Hanna

Ardeevin, Co. Clare
1980

LATER, AFTER HANNA made some cheese on toast, her mother came into the kitchen and filled a hot water bottle from the big kettle on the range.

'Go on up to your uncle's for me, will you?' she said. 'Get me some Solpadeine.'

'You think?'

'My head's a fog,' she said. 'And ask your uncle for amoxicillin, will I spell that for you? I have a chest coming on.'

'All right,' said Hanna.

'Try anyway,' she said, coaxingly, taking the hot water bottle to her chest. 'You will.'

The Madigans lived in a house that had a little river in the garden and its own name on the gate: *ARDEEVIN*. But it was not far to walk, up over the humpy bridge, past the garage and into town.

Hanna passed the two petrol pumps standing sentry on the forecourt, with the big doors open and Pat Doran in there somewhere, reading the Almanac, or lying in the pit below a car. There was an oil drum by the swinging Castrol sign with the bare fork of a tree sticking out of it, and Pat Doran had dressed it in a pair of old trousers

with two shoes stuck on the ends of the branches, so it looked like a man's legs waving around in a panic after him falling into the barrel. It was very lifelike. Their mother said it was too near to the bridge, it would cause an accident, but Hanna loved it. And she liked Pat Doran, who they were told to avoid. He took them for rides in fast cars, up over the bridge, bang, down on the other side.

After Doran's was a terraced row of little houses, and each of the windows had its own decoration and its own version of curtains or blinds: a sailboat made of polished horn, a cream tureen with plastic flowers in it, a pink felted plastic cat. Hanna liked each of them, as she passed, and she liked the way one followed the other in an order that was always the same. At the corner of the Main Street was the doctor's, and the little hallway had a picture done out of nails and metallic string. The shape twisted over itself and twisted back again and Hanna loved the way it seemed to be moving but stayed still, it looked very scientific. After that were the shops: the draper's, with a big window lined in yellow cellophane, the butcher's, his trays of meat fenced around by bloodstained plastic grass, and after the butcher's, her uncle's shop – and her grandfather's shop before him – Considine's Medical Hall.

KODACHROME COLOUR FILM was written on a plastic strip stuck along the top of the window with Kodak FILM in bold letters in the middle of it and KODACHROME COLOUR FILM repeated on the far side. The window display was cream pegboard, with little shelves holding cardboard boxes faded by the sun. 'Just right for the constipated child,' said a sign, in groovy red letters, 'SENOKOT the natural choice for constipation.'

Hanna pushed the door open, and the bell rang. She

looked up at it: the coil of metal was filthy with dust while, many times an hour, the bell shook itself clean.

'Come in,' said her uncle Bart. 'Come in or go out.'

And Hanna went inside. Bart was on his own out front, while a woman in a white coat moved around the dispensary, where Hanna was never allowed to go. Hanna's sister, Constance, used to work the counter, but she had a job up in Dublin now, so they were a girl short and there was a testing irritation to the look her uncle gave Hanna.

'What does she want?' he said.

'Em. I can't remember,' said Hanna. 'Her chest. And Solpadeine.'

Bart winked. He had one of those winks that happen free of the surrounding face. Hard to prove it ever happened.

'Have a cachou.'

'Don't mind if I do-hoo,' said Hanna. She fingered a little tin of Parma Violets from in front of the cash register and sat in the prescriptions chair.

'Solpadeine,' he said.

Her uncle Bart was good-looking like her mother, they had the long Considine bones. Bart was a bachelor and a heartbreaker for all the years of Hanna's girlhood, but now he had a wife who never put her foot in the door of the shop. He was proud of it, Constance said. There he was, paying shop-girls and assistants, and his wife banned from the premises in case she laughed at the parish priest's impacted stools. Bart had a perfectly useless wife. She had no children and beautiful shoes in a range of colours, and each pair had its own matching bag. The way Bart looked at her, Hanna thought he might hate her, but her sister Constance said she was on the pill, because they had access to the pill. She said they were doing it twice a night.

'How are they all?' Bart was opening a pack of Solpadeine and taking the contents out.

'Good,' she said.

He tapped around the counter top looking for something and said, 'Have you the scissors, Mary?'

There was a new stand in the middle of the shop of perfumes, shampoos and conditioners. There were other things on the lower shelves and Hanna realised she had been looking at them when her uncle came out of the back room with the scissors. But he did not pretend to notice: he did not even wink.

He cut the card of tablets in half.

'Give her this,' he said, handing over a set of four tablets. 'Tell her to take a rain check on the chest.'

That was a joke, of some sort.

'I will so.'

Hanna knew she was supposed to go then, but she was distracted by the new shelves. There were bottles of 4711 and Imperial Leather bath sets in cream and dark red cardboard boxes. There were a couple of bottles of Tweed and a cluster of other perfumes that were new to her. 'Tramp', said one bottle, with a bold slash for the crossbar of the T. On the middle shelf were shampoos that weren't about dandruff, they were about sunshine and tossing your head from side to side – Silvikrin, Sunsilk, Clairol Herbal Essences. On the bottom shelf were puffy plastic packages and Hanna could not think what they were, she thought they must be cotton wool. She picked up Cachet by Prince Matchabelli, in a twisted oblong bottle, and inhaled where the cap met the cold glass.

She could feel her uncle's eyes resting on her, and in them something like pity. Or joy.

'Bart,' she said. 'Do you think Mammy's all right?'

'Oh for God's sake,' Bart said. 'What?'

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Hanna's mother had taken to the bed. She had been there for two weeks, nearly. She had not dressed herself or done her hair since the Sunday before Easter, when Dan told them all that he was going to be a priest.

