January

MOTHER ALWAYS SAID January is a lovely month. Everything starts over again in the New Year. The visitors are all finished with and you won't see sight nor hear sound of them until next Christmas with the help of God. Before you know it you'll see a stretch in the evenings. The calving starts in January and as each new life wobbles into the slatted house your wealth grows a little bit. It'd want to – you have to try and claw back what was squandered in December on rubbish that no one really wanted. The bit of frost kills any lingering badness. That's the thing about January: it makes the world fresh. That's what Mother used to say anyway, back when she used to have a lot more to say for herself.

EUGENE PENROSE and his pals were sitting on the low wall in front of the IRA memorial again. Isn't it a fright to God to say a man can't walk home without being tormented by yahoos every single day? A few times lately Eugene had clipped Johnsey's

heel as he walked past them and he had stumbled and nearly fallen. How could they be always there anyway? The dole is great, Mother says. It allows thugs to live like little lords. How's it he couldn't be a proper man, besides creeping along like a red-faced child, afraid of his own shadow, with tears of shame stinging at his eyes? Daddy wouldn't have put up with it, that's for sure.

People used to be afraid of Johnsey's father. He'd give ground to no man. He loved a good row at the mart or at a match or above in the yard about the worth of a player or the price of a beast or anything you could imagine men might argue about. But he was as well known for his kindness as for his fury. His kindness was never taken for weakness, though: Daddy was a tough yoke. He'd shouldered many a big forward into the middle of next week in his days playing hurling; Johnsey had often heard that said or something like it. Once he had worn a hurley off of a lad in pure-solid temper and the same lad was never again right after it. Johnsey had only heard that said once, and when the man saying it saw that he was listening, he stopped talking and looked into his glass of whiskey and turned red.

IF HE THOUGHT about something else while he walked the hundred-odd steps from the start of the low wall to the far end of the churchyard he could nearly cod himself that they weren't there at all, watching him coming, looking forward to making little of him. Like the deep pool in the stream down past the weeping willow at the far end of the river field as you start towards the Shannon Callows where he and Daddy used to swim. Sometimes Johnsey wondered what would it be like to lie down under that water and, when all the breath in his lungs was gone, just stay down there and breathe in water instead of air. Maybe a miracle would happen like the ones that happened below in

Cork years ago where the statue of the Virgin Mary came alive and said hello to everyone and cried blood over the state of the world. Mother said it was the state of the hairy mollies gawking up at her that made her cry. Wouldn't you cry too if you had that shower roaring the holy rosary up at you night and day? Maybe, instead of drowning, he'd discover he had superhuman powers, that he was able to live under the water and could control the streams and the rivers and the sea and all that lived there, and he could live there himself and be a king, with a deadly-sharp three-pronged fork, and loads of beautiful mermaids swimming around with no bras on and making him his dinner and kissing him.

Maybe when he gets home Mother will have a tart made for after the dinner, and she'll be just taking it out of the oven when he arrives. He'll eat a huge cut of it and she'll stand behind him with a mug of tea (just a tiny drop of milk, otherwise it's ruined, Mother says) and tell him how them apples were still growing outside not even an hour ago. He'll tell her it was a lovely dinner and she'll say Was it, pet, I hope it was, you need a good dinner after your hard day. These days, though, nearly always, she would have his dinner left in the oven and it would be blistering hot or freezing cold; she sometimes left the oven on too high or forgot to leave it on at all, and she herself would be above at the Height where Daddy was buried, saying prayers and cursing at the weeds. All the prayers she was saying for him, he must be getting no respite above in heaven. Father Cotter said at his Mass that there would be a fine house ready for him above and he'd probably start a fight with the angels over the design of it and want it knocked and built again to his own specifications. The neighbours all laughed at that. Some of them even looked at each other and smiled knowingly; sure he was a divil for exactness, you couldn't do a job right for him.

