

When Jack died I was real young, younger than I am now, and I said, in a temper, that I would never let it happen again. Jack was our cat. A dark brown Burmese fella, with nippy teeth, grabby scratchy claws and loud wheezy breaths that rattled through him in a strange sing-songy chorus as he tottered about on unsteady paws. He was also the first and only time that we tried, as a family, to have a pet. And when he arrived there was a big hullabaloo among the girls. They were all pulling and shoving each other, with a bit of scratching too, all desperate to have a go. Kissing and cuddling and yanking him under the covers, and chasing him round the couch until he hid in the corner and did a pee under the coffee table that drove Dad completely wild. That fecking cat! he said, gritting his teeth and pulling his fingers into a fist as if he was going to punch to death a six-week-old fluff bundle.

Jack's wheezing, from day one, got louder and louder, and by the end of the first week it had turned into full-on flu. The

vet said that he possibly had it all along, that the breeder, an ancient fella from County Cavan, was probably a bit of a shark, and that Jack might actually die instead of getting better. This scared the girls no end. And that, combined with all the snotty green drippy stuff pouring from his eyes and nose, and the way he'd suddenly sneeze and blast it outwards and right into your face, made them run like mad whenever he appeared in the room. And it made Dad want to kill him even more.

I was the youngest, and I was the one who kept nagging Mam for a pet in the first place, so it was my job to be the cat-nurse. Which meant chasing Jack up the stairs with some cotton buds, wiping all the mucus away, and then bringing him into the bathroom and holding him over a hot bath so that he could breathe in the steam that was supposed to clear away all the hardened snot in his lungs that was causing the trouble in the first place. He hated this bit. And no matter how many times we did it, and no matter how many times I finished it up with a cuddle in a towel and a treaty piece of squashed sardine from my fingertips, he always thought that I was doing it for the hell of it, or because I was mental vicious, and was going to chuck him into the boiling bathwater for a laugh. He'd go scrapey crazy on my hands, driving big gashy cuts into my wrists, often drawing enough blood to make a lone red drip that would plip into the bath while he was taking his last few steamy panicky breaths. But it didn't matter to me, because I was making him better again.

Jack recovered after two full weeks of the treatment. Everyone, even the vet himself, went all, Woo woo, do we have ourselves a budding Doctor Doolittle here, or wha? Even Dad

said, Well done, son, before looking over at Mam and adding with a sigh, I still think he should've died. She told him with a jokey slap that he was an awful man, and he chuckled back that he was just the way she liked him, and that she was to get out of the garden, which was an expression that meant, ah, feck off with yourself ye little who-er, which was also an expression, and it really meant that you fancied the person on the receiving end of it.

Jack became super fit, and fast, and spent weeks and weeks lashing round the house, and causing all kinds of funny chaos, like chasing after the shadow of the pogo stick down the full length of the slope, or fighting with his bendy brass reflection in the coal scuttle and covering the green sitting-room carpet in tiny black paw prints. He was killed on the road outside our door when he was just seven months old. No one saw it happen. The first we knew of it was Maura Connell from next door with a big sad look on her face, telling Mam that she should go down the slope and see what's on the road in front of our driveway. I was the only one of the kids at home, because I hadn't gone to big school yet, so when Mam brought Jack in, all squashed and red around the head, I had loads of time alone with him.

Mam said that we'd have a family funeral in the back garden for Jack when the girls got home, and she used one of her good kitchen towels to wipe away all the red and black goeey stuff that was pouring out of the side of Jack's head, mostly through his left ear hole and eye socket. She laid him out, next to the onion patch, real nice like, on a knitted blanket that Sarah had made in Home Ec, and then she ran up to the attic to find an old shoe box to use for a coffin.

I lay out beside him too, on the grass. And with no one around I stroked his still-warm coat, kissed the non-bloody side of his head and started crying like mad and telling him how much I loved him. I told him that he was such a good cat. I lied to him too. I pretended that I didn't remember all the scratches he'd given me, or the times that he'd put massive rips in Dad's armchair, or when he climbed all over the tray-bake pastry while Mam was on the phone. You're the best cat, I said, stroking and weeping. You're such a good cat. The best cat in all Ireland. All the others are jealous of you, Jack. Coz you're the fastest, and the cleverest, and the funniest, and the best there is and ever will be.

