Plenty of Harm in God:
A Novella

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ABSTRACT

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Plenty of Harm in God explores the themes of rescue, escape, madness and hope. It is a story about the damage people inflict on themselves and each other, and the things we do to make survival possible.

When the narrative opens, Clare, the protagonist, twenty years old and pregnant, is about to return to Inisheer, Ireland, to fulfill a suicide pact that she made five years ago with her cousin Gillian. As the story of the conditions under which the pact was made unfolds, Clare struggles to find a reason to go on living, but her despair and her belief that her genealogy is "poisoned" make it at first impossible for her to justify her own existence or even that of her unborn child. Her search brings her back to people from her past who believe in her potential to achieve some sort of "happiness" even in the face of suffering.

My main technical considerations have concerned the novella as a hybrid form combining the succinct, poetic nature of a short story with the broader thematic scope of a long narrative. I feel the semi-epistolary form provides the novella with a purpose and a clear vehicle for the development of character. In writing *Plenty of Harm in God,* I have come to a deeper understanding of how narrative voice can structure, cohere, and direct a work; once the narrator's voice asserts itself, the story seems in many ways to take care of itself.

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ONE

MOLLY

I

My father, your grandfather, was rich. He must have known he and my mother were going to die because when I was nine he placed me in a boarding school in St. John's. It was a charity school with an orphanage attached; it was a sort of act of kindness for rich parents to send their children there knowing they were paying for the education of orphans at the same time. But St. Margaret's, my father said, had a very good reputation.

My sister Rosary was older and had been at St. Margaret's since she was nine too. Rosary planned to teach there one day and the school was happy about her plan because she was such a strong intelligent sensible girl. But Rosary ended by marrying Colin Flaherty and moving away to some pile of rocks off the coast of Ireland.

My mother and father died in a car accident not two weeks after I entered St. Margaret's.

I expected, in a school full of nuns, to leave more of an impression than Rosary did because I was divinely blessed. My father had said so since I was a baby. My mother was old when I was born; the doctors told her she couldn't have any more children but then I arrived. My father said that at the moment I was born he was sitting on the steps of the Grace Hospital and saw a cloud of doves rising out of a birch tree. There are no doves in Newfoundland as far as I know so I agree it was quite a miracle. My father said that at my baptism I didn't cry; I sang "Be Thou My Vision" in baby syllables. (My mother always laughed at this story; she claimed I was saying the things all babies say.) My father said that when I was three years old he brought me to the Basilica for the first time since my baptism, on a cloudy day, and I stepped into the church before him and light burst through the

stained-glass windows in rainbow streams and I genuflected without being taught how and the whole building shook suddenly, "with the portent of God," he said. (My mother agreed there was a tremor on that day but wasn't at the church and refused to believe the sunbeam-and-genuflexion story.)

Is it surprising that I expected a school full of nuns to notice? But I think nuns are more skeptical now than people were in Biblical times, less open to miracles. The only hint that they saw anything unusual about me--at first--was when I was presented to the Mother Superior before Mass on the first Sunday after my arrival. (It was late in the fall. I'd been sick with jaundice and my father didn't want me to leave home until my skin had lost its mustardy colour.) The Mother Superior didn't smile. She pressed her lips together in exactly the way I pictured nuns doing and she said, "She is unusually pretty, isn't she." It didn't sound like a question, or a compliment.

"She is Rosary Greening's younger sister, Mother," said the young nun beside me.

"Rosary Greening? O yes yes, of course. Well, she's entirely unlike Rosary Greening. Why, she must be half Rosary's age, surely. And Rosary has none of those flashy golden airs about her. What's your name, young lady?"

"Molly Greening."

The young nun murmured into my hair, "You must say 'Mother'."

I frowned. "Why? She's not my mother." My voice seemed to bounce around the dark wood of the big room and settle into the hollow of the lightless fireplace.

The nun's eyes widened but when I looked at the Mother Superior I thought maybe she was trying not to smile. "Now, young Molly Greening, you'll have to learn to conduct yourself with respect. Your sister's the pride of

the establishment, and she'll make a fine teacher some day. I only hope you'll do us just as proud. You may go now. Sister Bernadette, see Molly's hair is cut off." I went hot and cold all at once and the Mother Superior raised a hand. "It's the school policy, Molly. No vanities."

When they came at me with the scissors I bit one of them. But still nobody suggested I might be possessed by divine spirit.

I liked Sister Bernadette and after a few months I decided I'd encourage her to recognize my secret. I told her that every night I had dreams of being fed by the hands of angels. This was not strictly true but it was the best way I could think of to bring it up. Sister Bernadette looked at me with deep concern. "Really, Molly? That's very strange. Every night?"

I didn't see much of Rosary in those days; she was already at the teachers' college in the old seminary building. She came to visit me once every couple of weeks and looked terribly grown-up and far away. She didn't have to wear a uniform any longer and although the older girls were allowed to grow their hair, hers was in a professional-looking little bob. She asked me a lot of motherly questions about my schoolwork and my friends. I didn't really have any friends except Sister Bernadette; the other girls in my dormitory and my classes seemed stupid and coarse to me and the couple of times I tried to elevate our conversation to matters more spiritual they laughed and looked frightened at the same time. I noticed too that when I raised my hand in class and offered answers the girls near me looked at one another with small smiles.

Less than a year after I arrived at St. Margaret's Rosary came for her regular second-Sunday visit and said she had something special to tell me. The Mother had given her permission to take me to lunch and so we went to a café downtown and I ordered fish cakes. I remember that quite clearly. I

don't know why it was fish cakes; we had them often at school and I should have wanted something that was more of a treat. But if Rosary noticed she didn't say anything. I ordered a cup of coffee and I thought she'd tell me I was too young for coffee; the Sisters didn't let us drink it. I didn't even like coffee. But she seemed far away.

During the meal we hardly spoke. She asked me a few questions about my studies and my sleeping habits but as I answered them she seemed to forget I was there.

After I asked the waiter for a rum cake for dessert she said, "Molly, I have something I need to tell you."

"I know." My mouth was full of coffee and some of it spilled on my blouse. I expected her to dip her napkin in cold water and dab it on the spot but she didn't. "You said so before."

Rosary nodded. She was staring out the café window onto the cobblestones of the street. "Molly, I'm going to get married."

She hesitated as she said this and so I knew it must be important but I didn't know why. Didn't everyone get married sooner or later? Rosary was eighteen as far as I could remember, which seemed–if I'd thought about it, and I was thinking about it now–like the kind of age when people got married.

My rum cake arrived and I took a bite of it.

"My fiancé is a man from Ireland, and we'll be going there after the wedding. We won't have much money, Molly, so I don't know when I can come back to see you again. But once everything is settled in, I'll send for you and you can come and live with us on Inisheer."

I chewed my cake a bit. I'd never had rum anything before. I didn't like the flavour much.

"Aren't you going to be a teacher anymore, then?" I asked.

Rosary shook her head. "No, Molly, not now. I'm going to be a mother is what I'm going to be."

I don't know why I understood the meaning of this--the Sisters didn't instruct us about where babies come from and what it means if they come before marriage--but I did.

"Oh."

"The Sisters will take care of you here, Molly. You like it here, isn't that right?"

I pulled myself up straight. "I like being close to God."

Rosary's brow furrowed. "Yes. Well. We're not having a wedding as such, it'll be quick and we won't have any guests. We don't want a fuss. But maybe you can come. I asked Mother Agnes and she said that, seeing as Colin and I will leave almost right after, it'd be all right for you to be there, to say goodbye."

This meant nothing to me one way or another, but I nodded. I hadn't finished my cake, but she signalled for the bill anyway.

The priest who married my sister to Colin Flaherty was named Father Bartholomew Corrigan.

You'd think that when you came along the Sisters would have finally believed in my divinity. Not only had I never been touched by a man but I wasn't even twelve years old and hadn't started bleeding. When I began to show, Mother Agnes called me to her room, slapped my face and demanded to know who the father was. I spat on her and explained that God was the father and would punish her for her brutality and lack of faith. I think this

was the only thing that saved me from a beating; the Mother Superior looked so alarmed and taken aback that Sister Bernadette was able to bustle me out of the room.

"Now Molly, really," Sister Bernadette whispered. "I know you're afraid, but we can't help you if you won't let us."

I soon stopped trying to explain, because I was tired, that I wasn't afraid and that I didn't need help.

I was moved out of the dormitory--no one wanted the other girls to see my state, which might appear unholy to them in their ignorance--and into the seminary with the teachers-in-training, who, being older, were expected to be more motherly and less judgmental I suppose. (Rosary told me later that the Sisters also thought that as teachers the older girls would need experience with this sort of thing. I was a kind of special training program.)

I felt as though the Holy Spirit was shining out through my skin, moving through my bones. I didn't go to class anymore. I sometimes spent whole days kneeling in prayer on the wooden floor by my bed, counting my ivory rosary until blisters rose on my fingertips, sitting over my dinner with my eyes closed and my lips moving, not needing to eat. That soon changed of course; after a couple of months I was so ravenous that the only thing I could do was stay on my knees in my room chanting until mealtime, when I would bolt everything in sight.

When I was five months gone the Mother Superior called me to her chambers and sat me down in front of the fireplace. She told me Rosary had written and asked that I not be separated from my baby. "She's explained," the Mother said stiffly with her hands folded on her knees and her eyes on the flames, "that once she and her husband are better established she'll bring you over to the Aran Islands to live with them. She's asked that in the

meantime we keep both you and your child here and care for you. She insists this is what your parents, God rest their souls, would have wanted. I'm a little troubled, Molly, in that I'm not sure you have the...capacities necessary to care for a child. But the orphanage is, of course, dedicated to that very purpose. So I've decided we'll offer you and your sister a compromise. We'll turn your baby over to the orphanage and he'll be kept there until your sister is ready to accept you at her home. You'll be allowed to visit him on occasion, but you'll return to your studies and to the normal life a twelve-year-old girl should be leading. Rosary has assured us that it'll not be long before she and her husband are established enough to provide for you and your child."

The Mother finally turned her eyes on me. My hands were resting on my belly where you were waiting.

The one thing in all my life that has made me question my faith is the fact that you were born a girl. I was so shocked that I cried for several days after the birth. The nurse insisted it was common for new mothers to be sad, that giving birth was a terribly difficult and unsettling thing, that I'd be all right in time. What she didn't understand was that I knew I was being punished and I didn't know why.

It made me think: maybe many women are chosen for this task and God waits to see who is worthy. Maybe He'd been testing me and I'd failed somehow. I didn't know what I'd done to disappoint Him. But the guilt made me so sick that I learned to turn my mind to other things.

They let me live at the infirmary and breast-feed you for a few weeks and for such a young girl I had a lot of milk, the nurses said. But they made me wean you too soon and whisked you away. While I was with you I learned to love you a little and then a lot, in spite of everything. And I started

to understand your purpose. Girls, I knew, were meant for sacrifice. Just as Mary Mother of God was a vessel that God passed through so you and I were vessels for divinity, receptacles. A series of angels visited me while I slept, each night a different one: the dreams I'd told Sister Bernadette about had become real. But instead of feeding me they spoke to me. They told me I'd know when the time came what I was supposed to do with you.

I named you Clare because your skin was so pale that I felt I could see right through to your bones.

You wouldn't remember much about the orphanage I suppose, because you were still a baby the night I slipped in and carried you away.

The angel came to me this time when I was awake, not asleep, and said it was all for nothing, God didn't need us anymore. He didn't say why. After my prayers, when the vision had vanished, I lay down on my bed (I was back in the dormitory then), lay until night trying to find the reason, trying to understand where I'd gone wrong. The other girls filed in, got ready for bed, turned out the lights. They never paid much attention to me any more.

When it was very very dark I went down the passage to the infirmary, sneaked past the nurse in her little booth, scooped you up, opened the first-floor window and dropped outside with you in my arms. I decided God would guide us and he did, all the way to the shore of Quidi Vidi Lake. The moon was almost the same colour as the sky, a charcoal grey close to black, and the stars seemed ready to give up. The water of the lake was black and thick too and I could feel the cold rising from it as I walked out onto somebody's wharf with you in my arms. I stood and watched the surface because the surface was as far as I could see. I was thinking of what drowning

was like–I'd heard it was an easy peaceful way to die. But I looked along the beach and I saw a fire burning.

As I gazed along the beach at it I thought: Maybe I heard the angel wrong. Maybe the angel said: You serve *another* purpose for God now. God has *another* plan for you. I watched the fire without moving. You didn't cry even when I started to shiver; I think you were asleep. This is a sure sign, I thought. I wasn't cold before and I'm cold now so I should go to the fire. I turned back on the wharf and wandered down the beach toward the flames.

A man was sitting alone staring into the fire and poking it with a long green branch. A halo of mist radiated, surrounding him and his fire in a bubble of dry heat. He looked up when I approached him and his face grew all surprised. He was around twenty years old and handsome with dark hair and a deep, slanted look around his eyes. He reminded me a little of Father Bartholomew Corrigan.

"Jesus Mary and Joseph," he said softly.

I didn't like his language but I was even colder now so I sat down near the fire with you still pressed against my chest. I looked straight into the flames and waited.

"What are you doing here, young miss?" he asked. His voice was quiet and slow.

I pushed my nose against your little neck and stretched my feet toward the warmth. "God sent me here," I said.

"What?" I didn't reply. "Whose baby is that?"

"She's my baby."

I tried to imagine what his face was doing but I didn't look at it. "Don't be foolish, now. You're not more than eleven or twelve years old. What's your name, darling?"

My heart was quiet. I tried to ask God silently what this man was here to do. God didn't seem to have anything to say to me. "Molly Greening," I said. "This is Clare."

There was a long silence. When I looked up his eyes were travelling up and down my body.

"Where do you live, Molly?"

I smiled. "We don't live anywhere now," I said.

He was good to you, Clare, don't you remember? A good kind father. It was years before they found us. So close by but he was very careful and so was I; I never left the house except in the dark and I never went into town; he never had any visitors and I didn't need friends. When the police came to the door during those first weeks I hid in an old refrigerator in the cellar; we were so sealed in that even when you started to cry before they left they didn't hear a thing. He could have left us in that refrigerator and let us die; it would have been easy; it happens to children all the time. He could have called the police a few days later and said we did it ourselves, sneaked into his house and shut ourselves into the smelly dark. But he didn't do that. He risked everything for us and he lost. You were almost five years old when they finally took you away from me and took him away to jail. By that time all my hair had grown back again, very long and gold.

They've been trying all these years to tell me he was a bad man. But there are so few people who understand the ways of the Lord. Even I didn't understand them right away. I thought He was leading us to the shores of Quidi Vidi because He was done with us altogether. But that wasn't what He meant. Our sacrifice was to be of a different kind.

I didn't even mind it much. I liked the feeling of His body on top of mine and I liked the sounds He made. I liked the way He would kiss and touch me afterwards. Sometimes I'd look up and see you watching us from the doorway, your blue eyes almost-milk-white.

The Cassatts said you were an angelic foster child. That was the word they used. "Angelic". They said you were an excellent student, you did your chores around the house, your friends were all nice sensible upstanding children. You liked to read and to swim and on weekends you often stayed home and played Scrabble or Pictionary with Mr. and Mrs. Cassatt and their friends. "She's so mature," Mrs. Cassatt told me, "so stable. She's never caused us a moment's worry. You'd never know..." And she stopped herself, out of politeness probably.

I saw you about once a month. We went for drives once they let me have a car. We sat in the park and I wanted so much to be a mother. I tried: I asked you about boys and school and friends and your new family but it was as if you didn't want me to know. You turned your blue eyes away and answered yes and no. So I started taking you to the movies where we didn't have to talk. It was more than I could afford on my bit of Welfare money but I didn't know what else to do with you. I wanted to take you to church but when I suggested it you looked at me like you were watching me lose an eye.

It was ten years before they let me have you again. I was twenty-seven and you were almost fifteen. I stopped telling the psychiatrists about God and angels and I took my medication. When I came to get you from the Cassatts they cried, and so did you.

I'd come into my part of the inheritance and now that I was no longer under hospital care I was allowed to use it. The social workers had found me

a nice apartment. Rosary wanted me to come to Ireland but the doctors and my counselor didn't think such a big change would be good for either you or me. I didn't want to go either, not at first. But soon I started looking at atlases.

Our family is from there, Clare. They first came to Newfoundland from Ireland. Not from Inisheer where Rosary lives now, not even from County Galway. They came from County Clare. I remember that now, my father telling me long ago.

Maybe you were a good girl when you were with the Cassatts but you weren't a good girl with me. You played hooky from school and you smoked cigarettes. More than once I came home from a church meeting to find you drinking beer in the apartment with your friends and boyfriends. You swore a lot; sometimes you swore at me. And you hardly spoke to me, hardly looked at me most of the time; you acted as though I was your enemy. I prayed and prayed but I could see you weren't interested in God's plan for you. Then I decided once and for all that we needed to go to Rosary. You'd reminded me so much of Rosary when I'd first come to take you back. But now you were turning into someone else.

I didn't tell anyone we were leaving, not even you; I was afraid you'd tell your friends and my doctors would find out. I didn't even tell God. For all my efforts God still wasn't speaking to me. I was hoping I'd find him in Ireland.

And I did too. When I met Michael Mulvaney the angels returned.

He was a man of God, Michael Mulvaney. He'd been a priest but had soon learned that his relationship with the Lord went beyond what the church would allow. He was a heavy little man with a black moustache, not

handsome but full of the word of the Lord. He told me I should stop taking the pills the doctors gave me and God would speak to me. He was right.

The first time he tried to make love to me on the beach the angels came down to me and said no. It is too late for you now, they said. You have been soiled. I cried when they told me that, remembering; I missed him still, that man who'd saved me. Michael was angry and I understood that; he'd interpreted God's will differently. But I said, "No no, Michael. It's not me, you see." And that's when I brought you to him. "I believe, Michael," I said, "that she is still untouched."

I know you didn't understand, my honey. How could you? So many things had come between you and God. But I was sure. The only thing I doubted was whether it was right of me to watch. I was afraid I might stain the moment. But Michael said he was sure God would tell me to go if that was what he wanted. And through the whole night God never said a word.

TWO

CLARE

II

You know it was Gilly, don't you, Auntie? She must have told you by now. Wherever she is. Wherever you are. I wish you'd answer me.

I'm coming to see you though I don't even know if you're still there. I have a promise to keep. Gilly and I both, we have a promise to keep. I don't suppose she told you about that. Well neither will I. Trust me though, it's important. Something in me keeps saying: Think of the baby. Everyone keeps saying that no matter what I do, when I have a cigarette or a drink or some Cheetos. Think of the baby. But whoever does that anyway? Mumma didn't for sure. You might have if you'd ever had a baby. I can imagine you thinking of the baby. That baby you were supposed to have who died.

Do you want to know the whole story? It's simple really. Gilly did it. I watched. That was all. You believed our story. Her story. I didn't say a word and you seemed to think that was natural.

Are you both still in that B&B on the pier, you welcoming guests as though they weren't interrupting your grief which started before I was born and is never going to end? Gilly hiding in her room smoking Silk Cuts and reading the Bible or maybe kissing Teffia Mulvaney on the rock beaches in the dark? O you know that for sure. But it doesn't matter; you don't read my letters; you send them back to me with RETURN TO SENDER stamped on the envelope. I never thought you'd do that, return me to sender. But you did and you keep doing it. Unless it's not you at all.

It's been five years now almost exactly. That was the promise: five years. I don't know why it was five; it was Gilly's idea and I was in no state to argue. I'm twenty now, starting to get big with baby. Just a little big; you wouldn't know unless I took my clothes off. O you don't need to know about

that; it isn't important. Mrs. Cassatt thinks I did it on purpose; I can tell although she doesn't say it; she just looks at me. Mr. Cassatt doesn't look at me at all. No no it wasn't him. I forgive you for thinking it but he's a good man, at least I suppose he is. It's hard to tell.

I have been well, yes, thank you for asking. Got a job at the women's center on George Street and started learning the bodhran. Yes there are bodhrans here too Auntie. We all come from over there in some way or another. The women's center is dull; I sit mostly, occasionally watch some kid while the mother is out shopping at the Avalon Mall. Read pitiful scripts that the theatre students churn out about domestic violence: "No no Johnny I won't be your girlfriend anymore because you hit me and that's wrong." "No no Mr. Boss I won't work for you any more because you pinched my titties and that's wrong." Written by girls my age who've never been hit or had their titties pinched unless they wanted it. I could tell a few stories I suppose but they'd be put away in a box. No one wants to know how these things really happen.

I've been going to talk to the counselor at my old high school. I used to see him when I was a student and we got in the habit of it so I've been seeing him some more. No not *seeing* seeing Auntie. Consulting. He's very nice; Mr. Pike is his name. He says things like: "Don't you feel angry, Clare?" And I say, "Yes, Mr. Pike, I feel angry." "And what do you feel angry about, Clare?" "I don't know, Mr. Pike, what do you think I should feel angry about today?" Or he asks: "Do you miss your mother, Clare?" And I say, "No, Mr. Pike, I don't miss my mother." "Why not, Clare?" "Because my mother was psychotic and she liked hurting me." I try not to elaborate but sometimes he presses me. "What do you mean by 'psychotic', Clare? What do you mean by 'hurting you'?" And I tell him the angels told my mother what to do and

they told her to hurt me. After that I tell him about my boyfriends. This has been going on for five years. He's been very patient. I admire him.

My ticket to Shannon is for next Saturday. I bought it two months ago but I haven't told a soul although sometimes I've been tempted. I've been saving all these years like I told Gilly I would. From my waitress job at the pizza parlour to every cent the Cassatts have given me. I never go anywhere unless I know someone will pay for my drinks. The only things I buy are cigarettes and books; even my bodhran was a present from my teacher. I almost told Don Masters when he tried to pick me up again at Shooters last night. In the end I told him I was pregnant--it got him to stop trying to put his hand up my shirt--but I didn't tell him I was going to Galway. I wasn't quite that drunk. If anyone finds out they'll try to stop me. The Cassatts will try to stop me. Not that they have any say any more. I'm twenty, I'm a grownup. But they'll get all concerned and Mrs. Cassatt will cry and Mr. Cassatt will sigh and go off to his study and I'll feel like I'm so ungrateful for all they've done.

