Extracts from recent novels

Contemporary
Fantasy
Historical/Historical fantasy
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<th>Ashling, Wednesday, 21 &amp; 28 May</th>
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| It happened again this evening. Mum was on the phone during my practising time. This time the other person rang her, though, so it’s not her fault. I’m dying to know if it’s the tall dark stranger. I hope so. Wouldn’t it be great if Mum had a - I don’t know how to put this - ‘boyfriend’ sounds too girlish, ‘man’ sounds too racy, ‘partner’ sounds too proprietorial, ‘friend’ sounds too coy. But maybe it was just somebody she got talking to outside the gallery. Maybe she was just telling him where the cloakroom was. Maybe they were just two people exchanging remarks on the street. But who is ringing her up? I just hope he’s not married, that’s all. Mum wouldn’t dream of it if he is of course. I mean, I hope he’s not married and pretending not to be....

Well! a great leap forward! Mum’s going out tonight with Richard. Richard is her new gentleman caller. That’s what she called him when she told us about him. It’s a little joke, that, a reference to a play, I think. I don’t know much about plays. Maths and science are more my line than English

She told us this morning at breakfast. I don’t think she chose breakfast on purpose because it’s a rushed meal and we have to leave first to catch the bus. I think she must have been working up to it for sometime. |

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<th>Cindy, Friday, 23 May</th>
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| It makes you wonder. I mean, Mum is not even two months dead, and there he is throwing himself at another woman. How could he be so callous? He can’t have loved her at all. Or maybe he did just at the beginning. I mean, there’s me, after all, so there must have been something there at one time. I was born six months after they were married. Mum used to joke about it, say I was a miracle baby. When I was small, I used to believe it, that I was really amazingly premature, but when I got older, I realised she was only joking, that she was pregnant when she got married. I used to be proud of that. I felt it proved my parents were unconventional and passionate. Now it makes me wonder. Maybe she pressurised him into marrying her. Maybe she only wanted an Irish passport. (I haven’t worked out why, though, that’s still a bit obscure.)

I often wondered why I was an only child. I assumed it was something gynaecological. Mum used to have a terrible time with her periods, and when I was about ten she finally had a hysterectomy, so I thought that was it. But now I wonder. Maybe they had given up sleeping together. I mean, they always had a double bed, but you know what I mean, though now I come to think of it, Dad used to spend a lot of time in the spare room, even before she got sick. Maybe he’s been a philanderer all along. The pig. |
**Nance**

I suppose you could call it delayed shock. It had been two weeks since I’d found the photo, and my life had gone on as normal. At least, that’s how it must have seemed to OD, my boyfriend, and to everyone else. But inside I’d gone numb. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t study. I felt nothing. And then I cracked.

The child in the photo was me. I was certain of it. My brown skin, the tight black curls, something about the eyes. I don’t know how long I spent there, gaping at the photo, before I put it back exactly where I found it; but, to this day, I can remember every detail of it. The impossibly blue sky, the lush green trees in the background, the bright colours of their clothes. There were five adults in the photo.... The strange thing ... was that not one of them were smiling except the woman who held me. This convinced me even more she really was my natural mother....

More than once, OD had told me he was surprised I never wanted to find out more about myself. I just told him I knew who I was, but it always felt like a lie. And lies can be easy to live with if you bury them deep enough. Buried mine beneath a heavy schedule of study, sport - and going out with OD.

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**OD**

When you think things can’t get any worse, that’s when you can be sure they will. Call it OD’s Law if you like - Disaster plus X (the unknown, the future, the next minute) equals Double Disaster. That afternoon, as I left Jimmy in his fantasy world where money didn’t matter, I was lower than zero. Then I shot down the minus scale.

I was at the gate before I copped Seanie’s puke-green Popemobile parked near Beano’s house. I couldn’t make sense of the scene. It was like seeing a hearse outside a disco or something off-the-wall like that. Seanie wasn’t looking in my direction but staring worriedly at the passenger seat. Next thing I saw Nance’s head appear. I didn’t wait to see her face. I staggered back towards the house like I was going home after a night at the Galtee Lounge. I went out the back way by the lane behind our house.

My heart was banging out a mad beat somewhere between reggae, rap and house. The lyrics went something like ‘It doesn’t matter’, or ‘So what’, but they didn’t fit the rhythm. At the same time, someone must have been sticking pins into a little effigy of me because my knee was peppered with stinging jabs.
As it turned out, Turaq did have a grandmother. Turaq’s father was away at the caribou hunt, but his mother invited us in. My dad was in heaven. His first invitation into an Inuit home that year.

I liked the inside of Turaq’s house. Nothing matched. Even the two curtains on the living-room window were in different fabrics and of different lengths. It gave the house a lovely topsy-turvy, haphazard, colourful feeling that I liked, like being in a caravan. My mother thought she was dead unconventional, being an actress, but she liked her curtains to match and she was for ever ‘picking up’ the green in a picture with a scrap of matching green in the carpet or the little red stripe along the rug with a sofa-cushion in the exact same shade. It was what she liked to do, but I always thought it made our house feel stuffy.

Turaq’s mother made us coffee, using a proper electric kettle - not very Inuit that, I could see Dad thinking - and offered us chewy meat to eat with it. I’d never had coffee with meat before; actually, I’d never had coffee. The combination tasted strange, but I suppose it was sort of ... interesting. Dad said later it was jerky, which is a sort of dried meat. It was like gnawing leather, but tasty leather. Dad thought it might have been caribou or moose. The coffee was dreadful. I’ve always been more of a tea-man, myself.

Anyway, we said we had come to say thank you to Turaq. At least Dad did. I nearly died - again. Turaq smiled and bowed stiffly and his mother looked pleased. His grandmother smiled too.

Then Dad got all flowery. ‘I don’t know how we can ever thank you properly, Turaq. There is nothing we can do to repay you for your ki...’

I glared at him. You didn’t talk to a ten-year-old about their kindness. That was too grown-up a concept. It sounded soppy to kids. I could never understand how adults could forget that sort of thing about being a child.

‘For your ... help,’ Dad finished, glancing at me.

Turaq just nodded and smiled again.

Then his grandmother made a little speech. She leant forward and said to my dad: ‘You don’t need to repay Turaq. What you do is, when you see someone in trouble, you help them. That’s how you repay a kindness. By helping the next person. And then they can help, another person. And so it goes. That is the Inuit way.’

‘A very wise old lady,’ my dad said to me afterwards.
Jessica shook her head. ‘Well, this has made up my mind for me. Look at you, covered in ... that. You’re a caveman, Bernard. My own little troglodyte!’

‘I couldn’t agree more,’ agreed Babe.

Jessica smiled at her. ‘I’m glad to see you’ve taken that filthy cap off, Babe. You have such lovely hair. Women in France pay a fortune for curls like that.’ Her scrutinising stare travelled down over Babe’s clothes. Baggy old sweatshirt and jeans. Both encrusted with fish scales. ‘There’s still a bit of work to be done, though.’

Benny frowned. This was going somewhere. Somewhere he didn’t want it to go.

‘So. I’ve made a little decision,’ announced Jessica.

Benny wondered would he agree with the word ‘little’.

‘I’ve decided that we’re going to put on a play.’

Benny reeled. ‘What?’

‘A play, Bernard. A show. You, Babe, George and myself.’

‘But, Mam! What did I do?’

Jessica smiled indulgently. ‘It’s not a punishment, Bernard. It’s to help broaden your horizons.’

‘My horizons are grand, thanks very much. They’re as broad as a ... broad thing.’ Benny’s simile skills were letting him down again.

‘Oh, stop being so selfish, Bernard. Think about someone else for a change. Maybe Babe is fed up bashing a smelly ball around the place.’

‘Babe?’ scoffed Benny. ‘Sure, she’s worse than me! Babe loves smelly things, and dogs and knives and all boys’ stuff. Sure, Babe isn’t like a girl at all.’ Once again Benny’s tongue was operating independently of his brain. If he’d been watching Babe’s face, he might have realised that he was on the wrong track.

‘Oh really, Bernard? Why don’t we let Babe decide?’

Babe was already fed up with Benny for his comments, and now here was this glamorous lady asking her to put on a play of all things. Now, generally Babe would walk several miles in bare feet to avoid drama or poetry or reading of any sort. But lately she’d been thinking more and more about the actual process of being a girl. And though she’d endure torture before admitting it, she’d actually had a go with her mother’s lipstick. Added to this was the fact that Benny’s mother looked sort of like someone that Babe might sort of want to be like... maybe, sort of.

So she said. ‘Yes. A play. I never did a play. Okay.’

Jessica positively beamed. ‘Good girl. Now, Bernard! Maybe you don’t know your friends as well as you think.’

Benny was speechless. Maybe he didn’t.

‘Now, chin up, Babe. And straighten those shoulders. Stand like that and you’ll have spine curvature before you’re forty.’

Benny’s voice came rushing back. ‘Don’t listen to her, Babe. She’s trying to turn you into a ...’

‘Into a what, Bernard?’

Benny struggled to think of the worst possible insult. Something that would put Babe off this drama nonsense forever. ‘She’s trying to turn you into a ... big frilly blouse!’

Judging by the big sour looks on the two women’s faces, he’d said the wrong thing yet again. Benny sighed. Looked like they were putting on a show.

Jessica draped an arm around Babe’s shoulder and led her towards the lighthouse. They began whispering and giggling. Benny heard the word ‘neanderthal’ mentioned, and wondered who they could be talking about. He moped along behind, cranking up his martyr act to the limit. Two females and himself, the odd man out.
FADE IN

EXTERIOR: RUNDOWN CITY STREET, DAMP AFTER RAIN — EVENING

Music: ‘Everybody Hurts’ by REM

Some of the houses (Georgian? Early Victorian perhaps?) are derelict, no sign of life, except a stray dog, nosing in the gutter. Then we see a young boy, thinly dressed in Manchester United top and old jeans, crouched on the wet pavement, his head partially hidden by the collar of his jersey, which he has drawn up around his face. He has an aerosol can to his nose and he is sniffing deeply. HOLD for a BEAT, then PULL BACK INTO -

INTERIOR: SEMI-DERELICT HOUSE — EVENING

The same young boy, dressed as before, is poking about among his possessions — a sleeping bag, some clothes. Then he turns to face the camera and we see him CLOSE-UP and he starts to speak TO CAMERA.

Johnner

They said it was daft to hold a party in a gaff like ours. It’s not really a gaff at all, mind you, not what you would call a place, like. Well, it is a place, I suppose, I mean, it’s here, it’s probably even got an address, like, officially anyway, though post never gets delivered. I dunno who owns it. I suppose somebody must, like, there must be a register or something, somewhere, where it says who owns which buildings.

Or maybe there isn’t. Maybe nobody knows. It’s abandoned - so maybe, like, it’s been forgotten too. Hey, cool idea. Maybe it’s the House that Everyone Forgot. Hey, weee-iird. We’re the Kids that Got Away, and we live in the Forgotten House, Beyond the Edge, Derelictionville, Outer Darkness. Hee-eey! Yeah! That’s us!

[PAUSE]

Oh, yeah, the party. I was going to tell you about the party - my party. They said you need ‘the basics’ if you’re going to have a party. The basics, according to them - my, eh, flatmates, I suppose you’d call them - well, the basics are electricity, running water and a roof that, like, keeps at least most of the rain out. Not at all, I said, no way. You just need a few mates, a bit of imagination and a lot of crack - not the drug, ha-ha, the fun kind of crack. Well, yeah.

Mind you, you need a few other things as well, I suppose. I have, like, thirteen and a half smokes that I saved up, and two six-packs of beer that Caro, like, liberated from somewhere, plus forty-eight candles behind the curtain.

Ha! You didn’t think we had curtains, did you? Well, we have just the one, yeah. Not one pair, one curtain, like, half a pair, I mean, but it’s huge and it’s nearly big enough to cover the whole window in the bedroom. That’s what we call it, the bedroom, even though it’s downstairs. It’s probably really supposed to be the sittingroom, or maybe you would call it, like, the par-lour, in a posh place like this, used to be posh, I mean. It’s not so posh now, with, like, the rain coming in and everything, and it’s even worse since we got hold of it, but I try to make it nice, yeah.

I put up all my Manchester United posters - yeah! - my old Busby Babes one that my uncle Ken gave me, that’s an antique that is, dead cool, and my Cantona-the-King one and my brand new 1999 one with Our Very Own Roy Keane scowling away in the front row. That sickened Beano, it really did, he supports Liverpool, like (can you believe it!), but I think he just says that to annoy me, like. I mean, football might as well be something played on another planet for all the interest he takes in it really. Hey, imagine all them aliens with six legs playing football! Feetball they’d have to call it. Hey, yeah!
Anyway, I was saying about the curtain. It’s a, well, I mean, sitting room sort of curtain, that thick soft stuff, velvet, only with, like, a pattern, sort of flowers on it. The flowers are the same colour as the rest of the curtain, so I don’t know if you call that a pattern or not, but anyway, you get the picture. Big, fat, rich sort of curtains, I mean, curtain.

Well, they have a point, like, the rest of them. I’ll give them that, up to a point, about the party, I mean. If the weather is really manky, like, then there’s definitely a problem. I mean, the rain pours in. Half the slates are off, and they’re not all off in the same place, if you see what I mean. I mean, it’s not as though there’s one big hole to avoid, like, and it’s fairly well covered elsewhere. That’d be okay, like. But it’s more a sort of a half-made jigsaw puzzle. I mean, there’s bits missing all over the shop, and you can get really soaked if you don’t dress for the weather, yeah.

We have these really great, like, capes that Beano nicked out of a bicycle shop and we put them on and put the hoods up and we look like bleedin’ pixies, all sitting around with the water lashing down on us, great gas it is, you should see us, yeah.

We have, like, these plastic bags as well, to put over our sleeping bags. We’ve built up layers of them, yeah, by this stage, but it still gets in and I mean you can wake up with all these, like, little puddles under your shoulder or around your toes.

