With My Lazy Eye

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Extract

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1

Why are there no photos of baby Bunty?

If you look down through the plughole of the sink in the upstairs bathroom – past gaps in the metal swirl, corroded from years of spat toothpaste, water from a leaking tap and tightly coiled with drenched hair – you'll see a plastic lice comb, lodged at an angle with just an edge exposed, its tiny teeth bleached clean.

I put it there at the age of eight. I pulled it from Mum and pushed it through the overflow hole below Armitage Shanks. I wanted to keep my lice. They were my secret and it was interesting to me to have something living in my hair. I liked to feel the tickle of one as it inched along my eyebrow or hurried its way around my ear. If I was quick enough, I'd catch it and snatch it between my nails, and turn it this way and that under my nose, inspecting it solemnly, somewhat out of focus. Before they were raked out that Sunday night, we'd been happily cohabiting my head.

Mum hummed on our way to the bathroom that evening, as she does when she moves from one place to another, or when she goes to answer the front door. Or

when something has gone wrong like her cheese soufflé not rising. Then she'll hum a different, louder hum as she scrapes the hot eggy mixture into the bin.

Up the stairs goes little me; I'm as sleepy as can be. Loud hum, soft hum, as a slipper pounded each stair. Up I went too, following her and the Frog, his bony bruised legs like strips of melded plasticine gripping around her soft centre.

I climbed two steps at a time behind them, pulling at the loose banister. *And how many times have I told you not to?* The sock in my left shoe had slipped down past the heel and my skin was sticking to the shiny leather inner.

Mum pulled both of us out of our ankle-deep, lukewarm bath prematurely. Someone had done a number two. It bobbed about in the turbulence we created getting out. Her hands holding me around the chest were cold; water snaked along her fingers, which were greasy pink like she'd been smearing butter on a goosepimply old chicken. That's when she tried to comb my hair.

Nothing felt nice that evening to begin with. It was Sunday, only one more sleep till Monday, which meant school. Sunday also meant *The Muppet Show*.

My father would join us in the playroom for this half-hour each week. When we heard him coming we'd jump out of the bookshelves we had fashioned into boats or burst through the cushions of our secret homemade dens. Once he had settled in a chair with its stuffing pulled out and found a space around our lives for his Jameson's and jiggly ice, he'd sniff and say,

'Has someone let that damned cat in again?' We'd sniff too, bubbly snot under our noses, and say we couldn't smell anything.

My father laughed at the two old judges and 'Pigs in Space' with his mouth thrown so wide I could see two strings of saliva near his throat, like a puppet mouth, a muppet mouth, as well as some stuck liquorice and silver shapes on grey like the sparkles on the rocks on Sandymount Strand.

I sat on the floor beside the television because of my lazy eye, and cried. I cried about school and about having no friends. The more my father laughed, the more I cried. But the more I cried, the less anyone listened and the less I could make out what Miss Piggy was saying. The playroom was steamy through my pig-pink eyes, the way it went when Mum had forgotten our fish fingers on the grill.

My mother was too busy in the kitchen to watch TV with us. When she came in on a search for dirty dishes, Ollie sat forward with his hands over his ears. We all wished she'd go back to the washing up because of the cold coming through the door she'd left open, and because she was talking over the best bits of the show. Mum likes to talk about what she sees on television the way she would if she were driving by interesting scenery on the road to Brittas Bay. She looked at the screen through the corner of one eye. The other one watched my father. If something made her laugh she would give him a sidelong glance to check if he felt the same way.

I got myself to sleep that Sunday night and other nights by banging my head against my bedroom wall. This gave me a big hairstyle and made a large chalky hole, which I could hide things like Playmen and Monopoly pieces in.

As I rocked in bed, I liked to think about my favourite clothes and me inside them. But the me in my head wouldn't have brown hair; it would be yellow, like Charlie's from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. I would be thin, so that you could see my ribs even when I wasn't breathing in, and I would be a boy. My three best things were:

1. My purple corduroy cap that Mr McNellis gave me for my eighth birthday, just before he had his heart attack. I hadn't seen it for a while; maybe it was in the clothes basket in the downstairs bathroom beneath all that ancient table linen and underwear and slips.

2. My *Man from Atlantis* swimming togs which were orange, tight and to the knee. With my flippers on, arms flat by my sides, I'd twist underwater in the shallow end of the pool, pretending to rescue people like the girl who couldn't swim in the red Polyotters. Before I went under I'd have to memorize where my victims were – Doctor Nugent said I might be allergic to chlorine so until Mum bought me some new goggles I had to swim with my eyes closed.

3. The Frog's verruca socks, which I teamed with a pair of red-rimmed Y-fronts with pictures of soldiers on them and a matching polyester vest. I like to wear this outfit when practising my running – on your marks, get set, and up the laneway behind the blue garage as fast as I could.

But none of these things had my name sewn into any part of them, like Oscar's and Patsy's did. They went to boarding school and had their own pairs of socks and gym kits and washbags and suitcases, all with their first and second names embroidered in. They had particular things they had to do at particular times of the day.

We were told to play together while our mothers collected for the Homeless Girls Society. I wanted to be adopted by them, to have a father like theirs, living in America, as well as a man from up the road who sometimes stayed over and bought them Sherbet Dips, and a mother who noticed tiny things about them, who knew how much they weighed, which cereal each preferred, whose socks belonged to whom.

I remembered being in a cage on a mountainside, naked and covered in mud. There was a berry between my feet and when I bent to pick it up, the berry became a bluebottle. Then the bluebottle was gone but I could still hear it near my ear, and when its noise stopped I knew it had landed on some part of me to explore. Bubbling bottle pops, hoots and burbles, and slippery

gumboots on rocks tumbled down a waterfall and away from me. My head was hot and damp and I wanted to tumble with them, but I didn't know who to shout to because I couldn't see what voice belonged to which feet. I pushed my left hand through the bars and drew in dried mud with a stick until it snapped.

There's a photograph of my older sister, Pie, in that playpen at a picnic in Wicklow. And when I ask Mum why there are no baby pictures of me when there's a pictorial shrine to Pie and the Frog, it was because I was born in the winter when it was dark, she'll say, or because I didn't like my picture being taken, or because photos just weren't something we were thinking about at the time.

That I was an antisocial middle child, with a bucket-shaped face, left-handed, lazy-eyed, mildly brain-damaged (as a result of repeated, self-inflicted blows to the head), lice-infested, chronically self-absorbed bed-wetter with vile and murderous tendencies wasn't mentioned.

I tried to kill the pallid Frog by forcing a Pete's Peanut up his nose when he was three. He turned that colour he went when he was having an Incredible Sulk or was on the potty – raw pink like luncheon meat – but he didn't growl or thrash his feet; he made a thin whistling sound as if he were asleep. He went away for a bit, but he came home again with a new trolley full of bricks. My father sat with the Frog on the playroom floor and using the bricks they built a fortress around them.

