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The Glass Lake

Written by Maeve Binchy

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The Glass Lake

Maeve Binchy



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To my dearest Gordon
with the greatest gratitude for everything
and with all my love

CHAPTER ONE

1952

Kit had always thought that the Pope had been *at* her mother and father's wedding. There was a picture of him in their house – a different Pope, a dead one – and the writing underneath said that Martin McMahon and Helen Healy had prostrated themselves at his feet. It had never occurred to her to look for him in the wedding picture. Anyway, it was such an awful photograph, with all those people in embarrassing coats and hats standing in a line. If she'd thought about it at all, Kit might have assumed that the Pope had left before the picture was taken, got on the mail boat in Dun Laoghaire and gone back to Rome.

That was why it was such a shock when Mother Bernard explained that the Pope could never ever leave the Holy See; not even a war would make him leave the Vatican.

'But he went to weddings, didn't he?' Kit said.

'Only if they were in Rome.' Mother Bernard knew it all.

'He was at my parents' wedding,' Kit insisted.

Mother Bernard looked at the little McMahon girl, a mop of black curly hair and bright blue eyes. A great wall climber, an organiser of much of the devilment that went on in the school yard, but not until now a fantasist.

'I don't think so, Katherine,' the nun said, hoping to stop it there.

'But he *was*.' Kit was stung. 'They have a framed picture of him on the wall saying that he was there.'

'That's the Papal Blessing, you eejit,' said Clio. 'Everyone has them . . . they're ten-a-penny.'

'I'll thank you not to speak of the Holy Father in those terms, Cliona Kelly.' Mother Bernard was most disapproving.

Neither Kit nor Clio listened to the details of the Concordat that made the Pope an Independent Ruler of his own tiny state. With her face down on the desk and hidden by the upright atlas, Kit hissed abuse towards her best friend. 'Don't you *ever* call me an eejit again, or you'll be sorry.'

Clio was unrepentant. 'Well, you *are* an eejit. The Pope coming to your parents' wedding. *Your* parents of all people!'

'And why shouldn't he be at their wedding if he were let out?'

'Oh, I don't know.'

Kit sensed something was not being said. 'What would be wrong with their wedding, for example?'

Clio was avoiding the matter. 'Shush, she's looking.' She was right.

'What did I just say, Cliona Kelly?'

'You said that the Holy Father's name was Pacelli, Mother. That he was called that before he was called Pius the Twelfth.'

Mother Bernard reluctantly agreed that this was what she had been saying.

'How did you know that?' Kit was full of admiration.

'Always listen with half your mind to something else,' Clio said.

Clio was very blonde and tall. She was great at games; she was very quick in class. She had lovely, long hair. Clio was Kit's best friend, and sometimes she hated her.

Clio's younger sister Anna often wanted to walk home with them, but this was greatly discouraged.

'Go away, Anna. You're a pain in the bottom,' Clio said.

'I'll tell Mam you said bottom out loud on the road,' Anna said.

'Mam has better things to do than to listen to stupid tall tales. Go *away*.'

'You just want to be skitting and laughing with Kit . . .' Anna was stung by the harshness of her dismissal. 'That's all you do all the time. I heard Mam say . . . I don't know what Clio and Kit are always skitting and laughing about.'

That made them laugh even more. Arm in arm they ran off and left Anna, who had the bad luck to be seven and have no friends of her own.

There were so many things they could do on the way home from school. That was the great thing about living in a place like Lough Glass, a small town on the edge of a big lake. It wasn't *the* biggest lake in Ireland but it was a very large one. You couldn't see across to the other side except on a clear day and it was full of little creeks and inlets. Parts of it were clogged up with reeds and rushes. They called it the Glass Lake, which wasn't a real translation. Lough Glass really meant the green lake, all the children knew that. But sometimes it did look like a mirror.

They said that if you went out on St Agnes' eve and looked in the lake at sunset, you could see your future. Kit and Clio didn't go in for that kind of thing. The future? The future was tomorrow or the next day, and anyway there were always too many half-cracked girls and fellows, old ones nearly twenty, pushing each other out of the way to try to see. As if they could see anything except reflections of themselves and each other!

Sometimes, on the way home from school, Clio and Kit would call to McMahon's pharmacy to see Kit's father, with the hope of being offered a barley sugar from the jar. Or they would go to the wooden pier that jutted out into the lake to see the fishermen coming in with their catch. They might go up to the golf course and see could they find any lost balls, which they could sell to golfers.

They rarely went to each other's houses. There was a

danger in going home, a danger of being asked to do their homework. To avoid this for as long as possible, the girls dallied on their way back from school.

There was never much to look at in the post office; the same things had been in the window for years: pictures of stamps, notices about post office savings stamps and books, the rates on letters going to America. They wouldn't delay long there. Mrs Hanley's, the drapery shop, sometimes had nice Fair Isle jumpers and the occasional pair of shoes you might like. But Mrs Hanley didn't like schoolgirls gathering around the window in case it put other people off. She would come out and shoo them away like hens.

'That's right. Off with you. Off with you,' she would say, sweeping them ahead of her.