But it’s not too bad. We sleep downstairs, because then we have the ceiling, like, as well as the roof, I mean, between us and the rain. The ceiling leaks like mad too, but at least it stops some of it, yeah well, maybe not much. I bet one day it’s all going to come crumbling down on top of us and kill us, yeah. What a way to go, conked out by a lump of ceiling plaster - yeah! But so long as the weather holds off, like, everything is cool.

I do love living here, I do. It’s like camping, I mean, it’s like being on your holidays all the time. And nobody wrecks your head here. There’s, like, nobody to tell you what to do, ask where you’re going, who you’re going with, when you’ll be back, will you do this, do that, did you do this, did you do that, why did you, why didn’t you ...

The other stuff we can manage without. Running water, I said, who says we haven’t got running water? It’s running all over the bleedin’ place, down the walls, through the roof - cracks me up, that joke about running water, it does - and as for electricity, well sure everyone knows electricity and water don’t mix, like, so don’t be annoyin’ me. That’s when I had the brilliant idea. Candles! I do love candles, I do. Add a bit of atmosphere, like. I’m all for atmosphere, I am....

... I have no problems since I got shacked up here. It’s great, it is, yeah. Great to have your own place and all, where you can be with your own mates, and they’re all great mates, I mean great fun, dead nice. And we are going to have one almighty party! Yee-ha!

I do love it here. I really do. Just love it. It’s freedom it is, living here, freedom and peace.

[CUT TO -]

Young girl, curly-haired and good-natured looking, dressed in a tracksuit, hunched against the cold, on a broken-down sofa, and chafing one shoeless foot, as if trying to warm it.

Samantha

I hate this dump, so I do. It’s so cold. Sometimes you’d swear the walls were actually radiating cold, you know, the way a radiator radiates heat, only it’s cold. And it’s damp, so it is. No, I tell a lie. It’s not damp. It’s wet, it’s sopping, it’s dripping, that’s the long and the short of it. Every surface you touch is clammy. Mind you, some-times you touch something and, I swear to God, it’s so cold you can’t tell whether it really is damp or just so cold that it feels damp. The walls, well you can expect them to be cold, the doors, the windows, the floors, all the hard surfaces, but even your clothes feel cold when you touch them, as if they have been in the fridge, even the clothes you are wearing, the top layer anyway. You go to pick up a towel or a dishcloth, and I swear to God it’s like hand-ling a dead fish.

And everything smells.
Robby gripped the top rung of the gate and, in one leap, was over it. There were still three New Agers: a long-haired man and the woman in the white dress he’d seen earlier, walking hesitantly around the stones, followed by the girl. Some kind of freaky pagan ritual, he speculated, wondering what kind of weird bunch this was.

The couple halted at the entrance to the circle, and a male voice reverberated softly across the night meadow.

‘There we go, then,’ it said. ‘That’s twenty-one.’

The girl joined them, and all three turned towards Robby. He wished he’d stayed in his room and let Eamon sort them out in his own crude way. But he was there, across the circle from them, and he had to say something.

He addressed himself to the girl because he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

‘I asked you not to come up here.’

‘You didn’t ask me, you warned me.’

The couple looked on in growing surprise as the red-haired girl cut through the circle and advanced on Robby.

‘I told you my great-uncle wouldn’t like it. What are you doing, anyway?’

‘Why aren’t you tucked up in bed with your Action Man dollies?’

Behind her, the dreadlocked man followed the path she’d taken. Robby saw that his smile was conciliatory if not friendly.

‘We don’t mean any harm, man. It’s not our intention to make a nuisance of ourselves.’ The curious mix of hippie slang and plummy tones confused Robby.

‘My great-uncle’s very touchy about strangers on the land,’ Robby said. ‘Especially in the middle of the night.’

‘A few days, man, and we’ll be gone. That’s not too much to ask, is it?’

‘You lot always leave a mess after you. We have to live here. We have to clean up after you.’

‘You lot?’ What’s that supposed to mean?’ the girl interjected. ‘We’ve never been in these backwoods before.’

Robby glanced at her, then dispiritedly away. Even the bad dream was better than this, yet another of the constant confrontations which made up his life.

‘I meant other - others like you ... other wasters,’ he said, kicking at the standing stone before him, wishing he could kick harder.

‘Now, listen here ....’ the man objected. But a hand appeared at his shoulder, and the face of the woman in white hovered into view between him and the girl.

The girl’s mother, surely. The resemblance was striking - the high cheekbones, the steep slant of the dark eye-brows, the slightly raised upper lip. But, if Robby was afraid to look into the girl’s eyes, he couldn’t resist the hypnotic effect of her mother’s. Even before she’d moved close enough to take his hand, he felt as though he’d been touched. The woman was clearly very unwell, and yet she made him feel calmed.

‘My name’s Andy, short for Andrea,’ she said, sounding to Robby like a laid-back country-and-western singer. ‘This here is Bubble, my long-suffering partner. And our daughter, Mayfly. But I guess you’ve already met.’

‘Yeah,’ he replied, tongue-tied under the girl’s tightlipped glare.

‘Aries, right?’ Andy asked.

‘Sorry?’

‘Your star sign,’ she explained. When he shrugged, she asked, ‘When’s your birthday? March? April?’

‘March. The twenty-third.’ He couldn’t quite believe he was having this unlikely conversation in the Stone Field after midnight with all these oddly-named people, but he wasn’t in any hurry for it to end.

‘Sensitive, sincere, energetic,’ she told him. ‘But a bit of a tough guy hiding in there too, right?’

Inside the stone circle, Mayfly stood with folded arms and tossed her wild red hair impatiently.

‘Hiding?’ she snorted.

‘Sometimes, you’ve got to be ... let’s call it resilient. Right?’ Andy said, and took hold of his hand. ‘You haven’t told us your name.’
‘Robby. Robby Wade.’ He withdrew his hand, only to have Bubble give it a firm thumbs-up handshake.

‘Blenthyne. Bubble Blenthyne.’

‘Mayfly,’ Andy called. ‘Come on over here.’

They shook hands briskly, across the barrier of the low standing stone. Robby found himself apologising again, but to Andy.

‘It’s my great-uncle, you see. He loses it when anyone comes up to the -’

‘Tell you what we’ll do, Robby,’ she said. ‘We’ll take our chances with your great-uncle. You got your problems, we got ours, right? Let us worry about this one, OK? Deal?’

Robby knew he should feel offended at her offhand assumption that he had problems. Instead, he felt that she’d reached into his soul and that some inexplicable light had briefly shone there. The wisp of night air brought with it a pleasant shiver. There was no arguing with this woman and the firmness in her gentle certainty. He found himself regretting that she appeared so unhealthily fragile.

‘Why did you come to Cloghercree?’ he asked.

‘The stones. See, we believe that the stones -’ Bubble began.

‘Bubble!’ Mayfly exclaimed. ‘You don’t have to explain to him ....’

‘Robby? Why don’t you come to us for supper tomorrow evening and we’ll talk about it?’ Andy said. ‘Say eight o’clock?’

***

Mayfly stormed away from the stone circle. She’d give him supper. Climbing through the hedge, she planned an extra-hot fire-and-brimstone curry that would have him racing back to his great-uncle in thirsty haste.

As she waited by Nirvana for her parents to emerge from the field, her rage subsided. The stillness of the night became a part of her being. The sense of calm that washed over her had nothing to do with peace or happiness. It was, rather, a tranquil prelude to the dawning of truth.

All day she’d been hiding behind a frenzy of rushing around to find a cure for Rusty, keeping busy with cooking and cleaning, venting her anger on the security guard and on Action Man and on Bubble. For weeks, months, she’d been carrying on like this.

The reasons were simple. She didn’t want Andy to die. She was desperately afraid. She couldn’t live without her.

But the real cause went deeper than that and had a harder, more unpalatable core to it. Achingly, almost sickeningly, Mayfly realised that, all along, she’d known her life wouldn’t end when Andy’s did.

Before her, the gap in the hedge, garlanded with a silhouette of leaves, was an empty frame.

***

Robby went, smiling a little daftly, through the trees and past the barn. Even the girl’s continuing hostility couldn’t dull his sense of anticipation at the unexpected invitation. He didn’t even bother to work on some foolproof excuse for going there. He’d think of something —  say he was going into town or whatever.

If it had been daytime, he’d have been whistling contentedly as he entered the yard. If he’d been whistling, the melody would have wound down as tunelessly as a song on a Walkman with fading batteries. The kitchen light was on. Eamon would want to know why he’d left the house at such a late hour.

As he pushed the door open, he promised himself not to give any explanation. Why should he? He owed Eamon nothing.

In the fireplace, there was nothing left but the blackened stumps of burnt wood-blocks. Eamon sat there anyway, huddled up in his tartan dressing-gown, his feet, blue with cold, on the stone hearth.

‘Where were you?’ he asked. Robby kept walking to-wards the hallway door. ‘Robby! Wait a -’

Robby swung the heavy door open and stood face to face with Razor McCabe.
This time I was the first to arrive at the shell house. I’d said I was going for a walk, which was true, though not, of course, the full story.

At breakfast Dad had read out the weather forecast from the Irish Times as he always did, regardless of whether anyone was listening. ‘It says there’ll be heavy showers,’ he announced. ‘About time. No need to water the lettuces.’

Mum looked out at the cloudless sky. ‘There’s no sign of a change,’ she said.

But by the time I reached the park that evening, dark clouds were gathering. Standing in the shell house I could see Daniel crossing the footbridge over the lake. He was wearing his leather jacket and carrying a plastic bag, which I knew contained the diary. He walked with a quick stride, his hair flopping over his collar.

Watching him through the window arch, I wondered why the sight of him made me feel so happy. It’s ridiculous, I told myself firmly, you hardly know him, and you have a boyfriend already. Remember he’s just a friend.

‘Hi,’ I said breezily, as he came in through the open doorway. ‘Has Fiacla recovered from her visit to the vet?’

Daniel grinned as he slid his jacket off and laid it on the ground for us to sit on. ‘She may have, but I’m not so sure that I have.’ Then he took the diary out of the plastic bag. ‘I did a lot of sorting out yesterday. I’ve found my mother’s translations of the next few entries.’ He stopped and looked at me seriously. ‘It’s heavy stuff. Are you sure you want to hear it?’

‘Of course,’ I said quickly.

November 10th, 1938:

I woke suddenly last night to the crash of breaking glass. At first I thought I was dreaming, because I was safe under my duvet, with the rosebud curtains drawn and Hanni asleep in her little bed beside mine. I heard more crashes and loud shouting, and then knocking at the front door. I rushed downstairs.

In the hall Mama was helping Papa into the surgery. His face was covered with blood, his clothes ripped, his left arm hanging in a strange way. By the time Mama had sponged his face and bandaged his wounds the whole family was downstairs.

Papa’s arm was in a sling and his face was a sickly white. ‘I can’t believe what I have just seen,’ he whispered. ‘They’re hunting Jews, they’re smashing the windows of Jewish shops, they’ve burned down the synagogue, they’re throwing holy books into the flames, they’re beating every Jew they see, kicking them and shooting them. I saw them chopping off the old Rabbi’s beard with a knife, and making women scrub the streets on their knees.’

After a moment Mama said shakily, ‘Who? Who is doing these things?’

Papa said, ‘The Nazis, the Germans, our neighbours - the world has gone mad.’ No-one spoke. Papa continued slowly, ‘We must leave Germany.’

‘But, Papa, we are Germans,’ said Max. This is our home.’

Papa sighed, and patted Max’s shoulder. ‘No,’ he said. ‘It’s not our country any more.’

November 11th, 1938:

Everyone talks about nothing but that terrible night. So many Jewish homes, shops and synagogues were burned, looted and smashed all over Germany that they call it Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass.

When Grandpa came, he and Mama drank coffee from tiny china cups. He told us that hundreds of Jews, and also Socialists and other anti Nazis had been arrested and sent to concentration camps. I was afraid to ask what happens to them in those places.
Grandpa suddenly looks very old. His rosy cheeks have become pale and his hands tremble. He had brought with him all the medals that he had received for fighting for Germany in the First World War. He showed them to us, telling us how he had been a good German citizen all his life. ‘I don’t understand why this is happening,’ he said.

For a dreadful moment I thought he was going to cry, but Mama brought the baby over to him and she made a grab at the medals. Then Hanni lifted the kitten on to Grandpa’s knee and she touched a medal curiously with her paw. We all laughed, in spite of everything.

January 1st, 1939:

Today is New Year’s Day. We haven’t got much to celebrate, but Oma says we must pray that things will get better this year.

Yesterday there was a gentle tap on the door. It was a young woman with a baby, who kept crying in a high weak voice. She begged Papa, ‘I know we must not attend Jewish doctors, but my child is sick and you are the only doctor I trust.’

Papa brought her into the surgery and drew the ‘blinds. I knew Mama was worried, but she said nothing. When the woman was leaving she kissed Papa’s hand and said, ‘God will punish them for what they are doing to innocent people.’

***

Daniel said, ‘That’s as far as I’ve got with it.’

It had turned quite cool and there were a few drops of rain. But that wasn’t why I shivered. I was chilled with horror at the story of the Night of Broken Glass. ‘I remember studying the Second World War and the Holocaust in school,’ I told Daniel. ‘But you don’t learn what it was really like.’

‘I didn’t know much either,’ said Daniel. ‘I looked it up today in Castlemines Library.’

‘And was it like Miriam described?’

‘It’s all true,’ he said fiercely. ‘About that night, Kristallnacht, and about the Holocaust. And it gets much worse. I can’t believe my family were caught up in something so horrific.’

Daniel appeared to me to be the sort of person who kept things hidden and rarely showed his anger. But what must it feel like to have events like this jump out of the history books and become entangled with your life?

‘Are there any more photos?’ I asked. I wanted so much to know more about them.
He stood at the back gateway of the abattoir, his hands thrust in his pockets, his stomach rigid with the ache of want. Men in white coats and baseball caps whistled and shouted as they move between the hanging carcases. He couldn’t see his father, yet I did not want to venture in. He knew the sweet warm nauseating smell of the place and he had had no breakfast. Nor had he smoked his first cigarette of the day. Smells were always so much more intense then. At intervals the crack of the humane killer echoed round the glass roof. Queuing beasts bellowed in the distance as if they knew.