Mother wasn't home. There was a shepherd's pie in the oven,

at a proper temperature, covered in tinfoil, and cutlery on the table. He ate it fast, and gulped a glass of milk. There was that thing on telly at seven about holidays, and that blonde lady would be on it. Sometimes if it was quiet enough, if Mother was out and there was no cat scratching and meowing at the window, he could imagine she was talking to him, she was his girlfriend, over in some hot place with palm trees and he was going to be going over to join her once he'd finished building their big mansion of a house. They were talking on a special phone with a big video screen. She was describing it to him, the place where they would spend their holidays. You couldn't watch her properly when you were eating your dinner, you had to keep looking down at your plate, and then you'd miss whole seconds of her standing there with her shiny blonde hair, in her clothes that only barely covered what needed covering and, sometimes, clear blue water lapping up around her bum in lucky little waves.

Just as it finished, thank God, Mother arrived in. She wanted to know was it busy below, what kind of form was Packie in, any word of the Scottish lady? Packie's eldest daughter was supposed to have eloped to Scotland with a foreign fella. She was now referred to as the Scottish lady. Like a man who went to work in America for a year or two would forever more be known as the Yank. Packie's daughter used to hang around the co-op some Saturdays, letting on to be helping. All Johnsey ever saw her at was inspecting her fingernails and chewing gum and pressing buttons on her mobile phone. She never really looked at him or talked to him, except once she offered him a Rolo and he said okay (why did you say okay, you spa?) and she held the packet out to him and the blasted Rolo got stuck in the packet and his hand shook like crazy and the Rolo was nearly melted before he got it out and now he could feel his cheeks burning hot again just thinking about it.

Packie had had no time for foreigners before the big elopement, but now he had a special hatred for them. You could nearly feel a heat off of it as it burned inside in him. You'd see them now sometimes, brown-faced people, or even proper blacks, driving through the village, on their way to town to cheat the system, according to Packie, sure tis a great country. If they were outside the co-op at the time, bringing in a delivery or something, Packie would nudge him and point with a tip of his forehead. There'd be a wicked shine from his eyes and it was then you could nearly feel that heat, like Packie's soul was already burning in eternal fire for the sins he was committing in his mind. The foreigners might look back, but you could see nothing in their eyes to give away what they were thinking. They're probably *Hoo-Toos*, Johnsey, Packie would say. He'd spit the words out like you would something you coughed up from your lungs. Probably they killed a rake of *Tootsies* and they're over here now, hiding. Johnsey would laugh and agree away with him, and a picture of the dole boys laughing at Eugene Penrose's stupid jokes would form in his mind and he'd feel sad and ashamed of himself. What in the name of God were a Tootsie and a Hoo-Too, anyway?

They never stopped and came in. Not into the co-op. Sure why would they? Maybe the Spar below did better in the foreigner stakes.

MOTHER DIDN'T really listen to his answers to her fired-off questions any more. She hardly heard her own questions. She asked them in a listing way that reminded Johnsey of the whole class reeling off the times tables in school years ago. He could have said Sure it was a grand day, Mother, I planted an axe in Packie's forehead, took all the co-op money, went off in the jeep and drove over Eugene Penrose and all the dole boys, killed them

all dead, and now that I have the supper ate, I'm off to town to be a cool bigshot and get off with girls. She would probably just stay folding clothes and tightening up and nodding and not seeing him and not hearing him. Good luck so.

He went out in the yard to practise driving. Mother's old Fiesta was going grand, and she let him drive it over and back across the yard. She wouldn't insure him on it, though. Insurance for lads like you now is about twenty thousand pounds, Johnsey. Twenty thousand? Would they know he was thick? Was that one of the questions they asked? Yes, Mister Cunliffe, hmm … seeing as you're a bit of a spastic … (there would be clicks of computer keys and sighs of impatience) … it'll be twenty thousand million billion pounds for basic insurance on that clapped-out heap of old shite. Okay? So stick to your laps of the front yard. All right? You fat gom. *Click*.

He thought better of the driving practice. Mother was complaining the other day about the price of fuel, and anyway it was only a frustration that he couldn't keep going past the gate and roar off down the road. He considered walking up through the long acre and down the river field to the stream. There was something satisfying about the crunching noise your boots made when you walked through grass that was decorated by frost. There was a spot down there by the stream on a rise above the little beach of muck formed by the thirsty cattle, under the weeping willow where you could sit, surrounded by light-green branches, where no one could see you. If you sat still enough you could imagine you were a tree too. No one ever called a tree a spastic or tried to trip it or gave out stink to it for stacking things wrong. Daddy said all life depends on trees. They make the air we breathe.