Then they would creep past Foley's bar with the sour smell of porter coming out, and on past Sullivan's garage, where old Mr Sullivan might be drunk and shout at them, calling attention to their presence. This would be dangerous because McMahon's pharmacy was right across the road and someone would surely be alerted by the shouting. They could look in Wall's hardware in case there was anything exciting like a pair of new sharp shears, or across the road in the Central Hotel, where you might see visitors coming out if you were lucky. Usually you just saw Philip O'Brien's awful father glowering at everyone. There was the meat shop, which made them feel a bit sick. They could go into Dillon's and look at birthday cards and pretend they were going to buy, but the Dillons never let them read the comics or magazines.

Kit's mother would have found them a million things to do if they went home to McMahons'. She could show them how to make shortbread, and Rita the maid would watch too. She might get them to plant a window box, or show them how to take cuttings that would grow. The McMahons didn't have a proper garden like the Kellys did, only a yard at the back. But it was full of plants climbing out of barrels and up walls. Kit's mother had shown them

how to do calligraphy and they had written, 'Happy Feast Day' for Mother Bernard. It was in lovely writing that looked as if a monk had done it. Mother Bernard still kept it in her prayer book. Or sometimes she would show them her collection of cigarette cards and the gifts she was going to get when she had a book filled with them.

But Clio often asked things like, 'What does your mother *do* all day, that she has so much time to spend with us?' It seemed like a criticism. As if Mother should be doing something more important, like going out to tea with people the way Mrs Kelly did. Kit didn't want to give Clio the chance to find fault, so she didn't often invite her home.

The thing they liked doing most was going to see Sister Madeleine, the hermit who lived in a very small cottage by the lake. Sister Madeleine had great fun being a hermit, because everyone worried about her and brought her food and firewood. No one could remember when she had come to live in the old abandoned cottage at the water's edge. People were vague about what community Sister Madeleine had belonged to at one time, and why she had left. But nobody doubted her saintliness.

Sister Madeleine saw only good in people and animals. Her bent figure was to be seen scattering crumbs for the birds, or stroking the most snarling and bad-tempered dog. She had a tame fox, which came to lap up a saucer of bread and milk in the evenings, and she was rarely without splints to mend a broken wing of a bird she had found on her travels.

Father Baily and Mother Bernard, together with Brother Healy from the boys' school, had decided to make Sister Madeleine welcome rather than regard her with suspicion. As far as could be worked out, she believed in the one true God, and did not object to the way any of them interpreted His will. She attended Mass quietly at the back of the church on Sundays, setting herself up as no rival pulpit.

Even Doctor Kelly, Clio's father, said that Sister Madeleine knew as much as he did about some things:

childbirth, and how to console the dying. Kit's father said that in olden days she might have been thought a Wise Woman or even a witch. She certainly knew how to make poultices and use the roots and berries that grew in abundance around her little home. She never spoke about other people so everyone knew that their secrets were safe.

'What will we bring her?' Kit asked. Nobody ever went to Sister Madeleine empty-handed.

'She always says not to be bringing her things.' Clio was practical.

'Yes, she *says* that.' Kit still thought they should bring something.

'If we went to your dad's shop he'd give us something.'

'No, he might say we should go straight home,' Kit said. That was a possibility they couldn't risk. 'We could pick some flowers.'

Clio was doubtful. 'Yeah, but isn't her place full of flowers?'

'*I* know!' Kit had a sudden inspiration. 'Rita's making jam. We'll take a pot of it.'

That would, of course, mean going home; Rita was the maid at the McMahons'. But the jam was cooling on the back window; they could just lift a pot of it. This seemed by far the safest way of getting a gift for Sister Madeleine the Hermit without having to run the gauntlet of a home interrogation.

The McMahons lived over the chemist's shop in the main street of Lough Glass. You could get in up the front stairs beside the shop, or else go around the back. There was nobody about when Kit slipped into the yard and climbed the back steps. Clothes were hanging on the line, but Rita wasn't in sight. Kit tiptoed to the window where the jams sat in containers of every sort and shape. She took one of the more common jars. It would be less likely to be missed.

With a shock, she saw a figure through the window. Her mother was sitting at the table, perfectly still. There was a faraway look on her face. She hadn't heard Kit, nor did she seem even aware of her surroundings. To Kit's dismay she

saw that tears were falling down her mother's face and she wasn't even bothering to wipe them.

She moved quietly away.

Clio was waiting at the back. 'Were you spotted?' she asked.

'No.' Kit was short.

'What's wrong?'

'Nothing's wrong. You always think something's wrong when nothing ever is.'

'Do you know, Kit, you're becoming as bad a pain in the bottom as awful Anna is. God, you're lucky you haven't any sisters,' Clio said with feeling.

'I have Emmet.'

But they both knew Emmet was no problem. Emmet was a boy, and boys didn't hang around wanting to be part of your secrets. Emmet wouldn't be seen dead with girls. He went his own way, fought his own battles, which were many because he had a speech impediment, and the other boys mimicked his stutter. 'Emm ... Emm ... Emmemm ... Emmet,' they called him. Emmet always answered back. 'At least I'm not the school dunce,' he would say, or, 'At least I don't have the smell of pigs on my boots.' The trouble was, it took him a long time to say these telling things and his tormentors had often gone away.

