IF YOU WERE MINE

A Novel

Carol Ann Lefevre

Thesis submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Creative Writing)

Discipline of English
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Adelaide
June 2009

Table of Contents

Abstract

In an outback town, Esther Hayes looks out of a schoolhouse window and sees three children struck by lightning; one of them is her son, Michael. Silenced by grief, Esther leaves her young daughter, Aurora, to fend for herself; against a backdrop of an absent father and maternal neglect, the child takes comfort wherever she can, but the fierce attachments she forms never seem to last until, as an adult, she travels to her father's native Ireland. *If You Were Mine* employs elements of well-known fairy tales and explores themes of maternal abandonment and loss, as well as the consequences of adoption, in a narrative that laments the perilous nature of children's lives. Through the telling of various tales of abandonment and loss, the novel asks how one lives with a history of abandonment.

The exegetical essay analyses popular fairy tales in the context of adoption, locating the tales as a genre within adoption literature. While feminist fairy tale scholarship has illuminated the roles of women in fairy tales, particularly in those popularised by the Brothers Grimm, different versions of the tales published over extended time periods provide insight into the ways in which society has perceived and, perhaps, still perceives the roles of biological and non-biological/adoptive mothers. However, the tales have never been read and interpreted from an adoptive point of view.

In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, psychologist Bruno Bettelheim asserts that 'giving comfort is one of the purposes of fairy tale' (62). This essay argues that the message subtly transmitted in many of the best-known fairy tales is of the almost supernatural power of maternal blood. Further, when read from the position of an adoptive mother, with an eye to the ways in which these old dark tales might affect an adopted child, or one who is not being cared for by its biological mother, fairy tales appear

as disquieting narratives, narratives concerned with questions of blood and genetics, while the acts of extreme violence they often include definitely lack the element of 'comfort' proposed by Bruno Bettelheim. Through writing *If You Were Mine* and this essay, I have been able to examine selected fairy tale narratives both imaginatively and critically in the context of adoption and their meaning for constructed families.

Statement of Originality

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Carol Ann Lefevre and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis (as listed below) resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library catalogue, the Australasian Digital Theses Program, and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

If You Were Mine was published under the Vintage imprint of Random House Australia on 1st September 2008.

Carol Ann Lefevre……..

26th June, 2009.

Statement Regarding Editing

If You Were Mine was published by Random House in September 2008 and normal publishing procedures meant that a professional editor read the creative work prior to publication. The manuscript presented herein for examination is the draft that followed my mentorship with Jane Rogers and has not been worked on by a professional editor. The draft does include later research into the Indigenous history of Death Rock, however, undertaken at the prompting of my editor at Random House, Elizabeth Cowell. I have imported this material into the earlier draft because I am anxious not to allow any work containing inaccuracies about Indigenous culture, however small, to circulate in the public domain. Overall, editorial advice about the section on Death Rock was limited to minor questions concerning word choice and observations regarding consistency and completeness of the creative work.

Carol Ann Lefevre……..

26th June, 2009.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank The University of Adelaide, for their generosity in granting the Research Abroad Scholarship which assisted my visit to Dublin and Tipperary. Thank you also to the English Department for arranging my very rewarding mentorship with the English novelist, Jane Rogers. A debt of gratitude is owed to Dr Jan Harrow, for our three-year conversation about mothers, daughters and fairy tale, and for her patient encouragement and support in the role of supervisor throughout. Professor Nicholas Jose was a wise and professional mentor when it came to editing and publishing the novel. Dr Eva Sallis encouraged me to press ahead with important research, and was generous with contacts. Professor Brian Castro both launched the novel and offered a rigorous critical response to the exegetical essay which was invaluable in helping me to refine my argument.

Thanks are also due to colleagues, Anna Solding, Heather Taylor Johnson, Katherine Doube, Rachel Hennessy, and Bernadette Smith, who read and commented on early extracts of the novel. Special thanks to Bernadette, who pointed me in the direction of Aristophanes and the origin of love. A huge debt of thanks is owed to Nukunu man, Jared Thomas, for assistance with the history of Death Rock in the Southern Flinders and its significance as a site of altruism on the track from Yappala. Jared explained that both Nukunu and Adnyamathanha people believe in the concept of heaven, although this is independent of the Christian belief.

In Ireland: Jon Sweeny at Walton's Music School in Dublin patiently spent two hours teaching me to play the tin whistle and introduced me to the gorgeous air, 'Innisheer'. Geradine Rowley at Ruhama offered informed comment on the lives of women trafficked into Ireland. The librarian at the Irish Traditional Music Archive advised on songs related to

Tipperary. I would like to thank The Keeper of Marsh's Library, Dr Muriel McCarthy, who offered morning tea, told me about the visiting habits of Swift and Thomas Moore, and recited the section about Marsh's Library from *Ulysses.* I am especially grateful to Jane Rogers for agreeing to mentor me. Her encouragement and clear-sighted reading of the manuscript helped me to restructure it into a much more workable shape.

Love and appreciation to Christopher Lefevre, who took on the driving in Ireland so that I was free to watch the scenery and make notes; he also performed the same role in South Australia's mid north. Finally, to my mother, whose unwavering love and encouragement has been a quiet presence not only in this project but throughout my life, I offer profound and loving gratitude.

PART ONE

South Australia

1962

On the fourteenth of February, in the outback settlement of Sugarbag, Esther Hayes looked out of the schoolhouse window and saw three children struck by lightning. The boys were playing cricket on a strip of stubble field that did for a schoolyard; minutes earlier she had heard them laughing as they hammered in the wicket with a stone.

1955

Esther was twenty-two when she first arrived in Sugarbag, stepping down from the mail truck wearing a white dress splashed with roses, and a double strand of freshwater pearls encircling her slender neck. As a child, Aurora liked to prise open the drawer of their old sideboard and take out the album in which a small creased photograph showed their mother standing beside the truck that had carried her to Sugarbag: wheat-coloured hair lapped her cheeks in waves, and her mouth was dark with lipstick that matched the roses. Although Aurora had not yet been born when her mother left the city, she felt she remembered this momentous arrival as clearly as if she had followed the truck from far out on the treeless plain, an ochre dust scarf spinning out behind as it laboured towards the clusters of tumbled stones and the few intact buildings that comprised the settlement of Sugarbag.

Her mother had come to the mid-north to take charge of the schoolhouse for a year, teaching children from drought-stricken farms to read and write, to draw accurate maps, to measure distance and weight, recite times-tables; she was to make them understand the weather. The city she had left was bound by parklands, its broad tree-lined streets ran straight and flat to the sea. Esther had been born close to large bodies of water. By her twelfth birthday she could swim and sail and snorkel. Rain was good for the garden; she divined no hint of danger in the smooth, curving patterns of isobars, found nothing to fear in the updrafts and

downdrafts of storm clouds, their boiling cumulus towers.

Even before she set foot on the main street's dusty surface, her mother had been compiling a list of favourite children's names. Esther had always wanted children, wanted them too much, it was said later, as if some law of nature made sure people only got to keep what they didn't care about. All through her teenage years – impatient for her real life to begin – she had slept with a slice of wedding cake wrapped in tissue underneath her pillow, while winter rain pattered on the corrugated iron roof. She had loved that sound. Up until she arrived in Sugarbag, and for a time afterwards, rain was still safe for her.

Esther had been teaching at the one room schoolhouse for a month when she met William Hayes at a dance. Her parents' rushed romance was a story Aurora had carried intact into adulthood, its telling coloured by embellishments her father had contributed over the years.

It was a hot night, and the sky was spectacular.

—Like the felted lining of a mandolin case, scattered with silver coins, William said. Her father's first thoughts of anything were always connected to music.

In a wool shed a dozen miles from Sugarbag, a hundred or so people had gathered around the edges of a floor slippery with lanolin. The double doors opened and a Caledonian pipe band marched in with kilts swinging; coloured lights reflected in their shoe polish as they crossed the jarrah floor. The pipes and drums drowned all conversation. Crimson-faced in the heat, and sweating in their black woollen jackets, the band completed a ceremonial circuit of the shed before settling against an end wall.

Esther had arrived at the dance on the hired bus from Sugarbag. She was with Julia Matthews, a girl she had known at college who had taken up a teaching post in Jamestown. Julia had loaned Esther a taffeta gown, and when William saw how the bunched bronze fabric matched the new young schoolteacher's eyes he had resolved not to let her dance with

the sunbaked station hands, or the swaggering shearers with their slicked-down hair.

—She had the slenderest ankles, William told Aurora. —And she stepped out like a thoroughbred filly. Then, as his wife hunched in silence over a book, her pale head gleaming in the lamplight, William would add a compliment. —A fine Palomino filly, and all those strapping farmers' daughters like heifers beside your darlin mother.

William had asked Esther to dance, and as soon as she stood up from the long wooden bench, where she'd been wedged between Julia and a country matron, they were swept into one of those giddying progressive dances in which he lost her as the partners changed and had her back by the end. The two of them were breathless as they waited side by side for the next tune.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please take your partners for the Pride of Erin.

It was strange, William remarked to Esther, how Celtic music could travel so far from its source without being altered by a single note. That was the beauty of music, he said. Unlike people, it was irreducible. Apart from the invitation to dance, they were his first words to her, and Esther registered with fresh interest the timbre of the bagpipes, the stirring, stamping staccato of the kettledrums.

—The Scots are good, William told her. —They get the blood pumping. But when my mate Paddy Doyle plays the Irish pipes, it will rearrange your vital organs. Trouble is, you could never rely on him turnin up on the night.

On the dance floor, William propelled her into the middle of the crowd and fixed her with his pale blue eyes; the unaccustomed weight and warmth of his arm circling her waist made Esther feel quite reckless. When the band took a break she looked around for Julia, but William tugged her by the hand and they slipped outside to perch on a flight of wooden steps. Straight away he disappeared to the bar, returning with a shandy for her and a glass of beer for himself. The shandy was straw-coloured and sweet, the first drop of alcohol Esther

had ever taken.

It was while they waited for the last waltz that William asked her to marry him.

Esther was flustered. —But I don't know anything about you, she said.

—There's nothin to know. William had a grave old-fashioned face on; he wasn't joking. —Nice little place, Sugarbag. You and I could settle down.

The pipers swung into the final song, a keening melody that unwrapped cloud-capped hills and rolling slopes dipped in the tan of dead bracken, the dusty pinks and purpled blues of heather. The hypnotic rolls of the kettledrums left no room for conversation, and Esther put her head on William's shoulder as they danced away.

Later, in the stuffy darkness of the bus, he took her hand and kept it.

—So, what d'you say? he whispered. —Shall we marry?

His audacity had made her laugh. In the south where she came from, marriages were not casually proposed on first meeting. The Haddys prized formality and tradition. They did things in a certain order. Weddings followed months of courting, visits between families, lengthy engagements announced with presents and speeches and bridal showers. Her father would be scandalised to think a man had dared to suggest marriage without first obtaining his permission. Esther guessed that William, with his Irish accent, was a Catholic, and Catholics were notoriously impetuous and wild, so her mother said.

He had squeezed her hand, but she shook her head. Her parents had gone without so that she could complete her education. This was her first teaching post, and she wasn't about to disappoint them.

She had laughed to cover her confusion. —Don't be ridiculous, she said.

But on the bumpy ride to Sugarbag her hand remained quietly curled in William's calloused palm, and three months later they were married by a Justice of the Peace with Julia as maid of honour and chief witness. Esther had invited her parents to the wedding,

hoping they would allow her this first great happiness of her life, or even share her delight. They had declined, pleading short notice, distance, and the heat, as well as various physical ailments. She knew it was because her husband-to-be was Catholic, but with William's family so far away in Ireland she hadn't the heart to explain their displeasure.

After a celebratory lunch at the Commercial Hotel in Jamestown, they had climbed into William's truck – white satin ribbons stretched from bonnet to windscreen – and headed north towards Sugarbag and the distant Flinders Ranges.

After hours of driving over long straight roads, the beribboned truck arrived at a solitary homestead.

—Who lives here? Esther whispered, awed by its grand scale.

William laughed. —For our once-in-a-lifetime wedding night, Mrs Hayes, we do.

He had stumbled on the empty house months earlier while chasing up stray cattle. On the edge of the property, closer to Sugarbag, its farm manager's cottage was in reasonable repair and William planned to rent it for them. The big house was surrounded on three sides by verandahs, and its tin roof was almost intact. Small brown pellets rolled underfoot as they mounted the front steps.

—Rabbit droppings, William said. —There are burrows everywhere.

The windows had been left boarded up, but William had been out the week before and prised off loose sheets of plywood and corrugated iron to give the house a less abandoned aspect for his bride. Stray planks lay strewn about, and the rooms at the back were dark, their windows still covered and nailed shut.

Esther had heard about ghost houses, properties abandoned by families who had walked off their land because of drought. The Heartbreak Plains were renowned for ruins, but this house looked almost as good as new. In their haste to be gone, the owners had left most of their furniture and the rooms were still habitable, even elegant, although the once

fashionably draped drawing room curtains had rotted in the glare of the sun. A double bed with brass posts and rails stood in one of the otherwise empty bedrooms, and as he opened the door William spun his hat with a flourish so that it landed on the bedpost. With little money between them, it was as good a place as any for a honeymoon.

They ate their first dinner as man and wife on a blanket spread beneath the crystal drops of an elaborate, unlit chandelier. Moths flapped at the windows; ants and small beetles appeared from cracks in the floorboards to carry away their crumbs. The dining table and chairs were missing, visible only as scratches where chair legs had once scraped the varnished boards, but there was a handsome mahogany gramophone, and a velvet-covered chaise longue where William tenderly undressed his bride and kissed her with an urgency that for the first time could be satisfied. Later, sleepily entwined in the splendour of the brass bed, Esther marvelled at the way her life had altered beyond recognition less than six months after leaving home.

They honeymooned at the homestead for a week, sleeping late, lazing away days on the verandah, dining by candlelight, like a couple of millionaires. Before the week was over Esther had grown to love the broad empty spaces that surrounded them; she saw how the country could get a permanent grip on a person's heart, with its brilliant elemental colours, profound silence, the intensity of everything – light, dark, sun, stars, heat, cold, thirst. She saw, too, that in the vast emptiness nothing intruded between human and landscape. It made for a kind of intimacy after which civilisation looked washed out by comparison.

Time passed so gradually, it was as if clocks actually ticked more slowly there, she told William.

—If we stayed here forever, we might grow old and never notice.

They returned to the homestead a year later, and this time Esther was heavily pregnant with

their first born son, Michael. It was to be a holiday, their last alone, and poised on the brink of motherhood every moment seemed to her lit with possibility, every object beautiful. She noticed the wallpaper in the room that held the brass bed was of a watery shade of green, with a pattern of birds nesting among slender leaves picked out in gold. Above the window, where the paper had peeled from the wall and flapped loose, she carefully tore away a wide strip and rolled it into a cylinder. Later, at home, she would use it to cover a notebook in which she planned to write a diary of her life as a country schoolmarm, wife and mother.

Esther woke shortly after dawn on their last day, feeling the warmth of her husband's body pressed along her flank. A gentle flow of air caressed her skin as she swung her legs over the side of the mattress and paused there, astonished by the radiance of her body reflected in the mirror over the washbasin. With the room falling away behind her, and a flush of early light defining her curves, she looked luscious and golden, full of inner calm and promise. She smiled and stroked her ballooning belly, relishing the new life about to unfold into her own, and in the mirror she watched as William reached up to tug her back down into the bed. She laughed and fended him off with a pillow.

—I'm starving! Last one dressed has to cook breakfast.

Her husband leapt naked from the bedclothes and pulled on his trousers, grinning as Esther fumbled with the dress she had discarded the night before without undoing the buttons. With his shirt on and flapping, and feet jammed into boots, William swaggered around the bed to kiss her, his thumbs hooked into an imaginary waistcoat.

—Right, I win! But seein as you're so helpless and slow, I'll make yer breakfast, anyhow.

She watched him scoop up his wide-brimmed hat from the floor, spin it like a quoit then wink as it settled at a jaunty angle on the furthest bedpost. Showing off for her; he was always doing it.

Slowly Esther undid the buttons and slipped her arms into the dress, as the crash of pots and pans and her husband's melodic whistle drifted in from the kitchen. She pulled up the bedclothes and smoothed them flat, relishing this small act of domestic duty, then found her favourite red lipstick, coloured her mouth and blotted it with a tissue. The shape of her smile was perfectly imprinted on the paper, and she grinned as she folded and refolded it into a tiny square and tucked it into the band of William's hat for him to find later. He was whistling one of the Irish reels he often played on the flute, a catchy, infectious rhythm that made her want to dance. She stood in front of the mirror and prepared to twirl, but her body was too cumbersome for the lightness of her feet. Kindling snapped as she brushed her hair. Time enough to dance after the baby was born.

William had coaxed the woodstove to life, and the smell of bacon frying wafted to greet Esther as she pressed both hands to her strangely contracting stomach.

1962

Esther had been marking the older children's spelling tests, struggling against the beginnings of a migraine headache, and the single classroom, with its rows of wooden desks, ticked like a time bomb as its stone walls and iron roof radiated heat. She was pregnant with their third child and her condition barely showed beneath a maternity smock, yet Esther felt the baby making ballet movements inside her, pirouettes and delicate arabesques, as if anxious to draw her attention to the deteriorating weather. She fetched a bottle of water from the ice chest, filled a glass and pressed it against her forehead, but it was soon tepid. From outside came the whack of ball against bat and the sound of the boys' boots pounding the sunbaked ground against the distant growl of thunder.

Around the walls, the children's Valentine's Day project was pegged on lengths of string, cards with brightly coloured flowers, and hearts cut from pink crepe paper. The largest card read *Happy Birthday Miss Haddy* in wobbly crayoned letters. Esther frowned – the ban on married women working meant she had stuck to her maiden name for teaching, and it annoyed her every time she saw it written down.

A sudden crack of thunder made her jump. She ought to get home before rain turned the unmade roads to mush, before the migraine settled in and played havoc with her vision. Her small daughter, Aurora, was at the Caledonian with Peggy Millard. Peggy had a four-year-

old of her own, and the afternoon would be starting to fall apart as the two girls began to grizzle.

Esther wiped her hands with her handkerchief, opened the window and shouted to the boys.

—Pack up now, we have to go in a minute.

Her son, Michael, stood in front of the wicket, his tongue jutting in concentration. Thomas Millard rubbed a cricket ball against the leg of his shorts. The older Millard boy, Danny, was trotting slowly backwards, his eyes on the ball. From the way he was moving towards the edge of the field, Danny expected the hit to be a big one. Michael and Thomas were best friends. Esther supposed it would be the same with Aurora and Thomas's little sister, unless they or the Millards left Sugarbag.

A brilliant wire of lightning sizzled behind a mass of greenish cloud, leaving an after-view of empty fields with a craquelure appearance. The baby stirred inside her. She would drive the boys to the pub and gather up Aurora. Cold meat sandwiches would do for their tea and she would let the children eat on the verandah. For herself, she wasn't hungry; all she wished for was to stretch out on the sofa under the fan and wait for William.

The boys had not responded to her request to pack up. She pressed both hands on the sill and leaned out of the open window.

—Michael! You boys, get into the car.

Michael raised his bat to wave to her and his small white face, with its peppering of freckles, creased in a smile.

—Just one more, Mum, he shouted.

Even at a distance she saw the cowlick on his forehead. Michael had his father's fine bright hair, and she noticed that it badly needed cutting. Thomas Millard was winding up his arm to bowl, starting his run. Danny was still back-shuffling away from them over the

flattened stubble. The air was thin and tremulous, moving around her; the distant fields glowed milk-pale, while the congested sky pressed down, velutinous and dark. The children seemed to float before her, three bright strokes of colour, evanescent, wavering now as if tugged by underwater currents.

Esther's hands wandered to the curve of her stomach, and as the migraine pressed her attention inwards, the outside world grew fuzzy. She stepped back into the schoolroom, into the scent of chalk dust, and inkwells, and the vague ammonia vapours of the approaching storm. Gravity tugged at her; she was overcome with an urgent desire for sleep and closed her eyes, it was only for a moment, and light flared against her eyelids with the neon intensity of a dream.

Outside the window, cumulonimbus clouds were stained with shadows the colour of blood. The school bell mounted in the arch over the outside door tolled once, and its dull bronze tone was swamped by a sudden and mighty jolt of thunder that entered through her feet and exploded against her eardrums.

Lightning punched the air in upside down electric branches. Esther ducked her head towards the window where boy shapes sprinted between twigs of light. Skinny legs pumped as the children darted this way and that. Her mazy mind could only think that they were playing, laughing. One of the shapes still swung a cricket bat.

She shouted as the air about her fizzed and crackled like a poorly tuned radio and a sudden violent draft ballooned her smock, lifted her hair and whipped it against her cheeks.

—Miii-chael…

The force of the charge that struck them shook the building. Esther fell with it, and in the after-stillness, a murmuring sound that might have been her own anxious breath rushed to fill the vacuum as she scrambled for the door.

Michael had been flung down on his back, and as she staggered towards him she saw

with horror that the soles of his shoes had melted: resting in a curl of smoking leather, a small white foot with fraying toenails.

He was not breathing.

Gravel gouged her kneecaps as she dropped beside him, tilted his chin and sealed his small mouth with her own. Pushing in air, releasing, pushing in, his child's mouth, its infinite softness, parted beneath her desperate kiss. Michael's narrow chest rose with each of her exhalations.

How was a life saved, was she doing it right?

Beneath his closed eyes, mauve shadows that had not been there just minutes earlier. A taste of battery acid lingered on his lips, and when her hands darted to his chest she saw, as if for the first time, the impossibly fragile architecture of his child's body: if she were to press too hard, it could be fatal. Raindrops as fine and sharp as needles struck Esther's scalp, they ran in rivulets down her cheeks as her hands moved blindly to pump above the heart. Fifteen tentative compressions followed by two deep breaths. Michael's bird-like chest, his delicate ribcage, obediently rose and fell; at any moment his reluctant heart could kick in and reclaim the task of pumping blood and oxygen around his body.

Any moment now.

A scorched scent wafted from his skin into the crepitant air. Esther's shaking knees leaked blood and her hair tumbled from its ribbon, brushing Michael's face as she hovered over him. She could keep this up forever if she had to. Until help came. Until her son sat up and smiled at her, freckles shifting as his cheeks lifted in a grin. The baby rolled inside her, distress evident in urgent pressure against her heart. Esther ignored the fluttering kicks and nudging elbows. Press, press, press, fifteen times, followed by the double breath; her movements grew more frantic, but for all her efforts she could not make him breathe.

Finally, an arborescent marking raised like damask on his neck led Esther's probing

fingers to the small deep wound burned into Michael's shoulder. She forced herself to leave him then and ran to Thomas Millard, veering blindly away at the spectacle of shredded clothing and shattered teeth.

On the perimeter of the playing field, Danny was curled in a ball with his arms over his head. A metal zip on his T-shirt had melted against his chest, but of the three boys playing cricket he alone had survived. As with Michael, only a fern-like stain on his forearm showed where he had been touched by electricity. Later Esther would learn that these marks were known as lightning flowers.

In the back yard of the Caledonian Hotel, Aurora and Baba Millard raced a pair of pedal cars along the concrete path between the kitchen door and a strip of lawn that Baba's mother obstinately kept watered, in spite of the drought. Neither child noticed the storm as it gathered in the pleats of the distant ranges and advanced across the Heartbreak Plains towards Sugarbag. On the horizon, the hills darkened from amethyst to smalt-blue, while clouds the colour and texture of steel wool steadily unrolled above the bleached fields. Sheet lightning flickered and a few fat raindrops fell, but by then the girls had crept into the hotel's cavernous kitchen. In the pantry, Baba climbed onto a stool to reach the box of pink wafers her mother kept for ice cream sundaes. Insulated from the outside world by two-foot-thick stone walls, they barely heard the thunder.

The first sign that anything was amiss came when the hotel's front door slammed open with a thud. The noise reverberated in the empty rooms in the heartbeat of surprised silence that followed, and then a rising wail that might as easily have been laughter. With crumbs spilling from their laps, the two girls held their breath and listened; the shriek had sounded like Baba's mother, only Peggy Millard was not given to sudden gusts of mirth. Footsteps bumped on the stair treads; up, then quickly down. Car doors slammed, and the Millards'

ancient Zephyr wheezed into life.

The children wandered out into the kitchen. It was almost teatime, but there was no sign of Baba's mother, or of her father, the gangly publican. They let themselves out the back door and went to the lean-to laundry where they had last seen Peggy folding washing. A gecko darted up the wall and turned a beady eye to stare at them as they surveyed the mound of sheets on the ironing board, the bundle of boys' school socks. Pegs lay scattered across the concrete floor, spilled from the peg basket. Puzzled, the girls went back into the hotel and up the main staircase to the bedrooms.

Mr Millard routinely slept in the afternoons in preparation for his evening shift in the bar. In the hottest months he took his naps in a spare room on the shady side of the building. The publican's ferocious snores terrified Aurora, and she was always relieved when they found him awake. Sometimes he would be seated at the table in the kitchen, a rubber pouch balanced on his lap as he teased out strands of tobacco and rubbed them between his palms. She liked to watch him roll a cigarette and seal the crisp white paper with a lizard-like flick of his tongue. He would prop the finished cylinder behind a sun-scabbed ear while he started on another, and if he was in a good mood he would give each of them a plug of tobacco and a paper and let them practise rolling a cigarette.

Baba poked her head around the door of the spare bedroom, but the iron bed was empty. They tiptoed along a threadbare runner to inspect the main bedroom, but that too was empty, empty as the whole hotel, empty as the saltbush plain outside the window. Only the drum of rain on the iron roof kept the children company.

Surprised, but not alarmed, they retreated behind the dusty floral curtain gathered at the window in Baba's bedroom. Baba found a doll to nurse and Aurora sucked her thumb, something she hadn't done for almost six months, as she waited for her mother to come and find her.

In the end it was William Hayes who climbed the stairs shouting for his daughter. His face was as crumpled as an unironed shirt and his hair stuck out all over his head as if he'd been carried to them by a whirlwind.

William gathered Aurora into his arms and held her close.

—There's a darlin girl, he cried. —Ah, there's a darlin.

As he squeezed the breath out of her, Aurora felt the dampness on her father's cheeks. It had been raining, and he ought to have been pleased, she thought, but all he did was clutch her to his chest and moan.

They took Baba with them and drove the length of the main street to Sugarbag's general store. Aurora watched through the rain-streaked glass as Big Louise the storekeeper scooped up Baba with one of her enormous wobbly arms while her spare hand reached for a jar of jelly snakes that stood beside the till. Then Aurora and her father were rattling along in the truck, but instead of turning right along the main street towards home, William turned left and drove flat out with Aurora bouncing beside him on the truck's broad seat. Bewildered, she watched the featureless plain flash by the window, its occasional windmills or the tumbled stones of ruined cottages the only markers of the passing miles. After an hour she put her head in her father's lap and fell asleep, and when she woke the fiery plain had given way to wheat fields where white silos loomed like lighthouses against the purple sky.

Jamestown's broad main street was deserted, its pepper trees stirring restlessly in a hot breeze. At a house near the school her mother's friend, Julia Matthews, appeared at the kitchen door wearing a pair of men's striped pyjamas.

—Oh! Julia said, when she saw William's face, and her eyes were anxious as she pushed open the screen door and stood back to let them in.

With her long thin face and messy beehive of black hair, Julia could have been a witch,

but Aurora knew from earlier visits that she was kind. Even so, when William explained that she and Julia were to take the train to Adelaide, Aurora went stiff with fright. Her father cupped her cheeks in his big chapped hands.

—There, there, no cryin! You have to be a brave girl, Rora, and realise that your poor mam is sick, with the new baby comin and all.

Her mother would soon be better, he promised. In the meantime, Aurora was to visit her auntie and grandpa in the city.

—Just for a little while. T'will be grand, William said, but his voice leaked doubt.

Julia, her face arranged in a smile of encouragement, chattered about the trip, making it sound like an adventure the two of them were to embark on. Aurora would build sandcastles and gather seashells in a bucket, she said. But her mother's friend wept quietly in the kitchen when she went to make the tea, and these stealthy tears alarmed Aurora. She wanted her father to take her home, wanted her mother's smooth arms around her. The house in Jamestown with Esther and Julia laughing and drinking tea in the kitchen was one thing, but to stay there alone and make a train journey without either of her parents was quite another.

Her father rubbed his eyes continuously. As he sipped from a mug of black tea Aurora noticed with a shock that he was wearing his pyjama top – what would her mother have to say about him leaving the house like that? Between his shorts and riding boots, William's legs were covered with a fuzz of apricot hair. Aurora loved the shape of her father's legs, like upside down bottles, and she imagined his bumpy heels inside the boots as he sipped tea and wiped his nose with the back of his hand. When the mug was empty he shuffled to his feet, and Aurora saw that his pale blue eyes were clouded, already shifting to where his truck was parked beside the kerb.

–Be a good girl, Rora, he said.

A collision of warm cheeks, then his bulk slithered from her grasp and her father strode

away from her towards his truck. Aurora saw his fair head duck behind the windscreen as he fumbled with the key; already she missed the strawberry jam smell of his skin, his tobacco breath. The truck roared into life and William waved once. Aurora waved back, helplessly squinting into the headlights as she stood alongside the dark-haired woman who was to carry her away to strangers.

In the front garden of her grandfather's limestone and red brick house, clipped box hedges enclosed roses, and a rectangle of lawn spongy with water. Each rose bush bore more real flowers than Aurora had ever seen in one place. Lemon, pink, cream and crimson, the roses were like party decorations, or fireworks; the pale ones looked edible. A pair of bay trees in concrete tubs flanked the heavy front door, beside which a copper name plaque glinted: *St Ives*. Julia sounded out the letters, and Aurora stared in awe at their gleaming shapes, dazed to find herself transported to a place where houses as well as people had names. The scent of roses pressed in on them from all sides as the doorbell chimed deep inside the house. Their dust-covered shoes looked shabby on the diamond tiles of the verandah and, quaking with apprehension, Aurora slipped her hand into Julia's.

There was a hint of her mother in the woman who opened the door, especially in the width of her eyes, but she was older, and lacked Esther's beauty and slender grace. Her straight hair ended in a blunt line at her jaw, and when she turned to guide them into the house her walk was lurching and awkward. There were floorboards with a runner of crimson carpet; pictures in heavy frames; the rose scent of the garden was overwhelmed by furniture polish, and the rotting smell of over-ripe apples. At the back of the house, in a kitchen made dim and tinted green by a vine at the window, the woman took a jug of water from the fridge and filled a glass for Julia and a plastic beaker for Aurora.

Aurora sipped once, shuddered, and set the beaker on the table. The water was

wonderfully cold but tainted with food flavours, very different to the sweet mineral taste of rainwater, or the earthy bore water they drank at home. She wished her father had come with them. Already she missed her mother and Michael and wondered how long she would have to stay. She slipped her hand into Julia's once more and received a reassuring pressure.

The woman was her mother's sister.

—Aunt Ivy, she said, smoothing her apron over her stomach. Her brown eyes were thoughtful as she searched Aurora's face. —Your auntie.

Aurora gazed doubtfully at the shadow above the woman's upper lip, at her brutal haircut and the clumpy shoe on her left foot.

—Hungry? Aunt Ivy had already slipped four milk arrowroot biscuits onto a plate and set them down beside Aurora's drink. —Now, be a good girl and wait here, she said, moving towards the hallway again and gesturing for Julia to follow.

Julia quickly leaned over Aurora and pressed a clean handkerchief into her hand.

—Don't cry, pet, she whispered.

Then she disappeared into the gloom of the hall, and an internal door opened and closed with a click. Aurora pressed the handkerchief to her nose and looked around. The waxed stillness of the kitchen was broken only by the tick of the clock above the fireplace as she inhaled the strange yet not unpleasant scent of Julia on the handkerchief. Her mother had a different smell, not so flowery.

From the kitchen, a back door opened into an outer lobby where a row of straw hats dangled on hooks and three sagging cane chairs faced the garden. It was brighter out there, and as Aurora moved towards the light she noticed a black china cat with yellow eyes glaring down at her from a high shelf. She retreated, and tiptoed along the hall towards the sound of voices. When she pressed an ear to the closed door, she heard the woman's voice so clearly that she must have been only inches away on the other side of the painted wood.

—At the drop of a hat, and not a stitch of clothing to her name.

There was silence for a moment, then Julia's voice, fainter than the woman's.

—An emergency. I'd ...myself, but...work...until the holidays.

In Jamestown, Aurora had slept in a T-shirt belonging to Julia – it had not struck her until this moment that she had been sent away from home without even a change of clothing.

Julia was speaking again; her voice coming from far away. *Catastrophe* and *shock*, Aurora heard. *Miscarriage,* and *slow recovery.*

That winter, her Grandfather Haddy wore grey flannel trousers with shirts and jumpers, adding a tweed sports jacket on the rare occasions he left the house. When the warmer weather returned the trousers were replaced by beige shorts that exposed his leg with its bandaged war wound. One morning, as Aurora passed his bedroom, the old man caught sight of her in the long glass of the wardrobe mirror.

—Don't creep about, child, he said. —Come on in.

Aurora edged around the doorframe. Her grandfather was sitting on the side of the double bed and, as the weather was warm, he wore shorts, and a shirt with bone-coloured buttons. His good leg, encased in a knee-length sock and ending in a brown laced-up shoe, was firmly planted on the floor, while the wounded right leg was propped on a footstool. In his hand he held one of the crepe bandages that Ivy washed and rolled into neat sausages on laundry days. From where Aurora stood she could see under the bed where a chamber pot with a pattern of pink roses held cloudy yellow liquid.

Grandfather Haddy's watery eyes rested thoughtfully upon Aurora.

—You look just like your mother, standing there, he said, and he beckoned her into the room, his smile reaching his eyes for the first time.

He was about to bind his damaged leg and Aurora kept her eyes averted, afraid of seeing raw bloodied flesh, or splintered bone. The bed springs squeaked as her grandfather fished in his trouser pocket and drew out a coin.

—See this shilling?

He waved her closer, smiling as he closed his fist on the coin and moved his hand over his injured leg. Unwillingly, Aurora's eyes followed; there was a hollow the size of an egg in the centre of his shin, but the skin surrounding it was taut and shiny, drawn to a puckered pink edge, not moist or bloodied as she feared. With a flourish, her grandfather slapped his hand against his shin, then held out the empty palm for her to inspect.

—Abracadabra!

Aurora stared in disbelief at the battered leg, which had somehow absorbed the silver coin. Panes of stained glass threw pink and green sun diamonds on the carpet. The bedroom smelled of talcum powder, of shoe leather, mothballs, dust, and Ivy's furniture polish, with the underlying reek of the chamber pot. She covered her mouth with a hand, taking shallow breaths.

Her grandfather reached for her free hand. —See if you can find yourself a shilling, he said.

His shin had a heat to it, and a pulse that throbbed under her wrist.

—Abracadabra, he said again.

The sensation of membranes sliding apart, and then there, in her palm, was the coin, released from some secret fleshy pocket.

—Keep it safe, he said, nodding benignly as she backed out the door.

Instead of taking the coin to her bedroom, Aurora put it into an empty tin that once held lumps of barley sugar. Then she helped herself to a soup spoon from the cutlery drawer in the kitchen, dug a hole under the apricot tree and buried the tin. After she had washed her

face and hands and the spoon she tried to forget about the shilling, but afterwards she was afraid of handling money that might have been contaminated by the bodily cavities of strangers. She shank from contact when Aunt Ivy passed her a coin to hand to a shopkeeper, overcome with revulsion, and every Sunday when her aunt tied sixpence into the corner of a lace handkerchief and gave it to her for the collection pouch, Aurora pushed the coin in, handkerchief and all. She got away with it for a month or two, until Aunt Ivy noticed the shortage in the ironing basket.

In the afternoons, after the household chores were finished and the lunch dishes had been washed and put away, her aunt sat at a small table in one of the rooms overlooking the front garden and pinned up the hems of men's trousers, replaced broken zippers, or repaired awkward three-corner tears in dresses which she said cost her customers too much to discard. Sometimes she used a treadle sewing machine to set in a zip, or run in a side seam. Aurora loved the rhythmic clack of the old Singer as Ivy's feet pedalled and her reddened fingertips guided the cloth under the needle. This was her aunt's work, and each afternoon Ivy set about it equipped with pins, needles, sharp embroidery scissors, and a look of furious patience. When she had finished an alteration she ironed and folded the garment and wrapped it in a sheet of brown paper. Then it had to be delivered to its owner, and the two of them did this together, Aurora with her small arms full of parcels, matching her steps to her aunt's uneven gait.

Aurora was astonished at the sight of garden sprinklers, iridescent arcs of water curving over lavish green lawns, and at the abundance of flowers in the seaside gardens. Aunt Ivy taught her some of their names and she especially loved plumbago, with its froth of blue flowers the colour of her father's eyes. A morning glory vine draped the fence of a disused tennis court behind St Ives, and at first Aurora was a little afraid of the flowers – when they

opened to the sun, the blooms were so vivid it was as if their fragile skins were shot through with electricity, as if they might burn or sting her fingers, or cause the sky to thunder if she picked them. But when she and her aunt had passed the tennis court a few times under a clear sky, Aurora began to suspect a different kind of magic. Seed heads worked their way into her socks and hair as she gazed into the blue flame of a morning glory. Within the trumpet, an indented star shape drew her eye to the hollow, magenta-rimmed core, and she whispered into it as if it was an instrument that could connect her with her mother and father, as if, through the vibrations of colour, her frantic prayers and wishes would be delivered and Esther and William would come and take her home. The morning glory spoke to Aurora, too, when at last she picked one and pressed it to her ear, urging her to enact small rituals.

In her aunt's garden she snapped the heads off flowers and arranged them in intricate floral shrines. Marigolds with quarter-inch stems, each pleated head carefully balanced in the glossy green canoe of a camellia leaf; purple and gold pansies bound into bunches with mauve and white violets; the brilliant crushed silk cups of poppies and ranunculi. Building her posies, Aurora lost track of time and place; she hummed as she worked, almost happy. Sometimes the softness of the petals and leaves in her hands reminded her of her brother. The sensation of his skin pressed against her own as he lay curled asleep beside her in their lumpy double bed.

It didn't matter where Aurora hid her offerings, Ivy always stumbled upon them, but even her fierce disapproval could not put a stop to it. After one particularly furious rebuke, Aurora waited until her aunt was busy with a visitor then descended the steps into the cellar and arranged a circle of rose geranium and lavender heads in the dark. Her mother loved flowers. Aurora had often heard her say so. In the absence of a telephone call, or a letter, a pattern of petals and leaves was like a brightly coloured spell which, in her loneliness, she

imagined might transcend silence and distance to connect with home.

Months passed, and when her aunt announced that she was to start school, Aurora abandoned all hope of seeing her parents again. It seemed as if her grandfather and aunt had replaced them, and they would keep her in their dark house until she was grown up. With the sudden change of her status in the household from visitor to resident, Aurora also sensed that the reluctance with which Aunt Ivy had taken her in had given way to an equal or even greater reluctance to let her go. Ivy's physical awkwardness, the result of her brush with polio as a child, lapped over into her everyday manner; her affection, never directly expressed, became apparent in small possessive acts of kindness – the purchase of a crisp new hair ribbon, the marking of Aurora's height on the kitchen wall beside the stove, her hands lingering over the child's auburn hair as she brushed it in the mornings and unplaited it each night at bedtime.

Aurora learned to say her prayers. With Aunt Ivy standing by she had no choice.

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child, pity my simplicity and give me grace to come to thee. If I should die before I wake …

Aurora huddled deep into the bedclothes, missing Michael's warm body, his boy's smell that never washed off in the bath. In the garden she built ever more elaborate shrines, pricking her fingers as she harvested the heads of her aunt's prized English roses, the first hibiscus. As she arranged them she almost felt her brother peeping over her shoulder, imagined slipping her smaller hand into his as they stepped into a tunnel of bleached grasses that stood taller than both of them. Now when she tore off lengths of morning glory vine and wound them into wreaths, its flowers were the evening colour of the ranges at home.

School was rough and frightening, the other children loud and already sorted into pairs. The desks were grubby from use, defaced with the carved initials of generations of children. To survive, she did her best to colour inside the lines, to make the neat strokes of the letters

her mother had already taught her; she sat up straight and tried not to draw attention to herself. When the boys in the desk behind tugged at her plaits she endured it in silence. Alone in bed at night she wondered whether her mother had the new baby now and had forgotten all about her. Each morning she went out to school and returned in the afternoon dragging her feet.

—Don't you like school? her aunt asked.

Aurora shook her head.

Ivy sighed. —Ah, well. You'll get used to it.

On one of their rare beach walks Ivy explained that this was sheltered water, the Gulf of St Vincent. Further down the coast, the strip of water called Backstairs Passage would be rough and flecked with white between the mainland and Kangaroo Island. Aurora remembered her father's stories of his sea voyage from Ireland to Australia, the heaving surfaces of the open sea, its wicked glassy green, sliding and unstable, its impossible distances and the seething life beneath. She remembered her mother's voice, which could be silky, like the wind in the dry leaves of the tamarisk tree, or breathy and pure when she sang to the accompaniment of William's flute.

Down by the salley gardens, my love and I did meet

Esther's voice brought tears to William's eyes whenever she sang the Irish songs he'd taught her. Now tears pricked Aurora's eyes as she remembered how on hot nights they all sat out on the front verandah and William would fit together the pieces of his flute. As he warmed the instrument in his hands, their mother would return to the kitchen for a bottle of beer and glasses, and the two of them would drink and sing as the stars came out and darkness swallowed the fields. Michael was learning to play the tin whistle and the flute, and whenever their father hoisted the boy onto his lap and pressed his fingers into position, their mother's face had a melting look.

One afternoon her father's truck was parked in front of the house when Aurora returned from school. She held her breath and stared at it, not daring to blink – it looked so dilapidated, so different to the other cars parked along the street. Between the clipped heads of the bay trees, the front door stood ajar, an unheard of event, and as she rushed up the path she almost tripped over in her anxiety.

Grandfather Haddy's voice came to her from the direction of the front parlour. Aurora's hand was on the doorknob when her aunt appeared from the kitchen balancing a tray with three teacups, the good milk jug and sugar bowl, and a plate with neat slices of dark fruit cake.

—There's cordial and biscuits in the kitchen, Aunt Ivy said, her voice sharp as vinegar, but Aurora wrenched open the parlour door.

Her father stood in the corner next to the piano, hands thrust into the pockets of his trousers. His face looked thinner and older but his solemn expression dissolved when he saw her.

Aurora was already flying across the room and William bent and swung her into his arms in one smooth movement.

—Sure who's been growin while my back was turned!

It was true; Aunt Ivy's marks on the kitchen wall showed she was taller. Aurora buried her face in her father's neck and breathed in the scent of his skin.

Ivy set the tray on an occasional table and carried a cup of tea to William.

—Sit down, child, sit down, she said. —Let your father drink his tea.

The edge of irritation in her aunt's voice made Aurora cling more closely to her father. William's warm palm spread across her back and he patted her as if she was a baby, while liquid splashed into a second cup, a third. Aurora heard the lid of the sugar bowl lifted and

replaced, the tink tink tink of a teaspoon stirring.

—Aurora is doing well in school, Ivy said. —The teacher is delighted with her.

Aurora heard the smile in her father's voice.

—That's grand news, so it is.

—It would be a shame if she didn't continue, Ivy said.

From the safety of her father's shoulder Aurora watched her grandfather nod agreement; his watery eyes glared at the two of them over his teacup.

—She has a natural ear for music, so the teacher says. Aunt Ivy's hands were folded tightly in her lap. —I've arranged for her to start piano.

—Ah, she's a great girl, her father said.

He patted Aurora's back again, and his voice rumbling in his chest vibrated against her ribcage. She began to cry softly; her father was going to leave her here, she could feel it. He was going to leave her, and Aunt Ivy would keep her and she would have to play the piano in the gloomy front room every afternoon after school and never again see her mother, or Michael, or Sugarbag.

—I hope this visit won't unsettle her, Ivy said. She added another spoonful of sugar to her tea and stirred it. —How long do you plan to stay?

—Well ...William's dusty boots were enormous on the parlour rug; they had made scuff marks. —I reckon I'll be off as soon as Aurora can be packed and ready to leave.

Aunt Ivy's teacup chattered in its saucer as she set it down.

Her grandfather cleared his throat.

—In the child's best interests, it's clear she should stay with us, at least for the time being.

William's feet were restless again, but his voice was firm.

—It's been grand of you both to keep her for so long, but her mother needs her at home.

A sob of relief escaped Aurora, and her father's hand again pressed reassuring pats between her shoulderblades.

—From what you say, her mother's in no fit state … Aunt Ivy's voice was bitter but she caught Grandfather Haddy's eye and trailed into silence.

Her father's heart beat against Aurora's chest, a strong, steady rhythm. She knew now that he would take her home, that she would be with her mother and Michael and the four of them would sit out on the verandah after tea as they used to while the new baby slept inside the house. Her parents would drink beer and play music, they would sing again, for she could not imagine they'd have had the will to sing or play music in her absence. Her father had talked about getting her to learn the fiddle. Soon she would play tunes with them. She wanted to shout for joy.

A little while later, Aurora stood beside her father on the front porch.

—Look, she said, shyly pointing to the house name on the copper plaque. —It says *St Ives*.

Aunt Ivy came through the front door with a packet of sandwiches for the road.

—Another thing, Aurora's learned to read, she said. —I hope she'll keep it up when she gets back home.

—Mum's a teacher, Aurora said proudly. She looked up at her aunt then, surprised to see that there was something soft and shapeless about her. Ivy had taken off her apron, and her body had a wilted look, like a week-old balloon. She came forward with her ungainly walk and bent to hug Aurora, and it was only then, with her aunt's arms around her, that she thought of the mending afternoons, of how Aunt Ivy would have to wrap the brown paper parcels by herself, have to wheel the old pusher down the street if she had more than one or two alterations to deliver. There would be no one to tell the names of flowers to, but there had been no one before she came so Aunt Ivy must be used to it.

Her grandfather's body was stiff with disapproval as he shook hands with her father.

—I guess I'll just take her and say goodbye, William said.

Warm air swelled under Aurora's skirt as he lifted her up and set her in the cab of the truck; she felt herself to be as light as thistledown in his arms, or even lighter. Through the rear window, she watched him stow her suitcase in the back and carefully cover it with the green tarpaulin. Then she sat up straight and waved to her aunt and grandfather, unable to see their faces clearly where they stood on the shaded verandah. Her father leapt into the cab and slammed his door. As the engine started, Aunt Ivy stepped forward from between the bay trees. One hand rose in farewell, and her narrow mouth puckered in a kiss that floated across the garden and was lost, whisked up and away on a current of air. Then, just as in Aurora's prayers and dreams, there was her father rubbing at the windscreen with the back of his hand, his pure tenor belting out 'Slievenamon' as they passed the outskirts of the city and struck the country roads with a glorious racket of truck noise.

—I'm afraid your darlin brother has gone to heaven, her father said.

They were roaring along an empty stretch of road between fields of ripening wheat. Aurora glanced uncertainly at her father, reassured by the familiar shape of him behind the wheel, his blunt profile. They were on the way home, and for the moment that was enough; she could not believe that anything bad had happened to her brother. Michael might have gone to heaven, but surely it was somewhere close by.