But I didn't kill Granny. I know it looked a little suspicious because I was the one who found her. My father didn't blame me when I told him that she wasn't moving in her bed, but I know what he must have been thinking and I bet he said something to Mum. Granny was fine at the Christmas party we'd had twenty-four hours earlier. She was wearing a blue twinset that I'd seen before, with her handbag dangling at her elbow like Minnie Mouse. Under her arm was a bottle of TK Lemonade for us. I remember her face looked red but I thought that was because she'd just taken something out of the oven. Yak Yak Yak, she said as she picked up a dirty tea towel.

I knocked on her bedroom window the next morning with her newspaper. She'd been living underneath us since her balance had got bad. Then I let myself in and called out along the hall and again outside the bedroom door; I was afraid to open it in case she was in the middle of putting on a girdle or peeling plasters off her bunions.

She didn't look at me or move when I came in – her eyes were staring at the ceiling. She had a hairnet on and she'd put that powdery stuff all over her cheeks and forehead, but she'd forgotten to do the two sore bits at the top of her nose, at that place where glasses sit, and the grey fluffy part above her upside-down mouth, along the lines where lipstick slid.

I didn't know what death looked like but I thought that dead hands and arms would be spread out, like Jesus on the Cross, or like people in films after they've

been shot. Granny's hands, all waxy and bunched, were gripping the bedclothes. Blue veins criss-crossed under her brown-spotted skin. Her fingernails were thick like toenails and curled at the edges, and though they were coated in cherry, I could see soft toffee stuff underneath. Her legs were crossed from the knee, the way she liked to cross them in front of her on a pouffe when she was watching the races at Leopardstown on the black and white television.

The travel alarm clock was ticking and a *Reader's Digest* bookmark stuck out of the Bible on the bedside table. Walking shoes – royal blue, bunion-shaped at the sides to fit her bunion-feet, and with a slipped Scholl insole inside each – were waiting under her bed.

A funnel of sunlight stretched from the window to a painting of Jesus above Granny's head. Inside the light were dancing diamonds of dust, Granny's dust. Dust to dust. Was her soul leaving when I opened the door? Was she stranded in limbo because of me, above her bed in bits of dust? Granddad was on his horse watching us from the mantelpiece. Maybe he was waiting to take her away or maybe she'd already gone off with Jesus.

Granny had changed but her smell was the same: a mix of brandy, Cussons talc, damp dog on a pink bath mat and twenty cigarettes from a packet of gold, the same gold as the Terry's All Gold she'd bought me when I'd burnt my toe on the gas heater. I was afraid to touch her; I didn't want to give her a fright. If

Granny had gone where was her soul? Maybe it was searching for her suitcase in Herbert Park pond, that's where she thought the robbers might have thrown it after they'd stolen it from under her bed and used it to carry away all her favourite things, like the squirrel salt cellar and the two silver candlesticks. And when the Frog fell into the pond by mistake, did his blue boots touch the edge of Granny's suitcase at the bottom? Is that where Granny floated now, deep and silent, in her nightie, with purple tubes like trapped worms along the backs of her knees, through mossy undergrowth, green water, twigs and leaves and spawn?

I tried to cry because that's what people do when they stand beside bodies, but I didn't feel sad. I felt oddly excited. I started to laugh. It was me who found Granny! It was my big bit of news. I wouldn't even have to knock on my father's study door; I could run right in with such an important thing to say.

It wasn't the right time to die because my birthday was still to come and she was going to get me a Space Hopper and because Mum was up in Belfast buying her a cassette recorder for Christmas. And if someone looked through my bedroom window at the exact moment that I was applying blusher to my cheeks on the day of Granny's funeral they would have seen me smile and they might have thought there was something a bit fishy about that. But I read in Mum's copy of *Good Housekeeping* that blusher should be applied to the apples of your cheeks and that the best way to find these

apples is to smile. Mum suggested that I might want to look like a proper girl on that day. Then she hummed as she folded the cleaned sheet from Granny's bed and put it back into the hot press.

2
Downstairs upstairs



I imagined myself into the painting of the storm. It was where I went when things were going wrong. Not out on the slushy street with the bent-over men and women in shawls struggling to move forwards in the squall, but in the house at the front of the painting. There were no lights in the windows or smoke from its chimney; I painted these in with my mind. Inside where it would be warm with burning wood, I'd climb a ladder to bed through smudgy candlelight, in my long johns and bare

feet, and listen to doors slam, wind buffeting the windows, sleet pelting the roof.

The painting hadn't been hung there for me. It hadn't been hung at all, but wedged between the bookshelves above my bed along with other things for which no home could be found like the old warming pan my mother got when Granny died and the statue of the Virgin Mary, missing her head.

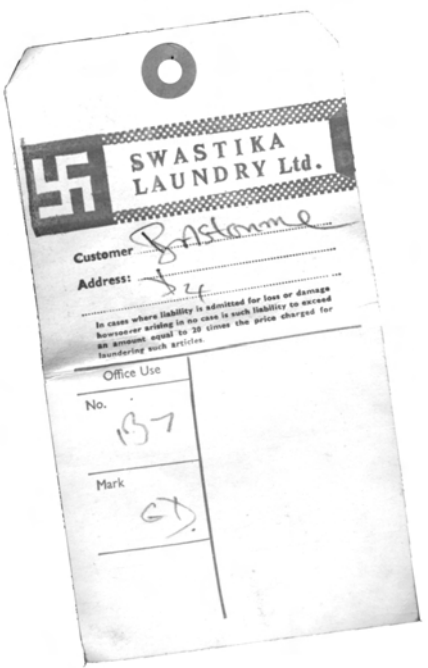
I'd been helping Mum with eclairs for the dinner party, breaking chocolate into a saucepan while she stirred with a wooden spoon. The spoon was in her mouth when my father came in carrying the table linen he'd collected from the Swastika Laundry. 'You really shouldn't be eating that, pet,' he said. I agreed with him; I hated when she licked things and put them straight back in the bowl. Mum said she'd eat what she bloody well liked.

She swore more often since her mother died, whereas my father was enjoying the peace. Granny talked too much when she was alive, the way old people do when you invite them over for lunch.

Happy occasions such as Christmas and dinner parties often made my parents swear, and the hours before them were fiercely tense in our house. By the time the first guests had arrived – always too early – my parents were generally not talking to each other. Aside from worrying about what would happen to us if they broke up or the threat of being asked to vacuum the hall, parties were exciting events: the fridge was fat with chocolate mousses in frosted bowls and plates wrapped in tinfoil and not to be touched, the house was warmer

than usual with the heating being allowed on, there was the prospect of presents from godparents to look forward to, but, above all, was the thrill of being allowed into the good rooms.