'What's annoying you?' Clio persisted, as they walked down the lane towards the lake.

'I suppose someone will marry you eventually, Clio. But it'll have to be someone very patient, maybe stone deaf even.' There was no way that Kit McMahon was going to let her best friend Clio worm out of her the fact that it had been very shocking to see her mother sitting crying like that.

Sister Madeleine was pleased to see them.

Her face was lined from walking in all weathers; her hair was hidden under a short dark veil. It was a cross between a veil and a head scarf really. You could see some grey hair at the front, unlike the nuns at school, who had no hair at all. Theirs was all cut off and sold for wigs.

Sister Madeleine was very old. Kit and Clio didn't know exactly how old, but very old. She was older than their parents, they thought. Older than Mother Bernard. Fifty, or sixty or seventy. You wouldn't know. Clio had once asked her. They couldn't remember exactly what Sister Madeleine had said, but she certainly hadn't answered the question. She had a way of saying something else entirely, which was a little bit connected with what you had asked, so that you didn't feel you had been rude, but which wasn't anywhere near telling you.

'A pot of jam,' said Sister Madeleine with excitement, as if she were a child getting a bicycle as a surprise. 'Isn't that the nicest thing we could have . . . will we all have tea?'

It was exciting having tea there, not boring like at home. There was an open fire and a kettle hanging on a hook. People had given Sister Madeleine little stoves and cookers in the past, but she had always passed them on to someone less fortunate. She managed to insult nobody by this recycling of gifts, but you knew that if you gave her anything for own comfort, like a rug or some cushions, it would end up in the caravan of a travelling family or someone who needed it more. The people of Lough Glass had got used to giving the hermit only what she could use in her own daily life.

The place was so simple and spare it was almost as if nobody lived there. No possessions, no pictures on the walls, only a cross made out of some simply carved wood. There were mugs, and a jug of milk that someone must have brought her during the day. There was a loaf of bread that had been baked by another friend. She cut slices and spread the jam as if it were a feast that she was preparing.

Clio and Kit had never enjoyed bread and jam like it before. Little ducks walked in the door in the sunlight; Sister Madeleine put down her plate so that they could pick at her crumbs. It was always peaceful there; even restless Clio didn't need to be jumping up and moving about.

'Tell me something you learned at school today. I love facts for my mind,' Sister Madeleine said.

'We learned that Kit McMahon thought the Pope came to her mother and father's wedding,' Clio said. Sister Madeleine never corrected anyone or told them that they were being harsh or cruel, but often people seemed to realise it themselves. Clio felt she had said the wrong thing. 'Of course, it's a mistake anyone could make,' she said grudgingly.

'Maybe one day the Pope will come to Ireland,' Sister Madeleine said.

They assured her this could never happen. It was all to do with a treaty. The Pope had to promise to stay inside the Vatican and not to go out conquering Italy like popes used to do years ago. Sister Madeleine listened with every sign of believing them.

They told Sister Madeleine news about Lough Glass, about old Mr Sullivan up at the garage coming out in the middle of the night in his pyjamas chasing angels. He said he had to catch as many as he could before the dawn, and he kept knocking on people's doors asking were there any angels hiding inside.

Sister Madeleine was interested in that. She wondered what he could have dreamed that was so convincing.

'He's as mad as a hatter,' Clio explained.

'Well, we are all a bit mad, I expect. It's that stops us being too much alike, you know, like peas in a pod.'

They helped her wash and tidy away the remains of tea. As Kit opened the cupboard she saw another pot of jam exactly the same as the one she had brought. Perhaps her mother had been here today. If so, Sister Madeleine had not told them, any more than she told anyone about the visits from Clio and Kit.

'You have some jam already,' Kit said.

Sister Madeleine just smiled.

Tea in the McMahon household had been at a quarter past six for as long as Kit could remember. Dad closed the pharmacy at six, but never on the dot. There was always someone who had come for a cough bottle, or a farmer in

for marking fluids for cattle or sheep. It would never do to rush people out the door. A chemist's, after all, was a place you came when you were contemplating some of the greater mysteries of life, like your health or the welfare of someone in the family. It was not a visit that was taken lightly.

Kit had often heard her mother asking why she couldn't work in the shop. It would be sensible, she had pleaded. People would like to deal with a woman when they were buying sanitary napkins, or aids for breast feeding, and then there was the cosmetics side of things. Travellers from the various cosmetic companies were paying more and more visits to country pharmacies to sell their wonders. There wasn't a week when someone from Ponds, Coty, Dawn, or Max Factor didn't call.

Martin McMahon had very little interest in such things. 'Give me what you think,' he'd say, and take an order of expensive bath soaps and assorted lipsticks.

They were badly displayed, often fading in the window and never sold. Kit's mother had said that the women of Lough Glass were like women everywhere: they would like to look their best. These cosmetic companies would give short training courses to tell the chemists' assistants how best to display the products, how the women customers should use them for best advantage. But Kit's father was adamant. They didn't want to be pushing paints and powders on people who couldn't afford them, selling magic potions promising eternal youth . . .