Dan was in his first year of college up in Galway. They would let him finish his degree, he said, but he would do it from the seminary. So in two years he would be finished in ordinary college and in seven years he would be a priest, and after that he would be off on the missions. It was all decided. He announced all this when he came home for the Easter holidays and their mother went upstairs and did not come down. She said she had a pain in her elbow. Dan said he had little enough to pack and then he would be gone.

'Go up to the shops,' said her father, to Hanna. But he didn't give her any money, and there was nothing she wanted to buy. Besides, she was afraid that something would happen if she left, there would be shouting. Dan would not be there when she got back. His name would never be mentioned again.

But Dan did not leave the house, not even to go for a walk. He hung around the place, sitting in one chair and then moving to another, avoiding the kitchen, accepting the offer of tea or turning it down. Hanna carried the cup to Dan's room, with something to eat tucked in on the saucer; a ham sandwich or a piece of cake. Sometimes he only took a bite of the food and Hanna finished it as she took it back to the kitchen, and the stale edge to the bread made her even more fond of her brother, in his confinement.

Dan was so unhappy. Hanna was only twelve and it was terrible for her to see her brother so pent up – all that belief, and the struggle to make sense of it. When Dan was still at school, he used to make her listen to poems off his English course, and they talked about them afterwards and

about all kinds of other things, too. This is what her mother also said, later. She said, 'I told him things that I told to no one else.' And this statement was very teasing to Hanna, because there was very little of herself that their mother held back. Her children were never what you might call 'spared'.

Hanna blamed the Pope. He came to Ireland just after Dan left for college and it was like he flew in specially, because Galway was where the big Youth Mass was held, out on the racecourse at Ballybrit. Hanna went to the Limerick Mass, which was just like standing in a field with your parents for six hours, but her brother Emmet was let go to Galway too, even though he was only fourteen and you were supposed to be sixteen for the Youth Mass. He left in a minibus from the local church. The priest brought a banjo and when Emmet came back he had learned how to smoke. He did not see Dan in the crowd. He saw two people having sex in a sleeping bag, he said, but that was the night before, when they all camped in a field somewhere – he could not tell his parents what was the place.

'And where was the field?' said their father.

'I don't know,' said Emmet. He did not mention the sex.

'Was it a school?' said their mother.

'I think so,' said Emmet.

'Was it beyond Oranmore?'

They slept in tents, or pretended to sleep, because at four in the morning they all had to pack up and troop through the pitch black to the racecourse. Everyone walked in silence, it was like the end of a war, Emmet said, it was hard to explain – just the sound of feet, the sight of a cigarette glowing at someone's face before it was whipped away. We were walking into history, the priest said, and when the dawn came, there were men with yellow armbands

in their good suits, standing under the trees. That was it, as far as Emmet was concerned. They sang 'By the Rivers of Babylon' and he came back with his voice gone and the dirtiest clothes his mother had ever seen; she had to put them through the wash twice.

'Was it on the road to Athenry?' their father said. 'The field?'

The location of the field outside Galway was one abiding mystery in the Madigan family, another was what had happened to Dan, after he went to college. He came back for Christmas and fought with his granny about taking precautions, and his granny was all in favour of taking precautions, that was the joke of it, her sister Constance said, because 'precautions' were actually condoms. Later, after the pudding was lit, Dan passed Hanna in the hall and he took her to him, saying, 'Save me, Hanna. Save me from these ghastly people.' He folded her in his arms.

On New Year's Day a priest called to the house and Hanna saw him sitting in the front room with both her parents. The priest's hair had the mark of the comb in it, as though it was still wet, and his coat, hanging under the stairs, was very black and soft.

After this, Dan went back to Galway and nothing happened until the Easter break, when he said he wanted to be a priest. He made the big announcement at Sunday dinner, which the Madigans always did with a tablecloth and proper napkins, no matter what. On that Sunday, which was Palm Sunday, they had bacon and cabbage with white sauce and carrots – green, white and orange, like the Irish flag. There was a little glass of parsley sitting on the tablecloth, and the shadow of the water trembled in the sunshine. Their father folded his large hands and said grace, after which there was silence. Apart

from the general sound of chewing, that is, and their father clearing his throat, as he tended to do, every minute or so.

'Hchm-hchmm.'

The parents sat at either end of the table, the children along the sides. Girls facing the window, boys facing the room: Constance-and-Hanna, Emmet-and-Dan.

There was a fire in the grate and the sun also shone, now and then, so they were as warm as winter and warm as summer for five minutes at a time. They were twice as warm.

Dan said, 'I have been speaking again with Father Fawl.'

It was nearly April. A dappled kind of day. The clean light caught the drops on the windowpane in all their multiplicity while, outside, a thousand baby leaves unfurled against branches black with rain.

Inside, their mother had a tissue trapped in the palm of her hand. She lifted it against her forehead.

'Oh, no,' she said, turning away, and her mouth sagged open so you could see the carrots.

'He says I must ask you to think again. That it is hard for a man who does not have his family behind him. It is a big decision I am making, and he says I must ask you – I must plead with you – not to spoil it, with your own feelings and concerns.'

Dan spoke as though they were in private. Or he spoke as though they were in a great hall. But it was a family meal, which was not the same as either of these things. You could see their mother had an impulse to rise from the table but would not allow herself to flee.

'He says I am to ask your forgiveness, for the life you had hoped for me, and the grandchildren you will not have.'

Emmet snorted into his dinner. Dan pressed his hands down on to the tabletop before swiping at his little brother,

fast and hard. Their mother blanked for the blow, like a horse jumping a ditch, but Emmet ducked and, after a long second, she landed on the other side. Then she put her head down, as though to gather speed. A moan came out of her, small and unformed. The sound of it seemed to please as well as surprise her so she tried again. This next moan started soft and went long, and there was a kind of speaking to its last rise and fall.