He saw the Preacher standing waiting with his glass. It was the local doctor’s prescription for any anaemic with a strong stomach. The Preacher was tall and thin with the Adam’s apple of a vulture and skin that was made even paler, if that was possible, by the light reflected from the white tiles. He cycled the countryside on his breadcart of a bicycle with a small ladder strapped to the bar and a clutter of tools in the saddle-bag, nailing tracts made from tin lids to trees and telegraph-poles. ‘The Wages of Sin is Dead Romans 8:5’ was on a sycamore tree on the Magherafelt road; and further out ‘I am the Resurrection and the Life. John 11:25’.

Crilly came over to the gateway to sharpen his knives.
‘Hiya, Cal,’ he said. Cal saw him press the blade on to the carborundum stone with his fingers, heard it hiss.
‘Is my Da about?’
Crilly looked up and stopped the movement. He nodded over his shoulder.
‘Will you tell him I want him,’ said Cal.
‘In a minute.’ He squinted along the worn crescent of his blade and gave it an infinitesimal touch with the ball of his thumb. He caressed the stone lightly once or twice more, as if sweeping it clean, then moved back into the building.
‘Shamie,’ he yelled. ‘Shamie.’

The humane killer cracked again and Cal saw the killing pen tip over and tumble a beast on to the floor, its legs stiff to the ceiling. It was immediately winched up by one of the hind shanks and its throat cut. The Preacher moved forward and held out his glass to catch the spout of blood. Cal turned away.

His father appeared, holding two halves of a hanging carcase apart like a curtain. Seeing Cal, he went over to the gateway. ‘What do you want?’
‘You took the cigarettes with you.’
‘Here,’ he said, jutting out his hip. His hands were wet and slimy and he held them out as if he were to be body-searched by the Army. Cal lifted the tail of his father’s white coat. It was japped all over with blood and stiff with cold fat. He put his hand in the trouser pocket and took out a packet of Embassy.
‘Take a couple,’ said his father. Cal took three and put the packet back. He fumbled in his own pocket for a match.
‘See you,’ he said, walking away. He struck the match, cupped it and lit one of the cigarettes, inhaling deeply. Almost immediately he felt the muscles of his stomach relax. Several more times while standing still he drew the smoke to the bottom of his lungs and exhaled, each time with a sigh. He began to walk, the cigarette hanging from his mouth, his hands in his anorak pockets. It was an autumn morning, the air full of clear sounds. As he passed the pens of cattle he heard their nasal bawling and, when closer, the slow slap, slap of their dung. He turned his face away and walked home to make himself a cup of tea and wait for his Giro to arrive in the post.

As he turned into his street he felt the eyes on him. He looked at the ground in front of him and walked. The eyes would be at the curtains or behind a hedge as a man paused in his digging. He could not bear to look up and see the flutter of Union Jacks, and now the red and white cross of...
the Ulster flag with its red hand. Of late there were more and more of these appearing in the estate. It was a dangerous sign that the Loyalists were getting angry. The flags should all have been down by now because the Twelfth of July was long past. It was sheer cussedness that they were kept up. Even looking at his feet Cal couldn’t avoid the repulsion because the kerbstones had been painted alternating red, white and blue. Cal felt it was aimed at them, the Mc Cluskeys, because his father and he were the only Catholic family left in the whole estate. Fear had driven the others out but his father would not move. He was stubborn at the best of times but if he thought pressure was being applied to him he was ten times worse.

‘No Loyalist bastard is going to force me out of my home. They can kill me first.’

But it wasn’t a single bastard that worried Cal, it was an accumulation of them. The feeling of community that they managed to create annoyed him and the stronger their sense of community grew the more excluded and isolated the Mc Cluskeys felt. They spoke to their near neighbours affably enough but beyond that everyone else in the estate seemed threatening. The Radcliffs and the Hendersons said they would stand by the Mc Cluskeys if it ever came to an eviction.

Cal detested the condescension of some of the Protestant men he met about the town.

‘You’re Shamie Mc Cluskey’s boy? A good man, Shamie.’ And implied in everything they were saying was ‘for a Catholic’. There was faint affectionate amazement on their faces that there should be a Catholic who was a good man, someone to equal them.

Cal turned in at the gate and walked up the path through his father’s neat garden. He let himself in at the front door with his key. He took a mug of tea and a slice of toast up to his bedroom, turning on the light rather than pulling back the curtains. He locked the bedroom door with a small bolt he had recently bought in a hardware shop. It was much against his father’s wishes but he had argued that he was nineteen years of age and had the right to some sort of privacy. He put on an LP of the Rolling Stones to drown the silence and sat on the bed with his back to the wall.

He put his head forward and sipped his tea. With his hair the length it was, he had had to develop some female gestures, like holding it back with his hand to prevent it getting in his cup. He had it parted in the middle so that it hung like curtains on each side of his face. When he was by himself playing the guitar, almost as if it was a tic he would shake his head from side to side so that the hair would end up all over his face, screening him from the world. Within the tent of his hair with eyes shut he listened to the sounds his fingernails picked from the strings as he sang in an American voice the things he’d heard on record. He could think of no good reason for this tic. It was like an attempt to rid himself of something, an overspill which resulted in spasmodic movement. He would also curse himself in pidgin French. He had learned very little French at school but he had retained enough of it to mutter to himself, ‘Cochon merde’, and twist his head. It was as if his mind had stuck. The phrase would come again and again. He even fretted as to whether or not it was grammatically correct. Not that it mattered because he even made up phrases of his own which were a mixture of French and English:

‘Dirty vache. You big crotte de chien.’

In the morning he would wake with a ridiculous phrase like this in his mind and throughout the day it stayed with him like indigestion. Sometimes he wished that he knew more languages to curse himself more thoroughly. And yet at this thought he had to smile.

He left his toast uneaten. The butter resolidified as it cooled. For the sake of the Movement he had tried to teach himself some Gaelic out of a book he had bought at a jumble sale but he never knew how to pronounce the written form of the words. How did you say ‘bh’ and ‘dh’? The words remained as printed symbols locked inside his head and he gave up the notion soon after. Some day he might go to a class and hear the words spoken.

He took out his second cigarette, straightened it with touches of his fingers and lit it. There was a slit in the curtains and a beam of sunlight slanted into the room, making the smoke swirl flatly. When the record finished he moved to the window and peeped out. The back garden led to a field.
of barley and beyond to the smoky blue of the mountain of Slieve Gallon. Nothing moved. He
opened the window to let the smoke out but left the curtains closed and when he sat down on the
bed again they moved and unfurled heavily in the slight breeze. With the window open he could
hear things going on. The monotonous cheeping of sparrows, a car accelerating, children squealing
distantly in the playground at school. The quiet made him tense. He began to file his nails with the
sandpaper edge of his matchbox. The nails of his left hand were closely trimmed, the fingertips
hardened to leathery pads which retained their scar of string long after they had ceased to press it,
while those of his right hand were as long as plectrums. He moved the box away from himself in
the direction of the growth of the nail. To do it the other way - against the grain, as it were - gave
him a sensation he did not like. His smoking fingers were faintly yellowed with nicotine. The silence
made him want to play another record. Then he heard a noise downstairs and stiffened. There was
someone outside. He unsnibbed his door and went quickly to his father’s room at the front of the
house. Keeping to the side of the window, he looked down and saw that it was only the postman
closing the gate. He went downstairs to find his Giro on the mat.
‘Yola ... Yola ...’

The girl stopped her grinding for a moment. On the stone slab in front of her the white maize flour gleamed. She listened ... nothing. She leant forward and swept the hard, yellow, unground maize into the path of her grindstone. She hated this job; it was tiring and cramping for legs that longed to run. The stone rumbled over the hard grains. Then she heard the voice again.

‘Yola ... Managu has gone away!’

The treble voice of Gabbin, her little cousin, sounded frightened. Managu was the herd’s bull, and Father’s pride and joy. Managu was a magnificent bull with huge spreading horns, the leader of the whole herd. If Managu were hurt, poor Gabbin would get the beating of his life and a shame that would last forever. How could Gabbin lose the bull? He was nine years old, too young to be left in charge of the whole herd anyway; if Yola were allowed she would herd the cattle like a boy - she’d take a book with her and read, you could do nothing while grinding.

She turned a basket upside down over the ground maize to keep away the hens and stood for a moment as pins and needles chased through her legs. She was fond of Gabbin. He was her first cousin and an orphan from the war; they were very close.

‘Gabbin, do you hear me?’ she shouted. ‘Stay where you are - I’m coming.’

‘Managu has gone, and the demons will get him,’ he shouted.

Yola snorted. But then something in Gabbin’s voice held her frozen for a second. Despite the blazing African sun a shiver passed down her back. What was it? What was making her uneasy? Then she knew - Gabbin had talked of demons! That, for him, was baby talk, back to the time during the war when Mother had used the threat of demons to keep them all away from dangerous places. There was only one place they all felt that there might be ‘demons’ and that was on the hill, and the hill was taboo. If Managu had gone up the hill ...

She knew she ought to tell someone, but she couldn’t betray Gabbin. Surely she could get Managu down for him. She looked around the compound - the high thorn hedge, grainstores, the three thatched huts where her mothers lived, Father’s house - nothing stirred, no one had heard Gabbin calling. She would go on her own.

She ran lightly, ready with an excuse should anyone call out, until she was out of the compound, then she increased her speed, enjoying the cool draft of air in her face and the feeling of pushing the ground back under her feet. All during the war they had been cooped up in town while soldiers from both sides fought to possess this very hill. She was free to run now if she kept to the paths, but only the foolish, or the very brave, followed the narrow paths that led over the hill because when the soldiers had left they also left their booby traps and bombs all over it. People might know to keep to the paths, but a bull, hungry for the lush grass that grew on its slopes, never would.

She increased her pace again when she saw the cattle at the foot of the hill, where Gabbin, having raced back, was waving his stick to prevent the cows from following the distant call of their leader.

‘Which way did he go?’ she called as she ran up. Tears were streaming down the boy’s face in black rivers.

‘There, there, up past the Russian tank,’ he sobbed. ‘Get him back Yola, please!’ Then he changed his mind, grabbed her hand and said, ‘No, no, don’t go, don’t go. I don’t want the Demon to get you.’ His feet were pattering on the ground with anxiety as he was torn between the wish to go himself and the terrible taboo of the hill.

‘Now, Gabbin,’ said Yola, taking charge. ‘I’m thirteen and a half, you’re only ten. You keep the rest of the cows down here! Do you hear me? That’s your job. That’s a real man’s job, understand? Don’t worry, I will keep to the paths the grown-ups use every day, and there aren’t really any
demons, all right?’

Gabbin nodded, but his eyes were round with fear.

The Russian tank, looking evil, squatted in the grass like a rusted tin-can. The ragged hole that had finished it and killed the men inside gaped black. Yola knew it as a landmark, the edge of the safe ground, but it also showed the beginning of one of the illegal paths that people used to go over the hill. The path was narrow and she felt as if she were on a tight- rope as she tried to keep to the centre of it. Bushes, which had sprung up since the fighting had stopped, crowded in about her. She wondered why the path was so narrow, just wide enough for her feet. It was as if people had been afraid to put even a foot on the grass beside it.

The path wound on up the side of the hill, then divided. Yola stopped, her heart thumping harder than it should for such a little climb. The ridiculous talk about demons suddenly seemed real to her. She forced herself to examine the ground for hoofprints, but there was nothing to show which way Managu had gone. Flies buzzed, it was hot; she wanted to go down, get away from this hateful place. She saw a movement out of the corner of her eye and froze: a butterfly had momentarily opened its wings. This was stupid. Yola forced herself to breathe slowly and listened for the great bell that Managu wore around his neck. Yes, there! Surely that was it, down there below the path. She ran along, stretching to see over the bushes. The bell clanged somewhere below her now. She needed to be able to see; if only there were a rock or something she could climb on.

All at once the path widened and there was a tree spreading a pool of shade. It was a cinnamon tree, planted long ago by the white people for its spicy bark, which they used to flavour their food. People had rested here, a cigarette packet and a couple of Coke cans made that clear. At any rate the tree was what she had been looking for, she could climb it and see how to entice the bull to safety. The tree stood only a step from the resting place. She measured the distance to the lowest branch with her eye – it would be an easy jump and she was as agile as a monkey in a tree. She stepped off the path, treading lightly, and coiled herself for the jump. She didn't remember it afterwards, but as she jumped the ground gave under her ever so slightly; there was a tiny click.

For an eternity, in the flame of forty sunsets, she rose, thrown up and rag-dolled against the branch above. The up-ward blast from the landmine she had stepped on suspended her for a second, shook her as a terrier shakes a rat, then dropped her, pierced by her own bones, into the smoking pit where the mine had been laid. Spirits crowded her now, spirits of the dead jostling with spirits of the living, all fighting over the young life that she could feel pumping out of her before she lost consciousness. Her only other sensation, and the only one she would remember afterwards, was an overpowering scent of cinnamon.
Captain Holly Short ... glanced surreptitiously around the cell.... Obviously her prison had been specially prepared.

‘Looking for something?’ said a voice. A cold, heartless voice.

Holly reared back from the wall. The human boy was standing not two metres from her, his eyes hidden behind mirrored glasses. He had entered the room without a sound. Extraordinary....

‘Getting ideas, are we, Captain Short?’ Holly bared her teeth, it was answer enough. ‘We are both fully aware of the rules here, Captain. This is my house. You must abide by my wishes. Your laws, not mine. Obviously my wishes do not include bodily harm to myself, or you attempting to leave this house.’

It hit Holly then.

‘How do you know my -’

‘Your name? Your rank?’ Artemis smiled, though there was no joy in it. ‘If you will wear a name tag ...’

Holly’s hand unconsciously covered the silver tag on her suit.

‘But that’s written in -’

‘Gnommish. I know. I happen to be fluent. As is everyone in my network.’

Holly was silent for a moment, processing this momentous revelation.

