

# 1

IT IS EVENING and the window is open a little. There are voices in the hall, footsteps running up and down the stairs, then along the back corridor towards the kitchen. Now and then Tess hears the crunch of gravel outside, the sound of a bell as a bicycle is laid against the wall. Earlier a car drove up the avenue, into the yard, and horses and traps too, the horses whinnying as they were pulled up. She is sitting on the dining-room floor in her good dress and shoes. The sun is streaming in through the tall windows, the light falling on the floor, the sofa, the marble hearth. She holds her face up to feel its warmth.

For two days people have been coming and going and now there is something near. She wishes everyone would go home and let the house be quiet again. The summer is gone. Every day the leaves fall off the trees and blow down the avenue. She thinks of them blowing into the courtyard, past the coach house, under the stone arch. In the morning she had gone out to the orchard and stood inside the high wall.

It was cold then. The pear tree stood alone. She walked under the apple trees. She picked up a rotten yellow apple and, when she smelled it, it reminded her of the apple room and the apples laid out on newspapers on the floor, turning yellow.

She lies back on the rug and looks up at the pictures on the wallpaper. Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Her mother told her the story. She picks out the colours – dark green, blue, red – and follows the ivy trailing all over the wallpaper, all around Adam and Eve. They are both naked except for a few leaves. Eve has a frightened look on her face. She has just spotted the serpent. A serpent is a snake, her mother said. The apple tree behind Eve is old and bent, like the ones in the orchard.

She feels something in the room. A whishing sound, and a little breeze rushes past her. She sits up, blinks. A black-bird has flown into the room. It flies around and around and she smiles, amazed, and opens her arms for it to come to her. It perches on the top of the china cabinet and watches her with one eye. Then it takes off again and comes to rest on the wooden pelmet above the curtains. It starts to peck at a spot on the wall. She holds her breath. She listens to the tap-tap of its beak, then a faint tearing sound and a little strip of wallpaper comes away and the bird with the little strip like a twig in its beak rises and circles and flies out the window. She looks after it, astonished.

The door opens and the head of her sister Claire appears. 'Is this where you are? *Tess!* Come on, hurry on!'

Something is about to happen. Her older sisters Evelyn

and Claire are home from boarding school. She loves Claire almost as much as her mother, or Captain the dog. More than she loves Evelyn, or Maeve her other sister, or even the baby. Equal to how she loves Mike Connolly, the workman.

The door opens again, and Claire holds out her hand urgently for Tess to come. There are people standing around the hall, waiting. The front door is wide open and outside there are more people. She can hear their feet crunching the gravel and the hum of low talk. She looks around at the faces of her aunts and cousins, her neighbours. Her teacher Mrs Snee is smiling at her. Claire pulls her close – they are standing next to Aunt Maud now – and squeezes her hand and bows her head. Suddenly she is frightened.

A shuffle on the upstairs landing and everyone goes quiet. Men's voices, half whispering but urgent, drift down from above. She thinks there must be a lot of people up there but when she looks up there are only shadows and shoulders beyond the banisters. She sighs. She will soon need to go to the bathroom. She looks down at her new shoes. She got them in Briggs' shop in the town during the school holidays, along with the green dress she is wearing. Her mother got new shoes that day too. And a new blue dress. Her mother bent down to tie her laces and Tess left her hand on her mother's head, on the soft hair.

The stairs sweep up and turn to the right and it is here on the turn, by the stained-glass window, that her uncle's back comes into view. Light is streaming in. Her heart starts to beat fast. She sees the back of a neighbour, Tommy Burns, and her other uncle, struggling. And then she understands.

At the exact moment she sees the coffin, she understands. It turns the corner and the sun hits it. The sun flows all over the coffin, turning the wood yellow and red and orange like the window, lighting it up, making it beautiful. The gold handles are shining. It is so beautiful, her heart swells and floods with the light. She closes her eyes. She can feel her mother near. Her mother is reaching out a hand, smiling at her. She can feel the touch of her mother's fingers on her face. Her mother is all hers – her face, her long hair, her mouth, they are all hers. Then someone coughs and she opens her eyes.

The men are almost at the bottom of the stairs and the coffin is tilted, heavy. She is afraid it will fall. Her father and her older brother Denis get behind it now, lifting, helping. She looks down, presses her toes against the soles of her shoes to keep her feet still. She wants to run up the last few steps and open the coffin and bring her mother out. She looks at the handles again, and at the little crosses on the top. She tries to count them. There is a big gold cross on the lid. Last night, when her cousin Kathleen took her up to bed, they passed her mother's room. The shutters were closed and candles were lit. There were people standing and sitting and leaning against the walls, neighbours, relations, all saying the Rosary. She dipped her head to see past the crowd. She could not see her mother. Just the dark wood of the wardrobe and the wash stand. And the mirror covered with a black cloth. And leaning up against the wall, against the pink roses of the wallpaper, the wooden lid with the gold cross, and the light of the candles dancing on it. They

put the lid on over her mother. She looks up at Claire, about to speak, but Claire says 'Shh', and tightens her grip on Tess's hand. A silence falls on the hall. She turns and sees the big brass gong that she and Maeve play with sometimes by the wall. She wants to reach for the beater and hit the gong hard.

