spoke in whispers. They didn't even spot my tears as I jigged on a plastic chair after soiling myself. It was my fault. I should have touched his arm to ask him could I go to the toilet on time, but was afraid to intrude on their private world until the stench alerted Phyllis.

I remember the cubicle door slamming and the marble pattern on the stone floor as shiny toilet paper chaffed my soiled legs. My father hissed in frustration while I gagged on the reek of ammonia cubes from the flooded urinals. Most of all I remember my shame as men turned their heads when he led me from the cubicle. Outside the final race was being run, with discarded betting slips blown about on the concrete and whining coming from dog boxes. Phyllis waited, shivering in a knee-length coat.

'How is *he* now?' Her voice was disconcerting as she glanced at me, then looked away. On the few occasions during the evening when I had caught her watching me I'd felt under inspection, but the brittle uncertainty in her tone made her sound like a child herself.

They walked together without touching, edging ever more fractionally apart as they passed through the gates. Lines of parked cars, the greasy aroma of a van selling burgers. I kept well back, suffocating in the stench of self-disgrace. They whispered together but never kissed. Then she was gone, turning men's heads as she ran out between parked cars to flag down the late bus to Dublin. I didn't know whether to wave because she never looked back.

It was Josie who cleaned me up properly before school next morning, standing me in the bath to scrub my flesh pink with thick bristles digging into me like a penance. My father didn't have to warn me not to mention the blonde woman. Of late Josie was paid to walk me to school each morning and wait for me among the mothers at the gate. My afternoons were increasingly spent in her damp terraced cottage in a lane behind Emma Terrace, playing house with her seven-year-old granddaughter or being held captive by pirates and escaping in time to eat soda bread and watch *F-Troop* on the black-and-white television.

Cigarette smoke rarely filled the outhouse now, with the telephone jangling unanswered. The first mineshaft was being dug on the Kells side of town, the streets awash with gigantic machines, unknown faces and rumours of inside-track fortunes being made on lands that had changed hands. My father was away every second night, working in Dublin, while I slept beneath the sloping ceiling of Josie's cottage. Her granddaughter shared her teddies, snuggling half of them down at the end of my bed after she swore never to tell my father or any boy from my school that I played with them.

It was Josie who found the first letter in the hall, opening up the house to light a fire for his return. She tut-tutted at the sender's insensitivity in addressing it to 'Mr and Mrs Brogan'. It was an invite for a reception in Dublin to announce details of the next phase of the mine. Some weeks later a second envelope arrived, this time simply addressed to 'Mrs Phyllis Brogan'. Josie stopped in mid-tut, her tone scaring me. 'But your mother's name wasn't Phyllis?'

It was Renee to her neighbours, but spelt 'Irene' on this gravestone in the quietude of Athlumney cemetery. Below my father's recently carved name space existed for one more, but surely Phyllis could not intend to join them?

I knelt to read through the withered wreaths left there three weeks ago. 'Deepest sympathy from Peter Clancy, TD and Minister for State'. 'With sympathy from his former colleagues in Meath County Council'. A tacky arrangement of flowers contorted to form the word DAD could only have come from my half-sister Sarah-Jane. It resembled something out of a gangland funeral. Rain had made the ink run on the card attached to a bunch of faded lilies beside it, but I could discern the blurred words, 'with love from Miriam and Conor'. I fingered their names over and over like an explorer finding the map of a vanished continent. Next to it lay a cheap bouquet, 'In sympathy, Simon McGuirk'. It took a moment for the Christian name to register. Then the distant memory returned of a teacher in the yard labelling McGuirk as 'Simple Simon'. Pete Clancy had battered the first boy who repeated that name as he offered McGuirk the protection of his gang and rechristened him 'Slick'. It was only the thuggish simpleton himself who did not grasp that his nickname was coined in mockery.

Meanness and premature baldness were passed on like heirlooms in the McGuirk family. Slab's son resorting to such extravagance perturbed me, but not as much as the small wooden cross placed like a stake through the heart of the grave. I only spotted it as I rearranged the wreaths. My father must

have placed it here some time in the past decade. The unexpected gesture shocked me. I knelt to read the inscription: *Pray also for her son, Brendan, killed, aged thirty-one, in a train crash in Scotland.*

Market Square. The old barbershop was gone; its proprietor one of the few kindly faces I remember. A boiled sweet slipped into my palm on those rare occasions when I was allowed to accompany Cormac there. Mostly my father cut my hair himself, shearing along the rim of an upturned bowl. A video outlet stood in its place, between a mobile phone store and a discreet lingerie window display in a UK High Street chain-store. Shiny new toys for the Celtic Tiger. McCall's wooden-floored emporium had disappeared, with its display of rosary beads threaded by starved Irish orphans with bleeding fingers who were beaten by nuns. Instead, music blared from a sports store displaying cheap footballs handsewn by starved children with bleeding fingers in safely anonymous countries.

The Dublin buses still stopped outside McAndrew's pub, where an 'advice clinic' caravan was double-parked, belonging to Pete Clancy. No election had yet been called, but with the delicately balanced coalition only hanging by a thread, more experienced politicians were getting their retaliation in early. Pete Clancy's face stared from a poster, like a touched-up death mask of his father. I recognised the two men dispensing newsletters outside the caravan, though their faces had aged since their days as young Turks laughing in my father's outhouse. They were mere footsoldiers now, ignored by the younger men in suits talking on mobile phones in the caravan doorway.

Jimmy Mahon was the older of the two. A teetotaller barman, he had been nicknamed 'the donkey' by Barney Clancy who got my father to dole out the most remote hamlets for him to canvass. Mahon was known to work all night on the eve of an election, leaflet-bombing letterboxes. He would have happily died for Barney Clancy and reappeared as a ghost to cast a final vote for him. At one time there were dozens like him in Navan, but now he cut a lonely figure as he approached the bus queue, impassive to the cynicism and indifference of Saturday afternoon shoppers. He reached me and held out a leaflet.

I stared back, almost willing him to recognize me without the beard. Three weeks ago he had probably followed the cortege here from Dublin at my father's funeral and perhaps knelt unwittingly in the same pew as the man who killed him. He glanced at me with no recognition in his eyes, then passed on. The four-page leaflet contained eleven pictures of Pete Clancy, claiming personal credit for every new traffic light, road widening, tree planting, speed ramp, public phone or streetlight installed in Meath over the past six months. As old Joey Kerwin used to joke, the Clancys only just stopped short of claiming credit for every child conceived in the constituency. *Help me to help you,* a headline proclaimed on the last page. *Contact me at any time at my home phone number or by e-mail.* I almost discarded the leaflet like most of the bus queue, but then pocketed it, deciding that the e-mail address would be useful.

The first bus to arrive was a private coach from Shercock. I boarded it, wondering if anyone in that small town still remembered Peter Mathews, a petty thief who limped into town on a crutch and got caught withdrawing money from a stolen post office book, which he hid before the guards came. He found himself stripped and bent over a chair in the police station. He found himself dead from a heart attack with his pancreas bleeding from a blow to the stomach. Guards who'd had better ways to spend their Saturday afternoon contradicted each other in court. Swearing in the jury, the judge asked anyone if they had to declare an interest in the case. One juryman had spoken up. 'I have no interest in the case, Your Honour, I'm not interested in it at all.' He might have been a spokesman for my father's generation. 'I have no interest in seeing what's in front of my eyes, no interest in things I don't want to know about. If people didn't turn a blind eye, Your Honour, we'd all be fucked.'

Half the bus would be fucked tonight if they got the chance, I suspected as I looked around it. Thick-calved Cavan girls wearing skirts the size of a mouse's parachute and platform heels that needed health warnings for acrophobia. They shared lipstick and gossip in a suffocating reek of perfume. A radio almost drowned out the lads behind me discussing the new satellite channel a local consortium

had set up to beam video highlights of junior local hurling matches into selected pubs until 10 p.m., when the frequency was taken over by a porn channel from Prague.

We crossed the Boyne near the turn for Johnstown. To the left a line of mature trees blocked out any view of the Clancy family residence, a Palladian mansion with an additional wing built on by Slab McGuirk and Mossy Egan the year my father left private employment. County Council workers had extended a six-foot stone boundary wall for free when the road was being widened. Beyond it the road grew lonely, broken by the lights of isolated homesteads and livestock huddled in the corners of fields. I stared out into the dusk as we reached the first turn for Tara, the dung-splattered seat of the ancient High Kings.

'Let's stop at Tara, I've never seen it,' Phyllis had pleaded as we passed here on the second occasion I met her, six months after our night at the dog track. By then, the secret was all over Navan about my father having remarried. Nobody seemed sure about how long he had been living a double life in Dublin or why he told none of his old friends. But people were impressed by stories of Barney Clancy being best man at the wedding and treating them to dinner in the Shelbourne Hotel. Brian Lenihan and two other Government ministers were rumoured to have joined in their celebrations, which became a near riot when Donough O'Malley arrived and my father reluctantly allowed his wedding night to be hi-jacked, flattered by the attention of such great men.

My father ignored Phyllis's request to stop at Tara in the car that day. Her interest in seeing it would have been negligible. But her apprehension and self-doubt about having to confront her new neighbours was evident, even to me, two months past my ninth birthday. Even the way she spoke was different from how I remembered her Dublin accent at the dog track, so that she seemed like a child unsuccessfully trying to sound posh.

My father, on the other hand, wanted the business finished, with his new bride installed and the whispers of neighbours faced down. He had accepted the job of heading a special development task-force within the planning department of Meath County Council and needed to live in Meath full-time. A more than respectable period of mourning had passed since my mother was knocked down by a truck on Ludlow Street, and it was several years since Phyllis's first husband, a Mr Morgan, passed away in his native Glasgow, leaving her with one son, Cormac, a year younger than me.

Neither Cormac nor I spoke to each other on that first journey into Navan. Cormac looked soft enough to crush, pointing out cattle to his teddy bear through the window and keeping up an incessant, lisping commentary. We shared the same freckles and teeth but his hair was a gingery red. Even though I was preoccupied in struggling against back-seat nausea, I could see the effect that his whispered babbling and the unmanly teddy bear were having on my father.

'Does this mean we'll be going to see the dogs again?' I asked.

'You never saw your mother at the dog track. She was never there. Do you understand?'

My father didn't turn as he spoke, but his eyes found mine in the rear-view mirror. *Mother.* Was that what I was meant to call her? Half the town probably saw them at the dog track, but to my father power was about controlling perceptions and this was to be his wife's stage-managed arrival into Navan.

Some time during their first night in the house I cried out. Perhaps my tears were caused by a sense of everything changing or maybe the inaudible shriek of a ghost being banished woke me, with no untouched corner left for my mother to hide in. All evening the house – already immaculately cleaned by Josie, whose services were now dispensed with – had been scrubbed by Phyllis. Neat cupboards were pulled apart like an exorcism, old curtains torn down before her new Venetian blinds had even arrived, and alien sounds filled up the house.

I just know that I cried out again, waiting for the creak of his bed in response and for yellow light to spill across the pattern of roses. Cormac's eyes watched like a cat in the dark from the new camp-bed set up across the room. But it was Phyllis who entered to hover over my bed. My crying stopped. How often have I relived that moment, asking myself who Phyllis was and just how insecure

she must have felt? A young twenty-five years of age to his settled, confident thirty-eight. Had they been making love, or did I startle her from sleep to find this house – twice the size of the artisan's cottage she was reared in – closing in around her like a mausoleum to the goodness conferred by death onto another woman, knowing she would have to constantly walk in that other woman's footsteps, an inappropriately dressed outsider perpetually scrutinized and compared.

Her hand reached out tentatively towards my wet cheeks, her white knuckle showing off a thickset ring. I flinched and drew back, startling Phyllis who was possibly more scared than me. Eyeball to eyeball with a new life, sudden responsibilities and guilts. We were like two explorers wary of each other, as she stretched out her fingers a second time, hesitantly, as if waiting for me to duck away.