'Oh God,' she said.

She threw her head back and blinked at the ceiling, once, twice.

'Oh dear God.'

The tears started to run, one on top of the last, down to her hairline; one, two-three, four. She stayed like that for a moment, while the children watched and pretended not to be watching and her husband cleared his throat into the silence, 'Hchm-hchmm.'

Their mother lifted her hands and shook them free of their sleeves. She wiped her wet temples with the heels of her hands and used her delicate, crooked fingers to fix the back of her hair, which she always wore in a chignon. Then she sat up again and looked, very carefully, at nothing. She picked up a fork and stuck it into a piece of bacon and she brought it to her mouth, but the touch of meat to her tongue undid her; the fork swung back down towards her plate and the bacon fell. Her lips made that wailing shape – touching in the middle and open at the sides – what Dan called her 'wide mouth frog' look, then she took a sharp inhale and went: 'Aggh-aahh. Aggh-aahh.'

It seemed to Hanna her mother might stop eating or, if she was that hungry, she might take her plate and go into another room in order to cry, but this did not occur to her mother, clearly, and she sat there, eating and crying at the same time.

Much crying, little eating. There was more work with the tissue, which was now in shreds. It was awful. The pain was awful. Her mother juddering and sputtering, with the carrots falling from her mouth in little lumps and piles.

Constance, who was the eldest, bossed them all quietly about and they carried plates and cups past their mother, as she dripped, one way or the other, into her own food.

'Oh, Mammy,' said Constance, leaning in, with her arm around her, to slip the plate neatly away.

Dan was the eldest boy, so it was his job to cut the apple tart, which he stood to do, dark against the window light, with the silver triangle of the cake slice in his hand.

'You can count me out,' said their father, who had been playing, in a tiny way, with the handle of his teacup. He got up and left the room and Dan said, 'Five, so. How am I going to do five?'

There were six Madigans. Five was a whole new angle, as he moved the cake slice through the ghost of a cross and then swung it eighteen degrees to the side. It was a prising open of the relations between them. It was a different story, altogether. As though there might be any number of Madigans and, out in the wide world, any number of apple tarts.

Their mother's crying turned to funny, staggered inhalations 'phwhh phwwhh phwhh', as she dug into her dessert with a small spoon and the children, too, were comforted by the pastry and by the woody sweetness of the old apples. Still, there was no ice cream on offer that Sunday, and none of them asked for it, though they all knew there was some; it was jammed into the icebox at the top right hand corner of the fridge.

After that, their mother went to bed and Constance had to stay at home instead of getting the bus back to Dublin and she was furious with Dan: she bashed about doing the

dishes while he went up to his room and read his books and their mother lay behind her closed door, and on Monday their father went out to Boolavaun and came back home in the evening, and had no opinions that anyone could discern.

This was not the first time their mother took the horizontal solution, as Dan liked to call it, but it was the longest that Hanna could remember. The bed creaked from time to time. The toilet flushed and the door of her room closed again. They got off school early on Spy Wednesday and she was still ensconced. Hanna and Emmet lurked about the house, that was so large and silent without her. It all looked strange and unconnected: the turn of the bannisters at the top of the stairs, the small study with its light bulb gone, the line of damp on the dining room wallpaper inching up through a grove of bamboo.

Then Constance came up and whacked them, and it became clear – too late – that they had been noisy and wrong-headed when they had meant to be cheerful and full of fun. A cup hit the floor, a lick of cold tea spread towards the library book on the kitchen table, a white, patent leather belt turned out to be plastic when Emmet put a bridle on Hanna and rode her out the front door. After each disaster the children dispersed and acted as though nothing had happened. And nothing did happen. She was asleep up there, she was dead. The silence became more urgent and corpselike, the silence became fully tragic, until the door handle hit the wall and their mother burst out of there. She came flying down the stairs at them, hair undone, the shadows of her breasts moving under the cotton of her nightgown, her mouth open, hand raised.

She might throw another cup, or upset the whole teapot, or fling the broken belt into the flowerbed through the open door.

‘There,’ she said.

‘Happy now?’

‘Two can play at that game,’ she said.

‘What do you think of that?’

She would stare for a moment, as though wondering who these strange children were. After which brief confusion, she would swivel and slam back up to bed. Ten minutes later, or twenty minutes, or half an hour, the door would creak open and her small voice come out of it saying, ‘Constance?’

There was something comical about these displays. Dan pulled a wry face as he went back to his book, Constance might make tea and Emmet would do something very noble and pure – a single flower brought from the garden, a serious kiss. Hanna would not know what to do except maybe go in and be loved.

‘My baby. How’s my little girl?’

Much later, when all this had been forgotten, with the TV on and cheese on toast made for tea, their father came back from the land at Boolavaun. Up the stairs he went, one stair at a time then, after knocking twice, into the room.

‘So?’ he might say, before the door closed on their talk.

After a long time, he came back down to the kitchen to ask for tea. He dozed in silence for an hour or so and woke with a start for the nine o’clock news. Then he switched off the telly and said, ‘Which one of you broke your mother’s belt? Tell me now,’ and Emmet said, ‘It was my fault, Daddy.’

He stood forward with his head down and his hands by his sides. Emmet would drive you mad for being good.

Their father pulled the ruler from under the TV set, and Emmet lifted his hand, and their father held the fingertips until the last millisecond, as he dealt the blow. Then he turned and sighed as he slid the ruler back home.

'Up to bed,' he said.