—Ma's been missin him somethin terrible. She'll be overjoyed you're home, her father said.

Aurora hugged her knees, hardly able to wait.

1963

Esther was sitting at the table in the kitchen when they arrived. Smoke drifted from a cigarette propped in a big glass ashtray. Her golden hair, fallen from its French pleat, hung down her back in knotted clumps. On the table in front of her were scraps of paper covered in handwriting, along with a mug of coffee with a skin of milk and the ashtray full of cigarette butts. It was a shock to find her mother so completely changed, so silent and empty-looking, as if she had been sitting smoking there on the hard chair all the time Aurora had been away

—Mum?

Her mother reached for the cigarette, and as she brought it to her mouth a grey stalactite of ash collapsed into her lap. She inhaled, then turned her head towards where they stood in the doorway, smoke flowing in two thin streams from her nostrils.

—Here she is, Essie, William said, a pleading note in his voice. —Will you just look at how she's grown?

Sparks flew as Esther tossed the cigarette into the ashtray. Her hands were busy with the scraps of paper, folding, shuffling, and Aurora saw that there were whole pages torn from a notebook with a green and gold cover.

William gave Aurora a nudge, and as she stumbled forward Esther picked up the ashtray

and slammed it on the edge of the table.

Bang!

Bang!

The thick greenish glass exploded on the second impact, and glass chips sprayed the kitchen. With a shard still in her hand, Esther beat at the table, gouging the already scarred surface, sending splinters of wood and glass spinning into the air. Ash and butts were scattered on the linoleum. Beads of blood sprang up on the soft white inside of Esther's arm and her lips stretched wide as if she would scream, although no sound came.

Aurora backed away, but her father lunged forward and caught a wrist in mid- swing.

—God help us, Esther!

This voice was one Aurora had never heard from him, hoarse and dry and desperate, as he prised the piece of broken ashtray from her mother's fingers. Esther slumped against the chair back, while William wrapped her arm in a clean tea towel. Then he stooped and picked up the shards of glass, found a broom to sweep up slivers that sparkled on the linoleum. When the mess was cleared away he tugged at Aurora's arms until her stiffened body relaxed enough to be lifted onto his lap.

They sat at the table, and Aurora felt their two hearts thumping.

—It's good to have you home, Rora, her father said, his wiry arms encircling her. —Your mother's just gettin used to it, that's all. It's been so queer and quiet for her.

The warmth of her father's body slowly penetrated Aurora's shock. She leaned away from him and searched his face, anxious for clues as to how this could have happened. His cheeks were hollow-looking, she noticed, the skin around his eyes more lined and weary than she remembered, but at least he was himself. She huddled close and slipped her hand into the open front of his shirt, still wary of her mother's blank white expression.

There was no jolly music played at home now. It was as if their house was held in the cast of a sorrowful and silent spell. At first, still shocked by the splintered glass, and the bloodied tea towel her father had rolled up and put in with the rubbish, Aurora did not speak of Michael, or question the whereabouts of the new brother or sister she had been awaiting with such patience. The grownups did not speak of them either, and as the silence around these absences gathered weight, Aurora found that she could not say her brother's name out loud. Much later, having blanked out William's talk of heaven, she half expected Michael to return; perhaps he had been sent away somewhere while her mother was sick, as she had been. Tense with watching and waiting, by the time William had left them again to go fencing, Aurora was too nervous of her mother's moods to ask when he might be coming home.

People felt sorry for her. That was the thing that surprised and embarrassed Aurora. Not long after her mother had broken the ashtray, Julia arrived from Jamestown; she had invited herself for the weekend, she said. On that Saturday morning, Julia rolled up her sleeves and announced her plan to spring-clean the house. Esther was dressed, but instead of taking an interest in the cleaning she carried a chair out onto the verandah and sat smoking, listening as her friend moved about their dusty rooms with furniture polish and a straw broom. On Sunday, Julia's beehive of black hair wobbled, shedding hairpins, as she pushed Aurora up and down the sunbaked driveway on a small two-wheeler bike she had brought from Jamestown in the boot of her car. Aurora was almost getting the hang of it when they had to stop for tea. After that it was time for Julia to drive home, ready for school the following morning.

With the kettle almost at the boil to fill her thermos flask, Julia stood behind Aurora, her hands lingering on the child's shoulders, fingers tracing the sharp collarbones.

—Wouldn't you like to visit me in Jamestown? You could have a term at school there

and make some new friends.

Aurora glanced at her mother. Esther's foot tapped sharply on the floor.

—No, thank you, Auntie Julia. I want to stay home.

The few people who had reason to call on them still spoke to Esther as if she would respond, even though she no longer engaged in conversation. Aurora quickly grew accustomed to sharing her mother's silence, but once, when a man who had come looking for her father assumed Esther was mute and asked Aurora whether her mother understood sign language, she had a fleeting realisation of their strangeness.

There was no sign language, only the cool, sombre voice of the piano. During lessons, when the two of them sat on the narrow stool with her mother's bare arm radiating warmth just inches from her own, Aurora thought wistfully of other parts that had once been accessible to her – the hollow between neck and shoulder where she had basked in the scent of freshly washed hair; the soft crook of an arm pinning her waist, keeping her from sliding from Esther's lap onto the floor. Her mother's lap was a distant country, now. Unreachable.

In their day-to-day lives, only music lulled Aurora, and she sensed it had the same effect on her mother; marooned together on the island of the piano stool, there were moments of closeness that she wished could last forever, but away from the piano Esther's indifference carried more sting than a slap. Like the abandoned cottages on the outskirts of Sugarbag – the ones with walls and chimneybreasts still standing but with roofs fallen inwards, or open to the sky – Esther remained physically rooted in their lives even though all she had once contained was gone. If there had been a sign language, it might have been useful, but her mother lived as if etherised, and during the weeks when they were alone together, so did Aurora.

Esther had her routines. On good mornings she rose late and sat in the kitchen smoking,

pouring cup after cup of black tea, moving to the shade on the back steps in the afternoons if there was a breeze. Sometimes she roused herself to boil up water in the copper for the laundry, to feed sheets and towels and Aurora's cotton dresses through the wringer. On Fridays she dragged a brush through her hair and drove to Sugarbag to shop, taking the long way round so as not to pass the schoolhouse. It was the only time all week she left home, and preparing for it was an agony that could last for hours.

Big Louise Brady had run Sugarbag's general store and post office for over twenty years; she remembered William and Esther before they were married. Louise had ordered special tins of baby formula up from the city after Michael was born because he'd had breast milk jaundice in his first year and was known to be delicate. With her own son grown up and gone to Queensland, Louise knew how small boys prised open their mother's hearts with only warty fingers and smooth straight backs as tools. Each week she took their shopping list and, as she fetched the items on it, kept up a kindly patter that papered over Esther's silence.

—I s'pose it's time you were buying another of the big bags of flour, Louise would say, then lean down to scoop one from the row of green metal bins fitted behind the counter. —An a tin or two of powdered milk.

All Esther had to do was nod. She could do that. The shopkeeper's bulky figure moved lightly in the cluttered space behind the counter, and in less than fifteen minutes they were on their way home. Aurora would have liked to stay longer in the store, maybe sit with her mother on the pair of stools beside the counter and sip a soft drink through a straw. With Louise being nice and kind, and the bottles damp with condensation in their hands, with the luxury of bubbles fizzing in their mouths, her mother might have felt a little more like her old self, might have started chatting to Big Louise as the other mothers did.

But Esther always nudged Aurora out and into the car. Once in a while she'd fill their old

sedan with petrol at the pump outside the store, then drive down the main street past the post office and the Caledonian Hotel with her shoulders stiff and her eyes fixed straight ahead.

One Friday morning after shopping, Baba's mother stood outside the pub. As their car glided past, Aurora waved, but Mrs Millard's arms remained dangling at her sides and she looked past them, her narrow face expectant, as if anything might come towards her over those empty baking pavements.

When Aurora started school at the end of the summer holidays, Esther drove her to the schoolhouse. There was yet another new teacher, brought from Port Augusta for six months until a permanent teacher could be found. Aurora was looking forward to it. All the way to town her mother gripped the steering wheel as if the car might buck, or veer with sudden violence into the scrubby bushes beside the road. Esther drove slowly down the middle of the main street, past the hotel and the general store, and stopped opposite the school, leaning her head against the window glass as if the short drive and her struggle with the car had exhausted her. Behind dark glasses, her eyes were closed.

Aurora's school case was heavy, full of the new exercise books and coloured pencils Aunt Ivy had bought for her in Adelaide. She leaned across the seat and stretched up to kiss her mother's cheek, then threw her weight against the door and slipped out onto the stony roadside.

Her mother's head turned, the dark glasses following as Aurora rounded the back of the car to the driver's window.

—You'll be all right?

—Yes.

Aurora could see four children sitting in the yard at the front of the school. They were playing jacks. She hoisted her case and crossed the road. When the car started up she

stopped and waved, but her mother was already gripping the wheel, swerving away towards home.

By the end of term, Esther's headaches had begun to reach a crescendo in the mornings. Her face was white as she twisted the belt of her housecoat around her waist and pulled it tight. The unrelenting sunlight gave her double vision – the drive was too much for her, she insisted; they might have an accident.

Aurora's smile was tentative.

—It's not so far to walk.

Perhaps it was the headaches, but her mother was a different shape now; the hourglass figure that had once seemed the most perfect geometry on the planet had melted to a whip-thin line given to sudden threatening angles.

When Aurora arrived at school flushed and damp with sweat, other mothers swapped glances and shook their heads. She knew those slow headshakes were about her, about the dust on her shoes and the way her hair in its ponytail could have been neater. Or it might be a cooking burn – one of them would spot where she had accidentally pressed the inside of her arm against a saucepan while warming baked beans for their tea. Sometimes she would overhear one of the women sigh and mutter that at least Peggy Millard still had Danny, even if he was a little slow now, and although this somehow softened the criticism Aurora understood was directed at her mother, she felt herself erased as Danny’s equal. That girls did not carry the same weight and worth as boys did not surprise her. It seemed like something she had always known. She longed to shed her child's body; it was too small and useless for the domestic tasks that needed doing. At school she asked the teacher what children should eat to make them grow quickly.

She did not even have the comfort of her old friendship with Baba Millard, for while Aurora was away in Adelaide, Baba had started school and become best friends with a girl

from one of the hardscrabble farms that lay east of Sugarbag. At playtime, the two were inseparable, and Aurora felt lonely and left out.

Weeks when her father was away working, it was the sound of the piano that let Aurora know it was safe to come into the house; her mother was calm at the piano, even if the pieces she picked were sad. Aurora would stand on the step listening, judging the moment when the fullness of a chord would cover the faint crack of the back door opening. Inside she would wait for the glassy echo of the last notes, for the moment when her mother would swivel on the piano stool, light dripping from her bare arms and her eyes clear but puzzled, as if she had looked up from the keys to find a stranger hovering in the doorway.

—It's hot, Aurora would say quickly. —Shall I make some cordial?

Sometimes her mother would pat the space beside her on the stool: it was time for a lesson.

Aurora practised the piano as if unwinding smooth melodies from its keys might be the formula for happiness. In the early years after she came home from Adelaide, she practised hour after hour, while her mother lay on the couch across the room or in her bedroom with the door open so that she could listen for mistakes. Aurora concentrated hard. It was an effort for her mother to get up off the couch and come to the piano to correct her; she wanted to avoid that. It was easier to play when her mother lay with her eyes closed and her breathing so slowed she might almost be dead.

Now that Aurora had progressed from beginners' pieces, she played the music Esther left for her on the stand – Schumann, Bartok, Grieg's *Lyric Pieces.* Music blocked the anxiety that gripped her on mornings after she had woken in the night to the slamming of kitchen cupboard doors, or her mother stumbling into furniture on her way to bed. Worst of all were the cries that reached her through the flimsy partition wall.

–*My darling boy...*b*eautiful, he was.*

–A twig, nothing but a twig of a boy.

–And so full of life...

Esther's pain whistled out into the night, a heat-seeking missile that would find no target under the cold moon and eventually fall back upon their cottage, provoking further distress calls. Aurora blocked her ears as best she could. Sometimes she heard the crack of the back door opening, the click as it shut – for when Esther's agony became too great for their small rooms to contain she would take it into the dark fields. Aurora imagined her mother running barefoot across the plain, stumbling among the ruined houses and abandoned farm sheds on the outskirts of Sugarbag, wandering ghost-like among the debris and wreckage of earlier lives.

These were the nights when, in the morning, Esther would pour a cup of tea and return to bed without drinking it. Once it was clear that she would stay there, Aurora would fill a glass with cold water and carefully carry it to the bedroom; she would tiptoe to the bathroom and find the pills in the brown bottle. How adept she became at wringing out a flannel in cold water; she knew just how to fold it, how to press it to her mother's forehead in the special way that soothed her.

—There's a slice of ham in the fridge.

Sometimes it was a boiled egg, or cheese.

—If you feel like a picnic lunch.

—Yes, I'll make a picnic.

—It wouldn't be too hot in the shade, down by the creek, if you-

—No, don't worry.

Aurora learned to keep her voice neutral, to deflect attention from her own needs. Sometimes her mother tossed off the flannel and then Aurora knew to make herself scarce.

Let her sleep, she prayed to Mary and Jesus, *let her sleep*. And then, once she had

checked the ashtrays for smouldering cigarettes, once the pills had worked and her mother's eyelids flickered with dreams, she would stand on a chair in the kitchen to make the picnic lunch and feel the day stretched out before her, long and hot and empty.

1966

A new schoolteacher arrived in Sugarbag that autumn. Her name was Kilkie Bleecker. Kilkie had barely walked from the general store to the Caledonian Hotel before word got about that she was the offspring of an Aboriginal woman and a white shearer known locally as The Flying Dutchman. The teacher was tall and lean with spirals of long black hair, eyes that seemed to take up half her face. Although her skin was on the light side, the parents were not happy. But the previous teacher had packed up the moment her contract expired, just like the one before her and the one before that. Kilkie Bleecker had been the only applicant for the position and she had graduated from the teachers' college in Adelaide. There was nothing to be done.

When she asked at the hotel for accommodation, Stan Millard told her they were in the throes of renovating.

—Nothing going at the moment, he said.

Kilkie nodded thoughtfully, and picked up the small brown suitcase at her feet.

Later, Stan would tell his missus how the new schoolteacher had wanted to board with them.

—Hardly changed since she was a kiddie, he said.

As Kilkie walked up the main street towards the schoolhouse, two Aboriginal women,

domestics from a sheep property outside Sugarbag, rose from a slab of shade at the side of the store and drifted towards her. Inside, behind the counter, Louise Brady snapped a rubber band around a batch of letters she had been sorting and leaned closer to the window, squinting; she was just in time to see the tall young woman disappear around the corner with a backward flick of her long dark curls. Louise touched chubby fingers to her own mousey fringe and stood quietly for a moment, considering.

The schoolhouse was near the still-shapely ruin of Our Lady of the Rosary, and it was here – amid fallen timbers and a sprinkling of jewel-coloured fragments of stained glass – that Kilkie eventually unpacked her suitcase. To the delight of the children, their new teacher kept bees and had brought a working hive with her. The bees lived in a hollow branch of the grey box tree which grew beside the church; with the church and the school so close together, she would be able to keep an eye on the children and her bees at the same time. Kilkie had picked out the bee tree herself, she told the children, and even though Aurora knew their teacher had arrived in Sugarbag driving a pale green Zephyr, still she imagined her striding across the plain ahead of a cloud of bees, guiding them towards this particular tree from somewhere far out in the wild blue ranges.

Kilkie Bleecker always wore white. It was to soothe the bees, she said, so that they wouldn't sting her, and it seemed to work. In the early mornings, and sometimes during the lunch hour, she would walk out to visit the hive wearing a white dress and a wide straw hat draped with a length of mosquito netting, the ragged end of the veil tucked into her neckline. It was the youngest children, the ones Kilkie called possum babies, who loved her most, and wherever she went, half a dozen of them orbited like restless satellites.

—Now, you mustn't come sniffing around my bees wearing dark red or blue, Kilkie warned. —Bees just can't bear red and blue.

There was no school uniform, so as often as she could Aurora wore one of the two light-

coloured summer dresses she owned, kept on wearing them even when they grew short and tight on her. They were her bee dresses, and it was important to wear them so that the bees would like her. Aurora wanted the bees to like her because more than anything she longed to be as beautiful and wise as Kilkie Bleecker.

—You kiddies ever heard of the Promised Land? Kilkie asked once, as a group of them walked towards the bee tree. —Well, it was a place flowing with milk and honey, when honey was one of the most precious things in the world. Honey was better than gold, better than jewels. Honey was rich as water. Imagine!

One morning there were six Aboriginal children at the school, sitting together with their skinny arms and legs jutting from washed out garments, their feet in sandals as dusty as Aurora's own. Their mothers were Nukunu women, the teacher explained. This was their country. At home time, when utes and stationwagons swooped in from all directions, Aurora watched the new kids walking away from the town and wondered if they had as far to go as she did. By the end of the term, there were ten Nukunu children; they made up almost a quarter of the school.

It was in that term that Aurora learned about Goyder's line of rainfall. Although she had lived in Sugarbag all her life, not counting the year in Adelaide, she had never heard that their doomed town lay on the wrong side of this vital line, or isohyet, as Kilkie called it. Back when Sugarbag was settled, nobody wanted bad news. They still didn't. In her geography exercise book Aurora copied the dips and curves so meticulously plotted in 1865 by the Surveyor General, George Woodroffe Goyder. What he had charted was a map within a map that carved out the state's desiccated core. North of the line, rain fell in meagre quantities.

—Not enough for growing things, Kilkie insisted. —So the wheat farmers who settled

round here were wasting their time.

All of them lived north of Goyder's line, and Aurora wondered how this lapse of judgement could have happened, especially to a town with a name of such unique sweetness, for sugarbag meant wild honey. Kilkie always pronounced the name of the town with a giggle in her voice, and soon the children did too, although they still didn't understand why it was funny.

The name of the town was not quite what it had seemed to the first white settlers, the teacher said.

—Aboriginal people used to make a drink with banksia flowers steeped in water, she told them. —But after the whitefellas came, with their fine sacking bags of sugar, they shredded and boiled the sugar bags instead.

The town had been established in a rush following a run of wet seasons. Farmers believed that rain followed the plough, but the rains had rarely been repeated, and in the wake of a relentless drought, all but the most tenacious had abandoned their properties and moved on. By the time William Hayes arrived from Ireland to try his hand at shearing, half the houses in Sugarbag were empty. Tumbled ruins of sandstone and brick with their blackened fireplaces open to the sky. Rusting farm machinery surrounded them, the sole signs of an earlier optimism. Until she made the trip to Adelaide with Julia, Aurora had assumed all towns looked this way.

If their teacher had the knack of making them laugh, she did not flinch from making them cry, either. One afternoon she told the story of Goyder's wife, Frances – how she was alone for years while her husband mapped the countryside, how she gave birth to twin babies that died, how she took her nine children back to England and was so loath to return to South Australia that she killed herself the night before the ship was due to sail. Her sister Ellen had travelled with the children in her place, and a little while later married their

daddy.

By home time all the girls were weeping inconsolably; even a couple of the boys were rubbing at their eyes. A mother complained, and Baba Millard's father came weaving down the road from the pub to remonstrate with Kilkie. Aurora worried that their teacher would take offence and leave the school, but Kilkie stood her ground with Stan Millard, ignoring his slurred sentences and bad language to answer calmly.

—Telling stories is the way children learn, she said. —And if a story makes them cry, they will specially remember.

1967

At around six o'clock on the night before Aurora's ninth birthday, her mother emerged from the bedroom wearing a clean dress that was not too badly creased and with her hair smoothed back into a ponytail. Aurora was reading, her elbows propped on the kitchen table; she glanced up in surprise as Esther filled the kettle and poked newspaper and kindling into the stove. While she waited for the fire to catch, her mother set out flour, sugar, eggs, tiny bottles of cochineal and vanilla.

Aurora kept sneaking peeks from behind her book as Esther rubbed butter around the sides of a pair of sponge tins – she loved it when her mother opened and closed the kitchen cupboards softly, when she brought out mixing bowls and wooden spoons and stoked the old woodstove until flames leapt and the kettle hissed on the hob. The smell of bread or scones baking, or even of eggs or sausages spitting in a pan, made Aurora feel as if the world had suddenly turned sunny side up. She did not even need to eat the end result to be filled to bursting point with happiness. Whenever her mother engaged in domestic tasks of simple goodness Aurora would go to bed in the evening without stopping to pray, without rearranging the coloured stones she collected on her picnic walks. The weight of the air in the house shifted and she breathed more easily, stood taller. But baking happened rarely. When Esther was unwell she had no patience for cooking, and she was unwell so much of

the time.

William had been contract fencing for months before Aurora's birthday, camping on the job, but he had promised to come home in time to see her blow out her candles.

—I'll be bringing your present, darlin, her father said, and she understood his oblique warning that she should not be disappointed if her mother forgot to go to town and shop. William would be home in time; Aurora knew he wouldn't let her down.

Esther beat butter and sugar, balanced the heavy mixing bowl against her hip and whipped until her hand was a blur. She cracked eggs one by one into a bowl. By now the firebox in the woodstove glowed and the kitchen was warm. When the batter was ready, she filled the sponge tins and slid them into the oven. Only then did Aurora risk interrupting with a goodnight kiss, before tiptoeing away to bed. She was looking forward to the morning, to her father coming home and the sound of his voice breaking the monotonous silence. She drifted to sleep on the vanilla scent of sponge cake.

Some time later she woke to the sound of a door slamming and cutlery rattling in the kitchen. The house was dark as Aurora edged towards the kitchen and peered around the doorframe. Two empty beer bottles stood on the floor by the bin and there was another, half full, on the table. Esther's shoulders were tensed in concentration as she cracked an egg on the edge of the mixing bowl. Broken eggshells littered the draining board; she was barefoot and swaying slightly. Flour had spilled from a packet onto the floor; her heels were dusted with it, and white smudges crisscrossed the linoleum. A recipe was thumbtacked to the cupboard, and the tins Aurora had seen put into the oven with their contents smooth and perfect were now upside down on the table. Beside them, sponge cakes lay in ruins, sunken discs with blackened edges and bottoms. Her mother cracked another egg into the bowl, then tipped back her head to take a long swallow of beer.

Aurora crept back to bed. Around midnight she rose again, pulled back the curtain and

looked out. A fine frost pearled the windscreen of their car; the dry grass would crackle underfoot if she walked to the road. She let the curtain fall and stumbled back to bed. Far far away, a train moaned. Or was it the banshee, the Irish witch with long hair whose presence, her father said, foretells a death? In a while she would get up and rearrange her stones; there was a smooth pink one with flecks of glitter that made her feel very calm whenever she held it in her hand. She would press it hard and pray, as she always did, that her old loving mother would return and replace the woman drinking beer in the kitchen. In the meantime she listened to the chink of bottles, the snap of kindling as Esther lit the stove. Later still Aurora heard her sobbing, the sound muffled by pillows.

Before dawn, she went along the hall to her parents' bedroom; she hoped her father had returned early, but in the beam of her flashlight she saw that Esther was there alone, asleep on her back with one arm flung out and the sheets twisted about her body. There was an empty bottle on the floor and half a dozen more in the kitchen, including one that had been opened but not drunk. Aurora emptied it into the sink, wrinkling her nose at the sweaty scent of William's home brew. To her surprise the cake tins contained two perfectly risen sponges, cool and light to the touch.

Aurora quickly washed and dressed, then returned to the kitchen where she ran a knife around the edges of the tins and turned out the sponges onto a wire rack. The window over the sink was still dark as she found a jar of raspberry jam and sandwiched the layers together, sifted icing sugar into a bowl. She added too much water and the mixture was runny at first, but by adding small amounts of sugar it gradually became stiff enough to spread. She would have liked it to be pink but the top on the cochineal bottle was stuck tight, so she settled for white and put the finished cake under the netting dome to keep the flies away. Then she filled a flask with water, and wrapped a slab of the ruined sponge cake in a sheet of greaseproof paper. Soundlessly, she opened the kitchen door.

As she set off across the fields, the cold night air rose and swirled about her legs like liquid. She was looking for the place where her father was mending fences. It was still dark, and once she found his camp she would surprise him with a kiss as he curled grub-like in his sleeping bag. William would unzip the edges of the bag and fold her into the warm lining with a hug. She longed to hear his voice in her ear – *Happy birthday, sweetheart*, he would say – and the time of waiting for him to come home would evaporate. Held tight in his stringy arms, she would feel solid again, her existence confirmed, celebrated.

Aurora walked out in a straight line from the house, keeping the faint flush in the sky where the sun would rise centred above the brim of her hat the way William had taught her. She followed the arrow of her flashlight over the rough, partially frozen stubble; encountering the first fences, she carefully parted strands of barbed wire and stepped through. At last the sun broke from the horizon, and its light had a queer greenish cast which made the land seem to rise around her as if she stood in the base of a long narrow valley. The air was not smooth; pockets and caves of warmth and coolth collided with her cheeks and her bare legs as she walked.

As the sun climbed higher the land began to flatten out, until the dry plain was varnished red, then gold; the sun coppered her skin as she walked towards it. Ahead, the landscape was featureless, and when she looked back she could barely make out the familiar shapes of the ranges slumbering on the horizon. She stopped and drank from her flask, then walked on again with the morning washing over her. When she paused for a second drink Aurora guessed it was around seven o'clock. Her father would be awake now and still there was no sign of his camp. The chill of the early morning was dissipating. She peeled off her jumper and tied it around her waist, walked on slowly, crushed to realise that her plan had failed.

She was about to turn back, when at last there was something to see: a homestead trembled mirage-like against the sky, its pale sandstone walls merging with the surrounding

fields, the slope of its rooftop shimmering. Strangest of all, the building was repeated in the sky, where a perfect replica of the house floated with its gables and chimneys pointing towards the ground. Suddenly the air seemed thicker, harder to process; Aurora passed a hand over her eyes and looked again at the land and sky. Missing sheets of iron exposed a skeleton of weathered beams, but evidence of decay did not detract from the mysterious beauty of either the earthly house or the chimera above. To her disappointment the sky house vanished as she neared the front gate.

Closer in, clumps of Salvation Jane frothed like purple petticoats at the base of the wooden verandah, and on a flagpole fixed to the roof a piece of colourless cloth dangled at half mast. Long thin shadows of fence posts striped the road. The slanting sun glanced off the dew-soaked grass like a million mirrors. It was as if an invisible forest had parted to reveal the presence of a castle, one Aurora felt she had always known existed. A stream of cold air laced with sweetness forced its way up her nostrils and even before she turned to look she sensed the golden flurry of flowers. Sure enough, behind the wrecked stables a wattle tree leaned, half drowning her with its scent of honey.

She stepped up onto the verandah and gazed at the flaking letters on the name plate: *Cluain Meala,* words so strange and lovely they might have drifted in on the wind from another world. The front door had an outer flyscreen, its lower half made up of tin panels embossed with a pattern of bell-shaped flowers and leaves. Beyond that, the inner door stood ajar, and when she entered the broad hall she saw at once that the house had been empty for years, saw too that it was a magical place, and that for today – her ninth birthday – it could belong to her.

With their high ceilings, the rooms were restful and dim after the hectic light outside. Aurora moved through them soundlessly, awed by the loveliness of gilt mirrors, the muted shades of peeling wallpapers. The floors were bare in all the rooms bar one, a grand sitting

room at the front of the house, where a rectangle of colourless carpet covered the floorboards. Here, shuttered windows opened onto a wide verandah, and in front of them stood a slender sofa – red velvet, a cushioned arm at one end, a curving back rimmed in wood, and the seat studded with velvet buttons. This piece of furniture was so exotic that Aurora blinked in disbelief. She counted the buttons, gingerly touching each one with a bitten fingernail – fifteen, including the holes with tufts of cotton protruding where three buttons had been lost. She peered at a collection of cobweb-covered fans tacked to the wall, at paintings hanging askew. Once she had straightened the pictures, the only signs of disarray were rabbit droppings and a few scattered feathers.

Halfway along the hall was a deep alcove, in which the remnants of a curtain partially concealed the entrance to another room. The door was painted cream, but chips revealed a red undercoat. Aurora touched the brass doorknob, longing to turn it. She fingered the full-blown roses on the damask as thoughts of treasure caused flutters in her stomach, but at the last moment she backed away. With its hidden door, the room was clearly special. She would save it until last.

The kitchen was a long room with a pantry and an outer porch where an empty milk churn lay on its side. A kettle stood centred on the iron range, but the grate and ashes were cold. Only an enamel plate, with chop bones solid as stone, offered proof of human occupation in the distant past. The room contained half a dozen mismatched chairs and a dresser with three picture postcards propped on its chipped green paint, but she was too excited to examine the faded landscapes.

Back in the main room, Aurora picked up feathers and brushed dust from the sofa with her handkerchief. She nudged rabbit droppings into a cone of old newspaper and carried them outside. The room looked elegant and tidy as she settled on the red upholstery, unwrapped her greaseproof paper package and pressed tiny pieces of burnt cake into her

mouth. When the last crumb had been eaten and the paper stowed in her pocket, she slipped into the hallway and approached the hidden door.

The knob turned easily and the door swung open on a large room at the centre of which was a bed made of gold – here was treasure indeed. Its posts and the decorative balls that topped them glowed with a dusty sheen in the light filtering through a shuttered window. The tufts on the candlewick spread were stiff against her knees as Aurora climbed up. She peeled off her hat and laid her cheek upon the creamy mound of the pillows, watching stripes of sunlight on the walls brighten and dull with the passage of clouds far overhead. Around her the house was silent, the neutral hush of emptiness peppered with bird sounds and the scurry of mice behind the skirtings, a harmless silence, compared with the oppressive atmosphere of home.

Michael's absence had sucked all the sound out of their lives, all the talking and laughing and singing, the joyful music they used to make. At school she had learned how objects could be crushed by the weight of air. Kilkie Bleecker had put a spoonful of water into a tin can, heated it until water vapour drove out the air; when the upturned can was suddenly thrust into a bowl of iced water, they had watched the can crumple. That was how it felt at home without her father to fill the vacuum left by her brother, but the silence here was nothing like that. In this house she did not have to walk on tiptoe; there was no ghost of Michael to reproach her.

Aurora slept, and when she woke, the room was awash with warm afternoon light. She slid down from the bed and turned to smooth the creases. In the mirror above a washstand she saw reflected a girl with a face as thin and pale as a candle, a girl with narrow shoulders, dwarfed by the beautiful bulk of the golden bed. As she moved closer to the glass, its surface darkened, and mottled flower shapes overlaid her features. Flecked with silver, tin, and flashes of coppery red, a taller figure shimmered behind her own reflection. Aurora's

heart lurched at this vision of swelling curves; she watched them expand and contract, leaned towards the glass as shapes settled. Then the room rearranged itself behind her. There was the briefest flare of a smile before the light dipped and the mirror darkened.

Aurora turned quickly, but the room was empty. Only a hat perched on the bedpost nearest the door was now at a different angle. Thinking she had brushed against it, she carefully adjusted the brim to the position it had occupied when she entered. Everything should be left as she had found it so that the magic of the house would remain intact.

At home, she found her mother drinking coffee and chain-smoking in the kitchen, and the narrow room seemed pinched and plain after the elegance of the homestead. Wordlessly, Esther held out her arms, and Aurora rushed into them. Even the odour of stale beer on her mother's breath did not repel or frighten her as her child's arms clasped Esther's bony shoulders. It was a thrill to hold and be held, to be rocked on a wave of warmth. Inside the cocoon spun by their joined breath, everything could be forgiven. The empty mansion and its treasures bubbled inside her; she wanted to tell about the buttoned sofa and the golden bed, and how, just for a moment, she had seen something she almost recognised, a shape, a smile, that had merged with her own reflection in the mirror.

But the birthday cake was on the table. Esther had pushed pink candles into the icing, and there was a bottle of lemonade and triangles of white bread sprinkled with sugar. Her mother still held Aurora close, soft breath caressing her cheek. Within this unaccustomed intimacy, the child stood motionless and quiet, knowing that a moment of pure harmony could be shattered by the slightest current of air.

William's truck pulled up outside as Aurora was easing onto a chair. Then her father butted open the door, comfortable and familiar in his khaki shorts and dusty work boots, grinning at the sight of the two of them with the cake and candles on the table between them and their heads close together. Esther wore a blue cotton dress and two rows of freshwater

pearls. Aurora felt as if she had somersaulted into an earlier birthday – that at any moment Michael would appear with his shirt tails flapping and his tin whistle swinging on a string around his neck.

—Your present's in the truck, her father said, his eyes alight with gratitude and pleasure. —Come and see.

His whiskered kiss reeked of tobacco and dust, of the miles he had covered in time to watch her light the candles and extinguish them with a single breath. Aurora had seen the look he gave her mother and knew that, like herself, William was foolishly thinking they were in the midst of one of their old happy times. Any moment now he would realise his mistake. So as not to see the hurt on his face, or the effort he would make for her sake to suppress it, Aurora leaned in close and hugged William, hugged him until she felt as if her arms and ribs would crack. This was how easy it was to live when love displaced emptiness, when the pressure of love inside was as fierce as the pressure of air outside so that, whatever happened, a person could not be crushed.

Each term it took Aurora a couple of days to become vocal again after the deep silence of the holidays.

—Freaky, freaky, freaky girl, has the cat got your tongue?

She was walking slowly along the main street when Adam Gunnet leapt out at her from the gate beside the post office. He danced around her, a boy with red cheeks and a chest so plump it formed a bosom under his shirt, tweaking the badly plaited hair each time he passed behind her. Adam had noticed the silence she carried over from home, a silence so profound she felt as if her tongue and teeth and lips were fused together.

Aurora tried to duck away, but Adam was quick on his feet and would not let her pass. She stood dithering in front of the general store, unable to reply, when the flyscreen flew

open and a girl stepped out. Iris Kenny was new to Sugarbag. She had started school at the end of the previous term, but was so beautiful that Aurora had been too shy to speak to her. Iris's father had taken over the store from Big Louise Brady since Louise had moved to Queensland to be with her grandchildren.

—Stop that! Iris turned a stern face to Adam and simultaneously slipped an arm around Aurora's waist.

Taken by surprise, the boy backed away.

—Come in for a milkshake, Iris said.

Inside the store, where Big Louise had once moved so lightly behind the long counter, everything was different, although *Brady's General Store & Post Office* would remain in flaking letters above the entrance for another two years. Groceries were arranged in aisles now, and there were metal baskets for customers to fill. There was a check-out desk with a new electric till. The old counter had been pushed close to the back wall of the store and a row of chrome stools stood in front of it. Behind the counter, a long mirror filled the wall, making the whole store seem bigger.

Iris led Aurora out the back where her father was counting change on an old laminex table, rolling stacks of pennies and sixpences into tight brown paper cylinders. She leaned over his shoulder and dropped a kiss on his cheek.

—Can we make milkshakes?

Roy Kenny wore horn-rimmed spectacles pushed up to the top of his balding head, and a tea towel worn like an apron was wrapped around his waist and tucked in over the top of his trousers.

—Sure. He smiled at his daughter, and by extension at Aurora.

Iris slid away. —C'mon, she said.

A new low fridge had been built in under the old counter, and beside the milkshake

machine stood a row of flavourings in stainless steel containers. In Adelaide, Aurora had watched children drinking milkshakes, but she had never asked Aunt Ivy if she could try one. Her eyes filled with tears as Iris gathered mounds of ice cream, dipping the metal scoop into a jug of water between each spoonful.

—What's your favourite flavour?

Aurora was silent, as if deciding, while she steadied her voice to answer.

—Is there chocolate?

—That's my favourite, too.

From the first blissful sip, Aurora would have done anything for Iris Kenny. Iris was not freckled, as she was, but golden-limbed and tall with a wide mouth and grey eyes specked with gold that showed in sunlight. Iris rode a pony to school, a soft-natured grey called Biscuit. When the family lived in Sydney she had been to the cinema many times and wanted to be an actress when she grew up. She would probably succeed, Aurora thought, with her almost saint-like beauty, and her kindness and bravery. At school, Iris wore her long hair gathered into a single plait – it started high up on her head and descended in precise folds. Iris's mother, burdened as she was with many children, still made time each morning to arrange her daughter's hair.

—It's called a French plait, Iris explained, and when they had drained the milkshakes she pulled a brush from her satchel. —I'll do one for you, she said, her fingers nimbly unpicking the plait Aurora had made for herself and slept on for days without Esther noticing. At ten years of age, Iris seemed to Aurora to have all the sophistication of a grown woman

Iris's mother, Renata Kenny, was careless with her sons in a way that surprised Aurora. The older boys roamed far and wide without supervision, while the littlest tumbled and rolled from trees unrebuked, or slithered under the house to build their forts in the dusty dark

where snakes or spiders could lurk. They bounced unrestrained in the back of Roy Kenny's truck all the way from the store in Sugarbag to the large dilapidated house he had rented for them out along the Quorn road. Perhaps it was different when there was an inexhaustible supply of children, Aurora thought. She was uncertain of the exact number of the Kenny offspring and wondered whether even the parents would miss one or two if they failed to return from their explorations in the countryside. All she did know was that since she and Iris had become friends, Adam Gunnet no longer teased her and she was no longer lonely, at least not during school hours.

The thing about Renata Kenny that quickly earned Aurora's trust was that she never asked about Michael and the tragedy that had struck their family. Nor did she ever comment, as the other mothers sometimes did, that her lunchbox might contain nothing but half a block of Kraft cheese, or that she walked to and from school even on the hottest days, although there was a car in working order at their house and everyone knew her mother could drive it. Renata must have heard all of this and more, because who in Sugarbag and the surrounding areas had not, but she treated Aurora as casually as if she was her own child, special in her own right, unmarked by disaster.

Sometimes Renata would look up from breastfeeding her newest baby, a boy called Lloyd. —Iris's pegging out the washing, she might say. —She'll be finished in a minute. Come and sit with me a bit, Aurora.

Aurora was shy at first, unable to bring herself to look at the baby's mouth where it sucked rhythmically at Renata's nipple. But after it had happened a few times she found that the milky noises, the warmth of the baby and Renata close beside her on the sofa, unrolled something tight in her chest and made it easier to breathe.

When the feed was over, Renata would pass the baby to Aurora. —Here, take him for me while I get a clean nappy.

Each time Aurora held the baby, the unfamiliar weight of him made her chest ache with pleasure. Renata showed her how to support his wobbly head, before she went in search of a nappy, a bottle of calamine for a mosquito bite, or a steaming cup of tea for herself. When she returned, Aurora would hold out the baby to her, guilty at how much she wanted to keep him, but as often as not Renata would shake her head and busy herself with some other small task.

—Oh, the little bug looks happy. Keep him a minute longer, will you? Do you mind?

The skin contact was like electricity coursing through Aurora. Her own mother rarely touched her, and although William, when he was at home, enfolded her in warm hugs until she was breathless, this false heartiness – much as she longed for it – distressed her, too. Her father's efforts to rouse Esther, to jolly them both along, seemed to Aurora to deny the silent weeks in which she had somehow managed without him.

When Aurora and Iris had been friends for a few months, Renata insisted on driving Aurora home after school one day, coaxing her into the front passenger seat of the old station wagon, while Iris climbed into the back along with four little boys, Renata's shopping bags, and a blue heeler pup by the name of Pogo. Renata parked a little way from the cottage, took the car keys from the ignition and left her boys with Iris to keep an eye on them. As they walked towards the house, she explained to Aurora that the children never came inside when she visited, they were noisy and broke things, and anyway, they were on the way home for tea.

As they walked towards the front door, Aurora experienced a moment of panic. Her mother might not even be dressed. Renata knocked – a gentle rap with her knuckles. Aurora held her breath as they waited, held it until the door swung open and Esther stood there staring at them.

—Hi, Renata said. —It was a hot afternoon so I gave Aurora a ride home, I hope you

don’t mind.

Esther shook her head in a dazed way, but didn’t speak.

Renata was holding something. —I just made a batch of marmalade from a case of Seville oranges Roy got a hold of. I’m the only one who eats it, so I brought a jar in case you care for it. I'm Renata Kenny, she added.

Esther’s hands moved over the front of her dress, smoothing creases, but when the jam was proffered she accepted it.

All of a sudden, Aurora felt ridiculously hopeful. She stepped away from Mrs Kenny and stood shyly beside her mother.

—Would you like a cup of tea? Aurora asked their visitor, realising that this lack of an everyday invitation gaped between the women like an abyss.

Renata beamed her gentle smile at them. —Just a glass of water, she said, shrugging towards the car. —I have to get the boys home.

Esther backed into the kitchen, opened the fridge and poured a glass of water from a jug. At least her mother was wearing a dress, although Mrs Kenny must have noticed that she hadn’t spoken a word yet, not even to say hello. Renata was busy drinking down the water and gave no sign that anything was amiss.

The loaf of bread Aurora had cut a slice from at breakfast still stood on the draining board; she must have forgotten to put it away, along with a chair pushed up against the pantry cupboard so she could reach the higher shelves – it was easier to leave it in place than drag it across the floor each time. Their table had no cloth, no jam jar with flowers or a froth of dried grasses as there was when she stayed for tea with Iris. Mrs Kenny was fond of sweeping the children’s mess aside to flick a linen cloth over the table, and she always set out china plates with roses on for Sunday tea.

—Pretty plates are food for the soul, she would say. It was Renata who had taught

Aurora to lay a table – the bread and butter plate on the left beside the fork, the knife on the right with a pudding spoon nestled next to it.

Aurora couldn't remember a meal at home but on the scrubbed table with minimum fuss. Most days she made her own food, strange mixtures of tinned vegetables mashed with tomato sauce, a boiled egg on the side if she had the energy and patience. Sometimes her mother ate the things Aurora cooked for her, sometimes she didn't and the congealed food would have to be scraped off and the plate scoured with steel wool. Every so often, William would bring home a leg of lamb and roast it for them. He showed Aurora how to mash potatoes with a knob of butter, stir in boiled cabbage and peas. It was her favourite dish, but unless her father was there to share it, she rarely made the effort.

Esther had moved to the window from where she could see the Kenny children leaping back and forth over the car seats, agile as monkeys. Aurora heard their peals of laughter and, as her mother's body in its thin cotton dress stiffened, dreaded the hours that would follow Renata's departure. The possibility of waking in the night to the sound of glass breaking made her feel faint. Often as she lay in the dark she imagined all the plates and glasses in their house broken and them never able to buy more. There would come a day when they would drink from jam jars, eat from the tablecloth and wash it up after every meal, as kids at school said the Trimboli family did. Oh, the shame of that!

1968

Music threaded through Aurora's life in a network as intricate as veins, its influence secret and deep, unknowable. As she grew older she understood that music could transform her; music could lift her up and carry her out of her life, cart her bodily into a safe zone of peace and tranquillity that – as real and solid as a wheat silo – existed inside her head. William played the Irish flute and penny whistle and she had picked up his tunes early, hanging about the kitchen when, wearied by his wife's silence, he played out Sunday afternoons in winter with a bottle of whiskey beside his chair. Whenever he was home he played at Saturday night sessions in the back bar of the Caledonian, Aurora tagging along behind.

The narrow smoke-filled room – with its sticky tables and beer mats curling – was rowdy, saturated with music, with nicotine, grog and laughter. On Saturday nights the players drifted in one by one, laying aside instrument cases coated in outback dust while they got to grips with the first few rounds. When that initial, urgent thirst had been satisfied they took out button accordions, mandolins, banjos, sometimes a tuba or cornet. There was always a guitar. They played the old tunes, sentimental ballads, whatever took their fancy, while their feet beat out the rhythm on the floorboards, or on the lids of their instrument cases.

Non-players lined the walls, clapping, and at a certain point in the evening, when the

energy in their hands had travelled to their feet, and enough beer had been drunk, the carpet was rolled back and dancers flung themselves into hornpipes, jigs and reels. Sometimes there were only two or three players; on a memorable night there might be fifteen or twenty. Musicians came and went with the seasons, so that the texture of the music, along with the repertoire, was rarely repeated. One time, a fiddle player turned up, a shearer on his way somewhere. William said he'd taken a hundred-mile detour just to play with them, and from the enthusiasm and grace with which the fiddler wielded the bow, from the sweat that trickled on his cheeks like tears and soaked his shirt collar, he would have driven further if he'd had to. Aurora always knew it was getting late when Stan Millard came out from behind the bar and played the spoons, beating them in his hand or against a bony knee.

Her father's best mates were all musicians, men who played as he did, with absorption, with effort and abandon. Drunk or sober, music oozed out of William in a steady stream that washed over other people and made them feel, temporarily, that the world was a better place. It made Aurora feel that way too. When her father played the flute his lashes lay girlishly thick upon his cheeks. Music gave him a peculiar innocence, it softened and reshaped his wiry body into something gentler, smoothed his battered face into the untroubled countenance of a choirboy.

On Sunday nights when William was at home, Iris Kenny climbed out of her bedroom window and rode bareback to the Caledonian to meet Aurora. William would buy them each a soft drink and a bag of chips, and they'd sit out on the verandah in the dark, licking grease and salt from their fingers and tapping their feet in time to the music. It was on one of these nights that Aurora decided she must give Iris something special, something to express the gratitude and relief she felt at being included in the Kenny family. After thinking hard she concluded that all she had to offer in the way of a gift was the old homestead, Cluain Meala. She had never spoken of it to anyone, but it lay midway between their two homes and she

was as certain as she could be that Iris would love it as she did. She drew a map and shyly asked her friend if they could meet there for a picnic lunch on Easter Saturday; and so it was arranged. Iris was to ride Biscuit, and Aurora would walk across the fields from home.

On the day, Aurora arrived early and covered the kitchen table with a cloth. Although neither she nor Iris drank tea, she set out cups and saucers, thankful to have Renata Kenny's example to follow. On the chair where her friend would sit, Aurora placed a small cloth-bound book she had found in a cupboard in one of the empty bedrooms; its thin pages teemed with poems, and Iris excelled at reciting.

When everything was ready for lunch, Aurora went out onto the verandah to wait for her friend, taking with her a cookery book from the kitchen dresser. The only other book in the house, she had found it one day when she'd been looking for a place to store the dish towel and soap she had brought from home. It lay in a drawer lined with yellowed newspaper, along with odd lengths of string wound into a ball and a tarnished silver serving spoon, all overlooked when the family had left.

Inside the front cover, in faded ink: *Bess Finnerty, Clonmel, Ireland.* Aurora stared at the name, wondering where Bess had gone, wondering how and what she had cooked without her recipe book. The names of the dishes were written in both French and English and contained mysterious ingredients: chervil, saffron, tarragon. Aurora closed her eyes and her brow creased with the effort of imagining: tarragon. The recipes called for a range of strange utensils, but a *batterie de cuisine*, a *moulinett*e and a *bain marie* were shapes she could only guess at. Within this opulent world, where humble potatoes were *pommes de terre*, and soups were transformed into *potages*, Aurora sensed elegance, a way of living that existed on a different plane to her own life in Sugarbag, different even to Renata Kenny's citified habits. It was a world she could get lost in for hours as she browsed the recipes, a world she vowed to locate and inhabit permanently one day, if that was humanly

possible.