‘Fowl,’ she said with feeling, ‘you have no idea what you’ve done. Bringing the worlds together like this could mean disaster for us all.’

Artemis shrugged. ‘I am not concerned with us all, just myself. And believe me, I shall be perfectly fine. Now, sit, please.’

Holly sat, never taking her hazel eyes from the diminutive monster before her.

‘So what is this master plan, Fowl? Let me guess: world domination?’

‘Nothing so melodramatic,’ chuckled Artemis. ‘Just riches.’

‘A thief!’ spat Holly. ‘You’re just a thief!’

Annoyance flashed across Artemis’s features, only to be replaced by his customary sardonic grin.

‘Yes. A thief if you like. Hardly just a thief though. The world’s first cross-species thief.’

Captain Short snorted. ‘First cross-species thief! Mud People have been stealing from us for millennia. Why do you think we live underground?’

‘True. But I will be first to successfully separate a fairy from its gold.’


Holly threw her head back and laughed.

Artemis checked his nails patiently, waiting for her to finish. When the gales had finally subsided, he shook his index finger.

‘You are right to laugh, Captain Short. For a while there, I did believe in all that under-the-rainbow crock-of-gold blarney, but now I know better. Now I know about the hostage fund.’

Holly struggled to keep her face under control. ‘What hostage fund?’

‘Oh, come now, Captain. Why bother with the charade? You told me about it yourself.’

‘I-I told you!’ stammered Holly. ‘Ridiculous!’ ‘Look at your arm.’

Holly rolled up her right sleeve. There was a small cotton pad taped to the vein.

‘That’s where we administered the sodium Pentothal. Commonly known as truth serum. You sang like a bird.’ Holly knew it was true. How else could he know? ‘You’re mad!’

Artemis nodded indulgently. ‘If I win, I’m a prodigy. If I lose then I’m mad. That’s the way history is written.’ Of course, there had been no sodium pentothal, just a harmless prick with a sterilized needle. Artemis would not risk causing brain damage to his meal ticket, but nor could he afford to reveal the Book as the source of his information. Better to let the hostage believe that she had betrayed her own people. It would lower her morale, making her more susceptible to his mind games. Still, the ruse disturbed him. It was undeniably cruel. How far was he prepared to go for this gold? He didn’t know, and wouldn’t until the time came.
THE ROOKS OF GILTSPUR WOOD were all of a flutter. They could not roost easily in their tall weather-beaten pines. They kept shuffling about on their horny claws, cawing and muttering to each other. Then they would suddenly leap into the air with a frantic flapping of their ragged black wings and just as quickly turn and land again.

Scrags was angry. Scrags, the biggest fiercest old rook was King of the Wood. For more years than any of them could count he had ruled his kingdom high on the south slope of the Little Sugarloaf Mountain in County Wicklow. When Scrags was angry every one was nervous.

From his perch on the tallest pine, he commanded a view that stretched from the sea at Greystones to where the Great Sugarloaf raised its sharp pointed peak to catch the last of the evening light. All the valley between lay before him: the tidy fields, trim hedges and neat farmhouses. He could see the cars moving silently on the road below, winding down from Kiltacanoge and vanishing into the deep wooded Glen of the Downs.

Scrags was angry. Carrock, this ragged spy, had just returned from a flight across the valley. The news was most disturbing. Bill Durkan was on guard in the Seed Field. Since early April the rooks had watched him preparing the ground. They knew the signs - the ploughing and harrowing. They knew they would soon have their annual spring feast. Scrags had announced it importantly to the assembled rookery. The Spring Seed Feed was about to begin. Any day he, Scrags, wisest of the rooks of Wicklow, would give word.

They had waited with growing excitement. But this evening when Bill Durkan’s work was finished and he should have gone to his house, Carrock had spied him standing on the edge of the Seed Field. The rook-spy had circled overhead until the light was almost gone but farmer Durkan remained guard.

Scrags brooded over it until darkness fell.

The following morning just before sunrise, Scrags himself flew out with Carrock and a party of raiders. Wisps of morning mist still drifted below in the shadowy places of the valley. Nothing stirred except the rabbits feeding in the grey-green fields. The rooks soared high above the trees then swooped silently towards the Seed Field. To their surprise Bill Durkan was already there, standing quietly by the grassy ditch at the far end of the field. They wheeled away from him settled in a large chestnut tree that stood between the field and the road. Scrags and Carrock watched. The figure of the man did not move.

“What is he doing?” croaked Carrock.

Scrags remained silent, blinking his wrinkled eyes. Carrock waited. He knew the King would answer when he was ready. On a branch below them, half-hidden by the young green leaves, the other raiders waited.

“He’s waiting,” said Scrags. “He thinks if he keeps still we will not see him. He wants us to come down into his field, then he will point his thunder-stick at us.”

“I didn’t see a thunder-stick as we flew over,” said Carrock. “Perhaps he hasn’t got it with him.”

Again Scrags did not reply. The raiders below were becoming restless.

“Perhaps not,” said Scrags, “but humans can hide things. They are sly and full of cruel tricks. Do not forget my cousin who was struck down over at Calary. They hung his body on wire by the field.”
I’VE ALWAYS been fascinated by spiders. I used to collect them when I was younger. I’d spend hours rooting through the dusty old shed at the bottom of our garden, hunting the cobwebs for lurking eight-legged predators. When I found one, I’d bring it in and let it loose in my bedroom. It used to drive my mum mad!

Usually, the spider would slip away after no more than a day or two, never to be seen again, but sometimes they hung around longer. I had one who made a cobweb above my bed and stood sentry for almost a month. Going to sleep, I used to imagine the spider creeping down, crawling into my mouth, sliding down my throat and laying loads of eggs in my belly. The baby spiders would hatch after a while and eat me alive, from the inside out.

I loved being scared when I was little.

When I was nine, my mum and dad gave me a small tarantula. It wasn’t poisonous or very big, but it was the greatest gift I’d ever received. I played with that spider almost every waking hour of the day. Gave it all sorts of treats: flies and cockroaches and tiny worms. Spoilt it rotten.

Then, one day, I did something stupid. I’d been watching a cartoon in which one of the characters was sucked up by a vacuum cleaner. No harm came to him. He squeezed out of the bag, dusty and dirty and mad as hell. It was very funny.

So funny, I tried it myself. With the tarantula.

Needless to say, things didn’t happen quite like they did in the cartoon. The spider was ripped to pieces. I cried a lot, but it was too late for tears. My pet was dead, it was my fault, and there was nothing I could do about it.

My parents nearly hollered the roof down when they found out what I’d done - the tarantula had cost quite a bit of money. They said I was an irresponsible fool, and from that day on they never again let me have a pet, not even an ordinary garden spider.

I started with that tale from the past for two reasons. One will become obvious as this book unfolds. The other reason is:

This is a true story.

I don’t expect you to believe me - I wouldn’t believe it myself if I hadn’t lived it - but it is. Everything I describe in this book happened, just as I tell it.

The thing about real life is, when you do something stupid, it normally costs you. In books, the heroes can make as many mistakes as they like. It doesn’t matter what they do, because everything comes good at the end. They’ll beat the bad guys and put things right and everything ends up hunky-dory.

In real life, vacuum cleaners kill spiders. If you cross a busy road without looking, you get whacked by a car. If you fall out of a tree, you break some bones.

Real life’s nasty. It’s cruel. It doesn’t care about heroes and happy endings and the way things should be. In real life, bad things happen. People die. Fights are lost. Evil often wins.

I just wanted to make that clear before I began.

One more thing; my name isn’t really Darren Shan. Everything’s true in this book, except for names. I’ve had to change them because... well, by the time you get to the end, you’ll understand.

I haven’t used any real names, not mine, my sister’s, my friends or teachers. Nobody’s. I’m not even going to tell you the name of my town or country. I daren’t.

Anyway, that’s enough of an introduction. If you’re ready, let’s begin. If this was a made-up story, it would begin at night, with a storm blowing and owls hooting and rattling noises under the bed. But this is a real story, so I have to begin where it really started.

It started in a toilet.
The Dream Invader
Gerard Whelan, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-516-2, pp 22-9

From the very first night, the Pooshipaw's visits had always been the same.

It had happened a couple of nights after Simon got the racing-car bed. He'd been sleeping peacefully when suddenly something woke him. At first he didn’t know where he was, then he remembered that he was in the big new bed that Mammy and Daddy had bought. It was very comfortable. It was his bed now because he was a big boy.

The night lamp with its cartoon shade was lit with a dim light; and Simon lay on his back half-asleep, looking around his room at the familiar things. There were his bears and his box of toys, the mobiles hanging from the ceiling and the paper frieze of tumbling clowns that ran all around the walls. The only thing in the room that had changed was the bed.

Then Simon heard a low beeping. He wondered what it was. Soon he realised that it was coming from the bed itself. He wanted to sit up, but he couldn’t. He was still half-asleep.

‘What’s that?’ he said.

Then the beeping stopped. Simon felt a weight on the bottom of the bed. He heard someone yawning noisily.

‘Ah, musha,’ said a voice that creaked. ‘No rest for the wicked.’

When Simon looked down he saw a peculiar creature sitting at the bottom of his bed. It was very short and very fat, and didn’t really look like anything he’d ever seen before.

The creature was shaped a bit like a dustbin, and it had a huge head. Its head and body were covered in fur of a funny colour like a cross between orange and green. It wore a big overcoat from which the sleeves had been torn; you could still see the threads hanging from where they’d been ripped. The overcoat was shiny with grease, and it smelled very dirty. The creature looked around the room and then turned to Simon, scratching itself. As it turned Simon noticed that its arms were bare of fur, though they too were green. The arms were strongly muscled, and there was something odd about them that Simon couldn’t quite make out. Then he saw that the oddity wasn’t so much in the arms as in the hands that were at the ends of them: the creature had two left hands.

‘Howya, Sausage,’ the creature said. ‘What’s your name?’

‘Simon,’ Simon said.

The creature giggled. ‘So,’ he said. ‘Simon!’ He pointed a clawed finger at Simon. ‘Before the cock crows twice,’ he said, ‘you will deny me thrice. Or is it the other way round?’ He giggled again. Divil the bit of good it will do you anyhow,’ he said.

‘What do you want?’ Simon asked.

‘Dear Sausage Simon,’ said the creature. ‘I’m going to give you the keys to my kingdom. Such as it is.’ Then he giggled again. It wasn’t a nice giggle.

‘Who are you?’ Simon said.

The creature was wearing a very large and very battered hat on his very large and very furry head. He scratched under the hat before answering.

‘Questions, questions, questions,’ he said. ‘But I don’t mind. I, Simon, am the Pooshipaw.’ ....

The Pooshipaw leaned over him and looked at his face. He ruffled the little boy’s fair hair. ‘Such a pretty child,’ he said. ‘Like your new bed, do you, Sausage?’

‘Yes,’ Simon said. ‘It’s a racing car.’

The Pooshipaw looked at the side of the bed. ‘Begob,’ he said, ‘so it is! We moves with the times, I suppose. We keeps abreast of developments.’

He took a bone out of his pocket. Simon saw that the bone was covered with dirt and earth. Things were crawling on it, nasty-looking things.

‘I prefer more leisurely times meself,’ the Pooshipaw said. ‘All this modem rushing around would make me dizzy. Rush, rush, rush! And for what? The same ould place that youse all end up.’
He looked critically at the bone, then sucked it. ‘Ah!’ he said. ‘That’s good, that is. Juicy.’

He looked in Simon’s eyes. His own eyes, large and yellow, seemed to light up with a cloudy light. ‘The Pooshipaw likes to take its time,’ he said. ‘Humans are after forgetting how to do that. But then, of course, they have so little of it anyway.’

He raised the bone and waved it in the air as though writing there. Simon saw smoky marks hanging in the air where the bone passed. He’d never seen anything like that before.

‘What is the world,’ said the Pooshipaw, ‘if, full of care, we have no time to stop and stare.’

The writing hovered for a moment and then vanished.

‘Are you a dog?’ Simon asked. ‘Or maybe a cat?’

It seemed a reasonable enough question. The Pooshipaw didn’t exactly look like either a dog or a cat, but he looked more like a dog or a cat than like anything else Simon had ever seen.

But the Pooshipaw didn’t seem to like the question at all. He sniffed.

‘Or a bear,’ Simon said. ‘Are you a bear?’ Because there was a certain resemblance there, too.

‘Hmmph,’ said the Pooshipaw. ‘I suppose at least it’s better nor a cat.’

He put the whole bone in his mouth and crunched it. Simon was astonished. It was a very big bone. That was the first time, too, that he saw the Pooshipaw’s great yellow teeth.

‘What I am,’ the Pooshipaw said, ‘is a class of a monster.’

The idea didn’t frighten Simon as such. He’d seen lots of nice monsters on television. But he knew immediately that the Pooshipaw wasn’t nice.

‘I don’t like you,’ he said.

The Pooshipaw crunched and swallowed. ‘That,’ he said, ‘is neither here nor there. I can’t say I’m mad about you either – a cat, indeed! Still, I’m sure we can work together. Our relationship is strictly a business one. We don’t have to like one another.’

‘I’m going to go gone,’ Simon said, and covered his face with his hands.

The Pooshipaw grinned down at him with his yellow fangs.

‘You never spoke a truer word, Sausage,’ he crooned. ‘That’s exactly what you’re going to do. But enough chit-chat. Let’s go for a drive.’

And suddenly they weren’t in the bedroom any more. They weren’t in the house at all. They were in a car, and now Simon was really frightened. It was partly because of the sudden change, but it was mostly because he was driving the car. Desperately he turned the steering wheel this way and that, as he’d seen Mammy and Daddy do in their own car. He wasn’t sure what turning the wheel did, but it seemed to work when he did it: the car kept going.

The car drove under a big sign that was stretched across the road. The sign was painted brightly. Written on it in large letters were the words START HERE - GOODBYE! Simon knew they were words because they looked like the words in the story-books Mammy and Daddy read for him, but he didn’t know what the words said because he couldn’t read yet.