Emmet walked out with his cheeks flaring, and Hanna got her goodnight beardie, which was a scrape of the stubble from her father's cheek, as he turned, for a joke, from her kiss. Her father smelt of the day's work: fresh air, diesel, hay, with the memory of cattle in there somewhere, and beyond that again, the memory of milk. He took his dinner out in Boolavaun, where his own mother still lived.

'Your granny says goodnight,' he said, which was another kind of joke with him. And he tilted his head.

'Will you come out with me, tomorrow? You will, so.'

The next day, which was Holy Thursday, he brought Hanna out in the orange Cortina, with the door that gave a great crack when you opened it. A few miles out, he started to hum, and you could feel the sky getting whiter as they travelled towards the sea.

Hanna loved the little house at Boolavaun: four rooms, a porch full of geraniums, a mountain out the back and, out the front, a sky full of weather. If you crossed the long meadow, you came to a boreen which brought you up over a small rise to a view of the Aran Islands out in Galway Bay, and the Cliffs of Moher, which were also famous, far away to the south. This road turned into the green road that went across the Burren, high above the beach at Fanore, and this was the most beautiful road in the world, bar none, her granny said – *famed in song and story* – the rocks gathering briefly into walls before lapsing back into field, the little stony pastures whose flowers were sweet and rare.

And if you lifted your eyes from the difficulties of the path, it was always different again, the islands sleeping out in the bay, the clouds running their shadows across the water, the Atlantic surging up the distant cliffs in a tranced, silent plume of spray.

Far below were the limestone flats they called the Flaggy Shore; grey rocks under a grey sky, and there were days when the sea was a glittering grey and your eyes could not tell if it was dusk or dawn, your eyes were always adjusting. It was like the rocks took the light and hid it away. And that was the thing about Boolavaun, it was a place that made itself hard to see.

And Hanna loved her Granny Madigan, a woman who looked like she had a lot to say, and wasn't saying any of it.

But it was a long day out there when the rain came in: her granny always moving from place to place, clearing things, wiping them, and a lot of it useless pother; feeding cats that would not come to her call, or losing something she had just let out of her hand that very minute. There was nothing much to talk about.

'How's school?'

'Good.'

And not much Hanna was allowed to touch. A cabinet in the good room held a selection of china. Other surfaces were set with geraniums in various stages of blooming and decline: there was a whole shelf of amputees on a back sill, their truncated stems bulbous to the tips. The walls were bare, except for a picture of the Killarney Lakes in the good room, and a plain black crucifix over her granny's bed. There was no Sacred Heart, or holy water, or little statue of the Virgin. Their Granny Madigan went to Mass with a neighbour, if she went to Mass at all, and she cycled in all weathers five miles to the nearest shop. If she got sick – and she was never sick – she was in trouble, because she never set foot inside Considine's Medical Hall.

Never had and never would.

The reasons for this were of some interest to Hanna, because, as soon as her father was out with the cattle, her

granny took her aside – as though there were crowds to observe them – and pressed a pound note into her hand.

'Go in to your uncle's for me,' she said. 'And ask for some of that last cream.'

The cream was for something old-lady and horrible.

'What'll I say?' said Hanna.

'Oh no need, no need,' said her granny. 'He'll know.'

Constance used to be in charge of this, clearly, and now it was Hanna's turn.

'OK,' said Hanna.

The pound note her granny pressed into her hand was folded in half and rolled up again. Hanna did not know where to put it so she stuck it down her sock for safe keeping, sliding it down along the ankle bone. She looked out one window at the hard sea light, and out the other at the road towards town.

They did not get along, the Considines and the Madigans.

When Hanna's father came in the door for his cup of tea, he filled the doorframe so he had to stoop, and Hanna wished her granny could ask her own son for the cream, whatever it was, though she sensed it had something to do with the bright blood she saw in her granny's commode, which was a chair with a hole cut into it, and the potty slotted in beneath.

There were four rooms in the house at Boolavaun. Hanna went into each of them and listened to the different sounds of the rain. She stood in the back bedroom her father used to share with his two younger brothers, who were in America now. She looked at the three beds where they once slept.

Out in the kitchen, her father sat over his tea, and her granny read the newspaper that he brought to her from town, each day. Bertie, the house cat, was straining against her granny's old feet, and the radio wandered off-station.

On the range, a big pot of water was coming, with epic slowness, to the boil.

After the rain, they went out to look for eggs. Her granny carried a white enamel bowl with a thin blue rim, that was chipped, here and there, to black. She walked in a quick crouch beyond the hen-house to the hedge that divided the yard from the haggart. She scrabbled along the bushes, peering down between the branches.

'Oho,' she said. 'I have you now.'

Hanna crawled in by her granny's bunioned feet to retrieve the egg that was laid under the hedge. The egg was brown and streaked with hen-do. Granny held it up to admire before putting it in the empty dish where it rolled about with a hollow, dangerous sound.

'Get down there for me,' she said to Hanna, 'and check the holes in the wall.'

Hanna got right down. The walls, which were everywhere on the land, were forbidden to her and to Emmet for fear they'd knock the stones on top of themselves. The walls were older than the house, her granny said; thousands of years old, they were the oldest walls in Ireland. Up close, the stones were dappled with white and scattered with coins of yellow lichen, like money in the sunlight. And there was a white egg, not even dirty, tucked into a crevice where the ragwort grew.

'Aha,' said her granny.

Hanna placed the egg in the bowl and her granny put her fingers in there to stop the two eggs banging off each other. Hanna dipped into the wooden hen-house to collect the rest of them, in the rancid smell of old straw and feathers, while her granny stood out in the doorway and lowered the bowl for each new egg she found. As they turned back to the house, the old woman reached down and lifted one of the scratching birds – so easily – she didn't

even set the eggs aside. If Hanna ever tried to catch a hen, they jinked away so fast she was afraid she might give them a heart attack, but her granny just picked one up, and there it was, tucked under the crook of her arm, its red-brown feathers shining in the sun. A young cock, by the stubby black in his tail that would be, when he was grown, a proud array, shimmering with green.