Each visit she copied a page from the book. At home she glued them over old spelling tests and comprehension questions in an exercise book. Today she paid attention to the instructions for homemade mayonnaise. *All ingredients should be at room temperature,* she wrote. *Eggs, especially, should never be taken directly from the cold larder.*

When at last Iris and Biscuit appeared over the lip of the dry creek bed, Aurora saw that her friend wore the blue cloak made from a curtain that had been her costume in the Christmas play. Matching blue ribbons were plaited into the pony's mane, and when Iris stood up in the stirrups and waved, Aurora returned her greeting as nervously as if welcoming her friend to her own house.

—On either side the river lie, long fields of barley and of rye, that clothe the world and meet the sky, and through the field the road runs by…

Aurora watched from the steps as Iris leaned on the verandah rail and read from the book of poetry. By now, after many visits, the story was familiar, but still she found the words bewitching. When she had given the book to Iris she'd had no idea its verses were in every way as magical as the house.

—And moving through a mirror clear, that hangs before her all the year, shadows of the world appear…

This part always raised goose-bumps. Aurora was reminded of the afternoon on the golden bed when she had woken and seen a shape rise behind her in the mirror. Since that day she had peered again and again into the old glass, but always it was only herself she found reflected there. Sometimes she wondered if the thing she had seen might have been her sadness about Michael, and about her mother, but then she remembered the flashing smile as the image faded. Perhaps she would never understand about the mirror.

—All in the blue unclouded weather, thick-jewelled shone the saddle-leather…

The hat that perched on a corner of the golden bed had a wide leather band with a small dun-coloured feather tucked into it, and it had become a ritual to make sure the hat was at the same angle as when she had first seen it. If Iris was there she would make an excuse to go back into the house alone so that she could check on the hat. She was not sure how it moved from visit to visit but guessed that drafts wafted through the empty rooms at night, nudging and tugging, making almost imperceptible changes to the position of things.

—Who is this? And what is here? And in the lighted palace near, died the sound of royal cheer.

Aurora remembered nights when her mother had come into her bedroom and read to her from a book of fairy tales. Sometimes she thought she must have dreamed this, but then how else did she know *Snow White, Cinderella* and *Hansel and Gretel?* Her mother's public silence had to do with Michael, as if he had taken her voice away with him. Aurora knew by now that her brother had died during a thunderstorm. Baba Millard's older brother, Thomas, had been taken by it too. It was why her mother hid from bad weather, why on windy nights she put her head under the pillow and whimpered. Fortunately, rain was rare in Sugarbag.

Once, when Aurora was squatting at the base of the bee tree with Kilkie Bleecker, she had asked her teacher about thunder and lightning, trusting that even if Kilkie knew the reason for her question, she would not press for details.

The teacher's enormous dark eyes were serious.

—A thundercloud is thick with violence. It's the rage of nature, that's what gives them that furious colour. And in the thickness is where the light gathers, where it changes and comes out yellow – not the happy colour of sunflowers or baby chicks, but a staining dirty yellow. It stores thunder and lightning inside. And the lightning, when it strikes, goes off like a mine full of dynamite. Kilkie looked up at the entrance to the hive, and her voice

softened. —When lightning strikes, it's the fastest thing on earth, she said.

A mine full of dynamite. That was what had happened to her brother and Thomas Millard. Aurora's shoulders pressed against the warm wood of the verandah. She had watched the women who brought their small sons to school, the way they hated to leave them the first year and kept looking back over their shoulders as they walked towards their cars. There was one woman who returned at lunchtimes, drove for half an hour in the heat just to sit with an arm around her boy while he ate the four little squares of a cheese and Vegemite sandwich she had cut for him. And Renata Kenny looked at baby Lloyd sometimes as if she wanted to gobble him up. Aurora had seen Renata kiss his baby feet, suck his tiny toes until he smiled his wet, blue, bubbly smile at her. Renata always looked younger and less tired when she held Lloyd. This was how boys were loved. It must have been how her mother loved Michael, which was why she was silent and empty now that he was gone.

—He said, 'She has a lovely face; God in his mercy lend her grace, The Lady of Shalott.'

Iris flung up her arms and stood outlined in profile. The blue of the draped cloak merged with the sky as she slowly folded into a bow, then bounced upright, smiling. Aurora clapped until her palms stung, and as they retreated into the dimness of the house for lunch, she found herself wishing she could somehow become her beautiful and clever friend, a girl everybody loved. Or better still, a boy. Any boy.

The kitchen of their cottage, with its small deep window, was dark in winter, its underlying stone slab floor icy. Aurora set the woodstove with paper and kindling each night so that in the mornings all she had to do was strike a match and watch as it leapt to life. The flames warmed her cheeks and hands at once, but took an hour or more to thaw her feet and her knobbly knees under the thin flannelette pyjamas. She had taken to wearing a pair of

William’s socks, skidding in them on the linoleum as she filled the kettle and carried it to the stove, or reached for sugar to sprinkle on the bowl of bread and milk she ate for breakfast. Sometimes Esther emerged from her bedroom wearing an old brown dressing gown of William’s and plucked a flaming stick from the stove to light her cigarette. As soon as her mother appeared, Aurora would pour her a cup of tea.

This morning, with her French cookery notes pressed open on the table, she read while she ate.

The flesh of a young chicken should be supple, smooth and bluish white. The wishbone should be soft. Aurora imagined a bone shaped like a wish; she turned the pages slowly, spooning bread and milk into her mouth, keeping a watchful eye on her mother.

—Where were you all yesterday?

Aurora judged that a vague answer would satisfy Esther.

—Iris Kenny and I had a picnic along the creek. We took turns riding Biscuit.

Her mother nodded, then flicked cigarette ash into the open front of the stove.

—When will Dad be home? Aurora said.

Esther drew the dressing gown together in front and wearily raised her shoulders. William would appear when the work was done. Then, when something else came up, he'd be off again.

Aurora glanced down at her exercise book, burrowing into a recipe for little biscuits called cat's tongues. *Langues de chat.* And eyeglass cakes, which she longed to bake and would bake soon. *Gateaux lunette.* She would ask her mother to buy the ingredients next shopping trip.

—I'll give you some money to go to the shop after school.

The money would be for cigarettes. Mr Kenny let her buy them for her mother.

A fresh fish should be odourless, rigid. It should never be soft. Its scales and skin should

be shiny, its eyes bright.

—You'd better get dressed or you'll be late for school.

Aurora swallowed the last of her bread and milk, and as she brushed past her mother on the way to the sink she saw that Esther was trying to stretch her pale lips into a smile.

The gills of fresh fish should be red and shiny inside; unscrupulous fishmongers will paint them with beef blood, so be sure to test them with a fingertip before you buy.

Renata Kenny's homemade rissoles, her thick buttered pancakes afloat in a lake of sticky golden syrup, filled Aurora with genuine wonder. She watched carefully whenever Renata made pancakes – too shy to ask for the recipe, she hoped to acquire it by observation. The trouble was that Renata altered the quantities of flour, eggs and milk depending on how many mouths were waiting to be fed. In the end Aurora guessed that a cup of flour, a single egg, and milk stirred in to form a batter would make the right quantity for herself and Esther. She couldn't wait to cook a batch. It would be a surprise, a treat to keep up her sleeve for next time Esther was low, something to replace the bottles of homemade beer, or the flagon of port her mother sometimes produced after one of her grocery runs.

With a bowl of pancake batter ready, Aurora stood on a stool to melt butter in the frying pan. The floury mixture seemed a little on the runny side, and the first spoonful did not rise in a puffy cloud as Renata's did. Disappointed, she added more flour and dropped a second spoonful of batter into the pan. The result was another flat disc, while the first was now punctured with tiny holes. When she flipped it with a spatula it looked brown and tough. Aurora stared at the flour packet, trying to work out what she had done wrong. Tears pricked behind her nose as she prodded the two flat cakes with her spatula. She was lifting them from the pan onto a plate when Esther appeared in the kitchen. Her mother leaned her hip against the counter and poked at the batter with a spoon; she reached into the cupboard

for a new packet of flour, stirred some into the mixture. When she scooped a dollop of batter into the pan, it began to rise at once.

So only mothers could make pancakes shaped like clouds. It surprised Aurora to realise that for a long time now she had stopped thinking of Esther as a mother.

1969

The disappearance of Kilkie Bleecker coincided with the arrival of a ragged convoy of garishly painted trucks; the vehicles belonged to a circus which had been heading for somewhere else when a series of wrong turns landed them in Sugarbag. They pitched camp a mile out of town on the Quorn road, where, circled around the broken-down lead truck, they resembled a party of covered wagons making ready to do battle. It was the week before the Labour Day long weekend. Michael's birthday fell during the holiday, and Aurora watched with unease as her mother moved unsteadily towards it, seeking oblivion in unusually large amounts of alcohol.

On the Wednesday Aurora woke with a headache. The bedclothes felt rough against her skin, and she pushed them off and went to brush her teeth. In the bathroom mirror her face was almost colourless, sprinkled with a mauve-brown confetti of freckles.

In the kitchen, she was opening a tin of condensed milk, prising up the lid with a knife, when the whole thing slipped and the knife’s serrated edge sliced deep into the fleshy base of her thumb. She dropped the can and grabbed a tea towel. The cut stung at first, then subsided into a rhythmic throbbing that made her head swim. Aurora sat down and waited for the dizziness to pass; she considered going back to bed, telling Esther she was too sick for school, but then she thought of the long day at home.

Her mother was asleep; it would be asking for trouble to wake her. With Michael's birthday to survive, the sight of her daughter's blood would make her impossible. There had been accidents before and Aurora had always dealt with them; fortunately it was her left hand, so she would be able to do her schoolwork and nurse the wound under a slab of sticking plaster.

She washed the thumb and covered it, then sorted her exercise books into neat piles and put them in her school case. Before she left, she arranged a tray with the teapot, cup and saucer, two Weetbix in a bowl, and left it on the table for her mother. The headache still pounded as she hoisted her school case and set off towards the town.

Throughout the morning, the cut somehow made her whole body feel tender. At recess she went into the toilets and replaced the blood-soaked plaster with a fresh strip. When Iris asked her what had happened she told her she'd scratched herself climbing a fence. If anyone saw her thumb there would be trouble.

By Friday morning a red line radiated from the wound along her wrist bone and forearm. The cut flesh still gaped, in spite of her best efforts not to flex the hand. The edges of skin were puffy and ragged; pus oozed each time she changed the dressing. She wondered about disinfectant, but her head ached constantly now and it was difficult to decide what would work. In the bathroom cupboard, the rust-stained shelf held an old razor of her father's and a knob of shaving soap with whiskers sticking to it. She held it up to the light and carefully inspected the tiny hairs, brushed her hot cheek with the greyish soap. There was no smell, only the unevenness of the embedded whiskers. She imagined William’s face close to her own. If only he was here now, he would know what to do.

There were two half-used tubes of hand cream in the cupboard, a new toothbrush in a narrow box, nothing that would encourage her wounded hand to heal.

She felt unusually thirsty on the walk to school; the water bottle weighed heavy so she

had not brought it with her. Instead she waited until she reached the canvas bag that hung beside the entrance to the schoolhouse. The bag was cool and damp, its water flavoured with the must of canvas threads. Aurora filled the enamel cup; sweat broke on her brow as she drank. She was raising the refilled cup to her lips when she saw the teacher walking towards her from the direction of the bee tree. Kilkie waved and Aurora lifted her hand to wave back. That was when it happened.

Dizziness took control. Suddenly the landscape tilted and she saw a sickening mix of colours swirled together, like slops stirred in a bucket. In the corner of her eye, Kilkie lurched towards her, arms outstretched. Then it was dark.

She woke in the shade beside the schoolhouse with her head resting in the teacher's lap. Upside down, Kilkie's face was grave.

—Say, what happened to your hand, possum?

—Accident. Her throat was tight and hot and ticklish.

—You should have had it looked at.

Aurora read reproach in Kilkie’s voice, as the teacher fluttered a handkerchief to keep the flies off.

—You should have seen the doctor. There ought to have been stitches, she insisted.

Aurora closed her eyes. —It's mending, she whispered.

—Sure. But it’s too late now for sewing. Kilkie stroked her forehead. —You better rest up, she said. —And then we'll see.

Aurora took this as permission to sleep, and closed her eyes at once. Later there was sun like a hot iron against her cheek, a sudden painful glare against her closed eyelids, accompanied by the loping rhythm of Kilkie's stride as she carried her past the bee tree and into the relative cool of the church.

The withdrawal from light and heat was balm. Aurora opened her eyes to stained glass

windows, shafts of coloured light, and the beauty of it made her moan. She was on a bed like a long boat, made by turning two high-backed pews and pushing them together. The mattress was sponge cake, and she rolled and curled into its soft billow.

—Get some sleep, possum, Kilkie said. —I'll see you at recess time.

Aurora woke, puzzled at the view of arching stone, of thick timber beams spanning columns of quivering light. Smells of moss and water, wood varnish and plaster wafted over her. In the windows, robed figures blazed, while high up in the corners, angels turned their soft limestone eyes towards her. She retreated into sleep, but an internal heat bubbled through her dreams and soon she found herself preparing a dish from the recipe book: squid in its ink. Somehow she had to remove the head and split open the belly of this unknown sea creature. The intestines must be removed, the recipe said, but it was vital to conserve the black ink in the stomach. Once she had dealt with the squid and its liquid, other recipes clamoured for attention.

Escargots au beurre. She knew the best snails were to be found in dry places. They were good for the health, but, being difficult to digest, had to be seasoned with garlic. In the distance, a low, urgent voice kept repeating something. It was Kilkie, Aurora thought, but her eyelids felt so heavy, sealed by the Renata light streaming through the windows.

When buying, make sure you choose a heavy crab. Then plunge it live into a court bouillon or boiling salted water. What exactly was a *court bouillon*? And how could she follow the recipe if she did not know what it was?

Lobster must be kept alive until it is cooked, then plunged into boiling water. When cooked, remove the stomach, which is found in the head. How strange to be an animal whose stomach occupied its head. Did that mean the brain would be found in the stomach? How could she push the lobster into the boiling water! She could not do it, she could not,

and yet the water seared her hand. Either that, or the claws of the frantic creature were snapping at her.

Aurora rolled on the foam mattress, curling away from the lobster and the boiling pot. She wanted to confide in Kilkie the secret of coaxing mussels open. You had to wash them carefully, and then put them in a dry pan. It was sneaky, but once they were all flat there, thinking everything was fine, you lit the fire and waited for the heat to build and build until the mussels opened their wide serrated mouths.

—*Away from the coast it is best to eat them in the R months.* In Sugarbag they were so far from the coast that if she ever cooked mussels it would have to be …

—Aurora, squeeze my hand if you can hear me. Squeeze!

It was not the lobster, or the crab, but herself being pushed down into the boiling water, the *court bouillon*. She thrashed wildly as heat cracked her skin and the scalding liquid bubbled in her dry mouth.

At last she woke, shivering, to find Renata Kenny kneeling at the foot of the boat bed.

—You've been sick, Aurora. We were worried. How are you feeling, dear?

Kilkie's dark head appeared above the pew back; she leaned over and reached for Aurora's undamaged hand.

—We had to get the doctor out. He dressed your wound and gave you an injection. You'll be feeling better soon.

Aghast at having caused a fuss, Aurora closed her eyes. She wanted to ask if Esther knew where she was, but Renata saved her the trouble.

—I drove out to see your mother. I guess you know this is a bad weekend for her, so she wasn't feeling too well.

—No, Aurora said, with an inward shudder at what Mrs Kenny might have seen out at their house.

—I told her we'd called the doctor, and that we'd bring you home when you were well again.

She opened her eyes. —I'm not well enough yet, am I?

Renata stroked her shoulder. —No, love.

Aurora hid her relief by turning her face into the pillow.

—I've got the car outside, Renata said. —We'll get you back to our place. You'll be right as rain in a day or two.

Aurora clung to Kilkie's fingers, feeling the long slender bones. She loved the Kenny house, but it was hot and crowded. Here in the spaciousness of the church, under the benign gaze of angels, she felt at peace. Aurora lifted her chin from the pillow and caught the gleam of Kilkie's white dress against the dark wooden pew; the teacher's hand smelled of honey.

—I don't think I can walk, she said.

—Oh, you're a featherweight, we can—

—I'll keep her here for the time being. Kilkie's voice was firm, her hands capable and decisive as she tucked the blanket around Aurora's shoulders.

Renata frowned; when she stood up her right hand moved automatically to make a quick sign of the cross before she walked down the aisle towards the heavy arched door.

—I'll come back later, she said, not looking at Kilkie. —In the meantime, Aurora, you just rest.

The days Aurora spent in the church with Kilkie were tranquil. Her teacher cooked their meals on a camp stove, songs bubbling out of her as she hovered over the frying pan, and at night, lying side by side in the boat bed, Kilkie told stories until they both fell asleep. There was no school for either of them, and time stretched gently ahead. Aurora never wanted this mothering to end, but on Sunday night she caught Kilkie looking at her with a steady,

speculative gaze and sensed that their idyll was almost over.

—I have to take you home, possum, Kilkie said. —Tomorrow early, before it heats up.

Aurora shrank into the bed, pulled the sheet up to her chin.

—Can't I stay till school starts?

—In town they're saying I should take you home, Kilkie said. —You know there's going to be trouble for both of us if you don't go.

Aurora began to cry silently.

—There now. Kilkie stroked the top of her head. —Well, I guess another day's neither here nor there. Your ma's not going to come stalking into town, is she, so let's just say we didn't hear a thing about going home, eh? And I'll take you to a special place tomorrow. It'll bottle your strength, ready for going back.

Early next morning, the two of them set off in Kilkie's car along a track that the teacher seemed sure of but to Aurora was barely visible. She was still sleepy, a touch woozy after the days in bed, but happy to be up again, ready for an adventure.

—Where're we going?

—It's on the track from Yappala, a place where sick people would stop to rest until they felt strong again.

From the quiet pleasure in her teacher's voice, Aurora guessed the place they were going to must be important to Kilkie's people, Nukunu people; they had lived here for thousands of years before white men came. Kilkie said her grandmother had worked on one of the big sheep stations, a place that in its glory days had shorn forty-thousand sheep in a single season. Now it was one of the district's grand ruins.

—Where did your grandmother go after the station closed? Aurora asked.

—She stayed on the land. Mum was born there in the overseer's cottage, and later, so was I.

Aurora glanced up in surprise. —Is she still there, your mother?

Kilkie slowly shook her head. —No, she said softly. —When I was taken away down south to live with a white family, it was too lonely there without me, so Mum moved out. I didn't hear where she went to.

Aurora imagined a tall woman walking away across the empty plain, walking and walking until she became a speck, then invisible. She thought of the vastness of the land between Sugarbag and the coast, Sugarbag and the ranges; there was so much space in this country for a mother to get lost in.

Kilkie lifted a hand from the steering wheel and touched Aurora's cheek. —Later on, when she knew I would be growing up, she came back, just in case. But before we could get together again, Mum took sick and died. So you see, possum, just having a mother around can be counted as a blessing, even if she doesn't talk much.

As they travelled on in silence, Aurora wondered how it would have felt to return from Adelaide and find her mother had died. Soon she would go down to Adelaide again, this time for high school. Aunt Ivy had written a rare letter, inviting her to board. Her aunt was alone in the house since Grandfather Haddy had passed away, so there was plenty of room for her, Ivy wrote. Since she had to go somewhere, her father said, it might as well be there. Aurora wondered if Esther would be lonely in the cottage without her.

Because of Cluain Meala, Aurora understood how places could be special, but nobody in Sugarbag ever spoke of the land or trees or weather as her teacher did. Now, as she told Aurora about the place they were heading for, Kilkie's tone of voice reminded Aurora of the way Aunt Ivy spoke of church, only the teacher didn't go to church, even though she lived in one.

That was another thing that made people, like Baba's father, mumble angry things about her. Mr Millard, even the Kennys, wanted Kilkie to move out of the church, but while the

publican flatly refused to rent her a room at the hotel, Kilkie wouldn't budge. Aurora knew that much from gossip. The Millards weren't even Catholics, but the Kennys were, and although the church had not been used for years, it seemed to make them furious. Aurora wished there was some way the teacher would come and live with her, but she knew that asking Esther was out of the question, just as she knew she would not talk about this expedition when she got home, although she could not have said why.

Lost in her own thoughts, Aurora barely noticed when the dirt road crossed a main road, or when Kilkie turned off and sent them bumping away up another narrow track. Then she was parking the car and stepping out, beckoning to Aurora.

—We'll walk, now. It's not so far.

The earth was red underfoot, and the going was easy. In a while they came to a dry creek bed, and on the rising ground beyond it Aurora saw heaps of rubble that had once been buildings. They walked on until they came to a place where trees with silvery trunks as smooth as skin rose up out of the rust-coloured soil. Below them, pink and grey stones mottled with lichen surrounded a kidney-shaped bowl of water.

—Where are we?

—On the boundary between Nukunu and Adnyamathanha country, Kilkie said. —Down there is the spring. The first white people who came here had big plans for it. One of them was a fancy man, the third son of an Irish earl. Kilkie pointed back the way they had come. —Along there, he was chasing up some cattle in a thunderstorm when the creek flooded. The earl's boy was swept from his horse and drowned. Later others came, but they all went away again. It's a place that outlasts people. Are you thirsty?

Aurora nodded; all of a sudden she felt parched.

—Good, because the water is sweet, better than medicine.

A stone the size of a house loomed on the far side of the waterhole, its surface marked

with charcoal streaks that appeared to Aurora like tall, straight figures, watching.

—In the old days, when sick or injured people came here they would sit in the shade of that rock, close to the water, Kilkie said. —Anyone who came across them had a duty to offer food, medicine if they had some. It was a place where people trusted in the kindness of others.

The sun beat on Aurora's shoulders as they clambered down to reach the water.

—Can we swim? she said. Then a sudden thought struck her. —Did your mother come here when she was sick?

Kilkie nodded, moving closer to the rock and leaning her cheek against its ochre surface. —Mum went straight from here to heaven.

Aurora stared at Kilkie for a long time. —My brother went there, too, she said.

Kilkie came and sat down quietly beside her, and when Aurora looked up, the sun flamed on the surface of the rock, bleaching out the black shapes of the watchers.

—Drink first, Kilkie said. —Later, if you still want to, you can swim.

They squatted beside the water, and when Kilkie dipped her hands to drink, Aurora copied her as well as she could without wetting her bandage.

—Here. Kilkie held out cupped hands and Aurora drank from them. The water tasted earthy and sweet, as promised. After they had drunk deeply and damped their faces, they sat together in the shade with their backs against the rock; before them, the surface of the pool was dark and shining. Kilkie hummed softly and Aurora's head drooped against her shoulder, cushioned by the teacher's mass of curly hair. The heaviness in her hand was gone, and in a while she drifted into a sleep vivid with dreams. Her father was there, and Michael, the two of them sitting on a couple of sofa cushions they had carried out onto the verandah. William was playing his flute, the slow air her mother loved, 'Innisheer', while Michael silently fingered the holes of his tin whistle.

—Don’t forget, Michael, piper’s fingers, William said.

Her father played the tune again, nodding to his son to join in.

Esther appeared with a tray of sandwiches and a jug of raspberry cordial. Sunlight flared on the lip of the old glass jug, on cubes of ice bobbing in the pink liquid. Their mother was fresh and young looking. She was smiling as she reached into the front of her apron for the bottles of cold beer.

Aurora felt the dream reeling forwards and resisted, clinging stubbornly to its back like a buckjump rider astride a frisky bull. Although dimly aware that what she saw on the verandah was a mirage, she wanted to linger for the longest time. A warm breeze wafted over her, and the scent of the water flooded her nostrils for a moment before she plunged back down into sleep.

The next thing she registered was an angry noise that roiled around them. She felt Kilkie beside her, the warmth of her bare arm, but the teacher had stopped her humming. The dream slewed to a halt, replaced by rough voices.

—Pick up the child.

—Fancy bringing a kiddie to Death Rock!

—Comes of putting the witch in charge of children in the first place.

Aurora couldn’t think who these harsh voices belonged to, only that her arms were gripped and she was lifted bodily from the smooth floorboards of her dream.

The sun was hot on her back as she was bounced along, thrown across a shoulder as broad and dense as a plank of wood. She thought a crowd walked beside her, within the menacing beat of a drum, but she could not see faces, only elbows, shins, work-dusted boots.

Where was the lovely vision of home now? Where were Michael, and her mother? Where was Kilkie Bleeker? Once she thought she glimpsed her teacher, just the briefest

flash of dark hair cascading in spirals. Kilkie's white dress seemed to merge with the shining trunk of a eucalyptus tree, her hair caught among the branches.

—Let me go! Aurora's voice was weak, though audible.

Whoever carried her did not listen, and she hung there uncomfortably, her chest blistering where it rubbed against a knob of bone. The world had tilted crazily, and the drum drowned Aurora's feeble shrieks. Then she was lifted into stuffy darkness, the covered back of a truck, with wisps of straw sticking to her hands and knees; the pungent smell of animals, their dung and urine, made her gag. She was propped against what felt like a sack of grain and clung to it as they bumped along. Later the door swung open, and she was dazzled by sunlight.

As the truck roared away from her, gears clashing, Aurora saw the main street of Sugarbag. She looked around for the crowd, but the street stretched out before her, wide and empty.

Renata Kenny ran from the store and clasped Aurora in her arms.

—Poor lamb, she repeated over and over. —Poor lamb!

Aurora was set on a wooden stool in the cool of the store and given a glass of iced water.

—Afterwards, she could never say for sure what she had seen at the waterhole. For weeks afterwards the kids at school talked of nothing but the circus that had been camped on the town's outskirts; the whole shebang had been stranded there for days – a dozen ponies, two camels, a moth-eaten lion, plus all the human cargo of clowns, tightrope walkers, lion-tamers and such. While the broken truck was being repaired, their roustabouts had unpacked the big top and raised it to create some shade. Two or three regulars from the Caledonian, with nothing better to do, had filled forty-four-gallon drums with bore water and carted them for the animals.

—You remember the circus, Aurora? Renata Kenny said. —They put on a bit of a show

in return for the food and water.

Aurora sensed pockets of deceit, like potholes, surrounding them. But when pushed to remember, she thought she could visualise a great tent pitched in the distance, even perhaps recalled seeing a camel and a line of tethered ponies. Lloyd Kenny told everyone he'd heard a lion roaring in the night, but Iris was preoccupied and vague when Aurora asked her about it. She'd got her first period, Iris said, and had been in bed with a hot water bottle on her cramping stomach the entire weekend.

Once when she mentioned the drumming to Baba Millard, Baba had yawned and said she'd heard Aurora'd had sunstroke. Even before the words were out of Baba's mouth, Aurora had turned away.

Kilkie did not return to school. For a few days, one of the mothers kept an eye on them, and then a relief teacher arrived and made disparaging noises at the state of their spelling and arithmetic; the possum babies were set to singing times tables for an hour at a time, morning and afternoon. What with their sing-song chant, and the distraction of new routines, it was a week before Aurora noticed that Kilkie's bees had vanished. Bewildered, she stood beside the bee tree and looked up at the hollow place which had been the buzzing entrance to the hive. There was nothing to see there now, only clusters of small black ants busily worrying at the sticky edges.

1974

Summer seemed charged with promise the year Aurora turned sixteen. For once decent rains had turned the country lush and green, and the air was humid. On the bus, heading home from Adelaide to Sugarbag for the long summer holiday, she watched for the crossing of the invisible line where drivers coming towards them waved instead of anonymously hurtling past. From her seat near the front she could tell the way country folk were feeling by how quickly the zone of indifference circling the city dissolved into the band of goodwill that extended all the way up country to Sugarbag. The first fluttered greeting appeared only an hour out of the sprawling northern suburbs: wheat farmers were happier than when she last made this trip, the result of the weather behaving itself, delivering water and sunshine at appropriate intervals in the crop cycle.

Iris was standing outside Sugarbag's general store when the bus hauled to a standstill. Aurora was amazed anew by her friend's beauty, which the severity of the wooden shop front and the emptiness of the broad main street only conspired to heighten. At sixteen Aurora felt unchanged in her awkwardness, while Iris looked more grown up than ever after going away to school. It still saddened Aurora that their schooling arrangements kept them apart, with her boarding in Adelaide and Iris in the country town of Gladstone. Iris jiggled up and down outside the bus window, flashing her radiant smile, while Aurora manoeuvred

her suitcase along the narrow aisle.

—Isn't it gorgeous! Iris shrieked. A whole summer holiday, and no more slave labour on Swetters' farm.

Aurora was gathered in a swift hug as she stepped down.

—I got your letter, she said shyly. Was it really that bad?

—Worse! Iris laughed. —Come for a cold drink. Mum's inside. She'll give you a lift home after.

Aurora followed her friend into the store, anxious that, after a school term of absence, Esther had not picked her up from the bus, but grateful Iris had not remarked on this.

Once Christmas was over, the two girls slipped into a warm slow stream of familiarity, a feeling Aurora relished after fending for herself in a secondary school full of city-raised girls with conventional families and neat homes in the suburbs. As always in Sugarbag, one unremarkable day followed another, with a permanent colour scheme of brittle blue sky and dun-coloured paddocks that brightened gradually to gold in the south where the sweep of the harvesters was visible in the stubble fields. To the north, bands of taupe and sable zigzagged all the way to the distant ranges; the country looked soothingly the same as it always had.

In the mornings Aurora played the piano for an hour and a half, rippling through four octaves of scales in all their permutations before working on the pieces she was polishing for her scholarship examination. Just before she finished for the day she would pick a sheet of music from the pile on the piano, something to please her mother. Esther was drinking less, Aurora noticed, and sleeping better. Some mornings she even appeared in a housecoat and sat nursing a cup of tea on the verandah, absorbed in whichever piece Aurora had chosen for her. Esther had always loved Erik Satie, his three *Gymnopedies,* six *Gnossiennes* and, most of all, his *Pieces Froides.* Formidable in their simplicity, these pieces were

difficult to play well, yet Aurora had worked at them for months and for the first time was rewarded by the sight of her mother's dishevelled head gently nodding.

Esther's other preference was for baroque music, but now she seemed grateful for the balm of Satie's cool harmonies, the yearning melodies teased from his unconventional scales. Satie's music had the effect of pausing time, and Esther sank into it with gratitude. She rarely sat beside her daughter on the piano stool now. With the professional tutoring at school, and hours of diligent practice, Aurora's skills had passed beyond Esther's ability to criticise or correct.

Aurora had automatically slipped back into the role of cook and housekeeper, but whenever her mother seemed restless she would pack a water bottle and a sandwich and escape to the old homestead. The elegant ruin was still her greatest consolation. Nothing could be broken there. Everything was already second-hand. Sometimes she spent a whole day curled in the brass bed, reading, but more often she went there with Iris. Her other favourite place was a sleeping bag on the floor of Iris's bedroom, while the younger children shrieked and tumbled in the passageway outside. It was here that Iris first spoke in detail of the farm at Gladstone where she had become a boarder.

—Mr Swetter, Fritzie, is a bad farmer. And the meanest man you ever saw, Iris said. She told about the dogs running loose, sad, mangy looking things, and how Fritzie's wife Gill looked just like them.

—She works herself to death cleaning at the school, while Fritzie goes boozing in the afternoons.

—How come your parents let you board there? Aurora said.

—Dad's only met Gill once. She had on a decent dress the day he went to talk about me boarding, Iris said.

—But if you explain what it's like.

Iris shrugged; there was a note of reluctance in her voice.

—It won't be for that much longer, she said. And besides, Gill relies on me. It's not so lonely for her when I'm there.

Aurora sat up and looked at her friend where she sprawled on the bed, flipping the pages of an old *Women's Weekly*. For the first time ever she sensed Iris was keeping something from her.

A week later, as they lay munching sandwiches on the verandah at Cluain Meala, more troubling details about the Swetters' farm emerged.

—There's this fellow works on the farm. His name's Aidan, Iris said.

Aurora sat up. —Is he nice?

Iris brushed crumbs from her lap. —Not exactly. He thinks he's pretty special though.

—Is he related to the Swetters?

Iris shook her head. —He comes from Queensland, but he does odd jobs for Fritzie, and helps out at harvest time. He works on other farms as well. He's a bit of a nomad, I reckon.

Aurora cast an eye skilled at reading her mother's moods over Iris; she registered the faint blush of colour in her friend's cheeks.

—Is Aidan your boyfriend?

—He's too old for me, Iris said. —But he likes me all right, pesters me to go with him to the pub and stuff. She twirled a strand of her long blonde hair and wound it around her fingers. —Aidan reckons I'd easily pass for eighteen, and anyway, on Friday nights the publican doesn't give a fig since he's always sloshed himself.

Aurora screwed up her face, disconcerted at being unexpectedly plunged into an adult world of dating and drinking.

—You wouldn't go, would you?

—Course not! It's fun making him suffer, that's all.

A week later, Iris arrived at the homestead with Biscuit at a canter.

—What's up? Aurora shouted.

Iris dismounted, blotted dust and sweat from her face with her sleeve.

—I was getting changed to ride over here, when I looked out my bedroom window and the bloke from Swetters' farm was staring in at me.

—Aidan?

Iris looped Biscuit's rein over the verandah post and stooped to pull off her riding boots.

—Yeah, him. Then all the way here I had the feeling someone was coming behind me. She shrugged. —Can't have been anyone though; his car would've kicked up dust for miles.

Later, when she looked back on that afternoon, Aurora would mark it down as the last time Iris was her old self. In the weeks that followed she seemed unusually preoccupied. Once Aurora arrived at the old homestead to find that Iris had been there without her; she had left her old straw hat on the kitchen table and a handkerchief on the washstand in the bedroom. Later still, when they were making lists of what they would do when they grew up and left home, Aurora noticed that her friend's grey eyes brimmed with tears. She pretended not to see – after all, Iris had so often turned a blind eye to her own distress that, out of a sense of delicacy and not wanting to intrude, it seemed only right to do the same. Afterwards she would wish with all her heart that she had asked her friend what was troubling her, but even then it would probably have been too late.

The final week of the holidays arrived, a band of iron-hot days when the weight of the sky seemed about to crush the brittle landscape. People were listless and cranky. The air felt lacking in oxygen, yet in spite of the soaring temperatures Aurora and Iris planned one last visit to the homestead – they would meet there early in the morning to say their goodbyes. Iris wanted one last waltz to the wind-up gramophone.

Aurora arrived at the agreed time, her blouse saturated with sweat and her cheeks and shoulders tingling from the sun. After going through the rooms to check that everything was in place she stretched out on the red sofa to wait for Iris, but the walk had exhausted her and she fell asleep.

When she woke it was with the realisation that she had slept long and deeply, that the time for lunch had come and gone and Iris had not appeared. Aurora shaded her eyes and scanned the fields, feeling a ripple of disquiet at their emptiness. It was unlike Iris to have broken a promise. Perhaps she had even had an accident – Biscuit was a quiet pony, but he could have put his foot in a rabbit hole. Aurora decided to walk to the Kenny house and find out what had happened, otherwise Iris would be back boarding with Gill Swetter and they would not meet again until Easter.

Lloyd Kenny squatted in the shade of a broken-down truck beside the house. Renata's youngest boy was at school now, and he had grown so much that he was more than half Aurora's height, but she still had a soft spot for Lloyd. He was watching her out of the corner of his eye as she walked towards him.

—Hi, Aurora said. —Is Iris home?

The boy turned his solemn face up; the older he got the more his close-set brown eyes marked him as his mother's son. He didn't answer, just picked up a pointed stick and began scratching in the dirt.

Aurora watched him for a while. —Well, is she?

Lloyd slowly shook his head, still scratching.

—See you later then, Aurora said.

She stepped onto the front porch and peered through the flyscreen. The house was usually scented by Renata's cooking, or the fainter acrid odour of unwashed clothing that littered the floor of the bedroom shared by the Kenny boys. This afternoon the house

smelled of nothing but the hot afternoon. She knocked on the wooden frame and waited. When there was no reply she opened the door and went inside.

—Iris?

There was a movement in the kitchen. Aurora passed the empty sitting room and went along the hall.

—Hello?

Renata Kenny sat at the kitchen table. For a moment Aurora was startled; something about the way she sat there reminded her of Esther. She had known her own mother to sit that way for hours without moving.

—I was looking for Iris, Aurora said.

Renata slowly turned her head, and her eyes, when they fell on Aurora, were shockingly vacant.

—We arranged a picnic, Aurora said. When she didn't come I thought something must have happened.

Renata nodded absently. Her face was tired, and for the first time Aurora noticed the network of fine lines around her eyes and mouth, the broken veins on her cheeks.

—The old Finnerty homestead, she said. —Iris reckoned you'd be waiting for her.

Aurora smothered a twinge of disappointment; if Mrs Kenny knew about her secret place, it was no longer a secret. She felt sticky with heat, confused about what to say and do next.

Renata Kenny sat up straighter on her chair. —Iris had to leave unexpectedly with her father. They went earlier than planned, that's all.

Instead of feeling reassured by this explanation, Aurora experienced a rush of unease; the dull bronze light in the kitchen seemed to curve about Mrs Kenny's head, and her voice had the sound of someone about to cry.

—She's gone back to school?

Renata hesitated for a long moment, and then nodded.

It was more than a month before the letter Aurora wrote to Iris at Swetters' farm was returned to her. The envelope bore a scrawled note to the effect that Iris was no longer known there, and someone had printed 'and good riddance' in greasy pencil on the back of the envelope. The pencil smudged on her hand as she turned it over, and she looked at the grey stain on her skin with distaste.

Iris did not return to Sugarbag at Easter. When Aurora asked after her at the store, Roy Kenny was vague, and out at the Kenny house Renata was brisk as she folded laundry at the kitchen table; she avoided Aurora's eyes.

—Iris won't be home these holidays. If you want to write, I'm sure she'd like it.

Renata's remote expression surprised Aurora, accustomed as she was to her good nature.

—I wrote, she said. —But the letter came back.

At that moment, a shriek from Lloyd or one of his brothers preceded a crash that shook the house as if a bomb had gone off in the region of their bedroom. Renata jumped up in alarm.

—What's going on, you boys? she shouted.

There was no reply, only further squeals. As Renata rushed from the room, Aurora moved towards the space beside the kettle where, among household bills and scraps cut from the newspaper, Renata kept spare paper to scribble on. She wanted to write down Iris's address, but there, leaning against the kettle, was a letter addressed to Renata in Iris's rounded schoolgirl hand.

Sounds of children crying drifted through from the back bedroom. Aurora picked up the letter and looked at it in wonder; it was postmarked Adelaide. If Iris was in Adelaide, they

could see each other during term time. Iris could even stay over at St Ives, help to fill those empty weekends with Aunt Ivy. It was strange that her friend had never mentioned any plan to go to school in Adelaide. Aurora turned the letter over. It only took a moment to memorise the address and prop it back against the kettle. Then Renata was stamping up the passageway.

—They pulled over the wardrobe in their room. If it hadn't been for the bed, it would have squashed them, she said.

—Are the boys–?

—They're just crying because they think their father will get on to them, is all.

Renata looked at her and then away. —The Swetter place wasn't suitable for Iris. She's boarding somewhere else now.

—Can I write down her new address before I go?

—I don't remember where I put it, Renata said. —Everything's a muddle at the moment. But if you drop your letter in at the store, I'll include it along with mine. That way, you'll save on postage.

All the way home, Aurora murmured the address she had gleaned from the envelope in the kitchen. Alarmed by Renata's deception, she wrote to Iris immediately and posted it. Roy Kenny sold her the stamp and stood behind the counter as she dropped it into the post bag sandwiched between a card for Aunt Ivy and a coupon for a catalogue she was sending away for. After a fortnight, this letter too was returned. It came enclosed inside a larger envelope, along with a politely worded note informing Aurora that the addressee was unknown.

Aurora walked across the fields with the returned letter in her pocket. As she approached the homestead she saw that a sheet of iron had lifted from the roof above the main sitting room. The weather would get in under the flap and deterioration would accelerate. When

she opened the front door, the house felt empty in a bad way, its air stale and stifling. For the first time she felt on edge there, a bit afraid of all that had taken place in the rooms over the years without her knowing. She entered tentatively, as if someone or something might leap at her from a doorway. This nervousness was the effect of Iris's inexplicable disappearance, she supposed. The mystery tainted everything.

1975

Aurora about to set off for Adelaide and a scholarship interview at the conservatorium when a telegram arrived with news that a horse William had borrowed had fallen and rolled on him during a cattle drive. The writer expressed sympathy and regretted that it had taken two days for someone to ride to the nearest telephone and relay the news to his widow. Esther read the telegram once before the pale yellow paper fluttered from her fingers. She was dry-eyed as she gazed through the cottage window at the unchanging view of empty fields; her resigned sigh even made it seem as if the loss of William was inevitable.

Aurora begged to go to her father and bring him home, but since she had only the haziest notion of where he had been working, and no idea of how to get there, she caved in when Esther insisted she stick to her appointment at the conservatorium. William was proud of her, he would have wanted that. Her mother was resolute – there was nothing else to be done.

On the bus heading south, Aurora stared for hours at the passing landscape. She had always missed her absent father, but somehow it had been a comfort to know that he was out there beyond the horizon. She had never blamed him for staying away, and loved to imagine him working with sheep and cattle, branding, shearing, mending fences, mucking in at meal times with the itinerant workers whose stories he brought home to them between

jobs, men with whom he was popular for the tunes he played on his flute when the working day was over. Now that her father was no longer part of it, the landscape looked harsh, even malevolent. She wondered where William's Irish flute was – its silver keys worn thin by his work-blunted fingertips, its ebony barrel that gleamed with the sweat of years. Perhaps, like her father, the flute was now lost to them forever.

The letter confirming her scholarship beat Aurora back to Sugarbag; as she climbed wearily from the bus, Roy Kenny was coming out of his store carrying a box of groceries for a customer who was filling up with petrol.

—There's a letter I kept until you got back. You let me put this box down, and I'll get it for you.

Aurora could barely look him in the eye, embarrassed now that Iris's absence stood between her and the Kenny family. When he produced the letter, she thanked him and picked up her suitcase. She would study in Adelaide and return to Sugarbag less and less often. Her life was changing fast, and with Iris and her father gone, there was little reason to return.

At the house, her mother was emptying cupboards and drawers, piling crockery and kitchen pans into an old handcart, heaping on sheets and towels, clothing that had belonged to William. She looked up at Aurora where she stood motionless in the doorway.

—I'm getting shot of all this useless stuff.

Aurora simply nodded. She lacked the will to resist. Perhaps these possessions had weighed on her mother; without china and saucepans, the mismatched cutlery, Esther would be lighter, she could make a new start in Jamestown; Julia had persuaded her to go. With the cart loaded, her mother began to push it in the direction of the place William called the quarry pit. It was not really a quarry, but a loop of the creek bed, a spot where the land had been cut away when stones were gouged from the bank to build their cottage. Aurora

followed behind to lend a hand.

The edge of the cutting was masked by a fringe of soft bleached grass. It would be easy to tumble down the steep incline and break an ankle, but for once Esther's movements were brisk and confident. She reached into the cart, drew out a blue-and-white striped milk jug and hurled it over the side. Even before it shattered against a rock, she had turned back to the load. Cups tumbled like acrobats; saucers spun through the air. A rain of blunt knives. Into the pit went a three-tiered cake stand that had been a wedding present from Aunt Ivy. A water-green scone dish edged with gold that might never have been used. The soup ladle dropped vertically into a crevice halfway down the slope. Esther picked up the old pressure cooker, which William had called the stew pot, and flung it with special energy. After the first load had been disposed of, subsequent ones were easy.

The two of them grew frenzied in clearing out the rooms, close, for once, in this joint endeavour. Aurora would have sworn their sparely furnished cottage didn't hold much, but they filled the cart over and over. There were cartons of dusty books she couldn't remember anyone ever reading, clothes and toys that had belonged to Michael, and a box of baby clothes in white and lemon – bonnets, and tiny bootees stuffed with cotton balls – that looked freshly knitted. When finally the kitchen table teetered on the edge of the pit, Esther gave it a shove and walked away as it tumbled in. By the time they had finished there was not so much as a spare box of matches in the kitchen. They had a suitcase of belongings each.

Before they left Sugarbag for good, Aurora tramped across the fields and opened the old front door for the last time. If only Iris had been waiting there for her with Biscuit tied to the verandah rail, but an ocean of air had closed over Iris, swallowed her as completely as if she had never existed. No one in Sugarbag spoke of Iris Kenny anymore; she had disappeared as thoroughly as Kilkie Bleecker.

Aurora sat at the table in the kitchen, filled a glass with water from her bottle and drank it down, then carefully wiped the empty glass and replaced it on the dresser beside the postcards. She knew each of their vistas and the titles on their backs by heart. The first was of a grey stone fortress, the Rock of Cashel in Tipperary. On the next, a river flowed under the stone arches of a bridge. It was the River Suir, and the edges of this card were burred and grimy as if someone had carried it around in a pocket. The third card showed a solitary dark mountain silhouetted against the sky; on the back a single word was handwritten: *Slievenamon*.

The sound of her father singing came to Aurora as clearly as if William stood there in the room; tears spilled down her cheeks as her father's life and death filled her thoughts. The air in the old kitchen was blue with shadows; blue air filled her lungs, her bursting heart, the long afternoon, with a sharp loneliness.

How little she had known her father. William had worked away from home so much that all the hours they had spent together might have totalled less than a single year. She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief and looked around the kitchen, noticing for once the frayed linoleum and the weeds that sprouted in the rotting windowsills. With the weather endlessly probing its weak spots, the place disintegrated a little more with every season. Already the entrance to the cellar had partially collapsed, and in a few years the roof would fall open. Once sun and wind gained entry, the contents would decay. Eventually there would be scattered stones, the blackened hearth protruding from a sand drift. It was astonishing how quickly objects that were apparently solid decomposed. In years to come there would be barely a trace.

In the bedroom, the bush hat had shifted again from its customary angle on the bedpost. The house would be altered if she took it as a souvenir – she had brought things to it but never taken anything away. It was her rule. A spider’s web stretched from the bed rail to the

hat's brim. She sat on the bed and brushed at it with her hand, tipped the hat to dust it with her skirt, and a slip of paper fluttered from the hatband into her lap. It was an ancient tissue, folded small. Carefully, she opened it on the bedspread. In the centre was the shape of a mouth, a full, soft red mouth, corners tilted in a smile. Aurora stared at it, dumbstruck. After a while she raised the pulpy paper and gently pressed it to her cheek, felt the distinct tingle of a loving kiss. It was unexpected, yet tangible. She sat for a while with the tissue in her lap, calmer and stronger than when she had arrived. At last, with infinite care, she folded and replaced the paper in the hatband. All these years, the kiss had been waiting for her. It was the house's most profound secret. She curled up on the old brass bed for the last time, imagining the moth-eaten, vacant rooms as protective arms encircling her.

Esther was sitting on the back step smoking when Aurora got home. Since the cottage had been stripped clean there was nowhere else to sit, nothing to do but hoist their suitcases into the boot of the car and drive to Julia's house in Jamestown. They didn't even lock the door behind them.

—No point, Esther said. —We never owned the place, anyhow.

1985

As soon as she could afford to live alone, Aurora had left the strip of coast where she had lived with her aunt and set up house in a shabby seaside suburb northwest of the city. A once remote island of sand hills and swamps, it had been established in the nineteenth century as a signal station to record the passage of sailing vessels in St Vincent's Gulf. Its early settlers had left a legacy of mariners' cottages hunkered down above the grassy dunes, and Aurora had kept the lease of one of them through many renewals, even though the cheap rent, which had been the main attraction when she moved in as a student, was no longer so important.