Though ours was a six-bedroomed Victorian pile, we inhabited only the antechambers and servants' quarters for eleven months of the year. On special occasions and on Christmas Day the keys to the good rooms were procured by my father from his secret hiding place, allowing us to venture into the vast, high-ceilinged reception rooms, and certain cold, unnavigated rooms at the top of the house, where overseas guests would be brought to sleep.



My father's wireless fuzzed from where it was lying face down on the bedroom carpet, angled to pick up the Third Programme. It was playing that spooky old harpsichord music he liked, the sort that made me think of dark palaces and furious kings.

With a snort he got up from where he'd been kneeling in black evening socks and Jockey briefs, the texture of the Persian rug imprinted on each kneecap. 'Doorbell!' he roared, establishing the cause of the interference, to no particular and all members of his family at the same time.

He twiddled the tuner, touring through Hilversum, Oslo and Radio Luxembourg before winding it back to Handel again, and laid two centre sheets of an old *Irish Times* on the rug, the first lengthways, the second on top of it but in the opposite direction like a protective cross. He folded his shirt sleeves to above the loose skin of his elbows and marshalled what he'd need for the job: Kiwi shoe polish in tan, a horsehair brush, the bristles so worn in the middle that you could see through to the pores in the wood, a leather buffer and half an underpant for application.

He selected a particular pair of brogues from ten identical sets lined up under a row of suits, hung in the wardrobe like limbless ghosts in a queue, and shoved a hand into an elderly inner. He bobbed his head in time to the music as he worked polish into leather, lifting the shoe glove-style and turning it in the air; the damp circles on its base like age rings on a tree. 'Oh, Christmas!' he cursed when a lump of polish fell onto

the rug, his weak eyes bulging to locate it before it smudged.

He kept his head still with the effort he employed for buffing. The three strands of silver hair combed across his pate fell over his face as he polished, the way they did when we were smacked. Task complete, he sat back on his hunkers and paused to admire his work.

'Ach! Doorbell, for crying out loud!' he bellowed on his way to the bathroom to shave.

Mum watched the choux pastry shells not rising through the oven window. Something wasn't right, their consistency looked wrong. She opened the door, stuck a finger into the mix, licked it, then closed the door again. Mrs Beecham's recipe for profiteroles would have to be double-checked.

The doorbell had been ringing for so long now that it had ceased being a single sound, but had split into a series of separate little tunes, like an orchestra in rehearsal, each busily playing their particular parts. Mum wouldn't have heard it at all if she hadn't opened the kitchen door when she did, to put the cat back out.

Pulling her apron off she went through the hall, humming a doorbell sort of chime purposefully loud to assure whoever was behind the front door that not only was she on her way but that everyone in our house was in high good form.

The mortified guests – Mr and Mrs McClean who had just moved into number 27 and were only being invited because the Hamptons had pulled out – had spent the previous few minutes trying to unstick the

doorbell. 'That ruddy thing!' said Mum, whacking it with the base of her hand. Out it popped and in out of the cold they came.

Early guests were abandoned in the drawing-room. Carrying a steak and kidney pie on her way up to the Hostess Trolley in the dining-room next door, Mum tried to cajole us in to welcome them: 'Will you not go in and say hello?'

'Mu-um!' Ollie whined, on his way to the playroom to watch *Top of the Pops* with some cheese on toast and a milk-moustache mouth, cross that she'd made this suggestion within probable earshot of the guests, but knowing at the same time that she was too addled to insist upon anything.

'Honestly, you'd swear I was asking you to …' she said, in that stiff smiling voice she uses when overheard, trailing off as she tried to count place settings, her right eye travelling towards her nose the way it does when she's preoccupied.

The husband and wife in the drawing-room didn't have anything new to say to each other so he looked at family photos and paintings with his hands behind his back, lifting his glasses and bending forwards periodically to better check some inscription or date. She sat at the edge of the sofa, closed-legged and upright, the way she never normally would, trying not to crease her skirt, with that expression that she keeps for parties – a fixed look of pleasant expectation towards the door. Left alone a little

longer she snatched out her compact, face contorted the way it changes when it sees itself in the mirror, bracelets a-jingle as she flicked a hand through her hair. Then, with the swift adoption of a bow-legged stance she yanked her tights up while her husband quietly eased some trapped gas from his system in the far corner of the room.

Billows of vapour travelled out through the wet lattice window of the bathroom – over the flat roof with its cracked ice puddles, leaf-jammed gutters and one of my father's handkerchiefs tied to a naked Action Man – before freezing into the December night. The sky was deep velvet and empty but for the distant red lights of a plane, a spattering of stars and some floating white flumps from the striped towers of the cloud factory on South Wall. A layer of frost spread over the leaves and sticks on the stiff rectangles of grass in the front garden; at the back of the house, the elongated shadow of the kitchen window stretched as far as the rubber tyre swing beneath the Scots pine. Little puffs of air escaped from the mouths of men as they climbed the front steps in galoshes, directing each other as they parked, getting that first joke in quick. Steam from the lifted lid of a pot on the cooker, from the scorching water whistling through the kitchen sink tap. Steam too from the hot chocolate Ollie slurped under a blanket he'd dragged down from upstairs, his eyes all the while roaming his *Tintin* comic.

I could hear Mr Malone's wheezy cough in the hall. What starts out as a chuckle had lately developed into full-blown emphysema, a five-minute stomach-turning

hack, finished off with a spluttering up of chewy phlegm. I tried not to make him laugh. Doctor Long had cracked the joke, he always laughed loudest at himself. Granny's former bridge partner, Mrs MacDermot, was down there too. Old Mrs MacDermot was a contrary old soul, particularly when it came to her daughter, Stephanie, who was her antithesis. 'Have you not met Stephanie?' Mum always says, 'Stephanie's great, she's big and bouncy.' Bigger and bouncier than ever, she had just produced a baby girl whom she had christened Poppy.

'Only Blacks give their babies made-up names,' said Mrs MacDermot. Mr Malone cleared his throat. Doctor Long moved away.

My mother was speaking to the McCleans in a strange new accent – theirs. What we traditionally referred to as the 'garage' had become a roomier-sounding 'gar*auche*'. She had a way of altering her voice to suit the person she was speaking to. Our Chinese gardener, Chang Lee, she addressed in broken English, enunciating each word in a slow shout and with an array of hand gestures the deaf would find excessive.

Mrs Scott Hamilton sounded silly already. I wondered when she'd start using the vase Didi Malone bought Mum as an ashtray for her cheroots. It came jammed into a box from Brown Thomas, but we saw the same vase at O'Connor's Hardware last Saturday, reduced to two for five pounds. Posterior in the air, she travelled through the hall, like a hen, in search of the loo.

And then there were three or four voices together and someone must have said something hilarious. Great howls and shrieks of laughter, pops of bottles and bubbles, the clink of champagne glasses, a freshly lit cigar. Pine needles and perfume and faces too hot, men tightly fitted in their shirts and their skins, the women all jingle flutter flatter. All bosoms and legs and Absolutely! Haw haw haw. Mr McClean on the fringes of the group, still a little gassy.