The coffin is crawling towards the front door. Then the men leave it down on two chairs, and rest for a minute. When they pick it up again everyone walks behind it and it passes through the open door, into the sun. On the gravel there is a black hearse and a thousand faces looking at them. The men bring the coffin to the back of the hearse and shove it in through the open door, like into a mouth. Maeve starts to cry and Claire goes to her.

Tess turns and sees Mike Connolly at the edge of the yard, with Captain the dog at his feet. He is holding his cap in his hand. She thinks he is crying. Everyone is crying, but she is not. She looks up and sees the blackbird on the laurel tree, eyeing her. *You robber, she wants to shout, you tore my mother's wallpaper, and now she's dead.* She looks past the white railings that run around the lawn, over the sloping fields and the quarry, far off to a clump of trees. Then the hearse door is shut and she gets a jolt. She looks around. She does not know what to do. The evening sun is blinding her. It is shining on everything, too bright, on the laurel tree and the lawn and the white railings, on the hearse and the gravel and the blackbird.

The hearse pulls away and people start walking behind it. Her uncle's car follows and then the horses and traps, and the neighbours, wheeling bicycles. Claire is beside her

again, leaning into her face. 'You've to go into the house, Tess. You and Maeve, ye're to stay at home with Kathleen.'

Her cousin Kathleen takes her hand, leads herself and Maeve around to the side of the house, down the steps into the small yard. Before they reach the back door, Tess breaks away and runs back across the gravel, the lawn, off into the fields. On a small hill she stands and watches the hearse moving up the avenue, turning onto the main road. It moves along the stone wall that circles her father's land, the crowd and the horses and traps walking after it. Sometimes the trees or the wall block her view. But she watches, and waits, until the black roof of the hearse comes into view again, flashing in the sun. It slows and turns left onto Chapel Road, and the people follow, like dark shapes. Then they begin to disappear.

She stands still, watching until the last shape fades and she is alone. She is gone. Her mother is gone. She feels a little sick, dizzy from the huge sky above. She feels the ground falling away from under her – the grass and the field and the hill are all sliding away, until she is left high and dry on the top of a bare hill. Like the Blessed Virgin in the picture in the church when she is taken up into Heaven from the top of a mountain. Maybe she, Tess, is being taken up into Heaven this very minute. She can hardly breathe. She turns her face towards the low sun and closes her eyes and waits. *Please*. She waits for her mother's face to appear, a hand to reach out. She leans her whole body upwards, desperate for the sun to touch her, the wind to raise her, the sky to open, Heaven to pull her in.

When she opens her eyes she is still in her father's field, and there, a few feet away, are cattle, five or six, staring at her with big faces and sad eyes. The ground is under her feet again, the grass is green, nothing has changed. She looks around, frightened, ashamed. She starts running back towards the house. She runs into the yard, searches the barn, the coach house, the stables. She sticks her head into the dark musty potato house and calls out, 'Mike, Mike, are you there?' and waits and listens. Everywhere is silent. Soon it will be dark. She hears the sound of a motor in the distance. A car is coming down the avenue. She stands and waits for it to appear in the yard. Her heart is pounding. It is the hearse, she thinks, returning. With her mother sitting up in the front seat, smiling, and the coffin behind open, empty – a terrible mistake put right. They had come to the wrong house. They had come for the wrong woman – it was old Mrs Geraghty back in the village they should have taken.

But it is not the hearse that drives into the yard. It is Miss Tannian, the poultry instructress. She steps out of her car in a green tweed costume and patent shoes. And auburn hair, like Tess's mother's. The sky is pink and as she comes towards Tess the last of the sun lights her up from behind. She is speaking to Tess, saying, *I am sorry, I am so sorry*. Tess runs away from her, off along the edge of the yard, under the arch towards the orchard. The big iron gates are open and she runs in and stands in the shadows. The apple trees are dark, their low crooked branches like old women's skirts. Her eyes dart all over the place, along the four high walls. And then she sees him, Mike Connolly, sitting on an old

stump at the far end, his head down, Captain beside him. As soon as she sees him the tears come. She runs and falls at his feet and begins to sob.

It is dark when the others come home. Her aunt Maud and Maud's husband, Frank, and the aunts and cousins from Dublin crowd into the kitchen. The Tilley lamps are lit. There are all kinds of nice things on the pantry shelves, cakes and buns and biscuits. Mrs Glynn, who took the baby over to her house, is here. She helps Tess's sisters serve tea and sandwiches to all the guests, and whiskey to the men. Her father sits quietly in the armchair. Her brother Denis has his head down. Tess wants to climb up on his lap like she used to when she was four. They are talking about the baby, Oliver. Aunt Maud says she will take him.

'It'll be for the best,' she says.

Her father says nothing.

'It'll only be for a year or two,' Aunt Maud says. 'And sure ye'll be over and back, and Kathleen can bring him back every Sunday to play with the girls.' She looks around the table. 'That's settled so. And isn't it what she wanted herself?'

'It is,' her father says at last. 'It's what she wanted, all right.'

She goes up to the front hall and drags a stool over to open the door. It is dark outside. She sits on the step and folds her arms. She can make out the laurel tree on the lawn. She remembers when she and Maeve came home from school every day, her mother sitting under the shiny laurel tree with a blanket around her knees, sewing, and Oliver beside her



in his cradle. Sometimes her head was down, sleeping. Oliver wasn't long born and he was sleeping too. Tess would run to them and look in over the top of his cradle and smell his baby smell. Her mother's long hair was tied back. Then she would get a fit of coughing and her hair would come loose. Once there was blood in her hankie. When she was in bed, sick, her hair was let down. They took Tess up to her mother's room last week and her mother was sitting up in her white nightdress. They lifted her onto the high bed and her mother kissed her forehead. But then, when Tess started to stroke her mother's hair and lie against her, Evelyn said, Come on, down with you now, madam, and she took her away.