'Why were you crying?' Her voice, kept low as if afraid of wakening my father, didn't sound like a grown woman's. I didn't know what to say. 'Were you scared?'

'Yes.'

It wasn't me who replied; it was Cormac, his tears deliberately staking his claim to her. Phyllis turned from my bed, crooning as she hugged her son, her only constant in this unfamiliar world of Meath men.

I never knew proper hatred before Cormac's arrival. Josie's granddaughter and I had played as equals, conquering foes in the imaginary continent of her back garden. But soon Cormac and I were fighting for real territory, possession of the hearthrug or ownership of Dinky cars and torn comics. He watched me constantly in those first weeks, imitating my every action and discovering my favourite places to play in, then getting there before me. 'It's mine, mine, mine!' Our chorus would bring Phyllis screeching from the kitchen.

It was the same in the schoolyard, where he shadowed me from a distance. Phyllis watched from the gate, making sure I held his hand until the last minute. But once she was gone I let him stew in the stigma of his different accent, refusing to stand up for him when boys asked if he was my new brother. The funny thing was that I had always wanted a brother, but I could only see Cormac as a threat, walking into my life, being made a fuss of by people who should have been making a fuss of me. Previously my father had been away in Dublin a lot, but I'd always had him to myself when he got home. Now Phyllis was there every evening in the hallway before me, perpetually in my way like a puppy dog needing attention. I was put to bed early just so they could be alone and even then I had to share my room with a usurper.

It was more than cowardice therefore that stopped me intervening when Pete Clancy's gang started picking on Cormac. They were doing my work for me. I would slip away into a corner of the yard and experience a guilty thrill at hearing the distant sounds of him being shoved and kicked. Only when a teacher's whistle blew would I charge into their midst, always arriving too late to help.

That ruse didn't stop me being blamed to my face by Phyllis and blamed to my father when he came home from his new offices in Trim, which seemed to have been deliberately set apart from the main Navan Council headquarters. The outhouse lay idle, with his private practice gone. The box-room had been filled with my father's old records and papers, ever since the morning, some months previously, when Josie and I found the outhouse door forced and the place ransacked. My father had dismissed it as a prank by flyboys from down the town, refusing to phone the police. But that night after Josie was gone Barney Clancy and he had spent hours down there clearing boxes out.

Any extra paperwork at home was done from a new office in the box-room now, though generally he preferred to work late in Trim where he had a small staff under him. News of an outsider being parachuted into this new position – created in a snap vote by councillors at a sparsely attended meeting – had surpassed even his second bride in making him the talk of Navan. Some claimed that the two in-house rivals for the new post had built up such mini-empires of internal support that a schism would have occurred within the planning office had either of them got the job. An honest broker was required, without baggage or ties, to focus on new developments. But others muttered

begrudgingly about clout, political connections and jobs being created to undermine the structures already in place.

These whispers went over my head. I just knew that he came home later, seemed more tired and was more prone to snap. Joey Kerwin stopped one Saturday to watch Phyllis's hips sway into the house ahead of us as though wading through water. 'You know what they say about marriage, Eamonn?' he gibed. 'It's the only feast where they serve the dessert first!' My father ushered us in, ignoring the old farmer's laugh. But sometimes I now woke to hear voices raised downstairs and muffled references to Cormac's name and mine. Once there was a screaming match halted by a loud slap. One set of footsteps rushed up the stairs, followed some time after by a heavier tread. Then I heard bedsprings and a different sort of cry.

But I experienced no violence, at least not at first. Perhaps the unseen eyes of my mother's ghost still haunted him from the brighter squares of wallpaper where old photos had been taken down. Once I woke to find him on the edge of my bed watching me. This isn't easy, you've got to help me, son. I didn't want to help. I wanted Cormac beaten up so badly by Pete Clancy that Phyllis would pack and leave. I wanted my father to myself, like in the old days when we'd walk out along the Boyne or I'd stand beside him as he swapped jokes in shop doorways in the glamorous male world of cigarettes and betting tips. But Cormac merely dug in deeper, accepting Clancy's assaults with a mute, disarming bewilderment that was painful to watch and was countered by an increasingly strident assertiveness at home. Why can't I drink from the blue cup? Why does Brendan say it belongs to him? I thought you owned everything now, Mammy? Why can't I sleep in the proper bed?

Why couldn't he? The question began to fixate Phyllis. If her own son wasn't good enough for the best, then, by reflection, neither was she. Why didn't her new husband take her side? Was it because he did not respect her as much as his first wife who had been the nuns' pet, educated with the big shopkeepers' daughters in the local Loreto convent? I can only imagine what accusations she threw at him at night, the ways she found to needle him with her insecurities, the sexual favours she may have withheld – favours not taught in home economics by the Loreto nuns.

I woke one Monday to find two bags packed in the hallway and raised voices downstairs. I pushed the kitchen door open. Startled, my father turned and slapped me. 'Get out, you!' I stood in the hallway and stuck my tongue out at Cormac who was spying through the banisters.

My father silently walked me to school that day while Cormac stayed at home. It was the last year before they stopped having the weekly fair in the square, with fattened-up cattle herded in from the big farms at 6 a.m. and already sold and dispatched for slaughter by the time school began. I remember the fire brigade hosing down the square that morning, forcing a sea of cow-shite towards the flooded drains, and how the shite itself was green as if the terrified cattle had already known their fate.

I was happy when nobody came to collect me after school. I walked alone through the square, which shone by now although the stink still lingered from the drains. I didn't know if anyone would be at home. On my third knock Phyllis opened the door. Her bags were gone from the hall. Cormac was watching television with an empty lemonade bottle beside him. Upstairs, his coloured quilt lay on my bed, his teddies peering through the brass bars at the end. My pillow rested on the smaller camp-bed in the corner. Two empty fertilizer bags lay beside the door, filled to the brim with shredded wallpaper. Scraps of yellowing roses, stems and thorns. On the bare plaster faded adult writing in black ink that I couldn't read had been uncovered. I changed the beds back to the way they should have been. Then I locked the bedroom door, determined to keep it shut until my father returned home to this sacrilege.

I don't know how long it took Phyllis to notice that I had not come down for my dinner. Furtively I played with Cormac's teddies, then stood by the window, watching children outside playing hopscotch and skipping. I didn't hear her footsteps, just a sudden twist of the handle. She pushed

against the door with all her weight. There was the briefest pause before her first tentative knock. Almost immediately a furious banging commenced.

'Open this door at once! Open this door!'

The children on the street could hear. The skipping ropes and chanting stopped as every eye turned. I put my hand on each pane of glass in succession, trying to stop my legs shaking. Cormac's voice came from the landing, crying for some teddy on the bed. Phyllis hissed at him to go downstairs. A man with a greyhound pup looked up as he knocked on Casey's door. Phyllis was screaming now. Mr Casey came out, glanced up and then winked at me. He turned back to the man who held the puppy tight between his legs while Mr Casey leaned over with a sharp iron instrument to snip off his tail. The greyhound howled, drowning out Phyllis's voice and distracting the children who gathered around to enjoy his distress, asking could they keep his tail to play with.

I desperately needed to use the toilet. I wanted my father to come home. I wanted Phyllis gone and her red-haired brat with her. Lisa Hanlon came out of her driveway, nine years of age with ringlets, white socks and a patterned dress. Watching her, I felt something I could not understand or had never experienced before. It was in the way she stared up, still as a china doll while her mother glanced disapprovingly at Mr Casey and the greyhound and then briskly took her hand. I wanted Lisa as my prisoner, to make her take off that patterned dress and step outside her perfect world.

Then Lisa was gone, along with the man and his whimpering pup. Mr Casey glanced up once more, then went indoors. I had to wee or it would run down my leg. There was a teacup on the chest of drawers, with a cigarette butt smeared with lipstick stubbed out on the saucer. Smoking was the first habit Phyllis had taken up after arriving in Navan, her fingers starting to blend in with the local colour. But I couldn't stop weeing, even when the teacup and saucer overflowed so that drops spilled out onto the lino.

Phyllis's screams had ceased. Loud footsteps descended the stairs. I wanted to unlock the door and empty the cup and saucer down the toilet before I was caught, but I couldn't be sure that she hadn't crept back upstairs to lie in wait for me. I was too ashamed to empty them out of the window where the children might see. Ten minutes passed, twenty – I don't know how long. My hand gripped the lock, praying for my father's return. I had already risked opening the bedroom door when I heard her footsteps ascend the stairs. I locked it again and sank onto the floor, putting the cup and saucer down beside me.

'Brendan. Open this door, please, pet. You must be starving.' This was the soft voice she used when addressing Cormac, her Dublin accent more pronounced than when speaking to strangers. 'Let's forget this ever happened, eh? It can be our secret. Your dinner is waiting downstairs. Don't be afraid, I promise not to harm you.'

Sometimes in dreams I still hear her words and watch myself slowly rise as if hypnotized. I try to warn myself but each time the hope persists that she means what she says. Her voice was coaxing, like a snake charmer's. I turned the key with the softest click. Everything was still as I twisted the black doorknob, which suddenly dug into my chest as she pushed forward, throwing me back against the bed. I tried to crawl under it, but was too slow. She grabbed my hair, dragging me across the lino.

Her shoe had come off. She used the sole to beat me across my bare legs. I thought of Lisa Hanlon and her doll-like body. I thought of Cormac, sitting on the stairs, listening. My foot made contact with her knee as I thrashed out. Phyllis screamed and raised her shoe again, its heel striking my forehead above the eye. I bit her hand and she fell back, knocking over the cup and saucer. From under the bed where I had crawled, I watched a lake of urine slowly spread across the lino to soak into her dress. Even in my terror, something about how she lay with her dress up above her thighs and her breasts heaving excited me. Suddenly I wanted to be held by her, I wanted to be safe. Phyllis slowly drew herself up so I could only see her hands and knees. Cormac's feet appeared, his thick shoes stopping just short of the puddle.

'I'll not mind you!' she screamed down. 'You're worse than an animal. I was free once. I won't stay in this stinking, stuck-up, dead-end, boghole of a town, not for him or any of yous!'

She was crying. I felt ashamed for her, knowing that the children on the street could hear. Cormac stood uselessly beside her. 'Can I get my teddy now, Mammy?'

I closed my eyes, dreading my father's return home. The lake of urine had almost reached me. I could smell it, as I pressed myself tight against the wall, but soon it began to seep into my jumper. My temple ached from the impact of her shoe. My legs stung where she had beaten them. When I opened my eyes Phyllis and Cormac were gone.

Dublin – the most ungainly of capital cities, forever spreading like chicken pox. A rash of slate roofs protruded from unlikely gaps along the motorway. Cul-de-sacs crammed into every niche, with curved roads and *Mind Our Children* signs. Watching from the bus it was hard to know where Meath ended and the Dublin county border began. Or at least it would have been for somebody whose father hadn't virtually ruled a small but influential sub-section of the planning department within Meath County Council.

Dunshaughlin, Black Bush, Dunboyne, Clonee. Every field and ditch in every townland seemed to be memorized in my father's head. Each illegally sited septic tank, every dirt road on which some tiny estate appeared as if dropped from the sky, with startled city children peering into fields that bordered their rubble-strewn back gardens. He knew every stream piped underground and the ditches where they resurfaced as if by magic. Within a couple of years he had become Mr Mastermind, able to track in his head the labyrinth of shell companies that builders operated behind, and willing, if necessary, to pass on their home phone numbers to residents' groups wondering whatever happened to the landscaping that had looked so inviting in the artist's impression in their advance brochures.

Fifteen years ago these townlands had seemed like a half-finished quilt that only he understood the pattern for. But by the time he retired surely not even my father could have kept track of the chaotic development that made these satellite towns resemble a box of Lego carelessly spilled by a child. Builders from Dublin, Meath, Kildare, Northern Ireland and the West vying with each other for the smallest plot of land. Men who once spat into palms in my father's outhouse to seal deals to build lean-tos and cowsheds, were now rich beyond their imagination. The sands of their retirements would be golden were it not for the tribunals into corruption currently sitting in Dublin Castle to investigate hundreds of frenzied re-zoning motions by councillors against County Development Plans around Leinster.