They wanted to send me to university, did I tell you? Not send me exactly because I'd be doing it here in St. John's, but they wanted to pay. I laughed at them. Can you see me, Auntie? Sitting in a classroom with no windows reading books of poetry and doing trigonometry or whatever it is. No thank you. It would be a waste. That's what I said. "No thank you, Mr. and Mrs. Cassatt, it would be a waste." And Mrs. Cassatt asked, "What do you mean by waste, Clary darling?" She calls me Clary darling like you and Gilly and Niall did although no one but Gilly ever called me Clary Sage. And I said she should never mind that but she shouldn't waste her and Mr. Cassatt's hard-earned pennies on educating me when I'd had all the educating I needed and it wasn't from school and I already knew everything I needed to

for the life I was going to live. And she said, "But, Clary darling, what are you going to do?" and Mr. Cassatt chimed in the way he does when he thinks finally a solid sober male perspective is needed and he said, "Now, Clare, you know nowadays everyone needs a university education and you don't think you're just going to marry a rich man do you..." and I started laughing so hard but then I felt ashamed. Mr. Cassatt's face went tight and irritated and Mrs. Cassatt looked so terribly hurt.

That was all before I got pregnant. Then they said I mustn't worry, they'd help me raise the baby or even adopt it if I wanted them to. That's why I can't tell them anything about going to Inisheer and all that. They might guess something. They'd try to stop me.

So I haven't gone to university. I continued at the pizza parlour for awhile and I heard about this job at the women's center. I went down and gave this very wrenching story about how I was abused as a child so I can understand the pain and victimization so many women feel and I told them I was pregnant and needed better work so I could support my baby and they were all very touched and a couple of them even cried. I cried a little too; I felt it would strengthen my chances. They gave me the job on the spot. All it involves is answering phones, reading scripts for this play they want to put on and looking after the occasional child. Filling out forms and keeping women entertained while they wait to sob to the counselor. They even offered me free counseling but I liked going to Mr. Pike. Although it occurs to me now that maybe I thought the woman therapist there would be more adept at getting things out of me than Mr. Pike ever was.

So that's what I've been doing. O the bodhran. Well you know all about bodhrans having lived on Inisheer all these years. Are you still living there, Auntie? If you're still living there why do you keep returning me to

sender? The bodhran's fun. Rhythm's the thing. I've always liked that. I've always had a feeling the drums are for me. My teacher let me join her Celtic band and we play at the hotels sometimes. I've even made some money that way. It all went into my Ireland fund. Everything went into the fund. Into Ireland.

I had a dream last night. I climbed down stones to sit by a river and when I got there I had something in my hand. I hadn't had it when I climbed down and holding it I wouldn't be able to climb up. But it was important and I couldn't leave it behind. I tried to take it back up with me but I dropped it and it fell into the river. The river took it away. But I don't remember what it was. I'm not sure I even knew at the time.

III

Today Mr. Pike said, "You've been coming every week for five years, and you haven't told me a thing about your mother."

We were sitting in his office in the high school. His hands were folded exactly in the center of his desk. He always sits that way, with his back bookbinding-straight and his hands folded on his desk, exactly in the center.

"That's not true, Mr. Pike," I said. "I told you she was so pretty that if it was her sitting here and not me, you'd crawl right out under your desk to get your hands on her."

He gave a brief tight sigh and a brief tight smile. "That tells me more about you than about her, Clare," he said.

And I said, "Well, excellent. Because after all, we're here to talk about me, aren't we?"

He sent me home. He's been very patient but it's run out. He said to come back when I was interested in making some progress. But what am I supposed to tell him? He wouldn't believe the truth if I told it to him. He doesn't have the slightest idea what he's getting himself into. I tell him that sometimes. "Mr. Pike, you don't have the slightest idea what you're getting into." And sometimes he sighs and says, "I'm not getting into anything, Clare." That's what he said today. "I'm not getting into anything, Clare."

I won't be going back because I'm getting on the plane next Saturday. The fact is though there's really nothing for me to tell him. I hardly remember, if you want to know the truth, Auntie. I hardly remember what Inisheer looks like even. I hardly do. Rocks mostly, and I remember the castle ruins.

I remember the boat coming up on the pier; I remember looking out to see the big sign saying FLAHERTY'S B&B. Even if I hadn't known FLAHERTY'S B&B was where I was going I might have thought for a second that it was the only place to go because that big painted sign was so big, so bright and green and white with the curlicues and flowers like a place you'd like to go, a place full of curlicues and flowers where you could lay your head down and it would float away on a pillow of the best things in Ireland. The best things. How was I to know? Although maybe you were the best thing in Ireland, Auntie. Maybe you were the best thing in the whole world.

When Mumma and I stepped off the boat from Galway onto the pier of Inisheer the sky was as white-grey as the edges of the sea. And I could only do what I was told no matter how much I wanted to throw myself into the wake of the Aran Flyer and follow it all the way back to Galway or until I drowned.

Seams of perfect stone stitches stretched all up and down as far up as the land could go and as far along, dividing it into bits and streams of green. The houses all jostling together to greet me: Over here! No no little Clare over here! And Mumma with her feet heavy on the dock, her piles of butter-gold hair heavy in the air, looking up with a smile as if the houses were calling to her and not to me at all.

"We're here, my honey," she said.

I half expected–I realize it now–a fat and laughing You to be standing on the steps of FLAHERTY'S B & B wiping your hands on your apron and calling "Top o' the mornin' to you!" But not only was it well past noon and not morning at all but there didn't seem to be anyone anywhere up and down the pier road. The outside of FLAHERTY'S B & B was white and cold and still as a lily in a florist's fridge with all its pollen pulled out.

Mumma reached out a hand and took mine. "Rosary's waiting for us, my honey," she said.

I picked up the satchel which one of the ships' hands had tossed out at my feet and Mumma led me up the little path to FLAHERTY'S B & B as though I were five and I allowed myself to be led as though I were five.

You were not fat. You were bony and warm-faced and although you were wearing a greying apron you didn't wipe your hands on it. You were standing over the stove in the kitchen when we came in, taking a boiling kettle off the heat. As you turned toward the door I saw beads of steam or sweat on your wide brown forehead.

You said, "Hello Molly dear," with no expression but fixed your black eyes on me and almost smiled. "You must be Clare," you said. The kitchen was scattered with dishes, open bags of sandwich bread, grease. The smell of teabags and fried potatoes. Through the windows was the sea, salt grey.

You took me upstairs to Gilly's room right away, leaving Mumma to sit in the kitchen. I remember Gilly's room all yellow and her in yellow too, a yellow t-shirt, and me too, in the yellow dress Mumma bought me in Galway, clingy and almost all the way to the floor. On the boat I pulled the neckline of that dress down to show my tits to the boat-hand who kept staring at me all the way over. He turned even redder than his sunburn, almost brown he was so red. I still have that yellow dress; I thought of leaving it behind in Gilly's room when you sent me home at the end of that summer--something for Gilly to remember me by--but in the end thinking of the boat-hand I packed it up. I think I'll bring it with me when I come again if I can find it.

I remember looking at Gilly and thinking there must be some mistake because she looked Chinese and how could I have a Chinese cousin? She kept staring out the window, while you left and went downstairs, and I sat on

the bed next to her and asked her if she had a cigarette. I thought maybe that would shock her--she looked so fragile and pretty from behind--but she turned her face to me and I saw she had freckles and her slant eyes were blazing like jars full of sparks. She was like that--sparks caught in a skinny jar. I learned that later. I learned she was afraid to let herself out, she was afraid of the things she knew she was capable of.

She reached under the bed and pulled out a pack of Silk Cuts and opened the window and she lit both our cigarettes and we hung our hands outside. When the cigarettes were almost done we waited for tourists to pass under the window so we could drop the burning butts on their heads but you called us to dinner before any came.

I remember the sun didn't seem to set until it was almost morning. Every night.

I started reading the Bible because of her. I've stopped again now but for awhile I read a bit every day. All those years I wouldn't because of Mumma, because Mumma kept trying to make me. But I saw the red New Jerusalem on Gilly's bedside table as we were getting ready for bed that night. "Are you religious?" I asked her and she said with a blazing smile--o Auntie you know--she said, "No, just Catholic." And I said, "Are there Catholics in China?" And she said, "I was born in Japan, ignorant cow, but I'm Irish Catholic like everyone here." I didn't even mind her calling me an ignorant cow. She made it sound like the highest praise she was capable of giving.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked and she smiled again. Her skin was like wet sand under moons.

"Sure," she said. "There's no harm in it."

"No harm in God?"

Gilly laughed, showing little white teeth. "There's plenty of harm in God. That's what I like about him." I sat down on the bed and picked up the Bible. "Start with Ecclesiastes," she said.

We slept together in that little bed of hers almost every night and sometimes I woke up to find her very close. I never really understood until I met Teffia. That wasn't until a few days later. Gilly took me up to the hotel pub to watch the band and Teffia was singing. She probably wasn't old enough to be singing in a bar but Gilly and I weren't old enough to be drinking in one either; Niall the bartender slipped us half-pints of Guinness in Coke glasses and scooped the foam off, made us drink it with straws, as if everyone there didn't know the difference--it was really for your sake, Auntie.

If Mumma was the prettiest woman in the history of the world Teffia would've had to be next, don't you think? Seeing her in her white dress with her strawberry hair all the way down her back I thought jealousy might shoot that Guinness right out of my mouth and all over the pub floor. And I saw Gilly looking. I'd never given any thought to such things before, never seen a girl look at another girl that way although Gilly had sometimes in those few days made me feel the way she was looking now. Or something like it. Not quite that. I'd never seen anyone feel that about anyone before. It was so thick I couldn't believe everyone in the bar wasn't choking in it. Do you suppose everybody knew, Auntie? Did you know? Maybe everyone else was busy with their own things but surely you could see?

You liked Teffie in spite of yourself, I know you did. One afternoon I passed the front room and she was in there with you; you hadn't told Gilly and me that she'd arrived. You were playing something on the piano from some sheet music that she must have brought along--a pop song; Celine Dion maybe. And she was next to you on the stool singing along, softly but it made

the house hum like a window pane when a semi passes far away. I poked my head in and the two of you looked up and I saw a trace of your smile which was not coming but going as though you wanted to put it away before I understood that Teffie was all right by you.

That first evening Gilly took me to the hotel pub Teffie was singing "The Foggy Dew" when we came in. I knew that one; Mrs. Cassatt used to sing it around the house sometimes but nothing like that. I couldn't believe the band members could keep playing and not stop in shame. Not that they were bad, just that it seemed wrong for anything else to happen while that singing was going on. Her eyes were closed and it slipped out of her in soft trembling waves like heartbreak was swelling up under her white skin and breaking through at her throat. Niall slid our glasses to us as we sat down and nobody said a word. The bar was silent, packed with Americans and Germans and French and Dutch but mostly with the locals who came every night and tore the place up with their Irish and their bellowing but who sat like stone birds listening to Teffia Mulvaney sing.

When she was done the song the band packed up their instruments for awhile and she slid into the seat beside Gilly's without speaking. Gilly was a twig beside her and Teffia was a tree, a birch tree blooming with roses. Side by side on the bartop their arms were bony, milk-cream and beach-brown, Teffia's long and soft-muscled, Gilly's crackable, a splinter. Beside them I felt like a scrubbed cherub bulging in all directions.

Gilly muttered something in Irish at Teffia and Teffie muttered something back at her and they both laughed. Then I knew there was no room for me at this tea party. Teffie looked across at me without speaking. Gilly said, "This is my cousin Clare, Clare this is Teffia," and I nodded. Teffia's singing had curdled inside me with the Guinness and with the sight

of her arms next to Gilly's on the counter just touching. I couldn't speak. Neither could Teffia it seemed.

How was I to know, Auntie? But I did and you did too, didn't you? Don't call it love, not any of it. That's such a hollow word. And desire is too heavy. Call it want. That says it all. *I want*...I am lacking. I want you: I lack you. I would make a soup but I want meat to flavour it. I would make a life but I want you. And you.

Later when all the singing and drinking was over Niall left the bar and took us all up the hill to the ruins of the O'Brien castle where a bunch of other boys were sitting around and we smoked weed and drank some Bulmer's cider. I want to see that castle again more than anything else I think, all falling down and open to the world except for that one black room in the center where there's stone still standing all around and one tiny sightless door. The outside walls that have crumbled into steps perfect for climbing up to the top. The way the wind tears at you from up there trying to knock you around, making it hard to hear anything else, even the person who's beside you. I ended up climbing the castle wall with Niall that night and getting sick over the side while he held my hair back off my face and laughed.

He was a nice boy, Niall. Not a boy really, almost twenty, and I guess it wasn't very gallant of him to kiss fifteen-year-old girls but he was a gentleman, never did a thing until I suggested it. I didn't really suggest I guess, I just planted one on him once I'd rinsed my vomit-scented mouth with some more cider and he didn't resist. Then he walked me home. The sun was coming up. By that time all the other boys had gone too. Gilly and Teffia were left alone in the castle and it was hours before Gilly got home.

(Even then I didn't get it. I didn't get it until one afternoon many weeks later when Gilly got angry at her and ran off. They'd been spitting at one another in Irish until finally Gilly ran away along the beach. I never asked what those fights were all about. Gilly never talked to me about Teffia. I don't remember much about what Gilly and I talked about except we talked about God sometimes.

Gilly left us out on the rocks facing away from Ireland and toward home. Teffia sat stone-like staring out over the ocean for awhile. I didn't know what to say but she turned to me and tried to kiss me and took my hand and put it up her white dress. She had no underwear and she was all damp and smooth. All right, it's true, I let her, although I wouldn't let her kiss me. She lay back on the rocks and undid the front of her dress so I could see her white plum freckled breasts falling away from each other and I rubbed her, watching her face. She came in about sixty seconds screaming and thrashing like a dervish, her voice bouncing off all the greyness of the rocks and the water. I'd never seen anything like it. Then she scrambled off without even buttoning her dress, a white and copper speck carried away on the wind, and I had to walk back over the rocks alone. I didn't see a soul.

That was the only time. Gilly never left us alone together again.

I once asked Niall if he'd ever fucked Teffie and he said, "Clary darling, there wouldn't be a man on this island who hasn't fucked Teffia Mulvaney." He raised his blond eyebrows in what I knew was a meaningful expression but I didn't think about it enough to understand. Not until I saw Michael Mulvaney did I understand. No, not even then.)

Gilly didn't come home, that morning after we'd been in the castle, until well after you were fixing breakfast; I woke up when she came into the bedroom and you were already clanging around in the kitchen. Did you

know she did that, sneaked in behind you at eight in the morning? When she slipped past the kitchen door did you call "Good morning Gillian" in that clipped quiet voice of yours? Did you think there was something you were supposed to do? Did you not have the heart or the time or the strength or the patience any more? Or did you trust us? Did you trust her? Did you think everything was going to turn out ok? Because when I was up and we'd both showered and dressed, her without sleeping and me feeling I hadn't, and we both came and sat at the breakfast table, made sick at the smell of sausages and eggs, and we drank some orange juice and made a show of pouring Corn Flakes and milk but stirred everything around without speaking, you said, "You girls are looking like death on a plate, go back to bed for the love of God." That was all. There were many nights and mornings after when it happened just like that.

She never went to the church with you and you didn't seem to care. Perhaps you thought that with all her Bible reading she was getting enough God. I'd surprise her in her room where she'd be sitting up on the bed next to the open window, a cigarette in one hand and New Jerusalem in the other. It scared me. But she seemed so true about it, Gilly. Sometimes she'd read me little bits. "Listen to this, Clary Sage," she'd say. (The first time she called me Clary Sage I said, "My name's not Clarisage," but she explained that it's an herb that causes euphoria. She knew all about herbs and things. I used to look at her collection of mysterious little bottles that she bought in Galway, with their white labels--jasmine, bergamot, lavender, melissa, rockrose, neroli, eucalyptus, hyssop, immortelle, myrtle, ylang-ylang, tea tree, clary sage--and wonder.)

She'd say, "Listen to this, Clary Sage. 'And whatsoever mine eyes desired I kept not from them, I withheld not my heart from any joy. Then I

looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and behold all was vanity and vexation of spirit.' Ecclesiastes 2 10-11."

And I'd say, "Ok." And she'd say, "Don't you see?" And I'd say, "What?" And she'd say, "O don't trouble yourself." And I'd say, "No, what?" But she wouldn't answer me. And a day later we'd have the same conversation again. "'My son, eat thou honey, because it is good; and the honeycomb, which is sweet to thy taste: so shall the knowledge of wisdom be unto thy soul: when thou hast found it, then there shall be a reward, and thy expectation shall not be cut off.' Proverbs 24 13-14."

And I'd say, "Ok." And she'd say, "Don't you see? That's just the opposite of what it was saying yesterday." And I'd say, "No, what?"

And so on. She never gave up. It was like she was talking to herself. I was just as happy. It didn't matter to me as long as she didn't send me away.

She was so fragile, her legs in her cut-off shorts splayed like a wishbone, the Good Book on the bed inches from her crotch, her other hand with a Silk Cut between her fingerbones hanging out the window. All her whip of black hair hanging around her. She'd move over so I could smoke out the window too and we'd sit not quite touching, she reading the Word of the Lord and me thinking.

But she never went to church and of course neither did I. We'd spend Sunday mornings sleeping off the sickest hangovers I've ever had. Guinness and Bulmer's cider; what was I thinking? Not much I suppose. I feel like I spent all my time thinking but when I try to remember what was going through my head it seems like an endless blank, like snow on a television, noisy but empty.

Maybe you're wondering why I don't have a thing to say about Mumma but why would I? What is there to say? I wasn't thinking about Mumma. I didn't think about Mumma until Michael Mulvaney came along. During the days before she met him she was always in the house with you, or alone I suppose, talking to her angels. At night I'd hear Gilly's door open and I'd slide my eyes awake a crack and Mumma would be standing there watching me, her gold hair all lit from behind like a house of glass on fire, her face a gaping shadow. Gilly would be breathing deep sleep beside me. I'd watch Mumma watch us and I never knew if she knew that I knew. Then she'd go away and the door would close behind her. Sometimes I'd move closer to Gilly as though I thought such a little bundle of bones could do anything to save me.

Later, when Michael Mulvaney had arrived, Mumma came home at night rumpled and still breathing hard like she'd been running, but running with her whole body, her skin tender and slightly blue all over where every point of her had touched the ground. I lay awake for hours until she opened the bedroom door and looked in, standing in the doorway with the light behind her, her face a black hole, hair like dandelion seed in the sun. There was always a hint even in silhouette of clothes in disarray, the fragility of pounded skin, and always I could hear how quick and strong and turbulent her breath was, like a storm on the way.

I don't remember that night Mumma came to take me to the beach. No, I do remember but not the part when she came, not her getting me out there. Gilly told me after; I have a picture in my mind of me like a sleepwalker in my white nightgown, gliding over the rocks like Jesus on water, not slipping once. And Mumma ahead of me in a pink sleeveless shift dress, looking neither left nor right, angelic and certain. I can picture these

things because Gilly told me. But I don't remember. How could I? Why would I follow my mother halfway around Inisheer in the middle of the cold night, nothing on my feet, not knowing where I was going or why? Why would I do anything my mother asked me to?

I suppose I must have sleepwalked all the way to Ireland too.

The first night he came into the hotel pub with Mumma I was already drunk and the sight of him made me scared and queasy all over. I'd never seen him at the pub before even though his daughter sang there three nights a week. He was a greasy man with a puffy black moustache, short and fat and dart-eyed. Teffia's mother must have been the beauty queen of Inisheer for Teffie to turn out the way she did. Maybe Michael wasn't her father at all. But Teffie's tendency to have sex with everything must have come from somewhere. Her father was likely to have given her that.

Gilly and I went home together early that night; she and Teffie must have been fighting and I didn't really want to tell Niall no once again. (I was working up to yes.) Gilly and I lay in bed and I asked who that man with Mumma was. "O that's Teffie's father, Michael," Gilly said. "Your mother would do well to stay away from him."

"Not much use in giving her advice," I said. "He's a nasty-looking man."

"He used to be a priest," Gilly said, "but he fucked the parishioners. Teffie's mother in particular. He married her when she got pregnant, but when Teffie was born she ran off. Can't say I blame her. He's the creepiest thing you ever met. I don't talk to him."

"Does Teffie live with him?"

"Aye, when she has nowhere else to go."

Why doesn't she come here? I wondered. But I didn't ask. I supposed, Auntie, that you wouldn't have it. Or maybe Gilly didn't want Teffie in her face all the time.

Where were you through all this, Auntie? In the kitchen waiting for the world to fall down? Why didn't you tell my mother to stay away from Michael Mulvaney? Why didn't you tell your daughter and your niece not to stay out until six in the morning getting wasted and fucking and falling off the pier? Gilly did that once, fell off the pier into the greasy littered water; we had to hold Teffia by the ankles so she could pull her out. Teffia was surprisingly strong.

Was it because you thought the only things we can call our own are our mistakes? Like your mistakes? Because that, Auntie, was very very foolish as I'm sure you now realize.

Why were we in bed and not off somewhere having a party that night Mumma came for me? One of those nights we felt the world was too much for us I suppose. A night when Teffie was solid and closed as a capped bottle, when the thought of sucking Niall off on a weedy cold slab in the graveyard seemed like too much trouble. And yet no matter how tired and fed up we were I went where Mumma told me to and Gilly knew enough to wake up and follow.

Gilly told me everything later when I'd stopped screaming and she was sitting next to me in that yellow room. She told me how she crawled along behind, ducking behind the smallest rocks to make herself a shadow. But I remember the solid rock pain of him crushing me, of stones tearing my back to blood. I remember the flaking tetanus surface of the big rotting boat under my hands as we followed Gilly up through the rust into the ocean air. And

then all I know is the endless plummet of Mumma's pink dress over the side of the Plassy into the sea.

I'm on my way to the Plassy again, but I don't need to tell you that story now. You'll know all about it soon enough.

IV

Auntie where are you? The woman who owns the B&B is making me pay.

She told me Gilly lives over in the castle village. But she doesn't know a thing about you. She's only been here a few years, married into the island and then her husband died. Just like you, Auntie. She said she had the post officer put all your letters in Gilly's post box. So it must have been Gilly who's been returning me to sender all these years. Should I be surprised? I don't know. I wrote her to say I was coming but maybe she returned that too and it's on its way to Newfoundland. Maybe I passed it over the Atlantic.

Nothing's really changed here except now the sign says INIS OIRR BED AND BREAKFAST without the flowers and curlicues and I'm staying in a guest room. My money won't last long though.

I saw that same boat-hand on the ferry, the one I showed my tits to the last time I came over. He's a bit older but I'm pretty sure it's him, his freckled pug face brown and sheep-eyed. I didn't wear my yellow dress; I wonder if I had would it have brought something back to him, would he have had a sudden bewildering embarrassment of a hard-on and a mental flash of fifteen-year-old fat peach boobs. I didn't wear that dress but it's in my bag. It might stay there. I'm afraid the baby pushing my belly out will show.

The B&B woman says Gilly lives in a green house and makes incense for some hippie store in Galway, never speaks to anyone. No one knows a thing about her except that Teffia goes up to see her. Why are they still here? After everything wouldn't Gilly want to be somewhere else? Maybe that's what happened to you. You wanted to be somewhere else.