'I wouldn't do that,' Helen McMahon had argued often. 'I'd only learn how to make the best of them and give them advice.'

'They don't want advice,' her husband said. 'They don't want temptation either. Don't they look fine the way they are . . . And anyway, would I want people to think that I had to have my wife out working for me, that I can't earn a living for her and my children?' Father would always laugh when he said this and make a funny face.

He loved a joke and he could do card tricks and make

coins disappear. Mother didn't laugh as much, but she smiled at Father and usually agreed with him. She didn't complain like Clio's mother did when he worked late, or when he went with Doctor Kelly to Paddles' bar.

Kit thought that Mother would have liked to work in the pharmacy, but she realised that for people such as they were it would have been unsuitable for Father to have let her work there. Only people like Mrs Hanley, who was a widow and ran the drapery, or Mona Fitz, who was the postmistress because she wasn't married, or Mrs Dillon whose husband was a drunk, worked in businesses. It was the way things were in Lough Glass, and everywhere.

Kit couldn't get the vision of her mother's tears out of her mind as they went home from Sister Madeleine's. She walked up the stairs slowly, almost unwilling to go in and discover what was wrong. Perhaps there was some very bad news. But what could it be?

Dad was fine; he was there closing up the chemist's. Emmet was home safely from rolling around in the dirt or whatever he did after school. So there couldn't be anything wrong with the family. With a sense of walking on eggshells Kit went into the kitchen, where they all ate their meals. Everything was normal. Mother's eyes might have been a bit bright, but that was only if you were looking for something. She wore a different dress; she must have changed.

Mother always looked so gorgeous, almost like a Spaniard. Someone had sent them a postcard from Spain of a dancer, where the dress was of real material, not just a photograph. Kit always thought it looked just like Mother, with her long hair swept up in a roll, and her big dark eyes.

Dad was in great form, so there couldn't have been a row or anything. He was laughing and telling them about old Billy Sullivan coming in for some tonic wine. He had been barred from every other establishment that sold alcohol, and suddenly he had discovered his salvation in the shape of tonic wine. Dad did a great imitation of Mr Sullivan trying to appear sober.

'I suppose that's why he saw the angels, due to the drink,' Kit said.

'God knows what he'll see after the Emu Burgundy,' her father said ruefully. 'I've had to tell him that's the last of the stock, that you can't get it any more.'

'That's a lie,' said Emmet.

'I know it is, son, but it's tell a lie or have the poor fellow lying on the road, roaring up to the skies.'

'Sister Madeleine says that we're all a bit mad; it's what makes us different from other people,' Kit said.

'Sister Madeleine is a saint,' Mother said. 'Did you go to see her yet, Rita, about the other thing?'

'I will, Mrs McMahon, I will,' Rita said, and put the big dish of macaroni cheese on the table.

Even though they ate in the kitchen, Mother always insisted that everything was elegantly served. They had coloured place mats instead of a table cloth, and there was a big raffia mat for the casserole dish. It was decorated with sprigs of parsley, one of Mother's touches for making food look nice.

'Wouldn't it all taste the same no matter the way it looked, Mam?' Rita used to say at one time.

'Let's have it looking nice anyway,' Mother would say gently, and now it was second nature for Rita to cut tomatoes into triangles and slice hard-boiled eggs thinly. Even though the Kellys ate in a separate dining room, Kit knew that their meals were not served as graciously as they were in *her* home. It was another thing that made her feel her mother was special.

Rita was made part of the family, unlike the Kellys' maid. Emmet loved Rita, and was always very curious about her comings and goings. 'What other thing?' Emmet asked.

'Helping me with reading.' Rita spoke out clearly before Emmet could be asked not to be nosy. 'I never learned it properly at school, you see. I wasn't there often enough.'

'Where were you?' Emmet was envious. It was so wonderful to be able to say casually that you skipped school.

'Usually looking after a baby, or saving the hay, or making the turf.' Rita spoke in a matter of fact way. She didn't sound bitter about the book learning missed, the years of childminding, growing old before her time, culminating in going out to mind other people's children and clean their houses for them.

Not long after tea, Mr Sullivan saw devils everywhere. In the fading light he noticed them creeping with pitchforks into the houses along the street, including the chemist's. Maybe they had gone in through the floorboards and through cracks in the wall. Kit and Emmet listened, giggling, from the top of the stairs to their father remonstrating with Mr Sullivan, while issuing orders out of the corner of his mouth.

'You're all right Billy. There isn't a devil here except yourself and myself.

'Helen, ring Peter will you.

'Now sit down, Billy, here, and we'll talk the thing out, man to man.

'Helen, let him know how bad it is.

'Billy, listen to me. Am I a man who'd let fellows with pitchforks into my house?

'As quick as he bloody well can, with any kind of tranquilliser he can get into a syringe.'

They sat on the stair top and waited until Clio's father arrived. The cries, and shouts of panic, and the hunt for devils stopped. They heard Dr Kelly saying to their father that it was the County Home now. Billy was a danger to himself and everyone else.

'What'll happen to the business?' Dad asked.

'One of those fine sons he threw out will come back and learn to run it for him. At least the uncle sent the boys to school. They may be able to turn it into something rather than the doss house it is,' said Dr Kelly, who did not share Sister Madeleine's view that we were all different and that's what made us special.