The new motorway petered out at the Half Way House pub, beside the old Phoenix Park racecourse which had mysteriously burnt down. I was back among familiar Dublin streets, with chock-a-block traffic being funnelled down past my old flat in Phibsborough. The bus crawled past an ugly triumphalist church, then onto the North Circular Road, before turning down Eccles Street. The driver stopped to drop off a girl with two bags and I slipped away too.

It was 7 p.m. Visiting time at the Mater Private Hospital across the road. A discreet trickle passed through the smoked-glass doors into a lobby that looked like a hotel, with plush sofas and soft piped music. I could never pass such buildings without remembering how we tried to nurse Miriam's dying mother in her rented house at the Broadstone.

An elderly man in a black leather jacket leaned on a crutch beside the railings, so circumspect that from a distance you wouldn't know he was begging. He had my father's eyes. The older I got the more I found that old beggars always had, staring up slyly as if only they could recognize me. I slipped a coin into his hand and walked past, up the street to where people streamed towards the huge public hospital, with cars and taxis competing for space outside. The open glass doors drew me towards them. I scanned the lists of wards with saints' names and quickly wagered on Saint Brigid's, then leaned over the porter's desk before I lost my nerve.

'Brogan?' I asked. 'Have you a Mrs Phyllis Brogan here?'

He checked his list, then scrutinized me. 'You're not a journalist?'

'No.'

'Family?'

'An old acquaintance.'

'Second floor, Saint Martha's ward.'

I cursed myself, having wanted to change my bet to Saint Martha's, but the first rule in any gambling system was never to switch once a choice was made. A familiar stab of self-disgust swamped me, though it was only a wager in my mind. For two years I had managed to avoid placing a bet, except for the dozens of imaginary ones that I tortured myself with daily.

'Do you get many journalists?' I enquired.

'Just one from a tabloid and some bogman who became aggressive. Her daughter-in-law asked us to keep a check. It's distressing, in the woman's condition.'

I noted how Miriam had made the arrangements and not Sarah-Jane. The porter was directing me towards the lift.

'I'm just waiting for my brother,' I lied. 'He's getting flowers. We said we'd go up together.'

It was the first excuse to enter my head. He nodded towards the sofas. It felt strange to be under the same roof as Phyllis, but I needed to ensure that she was out of the way and hadn't moved back home. I picked up an *Evening Herald* somebody had left on the sofa. *Romanian Choir Hoax,* the headline read. *Organizers of a choral festival in Westport were left red-faced today after the thirty-five-strong Romanian choir they invited into Ireland turned out to be bogus. While a two-hundred-strong audience waited in Westport church, the alleged singers took taxis from the airport to join the queue of illegal immigrants seeking asylum outside the Department of Foreign Affairs.* I pretended to read on, awaiting a chance to slip away when the porter left his desk.

It was a more comfortable wait than others I had known involving Phyllis. The eternity of that evening I spent as a child soaked in urine beneath my bed came back to me. Afraid to venture out, even after Phyllis went sobbing downstairs, with Cormac like a dog behind her. Teatime came and the playing children were called in, their skipping ropes stilled and the silence unbroken by the thud of a ball. Afterwards nobody ran back out as usual, still clutching their bread and jam. It felt like the whole street was awaiting the judgement of my father's car.

Finally he arrived home. The car engine was turned off and the front door opened. I expected screaming from Phyllis, but it was so quiet that I prayed she had left. Then my father ascended the stairs, his polished shoes stopping short of the pool of urine. He sat on the camp-bed so that all I could see were his suit trousers.

'Come out.'

'I'm scared.'

'I'm not going to hit you.'

I clambered stiffly out, my clothes and hair stinking of piss. 'I want my wallpaper back,' I said. 'I've always had it.'

'You'll speak when I tell you to. Your mother says you threw wee over her.'

'She's not my mother.'

The slap came from nowhere. I didn't cry out or even lift a hand to my cheek.

'If she doesn't become your mother then it will be your choice. This isn't easy for any of us. Since she arrived you've done nothing but cause trouble. I'll not come home to shouting matches. This is my wife you're insulting. She doesn't have to keep you. Did you think of that? When I was growing up I never saw my older half-sister. She was farmed out back to her mother's people up the Ox Mountains when Daddy's first wife died. That was the way back then. My own mother had enough to be doing looking after her own children without raising somebody else's leavings. Few women would take on the task of raising a brat like you. Because that's what you've become. You understand? If you don't want a mother then try a few nights without one. Go on, take those fecking

blankets off the precious bed that you're so fond of. This is a family house again and you can roost in the outhouse until you decide to become one of us.'

Even when he repeated the instructions they still didn't register. My father had to bundle the blankets up into my arms before I started moving. I could hardly see where I was going. The stairs seemed endlessly steep in my terror of tripping. The hallway was empty. In the kitchen Cormac sat quietly. There was no sign of Phyllis. Eighteen steps brought me to the door of the outhouse. My father walked behind me, then suddenly his footsteps weren't there. I undid the bolt, then looked back. He had retreated to watch from the kitchen doorway, framed by the light. I couldn't comprehend his expression. A blur ofblue cloth appeared behind him. Phyllis hung back, observing us. He closed the door, leaving me in the gloom.

I turned the light on in the outhouse and looked around. Anything of value had been removed to the box-room after the break-in some months before. The place had become a repository for obsolete items like the two rusty filing cabinets – one still locked and the other containing scraps of old building plans, a buckled ruler and a compass. Among the old copies of the *Meath Chronicle* in the bottom drawer I found a memorial card for my mother, her face cut from a photo on Laytown beach. One pane of glass in the wall was cracked. The other had been broken in the break-in and was replaced by chicken wire to keep cats out. The darkness frightened me, yet I turned the light out again, wanting nobody on the street to know I was there.

Casey's kitchen window looked bright and inviting. The back of our own house was in darkness, but I knew *The Fugitive* was on television in the front-room, with Richard Kimble chasing the one-armed man. Cormac would be lying there on the hearthrug, savouring every moment of my favourite programme.

I listened to the beat of a tack hammer from the lean-to with a corrugated roof, built against the back wall of Casey's house. It was answered by other tappings from other back gardens, like a secret code. The official knock-off time marked the start of real work for most of our neighbours who worked in the town's furniture factories. They rushed their dinners so they could spend each evening working on nixers, producing chairs and coffee tables, bookcases or hybrid furniture invented by themselves. Sawdust forever blew across the gardens, with their tapping eventually dying out until only one distant hammer would be left like a ghost in the dark.

Hanlon's cat arched her back as she jumped onto our wall, then sprang down. I miaowed softly but she stalked past. A late bird called somewhere and another answered. The back door opened. My father appeared with a tray. I hunched against the wall. He entered and stood in the dark, not wanting to put the light on either.

'Bread and cheese,' he said. 'And you're lucky to get it.'

'When can I come in?'

'Not tonight.'

'Has *he* got my bed?'

'He has a name. My wife decides who sleeps where from now on.' He put down the tray and stood over me. 'Don't make me have to choose, Brendan. If you do you'll lose.'

'I hate her. I want them to go.'

'She's going nowhere, Brendan. I'll make this family work if it kills me. A man needs a wife. I can't mind you alone. You understand?'

I didn't reply and he didn't expect me to. He sat on the edge of his old desk for what seemed an eternity. Perhaps he was the most lost of us all that night, torn between desire and guilt, remembering simpler times when he was fully in control, the monarch of this makeshift office. I just know that I never felt so close to him again as during that half-hour when he sat as if turned to stone, until Phyllis's voice finally called from the kitchen.

'Make yourself a bed,' he said. 'Let's have no fuss.'

As he stood up his hands fiddled with something in the dark. When he opened the door I saw in the half-light how he had removed his belt and held it folded in half. I watched through the chicken wire as he walked up the path, elaborately running the leather belt back through his trouser loops and fixing the buckle as she watched. He nodded to her. They went in and I heard the heavy bolt on the kitchen door.

The glass doors opened in the hospital foyer. An ambulance, with its siren turned off and blue light flashing, had pulled up outside. The porter disappeared through a doorway while staff bustled about, allowing me to slip away unnoticed. The beggar was gone. I crossed Dorset Street – a blocked artery of Dublin which had always refused to become civilized. Shuttered charity shops and gaudy take-aways. Pubs on every corner, alleys leading down to ugly blocks of flats. People walked quickly here, trying to look like they knew where they're going.

Where was I heading, with just two bags waiting for me in a luggage locker at the bus station? But what other sort of homecoming had I any right to expect? I was putting more than just myself at risk by being here, but even without my father's murder I always knew that one day I would push the self-destruct button by turning up again.

I crossed into Hardwick Street and passed an old Protestant church that seemed to have become a dance club. Across the road a tall black girl stood at a phone box, smoking as she spoke into the receiver. I don't think she saw the two Dublin girls emerge through an archway from the flats, with a stunted hybrid of a fighting dog straining on his lead. At first I thought they were asking her for a light, until I saw the black girl's hair being jerked back. She screamed. I stopped. There was nobody else on the wide bend of footpath. Music blared from a pub on the corner. Two lads came out from the flats as well, as the black girl tried to run. The Dublin girls held her by the hair as the youths strolled up.

'Nigger! Why don't you fuck off back home, you sponging nigger!'

There were four of them, with the dog terrifying their victim even further. One youth grabbed her purse, scattering its contents onto the ground – keys, some sort of card, scraps of paper and a few loose coins which they ignored. They weren't even interested in robbing her. I knew the rules of city life and how to melt away. But something – perhaps the look in the black girl's eyes, which brought back another woman's terror on a distant night in this city – made me snap. I found myself running without any plan about what to do next, shouldering into the first youth to knock him off balance.

I grabbed the second youth around the neck in a headlock, twisting his arm behind his back. The girls let go their victim in surprise, while the dog circled and barked, too inbred and stupid to know who to bite. The black girl leaned down, trying to collect her belongings from the ground.

'Don't be stupid, just run, for God's sake, run!'

'Don't call me stupid!' she screamed at me, like I was her attacker. One girl swung a hand at her, nails outspread as if to claw at her eyes. The black girl caught the arm in mid-flight, sinking her teeth into the wrist. The first youth had risen to leap onto my back, raining blows at my face as I fell forward, crushing the youth I was still holding. I heard his arm snap as he toppled to the ground. He screamed as the first youth cursed.

'You nigger-loving bastard! You cunt!'

My forehead was grazed where it hit the pavement, with my glasses sliding off. Their aggression was purely focused on me now, although the second youth was in too much pain to do much. I heard running footsteps and knew that I was for it. But when the thud of a boot came it landed inches above my head. The youth on top of me groaned and rolled off. I heard him pick himself up and run away. The other youth broke free, limping off with the shrieking girls following.

Only now did the dog realize that he was meant to attack us. I sensed him come for me and raised my arms over my face. His teeth had brushed my jacket when I heard a thump of a steel pole against his flank. He turned to snarl at his attacker as somebody pulled me up. It was a tall black man, around thirty years of age. The black girl knelt beside us, crying, cramming items into her purse. A

smaller, stockier black man banged a steel pole along the concrete, holding the dog off. The black girl turned to me.

'Don't you call me stupid! Don't you ever!'

'Stop it, Ebun,' the man holding me said. He looked into my face. '*E ma bínú.* Can you walk?'

'Just give me a second.'

'We haven't got a second. More of your sort will be back.'

'They're not my sort.'

'They're hardly mine.' He bent down to retrieve my glasses from the ground. 'You should get out of here. Have you a car?'

'No.'

'Where do you live?'

'Abroad.'

'Where are you staying then?'

'I don't know yet. Somewhere.'

The girl, Ebun, looked over her shoulder towards the windows of the flats. 'He's the one who's stupid,' she said. 'He jumped right in.'

With a final snarl the dog loped off back towards the entrance. There was a shout from a stairwell. I knew they wanted to get away from there.

'He'd better come with us,' the man told Ebun.