On the esplanade stood a World War One memorial clock built of grey stone, and a nineteenth-century time ball tower, by which – before the advent of wireless signals – ships' captains had checked their chronometers; there was a bathing pavilion, and a wooden jetty severely shortened by storm damage. The town's broad main street reminded her of the main streets of country towns up north. Gently decaying shop façades, built during the boom of the 1920s, housed the Odeon Star Cinema and a single Chinese restaurant, and in a room draped with dusty silk saris – reached via a fire escape at the rear of a second-hand bookshop – a clairvoyant would read tea leaves, tarot cards and palms. Aurora had climbed the stairs more than once to have her fortune read.

In this melancholy town, which had seen better days, she felt entirely at home. Her cottage was close to the town's landmark building, a great white Art Deco edifice called the Fantasia Ballroom, and on Friday and Saturday nights, when the wind was from the right direction, she would lie in bed listening to big band swing, or stamping tangos, visualising the ageing couples who queued for tickets swooping cheek to cheek across the sprung floor, their suits and rustling dresses impregnated with dust and camphor and the powdered wings of moths. Her landlord said there were live musicians on the bandstand in his day, but now they danced to records. Each time she passed the front of the Fantasia, the neon dancing couple above the entrance reminded her of Esther and William when they were young.

Music sustained Aurora as it always had. She tutored students at the conservatorium where she had gained her degree, and held a part-time teaching post at a secondary school renowned for its excellence in music. There were a few students whose well-heeled parents paid for her to coach them on their own pianos, but the conservatorium, with its bare practice rooms, its tuned and polished instruments, was the place she felt most at ease. Her students there were talented and passionate; in their relationships with her, only music mattered. There was none of the common-room camaraderie of the high school, no awkward invitations from ambitious parents to be fielded.

Periodically it occurred to Aurora that the squirming discomfort she felt in social situations, or in any place where people might ask questions, was the residue of her childhood; aside from music, there was nothing else left. She feigned normality, a life of indeterminate activity, but alone in her mariner's cottage during the bedraggled months of winter, or reading under a solitary beach umbrella through the endless summer holidays, when colleagues and acquaintances were busy with their families, Aurora knew herself to be unsatisfied and restless, lacking connection.

Unable to shake the habits of the past, she lived frugally, never using more than a cup of

water to wash her face, a tablespoon of water to clean her teeth, even though there was no bucket to be carted in from an outside tank. The meals she cooked and ate without interest were little more than variations on the strange mixtures she had once concocted to feed herself and Esther. When she thought about her family now it was with a sense that they had been savaged by the land; she wished more photographs existed from the time before Michael died, but neither Esther nor William had ever owned a camera.

What kept her afloat was a revived interest in Irish music. On the fridge in her kitchen was a list of session dates, and each time she overcame her apathy and went along to listen, she was amazed at how her father's tunes still pulled at her. She loved their titles – 'Boys from Sligo', 'Rip the Calico', 'Apples in Winter' – and the way they contained whole landscapes, towns peopled with men, women and children who spoke in her father's soft accent; she loved, too, their stories of struggles other than the familiar ones against drought and flood. Aurora had rediscovered William's music. Its repetitions and fierce tempos crowded her mind and left no space for thought. She guessed that this narcotic quality was the reason the tunes had been carried all over the new world, easing loneliness and hardship.

In the back rooms of various pubs where players gathered, she came to understand that the act of playing in unison was a statement of both solidarity and defiance; it created a united front against an enemy. Irish music was an impenetrable barrier, a border, all the more wondrous since its texture was that of lace, sound shot through with air, its instrumentation at any given moment dictated by players dropping out to go to the bar or the lavatory.

At pub sessions in the city, Aurora met old and recent immigrants; many had arrived with little in their suitcases but their music. The sessions always began sedately but often ended in wild playing, the odd fist fight. Even here, on neutral territory, old enemies were touchy. Brits in for an after-work drink moaned that the pubs were not the same as at home;

they moaned about the flies, the heat. The Irish, on the whole, were pragmatists.

—Would you listen to his whingeing, and who the feck was it paid the tenner to get here if it wasn't himself?

—Next thing, he'll be askin for the tenner back.

—Jesus, none of my relations even had a tenner, they were all sent down wit a flea in the fockin ear and a shovel.

Aurora loved their irreverent humour, and the music made her feel more Irish; it stirred warm memories of her father. Occasionally she would spend the night with someone she met at a session, but the fleeting intimacy of these one-night stands only emphasised her loneliness. Inevitably she would bolt for home at first light, and as she made her way through the empty streets it would be with the image in her head of a signpost outside Sugarbag which, for as long as she could remember, had pointed drunkenly along a north-bound set of tyre tracks: *Penance 39 miles.*

1989

One weekend, a group of Irish players she had known for a while invited Aurora along to a country ball. They were to play in the bar before the band started. Aurora declined at first, imagining the awkwardness that would overtake her without the music as a buffer. But one of the musicians, a girl who played button accordion, whispered that she would appreciate some female company, and in a moment of weakness Aurora agreed to go.

The ball was held at a vineyard in the Clare Valley, where a series of marquees pitched on the local football field had been decorated with vine cuttings. Irish music floated above the clink of wine glasses and the steady buzz of conversation. At supper time the buffet table sagged beneath platters of sliced ham and chicken; Aurora was sucking a wishbone when she recognised Baba Millard's brother, Danny. He was seated between two women in sparkly black. The women talked across him, while he sat silently before an untouched platter of cheese and biscuits.

Aurora wiped her fingers on a napkin, rose and moved towards their table. The women stopped talking as she approached, pencilled eyebrows raised above lids heavy with metallic eye shadow. She hadn't seen Danny since their schooldays in Sugarbag. He'd been quiet and diligent then, sitting in a front row desk to copy blackboard notes into his exercise books. People used to say that he was a bit slow on the uptake, as if the lightning strike had

blown a fuse or two in his brain, but Aurora had only thought that he was shy. He was dressed for the ball in country formal clothes – white shirt and dark tie, tweed-flecked sports jacket draped over the back of his chair. To her surprise he had grown tall, with a long thin face and a high forehead from which his hair was swept back into a ponytail. It was fine straight brown hair, she saw, with a few stray threads of grey. His face reminded her of one of the old saints in religious pictures.

—Do you live around here, or are you visiting? she said.

Danny stood up and smiled at her, and the women at the table frowned curiously at Aurora.

—Been here a while now, he said, squeezing between their chairs to join her on the other side of the table.

The band struck up then, and Danny took her elbow and steered her into the open air beyond the buffet tent.

Aurora realised she hadn't ever known where he'd gone or what he'd done since primary school. Now he told her that he'd boarded with relatives in Sydney.

—I got a place at uni doing fine art. Mum and Dad expected I'd come home and take over the pub, cut them some slack. You can imagine what they had to say about me going to art school.

—They got used to it, though?

—Eventually. I majored in sculpture, even got a couple of decent commissions in my final year. But it was always going to be difficult to pay the bills unless I took up teaching, so a couple of years back I started up a plant nursery and apiary. What spare time there is, I sculpt, but I work with living materials now rather than bronze or stone.

His parents were still in Sugarbag, still running the pub.

—They talk about selling up, but they don't seem able to leave the place, he said. How

about your folks?

—Dad was working up near the Queensland border when he had an accident. The words were out before she knew it, and Aurora raised a hand to her mouth as if to push them back; she hadn’t spoken to anyone of her father's death.

—I’m sorry, that was so tactless. I heard about it, of course. Terrible luck.

—He wasn't that old, only forty-seven.

—It must have hit your mum hard.

—Yeah. Mum's moved to Jamestown now, though. She seems settled.

—I wish my mother would go for a quieter life somewhere, but she’s never been any good at sitting still. Dad's not far off a dialysis machine, so I reckon when that happens they’ll have to rethink.

—You’ve moved to the right side of Goyder's line for growing things.

Danny’s smile was wistful as he plunged his hands deep into his trouser pockets.

—Old Goyder’s line’s creeping southwards. They say it’ll reach the Clare Valley within the next hundred years, but that’ll be long enough for me. Drop by sometime, he said. —Anyone’ll tell you where it is.

Later, in the wash of conversation around the buffet, Aurora heard his name mentioned more than once and learned that he was renowned locally for the flavour and texture of his creamed honey, and for his skill as a beekeeper.

—He works his bees without protective clothing, a woman said. The bees respect him.

Someone whose face she couldn’t see chipped in that Danny’s affinity with bees was a side effect of having been struck by lightning.

Perhaps Danny had absorbed Kilkie Bleecker’s secrets, her trick of wearing white and of never showing fear. Aurora remembered the scar on his chest, a trail of raised marks, like a ladder, that drew the eye. It must have been there beneath his sober white shirt as they spoke

about their families. Suddenly she wondered how much he knew of her family. Danny was a few years older, so he had known her mother before catastrophe transformed her into a woman who could not be comforted.

A couple of weeks after the ball, as she had known she would, Aurora threw a sleeping bag in the car and set off to see Danny Millard. Once away from the city, she drove for an hour or more between fields of vines and young olive trees, until she spotted the sign for his nursery and turned along a drive lined with poplars.

Danny's property rested in the fold of low hills, a stone house at the end of a driveway with a barn set at right angles. Beside the house, bees were busy in a row of lavender bushes. A black dog appeared from around the side of the house and raised a questing nose in her direction, flicked a thick tail from side to side. There was no one about. Aurora rounded the corner where the dog had come from, surprised to discover that the old building blossomed into a modern wood and glass extension, with steps leading up. There were wooden handrails, as smooth as something worn by the sea; the door was open and she tapped her knuckles on the doorframe.

—Hello?

From the bottom step, the black dog looked up at her and wagged its tail, urging her forward.

She stepped inside; a large room opened out to her left, a kitchen, where Danny stood at a long table with his back to her. He was bent over a preserving pan and as she drew closer she saw that he was picking over lilly pilly; the skins of the fruit glowed like neon. He hadn't heard her, so she moved quietly to the table, waited until he registered her presence and looked up.

—You came, he said, flashing the slow smile that had lodged like a grass seed in a corner of her mind. A natural sweetness emanated from him. It was a combination of the

curve of his mouth with the softness of his gaze, perhaps also the way he had been hovering over the pan of lilly pilly, handling each tiny fruit with infinite care.

She pointed through the window to a sign on the barn that showed a painted bee hive. — You promised to show me your bees.

A wood-burning stove crackled; the room was as cosy as a burrow. He waved her towards a chair and picked an enamel pot from a shelf. She watched him measure coffee, his patient movements, and when it had brewed she wrapped her hands around the mug he offered her and studied his face as he told of his living that came from raising plants and the odd sculpture commission.

—There's a bit of pocket money from the honey, and some candle-making just for fun. I've got a solar extractor for rendering the wax cappings.

The dog, Connie, lay stretched out near the stove, paws twitching with dreams, as they talked.

Danny had lost some hearing, he explained. At the ball he had been lip-reading. She nodded, remembering how he had guided her away from the noise of the crowd and the band.

When the coffee was finished he took their cups to the sink, then lifted the preserving pan under the tap to cover the lilly pillies with water. Their intense colour brought up a memory for Aurora: the gate outside the cottage in Sugarbag, she was jumping barefoot on fallen fruit, her legs streaked with their magenta juice, only shocked to stillness by the sudden sight of Esther’s face, taut with horror, pressed against the window.

—What will you do with them?

—Jelly, he said. It’s a gorgeous colour, and the tourists love it. Are you staying for some lunch?

Danny heated soup, set out a homemade loaf and a comb of honey.

—Home-grown organic veggies. Tell me you can't taste the difference!

—It must be satisfying to eat your own produce.

—It's a nineteenth-century diet, tough but real. It gets biblical at times, when crops fail. He filled a pottery bowl with soup and set it in front of her.

—You juggle loaves and fishes?

—Damper. And the wine has a tendency to turn to water, fast.

—The nineteenth-century diet was probably healthier, Aurora said.

—We've just changed the way we die, that's all. Used to be infection, childbirth, accident, ignorance. Now it's greed, Danny said. People are killing themselves with their knives and forks all over the place.

Over lunch he described how he'd started out growing English cottage garden plants because his mother loved them.

—She was born in Sussex, he said. Never got over the idea of an English garden.

—I didn't know your mother was English, Aurora said.

—Yeah. Unfortunately she ended up in Sugarbag, and everything she planted was doomed, one way or another.

Aurora tried to visualise Peggy Millard, but it had been years since she had seen her. The best she could do was a pair of bony hands, hands reddened from the laundry tub, or the dishes, hands that seemed too large at the end of skinny arms.

—She was always sending off for packets of seeds, sowing them in pots. They'd come up, and she'd be so excited. Then they'd get scorched by the sun, or some drunk staggering home would sit on them, and she'd be inconsolable. Especially after Tom died.

The death of their brothers. This casual mention electrified Aurora – in all the years, the catastrophe that had struck their two families had rarely been discussed in her presence. People shied away, as if death by lightning was too big, too shattering, to speak of. Danny

appeared calm, and after a moment she responded carefully.

—Your parents must have suffered dreadfully.

—Yours too. Your mother was the teacher on my first day at school. I remember she leaned over to show me how to lift the lid of the desk and she smelled so good. I told mum when I got home, and she said the new teacher probably used special talcum powder. Said her family were English people and they would have relatives send out soap and talc specially for them. She thought your mum was very refined and was overjoyed that you were Baba's friend.

Aurora looked into her soup, transferred a spoonful to her mouth. Danny was trying to spare her feelings, because everyone knew her mother had gone mental after Michael died. Esther had never bothered with talcum powder or soap again, never cared how she looked. She still didn't.

—Her family had emigrated from the Lake District, near Coniston Water, Aurora said. —But Mum was very young when they came to Australia.

—Ah, but all those centuries of culture are absorbed in a flash, according to my mum. Babies soak it up like blotting paper. She's never wavered in her belief that the British are superior.

—Do you still grow English plants?

—Gave up after the first couple of seasons. With a few exceptions, they're just too much trouble.

After lunch they walked through the gardens to where a creek wound along the boundary of his property.

—What’s Baba doing now? Aurora asked.

—She’s living in Perth, married with two kids. She seems happy enough. Danny pointed to a side path. —If you take that fork you come to a pool where the creek widens; it’s good

for swimming when the weather’s hot.

In the other direction, a larger than life-size figure appeared frozen in mid-stride between trees.

—Sometimes children find it a bit scary, he said.

Danny had produced bronze pieces for his finals, he told her, and had thought he'd always want to work with metals, until he'd found himself camped out in the countryside with the creek close by and had conceived the idea of using withies – bare willow cuttings woven and bound and then stuck in the soil so that they took hold and grew. The running man had been his first experiment with a living sculpture. In the spring, tender green leaves clothed the woven shapes in fluttering garments. Now, glimpsed through trees, the figure, with its leafy suit worn dark by a dry summer, appeared almost pagan.

From the creek they turned uphill through a stand of eucalyptus trees to reach the hives, stopping at a shed from which Danny fetched a white beekeeper’s hat. He handed it to her, along with a pair of thick gloves. His own head was covered by an old felt hat.

—The thing to remember is to move slowly and stay calm. Sure you want to come?

—Sure.

On the edge of the clearing they passed a tree thrumming with bees and Danny pointed to an opening high on the trunk.

—A wild hive. It's been here longer than I have.

—Is there honey in it?

—The tree is probably solid with it, Danny said.

They watched bees head off in purposeful lines. The dog walked between them, lifting her greying muzzle now and then to stare at Aurora from dubious eyes. As they climbed the slope, more bees whizzed past like bullets.

—When a bee stings, it produces a smell which warns the others of danger and makes

them more inclined to sting, said Danny. That's why you often get a couple of stings in short order. The pain seems worse because of the surprise.

—Are you exempt from stings?

Danny smiled.

—It happens the odd time, but the bees seem to like me so I don't cover up, just a hat when the weather's hot, in case they're thirsty and go for my saliva.

His hives were neatly laid out close to fruit trees. The dog sank to her stomach and watched as they walked towards the line of boxes.

—This particular breed keeps working through the winter, but they're a bit wilder than the rest. A few dozen bees circled his head. Some settled on his back.

Close to the hives, the air was thick with them. They clogged the mesh in front of Aurora's face. She ducked her head as a cluster of them flew into the corner of her vision; Danny's hand shot out and caught her by the elbow.

—Steady on!

She watched as he lifted a panel on the back of the hive. Bees formed a dark crust on his shirtsleeves, but Danny's movements were smooth and unconcerned. He drew a frame from the hive and held it up for her to see the mass of wax-sealed cells. Later, with a chunk of homemade bread spread with creamed honey raised halfway to her mouth, Aurora would watch Danny expertly spin his old felt hat onto a coat hook by the back door and feel as if the earth had momentarily tilted.

June 1990

Esther's illness struck out of the blue, although as Julia said, she had almost certainly ignored its early signals. All at once, it seemed to Aurora, her mother was gravely ill and had to move to the city for treatment. Although Esther was reluctant to leave Jamestown, she accepted it, or perhaps, more accurately, did not have the will to resist. Aunt Ivy offered Esther her old bedroom, but after so many years inland Esther yearned for a sight of the sea, so the front parlour was hastily converted for the emergency.

Aurora took her accumulated leave and moved back into the room she had slept in as a child, a room unchanged since the day she had so joyously abandoned it to return to Sugarbag with William. She had boarded there again through high school and her first year at university, but those years had left no visible imprint on the room with its kidney-shaped dressing table and flowered wallpaper.

By contrast, the parlour was severe, a high-ceilinged room where, in the early mornings, Aurora threw back heavy velvet curtains and allowed the pale coastal light to seep in and pool on surfaces of glass and wood. Light gleamed on the curves of the French Empire bed where Esther lay stretched like a queen upon a catafalque, while the orange oil Ivy used to polish the furniture entwined with the subtle yet insistent scent of sickness.

Each day brought a new struggle to raise the salt-rimed sash windows, which Aurora

knew rattled loose in the frames in summer. Then the breeze buffeting the rotted linings of the curtains released ancient odours that made Esther's restless hands roam across the sheets, while the shoreline, with its fine white sand, filled the windows. Aurora always pictured her mother against the stubble fields of the hot dry north, the difficult landscape of her own childhood. It was strange to see her now in proximity to pastel skies and the limitless sweep and shimmer of the ocean. Aurora became expert at rearranging pillows, plumping them so that Esther's gaunt shoulders were supported. Mornings were the best times, and although her mother rarely managed more than a few spoonfuls of porridge from the breakfast tray, she would lift her face towards the sea as she ate, seeming relieved to feel its light washing over her, banishing the long night. In the afternoons, as Esther slept, Aurora escaped into novels, or into the view of the gulf where jaunty sailboats raced, and the occasional liner was pasted like a paper cut-out on the horizon.

One day, as she sat beside her mother, she caught a view of herself in the mirrored back of a display cabinet – her father's pale blue eyes, startled, white face held at an anxious angle – and saw, for the first time, a resemblance between herself and Esther. The novel slid from her lap, and a sudden shift in the light made the air around her seem warped and dangerous with curves. They were mother and daughter; it was unthinkable that this abyss of silence between them should become permanent.

Esther's skin rustled like crepe paper under Aurora's fingers as she knelt beside the bed and brought her face close to her mother's cheek.

—Listen, Mum, she whispered. —We've never talked about Michael.

Her mother's breath was slight and her eyes remained closed. Under stress, Esther had often resorted to sleep; perhaps now she had finally escaped into a sleep so deep she would not return from it. And yet Aurora felt that her mother was not insensible to her presence. There was an air of listening about the tilt of her head on the pillow, as if whatever kernel of

vitality Esther still possessed had swivelled towards the sound of her daughter's voice. But although Aurora brought her lips close to her mother's ear, there was no answer; the old stubborn silence had settled on Esther like a curse.

Aurora persisted, longing for some kind of reconciliation.

—It wasn't your fault we were unhappy, she said. —I never thought so then, and I still don't.

Even as she spoke, Aurora wondered if what she said was true; perhaps after all this time she no longer knew what was true or false. As a child she had believed that telling a lie put a bend in the air at the spot where the lie was told. No one had explained this to her; she'd worked it out herself from the way adults behaved, from the way they laughed and joked while the air around them flickered with angles and nudging drafts. Sometimes she had discerned untruths even before they were spoken, knowledge unfolding slowly in an unexpected slant of light, or erupting with the surprising fizz and whoosh of a skyrocket. It was a gift she took for granted, a trick she once had, lost now, like the other insights and special powers of childhood.

She was still holding Esther's hand when the door opened and Aunt Ivy stood there watching. Blunt grey hair and heavy jaw. She was dressed head to toe in dusty black, already in mourning.

—Not taken a turn, has she?

—She's been asleep this last hour. The waver in Aurora's voice steadied as her fingertips searched for, and found, Esther's pulse.

—Well, one thing you can say, her dying's been easy. Ivy's thin lips that had never known a smudge of colour contracted downwards into a grimace. —Esther was like that as a child, she said. —Everything came easy.

In the chilly dining room, Aurora consulted Dr Brownlow.

—She's been sleeping a lot, she told him.

The speckled dome of the doctor's head nodded.

—I think that when the time comes your mother will be more comfortable in the hospital.

When the time comes.

The air pulsing. Truth curving away. In the room where they sat, the table – of some unknown varnished wood – had been pulled close enough to the fireplace to warm its massive turned legs. Aurora pressed a palm against its coarse-grained top. The table had been in the house when her mother lived at home; every meal of her childhood must have been taken from its scarred and polished surface.

Dr Brownlow spoke again. If Aurora wished, they could make arrangements for her mother to be moved.

Was that what she wanted? Yes. The selfish part of her longed for Esther to go to a hospital, longed for uniformed professionals to take over her care and deal with what was to come. But her mother would loathe the hospital, its bright sterile surfaces and lack of privacy. Aurora imagined Esther in a public ward, screened by curtains, her life silently ebbing under the impersonal gaze of nurses while noise from television soaps spilled over from the surrounding cubicles.

All through the mute weeks of her illness, her mother had been an undemanding patient, although unlike Ivy, Aurora doubted it had been easy. When cancer had first been diagnosed, Esther had taken the news calmly, and Aurora, when she heard of it, had been unsurprised: for as long as she could remember, her mother had been consumed by grief and finally her grief had surfaced. Doctors could locate it on a scan, its gory mass made visible, as incapable of removal as it had always been. Esther was dying. The doctors could do little but manage the pain. As a child, the suspicion that this could happen had terrified Aurora, but as an adult it was what she had expected. And Esther had succumbed with grace.

Dr Brownlow was still peering at her. He cleared his throat, nudging her towards a decision. Aurora wanted her mother to go to the hospital; she would visit daily. Surely that was reasonable.

Ivy stood with her hands folded. The air around them quivered. Whatever Aurora decided now would be made to happen. She could write the ending to Esther's life any way she wanted, and what she wanted was for her mother to go to a hospital. She wanted her own whitewashed cottage – by now her landlord would think that she was never coming back. She wanted to crawl into her own bed and watch afternoon shadows darken the duck-egg walls until the soothing ebb and flow of the surf mingled with dance music from the Fantasia. She wanted to sleep for days, weeks, decades. To close her eyes on Esther's haggard face once and for all. Truth be told, she was afraid of the compulsion that had almost overcome her once or twice, to ease the pillow from beneath her mother's sleeping head and press it to her face. To press and press and press.

Aurora took a long breath and turned to Dr Brownlow.

—My mother will remain at home.

There was an upright piano in the parlour, manoeuvred into a corner to make space for the bed. One morning, after a night when Esther's sleep had been especially troubled by pain, Aurora noticed the way her eyes slowly opened and came to rest on the instrument. So after she had cleared the breakfast tray and tidied the room, she raised the lid and tentatively placed her hands upon the keys. Esther's cheek turned, settling into the pillow as she watched her daughter's fingers move smoothly through a four-octave arpeggio. The ringing tone of the old piano surprised Aurora. Ivy did not play, but out of a horror of disorder she must have kept it tuned. The music stool was upholstered in peach silk; inside it Aurora discovered disintegrating hymnals, a dog-eared scale manual with her mother's name in

childish lettering on the cover. There was nothing she wanted to play, so she picked out simple pieces from memory, *Of Strange Lands and People,* and *A Child Falling Asleep* from Schumann's *Kinderszenen.* Finally she played Debussy's *Arabesque Number 1*, its melodic line as wandering and weightless as feathers falling. Her mother's face relaxed and her complexion lost a little of its pallor then. Later, when Esther had drifted to sleep, Aurora saw that her cheeks were wet with tears.

In the afternoon she asked Ivy to sit with Esther while she drove to her cottage to collect some music.

—I thought after your father died that she might have gotten her voice back, Ivy said. —One shock cancelling out the other, if you follow me, because there wasn't anything physically wrong with her, was there?

—No, it wasn't physical, Aurora said. —Mum would speak a little, but only at home.

—I thought so. Ivy chewed her bottom lip for a moment. —It was written up in all the papers at the time, the boys being struck by lightning.

A shiver passed through Aurora's body at this unexpected disclosure

—I had no idea.

—Oh, yes, it was on the front page of *The Advertiser*. A hint of outrage in Ivy's voice suggested that fact alone would have been sufficient to silence anyone.

Aurora moved towards the front door; as she fumbled with the lock, her aunt hovered behind.

—I think it's time we asked the Methodist minister to call, Ivy said.

Clearly she believed her sister was in grave need of a last minute clean-up after living all those years with a Catholic.

Later, Aurora whispered to Esther that her sister wanted the minister to visit, and her mother's head thrashed from side to side on the pillows until Aurora rose and went in search

of Ivy.

—Mum doesn't want the minister.

On the last morning, Aurora pressed her lips to Esther's cheekbone where the skin was dry and taut. She thought of the old bush hat on the bedpost at Cluain Meala, and the tissue that had slipped from it into her lap so long ago. It had been a moment of profound comfort, one she had never shared with Esther, but kept to herself. Now her lips brushed her mother's cheek, passing on as best she could the mysterious kiss she might have saved all down the years for just this crisis.

30th September 1990

Esther remembered her son's first cry as clearly as if she had heard it yesterday. It was a broken sound, the bleat of a lost lamb. He'd had the same long legs and knobbly knees as a lamb, too. At his birth, even smeared with blood, his body had looked like something priceless, something holy. She had not been able to wait to press him to her skin, but the midwife had whisked him away, and she'd been pinned by the numbness in her legs, by the weight of the anaesthetic they'd injected when the labour went on for so long that she had felt ready to expire. In the end, he'd slipped from her body in one smooth exhalation; she had breathed him into the world, and the midwife had looked up as if to ask what all the fuss and bother had been about.

Why it had taken thirty-five hours to birth him was a mystery. Perhaps he'd wanted to stay on the inside longer; it was said that babies who were reluctant to leave their mothers' wombs were the most loving. As a day-old infant, Michael had the wizened face of a little old man. Tucked beside her, he was as peaceful as a kitten. She had sat for hours just staring at him. The midwife had kept her husband away, so when at last William came in, he had wanted to know about the birth.

—I don't remember, she said. —All of a sudden he was there.

How she had loved him, her little pink sugar mouse, her flawless boy. She had counted

his fingers and toes, had held him up to kiss the down at the base of his spine. There had never been a baby like him in the world. Of course, other mothers she spoke to said they'd felt the same. It was just that in her case it was true. Michael had been beautiful.

She'd only had him six years before he was taken from her. Almost three decades had rolled over her since that day, each one as wearisome as a century, but still when she closed her eyes she saw him lying there on the stubble with his shoes melted.

His shoes melted.

She had never recovered from the sight of smoke drifting – his little foot with its fraying toenails, resting in the scorched leather, white and harmless as a seashell. The shock had catapulted her into labour, a dumb, grunting, mechanical delivery such as animals make. An hour later she had pushed out another boy, marble-white, perfect, too small and soft to live.

If she could have made a bargain with the devil, she'd have offered anything. It would have been the same, anyhow, because she'd gone to the devil ever since. The only difference would have been that she could have watched Michael grow, could have heard his voice break and strengthen as he changed from boy to man. She would have lived joyfully on the mere scent of him.

Ah, Michael, the beauty of the boy! It was dangerous to love anything or anyone as much as she had loved him – she had known that in a flash as the melted shoes were seared forever in her vision, as she had felt her heart crack.

She had been fragile ever since. Anything could break her. But she had been careful, no, more than careful, she had been vigilant, every moment, not to make the same mistake with Aurora.

October 1990

After her mother's funeral, and still bereft in a way she had not foreseen, Aurora was compelled by a yearning she could not articulate to drive north. Two hundred and sixty-nine kilometres from the city the road ran in a straight line to the foot of Mount Remarkable, where it made a sharp right turn into the sleepy little town of Melrose. With her limbs aching from sitting behind the wheel, Aurora felt overwrought, dazzled by the sun and the endless tarmac.

A sign outside the North Star Hotel offered rooms, so she checked in, then sat and watched from an upstairs balcony as the slow evening descended on the town. Bass-heavy music pumped from cars and utes as they pulled in outside the pubs. A group of children walked up the middle of the road, talking quietly. When it was dark the children walked back up the road, this time waving a torch. As the night deepened, occasional headlights appeared. Sipping beer, Aurora felt insignificant and alone; if she choked and died in her sleep, no one would miss her. But being alone was not new. She had been alone when Esther was alive, truly alone since the horse William borrowed from a Queensland cocky had folded and dumped him into a thunder of Hereford steers.

She left the beer unfinished and clambered into bed. Drifting to sleep, she imagined the next morning – leaving Melrose and reaching Wilmington, then striking out across the

broad expanse of the Wilochra Plain. She would not start too early; there was no hurry. To have come here under her own steam was what mattered, and perhaps she would see once and for all who Aurora, Esther and William Hayes had been.

When she reached the town, everything in sight was ochre-coloured as if lit from within by flame. On the outskirts it was still possible to discern the boundaries that had once been planned for Sugarbag – four terraces which were to have been surrounded by a belt of parklands. But Sugarbag had never earned its parklands. Even when the population had peaked at six hundred, with a butter factory and a brewery, there were never going to be parklands. The main street was much as she remembered it, but the Kennys' store was boarded up and a sign advised customers that the nearest petrol was in Wilmington or Quorn.

She stopped the car outside the Caledonian Hotel. The only sign of life was a yellow dog that raised an eyelid to inspect her car but did not uncurl from the knob of shade on the pub's verandah. She should go in and speak to Peggy Millard, tell her she would see Danny on the way back and ask if there was anything she wanted to send him. Aurora looked at the fist-sized hole in the flyscreen door, the dust-clogged windows, spun the wheel and backed out onto the road.

She had always known a kind of security was to be found in the slow flow of small-town life – movement, as gradual and inexorable as the progress of the glaciers they had read about in geography class, only measurable over decades or generations, even centuries. Isolated by the dry plain, Sugarbag floated like an island set adrift. Life here had been a collage of small cruelties and kindnesses punctuated by marriages, births and deaths. It had been spiced by stories and gossip that passed like Chinese whispers. Often enough her own family had been the topic. In the end she had been glad to get away. And yet there had been

times, especially at university, when she had longed to sink back into the comfort of a place where she had always been known, where nothing she could say or do would ever alter the fact of her belonging.

In the south you could be cast out as easily as you had been taken in; any title you held there was tenuous, dependent on the whim of strangers. In the city, identity was a flimsy thing; down there they were all shape-shifters.

She reached their old cottage almost before she'd finished changing through the gears; as a child, it had seemed so much more remote. The front door had fallen from its hinges. Inside, a pile of dark excrement that might have been human buzzed with flies. Otherwise it was the same dusty, flyblown space that she and Esther had abandoned, a space which was already abandoned when her parents first moved in. Their lives had been played out here until there was nothing left to unwind. Aurora pushed open the back door and tripped over William's boot scraper. Esther must have missed it in the purge.

Walking towards the quarry, it occurred to her for the first time that Esther's frantic energy on the day they emptied the house might have been driven by lack of money, the impossibility of removing all their belongings to Julia's small and already cluttered house. At the time, she had thought her mother was only intent on obliterating their old life.

Near the creek, the compacted earth rang out like rock beneath her boots; that the rain in the south had not reached Sugarbag would have been no surprise to Goyder. She stood looking down into the quarried creek bank – in her absence, sudden downpours had brought flash floods thundering through this channel, subtly reshaping it. Debris had collected. Most of their belongings must have been washed away downstream. The pine table would have splintered; its legs would have fallen off, and its solid top – still bearing the scars of Esther's shocking attack – would have rotted.

Aurora was about to turn away, when the glint of metal caught her eye; she clambered

awkwardly over the lip of the creek, and found a stick to scrape away the baked mud. It was the whistle her father had made for Michael all those years ago, caked solid with dirt. She turned it over in her hands, astonished to have found anything still intact.

Back at the cottage she lifted the boot scraper and carried it to the car. Then she looked around the kitchen one last time. The walls were bare but for a pair of watercolour landscapes, dun-coloured pictures, their mounts yellowed and speckled with dust that had penetrated between glass and frame. They blended with the nicotine-stained wall so well that Esther must have overlooked them. A fur of dust dislodged from the moulding as Aurora lifted the nearest frame from its hook. The watercolours had belonged to the original tenants, Cluain Meala's farm manager and his wife. Perhaps they were cast-offs from their employers, the Finnertys, whose presence here had drawn her father to Sugarbag.

Like the Finnertys, William was from Tipperary. He had often told how he'd emigrated, got all the way to South Australia thinking to find the family established and with plenty of work for a fellow countryman. But the Finnertys had given up and gone away years before.

—Ah, well. Her father shook his head. —They'd thought to become great landowners, but no one owns the land hereabouts, and no one ever will. Simple as that.

Aurora turned over the picture to look for a title and instead found scraps of paper stuck to the cardboard backing. Yellowed and grubby, they had been torn into irregular shapes, like jigsaw pieces, and as they fluttered to the floor her stomach flipped at the sight of Esther's shapely handwriting.

That evening she sat in Danny's kitchen while he brewed coffee, set out slabs of soda bread and the remains of a honeycomb. A shambling figure in a checked work shirt, he opened the stove to push in a lump of red gum. Aurora sipped coffee and looked away through the nearest window to where a patch of sunflowers grew, their giant heads desiccated, pecked

almost clean by birds. Their curling top leaves brushed the verandah guttering. On her first visit, Danny had explained that he never planted directly in the borders beside the house but let whatever blew in seed itself. If he liked a plant, it stayed. Aurora stared at the sunflowers, wondering how they had sited themselves so perfectly without help.

—Did you plant those sunflowers there?

—Uh-uh, that would be planning, and this patch is nature's garden.

—So nature just happened to put those sunflowers right there in the most spectacular spot?

Danny grinned. —Certainly, and this is how it happens. He turned out his shirt pocket and picked several seeds from the inner seam. — I like to eat sunflower seeds. So when I work here I take off my shirt and hang it over the railing. Voila! Seeds fall out, take root and grow to be twelve feet tall because they like this spot facing the sun.

—I see.

They settled into silence that was somehow comfortable, listening to the hiss of the garden and the distant rush of the creek over its bed of stones.

—I always remember Kilkie telling us that each life is a work of art we create for ourselves. Your life here is certainly that.

—And yours too, Danny said.

—Aurora waved a dismissive hand. —Mine is a mess. I don't know if I'll ever sort it into any kind of order.

—You can't see the picture because you're standing far too close, he said. —Each life dictates its own order.

—I'd like to think that's true.

Her own unguarded mention of their old teacher had caught Aurora with a stab of anxiety. It had been years since she had spoken her name aloud, Kilkie being a subject she

had always known could not be raised in Sugarbag.

—What happened to Kilkie Bleecker? she said softly. —Did you ever hear?

Danny turned from the sunflowers, his gaze troubled.

—It's the town, he said. —Sugarbag and places like it. They had a way of eating people who didn't conform.

Kilkie was gone, but not forgotten: Aurora imagined memory cells like a honeycomb, oozing bewilderment, abandonment and loss, and in one of those cells a tall woman in a white dress walked towards a tree beside a ruined church.

—Even her bees disappeared, she said. —The hive was empty, and later on the tree was cut down and burnt. It smouldered for a week, and there wasn't a single bee to be seen.

—Ah, they'll have followed the queen, Danny said. —Set up a new hive somewhere. Bees are tough. Their descendants will be working some old fold of the ranges even now, packing hollow trees with honey.

—And is Kilkie Bleecker with them, would you say?

Danny chewed his lip and frowned. There was a long silence before he answered.

—I like to think so, he said.

To Aurora's ears his response, though kindly put, lacked conviction. Danny wasn't sure, any more than she was.

—Do you remember the stories she'd tell?

—Yeah, she had a way of saying stuff so's it'd sink in deep, all right. Danny tucked a stray strand of hair behind his ears. —She could turn it on and off, though, the storytelling. Trouble was, us kids picked up on her ways, and we didn't always turn it off quickly enough.

—Her possum babies, Aurora murmured. —Some had no idea they couldn't take those stories home.

Danny nodded. —Dad used to turn beetroot if he ever heard me. The parents were hard on her from the start. When they were around she became someone else, more formal. But I reckon she was always herself when she was with us.

—And with her bees, Aurora said.

Looking out at the twisted stems and heads of the sunflowers, she thought of how her father and mother, two stray seeds, had fallen on inhospitable soil and tried to make a life there. Each of them had been far from home, William especially. What different lives they might have had if they'd put their roots down in some place that was fertile. William had left Tipperary and gone to work in Dublin at a biscuit factory. It was when the factory closed and men of all trades were marching to protest their unemployment that he left Ireland for good. Ireland, a vivid green in her imagination, could still hold traces of her father. Relatives who had chosen not to wander might be in Tipperary, as sturdily determined to flourish as Danny's sunflowers.

Aurora opened her eyes, unsure how long she had been silently locked inside her own thoughts. Danny sat looking out the window, where a flurry of leaves tossed by the wind showed their silvered undersides. She felt a sudden rush of shyness. Would he be disappointed?

—Did I tell you I'm going to Ireland? she said.

PART TWO

Ireland

December 1990 – March 1991

The winter in Dublin was shockingly cold, more intense because of the fierce summer Aurora had left behind. Even the overcoat she bought at Clery's didn't help much, since underneath it the clothes she wore were flimsy, styled for South Australian winters which she suddenly saw were barely cool enough to encourage leaf drop. She felt like a leaf herself, flitting this way and that along the damp grey pavements, or the boardwalks beside the Liffey, warming her hands around coffee cups at Bewley's, draping clothes over the radiator in her room at the B&B and lying in bed in the dark mornings until she heard the reassuring trickle of hot water through the pipes.

Aurora knew no one to visit, no one to call. She spent the nights reading and drinking in her room, heating bottles of red wine on the flesh-pink radiator; by day she walked the freezing streets, grateful for the novelty of coldness, the balm of the unfamiliar. Once she saw her father walking away from her over the Ha'penny Bridge. He wore a moth-eaten navy overcoat that almost brushed the pavement, carried something that looked like a battered flute case. Commonsense told her this could not possibly be William, but still she hurried up behind and touched the man's sleeve, and when he turned and showed her his toothless mouth stretched wide, his open calloused palm, she scrabbled in her handbag and thrust at him the cash she'd withdrawn from an ATM to pay for her room.

The man on the bridge was not her father, nor was the whiskery wreck she spotted one raw morning on Grafton Street, hunched on a bench to eat a loaf of white bread from the packet, slice by slice. Yet William's voice was everywhere, and she loved to walk in the streets, listening for him in the crowds. With incessant walking in the stinging cold, she was able to dodge almost all thought and memory of her mother.

She had planned to remain in the city throughout the winter, moving on to Tipperary once spring brought lighter, warmer days. But Dublin's quaint yet dingy demeanour belied the expense of living there, and already she was wondering if her money would hold out until the spring.

It was the offer in the *Irish Times* of a furnished townhouse for a female teacher of pianoforte that transformed her circumstances. Its appearance coincided with a nasty hangover that lasted two days and made her think she ought to get a grip. A secretary at the legal firm which had placed the advertisement explained that the lease included a piano and a large collection of music, even a list of current students, following the death of the piano teacher who had lived there – a Miss McGinnis. Miss McGinnis's heir in Boston was anxious that the house should remain intact; it was vital to her, the secretary said, that nothing was altered, nothing at all. Whoever took the house must be capable of leading students through the Irish Academy's pianoforte examinations and, apart from performing necessary dusting, maintain the interior exactly as it had been left.

The house Aurora went to view was crooked with age, overshadowed by grand neighbours on a street two blocks south of the Liffey. Its weathered red façade had dulled to rose, and black-painted trimmings reminiscent of lace and fishnet produced the impression of an ageing can-can dancer gamely shaking ragged petticoats while sandwiched between a pair of elegant but disapproving matrons. Built on three floors with a staircase twisting up through its centre, the interior of pale plaster walls and dark oiled woodwork exuded a quiet

simplicity that almost compensated for the lack of electricity or heating in the attic rooms. It would be a struggle to keep the cold at bay, Aurora thought, but the agent pointed out bulky radiators in the main rooms, and there were cast-iron fireplaces. The prospect of having a place of her own, as well as ready income, was too good to turn down. Also, her throbbing head insisted, she was ready to make a change.

With her teaching qualification deemed acceptable, Aurora signed the lease – along with a declaration that she would refrain from fiddling with the ornaments – and moved in with her suitcase, relieved to discover that at least Miss McGinnis's wardrobe had been emptied.

On the afternoon on which the first of her students was to arrive, Aurora fitted candles into the piano's brass sconces, lit a fire in the music room and left the heavy black front door on the latch. The instrument was a German Ritmuller with a wonderfully warm tone, and it had recently been tuned, presumably at the request of the owner in Boston. Specks of wax on the piano's fallboard and music stand hinted that her predecessor had followed a similar routine of fire lighting and candles. Later, as she listened to a shaky performance of Beethoven's *Für Elise* by a girl called Molly with thin black plaits, Aurora experienced the odd sensation of having slipped unawares into someone else's life, and she was not displeased.

Each afternoon she supervised scales and five-finger exercises, early grade pieces she had not taught in years, as drafts swerved the candle flames close to fluttering sheets of music. The light that was already fading when the first child arrived had turned the street to a canyon of darkness when the last of them left. Aurora kept a bowl of sugared almonds on the hall table and pressed the pastel sweets into her students' hands as they shrugged on overcoats, hats and scarves. There were nights when she would pull on her own coat then and walk through narrow streets, hurrying from one light pool to the next until she was mingling with the late crowds moving along Grafton Street towards St Stephen's Green.

There, beside the dense mass of the park, the long line of taxis with their yellowish ‘for hire’ signs made her wonder how Dublin had looked by gaslight.

Even now the city was dimly lit, its style lapped over from the shadowed interiors of churches. Sometimes, peering in a window, or through the narrow doorway of a public house, she would glimpse darkly panelled interiors with the hint of hands and faces stirring in their gloom. Dublin, she thought, had the atmosphere of a campfire, where people gathered each night to eat, drink and tell stories. By day the vivid colours of its shop fronts clashed as joyously as church bells. After sunset it quietened, its streets filling suddenly with the rich, warm, dark tones of seventeenth century paintings.

Now that she was settled she bought thick woollen tights and proper jumpers; she shopped for groceries and prepared meals in the kitchen with its brown linoleum and window of bottle-thick glass that magnified the tiny back garden – high grey stone walls against which an espaliered pear stretched knobbly arms, a washing line strung over the single flower border that was crowded now with the skeletal seed heads of lupins. She kept the house unchanged, as promised, and once a week ran a duster over the furniture, replacing small objects with care on the narrow shelves of the landing.

Thirteen St Agnes’ Crescent was sparely furnished, and the belongings left by the previous owner were a pleasure to handle. Her favourites were a collection of picture frames decorated with glass beads and mother-of-pearl buttons; a wooden sewing box with curved sides and hidden drawers in which were laid out pairs of embroidery scissors shaped like birds, silver thimbles of various sizes, a smooth mushroom-like tool for darning stockings. On the dressing table in her bedroom was an ebony hand mirror engraved with the letters MM. There was, too, a cut glass rose bowl, and a tiny crystal slipper in which Aurora kept her favourite earrings. She lived between the kitchen and the music room, keeping the dining room on the ground floor closed to save on heating. Besides the piano, the front room

contained a sofa and wing chairs upholstered in gentle blue damask, and a pair of bead-fringed lampshades covered in Art Nouveau silk which were especially lovely when lit. Everything in the house was both well-used and beautiful, and Aurora often wondered why the late Miss McGinnis – so obviously a woman of taste and talent – had never married.

Almost imperceptibly, the days began to lengthen. Aurora had discovered the traditional music sessions at a nearby pub called the Harp and walked there on Tuesday nights to watch the players. One evening, as she waited at the bar for her glass of Guinness to be poured, she saw herself reflected in the mirrored space between bottles and dangling pewter mugs. Although it was spring, she wore the green tweed coat from Clery's over her thickest jumper, and her face was paler than she'd ever seen it, a white oval scattered with freckles. Dark red hair fell untidily about her shoulders – she looked a little sickly, she thought, like an etiolated plant and, perhaps because she was still shy about going out alone, something remained of the lost look she had worn when she'd first arrived, those months when she had haunted museums and libraries and roamed the streets each day until darkness fell. She looked like someone slowly recovering from a long illness, she thought, and was amazed that mothers had been prepared to leave their children with her.

The Harp sessions made her long to play a portable instrument, something more companionable than the bulky piano. In the music store on Great St Georges Street she bought a tutor book and began to teach herself to play the tin whistle she had rescued from the quarry. Sometimes the purity of its high notes made her eyes fill with tears, as if the whistle's voice had opened a door into a happier time which she could access here, before the fire, in the spare elegance of the house on St Agnes' Crescent.

It was often when lighting the fire – while handling paper, twigs and matches – that memories of Esther surfaced. What she pictured first were her mother's hands, long brown fingers tearing strips of paper into smaller and smaller scraps, fragments of paper dropping

into her mother's lap, or scattering like breadcrumbs, marking the trail back to a catastrophic sorrow. Most of all she remembered an atmosphere, like the profound absorbent silence of a saltpan, expanding to fill a house.

Her first drink of the evening always softened the blow of the day; it bore the brunt of her loneliness, a sleight of hand that flipped life into something hazy and more manageable. But empty bottles under the sink would always remind her of Esther; she was careful not to let them accumulate. If by accident they did, she'd fill the teapot then rather than open wine, and hold out her hands to make sure they were steady. Without fail, the peck of rain on the flat roof of the kitchen brought her mother to mind – poor Esther, who could not bear even a single raindrop to touch her skin.

As a child, after the names of her family, rain was the word Aurora knew best, since all her young life people spoke as if the word itself might germinate, like wheat on damp cotton wool, as if by its repetition a tender green would rise and cover the brown baked earth. In Sugarbag the possibility of rain was at the centre of every conversation, and yet Aurora seemed to think it never rained, ever. Rain was a game the Kenny children had played in the washhouse under the rusty, slow-trickling shower; its gentle pit-a-pat was a memory the older children kept alive to make them seem more grownup. Rain, its falling, soothing sound, was soft in her father's mouth, a wistful lament suspended in the hot dry air.

This keeps up, there'll be nothin for the poor sheep. An as for the wheat, all it would need is a sprinkle.

This was an aspect of the Irish climate Aurora had not foreseen, that the northern winter was long, and in Dublin it rained and rained until the slick streets turned to dark mirrors in which – if she looked down quickly, in a certain way – she would find the past reflected.