Tess has not had her tea. She wonders who will make their teas now. She likes a boiled egg and currant cake with butter. She likes when her mother stands beside her father at the table and pours him a cup of steaming tea from the teapot. Sometimes, he puts out his hand and touches her mother's bottom and she and her sisters pretend not to see. Her mother is in her coffin in the chapel tonight. God will probably drop down his Golden Chute soon – any minute now – when he is ready to take her mother up into Heaven. That is how she, Tess, and her brothers and sisters arrived on earth. Her mother told her that whenever she and Tess's father wanted a new baby, she went to the chapel and there she prayed and God, hearing her prayer, dropped down his Golden Chute and popped in a baby and down the chute the baby flew, fat and happy and gurgling, into her mother's waiting arms.

Tess takes off her shoes, looks up at the black sky, begins to hum. She is not sure if the Golden Chute actually takes people back up into Heaven. That is a guess. She wonders if her mother is on her way, now, this minute, moving through the dark sky, in and out among the cold stars. She grows a little afraid. She looks down at her hands. She picks at the old burn mark on her thumb. She bites off a bit of skin and chews it. She remembers the day she got the burn. Oliver wasn't even born and she had not started school. She went out with her mother to feed the hens. Chuck, chuck, chuck, they called out. They went into the duck-house and the hen-house to gather the eggs. Her mother had a bucket and Tess had a small tin can. Tess wanted to be just like her mother. When her mother put the eggs in her bucket that day, Tess wanted eggs in her tin can too. She started to cry, but then her mother said, Look, Look, and she picked up three lovely shiny stones from the yard and put them into Tess's can and rattled them around. Then her mother ran off inside, in case the bread got burnt. Tess ran after her, but she saw another lovely pebble shining up at her from the ground and she stopped and put it in her tin can and raced in through the small yard, calling out to her mother about her new pebble. At the back door she tripped and tumbled down the steps into the kitchen, and then, half running, she fell sideways into the open fire. Her mother cried out and let the griddle pan fall and ran and lifted Tess and swung her across the kitchen into the big white sink. Later, telling Tess's father what had happened, her mother began to cry. Her two little hands were burnt, she told him,

wiping her eyes. Tess tried to show him the pebbles but her hands were all bandaged up.

Everyone dresses in black the next morning and goes to the funeral. Tess and Maeve stay behind with Mike Connolly. The dining-room table is set with the good china and cutlery. There's a leg of mutton cooked and left aside in the kitchen. Mrs Glynn comes with warm brown bread. She takes off her coat and puts eggs on to boil. She tells Maeve to mash up cold potatoes with a fork. When the plates are ready Tess and Maeve carry them up to the dining room. Mrs Glynn puts on her coat and says if she hurries she'll make the burial. Tess's heart jumps. Mrs Glynn takes Maeve with her, but Tess is too young to go to the graveyard. 'Your poor mother,' she says. Before they leave Tess asks about Oliver. When is Oliver coming home? Mrs Glynn says they can come and see him tomorrow. He'll be going to live with Aunt Maud after that.

When they are gone the house is quiet. The smell of the mutton makes her feel sick. She listens to the clock ticking. Everything is changing. No one puts the wireless on any more. She hears water dripping inside the pipes high up on the wall. Upstairs the floorboards are creaking. She starts to grow afraid. She is sure there is someone up there. She thinks her mother will come down the stairs and into the kitchen. She runs out into the small yard and as she turns the corner onto the lawn she crashes into Mike Connolly. 'Ah, *a leanbh*, slow down, slow down.'

'I think Momma is coming down the stairs, Mike, I think she's back. I heard her steps.'

‘Come on in now out of that, and make me some tea. My belly’s above in my back. D’you know how many cows I milked this morning, do you? Before you even turned over for your second sleep, Missy!’

He throws two sods of turf on the fire, and hangs the kettle on the crane. The clock is quieter now. Outside, the crows are cawing. Mike is standing, looking into the fire, and she does the same. When the flames are big and red and the kettle is singing he makes a pot of tea. He cuts the bread and says, ‘Will we make a bit of toast?’ She smiles. He knows – like her mother knows – that toast is her favourite, favourite thing in the world. He sticks a cut of bread on a fork and leans in and holds it before the flames. She leans in too. Their faces grow pink and warm as the bread turns brown. He toasts three or four cuts and neither of them says a word. But she is happy. She is happy. They sit together at the big table and he butters her toast and spreads jam on it and her mouth waters. He pours two cups of tea and gives her a wink. ‘Eat up now,’ he says. And then, just as he is about to take a bite, he turns his head and sees something and a change comes over him. She follows his look to her mother’s apron hanging on a nail at the end of the dresser. It is floury around the belly from all the times her mother leaned against the table, kneading the bread. ‘Eat up, Mike,’ she says quickly. ‘Your toast is getting cold.’