He was nearly over the stile when he thought of Dermot McDermott, and changed his mind. He was leasing the farm but you'd swear he owned the place, the swagger of him. When

Johnsey met him on the land, it was as if he, Johnsey, were a trespasser. He'd ask where was he off to, and he'd never call him Johnsey, only always John. He was too cool for auld *peata* names. And he'd consider Johnsey with a quick up and down of his slitted eyes and a bit of a smirk. He'd be probably thinking Look at this ape, his father dies and he can't manage the bit of a farm that's left behind! I'm here driving my big tractor over his birthright! What a waster!

Mother says people who give their sons names like *Dermot McDermott* are up their own arses. As much as to say we're the *real* McDermotts and our boy is Dermot, son of Dermot, descended directly from the High Kings. Thinking they're two cuts above the *hi-pull-eye* and one cut at least above their neighbours. Mother says the *hi-pull-eye* is the people who live in the council houses outside the village on the end of the Ashdown Road. They nearly all have mongrel dogs and loads of children. Or loads of dogs and mongrel children, Johnsey wasn't sure which Mother said.

THE LOCK on the door of the slatted house was broken and the wood was warped from dampness and rot, so the door was stuck half open. Even after three years it was strange to have the slatted house empty in January. The cattle made their beds in there every winter; they'd be cosy and warm and safe from the cold rain and the stinging frost, all squashed in together and using each other as big radiators. And their shite would flow away down a pipe all winter and into an underground tank to be sucked back up and spread on the land to feed the grass that they would eat and turn back into milk and shite again. Whenever the teacher would describe the Nativity in school, Johnsey always pictured the stable in Bethlehem as the slatted house that neatly divided the front yard from the big yard, and the three wise men as Daddy,

Paddy Rourke and Mister Unthank. The baby Jesus would have been fine and warm and safe in there.

There was enough light allowed in so that Johnsey could see the stout crossbeam that dissected the roof. Would it take his weight? Things was built right in them days, Daddy always said. He was very fat, though. Imagine if he did it arseways and fell on his hole and broke his leg! And Dermot McDermott found him, say. And called Mother. And the fire brigade. And Father Cotter. And then Eugene Penrose and the rest of the dole boys would arrive on after seeing the brigade flying out. The whole village would be standing in the yard for a finish, waiting for a turn to look in the door at the fat eejit on the floor of the slatted house with his leg bursted and cocked at a quare angle, crying like a small child, his face purple and swelled and the rope still tight around his neck, and they'd point and shake their heads and roll their eyes until someone kind would break it up and push them away and try to help him, and their kindness would stab him deeper than the laughter of the rest, because he didn't deserve it, and they'd know it, but be kind anyway.

Father Cotter was that way, and the Unthanks. Packie Collins wasn't. He told Johnsey every day that he was only allowing him work in the co-op out of respect for his father, Lord have mercy on him. He was a *liability*. Johnsey often heard Packie muttering about him to customers, who'd look around and smirk, and if he caught their eye they'd salute him, but in a way that was too friendly, as fake as that cake in the window of the wedding shop inside in town. As fake as a three-pound note, Mother would say. Father Cotter's job was to be nice to people; he worked for God, who gave strict instructions to all to be good and nice. And Mister Unthank was Daddy's great old friend; they'd palled around together since they were small boys. He'd stood at Daddy's coffin for ages in the funeral home, with his hand on the rim,

just shaking his head and saying, really softly, *Jack, Jack, Jackie*, and tut-tutting, like Daddy used to over things being wasted and things that weren't right, and Johnsey saw a tear rolling off of Mister Unthank's chin and landing on his father's cheek, so that it looked like Daddy himself was crying.

DADDY HAD ALWAYS SAID to be honest. Daddy wasn't able to tell a lie. Once, years ago, an auld biddy from the village rang to know would Mother be able to bake twenty tarts in a hurry for the ICA show and Daddy told them hold on and put down the phone and went out to the chicken coop in the haggard to ask her and Mother said to tell that old biddy make her own tarts, no, tell her I'm gone to town and won't be back till nine but Daddy said No, Sarah. You know I can't tell a lie. And the way he said it, it was like the priest saying *and the Word was made flesh*: it was a fact, a given thing; there could be no argument. Mother stomped into the hallway, raging, and had to tell her own lie. Then she told Daddy that now he had *her* feeling terrible and she had to go as far as town for a finish so as to make her lie into truth, and stay there until nine o'clock to make doubly certain that truth prevailed that day. That was one of the things about Daddy: he could make you feel bad by being so good, so that you *had* to try to be good like him.