I don't know where to send this letter.

I took a walk along the beach near the pier earlier. There were families with small children playing in the cold foam and a bunch of pre-teen students from the Irish school. One young man alone, a blond man with thin legs in shorts, ran barefoot all along the crest of the surf from the pier down to the airstrip, then back again, then back again. I sat down on the sand awhile and watched him.

I went up to the hotel pub. There was a fat freckled young man behind the bar who I also thought I recognized but I couldn't think of a name. He told me Niall still works there in the evenings.

I went around to the souvenir shops and bought an Aran sweater--not a handknit one, I can't afford that, but a pretty black cardigan made at the knitwear factory on Inishmaan. I looked at knotwork rings like the copper one Niall bought me in Galway, the day before he took me to Shannon Airport and put me on the plane home. I lost that ring down a drain this spring. Turned my finger green but I wore it for five years. Down the drain in a locker room shower. I went back a few times to stand in that stall, over that drain, hoping to feel some tarnishing copper loneliness travelling back up the pipes. In the shop I thought about buying one but didn't.

I'm trying to imagine what Gillian looks like now and can't picture her any different than she was: whip of black hair and freckles like an oil spatter, limbs no bigger around than pencils.

I keep thinking of this story you told me about Tchaikovsky one day when I was sitting at the piano in your front room: Tchaikovsky was obsessed by the tonic chord, the chord that signals without a doubt that the piece is over.

dum dadada dum dum dummmmmm

DINK!

That last

DINK!

is the tonic chord. When T was a child and lying in his bed at night his older sister would play the piano downstairs. And to torture him she'd finish her piece without the tonic chord.

dum dadada dum dum dummmmmm

And little T would lie with his teeth grinding until finally he had to get out of bed and go downstairs and slam on the keys.

DINK!

I've felt this ever since I went home from Inisheer. Now I've come back to slam on the keys but the piano's gone. Little T's sister sold it to someone across town and now I'm sitting where it used to be with my spine crawling up and down with lack of resolution.

Every now and then walking around the roads from the B & B to the shops to the pub to the beach and back again I saw a face that seemed to know me. But I've grown my hair and it's been a long time so it's not hard to be invisible, an American girl they think, one of the hundreds who will gallop through this place looking for some scent of where they came from. Little do they know.

I can see the ocean from my window, grey and white as seagulls. The sun still doesn't set here I see. At least not until the night is almost over. Gilly and I once swam naked just out there; if I'd been sitting right where I am now I would have seen us even if it was dark. And the sun coming up surprised us and we ran out onto the sand and watched the sky go all shades of marigold. I cared if someone saw us standing shivering with our clothes strewn from the road all the way to the water but Gilly didn't.

I've never been anywhere all alone before. The closest I came was those six hours on the plane you put me on, from Shannon back to Newfoundland and to the Cassatts. I think that plane ride was the only time in my life that I've been all by myself. Until now. I'm here in this room and I think: what if I went down to the pub next door, not the hotel pub but the other one, and sat at a table until someone tried to talk to me? And if they did what would I say? What would I do? What if they followed me home and tossed me down on the dirt under my window? What if they spoke to me again tomorrow and the next day and the next day?

I could walk over to Gilly's house and bang on her door but I think I need some time.

Teffia still sings at the hotel pub three nights a week, the barman said.

V

I waited until nine and then I went up to the hotel pub and there he was wiping things down. His thick tail of white-blonde hair brushing the countertop. I sat in front of him and waited for him to recognize me. He glanced at me, said "Evening," but nothing happened. People were starting to come in.

He doesn't look much older. A little thicker but still skinny. He was never handsome, Niall, but he carries himself like a beautiful man. Tossing around his hair the colour of the inside of a birch tree. Walking with his head high as though his pocked skin and crooked teeth were all a part of his charm. And they are I suppose. Gilly told me that every summer he chose a visiting beauty or two or three. Teffia'd slept with him a few times during the long winters and she wasn't the only local girl. "Your man's quite a prize," Gilly told me, "they fight over him."

"But you don't."

"Not me. He's like a brother to me. Looks out for me, doesn't let anyone take the piss out of me because of my chink face. He's a good boy, himself, he's kind."

Niall once said to me, one of those nights when we were alone in the castle and I hadn't yet worked up to saying yes, he said to me, "The boys are starting to think you're of Gilly and Teffie's kind." And I asked, "What does that mean?" And he said, "O surely you know."

I suppose that decided me because the next night I said yes to him. He was my first. I woke up in the middle of the night and couldn't go to sleep again; the ocean was too loud. Gilly was barely breathing, her face fragile in

sleep. I slipped out of bed, pulled on my jeans and tiptoed down the stairs and out of the house.

I'd been dreaming about the graveyard at the foot of the hill, about a stone with Mumma's name on it smack in the middle of the ruins of the sunken temple of Saint Kevin. The temple is like a cellar, the walls still pressed up against the earth but the roof gone exposing the stone entrails and the earthen floor to the sky and the dead people above.

As I approached I could hear panting and giggling. I peered over the edge of the ruin down into the hollow in the ground surrounded by crumbling tombstones only to see Niall's head of long hair glowing silver by the moon, on top of some girl spread on the earth. I pulled myself back and lay on the ground listening for a bit. They moaned and shuffled and my insides grew tighter and sharper every second. I wandered down to the beach and tossed some rocks in the water, looked back as the girl, also blonde, climbed back to the world, straightened her clothes, stumbled a little and headed up the hill toward the hotel.

Niall was alone on one of the sunken stone walls smoking a joint, a litre of Bulmer's cider beside him three-quarters gone. He looked up, smiled, gesticulated with the joint, so I climbed down and sat next to him, taking it and drawing on it. The smoke burned my lungs and made me cough. He smiled as if I were a baby learning to walk.

"What would be bringing you out among the dead in the middle of the night, Clare? Don't you know the spirits are walking?" His voice was like stones flinting against stones.

"Spirits like you, you mean?" I stretched out on my back along the wall, my head away from him, my calves dangling on either side.

He laughed. "Aye, let's call me a spirit. I like that. Would it make me less dangerous?"

"Less dangerous than what? I like dangerous things." I wanted to be careless but my voice was fragile as a sprain.

"Do you now like dangerous things? You don't strike me that way, I must say. You look like a spoiled cat, plump and white as you are."

"O you're one to talk. Sitting here, with the only people who can't cause you any harm all around you."

"Can't you cause me any harm?" He smiled and took a swig of cider.

We didn't speak for a minute and I didn't look at him although I could feel him shuffle. Impatient, I thought, wanting to go home to bed maybe.

"Don't you think," I asked, puffing on the joint, "that a little privacy is in order when you're fucking the tourists' daughters?"

He paused for a moment, laughed and leaned back on one hand. "O, so you saw that. I apologize." He slid along the wall toward me and held his hand out for the joint but I slapped the hand away. I took another hit and handed it back.

"You're jealous, so. I'm sorry, Clare, but you haven't been forthcoming, and I am not a man with marrying intentions. I like you, though. If you don't want me to be fucking the tourists' daughters, perhaps I can abstain until you've gone home." He handed me the bottle of cider. I sat up, swigged from it and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. "You are a tourist's daughter yourself, though; you might remember that."

I shrugged and dropped the empty cider bottle into the depths of the temple, watched it bounce and roll and lie still, the moon glinting off its brown surface.

"I want to go up to the castle," I said.

"And what will we do up there, then?" I raised my eyebrows at him and smiled. "Clare." He frowned a little.

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Niall, stop treating me like an infant." I stood and began brushing the dust from the seat of my jeans but he didn't move.

"I don't want you to prove yourself to me," he said. "It's not necessary. I'll be your man of the moment if you like, because I enjoy your company. But there's no need for us to do this right now."

"I want to."

He smiled gently. "And the truth is, I'm not altogether recovered. But I might well be in an hour or so."

The golden face of my mother asleep somewhere in your B&B washed over me but I sent her away. I wanted completely sightless black and his hands in all the right places and parts of him where no one had been before.

I swung around headed up the hill. "Hell," I called over my shoulder, "I've got the whole night." I wasn't sure he'd follow me but eventually he did.

There was no one in the castle and it didn't take us long. He was ready no matter what he said. It hurt me and I don't think he'd expected that I'd never done it before. But afterwards, to his credit, he held me while I bled into the dank earth and managed not to cry.

Yes, kind, but he didn't remember me. I waited and waited this evening while he wiped the bar and arranged ashtrays. The place was filling up and I tried not to look like a kitten at the SPCA begging to be taken home. And finally as he passed along the bar again he glanced at me and saw me watching. He gave me a brief sort of bemused smile. He was about to look away when I leaned forward over the bar a bit and said, "Your name is Niall, isn't it?"

He did a lazy double take. "Aye." He paused, looking at me. A ripple of memory passed over the thin pale pocks of his face. "I know you," he said.

Relief billowed up in me like smoke. I told him my name.

"Aye, of course." He smiled. His face is craggy and old-looking as ever although he must only be about twenty-five. His hair is still white-blond and halfway down his back. "Clare Greening. From...Canada, wasn't it? Newfoundland. It was your mother..." He stopped. "Well now, I'm sure you don't want to be talking about that. My apologies. Why don't you have a pint on me, so."

He pulled a quick Guinness and left it on the grille to rest as they always do. As I waited for him to return and finish it I looked around; I hadn't dared to before for fear I'd miss catching his eye. Everything in the pub is in the same place: the tables by the windows looking down and out to the ocean, the benches in the corner for the musicians, the bar shiny and dark. The menu hasn't changed: vegetable soup, fish and chips, toasted sandwiches. Harp, Smithwick's, Guinness and Budweiser on the taps. When he came back, finished the pint with a jerk and pushed it over the bar to me I asked him for a tomato sandwich.

He bustled about a bit more. The place was filling up, shouts and splashes and laughter getting thicker. A few men with guitar and fiddle cases shooed people away from the musician's corner and set themselves up.

Niall called something in Irish to the other barman, dropped his rag onto the counter and came around the bar. He placed my plate squarely before me with a significant smile as though the sandwich were a talisman of great importance.

"So what would you be doing back in Aran, Clare Greening?" He slid onto the stool next to me.

I bit into the sandwich, pulled open the bread to look inside. The tomatoes were pale and flavourless. "I'm here to see Gilly."

"Gilly? O yes, Gillian Flaherty--she's your cousin, is she not?"

"She is." I've only been here a day but to my own ears I sound more Irish already.

"Will you go over to see her mother, then?"

My stomach clutched and I put the sandwich down. "Over where to see her mother?"

"Don't you know? Well, it's no secret." Niall pushed his birch-blond hair behind his ears and stared straight ahead into the mirrors behind the bar. He always was a bit vain. He also never liked to look people in the eye unless he felt there was some weight to the exchange. "She's put Rosary in a rest home in Galway. Had a bit of a crack-up, herself. They say she'll be back in a year or so, just needs some time to settle her nerves. She's a tough one, Rosary, she'll be all right." He glanced at my face. "O Christ, did I say something I shouldn't? Maybe I oughtn't to have told you."

"No no, it's all right."

"How's Gillian coming along, then?"

"Shouldn't you know?" I picked up my sandwich again. "She lives just around the hill."

"Aye, it's not far, but she's a bit private. When she came back from England I was married, and we haven't seen much of one another since then."

"Married?"

He grinned. His teeth still remind me of walls falling down. "Yes, I've got myself a wife now, Clary."

I myself was shocked by the hot blush this brought to my face. "Who's your wife?"

"No one you would have known. Her name's Grainne, but she likes to go by Grace, although I'm trying to talk her out of it. A nice Galway girl who came for a weekend and decided to stay. We've a baby on the way too. She'll be in later...o, she's here, she must've just come in. There by the window, the long-haired one."

A heavy-faced young woman with big ornamental glasses and mouse-coloured hair thick as rain down to her bum stood over a table at the window and spoke down seriously to some girls, girls of about fourteen or fifteen, girls who could be Gilly and me when I was last here. They laughed at her, waved their cigarettes toward her belly which was big under the elastic of her denim skirt but could have been naturally and not pregnantly round.

"When's the baby due?" I bit my sandwich again, not taking my eyes off her. She frowned at the girls but then smiled and ran her hand over the hair of one of the very blonde ones. The girl moved her head away, then shifted back again and rested her temple against Grainne's hip. Grainne draped an arm, loose and white in its short blue sleeve, around the girl's shoulder.

"Not for seven months almost; we're just after finding out."

"Are you happy?"

"Couldn't be happier. And you, little Clare?"

"What?"

He glanced at my belly. "Are you happy?"

I paused with a shock. I tried to laugh but it came out a cough.

"I should take that pint away from you," he said, "I'd not have given it if I'd known. And you're smoking, too."

"I could just be fat for all you know."

"You've always been a bit fat, Clare, but there's nothing wrong with that. No, there's something about the shape and colour of you that makes it obvious."

The fiddler began to reel gently, the notes tumbling like puppies. I watched Grainne. The door opened behind her and Teffia Mulvaney sliced a cold breeze through the room.

Do you remember Teffia Mulvaney's face? When was the last time you saw her? Teffia has a face like a freckled kitten: pug nose and pointed valentine chin, wide raspberry lips under strawberry hair. Eyes the colour of clear tea. Skin pink spotted cream. O my. Grainne looked up and over and smiled but Teffia ignored her and clicked to the benches where the fiddler fiddled and the guitar player and the bodhran player waited. Teffia slid onto the bench beside the fiddler and watched the bow smacking the strings. Then she looked up toward the bar and saw Niall and me side by side.

I was suddenly conscious of my unwashed hair turned frizzy in the salt and wind; of my prickly unshaven calves and the way my scruffy denims, cut off at the knees, pinched in all the wrong places. She was in a delicate cream-white dress, no more than a piece of half-transparent cotton with darts at the waist and an eyelet neck and hem. She looked at me--I'm sure it was me she was looking at--for a long thick time and then turned her eyes back to the fiddle, pinching her lips together.

The guitarist joined the fiddler and they slipped and rolled and slowed into "Mo Ghille Mear". A strange choice I thought for the beginning of a night at the pub; after a few mourning notes my body began to tighten and turn in on itself. The others around me quieted a little.

Teffia stood up. She didn't move forward, just stood next to the fiddler. Her eyes were on me again but then she closed them. The bar hushed except for a few of the ignorant tourists. Niall didn't turn around but I glanced at him and then across the bar where Teffia's white face was still and filling up in the mirror.

The slow low thrum of the bodhran, gentle and faint, began in my solar plexus and spread out through my limbs to my scalp and the tips of my fingers. Listen carefully next time you hear a bodhran, Auntie. More than any other drum its vibrations scurry after each other so closely and so long that it feels like each tap could follow you for the rest of your days.

'Se mo laoch, mo Gille Mear

'Se mo Shaesar Gille Mear

Suan na sean ni bhfuaireas fein

O chuaigh i gceain mo Ghiolla Mear

Even the tourists were quiet now. I glanced at Niall again. His eyes were still on Teffia in the mirror but then he looked at me. He reached down the bar for a napkin and took a ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket. I watched as he wrote the words I've written above, the chorus of "Mo Ghille Mear", as Teffia sang them behind us filling the pub with sweet grief. He handed the napkin to me.

I read them over and tried to imagine what they might mean. The song went on and on and the bodhran rose underneath it, pounded and pulled below the surface like a rip tide. Finally Niall took the napkin from my fingers, folded it out and wrote next to the Irish words:

He's my hero my shining star

He's my Caesar my shining star

Sleep nor happiness I've not had

Since my shining star went far away

I looked up at Teffia again, her open seraphic lips and the sea of her red hair, and I saw around the closed slits of her eyes the forehead and temples and heavy cheekbones of her father Michael. Those same clenched eyelids a breath away from mine as the stones tore at my back and the carcass of the Plassy looming black above me in the dark. The pub spun around me; I extended my hand and closed it around the damp tepid glass of my Guinness, swallowed the night air bubbling up my throat.

I wanted to ask Niall: where did the man go? But Teffia's song went on and on. I touched my other hand to Niall's and he smiled at me. His face looked old, a little tired around the edges.

I thought: He's happy to see me and I don't know why.

He leaned and asked into my ear, "Will you be staying awhile, then?"

I turned my head until my nose almost touched the tip of his. He pulled back a little, to gain perspective I suppose. I was unable to decide whether the answer to his question was yes or no. So I shrugged and got to my feet.

I took the napkin with me. Grainne didn't look at me as I went out through the door. She, like everyone else, was watching Teffia.

I came back to the B & B but I know now that I won't find you on Inisheer anywhere and I won't run into Gilly by accident. I suppose in my mind I enjoyed the idea of giving her a good scare, walking up behind her at the shop or the whole-foods restaurant by the church and waiting to see what she'd do. But if she never goes out I suppose I have to go find her. It's just about closing time at the hotel now but if I dart out this minute I won't run into too many people on the road. I doubt Gilly's changed so much that she'd be asleep at one in the morning.

VI

Gilly's green house needs paint, Auntie. Flowers and grass burst up through limestone cracks in a cloud of odors, sandalwood cinnamon jasmine--these smells don't belong here in the salt mist off the Atlantic. As I came down the road from the castle I knew which one was hers. What a vista, even in the dark. You descend and the island stretches to the sea which stretches to Galway and in front of you are little houses curled out toward the graveyard; they follow each other like the sheep who decide like one mind to move from one little stonewalled patch of green to the next one, who step over just the right dip in the barrier one after another.

When I arrived in the middle of the night and knocked no one answered. The house was squat and peeling and the windows were dark and curtained. It would've been easy to believe no one lived there.

The door was locked. In places like Inisheer people open closed doors and step into houses and call hello without wondering what might be happening inside. There are things happening, I thought, that Gilly doesn't want the neighbours walking in on. But it was one in the morning for Christ's sake. I pounded for a little while and the door moved under my fist, budging and springing back again. I thought for a moment about whether I'd be able to kick it in.

One of the windows was half-open like Gilly's surly eyes when I used to try to wake her up in the morning. It was on the second floor--not really a floor but the attic I supposed--and set like a cyclops eye into the peak of the roof but big and low, not altogether out of my reach. I stood under the window and heard rustles of movement so I called out: "Gilly, I know you're

in there. It's me. It's Clare." There was no response. "Gilly, I'm not going away until you open the door. Or maybe I'll open it myself."

I stared up at the open window for awhile. Nothing happened. The limp white curtains inside shuddered a little. In the faint distance the sea spat and roiled.

In gym class I was never much good at things like parallel bars or rope-climbing. But there was nothing at the top of the rope that I needed. I crouched and sprang as high as I could with my arms outstretched. Under my fingers the sill crumbled and splintered a little; paint fell in grey-green flakes. Remembering what someone once told me about feet, not knees, I pushed and pulled myself up and stuck my head through the open window. Half of me fell into the house while the other half dangled outside.

The room was dim; the only milky light came from the moon through the white curtains and spilled across the bed. The floor was dusty, the walls bare. Salt air pushed through heavy spice incense and through something else like unwashed bodies licked clean by sea wind. A quilt was crumpled on the floor near the bed, the bed where Gillian was tangled in a mass of sheets and a curl-haired girl; small breasts long limbs fell in all directions. They pulled apart slowly and both turned, bored, half-awake, squinting, toward my torso hanging through the window.

"O for fuck's sake," Gilly mumbled and reached toward the lamp.

"Well, you should have known," I said.

I pulled myself through the rest of the window and almost fell on my head but managed to somersault and land backwards on all fours like a crab, wrenching my arm. With a grimace I dropped into the dust on the floor and folded my legs into a lotus. "Hello, Teffia Mulvaney," I said when the lamp was on.

"Hello," said Teffia Mulvaney sitting up slowly. She was wore a thin white slip torn clear down the middle and didn't bother to pull it over the white freckled breast hanging out. "Who might you be?" She pushed piles of tangled strawberry hair from her face.

"My name is Clare Greening. You don't remember me."

Gilly rolled over and picked up a pack of Silk Cuts from the floor. She was naked and her skinny brown bum poked out of the sheets. She's the same, Auntie, all tiny bones and freckles, although her hair is cut short. "I don't remember you as the break-and-enter type, Clary Sage."

It didn't take her any time to know me. She wasn't surprised; she'd been expecting me. She'd gotten my letter. She'd stopped returning me to sender. Or maybe when Teffia'd seen me at the pub she'd recognized me right away and had run off to fuck Gilly senseless the way a farmer brands a cow.

"I'd like a cigarette if you don't mind, Gilly." I hadn't bought any since I'd arrived, afraid of spending all my money.

"Get your own fucking cigarettes. A guest you are not."

Teffia pulled her lean freckled legs from the sheets and said something in Irish. Her mouth moved in her alabaster face like a snake coiling to strike. There are no snakes in Ireland, I reminded myself, and almost laughed.

Gillian shrugged.

Teffia picked up her white dress, crumpled and dusty, from the floor beside the bed and pulled it over her head. As she stood up the dress fell around her like foam on a Botticelli. Gilly watched as if seeing her for the first time, her black eyes as open as they could be, her lips almost smiling. Jesus, I thought.

"Very fucking nice to see you again, Clare Greening," Teffia said. She looked at me for a moment as though she planned to step straight over my

head but she slid past me shadow-like, sat on the windowsill, swung her white legs around and dropped into the darkness.

Gilly pulled the weighty worn blue quilt from the floor and wrapped herself in it. Her hair is short to her head but sticks out in tufts; her freckles are pale as though she hasn't seen sun in a long time. She's even thinner than before; the grey-and-white sheet showed patches of barely-brown skin over bone. Her eyes larger in her face. She lit her cigarette. "What you want from me I don't know. I would have told you not to come if there'd been time, so."

"A cigarette is what I want from you. Are you going to give me a cigarette or not?" Gilly threw the pack at me. "There was plenty of time," I said. I pulled out a cigarette and held out my hand for her lighter which she also threw, so hard that it clipped me on the temple. "OW. What are you so angry for? You had five years to tell me you'd lost your nerve." She turned her eyes to the wall. "We made a promise," I said.

Between me and the bed was a table with a dirty indigo-blue cloth; on it was a needle and a syringe with a drop of blood in it, and a red-leather-covered book. I got up on my knees and inched toward the table, drew on the cigarette and leaned to get a closer look. "Gilly. Is that the same Bible?" I glanced around but didn't see an ashtray, flicked onto the floor.

"No, don't touch it, you nosy cunt."

I sat back on my heels and contemplated her for a moment, dragged on my cigarette. I wanted very much to be cool. What did it matter in any case? We'd be dead soon.

"I've got to be honest, Gilly; I'm insulted by your tone."

"Well, go away, then. I've nothing at all to say to you."