They have all come back, the priest too, and they are sitting at the long table up in the dining room. Tess keeps an eye on the small china milk jugs, and when they are empty she

runs all the way back to the kitchen and refills them. She moves along the table offering buns and shop cake from a plate. Her hair is tied back neatly. She stands straight, smiling politely when she is praised. The priest asks her how old she is. Seven, she tells him. He says she's a great girl and that she's the image of her mother and in that second her heart nearly bursts with happiness. She looks across the room, up at the spot above the window where the bird tore the wall-paper. She wants to run and find her mother and tell her what the priest just said.

Her father sits at one end of the table, the priest at the other.

'May the Lord have mercy on her soul,' the priest says. 'What age was she, Michael?'

Her father stops eating. '1904, she was born. She was forty last March. That's when she started to complain. Just after the child was born.'

He looks around them all, then at the priest. 'I met a nun once in a church in Galway,' he says. 'She was back from America. D'you know what she told me? She said that a man's soul weighs the same as a snipe. Some scientist over there weighed people just before they died, TB patients she said, and then he weighed them again just after they died, beds and all. And weren't they lighter . . . Imagine that . . . The soul was gone, she said.'

Aunt Maud blows her nose into her handkerchief. Evelyn goes around the table with the teapot, then whispers something to Aunt Maud.

'She told Evelyn where to get the linen table-cloth to put

on the table for the meal,' Aunt Maud says. 'Isn't that right, Evelyn?'

Evelyn nods and sniffs. 'She did. Only a few days ago. She told me which drawer it was in.'

Tess is watching her father. He takes a drink of tea and swallows. All the time he is looking down. She can see the bones in his face moving under his skin.

'She was a fine woman,' the priest says. 'A fine woman.'

'She even told us which dress to lay her out in – her new blue dress,' Evelyn says.

Tess's heart nearly stops. She understands what that means; her mother is lying in her coffin in her new blue dress. The one she got in Briggs' that day that Tess got her dress, the one she is wearing now. Carefully, she leaves the cake plate up on the sideboard and walks out of the dining room on shaky legs. She climbs the stairs. The sun is flooding in through the stained-glass window, like yesterday. She hurries past, to the upstairs landing and down along the corridor to her parents' room. The door is closed. She stands for a moment, then turns the handle and walks in. It is dark. The drapes have not been opened. There is a bad smell, like when a mouse dies under the floorboards. She runs and drags open the drapes on one of the windows. The mirror is still covered with the black cloth. On the dressing table there is a photograph of her father and mother on their wedding day. She looks at it. Her father might get a new wife now. She might get a new mother. There is another photograph of her mother in a nurse's uniform when she was young and working in a hospital down in Cork. She opens the top drawer, lifts out

a red cloth box, checks her mother's brooches, her locket, her hat pins. Nothing is missing. She opens the wardrobe door and gets a terrible fright. For a second she thinks there are people in funeral clothes standing inside the wardrobe. She pushes at the coats and the dresses but there are too many and she is too small and they fall back in her way again. She pulls and drags on the hems of the dresses and skirts, bringing them towards the light. She is almost crying. There is no blue dress. Her mother is wearing it in the coffin. Then she remembers that her mother is no longer in the chapel. She is down in the ground now. Or up in Heaven.

In the dark she is counting sheep, like Claire told her to do. It is no good, she cannot sleep. She starts to count all the days since she was born, but it is too hard. She tries to remember every single day, every single minute with her mother. Suddenly, there is a loud bang. She sits up, terrified. She hears dogs barking in the distance. Maeve does not stir in her bed across the room. Then everything is silent again. She listens out for sounds in the house. A big bright moon is shining into the room, making everything white, even the floorboards. *Mellow the moonlight.* When the woman comes on the wireless singing this song, her mother sings along. *There's a form at the casement, a form of her true love. And he whispered with face bent, I'm waiting for you love.* Tess meant to ask her mother what a casement was, and a form. Her mother said there is a man in the moon and Tess kneels up on her bed now and looks out the window, turning her head this way and that, trying to make out his face.

In the morning before it is fully bright she wakes up. She listens out for Oliver. And then she remembers and a sick feeling comes over her. Early each morning last summer the little birds used to sing, huddled together under the roof above her window. Now they are all gone, their wings and tiny hearts are grown up. She closes her eyes, tries to go back to sleep. The house is so quiet she thinks everyone might be gone and she is the only one left. She pulls the blankets up to her chin to keep out the cold.

She sits up, looks across at Maeve sleeping. She gets out of bed and runs over to the big window, hardly feeling the floor under her. The sky is grey and low, everything still asleep. She looks out across the lawn, then far off over the fields. Her father is coming over a hill, in his long coat, with a gun on his shoulder. He is carrying dead rabbits. He comes nearer and nearer. She has never seen him like this, so lonely.



## 2

THEY ARE RUNNING down the road to Glynn's'. Running, she feels free. In her bare legs, in the rush of air, she feels strong and free. She keeps up with Maeve, happy, almost dancing, almost forgetting what has happened. The door opens and Mrs Glynn walks out with Oliver in her arms. They run to him, cooing, and take him into their own arms. Inside, they sit on a rug and eat bread and jam and play with Oliver until they all grow tired and quiet.