He couldn't think properly abroad in the yard or around the buildings or even in the dark of the slatted house. The whole place smelled of Daddy. Whenever he looked up the yard he expected to see him striding towards him, saluting with his stick and full of news even when there was no news. Everything in the yard seemed to have died with him, as though they had only existed to serve him. But still all these things were shaped by his weight and worn by his touch so that no one else could quite fit them: the rut along the yard where he had tramped the same track

over and over every day where visitors often stumbled, unaware of its presence until its sides caught their soles; the shiny, paintless edges around the handles of the doors to the slatted house and the milking parlour and the workshop where every day for years on end he had flung them open and closed; the seats of the tractor and the jeep, moulded by the burden of him into a hollow; the very walls of the buildings that seemed to stand now only to honour the memory of his stony strength.

It wasn't good for you, the way this house was now. Even a gom like him could see that. Sadness plus sadness equals more sadness. Sadness begets sadness. The deadness of the yard and the buildings made the air seem thicker and harder to walk through. Dermot McDermott had enough in his own yard and buildings above; he leased the grass only. Anyway, it would have made his heart sick to see that curly-headed fucker flying in and out around Daddy's yard with his big fancy John Deere, destroying the place and taking no care to maintain the integrity of Daddy's world. It would have been an invasion. Better the dead-quiet loneliness that prevailed now than the noisy ignorance of that chap and his fancy machinery. That's the way Daddy would have seen it, Johnsey was certain.

He heard Daddy one time saying he was a grand quiet boy to Mother when he thought Johnsey couldn't hear them talking. Mother must have been giving out about him being a gom and Daddy was defending him. He heard the fondness in Daddy's voice. But you'd have fondness for an auld eejit of a crossbred pup that should have been drowned at birth. He'd be no use for anything only eating and shiteing and he'd be an awful nuisance, but still and all you'd give him the odd rub and a treat, and you'd nearly always be kind to him because it wasn't his fault he was a drooling fool of a yoke. You wouldn't be going around showing him off to people, though, that's for sure.

His bedroom was the best place to think about things. Too much thinking could balls you up rightly. Your mind could start acting like a video player, showing you your own thickness. It was worst when he'd had to talk to people, like one of the auld biddies quizzing him on the way home or in the bakery about Mother or someone stopping him on the street to know how was he and how was his Aunty Theresa and was Small Frank finished his auld exams and he'd stand there and feel his cheeks burning off of him and he'd do his damnedest to try and answer properly and sound like a normal fella but words could make an awful fool of you. What use was talking, anyway? What was ever achieved with words?

Johnsey often thought about girls in his room. He had a dirty magazine that used to belong to Anthony Dwyer, who wasn't quite the gom Johnsey was, but who had the added hardship of being a meely-mawly with one leg shorter than the other. Looking at Dwyer's magazine often landed him in a sinful place and the thought of doing that made him feel like he sometimes did before walking up to Communion if the Moran girls were sitting near the front in their short skirts: he could feel his heart hammering and jumping and kicking about the place, for all the world as though it was ready to jump up his throat and out his mouth and slap him in the puss before running off on little fat red legs, leaving a bloody trail behind it, shouting Good luck now, fatarse, sure you don't need me, anyway! He had a look out the window and across the yard. No stir abroad. Why would there be?

He imagined Dermot McDermott with a lovely girl in a short skirt and she pinned up against that bollix, trapped, and he saying to her Go on, come on will you and trying to have his rotten way with her and she not wanting to and trying to free herself. Then he imagined he, Johnsey, striding up behind Dermot McDermott and he turning around and Johnsey planting him a box, square

on the jaw, and the lovely girl crying Thank you, thank you and Johnsey would put his arms around her and she would suddenly decide she wanted after all to do the dirty things Dermot McDermott had wanted her to do, only with Johnsey, and not the curly fucker who was now prostrated in the muck.