"Look at yourself." Curled naked on the bed like a shrimp, blanket clutched around her, her Japanese skin turned almost as pale as mine, her eyes hollow and bloodshot, pupils dilating with whatever had come out of that needle. Hair greasy and sticking out all over. The smell of sweat masked by frankincense.

"You're one to fucking talk," she said, sullen, "climbing in through windows where you're not wanted."

"What was I supposed to do? Wait until you came out to go to the post office? We had a deal. I'm ready."

"I don't have the slightest notion what you're talking about. You are completely fucking cracked. You can't just show up and...this is my *house*."

"Well, I can't afford the B & B, so I'm afraid you're going to have to accommodate me. Why don't you live there any longer?"

"Surely you don't want to hear the story of my life at this hour in the morning." She flopped back on the bed and pulled the quilt over her face.

"We don't have a lot of time, Gilly. It's only a few days."

"Until what?" Her voice was muffled

"Don't play innocent." I looked at the mound in the blankets a little while. It didn't move. "You're scared, aren't you? You haven't forgotten. It was you who said it, Gilly. It was you."

The cigarette had burned down to the butt and was singeing my fingers. I pitched it at the window but it hit the sill and fell to the cracked hardwood floor, smoking. I slid over to it, picked it up and dropped it outside. I had an impulse: to lean out and see if it had fallen on anyone's head. We used to do that, wait at her window to drop things on the tourists, smoking butts or candy wrappers or stones we found in our shoes. I smiled thinking of it, glanced at her but she was still buried.

"I know what you did," I said sharply. "You can't have forgotten that."

"Give me back my fags."

I pulled another one from the pack, lit it, tossed them and the lighter back to her. She pushed the blankets from her face and opened the pack, lit a cigarette and paused on one elbow, puffing, for a minute.

"What we did," she said.

"Don't put that on me. It wasn't me."

"Why are you so determined to go, then?" she asked. "If it's my fault, you've nothing to hate yourself about."

"It's not that," I said. "We promised."

"For the love of Christ, Clare. And you still believe in it. After all this time. Things are after changing since then."

"O yes, and for the better, I can see."

"Everything's different now. That was five years ago and I was out of my bleeding mind."

"What, your mind's back?" I grinned. "Look at you. You're a mess. The word is you never leave your house. What kind of a life is that?"

"Fuck you."

"You promised me. I promised you. We swore on that same Bible." I pointed to it, lying on the table so smug and red.

"We were fifteen years old."

"What do you do here all day, Gillian? What do you have to hold on to? Teffia Mulvaney?"

"Leave her out of this, you will." Gillian rolled over, stubbed her cigarette into something I couldn't see on the other side of the bed and tossed the covers off. Naked she looks about nine years old; her breasts are so small you'd think they'd just begun. Only the patch of wiry hair between her legs

and the roads of track marks up the inside of her arms make it clear she's not a little girl. She stood and went to the closet where she pulled a ratty pair of pyjamas, striped blue and grey, from the floor. As she pulled them on, her back to me, she said, "I make incense. For a shop in Galway. They give me oils and powders and I press them into cones and package them and send them back all counted and labeled. That's what I've been doing with myself."

"That would account for the oppressive smell. And that's it? That's the essential service you're performing for the world that you can't abandon?"

She turned to face me. She seemed to be summoning up a buried trump card; her face battled itself like a sheet twisting in the wind. Finally she swallowed and said:

"Teffia loves me. I love her. If I did anything like...I couldn't be doing that to her."

"My memory of Teffia Mulvaney is that she's not the loving kind."

"You don't know a thing about her." She threw up her hands. "Jesus, why am I explaining myself to you? I'm not going to throw myself in the ocean because I wanted to when I was fifteen and hysterical. I can't believe we're having this conversation at all. If you want to stay the night, stay the night. I'll make you up a bed on the couch."

I stared at the burning end of my cigarette. "Why didn't we just do it that night? Right then and there? It would have saved us this whole discussion. Just tipped ourselves over the side. I could have done without the last five years. Easily."

"But we didn't, did we, Clary?" Gilly closed the closet door and inspected her pale face in the mirror that hung on it; she ran a birdy hand

through the hair that stuck out of her head. "We didn't do that. Why would that be, do you suppose?"

"I always supposed it was because you had things you wanted to do in the meantime."

"You don't suppose dying wasn't really what we were after." She turned around, looked around her, lifted up the edge of the quilt on the bed and peered underneath.

"I don't imagine *we* were after anything. This whole thing was your idea. So why don't you tell me, Gilly. Why did you want to wait?"

She pulled a pair of blue scuffed corduroy slippers, men's slippers too large for her, from under the end of the bed and stuck her little feet into them. "Because I didn't want to *die,* you thick-headed twat. Neither one of us wanted to die; otherwise, we'd be dead."

"You said you did."

"Well, I thought so. But I'm not dead, and I'm happy now. I've a lot to live for, contrary to what you think."

"When was the last time you spoke to someone besides that red-haired whore? The people here say you never leave your house."

"Well, that is a simple misunderstanding." She looked around some more, found the pack of cigarettes buried in the blankets. "I am rarely going places where I meet other people, is all."

"And you feel nothing about the fact that you killed someone."

Gilly sat on the bed with a heavy sigh and picked up the pack of Silk Cuts. "Aye. I do. I do feel something, Clare. But it wasn't such a bad thing."

Incredulity filled me to my eyeballs. I sat up on my heels and stared at her, opened my mouth dramatically and waited for a long moment. "What did you say? It wasn't such a bad thing? Is that what you said? You

murdered her. But there are worse things you could have done? And what would they have been?"

Gilly stared at me, her eyes huge round tobacco burns in her skinny face. "What she did to you. That was worse."

We looked at each other like that for a little while. The curtains behind me stirred and brushed my neck as if fidgeting with sympathy.

"I didn't need saving," I said.

"You did."

"She didn't do it."

"It wasn't all her, certainly. I don't pretend I was entirely clear-headed. Which is all the more reason you can't possibly feel obligated to any crap pact we made."

"I do. I promised you, and I'll keep my promise."

Gilly sighed again, shuffled her feet in their big blue slippers, fell back on the bed and watched blue smoke float to the ceiling. "Well, I will not, Clary darling."

"I might have known."

"Yes, you might have. You could have saved yourself the trip."

"I would have come in any case."

"Why?" She still stared at the ceiling. "I'm sure you've a bottle of aspirin or a couple of razors at home."

"That isn't the point, Gilly. I can't believe you don't understand this at all."

"I wish you'd enlighten me, then."

"You and I...we needed...don't you have any consideration for the person you were then? I just want to honour..." I stopped.

"Honour what?" I didn't answer. She sat up. "Honour me? Is that it, Clary? If it's honouring me you want to do, you'll go back home and forget all about this. I don't want you dead, sweetheart."

"It's not that."

"You want to be bound up with me for all eternity then, is that it? Because that's not how it works. Suicides go to hell, my dear, and in hell we won't get to be friends."

I paused for a moment. She flopped back onto the bed.

"Is that it?" I asked.

"Is what it?" she muttered, the cigarette between her lips.

"You don't want to do this because then you think you'll go to hell."

"Well, if there weren't any other reasons, I suppose that might give me pause, yes. But the threat of hell is not the main thing; not wanting to be dead is my most immediate concern." She sat up again, threw her cigarette through the window; it sailed in a perfect arc and disappeared outside. She stood up. "Clare, I'm very tired, and I don't really know where this conversation is going; I'd rather talk about it in the morning, if you think you can keep from killing yourself until then."

She doesn't believe me, I thought. She doesn't believe I'm going to do it.

"I'll wait until the moment, Gilly. We made a promise, and it isn't time yet."

Gilly sighed again, crossed her twiggy arms across her flat chest and looked at me long and hard. Neither of us moved. Then she said,

"Do you know the story of Job?"

I frowned.

"Job received his reward after enduring all the hardship God sent his way. No matter how crap his life was, he believed there was a reason for everything."

I smiled. "But Gilly, there wasn't a reason. It was God playing a game."

Gilly shook her head. "He does not play games, Clary." I didn't answer her. We waited. Finally she shuffled her blue slippers toward the door. "Will you be needing a bed to sleep in, then?" She vanished and clattered down the stairs.

I sat unmoving and finished my cigarette, listened to her bang around in whatever was downstairs. This conversation is not over, I thought, but I knew she'd be having no more of it tonight.

I know it's hard. But Auntie, I'm sure you'd understand, wouldn't you? If you knew. The thing is it was her, it was her who said it. And she was right. This was the only way. The only way I could have gone on was to know it would end sometime soon.

Maybe she thought that in the interim we'd do good things, important things, happy things. Have lovers, write books, see joy. Have babies? Or something. It didn't happen that way. I talked to my therapist and entertained other people's children and learned to play the bodhran. And got myself pregnant but a little too late. All this time I was really waiting to come back to her. She wanted me to go off and make her proud. That would have made her feel better. And what did I do? Sat around and made a baby.

It occurred to me to tell her about the baby. But that would have made things worse I'm sure. And by the time I thought of it her face had closed over. It was obvious she didn't want to hear any more out of me for the time being. And what would've been the point? I can't really think of it as a baby

anyway. One more body for the world to suck dry, one more corpse in the end.

And her? What's she been doing? Locked up in this house with one hand on the Bible and the other up Teffia Mulvaney's cunt. Making piles of smelly dust into little cones and selling it to people to burn in their houses. Sticking a needle into her arm. And then she talks to me about God.

I'll wait for the day; I won't break my promises, not me. If she wants to forget, if she thinks Teffia Mulvaney and the New Jerusalem Bible and cones of incense will make it all worth living out her life a liar and a cheat and a goddamn murderer than there's nothing I can do.

She was willing to kill for me but it seems that's as far as it goes.

VII

She put me to bed on the couch in the kitchen but it was full of lumps and springs. At four in the morning, squirming and tossing, I remembered what Niall had told me about you in the hospital in Galway. I have to admit, Auntie, that in the middle of the night with Gilly and Teffia and Niall and everything else I forgot all about you. But now I started to get riled and I suppose the fact that I couldn't sleep and that coils of wire were sticking into my back didn't help.

I got up. I was wearing a T-shirt and underwear, my fat legs all exposed, so I wrapped my blanket around me. I pulled my lighter and a crumpled cigarette that I'd stolen from Gilly's pack out of the pocket of my souvenir-shop sweater which lay on the floor at the foot of the couch. Then I took myself out to the front step. I closed the door, sat and put my back against it, lit the cigarette and tilted my head back to look at the sky. The moon was dull with the clouds and the beginnings of daylight; there were no stars at all.

I wished I'd thought to ask her what the fuck she was doing putting you away. It didn't occur to me that maybe you were truly crazy, that you might have come at her with the spaghetti tongs or bitten one of the neighbours. It didn't occur to me because I knew--and I know now--it's not possible. I used to watch you, the way you'd stand in the kitchen, stirring the tureen full of oatmeal and flipping breakfast fries of eggs and sausage and potatoes for twelve or fourteen people at a time and you never even broke a sweat. I'd come into the kitchen and your eyes would travel toward me like lighthouse beams making their steady half-circle and back again. "Good morning, Clary darling," you'd say, your voice cool and honey-thick. And I'd

feel exactly what you meant: It's lovely to see you, missy, but I'm busy. You were clear and solid as glass. Auntie, of anyone you were the one who was going to be ok. But now for sure I know the world's no place for anyone to live in. If I had the slightest hesitation, thinking of you gone nuts and in a house full of crazy people has convinced me. It's time to go.

I'm sorry, Auntie. Maybe you sent me home because you thought it was my best chance; maybe you had hope for me. But there isn't any hope, Aunt Rosary, there isn't anything. We've got poison in us, poison we can only watch while it turns love to bile. You were my hope too. If I believed in anything at all you're proof I was wrong. All that's left is for me to save the world from all of us.

I sat until the sun had pretty much come up; it cast long tombstone shadows through the graveyard below and down into the sunken ruins of the temple. The island began to wake up; a man with a wheelbarrow trudged along the road below me; he was far away but he must have seen me because he called out those words for good morning in Irish. Gilly taught them to me long ago but I don't remember them now. I was so astonished I didn't answer him. As he moved along I thought: How can Gilly possibly live in this place? If she wanted to shut herself up in a house and never see anyone, if she wanted the world to forget she exists then how can she live here without going mad?

Maybe she can't. Maybe she will. But I know why she's here; it's because of Teffia Mulvaney.

I pulled the blanket around me and went inside and up to her bedroom. She was asleep; the dirty pale light of the morning fell through the curtains and across her bed, her cropped hair going in all sorts of greasy

directions. The breath moved the freckles on the bones of her face. Then she opened her eyes. "Good morning," she said.

I let her have it. "How could you have put your mother away you ingrate cunt don't you even care about your own fucking family after all she did for you what do you think your mother's a nutcase now and look at yourself you're the one who's lost your fucking marbles with your Bible and your goddamn junk"--at this point I picked up the syringe and needle from the table and slapped them at her and then the red Bible too.

She just lay there.

I ran back down the stairs, stripped off my clothes, pulled a blue sundress out of my bag and over my head, jammed my feet into my tennis shoes, grabbed my handbag and ran out of the house.

I ran up the hill, away from her and away from the sea. I'm on the hill now, halfway up the hill to the castle and the graveyard is down there out toward the ocean. On the side of the hill halfway up and halfway down, graveyard below, castle above. The shadow of the hole in the ground which is the ruin of the temple of Saint Kevin. To go down, not up, to go down to the graves and sit on the broken walls with the dead people; it hits me so hard I sit heavily on the stone wall on the side of the road. Stones stones stones. An old man passes, sidesaddle on a donkey, a basket on each of the donkey's sides. A couple of dogs chase, tumble over one another, in haste and joy.

and when you're only halfway up you're neither up nor down down down

down down down down down

Donkeys wander down the hill ignoring the black-and-white dog barking at their heels. The biggest donkey is at the front, the smallest at the back, two grey one brown one black. I never straightened out the difference between a donkey and a mule. I meant to ask Gilly once but there wasn't time.

Time: we had no idea then that nothing was urgent. We didn't know you would send me home. I wanted to stay here forever; you were the only family I had. But you were about to take Gilly to England, you had to get away from all this and you had no money for me and her both. At least I suppose that was the reason.

Heading down the pier with Niall, Gilly walking slow behind us, as if we hoped the boat would leave without me. We didn't know a day or two days was all the same, this boat or the next one or no boat at all, it didn't matter, none of it would change anything. You were sending me home to where the Cassatts were waiting for me once again to try to make me forget, although I know the forgetting was not your idea.

When I was fifteen I'd lived by this ocean all my life. But not here. I didn't see why it would make a difference, one side of it or the other. Mumma did though. Mumma kept saying: We've never been there. But she'd never been anywhere and neither had I. I didn't know then why this place mattered and everywhere else was so many colours splashed in an atlas.

Mumma made me so many promises, Auntie. From the earliest time I can remember--the time in that house where it was always dark, when we never went outside and I never saw anyone but that man she called my father--she was always telling me the things we'd do someday. Someday we'd be able to go outside, she said, but it wasn't true--once I got to be outside she'd been taken away and there was no *w e* any more. Someday we'd be a real

family, she told me on those weekends she came to see me, a real family with a house and some dogs and a father. But I knew even then it wasn't going to happen. Someday we'd be with God, she said, together we'd be with God. I know now there isn't any God but even if there is, Mumma isn't with Him and I probably won't be either.

One day we went to Cape Spear in the middle of winter to walk along the frozen sand and look for shells. I was about eleven. We'd had to wade through snow almost waist-high to get to the beach but it was easy to walk once we got there because the sea had washed the sand clean and hard. We picked up smooth stones and she tried to teach me how to skip them across the water but all mine sank. I fired them into the foam a few times and then gave up. The sea was slate-grey and howled like a mother who'd lost all her blood and all her babies. I turned to look at Mumma but she didn't see me. She was looking out toward Ireland. She said, "Someday, my honey, you and me are going to go there and live with Rosary. And we'll be happy there. We'll be very very happy, and God will take care of us."

I looked at her and for a quick guilty moment I wanted to throw the stone in my hand at her golden head and crack it open. But I stopped and I thought about it. She didn't see me as I stared at her and she didn't ask what I was thinking; she gazed out over the ocean. But I decided then and there that I was never going to promise anyone anything for as long as I lived unless I was absolutely sure I could make that promise true.

This is what Gilly doesn't understand and I don't really know how to explain it to her; I don't know how to make her listen. But if she thinks staying alive now will save her from hell then there's no way to make her understand anything.

That afternoon on Cape Spear I left Mumma at the edge of the water and walked by myself down the beach. All along it I found tiny orange shells, little snail shells all the same coral colour, no bigger each one of them than the head of a match. I had to dig them out of the packed sand with a fingernail or sift through piles of frozen pebbles. I found myself a pocket full of them. Near the tideline there was a puddle in a cold hollow where the sea had just washed in and I dropped the whole mess of shells into it and watched them deepen from coral-peach to apple-red. I left them there but when I got home I missed them and cried. I thought of asking her to take me back there again one day but I didn't. I tried never to ask my mother for anything.

Anytime we were near the sea she'd look out over it, her hair whipping into a tangle of gold, and she'd say, "We've never been there, Clare. We'll go together some day. That's where Rosary is."

I used to think about that sometimes in those years after she died and you sent me home. I'd face east on the water and I'd look out toward where I thought Ireland was. I'd think: that's where Rosary and Gilly are. Sometimes I'd think of Niall too. But not Teffia. Almost never her.

But now--I look down toward the beach; I see Teffia Mulvaney's red hair against the water.

I stand ready to go somewhere else but Teffie's head turns. Her arm, the underside almost the same colour as the beach--pale blue-white--rises and gestures. I hesitate a moment. She's waiting. So I pick my way down amongst the stones, kick off my tennis shoes when I get to the sand.

When I reach her she says, "I'm remembering you now."

Teffia's hair a strawberry cloud around her freckled face, cheekbones pink from the sun but not newly so. Feet bare and no shoes around.

"Why, do you suppose," Teffia says slowly (her voice rough and clear and heavy and sweet altogether) "Gilly never told me you were coming?"

Teffia's bare legs slender and soft and strong, unshaven of their down which is visible only because of a transparent copper catch of the light. Bare to the thighs where she's hitched up her dirty white dress. Bent at the knee, feet deep in the sand at the heels, square toes with broken toenails poking out. Her dress falls away at the pink cream freckled shoulders. On purpose.

"Do you believe," Teffia asks putting her elbows on her knees and leaning toward me, "it's because she didn't want me to know? Or do you believe"--and she pulls away just as suddenly and lies back into the sand, pushes her heels away and stays splayed like a snow angel, her eyes on me--"do you think it's because it didn't really matter?"

Her body wide open as a jug with no lid. Her eyes unblinking tea brown. I want to ask her to sing a song. I want to make some sort of use of a body so convenient and idle. Children play further down the beach near the airstrip.

I pull my sundress overhead.

I stand and walk to the edge of the waves. The water is very cold. Clammy sand, freezing salt foam break over me as I lie down.

Why do I always end up in places where the sea takes everything away?

The sand shifts with footsteps. Thinking of Teffia I look up but Teffia's gone. Gillian is wearing shorts so high I can see pubic hair spill out the edges. A black bikini halter, every pointy rib, the body of a child in one of those television ads meant to persuade fat people like me to give money to children turned to bone by famine. Track marks on the insides of her elbows. My head sinks back into the foam again.

"Would you be going stark fucking mad?" Gilly asks. I barely hear her through the waves in my ears and the tears that rise into the water. I pull up and my hair stiffens with salt.

"The sea is not a fucking spa," Gilly says. "Is it pneumonia you're after?"

I splash foam on my face and then I laugh. "Here I am, trying to wash my tears with sea salt. My life has been an exercise in futile gestures."

"Melodrama does not suit you."

"I beg your pardon? You're one to talk."

Gilly's face to the white sky. "Well, we won't speak of that, will we."

I turn my face up to the sky too. She's right; it's cold.

"I saw you through the window," she says, "down here with her, and I saw her go. I wondered if you might be going to drown yourself. If you were, though, you picked a crap way to do it."

I put my head back on the wet sand again and let a wave pass over my face; I choke and sit up; a whip of kelp lashes me across the eyes. Peeling it away I look out across the grey ocean toward Galway. Gulls circle shrieking. I wonder if they're like carrion crows or hawks, if they sense when people are dying and wait for them.

I get to my feet. The ocean seems so greedy, so desperate, but when I begin to walk out toward Galway it changes its mind. When the water reaches my chest a crest of foam knocks me down and pushes me back; I open my eyes and she's still on the beach watching me. Seaweed and the transparent veined bodies of jellyfish flutter past me; one pulsing globe slaps my hand and I pull away in panic. I think of Mumma because we never knew if she died right away, broken on the stones, or if her unconscious body understood about the salt and the living creatures that kept her company

until she was gone. They didn't let me see her corpse afterwards, but I imagine it all the time, the dye in her pink dress running into magenta and white marbling, sheets of kelp spilling around her swollen grey face, her face whose divinity and golden charm had been swallowed and washed away.

The waves keep trying to toss me back to Gilly and finally I let them. It isn't time yet, I think, floating. I push my feet against the sharp shells buried in the bottom, crawl out onto the beach. I lie down on the sand spluttering and shivering. She looks down at me with her black eyebrows drawn together. Then she picks up my blue sundress and tosses it on top of me where it can absorb the cold dirty salt I am left with.

"Cover yourself, for Christ's sake," she says. "I'll go put on the kettle."

VIII

I went to the B&B this morning to get the rest of my things and to tell the lady I wouldn't be back. She nodded, wrote me a bill, took my money and asked no questions. Much the way you would have, Auntie.

I wanted to look around some more, see the rooms she lives in, the rooms I lived in for that summer: the kitchen, the family bedrooms. It seemed rude though, presumptuous, so I didn't ask. I did, after I'd packed up my little bag, go into the front room which was always shared with the guests. The piano is still there; I think it's the same piano. I stood next to it for awhile and I watched out the window which looks over the pier where the children congregate around the chipper and the boats come to and fro. It was a sunny day today and the gulls seemed happy, circling and shouting. Families lolled on the beach. Some were in bathing suits and splashed in the water although it was no more than fifteen degrees; some rolled their pant legs and walked along the surf; some sat on the sand with sweaters and books, bare toes buried. I turned to the piano and thought about tonic chords, wondered how one would go about making one. I've never learned to play although that summer I was here I'd sometimes sit here in the daytime and twiddle the keys until you stuck your head in and offered to find me something to do. Subtle, that.