As they walked across the back yard, Hanna's father came out of the car house, which was an open-sided outhouse between the cowshed and the little alcove for turf. Her granny stood on tiptoe to shrug the bird over to him and it swung down from her father's hand as he turned away. He was holding the bird by the feet and in his other hand was a hatchet, held close to the blade. He got the heft of this as he went to a broken bench Hanna had never noticed, which lived under the shelter of the car house roof. He slung the bird's head on to the wood, so the beak strained forwards, and he chopped it off.

It was done as easy as her granny picking the bird up off the ground, it was done all in one go. He held the slaughtered thing up and away from him as the blood pumped and dribbled on to the cobblestones.

'Oh.' Her granny gave a little cry, as though some goodness had been lost, and the cats were suddenly there, lifting up on to their hind feet, under the bird's open neck.

'Go 'way,' said her father, shoving one aside with his boot, then he handed the bird, still flapping, over to Hanna to hold.

Hanna was surprised by the warmth of the chicken's feet, that were scaly and bony and should not be warm at all. She could feel her father laughing at her, as he left her to it and went into the house. Hanna held the chicken away from herself with both hands and tried not to drop the

thing as it flapped and twisted over the space where its head used to be. One of the cats already had the fleshy cockscomb in its little cat's teeth, and was running away with the head bobbing under its little white chin. Hanna might have screamed at all that – at the dangling, ragged neck and the cock's outraged eye – but she was too busy keeping the corpse from jerking out of her hands. The wings were agape, the russet feathers all ruffled back and showing their yellow under-down, and the body was shitting out from under the black tail feathers, in squirts that mimicked the squirting blood.

Her father came out of the kitchen with the big pot of water, which he set on the cobbles.

'Still going,' he said.

'Dada!' said Hanna.

'It's just reflexes,' he said. But Hanna knew he was laughing at her, because as soon as it was all over, the thing gave another jerk and her granny gave a sound Hanna had not heard before, a delighted crowing she felt on the skin of her neck. The old woman turned back into the kitchen to leave the eggs on the dresser, and came out fumbling a piece of twine out of her apron pocket as Hanna's father took the chicken from her, finally, and dunked the thing in the vat of steaming water.

Even then, the body twitched, and the wings banged strongly, twice, against the sides of the pot.

In and out the carcass went. And then it was still.

'That's you now,' he said to his mother, as he held a leg out for her to tie with her piece of twine.

After this, Hanna watched her granny string the chicken up by one leg on to a hook in the car house and pull the feathers off the bird with a loud ripping sound. The wet feathers stuck to her fingers in clumps: she had to slap her hands together and wipe them on the apron.

'Come here now and I'll show you how it's done,' she said.

'No,' said Hanna, who was standing in the kitchen doorway.

'Ah now,' said her granny.

'I will not,' said Hanna, who was crying.

'Ah darling.'

And Hanna turned her face away in shame.

Hanna was always crying – that was the thing about Hanna. She was always 'snottering', as Emmet put it. *Oh, your bladder's very close to your eyes,* her mother used to say, or *Your waterworks*, Constance called it, and that was another phrase they all used, *Here come the waterworks*, even though it was her brothers and sister who made her cry. Emmet especially, who won her tears from her, pulled them out of her face, hot and sore, and ran off with them, exulting.

'Hanna's crying!'

But Emmet wasn't even here now. And Hanna was crying over a chicken. Because that's what was under the dirty feathers: goose-bumped, white, calling out for roast potatoes.

A Sunday chicken.

And her granny was hugging her now, from the side. She squeezed Hanna's upper arm.

'Ah now,' she said.

While Hanna's father came across from the cowshed with a can of milk to be taken back home.

'Will you live?' he said.

When she got into the car, her father set the milk can between Hanna's feet to keep it safe. The chicken was on the back seat, wrapped in newspaper and tied with string, its insides empty, and the giblets beside it in a plastic bag. Her father shut the car door and Hanna sat in silence while he walked around to the driver's side.

Hanna was mad about her father's hands, they were huge, and the sight of them on the steering wheel made the car seem like a toy car, and her own feelings like baby feelings she could grow out of some day. The milk sloshing in the can was still warm. She could feel the pound note down there too, snug against her ankle bone.

'I have to go to the chemist's for Granny,' she said.

But her father made no answer to this. Hanna wondered, briefly, if he had heard the words, or if she had not uttered them out loud at all.

Her grandfather, John Considine, shouted at a woman once because she came into the Medical Hall and asked for something unmentionable. Hanna never knew what it was – you could die of the shame – it was said he manhandled the woman out into the street. Though other people said he was a saint – a saint, they said – to the townspeople who knocked him up at all hours for a child with whooping cough or an old lady crazed by the pain of her kidney stones. There were men from Gort to Lahinch who would talk to no one else if their hens were gaping or the sheep had scour. They brought their dogs in to him on a length of baling twine – wild men from the back of beyond – and he went into the dispensary to mix and hum; with camphor and peppermint oil, with tincture of opium and extract of male fern. As far as Hanna could tell, old John Considine was a saint to everyone except the people who did not like him, which was half the town – the other half – the ones who went to Moore's, the chemist's on the other side of the river, instead.

And she did not know why that might be.

Pat Doran, the garageman, said Moore's was much more understanding of matters 'under the bonnet', but Considine's was a superior proposition altogether when it came to the boot. So maybe that was the reason.

Or it might be something else, altogether.