JOHNSEY HAD never really spoken to a girl, besides Mother and the aunties and the auld biddies, and they were certainly not real girls like the ones in town or outside Molloy's smoking fags in what Mother called their *bum freezers*. A few hellos and goodbyes and grands and yes pleases and thanks very muches to Packie's daughter and the very odd customer in the co-op who was female; that was it, really.

His parents had talked him into going to a disco once. He didn't know why they were so mad for him to go. It was for the youth only, and being held in a parish hall fifteen miles away. A bus was going from the village, a twenty-five seater, but some would have to stand. The thoughts of that bus, and a hall with girls in it, and Eugene Penrose and all the cool lads laughing and looking at him as if to say where does *he* think he's going, he's not one of us, and the risk of having to talk or being expected to disco dance; Johnsey didn't know why Mother and Daddy were doing this to him. Why couldn't he just stay at home with them, like always, and watch *The Late Late Show* and drink tea and eat buns or currant cake?

Johnsey was thirteen then, his hair was thick and black and wouldn't be told which way to lie, his face was red, his hands were too big, his feet often betrayed him, his voice cracked in his throat and escaped from his mouth all high-pitched or too low and his head shook when he was forced to talk, and surely to God this much misery was too much for one boy to have to bear.

Mother had bought him new trousers especially – they would be for good wear as well, they wouldn't go astray, anyway – and a shirt and a jumper. The jumper was right expensive, and it had a tiny little golfer on it like the ones all the cool lads were wearing. And he had Doc Marten shoes on. Daddy had brought them home for him in a box that said 'Air Wear' on it. But the ones he had brought were too small and he had to carry them back into town and get bigger ones, but he didn't mind, he said it was his own fault – he should have checked.

When he was leaving the house that night for the disco, Mother had brushed his hair back with her hand and kissed him on the forehead and said My little man, off to his first dance. And Daddy drove him down to the village in the jeep, so he felt like a right big man jumping down from the high seat and Daddy winked at him and said Go handy now, leave a few girls for the rest! Johnsey wasn't sure what Daddy meant but it sounded manly and funny and he laughed along and said Good luck, thanks, Dad – he only just remembered not to say *Daddy* while there was a chance any of the cool lads could hear. Daddy had given him a whole fiver on the way down, and it was warm in his hand. The bus was paid for and it was two pounds in, so three pounds of the fiver was all his for spending. What was there to buy at discos? Johnsey could not imagine. Surely there'd be Coca-Cola, anyway. In spite of his nerves, he felt a thrill.

He had been hoping Dwyer would be down at the memorial to wait for the bus so he would have a comrade in spastication. He could still hear Daddy's jeep and smell its fumes when Eugene Penrose sauntered over, flanked by little Mickey Farrell and a lad with fair hair from Fifth Year who was in a fight one day with a fella from the minor team and he drew shocking red blood and won the fight and the fella from the minor team, who was *eighteen*, started crying and the blood solid spurted from his nose.

What are you doing here? Eugene Penrose's hair was long, straight down from his fringe and over his ears. He looked like a right dipstick, Daddy would say. An awful-looking yahoo!

Going to the disco, Johnsey had said.

Are you now? Come on so, come over here and stand with us, old Paddy Screwballs is driving the bus so he'll be ages yet. He's probably above at home picking cling-ons out of his hole.

Johnsey didn't know what to do. Eugene Penrose had talked friendly to him before now and it only ever ended badly. Once, it had lasted a full day, the friendliness, but then he had grabbed his schoolbag going past the church gates and hung it off the high railing and when Johnsey had reached up to get it, Eugene Penrose had pulled down his pants and put a big fist of muck in his underpants and mashed it in with a kick and started roaring that Johnsey had shat in his pants and the whole school-bus crowd saw him with muck all over his arse and on the backs of his legs and he was called Shittyarse Cunliffe for nearly a year after it.

But Johnsey followed Eugene Penrose and little Mickey Farrell with his slanty eyes (Mother had asked Daddy one Sunday coming from Mass, Is that little lad of the Farrells a Mongol, and Daddy had laughed and said No, he's a rat like his father) over to the memorial where all the cool lads were and a few girls acting like they were disgusted with the cool lads but you could tell they weren't, really, and a couple of nervous-looking spastics standing to the side, like bits of auld watery broccoli beside a plate of steak and chips.