She answered in a language I couldn't understand. My courage had vanished now that the fight was over, I was unsure if my legs would support me.

'I know,' the man replied. 'But we can't leave him here.'

The stockier man put the steel pole back inside his coat. Arguing in their own language, they half-led and half-carried me back onto Dorset Street, past a row of rundown shops and around the corner into Gardner Street. Their flat was at the top of a narrow Georgian house, with wooden steps crumbling away and rickety woodwormed banisters. I had once haunted the warrens of bedsits around here, knowing every card school in the anonymity of flatland where one could sit up all night to play poker and smoke dope.

But the journey up the stairs now had a dream-like quality. Every face that appeared on each landing was black or Eastern European. I had spent a decade abroad, but somehow in my mind Ireland had never changed. Maybe they didn't hang black people in Navan for being the Devil any more, but before I left the occasional black visitor was still a novelty, a chance to show our patronizing tolerance which distinguished us from racist Britain. We had always been an exporter of people, our politicians pleading the special case of illegal Irish immigrants living out subterranean existences in Boston and New York. So, with our new-found prosperity, why did I not expect the boot to be on the other foot? Ebun unlocked a door and they helped me onto a chair in their one-room flat. She put some ice from the tiny fridge into a plastic supermarket bag. Kneeling beside the chair she held it against my forehead.

'To keep the swelling down,' she said. 'You were crazy brave. I should not have shouted at you.'

'I didn't mean to call you names. I just wanted to make you run.'

'I don't run,' she said. 'No more running. I see too much to run any more.'

The men talked in low voices in their own language. Another man joined them, staring at me with open curiosity. I tried to stand up, wanting to escape back down onto the street. These damp walls reminded me too much of things I had spent a lifetime fleeing. I wondered at what time the bus station closed.

'Where are you going?' Ebun pushed me back. 'You have been hit. You must rest.' She adjusted the ice-pack slightly.

'He saw everything,' the stocky man said. 'I know those kids. This time we have a witness. I say we call the police.'

'No,' I said quickly. 'I can't.'

'Can't what? Go against your own kind?'

'It's not that.'

'Leave him alone,' Ebun said. 'What's the use of a court case in six months' time? By then we could have all been put on a plane back to Nigeria. Besides, a policeman anywhere is still a policeman. We should never trust them.'

'We thank you for your help,' the man who had picked me up said. 'This should not have happened. I tell my sister not to go out alone, but do you think she listens? Have you eaten?'

'No.'

'We have something. It is hot.'

I had smelt the spices when I entered the flat. The stocky man went to the cooker and ladled something into a soup dish. *'E gba,'* he said, handing me what looked like a sort of oily soup. 'It is called *egusi.* My name is Niyi.' He smiled but I knew he was uneasy with my presence. Ebun removed the ice-pack and they talked among themselves as I ate. Finally her brother approached.

'Tonight you have nowhere to stay?'

'Nowhere arranged as yet.'

'Then we have a mattress. You are welcome.'

I had enough money for a hotel. I was about to say this when I looked at Ebun's face and the still half-antagonistic Niyi. Strangers adrift in a strange land, refugees who had left everything behind, who lived by queuing, never knowing when news would come of their asylum application being turned down. This flat was all they possessed.

'I would be grateful,' I replied.

'Lekan ni oruko mi. My name is Lekan.' He held his hand out. I shook it.

'My name is Cormac,' I lied, with the ease of ten years' practice.

Lekan led me across the landing to a small bathroom. The seat was broken on the toilet, which had an ancient cistern and long chain. I washed my face, gazing in the mirror at my slightly grazed forehead. Then I peered out of the small window: rooftops with broken slates, blocks of flats in the distance, old church spires dwarfed by an army of building cranes, the achingly familiar sounds of this hurtful city.

A few streets away the woman I had been taught to call 'Mother' lay dying in hospital. Out in the suburbs beyond these old streets the woman I had once called 'wife' lived with the boy who once called me 'Father'. Conor's seventeenth birthday was in two months' time, yet he lived on in my mind the way he had looked when he was seven.

On the landing the Nigerians were bargaining in a language I could not understand and then in English as they borrowed blankets to make up a spare bed. My forehead hurt. Everywhere my eyes strayed across the rooftops brought memories of pain, so why was my body swamped by the bittersweet elation of having come home?

II SUNDAY

Asofa with scratched wooden arms that probably even looked cheap when purchased in the 1970s; a purple flower-patterned carpet; one battered armchair; a Formica table that belonged in some 1960s fish and chip shop; an ancient windowpane with its paint and putty almost fully peeled away. I woke up on Sunday morning in Ebun's flat and felt more at home than I had done for years.

A solitary shaft of dusty light squeezed between a gap in the two blankets tacked across the window as makeshift curtains. It fell on Niyi's bare feet as he sat on the floor against the far wall watching me. He nodded, his gaze not unfriendly but territorial in the way of a male wary of predators in the presence of his woman.

I looked around. One sleeping-bag was already rolled up against the wall. Ebun occupied the double bed, her hair spilling out from the blankets as she slept on, curled in a ball. Niyi followed my gaze. Maybe he had just left the double bed or perhaps the empty sleeping-bag was his. I'd no idea of where anyone had slept. All three Nigerians had still been talking softly when I fell asleep last night.

'Lekan?' I enquired in a whisper.

'Gone. To help man prepare for his appeal interview, then to queue.'

'What queue?'

'Refugee Application Centre. He needs our rent form signed.'

'But it's Sunday?'

'On Friday staff refuse to open doors. They say they frightened by too many of us outside. Scared of diseases I never hear of. By Monday morning queue will be too long. Best to start queue on Sunday afternoon, and hope that when your night-clubs finish there is less trouble with drunks. Lekan does not like trouble.'

'How will he eat?'

Niyi shrugged. 'We bring him food. Lekan is good queuer. I only get angry. Too cold. Already I am sick of your country.'

He pulled a blanket tighter around him. We had been whispering so as not to wake the girl. It was seven-twenty on my watch. There would be nowhere open at this time in Dublin, not even a café for breakfast. I turned over. My pillow was comfortable, the rough blanket warm. My limbs were only slightly stiff from the thin mattress. I could go back asleep if I wished to. From an early age I had trained myself to fall asleep anywhere.

Not that this ability was easily learned. I spent five years sleeping in the outhouse as a child, yet the first few nights, when I barely slept at all, remain most vivid in my mind. My terror at being alone and the growing sensation of how worthless and dirty I was. Throughout the first night I was too afraid to sleep. I knelt up on the desk to watch lights go out in every back bedroom along the street. My father's light was among the first. Yet several times during the night I thought I glimpsed a blurred outline against the hammered glass of the bathroom window. I didn't know whether it was my father or a ghost. But someone seemed to flit about, watching over me or watching that I didn't escape.

I'd never known how loud the darkness could be. Apple trees creaking in Hanlon's garden, a rustling among Casey's gooseberry bushes. Paws suddenly landing on the outhouse roof. Footsteps – real or imagined – stopping halfway down the lane. Every ghost story I had ever heard became real in that darkness. Dawn eventually lit the sky like a fantastically slow firework, and, secure in its light, I must have blacked into sleep because I woke suddenly, huddled on the floor with my neck stiff. My father filled the doorway.

'School starts soon. You'd better come in and wash.'

He didn't have to tell me not to mention my night in the outhouse at school. Instinctively I understood shame. Cormac sat at the kitchen table. He didn't seem pleased at his victory, he looked

scared. Phyllis refused to glance at me. She placed a bowl of porridge on the table, which I ate greedily, barely caring if it scalded my throat.

'Comb his hair,' my father instructed her. 'He can't go looking like he slept in a haystack.'

But the tufts would not sit down, no matter how hard Phyllis yanked at them. Finally she pushed my head under the tap, then combed the drenched hair back into shape. Her fingers trembled, her eyes avoiding mine. She snapped at Cormac to hurry up, pushing us both out the door. We were late, trotting in silence at her heels. Lisa Hanlon stared at me as she passed with her mother. Phyllis took my hand, squeezing my fingers so tightly that they hurt. Every passer-by seemed to be gazing at me and whispering.

'You mind your brother this time.' Her hiss was sharp as she joined our hands together, pushing us through the gate. We walked awkwardly towards the lines of boys starting to be marched in.

I glanced at Cormac whose eyes were round with tears. 'If you slept in my bed I'll kill you, you little gick,' I whispered. He released his hand from mine once Phyllis was out of sight.

It was hard to stay awake. My eyes hurt when I rubbed them. I avoided Cormac at small break, while a boy jeered at me in the long concrete shelter: 'What was your mother screaming about yesterday?'

'She's not my mother.'

Cormac moved alone through the hordes of boys, being pushed by some who stumbled into his path. But he seemed content and almost oblivious to them, absorbed in some imaginary world. I watched him walk, his red hair, his skin so white. He was the only boy I knew who washed his hands at the leaky tap after pissing in the shed which served as a school toilet. At that moment I wanted him as my prisoner too, himself and Lisa Hanlon with tied hands forced to do my bidding on some secret island on a lake in the Boyne. I don't know what I really wanted or felt, just that the thought provided a thrill of power, allowing me to escape in my mind from my growing sense of worthlessness.

When lunchtime came I knew Cormac was about to get hurt. Bombs were exploding in the North of Ireland, with internment and riots and barbed wire across roads. I didn't understand the news footage that my father was watching so intently at night. But Pete Clancy's gang had started to jeer at Cormac, chanting 'Look out, here comes a Brit' and talking as though the British army was a private militia for which he was personally responsible.

Yet I had never heard him mention his father or living in Scotland. It was like he had no previous existence before gatecrashing my life in Navan. He spoke with a softer version of his mother's inner-city Dublin accent, but this made no difference to Pete Clancy, who detested Dubliners anyway. Cormac was the nearest available scapegoat and therefore had to suffer the consequences.

I watched from the shed as a circle of older boys closed in on him, while younger lads ran to warn me that he was in trouble. The prospect of violence spread like an electric current through the yard. I wanted Cormac hurt, yet something about his lost manner made me snap. The huddle of boys seemed impenetrable as they scrambled for a look. They let me through as if sensing I meant business. But even if I could have helped him I had left it too late. Cormac's shirt was torn, his nose a mass of blood. Pete Clancy stopped, knowing he had gone too far. Behind him Slick McGuirk and P. J. Egan stood like shadows, suddenly scared. Slick was trembling, unable to take his eyes off Cormac, maybe because when they had nobody else to torment the two companions always tormented him. Pete Clancy let go of Cormac's hair and all three stepped back, leaving him kneeling there.

The circle was dispersing, voices suddenly quiet. I knew Mr Kenny was standing behind me, the tongue of a brass bell held in his left fist and his right hand clenching a leather strap with coins stitched into it. He looked directly at Pete Clancy. 'What's been going on here?'

'Two brothers, *a Mháistir,* they were fighting.'

Clancy's eyes warned me about what could happen afterwards if I contradicted him. McGuirk and Egan took his lead, staring intimidatingly at me.

'Did you try to stop them, Clancy?'

'I tried, *a Mháistir.'*

The Low Babies and High Babies were sharing a single classroom that year, while the leaky prefab, which previously housed two classrooms, was being demolished to make room for a new extension. Every boy knew that the school would never have leapfrogged the queue for grant aid if Barney Clancy hadn't pulled serious strings within the Department of Education. My father might be respected but my word held no currency against a TD's son. I looked at Pete Clancy's closed fist which still held a thread of Cormac's hair.

'Is this true, Brogan?' Mr Kenny asked me.

'No, sir. He's not my brother.'

Someone sniggered, then went silent at the thud of Mr Kenny's leather against my thigh. The stitched coins left a series of impressions along my reddened flesh.

'Don't come the comedian with me, Brogan!'

It was hard to believe that two hundred boys could be this quiet, their breath held as they anticipated violence being done to somebody else. Pete Clancy eyed me coldly.

'Did you strike this boy?' Mr Kenny asked me again.

Cormac looked up from where he knelt, trying to wipe blood from his nose. 'No, he didn't.'