Her mother saying: *They never liked us.*

Her mother pulling her past a couple of old sisters on the street, with her 'keep walking' smile.

Emmet said their Grandfather Madigan was shot during the Civil War and their Grandfather Considine refused to help. The men ran to the Medical Hall looking for ointment and bandages and he just pulled down the blind, he said. But nobody believed Emmet. Their Grandfather Madigan died of diabetes years ago, they had to take off his foot.

Whatever the story, Hanna walked down to the Medical Hall that evening feeling marked, singled out by destiny to be the purveyor of old lady's bottom cream, while Emmet was not to know their granny had a bottom, because Emmet was a boy. Emmet was interested in things and he was interested in facts and none of these facts were small and stupid, they were all about Ireland, and people getting shot.

Hanna walked down Curtin Street, past the window with its horn-sailed boat, past the cream tureen and the pink, felted cat. It was dusk and the lights of the Medical Hall shone yellow into the blue of the street. She went down on one knee in front of the counter, to get the pound note out of her sock.

'It's for my Granny Madigan,' she said to Bart. 'She says you'll know what.'

Bart flapped a quick eyelid down and up again, then started to wrap a small box in brown paper. There was a shriek of Sellotape from the dispenser as he stuck the paper down.

'How is she anyway?' he said.

'Good,' said Hanna.

'Same as ever?'

Some part of Hanna had hoped she would be allowed to keep the pound note but Bart put out his hand and she was obliged to hand the money over, pathetic as it looked, and soft with much handling.

'I suppose,' she said.

Bart straightened the note out, saying, 'It's beautiful out there all right. The little gentians in flower, maybe already. A little bright blue thing, you know it? A little star, blooming among the rocks?'

He put the old note on top of the pile of one pound notes stacked up in his till, and he let the clip slap down.

'Yeah,' said Hanna. Who was fed up of people talking about some tiny flower like it was amazing. And fed up of people talking about the view of the Aran Islands and the Flaggy fucking Shore. She looked at the soiled little note on top of the pile of crisp new notes, and she thought about her granny's handbag, with nothing inside it.

'All right?' said Bart, because Hanna was stuck there for a moment, her skin was alive with the shame of it. Her father came from poor people. Handsome he might be and tall, but the bit of land he had was only rock and he did his business behind a hedge, like the rest of the Madigans before him.

Poor, stupid, dirty and poor.

That was entirely the problem between the Considines and the Madigans. That was the reason they did not get along.

'Mind her change now,' said Bart, sliding a ten pence and a five pence piece out along the curving plastic of the till.

'Keep it, sure,' said Hanna, airily, and she picked up the packet and walked out of the shop.

*

Later, in the church, she sat beside her father who knelt forward with his rosary beads hanging down over the rail in front of him. The beads were white. When he was finished praying, he lifted them high and dangled them into their little leather pouch, and they slid into it like water. The Madigans always went to Mass even though you didn't have to go to Mass on Holy Thursday. Dan used to be an altar boy but this year he was in a white alb tied with a silken rope, with his own trousers underneath. And over that was a dress of sorts, in rough cream cloth. He was kneeling beside Father Banjo, helping him to wash people's feet.

There were five people in chairs in front of the altar and the priest went along the row with a silver basin and splashed the feet of each one; young and old, with their bunions and verrucas and their thick yellow nails. Then he turned to Dan to take the white cloth, and he passed it along the top of each foot.

It was just symbolic. The people all had their feet well washed before they came out of the house, of course they had. And the priest didn't really dry them properly either, so they had trouble getting their socks back on, afterwards. Dan inched along, trying not to get his knees trapped in the folds of his dress, looking holy.

On Good Friday there was nothing on telly all day except classical music. Hanna looked at the calendar that was hanging in the kitchen, with pictures of shiny black children sticking their tummies out under print dresses, and the priests beside them were robed in white. Above their vestments were ordinary, Irish faces, and they looked very happy with themselves and with the black children whose shoulders they touched, with big, careful hands.

Finally, at eight o'clock, *Tomorrow's World* came on RTÉ 2 and they were watching this when they heard Dan

go in to their mother. He stayed in the bedroom for hours, their two voices a passionate murmur. Their father sat pretending to doze by the range, and Constance dragged the listening children away from the foot of the stairs. After a long time Dan came down – sorted. Pleased with himself.

Their brother, a priest: it was, said Emmet, 'Such a fucking joke.' But Hanna felt momentous and sad. There were no flights home from the missions. Dan would leave Ireland for ever. And besides, he might die.

Later, that evening, Emmet sneered at him.

'You don't actually believe,' he said. 'You just think you do.'

And Dan gave his new, priestly smile.

'And what is the difference again?' he said.

And so it became real. Dan would leave them to save the black babies. Their mother had no power to stop him, anymore.

Meanwhile, there was the small matter of Dan's girlfriend, who had yet to be informed. This Hanna realised after the Easter dinner, with the chicken sitting, dead and very much unresurrected, in the centre of the table; half a lemon in its chest or bottom, Hanna could never tell which. Her mother did not come down to eat with them, she was still in bed. She would never get up, she declared. Hanna sat on the landing outside her bedroom and played cards on the floor and when her mother pulled open the door all the cards got mixed up and Hanna cried, then her mother slapped her for crying, and Hanna cried louder and her mother reeled and wailed. On Tuesday, Dan took Hanna back to Galway with him for a few days. He said it was to get her away from all the fuss, but there was fuss of a different kind waiting for them in Eyre Square.

'This is Hanna,' her brother said, pushing her forward.

'Hello,' said the woman, holding out her hand, which was covered in a dark green leather glove. The woman looked very nice. The glove went up her wrist, with a line of covered buttons along the side.