Hey, lads, Penrose declared, pulling him by the arm to present him to the rest, Look at Cunliffe's jumper – I'd say his mother knit it and glued a golfer on it!

I'd say his father bought it off the tinkers, someone else volunteered. Johnsey could see his fellow spastics were guffawing

away with the cool lads, feeling safely ignored for the minute and trying to gain ground while they could.

Hey, Johnsey Cunt-Lick, don't shit in your pants now, it's only a small bus!

We'll put the fucker in the boot!

Someone grabbed the back of his jumper and yanked the label out and roared *Penneys!*

Johnsey knew his mother hadn't bought his jumper in Penneys; she'd gone to a right expensive place in the city. He knew because he'd heard her telling Daddy it was an awful price and Daddy said Sure what about it and she said It's true, what about it. Then he heard a rip and the two buttons on the shoulder of his jumper landed on the ground. He bent down to pick them up but the jumper-grabber behind still had a grip and there was another rip. Now the neck of his jumper felt too loose and it was slipping down over his shoulder and he wondered how would he explain to Mother and Daddy how his new jumper that was an awful price got destroyed.

Paddy Screwballs arrived and Johnsey's torment, for the moment, was at an end. Surely to God he would be left alone on the bus, with an adult driving it. He sat at the very top, as close to the driver as possible. The other two harmless lads sat across from him. They looked a bit ashamed.

But his sanctuary was soon destroyed: Eugene Penrose landed down beside him, and put a big *mar dhea* friendly arm around his shoulders, and Johnsey had to shove in for him, and little ratty Mickey Farrell and the fair-haired lad landed in the seats behind him and when they started tormenting him again and trying to pull his jumper off of him, old Paddy Screwballs just turned a bit sideways and said Hey, go handy there, and sort of smiled and Johnsey could see he had only three teeth in the front of his stupid old head and he wheezed and coughed and so

did the bus and he rammed it in to gear and drove off.

Someone actually lit a fag towards the back of the bus! Even Eugene Penrose was a small bit surprised. But he wouldn't be outdone in the badness stakes. He looked for a fag off of the lad smoking and came back with it lit and started to jab it in Johnsey's face, making him hop the side of his head off the window of the bus every time he flinched. Yerra call a howlt, said Paddy Screwballs, and laughed and coughed. Johnsey could feel the heat of the top of the fag near his skin. He thought of Mother and Daddy asking how he got burned, who did it, and Daddy roaring off in the jeep to Eugene Penrose's house and tackling Eugene Penrose's father over it and there being a big fight and Eugene Penrose calling him *tell-tale-baby-fucker* all day Monday and probably kicking the shite out of him.

Instead of making a hole in Johnsey's face, though, he made a hole in the new jumper. Right in the front, and the place where he touched the fag to the material actually went a bit on fire for a second and that got a great laugh altogether; there were screeches and whoops of delight and when Johnsey jumped up and was beating himself to put out the little flame his fiver escaped from the pocket of his new corduroy trousers and flew away on him and Eugene Penrose grabbed a hold of it and claimed the money as his own. Someone said Ah give it back to hell, but Eugene Penrose said What are you going to do about it? And that was that.

Johnsey imagined Mother in the shop buying him the new jumper, and probably asking the fella working there was it a *cool* jumper now and was it the type all the young lads wore, and his heart broke to think of her thinking so much of him and how happy she'd been over him heading off, all kitted out, like a normal fella.

When they finally arrived at the parish hall where the disco was being held, Johnsey slipped away from the queue. One of the other harmless lads asked where was he going. He didn't answer.

He headed for the darkness at the back of the hall where there was a copse of thick-branched trees. He stayed there all night until the disco ended and he heard Paddy Screwballs grinding up the hill. He'd had to retreat further back into the shadows a couple of times because lads came out holding hands with girls and they were kissing each other in among the trees and Johnsey tried to hold his breath and be part of the darkness, because he could imagine if they saw him how the girl would scream and the fella would call him a pervert probably and give him a box.

He heard Bon Jovi singing 'Living on a Prayer', his favourite rock song, and everyone singing along with it, and the DJ was turning off the music at the chorus and it was just the boys and girls at the disco singing and they were nearly louder than the music had been. Then he heard the national anthem and after that they all spilled out and onto the bus. He never had to talk to any girls that night, nor never got to drink a Coca-Cola at the bar like a real man. He threw his burned jumper into the dark among the trees. No one looked at him on the way home, they were all roaring up and down the bus about who felt whose arse and who got a shift and one of the other spastics whispered Where were you all night? and he just told him fuck off.