Just when her thoughts start to come against her and she remembers why she is here, there is a knock on the door. A family of tinkers stands outside. Maeve and Tess gather close to Mrs Glynn. 'God bless this house and all in it,' the tinker woman says in a rough voice. She has a baby in her arms and three or four children beside her. A girl of about Tess's age is chewing the ends of her hair. She stops chewing and looks at Tess in a way that makes Tess look away. Out on the road the tinker man and three older boys wait with the donkey and cart. Tess recognises the tinker man. He

came to the school one day and cleaned out the lavatories. The tinker woman holds out an empty tin can now, begging for milk or anything they can spare. Her big brown face and her rough voice and all the wild children frighten Tess and she cannot wait for them to go away again.

She stands at the window and watches them crowd onto the cart and squat down. As they pull away it starts to rain. The girl is behind, facing back, and she catches Tess's eye again and stares at her. Tess feels cold and strange. She is afraid the girl will put a spell on her. She thinks the tinker girl knows something about her, something that Tess herself does not know. The girl straightens up. Her eyes lock onto Tess's. Slowly, she sticks out her tongue. Tess's heart almost stops. It is meant for her and her alone. She is doomed, cursed. The cart rounds a bend and disappears out of sight.

The next evening Aunt Maud comes and brings Oliver away. They have packed up all his things. Tess watches as their uncle Frank's car drives away. She walks around the house, trying to find a place that will make her feel right again. She goes to all her favourite rooms, to the space under the back stairs, the orchard. But happiness does not return. Nothing will do away with this feeling she is carrying inside her, like a bad secret.

Her older sisters, Evelyn and Claire, do not return to boarding school. On their first morning back at national school Claire walks Tess and Maeve to the end of the avenue. They have mutton sandwiches and shop cake, left over from the funeral, for their lunches. They walk along the road to

the end of their father's farm. Tess grows nervous; she is not sure they will be safe venturing this far from home. She looks into a field where the cattle are butting heads and jumping on each other's backs.

In the school yard the children form a circle around herself and Maeve and for a little while she feels special. Is your mammy dead? they ask. She wonders if there is a way people can tell now. 'Did ye touch her – was she as cold as marble? Where's she buried?' one of the big boys asks. Kildoon, Maeve says. 'That's where Seán Blake's granny is buried. Her grave was robbed,' he says. 'They dug up her coffin and took the rings off her fingers and the pennies off her eyes.' He looks straight at Tess. Then the bell rings.

She is allowed to sit with Maeve in the senior classroom today. Before the lesson begins Mr Clarke the headmaster picks up an egg from his desk and turns his back on the children and cracks it open. He throws back his head and swallows the raw egg in one gulp. A rainbow appears in the sky and he writes the seven colours on the blackboard and raps his cane as the children chant out the words. She sits close to Maeve, their arms touching. She is stiff with fear. She cannot read so she tries hard to remember the colours. *Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo and violet*, she calls, flinching at each rap of the cane.

On the way home they pass the tinkers' camp at the Black Bend. The dogs start to bark. The trees are leaning low and dark, but she can see the tents and the fires and children crying and running around in their bare feet. A man is sitting on an upside-down bucket, hammering a tin can.

There are rags drying on bushes, and a horse and a donkey tied to a tree. 'Hurry on,' Maeve says in a low voice and they walk quickly. Then Tess sees the girl from the day before, standing outside a tent. She looks smaller, paler. The girl sees Tess too. Tess has the feeling that they know each other, or that they are somehow close, the way sisters are close, and that the girl understands this too. She wants to smile, to show that they are friends. Then she does something – she sticks her tongue out at the tinker girl, just like the girl did yesterday. The girl frowns and looks sad and Tess feels bad. Her heart feels sick. *It was only a game*, she wants to say. But the girl is turning away. She lifts the flap of the tent and enters.

On the avenue they kick at the fallen leaves. A black car drives out of the yard towards them. It is Miss Tannian. She rolls down the window, smiles, asks about their day. She is wearing red lipstick. Tess can feel the eyes of her father and Mike Connolly from over the wall in the potato field, watching. Denis is bending over the pit in the corner of the field. He is as tall as her father now, but thinner.

'That one is after Dadda,' Evelyn says before the men come in to their dinner. 'And Mother not cold in her grave.' They are talking about Miss Tannian.

'Don't be daft,' Claire says. 'She only came to take the blood and check for reactors.'

'Reactors, my eye! Did you see the get-up of her – in the costume and lipstick? And she's no spring chicken either, let me tell you.'

Once, last summer, they had to lock up the hens in the hen-house for testing. It was a big job. Her mother held up each hen and Miss Tannian drew out blood in a little syringe and squirted it into small bottles to take away. Then her mother opened the hatch at the bottom of the hen-house door and flung the hen out into the yard. Rhode Island Reds and Leghorns. Leghorns are the best for laying, her mother said.

'Anyway, doesn't she know well Dadda is only after burying his wife?' Claire said.

'Mark my words – that one is setting her cap at him. She's after this place. Herself and her cocked nose.'