I left the B&B and walked up to the shop thinking I'd buy Gilly some groceries; I'd looked around the kitchen before I left and found it astonishingly bare; I suppose from the looks of Gilly it's possible she never eats. I brought some bread and juice and apples up to the counter and had to wait behind a family of tourists who didn't seem to speak English well; their conversation sounded like German maybe; it wasn't Irish because the man at

the counter didn't understand them. There was a mother and a father and five boys; the oldest, about fourteen and handsome, with big chocolate eyes and a minkpelt of dark hair, held the youngest in his arms, a baby wrapped in a thin blue blanket. A gaggle of teenage girls came in looking for chocolate and Ballygowan and as they swarmed around us at the counter a couple of them peered into the baby's face, touched his pomegranate cheeks with long freckled fingers. They looked up at his teenage brother and smiled and he averted his eyes. When he and his family gathered their purchases and trundled outside the girls looked at each other, giggled and whispered in Irish.

The man who rang in my groceries was huge-bellied and old with tufts of yellow-white hair and I asked him for tampons to see him mutter and blush no. Good thing too because I have no use for them and wouldn't have wanted to pay. You couldn't buy anything but pads last time I was here--sanitary towels Gilly called them--and I just wanted to check how much things had changed. The time I asked Gilly why I couldn't find Tampax she said, "Because they still hope nice Catholic girls wouldn't know what to do with them, and good married ladies would be too busy pregnant to ever have a period. Have to keep up the population of the Gaeltacht, you see."

It made me think of you, Auntie, who never had a baby, even the one you started.

As I walked back down toward Gilly's house someone was coming up the road. It was the pug-faced boat-hand who once saw my boobs on the boat. He turned in at Gilly's door. Gilly came out just as I arrived on the doorstep and the boat-hand handed her a package wrapped in brown paper. She took it without a word and handed him more money than I expect you would pay for a few ounces of powdered incense.

I didn't ask her what it was. I put my groceries down on the table and put the kettle on. She took the package up to her room and didn't come down for half an hour or so. When she did I told her about the lumps in the couch so she made me up a mattress in the little sitting room off the kitchen.

IX

The days are sandy and cold here. It hasn't rained but the sky stays a cool slate-grey; it's impossible to tell where the sea ends. At night the stars don't come out.

Gilly's house is dreary, Auntie. I don't like it that she lives here. The walls are bare and dirty; all the furniture is broken. There's no television, no stereo, no books except the red Bible. On the first floor is the kitchen, a small washroom with a dirty toilet and a little alcove where she's made me a bed; her room is in the peak of the roof with a closet-sized workshop where she keeps her oils and powders and jars. Even with the windows open the smell of incongruous plants hangs fog-like over everything; it nauseates me.

She never goes anywhere but the shop to buy bread and potatoes and meat bones. The post officer gets fed up when the junk mail spills out of her box, comes down to toss it through the door.

In the morning Gilly is always alone. We eat toast and tea together, usually in silence.

"We made a promise," I tell her.

"That was a long time ago," she says.

"We swore on that same fucking Bible, Gilly."

"I'll rip it to pieces if it'll make you go home," she says. But I say no. Nothing will ever make me go home now. Wherever that is.

"Think of the baby, then," she says. I didn't tell her about the baby but she guessed one night when she tossed me a t-shirt to sleep in and watched me undress. The biggest shirt she owns and I couldn't pull it over the little bulge in my belly.

"I am thinking of the baby," I say.

No more babies for Christ's sake. What have they got to look forward to? The sea takes everyone sooner or later. What if my baby has a baby someday? Another corpse, a corpse for as long as it lives, a baby for my baby to torture and lie to. Another joke for God to amuse Himself with. I won't have it. I wish it all could have been different, I wish I could have done something to make the wait seem worth it. For all the difference it made we could have followed Mumma's pink dress off the side of the rotten boat that night.

The other day I asked Gilly about England. She didn't want to say much. "Mam wanted to get away. She thought it was better for me. We stayed four years and I'd had enough." And then she shut up and I knew to leave it.

For half the day she presses scented dust into little cones, pours oils around. Rose sandalwood patchouli jasmine. Clary sage. Sometimes she lets me watch her through the workshop door; I sit with a book on her bed and smoke her cigarettes while she putters around. She burns things, heats things on her little Bunsen burner, cools them, stirs them; maybe I should pay more attention but it all seems so unnecessary to me. Things should smell the way they smell; they shouldn't smell like places far away. But I don't leave. I like feeling her there.

The other half of the day she reads the Bible at the kitchen table. For hours on end, I mean it, Auntie, how could you let this go on? She doesn't read out loud to me the way she used to. I sometimes wish she would; I asked her to once. She looked at me. "What good would it be doing you?" she asked, and her black eyebrows drew together. "You don't believe in it."

"I like the sound of it."

"Have you nothing else to do, so? A book to read, a boy to visit, a plane to catch?"

"Just read me a verse. Something you like."

She shrugged. "It's not a question of like or don't like. You wouldn't understand anything."

I look at that Bible sometimes and think about taking it down to the beach to burn it, to throw it into the sea. I haven't yet. The waves would just toss it back to me. The sea kills things but it doesn't keep them. I've always known this; it's the same where I come from. Fire is the best way to get rid of something for good but I don't know a thing about fire.

Sometimes we sit in the kitchen and eat soup. Soup and toast seem to be all she eats and not much of them. If I knew how to cook I'd make her something else, roast her a chicken or bake a lasagna. But she just throws a ham bone and an onion and a potato and a carrot into a pot of water and stews it all day. It tastes of bones and onions and starch. With all the smells around here you'd think she'd know something about flavour. But she doesn't seem to care.

I tried asking her about you. She shut up like a strongbox. I even yelled at her this morning. "How can you not care about your own fucking mother."

So she finally yelled back at me. "You're one to talk. Have you cried for her once, you frozen twat?"

It took me a moment to realize she wasn't talking about you. Then I said, "Yes. Yes, I have." And I was telling the truth in a way. I didn't explain that I haven't cried for Mumma since she died but I often did when she was alive. When she came to take me to live with her again I cried for hours and for days afterwards. She thought it was because I didn't want to leave the

Cassatts and go with her; she said that over and over. But it wasn't so simple. Before that, when she came to see me for a day and then went away again, I sometimes cried after she left. It was as though as long as she wasn't there I could forget she'd ever left me at all. It mystifies me even now. Why would I grieve for my mother? It's not like she had anything to give me but the voices of angels and bad promises.

At night Gilly goes into her room, to shoot up that stuff the boat-hand brings her I suppose. Sometimes Teffia comes and I try not to listen. Like you did I'm sure. But some nights Gilly goes away and doesn't come back until morning.

I went to see the Plassy yesterday. It's the first time since. It doesn't seem any more or less rotten than it was five years ago. A great flaking scar of a dead boat tipping itself toward the ocean. I sat on the rocks for awhile and looked at it. I didn't go inside. The big rusted signs say DANGER and SEACHAIN--when I first saw them I wondered what a seachain was, thought it sounded very poetic, until Gilly told me it's Irish for beware. Those signs seem to mean something now whereas they didn't really before.

Once long ago, it seems so long ago, Gilly and I sat on that beach and looked at the Plassy. It was sunny that day I remember, sunny and hot, the hottest I'd ever seen it in Ireland. Gilly said, "It's all so pitiful. When you think about it. What does it matter? What christly difference does it make, anything we do? On this fucking rock in the ocean. Sooner or later the world's going to burn up or burn out or explode or the Judgment Day will come, and nothing I'm after doing will change that."

I said, "But if the Judgment Day comes, everything you've done will matter."

"Only to me," Gilly said. "Only to me."

And to me, I thought. It already matters to me.

That was the day before she tipped Mumma off the side of the boat. Was that why? She wanted to do something that made a difference to someone? To me? I wonder sometimes. Why was it Mumma and not Michael Mulvaney? Why did she want to save me and not Teffia? Was it because she knew there was no saving Teffia? Was it because she knew she would never get Michael Mulvaney into that rust trap of a dead ship much less be able to push him over the side? Was it because she only had that moment when the tide was right and Mulvaney was already gone? Or was it because I mattered? Mattered more?

Picking my way through the stones to the boat again I found myself looking over my shoulder. I don't know where he is, Michael Mulvaney; he could be anywhere. Maybe I should ask Teffia.

That first day I was ever on Inisheer Gilly took me walking between stone walls along a path which seemed also to be a road. Sheep, ponies and a horse-pulled cart full of shrieking teenagers. The stones in the walls piled in rows like sketches I'd seen of cells, skin cells maybe. Flattened by one another, no visible gaps. Light does not pass through us. But a stone has no nucleus, no membrane: it's all one thing. Divided, it doesn't change significantly. If you pile stones together, they don't speak to one another, they transmit nothing between them. All they are is a wall.

This island is divided into patches. Gilly and I stood on a hill and looked down and could see it all in little rooms, cubicles in an office. The sheep knew where to go to step over the walls. But I'd get lost without the paths and signs. Not a labyrinth exactly; you can always see the sea. But maybe I could get to a place that's impossible to leave.

We were on the other side of Inisheer looking, not out to Ireland, but to the place I was born. I used to go to Signal Hill in St. John's a lot; once I went with a clumsy tumbling friend and a couple of other people who had sex in the backseat while we looked at the lights of the city and out over the water. I didn't care about the lights--they were ordinary as the sea--but I'd made a few things clear to my friend.

And stones too were ordinary. Once Mr. Cassatt and I went to the airport to pick up a friend of his from somewhere else, from the Prairies I think. Through the whole ride home the friend kept gasping, "O my God the mountains. So many rocks, so many shapes." It took a thousand years for me to understand that in some places the land is flat, uninterrupted, the earth soft and muddy.

We trundled along the beach of rocks, Gilly and I. Flat smooth stones; wet crags rife with barnacles like a cheesegrater; pillars, obelisks. I wanted to take off my shoes but I was afraid of sharp surprises. The Plassy loomed far away, a hulk of rust leaning away from the sea. The outline of a big yellow sign said DO NOT ENTER. I looked up and toward the water over ripples of grey and white stones and saw:

A man perched on a rock in the middle of the expanse of beach. A black-haired squat man with a black thick moustache. Heavyset. I couldn't see his eyes; he was too far away. He was wore blue denims and a cheap-looking short-sleeved blue shirt with buttons.

As we passed him far up the beach he turned his head to look although we were too far away for him to speak to us. I began to see near his feet the head of a girl, a pale strawberry rippled head, and her bare white shoulders. She sat in a recess, perhaps a pool. I could see her face in profile. It was impossible to say at that distance if she was pretty but she looked young, as

young as me. And he looked old, older than my mother. I imagined pale freckles on her pale skin. I imagined she had no clothes. He sat, his feet planted apart on the rocks near her head.

Gilly didn't look at them as far as I noticed. But how could she miss such a black head and such an orange one against the white-blue of sky and sea, the white-grey of stone?

It wasn't until I saw Teffia Mulvaney sing at the pub the first time a few days later that I remembered and even then I put it out of my mind as quickly as I could.

I think about Mr. and Mrs. Cassatt sometimes, wonder if I should call. But that's impossible. They'd come over here to find me, or send someone. Mrs. Cassatt would cry on the phone. I think of Mr. Pike but he doesn't care any longer. He sent me away as if he knew it was time for me to go. I wonder if the women's center has found someone else to sit at the desk and read playscripts. Then I laugh. What does it matter?

Answer me, Auntie.

X

Tonight at the pub I told Niall I'd been learning the bodhran. He left the bar and took the bodhran out of the drummer's hands, passed it to me. They made me sit in the drummer's seat. It was "My Match it is Made". Through the whole thing Teffia kept glancing at me, her tea-coloured eyes black and wronged. Everyone applauded though, very loud, and they made me get up to take a bow. The drummer clapped me on the back, whispered something in Irish in my ear. I think it might have been lewd.

When it was time to close up Niall went home to his wife. The band asked me come drink with them at the other pub down by the pier but Teffia had disappeared after splashing me with her eyes full of cold dew. So I said no and went home. Gilly wasn't there.

It was almost three in the morning and I should have gone to bed. But I wasn't tired and the bodhran had made me vibrate all over like the hum of a refrigerator. What I wanted was to go out for a walk. I was afraid to because I don't like the night--you can't see what's in it--but then I thought, for Christ's sake what do I have to be afraid of now? The worst anyone can do is kill me and they'll be helping me out.

It made me stop and wonder, that I had to think it out that way.

I walked up to the castle. It wasn't far, just up the hill. I wanted to sit for awhile in the total black that I remembered inside. It hit me hard as I got closer that I'd been hoping that Niall and I would come up here together again someday. So I didn't go in right away. I sat on the wall and looked at the ruins and thought for a bit.

He hasn't changed much, Niall. I saw it in his eyes again when he took the bodhran from the drummer and gave it to me tonight. He put his hands

over mine to press the skin of the drum between them and I thought: Why the fuck did he have to go and get married. That would be something to live for.

Then I laughed at myself.

I wasn't ready to go inside yet. I sat for a moment and put my hand over my belly. O the father's not an issue Auntie, some man I met at Shooters and went off with so I wouldn't have to fuck Don Masters who'd been buying me drinks all night. I don't even remember the boy's name. And yes all right I do wish a bit that if I had to have a baby it could have been Niall's. But then my mother wanted her baby to be God's, didn't she? And I might as well be. And this baby might as well be God's or Niall's or anybody's; in the end it doesn't make a whit of difference.

Someone was floating up the path toward me. Who the hell would come out here at four in the morning? Kids maybe, sneaking out of their houses to drink whiskey and have sex. Or maybe not. This person was a white wraith and her hair glowed copper like a lunar eclipse.

"Here." Teffia stood between me and the door of the castle and motioned, the same motion as the other day on the beach. With the moon behind her I could see the shape of her straight through her dress. "Let me show you."

I didn't move. "Show me what?"

"Come see, then."

"I think I already know."

"No, I'm promising you. You've no idea." She disappeared inside.

The middle room of the castle was almost opaque black but light must have come from somewhere to glow faintly on Teffia's white dress. Her back against the wall. "Over here."

"I was just sitting. I didn't ask for company. I thought you were with Gillian."

"I won't offer again. Come now, no one will know."

"How can you? No, I can't. I wouldn't."

Teffia's voice oboe-like, amused. "Ah, you will."

She pulled away from the wall and like a moonbeam flowed up to me. Her body was very unlike a moonbeam, warm and thick with breath. Wrapped a white hand around the back of my neck. Here inside the dark we might have been the only two people left alive. Teffia took my hand and slid it up under the white dress between soft legs.

"Come now," Teffia murmured. "It never takes me more than a minute, but I'll do you for as long as you want."

I knew the difference, Auntie. I tried to think as I ran my hand over the slickness of her and listened, wished I could see her face the way it was that day on the rocks so long ago...I tried to think why I would want such a thing knowing--or not knowing perhaps--what Gilly would do if she ever knew.

I pulled my hand away but not because I wanted to stop. I wanted to know what she would do. She slid her hands up under my shirt and I concentrated on the slim bones over my swollen breasts. Will she notice, I wondered, the suspicion of my belly? Then she pushed me down into the cold dirt and pulled my skirt up a bit roughly and my underpants down, tossed them away somewhere into the dark.

"Why do you want to?" My voice was too hard, echoing a little and then sucked away by the pores of the stones.

She froze. Her moist breath was poised above the fur between my legs. Slowly she pushed my knees apart. As she spoke in barely a whisper her lips

brushed a hair or two and shocks travelled from the core of me out toward the extremities of my skin.

"What does it matter?"

Then her tongue descended; her hands clutched me open where my legs meet the rest of me.

I knew what she was aiming for. She wanted me to do what she'd done that day, to writhe and scream and moan and then lie still. I've seen it in movies and read of it in books; I've even known enough to try to make it happen by myself. But I didn't believe that I had it in me to feel such a thing.

She was however true to her word and that surprised me. It seemed to take forever but after a minute or two I didn't mind that. She went at me with slow deliberation, long wet strokes that never seemed to grow tired. I closed my eyes and tried to forget that it was her, imagined that it was Niall, that it was Gilly. But soon I knew that I wanted it to be her, that if anyone ever tried to do this to me again it would be her that I would imagine in their place. It started to ache out in all directions, pulled me to the dirt ground and the ceiling stones and the ocean and her mouth all at once and when I let go with a cracked "O" she slid a hard finger inside me and then two and sucked with a masterful pull and plunge until the baby itself pleaded for her to finish me off and my whole life broke into an infinity of fragments the size of her grazing teeth, set free a yell I never knew was in me but that shot out all the broken doors of the castle and fell over the whole island, jarred it a few inches deeper into the sea.

She knew to keep her tongue at it a moment more, slowed and curled, withdrew her hand and let me pulse and burn and finally pull away. Then she drew herself up and settled her bare mound over mine, her legs folded tight on either side of my flanks, the soft peach inner lips of her over mine

and she nudged against me warm and firm and circled a little with her hips, and her breath started to roll in mountains right from her depths and poured over me, and it was no time at all before her hands pinned my hair to the earth and she moaned into my mouth and I rose up once again to meet her and the two of us shook and cried out into one another until finally she crumbled onto me and we lay in a heap of sweat-damp rags and soil and worn-out white skin.

If I had the slightest doubt that I don't deserve to live I'm free of it now.

We lay quietly for awhile side by side, our arms barely grazing, her hair tangled in mine between our faces. Then she laughed.

"What?" I asked; it broke as it moved through my throat.

"You," she said.

"What about me?"

"You being so sure that you wouldn't."

I didn't want her to go. I didn't want her to run off the way she did that other time. I thought of the afternoons when she and Gilly would fight in a language I didn't understand, quiet and vicious as knives; sometimes she made Gilly cry but when I asked Gilly what it was about she told me to shut up. I thought of Niall saying, "There wouldn't be a man on this island who hasn't fucked Teffia Mulvaney."

"Why do you do this?" I asked.

"Because I like it," she said. "Don't you?"

"You like it with everyone?"

"Everyone."

The laughter left her voice then. She lay very still as though deciding how to say something. I listened to the sea trying to speak through the broken walls.

"I don't understand," she said slowly, "why people can't just take things for what they are."

Silence.

"Like Gilly, you mean?"

I felt her head shake slowly; her hair moved against the side of my face. "No. Not Gilly."

"Who then?"

"People. People who think I'm so bad. What does it matter if it's you or Gilly or someone else? It's all in the moment."

The moment of passing them on the beach, a black greasy head and a cloud of sunrise waves.

"I want to know something."

She waited.

I told her about that first day I was on Inisheer when Gilly took me around the island to the Plassy. I told her about the man and the girl I saw amongst the rocks, the moustached man and the red-haired girl.

"Was it you?" I asked. "Was it you and your father?"

She didn't answer me for a moment.

Then she said softly, "You see? This is what I'm saying. What does it matter? If I want to do something, and it doesn't hurt anyone, why do people think they have something to say about it?"

"If you want to do what?"

She pulled away a little, turned on her side. In the almost-black light I saw an outline of her valentine face turned toward me.

"I came with himself like I did with anyone else," she said.

I was starting to shiver with cold, wanted to pull down my skirt, to get up and find my underpants, to go home and tell Gilly I was sorry. But I didn't dare move.

She said, "Animals do it to each other all the time, so. How do you think they made us in the first place? Of course every time they look at us they can't help thinking of us as little packages of sex. I can't really blame them. If I think of everyone I know who's been fucked or twiddled or licked or jerked by their ma or da, the only answer is that it's meant to be so."

She was watching me, I could feel it although I didn't know how she could see or what she was waiting to find.

"Why was it my mother," I said so low that I imagined she might not even hear, "and not your father, who died?"

The ocean laughed at me.

"Because Gilly knew," Teffia said, "that I could stop loving her just as easy as I started."

The moondim edges of her faces descended with a cold bruising kiss. "But it doesn't matter now, does it?" she whispered against my hair. With a white rustle all her warmth pulled away and out.

I lay alone on the cold earth of the castle floor and for a little while, I cried.

THREE

ROSARY

XI

I never loved Molly as I should have. I couldn't; who could? She was such a mad thing, frightening really. From the time she was born my father insisted she was an angel of some kind. O of course I was jealous; how could I help it? My mother and I were just women to him, meant for woman sorts of things, teaching and taking care of babies. Molly was meant for God.

Not that I envy her that in the end. That was what turned her into such a nutter. No there's no other way about it, Clare, and I'm sorry, it's not a nice thing to say about someone's mother certainly. But she was my sister too you know.

Oh yes she was pretty but you remember that no doubt. Pretty doesn't come close to describing it. Even as a newborn she was an exquisite little doll-like thing and then she got that pile of yellow curls and all those brown limbs. When her breasts came in you'd see grown men stop dead on the street to look at her; shameful it was, looking that way at a little girl. I've no doubt that if she had a big nose or if she'd been fat my father never would have thought to call her the Lamb of God. But then that's what got her into a mess of trouble really.

You look quite a lot like her, Clare. Plumper certainly, and paler and without that otherworldly sort of look that made men want to pin her down on the earth. But your eyes and the shape of your mouth. It's strange that you can look so much like her and so much like your father too: your hair's the same wavy dark and your nose...

Oh yes, I know all about that Immaculate Conception business. I only wish I'd been there to help her with that. When Mother Agnes called and told me about Molly claiming she was carrying the child of God I thought

about going home. Our baby had died by then after all and it seemed clear Colin didn't have much use for me any longer. But then we learned Gilly was coming. It had been a long wait and suddenly Colin and I had a reason to be together again. So we wrote and told the nuns we wanted Molly to keep you, that we'd bring you both over once Gilly was there and everything was settled and in order. And Colin got sick just after Gilly arrived and there was all that. And when he died you and your mother were nowhere to be found. And I didn't realize how attached I'd grown to Inisheer, to the life in Ireland. I thought maybe I should go home just to be there, to be a sort of beacon waiting for her to search for me. But after Colin died I realized I couldn't leave Inisheer. It had become my home and Gilly's home too. I mentioned to her once that maybe we could go to Newfoundland and that evening--all of four years old she was--she left the house all alone and walked out to the Plassy, climbed up inside and fell to the rocks below. The tide was out and she had nothing but a few bruises but I knew what it was all about. One of the villagers saw her heading in that direction and when I went off in a panic going from house to house looking for her he walked me along the beach and we saw her lying on the stones. The seconds when I thought she might be dead were the longest I've ever known. I knew what it was about. We wouldn't be going to Newfoundland.

Ah yes I'm sorry, I got lost a little there. No no darling. There's no doubt in my mind your father was Father Corrigan, the young priest who married us. It took him a couple of years to work himself up to it I suppose, but there it was; she mentioned him in her letters more often than I liked even if I didn't know why I didn't like it: going to see him about this and that, how kind he was and so on. She wasn't the first; he was arrested a few years later on charges from a whole mess of girls but Molly was long gone by then.