The words on the sign were the least of Simon’s worries. He was terrified of the driving, and he had no idea how to stop a car. He was driving down a narrow road with a high hedge on each side. The hedges were so high that their tops almost met overhead, so that sometimes he seemed to be driving through a kind of tunnel. He was afraid to take his eyes off the road, but he sensed someone sitting in the passenger seat beside him.

‘What do you say, Sausage?’ asked the voice of the Pooshipaw.

‘I want to stop,’ Simon said. ‘I want my Mammy And Daddy.’

‘Pshaw!’ said the Pooshipaw. ‘There’s no Mammies and Daddies here, kid. Not as such, anyhow. Here you have to stand on your own two feet. You can do that, can’t you?’

‘I’m a big boy!’ Simon said.

‘Sure you are, Sausage,’ said the Pooshipaw. ‘Sure you are.’

Driving frightened Simon because he didn’t know what he was doing. On the floor of Mammy and Daddy’s car, under the steering wheel, there were pedals that the driver pushed with his feet.
Simon’s feet didn’t reach to the floor of this car, and he couldn’t look down for pedals because he was so afraid of taking his eyes off the road.

What he really wanted to do was to take his hands off the steering wheel, because that might stop the car. But his hands seemed stuck to the wheel, so he just kept turning it.

Everything Simon could see of the car, inside and out, was coloured a dark green. The driver’s seat was very high, and might have been built up specially for someone his age.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked the Pooshipaw.

‘Over the hills and far away,’ the Pooshipaw said.

‘Hills?’ Simon asked. He could see no hills, but then, because of the hedges, he could see very little apart from the road itself.

‘Janey!’ said the Pooshipaw. ‘It’s only a line from a song, kid. Young people nowadays knows nothing. You never mind where we’re going. We’re going where I’m taking you. You just keep your eyes on the road.’

The Pooshipaw started to sing to himself. He would sing a snatch of a song and then another, but never finish any of them. He had a terrible voice.

‘Up on a mountain,’ sang the Pooshipaw, ‘that’s the place to be, listenin’ to a jackass singin’ in a tree.’

With each passing moment Simon grew more frightened. He was old enough to know that there was something very wrong going on here. In the back seat the Pooshipaw started to sing ‘Boolavogue’ in a voice so cracked that even the Pooshipaw seemed to feel he had to excuse it.

‘The ould pipes is rusty,’ he said. ‘They’re out of practice.’

They passed a road sign with a black border. ACCIDENT BLACK SPOT, the sign said, though of course Simon couldn’t read it. Suddenly they turned a tight bend in the road with a broad grassy patch beyond it. Another car was lying over-turned on the grassy patch. It looked very like Daddy’s and Mammy’s car. There was smoke coming out of it.

Two people were lying on the grass beside the smoking car. One of the people was a man, the other one was a woman. The man was Daddy. The woman was Mammy. They were lying very awkwardly, and they were very, very still.

Simon wanted to stop the green car, but he didn’t know how. It turned around another bend and left the crashed car behind.

‘Mmmm,’ said the Pooshipaw dreamily. ‘That reminds me. I’m hungry.’

Simon screamed and screamed and screamed. Then he was back in his bed and the Pooshipaw was gone. Mammy came running into his room in her nightdress. That was the first night, the easiest one.
A fleet of the foreigners came into Lough Foyle Cennrig was quickly abandoned by them, except for a few who remained behind in it through sloth ... Fergal, son of Domnall, King of the North, was in hostilities with them, and killed the crew of one of their ships and took its booty.

The Annals of Ulster, 920 AD

Only you will know where to find me.

Ellie opened her eyes. A tall boy-man was standing at her bedroom window, his slim face and golden hair caught in a pool of ghostly green moonlight.

My name is Harald Olafsson, he said, turning to face her with his startling blue eyes. You must give me leave to speak to you. You have no need to fear me.

Ellie raised her head from her pillow and rubbed her eyes. Was someone there or was she still dreaming? The boy looked at her, his expression so sad and wretched that she felt she must reach out and comfort him, but the figure floated out into the starry night without another word.

Night-time had always been vividly alive for Ellie - her dreams came thick and fast as soon as she hit the pillow and continued through the night until the first proop-proop of the alarm clock woke her. Some nights the familiar faces of her family and friends were crowded out by less well-known ones, people on the margins of her life like shop assistants, dimly remembered faces from her childhood, even, sometimes, the casualties of the random bombings and murders that fleeted across the television screen nightly – she imagined her brain frantically sifting through her life each night, recording everything, filing it all away for posterity.

Recently though, something strange and puzzling was happening – her dreams were so different they felt alien, out of character. It was almost as if they didn't belong to her. This voice, this Harald, was haunting her dreams, speaking to her in his strange accent, drawing her into another life, forcing her to listen ... She began to feel as if he had burrowed beneath her skin and was using her sleep to spin dreams thronged with strange men from long ago, their distant voices straining to be heard.

Each night now, for over a week, she had been dreaming of a ship, following its journey across the ocean. It came, she knew, from a wild and barren place, sailing swiftly across the sea where whales loomed and large seabirds circled and screamed above the sails. Harald stood next to the captain at the rudder. He was tall and broad-shouldered but his long slim face was still clean-shaven, with just a sprinkling of fine hairs on his upper lip. He had blond hair, so pale it was almost white, which he wore held back at the nape of his neck in a long ponytail. On the seventh night, he smiled and stretched out an arm to take her hand, but she shrank away from his touch and opened her eyes. The figure stood by the window, beckoning to her, as real and life-like as the figure in her dream, but as she raised her head from the pillow, he floated out into the night.

Ellie fell back into a fitful sleep, drifting in and out of dreams. Several times the scene shifted to a wide sandy beach, a place she half recognised but could not name. It was pitch-black to begin with but as her eyes became used to the darkness, she made out a crowd of people moving across the sand dunes. There was a high wind howling, stirring up the sea into white horses, making her shiver even in sleep. The tide was coming in fast, throwing itself against the cliff in thunderous bursts of spray.

Ellie was floating, looking down on the strand as if she were drifting above it in a hot-air balloon, conscious that at any moment she might come crashing down to earth. Suddenly great tongues of orange fire lit up the whole beach and the sand dunes behind. A vast bonfire had been set ablaze on the shore. In the flames Ellie could make out the dark shape of a ship around which the strange figures danced and ran, many of them wailing and crying out in a language she could not understand. A number of men approached the ship, carrying wooden shields which they beat with
long sticks to drown the wailing of the dancing women. Others began to move forward, each bearing a burning piece of wood which they threw on the pyre. The wind grew stronger and more terrifying, fanning the fire on the ship so that the blazing timbers creaked and groaned. Deep in sleep, Ellie's hand brushed her cheek to wipe away the splinters of sooty wood which the wind carried across the beach. The air was thick with the smell of burning resin and the salt of the sea.

She struggled to wake, and lay tossing and turning in her bed, listening to the wind howling outside and rattling the windowpanes. She heard the Guildhall clock strike five o'clock, then the quarter hour and the half hour. Some time later she must have drifted back to sleep only to take up the dream where it had ended.

The burning ship had turned to ash. She began to walk towards it, feeling underfoot the spiky blades of marram grass pricking her bare feet. As she drew closer, the heat coming off the charred timbers burned her cheeks and scorched the back of her throat so that she stopped and raised a hand to shield her face. She was astonished to find her cheeks wet with tears.

You're not dreaming any more, whispered the voice of Harald. Come and find me, he said. Only you will know where to look.

Once more Ellie forced herself to waken up: she would not listen any longer to the voice. At first she lay buried beneath the duvet, too scared to look into the room for fear of what she might see - but the voice would not go away. It called her name, repeating it again and again in a soothing hypnotic tone until finally she could ignore it no longer. She slipped out of bed and moved, trance-like, to the window.

Not a being stirred in the city. She looked down on the river, full and grey in the early morning light. It was moving swiftly, engorged by the recent heavy rains so that it almost lapped the lower deck of the bridge, and swelling in a wide s-shaped curve as it passed out of the city towards the lough beyond. As she watched, her blood froze.

A spectral fleet of six sailing ships was advancing up the river. Each bore one huge square sail behind which the wind screamed. They glided over the surface of the water like a group of monstrous invincible swans but as they came closer, Ellie could see that the long necks of their prows ended not in the graceful head of a bird, but in the snarling, bare-toothed sneer of dogs and dragons.

Am I still dreaming, she thought. Is this a dream within a dream? She shut her eyes tightly and wished herself back into consciousness. No, she was not dreaming any more. Gingerly she drew the side of her hand across the cold wet condensation on the windowpane and peered through the smear. The ships were still there and coming closer. She blinked again to make the image fade and rubbed her eyes. The city on the other side of the river seemed to shimmer in the light and fade away. The quays, the bridge, the cathedral spires disappeared. Now the soft rounded hills behind grew darker and more wooded. The familiar landscape that Ellie had grown up with, the contours and shadows of the city she had looked across at every day since she had been old enough to be aware of the world outside her window, seemed to shrink. Finally all that was left was a cluster of low buildings perched on one hill with the river circling around them. The modern city had vanished, leaving nothing but the island in the middle of the river.

I am dreaming, thought Ellie, even though I think I am not. She turned back: her room was exactly as she expected - the duvet lying at the base of the bed where she had flung it, the walls lined with the faces of musicians and actors, the green hands of the alarm clock showing ten to six. She put her face close up against the window and stared out into the darkness. Down on the river below the ships sailed relentlessly towards the city on its tiny island.

As Ellie looked on transfixed, two cormorants, flying in low over the water, landed on a rock mid-stream and stretched their stiff black wings, spreading them out to dry, like two witches of the sea holding their cloaks aloft. On the opposite bank, a large silver-backed wolf slunk out from the shadow of the trees and bared its teeth at the advancing ships beneath.
Suddenly there was a mighty shout that echoed over the river and startled the black birds which flew off low over the water. The sailors, so close now that she could see their bearded faces, seized their oars, hitting the water in short rapid strokes that stirred the river up into a milky foam. They were steering straight for shore, heading directly for the bank beneath her.

Ellie cried out and turned back into the room. At that moment the Guildhall clock began to ring, its chimes welcome and familiar. From far off she heard the hum of the army helicopter as it set off on its early morning patrol over the city. The wind had started up again, pelting the windowpane with large raindrops. She looked down towards the river-bank again. There were no strange ships. The Foyle snaked blackly past the sleeping city with its familiar landmarks, both old and new. There was the slender spire of the cathedral, there the green dome of the department store in The Diamond, and there the massive swaying arms of a crane rising above a building site on the quays.

What is happening to me? Was I sleep-walking? Did I dream those ships? Baffled and a bit frightened, Ellie sat down on the edge of her bed, trying to steady her breath which came in short painful gasps. A voice – a voice which might have been Harald’s – was echoing in her ears. Beware the curse of Fenri, it said. She repeated the phrase aloud, trying to make sense of it. Who or what was Fenri? What did it mean? Had she just imagined the ghostly figure at the window, the phantom fleet of Viking warriors? Or had she truly seen a ghost?

She lay back against the pillow. Her head ached and her limbs felt exhausted as if she had been running all night long but she fought the waves of tiredness that flowed over her. She would not allow herself to sleep again. With eyes stretched wide, she stared at the ceiling above her bed, fighting back the images of the strange world of the foreign sailors. You are in your own room, safe and secure, she told herself. Nothing bad can happen here. She repeated the phrases to herself, as if the saying of them might be enough to make them true. A loose corner of peeling wallpaper flapped in the draught from the window. The water tank suddenly juddered and gurgled. A car sped past the house, its headlamps briefly illuminating the room. This is normal, she thought, this is the real world – it was just a dream I had, nothing but a dream. Above her head, the cracks in the plaster of the old ceiling seemed to roll and shift, flowing like vast continental rivers towards the central light bulb, throwing out tributaries which snaked down the sides of the dormer window. Immediately the picture of Harald and his ghost-ships gliding up the Foyle reappeared and she shuddered. She felt possessed, as if someone had crept beneath her skin, manufacturing her dreams, compelling her to watch them.
‘This is the princess Aoife of the Red Hair,’ said Dermot Mac Murrough. He was proud of her. His eyes told me.

There was soot on her face and her clothing was stained with mud and cinders, but Aoife was like a bright light in that dark place. She was tall and strongly built for a girl, and in her face was the pride of kings.

I was very pleasantly surprised. In marriage a man takes what he gets, because marriage is arranged to unite powerful families or to make new allies, and the daughters of important men are often plain. I hadn’t expected anything more of this one.

But one thing was more important to me than her beauty.

Dermot had told me I would be his heir, I would succeed him as King of Leinster. Under English law, my marriage to his daughter made that certain. His crown would pass to me, I thought, and he had given me Aoife just as he would give me the crown. The two went together. Or so I thought.

I didn’t know anything yet about Irish law.

Having seen and admired my bride-to-be, I began talking with Dermot Mac Murrough. The tall red-haired girl stood between us for a few moments, then added her voice to ours. Her Latin was just as good as mine, I was startled to discover.

‘Why are you discussing my marriage as if I weren’t here?’ she wanted to know. ‘I haven’t yet said I would marry this man, Father.’

‘Of course I’ll marry her,’ I told Dermot over her head.

Aoife stamped her foot. ‘But I mightn’t marry you!’ she said directly to me.

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. How could a woman refuse to marry the man her father selected for her?

I looked at Dermot Mac Murrough. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. ‘What is this?’ I asked.

My uncle coughed. ‘Ah ... there’s something you should know, Richard. About these Irish.’

‘What is it?’ I asked impatiently. My men were staring at us.

‘A woman must give permission to the marriage, you can’t force her,’ my uncle told me.

I was astonished. That was like asking a cow’s permission before you bought it!
Granuaile. The Pirate Queen
Morgan Llywelyn, O'Brien Press, 0-86278-578-2, pp 58-9, 143

June the Year of Our Lord 1575, Clare Island

My dear Toby,

At this season I am usually at sea. A slight injury - nothing you need worry about - is keeping me on the island a little longer. My shoulder is giving me some trouble but my right hand is undamaged, thank God. So I can write to you.