After the dinner Tess goes out to the back hall, past the tap room and the apple room. She is searching again. She wants to leave down this secret weight, everything she is carrying in her heart. She thinks of the tinker girl inside her tent, and she knows, somehow, that the girl is thinking of her too at this moment. She goes to the dark space under the back stairs, where the incubator stands empty now. In spring the eggs hatched out there under a Tilley lamp. She loved the warmth and the glow of the red lamp. There, she was happy. Every day Evelyn or Claire or her mother turned the eggs over carefully. Then, one morning, a miracle – two yellow chicks had broken through during the night, and were staggering around on thin shaky legs. One day, she stood looking in at the eggs. She had a sudden longing to climb in, fold herself up, lie down under the lovely warm light. Then her mother appeared and leaned in and picked up an egg. She held it up to the window-light. 'Tess,' she

whispered. 'Come, look at the little birdie inside!' Tess moved close against her mother's body. For a moment she pressed her face against her mother's stomach and closed her eyes and kissed it, and breathed in her smell and she could taste her mother in the smell. When she drew away, her mother was holding the egg up to the light and Tess saw a shadow, the shape of a tiny sleeping bird, inside the shell. She could not speak. Her mother smiled and stroked her head and her heart filled up. Together they stood in a stream of light watching the shadow and then her mother placed the egg back on the straw. She picked up another egg and held it up to the light and frowned, and sighed.

'What's wrong, Momma?' Tess asked.

'No birdie here, sweetheart, no birdie here,' she said sadly. 'This one's a glugger.' She threw it in a bucket for the pigs' feed, and when it burst a terrible rotten smell filled the air.

Two strange men come to the house and fumigate her mother's and father's room. They are all tested, even Mike Connolly. That night in bed she remembers Miss Tannian – they have forgotten to test Miss Tannian. She might be their new mother. She does not want a new mother. She misses Oliver. He has come only once since Aunt Maud took him away. Claire made a lovely currant cake for the visit. He had a frown, a new little wrinkle on his forehead. He had looked at Maeve's face, then at Tess's, and back at Maeve's again. They kept smiling and flapping at him but he wasn't sure who they were any more. Suddenly Tess misses her mother like never before. It is like a huge wave flowing

over her. She misses her mother for herself, and for Oliver too. He does not remember, or understand, why everything is different now. It hurts her heart to think of his small head waking up in Aunt Maud's house, in a room full of cousins and different walls, different voices. A different mother. She thinks of him waking, looking up at the ceiling, or out at the rain. His little heart jumping when a door bangs or a strange face appears, looking in at him through the bars of his cot. That evening of the visit she could not eat the currant cake. It would not go down her throat.

In school she grows to love Mrs Snee, her teacher, and she knows Mrs Snee loves her too. Every day she gives her jobs to do. On cold days Mrs Snee lets the children leave their bottles of milk beside the fire to warm them. Tess doesn't mind leaving home each morning. The house is too quiet now. It is worse when her father comes inside. The wireless has not been turned on since the funeral. Denis cycled to the town one day and got the batteries recharged, but that night when he went to turn it on her father said, 'What do you think you're doing?' in a cold hard voice and Denis backed away without a word. She had always been afraid of her father but now it is worse. His face is dark and cross all the time. One night when the priest came to visit she heard her father say, 'What's gone is gone.' At night he stares into the fire. He does not seem to like anyone – not Denis or Claire or her – except maybe Evelyn. She is the eldest. He gives her housekeeping money every Saturday. She keeps the ration book and sells eggs to the egg-man from

Henaghan's, and swaps some of the butter she churns for sugar and jam and other groceries that John Joe Donnellan sells in his travelling shop. She sends Denis to the post office, or to town to order chicken-feed. Denis is seventeen. He has blue eyes and thick black hair. When he was a baby he was blond like Oliver. They were all blond at the start, her mother said. Denis sits in the kitchen at night, his arms folded, his long legs thrown out in front of him, not saying anything. No one says much any more. A silence came on the house the day of the funeral and it has stayed. Tess thinks that they would all like the silence to end now, but no one knows how to put an end to it. She looks at their faces at night. She hears her own heart beating in her chest, in her head and ears too, *thump, thump, thump*, deafening her. She watches Denis's chest rising and falling. He can hear his own heart too, she thinks. They can all hear their hearts – Claire and Evelyn and her father – making an awful racket, thumping inside them, like hers.

In the cold, Maeve's feet break out with chilblains and she cries at night. Claire rubs on Zam-Buk and she is kept home from school for two days. Tess goes alone and stays back after school to help Mrs Snee tidy up. The light is fading when she leaves and her boots begin to hurt. She hurries along the road, almost running, pulling her coat tight. Up ahead is the Black Bend and the tinkers' camp under the trees. She sees the flames of a fire rising and people gathered around – more people than she has ever seen there before, all moving, slow and wavy, in front of the fire. There are men standing at the



edge of the camp, smoking and drinking from brown bottles. As she draws nearer a strange quietness fills the air. Not even the dogs are barking. She stops and looks back the way she has come. The road is empty and she grows afraid. Her eyes meet the eyes of the tinker man who cleaned the school lavatories. He bows his head very slowly and Tess looks away. She walks on, faster, her head down. As she passes in front of the camp a woman lets out a terrible cry. Tess stands, frozen. There are women and teenage girls gathered in a circle in front of a tent. They look up and see Tess and a hush falls on them. The circle opens and Tess sees a wooden table and on it a child is lying, dressed in white. It is the tinker girl, her eyes closed, her face snow-white, her hands crossed on her chest. She is dead. At the end of the table, a woman is combing the child's hair. It is the tinker woman who came to Mrs Glynn's door. When she sees Tess she stops and bows her head. The flames of the fire are dancing on her face. Tess cannot move or take a step. Then the girls and women close in around the table again and Tess looks at her feet and walks on, beating down the fear.