One of the only priests I ever knew who preferred little girls to little boys. I'm sorry darling, that was a cruel joke. It's not a laughing matter, I'm well aware. His arrest was a shock to everybody; he was a young and handsome man, very kind to everyone, I'd fancied him myself before I met Colin but Father Corrigan never looked twice at me in that way although he was always very friendly. Then again, God knows what would've happened if I'd ever been caught alone with him.

Do you remember anything at all about St. Margaret's? It was a strange place, looking back, with all those rich girls mixed in with all those orphans. And Molly and I were both, rich and orphans, although by the time Mum and Dad died I was too old to be an orphan really, old enough to look after myself although it must have been hard for Molly. She always said it was all right, they were with God and that was best, and I never had the heart to say that if God stuck to his rules they weren't with him at all most likely or at least Dad wasn't. O I'm pretty sure their death was no accident. Dad talked often about how he was not meant for this world; too miserable for this world more likely--I said that to him once and got a wallop to the side of my head for my trouble. No Clare, our father was not a nice man. Molly was too young to understand, never seemed to have noticed that he beat our mother senseless. He never laid a hand on Molly. I don't think it was a coincidence that he made sure she was well cared for and went directly to drive himself and Mum off the side of a cliff. O I can look back now and say it easily but at the time I thought I might go mad myself crying every night over my poor Mum. But I had to be there to look after Molly; I had to get a hold of myself for there was no chance she would.

O we weren't close, don't misunderstand. I left home for school when she'd barely been born. I only saw her in the summertimes and at Christmas

and once I turned fourteen and could work at St. Margaret's in the summers Dad was all too happy to leave me there when I asked. But when she started school I felt an obligation.

Well now. Let me be honest. I was frightened of her even then; she seemed so possessed, like she was full of demons that had convinced her they were angels. We learned later it was all medical, or mostly. But in a way I was rather proud under everything. I was proud because I was the one everyone said was so capable and I liked to take care of things, you understand...well that's not the important thing, I'm just trying to make things clear for you. The important thing is that I was proud she was my sister even if she was a lunatic. She was so beautiful you see, it would stop your heart, it really would, and what's more, although she had the meanest temper you ever saw--she bit a nun once who was trying to cut off her hair--when she was sweet it was a real sweetness, not put on the way some girls do it to get what they want. She wasn't at all the sort to be devious or to manipulate. She didn't need to. Either people gave her anything she asked for or she went out of her head and screamed and kicked. I can imagine what happened with that pervert who kept her locked up for two years--o and you too Clare, o God maybe this isn't something you want discussed. Do you remember all that? Of course you were still a baby then. I don't know what was in her mind but when they finally found her, the story goes, she didn't want to go with them. She loved him, she said. I try to imagine the two of you shut away like that, her using old T-shirts because he didn't dare buy diapers at the store. But I can imagine what happened. She chanced upon him somewhere and he took one look at her and all his brains dropped straight into his prick. Shame on him, a little girl like that. And she didn't

have to do a thing, just presented herself to be rescued. From what I'm sure I don't know.

I do believe it was that family who saved you, the ones they sent you to while she was in the hospital. What were their names? I talked to them occasionally and they seemed like such lovely people. Weren't they lovely people? It's the only explanation I can find for why you're not dead or in jail or a complete fruitcake like your mother. Isn't it strange, Clare, how you turned out so strong and Gilly...well, that's another story, isn't it. But I can tell you one thing, Clare. Your grandmother would be proud of you if she were alive.

Yes, I know the story. Gilly told me everything. Why do you suppose we left for England after you were gone? We couldn't stay around where people might figure things out; I don't know if you've ever lived in a place like Inisheer, but it's not the sort of spot you want to be if people think you're a scandal. And Gilly went ahead and went back home anyway all over that foolish Mulvaney girl. O I don't judge; after the things I've seen in my family my daughter being a lesbian is the least of my troubles I can tell you. I still love her with all my heart after everything; she's a good girl deep down Gilly is, no matter what shows on the surface. She told me the story, Clare, and I have to tell you I've never caused harm to anyone in my life, never kicked a dog and never struck my children more than a little tap on the bum but if I'd seen what Gilly saw I might have killed your mother myself, Clare. I wouldn't have calculated it like a CIA agent as Gilly did, mind you, but I might very well have picked up a stone off the beach and crushed her pretty head. Forgive me darling. But when Gilly finished telling for a moment I felt nothing but relief that Molly was dead.

But as for that Mulvaney man...do you see what my problem was? How was I to do anything about him without exposing my daughter? It would be very easy for the connections to be made and Gilly was too volatile, she wasn't shrewd, she was sure to say something to implicate herself. It was cowardly of me, Clare, I know that now. Gilly did what she did and she was still a child; her punishment wouldn't likely have been more than what one deserves for killing a woman no matter how good a thing it is that the woman is dead. But I couldn't see my daughter taken away from me, Clare. Seeing as who your mother was that might be hard for you to hear. But Molly felt the same way for you no matter what kind of love it might have been.

In the meantime Gilly's back there and the laughingstock of Inisheer although it's nothing to do with Molly now I suppose. I wish to God she'd go back to London where it's easier just to be one more face with a nasty invisible history. But I think that as long as Teffia is alive Gilly will be with her. They've known each other since they were tiny children and I remember walking on them playing their little sex games when they were hardly old enough to know what any of it meant, and more than once. It did worry me, I admit, but I put it down to normal childish curiosity. I wasn't very comfortable discussing that sort of thing. I'm still not although I've recovered from many of my discomforts over the years. I've never seen anyone love anyone the way Gilly loves Teffia and no good will come of it, I'm convinced of that. It wouldn't bother me so much if I thought Teffia were the kind of girl who would do well with love. But between her rapist of a father and her runaway mother she's turned into the hardest, most loveless thing you ever saw. O she cares for Gilly as much as she knows how to care for anyone I imagine. But since she was old enough to walk she's laid down on every

patch of soil to be found on the island and most of the hard rocks too with just about every boy or man who didn't have the fibre to say no and more girls than just Gilly I gather and she's broken the hearts of more than one. She's got no love in her, that girl. It's amazing what this thing called beauty can do for a woman. Those of us who don't have it will never know that kind of power. Teffia and your mother were of a kind that way although at least your mother, crazy as she was, did not have malice. Teffia's a mean one, Clare, and I can't say I blame her when I look at her life but I wish to God she'd get the hell away from my daughter.

O I've tried, Clare, I've tried. I've tried to take her away from there. I've tried at least to get her to stop shooting up that cheap smack she buys off the boats; I wake up nights cold and sweating having dreamt she died on the beach in a pool of her own vomit. And in the end it was that I suppose that broke me down.

What I really want is to be back home. Home on Inisheer I mean, that's my home now and the past is past enough that I think I would be ok there. I've thought of going back to Newfoundland too, more than once, but I don't know what would be left for me now and Molly's shadow would be everywhere. The bad memories won't go away and there are days when I think of my Dad and think maybe he did the most sensible thing saving everyone from himself. But I don't think the world needs saving from me, Clare. After everything I think I've come through all right. You and I are of a kind that way.

FOUR

CLARE

XII

Niall came here yesterday in the evening. Gilly was inside with her Bible. I was lying across the doorstep in my yellow dress from Galway, my feet bare and my head in the spare uncut weed-grass, my face up to the pale nine o'clock light. Every evening I wait for it to get dark at a reasonable hour and every evening the sun stays up and up and hovers and teases. I like it. I've never liked the dark. I was trying to decide whether I wanted to spend one more night at the pub or what and there he was standing over me, his face and hair all shadows against the stone-milk sky.

As I looked up at him one of the small planes started up on the landing pad below near the beach; I could hear it whirr, grind, then purr along. I remembered, as I watched it pass over his head, sitting five years ago in the window of the plane from Shannon to St. John's looking down as it took off and wondering if he still stood in the airport where I'd left him, if he was looking out as my plane flew away. I remembered sitting by the window looking down at my hands where the copper ring he'd bought me in a Galway souvenir shop the day before was already turning my finger green. And I remembered thinking: why didn't he say I could stay with him? Why didn't we run away somewhere together and look after each other? Why did he let me go?

I said, "Not working tonight?"

"Nor you, obviously." He grinned, a faint movement in the shadow of his face. "Grainne's at the bar for me this evening."

"You put her to work so you could come to see me? Or maybe you're here by accident."

"No, I'm here to see you."

"And why is that?"

"To see how you're doing is all. I've a nice firm toke and a bottle of whiskey, if you'd like to share with me. Just a puff and a glass for you, though, in your condition."

"Sounds nice." My stomach was a blizzard. I sat up, smoothing my dress down over my knees. "You shouldn't let your pregnant wife work on her feet in that bar full of smoke."

"You're no one to be giving me lectures on the proper treatment of pregnancies. Come on, now."

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you think? To commune with the spirits."

So we picked our way down to the graveyard to sit on the wall of the temple of Saint Kevin.

It was a cool still evening and voices floated from the beach and from the village; down by the water a few tourists stretched their covered legs on the cold sand, probably discussing a late dinner or a pint. A couple of people loitered above us in the graveyard looking at tombstones, a youngish couple, the woman plump in a long dark dress, the man skinny and bespectacled and silent, snapping a fancy automatic camera while the woman kept her back to him, chattering about something I couldn't quite distinguish until she turned around and cried, "Would you stop wasting the film on all those shitty pictures!"

Niall slung one leg over the wall of the temple and so did I, hitching my yellow dress up around my thighs. We sat with a little decent space between our knees. What is it about men, Auntie? I could look at him from every angle and I could see how completely he was not at all beautiful, his face all craggy and his teeth broken, but it didn't matter a bit. It wasn't like it

was with Teffia where all I cared about was the shapes and colours of her. And Gilly's something else altogether. But sitting there, our legs on either side of the wall as he lit the toke carefully and his moonlight hair fell around him in the white dusk, I thought: I could wait my whole life for this.

"Aren't you concerned someone could see you fucking off with the Canadian girl while your pregnant wife slogs behind the bar?" I asked.

He puffed and handed the toke to me. "We're smoking and talking is all, Clare," he said, "and Grainne usually works on Tuesdays. It's a slow night, she'll finish up early and leave the closing to Padraic. I need a holiday now and again. I'm not here to seduce you, darling, I just wanted to talk to you a bit."

"All right." My throat sank in disappointment. "All right, then."

He smiled. "I am well and truly married now, Clare. I'm sorry about that. If I'd known you were waiting for me, I might have thought twice."

My face went hot as boiling milk. "Fuck you, Niall."

"I'm just taking the piss out of you. But I'm out here where we can be seen exactly because I don't want to foment any gossip, or any misinterpretation on your part, either."

"Right. Well, I will not misinterpret then. You came to see me because..."

"Well, we've a bit of catching up to do, don't you think?"

"I don't see why."

He held the joint out to me and I took it. It was cold and I hadn't brought my jacket; he must have seen me shiver because he took off his sweater and handed it to me. (His jumper you'd call it, now that you've been here so long. I almost wrote that but I'm not quite Irish yet. Sweater is an ugly word though, I realize.) I thought about resisting but I put it on.

Above us on the road a gang of kids, boys and girls between fifteen and twenty, swarmed along laughing and bitching. They were speaking English but a voice sounded Irish and then another was indecipherably foreign. One of the boys snatched a girl up around the waist and ran up the hill with her tucked under his arm, her limbs splayed, bobbing like a blow-up doll; she shrieked and kicked and jabbed with her elbows.

I went blind with a vision of Gilly and Niall and Teffia and me and a bunch of those boys who always seemed to be around, that night when Gilly fell from the pier. We'd been at the pub long after closing and then had wandered down to see if we could spot sea otters. (I don't know who thought of otters; it might have been me; I swore to them that I'd seen one when we'd come over on the boat although I didn't know how to tell an otter from a seal when they were in the water.) Gilly'd been the drunkest I'd ever seen her, staggering and occasionally sick; on the short walk from the hotel Teffia had to drop behind with her several times to hold the hair off her face and to prop her up and keep her moving. Then we all forgot about Gilly for a moment as we sat on the concrete sides of the pier lighting joints and laughing, and when we looked up she was standing on the end beyond the moored boats, one leg stuck out like the needle of a compass and her hands wide and fibrillating. "Otters!" she shouted. Teffia and I leapt to our feet and dashed toward her, the boys not far behind, just to see her topple and shriek and disappear with an almost inaudible splash. Teffia was about to go over after her but I grabbed her around the waist and Niall began shouting orders until we organized ourselves. Niall and another boy took Teffia's ankles and lowered her over the side until she could clutch Gilly under the arms. I wanted to help but Teffia managed to hold on to her until the boys had pulled both of them back up to the pier. Then Gilly lay laughing on the ground,

shouting "Otters!" again and again until Teffia burst into tears and kicked her in the ribs. I don't think Gilly even felt it; she just lay there and kept on laughing.

Niall sighed and unscrewed the cap of the whiskey bottle. "Teffia told me about your little plan."

The joint fell from my fingers. My eyes followed it as it bounced off the crumbled wall and fell onto the moist packed dirt deep in the temple. Without a word Niall propped the whiskey bottle against a stone, swung his legs over and dropped off the wall into the ground. He emerged with the joint which was now a little moist and dirty and swung himself over the wall again.

"Grass may be cheap where you come from, love," he said, "but it's after travelling a long way to come here." He brushed the dirt off the paper with the tips of his fingers and tried to light the joint again without much success.

"What plan?"

It lit finally and he puffed at it, smoke billowing from his lips. I held out my hand but he drew back and shook his head. "I'll not have you throwing my hard-earned drugs into the earth. Your plan to tip yourself off the Plassy into the ocean."

Damn Gillian. "That's ridiculous."

"Is it, then?"

I snatched the bottle of whiskey before he could stop me. "How would Teffia know?" I took a long swig and wiped my mouth with the sleeve of his sweater, which made him grin but his face went serious again.

"For Christ's sake, Clare, your cousin's in love with her. Have you ever been in love with someone?"

"No."

His eyebrows, which are almost as pale as his hair, arched. "Well, it makes secrets hard to keep."

"Gillian had no right."

"Maybe not." He held his hand out for the whiskey bottle, which I passed him, and he extended the joint to me. When I put my hand toward it he pulled away and looked at me meaningfully.

"I won't drop it," I said.

He gave it to me. "So you're thinking it's all over now," he said, and took a drink.

"I am."

"Aye."

"We made a promise."

"Aye, Teffie told me that story too. But you were children, Clare, and things were very bad at that time."

"Things will always be very bad, my love."

I don't know how that slipped out. He smiled, staring over his shoulder at the ocean. Embarrassed, I continued. "Don't tell anyone."

"What? That your cousin Gilly killed your mad mother? Or that you're off to hurl yourself into the sea? You don't expect me to let you go and die." He leaned back on one hand, the other hand dangling the whiskey bottle, his wide eyes holding me in place.

"You've got nothing to say about it."

He looked away again, gave another little sigh, pushed his mane of shifting hair off his face with one hand. "Everybody knows, Clare, that your mother did not jump off the Plassy of her own accord."

"What do you mean?" I handed the joint back to him and he puffed at it a bit. I waited for him to hand me the whiskey but he didn't. He turned and furrowed his brow at me as though he thought I was just asking questions to be difficult.

"Why do you suppose Gillian Flaherty never leaves her green house?" He flicked ashes from the joint with vehemence. "Why do you suppose her one friend is the Happy Hooker of Inisheer? The only surprise is that she's still here, and that redhead harpy is the reason." He settled back on his hands, satisfied, the butt of the joint poking from between his fingers.

I snorted. "Ah, love."

"Call it what you like." The toke was burning low and I wanted some more before it was gone but when I held out my hand he ignored me. "Everyone knows everything here, Clare. If the gardai don't know—and they might—it's because they don't stay here. It's more likely they do know but they don't feel there's any need to do anything about it."

He took one last puff and flicked the end of the joint. It plummeted into the depths at the center of the temple, then lay still and burned like a resting firefly.

"What else do people know?" I asked.

"Such as?"

"Well, do you know why?"

"Why you're planning to kill yourself, you mean?"

"No. Why Mumma died."

"About you and Teffia's father? Aye, Teffia told me that as well, a long time ago. But I don't think there's too many who know that story." He swallowed some whiskey.

"And you don't think the gardai need to do anything about that either, I suppose."

"About Michael Mulvaney?" Niall peered into the neck of the whiskey bottle as if surprised by the taste of the stuff and wondering if it was not what he thought it was. "Michael Mulvaney should have been sterilized and hog-tied at birth. But there's not much to be done now."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

He looked at me, the bottle still near his face. "Mulvaney's dead, Clare. Died not a month after you left and Gilly and her mother took off for England. Hanged himself."

And he passed the bottle to me again.

I swung both my legs to the side of the temple wall that faced the sea. Beside us the spattering of graves with stones of all sizes and shades of grey rose like a cresting wave, the couple still wandering, the man silent and the woman gabbing; a phrase or two floated down: "...back to Doolin tomorrow where there's something to fucking do..." It was growing dim now; it must have been close to eleven o'clock. I shivered again but Niall had no more sweaters to give me.

"Killing oneself is not a brave thing to do, Clare."

"What about killing someone else?" I didn't look at him.

"About that I don't know."

I looked down into the sunken temple as it filled with shadows. What once were walls had become nothing but borders, memories made of rock. "You don't get it, Niall."

"Get what?"

"What it is to be full of poison. Everything I touch dies or goes rotten."

"You touched me, love, and I'm still here."

All the blood in me pounded and stopped. I looked up. He was looking down into the temple too, swinging his heels in their battered tennis shoes against the wall. Then he looked up at me almost coyly, his long pale waves of hair falling away from his face and whipping themselves into knots in the sea wind.

"Why are you still here, Niall?"

His blue eyes were going grey as the light faded. "What do you mean?"

"Here on Inisheer. And don't tell me about that four-eyed mouse of yours."

He frowned. "What a miserable thing to say. You don't like her, do you? You don't know her. She's a good woman."

"She's not the kind of girl who ever meant a thing to you."

"Those little blonde girls from Paris and Stockholm, is that what you're talking about? But you weren't like them either, Clare, and of all of them I liked yourself best." I blushed and opened my mouth. "No, that is the truth, I'm not just saying it because you're the one I'm talking to. You weren't as handsome or as glamorous as the Sophies and the Gretels and the Lucias, but you were something to me."

He pulled a pack of Sweet Aftons from the pocket of his black T-shirt. I stretched out a hand. He held them away from me and shook his head but I fixed him with a steady look and kept my hand extended. Finally he relented, offered the pack, pulled out his lighter and lit both our cigarettes in one motion. I spat a few shreds of tobacco and coughed.

"That day I took you to Shannon and put you on the plane, I thought of asking you to stay. I thought: she could come and live with us; it's not like she has family waiting for her any more. It wouldn't have been easy,

jamming you in with me and Da and the two sisters, but I didn't fancy letting you go right away.

"But then I thought: she's just a little girl, and she needs to be where she belongs. I didn't know for sure if I would...love you. I hardly knew you. And although I didn't know then all that happened with your mother and all that, I knew that something was gone to crap. You looked so bruised and emptied out. I was afraid. Do you remember that ring I bought for you?"

I nodded but I didn't look at him. I tried to speak, to tell him that I'd worn it for all those years, but I was afraid I'd cry. The young couple had left the graveyard and were wandering down the road, not talking, not liking one another much.

"I didn't want that you'd forget me," he said.

I tossed my Sweet Afton down into the temple and took a swig of whiskey.

"When I met Grainne...well, not when I met her. I have to say, Clare, after a year or so I didn't think of you much any more. Gilly and Rosary had gone away to England, so there weren't many reminders. But since you've come back, I've been remembering, and I notice things about herself that are like you. She's very sure of things on the outside, sure that she knows what she wants. But there's a wavering underneath. It took a long time for me to believe that she wanted us to marry, because although she said it with great conviction, I could see that she hadn't thought it through. But then one night we sat out on the pier with some friends. It was just when her Irish was coming to full flower; she could talk to people and they forgot she wasn't one of us. She was laughing and drinking and her face was all lit up with the moon and everyone was teasing her that she didn't want to be stuck with an eejit like me. And she looked at me and she said, 'But I do, lads.'" He said

something softly in Irish. "'But I do, lads.' And she meant it, then, and I knew, no matter what she'd said before, that this was the first time she'd said it truly."

He took the whiskey bottle from my hand and touched it to his lips.

"So you're here because this is where she wants to be," I stated.

He swallowed, spluttered, wiped his mouth and shook his head. "Quite the opposite."

"Niall. You can't really want to spend your whole life on this tiny rock in the middle of nowhere. You could have gone to university. You're made for more than this."

"That's where you're dead wrong. None of us are made *for* anything; the most we are is made *of* something."

He offered me the pack of cigarettes and I took one.

"It's my home, Clare. I tried Galway, I tried England. Even went to Boston for a few months. Americans bore me, with their Coca-Cola petty values and their hundred-and-five channels. The English bore me with their tight-ass chin-up pasty faces. Even the Irish bore me with their talk of Sinn Fein, children learning to speak the Irish without a clue what it really means. You know what I saw? When I was working in Galway I went to a football match between Galway and Manchester schools. They were huddled and one of the little Galway lads backed out and bawled at the English team..." and here Niall bellowed something in Irish. His voice bounced off the walls and the gravestones and ricocheted down across the sand and the water. "Do you know what that means?" he returned to me. "It means, 'Sausages are tasty and I like ice cream.' I got on the boat home that very night, left my contract without a word to anyone.

"This is my home, Clare. My friends know what it is to be who I am. My language is a real language here. My wife has committed herself to living the life I want to live. I'll be pushing coffee and Smithwick's in that hotel pub until the day I die or until I'm too old to stand, and then my children or my neighbours or God will look after me. You may not think much of my life, but you haven't the slightest notion. This may be the only real world left as far as I can see."

He pushed his hair off his face with one hand. With the other he put the cigarette to his lips. I watched him and wondered if I was remembering correctly what the touch of those lips was like, how that hair felt under my hands. He turned his eyes on me again and I knew I wouldn't get what I was waiting for.

"All you want is a place," he said. "There's no poison in you, love. You're just lost. And no one else is going to find you. You need a place, and so does that baby of yours. Your cousin Gillian has found her place."

He tossed his cigarette into the ruins and stood up. Against the darkening sky he was weedy and bent; the wind pulled at his clothes. I took off his sweater and handed it to him. A blue sweater knitted in Aran patterns; I wondered for a moment if Grainne had made it for him.

"Right now," he said--and once again his crooked smile flicked through the shadows of his face--"I wish I'd met you one more time before I decided to get a wife. But there's nothing to be done about that. Understand, though, Clare: if you decide living is a better option, there are worse places you could do it than Inisheer."

He turned and walked away up the hill toward Gilly's house, toward the hotel where his wife was working at the bar, toward the other side of the island which faces the place I come from.