'I did so!' I contradicted him, not knowing if I was trying to save Cormac or myself or us both. Clancy's henchmen haunted every lane in Navan, whereas with Kenny it would simply be one beating. 'He's a little Brit,' I said, parroting Clancy's phrases. 'They're only scum over there in Scumland.'

'Brendan didn't touch me, sir,' Cormac protested. 'Please leave him alone.'

'Stand up,' Kenny told him. Cormac rose. I knew he was crazy, only making things worse. But Clancy and the others stepped back, suddenly anxious. Cormac's honesty was illogical. There was no place for it in that schoolyard and they were suddenly scared of him as if confronted by somebody deformed or spastic.

'You needn't be afraid of what he'll do to you at home. I'll make sure your mother knows about this,' Mr Kenny said, beckoning us to follow him.

A large wooden crucifix dominated the corridor outside the head brother's office, framed by a proclamation of the Republic and a photo of a visiting bishop at confirmation time. I stood outside the office while Slick McGuirk and P. J. Egan pressed their faces against the window on their way home, muttering, 'You're dead, fecking dead!'

Their threats weren't directed at Cormac sitting on a chair near the statue of Saint Martin de Pours, but at me. They ignored the child who had defied them, but, in acquiescing, I had become their new bait.

Phyllis didn't even glance at me when she emerged from the head brother's office. Her silence lasted all the way home as she gripped Cormac's hand and I fell back, one step, two step, three steps behind them. Conscious of watching eyes and sniggers. Aware of hunger and of how my palms stung so badly that I could hardly unclench my knuckles after my caning by the head brother. Cormac didn't speak either. Perhaps he realized that the truth was of no use or maybe he was exacting revenge for every sly pinch I'd ever given him.

The grass needed a final autumn cut in the back garden. I remember that leaves had blown in from the lane to cover the small lawn with a riot of colour. They looked like the sails of boats on a crowded river. I wanted nothing more than to block the real world out by kneeling to open my bruised hands and play with them.

'*Tháinig long ó Valparaiso, Scaoileadh téad a seol sa chuan…*'

I remembered Brother Ambrose's voice in class a few weeks before, losing its usual gruffness and becoming surprisingly soft as he seduced us with a poem in Irish about a local man who sees a ship from Valparaiso letting down its anchor in a Galway bay and longs in vain to leave his ordinary life behind by sailing away on it to the distant port it had come from.

Phyllis had left us alone in the garden. I knelt to gather up a crinkled fleet of russet and brown leaves and cast them adrift. Cormac watched behind me, then knelt to help by sorting out more leaves and pushing them into my hands.

'What are they?' he asked.

'A fleet of ships. Sailing across the world to Valparaiso.'

'Where's that?'

'Somewhere that's not here.'

He nodded companionably as if the confrontation in the schoolyard had finally given us something in common. It was the first time we became absorbed in playing together, our hands sorting out the leaves excitedly.

'The purple ones can be pirates,' he suggested, 'slaughtering the goody-goody ones that are brown.'

'Did you come from Scotland on a ship?'

'I don't know.'

'What was it like, Scotland?'

'I don't know.'

Footsteps made us turn. Phyllis was struggling with a spare mattress she had taken down from the attic, trying to force it out the kitchen door. Mutely we watched her haul it down the path. My blankets were already in the outhouse from last night. I have a memory of Cormac and I holding hands as we stood together. But this couldn't be possible, because when she ordered me into the outhouse I was still clutching a pile of leaves tightly in both fists.

'Put those down before you litter the place,' she said. 'Make a bed for yourself. I'll not have a thug under the same roof as my son.'

Her make-up was streaked from tears. I didn't want to simply drop the leaves. Cormac opened his hands and I passed them to him so that he could continue the game. He was still holding them, solemn-faced, when Phyllis slammed the door.

I don't know at what hour my father came home, but it was long after the chorus of wood saws and the tic-tic-tic of upholstery tacks had died out in the garden sheds. He brought down a tray with water and a bowl of lukewarm stew. I told him the truth about Pete Clancy, crying my eyes out, desperate for someone to believe me. The terrible thing is that I think he did believe me, but just couldn't afford to admit it to me or to himself.

Barney Clancy had dominated that outhouse on every occasion he stood there. His rich cigar smoke, the shiny braces, the shirts he was rumoured to have specially made in Paris. After years of hard times Clancy was putting Navan on the map. Without him there would be no Tara mines or queue-skipping for telephones or factories set up to keep the 1950s IRA men out of mischief. The new wing for Our Lady's Hospital would not have been built, nor the Classical School resurrected from the slum of Saint Finian's, and the promise of a municipal swimming pool would have remained just a promise.

Dynasties like the Fitzsimons, Wallaces and Hillards were among the decent honest politicians who would be easily elected for generations to come, but Barney Clancy was different from them and dangerous and special. People talked as if the River Blackwater would stop flowing into the Boyne below the town if he was not there like some Colossus to watch over us. Things were happening to Navan that the aborigines of Kells or Trim could only have wet dreams about. And my father played his part too, not just helping out with constituency matters but increasingly looking after domestic finance and bills and other mundane matters that Clancy no longer had time for. He was respected in the town as a lieutenant to the whirlwind whose audacity was making us the envy of Ireland.

'I want no more trouble,' my father said quietly when I finished crying. 'If and when your mother forgives you you will come back in and stop behaving like a brat.'

He slipped me an old comic from his pocket as he left. It was crumpled and I'd read it a dozen times before. But I studied every word repeatedly to keep the darkness away. Dennis the Menace and the Bash Street Kids. I spoke their lines aloud, imagining myself at one with them for whole moments inside each story, caught up within their anarchic freedom. Then I'd reach the final page and sounds from the street intruded into my loneliness. Toilets flushing, canned laughter from television sets, a woman throwing tea leaves out the back door and banging the empty pot three times like a code.

After undressing I lay in the dark. I thought of Cormac's white skin snuggled against mine as sleep overcame us on our ship with billowing sails of autumn leaves, which we had steered out along the Boyne to the open sea to sail towards Valparaiso.

Time is not a concept any child can properly understand. One night can last an eternity while several years fuse into a blur. Did my father and Phyllis decide on that first night to permanently exile me, or did my punishment simply become a habit, a decision they never got around to reversing? Maybe they rowed for months over it or perhaps my father simply let Phyllis get on with running the house. He was too swamped by internal County Council sniping with the main planning department and his recently acquired voluntary weekend role of trying to balance the household books of Barney Clancy so as to leave the great man free to focus on politics.

I once overheard my father tell Phyllis about Barney Clancy's advice to a businessman moving to Athlone. 'Make them sit up and quake in their boots at the sight of you. Look down your nose on every last Westmeath bog-warrior. Fear is the only way to get Athlone people to respect you.' Respect. The word rankled with Phyllis, gnawing at her dreams like a cancer. She craved respect in the same way as women in Navan had started yearning to entertain at home with steak fondue evenings or to take foreign holidays that didn't involve pilgrimages or fasting.

But the hardchaw Dublin workmen erecting a new fluorescent sign over O'Kelly's butcher's in Trimgate Street instinctively recognized one of their own as they wolfwhistled after her every morning, and other mothers at the school gate kept a clannish distance. Phyllis mimicked their accents, despising what she regarded as their bog fashions, headscarves and plump safely-married figures that were 'beef to the heel like a herd of Meath heifers'. Yet she clung to any casual remark addressed to her, desperate for some sign of acceptance.

Back then neighbours counted how many tacks a man used to upholster an armchair, knew if the postman delivered a brown Jiffy bag from England or whose wife was spied visiting a chemist shop in an outlying town. It must have been obvious, even to Phyllis, that people knew and disapproved of my growing ostracism at home. Children from first marriages were sometimes treated as second-class citizens within Irish families, but never to this extreme. Furthermore, for all her airs, I was still a local and they regarded Phyllis as just a blow-in, tarting herself up like a woman on the chase for a husband instead of one securely married.

But the more they ignored her the more I bore the brunt of her frustration. Each day I came home from school, ate dinner at the same table as Cormac and was banished to the shed before she produced ice-cream for his dessert from the new refrigerator which gave itself up to convoluted multiple orgasms every few hours. When my father eventually arrived home he was sent down to harangue me over my latest alleged insult to his wife – Phyllis having abandoned the pretence of me calling her mother.

Some nights he lashed out at me with a fury that – even at the age of ten and eleven – I knew had little to do with my 'offence' or even the inconvenience of my existence. At such moments he became like a savage, needing to dominate me because I was the last thing he could control with life starting to spin beyond him. I'd seen him taunted on the street as 'Clancy's lap-dog in the Council' and heard Pete Clancy's joke about his father taking my father and Jimmy Mahon for a slap-up meal where he ordered steak and onions and when the waiter enquired, 'What about the vegetables, sir?' Clancy replied, 'They can order for themselves.'

The only place where he still felt in command was the outhouse, in which he began to lock papers away in the filing cabinet again, warning me never to mention them to Phyllis. This made me suspect that they were related to my mother, photographs or other souvenirs of her unmentionable absence. Feeling that I was in the same room as them gave me a certain comfort at night.

Mostly, however, he didn't hit me. After some half-hearted shouting he simply smoked in silence or questioned me about school, joking about the soft time pupils had now compared to his youth. 'You're happier down here with your bit of space,' he observed once, more to himself than me. 'Few boys your age have so much freedom.'

Often it felt like he was putting off his return back up to the rigid game of happy families being orchestrated in that house. Mama Bear, Dada Bear and room for only one Baby Bear. 'She's a good woman,' he remarked after a long silence one night. 'It's not easy for her in this town.' He looked at me as if wanting a reply, like he ached for reassurance or justification. Yet I knew he was so wound up that if I opened my mouth his fists would fly.

Some evenings I peered through the chicken wire to watch them play their roles in the sitting-room window. Except that nobody seemed to have told Cormac the plot. He had sole possession of the hearthrug and bedroom, but increasingly he wore the distant look I had first seen in the schoolyard. Self-absorbed, no longer clinging to his mother but largely ignoring them by escaping into his own inner world. He seemed the only one of us not to be bent and twisted like a divining rod by unseen tensions.

With the mines creating an influx of jobs, boom times were hitting Navan. Building sites sprang up. Anxious developers, farmers with land to sell and total strangers would call to the house at all hours, hoping in vain for a quiet word with my father after having no joy with the main planning department. Phyllis had instructions to run people like Slab McGuirk from the door, savouring her status at being able to exclude prominent citizens which made her feel as omnipotent as a doctor's wife or priest's housekeeper. Very occasionally she attended sod-turnings and ribbon-cuttings with my father if there was a slap-up meal later in the Ard Boyne Hotel or Conyngham Arms in Slane. A girl was paid to babysit Cormac on those occasions, while I was allowed up into the house, for the sake of appearances.

But the outings were rarely a success. The tension was so electric on their return that the babysitter was barely gone before the rows started. 'What are you sulking about now?' she would nag in a tipsy voice. 'How I held my wineglass or laughed too loud or upstaged Clancy's pig of a wife – the only woman in Navan who doesn't know about his mistress in Dublin?' Phyllis's voice followed me, spoiling for a fight, as I was dispatched to the shed: 'Come on! Tell me to start behaving like a grown woman. But you like me as a girl when it suits you, don't you eh, Mr Respectable?'

I was eleven on the night when they grew so caught up in their row – which now seemed almost like a ritualized game leading to subsequent peace-offerings – that they forgot to properly close the bedroom curtains. The gap was small where they shifted in and out of the light. My father was naked, with black hair down his chest and his belly swelling slightly outwards. I didn't know what an erection was, just that Phyllis knelt, wearing just a white bra, to cure it in the way that you sucked poison from a wasp sting. I should have been disturbed, but everything about the scene – the way they were framed by the slat of light, his stillness with his hands holding her hair and his face turned away – made it seem like a ceremony from some distant world that I would always be forced to witness from outside.