I kind of wound myself up after a while. And the tears turned into big bonkers screams. Mam had to come rushing out and pin me into her arms. I told her that it was wrong, and that Jack should still be alive, and that God had made a stupid mistake. Mam, who went to Mass every day at ten in the morning without fail, and did praying the way most people did breathing, flinched a little at this. Feeling angry, I continued. And so, if God wanted Jack dead, I said, still crying, then I wanted God dead. Mam pushed me away from her chest and gave me a right shake, and told me that I was out of my mind, and saying terrible, terrible things. But that just made me worse, more angry, more bold, and made me say that I'd swap Jack for God any day of the week.

Mam told me to go to my room, and that I wasn't to come down until the funeral. I turned away from her, marched back into the house and shouted as I did, loud enough for her to hear, the words, Fecking God!

And I wasn't messing either. I lay on my bed, mad head dug

into the pillow, still crying, still angry, and I said to God that I'd had it with Him, and that killing Jack was the last straw. He was in trouble now. Big trouble.

Eventually, drowsy with tear-heat, wet-eyed and weak, I fell asleep arguing with Him in my head, and thinking of the joke that Auntie Una once told about the little Italian fella who's praying to God for a brilliant birthday present and, just to be sure, chucks a statue of the Virgin Mary in his drawer, locks it tight, and then says to God that if He ever wants to see His Mother again He'd better make sure that he gets a bike for his birthday. It's a gas joke, because the little fella is supposed to be acting like a Mafia man that you see on telly, but actually the really funny part of the joke is that you say it with your voice gone all Italian, like the Cornetto man, all eef-a you-a want-a see-a your-a mother-a again-a you-a better-a get-a me-a bike-a. Auntie Una told it one Christmas Eve and it became the joke of the season, and the whole family, all eight of us, any time we wanted a laugh, kept on sticking 'a' at the end of our words and pretending-a we-a were-a Italian-a. Even after New Year's.

I told God that He could do what He liked to me, but really, that was the last time he was to pull that killing trick while I was around. I didn't have a statue of the Virgin Mary to hide, but I told him anyway that as soon as my mam allowed me, I was going to stop going to Mass, and confession too.

I slept right through to the next day. Missed the funeral and everything. Mam said it was just as well. Would've been too upsetting. I think of him now, though, Jack. Right at this moment. Here in this kitchen. And I wonder if it could've been different.

Summer Loving

Helen Macdowell gets hit in the face with a hockey ball. That's how it starts. Yes. The beginning of the end. All downhill from there. Helen's beautiful. She's got this light brown wavy flowy hair that curls back from her forehead. Her face is round, and her nose is soft and slightly ski-slopey. Her lips are brownish pink, but shiny with lipgloss. And her eyes, Jesus, her eyes are crystal blue, really clear blue, no dirty bits in the blue. She's beautiful and she's going to be a nurse, or an air hostess, or a private investigator. At least that's what my sister Fiona says, and she should know. Fiona and Helen used to knock around together before Helen became too beautiful to have friends. They were best buddies once upon a time, and used to cut their fingers and stick the bloody bits together and pretend that they were witches and all the rest. Then Helen got boobs, nice hair and beautiful skin, and stopped knocking round with anyone except herself.

So, she's standing there, the best-looking girl on the black

gravel pitch, wearing make-up and everything. Bully one, bully two, bully three's all done, and the sun's streaking down, battering the hockey girls good and hard. They're sweating in their short slate-grey gym skirts and their tight light-blue aertex tops, and we're cheering from the sidelines.

Go on now, ye ride, get them off ye, ye sexy little who-ers!

The nuns are looking round, scowling, pointing fingers, and we're loving it.

School's out, summer lovin, havin a blast.

And Helen's just standing there. Centre of the pitch. Staring. I don't notice it at first, but the lads do.

They say, all giddy, Ooooooh, Finnegan, she's looking at you!

Looking at me?! Bollocks!

Yeah, looking at your bollocks all right!