FIVE

GILLY

XIII

I don't know what time of the night it was. It was dark as fuck. I wasn't even all awake but there were voices...and she wasn't in the bed any more. I turned over just to see her mother, in a pink dress, taking her out the door by her arm. Gently though: Clare wasn't fighting. Nothing on but her little transparent nightgown.

I followed them. All the way up and around and past the village over to where the Plassy stands. Why it had to be there I don't know; there are hundreds of places you can go here in the middle of the night to be alone. I should know; I've been to most of them. He was waiting; I wanted to hurl rocks at him but I didn't want to be seen. This isn't Robin Hood country, no trees to hide behind. Stones behind stone walls; my knees were so bloody and my back hurt so I could have hit any one of them including Clare for being such an ass as to do what Molly told her.

Her mother handed her over like she was a Christmas basket. I don't even have words for it, what happened, I've seen some ugly things but this was the ugliest. I could hear her shrieking right through his hand over her mouth and he threw her down on the rocks under him like she was made of rubber. When he was done she lay limp as the dead and he walked away. Her mother didn't go, though. I couldn't see Molly's face from that distance, just the smudge of her pink dress, but I wondered if she was starting to think how some things are right and some things are wrong.

Once he was gone I walked right up to them. Clare was lying on the rocks with her nightgown all torn and when she saw me her eyes went big as plums. Molly just looked at me. You know very well, Mam, she was not an intelligent woman. If she were, none of this would ever have happened. I

said, "Aunt Molly, do you want to see something?" And Clare didn't say a word. Molly looked a bit confused and I said, "Come see."

I walked them both down to the Plassy and I went inside. I wanted to tell Clare to wait on the beach because it's dangerous in the boat, anything you touch could fall out from under you, but I didn't want to break the spell Molly seemed under. I started thinking Molly knew what I was doing and it was ok with her. The three of us managed to climb up to the deck facing the ocean, and we stood for awhile looking at the tide on its way in. And it was easy as anything, because Molly was so small, to grab her legs and roll her right over the railing with a good firm push to be sure she didn't have a gentle fall. It wasn't that far down though. It was pure luck she hit her head so hard. I don't even know if she was dead when she hit the ground, if it was the sea or the stones that killed her.

Clare stood looking for long enough that there was no way to save her mother. It seemed a very long time, minutes long. Then she started screaming. Which would have been a good thing if anyone had been walking by at that moment, anyone we needed to explain things to. Even if she didn't cry she screamed in a way that was most convincing. I'd be willing to say she meant it.

But you know what? Small as Molly was, I'm not a big strapping girl myself. If you'd asked me before that day if I could lift Molly all alone and throw her, all alone, over the side of a boat so quick and easy that she never knew what hit her till she was dead, I would have said no. Not all by myself. When I told you you said it must have been the rage made me so strong. But I'm not so sure.

I was surprised how easy it was to make the garda believe Molly herself did it all, that Molly would have picked such a spot. It was probably you who

made the difference. You were brilliant. Every time he asked a question you said, "My sister was not right in the head, sir. She's done this before. If she did it enough times it was bound to be successful one day."

When he asked about her torn nightgown Clare couldn't speak and I said, "Molly came to get us in bed sir, she told us to come and follow her, she wanted us to see something. Clare was still sleepy and she fell on the rocks near the village. And Molly made us wait on the beach while she crawled through the boat, she said she had a surprise. We were waiting and waiting and she never called and she never came out, so we finally went up through the boat and that was when we found her."

And through the whole thing Clare looked so truly finished and burned that it was easy to believe that over and over in her mind she was imagining her mother dropping off the side of the Plassy onto the rocks where the sea could come and kill her.

Once the garda had gone and you'd put us to bed, that was when I said it. Only when the quiet came over us did I understand that I'd killed a woman. I could feel the wrath of God soaking through me. I thought then of getting up and going straight down to the pier and throwing myself off it. But then I thought of Teffie. Clare was lying awake beside me and I said, "I don't think I can live with myself after tonight." But I knew even then I didn't mean it. She turned to look at me, her dark hair all knots and her eyes rusted and dead as the Plassy. She said, "We don't have to." And the thought of us leaving this world together was a comfort to me until I thought of Teffie again. I said, "Will you come back some day?" And she said, "When?"

So we made a plan. Five years, I thought. Even at fifteen I knew that love isn't likely to last that long. But it did, while grief and guilt didn't, not mine.

Even the day I put her and Niall on the boat and watched them go she didn't lift off me right away. It was only when we got to London and I saw the world was bigger than I expected that I began to forget. Everything but Teffia. And our Lord. I went to the Bible again and again to ask for guidance and even on those days when I wasn't thinking of Clare or Molly or death at all--and there were more and more of those days as time went on--the answer was always the same. It is God who gives life and God who takes it away and the rest of us have no business fooling with it. I'd forgotten that. And I'd also forgotten that God forgives. And understands. If we give Him half a chance.

SIX

CLARE

XIV

I had that dream again last night. The one where I climb down to a river and when I get there I have something in my hand that I didn't have before. This time, though, I looked at the thing in my hand--even now trying to remember I don't know what it was, I don't even know if I could see it while I was dreaming. I looked at it though, straight at it, and then I heaved it out and over the river. It didn't fall in the water. It flew on outward, kept going and going until it disappeared. It might have fallen once it was out of my sight but I suppose in a dream things only happen if you see them happen.

You'll be glad to know she's not coming with me. I tried one last time this morning. She was alone in the kitchen when I woke up; Teffie hasn't been here. Since that night. I lay on my mattress and listened to the pages of her Bible turn. Turn and turn, as though she wasn't reading but searching for something she'd lost.

I rambled out in a rumpled shirt and shorts and put the kettle on. She didn't look at me. Outside were birds and sunshine, a pretty day. I stood in the open door of the kitchen for awhile, smelled the warm salt air, watched the villagers wheel things and drive things and shout those Irish words for "Good morning" to one another. I wanted her to speak first but she didn't so finally I turned around and watched her flip pages.

"I won't be back tomorrow," I said. She didn't answer.

I sat down across from her at the table and watched her. Flip. Flip. Flip. I imagined snatching the Bible from under her brown hands and slapping it over the gas flame of the stove.

"If you want to be a good Catholic girl," I said, "you might want to give up smack and cursing and sex with whores."

"Kiss my skinny arse."

Maybe it's not smack at all. Isn't it supposed bring calm and carelessness? Her eyes were ready to set the Good Book ablaze. Surely she had something more to say. I waited but she kept turning the pages metronomically.

"Gilly."

"What?"

"You need to bring your mother home."

"Don't tell me what I need." Her eyes were still on the pages. Flip. Flip.

"Your mother needs it."

"You haven't spoken to her in five years. You haven't seen her. Go away."

"Yes, I'll go away."

"That's not what I'm saying." She finally looked up at me, her lips pulled into a little sneer showing the edges of her pearl teeth. "I don't believe for an instant that you won't be here tomorrow."

"I'm done, Gilly. I'm sorry."

"I don't believe it." She shook her head slowly and looked down again. Flip. Flip. Flip.

"I'll wait for you, but if you don't come, I won't be back."

She closed the Bible with a slam, grabbed the kettle from the stovetop and hurled it at me. The lid flew off and struck me on the shoulder. Warm water splattered over the table, splashed me from face to waist. The kettle

bounced off the wall behind me, hit the floor with a clang and spun in bewilderment before settling into the dark wet arc on the wood.

We were silent for a moment. She was still but quivering. I thought: I've seen that face before. Every time Gilly had fought with Teffia, the two of them snarling Irish words I couldn't understand, Gilly's face looked just like that. And that day I got back to the B&B after she'd left me and Teffia alone out on the rocks; I walked into her bedroom that evening to find her staring at me with that same expression. Staring as if everything that kept her in one piece was about to be taken away from her and she'd kill someone before she'd let it happen.

It's not the look she had when Mumma fell from the Plassy, though. That night Gilly's face was smooth and cool, as if she was risking nothing.

"I know what you did," she said. "If there are whores in hell then the two of you will have good company."

She tore out the open door and ran down the road toward the graveyard.

The birds stopped singing for a long moment. Then they chimed up again, their morning celebration turned to gleeful gossip. I watched the red cloth cover of New Jerusalem as it lay helpless in what would have been my tea. The worn gold edges of the pages buckled. Through the open door the sky above the ocean was blue and clear.

XV

I went to the pub one last time tonight. The bodhran player came to put the bodhran in my hands but I pushed it away. Teffia sang "Women of Erin" and "Molly na gCuach ni Chuilleanain". "Molly of the Ringlets," Niall said. A vision of my mother's golden hair burst open in me and I started to cry.

Niall leaned his elbows on the bar. I could see, as I couldn't see before, threads of grey-white in his long birch-gold hair. He put a hand over mine and waited for me to be done. No one else seemed to notice or care and Padraic the fat freckled barman didn't interrupt even though the pub crackled with Irish calls for service, even through Teffia's song. I thought my skin would shiver right up off my bones.

When we'd all sat around here watching Teffia sing long ago, Niall pulling pints and Gilly and me laughing at the boys, I never felt quite right. They all talked in Irish and then apologized to me and translated. Gilly often didn't speak to me at all, as if she was embarrassed by her cousin who everyone thought was American and whose clothes didn't fit quite right on her plump body. At least that's what I thought; it wasn't like anyone around here cared much about how their clothes fit, including Gilly.

Once or twice during those days, sitting here at this bar, I'd wanted to cry like I was crying now, all the muscles in my body in spasm, whimpering. I'd wanted her, I'd wanted all of them, to understand. I'd wanted so badly to make them understand that I would've given up seeing any of them ever again for just one moment of clarity.

I'd never cried with them though. Not even with Gilly, not even the night my mother died. I'd screamed until no sound came out any more, but I didn't cry.

When I caught my breath I said, quietly enough that I didn't think anyone would hear but jagged with the remains of tears, "If you'd promise to take care of me, I think I could stand it."

Niall's face was serious. "You can't ask me for that, Clare."

"That's all that would matter."

Niall pushed a pile of napkins toward me; I picked one up and mopped my face with it. "No one else can make things all right," he said. "You know that."

"You're the only thing that's ever made any *sense*." I slapped my hand flat on the bar and laid my forehead on it, shoulders heaving.

"No man on earth has ever made sense, love." That almost made me laugh; I let out a little snort from my dripping nose, reached a blind hand for a napkin to wipe it. "If there's anyone who makes sense, it's your Aunt Rosary."

"My Aunt Rosary is in a mental hospital." I blew my nose, blew it again, dropped the dirty napkins on the bar top.

Niall picked up a garbage pail and swept the napkins into it. "And it makes sense, if you think about it. She deserves to be looked after, with all she's been through by no fault of her own."

"I can't do anything for her now."

"You can stay alive so she won't be suffering one more loss. What would that do to her, if you died?"

"She doesn't even care. I haven't heard from her in five years." I started to cry again, my throat closing up. The people around me were

beginning to notice, glancing and then looking away as though I were a car wreck and they were ashamed of being interested. Fat Padraic glanced down the bar at me with a tired scowl. Teffia seemed to be singing louder, as if hoping she could keep me from stealing the show.

"It's you who needs to care, Clare. Caring's hard, but it helps, I find."

"How would you know?" I pushed my pint of Guinness over the bar where it crashed into a puddle of glass splinters at his feet. The pub fell silent except for Teffia's voice shaking and sweet as the surface of tea in a storm.

Niall signaled to Padraic, pointed to the smashed glass and pool of stout. Then stepped around the bar, took me by the arm with firm fingers and guided me out the door.

Once outside I wrenched away from him.

"Go on," he said. "Run away, then. That's all this is, isn't it? If you wanted to die, Clare, you'd be after doing it long ago."

"I'm working up the courage is all."

"It's not courage I'd call it." He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back against the door frame.

"I'm waiting for the time. We made a promise; we set the date."

"And when is that date, Clare?" I didn't answer him, turned away to look down over the hill to where all roads led to somewhere near the sea. "You want to tell me, you know you do. You want me to come and try to stop you. And I probably will, if you tell me." I said nothing. "No one is holding you to any promise. Gillian has a life now. And so do you."

"A life? I've got nothing but a baby I don't want. I've got nobody." I bent and picked a stone up from the step, hurled it toward the ocean. Watched it dive and land in the short grass not thirty feet from where I stood. Tears were still rolling down my face.

"Listen to me," Niall said. "I want you to listen."

I set my mouth, wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. It was a calm evening, not yet dark, the lap of the sea slow and gentle far away down the hill, the air cool but still.

"I'm listening," I said.

"I cannot give you what you want. What you say you want, what you think you want. I don't even know who you're thinking I am. But I can be a friend to you if it would help you. I can promise you that."

That's what he said, Auntie. Through the pub door I heard Teffia singing "My Match it is Made". I turned and ran off down the hill and wished it were truly night so he could see the darkness swallow me.

As I ran I wondered whether he'd come after me, but I knew he wouldn't. I wondered whether I should have told him that tonight's the night, but he was wrong, I didn't really want him to know. As I turned onto the road toward Gilly's house I stopped so abruptly that my feet skidded out from under me and I fell into the dust and pebbles of the road, scraping my elbows.

Halfway between me and the green house was a tiny long-limbed woman with a pile of gold ringlets. In the marble-grey light of almost-dusk her hair was dull. She was walking away from me; I couldn't see her face. She wore a pink sleeveless shift like the one Mumma was wearing the night she died.

I wanted to call out, but I knew: this is a dream. I lay in the dust of the road and watched her as she turned at Gilly's step and went into the house. This is a dream, I thought. I waited for something to happen: for screams, for thunder, for the house to burst into blue flame, for me to wake up. But I just lay there and lay there waiting until someone came around the road behind

me and I was embarrassed enough to get up out of the dust and walk, slowly and blurrily, down to the house and inside.

It was empty except for a pot of hambone soup and a loaf of soda bread. I called out several different names but no one answered. I sat down at the kitchen table and waited for the dark, which was a long time coming, or someone, who never came.

XVI

I wish that from inside the boat there were a place where with one step you could enter the deepest part of the sea. You could crash through the rusted skin of it and plunge into the water without ever making the decision yourself. But there isn't. The Plassy's been tossed up on the rocks and the sea looks like a memory from there. Except when the tide is high, it's a dry boat.

Here on this last night, I'm remembering the moment after. Me in my white nightgown like someone drugged, all rips and scratches. Gilly telling you and the policeman—what do they call them here?—the garda. Me sitting. Gilly said later it was easy to imagine from the look of me that I'd just seen my mother throw herself into the sea. But Gilly didn't tell them why, lied to them about the rips in my white nightgown. I didn't even think at the time. Didn't even ask. Didn't wonder why she'd take care of Teffie's father but throw my mother off a boat.

What were we supposed to do now? What are we supposed to do now? Go home, but I haven't any home to go to. Stay here, but you've got that look, I've seen it on so many people, that look that says: Time to go now. Time for me to go, time for you to go. It's done.

My mother must have been the prettiest corpse in the history of the world. She fell from the railing of the Plassy, plummeted toward the water like a feathery fishing fly.

I wish Gillian had pushed me from the boat. We could have tied Mumma up and left her amongst the tetanus gagged like a muzzled poodle, her piles of gold hair filling up with flakes of rust. Let her live. It wasn't Mumma she wanted to kill at all of course. I wonder how many nights Gilly

hung over the railing of the Plassy all alone, her hair whipping full of salt and rust.

I crawl up through the scraps, through the seachain. You wouldn't think that on my way to the sea I'd be afraid of rusty cuts, of floors that could send me down to lie dry and waiting in a heap of gashes and cracked bones. But dying alone in a dead boat after days of tetanus fever was not the plan. That was not the promise.

I reach the railing and stop for a short breath, a view of the black greedy night water that leads to Ireland. I think for a moment: Maybe it would have been better to do this on the other side of Inisheer where I could imagine being washed, not toward Galway, but toward home, if the sea agreed to take me and not toss me up on this island again. I stand and think about that for awhile. I stand for a long while.

It's cold and dark and I think about how cold Ireland is all the time and how rarely it's dark, at least in the summertime. Then I think of how I've never seen Ireland in the winter and I wonder if it would be anything like Newfoundland. Anything like the beach on Cape Spear where I dropped gnat-sized orange shells in seawater to make them burst into red like sulfur to flame.

My hair fills with salt and wind, tangles like a bag of pretzels. And the stars are out. It's the first time in weeks I've seen the stars. The moon too, a sliver of white skin like the hard worn edge of a bodhran.

I hear her. Hear the creak and crumble of the innards of the boat. And I'm afraid and I start to cry again. She hasn't forgotten, I think. She knows now that a promise is a promise.

She pulls up beside me, stands against the railing too; her shorn hair shows her thin eyes wide and full of stars. Sparks in jars of oil. Last time we

were here the sheet of her whipping hair hid her face. She leans on her elbows and I see a gash running up the twig of her forearm, sliding with grey-black blood in the dark. She's wearing very short shorts which show the bottom edges of her bum and her brown skin is all gooseflesh.

She waits until I stop crying. Then she says,

"Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it."

The sea spits salt up at the moon.

"It is vain for you to rise up early, to sit up late, to eat the bread of sorrows: for so he giveth his beloved sleep."

The wind rises higher; the stars shiver and grow still.

"Lo, children are an heritage of the Lord: and the fruit of the womb is his reward. As arrows are in the hand of a mighty man; so are children of the youth."

For a moment I think I see the white fringe of the sun out where Ireland should be but then the sea is black again.

"Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate."

My limbs and ears are shooting with cold. "That's a psalm," I say softly.

Gilly nods. "One hundred twenty-seven," she says. "A song of degrees."

"Ok."

We help ourselves to another pause full of salt wind. Something moves across the sky, swallows the stars one by one, then handful by handful. The underside of the hand of God, I think, and almost laugh at myself but there's nothing funny any more. Why is the sky filling up when everything should be empty? Does death hollow you out or flood you with something new, something I'm in no position to understand? I can't decide which I

want more: to feel nothing and know nothing or to feel and know something that is not this. Either way...

Those nights when we all hung about the castle and the pub and the pier and the graveyard, as if the whole island was our own now that people were in bed--once in a while during those nights I felt something that was not this. Once in awhile I'd say something and everyone would laugh as if I wasn't a stranger. Once in awhile Niall put his arms around me as if I was a part of him which had left for awhile and which he was so happy to see again. Once--maybe just once--Gilly looked at me as if she was surprised at what I was making her feel.

The air clings moist and cold. I want silence but the waves hiss and boil and the wind might be carrying the distant bare murmurs of almost-sleeping voices from the hotel, from the village, people going on and living into the night and speaking to one another about things that matter as they are being said.

"I'm sorry about Teffia, Gilly," I say. "How did you know?"

I feel her shrug; her arm moves against mine. "I guessed. It was to be expected."

"You don't forgive me."

"No, I won't forgive you that. But there are many things I haven't forgiven her, either."

The stars are gone, the moon a dim grey shadow. I turn around and lean against the fragile eaten railing. I can't see past the mangled iron of the port side of the Plassy but I imagine the stretch of rocks beyond that lead to more rocks, to walls of silent stones, to small rises and small falls and to rocks and rocks again and then to more sea that always looks as though it laps and rolls forever. But it doesn't. The ocean isn't endless and even the hugeness

between this world and my world doesn't crash and break the whole way. There are times and places when it runs smooth as skin.

"I'll make you a deal," Gilly says.

I almost go over the side then with or without her. No deals, I think. I will not negotiate with a God who is so amused. Or indifferent. I turn and hang my head and shoulders over. A spatter--rain? or sea spit?--touches my neck like the finger of someone wanting my attention.

Gilly lays a bird-boned hand on my arm. "I will make you another promise."

"You don't keep your promises, Gilly." I lift my feet from the deck, testing my weight against the reliability of the railing. A few flakes of rust scatter and ride away on the wind. It's rain and not sea that's spitting on me.

"I will. I will keep it."

"You have nothing to give me anymore."

"Listen to me, Clary Sage. If you'll come down from here with me now, I'll go get my mother and I'll bring her home."

Behind the clouds a weak attempt at lightning flutters and then with a groan of thunder the sky rips open and wails. I watch the blood running from Gilly's forearm onto mine. The black of it thins to grey. I think for a moment that the wet on her face is tears; she's shaking but it's likely to be cold and not grief. My hair tears around between us, slapping the side of her face.

I'm wearing the t-shirt she gave me to sleep in, the one that pushes my breasts together and shows my baby over the top of my jeans, and the black machine-knit Aran sweater I bought on my first day here from the souvenir shop. It's all soaked through in less than a minute. The sweater is unbuttoned and I push it from my shoulders, shake it off my arms and let it fall to the rust iron floor. The rain coats me like slop thrown from a bucket.

I suddenly think of my yellow dress, the butter-yellow dress Mumma bought for me long ago in Galway, and I wish I'd worn it, I wish I looked exactly as I did the first day Gilly ever saw me so she would remember. I lean over the railing as far as I can without letting my toes leave the scars on the deck. Down below the sea comes up through the rocks to meet me ruffled with foam. But as long as I watch--and it seems like a long time--it never manages to kiss the side of the Plassy. Not even close. Finally it starts to make its way back toward the lights of Galway, still wrenching toward us from time to time as though afraid it will be lonely for us if it goes too far.

The rain pulls up and evaporates away. The quilt of cloud hesitates and, as though remembering the stove has been left on at home in Scandinavia, tears off toward Galway and keeps going and going until the sky is thin and silver-grey with the light that someone once told me is not stars at all but the thousand-year-old memory of what the stars once were.

Panic swells in me like flame. With a grunt, grinding the rust off the railing to a sift of snow under my hands, I heave myself over and flip so that my face greets the sky.

I watch the memories of the stars for longer than possible, watch them as the wind tries to hold me up. The air is thick and cold and liquid and I think for awhile that it will bear me away from Inisheer and bring me safely and gently back to land but the wind can't decide on a direction: Ireland? America? Or someplace altogether new where fear is not the result of violence but the prelude to adventure?

The moist hands of the tempest pull away. I hover in the shock of silence, suspended, and then the crash of my back against the beach of stones shakes me like a house when the earth trembles.

I watch the stars some more as I think about pain. Think about how you don't always anticipate how much or how little there will be.

Then the water comes to get me. It claws up from my shoes to my face, it washes the wind out of my hair and takes it back toward Galway. I breath in as much salt as I can but I'm too slow.

Above on the deck of the boat I can see a splinter lean toward me, a splinter with slender eyes full of the bodhran moon and I think, slow and amused as the sea comes up gentler this time: It's not very far from there to here. Not very far at all.