But something was going to go wrong. A denture might come free in the middle of a story or there could be a fight like last time about whether the Swiss were a good or bad race. Doctor Long might come and sit with us in the playroom with his shirt poking through his opened fly. Or Didi Malone could walk in on Doctor Long's wife while she hovered over the toilet in the unlockable downstairs bathroom trying not to catch our germs.

With the inevitable delayed for as long as politely possible, having not wanted to throw a party in the first place, my father went downstairs – a last thunderous purge of his nose along the way – quickening his step for the final flight to portray enthusiasm and so that his guests would hear him as he made his entry.

Rooms changed when my father entered them, as though the lights had suddenly been switched on. People stood up, women fiddled with their hair, conversation became animated, eyes wandered to where he was.

Doctor Long shouted something, there was an abrupt clap, followed by a spontaneous round of applause. A lower voice – my father's witty retort – then chortles like bubbles travelling up and down windpipes, like ice cubes and lemon tumbling around a glass.

On school mornings I'd watch him take the front steps, nimble, quick, and stride out along the gravel, off to a job I knew nothing about in the city. Sometimes he would disappear into a long black car. His driver, Mr Barry – who I dreamt of being because he was a man, and alternatively of being married to because he looked so smart and serious in his uniform and flat cap – holding the door open and relieving my father of his briefcase.

I pictured great halls and wood-panelled rooms, books lining the walls and high ceilings, my father at a window formulating ideas and solutions to things, or seated behind a vast mahogany desk, glaring over his glasses, dictating to a shorthand typist. People would neaten themselves in the corridor outside, and hesitate before knocking on his door.

Now that my father was downstairs, Mum could go up and get changed. When I heard her coming I climbed off the banister I'd been scaling and hid behind the velvet curtains in their bedroom in the mouse mask I'd worn for the school play. Mum had cut the eyes out wonky, one was higher up than the other and they were both too small. The only way to see where I was going was to look out through the bottom of it.

Mum sat at her dressing table pulling dead dyed hairs

from a brush. With eyes shut she sprayed Elnett about to make her hairstyle set. Once she'd painted and powdered her face, she stepped into some tights and jangled about her wardrobe for a suitable outfit to wear.

She stood before the mirror in her ballerina pose – the one she always uses to look at herself. Head up, shoulders back, big breath in. One leg stretched far out in front of her, an arm by her side, the other held at an angle, hand flexed – Mum never seems sure about what to do with her spare hand. Her feet looked too small for the rest of her, like she'd borrowed them from somebody else. She wore a salmon-coloured crimplene trouser suit with a pea-green waistcoat beneath. Something was missing. She rummaged about in her drawer for a scarf. A scarf finishes an outfit off, she says. Back in front of the mirror she flung it movie-star style across her chest.

My eyelashes flicked like trapped flies behind the mask. My breath was making the cardboard wet and the rubber band was too tight against my ears. 'You little monkey,' Mum said when she saw the curtains move. 'Will you not come down and say hello?' I didn't need to answer; she wouldn't wait for a reply. She was gone, leaving just her scent behind: the warm flowery smell that meant she was going somewhere without us. I trailed back out to the landing.

I hadn't wanted to be a mouse. I'd wanted to be one of the three kings. I envied their exotic costumes and had learnt all their lines. At the purple curtain I queued behind them in their tinfoil crowns and cloaks with the

other bit-part players: the clouds, the blades of grass, the trees. The cardboard set oscillated as we took our positions on stage to the raw sound of the upright piano Mrs French played. She held her eyes on us as she struck the keys; her mouth stretched huge prompting the words of songs we'd been rehearsing for weeks.

When I'd tired of reciting everyone else's lines, I pulled off my mouse mask and set it on top of my head. I scanned the room for my parents: it was hazy out there beyond the white stage lights. Someone had a cough, people were shifting in their seats to get comfortable, some small commotion was going on at the entrance door; it opened, closed and opened again. There was Mum near the front – I waved when I saw her. The Frog had his head on her shoulder and looked asleep in his zipped-up anorak. But where was my father? Everyone else was there to see our play, even the mother who had three weeks to live and no hair.

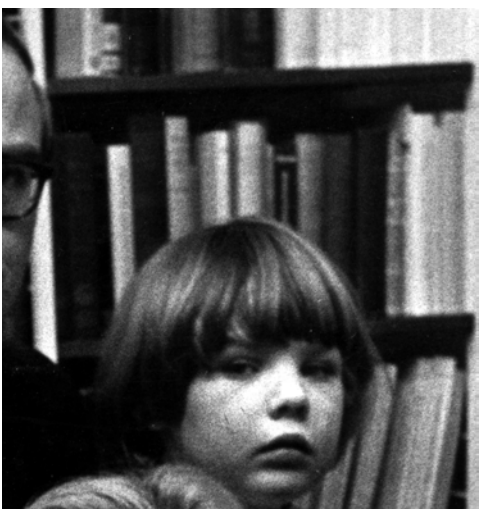
Through the banisters I watched the Frog. He knew how cute he looked struggling upstairs under the weight of the guests' winter coats, his milky skin and shoulder-length white hair poking from that itchy green polo neck Mrs McCabe knitted for him last year. My father promised to pay him five pence if he collected coats and brought them up to the spare room. With his rash-wrinkled skin and malnourished frame, the Frog was always being given things, which he carefully catalogued and indexed and saved.

Pie baby-stepped through the hall towards the drawing-room, in her new jersey dress and white tights with a tear in the knee, a bottle of wine secured under each arm. Her nostrils flared as she sucked her lips in with effort and her stubby pigtails bounced as she moved. Sometimes they would do gymnastic routines together for the guests, Pie thumping across the hall carpet in her leotard – mottled legs unaccustomed to exposure, the first suggestion of breasts – cart-wheeling towards her poorly matched partner bracing himself to catch her mid-flight. If that bit went OK, Pie would balance the Frog on her feet in the air. 'Ah Pie! You'll crease him!' my father would say as everyone enthused and clapped.

If I timed it right no one would spot me on my way down to the playroom. I was terrified of being forced into a room full of adults. I never knew who was who, who was standing where, what I should say, who had seen me, who was smiling and waving at me to come over, whether I could slip out again because no one had noticed me at all.

I'd lost my voice, the way I did every Christmas, which was why I had to be on guard. Traditionally this was when my father liked to record me reciting nursery rhymes in front of his friends. Bent on one knee to get down to my size, he would hold his Dictaphone by my mouth, his lips parted in expectation. After the first line of 'Georgie Porgie' there were no words at all, just sporadic high-pitched squeaks, just my mouth opening and closing like a fish and the sound of my father and a hazy assortment of high heels and tights and suit jackets above me.