12th April 1991

One Friday evening, Aurora woke on the sofa to find the fire almost out. She sat up and pushed the last lumps of coal into the grate, rubbed her hands to dissipate the remnants of a dream in which her mother had sat weeping on a bench in Grafton Street, tearing chunks of white bread from a loaf with her long brown fingers and offering them to passing strangers. Esther's voice, as she beseeched passers-by to take the bread, still echoed in Aurora's head.

She shivered and reached for the wine glass on the mantelpiece. After the last of her students had departed, and with steam still rising from an untouched cup of tea, she'd yanked on her boots and rushed to Heggarty's liquor store to buy a bottle before closing time.

—Anything red, she'd told the woman behind the counter.

Once the bottle was paid for and wrapped she had headed back to St Agnes' Crescent, walking sedately with her head down and the brown paper bag hugged close to her body. Not that Heggarty's ever shut on time, there had been no need to dash there as if pursued by demons, and all this in spite of the New Year promise to herself that she would slow down with the grog. But she'd had a dose of the Friday night blues, as the prospect of an empty weekend loomed. A bad dream served her right for drinking on an empty stomach.

Flames reflected in the curve of the wine glass. Through the window, where the street

flowed out of sight in the direction of the river, ground mist floated like muslin under the streetlight. The wine the woman had sold her was cabernet sauvignon, from a vineyard in South Australia she remembered passing on her last visit to Sugarbag. She closed her eyes and let the purple liquid linger on her tongue. It was strange how this taste of home was so easily come by, almost any liquor store or supermarket she passed could sell it to her.

The house was swaddled in darkness. Her stomach grumbled. She should cook something hot and nourishing, but instead went to the kitchen for more wine and carried it to the music room, along with a tough-skinned orange from the fruit bowl. She rolled the orange's cool pitted skin against her cheek as the fire snapped and crackled; raindrops flecked the windowpane and ran in rivulets.

It was a little past ten o'clock when Aurora closed the curtains. She had finished the wine and was tossing up whether to go to bed, when she heard a knock at the window. The sound was soft yet insistent, knuckles rapping gently against the glass. Car tyres hissed on the wet street and for a moment she considered ignoring the knock, but whoever it was could see her light shining through the curtains. She got up stiffly. It could be a drunk staggering homewards. Then again it might be one of the mothers who had left something behind and only just discovered it; they were always leaving things – umbrellas, car keys, spectacles, bags of shopping. She decided it must be one of the mothers, because drunks passing her windows were usually roaring by this hour.

She opened the front door. It had stopped raining, but the black pavement was damp and an icy wind gusted along the crescent. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she saw a figure leaning against the house wall, a girl with a sharp little face and platinum hair plastered to her scalp. She wore a grey coat with a velvet collar and cuffs; long black boots showed underneath.

—Hello, the girl said, —sorry to trouble you. The pitch of her voice was soft.

—Is it something left behind?

—You don't remember me. The girl pushed her hands into her pockets and her narrow shoulders hunched as water dripped from a loose tendril of hair onto the velvet collar. —Of course, there's no reason you should, only—

—No, I do remember. Aurora suddenly recalled where she had seen the girl's pale hair and feline face. —It was at the Harp, wasn't it?

The girl nodded. —Rose Mulcahy, she said. —Your friend, Liam, brought me over to say hello once. He said you'd taken over teaching piano from Miss McGinnis.

Aurora's overcoat was hanging in the hall and she wished that she was wearing it, wished the girl would get to the point before they both froze to death. Liam Callan was a musician, and Aurora had a soft spot for the way he sat so upright when he played the flute – his posture and expression of fierce concentration seemed both attractive and familiar. After she'd been to a couple of sessions at the Harp, Liam had noticed she'd become a regular and would speak to her. Aurora had gone home with him one rainy night when the prospect of her own company seemed unendurable. It had felt awkward between them, but Liam persisted in believing they had something going. Perhaps the girl had seen them walking from the pub together. Liam'd had a girl with him that first time he'd stopped at her table; it could even have been this rain-drenched waif.

—Was it about piano lessons? Aurora said.

A passing car sprayed the pavement and when it was gone the girl had moved into the spill of light from the front door. Her eye makeup was smudged, and she looked very young.

—Miss McGinnis was going to be my teacher, Rose said. —I was about to start grade five.

Raindrops blew onto the doorstep from the guttering, and the girl leaned against the wall of the house again, as if she might fall without support.

Aurora shivered. —You'd better come in a moment, she said, and stepped backwards into the lighted hallway.

She ushered Rose into the music room, then went to the kitchen for a handful of kindling to revive the fire. The newspaper on the sink was soggy with potato peelings – a meal she'd started earlier and abandoned – so she took a magazine she had been reading and carried it into the music room. Pages crackled as she crumpled and pressed them into the grate.

Rose perched on the edge of the sofa and watched as Aurora arranged pear wood prunings in a pyramid, balanced chunks of coal in the gaps. Her coat was still buttoned and she kept her hands tightly clasped in her lap. The room smelled of chimneys, and of the musty much-thumbed music volumes which crammed shelves in alcoves either side of the fireplace. Aurora lit a match, touched it to the paper, and together they watched the shiny pages jerk and writhe. The kindling caught, spitting sap, and the coal began to smoulder. Soon the warm chimneybreast would force out the residue of sweat Aurora imagined deposited by all the nervous fingers that had turned the pages in decades of piano lessons.

She offered her visitor a tentative smile. —Would you like a cup of tea, Rose?

—I don't want to be any trouble.

—I was going to make some anyway.

Rose shifted uncomfortably.

—Or perhaps cocoa?

The girl nodded quickly, and summoned a weak grin.

—Keep an eye on the fire, and I'll only be a minute.

Rose Mulcahy had unbuttoned her coat and was peering at the framed photographs on the mantelpiece when Aurora returned with two mugs of cocoa. The smudged makeup around her eyes was gone, and as she stood dabbing at her nose with a handkerchief Aurora saw that her skinny legs were slightly bowed, like a toddler's; they didn't fill the black boots

she wore with her short wool skirt and baggy jumper.

—What was she like, Miss McGinnis? Aurora asked.

Rose turned, her pale brows raised in surprise. In the light her face was completely unmarked by freckles or lines, the skin as fresh and white as full cream milk. The blonde hair, which looked natural rather than bleached, was pulled into two tiny plaits at the back, with stray damp strands tucked behind her ears.

—You didn't know her?

Aurora set one of the mugs on a side table. —No. And living in this house with all her things, I often wonder who she was.

Rose moved to the sofa and sat down.

—Miss McGinnis came to our school concerts, and sometimes there were one or two children she would offer free lessons to. Rose thought for a moment, then reached for the mug of cocoa. —Her cardigans always hung from her shoulders as though she had forgotten to put her arms in the sleeves, and she wore little flat indoor shoes, like ballet slippers. I'd say because she was tall. Rose pointed to the mantelpiece. —This is her, in the photograph.

Aurora had known the piano teacher was tall and thin – some of the younger students, when prompted, had remarked on it; one or two had even pointed out the picture, but they had not been able to say what their teacher had been like. The black and white photograph showed a woman of perhaps forty, with dark, wavy, well-cut hair, presenting a silver trophy to a smiling schoolgirl. The woman's hands were large, although the thin wrists restored a sense of delicacy. She wore a suit of some light colour, with a straight skirt and fitted jacket; a leaf shape glittered on a lapel. Because of the way the shadows fell in the photograph, it was impossible to see her eyes, but the mouth was full and warmly curved. It was the image of an elegant woman in her prime.

Rose put her head on one side, thinking.

—At our school concerts, there was certain music that always brought tears to her eyes, and it didn't matter how badly it was played, either. She took a cautious sip of her drink and its taste seemed to relax her. —Even in public she never tried to hide when she was crying, not like most grown-ups.

A sudden edge of grief in the girl's voice surprised Aurora. She took a sip of her cocoa and waited, but Rose was silent.

—So, you had another teacher up to grade five?

—Yes, then when I left school and found work I came to Miss McGinnis. But each week she postponed the date I was to start. Cancer took her, so I heard. She wasn't long sick before she died.

Rose looked young to have done with school.

—Where do you work? Aurora said.

—A florist's, near the maternity hospital. I'm learning to do up arrangements, and I serve in the shop.

By now it was eleven o'clock and Aurora wondered where Rose lived, whether it was safe for her to walk home. Together they stared into the fire and listened to the clock on the mantelpiece tick towards the half-hour. Aurora's head felt heavy with the need to sleep, the effect of the wine she had drunk earlier. When she had swallowed the last of her cocoa she put the mug on the floor and turned to her visitor, expecting an explanation for why she had come, why she had knocked at the window and was keeping her from bed.

Rose seemed uneasy again; she put the mug on the table and squeezed her hands into fists in her lap.

—It's late, Aurora said. —If you want to arrange piano lessons, it would be better to come back—

—That wasn't why I came. Rose took the handkerchief from her pocket again. She

looked about to cry, and Aurora felt at a loss.

—I know it was cheeky, coming at night like this, but—Rose sat forward on the sofa, arms hugging her waist. —You see, my ma's thrown me out.

Aurora raked her fingers through her hair and gazed at the girl in dismay.

—Oh!

—I called in at the Harp, but no one I knew was in. Then I remembered Liam saying you'd taken Miss McGinnis's house, so I walked round here.

Perhaps it was because she was Australian that Rose had come to her, Aurora thought. Australians had a reputation for being laid back and friendly, it was supposed to be part of the national character. However, it was getting on for midnight and Rose Mulcahy was young, vulnerable, and clearly in distress. There was no choice.

—Would you stay here tonight?

Rose sniffed into her handkerchief and nodded.

—Thanks, she said. —Thanks a million.

—There's a spare bedroom, Aurora said. —And in the morning you can sort out your differences with your mother.

Rose shook her head and the tears that filled her eyes spilled over and ran down her cheeks.

—I'm adopted, she said. —So she's not my real ma. That's how she could throw me out at gone nine o'clock on a Friday night. She mopped her face with the handkerchief, sniffing back further tears.

Perhaps it would do the girl good to cry, Aurora thought, yet Rose seemed determined not to break down completely in front of a stranger, and who could blame her? Aurora stared into the fire, unsure what to say. In her experience, sympathy at such moments was unbearable for the person suffering.

—I didn't mean to come here and make a spectacle of myself, Rose said at last.

Aurora stood up and propped the screen in front of the fire.

—I'll show you the spare room, if you like, she said. —See how things look in the morning.

The girl's face was blotchy and damp, and she appeared the essence of misery as she rose to follow Aurora upstairs.

By the time her guest was settled with a hot water bottle and spare pair of flannel pyjamas, it was well past midnight. Aurora clambered gratefully into her own bed, where she fell asleep at once. She woke briefly to hear the clock on the landing strike two and, from very far away, a child's quiet sobs. Both sounds seemed to have travelled to her from a dream, and she was trying to make sense of them when a car alarm started up nearby. She pulled a pillow over her head to block the noise, and went back to sleep.

In the morning Aurora woke for the first time with the knowledge that the house was not empty. She was staring at the crack of light between the curtains and thinking about the previous evening, when the door opened and Rose Mulcahy appeared holding a cup and saucer. She wore her grey coat over the baggy pyjamas.

—I made you tea, she said. —I hope you like it with milk and sugar.

Seeing Rose appear in the darkened bedroom with her little blonde head dishevelled from sleep and her perfect skin glowing like a candle flame, it occurred to Aurora that in some mysterious way she had stumbled upon the real reason why she was installed in the house on St Agnes' Crescent.

A short while later, she heard the bathroom door close and settled back against the pillows with an article in the *Irish Times* she had started days earlier. Having finished it, and drained her teacup, she got up and found clean clothes for the day. It had been a good twenty minutes since she had heard Rose in the bathroom, so Aurora headed along the hall,

turned the handle and pushed open the door.

It was a surprise to find her house guest standing before the sink wearing a candy-pink bra and pants. Her slender back, supple as a young willow, faced Aurora, but there in the mirror was the unmistakeable swell of pregnancy. In one hand Rose held the rolled end of a wide crepe bandage, the stretched length of it wound tightly around her waist. Aurora froze in the doorway, unable to drag her shocked gaze from the bowl of the girl's stomach, the vicious pull of the bandage.

As their eyes met in the mirror, Rose snatched up a towel and clasped it to her front.

—Does your mother know you are expecting a baby? Aurora blurted. —Was that why she turned you out?

—I'm not! That's a lie, Rose cried, clutching the towel more tightly to her.

Even undressed and on the defensive, there was a fierceness about her that made Aurora step backwards into the hall. After a moment, though, she persisted in a quieter voice.

—Rose, you must talk to someone, if not your mother, then a doctor.

The girl turned away, but with the mirror in front of her and Aurora behind, there was nowhere in the bathroom to hide the evidence.

—I would go to the doctor, she said at last. —But not our one who saw me as a child. He'll only ring my parents. Nothing's ever private with that old pervert.

—Sooner or later they'll have to know, Aurora said gently. —Wouldn't it be better to break the news now and let them get used to it?

—You don't understand, they'll never get used to it!

They stood in uneasy silence, and Aurora looked down at the bandage unrolled on the floor where Rose had dropped it.

—Binding your stomach could be dangerous. Seriously, you know that, don't you?

Rose put her face in her hands. —I hadn't thought, she said.

—It could hurt the baby, or your own body. Rose, you have to stop.

The girl pulled the towel up to her face and began to sob noisily. Aurora reached behind the door, hooked down a towelling bathrobe and draped it over the girl's white shoulders.

—I'm sorry I came barging in, Rose. I'd no idea you were here. But perhaps it's for the best.

—I work on Saturday mornings, I'm going to be late, Rose sniffed.

Aurora tried again. —Rose, you have to see a doctor. Will you promise?

The girl mopped her eyes with the towel and pulled the bathrobe around her.

—I will, she said. —Do you happen to know of one?

—Come downstairs, and I'll see.

Aurora telephoned the mother of a student who lived nearby; at her daughter's last lesson the woman had mentioned a young female doctor who'd come to their house when the children were ill and how she had had been so bright and cheerful that the little ones had kept asking for her, even after they were well.

—Here's the telephone number. Would you like me to make the appointment, Rose?

Dressed now, the girl appeared subdued. —No, I'll do it.

Aurora went to the kitchen while she made the call. In another minute Rose appeared in the doorway, her fingers nervously fiddling with the buttons on the grey coat.

—It's only emergencies they're taking this morning, she said. —I made an appointment for Monday.

—Right. I hear she's very nice, as doctors go, Aurora said. —Would you like more tea and a slice of toast, or does eating not agree with you in the mornings?

—I got over that a while ago, Rose said. —I would like another cup, please, and some toast would be grand.

Aurora slipped two slices of bread into the toaster and flicked the kettle on.

—What about your parents?

Rose frowned. —I'll tell them after I've seen the doctor, she said. —Will that do?

From the determined expression on her young face, Aurora saw that it would be futile to press her further. Instead, she turned to the bench and spooned loose tea into the pot, reached down a plate for the toast, a knife, butter.

—Would you let me stay? Rose said. —Please, just until I've seen the doctor? I promise I'll keep out of the way.

—Yes, of course, Aurora said. She had been dreading the enforced solitude of the weekend anyhow.

15th April 1991

The music teacher was nice enough, Rose thought. Usually a woman of her age would feel superior to a teenager, especially one who'd never travelled further from home than a school camp to Kildare, one who'd got herself into trouble. But this woman, although she was half Irish, had grown up in Australia, and it was probably that which made all the difference. In the end, Rose had asked Aurora if she wouldn't mind meeting up on Monday and walking with her to the doctor's.

—In case there would be bad news, she said. Oh, she'd had it in her mind they'd tell her the baby had two heads or something awful. It would be just her luck.

The woman had seemed almost pleased and said straight away that she was willing.

Afterwards, coming out of the medical centre, her knees began to shake. It was the way the doctor had talked about her 'due date' and booking her into the hospital where she would deliver the baby, as if it was all done and dusted and there was nothing Rose or anyone else could do about it. That was when it had finally hit her like a brick that she was going to be a mother. And it wasn't far away either. May was just a few days off, and the baby was due to land in October. That's when the music teacher's birthday was, she'd said, when Rose told her the date. There had been something else about birthdays, but Rose had been busy trying to picture herself this time next year, walking along this very street with a

baby in a pram.

What if it screamed hour after hour, and where would she get a pram? Would her figure ever go back to its proper shape, and the baby – how was she going to explain about its father when it was older?

It was all too much to bear, Rose thought. All of a sudden the future was unreal and frightening. It would be easy to give in to the desire to throw herself down on the pavement, kicking and screaming, to let someone else take charge. But that thought was frightening, too. They might lock her away – she had a momentary flash of a thick red-painted door with a slam that made her jump, of long corridors painted a watery green, and slow footsteps echoing the length of them.

—Let's have lunch here, the music teacher said. —It's my treat.

There was a gentle tugging at her arm, and Rose followed meekly. As the hum of conversation inside the cafe engulfed them she noticed potted palms, and an oil painting of a woman wearing a red dress; a waitress guided them up to a table in the gallery. From there they could look down into the gloom of the wood panelled interior, where yellow light falling from stained glass windows tinted the hands and faces of diners, making them look jaundiced. Towards the front, Rose saw people perched on cherry-red upholstery; there were oriental vases, and the light from the street came from far away, like the light at the end of a tunnel. She turned her gaze upwards to the crystal chandelier.

—I've never been in here before, not properly.

—No? I thought the whole of Dublin came to Bewley's.

Rose shook her head. —Once I met a friend here in the holidays. Her aunt was up from the country and they were having tea in front under the stairs, one of those small brown marble tables. There were no tablecloths.

Aurora said, —It's beautiful up here, with the windows.

—I asked for the afternoon off, Rose said. —I thought it would be hard going back to work, you know.

—So we can take our time over lunch. The woman smiled at her.

It was another bizarre aspect of her stupid fucking life, Rose thought bitterly, that she had never eaten lunch in Bewley's despite growing up within walking distance. Her mother, Grace, was not the sort of woman to pay for tea and sandwiches that she could as easily make at home. Going out for lunch was an unnecessary extravagance, so the two of them had never sat together at one of these little corner tables in Bewley's. On Friday nights her mother would send her round the corner to bring home fish and chips – that was the extent of their dining out. Grace had probably never sat beneath a chandelier in her life.

But her birth mother might have brought her here. Rose strained to see downstairs into the shadowy corners; they would have sat in one of those booths eating cakes and dainty sandwiches, so close their heads were almost touching. Her mother's skin would have the same scent as her own; their fingernails would be the same shape. Rose checked the faces of the women at the next table, her glance sliding over them, scanning, as she always did, for a resemblance – a head of startling fairness, a familiar gesture. None of the women there could be her mother: they were all too old, their faces browned and shrunken like the miniature goblin heads her father whittled out of windfall apples. But the real one, the one with the hair as pale as her hands, she was somewhere right now. The certainty of it turned Rose's stomach

That was the difference between herself and normal people, like the music teacher, even her own parents. She could've had another life, been someone else, a girl who knew about literature and smart cafes, a girl with the confidence to waltz in and order lunch at Bewley's, and just whenever things were going well for a change – not that they were right now, but still – it was this thought that always returned and unsettled her.

When they'd finished eating, Rose told the woman what she wanted to hear.

—Time to face the music at home, I suppose, she murmured.

Right on cue, Aurora squeezed her hand and said something about it not being as bad, when it came to it, as Rose imagined. Yeah, right.

They came out of Bewley's and stood watching a group of young buskers, a string quintet. Aurora said they were playing some movement or other from Vivaldi's *Four Seasons;* she seemed to like it and dived into her handbag for coins, which she tossed down. When the Vivaldi piece was finished, Rose said goodbye and walked away up Grafton Street.

—Let me know how it goes, the music teacher called after her.

She was heading towards Cuffe Street when she crossed to the park and went in. People were sitting on the grass enjoying the weak spring sunshine; lots of them were lovers, canoodling. Rose's head began to throb then and she felt like crying. She had done so little canoodling, and now here she was with a baby growing inside her. Without the bandage holding in her stomach it was pretty bloody obvious that she was expecting; she could tell by the way some people looked at her, and their eyes darted away. But her boss was a fair woman; she might let her carry on working. Because she'd need to put aside a bit of money for baby things – oh, Holy Mother, wasn't it only just sinking in what a fine mess she'd made for herself.

Rose stared unhappily across the pond. What else but this had she thought would happen when she'd gazed into Conor Seidel's golden eyes and slowly unbuttoned her blouse? She could never say he'd taken advantage of her; there had been plenty of chances to turn back, but she'd been reckless, hell-bent, if she was honest. She watched ducks glide across the surface of the water, automatically touched her pockets for the chunks of stale bread her mother would put there when she was small. Soon she would be saving bread for her own

child to feed to the ducks and swans.

I wonder will it be a girl or a boy, Rose thought.

After a while she turned away from the pond and began to walk back through the park; if the truth was told, this was only what she had always wanted, another living soul to call her own, her own flesh and blood at last.

It had started back last year when their neighbour, Mary Devlin, had taken in a lodger, a foreign student from Trinity College.

—His name's Conor, and he's over from Canada, so he is, Mary said. Her lodger was writing an important thesis, although she was vague about the subject.

—It's something to do with the weather; Conor sets great store by our weather.

The arrival of the Canadian was the most exciting thing that had happened on their street in years, Rose thought. She had just turned seventeen and longed for life to become more interesting. From her bedroom window she could look down into the narrow yard next door where the lodger often spent time in the afternoons. Whenever the day was especially cold he was out there in his long black overcoat and muffler, his face hidden from her beneath the brim of a dark felt hat. Most often he was fiddling with pieces of equipment which he stored in the shelter of Mary Devlin's laundry, but she already knew what the lodger was doing in there because their neighbour had hurried in to inform Rose and her mother.

—In case you're wondering, his outdoor antics are for the photography of snowflakes. Now there's a thing!

—Well, I've heard everything, Grace said.

Rose kept an eye on the weather forecast, and crossed her fingers for snow. Once, as she stood plaiting her hair at the window, the lodger had noticed her and waved. Rose was startled and stepped quickly back into the bedroom. But the next time he waved to her she

waved back.

Then one afternoon their paths crossed in the street. He was on his way home, as she was, and he fell in beside her. He introduced himself as Conor Seidel.

—Irish mother, German father, born in America, moved up to Canada, he said.

After that, she ran into him often. Once it had been raining, and Conor laughed when he saw her holding a shopping bag over her head to protect her hair from the sudden shower.

—A few drops of water, he said, —and look how people behave. He nodded towards the street where pedestrians without umbrellas scurried, bodies shrinking from the sky as if by shying from it they could somehow slip between the raindrops.

Rose giggled, took the bag from her head and straightened her shoulders. She would not be a sheep. She could hear her friend Lizzie's teasing voice: Baa, baa, baaa!

Conor's tall figure in the dark coat cut a dash in the nondescript grey streets. His face was whitewash pale, with dark eyes and wispy down on his chin and lower cheeks, as if he would one day grow a beard there. Golden brown hair corkscrewed into curls on his collar. His accent jangled pleasantly in her ears.

—Do you never mind the weather? she said.

Conor's expression was serious. —Never. Not a bit. It's the most fascinating thing on earth, don't you think?

Rose had never given much consideration to the weather, except the inconvenience of either too much heat or cold, but in the light of Conor's admiration she began to study it more closely. There were days when low mist diffused the light over the Liffey so that the river and its bridges, the buildings, even people, faded softly into view. Days when the city seemed like the ghost of itself, its edges blurred by light or fog, when solid objects might easily be porous, penetrated by ground mist and cloud. On these days she could persuade herself it was not Dublin she walked through, but Venice.

Once, as they crossed the Grand Canal, Conor told her about the superstition of *soilshey-ba.*

—It means *living light*. Sunlight falls on certain herbs, and people believe it endows them with supernatural powers of healing.

—Is it true?

He shrugged lightly. —I wouldn't discount it, he said. —The sun has miraculous powers, so you just never know.

From Conor Rose learned that rainbows did not exist except in the eyes of the beholder, and there was something about this she found both disappointing and wonderful. That the human eye could conjure rainbows out of sun and rain and air, now that really was something, although it was self-deluding, too.

Then at last, in the dull grey days after Christmas and New Year, the weather Conor had been waiting for settled across Ireland. Rose opened her window and caught a snowflake on the back of her hand, watched as it melted on her skin leaving a cold circle. She took a magnifying glass and squinted at the glitter of snow crystals, like salt, lying along the sill. In the yard next door, Conor was setting up his camera. The sky was heavy, the clouds steel-coloured, pressing on the rooftops. As Rose leaned close to see what he was doing, her breath fogged the windowpane.

He had dragged a sheet of plywood into the back yard and propped it on the empty dustbin under the clothesline. Flakes of snow fluttered around him as he covered the wood with a piece of black cloth.

Rose waited until Mary Devlin set off for midday mass, her bulky figure square under her winter coat. When the round head in its tightly knotted headscarf had disappeared around the corner, she slipped through the side gate and round to Mary's back door.

—Missus Devlin, she called, keeping the laundry steady at the edge of her vision. Rose

knew Conor was there in the laundry, but she didn't want him to think she was chasing him.

He appeared in the opening, a dark shape, with the snow-covered yard between them.

—The lady's just gone out, he said. —Shall I give her a message?

Rose crossed the yard, stepping neatly between the puddles.

—It's nothing serious, she said. Can I see what you're doing there?

Conor beckoned her into the laundry.

—My studio, he laughed, spinning soft white breath into the air.

She saw the bulky machine clamped to an old kitchen table. Stray snowflakes brushed her cheeks and neck as she stepped inside.

—It's going to snow hard.

—If we're lucky. Conor grinned.

—You must be the only one in town who's looking forward to it. Rose peered at the machine clamped to the table. —Most people think snow's a nuisance, especially when it turns to slush.

Conor's eyes sparkled. His long face was paler than her own, and he had a girl's soft skin.

—People are blind, he said. —If they looked further than the tip of their own cold noses they'd see the most amazing art show with every fall of snow.

When Rose looked sceptical, he leaned closer and spoke fast.

—Let them appreciate a flower at the centre of a snow crystal, one that reproduces the Tudor rose exactly, down to the incurving petals. Every detail perfect. Or a star inside a crystal, twelve-branched stars, all more elaborately formed than the greatest man-made sculptures. Jewellery cut from ice couldn't be more beautiful, each one an original, never to be repeated. Snow crystals suggest the existence of God, Conor said. —Do you believe in God?

Rose hesitated.

Conor looked up at the sky. The air was bluish with the snow that was still a way off. He flicked a switch and a light came on inside the polystyrene box.

—This will keep the camera warm, he said. Come and see the pictures if you don't believe me.

He led the way through the back door, stepped out of his shoes in the porch and she did the same. Mary Devlin's kitchen, which Rose had seen hundreds of times before, suddenly looked different as she followed Conor through it and into the hall; the stair carpet was nobbly under her stockinged feet.

—I've been sorting the best ones from my portfolio, he said. At the top of the stairs he opened a door and ushered her into a small room. The bed was covered with a sheet of cardboard on which were laid out perhaps two dozen photographs. He knelt beside it and after a minute she did the same, aware of the two of them close together there in the empty house and kneeling on the cold linoleum as if they were at mass.

There was a scent in the room that was different to the egg and bacon smell of Mary's house, a smoky, floral scent, perhaps incense, although more sensuous than the incense in church, which only made her eyes smart.

Conor handed her a picture of branching stars, and then others with delicate fern shapes, slender hexagonal columns, flowers within flowers within stars, all clear as glass but defined by dark outlines.

—The air becomes entangled, and shows up as these dark markings, he said.

Rose stared at the pictures. —How did you learn to do this?

He smiled and passed her the print from the centre of the display – six segments, perfectly symmetrical, with a core of cells, like a slice of honeycomb, at the centre.

—Northern Ontario has the best snow. I was a weedy kid who never got the hang of

skating or skiing when we went there on holiday. In winter I'd sit by the window and draw the patterns I saw in snow crystals. I had to be quick. Eventually I came across the work of a man called Bentley. Wilson 'Snowflake' Bentley collected nearly five thousand microphotographs of snow crystals in Vermont. Once I saw those pictures I was hooked. Five thousand and no duplicates!

Outside it had begun to snow in earnest. The white sky was falling around them in tiny pieces, erasing the grubby mundane world. Rose felt on her cheeks the chill falling off the windowpane, as snowflakes brushed the glass and whirled away.

Conor stood up and took her hand to help her to her feet. —You can be my assistant, if you'd like.

There were two heavy falls of snow that winter which Conor said was a poor show.

—He should've been here that time, oh, it was years back now, when it snowed solid for three whole weeks and the city came to a standstill, Mary Devlin said.

—Remember it, Grace?

—I do, Grace said. —We didn't go out of the house at all for weeks, and there was no traffic.

—The whole town, silent as the grave. When Mary nodded her head, the silver hairs glinted. —There were no snow ploughs, nothing. All we could do was sit and wait for it to melt.

Towards the end of winter, Rose and Conor were sorting through his snowflake prints, picking out the best for a photographic competition he wanted to enter.

—I can't choose because they're all so special, Rose said. —Each one is unique, like DNA, or a secret message from somewhere.

Conor stopped shuffling the prints and leaned close to her with a quizzical smile.

—A message from where, Rose?

—Oh, I haven't a clue! You know, Neptune or Mars. It's like we don't get it because we're dumb, but someone's trying to tell us stuff. How the universe works, who we are. It's in code. If only we could crack it.

He picked up the Tudor Rose photograph and inspected it closely.

—Formulae! It could be.

Rose sat back on her heels and looked up at him. —Have you ever left secret messages for somebody to find?

Conor frowned. —Like a message in a bottle, you mean? No, have you?

—I used to write things and slip them into library books, she said quietly. She squeezed her hands together, and then went on. —I'd wait until they were on the hall table ready to go back then push a little note between the pages.

—Who were the messages for?

—Oh, my mother, of course. The other one, I told you about. Rose swallowed hard and looked down at her hands. —It was always the same message. *Come and get me.* Pathetic. I knew it was only the librarian who would find them. Probably she threw them away, but you could never be sure, that was the thing. There was always the possibility one would sneak through, that she would borrow the book and find it. I was convinced she'd know who it was from, and that it was meant for her. One day there'd be a knock on the door. For years I was certain of it.

—But you would have opened the door to a stranger; you wouldn't have known if it was your mother or a passing motorist asking the way to somewhere.

Rose's cheeks flushed.

—She would have looked like me, and I would have known her. I would!

Conor's smile faded.

—There, Rose, I didn't mean to upset you.

—I'm *not* upset!

—My mistake. Connor gathered the photographs and shuffled them briskly until the one she had always liked best was on top.

—You can keep this one.

Rose smoothed the ragged hair of her fringe against her forehead with her knuckles.

—But that's your favourite.

—Do me a favour, Rose. Take it, please.

—Thank you, she said, sniffing. —I'll pin it up on the corkboard in my room.

Conor slid the pictures into the portfolio, then thrust his arms into the sleeves of his overcoat. At the door he hugged Rose warmly, and spoke into her hair.

—I know a story about a girl slipping a message into a book. Meet me tomorrow afternoon outside Saint Pats and I'll tell it to you.

—And why would I want to know it?

—Because there is a ghost involved. Didn't you say you'd always wanted to see a ghost?

Rose nodded.

—I did so.

—Meet me then?

—Well, perhaps, she said, knowing she would.

Rose had never disclosed to anyone the random attempts to contact her mother, so it had been a relief to confide in Conor. But she hugged to herself the knowledge of the existence of a certain envelope in Grace's handkerchief drawer. She had found it years earlier in the way children do, not snooping, not really, only propelled by a desire to understand the adult world. Whenever Grace was busy elsewhere, Rose had poked about in cupboards and drawers, and the moment she'd seen the envelope she had known it was to do with her. Over

the years she must have handled it dozens of times, as familiar with its dark looping handwriting as with the neatly sloping letters in her school exercise books. The front was unremarkable, addressed to some nuns, but in the return address on the back, the capital letter C was distinctive – slightly tilted and inward curving, it resembled a lucky horseshoe hung askew.

The address was not so far from where she lived; she had walked there and loitered, noticing children with their mothers coming along the street and going in. Eventually she discovered they were there for music lessons; the teacher, Miss McGinnis, was a woman who had twice come to Rose's school for the annual prize-giving and handed out the music certificates. For about a week, Rose was certain that the music teacher was her real mother. In the end she'd realised Miss McGinnis was far too old, but the house had something to do with her mother, of that she was convinced.

It was on the lawn outside St Patrick's Cathedral that Conor first kissed her. Rose felt his lips melt against her own like the snowflakes that had brought them together, and his mouth was gentle, so soft and sweet and warm she could have kissed on and on forever.

Conor's eyes sparkled as he drew away from her, and as they skirted the cathedral and walked along St Patrick's Close, he linked closely with her. They turned in at a blue door set in an archway, where a flight of stone steps led to an elegant entrance with *Marsh's Library* written above it. When Conor pressed the bell beside the entrance, the outer door buzzed open.

—I've ordered up a book, he said. —Keep your eyes peeled for the ghost.

They had entered a spacious red hallway with black-painted stairs, and when they reached the top, the clang of a hand bell announced their presence. The library was lined with darkly panelled bookcases packed floor to ceiling with ancient books. In the reading

room, a ladder leaned against the highest shelf and a window looked out into the knobbly branches of an enormous fig tree. Rose counted the panes of glass – twenty-four. In all her years she had never seen anything as scholarly or solemn as this bookish room.

—What is this place? she whispered.

Conor looked bemused, as if he couldn't believe she didn't already know the answer.

—Marsh's was your first public library in Dublin, he whispered back, and as they moved slowly along past alcoves of books, each one with a tall window at its centre where muslin blinds filtered the light, Conor told her the ghost story.

—It was the Archbishop of Dublin, Narcissus Marsh, who built the library. Marsh brought his niece up from the country to be his housekeeper, but she was only nineteen and must have found life with her uncle boring, so she eloped.

They had reached a long uncurtained window which overlooked a walled garden. Rose stood gazing down into it as Conor continued.

—Later on, the niece regretted upsetting her uncle, so she wrote the old boy a letter and hid it in one of his books. As a consequence, the Archbishop wanders the library looking for it. Now what do you think of that, Rose?

—And yourself, do you believe in it? she said.

Conor only grinned and shrugged and guided her back towards the reading room. In there, rows of books were covered in a creamy binding which he explained to her was vellum, made from the skin of veal calves. On the lower shelves, taller books were speckled and stained with dark blotches, the remnants of an earlier time when the original wooden floor was carelessly scrubbed down, Conor said.

—Not much has changed at Marsh's since the Archbishop's time. All the books occupy the same positions. Think of it, Rose! As Dean of St Patrick's, Swift came here. And they say Thomas Moore was locked in because the opening hours weren't long enough for him.

Of course, Joyce came here – Marsh's is mentioned in *Ulysses.* At different times, all of them probably sat right where you are sitting now.

Rose squirmed on the chair and looked out the window into the bare silvery branches of the fig. Sure, she'd heard of Joyce and Thom Moore – who had not? – but Conor had moved beyond her range of interest now, away from the wonder of the snowflake pictures into an intellectual maze of literature that she felt, being a Dubliner, she ought to have a greater grasp of but had not.

The book Conor had requested awaited them on a green baize stand. She watched him pick it up – although old, it looked ordinary enough, a chocolate-coloured volume with an embossed cover. It was a book on thunderstorms and lightning, written by a W. Snow Harris.

Rose pointed at the spine and smiled. —An apt name, isn't it?

But Conor was already polishing his glasses and bending close to the text. The room had a faint musty odour, the odour of ancient paper and bindings impregnated with dust, Rose supposed.

After a bit, Connor shuffled his feet with excitement.

—Look at this, Rose. It shows the conducting and insulating powers of various substances. According to Snow Harris, some of the most perfect *conductors* of lightning are plumbago and smoke! Rose leaned closer to the book, her cheek beside Conor's. She was still giddy, thinking about the kiss. —And of the *insulators*, he said, —some of the most perfect would be animal fur and hair, amber, talc, transparent gems such as diamonds, also brimstone and shellac.

Rose ran her fingertip down the page, trying to show him she was interested in this book if he was.

—Look, it says here that *less* perfect insulators might be feathers, or silk. Does he mean

that sailors could protect ships' masts from lightning strikes by wrapping them in silk, or tarring and feathering them?

Conor flicked back to the title page where a drawing of a sailing ship – storm-tossed – seemed at the mercy of a zigzag of white lightning.

—Hmm, I'm not sure about the tar.

Afterwards they walked across the river to Leo Burdock's for a plate of fish and hot salty chips with vinegar. Rose still glowed from her first kiss and wondered if her mother would notice. She doubted that her parents had ever done much kissing, so although Grace might comment on the colour in her cheeks, she wouldn't necessarily know what caused it. Conor's lips shone with grease and salt as he tucked into a piece of battered cod. They sat close together, and when she felt the gentle pressure of his thigh against her own Rose looked up shyly, remembering the story he had told of the elopement. She visualised the hushed winter landscape of Northern Ontario, saw herself and Conor setting up the photographic equipment amid whirling white confetti. Elopement – the very word! There would be more kisses, Rose felt certain, and the knowledge brought an unexpected leap of happiness, an iridescent streak of pure energy like a salmon breaking the surface of a river.

April – June 1991

Rose reappeared at Aurora's door during a changeover of pupils. She carried a small blue cardboard suitcase and from her reddened eyelids she'd been crying. Aurora took one look and beckoned her past the curious stare of the uniformed schoolgirl waiting in the hall.

—Go upstairs, if you like, Aurora said. —Or else make yourself a cup of tea. You know where the kitchen is.

Rose offered a teary smile in gratitude.

When the last of her pupils had been despatched, Aurora looked for Rose, but both the kitchen and the bedroom she had used were empty. She was beginning to think the girl must have left the house, when the sound of muffled sobs came to her from the bathroom.

She knocked gently at the door. —Rose, would you come downstairs and talk?

At the second knock the door opened; Rose stood there dabbing at her eyes with a towel.

—Sorry to come bothering you again. I'm sorry.

—So, it didn't go well.

Rose shook her head then mopped a sudden spill of tears.

—Oh, don't cry, Aurora said.

Later she would wonder at how easily they had settled in together. Certainly, there was never a definite invitation, never a definite request for help. Rose was simply there, and

there she stayed. After a while it was difficult to remember life without Rose. For Aurora, time was punctuated by piano lessons, by the examination successes and failures of her students, by visits to the Harp and her intermittent attempts to conquer the tin whistle. For Rose it was work, and a series of doctor's appointments, worryingly frequent around the sixth month when her escalating blood pressure caused concern. Sometimes she and Aurora went to the appointments together and walked in the park afterwards. Rose said she was getting fat and it wasn't all baby.

With the blood pressure settled, she hunted out maternity clothes in charity shops, and the eclectic pieces layered one over the other had a waifish appeal that disguised her growing stomach. That helped at work, Rose said, and when she stood behind the counter there were customers who never even noticed her changing shape. Her boss had said she could stay on making up arrangements for as long as she felt well. They had even put a small table and chair out the back for her to work at. It was better than standing for hours, Rose said. They couldn't have been nicer.

At first Aurora thought Rose would make up the quarrel with her family and go home, but as time passed it seemed less likely. Rose continued to cope at the flower shop. In spite of the way her childish body had stretched, her skin had taken on a new radiance that made her small face luminous. Her energy returned and she started going to the music sessions at the Harp again, sitting with a crowd she'd met through a customer at the flower shop. Just looking at Rose and her friends, their unlined faces, heavy with makeup, made Aurora feel uneasy and old, yet she was pleased that Rose had friends among her own age group.

—Are you coming out tonight? Rose said one Tuesday evening.

The teaching day was over, and Aurora was sitting in the kitchen wondering how to fill the hours before bed.

—If you are, Rose said, —I'll have to see you there. Lizzie's calling for me, and we're

getting fish and chips first.

Looking up at the second hand circling the clock face above the back door, Aurora decided on the spot to go.

—Don't feel obliged to sit with me if your friends are in. I'm very used to sitting on my own.

If Liam was there he'd come over in the breaks, she supposed. That's if he was still talking to her. Aurora's visits to the Harp had been infrequent since the night she'd gone home with him. She didn't have a ready explanation, because she liked him well enough.

—How's the whistle playing? Liam put a fresh glass of Guinness in front of her and his own drink beside it. —Is the little rascal behaving?

Aurora pulled a face. —You don't want to hear it, she said. —And the repertoire's not large.

—I've a tune for you, he said. —A slow waltz that's perfect on the whistle. He reached inside his jacket, produced his own whistle and put it to his lips.

—Listen.

Aurora watched the flutter of his agile fingers over the holes, heard the subtle bends as the melody rose to three piercing high notes in the middle, then sank to a breathy low d. Liam wore a navy spotted scarf tied over his head, pirate style, and a leather thong around his neck with a smooth tear-shaped wooden charm knotted to it.

—It's a beautiful melody, she said.

— Here, I'll write down the notes. You'll be playing it in no time at all.

That night, when the session finished, he drifted along beside her when she joined Rose in the overspill of customers on the pavement outside the pub. There were still people about as they began to walk, although not so many as on a Friday or Saturday night. Up ahead, by

the railings of the Huguenot Cemetery, Aurora saw a beggar jump out at a young couple holding hands, heard his curse when they shrugged off his request for money. She was grateful for Liam's presence then, for when the man stepped up to them with his hand thrust out and his chin jutting aggression, the flute player spun a couple of coins in the air so that they landed at the man's feet. While he dived for them, they made their getaway, Rose hurrying beside them.

—Seeing as the streets are no fit place, I think I'll walk you lovely ladies home, Liam said.

It was the first time he'd been to the house. After they got in, Rose tactfully disappeared upstairs.

—Coffee or wine, those are the choices, Aurora said.

But Liam slipped his arms around her waist.

—It crossed my mind, you've been avoiding me, he said. —You missed the last few sessions.

—I've had a cold, she lied. —And there's been Rose.

—You've taken the little one in, I see.

—Yes.

—And how's that working out?

—It's okay, for the time being. But things will change when she...

—Ah, they will so.

When Liam kissed her, Aurora suddenly wondered what she had thought was awkward about this. She ran a finger over his sharp cheekbone, and lower down where tomorrow's stubble pushed through.

—We could take the wine upstairs, she thought, then laughed when she found she'd spoken aloud, the habit of a solitary life.

Liam grinned at her, and she watched the fine laughter lines spread from the outer corners of his eyes.

—I had my fingers crossed you'd say something like it.

Lying beside him later as he slept, Aurora wondered what kind of mother she might make, supposing it ever came to that. Oh, not especially with Liam, but with anyone – in theory. She'd had such a lousy time with Esther that it was something she rarely considered. At thirty-six, her biological clock remained stubbornly silent, which was a blessing, given the lack of a solid relationship. She raised her head and studied Liam's clear profile on the moonlit pillow. Without the scarf covering his stubbled head he looked less radical, more suited to his day job in the Bank of Ireland. It was a strong face, full of energy, even in sleep. Aurora was drawn to Liam's musicality and, she had to admit, to the sound in his mouth of her father's soft accent.

In the morning, he kissed her awake before slipping out of bed early.

—I have a meeting first thing, and I can't go dressed as a pirate.

Aurora smiled drowsily, and once she heard the front door close fell into a deep and dreamless sleep that must have lasted hours. When she came downstairs, it was later than she had realised. Rose was in the kitchen buttering bread, sprinkling the slices with brown sugar, her latest craving.

—I've a late finish today, so it's a late start. I'm having a second breakfast to fortify me. The teapot's still warm, I'd say.

—Thanks.

—I poked my head in earlier, but you were living up to your name.

Aurora paused with her hand on the teapot. —What?

Rose's pale eyebrows shot up. —Sleeping Beauty. Her name was Aurora.

Aurora poured a cup of tea and pulled a chair up to the table. —Was it?

Rose brushed sugar crystals from her chin. —Yes. And I'll say for Liam, as princes go you could do worse.

Aurora glanced sharply at Rose, but the girl had turned and was running water for the dishes. It might have been her imagination, but Rose's back looked tensed as if she was trying not to cry.

For the first time, Aurora wondered about the father of Rose's child, surprised she hadn't thought of it before. The identity of the father was not a question to be blurted out over the washing up, Aurora thought. Still, after last night, it seemed clear it was unlikely to have been Liam

December 1990 – February 1991

Of course, she had been right about the kisses. Once kissing started, Rose found, it was impossible to stop. Sometimes so much heat was generated between them that Rose felt she might even spontaneously combust. Conor pulled away then and insisted they be cautious, but Rose was in no mood for caution. A hurtling recklessness gripped her and, far from wanting the kissing to stop, she found herself pushing it further until they were both stretched to the limit. The strength of her response sometimes shocked Conor, but she smothered his concern with more kisses, even as her mother's voice rang in her ears talking about some young woman who had got herself into trouble.

—Oh, she had no shame, that one, not a shred.

Shame. Rose didn't allow herself to contemplate shame or disgrace in relation to herself and Conor, and the kissing continued, fanned to passion by Rose's desire for more. In the absence of snow, which would have kept them occupied in the relative safety of Mary Devlin's laundry, they spent the wet, dark afternoons together in quiet corners of the city. Sometimes Rose walked to Trinity College and waited for Conor in the library. It was warm enough there and nobody took any notice as they sat entwined in one of the window seats, or in the little study alcoves where students nodded off to sleep over their books.

On Friday afternoons Mary Devlin made the trip to Glasnevin with flowers for her

husband's grave. Afterwards she went to see her sister in Drumcondra and stayed for tea, and it was then that Rose could slip through the side gate and up to Conor's room. There, with the pristine snowflake pictures lined up on the wall above the bed, she finally pressed her virginity upon him, pressed and pressed until he was helpless to resist.

Conor had a beautiful body, when he finally undressed. His smooth white limbs glimmered like fallen trees banked with snow. The porcelain hollow of his abdomen was punctuated by the indentation, pleated like a fan, where he had been severed from his mother's cord at birth. Rose often peered at her own bellybutton, imagining herself joined to an invisible body by something golden, woven like a dressing-gown cord. The secretive nature of this pleated dent, its lack of information, made her furious. Now, with their bellybuttons pressed together, her body fitted his as snugly as a white suede glove. Afterwards Conor cried, actually cried. Rose picked up her blouse from the floor and used the soft doubled muslin at the hem to mop his tears. Dry-eyed herself, she was unrepentant.

But of course it was afterwards that he suddenly blurted out how his father expected him to return to Canada. His father had plans for him, business plans. His Irish mother was soft, she would never force him, but his father was a difficult man; his father was German. There would be no further funding for his studies if he did not do what his father expected of him.

Rose refused to take any of this seriously – after all, it was not the nineteenth century, and while one wished to please fathers, it was not always possible.

Conor pulled on his clothes and went down to Mary Devlin's kitchen; he boiled the kettle while she used the bathroom. There was surprisingly little mess for such a momentous event, just a smudge of red on the wad of tissues she wiped herself with, and a lingering ache inside. People made too much of virginity, Rose thought.

When she returned to the box room, Conor had brewed a pot of tea and poured it into a willow pattern cup for her. He stood at the window looking miserable while she sipped it.

—Don’t be sad, she said, leaning forward from the bed to stroke his arm. —And don’t regret it, because I don’t.