Emmet was sitting with his chin in his hands. His stutter

always came back when he was frightened. 'Are they going to lock him up?' he said, his eyes big and round. It took him ten attempts to get his tongue around the word 'lock'.

Kit thought suddenly that if she had been given a wish now, at this very moment, it would have been that Emmet's stutter would go. Sometimes it would be that she had long blonde hair like Clio, or that her mother and father might be friends with each other like Dr Kelly and Mrs Kelly were. But tonight it would have been Emmet's speech.

When Mr Sullivan had been taken away, Dad and Clio's father went for a drink. Mother went back inside without a word. Kit saw her moving around the sitting room, picking up objects and putting them down, before going to the bedroom and closing the door.

Kit knocked.

'Come in, sweetheart.' Mother was sitting at the dressing table brushing her hair. She looked like a princess when her hair was down.

'Are you all right, Mam? You seem a bit sad.'

Mother put her arm around Kit and drew her towards her. 'I am fine, just fine. What makes you think I'm sad?'

Kit didn't want to tell about seeing her through the kitchen window. 'Your face.'

'Well, I suppose I *am* sad about some things, like that poor fool being tied up and taken off to a mental home for the rest of his life because he couldn't drink in moderation. And about Rita's selfish, greedy parents who had fourteen children and let the older ones rear the younger ones until they could send them out as skivvies and then take half their wages from them . . . Otherwise, I'm fine.' Kit looked at her mother's reflection in the mirror doubtfully. 'And are you fine, my little Kit?'

'Not really. Not completely fine.'

'What would you like that you haven't got?'

'I'd like to be quicker,' Kit said. 'I'd like to understand things immediately, the way Clio does, and to have fair hair, and to be able to listen to one thing while saying another. And be taller.'

'I don't suppose you'd believe me if I told you that you were twenty times more beautiful than Clio, and much more intelligent.'

'Oh Mam, I'm not.'

'You are, Kit. I swear it. What Clio has is style. I don't know where she got it, but she knows how to make the most of everything she has. Even at twelve she knows what looks well on her and how to smile. That's all it is. It's not beauty, not like you have, and you have my cheek bones, remember. Clio only has Lilian's.'

They laughed together, grown-ups in a conspiracy of mockery. Mrs Kelly had a plump face and no cheek bones at all.

Rita went to Sister Madeleine on Thursdays, her half day. If anyone else called, Sister Madeleine would say, 'Rita and I are reading a bit of poetry. We often do that on a Thursday.' It was such a tactful way of telling them that this was Rita's time, people began to recognise it as such.

Rita would bake some scones, or bring a half an apple tart. They would have tea together and bend over the books. As the weeks went on and the summer came, Rita began to have new confidence. She could read without putting her finger under the words; she could guess the harder words from the sense of the sentence. It was time for the writing lessons. Sister Madeleine gave Rita a fountain pen.

'I couldn't take that, Sister. It was given to you as a gift.'

'Well, if it's mine, can't I do what I like with it?' Sister Madeleine rarely kept anything that she had been given for more than twenty-four hours.

'Well, could I have a loan of it then, a long loan?'

'I'll lend it to you for the rest of your life,' Sister Madeleine said.

There were no boring headline copy books; instead, Rita and Sister Madeleine wrote about Lough Glass and the lake and changing seasons.

'You could write to your sister in America soon,' Sister Madeleine said.

'Not a real letter, not to a person.'

'Why not? That's as good as any letter she'll get from these parts, I tell you.'

'Would she want to hear all this about home?'

'She'll be so full of happiness to hear about home you'd nearly hear her thanking you across the Atlantic Ocean.'

'I never got a letter. I wouldn't want them to be thinking above in McMahons' that I was in the class of having people writing to me.'

'She could write to you here.'

'Would the postman bring letters to you, Sister Madeleine?'

'Ah, Tommy Bennet is the most decent man in the world. He delivers letters to me three times a week. Comes down here on his bicycle whatever the weather, and has a cup of tea.'

Sister Madeleine didn't add that Tommy never came without some contribution to the store cupboard. Nor that she had been instrumental in getting his daughter quickly and quietly into a home for unmarried mothers and keeping the secret safe from the interested eyes and ears of Lough Glass.

'And you'd get enough post for that?' Rita asked in wonder.

'People are very kind. They often write to me,' Sister Madeleine said with the same sense of wonder.

*

Clio and Kit had learned to swim when they were very young. Dr Kelly had stood waist deep in the water to teach them. As a young medical student he had once pulled three dead children from the Glass Lake, children who had drowned in a couple of feet of water because nobody had taught them how to swim. It had made him very angry. There was something accepting and dumb about people who lived on the edge of a hazard and yet did nothing to cope with it.

Like those fishermen over in the West of Ireland who went out in frail boats to fish in the roaring Atlantic. They all wore different kinds of jumpers so they would know whose family it was when a body was found. Each family had its own stitch. Complicated and perverse, Dr Kelly thought. Why hadn't they taught the young fishermen to swim?