I took off my mask and pulled my face into a long stretch to make my eyes open wide, like someone pretending to be English and posh. China blue, my father said, when I was standing on the bench in the kitchen that day. I tried to picture china blue – the colour of the teacups at Uncle Pat's house? But my father didn't know about my secret trick. My eyes weren't blue at all; they were small and grey and one was bigger than the other. It was only when I looked out of windows that they changed colour and got bright and see-through.



I was afraid the guests would notice that my eyes didn't match. That I couldn't make my lazy one look at them even when I tried, and that I couldn't help it if my

bad eye went off, right over their shoulders when they spoke, out of the window and away.

I imagined stretching that knobbly wart on Mr Barnham's chin, as far as it could go, then letting it ping back just to see what everyone would say. 'Absolutely divine' would become 'Absolutely disgusting!' And the way they'd say disgusting would be like this: diz ghust ing, the way Percy the gardener said it when the *Blue Peter* garden was vandalized.

As I snuck past the drawing-room, I could hear my father telling Genevieve a joke. Something to do with the King being dead – they were still going on about that. I squinted around the open door, with my back pressed against it, private-detective style. His hand touched her bracelet as she laughed, all lipsticky sweet. He laughed too and held on to her arm, making out that he needed to just to stay upright.

Mum was back in the kitchen biting her bottom lip as she beat the new profiterole mix. She told me what she was doing the way she does when you come into a room that she's in. 'You must beat it briskly, it's all in the wrist.' A piece of hair fell over her face as she beat; she pinched her fingers round it and put it back in place. It fell over her face again, but this time she left it there, held on to the bowl and beat harder.

All the guests had gone but the air was still thick with the mix of cooking, Chanel and cigars. Someone hadn't liked the steak and kidney pie; they'd scraped it to the edge of

their plate and had covered it with a napkin. An unopened box of After Eights lay on top of a discarded purple scarf.

Into the dining-room I crept, over to the sideboard and down to the cupboard that looked locked but was secretly open. I put my hand in the box of Lemon's sweets, felt around for the ones I wanted and washed them down with some soda water. Father Christmas was laughing on the front with silver snow all around him and sleighs flying through a purple sky.

On my way back to bed I saw a strip of yellow light coming from under the drawing-room door. Someone must have forgotten to switch the Christmas tree lights off. I snuck in to see if any of the guests had left presents for me.

When I slid my hand under the branches there was a sudden kerfuffle. My father was sitting on the sofa in the dark with Genevieve; she seemed delighted to see me and slapped her hand down in the space that spread swiftly between them.

My father liked me best at these times – when his friends were with him or after dinner parties when he was happy. I loved these times too – having his attention and being let stay up late. But he didn't want me there that night. 'Ah Bunty! What is the meaning of this?' he said. His accent was peculiar, like an American's. Words were skating off his teeth and his eyes weren't focusing on me. 'Back to bed this instant!'

The door handle of our bedroom bounced a bit later. 'Hi!' my father said, rolling backwards then forwards

again. Pie didn't move in her bed. He had his wireless in one hand, a Jameson's in the other; his wet eyes making him look upset. He bent down to me with his smell of coal-tar soap and gave me lots of little quick kisses on the forehead, interrupted by a hiccup.

3

Belief and beyond

My father disappeared with the best deckchair, the black and cream Bovril flask and a shape like a butterfly on his trousers where he must have sat on something. 'Who wanted egg?' said Mum, sounding tired. She was sitting on a rug on the ground between chairs, her legs stretched out on either side of the picnic basket, like a toy doll in charge, trying to exert some authority over us but knowing that chaos would reign now that my father had gone. We swarmed around her, pulling at the things we had packed an hour earlier, bickering with each other about who got what first. Out came the pink ham, two packets of EasiCheese Singles, some sliced tomatoes in tinfoil.

Picnics were always unsettling. I'd start out in good humour but some great injustice, like not being allowed a third packet of Tayto or the irritation of Mum breathing over my food, Pie pushing against me, the insects snooping around, would inevitably darken my mood.

Mum passed Pie the MiWadi to mind – there was hardly any left since I'd knocked it over, flowing under all of our seats, presenting my father with the perfect excuse to escape. Pie wedged it between her nettle-rash knees and

turned the cap extra tight. Then she opened a packet of Tayto, sprinkled handfuls over her Spam, Bovril and salad-cream sandwich, and scrunched everything together.

I hated mixed-up things; I was happy with banana and butter, but I had to eat it swiftly so there would still be some sweets left – Ollie was already rooting for his Wagon Wheel while Mum tried lazily to refine his home-scissored hair. He ate some custard so fast once that it came straight back out in two lines from his nose.

We were permanently hungry but were never taken to McDonalds like everyone else and had to survive on homemade food. At an early age I developed a taste for rubber – hot-water bottles, elastic bands, tennis shoes – but what I liked best of all was Aunt Maureen's leather car seats. I liked to lick and chew the headrests. I took a large bite from one once. In the same way as there's never enough biscuit on a cheesecake, there was too little leather, too much foamy stuff underneath. Frog was the only pernickety eater in the family, refusing all but Denny sausage rolls which he only liked the pastry parts of. These he ate at a little table on his own with his back to the rest of us, to prevent him from getting indigestion.

We were a plastic cup short because someone had trapped a wasp; it was under a seat in the upside-down snare, banging around with its shadow, making tiny 'tisk' sounds. Mum swallowed her oxtail soup from the flask-top, shook it out, splashing her shoes, and handed it to me to use. Little oxtails swam around in the orange as I poured and it looked the wrong colour to begin with in the brown flask-top, it tasted too weak, too warm.

I pulled a hair from the banana mix in my mouth; my tongue found it first, twisted up in the bread. I fiddle-fingered it out, gagging the longer it grew and cleaning it unintentionally between my lips as it came, sludgy bits of banana stuck to silver-grey.

'Oh for Pete's sake! It's only a hair.'

I swivelled into a sulk. The woman behind me was spindly, with a scarf tied under her chin. She looked organized and cross, like a teacher. There was a boy in a blazer beside her and between them on a special stool was a proper plastic lunch box. The sandwiches in the lunch box weren't in the wrapper from the sliced pan; they were shaped like little triangles and covered in cling film. And if they were still hungry they had a Babybel cheese and a mini Swiss Roll each.

I wondered what we looked like to them? I wished Mum would bend at the knee when she needed to get things from the picnic basket instead of keeping her legs straight and her bum in the air. She was talking too loud on purpose, just in case the people around us might be interested in what she had to say. But they weren't listening to her.

We were up near the front with all the dying people and presidents and priests and TV cameras and VIPs, because my father was important and maybe also because of me, because I couldn't see properly. Megaphones crackled as more and more people came, pushing against me to get organized with their transistor radios and squeaking wheelchairs, exposing tucked thermal vests in huge nylon pants as they bent, airing musty old indoor smells when they finally sat down

sighing. Everyone was thanking the Lord about this and that and weren't we lucky with the weather, and asking us if we'd mind awfully moving up a little bit. 'Oh! not at all, of course yes, sorry yes!' Mum shunting me along with her hips, saying something about Dunkirk and not looking at where I might be going.