—Oh, Rose, was all Conor said, and to her disappointment, then and later, uttered not a single word about elopement.

People had always told Rose she was a good girl. When she was a child her parents remarked upon it so often that she began to feel uneasy, as if there must be a reason they would stress this goodness, while she herself only felt ordinary, neither particularly good nor particularly naughty. But friends and neighbours stopped Grace on the street to remark upon her daughter’s pale hair, or the way she walked quietly to the shops with one small mittened hand attached firmly to her mother.

—That’s a great girl you have there, Grace Mulcahy, the woman in the corner shop would say, and she’d lean over the counter and offer Rose a lollipop, or a stick of sherbet.

Later, when Rose had realised her family was different, she thought this insistence on her goodness must have something to do with the way she had come to them from the nuns, as if people thought proximity to the holy sisters had caused some of their virtue to rub off on her, and perhaps it had. Either that, or there was something bad the adults knew about and were determined to disguise.

At home she had played quietly for hours with her dolls, teasing out the matted hair, bandaging their fat plastic limbs with lengths of torn sheet. She was a watchful child, careful to say the right thing, careful to keep her feelings to herself, for she was nagged by doubts that no one around her seemed to suffer from. At school once, when asked to make a drawing of her family, what she drew was a tall pyramid with her parents at the base and herself, like a circus gymnast, precariously balanced at the top. Her sense of being

uncomfortably, even dangerously poised in her life became acute after the train journey and the terrible thing she saw.

They were visiting an old aunt of her mother's who lived outside of Dublin – Rose had no idea where it might be on the map – and they went by train. It was a Saturday morning, windy and bright. Rose was five years old and would soon be six. Her mother brought along a magazine to read, and Rose carried a little straw purse with a few treasures inside. Once outside the city she sat close to the window and watched the countryside unfold. The open spaces and lack of people were a novelty after the crowded streets of Dublin, the luxury of fields, with tiny village houses, and narrow roads curving out of sight, and cows lumbering slowly across the fields under scudding clouds.

The train stopped at a village station to let some people off. When it started up again Grace settled more comfortably into her seat with the magazine, and her eyes closed from time to time, Rose noticed. On the outskirts of the village was a river, and as the train slowly began to cross it she could not see what sort of bridge it was beneath them, only that the water flowed quickly. Rose looked down and imagined the river was deep. Then, parallel with the railway bridge she noticed a pedestrian footbridge, a slender grey iron structure as delicate as lace against the pearly sky. On it, a woman walked with her head down and hands plunged into her overcoat pockets. Behind her skipped a child in a red coat, a girl who jiggled a balloon attached to a string. All of this Rose gathered in an instant.

Then the string tethering the balloon left the child's hand. There might have been a gust of wind, and yes, Rose sensed a tug before the balloon was swept over the railings. She watched it roar away under the bridge, an insignificant smudge of blue against the marble surface of the river. And then her eyes returned to where the child leaned through the railings, one outstretched hand grabbing for the vanished string.

It happened in a flash – the leaning child overbalanced and tumbled through the gap; she

was sucked away under the footbridge, apparently as weightless as the balloon. The child in the red coat did not fall in a straight line. Rose sensed the wind cradling her body, even as it rushed her on towards the river. The red coat disappeared before Rose had even opened her mouth in surprise. The woman walked on the empty bridge with her hands deep in her coat pockets, while the train whisked them forwards and away into their own lives.

Rose blinked, and the horror of the red coat falling exploded inside her. She opened her mouth, but her tongue felt paralysed. The train gathered speed, and when she looked out again it was not upon the river but on a sea of newly ploughed field. A farmer stood beside his tractor; she saw the man remove his cap and blot sweat from his forehead, then bend down to pick up a thermos of tea.

Rose felt drained of blood. She leaned across the gap between herself and her mother. Grace had fallen away to sleep with her head jammed in the corner between the vinyl seat and the window. The magazine slipped slowly from her lap; she had seen nothing.

When Rose touched her hand, Grace's eyes flicked open.

—What is it, Rose, do you feel sick?

Rose stared in mute shock at her mother. Some part of her mind that still worked wondered if the woman had reached the far side of the bridge yet, if she had turned and registered the absence of the red coat, the skipping presence of her daughter.

When she could move at last, Rose slipped across and pressed close beside Grace. She kept her face averted from the window for the rest of their journey. It did not do to peer uninvited into others' lives. You could not tell what you might see, or even if the fact of looking caused calamitous events that might have been avoided if only they had gone unobserved. Other people, she now saw, were as dangerously poised in their own lives as she, as ready to tumble into oblivion as the unknown child in the red coat.

All the way from the station, she clung to Grace's hand. The old aunt they visited was

impressed by this show of devotion and her whiskery top lip parted from the bottom one in a straw-coloured smile.

—Well, Grace, the child looks a perfect angel.

For months after the train journey, Rose clung to her mother. When they visited the park she had to be prised from Grace's skirt to be lifted onto the swing, or coaxed to climb the slide. Once in the school playground she pushed another child who stood too close to Grace's side.

—This is my mam, she cried. —Your one's over there.

In her dreams she saw again and again the red coat plummeting, and as time passed it was often she who wore it.

It was not long after the train journey that she first heard *The Goose Girl.* It was fairy tale about a princess who was betrothed to a prince from a distant kingdom, and as she set off to meet her groom, her mother, the queen, pricked her own finger and shook three drops of blood onto a handkerchief.

—Here, she told her daughter. —Keep this handkerchief close by you, and it will protect you from harm on your journey.

But the careless girl lost the handkerchief almost as soon as she was out of sight of her mother's palace and terrible things befell her. Rose borrowed the book of fairy tales from the school library and at bedtime pleaded with Grace to read *The Goose Girl* to her. Over and over she listened, wide-eyed, as the queen pricked her finger and the three bright drops of blood splashed onto the linen handkerchief.

The story made Rose doubt her own safety, although she already knew that anyone poised on the tip of life as she was could tumble and disappear at any moment. If she had been the princess, she would not have allowed the handkerchief to be lost. If she had been the child in the red coat, she would not have leaned out over the railings to reach for the

balloon.

When a boy who lived in the next street began to tease her on the way home from school, she begged Grace for one of her handkerchiefs, then pestered until she pricked her finger and forced out three drops of blood. Bewildered by the bizarre request, Grace nevertheless obliged.

—Anything for peace and quiet, she said.

Rose kept the handkerchief in her pocket and checked often that it was there. Checking it was safe in the pocket made her feel protected, but the bully crept up behind her in the playground.

—Your mam gave you to the nuns because she didn't like the look of you, he whispered. Another time he told her that he'd heard her mam was dead.

At first Rose couldn't understand why the magic hadn't worked for her; the handkerchief's lack of power distressed her more than the way the boy twisted her arm up behind her back and whispered those cruel things. If the spell had failed, the blood on the handkerchief must be defective, she decided. Later, when Rose had worked it out, she began to wonder where she might procure the magic drops that would defend her from harm.

Now, at last, Rose could see all her presupposed goodness for what it really was: nothing more than wishful thinking. People must have always known she would be capable of anything. They would shake their heads when they heard she was in trouble, but no one would be a bit surprised.

She had imagined herself and Conor as the lovers in the willow pattern, but the blue-and-white design, with its symbols of love and elopement and parental control, was a pattern all too familiar to betrayed women. She had worked that out as she contemplated breakfast on a willow plate for the third morning in a row and felt that even a single mouthful would make

her vomit. She had noticed other small changes in her body, too, and the occasional fear of falling had become a permanent sense of vertigo. She had been about to confide in Conor when she received the letter saying he was already on his way to Canada.

Dear Rose,

I hope you will forgive me for going away like this. I have had to return home urgently, and a hasty farewell would have been distressing. I just wanted you to know how much your friendship has meant to me this winter. I would have been so lonesome without your company. . .

Company! Rose had folded the letter into the envelope and put it away, resolving to read the rest when she was feeling better, when she knew for certain why she felt so wretchedly doomed and ill these damp spring mornings. But she really hadn't needed to read it all to recognise it as a letter written to someone who was not quite good enough to be introduced to a family in Canada as a prospective bride. Ah no, she was good enough to steady the camera in a blizzard, to catch her death standing in Mary Devlin's laundry while he fiddled with the focus; good enough, too, to lie naked with in the boxroom. But not good enough for real love, not good enough to marry.

Her state of grief and terror in the aftermath of Conor's departure reminded her of low times as a child, when she had feared that the boundaries between her body and the world would disintegrate. It used to happen most at night when the edges of things disappeared. Suddenly, she would be formless and fluid with no borders. The slightest jog of an elbow, she felt, would have caused her to spill on the carpet. Now she felt that same fear magnified, felt herself thrust down into a sad dark place without the buffer of what she had imagined between herself and Conor.

July 1991

The ornaments from the narrow shelves on the first floor landing had been moved. They lay in a heap on a corner of the carpet runner, each one on its side like a fallen soldier. Aurora picked up a small black china cat, the crystal bell, swooped with a cry of alarm on a miniature jug that had lost its handle; surely it had been intact this morning – yes, there was the tiny handle in two pieces on the carpet.

—Rose, we're not meant to touch these things, she cried.

Rose appeared in her bedroom doorway, rubbing at her damp hair with a towel, her body now so swollen that there was no mistaking her condition.

—I was going to dust, she said.

Aurora grew agitated, trying to remember exactly where each object had stood. It was a point of honour with her to uphold the conditions of her lease; she relished the sense of guardianship of these belongings, as she had once relished her occupation of *Cluain Meala*. It didn't seem in the least obsessive, as Rose's expression of mild contempt hinted. Aurora cared about the precise placing of these objects as she had once cared about building floral shrines in Aunt Ivy's garden, or arranging her coloured stones; it was a personal talisman against bad luck.

—This jug is broken, she said. —We'll have to glue the handle on.

—Oh, Rose said carelessly. —I didn't notice it break, I'm sorry.

Aurora put the knick-knacks back as well as she could, and carried the little jug to the kitchen table to be mended. After the episode of dusting she found that Rose still occasionally moved things, and there were other personal irritations, too. At the end of the day Aurora would long to open a bottle of wine, and as she reached into the cutlery drawer for the corkscrew she would look up to see her house guest hovering in the doorway with raised eyebrows. Sometimes Rose would put out the rubbish, and Aurora swore she deliberately clanked the bottles, making some kind of protest, she supposed, about the quantity. Although Rose said little about her drinking, Aurora felt too old to tolerate the unspoken censure in her wide grey eyes.

One afternoon, before her first pupil arrived, Aurora walked all the way to Iveagh Gardens and back, deciding as her boots pounded the pavements that she would ask Rose to leave. Surely her parents would not refuse to take her in at this late stage of pregnancy. With the question settled in her mind, Aurora returned to the house, flinging her keys noisily on the hall table to announce her presence. It was almost three o'clock and her first student would arrive in a little over half an hour. Boiling with determination, she flung open the kitchen door to find the room empty. Upstairs in Rose's bedroom, the bed was smoothly made, with freshly ironed clothes in a small pile at the foot.

Feeling thwarted, she made a cup of tea and carried it into the music room, and it was there she found Rose. She was lying on the blue sofa, her scrappy hair dishevelled and an arm flung up in front of her face as if fending off blows. Aurora stared at the soft white skin of Rose's underarm; far from being an irritating stranger she wished to evict, the girl looked the picture of defencelessness.

Rose opened her eyes then and Aurora saw that the lids were swollen. Her face looked drained and vulnerable, her grey eyes frightened.

—I haven’t felt the baby move once all day, she said, her voice small. —Aurora, I’m scared.

The suppressed wail in Rose’s voice felt as if it had been caused by something Aurora had done, as if her thoughts of eviction had travelled before her and caused acute distress. Perhaps the force of her intention had even affected the baby. Aurora knelt beside the sofa and took the girl’s limp hand.

—Oh, Rose, she said, —I’m sure everything’s all right. But if you’re worried we should go to the hospital and see.

She telephoned for a taxi and helped Rose into the back seat. A note on the front door advised that the day’s lessons had been cancelled. In the emergency room, after minutes of tense silence, a monitor finally amplified the sound of the baby’s heart – as fast and furious a drumbeat as Aurora had ever heard. They both sagged with relief.

Afterwards, there was no question of Rose moving out. Small things still irritated Aurora as no doubt they irritated Rose, but already she had invested too much energy in this girl and her unborn baby to bail out before the birth.

September 1991

The baby arrived a week early and caught them off guard. It was late one Sunday night, and Rose had woken feeling famished and gone down to the kitchen for an apple. She was peeling it at the sink when her water broke. Apple and peeler flew across the kitchen as she wrapped both arms around her stomach.

—It's started! she cried.

The linoleum was slippery as Aurora went for the telephone. Luckily Rose had a suitcase packed, so they arrived at the maternity hospital in reasonable array. Later, all Aurora would recall of the labour was Rose's voice, cracked and raw when the pain grabbed her, crying again and again for her mother.

—I'll call her, Aurora said. —She'll come.

In the space between contractions, Rose's grey eyes flashed up at her from the mattress.

—Don't you dare, she shrieked. —Don't you ever fucking dare!

Confused and uncertain, Aurora comforted Rose as best she could.

Near the end, sounds were sharpened, odours pungent – urine and blood mingled with a base note of disinfectant. Aurora knelt beside the bed while Rose moaned and rolled on the thick plastic sheet that covered the mattress.

—Squeeze my hand, Aurora whispered, but Rose could not keep hold. Her arms flailed

and her cheeks were drained of colour, while the breath rasped out of her as if a valve inside her narrow child's chest was broken.

The midwife was a slow-moving shape, hovering first this side and then that. Unable to comfort Rose, Aurora hugged herself until the nap of her velvet jacket had absorbed the dampness from her palms. In the end there was a final piercing shriek and Rose collapsed, her breath momentarily stilled. The midwife's shoes squeaked in the sudden silence.

When the baby cried, Rose's eyes flicked wide open. Her face was ghostly, the skin stretched tightly over the bones and the dilated pupils making her irises look black. The baby's voice was small and phlegmy, more like a protesting cough. Aurora's head swivelled towards it. She had not envisaged this, had not looked beyond the drama of the rounded belly, the hobbling, worrisome journey to the hospital in the darkest part of a wet black night. The cry gathered wind and strengthened. And just then Rose, who had held out so grimly for this moment, rolled back her eyes and fainted.

The cold linoleum had locked Aurora's knees; they cracked as she rose up awkwardly from the floor. From behind the screening curtain came the splash of water in a basin, and then the midwife appeared with the swaddled infant in her arms.

—A boy, she said, and thrust the bundle at Aurora.

He was nearly weightless, and his tiny damp skull had a tuft of strawberry blonde hair plastered to it. One of his hands broke free of the wrapping, and the fingers, long, almost transparent, brushed her mouth.

—His fingers are blue!

The midwife swivelled from tending Rose to grab a fist and rub it briskly.

—Oh, he'll soon pink up, she said.

And so Aurora was the first to hold him, first to touch the tiny fingers, and the feet so small she could have warmed them in her mouth. She cupped his marble head in her palm,

held spellbound by the eggshell scalp, the perfect curve of his eyelids. It was shattering how beautiful he was, how complete. Afterwards she would recognise this as the moment when she opened her heart to his loss. His eyes were squeezed against the light, but as she leaned over him they flicked open and their blueness pierced her, the prick of the spindle, she thought, and this starburst of colour was an opening into which she fell headlong – the entrance to a winding stair that led her up, up, up into the highest turret. Whatever happened in the rest of his life or hers, Aurora had been the first to hold him and she had felt the magic door fly open. It was wide open now, and that was all there was to it.

The midwife had slipped an arm under Rose's shoulders and the girl began to stir. Aurora held the infant close to Rose's face and saw his tiny nostrils pulse with breath.

—Your baby's here, Rose, she whispered.

Rose was trembling as she lifted her head.

—Let me see, she said, and at that the infant flexed his delicate body. There was no mistaking the intent of his blind, grub-like turn towards the sound of Rose's voice.

—Oh, look! He knows me, Rose said, her grey eyes shining.

She named the baby Jamey Conor Mulcahy.

—Jem for when he's little, she said.

Within half an hour of his birth he was curled at Rose's breast, sucking like a kitten. Aurora hovered at the end of the bed, mesmerised by the perfect symmetry of their two white bodies folded one into the other.

Later, when she stumbled out into the morning streets, the day seemed more alive, more freshly made than it had ever been before. She drank coffee at a cafe where they were still washing down the pavement and setting out chairs and tables, but even the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans didn't swamp the newborn scent that followed her from the hospital. His head had a subtle yet insistent scent, and as she walked from the hospital through the

damp grey streets she smelled it on her velvet jacket, on the palms of her hands. It was still there when she stood shivering in the kitchen and poured herself a whiskey, there when she woke on the sofa, blinded by dusty sunlight and with the drink still sour on her tongue.

In her restless sleep Aurora had dreamed she'd tugged the baby into the world with her own hands, although it was not clear where she had tugged him from. She drank a cup of strong dark coffee in the kitchen, then bathed and changed her clothes and went straight back to the hospital, avid to see him – tiny Jem Mulcahy.

Three days later, they carried him home to St Agnes' Crescent in a taxi, and Aurora felt unexpectedly relieved when Rose and the child were safely settled in the house.

A week after Jem and Rose had come home from hospital. Aurora found a thin woman with bobbed grey hair waiting nervously on the doorstep.

—I'm Grace Mulcahy, she said. —I've come to see Rose.

Surprised, Aurora stepped back into the hall. —Come in, she said, but the woman hovered on the step as if some solid barrier prevented her from entering the house.

As she dithered there, gazing up at the smudged rose façade with its black painted drainpipes and windowsills, Aurora gathered her wits enough to ask if Rose was expecting her.

—Yes, Grace said with sudden dignity. —She telephoned and asked if I would come.

In the end Aurora had to take Grace's arm and draw her into the hall. As she guided her towards the music room she saw that the woman's hands were trembling.

—If you wait in here a moment, she said, —I'll call Rose down.

Upstairs, Rose was fussing over Jamey, buttoning him into a clean baby suit and smoothing his hair flat against his chalky scalp. The baby had just been fed, and his blue eyes blinked sleepily.

—Here, hold him a minute, would you?

Rose went to the mirror and began to tidy her hair.

—Hello, little Jem, Aurora whispered. She bent her face to his warm neck, and when his tiny hand brushed her cheek she smoothed the crease lines around his wrist between her thumb and forefinger. His scent was still strong, still identifiably his own, she noticed, as she joyfully breathed him in.

—So how does she seem? Rose asked.

—Your mother?

—Yes.

Aurora answered truthfully. —She seems anxious and unhappy.

Rose nodded. —Yes, that's her, she said.

When Rose entered the music room with Jamey, there was a soft exclamation from her visitor. Aurora went to the kitchen to make a pot of tea and carry it in to them; she was setting out cups and saucers and a plate of biscuits when the sound of raised voices reached her. She switched off the kettle and listened, but all was quiet again. After a moment, she let the water boil, then 'wet the tea' as Rose always described it, and carried the tray into the hall.

She could hear Rose's voice, exasperated. Grace's response was swift but low; Aurora could not hear what they said.

Then Rose's voice, raised again. —I know I asked, but look, don't come again, all right?

The door opened and Grace Mulcahy emerged, her face twisted in distress. Aurora stepped quickly back into the space beside the stairs, steadying the laden tray against the wall. The front door opened and shut, and then Rose closed the door of the music room with an emphatic thud.

Aurora carried the tray back to the kitchen. Without stopping to think she ran upstairs to

find her purse, then back down and into the street.

Grace Mulcahy was walking very slowly, as if in physical pain. Aurora caught up with her at the corner, and insisted they continue on together to a nearby cafe.

—But I *never* threw Rose out! Grace said, affronted. —Neither Pat nor I would have asked her to leave, whatever she had or hadn't done.

Aurora refilled the teapot from the hot water jug and poured them both a second cup. All the time she had known Rose she'd harboured a hard opinion of her adoptive mother, an impression formed entirely from Rose's behaviour, if she thought about it. Listening to Grace, she was beginning to wonder if her disapproval had been justified.

—Rose ran away from home, Grace said firmly. —It came out of the blue. We were shopping for her birthday present, and that was always a difficult time because she was touchy about her birthday. Anyhow, we were in a clothes shop where she'd taken me to buy a dress, and then suddenly she didn't want it. I didn't understand her, she said, and ran out into the street crying. I went home thinking she'd be there, but she wasn't.

Grace paused for a sip of tea, and the hot sweet drink seemed to steady her.

—Rose didn't telephone for four days. Her dad was all for alerting the Gardai, but then she rang to let us know she was all right. Wouldn't say where she was staying though. Oh! Grace's eyes filled. —We went to hell and back again that weekend, I can tell you.

Aurora remembered a moment from the first week – Rose's hand on the telephone in the kitchen and an odd rebellious look in her eyes. She had not thought much of it at the time, just registered her expression. But in the light of Grace's story, the inconsequential moment made sense.

—She came to me on a Friday evening, Aurora said.

—That's right. We were shopping on her birthday. That's when she ran away.

—When was her birthday?

Grace searched in her handbag for a handkerchief. —Oh, it was that Friday, and we didn't hear from her until Tuesday. Pat was certain she'd been murdered, but I knew she was alive all right.

—She brought a suitcase with her on Monday evening, Aurora said. —A small blue suitcase.

—She'd packed it already when we went out shopping, Grace said. —I found it missing when I went home. That's how I knew she'd planned to go.

Aurora imagined Rose retrieving the suitcase from wherever she had left it, then reddening her eyelids and walking to St Agnes' Crescent.

—What made her come to you? Grace said.

—Rose and I had met once, a friend introduced us.

Grace stared into her teacup, and when she spoke her voice was apprehensive.

—She called a few times on that one who lived there before you, the music teacher.

—She was to have piano lessons, Aurora said.

As she said this, it struck her that Rose had never once touched the piano since she'd been in the house. Of course the pregnancy would have taken her mind away from music, but even so, players were always drawn to their instrument and usually found the time to pick out a favourite piece.

—Did Rose ever learn piano when she was at school?

Grace's sombre brown eyes shifted from the teacup to Aurora's face.

—No, she started violin once but she would never do her practice.

So Rose had lied to her about certain things. Aurora was pondering possible reasons for this when Grace cleared her throat; she'd gone red in the cheeks and there was something more she wanted to say.

—What is it? Aurora prompted.

—While Rose was gone, I read her diary. Grace glanced quickly towards the door. —It was after two days, when she didn't make contact. It was wrong of me, but only what anyone would have done in the circumstances, wouldn't you say?

—Yes, of course.

Aurora imagined poor Grace Mulcahy wrestling with her conscience before opening the little book, one of those schoolgirl diaries with a lock and key, she imagined, simple to pick with a hairpin. If it had been her, she'd have opened it at once.

—I knew where she kept it, though I'd never dreamed of touching it before. But after we had waited and waited, and she didn't come home, or call, I got it out and read it.

—Did you find out why she planned to go?

—She'd been with the neighbour's lodger and got herself into trouble. A tear tracked a slow path down Grace's powdered cheek. —Even if she thought her dad would kill her, she should have known that she could come to me. Actually, her dad's a big pushover and Rose knows it. She must have been devastated that the boy had gone away to Canada, but I couldn't believe she'd run off rather than tell us she was expecting. Grace took out a handkerchief and patted her eyes. —But now every conversation with her becomes an argument. Rose was such a loving child. I don't understand what I've ever done to make her hate me so. I suppose what happened was that we forgot she wasn't our own to begin with, Grace said. —We had got to thinking we were like any other family, but all the time the past was festering underneath.

So Rose's life was even more complicated than she had imagined. Aurora took in the woman's grey hair hooked behind her ears, her down-turned mouth; she was the opposite of a fairy godmother, though it was clear she longed to be one.

—Would you have her home again now? Aurora said.

Grace Mulcahy smiled wearily. —If she'd come home, yes. We love Rose. Of course we'd take her, and the baby.

If Aurora turned her out, Rose would have little choice but to go home. Perhaps that would be the kindest thing for all of them, in the long run, she thought.

Grace's knuckles were dry and cracked from housework, and as her nervous fingers twisted the corner of a cotton handkerchief, one of them began to bleed. Aurora watched her dab at it with the handkerchief. Yes, it would be the kindest thing for this woman if she forced Rose to go home. But at the thought of being parted from the baby boy, Aurora's stomach knotted with distress. Jem's pure sweet smell was in her nostrils wherever she went, it was with her here in this cafe with its smeary oilcloth-covered tables, and even though she had listened with empathy to everything Grace had said, underneath the conversation pulsed a current that was all to do with getting back to him.

The ache inside went right back to the winter they were married, Grace thought. 1972 it was when she and Patrick had moved into the house with the queer smell, her in-laws' house on Lagan Road, and her mother-in-law, old Brigid Mulcahy, who'd had seven children herself, was still alive and kicking. The house had been dark and cold, its linoleum floors icy underfoot and the decoration shabby from when Pat and his sisters were growing up. It had never once been painted since they moved there, Brigid said, and Grace had discerned a note of pride in her mother-in-law's voice, as if, when all was said and done, there was something extravagant and possibly sinful about a fresh coat of paint.

From the very first morning she had felt Brigid scanning her, checking hair, stockings, hands, before settling thoughtfully on her waistline. How thin she had been then, her abdomen so empty half the time that it was hollow. And her mother-in-law took every opportunity to make the nasty remarks about there not being enough flesh on her to bring

out a decent baby. At night, when she cried to Patrick in their bedroom under the eaves, he told her not to worry.

—Grace, don't cry so. It's only me ma, he'd say, as if that made it all right. —She has a sharp tongue, she means nothin by it.

But Pat went out to work early in the mornings. All day long he drove a delivery truck around the city while Grace was stuck at home, for although she had tried to get a job, times were hard and there were too few to go around. It was bad luck that Pat's wage wasn't enough for them to get a place of their own. They couldn't afford anything, so his mother was stuck with them, and they with her.

It was a case of sour grapes on Brigid's part, Grace thought. Pat's mother had been orphaned young, and the relatives who'd taken her in had married her off at the first opportunity to Declan Mulcahy, a gruff bachelor several decades older than herself. Looked at in that light, poor Brigid'd never had the chance of a sweetheart her own age, and then, just as abruptly as she had married, she was widowed. Now her only son was going round like a great soft galoot, all starry-eyed over his young bride. Pat's new-found delight had stirred a jealous streak in his ma, Grace realised. Brigid resented their love, the way you would with a marriage of convenience behind you. Grace understood all this about Brigid, but even so, the sly remarks had worn her down.

To keep busy, she had started a patchwork cover for their bed. One of Pat's married sisters in America had sent a cutting from a magazine, pictures of quilts with diagrams of how to cut and sew them, so armed with a raggle-taggle of fabric scraps from a market stall at Mother Redcap's, Grace had picked a simple pattern – the Ohio star – and had the top pieced in a matter of weeks. It had taken her months and months to hand quilt. She'd sat stitching in the afternoons by their bedroom window, glad of the quilt's soft bulk to warm her knobbly knees and her feet. The room had been silent enough that she could hear the

needle as it pricked the layers of cotton. Over and over, thousands of tiny stitches crisscrossing the starry surface; when her fingers grew stiff she slipped them between the layers and turned to watch snowflakes sift into the narrow grey channel of the street. There was a fireplace in the attic room but Brigid would not allow it to be lit during the day, so Grace tied around her shoulders a little red shawl her mother had knitted for her years earlier and which she still treasured and found comfort in wearing. She was snug as a swaddled baby there in the thin afternoon light, watching snowflakes flutter and settle on the window ledge at her elbow.

She had stitched into that quilt all her dreams of her and Pat having a child of their own, a child with skin as white as snow, with hair as black as ebony and cheeks as red as blood, like in the old fairy tale. When the quilt was finished even her mother-in-law had been impressed, and so, flushed with success, Grace had looked for other ways to transform their room into a sanctuary her husband would hurry home to. At a charity shop she had found a table lamp with a pink satin shade. Once it was plugged into their one electric socket, the room was suddenly rosy. It was a simple change, but stunning after the harsh light from the overhead bulb. Pat's eyebrows had disappeared up under his curls when he saw it.

—Well, he'd said, —aren't you the artistic one. I would've never thought of somethin like that meself.

The first time she had shown Pat the pink lamp she was aware of Brigid's whippet shape hovering in the doorway, trying to peer past her son.

—Wait till you'll see this, Pat said.

When at last she had her face in the door, Brigid had given Grace that sour, half-envious look.

—Make sure you keep the curtains closed, she'd said, —or people would think it's a brothel.

The best time of day, the moment Grace looked forward to from the instant the front door shut behind her husband in the mornings, was when the two of them slipped away upstairs after supper. When they closed their bedroom door and fell into the double bed, the world below, with all its petty irritations, disappeared. Sometimes Pat chased her up the stairs two at a time, laughing. Six foot six inches long, four foot wide, their bed was a raft, a lifeboat, a coral isle, a bower. The quilt she had made cosseted their tired bodies. Sometimes she'd pull it up over their heads with the lamp still lit, and the two of them would lay side by side picking out their favourite stars – hers was blue, quite near the centre, formed of soft pale cotton with a pattern of tiny swans. Pat picked a different one every time. She sensed that by singling out each and every star he was letting her know how he prized her handiwork, that he cherished the joy she had brought to this chilly house with its scuffed walls, and to him in the soft nest she had made for them under the eaves.

Oh, those early days of their marriage! Her body had become brand new to her, full of urgent throbbing and longing, and at night, under the quilt of stars with Pat's arms wrapped around her, she would have sworn she heard her very blood sing. In the mornings, the feather pillows held the indentations of their two heads. Sometimes, when she made the bed, she didn't fluff the pillows. Then, after lunch, when Brigid went calling on her cronies for a game of cards, she could slip under the quilt on Pat's side and nestle her cheek into the hollow his head had made there.

Come her time of the month, her husband's pillow was a special comfort. The waiting to conceive was difficult, continual disappointment hard to bear. In the bathroom she picked swansdown from her hair, blotted tears on her apron and hurried down to the kitchen to peel spuds, chop kindling, while the cramping pain low down in her back and belly reinforced what she already suspected – there would be no baby started for them this month. She was glad Pat's sisters, with seven pregnancies between them, all lived far away in America, so

that she was spared the sight of their swelling bodies, of shopping for baby clothes, christening and Christmas presents for their offspring. She heard all about them in the letters her mother-in-law read aloud to them.

After a couple of years the gleam in Brigid's eye had got malicious. She would heap potatoes on Grace's plate at meal times.

—We've to fatten you up somehow, my girl, she'd say. —Or else Father Trevor will be asking the difficult questions.

What questions? Grace wondered. But she was too ashamed to ask. Across the street in one of the narrow brick houses, a young wife, married a few months before her and Pat, was already well along with her second child. In the house next door, a woman went into early labour. Grace had heard her cries while it was still dark, and then in the morning, the squalling cry of the newborn. She had squeezed Pat's hand so hard that he woke with a start.

—What is it?

—It's a baby, she'd said, her eyes dripping. Would you listen to it!

The couple next door had only been married eight months and said the baby was premature.

—Pink as a prawn and not much bigger, Brigid reported, after she'd hurried in with a cake of soda bread in a cloth, and a glass of Murphy's to fortify the mother's blood.

So for Grace it was potatoes and cabbage stirred with a knob of butter, while all around them young mothers dined like queens on bread and jam and honey, washed down with a glass of stout.

In the end she went to the doctor, went off by herself because there was no one she could bear to have go with her. Especially not her husband. She couldn't imagine Pat sitting there on a hard chair in the surgery, as she had to, answering questions about their private life like it was something in the newspapers. She had pretended for all she was worth that it was fine

to discuss such matters with a stranger, those intimate doings under the quilt which she and Pat delighted in but had never given words to.

Lying on the hard white couch with her skirt up round her waist and the doctor's dry wrinkled hand kneading her stomach, she had felt the warm brush of his breath on the inside of her thigh. Before that visit to the doctor, Patrick Mulcahy had been the only man who had ever seen her naked, the only man to touch her there. The doctor had sent her away with a thermometer and a chart and an idea of what to do with them. But already everything was different, although, praise Mary and the saints, Pat had no idea of it.

In the end the doctor suggested she talk to her priest about adopting a child.

—I've known women conceive in the same month as they adopt, he said. It's anxiety that prevents them falling, and, if I might say so, Grace, you do seem very anxious.

There was no denying that.

So she and Pat had gone to see the priest, Father Trevor, about babies from the convent. She remembered squeezing her husband's hand, the two of them pressed side by side on a couch in the priest's office while he inspected them over the rim of his spectacles. It seemed to Grace that there was something especially perplexed in the look the priest turned on her, as if he was trying to see through her clothing, beneath her skin, to work out what had gone wrong inside her. When he spoke to Pat he was gruffly polite.

—I'll let you know when I have news.

Grace didn't believe adopting a baby would make her conceive. They would adopt, that was all. Babies were innately loveable; it never once occurred to her that she might have trouble loving a stranger's offspring, or it her. Love was the grandest and simplest of things. It would be given and received and the child would be precious to them, no different really to a child of their own. Except that she would forgo the intimacy of pregnancy, that sharing of blood, body space, flesh, food and air. Grace had always been more than willing to share

all of this with another human being, indeed there was a part of her that suspected a pregnancy might be the only union that could satisfy the yearning to be completely joined with another.

In their bed at night she felt this yearning in Pat, but always after pleasure came the moment of parting, their inescapable separateness. Grace wondered if this was the essential difference between men and women, for Pat's expectations were more than satisfied by the temporary merging of their two bodies; he did not feel this pervasive longing, day in, day out, as she did. She was programmed to nurture, and thwarted all the way.

Perhaps maternal love was the only pure love that existed, the only true escape from loneliness. But then her body was not the temple it was supposed to be, it was tainted by failure. So they'd take pot luck. Her husband was big and soft. He'd do anything for her. Grace wanted a child, and Pat wanted her. She knew this was how she would get her way, but she also knew that once she had a child, the anxiety the doctor had spoken of would be turned towards the infant's health and wellbeing. Whatever happened now, anxiety would become a permanent part of her.

Even before the child came, just the promise of it filling her lap had made her shine with happiness. In some ways those months of waiting had been the best of her life. She had almost been able to kid herself it was a pregnancy. The baby was to be collected by a neighbour on their behalf. The neighbour, Mary Devlin, would accompany Father Trevor to the hospital and carry the baby home. Pat's mother, old Brigid Mulcahy, had asked Mary Devlin if she'd do them the favour. That way, there would be no complications.

—What complications? Grace said.

—Well, you wouldn't want to go bumping into the mother, and if she's ready to let the baby go, then likely she'll be ready to leave the hospital. Father Trevor knows what's best,

Brigid said.

Grace wanted to ask how her mother-in-law had got involved in talking to the priest and Mary Devlin about what was best for her and Pat. She had whispered to her husband that she wanted to go herself, that it wasn't fair she couldn't bring their baby home from the hospital. But Pat only rolled his eyes and refused to tell Brigid to mind her own business; a lack of grit where his mother was concerned was his one serious weakness.

—It is her business too, in a way, Gracie, he said. —Seeing as it's her grandchild we're talking about.

Grace had pulled her red shawl tightly around her shoulders, gathered it in both fists over her breasts. So Mary Devlin would bring the baby to them, she would act as midwife, and that was all there was to it. Grace sat on the edge of the double bed and stared out the window, looking at the pigeons strutting on the rooftop across the way, at the teams of children playing tag up and down the street. She was still watching when the stout figure of their neighbour hove into sight carrying something brown, like a large parcel. Grace thought at first it was her shopping Mary carried and that she had come from the convent empty-handed. Her breath arrived in little gasps then – someone else had taken their baby; Father Trevor had given it to another couple instead. As she sat there, immobilised by panic, Mary crossed the street, looked up at Grace's window and smiled. Then, from the bundle, she extracted a small arm and waved it.

Grace ran down the stairs, still in her slippers, and out into the street.

—Here she is! Mary held up the child wrapped in a brown knitted shawl.

—But there must be a mistake, Grace said. —Where's the infant we were promised?

Mary Devlin jiggled the child on her hip.

—Father T was there himself, she said. —This one's fifteen-months-old an she's definitely for you. Mary turned her head to the side and whispered. —Truth be told, there

were complications wit the birth an the other one died, poor mite. Anyway, that's a lovely child you've got here.

When Grace took the toddler in her arms, the soft breath on her neck raised goose-bumps. The sweetness of the child's skin was overlaid with a drains-and-gravy odour, the smell of poverty, Grace thought, but she closed her eyes and savoured the weight against her hip, the warmth from their two bodies slowly fusing. Then, standing in the street with the new strangeness of holding the child making her awkward, Grace was suddenly sensitive to the elements: the wind slapping her cheeks; the pavement gritty beneath her slippered feet; the cold air cutting her lungs with every breath, as though she had accidentally breathed in ground glass, or seashells. Beneath the bodice of the child's dress, a tiny heart beat faster than her own; Grace felt it thumping with fright, a fist upon a door which her own soft heart answered at once – *Oh, come in! Come in and be safe with me*.

She would wash away that smell and nothing would ever part them. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and Mary Devlin, with her hands planted on her hips, made a clucking sound.

—Ah, Grace, she looks made for you, I'd say.

Grace almost swooned. Yes, she could love this child. There would be no difference. It would be as if this little one had always been their own. She would see to it.

Rose they called her. Their dainty rose. Later she watched Pat lift the tiny girl with his big hands and twirl her over his head, and wept again with relief. Pat was a softie. He could love Rose as he loved her, without reservation. At last they were a family, bound tight against the world, tight as a conker inside its shell.

When the front door shut behind Grace, Rose had wedged the baby into a corner of the sofa and gone to stand beside the window. Through the lace curtain she saw the houses on the opposite side of the street with their window boxes of scarlet geraniums, lobelia and trailing

petunias. She saw windowpanes reflecting slabs of sky, and pigeons strutting on the rooftops, saw her mother emerge from the shelter of the porch, descend the front steps and turn right without looking back.

Grace had walked slowly, keeping close to the railings, as if at any moment she might reach out for support. Her head looked too heavy for her narrow shoulders. The old navy jacket, and the skirt of some small-patterned cotton, were dated and dreary. Rose's eyes filled in sympathy – no matter what her mother wore, she always looked drab. There were times when Grace dressed up to mark some special occasion, and the results were even worse.

Like the afternoon she had run away, Rose thought. It had been her birthday. Every year it made her breathless with apprehension. She would always have a go at talking herself out of it, but it never worked. The crunch usually came after breakfast, once the cards and presents had been opened and the grey expanse of the day yawned before her. Her mood would plummet then, and there was no direction to go but down until she bottomed out. The fallout from it could last a week. This year had been the worst; she'd felt disabled by dread as soon as she opened her eyes. She was lying rigid in her bed, when Grace had crept in and left something beside her pillow. Rose had pretended sleep, but through her lashes she had seen her mother's face – that same secretive yearning she'd seen on the faces of girls who'd dragged their boyfriends to the window of a jeweller's shop, the dogged way they would keep on peering through the glass even when their fellow was shuffling his feet with boredom. It infuriated Rose. How in God's name did Grace manage to make her feel so fucking *guilty* all the time, so fucking *responsible* for her and Pat's happiness?

When the bedroom door closed, Rose had slipped a hand out from under the sheet — Grace had left a birthday card and a cupcake with pink icing. She lay under the bedclothes nibbling cake, letting the pink sugar melt on her tongue and waiting until the last minute to

get up and dress. At school she would go all day without telling a soul it was her birthday. This year she had been working at the flower shop, and as she stood there with the wardrobe open some random impulse had made her stuff some clothes into the old blue suitcase. . It lay among little drifts of grey fluff under her bed, a relic of her mother's filled with dressing-up clothes, her old ballet shoes and school photographs. On the spur of the moment, she'd tipped out the contents and kicked them under the bed. It wasn't that she had consciously planned to run away from home, but packing clean underwear and a change of clothing into the suitcase, just *pretending* she might go, had been a temporary comfort.

—I'll meet you in town after work, her mother said. —You can bring me to the dress shop.

The dress Rose wanted for her birthday was black with green butterflies and Grace had said she'd buy it. So they'd met and walked to the funky little place with the spider's web painted on the window. Grace had made one of her efforts at dressing up to go to town – her blouse was salmon pink with a droopy bow at the neckline, a dire choice, teamed with a grey flared skirt and the sombre navy jacket. With its low neckline, the butterfly dress was a more risky garment than anything Rose had aspired to before she met Conor. She saw at once that her mother hated the shop, but Grace was so eager to please her, so anxious to buy a buoyant mood, a happy birthday, as if happiness was as easy to come by as forking out the cash for a dress. Seeing Grace's expectant face as they entered the shop, Rose had decided on the spot that, although she wanted the butterfly dress quite a lot, she would not let Grace buy it. On this day, of all days, she had an overpowering need to exact revenge on a mother, and Grace was the only one available to her.

She had gone behind the curtain and quickly slipped the dress over her head. It was gathered underneath her breasts and then swirled out from there, skimming nicely over the problem area around her waist and showing off her thin legs. In it, she looked her old slim

self. When she whipped aside the curtain and stood in the doorway of the changing room, Grace nodded, and took out her purse.

Rose said quickly, —I don't want it after all.

Grace, confused and awkward-looking amid the racks of tiny bright dresses, took a moment to absorb this.

—Oh! Well, is there something else?

—No, not really. Rose's voice was deliberately dull and flat, each syllable like a slap on bare skin.

As her mother's disappointment accelerated to dismay, Rose felt a twisted kind of pleasure – if she was to feel gutted on her birthday, at least she would not suffer alone.

—What about this? Grace swung a hanger off the rack beside her and held up a short red dress, desperate now that she had realised Rose would go home without a birthday present.

Rose had shrugged the dress away. Its colour made her shudder. The butterfly dress was slithery against her skin as she stepped back into the booth and closed the curtain. By the time she had her own clothes on she'd convinced herself she really didn't like either the cut or the fabric. The blue suitcase nagged at her. It was packed and ready in the dark space underneath her bed. If she was to retrieve it, she had to ditch Grace. So she'd picked a fight over nothing and run out of the dress shop into the street.

Unable to resist one backward glance, she had almost turned around when she saw Grace standing in front of the fitting room with the red dress crumpled in her hands. Her mother's head was bowed as she struggled to stifle tears. Rose's own cheeks were suddenly wet, because in turning her back on the birthday treat she'd been hankering after for weeks, she had a sudden impression of *Grace* walking away from *her,* while she herself cartwheeled into space, twisting and flying into the unknown, coat flapping, arms flailing, sucked away from everything she knew.

Inside the blue suitcase, underneath the clothes, was a single sheet of airmail paper – she'd risen in the middle of the night and written a letter breaking the news of her pregnancy to her departed lover. The thought of Conor never knowing he'd left a child behind in Ireland had driven her to write, wetting the envelope and sticking it down with her own salt tears.

Rose had run all the way home from the shop and straight upstairs to her bedroom. With the suitcase in her hand she had devised the plan of delivering the letter to Marsh's Library. Of everything Conor had seen in Dublin, he had loved Marsh's best. Rose knew he would return there one day. When he did he would revisit the book on lightning, and her letter would slip into his hands, truly a bolt from the blue.

It was a few minutes before five when she arrived at St Patrick's Close. The keeper's assistant answered at the second ring.

—We're almost ready to close, the woman said.

—Just one quick look, Rose pleaded.

Reluctantly, the woman let her in and Rose had drifted out of sight along the rows of books. She had seen the Snow Harris book put away, and it only took a minute to find it. When she was certain the woman wasn't looking, she slipped the letter inside the front cover, nestled snugly against the brave little sailing ship and its zigzag of white lightning.

November 1991

One freezing Sunday afternoon in November, Aurora took a bus to the Phoenix Park. Inside the gates, children raced across the grass, their small booted feet striking the frozen ground with the staccato snap of horses' hooves. Away in the distance, above the roof of a bandstand, a kite dipped and swooped against the flinty sky. Ahead of her on the path, young couples strolled with their arms entwined; the girls were skimpily dressed, oblivious to the cold. Aurora passed a pair who had stopped to kiss; when they drew apart they exchanged heated whispers, breath puffing out of them like spoken cloud.

She pushed gloved hands into the pockets of her coat and walked slowly along the broad pathway. Her cheeks ached with cold; just to move forward was an effort, but she had set herself the task of reaching the monument in the centre of the park. The bus ride, the walk to the monument, would distract her on this raw Sunday afternoon when the world felt sealed against her. It was an effort she had to make, a choice between this and opening the bottle of wine she was saving for dinner. It would have been easier to sink into the wine's mulled depths, but already she had frittered more hours in this way than could be counted. She was taking herself in hand. For Jem's sake, she added, although she doubted she would be in his life long enough to be an influence.

This knowledge caused a twisting pain in her chest, and the prickling at the bridge of her

nose that warned of tears. She had to talk sternly to herself not to burrow into self pity. Jem did not belong to her. He would never belong to her, no matter that she loved him. To have bonded with him the way she had, to love him this hard, was a catastrophe. Rose would eventually move out. She would go home, or she would meet someone and leave. She might even go to Galway, since one of her girlfriends came from Spiddal and there was talk of the two of them going for a visit in the New Year.

Aurora walked faster to keep warm and soon arrived at the edge of a pond. There she watched a couple with two small children; they were tearing up crusts of bread for a flock of small long-legged birds that darted over rocks along the water margin. That was when she noticed the way the funny-looking birds were behaving: instead of gobbling down the crusts, the larger ones would run with it in their mouths to feed the chicks. The twisting pain came back as she watched this communal nurturing. The smaller birds were not quite young enough to be helpless, but the touching concern shown by their elders meant they would quickly grow to be big strong birds.

She had broken her own rule and opened a bottle of wine before the first lesson. To make things worse, she'd poured it into a stoneware mug in case Molly and her mother arrived early. This act of concealment made her feel shabby and somehow lost, but sitting with a glass of wine at three o'clock in the afternoon would attract unwanted comment. Rose had been out for hours and the baby's coat with its little mittens dangling from the sleeves was upstairs hanging on the corner of his cot. Aurora fretted, imagined Jem's fingers turning blue, almost transparent, as they were when he was born. The coldness of the day seemed all the more penetrating for knowing he was out in it without warm clothing. She had checked the refrigerator and found his bottle tucked into an alcove of the door – possibly Jem was hungry, too.

At half past three her first pupil arrived, chewing nervously at the ends of her thin plaits.

—Hello, Molly, Aurora said.

As she came forward to take the girl's coat, Molly's mother flashed a sharp look from underneath her dyed blonde fringe. Aurora hustled the girl into the music room, smiling weakly at the mother over her shoulder; perhaps the woman had caught a whiff of wine on her breath, she thought.

There were two more pupils after Molly, and as they played their faltering pieces she listened for the click of the front door. But Rose did not return. In the half hour gap of a cancellation, Aurora poured another mug of wine. Sipping it in the chilly kitchen, she felt brittle enough to snap at the least pressure. Her next student was a sulky girl who had not touched the exercises that had been set and made no secret of her disinclination to practise the piano.

—Why do you come to lessons, Sinead, if you have no intention of practising?

—Mam wants me to play, the girl said, tossing brown hair that was dull with hairspray.

—Well, she might think about saving herself the money, Aurora snapped.

Sinead Murphy – a plump thirteen-year-old – looked up from the piano stool and her brown eyes frankly roamed Aurora's face. After a moment, she stared pointedly at a pinkish stain on the front of her blouse where the mug had dripped a tiny splash of wine. Aurora's hand rose to it and Sinead smiled then, her mouth bending into the thin disparaging shape that would settle permanently there in her middle age.