'Go on,' said Dan, and Hanna, who had no manners yet, reached out to shake the woman's hand.

'Fancy a scoop?' she said.

Hanna walked alongside them, trying to make sense of the traffic and the people who passed, but the city was so busy, there was not enough time to take it all in. A couple of students stopped to talk to them. The girl's check jacket was hanging open over a woolly jumper and the man had big glasses and a scraggy beard. They held hands, even while they were standing there, and the girl shifted and took glimpses at Dan from under her messy hair, like she was waiting for him to say something hilarious. And then he did say something, he said:

'What fresh hell is this?' and the girl fell about laughing.

They parted, a little uncomfortably, from this pair and Dan's girlfriend led them in through a pub door. She said, 'You must be starving. Would you like a ham sandwich?' and Hanna did not know what to say.

The pub was very dark, inside.

'She would,' said Dan.

'And what? Do you want a pint?'

'Maybe she'll have a fizzy orange.'

And so it had appeared, in a glass that flared out at the top, and the surface of it a hush of bubbles that rose and were lost to the air.

'So are you in big school?' said Dan's girlfriend, as she threw three packets of crisps on the table, and sat in. 'Have they killed you yet, the nuns?'

'Doing their best,' said Hanna.

'No bother to you.'

She busied herself with gloves and bag. She wore a clasp in her hair made of polished wood, and she took this out and settled it back in again. Then she held up her glass.

'Gaudete!' she said. Which was Latin, and a joke.

Hanna was mad about Dan's girlfriend. She was so fine. There was no other word for it. Her voice had layers, she had sentiment and irony, she had no idea – Hanna realised, with an odd, crumpled feeling – what the future had in store.

Dan was going to be a priest! You wouldn't think it as he set down the pint in front of him, and hooked his lower lip over the top to clear it of foam. You wouldn't think it as he looked at this young woman beside him with her cascade of light-brown hair.

'So what's the story?'

'She's well up to it,' she said.

'You think?' he said.

Dan's girlfriend was a tragedy waiting to happen. And yet, those green gloves spoke of a life that would be lovely. She would study in Paris. She would have three children, teach them beautiful Irish and perfect French. She would always mourn for Dan.

'Sorry, what's your name?' said Hanna.

'My name?' she said, and laughed for no reason. 'Oh, I am sorry. My name is Isabelle.'

Of course. She had a name that came out of a book.

After the pub they ran down a lane and were suddenly in a place where everyone smelt of the rain. Dan pulled the coat off Hanna even though she was well able to take off her own coat and when Isabelle came back she had the tickets in her hand. They were going to see a play.

The room they went into did not look like a theatre, there was no curtain or red plush, there were long benches with padded backs and when they found the right row,

there were two priests in their way. Actual priests. One of them was old, the other was young and they were dealing, in great slow motion, with programmes and scarves. Isabelle had to push past them, finally, and the priests let them through and then sat down in an insulted sort of way. They stuck their holy backsides out a little, and dipped them on to the leatherette. It was the kind of thing Dan would have laughed at once, but now he said, 'Evening, Fathers,' and Isabelle sat in thoughtful silence, until the metal lights cracked and began to dim.

The darkness of the theatre was a new kind of darkness for Hanna. It was not the darkness of the city outside, or of the bedroom she shared with Constance at home in Ardeevin. It was not the black country darkness of Boolavaun. It was the darkness between people: between Isabelle and Dan, between Dan and the priests. It was the darkness of sleep, just before the dream.

The play moved so fast, Hanna could not tell you, after, how it was done. The music thundered and the actors ran around, and Hanna didn't fancy any of them except the youngest one. He had eyebrows that went up in the middle and when he ran past, she could see everything about his bare feet, the pattern of hair and the comparative length of each toe. He was very real, he was as real as the spittle that flew from his mouth, though the words that came out of him were not real – perhaps that was why she could not follow them.

The story was about Granuaile the pirate queen, who turned, in the middle of it all, into the other queen, Elizabeth the First. The actress lifted a mask, and her voice changed, and her body changed, and it felt like the bubbles rising in Hanna's fizzy orange, except the bubbles were in her head. Dust moved in the hot lights, the lamps creaked in the rafters. The woman turned, and the mask turned

slowly, and suddenly it was all happening inside Hanna and she could feel it spread through the audience like a blush, whatever it was – the play – every word made sense. Then the actors ran off and the ordinary lights came on, and the two priests sat still for a moment, as though trying to recollect where they were.

'Well now,' said the older one. And when it was time for the second half, they did not come back.

In the crowded little room outside, Isabelle said, 'Would you like an ice cream?'

'Yes,' she said, and Isabelle went into the pack of people and came back with a Twist Cup.

During the second half, the nice actor spoke to Hanna. He stopped on stage and levelled his head to say something very quiet, and he was looking at her bang in the eye. Even though he could not see her. Or probably could not see her. And Hanna had a sharp urge to step through to the other side and be with him there – his look an invitation to her, as ghosts are invited in from the dark.

After the play was over, Hanna went to find the toilets, where the women were talking with such carelessness to each other, as they splashed their hands beneath the tap, or pulled some fresh towel down from the roll. Hanna didn't want real life to start again yet. She tried to hold on to the play as they walked through the rainy streets and turned down by a big river; even though the river was exciting in the night-time, she tried to hold the play safe in her mind.

In the middle of the bridge, sitting against the balustrade, was a beggar woman who asked Hanna if she had any spare change, but Hanna didn't have any money at all. She turned to tell her this, then stopped, because the woman had a baby – this old, dirty woman had a real, live baby – under the plaid blanket she used for a shawl.

Dan took Hanna's arm to steer her forward, and Isabelle smiled.