DWYER HAD GIVEN him a loan of the dirty magazine when they were pally, years ago. Johnsey had kept it for way longer than Dwyer had meant him to. For a finish, Dwyer had started to get a bit thick over it, but not too thick. A lad in Dwyer's position couldn't afford to be getting too antsy – his heart was in worse shape than his crooked leg by all accounts. He upped and died before Johnsey ever got to give him back his magazine. His heart just stopped beating one night while he was asleep.

His mother and father had been mad about him. Sure why

wouldn't they have been mad about their little *crathur*, Mother said to Molly Kinsella the day Dwyer died and a few of the ICA biddies had gathered in Johnsey's mother's kitchen to pick at the tragedy like crows picking at a flungaway snack box. Molly Kinsella allowed that she supposed, throwing her old hairy eyebrows and her witchy chin towards heaven, as much as to say a lad like that couldn't be loved the same as a lad that would be fine and tall and handsome, like Dermot McDermott, and out hurling and having young girls huddled in the bit of a stand mooning over him in little giggling bunches.

Johnsey saw Dermot McDermott kicking his own dog once, above near the Height where the McDermotts' big farm met Daddy's little one. Johnsey had been up foddering but he had left the tractor in the near field and walked a forkful up. He'd heard shouting, a girl's voice calling someone a prick, but by the time Johnsey got a view across to the McDermotts' top field, Dermot McDermott was alone with their old border collie. A collie was a dog that would love you without fail or compromise. Johnsey saw Dermot McDermott deliver a kick to that lovely old bitch's flank that nearly toppled her and she limped off, crying. He pictured some young lady, after fighting with Dermot McDermott, and she storming off down past their house in a temper, and his people only laughing at her inside in the house as she ran through the yard and he only shaking his head and going on about his business with his big experimental crops that they do be all congratulating him over in the co-op and all questions and telling him he's great. Was that the way with all men and women now?

Not with Mother and Daddy, they only had harsh words the odd time, and then only over silly things like muck getting dragged in through the house and even then Daddy could placate Mother by making her laugh and Johnsey would laugh too at Daddy's clowning and letting on not to know anything about the

muck and pretending he was calling the guards because surely an intruder must be at large, and it seemed their world was nearly improved because of the fight. And the Unthanks, Himself and Herself as Mother and Daddy always called them, had a quiet way of moving about each other; you knew they were mad about each other just by the way they laughed at the things the other said and listened when the other was talking and called each other *love* the whole time.

But Johnsey had seen young couples outside Ciss Brien's and they were certainly not nice to each other. One Friday evening, Johnsey had had to hang back at the pump before the corner because there was roaring and shouting going on just up the road and it made him nervous. A woman was shouting louder than he had ever heard at a fella – Johnsey tried not to listen, but the gist was that they had children and she was going away somewhere and he was meant to be minding the kids and he had promised and here he was drinking every penny he had and that was her money for the *hen*.

A hen? Johnsey couldn't imagine this one buying a hen, with jeans that tight and heels that high. As he chanced walking past he saw her face clearly; it had black rivers running down it and your man was a fine fat lad like himself, but with a tattoo of a cross on his neck. Out from the city, like a lot were, rehoused by the County Council. The cross-tattoo lad was smoking his fag away and ignoring the woman in the tight jeans and for a finish she just stood there going You bastard, and when Johnsey walked past trying to be invisible she said What are you looking at, you spastic, in that singsong townie voice.

Johnsey felt aggrieved that she should know this about him. The cross-tattoo lad seemed glad she had a distraction from him. He's only a retard, he declared. Johnsey picked up his pace. A *retard*. Ree-tard. Lovely, coming from a big fat lad with a cross

drawn on his neck that wouldn't mind his own children, besides drinking all the money for the hen. Johnsey wouldn't do that if he had a wife, even a wild-looking one with jeans stuck to her arse; he'd mind her and his children and bring all his wages home and do silly things to make them all laugh. Thinking of those jeans and the bit of pink frill he could see peeping over the top of them made Johnsey think of the magazine again. And what if one of those who had passed away was watching him and he inside in the jacks, interfering with himself? The dead are all around us, according to Father Cotter. They're having a right old laugh at me, so.