—Just play some scales for me, Sinead, Aurora said, keeping her voice even. Try four octaves, major and minor. She walked out of the room, unable to trust herself not to slap the girl's smooth white cheek, or tug at her over-processed hair. In the kitchen she glanced in the mirrored back of the sideboard and found her own hair dishevelled. The ends fell over her shoulders, and the fringe, which needed cutting, dangled in her eyes. She picked up a

brush Rose had left on the table and raked it through her hair, poured a glass of water and stood at the sink to drink it off. Her skin felt overheated and greasy, in spite of the coolness of the day.

She followed Sinead's halting progress through the notes of a minor scale. The girl would never make a musician; the mother was wasting her resources. Children who would become musicians were the ones you had to nag to close the piano and come to the dining table. They never spoke of practice, only of playing favourite pieces. Musicians were born, and teachers were there to guide them. A few children might be coaxed through the learning process, but there was never a natural lightness to their hands, never a genuine enthusiasm. Any skill they acquired was valued mostly as a means of gathering attention, whereas real musicians would play to an empty room, ending dizzy with emotion and ready to begin again.

Aurora ran cold water on her wrists and damped her cheeks. She dried them on a clean tea towel then stalked back to the music room.

—That will do, Sinead. Please put on your coat and wait on the chair in the hall for your mother.

When the woman appeared, huffing and puffing, twenty minutes late, Aurora told her there was no point in continuing her daughter's lessons and handed her a refund for the remainder of the term.

—But why? The woman stared at her, little plucked eyebrows raised and her mouth open in surprise.

—Because your daughter doesn't want to learn, and I can't make her, Aurora said. She noticed Sinead was already halfway out the door. Probably she knew that at any moment her mother's surprise would gather and turn; she would have seen her on the offensive.

—Well she never had any trouble with Miss McGinnis. The woman's cheeks were

reddening now and her shoulders setting in a square shape.

—No, Aurora said gently, trying to defuse the woman's anger. —But that was before she turned thirteen. Things change, she said, —and not always for the best.

After Sinead and her mother had gone, she emptied the stoneware mug into a glass and downed it in a couple of swallows. There was a draft then as the front door opened and Rose came in with Jamey in her arms. The boy was wearing a new coat, and he was asleep with his cheek against her velvet collar.

—I wondered where you were, Aurora said. She gazed with helpless adoration at the sleeping boy, his porcelain skin and the tips of his hair, fine as fairy floss, showing under his woollen cap.

—I took him to see his Gran, Rose said. Her voice was matter of fact, and she looked pointedly at the empty wine glass on the table. —Don't you ever get a hangover from that?

1977

To begin with, Grace never noticed Rose's silence. A little later, and a touch uneasy, she had thought that if there was anything bad then love would be a laser, burning away the damage, cauterising wounds. After all, how much did babies know of what was happening to them? What did they remember? She herself remembered nothing before she was four, or even older. But eventually the tentative quality of the child's smile made her anxious. What if Rose had been with the mother though? What if she grieved for her loss? What if Grace couldn’t measure up to the woman who'd birthed her?

She would not think this way. She would not.

But try as she might to dismiss these doubts, the fifteen months she had lost from Rose’s life gradually became an obsession. So Grace sat down to work out, day by day, what she herself had been doing when they were apart, reasoning that she could tell Rose later on. But without knowing how Rose had passed her days, how would they ever join up the dots of their two lives? Would Rose grow up to reproach her for not having been there from the start?

In the end she went to see Father Trevor, took Rose with her wearing a crisp bow in her hair and her best dress, freshly ironed.

The priest was about to retire, she’d heard; he was looking older now, dehydrated and

wizened, and she noticed how his once-strong voice had acquired a slight quaver. The years had added up without her realising. Five years since she and Pat were married, most of them spent waiting and hoping before they had revealed their disappointment to the priest. She was almost thirty, herself. On the outside she maybe still looked all right, still cut some kind of dash in a respectable way. But the waiting had made her old and shrivelled inside. She and the priest were a pair, Grace thought.

—Would I ring for tea? he said.

—Please don't trouble, Father, said Grace. —I only stopped in for a minute.

—Ah, well, it's a pleasure to see you both looking so well. Is everything all right at home, Grace?

—Yes, she said. —Yes it is.

In the silence that followed, she smoothed her skirt over her knees

—Was it anything in particular? the priest said.

Grace cleared her throat and plunged in with the question that'd begun to tick day and night in her brain.

—It's where the child was before she came to us, Father.

—Do you mean where, or with whom?

She meant both, really, but yes, she wanted to know if Rose had been in the care of her natural mother, or in an orphanage. She'd been wondering about it for some time, Grace said, the way you would with a child you were fond of. And Rose would be asking about it one of these days.

—There was a bit of back and forth, if I remember, the priest said. —The mother left her with the nuns and then a little while later she returned and demanded to take her away.

—Oh!

—Yes. She kept her a while, but in the end...

Father Trevor's voice trailed into a cough. His chest sounded bad.

—In the end?

—She brought the child back and begged the nuns to find her a home. I believe she left Dublin soon after, he said. —So don't be worrying your head she's coming back for her. The child is your own.

So Rose had a past. Someone had loved her before Grace. Another mouth had pressed kisses to the curved soles of her feet, another hand cradled the head. Perhaps the breast had even been offered and accepted. There would have been milk. Oh, she could not be sure! Perhaps Rose still had the taste of it in her mouth and it would always be there, a milk memory that could never be satisfied, a foolproof way of telling the real mother from the impersonator. The idea drove Grace to distraction, but there was nothing to be done. She and Rose had been cast together by fate. They would mean something to each other for the rest of their days, whatever happened now or didn’t.

Home. Grace was both consumed with the curiosity to know where the child had lived before she came to them, and terrified of a knock on the door, a letter, that would announce a prior claim on Rose. Their relationship felt tenuous, contingent, a fragile structure that could collapse at any moment. Rose continued to regard her thoughtfully. She made almost no sounds, no burbling noises; she never even cried as other babies did, but remained watchful, tensed for change.

A few months later, still unable to let the past rest, Grace crossed the river and walked to Sean MacDermott Street to stand outside the convent. It was a humid afternoon and Rose was wriggling in the stroller, so Grace unbuckled the straps and took the child in her arms, then turned to look up at the grey brick walls, the rows of windows on three floors with attic rooms above. The Madonna and child gazed down serenely from a niche above the entrance, and Grace saw that the statue of the baby Jesus was about the same size as her

Rosie. She paced up and down the length of the building, almost a whole block, wondering feverishly what to do. When passers-by began to eye her strangely, she gathered her courage and approached the enormous door of the convent that was painted dark red, the colour of old blood. At her second ring, an opening in the door slid away and a pair of bright blue eyes stared out through a rectangle of mesh.

—Yes?

Haltingly, Grace explained her business, and was brought inside to an office. There, after listening closely to her, a soft-faced nun offered a perplexed smile and asked if she wished to return the child.

—Not at all! Grace clutched Rose to her chest and angled her body so that the nun's view of her was partially obscured. —I only wanted to ask about the mother, which part of Dublin she came from.

As Grace spoke she recognised within herself a secret hope that the nun would simply shake her head and say they knew nothing. Truth be told, she dreaded hearing that the woman had come from Ballsbridge or Donnybrook, one of the brothels it was well known flourished there. The thought of Rose in such a place, of the things her tender baby ears might have overheard in those lost months, made Grace grab the table edge for support. All the same, she felt compelled to find out what she could.

—Just wait here a minute, the nun said.

She went away to another office, and when she returned she handed Grace an envelope. It was a standard white envelope with the address of the convent on the front, but when she turned it over there was writing on the back. The nun pointed to the shaky handwritten letters.

—This was where the woman lived at the time she left the child.

As Grace stared at the writing it seemed to blur.

The nun raised a fingertip to her soft chin, as if thinking.

—I did happen to notice, when I picked this envelope from the file, that the baby was a home delivery.

Dumbfounded, Grace looked again at the street name – to think Rose had been born little more than a brisk walk from herself and Pat.

She found the house in Temple Bar and lingered uneasily on the pavement across the street. Its colour, a fleshy pink, was distasteful to her, as was its slightly tipsy-looking façade. The house was, oh, sort of arty looking, a bit dangerous. She tried to visualise a woman coming down the front steps carrying a child in her arms – carrying Rose. The mother would be watching her feet so that she didn't trip and fall. Then she would have turned and walked towards the paper shop on the corner; she would've walked to the convent and stood in front of the great red door. Grace imagined a nun speaking to her through the wire grill, ushering mother and child along the austere corridors with their gleaming, hand-polished floors. If it was a weekday there would have been the pounding of machinery from the convent's vast laundry. The woman would have handed Rose to one of the sisters. When the red door slammed behind her, she would have walked back the way she had come.

For the life of her Grace could not imagine handing over a child of hers to anyone. Yet this woman had carried Rose to the convent; they had left this house together, and the woman had returned to it alone.

She was not feeling quite herself this morning. The crowded streets pressed in on her; there was too much noise, so that she could hardly hear herself think. Grace hurried away, not noticing which route she took, walking and walking, pushing Rose's little stroller before her and grateful of its handle to lean on, until at last she found they had crossed the city and arrived at the canal. There, under the trees, she sat on a bench beside the width of greenish

water and waited for her heart to cease its violent thump.

Rose, who had dozed all the while they were on the move, sat up and stretched her dimpled arms towards a pair of swans that had appeared on the canal. The birds came gliding towards them, ripples fanning out across the mirrored surface as Rose waved chubby fists at them.

—Swans, Grace said. They're beautiful so.

She had heard swans mated for life; they were faithful birds, like herself and Pat. Tears sprang into her eyes as the creatures floated serenely past and away, and she turned from Rose and mopped her eyes on her sleeve. Everything would be fine. It would be all right. When she got home she pushed the envelope the nun had given her to the back of the bureau drawer among her handkerchiefs. She should have left well alone, she thought. The knowledge she had gained filled her with a formless dread, yet she knew she would be unable to discard it.

A few nights later Grace was woken by a strange noise – a muffled whistling sound. It was coming from the box room where Rose slept, next door to their own bedroom. Grace tumbled out of bed and hurried to Rose's room where she found the child wedged against the wooden bars of the cot, her breath laboured and cheeks scarlet. When Grace lifted her up she felt through her nightdress the sticky heat of her skin. Quickly she carried her down to the bathroom and sponged her little body with tepid water; she measured out medicine for the fever on a spoon, then walked up and down the kitchen with the child against her shoulder. In a little while she sponged Rose again and felt that her skin was cooler. The child whimpered a little and clutched at her with damp hands. Her breath on Grace's cheek grew easier as the night folded around them like a blanket; they alone were awake in the world, for all Grace knew.

Rose's helplessness, the wounded sounds she made, wrung Grace's heart. In the end she

unbuttoned the neck of her nightgown and held the child’s cheek against her skin. Rose relaxed then, nestled close to Grace’s heartbeat. Soon her small limbs softened, and her breathing slowed. She slept in Grace's arms as if in a feather bed, while wind and rain buffeted the house.

At dawn, with her arms numbed from holding her daughter, Grace could have laughed out loud. There was, she realised, a manual element to love that had to be practised again and again, after which a heart could lift away as effortlessly as a bird on a layer of warm air. Now, with the sunlight stealing in the window, she felt for the first time like the undisputed mother of this child, Rose Mulcahy.

There would always be a difference between herself and other mothers. She could never take Rose's love for sure, and Grace knew any love that came her way would have to be earned. *Love love love:* she would make what lay between them the very best it could be.

December 1991

On Monday a secretary from the lawyer's office telephoned to say that a house inspection was due before her lease renewal. Aurora agreed a date and time for the visit, then set about fussing over the house contents. It annoyed her that Rose took no interest in the proposed inspection, but since the afternoon when she had taken Jamey
to visit Grace, Rose had shown little interest in anything, not even the baby. Aurora wondered if it was some kind of delayed postnatal depression; she even broached the subject once with Rose but was given short shrift.

On the day of the inspection Rose announced that she would take the baby for a walk and keep out of the way.

—The lawyers might not approve of you having house guests, Rose said.

Aurora saw that she had a point. So she helped Rose wrestle the baby's pram down the front steps and watched her listlessly push it away up the street. Rose wore the grey coat with velvet collar and the black boots she had worn the night she knocked on the window. Her legs still stuck out of the boots like straws from bottles, and her platinum hair, longer than when she first came, flapped in the breeze showing darker layers of blonde beneath. With the back of her neck exposed like this, Rose looked as vulnerable as a child and, as always whenever Jem was out of reach, Aurora was gripped by panic.

What if some calamity should befall them as they wandered through the city? A bus could swerve out of control and mount the pavement, or as Rose turned to look in a shop window a hand could reach into the pram and snatch the baby. Before his mother knew anything, Jem could be spirited away, his little blue-grey eyes puzzled as they fixed on the face of a stranger. He could be a ‘stolen to order’ baby for someone desperate to have children. He could even end up in the cesspit of the underworld, that particular hell realm where babies and young children were trafficked for purposes it was best for one’s sanity not to contemplate

Aurora forced herself to go inside and tidy the kitchen, to wash and dry the coffee cups and hang the pink rubber gloves on their hook under the sink. When the lawyer arrived, everything was in its place. Jan Gorman, of O’Grady and Gorman, was a woman with sleek dark hair dressed in a well-cut black trouser suit, mustard shirt, and discreet gold jewellery. Her handshake was firm. They trooped through the house together, from the unused attic rooms to the wood store in the old lean-to laundry, while the lawyer consulted an inventory she carried on a clipboard. When everything had been ticked off, Aurora offered tea. The lawyer hesitated, then checked her watch and declined.

—Please don’t trouble yourself, she said, —I have another appointment.

They were standing in the hall and Jan Gorman was stashing her clipboard in a briefcase.

—Everything is grand and the lease will be renewed for another year, she said.

Aurora nodded. By then Jem would be walking; they would have to do something about the stairs.

—I suppose this all seems very odd to you, the lawyer said.

—Odd?

—The insistence on keeping things in a certain order. I have to admit, it is unusual as leases go.

—I suppose the owner is worried about coming back one day and not recognising the place, Aurora said.

—Perhaps, said the lawyer.

—Or it might be an obsessive compulsive disorder, in which case you have to sympathise. Imagine the stress of obsessing long distance, never sure if objects are in their right places.

The lawyer checked her watch again and rubbed her glossy lips one against the other.

—Yes, she agreed, but with a twisted little smile that implied the tenant might be as loopy as the landlord. —Anyhow, I'll put two copies of the lease in the post. Just sign them and return one to the office.

Aurora wondered why the lawyer had not brought copies of the lease with her. She could have signed them here and now. But the lawyer picked up the briefcase and was delving into a side pocket.

—Here's a note for you from the landlord, an explanation for the strange conditions of the lease, perhaps, or else just a thank you for looking after the place.

She handed over an airmail envelope with a US stamp, but something expectant in Jan Gorman's eyes made Aurora suddenly anxious to be rid of her. She set the letter on the hall table, propped against a pile of books on elementary harmony she had ordered for her theory students, and reached past the lawyer to open the front door.

Rose spotted the letter on the hall table when she returned in the afternoon. She was hanging up her coat when her eyes fell on the familiar looping handwriting. Cautiously she picked up the envelope by a corner, gutted to find it was not addressed to her. But there on the blue-white paper was the same handwriting as on the letter she had filched from Grace's handkerchief drawer. The distinctive capital C resembled a horseshoe on its side, tipped a

little, as if trying to contain its luck. She turned the envelope over, but the back was blank. Still, the thrill of it sitting there unopened went through her like an electric shock. She drew a slow deep breath, absorbing the knowledge of its presence. It was no surprise, not really; she had waited years for this letter to turn up, not knowing when it might happen, only that it would.

Jem was crying to wake the dead, Rose noticed. She picked him up and jiggled him over her shoulder, but he would not stop. She could not drag the pram up the front steps, so left it on the street in front of the open door. The slow piano piece drifting from the music room was too accomplished to be a student. Rose stuck her head around the door and sure enough, Aurora was at the piano. She stopped playing when she saw Rose and Jamey.

—That's lovely, what is it? Rose said.

—Debussy.

—It's made the baby quit his bawling, so don't stop.

Aurora played a few bars and saw that Jem's teary eyes followed her hands.

—I had a cancellation, she said. —Here, let me take him a moment. I think I smell something; doesn't he want a clean nappy?

—Maybe. Rose sounded distracted as she handed him over. —But first come out here a moment, I want to show you something.

In the hall Rose went to the table where the airmail letter was propped against the pile of books. Silently she pointed to it.

Aurora was nuzzling the baby's neck while he waved his fists at her.

She said —The lawyer left that, I haven't opened it.

—So I see.

Rose reached into her handbag and drew an envelope from an inside pocket, flipped it over and propped it beside the other.

—Notice the handwriting, she said.

Aurora stopped making popping noises to amuse Jem, and glanced over his shoulder at the two envelopes side by side.

—That's strange, she said.

She moved closer to the table, looking from Rose's white face to the letters. The addresses and writing were identical – 13 St Agnes' Crescent – but the envelope from Rose's handbag showed it as a return address.

—These were written by the same person, Rose said.

—The landlord, Aurora said, mystified.

Rose looked suddenly as if she might faint. —Who is it? she whispered.

—I haven't a clue, Aurora said. —Open it and see.

The letter the lawyer had delivered contained a single sheet of paper. There was a return address at the top of the page, a house number in the thousands – a long street somewhere in Boston, in a suburb neither of them had ever heard of.

Dear Tenant,

I think the lawyer gave you my address when you signed the lease, but as I have recently moved, I am sending new details in case anyone should particularly wish to contact me. All repairs must of course be directed to the law firm of O'Grady and Gorman, who will arrange for a tradesman to call.

The house is old but comfortable, a building with much history, and I thank you for taking special care of it for me.

Yours faithfully,

Cristina Piekarska.

They read it in silence, first Rose, and then Aurora. Rose rubbed a fingertip over the C at

the bottom of the letter.

—Cristina!

—Where did you get that envelope? Aurora said.

Rose was still staring at the signature, repeating the name under her breath.

—What? Oh, my mother had it squirrelled away. It came from the nuns.

—I think you're definitely onto something, Rose, Aurora said slowly.

—I am, Rose said. But looking at that signature, she knew the letter was more than a clue, it was the whole missing piece of the puzzle.

Rose wrote at once to the address in Boston, and then spent two miserable weeks waiting for a reply, although she never doubted there would be one. Why else had the woman invited contact, unless she hoped her lost daughter would come looking for her? The envelope from Grace's handkerchief drawer was the key to the past; it was the reason Rose had pestered Miss McGinnis for lessons even though the teacher had been ill, especially then, for she had been afraid that if she died the house would be sold and this mysterious connection to her past would be severed.

The old envelope – an empty pocket, with the address of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity on one side and the shaky black letters of the McGinnis house on the other – held the answer to her disjointed life, and Rose had been determined to find out all she could. It was the reason she had knocked on the door that night and talked her way in, the reason she had searched the house from top to bottom whenever she had the chance. Her searches had not turned up anything, but the house had something to do with her life. If she had never confronted Grace over the envelope, it was because the truth she craved had to come from the source. So now she waited, gnawing her fingernails with impatience, yet knowing that Cristina too had been waiting.

1982

One morning Grace announced over breakfast that she was going with Gran Mulcahy to the hospital. The old woman had been unwell, and Brigid's doctor had asked Grace to take her for a blood test. As it was school holidays, Rose would have to come with them.

—And afterwards the two of us will go to town and have your feet measured for new school shoes, Grace said.

At the hospital, there were lots of people, mostly elderly, sitting waiting on rows of plastic chairs; they were all to have their blood tested, her mother said. While Grace settled her grandmother in a corner, Rose counted the people who would go in ahead of them.

—There's twenty-three before us, she whispered to her mother.

Outside the window, through a pair of double glass doors, they could see a concrete path bordered by a strip of beaten-looking grass. The sun was shining out there and Grace said it would be fine for Rose to walk out and have a look around, if it would help to pass the time.

—Just stay where I can see you, she said.

Once outside, Rose took a stump of chalk from her pocket and sketched hopscotch squares on the concrete path. Through the window she could see her mother and her grandmother; Grace was turning the pages of a magazine and the old lady appeared to be dozing. From time to time Grace looked up and smiled at her. When that happened Rose

would make a spectacular leap to show how far she could jump, almost from one end of the hopscotch grid to the other. Soon she became absorbed in her game, hopping as quickly and neatly as she could, turning fast. Then she noticed that her mother had shifted in her chair and only her knees were visible, or the shape of her knees under the sweep of a grey skirt. Rose hopped again: one, two, three and four and five. Then, instead of turning, she continued hopping along the path.

Further from the blood clinic was another open door. Rose heard a scraping sound and a rush of air, as if someone had moved a chair and plopped down on its cushion with a sigh. Rose switched to the other leg and hopped towards the sound. When she came level with the door she saw a section of bare corridor where a tired-looking woman waited on a chair. The woman sat sideways, her arm in its coat sleeve lying along the chair back and her head resting on her arm. Possibly, Rose thought, the woman was asleep, although it looked an uncomfortable spot for that. There was a blue cup and saucer on a table beside her, and a plate with biscuits. Otherwise the hallway was bare.

Drawn to the doorway, Rose stood poised on one foot, gathering herself to hop back to her game, when the woman opened her eyes. Far away out on the street, a car horn sounded once, and moments later a door slammed somewhere deep inside the building. The woman's eyes were navy blue and watery. She'd been crying rather than sleeping. Her dark eyes held Rose's gaze, and when they had looked steadily at each other for a moment the woman straightened on the chair, raised her arm and beckoned Rose to come to her.

Rose glanced back along the path; beyond her chalked squares lay the entrance to the blood clinic. She could not see her mother now, but she was there, all right, just a hop, skip and a jump away. The woman wore a long coat and its lower edge was damp where it had trailed in something wet, perhaps a pavement sluiced with water in the early morning. The colour of her coat was that of rich dark chocolate; it was the colour of the coat worn by the

woman who had walked on the bridge. For a moment Rose wondered if this could be the same woman.

She could smell the scent of the wet wool coat. Underneath it the woman's dress was skimpy, too short to be something Grace would approve of, and her heels were high with paper-thin soles. The woman raised her arm and stretched towards Rose, and Rose went into the room and stood beside her. Slowly the woman reached out and drew the child's head close to her chest. Rose stood listening to the slow thump of the stranger's heartbeat. The sound was soothing, hypnotic; she could stay like that forever, Rose thought.

The long slow breath caressing the top of her head carried a hint of onions, or the other thing her mother said made foreign food smelly. But Rose didn't mind. The memory of the bridge had made her feel unsteady; she leaned closer and felt an answering pressure from the woman's arm. Rose closed her eyes and thought about the creamy swans gliding on the canal, their long necks that curved like question marks, the secretive and complex folding of their wings. After they had been to the shoe shop she would ask her mother if they could walk that way instead of taking the bus. Often, the bakery would give them a stale loaf for the birds. It was wintertime, and the swans would be hungry there on the cold canal; they would appreciate her scraps of bread.

—Rose!

Her eyes snapped open, and the woman's arm, suddenly heavy, dropped like a brick from her shoulders.

Grace stood looking in at them with her cheeks flaming and her mouth all crooked.

The woman on the chair moaned as Rose moved away from her.

—After we get the shoes can we walk home by the canal? Rose said quickly.

But instead of answering, Grace grabbed her roughly by the arm and propelled her along the path to the waiting room where her grandmother sat. There she endured a whispered

lecture about not talking to strangers, and although she said the right things she wasn't really listening. A promise was made to say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys every morning for a week, but what Rose was thinking of was the painfully slow heartbeat of the woman on the chair, of the scent of her breath as it had rippled over her hair. Grace’s face was distorted with some strong emotion. Rose nodded her little head, the picture of docility, but she was thinking of the precise feel of the woman's arm around her, the rub of her woollen coat and its wet smell, the smell of the woman, even. Yes, the smell, it was that which had stirred something inside Rose. Suddenly she felt weak and warm and awkward inside her skin.

December 1991

Gradually Aurora had become aware of a feeling of lightness in her days; it was an unexpected sign of happiness, she thought. Who would have believed that a baby boy could deliver so much pleasure? But then, three days before Christmas, the letter arrived from Boston. Rose was winding tinsel around a tree Aurora had set before the window in the music room when they heard the snap of the mail flap closing.

—That's the post, Rose said, dropping the tinsel in her agitation, and hurrying into the hall.

Aurora was on the sofa with Jem on her knee; she was twirling a snowman ornament and laughing at his attempts to grab it in his chubby hands.

Rose reappeared in the doorway holding an airmail letter.

—It's come, she said.

—Oh! Aurora saw that Rose had gone very pale. —Go on and read it. I'll look after him a minute, she said.

Rose backed out of the room and Aurora heard her quick footsteps on the stairs, the sudden closing of the bedroom door. She carried the baby to the tree, and her chest was tight with anxiety as she held him up to look at it. Jem's suit had a hood with two tiny ears that made him look like a cream teddy-bear. His eyes, which had been blue when he was born,

were slowly changing to a dark grey. Together they circled the tree, Jem burbling his delight. After a while she sat at the piano and pressed one of his tiny fingers into the tune of *Jingle Bells.*

When Rose had still not come down after an hour, Aurora carried the baby up to her bedroom. The light was off and the room was dark.

—Rose?

Jem added his gurgling voice to her own; he was restless now, ready for a nappy change and a feed.

In the gloom she saw the eiderdown peel back and Rose unfold from the bed; she moved blindly towards them and held out her arms for Jamey.

—Sorry, she said. —He must need changing.

Aurora watched as Rose rolled the baby onto the mattress and unbuttoned his suit. The letter was nowhere to be seen, and in the half-light she could not judge whether Rose had been crying.

—I'll come down and make up a bottle, Rose said. —To tell the truth I feel so drained I can't face nursing him.

She'd been supplementing breastfeeds with bottles in recent weeks and Jamey didn't seem to mind; he was a hungry baby and latched onto breast and bottle with equal enthusiasm. It meant, too, that Aurora could feed him.

Rose had stripped off the wet nappy and was wiping the baby down, when she paused and looked at him. Jem still wore the cream top with the hood pulled up, and with the little ears sticking out, and his pink lower half exposed, he looked half teddy-bear, half-human.

—After I was born, she went to America with a theatre company and never came back to Ireland, Rose said.

—Is she definitely your-?

—It’s her, all right.

Aurora handed Rose a clean nappy from the pile. —So are you happy she got in touch?

Rose fastened the nappy, then pushed Jem’s feet into the legs of his suit and buttoned him up.

—Happy? She pulled a face. —It seems she went to America as a nanny. Dumped me with the nuns, and set sail for New York with the children of some actress. How am I supposed to feel *happy* about that!

—Oh, Rose! I’m sorry, Aurora said.

—Her master plan was to earn enough to come back and get me. But the nuns wouldn’t oblige unless she let me go for adoption. It was the second time she’d taken me to the convent, and the nuns were sick of her changing her mind.

Rose picked up Jamey and turned towards the window, smoothing down his apricot-jam hair with her palm.

—She says I was born in this house. It’s hard to believe, isn’t it? It might even have been in this very room.

Aurora looked around incredulously at the mahogany furniture, the polished floorboards covered by a square of dark red carpet, and when she turned back to Rose she saw that the girl was angry.

Her voice shook as she spoke. —All these years I’ve imagined some poor woman gave me up so that we wouldn’t starve together. But no, she was gallivanting in New York and never even sent a postcard!

Early next morning, Rose fed the baby and handed him to Aurora.

—Are you sure you don’t mind? Rose said.

Aurora said she didn’t, keeping from her voice the pleasure she always felt at having the

little boy to herself. Jem was a darling, and holding him made her feel at peace with the world.

—There you go, Jimmy boy, Rose said. —Have fun.

There were shadows under Rose's eyes as she poured a mug of tea and disappeared upstairs. Since the letter arrived she had been tense and distracted. Aurora was nervous, too, wondering what the future held for Rose and especially for Jem.

After an hour she went upstairs to tell Rose she was taking the baby to the park. Rose was underneath the eiderdown, curled on her side with her eyes closed.

—Sure, take him, she said. —There's two bottles made up, and his warm jacket's in the pram.

Leaving the house with the baby, just the two of them together, felt like an escape. Elation quickened Aurora's footsteps as she pushed the pram to the end of the road and turned the corner. Snug in his cocoon of blankets, the little boy was wide awake. She watched his petal mouth open and close as he gurgled; his eyes gazed up trustingly.

Out of sight of the house, Aurora leaned over the handle of the pram.

—It's just you and me, beautiful boy, she said wistfully.

She spent the next hour Christmas shopping. Then it was time to take a turn around the duck pond in the park. An old man wearing a coat fastened with a length of twine sat on a bench outside the railings of the Huguenot Cemetery. He looked so frail there on the cold seat that Aurora pressed some coins into his hand, then pushed on past the Shelbourne Hotel. Spots of rain splashed the pavement as she crossed to the southern side of St Stephen's Green, and soon it began to rain in earnest. She unrolled the waterproof pram cover, smiling down at Jamey, although his face was a blur behind the plastic. He sounded fretful then, waving his fists at her. Across the street, wedged between two tall buildings, stood Newman's University College Church. Aurora had discovered it on her early walking

tours of Dublin and remembered the paintings lining the nave. They could shelter there until the rain passed. She would pick Jem out of the pram for a cuddle and hold him up to see the saints with their bright robes and golden haloes.

Aurora crossed the street and steered the pram into the porch, left it neatly parked and carried the baby into the church. A man with a meaty complexion and shaggy grey hair was bent over a newspaper in the nearest pew, and as soon as she appeared he held out his hand to her, begging. Aurora fumbled in her purse for coins, dropped them into his palm and was walking away down the centre aisle when he called after her, his hoarse voice accusing.

—This one's no good, 'tis foreign!

Aurora retraced her steps and looked down at the coin he returned to her, an Australian twenty-cent piece. How far she felt from Australia; Sugarbag might have been on another planet. She clasped the baby boy against her body as if he might suddenly be spirited away.

—I'm sorry, she said, but the man had turned back to his newspaper.

To the left of the altar stood a pedestal of white lilies, their petals beginning to fall. The heavy perfume swirled around them, as Aurora carried Jamey under the choir gallery and entered the Lady Chapel. Half a dozen wooden pews faced a statue of the Madonna ascending to heaven and she chose one near the front, her gaze drawn to the plaster statue's ecstatic smile. After sitting quietly for a few minutes, the baby's waxy eyelids closed, and as Aurora studied his lashes – almost white – and the lavender veins that showed through his translucent skin, the silence, only broken by Jem's tiny inward breath, flowed around and over her like a river. His small weight against her chest warmed her, and she saw that the face of the Madonna expressed this same calm joy. Aurora slowed her breath, matching it to his, as a sensation settled on her of having reached perfection, of peace and union with another human soul. This was how it felt to be a mother. This was how Esther must have felt when she held Michael.

A memory stirred then – the milky scent of a baby in her lap, Renata Kenny pottering about her kitchen, the filling of a teapot and the cheerful clash of china. And from further back – her brother sleeping beside her in their parents' bed while thunder rumbled far out across the plain.

At university she had learned Aristophanes' legend of the *Origin of Love,* how all humans were once paired, stuck back to back in various combinations; male with male, female with female, male and female. Each human creature had four arms, four legs, twin souls. But the gods became jealous and split the humans with a bolt of lightning. From then on people struggled to be reunited with their other halves. And so the search for love was born, along with the threat that humans could be divided again if the gods were angered.

She and Michael had been split. Esther and William and Michael had been split, and Esther had never recovered from the blow. The scent of warm candle wax mingled with the perfume of the lilies as Aurora hugged the sleeping boy close. Rose, too, had been split when she was younger than Jem, split again from Grace and Pat Mulcahy. No wonder she was anxious. But Rose was the luckiest woman in the world to have borne this perfect boy.

Aurora remembered the drama of Jem's birth, remembered the astonishment with which she had registered his first cry and taken his nearly weightless body into her arms. From there it had only been a tiny leap to feel that he and she were joined by the intimacy of that pristine contact, by the delicate vibrations of his first phlegmy intakes and expulsions of air. Whenever she held him, a feeling of peace came stealing over her, and the pleasure of it was addictive.

Aurora looked up at the Madonna's mouth. This concealed state of ecstasy had always existed between women and their children. She sat up straight against the pew back – feel this way and you risked angering the gods, like her friend Iris Kenny.

1977

Iris had reappeared in Aurora's life by accident, the year after she had arrived in Adelaide to study at the conservatorium. Aurora had been on a bus when the driver pulled close to the kerb to make way for an ambulance. Passengers leaned towards the outside windows for a glimpse of flashing lights, but Aurora always looked away from trouble if she could. She had turned to the pavement where a line of women walked two abreast, an orderly procession that stretched away up the block.

The first thing that struck her was that they all had haircuts reminiscent of the savage bob Aunt Ivy still inflicted on her own grey hair. And the women were unusually quiet, not talking or looking around as they walked. They wore identical brown and white checked cotton dresses with brown shoes and ankle socks, although they were too old to be schoolgirls. A few walked with their heads down; they all seemed weary and listless. .

Then, a nun's face framed by stiff white linen drew level with the window. As she passed, her eyes met Aurora's. They were small eyes in the putty-white face, challenging beneath hidden brows. Aurora had sat back in her seat, repelled by this glance. There was a gap then of about a dozen yards, and then a girl appeared walking alone. She was a yard or two in front of the next pair of convent girls, for that, Aurora had decided, was what they were, in spite of their disparate ages.

Aurora pressed closer to the window, and the girl, feeling her stare, looked up: Iris. It was her, but a new dull-eyed version. Aurora had leapt up, but the bus was already pulling away from the kerb. Holding on to seat backs, she lurched towards the driver.

—I have to get off, she pleaded, looking over her shoulder to where the last of the brown dresses was disappearing around a corner.

—Can't open the doors in traffic!

—Please, it's an emergency.

Moments later, the traffic light ahead turned red and the bus stopped abruptly. Aurora moved into the space beside the driver's seat.

—I'm going to throw up!

The bus's front door jerked open.

—Off you go, the driver growled.

She found the convent wall – long and high and built of plain red brick – and followed it to the main gate. Her friend was standing on the other side, waiting, as if she had known Aurora would follow. Even with her hair cropped, Iris had still been beautiful then, although the shadows under her eyes made her look older, more careworn.

—How did you find me? she said.

—I was on the way to Aunt Ivy's. Aurora held up the crumpled bakery bag in which the iced yeast loaf she had brought for their afternoon tea was squashed out of shape. —I'm still boarding with her.

Iris slipped a hand through the bars of the gate to touch Aurora's arm.

—You're looking well, she said.

Aurora couldn't think how to ask what Iris was doing in this place so far from Sugarbag, with her hair cut and her fingernails bitten.

Instead she said, —I got the scholarship, in the end. I'm in my second year.

Iris gave a faint smile. —Nice, she said. —Good that you got away.

—Yes. Aurora felt uncomfortable; in all their years together, she and Iris had never discussed her problems at home.

—You heard about the baby?

Aurora slowly shook her head, but as her mouth formed a silent ‘no’, she realised she had known all along.

—I suppose Mum wouldn’t say, Iris said. —It was a boy. I only saw him for a moment before the nuns took him away. They said it was the best thing for him. She leaned her head against the wrought iron gate. —I didn’t even get to kiss him.

Aurora stepped closer and slipped an arm around her friend’s waist; the iron bars of the gate made an embrace difficult.

—Are you allowed to go out? she said.

—Sometimes, when I’ve finished in the laundry. It depends if I’ve been behaving myself.

—Visitors?

—Who would come?

—I could ring up the office, Aurora said.

A bell sounded in the convent building, and a nun appeared on the front steps. She started to walk towards them.

—That girl there, Bernadette! Come inside at once! Didn’t you hear the lunch bell?

Iris’s head swivelled towards the nun. —Yes, sister.

Aurora withdrew her arm, her expression one of puzzlement. Who’s Bernadette? she whispered.

Iris turned to Aurora, her eyes hard. —That’s me, she said. —They give you a new name and after a while you’re someone else. Once the baby was born I could have gone home, but

it would have looked like I'd forgiven them.

The nun was moving towards them along the gravel drive, her fleshy face visibly angry beneath the starched veil.

—I'll visit, Aurora promised.

—Tell them you're my cousin, Iris hissed, as she turned to face the nun.

Aurora had looked up the convent in the telephone book and discovered it was at the address that she had memorised in Renata's kitchen. The nuns had denied Iris's existence. Perhaps that was the purpose behind the change of name: do away with Iris Kenny and then when anyone came asking there was no need for them to lie.

The sisters had grudgingly allowed her to visit and she had sat with her friend in the convent gardens eating cakes, talking of this and that, nothing serious, Iris insisted, because the nuns had spies everywhere, they listened to every word. Six months later, Iris had telephoned to say that she had left the convent and was getting married.

December, 1991

On the morning of Christmas Eve, Rose announced that she would walk to St Teresa's in Clarendon Street for mass. Aurora offered to mind Jamey, but Rose said she would take him.

—He'll sleep through it, she said, and set off with him in her arms because the pram was too bulky to wheel into the church. When they had gone, Aurora wrapped presents and piled them under the tree. She put sausage rolls and mince pies in the oven to warm, and the left over pastry she cut into circles to make a batch of what Aunt Ivy called egg and bacon pies. The recipe book at Cluain Meala had another name for them: 'petit quiches'. *Peel and chop an onion very fine, then, at the proper time, roll out the pastry...*

The proper time – she had always wondered what that meant. It had been years since she'd opened Bess Finnerty's old cookery book, but its authorial voice – expertly and calmly describing everything from simple desserts to vast banquets in both French and English – still both puzzled and soothed her.

Roasts should be served on time! Once cut, they must be eaten.

. *Potatoes take up a lot of space in the stomach and satisfy hunger.*

An eel is skinned from head to tail.

How on earth did anyone develop such super-human confidence?

She put on a pan of wine to mull. Liam and a few of the players from the Harp had been invited for Christmas drinks. It was a rare social occasion, and Rose, seeming quite buoyed up by the plan, had even invited a friend.

The two of them returned from mass together.

—This is Lizzie, Rose said. —We were at school together, only Lizzie stayed longer.

Lizzie had a long brown plait that swung to her hips. She wore a man's overcoat without any buttons, and the two girls chattered and laughed until Aurora realised that she had never heard Rose laugh before.

—Lizzie wants to be an artist, Rose told Aurora.

The girls were helping to fill bowls with nuts, sliding the warm sausage rolls from the oven tray onto plates.

—But she's too conservative. I've told her if she wants to paint well, she can't get around in jeans and trainers, she's got to dress more bohemian, a little scarf and a skirt, and on her feet walking boots and walking socks, say.

Aurora nodded and smiled at Lizzie, who was reaching for a sausage roll.

—Unfortunately she doesn't even *understand* the word bohemian, Rose said.

Her friend laughed. —Oh, Rose, I do, she said.

Rose was bubbly with laughter now. —Listen, she said to Aurora, —I went past this tiny gallery a while back, and there was an exhibition opening, people standing around with glasses of wine, lots of them milling around outside on the pavement. In the window was this black canvas with a pink chalk circle. It cost a fortune. Afterwards I said to Lizzie, 'You won't want to know about it'. And she said to me, all in a huff, 'You mean I won't *understand*!'

—'No, you won't be *interested,'* I said, but I started telling her anyway about the black canvas and how people were arguing over it and most of them seemed to agree it was

something special. ‘Oh, shut up, Rose’, says Lizzie. ‘You know you’re right, I’m not fucking interested!’

The two of them fell onto the sofa giggling over this story, and Aurora smiled and swung Jamey up onto her hip.

She had got the fire going by the time Liam turned up. He’d brought along a sad-faced man with hollow cheeks and a wispy beard, who he introduced as Donal. Aurora had seen him playing accordion at the Harp.

—Donal’s girlfriend’s coming in a minute, Liam said. —She’s getting her fiddle from the car. I thought we could play a few tunes and go slow, so’s you can join in on the whistle.

—Only if I want to embarrass myself, Aurora said.

—Oh go on, we all started sometime. Afterwards you can play the piano and show the lot of us up.

The front door opened with a blast of cold air, and a dark-haired young woman Aurora had seen at the pub smiled at her over a cardboard box filled with cans of Heineken.

—Shall I put this in the kitchen? she said.

The girl’s name was Dymphna. As she tuned her fiddle she explained to Aurora that she never played at the Harp.

—There’s Roy who’s been in residence for donkey’s and it’d put his nose out. He’s a funny one like that. So I just sit with Donal and we play other places together, usually with Liam.

—Dymphna’s classically trained, Liam said. —So we’re aching to hear the two of you play something off those stacks a music you’ve got drying out against the chimney.

Donal opened beer for all of them. Lizzie and Rose were still giggling and whispering on the sofa, and Aurora held Jem on her lap as the three friends began to play. She loved the way they swung into a tune together with no visible signal. She’d asked Liam about it once

and he said it came from being on the same wavelength.

—Maybe it's the way I take a breath, or not, before I start, that lets them know what tune I'm thinking. Or maybe they just hear the first couple of notes and join in quick as lightning, but you wouldn't notice the delay.

Comfortably crammed into the small front room, firelight flickered on their hands and faces as they worked through a set of reels. Liam, with his straight back, sat on the piano stool, and Donal and Dymphna had an armchair each. Rose and Lizzie were on the sofa, and Aurora sat on a cushion on the floor with Jem in her lap. At the end of the set Liam waved to Aurora to get her whistle, but she shook her head and took a sip of beer.

—Don't think you're getting away with playing nothing, he said.

They played an extended slip jig then stopped for a drink, and in the sudden lull Lizzie leaned forward on the sofa and announced that Rose could sing.

—Oh, stop it, Lizzie, Rose said.

—No, you used to sing at school. I remember you always tried to get out of it, but you'd have to in the end because the sister who organised our concerts was a tyrant.

—If you can sing at all, and don't, it's as if you can't, Rose, said Donal. —So go on, give us a tune.

Rose ran her hands over her hair, nervously patting wispy bits behind her ears. After a moment, she began to sing unaccompanied in a pure sweet voice.

Black is the colour of my true love's hair
Her lips are like some roses fair
She has the sweetest smile the gentlest hands
And I love the ground whereon she stands.

I love my love, and well she knows
I love the ground whereon she goes

I wish the day soon would come
When she and I will be as one.

As Rose started the second verse, the telephone began to ring in the kitchen. Aurora hoisted Jem onto Lizzie's lap and slipped from the room to answer it.

—Hello?

There was a hollow resonance as if she had spoken into a metal bucket, the echo of her own voice bouncing back from a great distance. For one shocked moment, Aurora imagined the call must be from Australia, Julia, perhaps, bringing news of some disaster. But the voice that spoke to her out of the emptiness was foreign, overlaid with an American accent. Aurora heard the grainy texture inflicted by decades of cigarette smoke.

—This is Cristina Piekarska, may I please speak with Rose?

Aurora asked her to hold the line, and stared for a moment at the chunky black telephone's old circular dial. In the music room, Rose had finished the song and her cheeks were flushed as the others clapped with enthusiasm.

—That's a voice you shouldn't hide under a bush, Liam said.

—I'd say definitely not. Dymphna was rubbing rosin on the violin's bow.

—Rose, there's a call, Aurora said from the doorway.

As the girl stood up and came towards her she was still pink and smiling from the effort of singing, and from the applause.

—It might be Ali, she's meant to come, but—

—Rose, brace yourself, Aurora said softly. —It's Boston calling.

Afterwards, as she sat on the sofa with Lizzie and Jem, Aurora heard again in her ear the exotic voice, its sticky smoke-thickened timbre. She could not seem to get it out of her head, and wondered how difficult it would be for Rose, or even if she would want to. The conversation in the kitchen went on and on. In the gaps between tunes she could hear the

sound of Rose's voice, not bubbly as it had been earlier, but soft and serious. Aurora wondered what they were talking about over such a distance, and how it would change things.

With prompting from Liam, Aurora and Dymphna managed a fluid enough performance of the slow movement of a Mozart sonata. The tone of the violin was treacly and warm, a good fit for the old upright piano.

—Would you play another? Donal asked.

But Jem was beginning to fret, and Aurora took him from Lizzie and excused herself to go upstairs and change his nappy. As she passed the kitchen, she lingered a little until she heard an exclamation from Rose in a tone that was not altogether unfriendly.

—I just can't believe you're not Irish, Rose said. —I mean, in all the years, all the scenarios I've imagined, until I saw your name written down, that possibility just never crossed my mind.

January, 1992

In the first week of January, letters and small parcels from Boston arrived in the post. Rose seemed in a trance. It was like watching a love affair in progress, Aurora thought, but one where there was a difficult history to recover from. She grew accustomed to the gravelly voice asking to speak to Rose. And if Jamey needed feeding or changing during their rambling conversations, Aurora would whisk him away to the kitchen, or the bathroom. Sometimes Rose was so absent-minded she forgot the boy for hours at a time.

—I'm going back to work a couple of days a week, she announced one morning.

Aurora was feeding Jem tiny spoonfuls of baby rice, scraping it off his chin with the edge of the spoon.

—The mother of someone I know does childminding. She says she'll take him, Rose added.

Aurora slowly stirred the spoon around the mushy rice.

—Have you noticed he's dribbling? He's getting his first tooth, she said.

—It's the only way I can save some money, Rose said. —If he settles all right with Maire, I can do more days.

Aurora reached for a wet flannel, and the baby smiled up at her as she wiped his face and hands. She wanted to shout that if she had anything to do with it he would not be bundled

off to childcare. But of course she had no stake in what happened to Jem. Rose's sudden need for money made Aurora anxious. Until now she had seemed content with her meagre benefit cheque, and life was easier for her than it might have been because Aurora had never asked for rent.

She kissed Jamey, then handed him to Rose and went into the music room. Theory exercises waited to be marked; they had been waiting since before Christmas, but after sitting on the sofa with the papers on her lap for a while Aurora jumped up and began to pace the room. Rose's decision to send Jamey to childcare felt like the end of something. What would come next – the voice on the telephone with a wheedling invitation? Soon she would find herself waving Rose and Jem off on a plane to Boston. The thought of being permanently parted from the boy brought a physical pain. How on earth was she to deal with this?

That evening Liam called and asked if she'd go with him to a wedding in Kilkenny.

—The groom's an All-Ireland Champion piper, wait till you hear the music. The town'll be jumping.

She heard the disappointment in his voice when she refused, and wondered why she was so unaffected by it. If anyone had asked she would have said she liked Liam.

—Go on, just tell us you will, he persisted.

—I've papers to mark, and I'm way behind, she said. —Plus I'm too grumpy for a wedding. I'll only spoil it for everyone.

He tried to talk her round, but in the end gave up.

—You're a hard woman, so you are. Shall I call you when I'm back from Kilkenny, or would you rather I didn't bother?

She heard the edge in his voice.

—Oh, Liam, she said lamely, —I'm sorry.

Jamey returned from his first day at childcare with sticky fingers and the beginnings of nappy rash. Aurora peeled off his clothes to bath him, hugged his little naked body to her chest for a moment before she lowered him into the water. He was silky and warm. His scalp still had its special scent of apricots, which she imagined came from the hair.