Are you well, my son? Are the priests teaching you as I have instructed them? Learn your letters, study Latin, and memorise the names of the major seaports. Your older brothers by Donal O'Flaherty are merely simple warriors, all strength and shouting. I want more than that for you. Against an enemy as powerful as the English it is necessary to fight with one's brain. Fortunately you and I both inherited good brains.

It saddens me to tell you that my beloved Dubhdara is dying. Your grandfather is like an ancient oak tree that has fallen in the forest and is slowly crumbling away. I continue to captain the fleet and support his people. I cannot say what the future holds, but be assured I shall do my best.

Always,

Granuaile

March, the Year of Our Lord 1593, Rockfleet

My dear Toby,

I need you to compose a petition in the English language, addressed to the queen. The document must not go through the lord deputy’s hands. Fitzwilliam and Bingham are cut from the same piece of hide. I shall send the petition to my old friend, the duke of Ormond, and ask him to deliver it to Elizabeth in person. Black Thomas has become a favourite of hers, I understand.

In my petition, you are to describe me as Her Majesty’s loyal and faithful subject, Grania O’Malley of Connacht.

Tell Elizabeth that I am an old woman, but one who is devoted to her. Explain that Richard Bingham has deliberately ruined both my ships and my livelihood. The property of my late husband, your father, has been taken from me. I retain only Rockfleet Castle, and I fear Bingham means to drive me out of this too. Ask Elizabeth to protect me from him. Further ask her to allow me a portion of Richard Bourke’s property to maintain myself. Also beseech the queen to grant me the liberty to attack, with sword and fire, her enemies, wherever they shall be.

If she agrees to this she will have to give me my ships back.

Always,

Granuaile
About one million people died during the Irish Famine. Historians cannot be sure of the exact number since accurate records were not kept owing to the vast number of people dying. People died from diseases like dysentery, typhoid and cholera as well as starvation. There were so many deaths that burial rituals, such as keening and waking, so important to the Irish, had to be overlooked. In fact, bodies were often taken away in carts to be buried, without coffins, in mass burial places. Sometimes, the bodies were not found until they were half-devoured by dogs or rats.

They pushed in the door. Mother was dozing with Bridget in the chair near the fire. She looked tired and they could tell she had been crying.

Quiet as mice, they reheated some leftover oatmeal and water. They were all tired out, and glad to fall into bed. With arms and shoulders aching, they scarcely had time to notice the normal rumbling hunger pains that came before sleep.

At some time during the night they became aware of their mother’s sobs and of Bridget coughing and trying to breathe. Michael came and lay down in the bed beside the girls. They held hands and prayed - every prayer they had ever learned.

‘God help us, please help us, God,’ they whispered.

No one slept. It was the early hours of the morning before the coughing stopped. Then there was a sudden silence. Mother was kissing the baby’s face and each little finger one by one.

‘God let the sun come up soon and let this terrible night end,’ the children begged.

Suddenly they became aware of their mother’s silence. They got up and went over to her. Large tears slid down her cheeks.

‘She’s gone. My own little darling is gone.’

Peggy started to cry. ‘I want Bridget back,’ she wailed. ‘I want her.’

‘It’s all right, pet,’ assured Mother. ‘She was too weak to stay in this hard world any longer. Look at her. Isn’t she a grand little girl, now she’s at rest.’

The baby lay still, as if she were just dozing. Mother told them to kiss her, and one by one they kissed the soft cheek and forehead of Bridget, the little sister they hardly knew.

Mother seemed strangely calm and made them go back to bed. ‘At first light, Michael, you must run to Dan Collins and ask him to get Father Doyle. I’ll just sit and mind my darling girl for a little while yet.’

Later, Michael set off, his face pale and his eyes red-rimmed. The chill of the early morning made him shiver as he pulled his light jacket around him.

Mother had heated some water and with a cloth she gently washed Bridget, and brushed and brushed the soft blond curls. Eily pulled the old wooden chest from under Mother and Father’s bed. As instructed, she opened it. There wasn’t that much in it, so she soon found the lace christening robe which her great-grandmother had made. The lace was yellow and old. It was only ten months since Bridget had worn the robe before, but her little body was so thin and wasted it still fitted her. Dressed in it she looked like a little pale angel, though Eily couldn’t help but remember a porcelain French doll she had seen in a shop window in the town once. It stood stiff in a white lace dress with a starched petticoat and long curling real hair. How she had wanted to hold and have that doll. Now she felt the same longing, but much worse. She ached to hold Bridget and never let her go.

Michael came home. They all had a sup of milk and tidied themselves and the cottage as best they could. Dan Collins would get the priest. Father Doyle was a nice man - he and Father were very friendly and sometimes he would drop in for a chat and a bit of company. Father used to say that being a priest was grand, but it was a lonely life.
Mid-morning they were all surprised when Dan Collins and his wife Kitty arrived. Kitty ran straight to Mother and kissed her. Their eyes were full of tears and unspoken words.

‘Margaret, we are so sorry. Poor little Bridget,’ whispered Kitty.

Dan Collins cleared his throat and shifted uneasily. ‘There is more bad news, God spare us. Father Doyle is gone down with the sickness himself and will not be able to bury the wee lassie. Already in the village a few have died of the sickness - Seamus Fadden, the coffin maker, being one - so there are no proper funerals ...’ He stopped.

Mother let out a high wailing cry. ‘What will become of us, what are we to do?’ The air hung heavy.

‘We'll bury her decently in her own place,’ said Dan.

The three children stared at Mother, waiting for her reply. She nodded her head silently.

‘Under the hawthorn tree in the back field,’ she whispered. ‘The children always played there and its blossom will shelter her now.’

Dan motioned to Michael and they left the cottage and disappeared up to the field carrying a spade.

‘We've no coffin,’ said Mother hoarsely.

Kitty looked around the cottage and begged Eily to help her. Eily cleared her throat. ‘What about using grandmother’s wooden chest?’

Kitty and Eily pulled it out from under the old bed and lifted it onto the blanket. Mother walked over and nodded silently. Kitty began to take out the family treasures and lay them to one side. Kitty and Mother started to get everything ready. Eily and Peggy, sensing they were not wanted, ran outside and pulled bluebells and wild flowers. They sucked in deep breaths of air to try and calm their hearts.

Dan came back down the field and went inside. In a few minutes the three adults emerged, Kitty holding Mother’s arm and Dan carrying the carved wooden chest.

A light breeze blew and the blossom bowed and waved in welcome. There was a clear blue sky. A family of bluetits sat on the branch of the tree, helping to keep vigil.

Dan and Kitty led them in the prayers and they all remembered the words of Jesus, ‘Suffer the little children to come unto me’. They prayed too that they would ‘meet again in Paradise’.

Eily and Michael gently placed the flowers beside the chest. Peggy clung to Mother as huge sobs racked her body. Mother stroked her hair. They all sang a favourite hymn of Father Doyle’s, then Kitty led them back to the house. She had brought some tea and made a mug for the adults. She made Mother sit down near the fire as she warmed some leftover potato cakes.

For the next few days, Mother stayed in her shift with the shawl wrapped around her, and barely bothered to do anything. Eily and Michael fetched the water, swept out the cottage and searched for food. They wished that Father would come back. Eily was scared. How long would it last?
IT WAS STILL ONLY TWILIGHT in the streets outside, but in the high hallway of the tenement house night had fallen long ago. There were no lights in the hall, and it was pitch black.

Jimmy Conway had often made this journey in the dark. In some ways he preferred it, because you couldn’t see the shabbiness and dirt. He moved quickly and quietly now up the dangerous stairs, avoiding the missing treads and the loose banisters. Sometimes drunken people slept on the stairs, and you’d have to step over them; but tonight Jimmy heard no snores, and was glad of it. He kept going until he stood outside the door of his own home. Then he stopped and stood silently, looking and listening.

There was no sound from inside, and no light showed around the ill-fitting door. That was good. Ma was due to go and see Mrs Doyle tonight about getting some work. Sometimes the nuns in the convent gave Mrs Doyle a bit of washing to do. It was the only money the Doyles had, but if there was a big batch of laundry Mrs Doyle would let Jimmy’s Ma do some of it. The work wasn’t regular, and the money wasn’t good, but every penny was welcome.

It was more than a matter of money. ‘You can’t trust just anybody with the holy nuns’ washing,’ Mrs Doyle would say. ‘But you could trust Lily Conway with your own life, because there’s no more respectable nor decent woman going.’

Hearing her say this was worth gold to Jimmy’s Ma. It helped her keep her head up, she said, when her heart was dragging.

Ma’s heart seemed to be dragging a lot lately. It was the reason Jimmy was glad she wasn’t home. He wouldn’t put it past some of the local gossips to come and tell her lies about him just for the sake of passing scandal. Some of them had nothing better to do.

Obviously no gossips had come. If Ma had heard about the old man, and thought that Jimmy was involved, it would have broken her heart. She’d have stayed home to wait for him, and he’d have heard her crying before he even went in. She wouldn’t beat him, but the crying would be worse. When she cried he felt like begging her to hit him instead.

There was no lock on the door. Jimmy opened it silently and stepped inside. The single big window was a pale rectangle in the darkness. It was a handsome window, a relic of the times when these houses had been the home of the gentry. One of the windowpanes was cracked, but at least it wasn’t broken, and there were heavy curtains that kept out the worst of the cold in winter. Many of the neighbours had windows that were full of holes, with maybe bits of paper stuck over them; and some had no curtains at all.

Jimmy heard the breathing of his sleeping sisters. He crept towards the mattress in the corner where Sarah was already lying. From the big bed in the opposite corner Josie made a noise in her sleep. Jimmy stopped, but Josie was only dreaming. When she was quiet again he went on.

He knew exactly where to put his feet, and sidestepped the hole in the rotten board by the corner of the mattress. Then he eased off his boots, crept in beside Sarah and pulled the old coats that were his bedcovers over him. He relaxed a bit then, safe for now at least, and lay on his back in the dark, thinking.

By the standards of many of his friends, Jimmy’s home was more than comfortable. True, it was only a single room, and there were those places on the floor where adults shouldn’t walk because the rotting boards might cave in under their weight. But there were only a few spots like that, and in some homes the whole floor was dangerous. Still his Ma was always going on at the three children, warning them about the holes.

‘Mind your feet!’ she’d say. ‘Watch where you’re walking! You don’t want to end up like Cissy Kavanagh!’
This was the whole point, of course. Last winter Cissy Kavanagh, one of his friend’s sisters, had fallen through the floor of her home into the stairwell and been killed. Kavanaghs’ floor must have been very rotten, though, because Cissy hadn’t weighed much at all. She’d been seven years old, and very thin.

Jimmy’s Ma was always worrying about how awful their home was, even when Jimmy pointed out to her that they were very lucky compared to plenty of the people they knew. Even the cracks that showed in the plaster in one corner of their ceiling weren’t too bad; the Twomeys, who lived on the floor above, had one big piece of their ceiling fall in on them during a storm last January. Rain seeping in through the holes in the roof had rotted the plaster. No-one had been hurt that time, but now you could look out through the Twomeys’ ceiling and see patches of sky.

There were a lot of very poor people in their part of Dublin. At a political meeting Jimmy had heard a man say that the city had the worst slums in Europe. There were rich people living in the city too, of course, but Jimmy didn’t know any of them. You’d see them every day in Sackville Street - shopping and going about their business, but certainly none of them lived around here. Jimmy wasn’t even sure how rich people lived, except that they always had enough to eat: you could tell by looking at them.

The whole area where Jimmy lived was crowded with large families living in small spaces. Before Jimmy’s Da joined the army they themselves had been much worse off, but even then there’d only been the five of them living in the room. Nowadays there were only four, and three were children - Jimmy, the eldest, was twelve, while Josie was ten and Sarah just six.

When Da came home from the war it would be a tighter fit, but some families had ten or more people living in one room. There had been twelve of the Kavanaghs before Cissie died.

Thinking of his Da always made Jimmy confused. He missed him very much, but he knew that they needed his wages from the army to survive. Da had known that too, but even so he’d hesitated a long time after the war started before joining up.

‘Why should I fight their damned wars?’ he’d always say. ‘Irish and English working men standing in trenches shooting at German working men, while all the time their generals are probably drinking together and laughing at them!’

He’d usually say this when he was discussing politics with Ma’s brother Mick. Da was an old trade union man, and blamed the bosses for all of Ireland’s troubles. Mick was more of a nationalist; he agreed that the bosses were trouble, but said that the English were the real problem.

‘But even if we do get rid of the English the bosses are still there,’ Da would say.

‘No,’ Mick would argue, ‘it’s the English class system. We could make the bosses change if the English were out of our way.’

‘You make it all sound too simple,’ Da would tell Mick. ‘Come back when you know what you’re talking about.’

In the end Da had gone into the army, like many other men. The war had put prices up, and Da hadn’t any money to begin with. He’d had no real job for three years, not since taking part in the great strike of 1913 when half the city starved. Finally, one day, he came home looking heartbroken and announced that he’d joined the British army.

‘I’ve enlisted,’ he said simply. ‘I start training next week.’

Ma was horrified. ‘What have you done?’ she asked, almost in tears. ‘James, what have you gone and done?’

But Da answered her firmly. ‘Them childer’s faces are thinner every time I look at them, Lily.’ he said. ‘There’s not one employer in town that will give me a job. I’m a marked man since the strike.’ Da looked really angry and upset. ‘This way, Lit, you’ll get a weekly payment from the government. Damn it, woman, can’t you understand? You’ll be able to eat.’

Ma said it wasn’t worth it, that she’d rather they all starved and Da, not wanting to argue with her, just walked out. Afterwards they didn’t discuss it again, at least not that Jimmy heard. Anyway,
as Da pointed out, it was too late to change anything now. He couldn’t back out. A week later he was gone for training, and they began to get the separation allowance. ‘Ring money’ people called it, referring to a wedding ring. The wedding ring was all that Lily Conway had of her husband James now. He’d been away now for more than a year, in France, fighting the Germans.