At the tea they are all looking at her. 'What's wrong with you, why don't you answer me?' Evelyn asks her. 'Why aren't you eating? And you ate no dinner either. What's wrong? Did you lose your tongue or something?' *I did answer you*, she replies. *I'm not hungry*. But then, after a few more answers, she knows they have not heard her. Her words are not working, the sounds are not coming out of her mouth into the air.

'Did something happen in school, Tess?' Claire asks her softly, and she runs from the kitchen, out to the front hall and up the stairs. At the turn she stands under the stained-glass window. She thinks of the tinker girl's white face. She remembers the day she stuck her tongue out at the tinker girl and now she is dead. She turns her face up to the window, longing for the sun to pour in and warm her. She joins her hands and says a Hail Mary. She listens for the words, to test her sound. But no sound comes. She prays louder, harder. She gives a little cough, and tries again. She starts to cry. She touches her face and the feel of the tears makes her cry more. She climbs to the top and runs along the landing to her mother's and father's room. On the dressing table she picks up the photograph of her mother in her nurse's uniform and carries it back to her own room. She takes off her boots and gets into bed with the photograph in her hand.

When she wakes it is dark. She knows from the silence of the house that it is the middle of the night. Across the room she can make out Maeve's shape in the other bed. She moves a little and feels the mattress damp under her. She puts a hand down between her legs. She has wet her knickers. She gets out and takes them off and climbs back in, keeping away from the wet spot. She remembers the photograph and feels around until she finds it on the pillow.

Her talk does not come back. Her father and Evelyn bring her down to Dr O'Beirne and he sits her up on a high table and asks her questions. But she cannot answer them. One

day Denis sits beside her on the low wall. 'You'll be all right – any day now you'll be as right as rain,' he says. 'I bet you by Christmas when Santy comes you'll be talkin' away to him.' She says her prayers, like Claire and Mike Connolly tell her to do, but her talk does not come back, not even for Christmas. At school, Mrs Snee brings her up to her desk and tries, in a kind way, to trick her into talking. On one of her visits Miss Tannian takes her aside, tells her to take deep breaths and say her own name. *Tess*, she keeps saying, *Tess*, as if Tess does not know her own name. Sometimes people get cross with her. She gives up trying to answer them. She looks into all their faces and their eyes and then they give up too. Little by little she gets used to it. She does not miss talking at all. She does everything they ask – all her chores – and they all get used to her silence.

One day when Evelyn and Denis are gone to town her father wants help with the sheep. Tess is told to stand in a gap leading into the yard. Claire is standing at the avenue and Maeve is at the orchard gate which has fallen off its hinges. Her father and Mike Connolly go off into the fields to round up the flock. They are gone a long time. Tess hates when there are big jobs like this going on – when the cattle are being dosed, or the sheep are being dipped or shorn. She lies awake at night thinking of all the things that can go wrong, all the dangers.

Then the sheep appear, running, bleating, Captain nipping at their heels, and behind, her father and Mike Connolly. She moves a little to the right, then to the left, trying to spread herself across the gap. She feels the ground shaking

from the pounding of their hooves. The smell of them, their greasy wool, reminds her of mutton. Her father shouts, *Keep back a bit*. Mike Connolly is talking to Captain all the time, making little whistling sounds that Captain understands. And then something small and dark – a cat or a rat or a bird – darts across the track and startles Tess and she jumps and one of the sheep sees what Tess has seen and turns and breaks away and rushes towards the gap, towards Tess. The others break and follow and in an instant the whole flock is coming at her, diving past her, right and left, into the open field beyond. Her father and Mike Connolly and Claire are waving their arms, shouting at her. She stands, trapped, as the sheep shoot by, brushing off her arms, leaping past her head, their hooves like thunder so that she has to crouch down and cover her head to save herself.

They are all shouting at her. The sheep are spreading out in the field behind her, Captain after them. They will go on and on through all the gaps into the far fields. Her father is coming, running, his face red. ‘Get into the house, you!’ he roars. ‘Get in, *get in out of my sight!*’ He has his hand raised and she thinks he will lash out and wallop her as he passes. But he runs on in his wellingtons. And then Mike Connolly comes through the gap, older, slower. Their eyes meet for a second. She longs for him to nod or say something but he looks away and keeps on going.

She walks around to the far side of the house where the sun never shines and no one ever goes. There’s an old rag hanging on the barbed-wire fence. A bird is singing in a tree. She leans over the fence and vomits, her hair falling

into the flow. She reaches out for the rag to wipe her mouth. It is her mother's old blouse, faded and tattered, hung out to dry a long time ago, and forgotten.

For a long time she cannot look at her father. She tries to stay out of his path. He has a way of looking at her, a long mean look, as if he is about to say something terrible that will shame her. He keeps his eyes on her when she moves around the kitchen. With each step she is afraid the ground will open and pull her in. She can hardly breathe. *I have no mother*, she thinks, *I have no father*. When he is going to a fair or a funeral she brings him his good coat and hat. Once, he said, 'Good girl', but he never says her name. Mike Connolly says her name. She has grown shy with Mike, and ashamed, since that day with the sheep. Claire is the nicest, always. She says there's a doctor in Dublin who can help her to talk again but Tess shakes her head. Some nights when the moon shines in her window and shadows cross the wall she jumps out of bed and tiptoes across the landing into Claire's and Evelyn's room. Claire puts a finger to her lips and lifts the blankets and lets Tess in beside her. They make chaireens and Tess sleeps all night like that, against Claire's lap, inside Claire's arms.