'Hold on a minute,' she said, and she went back to drop a coin.

Dan's flat was above a hardware shop. They stopped at a little door and went up the narrow staircase to the first floor, where there was a large room with a kitchenette and a sofa for Hanna to sleep on. The sofa had square steel legs and nubbly brown cushions. Hanna rolled out her sleeping bag and took off her shoes, then she climbed into it, and took off her trousers inside, extracting them up out of the mouth of the bag. She reached down again to get her socks, but it was a bit tight in there, and she ended up just pushing them off with her toes. It was the same sleeping bag of dark blue nylon that Emmet brought to the Pope's Mass and Hanna thought she could smell the cigarettes he had smoked that night. She imagined how jealous he would be of all she had to tell, now.

Hanna got off the bus and made her way down Curtin Street, up over the humpy bridge home. The house looked very empty and she went around the back where Emmet had a den out in the garage, but he wasn't there. He was in the broken greenhouse with a new batch of kittens, the mother cat stiff with fury outside the door.

Hanna told him about the girlfriend.

'So much for that,' he said, getting to his feet.

'It's not like it used to be,' she said. 'They encourage you to date girls, until you take your final vows.'

'Date,' said Emmet.

'What?'

'Date?'

He took her ear and twisted it.

'Ow,' she said. 'Emmet.'

Emmet liked to watch her face when he hurt her, to see what it might do. He was more curious than cruel, really.

'Did she stay?'

'Who?'

'The girlfriend?'

'No, she did not stay. What do you mean, "stay"?'

'Did she sleep with him?'

'God almighty, Emmet. Of course not. I was in *the next room*.'

She did not tell him how beautiful Isabelle was: how Dan sat after she was gone and took off his glasses and squeezed the bridge of his nose.

Hanna went into the house through the back door, along the passage, with its washing machine and coal store and apple store, into the big kitchen, where the heat was dying in the range. She went through to the hall, glanced into the little study, where papers fell out of their piles to make yellowed fans on the floor. There was a shaft of cold air twisting in front of the cracked hearth in the front room that was actually someone's ghost, she thought. The house was its weirdly empty self, with their mother 'sequestered', as Dan used to call it. Horizontal. With her mother dead.

So Hanna went upstairs to tell her dead mother she was home, to ask if she wanted tea and to sit beside her on the bed, and then lie down, while her mother – who was warm and actually, beautifully alive – lifted the eiderdown so Hanna could spoon back into her, with her shoes stuck out over the edge of the mattress. Because Hanna was her baby girl, and she would never make her mother cry, and it was enough to lie there, and let her arm hang over the edge of the bed to stir the books piled up on the floor.

Rain on the Wind

'Not that one,' said her mother. 'It's a bit old for you.'

The cover was a girl with pale lipstick flirting with a man. 'Drama, excitement and romance amid the terrible beauty of Galway's Atlantic seaboard.'

'He has a girlfriend,' said Hanna.

'Does he now,' she said.

'Yes,' said Hanna.

'Are you telling me?' said her mother.

'She's really nice,' said Hanna.

And before Hanna knew it, her mother had the covers pulled back and was off out the other side of the bed. She took off her little jacket of turquoise quilted polyester and sailed it across the bedroom on to Hanna's lap.

'Go on. Out!' she said, but Hanna just slid down between the sheets, while her mother walked around the room doing things she could only guess at. It was so nice, lying there in the darkness as the hairbrush clacked on the dresser top and hair clips made their tiny, light clatter. Hanna heard the shush of a hoisted skirt and, as her mother left the room, the dull sound of something tripped against. A shoe belonging to her father, perhaps. When she was gone, Hanna rose into the bedroom light and checked by the end of the bed. There it was, kicked astray; black and polished, ready for Mass.

'Come on now, Hanna!'

Downstairs, her mother filled the rooms again. There was housework. There was chat: 'Tell me all about Galway, you went to see a play?'

Hanna told her about the pirate queen and about the beggar on the bridge, and her mother had the tea towel for a headscarf, and she was hobbling along saying: 'O, to have a little house! To own the hearth and stool and all'! Hanna joined in with the poem which they had not done together since she was a little girl. Her mother told

her the story about the day war was declared and she went to see Anew McMaster play Othello. She was only ten and it was in Ennis, maybe, and he was in blackface, with big hoop earrings and armlets, naked to the waist. You could feel his voice like something pushing against you in the darkness. After this, she looked at the tea towel in her hand and had it suddenly thrown into a corner by the sink, saying, 'God, that was in my hair,' and she wrestled out the big saucepan to boil all the kitchen cloths on the range. Before long, the whole house smelt of cooked carbolic and hot, dirty cotton. Hanna came back into the steamed up kitchen, looking for something to eat, but Constance was back up working in Dublin and the only thing cooking was dirty dish-rags. Hanna lifted the lid and looked at the grey water, with its scum of soap. Her mother was sitting at the table, looking straight ahead.

'I thought I could do some cheese on toast,' said Hanna and her mother said, 'I made him. I made him the way he is. And I don't like the way he is. He is my son and I don't like him, and he doesn't like me either. And there's no getting out of all that, because it's a vicious circle and I have only myself to blame.'

This all seemed, to Hanna, either true or beside the point. But instead of telling her mother this, she said the thing she was supposed to say:

'But you like me, Mammy.'

'I like you *now*,' said her mother.

Later, after Hanna made some cheese on toast, her mother came into the kitchen and filled a hot water bottle from the big kettle on the range.

'Go on up to your uncle's for me, will you?' she said. 'Get me some Solpadeine.'

'You think?'

'My head's a fog,' she said. And when Hanna went down to her uncle Bart's there were new perfumes in the Medical Hall.