I scanned the crowd for my father; I couldn't see anything clearly. I couldn't see the air-raid shelter near Palmerstown Park when he lifted me up against a wall and told me to look over the top. I pretended I could, because I knew my father thought this was just the sort of thing small children would find interesting. I was too heavy in his arms; as he held me round the waist they trembled. I wanted to ask what an air-raid shelter looked like in the first place. But he put me down again before I could, because it was getting dark and Pie and the Frog still needed a turn.

A million heads swarmed behind me like an endless cobblestone road. Close up in colour and detail and shape, then diffusing and blurring into one great grey borderless thing, swelling outwards and down, as far as the deer grazing beyond tiny Christmas trees. I wanted to shout, to hear my voice travel and fall, to run over everyone's heads. It was called devotion when men crumpled over their umbrellas muttering things, when nuns knelt with their tangled rosary beads. A man from St Johns Ambulance fed water to a woman who'd been sick in her handbag. White flowers fluttered in the arms of an Irish dancing girl, ankle-socked, knees together, a last sticky-licked hanky wipe to her cheek. Blurred

bodies behind railings looked ahead. I bet they were wondering what was so special or so wrong about me, that I should be five rows from the front. But everyone wore a badge, they had theirs too, which told you who you were and where you were meant to be.

Then there was clapping, like rain on the playroom roof, and everyone got up in a rush. Mum's cardigan slid off the back of her chair, milky tea spilt, flies flew. When he first came on stage with all those sinister bishops and cardinals, I waved my yellow flag. We all did, even the adults, holding theirs between their thumbs and fingers like daisies, which looked a bit silly I thought. 'Let us pray,' and down we all sat again. I tilted forward until the back legs of my deckchair lifted off the ground, fitting my face into the circle-shaped space between a woman wearing a brown hat like a Hazelnut Swirl, and the man beside her who'd forgotten his socks, his heels like turnips wedged into shoes.

Being around crowds of old people scared me. I was worried that one of them would collapse and be carried off the way Granny had been or that I'd have to perform that manoeuvre I'd heard about if they choked on their teeth. Someone might wet themselves like the lady I'd seen outside Donnybrook church, crouched in a side-door, handbag twisted around her fingers, tights pulled down, flowery dress hitched up, Mum telling me not to stare as a stream of wee travelled towards me.

Mum asked if I could see properly but all I could make out was a cream thing with missing feet fluttering far away over hats and flying grey hairs, dangling about

in the wind like the plastic statue of Jesus Mr McCabe had tied to the rear-view mirror of his car. I couldn't hear what he was saying and the wind was blowing his voice over our heads, down the valley all the way over to Car Park E, where there was no one listening.

Why couldn't God just appear if He was there that day? What was the big secret? And what was in that secret box on the altar – the one that was always locked? What happened in those rooms backstage and behind the curtains of confessional boxes, which people came out from crying? Why were there great purple covers over everything? Why did I have a headless statue of the Virgin Mary above my bed? Why had no one thrown her in the bin if she was broken? Or was that a mortal sin?



The Hazelnut Swirl kept moving and getting in my way and the front bar of the deckchair was digging into my legs. I swung back, too far in the other direction, but recovered well. Mum turned to me with her eyebrows arched like two caterpillars about to have a fight, she looked sad and looked forward again and rejoined her hands. I hated the way religion did that to people's faces; it meant there was no chance of getting their attention.

Everything was moving too slowly. I made a rabbit hop along the cement with the shadow of two fingers, and up the tartan rug of the woman in the wheelchair beside me, who smelt of vegetable soup. Trying not to think about how horrible it would feel to bite her rug between my teeth made me think about it again and again. With my finger and thumb I made a gun, slipping it into its holster when a guard passed by, in case he saw its shadow and thought I was getting ready to assassinate the Pope when he waved at us from his mobile. The choir sang 'Be Not Afraid' and I swam away and back into my head. Back to what had happened that morning, from the very beginning again.

I'd ridden my Chopper down to the Cash Stores to get some ham for our picnic, zigzagging in and out of the white stripes in the centre of the road, leaping over ramps, Evel Knievel, and doing little wheelies on the safe smooth bits. Then back in the saddle and no hands for longer than I'd done before, long enough to do a quick sign of the cross at the church. A low, sharp turn round the corner before the bridge, knee nearly grazing ground, motorbike-racer style, and fast as anything for

the final straight, off the saddle, head over handlebars, speeding through hills of swept up leaves.

I had to keep stopping on my way back; the plastic bag I'd looped round the handlebars was swinging too much with the sweaty ham and getting caught in the spokes. But I didn't look annoyed; I was still thinking about Mr Brown and the joke we'd had when I'd asked him how much the penny chews were.

'Hello there!'

I scrunched up my eyes to see Billie coming towards me. She was wearing a leather jacket and smiling. I dismounted in that way you can if you're an experienced rider, one leg over the top, quick as anything, and still cycling for a bit, balanced on one pedal. It sometimes went wrong, which hurt, but that morning it worked out perfectly.

I told her we were off to visit the Pope and she said how exciting that would be for me. I mentioned just in passing where we would be sitting, and asked her what row she was in. She said she wasn't going, that she was looking forward to spending the day walking around an empty city. Then she smiled at me again, and I could see some white chewing gum between her teeth.

I was pleased with our conversation because I didn't stutter once. Not even when I started that sentence with 'Y', when I said, 'You know, because of Dad being a VIP.' And I was extra pleased that she saw me in the outfit I had on: my green army sweater with patches on the elbows and shoulders, my white aeroplane T-shirt underneath – you couldn't see it, but it was the one with

the plastic blue plane in the middle that stuck out like it was real. I had my new jeans on with the shopping list in the back pocket which I knew made me look good in an American sort of way, and blue Converse runners; the lace was broken on the right one so I'd had to tie it very far down to keep it on. I liked that they made me look as if I'd been through a lot.

The only thing wrong was the colour of my Chopper. It was red; silver was what I'd asked for. Mum said they weren't making the silver ones any more but there was a picture of one on the back of the brand new box of Rice Krispies, which you could enter a competition to win if you collected fifty tokens and explained why you love Rice Krispies in less than ten words.

My hair was doing just the right thing. I'd woken with my fringe sticking up at the front, which made me look sweaty and tough, and I pictured my neck being downy and brown like a boy's. As we stood there chatting about this and that, I could feel the sun warming and browning it even more, making the little lines of hair on my neck whiter so there'd be a lovely difference between the two. I was looking at Billie through the sun so I knew my eyes would be light and blue, and the middle of my right one would have shrunk and stopped looking all swollen and strange like David Bowie's. When our conversation was over I took off as fast as I could. As soon as I'd steadied myself I sat back and cycled with one hand, but I'm not sure if she saw that bit.