Things were a bit easier with the ring money, though it hardly seemed worth losing your Da for. Still, at least there was something to eat most days, and that made a change. Even if the money ran out before the end of the week and you had a hungry weekend, you knew that on Monday there would be money again. It kept you from giving up hope. Lately they’d started to have some hungry weekends, for reasons Jimmy couldn’t really understand as Ma was usually very good with money. He felt it had something to do with his aunt Ella.

Jimmy wished more than ever that Da could be here now. The fact that he wasn’t made Jimmy the man of the house, and at twelve years of age Jimmy found that hard. The man of the house was supposed to know right from wrong, but Jimmy didn’t always find this so simple. And then again even adults couldn’t seem to agree on what was right and what wasn’t. Uncle Mick, for instance, had been furious with Da for joining the army.

‘How can he fight for the British?’ Mick asked Ma when he heard the news. ‘And for what? For their money.’

This was just after Da went away. A week before, Ma herself had been giving out to Da for signing up, but now she turned on Mick.

‘There’s food for the children now,’ she said. ‘That’s what that money means to James. That’s all that war means to him. He was never out playing soldiers like you and your Citizen Army friends.’

Mick looked insulted but Ma continued, anger in her voice now. ‘It’s all very well for you, Mick. You’re single, and you have no-one to look after, barring yourself. You can afford dreams and high ideas. How long would your ‘dreams last if they were all you had to bring home to a house full of hungry children? Dreams make bad dinners, Mick.’

Suddenly there was a noise in the hall outside and Jimmy recognised the sound of Ma’s footsteps. He must let on to be asleep. Would Tommy Doyle have said anything to her? He’d know soon enough.

The door opened and Ma came in. Jimmy heard her cross to the table, then the sound of a match being lit. He opened his eyes a little bit and saw the light of a candle blossoming in the middle of the room. In its glow he saw her standing there, a small woman looking older than her age. He was glad to see she looked no sadder than usual. In fact, she was almost smiling.

He shut his eyes as she looked over towards him, and kept perfectly still. Through lowered eyelids he saw her pick up the candle and come towards himself and Sarah, and he closed his eyes completely. But he had misjudged how exhausted he was by the day’s events. He’d hardly closed his eyes before he was suddenly asleep. The last thing he saw in his mind’s eye was the sight that he’d been trying not to picture all evening, the terrible purple face of the dead man in the street.
Amelia was still getting used to being allowed to sit up for dinner in the evenings with the grown-ups, and she tried hard to behave terribly well, for it would never do to show herself unworthy of her elevation to the dining room. So she was careful to wipe her mouth daintily with her napkin before taking a sip of water, to make a minimum of chomping and slurping noises as she ate, and to pass the butter and the salt and the redcurrant jelly or the horseradish sauce or the gravy or whatever there was to go with the meat, to Grandmama, who sat gravely next to her and chewed her food slowly and purposefully. The hardest bit was not making eating noises, especially when there was clear soup, as there was tonight - consomny [sic] Mary Ann called it, and nobody was unkind enough to correct her pronunciation. Thick soup was easier to eat quietly - it seemed to be less irredeemably wet - but clear soup was so thin that it was difficult to control.

Amelia was making such a determined effort to transfer the beef consomme from the soupspoon into her mouth and safely down her throat, which would make the most unbecoming swallowing sounds, no matter how hard she tried to control it, that she almost missed the conversation her parents were having quietly at the other side of the table. But not entirely. She tuned in just as Mama was saying, ‘Eleanora is prostrate, and as for Gerald, he’s out of his mind with worry and anger and disapproval and heaven knows what other emotions. It really is too bad of the boy.’

Amelia recognised the names of the parents of her friends Frederick and Lucinda Goodbody. ‘The boy’ could only mean Frederick – there was only one son in that family. Amelia pricked up her ears. What on earth could Frederick have done that was having such a very dramatic effect on his parents? Frederick was always so polite and well-behaved, it was hard to imagine him involved in a family row. And yet she was not entirely surprised to hear that something was up in that family, after Frederick’s odd moodiness on Sunday.

‘But does he realise the seriousness of what he is doing?’ she heard her father ask, his voice full of concern. What could he be talking about?

‘Oh, Papa!’ Amelia cried out, exasperated, ‘I wish you and Mama wouldn’t mutter so. You always complain if Edmund and I have secrets at breakfast, and you say that meals are for sharing conversation as well as food. I do think grown-ups might follow their own maxims occasionally.’ It all came out much more irritable than she intended it to.

Grandmama gave a disapproving little cough, but she said nothing – just lapped away quietly at her soup, without a hint of slurping. How ever did she manage it?

‘You’re quite right, Amelia,’ said Mama, who was always fair. ‘It’s rude to have a private conversation at a family meal.’ But instead of addressing the situation by letting Amelia into the conversation, she chose instead to change the subject. After her outburst, which really was stronger than the situation had warranted, Amelia felt a little sheepish, so she didn’t dare to try to turn the subject back again, but instead answered monosyllabically the questions Mama put to her about her history essay and whether her second-best boots needed heeling.

And so it wasn’t until the following morning that Amelia found out what was afoot in the Goodbody household. Lucinda came into the classroom pale and red-eyed. Good heavens, thought Amelia, it must be something truly dreadful that Frederick has done if Lucinda is so upset. Lucinda Goodbody was not known for the softness of her heart or the quickness of her sympathies.

When they were little girls of twelve, Amelia and Lucinda had been best friends: Amelia had admired Lucinda terribly, and Lucinda had basked in the admiration. But there had been a coolness between them at one point, and though they had long since made it up and were no longer pitted against one another, they had never resumed their former closeness.

Still, Amelia didn’t care to see Lucinda miserable, and besides, she wanted to find out about Frederick, so she sidled up to Lucinda at coffee-break and asked, not unkindly, ‘What’s up, Lucy? Everything all right? You look a bit washed out.’
‘Oh, Amelia!’ said Lucinda, with a wobble in her voice, and with that she collapsed on Amelia’s shoulder and sobbed out: ‘Frederick’s enlisted! He’s going to Flanders to fight the Hun!’

Amelia’s heart did a little leap inside her chest. Flanders meant Belgium, where the war was. Gallant little Belgium, people used to call it, when the war started. Nobody said that so much any more. But who was the Hun?

‘What?’ Amelia asked, gently disengaging herself and brushing Lucinda’s fringe out of her eyes, so that she could look at her. ‘What did you say, Lucinda? Frederick is going to the war?’

‘Yes!’ said Lucinda in a strangled voice. She was rather enjoying being the grief-stricken sister, and she hung her head, so that her burnished curls trembled in an affecting manner.

‘To fight who? I mean, whom?’ asked Amelia, still trying to get the story straight in her mind.

‘The Hun of course. The Bosch.’

‘The Hun? The Bosch?’ They sounded like monsters or machines.

‘Yes of course, you ninny. The Germans. Who do you think we’re at war with? Anyway, the thing is, Frederick has joined up. He just marched into some horrid recruiting office in Grafton Street, and he’ll be gone by the day after tomorrow!’ And here she gave another effective little sob.

‘Lucinda, I don’t understand. Quakers don’t go to war. Frederick is a pacifist. Isn’t he? He must be. We all are. Aren’t we?’ Amelia was quite confused.

She was remembering Frederick’s outburst on the train on Sunday. He had sounded quite the conventional Quaker, showing his abhorrence for this war. Hadn’t he? Or had he? She tried to remember his exact words – war is beastly, people get killed, not a laughing matter. At the time, they had sounded like anti-war views, but of course you could read them as just the apprehensive thoughts of somebody about to join up and under no illusions as to the seriousness of his action. Then a thought struck her:

‘They haven’t conscripted him, have they?’ she asked. ‘I thought there wasn’t any conscription in Ireland.’ No, they couldn’t have. Amelia was sure Mama had been involved with other Quakers in a successful campaign to oppose conscription in this country.

‘No. That’s the awful thing. He wasn’t conscripted. He went and enlisted, voluntarily. Isn’t it dreadful? Mama is distraught.’

‘Prostrate,’ corrected Amelia absently. No wonder Frederick had been so uneasy on Sunday. She was right to think he was trying to tell her something. What a piece of news!

‘And Papa ...’

‘Is nearly out of his mind with worry and anger.’ ‘How did you know?’ asked Lucinda in surprise.

‘Oh, you know, one can imagine,’ replied Amelia. ‘But why, Luce? What can have possessed him?’

She searched her own mind for the answer. And why hadn’t he told her all this the other day? He must have been afraid she would have tried to dissuade him. Would she have? She supposed so, but she wasn’t sure. Why wasn’t she sure?

‘That’s the thing. He won’t say why. At least, he’s been rowing a bit with Papa lately, I suppose. Maybe he’s trying to ...’

Lucinda spilt out a long and complicated story of family tensions which she thought must be the cause of Frederick’s taking this extraordinary step. Frederick had finished school some months before and had joined his father in the family business. They had not been getting on together at all, Lucinda said. Frederick didn’t like the office, he didn’t like the work, he didn’t like working with his father. In short, he was deeply unhappy with his life at the moment. The war, dreadful as it was, must have looked like a way out, a chance to prove himself as a man, separate from his family and away from his father. But what a course of action! No wonder his parents were in such a state!

Amelia sat down and tried to assess her own reaction to this piece of news. Her heart had given a lurch when she first heard it, but then her heart gave that same lurch every time Frederick’s name was mentioned. After that, she had been confused and surprised by what Lucinda had said, but
what ought she to feel next? Anxiety would be appropriate. After all, Frederick might be wounded, shell-shocked, even killed. But though she did feel some anxiety, it was only in a mild sort of way. She couldn’t really imagine Frederick dead or wounded. It was too unbelievable. No.

What she felt, she now began to realise, was a sort of secret, shameful elation. Frederick was taking a stand. He wasn’t going to just go on living his life the way other people – his parents, his community - had ordained that he should. He was going to make something of himself. Yes, he was going to really do something, be somebody. Frederick Goodbody, officer of the king’s forces – for surely he would be an officer, a young man of such good background – off to the trenches to defend the rights of small countries to rule themselves and to resist invasion. Why, it was all so gallant and adventurous! Oh, if only girls could do such fine things as fight for justice and truth, the defence of the Empire and the protection of the innocent! But here she was, doomed to remain on a remote little island at the edge of Europe, writing history essays and hearing Edmund’s spellings, while Frederick could sail off to glory on the battlefield. Amelia had made up her mind how she felt after all – she had decided to be overcome by the magnificence of it all.

‘Cheer up, Lucinda!’ she commanded, slapping her friend heartily on the back, as she thought glorious thoughts. ‘Young Frederick knows how to look after himself, and with a bit of luck he’ll be home in six months with a chestful of medals and a fund of tales of bravery in the face of the enemy.’

‘Don’t!’ wailed Lucinda, determined not to be robbed of her great sorrow. She shrugged Amelia off and gave a becoming little sniff into her dainty, lace-edged handkerchief. Just then the bell rang for the next lesson, and the girls drifted back to the classroom.

‘And the worst thing is,’ said Lucinda as they reached the classroom door, ‘he’s not even an officer or anything, just an infantry soldier in some wretched little regiment nobody’s ever even heard of. The Dublin Fusiliers – I ask you.’

When Amelia returned to Casimir Road that afternoon she threw her satchel under the stairs and went into the kitchen. Mary Ann was black to the elbows, and had odd black smudges here and there on her face too, and there was a strong, acrid-sweet, metallic smell in the air.

‘What ever are you at?’ asked Amelia, to whom the mysteries of the servant’s life had still not fully been revealed.

‘I’m making a cake,’ muttered Mary Ann.

‘A cake?’

‘Yeh, a lickerish cake,’ Mary Ann affirmed.

Amelia looked curiously about the room. There was no sign of baking utensils or ingredients, and the smell of the black substance wasn’t remotely like liquorice.

‘I see,’ said Amelia. ‘And tell me, if you’re making a cake, why is it necessary to use half-a-dozen filthy rags, a wire brush and three goose-wings?’

‘All right,’ conceded Mary Ann, ‘I’m cleaning the stove.’

‘Golly, isn’t it pretty!’ said Amelia, peering at it as if for the first time. ‘I never noticed this little panel of birds and flowers down the side before. Look! They’re smiling at us, since you polished them up.’ And so they were, gleaming and preening themselves coquettishly.

‘Huh!’ said Mary Ann. ‘I could have done without that panel, thank you very much, smiles or no smiles. It’s all little cooks and grannies and fiddly bits.’

‘Cooks and grannies?’

‘Yes, it’s good isn’t it. Like me and your grandmother of an afternoon.’

Amelia looked bewildered.

‘Nooks and crannies, Amelia. Gosh, you’re so slow on the uptake sometimes! It’s a joke. Anyway, them things were absolute murder to polish. Lucky for you it’s nearly done, or I’d have had you at it as well as meself. But at this stage there’s no point in the two of us getting covered in black-leading, so if you want to play cooks and grannies too, you can fill the kettle.’

Amelia did so, and then sat down to tell the news about Frederick to Mary Ann.
Mary Ann didn’t say much. She just put away the cleaning things and then used a skewer to pick black-leading out from under her fingernails and grimaced at Amelia’s story.

‘I don’t know,’ she said at last. ‘I thought you people didn’t believe in warfare.’

‘Mmm,’ said Amelia, reluctantly. She had known all along that this was a problem, but she didn’t want to face it. She didn’t want to let Frederick down.

‘Well, then, it should be against Master Goodbody’s religion to go to war.’

‘Yes,’ said Amelia lamely. ‘I suppose it is.’

‘Then he shouldn’t go, should he?’

‘No, I suppose he shouldn’t,’ agreed Amelia, deflated. ‘But perhaps,’ she went on, making it up as she went along, ‘perhaps he feels so strongly about this war that he is prepared to set his pacifist principles aside on this occasion.’

Even as she said it, Amelia knew it didn’t ring true. In truth, she didn’t really understand Frederick’s motives, and though the idea excited her, it also confused and worried her.

‘Feels strongly about this war!’ Mary Ann sniffed. ‘How could anyone feel strongly about this war? What’s it about, can you tell me that?’