As soon as the young Kellys and McMahons could walk they were taken to the lake shore. Other families followed suit; the doctor was a figure of great authority. Young Philip O'Brien from the hotel learned, and the Hanley girls. Of course, old Sullivan from the garage told the doctor to keep his hands off other people's children, so Stevie and Michael probably couldn't swim to this day.

Peter Kelly had been in other countries where lakes like this one had been tourist attractions. Scotland, for example. People came to visit places just because there was a lake there. And in Switzerland, where he and Lilian had spent their honeymoon, lakes were all important. But in Ireland in the early fifties, nobody seemed to see their potential.

People thought he was mad when he bought a small rowing boat jointly with his friend Martin McMahon. Together they rowed and fished for perch, bream and pike. Big ugly fish all of them, but waiting for them on the ever-changing waters of their lake was a restful pastime.

The men had been friends since they were boys. They knew the beds of reeds and rushes where the moorhens sheltered and where sometimes even the swans hid from view. They occasionally had company on the lake as they went out to fish, since a few local people shared their enthusiasm; but normally the only boats you saw on Lough Glass were those carrying animal foodstuff or machinery from one side to the other.

Farms had been divided up so peculiarly that often a farmer had bits of land so far apart that the journey across the water could well be the shortest route. Yet another strange thing about Ireland, Peter Kelly often said, those

inconvenient things that weren't laid on us by a colonial power we managed to do for ourselves by incessant family feuds and differences. Martin was of a sunnier disposition. He believed the best of people; his patience was never-ending. There was no situation that couldn't be sorted out by a good laugh. The only thing Martin McMahon ever feared was the lake itself.

He used to warn people, even visitors who came into his chemist's shop, to be careful as they went along the paths by the lake shore. Clio and Kit were old enough to take a boat out alone now, they had proved it a dozen times, but Martin still felt nervous. He admitted it to Peter over a pint in Paddles' bar. 'Jesus, Martin! You're turning into an old woman.'

Martin didn't take it as an insult. 'I suppose I am. Let me look for any secondary signs: I haven't developed breasts or anything, but I don't need to shave as often . . . You could be right, you know.'

Peter looked affectionately at his friend. Martin's bluster was hiding a real concern. 'I've watched them, Martin. I'm as anxious as you are that they don't run into trouble . . . but they aren't such fools when they're out on the water as they seem to be on dry land. We've drilled that into them. Watch them yourself and you'll see.'

'I will. They're going out tomorrow. Helen says we have to let them go and not wrap them in cotton wool.'

'Helen's right,' Peter said sagely, and they debated whether or not to have another pint. As always on these occasions they made a huge compromise by ordering a half pint. So predictable that Paddles had it ready for them when they got around to ordering it.

'Mr McMahon, will you please tell Anna to go home,' Clio begged Kit's father. 'If I tell her, it only starts a row.'

'Would you like to go for a walk with me?' Kit's father suggested.

'I'd like to go in the boat.'

'I know you would, but they're big, grown-up girls

now, and they want to be having their own chats. Why don't you and I go and see if we could find a squirrel?' He looked at the girls in the boat. 'I know I'm a fusser. I just came down to be sure you were all right.'

'Of course we're all right.'

'And you'll take no chances? This is a dangerous lake.'

'Daddy, *please*!'

He went off, and they saw Anna grumbling and following him.

'He's very nice, your father,' said Clio, fitting the oars properly into the oar locks.

'Yes, when you think of the fathers we might have got,' Kit agreed.

'Mr Sullivan up in the home.' Clio gave an example.

'Tommy Bennet, the bad-tempered postman.'

'Or Paddles Burns, the barman with the big feet . . .'

They laughed at their lucky escapes.

'People often wonder why your father married your mother, though,' Clio said.

Kit felt a bile of defence rise in her throat. 'No, they don't wonder that. *You* might wonder it. *People* don't wonder it at all.'

'Keep your hair on. I'm only saying what I heard.'

'Who said what? Where did you hear it?' Kit's face was hot and angry. She could have pushed her friend Clio into the dark lake and held her head down when she surfaced. Kit was almost alarmed at the strength of her feeling.

'Oh, people say things. . .' Clio was lofty.

'Like what?'

'Like your mother was a different sort of person, not a local person . . . you know.'

'No, I don't know. Your mother isn't from here either, she's from Limerick.'

'But she used to come here on holidays. That made her sort of from here.'

'My mother came here when she met Dad, and that makes her from here too.' There were tears in Kit's eyes.

'I'm sorry,' Clio said. She really did sound repentant.

'What are you sorry about?'

'For saying your mother wasn't from here.'

Kit felt she was sorry for more, for hinting at a marriage that was less than satisfactory. 'Oh, don't be stupid Clio. No one cares what you say about where my mother is from, you're so boring. My mother's from Dublin and that's twenty times more interesting than being from old Limerick.'

'Sure,' said Clio.

The sunlight went out of the day. Kit didn't enjoy the first summer outing on the lake. She felt Clio didn't either, and there was a sense of relief when they each went home.

Rita got two weeks' holiday every July.

'I'll miss going to Sister Madeleine,' she told Kit.

'Imagine missing lessons,' Kit said.