But I was outside everything now. The whole of Navan – and even the Nobber bogmen arriving in bangers with shiny suits crusted in dandruff – knew it. Pete Clancy perpetually devised new means of public ridicule. His fawning cronies brought in soiled straw to fling at me and shout that I had left my bedding behind. They held their noses when I passed, making chucking noises and perching like roosting hens on the bench in the concrete shelter.

The funny thing was that – although Navan would never accept a blow-in like Phyllis – Cormac had blended in, accepted and even slyly admired for his oddity. From the day that he contradicted

Pete Clancy any bullying of him had switched to me instead, although I noticed that in the yard Slick rarely took his eyes off Cormac. He even made a few friends, boys who similarly seemed to inhabit their own imaginations out on the fringe of things. But for every friend Cormac made a dozen of mine melted away, aware that even association with me could put them at risk of being bullied too.

The town whispered about what was happening to me at home, with neighbours always on the verge of doing something. Teachers after I fell asleep in class, my mother's only brother who arrived home from England and threatened to call to the barracks. A policeman spent twenty minutes in the front-room waiting to speak to my father, with not even Phyllis daring to send him packing. On another night a young priest came, very new to the parish, after spotting me at school. There was a brief and strained conversation before he left and never came back. Old Joey Kerwin probably called upon the curate with a bottle of whiskey and the advice that he would earn more respect in Navan for not stirring up unnecessary trouble and maybe leaving his guitar in the presbytery instead of flashing it around the altar.

Had my father been unemployed or a mere labourer I would have been taken away to be placed in the chronic brutality which passed for childcare. I would have shared a dormitory with forty other starving boys; been hired out as slave labour to local farmers; taught some rudimentary trade and lain awake, if lucky, listening as naked boys were flogged on the stone stairs while two Christian Brothers stood on their outstretched hands to prevent them moving. After the state subsidy for my upkeep dried up on my sixteenth birthday, the Brothers would have shown me the door, ordering me to fend for myself and keep my mouth shut.

When boys disappeared into those schools they never reappeared as the same people. Something died inside them, caused by more than just beatings and starvation. But that system was designed to keep the lower orders in check and provide the Christian Brothers with an income. For the son of a senior County Council official to be sent to an industrial school was as unthinkable as for a priest to bugger a Loreto convent girl. The middle classes managed our own affairs, with minor convictions squashed by quiet words in politicians' ears and noses kept out of other people's business. No action was ever taken about my confinement, my occasional bruises or burst lip, or the fact that neighbours must have sometimes heard me crying. My father just got busier at work and – corralled in the home – Phyllis grew ever more paranoid about 'the interfering bitches of the town'.

'What were you saying to that Josie woman from the terrace?' she would demand if I was a minute late home from school. 'Don't think I didn't see you gabbing to her when I picked up Cormac in the car. Does she think we're so poor she needs to give you food from her scabby cottage that should have been bulldozed long ago? You get home here on time tomorrow.'

Shortly before my eleventh birthday Mr Casey had begun to interfere. Trenchantly at first, after a long period of simmering observation, and then in subtle ways which made us both conspirators. His garden was an ordered world of potato beds, gooseberry bushes and cabbage plants. A compost heap stood in the far corner, away from the lean-to where he made furniture most evenings. Close to the wall of my father's outhouse he'd erected a small circle of cement blocks, used to burn withered stalks and half his household rubbish. Before Phyllis's arrival I remember accompanying my father and Mr Casey on occasional outings to his brother's farm near Trim on a Saturday morning, returning with a trailer full of logs. Long into the evening his electric saw would be at work, with sparks dancing like fireflies, logs thrown over the hedge into our garden and the softest pile of sawdust for me to play with.

Their joint ventures stopped however after Phyllis perceived some real or imagined slight in Mrs Casey's tone towards her. Afterwards both men kept each other at bay behind a facade of hearty greetings shouted over the hedge. But they hadn't properly spoken for two years before the winter evening when Mr Casey heard me crying through the outhouse wall. I recall the sudden thump of his hand against the corrugated iron and my shock, after being so self-absorbed in my shell, that an outsider could overhear me.

'Is that you, Brendan? Surely to God he hasn't still got you out there on a bitter night like this?'

His voice made me hold my breath, afraid to reply. I knew I had let my father down and done wrong by allowing Mr Casey to hear me, I wanted him to go away but he kept asking if I was all right. Was I thirsty, scared, had they given me anything to eat? 'I know you're in there,' he shouted. 'Will you for God's sake say something, child.'

Possibly my inability to reply finally made him snap. But there was nothing I could say that wouldn't make matters worse. I huddled against the corrugated iron, hearing the dying crackle of his bonfire and longing for him to go indoors so that I could creep out and sit near it for a time until the embers died. Injun Brendan who roamed the gardens at night, forever on the trail with no time for tepees or squaws.

When Mr Casey's voice eventually died away I stopped shaking. Too scared to leave the outhouse, I closed my eyes, imagining that my fist – pressed for comfort between my tightly clenched legs – was the feel of a horse beneath me. I rocked back and forth, forcing the warmth of the fantasy to claim me. Injun Brendan, always moving along to stay free. The bruises on my legs were no longer caused by Pete Clancy's gang lashing out at me as I raced past to get home from school in time. Instead they were rope burns after escaping from cattle rustlers. I fled bareback along trails known only to myself, seeking out the recently constructed makeshift wigwam of corrugated iron sheets which Clancy's gang met in by the river so that I could tear it to the ground. I had seen it one night among bushes by the Boyne but even in the dark I hadn't dared approach it. Now the fantasy of destroying it filled the ache in my stomach, blocking reality out until the sound of raised adult voices intruded.

'Don't you tell me how I can or cannot punish my own son!'

'Punish him for what? He's been two years down in that blasted shed. If his poor mother was alive…'

The voices were so loud I thought they were in the garden. But when I checked through the chicken wire I could see Mr Casey in the dining-room window, with my father looking like he was only moments away from coming to blows with him.

'It's no concern of yours, Seamus.'

'It's a scandal to the whole bloody town.'

'There's never been cause of scandal in this house.' Phyllis's voice entered the fray, suddenly enraged. 'Just work for idle tongues in this God-forsaken town.'

The more they argued, the more frightened of retribution I became. I looked up to see that their voices had woken Cormac. He entered the back bedroom and sleepily looked out of the window. By this time I didn't begrudge him owning my old bedroom. He looked perfect in that light, gazing down towards the shed, with his patterned pyjamas and combed hair. I was sure he couldn't see me in the dark but he began to wave and kept waving. We never really spoke now. Phyllis discouraged contact at home and at school we had nothing left to say to each other. The adult voices threw accusations at each other. Cormac stayed at the window until I forced my hand through a gap in the chicken wire, scraping my flesh as I managed to wave back to him. Then he smiled and was gone. When the voices stopped I lay awake for hours, with the memory of Cormac's body framed in the window keeping me warm as I waited for vengeful footsteps that never came.

It was half-nine before Ebun stirred. Niyi had made coffee and quietly left a mug on the floor beside me, before relaxing his vigilance long enough to disappear down the corridor to the bathroom. That was when I became aware of Ebun languidly watching me slip into my jeans. I hurriedly did up the zip.

'You slept well,' I remarked.

Ebun curled her body back up into a ball, lifting her head slightly off the pillow. 'Where do you go now, Irishman?'

'I have business in Dublin.'

'Have you?' It was hard to tell how serious her expression was, but I found myself loving the way her eyes watched me. 'I think you are a criminal, a crook.'

'Crooks generally find better accommodation than this.'

'Do they? Are you married?'

'Are you?'

She turned her head as Niyi returned. 'I think he is a gangster, like the men who smuggled us onto their truck in Spain. He has their look. I think we are lucky not to be killed in our beds.'

The man admonished her in their own language, glancing uneasily across, but Ebun simply laughed and turned back to me. 'I don't really think you are much of a crook, Irishman. I should know, after the people we have had to deal with.'

'This is stupid talk,' Niyi butted in.

'I enjoy a joke,' I told him.

Ebun stopped smiling and regarded me caustically. 'I wish to dress. It is time you left.'

I stood up to pull on my shirt, thrown by her curt tone. When I arrived in Ireland yesterday I had been nobody, a ghost, ready to do what had to be done and disappear again without trace. The last thing I needed was attachments, but I found myself lingering in the doorway, not wanting to leave just yet. 'Thanks for taking me in.'

'Forgive us for not being used to your customs,' she replied. 'We didn't make you queue.'

Niyi muttered something sharply, caught between embarrassment and relief that I was going.

'She means no harm,' he said in English. 'But in Nigeria I did not live this way. I had a good job in my village, yet here I must queue with gypsies.'

'They have the same rights as us Yorubas,' Ebun contradicted him from the bed. 'None.'

Niyi accompanied me out onto the landing and had already started down the stairs when I glanced back. Ebun's expression was different in his absence as she quietly called out, '*E sheé.* Thank you for last night. Call again, Irishman.'

Her words caught me off guard. I was unable to disguise my look of pleasure from Niyi who escorted me down to the front door.

'Thank you again. *Ò dábò.'* He shook my hand formally, as if entreating me to ignore Ebun's invitation and regard our encounter as finished. He watched from the doorway until I reached the corner into Dorset Street.

There were more cars heading into town at this early hour than I remembered. Walton's music shop still stood on North Frederick Street, but the shabby cafe on the corner was gone, with workmen even on a Sunday morning swarming over steel girders to erect new apartments there. The bustle of O'Connell Street felt disturbing for 10 a.m. Tourists moved about even in late autumn and there was a striking preponderance of black faces compared to ten years ago, although one could still spot the standard fleet of Sunday fathers queuing at bus stops. I would probably be among them if I had stayed, although, approaching seventeen, Conor would be too old for weekly treats now, more concerned about having his weekends to himself.

Those separated fathers on route to exercise their visiting rights were a standard feature of the streetscape in every city I had lived in over the past decade. Too neatly dressed for a casual Sunday morning as they felt themselves to be on weekly inspection. Their limbo in Ireland would have been especially grim, with divorce only just now coming into law. Existing in bedsits on the edge of town with most of their wages still paying the mortgage of the family home, arriving there each weekend at the appointed hour to walk a tightrope between being accused of spoiling the children or neglecting them. Living out fraught hours in the bright desolation of McDonald's or pacing the zoo while the clock ticked away their allotted time.

I knew that I could never have coped with such rationed-out fatherhood. It was all or nothing for me and the only gifts that my gambling could have brought Conor were disgrace, eviction and penury. My feelings for the boy had grown more intense as my love affair with Miriam died. Died isn't the right word. Our marriage suffocated instead inside successive rings of guilt and failure, disappointments and petty recrimination. The pale sprig of first love remained buried at the gnarled core of that tree,

but it was only after the axe struck it that I glimpsed the delicate lush bud again when it was too late. One final gamble, a lunatic moment of temptation had cast me adrift from them like a sepal.

Ten years ago when I flew out to visit Cormac in Scotland there was graffiti scrawled in the toilet in Dublin airport: *Would the last person emigrating please turn out all the lights.* Half the passengers on that flight were emigrants, fleeing from a clapped-out economy. I had been on protective notice for two months already at that stage, knowing that soon I would receive the minimum statutory redundancy from the Japanese company I worked for in Tallaght who insisted on blaring their bizarre company anthem every morning. *Together our workers lighten up the world…*

The world needed serious lightening up back then, with life conspiring to make us bitter before our time. Mortgage rates spiralled out of control and the Government cutbacks were so severe that Miriam's mother died in lingering agony on a trolley in a hospital corridor with barely enough nurses, never mind the miracle of a bed. Miriam didn't know that it was only a matter of time before we would be forced to sell our house or see it repossessed because of my gambling. There were many things Miriam didn't know back then, so much she should not have trusted me to do.