SEVEN

MOLLY

XVII

The only thing that ever made me question my faith was the fact that you were born a girl. But I didn't think at the time: Wasn't Mary conceived without sin herself? That's what the feast of the Immaculate Conception is all about; not the beginnings of the Saviour but the beginnings of his mother. I didn't think of that at the time. I suppose I was too young.

I'm sorry, my honey. I was just a woman in the end, not always able to interpret the voices of the angels. It wasn't their mistake; the Lord gives us what he gives us but it's up to us to understand his plan. I wasn't worthy. I hoped you would be. I'm still hoping.

I don't begrudge you anything. It was my time; I never would have followed if I hadn't understood that. Once Michael Mulvaney walked away from us over the grey rocks of Inisheer I saw I'd failed. I waited for someone to tell me what to do.

The only voice I heard was your cousin Gillian's.

EIGHT

CLARE

XVIII

They sent a helicopter for the doctor and it took only an hour. They brought him over because Gilly was afraid to move me. She ran to the hotel with black blood running from her forearm down all her clothes and told Niall to call Galway. Niall made the call and asked the doctor to bring tetanus needles for Gilly and a stretcher and help. He left Padraic in charge of the bar and came running down with his wife Grainne and with blankets and towels and a bottle of whiskey. Gilly had left me right where the sea could come up and splash all over me because she didn't know what to do and was afraid I'd broken my back and if she moved me she'd kill me or paralyze me for life. When Niall found me, with Gilly and Grainne running not far behind him, I was half choked, shaking and soaked through, gasping in panic between the waves that shimmied up to me and shimmied away leaving little almost invisible jellyfish clinging to me and sending their soft tingling stings through my clothes.

Niall and Grainne took my arms and legs and Gilly slid her arms under my back and head and they lifted me as gently as they could out of the reaches of the ocean onto a dry blanket on the cold sand. Niall took a little Swiss army knife from his pocket and cut and peeled the wet saline clothes off me, plucked the jellyfish off my bare arms and legs and face. I felt almost shy at him seeing me naked after all these years. The baby sat on top of my belly like a fat tumor. Grainne dried me as best she could with a towel and they piled blankets on top of me.

Niall wanted to give me some whiskey but Grainne wouldn't let him lift my head. "Sure and we're after moving her now, what's the difference?" he asked but she was adamant. She sat next to me, tugged my wet hair out

from behind me, wrung it out like a long dishcloth and laid another towel over my head and tucked it around without moving my neck. The stars and the moonfoam off the sea reflected in the thick smeared lenses of her glasses and her long hair glowed dully like the sand. She sat next to me and ran a hand over my forehead. She said something quietly to Niall in Irish.

"Why don't you speak so she can understand," Niall said.

"You're cold, Clare," she said. "Do you hurt anywhere?"

"Just my sides," I said, shivering, "and my head, a little."

Gilly sat a couple of feet away, her black hair sticking up in all directions, her brown noodle arms wrapped around herself. She huddled with her knees up so I could see the undersides of her legs in their shorts all the way up to her crotch. She seemed to have blood all over her.

"Don't move," Grainne ordered me. She stood and produced another blanket ("How many fucking blankets can three people carry?" I asked weakly but no one paid any attention to me) and wrapped it around Gilly's shoulders. Then she pulled Gilly's arm out and inspected the gash. She picked up a few pieces of my sliced-up T-shirt, trotted down to the surf and dipped them in, trotted back, sat down and dropped two of the rags in her lap. The third she wiped over Gilly's bloody forearm.

"That can't be too clean," Niall said.

"It's the best we've got at the moment." Grainne held out a thick hand for the whiskey bottle, which Niall handed to her. She poured whiskey on another rag and wiped that over the cut. Gilly pulled her breath in between her teeth. Grainne handed her the bottle and Gilly took a small sip while Grainne wrapped the third rag around the wound. There were bloodstains on Grainne's thin lumpish dress and spots of cold wet seawater spread over it

but she didn't seem to notice she was shivering herself. She sat down next to me and placed her hand on my forehead again.

"You're going to be a good mother," I said.

She smiled, her heavy face white in the sealight.

We heard the doctor crunch over the stones from the direction of the landing pad with voices around him. He settled down next to me, a short wide-bellied man with a crown of bristly silver hair and broken capillaries all across his nose. The moon reflected off that shiny spider-veined nose until it was all I could see. I closed my eyes.

It turned out I'd cracked a few ribs and given myself a bit of a concussion. The jellyfish stings were no more serious than big mosquito bites. "I don't think you've punctured your lungs," said the doctor. "And I think your baby is all right." He looked at me sideways as though wondering if that was what I'd wanted to hear. For a moment I wondered what baby he was talking about. It was like I was hearing everything from far away or watching it on television.

They put me on the stretcher and joggled me over the stones and out to the road where a van waited. It was only when they were loading me in that I realized Gilly wasn't with us. "Gilly," I said to Niall.

"It's all right," he said, "Grainne's with her."

"What are they doing?"

"She'll be all right, Clare. We're bringing you back to the house."

"Are you coming with me?"

"Yes, I'm coming with you."

"I'm not dead, am I, Niall?"

Niall laughed and slid into the van next to me. He put a long bony hand over mine. "I don't think so," he said. "You're cold as a spirit, but a bit heavier."

At Gilly's house they slid me onto her bed and tucked the thready blankets and the quilt around me. Niall went downstairs to make tea. The doctor spotted the syringe on top of the warped and still-damp Bible, frowned and picked the syringe up, pocketed it. "Take the Bible too," I said. He glanced in my direction, and then pretended not to hear. "I *a m* dead," I muttered.

The doctor poked and prodded me some more, wrapped my torso up in some bandages and gave me a cane. "You're not to be leaving this bed for a day or two except for the loo," he said. "After that, take it gently. I'll be at the hotel tonight. You oughtn't to sleep yet; wait until morning, and then have someone wake you every couple of hours. I'll tell Niall. Have them call me if there's anything."

Then he was gone. I was alone in the room. The windows were open letting the night in to mingle with the cinnamon and sandalwood and I wanted them closed because I was cold. I watched the limp greyish curtains move with the salt wind. The room began to swim a little and knowing I shouldn't sleep but knowing I didn't care enough to stay awake I thought mistily of calling for Niall, who I could hear moving somewhere in the house. But I heard a scrabble outside the window

Two long alabaster hands wrapped themselves around the sill. Teffia Mulvaney's eyes, floating in a cloud of starlight-and-apple hair, inched up into the window and hovered there fixed on me. She swung herself forward and somersaulted into the room, landed crouched on her haunches with a catlike thump. She was wearing a rose-printed dress tonight and boots laced

up around her ankles; she could have been on her way to a Buckingham tea party except her hair which was party all its own where someone had set fire to the house.

"It's yourself," she said, freckles squinting at me.

"It's me." This, I thought, is one way to prevent a concussion from lulling you to sleep.

"Are you all right?"

"Depends what you mean."

She sat next to me crosslegged on the braided rug. With one slim hand she palmed the red Bible from the table onto her lap and flipped it open. "Where's Gilly?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I came to see you, anyway." Her dress was hitched up around the birch-trunks of her thighs, her eyes on the water-smudged pages: Ecclesiastes, I saw as if from across the world. "Padraic told me you're after falling off the boat."

"Yes."

"But you're not dead, I see."

"Well, if you say so."

She smiled. "You'd have to be precise, to die from falling off the Plassy. It's really not as far down as it might seem."

"You seem to know a lot about it."

"I need to ask you something."

"All right."

Light from the lamp obscured the moonlight from the window but I could see the sky behind Teffie's head turning from night-sea grey-blue to

morning-moon dingy white. Teffia's skin wavered between cream and pale ash.

"Did you tell her?"

Everything in me weighted me to the bed like stones dragging me to the bottom.

"Tell who what?"

"You know it."

I almost laughed. "I thought you told her." She didn't answer. "What does it matter?" I asked. More than my ribs, the tint of the rising sun surfacing in her skin was hurting me. "You could fuck her mother and Gilly would still spread out like a kite for you." I lifted an arm to scratch at a jellyfish sting across my cheek.

Teffia's eyes boiled like tea. She didn't move. The peach-pink of the flowers on her dress rose under her cheeks like steam. The Bible lay still on her lap; my eye fell on the words. *Is there any thing whereof it may be said, See, this is new?*

"Have you ever loved anything?" Teffia asked.

It wasn't rhetorical. She was waiting for an answer, her beautiful wide mouth set in a hard line. But the room spun around me until the whole world went blank.

I was on the pier again, that second before Gilly screamed "Otters!" and dropped out of sight. Teffia and Niall and the boys and I sitting with a joint and some drunken jokes, the moon reflecting all over us. Teffia looking at me with sly laughing eyes, maybe thinking that I was all right by her. Niall's arm tight around my shoulders not wanting to let me go anywhere. Even the ocean on almost all sides was, for the shortest moment I've ever known, one more thing to be happy about.

When I opened my eyes Teffia was gone and all the scent of other places had been washed away by the smell of cold clean salt stones.

XIX

The afternoon I was able to get out of bed, a few days later, I hobbled up to the pub to find Niall behind the bar and the bodhran player alone on the musicians' benches thudding quietly away as though his bodhran was his ventriloquist's doll with whom he was having a hushed and private chat.

I'd had a scrap with Gilly that morning. She'd finally come out and said it. "I don't owe you a thing," she said. "You'd be dead as a flayed duck right now if it were up to you. It was God who saved you."

"Perhaps you owe God, then." She'd made us porridge for breakfast and it was dreadful, only half-warm by the time I got to it and full of dry lumps.

"I only said it to get you off that damned boat," she said, "and you didn't oblige. Not in the way you were expected to, in any case."

"I think we're even then," I said.

She put her cowlicked black head in her hands. The bones of her forearms are like straws. The gash seems to be festering but she assures me it's fine, bathes it with lavender oil in the mornings and nights.

"You don't understand," she said. "You never truly had a mother."

I stood up and turned my bowl upside down in the sink leaving the porridge in a mess of paste. "Yes, I did," I said. "I had a mother once." I picked up my cane and limped out of the house.

When I sat down at the bar Niall put down his cloth and came to lean on his elbows in front of me. "You're feeling better," he said.

"I am." I wanted to reach out and put a hand into the pale cascade of his hair but I refrained.

"How's the baby?"

I pulled up my shirt to expose my belly. "Ask it," I said.

Niall reached over the bar. His craggy hand was cold against my skin. "Hello, baby," he said softly. "How are you going?" He waited for a moment, smiled, his crooked teeth glinting. "I don't understand what it's trying to say." He pulled his hand away.

We were silent for a moment, my eyes on the shiny surface of the dark wood bar, he leaning on his elbows and, I could feel it, watching me. When I looked up he leaned in a little closer and said, "You're not going to be precipitating yourself off any more boats, are you, Clare?"

I shook my head.

"And why not?"

I looked down at my belly. It was still exposed, white and round and not very pretty like a loaf of bread risen but unbaked. I folded my hands over it. And I said:

"While I was lying there waiting for you to come, with the sea pulling at me and jellyfish hanging off my ears...I was thinking...I realized...I was glad I was only hurt, and not dead. I'd never felt that before."

Niall leaned in a little closer. I almost thought he was going to kiss me but he stopped and smiled and I blushed at my foolishness. "And why were you glad?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What were you thinking of?"

My baby, I wanted to say, but that wasn't true and if there's anything I've always known it's that a lie is worse than anything else. At least I think that's it. "I was thinking about how I wished I was on the other side of Inisheer," I said. "The side that faces home. I wished I could lie and wait for

you and imagine my home was watching and praying for me, instead of Galway just sitting there not knowing who I am."

Niall leaned back a little, pulled a stool underneath him and sat. "A home is just a pile of stones in the ocean, Clare," he said. "No matter where you are, that's all your home is in the end. In a small place, it's easy to see where home ends and ocean begins, but no matter where you are, it's just the same. A pile of stones cannot pray."

"That's not like what you said the other day, Niall."

He smiled. He is a beautiful man, Auntie, no matter what the different parts of him might say. "No, indeed," he said, "it is not. But neither is it contradictory. And what's more, Clare, it wasn't Galway watching you at all. The Plassy faces Doolin, toward the south. Those waves would have washed you to a place you've never been."

The bodhran player thumped away. I turned around to look at him and he winked. He's a funny man, the bodhran player, youngish but wrinkled and brown because he often works on the boats, with a smooth-shaven head and a few silver-capped teeth. He grinned; the metal in his mouth glinted. He held the drum and the stick out to me. I shook my head but he didn't withdraw them and finally I went and sat down on the bench next to him. I took the bodhran in my hands and felt the skin of it with my palm. This, I thought, is what Gilly's skin feels like. Teffia's skin is soft underneath like a crust of bread and Niall's is sharp and rigid with bones. But Gilly's skin is--or was when I last touched it five years ago, and the years between fifteen and twenty are very long--tight and empty like the new skin of the drum-child of a thousand-year-old music.

I didn't play. I went home. Back to Gilly's house I mean. Down the path that leads all across the island from the bottom up to the top and back

down again from one shore to the other. On this side I can see almost all the way to Galway. I headed down toward her, toward the green house whose paint the wind from the sea is stripping away.

When I arrived the kitchen door was open. From the step I smelled something odd; for a moment I wondered if I'd come to the right house. I looked inside.

Niall's wife Grainne was in Gilly's kitchen. She was taking off a grey apron, an apron stained with grease and traces of flour which looked much like the one I saw you in the first day I ever came to this island. At the table Gilly sat a little sullen, her left forearm newly bandaged from wrist to elbow. In front of her was a plate of roasted chicken and a basket of steaming soda buns. She looked up at me as I came in and her face moved in more than one direction, then settled into no expression at all.

Grainne smiled at me, said a quick word in Irish (I think it was "Good evening") and dropped the apron into the dust on the wood floor.

I sat across from Gilly; Grainne sat next to her. I reached for the basket and took a bun, broke it open releasing a breath of steam. Grainne watched me as I took a bite. It was a bit tough and a little more soda than bun, prickling. I chewed and swallowed and put the two halves of it on the table, carefully side by side.

"Help yourself to some chicken in the oven," Grainne said.

I nodded but I didn't move. Gilly was eating in small steady bites but soon she slowed and put her fork down, wiping a hand across her mouth and then across the leg of her shorts. Only half her chicken breast was eaten and she hadn't touched the potatoes or peas. I expected Grainne to look at her with concern, to coax her into taking a few more bites, to push the basket of

buns toward her. But Grainne was still looking at me; under the low-riding rims of her big glasses her smile was thin.

"I'll be leaving soon," I said to Gilly.

Gilly looked up and nodded. There were touches of grease at the corners of her mouth. "When?" she asked before standing to put on the kettle.

"I don't know. I'll see. Soon."

Grainne was looking at the still-warm plate of chicken and didn't seem to hear us. I wished suddenly that she'd leave, leave us alone, leave Gilly to be exactly what she had been a few days ago, at least until I'm gone. But then I thought: half a breast of chicken is more solid food than I've ever seen Gilly eat at one time. And not even Teffia sits down in this kitchen and stays awhile.

Gilly stood at the open door looking out. I could hear echoes of the village beyond her but all I could see was the shape of her back etching a blank in the pale afternoon light.

"We'll go to Galway first, if you like," she said.

What's more, I thought, the smell of food drives all those other smells away.

Grainne stood and moved over to Gilly, put a brisk arm around her shoulders and hugged her against the side of her growing belly. Gilly's back did not relent but neither did she pull away. Grainne said something Irish and turned to flash me a quick smile; I hardly saw it because her face was in shadow. Then she slipped away, turning in the direction of the hotel as she stepped out the door, leaving the grey apron to lie in the dust.

"Rude as whispering," I said. I reached for Gilly's plate and pulled it toward me, suddenly ravenous. "What did she say?"

Gilly's face was still to the outside. "She said I should let her know when my mother is home, so she can come by and help me out."

The chicken was too cooked, the peas too soft but the gravy was smooth and rich with drippings. I stroked a piece of my soda bun through it and chewed.

"That's nice of her," I said through a mouthful of bread.

Gilly nodded. "It's nice of her."

"You need some friends, Gilly."

"Aye." She sighed. "I suppose I do."

She looked so small, so girllike, the shadow of her body just a reed in the doorway, the world outside so huge with the sound of the ocean. I was afraid suddenly to leave her and go home, and not afraid for myself for once. But then she came beside me and picked up her fork again. She sat and together, bite by silent bite, we polished off the plate of chicken, potatoes and peas and half the basket of buns. The air cooled, as did the food, and the sounds outside changed from day sounds--donkeys, cars, shop bustle, children's recitations in the yard outside the Irish school--to night sounds--televisions, the clink and sizzle of supper.

Afterwards she made tea and we drank it on the doorstep, not talking much, just looking down over the dead people below us and out over the water, listening to boats and children on the beach and the beginning noises of fiddles and drums and laughter floating down from the hotel. And for the first time since I've been back, the first time since that night when Gilly and I did what we did--because she couldn't have done it alone, a little girl like her--I thought I saw the oil in her eyes thin from black to amber so the sparks could swim freely, although it could have been a trick of the light.

XX

If it's a girl, I'm going to name the baby Rosary, even though Mr. and Mrs. Cassatt think it's a dreadful name. At their insistence I've agreed we'll call her Rose. Niall if it's a boy. I figure I owe him something.

They're trying to convince me to go to university after it's born. Mr. Cassatt puts on that sober authoritative male voice of his and tells me I can't expect others to take care of me. Mr. Pike is in on it too. I finally told him everything this morning after making him promise not to reveal it to a soul. I'm not even sure he believes me but that's all right, better even maybe. When I left today he looked so satisfied, like he'd finally pulled a sword from a stone.

It's almost November and the winter hasn't come yet. The women's center is closing down; they didn't make any money off that play of theirs. The girl they hired on when I disappeared chose some dreadful fluffy thing about the agony of abortion and all of ten people came to see it, theatre-school girls who left wads of damp salty Kleenex in the aisles but didn't tell any of their friends about it. I've gone back to my job waiting tables at the pizza parlour.

I still play the bodhran though. My teacher has arranged for me to be a permanent fixture in her little band and we play the inns every weekend. They've even arranged a show at the Arts and Culture Center. I go along for the ride, collect a few dollars here and there. I'm not saving anything at the moment although I do think that one of these days I'll go back to Inisheer. When the child is old enough to know the difference between one place and another.

I'm trying to decide what I should tell it. What is it that children need to know? Or see? When I think about Mumma and how she could never tell the difference between herself and me I get so frightened. On those days I go off to Shooters by myself to forget. Better to forget than to hand it all over to my baby, I say to myself. They don't serve Guinness here but the Smithwick's tastes almost real if you hold your nose. I only have one pint now and then, and last time I saw the barman look at my belly; soon they'll refuse to serve me at all, which I suppose is just as well.

The first thing was that man she called my father.

They don't think I remember that. None of them. I've never said it. I don't remember the orphanage or that night on Quidi Vidi although she's told me about it so many times that I might as well. The first thing I remember of my entire life is looking at them in the bed.

I got a letter from Gilly a couple of weeks ago. She's never written me a letter before. I'm glad you're settled in and making her eat something besides that ham-and-water soup. Try to see now if you can wrest New Jerusalem out of her hand. The smack and the sandalwood and Teffia Mulvaney are harmless compared to God.

I worry about you sometimes, Auntie. That hospital in Galway, the day we came to get you, scared the bejeezus out of me, and you all grey-faced and hollow. The corridors full of old people; it seemed like every person we passed on the way in was so old but it can't only be old people who go crazy in Ireland. And you sat in your chair in your room and looked out the window; that first look I got of you...thank God you were dressed and not in one of those olivy gowns all the others wore. And you turned your face to us and it was so thin and fallen and the same hospital bloodless beige as the walls.

When you started to talk though I could see it'd all been a mistake, you were still inside yourself waiting for your place so you could come out again. Sometimes I think everything hinged on me arriving at just that moment. I know it's probably not true; I know you probably would have sat solid for as long as it took. You and I are of a kind that way. But some days I want to throw everything in and get back on that plane, to make sure Gilly's not lying to me, to make sure she hasn't taken you back to that egg-white room with the skull-eyed nurses sticking needles and pills into you. Or she hasn't left you in a wheelchair in the corner of the kitchen next to a boiling hambone.

But I think I trust her now.

Maybe I will take a course or two to feel like I won't spend the rest of my life smelling of pizza. History I think, or maybe music. I considered religious studies, wondered if maybe I could learn something that would take the piss out of all Gilly's droning scripture quotes. Apparently the head of the theology department is an atheist. This delights me to no end. I think though it will be a few years before I can stomach any talk of God.

What do you think, Auntie? Are we going to be ok? I'm learning to cook; Mrs. Cassatt showed me how to make pickled eggs the other day. I like pickled eggs; they smell the way a good solid Irish Newfoundland house should smell. Mr. Cassatt gave her some frankincense cones for Christmas but I won't let them burn them in the house. I haven't thrown them down the toilet yet; I'm thinking of it. Or burying them in the yard but they might grow into some sort of tree that doesn't belong here.

Mr. Pike tells me I am resilient. "You are a very resilient person, Clare," he says. And I say, "I don't want to be resilient, Mr. Pike. I don't want to need to be resilient any more." And he smiles and says, "But Clare, we all need to be resilient. Everyone needs to know how to pick up their pain and

put it to use." And I say, "Not my child, Mr. Pike. I'll take her pain away from her and burn it if I have to." "You would be doing her a great disservice, Clare," he says. And I say, "Mr. Pike, you have no idea what you're talking about."

But maybe he's right. Do you think maybe he's right?

Answer me, Auntie.

I think I feel snow in the air.

The band is learning "Molly na gCuach ni Chulleanain." Molly of the ringlets. Sometimes I can't play because the sight of my mother's hair with the light behind it like a glass house on fire blinds me. They understand though, even if I don't tell them. Everyone is very patient: my band, Mr. Pike, the Cassatts. They tell me the baby won't be so patient when it comes.

I'm thinking of trying to learn Irish but I know Niall would laugh at me.

I took the car down to Cape Spear last weekend alone. It's not as cold now as the last time I went with Mumma. I still can't make the rocks skip, and the ocean still looks as angry as if I'd chained her up in her own hair. But there are also little coral shells all over the beach if you know how to look, smaller than the grains of myrrh Gilly crushes into powder. They glow red like matchheads just struck, if you drop them into water.

A Note on Sources

All Biblical quotations were taken from the Thomas Nelson, Inc. 1977 edition of the King James Version.

The English translation of the Irish folk song "Mo Ghille Mear," on page 47, was taken from the liner notes of the Dara Records album *éist: songs in their native language.*

The quote on page 63 is from the traditional English children's song "The Grand Old Duke of York."

The 1996 edition of *Ireland: A Lonely Planet Travel Survival Kit* was extremely helpful in providing geographical data for this project.