Billie was my Art Appreciation teacher at school. She was different from the others; she sat on the table in

class with her boots on a turned-around chair, and her pink Sasperillas were so tight that you could make out the shape of her downstairs. When she told us about Giotto drawing a perfect freehand circle for a pope, she opened her eyes wide, perfect-circle wide, and squinted them into little slits when she talked about Caravaggio having murdered a man. I loved it when she picked on me and made me stay late after class, even if it was because I'd made everyone laugh when my legs got stuck in the back of that chair by mistake. I saw it as an excuse to spend more time with me because she thought I was talented and extra special. She drew dark paint around her eyes, her hair was spiked like she'd just had a fright, and when she spoke her mouth smelt of cold outdoor smoke and Wrigley's Spearmint gum.

Sometimes I'd say something when I wasn't even trying to be funny and she'd laugh and her eyes would go all wet and warm. But at other times I'd say something that I was pretty certain was funny to Patsy, in an especially loud voice, and she mightn't even smile or else she wouldn't be listening; she'd be looking at the horse that Samantha Jennings had drawn, saying how she'd got the legs just right. She'd bend down beside Samantha to have a closer look and put her arm around the back of her chair, and tell her, very close up, everything that was good about her work. And then she'd walk behind me without stopping to look at the clouds that I'd painted, wet watery blues and soft drifting whites.

I made Patsy agree that she often gave me extra attention. She had a small crush on her too but knew she was

more my type being a tomboy. When Patsy moved to our school I had someone to be in charge of for the first time. This gave me power; I was the bully of one. I wore my overall with the buttons open, took up spitting for a day, ran down corridors past the simple girl who was scared of everything, with her tight curls, wild eyes and a string of mucus dangling from her nose. The only time she got anyone's attention was when she pulled down her pants and showed her hefty bum to Mr Tetley, the school builder. I imagined her fingers twitching in her pockets, tugging at threads, sweating, flicking. Unlike the simple girl, I had a friend, and I knew more than her. If Patsy stepped out of line I could crush her with my taunt: 'Patsy's half-American' – it always made her cry. Secretly I wanted to be half-American more than anything.

On a day when it was too nice to be inside, Billie decided we should have class in the garden. I climbed up the oak tree in front of the kindergarten school, as high as I could without being scared, and tried to draw my picture from there. Billie came over to see how I was getting along and had to climb up a bit of the tree herself just to look at my sketch. She said there was a great sense of height about it. Then she said how important it was to look at things differently. I hadn't painted the kindergarten school at all, but my speciality, clouds and sky. I spoiled it all by boasting and exaggerating to Patsy about what Billie had said, not noticing that she was standing under the tree listening. I didn't want to kiss Billie, I didn't know how. But the day became happy

when she was close by, when she sat down beside me to say something particular.

I thought I saw Billie twice in the queue for communion – the way she walked, a jacket like hers. Why wasn't she there? I thought everyone in Ireland had to be; I thought it was compulsory. God was bound to notice her missing. Was she not worried about what He might do to punish her? Maybe I'd go to Hell too for having a crush on someone who didn't believe in Him, though wouldn't everyone up at the front be guaranteed a place in Heaven? The people behind us must have been nervous – stuck all the way back in limbo land. Did it matter if I was there but not concentrating? Could He see into my head?

I pictured Billie alone in an empty city. I wondered what it would be like to be the only two people in the world. To drive a Rolls-Royce down Grafton Street, taking anything we wanted – a silver Chopper, black Sasperillas from the Jean Machine, to help ourselves to Skittles and Coke from the mini-bar in a five star hotel. I could show Billie some things she mightn't know about, like the air-raid shelter near Palmerstown Park, and the secret entrance to the Iveagh Gardens. It would be my own small universe, one that I could rule over and arrange, giant-like and in charge, the way I felt when I peered into rock pools in Connemara: forest, mountains, sea, a Clark sandal at each end, a snuffling face of concentration in between. The funny thing was that even if she didn't know it, even if she didn't want to be, Billie was in the Phoenix Park with me and the Pope.

And there had been something else in the air that day that no one had noticed. A bright and shiny tinsel-blue thing, out of place and moving on a different level to the crowd: a tiny flash of lightning above all our greys and browns. It circled me and hovered for a moment between my eyes. I blinked and it darted away and upwards, zigzagging about in mid-air. With my head bent back I traced its erratic journey, diving, twirling, flashing through the sky. Its wings were purple at the edges, like the foil from a Dairy Milk, with light, chocolate-flake-coloured fibres at their centre. Its spiralled body was stiff and shot straight out behind; a miniature hang-glider. I lunged backwards to follow it, pulling at my lips to keep a smile from developing, lest anyone notice that I was, for that moment, happy. My father, having returned to his family now that the chaos of feeding us had finished, turned round and standing up, irritated, he traced its movement too, his Bible opened beneath it like a crazed worshipper. He waited, waited, then 'Got you!' he said, snapping the Bible closed. He opened it again instantly to be satisfied the dragonfly was dead.

I wore my purple sweatshirt under my overall the next Monday at school. I was excited about seeing Billie again, to become even better friends than we were at the weekend. But she wasn't in so we had to have double PE instead. I wanted the day to be over to see if she'd be back the next day. What if she didn't come back at all? And if she really liked me that much why would she miss

an opportunity to see me? This was an ominous sign. She was my motivation for going to school even when I was sick. Mrs Buckley made me borrow Sarah O'Brien's spare gym skirt, which was too short and tight for me, because I'd left my tracksuit bottoms at home. She must have forgotten that I didn't wear skirts.

The Big Room echoed like a swimming pool with whistles and screams and the stretched squeak of runners chasing basketballs. My team were doing forward rolls, which I wasn't a bit happy about, as there was a hole in my knickers in a bad place.

When it was my turn, I started in the right position – head up, legs together, arms straight – but at the middle bit, on my back and upside down, I made myself veer off to the side, so no one would notice the hole. Mrs Buckley blew her whistle. 'Do it again!' Again and again I rolled and each time I turned, I could feel the hole grow. The salty feet smell of the rubber and the dizziness of my revolving head were making me sick. And I knew as soon as I stood up that I'd have to roll over again, 'because you're still not doing it right!' The more I rolled the more everyone watched: Mrs Buckley then Jenny Brady then Eimear Kinsella and Joanna Blake. I hated Joanna Blake.

I thumped my Chopper down the steps of the side passageway when I got back from school that afternoon. It was four o'clock, the time of day I hated most. Not proper like morning, cold and new and bright, up early with lots of things to do. Or still and safely locked up and blown out like orange candlelight night. Just flat

grey dull old four. A languid cat stretches along a stone wall at a nothing time of day.