There are nights when she is afraid to sleep. She lies in her bed, remembering. Captain starts to cry below her window. She gets up and creeps down the stairs and opens the front door. The moonlight is on the steps. She does not say a word, just looks at Captain and he walks in and follows her up the stairs, into her room. He jumps on the

bed and curls up against her. He understands something about her, maybe everything, and her heart begins to open. In the darkness, in the perfect silence, she hears the smallest sounds – Maeve’s breath from across the room, the flapping of an insect’s wings high up in the corner, the tap dripping far off in the bathroom and in her mind she sees each drop falling through the air into the white sink, landing and sliding down inside. They are all asleep in their rooms, their eyelids flickering as they dream, and the rooms are silent and sleeping too, and downstairs the coals in the fire are almost gone out but still glow a little in the dark, and a thin line of smoke disappears up the chimney, curling into little puffs along the way. And the table and chairs all stand there, and the dresser, watching, waiting – in her mind she can see them all. And outside the hens and ducks locked up for the night, and the birds asleep in the trees and the cows in the cow-house and everywhere, all over the farm, worms and insects and small animals are curled up under stones and hedges and bushes. She can see them all. She imagines herself small, so small that she can see everything, hear everything, hear the blades of grass whispering, the pebbles laughing in the dark. She strokes Captain and he sighs. She can feel the beat of his heart against her. She is amazed at how happy she is. In her bed, in this house. With the lawn and the barns and the fields around her. There is nowhere else she wants to be. In her most secret heart she knows there is nowhere she loves more.

When morning breaks she walks outside and crosses the courtyard. It is Saturday and no one is up yet. The sky is

blue and the sun has reached the orchard wall. The coach-house door is open and inside someone is moving in the shadowy darkness. She looks in and sees Mike Connolly reaching to hang the horse collar up on a hook. When he turns and sees her he gets a little fright. Then his eyes soften, but he says nothing. A time will come when no one will talk to her at all, or even look at her. She is a disappearing girl.

In the darkness her eye is caught by something bright and shiny on the floor, a coin maybe. She steps inside and as she runs towards it she hits off the corner of the work bench. She cries out. *Ow*. She holds her side and rubs her hip and, when she looks at Mike, the tears come.

'Aw, now, come here to me, *a stóir*.' He kneels beside her. He puts an arm around her and makes a pitying sound with his tongue. 'Where's it sore?' he asks.

She mumbles through the tears, and keeps rubbing her side. He gets up and goes to where his old coat hangs from a nail and comes back with two toffees. 'Now,' he says. 'Here. Eat this and you'll be better in no time. Sure, you'll be better before you get married!' He takes the paper off and her mouth starts to water. As soon as she tastes the toffee she smiles.

'Now! What did I tell you, what did I tell you! Of course, now you'll have to marry me!'

It was a game he used to play with herself and Maeve when they were small. Whenever they fell or cut themselves or got upset he'd say, 'You'll be better before you get married.' She would wipe away the tears and say, 'I'm going to marry you when I grow up, Mike.'

*'I'm going to marry you when I grow up, Mike.'*

It is the look on his face that tells her he has heard her. She has heard herself too. The sound has come out of her mouth, the words are working. They look at each other. He bites his bottom lip. She holds her breath.

'Well, are you now, Missy!' he says, smiling. 'Are you indeed! And who says I'll have you? Hmm? Who says I'll marry you!?'

'I say.'

'Sure, I might be long married by then. I might have a wife of me own by the time you grow up,' he says. 'Mmm . . . Unless you marry me now.' And he turns and looks around. 'Where's the broom at all?'

She had forgotten that part of the wedding game, that the bride and groom have to step over the broom to get married. He walks into the darkness and brings out an old yard brush.

'Now, Missy, I think we're all set. Except for the priest!' He goes outside and lays the brush flat on the gravel. Then he whistles and Captain appears and he says, *Sit*, and Captain sits still and obedient.

Mike comes and gives her his arm. Through the open door she walks beside him into the winter sun. Captain is there, waiting. Mike begins to hum. She looks up at the sky and hums too and then Mike hums louder as he skips along, almost dancing, with her arm through his. And then they stand before Captain, and Mike tells her what to do, what to say, when to jump over the broom.

'And you, too,' she says. 'You've to jump over the broom too, or else you're not married.'



'Oh, I'll jump, I'll jump, to be sure.'

'And then will we go and live in your house in Connemara?'

'We will. We'll go and live in Connemara.'

And so, standing side by side, they begin. He takes her hand, and bows and says, 'Miss Teresa Lohan, do you take me, Michael Joseph Connolly, to be your husband, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, all the days of our lives?'

Captain cocks his head and whines and she laughs and says, 'I do,' and jumps over the broom. And then it is her turn.

'Will you, do you, Mike Jophus Connolly take me Tess Lohan as your wife?'

'I do.'

He jumps over the broom to her side, and puts his hand in his pocket and brings out hay seeds and chaff and tosses them over their heads. And just as he takes her two hands in his and begins to dance her around the yard, Claire walks out of the house onto the front step and sees them and smiles and comes towards them. Tess waves, calls out, and Claire begins to run, the morning sun on her back.