'Ah, it's what you don't have, you see. Everyone wants what they don't have.'

'What would you really like to do in the holidays?' Kit asked.

'I suppose not to have to go home. It's not a home like this one. My mother'd hardly notice whether I was there or not, except to ask me for money.'

'Well, don't go.'

'What else would I do?'

'Could you stay here and not work?' Kit suggested. 'I'd bring you a cup of tea in the mornings.'

Rita laughed. 'No, that wouldn't work. But you're right, I don't have to go home.' Rita said she would discuss it with Sister Madeleine. The hermit might have an idea.

The hermit had a great idea. She thought that Mother Bernard in the convent would simply love someone to come and help her spring clean the parlour for a few hours a day, maybe even give it a lick of paint. And in return, Rita could stay in the school and some of the nuns would give her a hand with the lessons.

Rita had a great holiday, she said, the best in her life.

'You mean it was nice, staying with the nuns?'

'It was lovely. You don't know the peace of the place and the lovely singing in the chapel, and I had a key and could go to the town to dances or to the pictures. And I got all my food and hours of help at my books.'

'You won't leave us, will you, Rita?' Kit felt a shadow of change fall over them.

Rita was honest. 'Not while you're young and the way you are. Not till Emmet's grown up a bit.'

'Mam would die if you left, Rita. You're part of the family.'

'Your mother understands, honestly she does. She and I often talk about trying to take your chance in life; she encourages me to better myself. She knows it means I hope to be doing better than scrubbing floors.'

Kit's eyes felt full of tears suddenly. 'It's not safe when you talk like that. I want things always to be the same, not to change.'

Rita said, 'That's not going to be the way it is. Look at the way Farouk stopped being a kitten and is a cat now; we wanted him to be a kitten for ever. And look at the way those little ducklings in Sister Madeleine's grew up and sailed away. And your mother wants you and Emmet to be young and nice like you are, but you'll grow up and leave them. It's the way of things.'

Kit wished it wasn't the way of things, but she feared that Rita was right.

'Will you come out in the boat with me, Mam?' Kit asked.

'Lord no, my love. I'd not have time for that. Go on yourself with Clio.'

'I'm sick of Clio. I'd like you to come. I want to show you places you haven't been.'

'No Kit, it's not possible.'

'But what do you *do* in the afternoons, Mam? What do you do that's more important than coming out in the boat?'

It was only in the school holidays that Kit was aware of how her mother's pattern of living differed from other people's. Clio's mother was always getting a bus or a lift to

the big town to look at curtain material or to try on clothes, or to have coffee in one of the smart shops with friends. Mrs Hanley and Mrs Dillon were working in their shops; Philip O'Brien's mother went up to the church and cleaned the brasses or arranged the flowers for Father Baily. There were mothers who went to Mother Bernard and helped make things for the various sales of work, bazaars and functions that were held regularly to aid the Order's work on the missions.

Mother did none of these things. She spent time in the kitchen with Rita, helping, experimenting, improving the cooking, much more than other people's mothers spent with maids. Mother arranged leaves and branches as decoration in their sitting room and framed pictures of the lake so that one whole wall had two dozen different views of Lough Glass. If people came in they were amazed to see the collection.

But people didn't often come in.

And Mother's work was swift and efficient. She had a lot of time on her own . . . all the time in the world to come out with Kit in the boat. 'Tell me,' Kit asked again. 'What *do* you like doing if you won't come out with me?'

'I live my life the best I can,' her mother said. And Kit felt a shock at the faraway look that came over Helen McMahon's face as she said it.

'Dad, why do you and Mam sleep in different rooms?' Kit asked.

She picked a time when the chemist's was empty, when they would not be disturbed. Her father stood in his white coat behind the counter, his glasses pushed back on his head, his round, freckled face full of concentration. Kit was only allowed to sit on the high stool if she didn't distract him.

'What?' he said absently.

She began again, but he interrupted. 'I heard you, but why do you ask?'

'I was just asking, Dad.'

'Did you ask your mother?'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'And she said it was because you snored.'

'So now you know.'

'Yes.'

'Any more questions Kit, or can I get on with earning my living and making up compounds?'

'Why did you and Mam get married?'

'Because we loved each other, and still love each other.'

'How did you know?'

'You *know*, Kit, that's it. I'm afraid it's not very satisfactory, but that's the only way I can explain it. Like, I saw your mother at a friend's house in Dublin, and I thought, isn't she lovely and nice and fun and wouldn't it be great if she'd go out with me. And she did, over and over, and then I asked her to marry me and she said yes.' He seemed to be telling it from the heart.

But Kit wasn't convinced. 'And did Mam feel the same?'

'Well, darling child. She must have felt the same. I mean, there was nobody with a great big stick saying you *must* marry this young chemist from Lough Glass who loves you to distraction. Her parents were dead; she didn't do it to please anyone, because I was a safe bet or anything.'

'Were you a safe bet, Daddy?'

'I was a man with a steady job. In 1939, with the world on the edge of the war and everyone very confused by everything, a man with a good job was always a safe bet. Still is.'

'And were you surprised that she said yes?'