I hoped the new fridge had arrived. The one we were getting was the latest model by Bosch with a separate compartment at the front from which you could pour cold water. I imagined what it would feel like to use – the rattle of bottles as I opened it, the heavy clunk as it closed, and the sort of things it would contain. It would be like the one in *The Brady Bunch*, full of Coke and cheese singles and pizzas and hot dogs unpacked from brown paper bags.

I'd forgotten that the boy whose Mum died was staying with us. I don't know why he was there but we were told to be nice to him. She'd gone to get her hair done in Dun Laoghaire and was crossing the road with it freshly styled and set when a bin lorry reversed over her by mistake. I pictured her flat except for her big blow-dried hair, like that squished squirrel I'd seen on our road – its fuzzy tail full of life and sticking up in the air.

He rubbed his nose with his fingers when he saw me – he was leaning against the tool shed in the side passageway, one leg folded behind him. His white shirt was half out of his school trousers, which I thought looked good. And I liked his name, Nat. He was holding something behind his back. When a twist of smoke rose, I felt scared of him because what he was doing was so secret and so wrong. His eyes looked sore from crying or maybe from the smoke and he smelt of oranges and trapped feet.

That evening Nat kissed Pie. I was in bed reading *The Dandy* when it happened; Pie was beside me, indulging in her two main hobbies – God and the Royal family. She was sticking newspaper cuttings of Lady Diana and Prince Charles into her blue photo album illustrated with the Queen's Guards, while singing 'Seek Ye First'.

Nat came in without knocking. I stuck out my tongue, but he didn't say anything back. He went over to Pie and pulled her up by the hair, which sounds strange and sore but it wasn't like that because as he pulled, Pie moved up with her hair. Then he put his mouth on her mouth for at least five seconds and when he stopped, but was still close to her mouth and smiling, he said, 'Will you think about it?' I kicked off my blankets and ran upstairs to the bathroom cabinet. How could Pie have let him do that? I had a good mind to tell Nat that he was wasting his time; Pie was already in love with someone else. I knew for a fact that she had written to *Jim'll Fix It* to fix it for her to go on a date with Prince Andrew.

When I got back in a hurry, her nose looked all swollen and sore like Father Perry's but she wouldn't take the capful of Listerine I proffered. She told me to stop being so mean to Nat, that she didn't mind him kissing her. Then she told me to leave her alone.

'Pie face has her period! Pie face has her period!' I wasn't sure what having a period was but I chanted it all the same, like I always did when we were having a fight. I slammed the bedroom door and went back up to the bathroom; I needed the loo.

I took a copy of the *Phoenix* from the pile of newspapers and magazines on the floor, tore a strip from it and wiped myself. My father had confiscated the toilet roll because he said we were using too much. Under the new house rules it would be utilized only by guests and on special occasions. As the paper flushed away, Charles Haughey's head was smeared in blood. There was some Sudocrem on the side of the bath, which my sister had been using for her spots. I stretched over, pyjamas around knees, and put lots of it down there. It didn't stop the blood, so I folded up the rest of the magazine and lodged it in my knickers. It felt hard and scratchy against my skin, and when I moved it kept slipping out of place.

I wore my new sleeveless blue puffa jacket for our school retreat to Glendalough two days later. My mother said she thought it was 'snazzy and with it' when she bought it from Winstons for me. No one else on the bus was wearing a sleeveless jacket and no one had asked me where I'd bought mine. No one had said anything about it at all. And I hadn't noticed anyone being especially nice to me, which was a definite sign that I should never have nagged Mum into buying it for me. People were friendly to me the day I wore my purple sweatshirt; that's why I wore it for a whole week. I took my puffa jacket off and sat on it. Just thinking about Mum was making me homesick.

The bleeding still hadn't stopped. The ointment hadn't healed the cut and the newspapers were digging into me, but the trick was to stay absolutely still. Nothing would happen so long as I stayed still.

Then the bus driver said what about a song. And because people knew about my lovely voice, everyone begged us to do 'Ebony and Ivory'. I took the high bits for this particular number, which surprised people because of me being like a boy and chubby; Patsy did the deep, low parts, even though she was bony with a nose like a shark's fin.

But as I reached the chorus, the blood began to seep. It soaked through the newspaper, through my trousers, and onto my puffa jacket. I prayed that it hadn't reached the seat. Then I couldn't stop it, even after our song was over, even when I was still, hot swollen drips issued out of me. I prayed to God that no one else could smell its burnt heat.

A woman in a white coat called Nurse Kelly opened all the windows in our classroom several weeks later, when she came in to give us an extra-curricular class on menstruation and personal hygiene. She seemed to take relish in mortifying us as she talked about private parts. Standing too close to me one afternoon – all hushed and bosomy and intimate – she told me that I was becoming a young woman.

Nurse Kelly seemed to think it was a positive development, a wonderful, womanly bosomy thing. But the last thing I wanted was to become a woman; I wasn't even happy about being a girl. My plan was to stay a boy, to join the army – not to get killed or do any fighting or anything risky like that – but to run through obstacle courses, mud spattering my face, to crawl beneath nets and swing on tyres and climb over huge

wooden frames, to sing 'When The Saints Go Marching In'. To tumble down sand dunes wearing just my jeans, with the band of my white underpants peeping out against the sallow skin of my back. To catch fish for my lunch like Huckleberry Finn in rolled-up dungarees and bare feet treading dusty ground, dangling in still green ponds under tree houses and tadpoles and torches and tents and cuts on my knees and a long scar through the brow of my good eye.

Mum kept leaving salmon-pink packages on my bed. They made me cross – I hated them. I hid them in Pie's underwear drawer, and stuffed my bloody knickers down the back of the dressing table. Mrs McCabe pulled them back out every Tuesday when she cleaned and threw them in the bin. She also by accident threw out my Memory Box with the decanter label I'd made into a dog tag and my *Late Late Show* ticket, which Gay Byrne had personally signed.

While not tidying my room on a drizzly Saturday afternoon I found in my bedroom cupboard, amongst the usual leftovers from sales of work (pin cushions, lavender soaps, woven hanging baskets) a copy of *The Thorn Birds*. I skipped vast sections of landscape description and dialogue to the bits of the book about periods and sex and men which I read and re-read, shoving it down the side of my bed whenever I heard footfalls on the stairs.

Mrs McCabe told Mum about my underwear, but it didn't change anything between us; we still couldn't mention the 'P' word. I'd seen an unwrapped sanitary

towel twice in real life, once on each of Tracy Kenny's knees when she'd used them as shin pads for hockey; once on Joanna Blake's little brother's face: his Mum had looped the ends round his ears, and put the padded bit under his cut chin, but I couldn't even take one out of its packaging and I dreaded that panty pad advert with the ice skater on TV. I talked over it immediately whenever it came on; Mum would untuck her slippered feet from where she'd been sitting on them and say she had better just check my father's liver under the grill.