But it's obvious, yes, she's looking straight at me. I turn my face away and go puce. I count to five while looking at the sideline grass and thinking about my whole family getting squished through a giant mincer like in the song on telly. But the funny thing is, when I turn back I notice that she's not really looking *looking* at me. Not giving me the eye or anything. She's just kind of staring into space, but at me.

Even so, the lads are going wild, saying that she wants to ride me, and touch me mickey, and all that stuff, only I'm feeling a bit sick from her stare. Her lips are curled downish, and her crystal-blue eyes are fizzing fire at me. She looks sad too, like she's feeling sorry for me, like she wants to shake her head and say, 'You poor poor prat.' I feel dizzy. I need to stand up, shake my head and turn away again. I want to go home to my mam.

But before I can do anything, it happens.

THWACKRUNCH!

Holy fuckster! one of the lads yells, as everyone goes spare. Helen Macdowell has just got a hockey ball in the mouth. There's teeth-bits everywhere, red teeth-bits. She opens up her mouth in agony and you can see that her lips are all puffed and slit and stabbed with bits of red teeth. Her face swells up in front of us. Blood pours out of her mouth. Like she's getting sick, and instead of puke there's blood coming out. The girl who hit her, Mary Davit, a big bruiser of a thing, is sitting in a heap on the ground, crying. Helen isn't crying yet. She's pawing her face, trying to feel the outline of her lumps and bumps. She's surrounded by the nuns, like a flock of nervous magpies, who keep the girls away. The others are still sweating in their skirts and shirts, but they're mostly whispering to each other and comforting Mary Davit. Someone whispers, Stupid bitch, that'll teach her!

After tapping and tipping her face for a few seconds, Helen lets her head drop to her chest and just screams the whole hockey pitch to pieces. Really screams. Like when you're being chased down a dark alley by a fella with a big carving knife in a Halloween horror flick. That loud! And to prove it, she lashes out at the nuns and starts to run for her life. Seriously. She runs straight off the hockey pitch, through the long grass, and out the main school gates on to the Ballydown Road. Screaming all the time, that carving-knife-horror-flick scream. And running, not stopping.

Maura Connell saw her running full pelt past Quinns-worth's at two o'clock that afternoon. Helen Macdowell, the most beautiful girl on the hockey team, with her brown wavy hair flowing away from her, her crystal eyes on fire, and her

battered minced-meat face shiny with blood. Blood pouring down her neck from her slash-hole mouth, all over her aertex gym shirt.

The rumour going round The Rise says that Helen was eventually wrestled to the ground by two shopping centre security guards inside Murray's chemist shop. She was in deep shock, and trying her damndest to buy a jumbo refill of lip-gloss.

We'd never seen anything like that around our place before. Not right in front of our eyes. You always heard about it, though. Through friends of friends. Or when The Mothers got together for coffee mornings. They'd sit around in a steamy kitchen circle like four mad witches, and dip ginger-snaps into Maxwell House until they went wobbly warm, and take turns at saying, Jahear about so-and-so, Lord rest his soul, only thirty years old, poor creature!?

They were brilliant at it. Scaring the shite out of each other, grinning inside, but on the outside all sad, just breaking up the day between ironing, washing and making sausage, spuds and parsnip dinners for the dads on their way home from work with their newspapers and their tired faces.

Of course, they'd go all hushed if they saw one of us coming in from the telly room. They'd lean in together and start talking with their mouths closed, or speaking in code. But most of the time, sitting in silence on the floor with the telly on low and the door half open, we got the gist.

For instance, there was Kent Foster, died of skin cancer aged twenty, God rest his soul. Kent was mad into the sunbathing. Every summer, down there on the black tarmac behind the

five-a-side pitch, in his brown speedos, lathered in sunflower oil, like a Malteser covered in spit.

English blood! The Mothers would say.

With that name!

Right you are, Maisie.

Then one summer Kent just disappeared. No one knew where. No one except The Mothers.

Jahear about Kent Foster? No? Well, poor soul's down in the gym, he spots a little black freckle on his thigh, and two months later he's stone dead. Cancer! Riddled with the stuff! Only twenty years old, God rest his soul!

Cancer, death, only twenty! It's music to their ears, like the sound of a starter gun.

And so, stories at the ready, champing at the bit, they're off.

Gary's mam is thinking, I can beat that one hands down!