'No, darling, I wasn't surprised, not at that stage. We loved each other, you see. I know it's not like the pictures, or the things you youngsters giggle about, but that's what it was for us.'

Kit was silent.

'What is it Kit? Why are you asking all this?'

'Nothing, Daddy. You know the way you get to wondering, that's all.'

'I know the way *you* get to wondering,' he said.

And he left it there, so Kit didn't even have to think any more about what Clio had said. Clio had told her that she had overheard a conversation in her home where someone had said that Martin McMahon had a job keeping that wife of his tied to Lough Glass and the miracle of the whole thing being why she had ever come here in the first place.

'I'm only telling you,' Clio had said, 'because you and I are best friends and I think you ought to know.'

'Sister Madeleine?'

'Yes, Kit.'

'Do you know the way people tell you everything?'

'Well, they tell me things Kit, because I haven't much to tell them, you see. What with gathering sticks and picking flowers and saying my prayers, there isn't much to tell.'

'Do people tell you their secrets, like, their sins even?'

Sister Madeleine was shocked. 'No, Kit McMahon. Don't you know as well as I do that the only one we'd tell our sins to is an anointed priest of God, who has the power to act between God and man.'

'Secrets then?'

'What are you saying to me at all? Chook, chook, chook . . . will you look at the little bantams. Brother Healy was so kind. He gave me a clutch of eggs and they all hatched out beside the fire . . . It was like a miracle.' She knelt on the floor to direct the little chickens away from some perilous journey they were about to make and back into the box of straw she had prepared for them.

Kit would not be put off. 'I came by myself today because . . .'

'Yes, I missed Clio. She's a grand friend for you, isn't she?'

'She is and she isn't, Sister Madeleine. She told me that people were talking about my father and mother . . . and I wondered . . . I wanted to know maybe if you . . .'

Sister Madeleine straightened up. Her lined, weather-beaten face was in a broad smile, as if she was willing the

anxiety away from Kit. 'Aren't you the grown-up woman of twelve years of age, and don't you know that everyone talks about everyone else? That's what people *do* in a village . . . You're not going to get all upset over that, are you?'

'No, but . . .'

Sister Madeleine seized the word No. 'There, I knew you weren't. You see, it's a funny thing when people go miles and miles away to big cities where they know nobody and nobody knows them. The whole thing is turned around. It's then they *want* people to be all interested in them and their doings. We are funny sorts of people, the human race . . .'

'It's just that . . .' Kit began desperately. She didn't want to discuss the human race. She wanted Sister Madeleine to tell her that everything was all right, that her mother wasn't unhappy or wild or bad, or whatever it was that Clio was suggesting. But she didn't get far.

Sister Madeleine was in full flight. 'I knew you'd agree with me, and one of the funniest things – animals are much more simple. I don't know why the Lord thought that we were so special. We're not nearly as loving and good as the animal kingdom.'

The old dog, Whiskers, that Sister Madeleine had rescued when someone had tried to drown him in a bag, looked up when she said this. Whiskers seemed to understand when she was saying something good about animals. It was as if the tone of her voice changed. He gave a sort of gurgle to show he approved. 'Whiskers agrees with me. And how's Farouk, that fine noble cat of yours?'

'He's fine, Sister Madeleine. Why don't you come and see him?'

'Sure you know me. I'm not one to be visiting people's houses. All I want to know is that he's well and happy, and stalking around Lough Glass as if he owned it.'

There they were, talking about Farouk and Whiskers and the human race, and it would be rude now to go back to the reason why Kit had walked down the leafy lane to see Sister Madeleine on her own.

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'How are things, Kit?'

'Fine, Mrs Kelly.'

Lilian Kelly stood back to look more attentively at her daughter's friend. The child was very handsome, with the great head of dark curly hair and those unexpected blue eyes. She would probably be a beauty like her mother.

'And tell me, have you and Clio had a falling out?'

'A falling out?' Kit's blue eyes were too innocent. She repeated the phrase with wonder, as if she hadn't a clue what the words meant.

'Well, it's just that up to now you've been like Siamese twins, joined at the hip. But in the last few weeks you don't seem to be going within a donkey's roar of each other, and that seems a pity, seeing that it's the summer holidays.' She paused, waiting.

But she was getting nothing from Kit. 'We didn't have a row, honestly Mrs Kelly.'

'I know. That's what Clio said.' Kit was anxious to be away. 'Nobody listens to their own mother, so maybe you might listen to me instead. You and Clio need each other. This is a small place; you'll always be glad to have a friend here. Whatever silliness this is it doesn't *matter*, it'll soon be over. Now you know where we live. Come on up to the house this evening, will you?'

'Clio knows where *I* live too, Mrs Kelly.'

'God protect me from two such stubborn women. I don't know what's going to happen to the next generation . . .' Mrs Kelly sighed and went off good-naturedly. Kit watched her go. Clio's mother was large and square and wore sensible clothes. Today she had on a cotton dress with white cuffs and collar and a small daisy print, and she was carrying a shopping basket. She was like the picture of a mother in a story book.

Not like Kit's own mother, who was very thin, and who wore bright greens or crimson or royal blue, and whose clothes were sort of floaty looking. She looked much more like a dancer than a mother.

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