Johnsey went down to the front room where Mother was watching the news and knitting something with no shape yet, and the big brown clock ticked and tocked the night slowly away. They'd hardly ever used the good room before Daddy died. If they were all watching telly, they'd sit on the long, battered green couch that was hidden away near the back kitchen, out of sight of visitors when not in use. Daddy would drag it into service and position it in front of the hearth, directed in by Mother like he was reversing a trailer in the yard, and Johnsey would sit in the middle between them and they'd look at a film or a comedy and Mother would make tea during one of the ad breaks and bring over tart and cream on a tray and you couldn't get better than that. But now it was all the good room with Mother. That long, battered couch was covered in boxes and bits and bobs that had no business on a couch. It wouldn't have been balanced right, anyway, without Daddy. There'd have been too much empty space on it, and that empty space would draw out your sadness like the vacuum cleaner draws out dust from behind the television: you'd have forgotten it was there until you went rooting around for it.

When bedtime came he was glad to say goodnight to Mother and retreat upstairs to think. A man couldn't think about things

with his mother in the room – it was hard enough thinking of things to say to a woman who had hardly any words left for the world, only lonesome thoughts and muttered prayers.

The cross one in the tight jeans had looked a bit like the girls in Dwyer's dirty magazine. Johnsey couldn't believe they were fully real, them wans. How could a part of a woman look so strange, like an alien's face, and yet make you not be able to stop looking at it?

JOHNSEY LIKED thinking about the stories Daddy used tell him before he went to sleep. A rake of his great-uncles were priests in Scotland and America and Canada. They joined the priesthood and exiled themselves as penance for taking the lives of so many Black and Tans years ago during the War of Independence. Daddy's father was only very young, the youngest of six boys and a girl, and he and his sister would be warming blocks all night and placing them in the lads' empty beds, down low where their feet would be if they were not patrolling the countryside shooting Englishmen, so when they came home and tore their clothes off and jumped into their beds, their feet would warm quick enough so that if they were raided, their mother would shout Sure look, sir, feel those boys' feet, they've been in their beds since sunset, for they've all to be up at cockcrow. And sure enough the rotten bastard would beat them from their beds with the butt of his dirty English gun and line them up for his inspection and they would act like they'd just been dragged from the deepest of sleep and their toes toasty, and that trick saved many a young rebel's life.

The English officer would leave them their lives but before they went away he'd let the Black and Tan bastards loose about the place and they'd try to flush the Blessed Virgin down the toilet and they'd take the holy picture out to the yard and fling it on the

ground and piss all over Our Lord and God only knows what other depravities were visited upon holy things before finally the great-uncles won their war and John Bull and his savage legion fecked off home out of it. Johnsey thought of their bravery and boldness and wondered why had he not the same daring. Hadn't he the same blood? Those great-uncles he never met would have no trouble talking up for theirselves or getting girls to do the things described in Dwyer's American magazine. They'd beat the head off of the likes of Eugene Penrose for sport.

And what about Granddad? Sure didn't he grow up just as brave, but by then the Free State had been established and the Irish had turned their guns on each other and then made up again, kind of, and his brothers had scattered to the four winds. He drove his motorbike across Lough Derg once, when the lake was iced over completely, from Youghal Quay the whole way across to County Clare, just to see could it be done without a fella falling through, and he made it clear across, where he drank a brandy and smoked a fag and doubtless talked to a load of Clare girls and turned around and flew it the whole way back and was hailed a hero. Maybe you had to have brothers to be brave; they would knock toughness into you. Granddad married a woman so beautiful that people – men *and* women – stood and stared at her with their mouths open, wondering could such a creature really be real. And Daddy was another hero, loved and feared in near equal measure by all who knew him. And what about Daddy's brother, Uncle Michael, who was long dead and nearly never talked about? He fell off of scaffolding beyond in London and was killed and he only twenty-one. He was *beautiful*, Mother said once. That was a funny thing to say about a man. He could have charmed the birds right out of the trees, by all accounts.

All about him in that house were the ghosts of heroes, and here lay he, a lonesome gom, letting them all down.