Mozzo's mam is racking her brains, scratching her fag packet and trying to remember that recent tragedy she heard about from her brother-in-law in Finglas.

And Maisie O'Mally, the crinkly septuagenarian from number 43, is faking it, saying, Did you hear about what's his name, who fell into the river?

Luckily, Gary's mam, the old reliable, cuts her dead. Not as bad as Neil Cody! she says.

Neil Cody is this boy from Mount Merrion, only fifteen. He's a bit of a swat, and likes to read his daddy's newspaper every day. So one Sunday morning, still in his pyjamas, he grabs the paper, the *Indo*, hot off the kitchen table and, dead excited, brings it up to his bedroom for a good ole read. Half an hour goes by. No sound from above. An hour. Nothing.

Imagine it! says Gary's mam, Silence from upstairs, what do you think? He's fallen asleep with the papers, the little dote, yes?

Well, no one's heard a peep out of Neil in three hours, so his mam runs up the stairs, knocks on his door, goes into his room, and there he is, dead as a dodo, flat out on the bed, a stream of blood coming out of his nostrils and down on to the funnies. He's had a brain haemorrhage and died. Just like that!

The Mothers all bless themselves and mutter things about St Anthony and Jesus and the apostles. Gary's mam is feeling happy with herself, and everyone thinks that she's won the competition hands down when Mozzo's mam lights up a John Player and says, dramatically, And of course, you've all heard about poor June Shilaweh?

Gary's mam freezes and, furious, aware that she's going to be trumped, shakes her head.

Mozzo's mam nods gravely to herself, as if she's not sure whether she should continue.

My mam tells her to hurry up and put them out of their misery.

The Shilawehs, Mozzo's mam says, are an African family, black as night, who've moved to the Villas.

The Villas! everyone goes in unison, groaning at the thought of that long line of little boxy terraced houses down the back of the estate. To hell or to the Villas! They couldn't've picked a worse spot if they tried, the eejits. Worse than the bloody jungles they've come from.

The Mothers all laugh at this, though they hold their hands over their mouths as they do.

So, the Shilawehs are trying to settle into life in the Villas.

They say, Hello, good morning, to all their neighbours, even the ones who say Fuck off nigger to their faces. They send their only daughter, June, to the local girls Catholic school, Mother of Sorrow, or just The Sorrows for short, which is the one that my sisters go to, and the one that Helen Macdowell went to before she lost her face. And Mr Shilaweh gets a job stacking envelopes at Ryan's post office. The one thing that's missing is a bike. Little June Shilaweh has never had a bike, and now that she's in the free world and out of the jungle she wants one.

Indeed, interrupts Maisie, what would you want a bicycle for in the jungle? It'd only get whipped by the monkeys!

The Mothers do their hand-covering-mouth laugh again.

Anyway, little June Shilaweh gets a bike from her dad, who's saved up all his post-office money to pay for it. She hasn't even had it a week when she cycles up Clannard Road, gets overtaken by a juggernaut, swivels and turns, falls off the bike and goes right under the rear wheels. Crushed to death on the spot.

The Mothers all sigh in silence and avoid looking each other in the eye.

And you know the worse bit? says Mozzo's mam, teasing and toying. Johnno Mac, who works in Mangan's Hairdressers right outside the crash spot, Clannard Road said he had to clean up after the truck was gone. Said that little June had no head left, swear to God, it was popped like a pimple under the weight of the truck. Ambulance just dragged a headless corpse inside, and the poor Shilawehs had to identify their daughter by the handlebars that were still stuck into her innards when they arrived.

Mozzo's mam has gone too far. My mam shoots up, leans

against the sink, and says that she's doing sprouts tonight and you know how long them feckers take to peel. Gary's mam says that she'll walk Maisie home, even though it's only four houses down. Mozzo's mam, quickly getting the message, stands up to leave.

She sticks her head into the telly room and tells me that Mozzo's coming back today and he'll be dying to see me.

Mam, Gary's mam and Maisie mess about with coats until Mozzo's mam is out the door, and then they agree that she's a lovely girl, but a bit crude.

The fella left her, of course, says Gary's mam, left her with that little animal!

Meaning Mozzo.