At seven Conor knew more than her, or at least saw more of my other world. The places where us men went, places men didn't mention to Mammy, even if she dealt with them in her work. Our male secret. Bribed with crisps to sit still while I screamed inwardly as my hopes faded yet again in the four-forty race at Doncaster, Warwick or Kempton. 'What's wrong, Daddy? Why is your face like that?' 'Eat your crisps, son, there's nothing wrong.' Nothing's wrong except that half of my wages had just followed the other half down a black hole. Nothing's wrong except that I kept chasing a mirage where more banknotes than I could ever count were pushed through a grille at me, where Conor had every toy he ever wanted, Miriam would smile again and the shabby punters in the pox-ridden betting shop would finally look at me with the respect that I craved from them.

No seven-year-old should have to carry secrets, be made to wait outside doorways when a bookie enforced the no-children rule, see his Daddy bang his fists against the window of a television shop while his horse lost on eleven different screens inside. I lacked the vocabulary to be a good father, gave too little or too much of myself. I simply wanted to make people happy and be respected. I hoarded gadgets, any possession that might confer status. I loved Miriam because she could simply be herself and I wanted Conor to be every single thing that I could never be.

Possibly Miriam and I could have turned our marriage around if I had been honest to her about my addiction. Perhaps we would now radiate the same self-satisfied affluence as that Dublin family yesterday on the stairwell of Lisa Hanlon's house. I might even have been around to disturb the intruders at my father's house, with him still alive and all of us reconciled. Father, son and grandson. The pair of us taking Conor fishing on the Boyne, watching him walk ahead with the rods while my father put a hand on my shoulder. 'You know I'm sorry for everything I did, son.' 'That's in the past, Dad, let's enjoy our time now.'

How often in dreams had I heard those words spoken, savouring the relief on his lined face, our silence as we walked companionably on? The sense of healing was invariably replaced by anger when I woke. The only skills my father taught me were how to keep secrets and abandon a son. There was never a moment of apology or acknowledgement of having done wrong. Nothing to release that burden of anger as I paced the streets of those foreign towns where I found work as a barman or a teacher of English, an object of mistrust like all solitary men.

In the early years I sometimes convinced myself that a passing child was Conor, even though I knew he was older by then. The pain of separation and guilt never eased, drinking beer beside the river in Antwerp or climbing the steep hill at Bom Jesus in Braga to stare down over that Portuguese town. It was always on Sundays that my resolve broke and several times I had phoned our old number in Ireland, hoping that just for once Conor, and not his mother, would puzzle at the silence on the line. But on the fifth such call a recorded message informed me that the number was no longer in service. I had panicked upon hearing the message, smashing the receiver against the callbox wall and

feeling that the final, slender umbilical cord was snapped. I didn't sleep for days, unsure if Miriam and Conor had moved house with my insurance payout or if there had been an accident. Miriam could have been dead or remarried or they might have moved abroad. Yet deep down I knew she had simply grown tired of mysterious six-monthly calls. She was not a woman for secrets or intrigues, which was why she should never have married me.

I crossed the Liffey by a new bridge now and found myself wandering through Temple Bar, a mishmash of designer buildings that looked like King Kong had wrenched them up from different cities and randomly plonked them down among the maze of narrow streets there. I bought an Irish Sunday paper and sat among the tourists on the steps of a desolate new square. The inside pages were filled with rumours of the Government being about to topple because of revelations at the planning and payments to politicians tribunals, along with reports of split communities and resistance committees being formed in isolated villages that found themselves earmarked to cater for refugees.

I stared at the small farmers and shopkeepers in one photograph, picketing the sole hotel in their village which had been block-booked by the Government who planned to squeeze thirty-nine asylum-seekers from Somalia, Latvia, Poland and Slovakia into its eleven bedrooms. *Racists,* the headline by some Dublin journalist screamed, but their faces might have belonged to my old neighbours in Navan, bewildered and scared by the speed at which the outside world had finally caught up with them. The village had a population of two hundred and forty, with no playground or amenities and a bus into the nearest town just once a day. A report of the public meeting was stormy, with many welcoming voices being shouted down by fearful ones. 'You'll kill this village,' one protester had shouted. 'What do we have except tourism and without a hotel what American tour coach will ever stop here again?'

This confused reaction was exemplified in the picture of a second picket further down the page. This showed local people in Tramore protesting against attempts to deport a refugee and her children who had actually spent the past year in their midst.

There were no naked quotes from the South Dublin Middle Classes. A discreet paragraph outlined their method of dealing with the situation. There were no pickets here, just a High Court injunction by residents against a refugee reception centre being located in their area, with their spokesman dismissing any notion that racism was involved in what he claimed was purely a planning-permission matter.

Two Eastern European women in head-dresses sat on the step beside me, dividing out a meagre meal between their children. I closed the paper and, leaving it behind me, located a cyber cafe down a cobbled sidestreet which was empty at that hour.

My new Hotmail account had no messages, but there again whenever I left a city I was careful to leave no trace behind. I got Pete Clancy's e-mail address from the leaflet in my pocket, sipped my coffee and began to type:

Dear Mr Clancy,

'Help me to help you', you say. Maybe we can help each other. Your problem in the next election could be how to know you have reached the quota if you're not sure that you have all the magic numbers. Your father once joked that death should not get in the way of people voting. It need not get in the way of the recently deceased talking either.

Fond memories,

Shyroyal@hotmail.com

I stared at the message for twenty minutes before clicking 'send'. It was a hook but also a gamble, pretending to know more than I did. What would Clancy make of it – a local crank, a probing journalist shooting in the dark, a canvasser for another party trying to snare him? Some party hack might check on the messages for him, scratch his head and just delete it. But I figured that the odds were two-to-one on Clancy himself reading it and five-to-two that the word 'Shyroyal' might capture his attention.

I had only heard it once in childhood, when Barney Clancy turned up in a gleaming suit, slapped his braces and joked to my father: 'This is my Shyroyal outfit. Sure isn't Meath the Royal County and don't I look shy and retiring?' Something about his laugh made me glance at him as I came up the path, after running a message for Phyllis, and something in my father's eyes made me look away, knowing it had a buried meaning not meant for the likes of me.

By the age of twelve I had learnt to pick the lock on the filing cabinet, opening the drawers gingerly at night, uncertain of what I hoped to find there. Secrets that would make me feel special, photos of my mother or some other token to break the loneliness. The letterheads were torn off the sheaf of paper in the top drawer but, even at that age, I recognized them as bank statements for something called Shyroyal Holdings Ltd, with an address on an island I had never heard of. The rows of figures meant nothing to me, but I could read the scrap of writing on the cigarette packet stapled to them: *Keep safe until I ask for them*. It was unsigned, but I would have recognized Barney Clancy's handwriting anywhere.

Not that I had considered the statements as suspicious back then. Funds were constantly being raised for the party on the chicken-and-chips circuit or by good men like Jimmy Mahon at church-gate collections. This seemed just another component of the adult world where important people were making things happen for the town. If I hadn't previously overheard Barney Clancy's joke to my father the Shyroyal name would not even have registered. Indeed, at the time I just felt disappointment that nothing belonging to my mother was actually concealed in the drawers.

Even today I couldn't be certain if my suspicions were correct or the product of a need for revenge. I could barely even recognize the country outside the cyber cafe window and felt doubly a foreigner for half-knowing everything. I found myself thinking of Ebun again, how she had looked calling out from her bed this morning and how Niyi too had looked, staring back at us both.

The cafe was starting to fill up. I finished my coffee, collected my bags from the bus station, found a hardware shop open on a Sunday where I could purchase a crowbar and booked myself into an anonymous new hotel on the edge of Temple Bar. It was important that I shaved at least once a day to ensure that black stubble didn't clash with my hair. Lying on the bed afterwards, I repeated the name Brendan out loud, as if trying to step back inside it. I remembered how Miriam and Cormac used to say it, the way Phyllis had twisted the vowels, and tried to imagine Ebun pronouncing it. But each time it sounded like a phrase from a dead tongue last spoken on some island where the only sound left was rain beating on bare rafters and collapsed gable ends.

During the first fortnight after the train crash a sensation of invisibility swamped me. All bets were suddenly off, because not even bookies could collect debts from a dead man. Our endowment policy ensured that once my death was confirmed, the house belonged to Miriam with the outstanding balance of the mortgage written off. A company scheme in work meant that, because I died while still employed by them, my Japanese masters would have to grudgingly cough up a small fortune. That was before taking my own life assurance policy into account, not to mention the discussion in the newspapers that I carefully read every day about a compensation fund for victims. My name was there among the list of the missing. There was even security footage of me splashing out on a first-class ticket at the booth ten minutes before the train left Perth. Death had finally given Brendan Brogan some cherished status. He was virtually a celebrity, but he wasn't me any more.

I was free of all responsibilities, shunting quietly across borders on another man's passport. Not that my initial decision was clear-cut. In the hours after the crash I wasn't sure what I had wanted, except perhaps to make Miriam suffer a foretaste of what it might be like to lose me. Little enough beyond recriminations still held us together. But I knew that her anxiety would be intense as she listened to reports of the crash and prayed for the phone to ring, aware I was supposed to be on the train.

Rarely had I experienced such a sense of power. For months I had helplessly waited on word of the factory closing. At night I had kept dreaming of horses that I knew had no chance of winning,

but next day I would back them in suicidal doubles and trebles, waiting for that one magic bet to come up that might buy me space to breathe. By night I woke in a sweat, thinking that I'd heard the doorbell ring with a debt-collector outside. By day I hovered inside the doorway of betting shops in case some neighbour passed who might mention seeing me to Miriam. On buses I found myself incessantly saying to Conor, 'I bet you the next car is black,' 'I bet you we make the lights before they turn red,' 'I bet you…I bet you…I bet you…'

Brendan Brogan was a man who couldn't stop betting. But wandering through Perth on the morning of the crash I had the bizarre sense of having stepped outside myself. I wasn't that pathetic gambler any more. Suddenly I was the man in control who could choose when to release Miriam from her anxiety by phoning home. I imagined the relief in her voice and, with it, an echo of her earlier love. Yet once I made that call my new-found power would be gone. I would have to explain my getting off the train before it started, how I had chickened out of meeting Phyllis in Glasgow. I would return to Ireland to face the hire-purchase men and money-lenders, the pawnbroker who held all of Miriam's mother's jewellery which she believed I had put in the bank for safe keeping, and my seven-year-old son baffled by the civil war fought out in the silences around him.

I knew that my not phoning her was cruel and petty, but it was also a confused attempt to reach Miriam by letting her understand powerlessness. It was not that I hadn't wanted to tell her about my childhood, but I had never found the words that wouldn't make me feel dirty by discussing it. Her mind was too practical to understand why people had done nothing. But the hang-ups were totally on my part. I could never cope with her lack of guile and she had felt hurt by how I clammed up on nights when the memories turned my knuckles white.

Before Conor was born I genuinely believed I had outgrown that hurt. But the older he got the more I found myself forced to relive my childhood, imagining if Conor ever had to endure the same. Surely at some stage my father must have felt this same love for me as I felt for Conor, an overwhelming desire to protect him at any cost, to kill for him if necessary. Yet every time Conor laughed I remembered nights when I cried, with every meal he refused to eat I recalled ravenous hunger. Carrying a glass of milk up the stairs for him in bed I remembered creeping from the outhouse to cup my hands under the waste pipe from the kitchen sink. What father simply abandons his first child? On some nights Miriam would find me cradling Conor in bed, his sleeping cheeks smudged by my unexplained tears. I would want to go to Cremore where my father now lived and punch his face, screaming, 'Why, you bastard, why?'

I did actually mean to phone Miriam from Perth after I had scored my point. But somewhere along the line I left it too late. By 9.15 the phones would already be buzzing, with Phyllis calling my father from Glasgow airport and him contacting Miriam. By half-ten I knew her anxiety would be tinged with anger. If I phoned now she would know that I had deliberately been playing games.

And it was a game until then. Partly I was in shock from the realization of how close I had come to still being onboard the train when it left Perth. But my mind was also in turmoil from trying to comprehend the events that had occurred since my arrival in Scotland two days before.