—Have you seen his little bottom, she said to Rose, handing him over in his pyjamas.

—What?

—He must have kept a wet nappy on. It's given him a rash.

—Maire does have quite a few babies there, Rose said. —I might have to look for somewhere else.

She was sitting with a pad of paper and a pen. Another letter on its way to Boston, Aurora thought grimly. And all the while her boy was getting grubby and crying with a full nappy in someone's dark front room. Was the woman even a registered carer?

—Where is it he goes to? She asked.

—Maire MacMenamy's.

—Where does she live?

Rose told her, and while she was busy tucking Jamey into bed, Aurora went to the music room and wrote the address in the front of her music diary.

One Saturday afternoon after grocery shopping, Aurora pushed the pram slowly along a cobbled pedestrian precinct, reluctantly heading for St Agnes' Crescent. After her temporary high spirits over Christmas, Rose had been moody again for weeks, barely speaking except to rebuke Jamey when he cried. The little boy had started to wail to remind her he was hungry, since his mother had grown increasingly absent-minded about meal times.

Aurora passed a row of elderly men smoking on a bench outside a barber's shop. Further

along the street, a couple dithered beside the pedestrian crossing. The woman had a map open, and her male companion peered at it over her shoulder. They were trying to locate St Patrick's Cathedral. Aurora glanced at the back of the map where the whole of Ireland was scored with winding lines, the gentle shadings of mountains and lakes. She noticed the density of roads radiating from the black circle that marked Dublin, and then her eyes drifted south west to where the name of a county was spelled out in dark red: *Tipperary.*

Letter from Boston #1

My dear Rose,

I know you are angry in your life, so I will explain how things were for me before you were born, although when you hear my story you may be even more angry. After all this time, I still find it painful, which is why I have always pretended it was a life that happened to somebody else.

I was there legitimately in the beginning, or I thought, and the luxury was amazing – hot water pumping through chunky radiators warmed the rooms of the house I shared with three others. In the shops the shelves were never empty, and all the cars looked new. The cars had tyres, and petrol. In the West this was how people lived. It was why we had made the long journey there to work.

At first I was happy, if I've ever been happy. The other girls were apprehensive, convinced by certain small signs that there was more to it, or soon would be. Two of them were sisters from the next village at home. I knew their cousins and aunt. Their uncle had once sold my father a piece of farm machinery that had broken after a week and could not be mended. The third girl was from some place I had never heard of. She was mute with anxiety, and very very young.

To be honest, I knew the others were right to be suspicious. Poor girls like us couldn't

get so lucky, and that amount of luxury would have a big price tag. Yet at first the days passed gently, a revelation of soft light and warm water, as I soaked for hours in the tub letting the old life soften and disintegrate until I could hardly remember its hardships.

The cold, of course, I never forgot the flaying cold in the milking sheds, and the great warm bodies of the cows, the steam of their breath, and pressing my hands against their necks before starting work. The glare of snow, the weight of it covering the house. There were plantations of pine and larch all around, and in winter the snow pressed on their branches with unimaginable force. The stove never warmed the old house properly, but there were simple pleasures – after the day's toil, a mug of warm milk sweetened with honey and stirred with a vanilla pod. Each afternoon I cooked whatever vegetables there were with rice, meat if there was any, then wrapped the frying pan in newspaper and put it in my bed to keep warm. When it was time to eat, the rice was sticky; at night the sheets smelled of cooking.

My bad dreams were always of the churchyard, its gravestones, and our mother there under a counterpane of snow. Some graves were ancient and poorly tended. Once, when I took flowers, I noticed a grave where a long smooth white bone poked up out of the frozen ground. We would buy a headstone for her when there was money, Father said. In the meantime there was a wooden cross he made. But wood rots, and as I floated in the tub I wondered if the cross had survived the last hard winter; as I inhaled the soft grey steam, I hoped it had.

The four of us were going to work in a large hotel. In the kitchens, the chefs would feed us. There would be leftover prawns, and soups flavoured with coriander and coconut milk, the ends of expensive cuts of meat. We would make up beds with perfect corners, change the towels, place foil-wrapped chocolates from Belgium on the pillows and dim the lights. Our hands would never be too cold to perform these simple tasks. Any day, the courier said,

it would be our turn to work in the big hotel. The money we earned would be staggering, compared to home. Some of it I would send there to buy warm clothing for my father and brothers, medicines, animal food. Buy the headstone.

In the meantime, my needs were small. I stayed in bed late to save on heating, or in the bath, my one luxury. The courier, Ludo, brought groceries once a week. I ate little, and only wore stockings when we went out, which was almost never. The view from the window showed a triangle of sky between rooftops. I watched that space where aeroplanes sometimes appeared and disappeared into patterns of feathered or pleated clouds.

Later, I thought of how the others were right. There was more to it, and the debt to be repaid to Ludo was greater than I had ever imagined, an absurd amount of money that would always be out of reach. The work he demanded was inevitable. There were hotels, but we never saw the kitchens, never stayed long enough to make the beds we rumpled. Once there was trouble, not for me but one of the other girls, the very young one. She had been crying for her mother off and on for days, and the sound was like something tight and twisted that had begun to fray and would soon fly apart. At some point we heard a man's voice cursing. Then the girl's cries changed pitch. She still called incessantly for her mother, but the words were broken now and pleading. I had a customer, so there was nothing I could do for her at once. By the time I knocked at her door, the room was empty. None of us ever saw her again. Ludo became enraged and dangerous when we asked for her. He brought two girls from somewhere to take her place. Neither of them spoke our language.

One night he moved us to a rundown farmhouse far from the city. His life would be difficult until the trouble about the young girl blew over, he said. We would all have to try harder. The others wept when he explained the new work, but I knew that somehow all those warm baths had to be paid for.

There was a chair in the hallway by the farmhouse door, and in the afternoons and at

night we would take turns to sit there under a red light. Men came and peered in through the slot Ludo had made to look like a letterbox. Whoever was in the chair when the click came of the flap opening had to do things to excite them.

If the men liked what they saw, Ludo would take their money and they could come inside. One night when business had been quiet, a man looked through the slot but chose not to enter. Then Ludo flew into a rage and accused us of not making the best of ourselves. There was shouting and abuse, and we cried and shrank from him, promising to try harder. The pimp emptied the contents of one girl's handbag on the table; he picked up a lipstick, grabbed the girl by the chin and coloured her mouth a sticky dark red. Then he tore aside her dressing gown and she was naked underneath, waiting her turn in the chair. The rest of us whimpered as we watched him force her down onto the cold vinyl.

—This dark cave you have here, you have to show the customer a friendly fire glows inside. The customer wants hot. Can you do hot? Because if you cannot, I think you said you never learned to swim, and the harbour here is freezing and very very deep.

His thick fingers clamped like a vice on her arm, bruising. She took the lipstick and, as he ordered, opened her legs and pressed the stick of colour in. After a few weeks a couple of us shaved there. It made us childlike, and that excited some of them, some it made gentler. Others grew rougher than you could ever have imagined.

One night I had a difficult customer. The things he insisted on were beyond reason, beyond what a body could withstand. When he went to the bathroom, I grabbed my clothes and bolted. On the way out I snatched money and a gold watch from the jacket he'd discarded on the floor in his haste. How dark it was in the fields, the narrow road running between the hedgerows. I walked and walked for hours until a woman in a car stopped, a nurse on her way home from an emergency caesarean.

—Twins, she said. —A boy and a girl, both small but healthy.

As the car passed through the darkened streets of the city, all I could think of was the unknown woman in the hospital bed: the tiny sleeping faces of the babies close by, and her exhausted sewn-together body wrapped in starched white linen.

I got off in the city, avoiding the nurse's gaze as she leaned out of the car window and asked if I had somewhere to go. Then I walked again until I came to a school with a fence that could be clambered over. It was a safe place to rest until morning, I thought, but there were others who had thought the same.

At the back of the school was a garden wall, high, but I was always a climber and scrambled over in the dark. It was quiet in the garden, and when I came close to the house I saw a kitchen windowsill with snowdrops in a stoneware jug. Someone with a windowsill like that would have food, and it was a long time since I had eaten.

A stone was easily loosened from the wall. When I covered the window glass with my coat it hardly made a tinkle. There was roast meat and cold potatoes in the refrigerator. I was standing eating in the fridge light when the kitchen door opened.

—Who are you? the woman said.

Cristeva. Cristen. Cristina. Christa. Cissie. Cindy, Cristel, I had been all of these names, and more.

May, 1992

The map of Ireland with the dot marked Clonmel nagged at her. She bought a map and studied it, wondering whether anything of William or his family could still be found there in the shadow of the mountain, Slievenamon. At half-term she hired a car, requesting one with a travel cot because she had thought of asking Rose to bring Jem for a ride out into the country. But Rose was working, she said. If Aurora still had the car at the weekend, maybe they would go somewhere. So on Monday morning she caught a bus to the airport to collect the hire car, and drove slowly back to St Agnes' Crescent. Her bag was already packed, all she had to do was put it in the car and leave Dublin. Rose was working four days this week since the florist shop was busy with a society wedding. Jem was with Maire MacMenamy, delivered by Rose on her way to work. Lately he'd been crying when she brought him home, the combination of another tooth coming through and a bit of a cold, Rose said. Jem's discomfort never rattled her, and Aurora wondered if that was how it was when the child was your own.

In the end, she could not bear to leave Dublin without kissing him goodbye, so she looked up the address on the street map and parked outside Maire MacMenamy's long thin house. There were milk bottles on the doorstep, a blue front door standing ajar. When she rang the bell nobody answered, so after waiting a few minutes she pushed it open and

stepped into an outer hallway crammed with coats and a jumble of shoes. When she opened the inner door, a radio tuned to a talkback program crackled from the back of the house. In the room to her right, a woman sat facing a bulky television set. Her broad back was turned towards the door, and a scene from a popular comedy show was being played out on the screen. She hadn't heard Aurora.

From the back of the house came the random sounds of small children. Aurora moved along the hallway following the noise, passing another room jammed with cheap furniture – chairs piled on top of tables, sideboards and other mismatched pieces all jumbled together. Crying started up further in. The door was closed and she wondered about knocking; in the end she just pushed it open.

It was a large room, its walls painted yellow to imitate the sunshine that would never enter through the window overhung with creeper. Yellow walls covered with the shapes of Pooh, Tigger and Piglet, and other storybook characters she didn't recognise. The floor was scattered with toys. Toddlers crawled and rolled among the wooden blocks, and it was one of these who was crying, a little girl with the rubber body of a doll clutched in one hand and its head in the other, distraught at the sight of the broken toy. The room stank of dirty nappies. At the back, three cots were pushed against the wall. Aurora found Jem in the centre. He'd been propped up but had toppled over and was lying on his side looking through the bars. The sheets were none too clean.

—Oh, baby! She picked him up and wiped his dribble-wet chin on the sleeve of her blouse. His face broke into a sunny smile as he looked at her.

The babies in the other cots were asleep. There were five toddlers on the floor, all quiet, apart from the little girl who was crying over the doll. In one corner, the teasing voice of the talkback host was questioning a caller. Aurora knelt beside the girl and pushed the pieces of the doll together.

—Don’t cry, she said. —Look, it’s all better.

There was no sound of an adult anywhere near, and Jem’s nappy smelled to high heaven. She found his nappy bag under the cot and quickly cleaned him.

—Oh, Jem, whatever are you doing here? she said. And when the clean nappy was snugly in place and she’d buttoned up his pants, she slung the bag over her shoulder and stalked out of the house with him in her arms.

Driving away from Dublin on the road to Naas and then Carlow, the wide roads turned eventually to narrow roads, and then to roads that were narrower still. The baby seemed sleepy, content to be with her. As she drove, Aurora imagined Maire MacMenamy still stuck in front of the television set. How long would it be before she even noticed Jem was gone?

She travelled at an easy pace, stopping the car often to get out and walk about, to drink a cup of tea in cafes where they would warm the baby’s bottle for her. Before long she was driving with the sensuous and brooding shape of the mountain, Slievenamon, on her right, its purple hillside belted by trees. Her father’s wistful vibrato sang in her ear.

Aurora remembered the watery gleam of William’s eyes as he stood up from his chair and sang unaccompanied, his baggy work trousers held up by an old brown belt and his shirt sleeves rolled back over freckled arms. The texture of that triangle of sunburnt skin at his throat was a memory she still carried in her fingertips, and in her ears his pure tenor voice, light as a bird, a voice that could fly across a room, across a street, fly forever across the flat brown stubble.

To be here was like stepping into a dream, and all she wanted was to stay.

They reached Clonmel early in the afternoon, and Aurora lifted Jem from the back seat of the car. Sunlight fell on tall pastel houses facing the river, as she walked through the town looking for something old enough for William to have had his hand on. A ruined mill stood

beside the River Suir, and the light was brilliant on the fast-moving water. Aurora tried to remember if her father had ever mentioned a linen mill that employed people here in his time. She walked along a narrow lane where a crumbling wall showed evidence of old windows that had been bricked up. Inside the derelict building, a tangle of plant life had gone mad, creepers pushing out through cracks in the brickwork.

On the far side of a hump-backed stone bridge stood a tiny public house, and as she approached from across the river, Aurora saw a man standing outside its back door. He was in his shirt sleeves, staring out across the water, forearms comfortably propped on the parapet. She watched him lift a cigarette to his mouth and exhale a cloud of blue smoke towards the river, slowly shift his weight back onto his arms as if he had all the time in the world to watch this stretch of bright water.

How she would have loved to walk here with her father, to listen to William tell his stories here in the place where they were made. She had been too young when he told about his early life, so his history, as well as part of her own, was lost.

When Rose arrived to pick up Jamey there was a woman in the front room arguing with Maire MacMenamy. It sounded like a dispute over money. She swept on past and into the play room. It was late, and there was a solitary toddler wriggling on the carpet. Jem's cot was empty. She stood with her hand over her mouth in dismay, staring at the bare sheet as if her baby would materialise.

—What do you want?

It was Maire staring at her from the doorway.

—Jem, of course.

Maire's face went beetroot. —But didn't you sneak in here and take him out this

morning? I was going to give you a piece a me mind for it.

Rose's skin began to crawl; a million insects were there scrabbling under the top layer. She held on to the side of the cot and the room blurred. Jem. Oh my God! But the terror only lasted a moment. She knew Aurora had him. She'd have come and taken him away, not told her as a punishment. And didn't she deserve to be punished – look at the place, it was a dive. And Maire hadn't even noticed when he was taken, the bocketty old bitch. She was always glued to that fucking old television set, and Jem was always starving when she brought him home.

Maire was going for it now, saying how people would collect their children without seeing her because they were avoiding paying their bills, and it wasn't her fault because she'd had every reason to assume it was his mother that took him.

—Ah, shut up, or I'll call the Gardai.

Rose stamped out of the house and ran all the way to Temple Bar. Her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly fit her key in the door. It was quiet inside, no piano lessons in progress because of the holiday. Aurora's coat was missing from its peg in the hall.

—Oh, it was her own fault. Hadn't she known in her heart it wasn't the place to leave him? But she had needed to do four days because two of them went on childcare. If she was to go to Boston it would be under her own steam, not paid for by Cristina. And she *would* go, if for no other reason than to see her own face reflected in something besides a mirror, for there had never been a physical resemblance between herself and Grace, not like girls at school had with their natural mothers. It was because she was angry with Cristina, because she didn't want to be beholden, that she had condemned Jamey to neglect, Rose thought. Grace wouldn't have left a baby with Maire MacMenamy, not in a million years.

Suddenly she wanted the solace of Grace's quiet presence, wanted it so badly she could

scream.

There was a note on the kitchen table from Aurora. She breathed out, a single long slow breath she had been holding in her chest, the hot tight feeling there released with the knowledge that Jem was safe. She should never have left him in that hellhole.

She thought about Cristina, how she had taken her to the nuns then walked away down Sean MacDermott Street. Rose had been back for a look at the place. It took up nearly the whole block with its great red door with the statue of the mother and child above, and its brick walls you could beat your head against. The nuns had shipped her off to the Star of Bethlehem Orphanage, though she had no memory of that place, which was just as well. A while ago she'd met a woman who'd been in the same institution, a jittery creature with a string of hard times behind her; she'd been drinking Guinness with Sambuca chasers in the Harp, when Rose had let slip the name of the place.

—Remember the wet sheet walk? the woman asked.

Rose hadn't known what she was talking about.

—You're lucky you were a baby, she said. —They used to make the ones that pissed the bed parade around the quadrangle at six in the morning with the wet sheets over their heads. We were down there bumping into each other in the freezing cold while the other kids were just waking up. Some of us were only three and four.

Rose had been anxious to get away, hadn't wanted to be filled with memories of a time and place that she could not recall. But once she had got going, the woman wouldn't shut up.

—And the kissing wall, she said. —It was in the entrance to one of the shower rooms, a pattern raised in the plaster that someone said looked just like a woman's face. Some kids actually thought it was a picture of their mother being shown to them by God. It became a ritual to kiss it after a shower, and over the years the plaster became watermarked where

rows of mouths had pressed. The nuns never noticed; I suppose because it was at child height, it was beyond their line of vision.

Rose shivered, wondering whether Cristina would still have given her up if she had known about the wet sheet walk, or if the pregnancy had happened now. In their conversations Rose had detected in her mother a longing for the good life; it was what had got Cristina into trouble in the first place, what had left her sitting around in her underwear in a farmhouse outside Dublin, waiting for the letterbox to open. Oh, Cristina would always make it sound as if she had no choice, but the truth was that she would have relinquished her baby to the nuns at any time in history. Her mother was a gambler, Rose thought, a risk-taker. And the lure of America had been too great. Alongside the bright lights of New York, changing nappies, rising in the middle of the night for feeds while sewing for a living, had never been an option. Talking on the telephone to Boston, Rose sensed that the skills Cristina had picked up before she met Maeve McGinnis had helped her quest for upward mobility in America.

But Grace – Rose had heard her refuse to have a pap smear once because it was *too intimate*. That's what she had said, sitting there with her lips gone white and pressed together in the doctor's office. As far as Rose knew, her mother had never had it done. At this very moment Grace could be slowly dying from something that could've been fixed all along. Anyone would be wasting their breath trying to persuade her though.

Rose picked up her purse and slipped Aurora's note into the outside pocket. Then she shut the front door and went into the street. People were coming home from work in the dark, as Rose stumbled along past pubs where the doors opened with a blast of warm yeasty air, past the shop fronts on Grafton Street, and the park, then turned right on Cuffe Street, the old route she had taken so often after a trip to town with Grace.

Letter from Boston #2

My dear Rose,

To hear your voice on the telephone was like a dream come true, you have no idea how I have longed for the sound of it all these years. But I want to tell the rest of my story so you can decide whether to come and visit me in Boston.

That night in the kitchen, while I was gobbling down her cold roast meat, the owner of the house woke sensing movement in the kitchen. Her name was Maeve McGinnis. There had been a sudden draft, Maeve explained later. She had tossed up the wisdom of coming down. Turning a blind eye might be safest. What could anyone steal, after all? The furniture was too big, the good bits of silver had all been sold off long ago, and what was left was pretty bric-a-brac of minimal value. The dark was particularly dense that night and the kitchen was icy, as I listened to the hard patter of sleet on the roof tiles.

When she flung the door wide open, not knowing what the owner of this house might do, I snatched up the bread knife I had kept beside me from the cutlery drawer. This makes me sound like a violent woman, but the houses I had worked in, Ludo's psychotic ways, had taught me to defend myself.

Maeve McGinnis stared in silence from the doorway.

—You put that down at once!

It was the voice I would later hear her use with rowdy students and, like them, I obeyed at once. Her eyes were still on me, wild and challenging, but after a moment she marched over to the electric kettle and flipped it on. Then she took two mugs from hooks under the cupboard, two tea bags. When she had made tea, she handed a hot mug to me. It was then that she saw I was wearing only one shoe, and that I shivered. The other shoe had fallen off when I climbed the wall into her garden, although I had not noticed. Maeve went out of the room and returned with a blanket, which she wrapped around me. I still remember the cold linoleum under my foot, the sense of wonder that an unknown woman could be so kind. From then on, there was nothing I would not have done for her in return for that unsolicited act of kindness.

May 1992

The road with its muddy verges unwound between hedgerows, and less than ten minutes after leaving Clonmel, Aurora arrived at a tiny parish church. At the house next door, stepping-stones led across a puddled yard to where a young woman waited in the cluttered porch, while a toddler made wobbling attempts to pull on a green gumboot. Both wore coats and woollen hats and the woman looked up and smiled, her breath spinning out white into the air.

—Claire Sullivan, she said. —You'll want my brother, Declan. Aurora found out later her accent had been born in Belfast.

Her brother was thin and pale, slender musician's hands jutting from the sleeves of a worn tweed jacket. He was busy writing up tomorrow's sermon but pushed his papers aside to make space on the kitchen table for teacups.

—We've got a sister in Perth, he said, and gave Aurora a smile, conspiratorial and sorrowful in equal parts.

She explained about William while he poured tea.

—Ah, well. We'll see if there are any of his relatives on our books.

While she turned the stiff pages of the marriage register, Declan O'Donnell told how he and his widowed sister had thought of emigrating.

—But you didn’t?

We came here instead, just while Claire’s children are small. We go back to Belfast every summer for a holiday.

He rubbed his hands to warm them and his face was wistful.

—Will you visit Northern Ireland on your travels?

Aurora shook her head, reluctant to disappoint him.

—Perhaps next time.

In a tiny stone flagged room behind the vestry, the original marriage records were kept. In places, the names were almost obliterated by mould and water stains. *There was a flood one year. We didn’t get everything up high in time*.

—Claire will mind the little one inside the house, Declan said —It’s warm in there, and this could take a while.

Aurora turned the pages until her feet lost all feeling on the icy floor. In the end she found the entry for her grandparents' marriage. Their names and occupations. Their signatures, faded to a series of awkward, almost colourless swirls.

Letter from Boston # 3

My new friend found work for me with a theatre group. They were overhauling a costume wardrobe for a season of Shakespeare's plays. Maeve had offered to let me stay with her until I was established, but every time I stepped into the street I was looking over my shoulder for Ludo, or for the police who might want to ask about him. Each afternoon I would arrive home quaking and slip upstairs to calm down in the bathtub.

Maeve McGinnis was nothing if not perceptive, and little by little she teased the story out of me. I told about home, about the cemetery with its bones and snow, about the chance I had been offered to work in the West, a legitimate job in the hospitality trade with enough cash left over to send back home. I admitted it had sounded too good to be true, but denial had been easy because I wanted the possibility of a good life while I was still young. My mother had died before her fortieth birthday. Sometimes I even imagined she had chosen that path because her life was unbearably hard. I was the only girl, and the thought of taking on her life had always terrified me.

—So you were trafficked into Ireland, Maeve said sternly.

I did not know whether to admit or to deny it, and in the end I told the truth: I had been promised the world, but the world had turned out to be a suburb in Dublin and an endless stream of men who were prepared to pay Ludo. Ludo had helped us escape a life of

drudgery, he said, and we would not be free until the debt was had paid. I had no clue who Ludo was, or whether the name he went by was his real one. The other women were in the same boat, only I had been lucky and escaped. Except that there was now another problem, queasiness in the mornings, and my breasts tender and burning as if buzzed by an electric current. I knew the accidental pregnancy would make life tougher than it had ever been.

The sewing money was welcome, but it was not enough to live on. I sensed that suited Maeve, as she seemed to want to keep me close. Maeve McGinnis had developed a crush on this one-shoed woman who had broken into her home in the middle of the night and been prepared to stab her with a bread knife. She was older than me, lonely and childless; her crush was gentle. After the harshness of the past, I sank into her affection as into one of those warm baths; I took pleasure in her company. But there between us was the baby, growing.

Maeve knew a woman who had once been a midwife, and you were delivered at the house in an upstairs bedroom. I named you Valentina. At first I tried to work, but after two weeks of sleepless nights, I gave in. Maeve contacted the nuns. Three weeks later, unable to bear the separation, I returned alone to the convent and demanded they return you to me. The nuns were severe, but they handed you over. We lasted together for twenty-three days more, but I became exhausted and could not work. When your cries disturbed my benefactress's piano lessons, I worried that she would throw us out. We had nowhere to go.

The theatre company I sewed for arranged a tour of America; they were doing a series of plays by Shaw. The director's wife was the leading actress and she had three small children, one of them a new baby; they would take me to America as their nanny. Although I pleaded for you to go with me – it seemed perfect – the director would not agree. There was no hope for me to raise a child alone, so I wrote to the nuns and explained that I had to go away. I wrote because I could not face them, being too ashamed. They replied that they would take

you back, but only if I signed a paper for adoption. So one grey, hopeless morning I returned you to the nuns, then departed for America in charge of the actress's young brood. The crying of her infant would start my milk flowing; I had a hard time on the crossing.

In New York, my dressmaking skills were in demand, and when the company returned to Ireland I quit the sulky actress and her spoilt offspring and moved on to work for a theatre company staging musicals on Broadway. My English was good, but although I could write letters I was no longer in contact with Maeve McGinnis. When she wrote to me, I did not reply, for I knew that if she had been willing, I could have kept you with me.

The irony came later, when the American I had married sought divorce after I failed to provide him with an heir. The so-called midwife who had delivered you in Dublin had left a trail of damage, I learned. There would be no more children.

After many years Maeve wrote that she was dying of cancer. With no next of kin, she had decided to leave the house to me in her will. She regretted her role in your loss and admitted she could have kept us both. Since I had gone to America, Maeve wrote, she had discovered what it was like to really be alone, just as I had been alone for most of my life.

The house where you were born was to be kept intact, nothing altered. It was Maeve's suggestion in her last letter and she undertook to fix it with the lawyers.

—Let the house be kept the same, she wrote –because I am as certain of human nature as I am of anything, and when the child grows up she will find her way back there. Like salmon, we humans are irresistibly drawn to the places that were meaningful for us. So keep the house, Cristina, and one day your Valentina will return.

And Maeve was right, not only the child but the grandchild. If I send the fare will you visit me in Boston, Rose? Please say you will.

Your loving mother,

Cristina.

May, 1992

At Fennessy's Hotel Aurora was given the key to a yellow corner room on the top floor. One window looked along the length of the main street of Clonmel, while the other faced the massive bulk of the church of St Peter and St Paul. There was a double bed with a headboard of carved oak. A narrow mirror on the wardrobe door reflected chimneypots and sky. Aurora spooned warm rice and vegetable puree into Jem's mouth, then offered him a bottle. His movements slowed with contentment as the milk drained, and she held him until he slept. Then she shed her dress and lay down beside him in the double bed.

The rough call of rooks woke her early to watch light creeping into the sky over the distant hills. She changed Jem's nappy and boiled the kettle to warm his breakfast. Outside the window, night lingered in the treetops and the buildings of the town. She fed the baby as rooks swooped from patches of shadow, flapping from darkness into light like fragments of a bad dream, like dark thoughts escaping. She watched them gather on the roof of the church. Each bird's voice was different, and the faint sheen of their feathers made her shiver. Once it was fully light the rooks fell silent, their cries replaced by the scratch of a broom, as a solitary man swept the street clean of the previous day's litter.

She was sitting in the small dining room waiting for breakfast when the waitress came towards her holding a telephone.

—A call for you, she said.

Aurora was startled, thinking Rose must have discovered where she was. How on earth? she wondered. But the caller was Declan O'Donnell.

—I asked around about the Hayes family, he said. —Thinking it would save you a bit of legwork.

—Oh!

—The old folks, your grandparents, were alive hereabouts until 1972 and '74. Their boys went away to America. Someone said they married there and settled. It might be possible to locate an address, but I wouldn't get your hopes up there. People are not great letter writers.

—Where are my grandparents buried?

—They're both here, in the churchyard.

—Thank you for your trouble, she said.

Aurora disconnected, and picked up a napkin to wipe dribble from Jem's chin. So they'd been alive in her lifetime and she could have known them. Now that she thought about it there had sometimes been a letter from Ireland. It would come to the post office in Sugarbag, and Roy Kenny would hand it to her to take home after school. If her father was away it would sit for weeks on the mantelpiece, waiting for him. When he came home he'd look at it and push it unopened into his back pocket. He would kiss her and Esther, then head straight for the pub.

—I've got a shocking thirst on, he'd say.

Esther might open the fridge and pull out a bottle of home brewed beer, but William would shake his head.

—That will do for later, he'd say. —But first I have to see a man about a dog.

Esther used to shrug then, as if this was only what you'd expect from a husband. But

Aurora had always known it was the airmail letter that sent him out when he'd hardly had his face inside the kitchen. She remembered once crying when his truck started up, and it had made her feel resentful, so that when the next letter came she thought of hiding it, or losing it on the way home from school. God help her, as far as she could remember, she had never done it. How terrible it would have been to have deprived him of their voices, their loving words. Michael William and Moira Bernadette Aurora Hayes had written to their middle son, and her father had needed a stiff whiskey before he could bear to read their news of home, of his brothers far away in America. After growing up in the lush countryside around Clonmel, William's stories of the Heartbreak Plains must have discouraged his brothers from following him to Australia.

Aurora stood beside the headstones in the churchyard, struck by their mottled beauty. Patterns of yellow and green lichen formed an otherworldly map on the weathered surfaces, while the gerberas she had brought were a trumpet blast of colour in the subdued palette of the landscape. She touched the names of the old people with her fingertips, wishing she could touch their hands and faces, could hear their voices as she could still hear her father's.

Michael William Hayes

Bernadette Aurora Hayes

She remembered then an old tale of her father's about growing up here. Nestled in the Comeragh Mountains, William said, were deep pools where the legendary wolf fish lived. The fish were peculiar to the pools around Clonmel and lived nowhere else in Ireland. They were as slippery as eels but the flesh was delicate, translucent, with a special flavour. Because of their great rarity, from ancient times until the present, there was a rule locally that only young would-be warriors were allowed to catch two wolf fish. They were to be caught bare handed, caught and eaten in the same hour, William said.

—Did you ever catch one, Daddy?

—Oh to be sure, William laughed.

As Aurora walked away through the churchyard she thought of an old slow song she'd once learned that was written in the key of F sharp minor. Of all the keys, that one had the surface of a mountain pool; its harmonies held the ache of cold dark water, with weed and wolf fish moving in slow motion underneath. The key of F sharp minor was and is the saddest sound on earth, Aurora thought, which was why Mozart avoided it. His only composition in that key was the second movement of his *Piano Concert No. 23,* and it was this adagio that seemed to follow her as she picked her way between ancient gravestones to the car.

Aurora strapped Jem into his travel cot and smoothed out her map on the front seat. She would visit Cashel, the fortress on the rock which she had seen first on an ancient postcard which even now might be propped up on the chipped dresser in the empty homestead.

Her grandmother's name, Bernadette, reminded Aurora of Iris, and how after her time in the convent she had kept the name the nuns had given her, although Aurora never used it. Aurora talked to Iris now as she steered the car along narrow roads towards Cashel.

—Oh, you would have loved Clonmel, she whispered, glancing at the passenger seat as if her friend was there beside her. —It's so lush with water, almost indecently green, and nothing at all like the homestead the Finnertys named for it. Poor souls, they must have thought they'd left heaven and ended up in hell.

Iris had made a similar leap in her life, from the frying pan into the fire. She had married an electrician who came to rewire part of the convent. She and her husband, Allan, had moved to a suburb in the far south of the city. With canvas awnings drawn low over its front windows, their yellow brick house looked asleep, or even dead. Iris worked part time as a domestic in a nursing home for the elderly; it was hard work, she said, and poorly paid.

—It’s a pity I never finished school, she said.

Iris was fatter, coarsened, frozen with grief. Allan didn’t seem to notice, but then he had never known the old Iris and perhaps had never expected more from a wife. To explain her time in the convent, Iris had invented a tale of hard times at home. Her parents were not invited to the wedding and Allan knew nothing about the lost child. Aurora had once asked Iris if she and her husband wanted children.

—Allan has to establish his own business first, Iris said. Get something behind us. He wants to buy this house, instead of renting.

All Iris knew of her lost baby was that he had been adopted by a couple who owned a garden centre. So at weekends, while Allan worked overtime rewiring houses, she traipsed from one plant nursery to another, peering past banks of potted palms and young fruit trees into the private areas of shade houses and poly tunnels, hoping to glimpse a child. At home their tiny garden overflowed with shrubs and trees that would soon outgrow the space available; in the cracks between paving slabs, seedlings struggled, but still she shopped for more.

One afternoon her friend had waited for her in the front yard where a flag iris leaned at an angle across the path.

—Your name flower, Aurora said, nodding at the sword-like leaves and luscious velvet blooms.

Iris turned towards the flowers, her eyes vague.

—Oh, yes, she said, and then shrugged. —Allan thinks I’m a committed gardener. I hear him telling people, but I don’t care about plant names.

Inside, over a pot of tea and sweet biscuits, Iris confided that her new doctor had prescribed pills to cheer her up.

—The last one gave pills to calm me down, she said. —I’m so sick of doctors. They

never tell the truth. Worse still, they don’t listen.

Aurora reached for Iris’s hand and held it tightly in her own.

—*I am half sick of shadows, said the Lady of Shalott.*

Iris raised her chin, and her face brightened; for a moment it seemed as if the old radiant schoolgirl might be about to surface.

—Cluain Meala, she breathed. The word contained all the warmth of their lazy afternoons, all picnic lunches they had shared there on the verandah, or in the grand sitting room where sunlight sparkled on the crystal drops of a chandelier which had always been without electricity.

—It must be quite blown away by the wind now, Iris said. She had withdrawn her hand from Aurora's, rubbed at the skin as if to erase the memory of happy times.

Iris had refused to go with Aurora to Sugarbag.

Her parents had closed the store a couple of years ago, she said. People drove to Wilmington to shop for groceries now. Renata and Roy had bought a campervan and roamed the coastal towns of New South Wales.

—They’re grey nomads, Iris said. —Mum can't get enough sea air and reckons Byron Bay’s as close to heaven as you can get without actually dying.

Postcards arrived every couple of months. Iris had even seen them a few times when their travels had brought them south.

—Lloyd's working up in Darwin. He rings up sometimes, but he's the only one. The other boys are scattered, one in every state in Australia. Iris sighed. —None of us has much to say to each other anymore.

Renata was a grandmother many times over, but she hardly spent any time at all with the lads and their families.

—She raised too many of her own, Iris said. —Reckons she's sick of little kids and only

wants to please herself, now. The truth is, she doesn't want to rub my nose in the dirt, but I reckon she worries every day of her life where that baby went to. He was her first grandchild.

May 1992

Aurora and the baby moved in a strange limbo land now, the two of them coasting unnoticed through the green landscape as if borne on tides of air blown in from a parallel universe. The world behind them grew less real with every mile, while the countryside they passed through glowed with the intensity of a fairy tale. At times, overcome by emotion, Aurora stopped the car and wept, then dried her eyes and walked up and down in the fresh air, holding the baby close. She could not imagine ever letting go of this child, could barely remember how empty she had felt before he came into her life.

Jem blew milky bubbles, his eyes trustfully focused on her face. She covered his cheeks with kisses before she strapped him into the cot. God, look how much she loved him! She had not drunk a drop of anything since leaving Dublin. Being in sole charge of Jem, responsible for his every moment, alcohol was too risky. At Fennessy's, the waft from the bar had broken over her like a wave, and she'd had a moment of desperate longing for a glass of something. But it had passed as she nuzzled the baby's head and wrapped his bunny rug securely around him.

She had felt shaky as she stood at the reception desk to pay the bill, just a momentary lapse of nerve that made her hands quiver as she signed the credit card slip. The couple who owned Fennessy's insisted on carrying her luggage to the car; they had waited on the

pavement to wave her off. The man was one of those people whose every word was spoken with the intensity of an actor playing Hamlet, one of those who stand very close when they talk.

—A safe road to you, that's the main thing, he said.

Aurora saw them waving in the rear view mirror, the anxious lean of their bodies as their eyes followed the hire car along the main street. She hadn't told them her father was from County Tipperary, but they had been so friendly it was almost as if they knew.

At Cashel she followed the signs to the Rock. Tourist buses were arriving as she parked the car and walked up the steep hill towards the ruin. Overhead the sky was marbled blue and white and grey; rooks circled high above the round towers, some of them roosting in the dark slashes of the open windows. St Patrick's Rock looked much as it had on the postcard, only older, its broken stones more weathered, more soaring and immense than any two-dimensional image could convey. Inside, she walked through cathedral spaces open to the sky, her footsteps echoing on the ancient stones. The scope of the ruined church seemed connected to her boundless love for Jem. If she wondered whether Rose was suffering, she pushed it from her mind.

St Patrick had come here centuries ago when the world was a dark place. Aurora walked among the gravestones inside the old walls, reading the names, touching the Celtic knots and crosses, holding the baby up to see the great walls and towers that loomed above them.

After an hour, she returned to the car to change Jem's nappy on the back seat, then sat in the warmth there while he drank a bottle. At the bottom of the hill stood a small souvenir shop; when the boy was comfortable she went in and bought a postcard and had it stamped for Australia. She wrote Danny's address on the back, but could think of nothing to say that would not sound gushing. In the end she just wrote *I'm here at last,* and signed her name. She was about to hand it to the woman behind the counter for posting when she impulsively

pressed the postcard to her lips, closed her eyes for a second and imagined Danny standing in the orchard among his hives; she heard his soft voice talking of the lightning strike that had killed their brothers.

—The sky was so dark I wondered if I'd even be able to see the cricket ball. When Tom ran in to bowl, the ground shook and I was knocked down hard. That's what it felt like, being thrown to the ground by a huge dark animal, a bear, or a buffalo. Next thing, your ma was running across the field screaming. Folk said she never made another sound, but in my dreams she was always screaming.

The postcard bore the faintest imprint of Aurora's mouth.

The woman behind the counter smiled. —Someone's a long way from home, she said, her eyes twinkling.

At home there would be stubble fields under the bleaching sun, gold all the way to the curve of the horizon. Further north, the taupe-coated sheep moved almost invisibly under a cobalt sky.

Walking from the shop she saw a group of cottages, brightly painted. One of them had a sign for tea and cakes. She was dawdling down the narrow road towards it when in the distance she saw a woman wearing a beekeeper's hat and surrounded by a cloud of bees. The woman walked towards a small white cottage that stood in a field well back from the road. To one side of it was an orchard in which Aurora could just make out a row of white bee boxes. The bees seemed to be following the woman as she moved purposefully towards the orchard.

The sight was as surprising to Aurora as if she had suddenly come upon Kilkie Bleecker. Without realising that she was following the woman, Aurora found herself standing beside the cottage's low iron gate. In the orchard the woman bent to one of the bee boxes, and the cloud of bees swooped with her and disappeared. At that moment, a stray bee brushed

Aurora's cheekbone and another alighted on a corner of the baby's rug. She brushed at it with her hand, shooing it away with a small shriek. Jem waved his little fist and she hastily tucked it back under the blanket. The bee that stung her must have become entangled in her hair. She felt the sudden jab of pain in her neck, and cried out before she could stifle it. In the back of her mind she heard Danny's voice explaining that bees release a scent when they sting, and braced herself for a second dose of pain.

The bee woman was walking towards her from the cottage. She was tall and lean and with her white hat removed, red hair tumbled down her back in long loose curls.

—Is something wrong? she shouted.

The pain was more intense now, throbbing through her, and Jem began to squirm and cry.

—I've been stung, she called.

—Ah, the little one's comin out in sympathy, the woman said. Silver bracelets jangled on her freckled forearms as she opened the gate and waved Aurora in. —Come on inside for a minute. I'll put something on that for you.

They walked to the cottage and the woman pushed open a front door that was painted an electric green, with an upended horseshoe nailed in place for luck.

—I'm Maggie Logan, she said. —But first I'll fix up the sting and we can exchange callin cards later.

She motioned Aurora to sit at the kitchen table and opened a cupboard beside the sink. When she turned she held a knob of bright blue cloth in her hand.

—A blue bag rubbed on a sting works wonders. I use it more for that than blueing clothes.

After a few minutes, the pain at the back of her neck eased.

—You're lookin brighter, Maggie said, smiling at her. —Could you go a cup of hot tea?

Aurora nodded gratefully. —Thank you, she said.

She put Jem to her shoulder and rubbed his back, reassuring him that all was well now, as she introduced herself to Maggie Logan.

—Do you extract your own honey? Aurora said.

Maggie turned from rinsing a teapot and smiled broadly, her young-old face creasing in lines around her eyes and mouth.

—I don't keep bees at all, she said. —Were you thinkin I did?

—But the hat, the white boxes in the orchard. Aurora's voice was shaky. —I was sure I saw a cloud of them around you as you walked. I thought it was one of your bees that stung me.

—A horsefly, I'd say, and they hurt so. But no, the hat is one I wear to keep the sun off my freckles, and the white boxes belong to the hens.

—Oh, but I'd have sworn...

The woman shook her head. It was difficult to guess her age, Aurora thought, as she watched her pour boiling water into the teapot. Beneath the lines, her skin had a luminous quality; Maggie Logan could be twenty-five, or she could be sixty.

They drank their tea sitting at the kitchen table, Aurora nibbling on a biscuit Maggie had insisted she take to boost her energy. When her cup was empty, the woman swept her long red hair up into a bundle and speared it with a silver pin.

—Did you come far today? she said.

—Only from Clonmel.

Maggie laughed. —It's been a day of bees and honey for you, she said.

Aurora raised her eyebrows, puzzled by this remark.

Maggie explained. —The Gaelic translation of Clonmel is *Cluain Meala*, the honey meadow.

Aurora was processing this information, thinking how odd it was that the Finnerty family

should have brought that name with them to Sugarbag, a township that was also named for honey. How disappointed they must have been at the lack of sweetness they found there.

—Are you staying in Cashel? Maggie said.

—No, I just came to see the Rock. Aurora realised with a twinge of alarm that she had no idea where she and Jem would sleep that night.

—Ah! I suppose you'll be takin the little one home to his mam soon, Maggie said.

Aurora wondered if her dismay showed on her face. Surely she didn't look too old to have borne a child. At thirty-three she could conceive one if she had a willing partner.

—How do you know he isn't mine? she said, certain she didn't look too old to bear a child.

Maggie studied her face for a moment, then poured herself another cup of tea. When she had stirred in milk and sugar, she gazed down at Jem in silence. Aurora saw that the baby, who every day bore a stronger resemblance to Rose, looked back at Maggie intently.

—I suppose it's his eyes, Maggie said at last, —or rather, their difference from your own. Those pale blue ones you have there are special, and I'd have said he'd get them. But it might be something else. I'm one for intuition. So tell me, am I wrong?

Aurora slowly shook her head. —I would like to be his mother, but I'm not, she said, wondering if she would be able to stem her tears in front of this strange woman who – although she bore no physical resemblance to her old teacher – uncannily brought back Kilkie's presence.

Maggie sat with them in silence for a while, then reached into a cupboard and brought out a tall jar of creamed honey.

—A friend of mine who lives near Clonmel does follow the art of beekeeping, she said, smiling. —Take this with you, a small souvenir.

Aurora weighed the jar in her hand, the heft of it carrying her back to Danny's kitchen

with the taste of homemade soda bread and honeycomb melting on her tongue. She imagined Danny in his jeans and work shirt measuring coffee into the percolator, saw his hands that were comfortable with plants and bees and wondered how they would look wrapped around a child. She remembered how outside his windows the air vibrated. Silver-leafed trees tossed their heads, and the shapes of willow figures took root and sprouted leaves on bare withies. Aurora retraced in her mind the silvered ladder of Danny's scar, remembered from schooldays; if she could run her fingers over it, what electricity might flow between them there in that quiet house.

In her arms, Jem was gnawing on a rusk Maggie had given him. Aurora hadn't seen her hand it over, hadn't noticed Jem put it in his mouth. She saw how easily she had been distracted. No one could blame Rose – she'd had a lifetime of secrets to unravel, as well as a child to rear alone. Jamey would always be Rose's son – nothing that could happen to either of them would ever rearrange that fact, just as it was true that Jem would never belong to her; she could love him, but she would never be his mother. Rose must be going mad with grief by now. Mad.

Aurora remembered Rose putting down the telephone and exclaiming bitterly about her birth mother in Boston.

—Cristina might have been a trafficked woman, she said, —but so am I. All children who are not in the care of their rightful mothers are trafficked!

Yes, Rose would be going mad without Jem. It was a wonder she hadn't called out the Gardai, or perhaps she had.

Aurora stood up.—Would you know where the nearest telephone is?

Maggie Logan smiled, and silver bracelets tinkled on her freckled arms as she pointed to her own tiny hallway. —That's right, darlin, she said, —you ring and let them know when you'll be bringing the child home.

PART THREE

South Australia

South Australia -1994

Christmas morning – warm before sunrise, with a soft breeze wafting eucalyptus through the open window along with the first tentative birdsong. Aurora slipped out of bed without disturbing the figure curled beside her under the sheet, stepped carefully around the slumbering heap of the dog.

When she opened the bedroom door, the dog rose and followed her.

—Come on, old girl, Aurora whispered, as she let them both out through the kitchen.

Silky grasses brushed her legs, and the trunks of the young gums rose gleaming from shadow as she followed the slow wave of the dog's tail. Aurora took the path that led to the dipping pool, and when she reached the water there rose from it a greenish light. Further along, if she was to follow the meander of the creek, she would come to the place where Danny cut willow, the salley garden.

She quickly peeled off her nightdress and stepped forward until her toes sank into the marshy verge. In the shallows, a little way out from the bank, a clump of white flag iris grew. The dog watched her as she waded in, passing the flowers and gliding into a smooth breaststroke, pulling away towards the centre of the pool. The water was colder there, refreshing on her skin after the stuffy night.

Aurora rolled onto her back and floated. In Dublin, Rose and Jem would be asleep upstairs in the house on St Agnes' Crescent; it was their own house now. This was the first Christmas that Jem had really understood what was going on, Rose said. When he opened

his presents he would find the animal puppets Aurora had posted to him – the platypus and koala, the wombat and the kangaroo. She supposed Rose would explain that these strange creatures were Australian. Later the two of them would go to his Grandma and Granda Mulcahy's house for Christmas lunch. Probably there would be a telephone call from Boston. Jem had spent a Christmas there, but in the end Rose had taken him back to Ireland.

Aurora rolled and dived in one quick movement. Underwater, she opened her eyes and searched among the swaying weed for fish. Sometimes when she swam here they arced away in a silvery flash as her arms sliced the dark water. Their elusive habit reminded her of her father's stories of the cold pools in the Comeragh Mountains. One day she and Danny would go to Tipperary and catch a wolf fish; Danny, of course, would insist on letting it go without tasting the delicate flesh.

She surfaced, sucked in a deep breath then dived again, but her first dive had clouded the water and she could see nothing. Kicking towards the surface, she thought as she often did here of the pungent sweetness of the water at Death Rock, the swim she had been promised but never taken. Whenever she turned to that day it presented a mystery as deep as it was wide. It did not matter how tightly she held her breath, or how quickly she dived, nor at what angle, the truth – always more limber – slithered out of reach.

Aurora surfaced and flipped onto her back. As she floated, with the silence of the water flooding her ears and the empty sky arching above, a question flowed into consciousness as quietly as if it had risen from the cool sedimented depths of the pool.

Will our children play here?

After a while she swam with lazy strokes towards the bank. Bees whizzed by and the sun broke from the treetops as she wrung water from her hair, gathered up her nightdress and turned towards the house.