‘Oh yes,’ began Amelia confidently. ‘It’s about – well, it’s about putting the Kaiser in his place.’

‘Putting the Kaiser in his place, is that it? I see,’ said Mary Ann. ‘In other words, it’s about the English being in charge of Europe, not the Germans.’

‘Well, yes, I mean, after all ...’

‘Oh, I see. So you think the English should be in charge of Europe, do you?’

‘Not exactly, no. But I think the Germans shouldn’t be either.’ Amelia had a sudden flash of inspiration: ‘We should all be in charge of our own countries.’

‘Aha! Like the Irish. In charge of Ireland, like?’

‘Certainly.’

‘So it’s a nationalist you are now, Amelia Pim. Well, I never would have thought it!’ Mary Ann sounded both amused and triumphant.

‘A nationalist, am I?’ said Amelia wonderingly. She was sure there was something wrong with this assertion. ‘Anyway,’ she went on, ‘I seem to remember you being very pleased when this war started, Mary Ann Maloney.’

‘Ah yes, but that’s because England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity,’ said Mary Ann cryptically, throwing aside her skewer and coming to sit at the table opposite Amelia. Amelia hadn’t the smallest idea what that was supposed to mean, but she was sure it wasn’t anything very nice, so she gave a disapproving little sniff. Mary Ann misinterpreted the sniff.

‘Poor Amelia,’ she said, with sudden sympathy. ‘You’ll miss your beau, won’t you?’

Amelia had been so busy convincing herself what a fine thing it was for Frederick to be going off to fight in this terribly important war that she hadn’t allowed herself to think this perfectly simple thought at all. She had considered the idea of his being hurt or killed, and she had set that thought firmly aside. But now that Mary Ann put it so simply, she realised that she would indeed miss her beau, very much. She plonked her elbows on the kitchen table and gave a long, slow sigh.
Notes on novels

Contemporary

Sisters ... no way! Siobháin Parkinson, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-495-6
A flipper - and brilliant - book, it deals with teenage life in an amusing and unusual way, using a dual diary format and two very different characters to expose very sensitive and personal problems common to young people, problems largely caused by adults. Cindy does not want her dad to remarry after her mother’s death - especially not the divorced mum of the prissy and utterly boring Ashling. Ashling wants her mother to find a nice man, but does it have to be the widowed father of the obnoxious Cindy, arch-snob and ultra-opinionated? No way do these two want to become sisters and make their feelings clear in their diaries. ‘The author makes the reader sympathetic to both girls as each faces a difficult time.’

White Lies Mark O’Sullivan, Wolfhound Press, 0-86327-592-3
A rollercoaster of the stormy relationship between two seventeen-year-olds, is told by each character in turnabout chapters. Nance, black and adopted, journeys into the past to discover her roots and identity only to find the truth is nearer home. OD dropped out of school at sixteen, works on a FAS scheme on a building site and has an attitude. Unable to get on with his washed-up, alcoholic trumpet-playing father, he becomes embroiled in shady dealings, his best friend Beano gets into drugs, and he falls out with Nance. Living their lives on the edge of adulthood, they have to face up to choices and the truth behind white lies.

Call of the Whales Siobháin Parkinson, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-691-6
In this haunting coming-of-age novel, Tyke, who breathes, sleeps and dreams whales, gets a chance to do whaling in the icy wilderness of the Arctic with his father, an anthropologist. From his humdrum life in Dublin, Tyke steps into a world beyond his dreams, where he makes friends, has unforgettable adventures and learns the value of life and death. The author is at pains to point out ‘I have deliberately told this story of Arctic life from the point of view of an Irish narrator. And this is all this novel is meant to be: an outsider’s perspective on a rich and fascinating way of life in a place of great beauty.’

Benny and Babe Eoin Colfer, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-603-7
Visiting his grandfather in the country and thinking he can take on the world, Benny suffers a severe blow to his pride when he meets Babe, the village tomboy. He may be a wise guy but she is at least three steps ahead of him, and they are on her territory, given serious respect by the local tough guys. Things become dangerous and complicated when Furty Howlin wants a slice of Babe’s thriving business of rescuing the lost lures and flies of visiting fishermen and selling them at a tidy profit. They become even more complicated when a disco reveals a transformed Babe. Can they still be friends now that she is a real girl?

Breaking the Wishbone Siobháin Parkinson, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-635-5
This is an inventive presentation of the tale of homeless youngsters in a Dublin squat as a ‘documentary, if you like, heads to camera, as they piece their stories together’. Cut off from their families, five teenagers scrape together a makeshift home in a squat. For Johnner it’s a bit like camping - for a while. The others are older and more worldly-wise. Beano is manipulative, violent and controlling, out to score whatever and whenever he can. Caroline, overwhelmed by loss, is distant and confused. Samantha conjures up dreams to keep herself going. Curly is somewhat slow but honest and steady, trying hard to make the best of a bad lot. ‘Breaking the Wishbone explores their lives and experiences and their ability to face the most harrowing situations with humour, courage and resilience.’

Silent Stones Mark O’Sullivan, Wolfhound Press, 0-86327-722-5
A gripping, thought-provoking and moving story of two teenagers forced to come to terms with their own and their families’ pasts at Cloghercree in the Irish Midlands. Mayfly Blenthyne is there because her English New-Age traveller parents believe that the ancient standing stones will miraculously cure her dying mother. Robby Wade is there because, trapped between his embittered great-uncle and the shadow of his dead IRA father, he cannot escape. Matters come to a head when Cloghercree is invaded by the ruthless terrorist, Razor McCabe, on the run from the police.

Could I Love a Stranger? is the second of what is known as the Jackie trilogy, three novels about Jackie’s first teenage relationships with boys. Jackie’s boyfriend Kev is away, and when the mysterious Daniel comes to stay, Jackie is intrigued. But is it Daniel who fascinates her, or the secret diary, telling of what happened to his family in Nazi Germany? It is a telling account of a young person’s reaction on learning of the excesses of the Third Reich, and raising more generally the question of ethnic cleansing in the Europe of today.
Cal  
Bernard Mac Laverty, Penguin, 0-14081-789-1
Cal has very few choices in life. He can continue working at the abattoir, which sickens him, or join the ranks of the unemployed. He can reflect on his past or try to plan the future with Marcella, the widow of the man he was involved in killing. This is a novel of contrasts and contradictions, the range being set in the first few pages. Nauseated by the violence, noise and 'humane' killing of the abattoir, Cal seeks relaxation in the peace and quiet of the library where Marcella works. Cal and his father, Shamie, are Catholics, but live on a predominantly Protestant estate. Cal really is 'a haunting love story set against the fear and violence of Ulster, where tenderness and innocence must struggle to survive' but it is, above all a tragic novel which recognises that, 'where loyalties are so divided, guilt is perpetual and happiness has to be paid for by an equal measure of suffering - they are the two faces of the same coin'.

The Cinnamon Tree. A Novel set in Africa  
Aubrey Flegg, O'Brien Press, 0-86278-657-6
When a landmine explodes beneath her, Yola Abonda is thrown violently into a new life – her dreams shattered. She must learn to walk again after the amputation of her leg. She must accept that no man will pay a bride-price for a disabled girl. Then Yola meet Hans and, with his help, travels to Dublin for treatment, where she meets Fintan. Returning home to Africa, she is desperate to educate her people about the dangers of landmines. With Fintan’s help, she fights for her beliefs to the bitter end against the international landmine trade, controlled by ruthless and dangerous people, and even her own family and friends.

Fantasy

Artemis Fowl  
Eoin Colfer, Viking, 0-67089-962-3
For some, Artemis Fowl is Ireland’s equivalent of Harry Potter. For others, it is more like a video game than a book, with its preference for snappy dialogue rather than characterisation and peppered as it is with up-to-date references to the Internet, digital technology, gratuitous violence and martial arts. Nevertheless, the target audience seems to like the fact that Artemis Fowl, one of the Mud People (Colfer’s answer to Muggles), is a 12-year-old criminal mastermind. Fowl pits his wits against the Leprecon (Lower Elements Police Reconnaissance) to steal fairy gold and restore the family fortune. Enter Captain Holly Short, a tough female elf who packs fairy hardware and is taken hostage in the Fowls’ Manor, set in North County Dublin ...

The Battle below Giltspur  
Cormac MacRaois, Wolfhound Press, 0-86327-356-4
At the foot of the Sugar Loaf Mountain Niamh, Daire, and the magical Glasán begin a fantastic adventure but the wolves of Morrigan are waiting. Set in modern County Wicklow, Ireland, their adventure provides opportunities to work on the themes of mystery and fantasy, with real characters embarking upon a journey and mythical characters and powers appearing within a modern setting. The first in the Giltspur trilogy, The Battle below Giltspur bristles with atavistic resonances. Fast, tense and full of blood-curdling happenings, it is a rivetting fantasy, a magical tale of power and revenge, blending high adventure and ancient Irish myth, avoiding the pietism that ruins many 'good-versus-evil' books by creating characters, real and supernatural, who move beyond mere allegory into forceful credibility.

Cirque du Freak  
Darren Shan, Collins, 0-00675-416-3
Darren Shan’s first children’s book is about something out of the ordinary, but set against the background of children’s normal lives to chilling effect. The narrator and main character, Darren Shan, is a strange boy. He goes to a freak show with his friend, Steve. It’s the gothic ‘Cirque du Freak’ where weird, half human/half animals appear and interact with the audience. Darren ‘falls in love’ with a tarantula and determines to steal the spider so that he can train it to perform amazing deeds. Soon, Darren and his friend Steve are caught up in a deadly trap. Darren must take a bargain with the one person who can save him. But that person is not human and only deals in blood. Darren must become the vampire’s assistant and a half-vampire himself in a bloody initiation ceremony. According to the author, ‘It’s not a book that sets out to be frightening for the sake of it. Dark things happen, but they happen for a reason, and there are definitely repercussions.’ Cirque du Freak ends with the chilling three words ‘To Be Continued ...’

The Dream Invader  
Gerard Whelan, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-516-2
One of the scariest tales of ‘good versus evil’ ever written for children. At stake is a little boy’s life. Every night Saskia’s cousin, Simon, wakes screaming and terrified in his new car-shaped bed, for the most horrific journeys are being undertaken in a green car by Simon and his tormentor, the Pooshipaw. The Pooshipaw orchestrates Simon’s dreams. The further down the road they travelled, the more sick and frightening were the scenes at the roadside. With every dream Simon grew more afraid because at the end, the Pooshipaw warns Simon ‘dreams of you will be all your precious Mammy and Daddy have left’. Pooshipaw was not a nice man at all ...
Historical/Historical fantasy

**Distant Voices**  
Maeve Friel, Poolbeg, 1-85371-410-0
Set in the north-west of Ireland, this is a powerful and unusual evocation of the Viking era. This voice, this Harald, was haunting Ellie’s dreams, speaking to her in his strange accent, drawing her into another life. He spins stories of sea voyages, exile and death, while she sleeps. His appeal to Ellie, ‘Only you will know where to find me’, leads her across the border from Derry into Donegal where she makes a startling discovery on a lonely headland.

**Strongbow. The Story of Richard and Aoife**  
Morgan Llywelyn, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-274-0
This is a thrilling true-to-life novel about Strongbow (died 1176), the Norman knight, and Aoife (the date of her death is unknown), the Irish princess, against the backdrop of the Norman conquest of Ireland. It is full of battles and warfare but is also a story of love between an unlikely pair - the willful Irish princess and the greatest of the Norman knights to come to Ireland. Strongbow gives an impression of the confusion and complexity of the period by telling of Strongbow’s arrival in Ireland from the points of view of Strongbow and Aoife. The author writes about the famous, the great and the infamous, creating a broad sweep in her stories, and does not use a child observer or narrator.

**Granuaile. The Pirate Queen**  
Morgan Llywelyn, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-578-2
Grace O’Malley, alias Granuaile, pirate & politician, c. 1530-1603, is one of Ireland’s most infamous figures. More than the ‘pirate queen’ of Irish legend, she was a courageous woman who stood up for her rights during the turbulent Tudor conquest of Ireland. Such was Granuaile’s power that in 1593 Elizabeth I agreed to meet her in London to consider requests for money and permission ‘to invade with sword and fire’ the queen’s enemies. The only Gaelic woman ever to appear at court her petition was successful, but Granuaile died ten years later outwitted and impoverished by Tudor officials who never forgave her earlier ‘betrayals’. This inventive, if uncritical, historical novel is an excellent source for storytelling. The narrative is interwoven with imaginary letters between Grace and her son, Tibert, which capture a lesser-known side of the Pirate Queen.

**Under the Hawthorn Tree**  
Marita Conlon-McKenna, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-206-6
This is the first of an award-winning trilogy, a gripping story of love, loyalty and courage set in the time when Ireland was devastated by the Great Famine of the 1840s. Three children, Eily, Michael and Peggy, are left to fend for themselves. Starving and in danger of the dreaded workhouse, they escape in the hope of finding the great-aunts they have heard about in their mother’s stories. With tremendous courage they set out on a journey that will test every reserve of strength, love and loyalty they possess.

**Guns of Easter**  
It is 1916 and Jimmy Conway, aged 12, lives in the Dublin slums and is caught up in the Easter Rising. While his father is away in France, fighting with the British army, his uncle Mick joins the Rising, fighting against the British army in Dublin. Jimmy feels he must be the provider for his mother and two younger sisters. Setting out to find food or money, he finds himself adrift in a nightmare version of the world he has known, questioning old loyalties.

**No Peace for Amelia**  
Siobhan Parkinson, O’Brien Press, 0-86278-378-X
It is 1916 when the conflicts in Europe and Ireland bring heartbreak and divided loyalties into the lives of two young women in Dublin. Amelia Pim, now aged 15, lives in a Quaker family in a well-off district of Dublin. One of her best friends is Mary Ann Maloney, who works as cook-general. Amelia has a boyfriend called Frederick Goodbody, who, though a Quaker, volunteers to fight in World War I. Mary-Ann’s elder brother, Patrick, is a member of the Irish Volunteers, an army who fight during the Easter Rising for independence from Britain.