Eleven a.m. had found me outside a TV shop in Perth, watching live pictures of firemen frantically working. Reports were booming from the radio in the pound shop next door, with talk of signal failure and dazed survivors found wandering half a mile from the track. I had more cash on me than I had ever handled before, money nobody else knew about. Enough for a man to live on for a year, but not enough to do more than temporarily bandage over the cracks at home, even if I didn't blow it in the first betting shop in Dublin. I had needed time alone to mourn and come to terms with Cormac's last words to me that called for some new start, some resolution. I had also needed time to deal with Cormac's revelations about my father. The facts should have been self-evident had I wished to see them, but in my ambiguity of both hating him and craving his respect, I had always shied away from over-scrutinizing my father's relationship with Barney Clancy.

I had bought shaving foam in a mini-market, sharp scissors and a disposable razor. Nobody came into the gents' toilets in the small hotel beside the bus station while I was removing my beard there. I cleaned the sink afterwards until it shone, putting the scraggly hair and foam and used razor in a plastic bag. The air felt freezing against my cheeks as I dumped them in a waste bin.

People stood around the station in numbed silence as I caught a coach at half-eleven, barely aware of my destination until I saw 'Aberdeen' printed on the ticket. Cormac's voice seemed to be in my ear, giving me strength. *Go for it, brother, take them all for the big one.* Twenty-four hours before I had cradled his body in his flat, trying to hold him up even though I knew from the way he hung on the rope that his neck was broken. But suddenly it felt like we were together in this, thick as thieves, the inseparable duo that strangers thought we were when we first moved into a flat together in Dublin. I had felt as if I was outside my body when the bus pulled away from the station. I was Agatha Christie faking amnesia to scare her husband. I fingered the first-class train ticket that was still in my pocket. After all the useless bookies' slips cradled in my palm there, this was the magic card which I had acquired without even knowing. With it I could fill a royal flush, turn over the card that made twenty-one, see the most impossible treble come up. Cormac's ghost and I were hatching the biggest scam in the history of Navan, laying down the ultimate bet and the ultimate revenge on my father too. This buzz was more electric than seeing any horse win. I didn't crave respect from the other passengers, it was already there because I was someone else now, free in a way that I thought only people like Cormac could ever know.

When we had reached Aberdeen my nerve almost failed. I spent twenty minutes in a phone box, constantly dialling Miriam's number, then stopping at the last digit, biting my knuckles and starting all over again. Cormac's ghost didn't seem inside me any more. I was my old insecure self, about to muddle my way through some excuse, when I glimpsed a hoarding advertising a ferry about to leave to the Orkney Islands from Victoria Quay. *Go for it, go for it.* Cormac's tone of voice was the same as when he had dared me to do things in the outhouse.

An hour into the voyage it started to rain and the wind was bitter, but I stayed up on deck on the ferry, all the way past the Moray Firth and beyond John O'Groats. Eventually in the darkness Stromness port came into view on the island called Mainland. From there I had taken a taxi to a hotel in Kirkwall, where I sat alone in the bar to watch an extended late-night news bulletin about charred bodies still being located among the train wreckage and the death count rising.

Even then it wasn't too late to change my mind. Miriam would be frantic, with Conor crying as he sensed her anxiety. But life without me was going to occur for them soon enough anyway. The Japanese factory would be the fifth major closure in Dublin since the start of that summer. Every day I had endured the torture of other workers looking for the return of borrowed money. Even if I used the cash in my pocket to clear every debt, how long would it take me to return to the equilibrium of being in the gutter again? It was the one place I felt safe in, where I had nothing more to lose. Winning always unhinged me. Even amidst the euphoria at seeing my horse cross the line I had always been panicked by the money being counted into my hands, knowing that life was toying with me, tauntingly postponing the inevitability of being broke again.

Fragments of my last conversation with Cormac had entered my head:

Maybe you just think you'd blow it becaus you've never felt the power of fifteen thousand pounds cash in your hands…Make something of yourself. Ask yourself who you want to be. Suddenly I didn't have to be a loser whose son would learn to cross the street with his mates to avoid me. I could become someone else in his eyes, revered like my mother in a society where goodness was instantly conferred by early death.

I realize now that I wasn't thinking straight back then, still in shock from Cormac's suicide. But as I sat in that hotel bar and listened to the experts being interviewed, it seemed that my getting off the train had been a miracle of Cormac's doing. There had been no cameras that I was aware of on the platform or at the station's side entrance. I could never explain to Miriam where the fifteen

thousand pounds had come from, nestling in the envelope between the two passports in my jacket pocket. She would think I had been gambling again and I was. I was taking the biggest gamble of my life to provide every penny they would need for years to come.

Another pundit was talking on television as I left the hotel bar long after midnight. He repeated the only fact that the experts seemed able to agree on. The heat inside the first-class carriages had been so intense that investigators would never establish just how many bodies were reduced to ash inside them.

The old sandstone buildings beside the quay at Kirkwall had an almost Dutch feel in the dark as I walked along the pier. An elderly man and his dog reached the end and turned to walk slowly back. Normally I didn't smoke but I had purchased a packet of the tipped cigars which Cormac liked. I would need to buy red dye for my hair tomorrow and glasses like Cormac wore in his photo, but already with the beard gone a vague resemblance was there. I was an inch taller, but did officials really check such details? I hadn't known where this voyage would take me, but surely far enough away from my old life that if I had to end it nobody could trace me back.

The paper inside my own passport was thick. At first the cigar merely singed it, making the edge of the pages curl up. Then suddenly a flame took hold. I glanced behind. The old man was out of sight, the tied-up fishing boats were deserted. Gulls scavenged under the harbour lights for whatever entrails of mackerel and cod had not been washed away. The flames licked around my photograph, consuming my hair, then my forehead, eyes and mouth. The cover was getting too hot to hold, my date of birth burnt away, my height, colour of eyes. I had flung my old self out into the North Sea and saw the passport's charred remains bob on the waves before slowly sinking from sight.

At half-two I got dressed again, ripped the lining inside my jacket so that the crowbar fitted into it without attracting attention, and left the hotel to stroll up towards Phibsborough. That familiar Sunday-afternoon malaise lingered around the backstreets here, but new apartments crammed into every gap along Phibsborough Road itself, standing out like gold fillings in a row of bad teeth.

The tiny grocer's opposite my old flat had been replaced by a discreet one-stop-shop for transvestites. A single-storey country dairy still stood beside it, from which an old man used to emerge each morning on a horse-and-cart. But it looked long closed down, a quaint anomaly which – by fluke or quirk of messy will – the developers had overlooked in their frenzy.

A new stand had been built in Dalymount Park, but little else appeared to have changed to suggest that the ground wouldn't pass for a provincial Albanian stadium. Bohemians were playing Cork City at home. I paid in at the Connacht Street entrance and, once inside, paused to lean against the wall of the ugly concrete passageway beneath the terraces which was empty except for a late straggle of die-hard fans.

Nostalgia brought you to the funniest places. The game had already started but I had no interest in climbing up to the terraces. I wanted to forget the bitter finale of my love affair with Miriam and recall the magic of its origins. Everything about the Ireland I had left seemed summed up in the haphazard disorganization of that February night of mayhem and terror in 1983, when Italy arrived as reigning World Champions to play a friendly international. Rossi was playing that night as well as Conti and Altobelli who scored their second goal. Yet nobody in authority bothered to print tickets for the match. The crowd simply drank in the pubs around Phibsborough until shortly before kick-off, then spilled out, fumbling for change as we formed the sort of scrum which passed for an Irish queue.

As a nation we knew we were down and out – with Barney Clancy, by then a senior cabinet minister, hectoring us about living beyond our means. The World Bank hovered in the wings, itching to take over the running of the country. But there seemed a sense of anarchic freedom about those years as well. Half an hour before kick-off I was still drinking in the Hut pub with Cormac and his friends; some of them urging us to finish up while others clamoured for a final round.

The crowd was already huge as we approached the stadium, clogging up the alleyway which led to the ground. Yet it might have been okay had an ambulance not passed down Connacht Street with

its siren blaring. We squeezed even further up the alleyway to let it pass, but more latecomers surged into the cleared space in its wake, causing a swollen crush. People responded with good-humoured jokes at first, shouts of 'Shift your hand' and 'Mind that chiseller!' But soon it became difficult to breathe.

The tall girl with permed hair was the first person I saw who panicked. But she was not even going to the game; I'd seen her emerge from a nearby house and she was unable to prevent herself getting caught in the crowd. A roar erupted inside the ground as the whistle blew for kick-off. I had ten pounds on Italy to win two–nil, with Rossi to score the opener. The crowd pushed harder, anxious to miss nothing. One minute Cormac was by my side, the next we were separated in the turmoil. But my only interest was in rescuing that brown-haired girl. I couldn't explain the attraction, I just knew I had to reach her.

She turned around, trying to plead with people to let her out. But another surge pushed everyone forward, knocking her off-balance. Her hands flailed out helplessly. She was ten feet away and suddenly I hadn't cared who I hurt in attempting to reach her. Not that etiquette mattered any more. Her panic infected the crowd who realized they were likely to be crushed against the walls long before reaching the turnstiles. There was no way out. Fathers held their children tight, using elbows and fists to try and generate more space.

We were twenty feet from the stadium, nearing the zenith of the crush, when I lost sight of her. Her mouth opened as if to scream, her head went down and never reappeared. I took a blow to my skull as I clawed my way through. Then I was lifted up, my feet no longer touching the ground. People trapped against the wall screamed in terror. I saw her blue coat through a mass of legs. She seemed to be lying on something. My feet trod on somebody, then briefly touched the ground before I was pushed forward, landing on top of her. Her head turned. She looked at me, wild-eyed, terror-stricken.

'It's okay,' I wheezed, 'I've come to help.'

I don't know if she heard or understood. I was just another man crushing her. I couldn't save her or myself or anyone. When I tried to shield her head she pushed me off like an attacker. I wanted to explain, but the breath was knocked from my body.

Then my legs found space in the current of people. I felt myself being lifted off her. The police had managed to open the exit gates and bodies were suddenly sluiced into the ground. I put my arms around her, half-lifting and half-dragging her. She had been lying on a collapsed crowd barrier, in which her shoe was entangled. The wire cut into her trapped foot. I pushed against the crowd, making enough space to free her foot, then tried to help her up but she seemed unable to walk. We were carried inside the ground by the crowd's momentum, before people broke away, rushing in different directions. I found a wall and helped her hunch down against it, trying to offer comfort with my arm around her as she cried. She looked up suddenly, pushing me off.

'Just leave me alone! Leave me!'

She almost spat out the words. I had backed away, finding that my own legs could barely support me. I sat against the opposite wall, watching her cry. The passageway was quiet except for more latecomers wandering in, delighted they didn't have to pay. Parents were leaving, holding sobbing children. Policemen argued with officials. I walked out into the alleyway, wondering how many would have died if the gates hadn't been opened in time. Few clues were left to suggest that panic, except for some lost scarves and, here and there, the odd shoe. I found hers beside the barrier, with its heel broken, carried it back inside and waited until she looked up before offering it to her. She wiped her eyes with a sleeve and tried to smile.

'Stupid bloody match. Who's playing anyway?'

'Italy. The World Champions. Your heel is broken.'

'Only for you my neck would be too. Thanks.'

'That's all right.'

And everything was, too that night, like magic. Rossi scored first with Italy winning two-nil, a fourteen-to-one double off a ten-pound bet. We laughed all the way down Phibsborough Road to the Broadstone. At twenty Miriam Darcy was two years younger than me, just finishing her training as a social worker and ready to change the whole world. She leaned on my shoulder, limping slightly and carrying both shoes in her hand. Double-deckers pulled into the bus depot, with its statue of the Virgin high up on the wall. The King's Inn rose to our left and blocks of Corporation flats to our right. Glass was smashed on the corner where winos had occupied a bench. I gave Miriam a piggyback over it, laughing as she slapped me like a horse when I stalled and threatened to throw her off. We reached Great Western Way, with its boxing club and row of ancient trees, then the Black Church, around which Miriam's mother was afraid as a child to run three times in case the devil appeared. Every step had seemed magical as I bore her into the old L-shaped street where she lived with her mother.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.